

Maple on James

a Short Novel by Nathan Paul

Chapter 1

On James Avenue sat a white house, nearly identical to every other house on that side of the street, save for the color, and collectively they stained the earth like so many years of grime and wear on the very siding that clung from those dodgy domiciles. Inside of this particular house sat a girl, legally a woman by several years, but indecisive enough in her 20-something ideals and wishes to prevent her from having that particular glint in her mottled hazel eyes that would give another individual reason to call her a “woman” rather than “just a girl.” Blanketed in a dress which she had fashioned herself using her dead grandmother’s sewing machine, it hung loosely and wrinkled from her shoulders, draped along the floor to cover her feet, the souls of which were caked in the dirty thickness of suburban America; her never wearing shoes, socks or any other garb befitting a set of toes, heels and in-betweens. The dress was once white, but had now slightly yellowed from the stains of nicotine and spilled tea and she had sewn patches from various other clothes of sentiment. A rose print formerly part of a blanket made by her mother but later chewed to tatters by her dog; a Czech Republic flag from her six month galavant through Europe; a long maroon strip crimped neatly into pockets running down the dress’ left side from the sleeve of an ex-boyfriend. That would be an accurate physical description, but quite simply put, she was sunbeam elegance vibrating through the dirty specs in the air, she was the heavenly light streamers pouring through the clouds in the early morning after a long, boring haul at church, she was the apple freshly fallen from the tree and rolling down the farmland’s endless grassy hill.

The girl was rocking herself towards sleep with the mechanics that a leather couch and those dirty feet of hers produced, the middle of a sunny summer afternoon pouring in satin-thick through the windows in its best attempt to avert her from her slumbery mission. Her lips wrapped up in the wealth of yummy humming-stirring that fills the skin in that strange twilight between blinking your eyes closed and just barely napping, the curl spilling up over her cheeks like just too much milk in the mug. A cute boy from high school rode past her on a unicorn, a younger version of herself trotted a tricycle in circles around the garage, and the sun shot rays of Disco ball light all over the never-ending foggy landscape of her memories mixing with her dreams. Just as her eyes closed and she was seconds away from sleep her father walked down the stairs and, not seeing her sleeping, asked “Would you like some tea then, Annie?”

"Hmmm....mmmm..." she reveled in the waking, as it would only lead to prolonging this purgatory dreamscape. "No thank you," she whispered, nearly inaudibly, "I'm just going to take a nap here."

He looked her over, smiling, feeling the plethora of emotions that a proud parent is overcome with each time they realize that the creature in front of them is the same one they watched from the time she was no more than a kick inside of her mother's belly. Her eyeballs moved under their fleshy lids, the index finger on her right hand slowly stroked the arm of the chair and just enough motion was left in that old rocker to keep her swaying through the dusty particles dancing through the sun's big beams. A picture of Annie when she was a child glared in the reflecting light, she wore a baseball uniform and smiled with all of the innocence and hope that we all have before the realities of life come in to occupy our time and remind us of what we could have become if the necessities of putting food on the table and a roof over our collections of junk hadn't made the top of the priority list. He began to imagine that they were both fifteen years younger, he was doing the dishes and looking out through the back window at her climbing the big maple tree in the backyard, brown hair blowing through the limbs and leaves like vines finally finding the proper home. Her toes weaving between the bark and sending her up like a geyser riding a bottle rocket on a Sunday afternoon. From the time she was six, well into her teenage years, she would climb that tree every morning, playing cowboys and Indians and Barbie dolls or just playing, generally enjoying youth. As the daydream memory scene was playing out in his head, he watched her swing from one branch only to miss the next, and come bellowing ten feet down from the tree to the earthen floor below. Just as she, in his vision, hit the ground, so did the plate he was drying. He snapped back into reality.

"What happened?" Annie called from the living room. "You alright?"

"Yeah. Yes...yes," he replied, eyes welling, a bit shaken but not so much from shattered plates, "I just dropped this plate is all. Really." He swept up the glass as best he could and walked up into his study. Moments later, the tea kettle kicked up, humming its tune at first before brandishing its best falsetto. Annie came to pour a cup for him and herself, and made her way up the thirteen stairs that led from the ground floor to the second floor of the old Cape Cod style dwelling they had come to call home. She stood in the doorway of the study where her father was resting, melting into his armchair while leafing through an old black book, its cover's corners dented in and the pages loose inside, left many years ago to pull from their bindings over the struggles and subtle pleasures of long days of being opened and closed and folded and written in and closed

and opened. The book's pages were all done up in hand written and as Annie's father read over each page, slowly turning one to another like a mother parting her daughter's hair into Sunday school braids, it was apparent that he was teetering at the edge of a pool of tears. He was sucking air up into his nose and lungs like a baby whimpering, but doing his best to silence it all, having no idea his daughter stood in the doorway behind him and not wanting his insides to come spilling out all over the pages. He was well trained in such matters, though, as he'd been holding in bubbling magma emotions for decades now, containing small atomic explosions of desire and lust and regret and shame inside of his bones so that he was nearly completely shattered and only now held together by a few thin layers of skin. He was adult man, strong and stern from the skin out, and everything wobbling, cracking, cringing, just-held-together inside.

"What's that?" she slid through the door and cracked open the silence, startling him in the process. A single tear made it through his defenses, puddled up on the brim of his eye and then took the long spinning plunge down to dot and splatter across his book. He looked up at her, steamy tea swirling around her face and through her winding unkempt hair, "freckles in the fog," he thought to himself.

"Oh, nothing, really. Just something I used to do."

She sat down beside him and handed him the big green mug that was his half of the leafy caffeine warmth. "Looks like poetry to me, you used to write poems?"

"Yeah," he smirked, as though she had just asked Michelangelo if he liked to draw. "In my younger years I was a bit of a poet, I surmise."

"Well, you wrote poems so you were a poet, right?"

"If I'd've said, 'I suppose,' that would have given you reason to believe that I at least had some sort of inkling as to whether or not I was a writer. 'I surmise' is more accurate, because I don't have hard evidence." He closed the book up and pushed his gaze through the smudged window across the room. "I never got around to that part."

"Can I see?" she leaned over and tried to slip the book from his hands, hoping to read what was written in the smudged and faded pencil, yellowed worn pages and atrocious handwriting.

"Someday maybe, not right now." The 20-something version of him had been slightly more objective about sex and drugs and his willingness to write about the implications

that childbirth had dropped upon his youthful spirit, so he wasn't certain that her reading his long dormant words was the best idea. Not while sitting in the same room as him anyway. He sipped his tea and kept looking out the window until it was uncertain as to whether or not he might fall up out of his chair and right through the glass.

"What's wrong, dad?" she asked him, hoping he would tell her but knowing his standard response.

"Nothing." To him it was just another question, like when the girl behind the counter at 7-11 asks you, "How's it going?" It usually doesn't even warrant a reply, just a return of the question. We've all been reduced to asking questions to be polite, not even realizing that we're being utterly rude by not answering. We'd all be a lot better off if we only asked questions when we were looking for some sort of solution to a problem. Annie was thinking similar thoughts at the very moment.

"Okay. But if you wanted to we could chat."

"I know, I suppose, anyway. Mid-life crisis I guess you could call it. Only I've been going through it for the last twenty years."

"What, you're unhappy with where you're at? A nice house, two cars, a beautiful daughter." She smiled a little. He smiled back, but only out of a similar sort of courtesy he might show that woman from 7-11. "You weren't dealt such a bad hand."

"No, but that's the problem. Someone else dealt the cards." His reply was sharp, quick, rude, and he felt that it was a little too directed at her for comfort's concern. He considered his composure and with a new tone, "I never had a chance to draw from the deck, you might say. I never really wanted any of this," he looked up at her, "I despise owning things, special sets of silverware for certain occasions, leather couches and five TVs. I just can't understand how we've gotten to this point?"

"Well, I'm guessing it started at Wal-Mart and..."

"Hah, you're funny, Annie, really funny. Forget about it." He looked back down into the book and she felt ashamed that she had made a joke at what was obviously a very serious moment for him.

"Alright, I'm sorry, Daddy." She moved a bit closer to him, kneeling up against his chair, on her knees, arms folded to pillow her head and looked up to him with the adoring admiration of a girl who imagines heros wear her father's necktie. "Look, I start thinking about life and where I'm going to be in ten years, or when I'm your age, you know?" He kept his neck stone stiff and staring at the murky reflection of the room in his loafers. "But there's no use in regretting anything or...well, I don't know. I'm not you, I guess."

"You're not, baby, and I appreciate the consolatory advice and all, I guess I just don't see what the point to it all has been."

"You act like your dead, dad. Calm down. Sip some tea, take a drive, do whatever, just relax. Life's too short, I know that sounds—"

"Exactly. Life is much much too short and I've gone and wasted all of it already. When you're young, your age, it seems like you have all of the time in the world to relax and enjoy yourself and get around to things in a little while, but eventually you wake up and it's been a good long while the only time you have left is sucked up in mowing the lawn and trying to remember all of the anniversaries and dinner parties and birthdays of everyone you're looking to have respect you. Why, I have no idea."

"So they'll remember yours as well, and bring you a nice big bottle of beer to wash away those blues you seem to get every time you come up here. Up here to disappear, I guess. Is it into those books?"

"These books were everything to me. At one time, anyway. I never went anywhere without one and I never went a day without filling up a dozen pages or so."

She imagined him the younger man he is in pictures around the house, sipping coffee and writing graphite rivers. "So why'd you quit?" She noticed his face was flushing, and his hands were clenching to crack his knuckles in every direction they would twist.

"It's not something that just happened. Slow, over time, you know."

"No, not particularly. Why don't you tell me?"

"It's nothing really. I don't want to be the old dick who tries to ruin the young kids' lives because he hates his own, but you be careful, okay? Be careful because every day that you get older a little something dies and you never realize it until you're knee deep in

diapers and medical bills and..." he waned off into such a grumble that it was more alarming to her than if he'd have suddenly stood up and shot through the roof bullet-like into space. Then he just closed his eyes and asked her to leave the room. She was confused and at first hesitated to listen to him, but after a few moments realized that he hadn't really been in the mood to talk with her at all. All he wanted was to wallow and stew in his own mind for awhile.

Annie made her way back down stairs and back into the slippery sleeper of that leather couch, continuing to think about her father, her mind darting back through the archives, remembering her parents talking about his writing occasionally when she was much younger. It would often lead them into arguments, but these were hazy memories from before she was in the double digit age range and she hadn't noticed them talking about it for years. She started thinking about everything he'd said, particularly how you have to hold onto youth because it's always becoming a little more buried in yesterday. How he felt that he'd been dealt this life rather than having decided it for his own. Then she started thinking about how a child would be the first step on the way to ultimate adulthood depression, as pure and complex as responsibility can be. Annie realized that she was the reason for his unhappiness, and slipped into sleep wrapped in a blanket heavy with confusion, anger and guilt.

Chapter 2

Winter's chilly fingers were melting their retreat out of the curves between the bark on the great old Maple tree sitting in the back yard. The snow dripped under the warm spring sky, as the Vernal Equinox set the sun high and heavy in the March morning calm, splashing down over toadstools and the chew toys of stray neighborhood dogs. Green was pulling itself up and out, after having taken its vacation sometime back in Autumn and not showing up for work again until now, it had all the vibrancy and simultaneous fear of drudgery that is present in the eyes of the working class every Monday morning, refreshed and depressed in an instant. A small tuft of moss was doing its best to avoid the shadow of that big broad Maple tree, but given another ten minutes or so all hope would be lost as the Sun made its daily delivery across the big blue above.

Unfortunately for the moss, his time was cut short as a long mop of brown hair, resting atop the body of a man in his early twenties, came to rest against the tree, extending the Maple's spiraling shadow just enough to exclude our poor carpet-like foliage from getting its due last sparkle of shine. The long haired man, brown locks twisting down over his ears and over his cheeks, spilling onto and off of his shoulders to hang like a suspended waterfall of chocolate milk, frozen in an instant with fear of staining another mountainside worth of shirt. He held a book in his hands, hard black cover and binding holding several hundred pages, most of them filled with the graphite scratches that he referred to as his work, hundreds of poems, rants and short stories, written notices on the very fabric of life as it wove through the world, he alone sensitive enough to see the strands as they split the sky and hemmed the contours of daily life.

His shoes squished a spring song, joined only one notch above silence by the slight hum of the wind as it pushed itself around the rolling tires in the street out front, mimicking bullfrogs as they sound when no one is around to hear them sounding like themselves. He let those shoes slip out from under him, his back sliding down the trunk of the tree, a back-scratching on his way to a favorite resting place, the good Mother Earth. Within moments the pencil that he'd concealed between the jean material constituting his pants and their pocket was unleashed, dashing scar and scribble against the crisp parchment tucked inside of that black sketchbook.

Annie, through the kitchen window, watched the young man leaning against the tree in the back of her yard for several moments before it occurred to her that he was a

stranger, and in her yard as though nothing was unnatural. After another moment she realized that he had gotten there by stepping out through the garage door, quite casually in fact. Then she wondered why she wasn't disturbed. Strange men coming out of your garage should alarm anyone, in particular a young girl, presumably home alone. She turned to look around and confirm whether or not she was alone, and as her heel pivoted across the cold linoleum floor and her head followed her shoulders into what should have been the rest of the kitchen she was met with surprise and shock. The spinning stopped, and suddenly she was perched on the picnic table in her backyard, though it felt slightly firmer and something was strange about its color or perhaps the way the wood was much more willing to give slightly under her own weight. She looked up suddenly and saw the long haired man, whittling away at the pencil in his fingers, long lines of verbs and nouns and other such magickal devices. A little air pulled in through her teeth, whistling at first and trailed by a wheeze as it rolled down her throat and dropped directly, stone-like, to the pit of her stomach. She winced back, expecting the man to look up, but he never did. Consumed in his work, he scratched back and forth, filling page after page after page before he finally set the book down, reached in his pocket and produced a single slim cigarette.

Annie was certain that now he would look up and discover her, but even as she watched him whisper smoke rings to the springy air, she couldn't move. Stuck hard in a trance, wondering who this man could be, she felt the sting of intrigue and exhaustion that only those who have jumped from the tip of a skyscraper, unhindered, to land speedily and suddenly on the cold concrete below, can properly express. Just as his eyes were under their brows' horizon, her viewpoint was immediately changed and she saw herself sitting on the picnic table, looking quite comically shocked. She realized quickly that she was looking through his eyes at herself—out of body—still up on the picnic table.

Half of a moment later she opened her eyes, disoriented at first but soon recognizing the curve and contour of her ceiling as it hung, unimpressed, above her and her leathery rocking chair.

Chapter 3

A few footsteps after she'd come out of the dream, Annie found herself standing in the bathroom, looking at herself in the mirror. Her eyes darted back and forth, up and down inside of their sockets, glowing green, bright flashing green, the green seen on the blurry backs of grasshoppers as they make their first jump for the season, darting through and splitting apart any other color or hue in their way. Those eyes had been good to her. Without them how would she know the difference between sitting at a stoplight and being on your way? They had shown her the ugliness of the naked male body, her first boyfriend undressing before what was supposed to be their first time. She used them to watch the sun rise up over the Manzanno Mountain Wilderness, a great sequoia encrusted mountain in New Mexico, where she had camped for two weeks with her father when she was only six years old. Those eyes had shown her the distorted twists of her first puppy as it lay scattered all over the road, shortly after the dog had come a little too close to the giant rubber rolling pin tires spinning under a passing SUV. But right now they were looking into and through her, investigating what might be the source of the dream she had just pulled up out of.

She thought that she looked funny in that dream, after she had assumed the identity of the long haired man, gazing up at her flabbergasted self staring back at her, arms the color of honey, dripping out from her little white blouse to pour her sticky sweetness all over her skinny legs and blending into the wooden table underneath her as though one of the great old masters had painted the scene personally.

Then she thought about how the long haired man looked. He was lanky, though not skinny particularly, perhaps toned would be an accurate description, but it was more that he was just perfectly fitting. The meat wrapped around his bones and in turn was wrapped in clothing to make him seem to have no seams, no difference between skin and cloth, lips and cheeks. "If I looked like him, I'd knock all the ladies on their asses," she said, smiling, to herself, followed with a kiss on the mirror and a spin on her heels, she slipped into the shower to get started on what promised to be a good new day.

Hot water running over human flesh is one of the most amazing concoctions available on this planet. While the liquid itself burns just enough to get the attention of the nerves, those sinewy tendrils so ready to tell the brain the many stories of the body, it sizzles and floods away the dead skin from the previous day. All of those crusting epidermal flakes, in their last fleeting moments stopping to wonder if what they've seen over the

day was equal to that of those they'd replaced. Each new day's worth of bacteria an entire civilization, raised and burned between the rising of two suns.

Annie stood very still, letting the steam fill the air and blur over whatever trace of her the mirror might be trying to hold onto, the water rhythming down over her eyes, kissing all around her lips and dropping over every inch of her until she was completely and immaculately immersed, the water outside of her body longing to meet its kin on the inside. Annie often thought that if the human body is made up of 75% water, then if she were to get wet enough, she could liquefy the remaining 25% until she was as fluid as the rain. Then she could slip down the drain and start her way off into the ocean, where she could get evaporated up into the clouds, sitting up there just until they decided to dump her back down into her salty sea home. She was sure that she could do it, but avoided an attempt until she could be certain that she'd rain down into her self again, and not end up as half an Annie here the other half stuck up in her tree.

The long haired man kept creeping into her mind, popping his head out from behind every image as they flashed, thousands in the course of her shower. He rode on the back of a pony that Annie had once taken around a circle at the county fair. He was the tobacconist where she bought her favorite cigarettes. His eyes peered out of the closet where her bogeyman once stood. Everything she thought about ended up being polluted by his murky image, which hadn't faded in the least though she'd been awake for nearly an hour now. He was familiar to her, but she didn't know why. Then she heard her father yelling something, indiscernible over the hum and the rush of the shower and separating walls, which was so startling to her that it immediately replaced the image of the long haired man with that of her father, to the point that she was unable to remember what the boy from her dream even looked like now.

"Oh, daddy," she sighed a desperate puff enough to break through the milky misty steam filling the room. "Why wouldn't you keep writing? What made you stop? If it really was me, then what about having a baby kept you from finding your own time." She thought these things to herself and found her lips falling into a sort of frown, which for her was simply a straight line, but her lips were lower than usual. "Well, if it was because of me that you had to quit, I suppose I'll be the one to help you get published," and she decided that she would spend the next couple of weeks trying to get his work out to agents or publishers or whoever it is that you send these things to.

After separating the excess shower water from her body's own supply, via a nice thick towel and the violent shaking of her head which sent little drops of oxygen-mixed-

hydrogen splish-splashing all over the bathroom walls, she made her way upstairs, into her father's study. Books of all sorts lined the walls: some self help books, some technical manuals, a half completed encyclopedia, even a few comic books. Mostly though, those old shelves held books on philosophy and religion, all written by authors doing their best to figure out what separates the living from the dead, all trying to discover the secrets of their own existence, who they are and who they would want to be. Unfortunately for them, as dreamers, if they ever got to be who they wanted I'm quite certain they'd still be disappointed.

Annie rocked up onto the tips of her toes and reached as high, as long as she could, extracting several black books, one at a time, all full of her father's writing. She fell back into his recliner, wrapped in a towel as she hadn't given even half of a thought to changing before diving into this treasure trove of a telescope into her father's past. Her own past, as well, she hoped, assuming that something would be written about the way he felt for her or some small speck of indication that it wasn't as horrible an experience as she was beginning to play out in her head. She cracked open the cover to the first book, it smelled sort of like chocolate, chocolate covered raisins, but it was more powerful than that. It was the sort of feeling you get when you first "smell" Autumn, or when you open a new pack of cigarettes on your way to your favorite band's concert. The first poem, practically fading off of the page, read:

Where I've come from here
Is far from where I'll be
The question only is
"Who will be there with me?"

She reread it a few times. Poetry, she thought, is a silly bowl of Jell-o, hard to hold but tasty once you get it off the spoon and into your belly.

The bucket's red with paint
And similar with age
Washed halfway down a drain
To an unimaginable space

Handmade baskets line
The bricks of basement walls
A boy enters upstairs
While below the Spider King crawls

The boy is thick with grins
From donut charity
The spider dims the basement light
A midnight rarity

She was impressed. A magickal sort of feeling came up through her fingertips and danced around her shoulders, so she continued:

Princess in her cap and gown
Skipping stones for two
Pictures talking on the wall
Best of wishes to you all

The music's short
But jingles on
The night is good
But lingers along
Morning creme brulee memories
The picture box you're treasuring
Of all the dead photos you've thrown away
You forced yourself to make this one stay

A cup of tea for in my head
A much tread rug for a carpet
A floating feeling in my lung
A drowning singing in my sung

A brand new star begins again
The music shifts to alter in
A weekends worth of paper and glue
To reassemble all that you
Can manage to resemble
After collaging the "who you will be" with the "who you knew"

Annie smiled again, a big, ear licking smile as she sank further into the chair and even further into the books. Hours passed and syllables went dancing their way through words, nouns and verbs, sentences and simple thoughts so amazing that she might as

well have been a sketch on the page for how captured she was with the writing. The rest of the world became nothing more than an old wooden stick, holding up this giant bound book, large enough to crawl right inside, for anyone who wanted to. And as the light bulb lit up a warm halogen glow above Annie's head she realized, anyone who read it would most definitely want to.

Suddenly, Annie's father waltzed into the room, unaware even of her presence at first, but once he saw what she was doing, he was shocked, coated in embarrassment and only the slightest tinge of anger. She, in turn, was thrown, dropping the book in her hand and knocking the rest off onto the floor. She quickly, and without him noticing, slid one of the books under his recliner.

"Annie, what are you, um, doing?" he felt a little uncomfortable as her towel had loosened itself over the course of her reading and she was working to adjust and affix it to cover the parts of a young girls body that her father has long ago decided to ignore all together, let alone see them in their rawest state.

"Nothing," she pulled the towel tight and looked at the recliner, making certain it completely concealed the hidden book, "I was just reading your stuff, it's really good you know!"

With that statement, all of his anxiety suddenly stepped out and he was left with only slight confusion, mixed proportionally, as was appropriate, with excitement. "Well, I'm not certain you should be reading those...things. I mean, there's stuff in there that I...well, I was a much different person back then and didn't have the responsibilities that I do today in as much as..."

"Dad, it's fine. Nothing in here is offensive or anything, I liked it. I like it. A lot."

"Well, even still...you shouldn't be reading it. I don't know." He started scratching the back of his head, his thinning hair standing up as though he'd been charged with enough static electricity to cover the earth in helium balloons and alter its orbit around the sun. Summer in February for all.

"Look, your mother will be back tomorrow, I'll talk to her and if you still want to read them and she says it's okay, well then—," he finished the sentence even as it was only half completed, as was a typical custom of his—assuming that people had gotten his meaning and seeing no point in continuing to exhaust his voice, as though he had a

certain amount of words he was allowed to use in any given day and was doing his best not to get charged for going over.

"Okay," she very nonchalantly picked up the books she'd knocked over, save for the one she'd hidden, handed them to him and made her way out the door and towards her own room, leaving her father standing there with a stack of his memories and nothing to feel but embarrassed. Then he thought about how he never used to get embarrassed in the least when people would ask to read his writing.

"Am I embarrassed for the words," he asked himself, "or because they've been sitting on this shelf all these years?" Then he let a smirk dart up either of his cheeks at the realization that talking to yourself is a sign that you're still crazy enough to be interesting.

Chapter 4

Day's crisp glow left the twilight to blur it around the edges, pink its cool hues and with a windswept hoorah it traded itself in for the night. A big moon hung blunt and silver in the deep majesty of that particular spring midnight. Bats fluttered around, singing songs like blind men on street corners, great inspirational songs that struck fear and awe into the hearts of passersby rather than pity all too often felt for the blind. The crickets swayed their legs, drawing long piercing chants into the howling deep blue of 1 o'clock. A single headlight, its twin long lost from the front of a 1988 Chevy truck, rust chewing holes through the bed and alcohol chewing holes through the liver of its driver, sped through the night in front of Annie's house, cracking a gap in the silent dark of 3 o'clock. 4 and 5 found themselves quite content to listen to the wind rustle gently through the big Maple in the backyard and just after 6 o'clock the garage door opened, sucked up by a great automatic machine, powered by the fingers of the lady of the house.

Annie's mother put her car in park, as it drifted slowly into an exercise bike that fell over under the slow momentum of the silver SUV's bumper, crashing a sort of clunky clatter all over the dirty garage floor. She swore at the sound, for its potential to wake her husband and daughter, loud enough to finish the job if it hadn't been done right the first time. Luckily for her, neither of them had heard her.

Her arms went bare into the trunk and came out lined with bags. Bags full of casual wear and business wear, and business casual wear. Bags full of makeup intended to be worn in a meeting and perfume intended for the hotel bar afterwards. Bags full of briefcases full of documents that no one ever intended to read but everyone was quite certain to take notes on and then file off in some drawer. Being the only representative for the entire west side of town for one of the largest paper distributors in the region was no easy task, and it involved an insurmountable amount of traveling. Once when Annie's father was tired of saying goodbye every other day he said to his wife, "Gwen, I swear there's an impression on every damn airplane going out of the city that'd fit your ass cheeks perfectly." All that she'd heard was a faint mumble ended with the storm door slamming behind her.

Back in the present of her return, she managed to distribute her bags on various chairs, coffee tables and the floor between the front door and her bedroom, exchanged her business suit for a night gown and proceeded directly to the bathroom. She vomited profusely for about 15 minutes before returning to bed.

Gweneth, Annie's mother's full name, had never bothered to wake her husband during the night to let him know she'd returned. In fact, she hadn't touched him at all, instead vying to wrap her fingers spider-like around her own stomach, a web of cold skin over cold skin, in an attempt to subside any further ventures to the lavatory. An hour after her head sunk into the pillow her feet again had the pleasure of tiptoeing back in that direction however, more out of concern for keeping those manicured toes warm than not waking her family. Or perhaps she just didn't want her family awake so that she might not have to deal with them exactly this early, what with the sun just barely making it over the horizon and not quite yet surpassing the top of the First United Methodist Church's steeple.

When Annie's father came into the living room for the first time that morning, his wife was spread out on the couch, a cup of tea spilled on the floor and it looked as though she'd gotten sick all over her nightgown. He tried to gently lift her left leg back onto the couch and wrap her up in the closest blanket, but when he began to wipe away the vomit from her collar she woke up, startled, and swung her hand so that her wedding ring caught him in the glasses and sent the wire framed appendages careening across the room and into the far wall.

"Jesus, what are you doing!" she shouted, pulling her gown together taut over her chest and finding she'd just stuck her hand in yesterday's dinner. "I nearly thought you were some room service bell hop coming to attack me!" she wiped her hand off on the blanket and stood up, noticing the spilled tea and shaking her head in disgust.

"Sorry, hun, I just was trying to cover you up, it's a little chilly out is all." She didn't hear a word he said. Her eyes were perfectly situated on her face in the appropriate manner, but no one was looking out through them. She was clearly far from home, in a manner of speaking, but he couldn't tell exactly where she might be visiting. "With all of the flying she does," he thought to himself, "it's a wonder she doesn't just leave herself behind one of these times."

"Look," she patted her night gown down and walked into the bedroom, "we need to talk."

Annie's hair static clung to whatever nearby solid objects it could find as she swiveled her body south of the hips off of the bed and her toes kissed the floor for a good morning greeting. The staggering sensation she had in her head from a too early

morning mixed with an eagerness to get going into a brand new day was matched quite nicely by the sway in her hips, not so much a sexy, show-off-your-curves-baby sway, but more of the drunkard-gone-for-a-walk type. Her spirit was all that was holding her up, and her feet might as well have been dragging her toes behind her as ethereal as she felt in the misty cotton mouth morning. Her door was a barricade, typically easily surmounted, but today the backdraft of heated parental anger was about to burst into the room.

As she opened the door she was nearly knocked back by the screaming sounds of lightning and distortion crackling through her parent's bedroom walls. She couldn't make out any of the words exactly, but even muffled, the verbal grudge match going on behind those walls was certain to involve the thrashing of arms and the degradation of one and the other's personal habits in order to prove a point. Annie laughed for a minute after realizing she could discern the muffled groaning of her father's retorts from the stifled high pitch flailing of her mother's relentless attack. She laughed again at the idea that she knew them so well that it was most certainly dad in the defense and mom swinging the club. Then she purposely frowned in order to amend for the horrible act of laughing at others' misfortune, but forgot the whole event as she slid down into her daily breakfast beginning.

"Tea would be nice," she said, looking up into the doorway as though someone was standing there, "would you care for some?" She slid her chair back and made it to her feet, "No, no, don't be silly, I'll put on some water." A pause. "No really, no trouble at all," and she danced across the hard stone tile and grout, lit a match and applied it to her own cigarette and then to the gas powered stove. While the water took its time bubbling and boiling she danced with her imaginary companion all over the kitchen, backed by the sound of her parents clamoring in the distance and birds' contrasting happy-as-the-sun whistle, until finally the teapot let out its great bellow, indicating it could take no more and that the game had begun. "I always win out, you weak-willed little thing."

Annie and her tea made her way into the bedroom, forgetting that imaginary beau in the kitchen, only to have him reappear, reflecting in the big picture window that televisioned the outside world into the living room. Her lips crept slowly down, looming over the steam proclaiming heavenly aspirations and she was just meager moments away from having the first hot wisps of leaf and steamy delight roll over her kiss when her father came bursting out of the bedroom.

"I don't know what to tell you Gwen, I'm...I mean, well—" he was flush red and desperately struggling over his words. Annie thought it strange that a man so much the master over the written word would have such a hard time when speaking face to face.

"Forget it! Just, dammit, forget it!" Annie's mother slammed the door shut, only to open it again in a moment, "And no, Annie doesn't need to be reading that trash about how you can't handle life!"

As her father, head hung in a murky concoction of shame and regret and remorse, walked through the living room and out into the backyard, Annie realized that she wouldn't be reading any more of her father's poetry. Not with her mother's blessing, anyway.

Instantly her mind shot to the secret last chronicle she had tucked away so slyly under her father's chair and her cheer went up like it was always meant to. She sat still, however, and finished her tea as the rising morning sun experimented with positioning the world's shadows in an assortment of curves and densities. She sat there for nearly an hour, soaking in the good morning and wondering what exactly her parents had been arguing about, but only briefly. It first struck her, after hearing what her mother had to scream before practically smashing the door closed so hard it nearly became a permanent part of the wall, that it was an argument over whether or not she was able to read her father's work. That realization quickly wilted into one of the most depressing and guilt laced feelings of Annie's life, but she quickly floated above the idea, balloon-like, considering the context and inflection in her mother's words. Still, she was left to wonder what could cause them—her parents who hadn't spoken a word, harsh or nearly otherwise, in years—to go barrels blazing into the setting sun before noon could even show its zenith crown. Eventually her mother emerged from the room exhausted, said hello, using as few syllables as possible, and made her way out the door, into her car, and down the suburban street.

Chapter 5

Annie's father had by now left as well, and so she proceeded to lay claim to the top of the stairs, the longest hike high, her intentions to uncover that holiest of grails, that ark of the covenant that was now all the more appealing for its newfound taboo determination. She reached the top and wrapped her clammy and shaking fingers around the imitation crystal knob to her father's den, looking back down the thirteen steps, steep and brooding, making certain no one had come home to surprise her in her actions. As the coast was clear, she opened the door only enough to slide her skin and bones through, careful not to disturb any restless souls who might report her to her father at the slightest disruption. She glided across the carpeted floor and fell quickly to her palms and knees, feeling with her left hand under the recliner-gone-treasure-chest for that most sacred of tomes. First her index finger and then her middle one, followed soldier-like by the rest of her hand, wrapped around the spine of the book and she drew it out quickly and carefully, jumping to her feet after her eyes had assured her of her prize, lifting it high into the air like some Pan suddenly finding his mystical flute. She immediately dropped the book down to eye level and opened it, only to make certain that the words were still written within. "Why am I so excited?" she thought but quickly dismissed it as her teeth smiled a brightening throughout the whole room and she darted downstairs to refill her mug of tea.

The hot flowed quite nicely, oxygen and hydrogen boiling over one another in an endlessly braiding stream from silver pot to stone mug until the last drop that could fit bubbled the water up over the brim. Annie looked out the window and saw that big great Maple in the backyard, its limbs motioning her to come, it couldn't have been more intoxicating were one of the Sirens singing from off one of its bows and dropping money as fruit to the ground. She was out the door and up into her favorite position, two limbs that formed a perfect seat, back and single armrest, all before the leaves could turn her tea green.

She opened the book to a random spot and began to read:

On

out on the wind
is a settling sound
of determination

mixed with resound
out in those trees
is a calling of pleads
come to your life
and it will fall on your knees

here in my skin
i can twist and pretend
it dies and it's dry
or flakes and it sheds
here in my eye
is a wonderful sight
but i look it too long
and it sees me as slight

here in the sky
is the moon bouncing shine
i'd like to be loved
but i love to be liked

out on the wind
is that rustling still
i get up and go
of my own good free will
out on that lake
is a man walking free
i wish she was mine
and i wish he was me

Annie's eyes grew heavy with a nostalgia, she could almost feel the exact same way as her father felt writing that. Not that she felt that she was close to his own emotions, but she knew, somehow, exactly what he was thinking, almost as if remembering writing the thing herself. Then she turned to the last page to find a poem titled Annie.

Annie

In your eyes I watch a little memory of me
Come blooming out to animate all the pictures that I've seen

In my eyes you laugh and wrap your fingers 'round my wedding ring
Before you I never noticed that the crickets sound is "sing"

I see you for the hindrance that you'll put all on my life
I feel you when you cry and I'm a hundred miles away
I know who you'll become and wish I would have tried
A little harder not to push you into being who I'd wanted you to be

But you're still only nothing, no number to your age
Just a sleeping mass of mixed up between your mother and me
And how she cries because you've left her for the world
She had you all inside and to herself now she has to share her little girl

I'm sorry if I look sad when you're old enough to know what that means
But I'm giving up myself to provide you with the best that you can be
And someday when you read this, through the time and faded lead
Know the way I felt is never easily captured by the way it was said

And as I write this final page of fortune teller poetry
Like a blind man looking for a longer cane in hopes of finding prophecy
I sit here, perched and lanky, in our backyard Maple tree
Drunk on teetering along the edge of social heresy

Annie fell asleep just as the final consonant crawled into her head, wrapped in the big arms of the Maple and never safer than fifteen feet above the ground, perched like a bird with no reason to fear the sensation we as people call falling but the birds only know as flying.

The sun did its zenith dance and looked as far westward as it could from over that old dusty white house, bleaching its sides in an effort to fight the accumulating grime that Mother Earth loves to spread so thick and often. It was hours into its retreat before Annie awoke, her eyes practically snapping from the crusties that had accumulated in the corners of them.

In the haze of the moment she forgot to be startled by her position, and though she couldn't put her finger on it, something was different. Subtly and drastically different. Annie fell out of the tree.

Chapter 6

A monkey couldn't have swung out of the big bear hug that was that tree any faster than Annie herself did right then. No sooner did her feet force a little dust cloud out of the dirt than her head, tilting from a bird's eye view to survey the horizon, noticed that her house suddenly seemed different. If "what the?" had ever been uttered actually and out loud, it was right then and there, squealing at first, from the back of her throat, and then stopping with a loud thud right into the porcelain of her top teeth. At first she noticed that the house was whiter, cleaner — had someone cleaned it while she was sleeping? It would be a bit absurd that she had been careening up in that old tree all day while some strangers came by and white washed her house, painted it with a fresh coat and cleaned everything up without her ever noticing it. At times like these the wayward soul wonders if they should be wearing a watch to make certain days of their lives aren't passing them by without knowing. Of course, the more you stare at a time piece the less time you have to not stare at it, but that's for another sentence in another story.

Annie began turning around, her feet not necessarily moving as much as the world just started spinning behind her, the sky a blur, her own surroundings pivoting faster, faster, slower, faster, speeding up and coming to a halt enough to make the most scallow of wags fall seasick into the Mississippi. Annie tried to stumble to the picnic table, but it was unfamiliar to the touch, though very similar to how she had remembered it in her dream. She sat down, thinking she must be blacking out or fainting or under the influence of some sort of ailment, but then realized that she was completely about her wits. She stood up, took a step forward, half expecting to fall through the ground itself. She then noticed that her house was missing a certain key element, the garage. She ran over to inspect the situation, but the siding on the house was unhindered in any way. It was as if no garage ever existed.

"Whew," she thought to herself (actually, she thought about saying it aloud to her self), "Okay, I'm just dreaming. A lucid dream. Yes, quite fine." Her first inkling was to look into the corners of her eyes and check for that black sort of fog that they always insert into daytime television or old movies to indicate when someone is dreaming. "Hmmm," she thought quite vocally, "No fog."

Annie ran into the kitchen through the door that once lead an early riser out the door and into the garage (still non-existent), only to burst into a completely foreign room. This was her house right? All of the cabinets and the placement of the stove and refrigerator

was the same, they were just all different colors...a different table, linoleum floors, wood paneling. "God, what is this, the 70's?" she screamed, out loud, half hoping that someone would hear her and explain this all away, yet half frightened of whomever might live in such an incredibly tacky domicile. "Well," she thought, unaware if she was speaking or thinking at this point, "Actually, it isn't so bad." She was suddenly struck with an idea and, quite embarrassed, ran outside thinking that she had wandered into someone else's home. The houses on her side of the street were all based around the same architectural design, a money saver for towns booming up in the 40's and 50's.

If a good idea ever was, this certainly wasn't it. Before she even opened the door, Annie immediately noticed through the kitchen window that all of her neighbors houses were different colors. After a moment of reaffirming her position and the shapes of the houses around her she realized that she was in her house. Only her house, and all of the other ones as far down the street as she could see, were completely different.

Suddenly a car pulled into the driveway and a striking young woman, straight brown hair flowing down over a bright green shirt, long arms tucked into pockets crowning long legs and ending in belled bottoms large enough to call the congregation in for Sunday service, appeared out of the car and into the kitchen so quickly Annie never had a chance to react.

The woman opened the door and Annie went to cringe, expecting the other woman to scream. Only there was no scream. In fact, there was no cringe. Annie opened her eyes to find that she was hugging this stranger, full on and now, wait, kissing her!

"I'm sorry!" she meant to scream, but the sound was only in her head. After a moment of confusion that, if measured, could rank somewhere up there with the War of the Worlds scare or the reelection of President George W. Bush, Annie realized that she wasn't at all in control of her body. Then she began to take notice of her hands, swinging in front of her, and caught a reflection of herself as the body passed through the kitchen window's field of reflection — it wasn't her at all! In her stead, where once the caramel and soft of her skin had existed, now there were thick and hairy arms, she felt stubble on her cheeks and her body had the strong awkwardness of a man.

She only had a moment's glance, unable to control the direction her eyes were looking in or any of her motor functions (or whoever's functions they were), but could discern that she was somehow inside of the body of the Long Haired Man from her dream. The man and the woman who had returned to what Annie could have sworn was her house

were embraced in a long hug and affectionately discussing their days with one another. Annie realized that she was merely a guest now in this body, though she seemed to have had full control only moments earlier. She studied the woman, who looked very oddly familiar, and Annie wondered for a moment if it was her sister, somehow.

"Do I have a sister? Maybe a twin? Yeah, that's it!" Eureka, word is born! "I have a twin sister and we were separated at birth and now, somehow, I've been brought here, to this same town where my sister lives...because they're always talking about how twins separated at birth like this end up meeting and having all kinds of things in common. That explains the house!"

That didn't explain any of it. Annie was uncertain as to whether or not she should let herself remain completely confused or keep going in the twins direction.

Then it became obvious to her that there wasn't really much of a choice, no certain one anyway, so she just let her mind race while she watched her host and his love interact.

Chapter 7

"So, would you like to hear of what wonderful amazement I've been up to today?" the Straight Haired Woman asks the Long Haired Man, squirming in her seat, fidgeting her fingers inside of her pockets so intently as to make a baker kneading dough pull out a pencil to take notes.

"Well, as I do sit around and waste away my days dreaming of what it is my beautiful wife is up to, I suppose that I most certainly would." Chimes outside of the window play a rickety tune as Annie sits, enthralled, trapped inside of a talking head, hearing him from the inside, quite literally, his thoughts as well as the earthly sound vibrations batting about the room.

"Okay, well, first go and get some wine," she playfully flicks her wrist as a master might do to a slave. The man cocks his head back slightly, pretending disbelief at her audacity, and marches into the kitchen. Annie feels for a moment as though she's still in the chair, but quickly yo-yos back into his space. "Hurry," the woman yells, "this is news you don't want to keep waiting!"

Back in the kitchen, he opens a cupboard door, where in the familiar house she used to know would sit several matching glasses, and from a large rack of wine bottles taps his fingers across their tops—"Last year's Christmas present...good news?"

"Sounds grand, just quickly, oh—"she begins to get up as though making her way into the kitchen as well, "I'll just come in..."

"I've got it," he appears in the doorway, two glasses, quite full and one of them spilling over a bit onto his jeans and the thick carpet, burnt orange and shag under the splashing droplets.

"Okay, sit down," he hands her glass to her and slides across the couch to meet her at the hip. "I went to the art museum today, I just stormed right in, with my paintings and all and demanded a showing!" The sarcasm was thick in her voice, enough to push up past her first swallow of wine and dance all down his throat and into his heartstrings.

"You got a showing?" he made a motion with his glass as though to set it on some invisible table, but as is the result of using those sort of non-existent furnishings, the

glass merely fell to the floor and gave the good people at Crayola a run for their money, mixing wine's plenary purple blood crimson with the carpet's orange, borrowed most likely from the tip of a lit cigarette.

No one cared. They were now conjoined at every possible location, lips tasting lips, legs locked around hips like belts holding up the felicity that, if not contained between the two, might run the risk of exploding out the room and into the world, setting the karmic balance off two-fold and causing all death and destruction to come to a halt. This, they knew, would be incredibly bad for business, and not wanting to be the single source of reason for the downfall of modern man, decided to hold the feeling all in to themselves.

"So when is it? Let's get ready!" The Long Haired Man made a quick glance out of his left eye towards the spilled wine, then plucked his beautiful wife's glass from her hand and began participating in the most elegant act of sharing.

"Well, it isn't for a few months, so I've got time...to sort out the ones I want to show and all."

"Good, then we'll celebrate straight for a week, if you've got time," he reached under the couch and in what can only be imagined to be the way an infant Houdini would magic out his baby-burps, produced a small pipe, made of colored glass and packed taut with a leafy green substance.

Moments later their tastebuds were realizing what life was like on a cotton field and the air was no doubt upset for having to share space with the potent wafting smoke of marijuana. Annie, who in her own body at her own time, was not unaware of the effects of the good drug, which she often assumed was just another sort of food or drink, as it sprung not just from the ground, but from ground in lands that were near-fable to her. Balmy, tropical worlds that saw only two seasons, continual heat sparsely mixed with relentless rainstorms. Extreme sun and extreme rain, the cycle doesn't get much more poignant than that, she assumed. Here, inside of the Long Haired Man's head, though, she was left sober and simultaneously able to see how it was truly affecting him: eyelids growing heavy, head bouncing like a tennis ball back and forth and his thought erupting into too many conversations to relate to the only other set of ears in the room. And nothing he ended up saying was at all in resemblance to what originally sparked in his thoughts. She began laughing profusely, inside of that great covered dome mounting his face and neck, and he proceeded to follow her cue.

Within the minute the entire room was giggling and the two lovers began to roll around on the ground, through spilled wine and crushing the glass beneath them. "Ow!" squeaked the Straight Haired Woman, but the pain was less notable than the pleasure of current existence, so they both ignored it and went on laughing and talking.

"Well, now you know what this means," she said, "no more need for anything even closely related to work." He rolled over on his back. "No more of this retail blah blah blah talking to women all day about how they might do better off with a size 6 shoe instead of crushing their toes in a 4. And after we get the money, you can start working on your little dream, right?"

"Ah...perhaps, I'm not ready yet, but we have awhile to go." He turned his head to the side, so that his nose came bumping up perfectly against hers. "Now, I'm certain you'll be a smash at the show, but I think I'll keep doing the part time thing until we actually see old Cherry Tree George's wooden-toothed grin come filling up the couch cushions, okay?"

"Suit yourself," she hopped up and fashioned her back to the seat of the couch, motioning for him to join her, "but as for me, it's all holidays from here on out." He jumped from the floor to the couch and landed on her in a manner so accurately deceiving as to be fit for professional wrestling, and began tickling her curvaceousness profusely, right up until she kicked him off of the couch. He yelled, a startling yell, inappropriate for the playful way of the moment, and Annie felt a sudden biting, stinging, driving headache of a sensation shoot through his brain. Then, all black.

What Annie could only assume were merely moments later she opened her eyes. She was clearly back in control now and those giant mottled hazel orbs she had almost forgotten how to work on her own were staring straight up into a beautiful blue sky, cut into sections by the big backyard Maple she'd fallen out of and her mother's downward gaze as she knelt over her daughter's fallen person. Annie noticed none of these objects as details however, simply as her backyard. Her familiar backyard, the way she had grown accustomed to it.

Chapter 8

Annie hadn't been sucked back into the real world for more than half of the time it takes to officially declare a moment a minute when her parents, mother and father holding hands the way only lovers in the wake of a heated argument do, came through the garage's back door to find her laying on the ground, the pages of her father's book scattered all over the ground as the binding had busted loose after falling out of the tree above. Some of the pages were still blowing about, and one of them let the wind push it up against Annie's mother's feet.

"What...are you alright?" her father asked, recognizing the parchment pressed up against his wife's shoes and wondering whether he should be worried for his daughter, prepared for his wife's retaliation once she realized the contents of the ruined book, or angry at himself for allowing his life to drop him off here, in this loneliest of frightening moments.

Annie's mother hadn't recognized the papers though, and immediately left her husband to Florence Nightingale at her daughter's side. Several of the other sheets blew around the women as George tried to collect them up in his arms, half out of wanting to keep the memories safe, but the much larger half simply wanting to avoid his wife's wrath. "Annie," her mother held her hand and felt her head, inspecting the ground around it for blood, and after being satisfied with her daughters nod and grunt, turned back to look for why her husband hadn't joined them.

"What are you doing George?" the confusion in her voice was a ploy, a clever acting trick meant to carry on its back the burden of guilt that she decided was only appropriate for him to be feeling for not rushing to his daughter's side. "Don't worry about those papers, get over here and..." suddenly it dawned on her what the scribbles and scratches of lead were all over the pages. Like ancient taboo papyrus gliding over the desert sands, George was shuffling and scampering to pick them all up, red-faced and dropping as many as he managed to retrieve, the slave fumbling with the mop to clean up the milk he had spilled in the master's quarters.

And when the master realized just what had occurred, she rose up with all of the fury of Cleopatra riding the back of Rah and made ready to smite her wicked subject. George turned his head, eyes closed, waiting for the tidal wave to come and crush him where he stood.

But nothing.

George heard the door to the garage slam shut and as he looked around, his wife was nowhere to be found. The papers had all fallen from his hands and lay strewn across his feet, crumpled and beginning to blow. Several more swirled around Annie, who was slowly sitting up. At first he looked right over her, wondering why his wife had just left when she was poised so keenly to attack. Then he glanced back at his daughter, the flat back of her head unaware that—even as she sat there staring at her father, fearful and ashamed for what she'd done because of what it now meant for him—it was growing what would soon be a large lump right where her head had come drumming down on the hard, real earth.

There was a moment of peace between father and daughter. Annie still confused from her strange superb journey into what was too real and absurd to have been a dream, swirling into the feeling of regret for what she had now obviously caused her father. He noticing her anguish and seeing in his daughter the little girl but now, suddenly, with the eyes of a grown woman, wondering what she must think of him from what she's read, knowing that in those pages were ideas that must have been quite confusing for her. Poetry about how having her come into his life had ruined his dreams and given him new ones at the same time. Poems recounting his indefinable love for her, his occasional despise of what she meant to his freedom, and the strange quilt that it laid as the foundation for their entire existence. Both of them looked into and through each other, almost back at themselves through the others eyes. The birds became quiet and the wind motionless in that instant, and the earth stopped in its orbit out of wonderment over the energy bouncing around under that Maple tree at that moment.

Suddenly, the kitchen window opened and Gwen unleashed her full anger in one grunting primal scream. It lasted roughly two minutes or so, and she must have been screaming some string of words that clearly had meaning for her, but were incoherent to anyone in the two mile radius who most definitely heard her. Then she stopped, regained her composure and shrieked “And now we have another one on the way!”

Chapter 9

These expansive small town hills that are the Northwestern United States today were once a thick and mighty forest, one of the most far reaching and beautiful blankets of foliage and fauna in the world in its great green golden years. Maple trees lived among oaks, firs, squirrels and the native people. They dripped their sap out in sugary delight, happy to be an aspect of survival to the tribesmen and insects who were all joined together in a cyclic give and take, all instruments in the larger organism of life in general. It's an old story with a brutal ending, where a foreign parasite invaded and reduced this great wood to merely a few remaining trees, boats made from the death of the old world's forests and carrying the sicknesses and pestilence and ravage that is the white man.

Early settlers felt like conquerors of this domain and took pride in felling trees to the ground, champions over nature. It's understandable that a people so ravaged by their first winters in this place would feel it necessary to conquer Mother Earth, her having squeezed them to the point of extinction or driving them back to their European oppression coupled with the fact that they'd been doing this for centuries in their own lands, but the idea that the very natives helping them to learn how to exist in this world weren't able to see the settlers' disregard for the land is slightly baffling.

Fingers have been pointed, decades have past, and nothing will ever be the same. That said, a few hearty or lucky trees are still around, and still doing their part. And the people have gotten a little better on their end as well. Some of them anyway.

The Maple tree behind Annie's house was standing particularly tall today. And why not, it was a friendly day in the neighborhood. A bee did its best to buzz, a piece of lint drifted through the air after having spent the morning in a small child's belly button and a raspberry bush two yards over had been winking in a particularly enticing fashion all day. The maple sucked up a large gulp of carbon dioxide, stood as straight as a tree, and made a small rustling sound as the wind hurried off to work for the day.

The tree's trunk sat thick as a barrel full of rum on a pirate ship long at sea, gripping the the ground below her mighty belly with three clutching roots visible to surface dwellers, holding the earth in their palm as though it were a child's basketball in the hands of Atlas. Five feet above the Earth's floor she split in two, the main shaft continuing up, further up, while the offshoot darted East in search of the morning sun. It was up this

kingly branch where Annie typically sat, the diverted branch again splitting into two and forming a small cradle at that point, enough to fit the small round curve of a young woman's bottom end perfectly, her back and arms left to lean up the branches as they climbed into the air and her feet propped up onto the other, more primary trunk extending heavenward. Once the leaves had set in every summer, the tree provided all of the shade and reading girl could want, tiny shimmering speckles of sun only barely making their way through the canopy of leaves above, and every thin spindly branch darting out as far skyward as possible before bending down, many of the branches nearly touching the grass below they were so long and heavy and rarely pruned, if ever.

Any young or young at heart child would have no problem finding a summer's worth of happiness climbing and resting and swinging and jumping from and even, occasionally, falling out of that mother Maple, and so had Annie and her father before her found it a paradise on their own land. An oasis from the cynicism of reality, the obligations of the workplace and household responsibilities, and simply a respite from all things that weren't directly perched in the tree.

The tree was planted in the spring of 1933 by a grandmother who had lost all of her children and grandchildren to disease within a few months of one another. Heartier as women were back then, rather than allow the tragedy to swallow up her own dwindling life, she found herself more determined than ever to live as much as she could, to make up at least some of those years nature sought fit to take from her offspring. Her husband had died some time ago, a soldier who accepted a bullet to defend a country that wasn't even his own, and she was left alone, no heirs to live out the family name. When she was gone, thousands of generations of her ancestry would be forgotten. She decided that such a legacy was not befitting her line, and so began planting hundreds of trees all across the expansive farmlands that surrounded her house. The Maple that sat now in the backyard of the house on James' Street had outlived those farmlands as they were all converted to suburban domiciles and roads which became streets and highways. Many of the tree's siblings had fallen to the ever expansive leeching from the planet that humanity deems "progress", some to make way for big box stores, others simply to remove an obstacle from a lawnmowing man's path. The old grandmother was right though, and no one remembers her or her ancestors, all of her friends going senile and finding their own way into the ground, but the Maple is still there, triumphantly still under every winter snow, summer shine and the rainstorms between them.

Chapter 10

Annie dusted herself up off of the floor from which she had fallen, physically and emotionally, so solidly onto that it was thought by nine out of ten expert scientists well-versed in the nature of gravity that she might affect the very orbit of the Milky Way around the Universe. Luckily, there were bigger satellites to spin that day and Annie assumed what her mother used to refer to as "her usual position," which was right at her father's side.

"I'm sorry, daddy," she drooped her motley emerald eyes, thick forests glossing up and over, intentionally comically as she performed her best crying puppy dog impersonation. Cartoon canines in make believe pounds all across TV Land applauded her sensational performance and no doubt several awards shows were based around that little bony girl sitting on a picnic bench trying to make her father forget his troubles.

"Oh, Annie, this isn't your fault...at all." He cocked his head back, actually really more just left it fall back, tired of holding such a heavy weight, full of thoughts, up anymore. His heart kept on thumping but clearly something was dying, if it hadn't many years ago, and perhaps now the body was just figuring it out.

"Daddy, what happened to you two?" The usually singing tone that came whistling and whirling out of Annie's chirper was suddenly replaced with the dry and uncertain desperate cracked whimper that a child might use when trying to get his mother's attention in the middle of the night, ashamed to wake her but unable to be without those loving arms.

"Oh, honey, your mother and I will be fine, we're just working...well, a lot out." He looked up at the tiring sun, then to his ever-reminding watch and finally into his daughter's eyes, right on through and into her dripping remorse heart. "You're going to have a new brother or sister, you know?" She did, but that had nothing to do with her question.

"I don't mean right now, I mean, you seem to have been a much different person. The things you wrote in that book, about mom and you and you guys had all kinds of dreams. Well...I don't want to be a drag or get you down, but what happened to those people? When did it all change?"

He smiled and kissed her on the forehead, patting the top of her matted brown hair, his daughter, the innocent and naive puppy who was sad for having chewed up its masters sandwich without possibly being able to know that it was wrong. "Life just changes you. One day you're reading poems to star-struck audiences and the next, well, the next you have health care plans and retirement plans and basically just all sorts of plans plans plans that you need to worry about."

"Like babies," she muttered, half ashamed of saying it.

"Oh, now, this new baby...well, we'll be fine. It's just rough when you first find out something like this and—"he stopped as he finally recognized the expression on her face, the pages of his long and nearly forgotten youth ramblings blowing throughout the yard. He realized that she had read some of the things he'd written about her—having a baby in general—in those pages.

"Annie, you weren't the reason that this all changed, we were. Let me tell you something, to set the record straight." He pushed himself back a bit and turned to face her, both of them sitting Indian style, knees touching. "Your mother was a passionate woman in her youth. She had a lot of ideas about what she was doing and where she was going to do it. Now, I love her, but she may have had more passion than talent. And," he continued, looking over his shoulder, "certainly more than her patience. Your mother worked hard at what she did and finally got her big...well...her break. To her it was the chance of a lifetime, what would define whether or not she had what it takes. In addition to this, she was pregnant with you, which is an emotional strain, as you can imagine, what with having another person in you always kicking and eating the pie filling while she's just left with a belly full of crust and a hankering for pickles and ice cream." They both smiled with similar eyes. "Most people would have seen this as one chance in many, but for your mother, well, when it didn't go well...she just...shut down. It was over. She found herself a job in sales and has been doing it ever since."

"And what about you?"

He smirked. George couldn't remember if his memory was the way those events actually transpired or just his version of it. "I can't tell you. Not because I don't want to or because you shouldn't know. I just can't. I'm not sure anymore." Annie seemed happy with that answer, or at least understanding. George stood up and turned toward the house. His shoulders were fighting the moon as gravity's greatest accomplishment. He had a family comprised of a daughter disillusioned over her parents' lost life, a wife with

a belly full of child she was uncertain as to whether or not she wanted, and himself too distracted by his failed attempt at greatness to be expected to deal with any of it. Of course, he would. He would do his best and it would be better than most. After three steps, while he continued walking and without looking back, "You didn't do anything to our dreams, honey, people don't have things happen to them. Sometimes, they just forget to make things happen for themselves."

Chapter 11

There are over 25,000 flights taking off from various airports in America everyday, and as one of those big silver eagles was lobbing itself up into the sky to hope it didn't wind up a dodo, Annie's mother, Gwen, was sitting inside of it, tucked neatly away in one of the window seats with her head in her laptop while the world whizzed by and beneath her. Only a simple turn of the neck kept her from seeing the patchwork of the quilt of corn and wheat fields that is the American Midwest, but such a thrill had long ago been lost on her, as she spent more time in airplanes than most people do in their cars. The shadow of that very airplane passed over a small white house with dirty siding just as Annie was returning to it, hundreds of feet below.

"Dad?" she called out from the kitchen, her dirt caked feet kicking the door closed behind her as she proceeded to set the brown bag she was holding onto gently down on the oak table her father had made before she was born. "Oh, daaaadyyyy!" she called again, her slender, knobby fingers producing a rather large bottle of red wine from the old paper bag, which fell to the floor as she lifted the bottle up to inspect it. The silky malleable impurities meandering through the purplish-red thick of the juice reflected her in and out through the caustics of the glass. The label read "Bully Hill: Love My Goat" and had a rather psychedelic drawing of a goat's head with various sayings scribbled around it like "They took my name but they can't take my dignity." Annie had no idea what they were getting at, all she knew was that it was wonderfully delicious and rather inexpensive, grown locally and sold by a peddler down at her favorite market. She threw her arm like a slinky, up and into the cupboard, retrieving two wine glasses, and made her way upstairs. Her father was sitting in his den, reading an article on the Constitution of the United States, found in the 1991 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. Annie laughed at him when she realized what he was brushing up on, not completely without admiration for his ever-continuous quest for knowledge, as irrelevant as it might seem to a slack-jawed youth with little in the way of responsibility such as herself.

"Care for a spot o' wine?" she prodded, using her best Absolutely Fabulous impersonation and clinging the glasses together above her head.

"Oh, well, let's see...your mother's sky high and out of town by now and seeing as it's only just after 6:30—"he checked his wrist as though it had a watch on it, "most certainly." Britannica found herself, encyclopedia and all, closing shut and falling to the

coffee table. "So," he spun his fingers as to signal her to make haste, "what's the occasion?"

"Good times, my dad," big smiles, "Good, good times."

"Sounds like cause for celebration to me," he wrapped his fingers around the stem of the glass as she filled the chalice as full as possibly so and pulled it up to his lips, spilling a bit down over his hand and onto his lap. The wine is sweet and stings the back of his mouth. He let a relieved sigh escape and licked his lips.

"So, daddy, I was hoping that you were going to let me have a look at another one of your books, eh?" She batted her eyes in her typical daddy's-little-girl fashion opened her lips up to reveal a Grand Canyon's worth of pearly white smile.

He tilted his head and snorted a little through his nose, "Word of advice, honey." He took another sip and set the glass down on the end table beside him, between a book entitled *Who You Are and Where You'll Never Be* and a copy of the Bible that had never been opened. "If you're going to try and get what you want in life by going around and getting people drunk, you should wait until they've had at least two drinks."

She smiled.

He returned the favor.

"Okay, then, perhaps you could just tell me a little bit about your life back then?" and he could see in her inquisitive eyes a certain proper mixture of relentless and longing that was impossible to say no to.

"Christ," he thought to himself, "I almost bought her a pony because of that look." Her mother had diverted that flood though, perhaps to the dismay of her daughter. Certainly not to the detriment of the community.

"What about you, Annie?" He picked his glass back up, crossed his legs and slouched back in his seat. "What are you doing? You're 23 now and still living here, any hopes, plans, dreams? Or are we never going to get to turn your room into an office for your mother?"

"Hah! Mom with an office...what, so she could have a place to store her plane ticket receipts?" She licked the last drop from her wine glass and commenced filling it again.

Once a wine glass has been filled once, it feels incredibly less whole when you empty it, and so refilling it is the only kind thing to do.

"Seriously, let's talk about you." She could tell that he was giving her the same stubborn and serious look that she had given him only moments ago, with the exception that while hers was full of youthful cutesy, his had the power of fatherly demand to go along with it. She gave in.

"Okay, me first" she sipped another lip full, "then you." And before he could protest she began to recant her ideas, sealing the deal like neither a handshake nor twelve page document ever could.

"See, I've been watching the world for the last several years, and I've found it to be quite interesting. All of the cars and people and birds sitting high up on wires and gas pumps and mail sticking out mailslots and all. So I'm going to continue on watching life until I either figure out why it's so interesting, or get bored with it. At that point, I'll probably become an astronaut and see what the next world is like." He was about to laugh, when he realized she was serious. "But in the mean time, I've been thinking about getting a camera and taking pictures of the pieces I find the most appealing. You know, photography."

"And do you want to go to school for this?" His glass was now finished, but he sat it down on the table next to him without intentions of refilling it, finding interest in his daughter's words and wanting to focus completely on them as they rolled off of her tongue one syllable at a time.

"Hmmm...well I don't know actually, I hadn't given that any thought." She swallowed the last of her own glass and refilled the both of them. "Go on, drink up," she added. "I think I'll at first just take pictures on my own. See what I can figure out that way. I don't need any lessons to look at something and have a machine remember it for me, right?"

"Well, what about developing the pictures and all, that takes a little know how, I'm sure."

"Yeah, I'll just take them down to Gary. He's this guy I know who works at the photo place on West 8th. He'll take care of it for me. Probably won't even charge me."

"Yeah, I've been meaning to speak to you about that," he was now half way through his second glass. They always go much quicker than their predecessors. "How is it that you

don't have a job yet you're always coming home with stuff, eating out and all sorts of things. You never bring anyone home so I'm assuming you don't have a boyfriend, so what's the deal with that?"

"I don't need a job. Well, I don't need money. But I've got lots of jobs, I guess you could call them. I just do things to help people out and they return the favor."

"Oh yeah?" he left out a little chuckle, though in the back of his mind he couldn't help but feel a little worried. "Like what?"

"Well, take Gary for example. He doesn't really like his job, he wanted to be some big time photographer, you know, but I guess there's only room for so many photographers out there and he didn't make the cut. Anyway, he doesn't like his job, so every now and then I go over and help him out. I just do little things like sweep up or make silly flower decorations for the place. They remind him of me and we're friends, so that makes him happy. Instead of dreading going to work everyday, now he looks forward to it. I'd say that was a good thing, wouldn't you?"

"So in turn, he buys me lunch once in a while or maybe he'll develop my pictures for me if I ask him to. It's all very innocent and he knows it, so don't get any ideas. I'm not leading guys on or anything, a lot of the people I help out don't give me anything back, and some people do things for me and I don't do anything for them, really. I just kind of like living life with a happy little smile on my face and somehow it works out. You should try it sometime."

He smiled and realized how proud of his daughter he was, she was the free soul that he had always aspired to be at her age, but she didn't even seem to try, it was just the natural way she was. A flower that had been tucked up into one of the matted locks darting out from her head fell to the ground and suddenly he found himself very sad, thinking of the past 23 years and everything that had happened.

"It's amazing how years and years of memories can be condensed into a single moment," he said, "they all just flood in as one overwhelming emotion." She looked up at him, right into his eyes, which were shivering as they tried to hold back even the tiniest spot of tear. She put her hand on his knee and leaned over to give him a hug.

"But on the other hand, that traffic guard down by the elementary school is a real bitch." He laughed, knowing exactly what she meant, how the fat old woman would scowl at

you if you tried crossing the street without her permission, as though she commanded authority over all of the denizens of the land, not just the school kids walking to and fro.

They continued talking for the length of the bottle, and as the last drops made their way through the air to splash ripples in Annie's drink, she left herself fall back onto the floor and stare up and the dark blue ceiling, hundreds of little white specs where the paint had fallen off or been chipped away over the past 15 years since it was last painted. She watched as her eyes played tricks on her and the dots began shining like stars, and then lines connected them, each and every one.

"And I'll still make it to the moon one day, I've got plenty of time to practice." George smiled and leaned his head back, closing his eyes.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?" she shouted, scurrying to her feet. "I've got another surprise." Annie reached in her pocket and produced a small glass pipe and a plastic baggie full of marijuana.

"Want to?" she asked him, as though it was as innocent as asking a toddler if he'd like a sip of soda. "C'mon, it'll be fun. Besides, I know you used to."

"Then you should certainly stop reading my books. And it's been ages since I've...well, your mother would be furious, and anyway I shouldn't probably be doing this with you."

"Mom isn't going to be home for days so," she finished packing the pipe and handing it and a lighter to her father. He lit up the green bud and did his best to inhale the smoke, which he thought would be more difficult than it was. His lungs did a fine job and he thanked them all the more for it a few rounds later. He felt his eyelids droop down and his head having a conversation with itself that he wasn't particularly a part of, then leaned back and lit himself one of Annie's cigarettes.

The two talked for several more hours about George's younger days and how exactly Annie expected to get to the moon. Neither one would have been making much sense to any FBI agents who might be listening in through wiretaps or mutated cockroaches, but to each other they were having the chit chat of a lifetime, the defining moment when father and daughter form a friendship that breaks away the teacher/student relationship of the past and allows them to both branch out into new ways of seeing the other. If the hands on the grandfather clock in the neighbors' house would have been looking through Annie and George's window instead of busy pointing out how late the hour was,

they would have seen the two of them falling asleep in their chairs, Annie's head tilted over to rest on her father's shoulder and remain that way until the next morning.

Chapter 12

The sun cracked its light up over the horizon, rose and declared zenith all before Annie's eyes had managed to twitch open. She found herself sleeping in a pillow made of drool and her father nowhere to be found. By this time he must already be off to work or chores or whatever he had to do on this day, the name of which Annie had no idea. She laughed at herself for being completely oblivious to whether or not it was Saturday, Tuesday, Monday or when, and then laughed when she not only had to think twice about what year it was, but how old she was. It's easy to confuse yourself when you don't check a calendar daily, and you don't have anyone asking you why you're fifteen minutes late for wherever you really should have been.

Annie reached for a cigarette, took a look around and, through the blurry swaying vision that was her waking experience, noticed that her father had left a gift for her. A black book was laying on the coffee table, with a cup of tea that had cooled down over the last few hours and a note that read "Enjoy." She scooped up the book, slid deep down into the couch and began reading.

1 o'clock.

2 o'clock.

4:30pm.

Soon the evening news would be on but Annie was still scrunched up into the cushions of the couch and the pages of that book. She hadn't moved from the spot all day, so inanelly propped between intrigue and captivation that, though she had lifted the mug of cold tea into her hand several hours ago, she hadn't taken more than a sip of the smooth brown liquid all day. She had been swimming through her father's past, recognizing bits of herself in many of the lines and so much more about her father in-between them. She'd never felt this way about anyone before, not even her father from two days ago, but now that she'd read so much of his work and had the long night with him just hours ago, well, she was captured under a veil of mystique and longing, the fabric just thin enough to see a silhouette behind but incapable of making any definite observations.. Longing to know so much more about this person who had been in her life the entire time but did such a convincing job of having the world see him as a normal

everyday Joe rather than the brilliant lyricist he was. She read on and on and on, right into the sunset where, before her father had ever returned, she fell asleep.

When Annie woke up the next morning she looked around quickly, half expecting to be back in the dream world from before, trapped back inside of the Long Haired Man's head. After some careful inspection she realized that she was, indeed, in her own home and that nothing had happened. She was certain that at some point she would've been transported back to that magickal reality, but shrugged it off as her own silliness that it hadn't happened.

"Oookay, Annie," she joked to herself in an English accent, because she found them funny and couldn't manage to talk out loud to herself without using some funny voice, "now you're disappointed that you aren't crazy." A "teehee" that could have come from the snickering throat of a thirteen year old girl in love with her teacher followed, and Annie rolled off of the couch and down into the kitchen for a good dose of granola and tea. Her belly grumbled slightly, more of a "thank you" than a warning that she hadn't eaten now for over 36 hours.

A large black stone bowl filled up with rolled oats and honey and all of the other goodness that nature was so kind to make and the good people at the cereal factory were so happy to roll up and ship off, for a profit, sat in front of the sleepy benefactor of her father's previous day's generosity. She decided to forgo reading the book today, in light of the fact that she hadn't been outside in nearly two days and didn't want her poor skin to start dripping away the brown and leave her milky white lonely.

She hopped up into her normal chipper, happy-go-lucky self and, without shoes or shower, made off into the outside world. The day was singing summer already and between the sun in the sky, the glint beaming from passing cars and the twinkle in the neighbor's dog's eye, she wasn't sure which diamond to chase. She vied for the pooch.

"Hey Paulo, hey boy!" she called out and whistled. The big brown lab came charging at her. She stood completely still, one hand outstretched at hip level. Paulo, the pouncing, musclebound beast that he was, came charging with all of the force and determination of the Big Bang falling back in on itself and just as he reached her she lifted her hand into the air. Paulo leapt as high as he could, his head reaching for her stars and his hind legs still traveling forward, causing him to loop-de-loo tail over toes and let out a mild yelp as he skidded across the grass. "Aha, Paulo, got you again."

"One of these days, Annie, that dog gonna catch up to yer tricks." The voice came crackling out of the smoke damaged throat of Gino Lilliato, Annie's neighbor since before her memory kicked in and the owner of old Paulo.

"Now, Gino, he likes it!"

"Oh, I know it, don't I. Nobody he likes, nobody but you, missy." Gino laughed and put down the garden tools he'd been using to root up his vegetable garden. He plucked up a flower, making sure to pull the roots and all along with it, and walked very slowly, limping just a little, perhaps on purpose, to where Annie stood. Paulo sat down on Annie's feet, his tail wrapped all around her ankles.

"Here you are," he said, handing her the flower, "roots and all. I know hows you aren't liking to kill the things, now are you?"

"Well, Gino, you know I don't mind plucking their heads off," she patted her hair in hopes of discovering one of her flora victims. They'd all fallen out over the course of the last two days. "But I do love when you bring me new flowers to plant." She bent down and scooted Paulo out of the way like a sack of potatoes blocking her view of the back of the cupboard. He clumped over in respect of that analogy. She reached her fingers into the soil, still loose from the other night's rain, and dug a little hole. She plopped the rooty flower right down in and filled the whole back over. "There, perfect."

Gino laughed, "Right here in the middle of the yard? You make me crazy, missy, you make it all crazy." He gave the plant a little nudge to make certain it wouldn't be leaving its new home any time soon, and headed back for his garden. "Watch out for Paulo, you hear?"

"I'm taking him so that he can watch out for me, I thought." Annie grabbed the dog by his scruffy whiskers and gave him a little tug. Paulo barreled up out of his lazy position and made an honest attempt to be her best friend, whether she was man or truly otherwise.

The two skipped down the street, over cracks proving Grand Canyons to ants scurrying along with lettuce and leaf and under the tight wire circus show of squirrels on telephone wires above. The sky was separating itself quite nicely, right down the middle, giving Annie and old Paulo a clear view of where they should be going. Of course, neither of the two companions could agree on what it was the sky was showing them.

Annie was convinced it was the moon they were headed for, Paulo thought the park. After the old big brown lab had made a bolt for his destination of choice, Annie was forced to chase him through two blocks and under a passing rig before she managed to grab onto his leash. She tried pulling him back up toward that silver cratered satellite, but he proved twice her weight and three times her stubbornness. She eventually surrendered.

"Fine, we'll go to the park, but I'm not having any fun once we get there." Two hours worth of Frisbee throwing, chasing each others tails and belly rubbing (mostly Paulo doing the rubbing) later she realized that she'd gone back on her word.

"Ha ha, Paulo! You are the sweetest time," Annie fell back into the grass, each blade sticking up between the folds in her clothes and trying to get a lick of that salty warm sweat dripping from her pores. It was a good day to fall asleep in the grass, and as the giant melting hot fur and flesh that was Paulo came crashing down over her like a blanket made of bolts she almost left herself slip away.

Somewhere between the groggy haze of fighting to keep yourself awake and the distant allure of daydreaming through a schoolhouse window, Annie found herself walking through the blurry black edges of a dream. She was dressed in long flowing garb, a dress made of silk and sunshine woven in and out of the threads. The sleeves hung down far past her hands, to the very floor beneath her, and she was lost in all of the fabric. She could see a figure silhouetting out of the distant horizon, he almost seemed to be horseback at first, but upon closer inspection, as he drew further from the sun and closer to her own position, she could see who the Long Haired Man was. He walked up to her, straight up to her, almost into her, took her hand and held it between his. No words were said, he just smiled and his eyes and cheeks twitched out operas worth of drama and emotion for her. She leaned to kiss him, but his lips fell to her forehead instead of joining with her own. He left go of her hand and walked past her. She couldn't turn for all of the dress's fabric, and before she could manage to her father came over the horizon next, in a similar fashion but much more quickly.

"Annie, it's okay. You're so inquisitive. So curious. That's a good thing," he began to fade away, somehow getting smaller and more transparent but simultaneously his spirit grew stronger and stronger. "Just don't let it overwhelm you."

He was gone.

Annie came back to full consciousness with Paulo licking her face. He'd somehow managed to get his leash lassoed all through her legs and between that and having all of his weight bearing down on her torso, she was quite helpless to fight him off. Instead she just started licking him back and then tickling his belly. He flopped down over on her and stuck his legs into the air.

"Oh no, dog-o, we're heading home." She pulled her legs free and scooted the brute up and off of her. They danced together down the street for blocks, passing many strangers who, regardless of how they felt before seeing her, were smiling after she'd gone by. Annie turned the corner and looked up at the great old brick building that was all too often just a backdrop for her strolls, but today, it was a revelation.

"Aha!" she squealed and then pulled Paulo over to the library's steps. A huge flight of concrete stairs elevated the doors from the street, but Annie and her companion scaled them like a beetle up a twister. "Okay, Paulo, you wait here for a bit, okay?" She tied him to the railing at the top of the stairs. The landing had ample shade and a hot sunny spot if he so desired.

"Take a big fat nap, okay?" Paulo looked back at her in agreement, almost as if to say "Would you expect anything less?"

Annie burst into the library with all of the fervor and invigoration of the Crusades. She began leafing through book after book, looking up and down shelves and all through the card catalog. Finally, she found the one she was searching for.

"Okay, here it is." The book was thick, paperbound, a maroon cover reading Complete Writer's Guide to Getting Published she tore out one of the back pages and jotted down some of the names of publishers and their contact information on it.

"There, this will do just fine."

Chapter 13

The sun was on its way home from zenith and probably thinking about all the things it would do after it set the night as Annie shuffled through the contents of her cigarette and attempted to compile her father's poetry so that she might send it in to one of the many publishers she'd found in the book, those that looked like they might be the types to take a chance on an unknown poet from Small Town, America. She had originally lined up neatly some paper and a pencil, making a little graph as to whom she would put the most effort into submitting to, based on something in her head that said "Oh, this one's more likely than that," though all she had really was a name, number and brief description of the agencies. It didn't take her long, however, to drift into simply reading through all of the poems instead of trying to objectively look at which were better or attempt to see them for how the rest of the population might. She realized after about an hour that she was getting nowhere, and so if she was getting nowhere, she might as well do it out in the back yard.

Summer was hinting around that it might be showing up early. The Solstice was still a few days away, but the mood was right and the Maple tree's limbs were waving just in case that big old season were to come around the corner unexpectedly. Annie wedged her teeth down around the black binding of the book and writhed her arms all up and through the necessary crevices, cracks, nooks, crannies, turns, twists and tactical maneuvers necessary to find herself completely comfortable and easy of mind. Before she knew it, the book had opened itself, climbed down out of her mouth and sucked her right inside of its words. She'd gotten through about three poems before she nodded off, so content in the joy of the moment. So content.

The Long Haired Man opened his eyes after having had closed them to appreciate the zesty full aroma of a fresh and finely brewed cup of coffee. As his eyes opened, so did Annie emerge from her dream, once again looking out through the two way mirror of his eyes. It took her a moment, perhaps the Long Haired Man's eyes weren't focusing, or perhaps Annie just couldn't focus through them yet, but at first everything was just a swirling blur, spinning around the whole room so that she could see in front of her and behind her and everything. One by one objects began to stop and stay still in place. A calendar with a big red X drawn and then circled over a certain date. The refrigerator kicked in its full hum when it ceased spinning, the stove following after and a clock in the shape of a cat, its tail—dangling—the pendulum.

When everything finally was recognizable, at least standing still enough for Annie to focus on it, the Long Haired Man was joined by his wife, the Straight Haired Woman. She slipped up against him to sit across his legs and wrap one arm around his shoulders and one around his mug of Joe. She sipped a little from the cup and then kissed him, letting the hot fluid run between her lips, over his own and into his mouth. Annie could feel it burn a little but not in the way she would normally feel it. Aside from the slight tingling of pain, there was another intense emotion swelling up inside of her host, one that Annie couldn't recognize.

She'd never been in love before, but she wondered if this is what it felt like. "Perhaps," she thought to herself, but as she did, the Long Haired Man's lips spoke the same words, breaking the coffee colored kiss right down the middle.

"Perhaps what?" asked his wife, staring down into his eyes and feeling something very different inside of her own skin.

"I don't know." He looked around, almost as if trying to turn his head to see what was inside of it. "I really don't know why that came out." He leaned back on to her and began kissing her.

"Well," she stopped him, "do you know what I know?" She was toying with the top button of her blouse, running her fingernails from the other hand up and down the side of his neck, sharp and slow up behind his ear and through his hair.

"I know that you've been wonderful with me for these past few months." She popped the top button. "I know that you've been extremely patient with me, pushing around and quitting job after job to figure out how I'm going to do this art gallery thing." She had begun fiddling with the next button in line. "And I know that I have the most amazing husband ever." She popped that one open, and leaned in to kiss him. Annie had never felt so much tongue in a mouth before, and this coming from the woman! She laughed a little but then realized she sort of liked it. She laughed a little more at that.

"And, you know what else?"

The Long Haired Man looked into her inquisitively.

She pulled herself up onto the kitchen table, and proceeded to do the same to him. "I love you, George."

Before Annie knew exactly what was going on, the Long Haired Man and the Straight Haired Woman were nearly half undressed and tickling, poking, prodding and sticking together in all sorts of wonderful ways.

"George!" Annie screamed inside of that head, she had suspected it but back in the real world had managed to convince herself that this was all an elaborate dream. "These are my parents!" She focused again on the outside and realized that she was now inside of her father's body while he was kissing his wife, her mother, all up and down her horizon, every pore touched, every hair brushed over. Then Annie realized how much she was enjoying it all. It was the strangest feeling she'd ever experienced, the thought of being aroused by her own parents, but she couldn't be certain if it was just her feeling what George was feeling or if she was connected to it somehow, too. Finally he slid up to look into his wife's eyes and right then and there Annie could see his reflection in her eyes.

Annie was overcome with intense emotion, like she'd never felt before, her heart dropped back in her real body and she was thrust instantly from that world back into her own. When her eyes opened she was still in the tree, panting and in the middle of a panic attack. She closed her eyes again and tried to wait for it to subside.

Annie lay there, very still, with her eyes closed, her heart slowly pumping down from the gigantic over-sized ball it had become. She thought about how wonderful the experience was, but how strange it felt to kiss her mother with her father's lips. She put her fingers to her own lips. Annie was nearly going to try and laugh it off, after all, it was no big deal, she couldn't control that body and it was innocent enough on her part. She kept repeating this until she realized that it wasn't innocent. It wasn't innocent at all, because what she was confused about was not the feeling of kissing her mother, but that when she caught her father's reflection in her mother's eyes, just for that moment, she was certain that he could see her. And she was certain that he could see how she felt about him. And how she felt about him, that was the unexplainable part.

Chapter 14

Annie's backyard was nothing particularly exceptional as far as neighborhood backyards go. The picnic table that her grandfather had built for them—where she liked to sit some mornings and watch squirrels perform circus acts, particularly in the fall when the leaves simultaneously provided a colorful great Big Top canopy as well as rained down their golden, burnt and crimson confetti—sat year in and year out exposed to the elements of the Great Northern Mother Nature, buried in snow, licked with ice as the snow melted and refroze in early spring, split and grayed through the summer heat and then prepared itself for the cycle again every autumn. Aside from her favorite climbing Maple, there was another, slightly larger but infinitely less appealing Hemlock tree in the far back right of the yard, which held a birdhouse no birds ever chose to occupy and a tire swing that hadn't been swung on since a neighbor boy broke his arm trying to jump out of the too wildly swinging, floating wheel one summer. Annie's neighbor, Gino, once told her that between the two trees in her yard, every fall some half a million leaves dropped to the ground, all which needed raking, and most of which somehow seemed to land in his yard. Gino didn't have any trees. Gino hated raking. Two old clothesline poles, with no actual clothesline between them, had grown a rusty skin before Annie was even born and now stood alone against the backdrop of her neighborhood like the two crosses that held the thieves that Jesus was crucified with, he having moved his real estate perhaps to some remote galaxy beach while they were left to the elements. The yard was swampy and Annie's father didn't cut the grass as often as her neighbor's would have liked him to, so walking around the grounds in her bare feet Annie grew to love the soft plush of the long, cushioning blades combined with the mucky chill of the wet earth beneath them. The only other notable feature in the smallish backyard was a pile of grass clippings where his father threw the remnants of his monthly lawn mowing.

The big Maple—predominant above all, but less like a triumphant king than a watchful grandmother—sat in the back yard day in and day out with nothing more to say than what the wind through its leaves might have convinced it to whistle, the constant lengthy sound that trees nearly silently make as they grow through the decades, and perhaps a rustle or two of robin eggs as the babies inside try and piecemeal the cons or benefits as to whether or not it might be worth cracking through the speckled blue shell that has been their entire world for all of gestation. The only other motion that big beautiful tree could be even slightly held accountable for was Annie's feet and spindly fingers climbing through and positioning themselves and the rest of her within its bows.

It was Tuesday when Annie had the increasingly waning but nonetheless still intense experience of being her father, loving on her mother, and the general calamity that would expectantly generate inside of any young girl's consciousness. Annie's mind darted out of the awkward moments, the uneasiness of the whole experience, as quickly as it could pull itself from beginning to dip into such undesirable emotions as she tried to focus on the perhaps unique experience of having been afforded the chance to see her parents when they were roughly her own age now, to have the opportunity to see them as more than the source of her life and life's early lessons and simply as young people graduating through their years like any other human being.

Today was the third day in a row climbing that tree, reading and rereading every time those exhausted, pencil faded pages of the lone black book of poetry she had managed to hold onto so preciously since her father had given it gifted to her all of those days ago. Every instance now, nestled between the bark and bowing of the tree's limbs, she would read as many pages as she could, exhilarating as they were though, her eyes fell heavy and she'd fall asleep securely fastened in the woody grip of that great grand Maple. And every instance, again, as her eyes traded sight for sleep and her mind went from groggily to dreamily, she would assume the persona of her father, reliving old moments of his life.

The first of those nights she, as him, was walking through a coffee shop somewhere on the other side of town. If Annie's mind had been putting two and two together as an accountant in the more real world might have, she would have recognized the building which housed the cafe in her dreams as what is now an American Legion, likely full of old and growing ancient men nursing weak and cheap American beers from afternoon till night. But Annie was now, in this dreamy scape of her father's past, no more attached to that reality than one side of Velcro left to float through space alone. Here in her father's body, the coffee shop was full of beatniks who never quite got the memo to only wear black and snap their fingers. Couples and singles and groups of friends smoked cigarettes over black coffees. A duo on a makeshift stage no higher than a half stack of magazines played a saxophone and sang out to a barely attentive crowd, while an old dog and his older master sat in a corner talking to themselves.

"Afternoon, George," a waitress whispered out, flirtatious and inviting. "When're ya gonna go get up there and teach those trumpet belters how real art's done?"

George smiled back, Annie could feel, and set the small, black book he was carrying on the porcelain counter. "Just a coffee today, Deb." She touched his hand with hers, the

pointless kind of touch that a teasing homewrecker of a barista will apply to a man's hand whether he wants it or not, and particularly pointlessly when considering her task is to simply pour coffee into a cup and deliver it to him in exchange for money. Or so Annie thought, somehow jealous of this woman, though whether she was jealous for her mother or herself was a question best left to the ages. Suddenly though, the woman's eyes changed from silly schoolgirl tenacity to something more akin to sincerity.

"Seriously, George, I was talkin' to Frank and he says he wants you to do a reading for us. He wants you to come up on a Friday and he'll even pay you."

"I'll just take the coffee for now." George looked down at his book and smiled to himself, unsuccessfully Annie thought, as the girl behind the counter filled her own smile with a winner's satisfaction and went to pour the black liquid caffeine.

"But I'll think about it," he said as he traded a few quarters for the cup.

The second day that Annie fell into her hostly dreaming, her father spent the day writing and compiling and erasing and rewriting and numbering and tagging various pages from that little black book, its pages still crisp and white, the graphite across their surface bold, determined and black.

By the third day, when the tree had been climbed, the words had been read and her eyes had hung low enough to place her back in her father's past, he was on stage at the same cafe, reading to an amused crowd. The hip and smoking youths, the flirting couples in their most attention-seeking attire and even the old man in the corner's dog had all perked up, quieted down and were paying attention to his words.

For all I've known of who I am
A simple stroke of luck and man
I could have been a moon or king
But instead I'm simply reverie

George read to the crowd for nearly an hour and not a single person faked their snaps or clapped or hooted out a holler, so much silence prevailed in the room that if it weren't for their deadpan stares, he probably would have walked off that stage after only a verse or two.

When he finally finished, his papers packed back into a small green satchel, he walked directly to the counter, began to fumble with lighting a cigarette, and asked the same girl who had been behind the counter the first day, as simply as any other patron might, "Hey Deb, can I get a coffee?"

Suddenly the cafe crowd erupted into clapping and cat calls, Deb handed him his coffee and her lit cigarette. "Smoke that one," extending her slender hands, the smoke snaking around them with all of the slithering sensuality that the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil had succumbed to, "you deserve it, sweetheart."

George turned around, Indian faced and having to force himself from looking at the lack of shine on his own shoes in such embarrassment. The crowd was all too generous in their display of satisfaction, however, and a few "Good jobs," and a handshake or two later George was finally able to slip out the front door for the serenity of a cigarette and the last two sips of his coffee on his own.

Before the cup was able to even have the memory of being emptied, however, a white haired man in a plaid tuxedo came pushing through the front doors and grabbed George firmly by the shoulder. Masseuses, walnut cracking strongmen and professional thumb wrestlers didn't have the strength of this man's grip, George imagined, but any thoughts beyond that were late to the party as the man began to speak.

"George is it, eh?" The man turned George to face him. "Well listen there George, I just happen to so be a publisher." He stopped speaking for a minute as George looked him and himself up and down, trying to assess whether this interaction was going to be more akin to a rumble or some type of homoerotic love making session.

"You've got something in those pages, George, and I'd like to publish it."

By the time George had run home, a good 25 blocks of nearly full on, paceless running, he was sweating tears and trying to keep a mind full of the possibilities of a future he'd dreamed of—but never expected to actually fruit—from popping right through his earlobes. He swung the door that lead into the white house on James Avenue's kitchen open wide, knocking a wooden sign that had been loosely nailed to the outside surface and which read "Home is Where You are if You're Us" right off of it's clinging cliffside position.

"Gwen!" he filled the kitchen and every other room in the two story house with his delight. "Gwen, Gwendalyn!"

She appeared from around the corner that right angled into the living room. "Gwen, you'll never believe the luck, today I met this—"

Gwen stood in what seemed to be the opening between the kitchen and the hallway, but would later prove to be the stone and steel drawbridge between a future of bliss and mediocre reality. Her face was covered in salty wet, her eyes bloodshot and her hands twitching while crossed and barely touching her stomach.

"George," she whimpered, the sounds barely able to make it through her teeth.

"I'm pregnant."

Chapter 15

It was a cool and crisp Friday evening when Annie came out that dream, and despite her mother's apparent anguish in the dream, Annie couldn't help but feel the all too overwhelming excitement of having witnessed—no, taken part in—now both her own conception and the moment when her father first learned of her existence. In some past life she must have been a fireman with all the grace and ease that she used to slide down that tree and before she knew it she found herself opening a bottle of Bully Hill and racing without even a thought of getting glasses up into the room where her father kept his library.

"Dad!" She flung open the half closed door and handed the bottle to him as the slow sound of a new rain began tapping on the shingles above their heads. The Cape Cod style house they lived in provided for some of the most excellent rain-enhancing acoustics. "Mom's not home for another two days, right? I do believe it's time we kept up our little task at hand!"

With a bottle of freshly opened wine in his hands and all of the confusion that comes with your daughter's exuberance bursting through your door in perfect time with a new rainfall, he fumbled through his inquisition. "What task would that be?"

"Getting you published of course! I just heard about you getting your big break when you were younger—"

"You what?"

Realizing that he'd have no idea what she was talking about, she continued, "I mean, I um, I read in your book about the time that guy wanted to publish you and so, well, doesn't that mean it's a cinch? I mean, you're practically already famous!"

He took a small swig from the bottle, placed it on the table and looked at her with the eyes of a true parent—solemn, beaten eyes. "Annie, I don't have the time, I don't have the energy. I mean Christ, Annie, we're about to have another baby."

She went to continue, not fully taking in his words at first, but then seeing the desperate look of a man who seems ready to die on his face, full stopped dead in her own breath. She looked down to the floor, the carpet still looking brand new everywhere except for

the exact path that her father used to walk from the door to his chair and back out again. She sighed some simple syllable and went to hug him, but he turned and sat down in his chair.

"Just give me some time, would you?"

She nodded and went to pick up the bottle before leaving the room.

"Leave that, please."

Lightning cracked through the sky above their home and it's thunderous lover roared in the distance. Annie left the room, suddenly feeling the realization of defeat, not a welcomed aftermath having just spent three days watching a younger version of her father step off of the path that would have lead him to something closer to true happiness only to rest on a mossy rock for the rest of his life.

She sat in the kitchen looking through some outdated magazines that her mother had subscribed to, but no one had ever opened. Half a pack of cigarettes and countless advertisements for products promising to provide their customers with a nightlife like they only make in bad movies, she decided to climb the stretch of stairs back up to where her father had made his final last stand of defeat.

From the hallway she could tell the room was silent, though lightning, thunder and the dripping sky still made their mark on the world's senses. She slowly slid the door open and saw her father asleep in his chair, the bottle of wine lacking any contents and tipped over to rest underneath the small recliner, perhaps looking for that first black book of his poetry she'd hidden there.

As Annie watched her father, disappointment even on his sleeping face, her heart or soul or mind or whatever part of her was inside and inexplicable via scientific terms such as cells, blood and life felt a rush of emotions which only in these past few weeks had started to make themselves available to her. She loved her father as much as any daughter loves a good, providing head of household who's taken their offspring to the circus and amusement parks and been there for their kindergarten graduation and sweet sixteen and prom. But she loved him more than that as well. Like a groupie loves to be around fame. Like a pubescent school girl loves her math teacher. She was confused, because she knew that she was her father, at least she had been him, and in a very real way. His pain, his lack of success at his own life, was her own, and now as

she watched him there, drooling and drunk, his head nearly falling off his neck as he was passed out in that old chair, she felt that her own life was at risk of waste as well.

Annie stood there and watched him for maybe an hour, maybe two, as engaged as any moviegoer watching the movie adaptation of their favorite novel—exhilarated to see how it matched their own imagination and frightened by how it might not live up to such high expectations—until finally he stirred, but only to sort of fall out of the chair and land on his back, still asleep. She laid down beside him at first, propped up with one arm's elbow to still watch him, her face in one hand and the other's fingers brushing some hair out of his eyes, back behind his ears, as though somehow the act of cleaning up his face's physical appearance might make him, make everything, okay when he awoke.

After twenty four minutes she fell asleep with her head on his chest, hugging him and trying her best to suck the desperation out of his own bones so that she might bear some of this burden that she'd caused into herself. A burden now doubled by the thought, she assumed, of another child on the way.

Zeus did all he could, shot every last plasma bolt of lightning and had all of his hounds shout out their fears at that little white house on James Avenue, but to no avail. The storm went all night but both father and daughter slept through it, well into the hours of Saturday's morning.

Chapter 16

While Annie slept that night she dreamed her own dream for the first time in weeks. She was a bride, in a giant white dress under the vaulted ceiling of a magnificent church, the sunlight of a thousand stars filtered through stained glass windows. A priest spoke in tongues, recanting wedding vows in some dead language, and she turned to her groom. When the tuxedo clad man pushed back her veil, revealing that darling face in all of the glory you might expect from a bride on her wedding mount, she saw that the groom was the Long Haired Man, her father in his younger days.

Surprised, she looked desperately into the crowd, a church full of friends and family she didn't recognize, with a the singular sound of a man shouting protests.

"I have not condoned this! Yell out if you see this tragedy, this sin against nature! I object, priest, ask whomsoever does so object and I'll be the first to speak out and against—"

The man in the crowd was her father, flailing his arms in utter discontent, at the normal age she'd known him as before falling asleep on his chest the previous night. The other guests all sat smiling and crying in the wide and wooden pews as you might expect at a wedding, oblivious to any objections.

The Long Haired Man reached out for her hand to place it on her finger even as the father she knew continued his protests.

"This will ruin your life, daughter! This is ruining my life..." his shouts faded out as everything around Annie, the glint of the ring, the stained glass, the very air clinging to her skin disappeared to black. The dream persisted for what felt like several days. It was only when the loudest crash of thunder that the sky back in the real world could produce came belting down that she found herself sucked out of the dark and back onto her still sleeping father's chest. Her eyes opened just long enough to convince her that the nightmare was over. She produced a small pipe half stuffed with charred, day old marijuana from a pocket in her dress, took two hits and fell directly back into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter 17

Gwen arrived home a day early from her latest important affair, the paper industry being particularly keen to extend weeklong conferences into the weekend, where executives and vice presidents would mingle and drink and flirt and compliment themselves an extra two days without worry of waking up early for another exhilarating conference on producing paper and the most efficient and profitable ways of getting it to the point where small and large businesses alike could print copy upon copy of other, similarly important affairs. The living organism newly growing inside of her stomach, however, reminded her that not only was alcohol not the appropriate mix with her current physiology, but that she didn't even need the stuff to find herself exhausted and vomiting the next morning, and thusly decided to make the return trip home a full day, night and morning early.

It was due to such circumstances that Annie's mother discovered her daughter and husband still sleeping on the floor of the upstairs room, the skunky stink of marijuana still clinging to the air and a fully emptied bottle of wine laying on the floor. One would not be completely incorrect at assuming she enjoyed the fury about to belt from her lungs. It began as a ball no larger than an atom, somewhere deep inside of her stomach, and within less time that it took for the Big Bang to open up the universe, anti-gravitied up through her esophagus, flooding out over her tongue and through small gaps in her teeth to blanket the room in one of the rudest awakenings of all time.

"God Jesus dammit, George!" was a combination of syllables, each one somehow more profane than the next, enough to wake up old Zeus himself, who had by now taken leave of his attempts to stir the sleeping father/daughter picnic.

Before Annie could remove herself from her father's space, and far before George's brain could put together whatever molecules are responsible for ensuring a waking old man that he was indeed no longer in the sweet solace of sleep, Gwen continued her spitfire rain of assault.

"How in Holy Hell's gates could you have slept through this?! How horse-fucking drunk are you anyway? And with, what, withat," she stumbled, somehow elegantly in her anger, over her words, "With our daughter?" It was a barrage of accusations and claims of the sort that could make any mortal feel like he was not worthy of the miracle of life,

let alone George being a simple father, non-stop in their downpour before either Annie or George had made it downstairs and had a chance to look outside.

But looking outside was no great task, even a window wasn't required, as where there was once the kitchen and that glassy portal Annie had stared through so many times, now a giant bark trunk—surrounded by dirt and leaves and broken robins' nests—consumed that area. It took only minutes for George to realize what had happened, but for Annie, it took a mere few fractions of a second. She jumped over and ran through the leaf and limb that was now the kitchen, darted through the garage and out the back door.

While they'd slept last night, one a head full of nightmares, the other complacent in a few hours outside of reality, lightning had come down some Autobahn skyway and split the great, gorgeous Maple that had been such a part of both of their pasts in two, sending a falling portion of its mighty trunk to split the little white house on James Avenue nearly in half.

The old grandmother who'd planted it, her bones having rested peacefully for some eight decades, stirred in her pine box.

Chapter 18

George and Annie stood in the leftover wrinkles of yesterday's clothes, George a crumpled flannel shirt and khaki pants, Annie in a pair of stained capris and a Pink Floyd t-shirt, neither wearing shoes as their toes sank, oblivious to their owners, into the morning mud. Half of the big Maple still stood straight up, doing its all and simultaneously nothing at all to hold up the remaining half of intact branches that remained after the storm. Both looked directly at that still standing portion of the tree, perhaps forcing themselves—or maybe without the will to do otherwise—not to follow the now fallen mass along its broken trunk and into the kitchen where they would never have tea or read old magazines or stare out the window into the easy solace of their backyard again.

Dozens of minutes passed, quite possibly, but like it does for a boy first flung over the handlebars of his bicycle, time was not only standing still, it was at full military attention. Only the slamming of the garage's screen door, a mother and pregnant wife in all of her uncontrollable childbearing hateful glory producing herself and a half-filled black garbage bag in her hands jolted them from their gaze. She proceeded a steamroller's march across the yard, ignoring the fallen timber around her, and threw the bag into a back corner of the yard near a pile of old grass clippings.

Gwen turned instantly on her heel before the bag could even succumb to gravity and repeated the action, this time pulling an old metal garbage can from the garage. She placed the bag in the metal canister, then covered it in the moist yard waste, dressing the salad in lighter fluid and with a single match transformed a pile of waste into a burning pyre.

Annie and George just stood in awe, not quite able to write this new information to the database banks of their still computing brains, an hourglass presumably twirling around inside of their heads as they attempted to make sense of all of this arboreal and pyrotechnic mayhem. Gwen stood over the burning bucket for a few minutes and then walked passed them, not stopping as she made her way back toward the garage.

"And that's final," as she passed, leaving them dumbfounded in the mud, "your goddamn books are burnt."

Later Annie would find that every last page, every scratch of graphite on those old tattered pages, even the notes and lists of publishers she'd compiled for her father's eventual publication, had burned up in that fire. Every syllable that had come from her father's imagination, every noun and verb and fantastical possibility that she had read had disappeared with so much ash into the sky, floating up toward the sun and over the cracked-in-half tree where she'd read them all. She thought about trying to gather up the floating black ashes, about taping them back together somehow, no matter how long it took.

But she would have better luck trying to re-grow the tree than to fix what had been done now. George fell into the mud and back to sleep, his face regaining the simple, easy composure that Annie had recognized from her dreams of him. She left him there to soak up whatever whetted Earth might have him.

Chapter 19

George sat at a card table in the garage eating cereal the next morning. Mud still caked behind his ears and under his fingernails, he'd made an effort to wash himself up in the sink but did more dirtying up what was left of the general bathroom area than returning himself to the world of the sparkling and clean. The bowl of Raisin Bran slowly made its way soggy as he held the spoon just above it, half looking into the fish eyed reflection of himself in the bowl of the utensil, half looking at nothing, or perhaps right through it, into and passed the card table, directly onto the oil stained concrete below. He wasn't mourning and he wasn't one for sulking much. Pre-catatonic might be a more fitting summation.

Gwen appeared in the open garage door wearing a running suit that was nearly fancy enough to make the dress code at any local fine dining establishment, with a folder containing only a few papers tucked between her arms and hips. The morning sun silhouetted her so that George, were he even interested in looking up, wouldn't have been able to make out more than her shadowy pointing finger waving towards him, her eyes focused intently on the documents in her hand.

"I need to run into the office, but I'll be back soon enough. We need to talk about our—your—situation here. To be honest though George, I have neither the patience and I don't have the time to get into a long argument, so I'll just say one thing. I'm about to have a baby, and I can't afford the stress of having trees falling through my kitchen while I try and raise the two children I apparently have already."

Gwen rarely just said "one thing", and were George paying much more attention than his now single-celled mind could amass at that moment, he might have been surprised when she turned to leave, as though "one thing" was precisely all she would be saying. George often thought that his wife's points actually would come through clearer, at least be driven home harder, if she only said the one thing she wanted, if she got to the point rather than attempting to nail it so deep into the board that it simply fell out the other side. If George had been thinking straight he would have been forming those very thoughts, just as she made it halfway down the driveway and turned to continue, as though she was offering up a rebuttal to her own case.

"And you'll need to explain to Annie, by the time I get home George, that she needs to get herself a job, find her own place, and make a life for herself. We have a new baby to

raise and I can't keep washing the same old dishes." She looked at him, swore she saw him twitch slightly, and seemed happy with the results.

"By the time I get home, George."

By the time Annie showed up, climbing through the limbs of the fallen Maple to make her way from one end of the kitchen to the next, her father's Raisin Bran was something closer to the consistency of cream of wheat. She laughed a little at the thought of him wearing a Quaker's hat and one of those puffy shirts that Willy Penn seemed so fond of. She was going to bring it up, thinking it might cheer him sufficiently enough to at least produce a smirk, or perhaps, at best, a half-hearted laugh.

But just as she was going to say it—making her way past the stainless steel sheen of the refrigerator which now both echoed the reflection of the tree limbs as well as required their rearrangement to fashion yourself a bowl of cereal, for instance—she saw her father as she never had before, indeed as he never had been before.

His face was more or less the same, but underneath his eyes—the little indents that had always been somewhat blue and countered the bursting brightness of his mottled eyes—Annie's eyes—she now saw the vast emptiness of what a sunken man's face looks like when the eyes on it have died. She stood there and watched him age 10 years every minute until he finally, suddenly looked up at her, so quickly and with an expression so dire on his face that she swore for a moment he must be a zombie, and wished she had taken more formal preparedness classes for such an event. Then he spoke.

"Annie, baby...whatever has just happened, it's hard...it's too hard for me to handle right now. Your mother needs some time and space and probably, well, I guess we have a baby coming and the kitchen seems like it's going to be a big job." He left the spoon drop into the uneaten breakfast, rubbed the entire left side of his face with one hand and scratched the small of his back with the other. "I need you to...we need you to find yourself your own place."

In the moments those last syllabic darts made their way into her flesh, Annie felt betrayed, such an intense betrayal that were she a woman of even slight contempt for anything, she would have lost her temper to the moment and left the house never to return. It was only the fact that she also felt such pity and sorrow for her father that she

instead walked over to him, took the hand from his face and kissed his forehead, crying silently through her eyes, screaming fiercely just behind her skin.

Annie considered telling her father that it will be okay, that he could write more, that they could fix this all, and that she could somehow make things better, but somehow it all sounded in her head like doing so would be asking him if she could stay and nothing more. She even began to say something to that affect to him.

"I wouldn't have to stay..." was all that came out, and it sounded instantly stupid to her after what he had just said. She still wanted to console him, to at least let him cry to her. Instead she left go of his hand and watched, completely aware but unable to do anything about it, as whatever last chance he had of surviving this was pulling away and walking down the driveway.

Chapter 20

By the time Annie arrived at the American Legion, the same bar that was once the cafe her father read his poetry in so much life ago, she realized that she had no idea where she particularly was, how she had gotten there, or what came in between. Through the entire walk she basically held a month's worth of arguments, discussions and chit chats in her head with herself, of course, but also with her mother, with George, both her father George and the Long Haired Man. Every scenario she could think of, from reasoning with her mother to let her stay in the house and help look after her father, even the baby, to screaming at her father how much she hated him for letting this happen, for allowing himself to die like that, to succumb to this world and her mother and everything that he seemed to have such a fighting chance at living above.

When she finally did realize that it was the American Legion she was standing in front of, she realized that she had found herself without a single cigarette and thought it might be a fine a place as any to go in and produce one for herself.

As are most American Legions—or VFWs, the Moose establishments, and so on—the place was dark, perhaps contractually so, most of the light coming from behind the bar, above row after row of American whiskeys and a few bottles of cheap vodka, rum and whatever random fruit-flavored liquors the type of women who frequent American Legions might like to mix into their Sprite. Two old men sat at the bar, several chairs away from one another though both wore nearly identical outfits. To call them outfits might be a stretch, but even as soldiers and doctors and mechanics have uniforms, these seemed to Annie your typical old-man-at-the-bar wear: a thin, tan jacket that was likely made in 1985 at the latest, blue dress pants that fell a good 5 inches short of even coming close to reaching the dark brown loafers that helped the navy pants frame a pair of black socks. One man was drinking a beer so pale and yellow, so flat looking that Annie wondered if it was alcohol at all. The other held a half-emptied shot of whiskey in his hands. Both stared contently at their drinks.

Annie wondered if the reason they sat so far away from one another was the fact that they drank different types of booze. Perhaps they'd long ago had an argument over which method of intoxicating ones' self through retirement was the most effective and, unable to come to an agreement, found it easier to part ways and never have to deal with the topic again. Sure, they'd have to see one another every day, but it's a big bar, and there were plenty of seats to separate them. She laughed a little out loud, though

she tried about a quarter as best she could to keep it inside. The result was something like when you attempt to spit but the saliva sticks to your lip and just hangs there, leaving you unsure if you should try and spit it off or slurp it back up in defeat. As she finally made it to the bar, seeing the looks on their faces and not just the balding backs of their heads, she realized that it was more likely that the two had simply known one another for such a long time that they had literally said all that there was to say, to each other or anyone else.

The woman behind the bar was kneeling down, rearranging some bottles in a low cooler or moving some glasses out from underneath a series of tubes and pipes, Annie wasn't sure because she didn't find it necessary to be sure about the specifics of the situation, only that she would like it if the woman would stand up to meet her. Which she did, eventually.

"Do you sell ciggies?" Annie asked.

"Marlboro Lights and Camels, dear, but the Camels are no filters." The woman looked and sounded familiar to Annie, but in the way that perhaps all old women can remind you of some great great grandmother you once had, or a distant aunt.

"Marlboros, please." The woman walked the fifteen feet to the wooden counter which held two packs of small white and silver boxes, the Marlboro Lights, and two rows of dusty old brown paper packages, the filterless Camels. She made the journey there and back as though it was painfully difficult, but did it with a valor that had Annie thinking she was enjoying every last step she could take before death or worse.

"We don't have Marlboro sweetheart, just Marlboro Lights," she said, her hand held on the pack, looking over her shoulder for Annie's recognition of such hard and serious facts, and perhaps waiting for confirmation.

"Yes, the Lights," Annie thought about informing the woman that she had obviously realized that from their initial interaction, but decided against it. It's often better to let the elderly feel good about themselves for being right, even when they're wrong, than to try and set the record straight. "Old people only have a few more years of being right, wrong or otherwise left in them," Annie thought to herself. "I have the rest of my life." This last sentence she accidentally said out loud, but the other woman didn't seem to notice, though the old man drinking the flat beer turned his head every so slightly in Annie's direction.

The bartendress laid the cigarettes down next to Annie and with one hand adjusted her glasses as she looked for a button on the cash register. With her other hand, as Annie went to reach for the box of cigarettes, she gently held the top of Annie's own hand. At first it seemed to Annie that the woman was trying to prevent her from touching the box before she had paid for it, but the hand was so frail and held her so gently, the fingers slightly cold and clammy but so very soft...that Annie was exhilarated when she realized who the woman was.

"Deb?" Annie's question slipped from her mouth like a hungry mouse in the afternoon, when it hoped the cat was napping.

"Yes, hun?" the woman replied, still trying to find something on the register. "There we go," she said, pushing a large, round button, black in the middle and tarnished brass around the edges, on this ancient cash register. "It's hard to find the controls on this sometimes, my close up vision isn't quite what it could be."

The woman spoke comfortably but when she finally looked up and saw the expression on her customer's face, she looked back through her glasses and asked, "Do I know you, honey?"

Annie smiled.

"I don't think so," she handed a \$10 bill in the direction of the bartender.

"Maybe...maybe you knew my dad."

"Who's your daddy, sweetheart?" she inquired as she retrieved the note and began to make change, once again attempting to peer over the top of her glasses to discern the workings of the antique register.

"My dad's name is George, I think he used to read poetry here." She paused, "One time."

Deb looked right into Annie now, smiled, and leaned across the bar, leaving the \$10 to rest on the bar, nearly falling on the floor. "Dammit," she said, with a pleased tone and an even more satisfied look across her smiling cheeks. "George."

Annie couldn't have known for sure that Deb had fallen hard and stayed down for George, for most of her life if still not to this day. She had no way of knowing that her father and Deb once had a short fling—before George met Annie's mother—and that if things had just gone slightly differently, if one night George hadn't gotten too drunk to ask Deb out and if Gwen hadn't approached him that evening instead, how very much changed her father's life would have been. Of course, Annie likely never would have been born in that scenario, and so it was, for her existence's sake at least, better that she couldn't discern such specifics. She was certainly not so unaware, however, as to fail to realize that Deb's eyes were reflecting the flooding of emotions pouring all back into her heart at this very moment.

Annie lit a cigarette and by the time her afternoon of listening and eagerly inquiring of Deb about her father's past had come to an end, it was much closer to evening, so much so that if she hadn't left before finishing her 11th cigarette, she would have walked out of that bar into the pitch of night. When she finally did leave though, just as she got to the door, she turned to say thank you.

"Sweetheart, the pleasure was so very much mine. If you ever see your father, tell him I said...well, actually, don't tell him anything. And I probably shouldn't tell you this either, I know, but I will anyway. That's just the kind of lady I am, you know, say what's got to be said or it might sure as hell never get heard when it needs to be.

It's a shame what happened to that man. Your mother never really was any good at her 'art' anyway, and she didn't care about it a tenth as much as your daddy did his poetry."

Annie left the door swing shut behind her.

Chapter 21

By April of the next year Annie had her own place, a small studio above the American Legion that she secured, along with a part time job behind the bar, by fast becoming friends with Deb. The old woman had so many great stories, though at times they changed and sometimes even intermingled various plots and key points, that Annie couldn't help but feel as though she had found a new place to belong, at least for now.

Her mother had dropped off a few boxes of her clothes and a couple of other items from her bedroom, but aside from that hadn't spoken since the barrel fire, since the tree splitting. Annie hadn't seen her father either, but at times, working the bar and particularly when cleaning up the tables that sat on what used to be the stage area, a quarter century ago, she could still feel her father as the Long Haired Man, as though now he was more inside of her than the other way around.

She spent most of her days taking pictures around the Lake Erie town that she lived in, having found an old Polaroid camera and a box full of film for the device. Her walls were lined with snapshots of fire hydrants and the sword holding hands of local statues, plenty of sunsets and nearly every face that came into the bar, rarely one of them ever looking into the camera, nearly all of them staring down into their drink. But now that it was April, and the snow was melting even as the lake stayed frozen solid all the way to Canada, she thought she might stop by her parents house. She thought she would at least walk by, and as she approached the hedges that formed a natural wall blocking the view of her old home's garage she hoped that she might find her father standing there in the driveway, maybe even waiting for her, looking to see if she might pass.

But no one was standing in the driveway, and the garage door was closed. She walked in through the smaller side door, through the empty garage and up to the door which lead into the kitchen. She laughed as she thought about whether to knock or just walk right in, the place seemed so different, her presence their somehow forbidden. The lights were off inside and she first tapped lightly on the screen door with her knuckles, and when nothing stirred inside she gently tried opening the door.

It was locked.

Annie turned to leave, completely oblivious to the notion that today her mother was giving birth, and even as she stood there Gwen's face was full of the agony nature

deemed necessary to creating new human life. George at her side, concerned, somehow hopeful even if he had never even slightly recovered from the past summer's tragedies. Annie was going to leave, she was scheduled to work the bar that night and it would likely be busy, a Saturday night and all, but first she thought to walk into the back yard to see what had become of her tree.

Both sides of the great split Maple had been removed, a large pile of firewood now stacked near the back of the yard, half covered in lawn clippings, all in the very spot where the barrel fire had taken place. The ground still had patches of snow freckling the newly greening grass but Annie walked through the melting white blanket, tattered as it was now, that she had grown up in every winter anyway, slowly at first but then taking wide steps, as close to running as feet can get without actually making the full effort.

A stump almost three feet high stood where the Maple once lived, and Annie could nearly make out the exact outline of the tree in its living days. The stump, she found as she got nearer, was hollow on the inside, and nearly all of the snow had melted, though a few scraps still held on, clumped into shadier corners.

Annie didn't even notice at first, but as her attention moved from those slim remaining piles of frozen winter, she saw a single, small budding plant growing up from the middle of the tree's stump, out of the dirt and sod that had consumed the former tree trunk. The sapling had a single leaf which was reaching as high and mightily as it could at such a sweet, green age, confident in its stretch toward the sun.

By the time Annie was pouring her first patron his initial Budweiser of the night, her sister was born, a healthy and vivacious little girl who would in only a few days come home to the little white house on James Avenue to grow her young life up, alongside that budding baby Maple, the two of them having their own chance at figuring it all out. Even if the new baby wasn't her own, the new chance at a tree not precisely the one she had planted, the old grandmother in her grave found herself satisfied at never needing to stir again.

The End.