

*A Recollection of Romances*

**MANY  
MILLION  
DREAMS  
AGO**

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FOR ALL LOVERS  
— EVERYWHERE.



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# INTRODUCTION



*“At the touch of a lover, everyone becomes a poet.”*

*-Plato*

Our world is made for soulmates. The stars in the sky exist so we can use them to spell out their names—, a *what is to come* by starlight, the moon so we can use its shine to barely make out their faces—, a *what is* by moonlight, and the sun to show us who they really were—, a *what was* by sunlight. Who could merit such magnificent things but *The Lover*? A person’s other half that reminds them they are in-fact, incomplete. Who could bring a being to take blades to their once-porcelain skin and rip it apart at the seams but those that did it themselves first? Who could make this planet seem uninhabitable any longer without them by our sides? Soulmates are powerful. They have energy we didn’t know

existed. And still—, we are drawn to their scent like moths to a flame. We burn and bleed with ecstasy.

The paradox is simple; live out a lifetime's worth of emotion in a much shorter span. Such a relationship rarely lasts forever, so we must relish the moments we *are* given with glee. One remains another's other half only until the real world pulls them apart once more and again—, they are left in two, only to find another half, in someone else. The cycle repeats but as promised by fate, we all eventually settle for second best and begin to lose sight of something more permanent. So close to restoration. So far from perfect. Prior to truly understanding what sacrificing oneself for someone else really meant, I'd gotten close to something special a couple of different times. Everyone has a beginning—, mine is much like many others'.

My first real crush also happened to be my first real kiss. She was bohemian-chic and beyond sharp. Our friends' circles began overlapping so there we'd stand—, out in the parking lots and underneath our school's



gigantic arch; loitering, liking each other's music, and making each other laugh. We'd gotten closer over the course of our freshman year of high school and when we'd found out that we lived a mere mile away from each other, the attraction naturally blossomed into something a bit more advanced. I'd wait until well after midnight to leave through my front door and skate up the street towards her house in another neighborhood. We'd talk and talk and all the while, want to go further though neither of us ever had the courage to make any type of move.

"What're you doing?," my mom asked from her bedroom doorway one night. I hadn't noticed she'd woken up and saw me putting on my shirt and jeans to leave.

"I wasn't doing anything," I said. She didn't buy it, so I had to confess as to why I was leaving, where I was going, and who I was going to see. She saw the expression of excitement on my face, so she said what only my mom would say in such a scenario.

"Come on, I'll drive you." We arrived in my crush's complex at what must've been a very

late hour. I got out and walked through the dark neighborhood with confidence. I didn't know what I'd say, how I should act, or that I'd even be brave enough to kiss her this time around. All of the butterflies in my stomach stormed my insides together and I felt a special type of nervousness for the first time in my life.

I arrived at her house on the right and walked up the driveway to her window. I was about to whisper out her name when the front door slowly opened and there she stood—, long brown hair and probably a band tee-shirt on.

“Hey,” she quietly said, walking down the front cement steps towards me. There we stood for a minute before each taking a seat on the freezing pavement below. We spoke and spoke until we finally kissed on a cold night in March, marking the start of our short-lived courtship.

Those were the types of moments which helped shape and guide me towards what my future understanding of love would become. I knew to cherish such memories—, to not allow

the everyday routine put them on the back-burners of my mind and just have them sit there, collecting dust.

Amongst an array of others, I've had three serious loves in my own life. Every five years since turning eighteen, I've allowed my heart to harmonize with another on a deeper level. Firstly, The Girl with the Dark Eyes taught me about passion; what I should feel—, secondly, The Girl with the Epic Tattoos about maturity; when I should feel it—, and thirdly, The Girl with the Gorgeous Smile about wisdom; how I should feel about it once it's gone. Each showed me a side of myself that I hadn't known existed before.

The three had hair made of long, jet-black waves and short, brownish curls—, eyes of deep hazel and light honey—, lips of lusciousness and cherry drops. They wore tattered shell-tops and open-toe wedges—, spoke softly, assertively, enthusiastically—, looked dark, daring, and coy.

Dive with me into a story wrought with a blizzard of best-friendships gone awry, anger misplaced at the feet of familiar faces, and

self-loathing the length of a horizon that ultimately leads to utter destruction. While it's got my name written all over it, I realize how I'm still on my own journey and that's enough to keep me going towards another day, another dream, another Lover whose eyes I have yet to lose myself in.

# A DEEP, FOREIGN FULFILLMENT (PART I)



I was a mere fourteen years old when meeting her for the first time. I'd just started high school and was getting accustomed to my new courses when out of the corner of my eye, a girl took a seat right on the front row in our English class. I saw her before knowing what I was truly looking at—, or for. Long lashes with dark, downcast eyes. Probably scribbling something in her notebook. She wore black from head to toe. It matched her aura and pulled me in like a magnet. The teacher started role-call when I first heard her voice. Something about the way she spoke in lower tones made my soul want to console her own. An innate empathy. She was always deep in thought over something. I was envious that it wasn't me she was thinking of. So I got closer —, needing to know more about her.

“I’m...” so-and-so she said with a slight grin. Even then, at the very sound of her name—, a million memories stirred up in my mind from moments that hadn’t happened yet. Like a mist —, they rose up from the ground and encircled me with abstract vibes. I saw “friendly kisses,” a beachfront as wide as the world could reach, and so much more than I was able to comprehend. I saw broken glass, bloodied knuckles, and nobody to go to for sympathy. Heaven and hell met in the middle and out came a mixture of beautified malice. After catching my breath, I finally managed to make out;

“Hey—, my name’s Dre.” We’d go on to sit by each other in every class we had. It was a familiar presence—, something that we’d felt long before ever meeting. Soon, we became friends. Then good friends. Finally—, she became Best Friend and with that, I’d unknowingly marked the next half-decade of my life, hers.

Our English class began showing daily movies. The fluorescent lights would shut off and the only glow left came from the TV

screen at the head of the room. I had to take my chance while the idea was still fresh.

“You know what I love?” I asked her one day. “Hand massages.” She pulled out a little bottle of lotion from her bag and dangled it in midair, tempting me to go ahead and ask if she’d like to give me one or not. I did. She did. Everyday, like clockwork—, as soon as I’d take my seat, I’d hear the popping sound of her opening the bottle and squeezing out fruit-scented moisturizer onto her hands, just to take up my own and begin our ritual. I thought it was just something flirty between friends, nothing more. Then the teacher turned on the lights without warning one day. She suddenly thrust my hand back towards me and spun around as if we hadn’t just been caressing each other for the past half-hour. A thought too complex for dissection immediately filled my mind. *She can only do this in the dark.* It came out of nowhere and whispered itself awake, growing until it’d one day make more sense than I was really ready for.

The years passed by and we went from being freshmen to sophomores, juniors to seniors—, all the while, still maintaining a certain level of our friendship throughout. Finally, prom came around. I looked proper in my black tux. She wore her hair up and a deep-violet dress that was perfectly draped against her olive skin. We couldn't go together so we danced with our partners in circles around each other instead—, slightly dispirited that it wasn't us in the middle of every spotlight.

“You look so handsome,” she quickly said to me. I couldn't bring myself to say how I thought about her in return—, a picture of pure style. I felt a sort of envy for everyone else in the room that night. They'd see her at all angles, all the seconds in-between the looks I'd be able to sneak in for myself. Graduation wasn't too far off afterwards—, and we'd already begun hanging out with each other much more than at any other time beforehand. We prepared to leave high school together—, each by the other's side. We walked the stage and received our diplomas on the same,



glorious day. Our journey towards the real world had officially begun—, it stretched out right in front of us and went well beyond the horizon up ahead. All we needed to make everything as perfect as possible was to be together—, in a very formal, very real sort of way. It didn't take too long for the first step to present itself.

The relationships we both carried on with eventually began suffering from the fact that it wasn't the other we'd be kissing. They broke apart simultaneously once summer started. We were finally free to enter into a new phase of our friendship—, we just needed to wait until the right moment came along. Nobody could've predicted what was yet to come. Neither of us had a clue as to what was still expecting us. It'd be endless elation; parking structure smoke-sessions, continuous concerts, and candlelit swimming pools. During those specific seconds in our lives, we just lived for the present and wouldn't dare think about tomorrow until we'd be able to watch the sunrise itself with our own eyes. Like the

blossoming trees surrounding us, we were very much in season.

She came over my place one sunny afternoon. We'd just gotten a new fifth and wanted to share it together.

“Do you have a chaser?,” she asked.

“No chaser—,” I said, so that's the way we got used to doing things from that point on. Shot after toast after drink after sip—, we slowly succumbed to the oncoming effects, in our movements, our eye-contact, and our thinking. We snapped dozens of pictures with the disposable camera we'd gotten earlier and they'd too, turn out blurry and bewilderingly foreshadowing of what was yet to come. We let ourselves get guided by a vague and dream-like apparition that wanted to see us nothing short of completely impaired. It called out to us like a phantasmic force from the back corners of our minds. It was something dark—, something that threatened to shut off the artificial sunshine the drinks were providing and place in its stead the permanent dusk of an oncoming nightfall. We tried to ignore it as best we could. Still—, it lulled us off towards

the deep, shadowy depths of future possibilities.

Something about the way she looked made my heart melt at the thought that this may be one of the most memorable moments of my life so far. I was on the verge of the best summer I'd ever have and she was quickly becoming my partner throughout it all. We laid on my living-room floor—, laughing, lushed up, and slightly in love with the feeling. Things spun and swirled, twisted and twirled. Another level reached in each of our worlds. Time slowed to a crawl. Arms moved through the atmosphere and left traces behind in mid-air, knees bent and became weak from the constant spinning, our eyelids got heavy with the weights of wanting to stay awake another second longer, but couldn't. *Treasure this*. I suddenly got up to go to the bathroom, needing to splash some cold water on my face. Once there, I peered into the mirror with an intense stare, looking at my half-grin with caution. *Stay cool*, I thought to myself. I left to head back into the living-room and there she stood, center-stage. A gush of wind wafted

through her hair from the open window as she balanced on both feet, standing up straight—, tall and alive. The apartment’s walls seemed to sweat themselves something wet. Like the summer heat had made its way into the room, making it and everything around exude a thick moisture. I knew she was at the heart of it all —, radiating a fervor for the moment that I couldn’t capture into words. I wanted it to last forever. The feeling of being much more than tipsy with her by my side had finally bit me. That’s all I’d crave from there on out. A shared sense of urgency at the need to be permanently plastered together.

We’d see movies every once in a while and were on our way down the hallway toward the theater one night when a friend from school saw us and came over.

“You’re not seeing *this* movie are you?” she asked. “They say whoever sees it together will fall in love. So be careful, you two.” The plot played out like one would imagine; friends-turned-lovers, fate ripping them apart, and eventually, them finding their way back into each other’s arms. What a storybook ending it

all had. We didn't pay it much attention. It was, after all, just a movie.

We found ourselves doing one of our favorite things one day—, strolling around a bookstore. We knew we'd wanted to buy a book and read it together so settled on John Milton. We walked out with our two copies of 'Paradise Lost' and she'd go on to laminate hers not long afterwards—, cherishing it. Tragically and regretfully, they'd end up sitting on our shelves collecting more dust than memories. To turn back time and relive something over, it'd be to have read together more often; analyzing, commenting, growing in every way.

We'd go on to see each other daily—, mostly just to ride around downtown together. On a particular evening, the stars high above us twinkled the night sky alive. A cool air breezed through the atmosphere as she and I stayed inside my grey Nissan Sentra, parked and properly filled with the sweet smoke of clove cigarettes. We'd light the thin black sticks and hear the small embers sizzle themselves ablaze. Tonight felt different than all the rest

of the times we'd been here before—, on the top floor of one of our favorite parking structures, overlooking the entire city from a perfect vantage point. What was it about her and I together that made so much sense and almost contracted my stomach from the intense nervousness which I felt? Maybe it was the type of energy she always gave off. Her vibrations were wrapped in a deep, dark burgundy—, like always. Completely shadowed from top to bottom. Something that'd dim the lights to any room she'd step into and make everyone else take notice of her standing there in the doorway. She was nighttime personified; mysterious and romantically mystifying. I had to be a part of it —, the journey she was on. I needed to know that I could reach out my hand and there'd be hers, waiting to touch mine in return. Back to the moment, back in my car;

“I need to tell you something,” inexplicably came out of my mouth. She looked at me, patiently waiting to hear what I had to say. *Take a deep breath, then go—*; “I think I..., love you—.” I couldn't believe I'd actually said

those words, let alone in that specific order. The phrase flowed through the car, hanging in the air for a moment, changing everything from there on out. She listened—, wanting to say something in return but couldn't seem to find the right words. We eventually started driving back home. Something was different, like a weight had been removed from my shoulders and I was finally flying high throughout the sky above. We reached her neighborhood and again, parked to say goodnight, goodbye. *Hopefully not for good*, I thought. She exited the car only to come back in a second later and stretch herself over to my side, kissing my cheek.

“I love you too,” she quietly whispered and with that, left to go back inside her house. Like she'd just told a secret too shocking to repeat, I still replayed it over and again in my mind for the rest of the night and much of the next morning.

We'd made our local coffee shops homes away from home. When there was no place else to go and everything around was closed —, we'd head for the twenty-four-hour open

spots we'd grown so accustomed to. It was there—, sitting at a table by the front doors one night—, where we'd make our pact. It started as all of our friendly conversations did back in those days. We talked about the future and what things still lay ahead for the both of us.

“So what about marriage?” she asked out of nowhere. “Do you see yourself going down the aisle with anyone?” I'd told her before how I didn't think I'd ever find someone to truly settle down with. That I wanted to stay a bachelor for as long as I could.

“I don't know,” I answered back, too afraid to let on that I'd already begun picturing her in a long-flowing black wedding gown for a while now.

“I've got an idea,” she said, pulling out a piece of scrap paper from her backpack. She started writing. “If neither of us are married by the time we're twenty-eight, let's marry each other.” My heart melted at the thought. The only setback was having to wait for ten full years to pass. She drew two horizontal lines at the bottom of the page and wrote her name



out on the first in delicate cursive. Then she slid it over to me. “Sign it,” she nearly demanded. So that’s exactly what I did. Of course—, it too would get lost on the long road of life. The paper, the promise, and the pretend marriage would all eventually disappear.

Before any of that would have the chance to happen, however—, we still had another stepping stone to traverse and the perfect opportunity finally presented itself in the form of another night spent inside my apartment. I’d put on one of my favorite movies and the charming storyline took us to places inside our imaginations that were simply inevitable. We sat on the floor right in front of the TV, watching, waiting for one of us to make some type of move. Finally;

“How about a back massage?—, I give really good ones,” I said, recalling an old technique that’d already brought us this far.

“Of course,” she responded. I readied myself and got behind her, letting my hands rest on top of her shoulders. *Steady*. Then I started. My fingers trickled down her back, up her

arms, and down once more. Things—, escalated. Slowly, but surely. There was a tension too thick to ignore. She wanted something to happen. I wanted something to happen. I gently brushed my lips against her nape. Her head bent down, exposing her neck that much more. We couldn't take it—, there was nowhere else to go. We'd hit a wall. Anything more would've been, improper, given the fact that her previous relationship was still going through the process of officially ending.

“Excuse me,” she said, getting up from the floor and heading straight for the bathroom. She was covering half of her face and I figured that wasn't a good sign. I hadn't wanted to upset her by any means, maybe the situation was just getting out of hand. She emerged a few minutes later with slightly smeared mascara and a smile. She came over to me, took me by the hand, and led me over to the couch. We sat. And sat and sat and stared and wondered where things could possibly be headed. She pulled me closer to her body as we both slowly fell backwards onto the armrest. I wanted to inch even closer, to meld

my hands with hers but couldn't dare do something we'd regret later on.

"We're friends..., right?," I let myself say.

"Right..., friends," she whispered back. Then, the words came that'd change the course of everything afterwards; "How about a friendly kiss?," she suggested. All I could do is nod as my heart exploded within my chest, readying myself, letting our lips get pulled into something they'd never be able to rip away from. We drew closer to one another. Then—, everything made sense. The patience, the practice—, finally; pure romance. She was there all along, sitting one seat up or to the side of me in class, drinking coffee with me at our favorite places, always there—, before I'd ever really met her. How much can a single kiss truly change in a person's life? Or their journey's trajectory? Or even their understanding of love and fate in the first place? I didn't know. What's more—, I didn't care. All I wanted was this moment to last forever—, to freeze our timelines together and never let them thaw again.

What type of tumultuous affair awaits those who come across both Best Friend and Lover within the same person? I was about to find out first-hand—, whether or not I'd ever asked myself the question before. At the outset, it's like doing a line of the purest drug one can find. It goes in through the system and quickly travels up towards the brain—, scrambling the chemicals, offsetting the levels, creating a complete addict off of a single use. The stars whirl up in the heavens above. The planet spins on its axis like it wants to tip over and spill into the nothingness that surrounds it. Everything is beautiful and sunshine is everywhere. Then; the withdrawals. Shivers and shakes, the heart races and aches and all the while—, we endure these things alone. Nobody around us truly understands our plight. They see us meandering through life with no more smile or expression of happiness on our face and ask "why?" They don't comprehend it—, how could they? Unless they've made the exact same mistake of taking that draw off the table then they'd have no way of coming to grips with the hate that we

feel when we're emptied for a soulmate's own sake. And that was that. I inhaled and the powdery substance of her essence went up and through me like fine sugar—, sweet and addictive.

Things naturally progressed afterwards. When we weren't sitting right beside each other in the car, we'd be thinking about sitting right beside each other in the car. We started doing everything together—, going everywhere, ignoring everyone. Before we could ever really catch onto it, we'd become each other's worlds. Memories were being made on a nightly basis. We always tried to capture the feelings as best we could with pictures, notes, and letters.

Finally, a day arrived that began much like most others. We sat inside the car out in the parking lot, listening to music and doing our daily tradition. She lit a cigarette, exhaling the clove's smoke slowly from her mouth into mine as it drifted up and through the air. The energy was already pulling us toward one another in ways we hadn't ever felt before. It'd be a technique I'd keep with me for years on

afterwards. Once we'd finished half the pack, we slowly made our way inside. We found ourselves alone again inside my apartment. Things only took a heavier turn after the chilled bottle I'd saved in the freezer came undone. We'd both become inebriated just enough to still enjoy reality while creating our own in the process. We sat crossed-legged on the floor, staring into one another's bloodshot eyes and let our minds wander off as far as they could go. I gently took her hand in mine and began filling the spaces in-between her fingers with my own and with that—, the rest played out like a fairytale. We pinned each other up against my bedroom door, taking turns at who was undoing whose belt.

“I've waited so long for this moment,” she got out in-between kisses. I figured as much—, as I felt the exact same way. We finally burst through and into my room while staying wrapped up in the other's arms. We'd created a magnificent mixture of perfume, cologne, and sweat. Things mixed, interwound, and coiled together to form a new shape. It was almost perfect—, almost. It needed one final touch. I

reached for our bottle and let it slowly drip out on her stomach. It flowed down towards the carpet below and sealed us together in a fusion of deep euphoric revelry. Like glue—, alcohol bound us as one unique being. An entity made up of dulled senses and liquid confidence. We'd found our permanent calling on that fateful day.

# A DEEP, FOREIGN FULFILLMENT (PART II)



The Girl with the Dark Eyes and I started wearing each other's names around our necks —, tightening the personalized nooses as far as possible. We became branded. It felt good, too. We engaged each other every chance we could, captivating onlookers. A singular mass split in two. Dual shadows that seemed to resemble one another in ways that didn't immediately make sense. It was all so predictably beautiful in its simplicity—, such naiveté.

She soon decided it was time for a slight makeover—, a simple nose stud is what she had in mind.

“Let's do it,” I advised her. We walked into the piercing shop as a lady sitting behind the counter gave us a long look-over. She didn't say a thing and it wasn't until we were



readying ourselves to leave before she finally spoke.

“You two have such bedroom eyes,” the woman said to us. “And I think it’s very sweet that you wear each other’s names like that,” she added, pointing to our homemade necklaces. Others’ opinions of us only strengthened our bond and because of it—, our reasoning that it must be fate after all.

Her birthday would be coming up soon and coincidentally fall on a perfect summer Saturday. I crudely wrapped a new black mini-skirt in skateboard ads that I’d cut out of a magazine and couldn’t wait for her to open up the present.

“I should wear this tonight!,” she excitedly said.

“You will,” I replied, “because we’re doing something different.” The city had only one decent nightclub but everybody seemed to always end up there. We arrived on the street outside the front doors and could already hear the blaring music from inside blocking out all the other sounds around us. We gladly showed our I.D.s to the bouncer and in we went—,

making our way down to the dance floor where the bright strobe lights washed us over in deep neon greens and blues and reds. Beautiful flashes flickered from all directions and drenched us in their dreamy and druggy energies. Our bodies moved like we'd made ourselves at home. The pumping basslines of underground trance almost made our sweat jump right off of our faces and onto the floor below. We kept moving. Nothing in the world seemed to matter—, the summer was in full swing, we were in full feather, and things were finally making more sense than ever before. How could anything top the feelings we'd started to feel on a daily basis? There wasn't much more to go until we'd reach the highest point of our merged journeys before finding out how powerful the fall back downward can truly be. It didn't make much difference though—, for that moment on that night in that sweaty club, we felt like our time together was infinite—, and for a while, it was.

The days continued to pass by before finally, a new idea entered into our formula.

“Let’s have a dinner date,” one of us suggested.

“Definitely,” said the other. The next night I was on my way to pick her up and while having the usual butterflies in my stomach, I also felt some type of subtle pressure hanging in the air. I knew tonight would be different. The music matched the mood of my racing heart-rate before reaching her apartment. I knocked on the front door and upon it slowly opening, saw her gorgeously wrapped in red. She wore a skin-tight scarlet piece that came up just above the knees, accentuated by my black tailored suit. We looked good together. Back at my place, we put on the proper soundtrack to the glamorous evening as I took her hand in mine and began swaying from side to side. All of the moments gone by at prom came back and gave us another chance at stealing the spotlight. We danced in slow-motion right there in the middle of the living-room. The light-classical music kept playing on as I gently spun her in soft circles, taking her again in my arms and tightening my grip around her waist. We finally made our way

into the candlelit bedroom where dozens of red rose petals interspersed with pictures of us covered the mattress. Tender kisses with Merlot-stained lips and smeared make-up made up the rest of the night. The next morning, she collected the cork from the wine bottle and a few rose petals and put them all in a plastic bag as a remembrance of the beautiful evening we'd spent together. *I'll never forget this*, I silently thought.

As classy as the date was, what we craved was being alone with each other and our favorite drinks at the ready. I'd made it a personal tradition to toast every shot.

"Ladies, gentlemen, class of '04—, this is for you." We sipped and swallowed down the firewater with pride. The empty bottles were lined up along the wall like hallowed soldiers coming back from war. Like we'd soon be ourselves. They resembled us even before we'd been able to realize it. It was her and me and the bottle made three. Further down into the depths of our watery world we went. Sinking. Drinking. Under the influence—, and very much comforted by it. We rode the waves of

what it meant to be out-of-body, through hazy motions—, we lifted up and off the ground toward the stratosphere above. Hand-in-hand, we flew through the air—, from one end of the world to the other. Overlooking the planet below, we'd watch everything that's ever happened or will happen at once. A block-universe where the same moment would permeate throughout the entire timeline of everyone that's ever existed. It'd be beautiful. Sooner or later however—, we'd both be forced back down as we'd once again, wake up to the real world.

While back downtown one night, we decided that before we could leave the car to go out and enjoy the festivities we'd planned, we first needed to pre-party. We stayed in our seats, downing shot after shot. Music blasted through the speakers, cigarette smoke escaped through our mouths, everything was as it should be. Suddenly—, bright flashing lights. Red and blue. A police cruiser pulled up and out stepped an officer with broad shoulders who came to my side of the car.

“Good evening—,” he began, “any reason you guys have been parked here for so long?” We didn’t know what to say. “Been drinking tonight?” Again, we didn’t know what to say. “Let’s step out of the car guys,” he finally instructed. Two minutes later, a second cop car was on the scene as both of us were put in handcuffs, getting arrested together. How very appropriate of our relationship. We were transported to the police department in different vehicles and were processed separately. I’d been placed inside my holding cell first and could hear her voice from the next room over. It was tinged with an annoyance that I completely understood given the situation. I was almost proud of her in a way. I figured she’d be a mess, but she was just the opposite; cool, calm, and collected. Time passed slowly. Hour after hour ticked by without any indication of how she was holding up. *Maybe she’s fallen asleep*, I thought. After a while, I heard footsteps approaching and had to ask what’d been on my mind.

“Excuse me sir, could I write a letter and have you give it to her?” I just wanted to make

sure she was okay, to comfort her through some words of encouragement.

“I’m sorry, no,” he replied. So there I sat on the cold metal bench until morning finally came around. I’d almost fallen asleep myself when I heard the clinking of loud keys opening up my cell door.

“Let’s see if we can’t get you two outta here,” the officer said smiling, bringing up the breathalyzer to my face. All zeros. We walked out into the near-blinding sunshine, hand-in-hand, with smiles on our faces and M.I.Ps on our records.

“So what’re we doing for tonight?,” I asked. She replied with a grin and that would be that.

Despite our court-ordered directives to attend an alcohol abuse class, we kept up our positive attitudes and tried to enjoy the rest of the season in style. Soon—, I’d be going on a week-long trip and of course, I needed to know she’d be by my side to truly enjoy it.

“Come to Naples with me,” I said.

“Absolutely,” she replied.

The plane’s wheels touched down on a Florida airstrip and with that, we’d begun our

first trip together. Stepping out into the crisp southern atmosphere, the sun shone down on our shoulders and we immediately felt the vibes of a very different lifestyle than the one we were coming from; wide beaches, endless tanning, and swimming in the Gulf were just a few of the things we had in mind from the moment we arrived.

We drove through the city streets with the top down and loud music escaping from the car. Something felt so right—, that this was the type of environment we should spend all of our summers in from here on out. The sun's rays beamed down on our faces and finally—, we were free to be the couple we'd always known we'd be from back home; together, in a tangle of brown hair and hazel eyes.

The houses lining the different avenues deep within the neighborhoods were enormous and told of the people who lived inside them. Their lives were probably so interesting and fabulous—, having such places to call home, with grand staircases in the lobby, massive portraits on the walls, and so



many memories they must've made from all the years of living there.

The sunsets were a painted canvas of oranges, pinks, and sky blues. We sat on the sand and watched the fading ball of fire drop down into the water below. Beyond the horizon; that's where all of our dreams interwove into a masterpiece of fate and emotional fortune.

"We should never leave here—, ever," we'd take turns saying to each other.

It was the seventeenth of August—, near midnight. We were swimming in the pool lined with lit candles and every so often, we'd take a break and sit on the steps leading down into the water. We'd kiss and look up at the starry night sky.

"So what are we—, officially?" she asked looking me straight in the eyes. I didn't know. All I knew for sure is that I wanted to be official—, so that's exactly what we became. From that point onward—, we didn't hide the fact that we were holding hands anymore. We let the world in on our very obvious love affair.

There was a different type of spark in the air the next morning. The wind ruffled our hair as we sat outside a coffeeshop not far from the beach. Her eyes looked different here. Like they'd been telling a story that I was only now catching onto. They sparkled, shimmered—, they personified every summer I'd ever lived through. There was a promise present in them. I needed to get down to its core. Was it that they were just waiting for the right amount of time to pass? Were they seeing something I wasn't? Were they full of a brighter future together? Maybe they saw us living in a spacious loft in the sky, somewhere in a big, sprawling city—, right downtown, right where all the streets intersect and the people move in waves of absolute energy. Maybe they saw us walking down the same aisle with separate parents by our sides—, going on to hospital visits from friends at the birth of a new generational blessing—, going on to parent-teacher conferences, bring-your-kids-to-work days, walking down a similar aisle decades later for another ceremony. Or maybe—, they saw nothing but the bright

sunshine blinding their perspective on all things possible. Either way, it was a sight that I'd remember for years afterwards.

A few days into our trip we found ourselves driving down US-41 South towards Miami, stopping only to get gas or see the street-side attractions. A couple of hours later, we were crossing the huge bridge into Miami Beach as the wind continued blowing her hair in all directions. After finding our hotel and dropping off our things, we quickly headed back outside towards the lively atmosphere. The time had come—, we knew the routine. We started wandering through the busy streets as bustling groups of people entered and exited the booming clubs lining the avenue. We were again, in search of a perfect candidate to provide the necessary party favors we'd need for the rest of the night. Finally, I saw a man that didn't look lost, but instead, seemed to be walking around aimlessly and alone. I cautiously went up to him and began with my request.

“Excuse me sir, would you be cool with buying us something to drink?” He smiled.

“Can you get me a couple cheeseburgers on the way?” I smiled back. We circled around towards the car and were off.

Again, we found ourselves crossing the bridge with our favorite songs blasting through the back speakers. Our stranger-turned-temporary friend bobbed his head up and down, keeping perfect time with the fast-paced punk music that seemed to be something new for him. We pulled into an alleyway as he hopped out of the backseat and into a corner store. Two minutes later he handed us a bottle of Bacardi O as we sped off towards the nearest fast-food drive-thru.

“Maybe I’ll see you two tomorrow on the beach,” he said after taking his bag of burgers and fries. And with that, he was off on his way down the dark sidewalks by himself, never to be seen by us again, but somehow, still strangely remembered.

Back on the main avenue, we parked the car and started walking down towards the water. Dawn would soon be on its way. We sat side-by-side on the pebbly sand as we watched the sunrise in quiet contemplation, all the while

passing the orange-flavored rum back and forth, and each letting out long breathy exhales of what can only be described as some sort of eternal exhilaration. The risks, the recklessness—, it all made such sense. We knew to enjoy it, just maybe, not as much as we ultimately should've.

Eventually, reality took hold of us once more and we were again, on a plane headed back home. It was like waking up from the deepest dream—, slowly, I'd regained my old state of mind, I'd come back to my old consciousness, and I was restored to my previous surroundings. We exited the airport and drove to our home city with all-over body tans and an experience we wouldn't soon forget.

Not long afterwards, we left again on another spur-of-the-moment trip. This time, to a very special place that I'd kept in my heart for many years while growing up; Chicago, The Windy City. Once we were actually on those busy streets and surrounded by all of the skyscrapers, we took to exploring downtown and the areas around it. We walked from store

to store, following the dozens of other tourists crowding Michigan Avenue and stopped to look at all the beautiful displays. Fine clothes and expensive accessories for them were everywhere. We let ourselves daydream about our upcoming futures—, if we'd ever be so lucky to wear the designer outfits ourselves and walk these same streets again with a sense of accomplishment, knowing that we'd finally made it. I knew we wouldn't have this chance again anytime soon—, to be amongst the lively lifestream of so much happening at once—, so I decided to playfully make the most of our visit the best way I knew how.

“Watch this,” I said to her, getting down on one knee. “Will you...,” she didn't let me finish. She quickly pulled me back up to eye-level and gave me a serious look.

“Don't do that,” she said.

“Why not?,” I asked back, not having meant to make her upset.

“Don't joke about those kind of things,” she answered in low tones. I then decided that the next time I'd ever do something like that, I'd have a ring waiting for her as well.

That night, we stayed inside the hotel room and looked out at the wonderful view of the staggering buildings all around. It took us into another world. Suddenly, the city seemed so romantic and bursting with possibility. We held hands, then kissed, then more. The next morning, there were still palm prints on the glass from the night before. We'd watched so many different types of people living out their lives in real time, while we were very much in the middle of living ours. The lights beyond all the windows opposite from our own turned on and off, illuminating the rooms with unique vibes. Lofts and apartments and suites of all kinds were scattered across the sky. There was a sense of excitement to everything happening below as well—, the people all walked in gracious movements to and from places, taxicabs and cars intermixed like streaks of paint on the same canvas, not too far off, the constant sound of sirens wailed themselves and everyone else within earshot awake.

“We should move here one day,” I mused aloud. Though she smiled, I'll never really know what exactly crossed her mind. That

afternoon, we were on the highway again, headed to our actual reality.

Back home. Back to our daily traditions in our old stomping grounds. It wasn't that they were getting tiresome or that we were growing weary from the same routine. It was more that we were saying goodbye to a perfect summer. We knew we'd never have one quite like it again—, and once winter came around, we knew things would take on a different shape. We didn't like it. It wasn't our season.

We both started school again and little by little, ice soon covered most of the streets and sidewalks around the parking lots of our local college. Since we'd always been so full of such good ideas in the past, we decided to go skating in the snow late one afternoon. Though the steps up ahead seemed to be slightly frosted over, I thought it smart to try and clear the set anyway. I rolled up to the edge and jumped—, followed immediately by my slamming into the frozen concrete below. I didn't realize I'd landed right on my wrist but instantly felt the throbbing pain shoot up my arm.



“I think I just broke my hand,” I said. We were in the car a minute later on our way to the hospital. She was searching her purse for something and finally pulled out her passport, removed the band keeping her hair in place, and put them together to form a makeshift brace for me until we’d get a real one put on.

“Here—,” she said, gently wrapping it around my wrist. “This’ll keep your hand straight.”

“Thanks—,” is all I could say, noticing her warmth and nurturing spirit which had always been some of her strongest qualities.

A few weeks after I’d gotten a neon pink cast placed around my arm and properly signed by all my loved ones, I found myself walking by the stationary section of a store one afternoon and couldn’t pass up buying a couple poster-boards for a project I’d been meaning to begin. Once home, I laid out dozens of pictures from our summer together and went to work. I cut and cropped and glued them all neatly around the canvas. In the middle was a shot of us kissing shaped into a heart. With black paint and a brush I wrote

around it the best quote I could find: ‘That which we love, we come to resemble.’ The words would go on to stamp themselves not only on the violet-colored cardboard but our frontal lobes as well—, coming to life in more ways than we were truly ready for.

I arrived at her apartment later on that night and upon pulling out the homemade artwork, she grabbed onto its sides and intently stared at it for a long time without saying a thing, studying it. Then;

“This is the nicest thing anyone’s ever given me.” She taped it to her bedroom wall within a minute. We decided we should take advantage of the sweet energy surrounding us and have a two-person slumber party right there on the living-room floor. We laid out the mattress but as the hours ticked by, we became restless. There was nothing to drink, nothing to smoke, we settled on kissing instead and seeing where that would take us. I looked at her while she laid on her back and began keeping time with the rhythm of our two bodies together. There was no music, there was only her deep breathing matching mine. Nothing to distract

us from the other, nothing stealing away our attention, everything was still—, except us. Something suddenly felt different. We were finally present—, finally alive—, finally sober. I noticed her eyes beginning to film over with a watery veil of emotion. Without even realizing it—, my own had started overflowing themselves and with a single teardrop, our two worlds merged through shared-DNA. We stayed silent for the rest of the night, never once breaking eye-contact. We fell asleep looking at each other and woke up hours later the exact same way.

Meanwhile, the stars in the sky seemed farther off than ever before. We shut the door and refused to leave the safety of her bedsheets. It was the warmth of the other's presence—, the refuge of the other's arms—, the calm before the storm. We'd started diving deeper and deeper into ourselves, making less and less contact with the outside world. We'd see the snow slowly falling past the bedroom window, we'd watch the sunrise pierce through the pulled blinds, but still—, we wouldn't invite anything new into our mutual reality

that didn't relate to our immediate circumstances. Those four walls surrounding us became our closest friends. They saw everything and never said a word. We'd plastered band posters and pictures of each other all over their surfaces in hopes that we'd still feel in touch with a fleeting counter-culture. It was no use—, those things only held our attention for a short while before we'd dive right back into our shared mania. A million "I love you"s wasn't enough. A thousand kisses and embraces and everything else that comes with a stronger love than one can handle still didn't compare to the feelings we chased day and night. Euphoria—, plain and simple. There was no finish line to our race—, no end in sight. Something new eventually needed to take the place of yesterday's rush. So it went, that we'd found a different type of intimacy. Beyond the locked door, beyond the bedsheets, and into each other's eyes, we saw a new sort of sensuality. Her room became something close to heavenly, something close to hellish. It was in that room where our game of darkness began.

# A DEEP, FOREIGN FULFILLMENT (PART III)



The weather outside had changed like clockwork—, summer to fall to winter and then? It seemed like it got stuck somehow. The cold had completely frozen the bedroom window shut, it had stalled my car's engine to where it wouldn't turn over anymore—, it quickly become one of the eeriest seasons of my life. The only place where I'd found any warmth whatsoever was in my girlfriend's arms. There was only one problem; we didn't know how to get any closer. Physically, we'd gone as far as we could go. Emotionally, we were completely tied up in the other. Only our mental state had any free space left to give away.

I'd moved to a different city—, we were now farther away from one another. Less time to be together, less time to share and

experience new things, less time, less time. We'd become desperate for reasons to stay inside. I didn't want to leave anymore. Home wasn't fifty-some miles away, it was wherever she was. We'd become desperate for reasons to keep grasp of the other. She didn't want to leave anymore. No friends, no work, nothing that seemed like it was from the outside world. We'd become really, really desperate. Desperation turned to anger, anger turned to hatred, hatred personified itself in the form of something too sharp for words. Something too vengeful, too heavy for mere emotions to make sense of. We held onto the handles of ominous instruments and used them to sculpt a darker reality than the one we'd been running from.

“Baby!—,” she'd exclaim upon waking up. *What happened here last night?* Unsettling thoughts ran through our minds. All we could do is guess at the unfortunate scenarios which may have played out. Furniture moved around. Couch cushions turned upside down. Thermostat all the way up. We'd blacked out and remembered nothing. Only the stains

remained—, measuring our madness like height-marks on a wall. We traded in long-term happiness for some temporary relief at the hands of tiny, pointed teeth. Regretful us. How short-sighted can young love really be? We were on a collision course in trying to find out. Two lost ships with no lighthouse in sight. Dense fog. Broken compasses. We never stood a chance at making it out intact. Every inch ripped apart—, another scar on our hearts. Pound for pound, we weighed and made sure to repay in kind. We became unrecognizable; cutlery rivals. That which we loved, we came to resemble.

“What’s happening with you two?,” friends would eventually ask. They’d noticed we’d become more withdrawn, less excited about the things which had made us so happy before. There was always a catastrophe to complain about. It was our new routine and we’d found some type of comfort in it. A quiet humming sound constantly played in the backs of our heads, like we knew something was wrong, but something we couldn’t shut off either. It pulled us out of everyday moments and

affected our presence in regular situations. This went on—, day after day, week after week, month after month. Things played out tragically; broken promises, broken spirits, everything around us was breaking apart. Slowly, the seasons began changing again, but not our negative energies—, we'd gotten too used to them. Now, they became ingrained in our thinking, in our voices, and in our love itself.

Summer came around once more so we headed back to a land of lovely memories we'd made just a year prior. Back to Florida, back to the Gulf Coast, and back to a type of temporary lifestyle that'd suited us so well beforehand—, but strangely, felt disconnected from this time around.

“What's different?” I asked myself aloud.

“Everything—,” I heard her voice whisper back throughout the once-sunny horizons of my mind. There were no more exciting drives throughout the city, no more people-watching, and no more dreaming about future lives lived out together. I wanted what we'd had before so badly—, I wanted our old memories and



moments which had made the previous summer the best one of my life. Now, it all seemed to be a distant dream to which I'd never be able to return. The car rides were quieter, the waves crashing onto the coast were calmer, everything was empty of any excitement or joy. At night we'd lay awake in bed, look up at the ceiling, and wonder if we'd made a good decision to come back here.

The morning coffee started tasting different —, even in a beautiful city like the one we were visiting, the depths of our regret from home followed us. We'd sit and sip and stare at the floor, very rarely bringing our eyes back up. We felt so many emotions at once and directed them straight toward one another. Somewhere deep within our dark roasts—, we could barely make out the shapeless waves of an uncertain future together and it made each passing day feel more hopeless and gloomier than the one before.

We were nearing the end of our trip and an hour before we'd be heading back to the airport, she tried one final time at making a lasting memory.

“Do you want to collect some sand from the beach with me?,” she sweetly asked from the armchair. I just slowly shook my head and looked back down at the floor in disappointment. So much for trying to rekindle a nearly-forgotten feeling. I’d go on to regret the decision for a long time afterwards.

Back home for another autumn. This one brought about a newly discovered rush with it. I’d made all the wrong types of friends in my new neighborhood and they had the party essentials one in my situation of desperation needed to take in order to fully enjoy life again. I bought a bag’s worth and waited until I saw my girlfriend again to dive in. I chopped up the piece and laid out a long line across a plastic case, gently handing it to her along with a rolled-up twenty-dollar bill. She readied herself, bent down towards her lap, and drew in every last flake with complete poise and perfection. I would’ve married her right there on the spot. She was everything a person looks for in their toxic-twin; courage, composure, and the sexiest bloodshot eyes. We were re-sparking a fire that’d almost completely gone

out. We were discovering something new together again—, like we had with drinking, smoking, and the rest of our rituals. This time though, the stakes were raised. We divvied up white lines on each other's stomachs and took turns inhaling the freshly fallen snow off our bodies. The room whirled around us—, we were alone in a sea of subjective spinning brought on by outside substances. Nothing to keep us tied down to this world—, we flew high above it all. High—, and above it all. Beyond clouds, beyond time and space. We'd found another realm where we watched ourselves slow-dance to a far-off symphony while going through all the phases of life. Together and separated only by our imaginations. Eventually, they too would combine into a singular vision; objective rapture. *Never wake up.* We almost never did. Earth came calling and we had to answer back, opening our eyes once more. The room stood still. Only our elevated heartbeats kept rhythm with what we'd just witnessed. It was useless to try and ask her if she'd seen the same things I had. I knew, somewhere deep

inside herself—, she'd dreamed of them before ever meeting me in the first place. They were just amplified now; feelings, fantasies, an on-going reverie that wouldn't let up. How could we go back to normal after something like that? We couldn't. So we didn't.

Though the fun lasted a short while—, it wasn't enough to truly keep us going for long. We swam with the current as far as possible before our arms started to give out. Driving back home to her apartment one day, we had the radio unusually turned off. There'd been something on my mind for a while and I couldn't keep the question to myself for a minute longer.

“Do you feel like we're drifting apart?” I sincerely asked. She instantly answered back.

“I really do.” That was all she had to say. Even with new toxins and exciting experiences, we couldn't escape the let down of our second summer. We tried our hardest to remain hopeful about the future, but things seemed to pull us in separate directions now more than ever.

We hadn't seen each other for quite a while. She started school again, I picked up another job, things naturally cooled down after our last car ride together. I was finishing up my shift at work one night when my mom walked in to surprise me.

"Hurry up and clock out, I've got something to show you," she excitedly said. We walked into a glitzy restaurant right across the street and headed downstairs. I reached the bottom floor and stood for a second, unable to react as there sat my girlfriend in a glittering red dress. She slowly turned to face us and gave me her signature look.

"Hey—." That was all she had to say. I'd fallen for her again in a matter of moments.

"I've missed you," I admitted to her later on at home.

"Me too," she replied. We moved from the bed to the floor and back again. It was as I'd remembered—, an unequalled emotion. Something absolute and complete. We were making up with each other, making up for lost time, and making more memories than either of us had in the previous few months. We left

the white linen sheets and still had the energy to smoke a couple of cloves on the roof outside my bedroom window while quietly wondering where everything was leading to this time around.

Winter rolled around once more. It seemed colder than the last one—, which was near-impossible. I'd been over her place for a few hours when we started downing shots—, one after another in quick succession. The room spun, the kissing started—, everything was going according to our usual plan. Finally, she fell asleep and I didn't wait long to do the same myself. The next morning, I could already feel the consequences of what'd happened even before I had the chance to open my eyes. We woke up in a haze—, not knowing the exact sequence of events or what order they'd fallen into, but we felt the weight of regret hanging heavily in the atmosphere. Something vile about the way reality came crashing back down on the both of us kept her and I quiet for a long while. She eventually broke the intense silence.

“Look at yourself,” she got out, raising her gaze up from the floor. She stared at me with the saddest eyes I’d ever seen as I noticed the smears I still wore.

“They’re just arms,” I naively said. She quickly covered her face with both hands.

“Those used to be *my* arms!,” she cried out from the bed. I had nothing to say—, no words could properly describe the amount of desperation I felt. I turned to walk away, leaving the room with an air of awful energy attached to it. I slowly made my way down the stairs and out through the front door, got into my car and forever drove away. So it went that it’d be one of the last times we’d ever see each other.

I needed to vent—, to lash out at something, anything. I had so much pent up within me that I didn’t know who to turn to. Everything was my fault—, I’d felt the emotion radiating from her spirit without her having to say a word. Without having ever fallen in love with me, maybe she’d be so much farther along—, with dreams, with relationships, with life itself. It seemed that I’d kept her in place

for much of the last few months. The same arguments constantly led back to the same conclusions; maybe it just wasn't meant to be after all.

We didn't speak for a long time afterwards. We just watched the clocks change seconds and minutes and hours but nothing else around us ever improved. We were without the other and while it gave us some breathing room, it also forced us to remember how everything felt before falling into our first kiss together. It all seemed like it'd happened so long ago—, in a different lifetime altogether. Finally, she called up one night to see how I was holding up and of course, it didn't take long for the attacks to begin.

“Are you using needles yet?,” she said in a soft tone. I cringed at the thought of her actually asking me such a question.

“No,” I answered back, a little annoyed. How was it possible that we'd drifted so far apart? Wasn't this the same girl who'd always kept me in line, calculating my grades everyday for an entire semester of English class to help me pass? Now—, she was asking



if I'd been injecting myself with drugs. Of course the flow of firewater never let up and the pills seemed to be in full supply ever since I'd moved, but her imagination was definitely getting out of hand.

"I don't think we should speak to each other for a while," was her suggestion. I appealed with pure emotion.

"So we can't even be friends?"

"I don't want to have a friend like you," she said, tearing my heart in two. That was that. We hung up and the world seemed a little bit colder than it was before our conversation had started. I pulled myself up off the floor where I'd always sit to talk on the phone and went upstairs to my room—, confused and more alone than ever.

I decided that if people were beginning to see me as a person on a permanent downward-spiral, then that's exactly what I'd become. Party after backseat after movie after bedroom—, I started making my way through all of them with a sense of invincibility. I'd figured that I'd already gone through enough to where only I could get in my own way—,

that nothing could slow me down or could take away from the momentum I'd built up over the last couple of years. Everyone around saw the walking catastrophe I'd turned into while I was becoming increasingly unaware of the dangers starting to surround me.

The night finally arrived when I took one too many pills and was rushed off to have my stomach pumped clean. I woke up with leather straps wrapped around my wrists. My arms were tied to the metal handlebars of a hospital bed on both sides. In the corner sat a woman of about forty with a nice, warm smile on her face.

"Hello," she said. "Do you know where you are?"

"Yes—," I answered back. I knew what'd happened. To escape the heavy sadness of the entire situation, I began replaying old memories of happier times. Just when it seemed like I'd made the worst mistake of my life, I noticed there was a phone sitting beside me on the nightstand to my left. I thought about it for a while before finally being allowed to pick it up and dial her number. It

rang—, and rang and rang. Just before I was readying to hang up, she answered.

“Hello?,” her familiar voice said with a tinge of worry to it.

“Hey—,” I began, trying to follow it up with something useful to say, but I came up empty. She didn’t wait long to get down to it.

“Why are you calling me from St. Joe’s?,” she promptly asked.

“I—, umm..., almost O.D.ed,” and just before I had the chance to say another word, I heard the coldest click of a telephone hanging up ever. That would be it. Nothing else followed but more tears and praying sessions for me with sidewalk preachers and sobriety milestones that I’d mess up later on anyway. There was nothing else to do or say. We split ways for good after that.

What’s it feel like when pure romance dissipates? It’s being left completely alone in a foreign country with no translator. Nothing around makes any sense and nobody can help out. Every message, meaning, and concept had been made clear through their presence. Now? Static. How can we eat—, or drink—, or even

sleep? The soul's been ripped apart and our own reflection is no longer familiar. Lover was gone—, but so was Best Friend. Nobody was left to confide in. Nobody was left to even speak to about anything that mattered at all. So onward I went—, into the pitch black darkness of an everlasting night with nothing to illuminate my path or guide me back to the dawn. I wasn't just pursued by the shadows any longer—, I became one myself.

Things started to make less and less sense. I didn't feel like I fit into the mainstream lifestyles any longer and couldn't pinpoint what I'd been made for in the first place. People all around me had goals, went in pursuit of them, and reached new levels of their destinies. Me? I just lulled around in self-pity. All that kept coming back were memories of better days. *Please let me turn back time*, I'd beg The Universe. No luck. What used to be someone so secure and confident was reduced to a mere hallowed-out shell of their former selves. I had to exit the existential framework. Life seemed so forced and anyone who didn't follow its strict guidelines was faulted to the

maximum degree. Selfish arrogance took over. I didn't think about anyone else—, least of which, the people that truly loved me—, least of which, my mother. She could tell I'd become withdrawn and uninterested in everything that I'd liked so much before. Who was I to take such a special gift as life in my own two hands and try to rip it into shreds just for the sake of self-interest and sorrow? No one. I was no one—, I just didn't know it yet.

Finally, the day came when everything around me silenced itself into a dull quiet. Like I'd finally reached the end of a long-winding tunnel. *What's left?*, I thought. Nothing. I found myself in the backseat of a car with the outside world blurring by. Faster and faster it went—, down the busy street and straight towards the nearest E.R. Once there—, I woke up—, mentally and emotionally. The doctors' hearts broke for my mother's own. I couldn't open my eyes from the sheer heaviness of it all and didn't know how to process the situation so just fell into a very deep, very detached sort of sleep.

# BRIDGES (PART I)



The years slowly rolled by—, one after another. I couldn't bare to think of all that I'd done so I tried putting all the negativities out of my mind. Good friends would come over during those in-between chapters of my life.

“Don't go to the dark side,” they'd say to me whenever seeing me intently staring off into the distance, not focused on anything in-particular. I'd try to snap back into the moment, to not let what was keeping me from enjoying life take hold and drag me down once more. My mom would come home from work and see me still laying in bed on my days off.

“Let's go see a movie tonight,” she'd suggest. That, or we'd stay home and watch our favorite TV shows one after another. I quickly realized we were in this mess together, shoulder-to-shoulder. Of all the people that'd come in and out of my life—, she alone stayed

with me through every single mistake, misstep, and mischievous moment of my last twenty-some years. Soon after telling her that I should move to a different setting in search of a more balanced lifestyle, she agreed and started helping me in my hunt for a new place to live.

I'd been looking for apartments one city over and found some nice places to try and make a new life in. Finally picking the right spot, I began wondering what type of people I'd meet, who I'd become friends with, and what kind of new experiences I'd have. Would they hold my history against me or take me as I am? Would they realize that I wasn't truly the person who I looked like on paper? I wanted to start fresh—, to have a clean slate to work with, a new canvas to try and paint a different, more-appealing picture onto. Before actually moving though, I needed to find another job closer to my new home. I applied to every store in the strip-mall across the street from my apartment until getting hired.

I packed up all of my belongings into boxes and my mom and I made nearly a dozen trips back and forth from my old city to the next. I

was finally feeling an exhilaration about life again—, like I'd made my way from one person to an entirely new human being in the span of three short years. I also knew I had an enormous responsibility in needing to make my mother proud of me. I had done just the opposite for so much time that things needed to drastically change.

The new job was exciting. The people were nice. The atmosphere was pleasant. I'd made friends with all the managers and they genuinely liked me. Of course, they only knew the new me but that was enough for them to invite me out to dinners and pool halls and clubs. Little by little, I was re-finding myself again. I'd begun taking the bandages off of all my old faults and realized they'd been healing well over time. I spoke in positive ways and about a bright future again. I knew that slowly, I'd return to the person I'd been before ever tragically falling in love.

On a random day like most others, I was straightening up displays on the side of the store when the double doors swung open up front. I saw her coming both quickly and in



slow-motion. Sunshine was beaming out right behind her as she walked down the center aisle that made making out her facial features nearly impossible. Even then, she was covered by a thick veil of deep shade.

“Hello—,” I got out, not knowing who she was.

“Hey,” she swiftly said, and nothing else. Walking away and towards the backroom, I realized she too was an employee and made sure to keep my composure from there on out.

She looked like the girl I’d dreamed of ever since growing up; tattoos, piercings, and a fierce spirit to top it off. I could tell she was the type to never take anyone’s bad attitude or negative energy and always kept her heart sheltered. Maybe from former experiences or less-than-perfect memories. Either way, I understood and clicked with it. After everything I’d gone through in the last half-decade, I needed someone new to shake things up with. Someone who wasn’t easily put off by a tainted story. Someone who knew something about sprawling shadows and how they could affect a person’s life.

I soon invited her over my place one sunny afternoon. Walking up the steps to my second-floor apartment, I could already feel the sensual tension between us. I wanted to take her hand in mine and play with her fingertips —, to slowly draw imaginary figures on her flower-stamped skin by outlining the indelible inked-designs. I was ready to talk to her about anything—, except of course, what eventually begun our conversation;

“So do you do drugs?,” she asked outright. I half-smiled at the question—, not really expecting it but respecting her for it all the same.

“Why do you ask that?,” I cautiously followed-up with.

“I don’t know—, I guess I’m just curious.”

“I’ve done some before but not anymore,” I admitted, “I’m not against anyone wanting to try them though, it’s their own life and their own decision, you know?”

“So if there was a line of coke here right now, would you let me do it?” I knew the answer even before I spoke.

“No—,” I calmly said, “I wouldn’t want to see you like that.” A slew of unhappy memories made their way back into my mind. I hoped she knew that I cared for her too much, that it wasn’t me trying to decide things for her, and that it came from a place of protectiveness. She quietly smiled back.

We started sharing a notebook where we’d write down our deeper thoughts. Things we couldn’t talk about while at work. Our dreams, our ideals, our definitions of love. We’d bring it with us every shift we had and place it in our designated locker for the other to find. Back and forth this went until the day came that I’d finally get the answer to my question of the last few weeks. I couldn’t wait to get back into the store and find the green journal. Once in the break-room, I flipped to the right page and started reading. It was pure flirtation. Ideas of a romance that hadn’t even begun yet. I knew what I had to do. Luckily, we were both working that day. I walked out onto the sales floor and went directly over to her. Gently taking her hand in my own, I placed it palm-up and ran my index finger

over it to draw out an I—, a heart—, and a U. She couldn't bare hiding the grin growing on her face. She looked back at me with wide open eyes.

“Whew—,” she said, letting out a long exhale. “Back to the real world.” That was it—, I knew things would be different from that day forward.

We finally decided to go skateboarding a short while later. Up and down the hill we went, letting the wheels run themselves over hot asphalt while we rode with the wind in our hair. The pop-punk music blared out from inside my Mercury Cougar and about an hour or so passed by when the sun began to set.

“Cigarette?,” she asked. I nodded in agreement and lit up two Marlboro Smooths while I sat on the car's trunk. It was getting windier by the minute. She nestled up closer to me. We started playing with each other's fingers, running them over each other's hands and finally, she began wandering too far upward for comfort. I shook my head and tried to maneuver away from her, but she got even closer. “It's okay—,” she softly said. New hands

slowly climbing up scarred arms; breathing getting heavy, heart racing from anxiety, and then—, acceptance. A soft kiss. A new Lover—, The Girl with the Epic Tattoos—, is finally here.

Back at my place, we kept getting closer as our lips stayed locked. We kissed on the living-room floor as minute after minute passed by. Eventually, her clothes began coming off one piece at a time. Tattoo-covered arms and back, barbell piercings, and jet-black hair that nearly flowed down to her waist—, it was all so picturesque. We moved up to the couch and it was there that all the visions of intense love came crashing back in a tidal-wave of feeling. Soon afterwards, I began explaining how I didn't want to come on too strong, that we should just take things slowly.

“No,” she willfully said. “I *want* you to smother me.” That was all she had to say. A fire ignited inside myself and I thought back to what it truly meant to do that to someone else and how it felt to have it done back in return. I wondered if she really knew what she was asking for. Either way, I took her words to

heart and started acting accordingly—, more sleepovers, more notes, more everything. We couldn't get enough of each other and for that, I credited my past missteps as merely ill-timed attempts at romantic gestures. This was a new day—, a new life. I could barely remember what had come before.

Things escalated to scorching new levels of ecstasy for both of us. We kept things pretty new and interesting on a regular basis; leather stiletto boots, backseat sessions in the parked car outside, and making out in the maintenance closet at work. On what seemed to be another normal night for us, we were again in the parking lot out front and fogging up the windows with our heavy breathing. I needed air so I slightly opened up the back door though didn't plan on the inside light being so bright, illuminating everything within.

“Sorry—,” I said, trying to shut the door.

“Leave it,” she suggested.

“What if someone walks by?” She said nothing, smiled, and just resumed onward with the routine.

It didn't matter how many mistakes either of us had made—, we'd found that we were very in tune with one another. She was a different sort of sexy—, our movements were a different type of love-making. I began wondering if everything that'd happened to the two of us didn't directly lead us into each other's lives. Maybe fate was still alive and well after all.

We decided to go out to a nearby bar with some co-workers one night. The atmosphere reminded me of older times but I could tell she wasn't that comfortable. We sat side-by-side as she took out a pen. She brought the drink menu closer to us and wrote O.O.M.E. in the corner. I stared at it for a while before feeling a smile taking shape. I looked at her and mouthed the words silently; Out...Of...My...Element. She smiled back and nodded.

"I'm pretty tired tonight," I began to say to the entire group, planning our escape home and back into each other's arms. "I think I should get going."

“Okay—,” she followed up. “Then that’s it for me too.” We were good with each other like that—, knowing what we’d both feel without having to explain too much. We related to one another through a type of shared-introversion.

That autumn, she started school again and was taking nursing classes three days a week. I made sure to wake up early in the mornings and iron out her white dress clothes so that I could place the patches on them in their appropriate spots.

“All set,” I’d say to myself, laying out the lab coat with pride on the ironing board before trying to make her breakfast in bed. At night, I’d flip through her college books and begin recording the assigned chapters so she could follow along as she listened through headphones later on. Sooner or later, we’d have to break apart and wait for another day to come around before seeing each other again. “You know what it’s like, leaving you?,” I’d ask. “It’s like there are two separate worlds —, yours and mine—, and when we’re both



asleep and dreaming, we meet on this bridge we've created that connects us together.”

“That’s perfect,” she replied. We held onto each other as tightly as possible—, physically and emotionally. We’d both been through our own battles with broken relationships and we knew very well to treasure the good times we were having together.

The honeymoon stage was well on its way with us. In-between reading aloud our favorite books or stories to each other, we’d play our favorite movies, songs, and shows. The only heaviness we’d feel would be when dusk would come around and she’d have to sometimes leave to go back home.

“See you on our bridge tonight,” she’d say with a smile. With that, she’d be through the front door and headed down the stairs outside my apartment only to return less than twenty-four hours later. Things had turned around and I was finally feeling the warmth of love on my shoulders once more.

## BRIDGES (PART II)



“Your girlfriend doesn’t look too happy today,” other employees would sometimes say to me.

“Oh, that’s just how she usually looks if she isn’t smiling,” I explained. It was true. If she wasn’t beaming with joy from ear to ear, she had a sense of annoyed anger splashed across her face. The smile she wore though—, it made all of that wash away and even sparked something angelic in her.

We’d plan on going out to romantic dinners every once in a while. We’d get to the place, take our seats, and immediately feel like we were more grown-up than ever before in our lives. We spoke at length about this and that while going over the menu and deciding which meal best suited our given mood for the night. Inevitably, the waiter would ask for our drink orders as well and with that—, we’d decide on

two very mature choices. Wine or fancy margaritas or something else that seemed to fit with our vibe. I had reached the point in my journey where whoever I was dating and I could enjoy a glass of Chardonnay and not use it as an excuse to completely forget about tomorrow. It was a nice reminder that I too, was finally growing up.

When we weren't out trying new restaurants or circulating through our favorite ones, we'd make a stop at the local church on Sunday mornings. It was surreal—, being in such an important place with such an important person by my side and all the while, knowing that there was no chance of ruining our good energy as soon as we'd step back out into the shining sunlight. Memories would sometimes come flooding back in; an old flame, a prior church, so many broken pieces of our hearts left out in those empty parking lots. It was just another example of how far I'd truly gotten.

That Christmas felt especially special. We'd both packed as many gifts as possible underneath my white light-wrapped tree I'd

kept in the corner of my living-room which gave the entire place a nice, warm glow. I got her a couple of new outfits that I knew matched her style; dark army-greens and Earthy-browns. She'd gift-wrapped a huge rectangular-shaped board and upon opening it I saw a beautiful black and white picture of us kissing blown up to poster-sized dimensions and neatly framed all around.

"This is amazing," I said to her, surprised at how artful the photograph turned out. It was from the very beginning of our relationship. Now we'd have a keepsake from that time-period forever hanging on my bedroom wall opposite my bed so that it'd be the first thing we'd see when waking up in the morning.

Even though I was beginning to feel a certain sort of joy again, the days were starting to blend into each other—, restaurants, movies, even going to church began seeming mundane. Like we'd already done it a thousand times before. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy the outings and especially the company, but I was getting the faint feeling that we were becoming stuck. That this was it—, there was

nowhere else to really go. No level to rise to, no separate stage to reach. We'd found out almost everything there was to find out about each other and now we just sat in silence, waiting for the night to roll around so we could head back off to sleep. Finally, she snapped me out of my constant daydreaming by asking a very grown-up, very mature question—, something I was far from having the answer to.

“So what’s your five-year goal look like?” she seriously said. I had no clue as to what that even entailed. I understood the point of having such a plan, but I was the last person who’d ever truly considered it before.

“I’m..., not sure,” I admitted. I knew I’d at least want to move somewhere different again. That I’d need a change of scenery sooner or later—, and that I even wanted her to be there for it, but other than that, I was just a shadow sifting itself from former faults. I was still healing in a way, still dreaming that everything would somehow circle around and I’d be able to become all I’d fallen so short of long ago. It

didn't take much time for her to follow-up the question with something even deeper.

"We should look into getting homeowners' insurance," she suggested. I had no idea how little I actually knew about being a responsible adult. No wonder I'd been such an ineligible bachelor before. Still, she saw something special in me and that went a long way in my trying to appease her expectations for future plans.

"Yeah—, we should," I finally said of the insurance. I just wanted to make her happy—, to make sure she didn't regret the decision to open up her heart to me.

"My friend wants to have us over for dinner," she unexpectedly said one day. "She's getting married next September and wants me in the wedding, so we have to go." She'd already been preparing her speech—, this was something very important to her and I needed to be on board one-hundred percent.

"Okay," I reluctantly agreed, knowing I'd have to be on my best behavior around the prospective spouses. It's not that I didn't want to go, I liked being involved in her world, with

her friends. They'd just lived a different type of life than I had. *If they only knew*, I'd think to myself, remembering all the wasted nights of being wasted and all the hazy days that'd follow. I was so much more acceptable now—, dressed better, spoke more sensibly, acted a touch above my previous years. Still—, the lit embers inside my soul burned onward, letting me know with each exhale of thick smoke that something still raged within. That young rebel never really did completely disappear—, he'd just fallen into a deep sleep that nobody else could wake him up from. *How do I get back there? Do I even want to go back there at all?* I didn't know the answers to the many things which kept my mind racing in the middle of the night. All I knew was that once the sun went back down, I'd be laying next to her again—, and that she liked who I was.

The day arrived that we'd be heading to her friend's new house. I maintained keeping my butterflies in check, knowing I was representing her and wanted to do as good of a job as possible in making her proud to show me off. We arrived and I readied myself to be

the person I'd always known I could be—, sharp, stylish, and somewhat-cultured at the very least. The door opened and beyond it was a cozy atmosphere that just oozed nearly-newlywed love. Above the fireplace stood two wooden capital letters, one for each of their first names. The kitchen was neatly organized and the dinner table was beautifully set up for four people. It was all so—, grown-up. I needed to act mature and make sure that this was all very routine and customary for me—, to have such friends that bought nice homes in nice neighborhoods and lived nice, normal lives.

“Let’s eat,” said the fiancées. We took our seats and spoke at length about new movies, books we’d read, and slightly touched on when my girlfriend and I would tie the knot ourselves. My stomach slightly dropped at the question. Not because it was a completely foreign concept, but because I wasn’t anywhere near ready for that sort of thing at this stage in my life. I’d already looked down that path in the past and almost took the first



few steps towards it, but now—, I was farther away from it than ever before.

We made our way back home and so, for the second time in my life, the arguments didn't take long to follow. We'd been growing weary of one another's mannerisms for a while and though I still found most of hers somewhat charming, she was probably getting fed up with mine. She could tell that I wasn't as excited about things as I'd once been—, that the ditch of real life that I'd fallen into was keeping me stuck inside of it like quicksand. She needed to intercede with something—, anything. So she did.

“Just know—, if you're not at that wedding, this relationship...” she trailed off. I knew what she'd meant. I'd felt it myself for a while. Still—, the thought of actually attending the event itself brought me down into a depression I couldn't tell her about. Again—, I had nobody to confide in. I wouldn't have been able to explain myself anyway—, that it was the atmosphere, the designer dresses, everything working together to remind one of what it truly meant to marry their soulmate,

once and for all. I didn't want to go to something like that. I'd been around weddings my entire life and always let myself daydream about my own someday. This was a new chapter of my life though—, and from here on out, I wasn't allowing myself to lose anymore time doing something like that.

All of my negativities, pessimism, and destructive depression came back like a wrecking ball. She noticed all of it and didn't know what advice to possibly give me that'd snap me out of my self-loathsome behavior and back into the real world she'd helped me face all this time. We'd begun arguing over the smallest and simplest things and always went on to regret it later.

On another random night, we'd been bickering for some time and had retreated to separate rooms of the apartment when the sound of her sobbing shook me back into the present moment. I walked into the bedroom and saw her curled up underneath the covers facing the wall.

“What's wrong?” I asked from the heart.

“I wish we could go back to when we first met—,” she said. “I wish things could start turning around for us.” I knew she’d been getting tired of the constant fighting, but this was a new side of her I hadn’t yet encountered. I felt a strong sense of empathy rush over me—, if only it would’ve lasted a while longer.

The arguments kept piling up—, one on top of another. It was a different type of personal disappointment though. One that seemed more advanced than the many nights I’d spent awake so many years prior. This time, it felt more consequential. Like I wasn’t just living for today or tonight but that my actions would have an affect on future emotions and moments altogether.

The perfect example of that came one morning when we’d both woken up with incredibly negative energies surrounding us. The way she rolled out of bed, got dressed, and was applying her make-up all felt so forced. Like she didn’t want to be there at all. Maybe it was just my imagination or maybe I’d been right all along about her fleeting feelings

—, but either way, I couldn't take much more of it.

“Problem?” I asked her while she smoked before leaving to go to work.

“Not one—,” she coldly replied, smashing the rest of her lit cigarette into the black ash tray with all the hostility she'd been holding inside her and storming out of the bedroom. I just quietly stared up at the ceiling before noticing an empty cup on the nightstand. I reached for it, snatched it off the table, and hurled it as hard as I could at the hanging portrait of us kissing—, shattering the protective surface into pieces and leaving a giant mark on the photograph itself. Not two seconds went by before she came back into the bedroom, wanting to see what the loud sound was. She noticed the broken Christmas present she'd had specially made and just looked back at me with the most disappointed eyes I'd ever seen her make. Years later, she'd go on to tell me;

“That was the moment I started letting you go.”

Some time passed by but the wound never truly healed. Finally, on a day that seemed on its surface to resemble all the others before it, I was half-asleep on the living-room couch when I felt her presence walking right up to me. She bent down to kiss me on my forehead before standing back up. It'd be the last one we'd ever share together. She walked towards the front door to leave as I slowly began waking up. I could tell something was different about the way she'd let her lips touch my skin for so much longer than usual. There was an added sadness lingering in the air, probably from the night before or our last fight.

“So, tonight then?” I asked of when we'd see each other again.

“Probably not,” she said with slight attitude.

“Why?” She just shrugged from the bottom of the stairs. That was enough to let me know something was wrong. Like we'd been heading down this road for a while but now we were finally at its end. I couldn't make too much sense of it. I just knew I wanted to change direction. I wanted to change myself and my relationship and my life overall—, I just didn't

know where to begin. A thousand things were piling up inside my mind and I wanted to say all of them at once, but there was only one phrase that I could come up with. “Have fun at the wedding,” I said, slamming the door shut. I couldn’t see it, I couldn’t make out the tearing sound, but I knew—, on the other side in the stairwell was a heart breaking in two, just like mine had been for a while now. An already-broken bridge began crumbling apart, piece by piece—, falling into the nothingness underneath. There was no more structure linking our two worlds together. We were finally on our own—, again. A familiar feeling to say the least.

Things settled down after that. The apartment grew more silent by the day. The friends coming over got more impatient with my gloomy nature. Wine lost its taste but not its effect. The bed felt empty but not the sleep. Anything to pass another day. Anything to make it through another mundane week. I quickly realized that there was nothing else left for me in either the city or the state itself. The environments I’d made less-than-perfect

memories in remembered my mistakes all too well. They'd remind me of them whenever I'd pass through. I needed a change of scenery, a change of lifestyle. It'd been time for me to move away for years, but only recently had I caught on to the notion for myself. There was only one place on the planet which could cure me of my despondency. I was finally headed towards my own personal heaven; L-trains, taxicabs, and crowds galore.

# WALK WITH THE WISE...

## (PART I)



I arrived in Chicago during summer. My friend and I drove all of my furniture across state lines with a rental and a good array of songs blasting from the truck speakers.

“Let’s go through the Loop—,” I said once we got into downtown. Driving on Michigan Avenue during the warmer months was like having front-row tickets to the latest fashion shows. Colors popped and blended together on skirts, shirts, and dress-suits alike. Men and women flaunted their good looks and better fashion senses all while enjoying their favorite lattes from the multitude of coffee shops lining the Magnificent Mile. Everyone was on the move. Nobody stood still for longer than a few seconds at a time—, either to take pictures or hail a taxicab. There were too many places to go and get lost in. So many shops and sights



and side-streets—, one didn't know where they should go first.

Further north through the Gold Coast we went and couldn't help but people-watch as they walked by in groups of two or three. All wore glittering jewelry and were draped in expensive clothes to match. The townhomes were nestled behind rows of lush trees and greenery, elaborate gates guarded the front doors, and the unmistakable scent of old money made its way through the atmosphere above.

After I'd gotten comfortable with the new streets and had lived in my neighborhood for a while—, I began seeing things with a different set of eyes. The people all had the same look splashed across their faces; excitement. A deep feeling that everything happening was fate making its mark on everyone's lives took hold. Whether or not I still held out hope for a bright future before I'd arrived was nullified once I'd become accustomed to my new surroundings. I noticed what heels the blonde across the street was wearing, what blazer the brunette crossing paths with me had on, what

everyone wore with pride—, to see and be seen. Maybe it was competition or just for plain attention—, regardless of the reasons, everyone looked wonderful in their own personal ways.

The city was alive. It was a type of liveliness I hadn't experienced back in my old home for quite a while. Everywhere I'd look, I'd see it; the same sort of energy bursting through the people crowding the streets. Through the windows of restaurants and cafés—, there were first dates happening, business meetings being held, and solo diners that were on quick lunch breaks before heading back off to work. Through the windows of moving L-trains rushing by—, there were parents trying to maintain order over their families, a million single people who were searching for their next great love, and homeless sleepers taking up two or more seats at a time. Through the windows of tall high-rises from above—, there were young professionals trying to keep up with the stress of success, mature adults who were retiring and just wanted to live out their golden years in peace, and first-time city

dwellers, like myself, trying to find themselves in the constant bustle of everyday life. Everything and everyone intermingled with each other. It was a thing of beauty and personal bliss as I walked by different stores, shops, and buildings of all types.

I started paying more attention to my movements, my way of speaking, and my mannerisms overall. I began dressing better, looking people in the eyes when I spoke, holding my head up high as I walked. This was finally my chance at ultimate reinvention. To recreate what the past near-decade had taken away from me; more amazing memories, more meaningful moments, and a higher sense of self-esteem that seemed to all but burst through the ceiling.

Picking up a job at a local shoe store right up the street—, I began meeting more people than ever before in my life. Crowds bustled in and out of the show-room which I'd stand in for hours and wait on different kinds of customers. There were the preppy yuppies, the above-it-all hipsters, and the old school businessmen who just wanted a new pair of

wingtip slip-ons. Coming into contact with so many different types of personalities within a given week made me confront some of my own characteristics. Why was it that it took moving into a new city to finally break out of my self-loathsome shell of so many years? Why did I have to wait so long to leave behind all of the bad habits and broken dreams of yesterday? For the first time in quite a while—, I actually liked who I was becoming and I couldn't help but wonder why it'd taken such a drastic move to make it happen.

I'd lived in the city for nearly half a year when I first saw her looking through the windows of a small seafood restaurant close by my building. She must've noticed me walking down the street towards her because as she looked up, I saw the most beautiful smile I'd ever seen. I nodded out of sheer reflex.

“Hi—!,” she said with absolute enthusiasm. It was like we'd already known each other for ages. I couldn't resist.

“Hi—,” I said back in my own way. I passed her by and couldn't get her smile out of my head for the rest of the night. Not two days

later, I was coming back home from work and was waiting on the elevator to take me up to my floor. As the doors slowly opened, I entered and she quickly walked in after me, the smile as wide as I'd remembered it. *No way she lives in the same building*, I immediately thought. She didn't recognize me but I knew I had to say something now or else I'd regret it for good. I noticed her yellow patent leather purse and figured that'd work.

"Cute purse."

"Oh yeah?—, thanks!," she happily replied. "Cute scarf!"

"Thank you—," I said before taking my shot. "Can I just tell you—, you have the most beautiful smile." Her eyes grew. The elevator reached the fourth floor and off I went on my way, excited that I'd made some type of move towards getting to know her better. She'd tell me months afterwards how she called her mom later on that night and was promptly told;

"You should date him." She'd eventually go on to take her mother's advice.

I'd bought a brand new orange sunburst acoustic guitar from a local music shop a couple of weeks back with money I'd saved up from my job. I played it everyday and was just getting used to the fretboard and developing new callouses on my fingertips when she first called up. We chatted about this and that, but all the while, I knew I had to make the most of what time I was allotted.

"Let's have dinner this weekend," I suddenly suggested.

"Sounds great," she said. I knew I didn't have enough money to take her out to the type of place a first date with such a stunning woman required—, so back to the music shop I went to return my new guitar.

A couple of days passed by before our date came around. I began getting ready for the evening—, a long shower, groomed hair, and my Sinatra playlist on repeat. I was letting my mind wander off into all the different possibilities the night may have in store for us. *What should I wear? What am I going to talk about? Hair spiked or flat?* This date was actually making me nervous for the first time

in a long while—, and I enjoyed it. I put on a freshly dry-cleaned burgundy shirt with deep grey dress pants and blue suede ankle-boots. Looking into the full-length mirror in my hallway, I was admiring my selection of clothes when suddenly—, a knock at the door. I opened it up and there she stood—, radiant in her long dress with black wedges on.

“Can you help me with something?,” she immediately asked. She turned around with her back to me and there was her dress—, undone and almost ready to fall off her shoulders. “Could you zip me up?,” she said coyly while holding her hair.

“Of course,” I replied, using one hand to hold the top in place while carefully zipping her up with the other. She spun back around to face me with her splendid smile—, like I’d just passed my very first boyfriend-test.

“Thanks—,” she said, and with that, we were ready to leave and let fate take over.

We walked into the elevator and pushed the button to the ground floor. Right before the door opened back up, she slid her arm in-between mine and my body, clutching it like

we'd already been dating for some time. We slowly walked through the lobby and let all the strangers see us in our magnificent state—, cleaned up and ready for all the city had to offer.

We'd planned on having dinner at an upscale place specializing in fondue dishes. After the short cab ride over, we entered the dimly-lit atmosphere of the restaurant and the hostess took us to our seats—, right by a window facing the winter wonderland outside. Snow and frost covered the glass while we sat inside by a single candle dancing atop the table. We looked around the room while trying to sneak stares at each other but we'd catch them every so often and make quick eye-contact. She finally broke the silence.

“So tell me about yourself,” she said. I looked down and tried my best to hide the personal disappointment I felt with its air of regret still following me around so many years later.

“I don't know—, I don't want it to change the way you look at me,” I earnestly said, deeply staring into her eyes.



“Don’t worry,” she said, “my past isn’t perfect either.” We went on to compare broken dreams, broken hearts, and heavy situations we’d both gone through at different stages of our lives.

“I almost wanted to end it all a long time ago—,” I opened up.

“Me too,” she replied. I suddenly felt a strange new admiration towards her—, like we’d both tackled the same shadows on our roads to finding one another and now the two kindred spirits were finally united over dinner in a busy corner of a bustling city.

“What made you change your mind?,” I asked, knowing I was getting into something much more personal than simply small-talk.

“A Frappuccino.” I raised my eyebrows in curiosity, unable to hide the fact that I wanted to know more about the story. “It’s true...,” she continued, “I was at the lowest point of my life and just before everything was to happen, I found myself in a bookstore coffeeshop. The barista behind the counter could see the desperation on my face—, so he gave me a

Frappuccino for free and said it was to cheer me up.”

“And it did—,” I interjected.

“And it did—,” she agreed. How much weight can a small gesture have that reinstates someone’s hope in humanity? My date was a prime example of just that—, and my heart went out to her so much more for it. “How about you?,” she followed-up.

“Oh—, it just wasn’t meant to be,” I said. “The Universe wouldn’t allow it I guess.” For the first time in eight years, I’d spoken those words aloud and I’d never been more grateful that my story as well as her own had ended up the way they did. We’d crossed paths not by accident, but perhaps to nurture our broken hearts back together again, knowing exactly what types of places we’d both come from.

We stayed a little while longer—, people-watching and letting our minds wander off into different places. There were so many separate dates happening all around us at the same time. I wondered if they too, talked about the deeper things which my own date and I had just gotten into. If they’d dug into

the softest, most vulnerable places of another person's being and still come out the other end infatuated and in love. It didn't make sense to wear such thickened masks on a first outing—, sooner or later, they'd too come off and reveal a much more beautiful face waiting underneath.

Finally exiting the restaurant, snow had begun falling from the sky in large, puffy flakes. We stayed underneath a lamppost, waiting for the next taxicab to drive by. We were encircled by tiny, white shapes that glistened from the street light above us. *What a gorgeous night to be in the city with such a beauty by my side*, I thought to myself.

Eventually, we arrived back to my place and as soon as we got in through the door, we were completely lip-locked. From spot to spot, we stayed in step with one another until reaching the bed. She began unbuckling my belt and unbuttoning my clothes. Slowly, she made her way downward towards the floor—, and slowly, I brought her back up.

“Well *this* is different,” she said with a surprised look.

“Let’s—, not rush,” I sincerely said. It’s not that I didn’t want to go to those places with her, it’s that I wanted it to be memorable. I liked her—, a lot. I could tell things would be getting to that stage sooner or later anyway, so I wanted to relish the moments we’d still have together, finding out more about each other and taking our time to build up to that level. We kept kissing but that was about it. Finally, we laid down next to one another on my bed’s blanket and continued to bask in each other’s warmth for a while afterwards. She was running her hand through my hair when she focused in on my eyes from the side and gave me a long, loving look.

“So what are we anyway?,” she finally let herself ask. I didn’t say anything for a minute. I just let my mind wander off, find, and grab hold of that word for a third time on its own; *Lover—, I’ve been waiting for you.*

# WALK WITH THE WISE...

## (PART II)



I'd go on to see *The Girl with the Gorgeous Smile* every single day for the next month or so. Restaurants, cafés, movies—, it didn't matter, we just wanted to be near each other, to learn more about each other, to pick our brains over anything and everything.

Going to one of our favorite coffee shops in the neighborhood on a random afternoon—, we decided it was a pleasant day to sit outside on the patio. We ordered our drinks, took them to our table, and sat down ready to talk. Instead, she pulled out a notebook from her yellow purse and tore off a sheet, sliding it over towards me.

“Here you go,” she sweetly said.

“What's this for?” I asked.

“Let's both write out a short story on the spot and then read them aloud to each other.”

I thought it was one of the best ideas I'd ever heard for two people to do—, especially two people in love and dating.

“Let's do it—,” I said. She gave me one of her pens and off we went—, our hands writing as fast as our brains could churn out the words in the right order. When we finished, we both took turns proudly reading our creations and then immediately started the process over again, and again. Three times in all—, we wrote, read, and reacted positively to each other's imaginations. Afterwards, she collected the pages and put them together in her notebook as future mementos to look back through and reminisce about.

Of course I respected and appreciated her mind—, that went without saying. She was much smarter than most other people I'd come across throughout my life—, but I was also attracted to the air of aristocracy she walked around with. She knew she was a beautiful woman—, inside and out. I told her how one of my idols growing up was Edie Sedgwick.

“That's interesting you say that. I've actually won an Edie-lookalike contest,” she proudly

said. Once I'd learned that, I can safely say I was hooked—, both to her mental and physical attributes. That all eventually took on the form of sleeping beside her, which quickly turned into one of my favorite things to do. Not just because she'd climb into bed without a shred of clothing on—, but that even to the slightest touch, she'd nearly purr herself awake. She had such a pure sensuality and we clicked very well because of it. We didn't have to go all the way to have amazing physical chemistry. I always respected that about us. We'd kiss each other alive while removing our shirts, one button at a time. She'd busy herself with me while I'd slowly slide my fingertips across her arches. Then I'd lay down next to her, basking in the moment when we'd finish.

One of our favorite pastimes was to see new movies the week they'd come out. She knew everything and everyone, especially from Hollywood's Golden Age. Buying our tickets, we'd walk down the same types of hallways toward our theaters that I'd walked a decade earlier—, still excited about whatever movie my current girlfriend and I would be seeing,

still wondering if it'd make us fall even further in love with each other. She'd pick up on all the symbolism, could dissect a film fifty different ways, and always stayed silent during the show—, focused on it, respecting it, making me respect her for it.

There was a particular piano bar downtown which everyone would eventually circulate through depending on where they were in their own relationships. It was the perfect place to bring someone on a date. It didn't take long for us to make our way down towards it one evening. The line was well into the street and around the corner, so we walked up to it, waited our turn to show our I.D.s, and go in through the doors down the front steps. Once inside, it was so crowded that it'd taken us a full fifteen minutes to walk from the main doors to the coat-check room and back out to the bar. We finally arrived at the front of the line and the bartender took our drink orders as we sat at a nearby, candlelit table. We started chatting each other up and wondering what we'd end up doing for the rest of the night. Her eyes twinkled in the soft light of the



atmosphere and she looked like she had something important to say.

“You know—, it just hit me,” she started, “I love spending time with you.” My heart naturally grew.

“I love spending time with you too,” I said.

“Yeah but—, I like it when it’s *just* me and you. We don’t need to be out at these fancy places. There’s nothing better than being at home together.” She was right. I’d felt the exact same way ever since stepping foot into the room—, it was so packed that we could hardly hear each other over the loud chatter all around us. While it was a charming spot—, it wasn’t the type of place we wanted to be in anymore. We cherished each other’s company too much to let other people get in the middle of our next conversation or kiss. I couldn’t help but think back to all the times I’d stood outside other bars and clubs, waiting to get in so I too, could become one with the flow of energy filling the different atmospheres therein. All those years of trying to find something to believe in while not knowing why I was even attracted to that sort of environment seemed

so out of reach now. I'd finally started feeling like I was growing up and maturing into the adult I was always meant to become. We paid our tab and made our way again through the crowd and onto the street outside. A quick cab ride later and we were back at home, in bed, and watching one of our favorite shows as we slowly drifted off into a deep and pleasant sleep.

I continued on at my job—, heading to work with a huge smile on my face more often than not. The front door to the shop flew open with attitude one day—, I could tell. From the briefest glance, I saw a woman with golden hair that flowed down to her waist walk in and immediately head in my direction.

“Do you have any heels?,” she said with a sense of high esteem.

“I’m sorry, we don’t,” I replied. She picked up one of the peep-toe wedges we had and analyzed it carefully.

“Well do you have anything classier than this?,” she asked. I could tell she wasn’t someone who liked to hear “no,” so I tried my best to appease her.

“How about this?,” I asked back, holding up something similar.

“If I were your girlfriend, would you let me wear that?,” she said looking straight at me.

“If *you* were my girlfriend, we’d be shopping down on Oak Street right now—,” I answered matter-of-factly. It made her smile—, which was more than I’d thought it’d do. I’d never been one to step out on whoever I’d be dating though so the conversation abruptly ended and she left the store empty-handed. I knew that after my shift, a beautiful woman was at home waiting for me to walk back into one of our small but precious studio apartments. So that’s exactly what I did.

Each and everyday—, there was always a new book or movie she’d want to show me. It kept things interesting and the relationship full of good conversation. Once nightfall would come around, we’d nestle up next to each other and either read or speak on the day’s events or plan out our tomorrows with excitement. The morning would always roll around and in all my months of spending time with her, I never once saw her hit the snooze

button on the alarm. She'd jump up and ready herself for the day almost instantaneously. I'd prepare her coffee while she ran the warm water in the tub. That was where she could be free from the rest of the world if only for a few moments at a time.

On a specific morning—, I knew I wanted to surprise her with something she wouldn't have expected, something different than what she'd gotten used to. I knew I wanted to make the day as special as I could so I woke up extra early, rolled out of bed, and snuck out of the apartment unnoticed. Walking down the street towards the corner store, I was already thinking to myself how happy we'd both be back upstairs in a matter of minutes. I bought my presents and stuffed them into my backpack before heading home. Once inside, I saw she was already awake and excused myself while going into the bathroom, backpack and all. I ran the water, let it fill up until it reached the very brim of the bathtub, and went to work on my surprise. A few minutes passed by before I walked back out

into the living-room and just sat there, waiting.

“I’m going to take my bath,” she said, much like she did every morning. I didn’t say a thing, I let her walk into the bathroom alone and once she looked down at the dozens of red rose petals floating atop the warm water, she came back out with her signature smile extended from ear to ear.

After work, we’d planned on having a nice dinner over my place. I began running her a bath again like I’d done so many times before but the night felt special for some reason. She’d come over earlier to cook dinner, turned on the stovetop, and began mixing the vegetables together inside the pan. The sound of sizzling romance was in the room and it brought back a handful of different memories from previous dinners; TVs turned toward the living-room windows so we could watch from the front patio, sweetner-tinged greens which I never knew would taste so good, and so many others I’d been unable to retain throughout the years. They’d all come and gone before I ever really had a chance at capturing any of them.

As we were watching live concerts on the computer, the music made its way into the bathroom and set the mood for our time together. She climbed in and slowly submerged her body underneath the bunches of bubbles. Letting herself relax, she rested against the back ceramic ledge and let me do all the work, which I gladly did. I soaked the washcloth and wrung it out over her knees, letting the droplets race down toward her thighs below. I gently began washing her legs as she stared at me with a sense of curiosity. She couldn't hold it in much longer before directly asking;

“What do you get out of this?”

“I like taking care of the things I love,” I answered. The rest of the night as well as the next morning were just as romantic, making it hard to part ways before both of us headed back off to work.

Later that evening, after returning home, we decided to spend some time up on the rooftop. We exited through the hallway door and stepped out into a picturesque view. Panoramic skyscrapers stood in wait a mere

mile away. Above us were tiny specks of light that glistened and glowed. I couldn't have imagined a more romantic scene. We sat down on the concrete next to a large smoke-stack and stared out at the city in a pensive silence. We shared the champagne we'd brought along with us as she placed her head down on my lap, closed her eyes, and let the night breeze drift her off into a soft sleep. I stayed awake and focused in on the buildings all around while brushing her hair with my fingers and sitting still for the next few hours.

Time passed by—, week after week, month after month. I was excited about where our relationship was heading though a subtle sense of disappointment from my past slowly started coming back again—, ruining all of the present memories I was still in the process of making. It wasn't just the time of year—, it was the year itself. I'd turned twenty-eight and still wasn't married. It's not that I particularly wanted to be, it's just that any probability of it ever happening got erased a long time ago. I couldn't tell my girlfriend about all of the

wasted promises I'd made, but something inside wouldn't let me be at peace either.

While digging through my closet one night, I'd found a homemade anniversary card with a giant heart-shaped logo drawn on the front. I opened it up and began reading. There was a date written within it from a decade earlier—, it was for a day that wouldn't pass until the upcoming summer. My stomach turned at the thought of what it represented and the wedding ceremony that'd never be. Even in my dream city, I couldn't escape the what ifs of yesterday.

Though I maintained a forced smile on my face more times than not, everyone felt its fake nature. My relationship began suffering because of it. She could tell that I was a thousand miles away. I wanted to be present more often—, to tell her how beautiful I thought she was and to share opinions like we used to when we first met, but it was useless. The constant calling of old mistakes came and ruined more than its handful of moments. The spark between us was slowly burning out. Like with others before—, we were steadily slipping



away from one another—, fading farther and further out into an open sea of uncertainty.

She came over one day and noticed how especially depressed I was.

“What’s wrong?,” she sincerely asked. I just sat in my chair and stared down at the floor below. Finally, the constant pressure of thinking the same thoughts on repeat spilled out of my head and over into the real world around me.

“I wonder had we would’ve never started something like that, if she’d still have those same scars on her today,” I let myself say with complete honesty.

“Not *this* again—,” she exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air from the frustration of having to go through yet another similar conversation. “Honey, that’s in the past now —,” she said with just as much honesty as I had. “Let it go.” Words to live by—, truly and utterly. It’d taken me an entire decade to let their meaning fully embed themselves into my mind and take their advice to heart. I knew she was right, I just couldn’t bare the supposed-responsibility of it all. Had it really

been my fault this entire time? *Was it really something I'd initiated?* I didn't need the answers to my questions as much I needed some type of forgiveness—, from The Universe, from the walls in the rooms which'd watched us desecrate our own temples, and mostly, from myself. I'd let the regret destroy too much of my present and it was finally affecting my future as well.

We were on the verge of calling it quits, I could feel it. I needed to protect myself before this relationship too, had a chance to implode. It was no use. She too, finally tired of my constant dislike for daily life. She'd fallen in love with someone completely different than the person I'd become within the past couple of months. When before, I'd walk into her studio excited to learn about which movie she'd currently be watching, now I barely noticed the TV was even on. I'd had the same depressing songs on repeat for a while when she finally snapped me out my self-loathsome pity party. She could take no more. She was fed up with trying to rescue someone who didn't even want to be rescued. I was back to

being lost so she let me be just as lost as I wanted to be.

“You’re not in a good place,” she seriously said one night after a lengthy argument. She threw my coat at me and slammed the door shut. I walked down the hallway toward the elevators—, broken and bewildered. I was upset with myself for ruining another relationship but also strangely attracted to a woman who I’d never see again. I hadn’t witnessed that kind of attitude in her before and I was happy to finally know that somewhere deep inside herself—, a powerful person did exist.

Returning home, I collapsed onto my bed and could barely keep the room from spinning completely out of control. *What am I doing with my life?*, flashed through my mind. I had no answer. I just stayed there—, searching the ceiling for my purpose within a very cold and lonesome existence.

# THE RELENTLESS EFFECTS OF NO SELF-RESPECT



I thought of all I'd lost in the last ten years. The girlfriends—, in all of their shades—, were gone. Now the drinks kept me company. *And the bottle makes three*, I thought to myself. It was all I had left to remind me of a time gone by. I grabbed the glass neck and lifted the bottom upwards—, downing all the drops, drowning all the dreams, escaping once more into a permanent nightfall. Deep down into the things that I'd missed out on I went; weddings, birthdays, events that'd never come around again. I could've gone with the women I'd loved before and sat by any one of their sides, making whoever she'd be proud of me and maintaining the relationship at a healthy level, instead of having it dip well-beneath

decent standards. I closed my eyes and dreamt of their lips again. How I'd give anything to press mine up against them just one more time. *I'm so sorry*, I thought to myself and no one else. I regretted all the moments that'd passed by which I'd made a mess of. I wished I had another chance at them once more—, to make it right, to make it meaningful, and to make them all so much more beautiful than the first time around. Remorseful me.

I began walking the streets of downtown alone. I needed to be around people but I knew that nobody could understand exactly what I was going through either. So I just blended in with the crowd. I made my way back down towards Michigan Avenue and recalled all the times I'd walked it before with others by my side. I saw visions of myself looking through the various display windows again. I saw visions of myself getting down on one knee again. I saw all of these things and couldn't help but feel a slight sting in my side from all my former faults. All the while, I was living in my dream city and still, I felt a hollowness from deep within—, an

unexplainable emotion to anyone else around me. I again, heard myself musing aloud;

“We should move here one day.” Like the blanket of time folded and wrapped around itself, bringing my past up to my present and permanently fusing the two together. Now that I was finally here, I didn’t know how to take hold of it all and enjoy it to its fullest extent. What’s the point of living in such a wonderful place if there’s nobody to share its scenes and sights with? I had it. At one point in time—, I had it all. Now; nothing but the commotion of the city outside my studio window. I got the world but lost the girl—, either with the Dark Eyes, the Epic Tattoos, or the Gorgeous Smile. What an appropriate ending to another one of my life’s chapters. It seemed like the overall theme was getting stuck on repeat. The reader didn’t even need to finish the phrase—, it was already spelled out from the beginning. I needed to change books or at the very least—, change genres mid-adventure. What was there to do but keep writing out my story? Onward I went—, with a blank piece of paper and pen at the ready.

The weather outside was quickly turning into a dreary grey—, scattered thunderstorms would soon be on the way. I decided to run to the corner store one last time for more fuel to add to the ever-growing fire inside my stomach. I stepped out into the calm before the storm—, a very familiar feeling took over me as I noticed how silent everything was. Nothing moved, all was quiet and still. I began walking down towards the main boulevard in my neighborhood. Then—, the tiniest drop. And another. And another. I kept moving right along. Suddenly; a torrent erupted from the sky and down came a cascade of water. I stood in place for a few minutes—, letting it all sink in; the break-ups, the disappointments, all of the regrets piled up into a single mountain of mayhem and I let myself soak within it in the process. Ex-girlfriends' DNA was in the rain and I let it cover me from head to toe. They dripped down from my brow onto the edges of my dry lips and fell off my chin below. *Where are you now?*, I asked any one of them through my thoughts. They were everywhere and nowhere at the same time. They were in my

past as a memory, in my present as a figment of my imagination, and in my future as someone I'd forever remember. Eventually, the rain washed away all of yesterday's mistakes and I began feeling brand new for the first time in a very long while. I knew I had to leave my shell of self-pity and get back out in the real world if I was ever going to finally get over my old life.

The days went along as scheduled. Seasons changed, jobs changed, and different friends came in and out of my life. I started taking my own advice as I'd gotten to know someone new recently and we'd decided to meet on our own for the first time halfway in-between our two places. I walked through the streets and avenues and wondered where this would all lead. Not just this spur-of-the-moment meeting but all of these chance encounters I'd been having with random people. I thought that maybe I was just trying to replace previous loves with new and exciting circumstances but I couldn't be sure. I knew for a fact that I didn't want to fall into anything deeper than a simple, surface-level love affair that would



ultimately go nowhere. Who was I to dictate my future though? Those types of things always happen when someone least expects it —, something deeper. I was never actively looking for a perfect match—, I'd just found her; sitting beside me in class, working beside me at a job, and living nearby in the same building as me. To think I'd actually find another half again wasn't just unlikely, it took a huge imagination as well. I redirected my attention to the present moment as I saw my new friend walking towards me from across the street. She was wearing a black and white-striped dress and sporting a cute ponytail.

“Hey!,” I said, trying to seem more excited than I truly was. There were streaks throughout her hair and I couldn't help but notice how pretty they made her look. “Nice highlights.”

“Thanks!,” she replied, slightly surprised that I'd even seen them. We walked the short distance to my apartment while discussing the usual small-talk two people on a first outing alone usually dive into. It didn't take long to get into the plans for the rest of the evening.

Getting home, she stepped inside the small studio and immediately got comfortable—, pulling up my blue butterfly chair I'd always give to guests as I sat at the desk. I knew where this night was headed—, we both did. Still, I didn't want to rush anything and cheapen the entire affair with pre-conceived notions that she'd just want to jump into bed as quickly as I did—, so we spoke for some time.

“Do you have any plans for the weekend?,” I politely asked while preparing a couple of drinks.

“I'm actually going to my first dance class tomorrow,” she said. “It's always been something I've wanted to try out.”

“That's really cool,” I replied, appreciating the fact that she was more fearless than her looks led on. Time passed by as it always does in these types of situations—, each second being one step closer to what both people are ultimately looking forward to. Finally, she let herself get as comfortable as possible. She got up and laid sideways on my bed, propping herself up with one arm. Her dress slid down

her shoulder, nearly coming off completely. The moment had arrived. I slowly leaned in for a kiss and brought my hand up to her cheek, gently palming it and bringing her closer to me. We twisted and turned—, all the while removing every article of clothing we had on our bodies. Piece by piece—, we became more and more in tune with each other.

Again, time passed by as it always does in these types of situations. I lit two cigarettes and handed one to her after we'd finished. Laying on our backs, we blew smoke out towards the ceiling and stared up with wide-eyes, wondering if and when we'd see each other again.

“I'm invited to a swingers party next week —, do you wanna be my date?,” she asked with slight innocence.

“Sure—,” I answered back. *Why not?*, I thought. I'd never attended something like that before and figured now would be as good a time as any to try and see what it was all about. My only concern was that she wanted to be something more than just a temporary

fling. I wasn't ready for anything serious. I'd lost too much and now had very little left of me to give.

The next morning rolled around as I was still reeling from the experience of the night before. I'd thought about how mismatched my feelings on the whole thing were. One half of me felt relieved that I could still have fun with another person while the other parts felt slightly devalued. I'd never been that cut out for one-night stands but I figured everyone goes through a phase.

My date got up and got dressed—, kissing me goodbye before leaving through the front door. Not a handful of hours passed by when I suddenly saw her name flashing across my cellphone as it started to ring.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Hey—,” she said, “I'm just getting out of my class and was wondering if you had anything to smoke.”

“Yeah, I have a little something. I can meet you outside your place in about thirty minutes.” With that, we hung up our phones

and off I was on my way to see her for a second day in a row.

Approaching her house, I could see her already sitting outside on the front steps. She jumped up and came towards me, giving me a big hug.

“So—,” I said, “how was dance class?” We chatted about this and that and though I didn’t have much time to spend, I sat with her on the steps as long as I could. She finally asked if I wanted to get high with her but I shook my head. “I’m sorry—, I have to go,” I regretfully said. Though she called me a week afterwards for the party, I was out of state for an impromptu trip and so, we quickly lost touch. That’s how things seemed to go in a big city—, people came and went at random, in and out of each other’s lives. I wondered if I’d ever make such a tight connection with someone as I had earlier in my life. The thought however, quietly slipped away, as all I needed at that moment was just good company for a night or two—, not another toxic-twin or a self-reflection of any kind. I’d be content with

someone whose name I could remember and that was about it.

Back in Chicago, the people began wearing thicker winter coats once more as the leaves began falling off the trees. It was another autumn night when I found myself walking the streets alone. I'd passed by a local pub plenty of times before on my way to the L-train station, but this time was different. People were piled out into the street and the atmosphere inside was loud, crowded, and festive. There was a group of six or so strangers to my right who were huddled up smoking cigarettes by the alleyway when I noticed a sultry look coming from the center of everyone else. She stood out from the other girls around and her voice was as lulling as the rain that began trickling down our faces.

"Hey," I said from outside the semi-circle of friends. She was already looking at me before I spoke. "Do you guys know where I could get some—," I brought my fingers up to my mouth, making a smoking motion.

"Yeah," she calmly said. "Right here." She pulled out a joint and asked if I wanted to

light up with her and her friends. A short while later we went inside the pub and enjoyed ourselves for a couple of hours more.

“So do you live pretty close by?,” she asked me out of nowhere. It was a ten minute walk to my place, so off we went, both eyeing each other the entire trek there. I knew she’d be fun, she knew the same about me. We seemed to click. The only problem with having her over my studio so late at night was that I had already promised a previous friend that he could crash there as well a few days earlier. We didn’t have much time to wrap ourselves around one another so as soon as the door shut behind us, we were in each other’s arms. As soon as the lights turned off, we were in bed. And as soon as we were starting to enjoy ourselves, my friend unlocked the door and walked right in.

“I’m so sorry—,” he said, quickly realizing what was happening. “I’m just going to use the bathroom for a minute and then leave.” We all blushed for a few seconds but didn’t think too much of it—, there was still plenty of time left

ahead for us to take advantage of. Suddenly—, an idea.

“Would you be cool with—,” I didn’t have to finish my thought. She knew what I’d meant and slowly nodded. She was both excited and a bit nervous, but I could tell she’d done this type of thing before. *Perfect*, I thought. My friend exited the bathroom, immediately read the situation, and with that, we began a night’s worth of fun and fantasy-filled revelry.

I couldn’t help but think of past Lovers—, how they themselves would’ve moved and maneuvered through the multitasking of pleasing two different partners at once. The thought made me smile as my friend and I made sure our mutual date enjoyed being the center of attention. After swapping, I situated myself at her frontside and laid down on my back, blowing smoke into the air. She too, like ex-girlfriends, was busying herself with me when I bent up and slowly lifted her chin with my fingers.

“Open,” I gently suggested. She parted her lips as I brought mine right up to them and pushed out the thick fumes from my mouth



into hers. She took a nice, deep breath. It was everything I wanted it to be—, and more. The music played on as we too, played on—, well into the night and until early the next morning. My friend got up to leave shortly after everyone was too tired to move anymore.

“We should do this again sometime,” he said and with that, it was just her and I for the rest of the day. We laughed, spoke briefly about our backgrounds, and what our future dream jobs would be. Puff after puff, time rolled by and in a few hours, she too left through my front door with an experience both of us were glad we’d made.

Around the same time, I began talking to a woman who was almost twenty years older than me in her late-forties and found myself over her house one fateful night. We sat on her living-room couch and spoke about topical things until the moment came to finally go into the bedroom. I saw her letting down her hair and thanked The Universe. She saw my scars but graciously said nothing. We each saw what we wanted to see in the other and that was enough for us. After laying on the bed, she

slid her hands down her chest, stomach, and toward her jeans. She slowly began making herself comfortable. I nestled my lips near her neck and softly bit her earlobe between whispers of what we should do. Finally, she let out a long exhale as she continued to lay next to me, running her fingers through my hair, staring at me.

“Don’t give up on yourself,” she unexpectedly said. “You’re different.” The words stuck themselves right onto the center of my heart as her sentiment burrowed itself inward.

I thought about all of the different experiences I was having and how I was really just chasing old ones with new partners. I’d been finding lovers but no Lover. No match, no *other*. I didn’t know where she could be—, in another part of the city, another part of the country, or another part of the world altogether? I thought about the two hundred-plus nations and none of them truly stood out as being separate from the rest. They were all on an equal level, brimming with possibilities and women of all kinds. So many locales with

millions of different blonde, brunette, black-haired, blue-eyed, brown-eyed beauties. How could I ever limit myself to one in-particular person with thoughts of complete permanence? Maybe that was just the story-book ending to a fairytale we're all told growing up. That out of the billions of souls on this planet, not only does our other half exist in the first place, but is in-fact living within our own timeframe, on our own continent, and has all of the qualities we actively seek for in a soulmate. It seemed—, improbable. But then again, so did a lot of other things I'd been through in my life, so I held out some type of hope that one day I'd get to meet her and see her for who she truly is; my reflection, unchanged, untainted, forever the same.

# FUTURE REFLECTIONS



The name is unknown, the face is blurry, and the voice I have yet to hear. Still, I know her. The final piece of the puzzle. Where I may finally find her remains a mystery and maybe I won't even be looking once I do.

There are a few things which I allow myself to continue on thinking about—, in every sort of angle down to the smallest detail. Events and stages of my life which I haven't yet achieved. Memories from the past flood in through my psyche and I can't help but wonder where I'd be today had I become who I was always meant to be. The story goes on. The possibilities are endless. I can't stop at one single scenario—, there are still too many unwritten ones to count and write about.

I dream about the wedding; white tablecloths with bouquets of dried red roses sitting in their centers; an incredible contrast of what was and what is still to be. Stringed

instruments play Mozart on a loop. Flower petals rain down like colorful confetti. It's all so impeccably picturesque. The lights dim, the choir sings—, the ceremony begins. She enters everyone's line of sight. She is not just an image of mere perfection nor solely radiates the light of beatific love, no. The bride is beyond Beatrice.

I dream about the marriage; constant laughter, a sense of harmonized peace, two against the world. There is no obstacle too great, no barrier too big. We handle it. A single path converged from smaller trails that were less important before finally merging. It doesn't matter where we live or how big our house or loft in the sky is—, we make our home feel like a castle. Cozy, comfortable, and an atmosphere of consistent love exudes throughout. We give each other quick stares when we're out in public, like we already know what we're thinking. We go out on dinner dates with longtime friends and fidget in our chairs—, impatiently waiting to get back home again and resume our normal, nightly routine. Overflowing bubble baths with

black and white movies from decades gone by in the background. We don't have to finish each other's sentences—, we're already thinking the same thoughts. We don't have to make time for each other—, we're already our first priorities. We are what everyone around us considers to be “*a happy couple.*”

I dream about the woman, herself; my own Song of Songs with Esther's courage and glowing of something godly. With closed eyes, I let my thoughts swirl themselves toward a figure I can't yet fully describe. Though she exists. She walks with purpose, speaks with appeal, and is overflowing with charisma. She exists; somewhere—, out beyond the horizon of my mind's eye. In another realm, another sphere of being. Ethereal obsession; marked by the way she says my name. A place where perfect skin and scars can mix. That's where I'll find her. Draped in silk and dripping with just the right amount of narcissism. That's when I'll find her. At our world's end. A new beginning awaits then—, with laced-up boots and breathy tones.

“I am yours,” she whispers while thinking, *and you are mine*. All hers. Forever. She is cultured to a point that makes me feel like I have so much further to go myself. She knows what she likes and why she likes it. A conversationalist—, she can speak to anyone from the most educated to the homeless on the street. She is not above, nor below anything.

*Deeper*. She wears three-inch heels everywhere she goes. Skin-tight jeans and see-through tops when in the house. Hair up in the morning—, down by sunset. She emits a style all her own. A natural beauty—, minimum makeup, far less foundation than the rest of her friends. Slightly-rouged cheeks and pink-tinted lips. She is polished and graceful in all she does and says. A kind, courteous spirit lives within her body. Stays away from gossip and never spreads rumors—, she is who everyone calls for advice.

*Deeper*. Our first time meeting is memorable. She and I make eye-contact throughout the strangers crowding the room and slowly start moving toward each other without trying to seem like we’re slowly

starting to move toward each other. We finally erase the wide space in-between our two bodies and stand a mere few feet apart. I'm borderline-awkward while trying to introduce myself—, she playfully laughs and does the same. I look deep inside her eyes and swear Cupid must've shot me straight in the back because all I can see are bright, smoldering stars. An overwhelming sensation takes center-stage as a new lead actress is crowned and given a multitude of red rose-bouquets in the form of clumsy compliments coming out of my mouth.

“You look..., nice,” I say with more weight attached to the word than ever before.

“Thank you—,” she says before returning the remark. We dance. Or maybe we just take a couple of seats and talk for the rest of the evening. Either way—, we know we won't be forgetting one another. Something special happens in the room that night. Something—, cosmic. Or at the very least—, something out of our control. Our names play games with our tongues for the next few days. Our faces are imprinted onto the frontal lobes of each other's



brains and we swear that we can see them on every person we pass on the street—, on every block, in every store. We finally ready ourselves and reach for the phone—, finding the right contact and calling ahead of dating-rule-schedules. We couldn't resist, the wait was too much.

“Hi—,” one of us says.

“Hi—,” the other replies. And so it begins. Not just the telephone conversation but the journey our two paths have intervened for from here on out. Our speaking patterns are a thing of beauty—, where one drops off the other picks up, there is no self-conscious silence or unease of any kind. We flow in and out of verbal wordplay—, a matrimony of consonants and vowels. She is—, of Poetess-caliber.

*Always—, deeper.* We attract like water. Droplets of rain pooled together atop a patio table, we advance and reach each other's edges—, merging, growing. We are one—, atop a patio table. Contoured compulsion; a blending of unbearable desire. It's what we do. Two shades of the same color on The Painter's

palette—, whisked and mixed together. He uses us to create. Impassioned portraiture. She is my favorite, everything. A sunburst, a shadow—, a perfect time to find my other. Raised heart-rates—, one hundred-and-some beats per minute.

“Maestro..., faster.” She waves her wand while conducting my body’s orchestra to full-crescendo. What a spiritual symphony we’ve created. Angels watch from above. Analyze. Envy. We don’t blame them. We’re envious of ourselves—, being unable to rewind time and repeat past movements. Emulation is all we have left. Breathe. Fingernails running across two backs. Palm prints on the steam-streaked shower door. Breathe. Sweat seeping through mutual skin. Glorified agony of our five senses. Again, we breathe. Inhaling one another. Fine hair that’s individually numbered. Lush lips that pout when speaking pleasing things. Long legs that wrap themselves around me. Soft ankles that ache to be caressed. Like the melting lollipops of a humid-conquered Houston summer—, we drip candy-apple red. Swerving—, in and out of faster lanes.

She is my perpetual winter night; like the glimmering snow, a beauty frozen in time. Amidst tree branches and twigs wrapped in ice, her silhouette glides across the wet ground —, beckoning me closer. Her touch is colder than cold—, a degree below the lowest point ever reached. She guides me through the still landscape of a twilight world. This is where we belong—, in a togetherness which keeps each other warm and alive.

She is both sexy and sweet, classy and passionate, ladylike and a luscious lover in every way. Something I'd waited so long for—, and will continue on waiting for until the day finally arrives when we'll both sense the stirring of sensuality in the air and slowly lean into each other for the first time. Much more than that—, we patiently wait for the moment to finally let ourselves go further. Similar hips shiver with anticipation that;

“Yes..., we're together and ready.” Indeed. Undone buttons; the jeans we slide down to each other's feet. Assuredly. By all means. *Where've you been?*, we both wonder of the other. Now that we're here—, we can safely

say it was worth it. Voice; I heard it. Kiss is perfect. The lesson life teaches I took it and learned it so this letter I write; love the way that it's worded.

I've always assumed that the type of woman I'd given my heart to was more important than the woman herself. That I would've always fallen in love as deeply as I did—, no matter the person. That it just *so happened* to be them. I strive to look forward, towards my future however, and I see a very specific outline that I can't yet flesh out. The blanks are there in the right spots but I don't yet have the words to fill them in. I realize it's more than a *type* of woman I'm looking for—, but her, herself. The fact that I know she exists and is looking for me as well makes everything that came before her that much more valuable. All the shattered dreams, promises, and pictures hanging on walls; mere stepping stones to a brighter future, together. With so many girlfriends gone and so many pacts broken apart, it can all seem so discouraging in trying to find anything as special ever again. Still—, I keep the fire alive, no matter how

close it's come to burning out before. A promise I *can* make as of now, even before ever kissing her lips is this; no matter the circumstances, our union will be a sober one. I want *her* to be everything that I've always looked for in foreign chemicals and fiery liquids. I want her arms to tremble at my touch and for mine to do the same of hers. All those vivid colors I've seen throughout my numberless dreams and darkened clubs—, I want to see again deep within her own two eyes. All those feelings of flying high above the atmosphere outside, I want to experience with her as we hold one another and kiss each other awake in the mornings. A new favorite type of drug—, one where there's no chance of overdosing. A new favorite type of rush, the real reason for a pounding heart within my chest and dilated pupils within my head. My new favorite movie, my new favorite song, and our relationship—, my new favorite story.

I once sent my mother a picture I'd found of a woman who had long, blonde locks looking downward and wearing a horizontally striped U-neck shirt. She was at the head of a small

boat out in the middle of wide open water. My nautical muse.

“This is who I will one day marry—,” I wrote out with the message. Not that specific model chosen for whatever ad it was, but someone who had a very similar vibe. Adventurous, attractive, an allure I wouldn’t be able to escape. From that point on, it became our inside-reference. The *other*, the soulmate.

“You still haven’t found your girl on the boat yet,” my mom says every so often. I think about it for a split-second and then;

“I know.”

I can only imagine what the next chapter of my life holds. What I know for certain is that I’m one step closer to finding her—, one day nearer our first meeting, our first dance, or in-depth conversation. She will wash away all of the stains from everything that’s happened before her. She will renew my faith in so many things which I’ve thrown to the side in recent years. Another half. A *better* half.

She is in my past—, as I’ve felt her for ages. She is in my present—, as I dream about her

nightly. She is in my future—, as we'll soon have the chance to finally hold each other's hand. She is infinite in relation to my life's timeline. I'm already trying to find her name in my star-filled night sky. The moon isn't far off and soon, the sun will shine its glorious rays of light in her direction—, illuminating every corner and crevasse there is. We will meet. We will merge. She will smile and with that—, close every loop that's ever been opened.