

It's Hard to Say

A novel by Blake Chasen

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Introduction

Blake Chasen

In the Summer of 2014, I read Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* and fell in love with the main character Larry Darrell, who gives up his traditional life in pursuit of some higher truth. I started reading a lot of Eastern religious literature; researching Buddhism and Hinduism because Larry had been interested in that as well. What happened when I started that research is what drove me to write my novel titled *It's Hard to Say*.

In my research, I read reports of Hindus who'd had dreams in which they were not themselves. In those dreams, they were other people in other time periods who experienced unique circumstances that could possibly explain phobias and nervousnesses that the actual people were having in their present lives. Shortly after that, I started having those same dreams!

First it was the 1970s or 1980s, and I was the son of the basketball coach at Cabrini College, a small Division 3 school outside of Philadelphia. My dad and I were on the road, recruiting a highschooler in New Jersey, and I was as happy as I imagined I'd ever be. I was only ten or eleven, but I already knew that I loved Division 3 basketball. Maybe that's why I, Blake Chasen, was oddly drawn to the Division 3 game growing up. Next, I was a drug addict in Queens who owed his dealer too much money. I couldn't come up with the cash and after begging for mercy the dealer still stabbed me over and over in the area around my rib cage. I thought maybe that was the explanation for why I, Blake Chasen, hate being touched on my torso.

I began wondering about a character who was down in the dumps: he landed a bad job after college and his love life was floundering. I wondered how that character

might react to a string of weird dreams when he was someone else, especially if that someone else was living a life of which to be jealous. What if my character had wanted to be a writer, and he started having dreams in which he was a best-seller who was living in a romantic European town to find inspiration for his next story?

I let that character, a Georgetown graduate named Tom who was working as an assistant manager at a Cheesecake Factory back home, take me on his journey which was heavily influenced by Maugham's novel *The Razor's Edge*. Tom started dreaming of an author named Nicholas who implicitly urged him to leave his hometown to find himself in the Himalaya Mountains.

I expected to follow Tom through a *Razor's-Edge*-esque journey. I thought that I was going to write my own version of Maugham's story. Instead, however, the more that I followed Tom through India the more I realized that I was writing my own story. I realized that Tom's story wasn't about Larry Darrell or Somerset Maugham at all. Throughout my writing, I learned that Tom's story was about me. He was about my process and about the things that I cared about. He was a character that I looked up to in the way that Maugham admired Larry. Tom led me to find my own beliefs about life on Earth and after death. The more I wrote, the more I realized what it was that I believed. My novel, driven by character and plot, had become a place where I'd actually processed all of the reading and research that I had done about Eastern religions. Tom's journey let me find my own belief about the self both before and after death.

After learning these things about myself, I found only one choice on what to title my novel: *It's Hard to Say*.

It's Hard to Say

Blake Chasen

PART 1

1.

What's linear is direct and sequential; stimulus prompts reaction, a cause and effect. Conversely, in an uncontrolled environment triggers are discontinuous, alternates must fill the gaps. These alternatives, so often parallel but dissimilar, are simultaneous actions, journeys, choices that lurk just beyond perception and consciousness.

Say a man enters a room with two unmarked doors across a long and narrow hall. Say that door one will lead the man to each of his dreams whatever they may be and door two – the identically marked door two – will give the man a life of obscurity and unhappiness. To say that whatever hides behind door number one is beautiful and that whatever follows number two is cruelty is wrong! It's wrong just for the sole reason that if there was not a second door, there could be no first. For the first door to be appreciated as it stands alone, or rather for the gift behind it to be celebrated, a man must be nearsighted and a bit indolent. Rather the two doors, or the ten doors, or the infinite, and each path that each one uncovers ought to be accepted and acclaimed because it is the connection between each that makes any worth while.

There have been men who have argued before, that each of those infinite doors cannot be opened, that each path cannot be walked. To that, I laugh along side those men and say of course. But to argue that those paths can't be imagined, can't be understood, and that a man can't learn from them is to argue that thinking is fruitless, that imagination is

inexistent, and that one always, without fail, sleeps through the night without a single thought or what one might call a *dream*.

If I told you right now that I *know* I'm not crazy, would you believe me? Well, I don't know. You have no reason not to, you don't know me. I've given you no reason to think that I've got anything wrong. But, of course, if I have to ask the question, well maybe that'd make a skeptic out of you. I'll tell you anyway: *I'm not crazy*. Listen to my story, and I think you'll agree. I'm just a kid from Missouri who was supposed to live in middle America's middle class. I was born to a fine path. But I was given an interesting twist.

Maybe I'd be crazy if I'd manufactured this whole thing myself. However, if you can do one thing for me, keep in mind that there was always something more to this whole thing. Through all of my doubt, through all of my worry and reservation, there was always something that pushed me forward. Should I call that thing desire or faith? Maybe some might call it insanity, and that's what I'm telling you it's not. I think, if I'm going to be honest from the jump, that thing by my side was *God*.

At this point, I feel it's safe to say that I need this as much as you do. You'll enjoy my story and maybe it'll change your outlook on a few things, but that's not my goal. In fact I have no goal: I must tell this sto-

ry, I need to. I need to get it out, need to figure it all out. So without further adieu, we might as well start at the beginning.

Like everyday, the smell of day old dessert welcomed me when I pushed open the heavy double doors into the Cheesecake Factory an hour before the wait staff would arrive. The heels of my Sperry boat shoes tapped against the faux-marble floor, and I slung my briefcase strap across my shoulder. God, I thought to myself, this bullshit wasn't in the job description.

Underneath the glass display sat old, putrid slices of dairy- Oreo Dream, White Chocolate Raspberry, *Not-so-Fresh* Banana Cream. I scooped the pieces on their platters out of the display and frisbeed them into a trashcan. Nearly half a year into my working career, the memory of my first day on the job as assistant manager, when I tried a piece of Dulce de Leche during the morning clean up, made me gag. I'd taken a plastic fork from behind the counter and eaten just a sliver of the creamy cake. It hadn't smelled so bad, but boy I could have never known how the smell of semi-spoiled dairy could be masked by factory-made, always seemingly fresh, sweet cream.

I held my breath as I disposed of the last of the old cheesecake and leapt through the metal swinging doors that led to the kitchen. Gasping for air, I smelled, the tuna and roast beef that would pace the lunch

hours. Compared to the old cheesecake, however, it smelled like Thanksgiving dinner. It was fresh, refrigerated.

Walking down the kitchen aisle, I did a maintenance check of our brunch ingredients. Any cracked eggs? No. The bacon too brown? Not *too* brown. Do the tomatoes display the same characteristics of that one which had the family of flies living in it? Not quite.

When I finally made it to my office, across the hall from the ladies' room, I dropped into my desk chair and examined my brownbag lunch. Peanut butter and jelly on whole wheat. People were always amazed when I told them that I packed my own lunch to work at the Cheesecake Factory. Well, they hadn't seen what I'd seen.

That job wasn't what I expected to end up with after I left Missouri for Georgetown University. It was not what I wanted, but it's what I had. Was it below my intelligence level? Absolutely. But did it give me the opportunity to make money when so many of my peers could not? Yes. And the money mattered so much more to me than did the stigma of working a lackluster job with little to no emotional or moral fulfillment.

Believe it or not, it's still easy to recall the excitement that I'd once had to start the job. I *really* wanted to get paid. However, within a year of leaving college I had decided that taking the job in St. Louis would come down as the biggest mistake I'd ever made. Do not let me fool you

though: it was simultaneously the catalyst of the biggest gift anyone could receive, but for now that is beside the point.

I feel comfortable telling you, at this point, that this story is not one about corporate restaurant management- don't worry. I hope I don't bore you with some details of a few of the months that I spent as an assistant manager at the Cheesecake Factory- and in many ways I know I won't. After all, you do need a bit of background. If I jumped right into my story exactly where I wish I could, you might not understand exactly what was at stake for me, for us. You've got to get to know my life in Missouri so that you can feel what I felt and understand why it's this very story that I must tell.

My parents, my teachers, my high school friends had all been so excited for the opportunities that I had in front of me when I left for Washington. *Your life is unfolding before your eyes.*

My father, an unpolished man who gave compliments few and far between, had bragged about me to every customer who walked into his convenience store on Ridgemoor Drive. "I want him to study economics so he can own a small business like his old man!" he said, "But he just cares about people too damn much. Going to be studying health policy, right boy?"

Right dad, I said a million times, feigning smiles to the chain smokers that were coming in for another pack and a honeybun. Health policy, I couldn't stand to tell my dad, was in the School of Nursing at Georgetown, and it would only be my major because it was the only program I could have possibly gotten into. After one look at the brochure that Georgetown recruiters left in my high school's college counseling office, I knew it was the place for me. The trees, the canal, the brick sidewalks, not to mention the proximity to all of the political drama that I watched so intently on television. And of course, being in a city where the other major university was nicknamed "Georgetown Waitlist" wouldn't hurt my ego one bit.

Now I wouldn't go as far to say I was a promising student in high school. I can admit that I was lucky to get into a school like Georgetown since I had applied for all of the wrong reasons. I wasn't sure what I'd do with my life and I often found myself wishing that my dad or his dad had made millions in the stock market so that I could afford to be a novelist. Alas, that path was not for me, and I knew sooner or later I was going to have to make some money.

Until that time came, I wouldn't leave Georgetown except for coming home for two days at Christmas in the winter of my freshman year. I chose to stay in D.C. for the next three winters because I hated airports, having to line up for an hour just to take my shoes off and then wait in

another line just to sit down for three hours in a seat that hurt my ass. My only other alternative was riding a bus for twenty hours that felt like twenty days. That sounded almost as bad as waiting in the airport.

I lived in campus housing, and because of a lucky draw at the housing lottery, my room was just off M street, above a cupcake shop, my junior and senior years. That's where I met Stacy. She was from Philadelphia and had gone to some famous high school. Germantown Academy. She worked in the Ralph Lauren store a block off M street and I had a habit of bumping into her, quite literally, on the way back from the library almost every night. She locked the front door at the same exact time that I would be rocking out to whatever was playing through my headphones, not looking in any particular direction. Then *smack* I'd walk right into her and we'd both fall to the sidewalk.

After the third or fourth time, she looked me up and down and asked, "are you doing this on purpose?" to which I said, "No I just have a habit of walking with my head down, sorry." to which she replied, "Well I think since this is the third or fourth time you've done this, you may owe me a drink."

We went out that weekend to a bar called Rhino because she had just turned twenty-one and getting passed the bouncer was the ultimate coming-of-age experience. The exact events of that first night don't necessarily matter, and I don't fully remember them anyway. I just know that after that night with Stacy, I told my roommate Richard that she

was the girl I would marry. All I could think about was her light brown hair - the way she wore it across her shoulders - and her light green eyes that shimmered every time she smiled.

I told Richard about how Stacy and I had talked about health policy until I was sufficiently drunk and let slip that I couldn't care less about the subject and that I really would much rather study creative writing. Her eyes grew, she put her hand on my knee and then told me that she hoped to teach at a small New England boarding school one day to fund her love for poetry. She was studying English. There are really nice private schools in Missouri, I mentioned, but she ignored that comment as it was either too soon or over her head.

Stacy and I continued to see each other somewhat regularly, thinking nothing serious about our relationship until on a random Thursday evening we realized that we had spent the last twelve nights together at her place. From there, twelve nights became twenty, and twenty became forty with me meeting her parents over brunch at the Peacock Cafe on a Sunday morning after we finally had sex.

Senior spring rolled around, and with graduation looming, Stacy and I didn't have jobs. The New England boarding schools were not looking for teachers without Master's degrees and I couldn't get an email back from a single think tank, nonprofit, or NGO. I guessed it was my because of grades- my C+ average didn't jump of the page, so to speak.

My impending unemployment could have also had to do with the way I reached out to companies, however:

“Hi, my name is Tom Tibbult and I major in Health Policy at Georgetown University. I have no experience in the field, but I am a decently hard worker and might like to learn more about your business,” I wrote to various companies, “If you’re looking for a new employee who knows basic Microsoft programs and can type almost sixty words per minute, I’m the man for the job!” *I didn’t want a job.*

On a Sunday morning in early May, in a panic, I accepted a job to be the assistant manager at The Cheesecake Factory in St. Louis, fifteen minutes from where I grew up. Up to this point, I had already received a few notices in the mail about programs to pay off student loans, but nothing hit home quite as hard as, *Attention! If you don’t pay off your student loans you can end up in jail... or dead.*

An exaggeration, sure, but then the more I thought about it I realized that I could end up in jail next to John Coffey in *The Green Mile* or maybe even in a ditch. I’m not sure which would be worse. As soon as I read that notice, I called Mr. Moriarty, a friend of a family friend, at The Cheesecake Factory and asked him if he had any openings in management for a Georgetown grad. Fortunately, their last assistant manager had just been fired for taste testing the cheesecakes every afternoon with his index finger.

Stacy, however reluctant she was to come to Missouri instead of the Northeast, accepted a position to teach English at St. Louis University High School. She had grown up Catholic and been confirmed, so the Jesuit tradition at University High fit perfectly. Her parents were proud that she had followed her faith to Georgetown and now again in her professional life.

Faith was something that Stacy and I rarely talked about. She had firm beliefs, and I didn't really have any. One night, very early in our relationship, over a Chinese food, she asked me why I had never talked about my religious upbringing when she had told me so much about her church, her priest, and all of her mission trips throughout high school. I lied and said that I just didn't have much to say, that I'd had a very standard Christian upbringing and that it was pretty much what she could expect. Apparently that answer was enough for her.

I hoped it never came up again because the truth was that my parents, born Jewish, never pushed religion on to me. I played football in high school and my parents worshipped the Friday night lights more than the Friday night Sabbath. The only confirmation I ever went through was when my dad asked, on my fourteenth birthday, to confirm that I was straight.

Right after we got our diplomas, we packed up Stacy's Volkswagen Jetta and went west. I was sad to leave D.C. and was scared to be thrown

back into my parents' world, so as Stacy drove on interstate-70 I felt as if an invisible magnet in the midwest was attracting the car and there was nothing I could do to combat its pull. I distinctly remember getting out of the car at a rest stop near Pittsburgh and feeling in my thighs that I had just gone for a long run. Later I realized that I had been pushing my legs against the passenger side floor mat probably in some sort of attempt to slow the trip.

For a long while, things in St. Louis went just fine. The Cheesecake Factory was all right. It was monotonous but I had quickly come to find solace in seeing a lot of my Georgetown classmates on LinkedIn still searching for jobs, when I had a steady paycheck coming every other Friday. Stacy and my mother got along surprisingly well. Stacy began teaching summer school at University High the week that we got to Missouri, and every Thursday during those months my mom met her after school at the farmer's market down on Macklind Avenue. Somehow, like only women can, they bonded over a faux-love for pseudo-wild blueberries that they found at the market. I think both of them had to know that neither one actually gave a shit about the berries, but it gave them a chance to share a common bond. I didn't get it but if it worked, it worked.

I had even begun to grow out of my fear of subjecting Stacy to my dad for more than a few hours. He wasn't dangerous by any means. He just used to be a bit rough around the edges. In moving back to St. Louis, I was happy to discover that in his older age, my dad had grown a bit

tamer. He still made comments about Stacy's yoga pants from time to time or asked her to pick the remote up off the floor when it was well within his own reach, but nothing was as bad as some of his old antics-if they could even be called that.

When I was a freshman in high school, I invited a girl over for dinner one night. I had an idea to ask her to be my date to the homecoming dance, but my plans were foiled when, through a mouth full of Brussels sprouts, my dad said, "Hey Tom this one's not much better looking than the one last week!" as he pointed at her with his fork. She was polite enough to sit through the rest of the meal, but that was the last time we had any extended interaction outside of an assigned group for a project on Susan B. Anthony in U.S. History a few years later.

Through that first fall back in St. Louis, things were mostly well for the Tibbults. Dad's convenience store had won a critical "turf war" against Seven Eleven, we were hitting every monthly goal at the Factory, as I had come to call it, and my mom and Stacy kept on buying up every carton of blueberries they could get their hands on.

Stacy's poetry, which she wrote in her free time between classes and at night, was published a few times in the Missouri Review. However, every time she reached out to a publisher to talk about publishing her work in a unique collection, she was shot down. "You've got talent," they all said, "It's just that the only poetry books that anyone wants to buy is

Shel Silverstein stuff. No one can top that so we don't want to waste our money."

She would get a rejection letter back once a week, and she took each one as if it was the first. She'd bawl and then she'd grit her teeth and say she would be back with a vengeance. And so every week, when the rejections would come in, I did what I thought any boyfriend ought to do and bought her flowers at the Whole Foods down the street. Strangely enough, the orchids, geraniums, lilies, roses, whatever-the-hell-was-on-sales- none of them made her smile.

One Thursday around Halloween, Stacy didn't come home from the Farmer's market. When I started to worry, my phone rang. It was my mother.

"Great news, Tom! There was a new guy down on Macklind Avenue who was selling pumpkins. He had part of a Walt Whitman quote tattooed on his forearm. Stacy noticed it and finished the line as he was rearranging his pumpkins. This guy- and trust me Tom he doesn't look like a poet- started talking about poetry. He recited something he had just written about his father's alcoholism. Then, Stacy recited one of her more recent poems, the one about her sister, and now they're sitting down for coffee to talk about a joint venture."

"What do you mean a joint venture? Who is this guy?" I asked, perplexed about why my mother was delivering this information instead

of Stacy. What the hell was she doing having coffee with a guy that had Whitman on his arm. Probably something in Helvetica like, *I too am untranslatable*.

“I don’t know. That’s what he kept calling it. Something about an internet series he’s been working on. He thinks she could be a big hit. She told me to call you because her phone is dead and she suggested that you get dinner on your own tonight.”

“Got it,” I replied, “What exactly does she want with this guy?”

“Oh come on, Tom!” My mother must have sensed my jealous suspicion; “She’s your girlfriend so just be happy for her. He’s helping her with her passion, not trying to *fuck* her!”

“Mom!” I distanced myself from the phone and then lied as much to myself as I was to her, “I just don’t want her to get caught up in some scam.”

“The guy seems like a real straight shooter.” *Great.*

Around ten o’clock, I was reading in bed and Stacy came through the bedroom door. “Did your mom call you?” she asked, smiling and holding a foreign manila folder.

“Yeah she did. Long time getting coffee. Who is this guy?” I wanted to seem sincere and I surprised myself with what a bad job I had done.

“Please Tom! He’s a really nice guy. His name is Ryan Connelly, and he played six games for the Eagles back in 2011. It’s such a crazy coincidence. My dad loved this guy when he was playing linebacker, and

then half way through his rookie year he tore his ACL. It's a shame because he was big time in Philadelphia. They called him Barbie because he has this long blonde hair, but my dad used to always say he hit a whole lot harder than a little doll in high heels. It turns out that he was born around here and he's back for good, tending a few different bars and writing poetry. He mentioned today that he was an academic all-American in creative writing at Missouri while he was playing there."

"Sounds like an asshole," I said,

"Don't be a jerk," Stacy replied, "He wants to help me."

"How? What can a bartender do? I've fired four of them in the last three months."

"He still has a huge following from his days as a football player and he does this web series on slam poetry. He wants me to review some of his own poetry and then prepare five minutes of my own work to recite on his next episode."

"Got it. Well I hope it all works out," I said smugly and rolled over in bed.

That night something weird happened. For the first time in my life, I wasn't myself in a dream. I'd be understating the entire scene if I even called it peculiar.

I sat on an old porch with large, snowcapped mountains looming above, their bases just a few hundred yards away. I was chilly in just a

washed blue tee shirt, but comfortable. I sipped on red wine in a stemless glass, and used it as a weight to hold a stack of at least a hundred pages on the table in front of me.

Someone joined me on the porch through large French doors behind me. “Bonjour monsieur, vous aimez la Suisse à ce jour?” I turned around to see a curvy girl of about twenty-two carrying a tray of different cheeses. I knew she was about ten years younger than myself, and I had just recently met her. I had not slept with her.

“Oui, I like it a lot so far,” I replied as she put the tray down in front of me.

“You like to ski?” she asked in a thick French accent as she refilled my wine glass.

“No, just to look at the mountains and to write,” I said.

“To write,” she giggled in her thick accent, “On ne peut à la fois être sincère et le paraître.” She twisted her brown hair and went back into the house.

I watched her go back inside and work in the small kitchen. The countertops were a smooth marble and the floors were old, uneven boards that had a certain European charm to them. She took the pits out of cherries and then mashed the small fruits. Every so often she looked out the window and giggled as we made eye contact.

The house was three stories tall, and I was sitting on a deck off of the second floor. My bedroom, which I wasn’t paying for, was on the third

floor. I remembered, as I watched the young girl mash more cherries, that my friend Lauren from back in London had set me up to live in this house in Zermatt as I tried to finish my next novel. I had been experiencing a bit of writer's block at home and she suggested that I go stay with one of her friends. She had met the young girl, whose name I now remembered was Alice, when the two of them had studied abroad at the Sorbonne. Lauren, who was privy to much of my private life, recommended Zermatt for the scenery and because Alice might get my mind off of a fresh breakup.

At seven o'clock my alarm went off. Stacy's back was towards me and she was wrapped in our sheets like they were a cocoon. She grunted and stuffed her cheek into her pillow, the rising sun illuminating her face. It shouldn't have reminded me of Whitman but it did. *Keep your face always toward the sunshine.* I read a lot of Whitman in high school, and now it was coming back to bite me. I walked to the kitchen and started to make toast. We hadn't done the dishes last night, so I buttered my toast right on the counter. The plastic tops contrasted with the marble from my dream, and I remembered Alice.

It was so strange, how vivid that dream had been. I felt as if I had really been there. Nothing was dreamlike in the sense that nothing was fuzzy- there wasn't any spillover from my real life into the dream. It wasn't like any dream I had ever had before.

As a kid, I had a specific dream every few months that I was trying to climb a snow-covered mountain that hung in the sky. My feet kept slipping, and finally I would lose my grip all together, slide down the face of the mountain and fall through the sky. I would land on whatever had been bothering me at the time: Jay Simons making out with Carrie Archibald when I wanted to take Carrie to the dance or maybe my parents throwing forks and spoons at each other from across the kitchen. In those dreams, I was always myself and my real-world problems were always at the center of it all.

As I ate my toast and poured myself a glass of orange juice, I wondered what my dream had meant. In a psychology class at Georgetown, I had learned of dreams where people felt like they were invisible, watching others play out a scene. Something like watching an interrogation through a one way mirror. However, I had never learned anything about someone being an entirely different person in a dream.

I hadn't been myself in a different body or in a different time period. I had been another man. I, Tom, myself, took Spanish through high school, never a lick of French, but I had understood Alice when she spoke to me on that Swiss porch. I can't tell you what she said now, but in the moment it was normal. I wondered about Alice all the way to work.

Business was slow at lunch, a rarity. It made my job a lot easier. I walked by the four or five tables that were dining and thanked our pa-

trons for choosing the Cheesecake Factory. I told them how I hoped they'd come back soon, and really meant it- we had been the top dog of the St. Louis restaurant scene since I had taken over as assistant manager, and that would help me when it came time to ask Mr. Moriarty for a raise.

In between the lunch and dinner crowds, I sat in my office and went through my normal day-to-day operations. First I balled up pieces of paper and shot them into the trashcan. Then I leaned back in my chair until the back wall behind my desk was the only thing that saved me from crashing onto the floor. Afterwards, I looked up how the Georgetown basketball team was playing, but there was a pop-up looking for donations for the football team, which reminded me of Ryan Connelly. I looked him up online. His backstory checked out just fine- academic all-American at Missouri, eleven tackles per game for the Tigers and then a third round draft pick for the Eagles before tearing his ACL six games in- never seeing a penny from his rookie contract. Poetry major at Missouri and damn those long blonde locks.

At four o'clock, Mr. Moriarty stopped by to drop off paychecks. I had forgotten it was payday, a pleasant surprise.

"Tom, how's my best assistant manager doing today?" he said as he shut my office door.

"Doing well, Mr. Moriarty. Lunch was slow but we're expecting a big dinner rush. We've got private parties booked for eight and nine."

“That’s just great. Let me tell you something, Tom. In all the years I’ve owned franchises, you’re the youngest assistant manager I’ve ever had, and you’re doing a great job. Have I told you that?”

As a matter of fact, he told me that same damn thing every single time he came into the restaurant, and it never got old. I just smiled and nodded. Smiles, nods, and happy customer reviews were my three pillars to a raise. “As a matter of fact, I think you have,” I smiled.

“Well great. Keep up this work, and at the end of the month I’m going to have a nice bonus for you. I sure am happy we stole you from all those health policy organizations in D.C. that had to be bidding over you,” he patted me on the back as he handed me my paycheck.

“I’m happy to be here, Mr. Moriarty,” I wasn’t necessarily lying in that moment. I was always happy to be at work when I got paid.

At seven o’clock I left work, leaving my assistant manager to handle the private parties. I called Stacy and told her to meet me downtown for drinks and dinner. She was finishing up some poetry and would be right there. She couldn’t wait, she said.

There was one thing Ryan Connelly’s biceps and triceps and shoulders couldn’t compete with and that was an assistant manager’s salary. I knew what the standard was for bartenders in St. Louis and he didn’t pose a threat to buy Stacy away from me. Again, all was right in the world. God bless Moriarty.

When Stacy walked into the bar at the Gateway Inn with that six foot four inch hulk, I felt my knees knock into themselves. I saw the two of them before they saw me, and I leaned against the bar to brace myself. The only way I could possibly describe him was *massive*, but massive in the way like a tractor-trailer is as it flies by you on a downhill- loud, fast, something I wouldn't want to be in front of. He wore a faded green tee shirt that fit snug around his chest and arms. It had an old Philadelphia Eagles logo in the center of the shirt, the wings of the bird stretched out across his pectoral muscles that had a definition I had only ever seen in superhero cartoons. His dirty blonde hair fell onto his shoulders like thin strands of gold that framed his narrow cheeks. His chin was powerful, almost as big as my fist, and his jaw line made me wonder if God actually used a chisel.

Stacy, at the center of the bar, spotted me on the far side and motioned for Connelly to follow her. She leaned against me and put her cheek to mine as she made a pronounced kissing noise that had a certain annoyance which no one else had ever seemed to notice.

"Hey babe," she said, "I was working on my slam with Ryan and thought I should bring him by to meet you."

I just smiled, a wise decision as I had a knack for epic voice-cracks at the worst moments dating back to my eighth grade graduation speech. Connelly, a few steps behind Stacy, stretched out his arm. His forearm looked as big as my thigh, his hand completely enveloped mine.

“Great to meet you,” he said, flashing a set of white teeth.

“You too. How are you?” I managed, looking up at him.

“Great. Just great. You’ve got a talented girl here, man,” he said as he patted her on the back, a jovial pat that I hoped was nothing more than friendly.

We ordered drinks at the bar. Stacy got a cosmopolitan, her usual, Connelly ordered a Moscow mule, and I did the same. He was a drinker’s caricature. He grabbed the cup in his bear-like paw, took it down like a shot of liquor, and clanged the empty copper against the bar as he exhaled contently. “Another mule!” he called, amused, and Stacy laughed.

“So, Ryan, tell Tom about your time on the Eagles,” she said.

“It was so poetic man,” he said, looking up at the stained glass chandelier above us. “Just the beginning of things, and the end of things so close together. The pleasure and the pain. God’s green light and the sound of a dove when it realizes its caged for good.” I looked at Stacy for guidance. She just smiled at him so I took a long sip from my drink.

“Are you talking about getting hurt?” I asked.

“Exactly, man. The physical injury is so obvious, but that emotional strain,” he took a deep breath, “you feel that too?”

I looked back to Stacy but she was turned around and standing on her toes, leaning over the bar and talking to the bartender about how to make a cosmopolitan, I gathered. Her cheeks were red, so he must have made it strong and she wanted to know how something so strong could

still taste so good. The bartender was waving different bottles in the air and using his index and middle fingers to show her how much of each. I couldn't stand to be alone with Connelly. "I hope you'll excuse me to the bathroom," I said. He winked as he inhaled the contents out of another copper cup.

I bought myself time in the bathroom by staring into the mirror. My reflection, partially blocked by the large *fuck* scratched into the glass, was so common. Short brown hair with brown eyes and a tired brown scruff growing on my cheeks, chin, and above my lip. I looked like a god-damn assistant manager. I wondered what had happened. Where had I gone wrong? How did I end up in a bar in Missouri with my girlfriend talking to two men, neither of whom were myself?

I ran the faucet and splashed warm water onto my face. I dabbed myself with paper towels until I was dry. Still, I wasn't fresh. I looked deep into the mirror, into my eyes. I saw Alice, looking back at me, saying something in a thick French accent – you like to ski? Giggling back at me as I stared at her. She was mashing cherries, looking out the window, caring for me. Whoever *me* was.

I nudged open the wooden bathroom door and exited back out into the bar area. Connelly, with his tight shirt and tight jeans and fabric boots was dancing alone. Stacy watched him from a table that she had moved to. I sat down next to her.

“This is going to be a great partnership, don’t you think?” she said as Connelly pulled an older woman’s hat off of her head and slipped it right above his eyes. He took a big step back and threw an invisible lasso around her. She chuckled and stepped towards him. I rolled my eyes and Stacy laughed heartily.

The three of us ate dinner around nine o’clock when Connelly was done dancing, and then Stacy and I went home. When we got back to the apartment, Stacy got in the bathtub so I laid down on the couch to watch TV. Missouri was playing Tennessee in basketball, but it wasn’t close. I dozed off.

Almost immediately I was back in Switzerland looking into a journal. I held a fountain pen and had almost filled the entire notebook with a looping print in black ink. I wrote about the mountains that I’d been admiring. *The Alps, I believe, are a proof of God. They are the result of His handiwork, a molding that He has left to remind us of His power.*

Alice came into the sitting room in a white cotton shirt and satin pants. Her hair was in a bun. We had spent the evening talking about my family, my mother and my father, before she retired momentarily for a shower. Now, I noticed that her toenails were freshly painted black. My mother, named Elaine, had been a famous British painter who died shortly after I was born. It was an unknown illness, which they later determined was an exceptionally rare form of Leukemia. She had always

worn black polish on her nails. One of the only things I remembered about my mother were her hands, painting on a canvas in her studio. She was a modernist who had been recognized by the Queen, in younger age, for her ability to seamlessly bring a new-aged painting style to a country rich in tradition.

Alice curled into a chair and let her feet drape over onto the armrest of the couch that I was propping myself up onto. She wriggled her toes between my cheek and my shoulder, a gesture that threw me since I had only known her for a few days. Her feet were soft and smelled like vanilla and nail-polish. I looked back to her and she had a bound book in her lap that she was drawing inside of. She turned the page towards me revealed the beginning - but a clear vision - of the Matterhorn.

“Mont Cervin,” she smiled as she brushed my cheek with her black toes.

“Oui,” I said turning back to my notebook.

“You like it?” she asked.

“It reminds me of my parents,” I said. My mother loved mountains and had met my father on a hike in Colorado. They had been in their twenties when they both independently traveled to the United States. They had both flown into New York City, not on the same flight but around the same time. Of course, they missed each other in the big city, but both of them decided to deviate from their plans that would send them from New York to Boston to Chicago, et cetera. Rather they both

went to Colorado - my father flying and my mother hitchhiking - and they met in some chic mountain town, either Vail or Aspen. I suppose it was love from there because what are the odds that you find another Brit your age, who travels to the United States at the same time as you, that skips the major cities to go hiking out west.

When she got out of the bath, Stacy woke me up. It was late, and I wasn't sure what I should say to her about these different things that were happening to me- Ryan Connelly and the dream. The dream was so strange. I had been confused when I had the first one. It was odd how clear I was thinking in the dream, noticing minute details like the texture of the mashed cherries. What alarmed me about the second dream was, well, that it was the second dream. The setting, Alice, the situation, it all remained the same. In fact, it grew on itself. I felt as if the dream was a portal through which I was momentarily entering into a different body. The story continued without me. It was clear that the other person I *was* had further developed his relationship while I was awake. Had it advanced in my subconscious? I had heard in college that the human mind was capable of creating and advancing elaborate scenes even when a person wasn't actively thinking about it.

Stacy got in bed and turned the light out. I leaned back on the couch and continued to think about the dream. I debated whether or not I should talk to someone about this, maybe a psychologist. I wanted

guidance. The muted TV flashed the nightly news, a death downtown—possibly homicide. There had been one last week but there was no relation.

Almost before I even realized that I was dozing back off, I was on the second floor porch in Switzerland, a warm night. Alice's black toes were propped on the wooden table that held a tray of cheese and two glasses of a red wine from the other side of the Alps, Italy.

"Take me out tonight, Nicholas," Alice said. I recognized my name.

"Where do people go in this mountain town," I laughed, "it's not like I can take you into the West end of London."

"The Hotel Pollux," she smiled as she brought her wine glass to her mouth, "my sister used to work there in the winters when we came here to ski. We can dance there."

"I'm not much of a dancer," I conceded.

"I'll make you one," she winked.

It was strange to me how much I was attracted to her. She did not fit the build of the women I had gone for in the past. She was much younger than me. I was used to an older woman. But when Alice let her hair down, those brown rings fell past her shoulders and onto the beginning of her breasts, I was intrigued.

"We'll see," I said, smiling at her. She thought she held the cards with my staying at her apartment, in her town, in her country. But I knew that my age provided me with a significantly larger advantage. That

was not even to mention my status as a writer, which I knew was in my favor with a girl like Alice. A girl like Alice, as in one who had read my first book. I noticed it tucked between two others on a bookshelf in her room when she had first showed me the apartment. "I'll change my shirt and take you out."

She jumped out of her chair, "I need a bra. We'll leave in ten minutes." I loved her French accent, the way she took her time on every syllable.

2.

I woke up on the couch, and the clock read five o'clock. I couldn't fall back asleep. I felt dual emotions. I missed Alice. I was furious that I'd woken up because we had plans to go out. But I felt guilty, an overwhelming guilt that I had nearly cheated on Stacy. I must be a good guy, and a bit crazy I thought, if I felt bad for having a dream about another woman *in which I was another man*. Lying on the couch, I remembered a story that Stacy had told me about her ex-boyfriend. About two months before I first knocked Stacy over on M Street, she had broken up with a guy named Phil who studied International Affairs at George Washington. She'd met him at a fraternity function.

For a while, during their relationship, she would often sleep over at his place, an apartment on F Street. When things started to go south, she would sleepover but leave his room and sleep on the couch after he

fell asleep. In the mornings, when he found her there, she would say that at some point in the middle of the night she couldn't sleep so she moved out onto the couch. He was dumb enough to believe it and blind enough, apparently, to be caught off guard when she finally ended it.

No matter how surprised he was, he bounced back quickly. I'd met him once at a bar when he confronted Stacy shortly after she and I began going out. He was there with a slutty blonde who I'd seen at parties. She wore a cut off shirt revealing a bellybutton ring, a skirt too short for the weather, and knee-high black leather boots. She had pink lip-gloss that turned me on in a way that I felt wrong about.

The night I met him, he said something to Stacy in front of me like, "I don't care if his diploma does say Georgetown- Health Policy doesn't touch GW's International Affairs." She told him that she preferred nice men to immature ones with difficult majors. Then she told him to fuck off in as few words.

I sat forward on the couch and wondered how we were back at this point with reversed roles. Here I was, sleeping on the couch, scared but still preferring a strange dream to my reality. Stacy was in the bedroom acting like there was no issue between us. Was she as oblivious as Phil had been? Maybe she knew. Maybe Phil had seen it coming all along and just played dumb when it finally happened. And then there was Connelly, who seemed to be a dumbass, but could possibly be a nice guy who

deserved Stacy like I once had. He had the bravery to commit to a career in creative arts that I didn't. Connelly wouldn't have sold out to the Cheesecake Factory.

I wondered about the universe for a moment, how funny it was that we, pieces on a chessboard, switched roles with such ease. But as I heard the alarm go off in the bedroom, I quickly transitioned to thinking about work. I had hardly slept. It would be an annoying day, but Mr. Moriarty would be at the restaurant to oversee new-hire training. I would have an opportunity to make another move towards a pay raise.

When I walked through the front doors of the Factory, I nearly bumped into the group of new-hires that were listening intently to something Mr. Moriarty was saying about our *proprietary cheesecake baking process* which didn't apply to any of them, as they were all to join the wait staff.

"Tom, Thomas my boy! Would you like to welcome the finest crop of new hires we've had in a good while," he exclaimed as he saw me.

I was embarrassed to be put on the spot like that, but in line with my professional creed - *if Moriarty says it, I do it* – I stepped in front of the group. "Welcome everyone," I eyed the new crop: two young men who, by the look of them, were students at St. Louis University, a large woman of about forty who I would not be putting in charge of cheesecake delivery for fear that she would eat an entire cake, and then a petit young

woman that I would have called a butter face in college because every one of her features was nice, but her face. She made long, lingering, eye contact that I still felt after looking away. I told the new crop how excited I was to add them to an already outstanding staff.

Life went on fine at work for the next few days. The new hires did a fine job. I spied the bigger waitress eating leftovers off of plates returned by the busboys, but I never scolded her about it. If she wanted to snack like that, I'd let her. It was better than having our fresh products tasted.

The boys from the university did a fine job. Some evenings when they clocked in they smelled like weed, but by the time they reached the tables they were totally fine. I was okay with whatever they wanted to do as long as it didn't affect their work.

And then there was the petit waitress. She was doing alright. She dropped plates here and there, sometimes she leaned down on tables like they teach at Hooters. For the most part, however, she had handled herself like a true Cheesecake Factory professional. We hadn't had any real problems with her, and I hadn't experienced any uncomfortable eye contact like that first day.

At the beginning the new hires' second week, a few hours before some private parties were supposed to arrive, the petit new waitress passed by my office door. Then, about a minute later she passed by

again. It happened three or four more times before I stopped her and said, "Excuse me! Can I help you with something?"

"No, not really," she said as she poked her head into my office, "but boy is this a big space. You must be very good at your job to have an office this big and to have so much responsibility." I couldn't tell if she was mocking me or not. I gave her the benefit of the doubt.

"We work hard here, myself included," I replied.

She inched closer to my desk, "Mind if I ask you a few questions now that I've stumbled into your office?"

"Go right ahead."

She pulled out a chair but pushed it to the side as she leaned over my desk. She wore her standard white oxford uniform liberally, with an extra button undone, I could see the white lace of her bra. "My name's Becca," she started, "and I want you to tell me about the protocol for employee hook-ups."

I was taken aback. We'd never had an employee relationship before. I wondered if she'd been put up to this task by Mr. Moriarty to test how I would respond to such a question. I didn't think that Moriarty would operate like that, but if he wanted to then I was game to prove to him that I could handle anything.

"Well, we've never had a situation like that arise," I said, "but I imagine we would simply ask the two employees to formally declare their relationship to corporate headquarters, as most companies would re-

quire.” I smiled up at her proudly, suspecting that she would show a sign of disappointment that her question had not had a more striking impact on me. “Is there someone at the restaurant you’ve had a relationship with?” I regretted adding immediately after the words left my mouth.

“No one I’ve had a relationship with *yet*, but someone I’m interested in,” she said as she pulled on the bottom of her shirt to tuck it into her skirt. In the process, she pronounced her round breasts, “and I’m not the type that likes to declare something.” She fastened her undone button and left my office without looking back.

I sat at my desk, stunned. If Stacy had been in the room, she would have swung at Becca. Then she would have scolded me for playing along with her like that. I wouldn’t be able to argue because it was my fault for walking right into that situation. I shouldn’t have prompted her.

As time went by, however, I started to think about the difference between Becca flirting with me and Stacy, more subtly flirting with Ryan Connelly. Was there a difference?

Stacy could bring an NFL player to the bar where we were supposed to meet for a dinner date, but I knew she’d hold me to a double standard. She would be mad at me for having a conversation with a female employee? For God’s sake, didn’t Becca just want to know about company protocol? She was curious about the company, that’s all! She was doing her job.

For a guy who hadn't prayed in a decade, I surprised myself when the thought slipped into my mind that Becca hadn't been a messenger from Moriarty, but rather one from God to show me that there is a difference between a working relationship and a personal one. I would never ask Becca to the bar, but Stacy had asked Ryan and only framed it as *working on poetry*.

For a while, during the set up for the private parties, I avoided any eye contact with Becca as she navigated the floor, moving from table to table. I wondered what Nicholas would have done in a time like this. Probably pin her to the table in his office and have sex with her.

Jeeze, I thought, I hadn't slept with Stacy in a few days and sex was creeping into my mind. I tried my best to channel Nicholas from within me. I wanted to see if I could possibly remember more pieces of the story than I had already dreamt. The harder I concentrated, the more trouble I had. I found myself making up narratives that even Ryan Connelly would have found forced and contrived. I couldn't do it.

I used what I already knew about him to piece together how he might respond to Becca. For starters, he was confident in himself in the way he knew he had control over Alice. I wondered how much his mother's death - especially when he was so young - caused him to analyze situations in the way that he did: constantly figuring out who was in control. That's the way men are when there's no female influence. It also had

to do with the success that he had seen as a writer at such a young age, having published a book that could be found on a bookshelf in a ski village in a foreign country. I'd felt multiple emotions after the last dream. I'd felt lots of confusion. But now each of those feelings turned into one—a desperate want what Nicholas had: control of the situation, control of himself.

When work ended at eleven o'clock, I sped home. I was determined to fall asleep, remembering my problems from the evening, so that I could consider them from Nicholas's point of view. I would take some sleeping medicine and think about Becca and about Stacy and Connelly as I began falling asleep. As I ran the red light at Wyndown and University Lane, I prayed that my method would work. I needed Nicholas for my own life in Missouri.

I unlocked the door to my apartment to find the lights off. I was relieved to find Stacy in bed rather than still out with Connelly, but I never considered jumping in bed, sliding behind her. That would not have been conducive to dreaming. I couldn't afford her rolling over and waking me up.

I brought my pillow out to the couch and curled up. The blinds allowed light from a street lamp to run across the living room carpet, so I left my position to adjust them. I saw a car flash by on the road below. I wondered if its driver was racing home too, to catch a dream. No way, I

figured, this was so peculiar that it had to be uniquely special- something just for me. When I walked back to the couch, it was perfectly dark and I felt myself doze off.

I heard an alarm go off. I woke up flustered. It felt so real. I looked around, finding the decor of my St. Louis apartment, not the Swiss village home. The alarm had been Stacy's. No dream. *What the fuck? What had gone wrong?*

As time passed, my anger switched to fear. I was not sure if I would have another dream, if I would have the chance to consult my problems as Nicholas.

I hadn't slept well enough on the couch, I decided. I needed a bed, but how? I didn't want to sleep with Stacy, and her *working relationship* with Connelly was accelerating to the point where I wasn't comfortable leaving town for a few days by making up a business convention. I didn't want to lose Stacy for a couple of dreams, I wasn't ready to say goodbye regardless of how my feelings were changing. I would find a way to have both.

Stacy opened the bedroom door and the bedroom light hurt my eyes. "Tom," she said, "you're sleeping out here again? What's wrong?"

I wasn't sure what to say. I couldn't find it within myself to say that I didn't love her anymore. Breakups hurt and I preferred to spare myself the pain. *God*, I was an awful person, but at least I was honest with myself.

For a moment, I thought maybe I should just blurt it out- Stacy once told me that her priest had said that telling the truth about horror was better than covering it up with a lie. I chose to be logical and lie. “I wasn’t feeling well. I didn’t want to get you sick.”

“Sick? Oh sweetie,” she said, “You should take the day off. You worked so late yesterday. You need rest.”

Stacy, she was still good for something. What an incredible idea. I could take the day, which would allow me to avoid Becca until I was able to nap and consult Nicholas. “You’re right. I’m going to get in bed.”

Stacy left, and I tucked myself in. For the second time in as many days, I thought about prayer. I choose to say a short thank you, to whoever was listening, for giving me the opportunity to dream again that day.

I fell asleep comfortably. So comfortable that I could hardly feel the sheets on my body. I was one with the bed, my cheek stuffed against a scrunched pillow. A breeze carried through the open window and I slept at peace, spread out across the full bed.

I woke up around two o’clock. No dream. Not even a sliver of one. I’d been spited by some higher being that I couldn’t trust. I needed to figure out how to get back. I needed to be Nicholas, to see Alice, to go dancing with her. My phone vibrated on the table, reminding me to call in sick to work. I started to dial when I noticed a notification for my voicemail, a missed call from Stacy, and three more from Mr. Moriarty himself.

“Tom,” the voicemail sounded, “where the hell are you? Don’t you remember we are being inspected today? You were supposed to let the health inspector in at noon, and your job calls for you to be in the office at ten anyway. You should know that by now. Do you I need to keep tabs on you? Call me back with a reason you’re out.”

Shit. I had completely forgotten about the inspection. I had been so desperate to sleep, and Stacy’s offer had been so enticing. Now I was screwed. I had fallen from grace with the man that controlled my fate in the restaurant business. No more raise, no promotion, no offer to join the managing partners someday down the line.

By the time I reached Moriarty, I had actually come to feel sick. My slip-up had caused my stomach to turn, and I felt as nauseous as I’d wished I’d been when I told Stacy I wasn’t feeling well. “Mr. Moriarty,” I said through my phone, “there has been a horrible misunderstanding. I have the flu, and I sent you an email earlier this morning, but it must not have gone through,” I hoped that one lie would save another.

“That’s very strange for an email not to send,” he replied in a stern voice.

“I know, but you have to believe me. You know it isn’t like me to miss work unannounced.”

“It’s not, but you did today. I expect more from you Tom, and I’m disappointed. Get some rest and be on time tomorrow.” Moriarty clicked

off the phone. I felt sorry for lying to him. He had been so good to me throughout my first months at work. He didn't deserve to be lied to and he didn't deserve an employee that skipped work to sleep.

It was Stacy's fault, I realized. She had suggested this plan. She started it. It had always confused me why adults never appreciated learning who started it in a dispute between children. The instigator was always at more fault on the playground, but adults never cared. I, however, knew that Stacy had *started* this mess. I cared. She set me up for failure. She kept me from Nicholas *and* from a raise. I hated her.

I closed my eyes again and tried to summon Nicholas. I had no such luck. I couldn't fall asleep. Rather, my mind wandered to Becca. I imagined her coming into my office, this time with one more button unhooked, exposing her bra even more. I told her that the company policy for employee relations was that what management didn't know wouldn't hurt them. She came around to my side of the desk and sat on my lap, pressing her chest against my chin and looking down at me.

I opened my eyes. I couldn't think like this. I needed to get myself together. I had an uphill battle to climb with Mr. Moriarty, and allowing myself to approve of a manager-waitress relationship would not help in any way.

I needed to get my mind off of Becca, needed to stop who I was becoming. I thought that if I could balance my hormones, by sleeping with

Stacy again, I would return to being myself and resume my dreams as Nicholas. Is that how hormones worked? I hoped so. If, for some odd reason, I was being mysteriously kept from entering the dream world because I wanted to bring questions about my real life, then I wouldn't try thinking about Becca or Connelly or anyone else while I was Nicholas. I missed the back porch. I missed Alice's French accent.

As I sat up in bed, I decided that I would raise my voice when Stacy got home. I'd blame her for setting me back at work and then I'd sleep with her as a pseudo-apology. It wasn't honorable, and I knew that, but hopefully it would get me back on track.

Stacy didn't come home after school, and she wasn't home for dinner either. Finally, once I had settled – stubbornly - in bed, I heard our front door open. She poked her head into the room, “Hey, how are you feeling?” she asked.

“Fine. Where were you?”

“With Ryan. We were filming my slam. I called to invite you earlier but you didn't pick up. I was hoping you'd come listen to me.”

“It sure took a while to film.”

“After class, I ate dinner with Sammy from University High and then Ryan and I took a couple takes of the slam.”

“Got it.”

“Babe,” she crawled onto the bed, “what's wrong?”

“Nothing,” I replied, “you’ve just been spending a lot of time with him.”

She reversed course quickly, sliding off the foot of the bed, and looked at me disgusted. Turning towards the door she said, “You’re such an asshole.”

“What?” I replied, “How?”

“You’ve been sleeping on the couch, Tom. I haven’t seen you all week, and you’re accusing me of wanting to be with Ryan. You’re disgusting. Now I’m going to sleep on the couch.”

Maybe she was right, I thought, as I shut my eyes. I couldn't figure out what I felt. I suppose I'd been an asshole, but I'd been a victim too. Why could no one empathize with the jackass-victim that exists in every misunderstanding? I couldn't even imagine how to describe my point of view so I wished that Stacy could borrow my head for just a few minutes. She would never understand my dreaming; who Nicholas was. She'd call me crazy. She'd leave me for someone more stable, someone who would just go insane after bringing her all the way to Missouri.

The next morning, when I woke up for work, Stacy had already gone. There was a note on the kitchen counter that read, “Hope you’re feeling better!” It could have been worse, I thought. I could salvage my relationship if I swallowed my pride, if I apologized to her. I would make sure that I took care of it that evening. As I waited for my toast, I devel-

oped a plan to invite Stacy out to the Gateway Inn and make it clear to her that I didn't want her to bring any friends. When she showed up, I would have a bottle of champagne waiting, and I would tell her how sorry I was for my actions and that I wanted to watch the next time she filmed her poetry with Connelly. I would make it clear to her that I supported her work with him.

I walked into my office just before ten o'clock. Becca was on the dinner shift, so I'd be able to get some work done during the day before I had to expend too much energy avoiding her.

It was harder to concentrate than I thought it would be. The dream world, or lack there of, consumed me. I missed Alice, missed being Nicholas. It had been more than twenty-four hours since my last dream. I wondered how the porch was. I wondered if it still existed even, if I would ever see it again. How had Nicholas danced at the Hotel Pollux? I wished I could have known.

My mind snapped into place. Expenses reports, specials menus, greeting lunch customers. If anyone thinks the job of an assistant manager is at all difficult, they're sorely mistaken. I still had to do the work though, no matter how simpleminded it was. As I organized my tasks for the day I felt sorry for myself. My classmates at Georgetown would have been so disappointed to see what my work life consisted of. Some days I spent hours on end, scratching numbers into predesigned tables like a sixth grader in pre-algebra. So often, I found myself eavesdropping on

our patrons. That day, three business men thanked me for stopping by and then waited to continue bad mouthing their boss until they thought I was out of ear shot. I knew the nooks and crannies of our dining room better than any place else. It was my home court, where I'd listened to stories from bad bosses to sex with teachers.

At two o'clock, Moriarty showed up and poked his head into my office. I was playing Tetris on my computer, but quickly pulled up a spreadsheet to feign managerial duties.

"Tom," Mr. Moriarty smiled, "I'm happy you're feeling better."

"Much better," I replied as I stood up to shake his hand. "I just want to apologize for the miscommunication yesterday."

"All's well that ends well, Tom. We passed the inspection with flying colors. Not to mention you're back, and today is projected to be a great day for business." Moriarty left the office and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Most of our customers think that we prepare our cheesecakes in house. We let them believe what they want. The truth is, we get them from an actual cheesecake *factory* in Illinois. The frozen bases are trucked in every Tuesday with packets of strawberry, chocolate chips, faux-peanut butter, et cetera. The cheesecake chef should really be called a cheesecake builder because he just puts the pieces together.

Everyday an hour before the dinner rush, I inspected the cheesecake display. The display, conveniently placed at the entrance to the restaurant, subtly encouraged customers to try dessert. It's of the upmost importance that the cheesecakes on display look authentic, original, and fresh. So if there was ever a time that our builder had been sloppy with a cake on display, it was my job to make sure that he swapped it with a better one.

While I reviewed the top layer of the Oreo Dream, using a magnifying glass to ensure that the whipped cream was consistent all the way around, I spotted Becca in the employee lounge looking into a mirror, smacking her lips covered in a pink gloss. She adjusted her skirt around her hips and pulled her shirt down by its sides. I slipped past the entrance to the lounge and shut the door to my office. My only mission was to avoid Becca for the night. If I succeeded, I would get my life back on track with Stacy and I'd be lounging on the back porch with Alice by midnight.

I'll tell you now that my plans did foil. It's not the fact that I failed that will interest you now, but rather the way in which the failure happened. The path directly in front of me had been clear, but I had failed to look around all of the corners.

During a lull in the dinner rush, there was a rap on my office door. I expected Moriarty coming back for a visit to check on how I was catch-

ing up with work. When I opened the door, I was surprised instead to see Becca. She immediately grabbed my shirt into her balled up fists. She reminded me of the way I used to block a defenders on the football field. She stepped into my office, pushing me backwards towards my desk. Before I could ask what she was doing, she put a finger to my mouth and whispered: *shhh*. She kicked the door closed in one swift motion.

I sat, propped against my desk, in shameless awe. Never in all of my life, had a woman come onto me so strongly. In any other instance – in literally any other world - I would have loved it. This was the kind of situation I dreamed about as a middle schooler, hoping my first kiss would come so easy.

As I looked into Becca's blue eyes and smelled the cherry flavor of her lip-gloss, a phrase that my cousin Ben had once said to me crept into my mind. *God is timing*. I had not thought of those words in almost a decade, but now in a split second, I asked myself if I was using Ben's creed to satisfy my hormones or if this was truly supposed to be my next step. There had not yet been a time in my life which produced one simple thought that acted as such a catalyst in my life's unfolding.

Immediately, I grabbed Becca by the hips and pressed my lips into hers. She pressed into me as our kisses intensified, pushing me back onto my desk and knocking over a framed picture of Georgetown's spires. What a nice way to live, acting as if the steps were predestined, as if timing were the ruler of all things.

As I rubbed my hand over Becca's back, I conceded to myself that this was not an act of serving some God – *timing* - but rather an act of human desire. I couldn't honestly convince myself that this action was destined. I slid back on my desk, creating separation between the two of us. She looked me up and down.

"I should get back to work *Mr. Tibbult*," she said with a light wink. She kissed me on the cheek and left me sitting dazed in my office.

I wondered how I'd explain any of this to Stacy. Could I hide it? Should I? My mind raced. I'd had a plan, but now I had a mess bigger than the one I'd left myself earlier in the week.

Stacy agreed to meet me at the Gateway Inn after work. I left an hour early without saying goodbye to anyone. I slipped out while Becca was taking an order. I had come to terms with the fact that the idea that I was meeting Stacy with an apology and high hopes for a bright future was simply a pretense.

As I watched her walk through the model arch that framed the bar, I stood slightly from my booth and waved. Stacy sat down, delicately tucking her skirt beneath her, and I poured two glasses of champagne.

"To us," I said.

"To us," she replied and we drank. "This is really nice, Tom, but why?" She looked down over her glasses at me, studying my face. I

smiled but quickly wiped it from my own face. It didn't deserve to be there.

"Look Stacy," I started, "I want to apologize for these last few days. I've acted wrong, and I want to start over fresh."

She took a sip of her champagne, put the glass down on the table, and slid her hand on top of mine. "Oh Tom. Of course!" she replied, "Of course! You didn't need to do this just to say you're sorry. I'm sorry too. It's been a long week."

Things were back! If only I could have leaned over the table, kissed her, and kept my mouth shut for the rest of my life, never uttering the name Becca again. I should have called Mr. Moriarty at that very moment and quit my job. I should have moved to a new city with Stacy, started a new career, and lived happily ever after. Instead, my jealous curiosity controlled me. I squeezed her hand and said, "let's be completely honest with each other."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Like about Ryan Connelly. Tell me what's really happened this past week with him, because you weren't the only one who's made a mistake."

The words settled slowly, awkwardly, and I sipped my champagne, refusing for a moment to meet her stare. She looked at me through slit eyes, her lips fell limp. "Ryan and I have a working relationship, Tom. I've

told you that a million times.” Her voice strained at the end of her response like a whiny girl appealing to her father after a wrong accusation.

“But what do you mean, we’ve both made a mistake, Tom?” she added sternly, now the role reversing with Stacy playing the parent and I the child. In every sense but a physical one, the table had turned.

I faltered. I wasn’t sure where to start so after a moment I just did. “Oh, Stacy, I’m so sorry. I messed up bad.” She slid down in her seat and brought her hand across her forehead. Whether she was wiping sweat or taking her temperature I didn’t know, but I knew that neither option was what I had hoped for to start this conversation. “Stacy, it wasn’t intentional even. This girl, Becca, at work. She’s new, and she came on to me today. She basically assaulted me the way she pushed me onto my desk and kissed me. I swear I didn’t even kiss back,” I rambled on, “I swear. I’m going to have her fired.”

“How long was it?” Stacy’s voice was low like the low-slung voice my mother used when I had once stolen a candy bar as a child. *I’m not mad. I’m disappointed.*

“Thirty seconds. If that.”

“Who has the audacity to let it happen for thirty seconds?” Stacy said dejected as she slid further underneath the table, sliding far away from the reality that was setting in- her boyfriend, the man that brought her so far from her east coast roots had cheated on her. She could almost rest her chin on the table. I wished I could tell her she looked cute

in a sad dog kind of way. She picked herself up but refused to look at me. "You'll have to excuse me," she said, stepping down from the table. She left her purse but took her phone. I wondered who she'd call. Would it be Connelly? That would piss me off. No matter who it was, I found solitude in that she would have to come back for her purse. This wasn't over. I would get another chance to talk.

As I sat at the table, the half-empty bottle of champagne sitting in a bucket of melted ice taunted me. It screamed my mistake back at me, showed me how differently things could have turned out.

Who could she be calling, I asked myself. It had to be her parents, my parents, Sammy from University High- let it be anyone but Connelly, I prayed. There was no way it was him. It couldn't be. They didn't have more than a working relationship, so why should she call him now?

This was Schrodinger's cat, though. Schrodinger's phone. Until she returned, it was both Connelly and not-Connelly on the other line. There was no point in trying to figure it out.

She left me sitting like an asshole. People watched her slip out of our booth and run from the bar. They turned and faced me until I slid down in my seat like she had done. I poured myself another glass of champagne and downed it in one fell swoop. My stomach felt heavy and hot. My cheeks were warm and the hair that hung over my forehead felt wet. I looked out the large rectangular window of the bar and considered leaving without paying my tab. I'd come back and settle up later or never

come back again. I decided that I could drive right to a locksmith, bring him home with me and have him change the locks. I could forget all about Stacy. I could hide in the bedroom, far from the front door, and dream through her pounding knocks. I'd leave her to fend for herself so she could feel the agony of being left alone while strangers stared and wondered about what you'd done to your date.

No, that would be wrong. I was proud of myself for recognizing the evil in that plan- there was still a sliver of good in me. When she returned from her call, I would just grab her hand and tell her that I would do anything. I'd quit my job. I'd do couples therapy *and* quit my job. I would let her stay out all night writing poems with Connelly if that would prove that I trusted her, that I cared about her, that I was worthy of her.

Stacy had been so good to me, and I threw her away for bullshit. For a fucking dream- something that didn't even exist. *You fucking dumbass*, I told myself as I pinched my temples with a thumb and middle finger. I ran my hand through my hair and pulled hard on the knots that caught my fingers. My eyes watered with pain.

I'd pull every last hair, I thought to myself, if it meant I could go back in time and never had one of those fucking dreams. I should have never tried to channel Nicholas, should have never acted on *his* impulse with Becca.

I poured another glass and put it to my lips. As the champagne sloshed in my mouth, Stacy walked back under the arch. We made eye

contact, me holding the glass to my mouth like an idiot, her with her hands crossed over her chest, glaring towards me. I dropped the glass with a thud on the table. I noticed her eyes. They weren't puffy, they weren't red like they had been after each of the poetry rejections she'd ever gotten.

I stood up. "That wasn't what it looked like Stacy. I haven't just been sitting here drinking." She grabbed her purse from the table. "Let's talk. Let me explain," I continued.

"There's nothing to explain. I'm going to stay with Ryan, and we'll be over to pick up my things tomorrow. We're done, Tom," she said in an indifferent monotone that hurt me more than hate would have. "Maybe he and I will try your kind of working relationship."

She walked away without looking back. I sat down in my booth, put my forehead on the table, and stayed there until I could feel my heart beat behind my closed eyes.

On my drive home from the Gateway Inn, I had a minor one-car accident. I had been going south on Forsyth Boulevard for a few miles, staring at a string of green lights when I heard a thick crunch below me. My car, a used Ford Fusion that I had bought from a local dealership, jolted. I pulled to the side of the road to check the front left tire. There I realized what I'd hit. I thought it had been a pothole, but actually it was

a turtle maybe a foot wide. Its green-brown shell mixed with a yellowy organic paste and dark red blood spread across the asphalt road.

A few cars passed by, swerving away from the mess that I had made. Drivers looked out their windows at me. Their nostrils flared and mouths turned down as to ask who the hell I was to be inspecting my front tire - something so easily replaceable - just after ending the life an animal. I got back in the car and drove home, keeping my eyes on the road in front of me.

It wasn't until a few hours later, when I was sitting on the couch with a cold bowl of noodles that I thought about the turtle again and about my relationship with Stacy. I saw a parallel.

In a lot of ways, she was the turtle. Stacy wanted to cross the road. She was trying to get from point A to point B. I paid no attention to her, her trials and tribulations, and I ran over her with carelessness and immaturity. I left her, a spewed mess to be avoided.

Probably, I imagined, the difference between the break up and my experience with the turtle was that, with Stacy, I never stopped to check my tire when I hit her. I never surveyed any damage. On the road, I felt trauma in the driver's seat and discovered what had gone wrong. With my relationship – ex-relationship - I pressed the pedal harder not ever wondering how I had hurt her.

I had a day off from work leading into the weekend, but I never left the apartment. Stacy had not called, so I supposed she was doing just fine without her things. I tried not to think about her staying with Connelly, but when my mind did wander there - as I stood at the kitchen counter watching cars drive by on the road below - I hoped that she was sleeping on his couch. I hoped that he was a good friend but maybe gay or already committed to another woman. I hoped that Stacy sat next to the sink in his kitchen as she always did in ours and that she thought about me and about second chances. I hoped she'd call. I would say, "So you want to pick up your stuff?" and then she'd reply, "No Tommy, I just want to come home."

I knew that if that time came, I would cry on the other end of the line like I already had as I'd held the phone to my ear, my fingers on the dial pad, wishing for the courage to call her voice.

I wondered what advice Connelly had given her on the phone outside of the Gateway Inn. Had he let her work through it herself or had he told her that she should be fed up with me? I wondered when he invited her to stay with him, if he called it *home*.

I lay in bed with my knees tucked to my stomach. When I closed my eyes, I saw Stacy running her hand, with peach nail polish, across Connelly's bare chest. I wished that it felt foreign, that she preferred mine, but the longer I thought about it, the more my mind ran. Her hand

moved down his chest to his abs, a smooth stomach, and I felt nauseous. I moved to the couch, ignoring myself in the mirror as I passed.

I sat in darkness. The only light in the room came from a street-light through the thin curtains and some flashing scene from the muted television. I hadn't eaten in almost forty-eight hours, and I was on my own. I thought about my friends from high school who had gone to the coasts. They were too far to help. I didn't want to bring my parents into this mess- my mother was always snooping, trying to determine whose fault things were. It struck me that the only person my age that I knew in St. Louis, besides Stacy, was Becca who must not have spoken more than a hundred words to me since I met her but had already put her tongue in my mouth. I was responsible for my actions; I'd stopped lying to myself on that front, but if I wanted to feel as helpless as a dog, getting sick on the carpet after she'd fed me some chocolate.

3.

I felt cool air brush across my cheeks. The sun, setting over the mountaintops in the distance, painted the sky burnt orange and red. London had never beaten Zermatt at sunsets. Rain, and smog, and women with crooked teeth dragging cigarettes left the London air gray. It was a gray, however, that I had come to love, that had toned my first novel in which a prep school student, born to be on stage, submits to parents' wishes and to his headmaster, thus attending Cambridge to study law,

become a barrister, meet a wife, have two children, and live happily ever after until he kills himself on a Thursday morning when he can't stand to go to even one more deposition.

Sitting under the scorched clouds, I felt inclined to turn my next novel towards found love. Maybe a character named Michel would leave a farm in the south of France in search of something more- some found faith in Australia, among the Aborigines. These Swiss Alps, tinted pink, suggested to me that if I did write Michel, he would not find faith in Australia but maybe love: definitely by way of lust. He was, perhaps, the type of character who would like to live on a farm in Australia, much like the one from his childhood, but one where he would be able to make his own choices; able to love his caretaker in a way different than the way he loved his mother.

"Nicholas," I heard the sweet French accent call from an open window, "voulez-vous plus de vin?"

"Oui mademoiselle, merci." Alice brought a bottle of Chateau Mouton to the table. Her father had sent it from Paris.

Alice stood behind me, draping her arms across my chest. Her hair was curly and damp and it smelled like lemon when she bit my ear. A street lamp and two candles lit the porch as the sky was dark now, and the Matterhorn was a massive shadow. I felt as if the world shut off when Alice joined me. Not in the sense that we were being spared, but that devotion and attachment were mutually exclusive.

“Tell me a story,” she said, sitting down and curling her toes on the edge of the table. She was wearing one of my sweaters, a blue and red striped Patagonia.

“Any story?”

“Not *any*. A true one.”

In all my experience with women, I knew that she wanted to hear a story about loss, about some woman of my past. That’s what *tell me a true story* meant. It would be in that fashion that I’d reel her in to my only true story.

“There was a woman I was engaged to,” I started. She looked at me, through squinting eyes, over the brim of her wine glass. “Our families were close, and near our wedding day I began to think we’d rushed things. A few weeks before the wedding, I told her that I didn’t think that we were right for each other. I thought that our relationship was forced, that we were just assets for our families to transfer. It was better to have that conversation then rather than after our vows, you agree?”

“Naturally,” she said.

“My fiancée didn’t take to that well. She said I had strung her along for nearly a year, that I’d used her for her body, her virginity. She called me a bum and argued that I’d felt this way all along, and that I had only extended our relationship so long, because she was making enough money to allow me the fortune to write.”

“I suppose she had every right to say those things,” Alice replied.

“Yes, I agree,” I continued, “I left when our argument finished. What was I supposed to do when she was sitting silently, crying, and I knew in my heart that I had no intention of salvaging a relationship? We had been doomed from the start by parents that wanted what we didn’t. She just hadn’t yet seen that. I went to a bar down the street and drank two gin sours. When I came home, all of my things were on the sidewalk, thrown from the window. Shirts, shoes, socks, photographs of my family.”

“What did you expect?”

“I’d predicted that she’d do exactly what she’d done.”

Alice laughed. “Of course. She’d been your fiancée.”

“Yes, exactly. But for me there was no love lost.”

“No loss?”

“None. Just gain.”

“Gain!” Alice laughed again, “How so?”

“That’s what this story is about,” I said as I refilled her glass. “I’ve pretty recently returned from a world not at all like this one.”

Through a window across the street, a family sat at the dinner table- a man and a woman, in their thirties, with a young boy and a slightly older girl. From my angle, the kitchen was modern with plastic cabinets and geometric art covering the walls.

On the street below, two university aged girls pedaled towards the village center, skis on a rack attached to the side of their bicycles. As

they passed below our deck, one shouted something to another in a mix of French and German about getting home before curfew.

“Two years ago, after I’d ended the relationship that wasn’t one I should have taken any further, I bought a round trip ticket to Australia. I’d developed an interest in the Aborigines,” I said, “I had a two-day layover in Hyderabad, India, and I never left that country. There was nothing *concrete* that made me stay, though. There was nothing more than a feeling that made me realize that I shouldn’t go on and travel to see the Aborigines. On the first day of my layover, I wanted to taste a truly authentic Indian flavor so I took a taxi almost forty kilometers outside of the center of the city. When I made it to the countryside, I met a beggar who unintentionally convinced me that I shouldn’t leave for quite some time.

“The man - he weighed about a hundred pounds and stood with a hunch so severe that we could hardly make eye contact - knelt on all fours at my feet and asked, in broken English and Hindi, if I could spare any money for a man of God to eat.

“Never in my life had a man practically prostrated himself in front of me. I kneeled to reply. I gave him a few coins, enough for a meal but no more. When I handed them over, he raised his head and thanked me. His eyes pierced me. They were a greenish-gray, but the color is not the only thing will be forever imprinted in my mind. It was the glint- there was *God* in those eyes. I was no longer concerned with the Aborigines, they could wait till the end of time for all I cared.

“When I think back to that exchange, I realize how different it felt in the moment as opposed to when I retell it now. You have to understand that this did not feel like a traveling man sparing a few coins for a beggar. When I looked into his eyes, I was a child. I did not deserve to stand in that man’s presence, much less over him. I wished I could have given him everything to my name. The only reason that I didn’t is because I didn’t have the guts to do it. It’s easier to wish something than it is to actually do it. Trust me though, this man was close to God. Standing in front of him was as close as I had ever felt to God, but it was not as close as I’d ever get.”

“Go on,” Alice said as she refilled my wineglass.

“I ate in a rural restaurant; I don’t remember the name because I don’t think it even had one. My taxi driver hadn’t lied about the food. The curry was the best that I’ve ever had. Prepared with ingredients straight from their own garden, it could never have been replicated in the city. I made friends with the owners of the restaurant. They only spoke a little English, but I understood some Hindi. We bonded over glasses of gudumba, a drink that has an original recipe native to Hyderabad and is banned by the Indian government. The drink came from a cauldron, and it tasted poisonous. The owners said in English, ‘Beware! Beware!’ as we toasted our glasses so I followed their lead.

“When the restaurant closed and the remaining locals left, the owners invited me to continue sipping gudumba with them. I suppose it

was rare that a Brit was in their restaurant. We sat at a long table, the only light in the restaurant came from a massive candle in the center of the room. The flame had to have been fifteen centimeters tall, and it cast a warm light that almost reached the corners of the room.

“I told them about the beggar. I wanted to know where he was from, who he was, because any time I closed my own eyes, I saw his. They’d had this quality to them. Je ne sais pas. It was a certain depth, though; the light green iris was, to me, a gate that kept light years of knowledge and conviction protected.

“The owners told me that he was visiting from the Maharuti Ashram, a monastery in the North which sent their faithful out to spread their word. They’d been feeding him bell peppers when they had left overs. The owners suggested that if I really wanted to discover my own depth I should head in that direction, through the heart of the country, to Uttarakhand, to the Maharuti Ashram. They told me that it would not be easy, that I would have to leave all of my possessions with them, but at the monastery neither picture nor idol is worshipped so a man learns to see God as He is. It must have been the gudumba finally kicking in, but the room whitened and began to pulse when they showed me a map with a route towards the Maharuti Ashram. I felt as if I’d been called.”

Alice sat in a ball with her toes curled in the edge of the table, her chin resting on bent knees. The evening breeze blew strands of her curly brown hair across her face. She pinned the loose hair behind her ear and

continued to drink. Between sips, her mouth was kept tight. She made that face, like she'd just eaten something sour and was trying to hide it, whenever she listened to something intently.

“We stayed up drinking gudumba until, at some point, the big flame went out and the room was dark. My hosts brought me a cushion and a set of woven blankets to sleep on, and when the sun rose through a lone window, I left for the Maharuti Ashram, not with the raging headache I had expected, but with a sense that the world was breathing alongside me. It is mostly unimportant how I traveled to the monastery, mainly by old, hot busses and in a creaky train car that carried a group of silent monks in red robes alongside lumber. In the train car that jostled from side to side throughout the entire trip, the silent monks and I took turns riding with our heads stuck out of the sliding door, watching the blurry forest.

“You might think that silent monks are a sort of beings above humanity. I did and so I was surprised to find that these monks were not only humane but *human*. They danced and smiled and pointed excitedly towards a pack of running wild horses. They marveled at my height and jumped to touch my hand when I held it above my head. I swear I even woke up once, when the train jostled, to all of them huddled around a deck of cards, playing some silent version of Go Fish. All in all, they seemed to be pretty ordinary chaps really.

“After three days of travel we reached the Maharuti Ashram. The group of monks was surprised when I got off with them. They didn’t say anything - of course - but they looked at each other with raised eyebrows and back at me with squints. I shrugged my shoulders and followed them about a hundred yards. We walked through a massive field lined with orchids. I inhaled the air, fresher than anything I had ever breathed in Europe. Once through the field, when my legs had finally loosened from all the time spent in the lumber car, the monks led me through the front door of the temple and motioned for me to stop. They kneeled in front of me and patted the ground, suggesting that I sit. I sat in a corner of that lobby for at least four days. I lost track of time quickly, because the lobby was dark like the restaurant where I started my journey. Also like the restaurant, there was a massive wax cylinder in the middle of the room that looked like it could have managed a twenty-centimeter flame. To my dismay it was not lit. Every once in a while, a monk would bring me raw beets or a flakey piece of bread. I started to count the days by counting my meals. I assumed that they weren’t bringing me three helpings a day- where would the challenge be in that? So I guessed I was eating twice, maybe once, daily.

“I’d only eaten eight servings of bread or raw vegetables when a monk dressed in yellow robes put his hand under my chin. My back was sore from sleeping on the wooden floor; my stomach ached to the point where I felt it in my hands. The monk lifted my head until my eyes met

his. He faced me with a wide smile that missed two bottom teeth. I had expected my acceptance to be more spiritual or more romantic, but I suppose this was fitting. The silent monks from the train played cards! I'd even once heard that the Dalai Lama- a Buddhist, I know, not the Hindu monks I was spending my time with – had a brother who owned a bar in Indiana. At first glance, these monks were not all the media said they were.”

Alice poured more wine into both of our glasses. She stepped behind me and wrapped her arms around my shoulders. “Were you at all concerned that the monastery wasn’t what you thought it would be?” she asked.

My stomach felt warm from all I’d drank, but I felt sharp in my eyes. The house across the street had turned off its lights, and I wondered what time it was. Sitting on the deck with Alice and talking until God knew when had become commonplace. I had been in Switzerland for a few weeks now, and despite not making any progress on my novel, I had no desire to go back to England. I leaned my head back against her chest and looked into her eyes. I half expected to see the beggar looking back at me, but Alice’s dark brown eyes were enough. I stretched my neck towards her and smiled to ask for a kiss. She put one finger over my mouth as she said, “After you finish your story, Nicholas.” I laughed, squeezed the hand that rested on my chest and continued.

“At that point, staring up at this smiling monk, I was sure I’d been sent on a wild goose chase to show me that one cannot be any closer to God than his neighbor. I was ready to spite the restaurant owners for setting me on a false trail. The monks had acted like clowns, the way they danced on the train, played cards, offered misfit smiles. I had expected to feel ten times the presence of God that I’d felt around the beggar. The truth is, I hadn’t yet learned that friendliness and spirituality could go hand in hand. I hadn’t learned that a holy man did not have to be a stoic.

“There have only been a few times in my life where I’ve had a true gut feeling. That moment was one of them. I felt an urge to trust this bald, smiling man. Rather than turn around, hop on a train south to Mumbai, and fly directly to Australia to watch the Aborigines, I followed the monk down a blank hallway- quite literally nothing but white walls. At this moment, I remembered what the restaurant owners had said about seeing God as He is, neither picture nor idol. I nearly laughed aloud when I imagined God as the smiling monk.

“We walked down the hallway, all white. There were two doors, painted in a gold outline, which I later learned opened to a cream-colored mediation chamber. Suddenly we entered an enormous square garden surrounded by jagged gray and brown stone archways. In the center of the garden, there was a mass of red robes, bent in silent prayer. The garden had more orchids, groomed into six-pointed stars, and at the center

of the entire region, in front of the bowing monks, was a gong with a radius of two or three meters that hung from a wooden gazebo. Massive walnut trees, they must have been hundreds of years old, shaded the ground where the monks prayed.

“Without even turning around, the crowd sensed us and parted for the monk in yellow. I stood still at the orchid point furthest from the gong. The monks, all dressed in red, turned around and stared at me, their hands by their sides. In an instant, the yellow monk struck the gong with a massive padded mallet. My eardrums were shocked. They ached and stung simultaneously, and I would continue to hear the ringing for hours. In the moment that the gong was struck, the ground vibrated beneath me. My knees buckled, and I fell onto the grass. Every monk stood still, seemingly unaffected by the noise and the quaking. I heard their silence in the humming of the gong.

“After a few weeks, I was fully initiated. My head was shaved and so was my beard; the clothes I’d traveled in were traded for a robe. I hadn’t spoken. The time came at a communal meal, after what must have been two weeks, that I came to peace with my silence. I sat in a white wooden pew passing wet carrot paste and bread to my fellow monks. The man next to me smiled as he tore into a piece of bread, and I realized how quiet my mind was. For the longest time, when we prayed outside, when we prayed inside the room with the gold-trimmed doors, my mind was screaming, trying to pry through my lips. As I stuffed piec-

es of bread into my mouth, I felt more a part of a community than I'd ever felt before. I thought for a moment, that I had finally understood what the restaurant owners meant. God, as He truly is, is the community that I was a part of. He's any community. He's the bond between you and I, or between the two of us and that family across the street or between a group of nomads in east Africa that we'll never meet.

"On a warm night, a few months into my stay, a group of orphans were brought to the monastery with a tour guide. This kind of thing was somewhat regular. We showed the orphans the gardens and our common areas. It was India's hope that some of the boys would stay- better to be poor in the mountains than poor on the street corners, they thought. On this occasion, there were eight boys and two girls, all under the age of twelve.

"In what I'm about to tell you I don't want to suggest that it was commonplace or that my friends don't take their devotion seriously. One of the boys, when shown the garden, pulled a small soccer ball out of his knapsack. Their tour guide, a particularly stout man with a Friar Tuck haircut and a festive stomach, looked towards us with a mouth opened wide. I'm sure our silent stares only made the situation worse. His face turned as red as the Swiss sky during a sunset over the Alps. The orphan boy kicked the ball around the orchid stars, and the tour guide chased him relentlessly yelling for him to stop, yelling that he was disgracing our spiritual ground.

“After a minute, the ball rolled to a monk. One of the ones I did not know well, but that I ate with from time to time. The monk stepped on top of the ball and rolled it onto the top of his foot. His foot skills were amazing. It was as if I was watching Zidane. He stepped over the ball, flipped it over his head in a rainbow, and passed it across the garden. The tour guide stood, frozen, like a statue. I thought how funny it would be if he were to stay like that forever. Orphans would come to tour the grounds and their new tour guide would have to tell them that there stood the statue of the most common man in the Eastern Hemisphere.

“We continued to pass the ball back and forth, around the children, in a silent game of keep away. These bald, barefoot monks were doing seal dribbles, maradonas, pedaladas. One monk, no taller than five feet, wove through four children and then caused two more to crash into each other.

“After about five minutes, the yellow monk picked up the ball and handed it back to the boy who brought it along. The yellow monk rubbed the boy’s head and then bowed to the tour guide, sending the children on their way. We followed our leader to a spiritual chamber and meditated for six hours.”

Alice sat silently. Her mouth hung open like I’d thought it would. I continued.

“Another night- actually the last night that I stayed at the monastery - I was on duty to wash dishes with another monk. As we finished,

my partner passed me a brown, translucent bottle. I could tell that the liquid inside of it was thick and dark. For some reason, I thought of gudumba even though the consistency wasn't the same. I brought the bottle to my mouth and right away my teeth were set on fire, my tongue went numb with pain. I forced the paste down my throat, and I found no trouble in suppressing a scream. I realized that I'd forgotten how to speak entirely.

"When one can't speak, it's amazing how unpretentious a reaction can be. I passed my friend his bottle and he simply smiled as he took a swig. In a matter of minutes, I felt like I was losing balance. The paste was moving through my blood stream, the kitchen began to distort. Distinct right angles, where the white wall met the white ceiling, started to round off, started to jut and turn and collapse. The doorway from the kitchen shrunk to something of a crawl space. As I began to squeeze my shoulders through the hole, I heard high-pitched and long-lasting laughter, a familial mirth that danced in my ears. I turned back to face my friend, but he was crouched behind me, his face rigid and quiet, urging me to go on towards our cots.

"I will never forget that laughter. I have some theories as to its origin. Possibly my id expressed itself in a tangible way, maybe God had really made himself visible between those blank white walls. Maybe it was both, simultaneously or even essentially as one."

Alice, with my sweater hugging her curled knees, looked at me with a half smile. “Are you telling me you’re crazy, Nicholas? Are you saying that I should run inside, lock all the doors, and call the authorities?”

“Absolutely not. I’d only be crazy if I sat here and told you I was enlightened.”

“What are you then?”

“I’m a just writer, Alice. One who’s been a monk, learned to speak twice, and heard God once.”

When my alarm went off, the Cardinals fight song, I felt like I had slept for a few weeks. I dressed quickly, tying my tie in the mirror. I looked into my own eyes, pale blue and flat. I breathed fog onto the mirror and wiped it away with my thumb. I had felt so many things about Nicholas in the short time that I’d been having dreams. I’d felt like I was elect and then I’d felt like I’d been cursed. It was clear to me now, though, that Nicholas was in my dreams because he could show me things, show me a path. I needed to listen closer, yes, but I needed to take action too. I couldn’t lose my life in Missouri. Nicholas, or whoever gave him to me, was giving me a chance. On my way to work, when I saw the exit on the freeway, I kept driving. I drove all the way to the airport. It wasn’t like me to make a drastic change, but within my heart I trusted Nicholas. My dreams could no be coincidence. With no baggage, I got on a plane to India.

PART 2

4.

At this point in time, I should tell you that for the next few pages my story might not stay as honest as it has been so far. For the most part, that's not my fault. I had to learn to speak Hindi on the fly, understanding very little of what was said to me at first. Going forward, I'll report on how I understood each of the things that were communicated to me.

I can't lie to you about the things I did, the things I saw, and the places I went. If I needed to lie about those things- this wouldn't be a story worth telling. Each of the events themselves are told exactly as they happened, however, the exact communication may have been misunderstood as, frankly like I've said before, I knew no Hindi when I landed in New Delhi.

I feel comfortable saying that as my story goes on it will return to the whole truth because I became close to being a fluent speaker, and I began to understand the intricacies of learning and communicating in India.

I'll tell my story chronologically, starting with my first day in New Delhi and moving towards my time spent in the Himalayas. If you let me ramble on now, I'll spoil exactly how my life turned and why I'm even here now. That would ruin everything I need to show you. You're re-

sponse would be something like, *now that's interesting!* Maybe you'd share a few words online. But that is not my intention. I am not telling you this for interest's sake. I'm telling you because I must tell it and because there is something more in this for you than a smile, a shrug, and an Internet post. For that reason, I will just jump right back in.

I should add – and I swear this is the last addition before we return to the story – that Nicholas continued to play a crucial role in my life, albeit inconsistent for a long while. Maybe I should say now, that I am forever indebted to him for giving me the opportunity to take this journey. Alas, I'll resume my story so I don't further bore you or spoil some of the things that must be shown for you to understand exactly how I ended up in the place where I am.

The sights and sounds of New Delhi, the smells too, should have overwhelmed me. Curry, dirt, goat shit, and an array of spices filled my nostrils with a stinging sensation that reminded me that I was a stranger when I first walked the Chandni Chowk. However, it was the layout of their roads that astounded me most.

There were no sidewalks, hardly any markers on the clay asphalt. Men walked in sweaty shirts with wide collars. Women carried baskets at their hips and sacks over their shoulders. The cars on the street held their horns down, for the most part, constantly braking in front of stray animals and scurrying children. Goats, donkeys, and chickens walked

between the cars- the goats with sacks across their backs, the donkeys pulling carts of vegetables and fabrics, the chickens squawking and flapping their wings in escape attempts. One man, dark skinned with a white arc of hair around the back of his head, chased after a cat with a butcher's knife.

The chaos, however, was not hellish but rather beautiful. I thought to myself that if the drivers were from D.C. or St. Louis, I would have already seen at least four deaths. The women, the children, and the animals being chased by sweaty men with knives; the cars and rickshaws and bikes understood each other. In many ways, the movement was one organism rather than a collection of many. After five minutes of stumbling and stuttering with my feet, I fit right in.

I kept my eyes peeled for a temple. As I passed through Connaught Place to the Gole Market, I started to see signs for the Lakshmi Narayan Mandir. Things couldn't go better, I thought to myself. Within an hour of landing in a foreign country, I had found a temple where I could learn everything I need to know about the Eastern religion that had such an extreme impact on Nicholas. I hoped that this temple would make me whole.

The temple was massive. Larger than any church I'd seen in the states. It was burnt orange in some places, red in others, and it was accented completely in mustard gold. The temple's three red towers were

shaped unlike any Western architecture. When I looked at that place of worship, I knew I was East- in a world that I knew nothing about but that was home to billions of people, billions of people with a history much steeper than mine. The temple's mass with its colors and curvature made me realize I had come to the right place. I knew that God was close- or rather *Gods*.

The gate around the temple was locked, however. I rattled the thin metal until a young man, probably a few years younger than me, came outside.

"I want to come in!" I called to him from the gate.

"We're closed," he said in a thick accent, "you must come back to-night."

"No, no," he didn't understand what I wanted. "I don't want to come back with the public. I want to live here, work here, pray here."

The boy laughed and grabbed onto the other side of the gate. He was a few inches shorter than me with black shaggy hair in a bowl cut. His bottom teeth were crooked, but they made his smile honest. "No one lives here," he said.

"What about a job?" I asked.

"There are no openings now. Maybe in a few months when Asad, one of our custodians, goes back to Pakistan."

I would need to plead with the boy, and I'd do it. "Please just open the gate. Let me come in now, let me pray with you, and the leaders of your temple. Let me join the private prayer, let me *learn* from you."

The boy laughed again. I felt my face turn red and hot. This boy, not any older than twenty, found my plea amusing. "You don't understand," he said, "there is no private prayer. We pray with the public. Our leaders are eating their chicken now, watching a football match. We are closed for private time, downtime as you say. We will open again for prayer this evening."

"So you say that your leaders aren't doing anything now?"

"Just enjoying themselves. They deserve free time don't they? Why should they have to live their job all day if no one else does?" the boy replied.

It struck me that I'd come to the wrong place. I'd been impatient in my search. I had felt like things would come to me as quickly as they'd come to Nicholas. I had looked for a sign in anything so I'd come to the wrong place. There was no depth to the temple. There were no deep secrets, no special prayer. When the public came in for worship, worship happened. Otherwise, the leaders relaxed. They relaxed like any normal person would. The only problem was that I wasn't looking for normal. I was looking for deliverance.

"I must go back in before my lunch gets cold. Come back for our evening prayer. It is a nice ceremony. Or come march with us next week,

through Ashok Place to commemorate Bapu's inauguration of our temple," the boy continued. He smiled and turned away from me before he jogged back to the temple's entrance.

I stood at the gate of the temple, confused by what had just happened. I'd gone from hero to zero pretty damn fast. I thought I'd found my home in Delhi, and instead I'd found a temple just as commercialized as the churches and synagogues throughout St. Louis.

I wouldn't give up hope yet because after all Nicholas hadn't found the God he did at a temple in one of India's biggest cities. He'd been led to a monastery. I committed myself to waiting until I was given the right clues, until someone pulled me towards their community and showed me what I had been missing in the West, how commercialization had stunted my spiritual growth and how I could reverse its effects.

Ten minutes into my walk from the temple back through Connaught Place, I passed a man balancing on the top of a wooden ladder, spit-shining a third story window.

"Ay! Ay!" he called down to me.

"Me?" I asked pointing to my chest, my eyebrows raised in a worried curiosity.

"American!" he yelled back down, and I smiled. His skin was burnt brown, the wrinkles in his forehead looked crusty and stuck. "An Ameri-

can is in here too!" he shouted as he stuck a finger in the air towards me to say, apparently universally, *stay put*.

I stood in the street, a car honked past me, as the man slid down a few rungs at a time. When he was about eight feet off the ground he leapt from the ladder and landed in a squat. "Come, come," he said, "another American." His syllables were choppy and heavily Indian.

I followed him through the slanted wooden doorway into a room covered in tapestries. Directly ahead was a red one with orange flowers and yellow vines tangled with each other. Sitting below the vines was a white man with salt-and-pepper stubble smoking a Hookah pipe. The Hookah bubbled loudly over subdued music. The man was wearing circular sunglasses that he slid down to the bottom of his nose.

"An American in this neighborhood, huh? Are you lost, supposed to be across town for business?" he asked as he took another draw from his pipe.

"I'm not here for business," I said, "or for pleasure really. I suppose I am lost. I don't exactly know what I'm looking for."

"Don't know what you're looking for?" he laughed and rubbed a tan hand through his slicked, black hair. "Well then you've come to the right neighborhood. Have a seat, introduce yourself." He kicked a wooden chair out from the table and pointed his pipe towards me.

I sat down in the wooden chair; its back squeaked under me, its legs scraped the dirty wooden floor as I pulled myself towards the table.

“My name’s Tom and I’m from St. Louis. Who are you?”

“They call me Boston Charley. Been here fourteen years, and I’ll never leave,” he pulled from his Hookah pipe. “Here,” he said as he offered it again. I took a hit. The lemony smoke burned my throat.

“What do you do here?” I asked.

“Let me ask the questions for now.” His laugh was low. “Are you here looking for work? Running from trouble?”

“Definitely not trouble,” I started, “well definitely not legal trouble. Maybe a bit of my own.”

“Work?”

“I could work. But I want to get to know the country, get to know the people.”

“Do you need money?” he asked.

“No, for now I would only work to become familiar and to find where I fit in.”

“Good,” he said and he scratched a note on a small pad in front of him. “Good.”

“Now what do you do here? Help Americans get work?”

“You could say that,” he flashed a set of crooked white teeth. I looked around the room again- Indian tapestries with circular designs, birds, and flower vines lay behind a thick layer of Hookah smoke. Behind

me, I could see the dark frame of a doorway that seemed to lead to stairs. The wooden table, which we sat at on the furthest wall from the door, was the only furniture in the room. For a man who helped Americans, he didn't advertise it much. However, he did seem to read my mind when he said, "You must understand we don't get many Americans through this side of town, but I'm always looking to help an ex-patriot."

Help. He said it with a smirk that suggested otherwise. "Thank you, Charley, or Boston is it?"

"Charley's fine."

"Well, Charley, it's nice to have a friend out here."

"Likewise. If you'd be so kind," he scooted his chair away from the table, "I have some business to attend to this afternoon that I must get ready for." He stood up, shifted his sunglasses, and shook my hand. "Be well," he said.

I left Charley's room through a cloud of smoky air, and was nearly blinded by the Indian sun. The chaos of the street had been muted inside, and now I was reminded of the world I had come to inhabit. The man on the ladder had moved down the block, and I noticed that he looked down at me through squinted eyes when I passed him. We exchanged waves.

A few more blocks from the center of town I passed a dark brown man with a mouth of loose-looking yellow teeth. He squatted in red rags and shook a small metal cup towards me asking for something in Hindi,

probably water or money. I remembered Nicholas's beggar, and I looked deep into this man's eyes for the depth told in my dream. There was nothing there. His gray eyes were cloudy- he was blind, and his smile was flat, two-dimensional.

I dropped a quarter and a dime into his cup, acting as if that would do him any good. Maybe he could take them to store in the city center that would exchange them for him. He grabbed on to the back of my knee and shook my leg while he looked down at the ground. He repeated the same phrase over and over again ābhārī hōñ, which I would later learn meant thank you. Walking away from the beggar down the Chandni Chowk I realized that I needed to learn Hindi one way or another.

I decided that I'd find a place to live first, a place where I could speak English to someone in case of an emergency, and then go back to Boston Charley and find a job where I could learn Hindi. I wanted to talk to the beggars, find out if any were familiar with the Maharuti Ashram.

Two weeks after I exchanged some of my American bills and started renting an attic with a straw bed above a rickshaw service, I went back to talk to Boston Charley. The rickshaw owner could speak English well enough, and I would have loved to spend the day with him learning Hindi and maybe getting good enough to talk to locals that needed a ride. The only problem was that my landlord wanted to brush up his English as much as I wanted to learn Hindi, and he wasn't a bad negotiator- telling me that we had to speak in English at all times if I wanted to keep

my room. Alas, I spoke with the locals as often as I could: Namastē and Alavidā, hello and goodbye.

When I walked up to Charley's door again, I noticed that the second and third floor windows were boarded up. I found it peculiar. I knocked three raps on the wooden front door. No answer. I knocked again and pressed my ear to the door. People were inside arguing, half Hindi and half English. I could hear Charley's deep voice. "I don't owe anything," the other voice yelled. It was clearly Indian. "You told me three hundred and I brought you three hundred!"

"I need three-fifty, Aarav. Three-fifty," Charley replied. The other man, apparently Aarav, started speaking faster and in Hindi. I gave up trying to understand them and knocked on the door one more time. "Who the fuck is there?" I heard Charley shout as his feet stomped closer. He propped the door open a few inches and looked out at me. "Oh, Tom!" he said, "Welcome back! I hope that your stay has been wonderful so far. Say, would you mind coming back in a few hours. An associate and I are just taking care of some business right now. Some personal business, if you don't mind."

I should have never knocked, I realized. "Of course," I said, "I'll stop by tomorrow or something. I want to talk about getting a job."

Charley's expression didn't change. "Wonderful. I'll see what I can do for another American."

When I went back to Charley's the next day, the door was locked, the windows were still boarded, and there wasn't a sound coming from within.

I paid my lease for the attic above the rickshaw service for another week. I spoke English with the owner every morning over breakfast.

"Good bread!" he yelled over the radio to me one morning, "Good bread!"

"Yes, it's good bread, whole grains," I smiled back.

"What is grain? What is this?"

"It's what bread is made of," I replied.

"Made of," he repeated as he stood up from the breakfast table and dunked his plate into a bucket of water, as if he had just discovered the most important pair of words in the English language.

I tried to translate the Hindi through the radio. In the last few weeks, I'd gotten better, and started to understand some of the colloquial terms that the newscasters used. Apparently there had been an accident on the Chandni Chowk on the other side of the city center. A man who had fallen asleep at the wheel of his vehicle had hit a mule or a donkey or some sort of four-legged animal carrying a cart of wet mortar. The Chandni Chowk, I thought to myself, not the best place to fall asleep while operating heavy machinery. I'd only been in Delhi for a few weeks, and even I knew that.

The landlord cut the radio off. "What do you say for work?"

“I told you, I want to speak Hindi at work.”

“You speak Hindi with the riders.”

“I don’t speak well enough to navigate the streets.”

“You just move your eyes.”

I laughed and contemplated for a moment. I measured the pros and cons for a second and then, for the first time in since I’d been in India, the Cheesecake Factory came to the front of my mind, pushing away the thought of running a rickshaw. I wondered how many emails Moriarty had sent me. I wondered if Becca had slept with my replacement, if she’d done the whole unbuttoned routine for him too.

I inhaled deeply and smelled goat shit from outside, a smell that was becoming commonplace for me. I actually had begun to surprise myself whenever I noticed the smells around me that had once been foreign. In the United States, air was air. That’s it. If you visited Los Angeles air was a bit thicker, maybe a tad salty. If you hiked in Colorado air was thin and pure. In Delhi, where I was living at least, air was goat shit and pepper- just as strong, but a whole lot better to me than day-old cheesecake.

“I’ll work,” I said, “but what happened to the new boy?”

“You want truth?”

“I’d prefer it,” I laughed, “or maybe on second thought I wouldn’t.”

“He was killed near the city center today. Trampled by a ghats ox.”

“On the job?”

“Not mine. But I’m sure he wasn’t moving his eyes. You must move your eyes.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said through another bite of stale bread. As I chewed I wondered what the hell I was doing. What did my parents think? They’d probably filed a missing-persons report.

Throughout college I hadn’t been prone to reflection, but I liked to think I’d grown introspective with a little bit of age. When I first moved back to St. Louis I recognized that I might not be a great person, but that I was special enough for even making that recognition. I prided myself on my metarecognition. Usually, I had answers for myself too. I understood why I was doing what I did. It was probably so that I could help myself climb some ladder somewhere, help myself achieve the standards that I hadn’t actually set for myself but that I knew someone would judge me on sooner or later.

Here, now in Delhi, taking up a job carrying a few tourists and a lot of locals on one of the most inefficient vehicles in the world while semi-tamed farm animals and manual transmission cars with shoddy brakes jockeyed for position all around me, I wondered why I ever left St. Louis. I wondered if I was chasing something stupid. Would Nicholas come back to shed some light? Would I even dream again? Maybe that’s why I took the job. Maybe I needed any excuse to wear myself down so

that I could sleep deeply enough to get back to Switzerland, to find out what the hell I was looking for.

My first run wasn't easy. I carried dark brown man around fifty who seemed in a rush. He didn't want to talk, just to be taken quickly to the meat market. I'd never met a man in America who was so hurried for meat, and I was confused why this man didn't get in a car if time was of the essence. I quickly figured that his sour demeanor was some form of foreigner hazing. As I tipped the cart at a sharp corner, he yelled, "Mūrkhā! You idiot!" His dark brown knuckles turned pale on the wooden armrest as he clung for balance.

"Sorry!" I called back in stuttered Hindi. I felt stupid for underestimating how difficult it would be to carry the rickshaw. When I considered the job, I wasn't sure if my arms would be up for holding the weight, but I also had never even thought about controlling the speed at which I'd have to run or the balance required to pull a few hundred pounds on rusty wheels with a few missing spokes. My shoulder's ached, but I remembered my high school football days when I benched more reps than anyone in the weight room even though I was one of the lightest full-backs. I just kept pushing the weight, kept pushing until my arms quit. To me, it was more honorable for my arms to quit than for it to be brain that went first.

I improved as the day went on and had a *nearly* perfect run with my last client of the day from the meat market to her house on the west end of town. The locals had even been giving me tips. I learned to keep my shoulders loose to serve as shock absorbers. During my last run, all was well until a massive ghats ox decided to cross the road. Usually these oxen are incredibly dumb, needing to be whipped a number of times to go in the right direction, and this one was either of the same intelligence as the rest or brilliant and out to spite me. Every time that I tried to reverse my rickshaw and go around the ox, he scooted backwards or stepped forwards to block my path. I started to sweat and feel the throb in my shoulders, as well as the afternoon sun against my forehead, so I dropped the rickshaw with a thud and smacked the ox with an open palm. “Kadama!” I called at the ox as if it knew Hindi better than any other human language.

The ghats ox trotted across the street, but the woman I’d been carrying groaned loudly and held her lower back. She’d fallen off when I’d dropped the rickshaw. “Damn!” she cried in Hindi, “Take me home!” So I took her home as fast as I could and walked the rickshaw back to my landlord’s garage hoping all the way that she wouldn’t appear the next day looking for her money back.

When I finally made it home, climbed the wooden stairs all the way to the attic, I ripped off my shirt and pulled down my shorts and lay on top of my squeaky mattress until my eyelids shut.

“How’d you even end up here? With this life?” that familiar French accent asked. I was in the sitting room in Zermatt, rain was coming down in steady layers from the mountains. “Because I can’t understand how you can pick up and leave places and not have a home?”

I looked at Alice and kept her stare for a few seconds. She wasn’t like British women. She asked tough questions, she didn’t put etiquette above a relationship- in that way she was like many of the American women I’d met. “Harsh,” I said.

“Oh Nicholas,” she said, and I loved it when she said my name feeling my pants stretch subtly across my lap. “You know I didn’t mean it in that way.”

“My mother was a painter. I may have told you that. And she passed when I was young. My father, on the other hand, could not have been any different from her. Somehow, I suppose, opposites attract. He was a banker for Wellington in London. He made money, sent me to the most expensive private boarding schools, and basically left me to venture on my own. I’ve been alone in the world since I was ten years old. The only family I have is the trust that my father made available to me at thirty.”

“So you’re not tied down. *Moi non plus*,” Alice returned, “But I don’t have it within me to pick up and leave whenever I want. This is my home.”

“I’ve never felt like home is geographical. For me, home is social. Home is where love is. Since my mother died I’ve always been looking for home. I’ve been around the world looking for home.”

Looking for home. For home. For home. I woke up repeating the phrase. It was four o’clock in the morning. By six-thirty I’d be carrying a rickshaw. I wondered how much longer I could really do that job. I hadn’t come to India to live like that. But, of course, it had only been a day. I felt like I owed my landlord work until I was ready to leave Delhi. I’d accepted his job, committed to him.

I lay awake, rolling over, squeaking on my old mattress under the tattered, aged, used-to-be-white sheets. I couldn’t believe I was in India. I missed the arch, the convenience store, blueberries from the farmer’s market. I wondered if my mom ever ran into Stacy. I wondered if Stacy and Connelly were happy. I wondered if they’d ever been together, were still together or if they’d just had a fling. I realized that I probably could have waited that whole thing out. Maybe another three weeks or so and everything would have been back to normal. Stacy and I would be on a walk through Forest Park right now. Or maybe we would be at a Blues game or taking a weekend road trip to Chicago. We’d eat at Harry Carrey’s. But there I was in New Delhi with no friends, no scent on the Nicholas trail to salvation, no idea what my own purpose was.

I pulled hard on a few arm hairs. I didn't want to stop and think, to realize just how crazy I'd gone. I couldn't admit it to myself just yet. Had I really just followed a series of dreams to the East? I'd learned to hate the love of my life because of some voyeuristic pleasure in listening to an illusory French accent.

When I closed my eyes, my head hurt. I was sure I'd fucked up. But why couldn't I bring myself to get a cab to the airport and head home? I didn't want to imagine walking into my parents' house and saying, "surprise! I'm back from India!" No one would understand. Not my family, not Stacy, not Moriarty, not any of my Georgetown classmates who were all probably now lobbying with graduate admissions offices around the country for better aid packages. They'd been the jokes on LinkedIn, but now I was the real laugh. The funniest part was that I kept thinking I knew one guy – well two if you count my dreams – that would really understand my situation. Connelly would tell me he was proud of me. He would say I had the balls to do what even he didn't. I wondered if this had always been just a ploy to show Stacy I could be free, to show her that I was willing to be my own existence.

Just as I began to doze off again, I woke up to shattering glass. A rock the size of baseball with a white piece of paper rubber-banded around it landed at the foot of my mattress. Small pieces of glass rained

onto the floor but the thin window stayed for the most part intact with spidered cracks reaching the wooden frame.

The note on the rock was written in a manly English print:

"TOM, SORRY FOR THE WINDOW. COME BY MY OFFICE ASAP. DON'T KNOCK WHEN YOU GET THERE. BC"

Boston Charley. I had no reason to trust him after that encounter I'd overheard, to leave work just to satisfy whatever he wanted, but for some reason I was drawn. Probably because he was an American or because he made me feel like I was a part of something in Delhi. I'd spent so much of my time feeling like a stranger, a bystander watching the world move, that Charley made me feel like I had a purpose in Delhi.

His wooden door swung open easily. The tapestry room was dark, with one small candle lit on the low table where Charley sat. The same place he'd sat before with his Hookah pipe the first time I met him. The room smelled like stale alcohol.

"Tom. Good, you're here," Charley said without looking up. He had his forefinger in the mouth of an amber beer bottle, spinning it on the table.

"What's up?" I asked, "Everything alright?"

"What are you doing here?"

"What? You asked me to come. With a brick through my window, that I expect you to fix, if you don't recall."

“Fuck your window. I don’t mean why are you here now in my office. I know that. It’s because I told you to come. But why are you in Delhi? What are you here for?”

I thought about what he would say if I told him that I’d been having these recurring dreams where I was a famous writer in Switzerland who’d spent time at a monastery in India. What would he say if I told him that I was loosely following what this imaginary character had done because I liked his dream life better than my own real one? I decided against explaining myself. He wouldn’t understand. “I just wanted to get away from Missouri. I needed to get away from normalcy.”

“Are you a criminal?”

“No!” I raised my voice, “That’s crazy! How could-”

“So you don’t think you could kill a man? If you had to.”

“No,” I said, “I couldn’t kill a man, Charley.”

“If you had to?”

“Like to save my own life? What’re you getting at?”

“That’s good to know,” Charley said as he took a final sip out of the amber bottle he’d been toying with. “Well, damn. I guess we can’t work together like I thought we may.”

“You kill people?”

“Not really,” Charley laughed quietly again, showing sharp white teeth. “Not me.”

“Then?”

“You’ll understand. I asked you to meet me here because I’m having a problem. Well, *we’re* having a problem.”

“We?”

“Just listen,” he said while he popped the cap off of another amber bottle of beer against the side of his little wooden table, “I do business with a man named Aarav. It’s a bit of extortion. Some locals around here pay for protection- sometimes we need to show them we mean business. Recently I needed a big front from Aarav, so I told him I was bringing in a business partner from the states that would help us in business development. Completely pulled it out of my ass so he would give me some extra cash to finance my make-believe partner’s arrival. Then by the grace of God, you came through here a couple weeks ago, and I had my chance.”

“What the fuck is this all about?”

“I told him you were a crazy motherfucker and you’d kill him if you didn’t get your cut. I said you were doing a lot of things behind the scenes so that’s why he hadn’t met you yet. It was my plan to take your cut as the front that Aarav wouldn’t otherwise give me - flawless. So I told him where you lived and told him where he could find you if he had any questions. I knew I’d talk to you before he did so that I could explain myself and so you’d be all ready to act like a crazy dude. All I really needed from you was to say that we were partners and that you were growing our business into your neighborhood. Then Aarav would give me

your money, I would pocket most of it, and give you a few bucks for your trouble. But then I got drunk and forgot to ever talk to you about any of this.”

I turned to walk away Charley, to leave his dim office and never come back. Boston Charley was a shady guy who I had no business with. He would only get me hurt.

“Just listen because I’m trying to help you,” he continued.

“Sounds like you’re trying to fuck me over.”

“Well I wasn’t trying to. I was trying to make us both a buck. And I was going to pay you something for your time, of course. The problem now is that Aarav has been watching you, and he figured out that you’re not actually developing our business. The sad twist is that he thinks you’re scamming me- that fucking idiot. He thinks you’re only driving rickshaws but that you’ve got me convinced that you’re growing my business so that I’ll pay you. Aarav told me that he’s going to kill you to solve our problem. He thinks if he kills you then he and I will both save money.”

“Are you fucking serious, Charley?”

“You have to understand my position. I couldn’t just turn around and start being honest after he made that point. I had to go along with his hunch. This guy is dangerous, and I could either say ‘Yeah Aarav, I lied about the whole thing to try to get some money out of you’ or I could say that this other American, *you that is*, must be screwing me over and

that I need help. One of those replies would get me killed and the other let's me off the hook completely."

"So you're setting me up to get killed?"

"When I first started talking to him about you, I convinced myself that you were actually a lunatic, running from the states because you were a criminal. I figured you'd jump at this opportunity to kill some guy and then join me as a partner."

"Absolutely not," I cried.

"You can't necessarily blame me," Charley said, "it's not everyday an American shows up without any bags in Delhi and begins renting an attic room over a rickshaw business. Sounds like a crazy fuck to me."

"You can't just assume that. That's not me!" I felt like I was underwater, totally out of my league.

"Well then," Charley sighed and then took a long sip from his amber bottle as he stared at me, "I think you should get the hell out of Dodge."

5.

Logic would say that I should have left for the airport and gone home, or gone to D.C. or to Zermatt even, anywhere away from India. But I didn't. I hadn't found my mystical beggar, hadn't run into a silent monk that motioned for me to follow him north. But I wasn't ready yet to give up my quest to learn like Nicholas had. I left Boston Charley's and head-

ed down the Chandni Chowk toward the train junction. Now Nicholas's Indian quest was an itinerary for what I'd do. Of course I didn't want to go straight to the Maharuti Ashram because it hadn't been recommended to me personally like it had been for Nicholas. I wanted to go somewhere that I was *destined* to go, not just somewhere Nicholas had been. I needed a physical sign.

For some reason, I had thought that things would be easier for me in India. I felt like my dreams would come alive, that I would be invited to a monastery right away and live enlightened ever after.

Now as I walked to the train junction, I felt more than ever that Nicholas was just a better man than me. Achieving his aura felt unattainable. Before I'd come to India, I'd felt like he was a man that I could become. However, in each of my dreams, things worked so easily for him. His life was effortless. Whatever he looked for, he found. Conversely, when I sought things out they were always significantly less romantic than I hoped they'd be. Nicholas went to India and found what he was looking for in almost no time. I pulled a rickshaw and almost got murdered.

I came upon six trains at the junction in Delhi all leaving the city in different directions. I had no idea where to go. I knew that Nicholas had gone north, but I thought that maybe I should head south to Hyderabad and try to meet the rural couple that had given him the original ad-

vice- if they even existed. If any of it was more than some twisted hormonal reaction, I would discover whatever I was looking for: freedom, salvation. But, I asked myself, at what point would I stop being a man on a spiritual quest and start being an ex-patriot who'd gone mad and lost himself wandering through an Indian train park?

I passed between the trains looking for, but knowing that I would never find, a small group of silent monks playing cards in one of the carts. Rather I found piles of timber, bins of soil, peppers, plants, fabrics. The tracks were quiet, and I had no idea which way to go. I wondered why there weren't other nomads looking to travel by train.

I had started to walk away from the center of the tracks where each of the six trains met in parallel. My dirty brown shoes slid over the gravel, and I decided that I would walk to the airport. I wouldn't dare go back to the Chandni Chowk where I was positive that Aarav would be waiting for me with a gun and a mind for extortion or murder.

I'd just fly back to St. Louis and plead insanity to my parents so that my father would let me take over as his assistant general manager at the convenience store. I wouldn't be proud to ask. I wouldn't be a happy man. But I'd be safe and I could say that I gave my own journey a try. If I were lucky, I would continue to find pleasure in dreams of Nicholas.

Then suddenly, as if thinking about him summoned his power, I had the first of what I could call truly *Nicholas moments*. In the silent train park, I heard *pssst, pssst* and when I turned around, I saw two white eyes poked around an opening in a train car. I walked back towards the car but kept my distance. It would be just my luck to get robbed at these train tracks. India would kick me while I'm down.

"What're you doing here?" the old, light brown face showed itself in the evening light and asked in Hindi.

"I'm looking to leave Delhi," I replied in broken Hindi that I had picked up over a few weeks. I appreciated having stayed in New Delhi for a few weeks so that I could learn to communicate.

"And go where?"

"I don't know. I'm looking for enlightenment," I felt corny admitting that, but what did I have to lose?

The face smiled, showing a surprisingly full mouth of teeth. "Giriraj. Himalayas. This train. Come sit, but be quiet because if the conductor hears us he'll kick us off no matter where. We could starve."

"The Himalayas?," I asked, "For discovery?"

"Yes, giriraj. You have to do the work, but this is the way you're looking for."

This was my chance to start a journey, so I leapt into the mostly empty car with a pile of scrap metal at the center. The light brown man sat against a dirty pillow on the edge of the car. "Thank you," I said.

“Svāgata,” he replied, “ancient men built the tower of babel but all they ought to have done was climb the Himalayas.”

The train bumped down the tracks through the entire night. The ride wasn't like the one in Nicholas's story. We didn't play cards or watch the bright, blurry green forest. Rather we were silent so that we weren't exposed when the train made stops and when men rattled the sides of the cars with flashlights. While the train moved, we braced ourselves in dark corners so that we weren't tossed across the car when the train jumped over rocks on the track. During those jolts, the scrap metal in the center of the car jostled from its pile and shot towards us at the edges. The metal was, for the most part, dull so it didn't do any serious damage. Each cart was a pressure cooker where materials shot across the cart like pinging marbles. I imagined that if the plants from another car were jostling like our metal was, the men responsible for unloading those cars would find broken stems, torn leaves.

All the while, the man I trusted to send me on the right path sat across from me smiling. Each time that I looked across at him, alarmed that we would be found and kicked off the train, alarmed that a piece of metal would take my head off, he stuck one brown finger in the air as to say, “be patient.”

I don't mean to make it seem like this man was monk-like in his serenity or in the wisdom that he exuded. When metal bolts flew across

the car and hit him in the chest, he grunted and cursed. When he dosed off during smoother portions of the ride he snored and cursed again when a bump on the track would wake him up.

This man was far from enlightened. His essence was no goal that I could set in front of myself and hope to reach. He did, however, seem to know what he was doing, where he was taking me. His single finger, wagging in the air, made me feel like riding silently in this jostling death trap would all be worth it when we reached the Himalayas.

At one point overnight, when the train moved slowly over a steady part of tracks, I was able to fall asleep. I found myself in Switzerland, as Nicholas, working in the kitchen with Alice. She diced chili peppers and I, Nicholas, used a muddler to garnish mixed drinks.

“You always want to make me drunk, Nicholas,” Alice laughed her French.

“You always want me to make you that way with your asking for another glass of wine.”

“Touché. I like to drink.” She said as she turned away from her peppers and wrapped her arms around my waist, played with my belt buckle.

I woke up after a small bolt pinged against the wall of the car above my head and fell into my lap. I looked across the dark cart and could barely make out my guide. I could only hear his congested snore. I wondered if some people simply have romantic lives and others don't, if

some people are born destined to be a Nicholas and others are born to be a Tom.

When we stopped for the last time, at the foot of the Himalayas, my guide and I had an easy time sneaking out of the train car. He motioned with one hand for me to follow him as we slid off the ledge of the car and dropped onto the tracks. The train park was much smaller than the one in Delhi. There was only one track. On the side of each of the track there were wooden crates used for storing the materials that come from the trains. There were machines which, I assumed, were used to unpack the cars. In the middle of the night the machinery was turned off and chained to posts. I made out the conductor across the park, at the front of the train, where he lit a cigarette and coughed into the silent night. We crouched as he walked into the small office, turned on a dim lamp and dropped his head onto his arms on the desk where he sat. Now we were alone on the tracks except for a boar that grunted as we passed it.

“Don’t worry. These animals are harmless if you mind your own business,” my guide said in Hindi. I nodded, and didn’t look back at the massive, scruffy pig. “You may want to sleep in my village through the night so that you don’t begin trekking the mountains in the dark. It can be dangerous.”

“Trekking?” I asked, “I’m not sure how prepared I am for that.”

“In the day time, it’s a short walk to the nearest community of monks. They will give you direction from there.”

“You know the monks?”

“Sometimes when one of our goats run from the village into the mountains, they hold it for us. Nice people and apparently spiritual.”

“How far up the mountain are they?”

“A few miles. A fine walk in the day, but at night you don’t want to run into a hungry leopard that can see much better than you.”

It was clear to me that my guide made this ride often, as he knew exactly how to navigate the tracks. We walked - he led - to a portion in the chain link fence that had been cut. He pulled part of the fence, and I crawled through the opening. He followed closely behind and jogged ahead of me, waving his arm for me to come.

I had no idea why we began to run, so I went quickly. Maybe the train conductor could see us. I thought maybe we were passing through a dark field full of the same types of sleeping animals that were the reason that I shouldn’t climb the Himalayas at night.

We passed under a wooden streetlight and my guide, running fast ahead of me, stopped and looked back. His white teeth shined bright under the light and his eyes were some of the happiest I had ever seen. “We are almost home,” he called out, and I understood why we ran. Never in my life had I been with a man so happy to return home that he

couldn't stand to walk the final hundred yards. The Himalayas were happiness for my guide. Maybe I would find that same feeling.

The next morning when I left from the foothills, the entire mountain village gathered to send me off. It was only a crowd of about thirty or forty people, probably all coming from the same set of ancestors- a common set of great-grandparents most likely.

When they saw me off, I had almost nothing to my name. I had one set of damp clothes- a tee shirt and shorts, socks and a dirty pair of shoes. My guide had washed my clothes when we arrived at his little hut, but they had failed to completely dry over night. The head of the village, a man slightly older than the one who had brought me from Delhi, wrapped a red and cream-colored blanket around my shoulders that fell below my waist.

"You'll need this some nights. It's cold up there," he said.

"Thank you," I replied as I wrapped the blanket tighter around my chest and my guide appeared behind me putting his hands on my shoulders.

"Thank you my guide. You have been beyond gracious," I hugged him and we did not let go of each other for quite a while. I wondered why he had been so helpful to me. Perhaps he appreciated that an American was looking for something in the Himalayas rather than in New York City, on Wall Street or Park Avenue.

I arrived at the camp of monks within two hours of beginning my hike. It was early in the morning, but I was greeted by a group of seven or eight monks who were gardening outside their small wooden hut. They shouted to me in loud Hindi. These monks were not the same monks that Nicholas had come to know, they weren't silent. In fact they were boisterous when they first spotted me. They leapt into the air, waving their arms and yelling "Here, here!" towards me. I made out *hellos* and *welcomes*, but a lot of the other communication was excited and primal shouting. Their smiles suggested that they were happy to see a guest.

About fifty yards beyond the loud group of monks, was a wooden hut that I guessed could house forty monks with room still for a kitchen and a meditation room like the Maharuti Ashram in my dream. This garden that the monks tended to was not as elaborate as the one that Nicholas had been to. There were no six-pointed star patterns that wove between each other. There weren't any orchids.

The major difference, and I suppose in favor of this garden, was that here in the Himalayas there was much more color than in the dream garden. I recognized magnolias, lilies, peonies of green, pink, white, and yellow that contrasted against the brown Himalayan ground. Each of these flowers were brighter than the ones that I'd tended to in my mother's garden growing up. This garden needed to be cared for daily because

flowers like these couldn't survive on the dry mountainside without significant attention.

The monks came closer and each shouted over the next. "Welcome!" they called before another series of excited shouts.

"Hello," I said in the best accent I had, "and thank you." I was feeling mixed emotions. It was nice that these monks could speak to me. But this was so different than Nicholas's experience. I worried that if I was too busy listening to Hindi then I would never hear God's voice.

"You know the language of the Hindus, I see. Impressive for an American." Normally I would have been surprised that he was so able to pick my nationality, but after the soccer from my dream, I was willing to believe that monks could do anything.

"I picked up a lot in Delhi. You choose not to be silent?"

"Of course not," he laughed, "God made us to speak so we ought to speak."

"So do you speak every language that God has given us," I replied.

"We were born here so we speak Hindi," he said, "I hope God isn't mad at us."

"Do you worry that Hindi or any other language can't capture exactly what your feelings are?"

"That's a natural worry for an inquisitive young man," he said, "I'm not sure that silence will mitigate that fear either. I suppose that's

the nature of all communication. Come for a tour.” We walked into the wooden building.

The walls of the monastery foyer were colored in splashes of bright paint. Oranges with yellows and pinks created webs that colored the off-white walls. Down the main hallway I noticed a group of five monks sitting on the floor cross-legged and holding hands. They reminded me of a group of elementary school girls at recess, except instead of giggling to each other they were sitting quietly, some closed eyes and others open. As we approached the group, I heard one of the monks whispering and after a brief pause another responded. Then the monks returned to silence. Oddly enough, there seemed to be no method to their madness- not exactly how I had expected my first monk experience to go.

The rest of the tour reinforced my first impression. The small mountain monastery was covered in bright paint, and around every corner there seemed to be a group of monks – maybe two, maybe ten – sitting together without any apparent purpose. As we passed the fifth group of monks, sitting by a large glass window on the second floor that overlooked a small valley, I asked, “Are the monks on break?”

“On break,” the lead monk laughed, “Is that what this looks like?”

“I mean no disrespect,” I replied.

“None taken,” he said, “Just funny to hear what an outsider thinks. We haven’t had a guest in some time.”

I recall a few weeks later, when I was still a very fresh monk at this unnamed mountain monastery, thinking again about the monk’s response and still not understanding what he’d meant. They’d given me a room immediately. It was a small room, but I found humor in the fact that it was nearly a replica of my freshman dormitory at Georgetown, down to the window’s position by the bed. The only difference was that my new room lacked those cheap wooden dresser and shelves.

I was initiated without any formal ceremony, without any effort on my part. The first morning that I woke up at the monastery, I found a neatly folded stack of yellow robes. I suppose at that point in time I was officially made a monk. It seemed too *easy* to me, I was angry. When I opened the door to the hallway and found the small stack at my feet, I looked both ways down the hall, fully expecting to be the butt of some cruel prank or at the beginning of a long induction. All I found was an older monk, the one who must have dropped off my robes, walking down the hall away from me. He was wearing the same color. We were equals already. I pulled the pile into my room.

The monastery was a strange one. I found myself often wondering if monks were funded by the state because then my questions would be answered. I would understand that these monks were faking the whole

damn thing so that they'd be fed, clothed, and given shelter. These monks weren't doing *anything* that happened at the Maharuti Ashram.

I sat on the foot of my bed, toeing my new clothing, asking myself questions about who these people were. Why did they speak? Why didn't they make me starve to prove my worth, why were they so jolly? Did they not understand the gravity of being stuck on this Earth? I wondered, to the point of stress, why these monks didn't seem to focus on improving the self in the name of removing the Earth's pain.

Since these monks didn't share any early meditations or prayers, in fact since these monks seemed not to even have a definitive list of monastery chores, I decided to take a nap before going down to the main hall for something to eat and some circle-sitting.

As soon as I fell asleep, thank whatever God was looking over these monks, I opened my eyes to Alice's hand pinching the skin on the back of my own as we sat on a bench in a foreign park.

"Oh don't you just love Barcelona, Nicholas? The pinchos and the empanadas. And I know you'll love the paella- you're such a tourist. My uncle's apartment is just off Las Ramblas in the Gothic area above a famous restaurant. If the chef wasn't his landlord and if my uncle wasn't such a dedicated tenant, we could never get in."

I could tell Alice was excited. She had good reason to be. This was the first time, in more offers than I could remember, that I agreed to

take more than a day from my writing. There comes a time during every novel, however, where I've slapped myself or dumped a cold glass of Pinot over my head and said, "Damn it, Nicholas. You're not just a writer, you're a God damn *human*." At those points, I've taken a weekend. For Alice, that meant a week. Then I scramble home, binge write to make up for lost time and out of fear of losing my deal. Then I enter the same depression I thought I might leave upon recognizing my own autonomy for a few days.

That's the thing I learned about being a writer. Writers are not these free creatures that sit on lakes, or mountainsides, and channel truth. Some of them, I'll admit, do sit on mountainsides, but they are slaves to the page. Slaves to every word, to the publisher, to the deadline, to the reader. Oh, how many days I've wished that I could be the least talented – or rather least recognized – writer in the universe. Then the page would be free, expectation extinguished.

We turned down Las Ramblas, and approached the Liceu Theatre. "You know my uncle once told me that I would grow up to dance ballet at the Liceu," Alice said.

"I think you ought to give it a try right now," I laughed.

"Tais-toi!" she scolded.

"Why not try?" I asked, "You certainly have the flexibility."

Alice came across my cheek with a short slap. “You better not talk like that in front of my uncle,” she said, “I can’t believe I put up with you.”

“Me either,” I said and she rubbed my cheek with the side of her hand before tiptoeing to kiss the red mark she’d made. She slid her hand into my back pocket and we walked on towards this *renowned* paella restaurant.

“As I was saying, *Nicholas*,” Alice had recently learned how to enunciated English words for affect, “My uncle told me I’d one day be a ballerina here in Barcelona.”

“Yes, right, and you don’t want to try it now.”

“What happened was that when my father started to make his fortune and become a wine collector rather than just a drinker, I found a love for something much more agreeable and much less grueling.”

“So it was wine that kept you from being a ballerina?”

“Have you ever seen a ballerina with this figure?”

“I suppose not.”

“But you say I’m still flexible?”

“I suppose so.”

“Then I’d say wine has been a nice love,” she said, “I just wish that my uncle had dropped the ballerina dream when I did. I’m sure he’ll scold me when sees me, say that I’m overweight for the stage. How can I

explain that I'm three years beyond the stage anyway? I have no more desire."

"Just smile," I said, "and think about what he would look like on stage."

Alice laughed as we walked towards what she called the Mirador de Colom. I chuckled and reached for her hand in my own pocket.

"Alice," I asked later that day on a walk through the Ciutadella, "have you ever heard of Paschal's wager?" I'd read a lot of philosophy lately and literature on the history of mathematics. Paschal was everywhere. He had a hand in so much- a renaissance man with honest passions. The real renaissance men have true passions rather than just the desire to be well rounded, but that's for a different time.

Paschal had interested me when I saw his name come up in so many different books, but I hadn't found any of his work that really caught my eye until I read his wager. Basically stating that there either is a God or there isn't a God, he said that man should live as if He exists because it's better to give up a little hedonism in exchange for a shot at salvation. Of course if God doesn't exist and man acts that way then he'll have a ball, and if God does exist and man acts as if He doesn't, then he's in for a troubling afterlife.

"I studied it in school," she said.

"What do you think of it?"

“You’re asking if I think it’s smart to hedge your bets for the afterlife?”

“Exactly.”

“Well,” she started and sighed. “Let’s assume there is a God anyway. If we make that assumption, there is still a fundamental question we need to ask: how twisted do you think our God is?”

“So the dilemma is if you think that God would actually design a world where a person is truly punished for having doubt?”

“Right. So if you think that our God is that kind of being, then I’d suggest living a life where you feel like God is pleased with you. If you don’t play the wager then you’re fucked, so you might as well play. You might as well live the life that the masses think God wants. You’ll feel like you’ve set yourself up for salvation as best you can. Right now, as far as the consensus is concerned, that means you ought to be a Christian.”

“But if you don’t think that God would punish those who doubt or those who take slightly different paths?”

“Well then it’s easy- don’t play the wager. Be good for the sake of goodness, I suppose but for no other reason. If you think God is *fair* then you shouldn’t play because playing the wager can make a man look like a jerk, even if he really isn’t one. Choosing to live a pious life for the reason that you think it’s all that God wants- that’s bullshit.”

“Go on, Alice.”

“So if you think God is ultimately accepting of all, then you ought to just live your life to maximize your relationships on Earth rather than living it for some religious hope that banks on the fact that God believes in winners and losers. Those who play the wager, those following the organized paths, seem to be good for nothing but debate and argument.”

“I see where you’re coming from, but I also see the merits to organized religion. Christianity, for example, creates family. Every Sunday in London I used to see families, young and old, walk into church around ten and then at half past eleven, they were back, congregating, on the stone steps outside the building. They talked, the kids played, they walked to lunch. It was really a beautiful sight to see it happen. I didn’t care an ounce about what was going on in the church, but I thought the bonds that it helped created were wonderful.”

“I agree,” Alice started, “I’ve seen the same sight in every city I’ve lived in. Let me tell you about what I saw on Sunday mornings in Paris, though. I’m sure you would have seen the same in any other city if you’d been looking for it. I saw groups of people congregate outside of their church and walk down the street to lunch. I’ve seen those people pass groups from other churches and not even acknowledge them, their fellow man. Sometimes the groups did acknowledge each other with a shallow smile, maybe a handshake between men. But after they passed each other, both groups returned to their own and began to gossip. *Can you believe what they do at church? They don’t even pray! I heard they don’t ask*

God for forgiveness. If they weren't whispering it, they were thinking it at least subconsciously. Don't you find that strange?"

"I do. It's wrong. It's shallow like you said and it's counterintuitive to the relationships that religion ought to create."

"Religion has created *many* beautiful families. In a sense, that's the problem! If we could unite under the idea that God doesn't pick favorites than we would have a singular family. Now wouldn't that be nice?"

"It would be. But it's too idealistic. One of the best things about humanity is that we have differences- different interests, beliefs, points of view," I replied.

"That's all well. We ought to continue growing these differences because diversity is one of the things that makes our race so special. But we don't need to construct differences for the sake of exclusion."

"The religions are quite inclusive though. If you decided one set of beliefs is for you, then they gladly accept you."

"They accept you on the grounds that you wholeheartedly believe in their scripture and that you take all others to be false!"

She'd made a good point. Alice was the proof that being thoughtful was the most important trait a person could have. On paper, Alice didn't look like the most impressive person in the world. She came from money, didn't have a job, and hadn't even finished her schooling. Regardless, she was thoughtful, and she observed everything. I fancied myself a

deep thinker - you've got to be one to some extent if you want to write well - but Alice's thoughts were beyond mine. She noticed things that I didn't. As we turned the corner and walked up the steps to the apartment, I wondered if that connection, the way that her thoughts were sort of complementary to mine, was a part of love.

I woke up with the sun glaring through my window onto my pillow- the same problem that I'd had at Georgetown. It always happened around ten o'clock in the summer months back in D.C., but here I had no idea what time it was. Although if there were ever monks who kept standard time, it would be these modern monks who speak and give any stranger a robe.

Nicholas was on my mind. I'd been letting him dictate my life for some time now. No matter how my geographic location changed, I still hadn't felt like I'd found any semblance of personal or worldly discovery. As I sat in my Himalayan dorm room, I wondered if it was time to stop with the Nicholas stuff. If it was all just dreams, just a weird reaction happening in my head then I'd really fucked up. Maybe if it was a tumor that was giving me these strange visions that each built upon the last one then sitting in India wouldn't be the smartest decision I could make for my health. But maybe, I thought, if I died I'd be freer than anything I could find on Earth. Tumor or no tumor, maybe I should continue my

quest, because the worst thing that could happen to me might actually be a blessing.

I also wondered why I was so attracted to becoming Nicholas. I'd had impulsive dreams in the past- in high school I would be hooking up with a cheerleader that was in second period chemistry with me, in college I was drinking beers with my comparative politics professor. But in those instances I never acted on the impulse. I never made a move on the cheerleader, never took her into the locker room underneath the stadium. And in college, after my Comparative Politics final exam, all I could muster was a "thanks for a great semester" when I shook the professor's hand.

Why now? I guessed it was because a string of dreams seems more legitimate than a single one. And let's not forget that in these dreams I *was* Nicholas. As I sat in bed I wondered what he was. Did he exist in some parallel universe where everything is the nearly the same? How could I close my eyes and be a different man? I wondered when Nicholas closed his eyes, if he got a glimpse into my life. Boy, that would *suck*. Nicholas, a famous writer, his life changed forever after one published book, and he'd dream about monitoring rotten dessert at the Cheesecake Factory. He'd dream about getting cheated on by his girlfriend and then meeting the worst, most illegitimate group of monks to ever pray in the Eastern Hemisphere. If I were Nicholas, I'd never sleep.

I stood up from bed to look out the window. Dozens of monks were sitting in circles on the back lawn. They were talking quietly, basically relaxing. I wondered what each of them was saying. I wondered how each of them ended up at this monastery.

As I looked at the circles, the monks sitting in complete peace, enjoying each other's company. I had my second Nicholas moment. I'm not sure why I even call them those. I suppose these things that happened to me were things that would have absolutely happened to Nicholas, so that's why. It may be more precise to call them moments that kept my journey on track.

I stood silently at the window and after a few moments heard, "Join them so that you'll learn to leave." I spun around to find that I was still alone in my room. It was strange the way it sounded. I felt like my ears never processed the noise, that the sound didn't completely come from an external source. I felt like the words had been planted in my mind.

Nicholas would have said that God was with him, that God spoke to him and urged him on. Maybe that is what happened. I wasn't sure I'd earned that. I hadn't done anything. But, maybe I was *special*. Maybe this was meant to be, God was with me too. Or maybe it was just my brain, coming to a realization that had shocked me to the point that I felt like it hadn't come from within me. Whatever it was, I put on my yellow robe and walked down to the garden.

6.

I'd like to step away from my story for a just a moment to try to best explain the way I was feeling as I walked through the monastery and prepared myself to enter the garden. The reason that I step away here is because at this point in time – where I am in my tale – I had made a change, but I didn't even know it. My journey had just begun.

Growing up, through college, and then even in my adult relationship with Stacy, I had never been a guy that ripped the band-aid off. I wasn't the type of person that made a decision and went with it. I had realized as I spent time in India, so often alone with no one to talk to, that I was the type of guy that let events and decisions slowly seep around me until something was so obvious or so uncomfortable that action had to be taken. The Stacy situation for example- boy did I draw that one out.

I made a decision that was out of character when I flew to India on a whim. In that instance, I had somehow figured out how to block my decision-making process from my own mind. I never questioned the decision as I made it. It seemed like my best option, for some time my only option.

In India, I had learned to say *fuck it* and jump into some situation. *Fuck it*: I'll pull the rickshaw. *Fuck it*: I'll join this stranger on the train. *Fuck it*: I'll hike to an unnamed monastery in the Himalayas. It was

only right that I said the same and joined the monks in whatever ritual they all participated in.

At this point in my story, I hadn't yet realized that saying *fuck it* is synonymous with becoming one with others, with the world. But, I feel like I have to share that now so that you can come to appreciate what these monks gave me- it was something after all.

What I mean is that when I used to let circumstances pile around me and grow until they were so intense and uncomfortable that someone else would take action, I was basically keeping the world at bay. For my pre-India life, I made decisions that weren't true to what I really wanted and then I rationalized them as best I could. Paychecks helped. But when I learned to say fuck it and jump into the unknown, I learned to connect to the world in ways that I previously hid from. I met people, I appreciated things, I felt that I was bigger than my body. I felt that I was every connection I'd made and that each tie was critical to my self.

It's funny that here I am, saying these things now, because even listening to myself I feel like this can't be Tom Tibbult. Then I realize that maybe I've got some Nicholas in me or maybe I'm bigger than even that. I hope this interjection doesn't spoil my story. I just want you to know this now because we're heading to a point where I need you to say *fuck it* and jump in with me.

I joined the biggest circle of monks in the garden. The more the merrier, I thought, so I could figure out what was going on, what these monks were whispering, why they would stare into each other's eyes and what that meant.

When I sat down, the oldest monk in the group said *namastē* and the rest of the group nodded. "Namastē," I replied as the circle resumed its silence. The Himalayan weather made me feel close to God. I felt like I had finally opened my eyes, seen the blue sky hanging low above us, and immediately understood what my guide had meant when he said that I'd have to do the work on my own but that the Himalayas were the place I needed to be.

I hadn't taken the time to appreciate where I was, but now, sitting cross legged in the cool mountain air, I wondered why men had ever conspired to build a tower to the Heavens while the Himalayas stood as tall as man ever needed. These monks, whether their style appealed to me or not, whether Nicholas would approve or not, were doing one thing right- they were living close to Heaven. I made a mental note- easy to do in the silence we sat in- to stay in these mountains no matter what.

It would be a hard sell for me to leave anyway. The way the deep brown dirt gave way to white and pink and yellow flowers. Then the way those flowers grew up the trunks of oak trees whose green leaves mixed with the clear blue sky. I thought for a moment, if these strange monks would disappear that I might recognize the Garden of Eden around me.

Or if the biblical God didn't feel like exposing himself, all I had to do was look through the wispy clouds to the west, at the mountain peaks looming above the weather and its power to recognize how close I was to the Zeus that some of the world's most powerful nations had worshipped before me.

After what seemed to be about a half hour one of the younger monks spoke up. "Have you heard about the new monastery?" he asked.

"Our own?" another replied.

"Yes, the American is financing it," the young monk replied and my ears perked. American, who?

"American? I thought we were going to refuse his help, his dirty money," a third joined in. Dirty money, it must be Charley, I thought.

"We have no choice. We need the new building, and I don't see any of you going into the city to beg. If you like your life of leisure you'll let him finance it."

The group returned to silence. I felt a bead of sweat drip down my forehead. Boston Charley, I wasn't so sure that I wanted to see him again. I didn't know the kind of trouble he could pull me into. I hadn't yet forgotten my recent and narrow escape.

I found it odd that no one in the circle asked me if I knew the man. How many Americans could there be in Northern India? Didn't they know I came from Delhi?

"I know the man," I said quietly.

“The benefactor?” the oldest monk quickly replied.

“If it’s the man I think it is, an American in Delhi, I know him.”

“They call him Charley,” the youngest monk said and each of the others in our circle turned towards me. I shouldn’t have spoken up, I realized. I never wanted to command this kind of attention in my first few minutes as an active member of a new community. I had just begun to appreciate my place.

“Yes, Charley, that’s him,” I said.

“And you’re his friend?” the oldest monk asked through pursed lips. I wished, with all of my heart, that I could go back a few seconds and keep my mouth shut. The monks looked at me, not like I was here to sabotage them, but like they ought to be on different behavior. Even though I doubted their spirituality, I’d never wanted to be an outcast.

“Hardly,” I replied to a collective sigh from the group.

“As you can tell,” the old monk started, “we aren’t happy to take his money. Do you know his business?”

“His business,” I laughed, “I have no idea. I only met him twice, maybe three times, but he almost had me killed in Delhi.”

“See!” the old monk spoke loudly, “See! This American nearly killed one of our own, and we want his money?” *One of our own.* For some reason when it was verbalized, I relished in their acceptance of me. Maybe Nicholas would have something to say when I fell asleep, but

maybe he would do it in that own special way of his, leaving it up for me to figure out where I stand, who I am.

“We have no choice,” another replied, “the monastery is falling apart. It’s not safe.” I looked at the back of the small building in front of me at cracks running down the pillars that held the second floor deck. The window frames were rotting.

My stomach knotted. I felt an unjustified fear of Boston Charley. I didn’t want to see him, didn’t want these monks to associate me with his business. Right when I discovered how close I may be to God, Charley and his sly business was right there to remind me how quickly it could go away.

“Why would he even want to give this monastery money? It doesn’t seem like this peace fits with his other business decisions,” I spoke up. The monks faced me, but no one spoke up. Finally, when one monk spoke, it was in that close-to-Hindi that I didn’t understand and the circle joined hands to start a ritual.

I joined in but my curiosity persisted and I felt a growing suspicion about these people’s proximity to Boston Charley. Something was fishy, and I vowed to keep my eyes peeled. Trouble in paradise already, I wondered, as I squeezed hands with my neighbors who each avoided my eye until the sunset and we entered the monastery for an evening meal.

My days at the monastery began to blur together. Three sunsets became seven and seven became twenty. The routine never changed. I woke up when the sun came through my window and then made my way into the garden, joining a circle of monks that I hadn't sat with the previous day. We went on like that until lunch and then after lunch and before dinner. Sometimes the monks were talkative and sometimes they were quiet. Sometimes they talked about weather, and only occasionally would I hear someone mention *that American*.

Every time Charley came up, I questioned the validity of the monks around me. It seemed like their whole production was bullshit. I wondered why they didn't make formal prayers, why they weren't stoic. I'd decided that these monks were just unique, like a special kind of troop. But after Charley had come up, I began to feel like the whole production could be a fake or a front. It made me uncomfortable, and I found myself avoiding the same eyes that avoided me on that first day in the garden.

One evening, maybe a month into my stay with the monks while I was still feeling out the whole Charley thing, I had a strange experience at dinner. The food was surprisingly good at the monastery. The garden at the entrance of the monastery was small and apparently just for show. The vegetables that grew near the flowers at the entrance were seldom picked, and when they were they looked unappetizing to say the least. As

I spooned sweet potatoes and an Indian kale onto my plate, I wondered how the monks were being fed. Charley was on my mind – he had to be behind it – but I couldn't understand how the monks came into play.

We ate dinner in silence. At first the rhythm of chewing threw me off. I never would have guessed what power fifty mouths chewing in unison had. As time passed I got used to the sound like a person gets used to the smell of a new car after its been driven down the block. As I finished my potatoes, I stared across the room at splotch of orange and red paint that covered the dining hall's largest wall. The colors mixed together and splashed around each other and I thought it looked like a red universe and an orange universe were starting the big bang next to each other.

As the red and orange started to play tricks on my eyes, swirling and dripping – that's what staring for too long will do – I found myself staring across a table at Alice.

"It's amazing that we can see the Sagrada Família from here. Don't you love this restaurant?"

"I love it," I said, "and I love what Gaudi had the guts to do."

"The guts? You don't think he just had different perspective?"

"He definitely had a unique perspective," I said, "but I think more so he was generations ahead of his time."

"That's what they all say. Did you just read that in a book?" Alice laughed as she brought a spoonful of rice to her mouth.

“I don’t mean architecturally or intellectually,” I raised my eyes at Alice. I knew how much she loved when I took an approach she hadn’t thought of yet.

“Do say more,” she said.

“He was ahead of his time – way ahead of his time – with regards to self-assurance. People want to be accepted. Even the craziest architecture in London, or in Paris, or Zurich looks like an Earthly building. No one, besides Gaudi, has had the guts to build something that seems to be from under the sea or from another planet.”

“Well I’d argue that form follows function so that’s why buildings look like buildings, Nicholas,” Alice replied.

“That’s the problem with architecture these days- people want their building to stand out but everyone is too self conscious to create something that a person will pass and wonder what the fuck it is. People are too scared to let function follow form.”

“Gaudi’s work is unique, but it’s still functional Nicholas.”

“Of course it is. It would be bad architecture, bad art, if it wasn’t. But he built from within rather than from expectation. He cared more about form than any other architect I’ve ever seen, because he wasn’t scared of function. He’d be generations ahead of our time, still, Alice.”

“You make a good point,” she said and then bit her bottom lip. She loved it when I showed my passions.

Suddenly there was in front of me but a wave of orange and red, the chewing of crunchy and too dry kale blasted my eardrums. I looked across the table at an older monk who had been in my garden circle. He nodded and smiled showing a mouth full of orange sweet potatoes. I pinched myself and it hurt. I was awake and judging by the reactions of the monks around me, I had never been asleep at the table. I'd gone to the dream world without ever falling asleep.

To the slowing tune of chewing, I remembered that as a child for my twelfth or maybe thirteenth birthday my mother gave me a notebook and a set of plastic pens. On the first page of that notebook, I doodled a series of Mars landings with stick figures discovering alien life. When the stick figures blew up after a malfunction with the jet fuel tank, I ripped the page out of the notebook and decided to stop my young career as a cartoonist.

On the next page I started to write a story. I wrote about a boy who wanted nothing more than to leave the Midwest. In less than a page, probably a hundred words, he grew up and got a scholarship to go to some fictional college in New England. At that college he was inducted into a pseudo-secret society that ate roasted duck and filet mignon every evening.

I recognized that I really did have a different kind of mind as a preteen. I'd never been concerned with becoming a professional athlete or a movie star. I'd wanted to be elite. I'd researched the Ivy League and discovered Finals clubs, Eating clubs, the Skull and Bones. I wanted to be a part of some long line of prestige. That was a lofty dream for a kid from Missouri.

By early high school I'd realized that it wouldn't happen. I had the academic record and the test scores to go to some tier of schools just below the elite. I'd fulfilled that in attending Georgetown. When I'd realized that my dream was ending, my writing did too. For a few weeks, I had tried to write new characters who attended exclusive parties that required nothing short of black tie. I found myself scratching those pages out, getting angry at the characters for reminding me of the life that I wouldn't have.

Just before I left for college, I cursed Missouri and the luck that I had. I hated the middle class. I hated that I came from a wealthy enough family to attend a great college but not a *special* one. I often found myself thinking, if I had just been born into extreme wealth, I could have been a legacy to any school, into any exclusive club. Or if I had just been dirt poor, I could have been one of those wild success stories that turns nothing into everything. In the middle class I was trapped. I was trapped in the thirty percent. I was trapped in a nice home but nothing people gaped at, at a nice school but nothing that turned people's heads. I knew

I would be fucking trapped into a good career that would pay enough but wouldn't drop any jaws.

I knew that I was going to live the type of life where one day I would go to Europe with my wife, and it would be a once in a lifetime experience. I would show people the photo album for years. That pissed me off- *once in a lifetime*. I never wanted a fucking photo album because I wanted the type of life where I spent so much time in Europe that collecting my photos would be frivolous.

Maybe, here in the Himalayas, I was finally realizing my jealousy. That had to be it. Nicholas had it all. His pedigree wasn't new news, of course, but God damn what I would have done to have his life.

When I got to my room after dinner, to take some personal time, I slapped myself. *Who are you*, I asked. *Figure this out*. I wanted to know who Nicholas was, where he was. I knew if I went to Barcelona right now, to the Sagrada Familia, I wouldn't find him. I knew if I went to the Swiss Alps, he wouldn't be there. Was he only in my head? If I was him, why couldn't I *be* him?

Before, for the last few months when I'd closed my eyes and seen Nicholas, I hadn't felt taunted. I'd felt like I had a unique gift, the ability to see a different world- something that could help me shape my own. But when his world encroached on mine - if I were to continue seeing his life when I was sitting awake eating a meal - I wasn't sure I could take it.

It was cruel. It was a constant reminder to who I hadn't been born, or worse to who I hadn't become.

I sat on the edge of my bed in that Himalayan dorm room fingering the thin rope that was used to tie my yellow robe around my waist. I ran five fingers through my tangled hair and pressed through a knotted tangle. I had no history of headaches or migraines, I'd rarely caught the common cold growing up. But here, sitting with my robe off of my shoulders, the cool mountain air flowing through my window and making the hair on my arms and chest stand, my head felt like it was ready to burst into a few thousand uneven pieces.

That white rope in my hands- I wondered what it would feel like around my neck, if I made a slipknot and pulled tighter and tighter until I couldn't breathe. I could hold it long enough to end this mess if I had to. I could hold it if it meant I'd forever forget the mediocrity of my lot. I went as far to put that white rope around my neck, I felt the brittle fibers tickle the soft skin under my Adam's apple.

But what's the point in setting you up for a suicide? I never tightened that rope. I didn't kill myself in that room. And now I feel like I should apologize for stepping out of this story at such a critical moment, but I think with hindsight being twenty-twenty, maybe it's better to tell you a bit from my current perspective rather than making you run

through the hedge maze that was my own thought process sitting that dorm room.

I suppose this is the storyteller's dilemma. The hindsight is so clear, but the story must be presented as it happened so that you can feel how I felt. However, I think it's fair at some times to talk to you, the reader, and explain what happened. It's got to be better to approach some things with the inherent knowledge and recognition of future.

It's still easy to recall what I felt like sitting there, confused, having no idea how I even ended up in India. Now I can see it clearly: I'd run from Stacy and Connelly, conveniently chasing Nicholas in my dream, got stuck in Delhi looking for the same romanticism and enlightened destiny that he'd found. I'd been scared that Nicholas wasn't real. I made my journey slightly different than his so that I could protect myself. I hadn't gone to Hyderabad because I'd worried that if I went to the places he went and they didn't exist or if the people there had never met him, everything would be ruined. So I tried to forge my own journey, simply inspired by his, and apparently that had failed miserably.

There had been flashes of brilliance- promising moments and a wonderful realization that God was in the mountains. But then real life always came back to smack me across the face- Boston Charley, some sort of symbol of hedonism that threatened to end my pursuit of deliverance before it even really started. He had nearly killed me in Delhi and he had a strange influence over the monks I lived with by paying for their

food and a new building. Financing the monks was probably some form of repentance for him- his version of a confession.

So I've realized that maybe it wasn't even important to mention the few details of how I sat in my room with a headache and my hands wrapped around that rope belt. Maybe it's fine to avoid the details about how I considered killing myself, how I wondered how much it would hurt to pull that thin rope tighter and tighter around my neck. Thank God I didn't follow through with the thing, because I had so much more to find.

In the end those things aren't important because this isn't a story about a young man's wandering off into the world to find nothing more than Death waiting, regretting that he had to do his work so early.

This, of course, is about a journey. A journey is one that any of us could have had. So please don't be angry with me that I've chosen for the both of us to skip ahead and avoid wasting our time with inconsequential thoughts of suicide in a dorm room tucked away into the Himalayas.

Before we jump back in, I want you to know that when I finally let the rope off my neck, I felt like I'd made it through a long storm, through all of my confusion. Finally I asked myself what *I* wanted. It was time to reevaluate who I was, who *Tom Tibbult* was. I'd been passive with Stacy, I'd been impulsive in chasing what Nicholas had found. Both of those things had made me who I was, and yet were made by who I was-

there was no denying the truths to either of those sides. I decided to leave the monastery.

It shouldn't go unmentioned however, that as I walked out of the monastery, through the same gates that I had been welcomed at, one of the oldest monks in the group approached me.

"You're leaving?" he asked.

"Yes, I've decided that I must," I replied, grabbing ahold of his wrinkled, brown hand as to say thank you in the way that we had become accustomed.

"Good," he said, "you ought to leave."

"Ought to?" I asked involuntarily.

"Yes, I had come to your room earlier to tell you this now, but I sensed that you were in a place of deep thought that I did not want to interrupt. It seems as if I may have chosen wisely not to do so."

"I just feel as if this isn't necessarily the right place for me."

"And your feeling is *correct*," he said in English. "Listen," he continued, "I was in your position when I was young. I wanted to find things. I wanted to find faith, and I wanted faith to take me to a place I had never been before. Life gets in the way. You become some type of monk and you make no progress. That's the thing. With faith you can make no progress, make no progress, make no progress, and then one day there's an explosion of advancement in your faith and your understanding."

“It’s like the stone cutter. The one hundredth strike that cracks the stone is only effective because of the ninety-nine that came before it. Faith is the same way, and I wasn’t strong enough to keep striking the stone. I turned to this monastery, this faux-Ashrama, because it was *comfortable*. So heed my advice. Climb this mountain- go to a place where no man can reach you and then renounce yourself. Become one with each of your surroundings, within and beyond your senses. Then you will find what you’re looking for, what I was too weak to go after.

If I needed any further motivation, I’d gotten it. I bowed my head, as is custom, and the old monk kissed my forehead. I walked through the wooden gate, past the flowers and the garden. I never looked back, but rather towards the sky, towards the mountain peaks that would answer my existence.

7.

I hiked up the mountain, further and further from the monastery, determined to distance myself from those monks, from anything having to do with Charley and anything that I felt was less than a full fledged effort at enlightened knowledge or purpose- What the hell did I know of the meaning of knowledge and purpose? When I left the small hut on the cusp of the foothills, I officially had nothing. My clothes had been taken when I swapped them out for the yellow robes that first morning. It was a daunting task ahead of me to hike the Himalayas bare-

foot and in a thin robe. I expected snakes and other animals, but I was sure I could avoid those if danger was eminent. I worried about the blisters I would get, maybe the cuts between my toes that were guaranteed when walking the mountain trails without support.

Despite my rashness in leaving, without any supplies, without any plan, in my stomach I could feel excitement, maybe a bit of anxiety too, to begin the grueling journey. I saw that mountain trek as my way of earning what I wanted to find. Job had to live hopelessly in a whale- I could walk a few miles towards uncertainty.

Surprisingly most of the early walking was easy. Walking paths were clearly marked for herders, and I walked on soft dirt pounded daily by the feet of thousands of sheep. When I had to cross an unmarked area or traverse a part of the mountain that hadn't been walked often, I was lucky to find flat rocks that were not punishing.

I knew that as my hike continued, the terrain would only become less forgiving so I walked as far as I could on the light dirt and flat rocks, even into the night, because I was sure that I wouldn't be so lucky on later days.

I wasn't sure, however, what I was even looking for. A few times I wondered if maybe I was looking, frankly, for a more romantic suicide than I could have given myself at the monastery. Maybe this was about ending on top of a mountain as close to the Heavens as possible. So

much nicer than leaving my body pale and cold, draped across the floor in an old wooden dorm room.

But that wasn't exactly right. I didn't want to die. I wanted to find something special, and I had a gut feeling that if I kept walking, kept hiking, I'd reach a place that no man had ever reached. I'd be at some bizarre, unique peak that no herder would dare hike to. Maybe there I would find answers. Maybe there I could see the world through eyes that would teach me about my essence.

The first night was quiet. I stopped hiking when the sun had set so low behind the mountain ridge that I could no longer look for roots and sharp twigs that threatened my feet. I settled on the highest ground in my immediate area. On a mound the size of a small truck, I had room to lie down and also try my luck with a fire on the other side.

As a boy, I'd been shown how to start a campfire, but what I learned was that that it took a great deal of luck - much more of that than skill - to have any sort of success in the endeavor. I never found the luck on my hikes through various state parks in Missouri and Illinois, but I was glad I hadn't because apparently my luck had been storing, waiting for a time in the Himalayas when I could use light and warmth for more than show.

It turned out that the fire I was able to create was more of a series of small flames that each went out after a few minutes of sputtering

and failing to spread. The flames didn't produce any light really, and hardly any warmth, but they brought some comfort and a sense of home that I hadn't felt or realized I needed until I had it.

The next day, walking through a dry valley, I stopped under a pine tree. That tree, which was such a strange sight, needed water as badly as I did. I developed a strange relationship with the pine. It was a friend for shading me, for keeping me cool, for giving me a place to pick the sharp rocks off of the balls of my feet. But I developed a strangely competitive mindset with the tree. Maybe I was dehydrated. I felt myself a competitor in some constructed battle where one would survive the heat and dryness and the other would fail. I found myself determined to outlast that tree. Looking back on that moment, all I can say is *whatever works*.

As I prepared to leave the tree and continue venturing through the hot valley between two massive peaks, I stubbed my toe on a raised piece of earth, on a strange, remarkably square, solid piece of raised earth. I hadn't seen any area of dirt so clearly defined and as flat as that piece, and to be tucked under the only tree within eyesight, something was fishy. I dropped to the ground and dug like a Labrador digging to hide a bone.

In less work than I'd expected I hit something hard and gold. *Treasure*, I thought I was going to be rich, and I ran through the rest of

my life. It was rather easy to plan: I had Nicholas to model after anyway. I would buy an Alice, buy apartments in Zermatt and Barcelona and Paris. I dug around the golden square I'd found, digging my nails deeper into the dirt, not caring if every piece of dirt from every mountain in the entire range got stuck in the whites of my nails forever.

Soon I discovered, as I dug deeper around the gold square, that I hadn't found treasure. The square was a thick journal, the gold was an thin and elaborate casing around the front cover. The whole thing probably totaled not more than a hundred dollars. On the front cover there was a lock made of a darker shade of gold. The keyhole was filled in with what looked like flakey dirt. It seemed like the journal wasn't buried for another man to find but rather it was dropped and then preserved by nature. I picked up a rock the size of a baseball and slammed it down on the lock. It popped open to show pages, hundreds of them, most of them stained beyond salvation, but a few preserved from nature and written in English. *English!* This wasn't lucky treasure, it was a miracle! I'd be able to read each of those pages with complete understanding.

On the first page of the journal, there was just one line: *What follows are the Adventures of N*

N- I wanted to believe it was Nicholas, but I knew that was just some romantic thought that would leave me disappointed. It looked like the one Nicholas had written in on the back porch, but it couldn't be his.

No way. My dad had always told me growing up: the secret to happiness is low expectations. Whenever he told me that, I didn't feel special, but I suppose he was right. If only I'd been smart enough to live my whole life like that- I'd be a damn happy Cheesecake Factory manager.

With low expectations, I dropped the journal onto the ground below me, into the hole that I had dug up, and I walked around the tree looking for other buried objects. I didn't expect to find anything and my presumption was correct. Scuffling my feet through the soft dirt, I found sharp twigs and worms. By this point, I'd developed callouses that were entirely immune to the twigs and that crushed the worms without feeling. I returned to the journal and flipped to the first readable page:

I've escaped Charley. That bastard drove me all the way into the mountains, completely away from civilization, but I've finally freed myself.

Christ, I didn't expect this to be a part of my adventure to the East. The fucking American roped me into his dirty business – killing for profit – but of course I should have realized that a man who kills for money would be willing to kill me for the same reason.

This will be a good story when I finally make it home, but for now I just need to survive. Isn't it every man's dream to come to a new city and become fully immersed until you barely recognize your old self, until you feel like you've developed this new dimension to your personality that couldn't have been born without the foreign experience?

Charley offered me that. He let me become a prominent member of the Delhi community. Women threw themselves at me, scared to cross me. Men paid for all of my meals. There were times where I felt like I should never leave. Why should I? Who could give this up and who could be blamed for not doing so?

But of course, when I fucked the wrong guy's wife and he paid Charley a hefty sum to end his relationship with me, I had to run for my life. That answered my thoughts: I could give this up. I should give this up.

I started to sense something was up with Charley. I knew he was a crazy motherfucker. So I left town before he realized it and came to the mountains. Someone must have tipped him off, because two days later, from a cliff in the mountains, I watched Charley talking to that group of monks from the Himalayan Monastery. I swear I saw him write a check.

I kept moving. I wouldn't get killed in India. That would be such bullshit. Not the adventure I'd bargained for.

The next few pages were stained with dirt. It seemed like the dirt stains had no rhyme or reason to them and that annoyed me. I'd prefer to have read one full section and forgo another full section rather than get bits of each.

I tucked the journal into a pocket on the side of my robe and kept hiking the mountain. I wanted to reach higher ground, get closer to the peak in which I would find God before I read more of the journal. It was hard for me to put it down but reaching my destination mattered more. I

had a feeling very similar to those of my days as a high schooler when I would come home, wanting desperately to go hang out with my friends, but I would force myself to finish my homework first. That tactic had mostly worked out for me back then, so I trusted it now.

I wondered what other knowledge the journal held. It couldn't have been Nicholas's journal, because he'd never mentioned Boston Charley in a dream. I looked forward to going to sleep so that maybe I could be thrown into that other world and so that maybe I could find out if the journal was at all tied to Nicholas.

I reached high ground by sundown. I was a day's climb away from the peak that I had set my sights on. Looking back on that journey, I wondered if I was refusing to admit my own suicidal thoughts. Why would I dare climb to a peak that no human had ever ventured? I get it- it's romantic, it's beautiful, it's Godly. But isn't it uncertain and perilous and crazy?

I made another fire and huddled close to the flame. It warmed my hands and face, and as I stared at the small orange flame, I stopped seeing my surroundings. I stopped seeing the flame dance, and instead I saw Alice on my lap, back in the sitting room I'd grown to know so well in Zermatt.

She was reading a book, *Nausea* by Sartre, and she put her left forefinger in the fold and looked me in the eyes. She rubbed her free hand through my hair.

I'd found many women attractive. For that matter I was attracted to almost all women. It was rare when I saw a woman and didn't think about sleeping with her. They had to be much older than me. Or much heavier. It was rare, however, for me to discover a prolonged attraction to a woman like I had with Alice. Even after months of getting to know her, months of understanding all of the little quirks that ought to piss me off, I still wanted her.

Alice sometimes lived her life. Sometimes, though, I felt like she was living the movie about her life. It's that kind of thing, pet peeves, that every woman I'd ever been with had done, and that made me thoroughly less attracted to each of them. These nuisances have wide range. They are not all as intense as wishing that one was in a movie about one's life. For example, one woman insisted on treating her black Labrador puppy like a child, and I had to call it off when I caught her trying to breast-feed. Another thought of herself as a superhero, some sort of Superman disguised as Clark Kent. She never said it aloud, but I could tell the way she acted when we saw some kids steal candy bars from a petrol station that she wanted nothing more than to rip off her shirt, expose a costume, and serve them justice. To her, I said, "chill out" one too many times.

For some reason, Alice's little gig didn't bother me. I noticed it, and at first it made me laugh, but then I just got used to it. It never made me angry like the others had. Instead, I began to notice the same trait within myself. There were times where I felt like I was in some zone. I'd be sitting at my computer, trying to get out six or seven pages before I could call it quits for the day, and I would have this pseudo out of body experience. It wouldn't be like I was watching myself from above, but it would seem as if my eyes and my hands were disconnected, like my eyes were the camera, and my hands moving – creating words on the keyboard – were what would be shown on screen.

Sometimes I felt that way when Alice was sitting on my lap. Sometimes I felt like I was in a romantic drama that would leave the audience in tears. Then there were times when Alice was on my lap, or Alice was over my shoulder while I was typing and we both felt like we were in the movie about our lives. I don't know if Alice recognized that trait within herself, or within me, but I was adept at seeing these kinds of things. When we both were acting that way, we changed the genre and it always ended up rated R.

As we sat on the couch, with *Nausea* in her hand, I could tell that Alice was about to say something from the script. She was going to throw herself into scene and find immense pleasure in feeling like her life was for the invisible camera that could capture it all and present it to the

world, beautifully, maybe even without edits. When Alice jumped into scene, she liked to act as if she was one of the great thinkers.

“Say Nicholas, how would you define an adventure?”

“An adventure?” I laughed, “I don’t know, Alice. I think it starts with being away from home.”

“So you can’t have an adventure at home?”

“Hardly,” I replied and thought about why not, “You can imagine one, sure, but you’ll never have a true adventure when you’re home, when things are familiar, when your wife or your mother or your father can call you in at sundown because dinner is ready.”

“I think you’re wrong,” Alice smiled at me. She liked to play the lead role in her movie scenes, setting me up and then swooping in with some novel idea. I think she liked me because I always presented a challenge for that. “I don’t think an adventure has anything to do with place. It has to do with time, Nicholas.”

“Time?” I enjoyed egging Alice on, seeing if she actually had anything to say.

“Yes, time,” she looked at me crossly, “Time as in those moments, no matter where you are, when you feel like things have slowed down, when you are truly *in the moment*.”

“So the first time we kissed- an adventure?”

“That depends on the person,” she giggled, “Two people can go through the same experience- one might see it as mundane and the other

as an adventure. Technically your own perception makes your adventure. But it's not so easy. You can't just force yourself to be present or to see time slow down. I guess it takes practice."

"Have you practiced?" I asked.

"Yes and no. I think I might be a natural talent. When I was young, my father used to take me to church with him every Sunday morning. We'd go to the Cathédrale Notre-Dame. I used to watch my father kneel and pray. I'd watch the way he sat while the priest gave his homily. He was conscious. He knew what errands we had to do afterwards. He knew if the priest was running late. After a while, maybe a few months, I was able to tune out my father. I didn't even realize it. I was captivated though by the Latin, by the chanting, and by the architecture—those intricate carvings into the ceiling and pillars. I wondered how men could have possibly created the designs hundreds of years before any form of modern machinery, all in the name of honoring their Lord. Every Sunday when the ceremony would end, I felt like I'd awoken from a daze. It was as if no time had passed, and yet somehow all time had passed. I was present. I was operating on my subconscious, my unconscious, my highly-conscious or whatever you'd like to call that second level of understanding."

"Are you suggesting then that altering consciousness is the way to live a life of adventure?" I asked.

“I’m merely suggesting that when one operates on their basic conscious level, they carry baggage that will make any moment dull. A beautiful sunset is dimmed by how many pages you need to write or by the fear that the market might be out of wheat bread. When you change conscious thought, time slows, we become one with nature, and life becomes adventure. Life is no longer a series of events but rather moments stacking on top of each other, independent of time, where we can interact in the most primitive and honest states.”

“It’s impossible to live an entire life without your basic conscious level of thought,” I laughed.

“Of course. So if anyone ever tries to frame their life as nothing but adventure, they’re lying. Because even the Pope sits down to shit. Even Gandhi spent time showering, brushing his teeth, clipping his toenails. It’s not all adventure. But you’re certainly at fault if you think it’s all dull, even at home.”

Alice opened her book back up, and flipped to a point in the middle. She began to read and never even lifted her eyes off the page to check my reaction like she normally did at the other moments when she retired from the scenes she constructed. For the first time, I felt like she’d won me over, she’d made me agree. Maybe that discussion had started in scene, but it ended in *real life*. It hadn’t been for show, for immature indulgence.

The sky grew dark and Alice and I sat outside. The temperature was the kind that doesn't change a person's feeling when they step outside for the first time, the kind that feels like the air and your bare arms aren't different entities. Alice wrote in her diary. I wondered what she was writing. There are so many things to do in a diary- tell a story, record events, do arithmetic even- I felt an urge to figure out what she was doing. I would have been disappointed if it was anything other than recording the scenes of the past day. That would be the most fun because that would show her *perspective*. If she told a fictional story, sure you could read it and learn a little about her: what she thinks about, what she likes, what interests her. But if she was recording true events in her diary, like one's about our conversation earlier in the day, then that would really be interesting. I'm sure she would interpret the entire exchange in a way much different than I had. I would love to know what she thought about it. A diary is only fun when you can put yourself in another person's head, especially in a way that they would never explicitly allow.

A light rain started to fall so the two of us moved into the sitting room. Alice quickly fell asleep, curled with her knees against her small chest, in the club chair by the fire that I'd set. Her diary was propped on one of the arms of her chair, and I knew I could take it and read it if I wanted. I could easily return it to the same location before she woke up,

and worst-case scenario – if she did wake up – I could kiss her and take her to bed before she'd have any time to get angry.

I wouldn't take the journal though. I couldn't open it. All of its mystery, all of its fun would be gone the second I began to read. If I read the diary, I would know its existence. Even if it was a report of the day's happenings, and even if Alice had some extreme point of view that scared me and delighted me and entertained me, it still wouldn't be as good as I could imagine it. It could *never* live up to the hype, to all the different things it could be if it stayed closed forever. The closed diary could be anything. It could be something to fight over. Something to kill a man over. It could be something to fall in love over. The closed diary is life after death- much more fun, much more *exciting* to not know and to wonder and to argue with friends or strangers over wine and some bread with olive oil.

When the sun came up and noise on the cobblestone street below rose into the sitting room, Alice and I dressed for skiing. She asked me to ski into Italy with her. She said she hadn't gone in more than a year and it really was a shame because it was just over the mountain.

"The only problem," she whined, "is that they won't let you bring their wine back over the crest."

I hadn't skied since I had arrived in Zermatt, and I liked it that way. Not skiing was one of the only things that had happened to me in

Switzerland that had gone according to plan. I'd had very different expectations for how my stay would go. I thought spend most of my time drinking German beer and meeting as many women as possible. My only fear was that my host, the young woman that I never expected to be *my* Alice, would dislike me for living on my own schedule, doing my own thing. I didn't want my actions to be misunderstood as lacking gratitude, but I really didn't care if that's how it went as long as my next novel got written and I had some fun doing it.

As it turned out, of course, Alice grew on me quickly – more than I could have imagined – and I spent all the time I thought I'd be drinking and fucking Germans instead with Alice in the sitting room, on the porch, and in her bedroom too, usually with a glass of wine.

The worst part about skiing for the first time in a few months, maybe a year, is getting off the lift. It's easy, it's minor, but it sucks if you stand up too late and get clipped by the lift bench on the way back around. When a child falls, the lift operator stops everything. It's code red on the mountain. Everything shuts down until the child is relieved. When a grown man falls, especially if he hasn't had to get up on skis in a while, everyone laughs and the operator doesn't stop the benches. What this means is that you've got a man on his back, unable to stand, getting hit with the legs and skis of all of the other riders who are trying to step

over him while he squirms to the side of the lift exit. Is there really anything worse for an adult's psyche?

That didn't happen to me, but was I scared riding that first lift up. Everyone feels self-conscious about things, yes, but I hadn't outwardly shown anyone my inhibitions since I'd hit it big as a writer. That's the best thing about reaching your ultimate goal- there is no more fear. The lift was a very tangible fear for me, however, and Alice could tell. She laughed and asked me why my hands were shaking. I told her I was cold, and she quipped that I had hand warmers in my gloves. I sat quietly until I successfully navigated the dismount.

When we reached the crest of the mountain that we could ski down from into Italy, I saw a group of three men hiking a peak dangerously close to the Matterhorn. Where they trekked, there seemed to be as much exposed rock as there was snow. The men, mere specks plodding along the massive mountainside, kept climbing up and up and up. I wondered what joy they found in that- the view had better be one of best in all of Europe to get me even thinking about taking a helicopter to that peak, and these men were hiking in ski boots for God's sake! Their skis were tied across their backs, I could tell, and I could barely pick out the heavy rope across each of their waists that kept them together.

When Alice and I began to ski down the mountain, I forgot all about the hikers and instead remembered the joy I'd gotten from skiing growing up: the sound of my skis cutting through the powdery snow,

scratching the ice below it all, mixed with the speed of tearing down a mountain side feeling like I'd left my stomach just behind me the entire time down. I hadn't done it in so long!

Alice was a more daring skier than myself. She made small cuts through the snow and pretended to check her watch at every plateau at which I met her. She liked playing a game where she felt like I was chasing her. She had to have known that I had no desire to catch up. That's how men and women interact, how they flirt. Men are always on their own time, and women try to get them to play on someone else's.

In Switzerland, the trails curled and winded and promoted having good skill as a skier. Children, who'd somehow escaped ski school, crashed into each other at critical turns because the paths winded in unconventional ways. Quickly I became adept at turning my hips, knees, and ankles at once. Powder sprayed up at skiers beside you, but that was fine- part of the experience. For everyone I sprayed at a turn, I got sprayed back at the next one.

Skiing in Italy was different, sort of relieving to be in a new country. Even the way the snow was groomed had changed. The trails were wide and straight, as if an avalanche had fallen over the winding Swiss trails and covered every turn so that all of the parts of the mountain was skiable. I had heard that this was the way that the Americans skied their Rocky Mountains. It made sense that the Americans got inspiration from

the Italians rather than the Swiss. I'd seen very few American tourists in Switzerland but in my experience in Italy, Rome and Venice were crawling with them.

It was interesting how flat the Italian mountainside was, compared to its Swiss counterpart: we were just on the other side of the mountain- one big rock after all? I caught up with Alice on the Italian slopes because there was more room for error on the wide slope. I could shorten my turns, cut through less ice, all while being at significantly less risk of having a disaster. There weren't any endless looking crevices to wind around, to fear that if I slipped down one I may never come back. I laughed when I passed Alice on the slope because I knew what she was thinking. She thought she'd won. She'd been looking back all afternoon, widening her turns just marginally so that I would catch up. When I passed her I knew she thought she'd broken me. She thought that I had joined her game. Maybe she wasn't even conscious of the game itself, but somewhere inside of her, she thought she had me. I laughed because I knew that I had passed her on my own time. But when I got to a plateau and looked up at Alice I looked at my wrist like she had, I pretended to check the watch I wasn't wearing. I wanted her to smile, to enjoy her own game. *Maybe* my time had become her time. Maybe she'd actually won! But maybe there was no winner or loser. Suppose that's the difference between men and women: men think of winners and losers, women do not.

When we returned to the other side of the mountain, I saw something that blew my mind. I looked back towards the peak adjacent to the Matterhorn, that peak that the lunatics had been hiking. There they still were, still small specks enveloped by the world around them. I could no longer make out the rope that had tied them all together. I wasn't sure exactly what they were going to do from that rocky peak above the snow.

Then, right as I looked away, right as Alice challenged me to the bottom of the mountain - *last one to Bahnhofstrasse buys dinner* - the hikers took off. I saw them, those little dots: one red, one yellow, one white on top with black pants, shoot down the mountain. Their skis scraped against the rock of the mountain, I swear I heard it from where I stood across the mountain.

I was frozen watching the spectacle, watching these men shoot down the peak that had probably never been hiked by man before. How had they even gotten to that side of the mountain? Was I seeing things? Then, after maybe a twenty seconds of watching the men shred through the light snow, scratch across the dark brown, weather-stained rock, they each turned towards a cliff. These men were going to commit suicide. How could anyone have let them climb that cliff? What did they say to their families when they left? *We're going to ski the mountain, see you all tonight.*

I couldn't believe what I was watching. I felt like an idiot for not figuring out their intent when I first saw them hiking the peak. I almost laughed aloud because one really couldn't write this stuff. If I ever tried to write a suicide about a bunch of Swiss men who skied off of a mountain cliff, my editor would ask me if I was feeling well.

The first skier flew off the cliff, the second was close behind, and the third right after him. But suddenly - as sudden as all of this insanity had rooted me in my place at the crest of the mountain between Switzerland and Italy - off of their backs were small explosions. Parachutes that yanked them back into the air.

It had never been suicidal! They had spent their afternoon hiking where no man had ever been for extreme pleasure rather than for death. The men sailed through the sky, coming closer to the ridge that I watched from. They glided past each other, and I could hear their hollers and their loud Swiss laughs. With their ski tips up, the parachutes let them off in a valley between the peak they'd hiked and the mountain side where the conventional, dreadful, lifts operated. I watched them unclip their skis, ball their parachutes up, toss everything into a pickup truck that was waiting in the valley and high five each other. They were still hollering and recounting their flight while they jumped into the truck and drove away. When the truck turned a corner and was out of sight from my vantage point, I started down the mountain to catch up with Al-

ice. She was probably waiting on the Bahnhofstrasse with a glass of wine. I'd buy her dinner.

The next evening, over salmon and a glass of white wine, Alice began to cry. At first I kept looking down at my food, out the window, anywhere pretending not to see her. She hated when I saw her cry. It had happened a few times: her eyes watered and she'd glance at me over and over to check if I had noticed. Once, early in our relationship, I called her out. She hated it. I'd learned to avoid her eyes until she composed herself. Later on I could ask her what was wrong, but she didn't like talking about it in the moment.

This time was different, however. She started crying harder and harder until she was eventually sobbing. She pushed her salmon away. "Nicholas," she said once she had gotten her breath back, "do you remember that night on the beach in Castelldefels?"

I met her eyes. They were red and puffy. "Absolutely."

"Do you remember what we'd had for dinner?" she said between deep breaths.

"You had empanadas, I had ravioli. Then we shared grapes on the beach. What are you getting at?"

"Oh Nicholas," she surprised me with her calm voice, "it would have been so nice to have died there."

"Why do you say? Has life been worse since that night?"

“Not at all. Our life has been great. But I haven't felt as close to God as I did that night. No matter how much time I spend in church on Sunday, no matter how long I pray before bed.”

“We'll have many more moments like that one, Alice. It's not over. That's what's special about love. You find God in love. Love puts life into perspective. God isn't in a book. He's in our words and the moments we share.”

“But you can't guarantee that we'll find him again. You can't promise me that. So I would have liked to have died that night, when I was as close to God as ever. Isn't that the point of life anyway- the true point? It's not to live forever. I think it's got to be to find God and get out. It's got to be to *understand*.”

A few nights later: “Nicholas, what do you think about memory?”

“I think it's nice,” I laughed, “I like remembering things that have happened.”

“Do you think that God is in memory?”

“Sure,” I replied, “if he was there in reality, he's there in memory.”

“I think he may manifest himself in memory. I've been thinking about so many nights we've had- nights that at the time I could only think about how the food tasted, if you thought that I looked good, if

you'd kiss me at the end of the night. Now when I look back at those times, I see God."

"I think that God was there all along, Alice. We are so often blind in the moment because we have other worries, but he's there. Our perspective changes when we are in memory and that's why we can see Him through that. Doesn't it give you solace that we will have moments again where He'll be present? He's here right now even."

"Maybe you're right," she said. "I guess it's a good thing I didn't die on the beach in Spain. Do you think it's possible to remove whatever lens we think through so that we can be conscious of God's presence in all of our moments instead of only through memory?"

"I don't think so. I think that disconnect is part of the human experience but maybe its the same as adventure, maybe we see God when we operate on another level of consciousness. Maybe that's the connection we've missed all along."

The fire dwindled lower in front of me. It was cold now, and I'd ripped my robe in several places during my hike. The small hairs on my back stood up in the mountain breeze.

What was happening to me? I was a member of two worlds, and I couldn't choose when I left one to enter the other. I missed the control that came with entering the Nicholas world only through my dreams- I did have *some* back then. I worried about the situation when I would be

in immediate danger, maybe eye to eye with a mountain lion or a boar, and then I freeze: I'm sent to Zermatt, or Barcelona, or some other romantic city across the world, and when I finally return to my life as Tom Tibbult I'm nothing but flesh on the ground- the animal has won because I've left myself defenseless while jumping into another body.

The thing I really struggled with, staring at that small flame surrounded by darkness at my Himalayan camp, was whether or not Nicholas was feeling any of this, whether he was feeling as strange as I was. I was willing to entertain myself with the idea that Nicholas could be more than a figment of my imagination. I was willing to accept the notion that maybe I was special, maybe I was cursed, maybe both. I wondered if he felt strange when I took over control. I wonder if he felt a feeling in the pit of his stomach whenever I was thrown into his world.

Of course, I fell back, every time, on the likelihood that I was utterly insane and that I should have never left Missouri. I always found a way to refuse that sentiment, however. I convinced myself, day after day, that I was on the right track, making the right choices to reach *truth*.

I couldn't sleep that night. I'd spooked myself, worrying about what would happen if my sleep took me back to Switzerland, back to the Bahnhofstrasse. I wouldn't forgive myself if I returned to a bleak emptiness because I was unable to defend myself from a wild animal while I enjoyed Alice's company. I didn't just want some fleeting moments with her in my dreams and in strange moments of downtime. I wanted my

own Alice, and I knew I'd be pointed in the right direction if I reached the peak that I'd set my sights on. I'd find the same pleasure the skiers had, and I could only hope that all of the people in Missouri that thought that I had gone crazy- my parents, Stacy, Moriarty, and maybe even Becca - would look on in some way like Nicholas had, and their jaws would drop like his did when those parachutes shot out and differentiated living from dying. I hadn't hiked so far to die. I'd done it to live.

At the first sign of the sunrise, I slid down from the boulder I'd sat on. I had no interest in planning how I would climb to the peak that stuck into the sky like a thorn. I intended to walk and climb, scrape and crawl until I reached the top. Once I got there I'd let out my parachute, whatever that was for me. God would deal me an ace of spades.

He'd make me earn it first, however, like he already was. Not more than two or three miles into my hike, a difficult portion of the mountain but not nearly as steep as I'd have to climb later on, I met an Indian black bear. I'd never seen a living one- just the hide of a one on the floor of Boston Charley's office. I hadn't even recognized the fur back then, but now staring into the face of one of India's most harmful creatures, I commended Charley for having beaten one. I wondered if he'd gotten one of this bear's kin. Probably, I thought, because that would be so fitting that again I'd be at the butt of his actions, about to take the punishment for something *he* had done.

Even on all fours she was tall enough to look me in the eyes. I'd watched enough television growing up, I knew she would stand to fight-maybe to eight or nine feet tall. I'd reached my end, I was sure of it. I backed up slowly. The thing that stood out most on the black bear was her stained red teeth. The teeth were so evidently used to rip flesh. I knew how many poachers worked in the Himalayas, she must have had a run in with a few humans before me. Of course, she must have thought that all humans were killers. She probably thought we all had some unfair tool like a sniper rifle that could rip apart a family from the safety of a perch a few hundred yards away.

She growled, I tripped and fell backwards. I'd stepped on the bottom of my robe and it caught. She pounced forward, and even through my fear, some small ounce of awe snuck into my head: to see a thousand pounds move as fast as she had, to leap through the air towards me. To see the muscles activate, to see her shoulders tense, I had to laugh - but for the most brief moment - at the human race for our collective egocentrism: to think that this specimen was *below* us.

The bear landed at my feet. I stuck my right leg out, pushed my heel into her nose. I was doomed, but I wasn't going to just give in. She swatted my leg out of the way, my calf began to bleed from her claws. I scooted backwards making a little distance. I kicked her in the face again. She grabbed my foot in her mouth and a sharp pain ran all the way through my hip. The frothing at her mouth turned red with blood

from my foot. I felt dizzy, ready to close my eyes and let her have her way.

Then in a truly biblical moment, or maybe a physiological one, I felt a rush of strength. Reaching behind myself, grasping for anything, I got my hands around a fallen tree branch. The branch, dry and firm, was so large it must of fallen in a recent storm. I swung it over my head and landed right between the bear's eyes. She screamed in pain, the most primitive noise I had ever heard. She whimpered and rolled over. She scurried a few yards away from me, patting her bloody forehead with a paw. She looked back at me, with almost questioning eyes, wondering how I had done that to her, how I had managed to turn the table. She crawled, crying, into the foliage that she had come out of.

I sat stunned. My right leg was bleeding profusely, the yellow robe was stained a bloody orange. The whole foot wasn't as disfigured as I had imagined, but my big toe was mangled. It looked as if it had been shaved down to the bone, soaked in blood mixed with the bear's thick saliva. I ripped part of my robe in two: one to bite down on as I used the second portion to wrap around the toe. When I touched my foot I could feel the pain in my ribs.

I took a minute to close my eyes and gather myself, to ask myself if I wanted to forge on, if I could forge on. I wasn't sure if I could walk any further. The pain was beginning to consume me, to make me sweat and wonder if I was about to die. Then as if it was right on cue with each

of the other visions I'd had - when I really needed them they came - the pain left my foot as I found myself back in the Swiss Alps.

8.

"Bonjour mon amour," Alice said, "Voulez-vous un peu de vin?"

"Oui mademoiselle, merci." I set down a stack of paper on the table in front of me. "I've finished the manuscript."

"You must be so relieved."

"Actually not. The worst parts are ahead of me now."

"You really think that the fame you've already garnered, and the fame to come from this novel too, is worse than all those hours you spent slaving away at your keyboard."

"The fame doesn't concern me," I replied.

"Not one bit?"

"Not one bit. I couldn't care less about the fame. The money is nice - I like knowing that I've earned my own - but I really don't need it when it's all said and done."

"Why do you write then?"

"Because I have to. I've got to do it. These things are inside of me, and I feel a pressure build in my chest, in my ribs, in my head and I've got to write. When I write I feel free."

"Why publish?"

“I wish I didn’t have to. But I’m not strong enough not to publish. I publish because if I don’t, then did I ever actually write? Of course I did, but no one else would know it. I’m egotistical in that way.”

“It seems like quite the dilemma,” Alice said through her wine-glass.

“It’s really not as intense as I’ve just made it seem,” I said, “It’s just a part of life. Nothing is perfect. Every single thing has something bad that diminishes it. In my relationship with writing it just so happens that the detractor is that I’ve got to expose myself to the public. I put myself at the mercy of whoever decides that they’re a critic. The worst part is, in my experience, that most of the time the critics haven’t even read the book!”

“I suppose this is where we finally truly disagree,” Alice stared at me for a long time while she twisted her brown hair around her thin forefinger. “So much in our world, in our lives, is perfect.”

I found it funny that of everything I’d ever said to Alice, this was where she’d place the division of disagreement. Alice kept her head in the clouds, always dreaming that there was more to the world than what we experienced. “I guess we just have different interpretations of perfect,” I said.

“If you don’t mind,” Alice said through pursed lips, “what was wrong with that first night we spent out here on the deck. The night we talked about who we are and what we are and what we want to be.”

“The night I fell in love with you?”

Alice blushed. She looked away from me, pouring another glass of Lafite and burying her face into her glass.

“Are you talking about that night?” I asked again.

“It’s the night I fell in love with you too, Nicholas, and I can’t see anything wrong with that. Not one thing.”

“Oh but there is,” I replied, “we’ve consciously or unconsciously agreed to take on the worst pain on Earth. At some point, I’m going to lose you or you’re going to lose me. One of us will cheat or maybe one of us will have to leave Switzerland and the other one won’t come. And if we don’t cheat, and we follow each other around the globe, from Zermatt to Zurich, Zurich to Barcelona, Barcelona to Jerusalem or even Timbuktu, then at some point you’ll die or I’ll die and one of us will be left alone.”

Alice started to reply and stopped herself. Started and stopped herself again. Her eyes turned shiny, a little glazed, and I knew I’d done it. I hadn’t meant to make her cry. I hadn’t meant to upset her at all. I was in love- I really was so it was never my intention to hurt her. I was starting to figure out, however, that loving me had pain as the byproduct. I didn’t know when to shut up because I was a vocal learner. I figured things out by talking through them. That’s why I wrote- so that I could spit it all out onto the page and discover whatever it was that I was looking for. I felt the same about talking- I talked and talked and talked until

I figured out why love stressed me out. This time it meant that I made Alice cry.

Finally Alice spoke up. "You're an asshole," she said, "You really are."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to upset you like that," I said, wrapping my hand around hers and resting it on the table between us.

"It shouldn't have upset me. Nicholas even a girl like me knows that loss is inevitable. I'm young, I'm naive and I want everything to be perfect like every other girl my age, but it's not my fault if it makes me sick to my stomach when I realize that it doesn't end up that way. Haven't you ever thought that you were *special*, that things would be different for you? Have you hoped that we'd live forever or that we'd die together?"

"Of course I have. But it's so much easier to accept the notion that we aren't special. What's your answer when things go bad, or worse when things are ordinary? If I think of myself as nothing but a fiction writer, then it all makes sense: I write fiction. But if I think that God has chosen me, if I think that he's put these awesome thoughts in my head and it's my job to act as the scribe then what am I supposed to do when people don't follow me like they followed Jesus?"

"Have you thought that if you accepted the notion that you are special, Nicholas, that maybe only then you'd produce work or that you'd live a life that is worth more."

“I have but don’t you find it stressful to fancy yourself chosen and then have life go on as if it’s all ordinary?”

“No because when I’m with you, I don’t find anything ordinary about life at all and that supports every feeling I’ve ever had about who I am and why I’m here.”

I stood forward out of my seat at our little wooden table tucked into the Swiss Alps, closed my eyes, and kissed Alice deeply to tell her that I understood what she was saying. She was right again. In the months I’d known her, she’d made me feel like I could do whatever I wanted, like I was *supposed* to do anything in the world.

When I opened my eyes, returning to the mountain side, I had no time to think of Nicholas. I had one thing on my mind: I *needed* to walk on. I owed it to whatever gave me that rush of strength to fight off the bear. I looked to the sky. I looked to the peak that I’d limp to. I saw how it loomed right below the deep blue above it. I would get there so that I could say a thank you once I did, once I made it close enough for Him to hear.

I’d never broken a bone. Even after four years of high school football, the worst I’d ever been hurt was a thigh bruise so bad that the trainer called it a contusion. It did feel good to tell girls that I had a contusion: it sounded much better than a bruise. Behind closed doors

though, I cried to my mom about how bad my leg had hurt, how thankful I was that I'd never broken a bone.

In college I was the type of guy to tear up when I stubbed my toe- I had a knack for stubbing my toe in my first dorm room. The wooden dresser wasn't well placed by my closet. I complained to all of my friends, saying how horrible stubbed toes were, and jammed fingers, and even hiccoughs. I feared pain and despised physical annoyances. I was the type of guy to maintain a decent body by eating salads instead of by exercising. I could trust a salad because it never hurt anyone, whereas soreness makes life hell.

So as I climbed over rocks, closing the ground between me and the peak that I dreamed of, I wondered how the hell I'd become this guy. I don't even mean this guy climbing in the Himalayas, I mean this guy who gave his foot to a bear, wrapped it in a dirty cloth, and kept walking.

Looming in front of me was my first true hiking challenge. To get where I wanted to go, I'd have to find a way over a twenty foot rock wall. There were cracks and crevices that I could grip, but I had never been much of a climber let alone a climber with a bum foot. I couldn't go around the rocks- on one side was a cliff that dropped maybe fifty feet and on the other side was a rock wall much taller- maybe forty feet. I sat down at the base of the wall and cried.

Cried may be the wrong word. I balled. I screamed and yelled and called for my mom. I called for Stacy. What on earth had I done? I was

doomed. I could turn back, but how infected would my toe get on the way down the mountain? And if I didn't turn back: would I die here? Maybe. And maybe that would be best for me. If I died on the mountain, some people might think of me as a hero. Stacy might remember me as crazy, but maybe as a lunatic that *at least* died searching for something more. I could be remembered as an extreme Chris McCandless.

If I turned back, everyone would still call me crazy, but not the same kind of crazy as if I never returned, not the crazy that operates on a higher level, but the crazy that needs help, the kind of crazy that ought to be sent away so that he can get help from professionals. I cried until dark, and at dark I had to make a choice. Pinned in against two walls, I was dead meat if I didn't climb or if I didn't head back down the mountain, back to the monastery for help.

But we both I wouldn't be telling this story if I turned back. In high school I was a part of a peer-leader group that went to a ropes course for bonding. I hated the rock wall, and I gave up after I'd climbed half way. This time, in the dark, was so much more difficult, but my life and the answers that I craved were at stake. I threw the journal up above the wall, and I jammed my bloody foot into cracks that could hold me. I screeched into the night until the animals around me howled back. I made it to the top of the cliff after an hour of work.

I'd reached the penultimate stretch of my hike to the unmanned peak. I lay exhausted on a grassy knoll at the top of the rock wall, which sat below my final climb. Already I knew that I had probably reached a point that no man had ever set foot on. People climb Everest, the world's highest peak, but it's become as commercial as being agnostic. I could pat myself on the back for the reason that when I looked out over the mountain range, I had already made it to a point higher than I could imagine any other man reaching. If I was a mountain climber, seeking nothing but altitude, I would have stopped where I was. I would have recorded a win in my book and wouldn't have risked taking any further steps. But I wanted more. I wanted to reach something, and more importantly I *trusted* that something more existed. I'd discovered faith, blind faith, and I liked the way it felt.

Why would those men thousands of years ago ever have tried to build the Tower of Babel? I believed what my guide had told me leaving Delhi. Those men had just been *stupid*- or maybe scared of nature. They should have climbed the Himalayas, and the only reason they didn't was because it was too dangerous. I wasn't scared to risk my life. I would be the one who did it. I felt *special*, felt like God would look out for me, had already looked out for me. And all I'd ever done was question God, question this path, wonder why it was so much worse than my dreams, why it hadn't lived up to my expectations. Along the way, however, God had

been there, and he would remain there to help me find him, just a quarter mile away by foot and then one more rigorous climb.

I know now, and I recognized at the time of my journey, that people get confused, people are confused, and I realized my own confusion at the time. Oh how many times to that point had I questioned myself, my motives, or whom I sought after. How many times I'd given up or felt that I was crazy! Now I was so close. I could feel God like a blanket around me. I could see his light above the peak I'd climb.

The knoll was long and flat. A few football fields away, if I had to guess, the mountain jut back up into the sky. The air was thin, cold, but I'd become used to it. The hair on my arms didn't stand up anymore, my sweat didn't feel uncomfortably cool on my chest. The rocky mass, at some part, was completely vertical. However, in this wide-open field, nothing scared me. I could see clearly in all directions, I knew that I wouldn't have to fight any more animals. There was no way that an animal would hunt in this knoll- it was impossible to reach without climbing the wall, and even if some beast could make it up, he wouldn't find any sustainable food source.

As the sun rose, and I realized I'd have to leave the journal behind if I was going to climb any further. My pockets were ripped and the final climb was too tall to throw the journal above. I'd need to read it in the knoll before I completed the last leg. But I wondered if I ought to look

through it again. Nicholas had made a great point when he wondered about Alice's diary. If I decided to open the journal then all of my hopes of what could be within would be dashed.

I wasn't going to look through it - really, I wasn't - when the thought crossed my mind that the journal had previously been buried under that lonely tree because its author had tried to climb further and hadn't been able to do it with the journal in hand. When I started to think like that, I had to open it. What if the author was at the top of the peak that I was climbing towards? What if he was surviving, experiencing God, or what if he was rotting dead?

I flipped through pages of the leather bound book until I found the first page that wasn't stained with dirt: *the world is spoiled the moment we open our eyes as our imagination becomes defined by our physical surroundings.*

I shut it, turned towards the cliff that I'd just climbed, and threw it like a frisbee as far as I could. The journal knew me. It was in my head. It was *smart*. Opening a book destroys imagination, opening our eyes limits our spirit because it defines *who we are* within our earthly rules. It would be wrong to disobey the journal. It would ruin everything if I continued to read on, because it wouldn't allow my imagination to run free.

Maybe that's why God, or whoever was messing with my senses, didn't allow me to stay inside of the dreams and visions for too long. It's

not right to see it all- it's evil to make someone live through all of the constraints that we've set, that nature has set.

If I hadn't been so close to the mountain top where I had - somewhat arbitrarily - decided that God would save me, I suppose it would have made sense to listen to the journal and to kill myself right then and there. The world is cruel. Earth and science: designed to aid humanity but incidentally limiting the psyche.

Arbitrary though- had I really chosen this peak at random? Had I even chosen it myself? Faith and random choice basically come hand in hand if done honestly. God isn't in some book. He's not in these stories about men that lived to be a hundred years old and made ridiculous sacrifices that conveniently align with morals the world likes to teach its children.

I decided that God wasn't even necessarily at the top of a mountain in the Himalayas. Rather, He could be wherever I looked for him, wherever I wanted to find him. Especially if I, or one, whoever, could separate looking for Him from the mainstream ways that we are ineffectively taught to find him.

That's why I walked forward. Because at the peak I wanted to find him at the top. I'd come so far. That's why I approached the mass of rock ahead of me with the intent to climb all the way to the top. I stuck my foot, dried blood on the mangled toe and all, into the first crevice I

found and I pushed myself up towards the first hand hold. I was on my way, taking my last step, to salvation.

I felt the air thinning with each of my breaths as I reached the top of the mountain. My foot was numb, my lungs were cold, and each of my fingers bled from my cracked and broken nails.

I climbed to a crevice, large enough for me to sit in, and looked at the mountain range below me. It wasn't as precisely gorgeous as I had expected. From my vantage, I could see every dirty peak of each of the smaller mountains, which had looked beautiful and white from the ground below them. I could see, understand rather, that the beauty was not necessarily in each of the careful details but rather in the expansiveness of this world, this universe, this network that we live in. I continued upwards, onwards.

Finally, after what must have been two hours of work, I reached the top: as close to heaven as any man had ever been. Sure Everest is higher, there may be a hundred peaks in the world that are higher, but closeness to God can't be measured solely by distance. It has to be measured by effort and by purpose too.

The mountain range beneath me was epic. Each explosion of earth fit into a uniquely shared space. I'd never seen the beauty of our world from this point of view, and I felt like if Westerners, Easterners, developed and underdeveloped populations - everyone in the world - could

see through my eyes, then there would be no misunderstanding that it is the shared physical phenomena, natural on Earth, which ought to be celebrated solely and entirely.

I had learned about tectonic plates in high school, extensively in a geology class. I knew that the Earth's crust shifted and crashed and *created* mountains. However, from the mountain peak, the flat maybe 400 square foot box that I'd reached, I recognized that whoever wrote the textbooks that I'd been assigned clearly hadn't seen the world from where I was. Those authors didn't have the perspective that washed over me on top of the mountain, where the oxygen was thin and cold.

Science, in many ways, is nearly indisputable I'd realized. Primarily for the reason that the first world believes that numbers never lie. The world's smartest people turn to empiricism in the face of conflict, and they each find that evidence *fully and wholeheartedly* uncovers truth. Humanity has trusted in science for centuries. While it is widely understood that science, statistics, finding-numerical-evidence is some sort of modern phenomena, the world even salivated over this kind of information when Leucippus and Democritus said we inhabited an utterly flat mass. The population believed the mathematic explanation that Thales gave when he stated that the earth floated like a log in water.

People *want* to believe in science because it can be justified in a lab and the proofs are nearly - to the point of percentage points of percentage points - unarguable. Belief in God or in the spirituality of the

world that we exist within, on the other hand, is as easy to poke holes in a piece of fabric with the aid of a needle. There are questions around every corner and answers are hard to come by. Everyone seems to use God as a means to a dollar or as a copout for ugly behavior. These people, the masses, are the voices that are heard, are the voices that make faith seem like nothing but a series of unfaithful acts.

From where I stood at the top of the mountain, I was willing to contest that if this view of the Himalayan range was made available - actually - for every voice that *claims* God but does not act for him, then proof of salvation would be unpenetrable and science would be proven smoke and mirrors that can be molded around anything to offer faux-proof. I still contest the same to this day- there is something more, something beyond sensory understanding, to the grandeur of the mountain range.

The top of the mountain was something like a twenty by twenty box, about four hundred square feet. The ground was crusty dirt covered with rocks about the size of the full cakes at The Cheesecake Factory that had defined my career in Missouri. Underneath the rocks, the dirt was wet and soft. At the middle of the peak the ground receded into a small, shallow pool of muddy water, a collection from the storm clouds that swirled just above my head.

I clawed out a circle of dirty rocks from the pool and replaced them with bigger dry ones from the edge of the summit. Then I ripped some more of my robe, this time the cleanest portion that I could find. The sleeves and portion around me knees were stained with blood from mishaps during my hike and climb, but the fabric across my chest had stayed remarkably clean. I covered the rocks with the yellow cloth, and smiled to myself that I had found a way to give myself a source of water while I found what I was looking for.

I waited and waited and waited for God to talk to me. I didn't expect a biblical booming voice to say, "Tom! Go from this mountain and I will show you." But I did think that God would show his colors in some other way, some concrete way beyond the view below. You may laugh when I say that it wasn't until that moment when I *really* started to worry. It was at that moment where it finally sunk in that I was probably crazy and that I'd made some huge mistake in coming so far.

I started to even question if the view was as meaningful as I thought it originally was. I wondered if it was the altitude or maybe some endorphins from climbing the Himalayas that had made me feel as passionately as I'd felt before. Maybe science, physiology, was at work within me, and I was just a statistic. I felt like a statistic with a few loose screws. I thought maybe they'd find my body one day, run a few tests, and explain every feeling I'd had during this journey. They'd be able to

explain exactly where I went wrong, which of my neurons wasn't firing properly, how natural selection would make it so that the few people like me, those dumb enough follow blind faith as far as death, won't be around for much longer.

Now, if I told you right now that I know I'm not crazy, would you believe me? Have I totally failed you? Do you feel like I lead you down a path towards the light that actually ends in nothing but darkness? Have you given up, shut your book, rolled your eyes, said *this motherfucker is crazy?*

If you haven't, hang on for a moment longer: God never showed up. He never exposed himself on top of the mountain. He never spoke to me, never appeared in a vision, never made his presence felt with any physical action. I never experienced anything explicit with the Lord that I'd given everything up for. Are you angry with me? I swear I didn't bring you along just to tell you that there is no God. I don't actually believe that the biologist in your neighborhood knows more about life and death than the Pope and the Dalai Lama together. I can understand if you want to shut your book right now and tell your friends that I've wasted your time. I get it if you go to the bookstore and ask for your money back. But if you'd like to read on, I can promise - *promise* - that my story will provide something more for you.

A calm mist fell from the sky right above me. Water slowly collected in the bowl I'd made out of fabric and rocks. I lapped like a dog so that I didn't dirty it with my hands. Then I washed my hands and face. I soaked my foot in the water until the crusty blood washed off and I could really examine the extent of the damage that the bear had done.

I hadn't even thought about my own hunger. I hadn't eaten in days, but my stomach had been no more than an afterthought. I'd had a mountain to climb, God to find. Now I felt dizzy- probably a mixture of hunger and thin air. I could definitely go longer before I needed to descend the mountain for food. I'd cross that bridge when I got there. I leaned back onto a portion of dry dirt and shut my eyes. I didn't have enough energy to wait for God any longer. I'd rest and try again later.

9.

"Honey, you've been laying on the couch all weekend. I want to go to the park and Jezebel needs a walk," a strange but familiar voice - something from the past - said. This voice was strong, assured, but tired.

I opened my eyes, sat up on the couch, and faced the television flashing muted scenes of an old western. "What time is it?" I muffled through a pillow as I dropped back onto the couch.

"It's three-fifteen, baby, let's go to the park," the voice said as I felt a hand, cold and dry, rub the back of my neck.

“Alright. Let’s go.” I grabbed the hand and sat up. I looked right into those green eyes that I’d known so well. “I’ll grab the leash and some dog treats, Stace, and we’ll go to the park with Jezebel.”

“Thank you sweetie,” she smiled and kissed me, pushing her tongue into my mouth. “And since you’re finally getting off the couch this weekend,” she said after she took her lips away from mine, “maybe there will be some more of that when we get back.” She turned away and took a few steps into the kitchen, looked back towards me and shook her hips before turning the corner into the mudroom and calling for Jezebel.

The dog park was right across the street from our new home on Kingsbury boulevard. I already knew the walk like the back of my hand—someone had told Stacy that a puppy can only learn to be house trained if the owner tells it *exactly* where it ought to go to the bathroom so I’d been making that walk religiously.

Stacy fell into step behind me and slipped her hand under my shirt. She rubbed my back and my side below my ribs. “I know they’re working you hard at the Cheesecake Factory, Mr. Partner, but you sure are keeping it tight. I can’t wait to get you back inside.”

“Can’t wait?” I laughed.

“Can’t *fucking* wait,” she said as she slid her hand from my ribs into my waistband for just a moment before running off with Jezebel. Her yoga pants, tight across her hips, taunted me and I jogged after the two of them.

I felt grown up living in a Clayton suburb with doctors and professors. I'd spent my childhood, driving through these neighborhoods, and wondering if one day I would make enough money to fit in. I figured I'd have to be a lawyer - personal injury; representing the construction workers that lived just north of me - or maybe an accountant for Walmart or Anheuser-Busch. I never thought that I'd end up in this Clayton neighborhood after I'd rode the roller coaster from the middle class to Georgetown to assistant manager at the Cheesecake Factory all the way to managing partner for every Cheesecake Factory in Missouri.

As I watched Stacy kneel down to scratch Jezebel behind the ears, I realized how nice my life had turned out. I'd been low- I thought, once upon a time, that Stacy would leave me. I'd been high too- Mr. Moriarty told me that he wanted me to manage every restaurant in the state the same week that Stacy said *I do*. Now life could settle in. We could grow a family together in Clayton, send the kids to University High then to Georgetown like their parents. They could be whatever they wanted. Stacy looked towards me and winked. We walked Jezebel home.

On the couch, in front of the same Western, Stacy unbuckled my belt and slipped her hand into my khaki pants. "Your dick's gotten bigger as a partner," she said as she kissed my neck.

I unbuttoned her shirt slowly, kissing the smooth skin between her chest and her neck. For each button, I thought about the things we'd

been through. First running into her outside the Ralph Lauren store in Georgetown and taking her out. The next one was for the morning I met her parents after she'd finally let me use the condom that I'd always kept in my bedside drawer. The third was for moving back home, and the fourth was for the drama with Ryan Connelly when I'd actually thought he'd steal my girl.

Now I had my hands on her breasts and she moaned like she had the night that Connelly killed himself, the night we hadn't gone to sleep. When we heard the news, I imagined that she would cry the whole night, maybe she wouldn't even want to talk to me, she'd just want to stay in her own head. Instead, right when she hung up the phone, she stripped her clothes off and told me to fuck her. That wasn't the Stacy I'd known before Connelly's death, but it was a Stacy I'd take.

Ever since that night Stacy had been horny twenty-four seven. I wasn't complaining. She said that she couldn't write poetry anymore, that it made her think of Connelly's dead body. I guess she needed some other forum through which to vent.

I don't want it to sound like I was happy in any way when Connelly died, but my life did improve. Coincidentally I'd proposed right around then, Moriarty was prepping me for a promotion, and Stacy started reaching for my pants any time we sat down on the couch.

"Follow me," she said as she pushed me back and walked towards the kitchen door that led to our back deck, "I want you outside." I

sat on the couch for a moment, stunned, hoping that none of our neighbors would notice. I wanted to stay in the neighborhood - to make friends - not for us to alienate ourselves.

I walked towards the door that Stacy would be waiting behind, naked with nothing but the woods around our house for cover. When I made it outside, ready to take her, I was confused by what I saw: no trees, no new finished deck, no Stacy.

I was staring into the night, gasping for the thin air around me. The wind howled nothingness.

I shut my eyes and heard tribal humming, feet popping against the dry ground to the rhythm. Thirty men and women participated in a sacrifice, dancing around a goat that'd had its throat slit. I sat in a tan Jeep, watching the clan dance from afar. I wore binoculars around my neck, but a small Australian woman with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a big chest held them to her eyes.

"Aren't you glad you didn't join them?" she asked, "a Franco-phone like you isn't cut out to dance around a bloody goat like that."

"You might be right," I said, "in Bordeaux, the only encounter I had with goats was smearing their cheese onto a piece of bread with some wine."

"Isn't that funny? You've come halfway across the world and you do the same thing at our vineyard."

“Yes, but I wasn’t with *you* in France. It’s even funnier that the very thing that brought me to you is the thing we find furthest removed from ourselves: these Aborigines.”

“What was it exactly that you were looking for, Michel, when you decided to leave your french paradise to join the savages?”

“I felt like I might get a better grasp on what it means to have faith if I joined a group of people with faith so strong that they refuse to join the modern world.”

The Jeep pulled closer to the dancing circle, but it seemed like the tribe had not even recognized that they had visitors. I wondered if they were used to people watching them, taking pictures or if they were so deep in their bacchanal state and they couldn’t even perceive us.

When I first came to Australia I’d hoped that it was the latter - the bacchanal state - and that I would be allowed to join them, to see more. But the more time I spent with Marie, on her vineyard, the more I realized that faith can fit nicely in the modern world and that the Aborigines were simply behind. That’s what she told me after she wrapped her legs around my head for the first time when her father was traveling across the country. It was easy to share her views on the Aborigine population.

“Luckily you found me to teach you what faith really is. It’s not a show around a dead farm animal,” she said. I wasn’t sure I believed her yet, but my feelings for her - her body too - overpowered my curiosity.

She reached over for my knee and traced her finger along the inside of my thigh. "What do you say we head back to the farm. You can fuck me in the barn before dinner?"

We drove back to Marie's family vineyard. In the rearview mirror the Aborigines grew smaller. Their movements were less exact than I'd seen them up close, but the smell of the goat was still sharp in my nose. I knew it would be sharp all the way to the barn.

The Jeep drove on, but the circle changed its form- now the dancers were a ferris wheel, maybe ten stories high and brightly lit with small golden light bulbs. It spun and spun to the sound of waves crashing against a dark beach. The car was gone, and I found myself in a new body standing with a new woman.

"Marcus, let's ride it. We haven't ridden the ferris wheel since our first date."

I reached a dark arm out and wrapped it around the woman I walked with. Her slender shoulder was so familiar in my hand. "Then let's ride it," I smiled and we walked down the pier towards the line of young couples, so many of them hoping for a kiss at the top of the wheel that they'd tell their friends about, that they'd hope wouldn't be a one time thing lost in the Pacific at sunset.

We waited in line quietly, her head resting between my chest and arm pit. She breathed softly. The wheel turned like the world. The prob-

lem with the kiss at the top is that as soon as you get there, you start to come back down.

I always had the same problem when I was playing football in college. My junior year we won the national championship, and in the locker room after the game, our coach gave a speech that our hard work - the morning sprints, the lifts, playing through injury - had all paid off, that we'd reached the pinnacle of our sport, the top of the mountain. All I could think about was the notion that, sure, we'd made it to the pinnacle, *the top*, but there was literally no where else for us to go but down. The ferris wheel spins down.

Now I ran my fingers through her hair. I hoped that our wedding hadn't been the top of the wheel. Only time would tell. Of course, life isn't distributed normally- it's a roller coaster, but even on a winding track there is only one highest point. That made me feel sick. One day, maybe it had already come, I would have the best day of my life.

"Baby," she said, "thank you for taking me out. Things have just been so hard."

"I know," I said even though I didn't really know. I could never truly empathize with her situation. "I know it's hard but we'll make it work."

She started to cry. "It was your dream to play in the NFL and even though you fell short, you can find solace in the fact that you gave it your all. All that time that you were dreaming of the Super Bowl, of play-

ing for the Rams, I was dreaming of being a mom. I was dreaming of dirty laundry and carpool lines at school. For God to have made me so that I can't make that dream a reality- it hurts bad, Marcus. And it hurts worse to have absolutely no chance to give it my all."

"You remember what Dr. Watson said," I pulled her closer as we stepped forward in line, "Being a parent isn't about giving birth but about raising the child."

"I know Marc, and we'll be great parents, but it still hurts. Some-days I wake up, and you've left for work, and all I can do is lay in bed and wonder why God made me like this. Why has He kept me from having a child?"

"God isn't punishing you, honey. It's just genetics. It's random."

"I'm not sure about that, anyway. I even feel guilty about adopting. If I can't birth a child, maybe I'm not supposed to get one," she said as she untangled herself from my arm. We were ushered into our cart on the ferris wheel.

We sat hanging at the bottom of the wheel for a moment, while teenagers loaded into the carts around us. I rested my hand on her knee and she wiped her eyes. The ferris wheel climbed slowly to its apex, but I couldn't get rid of the fact that soon enough we'd be on our way down. Even the way up was the way down.

Suddenly I found myself back on the new deck with Stacy. She sat on my lap with her arms wrapped around my neck.

“I’m proud of you Tommy,” she said, “and the best part is that you’re not done. I know you’ll *own* a restaurant one day.”

I squeezed her sides and she giggled. God had been good to me. It’s no coincidence when a guy accidentally knocks a girl over on his way home multiple times over the course of a few weeks. It’s not just luck when the girl’s reaction is to want to go on a date. Stacy had been the perfect woman. She let me grow up, and she never judged along the way. I had never known what I really wanted. I wanted to be famous, I wanted to loaf, I wanted to write because it seemed romantic. Stacy stayed by my side all along the way. She’d had her own dreams to go to New England and she gave them up for me. She was the most selfless person in the world.

“I love you Stace,” I whispered.

She pressed my cheeks together with her left and and kissed my pinched lips. “Things haven't been too bad for us, Tommy.”

“Not too bad at all,” I laughed as I looked out over our new backyard, “not too bad.”

“And to think that we’ve come from this from all that turmoil back when we first moved to St. Louis. You know, if you hadn’t been so open, so understanding to me working with Ryan Connelly, our relation-

ship could have gone in any direction. God really gave me a good one with you, Tom Tibbult.”

“And you with me,” I replied and took a deep breath.

When I exhaled I wasn't Tom. I was in a cold hallway leaned up against white painted cinderblocks. “Are you ready?” a thin blonde haired girl, one of my classmates, looked over at me and asked, “Michael will be out any minute.”

I couldn't believe it was finally happening. I had thought about kissing Michael Morgan for three months. I'd be devastated if I left the sixth grade without having had my first kiss. Finally it was time. The bus was leaving in fifteen minutes, and if I missed it again my mother would kill me.

“I think I need to leave,” I said, “I don't want to miss the bus.”

“Oh Meagan, shut up! You have fifteen whole minutes. Are you scared?”

“No I'm not scared!”

“Good you shouldn't be. It's easy. All you do is close your eyes and sort of lick his lips.”

My heart was pounding. What if Michael didn't think I was good at kissing? What if he told all of the boys that I'm bad and then I never got a boyfriend?

“What if a teacher comes?”

“Meagan, you’re nervous and that’s fine. You’re about to kiss a cute boy. I was nervous my first time too. But do you really think a teacher is going to walk down the hallway to the boiler room?”

As soon as my blonde haired friend had finished convincing me that I wouldn’t be caught kissing Michael, he turned the corner and we locked eyes. I could feel my face reddening- I prayed that it didn't look as bad as I thought it did. Michael smiled at me, his white teeth, accented with the silver bar of his retainer, flashed even in the cold light of the hallway.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey.”

“You ready?”

“Yeah, you?”

“Yeah,” he replied, “give us some privacy won’t you?” he added to my friend. She scoffed and turned her back, upset that she’d set the kiss up but wouldn’t be a party to any voyeurism.

We both leaned in towards each other. I went ten percent of the way like I’d learned on television and he met me there. I felt a tingling in my chest when our lips touched. I couldn’t feel my hands. He backed away from me and laughed. I wasn’t sure why, so I laughed too.

“Want to do it again?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said and he leaned in.

This time I stuck my tongue out a little and licked his lips like I'd been told to. After a few seconds I stopped thinking about the kiss. I wondered if Michael would ever take me to the movies. Then I wondered if he'd like to meet my parents. I thought my parents would like him. I thought about celebrating our one year anniversary at a steak house, but I'd settle for a pizza joint if he didn't have the money for anything bigger. I wondered if anyone could ever put up with me for a year. I hoped if he asked me out he wouldn't dump me right before my birthday or Valentine's day. I didn't want him to take advantage of my lips and then embarrass me because he didn't want to buy me a present.

His tongue was on my teeth when my friend screamed, "Meagan, your bus!" I turned to the hallway window to find my bus pulling out of the carpool line.

"Whatever," I said as Michael leaned in for another kiss. He *wanted* me. A few kisses and I could already tell that Michael was the type of guy that you take home. He was the type of guy that I could see myself staying with through middle school. He could never hurt me. I was on top of the world, and as far as I was concerned, there'd be no coming down.

Suddenly, I was in the woods. Another body. They weren't the woods that had been across the street from my house growing up- something was different. The air was different, colder. I wasn't sure where I

was but I knew where I was going. I ran forward, dodging past trees to the sound crunching leaves beneath me and scratching in the branches above me. Every time I turned, weaving a new direction through the tree branches, I turned to look behind me. Had anything changed? Was anyone close? I was running away.

After a few hundred yards, I started to hear my own panting over the crunching leaves. I saw light ahead of me. I picked up my pace- I'd gotten better at dodging low branches, hurdling roots. I needed to reach the light, and I felt like if I didn't make it I wouldn't be *me* anymore.

The light that I had been running to was a parting of the tree trunks, a twenty foot drop into a slow moving river beneath. I didn't slow my pace, jumping as far out into the river as I could. I landed at the bottom of the water and for a long while, I felt like nothing but legs. My eyes were shut, my mouth, nose, and ears were shut. All I could do was push off the floor of the lake and reach for air.

I came up on the other shore. Sensory overload. The water was rushing past, the rapids smelled fresh. The world was bright. I looked across to the woods I'd run through, and the trees were made of fire. I looked across at the orange wall of heat. The crackling of branches breaking and falling was overpowering. I could feel the heat on my face from fifty yards away. I turned back and continued on, away from the river, and I never looked back.

A hundred yards into the forest, on the other side of the river, I came across another clearing, this time one much more strange than the river. I found myself in a massive field- about a hundred acres. Right in front of me, however, was a man at an old wooden table. He sat waiting for me. I had more than half a mind to turn around and run right back to the river, but when I turned around I saw that the fire had caught up to me. Somehow it had crossed the river. I had no choice but to go forward.

I approached the man and he looked up. His shallow cheeks held crooked teeth. His eyes were gray, and I could nearly see through them.

“You’re here,” he said.

I wanted to ask who he was, but my mouth wouldn't allow it. I replied, “I am.”

“Sit,” he said. And then, “Tell me what you believe in.”

“That’s easy,” my response came quickly, “God and personal freedom. In that order.”

“But of course,” the man laughed, “I wonder then, if you’ve thought about the fact that the God you believe in, that you have faith in, that you trust as your Savior, doesn’t believe in personal freedom for all.”

“Of course he does.”

“If we define freedom instead of using it as some fashionable buzzword, would you still agree?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

“Freedom is is the power to act, to speak, or to think without restraint.”

“My God promotes freedom, no matter how you define it.”

“And every member of the human race is created in God’s image?”

“We are.”

“Does humanity, the collective image of God, promote freedom?”

“The advanced world does, of course. Maybe some developing populations don’t, but that’s why we have to help them. It’s our job to save them, to make the world better.”

The man smiled. For a long while he looked straight through me. “You couldn’t be more off,” he said softly, “for you’ve just taken away the freedom of so many humans. You’ve spoken for them. You’ve defined action, speech, and thought for them. You’ve told them what’s right, what’s *better*. You’ve killed for them when they never needed the bullets. And you live in God’s image? You serve him? It seems to me like the God you represent can’t possibly believe in true freedom.”

“But God represents *good*. And providing liberty for those who can’t obtain it on their own is inherently good.”

The man smiled even wider: “Your definition of good. Your definition of liberty. It’s all on *your* terms. That doesn’t seem right, does it?”

“Are you condoning the evil that happens in our world, saying that intervention in the name of what’s right, is wrong?”

“Not at all. There is more evil in the world everyday. Something must be done. I’m merely pointing out that you and your *advanced nations* are a bit egotistical in trying to right the wrongs. Our maker, if personified, would fight evil for the sake of goodness. he wouldn’t fight it as a front for imposing his will. Just because *your* shoe fits *your* foot, it may be much too large - or much too small - for mine. It may give me blisters. It be the cause of a broken foot. It would be wrong of you to force it upon me. I merely wonder if humanity is made in God’s image, why doesn’t humanity start to act the way He would act, rather than acting however humanity so pleases and then claiming its all in his image?” The old man reached across the table and put his hand on top of mine. He traced my fingers with his own.

I found myself back on the pier- the ferris wheel still spinning. The sun had set. Parents, holding hands, walked behind their children, giving them just enough space to simulate autonomy. A group of teenagers passed a joint back and forth leaning on the base of the pier right below the bench we sat on.

“You know babe,” I started, then leaned to kiss her on the cheek, and returned, “I’ve started to think that we aren’t put here to procreate. I mean I don’t think that’s the priority.”

“You’re saying that to make me feel better.”

“No, really. I’ve just been thinking that when we focus on procreation as our priority, it perpetuates this world where time just spins and spins, and it always seems like it’s spinning down.”

“You’re getting deep again,” she laughed.

“I’ll try not to. Give me a second,” I paused and watched a long haired sixteen year old take a hit below, “I think our priority needs to be to do good. Having kids is a means to do good. We can teach goodness to children and make sure that morality lives longer than we do. But we can do that without physical child birth. We can live that same ideal without kids, with adopted kids, with whatever we so choose.”

The scenery fell around me. The pier crashed into the ocean taking the ferris wheel with it. Santa Monica was gone, and instead I found myself, another new self, sitting at a small metal table in the Plaza Catalunya. I sat with two friends, both in their twenties, both spending their time wondering how they could hold on to the backpacking lifestyle forever: *What has college done for us anyway?*

We were traveling through Spain for the summer. With long, pale fingers and nails that needed to be clipped, I twirled an empty bottle of wine on its side.

“Five euro for the bottle, man. Can you believe that?” one friend, the better looking of the two, said with a drunken satisfaction.

“What I’ve been trying to say,” the other responded, “is that if we don’t consider the cost of hostels and hotels, we are only spending twelve euro a day. That’s roughly four thousand euro for a year. Round up to five thousand to account for days that we splurge. All I’m thinking is that with pretty easy jobs - working in a bookstore or something - we can afford an apartment by the hostels in Eixample and live like this forever.”

“I’m not sure,” I laughed. “Well, I’m sure your accounting is spot on, but I’m not convinced it’s the right idea. What about school, all the work we’ve put in?”

“Dude we’ll just give it up. We can set our own standards, and just because we’ve been living to the standard of hard work for college and employment, it doesn’t mean that standard is even what’s right. We’re conditioned to think that anything besides work is wrong but we can decide right now to say fuck that.”

“I don’t think the standard that we’ve lived for is necessarily wrong,” I replied, “Doing well in school feels good. And what about socially? I think we’d have a hell of a time getting women to take us seriously after about twenty five.”

“Some women would. Women with the same ideas as us would take us more seriously than anyone does now. Those are the people we should want to be around anyway. We’ll only find who those women are if we stay here.”

“That’s the thing. I think it’s impossible to stay right here. The place will change one day, but I’d be willing to bet that we change before the place. Our outlook changes, our feelings, what we want, and when that stuff changes, the notion of *staying* is something that’s fleeting.”

“I think that you think that man goes through a fundamental change. You think that one day you’ll wake up and you’ll have no desire to down a bottle of wine, or you’ll have no desire to chase girls. I don’t care if you’re married fifty years and have four kids, if a girl with a sexy accent and some yoga pants walks through this plaza, your going to have urges.”

“What are you getting at?”

“I think that satisfying those urges is the best thing that a person can do for his own health- physically and emotionally. The life I think we can live here would give us the best shot at indulging our inner wants. We can stay.”

“I prefer the security in living within our system.”

“And I’d rather let it ride, so I’m willing to bet you another bottle of wine that you won’t see me back in Pittsburgh next semester. I’ll still be here, working in a bookshop or a cafe in Eixample.”

“I’d take that bet any day,” I laughed, “because I know that your dad, a veteran, an American to his core, is not going to let his son drop out of college to keep partying in Barcelona.”

We laughed and pulled out another bottle. The foil peeled off of the bottleneck and the cork popped out with the sound of a summer night in Europe that would fade a few months down the line as midterms picked up. It would fade for us all, because while dreams are fun, the system, the rules, and expectations always overpower fantasy.

As that thought left my mind, the only thing overpowering was my own voice over the loud speaker. I'd been transported from the table in Barcelona to the fifty yard line in the Dallas Cowboys' stadium. There was a catch, however: there wasn't a single football player on the field. Instead I stood alone at center field.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the loudspeaker echoed my accented voice. "I want to talk to you about something I call versatility." The crowd was quiet and I continued, "I was inspired by the Renaissance for a reason beyond the great work. The reason that the Renaissance is one of my obsessions is that during that period, the *great* artists did not restrict themselves to a single medium. Let me use da Vinci's genius as an example. His brilliance was not contained just in picture, but in his scientific studies. How about Benvenuto? Cellini? Botticelli? They all also created wearable art, goblets, chalices, and other jeweled art forms. The reason why I'm here speaking today is because it needs to be impressed to our world's creators that working in a single medium is *stagnating*."

The crowd cheered, but I raised my hand in protest. “Please, one more thing,” I added, “think as a consumer for a moment. It is easier as a consumer to categorize creators into the genre in which they create. People like lists and order. People like things to be neat. If you reach the public on the page, then the public will call you a writer, they’ll think of you as a writer, they’ll expect you to act as - and only as - a writer.”

I paused at the microphone and took a moment to look out over the crowd that had come to hear me speak. When I first started to be recognized in public a psychiatrist had told me to pause for a second to take things in. He said that if I never looked up, if I never took a moment to appreciate what I’d done, then I’d be liable to find myself frustrated at my position rather than accepting the opportunity to make a difference for the world.

“It’s easier to think about what we consume if we only have to pair one genre to one face. Well if you want to change the world then listen to these worlds very closely: do not be stuck in a genre or a style. No one ever made change in a box.”

The crowd roared in applause but in a moment everything was black. I don’t know what I’d become. I felt senseless but still conscious. It is nearly impossible to describe the feeling, but I can do my best by saying that I felt hyper-aware, extremely content too. I felt like I was waiting for something. And I was.

After a few moments I started to sense orbs of lights some great distance away from me. In between me and the lights was a vast space, but by simply acknowledging the space, I could cross it. Distance was nonexistent. Everything happened immediately. The space, whether by yards or seconds, was an illusion that I superseded. When I concentrated on one of the orbs, it seemed like it was right next to me. For lack of a better word, the lights *talked* to me.

“Welcome home,” one said.

I felt the urge to reply with only one question: “Was I good?”

“Of course you were, and you’ve been rewarded for that. You’re here after all.”

“I tried. I felt like I knew a lot this time around. I was strong enough to speak up when something didn’t feel right, when someone was treated poorly. Of course, I made mistakes too. There were times I should have been a friend and I wasn’t.”

“We’ve got time to talk about all of that later. You were good.”

“Okay,” I replied in relief. It was apparent to me that being good during whatever we were discussing was a necessary benchmark to hit.

“We’d like to talk about more than being good, however,” it said, “You’ve been through this nearly ninety times. You’re close.”

“I’m close?”

“Of course you are. You know that. But it’s important to remember that while being good is necessary, having understanding is the key.”

“Understanding what?”

“This network, of course. You’re experiencing transition loss, and that’s okay. It happens to every spirit every time. So let me give you a worldly example so that we can prepare you for your next life. You can take it whenever you’re ready.”

“I’m tired.”

“That’s understandable. You can rest. There are spirits here I’m sure you’d like to savor. You can take a break.”

“Thank you.”

“Let me remind you for next time though: To simply be good is a flat act. Beneficial for your world, but flat. Say you’re good and you never bully your fellow man. That’s great, but you never learn a thing. You never give yourself the reason to understand righteousness. You can’t just be told something and truly know it.

“Say you get bullied and that makes you a bully, then later on you understand how being a bully has hurt and you admit to yourself that you’ve been one. Then you stop, you become an ally. You’ve learned through experience: you’ve learned some small portion of morality through your spirit, not simply through your human cognitive resources.

“We understand that Earth is not the perfect teacher. The human network is inconsistent. Not every person will be bullied. Not every person will become the bully. And sadly, many that become the bully will value pleasure on Earth above spiritual morality, so many will not dis-

cover the merits of goodness. That means they won't develop understanding.

"But as you know," the light continued, "that's why you can take as many turns as you need to complete your process of understanding. In as many turns as it takes, you can have so many different paths. You can find understanding in so many different ways; you need to navigate from so many perspectives. You meet so many different spirits. And then during a specific turn, we've constructed the concept of time- to make your journey on Earth feel rushed. Time makes man act quickly. He can't think analytically. He's forced to act with the soul instead of the mind in moments where time seems to be running out."

"I know those times," I laughed.

"Of course- you're good at it."

"People on Earth say to follow one's heart. Is that what you're saying people need to do?"

"That's a funny phrase. I'd like to look up where it started. It means well but the problem is that on Earth following one's heart has become a popular concept to talk about, but very few are willing to actually do it. *Follow your heart* has just become a justification for acting impulsively."

"Isn't impulse the opposite of the slow analytical process that we ought to avoid on Earth?"

“I’ve been misunderstood. One must find understanding in their spirit rather than their mind to leave the cycle, but that does not mean that cognitive thought, through the brain, is unimportant. Rather cognitive thought is one’s map and spiritual understanding is the x which marks the spot. If a person act’s impulsively, you can imagine that is like closing one’s eyes and running wildly around the map. It seems like a surefire way not to find the understanding hidden at the x . As you say on Earth, it is like a chicken with his head cut off.”

“This is all coming back to me. Transition loss wears off, does it not?”

“It does. Everything will come back.”

“And there are people here, waiting for me?”

“Of course. They are waiting for you so that you can take the next turn together. But before you go join them, you need to see more.”

I was back in the woods sitting at the table with the old man. He wasn’t looking at me anymore but rather at the line of trees behind me. The fire was gone. “Let me tell you a story,” he said.

I said okay.

“My father knew a dentist in New York a long time ago. One day the dentist skipped town, not because he was an unreliable dentist, not because he owed any money, but because he had a vision that he was living the wrong life. He thought he was supposed to be a king in the

jungle.” The old man paused to appreciate the clearing we sat in. He motioned to the woods behind me as if they were a simulation of the jungle the doctor dreamt of. “The dentist got on the first flight to Sao Paolo after he had that vision. He took a bus as far as it would take him into the Amazon and then swam the river and walked until he found a cave that he felt was suitable for living. My father told me that the man wore nothing but swim trunks and ivy that he pulled from the trees and tied around his chest.”

“The man sounds like an idiot,” I said.

“Perhaps you’re right,” the man continued. “The dentist quickly found a problem in the jungle: animals that had been born in the Amazon had much better senses of smell than the dentist did. They beat him to every piece of meat so he decided he needed to catch something and brutally kill it to show that he ought to be at the top of the food chain. He thought that other animals would submit to him after he proved he was a worthy predator.”

“Although I don’t understand his quest, I understand his logic.”

“Of course,” the man smiled, “So the dentist didn’t eat any of the meat that he was able to collect over the course of the next week. Rather, he laid it all out in front of his cave so that the meat might attract an animal which he could kill. He waited in the shadows until a bear approached the animal parts he’d found. When the opportunity presented itself, he leapt from the shadows with a sharp rock and bashed the head

in of the animal that had approached his cave. The dentist was a fit man—he ran a few miles to the gym everyday in New York. He broke the animal’s skull immediately.

“He became a savage!”

“He started clawing and biting at the animal. He ate the raw flesh until his mouth was stained red. He looked up into the canopy, out across the jungle and screamed, ‘Do you see this? Do you fucking see this?’”

“So he did go mad?” I asked, wondering about the old man’s angle.

“Most people in New York think that’s where the story ends. They didn’t see him again. They assumed he’d become the king of the Amazon. But the story actually ends a little later on. After he ate the dead animal, he spent days in his cave throwing up, convulsing with sickness. A man is not capable of digesting like that.”

“Did he die?” I asked.

“He did not,” the old man said, “he dragged himself out of the cave and back to the river where a boat picked him up and took him to Sao Paolo. He was revived there and then he flew to San Diego where he had family. He opened up a new practice there and never returned to New York. I supposed even though he’d tried to become an animal, he was never able to get rid of the human ego that refuses to admit failure.”

“Did your father stay in touch with him?”

“Sort of. My father ran into him in San Diego once and the whole story came out. My father swore to secrecy but told the tale when the doctor died. I wonder what you would do- would you rather die alone in the jungle for your own closure or would you come back to familiarity at home, knowing that you’ve failed.”

“Death isn’t necessarily failure.”

“That’s why I told you this story about that coward of a dentist.”

In an instant, I was in a new body, a new place again. I sat in the back seat of my own car- propped up on the middle seat, leather seats in a white Lexus. We were driving down a one-way street in a neighborhood we knew. I’d been drinking.

A block down the street another car was headed towards us, headed in the wrong direction. It was driving slow, maybe ten miles an hour but probably slower. We couldn’t pass, and it held down its horn, blaring at us.

“One way,” the man driving my car yelled, “One way!”. The horn continued to cut through the night, and the car facing us inched forward. Through the windshield I could see its driver. I could see in his eyes that he’d been drinking too. He looked like he was from out of town, the plates on his car suggested a rental. He inched forward as the driver in our own car jabbed his fingers into the windshield, “One way! Turn around!” The other car continued towards us. The driver, with a look in

his eyes like he'd drive through us if he had to, crashed into my car. His car under mine, the bumpers locked together.

"What the fuck!" I yelled.

"Jack, I'm sorry man," my friend looked back at me, horrified.

"It's not your fault," I said, "but put the car in reverse. Get untangled from this mess."

He put the car in reverse. The engine revved, his eyes met mine in the mirror and he said that it wouldn't unlock. He'd have to press harder, use more force. Finally the car unhooked and shot backwards. He hit the breaks but not fast enough and we bumped into a car parked behind us.

"Fuck!" our driver yelled. He got out of the car, "Jack, I'm so sorry."

"It's totally fine," I said, "This guy's drunk and it was completely his fault." I got out of the car too.

Our driver started waking towards the other car: "It's one way, dumbass! Look at what you did!" The other driver didn't get out of the car. He looked on with glazed, indifferent eyes. "I said one way, asshole. Look at this mess!" The other driver was motionless as ours walked up to his car and banged two fists on the metal hood, "Fuck you!"

I knew what was about to happen. All it took was the other driver's slow blink, and I knew. *Don't do it* I thought, but I was frozen, I couldn't speak up. I couldn't warn our own driver, my friend. The other

took his foot off of the brake. His car rolling forward, pushing our own back. He hit the gas and our own driver slipped. Then with more force the car moved forward until it pinned our driver's bloody head between its grill and mine.

Again the setting changed and so did my form. I was in eighth grade world history. I sat in the third row of desks between the window and a girl whose hair smelled like rosemary. It was a spring day- pink buds sprouted on branches. A bee rested on the window frame.

The teacher stood at the board with an elaborate diagram of how the Egyptian pyramids had been built. "The Egyptians developed a complex ramp system that allowed their workers to carry large bricks to the top of the structure," he said.

"Don't you mean to say slaves, not workers?" a boy called from the back of the room.

"This is pointless," I laughed, "anyone who reads the Internet knows that aliens are behind the pyramids. The vent system is way too complicated for the times."

"Gentlemen," the teacher shouted, "enough." The boy in the back laughed and I blushed.

The girl sitting next to me stood up quietly and left the room, presumably to the bathroom. I was impressed. I had never left a classroom without asking first for permission. For the next few minutes I sat

wondering if I had the courage to get up and leave the room without asking. There was almost no risk- my neighbor had been successful. The only risk I faced was if she had slipped out without being noticed. Or, of course, if the teacher would play favorites- let her leave but not me.

I sat still in my chair, asking myself over and over if I'd do it. Such a minor task, standing up and walking to the bathroom became a game for me. It became a personal challenge. I stood up and walked across the room to the door.

"Mr. Green," the teacher said, "where do you think you're going?"

"To the bathroom, sir," I replied.

"And you think you can stroll out in the middle of class without asking permission?"

"Sir, she did it," I motioned to the empty desk next to mine.

"And if she jumped off of a bridge would you do that too?"

Something about that adage bothered me. As I stood facing my teacher, preparing myself to respond, it hit me that my answer to his question depends. It depends on the person! There are some people whose judgment I trust. If they jumped off a bridge I would probably do the same thing because if they did it, there must be danger on the bridge or immense joy in jumping into water below. Someone with good judgment would probably have a reason to jump that I could agree with.

"Honestly sir, if she jumped from a bridge then I would too. I trust her judgment."

“It was a rhetorical question, Mr. Green. And that’s a bad answer, anyway. Now sit back down,” he said.

“How is it a bad answer? There has to be *someone* you’d jump off of a bridge after. Someone you trust that much?”

“Sit down, I said.”

“I need to go to the bathroom,” I said in front of the silent class. I couldn’t believe I said it. I didn’t even have to go. I just wanted to leave without having to ask. I couldn’t believe I’d created this mess for myself.

“Go the the bathroom then. And then keep walking to the principal’s office and tell him I sent you for talking back.”

I had a knack for doing that kind of thing: making trouble for myself. I could have just stayed seated. I could have not talked back. I shuffled to the door. A few boys in the back of the room laughed.

When I opened the door I was a girl, sitting on her father’s lap. We were ice fishing. After that, I was a young man working as a first mate on a ship traveling through the indian ocean. I saw thirty more scenes after that: I was a slave in South Carolina. I was a king in Bamako. I was Scandinavian and Vietnamese. I gave birth and then a few scenes later I was a man watching his wife die doing the same.

The time that I spent in each scene became shorter and shorter. I was a man crying. I was a woman throwing up. I was a daughter painting her own nails. I was a father changing a diaper. I moved through each

scene faster than the one before it. Sometimes I moved so fast that I didn't even recognize who I was or what role I was playing. I moved so fast, through so many different lives, it became hard to understand what it meant to be *I*.

Then the darkness returned. The balls of light floated in the distance like buoys in a dark ocean. I concentrated on one of them and asked, "What are these things you're showing me, these scenes? Why have you shown me all of these places?"

"They're critical moments," one light replied.

"Not *my* critical moments."

"This is why you'll need another turn," the light said.

"Because I haven't had those moments?" I asked.

"No because you don't understand that they're all *your* moments."

"Are you saying I've been those people? That I've had each of those moments in the past?"

"In a sense, yes."

"I think I get it. This is an explanation of the turns. This shows that it takes more than one life to find understanding in so many experiences so that we can truly *know* this network."

"You're not wrong," the light said, "but you're missing the point still."

“Have I earned the right to be told the point?”

“Of course. The concept of *earning* and *having rights* is such a horrible human construct. All you need to do is ask. Those who don’t know ought to ask those who do know, and those who know ought to reply. That’s *sharing*. Children, fresh into a new turn, still know it. Sadly our network is failing somewhere down the line and human action strips spirits of that concept, instead replacing it with all sorts of *rights*. You have one right- to exist in equality with every other spirit taking a turn.”

“So would you explain to me where I’ve misunderstood?”

“Absolutely. You need to know that the key to understanding is recognizing yourself in every other spirit, discovering what network means. We are one system. What that means is that someone with absolute understanding will recognize that it only takes one turn if that spirit can appreciate the critical moments of spiritual understanding of all of his fellows. We are still waiting for that someone to exist. It takes most spirits nearly a hundred turns to even start asking questions between them. You’re a bit early, not only asking questions but asking good ones. The key to this is knowing that we are a singular network that and everyone’s critical moments add to it. Each moment adds understanding to this system that you are a part of. Asking questions, sharing, knowing the other parts of the network can add to your own understanding. It’s selfish, maybe nearsighted, to want to gather all understanding through your own turns. You’d be on Earth forever. Instead, humanity needs to

share, to work together, to understand every feeling. In each of your turns you need to understand each of the moments of each of your fellow spirits.”

“I’m a part of one system. I am not the one nor am I one of many independent objects in a universe. I am a part of *one* living thing.”

“You understand.”

“I’m ready to return.”

“I hope that next time you’re here we stay longer.”

“Me too,” I said as the darkness around me turned to a blinding light. I felt pressure, I felt pain. I screamed and in an instant everything would be erased. I fought it, held on for a second longer. I didn’t want to forget. I didn’t want to start fresh on Earth in a new turn. Instead, I was ready to have my journey pay off. I was ready to preach the word. I had a chance to make something of my newfound knowledge.

The scene faded around me to the thin air of the Himalayas. The sun was rising from the peaks across from me. It turned the rocks and clouds into a chalky orange mass. Individual rays shot into the sky, turning the morning red. God had spoken to me, now it was time to wake up, and accept His glory on Earth, accept each of my peers. I had been reborn. I’d lived that. I had felt that pain. I had been told what needed to be done, and I hadn’t forgotten it. It hadn’t been lost to a new turn during my transition back to Earth.

It would be hard and I wouldn't necessarily be glorified for doing my job. In fact, I would probably get no credit for being a disciple of God, a man on his last turn. I would continue to listen, though, no matter how average my life turned out, because I knew that if I could come to understand the critical moments of each of my fellow man's existence, there would be nothing average about my *being* when my final turn came to an end.

I looked out over the vast range of which I'd reached the pinnacle. God's work, our arena. It was the place that he had given us so that he could turn his great power into something more. In a sense, God was going through some wild reproductive process. He was growing Gods out of us, and we were children far too simpleminded to understand what we needed to do to achieve what he wanted from us.

I felt it funny that the Eastern and Western religions had come so close to understanding God's plan. If it wasn't for the human ego, each religion may have gotten it. The Jews preach a Messiah who can deliver Heaven on Earth. The Christians say that goodness breeds salvation in Providence. The Buddhists seek Nirvana, a state so similar to the one I had experienced. The Hindus understand the concept of reincarnation. And so many other religions have taught factors of this network that the light had explained to me. Each one nearly had it. I wondered what our world could have become if religious leaders accepted reform, were will-

ing to meet together, to put great minds together, and to wonder together about the human purpose.

I began to feel light headed, the mountains below me shook, and the valley swelled, in and out with my breath. From my bones I felt a release that was in direct opposition of the pressure that I'd felt in my return to the human state. I stood appreciating the power that I had through the knowledge that I was just one part of the network that God had created. Together we're *everything*. I understood. I closed my eyes so and waited to see the orbs again. I wanted to talk to them about what we are. I wanted to show my understanding before I went down the mountain, before I clocked out for good.

So here I am, at the end of my story for now, in the darkness waiting for the orbs to return, to talk one last time before I went on my way. I've shared this with you for one reason: I'm not unique. I am not special, this is not a hero's quest. I am not bigger than humanity. As a matter of fact, if you've made it here, you know that I'm just a small part of it, of scale equal to you. As I wait for the light to come back to me again, to help me refine my next journey, I think I already know what it will tell me: Listen to your fellow man. *Listen*. This is a system made up of billions of parts, and I'm only one of them. My story is a tiny fraction of our experience, and I should treat it as such. Likewise, I ought to recog-

nize that the collective moments of all of humanity are the very network that we operate within. We must consume them all without restraint.

10.

“You know I’ve told you so much about myself, Nicholas. Don’t you find it a little funny that you haven’t told me anything from your manuscript. I don’t even know what it’s about.”

“The plot is probably of no interest to you, and you’ll be able to read it in print soon enough anyway,” I replied.

She scoffed into her glass of wine, an action I’d come to know so well during our discussions on the porch. “I think I deserve to know what it’s about at least. I’m sure there are a number of characters that are based off of myself.”

That made me laugh. Something about women- always thinking that everything is about them. The utterly crazy thing that I’d learned is that so often they’re right. Everything I’d worked on, all of my inspiration, in some form had come from Alice. She made me think. She made me wonder, and she made me want to discover truth. She let me refuse the idea that physiology governs the world. “There’s pretty much only one character and he’s not like you,” I said.

“Go on,” she smiled.

“Some people might think he’s crazy, but I’m not sure. He’s down in the dumps with his life. Nothing is going right so he follows these vi-

sions to India. He's looking for God. He climbs a mountain in the Himalayas because he trusts - he has faith - that God is waiting for him there."

"And does he find God?" she asked, setting her glass of wine on the table, looking right into my eyes.

"Well it's hard to say," I laughed. I hated talking about my own work. It always seemed so much more romantic, so much more epic on the page than it did when I tried to spit out the words. "It's hard to say," I said again, "maybe he finds heaven and returns to Earth as some kind of apostle."

"What makes it hard to say? The other alternative?" she asked.

"Yeah," I paused, "The other is that he dies alone."