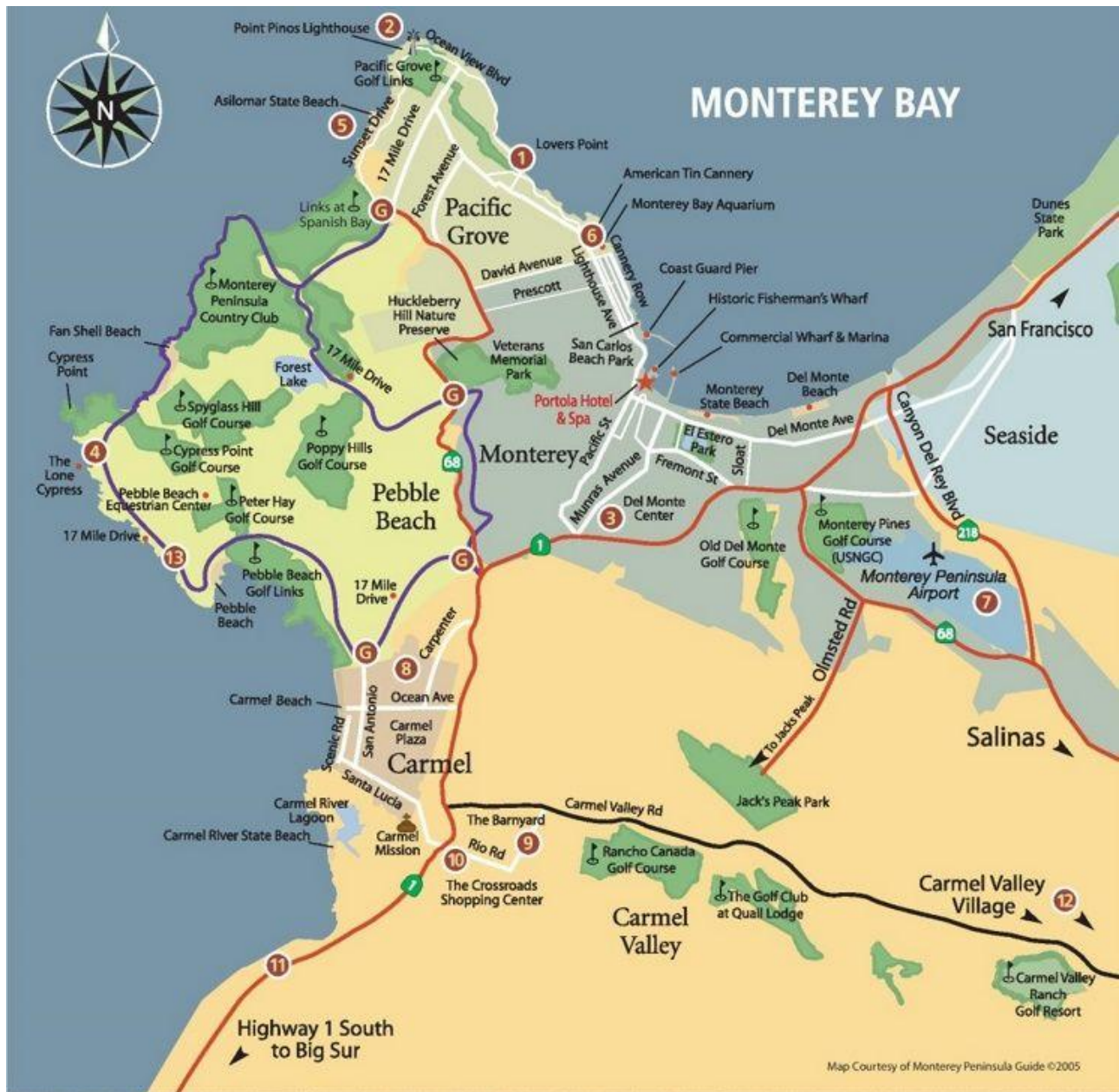




A Monterey Story



MONTEREY PENINSULA OVERVIEW

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|-------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| ① Lovers Point, Pacific Grove | ⑥ Monterey Bay Aquarium | ⑪ Point Lobos State Park |
| ② Point Pinos Lighthouse | ⑦ Monterey Peninsula Airport | ⑫ Wine Country |
| ③ Del Monte Shopping Center | ⑧ Carmel-by-the-Sea | ⑬ 17-Mile Drive |
| ④ The Lone Cypress | ⑨ Barnyard Shopping Center | Ⓜ Gates to 17-Mile Drive |
| ⑤ Asilomar State Beach | ⑩ Crossroads Shopping Center | |

A Monterey Story

For Savannah

1

Monterey

It was a German exchange student that once told me this: that if you looked with care onto the ocean's horizon, provided that the view was wide enough, you could see the curvature of the Earth. You need to know how to look at it just the right way. Look too close, and you won't see the big picture. Look too wide, and the whole thing just becomes a flat blue line. I never quite figured out how to strike the right balance, never saw the curve. Every time the exchange student and I would walk down to that beloved beach from our school in Monterey, he would try and teach me, his accent getting thicker over time with amusement and frustration. He tried again and again, until it was the end of the year and he had to go back to his home in Germany, where he could see the curve from the Atlantic rather than the Pacific.

To this day, I still haven't figured out how. But every time I revisit that shore, I try my hardest. Sometimes I finally see the curve, get excited, then realize that I've only fooled myself into thinking that it was there. Still, I make an honest attempt whenever I visit.

Today, as it was every time, it was November, when the ocean breeze went from pleasant to slightly hurting your skin, so that just like last time and every time before that, I wished that I had brought my jacket. Then my roommate, Martin, gave me a thousand different variations of "I told you so," today being no exception. I used to think that it was annoying, condescending even, but nowadays I find it to be charming. Like sentences from a fortune cookie.

This was how it was every time.

I haven't actually been there in years, of course.

The beach changed its color depending on the sunlight. The sand was a shimmering white on sunny days and a calm ivory on cloudy ones. Clumps of black seaweed and broken branches dotted the beach, and the waves dissipated into white as they slammed against the jagged black rocks by the shore. The color of the ocean followed a similar pattern as the color of the beaches—an enchanting turquoise when the skies were blue, and a dark, nearly black navy when the skies were gray. Out in the deep waters, colossal kelp forests that stretched from the surface all the way down to the ocean floor performed their ritual dance. The view of the horizon was completely unobstructed—so much so that all I could see from one corner of my eyes to the other was the sky and the ocean. On the horizon the sun went down with gold rays, kind enough to let us admire it without hurting our eyes. The beach was the sort of place you started to miss even when you were there. I wished that my eyes were like a camera lens, able to zoom out to capture more.

To the right of me was Martin, and to the left, Gordon. Gordon was the “honorary roommate.” If you wanted to find him during lunch, or after school, your best bet was to come to Room 207, where he would be sprawled out on the floor with Martin and I. Gordon was a stand-up guy, the type to always keep a smile handy and to laugh at every joke you told him. The great part was that he didn't laugh to be nice, although no doubt he was kind, but because he genuinely found it funny. He understood that the best joke you could tell was to laugh at someone else's.

After Martin's long string of reprimands for my grave mistake of not listening to him about the jacket was over, we stared in silence at the infinite horizon with its waves, rocks, birds,

and the setting Sun. When Martin asked what we should have for dinner, I knew that I should be taking my leave soon.

It was a Friday afternoon, and we were three high schoolers in their senior year. We were in Monterey, California, a place so beautiful that calling it so would be redundant. The weekend with its promises of laughter and leisure was ahead of us, assuring us that Sunday night was far away and Monday morning would never come. It was perhaps the most mundane scene, but these days I can't help but think that it would make for a good movie. One of those coming-of-age movies released during the summer. One with a bittersweet ending that makes you lovesick.

Martin nudged me on the side with his elbow. "Sam, you ready to stop staring at the sea and go?" he asked.

I was, but not to where they were headed. I would have loved to—to feast on good food and the even better spirits of a Friday night, but I had overindulged already.

Gordon pulled over onto the dirt path in his car. It was time.

2

Martin

It's like picking a part in a movie and rewatching it. Or rather, like picking out a chapter in a choose-your-own-adventure book and playing it out.

As soon as my eyes opened, irritation flooded my skin like needles of short hair. The tranquil beach of Monterey was gone, replaced by a hectic street in New York. The pleasant song of ocean birds was now the annoyed clamor of traffic, and in the place of my two dear friends were faceless strangers.

I let out the cough of a coal miner and began running my fingers through the wooden bowl in front of me. Most of them were quarters, as it often was, but there were a few crumpled dollar bills mixed in. I sat in the same spot, waiting and occasionally thanking strangers for their kindness. When it became dark, I counted again. It wasn't much, but it was enough to get something to eat.

After my dinner of canned beans, the streetlights reached their peak brightness for the night, with hunched bodies hurrying home under them. A whole lot must wait for them back home. Good food. A pet, or better yet, a lover. A bed with a soft pillow and warm sheets. I wanted to lie down on a real bed, instead of this pitiful excuse for a mattress made of thick cardboard. It was good, then, that I knew just where to go.

* * *

The blinds of my dorm room were broken. They were like that when I arrived in my room at the beginning of the year, and like that when I had to leave. One of the horizontal vanes around the middle was snapped in half, and lights from the other rooms would peer in through it. Some of the faculty lived on campus—dorm parents, they were called. One of them, Ms. Jamieson, lived right across my window senior year. Ms. Jamieson, if the lights of her house were telling the truth, went to sleep late most nights. If you had her for English the next day, you'd hear her complaining about mornings, an airtight grip around her coffee. I often made a game out of which one of us would go to sleep sooner with the light through my broken blinds as the judge. I lost most nights. As I visualized the striped shadows that Ms. Jamieson's apartment lights cast against the white walls of my dorm, I found myself there.

It was 2:03 in the morning, and my bed, while an ocean's weight better than pieces of soggy cardboard, was a bit damp. Sam Hanely did not wash his sheets too frequently—just one of a multitude of flaws he had in high school, but I suppose this was nothing compared to the other ones. I threw the damp sheets back and sat up. The room was small with whitewashed walls and a carpeted floor. Its organization was perfect, a beautiful mess that I've always been proud of. The bed was placed along the wall with the window, straight across from the entrance to the room. To your right as you entered was a small built-in closet, so close to the entrance that its door and the entrance door would often collide on your way in. Next to the closet was a brown desk with a shelf and a drawer, also placed along the wall, and in front of it, a black swiveling desk chair. On the edge of the desk closer to the bed's headrest was usually where I put my phone. This arrangement was ingenious—it allowed me to reach my phone from the bed lying down. Across the desk, along the left-hand wall from the entrance, was a cheap electric guitar propped up on a stand. Like the phone, it had the crucial characteristic of being accessible from

the bed. Due to the small size of the room, the guitar could also be reached easily from the desk chair. This meant that I could study for a bit on the desk, spin around, fiddle on the guitar (I was never a serious player, but Martin had convinced me to buy a guitar in junior year and was trying to teach me how to play at the time), then leap onto the bed straight from the chair. The bed, desk, and guitar formed a beautiful and convenient triangle, while the room itself was a tiny square. You couldn't take two full steps from the entrance before bumping into the bed, but its small size allowed for its greatest strength—everything being at an arm's reach. I loved, and still love, this room.

The shadowy stripes on the wall disappeared. You win this time, Ms. Jamieson.

I got up and ran my hands through the top of the desk. It was an old desk, the various bruises and scrapes left by the previous residents of the room marking its age. Some were simple doodles, while some appeared to be the initials of past residents. At the center of the desk was a crater about the size of a nickel. Why someone thought that digging it was a good idea or how they went about it has always been beyond me. Too often I would forget about the hole whenever I did my homework, eventually driving my pencil through the paper and into the crater.

I moved onto the top desk drawer where I kept all of my homework assignments and took out the entire bundle. I skimmed through the stack, watching the dates grow younger and getting annoyed by the occasional tear in the paper.

Next, I went through my then-recent texts on my phone. Have you ever read through your old texts? Even though most of them are just small talk and mindless chatter, they seem so special, almost magical. There is an odd sense of pity involved in watching your old self talk.

“You do today's math yet?” asked Martin that day.

“Not yet, but I'll get to it pretty soon,” I replied.

Then after a few minutes, from Martin: “I don’t want to do it.”

“You’ll have to if you want to study in New York,” I said.

“Good point.” Then twenty minutes later: “The city of New York needs your help with question 7.”

These simple sentences drowned me in more sorrow than most books and movies ever could. Go through your old texts. Try it. Close your eyes and scroll and scroll past recent messages for a few minutes, and see where it takes you. The banalest conversations will break your heart. When I revisit scenes like this one, I like to read what I had written back then. Math equations for homework, reminders written in haste, text messages—these things that you would never think of being able to make you melancholy did just that.

I stopped reading when muffled notes of guitar strings came from the other side of the wall. It was Martin. Now, in senior year, we weren’t actually roommates. We were roommates junior year, in a 2-bedroom dorm right across the hall from my room. The school put seniors in single dorms, but Martin and I wouldn’t have minded sharing a room again senior year: more hilarity ensued that way. Besides, with Gordon practically a resident of our room, we needed the space. We had hoped that we could keep living in our old room come senior year, and while we didn’t get our wish the next year, we got pretty close. Both of us got single rooms—not just in the same building, which we would have been content with—but ones that were right next to each other. Neither of us could believe the coincidence, and at the beginning of the year we went around telling all of our friends about it. We even did the math at one point to figure out how slim the odds were. Our dorm junior year had a partial wall in the middle that divided the room into two halves. So in a way, we’d say, the only thing that changed was the length of the wall. I guess you could say that our unbelievable rooming arrangements were why we continued to refer

to each other as roommates, but I think we still would have called each other that, even if we didn't have adjacent rooms. In fact, I'm willing to bet that if Martin and I were to meet today, wherever he may be now, we would still be referring to each other as "my roommate."

The walls dampened the notes from the acoustic, but I could still make out the melody: It was "Girl From Ipanema." Martin was going through a bossa nova phase then. Much like his remarks at the beach, it was only of late that I learned to appreciate Martin's late-night concerts.

"I've got an 8:30 class tomorrow," Sam would mutter to himself in bed. He tried all sorts of remedies: trying to ignore it; trying to embrace it, treating it as a lullaby; lying down on his side; wearing earplugs, although the guitar cut through both the wall and the plugs somehow; lying down on his side with earplugs on (this method was successful once in junior year when Martin was snoring—it blocked out significantly more noise than when he was lying on his back), and so on. When eventually none of them worked, Sam would sit up, realize that it was today now instead of tomorrow, and swear to himself. But with all that has happened since the forever ago that was senior year, those hushed notes were now one of my favorite sounds. Why stop at muffled notes? I thought, and walked to the door to see the show live.

The carpeted hallway of the dorm looked like the innards of a gray python. The hall was quite narrow, requiring one person to turn to their side for two people to pass each other. The walls were the same whitewashed kind in the dorms, and the dim yellow lights overhead lit the way past the dormitories to the end of the hall, where one of the entrances to a faculty apartment was. Dimmed lights in the hallway—that's how I knew that it was really late. At six, the lights in the dormitories would come on and keep their brightness up until 2:00 a.m., after which they would begin to dim. To see dimmed lights in the hall meant that you wouldn't be learning anything in class the next day.

I took a half step down the gray carpet and knocked on the door next to mine. It opened without hesitation. There were no questions of “Who’s there” or even a pause in his singing. At this hour, he knew.

“Girl From Ipanema?” I asked as I entered.

“Yeah. I think I’m really getting the hang of it now.”

Martin’s room was a mirrored version of my mine, with the desk on the left as you entered instead of the right. If my room had a method to its madness, well, Martin’s room was just madness. A duffle bag with his gym clothes and a basketball lay with its zipper half-open on the floor. His blankets were twisted into a swirl on his bed, while the bedsheets were loose and wrinkled in the shape of waves. Martin liked to keep his room dark. Even during study hall, he would have the lights off, depending only on his desk lamp. The lamp cast a spotlight on his desk, revealing textbooks and sheets of paper and wires overlapping with each other. On the corner of his desk was a half-eaten bowl of cereal, a bit too close to his strumming hand for comfort, but we were both used to it. Martin and I had many late-night snacking sessions, where we would devour a variety of junk foods, ranging from chips to sugary cereal to our favorite, instant noodles. The number of such sessions that we’ve had since junior year must be in the triple digits, for sure. We’d cook ourselves some noodles in Martin’s pot and put a movie on a laptop. We’d open a bag of chips and talk about girls past one, two, or sometimes even three in the morning. When either of us knocked on each other’s doors, we would be greeted not with a hello, but rather with a flying packet of ramen. I had a box of junk food below my desk—an arm’s reach from both the bed and the desk, of course—and so did he.

I grabbed an open box of cereal off of his desk shelf, poured it into one of his bowls, and sat on the bed to listen to him sing in a low voice. He slowly strummed the last chord at the end of the song and looked up to me with a smile as it reverberated softly.

“Dinner was kinda bad today, wasn’t it?” he asked when the chord had died out.

But I couldn’t answer that, because I didn’t remember what dinner was. It had been years for me, after all. To Martin, this was a regular Wednesday night. Tomorrow he would wake up, see Sam in the bathroom as he brushed his teeth, skip breakfast because he was running late to class, go biking after school, struggle with homework, and play guitar late into the night. Maybe he’ll knock on his neighbor’s door at one in the morning, and see his roommate grinning ear-to-ear with two packets of instant ramen when it opens. Maybe they’ll decide to watch a movie and quietly shuffle downstairs to microwave some popcorn. All I knew for sure was that whoever he would see in the morning, whoever he did his homework with, whoever he played guitar for and ate ramen and lamented about girls with, would not be me.

When sleepiness clouded the conversation, slowing it down to a natural end, I bid Martin good night. I walked back to my empty room, took one and a half steps, and plopped down onto the damp sheets.

3

Ice Cream

Or maybe it's more like playing an old video game. One where you lose progress if you quit before saving. Yes, I think that would be the best way to explain it. Like picking out a level or a checkpoint and playing it again from that spot. The starting point, always identical, but leading to different places as you make different choices. And when you have to turn the game off in a hurry before you can save because Mom is scolding you, saying that you'll end up like a bum glued to video games like that—all of the choices, the changes, the progress—gone.

I woke up during the crack of dawn to see the streets enveloped in the color of orange cement. It was a time when most people were still asleep, a time for alarm clocks to get out of bed. I packed my possessions: two pieces of thick, ragged cardboard, a gray blanket stained to black; a backpack that someone threw away, and inside it my precious notebook, a pen, what little money I had, a once-clear plastic case now opaque from scratches that held my toothpaste and toothbrush, and my wooden bowl. I headed to Downtown Brooklyn, where foot traffic was better.

The alarm clocks had done their job, and the streets were bustling with strangers made unkind by hurry. The orange glow was gone now, defeated by the harsh concrete, leaving everything around to be the flat tone of gray. I sat on the two pieces of cardboard with my back leaning against a building and my bowl placed in front. Across the street, another gentleman was in the same pose, except that he was holding a cardboard sign. It read: "Won't buy cigarettes or

alcohol or drugs I promise. Just need food & toiletries. Anything helps. Thank you and God bless.” I didn’t have a sign like that. Not because I had a good reason against it, but simply because I didn’t know what to put on it. The writing on the cardboard signs of the homeless was an intricate craft. To explain your life so far, the situation you’re in, your needs—and to convince a complete stranger to help you on top of that, all on a measly piece of cardboard? I had pages upon pages to do just that with my college applications, and I still failed.

The gentleman’s sign did the job just fine. It addressed the concern many people had with giving people on the streets cash: that they would be spending it on smokes, alcohol, or drugs, even if most of the time it went to things like socks, toiletries, and food. Some used the misconception to their benefit, writing something along the lines of “Why lie? Need money for beer,” hoping that humor would be the key to opening both the hearts and the wallets of strangers. This method could be effective, but only for those who saw it for the first time. It wouldn’t take them long to realize that the joke was commonplace. Personally, I felt that it was better to stick to the tried-and-true. A simple sentence explaining my needs, followed by a “Thank you and God bless,” maybe.

I took out my notebook from the backpack to pass the time. It contained a list of recollections, a catalog of memories I wanted bookmarked. Anytime I remembered a new scene from my days in Monterey, I noted it down for a later visit. Here were some of the options: going biking after school with Martin and Gordon in the horse trails around the school, having cilantro ice cream (a monstrosity that should not have existed, but Rachel–Rachel loved it) at the creamery in Alvarado Street, decorating the dorms at the beginning of the year, and going on my first date of the year. The list wasn’t well organized, but I liked it that way. With the list this way it felt incomplete, with always more memories to be added onto. I wanted the list to be like an

ice cream parlor with endless flavors. One where I could leave with the comfort of knowing that there would always be a new flavor to try—even if that flavor was cilantro.

I settled on a memory. It was about a caramel-flavored Sunday on which nothing happened.

* * *

It was one of those lazy weekend afternoons that made you guilty. Guilty, because you had done nothing all day but the sun was already setting. It was too late to start anything at that point, so you would just stay in bed, watching the orange of the sun fill the room. Nothing was happening, nothing was special, and you could just drift away.

In those ordinary, now extraordinary afternoons, you could usually find me in my tiny room with Martin, floating down the lazy pool of time. Regardless of the season, the yearning scent of Autumn would flow in through the window with every breeze, intermingling with the percussive beats of Martin's guitar in the air. I would be on my laptop and Martin on his guitar, taking turns falling asleep.

On most visits, I liked to take different paths, but in memories like these, I preferred to spend it the same way I had originally. Not long after I arrived, my eyelids began to grow heavy. I reclined my chair and gently swiveled to the left to watch Martin play the guitar. His fingers were hypnotizing, weaving effortlessly through guitar strings like water.

I was relieved to wake up to the sun-basked walls of my room rather than the gray pavements of New York City. I didn't check the time—there was no need to back then, and there was no need now. The sunrays that painted the whitewashed walls orange were more saturated now, as if someone had mixed a drop of blood in it. Martin was still playing his guitar. I wouldn't have been surprised if he was playing the whole time I was asleep, however long that may have

been. Martin was a man that was late to class more because he was playing the guitar than because he overslept, and he overslept a lot.

The laptop hummed to life as I opened it to go through its calendar. Between all the schedules and the events, calendars were a good place to go hunting for lost memories. The hunts were successful most of the time, but the way Sam titled the events was regrettable. So many expectations were littered throughout all of them. It was not just in the titles, but in the descriptions, the reminders, the word choices, and even the punctuation. It killed me to see an exclamation mark anywhere. Using an exclamation mark when describing the future was to make a promise to yourself that couldn't be kept. What was Sam thinking, putting all these exclamation marks everywhere? He was a 7-year-old on his birthday, balloons taped to the walls and a big cake in the center of his table, clapping in his cone-shaped hat covered in glitter. And I was his mother as the sun went down, carefully approaching him to pat him on the back and to bring him back inside when none of his friends had shown up.

I went through each event, removing the exclamation marks and changing the descriptions to be as matter-of-fact as they could be, making each event sound as monotone as possible. It was pointless, as if I could somehow let Sam down easy, but my fingers kept on. The soothing whispers of Martin's guitar slowly blended into silence as I played the ruthless editor. He was asleep on the bed, his right hand perched over the guitar's soundhole. This was probably Martin's most common sleeping position. He wasn't a back sleeper, a stomach sleeper, or a side sleeper, no—he was a guitar-on-top-of-stomach sleeper.

After editing the calendar for a while more with Martin's soft snores in the backdrop, I turned my attention to the procrastination-laced homework around my desk. One of them was a worksheet for calculus, and I was surprised to find that I could still solve some of the questions.

For the past three and a half years or so, the only math I had done was counting how much was in my bowl. Yet there I was, my hand remembering the equations and theorems I had long forgotten.

Martin's guitar headbutted the wall, clanging an unnamed, or rather an unnameable note. I chuckled and said, "Good morning."

Martin responded with a long, unintelligible groan that could only be understood by seals and long-time roommates. He was asking how long he had slept; I told him about how long. In response, he sat up, set the guitar down to not give it any more concussions, and slumped against the wall with his eyes closed and his arms crossed. He wanted to get up, but he was too tired to commit to it. So instead he was resting his eyes, telling himself that he wouldn't go back to sleep because he was sitting up. I often found him sleeping this way back when we were rooming together. It might as well have been his second-most common sleeping position: to be leaning against the wall, his head drooping forward so that his body made the shape of a C. It was a wonder how it wasn't doing a number on his neck and back.

Martin suddenly jolted up, a loud wail powering his ascent. He cracked that miracle neck of his, ran his hands across his face, and stretched his arms. His eyelids were drooping and his eyes were pink, but there was a little fire behind them, a hint of mischievousness.

It was a look that I was all too familiar with so I knew he would ask:

"You wanna write a song?"

Martin and I had always talked about being in a band together. If we weren't talking about our romantic woes, we were talking about our band. As I've said, I wasn't any good at the guitar—the electric in my room was more furniture than instrument. I learned from Martin here and there, but never on a consistent schedule, and practicing on my own was a rare occurrence.

As a result, most of my playing amounted to strumming the few chords I knew or fiddling a butchered version of a recognizable guitar lick. Nevertheless, being in a band with Martin always seemed like a good idea to me. It made for a good backstory: two roommates from a boarding school, who had started a band in their dorm room.

The dream was more plausible for Martin, who wanted to study music and be a musician in New York City. According to Martin, studying music in New York was a bit like studying computer science in California, or petroleum engineering in Texas. It was where the subject thrived and job opportunities abounded. He knew that I wanted to study business, well, not in the way that he wanted to study music but at least that I had planned to, and he would push me to also apply to colleges in New York. When asked why, his reason was simple but sufficient: He would yell out “Wall Street!”

So his plan was for the both of us to be in New York City, in a two-man band. We would be “just like Simon and Garfunkel,” he’d say. And whenever the plan came up, we humored it as best we could. Why stop at just being in New York City? What if we ended up going to the same school? Then we would both laugh as the realization struck us—if we went to the same school, we might as well be roommates again!

All that babble seemed so plausible back then.

To get closer to being a two-man band and to prove to ourselves that it wasn’t just a pipe dream, we would write songs. Most of them were about Hannah, the girl that Martin had been infatuated with throughout senior year. Now when it came to women he liked, Martin may have well been playing spin-the-wheel: He’d be head over heels for some girl, then in a month or two forget all about her and almost be worshiping another. His head was a rent-free apartment with a high turnover rate. Hannah was the exception. He started having feelings for her at the beginning

of the year, and as far as I was able to know, it continued (I wonder sometimes if they ever ended up getting together after I had to leave). I would help him the best I could, which included morning pep talks before class, late-night counseling sessions with ramen, deep analyses into her actions and replies, and of course, writing love songs about her with him.

I suggested the melodies by humming them out, and Martin would play them by ear. We tried different lyrics over the chords, rearranging them like puzzle pieces until they no longer fought against the rhythm. After an hour, we played through what we had and nodded to each other when Martin's final note whispered its last words. The progress was satisfactory. Good enough to show Gordon on Monday.

"I really like it—especially how honest it is. I hope you get to play it to Hannah one day," Gordon would say, without a doubt. And just as his laughs to all of our jokes were unfeigned, so would be his praise.

"I think I'll head on back for now," said Martin, picking up his guitar. "See you at dinner?"

I nodded and said of course, knowing all too well that while he would, I would not. Only the last lights of the weekend kept me company in the empty room once Martin left. An autumn breeze gently flew in. My jaws were hurting from laughing for too long.

4

Savannah

Again the murmur of the cypress trees was replaced with the shrieking of the streets. The sky was murky and covered thick with clouds, the color of the concrete pavements below them. The sun was hidden behind the thick clouds, but it must have been well past noon. Nearly an afternoon in Monterey amounted to a few hours in New York. The difference between how much time had actually passed and how much time I had spent in my dreams never followed an exact formula, but it did have a pattern: Time surpassed in New York was always less than the time spent in Monterey.

Dinner was a limp sandwich and a small bottle of water from the convenience store. I plodded along the streets afterward, searching for a new spot to settle down in and admiring the signs of the homeless. There was much to be learned from them. A few days ago I got some advice from an elderly man, who claimed that he was used to this life and laughed when I said that I had only been out here for less than a month.

“Don’t take food unless you saw them buy it at the store, or unless it’s packaged, and even then be careful,” he began. “Keep yourself visible when you sleep—alleys and dark places may seem safe because you’re secluded, but that just means nobody can see what’s happening to you. Which means,” he put a bony finger in the air, “anybody can steal from you, hurt you.” He then asked what had gotten me out here, a young man like myself.

Halfway through concocting a lie, I decided to tell a part of the truth instead. “Parents disowned me,” I said. I didn't want the man to know that my parents lived in a luxurious high-rise in Upper Manhattan. In response, the man simply nodded, scratching the gray stubble on his chin as if to say that he's seen it many times before.

I wasn't looking for a new spot because I needed one, but because I had to burn time. I promised myself to keep to a limit of two visits a day: one while the sun was up, and the other as I went to sleep. It was a way to avoid depleting new memories too fast—to show restraint at the ice cream shop.

Hours later, I settled on a spot across the street from a subway station. There, I took out my notebook again and began work on my daily quota. Two new memories remembered a day meant I could keep my visits sustainable. Even a minute, near-insignificant detail was good enough. It didn't matter how small it was when it could act as a window to an entire day in Monterey. Take the memory of the time I broke a plate in the dining hall. It was an embarrassing experience, sure, but one that wasn't too significant. But visiting that memory meant I could visit Monterey on the day it happened, and there was great merit in that. So any detail, no matter how small—actions, words, people, even the weather—were invaluable. Each one of them was a map to Treasure Island.

Still, on some days I would be left with a blank page, burning a hole through my reservoir of memories. That was when the favorites section of the notebook came in handy. It was a separate list of my most beloved memories near the end of the notebook. These were the memories I would never get bored of, the ones I could visit time after time.

A little boy in front of the subway station across the street was pointing right at me. With one hand he tugged on his mother's mink coat, while the other constantly stabbed away. The

mother looked down at the child and then to where he was pointing, and quickly pulled his hand down. She bent down to his ear, whispered something, quickly glared in my direction, then whispered into her baby's ear again. The child carefully snuck in a glance at me, nodded to his mother, and the two of them went their way, the child's hand in the mother's.

I shut the notebook with my palm. I was going to visit Savannah, already for the fifth time this week.

* * *

Savannah Yang was an odd girl. She was the twin sister of Hannah. Her hair was the color of the calm night sea, while her eyes were about as dark except with a tint of brown. When it came to her clothes, she preferred darker shades. I don't think that I have ever seen her in bright yellows, whites, beiges, or blues. Always she wore a black beanie, regardless of the season, tattered but still neat. In the memory of her car on the wharf near Alvarado Street that I visited today, she wore a purple hoodie with black jeans.

She knew about Martin's feelings for Hannah and wanted to help, and it was in our efforts to get Hannah and Martin together that I got to know her senior year. Every weekend or so, we would plan fake dates for them disguised as simple get-togethers between friends. It would be the four of us, Hannah and her and Martin and I, with us two trying to get the sparks to fly. The specific memory I visited took place after such a dinner date. Sam and Savannah were parked on the wharf next to Monterey Municipal Beach, having dropped off the two potential lovebirds on the sandy shores after dinner. That was how most of their plans went: the four of them would have the meal, and afterward either Sam or Savannah would make an excuse so that they could leave Martin and Hannah on their own for a while. Hannah must have caught onto it and about Martin's feelings as well after a certain point, but I think she was amused by it and let it play out

anyway. It was that or she didn't know what to do about it, which was fine, because neither did Martin

Her car, with all of its lights off and the engine sleeping, was as odd as she was. It was a beaten-up black sedan overrun with scratches and bumper stickers, a home to a gaggle of stuffed animals. A frog dwelled in one of the cupholders. A unicorn rolled around in the back seat. A tiny smiling whale was tied to the gear selector. A family of sea otters peeked their heads from the side compartment of the passenger seat door. While not a plushie, a miniature plastic skeleton (aptly named Mr. Skeleton) hung from one of the coat hooks, always missing a different limb somehow. With them, the car was a beautiful mess, a year-long witch's hut, with Savannah as the mother of the brood.

A car freshener far from fresh suspended from the rearview mirror, long retired. What filled the air instead was the scent of Savannah's detergent and the hum of the radio. Her music was made by bands neither you nor I have ever heard of, the kind of band that made music never to be seen on the top charts. Their songs were forlorn voices reciting poetry; they sounded like the best parts of high school. I often came out of her car with a list of bands to check out.

Savannah Yang was an odd girl. If she were ever to be in a focus group, she would need to be categorized separately as herself. She was quiet and never had a large group of people orbiting around her. Most of the time, it was just her and her sister. I think she tried not to draw too much attention to her, keeping quiet like a shadow, but in a way that seemed to draw more attention to her, like a black hole in a universe painted white. Sometimes in conversations around campus, it would come up that the Yang Twins lived with their grandmother, who was ill and could not walk very well. It wasn't that Savannah was an outcast in any way, and Hannah definitely wasn't, but she was a bit of an oddity, like what Pluto was among the planets.

Savannah Yang was many things. She was the twin sister of my roommate's love. She was the mother to a gaggle of animal plushies. She had one beanie for the entire year. She was a good granddaughter to her Gram. But most peculiar of all, she believed me. She believed that I was a time traveler from about three years in the future, that I had been here many times before and had all sorts of conversations with her. Every time I visit, I tell her. And every time, she believes, without fail. It, like the rest of the world, could not seem to surprise her. She alone was the only one I ever told, and the only one that would believe. Perhaps the former because of the latter.

If there was ever an appropriate place to tell someone that you were a homeless time traveler, it was in her car by that wharf at night. The wharf was empty and dark, and only the green glow of the dashboard illuminated the inside of the car, making us two shadows with faint green silhouettes, not much more than two voices floating in the darkness. And when we talked, our seats leaned back, gazing out to the black ocean and the faint silver outline of the Municipal Beach unfolding in front of us, we became invisible from the rest of the world and no longer a part of it. It was a scene that accelerated friendship, the opening of hearts, the pouring and confessions, and the exchange of words both thoughtful and loving. And Savannah was the catalyst for all of the above. She knew the exact point at which the other person wanted the conversation to take a solemn tone. Her voice changed from bright and playful to calm and understanding, her quick chuckles into slow nods, the "Yeahs" into soft "Mhms."

The sound of the waves canceled out the hum of the radio. Outside, the waves dissipated and retreated as they reached the shore. Savannah and I sat in silence for a while, melting into the dark night air.

"Think Martin's doing okay out there?" I said finally.

“He’ll be fine, Sam. I thought he was quite charming today,” said Savannah.

“Easy for you to say when you don’t have to spend the rest of the weekend analyzing everything that happened.”

“Hm. If you only knew,” said Savannah, which made me raise my eyebrows.

Back to silence again. Three more waves, I told myself. Three more waves and I’ll tell her.

“Hey, Savannah?”

“Mhm?”

“Can I tell you something?”

“No time you can’t.”

“Something ridiculous.”

“Nothing new under the sun.”

“I’m some sort of a... time traveler.” I still struggled with the line every time, like an actor with permanent stage fright.

Her eyes, devoid of surprise but instead filled with the warm glow of a worried lighthouse, beckoned me to go on. How did she do it?

“I time travel, but only in my dreams, and only within my memories,” I said. “I reminisce on a memory as I fall asleep, and I find myself there. And everything is exactly as it was back then, but I can relive it. I can say different things, make different choices, and see how it would have been if I said and did those things, you know? Like playing a perfect simulation of the world back then.” I sighed out a short breath as I searched for the next line. “But it won’t change anything in the present, in my life, because it’s all just in my dreams—wake up, and it’s all gone.”

When I first decided to tell her, I filled a few good pages of my little notebook preparing for all of the reactions I could think of. One where she stares, confused and not knowing how to respond. One where she laughs it off. One where she isn't sure if it's a joke or not and becomes concerned. Another where she thinks of it as a game and plays along. And in the case of a miracle that she believed me, I prepared a list of answers to possible questions.

When did you first notice it?

Not too long ago. More than a month, two months at the most.

How did you get it to happen?

I'm not sure. I would go to sleep thinking about Monterey a lot, and eventually I realized that I was reliving the scenes I was reminiscing about. I don't exactly remember when it went from simple dreams to the kind I have now, but I think that was a gradual process.

Have you told anyone?

Only you.

How do you know that it isn't a lucid dream?

I've wondered that myself. Besides them being too vivid, it's that I don't have complete control over them. I can only do what I would have been able to do back then. I can't suddenly change the weather or fly or anything like that. Another reason, and this one is more crucial, is that I can seem to find out about things that I didn't know about. Like how your grandmother used to have a cat. His name was Lucky, right? I didn't know that back then. But in one of my previous conversations with you, it came up.

I spent a few days trying to cover as much ground as possible. But it all turned out to be pointless, because there was one question that never crossed my mind. It was the easiest one to answer, and also the first questions she always asked.

“Are you visiting right now?” she asked.

Savannah Yang was an odd girl.

5

Lazy

“What other memories do you visit?” Savannah asked after I answered her first question. So I told her about my beloved dorm door room with the broken blinds, the lazy weekends with Martin and his love songs, the concrete path down from the school and the secret spot that Rachel showed me right before the bend down to the beach, the bus rides out of Del Monte Forest to the local mall or to Carmel, the dates that she and Sam would set up for her sister and Martin, the brunch place in Salinas with the sassy waitress from our school that teased me for not knowing what a country fried steak was; and the shooting stars at night, which at first I couldn’t believe were shooting stars because to me they were something so spectacular you would only hear about and never see, like auroras.

“All memories from Monterey,” observed Savannah. “So you pick any one of those and relive them when you go to sleep?”

“Pretty much. I keep a list of them in a small notebook to choose from.”

“So, can you visit any memory of yours, or are you only limited to ones from Monterey?”

“Any memory will work,” I said.

“So if you wanted to, you could visit your memories from childhood, for example.”

“I could, yeah.”

“Do you ever visit them? Reliving memories from when you were little?”

“Reliving when I was little?” I shrugged and shook my head. “No. I haven’t ever tried that, actually. I guess...I guess I haven’t really felt the need to.”

“That makes sense.” After a small pause, she said, “I don’t think I’d be in such a hurry to visit my childhood memories either.” She leaned on her side of the window, facing me sideways. “So when you wake up, where are you?”

“The streets of New York City,” I grinned. “I don’t have a bed to wake up in, or a home, for that matter.”

Having smothered her curiosity with kindness, Savannah continued nonchalantly. “How was your day?”

“It was...okay.” I then chuckled, and said, “Speaking of childhood, I saw a little kid right before I came here, actually. He was all excited to see me—I guess he doesn’t see homeless people often—and he was jumping up and down, pointing at me, trying to get his mom’s attention. And when his mom realized what he was doing, she slapped his arm down and started whispering to him in his ear. And I think I remember the same sort of thing happening to me when I was little. I must have been staring at a homeless person when she decided to make a little lecture out of it. She said it in a low voice so other people on the streets couldn’t hear.” I looked out the front window and crossed my arms. “I don’t remember much of it except one word, which was ‘lazy.’”

Savannah sat back up in her chair. “Hm. Lazy,” she repeated. “If laziness was the main reason behind homelessness, I think there would either be a lot more or a lot less homeless people in the world. I’m not sure which it would be, but I don’t think that it wouldn’t be the number it is right now.”

“That’s a good way to put it,” I said. “A lot more or a lot less, yeah. Maybe I should travel back to the memory of the mother talking to the kid today and tell her that. If that was what she was talking about, anyways. Who knows, maybe she was just telling her kid that it’s rude to point at strangers.”

“Let’s hope that was the case,” said Savannah. “I’m sorry about the barrage of questions, by the way. You must have to answer the same ones every time.”

“I don’t mind. I appreciate them, actually. They’re the sort of questions people who genuinely want to know more ask, you know? Like the kind of questions a good student asks a teacher.”

“Still, don’t you wish that I would remember sometimes, and we could pick up where we left off? I wish I could,” said Savannah.

“Of course that would be nice,” I said. “But that’s the thing, Sav. I don’t know how you do it, but it doesn’t feel like we’ve skipped much of a beat whenever I come back. It’s nice to have someone to talk to without feeling like it’s a complete reset every time, to feel like someone actually remembers you.”

“Is that how it feels when you visit other memories? Like people don’t remember you at all?” Savannah asked softly, the right side of her face glowing green.

“Sometimes, yeah. I mean, obviously they remember who I am. Like Martin and Gordon remember me when I visit them, but they remember who I was three years ago, you know? And I end up knowing more about them than they know about me, and over time, that’ll only cumulate. There’s something very lonely about that.”

“It must be. Because it’s as if you have to leave them behind every time.”

“Exactly. Although, I think maybe it’s the other way around. That I’m the one that’s being left behind. After all, I’m the one that’s coming after them every time,” I said. “I don’t know whether that makes it any better, though.”

“Mm,” Savannah nodded slowly. “I think about that a lot. Whether it’s worse to be the one leaving or the one being left behind.”

I leaned back on the headrest. “Now that I think about it, I think it’s worse to be the one that’s being left behind.”

“Yeah,” said Savannah. “I would have to agree with you.”

Savannah sank back in her seat, her head tilted slightly to the side and her gaze fixed on the boundless black sea outside. The song on the radio slowly came to an end with its notes reverberating over each other. The quiet and throaty voice of the host followed afterward, trying to tell us something, but the words were unintelligible—like how a voice over the phone was portrayed in cartoons, except that it was of a lower pitch.

“I’m thinking,” said Savannah, “would it be okay if I asked you another question? Although I’ve probably asked it many times before.”

I gestured with a wave of my hand. “Shoot.”

“I was thinking about what you said earlier about visiting the child and his mother. Have you ever done that? Traveling to a memory of your current day?”

“Huh. No, I have not. I guess that would be interesting though, to go to sleep and wake up at the beginning of the day,” I said. “You’ve actually never asked that question before, in any of my visits.”

“I see,” said Savannah. “What is the closest to your present that you’ve visited?”

“Probably one of the memories toward the end of senior year,” I said. “I’ve really just been visiting memories from Monterey.”

“Okay,” said Savannah, and sat up. “Now I know that you’ve most likely tried it before and that there’s a good reason why it doesn’t work, and again, I’m sorry if I’ve asked this question before, but would it be possible for you to travel to a memory of one of your dreams?”

My eyes grew firm and I squinted slightly. “How do you mean?”

Savannah leaned forward. “Visiting a memory of one of your dreams. Visiting this moment, for example, instead of visiting your original memory. If that was possible, wouldn’t you be able to pick up where you left off instead of starting over every time?”

I opened my mouth to say something, closed it, and mulled over the thought in my mouth. “I’ve never tried that,” I said quietly. “That might just work.”

“Should we try it now?” asked Savannah.

“Yeah,” I nodded quickly. “Let’s try that right now. I’ll leave, and I’ll try and come back to this—this memory.”

“Okay.”

“I hope to God this will work.”

* * *

“Did it work?” asked Savannah.

Letting out a laugh of disbelief, I fell back into my seat. I looked at Savannah. “I guess your question answers itself, doesn’t it?”

Savannah laughed too. “Well, there it is. I guess you figured out how to save this thing.”

“I guess we did.” I rubbed my palms across my face and grabbed a clump of my hair. “I can’t believe I’ve never tried that. Or that I’ve never thought of it before. How did I never think of that before?”

Savannah smiled. “Sometimes things are like that, I suppose.”

“Maybe sometimes they are.” I grinned at Savannah as wide as I could. “Or maybe my mother was right after all. Maybe I was just lazy.”

6

Farewells

Now Savannah's question was "What now?"

"The only thing I've wanted to do for the past three years. Live in Monterey again."

"So does that mean you'll be back here tomorrow? After a day in New York?"

"Yeah. I mean, I don't know, Sav." I frowned. "I think—I'm thinking that I want to start over from the very start of senior year. From the first day. So it probably won't be me that you'll see tomorrow, and we'll have to meet each other again."

"Mm, that makes sense. Starting from the beginning of the year."

"I'm sure that we'll meet again, though—as long as Martin likes Hannah, we'll be hanging out again, so that's pretty much a guarantee."

Savannah smiled. "I suppose so. Will you be telling Savannah again about your-phenomenon?"

"Oh, no doubt. As guaranteed as Martin's feelings for Hannah."

"She'll be looking forward to it," she said, then paused. "Are you going to be leaving now?"

I leaned back against the headrest, my head slightly tilted upwards, and thought for a moment. "Maybe not just yet," I said. "How about we pick up the two lovebirds? I want to see how Martin did, and I always loved the drive back from Alvarado to our school. Might as well wrap up the night before I leave."

“That sounds good to me.” Savannah buckled her seatbelt. “And then you’ll leave once you’re on campus?”

I took a slow breath in, then nodded. “Yeah. Once I’m on campus.”

Savannah’s car came to life with a soft growl as the headlights threw two bright beams into the night air. “I hope we’re not interrupting anything important when we pick them up,” she said. Then with a lopsided grin with the right side of her lip twisted up ever so slightly, she added, “Or maybe I am.”

Savannah’s car slowly crawled out of the wharf, then took a left to get on Del Monte Avenue. I called Martin, telling him that we were on our way to pick them up and repeating Savannah’s remarks from moments earlier.

Small buildings, most of them single-story and rarely exceeding two, fell asleep under the soft yellow streetlights. If it was a small seaside town that slumbered away to our right as we drove on, it was the restless night sea, stretching out to pitch black and greeting us farewell with every wave on our left. The inside of the car was no longer faint green and instead filled with curtains of yellow every time we drove under one of the streetlights.

Two figures that we recognized by their silhouettes alone emerged from the left. The smaller one was wrapped around a blanket, while the taller one stood nearby like some sort of scared magnet, standing as close as it could without making any physical contact. The car slowed and stopped next to the curb as Martin waved us in. As it was anytime the four of us were in a car, it was Savannah and the driver’s seat and me riding shotgun, leaving no choice but for the lovebirds to pile on the back. On his way in, I exchanged a short look with Martin, during which he raised his eyebrows with a big toothy smile for an instant before Hannah or Savannah could see.

The car made a U-turn and headed back the way we came on Del Monte Avenue until it reached a left turn into Alvarado Street. The street had been reclaimed by the locals now, with the crowd going from the eccentric ice cream shop to the pubs. Every block in Alvarado Street was host to a bundle of memories. Here, at one end of Alvarado Street, was the convenience store Martin and I once took a cab to on a weekday night after study hall to get microwave sliders, risking being out past when the dorm doors locked. Here was the music store with the myriad of guitars on the wall that he and I would try out with no means of buying them. Here was the famed donut shop, perhaps the most famous one in all of Monterey, where all the donuts would be sold out before noon, and where Martin and I rode a cab to on a weekday morning, this time risking not being able to return before classes began. Then yes, there was the creamery that I've already talked about many times, crowded with memories of Rachel and cilantro. Finally, at the end of Alvarado Street and after turning into Munras Avenue, was the seafood deli, where Savannah and I would set up many of Hannah and Martin's dates.

Savannah took a few more turns and we were on a small road, hugged by quaint houses on both sides. Savannah wasn't driving with the help of a GPS; she didn't need one for this route and neither did I. As a result, the path we were on wasn't the most efficient, but I liked to think of it as us taking the scenic route, although I would consider any route through Monterey to be the scenic route.

After a stretch of distance that was a breeze by car and a workout on foot, we merged back into Munras Avenue which led to the local mall. The mall was where most, if not all "dinner and a movie" plans for the kids of my old school took place. The school ran a shuttle, which went to places like the mall, Alvarado Street, Carmel, and on some days, Cannery Row.

One of the lines would drop a batch off at the mall, make its way to Alvarado, make another exchange of students there, and bring itself back to the school.

Now that we were on the same path that the school bus took back to the school, an old memory came knocking as we passed the mall. It wasn't one I wanted to visit, but a memory nonetheless. I don't remember when exactly it was, but it must have been somewhere in the middle of the year. Definitely not at the beginning or the end.

It was a big dinner that one of Sam's classmates invited him to, the kind where there would be friends of friends you would only be acquaintances with. They ate at a bar that served burgers, the type that was a little overpriced and a bit too big but still good nonetheless. After the meal, the big group decided to reconvene at the Municipal Beach, next to the wharf where Savannah and I would park. Nothing too important happened there. Sam chatted with his friends and this girl Elaine, who got so excited at the possibility of Sam joining the school play that he wondered if she was attracted to him at all because he thought she looked cute in her pigtails. Then it was the bus back to the school, where he read a text from Rachel asking him if he could bring back a pint of ice cream from the creamery. When he came across Rachel talking to her best friend Gwen in the common room, Sam smacked his forehead, laughing, saying I just read your message on the way back, I'll get it next time, yeah? And Rachel laughed too, saying it was okay because she had some brownies with Gwen.

And Sam never ended up joining the school play. He never intended to—not that he could have if he did.

The car continued onto California State Route 68 for a brief while before taking the exit on the right which led to the infamous roundabout. The roundabout was a demented circle of traffic before the gate into Del Monte Forest with branches of exits and entrances to other roads

along it, designed to guarantee confusion and awkwardness. Cab drivers would complain—rant with obscenities even—whenever they had to deal with it. I would say that you could tell how long someone had been in the area by how much they complained about it, except that the locals hated it just as much.

After passing the roundabout, which was a little easier by the lack of traffic at night, we went through the gate and into Del Monte Forest. This was the final stretch before we got to the school. By way of the famous 17-Mile Drive, which spanned throughout Del Monte Forest, we followed its twists and turns into the depths of the Monterey cypresses. Unlike the streets of Alvarado, there were no streetlights along the road, and what little natural light there was from the moon and the stars were hidden away by the thick overhang of trees. This made the drivers turn on their high beams and blind each other as they passed by if they weren't being careful. While it was generally regarded as common sense to turn off your high beams whenever other vehicles approached, during the nights on 17-Mile Drive, it transcended past the realm of good practices, taking up a nearly sacred tone.

While the road ahead may have been illuminated by two tunnels of bright, white light, the inside of the car could not be darker. It became so dark in the car that the people in the front seats could not see the people in the back, and the two sections may as well have belonged to two separate cars—a trait that Martin unfortunately couldn't utilize yet.

Finally, the car slowed down in that particular manner cars did whenever they approached their destinations: The gentle and mystical slowing down which, despite the lack of anyone saying “We’re here” or making any noise, somehow manages to wake anyone sleeping.

Humble balls of yellow light from outdoor lamps cast a warm glow on the well-kept grass, while bright rectangles of light floated midair in neat columns and rows from the dorms. In between the luminous shapes, flickers of familiar shadows went by, running and laughing and hoping and loving.

It occurred to me that there must be two types of goodbyes. Some goodbyes were just that—goodbyes. They ended with themselves and had nothing else to do but to roll the credits. But then there were ones that weren't really goodbyes at all. Instead, they were promises of continuation and reunion. These were almost greetings in a sense, a hello reserved for later.

Sav's car rolled into the parking lot at the front of the school, and the rhythmic thump-thump of the closing doors followed. Savannah rolled the windows down, one in the front and one in the back.

"I had a great time," said Hannah from the back window, a statement that was sure to be the highlight of Martin's week.

Savannah leaned to the passenger side window, stretching her seat belt. In a quiet voice through the window, she said, "Don't be a stranger now."

I replied with a silent smile and a nod.

Then Savannah backed up the old beaten-up black sedan, turned, and drove out of the school as we waved goodbye. When she disappeared down the road, I turned to Martin.

"You must have a lot to—"

"I have so much to tell you," said Martin.

I'm sure you do, Martin. And next time, you'll be able to. Because now—now I can say goodbye, goodbye for now.

Cypress

Monterey is a beach of cool, white sand. It is a breath of fresh air. It is the black rock shores and the rumbling white waves. It is a bittersweet forest breeze that makes you melancholy even on a Friday night. It is the golf courses by the shore and the deer that stroll them at night. It is Pebble Beach, Carmel, Salinas, Seaside, Pacific Grove, and many other places, all with beautiful names. It is the mighty kelp forests in the sea and the sea otters that call them home. It is the memory of the good old times, now forever dead.

Whenever I say Monterey, what I really mean is Monterey County. Geographically speaking, Monterey is a city in Monterey County, while Monterey County includes much more: It includes Alvarado Street, where as you already know, my roommate Martin and I spent many precious weekends of of high school life, and where Rachel would go to its farmer's market on Tuesdays and thinking of me as she always did, bring back a ham musubi for me; Carmel-by-the-Sea, where art galleries are more common than convenience stores (in fact, I wonder now if Carmel even has a single convenience store), a land of fantasy built on a hill filled with picturesque houses that I've only read about in fairy tales when I was little; Cannery Row, both the setting and the main subject of John Steinbeck's great novella *Cannery Row*, where you can still visit the husks of the places its characters lived in and where the famous Monterey Bay Aquarium is; Salinas, where John Steinbeck was born and where *East of Eden*, the book that Steinbeck himself considered to be his magnum opus was set in; 17-Mile Drive, home to

turquoise horizons stretching out to infinity and also to the Lone Cypress, a landmark where a Monterey cypress tree stands alone withered upon a rock but still strong; and last but not least, Del Monte Forest, where my old school was and where all my good memories lie. This is Monterey County, but I just call it Monterey. And I want to tell you more about it.

I say all this because I feel I have been doing a disservice to Monterey. Because in all my ramblings so far about how much I love the place that you may already be sick of, I fear that I have not been able to portray the sheer beauty of it.

But maybe the beauty of Monterey can't be fully explained. The person who got closest to it I believe was John Steinbeck, who wrote a great deal about Monterey and who also won both the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Nobel Prize in literature for his works. That not even John Steinbeck could portray the grace of Monterey is, of course, not to say that he lacked as a writer in any way. Instead, that not even a great writer such as he could not portray Monterey's beauty to the fullest should be a testament to how beautiful it is.

The source of Monterey's beauty was its nature. That was not to say that Monterey didn't have other types of beauty—artistic, poetic, historic, it had it all and much more—but its cause of it was singular. All the beauty in Monterey originated from its nature. The biggest thing in Monterey always belonged to nature and not some man-made thing and it was great that way. The trees of Del Monte Forest were taller than the buildings in Sand City, Salinas, or Pacific Grove; the symphony of the waves louder than the cacophony of traffic; and the stars brighter than the streetlights.

And all of Monterey's beauty had so much variety, too. In Sand City there were dunes of sand lumped up along the coast. Dense woods stretched as far and tall as the eye could see in Del Monte Forest. Fort Ord, a decommissioned US Army base turned national monument, offered a

change of scenery from the forests and the beaches with its brown hills of dirt and short green shrubs that you could mistake for a place in Arizona. Then there were all the beaches, which had their own variety-the beaches of Carmel were docile and easy to pet, ones in Seaside wilder with a hint of gray in their skies, and the ones along 17-Mile-Drive with fearsome waves that knocked over surfers and kayakers.

Above this mosaic of nature were the skies of Monterey that have always mesmerized me. What made them so special in my eyes was how unnatural their colors were. When the sun was at its strongest, the skies took on a vibrant metallic blue that faded to white near the horizon. Then around the time school ended, the whites and the blues were pushed up a notch, and in keeping with the theme of metallic colors, a hue of warm copper began to line the edges. As you had dinner, this line of copper continued to creep on, further pushing up the colors that came before it and taking more territory for itself. This was also when the clouds lost their youth as their innocent white hue began to age into a sun-faded shade of light brown. By the time you were on the short walk back from the cafeteria to the dorms, the invasion of the copper oranges was in full swing, with them advancing ever upward in the shape of an arrow and tinting everything in their hue.

When you looked out the window a few minutes before study hall began, you could see that the war was lost, the blues that had so dominated the skies earlier on in the day dead and dyed purple. Now the color copper, singing victory, enthroned itself the king of the skies. Decorated with the spoils of war, it was no longer the shade of metallic brown but rather the blazing color of pomegranate with the glowing yellow core that was the sun. This made for another unnatural view: near the horizon, the reds and yellows were deep and vibrant while the

purples above them were limp and anemic. It seemed synthetic, as if the view was a picture with its saturation values edited.

The pomegranate reds threw a glorious banquet on the horizon, drinking and feasting and laughing, a red like a beating heart, while past its borders a vast field of gray-purple lay. It was a view so beautiful that it nearly put you in confusion. An intense red that you didn't know nature could create with splotches of pink, followed by a swirling mix of red and purple, and above it a soothing plane of dead purple stretching all the way over to the horizon on the other side. How was this possible, you'd ask yourself. I didn't know that nature could produce these colors, this scenery. Then you'd take a picture of it, look at it later, and ask yourself the same questions again.

But the reign of the pomegranates did not last for long, for when the sun went down, so did everything else. From the pink and the red and the yellow, screaming and begging and kicking, to the complacent gray corpses of the blues of a past era, all were swallowed into the sunset. What remained afterward was pure black—clear and salted generously with stars. Shooting stars garnished the black plate in perfect frequency. They went by often enough to make spotting one plausible if you took some time to sit and gaze up to the night sky, but not too common so that you would get used to them.

At night the sky became its own ocean, its stars its fish. If you picked a star and stared into it, the meaning of the word astronomical would unveil itself as you began to see tens, hundreds, perhaps even thousands of fainter stars come into view. Try it sometime—stare into any one star in the sky, and you'll quickly see so many more around it.

If the night skies were quiet and serene, the oceans beneath them were the opposite. Under the cover of night, they grew into fearsome creatures with a bone-chilling roar. Perhaps

this is why the seals cried throughout the night. Some of my fellow classmates claimed that you could hear the seals crying on the coast from the dorms at night. Often, when I couldn't find sleep and it was long after I had lost the game against Ms. Jamieson, I would lie on my side, facing the window and trying to hear the seals. And much like the legend of the horizon's curve, I would try until I convinced myself of its existence.

Back on land, the deer ruled the forests, strolling free now that the congestion of humans was gone. Some deer would even make their way onto school grounds. In junior year, I would look out my dorm room window at night toward the amphitheater at the center of the school to see a herd of deer holding an assembly. The white stone paths that high schoolers took to their classes during the day had become catwalks for magnificent deer with great, big antlers by night.

Speaking of the school, just what kind of place was it?

It was a boarding school in Del Monte Forest within walking distance from the shoreline, and it was surrounded by golf courses. I don't know which came first, the golf course or the school, but I hope it was the school because the founders must have been insane if it wasn't. That it was close to the beach and surrounded by golf courses told you a lot (although certainly nowhere close to all) about what kind of place it was. The kids that were able to attend it were lucky. Some were lucky because they had parents who could afford its tuition, and others because they had qualified for scholarships, but all of them were lucky, lucky that they went to a private boarding school within walking distance from the shoreline that was surrounded by golf courses.

You may scorn at this description alone and want to laugh at it, but that was completely fine. Because it was funny—a school by the sea surrounded by golf courses? It was begging to be made fun of, and we made fun of it too. When other schools in the area visited for sports games,

they would crack jokes and say, “Hey, where can I walk my dog?” But we couldn’t get mad at that, because people did walk their dogs on campus, played catch with them, and even had little picnics on the grass.

As for where all of the places on campus I've been talking about so far—the dorms, the classrooms, the amphitheater—were?

The school could be split into three main parts. At the front of the school, you were welcomed by a large stone sign with the school name inscribed on it. Behind it was a small, circular parking lot for visitors; the same one that Savannah dropped Martin and me off at before telling me not to be a stranger. Behind the small parking lot was a little building with a brown roof—the visitor center—equipped with sofas, coffee tables, a fireplace, and a piano. Whether it was for friends, parents, cabs, or school buses, it was the perfect place for waiting.

When you exited the building with the brown roof through the back, you'd see the heart of campus, the amphitheater. White stone paths curved around a semicircle of benches like a fan, while the benches faced a large, flat stage made of stone. Behind the stage was what the students called the Main Building, where all the administrative faculty worked. The benches, the stage, the Main Building, and the well-kept grass around the white stone paths were the centerpiece of the school, to be included in every pamphlet given to prospective students and their parents.

To the right of the Main Building was the school library. In front of the library was the school cafeteria. Behind the library was the building where most of the classes took place. Rectangular and two-story, the simple building housed two rows of classrooms on each floor. The building with the classrooms was at the edge of campus, with the short brown fences that lined the border of campus right behind it.

On the left side of the Main Building were the dormitories, of which there were five. The five dorms made the shape of a U with right-angled corners, with the swimming pool in the middle and the school gym completing the open side of the U. The dorm Martin and I lived in was part of the bend in the bottom right-hand corner. My room was at the top of the vertical section above the bend, and Martin's room just below it.

Then there were a few places on the outskirts of campus, not part of the three main sections of the school. Mainly it was the chapel, which wasn't used so much for services as it was used for Christmas celebrations and special assemblies; and the football field, which was a short walk away from the main body of the campus. Except for these few, most buildings on campus were connected by the rectangular panels that were the white stone paths. So this was the school—humble buildings made of stone and wood rather than concrete and steel interwoven by white stone panels and dotted by Monterey cypresses.

As if it was the last day of summer break, I felt that I needed to pack before going to sleep today. I never hated having to go back to campus after breaks. During the last week of any vacation, I'd count with worry the days left as people who dread the future often do, realize that I didn't mind going back, then stop. Sure, vacations had all the time and sleep I could want in the world, but they didn't have Martin next door, Gordon driving up to the parking lot with his car, and dorm pizza parties. Vacations didn't have friends, and it certainly didn't have Monterey and its beaches, forests, and skies.

Whenever I went back to California from New York for a new semester, the dorms would have this particular scent. It was the kind of musk that would greet you as you opened the doors to your room at a small roadside inn: the smell of carpet and freshly cleaned sheets, somewhere

in between a smell and an aroma. The scent of vacation, of all things, was the first thing to greet me in the dorms. And this scent would only be there for a short while. It hung around for about the time it took you to get used to the new semester, a little longer than the lifespan of jetlag.

The moment I opened my door to what was planned to be my room until graduation. That's where I was going to start over.

The first day of senior year for me was a week before the first day of senior year for most. I had been accepted to be a resident assistant in the dorms at the end of junior year, which meant I had to show up to campus a week early for orientation. There were seminars from faculty on leadership, a rundown of the duties, dorm decorations, and most essential, a poolside barbeque. RA's held small but significant leadership roles around the dormitories: They checked in with fellow students they lived with, resolved roommate conflicts, helped anyone feeling homesick, and talked to students about problems they couldn't talk to the faculty about. To some underclassmen, they were like big brothers and sisters away from home. I had a lot of fun senior year, being an RA. It wasn't a paying position, but it was the best job I ever had. It was the only job I ever had, but even if it weren't, it would have still been the best.

Pallid streetlights stabbed into my eyelids, which were growing heavier by the moment. I waited patiently, hoping that the next time I opened my eyes, I would be in Monterey, in my room.

* * *

The scent of vacation and a ray of golden sunshine through the broken blinds welcomed me back. My beloved room was all bones, but they were good bones: the bed and the desk were already in place, and once I had retrieved the spinning desk chair from storage to replace the wooden one, all the furniture would be in place.

Unpacking first began—as it should with most things—with logistics. Where’s the outlet, how long’s the extension cord, and where should it be so it can reach all the devices in the room? After those essential questions had been answered, I dragged my laptop and its entrails of wires out of my backpack, connected it to power, and organized it on the bare desk. Then it was time to open the big suitcase with blankets on one half and clothes on the other. After retrieving the mattress cover from the suitcase, I slipped it on until it was good enough. There was some slack and a few creases, and I told myself I would straighten it out later, knowing I would have it like that for the rest of the year. Then I turned around, pulled the edges of the sheets, and tucked it in underneath the mattress until it was as flat as a sheet of paper.

Clothes for the summer went in the big sliding drawer underneath the bed. With the clothes for the next week in one hand and my suitcase in the other, I took one and a half steps toward the closet, opened the door, hung the clothes, and rolled the suitcase in. Then turning to close the door, I saw him in the closet mirror. Sam Hanely, the fool. His hair was dark brown, and his skin soft with a healthy red glow. His lips were used to cracking jokes and zestful smiles, while his hair was a mess. But it wasn't messy the way mine was, right? Because I think you used to have it slightly ruffled on purpose.

Two people were shouting at each other outside; it was the sound of an excited greeting three months in the making. I climbed onto my bed and looked out the dormer windows, which overlooked the poolside entrance to the dorm. From there, I could see who was going in and out of the dorm with a short glance. By the time I had looked through the broken blinds, however, all I could see was the backs of two figures disappearing into the common room. I quickly got off the bed, put on my shoes, and headed out the door.

The halls were empty and so was Martin's room, or rather, what was to be Martin's room. This was the quietest the halls would be until this time next year: In just a week, they would be bustling, crescendoing with hurry as first period approached.

At every one-third point in the second-floor hallway, there was a window with a wooden door. Through the window, you could see the common room down below, and since the dorm was mirrored with it in the center, the girls' side hallway on the other side. Friends would wave to each other from opposite sides of the hallway. If you had a crush on someone from the other side, you'd be hoping to catch a glimpse of them as you walked the halls.

It was Anna and Kate, two members of my RA team, that had just arrived in the common room. I made my way downstairs to the entrance to the common room, a set of tall dark green doors in the middle of the first-floor hallway.

The common room had high ceilings with a triangular rise and a chandelier that hung low from it in the center. There were two entrances from the outside: One was from the pool, and the entrance across it from a small grassy field often used for afterschool sports. Large circular windows were above each entrance, allowing plenty of light to spill into the carpeted room.

Next to the field-side entrance was an old brick fireplace that probably saw more classes of kids go by than any other faculty on campus. It was what was in front of this fireplace and the center of the room below the chandelier that made the room a common room. Two long couches with wooden frames and green cushions were around either side of a big coffee table under the chandelier. One couch was in front of the boy's side of the dorm, and the other in front of the girls'. In front of the fireplace were two rocking chairs, both facing the fireplace diagonally. It was perfect for staring into the fire to think or to clear yourself of thought altogether. Wooden chairs with red cushions, the same ones provided in the dorm rooms, were scattered about, free

to be moved to for different groups and occasions. The common room was what I pictured cabins in the woods to look like. And I suppose the dorm was a cabin in the woods, except that it was a lot bigger and also housed around forty teenagers.

“Look who it is—did you get here early too, Sam?” It was Anna, calling me over from one of the couches. Anna was a bubbly and easy-going person, always a few degrees friendlier than other people would have been at the same level of familiarity. If you were acquaintances with her, she treated you like a long-time friend. And if you were actually friends with her—why, you were her best friend. She had a knack for art too, and the walls of the dorm were to become murals for her chalk drawings later in the week during dorm decorations.

“How was your summer?” asked Anna.

“It was nice. But even nicer to be back,” I said.

“Right on. It feels like forever since I’ve been back.”

“You can say that again.”

“Do you know Kate?” asked Anna, gesturing to her friend. I did, but not too well by this time. I only knew her because she was Gordon’s girlfriend. We would become better friends as senior year went on.

“Yeah. I’m pretty close with Gordon, so,” I said. Kate smiled and nodded in response. Small and quiet, Kate was a calm soul whose response to most things was a silent smile.

“We were just about to have lunch—want to come with us?” asked Anna.

I obliged without a second thought. I never passed up opportunities for a good meal in my dreams. I’ll even admit with embarrassment that I had visits where the sole purpose was to eat a good meal. Anna and Kate led the way through the poolside entrance, with me following behind.

The sunshine bounced off the roughness of the stone paths, glistening the way sand does at beaches. I bobbed my head side to side and up and down along the path, watching the stone path sparkle. Above, the skies were that cool metallic blue, with the feathers of a giant bird made of clouds scattered throughout. The sun was eager, but not fierce enough to cause any discomfort. A cool and gentle breeze circulated throughout campus, and a good compromise had been reached between the breeze and the sun: the sun kept it warm so that the constant breeze wouldn't give any headaches, while the breeze fanned away the heat to the point where the sunrays felt cool. It seemed that pleasant autumn breezes were a permanent thing in Monterey, regardless of the season. The weather was so nice that it made it difficult to be angry. You could be storming out of a room, bubbling with anger and muttering obscenities, but once you were outside it would make you pause, maybe even take a step back to return inside for a reconciliation.

The stone path narrowed and took us through a gap between two dorms, and we could see the Main building and the amphitheater send their welcomes up ahead.

"Watch out for the sprinklers," said Anna. She waited, watching the sprinklers paint gray semicircles onto the white stone.

The cool sunlight and the warm breeze coated me with every step. Birds I could not name sang notes I could not sing. The scent of grass, freshly cut this morning and watered an instant before, rose from the earth. Off in the distance were happy conversations reduced to a soft whisper, the voices reverberating through the stone and wood. Over our heads, the Monterey cypresses waved in the breeze like the hair of somebody that used to love you.

As we continued on the white paths, the cafeteria grew larger, its red roof tiles basking in the sun. There would be a reunion of shouted greetings and lingering hugs under those roofs. A

crowd of excitement and friendship and youth, hard to replicate anywhere else. And in that crowd, around this time today, if I remember correctly, there would be Rachel.

8

Rachel

Sam Hanely had been loved before. He had never loved. Rachel was a victim of this fact.

Rachel Marigold was a girl in Sam Hanely's grade. She was lucky the way Sam was, because her parents could afford the tuition. She was slender, but quite muscular, to many people's surprise. You didn't get on the varsity swimming team for nothing. She had a great lion's mane of reddish brown hair that went down beyond her shoulders, and faint freckles which covered her cheeks and nose.

Her peers loved to have her in their classes, as did the faculty. She had a bright laugh that could be heard and recognized anywhere on campus. She would always be seen with her herd of friends, with the only exception being when she was with Sam. Then it was always just those two, and nobody else.

Sam Hanely was her best friend and lover. For some reason, and I still haven't been able to figure this out, she admired him. She looked up to him where there were valleys and dived into the intentions behind his every action, often cutting herself on the way down. If Sam was half the man she thought he was, why, he would have become president.

She knew drama between dogs better than drama between people, which was a very useful skill to have in high school (or at any period of life, really). Oh, Cookie was being so mean to Riley today. She was barking and chasing him around the common room. Cookie was kind of being a jerk. Riley just wanted to play with her, you know?

Her friends would call her ‘Rachi.’ Whenever she smiled, soft lines and dimples would fall into their well-rehearsed places. The ‘Rachi Grin,’ her friends called it. And make no mistake, it was Rachi with an ‘i’ and not a ‘y,’ as Sam had learned the week before Thanksgiving his senior year.

Every Thanksgiving week, the school would have a fundraiser where they sold candy grams. You could buy a piece of candy, attach a note to it, and have it delivered to anyone during class. On the last day they were being sold, Sam thought he should send Rachel one since he had received so many from her. He wrote a note in the neatest handwriting he could, and addressed it: “To Rachi.”

No no—this is spelled wrong—it’s Rachi with an ‘i,’ not a ‘y.’

How come?

Because because, it’s Rachi, like Ray-chee. If it was spelled with a ‘y,’ then it would be pronounced Rah-chee, or Rah-kee. See?

I guess I can’t argue with that, Rachi with an ‘i.’

Then Sam would put one hand on the top of her head, scramble her hair a little, bring it down to hug her around the shoulders, and the two of them would make their way to the common room of Sam’s dorm.

But at night, when the only lights were that of the stars, the moon, and the campus in the distance, the two would go to the woods on the outskirts of campus. They would find a dry patch of grass to lie down on, but on some days when it had rained and a dry spot couldn’t be found, they didn’t mind getting their clothes a little wet. From there the two would gaze up to the night sky, on the lookout for shooting stars.

Eventually, Rachel would say “I love you,” and Sam would say it back without meaning what it should. Then Rachel would respond with “Love you more,” after which there was silence and they went back to stargazing because Sam knew it to be true.

It took people a while to realize that Sam and Rachel were in a relationship. Sam wasn’t trying to keep it a secret, but he wasn’t in a hurry to tell anyone, either. He never brought it up on his own and only talked about it when he was asked. It even took Martin a whole three weeks after they had started dating for him to know.

As usual, Sam and Martin were in their room, having a late-night conversation segmented by the slurping of noodles.

So, whatever happened between you and Rachel? Is that going anywhere?

Yeah, it is—we're dating.

Martin was in the middle of bringing his chopsticks up to his mouth when he paused.

Dating? What? Since when?

It must have been...about three weeks now.

Then a flabbergasted Martin, jaws wide open with a chopstick full of noodles suspended in the air, unleashed his disbelief. How it was possible for Sam to not tell him about it for so long, if he had told anyone else, why he hadn't bothered to tell anyone, if he was trying to keep it a secret, if they were actually really dating, if he was sure, what was wrong with him, and so on...

That was more than three years ago. Now Rachel was at the back of the cafeteria, making a salad. Over three years ago, I went over to the salad bar and struck up a conversation with her. She was excited about dorm decorations, and couldn’t wait for the supply run to Sand City the next day. I told her to shoot me a text once she was in Sand City, since it was likely that my team

would be in the area for a supply run tomorrow as well, and strode away as quickly as I was confident.

Anna and Kate's conversation became a murmur as I searched for glimpses of Rachel in the middle of the cafeteria. Should I go over there, recreating what had happened before? It was the most surefire way, but doing it so carelessly as I had last time—that didn't seem right.

While I sat there thinking, Rachel finished putting together her salad and moved to her seat. The rest of her RA team must not have arrived yet, because she sat alone at a table by one of the large window panes.

"Not a big fan of chili, Sam?" asked Anna.

"Hm? No, I am. I'm just busy looking around to see if anyone I know is back yet."

"I hear Aaron's getting here soon. Melvin texted me and said that he was about an hour out and that he'll make it just before the start of orientation. I think Alyssa said she might get here late, but at least by tonight. As for the rest, I've no idea."

"It'll be good once the whole team is back on campus," I replied.

Kate excused herself to get a second helping of chili, and my thoughts wandered back to the matter at hand. I wanted to talk to Rachel before leaving the cafeteria, at the least say hello. From my table, I could see that Rachel was halfway through her cornbread. Rachel had a habit of eating any sides at the same pace as the main dish. If a dish of spaghetti came with three meatballs, she'd allow herself one meatball for every third of the pasta she ate. The same went for burgers and fries, and in this case, chili and cornbread. I glanced at the big clock on the wall.

I dug into the first hot meal I have had in days with haste, sneaking sideways glimpses at short intervals. Kate got up again, this time to get a glass of orange juice. By the time she was back, Rachel was finished with her cornbread. Without much of a plan, I stood up.

“I think I’ll get myself a glass of juice too,” I told Anna.

Rachel began leaving when my cup of apple juice was halfway filled. I trotted over to her in hurried steps, slowing down as I approached her to make it seem as if I had run across her by coincidence.

“Hey, Rachel,” I blurted out.

She turned around, with a small hint of surprise setting down in her eyes as she recognized me. “Oh. Hey, Sam.”

“You have a good summer?”

“I did—I met up with all of my friends back home, and hung around with them a bunch.”

“Go anywhere?”

“No, just around California, mostly. I wish I could have gone on a trip somewhere, though.”

“I mostly stayed in New York, too.” I looked at the table she had been sitting at. “I’m guessing the rest of your RA team isn’t here?”

Rachel frowned. “No, not yet. I can’t wait for all of us to be here so we can go on the supply run for the dorm decorations tomorrow. Have you guys decided on your theme yet?”

“Not yet. A bunch of us haven’t gotten here yet either.” I gestured over to my table. “It’s just Anna, Kate, and me so far.”

“Ah.” Rachel waved to the table, and Anna and Kate waved back.

Then a gap in the conversation came to pass. It was inevitable that I knew her better than she knew me. We had one class together junior year—chemistry—and worked on a few projects together. We were friends, but not too far from the line of being acquaintances.

“Well,” she said, “it was nice to see you again.”

“Yeah, me too. I’ll see you around?”

"Of course."

And that was the first time I had spoken to her in over three years.

The dean of the school would often speak on the stage in front of the amphitheater. His addresses ranged from simple greetings on the first day of the year to speeches near national holidays. On the first day of orientation, it was a mix of both: an early welcome-back greeting followed by a short speech on leadership.

One could only wonder how much a person had to read to write speeches like his. Every word that the dean spoke was full of elegance, but the speeches as a whole were nothing but humble. Each sentence from him soothed the heart and had the mind rooting into it to absorb as much wisdom as it could. His speeches were so much food for thought that by the end of them, the student body was left with an obesity epidemic of the mind.

He was not only a master of writing speeches but also of orating them. The pauses in between were as impactful as his words, and he never let his speeches overstay their welcome. The speeches always ended a segment or two earlier than expected, giving you time to digest what was said rather than to celebrate its end. He was a man who gave speeches for the listeners rather than for himself.

All that being said, I am embarrassed to admit that I don't remember anything from his speeches. What I do remember, however, is how they made me feel and the atmosphere around the amphitheater when he spoke. How the stage and the semicircle of benches seemed to be in a bubble, isolated from the rest of the world. How during one of his pauses, the only sound was the lonely cawing of crows. How despite the amphitheater being filled with hundreds of teenagers,

they sat in silence without anyone telling them to, and how it lingered for a while after he was done.

The sun lit the stage brilliantly when he spoke after lunch. I sat there, feeling more than listening. After the speech, Anna had to tap me on the shoulder to burst me out of the bubble as I remained seated with closed eyes.

“Sam—guess who just arrived?” said Anna, pointing over to the edge of the benches. I looked over to see Aaron and Melvin, smiling and waving in the distance.

“Welcome back, everyone,” said Melvin. We were back in the common room, sitting on the green couches around the coffee table. Anna and Kate were on one side and Aaron and I on the other, with Melvin sitting on a chair in between. Melvin had been an RA in junior year and was now acting as the head RA for the dorm. He was a kind fellow with round glasses and brown hair. He was shy in a way, preferring to keep to himself but becoming quite the chatterbox when someone engaged him in a conversation. He was the first to volunteer when there was work to be done and the last one to want credit. He would often break his preferences to catch up with others in the dorm, being the one to start conversations with them.

Melvin adjusted his glasses. “So, Ms. Jamieson told us to have a little get-together here, get to know each other, and go over some things.” He looked around the table. “I don’t think all of us are here yet, right?”

“Alyssa isn’t here yet. I think she’s still on her plane,” said Anna.

“Right. Well, for the ones that are here, why don’t we go around, doing simple introductions—name, grade, hometown?” He looked around the table again to see us in agreement. “I’ll start with myself. I’m Melvin, I’m a senior this year, and I’m from the Bay

Area.” Melvin did a short wave in the air. “Oh, and I’m the head RA for our dorm this year, and I’m looking forward to working with all of you.”

Next up was Aaron, Aaron from Arkansas. Aaron was a big man with an even bigger smile. He was our resident gentle giant, as dependable as the boulders by the beach. Need something up high that you can’t reach? Get Aaron. Can’t open that jar? Aaron. There’s a big spider in the common room? You knew who to get. A package you received from the mailroom too heavy? You didn’t even have to ask. Just struggle with it for a bit, and you’d find that Aaron had appeared out of nowhere, eager to help. He had a loud laugh that went “A-haw-haw-haw” that you could hear from the second floor, sometimes even from your room. And though you wouldn’t have any context about what he was laughing about, it would still make you chuckle. Everybody loved Aaron, and many references to big teddy bears were made about him.

“Heya folks,” said Aaron, waving his big arms. “Name’s Aaron.” A small “whoo” came from Anna. “Junior. From Arkansas. Nice to see you all.” Seeing him again brought a smile to my face, and I regretted not having visited him in my dreams before.

It was my turn after Aaron, and then Kate, who told us that she was a senior from Big Sur. Anna went next—San Francisco, also a senior—with Alyssa’s introductions done by Anna since she was still on her way back from Taiwan.

“Next up, we have to go over some ground rules,” said Melvin, looking at his sheet of paper. “No boys on the girls’ side and vise-versa, quiet hours after ten in the afternoon—all basic stuff that you guys already know, so I won’t dwell on it. Next, RA duties—even though you guys probably already know about this, I’ll go over it once more just in case. I think I was the only one that was an RA last year, right?” He looked up from his paper and nodded. “So every school night, we’re going to be taking turns being on duty during study hall. So we’ll be studying out

here, and then go around our side of the dorms to check in with everyone there before study hall ends. So if I'm on duty, I would go around the boy's side for that day, and if Anna was on duty, she'd go around the girls' side. Most of the time we'll be alternating boy-girl-boy-girl, and there are six of us, so we'll be on duty around once a week. That's pretty much the gist of it. It's pretty fun, going around and checking in with everyone. Right. Any questions?"

"What's our dorm theme?" asked Anna.

"Aha—I'm still on the fence about it. I've narrowed it down to two that I really like. I'm thinking that I'll decide on it by tomorrow and announce it before we go on our supply run."

"I trust that it'll be worth the wait," said Anna.

"I guarantee that it will be," replied Melvin. "Oh, and one last thing. We're going to have a cereal party tonight right here in the common room. Ms. Jamieson said she was going to bring some of her famous brownies, fresh out of the oven." Everyone was very pleased with the news, and with a satisfied look, Melvin concluded the meeting. "Alright, gang, looks like that's everything. Get some rest, and I'll see you tonight."

After the meeting, I returned to unpacking my room. A fresh towel went on the bar below the closet mirror, while the rest of them were organized into a neat stack on the top shelf of the closet. After restoring the pop-up laundry hamper to its former glory propping it back up and putting it under the closet rack, it was time to unpack the second suitcase.

Most of the second suitcase was books—textbooks and notebooks old and new. I went through it all one by one, organizing each book on the shelf of the desk. I had hoped that there would be a novel or two in the pile but found none. Sam Hanely wasn't much of a reader.

There were a few texts from Martin when I sat down to take a breather. He had asked me if I had arrived on campus—three hours ago. I quickly left a response, telling him that I had and that I was looking forward to him being here.

I checked to see that my phone had Rachel's number. Our most recent texts were a few half-conversations over the summer break. My fingers hovered over our conversations, and I may have typed a letter or two before deleting them and shutting off the phone. I decided to message Gordon instead, telling him I had arrived and asking him if he was in the area. Gordon didn't live at the school, since his house was only a twenty-minute drive away.

By then it was four, and I went on my laptop to pass the time while waiting for replies from Martin and Gordon. To my relief, the calendar was without any plans so far. Reading news stories from back then was another good way to pass the time. It was interesting to see what was news back then, and even more so to know better than all of the journalists in the world about what would happen. Had I been well-versed in the stock market, the finance section would have been a blast. Maybe I should study up on what had happened to the market in the past few years when I woke up. Then I could be filthy rich in my dreams, and maybe—just maybe—be able to afford a house near one of the golf courses here.

Speaking of news, my phone still lay black and dead, devoid of any. If it was one or two in the afternoon, I could understand why Martin wasn't responding since there was a good chance that he was still asleep. But it was nearing half-past four, and what of Gordon?

A soothing breeze glided in through the window. The wind came from the sea, but the stench of sulfur and decay was gone, having been filtered and made fresh by the cypresses. The Ocean's smell had its charm—when you were at a beach or on a pier—but they had no place being where you slept. Along the beach that the asphalt roads around the school led down to was a

small neighborhood. Maybe not even a neighborhood—more like a few vacation homes owned by some very wealthy people. Now, I assume that these were vacation homes because I can't imagine anyone tolerating the stench there for an entire year. The smell of the beach by itself was fine—many people live on the shore without a problem. But it was a rock near the shore in the ocean, named Bird Rock, that made it so insufferable.

As its name would suggest, Bird Rock was home to many, many seabirds. And anyone who has ever seen a car parked underneath a tree knows what happens to things that are under where birds live. Now just imagine that the car was the size of a gigantic boulder, and that hundreds of birds flew over, perched, and fed on it. Bird Rock was the best indicator of which way the wind was blowing: better than sticking your wet finger in the air as people on the golf links often did, better than looking at which way the trees waved, or even one of those bug net things with white and orange stripes. Was your lovely stroll along the beach suddenly ambushed by the stench of decay, nearly suffocating you? Look towards Bird Rock—that was where the wind was blowing from.

At long last, the phone lit up. It was Martin.

“Nice, man. How’s campus?” and stringing along it, he asked: “Dorm assignments out yet?”

“Campus is nice, it’s good to be back,” I replied. “Assignments aren’t out yet, but Ms. Jamieson’s going to let us know tonight.” After a short pause, I couldn’t resist but to send: “I’ve got a good feeling about them.”

This time the replies were instantaneous: “Let me know when they come out.” Martin then sent several audio recordings of him and his guitar. “Been practicing,” he said.

Thirty seconds to a minute and a half at most and recorded on his phone, Martin would often send snippets of his playing. The crude quality, the sounds crackling and muffled, were all part of its charm. “I like the third one best,” I said. “Did you write it?”

“Yep,” said Martin.

“We’ve got to write a song out of that one. Soon as you’re back on campus.”

“Let’s do it. Get your guitar out of storage yet?”

“No.”

“Get it soon,” he said. “Here’s a couple more I’ve been working on this week.”

I sent my comments for each recording. I like the way the chords sound on that one—I’m just letting it ring out, nothing special. What’s that humming you’re doing on this one—just something I do when I don’t have any lyrics for a song. What’s that bell-sounding thing you do here, how are you doing that—it’s called harmonics, I learned it this summer. I’ll show you when I get back.

It was already time for the walls of my room to begin glowing orange. Outside, the stone paths and the clouds were the same way. It was 5:45. Dinnertime already, I texted Martin. Breakfast for me, said my roommate. Haven’t eaten any proper meals all day, just some chips and cereal.

I walked out to the gray and empty halls and looked out from one of the windows down to the common room to see Aaron sitting cross-legged on the couch, having a conversation with Anna.

“Hey, Aaron, know what’s for dinner?” I called out from the second floor.

Aaron looked at his wristwatch. “Would you look at the time,” he said. “I think it was meatloaf and lemon cake. Do you guys want to go now?”

“Sure,” said Anna. “Sam?”

“Yeah—let me get down there,” I said.

“Might as well get the whole team—Sam, can you get Melvin on the way down?” said Aaron.

“I’ll go get Kate,” said Anna as she ran over to the girls’ side.

The sun was preparing its goodbyes, its orange glow slowly boiling into a red burn—a happy sight to see on weekdays and a sad one on weekends. As it was for lunch, Anna and Kate went in front, the sound of their conversation a bright train whistle for our convoy. Aaron went behind them, swinging his arms in a little dance, and at the very back were Melvin and I, walking side to side. The low-hanging sun blinked on and off through the trees and the buildings. Shadows of tree branches, elongated and loose, grabbed at our feet as we walked over them. Nearly everything was the tint of copper, and some corners of campus were turning dark. Off in the distance, the cafeteria again grew larger and larger as we approached it, its red roof tiles getting along well with the glow of the dying sun.

Aaron had been right. It was meatloaf with lemon cake as dessert. And the lemon cakes were delicious.

Another reunion took place during dinner now that more people were back on campus. And although it was larger, it was calmer than the one that had happened during the day. Rays of orange filled the cafeteria through the big window panes. The sunset outside gave a sense of winding down, making the students’ movements gentle and their volumes low. No one shouted their greetings, and the hugs were soft. Still, it had all the makings of a good reunion: The clash of silverware against plates of hot food blended with the sound of merry conversation, making the cafeteria take on a liveliness different from the one during lunch. It was a liveliness like that

of a winter solstice feast with a big campfire. Around the cafeteria, stories were exchanged and paid with laughter.

Anna, Aaron, and Melvin made up the bulk of the conversation. Kate was quiet, working away at her plate. But that didn't mean that she wasn't listening—she nodded along with the conversation and snuck in kind, silent smiles between her bites. I was more distracted, with Rachel sitting just two tables behind me. I tried my best to focus on the conversation, only for Rachel's bright laughter to shatter my focus whenever it rang out. It looked like her RA team was all back on campus, and Rachel was having the time of her life with them.

We got up as a group and headed out of the cafeteria as Rachel was nearly laughing her head off with her RA team. Slowed down by a good meal, our steps were sluggish and drowsy.

“Look,” Anna pointed toward the sky.

The bottom half of the sky near the sunset flared a tomato red. Around the edge of the flare, the skies went pomegranate, with a plane of small clouds like bubbles giving it texture. Above that, of course, was the purple, the most humble purple you had ever seen. We stopped in our tracks, admiring it as much as we could.

“I've missed that,” said Aaron. “It must be something in the skies in Monterey, or the ocean that makes the colors vivid like that. The same sun back home, but the sunset sure doesn't look like that.”

The red reflected on everyone's pupils. Melvin watched with his arms crossed, weight shifted on his left leg, lost in thought. Everyone admired it, though they had seen it every year. And hopefully, everyone would continue to admire it, though they would see it nearly every day.

It was another two hours until the cereal party, which was perfect because two hours was about the time that the body took to digest and start craving a nighttime snack.

Through the door of my dorm room came the hearty laugh of Aaron, muffled but still every bit as recognizable. I opened the door just in time to hear the long-awaited call come bouncing through the halls.

“We got cereal, come get your cereal,” sang Anna from the first floor.

I rushed downstairs to the common room, skipping two steps at a time. Out from Ms. Jamieson’s apartment came Melvin, jugs of milk and cartons of sugar-bombed cereal in his arms. Aaron went over to him, relieving him of the milk jugs. With Anna and Kate, I helped set up the plates and utensils on a plastic table that had been brought for the occasion.

“Have you said hello to Alyssa yet?” asked Kate. I turned to see Alyssa leaning on the couch, all the vitality gone from her.

“Hey,” she said, mustering a limp wave. “Sorry. The jetlag is killing me.”

“Ms. Jamieson said that she’d be out soon, and that we should help ourselves to the cereal first,” said Melvin once everything had been set.

The cereal was plundered through, and the gallons of milk quickly emptied. And just when I had gulped down the second bowl of sugar-infused, rainbow-colored milk and thought that I couldn’t possibly have any more sweets, Ms. Jamieson marched in from the girls’ side entrance holding a tray of hot brownies in her oven mitts to prove me wrong.

“Sit, sit,” Ms. Jamieson said as she set down her tray on top of a towel on the coffee table. “And dig in.”

“Oh, Ms. Jamieson, you shouldn’t have,” said Aaron. He took a brownie, dipped it in his bowl of cereal, and took a bite. “But boy am I glad that you did.” It looked so irresistible that I had to fill up a third bowl of milk and do the same.

Once everyone had at least one brownie, Ms. Jamieson and the RA team gathered chairs around the coffee table so everyone could sit in a circle. Ms. Jamieson looked around at the team and smiled, her rosy cheeks bundled up with warmth. Ms. Jamieson was a short woman in her mid-forties, and many students who were close to her often referred to her as their “school mom.” She certainly fed her students like one with her renowned baking skills, but it went far beyond that. She was also a counselor; not officially but perhaps the most sought-after by students when they wanted to speak to an adult. To their “school mom,” they would often come to talk about things they couldn’t open up to their parents about. She was light-hearted and carefree, but as wise and earnest as anyone when needed, and constantly respectful to everyone.

“How is everyone?” she asked.

Anna was fantastic, Melvin good, and Aaron excited. I said comfortable, while Alyssa said happy, but dead tired.

“Oh my, what’s the time back home?” asked Ms. Jamieson.

“I don’t even know, honestly. I couldn’t sleep at all on the plane—and the line at SFO—it’s just awful. But all this sugar is helping, Ms. Jamieson,” said Alyssa with a smile.

“I bet it is,” said Ms. Jamieson. “Wow. It looks like we have got quite a dorm this year. I really am looking forward to working with you guys. I think all of you know me by this point—Anna and Melvin, you had me for English last year, and Sam, aren’t you in my short stories class this year?”

“I sure am.”

“Super. Happy to have you. But anyhow, I’m Ms. Jamieson, I’ve been teaching English here for—what’s it been, almost ten whole years now? And as you folks already know, I’m going to be the head faculty for the dorm this year. Now, I know what you’ve all been waiting so patiently for, so I won’t waste any more of your time.” Ms. Jamieson opened her folder and began passing around sheets of paper with charts on them. “The dorm assignments.”

A moment of quiet fell around the room as everyone scrutinized the roster. I jogged my memory before taking a look at the list to see how many I had remembered. Short bursts of excitement erupted around the circle whenever someone found their friends on the list. I sent a picture of the roster to Martin with the text: “Guess who your next-door neighbor is?”

After everyone was through the list, the circle broke and people spoke in smaller groups. Aaron and I went to the plastic table to get more milk to finish the rest of the brownies, while Alyssa and Kate talked with Ms. Jamieson on the couch. In front of the fireplace, Anna was laughing at some joke Aaron had told. So this is how early it began, I thought. Aaron and Anna got together later in the year.

Half an hour later, the conversation around the common room slowed down as if it was a sugar crash. Without anyone saying that we should clean up, the RA team along with Ms. Jamieson cleaned the tables and the couches, threw out the trash, and folded the plastic table.

“Well, I’m going to head back to my apartment for the night. Goodnight, everybody. I know you kids like to stay up late, but don’t get too crazy—we’ve got a big day ahead of us tomorrow with the dorm decorations. I for one can’t wait to see what you guys will do with the place.”

We bid her good night, and she disappeared with her tray and oven mitts back through the girls’ side door. After a chorus of good night farewells along with utterances of how good it was

to see each other again, we went back to our dorms, with the chandelier of the common room shut off at last.

My phone was under a heavy barrage by the time I returned to my room. It was Martin, raining down a storm of messages filled to the brim with excitement and disbelief. A lot calmer and also with a lot less capitalization, Gordon had texted back as well.

“Sorry for the late reply. Been pretty busy all day at work. I am in the area—can you hang out anytime this week? I’ll probably drive to campus later this week to see you and Kate.”

I accepted his offer, asking him to let me know when he came by. Faint yellow lights came through the gap in the blinds, casting shadows against the wall. I opened my messages with Rachel, but after hovering my thumb over the conversation again, I shut it off. I left the phone to charge on the edge of the desk and climbed into bed.

Oddly enough—or maybe it was ironic—today had been a dream come true. I lay there, staring at the broken blinds, thinking about how having nothing left to look forward to must be one of the worst places a person can be. And I thought on, happy both in disbelief and relief. And before I knew it, I had won the game against Ms. Jamieson. And before I knew it, the sight of orange cement awaited me when I opened my eyes.

9

Wallpapers and Breakfast

The next day in Monterey I got up early to get breakfast, something fewer people did as the year went on. The sprinklers were already busy at work on the way to the cafeteria, and the grass glittered in the morning sun along with the white stone paths. Drops of dew covered the amphitheater's benches, and the stage was vacant and quiet. It was one of those glassy mornings, where the sun was as bright as it was at noon and the sky was sharp and vibrant.

Rachel was already in the cafeteria when I arrived. She had a hash brown and a bowl of oatmeal, and was pressing down the fried potatoes with a paper napkin until the napkin became translucent.

Rachel never missed breakfast. When Rachel and Sam would say goodbye in front of the swimming pool between their dorms at night, Rachel would ask, "Want to meet up at breakfast tomorrow?" to which Sam would say, "Sure!" And the next morning Rachel would pick out a table closest to the window overlooking the path to the dorms, waiting with two makeshift lattes she had whipped up from what was available in the cafeteria. And on the days he did show up, it was a very good start to the day for both of them. So then it was a shame that for most mornings, sleep tasted better to Sam Hanely than coffee and scrambled eggs with Rachel.

I got a plate of pancakes, a hash brown, and a cup of black coffee, and ate quietly at the table closest to the window overlooking the path to the dorms. Rachel left before I was finished,

and I saw her grow smaller and eventually vanish out of sight as she went past the amphitheater and into her dorm.

The theme for the dorm was “An American Diner,” and the team, especially Anna, loved it. It still seemed like a good idea after more than three years. It was unique, but not so niche that everyone could recognize it, and also had never been done before. Everyone began cooking up their best ideas: How about for the board in the common room where we have everyone’s pictures, we write “Staff” on top of it? Yeah, and the announcements board could be like the menu. We could have polaroid pictures of waffles and pancakes on the walls. You know, I’ve got a vinyl player in my room—maybe we could have it out in the common room for things like cereal parties? Like an old jukebox.

The cabs took around twenty minutes to get to campus whenever you called them. The drivers had to deal with the infamous roundabout, come into Del Monte Forest, and navigate the twisting roads of the woods, merging and splitting like roots. And it was twenty minutes if the driver was experienced—sometimes after more than forty minutes, drivers lost, confused, and angry would cancel their food deliveries and rides. The team split into two cabs and headed to Sand City for the supply run.

Once out of the twisting roads of the forest and past the roundabout, we were on the highway. The highway shot straight to the shoreline, and before we knew it, the full grandeur of Monterey Bay was in view. We were traveling along the shore now, with the Pacific Ocean to our left. Beside the shore were small dunes of sand covered with stubbles of plant life, red and green, and it looked as if the white sand dunes were rusting. Behind the dunes, the Pacific Ocean sparkled blue in the color of the sky and stretched infinitely to the horizon.

There was one dune bigger than all the dunes around it that people liked to form pictures and messages out of sticks on. When we passed it by, it was the usual—people's initials along with hearts made out of seagrass and broken branches. The sand dunes must be one of the places that stock photographers come to take their photos. If you went a bit past Sand City, you'd find yourself in Fort Ord, and the scenery there was much the same way. Many Friday nights as I was biking through its brown mountain ranges I thought: Now, I think I've seen this view at the electronics store before.

Tape, glue, and kraft paper in all sorts of colors. Scissors we have back in the dorms. Streamers to hang from one side of the second-floor hallway windows to the other. Don't forget to get the polaroid films—Anna's got the camera and a few left to spare but we need more.

How about these stencils for writing big letters in cursive? You know how those diners like to have everything in cursive. Come look at these here—checkered tablecloths—we could cover the desks in the common room with these. Now that's a great idea. Are we over the budget? No, we still have about 10 dollars to spare.

I had hoped to run across Rachel at the store, but it never happened. The team finished up their supply run and called a cab to return to Del Monte Forest, each member with big plastic bags dangling from their elbows. On the way back I watched the sand dunes and the infinite horizon roll on, picking out which view I'd like best as the wallpaper for my phone.

It was hours after dinner when the team was knee-deep in decorations that Rachel walked into our common room. Inside the room was a colorful pandemonium. The walls had to be plastered with paper cutouts and chalk drawings. The streamers had to be thrown from one side of the second-floor windows to the other. Every dorm room needed a nameplate on its door with the names of those who lived there, and these, of course, had to be in tune with the theme. We

made coffee, and it wasn't decaf. Ms. Jamieson dropped by at intervals to marvel at our work and to cheer us on with food—brownies, cookies, and even a surprise pizza break. Melvin put his varsity football skills to work, throwing the streamers overhead from the boys' side to the girls', where Kate caught them and tapped them down. Anna went around the common room writing and drawing on the walls with chalk. Alyssa sat at the round table by the girls' side entrance, cutting letters and shapes out of kraft paper. She passed them to Aaron, who put them up high on the walls, occasionally complementing Anna's drawings as he passed by. We decided that we would make the nameplates for the dorms out of paper plates we found left over from last year. The gimmick was to write the names in squiggly letters so that they looked like they were written with condiments—red for ketchup, yellow for mustard, and green for relish. This was my task, and I was over at the round table by the boys' side dorm, doing my best to write as squiggly as I could without making them illegible.

And it was when I was struggling with how to write the letter 's' in a squiggly way since it already had so many curves in it that I heard Rachel.

"What's the theme here?"

"An American diner," said Anna.

"So that's what the open sign on the door was about," said Rachel. Anna had made a sign that read 'OPEN' on one side and 'CLOSED' on the other, and the idea was that we would keep the open side throughout the day, and flip it after lights out.

"I was carrying some wrapping paper back to my dorm, but then saw the sign inviting me in," Rachel shrugged, "so here I am. Mind if I take a look?"

"Come on in," said Melvin.

“So pretty,” said Rachel as she observed Anna’s chalk drawings of burgers and ribs on the wall. She made her way over to the corner of the common room where I was looking at the half-finished announcements board.

“It’s supposed to be like a menu,” I said. “You can kind of see it, right?”

“Yeah—I can see that,” said Rachel, her head cocked to one side. She turned to me. “What are you working on?”

“The nameplates for all the doors. Thought we’d make use of some paper plates and write names on them as if they were a dish.”

“Ooh, that’s a good idea.”

“Are you any good at writing letters so they look like they were written with ketchup?”

“What?”

“So we’re trying to make the letters look squiggly like if they were written with condiments—ketchup, mustard, stuff like that—but I’m struggling with the letter ‘s.’ Thing already has curves in it, you know? Can’t add more without it looking too weird.”

“Let me see,” said Rachel.

I handed her a red marker.

“How’s...that?” she said, drawing out a long, stretched-out ‘s’ on a sheet of paper.

“Better than what I had,” I said. “You know, maybe I should grab a bottle of ketchup during breakfast tomorrow and try the real thing.”

Rachel smiled. “Maybe you should.”

“Saw you at breakfast today. You go every day?” I asked.

“I try to. What about you?”

“Well, I haven’t been much of a breakfast person, so I’ve been trying to change that this year. Get up on time and start the day right, you know? What’s the theme for your dorm?”

“Forests.” Rachel’s eyes perked up. “We’re putting up all sorts of trees on the wall. This is what we’re going to use for some of the leaves.” She lifted her left shoulder, motioning to the bundle of wrapping paper under her arm.

“Nice. How’s that been going?”

“Really well. I love my team. Shame that Gwen’s dorming here, but I think she’ll prefer burgers and fries over trees.”

"Don't we all," I said.

I looked around the dorm and gestured to the coffee table. “Speaking of food, we’ve got some leftover brownies on the main table—baked fresh from Ms. Jamieson. There’s also some pizza too, if you want.”

“Thanks, but I’m okay,” said Rachel. “Our dorm had a pizza party too, and I ate so, so much.”

“Alright.” I tapped my fingers on the table. “Well, good luck with your decorations. Mind if I stop by later?”

“Not at all. Please do,” said Rachel. “I’ll see you guys later,” she said to the rest of the team, and went out of the poolside exit. I walked over to the table, popped a cold brownie in my mouth, and got back to work.

Checkered black-and-white racing stripes made out of paper running across the walls. The announcements board looking like a menu. Each person an item on the menu, with contact information where the descriptions would be. Big, bold cursive letters denoting which door is the

boys' side and which is the girls'. Drawings of burgers, fries, milkshakes, and neon signs on the walls. Nameplates on every door. And of course, the streamers that dangle overhead. It was done.

"Looks pretty nice," said Melvin.

The team sat around the coffee table, now covered with the tablecloth as well, and ate cold slices of pizza.

"How about we go around and see how the other dorms look?" asked Anna.

"Rachel said that we were welcome to come by her dorm earlier," I said.

"I'll go," said Aaron.

"Me too," said Kate.

Melvin shrugged with a smile, got up, and made his way to the poolside entrance as the rest of us followed.

It was 11 p.m. We usually wouldn't have been allowed to roam campus this late, but during orientation week and especially on decorations day, the faculty didn't mind. The team and I turned right at the swimming pool and went into Rachel's dorm. Inside, it was green—lots of green—with some occasional reds and yellows thrown in there.

"Hello," announced Anna, "thought we'd stop by and see what you guys were up to."

"Hello there," sang Rachel from atop a ladder. She was in the middle of taping green paper mache onto the wall. "Would you guys like a short tour?"

"Please," I said.

The common room of Rachel's dorm was rectangular. The side we came through had two entrances, spaced apart. Across the entrances were huge window panes that gazed into the forest. In the center of the window was a fireplace made of stone. It had a chimney that split the window

in half and couches surrounding its hearth. Much like our dorm, a large coffee table stood in the middle of the room. From where I was, the boys' side entrance was on the wall to the right, and the girls' on the left. Rachel stood at the edge of a window near the girls' side entrance and began introducing the decorations counter-clockwise.

“This here is the good old cypress tree, this the blushing red maple tree, that one the faithful pine tree, and then some bushes—we needed something around the entrances—then the weeping willow tree; and the grandest and wisest of them all, the great big redwood tree. Looks pretty great, right?”

After the short tour, Rachel offered us chocolate chip cookies left over from their cereal party earlier. I wasn't hungry, but I followed her to the table in the middle of the room. The rest of the team was busy talking to others in the dorm.

“I like that the room looks like an extension of the forest outside the window,” I said, looking around with a small cookie in my hand.

“Right? That's exactly what we were going for,” said Rachel. “But we still have so much work left to do. The redwood tree isn't even finished yet. It's going to be”—she stood on her toes and pointed high up above where the redwood tree stood currently—“all the way up there.”

I glanced at my wristwatch and saw that it was nearly half past eleven. “Looks like you guys are going to be up pretty late.”

“Looks like we are,” said Rachel, her eyes bright.

“Still going to show up to breakfast tomorrow?”

“Of course—like I said, I try to never miss it.”

The rest of my team was gathered around the entrances, talking amongst themselves.

“Well then, see you tomorrow at breakfast, I guess.”

“Are you going to be there?”

“I will. I have some research to do with ketchup bottles, after all.”

Rachel grinned. “I’ll see you there.”

“Good night,” I told Rachel, walked over to my team, and went out the door.

When we returned, we saw how our common room looked coming in for the first time. Streamers loosely hung across the ceiling welcomed us in with open arms. A strip of black and white racing stripes went around the wall. Tables covered with checkered red and white tablecloths urged us to come and sit, and the smell of coffee and grease was almost in the air.

Melvin let out a whistle. “I wonder what Ms. Jamieson will say when she sees all this.”

“She’s going to love it,” said Anna.

Melvin nodded, then yawned. “Good work tonight, gang. I think I’m going to hit the sack now.”

Everyone wholeheartedly agreed with and echoed the sentiment. No conversation took place in the common room that night. The chandelier shut off, and the room was dark and silent. I took a hot shower, standing in the complete and continuous warmth for a long, long, time before going to sleep.

The next day in Monterey I met Rachel at breakfast. I made a fool of myself trying to write letters on my hash browns with a bottle of ketchup. She laughed.

The rest of the week went fast, the pace that good times often went. Gordon stopped by campus to drive me to town for coffee and lunch in Seaside, then had dinner with Kate in Carmel.

Before anyone could anticipate, it was the day before the first day of school. The new schedules were out and alarms were set. Some dread was present over school starting back again, but it couldn't beat the excitement that came with seeing your friends again. At the school, the start of classes didn't just mean seeing your friends, but living with them. Here was a community where your friends were your neighbors. You saw them before and after your classes and shared more than just classrooms with your classmates. Now I know that it sounds like one of those things that seem great until you actually try it, like being roommates with your best friend (although I can't relate too well to why it wouldn't be), but living with your friends, eating with them, brushing your teeth with them—having them be the first and last thing to see in your day—that was a very precious thing to have when you were in high school. And the ringing of the alarm, the struggle out of bed, and the five-minute commute from bed to class—that meant the first breath of that community, that beauty.

Martin arrived late in the night, throwing all rules about quiet hours after ten out the second-floor hallway window.

“This here—this is my room. And right here, next to it, that's yours.” He laughed. “And to the left that—”

“Is yours,” I said.

Martin laughed again. “I can't believe this.”

I helped him bring his luggage to his room. Martin leaned his guitar case gently on the desk and jumped on the uncovered mattress of his bed. “Nice place,” he said. He then dug through his luggage, his clothes spilling out. Through the heap, his hands found a packet of instant ramen and a bowl. Martin waved the packet in the air with a questioning look.

“Sure, why not,” I said. Another shirt fell out as Martin pulled another packet from his luggage and threw it to me.

We ripped open the packet, put it in the bowl, and filled it with hot water. I brought over a chair from my room to sit next to Martin’s desk. “So, which classes are you taking again?” he asked.

“Economics, calculus, statistics, Short Stories...physics.”

“Some tough classes in there.”

“I’ll be fine.” I opened up the lid, stirred the noodles, and closed it back down. “You’re taking what, biology, music theory, calculus—we’re taking that one together—Short Stories—that one too, and...what was the last one?”

“French.”

“Right. Fun classes.”

“I don’t know. I’m going to need a lot of help with calc. And biology—I’m not too excited about that,” said Martin.

“I think you’ll enjoy biology.”

“How so?”

I smiled. “I don’t know. Biology is fun, you know? Punnett squares and whatnot.”

The ramen was ready, and we made quick work of it, noodles and soup and all. “Rock-paper-scissors for who does the dishes?” asked Martin.

“I got it this time. I’m heading to bed early anyways. Big day tomorrow and all.”

“Sleeping already?” Martin said. He shrugged. “I guess you’re right. Big day tomorrow.” He took out a laptop from his backpack and set it on the table in front of him. “But still, I think I’ll stay up a little more.”

"Alrighty. Don't sleep too late," I said. "Good night."

"Come wake me up tomorrow," Martin said as I closed the door. "You know how alarms don't work on me."

"Yeah, yeah," I said through the closed doors, smiling.

Before turning in for the night, I looked through my schedule once more. The classes had been applied for at the end of junior year, so the only way to change them would be to go back all the way to the end of junior year. But there wasn't much point in that.

Martin and I had the same period for calculus. Short Stories I had with Martin as well as Rachel. Rachel and I also had the same period for economics. Economics was a fun class, taught by a retired investment banker who had the job as a hobby. He certainly didn't need the money. He had enough money saved up for ten retirements. Whenever he needed examples for a lesson, he would just pull one from his life. In one lesson related to real estate, he began with: "So I sold a house this weekend..."

If they had the same period, there would hardly be a class Sam and Rachel didn't sit together.

The whine of a guitar, its pitch twisting up and down as it was being tuned, came through the wall. After a moment of silence, a rich chord full of warmth rang out. Outside in the halls, the doors were banging open and shut, bustling with kids running around, taking showers, visiting each other's rooms, and making food.

It was loud. It was distracting. It was sleep-depriving.

And it was perfect.

10

Routines

Del Monte Forest becomes magical when it gets foggy. A thick fog covers the forest with confidence as if it has covered the entire world, only for it to disappear quite literally into thin air once you get out of the forest. One moment, you are carefully driving through the twists and turns of the forest, slowing down around the bends and watching out for deer that may appear out of nowhere. And the next as you exit the forest, the skies are metallic blue and the sun is shining, laughing as if it was playing a cruel joke on you. Tree branches up high are hidden behind a blanket of fog, incrementally fading from visibility the higher they go, and all sound is dampened to tranquility.

But while the outside may have been tranquil and mystical on the first day of school with the fog, the inside of the dorms was anything but. Alarms cried out like neglected children after being snoozed for the fifth time. Doors were opening and shut at a rate of approximately twenty a minute. Kids with hair mohawks made overnight rushed through the hallways, dangling their backpacks on one arm and trying to save their hair with the other.

But having gotten up a good forty minutes before the start of classes for breakfast, I was able to save myself from all that madness. Instead of bad hair and my mouth feeling stuffy, I could enjoy a cup of coffee and a conversation with Rachel.

“What class do you have?” I asked, taking a sip of coffee.

“Spanish. What about you?”

“Calculus.”

“That’s in the same building as Spanish, right?” Rachel drank from her latte and checked the time on her phone. “Do you want to stay here for a little more and then walk to class?”

“Sure,” I said, looking out the big window to the amphitheater. “Anyone you’re close with in your Spanish class?”

“Sofia from my RA team. You?”

“I got Martin taking calculus with me,” I said.

"Sounds like it'll be fun."

"It will be," I said. I thought back to when the lights went out on campus during a storm, and how we had to finish our calculus homework by the light of a camping lantern. Or how he once got a better score than me on a unit test after a bet and launched into a flurry of celebration and self-satisfaction, only for it to turn out that his score was switched with someone else's.

Then moving my gaze along the path around the amphitheater to the dorms, I set down my cup. “Ah.”

“Anything wrong?”

I looked back at Rachel. “I think I’ve got to go back to my dorms.”

“Did you forget something?”

“Yeah,” I said, gathering my things and smiling, “one Martin Wilson.”

There was a long yawn on the other side of the door, followed by a leisurely shuffle, most likely as he reached for his phone. After a string of rapid obscenities, the door swung open, banging on the wall.

“Why’d you get me so late? What is it—calculus?”

“I was at breakfast, and to be honest, I almost forgot to come get you,” I said, breaking an apologetic smile. “But yes, it is calculus.”

“Breakfast?” said Martin, rummaging through his stack of books spilled on his desk. “Since when did you get breakfast?”

“Since last week. New thing I’ve been trying out.” I looked at my phone. “Five minutes until class now.”

“You all ready?”

“Have been. Lots of time when you get up early for breakfast.”

“Less time sleeping,” said Martin. He picked up his toothbrush, put it back on the desk, and grabbed a tin of mints instead. “Let’s go.”

The fog hugged the campus down on its stomach, and the stone paths were coated with a thin veil of moisture. The sky was steel gray, but it would return to its blue self by the time assembly rolled around. Martin and I ran through the grass, ignoring the scenic route the stone paths suggested. We didn’t have half the time or the mind to watch out for the sprinklers.

“See, we wouldn’t be all wet if we got up early for breakfast. Up early and ready.”

“I already know you’re only going to keep this up for the next week, at most. Matter of fact, I’d bet on that. I say by this time next week, you’ll be sleeping in.”

As we slowed down, approaching the classrooms, I caught a glimpse of Rachel. She was walking into class, wearing that big famous grin of hers.

“You know what,” I said, catching my breath, “I think I’ll take you up on that bet.”

As expected, the fog lifted when it was time for the welcome-back assembly after the first period. Silence, earned not out of fear but by respect, covered the amphitheater as the fog had earlier in the morning. It seemed even the crows had respect for what the dean had to say, as they cried out only during one of his masterful pauses. It took some time for the school to return to its lively self after the assembly. It was a gradual process, more like a slow and gentle roll of a dial rather than a sudden flip of a switch. At first, it was whispers as everyone got up from their seats, murmurs as they found their friends, and a while before chatter and laughter were nursed back to their good health.

After assembly was Short Stories. The Short Stories classroom had its desks arranged in a U-shape in front of the whiteboard for discussions. Rachel was sitting at the side of the U furthest from the door. I briefly thought about what Sam, having been clearly interested in Rachel by this point, would have done.

I've been told that there are times when it would do you better to be a little overt with showing your interest in someone. Maybe not spelling it out for them, but showing them a few letters and getting them to fill in the blanks. There are numerous ways to go about this, few good and many bad. Now, walking into a room and then painstaking making your way across it to sit next to someone for no reason in particular—that seemed to me to belong to the latter, although I wouldn't put it past Sam.

I sat with Martin on the two desks closest to the door. Soon, Ms. Jamieson began class, pacing back and forth from the whiteboard to each desk, asking us questions and outlining the course. Each one of us, she said, after reading a great number of short stories, would have our own by the end of the semester. First in line of the pile of stories to be read was “Linoleum Roses,” which she assigned for homework at the end of class.

After lunch with Martin I had statistics, and that was the first day of school for me. Economics and Physics I would be taking the next day. Martin, Gordon, and I met up in the common room of my dorm after school, helmets in hand to go mountain biking. The biking team had a few favorite routes it rotated between. The most common was the horse trails around Del Monte Forest. They went up and down the mountains of the forest, and as long as you watched out for any equestrians that would be passing by, it was as good on bikes as it was on horses. Other times, the team would ride the asphalt road at the back of campus down to the beach. Then they would bike along the shore on 17-Mile Drive, and when they zoomed past the cross-country team they would suddenly gain newfound gratitude for their bikes.

Sometimes we would even bike to Carmel-by-the-Sea. Carmel was surprisingly close to campus when you were on a bike—around twenty to thirty minutes. And while mountain bikes roaming their picturesque streets were almost too much excitement for the gentle residents of Carmel (which is to say that they did not like us very much), it was one of my favorite routes.

Finally there was the crown jewel of it all, the trip to Fort Ord on Fridays where the school's chemistry teacher, Mr. Phillip, who had biked for so long and so much that he had melons for calves, would hook a bike trailer to the old school van and take the team to Fort Ord. Once in Fort Ord, we'd explore the old Army base until sundown, finding gun casings on the trails and wondering what purpose dilapidated buildings must have served in their prime. And after biking for two, sometimes even three hours, the white-bearded chemistry teacher would drive the old van, the bike trailer rustling behind, to a burger joint for the most rewarding meal of our lifetimes. And oh, how the time it took for the burgers to come out felt like an eternity. When you've just spent the last three hours biking up and down mountain ranges, no food feels like it deserves to be called fast food.

One time on the way back from the restaurant after having nullified our entire workout with burgers, milkshakes, and fries, the van broke down. “Well, gang,” said Mr. Phillip, more amused by the situation than worried, “good thing we’ve got bikes in the back, right?”

That night we rode our bikes all the way back to campus, somehow not getting lost and making it through the labyrinth of Del Monte Forest by the way of our bike lights. I’ve relived the memory a few times, starting all the way from the trip at Fort Ord to the grand meal to the finale back to the school.

The biking team took it easy on the first day. We took the asphalt paths down to the beach and went along 17-Mile Drive since it was flat and the breeze was nice. It still made us plenty hungry, and what do you know, it was beef sliders with cheese for dinner.

Then from 7:30 to 9:30, it was study hall, with the first on duty being Melvin. It was a blessing to be able to focus in silence for two whole hours by myself. Writing slowly and being proud of the neat letters that had appeared. The satisfaction of crossing out each item on the to-do list. The refreshment of switching from differentiating curves to interpreting supply-and-demand graphs to reading a good story—these were all pleasures that had been absent from my life for so long.

There were little games I played. I would see how much I remembered in a story and be surprised at how much I had forgotten. If a question was multiple choice, I would try to remember the answer without solving it. For calculus, I would attempt problems from a few chapters ahead, seeing how far my hand could go.

And if I needed a change of pace, or simply felt a little drowsy, I would walk down the hall to the water dispenser to make a cup of tea, and on the way back see how everyone was doing. I could stop by the room of John and Tami, two sophomores who would no doubt be up to

anything but schoolwork; look down from the windows to see who was in the common room, or check if Martin had fallen asleep before returning to my room.

He had.

It was a long day, after all. I stood in the doorway and stared at him to see if he would sense anything and wake up.

He didn't, and I went back to my room, quiet as to not wake him.

Two knocks on my door took my attention from the last few pages of "Linoleum Roses."

"Hey."

It was Melvin, making the rounds.

"Hey. The rounds going well?" I asked.

"Yeah. I'm getting to know everyone, trying to match the faces to the names. So, good first day?"

"I suppose that's the question of the day?"

Melvin chuckled. "Yeah. A freebie, this one. Going to have to try harder to come up with new ones as the year goes on."

Leaning back in my chair, I let out a sigh. "I had a good day. An 'I wouldn't mind if the rest of my life was like this,' sort of day."

Melvin raised his eyebrow. "That much, huh?"

I shrugged with a nod.

"Did you have all of your classes today?" asked Melvin.

"Just three of them. Have the other two tomorrow."

"Any of them you're not looking forward to?" He was good. Each question set up the next seamlessly.

I trained my gaze on my desk as if it was some faraway object. “To be honest?” I said, looking back up at him. “I think physics, maybe.”

“Why’s that?”

I looked at my desk again. After a second, I said, “You know, just—pulleys and gravity and friction and electromagnetics.” I smiled at him. “Just never been a fan of that stuff, I guess.”

Melvin nodded in agreement.

“Wonder what my question of the day should be for when I do rounds,” I said.

“You’ve got the whole week to think about it.” Melvin knocked his fist twice on the door. “Well, it’s been nice catching up with you. Have a good rest of your night.”

“Good night.”

Melvin moved on down the hall, keeping his impeccable tempo. The timing of the two knocks in, the flow of the questions, and the two knocks as he left were down to a tee.

Study hall. 7:30 to 9:30. The two hours went quickly.

And so did each day, as everyone established their routines and got used to them.

Assignments grew into projects and projects into the inevitable tests. We had a unit test for calculus the third week—I did well, but I suppose I had an unfair advantage. I settled into two routines, one for Monterey and the other for New York. Most, if not all of the routine in New York consists of waiting. Since I now spent multiple days at once in Monterey, I decided to keep myself to one visit a day, just the one as I went to sleep. While I wait out the daylight, I review the lessons from my classes and wonder how many strangers who pass me by know what I’ve learned the night before. In my little notebook, I make plans for the day in Monterey. A list of

what will happen tonight, what I need to get done, and what I want to do. And every morning in the same notebook I keep a diary, writing about what happened in Monterey.

The routine for Monterey is much more beautiful and much more lovable. Much to Martin's dismay, I've been going to breakfast every morning, starting my days right with fried eggs and coffee along with Rachel. I look forward to my classes in general, and find that often I won't even look at the clock once during classes. After school, it is straight off to biking with Martin and Gordon, then study hall with two hours of focus and calm. As the day comes to a close I am in Martin's room, chatting with him until I'm dozing off.

I have yet to speak with Savannah, but I know that will come soon, as Martin will surely begin to develop feelings for a certain girl in his biology class.

Around half past noon on the weekends, Gordon cruises into the parking lot by the visitor center, ready to pick us up. Then it is out of the forest and into town with Martin and Gordon. We go to the mall to watch movies or to get groceries, and on our way there stop by the Vietnamese restaurant right across the street. Or we continue down the road to Alvarado Street, where we are sure to drop by the guitar shop and the creamery with exquisite flavors.

But before all that, when Martin is fast asleep and it is still hours before Gordon will come pick us up, I spend time in the school library. The first thing I did was to search for Steinbeck's novels among the shelves, and how fitting it was that the first one I came across was none other than *Cannery Row*. Fitting because it was the first of his books I had ever read, and also because it was one of my favorite books, even amongst Steinbeck's other great works.

Cannery Row, as I have said before, is about Cannery Row in Monterey. It is not about a story set in Cannery row. Rather, the story *is* Cannery Row. Should anyone ask: "What is

Cannery Row about?" I would answer: "Cannery Row." All in all, it may be the most honestly titled book ever written.

In the first pages of the book, Steinbeck describes Cannery Row in the most beautiful manner the English language can accomplish when describing. He then says that the way to write this book—*Cannery Row*—would be to "open the page and let the stories crawl in by themselves."

And let the stories of Cannery Row crawl in by themselves he did. And that was the only thing he had to do, because writing about Cannery Row was all that was needed to convey friendship, contentment, humor, love, pain, loneliness, and the beauty of nature to the highest degree and in the truest light.

I've read the book many times before, but when I found the short novel again, its cover tattered on the edges like the wind-beaten trees on the shore, there was not much else I could do but to read it again. So that is where I've been spending my time on the cool weekend mornings where solitude is a virtue. In a library in Del Monte Forest, happily lost in a Monterey of Steinbeck's making.

But it is not the weekend mornings that I spend in the library. It is also the weekday evenings. 7:30 to 9:30, to be precise.

This came to be when it was my first night on duty. I was out in the common room on the round table next to the girls' side entrance with Ms. Jamieson, the faculty on duty for the night. Ten minutes after study hall, Rachel walked in through the poolside door and stood next to the girls' dorm entrance, waiting.

"Waiting for someone?" I asked Rachel from my table.

"Yes—for Gwen. We're going to the library for study hall," she said.

"I forgot that we can do that. How is it over there?"

“I love it. Well, to be honest, I don’t get much work done because I’m there with Gwen, but that’s the reason I go to the library in the first place, so,” Rachel laughed.

“I never had study hall there. I should go sometime.”

“You should—Gwen and I go most days. Do you want to come with us tomorrow?”

I wasn’t expecting an invitation, but maybe that was what I was hoping for deep down when I said that I should go sometime. “Sure,” I said. “Same time, tomorrow?”

Gwen came out of the girls’ side entrance. Rachel greeted her with a rapid waving of her hand and looked back at me before leaving for the library.

“See you tomorrow,” she said with a smile.

So the next day when Aaron was on duty, I told him that tonight I would be at the library for study hall, and left with Rachel and Gwen through the poolside entrance.

On the way there, the library shone like a small campfire in the distance, yellow and inviting. Upon entering, Rachel and Gwen picked a big white desk in the corner.

“Our usual spot,” Rachel explained.

Rachel sat next to Gwen on one side of the table and me on the other. Laptops, textbooks, notebooks, and stationery were arranged to each’s liking. I got physics out of the way, then econ, then statistics. Since I had made good progress on the calculus assignments and there was no calculus the next day, I decided I would read instead.

“You’re a fast reader,” said Rachel.

I looked up from my page just as Mack and the boys were catching frogs for Doc in their ingenious ways. “Hm?”

“You’ve been going through those pages fast. You must read a lot,” said Rachel.

I put a piece of folded paper to mark the page. “Used to not be much of a reader. Up until junior year, even.”

“Did you read a lot over the summer?”

Nodding slowly, I said, “Something like that, yeah.”

“I remember reading the book freshman year. I should read it again sometime. I should read more in general,” said Rachel.

“You ever been there?” I asked.

“To Cannery Row?”

“Yeah.”

“Of course—you?”

“Only in the book,” I said, putting my hand over it.

Rachel laughed. “This is your fourth year at the school, and you’ve never been? Even people who’ve only been in Monterey for four hours have been to Cannery Row. What have you been doing all these years, Sam Hanely?”

“Good question. Guess I should look around some more, huh?”

“You definitely should,” said Rachel.

It is your last year, after all.”

“That it is.” I looked around the library with a thin smile. “That it is.”

The two hours went quickly.

11

Twins

When it comes to when you know you like someone, there seem to be a few trains of thought. Some are strong believers in love at first sight, claiming that attraction is as inevitable as chance. Others believe in the complete opposite, and say that it takes time—time to talk, time to laugh at each other's jokes, time to share passions, time to talk about the past, and time to talk about the future. Like a puzzle, they say that attraction truly comes together when enough pieces have been assembled, and only then will you know.

My definition of when you know lies somewhere in the middle of these two opposing ends.

I think the moment you know comes when having been completely unprompted, you start talking about them to your friends. Because when you like someone, you've got to talk about them. Your heart beats up your throat, and talking to your friends about them is the only way to scratch that itch. It doesn't even have to be about your feelings, or whether or not you find them pretty or handsome. As long as their name is said, it is good enough. Guess who I ran across today. Do you know her? Are you close to him? We talked for a good bit today.

When you talk about them to your friends, you know it is over.

It was over for Martin on a Wednesday night. We were hanging out in his room after study hall, as usual. I was sitting on his desk chair, and Martin on his bed with his back against the wall.

“Do you know Hannah Yang?” he asked.

“Kind of,” I said, containing my smile, “She has a twin sister, right?”

“Yeah. Are you close with them?”

“I know Savannah a little. Why?”

“Just asking. I have the same class with Hannah for bio.”

And he would keep bringing her up after that. We got partnered for an assignment. I texted her during study hall. Did you know that she lived in LA when she was little? It went on until a few weeks later, when he finally broke down and confessed. This time it was after midnight on a Friday night (well, on a Saturday, but you know what I mean), when drowsiness was just strong enough to somewhat emulate the effects of drunkenness.

“I think I like someone,” Martin said in a timid voice.

I played along. “Who?”

“Hannah. Hannah Yang. I think we have good chemistry.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Well, we always partner up for assignments. We sit next to each other during class. Recently, I started sitting with her and her sister during lunch,” said Martin, listing off as if he was back in elementary school and doing a presentation in front of the class.

“Thought the Yang twins kept themselves to a small group.”

Martin sat up so that he was at the edge of the bed. “Exactly. Which is why I was a little surprised when Hannah told me to come sit with them during lunch.” Martin paused, calming himself down. He sank back to the wall. “I don’t know. Maybe she was just being nice, or you know, because that’s what friends do when they get out of class together. I don’t know. What about you, man?”

“What about me?”

“You know, you and Rachel Marigold. You rarely say a word to me in Short Stories. Too busy talking to Rachel. You go out to the library to have study hall with her every night. And breakfast—I was wondering how you were making it to breakfast every morning, until Gordon told me that he keeps seeing you and her sitting together.” Martin put on a smug smile. “Gordon told me that when a guy starts making new habits, there’s usually a girl involved. Now either Gordon’s wrong, or you like her. You like her, don’t you?”

Now it was me that was speaking in a timid voice, averting his gaze and looking at the desk.

“Yeah, I like her.”

And that made Martin pretty giddy, chuckling to himself, so proud of the fact that he had figured it all out. But when he was done, his eyes sharpened, he sat up again, and got right to business.

“You’ve got to help me. With Hannah.”

I briefly thought about how it went the first time, how the idea of me and Savannah working together to help Martin went about so I could recreate it.

“Sure. But how?”

“Maybe you could sit with me during lunch. I don’t think Savannah and Hannah will mind you joining, even if they usually keep to a small group.”

“I could do that,” I said, nodding. Joining Martin for lunches with the Yang twins—that was how I got to know Savannah better in the first place. And since I wanted to tell her about my phenomenon soon, it would work out for Martin just as well as it would for me.

"How about you ask Hannah if she wants to go out for food this weekend? A dinner at Alvarado, maybe," I said, knowing what his response would be. Seeing him with his arms crossed and his teeth clenched in thought, I said, "Which you probably don't want to do. Okay."

Even though he had been after girls all throughout high school, so head over heels for so many that he practically got through the years in a somersault, Martin had never been on a date. In fact, I don't think he has even *asked* anyone on a date. Before he could muster up the courage to ask, he would forget all about it and somersault over to some other girl. That sounds foolish, but maybe it was quite wise, seeing as how he never got heartbroken in his life. When things didn't work out for him, it was more of a bummer than the end of the world, more like a sitcom than *Romeo and Juliet*.

"How about," I said, as if I had just thought of the idea, "after I become better friends with the Yang twins, I ask Savannah if the four of us want to go out for dinner? Then you can spend time with Hannah and get to know her better, but it'll be like a simple hangout between friends."

Martin seemed to like the idea very much, as he listened to the plan with the strategic focus of a four-star general.

I took it one step further. "We could even let Savannah in on the whole thing. Tell her you like her sister, ask if she can help. If she says yes, you'll have a wingman and a wingwoman. And Savannah, she's got heavy lips. You won't have to worry about her telling anyone."

Martin considered this for a moment. "Yeah...yeah--and it'll be like having an insider, too." In the end he seemed very satisfied with the plan, maybe even more so than when I had first told him.

He clapped his hands together.

“Okay. I think this would actually work.” With a happy sigh of relief as if the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders, Martin grabbed his guitar at the end of the bed and started strumming softly.

“You get your guitar from storage yet?”

“Not yet.”

“You should. I’ll teach you. Simon and Garfunkel, remember? I’ll go with you after school tomorrow. I need to go get my good chair out of there anyways.”

“I guess we could do that.”

“Going to sleep?” asked Martin.

“Yeah. So, lunch tomorrow?”

“You bet,” said Martin, full of hope.

For the next week, I sat with Martin and the Yang twins for lunch, getting acquainted with Savannah all over again. We got along quickly as if we hadn’t skipped a beat between all of my previous visits. One day, after Martin and Hannah had gone to put their trays away and it was us two at the outdoor table, I told her on the spot.

“Martin likes your sister.”

You may think that this was greatly lacking in tact, but Savannah was someone that could believe I was a homeless time traveler. No dancing around the bush was necessary.

Savannah smiled. “Mm, I guess as much.”

“And I was wondering if you’d try and help me get the two of them together.”

“Well, Martin’s a good guy...a good singer, too. I don’t think he would be a bad match for Hannah...Okay—I’ll take part.”

“Great. So, here’s what I’m thinking: a dinner this weekend at Alvarado Street. Think we could do that, the four of us?”

“Martin wants us to be there?”

“Says it’ll be too awkward if it’s just him and Hannah. He’s a pretty shy guy. But I was thinking that after the dinner, we could make some excuse to drop them by the beach for a while so they could get some one-on-one time.”

“That could work,” said Savannah slowly, as if she was iterating through all the possibilities of how that would go. “Okay. I’ll talk to Hannah.”

Later that night, while Martin and I were huddled in his room over a pizza we had ordered, I got a text from Savannah."

“We’re on Saturday. We’ll come get you guys at five.”

And before I could tell Martin, he yelled in triumph. He had gotten a text from Hannah, telling him the same.

Alvarado street is a long, straight stretch of road in downtown Monterey. On one end of it is a plaza, and past that Old Fisherman’s Wharf, where tourists gather like the fishing boats moored along the harbor. If you start from the plaza and head down the street for a while, you’ll come across a small music store with guitars covering its walls like ivy. Martin and I would stop by, pretending we could afford all of the things we were trying out, although I doubt the owner was ever convinced. A little down the street from there, you’ll come across the famous donut shop I’ve told you about, the one that sells out before noon. About half a block down from the donuts is the ice cream shop with the cilantro flavor, and a bit more after that, the end of Alvarado Street. Now, if you take a left onto Munras Avenue, then turn right when you reach an

intersection, you'll find yourself a deli. This was where we were going to have dinner on Saturday, and where many of our fake-dates between us four would take place.

Here was the plan. Savannah and Hannah were picking us up from campus to Alvarado Street at five. After dinner, Savannah and I would suggest a walk along the beach, something most people heavy and content with good food rarely denied. But on our way to the beach, Savannah would make an excuse to be somewhere else, and I another to come along with her. Oh well, Savannah and I would say. How about you guys go ahead? We can meet up once we're done.

The dinner went better than expected. Martin let loose as if he had somehow accumulated experience from my previous visits. And Savannah, in the way we looked at each other, seemed to be aware of those visits, of my phenomenon. Every time Martin made Hannah laugh she'd pass a glance my way as if to say, "better than last time" or "remember this part?" and it felt like we had inside joke.

I was going to tell her tonight. At the pier, as always.

"How about a walk at the beach to digest?" Savannah suggested after dinner.

Again, few disagreed with such a suggestion on a Friday night.

We drove along Del Monte Beach and stopped at a parking lot. We slammed the doors of the old car shut, and greeted by the cool nighttime breeze of the sea, made our way down to the sand. But Savannah remained behind, patting her pockets. She opened the driver's side door and looked inside the car, hunched over her seat. When she came out of the car she patted her pockets again, checking her jacket as well.

"I think I've left my phone back at the deli—I'm going to go back there and check. You guys go on ahead. I'll join up later."

I looked around at Martin and Hannah. Hannah looked concerned, most likely thinking about when she had last seen her sister with her phone. Before either of them could say anything, I chimed in.

“I’ll go with. You need someone that can call, make it easier for us to meet up again.”

Savannah pretended to consider this.

“If you’re okay with coming along, then yes, that sounds like a good idea.”

Savannah turned to Hannah and Martin.

“Are you two okay with being here for a while? We’ll call you once we get back, and we can meet up then.”

Hannah and Martin both gave a shrug of agreement, Martin’s a bit too exaggerated and eager.

And that was all it took. Perhaps abrupt and a bit forced, but it worked the first time, then time and time again, so why fix what wasn’t broken?

We drove back along the shore on Del Monte Avenue, sleepy yellow lights casting a warm glow over small buildings to our left and right. We had planned to head straight to the wharf, where we would spend around twenty minutes chatting with the ambient murmurs of the radio in the background, but I wanted to take a detour.

“You know the famous ice cream shop on Alvarado?”

“Mhm. The one with the crazy flavors?”

“That’s the one. Let’s stop by there. I haven’t had ice cream in a while.”

The ice cream shop was still busy considering the time of night. Even before we went in, we could smell the sweet aroma of butter and sugar from the waffle cones. No wonder the ice

cream parlor was still busy. Anyone walking on Alvarado Street couldn't go by without at least considering a scoop.

A wide chalkboard hung on the wall behind the counter. On it was the list of flavors, with each flavor written in a font and color that suited them best. I wondered if they had specifically hired a person to do that, or if one of the workers happened to be talented in calligraphy. And if that were the case, boy were they in trouble if they ever decided to quit.

Although the menu was as eye-catching as it was big and expensive, I didn't even give it a glance. I already knew what I was having.

"I'll have a big scoop of the cilantro," I said with a big smile.

As I was moving out of line, I noticed Savannah was immediately moving along with me.

"Not getting anything?" I asked.

"I'm okay. I'm not really feeling ice cream."

"Come on, it's Friday. Even if it's on me?"

Savannah looked pleasantly surprised. "Are you sure?"

"I insist."

"Well, if you insist..."

Savannah looked up at the menu and was immediately lost in the swarm of flavors.

"What's good here?"

"The vanilla with the honeycomb is a must-try."

"Honeycomb?"

"Yeah. Comes with a chunk of real honeycomb."

"I'll have that, then," said Savannah. She smiled. "And thank you."

The low green glow of the dashboard lit the car at the wharf, a green like the color of cilantro.

“Finished already? Thought you weren’t in the mood for ice cream.”

“I was wrong,” said Savannah with a faint smile. “Thank you again. Really. How is yours?”

“Not...so great, to be honest. But I’m trying to get used to it, see if it’ll get any better.”

“That seems to be most people’s experience with cilantro.”

How did it go every time? I couldn’t find an opening, the right time.

But then again, no time was the right time to tell something as ridiculous as this.

And again, any time was as good as any with Savannah.

“Hey, Savannah?”

“Mhm?”

“Can I tell you something?”

“Of course.”

“Something ridiculous.”

“All the more reason to hear it.”

“I’m some sort of a... time traveler.”

12

Rounds

Outside, the couples in the dark saying see you right after, and coming out into the light, out of the woods, out of the golf links. Pretending ignorance and innocence, pretending they are nothing more than friends. From the grassy fields to the benches to the outskirts of campus, hurrying back to their dorms. But not before making promises, making promises that they will meet again tonight. Then the deer taking back their territory, occupying the dark grass in the absence of humans under the starlight.

Inside, all the yellow lights lit. Sometimes the fireplace as well if the mood is right. In the dorms, hurrying again: hurrying to finish showering, to run back from friends' rooms to theirs, to finish the food they've ordered. A momentary hustle and bustle like a busy street.

And then, calm.

7:30.

Study hall, doors open, phones out.

Walking along the halls, knocking on the doors, and making the announcement. Each person has their own: their own variation, their spin on the phrase. The accents and the tone and the volume and the ordering.

Study-ha-a-all, phones-out-doors-open-

By 7:35, everything in its place. Phones out. Doors open. Study hall.

Now go out to the common room. Say hello to Ms. Jamieson. Start work, do it for around thirty minutes, maybe forty.

Hey Sam—

Library?

Yeah.

Alright. Sorry I couldn't join you guys today.

Wave as she goes out the door. Look at the clock and decide that you could use a break. Up and into the halls. Which way to circle tonight, right or left?

Knock knock.

Hey, how's it going?

I'm doing all right.

How have you been holding up?

Pretty well.

Any tests?

I have one coming up tomorrow.

What subject?

Chemistry.

Ah. How you feeling about it?

I think I'm going to be fine. I've been doing pretty well on the other tests.

Good to hear. Well, it's already Friday tomorrow. We're almost there, yeah?

Yeah.

Alright, take care—

Good night—

Knock knock.

Hey, Sam.

Hey, Will. How's the week coming along?

It's been fine.

Something the matter?

I've got this bad stomachache.

How bad?

Pretty bad.

Do you need the nurse?

No, I'm sure it'll get better. I've never had a stomachache this bad, though.

What do you think might have caused it?

No idea. I looked it up, and it said it might be appendicitis.

Appendicitis?

Apparently. Look here.

'Symptoms include excruciating pain.' Well, is it excruciating?

I don't know about 'excruciating.' It is pretty bad, though.

Let me know if it gets worse. We can always call the nurse.

Thanks.

Have a good night.

You too.

Knock Knock.

Yo.

How's it going?

All good.

Things go well in biology today?

Oh yeah. The lab's been a lifesaver. She's even talking about coming to campus during study hall so we can work on the lab report together.

Big news.

Yeah—and I've been thinking—what do you think about going to the mall, the four of us?

Mall sounds good. I'll talk to Sav.

Thank you. Here—chocolate?

Thanks. Congrats on getting to have study hall with her.

Yeah—I'm going to get to see you and Rachel at the library too. When you asking her out?

No idea.

But like, just to hang out with her, you know? Like what I'm doing with Hannah. Doesn't have to be a date date. Just lunch or something. You should do it.

Mm. I might.

You know I'm rooting for you. How's the guitar?

Haven't played it yet.

I ought to start working on a lesson plan for you, give you homework.

Maybe. Well—it's almost Fri—

Almost Friday, yeah yeah. Heard you all the way up here.

Hah. Alright then. Good night.

See you later.

Back in the common room. A chat with Ms. Jamieson. The weather's so nice these days. We might do some writing at the beach for Short Stories—it should be a blast.

Poolside doors swinging. Rachel walking Gwen back.

Bye-bye, see you la-ter.

Bye—hey, Ms. Jamieson. I'm back from the library.

Get a lot of work done, Gwen?

A good amount.

Gwen going back to the girls' side. Rachel waving goodbye one last time.

Hey.

Hi, Sam.

Get a lot of work done?

You know how it is with Gwen.

Heh. It's almost Friday.

It-is. Makes me so ha-ppy.

You're in a good mood.

No reason not to be.

Doing anything this weekend?

Probably just hanging out with Gwen.

Mm. You going to the mall at all? I was wondering if you wanted to head there for lunch maybe.

This weekend?

Yeah.

Lunch?

Yeah.

Okay.

Yeah? Alright then. 11:30 bus?

Yes, but how about we go somewhere else?

Where?

Cannery Row.

Ah.

I think it's about time you went, Sam Hanely.

I agree with you. 11:20, meet in front of the swimming pool?

Yes.

9:30. Phones retrieved. Doors closed.

Time to go back to New York. Time to leave.

Five more minutes.

Look around the perfect triangle of the room. The desk, the bed, and the guitar. Grab the guitar and put it on the bed. Wipe the dust off the body. Front, back, side, and around the curves. Get a screwdriver from one of the drawers. Take off the pickguard. Stare at the bare wood underneath and its electronic innards. Around the circuit, the switches, and in the crevices of the pickups. Wipe it down, all of it.

Take the strings off of the guitar. Turn the tuning pegs counterclockwise until the strings become loose. Take them off and put them down in order. Wipe the fretboard and the neck too.

Clean the tuning pegs and the headstock. Now assemble it back together. Pickguard, screws, the strings. Once reassembled, put the guitar on its stand.

Or grab its case from the closet. Put the guitar in it, making sure that the neck is well secured. Then fold up the stand, and along with the guitar, put it in the corner of the closet.

And outside, better couples kept their promises and went back to the golf links and the forests, under the stars.

13

Glass Eye

Cannery Row in Monterey in California was indeed a dream—in all ways poetic, and in my case, literal as well. Cannery Row wasn't always called Cannery Row. It was just the nickname for it, with its actual name being Ocean View Avenue. That changed in 1958, when it was officially renamed Cannery Row in honor of Steinbeck's novel. Imagine writing a book so good they change reality to match your fiction.

On Saturday, Rachel and I had a simple lunch of pasta and seafood and went for a walk along the Row.

Rachel sings her sentences when she is happy. She gives her sentences rhythm and pitch, sometimes even swinging and dancing along to them.

"I'm-so-full," sang Rachel.

"We'll walk it off. We've got a lot of sightseeing to do."

"Yes-we-do. I'll be your tour guide for the day."

Rachel marched in front, almost skipping.

Have you ever seen a tour guide that seemed to be as surprised as you were by the tour? I have. Her name was Rachel Marigold and she was the most excitable tour guide I had ever met. Every few steps she would see something that grabbed her attention, and we would stop to marvel at it. Then just a few strides later—"Come come, look at this here." Again and again and again.

It left a constant smile on me.

“This is why I shouldn’t go to places like Chinatown in San Francisco. I’d be too distracted. It would take me hours to get through the street.”

She was right. Rachel and I did go to San Francisco once, and she looked around Chinatown like a child at the zoo.

We went under the famous Cannery Row Company bridge, quite possibly the most photographed place in Cannery Row. If you’ve ever seen pictures of the Row, you’ve surely seen a picture of this bridge. It’s got a red roof with a sign in the same color that reads "Cannery Row Company" in white capital letters.

I looked around, searching for anything resembling descriptions from Steinbeck’s book, and finally found one.

“Remember Lee Chong from *Cannery Row*?” I asked.

“Yeah—the shopkeeper, right?”

“Right. Now, it’s a little faint, but can you read what it says on that wooden siding there?”

I said, pointing to a two-story building painted dark red.

Rachel squinted. “Wing Chong Building.”

“That’s what the store in the book was based on.”

“Lee Chong’s?”

“Yep.”

“That’s the actual store?”

“Yeah. right here.”

Rachel grinned. “You should be the tour guide, Sam Hanely. How did you know that?”

“I did some research. I’ve wanted to visit here for a long time, after all.”

Rachel clicked her tongue. “And yet you wanted to go to the mall.”

We walked by the Monterey Bay Aquarium, another place I’ve planned to go but have never been to. Rachel had always wanted to go. It was always something—a test, a project, a college application deadline. Always some inconvenience. And when there were no inconveniences, why, it was the perfect opportunity to do nothing and relax for the first time in a while. Next week, I would tell her, until there were no more next weeks. As she led the way to the beach, I made a silent promise I would take her this time around.

Our hair was warm and the sand hot down by the beach. She ran around the waves, chasing them when they retreated and running away when they came back.

I used to have a pretty good life.

Savannah remained nonchalant about my phenomenon. She acted as if nothing had happened, leaving me to wonder if she had forgotten about it, or if she had written it off as a bizarre, one-off conversation. So it was a big relief when after Martin and Hannah left to put their trays away at lunch, she brought it up.

“How is New York?” she asked, so offhand that it even threw me off.

“It’s...alright. Not as nice as here, of course.”

“What month is it over there?”

“November, I think. I’m not entirely sure, but from what I gather, November.”

“It’s not too cold?”

“Not yet, no.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Yeah. I haven’t even started thinking about winter yet. Guess it will get pretty cold. Good thing that the weather here is all right here year-round.”

“Mhm. Still, maybe it’s not too early to start thinking about the winter. I lived in California my whole life so I wouldn’t know, but New York gets pretty cold in the winter, doesn’t it?”

“It does. I’ll need a thicker jacket, for sure.” I waved to Martin, who was now walking to biology with Hannah. “By the way, Martin was wondering if you and Hannah wanted to hang out again. Dinner and a movie at the mall.”

“A dinner and a movie at a mall sounds good. Then some excuse to leave the two of them again, I’m assuming?”

“Exactly. Think Hannah will be up for it?”

“I think so. She told me that she had fun last time.”

“That’ll make Martin’s day when he hears it. When do you want to do it?”

“Let’s see... I’ve got work Monday through Friday after school, so weekdays wouldn’t be good. I get off shift at three on Saturday, so Saturday should work. Anytime Sunday afternoon works as well.”

“Saturday afternoon sounds good. Is four okay?”

“Let’s do five. I’ve got to cook for my Grandmother.”

“Five works for me,” I said, getting up to go to class. “See you Saturday?”

“See you,” said Savannah, gathering her backpack. “And have a nice day—for both of your days.”

The mall almost felt like an extension of campus. You would wave hello to your classmates just as often as you do in the school hallways. It had fast food, groceries, convenience stores, cafes, and a movie theater. You could get through all four years of high school by only going to the mall, although that would be a very boring way to spend four years in Monterey.

Every weekend, supplies were bought to last the next week. Chips, sodas, microwave meals, and don't forget the laundry detergent, because Martin will sigh every time you bump one off him. All of it was put into a sickening amount of plastic bags and carried down to the bus stop in front of the mall, where the mass of students waiting for the bus looked like trees with plastic bundles for fruit. In front of the bus stop was a furniture store with large display windows looking right out to the bus stop. This made it the perfect place to wait for the bus in comfort, much to the store manager's plight. The manager was balding, and his head only got thinner every time he had to tell a group of teenagers to please get off of the couches.

The movie theater was at the edge of the mall, modest but not small. It was the job of the senior with an early birthday to walk up to the counter to buy tickets for the rest of their friends if it was an R-rated movie. I remember having to do it once when the RA team went to watch a horror movie for Halloween.

The four of us walked to the movie theater after dinner. Our seats were toward the back. Savannah went into the seats first, then Hannah, followed by Martin, then me. This seating arrangement was, of course, planned ahead of time. It made it seem like nothing was forced while allowing Martin and Hannah to sit together. The two shared a bag of popcorn and whispered comments about the movie as the big screen flashed on. The date already seemed a success in my book.

When the movie was over, Martin and Hannah walked out of the theater ahead of us, side by side. They were talking about their favorite scenes, poking fun at the absurd bits, and giving it an overall rating.

“We could sneak away now, and they wouldn’t notice a thing,” said Savannah.

“Maybe we didn’t need to do any planning after all.”

Still, we went ahead with the plan. Savannah was going to drive me to the guitar shop in Alvarado so that I could get a setup for my guitar. And since it would take a while, Hannah and Martin could stay back at the mall if they wanted to. But Savannah was going to come along, seeing how she was already driving me to Alvarado. That left Martin, who lied and said he didn’t care much to go to the music store, and a silent Hannah.

Hannah exchanged looks with Martin.

“Sure. I needed to get some groceries anyway. Are you okay with that, Martin?”

“I don’t mind,” said Martin. And he truly, really didn’t.

So Martin and Hannah walked to the grocery store from the parking lot, and we watched them until they were out of view.

“Was it this easy every time?” asked Savannah.

"Pretty much."

“Surely Hannah must have caught on some time, sensed that something was up, no?”

“My theory is that she did catch on—maybe even as early as right now—but she let it go on.”

Savannah smiled. “Because she likes Martin back?”

“That’d certainly be the answer Martin’s hoping for.” I turned to Savannah. “So, where to now for the two of us? The wharf?”

“Sure. But I wouldn’t mind stopping by the guitar store. I wasn’t lying when I said that I had never been in one. Might as well, right?”

So with a shrug from me in reply, Savannah drove us down Munras Avenue to Alvarado Street. We drove past the ice cream parlor, then the donut shop on the next block, and parked curbside in front of the store.

“It’s almost closing time, but I think we can get a look around,” I said.

“You don’t need your guitar set up?”

“That old thing? No. I probably won’t end up playing it.”

A mosaic of stringed instruments decorated the walls, electric and acoustic, new and old. Savannah looked around the walls, about as lost and struck with wonder as she was when she was reading the menu at the ice cream parlor.

“How good are you with the guitar?” she asked.

“Not very. Martin tried to teach me my senior year, but we never got too far.”

“Hey, maybe this time.”

“Maybe so.”

On one of the lower stands on the wall was an electric guitar. It was in Martin's favorite finish, three-tone sunburst, and I admired the woodgrain like Martin always would.

I took it from the stand and strummed the few chords I knew.

“Martin told me an interesting story once when we visited this place. About a man named Leo Fender—whose name happens to be right here.”

I pointed to the guitar's headstock.

“Martin said that he was one of the most influential people when it came to electric guitars. Bases, too. He said more than half the guitars in this store, or any guitar store, were

either of his design, inspired by it, or a copy of it. Anyways, the story goes that Leo Fender had a glass eye.”

“A glass eye?”

“Yeah. He lost his eye from a tumor when he was young, and got a glass eye to replace it. But having a glass eye—that made him ineligible for the draft in World War II. So some say that if it weren’t for that glass eye, guitars wouldn’t be what they are today, while others go as far as to say that modern music wouldn’t sound the same without it.”

“Mm,” mumbled Savannah, looking around at the wall of guitars again. “I like that story. I’m going to have to remember that one.”

“Yeah, Martin loved telling it too. Would talk about Leo Fender’s glass eye again and again when we’d come to this store.”

I put the guitar back on its stand.

“Well, should we head for the wharf?”

“Let’s,” said Savannah.

The store started preparing to close when we returned to our car. As we approached the wharf I opened the window a crack, and the salt and the roar of the sea crashed in through the slit in the form of a cool breeze. As always, the wharf was empty at night. She parked at our usual spot, on the line where the ocean met the beach. From there, we could watch the waves roll back and forth from the side.

“Hannah’s texted,” said Savannah. “She asked if we were done yet, but that we didn’t need to hurry. They’re getting ice cream.” Savannah looked up from her phone with a smile.

“Really? Nice, Martin.”

“I guess he’s been doing pretty well after all.”

"Tell me about it. I don't know what's making him do so well this time around. He's a shy guy, you know? Never been on a date. Never even asked out anyone."

"Same with Hannah. Never had a boyfriend."

"Yeah. Trying to get two shy people together. It's like trying to mate two hermit crabs."

Savannah laughed. "Hermit crabs. Well, at least they're doing well today."

"Yeah, better than ever."

"I've been meaning to ask. Do they ever get together? By the end of the year?"

"Your guess would be as good as mine. I never really got to see what ended up happening to them."

I looked down from the window to my hands in my lap, then looked up at her.

"I never got to graduate."

"I see." Turning soft and quiet and kind, she investigated no further. "Tell me how your day went."

"Well, it's been an ordinary day. Woke up, walked to Downtown Brooklyn and sat on the streets," I said, trying to revive a lighthearted tone in my voice. "Been thinking about making a sign."

"A sign?"

"Yeah, like the cardboard ones people on the streets have out."

"What are you going to write on it?"

"That's just the thing. I was thinking about what I would put on it. I've been studying other people's signs for inspiration."

"And what do they do?"

"Some people put their life story in a few sentences and it works out. But I don't know if I should do that, or if I even want to."

"What is your life story?" Savannah asked.

I leaned back and crossed my arms.

"Savannah."

"Yes?"

"Do you really believe me? About everything?"

"I do."

"I've been worried the past few days, thinking that you didn't believe me, or that you thought I was joking. The way you go on, business as usual. You're not playing along to what you think is some bizarre joke?"

"No."

"How?"

Savannah chuckled. "It looks like you're the one having a hard time believing."

I shook my head. "It's just that astonishing you would."

"You said that you've visited lots of memories of this wharf."

"Yes."

"And when you told all of those Savannahs, did any one of them seem like they were playing along to a joke?"

"No."

"Then that's the best proof I can give you," said Savannah with a light smile.

I sighed in disbelief and shook my head again. "How do you do it? Really believe me?"

Now the smile disappeared from Savannah's face, but a lonesome kindness remained. I felt ashamed, as if I had asked a question I shouldn't have.

"It requires a letting go," said Savannah. "I've been living sort of...floating away for a while now, having let go. I'm assuming you know how that feels?"

I thought about my parents. "I do."

"I find it's more peaceful that way. To let go, to surrender it all. I've been thinking about how random the world is, and it seemed like a lot of sense to live that way." Savannah paused. "Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"I do. Besides, nothing you can tell me will be as ridiculous as what I've told you."

"Well, I've been thinking about how... one person meets this person instead of another, and generations afterward, the world's got different people. Some cell decides to split, and there's Hannah and me instead of some complete stranger. Leo Fender, like you told me—he loses his eye, and music sounds different. Some kids have parents with three houses and go to a school next to a golf course, others go to that same school on financial aid, and out of nowhere there are kids that get beaten, abused by their parents. All in the same world.

"It just doesn't seem to make much sense to me, how much luck and coincidence are involved in everything. Feels like life shouldn't be that fragile, all a big dice roll. And it's not only like that in ways we can comprehend. How many particles had to bounce the right way, collide just the right amount, at just the right moment for you and I to be sitting here? It's a miracle. Everything is. And if all of those things are considered normal—Hannah and me, the kids, Leo Fender's glass eye—maybe you being a homeless time traveler isn't so strange after all. Not much stranger than the fact you and I are in this car on a wharf in Monterey, setting up dates

between your roommate and my sister. That's how I've decided to look at it, at least. To accept everything as a miracle, as a bunch of dice rolls."

"So are you saying that nothing really matters?"

"Well, I don't mean to say that nothing we do matters since it's all up the roll of the dice—I wouldn't be working two, three jobs if I thought so—but I've been trying to find an explanation for why the world seems to operate on so much luck, and so far that everything is odd and a miracle is what I've arrived at"

"And you're okay with that? That the world is like that?"

"Yes."

"Where do you get that sort of faith?"

"That's what I've been trying to figure out. But in the meantime, I've just been practicing letting go. Stop trying to make so much sense of it. And when I'm able to do that, there are glimpses of peace, a beam of light through a crack in the wall so I know I must be on the right path."

"So letting go has been working for you?"

"So far it has."

"I wish I could be at peace with letting go. To not struggle so much to make sense of everything, which I suppose is the same thing as worrying. I can see how there would be peace in that, but I don't know if I'll be able to get there. Where's the guarantee that everything will be alright? I think I try to make sense of everything and worry because I want some reassurance that things will be okay. To work it out. But when you let go, there's nothing to lean on, right?"

Savannah seemed to have an answer for this, or at the least a thought. She was rolling the question over in her mind, thoroughly and carefully steeping her words. You could see that this

was a question she had been asking herself. But before she could formulate an answer, her phone rang.

“Hannah?” I asked as she took her phone out of her pocket.

“No, it’s my grandma. I’ve got to take this—give me one moment.”

She stepped out of the car and walked to the end of the wharf to take the call. I looked away from her and ahead to the ocean as if to give her more privacy. Del Monte Beach stretched onward, waves rolling over the black sand. I focused on one spot on the beach, where there was a wad of washed-up seaweed, and watched the water travel through and around it. Every time the wave came by it would be a little different, making it a bit farther onto land or spreading out in a new pattern or having varying amounts of foam. What kind of dice roll makes each wave move their own way, I wondered.

Taking my gaze off of the beach, I noticed a piece of purple ribbon sticking out the edge of the glovebox. I opened the glovebox to see that it belonged to none other than Mr. Skeleton, who had the ribbon tied to his spine so that he could be hung on the car’s coat hooks. This time, it wasn’t just any limb that was missing from him, but his skull.

“Oh boy, Mr. Skeleton. I do wish you a speedy recovery,” I said.

I lifted him out of the glovebox to get a better look and ran my hands over the bump at the top of the spine where the skull would attach.

“How did you lose your head?”

Maybe it had been detached while he was in there. And it was when I was digging through the glove box, shuffling things out of the way with my hand, that I saw the small plastic packets with brown powder in them—just like the ones I used to stash for Sebastian.

So this is how the dice have decided to roll, I thought.

14

Address

I am not a complete stranger to the letting go that Savannah talked about. After I did my three years, I too, let go. I left my parent's home, though I doubt they wanted me there to begin with, and came out here to live my days dreaming. And since there was no reassurance to be found in that life, I gave up on trying to find any. The best I have been able to do is to try and stop thinking about it altogether, about the future, although I am afraid my subconscious still chips away at it every moment, sleeping or awake.

I took one of the small packets, clear and delicate and filled that sickly powder, and waited until Savannah returned. As she sat down, she noticed the opened glovebox and the little plastic bag in my palm.

"Did you get these from Sebastian?"

She did not answer right away. "Yes."

"Then this stuff will kill you," I said. "I would know, because it killed someone back when I used to stash it. Fentanyl overdose. They told me what I kept in my room probably killed a few more people, just that we didn't know about it."

"Know how we did it? You know that guitar in the trunk? One time during the second semester, Sebastian and I got partnered up for a physics lab. He comes over to my room and sees that guitar on my bed, disassembled and opened up. Martin heard a weird hum when he plugged it into the amp and was investigating it. Out of nowhere he proposes a deal. Still don't know what made him do that. A bad mistake, I guess, but then again the whole thing was. I don't think

he was a bad person. The people he got a cut from told him it was safe, and that's what he told me. Our fault we thought that was good enough. The guitar was disassembled on my bed because Martin had wanted to take it apart earlier. And he's looking at it, destinged and bare with its circuits exposed, and starts talking. Asks me if he can take the guitar down to shop. Know what his plan was? He was going to carve out the guitar, right behind where the pickguard fit. And he asked if I could stash what he was dealing in there. Stash it in the guitar, put on the pickguard, hang it on the wall. No one would notice. Not for free, of course. He'd come by when he needed to make a sale, and I'd get a cut. I made a bit of money off it, not that I ever did it for that. Doing it made me feel special and I liked that. I'm a senior in high school, but I have this side hustle that nobody could even imagine for me to have. I'd get a kick from watching people get surprised when I paid for their meal. I felt good, and it was just a thing I did. And once I had the rhythm of it down, it really was nothing.

I still have to say, not a bad idea, to stash it in a hollowed-out guitar. But that didn't matter when someone that Sebastian dealt to ended up overdosing. When they got to him he confessed. About everything, which included the guitar. I don't blame him for it. I got three years. Just got out earlier this year."

Savannah kept silent.

"Just had to be you. No point telling you to quit now, is there? Think Savannah will be okay? Out there?"

"I don't know."

I felt my insides sink, collapsing and crushing into themselves. I sighed and clenched my teeth. I almost slammed down on the glovebox with my fists.

"I'm sorry, Savannah." And with that I left the wharf and returned to New York.

In the morning I walked to the local library and searched for her name on the public computer. There were many Savannah Yangs, but none that I knew. I searched for her name along with Monterey. I tried her name, Monterey, and overdose; her name and heroin, her name and heroin and fentanyl and overdose and Monterey. There was nothing. At last I searched for Monterey and overdose deaths, and read the articles and news reports. I especially looked for ones dated after I had to leave Monterey. There were deaths. From shortly after all the way to the present. Some of them were specific, stating the names while the others were more vague, putting down a number instead. Thankfully I couldn't find Savannah's name among them, but one article was about an unnamed Salinas girl who had lost her life from an overdose. I tried to find out more, now searching for Salinas and overdose deaths, but didn't get much further.

Salinas. That's where Savannah lived. How many girls were there in Salinas? What were the chances? How many dice rolls?

There were many articles about overdose deaths, just in the small county of Monterey. Some were from before I was in high school. Some were from during, and some from after. One was about two boys that went to a local boarding school that had dealt out of their dorm rooms. I shut off the computer, walked far away from the library, and sat in an alley.

When I returned to New York after the three years, I found that all of my possessions were gone, gotten rid of. My room was repurposed, all my clothes save a few were most likely donated, and my phone was God knows where. If I still had my phone I would have tried to call Savannah. I figured I could visit Monterey in my sleep and find out her number from there. Then with the number, I could go to a payphone and try to reach her.

Then a thought. And like a man possessed and struck on the head, I rushed to sleep.

* * *

In the car. At the pier. After Savannah had left to talk to her grandmother. This time I did not touch the glovebox; I didn't even look at it. I listened to the murmurs of the radio, waiting for her to return.

"Sorry, she was checking up on me to see if I was okay. I told her Hannah and I'd be back soon. Now, where were we?"

"I was asking you a question about letting go. But actually, I just thought of another one I wanted to ask."

"Sure--shoot."

"Where do you see yourself in three, three and a half years?"

"Mm. Around three years? I haven't exactly told this to anyone, not even to Hannah, but honestly--still here."

"Still in Monterey, after three years?"

"Mhm. I don't see myself moving on. But I love the place, and my grandma's here, too."

"Hey, Savannah?"

"Yes?"

"What was your address again?"

15

California

I'm going to California. And I must get there, to Monterey. Even if it is the last thing I do. I need to know that she is okay.

Behind the front cover of my notebook, before the first page, I wrote her address and below it, her number. Plan A is to make my way to the address. And when I can't find her there, Plan B is to call her number. I guess the number is Plan B because I am too afraid to find out right away. But I figure that no matter what happens when I call the number, I'm going to Monterey. If I got no answer, just a disembodied voice telling me that it did not exist, I would be going to Monterey as a last resort. If she picked up, my God if she picked up—then I would be going to Monterey to see her. And if I had somehow found out that the worst had come true, that she was gone—well, I would still like to see Monterey one last time. So all roads lead to Monterey, and any delay seems unnecessary.

I scrambled to get my belongings as soon as I woke up. With the backpack slung in haste and the cardboard mattress folded the wrong way, I sprinted to the bus terminal where I often spent the daytime. I arrived at the reception desk six minutes later, out of breath.

“What's the most westward any of these buses will go?”

The receptionist behind the tinted glass raised an eyebrow. “West? Be more specific. We have buses to Seattle, Los Angeles, Portland—”

“California. I need to go to California. Are there any buses to San Francisco?”

The clerk sighed and beat her long nails against the keyboard. “We have one at 7 p.m. on the 15th, so tonight.”

“How much?”

“\$282”

That could take more than a month to save up. More than two months, if I was unlucky.

“Are there any other cheaper buses that still go west?”

“Again, you’re going to have to be more specific. I’m not going to sit here and list cities for you.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I just need a bus that’ll get me west.”

“You’re holding up the line.”

“I’m sorry—please. Would there be anything that would get me halfway?”

The receptionist must have realized that the quickest way to get rid of me was to help me find a destination. “Halfway. Sure. Indianapolis.”

“Indiana. Okay—how much would that be?”

“\$77. Can you afford that?”

\$77. That was more manageable. With some luck and I could maybe have that within two weeks.

“Not yet. But thank you, so, so much, ma’am.”

I left before the clerk could say another word. I was afraid it wasn't going to be very pleasant. And coming back from the bus terminal, I knew what to put on my sign.

I found a new piece of cardboard by a dumpster in an alleyway, about the length of my arm. With my ball-point pen, I wrote ‘Need a ticket to Indianapolis’ and under it ‘0 out of 77.’ The idea was that I would update the counter every day for how much I had saved up so far. 5 out of 77, 12 out of 77, 56 out of 77, and so on. I wrote over each letter multiple times to make them thicker. Still, it was hard to see and messy, and unfortunately the two flaws did not cancel each other out.

For the next few days, I set up shop at the terminal with my new sign and made slow progress. I even saw the same receptionist I had spoken to a few times. From how she would stare, I think she recognized me.

Whether out of pity or amusement from the sign, the commuters helped add to the counter. I was doing some extreme penny-pinching, but it was steady progress, and it was going well until about a week later when the security guards told me to leave.

During all that time, I had never been back to Monterey. One part of me feared seeing Savannah again, while another part said I didn’t deserve to go back. But a smaller, much more honest part of me knew it was all for show. I was going to start visiting again sooner or later. I was waiting out on an arbitrary timer before it felt acceptable to do so again.

I didn’t want Savannah to know that I knew about what was in the glovebox. I didn’t want to worry her. Savannah would believe any and everything I tell her, but telling her that the real Savannah may be dead—whatever ‘real’ may even mean to her—would be too much, even for her.

And so on the 9th day after I had started the counter, 49 out of 77, I prepared a repertoire, rehearsed it multiple times, and went back to the car, by the wharf, in Monterey.

* * *

“What do you need the address for?” asked Savannah.

“Well, I was thinking about what you said about preparing for the winter. And you’re right—it’s gonna get cold soon, and it won’t be pretty. I don’t have any winter clothes, and my tattered blanket won’t do. I could get new clothes and a thicker blanket by the time the cold really strikes, but even then it won’t be foolproof. I thought maybe it was time I looked into shelters, but that’s not a permanent solution, and a difficult one too. Then I had an idea. A crazy one, but it might just work.”

“Go on.”

“If cold weather’s the problem, I just have to be where it won’t be so cold.”

“Sound logic.”

“Hawaii’s not exactly walking distance.”

Savannah smiled. “Yes, I’ve always found that to be a shame.”

“Don’t even know where my passport is.”

“I’m not sure I know where mine is, either. I’ve never been on a flight,” said Savannah.

“So, Hawaii’s out. What other options are you considering?”

“I hear Florida’s nice in the winter, but I also hear that it’s not uncommon to see gators strolling the streets, which isn’t exactly good news to anyone who has to live there. But then I thought of another place where the weather’s all right year-round, a place that I’m already well acquainted with. ”

Savannah’s eyes grew big, and she leaned in. “Are you really? All the way to Monterey?” I don’t think I’ve ever heard that much excitement in her voice before, or any excitement, for that matter.

“I already visit here every night. What’s one more visit?”

Savannah leaned back, and her jaw dropped as she laughed in disbelief. “How are you going to do it?”

“There’s a bus to Indianapolis. \$77. I’ve been saving up for it. I tried to get one for San Francisco to get to California right away, but it cost too much. I’d rather be moving, you know? The cold will creep up on me soon. I’ve already got \$49 so far.”

“I hope you’re not starving yourself trying to save money.”

“I’m not,” I lied.

“You’re really doing this? You’re sure?”

“I’ve got nothing better to do,” I said, being honest this time. “And visiting my friend Savannah sounds like something that’s good to do.”

“You’re going to come see me?”

“Yes. Wouldn’t have asked for your address otherwise.”

“You’re really coming to see me?” Being careful not to let excitement overcome her, she quickly swapped it with worry. “It’s going to be a long trip. A difficult one too.”

“Do you think that it might be a bad idea?”

“I think it’s a great idea. It’s the best plan I’ve heard of all year.”

“I’m glad you think so. If I can do it, it may be the best thing I’ve done this year—no, in years.”

Savannah nodded. “So, how long were you gone for?”

“Gone where?”

“From this conversation. You left in the middle of it to New York and came back, right?”

“You could tell?”

“Wouldn’t take a detective to tell. One moment we’re talking about letting go, and all of a sudden you’re asking me for my address. And Indiana or the \$77 or this great plan of yours, you haven’t mentioned any of it before. If I had to guess, I would say you left while I was calling Gram. Perfect time for it. So, how long were you gone? I’m curious.”

“Around a week,” I said.

“How’s your week been?”

She thought the progress bar on my sign was a good idea and stamped her approval of it with a laugh. Eventually we decided that it was time to pick up the lovebirds, and called them. When we drove along the beach looking for the two, we were glad to see them deep in conversation and standing so close to each other. Autumn nights on the beaches of Monterey can get chilly but not freezing. It is enough to give you goosebumps but nothing more, and it does wonders for love.

As Martin and Hannah climbed into the car, there were no complaints along the lines of “Where have you guys been?” or “We were waiting for so long.” They were quiet, but Martin’s big smile and his hop-like gait told me that he had a lot to say once we were back.

“So, how did it go?” I asked as soon as Martin’s door shut behind us in his room.

Martin turned around, doing a little dance in place. “We were at the beach.”

“Yes.” I sat on his bed and Martin on his swivel chair.

“And I gave her the blanket for her to use since it would be weird for us to share it.”

“You ended up sharing the blanket with her?”

Martin stopped smiling, suddenly feeling jealous at this supposed version of himself that got to share a blanket with Hannah at the beach. “Well, no—maybe next time. But we’re talking, she’s laughing at my jokes, and we’re making fun of each other.”

“So far so good.”

“And I teased her about something—I don’t even remember what—and she punched me on the shoulder for it. So I’m retaliating, shoving her shoulder a little, we’re going back and forth, and then—I put my arm around her.”

I raised my eyebrows. “You did that?”

Martin could barely contain his smile. Actually, that’s a lie, because he didn’t contain it at all. He didn’t even try and he had the biggest grin I had ever seen, beat perhaps only by one of Rachel’s. “But that’s not even the best part. I put my arm around her, and she leans in. And we just sat there, my arm around her and her head on my shoulders, staring at the beach. I don’t know how long we were like that, but time seemed to slow down for a moment there, and I really appreciated that.”

Martin sighed, jealous now at a past version of himself.

“Eventually she sat up, but afterward we were sorta quiet for a while. Like something significant had happened and we both knew it. That’s progress, right?”

“If that’s not progress, I don’t know what is.”

“But you know, some girls, just because they lean on you doesn’t mean they’re into you,” said Martin.

“I know, and the world is so much more confusing because of them.” I laughed and shook my head. “I guess it really can be a friendly gesture. Maybe it’s just that I don’t have the guts to do it.”

“I don’t have the guts to lean on Hannah,” said Martin.

“Yes, but you like her. And you had the guts to put your arm around her.”

“What if Hannah thinks of it as just a friendly gesture? Leaning on my shoulder, I mean.”

“I don’t think so. I mean, nighttime at the beach, just the two of you, her in your arms—sounds like it was romantic.”

“I sure hope so.” Martin leaned back on his chair, eyes closed, and sighed contentedly as if reliving tonight from the beginning. “I want to take her somewhere fancy. What do you think of Carmel for the next time we hang out?”

“You still want Savannah and I to come with?” I said, lying down on his bed but not using his pillow.

“Yeah—I still think it would be a little awkward if it was just the two of us. Besides, you two coming along has had good results so far.” Martin suddenly sprang up in his chair, looking alert. “Unless you don’t want to come—”

“No, no. I want to go. It’s a good time. I was just making sure if you and Hannah wanted to be alone or not,” I said. “I’m still going to have to schedule with Savannah, aren’t I?”

“Well...” Martin shrugged my way, saying “Y’know,” “I’d certainly prefer it if you did,” and “Thanks, man” all in one motion.

“I’ll talk to her. But if you’re taking her to fancy restaurants in Carmel, you might as well ask her out. When’s that going to be, anyway?”

“I’m going to need more time.” Martin smiled mischievously. “Want to make a bet? I bet I’ll ask her out before you ask Rachel Marigold.”

“You already lost the last one about me and breakfast, but sure. You’re on.”

Martin put his chin on one palm and sighed. “I hope she’ll say yes.” He was probably thinking through all the possibilities of what would happen when he finally asked her out.

“Me too,” I muttered.

The yellow glow of Martin's desk lamp stretched against the corners of his room. Following the faint, dying edges of the light against the whitewashed walls to its source revealed Martin's face, with a smile as bright and warm as the light. And as far as I knew, he had no versions of Martin to be jealous of.

16

Tidepools

The next week in Monterey went quickly, much quicker than the progress on my sign or the week in New York. Every morning I walk to the cafeteria to have breakfast with Rachel. Sometimes as I pass the amphitheater I'll see her in the distance, and we'll wave at each other before joining up to walk together.

On these mornings the grass glitters with dew, and by this time all the deer have gone home. As if they have just woken up as well, the crows squawk in irregular and awkward rhythms. On some days the mystical fog, a few tints darker than the color of the stone paths, envelopes the campus, and the fog combined with the uneven cry of crows makes the short walk quite lonesome. Then the cafeteria, glowing yellow, becomes more of a lighthouse, and the smell of grease and the clashing of dishes and the low chirps of morning chatter as you open its doors is most welcome.

Rachel and I usually stay in the cafeteria until five minutes before the start of class. If the first period is not Short Stories or Econ, we'll walk together as far as our paths will overlap and bid a quick farewell. After the morning classes it is time for assembly at the amphitheater, and on the days without it time for the essential act of aimlessly chatting with Martin and Gordon in our rooms until the next period. During lunch I watch with fascination as Martin becomes a better conversationalist day by day, and talk to Savannah about the progress on my ticket to Indianapolis when Hannah and Martin leave to put away their dishes. Then it's more classes in

the afternoon, mountain biking after school, dinner, study hall, and then spending time in Martin's room until we are the likely last ones awake on campus. In that pattern the days roll on—breakfast, classes, assembly, lunch, classes, biking, study hall, and sleep.

The highlight of the week was when Ms. Jamieson piled up the Short Stories class onto the old school van, the same one Mr. Phillip drove on our trips to Fort Ord, and went to the beach. She drove down the concrete path—past the golf links, past the secret spot before the bend, onto 17-Mile Drive, and past Seal Rock and Bird Rock, to get China Rock (17-Mile Drive had many rocks; people loved naming them). I always imagined China Rock was called that because you'd end up in China if you went in a straight line across the Pacific the way the rock pointed. In reality, I've been told that it got its namesake because there used to be a small fishing village of Chinese immigrants back in the 19th century. No traces of such a village remain and it's hard to imagine there ever being one, although some claim you can still see the cooking smoke from back then stained on the rocks.

The shore around China Rock was more rock than sand. It got rockier the closer you got to the ocean. The stones also got darker—they went from white and sandy to gray, then black with no sand near the waters. Our assignment on the beach was to write as stream-of-consciousness as possible. Words, phrases, the five senses—maybe even a personal anecdote. Whatever came to mind among the birds, seals, waves, and winds.

In one of the chapters of *Cannery Row*, chapter six, there is a passage on the tidepools of the Monterey Peninsula. And like many other things in Monterey, Steinbeck describes them better than anyone else can. For my assignment I did my best to depict the tidepools, and I thought about sharing it with you, but I think it would be better for both of us if you went and read the chapter instead. All I can add is that there are tiny pebbles near the crevices of the

tidepools, and that you can spend a good amount of time entertaining yourself by dropping the little stones into the mouths of orange anemones below. The entire anemone slowly constricts and collapses around where the pebble falls, and it is like watching the water ripple but in reverse.

Rachel and I squatted over one such tidepool, where the water was clearer than freshly cleaned windows.

“What did you write about?” asked Rachel.

“About the tidepools. You?”

“About the sunrise. Gwen and I wake up really early to go down to the shore to watch it sometimes. Not all the way here, but on the beach near Seal Rock. It’s very pretty.”

“I wouldn’t expect it to be anything but,” I said.

I picked up a small pebble and dropped it over an anemone.

“Already Friday,” I said. “Want to go to the mall tonight?”

Rachel looked up from the pool where the anemone had snatched the pebble. “Oh, I already made plans to go there with Gwen tonight,” she said. “But I would love to anytime this weekend, if you can.”

“Sure. Saturday work for you? There’s a seafood deli at Alvarado Martin and I go to often. We could go there.”

“Saturday sounds good. I know the deli—Gwen and I go there often too.”

“Perfect. Saturday it is.”

Rachel dropped down a pebble herself and tilted her head side to side as she watched it sink. “Perfect.”

She and I sat around the pool a while longer, plopping pebbles into the pool, until Ms. Jamieson called everyone over and it was time to go home.

After Short Stories was my last class of the day. I was about to message Savannah about weekend plans on my way back from class when I saw her coming out of the library entrance.

“Savannah!” I called out and ran over to her. “Hey.”

She shook her head with a grin. “Wrong Savannah.”

“Oh—Hannah. Sorry.”

She shrugged. “Hey, you're not the first, and certainly won't be the last. Maybe I should get glasses. Maybe then people will stop confusing us. Anyway,” said Hannah, motioning to the library door, “there's the Savannah you're looking for.”

“Did it happen again?” Savannah asked.

“Yep. I guess that's three total this week.”

Hannah still had one more class, but Savannah was done for the day like I was. We walked to the cafeteria, where Savannah grabbed fruit for her grandmother.

“So, another date for Martin and Hannah?”

“Precisely. How does a brunch at Carmel sound?”

“Carmel?”

“Yeah, Martin wanted to take her somewhere fancier this time.”

“Mm. We could do that, I suppose. What time?”

“Does Sunday work?” I asked. “I've already got something Saturday.”

“I can't do Sunday brunch, but I could make it work if you two are okay with a late lunch instead of a brunch.”

“That works—we’ll be eating the same thing anyway, I think,” I said. “What’re you going to do now?”

“I’m going back to the library to wait for Hannah. Are you done with your classes as well?”

“I am. Mind if I join you there? Think I’ll get a head start on work. It’s looking to be a pretty busy weekend.”

“Not at all,” said Savannah. “Think I’ll do just the same.”

The next morning began where Friday ended: in the library, as with all other weekend mornings since my return to Monterey. After finishing *Cannery Row*, I read *Of Mice and Men* and *Tortilla Flat*. The last one I enjoyed a lot because it was set in Monterey and I hadn’t read it before. I wanted to read something longer after three novellas in a row, so I am currently making my way through *Grapes of Wrath*.

I must have read every piece of Steinbeck the library at the penitentiary had. Two, three times over, cover-to-cover, back-to-back, for every single one of them. I was lucky that the library was maintained well. When I first got there I had never read any of his books, let alone read much at all. But I knew that Steinbeck was a writer from Monterey and that he wrote a book called *Cannery Row*, so that’s where I started. Instantly I took a liking to it. In his books were the places I loved and was loved—Alvarado Street, Del Monte Beach, Carmel—the places I’ve been telling you about. Often I would realize that I had been to exactly where he was writing about, and those were my favorite parts of the books.

It seemed to me that he loved Monterey as much as I did. Actually, more than I did. So many of his books were set in Monterey, and that was very comforting for me. If one of the greatest American writers loved Monterey so much that he made it a central part of his work,

writing about it again and again, maybe it wasn't so strange that I couldn't move on from it. Maybe Monterey was just that beautiful.

I scavenged for every last one of his books I could find after the first time I read *Cannery Row*, whether they were set in Monterey or not. I started reading books from other authors too, not because I was tired of Steinbeck but because I wanted to save them for later. I would save up the books set in Monterey even amongst all the other Steinbecks. I remember delaying reading *East of Eden* as much as I could. I did it because I read that it was a story set in Salinas spanning generations, and it seemed the most Monterey-centric novel out of them all. The delay was very much worth it, and I'd say that it is my favorite book. So that was the next three years for me—alternating between books by Steinbeck and other authors—reading, re-reading, and reading again.

And now here I was, back to reading Steinbeck in a library. I'm excited to see how many of his works I hadn't previously read are in the school library since the collection seems bigger. After two hours in the library I picked out another book, one of Hemingway's, and walked to the pool to meet up with Rachel.

Rachel and I sat at a small table for two in the corner of the deli. It was diagonally across from the big table in the middle where Savannah, Hannah, Martin, and I had sat last time. We shared a plate of sushi and I ordered a rice bowl, a move which Rachel copied after indecisively hovering over the menu for some time.

"You said you and Gwen come here often?"

"Yeah. And you said you came here with Martin a lot, right?"

"Mhm. Had dinner with him, Savannah, and Hannah not too long ago," I said.

“I see the four of you together a lot these days. I never realized you guys were so close.”

“We actually only got closer this year.”

“Really? How did that happen?” Rachel asked.

I took a sip of green tea. I thought about it as I drank it, and when I put it down I smirked.

“Can you keep a secret?”

Rachel's eyes brightened and she leaned in. “I take them pretty seriously, so yeah. Is this something that would be okay for me to hear?”

“Yeah, I think so. It's nothing serious. More of a funny thing.”

“What is it?”

“It's Martin. He really likes Hannah Yang. Got it pretty bad for her. She seems to be all he can talk about. But he's a very shy guy, you know? It's easy for him to talk about her—not so much to her. Too shy to ask her if she wants to do anything. So he's got me asking her sister Savannah if the four of us want to hang out. Says he feels more comfortable if it's the four of us before he can get closer to Hannah.”

“So you're there to wingman for Martin?” asked Rachel.

“Pretty much. I've been having a lot of fun doing it.”

“Does Savannah know about how Martin feels?”

“Oh yeah. She's not only in on the whole thing but an avid supporter. She thinks that Martin would be good for Hannah.”

“So she's there to wingwoman for Hannah.”

“Her and Martin. Martin's been getting a lot of help, and God knows he needs it, you know?”

Rachel laughed. “That sounds really fun. Like a secret operation. How’s it been going so far?”

“Good progress. Last time we were here, they went down to the beach after dinner, and Martin told me that Hannah leaned on his shoulders and he had her arms around her.”

“Oh, good progress indeed. Go Martin.”

“Promise you won’t tell anyone about Martin and Hannah?”

“Never. To nobody. Not even to Gwen.”

“I’ll keep you to your word, Rachel Marigold.” I looked around the table to see all of the plates empty. “Now then, on to the next order of business. Ice cream?”

After dance-walking her way from the deli to the creamery, Rachel’s rhythm came to a steady beat as she tilted her head left and right like a metronome in front of the ice cream display.

“What-to-get...Any suggestions, Sam Hanely?”

“Aren’t you a pretty big fan of the cilantro?”

“I am. How’d you know?”

“You seem like a cilantro sort of girl.”

“Well, Sam Hanely, I am. Not many people understand it, but I like the flavor.” She pouted over the display, her chin pruning. She peered into the glass and stared at the speckled light green mass that was the cilantro. “But I also feel like a honeycomb girl right now. But that only comes with the vanilla.”

“We could ask to put the honeycomb on top of the cilantro.”

She turned to me. “You can do that?”

“We can try. The honeycomb’s just a topping, right?” I spoke to the man behind the counter. “Sir, is it possible to get the cilantro flavor but with the honeycomb on top? We’re feeling a bit adventurous today.”

The bright-eyed clerk was enthusiastic and almost seemed to be more excited than we were about our endeavor. “Sure—why not?”

I turned to Rachel. “Shall we?”

She had a child’s grin on her face. “Why not?” she said, mimicking the clerk.

“Well sir, we’ll have two scoops of the cilantro, each with a honeycomb on top.”

Rachel took out her wallet as the clerk went to prepare the amalgamation. “This one’s on me since I’m the reason we’re doing this.” She laughed. “I’d say that it’s my treat, but I’m not so sure if this will be one.”

The clerk brought up what looked like two grassy hills with the sun coming up over them. It was the worst, but the most fun scoop of ice cream I have ever had.

After the ice cream, we walked to the end of Alvarado Street and onto Munras Avenue to wait for the school bus.

“That was so fun,” said Rachel. “We should do this more often. You know there’s a farmer’s market here every Tuesday?”

“It sounds like we’re going to have to go, then,” I said.

Carmel-by-the-Sea

Carmel-by-the-Sea is a city of hobbies. A sense of carelessness that only originates from hobbies envelopes the place, and there is no air of desperation to be breathed anywhere. Everyone you come across on the streets is either young and a tourist or old and a retiree. Sometimes when you call a cab, a car that costs as much as a house elsewhere will come to pick you up. When you ask the drivers why they're running a cab, they explain they're doing it as a hobby because they love driving their cars. If they're going to be driving anyways, why not make some money doing it? That is what they all say, though you never need to ask because they are in a hurry to tell you as soon as you get in their car. Even some shopkeepers seem to be running their businesses as a hobby. There is a shop that sells exclusively cowboy-related goods; another that only sells Christmas decorations year-round. Little office-like art galleries snuck in along the streets are run by the artists themselves, and they have enough spare time in their hearts to let a bunch of high schoolers browse their work, knowing they cannot buy anything. One moderately sized watch shop with not-so-moderately priced watches is run as a business and not a hobby, but that is only because the Swiss horologist that owns it has turned his love of watches into his profession. He loves watches more than selling them, you can tell. But you don't need to look around at all that to realize the laxness of the place—just examine yourself, and you would realize that you only spent time in Carmel when it was free.

You can have a great time in Carmel by laughing at its prices. For a chuckle go into the gift shops and read the price tags on the handmade goods. For a proper laugh go to the restaurants or the art galleries, and for a real knee-slapper look up how much the houses cost. I once saw a set of two stone coasters for sixty dollars, and to this day I wonder if they have been sold.

Some people laughed at these things light-heartedly, while others thought it was pretentious and hated Carmel for it. Whichever it was, I think it all came from a small piece of envy. How could anyone help? It was a beautiful pastel city with fairytale houses on rolling hills, and not just that but one that was by-the-sea.

The school bus would drop off at the top of a hill next to a small church. From the church it was a straight line down Ocean Avenue to the beach. Across the street from the church, there was a ramen place that was cash-only. People joked that it was a money-laundering operation, but if it was, that it probably made more from its noodles than from crime. On a left turn before going into the next block, snuck away in an alley, was Carmel's best-kept secret—a small Chinese restaurant, with the secret being that it was an affordable place to eat in Carmel. They served messy plates stacked high with chow mein, egg rolls, pork, beef, dumplings, and steam buns, and there would be so much food that no boundary existed between where one dish ended and the other began. The plate was one great wall of a meal, and the restaurant may be the only place in Carmel that leaves both your stomach and your wallet full.

Two blocks down Ocean Avenue, if you didn't turn left, was a bakery. Outside the store was a big window with the cookies, cakes, and pastries put out. The showcase was like those of the many jewelry stores of Carmel, except that everything on display was quite delicious. On one of the bakery's walls hung a quote by John Steinbeck. It read: "If Carmel's founders should

return, they could not afford to live here, but it wouldn't go that far. They would be instantly picked up as suspicious characters and deported over the city line.” And right across from the quote, they sold ice cream that cost as much as a lunch (assuming of course, that the meal was not had in Carmel).

It was seven more blocks down Ocean Avenue to get to Carmel Beach. If you got an ice cream cone from the bakery, you would finish it just as you arrived on the beach, which is what I often did. A big sandy hill led the way down to the beach, and the beach was—wide. “Wide” is an odd word to describe a beach, but in the case of Carmel Beach, it is the perfect word. To the left and the right the shore bends, and unlike the mythical curve of the horizon, it is easy to see—so much so that if you had a map of the Monterey Peninsula, you would be able to point out the curves. Carmel beach is so wide that it would be pointless to take pictures of it unless they were panoramas.

This walk on Ocean Avenue to Carmel Beach is in my mind, one of the best things you can do in Carmel. If ever you meet someone you love very much, take them on this route down Ocean Avenue, stopping for lunch and a dessert, laughing at the absurd prices on the way to the beach.

Sav and I drove around and parked under some cypress trees while Martin and Hannah went for a walk along the beach. For the four of us to separate into pairs of two after the meal was a natural routine by now, and plans or explanations or excuses were no longer necessary.

“How goes the ticket?” asked Savannah.

“The goal’s met. I’m getting the ticket tomorrow.”

“Really? Then it’s off to Indiana?”

“Off to Indianapolis, Indiana.”

Savannah laughed the way people do when they couldn't believe something good. "How long's the ride?"

"Not sure yet, other than that it will be a long one. Around twenty hours, maybe."

"Twenty hours. That is a long ride," said Savannah. "Will they give you something to eat on the bus?"

"Probably not. But it doesn't matter. I'm going to be sleeping through most of it."

"Mm. Right. In that case I hope you'll be able to sleep okay."

"No worries there. I think the seat's going to be more comfortable than what I usually sleep in, actually."

Savannah nodded. "So, Indiana. That's almost one-third of the way across the country. Have you been thinking about what you're going to do once you get to Monterey?"

"Like I said, I'm going to go visit you."

"You're serious?"

"Dead serious." I paused for a second. "Do you think that Savannah wouldn't welcome it?"

"Quite the opposite. I think Savannah would be looking forward to seeing you again."

"You really think so?"

"Perhaps I shouldn't be speaking for others," she shrugged, "but Savannah—I like to think I know her pretty well, and I think she would be."

"You've got to remember that you and I—Savannah and I—weren't as close as you and I back in senior year."

"We weren't strangers junior year. And besides, you and Savannah still planned out dates for Martin and Hannah, right?"

“We did.”

“Then I’m sure she had a lot of fun doing that, and it’s something she looks back at fondly. She’ll like a surprise visit from someone back then. I’m very excited for her that you’re going to visit her. It’s very nice of you to do so.”

“I don’t know about nice.”

“I think it is. And you know what I think would be great for the two of you to do? Go visiting the places you two took Martin and Hannah—Alvarado, the mall, Carmel—if those were the places you went with her, that is.”

“Think she’ll like that? She might not even remember going there.”

“She’ll remember. That I can guarantee. You know, I’m almost starting to envy her. All that sounds like a great time.”

Savannah looked out to the cypress trees outside, which were swaying gently in the breeze, then looked back. “When are you leaving?”

“Leaving as in leaving the dream?”

“Mhm. You’ve got to go get that ticket.”

“There’s plenty of time for that.”

People moved about slowly outside, absorbing as much of the Carmel sun as possible. Their voices were muffled and I couldn’t hear what they were saying—only if they were talking or laughing.

“Sav?”

“Mm?”

“Can you always tell when I leave?”

“I think it’s more that I can tell when you’ve come back after a while rather than knowing the pinpoint moment.”

“So you don’t feel anything when I leave? Nothing happens?”

“Not that I’m aware of, no.”

“That’s... good.”

“Were you worried that it was going to be the end of the world for me whenever you left? That the world would go pitch black?”

“Something along those lines, yeah.”

“It makes sense that it would. If this is your dream and you wake up, I suppose this world is over. That or it’s suspended until the next time you visit.”

“That doesn’t scare you at all?” I debated whether or not I should go on. “That whenever I leave, you might be in some sort of purgatory?”

“What’s it matter to me? Life goes on. Soon we’ll go pick up Martin and Hannah, then say goodbye. After that I’ll drive home with Hannah, we’ll make dinner, and I’ll go to work. The next morning I’ll cook something for Gram, drive to the school, and have breakfast before class. Then at lunch I’ll see you again and we’ll plan the next date for Martin and Hannah. Before we know it we’ll be in this car again, and soon it’ll be time for you to leave.”

“I guess that’s one way to look at it. Honestly? I don’t think I’d be as comfortable as you are with this situation.”

Savannah shrugged. “It’s easier the more you’ve let go. Glass eye. You’re a time traveler. What’s one more thing on top of that? Besides, I’ve got enough on my plate as it is. I’m working two jobs. I got school to keep up with. I need to figure out how to get a scholarship for college. I’ve got to be there for Gram, and Hannah too.”

“Are you doing okay?”

“I am. Managing well enough.”

“Well, talk to me about it. It’s only fair for me to listen to you after all the listening you’ve done.”

“There’s not much to talk about. Like I said, I’m letting go and I think things will all be okay.”

“You’re not worried that things won’t be?”

“That’s the whole point of letting go. So that I don’t have to worry about whether or not it will be.”

“But how can you trust that things will be okay?”

“As always, that’s what I’ve been trying to figure out. That’s why I think that things will be alright instead of knowing that they will be. Anyway, I’m doing alright. You’ve got enough on your plate—I’ve got enough on mine. I’m managing. Working through it. So you go do that too.” Savannah clapped her hands together softly. “Now, go get that ticket. Savannah’s waiting.”

On colder nights, the weather in Del Monte Forest got so that it was nice to light the fireplace in the common room but not necessary—for heat, that is. For the sake of friendship and comfort and an excuse to toast marshmallows, it was absolutely essential. So every dorm had a red brick fireplace in the common room, and benefited from it.

On Thursday night I was on duty, toasting marshmallows and wishing that my chair was a rocking chair when Martin came out from his room.

“Done with homework?” I asked in a low voice.

Martin dragged over a chair from the middle of the room and sat down. “No, just got tired of work. You making s’mores?”

“Mhm.” I handed him the packet of marshmallows on my lap.

He reached behind to get a bag of wooden skewers and started toasting a marshmallow on the fire. “You know why it’s called s’mores?”

“Why is that?”

“It’s ‘cause you always want some more.”

“Hah. Maybe try that one on Hannah. She might like it.”

“It’s true, look it up. And also, Hannah’s the one that told me about it in the first place.”

“I see that you’ve been talking to her.”

“Of course—it’s not like the two of us become suspended in time when you’re not around. We talk on our own quite often now. Although I guess I have you to thank for that.” He spun his skewer in the fire, smiling like a fool, but a good fool. “We’ve been talking even more recently. She messages me a lot.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, putting the bag of graham crackers and chocolates between us. “Now take that marshmallow out—you’re supposed to toast it, not roast.”

The surface of the marshmallow was browned over and delicate as if it were a golden eggshell. The insides were all melted to perfection, consistent and sugary and gooey. We took it off of the skewers, put them on some graham crackers, and topped it off with a piece of chocolate. We inserted the chocolate in the center of the marshmallow as if it were a chip, and the skin of the marshmallow tore and submerged the chocolate like lava. Finally we shut the sandwich closed with another cracker, creating an airtight seal of sweetness. We offered one to Ms. Jamieson over at the table in the corner. She waved her hands in the air, saying “Oh, I’ve got

to watch my calories,” and “It’s too much sugar too late in the night,” only for her to take one anyway.

“You ever been to Indiana?” I asked Martin.

“Indiana? No—why?”

“Just wondering what it’d be like over there.”

“Your family going over there for Thanksgiving?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t think I’m going back to my family for Thanksgiving. I was just wondering.”

“It’s mostly cornfields, right?” Martin put another skewer on the fire. “Think we could roast corn in this fire?”

“I don’t know how Ms. Jamieson would like that. Might make for a good dorm event, though. The whole dorm roasting some corn in the fireplace.”

“That sounds fun.”

I chuckled. “You going back home for Thanksgiving?”

“I am. Hey, if you’re not going back home, want to stay at my place?”

“Really?”

“I’ll have to ask my parents, but I think they’d say yes. We don’t really fly out to see anyone on Thanksgiving. It’s mostly just us. We’ve got a spare guest bedroom.”

“I’d love to stay at your place if I can. Would you ask them for me?”

“Of course.”

“Let me know what they say. Thanksgiving at your place sounds like it would be an incredible time.” I looked at the clock above the table in the corner. “I’ve got to do rounds. You want to head up?”

After the rounds I returned to my seat at the table in the corner. Ms. Jamieson was working on her laptop, but put it aside when I sat down.

“How is everyone?” Ms. Jamieson asked.

“Lots of busy people today. They’re all looking forward to Thanksgiving break to save them.”

“Aren’t we all. Are a lot of folks heading back home?”

“Most of them are.”

“What about you? Are you going back to New York?”

“I don’t think so. I might be able to stay with Martin. We were just talking about it a bit ago in front of the fireplace.”

“I see. Is that what you usually do for Thanksgiving?”

“No, it’ll be my first time. I’m really looking forward to it, though.”

“Where did you go last time?”

“Last time...last time I went back to New York.”

“Must have been nice to be back home.”

“It was okay. I mostly worked on college applications.”

“You were working on college applications in the fall of junior year? Talk about a head start.”

“Uh–yeah.” I scratched my head. “I guess I was getting an early start. What are we doing next in Short Stories? I really loved the trip to the beach.”

“Oh, we’ve got a pretty big project coming up. One I’m very excited for.”

“It’s the–the ‘short-short’ stories, right?”

“Yes it is. How did you know?”

“I think I heard it from someone who took the class last year.”

“I see. Well, we’ve got some practice putting words down on the page, so now we’re going to try our hand at telling a story. One that isn’t too long—one that’s even shorter than a short story, hence the name.”

“How many words?”

“Around 1500 is where I see most students write. After we’re done writing them, we’re going to share our work with everyone in the class and have a workshop session. Few things are as embarrassing as showing others what you wrote, but I’m hoping everyone in the class is used to sharing their work by now.”

“Looking forward to it,” I said. “I better get to brainstorming what I want to write about.”

“Got to get that head start, huh?”

18

Stories

Love is most often given the color red. It is commonly described as a vigorous, dynamic, and a hot thing. But maybe it could be described as the exact opposite and still be accurate. Love, good love, is exciting and hot but calm and cool. It is the temperature of a warm cup of tea that won't burn your tongue but instead leave a strong warmth down your throat. It is the color of undisturbed snow, or even a boring beige. A red-hot love is a reaction, a combustion; it burns bright and consumes. A beige love is lukewarm to the touch; it restores and gives rest. It is something on the shoulders of which you can rest on. A cool, beige-colored love we can heat up by squeezing it tight between our palms, and it will keep us warm. So I like the love that is beige. It is much better than a red hot love that can't cool down, that doesn't know how to cool down.

Rachel was very good to me. Though we were very young, both eighteen, she gave me that kind of love. The type to retire to, to relax in. The type that at times will lower your heart rate instead. I looked forward to the mundane with her. Running errands was fun if it was with her. She was my favorite person to go grocery shopping with. I think this is what people mean when they tell you to marry your best friend. To marry someone you share that beige-colored love with.

The story of how we first got together is either romantic or careless. I wonder what you'd think of it. It happened earlier on in the year and a lot faster overall. We spent time together like we have been so far. The breakfasts, the study halls in the library, the weekend outings—they

were all things I had done with her originally. It's very rare for two people to start liking each other at the same time, and even rarer for both of them to know their feelings about each other without talking about it. Then the time they spend before they get together is almost a formality, and when people ask how long they have been with each other, they cannot give an exact number or a date. That was the case for Rachel and me.

We would go on these night walks a lot. After study hall or on weekends after a night out. We would always meet in front of the swimming pool. From there we'd either go past the gym and disappear into the forests and the golf links or to the edge of campus to the classrooms, because if golf links and classrooms had anything in common, it was that they were both empty at night. And we'd just walk, not holding hands but knowing there would be no surprise if one of us took the other's hand. And we'd just talk, about friends and school and college and sometimes family. Me about whatever exploits Martin, Gordon, and I were up to, and her about Gwen and her beloved RA group. Night walks were like that, around the campus. Miraculously almost never running into other couples but being very embarrassed for some reason when we did.

And on one of those night walks, we went past the gym and into the woods.

And when we came out, we were together.

And I'd like things to be different this time.

From New York to Pennsylvania, then through Ohio, and finally Indiana. Indianapolis has been nice, though it certainly has fewer people than New York. Progress on my next ticket has been slower as a result. I started thinking it would have been better to save up a little more to get to a bigger city like Chicago, but seeing how I had enough hindsight for two lifetimes, I decided not to dwell on it.

The short-short stories assignment has been keeping me busy back in Monterey. At first I thought I would rewrite the story I had written originally. But regardless of where the student code of conduct stood on plagiarism and time travel, it didn't feel right. The original story was about two high schoolers who would sneak out at midnight to play music around their small seaside town. They would go out, play shows throughout the night, then assume their normal lives during the day, with their friends and family being none the wiser. I wrote it after Martin and I went to an open mic in Pacific Grove after an invitation from Savannah. It was in a cafe that felt more like a bar, full of people that Martin and I weren't too comfortable around. There was nothing wrong with them—they were just the sort of people we had never talked to before. A couple people from our school were there, but Sav and Hannah were the only ones we were friends with. Come to think of it, Sebastian was there too. Although I couldn't understand what half of the songs were about, I still enjoyed it, even if I was relieved when it was time to go. It was fascinating, that cafe. As if a separate world of oddities existed only for those two hours every Saturday night. I guess that's what I wanted to do back in high school. To sneak out of campus to play music at cafes like that, without anyone knowing about it but wishing they would. But that wasn't the story I wanted to write anymore.

I don't remember what Martin's story was about, but I remember Rachel's clearly. It was a story written from the perspective of an unnamed girl in middle school. The girl likes this boy in her class—not the most popular, just a nice boy she's sat next to a few times. He's very kind to her and always the first to chat her up at school. But she's too shy to talk to him more, let alone tell him about her feelings, so she decides to write a letter in her best handwriting, fold it up, and sneak it into his desk compartment. For the rest of the story she confides in her friends about the boy, he talks to her during class, and she rewrites the letter again and again. The story might

sound dull and even cliché, but I want to assure you that it was neither. She never said so, but something tells me the story was autobiographical. So instead of being a corny story about middle school, it was Rachel sitting next to you in a quiet place—just the two of you—telling you about the first time she had ever liked a boy. And that was a good story.

On Tuesday in Monterey I sat in my room long past the end of study hall, staring at a blank screen. I'd been staring at it so long that I had made a game out of syncing my blinks with the blinks of the cursor. Ms. Jamieson helped us get started with our stories in class, telling us it didn't matter what the story was about as long as it was a story.

People have so many variations on the phrase "Don't write what you don't know." Don't write what you don't know. Do write what you don't know. Don't write what you do know. And for every variation, they have good reasons for why you should or shouldn't. Don't write what you don't know, instead spend the time to get to know it before you write it. Do write what you don't know, because it'll make you a better writer.

That night, I believed in writing what you do know, and began a story. It was about a homeless man in New York who could relive his past in his dreams.

The night before the assignment was due was not a happy day for the school printers. If not being able to do double-sided printing was ever a death sentence, it was on that night. Instead of handing in one copy to Ms. Jamieson, we had to print one out for everybody in the class for them to leave comments on. Over the next week the class would go over the stories one by one, discussing them. Ms. Jamieson had a rule for the workshop where the author of the story being discussed couldn't talk. No explanations, interjections, disagreements—nothing, as if they were a ghost. This was actually very helpful, because if you wanted anything in a room full of people discussing your first story, it was to not be there at all.

My story was short, with the man reliving a few memories from his high school years. It was the first to be discussed in class. Swap out the horror in scary movies with embarrassment and keep the thrill, and you can get a good idea of what the workshop felt like. I got everyone's annotated copies back to review after the workshop. I didn't expect any comments to be overly critical, but still I was surprised by how nice they were. I felt very good, reading my classmates' reactions. Of course, the person who had made the most comments was Rachel. She wrote so much she might have written more than the story itself. My sentences looked like a tree with her thoughts branching out from them like flowers. And none of it was empty praise; if she liked something she really did, and if there was something she thought could be improved, she told me. She even left comments analyzing the story, going so deep into it that I started getting ideas from her. On Ms. Jamieson's copy, she wrote that she wanted to see the story developed further, perhaps for the final project. She left many other kind comments, but coming from a teacher, that was the most complimentary. I know I shouldn't have, but I couldn't stop reading all the comments over and over. I didn't get much else done the whole night.

I did my best to return the favor when I received Rachel's copy. I mirrored her commenting style, with plenty of branches coming out of her sentences. After populating the margins of the page with fine little letters, I arrived at the end of the story. The girl was in front of the boy's desk two minutes before the bell, hesitantly fidgeting with the letter in her hands as she heard him come down the hall. For my final comment, I asked her what she would have done. Then I asked myself the same question. I went next door.

"Is the bet still on?"

Martin took off his headphones. "What bet?"

"The bet on who'll ask out first."

“I guess it is.” Martin looked a little dumbfounded. “Why, you planning something?”

For a reply I smiled, went back to my room, and wrote a little letter in my best handwriting.

Every place was really two places: one in the light, and the other in the dark. And when you’ve only been to a place in one and visit it in the other for the first time, it feels alien and your heart beats with a sense of exploration, even if you’ve been there a thousand times before. If you’ve ever been to a school at night, you know what I mean.

There was a beating in our hearts as Rachel and I neared the classrooms on our night walk, although the sense of discovery was only a fraction of the reason why. We peered into the dead classrooms, imagining we were the last two people on Earth. We played a game where we went around each classroom, testing the doorknobs to see if any of them were left unlocked. None of them were. At the back of the building, we came to a stop. Rachel leaned against a wooden door of one of the classrooms, and I stood across her, leaning on one of the wooden beams supporting the second floor.

“I got a little letter today,” she said in a near whisper.

“Did you now?”

“Yes. It was in my desk compartment.”

“Mm. Sounds familiar.”

“I wonder who put it there.”

“Did you read it?”

“I did.”

“Then you know.”

Slowly I stepped forward and took her by the hand. And our hearts, not skipping a beat but adding more instead, beckoned us to retreat from the lights. So we headed in the direction of the dorms, sticking to the dark edges of campus until we reached an opening into the woods. We went into the cypress trees until the overlapping branches protected us from any eyes. Once we agreed in silence that we were invisible, Rachel put her back to a tree, and we embraced.

And my hands differentiated the curves of her face like the equations I thought I had long forgotten, and truly the hands must be the last organ to forget.

And once we were out of the forests, feigning innocence, we were together.

And I guess some things don't change.

Names

If ever you were on a search for names that were beautiful, descriptive, and honest all at the same time, look no further than the places of Monterey County. 17-Mile Drive is 17 miles long. Bird Rock has many birds on it, and Seal Rock many seals. The Lone Cypress is quite alone and quite a cypress. Cannery Row used to be a row of canneries. Sand City is a city in the sand, and Seaside is, well, seaside. Then there are some names I can only assume the origins of. Big Sur, for example. I am not sure what a “Sur” is, but given how honest Monterey seems to be with its names, I am sure it is of the big variety. Gigling Road, a biking trail around Fort Ord, is probably named that because whoever named it made people giggle often with his horrible spelling. And the Spyglass golf links, one of the best golf courses in the country, I assume is called so because the closest you’ll ever get to golfing there would be to watch the more fortunate enjoy it from afar with a spyglass. Monterey’s names have a simple and poetic tone about them. When I first arrived in the area and heard it was called Monterey, it made sense to me. It felt right that the place should be named Monterey. The word bounced around in your mouth the way the waves rolled and crashed, the pelicans surfed in the air, and the giant kelp forests danced. On top of it all, “Monterey” and “Bay” rhyme, something I always thought too good and beautiful to be just a coincidence. And all these lovely places of Monterey, so simple and honest and beautiful, were now all places to go with the lovely Rachel.

“Their omelets are great. I’m going to have a country-fried steak, though,” I said. We were in a cab, headed to a brunch in Salinas.

“What’s a country-fried steak?” asked Rachel.

“Not sure.”

“You don’t know what it is and you want it?”

“What better way to find out what it is than to have it?”

The sun warmed the pavements pleasantly and the skies were clear when we arrived. The restaurant was bustling but the queue wasn’t too long.

Rachel didn’t follow as I went toward the building. “What’s up?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” Rachel looked as if she was trying to not laugh. She alternated between standing on her toes and her feet, hopping up and down in a playful rhythm. “How set are you on having that country-fried steak?”

“I want to know what it is, that’s all.” I looked at her, still bouncing in place. “You’re planning something, aren’t you?”

“Maybe. How about we go this way?”

I shrugged and gestured for her to lead the way. She went to the end of the block, took a left, and continued for three blocks more. Finally she stopped in front of a quaint Victorian-style house with brown roofs and beige walls.

“Nice place,” I said.

“Right?” She stood next to the sign in front of the house, grinning.

I took a closer look at the sign. “Is this really?”

“Says so on the sign.”

“This is where he was born?”

“It is unless the sign’s a liar. And guess what?”

“What?”

“They serve brunch.”

“So it’s a restaurant now?”

“That and his birthplace and his childhood home. And I guess sort of a museum. Come come, let’s go inside.” Rachel hopped to the entrance. At the desk she asked for a reception under Marigold, table for two, and we were seated in a colorful room with floral carpets and white tablecloths.

“How’d you find out about this place?” I asked.

“Just a little bit of research. You’re always talking about him—Steinbeck Steinbeck Steinbeck, how great he is and how much you love him. Just when you’ve gotten used to not hearing it, there comes his name again.” She laughed. “But I get it, and I thought it would be a nice surprise.”

“Seeing his childhood house would have been a nice surprise. Finding out that it’s a restaurant now and getting to eat there, that’s far more.”

“Do you like it? I’m sorry about your country fried steak.”

“Rachel, I don’t care now if I never have it, whatever it is. This is the best surprise I’ve had in years.”

Rachel was happy, and even happier when the waiter brought out large helpings of a casserole.

“Y’know, I wish I could go on a road trip across the country and eat at roadside diners. Then I’d get to have food like this every day,” said Rachel.

“One of those places where breakfast is more food than an average breakfast, lunch, and dinner combined?”

“Yeah. One of those places.”

“Any specific place you’d want to go? Or would you just roam around?”

“Well, I’ve always dreamed of going to New York City. I want to try living there. How do you like New York?”

“To be honest? I prefer Monterey.”

Rachel pouted. “Still, doesn’t a road trip sound fun? Wish we could go on one! We could start from Monterey and make our way to New York City, and you can show me around.”

I snorted mid-sip and almost spat out my drink. “From Monterey to New York City?”

“What? You don’t think that sounds fun?”

“No, it sounds great. Sounds like a big adventure.”

“Exactly—a great big adventure.”

“How would you go about it?”

“We could rent a van, but neither of us can drive... Oh, we could take a train.”

“Trains.” I nodded slowly. “Trains are good. But if we’re looking to save some money—we’ve got hotel fees and food to think about—the buses are a good option.”

“There are buses that’ll go that far? Between states?”

“Oh yeah, plenty of them.”

“Maybe we could really do this thing. How about for a graduation trip next summer? It seems plausible. Some kids go as far as Europe for their grad trip, ”

“Mm. Yeah, maybe.”

“I mean, would you want to go on a trip like that?” asked Rachel.

“Of course I would. You and I, across the country.”

She grinned. “Yeah. Maybe with a dog like Charley too.”

“Charley?” I wondered if there was a new puppy on campus that I hadn’t heard about.

“Charley. Charley the poodle,” said Rachel. “Not ringing a bell?”

“Can’t say it is.”

“Steinbeck’s poodle he traveled around America with. He wrote a book about it. *Travels with Charley*. You’ve never read it?”

“I have not. Is it in the library?”

“Yup. I borrowed it last week. Wow, a Steinbeck that Sam Hanely hasn’t read. Unbelievable.”

“Yeah, I guess I’m not allowed to eat here anymore, huh? What’s the book about?”

“Him and his poodle Charley going across America on a road trip. I love it, although I haven’t been able to read much of it lately. College essays have been keeping me busy.” She frowned that comical frown she often did, with her lower lip protruding out and her chin pruning.

“How far along are you with your applications?”

“Not much far at all,” I said.

“Really? Do you know where you’ll be applying?”

“Sort of. Where are you applying?”

“Mostly schools that Gwen is applying to, so schools in California.”

“What about New York? Thought you wanted to live there.”

“I’ve been thinking about it, but it’s a long way off. I’ve never been out of California. And maybe this is silly, but Gwen and I’ve been talking about going to the same college. New York sounds nice, but so is being in California with Gwen, y’know?”

“I get that. Martin and I used to talk a lot about the same thing, but in New York.”

“So are you two applying to colleges in New York?”

“I guess so, yeah.”

Rachel frowned again, but not the comical one this time. “That’s more the reason to get started, then. Don’t your parents harp on getting your essays done? My mom’s always calling me about them.”

“Sometimes. But we don’t talk so often.”

“We could work on the essays together during study hall. How does that sound?”

The waiter brought out lemon cakes for dessert. The tops were glazed and they gleamed in a light yellow hue. “That sounds great,” I told her.

The next date after the one in Salinas was at Lover’s Point in Pacific Grove. We had lunch at Alvarado Street, then took a cab there on a sunny day. Although we took a cab, it would have been a good idea for us to walk there. Alvarado Street, Cannery Row, and Lover’s Point are all along the shore of the peninsula, with Cannery Row sitting right in the middle. Taking around an hour to walk to Lover’s Point and stopping by Cannery Row on the way sounds like a wonderful way to spend a Saturday afternoon, provided you had a big tube of sunscreen.

We go to Carmel somewhat periodically, Alvarado Street and the mall frequently, and take our night walks daily. Every night after study hall, we begin the ritual of meeting in front of the swimming pool to disappear into the forests. Once we ran into Gwen and her boyfriend on the golf links, but out of courtesy we rendered each other invisible. Rachel pointed out a shooting star to me one time while we were lying down on the greens, and I pretended to not know what they looked like so she could teach me to spot them for the first time all over again. Another time, while we were watching a pack of deer go by, a stag with great antlers that looked as if it

could impale us both got too close to us and gave us a little fright. We made a habit of asking each other for the time, because too often we'd return late to find the dorm doors locked.

It's often surprising, especially for people who have lived in cities their whole lives, to see how pitch-black nights get without electricity. But I think what is more surprising is how bright it can be with only the glow of the stars and the moon. That kind of brightness is so fine-tuned it seems intentional: everything but your partner becomes a silhouette, which also means that to the rest of the world you two are invisible. In the woods and on the links everything else but Rachel was a shadow, and the hour we had between the end of study hall and the doors locking went by faster than most hours. We'd stay as long as we could until the sparklers would come on and evict us. Then we'd make our way back to the school, bid a quiet farewell, and I would go around to the back of my dorm. From there I'd call Martin so that he could come and unlock the door from the inside, always with an earful. I suspect it was the same way for Rachel with Gwen, only Rachel could at least pay back the favor when it was Gwen on the other side of the door.

On Tuesday I spent more time with Rachel than I did with anyone else, even myself. We woke up at 5:30 in the morning and walked down the concrete paths to 17-Mile Drive to watch the sunrise. Rachel brought Gwen's blanket, and we laid it out and sat on the beach in front of Seal Rock as the horizon started to burn. It was what Steinbeck called the hour of the pearl—the gray time after the light has come and before the sun has risen. I told Rachel about the curve, and we spent the sunrise trying to see if we could really see it or not. Rachel swore she could, then tilted her head and said maybe she was only imagining it. After the magical hour had gone and the gray was gone from the skies, we went back to campus for breakfast and went to first period, which was none other than Short Stories.

We had to go to different classes after the first period but reconvened soon enough at lunch. By now Martin needed no help talking to Hannah, so I went and had lunch with Rachel. That alone would have been enough to say that it was a day full of Rachel and therefore a day well spent. From 5:30 a.m. to noon. But it was Tuesday. And Tuesdays were when the farmer's market was held at Alvarado. It was a proper Californian farmer's market—from fresh fruit to kombucha to naan-ritto, which was curry wrapped in naan, like a burrito. Then there was my favorite, the ham musubi.

"Gwen really loves this," said Rachel in front of the tent that sold the musubis. "It's ham and rice wrapped in roasted seaweed. Ever had it?"

"Yeah. A friend would get it for me."

"How was it?"

"I loved it. Finished it in three bites and wished there were more. Probably my favorite thing here," I said.

"I always wanted to try it, but it seems too small."

"What do you mean? You've never had it?"

Rachel shook her head. "It seems too pricey for how little it is."

"Well then, I'm going to get two, and you're going to try one today."

"No, don't do that. There are so many other things to get here," she said.

"How about I get one, and then we split?"

"Mm...okay. We can do that."

But then I placed an order for two, and she had no choice but to take one.

And just a minute later, we were both done.

"Wasn't that good? Splitting one would have been too small, right?"

“Yes.” Rachel nodded. “And yes.”

Then we took a cab back to campus, had study hall together, went into the forests, and by the end of the night I was calling Martin, asking him to come downstairs.

Thanksgiving

There's no need to pack so much. It'll only be six days of Thanksgiving break. If you're smart about it, you might not need a suitcase, only your backpack. Clothes, a towel, a laptop, and a book to read. Don't forget your toothbrush. That's the one thing you won't notice until the end of the day, and you can borrow many other things—sometimes even a towel—but not a toothbrush.

“Promise you'll call every day?”

“Promise.”

“And promise you'll put on the sunscreen?”

“Only because you got it for me.”

“You'll thank me once you see what the sun is like over there. Right, Martin?”

“It'll burn you to a crisp,” said Martin. “I believe the sun over here and the sun in Arizona must be two different stars.”

“See? You better listen to him, Sam Hanely.”

“He's the one with a tan.”

“Still. But then maybe you wouldn't look so bad with a tan.”

“Mm. Maybe you'll find out when I'm back.”

Her lips twisted up ever so slightly. “Maybe.”

And that was about as much as Martin could take. “Right. I'm going to wait in the car,” he said. “Meet me in the parking lot when you two wrap this up.”

Martin turned the corner and disappeared behind the dorms. I looked around to see that no one was there, and gave Rachel a kiss. "Okay. Now we should really listen to Martin," I said.

She wished me safe travels and told me to call her when I got there. She waved us goodbye until we were out of her sight, but knowing her, she was probably waving even after that.

It was a long drive to Phoenix of about eleven hours. Martin's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, were kind enough to drive all the way to Monterey to pick us up.

Martin opened the sunscreen and took a whiff. "Nice scent."

"It's chrysanthemum," I said.

"A what?"

"Chrysanthemum. It's a flower. Rachel likes to put dried petals of it in hot water to make tea. I've tried it a few times. Pretty good, except for all the petals floating around."

"And somehow she found sunblock with it."

"Somehow she did."

"You got so lucky with her. Wish Hannah'd get me some chrysanthemum sunscreen."

"You'd wish Hannah would do anything with you, honey," said Mrs. Wilson.

"You told your parents about her?"

"And how you've been a huge help," said Mrs. Wilson.

Martin asked, "Your parents know about Rachel?"

"They haven't a clue."

Martin opened the cap and smelled the sunscreen again. "Well, you should. Wish Hannah'd get me something like this. You got so lucky with her. Once-in-a-lifetime lucky with her."

“Yeah. Once-in-a-lifetime lucky,” I said.

Eleven hours. And that was between two bordering states. How many states did I have left—six, seven? About that if I went in a straight line. Progress was still slow on the next ticket, and I didn’t know where to go next. It would take too long to save up for a ticket to California. Maybe I could get a ticket to Phoenix and make my way to Monterey from there, I thought. But when we finally arrived at Martin’s home and I felt the gush of hot air suffocate me as soon as I got out of the car, I scrapped that plan entirely.

I am sometimes thankful that when it comes to traditional American cuisine, health seems to be not a priority. A big fat greasy turkey, sure, but why stop there when you can stuff it with the aptly named stuffing, which is made with more meat? Stuff meat with meat, then let’s have mac and cheese, a dish of fat on carbs. And how about the sweet potato casserole, which in some households (as was the case at the Wilsons) is topped with marshmallows. The most egregious thing about this dish isn’t that it’s topped with marshmallows, but that it isn’t a dessert. Because after a meal with an entire bird, several cups worth of butter, and this thing with a layer of marshmallows, dessert was still a separate matter. Pies, pies of all flavors—pumpkin, pecan, apple, banana cream—with whipped cream on top. Nobody beats an eye at all this, quite understandably, because why think when you have food this good?

Oh, and sometimes after all of that, there’s ice cream.

And you’ll somehow find yourself eating it.

With food like this, it’s very hard not to give thanks.

Martin’s parents treated me to many family dinners, and for the duration of Thanksgiving break the Wilsons had two sons. I also got to meet Martin’s little sister, who had lots of questions

about what kind of girl Hannah was. After the big Thanksgiving dinner, I offered to do the dishes—*learn a thing or two from him, Martin*, said Mrs. Wilson—and so we got to work, though it did not feel like a chore.

“You should join us for board games after this,” said Martin as he scrubbed a pan.

“Board games?”

“It’s a family tradition. Thanksgiving and board games. We’re not too big on football. Your family more of a football family?”

“Not really.”

“A fellow board games family?”

“Heh, no, not really that, either.” I took Martin’s pan and put it on the rack. “So, what kind of board games are we playing?”

Playing board games with your family, I learned, was a gentle way to lower yourself to sleep after a big meal. After the games, Martin and I went to the guest room where I was staying, and we talked as we would back in the dorms.

“That was a great dinner. Tell your parents I said thank you again after I leave.”

“No problem. I think you made my mom pretty happy with how much you enjoyed the food.”

“Hard not to. That and the board games. That was a blast.”

“Right? Have you called Rachel yet?”

“I have not.” I looked at the clock. “I should probably get to that.”

Martin smirked. “I’ll leave you to it. Want the light on or off?”

“On is fine.”

Martin left, gently closing the door behind him. On his way out, I could hear him mutter one last sentence. “Wish I could call Hannah before bed,” he said.

* * *

The first thing I noticed when I woke up was how hungry I was. The second thing, not far from where I had slept in the alley, was a wallet. It had a brown leather cover, and its pebbled surface was cold and grainy to the touch. A driver’s license peaked its head out of one of the card slots, quite literally—all I could see was that it belonged to a blonde man who maybe wore glasses.

Opening the cash compartment, I found some loose bills, and at the very bottom a hundred-dollar bill. I looked around both ends of the alley to see it empty. It was still early in the morning. I pushed the driver’s license down the fold so that only the top of his head was visible and emptied the cash, leaving only a few dollars and change. Then I put it down where I had found it, in the way that I found it, quietly packed my things, and left. It would only take two more days of saving, three max. I wasn’t going to Chicago, or Phoenix. I was going to Monterey, California.

21

Cornfields and Jesus

I've heard it said that Indiana is mostly cornfields and Jesus billboards, and there seems to be some truth in that. On the bus to Indianapolis I saw dirt fields, though without corn because of the season, stretch to infinity toward the horizon like the oceans of Monterey. I thought maybe it would be different since it was land, but no, I still could not see the curve. Billboards preaching of sin and judgment and hell and sometimes salvation towered over the empty fields at regular intervals. I passed the time on my way to Indianapolis reading them whenever they came up, and I still see them often when I walk around. The billboards are fascinating if you don't take them too seriously. You'd think that a billboard trying to turn people towards God would be about heaven, but most of the time it's the opposite. It's almost like they want you to go to hell so they can feel better. What kind of strategy was it anyway to try and convince someone by telling them to go to hell? I wonder if any of them have ever worked, on anyone.

* * *

Back to Del Monte Forest after a much-needed rest. A goodbye and a thank you to Mr. and Mrs. Wilson. Offering a handshake but getting a hug back. Rachel returning after dinner, overjoyed to see me, hopping over like a rabbit. A run-up crashing into a hug in front of the swimming pool, then to the golf links for a catch-up. Talking with Martin at night, dreading classes tomorrow in his room, halfway unpacked and messier than ever. A good night earlier than usual, because both of us are exhausted.

The routine was back in full swing by the next morning. I walked over to the cafeteria with Rachel. We went to class and met back for lunch. After school I went biking, had a dinner of meatloaf and garlic bread, and walked back to the dorms with Martin for study hall as the sun set.

Not too long after the end of study hall, I went to Martin's room. "What're you up to?" I asked.

"Not much. Feeling sleepy."

I sat on his bed. "I feel a bit tired too. Didn't feel like doing work tonight."

"If you think about it, today was the first time in the last week we got up before noon."

Martin typed something on his laptop. "Hey. Guess who I'm talking to right now."

"What's Hannah saying?"

"I asked her if she wanted to go to the aquarium this Sunday."

"Finally scheduling your own dates. What'd she say?"

"She just said yes." Martin was giddy. "She's also asking if we want to have dinner at Alvarado after that, with her and Savannah."

"Us four? Yeah, tell her yes."

Martin got a reply instantly. "Looks like Sav is coming to pick you up on campus, and Hannah and I will catch a cab to Alvarado from the aquarium."

"Sounds good. Look at you. An aquarium date and a dinner date. You must be feeling pretty good right now."

"I am. Matter of fact, I don't think I'm sleepy anymore. Think I'm gonna do some work."

I propped up a cushion against a wall. "You do that. I'm going to rest my eyes for a while."

On Sunday Savannah arrived on campus while I was in the library, and we met up at the school cafeteria. She wanted to pick up some fruit there before we left. She went through the fruit as if at the farmer's market, carefully picking out the freshest ones.

"Sorry about the mess." Savannah cleared the passenger seat of loose sheets of homework and textbooks and threw them in the back. "Do you mind taking a small detour to my house? I want to drop off the fruit for my Gram."

"Not at all. We're early, anyways."

The house had two floors, with red roofs and off-white walls. The overgrown garden climbed up the walls, adding streaks of green over the faded yellows. The entrance had a portico and the door complained of its old age as we entered.

"Hey Gram—I'm back with some fruit. My friend's here too, it'll be just a while," called Savannah as we entered. She motioned to an old couch with colorful floral patterns. "Sit. Let me make some tea for Gram and then we can be on our way. Actually, do you want anything to drink? I also make a good cup of coffee."

I glanced at the time to see that there was plenty. "Sure. Coffee sounds nice."

"I'll be right back," she said. Savannah went into the kitchen. The gas burner puffed to life, a kettle began hissing gently, and the cupboard creaked as it opened and shut. Then to my left there was a small wooden thud. A small lady in a wheelchair was working her way through a doorway into the living room.

I stood up. "Hello, ma'am."

She said nothing and stared with a blank expression. As I was about to introduce myself, Savannah stepped into the living room. "Oh—Gram, this is Sam, a friend from school."

"Friend?" asked her grandmother.

Savannah smiled softly. “Yes, Gram. Friend.”

Savannah’s grandmother turned to me. “Are you the one that Hannah likes?”

I raised my eyebrows and looked at Sav. “No, no. That’s Martin. Sam is very good friends with Martin, though,” she said. “The tea’s almost ready. I got earl gray at the grocery store yesterday.

“That sounds nice, dear.”

“Where do you want to have it?”

“In my bedroom is fine.”

“Nice to meet you, ma’am,” I said.

After some silence, Gram said “Yes,” and Savannah wheeled her back to her bedroom. Sav cut the fruit into slices and took it to her grandmother with the tea, and brought the coffee on a plastic tray for us to have in the living room. “There’s sugar and cream if you’d like.”

“I’ll just have it black,” I said. “Thank you so much.”

The coffee was very clean. It was silky and not bitter at all, but also didn’t taste weak or watered-down. “Mm. How’d you get it so clean like that?”

Savannah was delighted. “Raw egg,” she said with a straight face. “I mix the coffee grounds with a raw egg before I simmer it in water. Then I strain it through.”

“Raw egg?” I swirled the coffee around. “Never heard that one before. Where’d you learn it?”

“I have my sources.”

“Well, wherever you learned it from, Savannah Yang, they sure do know how to make a good cup of coffee.”

"I'm glad you like it." When we were done with our cups, we decided it was time to go see the lovebirds. Savannah went to her grandmother's bedroom to get her tray and told her she would be back around nine before we left the house.

As soon as we were in the black sedan I asked, "So what's this about Hannah liking someone?"

"Mm. You weren't supposed to know that, but I guess the cat's out of the bag now," said Savannah with a light sigh. "Yeah, Hannah likes him back. Promise you won't tell Martin?"

I laughed. "Since when was this?"

"She only said it recently, but who knows when it started. Promise you'll keep it a secret."

"It'll be hard. Oh wow, the dinner today is going to be incredible now that I know. It'll be really difficult, but my lips are sealed."

"They better be. By the way," said Sav, "don't worry if my grandma seemed a little cold. She doesn't have anything against you."

"Oh, no, I'm not worried about that. At first I was worried I did something wrong or that she didn't like random visitors, but I'm okay."

"It's nothing you did. Gram can be like that to boys. More my fault than anybody's—God knows I've given her more than enough reason to be wary. Gram's just looking out for me, you know?"

"Looks like Martin's got quite a task ahead of him then, huh?"

Savannah brightened up. "He'll be fine. I've been putting in a good word whenever she asks."

Of course now that I heard about it, it seemed painfully obvious that Hannah had feelings for Martin too. During dinner she missed no opportunity to tease Martin and laughed like a songbird when he retaliated. She even told Sav and I that we knew where to find them and hurried off to the beach with Martin after the meal.

“Was Hannah always like that, or did Martin pull something off over Thanksgiving?” I asked Sav.

“Hannah and I had a talk over Thanksgiving, and let’s just say that there’s been a change in strategy.”

“Does she know how Martin feels about her?”

“I haven’t told her, but I think she knows. Hard not to, with a guy like Martin. But let the two confess to each other. I think our job here is done.”

“That sounds like the right idea.” I looked around Alvarado Street. “So, to the wharf?”

The wharf was empty as usual and we parked in our usual spot where the sand met the water. Savannah turned off the engine and dialed in the radio, and its soft hum and the faint green light flooded the car.

“So how did it exactly go, when Hannah said she liked Martin?”

“We were in my room and she said that she thought she did.”

“What did you say?”

“I asked her why, listened to her reasons, and asked her if she liked him again. She said she didn’t know. Then a few days later she came back and said she did. But enough about Martin. Heard you were with Rachel Marigold. When’d that happen?”

“Yeah—it happened right around Thanksgiving. A little before that. Hasn’t been too long, I guess.”

“Mm. I don’t know her too well, just that she’s a good person.”

“She is. She’s amazing.”

“Did you date her the first time around? Before all of this?”

“I did. It fell apart when I had to leave school, understandably.”

She paused for a moment. “What’s Indiana like?”

“Well, you ever hear the term ‘Bible Belt’ and ‘Corn Belt?’ It feels like Indiana is where those two intersect. Farmland and Jesus billboards everywhere.”

“Jesus billboards?”

“Yeah. Those billboards that like to tell you about hell and how you’re going there.”

“Ah.”

“I wonder, do you believe in heaven and hell, Sav?”

“I like to believe that there must be something of an afterlife.”

“Mm. Where do you think you’d be headed? Heaven or hell?”

“I’m certainly trying for heaven, but I don’t know. What about you? Heaven or hell?”

“I guess my answer would be the same as yours. But according to the signs, sinners go to hell. And if that’s the case, heaven seems difficult.”

“You think you have sins weighing you down?”

“Yeah, sins. A couple days ago I found someone’s wallet in the alley, and I took all the cash in it. Around \$150. Figured I’d be able to catch a bus straight to California with that. That’s got to be a sin, right?”

“It’s not good, but if that’s enough to land you in hell, then everyone’s ending up in hell.”

“That’s one small example. There’s a lot more.”

“There’s always more. Everyone’s always got more.”

“I wasn’t good to Rachel back in senior year, for example. I remember when the early action college results came out and they were all bad news. All the letters started with ‘regret’ or how many students had applied that year. I became very sulky then, like a spoiled child. I wouldn’t even leave my room outside of classes. Had all my meals in my room, instant ramen or delivery. One day there’s a knock, which with me throwing such a fit I try to ignore. Then a little note slid under the door, and I rushed to it only to find a brown paper bag. Inside it were these ham musubis—they’re rice and ham wrapped in seaweed, very delicious. Turns out Rachel went to the farmer’s market to get them for me and asked her friend if he could deliver them to my door along with the letter. And the letter—it was just the loveliest words ever. Words of how I’m going to have good news eventually and how smart she knows I am and how much she loves me. Got me to finally stop sulking in my room.

“Every time after that, I’d ask her to get me a musubi when she went to the farmer’s market. Sometimes I’d go with her, but most of the time she’d go with her friends. One time she forgot, just one time. And I remember being very annoyed with her. I didn’t get mad at her, but acted all cold towards her, half-heartedly saying that it was okay in a tone that made it clear I wasn’t when she apologized. Can you believe that? Genuinely annoyed that she hadn’t voluntarily brought some snacks for me. After all she did. I don’t know. I think that’s a good example of my attitude toward her. I never stopped enjoying flirting with other girls after we got together. If I found them attractive, I wanted them to think that I was charming. I kept seeking after that. That’s got to be a few sins already, right? And those are still the smaller ones.”

“It happens. I should know. It’s understandable. Doesn’t make it okay, but it’s understandable.”

“I’m surprised you find it to be understandable. Is there anything you don’t find understandable, Sav? I think you’re great for that, and for what it’s worth, I think you can get to heaven.”

“Do you? How so?”

“You work hard. You look out for Hannah. And you’re so good to your grandmother. You cook for your family, go grocery shopping for them. Not many high schoolers would do all that.”

Savannah had a forlorn look in her eyes, the kind people often had when smoking. “Yes, but I also have a pretty big sin. Would you like to hear about it?”

“Please.”

“I put my grandmother in that wheelchair. Pushed her off the top of the stairs when I was little. I was an angry kid when Hannah and I first moved to Salinas after Gram took us in. I was about seven, but I gave my own grandmother hell. I’m talking daily tantrums, multiple times a day. I would sometimes hit her or throw things at her. One day I didn’t like what she had cooked, threw a tantrum, ran upstairs to my room, and shut the door as loudly as I could. When I heard her come up the stairs a little later, I ran out and pushed her as hard as I could. She had microwaved a plate of chicken tenders so her granddaughter would have something to eat. She tumbled all the way down to the end of the stairs, and Hannah had to call the ambulance while I was shut away in my room. Nine years old. So yeah. Sins. And like I said, there’s a lot more.

The contours of the glovebox glowed in the faint green light. “I’ve got a pretty big sin like that too.”

“Want to tell me about it?”

“Maybe not about it, but I’ll tell you that I was in jail for three years for it. That’s why I had to leave school, and that’s why I am where I am,” I said. “What are we to do, Savannah?”

“What we’re doing. Doing the best we can. It’s the least we can do. You try to live past all of your regrets, and I work hard so Gram and Hannah won’t have to worry. Not about food, not about Hannah’s college tuition. Us two, we’re the best that we can, right?”

“Right. It’s the least we can do.”

It was high tide and the waves went far past where we were parked, leaving both of us far behind the shoreline. The waves crashed onto the shore like whispered shouts and the radio was playing some indecipherable song again.

“Hey, Savannah?”

“Mhm?”

“In how long do we have to say farewell? Before I have to go back?”

“Never. Whenever you’re ready.”

* * *

Water droplets like cold needles welcomed me back to Indiana. What at first was a drizzle became rain, then a proper downpour in just five minutes. Panic set in then. In the place of annoyance was fear and I packed in haste, taking only the backpack and abandoning the cardboard. Far up ahead was a highway bridge with shelter underneath. My feet splashed against fresh puddles, muddy water sloshing in my shoes with every step. By the time I reached the bridge I was a sponge, dripping with my own circle of rain. Head to toe I was covered in an unpleasant stream of water, stealing heat and warming itself to the temperature of sweat. The water was like glue for my clothes, and they stuck to me as if I was vacuum-packed. A puddle formed where I set my backpack down. I had to practically peel away my coat from my skin, and two waterfalls formed when I took off my shoes. Black droplets fell from my hair. I was

freezing. It was then that I noticed the stranger, watching me with his back against the pier of the bridge. “Rain came out of nowhere, didn’t it?” I said, shivering.

He nodded. His clothes were dry, but dirty and tattered like mine. “I’m all soaked over here,” I said. The man pointed to a barrel underneath the center of the highway. He then produced a plastic lighter from his cargo pants and held it out. I looked at the barrel and then back at him. “My God, you’re a lifesaver.” I put on my shoes with the back folded like slippers, took the lighter, and walked to the barrel. But all that was in it was a pile of ashes, nothing that would burn well. The fire from the lighter only tickled it. After some time trying I chuckled and said, “Looks like I’m going to need something to burn first. There’s got to be some trash to burn around here, right?” And turning around, I saw the man with my backpack, sprinting away at full speed.

I shouted—pleading, begging, crying—all of which only succeeded in making the man faster. I ran the fastest I ever had, ignoring the flaming needles in my chest or the deep puddles. But it was no use. My shoes weren’t even on properly. The man took a left into an alley as I was momentarily in place, jamming my fingers into the back of the shoe to straighten it out. I took off, running even faster, determined not to lose him around the corner. But as I made the sharp left and started running down the stairs, something on the wet pavement gave away underneath my feet, and for a split second I was going sideways in the air. The staircase was very steep and I fell forward in midair down the entire length of the steps before landing on my left knee. My entire weight slammed down on it as I hit the concrete, and I headbutted the pavement. Pain pierced through the marrow of my knee. Instantly I tried to get up, but it felt like my bones were having a spasm and I fell back down. It was so much pain I could barely gasp. Up ahead the alley split into two streets, at both ends of which the man was nowhere to be found.

I limped back to the bridge. Where my backpack used to be, I found my journal. The man must have rummaged through and discarded anything that would slow him down. My coat was still there too, thankfully. But the backpack was gone. The blanket I had packed inside it was gone. My toothbrush was gone. And all the cash, including what I had taken from the wallet, was gone. I gathered cigarette butts and paper bags littered under the bridge and lit a fire with a \$200 lighter. I put my socks and shoes near the fire to dry, wrapped myself up in my coat, and fell asleep.

The next morning the sun cut through a sharp blue sky, and although the ground was still wet, the rain was no more. The sound of cars rushing past on the bridge above had the timbre that roads take on after rain. The fire was dead, but all of my clothes were dry.

I cleared my throat to see if it hurt, fearing I had caught a cold the night before. It felt fine. I had my clothes, the lighter, and my journal. Nothing else. I opened the journal to the first page. It had not gotten wet the night before and the address was still there, sharp and crisp. I put the notebook in my coat pocket, the lighter in the other, and dragged myself out the shade of the bridge.

Where the bridge ended a highway sign, green and in its unmistakable bold white font, read:

WEST

CHICAGO

And so limping along the signs that told me to go to hell, I went west.

Dinner

Though it doesn't snow in Monterey (but it would be very beautiful if it did—can you imagine the cypresses powered over like Christmas trees, and the beaches covered in snow?) nor get so cold that you would need a thick coat, that doesn't take away from any of the festive spirit. In the dorms they light the fireplace every night and make hot cocoa in the common room. The school assemblies are held at the indoor auditorium instead of the amphitheater, and the dean chooses words that deliver even more warmth than usual. In the small chapel on the outskirts of the school is an end-of-the-year ceremony, where everyone lights candles while the school choir sings hymns and carols. The dean makes a speech here too, and while not religious in nature, he has the tender voice of a loving pastor. For a short time the year-round Christmas store in Carmel starts to make sense and gets more business, while the cowboy store probably loses just as much. People still surf and kayak, and of course they still golf. If the people of Pebble Beach ever stop golfing, something very terrible must have happened to the world. Or maybe not. Even during rapture they would be golfing, praying for a birdie. Anyway, such is Monterey in the winter, at the perfect temperature—not too cold for thick coats, but cold enough for hot chocolates.

Martin faced a dilemma for winter break. Usually, he went back home to spend the holidays with his family. But this year Gordon had thrown a wrench in his plans, the wrench being a generous invitation for him and me to stay with him over the break. Gordon's house was only a twenty minute drive from Salinas. It really said a lot about Martin's good nature that he

struggled so much with what most high schoolers would have decided in a heartbeat. It said even more about Martin's parents then, that when he called they told him to stay over at Gordon's, all without a single mention of Hannah.

The last week before break everyone was busy, with finals and the college essay deadlines creeping up. Most dates between Rachel and I were study dates. I wrote my essays, but only because of Rachel. She was very adamant about me not procrastinating on them. We still went on a few normal dates and met in front of the swimming pool nearly every night. The last Friday before finals week, we had an early dinner and went down the asphalt roads to the shore.

"Wish I could stay in Monterey with you like Martin and Gordon," said Rachel.

"So do I. You're staying over at your parents, right?"

"Yeah. At my mom's."

The horizon's edge started to take a yellow hue, although it would be a while before the stars started their day.

Rachel leaned on my shoulder and sighed. "I'm gonna miss you over break."

"I'll miss you too."

"I'll miss you more."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure."

And it went that way for a while, going back and forth.

Rachel dug herself deeper into my shoulder. "How is your story for the final coming along?"

"It's going. Been writing it bit by bit every day."

"Please finish it soon. I really want to know what happens to the dreaming man next."

“Tell you what. I’ll get to writing it as soon as I get back.”

I finished the short story that night. It ended with the man deciding to go to the place of his dreams.

Gordon lived in a brown two-story apartment. It was a modest home very different from the colossal mansions that reigned throughout the forest. Though much smaller, it was more of a home than most of those castle-like houses. Gordon’s room was on the second floor and his parents’ on the first. The living room took up half of the first floor and had a small fireplace. Across the fireplace on the other end was a kitchenette and a wooden dining table where the family gathered every night. In the mornings we would go to the beaches for a swim; have lunch in Alvarado, Carmel, or the places Gordon knew of in Pacific Grove; then spend the evenings at the mall, having some dinner and catching a movie. But on the fourth day, Gordon couldn’t be with us because he was going out with Kate.

“Her family’s got vacation home in Big Sur, so I’ll be driving out there tomorrow,” said Gordon as we were having dinner at the mall the night before.

“Fancy,” said Martin.

“So, you gonna call Hannah? Finally hang out with her?” asked Gordon.

I looked at Martin. “Should I message Sav?” I said.

“No, I’ll do it. Carmel. Tomorrow. Let me go make a call,” he said, and walked away.

I watched him leave then looked back at Gordon. “They grow up so fast, don’t they?” He chuckled and gave a shrug.

Savannah’s black sedan found its way through the twisted roads of Del Monte Forest to Gordon’s apartment the next day. Hannah sat in the back, burrowed in a gray hoodie, while

Savannah was in the driver's seat with a beanie and a denim jacket over a faded blue t-shirt. The shirt was oversized and she had it tied into a knot around her waist.

We ate at Carmel's best-kept secret, and as soon as we were out of the alley, Hannah announced that she and Martin were going to look around the art galleries. She invited us to come, but only as a courtesy, I'm sure. We told them to have fun, then walked the two blocks down to the bakery and each got a scoop. It was impossible not to walk down to the beach afterward.

"If we walk along the beach this way and then go up, it should be about where the car's parked," said Savannah.

So we went the way she mentioned, strolling along the wet curves the waves had carved on the shore, occasionally taking pictures for tourists and dipping our fingers in the cold water.

"Got all my things stolen a couple days ago," I said.

Savannah stopped walking. "What do you mean?"

"Someone stole my backpack. With all my money and everything."

"What happened? Did you get hurt?"

"I'm doing fine. I fell pretty hard chasing the guy who took my backpack, but I'm already feeling better. I was under a bridge because it started raining, left my backpack on the ground to dry myself, and this other guy under the bridge took it and ran. But I've been able to take care of food and all that. It's just all the money I've been saving up that's the problem."

"Do you still have your coat?"

"Thankfully yes. Just the things in the backpack that was stolen, is all."

"So are we starting over on the tickets?"

"Not quite," I said. "I'm on my way to Chicago."

“How?”

“Walking.”

“Oh.” Her eyebrows untangled a little. We began walking again.

“You’ve probably thought of this,” said Savannah, “but what about hitchhiking?”

“Like, with strangers?”

“Mhm. Some people have had success with it.”

“I actually haven’t thought of it at all. Don’t know why I haven’t.”

“It’s probably not so easy to do. Or safe, for that matter. I suppose the buses are our best bet.”

“I don’t know—you might be onto something there, Sav.”

“Are you going to try it?”

“I might. I have no idea how, but I might.”

We climbed up a sandy hill to go back to where the car would be. On the way into Carmel was a small thicket of cypresses, keeping guard over the border between the city and the sand. The trees were weathered and their trunks scarred with faded names and hearts. I picked up the sharpest stone I could find and began carving. When I was done a large M, a plus sign, and an H were carved into where the inner bark was exposed.

“Ah.” Savannah laughed. “Give it here—let me try.” She took the stone and carved a large heart around what I had put in. “How’s that?”

“Much better than I could have done. Here’s hoping they’ll make one of their own.”

Savannah laughed again. “Here’s hoping.”

Then we got to her sedan, and went to pick up Martin and Hannah. When we got there they were very quiet as if they both had a secret to keep. Savannah drove us back home, where Martin and I began preparing for the grand meal, though we had eaten only hours before.

“Steak dinner,” said Gordon.

“Steak dinner,” said Martin.

And a steak dinner it was when Gordon returned from Big Sur with thick slabs of beef. Gordon’s parents were out for dinner, which left us to make a mess of the kitchen. Bossa nova and acoustic folk filled the grease-soaked air as we worked. I chopped the garlic, Martin washed the asparagus and the potatoes, and Gordon massaged the steak with olive oil, salt, pepper, and rosemary.

“Oil,” Gordon sang in a high note as he drew generous circles of olive oil on the pan. He moved the pan around to soak its entire surface, grabbed the thick slab of beef with a pair of tongs, and in an exaggerated motion slid it onto the pan. A mist of oil erupted with a mighty sizzle.

“And now, for the most important ingredient,” Gordon said, carefully unwrapping a block of butter. He measured it with caution, moving his knife across the slab trying to decide where to cut. Finally, he cut off a small knob about half the size of his thumb. He then moved it aside, picked up the remaining big chunk, and threw it into the pan.

“What about the small bit?” asked Martin.

Gordon picked up the small block and scratched his chin. “Too small to wrap up and refrigerate again. Eh.” He threw the knob into the pan of asparagus. “That’ll do.”

After searing both sides, adding the garlic, and scooping up the melted butter and basting it over the steak repeatedly, dinner was ready. The first few minutes of the meal were just grunts of appreciation. The conversation only began after three or four cuts.

“So, how was Carmel?” asked Gordon.

“Almost as good as this steak,” said Martin. “Made lots of progress.”

Gordon said, “That’s what I like to hear.”

“What about you? How was Big Sur?” I asked Gordon.

“It was fantastic. Have you been to Big Sur with Rachel yet?”

“Not yet, no”

“You’ve got to go, man. On a sunny day like this. Place is beautiful.”

“Yeah. And you can douse yourself with that sunblock she got you,” said Martin. “You know Rachel got him this fancy flower-scented sunscreen?” He stuffed another piece of steak in his mouth. “I should get Hannah something nice like that. Maybe for her birthday. When is her birthday? Can’t believe I don’t even know her birthday.”

“I know her birthday,” said Gordon.

“You do? When?”

“Same as Savannah’s.”

Martin scoffed and sank back into his chair with a smile, admitting defeat. What at first was a devouring became more of a grazing as we ate on. Weighed down by heavy stomachs and the excitement of the day, our conversation lulled and our movements became sluggish as if we were tipsy. Then came the time of confessions, of sharing secrets.

“You know,” said Martin. “I used to like Rachel. Not anymore, of course, Hannah’s the only girl in my eyes, but I used to.”

“Shut up. Did you really?” I asked, barely containing a laugh. “When?”

“I did. Sophomore year.”

“What happened? You ever tell her?”

“I had a couple of classes with her sophomore year, got close. Never ended up telling her—she probably doesn’t know to this day. But you don’t need to worry, Sam. You don’t ever, ever, have to worry about me ever having feelings for Rachel. Know why?”

“Because of Hannah,” I said.

“Yes, but there’s more than that. Because I’m dating Hannah.”

Gordon and I both looked at each other, then back at Martin.

“Like, really dating? As in, this is not an assumption? If I ask Hannah right now she’ll say the same thing?” I said.

“Yes. We had a talk about it. Turns out she likes me too. And I also, you know,” said Martin, “kissed her, so.”

Gordon laughed. “Today?”

“Yeah.”

“Where? When?” I asked.

“Turns out there are more quiet and empty alleys in Carmel than you’d think.”

Gordon and I laughed and hollered in disbelief and in congratulations, listened to him tell the story of how it happened, and had ice cream to celebrate. And it’s moments like those, in the sweet fog of bossa nova and butter among laughter, that I forget I am dreaming. But dream or not, I was very grateful to have them next to me, and very grateful I had her too.

Break

It took a couple days of walking to get to Illinois. Shortly after crossing into Illinois through the northwest corner of Indiana, I arrived in Chicago. I told Sav about it, and she asked me if I had come across that one famous statue of a silver bean there. Her grandmother had told her about it once. Today while walking around I saw a college campus, and it seemed very strange that all the students I saw were around my age. Not just my age, but Martin and Gordon and Rachel's age. They must be seniors now in college. In my dreams I see them as seniors, and I guess they are seniors out here too. I think that Martin would be in New York. Rachel is probably in California, and maybe she ended up going to the same school as Gwen. Gordon, I don't know. I think he could be anywhere, would be happy anywhere, and would do well anywhere. For all I know he could be somewhere like Italy and still having a great time being his kind self.

It is a strange thing to imagine what people no longer in your life must be doing at this exact moment. Right now, as I take this breath, what is Martin up to? What does 11 a.m. on a weekday look like for him? Is he taking notes in class? Having lunch with his friends? The night I was chasing the stranger in the rain, that was a Friday night. What does Friday night look like for Rachel? Is she out with her boyfriend, out on a date? Think of someone that used to be very dear to you and try to imagine what they must be doing in this instant. Guess enough and you'll get it right sometime. Yes, he must be going on a road trip with his friends. She's cooked something for him. He's brought a bottle of wine to her 21st birthday party. They're moving in

together, and they've got a cat. Don't the thoughts frustrate you, make your chest stiff? It's like a watch stuffed deep in a drawer, forever forgotten but still faithfully ticking away, only you're the watch.

Tonight it is Christmas Eve in Monterey. Gordon is going to Big Sur again, and Martin out with Hannah. I'm going to have lunch at the mall, then read at a nearby cafe until Savannah is done with work. Seeing how both of us were abandoned by our friends and family in the name of love, we decided we'd have dinner. I found a rather remote street and settled down for the night. I saved enough to buy basic necessities like a toothbrush, but still haven't bought a blanket. The nights got very cold.

* * *

"We really got the short end of the stick tonight, huh?" said Savannah.

"I don't blame them," I said. "Let them love in the holiday cheer."

Savannah finished her ice cream and reached forward between the front seats to deposit her cup. "How is Chicago?"

"Alright. Lots more people. Still haven't found the bean yet," I said. "I've been thinking about hitchhiking a lot since we last talked."

"Tell me about it."

"I think it's plausible. California's a popular destination. It doesn't even have to be California, as long as it's west. Of those thousands of people going west every day, I only have to luck out with one of them. Chances are slim, but there are so many of them, you know? Like having a million lottery tickets," I said. "But I still haven't thought of how to go about asking people. I got a marker and wrote a sign, but that's about it."

"What does the sign say?"

“Need a ride to Monterey, California.”

“Simple enough,” said Savannah.

“Yeah. Couldn’t think of any gimmick for it.”

“Mm. Maybe not having a gimmick and being upfront is what it takes. What else is going on in Chicago?”

I finished my cup as well and reached forward to put it where Savannah had. “Came across a college campus today.”

“How was that?”

I sighed. “Not so good, I think. I saw all these kids—well, I shouldn’t say kids, they were around my age—these college students, going to class, you know, in their college hoodies and backpacks. Made me think of Martin and Gordon, and what they must be up to now.”

“I’m guessing you haven’t kept in touch with them.”

“Yeah. That’s my fault, though. They would reach out after I first had to leave. Martin and Gordon would write and call. They even wanted to visit, actually. But after a while I cut contact with them. I couldn’t fathom it, the lives they were going to have. It wasn’t just the feeling of being left behind, it was more than that. More like—as if I had been moved to an entirely different track altogether. Unable to ever catch up unless I can turn back the clock. Like being on the sidelines. Yeah. That’s what it felt like. Just watching the whole thing unfold from the sidelines. It was better not to hear any of it.” I looked out at the beach. “How often do you think Monterey crosses their mind these days? Once every couple of months? Once a year? Not at all?”

“Not often,” Savannah said softly.

“Maybe here and there, but not every day like me, I bet. When I think about that it makes me feel very pathetic.”

“That’s my worst fear too, you know,” said Savannah. “Being left behind.”

“What are you afraid of being left behind from?”

“Same as you—everybody else.”

“I thought about you too. Whether or not you’d be in Monterey or not. I think I’m going to tell her everything if I find her. About my past, about all this. About you. That I’ve been talking to another Savannah. I think she’d believe it.”

Savannah chuckled. “Tell her all that. Tell her how you came all the way from New York, taking buses and walking and hitchhiking.”

“If I find her I will,” I said.

“I think you’ll find her.”

“What makes you so sure?”

Savannah turned to me and flashed a faint smile. “Because I don’t think I’m going to college. Gram says she can afford it, but I know she can’t. We can barely afford it for Hannah alone. And in terms of scholarships,” said Savannah, kicking one of the textbooks put on the floor to clear space, “I just about blew it all.”

I furrowed my eyebrows “What are you going to do?”

“Stay here with my grandmother. Take care of her. Keep working, so I can support her and Hannah. Pathetic, right?”

Somewhere in her life, Savannah must have mastered compassion. This is her method: She first listens, and then mirrors. She always matches your pain with hers. Not to minimize your struggle, or to offer a miraculous solution, but to let you know she has the same pains. She

mirrors your regrets with her mistakes, your insecurities with her fears, and your sins with her confessions.

“I don’t think that’s pathetic,” I said.

“No? It’ll keep going on like that. Twenty-something-year-old, living at her grandmother’s house, when people her age are graduating college? What about thirty-something-year-old, still in the same house, when people have careers and start families?”

“You’re not leeching off of your grandmother. You’re doing a noble thing.”

“I’m using her as a safety net.”

“There’s a difference. You’re taking care of her. Sure, there are things she’s providing for you, but you’d be doing good by her. You’re already doing good by her. There are sacrifices you’re making. You’re not just taking from her endlessly. You’re giving her something nobody else can give her.”

“I think if anybody should do it,” said Savannah, “it should be me.” Savannah took a deep breath and trembling a little, exhaled.

I put a hand on her shoulder. “You know, I’ve been thinking that if I find Savannah, we’d be able to help each other out a lot.”

“I think so too,” said Savannah in a low voice. I slowly moved my hand to her other shoulder and put my arm across her. She leaned, and her hair tickled against my neck. We stayed that way for a while.

“You are living my worst nightmare,” Savannah whispered. “How do you do it?”

We kissed in the faint green light.

Cleveland

I remember playing a game with Martin and Gordon around winter of my senior year. A sick game. I remember we were in Martin's room with some takeout. As usual, Martin was singing his praises for Hannah. Then out of the blue I asked him to rank the girls of our class, and where Hannah would be placed against them. Like a knee-jerk reaction, he said that she was undoubtedly number one, then corrected himself by saying that in his eyes there could be no list to begin with. He then asked me what my rankings would look like.

I got out of the car and called Rachel, and to her excited greetings told her everything. To Savannah, I said I would take a cab back to Gordon's.

In my rankings, Rachel was around 4th or 5th.

It was the middle of the night when I woke up. I walked away from the college as much as I could, moving away from tall buildings, and trudged into an alley where the streetlights could not reach. It was the concrete-gray hours before sunrise when I went back to sleep, and noon when I woke. When I couldn't fall back asleep, I sat up and idled until it became unbearable. When my chest felt like it would die of thirst without a distraction, I dragged myself out of the alley to the sidewalk. The rest of the day I watched people passing by, observing them close and trying to get to know them as much as possible before they were out of sight. When it became dark, I got food and went back into the alley for the night. I did not go to Monterey.

That went on for a while. But on the third morning of living in and out of that alley, I saw a man at the opening of the alley. He had a cigarette in his mouth, and after trying to get it going with his dead lighter, he shrugged to an invisible entity and began returning the cigarette to its pack. Then I remembered and I called out to him, my green lighter in hand.

“Appreciate it,” he said. His voice was deep. He inhaled, held it in with a contemplative look, and turned sideways to exhale. After taking another puff, he asked, “What’s on that sign there?”

I showed him the sign, and he let out an amused “huh.”

“Mind if I take a picture of you with the sign?” he asked. “I’m a photographer by trade.”

I didn’t know what to think of it, but I agreed.

“You can sit back down, stand, whatever makes you comfortable. You can look at the camera if you want or not. All up to you.” He reached into his sling bag and took out a camera, one of those where the lens was longer than the body.

I sat back down and still not knowing what to do, looked at the camera with the sign at my side. The man looked like a cyclops with a big black eye. After a few clicks, he scrolled through the photos and nodded to himself. He put his camera back in the bag and looked at me and my belongings. “When’s the last time you had a good meal?”

He took me to a fast food restaurant and let me order “To your heart’s content, man. It’s just burgers and fries, anyways.” He got what I got, and as he put in his order he asked to make both our orders large.

“Been driving all day. Traffic’s a pain. My back’s in pain. Gets a man hungry, you know? Name’s Cleveland.”

Cleveland was a large man that looked to be in his early forties. He had short curly hair and seemed to be one of those people who had wrinkles from smiling too much. He was lucky enough to have a light smile as his resting expression, although maybe I shouldn't say lucky, because such a thing was a result of a great deal of effort to be patient and kind.

"Mine's Sam," I told him.

"Nice to meet ya, Sam. I'd shake your hands, but they're greasy." He let out a chuckle, which was almost like a giggle in a deep voice. "So, if you don't mind my asking, what's your story? Sign like that, I figure there's got to be one."

"This?" I looked down at the sign propped up against my chair. "Just what it says. I've been trying to get to Monterey. Got here from New York City."

"All the way from New York? How'd you manage that?"

"Saving for bus tickets and a lot of walking. Got to Indiana by bus, and I was going to take another bus west, but there were some setbacks. Got my things stolen."

"So now you're looking for a ride."

"Pretty much. I don't expect I'll be able to hitchhike all the way to Monterey, but I'm hoping it'll get me closer."

"What's in Monterey?"

"A friend."

Cleveland nodded. He wiped his mouth with a napkin, scrunched up the trash on his tray, and gathered it in a paper bag. "I've got a proposition for you, Sam. It just so happens I'm headed west. To Seattle. And you know what, it gets pretty boring there out on the road, so I'd be willing to give you a ride. But I do have something to ask of you."

"What?"

“That you’d let me take pictures of you on our trip. As I’ve said, I’m a photographer, and I think our circumstances would make for some good pictures. We got a deal?”

“Absolutely.” I stuttered. “You’d really be willing to give me a ride all the way to Seattle?”

“Sure,” said Cleveland. “Think you’ll be able to get to Monterey from there?”

“Yes. I can figure that out. Made it this far.”

“Oh, and also, we’re going to be taking a little detour. A scenic route, along the northern edge instead of cutting straight through. I once read that Montana was very beautiful, and wanted to do some sightseeing. That okay with you?

“Not a problem at all. We could go to Canada and back for all I care. It’d still be faster than walking.” I calmed myself down. “Thank you. Really. This is quite incredible.”

“Don’t mention it. Done with your food? Let’s get going before the traffic starts up.” Cleveland got up from his seat. “Car’s parked just around the block.”

I don’t know what I was doing. It all happened so fast, and I still hadn’t thought fully about what I had done. But I ignored my thoughts, and went with what was in front of me. Going forward, if anything, was a good distraction.

Cleveland drove a gray SUV. The trunk was full of luggage, almost blocking the rear window, and the back seats were piled up with boxes as well. Cleveland put his camera bag on the floor behind the driver’s seat and told me to ride shotgun.

“Now, we’ll be driving a while,” said Cleveland. “Take a nap if you’re feeling sleepy, I won’t mind. There’s a lever to your side that’ll recline the chair back.”

“It’s alright. I’m not feeling sleepy, but thank you.”

But the car seat was very soft, and one of the nicest things I've had my back on for a long time in this life, and after an hour of fighting the slow tide of drowsiness I fell asleep. I woke up as the car slowed down to a stop.

"Had a good nap? You were out cold, man." Cleveland giggled.

"Shoot." I rubbed my eyes. "I'm sorry. I must have slipped off without realizing."

"It's all good. Man's got to sleep. I would've done the same."

"Where are we?"

"In the state of Wisconsin. Thought we'd make a stop here. Stretch our legs, take some photos."

We got out of the car and went for a walk. While we were waiting at a crosswalk, Cleveland suddenly took out his camera and started to take pictures of people on the other side. He kept taking pictures of strangers after that. People on sidewalks, people walking their dogs, people eating at restaurants. He even went into a grocery store and took pictures of two people comparing paper towels. When they noticed him they looked around, and with concerned expressions walked away.

He showed me his photos when we returned to the car. People were frozen mid-laugh, in conversation, greeting each other, and on their phones.

"You make normal life look like shots out of a movie," I said.

"That's some high praise. I'll take that." He scrolled back through his gallery. "Here's my favorite." It was a picture of me in the passenger seat, deep asleep with my jaw wide open. Cleveland laughed. "I'm sorry, man. It was too good not to take."

"Hey, deal's a deal," I said. "It's a good photo. I like it. Where to now?"

"Well, let's see if we'll be able to get to Minnesota before night."

Afraid of falling asleep again, I asked Cleveland a question once things got quiet on the road. “How do you walk up to complete strangers and start taking pictures of them? I wouldn’t have the guts to do that. Too nerve-wracking and embarrassing. And what if somebody has a problem with it? Some people must get angry at you for taking pictures of them, right?”

Cleveland smiled as if he had been waiting for someone to ask my exact question. “You mean how come I never get punched in the face doing what I do?”

“Pretty much. So, what’s the trick?”

“Well, it’s true that some people don’t like it when I’m taking pictures of them, which is completely understandable. People come up to me, and usually it’s along the lines of ‘Why are you taking pictures of me?’ to which I answer: ‘Because I think you’re beautiful.’”

“And that works?”

“Why, does it sound like it would lead to more punches in the face?”

“You said it, not me.”

“Does my face look bruised to you?” Cleveland giggled. “You’d be surprised how well it works. Of course, it doesn’t work all the time. In that case, I apologize and delete the photo in front of them. But in the end, I did it so much I got used to it. When I first started doing street photography, I was terrified. But now? I don’t feel much anymore.”

“You really don’t feel anything walking up to a random couple in a grocery store and taking pictures of them?”

“There is a bit of excitement. But fear? Not so much. Then there’s the satisfaction when I look through my work at the end of the day and see that I’ve got a good shot.” Cleveland seemed happy he could talk about the topic. “May I ask a question? You said you had a friend in Monterey. What kind of friend is he?”

“She. She’s a friend back from high school.”

“You must be pretty close to her to go to these lengths to see her.”

“Something like that. I haven’t seen her in a long time.”

“I see,” said Cleveland. “Sam, could I ask another question, perhaps a bit more personal?”

“What is it?”

“Is this about love?”

“No.” I shook my head. “It shouldn’t be. She was a good friend,” I said, trying to think of how to tell it to Cleveland, “that I ended up cheating on my girlfriend with. But recently I heard she might not be doing well, so I decided I’d go see her.” I looked at Cleveland. “That doesn’t make much sense, does it?”

“Hey, might not make much sense here,” he said, pointing at his head, “but it makes a whole lot of sense down here.” He pointed to his chest. “I can understand that. We can be like that, as people.”

“You ever gone through anything like that? On either side of it?”

“Yeah,” said Cleveland. His smile, along with the wrinkles that suggested them, were gone. He drove in silence for a moment. “I cheated on my fiancée . Whole reason I’m out here, really.” We passed by a sign for a rest stop, and Cleveland sighed. “Let’s stop for a bit. I could use some fresh air.”

We stopped at a gas station and he got snacks for the both of us. He took his camera with him, but didn’t take any pictures. “Mind if I have a smoke?” said Cleveland.

“Not at all.”

Cleveland took out a cigarette and thanked me when I handed him my green lighter. I told him he should keep it. “Funny how I said I needed some fresh air then started smoking, huh?” He drew a deep inhale and coughed a little. “I guess you’re pretty remorseful for what you did to your girl still?” I nodded. “Yeah, I am too, except for me it's only been weeks. How long’s it been for you?”

“It... happened in high school, so more than three years.” I wanted to tell him that it was very recent for me too. “But when I think about it, it feels recent.”

“That’s not good news for me, but I guess we deserve it,” said Cleveland. “She was very good to me, too. It wasn’t like she was cheating first on me, or didn’t love me anymore. Not one of the excuses that people have for cheating. She loved me every bit as much as she did when she loved me most, which was all of the time. Stuck with me when I was trying to make it as a photographer, through all those years.” Cleveland inhaled again and sighed it out.

“She was very good to me too,” I said. “And you know what’s worse? This time—I mean, when I cheated on her—it wasn’t the first time I was like that. I knew I wasn’t good to her. I had learned my lessons. I knew so clearly what was wrong, down to the details. I studied it, analyzed it, knew just where and what was wrong. Came up with a plan not to do it again. Then I went and did it again. How do you figure something like that happens?”

“Well,” said Cleveland, “I think knowing what’s wrong and doing what’s right are two different things. I mean, look at this here.” He took out his pack of cigarettes. “It has a picture of some dude’s lung all rotted out. It’s literally telling me that I’m going to suffer and die if I smoke it. Everybody in this country who smokes knows that, but it doesn’t mean they’ll quit. If people knew what was wrong and acted right, cigarettes wouldn’t be a multi-billion dollar industry.” He put out his cigarette, and threw it in a nearby bin. “What are the chances, people like us two

meeting at a time like this? I knew there was something was up when I saw you.” He slapped me on my shoulder. “Let’s get back on the road.”

Cleveland’s mood improved as we breezed through Wisconsin and entered Minnesota. When one of his favorite songs came up on the radio he turned it up and sang along to it. It was one of the songs he used to listen to a lot back in college, he said. When we stopped for the night in Minnesota, he bought me another meal. “Don’t try to refuse. I’m lucky enough to be making good money doing what I love. I got you while we’re traveling together, alright?” he said.

Toward the end of the night he got very needlessly apologetic trying to suggest that I would have to find a place to sleep for the night. I reassured him, saying that I would have never even expected to stay with him. Nevertheless, his face contorted with unnecessary guilt.

“It’s pretty chilly tonight. You sure you’ll be alright?”

“Yeah,” I told him. “I’m used to it.”

25

Careful

We met up very early in the morning and left Minnesota. Montana-bound, we drove in a straight line across North Dakota. Montana was, as Cleveland had read, very beautiful. You didn't have to be someone like Cleveland to get good photos out of it. Any photo of the towering mountain ranges holding up the sky like pillars would do. Just like the dunes of sand city, I imagine they would make for some excellent wallpapers.

Cleveland and I stopped in the afternoon for a late lunch. As we got out of the car Cleveland took a deep breath and said, "Air's so good here, I'd feel guilty to smoke."

We found a charming outdoor cafe and had a lunch of sandwiches and orange juice. Even there, Cleveland was busy with his work. He was particularly interested in a couple sitting across from us. They were silent, and I don't think they even noticed Cleveland. They seemed to be as interested in Cleveland as they were with each other. Before getting back in the car Cleveland took out his cigarettes, shook his head, and put it back in his pocket. By sundown we were approaching the center of Montana, the final orange rays of the sun flooding the car. The radio was turned down low to a murmur, and Cleveland seemed to be as done with the day as the sun. It was late when we had dinner. We parked at an empty rest stop and got food from an old hot dog stand. The picnic table we sat on was dusty with most of the paint stripped, and the neon lights from the hot dog stand faintly stained our food pink and green.

For a while we ate in silence. Then Cleveland stopped eating, took a long sip of his drink, and spoke. “Mind if I ask another question? One that really is none of my business?”

“Go ahead.”

“How did it happen? The cheating, I mean.”

I put my food down too and sighed. “I think we had a lot of secrets we only told each other about, and that was the root of it.”

Cleveland nodded. “Mhm. Intimacy grows on secrets.”

“Yeah. And we’d spend a lot of time together. She had a twin sister, who my friend had a crush on, so we started hanging out trying to set them up. Then we started hanging out on our own, again and again, and eventually it happened,” I said. I took a bite of my food and washed it down with soda. “What about you? How did it happen?”

Cleveland took a few seconds to think. “I think in terms of the emotions involved, mine was in the other direction. I think for you, Sam, it was a lot more about vulnerability. Shelter in each other. For me, it was more about invulnerability. Things were going good for me. I had exhibitions under my belt, commissions, even some offers to do lectures. She was someone I met through my agent, involved in the photography world. I met up with her a lot, feeling more invincible each time, and like you said, it eventually happened. And you know, it’s not like I didn’t have support from my–ex–fiancée . It wasn’t like she didn’t admire me. She’s the one that stuck with me while I was a starving artist. She’s the reason I didn’t starve. But knowing that didn’t stop me.”

“So, what are your plans now?”

“Now?” Well, Seattle’s where my folks are, which is where I’m headed. I told them over the phone, but I thought it’d be good to talk with them in person. Wish I could visit them under better circumstances. After that, I’ll probably wrap up the exhibit I’ve been working on.”

“Is that what all the photos you’ve been taking were for?”

“Yeah. It’s a collection I’ve been working on, of couples. I wanted to see if I could capture people getting used to each other. From the honeymoon phase to when they’re bored. Not just the two states, but every step in between. So when I’m done, maybe it could show the process of how a couple ends up taking each other for granted,” said Cleveland.

“Makes sense now why you were so interested in that couple at that cafe.”

“Pretty insane, though, right? I go and cheat on my fiancée , and go take pictures of how people get to where I ended up..”

I shook my head. “I think it’s a good idea, Cleveland. It makes more sense than what I’m doing.”

Cleveland smiled with a gentle rise of his cheeks and it propped up his tired eyes, although his face was still buried in grief. “I beg to differ, but thanks, man. You a good man. I know the exhibit isn’t some grand gesture I can do to bring her back. It’s just the hole I’m in and the only thing I know how to do is take pictures. I’ve also been thinking about talking to her again to apologize. Not to even ask for forgiveness or another chance, but just to apologize. But even that seems out of line. I suppose that’s what I’ll talk to my folks about,” said Cleveland. “I’m curious to hear what you would do.”

“I feel the same as you do. I want to apologize to her. But maybe that’s being selfish.”

“Selfish, yeah. Is it for her or is it for me? Probably for me. You know, Sam,” said Cleveland, “I’ve been thinking a lot during our little trip. Especially what we talked about

yesterday. Knowing better but doing wrong. And I think I know the reason for it. It's because we get used to it. In the end, I think that's all it is. You get used to something, and you forget that you know better. And a human being can get used to anything, which isn't a bad thing—I would be too scared to take a picture of someone on the streets if I wasn't used to it—but it's that we get used to everything. Whether it's our job or our partners. It's human nature, and a powerful one at that. But the man that can control what he gets used to—that'll be a happy man." Cleveland nodded to himself. "That'll be a good man."

The hotdog stand's neon sign was slowly dying, flickering its vital signs. An old truck trudged into the gas station, tired and quietly coughing with its mouth closed. Cleveland and I kept it company for a short while and topped off our tanks before driving into town. As we said farewell for the night, Cleveland yet again folded his face in the shape of worry, but then unwrapped it with inhuman kindness.

"What the hell—come on stay with me tonight. The place has got to have a couch bed or something." And before I could refute he turned away and started walking toward the hotel's entrance, leaving me with no choice.

I couldn't sleep well that night. I still didn't know what to make of the last few days. In just two days, I had gone from being in the midwest to nearly making it to the coast. In just two days, I had somehow met a man who hurt someone as deeply as I did, and he gave me a ride and even let me stay in his hotel room. It had all happened too fast, as if I had blinked and skipped a few months ahead. I thought about Savannah and her dice, then shook my head because I shouldn't think about her anymore. Everything was insane. But none of this had been normal to begin with. I'd do in Monterey what I would have done in real life. In the meantime, I would keep heading west. I had to keep moving, do what I could.

We arrived in Washington the next day. Cleveland's van steered into the driveway of a suburban home painted baby blue and came to a grand stop, the last of its kind on this trip.

"Here it is. This is where I grew up."

"Beautiful house," I said, getting out of the car. The hedges were well trimmed into neat cubes and the plants on the porch gleamed like green light on a mirror.

"Think my folks are out," said Cleveland. He began unloading his car, and I offered him a hand.

"This is all my stuff from the place Susanne and I lived in. Susanne, that's my-ex-fiancée."

It didn't seem like much for a whole household. There were two plastic containers full of clothes, three densely packed cardboard boxes, a disassembled white desk; and at the very end, a guitar case.

"Almost forgot about this old thing," said Cleveland. "Haven't played it in a long time. It's been sitting in there even before I moved out, actually."

"Is it an acoustic?"

"Yeah, some old beater that I got from a thrift shop. Sounds fine, though. You play?"

"I sort of did, back in high school. I had a friend who was really good with the thing, and he tried to teach me. It never got too far, though."

"Want it?"

"What-the guitar?"

"Yeah. Not like I got much use for it."

"I couldn't possibly take more from you, Cleveland."

“You’d be doing me a favor. It’s just more luggage for me. I guess the same would go for you, having to lug it around. But it’d suit you, I think. A traveling man with a guitar, that sounds just like the sort of thing I’d love to take pictures of.”

I ran my hands over the lint-ridden fabric of the case. I unzipped the top to see the headstock of the guitar, rusty strings coiled into it. “You sure?”

“It’s all yours,” said Cleveland, and I thanked him, probably for the thousandth time.

After moving all the luggage, Cleveland and I sat on a bench on the front porch. The breeze was cool and the sun just about to retire for the day. Cleveland reached for his pocket but stopped halfway through. I think he was going for his smokes but stopped when he realized where he was.

Cleveland broke the silence. “I don’t know about you, but I couldn’t sleep too well last night. Did a lot of thinking, and I think I’m gonna apologize to her. I’ve at least got to.”

“I think that’s what I’d do too.”

“Yeah. The rest is her right to decide, and apologizing is all I can and should do.”

“I wish the best for you, Cleveland. I really do. You’ve shown me more kindness than anyone would have.”

Cleveland waved his hand in the air. “You know it wasn’t much. And I wish the best for you too, man. I hope you’ll find what you’re looking for in Monterey.”

I looked at him and sighed. “Thanks for the ride again, Cleveland.”

“Grateful you joined me for it.”

I reached out for a handshake but got a big hug instead. I greeted him farewell one last time, and with a guitar on my back, began walking toward where Cleveland said downtown would be. I didn’t get very far, though, because I heard Cleveland after only a couple steps.

“Oh, and Sam?” Cleveland called out.

Turning back, I saw a big Cyclops with a black lens for an eye. And at that moment, as I stood looking back, I heard his camera click. “Be careful what you get used to.”

Fair

Cleveland will be returning to his fiancée, and as for me, to Monterey. I got out of the car and told Savannah I would take a cab back, and all was hushed around the lonely pier after she left.

I was the first to return to Gordon's home. Martin was still out with Hannah, and I presumed Gordon on his way back from Big Sur. I greeted Gordon's family, who were watching TV after dinner, then hid in his room until my friends' return.

Martin arrived after an hour. Though he entered the room with a big smile and no doubt a plethora of stories about Hannah, both promptly dissolved into the air as soon as he saw the look on my face.

"I messed up," I told him.

He sat slowly on the bed and I told him everything, beginning to end. We waited together for Gordon's return in silence.

Gordon too came in with a loud greeting and an ear-to-ear grin, but soon went through a transition like that of Martin's. "I cheated on Rachel. With Savannah, tonight," I confessed to him.

"Is Rachel okay? Did you tell her?" he asked immediately, dropping his smile for good.

"I called to let her know. But she said nothing. Just hung up."

Martin sat hunched over with his elbows on his knees and his hands gathered below his chin, muttering something along the lines of, "Oh no, Rachel." Gordon instructed us to wait in

the living room and went into the kitchen. By then his family had retired for the night, leaving it dark and empty. Martin turned on the fireplace to a gentle flame and joined Gordon in the kitchen. Moments later, they returned with three cups of hot chocolate on a tray.

“Couldn’t think of anything better. Or anything at all,” said Gordon.

The three of us sat in a semi-circle around the faint glow of the fire. “What are you going to do now?” Gordon asked.

“Apologize to Rachel, in person. Not to ask forgiveness or for her to take me back. Only to apologize.”

Martin nodded slowly, his gaze fixed on the faint yellow flames ahead.

“I’m sorry to you two, acting the way that I did and bringing this to you. Especially when things are going so well.”

“That you don’t have to be sorry for,” said Gordon. “You have enough of that to do for Rachel.” He sighed and put a firm hand on my shoulder. “But I’m here.”

I turned to him. “You sure?” I asked quietly.

“Well, do you know that what you’ve done is bad?” asked Gordon.

“Of course.”

“And you’ll be doing your best to right your wrongs?”

“Yes.”

“Then I don’t see how leaving you alone would do much good.”

I let out a deep breath and looked down at the floor. “I don’t deserve you two,” I whispered.

“Hey.” Martin turned to the clock, his hand also gripping my shoulder tight. It was a minute past twelve. “Merry Christmas.”

It was the final semester of our senior year when we returned, the spring semester. All of the classes were the same except for Short Stories, which was now “Novellas.” I didn’t go to breakfast on the first day of school and instead had cereal with Martin in his room.

I sat next to Martin for Novellas and stayed silent throughout, refraining from discussions and looking down at my notebook for the most part. Rachel rushed out the door as soon as class was dismissed, and by time I had gone out she was already heading down the stairs at the end of the hall.

“Rachel,” I called out, in a reluctant voice just short of being a shout. I saw a slight hesitation in her but it quickly dissipated, and she continued down the stairs.

Like Cleveland said, even the apology was selfish. If she didn’t want to hear it, that was it. I went down the stairs admitting this to myself, only to find her at the bottom, standing silently.

“I wanted to apologize and talk about what I did,” I said, trying not to stammer. “But only if you wanted to hear it.”

“When?” she asked coldly.

“Would tonight be okay?”

“After study hall. In front of the library,” instructed Rachel, and hurried away.

I kept my rounds short that night, trying to keep up a smile as I welcomed everyone back for the new semester. Ms. Jamieson was on duty with me as usual, working in the common room.

“So, how is the new semester for you?” she asked as I returned.

Trying to muster up a smile again, I said, “Good. I thought it was cool that Short Stories was called Novellas now.”

“Oh yes—I love surprising my students with that every year.”

“Will we actually be writing novellas?”

“We’re certainly going to give it a try; I’ve had students write full novellas, others a collection of short stories. The point is to attempt a much bigger piece of work, bigger than anything we’ve ever written before, and to learn from that process,” said Ms. Jamieson. I wanted to ask—have you thought about continuing the short story you wrote for your finals? The ending made it seem like there was more to be told.”

“I think there is definitely more to be told. The man’s got to get to Monterey, after all. That’s a long journey.”

“Well then, it looks like you have your work cut out for you. As always, you’re welcome to share your progress with me if you want feedback,” said Ms. Jamieson kindly. “I’m looking forward to what’ll happen to the man, if you decide to continue the story.”

“I’ll be sure to keep you updated, Ms. Jamieson.” I wished I could have talked to her about the story more, but I checked the time to see that study hall was over. I bid Ms. Jamieson a good night and hurried out the poolside entrance of the common room. I darted past the vacant swimming pool, no doubt to be heated up the next morning as practice for the spring season began, and dashed through the space between the two dorms. The white paths were colored gray and yellow by the lights, and my feet slapped against them as I ran toward the library. The amphitheater was empty. There were no deer, but plenty of stars.

Rachel arrived about five minutes after I had. I waited in front of the library’s entrance, staying silent until she reached me.

“Hi,” I greeted her.

“Hello.”

“Thank you for letting me talk to you.”

“Okay.”

“I’m not here to ask for forgiveness or to ask you back. I got used to you, took you for granted, and I cheated on you. You deserved none of it, and I’m sorry.”

“Okay,” Rachel said again. Rachel’s lips twisted, hesitant to speak her next words. “Do you still...have feelings for me?”

I followed her question with a pause. “I don’t think I deserve to say that I do. But I do.”

“Because I still do too. And I wish I didn’t—I wish it could be like Gwen said, to forget it all and abandon you completely, because you used me.”

“She’s right.”

Rachel continued, rushing through her words as if she were out of breath: “And Gwen says that it’s natural to still have feelings for you, but that I need to move on. No matter how much you say you’re sorry or beg, she told me to never make the mistake of getting back together with you. What do you think about that?”

“I think she’s right again,” I muttered.

“But for some reason,” she said with great anger and frustration, both things I had never seen in her before, “I still find myself attached to you. Am I a fool for that?”

“No. That would be me, not you.”

“Okay.” She paused again. “So like Gwen said, we’re ending it here, right?”

I took a deep breath and tried to look at her, but had to avert my gaze. “Yes. I think that’s only fair, after what I did to you.”

“You’ve hurt me more and in more ways than I thought was possible. And I know Gwen is right about how unhealthy and big of a mistake this is. But despite all that, I find myself wanting to try again.”

“You’re willing to give me another chance?”

Rachel swallowed a lump in her throat. “I’m afraid I am.”

Though unsure if I could, or should, I hugged her. My hands over her back could feel the soft wool of her clothes and the slight warmth underneath, and the scent of a laundry detergent comfortably broken in enveloped me. I could have made promises and pledges to be better and faithful a thousand times over, but all I could do was say that I was sorry.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

All she did was hold on tight, the scent of an unnamed flower about her.

We’ve been going to breakfast again, and I take care to arrive before her, although she still surprises me sometimes by waving from the window as I approach the cafeteria. We’ve been walking to classes together, and even the night walks have resumed.

I haven’t talked to or seen Savannah since. My lunches are spent with Rachel, since Martin spends his with his girlfriend now. What I’m doing to Savannah isn’t fair to her either, but it’s either this or wronging Rachel even more. I’ve also told Martin and Gordon about Rachel and me along with my new boundaries, and they’ve been nothing but supportive. I think they’ve talked to Rachel separately as well. Martin and Gordon, they truly are great friends.

Only one aspect of Rachel and my old routine, the study halls, has changed. She decided it would be best if I didn’t come to the library with her anymore. She hasn’t talked to me about it,

but it's quite obvious that Gwen would detest me, and with good reason. Study hall is a time Rachel has reserved for Gwen now, and I'm happy she has.

The Thursday a week after Rachel and I talked, Gwen confronted me. It was after the end of study hall and I was alone in the common room, gathering my belongings. Gwen came in through the poolside entrance, returning from the library, and marched straight towards me.

"So Rachel gave you another chance," said Gwen.

"She did," I said quietly, and waited for her to continue.

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Gwen, her cold voice articulating every syllable.

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that I don't deserve it, after the mistake I made."

"You cheating on her wasn't a mistake. Her getting back together with you is."

"That's fair."

"Yes, fair." Her voice softened. "To everyone but Rachel."

Infinity

Today I realized again how beautiful the sunsets are here, especially on the beaches of 17 Mile Drive. The Sun goes without a fuss as it drowns, bleeding all over the sky and spilling its orange guts over the horizon. It gifts the caps of little waves with light, and they must like it very much because they dance joyfully, shimmering as they sway. The unhindered horizon provides a glimpse of infinity—it is where two parallel planes, the ocean and the sky, never to meet, meet.

The waves whispered steadily into our ears while the spontaneous barks of the seals broke the monotony. The sea smelled of the sea, but not one that reeked of death. It was a scent of sand and salt more than anything else, and it was pleasant except for when the wind blew from Bird Rock. Before us were the orange, red, and dark blue of the conjoining infinities, and beneath a beige bed of sand. A thick mat of ice plants, green succulents with red and purple tips, covered the incline to our backs. I've been told that the plants aren't from here. Instead, they are an invasive species, with a voracious appetite for choking out native plants. You can see firsthand that this is true; the plants cover the better part of 17 Mile Drive, even more than sand in some parts, and barely leave room for any other flora. Their conquest isn't limited to Monterey either—drive along the coast of California, and you are bound to come across the remnants of their war path. And though they are foreign, 17 Mile Drive wouldn't be 17 Mile Drive without them. If they are aliens, 17 Mile Drive may as well be Mars.

The sand was cool to the touch, but not wet. And Rachel, leaning against my shoulder, was very warm. We waved goodbye to the sun and waited until all the light vanished, and the only source of warmth was that of each other.

I catch glimpses of Savannah here and there, always in the corners of my eyes. She's there for split seconds before she disappears around a corner on my way to classes, heads out the door with fruit as I have lunch with Rachel, and gets in her car as I get the bikes out of the shed after school with Martin and Gordon.

School has been going, and I've started on my novella—although I don't know if I can call it that, since I don't know if I'll be able to finish it. So far the man has left New York on a bus to Indiana, reliving his fondest memories every night. Who knows, maybe he'll get his things stolen and have to walk to Chicago where he'll meet a very kind-hearted man who'll give him a ride to Washington. Maybe this is cheating. Every day I review my words from the night before, whispering them back to myself in search of sentences that need sanding down. It's an odd mix of frustration and embarrassment. You are eager to break through so you can move on, but simultaneously so embarrassed of your own words that you wouldn't touch them with a ten-foot pole. And I wrestle them, writing them every which way except one that sounds natural—the one that sounds like the books you've read—until I decide I need a break and walk one door down the hall.

"Again?" Martin asked as I walked over to his bed.

"Yes, again."

"What was it this time?" he inquired, looking back and forth between his laptop and his worksheet.

“Everything,” I replied. “Just sentence-to-sentence. I can’t put a finger on it, but it just feels off when I read it. It doesn’t sound like anything I’ve read.”

“Maybe you’re not reading enough.”

“Yeah, that’s probably it right there.”

“I feel like you’re stressing too much about it. If you think about it, you’re already ahead. I haven’t even finished a single story outside what I wrote last semester.”

“I guess you’re right.” I laid down on Martin’s bed. “I do enjoy it though.”

“How much do you have so far?”

“Around thirty pages. But that’s double-spaced.”

“Thirty pages?” Martin looked up from his desk. “You’re way ahead. I don’t think all of the college essays I wrote would be thirty pages combined.”

“Yeah, well, I think stories are easier to write than college essays, though.”

“Depends on the person,” said Martin, swiveling his chair to face me. “But I’m so glad we got the essays done with. You gotta write them, meet with your counselors, rewrite them, and then proofread the same thing over and over again... Now all we gotta do is wait.” Martin leaned back and briefly stared at the ceiling. “Which schools you think you’re getting into?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t.” I too stared at the dim ceiling, my hands gathered behind my head like a cushion. “Have you talked to Savannah lately?”

“Not really. I don’t see her too often.”

“Not even at lunch?”

“She doesn’t really join us for lunch anymore. Apparently she told Hannah that she didn’t want to interrupt our time together. Hannah’s been trying to get her to sit with us again, though.”

“Mm. Hannah ever talk about her? How she’s doing?”

“Sometimes. She’s been a little worried, but it looks like Savannah’s managing, for the most part. Going to work after school and all that, as usual.”

“That’s good to hear,” I said quietly. “What about you and Hannah? Things are good between you two?”

Martin broke a soft smile, and his expression brightened. “Yeah. It’s wonderful. More than I imagined it would be.”

“That’s good. I’d say, you know, to never get used to her and all that, but I think you’ve already got it. That and I’m not the greatest person to be giving advice.”

“No, that’s good advice, and something that I should always keep in mind.” He hesitated a little, then asked carefully: “Things between you and Rachel good?”

“Yes. Things are—different, I think. But not in a bad way. Just different. It’s more—quiet? Feels more quiet and calm, maybe. I don’t know if that’s the right way to put it. Regardless, I think it’s good things are different. It didn’t exactly go well when it was like last time. But yeah—good. Thanks for asking.” I sat up. “Think I’ll go back to work now. See you later?”

“See you. Hey,” Martin asked as I was at his door, “ramen after study hall?”

You know what my answer was.

Sometimes, Steinbeck steps back from being a storyteller to talk to you. Sometimes it’s at the beginning of chapters, and other times through the words of his characters. He puts down the storybook he’s reading from, takes a long draw of his cigar, and briefly becomes a philosopher to tell you what he has found to be true in life. And the great part is that he isn’t dispensing his thoughts out of nowhere, because it all relates back to the story. He gives you something to chew on, some food for thought, then proves it in the story he tells.

Take this passage from *East of Eden*, where he calls time a “strange and contradictory matter in the mind.” It would make sense for the routine and eventless times—the boring times—to be thought of as endless, he says. After all, we’ve all been stuck in a long line or bored out of our minds in class where time seems to be deliberately moving slower out of spite. But then he contests that it’s the opposite, that it’s the times filled to the brim with emotions, the times “splashed with interest, wounded with tragedy, crevassed with joy” that seem long looking back. Events are like posts for time to hang onto, and therefore the eventful times long and the mundane short—“Eventlessness has no posts to drape duration on,” he writes. “From nothing to nothing there is no time at all.” And this is right when I think about it. Looking back at the past few weeks—New York, the bus, Chicago, and Cleveland—they feel like a couple months instead. And where I was three years ago seems almost equidistant in time to what my life was a couple weeks ago; the distance between when I was in New York and when I was last physically in Monterey seems about the same. I guess time stretches when it’s stowed away in the cupboard of the mind, draping itself on memories while the eventless shrivel down to dust.

Ms. Jamieson and I had a discussion about the passage on Thursday night, and she agreed. “It’s like coming home after a family vacation and looking back to the start of it, isn’t it? It feels like ages ago, even if it was only a week or two. I suppose old John is right—each memory is like a hurdle your mind has to jump through. It’s a very good book,” concluded Ms. Jamieson. “Quite long, but worth it.”

“Have you read other books by him, Ms. Jamieson?”

“Of *course*. You practically have to if you want to be an English teacher. In fact, I teach *Cannery Row* for my freshman English classes. How is your novella going, by the way? I’m curious to hear your progress.

“Oh, it’s been going so slowly. I don’t like any of my sentences and I don’t know why.”

Ms. Jamieson put her chin in her palm. “Well, are you trying to write every day?”

“I am. I try to get in a little during study hall if I’m done with my work, or after it before I sleep.”

“Then you’ll be fine,” said Ms. Jamieson, waving her hand in the air. “Think about it this way. How many words do you write in a day?”

“In a day? Not much.” I opened my document and scrolled around. “I would say 300 to 400? 500 on a good day.”

“Perfect. Let’s say you’ll get better at writing and your speed improves, which it will, and that you start averaging around 500 words a day.” She searched something on the web. “The internet tells me that *Cannery Row* is about 50,000 words long. So if you keep that pace up, you’ll have something as long as *Cannery Row* in 100 days. Your own *Cannery Row* in about three months. Not bad, right? And what we’ll need to write in class will be much shorter than that.”

I chuckled. “Huh. I suppose not. *Cannery Row* in three months.”

Ms. Jamieson was getting quite enthusiastic now, having that precious moment where teachers become excited. “Let’s take it one step further—it says *East of Eden* is around 200,000 words. That’s only 400 days at 500 words a day. About thirteen months, to be exact. That may sound long, but think about where you were 13 months ago. Now imagine that in the amount of time from now, you can have your own novel—most likely in less time than that too, since 500 words is a conservative estimate. Isn’t that incredible?”

“Huh. I suppose so.” My mind hurdled over to where I was a year ago. “A whole book in a year with just a few paragraphs a day,” I muttered.

Ms. Jamieson smiled with warmth. “Of course, it’s not the end of the world if you miss a day here and there. We all deserve rest. Speaking of which, do you have any plans for this weekend?”

“Yes I do. I’m thinking about going stargazing this Saturday.”

Ms. Jamieson perked up from her seat. “How wonderful, where at?”

“Just around the forests. I know a spot.”

“Well, have fun,” said Ms. Jamieson, “but don’t let me catch you locked out after lights out, you hear?”

On Saturday night I met Rachel in front of the dimly lit swimming pool, chilled by then from the ferocious whirlpool it was that morning. She arrived cloaked in a fuzzy brown blanket, wrapped around her head like a hood and draping down to her knees like a cape.

“Gwen let me borrow it,” said Rachel. “I didn’t tell her what it was for, though.”

“Yeah, probably best that you didn’t.”

“So, where are we going?”

“I thought it would be a beautiful night to go stargazing.”

Rachel stood up on her toes, as if the added height would help her see better, and looked up to confirm my statement. “I agree. Where to?”

Instead of our usual path past the gym to the golf course, I led us to the edge of campus. From there we got on the asphalt roads.

“Are we going to the beach?” asked Rachel.

“Almost,” I said.

The road bent right, and we continued down the hill that we would usually take to the beach. The golf course was on our right, looking as empty and massive as ever in the moonlight, and mounds of dirt covered thick with trees and bushes on our left. I stepped off the road onto one of the dirt mounds and led Rachel by the hand through a small opening between branches.

“Wait a second...” muttered Rachel.

“Watch your head,” I said as we went up a narrow path up a sharp incline, thin branches like veins hanging low. Finally I set aside the last bundle of branches at the top of the incline, revealing a flat bed of sand enclosed by cypress trees on all sides.

Rachel looked back at me, her teeth gleaming in the dark. “This is Gwen’s secret spot. How do you know this place?”

“You told me.”

Rachel shook her head. “Nuh-uh. I would remember sharing a secret like that. When did I tell you?”

I smiled softly. “Maybe you did forget. It was a long time ago, after all.”

We set Gwen’s blanket down in the sand to lie down. “This is the blanket Gwen uses for the beach, so it’ll be okay, setting it down on the sand like this,” said Rachel. The sky was obsidian black with stars, so many that the stars were only a thumb’s length apart from each other. “Some of my college results came out,” said Rachel quietly, her words gliding along the soft ocean breeze.

“Yeah?” I waited for her to continue. With things like college results, it was better to let people tell you. If it was good news they would share it without being asked; if it was bad, asking would only salt the wounds.

“Lots of options, thankfully,” Rachel said.

“I’m happy to hear that.”

“Yeah. My mom and dad had a lot to say about it.”

“Is it one of those early action schools you have to commit to?”

She turned sideways to face me and nodded. “Yep.”

“Any of them in New York?”

“One of them, yeah.”

“That’s great, then. That’s what you wanted, right?”

“I guess. My mom thinks I should commit to it. Then my dad calls and says I can do better. Then there’s the school I applied to together with Gwen, which won’t come out for a while.”

“And the deadline to commit is soon, I’m assuming.”

Rachel nodded again.

“Sounds stressful.”

“It is. I wish they’d stop calling me about it. Always one thing with mom, another with dad, and I get to play the messenger.” Rachel sat up and hugged her knees. “And the messenger always gets shot. I got really angry at them yesterday.” She took out her phone from her pocket, and it had a large crack spread across its screen like a spider web. “I feel so ashamed.”

I took it from her hand. “It’s okay. Don’t be. I would have done the same, if not worse.”

“I just feel so horrible every time I see it. Like I’m being a bad daughter. They’re the ones paying for college after all. And the tuition they’re paying for this place”—she waved her hand around at the trees—“is as much as that already. We’re lucky, you know? To be able to live at a school like this. Next to a golf course and a beach. All they’ve provided is much more than what most kids get, and I feel so ashamed for complaining. For getting angry.”

“Providing isn’t the same thing as loving. Not to say that your parents aren’t loving,” I added.

“I know. Still—we’re lucky, you know?”

I nodded slowly. “That we are. But if that’s all that mattered that’d mean everyone here feels loved at home, and well, we know that isn’t true.”

“I guess you’re right.” Rachel buried her chin on her knees. “Providing and loving, Providing but not loving, Not providing but loving, and not providing and not loving,” she muttered. She picked up a stick and drew a two-by-two chart in the sand. “I think that it’d be easy to say that parents who provide and love are good parents, and parents who can’t provide and don’t love are bad. I don’t know about the other two, though. What do you think?”

“About which one?”

“Let’s start with providing but not loving.”

“I think it’s safe to say that they’d be on the worse side of things.”

“But if they can provide a life for their kids where they won’t be lacking anything? Allow them all the opportunities they want?”

“Those are good, yes, but I think lack of love would be too big of a thing to be missing. So big that it might just undo all the good.”

“True,” said Rachel in a slightly more energized voice, enjoying the discourse. “What about parents who love but can’t provide? Parents who can’t afford to feed and clothe them properly, let alone give them a good education. People who can’t give their kids any opportunities. Would they be good parents?”

“That wouldn’t be ideal either, of course.”

“Let’s say that we have two pairs of parents. The first set is providing, but not loving. So the kid ends up having a bad relationship with them for the rest of their lives—never calls them, and family dinners are forever a thing of the past. But the parents have provided for their kid so well that the kid grows up to be successful and happy with their own family. A loving family.

“Now the second set of parents, they can’t provide but they’re loving. The child faces many struggles growing up, and it continues into adulthood where they’ll now have to take care of their parents on top of their own burdens. Not to say a child who hasn’t been provided well will always end up in a bad situation, but which one do you think is the better parent, the first or the second?”

“Well, it’s mostly going to be a mix of the two parents, won’t it? Most parents would fall somewhere in that grid,” I said, motioning to her drawing in the sand, “rarely at the corners.”

“So which would you have less in the mix?” Rachel and I both pondered, weighing the scales in our minds, until she picked up the stick again and shifted the sand to erase the chart. “It’s a difficult thing. But I guess at the end of the day, it is a mix and when it comes down to it my parents do love me. They wouldn’t abandon me.”

The breeze died down and so did the humming of the trees. “Yeah, I guess they wouldn’t. You’d certainly hope that they wouldn’t,” I said and sat up. “I’ve got another question—let’s say you ended up doing something bad. Something very horrible. Do you think your parents would still be by your side?”

“How bad?”

“Let’s say you hurt someone a lot. Worse than what I’ve done to you. I mean physically, to an irreversible degree. And let’s say because of that you don’t have a future anymore. No job, no family, nothing like that.”

“My parents wouldn’t leave me in that state.”

“No? Even if it was completely your fault?”

Rachel shook her head. “I don’t think so. I think when it comes down to things like that, neither of them would give up on me. They’d know leaving me like that wouldn’t do anyone good.” She leaned against her knees, facing me. “What about you?”

I stared at a star until I could see many more around it. “I don’t know. For some reason I’m not very confident that they’d stand by me. But I suppose when you do something like that you don’t exactly deserve support.”

“But that’s the nature of having children, isn’t it? Good things you give them more than they deserve, and bad things not as much as they do.”

“If they’re providing and loving, maybe.” I lay back on the blanket to get a better view of the universe. Rachel followed, snuggling right next to me so that I could catch the scent of that unnamed flower again. I told her, “Let’s you and I go to Big Sur this weekend. Gordon tells me that it’s beautiful.”

“Okay,” Rachel said with her childlike smile under the starlight. “How are we going to get there?”

“I’m sure there’s a bus we can catch that’ll get us there. It’ll be a little road trip.”

She jolted in place as if she was hopping on the ground. “Yes—a road trip. Let’s do that,” she said, and her teeth shone bright like the stars above. “You know, tonight reminds me of my favorite painter.”

“And who would that be?”

“Van Gogh.”

I looked up towards the sky again and laughed. “Ah. I guess it is a starry night after all.”

Rachel laughed too. “Yeah. You know, there’s a quote by him that I really like. I even memorized it. He said: ‘Be clearly aware of the stars and infinity on high. Then life seems almost enchanted after all.’”

And life seemed almost enchanted after all.

Rain

It gets very lonesome whenever it rains at the school. When it rains in Del Monte Forest there is only gray and green, and the two colors make you feel very blue. The rain hushes everything to a quiet murmur in its embrace. The air, pleasantly humid, offers a cool touch while refusing to cling to your skin. All of this makes you very nostalgic for the present. You don't want to go out, not even for food. Instead you just want to stay indoors, be isolated with someone, and listen to slow and melancholy music.

I remember looking out my window on a day like that junior year, watching and listening to the trees sway in the rain. All the lights were off except for Martin's dim desk lamp, casting the whole room in a shadow. The rain was knocking politely on our windows, asking to be let in, and inside there was no need to put on any somber music because Martin was making his own.

Even now, I miss that very much.

It was a day like that in my dreams tonight. I must have replayed it a thousand times over in my mind, but I had forgotten that it was a rainy day. Though I have thought about it a lot, this was my first time reliving it, after all. A group physics project was due soon, and I was scheduled to meet with my partner Sebastian to work on it during study hall.

There were ways to avoid it, I'm sure. I could have talked to the teacher and made up some excuse about how I wasn't comfortable working with him. But then I wanted to try something, and so I let it be.

The day was foggy from the start—I couldn't see the cafeteria from the dorm on my way to have breakfast with Rachel. Foggy mornings were common in the forest, but when the skies hadn't cleared up by lunch, we knew. Umbrellas started showing up in the palms of students and faculty on their way to class in zip-ups and hoodies. By the time classes were over, the eerie gusts of wind, the dark-gray skies, and the colder-than-usual temperature all pointed to one thing.

The rain started to drizzle just when we had ridden our bikes out of the parking lot. "Shoot—rain," said Martin, his bike leaning against his side.

Gordon took his helmet off and put a hand out in front of him. "Looks like it. Guess biking's off," He hopped on his bike. "Best get back to the trailer before it gets any worse."

The bike trailer was parked near the faculty houses. Its aluminum hull was dented and scratched up by generations of high school students, and the rain was drumming an incomprehensible rhythm against it. Gordon put his bike in first and helped get ours in. Soon the rain started coming down much harder, and the drumming so severe that we had to start yelling to hear each other. "Where's the rest of the team?" Martin yelled.

"Probably watching the weather report," replied Gordon.

The rain was now so fierce that the view outside of the trailer looked as if it had a shower curtain over it, and so the three of us sat in the trailer, waiting for the rain to have its fit. It was then that I saw two figures emerge from the edge of campus. The two of them, one much taller than the other, ran across the parking lot and hurried into an all-too-familiar black sedan. It then drove off, Savannah driving Sebastian to only God knows where.

We rushed back to our dorm when the rain died down momentarily. Gordon was staying over at Martin's room until dinner, but I told them I was tired and retired to my room. After my shower, I took the strings off of my guitar and wiped it down until it was free of fingerprints and

dust. When the cleaning was over I put on the strings, tuned it up, put it back on its stand, and waited until 7:30.

Sebastian arrived about ten minutes late. We discussed what we needed to do for the project and got to it. After an hour of working, Sebastian set his pencil down and stretched. “I think we’re in good shape,” he said.

“I think so too.”

“You mind if we take a small break?”

“Sure, let’s do that,” I said. Sebastian leaned back and silently scrolled through his phone, occasionally stopping to text someone. After 10 minutes he stretched again, cracking his joints, until he caught a glimpse of my guitar on the stand.

“Hey, nice guitar,” Sebastian said.

“Yeah. I got it junior year. Martin’s been trying to teach me.”

“Cool,” he said. “Well, ready to go back to work?”

“Yeah, sure.” I opened my laptop, and we began working in silence again. There wasn’t much to be said, and study hall was nearing its end. “You hear the news about people dying from overdoses in the area?” I asked out of nowhere.

Sebastian looked up from the desk with a raised eyebrow. “Yeah, I’ve heard.”

“How do you think that stuff gets around here?”

Sebastian shrugged. “However drug dealers do it, I guess.”

“I wonder if they ever know what they’re giving to someone will kill them. And how they would feel when they find out someone actually died. How responsible do you think they are in a case like that? Because it isn’t quite murder, right?” Sebastian’s eyebrows were twisted in confusion and his lip pressed together tight. I looked at my physics partner with compassion.

“I don’t know. Sorry, I was just reading an article about it earlier. Seemed really random, you know? You wouldn’t expect something like that to happen in Monterey.”

“I guess not.”

When study hall was over, Sebastian promptly packed his backpack, told me he’d see me in class, and left. I didn’t write that night. I sat in my chair with my guitar, strumming the few chords I barely knew.

A few weeks have passed since that rainy day. I keep seeing Savannah with Sebastian together around campus. Sometimes when I come back to my room I have an empty laugh at the sight of my guitar. And as the weeks go by, in the emails, the announcements during assembly, and the conversations between friends, I am reminded that the year is coming to an end. All the college results will come out soon, there’ll be prom, and then the finals. All that will happen in the short span of about 2 months. After that, though I have no idea what it’ll be like, we’ll graduate.

What would I do then? Would I start over from the beginning? Say goodbye to Rachel, Martin, Gordon, Hannah, and Savannah, and say hello to Savannah, Hannah, Gordon, Martin, and Rachel? I don’t think I can bring myself to that. So what would be the alternative? To keep living on? Imagine that. Going to college in my dreams, living my life as it should have been. That may be more disturbing than starting over.

“Writing again?” asked Ms. Jamieson on a faithful Thursday night the week before spring break.

“Yeah. Just chugging along,” I said.

“Are your sentences still not feeling right?”

“That, among other issues.”

Ms. Jamieson closed her laptop. “Would you like to discuss them with me?”

“Actually, I think I do.” I closed my laptop as well and looked at Ms. Jamieson. “I’ve been having problems with the plot. The man, he’s headed to Monterey, meeting new people on his path, all the while he’s reliving his last year of high school. But then I got to thinking—what would the man do if he finishes living his senior year in his dreams? Would he start over from the beginning, or would he live out his life after high school?”

Ms. Jamieson looked up at the ceiling with her index finger on her chin. After some thought, she said, “Well, I think that depends on what the man is looking for in Monterey. He is dreaming of Monterey because he misses it, and he’s headed to Monterey in hopes that he’ll find something that will satisfy him, right? Is the man simply going to stop dreaming just because he gets there? I would think not. Whatever he finds in Monterey will either convince him to stop or not. So, what is the man looking for in Monterey, Sam?”

“A fresh start.”

Ms. Jamieson smiled. “A fresh start. There we go. If he finds a new start there, maybe he won’t feel compelled to be dreaming anymore.”

“What if he doesn’t find a fresh start?”

“Well, that’s for you to decide. Maybe the man will continue dreaming for the rest of his life, or he’ll have to find a reason to quit. If he wants to quit dreaming, that is.”

“That would be a very bleak ending,” I said. “If the man resorts to living where his life and his dreams are switched around.”

“Nothing wrong with bleak endings. I think that would be a very interesting approach if you decided to do it.”

I spaced out for a moment, staring at the fireplace and imagining myself as the logs. “Maybe it would be.” Snapping out of my trance and meeting Ms. Jamieson’s eyes, I said, “But I don’t think I’ll let it end like that.”

Record

Tahoe was where Martin, Gordon, and I were headed for spring break. We were staying there for four days, packed to the brim with skiing, driving around Lake Tahoe, and cooking good food.

I asked Rachel if she wanted to join us, but she decided it would be best for her to return to her mother's house. They had a lot to talk about, she said. So it was decided that the trip was going to be one for the boys—Martin and Gordon both agreed that they would have enough time with their girlfriends once we were back in Monterey, since Gordon's folks were kind enough to let us stay at their home again for the rest of spring break.

There were many ski resorts in Tahoe—it is kind of like Monterey with its golf courses, I suppose. The location of these resorts was a great convenience if you wanted to ski; the price of them, however, was not. We were overjoyed to discover, then, that there were plenty of bed-and-breakfasts within walking distance from the slopes, all with much more affordable rates. The cabin we rented outdid our expectations—it was a tall two-story house with one bedroom on the first floor and the other on the second. The layout was odd, featuring both bathrooms on the first floor and the kitchen on the second, but it was such a charming little cabin in the woods that we couldn't complain. It even had a large stone fireplace in the living room and an outdoor terrace next to it.

We arrived around one in the afternoon in Gordon's car. For lunch Martin and I made sandwiches in a feeble attempt to pay Gordon back for all the driving, then went skiing for the

afternoon. We returned around sunset when the slopes closed down, and for dinner we cooked steaks bought from the local groceries. The end of the day culminated with the three of us sipping hot cocoa on a couch in front of the roaring fireplace. A big meal, compounded with a day at the slopes, rendered our voices low and our movements minimal.

“So,” said Gordon, slumped back on the couch, “when do you guys hear back from your colleges?”

“Soon. Most of them will come out early April, I think,” said Martin. He yawned then asked, “What about you, Sam?”

“Around the same time,” I said listlessly.

“Yeah, I suppose all of them are out about then,” said Gordon. We sat in silence for a while, the reflection of the flames dancing in our eyes. Gordon continued: “It’s really almost over, huh?”

“Yeah. Kinda weird to think that we’re this far,” Martin said. “Doesn’t the beginning of the year seem like a dream? Like the first time we went biking to Fort Ord this year. When I think back to that, it doesn’t feel real. I remember watching the sunset with you guys back in Fall and being comforted that we’ll have plenty of these moments. Now when we get back we’ll only have what–five, six more trips to Fort Ord before we graduate? That makes me sad to think about. We always went to Fort Ord.”

“Let’s not count,” said Gordon, smiling softly.

“We really won’t have much time left once spring is over,” said Martin.

“Then we’ll make the best of it,” Gordon assured us. “Besides, we’ll keep in touch in college.”

“Of course,” said Martin. “I hope that this isn’t the last time we’ll come to Tahoe, either. We should come back next year. Like a reunion. Maybe we could make it a tradition—an annual Tahoe trip.”

“Now that’s a great idea. I’m up for it. Sam?” asked Gordon.

“Hm?” I replied as if I was drowsy. “Yes. Tahoe sounds very nice.”

Martin broke into a smirk. “Sounds like he skied a bit too much,” he said.

I returned a quiet chuckle at him. “I guess so. Feeling a bit tired.”

“Well, it is getting late.” Gordon set his cup down on the coffee table. “I think I’ll go call Kate. See you guys tomorrow?” We bid him good night, and Gordon went downstairs to make his call. Martin kept me company for a while, but he too had to go when Hannah called him.

I wasn’t sleepy at all. I was lost in thought thinking about how just a few days ago, I must have gone past how far I had made it in my original life. It was a new record.

My phone was devoid of any notifications. The last conversation between Rachel and me was about dinner. I sent her pictures of the steak we had cooked, to which she responded with how hungry it made her. The chat had died a peaceful death. Out of old age and out of natural causes. It didn’t come to an awkward end where we were both out of responses. Neither of us was ignoring each other, or procrastinating on a reply. It had lived a long and fulfilling life and passed away quietly in its sleep. After waiting for an hour with nothing new on my screen, I went out to the terrace to call Rachel.

It was very cold out on the terrace. We called, and afterward I went to sleep, but not before crying for a little bit.

Not much was planned for the second day. We slept in, had pancakes for brunch, and drove to Lake Tahoe to sightsee. Once there we went around the lake, stopping for pictures and shouting in excitement whenever we crossed the border between California and Nevada. It was late afternoon when we returned to the cabin after getting groceries. In the lazy afternoon as the sun was ripening into an orange color, Gordon took a nap while Martin played his songs in the living room.

“Hey,” I said when he was finished with a song. “We should finally get around to you teaching me guitar.”

Martin smiled as if he had been anticipating the question for months, which he had. “Now you’re talking. What do you want to learn?”

“Teach me everything you know.”

We began with the basics: the anatomy of the guitar; the shape and movement of my left and right hands, which were now called the fretting and picking hands; and some simple chords along with easy songs that used them. I practiced the entire afternoon, and again after dinner until I went to bed.

The next morning did not come, because I had traveled back to the beginning of the second day. I asked Martin to teach me more advanced concepts—other techniques, more exercises, different songs, and even a little bit of theory. And that’s how I’ve been spending the last week. I wake up to a breakfast of pancakes, do the exercises from the “night” before, go to Lake Tahoe, ask Martin for a lesson, and practice for the rest of the day.

“How are you picking up these things so fast?” asked Martin in astonishment on one of the afternoons.

“I’ve been practicing for a while,” I said. “That, and I had a good teacher.”

30

Jang

Eventually, I asked Martin to teach me how to sing. When I became decent at both singing and playing the guitar through a handful of songs in Tahoe, I began performing them in Seattle with Cleveland's guitar. My waking days have been as repetitive as my dreams. I play guitar in the daytime, then go to Tahoe for the night to get lessons from Martin and to practice. When I go to Tahoe, I repeat through multiple days before I wake up so that I have ample time to practice what Martin has taught me. I've got the routine down like clockwork: Seattle is for performing, and Tahoe practicing.

I wonder how long it would have been like that if I hadn't come across Jang. I met Jang after about a week of busking. As usual I was strumming the old sunburst guitar, earning my way towards a dinner when I noticed that someone had been watching me for a while. Most people passed by without a second look when I sang my songs. Only a few hung around to listen for a minute or two before dropping off spare change, and it was very rare for anyone to stay around for more than a song. So when a young man not only stayed for more than one song but waited until I played through all of them, it made me more anxious than happy. I snuck in glances between chords in an attempt to figure him out. He didn't look like law enforcement or anyone I should be avoiding, so then I tried to piece together if I had recognized him from somewhere without fruition. He walked up to me when I was done with my songs, which made me involuntarily shrink away. Seeing my reaction, he took a step back.

“I enjoyed your performance,” he said. “Some of the songs you played were ones I really like.”

I cleared my throat and thanked him. He asked, “Did you have lunch yet?”

“No sir,” I said, shaking my head.

“Me neither. Would you like to join me? It won’t be anything fancy, I was thinking of getting some tacos, but I’ll be buying.”

“I’d appreciate that very much, sir.”

“You don’t really have to call me sir. You look about my age. How old are you?”

It took me a few seconds to answer. “I’m...twenty-one. Yeah. Twenty-one”

“Blanking on your age already? I can’t blame you, seeing as how I stopped counting a while ago. But yeah, I’m twenty-two. We’re only a year apart, so no need to call me sir. It’s not like I’m an officer or anything.”

I nodded. “Okay. What can I call you, then?”

“You can call me Jang. My actual name is Jang Eun, but you can call me that and make it easier for the both of us.”

“My name’s Sam.”

“Well, Sam, my phone says the restaurant is this way. Shall we?”

Jang was an Asian man around the same height as me. The sides of his hair were kept short, with the top of his hair just long enough for him to style. He was wearing blue jeans with a dark navy-colored hoodie. There was numbness in his idle face as we waited for our food, as if it had been paused to conserve energy. It was the look of someone whose weariness was defined more by its duration rather than magnitude.

He waited with his phone on the table and his arms crossed at his chest. He had a watch on his left wrist. It had a black rubber frame and a rectangular digital display. The edges looked worn, and the display had a small scratch on it.

“Have you had that watch for long?” I asked, trying to make conversation.

“This?” he said as he turned his wrist. “Sort of.”

“It’s a nice watch.”

“It is. It’s got a lot of sentimental value for me. Got it at the start of my military service and it’s been with me through the whole thing, faithfully ticking away.”

“Oh—thank you for your service.”

He chuckled once. “Heh, not so fast. I said I served in the military, not the US military. I was in the Korean Army—had to, mandatory service—but still. I appreciate you for saying that. This is actually only the second time in my life that I’ve been thanked for it. And both times it was from Americans, too.”

Jang’s name was called, and he stood up to get the food. “I’ll get it,” he said as he motioned at me to sit down.

“Do you do this sort of thing often? Buying people on the street food, I mean.” I asked when he returned.

“Never done it before. What about you, do these things happen often? I’ve heard that they happen, but obviously it can’t be common.”

“They’re not. Only happened once before in my life, actually. I met this guy in Chicago, and he not only bought me food but gave me a ride all the way here.

Jang looked mildly surprised. “All the way from Chicago? It sounds like he was an awfully kind person.”

“He was.”

“So, what’s your story? Are you a traveling musician?” he asked.

“Not really. I’ve been trying to get to Monterey, California. The performances are only something I’ve started recently.”

“You’ve got those songs nailed down. How long have you been playing?”

“Hard to say,” I said as I thought of an answer. “I’ve only been playing seriously for a little while. But once I’ve started, that’s all I’ve been doing.”

“Ah. So what you’re saying is that you haven’t played for long, but practiced as much as someone who has.”

I laughed. “Yeah, I guess you could put it like that.”

“I respect that. I’m in a band myself, so when I saw a one-man band belting out songs on the street, it caught my attention.”

“A band? That’s cool, I envy that. I had a friend in high school who was really good at guitar and singing, and we’d always talk about being in a two-man band in New York City.”

“Two-man band in New York. That sounds like the dream.”

“Sure does. It never got anywhere, but yeah—tell me about your band.”

“We’re not much. Standard 4-piece rock band. You won’t be able to find us online or anything. Not yet, at least. We’re mostly playing local shows around our college when we can.”

“That sounds so cool, though. You play around here a lot?”

“Not around here. We’re in California.”

And with that, I felt something move inside me. Like a tug on a fishing rod, so minute that you can’t tell if you’re imagining or not. “What’re you doing in Seattle?”

“One of my favorite bands is having a concert here, so I’m taking a little road trip by myself. I thought that it would do me some good.”

“I see. Then it’s back to California?”

“Yeah, back to California. But not straight back home—I’m going to stop at San Francisco on the way there.”

And there it was. San Francisco.

“You know, uh,” I began carefully, “I shouldn’t even be asking for this—seeing as how you’ve already done so much—and I know that it’s an insane ask, but I was wondering if you’d be willing to let me ride along with you. To San Francisco.”

“To San Francisco?” repeated Jang with a cold look.

“Yes. Like I’ve said, I’ve been trying to get to Monterey—I’ve been making my way there all the way from New York. I went from New York to Indiana by bus, then walked from Indiana to Chicago, and got a ride from there to here from that good man I told you about earlier. And if you’d let me go with you to San Francisco—I’d be so close. San Francisco. That’d be all. I’d figure it out on my own from there. I know it’s a crazy ask, and I don’t expect you to say yes, but I had to ask. I hope you understand.”

Jang’s face was still and expressionless as if he couldn’t hear anything I was saying.

I reached for my guitar case. “I know I can’t, but I’ll try and make it worth your while. I’ve got money I’ve been saving up from my performances—it’s not a lot, but maybe it can cover the gas on the way to San Francisco. You could have all of it.”

Jang stopped me. “No, I wouldn’t want that.” Another moment of silence followed. “Why do you want to go to Monterey?” he asked finally.

“My old friend lives there—lived there, and might still be living there. I’ve lost all contact with her for years, and I’m trying to see if she’s still there.

“Your old friend?”

“Yes—from high school. I went to high school there, in Monterey.”

“Why do you need to see her?”

“I need to know that she’s okay.”

“Why wouldn’t she be okay?”

I inhaled deeply to collect what I was going to say. “She’s abused substances since high school, and I’ve heard recently that someone’s died there from an overdose, and I can’t shake the feeling it might be her. Look, I know that I have no way of convincing you that I’m not a madman, and I understand that you probably can’t. But again, I had to ask.”

“I don’t think you’re a madman,” said Jang. He tapped his phone on the table, which revealed an empty screen. After a sigh, Jang asked, “To San Francisco, then you’re off to see your friend in Monterey?”

I nodded.

Jang glanced at his phone once more. “You know what—sure. I’ll give you a ride. But only because you’re a fellow musician.” He drank his beverage in one go and put it down on the table as if it was a glass of whiskey. “Besides, it’s not like I have anything better to do. Let’s go to San Francisco.”

Jang and I walked from the restaurant to his car after our meal. It was an old gray hatchback, gray like the cloudy winter Seattle day it was. “Before we go,” said Jang in front of his car, “mind showing me what you have in your guitar case? I’d feel more comfortable having checked it.”

I obliged quickly “Of course,” I said, putting down my guitar and my bag for him to inspect. He did a rather thorough check, going through all of the pockets, and apologized when he was done.

“I just had to make sure,” he said. I told him I understood, and he helped me load them into the trunk.

It was a silent drive. I had a feeling that Jang would have preferred to drive without talking, but I could see that the awkwardness was getting to him too. With Cleveland, it felt like he was certain he wanted to give me a ride. But with Jang I didn’t feel assured, and I began to fear he would change his mind. In an effort to make conversation, I tried to think of a question he would want to be asked.

I finally broke the silence. “So, what was the military like?” I asked.

Jang grunted quietly at the question. Thankfully, it was the type of grunt reserved for contemplation rather than irritation or annoyance. “I would have liked it, maybe,” he said, “if I had chosen to go. But then again, if I had a choice I wouldn’t have gone.”

“What did you do there?”

“Lots of things—getting up early in the morning, getting up in the middle of the night. Getting up in the evening to stay up if I was on the night shift—but the only thing I did that mattered was my songs.”

“You wrote songs while you were in the Army?”

Jang nodded. “Yep. They let us keep a guitar in the barracks. It was allowed for ‘self-development purposes,’” explained Jang. “I had an old acoustic, just like yours. I’d play the hell out of it every day when I got off work and wrote songs on it. I ended up writing a good

amount. Made a whole album of songs. Well, what I like to call an album, anyways. It was my project for the year and a half I was in the Army, putting a dozen or so polished songs together.”

“That’s impressive, putting an album together by yourself like that.”

Jang shot a barely visible smile across the open road. “Thanks,” he muttered.

“What was the album about?”

“What most songs are about—a woman I love that doesn’t love me back.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” I said.

The road became straight and it was empty. Jang dropped one hand from the handle and leaned back a little, his gaze still fixed on the road. He was silent for a moment before responding. “I guess it is a little different. Just a little. The whole album, it’s just about one girl. In fact, most of the songs I wrote during those 18 months were about her.”

“You must have loved her very much.”

“I still do, which is the problem. Kind of pathetic, isn’t it? I had over a year and a half to get over someone, and instead I sang and made a record of it. And I’m still stuck on her. How stupid is that?”

“Bittersweet, maybe, but not pathetic at all.” I thought for a moment more before continuing: “I’d be a hypocrite if I had called you pathetic for that. I’m doing something similar too—I’m writing a story, I guess also because I haven’t been able to move on.”

“Yeah? What’s it about?”

“It’s about a homeless man in New York that can relive his past memories in his dreams. He relives his memories of high school in Monterey because that’s when he was happiest, until he decides that he’s actually going to go there. So he starts living a double life—journeying from New York to California by day, and visiting Monterey by night.”

Jang chuckled. “I like it. I’m guessing there’s some self-inserting going on?”

“Maybe just a little.” I let out a light laugh. “Does that make me a narcissist?”

Jang shook his head. “Not at all. If self-inserts help the author be as brutally honest as possible, I think it can only be a good thing. Well, maybe if the protagonist is a self-insert, and meets another character that is also an insert—then the author may be thinking about himself too much.”

“Heh. Yeah.”

“Besides, songwriters self-insert all the time, and most love songs I’ve heard tend to be autobiographical. No reason you writers can’t do the same, right? I find it helps you confess things you’re too afraid to admit. When it’s in a song, or through a character in a story, you can acknowledge them without letting them drag you down to the void. I can’t say that I still love her and that all the vacant spaces in my mind are filled with thoughts of her, but I can sing it,” said Jang. “You know, I’ve heard somewhere that all biographies are fiction. Maybe it’s just as true the other way around.”

“I’d like to believe that it is.”

“But then again, maybe we are narcissists and I’m just saying that to justify myself.”

“If that’s the case I guess we’re both narcissists, and if it’s pathetic I guess we’re both losers.”

Jang smiled. “Sounds like a good deal to me.” Jang’s solemn mood seemed to be elevated, albeit slightly. He looked less tired and grew more talkative. The straight stretch of the road ended, winding left and right again.

“Did it help?” I asked.

“Did what help?”

“Finishing the album. Writing all those songs about her. Did it help you move on?”

“I’m still in love with her, so in that sense, no. Might have been more detrimental, really. But I will say this—working on that album kept me going for those 18 months. Kept me sane. Helped me feel alive. Perhaps even made me okay with being stuck where I was, physically and mentally.” Soft taps like small pieces of grain fell against our windows. It was beginning to rain.

“So in that sense, did it help? Yes. Yes it did. More than anything else in this world.”

Obsessions

Everybody seems to mind their own business in the rain. People prefer not to look outside their umbrellas, and those that don't have one are usually too busy trying to stay dry. Strangers become even more so in the rain. Even stray cats, who have no shame in intruding on even the most personal of matters if it interests them, become invisible in the rain. If it rains for a week, the local feline population goes extinct for a week. Everyone and everything mind their own business, except one, the great offender and cause of it all, rain itself. It pervades into every crack, every space, every home, and every conversation. It is unclear whether tragedies occur more often in the rain or if they seem more like tragedies because of how it makes people feel. Either way, perhaps the rain's inability to mind its business is to blame.

The last time it rained in my life, I had my backpack stolen and my knee smashed against the pavement. This time, Jang's car decided that it would break down. "Some luck you have," Jang said. "The one car you happen to get a ride from breaks down."

"How bad is it?"

"The mechanic said that it'd be fixed by tomorrow, so I guess we're stuck in Oregon until then. Still going to hurt my wallet plenty, though. That and I need to call the inn to cancel and book a new one. And call my parents." Jang sighed.

The rain fell all around us. It dripped from the overhang of the auto shop, butting into our conversation with its ideas of pitter and arguments of patter. “Can’t seem to catch a damn break,” muttered Jang. “Guess you don’t have anywhere to go in this weather.”

“Under a bridge, maybe. Although the last time I did that, I got robbed.”

Jang raised his eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Yeah. Set my backpack down to dry myself, and this guy just took off with it.”

Jang stared at the rain without focus. He checked his phone out of habit, sighed, and gazed into the watery void again. “Forecast said that rain would stop by tonight. You’re welcome to stay with me at an inn until then. We can have dinner.”

I too glanced at the downpour, and this time did not refuse. “If you really wouldn’t mind, I’d appreciate that very much.”

Wet and weary, we stepped into the lobby of the nearest inn, our desire for a warm shower beginning to boil. The room had old brown carpets with the classic musk of roadside inns, and a couch in the living room in front of the TV that looked a decade old. “Why don’t you go ahead and shower first?” said Jang, putting down his backpack.

I shook my head. “No, you go on ahead. Not because I don’t appreciate the offer, but because I think I’ll be in there a while. Wouldn’t want to keep you waiting.” Jang shrugged, picked his backpack up, and went into the bathroom.

When it was my turn, the hot water felt like a blessing against my stiff and oily hair. I used all of the remaining shampoo and lathered myself with soap until it was visibly smaller than it was before. I scrubbed every corner, even behind my ears and my earlobes until they didn’t feel slimy anymore. I couldn’t get enough. I must have taken off two, three layers of dead skin.

After the shower, I trimmed my nails with the clippers the hotel provided and packed it in my guitar case when I was done.

Jang was on the couch texting someone on his phone when I came out of the bathroom. He put the phone down, covered his face with his palms, and sighed. “Oh, you’re done,” he said. “Good shower?” he asked with a faint smile.

“The best.”

We ended up going to the convenience store across the street for food. They had fried chicken, so that’s what Jang got us. As we were making our way to the cashier, Jang stopped at the liquor section. “I forget that I can buy alcohol in this country now. Do you drink?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Never really got into it. What about you—drink a lot in the military?”

“They wouldn’t even let us keep our phones with us at all times. You think those people would let us drink?” Jang chuckled at himself and shook his head. “Only sometimes, when the officers would take us out to dinner.” He picked up a bottle at random. “Let’s see. Know anything about scotch?”

“The only thing I know about scotch is its name.”

“That’s about the extent of my knowledge, but I think that’s a good thing; neither of us don’t know what bad scotch is supposed to be like. It’s pretty cheap—want to try?”

I didn’t know how to answer, so Jang made up his mind for us. He carried the bottle and our food to the cashier and made his purchase.

Since the room only had mugs, we made do with them for drinking. Jang carefully poured a little bit of liquor into both of our cups, and we clinked our mugs in a toast before taking a sip.

“How is that for you?” Jang asked with a twisted face.

“Hard to say, but I don’t mind it.”

“Care for another?” he asked, raising the bottle.

“Sure, I don’t see why not.”

Jang carefully poured a half-inch of liquor into our cups and began unwrapping the plastic bag from the convenience store. “I hope scotch goes with fried chicken,” he mused.

Once everything was set, we dug into the food and poured ourselves another cup. “I wonder if we’re drunk yet,” I said. “I feel a little dizzy, maybe that’s it?”

“Only one way to find out for sure.” He raised the bottle again, the golden liquid swirling around like a pendulum, and I obliged. Jang drank his cup in one determined swig, as swift as it was aggressive. “So, tell me more about your story. How far are you with it?”

“About halfway. Although I can’t say for sure, because I don’t know how long it will be, or how it’ll even end. The man’s making his way to Monterey, and he’s going to get there, I’m sure of that. But I have no idea what he’ll do once he gets there.”

“Get there yourself and you’ll know,” said Jang.

“True, but I have no idea what he’ll find. What he *should* find, and what he’ll do with it. What he’ll do with the rest of his life. He’s only in his twenties, after all. Anyways,” I said, waving my hand in the air, “that’s the big picture stuff. I’m mostly struggling with my prose and trying to make it sound natural. Sentence-to-sentence, you know? Dialogue and transitions and all that.”

Jang poured us another drink. I accepted it without a second thought, since such things were long gone by then. He said, “That’s inevitable. Have you ever gone to sleep thinking, ‘Wow, I wrote some great stuff today,’ and you feel like you’re so talented and special, only to wake up the next morning and just cringe at yourself?”

A chuckle escaped me and I clapped my hands in amusement. “Yes—yes. Every time. I’m so glad people can’t read minds; if they could, they’d be in stitches over how arrogant I am. But yeah, I’ve got a lot of work to do. There’ll always be something wrong with it.”

“That’s a blessing, though,” said Jang. “Having lots of work to do on what you love. Because then you can immerse yourself in it, with there always being something for you to improve. Everything in the world becomes background noise when you can live in your work like that. And when you live in it, time passes. Hard times especially.”

“I do love getting to forget everything and writing about Monterey.”

“Boy, you sure love that place. What about it makes you love it so much?”

“If you’ve ever been there, you’d know.”

Jang chuckled. “Come on. Tell me about the place. What makes it so special?”

“Well,” I said in a sluggish voice, taking another sip and stretching out my legs, “everything is breathtaking there, for starters. The sky isn’t just the sky. And neither are the trees, the beaches, the forests, the sunsets, the wind, the ocean, the sand, or the people—everything makes you take a second look with a tilt in your head because it caught your eye. It’s got great weather—and I don’t mean that it has a lot of sunny days, although it does—but I mean to say that all of its weather is great. When it’s sunny, the sky is so piercingly blue that if there was a gem that color, it’d be worth more than diamonds. When it’s foggy it’s mysterious and magical, and when it’s rainy it’s bittersweet and nostalgic. And there’s so much wildlife there, so much pure wildlife. Sea otters and seals and deer and rabbits. All so close to you that you start to wonder if you’re allowed to be that near them. Oh, it’s grand there. It’s majestic.” I caught my breath. “Of course, I am biased. Everything that loved me was in Monterey, so I can’t help but love it too.”

“But hey, if you want a practical reason—one that’d look good on a brochure instead of the heap of sentiment that I just spat out—it’s the place that John Steinbeck wrote about so much. You know him, the writer? Yeah, to be able to go around and realize what you’re seeing is something that Steinbeck saw one day and wrote about. You can read *Cannery Row*, and then go to Cannery Row. That’s amazing to me.” I finished my cup and asked for another. “Sorry—I guess I went on a bit of a tangent. Okay, now it’s your turn—tell me about that girl you wrote all those songs about. What makes her so special?”

“Oho, now that’s a good one.” Jang’s eyes lost focus as if he was staring off into the distance, and his smile suddenly grew faint. “She’s a wonderful woman. She’s the most beautiful woman I have ever known, and I’m afraid she’ll continue to be. She is kind—an encompassing, embracing sort of kind—but fierce too. And she’s so passionate, not just passionate but with the discipline to back it up, which is something you don’t find often. Her laughter is the most confusing thing in the world. Delightful when I’m the one who caused it, terrifying when it’s somebody else. I feel like I could take on the world with her; I could have the world on my shoulders, but with the added weight of her head it’d all feel as light as a feather. And she—she can do so much. I’m not just saying she’s smart—which she is, but that she’s capable of things that I’ll never be able to do. Things I couldn’t do even if I tried very hard, and trust me, I know how to put in the effort. I’ve always respected her for that, which is something I’m not sure is reciprocated.”

“How do you mean?”

“Everything is reciprocated—friendship, loyalty, care, support, honesty—except for respect,” said Jang. “She’s not trying to disrespect me; she’s not the sort of person to do that. Rather, it’s that she’s just not thinking about me, and as a result there is no room for respect.

How can you respect someone that you're not thinking about, after all?" Jang took another swig and hung his head. "Know what I did for her birthday? I wrote her a song—not romantic or anything, just a nice instrumental piece. But I don't think she ever actually listened to it."

I put my cup down and bit my lip. "What makes you think that?"

"I send the song—she's surprised, amazed. Says that no one's ever written her a song before, and thanks me. But after that, she never mentioned it again. The only thing she said about the song was thanking me for it when I sent it to her." Jang sat back and laughed at himself. "Wow, I sound so much more pathetic when I say it out like that. Whew, I sound insane." Jang shook himself and poured another glass. "And I know what you're thinking: that if she didn't care for the song then she clearly isn't the right girl for me. But when you're as sick with infatuation as I am, I guess you become incapable of common sense. Whenever I think about her I feel all constricted, and my chest feels all scrunched up to the point of hurting. But I can't stop it; even if she's so indifferent towards me. And it's not her fault, because it's my doing. I've ruined our friendship with my feelings. We used to be good friends."

"You ever read *East of Eden*?" I asked.

"What? No. Why do you ask?"

"I've been reading it recently, and one of the scenes in it reminds me of your situation."

"Tell me about it."

"There's this man, Adam, who can't move on from this woman named Cathy. She clearly doesn't care for him at all, but like you said, he can't help it. He's too far gone. And this other character in the book—he's sort of the wise old man of the story—tells him that he should find a new Cathy to fight the dream Cathy. Let new Cathy fight dream Cathy to the death, he tells

Adam, and in the end marry your mind to the winner. I think maybe you should do the same. Find someone to fight your love. To kill your love.”

“Well then, I’m afraid she just might be invincible.” Jang laughed out loud with a sharp bitterness and took another drink. “Know what my friends in the Army would say? That I don’t actually love her, and instead that I’m obsessed with her. That she is an idol to me. That must be true because I hear that, know they’re right, and still feel love for her. I’m obsessed with her. Even if by some miracle she started to love me back, I don’t think I’d truly be in love with her because of how hurt I was when she didn’t love me. When you like someone too much, you become incapable of loving them. And you become very jealous of them—maybe she’s not everything I want, but has everything I want. While I was in the army she was in the States, working towards her degree and going to concerts and having good food and going on dates with her boyfriend. It’s the jealousy that made me obsessed. Sometimes I have these awful thoughts about horrible things happening to her. Things that would leave her desolate and miserable. Like what if her boyfriend happens to be the most terrible person, and cheats on her? What if she fails in school? What if she loses all of her friends and is truly lonely? And I sometimes think, what if all those things happen to her, but then I can be there for her? It’s madness, I know. I guess that’s how I know it’s an obsession, and how I know I’m sick.” Jang swirled his empty mug, looking down at it in dejection. He poured more liquor into his mug, only this time filling it to the top as if it were water.

“You all right?”

Jang’s voice dropped low and scratchy, as if he was scraping the bottom of his gut. “I haven’t been all right for a while, friend. When I got out of the military, I told myself I wouldn’t be disrespected again. And that was the most painful part of it all—disrespect. It wasn’t waking up

at the crack of dawn after pulling guard at 4 a.m. the night before, all the yelling, or all the exercise. It was being treated like children while being worked like men that really got us. Like I told you, my friends and I couldn't even keep our phones with us all the time. They'd collect it at 9 p.m. and we wouldn't be able to use them until after work the next day. Like we were toddlers. Something about ensuring that we get good enough sleep. Because apparently they trust us with their guns, but not with our phones.

"We couldn't wear what we wanted because commercial clothing was banned. Even having it in your locker could get you in trouble. And I'm not just talking about your uniforms. Doesn't matter if you're off duty or if it's the weekend. They gave us cheap government-issued drab branded with the Army's logo, from shirts to socks to even underwear, and if we were seen with regular clothes we were in trouble. Even what we ate was dictated—we had to eat what the mess hall had. Whenever me and my friends would order food, we'd have to sneak to the edges of the base to retrieve it. The delivery guy would have to squeeze the food through the iron bars and we'd always hurry him up, anxious that someone would spot us." An empty laugh broke out through him on a painful trip down memory lane. "Outside food is unsanitary and lacks nutrients, they would say. Well, I once saw a rat in the mess hall, so there's that. And they rarely served fruit, too. On the rare occasions we were allowed to eat at the American mess halls, my friends and I would bring back fruit by the armful." Jang laughed again. "They stuffed us in unsanitary barracks with sixteen men per room, and when we all got the flu, blamed it on us. Said that we wouldn't have gotten sick if our rooms weren't such a pigsty. And if we ever did anything that they deemed unacceptable, which included doing anything a man in a free country should be able to do—like to use their damn phone or eating what they want or God forbid stepping outside of the military base, what'd they do? They'd take away your leave. The one

chance you got to be outside the base, the one chance of having the most basic and unalienable right of freedom, and they'd take it away. And that was if you were lucky. I knew guys who were caught sneaking outside of the base, and they sent them up North to stare down North Koreans for the rest of their service. All that talk of how serving is the honorable, great, and admirable thing to do, and they send men to the border as punishment. They don't even believe the garbage they spew out. They just want to waste everyone's time with as little money as possible." He finished the cup and pounded his chest as the liquor burned down his throat.

"The songs kept me sane through all that. I don't know how I would have gone through it without them." Jang sighed. "But despite everything, I was so hopeful then. I believed I could do so much once I got out with how much I've changed. I'd ask her out on a date and she'd say yes. I'd crush through school with how much discipline I had. All that. It was so easy to stay hopeful. But now?" Jang shook his head. "I'm not sure I have much to look forward to anymore. I told you when you asked me for a ride: I don't have anything better to do. There's my confession." With that, he threw his cup on the floor, and it rolled until it hit the wall.

My head was aching and I was definitely drunk now. And Just in case I wasn't, I poured a big drink like Jang's and gulped it down in one go. I spoke in a weak and monotone voice, leaning against the wall with my legs stretched out and my arms drooping.

"I sold heroin to the girl I'm looking for. I kept it stashed in my room for the guy she bought it from, and got paid for it. Eventually it went bust, and I got three years in jail. People in Monterey died from fentanyl overdoses back then, and guess what they found in the stuff I was hiding. And I keep thinking, you know, that maybe she's not around anymore, and maybe it was from whatever I had in my room. But you know what? I'm not going to Monterey to see if she's okay. No. I don't want her to be okay. It's not about her. This is about me getting a fresh start. I

know she was an addict, a screw-up with nowhere to go in the future, just like me. And I want her to keep being stuck like that, so that when I get there we can have a fresh start together. There's my confession. That's why I'm going to Monterey. Because she's my ticket to a new life."

Jang and I both stared off into space.

"Feels good to be this honest, huh?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Thank you," said Jang. "Some things you can only tell strangers. I can't tell any of my friends—I wouldn't want to burden them, since some of them are going through much worse than I am. Actual problems, instead of being lovesick. Can't tell a significant other because I don't have one. And my parents—I wouldn't dare tell them. After all they've provided for me, sending me to school overseas—"

"Money doesn't make good parents."

"Yeah, but in the case of my folks, it isn't just money. It's care, it's love, it's kindness, it's prayer, it's everything. I can't dare tell them that I don't have anything to look forward to anymore. Some things, I think," said Jang, "you can only tell strangers. Like our songs and our books—you can tell them what you're too afraid of telling yourself and be more honest than ever."

We finished the rest of the bottle and drifted to sleep under the lullaby of the rain.

San Francisco

First, a memory. One from senior year, as always. It was a long weekend and Rachel and I were in San Francisco. Rachel had been wanting to go for a while, and she had finally convinced me. Gwen drove us there along with her boyfriend. Rachel was excited—we'd do a double date for lunch, then split off to spend time on our own. If you ask for recommendations on where to visit in San Francisco, two names you'll hear often are Japantown and Union Square. Ask where to avoid, on the other hand, and one name that will always come up is Tenderloin. After the double date lunch in Japantown, Rachel and I decided to walk to Union Square. A brisk thirty-minute stroll didn't seem so bad after a meal. What we didn't know was that Tenderloin was right in between Japantown and Union Square.

We were likely worried about nothing. Nobody noticed us, and it was broad daylight, after all. But back then, going from cherry blossoms and cutesy stores to the stench of human waste was jarring to me. I put my arm around Rachel and held her close until we got to Union Square. She told me later that she liked it a lot. "It made me feel safe," I remember her saying.

The next morning consisted of headaches and drinking lots of water. I found myself on the couch and vaguely remembered crawling to it in the middle of the night. Jang came out of the bedroom, greeted me, and brought back pastries from the continental breakfast.

"Last night was necessary," he said. "But I hope I never have to do something like that again."

I nodded slowly in agreement, careful not to trigger another headache.

Jang picked up the empty bottle, motioned gulping the whole thing down, and chuckled. “I guess we should brush our teeth and try to shake this awful feeling off. Maybe take a shower while we’re at it.”

“Yep,” I agreed in a weak voice.

After showering we decided to take a nap, followed by a cup of coffee at a nearby cafe. When Jang felt certain it was safe to drive again after meticulously searching through the internet, we hit the road. Soon we crossed the border into the long-awaited state of California, and journeying for several more hours after that, finally San Francisco. The sunset bathed the entire city yellow, and for once the Golden Gate Bridge seemed golden. It was still a long journey to Monterey, but now I was confident. Not confident about what I would find, or what I would do with my life afterward, but confident that I would get there. Jang offered to buy me one last meal before we parted ways.

“You’re not getting anything?” I asked as we sat down with my order.

Jang shook his head with a gentle smile. “I’m okay,” he said. “So, what are your plans now?”

“Same as it’s been,” I said. “Get to Monterey. Thanks to you, I’m close enough to make it on foot.”

“It’s still a good amount of distance to cover.”

“Yeah. But I’ve got some things to settle—some thinking to do, I mean. I figure the walk would do me some good.”

“Fair enough. Do you know how to get there?”

I put my fries down and thought about it. “Not really, no. But hey, I figured out how to walk from Indiana to Chicago—I’m sure I can figure this out.”

“Let’s see here,” said Jang, taking out his phone. He looked through the intricate and intertwining veins of roads to locate one to the heart. “Looks like the California Route One will get you from here straight to Monterey. See this here?” he asked, pointing at a section of the map. “Think you can recognize your way from there?”

I could see where the highway cut through Sand City. “Definitely. I’ve been on that stretch countless times—I can already picture it in my mind.”

“Great. It isn’t the fastest way since you’ll be going around a bit, but it seems simple enough. All you need to do is to keep the One in sight and travel south.”

“And it’s along the coast, which is an added bonus. I’ll have a good view while I walk.”

Jang let out a laugh. “That ended up being simpler than I thought.”

“I guess that could be said for my entire trip, thanks to people like you,” I told him. “What about you, what are your plans now? You said you were seeing friends here, right?”

“A friend.” And on his face was that faint smile of sadness from yesterday. “I’m seeing her.”

I looked at him with an open mouth, words failing to escape me. “That’s why you’re not eating right now. You’re getting dinner with her.”

Jang chuckled. “Yeah.”

“There it is,” I said.

“There it is,” agreed Jang. “I don’t know what the hell I’m doing. After all we talked about yesterday and all the revelations I had, and here I am, still in love with her.”

“And here I am too,” I said. “Still headed to Monterey.”

Jang cracked up and covered his face with his hands, and I couldn't help but laugh too.

When Jang dropped me off the highway it was dark, the gold of the sunset replaced with the fool's gold of streetlights. "That there's the California One," he said, engaging the parking brake.

"Thanks again for everything that you've done, truly."

"Don't mention it," said Jang, reaching out his hand. "Good luck, brother."

I grabbed his hand and he shook it firmly. "You too, brother."

I stepped out of the car and began walking along the One, southbound. And just as I was getting used to the sound of cars racing by so that I could think, a car honked at me as it drove past. It was Jang, and an arm came out through the window and saluted me with on. I waved back, and something tells me that he was watching through his rearview mirrors, smiling on his way to see the love of his life.

Foggy

When you return from spring break of your senior year, it is the beginning of the end. But when you first return, there is just enough time left to convince yourself that it isn't so. Sure, it may be past the halfway point, but it's not over yet. There's still plenty of time to do the things I love with the people I love, and there's no need to worry just yet. But truthfully, during these times, some things—things that we did every day, things that were as routine as ever—will be done for the last time in history. We refuse to believe this, but that is only because we are not keen on it. How in our simple minds could we have ever known that it would be the last time, after all? Only when the end arrives and we have no choice but to accept it do we look back and realize.

We try not to worry, but anxiety inevitably seeps in. Then we begin to make promises—promises of doing things again that we would not have made before. We get desperate—hey, we can always meet up and do it later for old time's sake. And with these promises, we comfort ourselves from having to say goodbye. Some of these promises, of course, do come true—reunions happen. Trips down memory lanes happen. But look around at all those around you. Some you will love, and some you would love to never see again, but know that this will be truly, truly the last time in history—until when our sun dies or until Judgement Day—that all these great people will be in each other's vicinity. And the unique world that they make up, the inimitable bubble that they inhabit, will be lost forever. This world will come to an end, and soon.

This is the pattern that beginnings of ends make. Not just for the end of high school, the death of the good old times, or the last days on Earth with our loved ones—but for everything that we look back fondly on.

And in that pattern, there is a fog. A great and kind and warm fog. It clouds and shelters us in that final act so that looking back, it feels as if everything had been a dream.

The great fog was in full motion by the time I returned from the near-eternity of spring break. Rachel came back on campus in the evening, and we had a soft greeting in the cafeteria: A wave from afar, and a hug up close.

Anxiety about the end began stirring up everyone on campus immediately. Every teacher began their classes with the words “last” or “almost” or “the end,” and over time the frequency of them only increased. Many things started to become the last of their kind—assignments, quizzes, projects—even classes as a whole.

It’s frightening to think that there must be a counter to all that we do. A definite number that dictates how many more times we have left for something in our lives. It must always be ticking down unbeknownst to us, inevitably approaching that fatal zero. That number made itself known to everyone at this time, and it was the source of the anxiety.

The counter for my night walks must be running low. Perhaps it was close to being single digits, or already there. I’ve been hesitant to text Rachel after study hall for the fear of it, but maybe it was the other way around. Maybe every time it happened I wasn’t deducting from a count, but adding to a total. So I reached Rachel—with not a text, but a call—and asked her if she wanted to go on a walk.

“Hey, Rachel.”

“Hey.”

Need I say what we met in front of?

“Been a while since one of our walks,” I said.

“It has. What’s the guitar for?”

“For playing you a couple songs. I practiced a lot of guitar over spring break—Martin taught me,” I said proudly.

“Really?” said Rachel, a thin smile rising from her lips. “I’d like that.”

I smiled back and turned toward the golf links out of habit before Rachel stopped me.

“I’d like to maybe try going to a different place today,” she said.

“Oh? Where?”

“To the football field. Gwen says she goes there often and that it’s a nice spot.”

“That sounds good to me. As long as we don’t run into Gwen and her boyfriend there,” I added with a laugh.

We went past the gap between the two dorms and around the amphitheater until we got to the cafeteria. From there, we took a right and stepped onto the dirt tracks to get to the football field.

The football field was navy blue and silver in the night. The field had taken on the color of the night sea, and the bleachers were silver. To our relief it was empty—no crowd cheered on except for the rustling of trees. Rachel and I sat toward the back near the commentator’s box, as if it would provide us with more cover. I must admit to checking if the commentator’s box was unlocked—it wasn’t. We had a lot to catch up on: I wanted to tell her about Tahoe, but more importantly, ask her how being at her mother’s was.

“Gwen sure does know all of the good spots,” I said. The navy field ahead seemed so vast that the bleachers became a ship and Rachel and I on the deck of a cruise.

“She really does.”

“Does she have any other ones? We should visit them all—while we can.” The last part I said without meaning to.

“I’ll ask her if she does tonight.” Rachel turned her silver smile toward me. “So, how was Tahoe? Did you get to ski a lot?”

“Oh yeah, a lot of skiing. I was surprised how open the slopes were. No fences or anything like that, you know? You could drift off into the woods if you wanted. Driving around Lake Tahoe was so nice too—I didn’t know water could be that turquoise. The whole place was just stunning, and I wish you could have been there with me.”

“Mm. Me too,” said Rachel.

“But yeah. I’m glad you went home. I hope it was good.”

Rachel sighed and gathered up her knees around her arms. “Yeah. My mom and dad and I talked a lot. Not all of it was peaceful, but it was good that we talked. It was necessary.”

“I’m happy to hear that.”

We stared off into the blue field in silence as if we were waiting for the sunrise. A breeze came, unfurling Rachel’s hair like a sail, and with it brought the green fragrance of dewy grass.

“Sam,” Rachel began in a forlorn voice, “have you decided where you’re going to college yet?”

“Not really. I suppose I should get to it soon, huh?”

A kind smile blossomed across Rachel's face, and she turned to me, her head leaning against her knees. "No, stuff like that takes time." She went silent again and stared at me with her unmoving smile. "But the ones you got into, none of them are on the East Coast, right?"

"No," I replied quietly. "I don't think so."

"I see." Rachel looked up at the night sky, and when they returned to meet mine they glistened just like the stars. "I'm going to school in New York, Sam."

I sat up. "Really? No kidding, the one that you got accepted to early?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I decided on it over spring break."

"That's great—congratulations, really. I know that must have been a hard decision to make."

"It really was."

"Have you told Gwen?"

"I have. She's going to the one we applied to together."

"I see," I muttered. "So. New York City after all."

"New York City after all," Rachel repeated. "But in a way, I'll be close to where your home is, huh?"

"I guess who could say that."

"You could give me a tour around the area this summer—show me what it's really like! And when you come back home during the breaks, who could spend time together?"

"Of course," I said softly with a nod. "I'd love to do that."

We sat still for a while, looking at each other and saying nothing more. Eventually, another breeze came to break up the silence by throwing Rachel's hair across her face.

Rachel cleared her hair out of the way and wiped her eyes. “Hey,” she said, putting effort into a newfound smile. “How about a song? I want to hear you sing.”

“Alright, which one do you want to hear?”

“Ooh, how many did you learn over spring break?”

“Oh, quite a bit,” I said. “I had a lot of time to practice.”

I would like to do one thing in this fog before it ends with everything else; before it’s too late and I arrive in Monterey. I wish to confess. She deserves to know why I decided to go to Monterey in the first place. Once I find Savannah or what has become of her, I don’t think I’ll ever talk to her again. Right now, on the twists and turns of the California One, may be my only chance.

I suppose the question is if I should be talking to her again in the first place.

Martin scratched his head. “I don’t know. Honestly, I don’t think that it’s a good idea.”

“I know it’s not ideal, but I think I should talk to her.”

“About what?” asked Martin.

“About a lot of things. Obviously with what happened between us, but other things too.”

Gordon leaned against the wall, quietly listening with furrowed eyebrows. “Why are you suddenly thinking about her?” He interjected from the corner. “You have nothing to do with her now.”

“I know that,” I said. That’s why I stopped talking to her, and it was the right thing to do, absolutely. But I can’t help but think that it’s right to leave Savannah like that.”

Gordon was relentless. “And you wish to somehow make things right by talking to her again?” He let out a sigh. “Look, I get that she was a good friend to you. And yes, maybe it’s not right by her, but how can anything be right when the whole thing was so wrong?”

I averted Gorgon's gaze and looked down at the floor.

“Sam, I’m sorry, but I don’t think we get to do right by everyone here. Yes, talking to Savannah might be better for her. But it’s wrong to do it at Rachel’s expense, wouldn’t you say?” Gordon’s voice softened. “Even if you could take away Savannah’s pain by talking things out with her, that pain could just end up landing back on Rachel. Think about it this way—let’s say the love of your life cheated on you, and after much deliberation and pain, you decide to forgive her. How insane would it be for her to come up to you and say hey, I feel bad for the guy I cheated with, and I want to go talk to him?” Gordon was now standing in front of me. He covered his face and sighed again. “I’m sorry if I sound too harsh. It’s just—you shouldn’t.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s okay,” said Gordon. “I’m sorry I got a bit heated up there—”

“I’m really sorry, but I think I need to talk to her.”

Deep frustration carved canyons of anger on Gordon's face, and soon grief for Rachel flowed through the crevices. “What is this, man?” He began marching towards the door. “You know better than this,” he said as he was at the door, and left.

The door slammed behind Gordon. Martin looked back at me, fidgeted for a few seconds, and followed after him.

I had to talk to Savannah, but not before talking to Rachel.

Rachel became dimensionless as I spoke to her the next day: her mouth became a flat line, her eyes empty, and her voice monotone. By the time I was done, she was reduced to a quiet and expressionless “okay.”

And just as Rachel had become a line, so had I. Like an executioner who had seen it all in his time, I drifted seamlessly onto what had to be done. I messaged Savannah and got straight to the point—that I there was something she needed to know about why I was headed to Monterey.

It was the first time in months I had seen her up so close when we met behind the gym. There was an unfamiliarity about her as if she was an old photo of herself. Her eyelids were weary and without any tension, but the eyes were as precise and cold as ever. Her hair was longer, coming down to her shoulders now, and for some reason she seemed shorter. The only thing that felt unchanged about her was her old and battered beanie.

“Hi,” I greeted her simply.

“Hey.” There was no smile, no energy; only caution for what would come next.

I began immediately as if I could outrun remorse. “You buy from Sebastian, right?”

Any other person in her shoes would have been caught off guard, but not Savannah. There was no confusion, feigned or real. She had been pushed off of a plane, and yet somehow managed to land right on context. Her eyes lost focus, but they were not clouded over. Instead, they were crystal clear and glassy—they just weren’t looking at anything in particular, the way the universe has no center.

She wasn’t trying to outrun anything. “Yes,” she replied.

“I used to work with him. In my real life. I’d keep his stuff hidden for him and get paid for it. We eventually got caught and I was sentenced to three years. That’s why I never graduated high school.” I continued: “Turns out what he sold was laced with fentanyl, some of them with lethal doses—which means what you get from him is probably laced too. I found out what you kept in your glovebox in another dream, with another Savannah.

“I found some articles about teenagers dying from overdoses in Monterey, dated shortly after I left. No names, though. That's why I asked you if you thought you'd still be here in three years, and that's why I'm headed to Monterey.”

Savannah's eyes were now fixed on me, the big crunch of her soul condensing into a singular point. “Promise me,” she said in an unmoving voice. “Promise me that no matter what you find in Monterey, you'll return here and be honest with me.”

“I promise.”

She left quickly as if she were never there. Alone in the forest, I called Gordon to apologize. He answered immediately.

“I talked to Savannah,” I said quietly over the phone.

The deep sigh of Gordon and the lonesome cry of trees overlapped into one. “Why'd you do it, man?” he asked.

“I guess I'm still selfish,” I said.

Another soft sigh came over the phone. “Martin and I are in his room. Come on back. We'll order some food.”

Aquarium

Now the end really is nigh, and it is unmistakable as it is inevitable. Many have accepted the fact by this point. Some have done so with more grace than others, like an elderly woman muttering that she's lived long enough like a habit, content with her life and her trust in heaven. Others, terrorized by the end, have become obsessed with it. Everything they do, they do with the omnipresent counter in mind. There is no comfort in knowing that there will be a next time, and it is a great void in their hearts. They become paranoid—they worry over everything being for the last time, that they cannot enjoy it for the last time.

The fog is thick, and slowly, bit by bit, we begin to pack our things. The excuses for things kept “just in case” expire and are thrown away, while others are preserved for the sake of memory. We travel back in time as we go through our drawers—there are plastic eggs, cards with hearts on them, a drawing of a jolly old man with a big white beard, paper cutouts of turkeys and then of spiders; and finally, the old “new” schedule for the year. The schedule is obsolete for two reasons: one, because you've already got it memorized, and two, because it will soon be irrelevant.

Some things have already met their end by this time. They are as dead as an urn of ashes. The best we can do then is to think about what still remains with us and plan the best funerals possible. And in this preparation, which is at times frightening and always sentimental, we occasionally stumble upon the possibility of something new. Something we've never done

before. We think, “Why haven’t we ever done that before?” and if we are fortunate and wise enough, we do it, for the first and last time.

Rachel and I have been struggling to find each other in the fog. We’ve both been so busy attending funerals, with not many of them being for the deaths of mutual friends. When we finally had a moment to catch our breaths, we had lunch together. It was a sunny day, with the skies in that metallic blue. Dogs chased each other in the grass, and people watched them from the amphitheater, wholly content. The stage and the stone paths glistened white, and it was almost blinding.

I looked at Rachel, and she smiled back, bobbing her head to the pleasant breeze. “Busy this weekend?” I asked.

Rachel stopped bobbing her head side-to-side and thought about her schedule. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Would you like to go to the aquarium with me?”

Rachel jolted up with the shock of delight, and it warmed her up into a smile. “Yes. I would like that. I would like that very much.”

I wish I could have told you about the Monterey Bay Aquarium in detail beforehand as I have done with the other places of Monterey. But seeing as how it was my first time going there, I’m afraid I can only offer a brief description, and not a very good one at that.

The Monterey Bay Aquarium is located in Cannery Row, which only makes it better. It is on the same street as Pacific Biological Laboratories, which was the inspiration for Doc’s Lab in *Cannery Row*. It was run by Ed Ricketts, the basis for Doc’s character, who was a pioneering marine biologist and a close friend of John Steinbeck. They say that Steinbeck visited the lab

often to spend time with Ricketts and learn marine biology from him. I like to think about how when you climb up the steps to the lab's entrance, you must be retracing the great writer's steps, quite literally.

But back to the aquarium itself. The aquarium feels like an extension of the ocean rather than a piece of it kept in captivity. And this is somewhat true: The establishment is built on the coast, and it pumps in seawater from the ocean for its inhabitants. It is a lean-to on the Great Pacific.

Rachel took up all the good of being childlike without any of the bad of being childish at the aquarium. She hopped around brimming with so much wonder and enthusiasm that I was afraid it might spill. It nearly did at the sea otter exhibit, which I knew would be Rachel's favorite.

"So cute," she said over and over again, barely containing herself whenever one swam by. Her grin was in full swing. She exclaimed when one came right up to the glass. She waved her slender fingers, not tapping or knocking on the glass but simply sending a silent greeting to her otter friend.

"Hello, what's your name?" she asked. And the otter must have whispered something in her ear, because she stood there listening intently and even nodded along while I couldn't hear anything. "So cute," she muttered again when they said farewell.

"Is this your first time seeing them?"

"Yup—I've never seen any of these fellas in person. Have you?"

"I saw a couple of them with Martin and Gordon when we went ocean kayaking last year. Once you get a good bit into the ocean, you start to notice them swimming around."

The thought was almost too much for Rachel to handle. "Really? Out there in the wild?"

“Yes, really.” I chuckled. “Sometimes they come right up to your kayak and peek their heads out to see what’s going on.”

Rachel grinned ear-to-ear at the thought. “Where? Where did you go kayaking?”

“Right on the beach where Seal Rock is. Gordon knew a guy with kayaks and wetsuits, so one weekend we borrowed them and set off from the shore. We saw the otters near a gigantic kelp forest—according to Gordon, they like living there because it gives them shelter from predators and storms.”

“Storms?”

“Wouldn’t you want to be wrapped up in kelp if there were loud noises and the whole world started shaking around? Maybe what storms are for them are like earthquakes to us.”

“Aw, poor babies.” Laughing, Rachel said, “I feel bad, but I keep imagining them wrapped up in kelp and think that it’s so adorable.”

I laughed along with her. “No, you’re right. That does sound pretty cute.”

Rachel sighed. “You’re lucky. I wish I could have seen them out in the wild like that.”

It was a great time. Not just the sea otters, but all the animals—octopi, sharks, penguins, snails, crabs, and starfish, just to name a few, were great. Rachel made conversation with all of them, politely asking them their names and how their day was.

I spotted something that I knew would delight Rachel. “Look, Rachel,” I said in a low voice, “puffins.”

It was fascinating to observe a puffin swim. I had anticipated them to swim like fish, by swerving their bodies left and right, but instead they swam much like how they flew, by flapping their wings. “Maybe flying isn’t so different from swimming when you can do both, huh Rachel?” I mused. “What do you think that one’s name would be?”

I looked around. “Rachel?” I searched among the crowd for a figure I could recognize. I found her at another exhibit, her face illuminated blue close against the glass. “Hey, I thought I lost you there, Rachel”

“Look,” Rachel whispered, her gaze still fixed ahead. “Moon jellies. Look how they glow, Sam.” She looked up at them as if they were stars of the Milky Way.

“I see them,” I said quietly. “I see how they glow, yeah.”

But I wasn’t really looking at the jellies. I was looking at her, thinking that the Rachel standing in front of me was quite a stranger to the Rachel I held close in San Francisco, in Tenderloin, all those years ago.

After spending hours at the aquarium, we walked around Cannery Row, looking for a place to have dinner.

“See that building there?” I asked as we passed what looked like an old wooden shack.

“That pretty little brown one? Yeah.”

“Remember Doc, from *Cannery Row*?”

She nodded. “That’s the man that ran the lab, right?”

“That’s right. And here’s that lab.” I said. “Used to be run by a man named Ed Ricketts, who was a close friend of Steinbeck.”

Rachel smiled. “You and your tours, Sam Hanely.”

We found a small restaurant with a view of the ocean. They had a country-fried steak so that’s what I had, and Rachel ordered a smoked salmon.

“Feels a bit wrong, after making so many friends at the aquarium today, but...I haven’t had fish in a while,” said Rachel as she laughed.

By the time we were done with the meal, the sky was making its preparations for the sunset. The sheen of copper crept along the sea, and soon spread all the way across to the top. From my seat I faced the horizon, and as the sun sank it went directly behind Rachel, giving her an orange halo.

“You know, I was thinking, Rachel,” I said in a raspy voice. “We never went for a swim at any of the beaches. A swim at sunset as the water turns red. Doesn’t that sound nice? I wonder why I never did that with you. It wouldn’t have taken much effort either. All we would have had to do was to bring a towel and walk to the beach in our swimsuits one weekend, the same one we walked to all those times. It would have been so easy.

“I’m sorry we never went swimming in the sunset, Rachel,” I told her. “Today was—so good. So very good. And I’m sorry that every day could have been this good but it wasn’t.”

Rachel shook her head. “That doesn’t matter. It’s okay. It really is. I had a great time today, and that’s all I care about.” She locked eyes with me, and there was love in them. Love and affection and care and somehow after all that I had done to her, respect. But there was also something else.

Rachel was a true master at introspection. Her eyes appeared outward like everybody else’s, but in reality looked more inward than anywhere else. What her eyes brought in would bounce around her soul, be digested, and become part of it. Everyone goes through this process at some level, but what set Rachel apart was that she let nothing go to waste. Every gesture, every sound, every word, every promise made and broken, the entire past—it would all be swallowed by her soul to be agonized over. Her eyes, facing inward, supervised this process, making sure every bit was put to work into a dent, a mark, or a scratch on her soul. And because her eyes were so busy with that process, they had no time to judge others the way the rest of us

do. In all the time I had known Rachel, there was always pity in her eyes. In the absence of any particular emotion, pity would fill the void. Even when there were other emotions, like joy, there was pity, always lurking in the corners. She could be smiling, but the corners of her mouth would be twisted with sorrow. And still there was pity in her eyes, but that evening, perhaps for the first time, they were not directed inward.

“It’s okay,” said Rachel in a soft voice. “We had a lot of good days, Sam, we did. It’s okay.”

Rachel and I took our last night walk the following week.

“I was wondering if we could talk tonight,” she said to me. “The year is ending, and there is a lot I would like to talk about with you.”

At 9:30, I got dressed a little nicer than I usually would have for our night walks. I chose a black jacket instead of a hoodie, and a nice pair of jeans over my shorts. Standing in the mirror, I gave myself a faint smile, perfectly aware of what was about to come.

We arrived at the swimming pool around the same time. There was no waving, no shouting, and no running to each other.

“Where do you want to go?” I asked.

“Here is fine, I think.”

We sat on a small bench in front of the swimming pool. Rachel looked down at her feet with her hands neatly folded on top of her lap. “We’re graduating soon,” she said.

“We are. Time flies, doesn’t it?”

“Mhm.” Rachel nodded slowly. “I’ve been thinking a lot, Sam. About me. About you. About my friends.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She struggled against an undying lump in her throat. “It’s not that I don’t love you anymore,” she said, “that has any been the case, ever, even with everything that has happened. I want you to know that.”

“I know.”

“But—I don’t know.” She paused, gathered herself, and began again. “I’ve been thinking a lot, Sam, and—”

“Rachel,” I interrupted. “You don’t have to say it. And I agree with it.”

Rachel turned to me, her eyes shimmering. “You do?”

“Of course. I think that maybe for your sake you should have done it earlier, but I’m very grateful you didn’t.”

“I don’t know, Sam. I want you to know that I thought a lot about this, to make sure I was making the right choice.”

“You are.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“It’s really not that I don’t love you anymore,” she said again. “It would have been so easy if I didn’t. But it’s that I want to try moving on. All my life I’ve moved on from so many things, but it occurred to me that I’ve never been the one to choose it. And it’s scary, and it hurts already just thinking about it. But I know, Sam, that I want to try it, and that this is the best time to do so.”

I smiled softly. “I whole-heartedly agree with you.”

“Thank you,” she whispered. “Do you think,” she said after a moment of silence, “that it could have gone better? In another world, maybe?” She let out a soft laugh and looked down at her feet again. “That maybe in another world we would have gone kayaking to see the otters, gone swimming in the sunset, and met up in New York every summer after we graduated?”

I shook my head and gazed up to the infinity on high. “No. I think this is the best it could have gone, Rachel. With me at least. Because of me. You’ve been nothing but good to me, Rachel, you know that? You were the best of everything I could have asked for, and I didn’t even ask for it. And I think, Rachel, that there’s going to be so many good people in your life from now on. People that won’t make you so worried about yourself all the time. People that’ll think about you as much as you think about them. People that’ll respect you,” I said. “And I’m happy about that.”

Rachel broke a smile through the tears and let out soft chuckles through the cracks. “Why are you talking like an old man all of a sudden, Sam Hanely?”

I let out a chuckle too. “I don’t know. Hopefully it means I’ve finally wised up a bit, although probably not.”

She smiled at me with glassy eyes.

I stood up. “So, Rachel Marigold, I suppose this is it, then?”

Rachel nodded, fighting to maintain her smile. “I think it is, Sam Hanely.”

Rachel stepped forward to give me one last hug. It lasted a few seconds, and I felt something warm crawling against my cheeks, and also something warm against my shoulder where Rachel had leaned in.

I have said all this time that I missed Monterey. I realize now how that is not true. I did not miss Monterey—I missed what Monterey could have been. Monterey was to me a chance to

be in love. Not just with Rachel, but with everyone and everything around me. Rarely do we ever get to be in love with the sole requirement being our willingness, and Monterey was that chance.

Monterey to me was a serene painting at a museum. I recognized its beauty, but I was not in love with it. I did not know its history, its meaning, or its painter, and because of all my ignorance to these things, its significance.

I missed what Monterey could have been.

Without looking back, Rachel walked to her dorm and went inside the warm yellow lights, her hair swaying in the wind.

35

Home

Monterey. The place of my dreams. The birthplace of John Steinbeck and the deathbed of John Denver. Home to artists, writers, poets, and the extremely rich and retired. The promised land of golfers. Where cypress trees, lone or otherwise, prosper. Home to that tiny peninsula where all our memories reside, filled to the brim with the could and should haves.

It began with the bright-red snow plants along the road. After that it was the cypresses, and then the sand dunes. Finally, as if concerned I still haven't figured it out, it was the road signs, dropping some not-so-subtle hints.. I didn't need to stick to the One anymore; I knew where these roads led. In a little while the view of the Pacific opened up to my right, and there it was—the horizon.

And that's how the traveler came home.

I have decided to stop visiting Monterey in my dreams, because well, I am already there. I can do my visits in the daytime now. I'd like to go see some of my old loves: Alvarado Street, Carmel, the mall; even the school, although I think I will save that for last. Then there is the reason behind it all, Savannah's address, but for now I'd like to see how Monterey has changed, or better yet, how it hasn't. The journey has made me very tired, and I need the rest. The pain in my knee has returned, my feet feel as if they are stepping on jagged rocks with every step, and I have developed a nasty cough. In the meantime I plan to play music around Monterey, hoping to gather enough money for new clothes and a haircut. Anything, ranging from a haunting

nightmare to an impossible fantasy awaits me at that address, and I want to be well prepared for it.

In Sand City I stood at a crossroads with two options. I could stick close to the coast and make my way to Alvarado Street, or head southwest to get to the mall. I chose the former, since Alvarado Street felt like a better place to busk. I remember seeing a man playing guitar there on one of the dates Rachel and I went on. Rachel dropped in a dollar, and in return he gave Rachel a big smile which she so graciously wore. After a few days in Alvarado I would head south to the mall, make the preparations, and finally make my way to the address. I thought about visiting Carmel, but realized it would be a bad idea in my current state. Something told me that I would be instantly picked up as a suspicious character and deported over the city line if I played music there the way I was.

It was right before sunset when I arrived at Alvarado Street. Every little thing, from the small shops to even the cracks in the pavement, welcomed me back. And though it was good, it was suffocating. I felt as if I were a soldier returning home on a brief leave—perhaps Jang could attest to this. There was pleasure in savoring every moment, but at the same time so much pressure in wanting to live it to the fullest.

It's been two days in Alvarado, and I've been able to get a good look around. The ice cream shop is still here, although they seem to have gotten rid of the cilantro flavor. The guitar shop is in business, but it has relocated to a smaller venue down the street. Because of the smaller estate, their wall of guitars is even more compact now, like a beautiful mosaic of Leo Fender's best work. I am also glad to report that the seafood deli remains, as a place with such good food deserves to be.

Oh, and the farmer's market still happens every Tuesday.

I have been playing music at the plaza at the edge of Alvarado Street, which is also where Rachel and I saw the man with the guitar. When I take a break, I like to walk to Old Fisherman's Wharf. For some reason, all my memories from that wharf seem to take place on a sunny day. It was sunny too when I made the walk today, although I didn't get on the wharf. Instead I walked to the circular bend to the left of the wharf's entrance, where Martin, Gordon, and I would wait for cabs. Though I had no intention of catching one now, I circled around the bend, thinking how somewhere on the asphalt must be the very spot I had walked on years ago. Maybe there was some invisible trace, down at the atomic level or beyond. Better yet, some satellite could have been watching over Monterey. It would have had a clear view—it was always sunny, after all. If someone accessed its video footage and wound it back enough, they would be able to see me, right here. Then if they fast-forwarded it around three years they would see a strange man, aimlessly limping back and forth, but they would never guess that it was the same person.

I think that by tomorrow night I will have enough. I've been able to save a surprising amount, and I may even be able to rent a cheap room. It'll let me shower and shave and tidy myself up, just as you would for a marriage or a funeral.

By night the tourists were gone and the locals took back the street. The light-hearted shops retired for the night, while the bars were just waking up with their violent attitudes. People in worn-out ponchos started showing up, often pushing dilapidated shopping carts with broken wheels. Along the guidance of the faint yellow lights, I took a right at the plaza and continued down Del Monte Avenue. My knee croaked in pain with every step, and I had to pause often. I had been vastly underestimating how bad my knee was after the fall. I thought it had improved, healed even, but it dawned on me that it wasn't hurting simply because I had not been walking

much since Chicago. With the strains of the California One weighing on the joints, it felt as if there was a metal rod stuck in my knee. I continued to fight my way east until I arrived at Del Monte Beach, on the other wharf.

I think I had a slither of hope that Savannah's car would be here. The spot was empty, and exhausted, I collapsed on its parking block. A faint radio hum began in my head like a mosquito in the night. I closed my eyes and expected to see the green glow of her dashboard when I opened them again. Here was the spot where I told Savannah that I was only a visitor, and here was the spot where she believed me. Here was the spot where she became my best friend, although no satellite ever knew, since we only came at night.

All of this could have been for nothing. She could be in college now, at some far-away state, Monterey and the high school and the acquaintance named Sam all wrapped up in that gentle fog, the memory almost intangible. But that would be the best-case scenario. Then this would just be a story about a useless man driven by his sin and guilty conscience, and most of all she would be okay. Yes, that would be the best thing. The most likely thing.

I laughed at myself out of embarrassment over the future with Savannah I had fantasized about. Somehow she'd remember me. We'd go have lunch and reminisce, and then she'd tell me about how things haven't been well. How she felt stuck and unhappy. And I'd tell her the same. I'd find some job, any job, and live here no matter how impossible that would be, and eventually we'd make it out together. I would have my redemption and my past would not matter anymore, as would hers.

When I started this journey, I somehow put my faith firmly in that vision. I really believed it was possible. Now only a numbness drenched me from head to toe. One moment it felt as if the rod in my knee had been jammed in my chest, and the next it was sheer emptiness. I

did not believe in the fantasy anymore, but neither in the nightmare. She would be fine. No matter what happened, soon it would be proven that my journey was useless. But I wouldn't regret making it here. I have always said that no matter the ending, I would like for it to be in Monterey.

She would be fine. Her grandmother would come out, confused, and tell me that she was in college, far away from home. Or maybe another family was living there now, and a complete stranger would answer the door. They would kindly explain what happened, and maybe give me some information on how to reach the old owners. But I wouldn't go looking for her elsewhere, or go anywhere, for that matter. Yes, I would like for it to be in Monterey.

In my silent pondering I came across a thought like a pebble in a clear stream, and flipping it over, I laughed.

The satellites probably knew what happened to her. They must have been keeping a watchful eye over her all these years. Even before I began my journey, they would have known all along. They could tell me.

I opened my eyes toward the sky in search of guidance, but all I could see were the stars.

Preparations

It took me an hour to walk to the mall. The clerk, a tall, lean boy with curly brown hair and a red nose, initially seemed very nervous.

“I’m here to shop,” I told him, but I couldn’t tell if it made him more relieved or troubled. I took out some cash from my pockets to reassure him. “I’ve got the money.”

“What kind of clothing are you looking for?” he asked carefully.

“Something casual. Casual, but tidy and neat.”

“So close to business casual, perhaps?”

“Something like that.”

“I see, I see.” He scrambled around the store to grab clothing. “How’s this?” He said, holding out a pair of navy colored slacks. “Then you could pair it with a nice dress shirt. You can have your pick there,” said the clerk, pointing to a rack full of shirts behind me.

I picked out a crisp button-up shirt in black with small white polka dots. I put them on with the slacks in the dressing room and came out to show the clerk. “How do I look?”

He seemed to be enjoying this odd encounter now. “Good, I think. It looks good to me, but honestly, I’m not the best guy to ask. Not something you want to hear from someone who works at a clothing store, but it’s true.”

I chuckled. “Your opinion is as good as any for me,” I said. “You in high school?”

“Yep.”

“Around here?”

“Yeah. I go to Seaside High. It’s in—well, in Seaside.”

“I know the place. Seaside is a good distance from here, isn’t it?”

“It’s not too bad with a car,” he said.

“Makes sense. I’ve been there a couple of times. Do they still hold college entrance exams there on the weekends? I used to take them there when I was in high school.”

The clerk’s interest peaked. “Oh, did you go to school around here?”

I nodded. “I did. It’s not too far from here—it’s in the forest. I used to come to this mall often with my friends—”

“You mean the boarding school?”

I smiled, a little embarrassed. “Yes, that one.”

Questions flashed through the clerk’s mind, but he suppressed them quickly with kindness. “Well, anyways, I think the black looks good with the navy. They don’t clash, and you can’t go wrong with a pair of slacks and a dress shirt, I think. You look good.”

I exchanged an awkward gaze with myself in the mirror. My hair was a mess and my shoes caked with dirt, but my clothes were sharp and fresh, like old cloth patched with new. My beard had also grown very long, and I absentmindedly brushed it as if it had appeared overnight.

“I’ll take them,” I said.

“Great. I can help you over here,” said the clerk, walking to register. “So, what’s the occasion?”

“I’m seeing an old friend.”

“Ah. A reunion?”

“Somewhat. I haven’t seen her since high school.”

“A high school reunion. Well, sir, I hope it goes well,” he said as he rang me up. “And Happy Holidays to you.”

“Is it already? What’s the date?”

“The 22nd.”

“Oh, I see,” I muttered. “You tend to lose track of time out there.” I handed him the money, and the clerk neatly folded my clothes and placed them in a paper bag. “Thank you”—I said, searching for his nametag—“Carl. Hm. I used to know a Carl.”

“That so?”

“Yeah. He was an exchange student from Germany my junior year.”

“Well, I hope Carl was a nice guy.”

“Oh, nothing but. Great guy. He’d read a lot. Never fiction, though—always books on economics or world politics or self-improvement. Hard worker, too. He’d go to the music room every night to teach himself piano, and by the end of the year he was quite good at it. He was a great friend. I was sad to see him go.” I smiled at the recollection. “Heh. Carl. There was this one thing he’d always say.”

“What?”

“Whenever we went to the beach, he’d say that you could see the curvature of the Earth if you knew how to look just right. Every time we were there he’d try to teach me. I never figured it out, though. You ever try that? To see the Earth curve with your naked eyes?”

Carl shook his head. “First time I’ve ever heard of it. I’ll be sure to try the next time I’m at a beach,” he added with a smile.

“Maybe you could stop by a beach and check on your way back.” I chuckled and dropped the change in the tip jar. “Happy Holidays, Carl.”

I left the mall and walked into the closest in across the mall. There were probably cheaper places to stay, but I could barely walk and so I decided I would stay if I could afford it. The room had a bed, a small shower, and an old TV on the wall, like the one I stayed at with Jang. When I took my shoes off at the door, I found that the socks were soaked with blood. Carefully, I peeled them off, and it burned as if my skin was coming off with them. Bulbous blisters covered my soles, oozing with blood and pus. I was in desperate need of a shower. In the shower I rinsed my feet with cold water, wincing in pain with every splash, and watched my blood swirl down the drain. I thought soaking myself in warm water would ease the pain, but I was sorely mistaken. The sudden temperature change triggered a violent coughing fit, and I had to sit back down and lean against the wall until it subsided. Thankfully there was no blood, but a lot of mucus. I sat in the shower for a long time, enjoying the warm water raining on my face.

I had little cash left, but enough for a barber. After drinking a large glass of water and resting my knee, I got dressed in my new clothes and set off for the mall again.

“Something that would go well with this outfit, please,” I told the barber. I had my hair cut short and my face clean-shaven, and the world felt breezier on my way back. At the inn I threw my old clothes in the washer-dryer and turned on the TV to pass the time. I tried to watch the news, but I couldn’t understand anything they were talking about. After flipping through a handful of stations, I gave up and settled for the tourist information channel.

I hung my clothes to rest in the closet along with my slacks and dress shirt when the laundry finished. And as I drifted to sleep, 17 Mile Drive and Cannery Row and Carmel and Big Sur and the Lone Cypress flashed by.

The next morning, I took another shower and tried my best to replicate how the barber had left my hair. I made my bed, and packed my old clothes into the guitar case.

At nine I set out for the address, holding on dearly to the directions sketched out by the receptionist at the inn. The day was beautiful, with large white clouds rolling against a sharp blue canvas. The sun was gentle, only kissing the top of my head with a light touch, but nevertheless I traveled by the solace of the shades.

Her house was just the way it had been in my dreams. Red roofs and off-white walls. Even the garden seemed as overgrown as I remembered. Flowers scattered among clumps of weeds, and ivies wrapped the house, circling their way up to the chimney.

I stood watching from the curb across the street. All of the curtains were drawn, with not a single light or a shifting shadow to be seen. There was nothing to prove that the house was empty—no realtor signs guarded the front yard—but there was nothing to indicate the contrary, either. The garage was closed so I couldn't see if there was a car, no smoke came out of the chimneys, and the front porch was devoid of any packages.

You could go and knock.

What if Savannah answered the door? What would you do then? Try to start a new life with her? But we know that's impossible. Her being alive and well is more likely than her being dead, and her being dead has more chances than you starting anew with her.

I know that.

So, what are you going to do?

If she opens the door?

Yeah.

I would like to talk to her.

That's as far as it would get.

Yes.

And after that?

The mailbox was another dead end. It lacked any names, displaying only the street number. But it had no lock on it. I'll take a peek, and if it's not her family I'll leave, end of story. But if it's her—I'll go and knock on the door. How about that?

The door creaked in its old age as it opened.

And I ran to her, crying out her name, again and again until it was reduced down to a whimper. But looking into her eyes, in that all-too-familiar gaze clouded with sorrow, I could see that she wasn't.

Wake

Savannah Yang died of an overdose a week after her high school graduation. She was 19 years old, and it was a Saturday evening. They found in her car overlooking the ocean, at a wharf, in Monterey.

Hannah was visiting her grandmother for the summer, as she had done every year since leaving for college.

“Have you eaten?” she asked. “It’s on me. How about that deli in Alvarado? I wonder if it’s still around.”

“It is.”

She drove us there in a car I haven’t seen before. This one was a silver-gray sedan, not as beaten up as Savannah’s. We sat outdoors.

“I haven’t been here in ages,” said Hannah. “We used to come here a lot senior year—you, Martin, Sav, and I. Remember that?”

“Of course,” I said quietly. “As if it were yesterday.”

“I think we sat on that large table in the center there.” She looked in through the windows and back in time to see the four of us, and she smiled gently. “All a part of that scheme of Savannah and yours.”

I turned my gaze from the table to her. “I’ve always wondered if you knew all along.”

Hannah clicked her tongue. “Come on, Sam. Savannah asks if I want to hang out with you and Martin every weekend, and every time you two disappear to leave Martin and me alone? It wasn’t exactly subtle. Not that I didn’t look forward to it every weekend,” said Hannah with a raised eyebrow, “or that it didn’t work.”

“So it worked out between you guys? I had a feeling it would.”

“Mhm. I could tell why you were wingmanning for him. And why Sav thought we would be a good fit. He was a good boyfriend.” Hannah sighed. “Oh, Martin.”

“Do you still talk to him?”

“Mm, not much. We dated a little into freshman year of college, but that was the last time we really talked to each other. Not that we didn’t end it on good terms—we just went our separate ways after high school.”

“I see. I haven’t talked to him much either since I had to leave high school.”

“He’s doing well, from what I gather. He’s in New York City now.”

“He ended up going to school there, after all?”

“He did. I remember he was very excited about it.”

I smiled faintly and let out a wistful chuckle. “That’s great for him. You know, back in high school he and I would always talk about going to a school in New York together. We had these plans to be a two-man band in New York, just like—”

“Like Simon and Garfunkel,” said Hannah. “I remember. He would talk about it a lot.”

I sank back in my seat and looked down at the table. “Yeah. I wonder if he still does music.”

“He’s in a band, actually,” said Hannah. “Not quite a two-man band, but they seem to be doing well. They play shows around the city often.”

“Really? Wow, he really did it, huh?” I muttered to myself in astonishment, so proud of my friend. “Oh, Martin.” I shook my head, then looked back up at Hannah. “What about you? How’s college?”

College has been good. She’s studying to become a doctor, and has a scholarship she’s very grateful for. Her grandmother is also doing great; she has been complaining about her back pain less and less. She wants to go into orthopedics to help her grandmother and people like her, she says, although her grandmother may not need the help by the time she makes it, with how much her health has been improving every year.

The meal came to an end and a tender silence fell across the table. Hannah’s eyes had depth to them, as if she was looking into the bottom of the ocean. “Thanks for stopping by,” she said softly. “Savannah would have really enjoyed your visit.”

“Would she have?” I asked in a hoarse voice. “Hannah. You know why I had to leave high school.”

“Of course.”

“And it’s still good to see me again? Truthfully?”

Hannah fixed her gaze on me with a razor-sharp focus, but she didn’t see me there; she saw her sister. “A couple years ago, I would have been furious.”

“So how did you find your peace?”

Hannah took a big breath, and leaned back in her chair with a large exhale.

“It requires a letting go,” she said. “But not just any kind of letting go. It seems to me that there are two types of letting go we can do in this life, Sam. There is a letting go that is a loss of faith, and then a letting go that is a transfer of it. And it’s the latter that helps. I’ll spare you on where I think you should move it, only that you *should*. You must plant it somewhere firm where

you will never lose it. You don't do that, and it's all over. Nothing to grab onto to pull yourself out of that hole. Nothing to hold on to in the fearful storm," Hannah said in a quiet yet firm voice. "No matter what, you mustn't lose it." She took another deep breath, and breaking out of her trance, she saw me in the place of her sister. "I'm sorry if that didn't make much sense, but it's how I've been working to stay in the light."

Now my eyes traveled the great length of an invisible distance, and at the end of it, I too saw Savannah. "No. It made sense. You know, what you said sounds a lot like what Savannah would have said. In fact, I think it may be what she's been trying to tell us this entire time. And I think Savannah would--no, is happy that you've arrived at it, and even more so that you and your grandmother are doing so well."

"Yes. I only wish that I could tell her." Savannah smiled, and bit by bit she faded away until Hannah remained. "Thank you for visiting, Sam. It really was nice to see you again."

At one end of Alvarado Street is a plaza, and past that, Old Fisherman's Wharf. I only ever remember the weather being sunny there. Next to it is a curb where Martin and Gordon, two of my best friends from high school, would often wait for cabs. If you start from the plaza and go down the street for a while, you will be greeted by a quaint little donut shop. The donuts are so good that they sell out by noon, so you must get there very early if you want a taste. Martin and I would sometimes wake up at dawn to catch a cab to Alvarado Street, just for the donuts. It was always worth it. Half a block past that, there is an ice cream shop with exorbitant flavors and the prices to back them up. One of their most curious flavors is cilantro, where the herb is sprinkled on top of a mint-colored scoop of ice cream. Someone that used to love me very much loved the flavor for reasons I never found out. A little more from the ice cream shop, and you will have arrived at the other end of Alvarado Street. Take a slight left to Munras Avenue. Continue until

you come to an intersection, then turn right. There you will see a little seafood deli. It's where Martin and I would have lunch with Hannah, a girl that Martin had liked very much. Martin was too shy to ask her out directly, so the lunches would be disguised as a casual hangout for Martin to get to know Hannah better. I would go with Martin, and Hannah would come with Savannah. Savannah was Hannah's twin sister. She and I would scheme these lunch dates together. Savannah died of an overdose a week after her graduation. She was 19 years old, and it was a Saturday evening. They found her in her car overlooking the ocean, at a wharf, not far from that deli.

Sand

I had a dream last night—not a visiting dream, just a regular one. It still took place in Monterey, at the beach overlooking Seal Rock. It was deep in the night—the sea was an howling abyss and the road devoid of any cars. The only sound was that of the crashing waves, and the moon alone illuminated the skies; not even a single star could be seen.

On the beach was a haggard old man. His hair was frizzled, with greasy strands stretching wherever they pleased, and his fingernails, chipped and far too long, were tainted the color of soot. His dry skin had ruptured like a field in a drought, which he hid the best he could under his tattered brown jacket. Everything about the man was anemic and depressing, except for his eyes. They were exceptionally clear, abnormally so, and they were sharp as if they could cut through metal.

He was digging around the beach with no rhyme or reason behind his method. A dog frantically digging holes in the sand had more sense than him. He would be halfway through digging one hole, suddenly run to another spot, dig there, and in a moment run off elsewhere to start another pit. Even his ways of digging were sporadic. He would dig by cupping the sand with his palms, switch to kicking the sand out of the way, or in an act of sheer desperation start scraping the sand with his fingernails. Small mounds of sand were chaotically scattered about the beach, ruining the pristine ivory sheet it had been. Puzzled, I cautiously approached the man and asked what he was doing.

He turned, surprised by my presence. He opened his jaws to speak, and his teeth were yellow and in disarray, like the mounds of sand he had created. He was an ugly man, a filthy man. A disgusting, pathetic, and evil man.

Answering me, he said:

I left my heart here, long ago

For the beach to keep.

And now I've come to ask it back,

But all I find is

Sand, sand, sand.

I spent the rest of my money at the mall to buy three sheets of paper for writing letters, and arrived at the beach near Seal Rock by evening. A small bench overlooked the ocean before the decline to the beach, and I sat not on it but behind it, using the bench like a table. I put down the sheets of paper and began writing three letters: one for Rachel, one for Martin, and one for Gordon.

When I finished, I sat on the bench and watched the orange glow fade until the sky and the ocean joined to become one black void. Then I limped down to shore and waded into the waves until they came up to my knees.

It would be nice to be a part of the sea. I'd belong to the fish, and eventually the fish that have accepted me to other fish. This would go on and on, around and around, and in time they would all dissolve back into the great ocean. Then every bit of me would be scattered around the peninsula, and I'd be immortal, forever a part of Monterey.

I shuffled back to shore and suddenly began kicking the sand. I repeated, watching patches of wet sand fly, then moved to another spot to start a new dent. I scooped the sand and released it to see how it felt. I threw fistfuls of it into the ocean, just for it to settle down and become part of the beach again.

I don't know how long they were watching me. A boy and a girl stood atop the incline, watching the inexplicable scene in horror. The boy was taller than the girl, but not by much, and he had his arm around her. I named the girl Rachel, and the boy Sam.

Calling out from the top, Sam asked me what I was doing.

So I told him what the man in my dreams had said.

Ghosts

Two things remained for me to do. The first concerned the letters. All I had to do was to climb up the concrete paths I had gone up so many times, get to the school, and drop them off. The school would know how to contact its alumni.

The next morning, a small dirt path cutting through a thicket brought me to the edge of the school, the same place Rachel and I would start off from when going to the beach. In the distance a crow let out a lonesome cry, while rays of sunshine poked through the cypresses overhead. When I stepped onto the campus grounds, it felt as if the world had ended long ago and I was the first person to visit in centuries. A dog barked nearby, probably one I used to know. It was very strange; the campus felt more like a dream than the dream itself.

I have always thought that it would be more melancholy to return to a place that has changed completely than to a place that has remained the same. That there would be comfort in validating the image of your memory. I am not so sure anymore. Upon returning to a place drastically changed there may be some initial shock, but it is quickly followed by the excitement of discovering the transformations. You can tell stories of how it used to be, and that is quite exhilarating—there is a reason why the elders delight in it so much. But returning to a place unchanged, remaining just as how you remembered? There is only confusion. The set remains the same, but all of the actors have changed. And you, looking around the audience, realize you are alone.

The school was exactly as I had dreamt it. Mindlessly, I wandered towards the amphitheater, wondering why the school was so quiet and empty when I realized it was the holidays. On my way there, I inevitably came across that old gray building, my dorm. It was still the same exact color, not a shade lighter or darker, and even the dust that had settled on the windows seemed the same. I tried the entrance door even though I knew that it would be locked. But through the glass, I could see the common room. The fireplace, the round desks where Ms. Jamieson and I would sit, the coffee table in the center, and the chairs around it—they were all in the same place. I turned back and looked up where I knew the windowsill to my old room would be, then began laughing hysterically. I tried to keep quiet to not disturb the silence, but when I looked at it again I couldn't help but burst out. I was running out of breath when a voice called out.

"Sam?" It was a woman's voice. Startled, but in a good way.

"Oh—" I gasped in the same tone. "Ms. Jamieson. You're still teaching here?"

With a big smile, Ms. Jamieson said, "Of course I am, but what a pleasant surprise, Sam—it's been so long since I saw you last. What are you doing in Monterey?"

"I was just," I dragged out my words, "visiting, and I thought I'd come by the school."

"Well, aren't I *glad* that you did. My God, it's been so long. Too long. Have you got somewhere to be? Why don't you come by my house for some tea, perhaps with some cookies?"

"That sounds lovely, Ms. Jamieson. Do you still bake your own cookies?"

"Now what would I be if I didn't? As a matter of fact, I just made a batch yesterday."

"Brownies?"

"Snickerdoodles," Ms. Jamieson said with a laugh.

"Oh, those are great."

“Follow me, then.” Smalltalk flooded out of Ms. Jamieson with joy. “I moved houses last year. I think you’ll remember that I used to live over there, right across your room? The school moved me to a bigger house on the edge of campus—it’s very nice.” She took a right at the parking lot, and we could see her house in the distance. “By the way, do you mind letting me know what you were laughing so hard about? I’m curious.”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” I said with a thin smile across my lips. “That room there, on the second floor—like you said, I used to live there. And it’s just that—heh—it’s just that the blinds are still broken.”

Ms. Jamieson’s house was the epitome of comfort. Brown and muted reds were the primary colors of her living room as if Autumn had taken a fall and spilled over. The kitchenette was mostly made of wood, and all of the cabinets and drawers let out a familiar creak when you opened them. The centerpiece of the kitchen was the large oven under the stove. It was probable that it had fed more than a hundred kids already, and even when it was empty and cool it housed a sweet scent of butter. The line between hardwood and carpet marked the border between the kitchen and the living room. At the center of the room was a long and heavy couch, firmly rooted in the carpet, with more cushions than the number of people that could sit. In front of the sofa a brick fireplace proudly guarded the space between the two windows, and an old rocking chair faced it diagonally. Judging by the bookshelf in the corner within an arm’s reach from the chair, I guessed it was where Ms. Jamieson got her reading done.

Ms. Jamieson brought out a plate of snickerdoodles, along with a pot of chrysanthemum tea.

“Still smiling about those blinds?” asked Ms. Jamieson.

“No, no,” I shook my head. “It’s the tea, Ms. Jamieson—it’s very delicious.” I finished the cup and smiled again. “Ms. Jamieson, you must see what, a hundred students a year?”

“Hm, that sounds about right. Maybe a bit less, but around a hundred is a good guess.”

“Then you must have seen around three hundred students since I left, so I’ve got to ask—how did you recognize me, let alone remember my name?” Then scoffing quietly at myself, I said, “I suppose I had a rather memorable exit. Is that it?”

Ms. Jamieson’s face sank into the friendly and well-known folds of her skin. “No, it wasn’t that. But to tell you the truth, I don’t remember you as much as I remember your story,” she said, pointing to the bookshelf in the corner. “Do you see the big white binders on the top shelf? Those binders are where I keep my students’ stories. I like to read it from time to time. Your story, it was about two boys that snuck out at night to play music around town, correct?”

Astonished, I could only laugh. “That’s exactly it. I can’t believe you still remember that.”

“Well, you shouldn’t play favorites between students, but no one ever said anything about their stories,” said Ms. Jamieson, shrugging with a smile.

“I don’t know, Ms. Jamieson. I haven’t read it in a while, but I know for a fact that it was some awful writing.”

Ms. Jamieson relaxed back in her chair with an illuminating look only teachers possess. “Necessary, Sam. Necessary rather than awful.” She took a sip of her tea and sighed. “I always wondered how that story would end, Sam.”

“I don’t know how it would, Ms. Jamieson. I Haven’t thought about it in a long time. But—I have been working on a story recently,” I added carefully.

“Oh?” Ms. Jamieson raised her eyebrows. “Please, tell me about it.”

I had the routine memories by now, and the premise flowed with ease. “It’s about a homeless man in New York that can travel back in time, but only in his dreams. He spends every night reliving his high school years, which unfold in this little place called Monterey.” I paused for a second. “Then one day, he decides that he’ll go visit in person, and so he begins his journey across the United States, from New York to California.”

“Interesting. Does he ever get there?”

“He does.”

“And what does he find there?”

I could not answer right away. After a long pause, I said: “Ghosts.”

“Hm.” Ms. Jamieson nodded and looked up, as if seeing apparitions of her own. She looked back down slowly and asked, “And then what does he do?”

“He... he writes these three letters. Three letters to three of his closest friends he had in high school—friends he hasn’t talked to for years and doesn’t know how to reach.”

Ms. Jamieson had spent so much time reading between the lines that she had become an expert in doing the same for people. “I see. You said that the man likes to relive his memories of high school. Does he ever visit his old school, now that he’s in Monterey?”

“Yes.”

“Is he going to ask if the school can mail in the letters?”

All that remained was a faint and pensive chuckle. “Maybe. He’s on the edge about it. He was sure of it when he wrote them, but now that he’s at the school, he’s not so sure. Now it just seems selfish.” Ms. Jamieson became blurry as my focus shifted to the fireplace behind her. “Ms. Jamieson. Do you also remember a student by the name of Savannah Yang? She was in the same grade as me.”

“Yes, I remember Savannah,” said Ms. Jamieson quietly. “I think everyone does.”

“I only found out what happened to her very, very recently. Just yesterday, in fact.” I was smiling, although I don’t know why. “Ms. Jamieson. You must also remember my crime.”

She had been looking like a grim statue the whole time. Suddenly, the stone broke through and she asked: “How does it end?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Your new story. Have you finished it?”

“No.”

“You haven’t made an outline for the story?”

“No. I guess I’m more of a writer that likes to figure it out as it goes.”

“So nothing is decided, then?” inquired Ms. Jamieson.

“No.”

I finished the last cookie on the plate, and the conversation began to age rapidly. It became deaf and mute, and the weight of the silence had hunched its back. The dog barked in the distance again. It was as good a signal as any.

“Thank you for the hospitality, Ms. Jamieson. Really. Best cookies I’ve had since—since the last time I’ve had your cookies. But I think I should be going now.” I grabbed my jacket and headed for the door.

“Sam—the letters you wrote. Will your friends be hearing back from you?”

I turned around and patted my left pocket, feeling the folded letters. “No. I don’t think I’ll be sending them in, after all.”

“But if you did and they responded, would you write them back?”

I hummed to myself. “Hm. Maybe. I’ll read them at the least, Ms. Jamieson.” Vines of guilt ensnared my feet to the carpet, and I found myself unable to take another step. She had shown me kindness, and in return I had given her the cancer of worry.

A moment of hesitation was enough for Ms. Jamieson to strike again. She rushed up from her seat, almost knocking back her chair. “Sam,” she commanded with an iron voice. “Finish the story. And I mean that literally. As in, write the words, the hundreds of thousands of them. With a pencil, a pen, a keyboard, even a typewriter—I don’t care, as long as you finish the story. A story that you can make a physical copy of that you can hand someone. No metaphors here. A story, just like the ones we used to write in class. Do you understand me?”

My feet were completely turned away from the door, and I was facing her directly now. “I understand, but I don’t know if I can promise that, Ms. Jamieson.” The vines were up to my chest now, suffocating my breath. “But I’ll try. I want to finish the story, I really do. The literal story. The physical pages. Believe me, I want it. I’ve wanted it for a while. But again, no promises, Ms. Jamieson.”

Her gaze was paralyzing. “I’m sorry, Sam, but I’m afraid I won’t let you leave until I hear that you will at the least try your hardest.”

The tray of snickerdoodles on the table cowered like children while their parents fought. “I will,” I said softly. “I’ll do my best.”

Ms. Jamieson put the rest of the cookies in a paper bag for me. As I stepped out of the house I expected a fog, maybe even a drizzle, but it was still as sunny as ever.

The second and last thing that remained for me to do was to keep a promise.

Let’s go find a cypress by the shore.

There's got to be one along the road.

But then Carmel is close by. Wouldn't be bad to visit.

Then we can stop by Carmel first. We need somewhere to spend the night, and Carmel Beach gets pretty empty then.

Okay. Carmel it is.

But then the next day?

Fine. The next day, we'll go find a cypress.

Requiescat

Carmel Beach, the one at the bottom of Ocean Avenue, becomes surprisingly empty at night. You'd expect something so populated in the daytime to at least retain some fragments of its youth in the darkness, but that is not the case. Even some beaches in Monterey that are a lot less popular than Carmel Beach have a few visitors at night. People sit on blankets, sometimes with a makeshift campfire, sharing a moment of love or friendship or both. I haven't seen any of that at Carmel Beach. No, just the silver sand and the indigo air and the black sea. And in its desolation, the whole beach becomes so much more massive than it was under the sun. Carmel Beach at night is either the Mojave Desert or the surface of the Moon.

It is a long but feasible walk from the school to Carmel. I followed the same path our biking team would take. You exit from the front of the school and follow the road down until you get to 17 Mile Drive, and follow it until the road splits off in a downward spiral. Martin especially loved speeding down the final downward spiral before arriving in Carmel. "Bombing down it," he would call it. I remember always seeing him rush past me and disappear around the bend with great speed as I hung to my handlebars tight, trying not to go too fast. Once down from the slope and past the gate, Carmel Beach opens up to your right.

It was a painful wait until everyone had gone away for the transformation of the beach to begin. Carmel had too many memories, but I was glad I visited. It was the best bittersweet I had ever tasted.

And at night, completely deserted by everyone, on a beach full of silver and blue and black—the hour of the black pearl—I visited Savannah.

* * *

We met on a Saturday morning, when the whole campus was still lost in a deep and hazy sleep, relaxed to the point of delirium. When Martin was still asleep in the next room, snoring loud enough to be heard through the wall, almost as loud as he had sung the night before. When there were no footsteps to be heard, just the flap of wings and the cawing of crows. When the beams of light through the leaves of trees were healthy and showed no signs of ever leaving us. If time had stopped ticking, nobody would have noticed. I like to believe that it was in that pocket of infinitesimal and indefinite time that Savannah and I met, unseen and unknown by everyone.

She requested that we met at the old chapel on campus. The chapel had a steep triangular roof made of dark brown planks, and they were tinted with moss. Inside, rows of pews, polished to perfection by age, shone brilliantly in the morning sun through the window behind the lectern. The elderly organ quietly watched all of this from the very back of the church. It had witnessed many weddings and funerals over the years, but not many prayers as of late.

The window behind the lectern was a large glass pane following up the triangular rise of the roof. It revealed a world of its own, that of a deep forest, only able to be seen through the glass wall. Go outside and into the same forest it peered into, and it would not look the same. The lectern divided the pews into two groups down the center, making room for a walkway. Savannah sat on the third row of pews from the front to the right of the lectern. Seeing me enter, she waved me in with an old smile. I like to think that she knew.

I sat on the other group of pews to the left of the lectern. We sat in silence, staring ahead at the oblivious forest, swaying in the sweet breeze with joy. She gave me ample time to begin,

though my demeanor had probably told her enough.

There was no right way to say it.

“Savannah passed away. By an overdose, about three and a half years ago. They found her in her car at the wharf. I’m sorry.”

Savannah nodded to herself. “Mm. I had a feeling it would be that way for some time,” she said gently. “Although I’ll admit, there was a small hope against it in my heart. Did you by any chance get to hear how Hannah and Gram are doing?”

“It was Hannah that answered the door.” Trembling, I met her eyes. “They’re doing very well. Hannah says that school has been very good, and that your grandmother is very healthy—that she seems to be getting healthier every year. That her back pains her less.”

“Hannah must be a... junior in college this year?”

“Senior. She’s a senior in college now.”

“What did she decide to study in college?”

“She’s studying to be a doctor. An orthopedic, she said.”

Savannah smiled. “She would talk about that when we were little. How she wanted to help her grandma with it when we grew up. Looks like she’s really doing it. I’m so proud of her—and you say that she’s doing well?”

“Yes. Good grades, good friends—all of it, good.”

“How are they affording school?”

“She was able to get a scholarship.”

“Really?” Savannah laughed quietly. “I am so proud of her. So incredibly proud of her. And you said Gram’s pain is better?”

“Yes—Hannah even said that by the time she was a doctor, your grandmother may not even need her help anymore, with how well she’s doing.”

Savannah’s eyes would not let go. “Sam. Remember the promise you made me. You have to be truthful with me. No lies at all. All of this is true, none of it altered or exaggerated or omitted in any way?”

“Yes. I promise.”

“You need to tell me the truth. It would be worse if you were lying, whether it’s good news or not. Not even lying—if it differed even a little from the truth in any way.”

“I understand that.”

“So knowing that, all of what you told me—about Hannah and Gram—is true?”

I nodded firmly. “I swear that it is.”

“Thank you,” she said calmly, her gaze still holding on but relaxing. With the caution gone from her voice, she asked softly, “So, what about Sam? Is he thinking about it?”

“About what?”

“You know. Isn’t there almost a great temptation to do it? Almost a terrifying thrill? That was the way it was with me, at least.”

“Ah, that. Yes. I think I feel the same thing.”

“So it is on your mind.”

“Yes.”

“Have you thought about how you would go about it?”

“I have. Really silly, some of them. I keep thinking about making a scene out of it. Thought of hanging myself on a cypress for everyone to see. Or to leave my shoes next to a cliff overlooking the ocean and jump off. Something for everyone I used to know to hear about, so I

can have an impact that way. It's a twisted, pathetic, selfish way of thinking, but it's no use hiding it from you."

Savannah looked up at the unadorned chapel ceiling. With an inexplicable smile, she said, "I can't deny that I've had similar thoughts—of making a spectacle so that more people hear about and remember me for a long time. I liked to fantasize about it from time to time. For me, it was getting life insurance before going through with it. Leave something for Hannah and Gram, you know?" Savannah sighed. "Sam," she said in the smooth tone that teachers used to address a child in kindness, "I'm assuming that it wouldn't help if I said that things would have ended up the same even without your involvement. That the guilt would gnaw at you, no matter what I say."

"But I have been involved, Sav. And the damage has been done."

She smiled as clear as the skies outside, sure of the solution in her mind. With a voice calming but clear and strict, she said, "In that case, could you make me one more promise, Sam? Actually, two more. Just two more promises, and that would make me all okay. Truly all okay."

"Anything."

"You have to promise to keep them once you hear them."

"Yes," I said again, "anything."

"Okay then. The first promise is about you not going through with the plans we discussed. Including any of the same nature you haven't told me about, or any that might arise in your mind. You can never go through with them. Not now, not at any point in the future. You surrender the ability to choose when your time is up. Do you understand this?"

"Yes."

"You've heard it, and now you are bound by it. Are you ready for the second promise?"

I nodded.

“The second promise says that you can never come back here. Not this Monterey, or any other in your dreams. The only Monterey you’re allowed to visit is the one outside of your mind. You surrender being able to return here forever. Do you understand this?”

“I do.”

“Good. You’ve heard it, so as it was with the first, you are also bound by the second,” declared Savannah. “Sam, you must keep these promises. If I ever meant anything to you—if Savannah ever meant anything to you, please keep these two promises. For me, Okay? For Savannah.”

“I will keep them,” I said, fighting through tears like searing molasses.

Savannah nodded, content with my answer. “It looks like it’s your time to go then, Sam. One last thing. This one is a request. Don’t worry—it’s simple, nothing like the other two. Could you leave once you are in your room, after walking to your dorm from here? And if you could walk slowly, I would appreciate that—I’d like a moment for myself.” Savannah locked eyes with me. “Would you do that for me?”

I nodded, and she smiled in response. “Now turn around, go, and don’t look back.”

Time slowly warmed up on the walk back, preparing to flow again. As the door clicked shut, it resumed, and then ended altogether.

* * *

To the left, where the incline out of Carmel that Martin loved to rush down begins, and from there a way into a forest of cypresses. To the right, where the coastline unfolds, a tall cliff bound to occur somewhere.

Walking up in the hour of the pearl, armed with an unbreakable promise, a man lumbers
up Ocean Avenue.

The Curve of the Horizon

It's been a long time. So long that it's necessary to summarize, because telling you all that has happened since would be longer than this entire story. So please, bear with me.

Shortly after making my way up Ocean Avenue, I left Monterey. What I had been in love with were all ghosts, which I think you would agree is not a good relationship to be in. Savannah is gone. But so is Martin, Gordon, Hannah, Rachel, and the entirety of Monterey that I remember. And so is Sam Hanely—the boy that lived in Del Monte Forest who had great friends, a girl that truly loved him, and an odd friend whose twin sister he would try and set his roommate up with; who woke up in foggy mornings to go to class and went biking around Monterey's great landscape after school—dead. Just as Savannah and Hannah may look alike but are different people, so is Sam Hanely of Monterey and I. One is dead, and the other alive.

I needed time to mourn all the deaths, of course. I suppose that is what my journey across the United States was about all those years ago. But that was only the start of it. If ghosts are real, they must be the sorrow for our loved ones long gone. And the ghosts, in their undying insistence, would not stop haunting me.

So I wrote a story, a story about Monterey. Each page is a grave for their souls, a final resting place.

And it helped. Pain and suffering must be a bottomless inkwell, and blank pieces of paper the perfect coffin. That isn't to say that it was the magical cure, the infallible solution—I would

come very close to breaking the two promises many times. Sometimes the first, sometimes the second, and other times one after the other. The story didn't make everything okay, but it helped. When you put enough consistent effort into something, you can convince yourself that it is legitimate work and not a fickle spark of inspiration. And when that happens, the work is a very great thing to return to every day. It becomes your shelter in the lonesome, withering storm.

But most importantly, whenever I came very close to breaking my promises, I could look at the mound of work I had built up, and a little hope would hatch. I'd say, "But look, all this pain, it's turned into all those precious pages there," and the hardships would seem less and less like losses. Not all beautiful things are made of pain, but perhaps all pain can be made into something beautiful.

I still do think of Rachel sometimes, although it's been years. Not in a romantic or a yearning way. Just as a fragment of a warm memory.

As I wrote this story, many thoughts of you inevitably flooded my mind. I would have silly thoughts about you reading it someday, though I knew the chances of that were slimmer than the lightest raindrop. But the thoughts were mainly about how no matter what I did differently in my dreams, or no matter how much I wrote about it, how I've been to you does not change. No amount of regretting or dreaming or writing will change that.

But a friend of mine says, Rachel, that I shouldn't apologize. Not because I don't owe it to you, but because you don't need me to feel sorry for you. Because you've moved on.

I remember the day at the aquarium that we never really got to have. How you stood in front of the jellies, mesmerized. You'd be hard-pressed to find a creature as delicate and soft as the jellyfish in the animal kingdom. But you'd struggle even more to find one as resilient as it.

You can stab them, cut them up, and throw them mercilessly on the shore, left to fry under the sun, but they'll still be living, pulsing, stinging—embracing. They are as easy to cut as they are resilient. Or perhaps, they are so resilient because they are so easy to cut.

You are the jellyfish, Rachel. In your strength, you knew how to grieve, and then move on. And no doubt you have moved on, far from Monterey, so all that remains of it is a happy fog. I also have no doubt, Rachel, that you have met someone that loves you as much as you love them. Maybe one day you'll take him to Monterey and show him all of the places you were in love with. You'll take him to Alvarado Street, and share your fascination with a very peculiar flavor at a very eccentric ice cream shop. Or to Cannery Row, where you'll introduce him to all your aquatic friends. But eventually, when the dying orange light kisses the two of you farewell on that sandy shore, you two will get into your cars and move on, away from Monterey.

So I won't apologize, Rachel, although I suppose saying all this is a way of apologizing.

Instead, I want to tell you this, Rachel: that I respect and admire you. You loved profoundly, grieved deeply, and moved on bravely. What I've tried to do with all of these pages, you have done on your own a long time ago. And for that, Rachel, I respect and admire you. In more ways than I have the pages for.

That leaves us with the most difficult part of the story. Difficult, because quite honestly, it doesn't make any sense. The most inexplicable and perhaps the most inhuman part of it all.

Savannah Yang.

Inhuman, because how could she have done it?

Here is a story. See for yourself if it makes any sense.

A man kills a woman, and what does she do?

Let him kill her again, so that he can go on living.

My God, it doesn't make any sense.

And last and least, what have I been up to?

Well, every day I go on, living a life undeserved. I've been able to find a job waiting tables that I'm very grateful for. It's a small palace, but they've been good to me. The next part, I think, is more of a miracle. After many attempts of telling my story, not just this story but my past and my journey across the United States, I was given an opportunity to attend a community college with aid.

So these days, you'll find me hard at work in getting my degree in English. Outside of school, you can usually find me working at the restaurant, or writing in my apartment.

But on some days, you'll find me at the beach. It's not the one on 17-Mile Drive, or any of the ones in Monterey—it's quite far from all of them, in fact—but still a lot alike. It's got majestic whitewater waves that roar, accompanied by the chorus of singing seagulls and the rhythmic conversations of a happy crowd. And behind it all, an unobstructed and panoramic view of the horizon spans the Earth.

I usually go down there around sunset to watch the magnificent show: the sun giving itself into the ocean, emitting those final rays of gold which give birth to so much beauty.

Sometimes I have a thought that makes me chuckle—half serious and half joking—about how it would be nice to return to Monterey someday when I'm ready. Maybe I can teach at my old school. Then I can walk to that old friend, that shore.

But most of the time, I'm not even thinking about that.

Rather, I'm looking off into the horizon, hard at work searching for that elusive curve of the Earth, all the while trying my hardest not to get used to it.

Epilogue

A lone cry of a crow. Cypresses rustling in the breeze. A faint snore from the next room. A fragment of light leaking through the broken blinds.

A promise broken.

With quick steps, following the white stone paths to the old chapel. A dark green metal garbage can, the color of the cypress leaves, next to the chapel's parking lot, and walking from it to a black sedan—Savannah.

Her eyes, catching a familiar shadow in the corner. Concern immediately flooding her pupils.

“Sam—”

“I know, but I’ve got a good reason. I’m still most definitely keeping the first promise, and this is the last time I’ll ever break the second.”

A long stare accompanied by silence.

“How long has it been?”

“Quite a while.”

“More than a few months?”

“A lot more than that.”

“Years?”

“Yes.”

“How many? Three? Five?”

“About a decade.”

Back to silence.

“I’m sorry I came back. But I have some good news about Hannah I thought you’d want to hear.”

Another pause, then following it, a sharp exhale. “Well, are you going to tell me about it?”

“Of course.”

“Then get in the car.”

“Where to?”

Silence again, because the answer is known, and she knows that it is so.

A wharf. A bright morning, for all the satellites to see.

“I met Hannah a few days ago. She told me she received her license recently. Your sister is an orthopedic surgeon. I was able to see your grandmother, too. Hannah said that she jumped up and down at the news—literally.

“She also told me that she believed her sister was smiling down at her, proud of her and overflowing with joy. I thought you would be too.”

A pained gulp and a fight against tears. “Thank you, Sam. A broken promise is a broken promise, but that does make me very happy. What about you? How have you been, old friend?”

“Well, there is another reason for my visit. I’m starting a new job tomorrow. As an English teacher, at our old school.”

A gasp, blossoming into a great smile. “Even more good news. I wish I had a gift prepared in advance. Oh, well, I suppose I do have a gift, sort of.”

“How do you mean?”

“It’s in the glovebox.”

Confused, hands slowly clutching the handle. Opening it even slower.

“There’s nothing in there.” Then a smile, and pressure building behind the eyes. Now in the tone of perfect contentment: “There is nothing in here.”

A quiet nod in response.

*

“Hey, Savannah?”

“Mhm?”

“In how long do we have to say goodbye? Really say goodbye?”

“Soon. Because you’re ready.”