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Synopsis:

This is a tale of one man's quest to quench an agonizing thirst for sanity and solace. The phenomenally flawed John Robe finds himself at a crossroads battling his conscience and his destiny. With his sacrifices only knowing shortcomings and his hope fading under the passing seasons, John wields and evades the dagger of ambition. For all that is uncertain was once unknown, inspirations root from love and friendship amongst fields overgrown. This is a story of a man and his pen, in desperate need of an epic song and a better friend.

Author Bio:

Cameron published his inaugural title "Who Cares?" (2005). In 2008 with maturation and less hair he published, "Just Because".

Cameron began writing Maggot Brain Dreams inspired by the music of Prince, Hendrix and Funkadelic. Cameron would later meet legendary Parliament Pianist Bernie Worrell to whom Cameron shared his vision to capture his love for music in a fictional yet powerful story. Cameron enjoys relaxing on Hermosa Beach but has not yet learned to swim.

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Editing by Dena Terry

Proofreaders: Jewell Byers, Tonya Edwards, Melissa "Jennifer" Edwards, Connie Mayes

All glory to God

Additional Thanks to: Mr. Bernie Worrell, Carlon Clinton, George Clinton, Glen Byers, Sidney Johnson, Thelma Byers, Verdell Duncan, Maria K. Morales, James & Thelma Harris, Kimberly Rowe, Rita Khorl and Emmanuelle Chriqui.

Dedicated to the memories of: Martha Monroe, Delores Alston, La'Rhonda Gowdy, Trayvon Martin, Muhammad Ali and Prince

"A man who has no imagination has no wings" - Muhammad Ali

Maggot Brain Dreams

Cameron C. Duncan

Ernest Hemingway once said “The writer must write what he has to say not speak it” We are not limited to the obvious we are not limited to the extraordinary, we are driven by emotion and manage our desires and shortcomings with our strength; the ability to capture emotion like spring water in an oversized jar. Writing is not about words it’s about inciting thought when audio is not available. It’s the expression of Love in a Ballad the projection of sadness in the blues, or the power of passion in a poem.

I would rather have a million thoughts and not make a sound, than speak without merit. Besides somewhere between my brain and my tongue words just seem to get lost, and even the perfect sentence meant to be chronicled in color became merely chaos. There is no eraser for what is spoken, there is no option to rip it up and start over, only regret. I used to want to be like the guy on stage adored by thousands or the smooth talking guy at the bar who could knock a complete a stranger off of her feet, well, really just anything more than I was, which to me never really seemed like all that much. I was the secret admirer, the guy who wanted the last dance but was too shy to ask; the guy whose thoughts were much greater than his presence, a Maggot Brain. I wasn’t completely lost but writing was the only way I had to be remembered, the only thing in life that I was ever more than just good at. I needed to be better than great. I had a gift; the struggle was how to open it. There were the voices, the heartache, the frustrations, and the need to be more. Pain was my path to happiness and my quest for creations waded on certain destruction. Sometimes you’re nobody till you’re gone and I lived so that I could have in death what I never would in life, Immortality.

This is my tale, my dreams and nightmares.

What is a Maggot Brain? It is even more than a mesmerizing guitar solo by the late great yet under-known guitarist Eddie Hazel. Picture the visual context of complex thought and intellect being feasted on by the need of a simpler organism to survive. Jealous motives to rob another of a spirit that they wish to possess themselves. The challenges of life strip imagination and dreams from innocence even faster than time steals youth. Life, pain, passion, pride, humility, glory, love, loneliness, death, in these days I speak to you in truth. You have provided me with the courtesy to lead you through the journey of my life. I ask not for sympathy or admiration, I will not transpose myself into a hero a saint. I am a flawed man and son; I am all as I am none. One of the hardest parts of sharing this story with you was being able to reveal my secrets, my fears, my delusions and my weaknesses. I believe for every man God has written a melody of purpose, and our choices write the verses and at the end we earn our chorus. Jim Morrison once spoke of life being a movie that we would reflect a upon once our lives are over he said

“The movie will begin, in five moments, the mindless voice announced. All those unseated will await the next show. We filed slowly, languidly, into the hall. The auditorium was vast and silent. As we seated and were darkened, the voice continued; the program for this evening is not new. You have seen this entertainment, thru and thru. You’ve seen your birth, your life and death. You might recall all the rest (Did you have a good world, when you died) enough to base a movie on?”

I deliberated upon that question not for an answer but in reflection of the fact that to this point, I would not want to sit in a room and watch the story of my life, there was

nothing to base a movie on, not even a scene. I may not be interesting enough for a film but at least I had plenty for a lyric sheet.

Chapter 1

“Free your mind and your ass will follow.”-George Clinton

John Michael Robe, “You ain’t shit,”

The phrase weighed on my mind like each word was a ton.

“You ain’t ever gonna be shit, you’re 29, highly educated, dedicated, and some kind of talented. Yet, you’re 100,000 dollars in debt, working a dead end job. You’re single, you’re lonely and no one gives a shit about you. If you died tomorrow nobody would care and I might even piss on your grave.”

These were the words of my worst enemy, these were the words of my best friend, me. And the allegations were true. I was alone, but not lonely, I wasn’t poor, just broke, I wasn’t miserable but I wasn’t happy, I was an accomplished failure. I was a kiss without lips perfectly flawed and amazingly awful. It was like having an amazing ten-minute conversation with the person of your dreams only to find when you got home that they gave you the wrong telephone number. How could I have been so successful without being a success? Success is really what you make it, not to be defined for you by the constructs of your peers. Some measure it with money, some measure it with a sense of purpose like parenthood; others measure it as living each day to the fullest, for some it’s just surviving. For others it’s none of the above. For us, success is forever elusive; we have the desire to conquer continents. It drives us to win at all cost because losing is worse than dying. I was complicated, but my intentions were simple and my passion was true. I wanted to be remembered. I wanted to be the best or anything but a plain Joe. I had no desire for my own family, or a house in the suburbs with 2.5 kids and a mortgage. I did not want to waste my life building others wealth while counting my own pennies. I was consumed by tantalizing dreams of greatness. Goals for greatness always come with criticism, people tell you it’s impossible, that you can’t do it, that you should just give up your big dreams and get a real job. So instead of persevering through the struggles in pursuit of what is truly worth the pain, people endure the same struggle striving for things that don’t justify their pain. I heard so much negativity about how my goals were pipe dreams and odds were against me, meanwhile I had to submit 1500 applications to get one interview for a \$50,000 a year job that I couldn’t wait to quit. Life is often a marathon and all I wanted to do was sprint. But the track was rocky, my shoes were unlaced and the hurdles stood before me as if they were confident I would crash.

My life was a hell of available nothing; I lived my mid-twenties like they were my mid-sixties. I went to work I worked out, and I wrote. The 3 w’s I called them and every time someone asked me what I had been up to it was the same answer “The W’s” The older I’d get, I’d see the people around me who I went to school with and so on, moving on with their lives, becoming doctors, lawyers, athletes, models, they had careers and families or whatever else they wanted out of life and I was stuck in the same place doing the same shit in the same toilet. I knew that in the back of my friends minds they thought; “Damn, he’s really not gonna let it go.” I didn’t date, I didn’t spend a lot of time with friends, I was often a recluse, sometimes even borderline depressed. I was trying too hard

to be stuck in neutral if not reverse. I believed I was cursed. As the pain grew my mind became manic with ideas, sounds, and words. Voices in my head would ramble like the sounds of afternoon hallways in an Asylum. All that I am is this lyric, all that I ever will be is this harmony. I am not a man. I am not among the living. I'm dead and I don't even know it yet. The answer was not simple for me. I was not an M.C like Eminem that could dominate local rap battles to pave my way, though I stood as a stranger to his right. I was no dancer so Beyonce didn't notice me in the hallways. Kid Rock borrowed my pen to sign autographs and Ben Wallace was blocking me out of the picture in Sports Illustrated. I was always close to something that mattered, yet struggling to become more than just matter. You see there is the closeness of being two pieces away from finishing the world's most complex puzzle, and there is the closeness of the game winning catch falling tantalizingly out of your reach. One is full of hope, and excitement the other is frustrating, and regretful, it plays over and over in your mind, what could you have done differently? Will you get another chance? To face the facts there are millions of talented people with the same aspirations that I have, so what makes me any different? What makes me so deserving? What makes me so special? All talent and all hard work needs opportunity and many never get it and just give up. Most people can live with themselves, why else would people work jobs they hate for years? I once read a story about an old man and a dog. An old man was sitting on a porch with his dog when a young man came to speak with the old man. During the conversation the young man periodically heard the dog whimper in pain, finally the young man grew curious enough to ask the old man why the dog whimpered. The old man replied,

“Well he is lying on a rusty nail.”

The puzzled young man asked, “Why doesn't he just move?”

To which the old man answered, “It doesn't hurt badly enough.”

Well I was hurting, I was in agony, I was out of my damn mind, wavering between meaningful creation and utter destruction.

I loved music. It was my true love, my lifelong companion. Music did not judge me, it would not abandon me, and each day I lived seemed to have a new theme song. Oh the sounds were so beautiful, the sounds were so maddening. Each harmony was like a newborn child, so full of potential. Writing is like a birth, without bounds it can only be limited to your imagination and vocabulary, the possibilities are immense. So even when I felt physically trapped in an unfulfilling existence, it gave me hope for better days. It allowed me to get through the hard times because I had reason to hope that I was only writing a story, and I just hadn't gotten to the good part yet. Sometimes I hoped this life was just a bad dream but unfortunately I felt every pinch. Everything would be just fine if I could make it out of here. I was questioning all the choices I had made up to this point; I mean I did everything I was told to do growing up. Get good grades, get into a good college, and get your degree, check, check, check but my \$70,000 education made me exactly 0.00 in life. I should've been a doctor or an athlete. What am I really? Oh yeah an author! How many best sellers do I have? A poet! Who can recite anything I've written? A lyrical genius! Well how come I can't figure out on how to get a song on the radio? Damn! Am I going to be a failure? I could not settle on ordinary, I could not rest on mediocre; I could not walk with pride and be average. Does that make me special? No, but it

gave me the hunger of a starving lion and the attitude of the hyena willing to take his meal.

Socially, I was awkward, even strange. I was an intellectual with the spirit of a gladiator. Academically I performed well, but was rejected from a gifted program due to my erratic behavior. I don't know what made me so uncomfortable around people. I always felt different, and often viewed subtle situations as blatant attacks. My upbringing was strict but loving. My mother was a single parent. She was strong, glamorous, intelligent, beautiful and street smart. She did not believe in raising a dummy or a soft man. She was an icon to me, the county's first minority female coroner. At a young age I had an advanced realization of mortality. Doing your homework next to dead people seems to have that effect. The scariest thing that ever happened to me was a dead person farting while I was practicing long division. A "C" on a report card was unacceptable, and carried maximum punishment.

"Do you want to be average?" she spoke angrily.

"You will need to work harder and be better than everyone else to be successful."

Though at the time I didn't quite understand why, I soon learned. I remember her once pointing out a kid walking down the street with his pants hanging on his knees.

"You see him?" she asked.

"He may be a bright a young man, but looking at him I would think he's a hoodlum."

It was a lesson in respect, it's not easy to earn, but it's easy to lose. My father always thought she was too hard on me. In fact so did I. but the older I get the more I realized she was right, every great man needs an edge, an undying passion for something and the pursuit for it must be relentless or it will wither and die, like roses sent to symbolize love on a holiday, or after an affair.

My father was a traveling businessman a spokesman for a major soap manufacturer and notorious playboy. I was three when my mother discovered that he had a separate family. But he was always in my life and I admired him because he was on TV and everyone seemed to recognize him. He was charming, outgoing and handsome and I wanted to be just like, but nothing like him. I remember that the only times my mother cried was when she was hurt by the men she loved, abused emotionally, cheated on, you name it. A woman who I thought was impregnable was actually vulnerable. Love held onto her for years like sandbags tied to the talons of an Eagle, restraining her flight, holding her talents and desires captive on the side of a moderately elevated mountain, I needed to be the wolf to help set her free.

Why would you ever hurt someone you love? I vowed I'd never do the same to anyone, I took it a step further because I lamented getting too close to anyone that they could make me feel so weak and vulnerable. I could never be vulnerable! So I would go through life a sucker for the gorgeous women with long hair, and bad attitudes because they were unavailable and had no expectations of me. In the film "Heat" Robert DeNiro said,

"Never get so attached to someone that you can't leave in five seconds flat when you see the heat coming around the corner" and Sean Carter said "I got 99 problems but a bitch aint one" perhaps I took both statements too literally.

I never believed my writing journals would lead anywhere past my notebook. Words continued to blossom from “will you go with me?” notes to short stories, and poems. It wasn’t until 5th grade that I realized I was any good. On Fridays, I’d read a story I wrote during the week aloud for the class, after tolerating most readers, normally inattentive kids became excited. Eyes would light up as if the ice cream man had walked into the room. My classmates would stop doodling and it was all eyes on me, like the epic 1996 2pac album. It got to the point where I looked forward to it and added a new song at the end of my story every week for everyone to jump in and sing. Every Friday my classmates would plead for Mrs. Messier to let me go first but she always made go last. Those four minutes a week always gave the cute girls in class a reason to talk to me. The fame lasted for maybe 10 minutes, but it felt good to be recognized; to be seen as the best, anything less from that point would be considered failure.

Exit my childhood and Fast Forward to the harsh reality of young adulthood. I still had the dreams of a child but I was old enough to realize that they all would not come true. I wasn’t a Ninja or superhero I was a guy with an ordinarily unimpressive job. It was one of the worst feelings in the world to me, being dragged out of bed every morning to go build someone else’s dream at a minute fraction of your value. Yet, still I showed up every morning on time, willingly offering my sweat and dignity because hope had yet to deliver me a dollar. It wasn’t a bad job, I didn’t hate it, and it kept me motivated. Every day I would rub shoulders with millionaires and celebrities, and I knew that someday I would look back and laugh at today no matter how terrible today was. I would not allow myself to be too proud to work hard for every cent I made, because I had the attitude that whatever I did, I had to do it better than others. If I were a window washer I would have made every window spotless, if I were a serial killer, I would have made every morning headline. To be honest there were times I felt like if I couldn’t do something good with my life, I may as well as be something historically bad. I mean would you rather be ordinary or extraordinarily awful? John Doe, or Genghis Khan? I’d take Genghis Khan. It is difficult to find solace in being good at things that don’t really matter. Is it really self-gratifying to hear;

“Good job you really flipped the hell out of those burgers, or hey great job picking up that table or moving that couch six inches? Actually you were so good at picking up those chairs that I’m going to let you go duct tape those wires down because I bet you’d be good at that too”.

You still have to do your best because it is your character, it is the drive that will get you away from here but right now it’s just a reminder that you may be wasting your talents. Perhaps you’ve been there before or even still there. Whether it’s mowing someone’s lawn in 100 degrees heat and they don’t even offer you a glass of water, or listening to someone belittle you because their coffee wasn’t sweet enough. You can’t let your current situation define you. Success is an attitude and you cannot be a master without being a great student first, you won’t be a successful President of the United States, if you can’t conquer being a fry cook and you learn to love while getting your heart broken.

Chapter 2

“You have to give people something to dream on” - Jimi Hendrix

(Alarm clock rings) Damn! I’m still here. It’s six o’clock in the morning and I am woken by the horrible screech of an alarm clock, signaling it’s time to get up for work.

“I hate my existence,” I thought to myself as if it appeared in a cloud of text that you would see in a Sunday Morning comic strip.

For today would be another day that what I desperately wanted was tantalizingly within my reach but yet a world away. It was like reaching for Neptune under the aid of a powerful telescope only to see it fade away and become yet again indecipherable amongst the stars.

It was the biggest show of the season. Tonight the venue I labored at would welcome 20,000 adoring, screaming fans; anxious and melting in the anticipation of the first glimpse of the stunning Sunol. Hundreds of luminaries had walked these halls before but she was without an equal. She was a hometown hero who grew up a stone’s throw from here but left it all in her rearview, she had her reasons. A Michigan State drop out who became a household name by the age of 20.

Somehow numb to the usual mania that swirls in these dungeons on Saturday mornings of concert season. I admit I was bitten with a slight alacrity as I postulated what she was like; naked of the nimety of make-up, the extravagance of jewelry, and the grandiose wardrobe of wanton hysteria as she just wandered comfortably casual through the backstage halls in search of dressing room 3. I wanted a flash of the real person. The one who had had to take ACT’s and scrape off her own car windows in the winter mornings. The girl who wrote poems, some of which she probably kept private some of which she shared, her audience at the time never fabricating who she would one day become.

The synopsis read sound check at 4:30. It would be the perfect opportunity for me to see her without her noticing me. For I could stand disguised in the cloak of the shadows, waiting for a sample of her voice, so I could store it in memory to complete the chorus of a song I had written for her next album. I hoped that someday we would cross paths, more than two years but hopefully less than 7 from now. For then she would still be her but I’d be more than me.

Yes 4:30 would be perfect. So at 3:13, I heard my name called.

John “They need another couch in dressing room 3. The words “dressing room 3” projected as if they were spoken in slow motion by my vertically challenged supervisor. His hair slicked back like a gang member Pony Boy from the film “Outsiders”. He was a high school dropout known for barking orders, and making enemies. But somehow we got along; he appreciated me for busting my ass, I respected him for his frankness.

“Sunol’s room?” I asked, knowing the answer but hoping I was wrong.

“Yup” he quipped with a sideways smirk on his face, like he was casting characters for his own comedy. He had walked past three of my co-workers playing cards to get to me. So I knew not only was it her room but she was likely already in it. He knew I was the only person in the room that would prevent talking to her at most costs, while most

others would be looking for any excuse to shake her hand or stay a bit longer than she needed, just to grab an extra moment that they could embellish later.

I grabbed my coworker Eric to assist me on the task. I knew I could trust him not to bring any bad attention to us and he would at least create some zany subject to keep me from thinking too much and ease my nerves. I pulled my hat down to cover up as much of my face as possible and I flipped up my collar to reduce my profile.

4:17

Eric didn't disappoint he was two questions into his wildly exaggerative hypothetical situations:

"OK OK OK, so would you go into the future 40 yrs. and do it with an old Stacy Dash so you could be with her how she is now?"

"Man no she'd be like 84 yrs. old." I replied

"I would, Stacy Dash only ages 1 year per every 8 so she still will look like she's in her late 40's" he calculated.

"OK, Lucy Liu" he yelled with immense excitement as if he was going stump me.

"Would you screw a 275 LB version of Lucy Liu so you could sleep with her now?"

I admit I paused for a bit actually imagining how a butterball Lucy Liu might look.

"Maybe, is her face fat?" I inquired.

"Naw man her face is still regular!"

"Is it like the rolled up fat or the solid fat?" I dug deeper.

"Solid fat, like Loretta Devine in Waiting to Exhale" he added.

It became like a game I couldn't let him win.

"Hmmm how about 225?" I negotiated.

"No, she has to be 275!" he calmly insisted.

I had a crush on Lucy Liu since the movie "Gridlocked"

"Yea I'd do it," I confessed. It was not one of my prouder moments in life.

He chuckled loudly enough to catch a strange glare from a hospitality worker.

As we turned the corner heading to Sunol's room. I was somewhat relaxed and curious what the final questions would be.

"Would you make out with a chick who looked just like Rosario Dawson, as in her twin but she only had one lip, the bottom one?"

"Why does it have to be the bottom one?" I questioned in disgust.

"Because the top one gets the most attention when you're kissing so you would have to change your kissing style."

In that second, I realized, He really put a lot of consideration into these questions.

"But her lips are her best feature!" I stated puzzled.

"I know! That's the point!" he exclaimed.

"Nah I can't do that one, maybe if she had the top lip, maybe."

"Well, what if the real Rosario Dawson would go out with you, if you did?" he twisted.

"Well then, I suppose." I admitted.

You may be asking yourself, do men really have these conversations. The answer is absolutely.

We were within 20 paces of the dressing room so he was running short on time to create new mindbenders.

“99 Halle Berry or 86 Appollonia?”

“Tough choice but Halle”

“Jennifer Lopez or 98’ Janet Jackson” he countered.

“Janet”

“Mya or Zoe Saldona?”

“Mya,” I answered.

“I thought you said Zoe was your favorite actress,” he barked curiously.

“She still is but I’m pretty sure she doesn’t like black guys, not that I’m her type even if she was, but even though you’re speaking hypothetically, if all things were equal she still doesn’t like black guys.” I explained.

“What’s wrong with that?” he asked, curiously as a young black man that dabbled in dating white women.

“Nothing is wrong with it, you love who you love, you like who you like, people have preferences, and it’s fair. I’m just saying, if I met two amazing women at a library’ Girl A and Girl B and you told me, Girl B doesn’t like black dudes, I would channel my energy towards Girl A. Get it?”

“Yea but then which girl would I get?” he asked in confusion.

“No that’s not what I meant. Fine then you would talk to Girl A,” I tried to clarify.

“No it’s Ok you can have her, if one girl is racist the other probably is too,” he exclaimed.

“Hey guys,”

We were greeted by Leslie, I wasn’t sure exactly what her job was but I had worked with her during shows before so I was comforted knowing that if she was going to tell us where to drop these couches off Sunol wasn’t around. A sense of relief came over me, like a college freshman that got assurance from a moderately unattractive girl he had unprotected sex with that her late period was a false alarm.

“You can just drop the big one in the back against the wall,” she instructed.

“And place the small one perpendicular to it on the left wall.”

Eric lifted his side and I hastily gathered my end, thinking that in three minutes this would be over and I could just stay under the radar until sound check.

Eric continued with his questions as he walked backward cautiously checking to make sure he didn’t trip over something and risk dropping Sunol’s custom ordered lavish white leather coach with gold legs.

The conversational subject matter had changed to a more G rated conversation in music, so not to offend the women working in earshot of us, preparing Sunol’s spread, and inspecting her wardrobe.

“Top 5 Rap albums” he blurted.

In no particular order, I replied

“Outkast ATliens 1996

Tupac Makaveli 1996

Tupac “Me Against the World.

The Eminem Show”

Hmmm (thinking) as we set the couch down
“One down, One to go, almost home free”
“I’ll leave 5 open otherwise I’ll leave somebody out” I said
“What about the Chronic?” Eric urged.
“It’s a classic but then I’d be leaving out NWA Straight Outta Compton, Wu Tang 36 chambers,”
I’d put Jay Z the black album on the list, and Ice cube “The Predator”
“Yeah those were good too and LL Cool J didn’t even get one in.,” he agreed.
“What about females?”
“Female rappers? You mean like Left Eye?” I assumed.
(Lifting the last love seat)
“No singers, female singers” he agreed.
“Best voice or performers?” I sought.
Eric looked over my shoulder and paused before he sat down the couch. His expression was peculiar but didn’t alarm me.
“Uhm singer I mean voice” he gathered himself.
“Well new breed you gotta put Christina Aguilera, in there, Mariah obviously, and”
“Whitney”
A woman’s voice spoke the name on my mind.
“Yeah Whitney is still the coldest, thought she hasn’t done much in a while” Eric added.
“Yeah Whitney would be #1” I added while sliding the couch into place. As I turned to address the female employee that had also become engaged in the discussion, time froze.
There she was in a baseball cap, wearing a short green jacket, and tight black jeans accessorized by sunglasses and an olive scarf. Her hair was black and snuggled into a bun. Her boots rose three inches below her knee. I could feel the cold wind jumping off of her from the freezing temperature outside. Her gaze was aimed at the food table searching for the first hot drink she could consume.
“I’d add Arethra Franklin” I thought, I had to quip quickly to prevent an awkward silence. But before I could get the words out, she tilted her glasses slightly off her eyes.
“Do you know where I can get some tea around here? I can’t feel my toes,” she added.
Anyone from a cold weather climate knows the feeling when you don’t wear enough socks and your toes feel like ice cubes.
There was no sense in trying to hide now; I just had to be as non-memorable as possible,
Well you can go down the hall to hospitality or you can wait a couple minutes because I heard the girls talking about going to get hot water.
I was relieved that I didn’t stumble over the word *hospitality* or *you* for that matter.
“Thank God” she puffed in relief, pulling off her scarf.
“I don’t miss this weather.” she mumbled as she made her way past us to sit on a love seat, where she painstakingly untied her left boot.
“So I’m curious, who was next on your list?” she spoke while attempting to restore the blood flow to her toes.

This conversation had gone on for about two responses too long.

Her second boot was now off and she covered her cold feet with a blue quilt from the end table.

“Why would she even bother to small talk with two peons in black shirts?” I thought.

But I inferred she’d been on the road for months, same people, same show every day, she had to be irritated with talking to the same people, I know I would be.

“What about Big Mama Thornton” I suggested.

“Who is that?” Eric asked with a bedazzled look.

“Wow, clearly you don’t like Blues, she wrote the songs that other people made more famous, like Hound Dog made famous by Elvis, and Ball and Chain, which is synonymous with Janis Joplin. If you ask me, only Janis Joplin did her songs any justice.”

Though no one did ask me, I continued.

“Babe I’m gonna leave you is epic, not to be confused with a similar Led Zeppelin title”

I thought she might make a suggestion, I thought she’d agree or oppose.

She tilted her head in consideration like a scientist slightly intrigued by the results generated by her research subjects. I took it as the perfect cue to leave the room to avoid overstaying our welcome.

We may have walked three steps outside of the door when I realized that her non-descript gesture may have meant that she was expecting us to mention her name amongst the four.

“Nah she wouldn’t do that, she wouldn’t care, what we thought. Besides she had to hear us say vocalist and performers, right?” nah she wouldn’t.

Nevertheless, I was just glad to have escaped, I was sure she’d never recall this brief interaction. I was in the clear.

4:28 lazily arrived; I walked into the dark arena, and found a shadow where I could witness her true voice without engineering, without lights, without an audience, just like it was church choir practice in the mid 90’s. She walked onto the stage with bottled water in her hand, now escorted by a slightly burly bodyguard. Her hair was down, slightly wavy extended past her scapula. The left side of her locks was pulled behind her left ear. She wore a long black dress, possibly navy, with a long slit up the right side, exposing her leg covered by a flesh colored stocking. I saw but one piece of jewelry, a shiny anklet that laid mid ankle on her high heeled suede boot, also either black or navy. She turned her head to say a few words to a grey haired man behind her sitting at a piano; they shared a laugh before she walked to the microphone as she had done countless times before. Her left hand smoothed any out of place strands of hair.

“Tony, have you tested the levels already?” she asked a tall dark gentleman.

The microphone was on and adjusted.

She warmed her voice stretching a note from low to mid to high, as if she went from humming a lullaby to her newborn child, to singing along in a car, to polishing off an audition.

She turned back to the grey haired man and he nodded in approval.

I recognized the first few keys, they seemed so familiar like a beautiful face you’d seen a thousand times, but the owners name escapes you for two winks.

“It was so simple I know that...”

“Whoooooooooaaa, one day I’m goooonna leave you, I know you think I won’t,”

She was belting out the classic blues tune by Big Mama Thornton in a way that would make Janis Joplin blush. It was effortless, it was smooth it was passionate like it meant something to her.

Who did she leave? What had she left behind, that she revisits every time those notes are played?

I had seen something in her for a moment that could not be purchased from a box of-
fice. It wasn’t a performance it was truth, it was vulnerability, it was sorrow, it was bliss,
a hard slap followed by a long kiss.

For a moment time stood still, until darkness fell around me when patrons filled the
arena and the show lights came up.

The crowd filled the ambient silence full of applause, joy and laughter. The clean
aisles became sticky with spilled beer and popcorn. The all too familiar scent of warm
pretzels and mustard, triggered something inside of me that night. It was time to go, a
dream without direction is a wish and a path without progress is merely a view.

The course of my life was changing as I stood stoutly on the grand concourse, watch-
ing the flashing lights of an encore, feeling the rumbling of a pleased crowd under my
feet, the last summer night of the season slips away. This was my last hour at this place.
Right now would one day be a fond memory of change. Why would I leave all that I
know behind, and abandon the privilege to rub shoulders with the very people I aspire to
collaborate with? The answer is insanity. Not the insanity that is thought of when I an-
swer my own questions. Not the idea of insanity that leads me to walk around nude and
contemplate my method of death but rather the true definition “Insanity is extreme folly;
senselessness foolhardiness”. Like the woman who stays with a man who batters her, or
the man who stays at the company that continuously ignores his contributions and passes
him over for promotions. I would be a fool to do the same thing in life and expect for
things to change, just as it is senseless to expect a perfect body when you consume fried
foods, sugary snacks and never leave your couch. I didn’t know if I was making the right
decision, but I knew that staying and rotting in Michigan was the wrong decision. Don’t
get me wrong it was home and I had every intention of coming back, but on my own
terms, with my life firmly in my grasp and my head held high walking with the bravado
of a 17th century tyrant. I couldn’t come back the way I left, far from nothing but barely
anyone. I honestly did not know how I would get to that point. All I had were a few dol-
lars and a prayer that I would find whatever pieces I was missing to become complete,
whatever inspiration I needed to become a better artist. It would be me against the world
and maybe I would get my ass kicked some but I felt there would be a new world to con-
quer.

Chapter 3

“Don’t ask God for a ride to eternity and scoff at the train. For you’ll be like everybody else if you sho think the same.” - A. Nobody

She sat in her favorite chair reading a magazine and took a drag from her preferred brand of cigarette, I hated when she smoked.

“I’m moving Mom”

I spoke with an unexcited tone as if I’m headed to the corner store for an Everfresh juice and a newspaper. She answered with the simple joy of finding your lost keys.

“Good, there is nothing for you here”

Pleasantly relieved, she must have sensed my misery on my weekly visits.

“When do you leave?”

In my mind I contemplated that it should’ve been 5 years ago.

“September 25th”

A virgin date with no current historical significance just as September 23rd 1966 the day that Jimi Hendrix left America for England once was. Just as he was tired of patent leather shoes and hairdo’s to match, I was eager to shed the work boots and graveyard shifts. I was determined to look back at that day as the crossroads for my own battle of independence. An independence of 5:30 A.M alarms and bedtimes, the independence of living life how I want rather than how it can be afforded, the independence to do only what I love and to only love what I do. No more sacrifice, no more anonymity and no more long cold winters.

The future always seems so perfect doesn’t it, so ripe for optimism, so welcoming, like a child who wants to be a teacher and live in a mansion with five children and a horse. The future can offer an escape from today’s harsh realities; we can look beyond present circumstance and lean on the promise that our struggles will find reason, that our pain will only help us to cherish our future happiness. Just maybe! The future gives us strength to push through now, though now was the future yesterday. At 9am we look forward to getting off work at 5:30 and Monday we look forward to Friday. In winter we look forward to spring. Sometimes we’re right, sometimes tomorrow is better, sometimes next year is the year; sometimes the next try is a success. But many times the next day isn’t much different from the last and the season is just another season. The years go by like Minivans in the car pool lane, just like every other year before. Frustratingly, sometimes we even fall backwards but if we are strong and we keep fighting one day our day may come. It may not come how we planned or as a dramatic event, but rather slow and gradual changes that we didn’t notice were happening seem to take place. Maybe we become better people and maybe our experiences give us the wisdom to learn what is truly important. Maybe we focus on the things we have and the relationships we have built rather than the things we don’t have or the places we haven’t been. Maybe we even trade comfort for uncertain bliss. All choices have consequences. Consequently, we may find what we want and lose what we need; feel what we wanted to feel only to find it didn’t feel the way we expected. I wondered what side I was on. What were my consequences? What

kind of man was I socialized into? Was God still preparing me for greatness or I was already great but didn't know how to reveal it? Was I just a dreamer? All I wanted was all I wanted, there was no compromise, no consolation prize, either I was the best at my craft and everyone knew, or I was an utter failure regardless of anything else I would accomplish in my worthless life. I would not accept 12 lemons for a peach. I would bare a million nightmares for that one dream. I would win or I would die.

She was no love of mine, but her piercing green eyes made me pretend, as she rubbed my thigh and ignored her boyfriend's phone calls. She was just my type; beautiful, witty, taken and temporary. I often lamented the idea of being with an attached woman. I considered the way I would feel if it was my calls being ignored, while my lady fell into the arms of another, then I remembered that had been me and I got over it.

"So you are really leaving?" she asked in a sincere tone, like she'd miss me.

Her facial expressions portrayed a hint of sadness, a hair of relief and a cup of happiness as if she knew I had to go.

With three days left until forever, I knew that we'd meet again but never the same.

Her last kiss tasted of that familiar lemon, so similar to the first one; I savored the scent of her perfume as she hugged me, knowing this embrace would be the last of its kind. I was not at all, but completely hers just as she was hardly but sincerely mine.

She gave me her favorite flower a Purple Lilac and said without promise I was her second favorite man. A lesser guy would take her hand and never look away. Not only did I walk away, I ran.

I drove into a mountainous new world with a few dollars and a place to stay. The views were mesmerizing to a Michigan boy though. I acted as though I'd been here before, like Barry Sanders simply handing the ball to the referee after his first touchdown. Like a young lady I courted in my mid-twenties I acted as though nothing impressed me, yet the excitement of new possibilities helped me to forget that I was broke, had no friends and I was all alone. I was running on faith like an Eric Clapton song. Far away from all I knew because all that was known was that I had to be here. It would've been fun to say I boarded a spaceship and the next stop was the moon but my hands are calloused with reason. Opportunity now existed around every corner, it was easy to be hopeful, and every conversation was yet to be had. I took a job at a local gym training housewives and cellophane socialites.

I would watch people have so much excitement about improving their health and for the first 2-3 weeks they are really committed, working out 4-5 times a week especially after the New Year. But gradually the visits to the gym become more infrequent and finally they'd stop coming in at all. But few ever came in to cancel their memberships. I wondered what changed in their life that derailed the excitement and commitment they once had and were they too embarrassed to come in and cancel their memberships because they didn't want to feel as though they had given up. Perhaps keeping the option open of continuing again one day when their schedules allowed it; maybe when work wasn't so hectic or when the kids were a little older. But at what point does what we want for ourselves no longer matter? It reminded me of a horrifying reality that at some point our goals would become buried in responsibility to others. I would confess to anyone

who'd ask about my single status that I did not want to be responsible for anyone but me and that I never planned to marry or produce children.

"Oh you'll grow out of it" people would exclaim.

"You're so selfish" they'd say.

"I'm not selfish my dream is just bigger than yours" I'd retaliate.

I was offended because the idea of being selfish made me think of someone who would let a heavy glass door close in an old lady's face or clandestinely drink the last of the bottled water on a desert hike, someone who has no regard for others well-being. But that's not selfish that's just wrong. As for selfish I am selfish and who cares? What's so bad about being selfish? We are Americans, the most selfish society in the world. Every great American figure that I can think of took a path of selfishness to accomplish great things for themselves and eventually others. No one became President just because they wanted to change healthcare reform. Would you marry someone you didn't want, even though they adored you? Every relationship we create in life besides parenting is based on the principal that it is good for us. However we can't disregard the needs of others because if we refuse to give to them, they will no longer give us what we want. Very few people invent anything that they weren't interested in using or profiting from. Selfishness is a red herring used to divert the truth of our own selfishness and cast shame on others for not putting us first. Yet our selfishness is vital to our identity, our passions, our ambition and when that freedom to be selfish is taken or expires we may become resentful and or unfulfilled if those passions and goals have not been satiated. So yeah I'm selfish and why can't I be? No one else will make sure that I succeed; no one is going to write this song for me. No one is going to sacrifice for me, everything is on me and with so many expectations on me I should be my main focus because I am my only responsibility.

I hated training people and had little patience for a 45-year old man that couldn't do a push up.

"Karl, The Bad news is you may be the weakest healthy man I've ever met. Good News is you can make it home early enough to catch your wife screwing your neighbor"

"What the hell am I doing with my life?" I pondered.

I even hated when people referred to me as their trainer. I often found myself trying to convince them of what my true aspirations were, if nothing else but to excuse why my people skills were awful. No one gave a shit. A teacher, who paints, is a teacher. Eventually, I learned to not to proclaim myself as a writer. I didn't want to make a fool of myself, when people asked, "Anything I heard of?" So I could reply with a dumb ass answer of "Probably not." Or have to explain why I was wearing a nametag. I'm not saying that anyone should be ashamed of working a job, but it can be shameful to be caught working a job when you project that you don't need one.

Patience was not a virtue that identified me, but I was left with no other choice as every day of my life was being lost building the dreams of another while mine wavered and laid dormant like a star fish on the ocean floor. One thing that a big city gives you is options it makes you think of all the things you could do if you can't do something else. I could be a journalist if I can't be an author, I can be a business man if I can't be a musician, I can be a doctor if I don't make it as an actor, Options are great to have when you don't know what you want. When you're in love with something you aren't concerned

with options, you don't care to be a ring announcer when you desire to be the world champion.

When I was a child my parents told me I could be anything I wanted to be, as a teen my peers said that I could only be some things and as a man I realized that everything is possible if I let nothing stand in my way. I refused to allow the circumstances of life to rob me of the passion and imagination that gave me hope that I could do more than just exist. At some point in our lives people lose their imagination and creativity to others realities. Because people did not accomplish what they wanted to in their own lives for any multitude of reasons whether it be as a result of the choices they made or the lack of talent they presume we will be the same. The saying goes that it's misery that loves company but so does ordinary.

We all have limitations. I could not truly be a great Artist like that guy with the afro who painted stuff on Saturday morning cable because I couldn't draw a straight line without a ruler. I wouldn't likely ever be some high-powered sports agent because I could barely sell water to a dying man in the desert. Yet, I would always hear these statistics that were supposed to scare me away from doing what I really wanted to do, and instead concentrate on another plan, i.e. go to college and bury myself in debt so I could get a degree that left me being a subordinate to a man without a high school diploma. Well at least I would fare better with an advanced degree right? I applied for 723 jobs and got calls for three interviews. My conclusion was there are no safe choices in life, so if you are going to fail, fail without regret in pursuing your passion rather than fail in your pursuit of merely avoiding failure. The American dream is not the same for everyone and if your dream is not to sit in traffic twice a day, and sit in a cubicle, then don't strive for it!

My vision of the right path was murky at times. But I knew I did not want a wonderful hell, better than where I was but far from where I needed to be. I wanted more than melancholy cheer, and short periods of joy earned by longer periods of drudge. I need greatness right now more than ever. Help me find it God! Give me something give me heartache, give me joy, give me beauty, wisdom, whatever I need, share it now. But there was nothing, the voices hushed to cruel whispers, no harmony, just a faint buzz like a blown speaker. What is missing from my life? I was so wrapped in what I didn't have I forgot about what I did. I was alone here no friends, no history, no memories of good times, good laughs to share. I had no inspiration.

Inspiration is in experiences and personal experiences aren't always enough and in fact we probably aren't really as interesting as we think we are. Check that, I'm not. I'm not an action movie or a romance novel, I was just a guy alone in a room with a vision of the life I wanted and truly believing that I could succeed by myself because I failed by myself. One of the most puzzling matters of truth came to me by realization that very few people really believe in your journey until you reach your destination. I mean sure some of your friends may tell you that you're going to be great but it's not always because they believe it but because they are being a good friend and not crushing your dream. But as someone once told me true love is not about feelings and rhetoric it's about actions. Here are the harsh actions from the ones who claimed to believe in me. When my first book was released of all the people who claimed to support me very few of them actually even bought a copy. Imagine yourself as a R&B artist and your first album comes out, but

hardly any of your friends went out and bought it. Your friends, or even your family go out on the first day of release to buy iPhones, or their favorite rappers mixtape but neglect you even after they've seen what you've gone through firsthand. "I believe in you" Screw you show me! Some friends even have the audacity to tell me they shouldn't have to buy what I worked hard for months and years to create. Strangers pay the rent but friends come to the party, Aint that something? The blessing was that I learned who really stood with me and behind me versus who just came around the block to hang out on occasion. But no dynamic of life is perfect; even great mothers make terrible wives, and even great wives prefer to screw other men. Don't get me wrong if I was mixing stool in a blender and selling it as a smoothie, can I really blame them for wanting lemonade? The problem wasn't my product; it was the demand. I was Ibuprophen in a Cocaine revolution so could I become a Heroin? If I only knew the answer to that question I'd be writing on a beach somewhere, rather than on my lunch break. My ego tells me I am the best, but reality reveals that though I think the songs I hear on the radio are simply terrible, they are effective. Oh what I would've given at that time for a bad song that was a hit rather than a wonderful mingling of words in college ruled tablet tucked away secretly in my nightstand audible to only me.

My words stopped flowing like cold Kool-aid on a Texas summer day and more like mucus through a collapsed lung. I had begun to focus so much on getting away I had left behind much of what made me what I was. A good friend once reminded me on a late night drive that our experiences, our history and our surroundings are what make us unique and we can become so frustrated with our existence that we neglect to recognize that the chaos of our lives can be used as the ingredients that mix the paint that color us and create the will that forces us to push forward. It is the reason why the greatest love songs are often written following the pain of lost love. It is the reason that Blues is soulful and most impactful when it is authentic. It is the reason that my pages were empty. At some point in my journey I had stopped feeling, while I never wanted to be controlled by emotions I let them all drift away to the corners of the earth. I lamented over my past decisions pondering where I would be had I followed my left mind, and I stopped believing that destiny or fate alone would get me anywhere. It wasn't all bad because my perspective changed, for the first time I realized that everything I wrote wasn't great and that maybe I was where I was, because that's where I deserved to be at that point. Maybe I just wasn't good enough. It was frightening to consider at this point of my life after dedicating so much time and ink to being the best, that perhaps I was just average. To make things worse I couldn't find much to write about anymore. I was lost at the exact point where I expected to be found. I wasn't the same person anymore, I was cold, and analytical instead of warm and creative, I was a shell without the sound of the ocean. I was so tired of being nobody, that I abandoned myself. Somewhere the best part of me was locked away in room with a bowl of Cap'n Crunch, A Jimi Hendrix Experience box set, a 6 pack of Optiflow pens, and a composition notebook. I was in my hiding spot far away from the dull gray spectrums of a complacent, common reality. I had pressed the mute button and left the room during the commercials until the feature presentation came back on. However, like the outcome of long commercial breaks, I forgot what I was watching and immersed myself in a whole new activity. But it wasn't so easy to come back as to

open a door and call. The room was sound proof to the outside world and Bose noise cancelling headphones covered my ears, filling my brain with nothing but manic melodies welcoming that perfect chaos clinging to my being like hot silk pants in an Alabama Baptist church. I would need the key to be freed of captivity. And the only way to get it was to let go of my past regrets and move forward. I needed to stop trying to fix my past decisions and concentrate on building the future I wanted. I had found myself in a quest more for status than Art and I was trying to get it by every means necessary. I was spreading myself too thin. I was an athlete, student, scholar, employee, businessmen, fitness guru, a writer, I was too much and therefore nothing. It was like being in love with a beautiful, wonderful woman who makes you laugh, builds your confidence, and is there for you when you need her, but she won't marry you. Yet, instead of building the relationship and earning her trust by being patient; you start courting cavalier women, who other men may adore but you are lukewarm for, because you don't know if the true love of your life will ever say yes. Furthermore, the love of that cavalier woman is not guaranteed, you'll never be the world to her, and she won't mean much to you. My flawed philosophy was if I just threw enough darts at the target something would score a bulls-eye but a foolish focus is not in focus at all.

Writing is like true love, you write because you love it not because of what it can do for you. You don't protect your child so they will take care of you when you grow old; you don't clothe your child so people will tell you what a good parent you are. You care for them because you know no other way, because they're cold is your cold, their pain is your pain, and they're life is more valuable than your own. Writing without love was like planning courtship of a woman as to how quickly I could get her to sleep with me, it was disingenuous. It wasn't fair for me to expect, words to kiss me when I hadn't called, for lyrics to comfort me when I had not listened, for harmony to trust me when I had abandoned them. Imagination is a fickle lady, she loves hard or hardly at all and if she leaves you she may never come back. I needed to caress her, I needed to invite her, I needed to welcome her back by my side and if she would only come back to me and love me now more than she did before I would never leave. But I had to make room for her I had burdens to release. I had to free my mind of regret, fear, insecurity and heartbreak. I needed to accept all of who I was the strong, the weak, the vulnerability, the pride, the caring, and the cold. I could not fool her. She knew what made my heart beat, and what made the Maggots in my mind begin to slither. I recalled memories I had suppressed, I recalled tears that I shed, I recalled the feelings of abandonment, tenderness that I cursed away, the sensitivity that I rebuked. I felt the fear, some of which I overcame some of which I disguised. I was often wounded when I called upon her and she healed me, I often wept to her and she made me strong. I shared my emptiness with her and she made me full. For every piece was given to her, all of my passion and doubt but she made me believe it was all a gift from God. I was pure, plus naive. Scar tissue covered my wounds so I could pretend they were no longer there. I could play a role, create a new me, one that wasn't so tormented, one that could just go through life without madness. I could've been someone people would look to and say "that guy has it all together". But I was not together in the least and flirted with desires of ending it all; I'd be six feet under or stand 6 feet tall.

It was difficult to forgive myself for decisions I made that I felt were incorrect. I was convinced that if I had just picked Door B, I wouldn't be in this war. I was convinced that in some parallel world my life was perfect, complete with all the possessions and respect that this world fails to offer. What do you believe exists behind the door you didn't choose? For a single woman who yearns for a family, is it a child with your eyes and their father's nose? For a frustrated intern; maybe you're an executive at prestigious firm. Lives are full of difficult decisions; the choices we make are met with reward and consequence. But reward also has consequence and consequences may have rewards. We are often tasked to make decisions to avoid consequence or chase reward. We may pass on future opportunity in pursuit of immediate gratification. If you have ever trained for a marathon or a sport you understand the importance of choosing painful consequence for the ultimate reward; just as someone who has sold stock immediately after an increase in value understands the choice of immediate rewards and consequence prevention. When reflecting upon our life's paths we may feel that because the road of our journey is not paved in Sapphire, that the other options would have provided the remedy to what ails us, completed the voids that exist within us, protected us from our heartache, or hardship. We envision a utopia of sorts where our weaknesses would have no merit and our strengths would be magnified like a politician's private life during election time. Perhaps one or all of them would have. But in my survey of what was missing or not found I forget to enjoy what I collected. If we are too busy looking for gold we neglect to appreciate the beautiful site, people and experiences that we have met along the way. For if we can only endure the pressure and heat of this coal road, just maybe one day we will walk on diamonds. The hindsight bias reveals how easy it is to make decisions when we know their consequences, but if we know all of the consequences to every decisions, there would be no daring, there would be no suspense, it would be like reading a book from the back to the beginning. Additionally, if it wasn't enough to second-guess ourselves we begin to compare our lives to others. It can be the jealousy of why do they have or deserve the life I should have, or why didn't we follow the path that would have led us where they are. Another world tends to have a different color when you're staring out your blue window, but such shades may not be true, because someone is peeking through their patio to catch a glimpse of you.

Chapter 4

"The wonderful thing about make believe is that it makes us believe." -A. Nobody

She came to me in a dream this night glowing in a gown of gold with fire on the tails. I sat anxiously my thoughts raced like a black corvette in a pitch-black night. My palms moist with sweat clasping a cheap pen low on ink trying to scribble out the first line of redemption. My glasses hung crooked and I ignored the fingerprint on the left lens that would have normally driven me mad. My eyes grew heavy and my head dropped as the clock struck 2:27AM. I drifted into the space where she could find me. Her gold gown glowing, her curly hair hung to her knees. Her eyes were bold and hazel brown. Her skin was as soft Egyptian down; her essence vivid and powerful, her lips were full and as moist as buttercup fountains. She was beautiful. Even after a million years she was ageless. Her smile was genuine and proud like her only son had been crowned King. The sky behind her became dawn and she spoke tenderly but certain.

It was you who left me!" she whispered

I recall the coat you wore when you left me there in the snow, but it was you who froze. You left me your heart in that blizzard and as the chills carried from your ears to your toes. I thought you would call for me sooner, was it your pride that kept you away?

Why now? Why here, this eve, this day?

Like a murderer in court, words of truth would be condemning, for this moment would be my reprieve, my crossroads or my ending.

"Forgive Me," I whispered, so ashamed my words mumbled.

"Show me that you love me," she said, her soft hands extended placing her palm gently upon my head.

"Speak to me as though you couldn't have before; cry to me the tears you've never wept before now."

"I am stupid" I looked into her eyes and replied,

Dry me a river

I earn my pain

My thoughts in a room full of mirrors

Why do we look the same?

I stand as a man with more feet than socks

And travel through the valleys when the road is blocked

When 6 come 9

Plus a quarter to 4

We only got a 1000 steps left till a Million more

It can't be simple I'm just too strange

In my one good suit with 4 bad stains

I'm so stupid

Something super stupid

I begged you stay
But I ran away
Stone Free is too high of a price to pay
Though I love the land of make believe
I gotta find a way just to make it be
For if my next breath has no reprise
A waste of life to never be alive
I'm so stupid
Something super stupid

I soil my hands of cleanliness
In pursuit of the shrines of emptiness
Till a quest makes me whole
I battle for, not too wage war with you
Trade you diamonds for coal
For my genius wont comprehend
No classes or school
Not an entity quite like me
Just as nothing compares to you

I'm so stupid
Something super stupid

If you give all your love to me
Or hold me too close
You will see what you think I need
Is what I resist the most
I've been a Voodoo Chile and a Mannish boy
Color my world in Purple mist
Even if I aint much at all
I gotta be better than this

I'm just stupid
Something super stupid

Stupid says to dummy
You can't tell me my hearts not true
Call me foolish
Call me cruel
But don't call me out of Love with you
Super stupid I can feel my dreams cut me in my bed
And the voices turn to screams
Can't get them out of my head

I'm Stupid
Something Super Stupid
Super Stupid but I aint ashamed
I can't shake these maggots up off of my brain
Insect a side, Lord free my mind
If the Earth shall hath me bound
I've been the Bear amongst the beast of burdens
And the Prince of pretend
Even heard my own self knockin
But I won't let me in
I'm so stupid
Something super stupid

"I pledge this to you in honesty and on all, the Lord has blessed"
She pinched my cheek and said, "I know that's why I never left."

I pledged I'd give her everything to keep her at my side, even if it meant spilling blood from my old wounds, searching for lost tears, and placing a torch to old burns.

I had sworn I'd never write of love again. Not because I had been hurt, not because it had abandoned me, not because I yearned for it. I felt that I could no longer be genuine, how could a man that pushed away any woman who would dare to love him, write with promises of affection and companionship? How could a man so eager to leave, vow to stay. The more I learned about love the less I understood, I didn't know how to keep it so I just let it go. But I could not deny that every song is a love song. If I refused to write love songs, I wouldn't be able to write about anything passionately. There would only be a black hole of utter emptiness, barren masses where creativity once lived abundantly.

I suppose you're wondering what's my story what went wrong for me to only see the dark side of the canyon. Well I could lie to you and tell you my heart was broken, that I was the perfect guy chasing the wrong woman, so you'd feel sorry for me. I could even tell you about the tears I caused but that's just life. Those are events that happen to anyone who lives and cares for someone else. You will be hurt and you will hurt someone. Life is short and we are on a path to live it as best as we can and be surrounded by the people who make us feel the best. Conversely, sometimes we don't always make others feel the way they make us feel. Your dream guy may have another dream girl; your wife to be may have another husband in mind. If life was all pleasantries and apple blossoms, what would your favorite song be?

OK so, maybe there was a girl, in fact or fiction, with soft thick hair, sometimes short, sometimes long, sometimes light, and sometimes dark. Her skin tinted the shade of mocha in the summer, flavored with butterscotch 3 weeks after fall. I knew that her smile was pure from the moment I met her. For I was pure myself, I was the recluse who only knew of books, and music, and she was the outgoing free spirited art student, I was the introverted Pre Med pupil short for Pre Meditating. She was warm and comforting like your favorite blanket as you nestle into the couch on a lazy Sunday. Why would such a beautiful girl sit next to me and smile? She must want my class notes. I was pleasantly surprised by a bit of Serendipity, which is also classic movie starring John Cusack and

Kate Beckinsale. From the first words she spoke to the next few that I stuttered. I knew that this moment was the beginning of something, some type of story, something that would be told over the years. I didn't know how it would be told, from whose perspective or who to, but it had the ring of "Once upon a time"

Time is a precious thing, the present, immediately becomes the past, relationships blossom, color, fade and wither, friends are separated and reunited, love grows, or shrinks but never remains constant. She was the essence of time; time was lost when I was with her, time passed preciously when I was away. Time watched us drift apart; time had brought us back together. Time was taken for granted, as I believed the perfect time would come. In time I missed moments that I would never get back. Time brought her to me in the right place at the right time, on the right hand and time revealed that our time would one-day end, sometime before never. I realized that in real life "once upon a time" doesn't end in "Happily after ever" and just as we all eventually lose our loved ones, I would lose her too. One day I would attend her wedding and smile as I fought back chills that stabbed like a stiff arctic breeze. One day when I came home she would no longer be in the house over yonder. The last page will be turned and she will embark upon a new volume elsewhere. While I ponder alternate endings like those choose your own adventure children's books. I think of times I should've kissed her but shied away in fear of losing what we did have together, even if it wasn't enough. I could choose door #3 and find more than I imagined, I could choose door #1 and lose it all or I could stand pat and hope to ride the wave of today into the tide on another.

We danced close one night, this moment the penmanship could've changed, the dialogue could've become written in italics, punctuation could've have been placed at the end of sentences. The music pulsed, our bodies were aligned and in tune, her breath was sweet from the Captain Morgan and coke, and half a drag of cig, (she only smoked when she drank.) I felt her breath on my neck, and I'm sure she felt mine, my heart raced like a novice high school debate team captain in a backseat of a 67 Cadillac with the head cheerleader, bababa boom baboom. The base pounded in our ears, my left hand was placed gingerly on her right back pocket, and my right hand clutched her belt. I felt her lips softly brush against my neck. The rapid heart rate turned to nervous shakes, which I hoped were hidden by the music, bass vibrations, and her modest buzz. Her hips sunk into me, her pelvis pressed against mine, the friction was so strong that the next touch could've meant static shock. Her skin was warm, but she was cool, her movement fluid, she was temptation, she was fantasy, only she was real; she was seduction, she was sex. I was a virgin puzzled by my own passion. I had only seen this in movies. It was too good to be true; things like this didn't happen to me. I must be reading the signs wrong, like when my high school baseball coach told me to take the pitch rather than swing wildly. "It's just a dance don't get excited, too late you're excited. Kiss her! Say something sensual! Say anything! Do it now!" The music faded the song was over. The moment was lost, the opportunity had passed, the sands funneled faster through an hourglass. I said to myself

"If only, I can get another chance," I didn't.

"If I could just get one more dance," I couldn't.

"If I could just hold her that way again," I wouldn't.

In a life spanning 10,000 days, my only regrets are what I had not done, what I had not tried. Even in deception my regret was that I did not tell the truth, not that I lied.

Another one walked down the hill, she tried to give me a shot but I didn't offer much. So I deserved the nothing that I got. Playfully I perplexed her, sent her to the moon with frustration. She just wanted me to say something from the heart and act without calculation. From the moment I wrote my number on a napkin, to the last email; I never pushed, I never pressured, I never persisted, and I never really tried. It felt better flying on the wings of maybe than dragging on the tail of No, sometimes you just want to hold on to the dream so tight you let the real thing go.

I could not blame her for moving on. I didn't even resent her for it. I was a wayward ship in a rocky Sea, so when the jet came to her rescue it was probably meant to be. Despite my wanton for words and expression, the goodbye would be expressionless without a soliloquy for a fairy tale farewell. It would be simple, the frigidness of I'll never see you again would wear the same scarf as the lukewarm sentiment of see you next week.

I know it's not what you read on Marshall's inspiration posters, or see in sappy films. But real life isn't perfectly scripted for theatre. We can only hope that by the end of it we have enough good clips to put a good film together. Love was a fantasy to me. And we adorn fantasy because we are dull without it. But to truly appreciate fantasy, it's important to understand how elusive and rare it is. As adults published fantasies are sometimes all that is left to remind us of the dreams we once had and the imagination we once nurtured. Fantasy is the reason that some people would rather masturbate than sleep with their partner. Fantasy allows us to refrain from stabbing an evil boss or choking an annoying neighbor. It even sheds light on how shitty our current existence is so maybe we will do something about it and then just maybe something good could happen.

Chapter 5

“You have been ravaged young man. Slighted by the tongues of those who whisper, you’ve been lost searching the world with only faith stronger than thickest of the darkness and a savage desire to starve a burning hunger. For all in the rearview is lost on you, for nothing else will matter now, you’ve promised me your burden, you’ve promised me your pain, and I promise you an ending for these tears even if it all was in vain.”

It was a Friday night at the gym about an hour before closing when my co-worker Eddie pleaded for a favor. He had been training a beautiful woman who just so happened to have the evening free. The problem was Eddie had a second job-chauffeuring people to and from the airport for a sedan service from 10-6.

“John I need favor,” he asked with a look of desperation and anxiousness.

I knew by his expression this favor wasn’t going to be something simple like borrowing a tennis racket or jumping his car.

“No: I responded out of instinct”

“I didn’t even tell you what it is yet, just hear me out!” he persisted.

“Fine, what is it?” I asked reluctantly.

“I need you to do some pickups for me tonight at LAX,” he exclaimed

“Hell No, I don’t work there”

“They will never know, I’ll pick the car up we’ll switch I mean you are a little uglier than me but wear the hat and no one will notice”

“You want me to wear that damn hat too?”

“Look it’s not bad man they tip well, and you just have to cover for a few hours, when I drop her off I’ll come finish the shift”

“No” I insisted

I’ll give you my hourly too that’s like 120 for 4 hours and I know you could use the money. C’mon man you know how long I’ve been trying to get with Courtney, her ass is...Man please don’t make me cancel on her” he pleaded.

“What if I have plans” I asked

“You don’t have no damn plans John, Help me out man.”

“Fine” I reluctantly agreed

Shamefully, he was correct, I didn’t have any plans, I needed the money and Courtney was gorgeous.

Eddie left to return an hour later with the Limo as I was locking up.

I realized in the moment that he opened the vehicle door and walked towards me that my life really had not gone at all how I planned. I was now a chauffeur. To compound the matter I was sure I was doomed to feel like a peasant at some point in the night when a beautiful actress or model gave me 5.00 bucks for carrying her bags to her door. Sometimes in life there are these points in time where you’d think you’d rather die or take on some ailment just to have an excuse not do something you don’t feel like doing. I thought that if I just drove into a tree at 80 mph I wouldn’t have to face the shame. Fortunately, my reasonable side kicked in, it was only 4 hours, what could possibly happen right?

“Thanks for this Man, I won’t forget this,” he promised.

“Yes you will.” I assured.

“The pickup list is in the car, now where are your keys I’ve gotta go” he asked

“Why does he need my keys?” I pondered, before the logic crept in. He obviously would need my keys because he had taken his car to pick up the Limo and whenever he dropped the harlot off he could meet me, give me my car and take back the Limo.

I gave him the keys and as he approached the passenger side of the vehicle he noticed a big brown box.

“Man, can you move the box please”

I remembered I had just received a shipment of 150 books that I intended to sell and give away to bookstores to promote my work. My trunk was full so I had put the box in the front seat. Eddie needed the space and I couldn’t blame him for not wanting a large box banging around the backseat of the car every time he reached a stoplight. I was able to tuck the box on the right side of the limo trunk and drove to LAX to cover his shift.

The clock read 1:17, I had completed about four or five runs and collected about 50 bucks in tips. There was still no word from Eddie. Perhaps the date had gone well and she invited him upstairs for Milano cookies and water sports, Eddie was nasty like that. The pickup list showed a 1:45 pickup at American Airlines terminal en route to Westwood. “What the hell” I thought. I’d never been to Westwood. I arrived at the terminal eight minutes early and held up a sign for Madelyn Kopelstein. A lovely graceful older woman approached me.

“Hello, I am Madelyn” she greeted me, extending her hand in introduction.

I’d estimate her age to be 50+ based upon her hands, which you couldn’t help but notice due to the enormous diamond wedding ring she wore. However, she looked good for her age and could pass for 45 in gloves. She was dressed comfortably in well-fitting sweats. Her breast appeared to be augmented; her lips possibly had been touched with collagen. Her hair was neatly highlighted mingling shades of brown. Her demeanor was pleasant but she was clearly fatigued and eager to get home. Two large suitcases accompanied her that barely fit in the trunk.

I drove in silence for the first 5 minutes of the trip to her home. I figured that most people preferred to just lay back, enjoy the ride and not to be bothered the driver.

“What’s your name young man?” she asked

“Shit what was my name am I Eddie or John? Well no sense in lying” I thought.

“John” Ma’am

“Oh really? My grandfather’s name was John,” she mentioned.

“So John how have these over privileged midnight flier brats have been treating you tonight” she asked.

I was a bit surprised by the question and couldn’t help but laugh as I answered her

“Just fine Ma’am I just keep on straight ahead and try not to commit any traffic major violations.”

“Oh call me Madelyn, my mother is Ma’am

“Where are you coming from?” I asked.

“Philadelphia?” she responded, I was there for my niece’s wedding, two weeks with my extended family was a nightmare. I would’ve become an alcoholic if I had to stay three more days”

Her sincerity was refreshing. I felt like one of those cab drivers on HBO with passengers venting to a stranger.

She was fun to talk to and the dialogue made the trip seem to go quickly.

We arrived at her residence. I opened her door and began to extract the luggage from the trunk. The size of the bags made it a tight fit so I had to jostle them out and upon freeing the first back I serendipitously ripped open my box of books and they spilled onto her drive way. I retrieved her other luggage bag before picking up the mess.

“Sorry about that” I said while tossing the loose paperbacks back into the trunk.

“Not a problem.” she insisted. She was helping me fetch the loose books when she collected one and observed the cover.

“Are these your books?” she asked

“Yea,” I said impassively.

“Now that I think about it you do seem like a writer. What are you doing driving Sedans?” she asked.

“Well I guess I’m not that good of a writer,” I quipped jokingly.

“I find that hard to believe,” she added.

“Actually, I’m not even really a driver, my co-worker at the gym I work at had a date and I covered for him.

“Well that’s kind of you”

“Kind of stupid maybe, I tried to get out of it but I couldn’t come up with a good excuse” I added.

She laughed and stated,

“Well you are still a young man, enjoy it and have some fun,”

“How much are your books?” she queried.

“Oh here you can have one I insisted; if you like it just spread the word”

“No, you should be paid for your work” she said as I set her bags by the door.

She handed me a \$50 bill and said she would tell friends if she liked it. I gave her a business card and I shook her hand in goodbye never expecting to see or hear from her again.

At 2:40 AM Eddie called as I was heading back to the airport

“I’m sorry I am late man, meet me at the Boeing parking lot at 3 and I’ll tell you about everything later.”

I met Eddie at 3 and he filled me in on the sultry details of their early morning romp, it had gone as I presumed minus the cookies. I tossed the broken box of books back in my backseat and headed home, sadly looking forward to a weekend of Twilight Zone reruns and naps.

The phone rung at the ungodly early hour of noon, I nearly ignored the call figuring it was a telemarketer or bill collector until I noticed the familiar “323” area code.

“John, this is Madelyn Kopelstein, we met last night and I couldn’t sleep so I read your poetry and couldn’t put it down. So in short I called my brother in law at *Imagine* and he wants you to meet him at his office Monday, at 2 if you’re available. I was drowsy

so the information processed slower than usual but I could not believe what I was hearing.

My eyes widened in the amazement but my heart was skeptical that this was merely a cruel dream or prank. But I hadn't told anyone about meeting Madelyn.

"Of course I'm available. Thanks a lot Madelyn, wish me luck!" I responded

"Honey, you don't need luck just opportunity, so make the most of it."

I arrived at Imagine headquarters at 1:42 and checked in with Lisa the receptionist, a beautiful young lady with a chocolate complexion, slender build, short hair and pretty teeth. I sat in the lobby waiting to be called with the priority level of a man with a rash in emergency. The walls were covered in platinum and gold records, dating back to the 60s. Placed before me was a poster that read "Changing the world one song a time, Imagine That." I stared at the picture for what seemed like hours but only 14 minutes of real time. My watch read 1:56, they would be calling my name any minute now. The room was calm and quiet except for Lisa answering phone calls to occasionally inform callers "We do not accept unsolicited material." The music in the room was faint but I could recognize that the song playing was Cyndi Lauper "Time after Time" It was now 2:03, my neck felt warm, my tie felt tight. I closed my eyes to meditate and imagine, just then I heard,

"John Robe, Mr. Robe!" Lisa called.

I must have drifted off for a second.

"Yes" I answered.

"Mr. Marshall will see you now"

I gazed at my watch again.

It was 2:13, a thirteen-minute wait, not bad for a no one.

"You're a love song writer" Mr. Marshall started, skipping prolonged introductions.

"I guess you can kind of say that." I replied.

"No, you're definitely a love song writer, that's good we've got Pop, plenty of it what we need here are love songs, ballads, that type of thing. The reason why I wanted to speak with you is because your writings speak the words of an old soul, a true romance that barely exist anymore, with relatable heartbreak. You see John, between you and I most of our writers are shit when it comes to love songs, no imagination, no perspective everything is just about sex and while we all like sex, sex is not necessarily romance and romance sells. We need you to help us put the B back in R&B.

"Well thanks, I don't know how much perspective I have on the issue but I keep the Blues in a briefcase" I replied.

"It's here on the page, you write from a women's view here." he added while scanning my book.

"A guys view here, it doesn't wait for the chorus to make the song, and the verse makes the chorus. This is good stuff you got here, some of it we can use. And because you drive limos for a living I am guessing that you don't have much experience. Which means you don't have bad habits? I hate bad habits. My ex-wife had bad habits, spending money and screwing other men but I digress."

Mitch was mildly strange, a little egocentric, a risk taker and I needed someone to be willing to gamble on me.

“Well I’m not a limo driver sir, I was just driving it for my friend”

“You drive limos for your friends?” I don’t get how that makes you not a limo driver. But nevertheless one job is another, whether you are driving sedans or wasting away in a 5x5 cubicle. What I want to offer you is an opportunity for your life not to suck. Are you interested?”

“Yes definitely!” I replied.

What else was I going to say? “No thank you sir,” and go back to work and sit in my cubicle thinking about how I ruined this?

“I’m going to give you a chance to prove yourself. You succeed. We negotiate a fair contract. If you fail well, maybe you can be my driver,” he stated.

Not the most encouraging of sentiments but I was up for the challenge.

“Now, I have some good news and bad news which one do you prefer first” he asked.

“Bad news already?” I pondered so I selected good news first to dilute the upcoming blow.

“Good news is you’re going to be working with one of our biggest stars”

“That is good news,” I replied ready for the bad news.

“Bad news is, she has fired her previous 4 writers, good luck.”

He handed me a piece of paper with a floor and studio number on it, your mission begins now”

“Now?” I replied excited yet nervous.

“What do you have someone else to take to the airport?” he asked.

“No, just wasn’t expecting...”

“For things to happen so fast?” he guessed.

“Yea” I admitted.

“John, how old are you 28, 30?”

“33” I responded.

Well John, I am inclined to say this has not happened quickly at all. I imagine pardon the pun that you have been waiting about 20 of those 33 years for right now. So tell me, am I moving too fast for you because if you prefer I could tell you I’m going to call you and make use of this delightful shredder Lisa got me for bosses day, to think I didn’t even know there was such a day.”

“No I’m in” I assured him.

“I told you, we can use you so you’re being used, meet Tony in the studio in 5 minutes I’ll call him to tell him you’re on the way. Take the elevator to the 12th floor; turn right, you can’t miss it. Like I said you’re going to be working on an album, with one of our more experienced artist, that is if she agrees to work with you, she’s has a reputation for being a little difficult, but you’re a likable guy, she may not hate you.”

“You think she’ll like me?” I replied rather surprised because charm was not my greatest attribute.

“That’s not what I said, I said she may not hate you,” he corrected, as he directed me to the elevator.

I was ready for this. I was writing more each day, it was a challenge to create something fresh but relatable, fun but serious, heartfelt but not weak. A music exec once told me that lyricist need to find a niche and learn to be honest with themselves so they can understand that everything they write is not a hit, much of it is not even good. As much I hated to admit it, despite how I vowed to abandon them. I knew that love songs were my niche and it was a bitch.

I made my way to the elevators somewhat shocked but mostly nervous, what just happened? Five years ago, I was locking concert chairs for a living, 24 hours ago I was falling asleep in a meeting about BMI and acupuncture charges. I had to be dreaming; surely this alarm clock would alarm any second, as I watch the numbers change on the elevator display, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12.

Bing.

The doors opened and I could hear music, but it wasn't Bone Thugs, Days of Our lives or All Along the Watchtower, my usual morning alarms.

It was an unrecognizable foot tapping instrumental. It reminded me of being back in college in a buddy's basement while they produced Hip Hop beats. I turned right following the sound; the music grew clearer with each step. Now I could hear some chatter. The music stopped replaced by intermittent instruments as if someone was tuning. "What should I do in that break, should I leave it blank" speaks a woman in a sweet and mildly raspy voice.

"Just let it go," uttered a male voice.

"The third line is awkward, do I just sustain it? The female responded.

"Just do it fast, bravado," said the male voice.

"Yea whatever loser," she responded in laughter.

Goosebumps rose against the back of my neck and arms; it could have been 80 degrees or 20 and I would not have known the difference.

It was like slow motion as I turned the corner into the entrance, my forearm gently pushed in the half-open door careful not make a creak to narrate my introduction. I pictured a moment like this once before while I lay in bed, though the music in the background was different. I felt like a boy in from the storm with a thousand blues who walked over a million miles without a scuff on his shoes.

Initially I went unnoticed or ignored depending on the point of view. I scanned the control room, wondering which one of these three guys was Tony.

I suspected it was the one with short black but full hair. He looked to be in his late 30's. His face was scruffy like he preferred to be clean-shaven but just hadn't gotten around to it the last few days.

"This is the last time I'm going to do it Tony" the woman shouted.

"Yep that's him," I realized. But it was the female voice that sounded familiar, it was like hearing the voice of an old classmate, it wasn't your former best pal, just someone you know but their name slipped your grasp like wet bar soap in a hotel shower.

I wrenched my head around to peak around the glass to see who it was, her hair was black, I just needed her to turn her head 40 degrees to the left to reveal her face.

I inched closer to the production board where Tony sat and two guys who looked like creative types noticed me.

The look that I received was that of “can I help you, cause you’re not supposed to be in here” like I was a sandwich delivery boy lost in the pentagon.

For a second I wished I did have a sandwich in my hand. Then at least the glares would have been mixed with slight excitement that lunch has arrived.

The intro drum line had begun to kick.

“Wait a minute, he’s starting that slur too early.” The female voice exclaimed.

The music stopped and the momentary break broke Tony’s concentration just enough to notice that now three people in the room were staring at something or someone behind him.

He spun his chair around,

“Hey who the heck are you?”

“Yeah I’m John, Mitch sent me.”

“Oh you’re that Lyricist, I’m Tony, that pale fucker over there is our bass player Randy” pointing to a slender blonde guy with skater shoes and skinny jeans.

“And the guy with the dreads over there is Mike the drummer, and that is Izabella,” he pointing to a well-dressed lady with a smooth bronze complexion, full lips, long dark hair and piercing eyes sharp enough to cut through the will of a man like fresh birthday cake.

“She is, something else,” Tony finished.

“I’m good fortune,” she said extending her hand, “Nice to meet you Charlie.”

I reminded her that my name was John and was met with:

“Oh not yet you aren’t” she spoke with a sinister giggle.

“But at least you have a nice butt, Sunol your new Charlie is here!”

The next steps felt like slow motion as it all came together, that singing voice, the half raspy talking tone. Five years and 9 months to the day I saw her in that dressing room we met again.

I extended my hand to greet her.

She didn’t budge. Her hair was longer, lighter, her make-up a bit thicker then I remembered and she wore prescription glasses.

“Where are you from Charlie?”

Puzzled as to why people kept calling me Charlie,

I hesitated, before replying “Michigan”

“Awwww that’s so cute” chimed Izabella in a partly genuine but mostly condescending tone.

“Sunol is from Michigan,” she continued.

“Yeah, I read; the pride of Imlay City right?”

“Yea Guilty” she said almost embarrassed.

“So Mitch says you’re pretty good” she changed the subject, which was fine by me.

“Well that’s up for debate but I try not to suck, if that’s any consolation.” I replied.

She smiled as if impressed by my combination of humility and humor; little did she know I was humbled by my inability to be humorous amongst other things.

She didn’t recognize me from before carrying couches in her dressing room a few years ago, which was a relief. The last thing she needed to know was that I was desperate, knowing this could be my one shot and I was terrified that I’d blow it.

I wanted her to believe she needed me.

“Who have you written for?” she asked.

With no hesitation I came up with names of some Indie bands I wrote songs for in college.

“Mostly rock groups, Ground Control, Akon (remembering a hit song of his that was stolen from me). I did some early work with Laface etc.”

I embellished a bit but it sounded good.

“So what did you have in mind for me?” she asked.

I had not a damn thing in mind, I just so happened meet a lady married to a guy who made a call to her brother-in law that put me in a room with her. But since I was, I might as well make the most of it so I said the first thing that filled my thoughts.

“The canvas is clear and while I hold your brush I need to learn your shades, spectrums and hues. You have outgrown your boots so you seek bigger socks and if you want me to write you a love story we’re going to need a plot. I mean I could give you a bunch of notebook paper I’ve scribbled on but it would be like walking through a hallmark trying to find a card that says I want a divorce or congratulations you’re not the father.” I explained.

Maybe I impressed her a little bit or maybe she just thought I was full of stool, yet appreciated the fact that I wasn’t trying to pawn off every song I’d ever written onto her. I figured I would let her ask for those later on. This was going to be a challenge to see if I really deserved to be here or if I had just been a dreamer all along.

“I’ll tell you what, take me to lunch and I’ll fill you in,” she proposed.

“Tony, let’s wrap up we’re not getting anything done today anyway”

“As you wish, it’s your dime not mine, just in time for happy hour I need a drink or eight just enough to make bad decisions or pass out whichever comes first. Care to accompany me Izzy? I’ll let you rev my bike just how you like it.”

“You really know how to talk dirty to a girl Tony” said Izabella.

“Sunol, are you going to be okay with Charlie?” Izabella queried.

“I’ll be fine, go ahead” Sunol assured Izabella that she trusted me not to kidnap her.

“Charlie I’ll see you in the A.M Yes?” yelled Tony.

“Yeah I’ll be here”

The room cleared leaving Sunol and I alone.

“I want Italian there’s a place down the street you can take me there, Are you driving?”

“Yea sure I’ll drive,” I offered.

“What do you drive?” she asked somewhat snobbishly.

“A Ford,” I stated casually.

“Oh cool a Shelby or a GT? My ex had a GT it was blue with white stripes, he was a prick but the car was gorgeous, you probably know him; Ben Bowman pitched for the Dodgers.”

“No, I only watch the Tigers,” I responded.

“Oh, he wasn’t very good anyway his ERA was as high as his ego, But I loved that car, so which one do you have?”

“I drive a Fusion,” I admitted, she went from long-winded to speechless. I had ruined the momentum of a budding conversation.

“Oh,” Her reaction led me to reminisce upon a brief moment in time when I sat next to a 5’8 blonde named Jordana in Economics class. I remembered her vividly because she had an ex named Chase to whom she would expose secrets about, that she probably vowed never to tell. There was a creepy guy who sat behind us who hated women and mentioned threatening a former girlfriend that he would attack her with a coat hanger if she ever got pregnant and refused an abortion. But back to the point of the flashback, Jordana was from L.A. but didn’t care much to go back.

“The car you drive will determine who will and won’t talk to you.” she warned.

She drove a blue convertible Volkswagon.

I expected Sunol would scoff and demand to drive, she didn’t, she offered pleasantly.

“Oh I can drive,”

It was like politely offering peppermint to someone with bad breath rather than saying your breath smells like garlic and carrots, please take this gum. I didn’t mind, life is too short to be offended, besides, the main reason I bought the car was because of the gas mileage and what better gas conservation than not driving at all. I also hated driving to places I didn’t know. The city was still foreign to me; one-way streets and lots of crossing pedestrians are a bad mix when you don’t know where you are going.

We took the elevator to the 4th floor garage, when she reached in her purse and disarmed the alarm to a beautiful pearl Audi R8 with black accents. I began to immediately hate my car. The windows were tinted limo black; the interior featured red leather seats with custom black stitching that spelled Touring Edition along the headrest.

“Buckle Up” she warned as she pulled off, melting the rear tires in smoke.

“This is a beautiful car” I complimented. In that moment I understood why ugly rich men can get gorgeous women that wouldn’t give me a handshake, and I thought I was a decent looking guy.

“Thanks” she replied.

“Do you mind if I ask how much you paid for it?”

“A Royal Flush” she answered.

I felt like an idiot and didn’t want to admit I was puzzled by what that meant. I assumed that it was some rich person’s term for a dollar amount.

“A Royal Flush, cool.” I repeated.

She must’ve sensed my confusion because she elaborated, “I won it in a card game.”

“Get off the gas!” I uttered.

She slammed on the breaks. “What?” she jumped, peaking over the dash to see what she was going to hit.

“No it’s an expression, like get outta here, or you’re kidding.” I assured.

“Oh” she said in relief. She put her foot back on the gas and continued talking.

“No seriously, I was at a party last year. It was probably 3 am, and only 8 of us were left playing cards at a friend of mine’s place. I was up about 100K, and this guy wants to raise the stakes, but he is 40K short so he throws in a business card. Obviously, I ask, “What is that? I don’t care who you are, either you’re in or you’re out.” Apparently, he owns a dozen Audi dealerships in Southern California. So he says in this Russian accent, “You win you come see me, I’ll give you whatever car you want. (Sounded like vaunt)” So I’m like fair enough. He plays his hand and it’s a Full House. He smiled from ear to

ear with this creepy, conquering crap-eating grin. I take a drink and pause, lay out my hand, Bam! Royal Flush, I thought the guy was gonna soil himself right there. He got up and left in a huff. A few days later Izabella took me to his Beverly Hills dealership and I picked the most expensive one I could find. The sales associate was scared to give it to me for free, so they called the Russian and he tells them to let me have it. I gave the salesman a grand because he was sweetheart from South Dakota.”

“I once won a Piston mug in a raffle.” I replied in shame.

“Well see we’re even because I’ve never won a Piston mug.” she quipped.

She laughed and I could feel that she may have let her guard down a bit as she sped around corners, and stopped suddenly in the valet parking of a bistro.

“C’mon Charlie” she says as the valet opened her door.

We were seated at a booth in the Northeast corner of the restaurant.

The nearest patrons were three booths away. A family, the father white haired early 50’s beard and edges professionally trimmed. His wife was mid to late 40’s, good looking but clearly had work done. Her lips reminded me of that lady who was married to Don Johnson. “What was her name?” I ponder as the waitress approaches to get our drink order. The waitress’ name was Amanda or at least that’s what was on her nametag.

Hi, I’m Amanda I’ll be your server today can I interest you in?”

I blocked out the rest, it may as well have been Charlie Brown’s mother talking. I was still thinking of Don Johnson’s ex-wife with the augmented lips name.

Tip of the tongue.

“Sir, Sir?” Amanda calls in the background.

“Charlie!” Sunol yells, snapping me back in focus.

“Why are you peeping on that old lady?” she asked.

“What was the name of that actress from the 80’s with the lips?” I asked.

There was immediate silence from the waitress and Sunol as I realized that my previous question failed to provide enough descriptive information for an actual response.

“C’mon the lady that was married to Don Johnson, she was in the Working Girl movie!” I added.

“Oh Melanie Griffith” said Amanda.

“Yes that’s it!”

I recalled, immediately relieved that I wouldn’t have to continue combing my memory for every white actress over 50 years old with potato-head lips.

Now I was curious to know how this adorable young waitress, not a day over 23 as evident by her tight skin and fading forehead acne, would know who that was.

“She comes in here sometimes,” Amanda offered.

“Anything to drink?” she persisted after probably asking four times during my brief escape to a mental Mars.

With a brief smile and still thinking, “Yeah Melanie Griffith, how did I forget that?”

I flipped my menu to the beverage section.

Raspberry lemonade, 8.00 the menu read.

“Water is fine,” I responded.

“Be right out” Amanda cheerily exclaimed.

I was smiling from ear to ear like a kid whose first crush just checked the yes box when Sunol looked up from her menu briefly, shifting her gaze to scan me.

“You’re kind of weird aren’t you Charlie?” she asked.

“No,” I responded. My first reaction was to lie,

“Well not really, probably a little ... Yes but not to be confused with a weirdo” I relented.

“It’s okay,” she says turning her attention back to the menu.

“Weird I can handle, this is L.A. It’s the normal people you have to worry about.”

“What about you?” I asked to see if she too would admit to occasional mental explorations.

“No I haven’t been weird in years,” she paused before continuing with a kidding smile.

“I’ve graduated to eccentric.” she clarified.

“When you’re weird, you’re all alone and when you’re eccentric people want to be just like you but I’d rather be weird than ordinary, at least you have something as your own that way?”

“Why do you keep looking at those people?” she inquired.

“Well there is this thing I like to do, I can analyze people and tell you about their lives just by watching them, the family in the booth behind you, just by watching them I can tell what he does for a living, likely property development, his build and posture suggest he has a blue-collar background but his precision haircut and his wife’s jewelry suggest he is a key decision maker. Furthermore, that’s not his first wife. Nor are they her children, plus the little girl doesn’t care for her much and lastly she doesn’t work.” I explain.

“I don’t believe you,” she doubted.

“Wanna bet?”

“Yes! What’s the bet?” she said excitedly.

Her eagerness gave me pause because I immediately realized her stakes would be high being that she told no more than thirtyminutes ago that she won a \$100,000 car in a card game, so I knew I needed to make the stakes interesting on non-monetary terms.

“When I win, the next time you accept a music award at a nationally televised event you have to pick your nose and casually flick a booger during your acceptance speech.”

“What? You have problems!” she laughed and refused, “No way!”

“C’mon are you scared Maxim is going to drop you 10 spots?”

“Fine you’re on, but if I win you are my errand boy for a week,” she proposed.

“Deal!” I accepted her terms.

“So how do we test this theory of yours?” she questioned.

“You are the celebrity; I’m a moderately scary looking black guy who may make them uncomfortable. So go over and compliment the little girl, I’m sure they will be quite talkative once they recognize you. People can be quite open with strangers.”

Sunol took my advice and approached the table targeting her attention at the young girl.

“You are such a pretty young girl. I love your pigtails you remind me of my little sister when she was a girl. What’s your name?”

“Gabiella!” the little girl answered happily. “But you can call me Gabby.”

“Well Gabby, that’s a pretty name for such a pretty girl. How old are you?”

“8,” Gabriella replied.

“You have a lovely daughter, Ma’am.” Sunol aimed at the Melanie Griffith double.

“She’s not my Mommy! My Mommy says she is a hussy.” The little girl volunteered. Which was two points for me as well as hilarious.

“Gabby, that’s not very polite,” The silver haired father interjected.

“Excuse me for saying so Ms. but you look really familiar.” The step-mom with the life jacket lips said to Sunol.

“I know who you are,” Gabby volunteered sweetly, leaning over her oblivious younger brother.

“You sing the song, *Alonely*,” Gabby continued.

The next few moments were typical, pictures were taken handshakes and smiles were exchanged before Sunol made her way back to the table.

“Okay you were right about the wife and the little girl,” she admitted.

“How did you know?” she leaned forward speaking a few notches above whispering.

I shared my observations. “The little girl’s body language, she always sits at an angle towards her father showing little direct acknowledgement of her step mom, she doesn't even look at her to answer questions. I could tell the wife is arm candy because she is early 40’s and desperately clinging to her youth with plastic surgery, working women typically don’t have the free time for that.”

“But I didn’t get anything about the Dad’s job,” she added

“Be patient” I suggested.

The sweet waitress Amanda returned to the table for our order. I took Sunol’s lead and gambled on the Grilled Lemon Chicken. I gambled wrong the order arrived with portions suitable for a teenage girl. Sensing the contempt and budding disappointment on my face Amanda returned to the table moments later with an extra portion of chicken and a side of broccoli. I liked Amanda.

She reminded me of a person from some point in my life that I forgot how much I liked.

“That was sweet of her.” Sunol agreed.

Sunol was barely on her third bite of her Lasagna when the opportunistic family man and curly haired Gabrielle stopped by our table to say goodbye. The young girl waved goodbye in the adorable way that well-mannered kids do and the father slipped a business card on the table before walking away.

Sunol looked at me with a grin of curiosity to see if I was going to pick up the card before she lifted it from the side of the bread bowl to read it.

I smiled back, and waited patiently for her to acknowledge that I had won the bet.

She nodded her head slightly in disbelief before turning the card around so I could see it.

“Rensberger Commercial Reality, Chief Development Officer,” she recited.

“You know that guy!” she accused.

“No I do not, believe it or not I don't spend my free time reading architecture and realty journals, but I do know that guys like him are way too opportunistic to let a great net-

working opportunity pass, he wasn't going to leave without giving you his card whatever his profession was.”

“You’re like Rain Man or something,” she commented while forking her vegetables a bit aggressively.

She clearly did not like to lose in any circumstance, especially one that she had reservations about agreeing to in the first place.

By the time we were ready to leave the restaurant that night, Sunol had come to accept her debt to pick her nose on national T.V. The various cocktails, fruity specialty drinks with umbrellas and cherry toppings she consumed helped her to cope. In her haze of alcohol induced bliss she held back very little. I realized that everything I knew about her that may have been printed in a magazine was just a fraction of her reality. She was the same girl who waited tables before her first hit song. She conversed and joked with Amanda. She was real and vulnerable. She shared her frustration with her label to sell with a lack of respect for her creative ideas. We were both at different points in our life but yet facing similar crossroads. She was holding on to something that I was reaching for. We were both seeing our own view of freedom. Before Jim Morrison died he longed to be regarded a poet despite his success as a rock star. Before the passing of Jimi Hendrix he just wanted to make music that he loved regardless of how commercial it was. They wanted to take flight to another dimension but were tied to the roof of a building. That is where she felt she was. I on the other hand, was just trying to get in on the bottom floor.

“I shouldn’t be driving, here take the keys.” Her sentence structure was still flawless but when she stood up from the booth her foot to floor coordination was noticeably compromised. Yet, she had the acumen to reach in her purse and remove two 100-dollar bills placing them neatly under a cocktail glass for the tip.

She wrapped her arm within mine and propped herself up against me, managing to walk out to the car without compromising grace.

“Where to Madam?” I asked.

“Fraggle Rock!” she coached like a slightly inebriated Pirate sending a crewmember to walk the plank for his own entertainment.

“Fraggle Rock?” I thought for sure that had to be the name of some strip joint or something.

“Fraggle Rock it is,” I agreed.

“But can I get in because I’m not really dressed y’know?”

“You’ll be fine.” she assured me before yelling “Fraggle Rock” in the navigation. A British female voice responded over the speakers set to provide turn-by-turn directions. It was a comforting voice because I had no idea where I was going and buzzed people tend to pass out randomly.

The night air was smooth and perfect. The lights of the city were dazzling as I drove through dark hills with no clue as to where I was, reliant on this navigation system. Sunol had been asleep since the first red light. Music for my mother by Parliament blasted from the Bose speakers. I almost felt like I was something. I almost felt like someone my Mom can be proud of but not really, nothing was really my own, it was just a moment; but a

good one, worst case scenario I go back to my cubicle Monday with a new experience able to say my weekend was better than fine; the best-case scenario was who knows?

At 10:13 PM we made our destination, and Sunol gathered consciousness just in time to lean over me and enter the gate code.

“What is this place?” I asked as the gate opened slowly reminiscent of scene 16 of a Dracula film.

“This place is my sanctuary,” she answered.

The property was hidden behind ancient trees, and well-manicured shrubbery.

Concrete angelic statues bordered the driveway. It was quite therapeutic, in fact I was expecting at any moment for an albino tiger to walk across the yards.

“Park here.” she directed.

“Nice spot, so did you move all the way out here just to play your music loud?” I joked.

“Just the opposite I moved here because all I hear are birds.”

The house was classic, similar to a 1960’s England two-story stone manor, like a fortress; A solace from a world that existed down the hill. I could relate to that, sometimes you just want to hear your thoughts, reflect and be at peace. Some people like the chaos, and need to be surrounded by others all of the time. I wondered, how do you find yourself that way? It seems that at least you would want to get away from the bullshit of other people’s lives sometimes, so you can deal with your own issues, unless of course you have issues that you just aren’t ready to deal with. A room full of mirrors can be a scary place if you can’t bare your own reflection.

“Make yourself at home, I’m going to go change,” she said as we entered the foyer. My curiosity led me to wander through the first floor, where I found a den, centered with a crème grand piano, capturing my attention like a lost child who found the game room. The carpet was light so I removed my shoes so not to stain it. Across from the Piano amongst a wall-sized bookcase sat an old antique circa 1940 record player, equipped with a gold horn speaker. I imagined that at some point in history this classical device served as a family’s main entertainment. I pondered what the music selection of that time would have been, likely Jazz, perhaps Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, or Cab Calloway. My mind always tends to run away with me. The bookcase was filled with records from artist of multiple generations most of which I was familiar with; Robert Johnson, Pink Floyd, Chuck Berry, Led Zeppelin, Carly Simon, Phil Collins, Sammy Davis Jr, and Nat King Cole, Billy Ocean and some others I had never heard of.

“So are you going to catalogue them or play one?” she startled me; leaning against the entryway, her arms crossed with a glass of red wine in her right.

“How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough,” she walked over to the bookcase.

“What’s your favorite right now?” I asked.

“Good question, what would be my favorite for today?” She squeezed hers lips thinking, attempting to match her current mindset with the album or song that matched.

“Ah got it,” She searched momentarily and recovered an album with a dark purple cover originating from the late 70’s to early 80’s.

“Edge of Seventeen, by Stevie Nicks,” she said excitedly.

“Ever heard of it?”

“No can’t say that I have,” I admitted.

“You know who Stevie Nicks is right?”

“Of course, I don’t think I could call myself a writer and not know who Stevie Nicks is, I’m just not familiar with that album by title.”

“Well Charlie it is my pleasure to enlighten you,” she said while placing the record softly onto the player and meticulously laying the needle down to the perfect spot.

I recognized the song immediately by the strong guitar riff. It had a feeling of captured emotion, something that could be used in a soundtrack of one’s life.

Sunol relaxed on the couch with her feet up and eyes closed, letting the music soak in like a drug, the wine glass now in her left hand.

I didn’t want to ruin the moment for her by speaking.

I knew exactly what she was feeling at that moment, regardless of what else may have been going on in her life, for five and a half minutes she could escape it all. She could go back to a time where she lived carefree, or perhaps look forward to such a time again. These are the moments that keep us sane. It keeps us from jerking the wheel to the left and driving off the cliff, or sitting in a closed garage with the engine running. It allows us to laugh through tears, and tear in laughter. We are reminded that we are not alone, we are reminded that we will heal, that we will grow, and that we have loved or been loved. In short, five minutes of the right song can help you move through a lifetime, believing as the credits roll on your story, you will drive off smiling into a mountainside sunset or sail away under the moon.

The music faded and she opened her eyes, returning to the ripe season of the present. “What were you just thinking about right then?” I asked.

She smiled and murmured “Apple pies” she divulged a tale of childhood memories with her family.

“Our family used to own an orchard out in the crush on your cousin country. On the fall weekends my sister and Mom and I would work there to help out my grandparents. I mean there would be people everywhere, y’know Michigan apple cider and pumpkin season. Anyway my sister Jasmine and I would spend most of the day just picking the apples and we would load them into a wheelbarrow and take them to the kitchen and separate the good ones from the bad. Jasmine always had an eye for the best apples and I always had the tendency to pick out the rotten ones, story of my life with men also but never mind that. Throughout the day, people would call to place orders for apple pies and my aunts and grandmother would spend all day baking. All day we would be tortured by the fresh smell of cinnamon apple pie and at 5 p.m. on Saturdays we would make the pie delivery runs with our mother.”

Her eyes began to widen as she reminisced.

“My grandmother had this burgundy 1980 Cadillac Brougham and we would pack loads of pies in the trunk and back seat. I always sat in the back to keep them from toppling over and because Jasmine once got caught eating the crust off of one of them. My mom would play the song every trip and we would all sing the words, and every time it ended, Jasmine would rewind it and we would start all over again. I remember the smell of those pies, the country breeze through the windows and I remember my mom being

happier than I'd ever seen her. I am sure she was sick of that song; Jas would probably play it 10 times, but she never said anything because we liked it. Once we were finished we'd go back to my grandparents' house get cleaned up and have dinner with warm cinnamon apple pie and ice cream for dessert, so yeah apple pies." she finished.

"Where was your dad?" I questioned.

"He was with bliss, he would be home watching Michigan Football with no girls to bother him."

"So how did you ever end up at state if your dad was a Michigan fan?"

"You have no idea, he wouldn't talk to me for weeks, he swore he wouldn't pay for it, he just couldn't understand that I didn't want to follow his footsteps but I thought it was the best decision for me at the time. Finally, once he was starting to come to grips with it I told him I was dropping out to be a singer. The disappointment on his face was cryptic, you would think I had just told him I was pregnant by some guy I met a rave." I spent my first two years out here waiting tables and he kept trying to get me to go back to school. And I was honestly thinking about it until I heard my first song on the radio. In that moment, I knew that no other profession in life would give me the opportunity to love what I am doing; the rush of a standing ovation or being able to control a crowd of 20,000 is something you will never experience in an office. It's probably the same thing that a fighter pilot feels the first time he releases a missile. There is nothing like it Charlie, It's better than sex, (pause) usually," she finished her glass of wine and begins to pour another,

"So how does he feel about your career choice now?" I asked.

"Are you kidding? God he loves it, I brought him to the Grammy's once and he got to hang out with Mick Jagger and couldn't stop talking about it for weeks."

The conversation was going so well until, the saga of I happened. "What about your sister?" I asked.

"She died ten years ago in a car accident."

"Classic John, you'd screw up a wet dream." I thought to myself, you'd think I would have known that from some Wikipedia page or common knowledge, but I had no idea.

I expected her to say she lived in Ohio with her husband and 3 kids.

There was a brief silence as the record player made its final spin.

"I'm sorry" I spoke, sincerely apologetic.

"No, it's fine, you didn't know, she was hit by a drunk driver."

"Your turn," she urged breaking the silence as she leaned back onto the couch, her legs crossing under her satin gown. Her posture was comfortable as if she was passively observing a therapy session.

"What movie takes you back to being a kid?" she added.

Immediately several movies pounced in my cloud of thought including Purple Rain, Last Dragon and Krush Groove. They were all classics in my eyes but I remembered one stood out; Breakin 2: Electric Boogaloo, starring Shabby Doo, Boogaloo Shrimp and Lucinda Dickey with special musical guest Ice-T. Every time that movie came on, I was hooked, like it was 1986 and I was a kid again. For some reason it made me feel like the best of life was yet to come, but when the credits rolled I felt like maybe the best had already passed. The truth was somewhere in the middle, there was a lot about that time I

would never be able to get back, like my grandfather, my dog, playful summers of neighborhood football and a strong hairline. Everything was still new and there was plenty to be excited about like Christmas mornings, weekends at my father's or a new Michael Jackson album. Not much excited me anymore, for every gain comes with a minus, every pleasure has a consequence and each accomplishment had been married to failure and that bride was something, vowing to accompany me through sickness and health, poverty and wealth, my how I wanted to leave her.

"On second thought I think I'll have that drink."

I poured a glass of red wine from the aged bottle and we talked about everything from our childhood best friends to old TV shows, we talked about loved ones, our worst jobs, terrible L.A drivers and bad dates. She said Madonna was the baddest chick she'd ever known. I told her Prince was the coolest dude I've never met. She admitted to being kicked out a Scientology seminar for laughing. I admitted to asking out the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen with toilet paper hanging from my shoe. She lost her virginity in a co-atrium. I nearly lost a testicle during a blizzard.

After several hours and empty glasses, the sun began to climb the horizon like a toddler on a Jungle Jim.

"What time is it?" she asked. I looked at my watch rubbing my eyes to gather focus.

"It's 4 no 4:33"

"Well I'm going to bed Charlie we have a long day today. There are five empty rooms upstairs that you can crash in, mostly people just use them to screw in when I have parties but I assure you the sheets are clean. I suggest you grab a couple of hours rest, or hang here and play music all night I don't care which."

I took her advice and found a room to retire into. I was mightily tired; the thought of a warm bed was precious at the moment. But at the same time there was excitement that I was going to miss something like a kid trying to catch a glimpse of Santa Claus on Christmas Eve. Or maybe it was because I thought I might wake up back in my studio apartment, to find it was all a dream, a cruel prank by the Sandman. It's not every day that you're invited to sleep in a castle by someone who could be classified as American royalty. It was like I was a Knight invited to dinner for saving the Queen. The manor was still but my mind was racing with the angst of hungry greyhounds. My eyes closed but I was not sleep. I could feel the sun climbing the sky to welcome the morning. In a few hours I would begin the rest of my life in one way or another, an epic tale or an epic fail. I was equally confident in both possibilities. What if I can? What if I can't? What if I'm just not the man I want to be? What if I am? My eyes opened as a strong acoustic riff confined to my mind, softly pleaded to be freed so not to reverberate outside the walls of my head. The riff led to whispers and the whispers grew louder into words.

Black dawn to morning glory
Back down to the same ol story
Back now to the same old place
I'd come back now just to see your face
It's the same me and a different you
If I could pause time just a second or two

I'd take 4, countdown to zero
Fade to black now, scene I'd be your hero
In the background we hear our song
We can dance now, all night long
Again
Sat down on satin sheets,
In my dreams though I can't sleep
I've fallen flat down, purple and blue
I've been so cold, just to be so cool
Cloaked in black down trimmed in purple hue
A different me yet the same is true
Can't go back now to a life without you,
Again
Thoughts so dirty, they won't wash clean
Laughter, sighs and screams
Twilight and sweeping shadows
Kisses, like bow n arrows
I'll leave now, if you tell me so
Strong hands, to let you go
Night caps and morning dew
Back now,
I've come back for you
Again

I was writing to the Sun, I was writing to yesterday and tomorrow.

"Just maybe I can do this," I thought. I scrambled for a piece of loose paper to scribble all the words that came to me before they abandoned me like the friends of a former millionaire. I captured them all while picturing a man losing the love his life to an illness; he is helpless as he realizes that every blissful second with her will torture him if he has to live without her. A fairy tale nightmare, there is a consensus that it is better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all, but I don't believe those currently losing it would always feel the same. The bedside clock read 5:47 and I began to lose the battle with consciousness. I could no longer fight the urge to close my eyes, like falling asleep while driving, finally rest.

Chapter 6

*“Imagination is the key to my lyrics. The rest is painted with a little science fiction.”-
Jimi Hendrix*

I woke from my brief slumber to the ruckus of a weedwacker. Leave it to me to pick the room just above where the landscapers started working for the day, they were punctual, the clock read 8:01. I buried my head in the pillow, certain that I could tune it out. I had slept through louder. I once fell asleep on the couch in a V.I.P room of a packed club while sober. Gr gr gr gr gr griiiiiind the sound was annoying but fortunately began to fade as the man made his way from the window. The house was again quiet and still, finally I could sleep.

At 8:23, I felt a tap on my right shoulder.

“Time to get up,” whispered a female voice. Any man would prefer waking to the sound of a female voice. But I didn’t know where I was at the moment, for all I knew this could be heaven or hell. Her face came into focus. It was the lady from the studio, Izabella. Quite amazing that I remembered her name actually because I was terrible with them but obviously something about her stuck in my cortex, like the scent of fresh sheets, or a familiar 80’s song that you can’t quite place which soundtrack it belonged to. My eyes adjusted, just then I became smitten by her flowing, dark, thick hair, big brown eyes, pouty lips and a faint scar on her left cheek which had once been a cut that required stitches. Her voice suggested boldness and loyalty, her eyes were windows to confidence, aggression, ruthlessness, yet empathy and kindness.

She began to smile, not a full smile but like that of a three quarter moon, bright enough to shine upon you but still partly hidden.

“You’re ugly in the morning,” she commented. Not the greeting I would’ve hoped for but honest.

“I’m ugly all day” I replied, stripping her of the satisfaction of a roast.

“Get up and dressed we’ll wait for you downstairs” she ordered.

Well maybe I was wrong about the empathy and kindness part. But truth can be invigorating in itself.

“There is a change of clothes and toothbrush on the chest.”

“Whose clothes are these?” I asked.

She closed the door behind her without a response.

“Or you can just ignore me” I mumbled to myself.

Not that I was being picky but the inseam of the jeans couldn’t have been more than a 30.

I figured I could get another day out of my jeans, but a man could always use a clean shirt.

I jumped in the shower and made my way downstairs within 15 minutes. Izabella and Sunol were waiting for me in the foyer like two older teen sisters waiting impatiently for their baby brother to get dressed for the mall.

Izabella whispered something to Sunol that created a snicker.

I figured it was something in reference to the shirt T-shirt I was wearing that was two sizes too small.

We headed back to the city I rode with Sunol and Izabella followed us separately in a gray Ferrari. It suited her perfectly; something about her told me that she had no interest in car seats. It was humbling to be surrounded by successful women though I didn't know what Izabella was successful at, possibly an assassin for the mafia. Meanwhile, I was just a guy without a measly \$1,000 to my name. Despite the lack of sleep I was wide-awake and alert, my palms were a bit sweaty and my stomach tingled with the uneasy sensation you feel when a roller coaster makes a steep descent from its highest point. I took out the piece of paper in my back pocket with the song I had written hours before, giving it a second look to make sure that my that early morning creation wasn't mere ramblings and run on sentences with no flow or harmony.

Sunol peaked over in curiosity "what's that, a poem?"

"Yeah, well maybe, it's something I put together this morning no big deal just some ideas. "My tone was somewhere between moderately confident and somewhat self-defeating.

"Well read it to me."

I shared the words I had scribbled on this wrinkled piece of paper.

*Black dawn to morning glory
Back down to the same ol story
Back now to the same old place
I'd come back now just to see your face
It's the same me and a different you
If I could pause time just a second or few
I'd take 4, countdown to zero
Fade to black now; I'd be your hero
In the background we hear this song
We can dance now, all night long
Sat down on satin sheets, in my dreams
Though I can't sleep
Fallen flat down purple and blue
I've been so cold just to be so cool
Cloaked in black down trimmed in purple hue
A different me yet the same is true
A different 3 and the same ole 2
Don't go back now, and be life without you
Again, Again*

*Thoughts so dirty, they won't wash clean
Laughter, sighs and screams
Twilight and sweeping shadows...*

"Let me see that!" she pulled over to the shoulder of the road.

She tilted her sunglasses slightly so she could read the words. I was surprised she was able to read my drunken calligraphic handwriting, but she could.

I read along with her in my mind and when she smiled I estimated that she was on the part:

*Kisses, like bow n arrows
I'll leave now, if you tell me so
Strong hands, to let you go
Night caps and morning dew
Back now,
I've come back for you
Again*

"I love it!" she yelled.

And in a moment I felt the relief of a rookie pitcher who struck out his first batter. I didn't walk this far to fail. I didn't come here to go back, I didn't live for this to let it die.

From this point on I would be all in. Sunol pulled back on the road behind Izabella who had pulled over also. And like my aunt used to say, "I was on my way."

Izabella went wherever she was going. Sunol and I headed to the studio.

The moment she crossed the threshold of the entrance she was another person. She was no longer the humble, open person who just spent the night sharing secrets of her life with a stranger. She was greeted by Tony the same way as every morning.

"Charlie has something for you, put it together in the next few hours and see if we can use it, give him the harmonies from yesterday to see if he can do something with them."

She walked in like a CEO with a strict agenda, no bullshit about how the kids are, or office gossip.

She grabbed a coffee and raisin bagel and leaned against the mixer.

Her glare turned to me.

"Is there a kick? Cuz I need a kick!" she slowly sipped from her cup.

And before I could answer, the taste of what I originally presumed was coffee momentarily blew her concentration."

"Jesus Tony! Is this plain?"

"Yes" he replied,

Why isn't there any honey in it?" she barked.

"Because it's in the bag, for God's sake take mine" Tony uttered, in sheer frustration like a father catering to his spoiled daughter.

"Thank You Tony," she remarked graciously.

"Yeah Yeah, you know I'm not your servant"

"Yes you are my servant but you're my favorite servant," she chided, somehow managing to come off endearing as she backpedaled away.

"Where's Randy?" she yelled from a fading distance.

"Do you see what I deal with? So what have you got for me?" Tony voiced.

I pulled the folded papers from my pocket again, not the most professional presentation but nevertheless it was a poem not a PowerPoint presentation.

He began to read the pages and just like I had before I read along with him in my mind to see what part struck him if any, he was a stoic, and why shouldn't he be as a producer surely he'd gone over a thousand songs by dozens of great writers.

But c'mon give me something, a scratch, bewilderment, a sound anything.

His top lip moved at...

Twilight and sweeping shadows

Kisses like, Bow n Arrows

I knew I had him.

"This is fucking good man. Did you have an idea of the harmony or what?" His excitement was bathed in a strong english accent.

"Yeah it starts slow with an acoustic beginning and picks up a drum kick on verse two, 3rd verse progressions to rock guitar full on electric background up the tempo, and exotic strings" I explained.

"OK let's see what we can do with it," he said.

Meanwhile, the rest of the band was filing in. In just under two hours, Tony and I were able to extract the sounds of my mind into something audible. It was like fantasizing about delicately caressing the skin of your dream girl only to awake with her lying next to you, is this really real or I am still dreaming?

Next was the fun part Tony and I had to present the sound to Sunol.

I didn't have much experience orchestrating professional musicians but it came naturally. We spent the next hour refining the harmony and perfecting the transitions until we were ready for vocals, then came the climax of the day,

"I'm ready!" she called.

Momentarily, I flashed back to that evening 18 seasons before, while cloaked in the shadows of anonymity I saw her sing with such passion and beauty. I dreamt that I might be so lucky to see someone project such love with my words. The music started and I anxiously awaited the first words, since in a dream this would certainly be the point my alarm clock would sound.

The words came out wonderfully but she only made it to the bridge before stopping.

"What should I do during the break, do I just leave it blank?" she asked.

"Just do whatever comes natural," I suggested. I trusted her instincts to add her own touch and I didn't want her to feel restricted to be creative.

On take 2, we got to the second bar.

"I messed up, I'm sorry the phrasing was too long" she said.

Take 3, bar one:

"I don't like him starting that string so early" she complained.

Tony then directed Randy to start on count 5 instead of 4, and play it softer.

"You were kind of harsh on it, we want it light early, until verse 3."

Take 4, 3rd verse 3rd bar,

"Kisses like," Sunol started, then abruptly stopped.

"I'm sorry, I know what I did, I got it this time," she confessed.

"That was great I said, I liked the pitch switch"

"Ok Take 5" Tony rolled.

Finally there was perfection.

“I think that’s it,” says Tony, before turning to me, “Got it?”

“Yeah we got it,” I confirmed.

Sunol slipped the headphones off her head and yelled,

“Hump me holy, we got a winner you guys are awesome, when you don’t suck.”

“Not a shabby first day for you man!” Tony reached over to shake my hand.

“Let me give you some of the music we’ve been working on and see what you can come up with” and I’ll work on mastering this.” he added.

“Yeah, no problem”

Just then Sunol walked in and high fived Tony, Nice job you guys, I want to hear it when you’re finished.

“I’ll finish it tonight and I’ll have it for you Monday morning, Charlie is going to work on yesterday’s stuff and we’ll see what we get.”

“Ok, I’m gone, love you guys, Charlie walk me out.” Sunol directed.

Twelve paces into our walk she looked at me with burning curiosity,

“I never asked you what you were thinking about when you wrote the song,”

“Well what did you envision when you were singing?” I asked.

“To tell the truth I actually thought of my first love, lust, infatuation back at State, Julian Holmes, he used to make me the most beautiful paintings of sunrises and he even painted me once while I slept in his dorm.”

“What happened to him?” I queried.

“We were young we both went home during the summer, we talked a few times, but then I decided not to go back and well you know how it goes.”

“You ever look him up?” I asked.

“No....” she started.

“Ok once, I googled his name and it went to this website selling his paintings, and it had the one of me sleeping, it was just as epic as it was the first time I saw it 17 years ago. So, I bought it for 1500 bucks. There was a part of me that wanted to call him and say hello but you know sometimes its better just to let the past stay in the past and appreciate it for what it was. But when I look at the painting I can feel the noon sun on my cheek, I can recall that mornings smell of stale beer, cold pizza and air freshener. I didn’t have money, I dressed like a tomboy yet he thought that moment was beautiful enough to be captured in eternity and he named it True Love.”

Her story was so classic that I almost hated to tell her the truth about what I saw when I penned the phrases. My mind manically worked by creating rhapsodies of misery dressed in the attire of happiness. I empathized with that artist she spoke of. Once upon a time under a hanging moon, I would’ve been the one in the chair writing harmony for her; whomever she’d be, that is until I woke up one morning and found myself dead.

“Are you sure you want to know?” I asked.

I decided to give her a final chance to let her story be the crucible for her passion in the song.

She insisted, so I acquiesced to share.

“His/her love is dying, and they’d go back to the worst of times just to have them at their best again. He knows he is going to lose her, so every blissful moment with her becomes excruciatingly painful because this is the end. The pleasurable sensations like

kisses become affiliated with the feeling of being struck with bow and arrows. Imagine loving someone so much that you'd rather feel pain in their arms than peace without them, so in the end it is true love."

She paused briefly and stated, "Somehow I knew the answer wasn't going to be so simple."

"The answer is simple, it's the question that is complicated," I said.

We arrived at her car and I opened her door like I was raised to do.

"Hop in for a sec, I want to ask you something important,"

I hopped in the passenger side and immediately became immersed in the soft leather seats. I got so comfortable I nearly drifted off to sleep.

She turned to me halfway, removing her sunglasses so I could read her eyes as genuine.

"I want you to write this album with me," she informed.

Well that was a statement not a question, I thought to myself but now was not the time to feast on semantics.

"Yeah, you got it, I would be honored."

"Good you're hired, drop by my place tonight around 8. Ok, Get out John!"

She drove off into the LA night and as I walked to my car I realized she called me John.

Oh yeah, I am John, John Michael Robe; writer.

Chapter 7

“There are only two tragedies in life; one is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it” -Oscar Wilde

I made it to Fraggie Rock at 7:47, and I detected immediate activity upon entering the gate. I noticed four cars in front of the estate among the vehicles, including a white BMW and black Tahoe, only the gray Ferarri looked familiar. I parked in an open space adjacent to the side of the house so not to block anyone, which would result in calling attention to find the person with the 10 year old piece of shit Ford to move their car. I was positive that such an announcement would come at a time when I was engaged in discussion with some model or any other person more successful than I was just to spotlight that I was the one in the picture that did not quite belong. Perhaps you are thinking what self-confidence I had to think that a model would be talking to me. It wasn't that I believed I would attract models it was the fact that I knew if I was going to be embarrassed it was not going to be subtle, it would be utter humiliation.

I made my way to the front door and I could hear music playing at a moderate volume grow a bit louder. I knew this song “How's it Goin down” by DMX. A great song that reminded me of nights spent in my college dorm with old friends. Friendships that you thought would never change, but had become reduced to occasional happy birthday post on social media. Damn it! Snap back into the moment John. Something about the song gave me the confidence I needed to enter the next moment where I didn't know what to expect. I knocked on the heavy door and found that it was cracked slightly. I pushed it open softly as not to appear as the police.

“Hello,”

I heard laughter in the distance but no reply.

“Hello, the door was open.” I yelled, scanning the premises like a predator for one recognizable face.

“Hey stranger,” said a familiar voice.

It was the familiar voice that owned the gray Ferrari.

“Hi Izabella” I said in my cool voice, which felt not cool at all.

“You look cute.” she complimented.

I paused momentarily, waiting for the rest of the statement.

Izabella had never been nice to me with consecutive statements.

The sweet hello would surely be followed by a cold or comical remark.

“Thanks” I said hesitantly.

Fortunately, the 8pm invitation gave me just enough time to pick up my dry cleaning and clean myself up.

Izabella was electric as she gracefully strutted her way down the stairs. She wore a gold top with dark jeans accented by a gold belt and gold heels that lifted her from 5'4 to 5'8.

“They're in the den” she informed.

I followed her trying to keep my eyes shoulder height so she would not catch me checking her out if she turned around.

But my eyes wavered like a pubescent teen in swimming class. She mastered walking in heels in a manner that only women aged over 27 years old have.

I noticed a small tattoo on her left shoulder that took me a second to make out it looked like an image of baby shoes.

Not a tattoo I would expect but surely there was a story behind it that I had not gained the trust to ask about.

She exuded a rare blend of sexuality, the aggression of a New Yorker, The ambition of a Californian, Ivy League intellect, Midwest sincerity and southern loyalty.

I followed her to the den where I heard another voice.

“John!”

I looked up and Sunol was summoning me like a Queen who spotted the jester.

I went to greet her.

“Are you having a party?” I asked.

“No, we are all going to Louis’ party in Malibu.”

“Who is Louis?” I questioned.

“Louis Wales, he does scores for movies, any way he has a party every summer, so I thought you could get out to meet some people and get some ideas, have fun whatever.”

I had seen the name before but it never really registered with me.

Sunol went around and introduced me to her guests excluding Randy and Mike. One was a lady I recognized from Tyler Perry movies and one looked like a model, tall and thin like she only ate carrots and kale. She was surely the one who I would have been talking to if I had blocked anyone with my car. But it wouldn’t have been so bad because she was only 24 and I didn’t have any interest in women that weren’t born when Michael Jackson’s “Bad” album was released even if she did resemble Beverly Johnson in 1977. I didn’t talk much I spent most of the time just listening to stories and conversations. It was amazing just to hear the settings of the stories, London, Italy, a New York hotel, old tour buses, courtrooms, on set. The people in the stories were even more amazing, fans, ex-lovers, colleagues, photographers, drunks and coke addicts.

I locked their realities in the back of my brain in the cell next to fantasy to call upon when the music merited the memory of such moments.

At 10:00 we loaded vehicles enroute to the Malibu Party.

I was still uncomfortable with strangers despite hearing stories of their lives for the past two hours so I sought out Izabella to see if I could hitch a ride. I figured Sunol would ride with the majority of her guests who slipped into the Black Tahoe driven by Mike the dreadlocked tour drummer.

While looking for the gold shirt to appear in my view, I heard Izzy’s voice behind me, “I’m not dealing with six deep tonight, come keep me company.” she instructed.

I followed Izzy to her car and as she opened the door Sunol looked over and yelled, “Bella, hold up!” She walked over as hastily as her long heels would allow, the summer breeze delicately lifting her half-length dark jacket like a cape behind her.

“Don’t leave me!” She mumbled just clearly enough for Izabella to hear.

“I thought you were riding with Randy,” Izabella whispered.

“No there’s like six people in his truck” Sunol hushed.

“I told John he could ride with me, what about Reggie and Britney?”

“Please No, Reggie’s a creep show. C’mon Bella please” Sunol pleaded like a bouncing kid begging for candy at the checkout counter.

“OK OK, Charlie can drive,” said Izabella.

I had not yet earned my birth name to Izabella.

“Yeah that’s fine I’ll drive,” I confirmed.

Sunol strategically conceded the front seat to Izabella.

“This feels familiar I think I made out in one of these before”

“Made out?” Izabella sarcastically commented looking into the rearview mirror to relay her facial expression.

“Oh like you’ve never had sex in a backseat before.” Sunol barked.

“I’ve done a lot I’m not proud of, but I didn’t volunteer a lie and say I was just making out,” said Izabella.

“Not all of us feel the need to be quite as crass as you.” Sunol responded.

“Why am I crass? If you thought it was a crass topic you had the option of keeping it to yourself, but when you chose to share... why tittle?” Izabella exclaimed.

You’re right, next time I will be sure to add all the details like how I couldn’t find my panties because they were stuck under the front seat.

Izabella cut her off with “Now you’re being coarse.”

Meanwhile, I was admittedly curious to hear how far she was going to go with the story.

I saw the immediate silence as my cue to find the perfect riding music as I followed the black Tahoe to the Malibu manor.

We arrived in good spirits after spending the last 30 minutes performing trios to Prince’s greatest hits. I felt as though most men in the world would trade places with me in this moment, I was sandwiched between two beautiful women. I could feel the stares on me, wondering who I was. Finally someone asked. The host appeared in a light sports coat. He was an older man who reminded me of the younger brother of the most interesting man in the world from the Dos Equis commercials. His brown but graying beard was perfectly groomed he had a full head of brown and silver hair with a proud hairline. He greeted Sunol and Izabella with kisses to the hand. A gentleman’s greeting I respected because it had been lost on my generation.

“And who is this dashing young man?” he inquired.

I looked behind me to see whom he was referring to.

“This is my songwriter J.R, J.R this *THE* Louise Wales.”

“Well I don’t usually go by *THE*, nonetheless it is a pleasure to meet someone else cursed with terrible sleeping habits,” he shook my hand with a firm business grip.

“Tell me about it” I remarked.

Within seconds Sunol was whisked away by a woman in a blue skirt, to mingle amongst the crowd of the socially elite. Izabella took a drink from the tray of a passing waiter, and disappeared into the masses also, leaving me alone in a room of strangers and judging stares. My initial instinct was to stay close to Izzy like a young cub to a lioness. But I didn’t want to appear like a lost pup in a shark aquarium. I stood in an awkward lo-

cation where people passed but didn't gather, my feet were rooted in the marble like an artificial tree.

"You really look like a tool right now, please move out of this spot, before anyone else notices you," my conscience screamed.

The voice was right. I needed to move smoothly, find a friendly face and just blend. There is a pretty friendly face; I spotted a young lady with pout lips and smooth caramel skin. I made eye contact and smiled at her. She stared back coldly before shifting her focus elsewhere; not the way I hoped to start the night but certainly foreshadowing a conclusion to the evening I was used to. Nevertheless, the indirect rejection motivated me to separate as far from that moment as possible. My next target was to find someplace to sit where I could go completely unnoticed for the duration of the night. Maybe I'd even take a nap if I could find room on a couch. I saw the bar and suddenly became overwhelmed with thirst for a cold glass of orange juice. My mouth felt like southern cotton and the moisture of refreshment was close within my grasp when a young lady stepped into my path curious to unveil who the strange man who would prefer a glass of orange juice over her sterling conversation was.

"Where do I recognize you from?" she prodded, as if she had seen me on T.V., or was just trying to find out if I was some rich and famous guy looking for a decent looking girl to have unprotected sex and illegitimate children with.

"Nowhere," I assured her.

"Are you sure?" she insisted playfully.

She was a cute girl with pretty teeth, clear cappuccino complexion, and luscious lips; she stood 5'6 with 4 inch heels but as a New Edition song once suggested, she was not my kind of girl. I preferred a woman who could wear a baseball cap and hoop earrings. Her makeup was too aggressive, her long dark hair was aided by extensions, her breasts were augmented, her eyebrows were drawn onto her face, all of which could be minor but she wore green contacts. My grandfather once said the eyes are the windows to the soul, so I inferred that a woman who cloaks those windows to appear as something else is hiding darkness. Worst case scenario, I am wrong and I miss out on a nice girl, which I was used to. Best case scenario, I avoid coming home three years and tens of thousands of dollars later and catching my girlfriend being sodomized on my favorite couch by a backup dancer. I'd have to throw my favorite couch away all because I ignored that same inner voice warning that tells you not to ejaculate inside a lady that you barely like.

Back to my orange juice, I was beginning to grow nervous that the bartender would go on break soon or that someone else who was the DD for the night would drink all the Simply Orange. Meanwhile, she was mumbling something about herself and really beginning to annoy me. I didn't mean to be rude but at the same time, I did. But the most attractive thing to a woman is a man who is not interested. So the longing of Orange Juice was making me more interesting than I'd ever be normally in conversation.

You know the usual talk, "What's your name? How old are you? What school did you go to? What did you major in? What do you do? Oh yeah, Uh huh, yeah, Oh alright, Uh huh, Oh yeah, Uh huh, yeah. Well now that I've gotten to know you let me excuse myself out of your life forever."

"What do you do?" she asked for apparently the second time.

“I’m a writer,” I offered regretfully, realizing I just made a major mistake. Telling someone you’re a writer only prolongs a conversation because it leads to polite analysis questions of just how valuable my sperm would be.

I should’ve said I was a logger so not to appear shiftless but not glamorous. Then came the next question as scripted.

“What do you write?” Of course I would have to lie now, no way could I tell this succubus of a woman with eyebrows by Crayola that I am a songwriter, she will think because I am here, I am a successful and wealthy one.

I paused a second to come up with a suitable tale.

“Porn” I panicked.

“Porn?” I thought to myself, “Is that really the best you can come up with?”

“Wow” she said excitedly “That is hot!”

“I’m actually really into porn. I did some online stuff but no movies.”

“Of course you did,” I mumbled to myself, people don’t get DD breast implants to work for Sprint.

While lamenting over the fact that my mother would not be proud of the direction I had taken this conversation, I proudly proclaimed,

“No, I write porn music.”

“That’s better, horrible but better,” my conscience voiced holding back a smile. God I am terrible liar and he wasn’t helping me on this one. I definitely should have gone with logger from the start but I was thinking on the fly. Would she be dumb enough to believe that was an actual profession? Yes, she was.

“Oh” You mean like instrumental keyboards and stuff?”

“Yeah and I do some lighting part-time,” I added, really pouring it on.

“Oh OK” she whimpered.

“Well nice meeting you.” She walked away like I released an Indian food fart.

“You too,” I said genuinely, chuckling to myself as she walked away.

I headed to the bar.

“May I have an orange juice please?” My mouth watered for the fresh pulp of Simply Orange.

“We’re all out.”

“No!” My face sunk into my chest with disappointment like the time I was excluded from my friends couples trip to Six Flags because I didn’t have a girlfriend.

I was pouting over a glass of cranberry juice when Sunol returned with a new face she wanted me to meet, her manager Geoffrey. There was something about him that I just didn’t trust. If we were running a major crime organization he seemed like he would be the one to bring it all down by snitching to the FBI. He had a devious aura about him. He wore a high-end suit, no tie; the top button of his shirt was unfastened as though he just left the office. His posture was confident, though he was an average looking guy; I inferred that he dated beautiful women, likely with coke problems and daddy issues. My immediate analysis suggested he was a USC grad, former frat boy who probably nine times if once slipped a roofie in a freshman’s drink and raped her in his friends room, as she lay unconscious with her pants to her knees. Yeah, he was definitely that type of cat. My mind began to wander, thinking about what happened to that girl. Did she remember

the night so that it torments her decades later? Is she now unable to trust any men in her life? Was she completely unaware that it ever happened, living in blissful ignorance? Perhaps it was all just my imagination and he was a good guy.

“Sunol has told me great things about you,” he said.

A classic and often false opening statement to which the common reply is, “All good I hope” But I don’t care if it was good or bad as long as it were true.

“Name two,” I replied.

He paused for a split second pondering a response for a question he wasn’t expecting. He then delivered.

“That you’re a talented writer”

“Is that it? That’s only one and debatable” I responded.

Sunol then added, “Well actually it was only one nice thing that I said about you, Geoffrey is exaggerating.”

“You caught me, nevertheless if you ever need representation there is a great demand for a man of your skill,” he offered.

He was handing me his card when Izabella walked up behind him.

“Keep chicky around this guy John,” she advised.

“I’m going to get air out back, I’m over this already,” She sipped a drink from my glass of cranberry juice. Her facial expression signaled a mild disappointment of missing vodka.

“Jesus Charlie, this is cranberry juice.”

“I don’t drink,” I confirmed.

“Come out back with me, I want a real drink.” she grabbed my wrist to lead me away.

“Hello Izabella” Geoff spoke.

“Scumbag!” Izabella coldly uttered.

“Why does she call you Charlie?” Geoffrey added.

“Long story that doesn’t matter,” I downplayed.

“Speaking of long stories, why don’t I tell the story of why you’re a scumbag.” Izabella directed to Geoff.

“Well it was a pleasure meeting you.” Geoff started to excuse himself from the tension between he and Izabella.

“How do you know?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” he replied.

“You just met me and considering I’m not some beautiful woman nor am I that personable, meeting me is not really a pleasurable experience. I didn’t make you laugh or improve your world-view in our conversation and because you don’t know the outcome of any future interactions you cannot assuredly say it was indeed a pleasure. Personally, I don’t know if it’s pleasure meeting someone until well down the line.”

Izabella interjected, “I think he was referring to the rather un-pleasurable experience of seeing me therefore making any other interaction pleasurable in comparison,”

“Right Geoff?” Izabella quipped.

“OK, well good night” Geoff disappeared into a pool of models.

“Why are you always so bitchy to him?” Sunol asked Izabella.

“Give me a break Sunol, he is a skel and you know it!”

Meanwhile, I pondered what the heck a skel was, which I later learned to be east coast slang for a lowlife or junkie.

“You don’t have to be so rude to him,” Sunol responded.

I slid away from the burning conversation and watched at a safe distance from smoke inhalation as they quietly but intensely went back and forth on the subject. It felt like one of those times when some of the info that was bound to come up was none of my business so it was best that I did not hear. Growing up around women, I understood that when they were upset they had a tendency to reveal the most hurtful and private of secrets that continued to burn long after the fire had been extinguished. So I buried my nose in the half full glass of cranberry juice with a hint of lemon and Izabella’s lipstick on the brim.

After a brief discussion, the two sides went their separate ways like the end of the first round of a close title fight. Izabella walked towards me at an angered pace similar to that of many women who had walked away from me in frustration. I could read the anger in her face as she whisked passed me, the pleasant scent of her perfume lingered. I turned my gaze towards Sunol, she looked at me and shrugged like it wasn’t the first time this discussion had taken place. I figured the right thing to do was go to check on Izabella. I found her on the back deck standing against the railing overlooking the courtyard. I stood about eight feet behind her in silence watching for movement in her shoulders to see if she was crying but she was still. I stepped forward slowly until I was standing next to her. I leaned over the railing looking at the clear view of the sky and said nothing. I was just there to listen should she decide to vent. But she didn’t seem angry anymore she seemed relaxed and in deep thought,

“She believes in you, yknow.” She said, acknowledging my presence.

I smiled slightly but didn’t offer an audible response.

She turned her head slightly to face me. Her body language suggested she was trying to extract the current thought from my head.

“You want to know what I’m thinking?” I asked.

“No, your thoughts are your own, until you vocalize them and I hate when people ask me what I’m thinking, if you have to ask you may not want to know, the whole if you don’t have anything nice to say don’t say anything at all thing,” she responded.

“How’s that working out for you?” I quipped.

“Not good at all actually,” she chuckled.

“In case you haven’t noticed my filter or lack of one is not one of my greatest personality traits.” she added.

“I wouldn’t say that, I think that it is a gift to be without restriction, truth is never wrong only the perception of it and you don’t strike me as the type, well never mind,” I stopped short, realizing that I was invoking a filter on my own.

“Strike you as the type to do what?” she inquired.

“To forfeit being yourself just so you can fit in neatly like volume F in a row of 1988 encyclopedias.”

She grinned before turning back towards the massive courtyard view.

“My granddad used to tell me, if you have nothing to say, shut the fuck up!” I shared.

She laughed outwardly. “He sounds like a wise man.” she commented.

“So, I often find myself embracing silence.” I joked.

I waited for her laughter to calm before responding to her initial question.

“Yes, I had an idea Sunol believed in me. Which is why I wanted desperately not to disappoint her. The last three days of my life had meant more progress for my career than my last 33 combined. I just want prove that she was right for doing so.”

“There is something about you I haven’t yet figured out.” she remarked.

“Well join the party I haven’t figured me out yet either, and I am not sure I want to because it may not be good,” I countered with a smile though I was dead serious.

“She’s a magnet of life that everyone is drawn too, people just cling to her, wanting something. Sometimes I get carried away trying to protect her but you just seem in your own world most of the time and now you sit out here with me, when there is a house full of feature articles and magazine covers in there.”

“I prefer hard back books. So you are like her Bounty dryer sheet? I inferred.

“I think you mean Downy dryer sheets but I guess that’s one way to put it,” she grinned.

“Since we are being honest I’d probably still be in there in the corner somewhere but I saw you two fighting” I confessed.

“We weren’t fighting; it’s just a long story.”

“You looked upset so I just thought,”

“Oh you thought I was going to smear my mascara? Ha, trust me I am no distressed damsel but the next time you think to be my shrink, I need less B.F. Skinner and more Captain Morgan, so let’s go get me a drink.” She wrapped her arm around mine and we walked back into the manor in pursuit of a beverage, which had become a recurring theme for the evening.

She ordered Captain and Coke. I wanted to continue our blossoming conversation from outside, but decided to quit while I was even. A few times in life mere coincidence occurs like a miracle on a situation at just the right time. I was out of clever things to say, and this was not a logical setting for a note on a napkin. I only had one trick up my sleeve to make the next moment. I wanted to ask her to Dance. I needed something that wasn’t too slow or too fast, something we knew all the words to. In that instance somewhere a broken clock was right on time. The playlist gave me a break. You’d probably know the song if you heard it. There is no place in the world that could prevent me from dancing when the violins began.

“I was working part time in a five and dime my boss was Mr. McGee, he told me several times that he didn’t like my kind cause I was a bit too leisurely,”

You can probably fill in the rest, if not I really don’t understand what you are doing with your life.

“She wore a Raspberry Beret, the kind that you find in a second hand store,” It was one of those songs that reminded me why I ever wrote a poem or why any well played instrument gave me chills.

I took Izzy by her left hand and led her to a small open space. We were the only ones dancing but who cares. She knew the words almost as well as me, the third verse tripped her up a little. It felt like I was back in college, often the last period in life where complete strangers become lifelong friends. For a few minutes, I didn’t have to think about what to say, because all the words were just right. Furthermore, someone who was will-

ing to share a song with you when no one else would is potentially someone who will stand by your side when no one else will. On cue, Sunol appeared, dancing against Izabella's right hip. The tiff from thirty minutes earlier had been forgotten and suddenly a night that began to be forgotten became a shame to end.

The evening had reached its climax, the music faded, replaced by passing chatter as visitors disappeared into the night. I tapped Izabella's elbow pointing out the poor clueless guy that was leaving hugged up with the succubus I had encountered earlier. I was ready to take off and ride into the next adventure of the night. Yet, when you are the designated driver for the most popular girl at the party you get to wait around and watch people hold long pointless conversations with her. Izabella sat next to me drained of the dancing energy she had a couple hours prior, now likely fantasizing about her mattress and bare feet as she kicked off her heels.

"How does she not get tired of all that attention?" I asked Izabella as I watched a small group gather around Sunol, hanging on every word she spoke. I watched her smile and laugh with people, some of which she may not have even really liked.

Izabella yawned and with her eyes closed she recited,

"Future fades to past, youth grows old, so you can't take anything for granted, one day we will wish someone cared about us, wishing we had grandkids to come visit on holidays"

Her statement spilled sharply like tacks under my heel, it was cryptic but it was true.

I fell asleep as I reclined into the soft cushions of the sofa and was awoken by 130 pounds of woman flopping into my lap.

"You ready to go?" Sunol asked.

I looked over to see Izabella fast asleep, I hated to wake her, she looked peaceful.

"Izzy, Izzy let's go," Sunol whispered into her ear while caressing her brow.

No response,

"Izzy!" she yelled.

Now she was up.

"Let's go hun!"

Izabella rose a bit groggy and confused about her whereabouts before grabbing her heels and heading for the door.

We were both exhausted like we had worked the night shift in a 1942 asylum but Sunol was alert and refreshed. Sunol had slept about as little as I had the past two days and she was a couple years older but she looked ready for a show.

Sunol teased Izabella as we walked to the car about how age had robbed her of the energy they once had to stay up all night partying and drinking. She mentioned that at one point Izabella could drink heavily and flawlessly complete a walking sobriety test. Sunol also admitted to also not having the endurance she once did, referencing youthful all night coital adventures in contrast to her most recent experience.

Her story contradicted scientific explanations of the female sex drive and I would've been smart to keep my knowledge to myself but I wouldn't have been myself if I didn't say the wrong thing at the wrong time, at least once a night.

"The female sexual peak actually extends well into a woman's 40's," I remarked.

“Yeah, I’ve read that too but I had a lot more sex in my 20’s. Now after twenty minutes I need to ice down my vag and call it a night.”

Any man with close female friends or that spends a lot of time with women is doomed to hear a few things they wish they hadn’t. I just had.

Izabella, even in her tired state was amused enough to contribute.

“I don’t think Charlie wants to hear about your battered Vag,”

“I am giving John valuable writing ammo here,”

“No, you’re not,” I assured her.

“Does the word vagina make you uncomfortable?” she asked.

“No, vagina does not make me uncomfortable. However, the added adjective of battered before vagina, a little bit.”

“So you’ve never said like I’m gonna beat up your..?”

“Sunol Stop!” Izabella interrupted.

“Okay, just making conversation.” Sunol barked back emphatically.

Then there was silence. It was a peaceful silence so I began to nod off in the passenger seat as Sunol drove.

I can recall my eyes opening periodically to catch the city lights beyond the hills.

It was one of my favorite scenes more beautiful than sunsets or oceans, my eyes closed again.

We arrived at Fraggie rock by the radio’s time of 2:47.

Izabella and Sunol were already walking to the front door by the time I began to switch seats to head home.

“Where are you going?” Izabella yelled.

“Home to bed,” I lazily replied.

“You’re not going to drive to Long Beach at 3am, if you fall asleep, crash and die, I’ll have to find another writer?” Sunol insisted.

“Well since you put it that way,” I closed the door and walked towards the house figuring I could just stay in the guest room again.

Sunol walked down the steps to meet me, while fumbling through her purse.

She then pulled out an old Lord of the Rings style key.

“You’re going to move into my guest house for a while, just until we finish the album and then you can find your own place closer to L.A.”

I appreciated the gesture and the offer did make sense. I’d have more time to concentrate on writing but no; I’m a grown man, I can’t stay in her guest house.

“I appreciate the offer, but I really need my own space and I prefer the beach to the city.” I said with pride.

“John, no one goes back there it’s over 1500 square feet, you’ll have plenty of space,”

It was three times the size of my apartment but it still wasn’t mine and it made me think of that Scrubs song by TLC.

I’d be living at a friend’s place but then again I’d still have my own space so it would be like working out of town and staying at a friend’s place instead of a hotel.

I wrestled with the idea of accepting her hospitable offer.

“Well alright, I guess I can crash there sometimes until the album is done.”

“Great it’s settled here is the key, it’s straight back and to the left, you can’t miss it.”

I was a bit ashamed that I caved in so easily but she was right, right?

I looked up and Izabella stood at the top step with her arms crossed, she had a victorious I told you so smirk on her face. I was waiting for her to make some coy remark but she knew her smile was enough to transfer her satisfaction in being right before walking inside.

I made my way back to the guest home and turned on the lights. She was right it had everything I needed; a kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, desk with computer, notebooks, pens. It seemed like a perfect spot to send family members, or friends who she wanted to be comfortably away. There was an envelope on the desk that caught my attention because it was addressed to me; inside I found a letter that read:

John,

Make yourself comfortable. There is food in the fridge and the linen is fresh, meet me at the pool for breakfast at 9am sharply.

P.S. Welcome Home

-S

She had this planned the whole night, well played, Sunol 1 John 0.

Chapter 8

"My nature just changes." - Jimi Hendrix

I slept hard and well so the morning came quickly upon me, like an avalanche to a mountain climber. I woke in panic like I had overslept and missed my flight. The time was 8:37. I rose heavy heeled and groggy. My vision was still out of focus and like the words of a song no one but me ever heard, I combed my teeth and brushed my hair to go meet Sunol by the pool at 9am sharply.

"How did you sleep?" Sunol asked courteously while reading a newspaper.

"You still read actual newspapers? Why not just read them online?" I asked.

"There is something about just holding a paper that I can't give up. My dad would read the paper every morning, I'd take the Entertainment section and that's all I would read. In a world of Kindle and Nook users, some people just want an old fashioned book."

"Do you still read the entertainment section first?"

"No, I never read it anymore, I either already know or I just don't care, it's mostly garbage now anyway. Speaking of which, you need to remember that most of what you will see and hear in this business is a lie. Just play the game, no one is really what they seem."

"What about you, what's your lie" I asked.

"I'm not really a bitch," she confessed.

We laughed before she reflected and elaborated.

"I mean I am but I wasn't always this way. I guess you can say I'm a product of my environment so I had to grow long claws and spikes to keep from becoming prey."

"Well I don't have that issue I was jaded a half hour past birth." I quipped.

"Don't bullshit me, there is something in there that you keep hidden, there is a part of you that you protect from the screwed up world, to allow you to write with a genuine even a brilliantly naive outlook on love. We are not that much different, yet we completely are."

"I suppose that's a compliment" I accepted.

"That depends on where we are different and where we are alike"

"Well I'm here so it can't be all bad."

"Maybe bad is what is needed right now," she proposed.

"This isn't about you or me John; this is about music, making a classic album like the ones we grew up listening to on vinyl, nothing more but nothing less. Finding you was just like finding a fresh needle to revive an old player, so if that's a compliment, consider your ego stroked."

An old hit song by Clarence Carter came to mind at that moment.

"I stroke it to the east I stroke it to the west I stroke it to the woman I love the best,"

What would the females perspective be? I pondered.

"What are you thinking about? You're grinning," Sunol asked.

"My thoughts are my own until they are spoken," I responded.

"Clearly you and Izabella had an in depth convo last night." she said.

“Nah, not in depth so much as not shallow, I only venture as far as to where my feet can find the soil.” I said.

“Well maybe you need to learn to swim,” she urged.

“Why swim when I can run?” I poked back.

“You can’t run forever,” she commented.

“True, but when I can’t run at least I won’t drown,”

“Some things are worth drowning for John.”

“Only if you know what’s worth living for Sunol,” I countered.

“You know when you go see a great movie and at the end of it you stay through the credits to see who was responsible for such a great film or to watch the hilarious out-takes?”

“Yea,” she nodded.

“That’s what I am reduced to now; just hoping someone will read my credits when it’s over.”

She sat silently in thought, looking off into the library of her mind.

I poured another glass of orange juice.

She returned from her brief mental journey and removed her glasses to look me directly in the eyes to for a moment of truth.

“May I ask you a private question, no jokes, no secrets, between us?”

“I have no secrets Sunol, and I don’t mind jokes, so ask till your heart is content,”

“What really happened to you? You are really messed up.”

“Well I’ll tell you the answer in this case is as simple as what would be the correct question, what hasn’t happened to me?”

She paused again before a sly grin came over her face.

“Well John talking like that I know one thing that never happened to you, you never got laid in high school because I have no idea what you just said.”

I couldn’t help but laugh as hard as she did.

“Touche, Touche, direct hit D3 to F12”

“I scheduled some studio time Tuesday, just in case you feel inspired, or maybe I will be.”

After breakfast I went back home and gathered all the clothes and necessities I could pack in my car and locked myself in the guesthouse. I believed there was a great flood set to begin with the first drop of precipitation onto desert sands but I began a dozen pages only to scratch out my progress and start fresh, the floor became littered with paper balls of frustration.

“Stop trying to be perfect and let it be,” I told myself.

“Man you suck, you’re choking, you loser, why don’t you just hang yourself on the ceiling fan, maybe you will make the news.” the voices tormented.

Sometimes the words flowed smoothly like I was telling a story of past events, other times my thoughts were blocked like I was on the wrong side of a locked door curious to see what was inside and anxious to learn what was happening outside. I stared at the walls blankly and scoured my mind for inspiration as if it would just walk through the door.

Suddenly, there was a light knock, loud enough to hear if you were open to company but faint enough to ignore if you were completely immersed in something or asleep. I yelled that it was open expecting it to be Sunol checking on me since the day had fallen dark and I had not uttered a word to a living creature since breakfast. I didn't even look up from my pages still barren as an elderly uterus, until I heard a wonderfully pleasant, softly grating voice.

"Hey... Sunol asked me to come tell you that she cooked if you're hungry,"

"Sunol cooks?" I replied somewhat surprised.

"Well by cook she means delivery."

"I'm OK, I'm trying to, who am I kidding? I don't know what I'm trying to do actually."

"I can tell," she grinned, while acknowledging the crunch of balled up papers under her feet.

"Come take a walk with me," she instructed, I agreed to follow.

We walked along a quiet street, dark enough to feel intimate and secluded but with enough light to see where we were going. The night felt still. I could hear crickets, the rustling of small animals in the nearby trees and the buzz of power lines. There was just enough silence to allow you to concentrate on your thoughts mixed with just enough noise to distract you from them. Amidst the natural ambience I would have been fine going through the whole walk without saying a word to her or she to me.

We came upon a park, which featured a large fountain with a statue of running horses. The careful carvings of the lead horse made me believe they were running somewhere and not from something. We sat on a swing set, the pale moonlight danced on Izabella's cheek, yet it was the beauty of the fountain that captured me. The horses ran freely without riders or saddles.

"Where do you think they are going?" Izabella asked.

"Um, I don't know, maybe they are just running because they can."

I hated it when I said "Um" it is a poor stall technique used when the mind is incapable of finding the right word quickly enough to express a thought.

"So you think they're running through the water and mud and whatever else because they just love to run?" she added.

"Yea I do, if you love something, the obstacles before you don't matter." I responded.

"So why do you write?" Izzy inquired.

"Don't say Um again," a voice in my head yelled.

I had to think about it honestly. Good writing has to be genuine and from the heart. It cannot be about the end result. The end result is a product of your truth, your spirit and passion. I tried to collect words of truth but once again my mouth failed to say the words my mind thoughtfully collected, so she continued,

"When I walked in that room and saw the balled up paper on the floor and the stress in your eyes, you were wearing a saddle, you weren't running free. What makes you unique, what powers you is that you don't care about what the world does cause you have your own and that's where your success will come from. Your passion, but to have passion you need to love so love every minute of it, the rest will come."

"Wow, you are smarter than you look," I said jokingly.

She smiled, shocked that I would say that and punched me in the shoulder.

"I'm kidding." I assured.

"I'll have you know that I am one of the premier neurosurgeons in Southern California."

"You are literally a brain surgeon?" I responded, surprised but then again not really shocked.

"Was that what you wanted to be growing up?" I asked.

"No, I wanted to be a dancer but when I was 16, I saw the average salary of a dancer plus my limited skill set, I did the math and realized that maybe it wasn't the best decision. So I went to college as a biology major and I had a great anatomy professor who made me realize I could do this, of course everyone laughed at me and said I should be something more realistic like a nurse but I graduated Summa Cum Laude, worked my ass off through med school and here I am.

"I dig it. I knew you were smart but I figured you were some marketing exec or TV producer," I added.

"God No, I hate office jobs and every business man I ever met was so infatuated with money; Money this, money that, my boat, my house. Money is great but I don't live for money." she recalled.

"Were you largely motivated to be successful to stick it to those who doubted you?" I queried.

"Well yes partly, it's not something I think about when I'm in surgery but it was something that stayed in the back of my mind the times I wanted to go out rather than stay home and study. It pushed me to stay dedicated. So I know a bit of what you are going through, plus I've seen Sunol the same way you are right now, though she may never admit it."

I became eager to hear what else she had to say. I was mesmerized by her intellect.

She continued, "If you were a basketball player or in my case a doctor, your ability to be great relies on repetition, for example shooting balls, practicing your movements, reading, practicing your incisions and so on. Yet in a creative sense writing the same page over and over again doesn't much help does it?"

"Well yes and no," I retorted.

"You certainly can improve as a writer by practice because you expand your vocabulary, perfect your writing style and so on but despite how flawless or great your writing style is, if you don't have ideas then you don't have ideas. To put it in your basketball example it's like shooting without a ball. I have one more question, why just one of the best in Southern California what about northern?"

"Well the north doesn't really count, maybe if I was a farmer it would," she chided.

"Wow, well if I was from San Francisco I'd say at least we have a football team," I bantered.

"So do we! USC! As I recall we routinely kick Michigan's ass in the Rose bowl and I am a loyal booster to the tune of a 50k donation last year."

"I'm actually a Texas Christian fan but "50k? I donated \$25 to my school."

She laughed and encouraged "Well maybe if you just relax and write you'll be able to make a large \$75 donation next time."

“Did you at least get to flip the coin before a game for that?” I queried.

“No, you get a plaque with your name on it and a thank you letter. I still had to pay for my season tickets. A lot of it is just about proving who the best alumni are,”

“Wow, Izzy, I just wanna borrow like 3.00,” I joked.

“I think it’s pretty cool, I’m still trying to get a notable alumnus mention on my schools Wikipedia page,” I mentioned.

“But seriously you are right and I appreciate you checking me on it. I just wish I could bottle up all the memories in Sunol’s brain so I could come up with something she can relate to.” I confided.

“Charlie, Sunol is an open book. You just have to be patient and let her turn the pages for you.” she informed.

Just then it hit me. The artist from college, surely if she was still buying expensive paintings from his website nearly two decades later, there was some small pilot light flickering deep within her soul.

I drew a pen from my pocket but I had forgotten my notebook. I asked Izabella for any scrap paper; a napkin or dinner menu or receipt would have sufficed. She pulled a yoga studio flyer from her jacket pocket. The back had plenty of space for a full song but not a rewrite.

I pondered what if Sunol had written a letter to him, that she never sent, a letter that sits somewhere in a drawer buried under jewelry or an old picture. A captured image, which seemed insignificant at the time as the moment played on without pause but as seasons passed, good friends became passing strangers and that split second flash from a time long ago became the only evidence that the present ever existed. What would that letter say? I was jolted by the energy of something new. My maggot mind gave birth to a song of truth. In life we all lose something or someone we love and struggle to understand why, Why us or why them? We need to accept why must we live without them so we can go on. Unfortunately, sometimes when you ask questions there are answers that you don’t really want to hear because you don’t want to believe what you already know. For all that is lost is not taken, nor is it misplaced, sometimes we simply throw it away. I wrote a letter in the eyes of a heartbroken woman. I pictured her eyes swollen as she fought back tears. I pictured her in a room sitting on a white down comforter writing barely legibly in a manic state. She paused only briefly to think of words to replace the ones she had scribbled out to best describe her pain but unbeknownst to her the one she reaches out to has endured the torment she feels multiplied a dozen times and they too scrolled a million words a thousand times to never.

At the end of the letter she placed her pen down, for her last line revealed to her why she must move on; the angst she felt paled to what she caused time after time again. Perhaps it was never to be sent, penned only for reasons of self-counsel and release. My love for the blues allowed me to see that real love rarely has a happy ending. True love is stepped on and taken for granted. True love comes from the ones who don’t neatly fit the soapbox catalogue of our expectations. Our true love is often too short, too tall, too sweet, too caring. Our true love is not beautiful enough, not smooth enough, their body isn’t perfect; our true love doesn’t have enough money, or is too shy. Our true love is not

found in magazines or theatre. True love is so hard to find because it often lives on a dark one-way street.

I was so excited to finish the letter I nearly dragged Izzy off of the swing to race back to the house. I raced up the stairs like a teenager coming home to show his mother his first perfect report card.

“Sunol, Sunol,” I yelled opening doors without any reservation of possible privacy invasions.

“What is going on?” she yelled, as she appeared from the furthest room down the hall.

“Here,” I handed her the paper breathing slightly heavy but completely winded.

“I have a Yoga instructor,” she said.

“No turn it over,” I gestured.

She turned around and walked back to the room to put on her glasses and sat down on a handcrafted antique wood and velvet bench.

“I can’t read your hand writing this time John, read it to me.”

“You want me to read it?” I asked rhetorically.

I never was very comfortable reading my own work aloud because I couldn’t sing and I hated the sound of my own voice to my own words so I decided I would just read it like a letter since that was how it was written.

*From minutes to hours I yearn for seconds of you
As precious moments turned from many too few
How did I make it hurt to warrant such shame?
You’ve always been there for me
But you aren’t here the same
Can we go back to then?
When you’d dance with me slow
Play a song that never ends
So you can’t let me go
Cuz darling you shouldn’t have
Then maybe you wouldn’t have broken my heart*

*When somebody leaves
The other one’s broken hearted
Now I have to believe
These teardrops will grow a garden
When darling you couldn’t have
No baby you shouldn’t have
Broken my heart*

*I tried so hard to fight you
But you swept me away
Every tomorrow you loved me more than yesterday
I don’t wanna let you go
But I can’t hold on*

*I wanted to be so right
I went right into wrong
And maybe I shouldn't have
Then maybe you couldn't have broken my heart*

*When somebody leaves
The other one's broken hearted
Now I have to believe
These teardrops will grow a garden
When darling you couldn't have
No baby you shouldn't have
Broken my heart*

*I want so much to hear your voice
I just wish you would call
I felt like your everything to nothing at all
How did I lose you?
Why won't you try?
The red in your eyes
Says you're too stubborn to cry
Oh darling I couldn't have
Baby I shouldn't have
Broken your heart*

As I finished there was silence, which grew more uncomfortable for me by the second. My heart was pounding in my chest like a redneck in a spelling competition. The silence had lingered now like bad gas for close to 10 seconds. My fingertips began to feel cool and numb despite a racing pulse. Finally, I had to break the silence,

"Well it's still a work in progress," I said lying through my teeth, it was as final as final could be.

"I can go back and play with it some more," I began to walk out of the room like a closer walking to the bench after giving up the game tying grand slam. I was beginning to rethink my angle and why she didn't find it heart wrenching. My shoulders slumped and I strolled across the soft carpet with my figurative tail between my legs. This was the reason I rarely got excited about anything because my excitement was usually paired with disappointment like a parent who learns the eldest twin has been accepted to Stanford only to have their joy broken by news that the other twin has been arrested on drug charges. I was crashing back to Earth like a meteor in some science fiction movie starring Liv Tyler, then she spoke,

"John wait," Sunol calmly called.

I turned around slowly expecting some feeble attempt to spare my remaining feeling or maybe just dig the dagger deeper into my chest.

"It's beautiful," she sighed.

"I love it,"

“Whatever!” I remarked.

I should’ve felt immediate release and comfort but my first thought was an angry one.

“Why in the hell did you take so long to answer me, if you liked it? I was ready to throw it in the trash and drown myself in Apple Jacks.” I yelled.

“C’mon it was 10 seconds,” she yelled back.

“I was just messing with you because you looked so excited,”

“It’s not right to play with people’s emotions like that,” I added.

“Aww I’m sorry, did I hurt the baby’s feelings?” she chided.

“I’m not a baby,” I pouted.

“You knew it was good, why do you need my validation? If you love something and I don’t, convince me why I should but this, this I like.”

“But it’s your record,” I countered.

“Meh,” she sighed.

“Did it remind you of anyone?” I asked.

“No, was it supposed to?” she answered, her facial expressions displayed confusion.

“Wait! Am I the bitch?” she gathered.

“No, never mind just thought there may be a teetering memory.” I replied

“Well speaking of teetering, I am teetering with the idea of getting in my bed or continuing this conversation and the bed is winning so get out of my room.”

I went back to the guest house as wide eyed as a coke addict. My imagination ran free as a Clydesdale on an Idaho ranch. I wrote anything and everything that came to my cortex; poems, songs, journals, even soliloquies that could be pieced to together like a giant puzzle. I didn’t even notice the sun had begun to rise and I didn’t care. I was in the moment like a soldier returning to the wife he had not seen in 16 months, so enthralled that he failed to realize she was 6 months pregnant. I had not felt this in days, weeks, months, years, ever?

I found great comfort in nature’s idea of silence and instrumentals. My eyes burned with unrest and my vision grew blurrier by the page. Thirty-Five hours after sitting helplessly in a rudderless ship in the vast Pacific, I had written an album, albeit it was not a final copy, it certainly needed some edits, typographical corrections and legible rewrites but the brunt of the blood in this battle had been spilled. Finally, I felt free to dream and lay back with a cunning smile on my face like I had made a three point shot in the fourth quarter to silence a ruckus Madison Square Garden crowd, timeout.

I slept through the first rays of the new rising sun. The graveyard writing shift had me keeping the wakeful hours of the vampire Lestat though I have never left the castle to prey on maidens. There was still so much to do. Thursday’s studio session was creeping upon my shoulder like a strange hand in the dark. Writing an album was something like writing a thesis for your master’s degree. You gather material, you organize your notes, you draft and redraft, you keep what you love and cut out some of what you don’t need until finally the mess of loose paper, notes, articles and ideas becomes a finished product that you can title and type your name on. I went unbothered and unwashed for two days and nights, seeking that moment where I too could bask because the necessary mania of wild paint strokes and splashing colors would be seen as true art. Every line with purpose, every chorus with harmony, every pause met with anticipation, these words would

pull tears, these words would sympathize with plight, these words would bring joy and bond with memories, these words would be shared by a million hearts, yet these words were all mine.

Chapter 9

“Reality is wrong. Dreams are for real.”-Tupac Shakur

The knock came hard at the door like the 8 o'clock bells going off in college as I finished the paper I waited till the night before to start. The door cracked, allowing the frail sunlight to enter the room.

Sunol's white heels clicked across the marble floor.

“Hey you're up already?”

“Up already? More like haven't been down yet?”

“How's it going in here I haven't seen you in days?”

“You tell me.” I said as I handed her a neatly organized binder complete with all the chronicles of my recent hours in print with proper punctuation and word structure.

“What's this, your diary?” she asked as she untied the string that secured the contents.

I waited until her hand extracted the first page, before I shared.

“It's your album,” I paused for a response, since she was usually quick to reply with something witty.

There was silence again, but this time I was not concerned, as she meticulously went through all the pages.

“Well most of it anyway,” I appended.

“You did this in three days?” she asked bedazzled.

“Well, technically it was three nights. I haven't been awake much of the last few days,”

“Why are you just now showing me all of this?”

“I thought you said I don't need your approval and if you didn't approve to convince you otherwise, so if you find something you want to change or don't like let me know and I'll change it or tell you why I won't.”

“I didn't expect you to take me so literally,” she countered.

“So you'd prefer me take you loosely?” I catechized.

“Look, smart ass! I just meant that if we are going to be a team, I have to trust you to be self-sufficient but that doesn't mean that you have to go rogue and do it all alone either.”

“Rogue is my favorite mutant, but I just couldn't stop because if I did there was no promise the ideas would come back.” I explained.

“Well get dressed and meet me inside in 30. I have to call Tony and tell him not to make plans tonight because it's going to be a long day, we are going to make an album!”

At 9:27 AM, we arrived at the studio. Tony as well as Sunol's band members were there to greet her. The atmosphere in the room revealed that Sunol's phone call from an hour earlier warning him that the day would be full had echoed through the room. Sunol was in good spirits that morning; she did not complain about the tea and she joked with Mike about his taste in women.

“Hey Tony,” she called.

“Will you punch up that master for John?”

“Yea, I’m getting it right now actually,”

“Have a seat John and tell me what you think.” Sunol directed.

I knew what to expect, because I was there during recording, trying to get the sound just right. Yet as the intro began to play I realized it was nearly impossible to expect what I began to feel in that moment.

It was my first song. Not my song as in the first song I ever wrote or even had recorded but it was my first song being that it gave me new life, new hope and a new beginning. To speak plainly, it was my first song that people would actually hear. It was my inauguration into the only reality I ever wanted. In that moment anything better than this was simply make believe.

It was perfect, every note, every harmony and every chord. I struggled to believe that I had written it. Someone would mourn to this, someone would cry to this, someone would apologize because of this. My long sleeves hid the goose bumps and held back my excitement as the song finally ended.

“I like it,” I commented holding back my thrill.

“Now let’s get to work.” I insisted.

The feeling was like the high from the best possible drug and I needed another hit, literally. There was no time to rest on last week’s laurels. We had a record to make and I wanted each song to be better than the last.

Ten hours later we had gotten through seven songs. My confidence began to grow in directing the band, guiding Sunol and communicating to Tony what I was looking for. Take after take we recorded verses over and over again. My ears were growing more sensitive to the slightest of imperfections.

“How was that one?” Sunol shot through the booth.

“Perfect,” Tony answered.

“One more time,” I interjected.

Sunol sent a glare my way, like I had just stolen her parking space in a crowded lot the day after Christmas.

Her vocals were absolutely perfect, but I wanted to hear it a bit differently.

One of my favorite traits of hers was that not one of her takes ever sounded exactly the same as another. There was always an ad-lib or a note that was held a little differently. I loved that because in life no two moments were ever exactly the same so why should the soundtrack to it be any different? I pressed, I pushed, I poked and I prodded until the day drew to an end. We still had a few songs left to complete but I could feel Sunol’s voice beginning to strain, which gave me an idea.

“Hey Sunol, I know you’re tired but will you just harmonize these two lines real quick?” I jotted down two lines that been plaguing my brain for the last two hours on a sheet of yellow notepad paper and handed it to her.

“Record it,” I signaled to Tony.

I suppose you’d like to know what the two lines were but I’ll come back to that in due time.

Back to the guesthouse; after a long day my mind was unsettled. Something was missing from the album and I knew exactly what it was but hadn’t yet come across the sound in my head that would be my resolution. In your world I would compare it to a woman

who finds the perfect wedding gown but can't find the right shoes. I wondered if Raphael or DaVinci had been here before, a portrait nearly complete but missing a color or obscure image in the distance. Did they obsess over the final paint strokes?

"You write love songs." I said to myself.

A man who sees love as a curse writes love songs.

My mother told me once that my naive view of love gave me a perspective that few had and that was my strength; but my narrow view of life, which lacked concern for much of what existed outside of my head, was a weakness. The drag about love songs is that sometimes you are so hurt that a love song is the last thing you want to hear. You want something that will make you laugh, something to make you forget about all the saga and stress in your life. The album needed that. Empathy and hope are wonderful but sometimes we just need to drift away to a new reality where only fun exists, but dance music was never my strong suit. Yet, across the yard walking past her kitchen window was a master of it. Would I be too prideful to ask her for help? Would I be too stubborn to accept it? Nevertheless I made my way across the courtyard and into the house where I found Sunol in the kitchen reading a finance magazine.

"Want some tea?" she asked not looking up as she slowly scanned the pages.

"Sorry about today, I just wanted to get everything perfect." I said.

"Don't apologize, it's fine, though you did wear my voice out,"

I stood stationary for a second thinking of how I could best phrase my question.

"Do you wanna sit down John, you're acting weirder than usual, what's on your mind?"

"Well you see," I started.

"You know I don't," I restarted.

"Sometimes I have trouble," I rephrased.

"Yes?" she questioned attentively, urging me to complete my question.

"I can't write dance music, I mean I can't write club dance music, will you help me?"

I finally put together.

"That's all? Sure!" When was the last time you went to a club?" she asked.

I scoured my brain for decomposing material like this that would be completely erased from my memory. I recalled a night where I had last been manipulated into entering a nightclub for a friend's birthday. I didn't have a great time because the music was too loud to fall asleep, yet there was not any surrounding conversation stimulating enough to stay awake. I recalled the stench of a hundred cigarettes in my clothes and a dance floor full of dry humping and spilled beer.

"It's been a few years," I responded.

"Let's go out tonight," she proposed.

"Ummm No" I reacted.

"John the only way to write dance songs is to learn what people like to dance to"

I had heard something like that before during swimming lessons when I was 12. The only way to learn to swim was to dive in the water. I jumped in the water and nearly drowned, decades later I still couldn't save a midget in a kiddie pool. The mere thought of standing shoulder-to-shoulder in a packed muggy building did not excite me. Sunol could read the disdain on my face.

“You will have fun, I’ll invite Izabella,” she said with a cunning smile as if she knew a secret.

I admit the thought of Izabella going did heavily sway my opinion. I hadn’t seen her since the night at the park and I eagerly yet bashfully looked forward to seeing her again. I calculated that a few dances with her were worth my shoes being stepped on by a few dozen strangers. Much like having a conversation with a beautiful stranger you pretend to be interested in doing many things you’d never usually consider just so you can get closer to them. There was something about Izabella that made me enjoy being near her and I was willing to be wherever I had to be for that opportunity. Regardless, like the night Sunol asked me to stay in the guesthouse, Sunol would not accept no for an answer.

Sunol and I arrived at a place downtown called Planet F. the waiting line at the entrance must’ve been 100 folks long. We drove around back and entered through the back entrance, she greeted the bouncers with kisses on the cheek and hugs. Obviously she was a regular and based on the “Who the hell is he?” glares I received, her past company was much cooler than I.

“This is John, he’s with me,” she informed the giant dreadlocked man as if she could read thoughts amidst the thumping bass in the background.

I’m sure he would not have let me in otherwise; he may have thought I was some guy pretending to be with the in-crowd to avoid standing in line out front. He didn’t appreciate me as an individual and I didn’t appreciate his hairstyle choice; dreads down his back with an aggressively receding hairline.

“Is Roman here?” she asked an even larger bald guy with a Rip Van Winkle beard, his large neck tattoo suggested that he was not an accountant by day.

“Yeah,” he responded. “He wouldn’t miss a cameo from you, I’ll tell him you’re in the usual spot.”

Suddenly, A gorgeous longhaired brunette ran up and hugged Sunol forcefully knocking her slightly off balance like she hadn’t seen her in years. The woman looked familiar, like someone I’d noticed but didn’t care to know. Maybe it was a movie trailer, a billboard, grocery store, The Beauty and the Beast TV show? Sunol and the mysterious vixen exchanged pleasantries before she introduced me again. The introductions were making me a bit uneasy, since it made it obvious that I was a person in need of introduction. If she would just not introduce me the lady may have assumed that she should know who I am. Perhaps I was just being insecure or it could’ve been that I didn’t really like meeting people very much. Her name was Kristen; she shook my hand delicately and smiled before pulling Sunol away into the darkness of the club.

The place was packed and I had to force my way through waves of dancing, talking and kissing couples to keep up with them. I kept my eyes on the silver metallic top Sunol was wearing to keep from getting lost since I was momentarily distracted by the multitude of events transpiring in dimly lit corners. Eventually, I found my way to the second floor VIP section with a pack of other recognizable people that I didn’t recognize. I scanned the room like the Terminator seeking Sarah Connor. I was hoping to find one specific face but felt a slight pinch of disappointment when my search yielded no favorable results. Part of me just wanted her to be there so I could avoid engaging in any awkward conversations. Yet, a great thing about L.A. is that all you have to do is listen and

pretend to be interested because people enjoy talking about themselves. For the next 45 or 13 minutes. I blended in by drifting off into my own world while appearing attentive and sociable, yet curious to why no one was dancing. If only I wasn't so socially retarded, I would be enjoying this moment by sharing pictures through social media outlets. The clock on the evening continued to run but still no sign of Izabella. I was beginning to ponder if the evening gamble was a bad roll. I walked over to Sunol to subtly inquire if she had heard from Izabella. As I approached Sunol's left side I was stopped.

"Hey do you remember me? Yelled a young woman in her late 20's with smoked mascara and dark lipstick.

"I'm not a celebrity." I said, assuming mistaken identity.

"Nooo, you helped me with my tire last month on the 405," she said.

"Oh, hey," I recalled the moment blaming my oversight on the lighting.

When I had met her previously, she was wearing glasses a long skirt and her hair was up in a bun like an IRS agent on her way to an audit.

"You two know each other?" Sunol inquired.

"Yes, remember when I was late for your shoot last month and I told you some guy saved me and changed my tire? This is some guy!"

With a surprised look on her face, Sunol responded, "John this is my publicist Renee and Renee this my writer and apparently emergency mechanic,"

Sunol then turned to me and whispered. "You are full of surprises."

I did lament the idea of being predictable so I took that as a great compliment.

"Why did you decide to stop that day?" Renee asked.

I didn't really have a narrative for an answer, but I could've replied simply "You seemed like you needed help," But I knew she would reply with the "it's a small world" cliché and I hated clichés.

"Well good thing I didn't rape you," I blurted.

"Why the hell did I just say that?" I thought to myself. Sunol immediately gave me the "What the H?" glance except with an F-word. I gave her the "I don't know I'm an idiot," shrug. I was doing so well keeping my talking to a minimum. It could have been a very bad turn of events. Fortunately, Renee thought it was quite funny. Maybe, it was the near empty wine glass that compromised her rational thinking.

"Oh stop, you don't even look rapey but that guy does," she pointed to an older gentleman slowly sipping a beer and staring at the butts of every young girl that walked past him.

Renee and Sunol went back to their conversation and I slipped comfortably out of the way. I turned my head to the left briefly and felt an immediate cold chill on my neck once I saw the familiar form that I had been seeking. Izabella was walking up the stairs. She was greeted by a few of the beautiful people I had avoided all night and a part of me wanted to walk over immediately to talk to her but my head thought better of it. I would just be cool, act like I didn't even notice her and let her come to me. I felt myself fidgeting to come up with some cool pose; lean against something, put my hand in my pocket, stand up straight, the more natural and cool I tried to be the more foolish and uncomfortable I felt. The fine hair began to rise on the back of my neck as Izabella inched closer. I could smell her Burberry perfume drawing near. My nerves became slightly agitated, as

the pores rose under my long sleeved shirt. Yet, I acted oblivious to her emerging presence and disingenuously attempted to ingratiate myself into a conversation I was completely lost in. Izabella greeted Sunol first with a soft hug and brief conversation, which faded in and out due to the loud music. Next she greeted and spoke with Renee briefly as I waited impatiently, pretending I had no idea she was coming and didn't care that she was there. During her conversation with Renee, she glanced over my way, she didn't smile or frown, it was just a look of recognition just as you may glance at an old college Public Speaking 101 classmate before deciding if you were going to speak to them. I committed not to smile back to keep my cool demeanor, which I was not sure was actually working. It had been several days since the night we bonded in the park and in this town a few days is enough for people to forget you existed. Friendships in L.A. are like clean toilet paper, useful then disposable but No Izabella can't be categorized amongst them, could she? She was too real, too grounded, and she was from Brooklyn.

"Just stay cool John, you are doing fine," I thought to myself.

"Don't look her in the eyes, stay aloof." The thoughts raced as I looked directly into her eyes.

"Well, don't smile, whatever you do, don't smile at her." I smiled in her direction.

"Pathetic," I thought, picturing the voice of instruction shaking its head in disappointment as I failed every command.

Our eyes locked, her face was impassive, before looking away briefly to end her conversation with Renee.

I could sense her stride shifting towards me. She approached my left side and placed her right forearm on my shoulder. There was no hello or small talk, or salutations.

"Miss me Charlie?" she asked.

"No, why?" I lied.

"You've been cheesing at me since I saw you."

"I told you," the voice gasped.

"What, can't I be happy to see you without necessarily missing you?" I tenderly shot back.

"Sure, but not likely," she responded.

"It's OK to miss me," she added.

"Well I'm pleased to have your permission but I haven't missed you, I've been too busy to think about you," I said.

"So you need to be busy not to think about me?" she retaliated.

"Nope, but it helps," I returned.

Her smile was followed by a momentary pause before I asked,

"Why did you miss me?"

"Nope," she responded.

"Too busy right?" I guessed.

"Nope," she replied.

"How did Sunol sell you to come out tonight?" she asked.

A good question that I was not prepared to immediately answer with a decent lie, so I told the truth.

"She said you were gonna be here."

She laughed victoriously like she had reversed my logic in a debate.

Logic would suggest that if we had come here for dance music inspiration. We should've been dancing instead of conversing in VIP like we were at an art gallery but I had not heard any music that would merit me to move one heel seven inches toward the crowded dance floor. Plus, I didn't like people touching me and some sweaty drunk guy bumping into me was inevitable, so the song had to be right.

"What's with this music?" Izabella exclaimed.

"What's today?" she asked.

"Tuesday," I responded though not confident enough to bet on, all my days had seemed smashed together lately.

"Ah it's Tonic Tuesday, a lot of the techno crowd is here tonight; I'll be back."

She walked off into the near distance and said something to Sunol, which stirred an "Oh that's right," response that I read on Sunol's lips.

She signaled to a tanned man in a slim fitting suit, who then tapped the shoulder of the DJ, within sixty seconds the music was crossfaded into something much more suitable than Moby in the moment. "Not just Knee Deep" by Funkadelic"

A perfect selection cause something about the music made you want to dance. In my first decisive action of the evening, I grabbed Izabella by the waist and pulled her to the dance floor like I was Clark Gable in one of his classic movies that I'd never seen to know if that metaphor made any sense.

For the few songs I danced with Izabella, I was able to forget everyone that was around me and just focus on her and the moment. The manner in which her hair draped to the side, the way her body moved in unison with mine. The slow song that came next was the perfect opportunity for me to pull her close to me, placing my hand firmly against her lower back. I tucked my nose against the left side of her neck; her perfume was subtle but intoxicating. Her hands rested softly on my shoulders. If only my lips carried the might of my pen her ears would be virgin notebooks and I could whisper words so perfect, so free, I could be a Knight, a Prince, her King void of all the follies of me. "My whole life has changed" the chorus of the slow song went. And those lyrics were true, since hours with her brought me nothing but inspiration. But she was much too winter to fall for me. She was much too complex to understand, that I was just a scared little boy, with the dying heart of an aging man.

"Tell her she's beautiful, make her laugh," the voices suggested.

"Anything but silence!" they cried.

I thought, "Doesn't the song say it all, can't I just hold her?" My right hand slid down the curve of her back before resting safely above her tail, the base of my palm barely grazed her right cheek; it was as firm as a ripe red plum.

My mind scoured the valleys in my cortex for a poetic phrase to utter into her ear; mindful of the manic voices growing inside my head granting no mercy, projecting that I could not let this pass like the voice of a stranger. I visualized the tides of a dozen oceans representing the seismic cataclysm she generated into my soul with her periodic element of essence quenching even the simplest of thirst with an entire river. Yet foolishly it came out "Your vagina must taste like water."

Suddenly, there was silence in my head; the voices were stunned.

Like a scratching needle stopping your favorite song I hoped she didn't hear me, but as she lifted her head and delivered a peculiar gaze I was certain that unfortunately she had.

"What did you say?" she said with a half shocked grin. It wasn't that she didn't know what I said but rather she was checking to see if I would repeat it.

I wouldn't have but fortunately Sunol appeared next to us in haste.

"Izzy can you take John home? I just ran into Brandon and he wants to show me his new place."

"Yeah that's fine," Izabella said as she gave me a look suggesting this conversation will continue at another time.

I would've completely understood if Izabella had refused and left me to be the annoying little brother preventing his sitter from getting laid.

"Are you ready to go?" Izabella asked.

I nodded my head yes, since I momentarily revoked my own rights to speech.

Surprisingly, she cupped her arm in mine and we followed Sunol back to valet where she introduced me to her nightcap Brandon Neal.

Brandon Neal was a 3rd Baseman for the Philadelphia Phillies. While he was very good defensively, I did not expect that Sunol who was a Michigan girl at heart would date an Ohio State alumnus who only batted .162 in the postseason. I had never seen a player strike out so much without swinging. Yet, once I saw Izabella greet him warmly with a hug like old friends I realized he was obviously a good guy. Perhaps it was his playoff batting average that kept him humble when surrounded by ravenous Philadelphia fans. He stood about 6'2 with a lean 190 pound build. Sunol snuggled against him like the Downy teddy bear as he talked. As Sunol walked away to tip the valet for her car Brandon invited Izabella and I to come and see his new home. Izabella's eyes shifted towards Sunol who was standing near her passenger side door making animated gestures for Izzy to decline the offer.

"I can't, I have surgery in the morning." Izabella declined.

Meanwhile Sunol continued to make gestures illustrating her intense attraction to the strapping lad.

"Oh ok well maybe next time." Brandon replied.

Izabella was biting the inside of her lip to keep from bursting into laughter at Sunol's actions.

The animations tickled me uncontrollably as I tipped the valet who brought Izabella's car.

"What did I miss?" Brandon cluelessly queried, he wanted to share in the humor.

"You missed it honey," Sunol said as she kissed him on the cheek. "You can drive,"

Sunol blew Izzy and I a kiss as they peeled off into the night.

"Shall we" I gestured while opening Izabella's driver side door for her.

"We shall" she accepted as if the recent hilarity of the evening had erased the awkwardness that had risen ten minutes earlier.

"Find a good station," she requested. I buckled my seatbelt and we were off.

My rhetorical folly sat on my mind like a Blues guitarist on a stool. I weighed slumping comfortably into the passenger seat and falling asleep to prevent inquiry. But I felt the right thing to do was face my embarrassment and apologize for my rude comment. The

background music of *Traveling Riverside Blues* by Robert Johnson gave me the courage to say something since the atmosphere felt clean of tension.

Hey Izzy, I am really sorry about what I said earlier, I was trying to say something else and it just came out all wrong, I didn't mean to be disrespectful, it's just that I have problems.

"Don't worry about it," she said with a smile. "We all have our issues, besides, I've heard much worse from strangers, a couple of months ago a guy told me he wanted to jizz in my hair under the sunset, as if that was supposed to make it poetic."

Oddly, that comforted me.

"So what was it that you wanted to say?" she asked.

Without thinking I responded, "Your presence is a cataclysm to my soul, quenching my thirst like China springs; I'll protect you if you call for me and bare your winter if you fall for me."

"Wow, you really did mess that up huh?" she said.

"Yup, story of my life," I mumbled.

"So the China springs part is?"

"Yup," I quipped.

"Well maybe you'll do better next time."

The fact that she said next time, gave me a glimpse of hope that all was not lost.

It provided enough relief to reveal a smile as I looked out the window.

"So why were you able to say what you meant just now?" she asked.

"I wasn't thinking about it." I said.

For most people it is best practice to think before they speak but for me it was nearly forbidden. There was too much chaos in my head; it was a democracy of anarchy and genius but genius had the fewest votes.

By the time we made it back to Fraggie Rock, all was forgiven if not forgotten. We were immersed in laughter and the old hip-hop songs on the Backspin channel.

I was disappointed when the car stopped paces from the guesthouse walkway, signaling the end of an evening I was not sure how to properly conclude but the more I thought about it, the more likely I would ruin it. So I asked her out to dinner sometime sooner than never but beyond today.

"What are you doing Friday night?"

"I can't, I have this thing Friday," she responded.

Normally, a thing means no thing but to my delight she let me down easy enough that I could walk away with a dash of dignity.

"OK, Thanks for the lift," I gave my gratitude, while quickly fleeing the vehicle.

"I'm so stupid, why did I did do that?" The voices had returned just in time to remind me I was not on the right side of sanity.

I began to take my long walk of shame back to the guest house, where I would write a poem and drink chocolate milk before falling asleep long enough to repress this instant as a forgotten dream.

"Do you always give up so easy? I thought you'd be a bit more persistent," she called.

"The line between persistence and harassment tends be pretty thin so I choose to err on the side of caution," I replied.

“And what has caution ever gotten you,” she asked.

“It’s not so much what it has gotten me but what it hasn’t, charges for example” I responded.

“You’re not a criminal,” she quipped.

“Well I could be a criminal if I wanted to but I don’t so I’m not but I could be, if I wanted to but I don’t,”

The voices pleaded to me to not stop talking and just say goodnight.

“Pick me up at 4 on Saturday,” she shouted over the purring engine.

“What if I’m not available?”

“Really?” she threw back sarcastically.

She was right, I had few friends and fewer prospects; of course I was free.

“OK from where?” I asked.

“You’re resourceful figure it out,” she said with mischievous grin.

“But isn’t that kind of stalkerish?” I countered.

“Not if you’re invited,” she assured, as she drove off.

“Seems stalkerish to me,” I mumbled to myself before walking back to the house.

“Dude you gotta stop talking to yourself out loud or at least stop answering yourself,” a voice reminded me.

“You’re right I do.” I answered.

It was not until I removed my shoes that I realized that I had a date, sort of. It was going to be during the day, which could mean my date was the appetizer for her real date later that night. Nevertheless, none of that mattered, all any man can ask for is a chance, and I had blown more than I cared to admit. I was pleased that something came of the night because the quest for a dance song inspiration was a bust.

Chapter 10

“My songs have always been frustrating themes, relationships that I've had. And now that I'm in love, I expect it to be really happy, or at least there won't be half as much anger as there was.”- Kurt Cobain

The dark film showing through my slumber was interrupted long before the credits by the sound of ice being crushed in a blender. On some nights the sound would've been mistaken for the chainsaw being wielded in my imagination but that nights viewing was a bit more tame. I awoke fully dressed as if I had passed out in mid-thought and moved slowly to the kitchen where I found Sunol frantically juicing.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you, the blender in the house stopped working and I really need an orange juice smoothie right now”

“You look well rested, didn't go too well last night I take it,” I commented.

“I don't want to talk about it,” she spoke dismayed.

I learned a long time ago that when a woman doesn't want to talk you should enjoy the silence because it won't last long, it didn't.

She dove right into the story.

“I drive out to Hermosa so Brandon could show me his new place and it was beautiful overlooking the beach, large windows, the furniture was not really my taste but whatever. He was showing me every room, his car collection, blah blah, so I start getting bored with the fucking tour and asked him to pour me a drink, so we could sit down on the couch and make-out a little. He poured me a drink, we sat on the couch and he kept going on about his interior decorator, I guess he thought because I'm a woman I care.”

“Did you tell him you didn't care?” I interrupted.

“Yes,” she said emphatically.

“But instead of getting the hint he started talking about baseball so I got annoyed obviously but I was in the mood and invested so I took my hair down, started leaning towards him and pulled him to me by his shirt. He finally got the hint so it's on. I lean back and he starts to lean over me, he spilled his drink all over my Vera Wang, then he panicked. I told him not to worry about it but he was so concerned about his coach staining that he left to get towels and spray to clean the couch. Now of course, the coach is wet and the smell of 409 is not a turn on.”

Revisiting the evening seemed to be therapeutic for her as she recalled each moment in great detail, projecting passionate voice fluctuations and hand gestures. I could see the whole night being replayed in my mind.

“So you just cared about his Wang not Vera's.” I joked. It wasn't funny and she gave me a blank look like she wanted my head to explode before she continued.

“But I didn't let that stop us, so we started kissing again and he lifted me up on the kitchen island and as he started to remove my panties his friends walk through the front door drunk and falling over themselves. I hid behind him to get my stuff together and at that point I was over it. His friends went off somewhere and I just told him I was going to

call it a night and came home. So to answer your question; yes I am well rested but my six mode detachable shower nozzle was busy.”

Sunol had a tendency to give me a bit more detail than I needed but over time I got used to it and appreciated that she felt comfortable enough to be so open about everything.

“So did you get any good ideas last night?” she asked.

Yeah I got some ideas all right but not the kind I was looking for,”

“Yea I heard that part, why did you tell my friend you wanted to water her vagina?”

“That’s not what I said at all actually,” I contested.

“What I said was it must taste like water,” I corrected.

Sunol stood silently pondering an avenue to make sense of my statement or my logic for even bothering to correct her.

“OK, strangely that actually is a little better, eerily even complimentary from a sanitary aspect,” she admitted”

“See,” I responded.

“No not see!” she retaliated.

“It’s not like you said your lips must taste like raspberries, your skin smells like French Lilies or even just, *you look great tonight*, it was still a ridiculous thing to say, you are a strange man John Robe,”

“There are French Lilies?” I asked.

“Sure I guess, why wouldn’t there be?” she tentatively confirmed.

“Well, I panicked,” I mumbled in defense.

“Why don’t you memorize your poetry and just recite it? Girls would eat that up,” she suggested.

“I was trying,” I responded.

She laughed and shared “I’ve known Izzy for half my life and she’s just a woman, just be you, buy her flowers and pull out her chair,”

“Run her shower wash her hair?” I replied

“You got it!” she said.

“Wait I have an idea, you got a minute?”

I grabbed my piano and asked her to help me fill in the blanks.

I played the first note and in my scratchy voice sang,

“I’ll buy you flowers...Pull out your chair”

She chimed in her soulful yet soft voice,

“I’ll run your shower...I’ll wash your hair”

I continued,

“I’ll light some candles. Your body I’d caress and soothe,”

She responded with,

“All the Romance you can handle... We can dance if you like the groove”

I added,

“If you don’t love me you could leave me, I won’t make a scene”

She offered.

“I may not be right but you seem like the one for me”

I followed with,

“Cuz you talk so cruel and you smile so mean, are we two peas in a pod Or Apples and Tangerines”

And together,

“Tangerine World you’re my dream girl”

I began the next verse with,

“You could have every dollar, If had a dime

Though you wouldn't even bother if you had the time”

Sunol offered,

“I'd make you dinner...I can't bake or roast”

And I followed,

“I am no tenor, so I'll whisper as I hold you close”

Together we sang the chorus,

“If you don't leave me, you could leave me

I won't make a scene

I may not be right, but you seem like the one for me

Cuz you dress so cool and you smell so clean

Are we two peas in a pod or Apples..

And Tangerines”

She started the next verse with,

“I have no castles”

To which I replied,

“Yes you do, though I have no crown but I'll be your comfort when you're feeling down”

The next line she extended beautifully,

“With faith in fairy tales and even magic, I'd write a story for you”

So bright that I had to darken it with

“Though the ending would be tragic I would die for you”

And together we sang,

“If you don't leave me, you could leave me

I won't make a scene”

But I added a twist,

I may not be like your Mr. Right but you're the girl of my dreams

Either you're just so cool or I'm so naive”

This led to her solo,

“Are we two peas in a pod or Apples and Tangerines?” which she followed with some wonderful solo that I could not give justice in text.

She hugged me excitedly before pushing me away “You're still strange” she smiled.

Saturday morning fell upon me swiftly like a hurricane energized by a warm ocean current. I had six hours to get dressed and find Izabella. She had not given me a single clue of her 4pm whereabouts. I thought perhaps she had planted the seed in my mind and was testing me to see if I was listening. In my haze of confusion that night it was possible that I had missed a minor detail that was now plaguing me to B major. Problem # 2, I only had \$102.13, certainly not the worst predicament I'd have ever been in; circa 2004 I

invited a gorgeous woman named Naomi to join me for a cup of coffee with 12.00 in my pocket. I let her order first so I could calculate what I could afford to order, her portion came to 8.47 so I ordered a small bottle of apple juice and managed to keep 1.41. We went out a couple times after before she went back to her ex-boyfriend. I wasn't upset about it though. I was once told that you should not be too disappointed in a lost investment if a woman did not sleep with you as long as the total net loss was under \$500, coincidentally the cost for a half hour with a high class Vegas call-girl; so I had heard. I did not want to try my luck this time and hope Izabella didn't order dessert or make her walk 8 blocks in heels to save on the valet. Mission 1 was to find out where Izabella was going to be. I walked to the main house where I found Sunol in her room riding an exercise bike.

"Hey do you know where Izzy is going to be this afternoon?"

"Do you knock?" she asked.

"Do you?" I returned.

"Good point; no I don't know, call her!" she suggested.

"I don't have her number," I sighed.

"Wait you have a date and you don't have her number?" she paused from pedaling in disbelief. "Classic," she uttered, before resuming.

"I'm not giving it to you?" she informed.

"Why?" I replied.

"Because you're a dork, what guy has a date with a woman and doesn't have her number? Incredible!" she groaned shaking her head in disapproval.

"OK, I don't know what that last Spanish word was but, You know people dated for centuries of years before phones and cellphones, it's not entirely ridiculous," I countered.

"It's Spanish for incredible John, good luck with your 1946 dating approach."

Just then, Sunol's concierge Marily emerged from the bathroom with a smile.

"Hi Marily, Are you laughing at me too?"

"Oh yes, we all laugh at you," she said, patting me on the left shoulder in passing."

"OK Thanks Sunol, I gotta go,"

"Wait, where are you taking her?" she said as she stepped off the bike and began patting the sweat on her neck with a towel.

"I don't know, I guess I'll figure it out,"

"John honey, I love you like my own brother so I'm telling you this for your own good, I can't let you think about this because, well you know. So I'm going to make you a reservation at Urasawa all you have to do is get the directions online. It's a little pricey though; how's your cash flow?"

"More drip than flow," I responded.

She reached in her purse and handed me \$300. "This should cover it."

Her thoughtful gestures overshadowed her unique brashness, though not surprising her consideration was stirring. I began to feel more like family than a simple investment. My initial reaction was to hug her but I restrained myself from laying emotion upon the sentiment.

"Thanks!"

Perhaps Sunol was pulling for me, like a March Madness underdog Oakland University facing North Carolina in the opening round of the NCAA tourney. She wanted to make sure I at least covered the point spread.

I walked downstairs to the grand foyer where I heard Marily call me over to her.

“John” she called barely above a whisper. “You’re sweet on Ms. Izzy.”

I lied for no reason. “No just hanging out,”

“Sure,” she quipped. “Well I guess you don’t really care to know where she is,” she muttered before she began to walk away.

“Wait!” I exclaimed, “OK, You win.”

Marily walked back towards me and revealed, “Well then, you would like to know that she teaches a class at UCLA on Saturday afternoons.”

“How did you know?” I asked.

“It’s my job to know everything in case of anything,” she replied.

“What class is it?” I queried.

“Oh No, that’s all you get from me, the rest is up to you,”

“C’mon Marily don’t be that way,” I persuaded to no avail.

“NO NO NO NO, you’re lucky I gave you that much, but you were walking around with your puppy dog face so I figured I’d throw you a bone.”

As a man in need I had no other recourse than to gladly accept the info she was kind enough to offer. To find my way through this intriguing yet likely unnecessary scavenger hunt I needed to think like a stalker. What would a stalker do in this situation? Well first he would go onto the UCLA website and find the neuroscience class schedule. Next he would scan those classes for Saturday classes taught by a professor with I as the first initial I ending around 3:30 and just like that I found it. I briefly was proud of myself that I could have been a stalker or at least a private eye if that had been my heart’s content.

I arrived on the campus at 3:07 and wandered around like a lost freshman searching for the Cobb building. It was some time after 3:30 when I found her class. I entered through the back door like a tardy student. Upon my entrance the students were being dismissed so I sat in the back shadows, and watched Izabella field additional questions from the inquiring achievers. She was having a conversation with the last student; a short brown skinned girl with a high-pitched yet soft tone. I realized that considering all of the actions I had taken to find Izabella on this day, watching her from the back shadows of the room made me feel like a creep. So I walked up to the front of the room into the light revealing myself like Jack the Ripper in the alleys of London as the young girl left the room.

Izabella looked up at me without startle or excitement.

“Hey John, I thought you were one of my students, good job you found me,”

“Well I am resourceful,” I boasted.

“Marily told you huh?”

“Sort of,” I muffled, short of lying.

“But I come bearing adventure or mischief depending on your choice.” I said

“Well both sound intriguing, but I’ll have to go with adventure because there’s not much mischief in Westwood.” she replied.

“Oh I beg to differ, crooked creeps lurk around every corner, peaking over every pit, we just choose to walk the straight line for fear of what lies outside of it.”

“Maybe I will share my chronicles of mischief with you one of these days when I’m not wearing heels, so what’s the adventure,” she inquired.

“I don’t know I was counting on the mischief,” I replied.

“My chariot awaits. Actually, my chariot wouldn’t start so it’s a borrowed chariot but have no worries because it will not turn into a pumpkin at midnight,”

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

“Clearly not as hungry as you since you asked first but I can always eat, How about Sushi?”

Her eyes lit up at the idea.

“Yes I love sushi,”

“Cool, I passed a place on the way here that looked intriguing.”

We arrived at the restaurant and received the best table in the house courtesy of association. Like the gentleman I was taught, yet sometimes forgot to be, I pulled out her chair and sat across from her with the bursting excitement of a kid who got his crush to say maybe after a thousand No’s.

For all the rattled nerves I had felt previously, aside from the modest goose bumps on my forearm hidden by long sleeves and stifling hairs on the back of my neck disguised by my collar, I was cool as a Ralph’s dairy section. Yet, I couldn’t help but stare at her as she looked into the menu. I observed that before she read, she would tuck her hair over her right shoulder and tucked her top lip while she tried to decide. She greeted the waiter by his nametag with an honest smile as she ordered water with lime and lemon.

I detected that her ears weren’t pierced so what better topic could there be to start the evening off? Plenty probably, but I was committed to that one.

“I didn’t know your ears weren’t pierced,” I stated.

“I hate needles so I could never go through with it,” she admitted.

“But you’re a doctor don’t you work with needles all the time?” I asked.

“Sure, but I don’t have a problem handling them or sticking anyone else,”

“I could’ve sworn I’ve seen you wear some hoops before,”

“You did, I have custom made clips-ons,”

“So no tattoos either, I presume,”

“Nope,”

“Ah, well I guess I’ll have to edit my fantasy.” I mentioned.

“What fantasy would that be?” she queried, inching her shoulders forward so not to miss a syllable of my response,”

“The fantasy I have where you are...”

“Are you ready to order?” Tim the waiter appeared.

His presence was good service but terrible timing.

I had been so consumed with Izabella’s every move I had not paid attention to a thing on the menu, though I had worked up a thirst.

She ordered a dish that I wouldn’t try to spell or pronounce, I ordered the same, entrusting my health to her sushi knowledge.

As Tim walked away I sipped from my straw and watched her squeeze the lemon and lime simultaneously into her glass before placing the drained remnants neatly into a napkin to her right.

“So you were saying?” her eyes gazed upon me in full attention like one of her students sleeping in class, called on to explain the pathway of a neuron.

So I knew I had to get the answer right, an unimaginative fantasy would render me nothing more than a creep, but a sexy idea would paint me as somewhat of a savant or romantic, truth be told I was neither but a middle of the road answer would default upon the former.

“The year is 1761, the eve of the King’s ball. I am an uninvited guest who happens to crash the ball under the disguise of one of the King’s knights, upon entry into the castle I wander upstairs away from the drunken awful masses dancing out of tune to winding piccolo’s, where I stumble across an open door of a room glowing in candlelight. I hear only silence, ignoring the music carrying from the main floor. I stop and stare frozen in indecision should I stay or go, should I announce myself or fade away before you notice me and scream, alerting the guards to a stranger in your midst. You catch my reflection as you stand facing your large mirror preparing your attire. Your extravagant gown clings to your torso.

You look at me through the mirror and say, “Well are you going to be a gentleman and help a lady into a gown or stand there like a lost fool?”

I take a step forward and your back is exposed because you cannot locate your servant to zip up your dress. As I get closer, I notice a tiny marking of a creature part butterfly part dragon on your lower back” I paused for her comment.

“And then?” she spoke, her voice drenched in curiosity.

“And then I zip you up and go on my way, story to be continued.”

“That’s it?” she asked as though I was holding out on the scene where the child would have to cover his eyes, while peeking through his fingers.

“Yea that’s all.” I leaned back comfortably in my chair, relieved that I had supplied a satisfying example and tantalizing cliffhanger for next week’s episode.

“So how do you know it’s to be continued?” she asked.

“Because a thought so vivid and detailed is rarely relegated to a sole snapshot,”

“But don’t you control those thoughts and drive them where you wish or let them fade if they no longer intrigue you?” she asked.

“I don’t believe imagination is controlled, if so it would come when we want and how we want it. We are just receptacles for it and as long as we stay open to it, it will find us and reveal to us what it wants us to see. Surely there have been thoughts you were unable to escape.”

“Of course,” she agreed.

“How did you escape them?” I questioned.

“Time for some, distraction for others,”

“See that’s exactly what I mean you couldn’t control the thought, so you closed yourself off from receiving them. It’s like not answering the phone hoping the caller will just leave you alone,”

“I’ve done that too,” she confessed.

“What we imagine is mostly out of our control if we can just free our mind, creativity then allows us to edit that world in a way which suits the momentary ever changing realities we like to mold. At least that’s what I believe; it’s all relative, so relatively I could be wrong,” I remarked.

“So what part of me standing in that mirror was imagined and what part created?” she asked.

“All but the tattoo on your lower back and the musical hymns in the background was imagined,”

“Have you ever considered donating your brain to science?” she asked.

I choked lightly on my water in response.

“No, I can’t say that I have, don’t think I’d want to,”

“It’s just a question, because of my choice of profession but when I talk to people who seem eccentric, thoughtful, a little off maybe in a great or dreadful manner I wonder how their mind works,”

“But didn't you once tell me a person’s thoughts are their own?” I responded.

“Good memory, yes I did and I believe that, I don’t need to know your thoughts I’m just curious of the process in which they are born.”

“So, you’re a process over results person?” I asked.

“That depends on the goal, in my field the process is often important because we need to reflect upon experiences to resolve conditions that come up. But to me, ultimately it’s the result that matters regardless of how we get there.”

“You can’t use that example!” I countered nearly choking on my water.

“Why not?” she asked.

“Because that’s not really you, it’s a product of your profession, for example do you read directions before putting a table together?”

“Yes,” she answered.

“When you give directions do you refer to street names and compass directions or landmarks?”

“Street names and compass directions,” she answered.

“If you had a son and you were checking his algebra homework would you make him show his work even if all the answers were correct?”

“Yes, but only because it would result in his teacher not giving him full credit,”

“OK fair,” I agreed.

“Have you ever had your salad tossed?”

“No, but that would imply I was results oriented.” she stated.

“No, it makes you nasty,” I stated jokingly.

“Shut up, what does that question have to do with anything then?”

“See there you go chasing the process,” I spoke.

“Nothing really, I just knew the series of questions would lend to the result of you answering a question you may not have otherwise volunteered.” I divulged.

“I don't have many secrets John so if you have a question, ask I'm not bashful nor should you be.”

“I'm not bashful or Blitzen just sometimes a little uncertain.” I said.

“Blitzen? While I understand your attempt at word association, I should point out that your memories of childhood tales are woefully mixed up. Bashful was one of the seven dwarfs not Santa's reindeer, so your reference should've been Sleepy or Dopey.”

She was right, I never did get those tales right. I didn't know the difference between Snow White, Cinderella and Alice in Wonderland. I was more of a “Neverending Story” and “Where the Wild things are” child.

“Tell me about a recurring dream you have.” I rendered.

“What gave you the idea that I have recurring dreams?” she asked.

“First, you are a doctor so the likeliness an image replays itself in your sub-conscience is rather high. Second you answered my question with a question which usually means that there is merit to the initial question presented,”

“Are you a writer or shrink?” she joked.

“A good writer must be observant of the things that most people overlook, a great writer understands what most deliberately ignore,” I responded.

“You first,” she insisted.

“I often dream that I have to pee really bad and even though I get up and piss in my dream I still have to pee and I wonder why until I realize I only went in my dream.”

“Wow! Can't say I was expecting that,” she laughed.

“Has that ever happened to you?” I asked.

“I wouldn't say it was a recurring dream but I know what you mean.”

“My dreams have been a bit more intense actually,” she added.

“You're not Bashful or Dopey remember so spill it.” I instigated.

She began to tell the story but was interrupted as the waiter returned with our food.

I patiently waited for her to situate her meal before she continued.

“During my 2nd year of residency, I was on rotation in the emergency room when a family was rushed in after a car accident, the mother was DOA, there was a 6 year old daughter with broken bones and a concussion, and a nine year old boy named Christian Cole, he was bruised and battered but alert. I remember how he just kept asking about his sister Laney, “is Laney Ok is Laney Ok” is all he was concerned about. I treated and tested Laney, once we had her stable; Christian came into the room and sat next to her. He asked me if she was OK and I told him she would be fine. He stood next to her bed holding her hand. I went out to the nurses station to ask what the kid was doing out of bed and the attending physician for Christian had this look of confusion and shock on his face, before telling me that he didn't make it. Christian died in surgery due to massive internal bleeding in his abdominal cavity. I ran back to Laney's room and he was gone. But as strange as those events were, that isn't what haunted me. It was the horrible scream from the father who showed up at the ER that night to learn that his wife and son were killed coming home from a soccer game. So every now and then I have this dream that I'm back in the ER, on that rainy night and I'm trying to save Christian but every time I fail, then I look up and he's there standing by the bed; he's trying to say something to me but all I can hear is that wretched scream.”

I was silenced, the awe of her story made my admiration for her grow because she was strong enough not to let it drive her crazy or to drink excessively.

“Wow” is all I could muster.

“Yea wow is right, you’re the first person I’ve told,” she confided.

“I had never before nor have I since seen a man cry the way that father did that night. I grew up with three brothers and a father who were the epitome of masculinity, football, beer and carburetor grease; crying just didn’t happen in our house. But I couldn’t help but think how my own father would have crumbled under those circumstances” she added.

“When was the last time you cried and I mean cried enough tears to fill a pill shaped box?” she asked.

“I haven’t really cried outwardly since I was about 12,” I divulged.

“Do you think you cry through your writing?” she asked.

“Yes, I suppose it’s possible, it has always been my outlet, whatever was ailing me I could just put it on paper but to the same token I always feel like if I write something great as a result of whatever inspired me to write about it, then whatever pain I felt was worth it, a sacrifice in a way.”

“You know sometimes I swear you and Sunol were separated at birth, she always says bad experiences are worth it, if she gets a good song out of it.”

“I doubt that, she is lighter than me,” I joked.

“It is a trait of the craft more than the individual, writing can be so hard and for everything you write that is great you have much more that you threw away or scratched out. As a physician you are great all the time, you don’t need to sit and stare at a wall for hours thinking of where to make the first cut. As artist we cannot afford to let pain or happiness be wasted, it’s our only path to greatness. We can’t wait for inspirations we have to live them; creating music absent of life is like scouring for a sole marble in a sea of crude oil.

“That’s grim,” she replied.

“Well I will never promise you fairy tales but I can guarantee you truth if you can handle it.”

“Truth is all I ask, John.”

“OK, so where does your Joy come from?” she followed.

“Right now, here, this moment, sitting across from you.” I answered.

“Good answer; see deep down you can almost be smooth,” she said with a soft smile.

“Ahh, touché, are you going to hold that tongue slip on the dance floor against me, forever?” I countered.

“Forever could be tomorrow John, so absolutely not, if I were holding it against you, I wouldn’t be here, besides; confession, I’m not adverse to a little dirty talk with the right person. However, watering me is certainly a new one.”

She leaned back and smiled boldly like she had poked a caged gorilla in the chest.

“That’s not what I said, what I said was you must taste like water,”

On cue the waiter shows up again to check on us, just as I finished correcting her by providing the exact quote.

“You’re right that’s not as bad.” she admitted.

“Tim, have you ever told a lady her female parts taste like water?” she quietly asked the waiter.

“Yea sure” he responded.

“Shut up!” she laughed before pausing in disbelief.
“You’re serious?” she exclaimed.
“I think it’s a compliment,” Tim interjected.
“OK OK, I stand corrected if that is now normal operating procedure according to Tim, I won’t tease you anymore”
Tim walked away and I softly remarked,
“I can’t believe you told the waiter that, you may be the one separated at birth from the crown princess.”
“Oh don’t be embarrassed, I’ve had two glasses of wine, besides part of the reason I like you is because you remind me of my best friend and part of the reason you like me is because I remind you of your best friend”
“Sunol isn’t my BEST friend,” I responded.
“Really? Where do you live?”
“Sunol’s place,” I admitted.
“OK, whose car are you driving?”
“Sunol’s,” I admitted again.
“Who picked this place and reserved this table?”
“Sunol” I relented.
“And who is giving you the opportunity to fulfill your dream? If she’s not your best friend, your enemies must help you move.” she then sipped her wine.
She was right, and I felt like an unappreciative ass for not immediately realizing that she was my best friend, no one outside of my own mother had done what she had for me.
“What is the other reason that you like me?” I asked.
“You make me laugh,” she admitted.
“At or with me?” I questioned.
She leaned in and spoke slowly,
“At, but laughter is laughter and someone once told me doctors heal people but laughter heals doctors”
“Wow, that someone was an idiot, doctors heal doctors,” I argued.
She burst into laughter and pointed out that my plate was untouched.
I was so engaged in the conversation I had neglected the abundance of California and Tempura rolls on the table.
“Pass the soy sauce please.”

Chapter 11

“I think of myself as an intelligent, sensitive human being with the soul of a clown, which always forces me to blow it at the most important moments.” –Jim Morrison

I sat in the driveway near giddy, anxious to see Izabella again. Excited to spill my side of the night to Sunol. I was a gentleman. I opened her doors, pulled out her chair and walked her to a car. She showed her gratitude with a peck on my cheek. I refused to wipe off the lipstick for proof the night existed. I ran into the main house, where my adulation was tempted by relative horror. Geoff that slimy little stain was sitting on the couch with his head tilted back staring at the high ceiling. Sunol was next to him kneeling on the floor snorting a line of coke from the glass table with a fifty-dollar bill. My thoughts were emptied, my lips trembled in anger, my legs felt frozen, my heartbeat staggered.

Suddenly it all made sense. Why Izabella hated him and why I had immediately detested him. I felt he was a demon, a succubus, and evil preying on Sunol’s soul.

Sunol lifted her head to catch a breath and saw me standing in her pathway.

She paused for a moment as if she were embarrassed, like this was a part of her I wasn’t supposed to see. But she got over it quickly, wiping the excess powder between her nose and lip.

“How was your date? she asked casually, sniffing as if she were cutting onions.

“She didn’t call you?” I asked, trying to maintain my manner.

“God I don’t know, probably, I have no idea where my phone is right now,”

Geoff regained his wits and joined the conversation.

“John, man how’s it going? Do you want to party with us?”

Sunol sobered enough to stall his request; she wouldn’t have let me do it even if I was interested. This was not my type of party at all, and hearing his voice triggered me to clench my jaw, the veins in my forearm and hands became engorged. The voices in my head begged me to choke the life out of him for Sunol’s sake. The frat boy smile that came over his face was driving me to a sociopathic state. I knew that I wanted to kill him to save Sunol. I just had to figure out how not to get charged with his murder. God would forgive me.

“It went well,” I answered her question.

“Wait you were out with Izzy?” Geoff interjected.

“That must have been an adventure,” he blurted like he knew the punch line of an untold joke.

“How so?” I asked, one burst of energy from lunging towards his carotid artery with my key.

“You know man, she’s a firecracker, hell she can’t stand me man”

“I’m sure she has her reasons,” I replied.

His smile softened a bit as he noticed I didn’t care to engage in pointless conversation with him.

“George, can I talk to Sunol for a second?” I insisted.

“It’s Geoff,” he corrected.

“Yea, that’s what I said isn’t it?”

“No you said George,” he persisted.

I looked him in the eye, letting him know I didn't care what his name was.

My heart began to race and my knuckles clinched. I yearned for a reason to slam his face through the glass coffee table.

“Yea, whatever, I have to piss anyway.” he mumbled as he left the den.

“Congratulations,” I responded sarcastically, as I turned to Sunol.

“Don’t start John,” Sunol pleaded as if she read my mind before I even knew what I was thinking.

“Do you just expect me to look away like I didn't see you snorting coke with Dr. Giggles over there?”

“I’m a big girl, I know what I’m doing,” she said sternly.

“Yeah that’s what all the dead rock stars say isn’t it?”

“Fuck you!” she shouted.

“Don’t judge me, It’s a little coke, I’m not shooting heroin or loading up on pills, or sucking dick for blow, stop acting like a fucking after school special or like you are some holier than thou saint who has never jacked off to porn or screwed a girl out of wedlock,”

“I don’t want to see you...” I started.

She cut me off before I could finish.

“See me what Dad? In rehab? I don’t need you to protect me John; I protect you! I was fine before you got here and I’ll be fine when you are gone. So just take care of your own pathetic existence cause mine doesn't concern you!”

I stood quietly as she continued to tear into me with the wrath of a wounded leopard.

My spirit was sliced with a thousand cuts from the finest blades.

I heard the rest of her expletive laden rant like Charlie Brown heard his mother.

My intentions were good, my heart was in the right place, but she was right. Who was I to come into her life offering counsel? I didn't know if it was just the drugs speaking but her convictions were fierce and I felt like reality had kicked me square in the crotch, to remind me of my place. I was still just a worm in a ripe apple. I felt like the help, which I was.

Geoff walked back in the rooms and interrupted her tirade. “Soo are you guys gonna argue some more cause I can leave?” he surveyed.

“No Geoff, Don’t go anywhere John’s on his way out!”

“Good night John,” she said, so incensed she couldn't even look at me.

I walked back to the guesthouse crushed. I had forgotten all about the better part of the evening. I just wanted to crawl under a rock somewhere and never be seen again. A tear almost came into my left eye burning my Iris as I fought it back. I packed my bags and walked down the hill to catch a cab to Long Beach.

"I always wished for this, but it's almost turning into more of a nightmare than a dream."-Eminem

I spent the next few days in comforting isolation. I unplugged the phone from the wall and spent the majority of my days on the beach pondering what next. Maybe I'd be better off as a Walmart book aisle poet. I'd get a bungalow by the beach and live out my days looking over the ocean. Surely there wouldn't be too many of them, poets die young.

I was being a bit melodramatic. Yet, at the end of the day, I still felt like I had nothing and no one. A man can live without one or the other, you can have nothing but someone, or something but no one, but to be without both is a bitter burden to bear. I sat and looked into the ocean watching boats sail in and out of view. The rhythm of the waves touching shore put me to sleep. But my rest was not peaceful, a past terror revisited.

I saw myself at 18 years old, standing outside the gate of an old brick house. The shutters were dark maybe black. The front door was propped open, red and blue police lights plus ambulance sirens filled the night air as paramedics carted her battered body to the van. Chris was in handcuffs on the porch, his white tank top was worn and blood stained. He looked at me short of smiling as the two cops escorted him to the back of the cruiser. I never took my eyes off of him even as he looked away. I would not blink. Lisa's mother ran through the yellow tape to see to her daughter, she wept in terror before joining her daughter in the rear of the van. I should've been there for her, if only I had arrived an hour earlier it would've been a different day, and I would've been a different man. One day earlier, we were at an ice cream store talking about going to USC together; she was going to study film and be an actress. Her first big movie would be opposite Halle Berry but Chris aimed to take that from her.

"John! John! John!" a voice pierced through my vision.

I woke to an out of focus shadow standing over me.

"John get up," I recognized the voice as I regained consciousness but I was still too groggy to place a name to it.

Surely, I had had too much to drink; it was evident from the three wine bottles lying adjacent to my position.

Sunol sat beside me as I gathered my wits.

"Looks like I missed one hell of a party!" she said initiating a conversation that I did not want to have.

Her tone was soft and almost apologetic.

I had nothing to say, so I acted as if she wasn't there and stared at the water, unscrewing the cap from a half full bottle.

The wine was warm and wretched.

She sat silently for a few seconds before trying again, while I forced the awful beverage down my throat.

She dusted the sand from her skirt "Look, I know I was kind of witch a few nights ago, OK definitely, I was definitely a bitch and I got really out of hand"

I sat in silence.

"John, I feel like a pile of poo about it, OK, and stop drinking that hot sparkling grape juice!"

"It's wine!" I barked.

"Welch's doesn't make wine," she exclaimed, snatching the bottle from my hand to get my full attention.

I pouted like an eight year old denied a snickers bar in a checkout line.

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, or make you feel so uncomfortable that you felt you needed to leave. I do value your opinion and though I meant what I said, I didn't mean how I said it, I was wrong."

I was listening but I didn't budge.

"I want you to come home John,"

"I am home!" I fired with vigor.

"I accept your half assed apology but you were right, it's your life to live and your home, so I'd rather stay in mine and sit on this beach and mind my own business the way God intended." I added.

"Oh this is what God intended? You are as stubborn as I am, but if that's what you want, I guess I can understand that. Well I don't but I do. Personally, I'd want to be around all this coolness," she joked attempting to lighten the mood.

"C'mon, I have a peace offering,"

"Don't want it." I resisted.

"John, please,"

I hesitantly agreed to follow her back to the street where Izabella sat on the hood of a shiny black Range Rover.

For the first time, she greeted me with a hug.

"Proper etiquette is to call a lady after a date but considering the circumstances I think we can write this off under Article 9: The evil coked up Diva rule. Are you good?"

"Yeah I'm fine, I just needed some rest. No big deal," No way would I admit to the truth. What self-respecting northern man does that?

"You were right nice surprise."

"Ohh she's not the surprise, that's the surprise," she said, pointing to the vehicle.

Sunol had a tendency to go overboard with gifts when she felt she wronged someone.

"Wait, Wait, you bought me a truck!!"

"Well SUV but semantics, I figured you could use a car that starts every time.

"Where is my car?"

"Don't ask," replied Izabella, shaking her head, "It suffered a cruel fate."

Sunol ignored my question and carried out her agenda.

"But that's not the surprise either, guess!" she demanded with a grin.

"Geoff was robbed and brutally beaten at gunpoint?" I said with the hope of a young kid wanting a puppy.

Sunol ignored me but Izabella was tickled.

"What happens on Tuesdays?"

"Is this a word game? Ruby's" I answered.

"No think, what comes out on Tuesdays?"

"Weave?"

"No! Damn it John,"

"What is released on Tuesday, today is Tuesday"

“Ejaculate?” I answered sarcastically.

“Now you’re messing with me,” she barked.

I certainly was messing with her, I was amused by her increasing frustration with each wrong answer but I didn't know the answer so I continued with the game.

“Fine, what becomes available in stores, in particular stores that sell media,” she clarified.

“You got me an Xbox?” That actually was a serious guess but still wrong.

“God John, you would screw up a wet dream, albums, music? The album came out Jesus fun-loving Christ!” Even in anger she always made sure not to use the F-word “in between Jesus Christ.

I was stunned at first, because I did not know what to feel. I felt like if I let myself celebrate I would wake up, but if I didn't it would seem inappreciative.

“Cool” I commented.

“Congratulations,” Izabella said softly with a soft punch to the chest.

“Let’s go celebrate! Your treat, you drive, I’ll sit in the back so you can rub Izzy’s thigh.” Sunol tossed me the keys.

“Yeah I can handle that.” I murmured softly in agreement.

“You’re not rubbing my thigh.” Izzy informed, before she got into the truck.

Nothing came easy.

*My mind had few worries
My face knew less frowns
I was not yet the man that stands before you now
I once hoped for the moment I would kiss you
Gone are those days, and now I miss you.
This life aint free
I paid the best part of me
Through time space and colors
And words from my mother
The full heart of me loved fool heartedly
But If I had my druthers
I'd have another cup of tea
In your company*

*Times hath left creases upon my brow
Everlasting harmonies I am just writing now
While staring at your picture still unframed
A few wrinkled corners but mostly the same
I asked my mother, could I make you proud
Was there a better way, that's lost for me now?
She said...It's so hard for me to watch you fool-heartedly
If I had my druthers you'd be more like your brother
But Love's what you want it to be
And you got it from me*

Through time space and colors you're just like your mother

*I don't wanna just play it cool
When I just wanna be with you
I don't mind fool-heartedly
If you give your full heart to me
If I had my druthers
I'd make you a mother
And you'd tell her our son
You're so naive to love full-heartedly
But you're just like your father
So why should I bother?*

Chapter 12

*"I think I've been able to fool a lot of people because I know I'm a dork. I'm a geek"-
Gwen Stefani*

My treat meant a small soul food restaurant in North Long Beach with amazing sweet potato pie and poor customer service. It wasn't a place you'd take a lady on the first date but it's certainly a place you'd take her eventually if she were worth dating. I sat across from Sunol and Izzy, the conversations were endless some could've been offensive to sensitive eavesdroppers. Amongst a wide assortment of topics that evening in the diner, one comes to mind, what else but Sex?

"Confession, I have not had sex in six weeks," Sunol shared.

"I mean I've had interactions, like petting but no sex,"

"Who says petting? What are you 14?" Izabella commented.

"Well it was over the clothes petting, what would you suggest I call it?" Sunol fired back.

"I don't have any suggestions," Izabella responded.

Meanwhile I was listening attentively to where this conversation was going.

"When was the last time you had sex?" Sunol asked Izabella.

"Really, you are going to ask me that in front of John?"

"Yes, it's bound to come up right, we are all adults so c'mon Bella, don't be shy, how long has it been since you've done the nasty, bumped uglies, hunched?"

"OK, OK, A few Wednesdays ago,"

"Ohhh you've been holding out on me, who?"

Izabella gazed at me with modest embarrassment leaning over and whispering a name in Sunol's ear

"Oh he is hot; I thought you two were over," Sunol grilled.

"We are, he was just in town on business and one glass of wine led to another glass and so on."

"Don't worry John, he doesn't compare to you, he has more money and he's cuter, taller, more hair, and speaks like three languages," Sunol comforted.

"Four," Izabella chimed.

"OK, four languages, since apparently its necessary to make John look worse," Sunol modified.

"But no one is you," she added.

I wasn't sure that was a compliment but I tried to take it as one.

"How about you John, when was the last time you saw a vagina?" Sunol said as she started in on her pie

"11 months," I replied swiftly

"Ouch" Sunol chirped.

"Does it bother you that Izabella gets laid more than you?" she followed.

"Nah,"

“OK, next question, how many times a week do you have sex in a relationship normally, for me it’s like 4-5, Izzy your turn.”

“I guess the same, depending on the week or how much you see them at least three times.”

“How about you John?” Izabella asked.

Puzzled somewhat by their low numbers I considered amending my expectation but instead went with my first instinct

“13-16,” I answered calmly.

“What!” Sunol choked on her soda. “How in the world do you have that kind of time?” she asked.

“Simple, through the week you go around once in the morning and once in the evening and you are already at ten by Sat morning. Add three on Saturday, and three on Sunday you are at 16.”

For the first time I had left Sunol speechless and Izabella was somewhere between stunned and impressed. I’ll go with stunned.

“Wow the things you never know about people until you ask,” Sunol spoke after a momentary pause.

“So how do you go 11 months without losing your mind?” Izabella asked.

“It’s like the habits of a bear; they eat heavily when food is plentiful, so they can hibernate during the winter, same principle really,”

“Well OK Mr. Bear, are they all quickies?” Sunol asked.

“It’s a mix really, mornings tend to be but afternoons and evenings depend. Sex and the absence of it both provide great energy for writing like acid or weed; it’s my coke I guess.”

“You just couldn’t let it go could you?” Sunol commented.

“No, that’s not how I meant it, chemically sex and cocaine have similar actions,” I responded.

“He’s actually right, sex and orgasms substantially increase the flow of the excitatory hormone adrenaline to the brain, that’s why you don’t feel rug burns and stuff until afterward. Cocaine blocks the re-uptake of the neurotransmitter noradrenaline at the receptor keeping the action potential of the cell high giving you a prolonged state of stimulation,” Izabella elaborated.

“So you’re saying coke can make an orgasm last longer?” Sunol inferred.

“In theory, Yes.” Izabella confirmed.

“Hah,” Sunol sighed pondering the idea.

I expected that to be the end of that discussion, perhaps a transition to what we were going to do later. I was wrong. Sunol was in rare form that evening.

“So did you have protected sex Izabella?” she asked.

“You cannot be serious.” Izabella returned, clearly amazed and not pleased with the line of questioning.

“Yes, I’m dead serious, everyone wants to spill my business, Sunol has a coke problem, Sunol this, Sunol that, it’s a simple question. Did you make your lover rubber up?”

This was getting good, my ears perked to pick up mumbles and whispers.

Izabella sat quietly for a second, shaking her head with her lips tightened, expecting that at any time Sunol would say I'm just kidding and drop it.

Sunol joked but rarely did she relent, so I knew the awkward silence would remain until Izabella answered the question.

I had never seen Izabella so embarrassed before; it was quite attractive. She stroked her hair behind her ear and looked towards the ceiling, while lightly bouncing in her seat. I sensed she just wanted to curse Sunol but was torn because she didn't want to make a scene, which would only urge Sunol to speak loud enough for the whole restaurant to hear. Sunol waited patiently for fifty seconds before she began to instigate to get a quicker answer.

"I use them because I don't trust pills and the last thing I want is a zygote. Besides some of my exes weren't the best at keeping it in their pants. I don't see why you are being so shy, you dated the guy for two years, it's common to not use condoms anymore at that point. You know he doesn't have herpes or HIV or something; oh which reminds me,"

Sunol actually changed topics! Was she going to let Izabella off the hook? I wanted the answer more than Sunol did. Not because I was wanted to judge Izabella or that it would change my opinion of her. I was just curious like any other man would be. Sunol leaned forward, lowered her voice and continued on with her story,

"I was on tour a couple of years ago, and we had a couple days off between cities, so one night myself, the band and some of the roadies were all hanging out drinking, smoking, playing Truth or Dare. This roadie named Berton takes truth, and Greg asked him if he has ever had an STD before and if so which one. The guy says yes, he had herpes once. Immediately I yell, "What the hell, you don't have herpes once you have it forever." He said no he doesn't have it anymore it cleared up. So anyway we are explaining to this idiot that it never goes away but you may not have breakouts. But what's really sick and scary is that the guy goes around the entire country hooking up with leftover groupies and do you think he tells them? No, I would not let that guy near my tour bus."

"Wow!" Izabella gasped.

"Yeah I know right? Wow," Sunol agreed.

"So back to you, did he rubber up or not and if you don't answer in five seconds I'm going to ask if he pulled out,"

"No, OK," Izabella admitted. "I told you, it just happened."

"That's all you had to say, Geez not like any one is judging you, you can't help yourself, you're catholic." Sunol stung.

Izabella's jaw dropped as she sat looking at Sunol with contempt and disbelief.

"How about you John, are you a butt-naked surfer or do you wear a suit? Sunol interrogated.

"I wear a suit but I don't surf anymore these days." I replied.

"Ahh see, good boy," she patted the back of my hand in approval and pointed toward me while staring at Bella.

"See? Responsible!"

We planned to paint the town that night in celebration but as we cruised through the coast, fatigue crept upon us like dawn on daytime fun.

“I know I said we should celebrate tonight, but I’m exhausted would you be mad if I asked you to take me home, you two can do your own thing tonight,” Sunol voiced from the backseat.

I didn’t mind at all, the truth about the mid to late thirties is that even though you often have the intention of hanging out all night like you did in your 20’s the biological reality is that we can’t hang like we used to and sleep sounds much more enticing than a night in a club.

“Actually, I’m tired too, I’m on call tomorrow, I’ll take a rain check,”

“Rain checks? What does that even mean?” I asked Izzy.

“Rain checks you know like to postpone for another time,” Izabella answers.

“Have you ever cashed in a rain check and rescheduled a postponed event?”

“Um now that I think of it No,”

“OK so a rain check is really like a cancellation or nice way of saying No?”

“Yeah basically,” Sunol interjected.

“So why not just say I’m going to call it a night and leave it at that?” I provoked.

“You know what! Both of you can go to hell with the Nazis, I don’t know what this bonding experience at my expense is about but it’s going to stop!”

“My whatever do you mean?” Sunol replied with an exaggerated gasp.

“I bonded with him first,” Sunol added.

“Oh bull, you wanna play that game? I believe you said and I quote; “I don’t know about John he is kind of serial killer weird.” Izabella shared, her Brooklyn accent became obvious in her agitated state.

“I DID NOT SAY SERIAL KILLER WEIRD! I said weird, John do not listen to her,” she shouted while breaking into uncontrollable laughter.

In full hysterics herself Izabella was able to muster out more info “Yes, she did John, she said you never talk and you could be one of those guys who write poems to the police with clues about where you left the bodies,”

Sunol nearing tears of laughter, revealed, “Izzy said you probably wore tighty-whitey briefs,” at this point they were crying in laughter at my expense.

“OK, I did say that,” Izzy confessed.

“But I’m sorry,” she added. She kissed me on the cheek and turned back towards the window to continue laughing herself to tears.

I tried to contain myself from laughter myself. I admit it was funny, but I could not let them have the last one.

I remained silent, while they finished their chuckles.

“You were wrong about me, I’d never wear briefs.”

Chapter 13

“I remember one time we were getting ready to go to South America and everything was packed up and in the car ready to go and I hid and I was crying because I really did not want to go, I wanted to play. I did not want to go.”- Michael Jackson

Izabella and I grew very close over the next few months. I felt a certain comfort around her; there was no pressure to impress her. I trusted her to know everything about me. I confided in her with secrets that I had not even shared with Sunol. I told her about my fears and she told me her secrets. It was the first time in my life that a woman was just as invested in being with me as I was with her. As many of you reading this can relate, the one you love is rarely the one who loves you. It was also the first time I believed that I could live out the remainder of my years with someone other than myself. I didn't know if what we were building would lead to forever after but I knew that if it did, I would be good with it. I enjoyed bouncing my ideas off someone smarter than me and I think she liked having someone that she could call at 3 AM on a shift break. She inspired the hope my writing needed. I often thought about her when my eyes closed at night, she brought joy to my life like my favorite song. It was bittersweet that I would not see her for almost three months as I traveled with Sunol for the Supernova world tour.

Sunol was scheduled to perform in fifty cities across three countries in 100 days. For some reason I wasn't as excited to go as I expected I would be but I didn't have the courage to tell Sunol, most importantly I didn't want to let her down. Izabella drove me to the Santa Monica airstrip to join Sunol and the band on the flight to the first tour stop in Washington. We had some extra time to talk because Sunol was twenty minutes late. I was concerned that being away would create separation between Izzy so much that I considered not leaving.

“Do you think she'd be mad if I didn't go?” I asked.

“No, she wouldn't be mad, she'd be incensed,” Izzy advised.

“I thought you said I shouldn't lie about my feelings.” I countered.

“No, I said you shouldn't lie to me, you should definitely lie to Sunol, she is quite vindictive, and if you tell her you don't wanna go, she will make you feel awful until you go, but then when you go she will bring it up anytime you looked like you were having fun. So lie and pretend, until you don't have to.”

“You are wise,” I remarked.

“Perhaps that is why I am pulling out gray hairs weekly,” she quipped.

“Where is she anyway? It's not like her to be late, maybe I should call her.” I mentioned.

“No, that's not necessary,” Izabella, answered with a smirk, “I talked to her earlier, she had a busy night and morning,”

“Busy, doing what? She was the one that named the time?” Just then it hit me.

“Ohhhh busy, her and the baseball guy?” I prodded.

“Nope, and none of your business.” she corrected.

“Well at least someone is scoring,” I mumbled.

“Wait what did you say?” she challenged.

“Nothing,” I smiled.

“No, don’t be a fugazi; speak your mind.” she barked playfully.

“You said my thoughts are my own.”

“No, you can’t use that against me, as previously stated once you publicize any part of that thought to be used against another party it is no longer private.”

“You just made that up,” I retaliated.

“Noope it’s written,” she countered.

“Written where?” I argued.

“In the Bible, Ezekial 12:22,”

I paused briefly to consider if her remark could be plausible before calling her on it.

“No it isn’t,”

She burst into laughter, “Aww you actually had to think about it.” she teased.

“I’m pretty sure it’s blastphemy to misquote the bible.” I added.

“No, it’s certainly not blastphemy because that’s not a word, nor is it blasphemy. God knows I’m kidding; a ten Hail Mary penance was worth the look on your face as you thought about it. You definitely need to brush up on your theology,” she added.

“I know all about the Cosby show Thank You very much,” I replied in jest.

She giggled at my exaggerated ignorance.

As I watched her laugh, I realized how much I was going to miss her, so much that my stomach sunk like a sack of rocks in a quarry. She reached over the backseat and handed me a medium sized gift bag.

“I was going to wait to give this to you until right before you got on the plane, but here you go.”

Before I opened it, I knew whatever it was it would be cherished because it came from her.

The contents were simple, yet perfect; they included three smooth gel rollerball pens and a black paper notebook.

“Don’t open the notebook until you are on the plane,” she warned.

I had been looking for one of these black notebooks for years, with no success.

“How did you? Where did you?” I tried to form a sentence.

“You are always looking for them when we are in a store, so I called a college friend in printing and he gave me a good tip.”

I was grateful and moved that she would go out of her way for such a small thing that meant so much. The notebook may have cost seven dollars but there was not much else in the world that would have meant more.

She crawled over the console and straddled my lap. “You really like it huh?”

“Yea it’s really groovy, I dig it!”

“Good, now when you are bored in your hotel room being antisocial, you can think of me and write me a poem or song or a haiku.”

“Soo about these tour girls,” she started,

“No, don’t start that, I’m not even interested,”

“Oh you’ll be interested, just don’t act on that interest or I’ll break your neck, cause I will hear about it, I have ears everywhere and eyes in most places,” she informed, her Brooklyn accent obvious.

She leaned forward to kiss me; her hair was soft straightened and smelled of argon oil shampoo and shea butter.

Bap Bap! Jazz, knocked on the window.

Izzy rolled it down slightly, clearly irritated.

“Really Jazz?” I remarked.

“Bad timing Jazz,” Izzy agreed.

“My bad folk. Sunol is here, but proceed,” he informed before walking away,

“Ahh to be continued,” she sighed before laying a long soft kiss upon my lips.

Izzy exited the car to give her best friend a hug. I grabbed my bag and headed towards the plane. Just before I boarded I looked back at Izzy to get one last glimpse for the road. She was chuckling it up with Sunol but she noticed me and winked, her subtle way of saying, “see you soon” and it was all I needed. I made my way to my seat and opened the notebook to a page with the top left corner folded, expecting to find a heartfelt note. I found a note, it read:

Dear John,

I hope you don’t crash-Bella

The tour opened with a sold out show in Seattle. The intermission following the opening act was coming to an end. I was discussing basketball with the band when Sunol and her dancers gathered in the dressing room for their pre-onstage ritual ten minutes before the lights came down. A few of the band members from the opening act came by to offer good fortune. I started to exit the room and wander into the hall because I wasn’t sure I was invited to this on stage talent meeting.

“John, where are you going?” Sunol called.

“I was going to,” before I could finish, she interrupted “Get over here,” aggressively.

Her band mates Michael and Jazz, snickered at me. I was obviously unaware how serious Sunol got before she went on stage.

“Join hands everyone,” Sunol directed.

“Dear God, Thank you for surrounding me with these amazingly talented individuals, may we perform tonight with harmony trust and love in our hearts. Please wash away any negativity that may sweep through this room or in our minds. Free us from the reminder of burdens that exist outside these walls. Thank you for allowing us to live our dreams and may way inspire others to seek passion, peace and love under your will. Unite us a family, in your name we pray. Amen.”

Sunol then added, “I love you all, now let’s go have fun, count it off to 9.”

The object of the count it off exercise was for the group to count to 9 with each member calling off a number in a non-assigned order. If two members said the same number at the same time the count would start back at 1. I messed it up the first time on #7, but the second time around went smoothly.

The production manager knocked on the door, “Five minutes to lights!” she alerted.

The band entered the hall headed towards the stage, while Sunol stayed back for a last minute make-up and wardrobe check.

“You look beautiful!” I complimented, as her make-up artist brushed her cheeks. She didn’t even seem like the same person who watched horror movies and ate popcorn with me on the couch in sweatpants.

It was the first time I had ever seen her up close in full wardrobe, hair and make-up.

She wore white high-heeled boots, white leather pants and a matching magician-like jacket, waist high in the front; the rear was shredded and hung below her knees. Her makeup was flawless and her necklace sparkled like Polaris.

She took a long deep breath and exercised her vocals.

Security and the tour manager came to lead her to the stage. I could tell the lights had just gone down as we entered the hallway. The sounds of the crowd reverberated backstage.

“How could she be so cool?” I wasn’t even going on stage and the roars gave me chills.

I walked ten steps behind the entourage that surrounded her. Arena workers were stopped in the halls as she passed through; they watched her in awe, two young college-aged girls bashfully whispered to each other, I heard one say, “Oh my God, she is so gorgeous!”

In a world not far away I was one of those people just hoping to catch a glimpse of her. I knew how they felt.

I slipped off through another tunnel and sat in a small reserved section on the side of the stage for friends of the band, and promoters.

The band was in place and Michael kicked off the show with a booming drum line. The crowd roared as Randy started the bass, Jazz then joined with the keyboard.

The stage was dark, except for the tinted blue spotlights that shined on the band. The large monitors on each side of the stage displayed a moving view of the solar systems, with shooting stars and passing planets. The frames began to move quickly like a ship passing through space at warp speed. Suddenly, there was an explosion, pyros went off on the stage, creating a thick white smoke; the monitors flashed and began to display a live feed of the stage. Sunol appeared from the fading smoke, the crowd grew ecstatic, young girls in the front rows screamed at the top of their lungs, some cried. She stood there motionless, looking out amongst the crowd like a statue. My ears could barely tolerate the noise as the youth chanted behind me. The more reserved patrons whistled and clapped restraining their excitement.

The music stopped briefly to capture the sound of the crowd. Finally, Sunol spoke, “Did you miss me Seattle?”

The patrons stomped their feet on the risers, generating a fierce rumble. I could safely wager the answer was yes.

“Well I missed you too,” she returned.

The band picked up from where they stopped, and Wendell the lead guitarist played a solo riff fitting Sunol as she walked confidently with purpose to the front of the stage, like a Queen set to address her soldiers before battle. Suddenly, without fair warning her amazing voice sent tremors throughout the stadium as she belted a long note, that pierced

my skin and twisted my soul like the hand of God. It was even more than I was used to having listened to her daily, she gave her fans a little something more than she gave us in the studio.

“That’s my girl,” I thought, and the show had begun.

Izzy was right, by the time we left Seattle, I was glad I chose to come. When we reached Dallas I was having a blast. We all stayed out too late, which made it feel like we were getting up too early. We had in depth conversations about everything whether it was music, history, art, relationships, sex, philosophy, spirituality, education costs, or prejudice. It was predictable that religion and politics became the most heated topics.

I learned a lot about the band members and staff.

Sunol treated her make-up artist and wardrobe assistants the same as she treated her backup singers or dancers. She knew everyone’s name and what was happening in their lives. I heard that she helped the bus driver Derek’s daughter get into an exclusive private school. I also learned she paid her bodyguards generous six-figure salaries.

I learned that Jazz was a classically trained pianist and former 5-year-old prodigy.

Wendell hated Republicans and musicals and did not date women who had an E in their name.

The backup vocalist Vanessa pretended to be a Republican to anger Wendell because she had an E in her name and played an excellent Violin until her hand was broken in a car accident.

Her other vocalist Kylie was discovered by Tony a decade earlier while attending a friends church on Easter Sunday when Kylie sang a solo in the choir. He loved her voice so much that he made Sunol go with them the next week to recruit her. She was also a single mother of an autistic child.

Randy thought autistic meant artistic, he also kept a list of women some of which he had never met, that he would have unprotected sex with.

That disgusted Baltimore the wardrobe manager, a stunning, yet very straight laced and talented aspiring designer from North Carolina. Baltimore did not believe in open-mouthed kissing prior to marriage, or allowing a man that was not her husband to pay for her meal, which impressed the guys but infuriated Vanessa.

“That’s stupid, why would you spend your money when you don’t have to?” Vanessa asked Baltimore.

“Because if a man pays they feel it obligates you to sleep with him,” Baltimore reasoned.

“Honey, they can feel all they want but it doesn’t obligate me to give them anything.” Vanessa rejected.

“But it shows dependency,” Baltimore debated.

“I don’t think it shows dependency at all, if someone ask you out they should pay, conversely if you ask them out then you should pay. I make more money than most of the guys I date and I probably only pay 20% of the time.” Sunol interjected.

“20%! I don’t pay at all.” Vanessa quipped.

“Never?” Jazz commented.

“You couldn’t date me then love, I don’t mind paying most of the time, but occasionally you should show you’re not selfish and that you value my company also.”

"I second that." Mike added.

"You are all just cheap; I was raised to believe that women don't pay,"

"And that's why you are single," Jazz commented.

"Kylie, you always let the guy pay right?" Vanessa searched for someone to take her side.

"Usually but not all the time, that's kind of selfish, don't you think?" Kylie remarked.

"If you are interested, or really like someone you should pay occasionally. If you're not interested and he keeps pestering you than maybe that's different." she added.

"If he is pestering you just say no, don't waste his money." Mike barked.

"So by occasionally do you mean like 95/5? Or 70/30?" Vanessa began to soften her stance,"

"It depends, I guess" Kylie answered.

"60/40," Randy added

"Ha, good luck with that, I side with Sunol, if the woman plans the night, then she should pay, I can't stand it when a woman is at home thinking of ways to spend my money," Wendell remarked.

"See if you just go Dutch, you won't have this problem," Baltimore chimed.

"No wait, while I commend your independence and willingness to open your wallet, if you split the bill, it makes the guy look like a cheap piece, if you want to share expenses, at a movie for example, you let him buy the tickets and you buy the popcorn," Mike explained.

"I can't believe how all of you guys can have money and not want to pay," Vanessa pointed.

"It's not about the money, well it's a little about the money, but it's really more the principle, you want to know that the girl you are seeing isn't some selfish, inconsiderate, narcissist, like Vanessa," Kylie joked.

Vanessa retreated to her seat in a huff, her feelings slightly roasted.

"I'm only kidding," Kylie assured.

"Whatever," Vanessa pouted.

"Seriously guys, do you think that's why I'm single?" she added.

"No you're single because like your fearless leader Sunol you only date men with multimillion dollar contracts or French chateaus," Michael blurted.

The statement stopped Sunol from painting her toenails, her eyes squinted and her jaw tightened with irritation.

"Excuse me!" the words sliced the air as a dare to repeat the statement.

Michael lamented, stepping into a pool of boldness that he would likely drown in but he continued to splash against the rising current.

"I'm just saying you wouldn't date a guy like Derek for instance. No offense Derek."

"No I wouldn't date Derek, but it's because he is Derek not because of his tax bracket, don't ever generalize me amongst the sea of sorority skanks, Hollywood harlots and valley vultures that drive up your American Express balance and paternity suits!"

I thought it was a good time for someone to change the subject before Michael grasped for air again.

“Look all I’m saying is that women like yourself, models, performers, actresses, business women, tend to gravitate towards men with large pocketbooks, which works out for me because I have a couple dollars, it’s just not the best recipe for love is all.”

“Stop the Australian accent you are from Indiana.” Sunol yelled, eliciting a chuckle from everyone on the bus not named Michael.

Which reminds me, Mike was from Indiana and adapted an Australian accent to pick up women, he also had spent more than I made the previous year on prostitutes and church tithes, strange combination I know, but who was I to judge?

I decided to throw Mike a lifeline by adding a calm logical explanation for his claim.

“Mike, women gravitate towards men with confidence, I agree that the financially successful tend to have that confidence, normal guys are often intimidated, they see Sunol or the high profile ladies you speak of as these perfect humans, Angels even, that they could never meet, let alone date. They build a fantasy stronger than reality. If you were to actually meet your T.V. dream girl and she rejected you, you’d lose that fantasy and I think that’s more damaging to the psyche than a random lady at your local tavern rebuking your advances.”

“Geez man, I was starting to think we had to pull a string to get you to talk.” Jazz joked.

“You have been sitting on the couch like a Teddy Ruxpin all night.” he added.

“Awww I remember those,” Vanessa recalled.

“Everyone who grew up in the 80s does,” Wendell commented.

“I don’t,” Baltimore countered.

“You were born in 89’ that doesn’t count,” Wendell corrected.

“No John’s right,” Kylie confirmed, while fiddling with her hair, “Sunol and Vanessa do you remember when we were in Chicago at the Cheesecake Factory, and we had that cute waiter that we were flirting with all night?”

“Oh George,” Vanessa perked up like a schoolgirl. “He was gorgeous!” she described with emphasis on gorgeous.

I was envious of George that even as waiter, a gang of beautiful women remembered him so fondly years later.

I doubted that anyone had ever called me gorgeous; though I am sure other adjectives came up.

“Yes he was adorable.” Sunol agreed.

There was a moment of silence as the girls drifted off into an apparent flashback of the eve.

“Renee and Izzy were there too,” Vanessa recalled.

“You’re right, Izzy called him jail bait because he looked so young,” Kylie added.

“He was young he was only like 19, I asked him if I could see his dorm room” Sunol confessed with laughter.

“I asked him if he was still a virgin,” Vanessa admitted.

“I think we scared him,” said Kylie.

“We were a little buzzed, a little loud and maybe a little over the top but we probably gave him a confidence boost and a story he could tell his friends,”

“I almost gave him my number” Sunol confided.

Vanessa paused and shyly confessed, "Renee gave him hers, she slipped it under the tip, he called her and left the cutest message, we listened to it three times but she never called him back... What? He was a kid," Vanessa shrugged off the looks of judgment for playing with the guy's emotions.

"Well anyway to refute your opinion Mike, yes if a normal guy asked me out and I liked him, I'd say yes, Oh and speaking of Renee, did you know John is her hero now?"

"Renee has lots of heroes; oh did I say that out loud?" Baltimore joked.

"No really, John and I went to Planet F one night and she saw him and lit up, she was like "*Oh My God, I know that guy!*" So I said, "You know John?" She then tells me that a few weeks before she had gotten a flat on the 405 and John stopped and changed her tire, like some Knight in a Ford, not even a Mustang."

"Does Izzy know you go around changing random girls tires John?" Vanessa stated with a smirk.

"I don't even change my own flat tires." Wendell stated.

"Why would you? We are musicians and that's what Triple A is for," Jazz added.

"That's why I don't date musicians, that and the alcohol dependency," Baltimore fired.

"What do you care? You'd only let him change one tire anyway," Mike responded in support of his band mate.

Baltimore smiled sharply and sarcastically. Sunol went back to painting her toenails.

Kylie picked up her half completed blanket and continued knitting.

Vanessa scanned the room as everyone went back to their pre conversation activities and asked,

"Guys really, why am I single?"

I snuck off into a corner at some point of everyday to call Izabella, sometimes we'd talk for a spell, other times I'd leave her a long message or listen to a single voicemail she left several times. Part of it was that I missed her, the other part, was a bit of my insecurity; two months was plenty of time for her to forget about me and fall for some brilliant surgeon or basketball player. To be completely honest sometimes, I grew anxious when I listened to her messages; concerned that she met someone better than I. The voices in my head would always tease that I wasn't good enough for her and sometimes I believed them. I couldn't fully enjoy being on the road without knowing she'd be there waiting for me on the tarmac when I returned. "Surely, you can't be that pathetic" A voice exclaimed.

"Leave him alone; there is nothing wrong with having feelings for someone." Another voice countered.

"You're right, so as long as you have a vagina... Do you have a vagina John?" The first voice stabbed back.

"Shut up!" I yelled loud enough that Sunol overheard.

"Are you answering yourself again?" Sunol interrogated.

"No, I was watching T.V.," I replied.

"John, there is no T.V. on,"

"Yes I know, I meant yesterday I was watching a show yesterday and just now I realized how ridiculous someone's statement was." I was a terrible liar.

“OK, whatever. Hey we are ahead of schedule so I was thinking that maybe we’d get to Detroit a little early and spend some time with our folks, cool?” she suggested.

“Yea definitely!” The immediate excitement, took me away from the battle being unleashed in my head.

“Good, call your Mom and let Tracy know how many tickets you need for the show and stop answering yourself, people other than me will know you are crazy.”

On day 27, we had just made it to Detroit and were greeted by the worst rain storm in years. The sky was pitch black if it were gray. The winds were strong enough to blow a small child down the block. A torrential downpour pelted the ground like God was dropping small water balloons. We were stuck in a Birmingham hotel under the guise of a tornado watch, when Sunol called my room to ask me to come play cards. She didn’t care to admit it, but she was afraid of storms and just couldn’t stand to be alone as lightening crackled and thunder roared.

“Where are the cards?” I asked.

“I thought you had some,” she replied.

“You invited me, remember, why would I bring the cards?”

“So much for the extra time, huh?” she muttered while curiously peeking through the drapes.

“Or you could just ignore me, that’s cool too,” I mumbled.

“Don’t worry it will pass in a couple hours, just relax. My grandmother used to tell me storms were just the Lord doing his work, besides there is no sleep like rainy day sleep.”

“I can’t sleep during storms, I keep thinking some crazy guy will show up to my door, claiming he lost control of his car and needs to use my phone.”

“Your property is gated and you have security,” I reminded her.

“Exactly so, creepy wet guys don’t show up at my door,” she reiterated.

“Well I’m sure you are safe here, because there is a huge man standing outside your door, and to a lesser degree you’ve got me so no stranger men than me will be knocking on your door tonight.” I assured.

“I’m just being a spazz,” she admitted.

“We all have our quirks, I’m incapable of folding a fitting sheet and I may be socially handicapped.” I shared. She snickered as she sat Indian style at the edge of the California King, her hands rested on her thighs as she pondered her next sentence.

“Do you ever say anything positive about yourself?” she asked.

I thought about it briefly.

“I am sure I do, but I don’t like to make a habit out of it,”

“You don’t and even when you almost do you follow it immediately with something negative about yourself, why?”

Could she be right? Were those nagging voices inside my head beginning to affect how I viewed myself? “They should because they are right,” a voice answered. My mind was so crammed with noise it was difficult to have a private thought.

“I don’t mean to, I just don’t think it’s really up to me to speak highly of myself, I leave that to everyone else or no one at all, personal compliments make me uncomfortable.”

“So you don’t like it when I compliment you?” she asked.

“You compliment me?”
“Good point,” she sighed.
“How’d your song turnout?” she inquired.
“What song?” My brow furrowed in confusion.
“The blues song you were playing with your harmonica, the other night,”
“Oh that song, not really, I only came up with a few lines,”
“What were the lines?” she pestered.
“I don’t want you to hear it? I admitted.
“What! Why?” she remarked in astonishment.
“Cause Sunol it’s not any good yet,”
“So what?” she huffed. “My songs aren’t always good either and I let you hear them anyway.”
Sunol had a way of making me feel guilty even though she was the aggressor.
“Fine, wanna give me a string?”
“Why certainly,” she perked before retrieving her custom Taylor Acoustic electric guitar from her bedside,
Like I said, it’s a little rough,” I reiterated.
I cleared my throat, as though it would cure my broken course voice.
My voice cracked as I began to hum the opening line, Sunol maintained her desire to laugh so I would keep going.

*Hmmmm hmm hmmm hmmmmm
There’s a river down the road, river down the road
I sit down by the river, aint got nowhere else to go
River down the road, river down the road
Down by the river, only place I know*

*I aint got me a dollar
I aint got me a thing
But down by the river
I got me a dream
To own me a river; a riverboat yeah
Riverboat yeah, riverboat
I lost me a woman
Cause I can’t find a job,
They said complete an application and they’ll give me a call
But I aint got me a number
I aint got me a home
I used to have me a bit of pride
Even that now is gone
If I was down by the river, in a riverboat
All I need in this miserable world,
Is a tea stain of hope and a riverboat
Hmmm hmmm hmmm*

“That’s as far as I got” she stopped playing and placed the guitar in her lap.

“What’s a tea stain of hope?” she asked.

“I don’t know, it rhymed, James Brown made up stuff all the time so why can’t I?” I confessed.

“OK, let me make up something” she cradled the guitar and began playing, adding her own version to the song she mimicked the adlib that I had asked to record in the studio from perfect memory, She picked up with a long deep note,

*Aint got me a dollar, not a dime
My tank is past the empty line
I’m heading to the river by the stream
That’s where my future’s, happening
I lived in the city and lost my job
Went home and found out my place was robbed
I heard the down by the river by the stream
They got plenty of guitar strings
I’m just a simple kind of girl,
Just want my piece of this crazy world
Down by the river by the stream,
I’m gonna lift my voice and sing
No I aint got a dollar not a cent
And all my hope has been spent*

She slowed down and dragged out the last bars,

*I’m heading down by the river
Down by the stream
And I’m gonna sing
With the riverboat King*

She strummed to silence.

Her voice was so incredible the Cat in the Hat would sound good but her addition was epic. All I could do was watch her in awe as she casually laid her guitar down on the bed. It was like she had no awareness that she just blew my mind, again. I felt blessed just to be in her presence and a tad bit envious that she had more ability in her sock than I had in my soul.

“John Robe you are an old soul, is the blues your first love?” she asked.

“Well, I wouldn’t say it’s my first love but it may be the best love I have ever had. It was good enough for my ancestors, I reckon it suits me also, we were all searching for freedom.”

“Tell me about it,” she concurred.

“I didn’t mean you, you are free,” I clarified.

“You think I’m free?” she laughed in disbelief.

“Honey, I am no more free than you, or someone who sits in a cubicle all day.”

“I don’t follow that, at any time you can go wherever you want, do whatever you want without worrying about how much it costs, or how much PTO you have left.” I countered.

“True, we have different concerns but I have other restrictions, I can’t just go to the beach on a random Saturday afternoon, or walk my dog on a Tuesday night. I have to pretend to be a perfect symbol of diplomacy so not to offend people; I didn’t even make the type of music I wanted to,”

“What do you mean?” I prodded.

“I always wanted to be a folk singer,” Sunol confessed while caressing the neck of her guitar.

“I could see that because what you just did was outstanding but what happened?” I inquired.

“What do you think happened? The label, it was the beginning of the new millennium; pop music was what sold, boy bands and teeny bopper hits controlled the airwaves. So the day after I signed they dyed my hair light and made me lose the guitar,”

“I guess if you want a castle you can’t always choose the bricks,” I commented.

“I always envied people who did it their way, even if it cost them money and fame. Don’t get me wrong; my prayers were answered, I was young, broke and tired of being close without booking anything, besides it was better than being an intern in corporate America.”

“The young broke and tired I can relate to but fortunately and unfortunately for me, I’m not fit to be an idol.”

“You will not have to worry about fitting if you stay out of the box John,” she advised.

“Good advice,” I complimented.

“I can be a sterling example of wisdom on occasion,” she playfully proclaimed.

“Speaking of wisdom, for the record, I know you weren’t all too excited about coming on the road but I am glad you did,”

“What gave you that idea?” I pretended to be shocked by the allegation.

“John you are an awful liar and actor but it’s fine, all that matters is that you came.

“I have your back,” I shared.

“I know you do and I have yours, ride or die,” she assured.

“Are we supposed to hug or something?” I asked.

“Don’t ruin it,” she quipped.

The sound of the pattering of raindrops and knocking winds had faded.

But darkness loomed over the sky in the city we called home.

“Well that’s my queue to exit, the storm is over,” I gathered. “I’m going to go call my Mom and see if she can make it to the show.”

“John, wait,” she called as I walked towards the door.

I turned to face her standing against the window.

She paused like she had something on her mind but stopped short of saying it all

“Thanks,” she settled.

The storm had robbed us of the daylight and most of the time extra time to spend with family and friends so we arranged for them to meet us backstage for dinner the

evening of the show. Sunol called a car to take us to the venue about an hour ahead of the band. I could sense a nervous excitement about Sunol, which wasn't apparent in any previous stop. Typically Sunol would calmly read a book on the way to the venue. But on this day as I sat across her she tapped her fingers nervously against the window and hummed quietly. I thought it might be a bit of hometown jitters in combination with seeing her parents.

"What irks you friend?" I reached.

"Nothing I'm fine," she returned.

"No you're not, you didn't say why?" I replied.

"Why what?" she answered puzzled.

"Nothing and why, when nothing is wrong you say nothing, followed by the question why."

"So, if there is no why, there is a what, so what's wrong?" I asked again.

She smiled the way she smiled, when she realized I really understood her.

"It's just a lot being home," she admitted.

It reminds me of too much, the good and bad,"

"More good than bad though right? This will always be home even if it wasn't necessarily your birth. Your parents are coming and if you thought Seattle and New York were wild; wait until tonight." I attempted to comfort.

"It's not about who will be there, it's about who won't be,"

It hit me like a heavyweight jab that she was referring to her late sister Jasmine.

She could see it in my eyes that I knew, where her head was.

I was lost on how to help her, how does one console what is inconsolable, or reconcile what is beyond comprehension of reconciliation?

"Her birthday was last week, she would've been 34 and it's not that I want to forget her, it's just that everything here reminds me of her."

I didn't know whether to hug Sunol or give her space but I had a suggestion.

"Why don't we go see her?"

"You mean at the cemetery? God no, I can't go back there, No," she resisted.

I started to reveal a secret that haunted me, when Vanessa jumped in the backset with tears rolling down her face and smeared mascara.

"What is wrong with you?" a startled Sunol reacted.

"Marcus is a cheating asshole, guys are such jerks," Vanessa screamed.

"Calm down, tell me what happened," Sunol comforted.

"He has an online dating profile and it says it was active within 24 hours,"

"Honey, how do you know he has an online dating profile?"

"Because I saw it," Vanessa remarked.

"OK let me clarify, what lead you to the dating site that you found him on?" Sunol elaborated.

"Baltimore is on CutieCall and he came up,"

"Baltimore has a Cutiecall account?" Sunol interjected with surprise.

"What's CutieCall?" I interrupted.

"Use your imagination," Sunol urged.

Using my imagination was never an effective tool for understanding reality. However, I inferred it was one of those meet a friend sites.

“Have you talked to Marcus about it?” Sunol inquired.

“No, he’s just going to lie,” Vanessa cried.

“Vanessa, just talk to him, maybe there is a fair explanation and if not, technically he’s not your boyfriend, so I can’t say he did anything wrong,” Sunol reasoned.

“So you are talking his side?” Vanessa wept in frustration.

“No honey, I’m on your side but you are a little overcome with emotion right now and you logic is compromised. This is not an extinction level event, it’s just a conversation you two need to have regarding the status of your situation.” Sunol advised.

“You’re right.” Vanessa agreed, wiping the tears from her eyes.

I handed Vanessa one of the high quality hotel napkins I had lifted from the restrooms to dry her nose.

I always thought Vanessa was a bit too tough to be crying like a baby about a guy but I felt that now was not a good time to tease her about it.

“Are you going to be OK?” Sunol comforted.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine” Vanessa sniffled.

“Good,” Sunol and Vanessa embraced in a hug as Sunol’s compassion clock expired.

“Now get out!” Sunol instructed returning to her baseline state.

Vanessa exited and I couldn’t help but laugh, tickled by how the conversation ended.

“What?” Sunol remarked as if she hadn’t displayed symptoms of multi-personality disorder.

“I love her to death, but I can’t deal with all her drama today, I can’t.”

“Hey you don’t have to explain to me, I’ve never liked soap operas.” I assured.

“You are like my evil twin, you balance me. I wish we had grown up together,” she shared.

“I wish I had a grown up,” I muttered.

I thought about the childhood friend I had lost, memories I tried but failed to repress, even now, I couldn’t talk about it.

“Just think about it OK?” I suggested, referring to our conversation before Vanessa interrupted.

Sunol nodded in acknowledgment just as her bodyguard Roland entered the front seat, And we were off.

We arrived at the venue to find Sunol’s parent waiting for her backstage. Sunol ran to them like a child after the first day of school excited to tell them about the new friends and hand painted art that she had made.

They smiled proudly; her mother began to tear which must have been contagious because Sunol was fighting back teary eyes also.

Sunol introduced Roland and myself.

Sunol’s father thanked Roland for protecting his little girl.

“Is John the boyfriend,” Sunol’s father asked.

“Noo,” I answered quickly, “I am terrible at baseball.”

He laughed and remarked, “You know she always had a thing for the jocks since she was a teenager, especially the dumb ones.”

“Easier to control,” Sunol confirmed.

“John is my writer and coincidentally Izabella’s, whatever they are.”

Sunol’s parents appeared to be very easygoing and warm people. It was obvious that a large portion of them was passed down to her. I had hoped to see my own mother there but instead I received a call that she was running late but would meet us before the show started. Before the show, turned into sometime during the show, then after the show, it wasn’t that my mother wasn’t punctual; it’s just that she didn’t believe in rushing anything. She always said black people are already prone to high blood pressure so there was no need to stress over time, only to make good use of it.

On queue, as the show ended she called to announce she was there. We learned that she had gotten there just before Sunol went onstage but didn’t want to be a bother, so she watched the show and waited.

I was excited to see my mother and introduce her to everyone I knew especially Sunol. The show had gone masterfully so I figured Sunol would be in a somewhat social mood but one could never be sure with her. Especially with the home audience, if there was one mistake at any point she would harbor it for a few hours and sling some profanities before letting it go.

I spotted Vanessa first.

“Hey where is Sunol? I asked.

“She’s in #3 talking to Band-Aid,” she informed.

Band-Aid was the opening group, so I was confident if she was with them she wasn’t throwing chairs.

I knocked on the door, and their lead singer answered and welcomed us in.

“John is this your mother? She is gorgeous!” Sunol complimented.

I introduced her to everyone in the room, because she had no idea who anyone other than Sunol was. The drummer was kind enough to put out his marijuana in respect of his elders before my mother stopped him.

“Oh, no don’t waste that pass it,” she urged.

Everyone looked at each other rather surprised.

But they did pass her the joint, from which she took a soft drag, she observed their shock and murmured.

“What? I have arthritis!”

Everyone laughed and the ice was broken.

“Dude I love your Mom!” the bassist added before rising to give her a hug.

“Did you like the show?” Sunol asked, still tickled.

“I loved the show, and your wardrobe is just sensational,” my mother commented.

“John, which song did you write?” she inquired.

“About half of them actually” Sunol responded.

“Man we have to work together when get back to LA, I mean we usually write everything internally but if you’re up for a collaboration, that might be a blast,” replied Band-Aids lead singer Adam.

“That’s a great idea” Sunol exclaimed.

“You should come visit John in LA, Ms. Robe,” Sunol mentioned.

“Oh I’m not a Robe honey, his father and I never married, and you can call me Jackie. I don’t know, LA traffic is a bit much for me.”

“I’m sorry I forgot, John did tell me that his Dad is in Wyoming cause I asked him who in the hell goes to Wyoming voluntarily. Jackie, if John won’t chauffeur you around you can use my driver. Izzy and I will treat you to a nice spa, it’ll be fun.”

“Well maybe I will consider it,” my mom tentatively accepted.

“What happened to your folks?” I asked Sunol.

“They left early, my Dad is driving up to Chicago to watch a game in the morning,” she answered.

“Well, it’s getting late for me also, I have church in the morning but it’s a pleasure meeting all of you.” my mother announced.

She had a gift to win a room, everyone loved her immediately and this situation was no different.

I walked her to her car, dreading the idea that she was leaving so soon, we had barely even gotten to talk.

“Your friend seems nice,” she commented

“Yea she is good people,” I confirmed.

“Everything OK?” she inquired.

“Sure,” I reacted.

“Boy you were always an awful liar, one trait you did not get from your father”

“No really it’s good I guess,”

“But?” she inferred,

“None of this seems real, what if I just got a lucky and can’t keep coming up with new ideas?”

“It’s OK to rejoice in blessings, you’ve worked hard to earn this, you are talented you just needed the opportunity to let the world see what I saw everyday while you were growing up. Luck is a lotto ticket and we have never won the lotto,” she advised.

“I suppose,” I relented.

“Life and love will give you all the inspiration you need, so live, love and have faith. OK I’m done preaching give me a hug.”

She kissed me on the cheek and told me she was proud of me.

“Make sure you come back home and visit your grandmother,”

“I will and send my love,” I promised.

Seeing my mother drive off felt like someone kicked me in the stomach.

You know when you miss someone, but you don’t quite realize how much until they leave again?

I walked solemnly to the tour bus to have a few minutes to myself so no one noticed my eyes puffed and reddened.

I was sitting in a dark corner in the back when Baltimore walked in looking for her glasses and found me.

“Hey John, have you seen my glasses?”

I nodded my head no, so my voice didn’t crack like a wimp.

Baltimore wasn’t fooled and responded,

“Your Mom left huh? I get like that every time we leave Virginia, I think we all do it, if you want to know the truth, something in the air, the nostalgia the history and family, it’s hard to leave, that’s why no matter where we go in life, home is always home.” she offered.

“Thanks” I uttered.

“No problem, oh there they are,” she spotted her glasses.

“I bid you adieu, see you in a bit, we’re going back to our second home soon at least,” she added.

Baltimore started to exit the bus, before I called out,

“Hey Baltimore, could you not tell anybody?” I asked.

“Tell anyone what?” she winked and walked off into the night.

*Tomorrow’s the best day of my life
Blues and borrowed, to the left of you is you the only way to be right
I’ve been covered in secrets, I can’t hold
I am colored in pieces; make me whole
I’m trying to see the way you hear,
When every part of me, wants you near
Everything has been for me, my thoughts till now
To be un-stubborn and selfless, show me how.
When I have a dream, it’s you who believes
I pushed you away but you didn’t leave
When all is uncertain and life isn’t fair
You dared to love me, more than I cared
Couldn’t be more simple but so complicated, been lost on this journey
But baby we made it,
When you look into my eyes, laugh until you cry
My fantasy comes true,
For you are everything my prayers could bring
Nothing’s as good as you*

“Are you writing love letters again?” Sunol teased peaking over my shoulder on the flight back home to LA to finish the tour.

“No it’s not a love letter it’s a poem,”

“Same difference.” she answered.

It was something about being in planes that made me feel poetic, likely the idea of actually being in the clouds. As a kid I always looked out the plane windows hoping to see my grandfather waving at me in heaven. Even as an adult I was still hopeful but the list of people I longed to see had grown a bit longer.

The tour was nearly over after a grueling journey that saw close friends get a little irritated with each other from being together every day for two months. I was excited to sleep in my own bed. I was even looking forward to sitting on the couch and watching old horror movies with Izabella. I was always told that absence makes the heart grow fonder but I believed that was only true if your heart was in the right place and with Iza-

bella; I felt that mine was. When we landed I was hoping Izabella would be inside one of the black SUV's set to take us home. Unfortunately, she had to work, so on the way home I isolated myself in my headphones and gazed out the window for familiar landmarks with anticipation that I would be home soon. When I arrived home my apartment was still and immaculate, yet in my fatigue, I dropped everything I was carrying in the middle of the floor and left it. I took an extended shower, appreciating the flow of my showerhead and soft towels. When I made it to my room I found my bed neatly made with a note resting on the pillows.

The note read:

Welcome home, and don't wait up –IZ

I tried to anyway but soon I found myself in a dream.

In my dream I watched the childhood version of me play on the swing with no other concern than kicking my legs to see how high I could get. The clear sky turned cloudy and all the other kids disappeared but I kept swinging even as the rain fell, perhaps I was swinging for the moon. I was happy then, because I didn't know any reasons not to be. I swung so high that the chains began to buckle before jumping off at the highest point trying to fly. My young body appeared to be crash landing towards the muddy soil. Like a concerned parent I tried to catch my young self but I fell just outside of my outstretched grasp. My nine year old body was muddied but unbroken.

"Are you OK?" I asked my innocent self.

My younger self casually rose to my feet and attempted to dust the mud from my school pants, smearing it instead. Surely my mother would not be pleased.

With a large bright snag-a-toothed smile, I looked up to my older self,

"Did you see me fly?" I asked with total disregard of my flawed landing.

"Yea, man I saw you fly but didn't the landing hurt?"

"It always hurts a little," the younger me answered.

"Then why do you keep doing it?"

"Because one day I'm going to land on the moon." I insisted.

I smiled at my innocent naivety and marveled at my faith in imagination.

"Jonathan!" A voiced echoed.

"That's my Mom, I have to go Mr.," I saluted, before running off into the darkness.

"John, John" the voice repeated.

I woke up to find Izabella whispering in my ear.

"What were you dreaming about?"

"Nothing," I answered.

"You were talking in your sleep," she revealed.

"I don't remember," I replied, keeping the details to myself.

She laid her head next to mine and finally I felt at home.

But I couldn't help but think about that dream, struck by the realization as children we don't allow the threat of failure or pain to thwart our ambitions the way we do as adults. I wanted to be that kid again, not 4 feet 5 inches tall with missing front teeth but fearless, hopeful and free.

Chapter 14

“Friendship... is not something you learn in school. But if you haven't learned the meaning of friendship, you really haven't learned anything.” -Muhammad Ali

The night after the final show in LA, Sunol threw her traditional post tour party at Fraggie Rock. She invited only her close friends, most of whom she had known for years including her old roommates and co-workers from her pre-fame days. It was important for Sunol to keep her real friends close to her because it helped her recognize who she could trust. She once admitted to me that she just grew ill of hanging out with people in the entertainment industry, she wanted to hear about her life from other angles. I think she mostly enjoyed not having to put on a performance. She talked differently, she didn't wear makeup or heels, she laughed with her whole body, she spoke her mind without diplomacy, she drank Heineken, ate Doritos, belched and most importantly listened. She listened to her friends talk about their kids and jobs with genuine interest. She knew that no matter what happened in life, these moments were genuine. These were the people that would be there for her when the music was over.

We sat around an artificial bonfire in the gazebo alongside the pool sharing stories and laughs. I talked the least since I figured I was the most likely to be laughed at but mostly to collect inspiration amongst the stories and situations that were shared. I wanted to know what events played the most in peoples mind and what they related to. I wanted to know the genre of their lives.

“Hey if you had to pick a theme song to represent your life right now, what would it be and why?” I asked, breaking my silence.

I observed the partygoers thinking as they tried to come up with the perfect tune to play as they walked down the street in slow motion.

“I'll go first,” Kila volunteered. Kila was petite; two layers of socks over 5ft tall with thick long dark hair; clear cocoa skin, deep dimples and perfectly etched eyebrows.

“Pussy Control,” she blurted decisively. “Because I have my own money and possessions and I don't have time for any man that can't get his,”

“Somehow I've learned that love is not possession, somehow I've learned that love won't....” Renee sung.

“She's out of my life is your song, Renee?” Reggie inquired.

“No, I was just making a point that love is not possession, mine would be Sunol's *Over the clothes* actually,” Renee answered.

“Believe it or not that songs has helped me through a lot of relationships,”

“Kiss ass!” Reggie choked.

Renee responded with a gesture from her longest finger.

“We are all dying to hear your choice,” Kila chirped.

“*Harder than you think*, by Public Enemy because I'm a cop and it fits, I play it every day before my shift starts,”

“What about you Izzy?” Sunol asked.

"I don't know I never really thought about it. I actually listen to gospel music mostly lately but considering many of you don't know those songs. I'll go with *Put your record on* by Corinne Bailey Rae, it's one of those songs that I can listen to when I get five minutes to myself among the chaos at work and just relax and re-focus."

"Now for you Sunol," Izzy delegated.

"And don't use one of your songs like Renee," Kila added.

"God never," Sunol frowned.

"That's really hard, so many choices, yesterday I was in a Billie Holliday state of mind but today I will say *With a Little Help from Friends*-made famous by Joe Cocker but written by Beatles Paul McCartney and John Lennon, because I'm really happy that all of you are here."

"Isn't that the Wonders Years song?" Renee commented.

"Yes, yes it is and I loved that show. John you're on the clock." Sunol followed.

I was so focused on everyone else I forgot to think about what mine would be.

"Maggot Brain," I answered.

"I don't think I know that one" Kila admitted.

"It's an instrumental, it's a blank canvas in musical form depending on the day, you can put any story you want in it, I think you can fit every emotion into it, unfortunately I don't think it ends well," I described.

"Well, why would you pick a theme song that doesn't end well?" Reggie asked.

"Do all the movies you love have happy endings?" I queried.

"It's great that you all have songs that represent the good in your life, but life is more than that, your life has secrets, fears, bad memories, heartache, hope, triumph and tragedy, I just feel like my theme song shouldn't leave any of that out,"

"Shoot man, now I want to change my song," Reggie joked.

Well since we are all in the sharing mood, I have a game I'd like to play called Three Kings," Renee exclaimed.

"The object of the game is to select three people to fit within the parameters of the topics, so today's discussion will be who are your Three Kings if you had to pick someone to marry, someone to kill and someone to screw. I'll go first since it's my game. I would marry my hairdresser Shaun, I would kill that doctor who killed Michael Jackson and I would screw my trainer, Ricardo." Renee added.

"How would you kill the guy?" Reggie asked

"Poison of course, I'm not a monster," Renee answered.

"Right, because murder is acceptable if it's not messy apparently," Kila remarked.

"Well then let it be your turn," Renee barked.

"Fine, I would kill that guy molested all those kids at Penn State, with a gun, marry Denzel Washington,"

"Nope, you can't pick anyone to marry that is already married," Renee interrupted.

"Well you didn't say that!" Kila countered.

"You are right because I didn't really think it would be an issue, clearly some of us don't care about the sanctity of marriage," Renee chided while gulping down her 5th glass of wine.

"I wasn't taking the hypotheticals to be that literal," Kila defended.

“Guys relax it’s just a game,” Sunol interfered.

“Yeah Kila it’s just a game,” Renee quipped.

“Can I change my kill answer?” Kila countered.

Reggie and Izabella snickered while Sunol shook her head in judgment.

“OK, I apologize, please continue,” Renee laughed off the statement in good humor.

“So I would marry my boss, he is really old nice and rich, I would screw Lenny Kravitz because guitars turn me on.”

“OK too much information but Thank You Kila, Reggie how about you?” Renee continued.

“I’d marry my wife again,” Reggie started to the delight of the girls.

“I’d screw the Internal Affairs agent, if I wasn’t married of course and I’d kill my ex-wife, she won’t remarry just so she can keep collecting alimony.”

“Izzy, you’re up,” Renee exclaimed.

“I’d screw the IRS by reducing my tax liability, I’d kill any legislation that led to budget cuts for public schools, and I’d marry someone whose sister wasn’t the best divorce attorney in Texas.”

“Amen,” Renee exclaimed.

“Ouch, that was very dirty but well played.” Kila commented while raising her glass to toasting to Izzy’s sentiment.

“On that note I am going to the house to procure more wine for this wondrous affair,” Sunol announced.

“Do you have any more Martinelli’s?” I asked.

“You’re so fucking boring John, but yes just for you Martinelli’s coming right up.”

I noticed coming right up took quite a while as we continued talking amongst ourselves.

After about 15 minutes, I mentioned to Izzy that I was going to see if Sunol needed a hand. I figured she may have been trying to carry too much and dropped a bottle.

I walked into the main house and overheard Sunol arguing with someone on the phone. When she saw me she pointed towards the bottles that she had retrieved from the cellar and rolled her eyes to display her frustration in the conversation. I had learned to stay in my lane and mind my own business so I proceeded to gather the wine and snacks. It was too much to carry down the steps back towards the pool area without dropping something, so I looked around the kitchen for some sort of bag.

Sunol continued arguing with someone for what I figured to be business. I found a Whole Foods bag and began collecting everything she pointed me towards.

She then yelled into the phone with anger reserved only for loved ones and the IRS.

“You can come over but I’m not giving you any fucking money for drugs. Why? Because I’m not your pimp!”

The person on the phone apparently hung up since she dropped the phone on the counter and sarcastically mumbled, “Good day to you also.”

“I’m not even gonna ask,” I blurted as I tossed the bag over my shoulder.

“Fucking Geoff, why is it my responsibility to pay for his habit? I overpay him already for being a shitty manager.” she vented.

“Look that’s between you two but I don’t know why you keep a guy like that in your life, but what do I know?”

“Would you consider yourself a loyal person?” Sunol asked.

“Yes, of course” I reacted.

“So, if I was ever in a bad place, you’d be there for me right?”

“No doubt, I could never bail on you,” I responded.

“Good answer, because you see when I was a kid living off tips with three roommates, sharing a one bedroom apartment and having popcorn for dinner three nights a week to pay for studio time, Geoff was an energetic guy trying to make a name. I was his first client and he took my demo to every radio station and label that would give him an appointment and if he couldn’t get an appointment he’d go anyway. He took No’s for me almost every day for eight months, until finally he got me a break. Maybe it’s the middle class Michigan girl in me but I can’t be that person to turn my back on a friend, no matter how messed up they are.”

“Even if they nearly kill you?” Izzy appeared.

“Izzy it was an accident,” Sunol insisted.

“What was an accident?” I was clearly out of the loop on this secret.

“Izzy hates Geoff, because he accidentally gave me a laced joint and I got a little sick,”

“A little sick as in she nearly died John, It was on the news, reported as dehydration,”

“He apologized, I’m fine, whatever shit happens,”

“Not shit like that,” Izzy argued.

“He’s still my friend, I mean you’re right I can’t let him bring me down or finance his addictions, but he’s still Geoff, he’s just lost his way a bit,”

“He is screwed up beyond recognition,” Izzy commented.

“WE ARE ALL SCRWED UP! I have an addictive personality, I’m pretty sure I have OCD and ACD, plus commitment issues, John has MPD and maybe a little Schizo, and you drink too much.” Sunol fired.

“Wait, what is ACD?” I thought aloud.

“The attention thing, ACDC,”

“That’s a band, you’re Thunderstruck? Oh you mean ADHD?”

“Yes that,”

Izzy was appalled at being told she drank too much.

“I do not drink too much.” she lamented.

“Ohh yes you do,” Sunol scoffed.

“You don’t drink all the time but when you drink, you tend to go overboard, how many glasses have you had tonight 4,5,6?”

“Wow!” Izzy gasped in disbelief.

“Just saying,” Sunol softly remarked.

By now the escalating voices had attracted the rest of the guests to the courtyard to view the altercation through the open front door.

“This is so messed up; this is supposed to be a fun party, fine support your friend, see if I care.” Izzy quipped.

“I’m sorry Izzy, I didn’t mean anything by it,” Sunol apologized.

Izabella stormed through the doorway to cool off by the pool.

“Too much?” Sunol whispered.

“Just a wee bit,” I motioned.

“If you have everything, close the door behind you please,” Sunol requested as she followed Izzy through the door with a big smile like nothing had transpired.

“Everyone having fun? Good!” she addressed the onlookers.

I shook my head and closed the door behind me.

“And I am not Schizo,” I yelled. “Maybe a little,” a voice whispered.

Chapter 15

“Music is music, ultimately. If it makes you feel good, cool.”-Prince

It was not my favorite thing to do in the world. Cameras flashed everywhere; strange faces surrounded us like villagers watching the last walk of the accused to the guillotine. Sunol ate it up, she posed and smiled for the cameras and conducted the impromptu T.V. interviews. Meanwhile I winced, protecting my eyelids from being scorched. I just wanted to get to the end of the red carpet without answering a question about who I was. Sensing my discomfort Izabella grabbed my hand and led me through the bloodied ocean swimming with sharks and piranhas to a peaceful Isle in the corner.

We were escorted to our seats in Row H, directly behind that guy from that thing and next to that girl who had that one song, in front of that guy who choked that one girl. Good company I presumed. I didn't want to sit next to Sunol so I pleaded for Izabella to sit in the middle. I knew the camera would find Sunol at one point and I was embarrassed that I let her convince me to wear a bowtie in public. I felt like a ventriloquist dummy.

After sitting in the crowd pondering basketball scores and growing impatient, they finally got to our categories. Sunol was nominated for Best Pop Album. The presenters were a bleach blonde female that I liked who lead a band of guys about ten years prior and a surprisingly talented former boy band guy. Sunol's competition was as foreign to me as German calculus.

“Who are these people?” I thought loudly, thereby missing the announcements of their names.

“And the winner is...”

“She better win since I wore this damn bowtie.” I contemplated.

“Sunol Supernova!” they announced.

The audience rose to their feet with applause. The spotlight zoned in on Sunol moderately surprised and obviously overjoyed. Everyone within a few seats of us hugged her except for me. Izabella and the band walked toward the stage but I stayed in my seat. “Aren't you going up?” Izzy gestured.

“No!” I responded. If I'm not on the album cover my ass doesn't need to be on the stage.”

I must admit watching her walk towards the stage with that grand smile and thousands of admirers gave me chills. Everything was happening as if it were in slow motion. Time was still if it ever moved at all as she began to speak. She didn't have a speech or notes because she thought it was tacky to assume she'd win but I knew she had rehearsed everything she was going to say in her bedroom mirror.

She stood behind the podium, thanking the people who continued to cheer loudly and waited for the applause to silence enough for her to begin her speech.

“We love you Sunol!” someone screamed.

“I love you too!” she returned.

“Wow!” she started.

“There is a time in every artist career, when you wonder; can you eclipse your previous best work? Can you create that next masterpiece? Will you ever hear applause like

your last encore or quiet your toughest critic? When will you stand on that stage or be the feature of that last exhibition? Tonight, I am humbled because I pondered if I would ever again stand here before you all. There are so many amazing young artists as hungry now as I was when I was just a click on the minute hand between a woman and a girl. I want to thank God and all you from the bottom of my heart for keeping us in yours. I need to thank these marvelous musicians behind me for putting up with me and being so dedicated to their craft,”

She mentioned everyone on stage with her by name.

She looked around briefly like she was missing someone.

“And I am missing a few people,” she laughed.

“Mom and Dad, I love you if you’re watching,” My best friend Izabella for helping me maintain my sanity and last but not least, he opted not to come up, one of the last true poets John Robe for giving my voice volume and validity. Thank you all for this.”

Her smile and tone were so authentic, I would've believed her even if she were full of feces.

Her speech moved the crowd to their feet again. Yet, something came to me while she stood there set to exit right. She had a bet to keep.

“Don’t walk off that stage Sunol,” I mumbled to myself.

I was certain that she had either lost her nerve or forgotten about the bet, but I had reminded her about it just three weeks previous, while she was sketching her eyebrows.

She was a pair of paces from being out of view when she stopped suddenly and turned back to the podium, the applause quieted as people were eager to hear what caused her to jog back to the microphone in five-inch heels.

“Go Sparty!” she shouted, followed by a quick but legal nose pick and subtle flick before she ran off stage.

I overheard a man behind me ask his neighbor “Dude did Sunol just pick her nose? That’s awesome!”

“Yes, Yes she did and Yes it was.” I smiled.

It was a big night for Sunol and though I didn't know it at the time for me as well.

She took home three awards that night and was nominated for a fourth.

For all the years I had watched the show on TV, I never realized how long it actually was and how many awards they give out while viewers are watching Tide commercials.

Yet something happened in that building that night. The success of Sunol’s album had just catapulted me from just a guy in a bowtie, to an in demand songwriter because Sunol used her night as a platform to extol me. When we walked into the night air, I began receiving handshakes and phone numbers from other artist. I realized my world had changed swiftly like the carnage of a tornado in Texas. God had granted me what I asked and there was no turning back.

Sunol opted to attend an after party with the band, Izzy and I declined due to the social exhaustion of the eve. We took the limo back to her place. I walked her to her door, and a long kiss good night ensued. The kind of kiss you don't want to end but eventually does. Her arms wrapped around me; her tongue was active; her lips were soft, plump and sweet with the hint of cocoa from her lipstick. My hands firmly squeezed her checks. Our noses still barely touched as she pulled back slightly and smiled at me with perfect white teeth.

“So do you wanna come inside for a nightcap?” she asked softly.
Yes I’d love to,” but Eddie is waiting for me.
“Tell him to take off,” she stated sternly.
I ran over to the limo. “I’m gonna stay here.”
“C’mon man you said you were gonna hang out tonight,” Eddie exclaimed.
“Yeah but she wants me to come inside,”
“So tell her you can come back later,” he suggested.
“Nooo, she wants me to come inside,” I said again with more emphasis so Eddie would understand.
“Ohhh!” he realized, “I get it, play on words, that’s really nasty but oddly clever, you want me to wait, it will be like what 5-10 minutes?”
“Just go man; I’ll call you tomorrow,”
“OK, but you’re missing out, 1994 Game 5 Sonics vs. Nuggets is on ESPN Classic, the one where Dikembe was holding the ball on the ground at the end crying, like a little girl.”
By the time I had convinced Eddie to leave and turned back towards the house, Izabella had vanished inside leaving the front door half open. I crept inside slowly, under the guidance of the porch light into total darkness. I closed the door behind and observed a flicker of light upstairs slightly more luminous than a candle.
“Izzy” I called.
There was still silence.
I removed my shoes at the door before walking upstairs.
“Izzy, stop playing it’s dark as a mine down here,”
Izabella had a playful sense of humor similar to mine, so I was expecting at any moment for her to pounce from the darkness with plastic fangs in her mouth.
I felt my way to the staircase, nearly knocking over something that felt expensive.
I walked to the top of the staircase slowly to find that the faint light originated from Izabella’s room.
I continued to follow the light, as I entered the doorway, there was a soft aroma of Ivory soap and fresh linen in the air. Two candles were lit on opposite nightstands, providing barely enough light to notice a single heel on the floor ahead, a few paces forward I found another. Next to a flickering flame sat the gold bracelet she had donned for the eve. The trail of the night’s attire and accessories led to the bathroom, the door was closed but light glowed from the bottom to suggest it was occupied. I leaned my ear to the door and heard a shower running.
“Izzy,” I knocked and called softly.
Silence
The door was unlocked so I pushed it open slowly, releasing the warm steam from the hot shower. The golden gown she wore, hung against the wall next to a long satin bathrobe. Her golden-laced panties strewn against the base of the shower reminded me of a friend who mentioned that a person has arrived once their underwear matches their outerwear. However, the cut of her dress negated the need for a bra.
I crept towards the shower like a murderer,
“Izabella,” I called playfully.

Still silence, she was messing with me I was sure.

I pulled back the dark curtain covering the glass shower doors to find it empty.

“Looking for something?” I heard her say behind me.

I turned around to the glorious sight of her covered only in a long navy blue or black towel.

I was too surprised to speak immediately as my eyes scanned her figure.

“Could you help me with my necklace?” she asked turning her back towards me, lifting her hair to expose her neck.

“Yea,” I responded, confidently nervous.

The clasp was small, providing a challenge for my large fingers but I was able to unhook it soon enough that she did not notice a struggle. Upon removing the necklace I lightly massaged her bare shoulders, she sighed in delight.

“That feels great, higher,” she added.

I caressed her neck probing my thumbs to mitigate the tension in her neck and shoulders.

“So was tonight everything you dreamed it would be?” she asked.

“Depends on which dream you are referring to,” I replied.

“Your favorite one,” she inquired.

“In that case, I’ll let you know in the morning.”

She turned and stepped towards me, the portion of the towel covering her torso barely touched my shirt. Her hands rested upon her forehead. Her brown eyes stared directly into mine without blinking,

“Am I your favorite?” she interrogated.

“I’ll let you know in the morning,” I replied.

Her weight shifted upon her toes as she leaned towards me just as I did towards to her.

“I don’t think it will take that long,” she whispered.

The first kiss was sudden and harsh, our lips met like freight trains colliding in chaos of smoke, fire and buckling steel.

I wanted her so intensely my mind transcended making love to her; my inclination was to become completely immersed within her. I pulled her towards me vigorously, she violently ripped open my shirt; the buttons fell to the floor. I yanked the towel from her body before grabbing her forcefully by the hips to set her upon the counter. Her tongue patrolled my pallet, her kisses landed upon my neck and face, like waves onto the side of a ship. Her hands worked hurriedly to remove my belt and slacks, they fell to my ankles and I hastily removed my boxer briefs exposing myself to her, she smiled deviously. Her hands clinched my buttocks as she began aggressively sucking my collar. I placed my right hand on her lower back, pulling her pelvis towards me; my left hand caressed her inner thigh. Her feet flexed as she wrapped her legs around me. Her body was warm against my chest, her nipples were erect as I fondled them with my thumb and snuggled my nose between her bosoms. The heat and moisture of her chasm captured me. She exhaled a brief moan in felicity, our lips embraced, our palates engaged, her breaths were animated. I pulled her hair back revealing her nape and looked deeply into her pupils. She lustfully bit her lower lip. Her back arched as I delivered robust satiating flurries amidst the walls of her sodden cavern; igniting her into euphoric bellows. Her firm calves

clined against me tightly seducing me deeper into the echoes of adventure. The steam consumed the room; her skin grew slippery glistening in water and perspiration from the muggy air. Her nails anchored into my back. Adrenaline raced through my veins, as my being became united within hers. My mind began to lose control of my body; in anticipation of a volcanic eruption she cried, "I'm almost there,"

Submerged within her, she braced herself around my chassis and thrust forward frantically. I gripped her glutes with both hands and persisted to power her towards me.

A cataclysm was certain I couldn't hold it any longer. Just then she howled like a queen besieged by a hungry wild mammal. Her body convulsed. She clutched me securely, resting her head on my shoulders as the trembling symptoms of her spasms dissipated.

I lightly stroked her hair resting my chin atop her head as we remained in a comfortable silence for minutes.

"I think we ran out the hot water," I warned.

Chapter 16

“When I sing, I feel like when you're first in love. It's more than sex. It's that point two people can get to they call love, when you really touch someone for the first time, but it's gigantic, multiplied by the whole audience. I feel chills”-Janis Joplin

I woke up the next morning to the sound of an electric toothbrush and running faucet. I looked to my left across the empty space beside me to read the clock on the end table, 8:22 was too early for me to be up. Izabella floated out of the bathroom comfortably dressed in short pajama shorts and a half shirt.

“Good Morning,” she mumbled with her mouth full of toothpaste.

On five hours of sleep I felt amazingly well rested, considering four had become my new standard.

She slipped into her scrubs rested at the foot of the bed and retreated back to the sink to rinse.

“You have to work today?” I asked.

“Yes, not everyone won an award last night, some of us have to work for a living,” she teased with a fresh smile as she stood in the doorway tying up her hair like a schoolteacher.

“I was going to take you to breakfast like a gentleman,” I proposed.

“That’s really cute,” she responded as she leaned across the bed to peck me on the cheek.

“I already know you’re a gentleman but maybe next time,” she stated.

“Nevertheless, I am taking off, are you going to hang out here? I’ll be home after 7,” she added, powdering her nose.

“No, I’m going to go down to the studio,”

“Goodness, John, ambition is sexy but you’re treading on obsessive, go see your friends, play basketball, do something normal 30 something guys do for once and have fun.”

“I haven’t seen normal in a long time, besides I thought last night was fun,” I replied.

She smirked before gazing at me persuasively, “Just promise me you will take a day to do something else,”

“I only make promises, I can keep, but maybe you’re right and I’ll just go home,” I assured.

“Suit yourself,” she remarked.

I had just barely made it home when Sunol called.

“Did you two do it?” she barked.

“A gentleman does not kiss and tell,” I replied

“Which is why I asked you, so spill it,” she retaliated.

“Why don’t you ask Izzy?” I suggested.

“I called her but she didn’t answer, why are you being so secretive? I tell you about my exploits, or lack thereof, where are you?”

“I just got home,” I answered.

“Wanna meet me for lunch?” she offered.

“Nah, I’m going to have to pass I’m not going back to the city today,”

“That’s fine I’ll come out there, besides I’m bored and after last night’s awards I can’t go anywhere populous.”

“Well how about a hike on Burma trail? You won’t find any cameras there,”

She agreed to meet in a shade over an hour. I was somewhat excited she was joining because we could talk shop.

Sunol arrived twenty minutes late as could be expected in LA traffic, wearing Versace sunglasses and an old Tigers baseball cap, matching her dark blue Nike sweat suit; she carried an aged black Jansport backpack full of water.

“How long have you had that backpack?” I asked.

“Since college, probably the best \$40 I’ve ever spent.”

It was the little things like that which revealed her humility and endeared me to her, for all her extravagance, and glamour she was still practical and modest.

“I’m sorry, I’m late there were Asian drivers everywhere today.” she mentioned in frustration of a long drive.

“I brought us some water,” she added.

We made our way through the terrain, admiring the scenery. She had lived in Southern California for over 15 years and had never been this far southwest.

“It so quiet down here, I see why you like it, kind of reminds me of back home except for the mountains and ocean.”

Something about scenic views made me think about jumping off a cliff, I thought about flying over the oceans and the worlds end but most of all I pondered life, the good the bad and the terrifying.

I leaned on Sunol for advice.

“Do you ever think about, what happens next, in the distant future?”

“Which is it next or in the distant future?” she countered.

“Both, but like 22 years from now,” I responded, also unsure of what I was truly asking.

“Sure, I do sometimes, I just hope to be healthy without failing plastic surgery and floppy tits.”

Her sincerity brought hilarity to a quiet moment accented by the sounds of a soft breeze and the panting of a passing exasperated bulldog.

She continued after sensing my desire for a serious discussion.

“Maybe we will be right here, watching tides, walking dogs and talking about old times that are still in the future currently. Maybe I’ll be an aunt and we will have cook-outs and kids birthday parties. I do believe there is still more ahead of us than behind and that can be exciting or frightening depending on the view.”

“When I woke up this morning something just felt different,” I confided.

“Was it sticking to your leg? Because that’s normal,” she quipped.

“No it was more like nerves,”

“What did you forget to pull out?” she chimed.

“Sunol!” I pleaded.

“OK OK,” she relented, “You’re being serious, go on,”

“I had a moment that felt too good to be true. Izzy was wrapped in a towel doing her make-up and I was lying in bed, with the sunlight shining into the room. It was strange, because good things don’t really happen to me; I mean not life changing good. It always seems like something good is happening but it never turns the corner, y’know?”

“Sure, I understand, the first royalty check I ever received was \$764,171. I was living in an apartment in West Hollywood and I remember checking the mail every day that week waiting for it to come. I didn’t take a dime out of the bank for weeks because I feared the check would bounce and I would have to pay it back. Relax John; you deserve a little joy. I know you think you have to be miserable all the time to be a writer, but I don’t think that’s true, you just can’t be consumed by the dark all the time because you will miss the light. Think of inspiration like a fire. There are several ways to ignite and keep it. Your flame is burning brilliantly right now, and you are concerned the timber will run out, but I’m telling you there is plenty more you can burn, speaking of burning can we stop for a second?” she asked bending over to catch a breather.

“Yea sure, the next trail is a little easier so you can catch your breath.”

“Do you do this all the time, this is intense? OK, now what was I saying?” she uttered still panting.

“You were saying there are many ways to fuel a fire,” I paraphrased.

“Oh yeah, that’s it, blah blah blah. You get what I mean right?” she said still breathing heavily.

“Yeah I do,” I confirmed.

“Good, because believe it or not just as some nightmares come true, so do some dreams. I really hate you for making me sound like a Saved by the Bell special episode. I came all the way down here for an NC-17 to X conversation and you went all Don Cheadle film on me.”

“You’re right,” I apologized. “I had a bit of a moment there, how are you?”

“Shut up its fine, I’m only partly serious. I actually did have something else on my agenda other than being nosey, though I don’t know why you are being secretive all of a sudden when I tell you all my secrets.”

“You’re right what do you wanna know?” I asked.

“Nothing, now, I’m over it,”

“Oh you’re over it really?”

“Yup you blew it, we could’ve had an old fashioned friendly bonding experience, but I see how it is,”

I knew she was manipulating me, but she was right, she always did share with me, and she had given me some great ideas in the process. So I caved and gave her all the graphic details she desired.

“The bathroom huh? I that’s kind of hot, seems like you’d get dehydrated though with the steam and stuff, but then again it probably didn’t last all that long,”

“See how you are? I tell you then you insult me,” I fired.

“I liked the details, I’m just saying logically you can’t possibly last that long in a steamy bathroom without passing out. I know because I’ve nearly passed out taking a hot bath with the door closed but relax; I’m personally of the opinion that sex shouldn’t last

forever. When I was younger the marathon stuff was more appealing but now I'm older and have stuff to do, so I need it to be efficient." she conveyed.

"So you never got into that whole Hollywood Tantra fad? God no. God didn't make sex for it to last for six hours; no one would get anything done. Besides Tantra is like a Hindu thing and they worship goats or something."

"Sunol, don't tell anyone else that. First of all its cows not goats that you mean and second; Hindus don't worship cows they are just protected animals, meaning that they don't kill and eat them,"

"Hmm, really? Why would someone tell me that then?" she commented.

"Because people walk around with lots of bad information they believe to be true," I replied.

"OK, regardless Tantra just seems like a urinary tract infection waiting to happen," she remarked.

"So what was the other item on your agenda," I transitioned.

"Ahh I'm glad you asked, open the smaller pouch on my backpack and remove the contents," she turned her back toward me so I could unzip the pouch.

The only item in the pocket was a metal Altoids box.

"The Altoids box?" I asked, making sure I opened the correct section.

"Yes open it!" she said excitedly.

I removed the container from her pack and opened it, to find it empty.

"There's nothing in it," I stated.

"I know," she turned to face me with a smile.

"It's not about what's in the box, it's about what is not in the box," she added.

"Is this philosophy or a Mr. Miyagi type exercise?" I countered.

"No, humor me please, what would I keep in an Altoids box that I might carry around with me, ALL THE TIME?" she emphasized.

"Gum," I answered.

I immediately realized that was dumb answer, due to the simplicity of it.

She confirmed such by directing a look of frustration.

I took a second to come up with a better answer based on the information that I was provided.

"You stopped smoking Marijuana!" I shouted with confidence.

"Yes I did, actually but it's even better," OK ready?" she prepped me like a curtain was about to open.

"I am completely clean, no more coke. I dumped it all down the toilet!"

"That's amazing!" I grabbed her and gave her the heartiest hug I could without crushing her.

I was more proud of her in that moment than for her winning awards.

It was like a dark cloud had been lifted; an evil dispersed.

"How long" I asked joyfully.

"Six weeks!" she answered with a grin.

"Why are you just now telling me? Does Izzy know?"

“Well I wanted to make sure I made it past the awards before I told you. I didn’t want to say anything until I was confident I wasn’t going to relapse and No. I haven’t told Izzy and don’t you tell her. I just wanted you to be the first to know, after the incident and all.”

“Ah don’t mention that, it happens.”

“No it happened because I was messed up. I’ve done things the way I’ve wanted for so long, I just didn’t want to hear anyone tell me to do anything different, even if my actions were self-destructive.”

“So what was your call to Jesus moment?” I asked.

“To be honest I just woke up one Monday morning six weeks ago and I looked in the mirror and I was just over it. I compare it to waking up one morning and realizing you were in an abusive relationship and finally conjuring the strength to leave.”

We walked down the hills in silence, stopping to look over the ocean, when Sunol uttered

“Hey John, you know right?” she looked me directly in the eyes with truth.

“Yea, I know,” I confirmed.

“You know too, right? Yeah I know, let’s go get some lunch, I’m hungrier than an Olsen twin.”

Chapter 17

"I learned from Jimi Hendrix. They all wanted him to do the tricks, and at the end of his career, he just wanted to play. I lived longer than he did, and I can see how those pressures can really play with your head." -Prince

My career had launched with the combination of the awards show and Sunol's album going Diamond. I couldn't keep my voicemail box empty and if I wasn't in the studio, I was meeting someone for lunch to discuss a project. I don't remember when or if I actually slept, aside from dozing off on a studio couch. I hired an assistant at the recommendation of Renee to help me keep up with dates and appointments. I had seven songs in the Billboard top 40 and two in the top 10; record companies paid me five figures an hour to work with their artist, some of which I never really cared for and I retained publishing rights for everything I wrote. What does that mean to you? It means that every time something I had written was played on the radio, a commercial or a movie; I got paid. I even got paid to meet for coffee. It was strange to me because I had written for free for thirty years and now I didn't write anything without compensation. I even sold the love letters I wrote to Izzy which was actually a pretty crummy thing to do in hindsight but she was cool with it. She was my muse. I was still trying to impress her. I wanted her to be proud of me and I wanted her to feel like she didn't miss out anything by being with me. I wanted to show her I could be what I wasn't before. The problem with that is when you are trying so hard to be something or someone more, you can forget to be who you are; leave it up to me to learn the hard way.

Life was almost too good to be real but like a Michigan road, my smooth course suddenly struck a pothole. My phone rang breaking a peaceful noise. I answered expecting to hear a friendly voice, but the tone I heard was serious.

"Hey, can you meet me somewhere right now?" she sounded conflicted like she was pondering a major decision or challenge and needed advice.

"Yea, where?" I responded.

"Meet me at the Point in an hour," she said.

The short call left me with a touch of uneasiness in the pit of my stomach. My mind began to race with concerns. Sunol had never sounded that way. Was she sick? Was she just in deep thought? Was she heartbroken? Maybe she just needed a friend and I was overreacting.

I excused myself from the session I was finishing up with the band "EED 120" short for the Elementary Education 120 class the lead singer and drummer met in. I made it to the Point in 54 minutes, just after dusk.

The Point was a spot in the hills that she had taken me to twice previously to sit and watch the lights of the city. I watched my first sunset there; it was a peaceful place for her. Sunol was already there, sitting in her car with the top down watching stars in a clear sky. I pulled alongside her, observing her in a relaxed state wearing reading glasses. I had not seen her in those reading glasses since that day we met in her dressing room. I felt a bit of relief as I entered her passenger side door since because she didn't appear distraught or angry but I could tell something strong coursed through her cortex.

“What burden does my friend bare? What canal was too narrow to flow through? What crossroads puzzled her path?” I searched for the slightest clue.

The song *Can't let you go* by Matchbox Twenty played at moderate volume on her stereo.

Neither of us said a word while the song was in play. I knew that the song was not just noise in the background. Sunol never listened to music she didn't love even if it were hers. I listened to the words to tell me why I was here.

Who was she holding onto that she couldn't release? She was always kind of single and sporadically dating. Yet, the beauty of lyrics is that nothing has to be literal, a song can mean something entirely different to whoever hears it and we can all love it for infinite reasons. The song continued to play through. I looked out over the cliffs at the vibrant city lights of downtown and beyond. I was happy to just sit there. Truth is, if she really wanted someone to talk to her I'd be the last person she'd call, listening was my virtue.

As the music faded into the next song on Sirius she spoke,

“God I love it here!” she continued,

“When I was a waitress, I would drive out here and sit on the hood of my old Regal with my notebook and guitar and write songs, hoping to be like Tracy Chapman, or Lauryn Hill,”

“But instead you became the first Sunol,” I iterated.

“Yeah, that's one way to look at it. I told myself if I ever made it big I was going to buy a house in the hills so all the people down there who are where I once was would be able to look up and be inspired, because I did it. I pondered that beauty over and over and then when I finally made it. I was so tired of people I just wanted to be as secluded as possible. Does that make me terrible?” she asked.

“No,” I confirmed.

Of course, I would say no, I hadn't liked people since my freshmen year of high school when Sharise Reynolds laughed at me as I nervously handed her a flower I picked from my grandmothers garden, getting away from people seemed genius to me being that old wounds still burned cold.

She continued, “I have almost everything I've ever wanted and a lot of what I needed, so what's next? When you have money but nothing left to buy? Fame, but no longer care to be seen?”

I gathered the questions were rhetorical because I had not known such splendors to begin to think beyond them but I sensed her fulfillment without being fully fulfilled, it was as if she enjoyed a delightful main course and indulged in grand desserts and yet began to ponder not taking full advantage of the free bread that was passed out at the beginning of the meal. I on the other hand was sick of the free bread and welcomed the sizzling steak on the table.

A former Astronomy major at Michigan State she explained why she named the album *Supernova*. The term star often associated with well-known artist, athletes, actors and so on was consistent with the life cycles of their careers with some exceptions. When a star is born it burns luminous for a period of time before the light begins to fade but still remains bright to the naked eye. However as time passes by it runs out of energy. Sunol

revealed the title Supernova referred to the stage where a fading star expels it's remaining energy to generate an explosion of light that burns so bright it outshines anything else in the galaxy including the sun before it fades from view. The reality of stardom is that it often arrives later than you hoped and passes earlier than you may be ready for. Sunol was determined to go away brilliantly rather than end up doing infomercials. I felt her strategy was a bit too premature considering her album sales never fell below 4.2 million and many performers maintain relevance topping out at five-hundred thousand. Yet, who was I to tell her how to write her next chapter and thwart her efforts in turning the page to choose her adventure?

"So you aren't going make music anymore?" I asked.

"Of course I am, I love music, I just want to take a break, maybe go to Europe for a while, travel with my parents, I don't know, just to do something different for a while. I'll still make music but it won't be to sell records. It'll just be because I'm inspired to do so," she paused to grab my hand with reassurance.

"Don't worry you'll be fine without me for a while, I knew when I met you weren't the average Charlie," she smiled at me and I believed her.

The better part of me or maybe the worst, wanted to remain stoic and impassive as if this was no big deal but a smaller yet powerful portion of me felt like my big sister was getting married or going away to college at Oxford. It hurt a little. I was exploring a new world where the smiles were disingenuous, loyalty was non-existent and true friendship was fleeting. While my eyes were locked on Ursa Minor, the person who had protected me like a baby wolf was telling me it's time to hunt on my own. My pride would say I was ready but history had proven my pride had only eaten crow. I would have been nothing short of a bumbling hypocrite, if I were anything less than supportive in the moments she confided in me. It was not in me to be the overcast and rob her sunshine. If it wasn't for her, the fate of my notebook may have been doomed to become forgotten and dusty, lost in my grandnieces attic one day.

"What does she expect from me in this moment?" I asked myself, but I realized now like forever she just expected me to be me because for the first time in my adult life that was enough.

Maybe that's why we meshed, there was never a word that was minced, never a feeling that was repressed, love was rarely spoken but it was scrawled between lines of loose paper in perfect cursive, it was shared underneath smiles, and rode on waves of laughter, love was never the sentiment but it was the only action.

She rested her head upon my shoulder watching the night and said,
"Charlie?"

I smiled remembering the day I saw her gaze upon me as a lost stranger walking into her studio.

"Yes, Sunol," I replied.

"Will you love me forever after?" she prodded, in the strong, yet vulnerable voice that she had mastered like no other.

I paused, like she had done to me a hundred times before, as if I really needed a moment to respond.

"Till our last gasp." I whispered earnestly.

I drove home at a sliver of daylight shy of morning with a thousand thoughts scrambled in complexity someplace over easy. My life was going to be different and like the fast approaching turn down the winding road I didn't know what was around the corner. It was too late to pump the brakes, though a loss of control at this speed would mean a fiery crash, but at least I would be free not to worry about tomorrow.

I arrived at my apartment to find size 8 heeled black boots to the right of the door, the jacket that I had left thrown over the couch, was put away in the closet and there was an obvious smell of bleach in the air. I walked back to my normally dark room, lit softly by a single scented cinnamon candle that I had not previously burned. I discovered Izabella fully clothed cuddled on the left side of my bed on top of the covers with my great grandmothers green and white quilt covering her feet. Izabella had never before come to my home without me there, and she refused to have her own key. She insisted that there was no need for her to be at my place when I wasn't. But as she lay there soaked in the vulnerability both of us loathed, I knew that even though she wouldn't admit it, she needed to not be alone tonight with the knowledge of her best friends pending departure fresh and heavy.

I didn't waste a second with inquiry on her entry. I knew that she charmed the concierge Cecil. He once told me she reminded him of his niece. He couldn't help but smile when Izabella would take the time to ask him about his night.

She was always welcome and as I looked over her I realized I needed her just as much as she needed me.

Suddenly, tomorrow didn't seem so bad, I got in the bed next to her, pulled the quilt up to her shoulders and caressed the right side her head as she slept.

Feeling the slight touch of my hand over her temple she awoke briefly to say "I burned you cookies." before falling back to sleep.

Chapter 18

“Friends can help each other. A true friend is someone who lets you have total freedom to be yourself - and especially to feel. Or, not feel. Whatever you happen to be feeling at the moment is fine with them. That's what real love amounts to - letting a person be what he really is.”-Jim Morrison”

I had been warned that despite all the fruits of L.A. I would never find true friends like I had in Michigan. There would be no one here to share inside jokes with, no one here cared enough to text me weekly insults. The older you grow the harder it becomes to create strong friendships and it is not money but rather loved ones that are the measure of a good man's fortune.

The next few weeks passed like a single sunset until the day Izabella and I took Sunol to the airfield. I sat in the back looking out the window hoping the ride would go on forever like a child dreading the final destination home due to a poor progress report. I listened joyfully as Sunol and Izabella conversed with laughter. I desired for Izabella to enjoy every second with Sunol before a prolonged farewell. I knew Sunol needed it too; because when the wheels stopped, the luggage was unloaded and the hugs began, there would be waterfalls. Yet, I hoped the wheels never would stop and we could've just driven forever to anywhere like San Antonio to see the Alamo, the Great Salt Lake of Utah, the Space Needle in Seattle, Universal Studios in Orlando even Cleveland, just not LAX. My wish for the ability to freeze time like a Marvel character went unanswered as we approached the Tom Bradley terminal. I stepped out of the SUV feeling like a pouty teenager but I knew I had to keep it cool for Izabella and I owed it to Sunol not to make this any more difficult. I gathered Sunol's luggage for the Skycap and looked up to see her and Izabella fighting back Niagara Falls just as I predicted. After a long embrace as if the farewell was for a lifetime rather than a summer, a single droplet rolled down Sunol's left cheek from under her sunglasses, she wiped it away with an old cloth she kept in her purse. She adjusted her favorite baseball cap and took two steps toward me as I galloped towards her. I did not feel the urge to weep but my stomach felt as though I was on a roller coaster awaiting the big descent. She kissed me on both cheeks and in my right ear she whispered,

“Live not for what kills you but what will you die for, and all you'll need is ink.”

I wanted to respond with an outpouring of gratitude, thanking her for everything she had done to give me a chance at enjoying my life. I just wanted to thank her for saving me from sitting on a clock for 40 hours a week, pretending to care about my clients' waistline. I wanted to hold her like a 12 year-old boy before his mother headed off to war. I wanted to ask her to stay for Izabella because it would be selfish to admit it was for me. I had a dozen ideas and passages playing in my head on how to send her off with a colorful chorus, yet all my sealed lips could muster was,

“I'll bet you,” But I couldn't have said it any better, she smiled indicating she understood the reference to the 1969 song lyrics *“I'll bet you'll never lose my love and you won't lose I bet you,”* The words I love you made me uncomfortable so I usually left the

sentiment to be implied. The emotion of love comes bundled with vulnerability. I always felt people should know how you felt about them but deliberate expressions made me feel like I was doomed to lose them. Sunol knew I loved her more than a Baptist loves sweet potato pie, no need to get mushy about it. With a smile she backed and away called out to Izabella:

“Make sure he brushes his teeth and is in bed by 12, I’ll be home soon.” she issued a final salute and walked inside, and then it was just Izzy and I.

Izabella sat quietly looking out the window as we exited the airport, no longer in tears but in deep reflection. I knew however sad I was to see Sunol go, it was magnified 10x for Izzy. I couldn’t wallow in my own feelings; I had to be there for her.

“Let’s go somewhere,” I said to break her introverted focus.

“I’m not hungry,” she said still staring out the window.

“No, I mean go elsewhere,” I reiterated.

“You mean like out of the city?” she asked.

“No I mean out of the state, out of the region, like across the country.” I spiked her interest enough to catch her full attention as she turned to look at me.

“You’re serious, what about work?”

“You have the week off right?” I added.

“Well yeah but they still may need me for an emergency,”

“C’mon isn’t there like a number 4 surgeon in L.A. you can call in a favor to?”

She pondered the idea briefly like the first time she kissed a girl back in college.

“Sure, yeah I can, let’s do it,” she said with the first careless smile I’d seen from her in days.

“Where are you going?” she asked upon noticing I was not heading home.

“You said let’s go,”

“Don’t we need to pack?”

“No, not really, we have water and we can stop in Vegas to shop,”

“Where did this fun side of you come from?” said Izabella.

“What are you suggesting I’m not fun?”

“Sure you are fun, but it’s a different kind of a fun,” she continued.

“You mean different like not fun?” I proposed.

“I mean it’s more esoteric, you have a comfort zone you don’t really step out of,”

“That’s fair,” I admitted. She had a point, I was not the adventurous mountain climbing, parasailing type and my view of fun was occasionally limited to the narrow scope of what amused me. Fortunately, much of which amused her also.

As we left the city, the scenic view of the California Mountains reminded me of the hope and excitement I had the first time I saw them coming into the city.

My journey was incomplete and I was not yet on the same plane as satisfaction but if a stranger had told me that the next time I would be passing through this way it would be with my dream girl and a future tangled in possibility. I would’ve had shaken the prognosticator’s hand and pleaded to a passing star for such a fate.

Izzy and I rode off into the desert like fugitives escaping persecution, the bold mountainous landscaping turned to thirsty and barren dry lands. The muggy heat reminded us we were no longer near the ocean. I could’ve turned on the air conditioning, but the im-

age of Izabella's chest and brow in mild perspiration was pleasant enough to warrant barring my the discomfort as the heat climbed into the 100's.

"I have a confession," she turned to me with a sneaky grin while pinning her hair back exposing the small Wisconsin shaped birthmark on her left shoulder.

"You have to crap?" I guessed.

"No, God you are so weird, guess again,"

"Why am I weird? That is a fair answer. You said you had a confession and we are out in hills have eyes country and haven't stopped in a few hours so that would be a reasonable request,"

"So why didn't you guess pee?" she queried.

"Because I had crap on my mind I guess,"

"John, I'm not having this conversation with you, No I don't have to pee or crap but if I did I wouldn't start a conversation about it, I'd just say I have to pee or poop, because I don't crap I'm a lady. Now guess again,"

"You're married to some guy back home because they never signed the divorce papers?"

"No, but that was better, that would indeed be a confession," she paused waiting for another guess.

"OK, I'll show you," she went through her purse and pulled out a passport.

"Why do you have your passport?"

"Open it," she insisted.

"No, I'm driving and I've seen a hundred movies where a guy takes his eyes off the road out in the middle of nowhere and turns back in time to barely avoid hitting a critter or hitcher before losing control and crashing the car, then the group of college friends are stranded and end up in a basement tied up and everyone dies but the smart pretty girl, which in our case would be you."

"Aww, that's so sweet, no one has ever told me I'd survive a horror movie before."

"Are you kidding me? You'd survive the original and the sequel, you might get killed in the third one though." she blushed in flattery before she continued.

"I'll watch the road just look," she turned to watch the road.

"All clear, all clear, all clear," she repeated.

"You took Sunol's passport, doesn't she need that?"

"It's her spare, I tried to steal both but she had the other one on her,"

"How do you know it's her spare?"

"France, her main one has a France stamp from our first overseas trip, this one only has Belgium, look,"

"That's kind of brilliant, twisted, but I like it." I admitted.

"I recognize this area we are getting close to Vegas,"

"You recognize dirt?" I asked.

"There is a house out past that cactus formation, I always wondered who could live out here; it just seems so miserable and lonely out here.

"Location is just a circumstance," I countered.

"Yeah right, like you could live out here." she stated sarcastically.

I knew the truth was that I couldn't, to be trapped in a world of nothing but dirt would leave me too much time to think. I wouldn't last more than a week. Yet, the egotist in me had already made a comment that made little sense so I had to stick with it, if just for a way to pass the time in debate on this lonely road.

"Sure I could," I lied.

She faced me with a burning glare of disbelief, allowing me to explain my failing position.

"I don't need to be around people or fancy malls, you are just bougie, Brooklyn bougie,"

"Wait I'm bougie?" she asked in shock pointing at her chest.

"I'm just saying, a so called Brooklyn girl who only drives six figure cars and buys \$1200 purses couldn't hack it out here,"

"Oh that's right because you are so humble being from Michigan, yet when we went apartment hunting for you, we looked at a dozen places, because you had to have, wait let's see, a pool, Jacuzzi, a full onsite gym, and an on premises grocery store," she added.

She was right I did want all of those things. I was looking to create an environment, where I could avoid L.A. traffic as much as possible. Actually, I was looking to create an environment where I could avoid people as much as possible.

"Well I don't like driving far," I relented.

"Besides those are basics for most places now," I added.

"What about no shower doors, and must have a large garden tub so you can soak?"

"There is nothing wrong with large tubs, I grew up in the 80's a time when people actually took baths," I defended; she was starting to make me sound a bit soft.

"The point is you can't call me bougie because I like nice things when you like them too, besides you're overpaying for your place anyway."

I immediately realized she was turning the tables on me.

She had been commenting for a couple months that it wasn't necessary for us to have separate residences. If I had made any comment regarding my rental rate, it would have allowed her to transition into a topic I could not win. So in my mind I could've either ignored her and rode it out in silence, reset the whole conversation or use religious principle, I chose religion.

"The Bible says that the unwed should not live together,"

"Ohh you know the Bible now? What scripture did you read that from John was it the employment section?" she rebutted.

"Look that's not fair, it's spelled Jobs, anyone could've made that mistake."

"No one who has been to church ever makes that mistake John, but you're right and I will support your religious beliefs, starting with the next time you want to do what we did last night."

"I'm just kidding, stop being sensitive." I returned.

She rolled her eyes and ignored me for 70 miles.

We spent four days driving across country, we watched the sunrise and set, we visited sites in states we never had a reason to go to. We talked about anything and sometimes nothing, entertained by old songs on the radio, soothed by the sounds of the tires meeting

the road. Somewhere between Arkansas and Missouri, I saw Izabella smile again the way she once did. Maybe she finally stopped thinking about Sunol.

Somewhere near Indianapolis she grew tired of driving in silence and decided to interrupt me from my nap.

“Are you up?” she called, short of a shout but loud enough to wake me.

“Yea, I’m up now,” I answered slightly irritated.

“Have you ever been to Indy?” she queried.

“Did she really just wake me to ask me that?” I thought.

“Yeah we drove through it when I was a kid,”

“No, I mean Indy as a destination not a gas stop,”

“Do you wanna stop in Indy? I asked

“No, I just wanted to tell you a story about Indy,” she said softly.

“You have a story about Indy? What story could you possibly have in Indy? Do you have an adventure in New London, Ohio too?” I barked, still groggy and agitated.

“Real mature,” she sighed before continuing.

“Remember Market Square?” she asked.

“Yea the Pacers played there?”

“Right! I went to a 1999 Eastern Conference final game there, I never had as much fun at a game before or since, including SC football.

“What were you doing in Indiana?” I questioned, seeking the connection.

“Sunol was in town for a show and they gave her free tickets to a game, so I skipped work and caught the next flight out.”

Reminding her of Sunol was exactly what I was trying not to do, but fortunately she focused on the joyful memory”

“I didn't realize you were such a Knicks fan.” I admitted.

“I hate the Knicks!” she bellowed with disgust.

“Wait, hold on, how does a woman born and raised in NY not be a Knicks fan? Are you considered a traitor? Unless you’re a Nets fan?” I queried

“Nets? Never! My Dad is the biggest Knicks fan and growing up I hated it, because he would skip my games, and recitals to watch the Knicks games. I just hated that he would be in a bad mood and ignore us when they lost. So one afternoon we were watching the Knicks play the Pacers in the playoffs and my Dad was losing his mind because Miller kept hitting threes. The vengeful part of me just wanted to see them lose to piss him off, so I started cheering for Indy and I guess you can say I never stopped.”

“Do you hate the Giants too?”

“No, I love the Giants, they played on Sundays so my Dad always made sure we got home from church in time to watch the game. Yanks and Rangers, I’m good with too, it’s just the Knicks I can’t stand. So moral of the story is, if we ever have a daughter if you don't want her to hate your Pistons don't miss her performances to watch them,” she warned.

“Daughter? I thought you didn't want kids? Did you take a wrong turn to the pediatric wing at work?” I responded.

“I don’t currently, and I am 37, which means the clock is running, but who knows I may change my mind, do you think you could be ready for that?”

“Aren’t your eggs passed the best if sold by date? But I wouldn’t ask you to have an abortion.” I probably should’ve rephrased that.

“You can really be an ass sometimes, that’s really endearing. I feel so close to you right now that I just want to pull a tit out!” she stated sarcastically.

“OK, not the best choice of words on my part, but if you really wanted kids you’re a Brooklyn Boricua so you should have had like four by the time you were 26.

Obviously perturbed, yet bordering on playful, she turned toward me.

“First, I’m not married to have children, in three generations no one in my family has had a child out of wedlock. Second of all, that is extremely ignorant and racist,”

“Well it’s a little racist, it’s not extremely racist,” I bargained.

“It’s not like you’ve never done anything racist,” I added.

“Never!” she barked with her New York accent sneaking through.

“Really? What did you bring to my Aunt Helen’s barbeque?”

“A veggie plate” she answered.

“And then?” I dug.

“Watermelon,” she responded candidly.

“It was summer, everyone likes Watermelon,” she wanted to laugh but she was trying to remain serious.

“So, I know them negros like Watermelon,” never went through your subconscious at all? I probed.

She covered her mouth to collect herself from laughing but she couldn’t hide the funny tears in her eyes.

“Don’t talk to me, I don’t want to marry you or have your racist little girl anyway,”

“Girl, you mean boy,” I corrected.

“Yea right, you would not make a girl,” she laughed outwardly.

“What does that mean?” I quipped.

“It means you aren’t the type of guy to make a boy, I see how you write. God would only give you a girl. I think you’re scared of a having a daughter because you’d be wrapped around her finger,”

“So I’m wrapped around your finger?” I inferred.

“No, you’re a pain in my ass half the time, because you choose to be difficult just to show you can’t be controlled; often unnecessarily I might add, but with a daughter you couldn’t just give love and take it back the way you do with me.”

“I don’t take it back from you,” I barked.

“Yes you do, you don’t realize it but you do,”

“Then why do you stay?” I questioned.

“Because when you give it, you give it like no other, and even when it feels like you’re taking it away you always find the right time to give it back.”

Her statement was flattering and offensive. I wasn’t sure what she meant by taking away love. Was that a female term for not getting her way?

“We need to do this more often,” I mentioned.

“Are you referring to these discussions or the road trip?” she replied.

“The road trip, maybe we don’t need to drive across country again but to go home more often.”

“Yeah well we’re busy,” she replied.

“We are not that busy, that’s an excuse not a reason,” I disputed.

“It’s a reasonable excuse,” she corrected.

“No, it’s not. You have traveled to Europe twice since you’ve been back home,” I remarked.

“OK, You’re right it has been too long,” she relented.

“I’m not trying to make you feel bad because I haven’t done much better. It’s just that I’ve been thinking. For example: my Dad is 63 and my Mom is 59. Based on a normal life expectancy my Dad has approximately 20 years left, hopefully more and my mom has about 25,”

“That’s reasonable,” she nodded.

I continued. “Let’s say from this point on based upon those numbers you visit them once a year and for four days on average. I would see my parents 20-25 times for totals of 80 and 100 days. If you think back to when you were living with them that translates to a median number of three months. So is spending three months with your parents for the rest of your life enough for you?”

She drove in silence for a pair of exits as she contemplated the grim reality and gravity of my rant.

“That’s very morbid but I honestly never thought of it that way but why would you use median and not the mean? You only gave two numbers not three so there is no median number, it’s the mean, but I get your point.” she stated.

The idea of losing a loved one terrified me worse than dying myself. It is much easier to rest in darkness than it is to live in it. Everyone I loved made up a piece of me, and if they’d pass that part of me leaves with them, lost forever.

“I don’t think many people do, we assume we will see our loved ones again until we don’t. We need to be better at saying hello before the only option is goodbye.” I added.

Izabella rubbed her right hand against my left thigh and turned to me as she uttered “And that’s how you give it.”

Ten blocks away from our destination I stopped at a neighborhood liquor store to buy my mother’s favorite bottle of wine. Being away from home for so long can impair certain instincts, which is why I didn’t pay any attention to the black Mercedes with limo tint that had pulled up next to me on the driver side. I left Izzy in the car with the ignition running anticipated a short visit.

“Do you want anything?” I asked Izzy as I opened my door, she started to answer when I saw her eyes grow wide in shock. In that second I heard,

“Get out the car slow!” Izabella jumped out the passenger side to rush to my aid yelling something in Spanish that included profanity.

I could feel the cold barrel of the gun inches from my head.

“Keep your hands up and tell your chick to chill before I go El Pollo Loco out here,” The voice yelled.

I was unsure if they planned to kill me regardless or if it was just a carjacking so I remained calm and urged Izzy to calm down. I couldn’t believe my luck, ten minutes home in my own city and I was being robbed at gunpoint.

"I'll take that watch too," he requested. I definitely wasn't thinking when I wore this \$3,000 watch in my hometown, a gift from Sunol for my birthday.

I was reluctantly removing the watch when he spoke again.

"The time better be right too!"

That last sentence provided me with a strange comfort, though I knew he was serious, I recognized his voice from somewhere. "Hurry up!" he yelled again as my mind matched the voice with a face.

"Rashad is that you?" I asked with the candor of running into an old friend on the sidewalk. He paused, clearly confused how I knew his name.

"Man how do you know my name?" he questioned. His tone turned curious and concerned.

"It's me John Letter," I could feel the gun lower so I felt safe enough to turn around.

Once he saw my face, he looked up and began to laugh in disbelief.

"What's up boy? My bad I didn't know that was you."

John Letter was what people called me in high school because I would put love letters in girl's lockers, just for the record, it never worked out well for me.

I knew Rashad since sophomore year. We called him the gentleman as a similar reference to how you'd call a 300-pound man Tiny. He was the star running back of the football team. I used to help him write term papers and he would coach me on how to approach the girls I was too shy to talk to. I remembered him once telling a 15-year-old version of me before we walked into Desiree Chapman's birthday party,

"You know how I told you to be yourself? Don't be at all, just do what I do, you can be yourself later," Desiree gave me her phone number that night but I never could bring myself to call her.

He was always an intelligent guy but had little interest in school. He was the type of person who would find a way to make a living without ever punching a clock.

"We're good, this is my lady Izabella," I introduced.

"Nice to meet you Izabella," He politely extended his hand towards her to apologize for his behavior. She reluctantly accepted, surprised that I kept company with men that greeted us at gunpoint.

"What you up to these days, you still robbing people?" I asked.

"Nah, I'm a business man I just saw the Cali plates, Burbank plate covers and I was bored I aint even going to lie," he explained.

"I see you doing all right out there, though that's real good, when did you get in town?" he continued.

"About ten minutes ago actually, I'm just picking up some wine for my Mom before I head over there,"

"OK well I got some business in here so I got you, Red or White?"

"Red," I replied.

Once Rashad walked into the store Izabella while still startled exclaimed,

"Really?" she rolled her eyes and walked back to the car.

Rashad returned a few minutes later with a bottle.

"Hey here ya go, excuse that whole situation, and tell your mother I said hello. I gotta roll, but my card is in the bag." We bumped fist goodbye and went back to our cars.

I handed the sack over to Izabella as I started the engine.

"I hope he got us something good after all that," she said, while removing the bottle to check the label. "Wow, this is a \$100 bottle. Your friends need to stick you up more often."

The abandoned parking lots and empty buildings were nostalgic representations of my childhood, a time when I was abound with hope and pipe dreams seemed certain, A time when I had more energy than knowledge and even less sense, sense of worry, sense of time, sense of failure, and more sense of imagination. I pointed out to Izabella a place where a popular cheap burger joint once stood as well as the restaurant my friends and I went to after junior year homecoming. My heart began to race with excitement as I made the right turn down Apache Drive. The familiar houses on the block had not changed much. Most of the yards were freshly cut. Older women worked in their gardens; younger men sat on their porches, while children rode bikes and dribbled basketballs down the sidewalk. My boyhood home was located three houses down from the Jennings Lane cross street and stood the same as always with a fresh coat of paint. A late model metallic blue Buick Regal was parked in the driveway so I figured my Mom was home. I wanted to run up the walkway to the front door like a child coming home from school with a good report card.

I had not told my mother I was coming so I was expecting a big hug followed by a hard slug on the arm for surprising her. I playfully hid behind Izabella after ringing the doorbell.

"Who is it?" I could hear my mother yell irritated as she was, she never liked strange visitors.

"Mrs. Gaines, it is Izabella and I have come to return your son to you,"

My mother opened the door and yelled, "Keep him!"

"Hi Mom" I darted into her view.

She hugged Izabella first.

"John has told me so much about you, you're such a beautiful girl; does he work your last nerve too?"

"Yes Ma'am, almost daily," Izabella responded.

"Get over here boy and give me a hug," My mother gestured.

"Are you two hungry, because I haven't cooked anything?" she asked.

The inside of the house hadn't changed much with the exception of some new furniture and an upgraded kitchen. It certainly still felt like home.

"John, make Izabella something to eat?" My mother ordered.

"You aren't going to cook for us?" I countered.

"Um no, you should've told me you were coming. I've been in the yard all day,"

"Well we've been driving all day." I replied.

"KFC is open down the street, or you can cook something from the freezer," she returned.

I was home, and I received no mercy. I was relieved that she hadn't ordered me to mow the lawn yet.

I went to the kitchen and loudly fumbled through meticulously organized pots and pans to display my frustration, hoping that she would relent into preparing a warm meal

as a welcome if not for me for Izabella. Well Okay primarily me, but I had no issue with using Izabella as a bargaining chip. However, my mother had never been one to relent on anything, perhaps that was the reason I was so stubborn. Once I stopped making noise I heard them chattering in the living room. I eavesdropped just to make sure I interrupted the release of embarrassing information that my mother had no qualms with sharing. Her openness wavered between refreshing truth and too much information.

“I think Izabella is a beautiful name, it reminds me of that Jimi Hendrix song,”

“Yes that’s actually what I was named after, my Dad was a huge Hendrix fan, he named my brothers Miles and Billy after the Band of Gypsies,” Sunol shared.

“Well aren’t you two a match, where’d you meet?” My mother commented.

“He works with my best friend actually.”

“Oh Sunol, I like her. Why aren’t you in the music business Izabella?”

“No, Ma’am, the music business is a bit much for me, I enjoy cutting people open.”

“Just out of curiosity are there many women of color in your occupation?” Mom asked.

“No, I was actually 1 of 2 in my class when I graduated from medical school, but there are more now than there were 10 years ago and more 10 years ago than there were 10 years before that, so there is progress in that area.” Izabella answered.

My mother was always intrigued by a good conversation and persisted in her queries.

“Where are you from?”

“Born in Harlem and raised in Brooklyn,” Izzy replied.

“Wait,” I interrupted you never told me you were born in Harlem, I just knew about Brooklyn,”

“Yes, I did but you were in one of your weird space out moments,”

“Oh John, hears voices Izabella,”

“Mom!” I exclaimed.

“John! Your girlfriend is a brain doctor you should tell her about your gift,”

She always called it my gift to convince me and maybe herself, that it wasn’t an illness.

“Yes I am aware but please feel free to tell me more about this,” Izabella added as she leaned intently towards my mother waiting for her to spill the secrets that I hadn’t.

“When John was a kid he would have these spells where he would just stop whatever he was doing at odd times, he said people were telling him to do different things and he didn’t know who to listen to. Eventually, he started having problems at school with following his teacher’s instructions because the people in his head were telling him not too. His father and I sent for him professional help. But the voices never really stopped but I guess you can say they became constructive, he found his passion in writing and music because that was the only thing all the voices agreed on that he could do and he only made friends with people all the voices liked, so all the voices must like you.”

“Wow that is incredible,” Izabella replied.

“Do the voices like me John,” she asked.

I paused while determining if I should lie, knowing she’d know I was lying but yet be unable to prove I was lying, therefore it was a lie I could possibly get away with it due to

reasonable doubt but when she stared at me with those big brown eyes and inquisitive smile it was like truth serum.

“Sometimes,” I admitted.

“Hmmm, that explains a lot,”

“Why didn’t you tell me all of this?” Izzy inquired.

“You never asked,” I responded sarcastically. If my mother were not there Izzy would have certainly thrown an object at me.

“What was John’s Dad like when he was young?” Izzy asked.

“Oh he was handsome, and he could talk the pants off of a Nun, I wasn’t a Nun so you can imagine,”

Izzy laughed, “Well John did not inherit that trait.”

I was able to endure the hazing until dinner was ready, it wasn’t my best work but nevertheless it was edible. We chatted and watched movies; Izzy shared a lot about her own family that I didn’t know. It was not the most exciting way to enjoy a vacation but exciting was the last thing we needed. We both just needed to get our minds off of L.A., root beer floats and popcorn seemed to do the trick. I sat on the couch between Izzy and my mother who was quickly falling asleep and I felt happiness.

I woke up covered by blankets to the scent of bacon and eggs in the air as well as something burning. My mother was preparing breakfast and Izzy volunteered to help, which is why I smelled something burning, she was assigned the biscuits that turned out tar black.

I swear that I am much better surgeon than cook,” she assured my mother.

“Don’t worry about it, cause I am a better cook than a surgeon, you can cut the tomatoes,” she replied.

“You were really tired, you were snoring,” Izzy started.

“Sorry, I haven’t been sleeping much these days, is that why you are up so early?” I asked.

“Early? Its 11, No I went and slept in your old room. I am pretty sure it was the one with the Janet Jackson and Barry Sanders posters on the wall,” she added.

“Yeah I suppose I should take those down at some point.” I confirmed.

“John, I need you to mow the lawn after breakfast, the family is coming over later for a BBQ, Izzy and I are going to go to the store and pick up some more potato salad, ice and meat.

“You’re having a BBQ for me?” I questioned excitedly.

“No! It’s your Uncles Lew’s birthday.” she confirmed.

I loved Uncle Lew he was a giant man standing at 6’6 and 280 lbs. a former star collegiate linebacker in the late 70s. From the view of a stranger he could be terrifyingly intimidating as he often growled and furrowed his brow naturally in thought. He flashed perfect teeth when he smiled and refused to dye his thick grey beard despite my mother’s wishes. He was the epitome of the term man’s man; he chopped down trees for firewood, changed his own oil and made a load of money by manufacturing and supplying steel to automakers. Every time I saw him he was always trying to sneak \$10 into my pocket. He drove the same old Ford truck for 20 years, so I was surprised to see him pull into the

driveway in a brand new Chevy pick-up as I placed the bagged lawn clippings alongside the curb.

“John Robe Esquire!” he yelled as he slowly exited the vehicle.

“What’s going on Unc?” I replied, genuinely happy to see him.

“I’m just trying to get it like you get it young man,” he followed, with a handshake and hug.

“What’s with the new wheels, I thought you liked old reliable over new and suspect?”

“I still got the old one, but one of my clients gave me the family and friends discount and I fell in love with those heated seats they feel good on my back, I keep them on when its 80 degrees outside.”

“Well you have to treat yourself sometimes.” I rendered.

“Yeah I suppose, how is Hollywood?” he replied.

“Hollywood isn’t my type of hype but Cali is cool, weather is great,”

“I haven’t been out that way since 86, I need trees and land. Where’s your Momma?”

“She went to the store; she should be back in a minute,”

“All right give me a hand with this cooler in the back,”

Uncle Lew had bought a cooler packed tightly with ribs and chicken.

Mom and Izzy returned shortly after I helped Uncle Lew unload the food and beer into the backyard.

“Hey little sister, and who’s this young lady?” Uncle Lew started once he saw Izabella.

“Uncle Lew this is Izabella.” I introduced.

He extended his hand but Izabella countered with a hug.

“I’m going to get started; people will be coming over in an a couple hours.” My mother exited.

Izzy followed my mother inside and once she was out of hearing range, Uncle Lew gave me a big smile and a fist pound.

“Boy now that’s my nephew right there, how did you pull that off?” he asked.

“I have no idea,” I replied because I asked myself the same question.

Over the next pair of hours family members such as cousins, aunts and friends showed up to the house, most of whom I hadn’t seen for the better portion of decade. But someone was obviously missing.

“Mom where is Granny?”

“Cynthia, where’s my Mom,” my mother yelled across the yard to my aunt.

“I thought you were picking her up,” Aunt Cynthia replied.

“Oh Goodness no one picked her up,” my mother realized.

“We can go get her,” I volunteered.

“That’s perfect she would love that,” my mom agreed.

Izzy and I drove to the south side of town where my grandmother resided.

Izzy sat in the car as I went to the front door.

“Hello grandson!” grandma smiled as she opened the door.

“Your chariot awaits granny.” I took her hand and guided her down the four steps from her porch into the walkway.

My grandma was a leisurely lady, never rushed yet always deliberate. She wore a smile on her face most of the time because she didn't want frown lines.

Izzy started to jump in the backseat so her elder could sit in the front but Granny insisted on sitting in the rear.

"Hello I am Izabella,"

"Nice to meet you Izabella" I am Patricia, Granny replied.

Unbeknownst to Izzy who Patricia was, Izabella asked,

"Where is your Grandma?"

"That is my grandmother" I replied.

"Wait what really? That's your grandmother! You're his grandma?" Izzy exclaimed.

"I thought that was your Aunt," she added.

"Yes I am the Grandma," Granny replied, tickled like a 40 year old still being carded at the local winery.

Izzy was not the first to be confused by my grandmother's appearance. It made me believe she had convinced God to stop her from aging at 50, in exchange for premature silver hair, a small mole on her upper left temple and poor night vision, which was the reason she wasn't driving to the BBQ.

We returned back to my mothers in time for grace to be led by granny. Her prayer touched on the importance of family and the value of love. She once told me that if you spend too much time chasing money, happiness would walk right past you, and how important it was to understand the balance. I always listened to her but I wasn't sure I always heard her because to me all I knew was that being broke made me miserable. I was just now getting to the point where I could start sorting some things out.

The family loved Izabella, we danced to good music, ate too much good food, some of my relatives drank a little too much good wine and we had an old fashioned good time. For a while I just sat in the corner playing cards with my cousins watching Izzy laugh and listen to my granny and mom as they went through photo albums. Being home reminded me that like music we are a composition, anchored by notes of those that love and nurtured us, I was only able to bounce to the beat of my own drummer because of the orchestra behind me even if it was a little disjointed.

The last time, I left home I was much more excited than this. The pain sunk in as I threw the final bag into the backseat.

"Bye Mom" I whimpered, the two words that should not be neighbors.

"See ya soon" she answered.

"Take care of him Izzy," my Mom pleaded.

"You have my word." Izzy replied with a long hug.

"Izzy took the first driving shift, because I feared I wouldn't be able to shift into reverse"

She rolled back down the street the way we came a few days earlier. My mother waved from the front yard.

I recalled Baltimore telling me, "We all do it."

"I watched my Mom enter the house from my side view mirror, I fought it but my eyes did swell and as we turned the corner toward the highway, the first teardrop fell"

Chapter 19

“The story of Life is quicker than the wink of an eye, the story of love is Hello and Goodbye, until we meet again” –Jimi Hendrix

I returned to LA with purpose and the energy of an atom bomb. Plus things were going great between Izzy and me. She felt like I finally showed her a piece of me that I had kept a secret. She started staying over to my place three nights a week, rearranging my furniture and putting pictures up. I didn't mind though; something in me liked knowing that she was turning my place into her extended stay hotel. I enjoyed the small things like seeing her toothbrush in the cabinet and body wash in the shower. I even got used to the place smelling like scented candles and glade refills. I even slept better with the scent of her hair conditioner on my pillow. I massaged her feet after work and she brought my hot chocolate and rubbed my shoulders while I worked. We were inseparable but not clingy, close but not smothering, our arguments led to understandings, we had fun, passion and friendship. I won't say we were soul mates but she was good for my soul like Bible verses.

Just when I thought I had the relationship thing down. The challenge became more difficult. I accepted multiple assignments to work with EED and an action movie soundtrack. It was not my first time taking on two projects at one time but it was my first time taken on two projects that required so much from me in regards to lyrics and composition. I knew it may have been a bit much to chew but I wasn't one to back down from challenges and the money was outstanding.

The initial excitement of trying something new wore off quickly. I became obsessed, working 20 hour days even on weekends. There were many days that we wouldn't even talk. If I went to bed she was already sleep and when she woke I was sleep. Izzy knew as well as anyone how difficult it was to balance so much at once so she was patient and understanding, but those virtues come standard with limitations and I was pushing them.

I had agreed months prior to be there on the night she was honored for excellence in her profession. I had every intention of going. I even had my suit pressed so I could be ready to meet her at the lobby of the hotel at 7pm. At 3pm I had plenty of time, so I'd check my watch again in a couple of hours; 5 o'clock came and I figured I had few minutes. The next time I looked it was 8. I panicked and got dressed as quickly as I could; I cut myself trying to shave in a rush. I raced to get to the hotel as fast as I could but you can rarely make up time on the 405 and this was no exception. By the time I arrived at on the Avenue of Stars I could see well-dressed patrons exiting the building towards valet. I pulled up and left my car running hoping to find her so I could explain, though I had no idea how I would explain this. As I walked through the doors I spotted her to my right in a conversation with a couple who appeared to be congratulating her based on her smile of gratitude. She was breathtaking, dressed in a long metallic gown; her hair was clipped up revealing the platinum and diamond necklace I had bought her in Vegas. If she was a stranger it would have been love at first sight, instead seeing her reminded me of how crazy I was about her and made me feel worse for being late. She held

her plaque in her left arm, she noticed me as she scanned the room for the voice that walked passed me yelling congratulations.

She did not react; rather she looked me off like I was just someone who worked in the building. I pondered if I should go over there or wait for her to come to me. I opted to greet her in their company because she would have to acknowledge me.

“Congratulations! Truly deserved,” I greeted.

She hesitantly introduced me to the older couple.

“Dr. and Mrs. Wilshire, this is John Robe, John this Dr. and Mrs. Wilshire”

“Nice to meet you young man, Izabella, give it some thought we would love to have you, Have a good night” said Dr. Wilshire.

After the Wilshire’s walked away, I tried to speak to Izzy but she walked off to valet to wait for her car.

I followed casually, so not to attract attention before catching up to her.

“I am really sorry,”

“Yes you are, is that it?” she remarked.

“No, I’m really really sorry, I just lost track of time,”

“I get it, you’re busy,” she snapped.

The valet pulled up with her car and she got in.

Before she closed the door, I asked her,

“How can I make it up to you?”

“Can’t make it up Charlie, moment lost but you can tip the valet.” the door closed and she drove off

I tipped the valet.

I could tell by her stout posture as she stood in the doorway, that this would be an intense conversation. She stood in silence waiting for me to acknowledge her. I pretended to be focused on the task at hand. I could feel the look. She bit the left of her lip and crossed her arms. Her soft dark hair covered the right side of her face, her beauty cloaking the slightest evil. I could feel the heat of her gaze sneering at me. The temperature rose as her shadow inched towards me, until I felt her hands pressed firmly into my shoulders.

“Are you busy?” she asked softly while leaning over me; in her raspy Brooklyn tone. Her hair was damp and smelled of coconut and Moroccan oil shampoo. She had a way of luring me into a false sense of comfort, by affectionately stroking my ear with her thumb.

“No.” I responded.

“Good answer,” she encouraged, like a teacher verifying to a small child, that a Cow says moo.

She leaned closer, her moist cold lox draped over my head, just the way I liked it.

“Do you know what I hate?” she asked. I presumed rhetorically but I couldn’t resist.

“When I use your toothbrush to clean the sink?” I answered. She did not see the amusement.

“I hate, that you are all that I have,” she continued into my ear as she nibbled my lobe.

“I hate, that I have to wake up in your bed, but not next to you, I hate that your world can continue to be full when mine feels empty,” Her tone remained smooth yet stern as she softly kissed my neck, while her fingernails painfully dug into my scapula.

She persisted, “I loathe that I can feel you but not reach you. It frustrates me that I live for you to kiss me, like I’m dying.” Her hands firmly caressed my torso; her tongue teased my temple.

“I hate that I’d trade comfort and simplicity, for uncertain bliss and certain pain.” she placed both hands on my cheeks and harshly turned my head towards her.

“But all of that I live with....And All that I CAN live with for the rest of my life, if the rest of my life is meant to be with you. I just want you to fight for me John! Show me that you care, like when we were strangers on a balcony. Give me back that man, who used to smile and dance with me to his favorite songs. That man who said the wrong thing just so I would hear him. Tell me you don’t want me to go, tell me not to go to San Francisco because you need me like I need you. Show me it pains you to be without me when I would ache without you. Don’t tell me you love me John, just show me you do. “

Her dark eyes were slightly watered in sincerity but did not leak. Her fingers were warm against my skin. Her lips pressed softly against mine, as she rested her arms on my neck and straddled me. She looked deeply into my eyes, awaiting the response she coveted.

I wanted with every breath in me to tell her she was my greatest strength, my foundation for inspiration, I wanted to tell her she was my home and without her I’m cold and shiftless, wandering the earth without purpose. I wanted to say, “Tell San Francisco, You hate the 49ers and parades.” I wanted to promise her forever, through the heartbreak of lost loved ones that go before us, through the days our aged bodies began to betray us, through the days awards became dusty representatives of fond memories and all we had to look forward to was to open our eyes and see that the other was still there. But I was too courageous or cowardly to rob her of a dream even it meant my nightmare. I couldn’t bear the thought of her resenting me if I failed her in any of the ways I failed myself. Iza-bella was wrong about one thing. I would always fight for her. It is not possible to love without fight, fighting your own desires, fighting complacency, fighting ones instincts fighting to protect. But this fight for her came at the consequence of me being able to fight for myself. I could hope with every particle in my body that she would choose me. But I could not rob of her choice.

So how could I respond to her? What could I say to make her understand? If this were a song how would I put together the verses? What bar would lead to the chorus? What would our melody be?

Silence swallowed the room, as she awaited my response. Her fingernails tapping anxiously, against my shoulders, tap tap tap tap. Her lips pursed.

“Don’t fold John, be strong,” one voice said.

“Why are you complicating things just kiss her and tell her what she wants to hear, you can’t lose her, she is resplendent.” said another.

I wanted her more than the last breath of a thousand lives, time felt like wasteful seconds without her. So I let my heart lead with,

“I love that you still make me nervous because I want to be perfect for you. I love that you accept what I will never be. I love that you, steal my favorite pillow when I come to bed late. I love that you are my inspiration to write and live. I placed my hands on her hips and spoke softly into her ear. I love the way you feel when you’re in my grasp. It delights me to hear you sigh when I kiss your neck like this,” I softly kissed her neck; she exhaled.

“I love that I cannot have comfort if you are in pain,” I lifted her closer to me, looking into her eyes with sincerity. Her dark curly hair, still damp fell forward, touching my chin.

“And all of that I can live with forever, all of that I will fight for because you are my last kiss, you are my favorite song, you are my final dance,” Her back arched as I caressed the small of her back, her firm breast, began to smother me. She kissed me harshly, her heartbeat accelerated, her breaths grew deep. The only thing else I could say as she removed her top was,

“I also hate parades.”

Two weeks later she accepted an assignment to serve as Medical Director for the development of the Neurosurgery Department at the University of California San Francisco Children’s Hospital. At the age of 19 she learned that it would be a challenge though not impossible to have children after she was involved in car accident with friends leaving a USC vs. Arizona State football game. She didn’t like to talk about it but I knew deep down she needed this opportunity to save the lives of others children. I knew she would’ve stayed if I would’ve asked but a part of her would’ve resented me for it. Two weeks later she was gone and I was alone. For the first few weeks we talked on the phone every day but as the weeks and months went on. A day between calls would turn into a week then 2 weeks. I was certain that she was busy with work and maybe even a new guy so I did what I always did to get over things, I wrote. By writing I hoped to find solace in the idea that she was better off without me, she needed a guy who could be there for her all the time, and say the right things. I could live with that because she was probably happy doing what she loves and I’m doing what I always wanted. I was living the dream. So how could I complain? I was living the wrong persons dream. Someone told me once that doing the right thing often carries worse consequences than doing the wrong ones, weighing fierce punishments vs. meager reward. But if the right choices were easy, what would we write about?

For the first time in my life I was lonely because for the first time in my life I had learned what it was like not to be alone. It was easier to think that I did what was right by her because it was far less painful than admitting to myself that I made a mistake and I was miserable. If it wasn’t for the voices maybe I could have gotten over her. If it wasn’t for the voices maybe I could’ve convinced myself I was content. Yet, the more I tried to quiet them the louder they became, until finally it was just ruckus.

“You got your foolish wish, all of your dreams have come true, yet you have nothing left and I pity you.”

“Pathetic, while you’re hearing imaginary people, right now she is making love to a better man than you, you’re going to die here John, right where you belong.”

“Leave him alone, he did the right thing, that’s what Love is he sacrificed his joy for her ultimate happiness, what’s so wrong about that?”

“I agree maybe she will come back.”

“You sound as dumb as he is, she’s not coming back, she’s better off he’s a nothing, if it wasn’t for Sunol he’d still be selling fat ladies meal plans.”

Some of the voices sided with me under the position of logical reason, but they were outnumbered by a brood of growing bullies, the maggot like infestation swarmed my mind, sucking away every feeling of joy, every thought of satisfaction, every bit of peace. They whispered that all I deserved was pain, for it was the writer’s curse. Nothing else is worth knowing, but the harmony in a verse. They always had their way with me, my thoughts were so tangled it was difficult to credit the correct author. Nevertheless, perhaps they were right maybe this weighted and angry conscience was what I needed to do avoid the errors of an unchallenged me. Perhaps, I was losing my mind or I just never quite had it at all.

I didn’t sleep; I didn’t eat, or leave the house. But I didn’t sit in a room and cry like someone from a bad vampire movie either. I scribbled the mania in my mind into notebooks and onto walls. Music was the only way to appease them. But all songs and all albums eventually faded to an ending and so would I.

*Where have I come to? Where was I running from?
How do I get to you? Wherever you are is home.
Where have I come to? Where was I running from?
How do I get to you? Wherever you are is home.
If I could have my way, I’d only wish to pass your way
I’d walk from dusk till dawn, or ride from dark to day
Where do I run to? When the daylight is gone?
Where do I turn to, when the right way is wrong?
Where I have come to? Where was I running from?
How do I get to you? Wherever you are is home.
My feet are tired, my legs grown weary
If I call to you, where would you hear me?
I think I’ve been lost before, But I’m certain now
I trying to get back home, Can you show me how?
Where have I come to? Where was I running from?
How do I get to you? Wherever you are is home.
It could be so simple, it’s complicated
Love written in a perfect song, with no way to play it
Baby I’m tired, scared maybe I’m dying
Baby this pain, so strong, but I can’t stop trying
Where have I come to? Where was I running from?
How do I get to you? When wherever you are is home.*

There was harsh silence as I woke up on the floor of my chamber wearing the same clothes as Tuesday on a Friday. I needed a shave and shower. I attempted to pour a glass

of milk but the pungent aroma that permeated from the carton indicated it was sour. Best if sold by June 12. "Wait a minute" I paused while sorting through the 97 missed calls. It was July 9. A month passed by as swiftly as it would take to play my entire favorite album. Yet I had emerged from my dungeon with a year's torment of material, whether it was any good remained to be seen. I was just happy that the voices had silenced like a concert when the lights came up.

I just wanted to call her call her and say hello and see how her day was but I fought it the urge.

"Get yourself together Robe" I looked at myself in the mirror for minutes hoping a better part of me with more courage would surface.

"Just call her to say hello," I convinced myself.

"I will get my woman back." I assured myself.

"But don't make a fool of yourself. I have pride." I warned.

I walked out of the bathroom convinced that I could reach out to her without caving to the sound of her voice. Instead I spilled all the contents of my heart onto her voicemail, so much for not making a fool of myself.

She was heavy on my mind as I prepared for a speaking engagement that night. When I initially accepted the invitation I was expecting her to be there. It would have meant a lot to see her face in and find the comfort I needed to get through a presentation. I didn't know how to be interesting or funny, or particularly charismatic. The idea of being behind a podium under the spotlight was unnatural.

My audience was calm and attentive full of familiar faces but all strangers. This was supposed to be a shining moment but chills of darkness came over me like a tornado cloud. I was grateful yet, loathing, proud yet disgusted. I had to filter the silence of, silverware, scattered coughs and cameras. I reached into my jacket pocket for a folded hotel napkin and read from it. My penmanship was barely legible and punctuation was sparse but I knew exactly what I wanted to say because it was exactly what I felt. I had no concern on how it was interpreted or if people understood it, I didn't even care if they applauded. I had spent most of my life trying to make a dollar by appealing to the ear of enough people just so that enough would listen to verify that my life had purpose. But this time I didn't care what appealed to most all that mattered was that I reached the few who needed to hear it as much as I needed to say it.

FREE YOUR MIND! Spoken with certainty like a permanent stain soiled with no residue, this is the answer to the question burning in the maggot-covered mind. Come to me freely, fall into my waves of despair and emptiness and I'll show you great might. Might I be reckless in this adventure, might I be spoiled rotten, might I be brave, might I be short on sanity like twin sized satin sheets on a California King.

FOLLOW ME! Follow me in whole, not in parts sections or chapters. Follow me like Marchers upon Washington not Instagram photographs or birds of twitter chirping to unloved ones, strangers in friendship, the observers of peril.

FREE YOUR MIND! Merit cataclysmic synapse stimulation, parallel to ever ready seismic vibrations in the absence of penetration, yet yield a similar reward.

FREE YOUR MIND! Call upon me, loud as a whisper, and I will divulge to you all I know to be true, whether you believe the way it to be conceived in its birth, certainly naked but entirely up to you.

FREE YOUR MIND! To the spirits that beckon you to love, to flight, to laugh to breathe. Embrace the purity that comes with the pain of being naive.

FREE YOUR MIND! It is the full of heart of me that has loved fool heartedly, to earn heartache that has shaped such words; insatiable, passionate, fierce pleasures of a ballpoint pen, a song, riff, a chorus, once upon a time, The End.

FREE YOUR MIND! See more than sight allows, hear more than is spoken, release the ties that bind you, the stresses you bare, simply because you have lost the appreciation of a soft robe, when you had nothing else to wear.

FREE YOUR MIND! Stand strong in the wave of the wretchedness, prevail with your spirit, and thunder under your toes. Statistics and probabilities a genius way of saying nobody knows.

So FREE YOUR MIND! I dare you to escape, the here, the past is already now. Let OK, fine, alright, become Yes, amazing, WOW!

FREE YOUR MIND and your ass will follow not pregnant but fertilized dreams in the womb of hereafter.

The audience was still, it was not until I walked 4ft from the podium did I hear a single clap, which became 4, 8, 12 a room a standing ovation. I don't think most people understood it but applause is not a sign of comprehension as much as it is a reflection that the audience was entertained. Or perhaps it was because that I didn't smile seek glory, that what I said seemed important and they felt part of something that would mean more than now years later. I didn't wait around to ask.

Chapter 20

“My songs have always been frustrating themes, relationships that I've had. And now that I'm in love, I expect it to be really happy, or at least there won't be half as much anger as there was” -Kurt Cobain

It was day 5 of 5 and hour 12 of recording sessions to wrap the Elementary Education album. We were all a little irritated, sleep deprived, and hungry. I checked my watch for the fourth time in an hour, a practice uncommon since my Music usually left me with little regard for passing time. It was 8:42, when Izabella called to say she'd be in town later that night. I smiled for the first time in weeks.

“Will you be home?” she inquired.

“Yes!” I exclaimed.

I stopped to embrace the enticing idea.

“Hey guys I gotta go, right now,” I announced.

I congratulated the band on a job well done before taking off.

My heart pumped with adrenaline thinking about all of the things I would say to Izabella this time. I even contemplated going to San Francisco with her, if that's where she needed to be. I could write from anywhere, I did not have to be tied down to LA.

“Don't get carried away,” the voices balanced.

“She may be meeting you tell you she has found somewhat better and brighter, taller, more handsome wealthier, that smooth talking gentleman that you could never be.”

Maybe they were right, maybe it was too late and she just came to put my out of my misery and drop off some things that I had left at her place. Her grandmother's watch was on my nightstand and she certainly would have to retrieve before she left for good.

What would I do? Sunol was gone and Izzy would be gone to. I'd have no one to believe in me no one I could trust. I'd be lost in familiar surroundings with only myself to talk to.

The anxiety of excitement had transitioned to into a sinking feeling in the pit of my abdomen. My blossoming hope had transitioned to paranoia and misery.

I'd come a thousand of miles, climbed multiple mountains and watched many moons only to find myself at a sharp cliff ready to leap. I was still just a damn failure.

By the time I arrived home the voices had nearly defeated me; my head ached from the constant screaming. Izabella's car was already in the driveway so there was not time to sulk; I just had to face whatever consequence loomed. I could only blame myself as the root of my own misfortune. I opened the door to find her relaxed on the couch with a bottle of wine. Sunol was right she did like to drink. I was slightly comforted to see that she seemed happy to see me, she greeted me with a warm hug, she was not tense or rushed, she seemed home and in my eyes she absolutely was.

Angel

Angel spare my sin

Hero, save my soul again

*Ye hailed the world to doth that follow
Soiled in forbidden fruit
Miracle that will cast a curse on you
Sacrifice me, for all I'm worthy
Bathing in my blood,
Storming waters for the fire that burn before they flood
Forgive me, fathers for all my prayers wept selfishly for vain
Preyed upon like Lions sheep
Take away this pain
Angel, Angel spare my sin
Heroes, saints come marching in
To the degree of which I'm captured
She'll never set me free
I lost myself searching for treasures
That just will never be
I should've died the second time
The dagger found my heart
Murdered all the peace in me
The Eagle killed the Dove
How could she hate me so?
When I'd just wanted to be the one she loved
Angel, Angel spare my sin
I'm your hero, standing in the wind
Your breath will be the death of me
So long as I live
Take from me, till I have nothing left to give
For all my thirst, you'll dry the streams
Slave of my burden, Mare of my dreams*

I rested against her torso; I felt the peace that had eluded me for what seemed like eras. I felt the comfort that I had refused to accept. A desire that made me weak but support that made me invincible. I felt the warmth, that made me feel home. I could hear her heart patter, I could feel her breath, her spirit and in that moment I realized I could no longer function properly without her existence. I could not have happiness without her joy; I no longer wanted me without us. Maybe it was foggy eyes that heightened my other senses or maybe I had finally had evolved like a 27 year old who suddenly had more interest in reading a book at home than going out clubbing.

But what if it was too late? What if her heart had fallen elsewhere and she was there as an old friend with pity? If so, she was still an Angel because I did not deserve such mercy.

She held me tightly and rocked me like a wounded child. She kissed me and rested her chin on my forehead.

"It's OK, it's OK"

She assured me, and I believed her. I knew these stories rarely ended well but I wanted with all my heart left to believe her, I needed to.

We stayed up that night talking like we hadn't in months. She told me about how amazing San Francisco was and that she finally understood why I couldn't discourage her from going. I told her about everything, from the nightmares through the voices, to how my world truly collapsed without her. I was afraid that if I stopped talking she would leave again for San Francisco, only next time I wouldn't see her again. But we never ran out of topics or laughs. Finally, her curiosity came over her like a down comforter while I was shirtless for a rainstorm,

“What took you so long to call me?” she asked

“A month without a word,” she continued.

“Hold one second,” I requested as I rose from the couch.

She looked puzzled as I left the room in a hurry, to return with a blue Adidas shoebox.

“You got me shoes?” she remarked as I handed it to her.

She could tell immediately by the weight and shifting inside that the contents were not size 9 sneakers.

She removed the lid to find 4 sealed unstamped envelopes addressed to *Dr. Izabella Subhan, Somewhere in San Francisco, CA*, from *Wheryu Arnut*.

She was correct I did not call, but I had written 4 letters 20 pages long. I never could bring myself to send.

She sat speechless as she read through a few pages.

“You asshole, all this time I wondered if you even cared or if you still thought about me and you kept it locked away like this. Why?”

“I wanted to send each one, but”

“What stopped you?” she demanded an answer.

“I was worried I'd be anxious to go the mailbox every day and you'd never write back”

“You really are stupid”

“We'll you never wrote me or called, so why would I assume you would?” I said

“I pleaded with you, I nearly begged you to ask me to stay, just for a reason not to go and you were you. I was foolish to think or hope you'd be anything less or more. I didn't want to think about you, but I did. I wanted so much to not want to hear from you but I did. I would've thrown them in the trash then taken them out and read them over and over again, or burned them but eventually you would answer your phone and hear my voice or hear my heels in your walkway. Instead we are here at the mercy of time forever uncertain”

“As opposed to certainly forever” I replied

“Not opposed but met with doubt”

“The doubt I can handle, everything I've accomplished in life was against all odds, it's the givens and probably that I've struggled with”

“Sometimes it's the simple things that are the most necessary”

“Not necessarily, the simplest things are made possible only by complex processes, so simple is really what we surmise as being a path of least resistance or effort, so how can

you concretely surmise that simple is the most necessary, when perhaps we only see it as necessary because we also see it as simple?"

"You still don't get it, after all this" she said exasperated.

"I get it! I screw up everything. Do you think it was simple for me to let you go; to fight my every instinct and emotion to give into the contrary? Once upon a time on a swing, you wore that burgundy jacket and spoke to me about where you wanted to go. Did you simply forget that? Because I didn't, I want you to be happy more than you want it for yourself, it's not easy to endure misery to make it happen but I have to do something right by someone in this cursed hopeless life."

"John, none of this was ever about me. You want to convince yourself that you were thinking of me but you're wrong. You're scared. I think it was easier for you to let me leave for a reason you could justify, and then lose me for a reason you couldn't. I think you'd rather be alone and believe it was a choice than put your heart at risk and I just can't be with you like that anymore"

"You can't or won't" I asked.

"I refuse," she followed.

"I refuse to do this, anymore John, you can't keep looking at me the way you do because it breaks my heart, you can't keep pushing me away and expect me to come back. You can't love me on conditions of convenience."

"Love is inconvenient Izzy and I hate it. I hate that it has power over me, I hate that it thrives recklessly and out of control. Furthermore, it only comes with conditions, that I put your needs before my mine, within reason. So it's not fair but, I'd die for you Izzy," I replied.

I immediately regretting letting that phrase spill from my lips, it was so overdone, so cliché and how I hate Cliché. People die for strangers' every day, so it lacked any exclusivity or value but it made a great song in 1984.

"I didn't need you to die for me John; I wanted Life, I needed you to try. I needed you to be the one." Her voice cracked, her eyes swelled.

"But so much for that I guess" she added.

"I just wanted you to be happy." I mumbled meekly.

"I was happy, but you weren't, I was never enough.

"You are more than enough: nothing could be as good as you." I replied.

"That's your fantasy, I don't know that you can tell the difference anymore," she disputed.

"There isn't a difference because there is no reality; everything is fantasy, this house, this life and you. In real life women like you don't fall for guys like me, only movies only songs. I have to keep my writing that song, so it never ends, because if it does... if it does I fear you will fade away like the guitar in the final chorus. I can't write a better song than you, you are the height of my imagination. You're the most beautiful harmony ever composed, but I struggle because I find myself at a loss for words to give you the verses you deserve."

She grabbed her purse and walked over to the door. As she pulled it open, the dawn air blew in.

She paused, and looked towards me as I proceeded to keep her from leaving

She took my hand and spoke in recollection.

“Do you remember the song you played for me, when we stayed up all night talking after Sunols pool party?”

“Maggot Brain” I recalled.

“Right, I asked you how you could have a favorite song without words, and you said, sometimes words screw up the perfect instrumental.”

“I remember,” I confirmed.

“Maybe you should just let the music play.”

I paused as a reply escaped me. My response would need to be the right one because I knew if her heels touched the front porch pavement, I’d lose her. I couldn’t lose her; I couldn’t live one more second without her knowing that I would give her forever like it was schoolyard recess.

She waited impatiently, like she wanted to stay but was ready to go.

“I don’t wanna make it up to you, because it means I’ve let you down, I prayed you’d come home, cause I wished you were around. I am drawn to you, though I never can seem to color inside the lines, I’ve never had much to give but I’d trade your heart for mine. I’ll be your hero if you save me first and if your tears ever run dry of joy. I will fade in thirst.

“Shut up now” she interrupted with a forgiving kiss.

We kissed a hundred years’ worth in ten seconds, like it was the first, the last the only.

Chapter 21

“Every day I feel is a blessing from God. And I consider it a new beginning. Yeah, everything is beautiful.” -Prince

I woke up earlier than the usual noon to make breakfast. I knew the refrigerator was barren of any consumables outside of yogurt and milk. I had lived off of Apple Jacks and Almonds for days. The sun shined through the windows in a special way. I couldn't help but to open the blinds. Izabella was sound asleep, so I kissed her on the forehead and left a note on the end table. She was parked behind me and I did not want to wake her to locate keys. This summer air insisted it was a good day to uncover the Old Camaro and take it for spin.

I found it a little odd that no other cars were on the road on a Sunday morning, it was like the whole town slept in or congregated at mass.

I arrived at the local market and was greeted with a smile by the old storeowner Mr. Jackson. “Where is everyone?” I asked

“Now that you mention it is a little quiet for Sunday morning,” Mr. Jackson added.

“They're shooting a movie on Shoreline and Highland” Jacob the butcher added.

“Oh yeah I read about that in the community chronicle I didn't think anyone actually read that thing.” Mr. Jackson replied.

“My wife reads it, Denzel Washington is starring in it and they're paying locals \$100 each just to be extras.” Jacob added.

“John, that's your business aren't you some hotshot movie guy?” Mr. Jackson inquired.

“Not exactly, is Ms. Molly's shop open today?” I responded.

Molly owned the local ring store, which had a ring that Izabella would occasionally reference.

“I think she's over at the beach too but she should be back around here to open up around 11 if you can wait.”

The time was 9:18.

“I will come back later,” I replied.

I carried my items to the counter and observed an old candy ring behind the desk.

“They still make those things,” I mentioned.

“Yeah, kids have been coming here for them since I can remember. Though I'm old I don't remember as well I used to.” he replied.

I asked for a blue one it was Izzy's favorite flavor growing up.

“Take it, it's on the house, is that the old Camaro you bought. It was a heap the last time I saw it.”

“Yea we were one in the same, I reckon, but I had it restored, guess in a way we were both were.”

“Is that a 69 or 70?”

“That's a 68,” said Jacob.

I opened the trunk to load my two bags, and found that a pair of old tires occupied most of the space, so I placed one on the passenger side floor and the other in the seat.

“Take care, Mr. Jackson, I’ll be around later to catch Ms. Molly.”

I turned the key and the engine purred like a free lion. Mr. Jackson signaled thumps up. I looked at the clock knowing Izzy would be up soon, it was 9:23.

I wasn’t speeding but I was in a hurry to get back to her. For the first time in life I truly felt that everything would work out after all. Parliament blared on the stereo; I loved the Eddie Hazel guitar riff three minutes in. I slowed down to 45 accounting for the upcoming bend. The ocean was in view to my left. In mid-turn the bag on the seat began to slip, I reached my right arm to catch it, momentarily dropping view from the road ahead. I looked up to see a young Coyote in my path. I swerved before regaining control a mere ninety yards from the cliff. That’s when I saw the lights blue and red lights in my rear-view signaling me to pull over.

The officer approached my window, a middle-aged man with a typical cop moustache and no intent on hearing anything I had to say.

“Do you know why I pulled you over?” he started.

“Yes, I ascertain it was because I swerved a bit back there, a Coyote was crossing the road and I saw him late,”

“Have you been drinking at all?” he questioned.

“No, not all,” I replied.

“How about drugs, are you under the influence of any drugs?” he continued.

“No like I said it was just a Coyote in the road.”

“Do you have any drugs or weapons in the car?” He persisted.

“Once again no,” I answered attempting to remain calm but admittedly became irritated by the line of questioning.

“Where are you headed?” he asked.

“Home,” I answered, though I wanted to reply, “I’m headed where I’m going.”

“You live over here?” he asked in a condescending manner.

“You don’t look tall enough to be a Laker,” he joked.

I was beyond the point of humoring him; I had met many of his type along the way, constant reminders that many people who dance to or make love to my music would fear me if I walked into an elevator with them. I was certain I would need to impose self-therapy with the 2Pacalypse album when this was over.

“Is this your car?” his assault of sarcasm continued. I was convinced he was just being an asshole at that point; only an asshole would wear a mustache like that.

“Driver’s license and registration.” he asked.

I just wanted to get out of this man’s presence and I was running out of patience to continue to be polite.

First I went into the glove box slowly, though no one puts gloves in those things anymore to call it a glove box. Nevertheless, I found my registration and insurance info to supply the profiling officer.

I knew I had my wallet because I was just at the store, but I did not feel it in my sweatshirt pocket. I spotted it on the passenger seat floor and reached to retrieve it.

“Hold it,” he yelled and immediately fired multiple shots from an M&P shield 9mm in my direction.

The sound was more terrifying than the pain of the burning bullets. I almost had it all but instead it would end in three along an empty mountainside road as the cop car sped away instead of radioing an ambulance.

“Just let go,” the voices said, “It’s OK, God never should have put you in this world in the first place. If only your father had stayed home the day he met your mother it would not have come to this but the world has a way of resolving its errors.”

A trailer of my life story flashed, of the good times, swinging on that swing as high as I could trying to touch the sky as a child, my 12th birthday party, my mother’s smile of approval, riding in a car with friends, singing a duet with Sunol in her guest house and Izzy laughing at me and jumping into my arms. Maybe I didn’t do too badly after all, certainly people had lived longer without experiencing as much love and wander. That could be enough for me.

But it was Izzy’s smile that made it hard to let it go. Release, release, the voices whispered barely audible above the ringing.

“No!” I yelled. A shot of adrenaline jump-started enough for me to open my eyes, and start the car to head home to her. I wasn’t going to die here on this patch of road; I would go in her arms.

I was bloodied and disoriented; my head throbbed as my left eardrum was damaged. My left arm was weak barely usable for steering. I speed home driving as fast as I could before I passed out and crashed into the mountains or an oncoming car. I made it to my driveway and staggered to the door, I left my keys in the ignition so I rung the door bell and knocked as hard as I could hoping that she wasn’t sleep. I had lost so much blood that sounds became muffled and my legs began to buckle dropping me to my seat on the concrete porch. Just as I began to fade, I felt the door open; Izzy walked outside in bare feet, shorts and a tank top; she called out in terror before she cradled me.

“John, John!” she called with a deep concern in her voice,

“I made it”, I said, “I made it home to you”

“John, don’t close your eyes” she demanded.

“Stay with me!” she called.

“I never left,” I mumbled before it all went dark.

Chapter 22

“A dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world.” - Oscar Wilde

I opened my eyes and they were slow to focus on a fuzzy yet familiar picture on the wall but I clearly heard the Beatles Imagine playing softly in the room. An open magazine lay across my lap.

I closed my eyes realizing it was just all just a dream; I must have dozed off for a few seconds while waiting in reception. I was relieved at first because, I was alive, aren't we all grateful that we hadn't met our demise upon waking from a nightmare? But as the seconds passed the relief turned to disappointment and then sadness because I would trade my life to live that dream. I could only imagine. I tried to fall back to sleep go back to that world, y'know see how it ended, if there were a lot of people at my funeral, what happened to Izabella and so on. In sheer coincidence, I could hear Sunol's song "Shadows" come on the radio and I reflected upon the time she joined a conversation about music between a co-worker and I, who knows maybe I'd get the chance to work with her after all if the receptionist ever called my name.

Wait! I wrote the song "Shadows" or at least I had a feeling I did. I opened my eyes again this time getting a clearer picture of my surroundings; I was in a hospital.

"Hey you're up, finally I was really getting bored reading two year old magazines," said a woman in a black Nike hoodie emerging from the bathroom. She walked across the front of my bed and a new journal. I struggled to talk at first likely due to the passing effects of pain opiates in my system, consistent with the dull pain I began to feel in my shoulder and arm.

"Finally, I tried to mumble "You're Sunol!"

"Oh shit, you're retarded," she said sadly while rubbing my forehead with her thumb.

"He's not retarded he's drugged," I recognized the voice immediately as comforting as that of my own mother.

I turned my head to see Izzy walking towards me in what seemed like slow motion. She looked like she hadn't slept much; evident by the baseball cap hiding that she hadn't combed her hair nor was she wearing a trace of make-up yet she was absolutely stunning.

My mind raced faster than my tongue could carry.

"ssshhh" she whispered with a loving smile." You've been out for a couple of days." she shared.

"Yea, you were shot half as many times as 50 cent and by a cop nonetheless, the guy turned himself in after the dash cam video was leaked." I just stared at Sunol in awe as she talked.

"Are you sure he's not retarded?" Sunol asked again, puzzled by my childish glare.

"Yes, the head wound was just a graze, there was no brain damage" Izzy verified.

"Thank God that cop was a bad shot," Sunol joked.

Izzy shook her head in judgment.

"OK, OK, sorry, that's how I deal with stuff," Sunol relented.

Over the next hour, the drugs wore off and I was able to hold a conversation. Sunol quizzed me on music history determined to discover if I had an additional screw loose.

“Where’s my Mom,” I asked.

“She’s at my place, she was up for two days straight because she wanted to be here when you woke up, I had just come back from taking her home when you woke up,”

“I have good and bad news for you, which one do you want first?” Izabella inquired.

“I’ll take the good news,” I replied.

“Good news is you can go home in the morning under my care,”

“Fair, now what’s the bad new?” I asked.

“Bad news is...”

“He’s partly retarded,” Sunol interjected.

“Stop, leave him alone!” Izzy barked.

“Fine, but his car is really messed up and there are news stations that want you to release a statement, so it’s actually double bad news”

“And there’s that.” Izzy confirmed.

I loved that car and hated the idea of being any part of the news. I loathed that kind of attention and empathy. Yet Izzy convinced me that this went beyond music to potentially save someone’s life, perhaps she was right. I trusted her judgment more than my own and just having her next to me was all the reason I needed to believe there was hope for life beyond my narrow scope. Her smile made led me to question every flawed philosophy I had adopted through the years. I was right to lament that I never needed anyone other than my mother to survive but what I finally understood was that I needed Izabella to want to really live. I always thought I was somewhat of a fraud to write about love as though I was some expert but love is forever fleeting and it’s not about mastery, or even reason, it has turned a million geniuses into fools. If we are fortunate misplaced love will only stagger us is, if we are lucky we will fall for the right one. I had always tried to walk the fine line of giving just enough that I didn’t expect anything in return, so I would never be the person waiting for the phone to ring, or standing unwanted in a doorway as the clouds cried on my shoulders. I never wanted to have a broken heart I just wanted to write about them. But you know who fears a broken heart? The broken hearted. There was a reason Izabella inspired me; she was everything I wanted, everything I feared I would have because I was afraid to lose her.

We all stayed up and talked for what felt like minutes but rolled into hours. We listened to Sunol stories of her travels, Izabella talked about the new children’s hospital. We reveled in old times and my mother returned to shares tales of my childhood. We laughed until our eyes filled with tears; at one point I thought I might pop a stitch. Laughter is the most beautiful chord in the Gods grand composition and its harmony healed me.

As promised I was cleared for discharge the following morning. Izzy and my mother rolled me towards the hospital exit before I stopped them.

“Wait, I’m not going through those doors in this chair.” I refused.

I walked through the sliding doors and into the first sunlight I had seen in days. I took a deep breath of the LA air and choked. The not so fresh air was still an upgrade of the

stale smell of hospital bandages and latex. I spotted Sunol 12 feet to the right doing what she did, signing cast and posing for pictures.

“My friend had an accident also,” she said to a young girl.

“Do you want me to sign yours?” the little girl asked pointing to my arm in a sling.

“Of course” I replied.

We filed into the vehicle, Izzy drove, Sunol sat in the passenger seat and I sat in the back with my mother who helped me put on my seatbelt for the first time in decades.

“Oh I got you something,” Sunol announced as she handed me a new large brimmed leather hat.

“It’s for your situation up there,” she commented referencing the bandages still wrapped around my head.

“If you could put it on now that would be best,” she added.

I obliged.

“Where to?” Izzy asked, tasking me to select a destination I desired.

“The future,” I replied.

“Amen to that,” my Mother agreed.

“The future it is,” Izzy smiled at me through her rearview mirror and pulled away from the curb like the future was located at exit 39B off the 110.

We rode in silence toward a stoplight, where Sunol incontinent with her thoughts needed a more concrete waypoint.

“Yea just to be clear, I’d really like the immediate future to involve IHop.”

The End and ever after