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## When You Meet Me Again: A Novel

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**WHEN YOU MEET ME AGAIN:  
A NOVEL**

**JACOB HYATT  
HONORS THESIS  
2018**

**TUTOR: PROFESSOR DEBRA SPARK  
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## **PART ONE**



### Chapter One: Sick

He was twenty years old and thinking of all the ways that he might die, how likely each of them was to happen, and how badly each of them would hurt if they happened, when a professor and a student collided by accident in the doorway to the library in which he was studying. He had been sprawled on a couch just inside the door, taking up a space meant for three, his long legs spread out like spaghetti and his round little feet crossed and perched like sentinel owls on the armrest, when the professor and student had the misfortune to round their respective corners at just the wrong moment in time. The student's gasp, the teacher's grunt of surprise, were simultaneous and immediate. Papers flew from each of their hands; the teacher, burdened by a stack of two dozen or so freshly photocopied essays, dropped all of his papers at once, and they scattered in all directions about his feet.

This was still the summer, those inane couple of weeks the college had crammed in before September, when everyone was still overheated, unsure, and on edge. To make matters worse, a veritable plague of blowflies had settled on the campus: you could see them everywhere, banging blindly about the insides of the fluorescents and crawling all about the shower-heads and making indifferent, motionless love in the desserts the cafeteria workers set out in the dining halls. There were serious concerns of contamination, either from the flies or from the alcoholic sprays and little green gas bombs the physical plant department had put all around the academic and residential buildings. Some people were even worried—despite the very clear Health Services memorandum to the contrary—that the flies would ruin all the gluten-free foods by tracking God-knows-what through them. It was insane, but as soon as the idea was out and widespread, it stuck. Anything stuck these days; people were worried; people would believe anything in frazzled states like these.

He sat up on the couch. He was sweaty and there was sweat in his hair and around his collar and all down his back and he felt uncomfortable, too slow, vaguely like he was weighted down. He thought to get up and assist in the picking-up of the papers—normally he would not have helped, but several of the papers had come close to him when they'd landed, and he didn't want to seem like an out-and-out asshole by not picking up at least one or two of them—but then, seeing that the student and the professor were without doubt going to exchange words, given the looks of recognition that passed between the two of them, he sat back and observed them instead.

“Christine!” said the professor jubilantly. He was a short, well-built Asian-American man, a scarf-wearing type of man.

“Professor Xi!” said the student. She was a young white woman with long black hair and red creeping like a steady sea of ants up her neck. The way she said “Professor Xi!” like Professor Xi had said “Christine!” made the young man on the couch feel sicker, like he was in some romantic comedy in which the lovers had reconnected after their third-act time apart.

“How have you been?” was the inevitable question, which they both said at nearly the same time.

“I'm great,” said Professor Xi, taking the lead. “Super. These... these damn flies, though, they sure are *annoying*.” The way he said “damn” was the way teachers says “damn” to gauge the boundaries of their cool.

“I know it!” the girl said, loudly and obsequiously, the awkward and nearly orgasmic way people talk to each other when they're not entirely comfortable with each other. “I was in Roiland earlier today for Orgo,” she went on, “and someone literally swallowed one.”

“They swallowed a *fly*?”

“Yeah, it was... not good.”

Why did people feel the need to do things like this, to have these stupid little talks? And why did he feel the need to watch? He thought about that a second. Maybe it was because no one ever noticed him; he sunk into the backdrop like some kind of ghost. Which meant that he could get away with it.

They had moved on to talking about last year’s Spring concert.

“Oh, yes, I thought it went *so well*. I wish I could’ve taken you all out for a beer or something afterwards but my two-year-old had had the flu for like four days—”

“*Aww*,” said Christine. “That’s too bad.”

“Yes, well, he pulled through just like a little trooper. I mean, not really, I guess: he was up all night crying and puking and it was just an awful mess—” Professor Xi trailed off; gave a short, barking laugh of recollection; and shook his head. “Anyway, Alice didn’t have any sort of issue with that scratch after?”

“Scratch?”

“The oboe.”

The red, which had slowly been diluting, now flared across her face. The girl now acquired that sweaty, mortified look of someone—not unique to but certainly perfected by students—who has just realized something important and realized it too late.

“Was Alice... was Alice supposed to look it over?” the girl said.

Professor Xi, who was picking up his papers, now blinked and cocked his head forward a little, as if he wasn’t quite hearing her correctly.

“Was Alice... I mean, yeah. Did you not take her your oboe last semester?”

“Well... well, no, I thought... Remember I sent you that email—”

“The school was renting that oboe for you; if you didn’t turn it in—”

“No, no, I get that, but, like, I sent you that email at the beginning of the semester and gave you the code to the locker, and you said... I thought you were taking care of that. You made it seem like you were taking care of that.”

“If you didn’t bring it back to Alice,” Professor Xi said solemnly, as if about to announce to her that, after a long battle with illness, the oboe had passed away, “if you didn’t bring it back, then the school probably had to pay rent on it all summer.”

“Oh... oh, no, Professor Xi, do you want me to talk to the Music Department and I can see if I can explain? I’d be happy to pay for it myself, too, I didn’t mean to.”

“You should have sent me an email,” said Professor Xi, and a pang of rage abruptly and unexpectedly ripped through the young man’s gut like a cyclone. It was a humiliating thing to do, what the teacher was doing. Disregarding an apology. Everyone made mistakes, didn’t they? He couldn’t understand why people didn’t understand that.

“I can talk to the Music Department,” the girl repeated, floundering.

“No, no, it’s quite all right,” said Professor Xi. He stood up ramrod straight then—probably so that he could look stern—and gave a brief bob of his head. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you, Professor Xi,” said the young woman. She was red as a pepper by now and on the verge of tears.

“It’s quite all right,” said Professor Xi again, bending over to pick up the last of his papers. “I’ll see you at the semester concert, then.”

“Yes. Yes, of course.”

The two parted ways, Professor Xi making his way stiffly, grumpily, for the first floor elevator, and Christine, after a glance back over her shoulder, making her way, hunch-shouldered

and despondent, for the quiet sanctity of the library. The young man on the couch watched her go, blinking and thinking. His chief thought, above all else, was how strange it was, that this conversation should be gifted to him, to observe and consider without impediment. It was like some unexpected act of providence; surely it was for some *reason*. But he didn't want it. He really didn't want it. It was all too much to wonder about.

He felt sick.

...

Later that night he lay on his back in bed. In the dark the ceiling seemed both close and far away. He heard the blowflies—heard them out there, out there with their bright green eyes and their delicate little wings. Sometimes he thought he could hear them conspiring, rubbing their little line-hands together, plotting their petty revenges, exhorting their fellows to act on all the animosities of their pointless race.

Sick. Sick. And he could not stop thinking about Christine and Professor Xi. They would not stop buzzing around the inside of his head. They moaned and cackled and bumped incessantly against the curves of his skull.

Because of that, earlier in the day he had sought out his friend Mark. Short for Marcus. Impossibly skinny, Latino, quiet, and wise. He had found Marcus crouched like a gargoyle at the head of his bed, a book planted firmly in his crotch, a highlighter in hand. Poetry; what a waste of a good mind.

“Marcus.”

“Thanks for knocking, chum.”

“Marcus, what do you do when you got like an earworm.”

“I’m just saying God knows what I coulda been up to in here.”

“Marcus—”

“Some people around here do some awful nasty shit in their rooms, man.”

“I said what do you do when you got an earworm or whatever.”

“I think they have creams for that.”

“Uh-huh. Ha.”

“I don’t know. What’re you asking me for?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m not WebMD.”

“I thought maybe you would know.”

“I mean I’m about as far away from a doctor as they come. Maybe you’re just crazy.”

That hurt, because it was probably true.

“Maybe.”

Marus looked up from his book. His face was covered by a heavy pair of glasses and sometimes when he spoke he made a little sucking noise with his front teeth first, which he did now.

“What’s the song?”

He froze.

“I don’t even know. Some stupid thing I heard on the radio.”

“Well, that’s where you went wrong,” said Marcus. “The radio. Everything on the radio’s shit these days.”

“Yeah.”

“How about I read you some Terrance Hayes?”

“What’s that gonna do?”

“Maybe something better’ll just knock the bad stuff outta your head.”

“Better’s subjective.”

“Well, I guess.”

“Okay.”

“I lock you in an American sonnet that is—”

“Okay, okay, it’s gone, I’m cured, you can stop, you can stop.”

“This is a good fucking poem, man.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You just don’t know how to appreciate these things. I’m not saying you can’t—”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m just saying, they didn’t ever give you the proper training. Like when I read this stuff it’s like a little light glows inside me or something. Like a little peg finally slips into place and the gears can get going.”

“Geez, I thought a poet’d come up with better metaphors.”

“Yeah, and I always thought comp-sci people were supposed to be smart or something.”

“Hey, I’ll remember you said that when I come to visit your cardboard box.”

He grinned and Mark grinned back. The teeth that Mark sometimes sucked on were big and white. It was that smile, their first year, that had attracted him to Mark, had made him say, I could be friends with that person. I could talk to that person. Maybe Mark had no other friends, but *he* had known Mark was alright, just by looking at him. He had known what Mark was like. It was this special skill he had, to know these things.

“Listen, Mark, I have an essay to go write—”

“Well, you’re the one coming around bugging *me*.”

...

Later still and he was still on his back. Nothing—melatonin, counting back from a hundred, a trip around the more naked sectors of the world wide web—had done the trick. He looked at his watch: a few minutes past midnight. That was all. It felt so much later.

He sat up. Swung his feet over the bed and slipped his discarded pair of jeans up onto his long legs and slid an autumn jacket over his arms and laced up his sneakers.

Out in the hall it was mostly quiet. Some loner down at the end of the hall was listening to G-Eazy, and with each sonorous dip into the bass the loner's door would rattle once in its frame. In the bathroom, someone was running water. Maybe they were one and the same.

He stepped outside. It was warm even now, but a soft breeze licked his skin and sent a shiver down his frame. Like vibrations down a plucked string.

"Alright," he said to himself.

It was a small campus. An orderly campus—the kind that the chubby white parents in their polos and sports jackets would tour with their children. Neat rows of brick buildings with big white doors and yellow lights just inside shining out from the lobbies and the rooms of students with too much work to do to sleep. He surveyed the square that stretched out before his dormitory. The grass perky and crayon green under the lights. A circle of large rocks that in the light of day served as an adequate study nook for the more outdoorsy sorts but which at night looked like the leftovers of some dark ritual, some bloody bout of midnightery.

He took his phone out of his pocket and logged on to his personal university page. That done, he went to the directory and performed a search for "Christine." There were only three. One of them was a professor, so he ruled her out. The other two were on opposite ends of



campus, so he set to moving for the closer end, which was called the Gooseneck for the way it pinched out tending toward the highway.

Occasionally, he passed people. Late studiers; students who had finished a round in the sack with their SO but had to return back to their own dorms lest they catch a taunting from their roommates; a clique of young women returning from grocery shopping and laughing the way people do when they do fun things with friends. One young man he passed and whom he afforded the widest of berths, even wider than the ones he afforded women, was slurping a quesadilla from a plastic plate. Sour cream matted his beard and in the dark he looked almost spectral.

Christine One—Christine Gostkowski—lived on the second floor of Truman-Wallace, a new redbrick colossus out in the farthest regions of the Gooseneck. He was almost to the dorm when he remembered that his student ID card wouldn't buzz him into a building that was not his own past midnight.

Oh, well. Nothing for it—he was nearly there and might as well carry on.

He picked up his pace and within minutes found himself outside Truman-Wallace. He looked up at its big walls and big locked metal door and the pale glow of lamps from within some of the rooms, and he stood there looking just long enough for the stars to align: a group of five young men and women, all chattering loudly about some movie they had seen, materialized out of nowhere. He caught sight of them as they were almost to the door, sprinted on cat feet to catch up, and slipped in behind them. The girl in the rear even held the door open for him on the way in. As if he belonged among them.

The ceremonious clink of the metal slider rolling back into place as the door closed behind him solidified that he was really doing this. He was sick; he knew that. But, more

importantly—what a thrill! What an absolute lightning bolt jolt to be where he should not be, to be on the verge of spying and stalking and sneaking and, best of all, *knowing*. It was that thought of knowing that carried him forward more than anything.

The lobby was spacious. Reasonably cozy. Plush armchairs and a few of those industrial wooden study tables common to schools everywhere. The whole lobby smelled of beer and piss. There was a flight of stairs opposite the doorway and a bulletin board in the nook underneath the stairs and somebody had ripped out the middle section of a flyer of a doctor on the bulletin board, so that some jawless, neckless monstrosity peered out at him silently from the semidarkness.

The group of cinemagoers was disappearing up the stairs. He waited a second, to seem like he wasn't following them, and then he charged up the stairs and through the door into the second-floor hallway.

It was dim here. The smell of beer was stronger. More music than in his own dorm: music from rooms and music blaring from the bathrooms, where the jocks with their square heads and giant schlongs proclaimed their own existence by cranking their shitty songs as loudly as their phones would allow. Music from what seemed like the walls, the rooftop. He felt uncomfortable and, even though he was walking and doing so at a normal pace, some part of him felt like he was staggering. Loping forward with his hands along the walls like some greasy wino.

Two-thirty-three. That was the number. Probably it was the room farthest from the door. Probably this was like those places in myths—magic caves and stuff like that—where you had to cut off your finger to get in. You couldn't get anything for nothing. He would have to suffer to get what he wanted.

Two-twenty. Two-twenty-one. Two-twenty-two.

The music was getting louder. Voices from somewhere, too. A party. What if a crowd were to tumble out of some room and surround him; or, worse, what if they, in some cruel gesture of college-brand affability, attempted to drag him into their party, their stupid bacchanalia? He didn't do well with crowds. Not even really with loud music. This was not the place for him.

He rounded the corner, followed the arc of the hall. Two-thirty. Two-thirty-one. Two-thirty-two. Two-thirty-three.

Two-thirty-three. He froze; he felt cold all over. What was he doing here? What did he hope to achieve with this?

The door, like all the doors, had a whiteboard on it. Christine Gostkowski was written on it in red marker.

Abruptly presented with the actuality of what he was doing, he realized he could do nothing. He couldn't knock on her door and talk with her—he had nothing to say to her, had no plans to ever converse with her about anything. He had no way of spying on her, either, unless he stood outside her window like a creeper. No win there. He had zero way of finding out what he wanted to know.

And for that matter, why did he want to know what he wanted to know? It was ridiculous—none of his business.

He was just being crazy, was what he was being.

Later, he would tell them this. Later, after everything happened, he would tell them that he really had had every intention, despite having come so far, of letting sleeping dogs lie, of letting it go, of turning around and heading back down the hall and descending the stairs and

trudging all the way back to his room, empty-handed but having done the right thing. Later, he would truthfully tell them that this was what he had decided.

But then Christine Gostkowski opened the door to her room, and he changed his mind.

There would simply be no changing his mind again. The whole matter was settled in an instant.

## Chapter Two: The Death Dinner

Her name was Tara. She had black hair and wore a lot of blue. Her voice was very pleasant and she was a good singer. She had four close friends on campus: Emily, Emily (“Em,” to make things easier if they were all together), Funani, and Rachel. She made all A’s, mostly just to stick it to all the people who had thought she’d blow college off. Even with the good grades, people from her agent to her mother to her stepsister would say things like, “Oh, T, your drama classes must be really rough on you,” or “Tara Tanaka? *The* Tara Tanaka? Can I get your autograph? You were so good in the Spring play.”

Hardy-fucking-har.

She was the most famous student on campus. Fat lot of good it did her. The bastards, the bitches—they had sprung out of the woodwork like ants flocking to a picnic lunch. From the moment she had stepped on campus, two years ago now, they had either hounded her for either the inside scoop on the industry or the fast track to fame. When she told them success was largely random, people grew distrustful, as if she were selfishly keeping the secrets to herself. Many people simply assumed she was stuck-up because, surely, she must think she was better than all of them. At least two guys a week tried to get with her, at least in the early days, and her penchant for denying all of them only increased negative perceptions about her. The truth was, she wasn’t into men—above all, she thought their sluglike, smelly penises were repulsive—and

the few women who did express interest in her had all been below her standards. She generally thought of herself as a good person, though she was admittedly shallow in that she wanted a really attractive gal and was willing to wait for her. But really, what was wrong with that? Anyone who said otherwise—oh, I can just like a person for their personality; oh, look at me and how positively twenty-first century I am—was just kidding themselves.

She didn't lose sleep over who she was.

What she lost sleep over, though, was the death dinner.

The horrible, miserable death dinner.

Most major television shows these days, which are steeped in mayhem, have a death dinner. Some character meets his or her bloody demise getting turned to corn syrup and sausage links on a zombie show, or somebody drowns in the ocean, or gets barbecued by a dragon, or—maybe the most usual and banal culprits of all—gets shot down on a police procedural or, even worse, gets cancer on one of those doctor shows and dies during an operation. You didn't even get any fucking last lines when you went out that way. They forgot about characters without last lines. Often, unless you made it to the end, they forgot you anyway. Like all narrative was, anymore, was some plodding, cynical battle royale.

She had done fairly well for herself. Thank God for that at least. She had died in the first half of her show's last season, just before the hiatus, so people were at least thinking of her over break and were reminded of her in the "Previously On" bits when February rolled back around. By February, despite some solid offers, she was finishing up her applications to college for the Fall semester. The application process was alternately gratifying—you really are an adult, after all, Tara Tanaka, she would tell herself, sometimes looking in the mirror—and frustrating. She was more than halfway to banking six figures an episode and who knows, maybe if one of the

daytime shows had picked her up as a lead or one of those long-running fantasy nonsenses had stuffed her into some supporting role, she might have gotten to six figures. But after five years on one show, she was burnt out and more than a little disillusioned. She was good at acting and she liked that she was good at acting, but the acting life was not nearly as easy as she might've believed before she started.

Thus school.

And, in the December before that, the death dinner.

When a cast member “died,” they threw them a death dinner. It wasn't immediately after shooting; instead, everyone watched the episode together when post-production had wrapped. Then they all went out to a fancy restaurant—usually the ‘Appy Aardvark in Benedict Canyon—and everyone got champagne and talked about how wonderful the person had been and what a blessing they'd been to the show and yadda-yadda-yadda, boo-fucking-hoo. Tara had always thought they were fun—it was a nice group of people; the food was good; free champagne, and nobody ever batted an eye when she had a glass—but when it came time for her own, the experience was as rotten as could be.

For starters, she ended up having to Uber to the lot because Marisa, her stepmother from her father's remarriage, had an appointment for a perm, and her father, who was Steven Tanaka (the horror film director), was off in England having the living daylights scared out of him. (Mr. Tanaka was shooting live in what was supposedly an actual haunted house, and he said the chairs would move and the cameras would malfunction and that this was going to be one of those sets that they would someday put on the lists of sets where people had actually died, though this didn't ultimately come to pass.) Alex, her stepsister, was also away, doing on-location shooting for a Chicago medical program. And she couldn't drive herself—she didn't know how. Thus, the

Uber, which came almost fifteen minutes late and charged her a tax she wasn't entirely sure was legitimate.

Once she'd finally gotten to the set, she'd been surrounded from the start.

"Tara!" said Suzanne commandingly. She was the show's lead. During shoots she wouldn't have looked any way but cross-eyed in Tara's direction, but now they were suddenly besties. It figured. The bitch was probably just happy Tara was out the door.

Suzanne was wearing a dress with such a dip down the front that it revealed the belly-button on her perfect stomach. When she unexpectedly slammed herself into Tara, wrapped her arm's around her, and gave her a big hug, Tara could feel the woman's breasts flattening the air right out of her. Back in preproduction for season one, she had actually found Suzanne quite attractive. By this point in time, she only felt sick—the woman was too much.

"How have you *been*?" said Suzanne, as others started to spill out of the trailers and come in their direction. Then, before giving Tara a chance to speak: "It was so *dreadful* reading that script and seeing you go like that! I mean, I figured they would write you out before the end—you know, Jessica's seen something like this coming for a while now—but in that *way*! *Ugh*! I felt terrible the moment I learned of it."

"Yeah," said Tara. "I was pretty wrecked."

"You must have been in *tears*."

Tara grimaced. "I mean, I'm not that type. But, yeah. It was sad to hear."

"Jesus, I'd be a *mess*. They'd have to pick me up off the floor if I read something like they gave you. I mean, I'll probably be like that in April anyway but *still*."

"Yeah," said Tara.

Just then, a giant hand fell over her shoulder. She turned to see Miguel's stubbly face squinting down at her. He was a handsome young man, tall and cool, with shockingly black hair that was surely dyed. She didn't know how old he really was—twenty? twenty-five? could he be thirty?—or where he lived or really much of anything about him except that he was refreshingly unpretentious.

“Tara,” he said. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“Ha,” said Tara.

Others joined them. Stace and Maurice and Ben. Jessica Miyajima—the woman who played Tara's mom on the show and who had won a Japanese Academy Prize before coming to American television—gave her a gentle hug and whispered, “It's so hard for me to see you go,” which was probably the only good thing to come out of the night, because Jessica really meant it.

The director was the last to arrive. The screenwriter wasn't coming. S5E8's screenwriter was a nice enough guy, but nobody ever really wanted the person who had sent you packing to come to the festivities. Petty as it was—it was as much the showrunner's fault as the writer's, though of course neither of the two showrunners were here, either (of course not—they didn't hang with the plebs)—it was a hard feeling to shake, even for Tara.

The director was a skinny man, old, balding, and very proper. When he reached the circle of actors he extended his hand to Tara and bowed slightly with his head.

“Ms. Tanaka,” he said. “So good to see you.”

“You too, Mr. Moss.”

“Please, *George*,” he insisted. “I think we are past ‘Mr. Moss’ after I killed you off.”

“Well. That was really more the script guy than you.”



Mr. Moss smiled. “You should bone up on your auteur theory, Ms. Tanaka. The episode was more mine than his.”

Then Mr. Moss turned his attention to the cohort and flashed them a friendly, grandfatherly smile.

“Alright,” he said. “Let’s get the TV on.”

Which is when things really started.

...

Mr. Moss opened the plastic case and popped out the DVD and pressed the open button on the DVD player and put the DVD in the machine and closed the player and hit ‘play’ with his thumb. Tara, who watched each of these small movements with wide, unblinking eyes, felt a lump growing in her throat. It was born not of sadness, exactly. It was more like confusion, like *bereavement*: who would she be now that this was over? Was she doing the right thing by taking a break, by going to college? They always said that a college education was a good thing, that you could never go wrong going to a good school, that you made more money that way, but that wasn’t necessarily true, was it? What about Mark Zuckerberg? *He* had left school early. And Steve Jobs hadn’t finished either, right? She felt like she had read that somewhere. Hell, Quentin Tarantino hadn’t even finished high school. So, no, it wasn’t the best thing for her, probably, financially speaking—indeed, she was going to *pay* a quarter million dollars to take a break from a lucrative career.

But it’s what she wanted. In the end, she had to remind herself of that. She wanted—what? Freedom? More opportunity? Not exactly. It was more like she wanted a broader window. Often it felt like she spent all her time locked in a one-room building—not even a well-decorated room, necessarily, not even an abundantly *interesting* room—and she had a tiny window, but

through the window, looking out, she got the hint of a garden, and a bird fountain, and rolling green lawns, and trees, and maybe even other people out there, talking and working and laughing. And right now, she didn't have much of a door to the outside. She was trapped in her little TV world.

But she soon would. That's what would get her through this.

That, and she couldn't get fucking emotional in front of Suzanne. Not after she had said she wasn't the crying type, something her therapist—hell, even her family—would have disputed. No, she couldn't do that. So no lump in her throat; no seeing the world slowly, with hyper-focus, like she was dying or something. That was just a character that was going to die, just a moment in time. The real party would be in the Fall, when she could start her *own* life.

She was going to be fine.

...

But the scene is a doozy.

In a shocking twist, it is revealed that Ben's character has loved Stace's character since grade school—the audience had known that Ben was once in love with Stace, but they hadn't known just how *deeply*, that there were some serious kind of shenanigans going on here—so when Jessica finally uncovers that Stace is trying to murder Suzanne's character, the head of the shadowy para-governmental agency CrissCross (which was the name of the show), she sends Ben to apprehend Stace and bring her in to CrissCross's interrogation/torture dungeon—the show had received most of its season-two flak from the introduction of the dungeon, which had, before its later revisions, looked too much like a BDSM room, apparently, to be taken seriously—but Ben tells Stace what is happening and gives her a head start to escape, even though she doesn't even love him back, but, rather than taking the head start to escape, she uses

it to try to poison Jessica's morning coffee, only to end up inadvertently poisoning *Tara's* coffee instead—which Tara has just started drinking to be more like her mother, who she loves—loved—more than anything in the whole world—and Tara starts bleeding from her nose and her eyes, and foam comes out of her mouth, and now cut to—the show was famous for its relentless crosscutting, which the fandom had affectionately dubbed “CrissCrossing”—Jessica's phone ringing in her pocket and Jessica picking it up to answer—then cut to Stace breaking the window on Tara's car, hot-wiring it, getting in to get away—then cut to Jessica's mom answering the phone and saying hello in that clipped, efficient way she has of talking—then cut to Tara, lying on the floor with her head in a growing pool of bloody foam, croaking an almost intelligible “I love you”—then cut to Jessica, not understanding, just as she had never really understood her daughter's enormous love, just as she had never cherished that love, just as she had never *reciprocated* that love, and hanging up the phone, shaking her head—then cut to Stace, nothing more than a mop of platinum blonde hair visible through the sunroof of Tara's BMW, heading down the highway, the camera pulling up towards the sky, the music crescendoing.

And through it all—through those forty-three minutes of mounting, almost unbearable tension, and even through the final five minutes of gut-punching—Tara was completely fine. Truth be told, it was not her up there. No. That was just a character. When she watched the episodes, all she thought of was memories of reading through the script; she thought of holding that script—that tangible, actual script—in her hands, and that made it all *less* real. In the end, it was just somebody's words; some people in an office somewhere had given her fifty-five-thousand dollars an episode to say someone else's words and they had given her sixth billing and they had campaigned halfheartedly for awards recognition at the end of every season, and now

they weren't going to do that anymore. Which was fine. It was *okay*. It was just something that had happened, and then other things after that were going to happen, and so on and on and on.

Tara glanced to her right, saw that Jessica was crying into a Kleenex, and that lump was back in her throat. Had it ever actually left, or had she just told herself that it had?

Jessica made one little crying noise, and Suzanne pounced on her like a cat on a mouse.

"Jessica, *honey!*" Suzanne said, loud enough to make a production out of it. Suzanne got up from her seat and came over to Jessica and wrapped her arms around her, and Tara thought godfuckingdamnit get your gross disgusting body out of Jessica's face you attention whore sleazeball, and then everybody was looking, looking at Suzanne-comforting-Jessica™, just like Suzanne wanted and Jessica certainly didn't want.

"Really, I'm fine, Suzanne, really—" Which seemed more or less true—she had even stopped crying.

"No, honey, please, it's *okay* to have these feelings. You just saw your TV-daughter die. I think that entitles you to a cry or two. Don't you?"

"I mean," said Jessica.

"I know, Jess"—*Jess*, for God's sake!—"I know. And think what Tara must be going through right now!"

Suzanne rounded on Tara, which meant, of course, that everyone else looked at her, too. Stace and Ben. Miguel, who just played assistant to Suzanne's character but got fourth-billing because he'd gotten an Emmy nod for a miniseries he'd done, but Tara let it slide because he was such a friendly guy. Mr. Moss, who sat there with his legs folded, squinting, his lips pursed.

"I'm absolutely fine," said Tara, her voice sharp, her tone much more irritated than she'd intended.

It was Suzanne's turn to purse her lips, her spotlight-slutting momentarily frustrated—but only for a moment. Then she offered up a thin smile.

"Of *course*," Suzanne said, though it was one-hundred-percent clear from the way she said it that she really meant of course you're dealing with a lot right now and would say that you're fine, but we all know you're not fine, no, Tara, we all know you're not fine at all, and maybe if I stare at you long enough with my big, blue, mascaraed, whorish eyes, you'll break down crying like the little girl you've always been, like Jessica is, too, like all of you are to me, just little boys and girls running around like little mindless ants on *my* Golden-Globe-winning television program.

Tara heard all this in Suzanne's voice and saw all this in Suzanne's eyes and so, without thinking about it, she did something that hardly anyone ever did in real life, and fought back.

"What do you mean, 'of course?'" said Tara.

Only when she had said it did she realize what she was doing. A wave of Oh-Shit passed over her, paralyzed her. The little trailer in which they were watching the screener suddenly felt twice as small and four times as warm. She felt everyone's eyes. Why were they not on Suzanne? This was all her fault. Even *Jessica* was watching her. Jessica was supposed to be on her side!

Suzanne—playing it for all it was worth; she was probably thrilled to see someone take her bait in so spectacular a fashion—feigned confusion. "I'm—I'm sorry? I don't—I just meant that, like, I understand where you're coming from."

And where's that?" said Tara.

What was it they said about going through Hell?

Suzanne's thin-lipped smile peeled apart and she let out a small, inconvenienced chuckle.

“Okay,” she said. “Obviously what I’m trying to say here isn’t coming out right. I know this is a tough time, so I’m not trying to tell you how to feel or anything. I’m just there if you need me.”

Suzanne smiled, to show just how serene she could remain under pressure, and even how wise, but could Tara just let it end there? No, she couldn’t. If she did, then *she* looked like the bitch, and it wasn’t fair.

“Well,” said Tara. “Like it just seems like you want me to feel all upset and everything when I’m not.”

“I’m sorry,” said Suzanne. “It just seemed to me like you were having a tough time is all.”

Suddenly seething, Tara said, “I *told* you I’m not a crier. I don’t get upset at things like this, and I don’t like having a whole big public production made out of my feelings.”

“It’s okay—it’s okay to feel *whatever* you’re feeling; I only meant to let you know—”

“But why do I have to be feeling anything? Why does whatever I may or may not be feeling have to be a spectacle for everybody?” Tears threatening; memories of a speech contest she’d entered in fourth grade, and she hadn’t thought she was nervous, but then she had begun to sweat nightmarishly when she’d gotten to the podium, and her throat had gone dry, and her face had turned red, and still she didn’t think she was nervous, but her body was telling her otherwise, her body was *revolting*... “Like isn’t it enough to have watched me die on TV, enough to watch my career up there dying? Or do I have to die *here*, too?”

“Now, honey, no one’s dying anywhere, okay? Let’s all just take a deep breath and maybe head out to the lot, yeah?”

“Am I crazy?” said Tara. “Like am I crazy?”

“I think you’re just ti—”

“I just don’t like how I’m feeling...” She wiped tears off her face, smeared tears across her cheeks with the side of her palm. “I don’t like a big deal being made out of it in front of everybody. And I don’t think Jessica probably liked being turned into a show, either.”

“Nobody’s turning anybody into a show.”

Under the circumstances, to Tara that seemed the stupidest possible thing to say. It was blatantly untrue. Just look at where they were! Look what had been done to her! People had been turning her into a show for half a decade now, and it just couldn’t fly anymore. She wouldn’t let it.

But then she looked around the room. No one was looking at her now; no one *would* look at her. Stace and Ben and Miguel were all looking at the floor; Mr. Moss was pretending to do something on his Blackberry. Even Jessica wouldn’t look at her. Instead, Jessica looked down at the crumpled Kleenex in her hand, her eyes wide and red, as if considering all that her little moment of sadness had led to. It was worse than having all of them look at her. She hadn’t thought that anything could be worse than that, but here it was. They all, every one of them, thought she was on the cusp of a meltdown. They were *embarrassed* by her, too embarrassed to even *look* at her.

Stupid pea-brained attention-whore Suzanne. She had made Tara look the very thing that Tara had said that she wasn’t—emotional. Now she looked like a baby; she looked pathetic; more than anything, she looked *sad*. And it was no one’s goddamn business to know what level of sad she was—not ever.

No—it was no one’s business. She wouldn’t let it be their business *now*, either. And she certainly wouldn’t give Suzanne the satisfaction she was so obviously taking from this whole entire mess.

“I’ve... I’ve got to go,” said Tara.

Which is what she did.

...

Well. Not quite.

She was halfway across the lot—a lot that suddenly seemed very ghostly, very somber and quiet, the only sound the regular *thwack* of her designer flip-flops and the only activity her own wearied trudging towards the road, where she had every intention of getting on her cellphone and demanding a ride from Marisa, perm or no perm—when she heard the sound of footfalls behind her. An echo to her own steps. She froze, turned slowly, and in the process of turning instantaneously came up with three guesses as to who it might be: Jessica, come to comfort her; Mr. Moss, come to do the same but in some sage, objective, and probably altogether unhelpful way; or, most likely, just Suzanne, tagging along in the hopes of getting in one last, obnoxious word.

But it was none of those people. It was Miguel. He was loping towards her, slow and bouncing, his hands hidden in the pockets of his sweatshirt. He looked at her and looked away and looked back again. His lips moved ever so slightly, as if he was worrying a piece of gum in his mouth.

She stopped. Yes, she would stop for Miguel. She didn’t want any advice, any comforting, and certainly not any more bullshit, but she felt confident that Miguel would not offer her these things. He was a straightforward-kind-of-guy, Miguel. Laconic, but not in a



pretentious, European, fuckboi kind of way. The first time she had met Miguel, during preproduction on the second season—Suzanne’s hiring of an assistant had been a minor season-two arc—he had greeted her warmly and proceeded to behave towards her in a mostly uninterested way, which she appreciated immensely. It seemed either everyone was always trying to be her best friend or was calling her names behind her back. Here was someone who treated the job like a job, who seemed immune to office politics, who could be both polite and genuine at the same time. How many conversations had they had together in four years? Maybe only a dozen real ones? It didn’t matter; indeed, if it did matter, that was really part of the charm. He did not belabor the fact that he was friendly or kind or considerate. He would hold open the door for people or get coffees or nod hello and people would say thank you and he would nod back at them, almost gravely, as if everything that happened in the world were simply a matter of course, and he was just a conduit. She supposed he was probably an objective nihilist. Or maybe a political atheist. In any case, it didn’t matter. He could be counted on to be level with her.

“Tara Tanaka,” he said when he had gotten near. “I’m looking for a girl named Tara Tanaka. You seen her around?”

Even though she was so filled with rage it felt as if a neutron star were expanding in her gut, she was able to manage a small smile. Not a forced one, either.

“Haven’t seen her,” she replied.

Miguel returned her smile. “Well, hell,” he said. “She was supposed to come to dinner with me and some chums of mine, but I guess she’s flown the coop, ain’t she? Lit out for the territories?”

“Guess so.”

“I’m s’posed to be finding her and taking her back in so we can all hold hands and stuff. But I imagine Tara’d hate something like that. Maybe instead if I find her I can just give her a ride back to her place in my car. Help her get a clean getaway. You think she’d like that?”

Now Tara actually grinned.

“Fuck yeah she would,” she said. Smiled. “Not to speak for someone else, or anything.”

“Good,” said Miguel.

...

He drove a little blue hatchback Subaru, and she had to practically fold herself into a ball to get through the car door, short as she was. Once inside, however, she stretched her legs out under the dashboard and kicked the seat back and folded her arms across her chest and closed her eyes and sighed so deeply the air sent a whistle through her lips.

Miguel didn't say anything. Didn't start the car, either. Tara cracked an eye open and saw him fiddling with GoogleMaps.

“Where we taking you?” he said finally. “Home?”

Now she wasn't so sure. Whereas five minutes ago she had every intention of having Marisa pick her up, now she suddenly didn't want to have anything to do with anyone. There'd be questions—so many questions. “Back so early?” “Uh-huh.” “How come?” “Party was lame.” “What happened?” “Nothing.” “You sound sad.” “Nope.” “You tired?” “Yes.” “You been taking your meds?” “You been eating okay?” “They get you any presents?” “What did you eat for dinner?” “How was the episode?” “Was it awful?” “How are you doing dealing with all of this?”

No, thank you.

Sure, the questions would be there no matter what. But she could put them off. That she could do, she supposed.

“I don’t know where I’m going just yet,” she said. “I don’t want to go home.”

She looked over at him to see what his response would be, but he only nodded, his face emotionless. “Cool,” he said. “I can just drive around for a couple hours if you want.”

“I’ll pay you for gas,” she said.

He smiled, breathed a small laugh through his nose, as if to say it was ridiculous to think they were not beyond such petty things as paying for gasoline. Then he started the car—a whirring, clunking process in itself—and backed out of his parking spot and drove straight through a bunch of empty spaces and out to the lot road, which led ultimately to the gate entrance. Seeing the lot’s trailers and sets and administrative buildings lean over the window like monster trees in a scary forest made her heart hurt, so she closed her eyes again and leaned back in the seat.

“Anywhere special you want to go?” Miguel said. “You hungry?”

“Not hardly,” she said.

Then after that she must have fallen asleep. She often did when she was stressed. She had a vague memory of LA lights, smoggy and uncertain, shortening and lengthening across the inside of the car, across her closed eyelids. And she could remember the car, rolling, quietly now, through the smoky streets, bouncing over slum roads, the lurch as it climbed up Mulholland Drive. At some point they must have passed behind the Hollywood sign, she supposed—that grand, overstated symbol. Her sleep was long and too deep, and she supposed she dreamt strange things, because when she woke two hours later, in the dark, overheated and sweating, there was an enormous black blotchiness in her mind, like something she was trying to hide from herself.

“Hey, sleepy,” Miguel said to her, and she peered over at him from behind her slitted sleep-eyes.

“Miguel,” she croaked.

“Why don’t I take us back to my place so we can fuck each other’s brains out?” he said.

It felt like an ice shelf slipped down her throat and cascaded into her stomach. For a second, she didn’t believe she had heard what she thought she had heard. Then she thought she must surely still be dreaming. Her mind was so splotchy, her eyes so shut, because this was all some nightmare, brought on by the absolute craziness of the day. Miguel, of all people, would not say something like this. Surely he wouldn’t.

“I can be at my place in my five minutes,” he said calmly.

God. God oh God. Is this what he had been like all along? Was this his true face? She felt like somebody had a hand on each of her shoulders and was pushing her down into the carseat. A new sheen of sweat broke out along her hairline.

And if he was like this, who else? She would have trusted him above all others, so now who could be counted upon? Was this what they were all like?

And for how long? This was only just coming to her now, this was only just happening, because she was eighteen, surely, but for how many years had Miguel—that quietest, gentlest of souls—been standing beside her, eyeing her, imagining his own smooth, loping body sliding on top of her? How long had any of them been like that?

In an instant, she felt entirely alone.

“Stop,” she breathed. “Stop the car.”

The first strong emotion she had ever seen on Miguel’s face stretched his smooth skin, turned his eyes up. She would have thought that emotion would have been alarm, that he would suddenly feign that disinterest so very much in his nature—hey, Tara, I didn’t know, that’s just

how we do things around here, I'm sorry if I came across as too harsh, I honestly was just feeling you out, let me take you home, I'm really sorry, we're all good, it's all cool.

No. None of that. Instead, his eyes widened, the corners of his mouth turned up, his nostrils flared—flared in triumph. He thought she was into it—honestly thought she was into it—thought she wanted him to pull over in some alleyway and park the car and climb over the center console and into the backseat—with *her*...

And oh, God, he was really doing it, too. They passed an alleyway wedged between a massage parlor and a Chinese laundromat and he pounded the brake with his foot; everything in her stomach abruptly lurched forward—which was not good. He flicked his blinker and wheeled the car into the alleyway and before he had even put the car into park she had thrown open the door and tumbled out onto the asphalt and, bent over on her hands and knees, had puked up all of her lunch next to an overflowing Dumpster.

Miguel was at her side immediately.

“God,” he said. She looked up weakly—it was all she could do to lift up her head—and glanced at his face. Now the alarm was there.

“Ugh,” she said, feeling all kinds of disgust.

“Are you alright?” he had the gall to ask.

“Just don't,” she said.

“Hey,” said Miguel. “Nobody's doing nothing. Okay? And you don't need to go blaming me for all of this either, you've clearly been stressed since the viewing party and I didn't mean nothing by what I said, like, you could've just said no thank you or whatever.”

He hardly sounded like himself now. He sounded like any late-twentysomething guy who'd tried too roughly to get in a girl's pants and was suddenly encountered with the deserved

flak. He sounded pathetic, frightened, and overly energized. Sounded like someone who'd committed a crime and didn't know whether or not trouble was about to come over the hill and come bearing down hard.

She wanted to tell him, "I thought you were better than this," wanted to see his face soften, and fall, from the blow that that statement would be to him. How could you talk to someone like that? Just say, "Fuck me," when she had never given any sort of signal that that was what she wanted and when, to top it all off, she had had a really shitty day.

"Go," she said. "I want you to go." She started to cry now, her face bent down over her vomit, her heart stomping in her chest.

Miguel looked at her and looked at his car and looked back at her.

"Well, shit, Tara... I can't leave you like *this*."

"Go," she said again, through the tears. "Just go and never talk to me again."

"*Tara...*" But he clearly didn't know what else to say. He stood there with his hands held out before him, like he wasn't quite sure what they were. Like he was a supplicant: please God take back the last five minutes and I'll never do anything bad ever again.

"I really... I really didn't mean anything by it or mean to upset you or anything, I honestly thought—you seemed like maybe you might be into..."

But he evidently didn't know what she might be into, because he fell silent again, just stood there, looming over her, looming over her like everything always loomed over her, like the city itself loomed over her.

"Jesus," he said. "Just... just let me call you a taxi at least. Can I do that for you?"

"I don't want anything from you," she said. She hiccuped wetly and looked up at his wounded face. That was the worst thing you could do to a man, was tell him there was absolutely

nothing he could do to be of any help, nothing he could do to fix things. She saw the magic it worked on his face, in his posture, in the color of his smooth skin.

“Please go,” she said again, her voice a whisper.

He did go. He turned and stumbled to his car and clambered in and turned the Subaru on. A small cloud of pale smoke plumed outwards from the exhaust pipe and shrouded her face; she coughed from deep in her lungs and swatted the smoke feebly with her hands. Then he was pulling forward, hurtling up the alleyway, revving away.

And in that moment, even though she wanted him gone, she hated him for leaving her, too. Just leaving her, without even a final word. Leaving her like this.

...

Had she overreacted? She didn't know; two-and-a-half years later, she still thought about it—a lot. It still haunted her. The death dinner. The death dinner. Why hadn't she gone to the stupid death dinner? Then everything with Miguel wouldn't have happened. She wouldn't have had to lose her faith in people. She could've just put up with Suzanne and all that nonsense, could have just traded an evil for an annoyance by sticking it through and going to her death dinner and eating the food and drinking the wine and going home, a little tipsy, probably, in the course of the night, having left the whole Suzanne business more or less behind anyway.

Instead, Miguel. And had she messed that up, too? Was there just something wrong with her, where any time something the least bit bad happened to her, it stuck in her heart like a nail, made her feel sick, made her weep like a child who couldn't find her way home? She was a strong personality—she knew it. Maybe Miguel, in his own crude way, not knowing she was gay, had just been trying to play off that?

No. No, fuck Miguel. God knows how long he had been leering at her on set, how long he had been imagining himself on top of her, even though she'd been a high-schooler, barely eighteen, not much older than a girl. And who knew what had happened during the car ride? Who knew how many times he'd let his eyes look over her body while she slept, how many times he'd reached over to "fiddle with the radio" or "adjust the heat" and had let his arm graze her arm, her shoulder, her legs...

Around and around she'd go. Fuck Miguel. No, actually, how was what he had done different from any other guy? No—no, fuck Miguel. But had he actually been mean to her? But he had left her! But she had told him to leave...

She couldn't figure it out. It ate at her, took over her mind, her body. She lost weight, lost sleep. And it was silly! It had just been a clumsy pass! He had had a hundred opportunities during the drive to do something devious, and he hadn't. Or had he?

But in any case, she couldn't let it get to her so badly, just couldn't. She talked to her therapist about it, in vague terms (she was never specific—being specific about her problems, her concerns, the things that made her weep, made those things all too real, and they were *already* too real), adopted a higher dosage of Sertraline, went on a weight-gain diet that worked well enough, cried in front of her parents—without telling them anything, you know, specific—and by the time late August had rolled around and she was on campus, she was more or less okay. The thrill of college, with its tough classes and loud parties, helped, too.

But she didn't forget. It was still there. There, there and *heavy*. Like the black splotchiness she had seen after her dreams in the car.

When Daydreamz came out, Tara Tanaka was practically the first in line.



### Chapter Three: Patricia Stoltis Is Dead

As soon as the elevator door had closed, Aleksandra Stoltis covered her face with her hands and started to cry.

Her grandmother—dead! Her sole guardian, her best friend, her closest confidante—all three of these in one person, and that one person dead! Now what form would her life take? She was effectively orphaned.

She had gotten the call at lunch. Or, rather, she had opened her phone at lunch, after a succession of three classes in which the slightest peep from her phone would have brought about at the very least a stern talking-to from the professor and at most an automatic unexcused absence, to find that she had four missed calls. Which was a bad sign. She didn't recognize the number, but no one called four times to bring you good news. That it was from her area code—from her town, in fact—was all the more reason for alarm.

She waited on returning the call. Her stomach had steadily filled with dread, dread thick and sickly sweet as honey, so she put it off. She waited fifteen minutes in the sandwich line and carefully carved out a slice of pepperoni pizza from the pie at the PIZZA STATION and took her time finding just the right table. Then she went and got herself a glass of water and returned to her table and sat down and watched beads of water fall down the inside of her glass. She realized her feelings were centered around her grandmother. If someone called her four times—if someone called her *urgently*, in other words—then it had to be related to her grandmother, right? Her grandmother was all she had in the world. Anything that happened was more or less related to the old woman. And if someone was calling on her grandmother's behalf, was calling for her able-as-they-came grandmother...

Her grandmother was dead, she decided, picking up the phone. A car crash? Sickness? Surely not suicide—but the old woman had seemed so very sad lately. Empty nest syndrome had hit her hard, Alexsandra knew. What, with a son dead, a beloved daughter-in-law dead, a husband dead, and her, Alexsandra, going, going, gone, off to school for years to come, it was no wonder that the old woman, that Patricia Stoltis, was sad.

But surely not suicide. What, then? A home invasion? An accident? Struck by lightning?

An image of her grandmother, jittering, arms and legs spread apart, a lightning bolt zipping down her spine, a flash of yellow sizzling around the old woman's body, her teeth clenched with agony, a thin stream of smoke rising from the woman's hair, her crisped scalp.

What a horrible thing to think.

...

She had no more classes that day and, as it was the beginning of the year, not very much homework, either, so after lunch she took the elevator up to her floor, cried a little in the elevator, went back to her room—mercifully her roommate was not in—and lay down on her bed facing the wall.

What would her life be like now? Who would listen to her when something bad happened at school? Who would help her with her financial aid forms? Who would assist her in finding a job, an apartment, a life? Who would she watch movies with, read to, cook for? Who would be her friend? What would become of all her grandmother's belongings? The house? Her cat? Was the cat just at home, sitting in the dark, sprawled out on its little green cat bed, not knowing its owner would never return to feed it, and scratch it, and love it? Who would she buy Christmas presents for? Who would she tell "I love you?"

She closed her eyes. God. Only the second week of college and now this. Surely there were people out there who were left entirely alone in the world in only their second week of college, but those were *other* people; they were not her.

She saw the whole course of things to come laid out before her. She'd talk to the doctor, cry; talk to her teachers and let them know what was going on and probably that she would need to be returning home, would maybe even need to leave for the semester, so she could grieve; talk to her academic advisor, talk to the advising dean, neither of whom she had met; talk to people back home, people she didn't know, people in white coats or in suits who would try to explain to her that they were going to take everything now, or they were going to give her everything now, or that she had to sign these forms, or pay this much money. Except it wouldn't really be a lot of *talking to*. Instead, people would talk *at* her, and she would sit there, and she'd listen, and she'd do whatever they told her to do, because at this point in her life, her grandmother dead, she was without power and without will, and she didn't have the strength to do otherwise. After all of it was over—in a month? months? a year?—she would take a look at herself and she would see what was left and maybe she would get her life going again.

But that was not now. None of it was now. She hadn't even talked to the doctor yet.

She didn't even know, of course, if her grandmother was even dead. What if her grandmother was sick but still alive and desperately needed her help—needed like a blood transfusion or something? What if her grandmother was alive and had been kidnapped? What if her grandmother had gotten lost on some outing and her phone had died and some good samaritan was simply calling on her behalf, was just trying to lend a helping hand, and she, Alexandra the Great, was doing diddly-squat to help out?

What if, what if, what if. She wasn't going to know anything if she didn't call the doctor back.

God. God, God, God.

Still she lay there, her eyes closed. As long as she lay there with her eyes closed, nothing could happen to her. She could lay with her eyes closed and her mouth closed and do nothing for the rest of her life. Her roommate would ask what was going on, and she, Aleksandra, would say nothing, and after a while, her roommate would call campus security, and then campus security would call an ambulance, and then the ambulance would take her to a hospital and doctors would talk to her and psychiatrists would talk to her, and still she could just lay there, quietly, almost as if she were dead, and it might not even be so bad, because they would hook her up to a feeding tube, and play music for her, and clean her diaper, and give her sponge baths, and they wouldn't tell her anything bad—for fear it would damage her irreparably—and it would be just like being a rich person, almost, or something like that. Years and years—decades—she could go on like that, not knowing, not doing, being cared for. Isn't that all anybody really wanted, anyway?

She opened her eyes and rolled onto her back. Stared at the ceiling for what felt like an hour. Then she swung her heavy legs over the edge of the bed and sat up slowly, like a groggy drunk, then stood and stumbled over to the full-length mirror that spanned the entire height of the door and looked at herself. Pretty, short, brown hair—almost a bob—and a smooth, unremarkable face, and a cardigan covered in hairs from her grandmother's cat (even though it was far too warm for cardigans, she had felt in the cardigan mood when she had awoken that morning, though she was not in the cardigan mood any longer), and long, tight jeans running down her equally long legs. Her socks white, bland. Good—she was all here. Everything

accounted for. When she made the call she would watch herself do it, and then it wouldn't be like she was doing it at all. It would be like watching a movie of somebody doing it.

She pulled the phone out of her pocket and flipped through to her recents and found the number and pressed it with her thumb and watched her double in the mirror perform all of these operations, and she waited for the doctor to say "Is this Alexsandra?" again, waited for the doctor to tell her her grandmother was dead.

...

Except her grandmother wasn't dead. It wasn't even a doctor.

It was a sheriff's deputy. A sheriff's deputy? For *God's* sake. What was going on?

Her grandmother had been trying to use her phone call for hours now.

"She's pretty testy," said the sheriff's deputy.

"Why is she—"

"Heh," said the sheriff's deputy. A sound of both amusement and annoyance. "Well. She was in a car crash early this morning—she's fine, everyone's fine—but then when she got out to talk with the guy the guy was kind of a dick to her, I guess, is how she put it, and they got fighting."

"And you arrested her?"

"Well. I mean, not me specifically, but yeah. The other guy, he had this heart condition thing going on with him—"

Oh, God. Somebody was dead after all.

"—and he had some time of aortal blockage, and they had to take him to the hospital and induce a coma. So he's in a coma now, and I guess he's not gonna die or anything, it's like a temporary thing, but the guy's family's pretty upset about the whole thing, because I guess they

didn't have insurance on the car so there's that, plus the coma, plus all the bills for inducing the coma, which is not cheap I guess, and, yeah, they're not happy at all with your—is it your grandmother?"

"Yes."

"Your grandmother. Yeah. So we've got her locked up."

"For what? Why do—"

"Well, aggravated assault, mostly. Verbally assaulting an officer, which is kind of a bad thing to do. You know why she was so—so violent about all this? She normally like this?"

"My—her son and his wife died. In a car crash. And she was in that crash, too. I don't know. She gets really bad road rage... I don't really know what to tell you."

"Yes. Well." The sheriff's deputy paused and cleared his throat. "You want to talk to her now? Your call."

...

Patricia Stoltis sounded hoarse, as if she'd been crying, and when she spoke it was with the hesitancy that comes from embarrassment.

"Alexsandra? You there?"

"Grama, hi."

"Good Lord, Alex. Good Lord Almighty. I—I just don't even know where to begin with all of this."

"They've got you locked up they told me."

"Don't I know it. And this is not a nice place, either, let me tell you."

"Well, I'm sure it's not home."

"Of *course* it's not home. Good Lord, child. Good Lord."

“Do I need to come and like post bail or something, Gramma? Because I—I mean, we don’t have like any money. I couldn’t—”

“No, Alex, no, there’s nothing to worry about there. They’ll have me before the judge tomorrow soon’s they can they said and then I’ll probably be out after that.”

“They’re not gonna put you in jail or fine you or something, are they?”

“They better not. They can just try it and I’ll—well, best not say. The walls have ears and eyes both if you know what I mean.”

“Is there anything you need or anything from me? I can come visit. I could be there in three-four hours maybe.”

“No, no, I just thought you should know what all’s been going on. I shouldn’t have been buggin you like I done. What I need from you is for you to focus on your schoolwork and get hundreds on everything and get into med school and make enough money to take me on a vacation before I croak. That’s all I’m asking of you, is one vacation before I die, and then I can die happy.”

Alexsandra didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry.

“Please, Gramma,” she said finally. “The last thing I need is to hear you talk about dying. That’s just about the worst thing I could think of.”

And in that moment, she thought of Daydreamz.

Daydreamz, and what she had done with it.

#### Chapter Four: Story Time

Three years ago, when he had still written fiction and had just experienced a horrible breakup, Marcus wrote an untitled story, one that never ended up seeing the light of day, and it went like this:

*Once there was a kingdom in which the laws of love were quite unlike those that you and I know today. You might find them strange—you might even find them appalling—but in truth they were quite common and followed by the citizens of this particular land; and, even if they didn't always yield the best results, people operated under the notion that there was simply no better alternative to be had.*

*It went like this.*

*The founder of this kingdom was a king of repute, who had killed the last of the Breath Snatchers and had inherited by default the lands in which those monsters roamed. During all of the warfare, which lasted ten or so years, his only daughter had been wounded and disfigured by a Breath Snatcher, and she was thereafter hideous—so hideous that her husband-to-be, Sir Zodrey of Bistinane, could no longer stand to look at her, and he abandoned her. So enraged by this turn of events was the king that, once the Breath Snatchers had been defeated, he sent a secret cohort of brave, strong, wholesome men to kill Sir Zodrey—an act in which they were successful—but it made no difference whatsoever: in the end, no one wanted to take the king's daughter for a wife, so ugly was she, and the king's daughter, saddened by the loneliness that she thereafter experienced, threw herself from the tallest tower in the castle and christened the ramparts with her blood.*

*The king, immensely saddened that the glorious warfare against the Breath Snatchers should result in such misfortune and sadness, knew that he had to do something to honor his*



*dead daughter; and so he declared that, upon punishment by exile, all romantic relationships that came, for whatever reason save death, to an end must conclude in a pact of assistance, in which the male party must help the female to find his own successor in love.*

*The king, having decreed that this edict should be strictly followed and enforced until the end of days, jumped from the tallest tower in the castle and joined his daughter in death.*

*And so it was for a thousand years.*

*Then, in the Great Period of Peace and Knowledge that followed the third and final Dark War, a relatively average, orphaned blacksmith by the name of Fogson was visited one sunny afternoon by his girlfriend Woræ, who informed him that she was no longer happy with him and that she was going to pursue other options.*

*“Then I guess I will have to help you find a new boyfriend,” said Fogson, though secretly it broke his heart to do so. He loved her more than anything, he supposed.*

*But there was nothing he could do. The next day, he walked with Woræ through the city and, with her, made comments about all the men that they saw: “too old,” “too young,” “too stooped,” “too thin,” “too fat,” “ugly face,” “bad teeth.” It boosted Fogson’s self-esteem some to see how picky she was and how she had yet, for a time, still found him adequately attractive.*

*Then the horrible cry rang out: “Oh, my, Fogson, he’s perfect!”*

*Indeed he was. Jifrod, the vegetable merchant, was gorgeous—flowing blond locks; clear, blue eyes; the faintest bit of manly stubble on his face; muscles bulging against the seams of his shirtsleeves; his shirt unbuttoned nearly to the crotch, which mounded promisingly.*

*Fogson cursed his misfortune.*

*“Jifrod?” he said aloud. “The vegetable merchant? Please, Woræ. A vegetable merchant’s not very manly work, is it? Not like the noble, manly art of blacksmithery.”*

*“Please, Fogson,” said Woræ. “I love him. Who are you to deny me what I love? If you loved me, truly loved me, you would help me obtain this great man.”*

*And he did—Fogson did truly love her. Even though it rent his heart in two, there was nothing he could do to dissuade her. He did not even try to argue his own case. He just wanted her to be happy, even at the cost of himself, and so he assented, and approached Jifrod.*

*“Jifrod,” he said to Jifrod.*

*“Fogson, is it?” said Jifrod, smiling with his perfect white teeth. “It is not often I see you here.”*

*“Yes, well, as a man’s man, I only eat meat.”*

*Jifrod laughed heartily. “You’ll kill yourself that way,” said Jifrod.*

*Fogson scowled. “I’m here on business of the law,” he said, changing the subject.*

*“Business of the law?” said Jifrod knowingly, grinning. When those who were obviously not agents of law enforcement referred to “business of the law,” it invariably referred to matters of romance.*

*“Yes,” said Fogson, gritting his teeth. “My girlfriend—former girlfriend—Woræ is in love with you. I think she should like you... like you to ask her on a date, or some such silly thing.”*

*“My, my,” said Jifrod, suddenly eyeing Woræ standing there in the city square, the noontime sun falling angelically upon her golden hair, her beautiful, flawless face. “I believe I just might.”*

*That night, Woræ and Jifrod went on a date at the city’s finest restaurant, and by all appearances—Fogson watched them from across the street for half an hour—it was an absolute success. Defeated, Fogson went home to stew and weep and curse himself.*

*After a full hour of this self-loathing and abject bitterness, Fogson could take it no longer. He could not lie there in bed and imagine the two of them traipsing drunkenly but beautifully back to Jifrod's beautiful condo, where they would make beautiful, explosive love. He simply could not bear it.*

*Then he snapped. Something broke inside him, some little psychological gate that he didn't even know was there, and he went from being perfectly A-okay to being a total wackadoodle in two shakes of a lamb's tail.*

*It happens to the best of us, sometimes.*

*He got out of bed and sprinted to his shop, where he pulled down from the wall the finest blade he had ever constructed, an indestructible length of the strongest steel ever found in the known world. It was a beautiful sword—maybe something even more beautiful than Woræ. With it in hand, Fogson ran to Woræ's condo, mounted the steps to the entrance, and kicked the door down with one mighty blow of his foot.*

*He caught them at it, too, in the utter throes of ecstasy, the woman who yesterday had been the love of his life bouncing vigorously, happily, beautifully atop that promising mound of Jifrod's. In a moment of utter madness and rage, he rushed towards them, and, the moment Jifrod opened his mouth to proclaim the moment of climax, Fogson brought the sword down clean through the man's neck.*

*"Don't worry, Woræ, I will save you!" Fogson cried, belatedly.*

*Woræ screeched a horrible screech and scrambled backwards off her new—and newly dead—lover. "Fogson, my gods! my gods!" she said.*

*Fogson looked from his girlfriend's—former girlfriend's—naked body to the naked body of the man on the couch, his body, grotesquely, still in the act of performing the business in which it had, just a moment ago, been engaged.*

*“Well,” said Fogson. Then no more. There was nothing else to say.*

*“I'm—I'm getting the Royal Guard,” said Woræ. “Oh. Oh my poor beautiful Jifrod.”*

*But she just stood there, naked, covered in blood, screaming, screaming. Fogson could see that his presence was upsetting her, so he walked to the door and walked through the doorway and shut the door behind him and left the condo.*

*Down the hall, a woman opened her door and peeked her head out.*

*“Is everything all right?” the woman asked. Woræ was still screaming for help, loudly and clearly.*

*Fogson looked at her and shook his head. “A man's just been murdered in this apartment,” Fogson said, and thrust a thumb back over his shoulder.*

*The woman looked at Fogson, standing there with a crazed look in his eye and a sword leaking blood down onto the new olefin, and then she hurriedly shut the door and locked it.*

*Fogson went down the stairs and out into the street and stood there a long time—too long a time—catching his breath. When he looked around he saw a trio of big, ogreish guards loping toward him, like hunchbacks or monkeys, from the crowd. He turned and ran up the street, which, he soon realized, to his utter dismay, terminated in the now-upright drawbridge that traversed the moat to the castle, the lever for which was guarded by an enormous Royal Guard in a maroon cap.*

*The Royal Guard saw him coming when he was about twenty feet away and raised his own large sword, either to attack or defend. Fogson would have one shot. If he failed, the Royal*

*Guard would surely rip him in two. He raised up his own beautiful sword, approached, and swung mightily.*

*The beautiful sword ripped through the Royal Guard's sword, breaking it off at the hilt, and cut clean through the top of the man's head, splattering the walk with blood and brain and sending the top of the man's head out into the moat, where it popped under the water and then resurfaced, floating there like half a grapefruit.*

*Fogson had no time to observe such things. He pulled the lever and waited with mounting horror for the drawbridge to drop enough so he could cross. He looked behind and the three Royal Guards were gaining on him—thirty feet, twenty-five feet, fifteen feet...*

*Finally, he scrambled across the drawbridge and ran to the only place he could run, which was the front door to the castle in which the king himself lived. He killed the guard there, too, but this time, the door could only be opened with keys, and, as this guard's keyring had nigh a hundred keys on it, Fogson realized that this course of action was futile.*

*He looked around desperately. The guards were only ten feet away now. Strong and beautiful as his sword was, he did not think he could take three men at once. In a second they would be on him; he had a second to act.*

*Without thinking, he stuck his beautiful sword in his belt loop, very nearly slicing it through, and mounted the castle wall itself. He climbed and he climbed until he reached the tallest tower in the castle, and there he heaved himself up over the precipice and crouched there, panting like a beast.*

*Just then, the current king himself burst through the trapdoor that led into the tower. Fogson shouted like a madman and raised his sword.*

*"Wait!" shouted the king.*

*Fogson halted, the beautiful, bloody sword quivering erect in his upright arms.*

*“It has just become known to me,” said the king, “that you are the child that came from my love for another woman many years ago. I thought the both of you perished; indeed, I had received notification of her death and believed you, inevitably, dead, too. But whoring was I recently, with great vigor and passion, when I chanced to speak with a whore who was by matters of profession acquainted with your mother, and this whore informed me that this woman did indeed have her child, just before her untimely death, and by tracking the progress thereafter of that child we have determined that it is you—that you are, indeed, my son. As I am without heir, my son having perished tragically in the most recent Dark War, and as I think more generally that all sons should be reunited with their fathers and mothers, should the child be at all separated—through tragic circumstances—from the parents, I have decided to seek you out, forgive what seems to be a considerable series of crimes—which is within my power to do—and name you the Crown Prince of the Kingdom. What say you, my beloved son?”*

*“Bless the Gods!” said Fogson, lowering the sword. “What fortune! What glorious fortune! I accept, of course, and am eager to get to know you, my father.”*

*Fogson plunged his beautiful sword back into one of his belt loops, but, this time, the blade cut clean through the fabric. There was a moment of utter stillness, in which all was good in the world, and then the sword plunged deep into the flesh and bone of Fogson’s foot. Fogson screamed, a high and mighty scream, full of anguish—a scream befitting a Crown Prince of the Kingdom; and then, in his agony, he stumbled backwards, first one then two feet found nothing but air, and he recognized with a sickening, horrifying lurch in his stomach that he had stepped over the edge of the precipice and off the tower.*

*“Dad,” he said, his eyes full of sorrow.*

*Then, like his ancestors thousands of year before, he fell from the tallest tower in the castle, to his too-soon and unnatural death.*

*Thereafter, in honor of his dead son, whose death filled him with grief, the king abolished the practice of post-romantic assistance, and the citizens of the kingdom behaved in a more normal, yet less story-worthy—and thus conclusional for this tale—fashion.*

### THE END

But Marcus did not like the story. It reminded him too much of real-life sadnesses and, maybe even worse, struck him as clever in a proud, and also sort-of trite, way. Ooh, look at me, I can write social commentary because I have angst. I read an eighteenth-century novel once, ooh, I'm hot shit.

It was the last story Marcus ever wrote. Afterwards, poetry, which had already played a big part in his life, made up the entirety of his artistic endeavors. He was good at it, and, at least when poetry was pretentious, it was obvious about it.

And besides: when Daydreamz came out, Marcus no longer needed such petty coping mechanisms as narrative fiction.

Like most other people, he found a better way to heal.

### Chapter Five: The College Job

The man was tired. At three in the morning he pulled the truck into a motel parking lot and cut the engine and got out and locked his car and walked into the lobby. There was a woman at the counter chewing her nails and he walked up to her and pulled out his credit card and she looked at him dully, so dully it was as if she didn't really even see anyone standing there.

"I'd like a room," he said.

Two minutes later he was looking at a bed and a bureau and an armchair and a desk with a small flatscreen TV on it. He turned the TV on and flipped through the channels and put on a movie. He had no intention of watching the whole thing or even ten minutes of it but it seemed a waste to rent a room for the night and not take advantage of the opportunity; more than that, he liked the sound of voices. It would help him sleep. Not that he would need much help with that.

He stood watching the TV a moment then went to the window and peeled back the blinds and looked out at the parking lot and the highway and the road beyond. A minivan slouched slowly down the road, hunched like a humpback whale. He closed the blinds and peeled off his sweaty clothes—he was always cold, always blasting the heater in his car, always sweating—and then pattered to the shower, his feet curved so as not to touch the cold tiles with the flat undersides. He turned on the shower full blast and waited a moment and got in and showered quickly. He would've liked a longer shower—would've liked to have stood under the steaming spray for hours—but he was too tired. Then he stood looking at his old and exhausted body in the mirror. Rounded, unkempt mounds of hair above the ears flanking a bald head. Like bushes flanking a walkway. A saggy neck. Dark, saggy nipples, the skin of his chest wrinkled randomly, like lines in a seismograph. He did not need to look any more. He did not need to do that.

He set an alarm on his phone and threw the phone into an armchair on the other side of the room so he would have to get up to turn it off and fell naked into the bed and kicked the cold white sheets and the thin chenille blanket and the comforter over himself.

“Oh God,” he said to himself. He reached up and shut off the lamp, listened to the voices on the television as if from far away. “You will be so tired tomorrow. It will be so bad.”

He passed out and slept for three hours and he didn't dream. Then his alarm went off. He lifted his heavy head off his pillow and peered around the room, which in the mauve light of



predawn looked so bleak, so cold. He laid his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes and went absolutely still and thought that for the next five seconds nothing would matter and he could just lie there, just like that, ignoring the alarm and the drive ahead and the whole of his life. Those five seconds were absolutely his. Then he swung his skinny, nearly-hairless old-man legs out of the bed and pushed himself up off the bed and staggered over to the alarm and shut it off.

“Oh God,” he said. More like repeated. He often found himself saying it. His mantra.

He was halfway to the shower when he remembered that he had showered three hours ago to save time in the morning so he put on his clothes and walked out the door. He went to the front desk and spoke with the same woman as three hours ago and if she was surprised to see him checking out so soon or was at all curious about anything in this world she did not show it.

He went out to the car and got in and turned it on and pulled out of the lot. It was quiet and the sky was a dark blue turning pale on the horizon. He pulled out onto the road. Fifteen minutes later he stopped at a gas station and filled up his gas tank and bought a Gatorade and a Milky Way and two slices of banana bread wrapped in cellophane, and on the drive to the college he ground the food between his teeth without tasting it, feeling soulless, his head heavy and his body light, his mind on his wife, who he loved more than anything in the world.

...

“Ralphie, hey.”

He turned and looked and there was Jenna. Jenna had dark unbrushed hair and pale blue eyes that made her seem more intelligent than she actually was. She was nice enough, he supposed, but deep down it was more or less true that he hated her. At least strongly resented her. He had once calculated it out that, given sleep and eating and all that, he actually did see Jenna more than his own wife. And that made life seem all kinds of pointless. Why put in all this

work when he never hardly saw the wife that he did it for? When he would never be able to retire and be with her? So, yes, he probably did hate Jenna. He had thought before, on particularly bad days (which were plentiful) of killing Jenna. But of course he would never actually do it. He was too chickenshit, sure, but more than that he knew it wasn't right. When he had been a kid whenever he did anything wrong his father would wack him on the ass and back with a rolled-up *National Geographic* until the skin either rose or bled. From that he had gathered pretty quickly a strong sense of right and wrong, one that was impossible to shake. He could have killed somebody much less easily than probably anybody alive. After all, thou shalt not kill. And thou shalt honor thy father. And so on.

But he didn't like to think about his father. And he didn't like to think about Jenna, either. Or even, really, his wife—as much as he loved her, thinking of her usually filled him with a longing so intense and painful that he couldn't focus on anything else. He probably needed medication—Zoloft, Prozac, something good like that. But he hadn't looked into it. So no meds. No thinking about his wife or his shitty father. No thinking at all, if he could help it.

But Jenna. You couldn't not think about Jenna, not when she was around all the time.

She stood there in the doorway to his office.

“Hey. Jenna.” The words were slow, forced, almost inhospitable.

“You seem awful tired today, Ralphie.”

“I am tired.”

“Trouble sleeping?”

He looked at her. She wore a stained jean jacket and jeans. Did her students think she was cool because she dressed like that? If they did, she didn't deserve it. He hated her and he hated looking at her small, dark, stupid-person eyes and he looked away.

“I went to visit my wife last night,” he said at last.

“Jesus, Ralphie, that’s a long-ass drive for one night.”

“Yes, it is.”

“And being you could’ve just waited for tomorrow and it would’ve been the weekend anyway.”

“Yeah.”

“How long is that anyway? Like four hours, isn’t it?”

She would not be stopped. On and on she talked.

“Closer to five,” he said. He blinked the sleep from his eyes and wished to himself that Jenna would go away.

“Five hours. Jesus. I’ve never driven five hours in my life. Not in one go,” she said, shaking her head wonderingly. “I don’t know how you do it. And then to have to turn around and do it all over again. Ten hours in a day.” He was surprised she could manage the arithmetic. “Jesus, it must wear you out.”

“It certainly does,” he said. It certainly did.

“You must not even get ten seconds to say hi before you have to turn around and come right back.”

“Do you ever shut up?” is what he wanted to say. Instead, he did his best to go along with, to accept, her attempts at commiseration. “Couple hours, anyway,” he said, and a wave of misery washed over him. Oh God, he thought. That sadness. You just never could make room enough for it.

It was all so stupid, too. The course of his life. He would’ve accepted anything if only he could’ve spent time with his wife. It was all he wanted. It did not make him simple: that love that

he had was complex, human, and enormous. It encompassed lifetimes of thoughts and emotions, an infinity in his consciousness. Its potential was astonishing and only he knew it as truly as it existed; even his wife had never gotten to know the full extent of that love. All because of a dead father-in-law, an adopted mortgage, an unsellable house. He did not want to, could not bear to, think about all that. Thinking about that always led not only to outrage but to an endless obsession with how things might have been, an obsession with the points at which he should have said no when he had said yes, with the moments in which he had let his future slip out of his fingers like grains of sand he could no longer find once he'd dropped them. It was all so terrible. He shouldn't think about it. He shouldn't think about her, about his wife. As cruel as it was to bifurcate his life in that way, to sequester her in two days out of the seven and block her from his mind as well as he could the other five, it was a bitter necessity. If he spent all of his time thinking about her and about not having her, then he would go crazy.

Jenna was saying something.

"I'm sorry?"

"Oh," she said. "No, I just said, 'Jesus, I can't imagine that. It must just be so hard on the two of you.'"

"Yeah, it can be rough some of the time," he said.

"I should think so," she said, shaking her head in disbelief that someone would have such a life, her face scrunched in empathetic hatred at the forces that should conspire to screw him over so, a look that made her appear at once puggish and supremely moronic.

He cleared his throat.

"Well," he said. "I got to prepare for class."

...

After his classes it was lunch, so he got in his truck and drove to the nearest gas station and paid five dollars for a vanilla shake and a cheeseburger and he sat in his car in the parking lot, eating, leaned back a little in the seat with his long thin legs stretched out before him, listening to the radio.

He thought about her. How could he not? He always told himself not to and then he went ahead and did it. He just couldn't help it. It was memories, mostly. Fairs they had gone to, the way she had looked eating fries and vinegar with two fingers and how horrible she had been throwing darts at balloons and the way she'd only laughed on a ride—never screamed, like a normal person did, or closed her eyes, or any of that. And the movies—most of them they'd watched, but for some they'd simply bought their tickets then sat in the back row and necked, groped, touched, long past the time that they were dumbshit teenagers not knowing what they were doing and such shenanigans should have ended. And places they had gone. They had never traveled, never had the money for it. But they had driven around the state on unorganized Sunday drives and gone to yard sales and little rock-and-gem shops and ice cream parlors and cafes where they ate greasy fried eggs and ketchup and toast and bacon like truckers headed west. Once they'd found a ghost town, population less than a dozen, the houses made like wells out of big round rocks and clay, the streets hardpacked dirt rutted by old cars, by wagons. There'd been a farm out there on the outskirts of that ghost town and they'd driven past it and looked at the thin ribby cows and the filthy pigs and they'd seen the farmer and the farmer's wife watching them from a window that looked out from over the porch, their stare all-seeing and blank at the same time, like that famous painting, like they were some mirror version of the two of them, like this is what he and his wife could've been had their life taken so altogether completely different a course, and then they had watched each other out of sight. That and all the times and places

they had made love, in the car and in the house and in the backyard on a red-and-white plastic tablecloth spread out over the grass on a sunny day and out behind the Phoenix Flight ride when they were young and foolish and had the whole rest of their lives ahead of them and oh God, oh God, just to get back to that moment, to get back all of those moments, to be young once more—he would have done anything for that.

He finished his lunch and balled up the trash and got out of the car and threw it away and went in and bought himself a coffee and filled it with cream. Then he got back in the truck and went back to school.

...

They'd worked it out, over and over, hoping for a different outcome, but to no avail. If the objective was saving the most money possible—which, of course, it was—then he had to keep his job at the college. While there were a couple teaching positions open much nearer his wife, they didn't pay nearly as well as the college did. It was that simple. He had long considered trading in his line of work for another that would let him spend weekdays at home, but that search was now as old as their residency in the house—two-and-a-half years—and exceptionally fruitless in the jobless countryside where he and his wife lived. And, too, he had just become very resigned to the whole of it: surely if your life was this miserable, this pointless, then it was supposed to be, and things that were the way they were supposed to be were as inescapable as night and day.

Soon, he hoped, despite the problems it would cause, something would happen and he would have to give up the college job. He would fall sick or, God forbid, she would. That, or his landlord would raise the rent of the über-cheap two-room apartment he rented in the college town, and it would no longer be more cost effective to maintain the current arrangement. Or the

school, already wracked by a string of budget cuts, would eye his paycheck as another place in which it could save a little dough. Any one of these would be remarkably deleterious to their lives together—he didn't know how he would fix something like that, or otherwise he would have quit the college job long ago—but if it meant he could spend more time with his wife, well, then he knew some very large part of him would be happier, regardless.

But, for now, the college job. That and his sad apartment. At four o'clock in the afternoon he stood in the doorway looking at the room. There was a bed and a chair against one wall and a little table with a nightstand next to the bed and some old paperback books he'd checked out from the college library on the nightstand. Against the other wall there was a small stove and a sink and a mini-fridge, which was usually empty. He did not drink beer or anything like that, and often he skipped dinner altogether; the hunger, when and if it came, was like a pin prick in a broken leg: barely registered against the other misery.

Off the kitchen there was the tiniest of bathrooms. A shower as small as his body and a sink and across from the sink a toilet such that whenever he shat he had to sit with his legs under the sink. Now he went in and shut the door behind him and peed and flushed and washed his hands. Then he laid down on the bed and pulled his phone out of his pocket. He had a cheap little flip phone so he could call the house at night but he had enough money on it such that he could call her only about five minutes a night. He called her now, and they kept the talk short, and not just because of money: they had long since exhausted all the ways to say they loved each other, they missed each other, they hated their lives but adored each other as the only worthwhile thing in it, and, in their miseries and resulting inarticulateness, they were struck dumb as beasts. He ended by telling her again that he loved her and she echoed his words and he carried the so-beautiful syllables and her gorgeous voice with him into the apartment and, soon after, down into

sleep, down into his sad and longing dreams, like Hades dragging Persephone down into the underworld.

...

He woke at quarter to midnight. Something was wrong. There was... wetness? Had he peed himself?

“What the hell?” he said, flailing about pitifully under his sheets, trying to kick them off. His legs and stomach were soaked and the sheets clung to him like cellophane. Finally he succeeded in extricating himself and he sat up gingerly and rested his back against the wall—there was no headboard on the bed in his apartment—and looked down at his crotch. Slowly he came awake. Determined that probably he had not peed himself. That was good. A guy could get pretty worried thinking he was back to being three years old again.

Just to be sure, he stuffed his hand inside his boxers and rubbed it along his crotch then pulled it out and sniffed, tensing at the potential of ammonia. No ammonia. Just sweat. It was all just sweat. He became aware then how hot it was—stiflingly hot. He would not have been surprised to smell smoke but there was no such smell, just the oppressive heat, thick and substantial, like a heavy blanket.

Had he left the window closed? He had. What a numbskull. He stumbled over in his underwear to the bedroom window and wrenched it up as far as it would go and stood there looking out the window at the streetlights, the quiet street, the cars parked along the curb like an infantry in wait. He stood in an exhausted daze, staring out at the street, for too long; the moment in which he might have gone back to sleep passed, and suddenly he was awake for the day. At what time? He looked at the digital clock on the nightstand. At 11:30. At 11:30 PM, for Christ’s sake. 11:30 PM was a bedtime, certainly not a time to begin the day. This was ridiculous.



11:30—what a stupid time—an even, precise time—as if something had forced him into consciousness as a part of some plan.

He moved away from the window and lay back down on the bed, his back pressed down onto the damp sheets, his one blanket thrust down around his feet. He lay like that for five minutes, trying to fool himself into thinking he was not too awake for sleep, that still yet some precious hours could be gleaned from the night. Then he slipped his underwear down to his ankles and peeled them the rest of the way off with his toes and lay like that, but he had never been one to feel comfortable sleeping naked—he always woke, after a nude sleep, feeling like someone had stolen his clothes. So it was a futile gesture, though the play of a light breeze across his body was nice enough.

At 11:40 he stood and walked into the bathroom and showered. He stood under the scalding spray with his neck bent and the top of his head pressed against the shower wall, the water running down his back. He was awake enough from the shower—really, fully awake—to ponder what it was that had gotten him up in the first place. He figured it had been a dream. The sweat alone would not have been enough to do it, and also he dreamt a lot. Some pretty scary stuff sometimes, too. He had probably dreamt that he was drowning. That, or his apartment was on fire. He tried to trick himself into remembering but he couldn't do it. Maybe he hadn't even dreamt. Maybe it was something else.

He shut off the water and dressed and walked down the outside steps to the tenant lot. He debated what to do. Breakfast? A drink? He could drive to the late-night movie place—it was three towns away, but they were small towns. A short drive, in other words. He could probably make a 12:30 showing if he hurried.

He didn't really feel like it, though. Didn't really feel like much of anything. There was a certain excitement to being awake so early—a holdover from his youth, when in a house with four other siblings the only personal time he had had was in the early morning—but he didn't really know what to do with himself. He felt lethargic and vaguely achey. And hot. Why had he taken a hot shower? What a numbskull. Already his shirt felt damp.

At last he walked down the street and went into the Sunoco. There was air-conditioning in the gas station and he stood in front of the smoothiemaker and felt the coolness radiating off the frosted metal cylinder and a shiver racked his body and broke his damp back out in gooseflesh. Was he getting sick? He sure hoped not. Or maybe he hoped so. Maybe he'd get to stay home if that was the case.

He walked down the aisles and picked a bratwurst out of the rotisserie and put it in a bun and covered it with ketchup and onions and nacho cheese and brought this to the cashier who looked at him with his face aghast at the disgusting slop Ralph held in his hands. He would've thought a gas station attendant would've been more prepared for such things.

He paid three dollars for the sausage and went outside and after the respite in the air conditioning he now felt able to handle the damp night heat. He took a bite of his hotdog and started walking, aimlessly, though after a minute, his breakfast nearly gone, he understood where he was headed.

He supposed it was as good a place as any other.

### Chapter Six: The Purple Teacup Man (I)

*When you meet me again, I will wear a different face. I will walk around in a different body and I will sing a different tune. I suppose it's only appropriate. The Stoics would have had*

*a thing or two to say about something like that, I'm sure, but, really, what do they know if they're dead? The fact of the matter is, we're just too goddamn sensitive these days. Or at least we like to pretend we are, don't we? If I built a bomb and asked the government to fly it over and blow up a city in one of those countries half of you haven't even heard of, and then you saw it on the news, how bad would you really feel? Answer: Is it time for Game of Thrones yet? Exactly. If you watched from a hilltop, though, if I coptered you down onto a hilltop overlooking the city we were blowing up and made you watch the bomb go off, yeah, maybe then you'd feel something. Then maybe you'd have something to say to me. Maybe if I showed you pictures of the dead bodies you would feel even worse. Maybe you'd even feel bad? I don't know. Also I don't know if I really care. Maybe if I made you look at one of the dead bodies up close and personal then you might even start to cry. Probably you would. You people are all like that. But anyways, my point being, you'd only give a shit because that death is getting closer and closer to precious YOU. Those dead bodies are underneath a pile of rubble whether you're looking at them or not, but you only feel you have to care, you only have some kind of response if it comes into contact with YOU. Otherwise, tough titty, said the kitty.*

*At least I'm telling you the truth. You can count on me to do that. Maybe I have a secret, but a secret's not the same thing as a lie—and even if it were, you're gonna find out soon enough. Oh yes you will. Where's my smileyface emoticon when I need it (ha-ha-ha).*

*Yeah, I'd say I'm you, exactly you, but completely honest, honest you, the you you know you're supposed to be and maybe (probably) even think you are but aren't. Have I introduced you to my friends ego and superego? I'm kidding. I keed, I keed. I know I'll get interviewed and written to and that they'll get some dude to play me in the film adaptation of my autobiography (I keed, I keed; just because I'm honest doesn't mean I'm vain), so I'm just warning you now. Try*

*to dig a little deeper, please. PRETTY please (with etc. etc. on top). I know you're not all that good with stuff like that but I think I'll have earned it.*

*Yeah, I know I will have. I'm a really good guy. I looked at myself in the mirror today. Took it all off, let it all hang out. Christ, I grinned like a chimp to see all of me. Nice brown hair; blue eyes; teeth white as a satin sheet, which I brush three times a day. I have a slight downturn at the end of my nose that makes me look a little birdlike—free, sharp, powerful, that's me. I dress nicely. You've got to, so people'll take you seriously. I'm not like one of those types who just think you can write everyone and what they think off, just say: FORGET IT. Doesn't work like that, chief, nuh-uh ungh-uh. You gotta play by their rules UNTIL you can suggest your agenda. Then—kapow! Blam! All that.*

*This thinking of how good I looked in front of that mirror (try not to get all hot and bothered, here, guys, I've got places to be) brings me back to this thing I remember that happened to me way back in middle school. I was playing four-square with the chums (close to CHUMPS? Are you following me okay?) and they kicked it like idiots out into the playground proper (you had to call it a playground proper because that way you could get by knowing you didn't—DID NOT—have a proper playground, that the taxpayers and the school both did not care about you one iota but didn't have the HONESTY (!) to cancel recess altogether and save everybody's time, which was already quite wasted by school, homework, and so on).*

*I went to retrieve the ball (Tommy = good kid) and wound up finding it at the feet of some girl who the way she slouched there with one arm holding the other like she was smoking must have thought that she = HOT SHIT.*

*I picked up the ball without saying anything. As I was turning to go, she said:*

*"Hey.*

*“Loser.*

*“Your fly is down.”*

*I checked right there in front of her. Face turned red as the brassiere my mother wore when Daddy tied her up. Skriiiiiiiiiich (zipper). The girl rolled her eyes. I went back to the game.*

*For the rest of the schoolday, I was really rather despondent (which is UNLIKE me). What an embarrassment/idiot/clueless little dummy boy I had been. Then I got to my last class, history, and Mister Whoever went on forever about Gandhi. Gandhi this and Gandhi that and Gandhi on the mountaintop and Gandhi in the valley, Gandhi everywhere. Anyways, what am I trying to say? I guess I just realized that I was great, you know? Like here this guy was getting paid, what? Forty thousand dollars a year, maybe, if that? just to spend all his time that day, six periods, over and over again, GANDHI GANDHI GANDHI. Like, I would NEVER be that guy. I would never even be a guy LIKE that. I just couldn't be. I was terrific, and wouldn't wind up like that guy, or like my stupid drooling classmates, or like that idiot girl on the playground (I mean, SHE was the one who was looking, wasn't she?), or even like Gandhi. None of them were doing anything and I would do something.*

*I had to prove that to myself. So, after that class, I followed that girl home when she walked home from school, and, when she put her little puppy dog out in the yard to take a shit, I called it over, and it came over wagging its tail, breathing heavy cause it was so excited to get some love (you see how different a person is from a shit-on-its-ass dog), and I grabbed it by the neck and put both my hands around its neck and squeezed as hard as I could.*

*Of course I didn't kill it. What, are you fucking nuts? I ain't a psycho, for God's sake. If you think I'm a psycho then there's this thing I'd like to introduce you to called page one, and*

*you should go look at it and read from there to here again, and maybe, I don't know, take an English class or something, cause I certainly ain't a fucking psycho. I squeezed the dog's neck for a second, no more, just to see that I COULD go all the way to that point—follow a girl home, hide in the bushes in front of her house IN BROAD DAYLIGHT, abduct her dog, strangle it, get away with it all. I could have killed it IF I HAD WANTED TO. I didn't, because I'm not crazy.*

*And, fuck, it did loads worse to me than I did to it. Soon as I let go, the thing bit me. Right on that webbed part of the hand between the thumb and the forefinger. Just chomped down and went to town, then skittered off before I could kick it or, you know, do what apparently I should have done to it when I had had the chance. It went running off for the doggy-door with blood dripping out of its mouth and I went running down the street blood dripping out of my hand wondering what the fuck I was gonna tell my mother.*

*In the end, I told her a dog had attacked me. It was the truth, after all, which is my jam. So what if I had to get a ring of rabies shots in my ass? It was kind of awesome to say that had happened to me. And my hand? I have a scar there now, a big, long, ugly one, which is a great conversation starter. And I love conversation. I love people. I love life. I love my family and I love my school and I love to read and bike and swim and fuck and eat, and, yeah, I guess you could say that I'm great, better than you, better than anyone, that I'm over the moon.*

*What were we talking about?*

*Oh, right. When you meet me again.*

*Oh, dear.*

## Chapter Seven: The Girl in the Window

*Oh, dear.*

Christine Gostkowski stood in the doorway, her long black hair draped around her head and neck and down her back like a frame, like her own private cosmos. She wore a towel wrapped tight around her body and she held a shower caddy in her hand and when she looked at him standing there her big eyes looked at him inquisitively, as if to ask the obvious question “What, good sir, are you doing standing here outside my door?” and a steady sea of red began to creep up her neck. It was, at least, certainly her; there was no question about that.

He looked at her a second. He wished the period of looking were shorter but he didn’t know what to say, and it was so obvious that he had been standing in this specific spot, outside *her* door, that to suddenly move away down the hall might seem all the creepier, like an admission of guilt. So he looked at her a second. Only her face. She was obviously uncomfortable at finding herself unexpectedly so close to this young man with the sweaty face and untidy hair. He was an odd, maybe even off-looking character, he could acknowledge—he sweated easily, his hair never seemed to stay put, his wardrobe was not up to the standards of the rich-kid institution he attended, he talked quietly and shook hands loosely and held eyes poorly—and he felt it would be all too easy for him to be classified as a creep, which he did not want and, what was more, felt he certainly did not deserve. So only her face. Only a second. Then he cleared his throat.

“Um,” he said, somewhat loudly, with all the trappings of drunkenness that he could muster on the spot, “um, does, like, Andrew Prince live here? Some dude told me I’d find him here.” He swayed a little bit and regretted it—it was too much. So was the word “dude:” it caught in his throat like a shard of glass. This was all so fake. God, what an idiot he was.

She blinked at him. In the three seconds now in which they had interacted she had closed the door nearly a third of the way shut, instinctively, and the hand holding the shower caddy had

risen several feet, as if intending to cover some part of herself or other. An enormous wave of shame flooded him, hot and sickly sweet, like a shot of liquor.

At last she said, “I think maybe you have the wrong school, not just the wrong dorm.” She gave a small, nervous smile, which by its very existence seemed a very generous gesture. “There are no Princes at the school.”

It was his turn to blink at her. Why had he not picked a real name? Had he feared she would care enough to check up on him, would possibly know the person and talk to that person and be like, hey, Sharukh, do you know so-and-so (she would obviously find out his name, too, somehow)? because he stopped by last night looking for you looking all sweaty and out-of-breath and everything, and Sharukh would say, Who? Yes, that is what he must have feared. Or maybe he just hadn’t been thinking at all. That was probably more likely. He certainly wasn’t thinking now; he couldn’t think. But then he did think: how did she know there were no Princes here? Who knew such a thing off the top of his or her head?

She spoke then instead, probably as much to get him to leave as anything else.

“Do you mean Andrew Padmore?”

He seized gratefully on the opportunity.

“Oh, uh, yeah. That must be who I meant. You don’t happen to know—”

“Way on the other side of campus,” she said—probably grateful for that fact, so that he would be far away. “Sixsmith Hall.”

“Sixsmith,” he repeated, as if committing the name to memory. “Sixsmith.” Then he realized he sounded weird repeating himself, and swallowed, anxiously, what seemed to be a golf ball in his throat. To clear the air, he said, “Yo, thanks for like, knowing so much about everybody and everything and—and helping me out and stuff.”



She flashed another tiny smile—*flashed* because it was there and gone in an instant. “No problem,” she said, her voice smaller than her smile. He had much overstayed his welcome. No—there had never been any welcome to begin with. He needed to go. Now.

“See ya,” he said, which seemed a painfully awkward, even stalkerish thing to say. What kind of idiot was he? His own color of red, even brighter and more crimson than Christine’s, flooded his face, and before it could consume him he turned and fled down the hall. He neither waited to hear a response nor looked back, simply put one foot before the other and kept doing so until he found himself pushing his way out the backdoor into the muggy night heat.

He stood a minute and tried unsuccessfully to catch his breath. “What did you accomplish?” he said, breathing heavily. “Huh? You idiot. You sicko idiot.”

He closed his eyes and breathed in through his nose, out through his mouth—what he had learned to do in therapy. He breathed and he listened to the night sounds. The booming of the music from within the dorm. The soft soughing of the wind in the small stretch of forest at his back. The crackle of dead limbs and dead leaves as little wood creatures transpired across them. He felt the hot air raise his flesh up in goosebumps and he felt the wind, hot and sticky itself, touch his skin, tentatively, like a ghost.

When he opened his eyes it was to the back side of the dorm building, which was entirely lit up with rectangular yellow lights: students, still awake at this late hour. He scanned the rooms, not sure if he was looking for anything in particular, then realized he was, of course, looking for Christine’s room. Would he be able to see anything from this low vantage point? What did he even expect to find—Professor Xi, standing naked in the window with a rose in between his teeth? He didn’t even think that was really what was between them; at least, he had no idea what it was. But perhaps he might see *something* that would provide him with a clue as to why they

had behaved the way that they did. For some strange reason, he had to know; it was a story he had to get to the end of—hell, the *beginning* of. He couldn't bear the thought of not knowing.

Third floor, seventh down the hall...

When he focused on what he presumed to be her room, his heart started to gallop in his chest. She was there, all right. She was naked, the towel she had had draped around her body now wrapped tight about her head to dry her hair, and he could tell from the way her face was scrunched that she was crying a little.

And now she was taking the towel off her head. Her long dark hair, clumped from wetness, spilled down her chest, pooled around her face.

Now she was bending over to pick something up. He watched her bend further... further... disappear below the bottom of the window. He held his breath.

Now she was standing, holding a Daydreamz unit in her hands. She lifted it to her head.

His eyes widened.

He had an idea now. He knew just what to do—knew what he should have done long, long ago. Knew because he had had the idea before, in fact. He had browsed the video game stores and video game aisles of Walmart and Best Buy when Daydream had come out, curious—like everyone—to see, and he had even tried it once, after standing for a quarter of an hour in a line at the local Gamestop. In Daydreamz, he had been on a hill overlooking a castle—it seemed foolish to build the castle at the bottom of a hill, because then your enemies could just throw dead bodies and shoot arrows and maybe shoot bullets (who knew when this was in time?) down into the compound—and he had thought, *okay, when I look to my left, there's going to be the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, and when I look to my right, there's going to be a purple man with no head but a face in his stomach. Yeah. And he'll be puking lava.*

Had they been there? He had doubted that they would be. But they were. Did the people waiting in line behind him hear him gasp with shock? Or was that just in the game?

He had gotten two minutes before the Gamestop employee had removed the console from his head and, already rigorously swabbing the inside of the headset with a Lysol wipe for the next person, ushered him with a single hand to get out of line. And he had, stumbling like a fool. He had made serious use of those two minutes. He wondered about that as he stumbled for the dull, dull parking lot. Did Daydreamz keep some kind of record? Did Gamestop? Or was what he did entirely his own? He thought about that. He thought that he had been studying computer science since he was twelve and if he really wanted to he could probably hack in to the records—if there were any. In fact, he knew he could. It was just a video game. Encrypted or not. At the end of the day, it was just a video game. Surely he could do it, right?

Despite the fascinating sight that was before him, his mind was now elsewhere. He watched Christine put the set on top of her head and watched her patch the nodules to her temples and hook the stabilizer under her chin, but he also watched himself on that dull afternoon several months before, watched himself getting into his car, his mind wild with thoughts of hacking and his eyes agoggle with the idea of Daydreamz.

Christine lowered herself onto her bed and disappeared from sight—almost. He could see the bottoms of her feet at the end of her bed, moving almost imperceptibly, the toes flexing.

Surely he could do it?

He turned to go—there was nothing left for him to do here—but then all those beautiful lights caught his eyes—beautiful, gorgeous lights, like dozens of movie screens—all endlessly engrossing, fascinating—all for him.

He thought about that.

...

He took the shortcut through the woods and within five minutes he was back in his room. Another five minutes and his computer was up and running and he was flying through rivulets of code, the numbers streaming down his screen, his fingers mashing the keys—eagerly, frantically—where appropriate. He was doing this. He was absolutely doing this. There was shame, of course, and already, there was regret for what he was about to do, but it was so far buried beneath the excitement, the *thrill*, that these other emotions barely registered. It wasn't just that he wanted to do it, either. No. He *had* to do it. Not just because he was probably one of the few people around good enough to do it, one of the few people with the vision to do it, but also because, quite simply, if he didn't do it, he would regret that forever, too. The not knowing—he simply couldn't live with that. The curiosity was simply unbearable. He supposed he was as much a child of the Internet as anyone; he needed the truth, instantly, at his fingertips. Where for centuries the truth of many things had eluded humankind, now all that was known was carried around in a pocket. He was just extending this; he was just being curious; he was just being inquisitive; he was just behaving how he and everyone else was raised to behave. The truth was out there, obtainable with only a little hard work, and he wasn't go to do any harm with it. Why not take such an opportunity? It would be a waste, otherwise. Secrets were always being wasted on those who held them.

He sat in his chair, in his room, breathing heavily, tapping away every so often at his lines and lines of code—adjusting, breaking, intruding.

In less than half an hour the Daydreamz server opened its gates to him.

...

But that was not the end of it.

...

It was all still just code—numbers, letters, symbols—a language that meant nothing until he implemented it. Until he actualized it.

He had been doing this for about three-and-a-half hours when he finally realized that he himself was, also, being hacked. Somebody out there, he realized, was copying the code and taking that copy away—he couldn't have said where. He sat there, dumbfounded. Somebody must have been waiting for just such a thing—someone out there, like him, had been waiting for the local Daydreamz server to be opened, if only for a few hours, and when it had happened, that someone had apparently pounced, tracing the open back to its source; it was, after all, much easier to hack a computer than to hack a high-tech server. At least for most people.

He was going to shut down—his immediate response to being hacked was to shut down everything—but then he thought about it. Took a deep breath. He had nothing incriminating on his computer—no financial account information, no passwords stored, no nudes. They could do nothing that would hurt *him*. Well, they could do one thing—they could stop him from acquiring the whole story, from downloading the amount he had intended to download. A week's worth of Daydreamz code. That was going to be *his*, and he wasn't going to let anyone stop that.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay.”

He let the hacking continue—his *and* his tracer's. The anxiety that developed from realizing that he was both perpetrator *and* victim allowed other negative feelings to surface, and the guilt at being greedy enough that he would allow this hacker to carry on with his business—well, it was something he certainly felt. Before, he had been able to rationalize it: he would do nothing wrong with the information, and, indeed, he might even give dignity to the unwitting

participants—the dignity afforded by *understanding* a person through their secrets, which was to understand someone more fully than they were usually understood.

But now this. How could he let it go on?

But he did. He let it go on and on. There was no clicking now, no typing—nothing. He sat there and took it all in and so did his tracer. By six-thirty in the morning, when he had finally acquired everything that he wanted, he shut off the computer then rebooted it and checked to be sure it was not still being hacked. It wasn't. The person had left; whoever they were had gotten what they wanted.

He set an alarm for eight-thirty—he had class at nine o'clock sharp on Fridays—then collapsed in his clothes into bed. He was eager to look at what he had, but he was also too drained. He knew he wouldn't appreciate what he had were he to watch it now. And, also, he was a veritable cauldron of emotions. Best to put that off. Best to tackle it all fresh and, hopefully, with his persistent guilt well behind him.

He lay there, falling fast asleep. He thought to himself, *Christine Gostkowski is at my fingertips. Professor Xi, maybe, too.* There was some solace in that. He had done it, and soon he would know.

In his room, a blowfly buzzed unceasingly. Music drifted in from the room at the end of the hall. All of it—none of it mattered. He crested the cusp beyond which laid a glorious sleep, knew in his heart that all that mattered was there, safe, in his computer, ready for his discovery. That was all there was.

If there was anything else of any importance, he was sure he would be able to handle it when it came.

And with that comfort, he fell blissfully into sleep.

## **PART TWO**