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### **Sile Smithwich**

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# *Sile Smithwich*

The Shape of Allure Cast by the Sea



a short story by

*Ewan Lillicii*

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# *sile smithwich*

ONE	Insides Out	1
TWO	Curtain Call	7
THREE	Crosswalk	11
FOUR	Devise and be Conquered	17
FIVE	Changing of the Guard	21
SIX	Educated Guest	27
SEVEN	The Ayes Have It	33
EIGHT	Shoe Laced at the Door	41
NINE	Armor a Primera Vista	49
TEN	Wok This Way	57
ELEVEN	Irish Vamp	61
TWELVE	Gentle Seamstress	65
THIRTEEN	Reupholstered Room	73

Written with love for Kelly Yvonne Zuniga.

The croco-dile, dial, dial that will not pick up the phone  
twelve months in a row. And counting...

1

# INSIDES OUT

It all starts with a forceful bang and ends in a peaceful flood of bright light. In between it's a perpetual wave of chaos, redemption, and rhythm. If you're lucky, you get to surf a few of the mavericks. I used to be lucky. Today I'm taking the long way to work on a bus that's making me nauseous.

At the end of the 45 minute ride, two miles away from home, I stumble off and head for the nearest tree. Leaning into the trunk I return my breakfast burrito to the earth. The words of a wise friend of mine come to mind. She told me once in a solemn moment, "Remember how easy it was, and who gave it to you." Then threw up a smile.

At the time, I thought that little line was a cool thing for her to say. Today it feel like a sarcasm worth railing against as I lean over to spit out a small piece of chorizo. I remember who gave me this new life of suffering. I remember how easy it was for her to do. Kayla Silverman is the Muñeca that nested in my heart and carved me with her Voodoo from the inside into the hollowed out and shamed man I am today.

I wipe my chin with an old pay stub from my computer bag and angle

my foot to wipe some of the yuck onto the grass. These days my shoes are everything I count on. I'm a little bowlegged like the cowboys in my family so the heels are worn out on the sides. Hurt feet are a typical trait for me now. Today, my sharp aches rise above the underlying dull pain that I carry within.

Last night I tossed and turned until sunrise then took a quick nap before heading into work late. Whenever the weight of memories ring my mind I replace them by lighting up a cracked pipe. In the last 24 hours I have had enough remembrances to take me on a winding road of contempt that still has me spinning. My tremors and quakes are her fault.

The door to my office building is at the end of a long and flowered sidewalk. There are a few smiling women getting out of their cars across the parking lot. I time my speed so I can avoid the possibility of them saying anything pleasant to which I may be expected to respond. A simple morning greeting is frightening to me these days. When your soul is stolen, someone seeing the empty vase in your eyes can shatter you.

To avoid confusion my key card is prepared in my pocket and I'm practiced at holding my smile as I approach the entrance. Confusion has to be minimized. Having to think about a process like whether to sip from the water fountain creates a river of panic that runs through my veins like a pulsing slush. I make it inside and to the top of the stairs. My next stop is the break room. I fill a cup with ice water and stuff a wad of napkins in my pocket after I fold them quickly and symmetrically. I know that once I get to my desk the sweating will begin. I add hot water, because when the drink is too cold it makes me gulp a little too loud. Planning is essential.

Everyone is in their cubes. I make it to mine without eye contact. My chair leans in to the desk, which fits today since I have already doubled-over once. If I drink too much water, it causes my stomach to gurgle and

splash. I drink a third of the cup and set it down. The wad of paper gets stuck as I pull it out of my pocket, and the jerk of my elbow as I pull harder to free it knocks over the cup. I jump up and soak the surface with the napkins. My sweat prevention system has been destroyed. That makes me sweat even more.

The girl on the other side of my cubicle wall is talking in a melody that makes me hate her guts. She's on the phone with a customer but they stopped talking business minutes ago. Now she's talking about her weekend. The thrill of going into the city with her husband. Walking down Union Street window shopping before he slips into Cocoa Bella to buy her a truffle shaped like a cappuccino. She saw a little orange car she thinks is so adorable. Something European. I think it sucks. I used to buy Kayla boxes of truffles in all sorts of shapes to fit her seismic appetite for delicate style. I slide on my headphones and turn up Papa Roach. Music gives me a rhythm that reduces my disgust. Sometimes.

As I try to focus on work. Over the din of useless chatter I hear Kayla being greeted at the door. Why the fuck is she here? I turn down the music and listen more closely. I can't take the headphones off or a passerby might be tempted to talk to me. I hear her standing with the CEO and an attorney. Someone introduces her to a group of people in the boardroom on the other side of the office. When the door closes I resist letting go of her voice. I am frightened by what they could be talking about, and I don't want to start crying again. I hate her for that.

Faintly, I can make out the image in my ear. Attorneys are talking to each other. There is glad handing and Kayla doesn't speak much, just clears her throat in a feminine way whenever the men in the room aren't fully aware of how pretty she is or how beautiful her voice can be. I exhale the heat building in my mouth slow and steady like a gargoyle. She is asked to sign something. Then something else. Business is wrapped up quickly. Someone asks if she would like to talk to me before

she goes. My heart begins to race. What if this was my last opportunity to change her mind and I blow it by having sweat circles under my arms? I wring out the water-logged napkins, unbutton my shirt in the middle, and dab the drips before they can gather. Then I put on another layer of deodorant from the spare I keep in my drawer. My fear is turning to expectation. I'm more excited than I've been in months. Kayla wants to see me again. This could be the turning point. All of this miserable existence has a purpose after all. The darkness before the gorgeous, perfumed dawn.

She clears her throat, tilts her head a bit and her soothing voice breaks the silence right on cue. "No, I think it would be best if he didn't know I was here. It might upset him."

"Motherfucker! Why?" I'm confident I didn't say that out loud but I breathed the echo of the words. It is almost enough to make me rise from my seat. But if I'm seen by someone it could mean eye contact. I grab my cell phone instead and text her.

Why, Kayla? Can't you just talk to me? You screwed up just as much as I did. Why don't you ever take responsibility? Why am I the only person that has to change? How can you leave me alone when we were so close to finally making it work? I love you. Stop being a bitch.

I send the text. Then I regret it. Why did I call her a bitch? Now she won't come to my desk. What if it was my last chance? I close my eyes and try to picture her turning around. The darkness and the misery combine to make me dizzy. I have to keep my eyes open.

Her voice is replaced by others - cops. From the FBI this time. They are pissed. I hear my name. Terror ends the rain down my cheeks and ups my pulse. They want to know how long I've been working for the company. I hear another one. A woman. She walks to my manager's

office and places her under arrest. "I had no idea what he was doing! I thought he was a good man!" she shrieks. "No, please. No!" I have to get the sound under control.

I'm not sure what they have come for. Vile ideas roll like frightening mud into my brain. Murder. Drugs. Guns. Kidnapping. Prostitution. Tax evasion. Every hair on my arms stands up. I was innocent of these things but they, whoever it was, had done a perfect job of framing me. Hope vanished into the muck and a spiral of acquiescence to torture in Guantanamo Bay jumbled my thoughts like a tornado. They were going to fuck me up permanently. I quickly navigate to the folder where I store all of the photos and video of Kayla and I together, zip them up into an encrypted file, and erase the originals. They will never know I knew her. It's my word against hers. I must avoid getting fucked up permanently.

I can't concentrate on work anymore. I prepare an SOS text message and fill the recipient list with everyone I think I can trust. I wonder if one of them might be a traitor. What if this one is the one that made up the story that's getting me put away? I take his name off. Shit. This could be my last chance to send a message. I have to make my communication count.

I prepare to send the signal but it gets interrupted. No signal in here. I make a break for the exit as calmly as possible. The unplanned travel is making me nervous. By the time I get back outside I'm dizzy with my eyes open. I sit at a picnic table and steady myself as much as I can. As I begin to calm down I wonder if Kayla's entourage parked on this side of the parking lot. Maybe I will see her as she leaves and she will glance back at just the right moment. If she sees me and understands how much I love her it will change everything instantly. Her love will heal me.

She isn't there. My heart sinks and the hurt calms me. Pain is a blanket of thorns I cling to. Today it's not enough. The door to the office

Ewan Lillicii

flies open and a group of interns march out for an early lunch. They're all short and they all work out. They put on their sunglasses in unison. It's an opportunity for them to flex. I've never talked to them but I can tell they hate me. They probably tried to get me arrested. This is too messed up. When the spiral hits the bottom I have to call for help.

Sile Smithwich

## 2

# CURTAIN CALL

There's one chance for salvation. For several weeks I've kept a list of doctors in my pocket. It's folded and matted from going through the washer. Peeling back the layers of paper reveals emptiness. Then some faint ink. There is one number in the center of the wad of white. Sile Smithwich.

I wipe my finger across the phone to dismiss the emergency text, but I accidentally hit the send button instead. Fuck! I wrap my fingers around the phone. I push my hands under my jacket and double over. I can't let the message go out I'm screwed. I wait until the count of thirty and look again. The connection was refused. It saved me. I call the number shrouded in the folds and the ring eases my fear. No answer. I dial again. Busy. I have to keep trying.

At any moment they might come looking for me. When they come I have to be able to say the worst is over or I'm screwed. If I go to jail or lose my job Kayla will never speak to me again. If I go to Guantanamo she'll probably testify against me. She'll tell them I was the one who planted the bomb in Oklahoma City. I wasn't even in Oklahoma City! But that doesn't matter. Maybe Alex Jones will help me out. I never met

the guy, but I went to school with him. He'll probably help me. I dial the number one last time. I have to make a connection.

It rings and rings for an eternity. Like a sine wave. I hang on every peak and my despair feeds within every trough. This isn't going to work. I can't make this happen. Death in a dark, cold, and lonely place is a certainty. I finally give up. My armpits are soaked, and the beads of sweat are stinging my eyes. I can't make things happen.

Then the phone rings. "Hello," she says. "Cloverdale Medical Center. Can I help you?"

"Sile Smithwich please, " I say in a hushed voice. My voice carries. I don't want anyone at work to hear it. I wait and then a friendly voice appears.

"Sile Smithwich."

She paused without asking how she could help me. The abrupt ending startles me. I'm not prepared to speak and I have to think of something quick before I stutter. "Hi," I say. Then I wonder if my voice cracked. I can't remember. If I don't continue speaking the long pause will sound worse than when my voice cracked. I have to hurry. Slowly.

"I need help... with something," I say. "Do you have time?"

"What kind of help do you need?" she asks. I can tell she's in no mood for bullshit.

"Just the typical help I guess," I say. I can't give anything away. I can't sound like a nut. "But I need something soon. Do you have... are you available?"

"I'll need to know what your problem is," she barks. She's already mad at me. I have to tell her the truth.

"I'm having a hard time, I mean I'm doing badly after a breakup. I'm drinking too much and other stuff."

"OK, how about tomorrow at 11:30?" she says. I can hear her writing on something. She's probably writing me in before I even answer. Wait, how would she know? Does she already know my name? Maybe she's with the police.

"What's your name?" she asks. Thank goodness.

"Felix," I say. Should I give her my last name too? Maybe. But what if she is with the police?

"OK, Felix. Tomorrow at 11:30. And bring your checkbook please. A thank you doesn't pay the fiddler."

"I will. Thank you."

Her voice sounded nicer at the end. As happy as I hoped in the beginning. Maybe this time was the charm. I look up and the reflection of the building blinds me for a second. I smile anyway and walk back into the chaos with a plan in motion. And an eye out for cops.

### 3

## CROSSWALK

Time passes in the blink of an eye and today was yesterday. I make it through the morning bus ritual with usual unease. I make it to my desk by well-worn path. My foot taps out the time of the seconds until 11:00am. The Medical Center is 10 minutes' walk away. Accounting for slow-downs to avoid confrontation and extraneous routes to bypass those still individuals who might be waiting to attract a conversation that leaves me 10 minutes to fill out paperwork. Everything is in order.

It was 10:39am. The weather outside is calm. Sunny. The relative humidity of my head and armpits is normal. It dropped below the dew point, but is holding steady at a trickle. I reach a saturation of work and spend the last 3 minutes counting out 180 tiptoe taps. Everything is a go.

I zig and zag, left to right making my way to the top of the stairs and empty my breath at the bottom. Then meander straight to Cloverdale with the perseverance of a snail across the flats. My cell is almost dead, but I plug in my earphones like a silent aural force field and keep my eyes to the pavement. I arrive at the twin glass doors that guard the entrance and take stock of the faces I see within. Everything is fine from here.

By 10:55am I'm sitting in a comfortable chair. Leaning back so my stomach doesn't cry out. The background noise is an instrumental jazz station. The receptionist wears large square glasses like those you get after an eye exam. I appreciate the absence of pupils staring in my direction like an ostrich. At the moment I'm fright-less but it doesn't hurt to be prepared. My last few minutes are reserved for one last trip to the washroom. Everything is going according to plan.

There's one light in here and it flickers at random. I'm drying my head and catch a glimpse of my eye in the mirror. It gives way to a stare and I walk up closer to myself, turning in profile to imagine a dapper gentleman nodding in approval of his apprentice. Then I hear my name being called. I have to hurry! I finish drying up and my ring falls into the sink. Everything just fell to chaos again.

"Felix Kakablanca!" shouts a muffled voice from the waiting room. I can tell from the tone that having to ask twice doesn't suit this woman.

Rushing to slide my ring back on I notice that I'm sweating again. I grab a handful of paper towels and dab furiously so as not to create redness on my shorn dome. Then I twist around to the door and out into the bright light. Everything is in her hands.

"Come on now, a good start is half the work. Felix!" she says with a disgruntled bark. When I hear my name a third time I fly into her field of view to connect with my new hired conscience. "Is that you then, Mister Felix?"

"I am Felix, yes ma'am," I say trying to maintain calm. An uncomfortable pause as she looks me over creates the hint of a tremble.

"Follow me," she says casually. She cracks a smile that washes away

the temporary guilt that had just taken root. We walk through a short hall tidy and tight with books and manuals of psychological importance, patient records, and a small sign with a grumpy cat drawn on it that says "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here," affixed to her office door. The sarcasm makes me gulp down the last bit of moisture in my mouth.

"Sit anywhere you'd like," she says. I plant myself on one side of a small couch and hang on to the arm with mine.

"Could I get some water please? The walk over here dehydrated me," I ask, trying to hide the smacking sounds of my tongue peeling off the roof of my mouth.

"Sorry, no water in here," she says as she crosses her legs and leans in a bit. "How can I help you?"

It's all business in this room. Time to focus. I look around for lenses and microphones. Everything looks safe. "I'm having trouble. The bad kind. I've been having a hard time focusing at work and when I get home I can't sleep. When I do sleep I just dream about things that bother me when I wake up and then do it all over again." She nods as if she understands and then continues her questioning.

"How long has this been happening? Is this an addiction problem?" she quizzes as she dusts off her notepad. I try to think of a quick substitute for the truth. I hadn't planned on walking a straight line to the point.

"Kind of," I stammer, "Well there's a girl, a woman, that I met in Las Vegas that I can't get out of my mind. She broke me in every way. Made a fool of me. Destroyed the last things I was proud of and then left me for this cop she lives with."

I look up to see if this level of honesty is acceptable. Her hand embraces the side of her face and her mouth and stare are straight as an arrow like a sign pushing me on. "I used to drink a lot and that's gotten a little better." Silence.

"But you know it's still a problem so you can help with that. And I'm also doing something else but I'm not sure it's a big deal or that I even need to tell you about it. It's gotten to the point I can't function anymore. I get terrified and all these evil voices start shouting out the method to their destruction of me. Like before I got here I was just walking down the street and this pigeon looked at me and stopped and I know that pigeons aren't mean unless they're seagulls but this one had something wrapped around its foot and I thought it was a microphone or something and then I could hear the people who were listening through it as they made plans to jump out from the hedge. I can't it anymore. And I don't want to be this way if she ever decides to love me again."

I bit off more than she could chew. My hand rose to cover my mouth as I became aware of her judgment. I pried my eyes from the floor to see if she could handle the stream of consciousness that I turned into a swamp. Her eyes were wide open. Pursed lips were sinking my boat. Then they unlocked a forced smile. "OK. So what I'm hearing is you have trouble with addiction and you're obsessed with a girl..."

"A woman," I interject softly.

"Sorry. A woman. And you need help to stop using substances and let go of your thoughts of... What's her name?" she asks.

"Kayla. She ruined my life."

"Kayla, right. OK. Well I think you did the right thing by coming here," she says as she closes her notebook. "I'm concerned about your

problems with work. Are you planning on dialing down your use of these things?"

"I guess. I mean I am. I know I can I just haven't yet." While I struggle to maintain composure the words dribble from my mouth like a ball of confusion coughed out by a Siamese cat.

We talk more about my problems at work, but every thread unwinds its way back to Kayla. The session ended and I made my next appointment. Then I walked back to the office with a little more confidence and a fuzzy vision becomes a little more clear. A new season has begun. Winter is finally over. But here in my bubble in California the sun can shine any day. I noticed a familiar patch of ground where the pigeon had been, but this time my fear had flown away with it. As I rounded the corner the walkway narrowed and a lone stranger was headed in my direction. Just an hour earlier the look in her eyes would have been terrifying. I looked straight at her and she looked straight back with a smile. It put a spring in the step of my uneven shoes.

# 4

## DEVISE AND BE CONQUERED

I wake the next morning with an unusual absence of pain in my shoulder. I spring out of bed and begin my morning rituals by making the bed. The actions themselves are rehearsed, but my timing is spontaneously correct - 7:00am. The subliminal lingo of failure rolls off my feathers and I crow with intent to the rhythm of a Johnny Cash song. As luck would have it, it's two in a row day. The DJ follows up with 'Big River' - my favorite. I carelessly hope that the theme of following his lost love down to the sea won't produce a trail of tears down my cheek. First mistake of the day.

I say good morning to Carl, the usual bus driver on Thursday mornings. I walk up the steps and past the driver when it dawns on me - I said hello to him yesterday. A week had gone by. I forgot since the last time I remembered. I think that was Tuesday. Whatever! Nothing matters as much to me as my appointment with Sile. She's my talisman against the echoes that fill the empty space that Kayla left behind.

I hop off the bus, but return to retrieve my computer bag. Luckily, Carl honked the horn when he noticed I left it behind. I thanked him and returned to my daydream. In the midst of the ongoing distraction I had a fleeting thought that that was my third mistake of the day. What had happened to the second? Wasn't important. That was my fourth mistake.

I saunter up to the left entrance with the comfort of thinking I finally made it to work on time. A side issue next to the fact that during this part of the day a person doesn't have to worry about the sound of strangers' footsteps leading to an awkward meeting of stares and the empty grin that follows. I'm unaware of what the root of happiness is today, but whatever it is I've grown full of it. I pay my respect to the flowers by the door and bend down to dust off the petals of one that had a clump of mulch holding it down. Then I enter a code on the keypad and proceed with my grand entrance.

The latch that holds the door in place has been known to fall short from time to time. Not a problem as long as it is pulled shut within ten seconds. Nine and a half seconds after I float in I pause on the landing and have a thought that the usual click of the closure was absent. Like clockwork, the alarm buzzer begins to blare. Shit! My first thought is to quicken my step to the second floor, but as I weigh the option I glance out the windowed wall and notice a co-worker from customer service walking toward the door. It's the one that talks too much. If I go down to shut the door I'll be cornered by conversation. The remnants of fear seep into the fractures of my mind though drops of sweat are no longer a problem. I'm becoming overwhelmed with the complex details of which way to turn. A breather is in order. I take a deep blue breath and the picture of her curled up in the comfort of periwinkle sheets slows my manic paralysis. Life decides instead. The door at the top of the stairs opens and the man in the dusty cap rushes down to take care of the crisis. I like that guy. He never speaks. Just tilts his cap as he goes on.

Can absence of action be a mistake? If so, that's number six. Crap, it's five. Now that's six. Whatever. It's going to be a delightful day! I yank open the door at the top and take the scenic route to my desk that winds past the accountants that huddle within the west corner of the building. It's still early but they're all in their seats looking busy. The company is notoriously cheap. Many of them are burdened with having to be in two places at once. They tack affirmations to their cubes. My favorite is the lady who had an appendectomy a few months ago. Her poster says 'New guts, new glory.' I rescue a Snickers bar from the community bowl and find my way forward.

The shadow of my previously protective nerves return as I see the snarky secretary staring at me in the mirror on her desk. A pattern of shakes erupt and a ring begins in my ears. I can see the words in my mind but I'm afraid to speak them for fear of stuttering. Without warning the phone rings and she picks up the receiver. I dial it down a notch and with a blank stare blurt out "Hey. Uh...Hi." Mistake number seven.

I break the flow of her script somewhere between "It's a great day at..." and "How can I make your day that much better for you?" The smile of her voice crinkles and she gives me a sideways look that stuns me like a deer in headlights. I scurry away in mutual unease.

Finally at my desk. The phone rings before I've had a moment to sit down and recover from the embarrassment. I pick it up with my computer bag still hung over my shoulder. Then I reach over my chair to open my email. Mistake eight! The bag slips and is caught by the phone cord. The whole apparatus crashes down like a house of cards. It doesn't matter. Today is going to be amazing.

I hum through a list of important tasks and then start on the first item. Minutes later, I hum through a list of important tasks and then start on

the first item. Oddly enough this happens again a few minutes later. I smirk at the idea of having wandered into some kind of wormhole and tie a piece of string around my finger so I will remember my forgetfulness. Wait. My brain is spinning on the accuracy of that notion. Should I instead forget to remember in order to prevent recurrence? If I forget then there is no memory to forget, in which case I will replay the error anyway. My noodle is cooking.

# 5

## *Changing of the Guard*

The time strikes me on the shiny part of my head. I put down my greasy glasses and her fingers begin their walk through my hollow ways. The office chatter is coming through like a shortwave station. The chattering teeth of keyboards gnaw and pull and then subside. The echo chamber of horrors is shorting out and the long walk to Cloverdale is becoming an effortless stride. Then I open my eyes. I'm running late as usual.

Jumping up from the desk I catch the phone cord and the whole web of electronics flies up and crashes to the ground with a billow of dust. "Son of Shit!" I scream. Or did I scream? Nope, I just whispered it. A successful psychosis. I claw at the floor to scoop up the remains and shovel them onto the desktop. The anger is setting in. As I turn from the cube the receiver slides down the face of the phone and leaps like a bungee jumper. On the upswing it banks off the filing cabinet like a gong. "Mother Fucker!" I think. Then catch the thought. Then let it slip

out. Another whisper. No harm. Just foul.

I don't risk another attempt at organization. The clock is ticking, my chords are tangled, and the light above the department is flickering in a way that sets my mood one more tick into the red zone. My vision begins to tunnel and swing. My rage for always being late builds a sizzling ball in my throat. I look both ways then smack my dry mouth and lick my lips as best I can. By the time I burst into the open air of the parking lot I can't remember what I was angry about. And that pisses me off.

Kayla, the source of my waking joy is back to her usual pendulum perch of endless wicked frustration. I reach up to clean the buildup from the corners of my mouth and consider the agony and loss she piled on my shoulders every lonely holiday she spent in some mystery city with her friend Chuck. Chuck was allegedly a casino host with connections to the best parties in Los Angeles. She would disappear for days and then return to stories of how I should be so happy for her experience of a last minute phone call that resulted in a trip in his Porsche to see "friends." The calm after the storm of those repeating patterns of fake innocence usually came with aftershocks of law enforcement business cards used as bookmarks, creamy single use bath bottles from five or six hotels, and a few new sets of designer shoes. As my laser vision returned from its blur I focused on a tree trunk that took a swing at me, scraping a brown fist across the shoulder of my new shirt. "Fuck."

The walk isn't memorable. I can't remember what I was just thinking about before my shoulder began to hurt and it pisses me off. Again. But the sweet sound of heels and loafers on marble tile helps me regain civility. I make my way to the waiting room and wait. I take the seat nearest the entrance to her tunnel. The door swings open. My first reaction is an awareness that I didn't startle when the door first opened. My second awareness was an unusual reaction to her legs. Mrs. Smithwich was kind of hot. Had I noticed that before? Why not?

She pauses for a moment at the front of the hallway and I proceed to the end of the off-white couch and position myself for a clear shot at the doorway. A slow-motion reception of hair wisped aloft and blouse buttoned slightly low add to the full-body Barbie I hadn't noticed before. She sits, crosses, pulls straight and lifts the pad to her lap, pets it with her pencil, and looks to me with a newborn gaze of uninterrupted porcelain softness. Her smile opened up for the song of her voice. "Well, how have you been doing since our last meeting?"

"Not bad," I say with a dopey smirk. "Nothing major going on. I had some issues this morning with the phone at my desk and a tree on the way here got in my way. I'm mostly over that. Still a little pissed at Kayla though. Not sure how I feel really. Angry maybe. Or just frustrated. Angry frustration probably." I paused for a moment as my eyes read the braille of each repressed scene of fraud and confidence back-peddling. I hated it. Fuck.

Her pencil perked up and scribbled some dribble then laid itself back down on her hand. She looked up and licked her lips a little before clearing her throat and continuing, "How many of your thoughts, percentage-wise, would you say are about angry memories of situations like these?"

"Most of them really. Except for the good times. There were those too. But those have to be remembered. The bad feelings always come up themselves at the least convenient time."

Sile tugs at her lip a tiny bit with her teeth and wrinkles her nose delicately. "Is it affecting your work these days then?"

The question catches me off guard as I realize that I thought of her by her first name. I think about it after speaking. "Not really. It affects me

most at night though. After I've already dressed for bed and I'm lying there as those vile memories tug at my head. It's pretty fucked up actually. But it doesn't bother me much.”

“It seems like your anxiety is beginning to fade. Have you had any problems because of these episodes?” Her head tilts a smidgen and two fingers slide up to twirl the tail end of her golden hair. I get lost walking my eyes up to her stare and then become aware of the inappropriate pilgrimage. A third finger now strokes her locks.

“No, not really problems. Sometimes I'll cry or something, but usually just wipe it off into the trash can and keep going. When I think about our dinners at Red Lobster or packing a salad for her lunch break it negates most of those thoughts. But I still end up pissed.”

As I mention getting pissed it makes me feel pissed. My leg starts to shake nervously. I calm it with my right hand before I look uncool to her.

“Do you have any friends you can rely on at work?” she asked, letting her fingers slide out of the silken threads. She kneaded her thigh through her proper black skirt for a moment. I lost sight of the question.

I flutter blinked and drooled out, “What?”

“People at work. Do you relate to any of them?” she questioned. Her sincerity textured in the soft Alpaca of the scarf she pulled around her shoulders.

“No, I rehearse mostly. In the mornings I stock my desk with everything I'll need from the break room until lunch so I can avoid unexpected conversation. When it happens I pretend I'm not there until the last word and then I agree.”

The admission ushers my memory to the office and a situation that irritates me. The girl who sneaks up behind me during my favorite songs, raises my headphone and offers me Fig Newtons. She knows I can't deal with gluten but the insistence is so uncomfortable I eat them anyway. By 2 o'clock I'm sure to need a bathroom break. If I don't time it correctly the janitor will have it closed off. The downstairs bathroom is always swirling with potential human interaction. I hate having a large small talk target on my forehead. All that for a cookie.

She wiggles in her seat while a puzzled look comes over her face. “I think the problem is that you feel like there's no one with whom you can identify. You feel isolated and misunderstood. Is that right?”

“Maybe.” I think to myself. After a brief consideration I say it out loud. “I've never really fit in. Whether it's a small town or a big city there aren't many people like me.”

She smiles with slight satisfaction and asserts. “Around here you can swing a cat and hit someone who feels the same way as you! There's no reason to be alone. Plenty of people feel empty sometimes. Maybe you could fill up your calendar with meetup groups for things you enjoy?”

Her voice punctuates how much I enjoy the rhythm of the Irish accent. I look to the side for a moment to consider her idea while visualizing her words in slow motion. Before I can form a reply my mind turns to memories of times in bed with Kayla when she would lower herself toward me and tickle my nose with hers before saying “I love you” slow and silent with a moist and crisp smile. Her lips would gingerly drift onto mine and the small beads of sweet sweat would bind a smooth kiss to sleep. I forgot to speak for a moment. Just as my sleep had been a formality that brought about casual awakening next to her, the picture of her saying “Good morning” to me snapped me back to my presence in Sile's office.

“I could try a group thing,” I reply. “I’m not sure I’m into it. But if you want me to I’ll give it a try.”

For the first time, I notice Sile glancing down at my shoes. Her eyes quickly move up my body stopping just under my own. The irony of my stark comments doesn’t occur to my flat face. I think she feels something though.

“You might feel better if you give it a swing. Up to you.”

The balance of the session tips from creative to practical. I think back to when I would plan elaborate trips for us on long weekend holidays. Without fail, she would create a chaotic problem, blame the root of the thing on me, and disappear with some pink clouded memory of friends with nice homes and respectful guests watching movies until 2am and waking to grab a late breakfast at some chicken or waffle thing. All bullshit. I knew it was bullshit before, during, and after she said it but I always got it stuck to my shoe. Why the fuck did I let that stuff slide?

As was typical, tears scale down the walls of my face like the footprints of Kayla walking all over me. It pisses me off. I’m used to it. That pisses me off too. When I’m with Sile Smithwich though, that pain suddenly becomes a distant memory.

I walk back to the office with a new sense of focus. I hate that I talk about Kayla so much. Imagining her relentless indifference pisses me off. I can see the office from this point on the sidewalk. The flowers are coming into bloom and spring has sprung. As my emotional ball of wax unwinds her memory begins to wane. I wonder if she thinks of me whenever I think intensely about her. Probably not. That pisses me off.

## 6

# *Educated Guest*

The alarm clock erupts from under a t-shirt across the room at 6:15am. I reach up from under the comforter and emerge from my resting place. Squinting and smacking, clawing and crawling with hands while legs drag still behind me. With a final lunge I stop the clock and drop off the edge of the bed. I roll over and rub my eyes to regain vision. Blur gives way to focus and the first thing I spy is the calendar. Sile day. A pillow floated down to the floor with me so I decided to stay for a while.

Elements of the room periodically conspire to assist my rise. Sunlight from the window is avoided with a sock across my left eye. The ladies in the apartment next door start their morning with gossip and tea that I muffled with broken headphones pulled from the trash. The kids from down the walk scratch and sniff around my door but go away on their own.

With the precious minutes of calm I’ve managed to extract within my dingy fortress I manage one more dream. Sile is there, watching me from a two-way mirror. I sense her presence and walk toward the glass. I stare at the image and her face appears in the reflection. She licks her lips and

peers down at my pajama bottoms while unbuttoning her blouse. Her eyes squint and her body language begs for a kiss. I lean in and shatter the mirror. There sitting behind the hole in front of a stone wall is Kayla. I sweep the glass aside with my hand and lean forward to see a cat jumping to catch a butterfly in front of her perch. She's naked, writhing on a stool like a Marilyn Monroe pose. The words "Happy Birthday Mr. President." slither from her mouth and she kisses the air. The smack wakes me. It's 8:37am. Just in time to be late again.

I pull dirty socks from under the bed. They've been air cleaned in isolation by seven days of forty-something degree temperatures under partly cloudy conditions. The soil has since turned clean despite some fuzz. I pull them on and push myself back onto the recycled cotton. A pair of black slacks and a tight button down shirt make up my ensemble. I whistle my way to the door where the black shoes are parked. I give them a quick shine and continue.

The bus ride is uneventful apart from a few bumps around a construction zone. As I look through my backpack for a pack of breath mints I survey the scene out the corner of my eye. A pipe bursts out the window. The work crew curses and throws down their picks and shovels while the trencher operator in the distance looks after his repetitive tasks unaware. The pipe quickly empties its rain on the scruffy men in hard hats. The calm breeze that follows tickles them with a cool that makes them smile.

I thank my friend and exit the coach and walk in the footsteps of each day past straight to my cube. For the first time, the path is effortless. The last engineer leaves the water cooler as I zip in and out to fill my cup. The gossip girls standing guard in the hall from time to time disappear into the copy room as I turn the corner. I smile wide and look down at the backside of one of the front office secretaries a little too long, spilling some drops. They don't hit my shoes, still shiny.

Finally at my desk and ready to make progress. Everything is in order except for the phone I haven't straightened out from last week. The room is quiet except for the murmurs of managers on the phone and texting their girlfriends, the bustling of interns ferrying papers and waiting for their girlfriends to answer the phone, and the jackhammers outside creating space for a new sidewalk. I chip my tooth on an M&M. Wincing expectantly, I reach into my craw and pull out a hard candy shell. Lucky. Inside the shell is a piece of tooth. I breathe out a menacing sigh and try to pause my descending smile at flat. I peer at an apple like it insulted my girlfriend. Then I smile at the thought of her. Wherever she is.

That thought gives way to another. Where is she and who is she with? My ideas descend into a realm of suspicion where I suspect I shouldn't go. I go anyway. Fuck. Twenty minutes pass and the heat of the torture makes my teeth chatter. Her memories complete a short circuit that may never end. I love her. And she loves me. Fuck. Who else does she love?

Another twenty minutes letting my ghost surf the net while my mind hangs on the ledge of her insanity. The serene cliff of subtle pitfalls that beg me to crawl out on tip toe in a mild field of explosive emotions. Thinking about the worm that's wrapping his arms around her at this moment distracts me from the dark feline walking daintily along the edge in my direction. Her purr in his ear starts a landslide that ends in the crash of my fists on the keyboard. Crap.

In the thirty minutes remaining before my appointment I catch up on the back log of work that has built up in my inbox over the weekend and through the first few days of the week. I complete the work with a few to spare. I pace around my mind to the rhythm of a song with a thousand notes written in disappearing ink. The clock strikes ten minutes to time and I'm out of it. I pack everything precious into my pack. Then in haste I leave it behind and start for the door.

By the time I arrive at Cloverdale it seems like no time at all. The doors open like lunch on a sesame seed bun. But the buns that hit the spot are those of a guy running away with a plastic jar of Vicodin. He feels no pain as his muscles dampen the fall to the slate. He snaps up and looks behind him in anticipation of a chase. Without the motivation he tips his head, throws it back with two in the air like circus peanuts and strolls to his black Mercedes.

The echo of the hallway to her suite is louder than usual with less people as a result of Spring Break. The only people here today are the geriatric crowd coming for their government-sponsored blood thinners, sleeping pills, anxiety medications, and amphetamine tablets so they can think more clearly. Most share their dose with their husbands or wives to save on two copays. Others sell some on the side at Bingo so they'll have wine money.

Finally pushing past the emptiness of the hall, I arrive back at my favorite flavor of the week. I catch a glimpse of her walking a clipboard to her office manager. She's dressed in tangerine today. A silk number with six or seven buttons. Pants today. That's a bummer. I can make the best of it.

The door swings open and her eyelashes lift the covers off of her pale blue eyes. "Felix, are you ready?"

"Ready and willing," I say like a dope. I follow her like a drunken shadow flashing my grin at the staff as I go by. My phone holster clips the edge of her book shelf and spills pieces to the ground. I fall to my knees grinding teeth in a rage of embarrassment. I watch her walking away like a kid lost in the mall. "Go ahead, I'll be there in a minute," I call out. She doesn't notice. That makes me a little ticked but I know she still cares.

I reorganize my self and enter the office where she already sits checking her calendar. I look from the corner of my eye, waiting to catch her welcoming me back. She ignores me like a geek in the back of the class. I plant myself in the usual spot and focus all my attention on making her smile.

Her hand raises and a finger flips up. "Just a second. I have to verify another patient meeting before we can begin."

What the fuck! I look down at my slacks and pick imaginary lint from the corners and folds. I pick a piece of yesterday's steak from my tooth with the space behind it and gulp it down quietly. She continues to entertain her schedule. My legs uncross and I lean forward with elbows on my knees, hands clasped. Nothing. Everything went right this morning - from the chance finding of clean socks to the minimal human contact everywhere I went. Why won't she look at me? She might be a bitch after all.

I'm distracted for a second by two squirrels arguing over a nut in the tree outside her window. From paw to paw they steal and swipe their way up to the nest. They try to enter with four hands on the prize. It nicks the edge of the hole and tumbles to the ground. I watch it plunge with pity for the poor animals. I can't help but consider the symbolism. I sit and think on the mechanical dynamics of the random action, visualizing the acorn moving backwards up through the air. Just as I steady the seed with my mind as it nears the hole Sile closes her planner and turns in my direction. I drop the nut and the squirrels are forced to witness their failure a second miserable time.

"Welcome back," says a straight face. "What can I do for you today?"

Her tone and message are short for the amount of time we spent apart. I don't want to make her feel uncomfortable so I just smile and answer

her like Kayla answered me every time I caught her turning off her cell phone. Likewise, I turned off my charm and added a little sarcasm to my cereal.

“I think anything you have in mind would be fine. How was your weekend?” I baited.

“Everything went arseways as a matter of fact,” she said with the same solemn wall of impenetrable cruelty. She composed quickly and continued “Why don't we move on then? How are you feeling today?”

I'd love to tell her how I'm feeling with the words I'd practiced on the walk over. Under the pressure of her dismissal I felt more like telling the truth. “I'm pissed and I don't think she cares,” I spit back. The exaggeration requires an over correction, so I swing my head with pursed lips and wait for my red face to inspire a warm sentiment. She raises her finger again and calls another time out then exits the room. Abandoned like a stray cat in a dark upper class alley where the smell of salmon wafts from the windows framing shiny earrings and perfect posture on the pictures of good manners that close the window as the miniature lion whines itself to sleep.

## 7

# The Ayes Have It

I am in my bed at 2:13am when the sounds return. There is no pitter patter, just the squeaky rat-like whisper of a body less than human, more than shade, sometimes joyful, sometimes inspiring fear and at all times completely evil. I bounce up from my bed like a coiled spider. Tip-toeing on all eights to the cracked window I look out in splintered directions at the noises that needle and knead me. Shadows lurch and crawl in undulating fashion but never the style or substance I expect.

Focusing on a pinpoint of the puzzle I notice the profile of an insidious little prick hiding behind the stalk of a bamboo tree waiting for his chance. He matches like a chameleon waiting to strike with flaming rage as soon as I turn my back. A Cheshire smile of satisfaction with the uninspired puzzles of a silver spooned drifter marks his cowardice. I close the blinds and return to my sleep.

In the morning, I jump from my spider hole and replace the cobwebs. I flex at the abdomen and then admire my thorax in the mirror. A diet of flies and ointments does me good. I pull on a red shirt and red bell bottoms and scurry to the kitchen to catch a quick protein breakfast before buzzing out the door. The bus arrives and I can't fit through the

door. Two of my legs are caught in the pincer-like opening and the driver looks at me from all angles like he doesn't know me. I suddenly realize I am not a spider.

I walk back home dragging my sack behind me and flop back into the spider hole. The sun has not even risen. It was a dream. Thirty minutes pass. I rise again. More human than before, still feeling a bit alien.

I make the bed, do my sit-ups down on the floor and scramble my eggs as usual. A little shower and a lot of shaving. I make it to work late earlier than usual. A new trend has begun I think. A shift from indifference to acceptable necessity. An unconscious wisdom to avoid fighting structure with contentment. The owl persists as he must.

I arrive at my desk and pull a bottle of 8.5ph water from my pack. The bus driver says it helps his wife feel more healthy. I think Kayla might appreciate it so I'm giving it a try. Two squirts of Holy Basil, a measure of Rhodiola and a garlic pill help ward off evil and round out my square rituals. I position my hands like a Palmolive commercial above the keys and then pause to scoop a jelly bean from a dish. Now I'm ready to begin again. One more thing - the telephone is still in a heap from weeks ago. I spin around to uncoil the mess and dust off the apparatus. The desk is neat like my water. I position my hands and begin again, again.

A funny thing happens on my way to the copy machine. I talk to someone. I'm unclear on the beginning, but by the end I know exactly what I'm going to get. My unrehearsed verse spills out about the one game I happened to watch over the weekend because I was too lazy to reach for the remote. A successful mistake that burns away the memory of lethargic annoyance and replaces it with an uptick of confidence.

I answer emails as they come and in between I organize the ones that

have built up into the folders where they go. The soothing sound of the keyboard puts me in a trance that ushers a wave of bubbles flying past like a superhighway of inventive spheres clamoring for supremacy in a race to my egghead. My eye is drawn to one that has a looped movie of Kayla sitting on my bedroom floor wrapped in a towel tweezing the hairs on her leg in the sunshine of the lifted shade. She looks back every so often and rubs her hand gingerly up and down the smooth, creamy surface of her work. Her lips separate slightly and the delicate expression around her eyes shifts to expose a fawn-like wonder. Butterfly kisses are blown on the breeze of her fluttering lashes and I catch them in my hand as they float straight through and surround my heart.

The reminder message appears on my monitor and bursts the bubble of fantasy back to the mysterious reality of this awkward morning. More awkward still, I can't leave yet. The tent in my pants has yet to have its poles pulled down. Embarrassing. And yet a welcome return to another sense of normalcy in a world increasingly familiar.

To allow time for my scout to fold up I answer a few more emails and close down my programs. Straighten my mouse, push in my chair and scurry away. The space between work and Cloverdale is pleasant. Spring break vacationers surf and ski their way back to the valley. Office towers made of sky scrape the shine off the sun and deliver it onto my face. The moments today have all run together in synch. I wonder how that happened and then get distracted by the complete disintegration of the broken heel on my left shoe. Crud.

I complete the journey with a limp, balancing on the toe of my broken slipper. She's waiting by the door when I arrive. As I approach she throws a smile with a new tint to it. A shimmering gloss that matches her shoes. I say hello and we proceed.

We sit and she makes a point of pushing her calendar to the side. I

inhale the fragrance that I didn't smell in last week's torturous session. A beautiful scent that Kayla tried on once. I remember buying it for her and how excited she was. The aroma of this one pulls me back into the room. Sile has on more makeup than usual too. I feel the uniform walking out again. I cross my legs and try to remember my troubles.

"So, how are we today?" she says. "You look well rested."

Very true. I hadn't noticed. "Yeah, I'm not waking up as much anymore. Things are beginning to settle down." I look into my lap as if I'm giving a command instead of an explanation. "I haven't cried at work in a few days so that's something. I even talked about sports with a coworker. If this continues I might get one of those fleece pullover jackets next."

"Good! Well, you look great and your health seems to be improving," says a girlie grin. Her foot twirls like a twinkling wand conjuring the memories of Kayla in the sunlight. Yet only the feelings erupt, the bare legs and smooth lines of Kayla's curves are on Sile now, in the middle of my cross hairs.

I pull my leg farther up my knee. I'm fully present again and Sile is in focus. I imagine her high heels slipping down and hanging from the tender edges of her soft red toes. As I look on she uncrosses her legs and then lays them over in the opposite direction. A glimpse is a dangerous thing but she offers it anyway. The discomfort of normalcy rears its head.

"Is that right? Are you feeling better these days?" she inquires. I break out of the unnoticed trance that had momentarily slipped a copy of reality before my eyes. She cranes her neck forward in hopes of catching my stare. I shake it off and rejoin the conversation with a few contemplative whispers.

"What's that you say?" she repeats.

"Oh... yeah I feel fine. Everything is smooth today. Except for the heel that broke off my shoe." I uncrossed my legs and leaned elbows to uneven knees with hands clasped tight.

"I've been having strange dreams though. Insects crawling around me. Snakes hissing at my feet. This morning I even became a spider. I crawled all the way to the bus and tried to squeeze my folded legs beyond the accordion door before realizing I had claustrophobia anyway. I moped back home and fell back to sleep and rose as myself."

Sile looked down her nose at the sight of my childish dream. Her legs were still crawling through my mind. My thoughts slid down her creamy soft skin down to a tornado of legs, arms, lips, and hands swirling gently like a perfect storm of seduction. The same whirlpool I slid into each night I hadn't been abandoned by Kayla. A drowning that gave me gills just as her butterfly kisses in the morning lifted me into the sea.

Back here on Earth, tension grew. I mistook Sile's youthful exuberance within our sessions for an interest in my immature ideas. Screw it, maybe she couldn't deal with her attraction to me. I waste little time on that. If I follow up with a second story that blows her away I can recover. I take one last whiff of 5th grade fantasy and find my focus on the mystery of the pieces of her body that disappear above her knee, below her tight skirt.

"How did you feel about that whole experience?" she asks offhandedly. I lost her. So I create a brilliant segue into my latest hypothesis for life and solutions for mankind.

"I felt nothing really. It was just a stupid dream. On my secondary trip to the bus stop I came up with a great idea for a motivational product. A

box, kind of like one of those Rubix cubes, except electronic. When you don't know where to start you give it a twist and it lights up in random collisions of colors that don't flow or particularly look nice. Each unique combination sets up a string of random insults and miseries that play over a loud speaker as the individual blocks of color light up. Until you can master the twist, you're likely to end up distracted or in a bad mood. Once you learn to turn the pieces into meaningful pattern you receive positive reinforcement. It's a way to fill empty and useless time with something equally useless so that you train yourself never to waste time."

I paused for a moment to gain confidence. Then blurted out a rehearsed line I fell out of practicing saying. "If I decide to really create that thing will you be my partner?"

She looked at me with a blank stare and bit her pencil eraser. That could have been phallic but I refused to think of it that way. She shook a smile out of her mouth with an increasing nod of understanding. I felt my shoulders fall a bit as they grew stronger. Sile ran her tongue back and forth across her teeth like a pianist. By the last note my spell on her was broken.

"Sounds interesting. Can we get back to your feelings though. Are you still at the mercy of frustrating memories?"

I zipped open my bag and rummaged around for a scrap of paper holding a list of feelings I recorded on the bus. "I did have a few moments," I explained. "Last Friday while eating alone at the Pho place I faded into a memory of our favorite spot in Las Vegas. We ate there every Saturday night around 1am. They have large aquariums and the fish swim like Tai Chi in the moonlight. I handled the noodles, squeezed the lemon slice and tore apart the jalapeno slices. She loved picking the basil leaves and sprinkling them into our shared bowl. I enjoyed watching her shiny nails dance on her delicate fingers as they massaged

and trimmed the stalks. Occasionally our eyes would meet as we sipped in sync with each other. On a weekend night it was always packed, usually loud, and the waiters typically tired. It was the perfect date." Another pause and then, "Do you ever go out for Pho?"

"That sounds like a nice time." Her dial tone was like static to me. She re-crossed her legs and turned them to the side. The silhouette is somewhat appealing, but her increasing loss of interest is making knots in my throat. I gulp a breath mint and continue.

"We follow that up by sipping drinks at the bar a few doors down. Followed by a couple hours of quality time at home just in time for breakfast." The sound of those last words woke me from the trance I had entered. I lift my lids to find Ms. Smithwich looking down uncomfortably at her notepad and holding the side of her mouth in her teeth. Her brow ripples and the calm that hung in our atmosphere turns into a shriveling cold front.

The rest of the session was as usual. Kayla this, Kayla that. Crying about my anger and raging through tears of solemn awareness of the vacancy she left in my heart space. She tacked a sign there, written in the unraveling yarn of my soul with a log cabin nail. I wondered to myself if Sile might be the woman that would bring me the life I hoped to have. Her intelligent and insightful mind is a compliment to the rare form of well-done woman she wore underneath her silky clothes.

8

*Shoe Laced at  
the Door*

Another week swings bye and I wake to the sound of a spider creeping to its place in the corner of the room where it doesn't bug me. Through the hazy sand of what was becoming restful sleep I am sure I see a top hat and monocle adorning her form. In one hand she carries a cane that she whirls like a wand. From the top of the hat a rabbit pops out like a jack-in-the-box and makes an offer.

“Good morning, Mr. Kakablanca,” it sneers. “Would you like my assistance with anything today?”

It takes off its spyglass, applies a hot breath and cleans it against a soft white coat. An indifferent turn of the head, the same outward sign Kayla displayed when I talked about politics or religion.

“I've only got one riddle bouncing around in my racquetball court,” she offers casually. “Would you like to play?”

I check my watch. One minute before my alarm was set to go off. I smile at the thought that things are coming back into sync. The arachnid's question returns to mind and I consider it as I slide out from under the covers. My two feet land firmly on the edge of a rug that floats over a waxy wood floor. Focusing my mind on riddles results in a slip. I surf it with wavy arms outstretched. Then grab a pillow to brace my feet under the bed, lower myself on bended knees and lie down for my morning sit ups.

“Not today,” I say between reps thirty-two and thirty-three. As I near my goal of sixty-four I rethink the dismissal. “Wait a sec. Is it a long riddle? Could I quiz over it while I make breakfast?”

Mister Creepy's interest crawls back and the sales pitch swings into action. “Of course. Someone as adept as yourself will have no problem completing my riddle over green eggs and bacon.”

I pick myself up off the floor and dust off my pajamas. A moment of wonder as to how he knew I eat Rainbow Eggs is distracted into oblivion as the landlord's son tunes his car stereo at full volume from beyond the curtain whence the riddler crawled. For the first time his windows aren't stressed to their shattering point by some teenage agony set to the gruff rhythm of an aging sophomore with smoker's cough. The soundtrack to this turning point pivots on the axe of Stevie Ray Vaughn in “Life by the Drop.” A comprehensively simple poem that rhymes from the basement to the lookout tower at the top of this stately Victorian and out into the crisscrossing ribbons of streets that give symmetry to this sleepy island of asymmetrical perfection that looks out without jealousy on San Francisco.

As I toss the pillow back into perfect position I realize that any scavenger worth his monocle would be aware of a singular fact - the

source of crumbs in the kitchen. He may have also used the green egg shell on my desk as a napping throne or something. Mystery solved. Now on with the riddle.

I slithered my way through the serpentine corridor to the basement kitchen. Then tossed open the door to the refrigerator with just enough appetite to get my eggs and bacon to the safety of my arms before it boomeranged shut. Then I spun around on my heel and got cracking. Four eggs of varying shades. No green ones this time, but there was an equivalent prize in a purple spotted runt that wobbled around in too much space of the carton. I decided to fry that one over easy on its own. The other three are getting the Humpty Dumpty.

Just as I crack the last of the amigos into a coffee cup for mixing I hear the wheezing voice of the lone musketeer. He fires off the question like a starting gun and this human's race is underway.

“What goes on four legs in the morning, on two legs at noon, and on three legs in the evening?” he says with a contrived nonchalance. Expecting my answer to take at least a few minutes the tender-footed scout goes on a snipe hunt for a portion of my egg mixture that soared over the rim of the mug. Not finding enough satisfaction in the yolk, he slides over to a banana peel with the bottom still fruitful. I whip up my Eggs Two Ways lickety split. I ponder the question as I lean back and balance on random numbers of legs of my chair.

Fully in a Taurus-like analysis mode, I look for clues to the answer as I gorge myself on protein. “Can I ask questions to clarify?”

“Why certainly,” he bellows as the fire of competition stirs him into a frenzy.

“Does whatever it is get weekends off?” I reply with a straight face.

“It can take them off. It can work them. It chooses. Sometimes it doesn't.” His gentle tone and face tilted toward the leftover banana that had congealed into pudding give me the impression he's expecting to stump me. In an effort to fell him, I close my eyes and watch all of the possible permutations of answer that had ever been uttered race by me in blobs and squirts. I search like a four-dimensional bull in a china shop that sells models of porcelain china shops. I burst them with disapproval in a random path stepping on each drop of possibility like stones across the charred scarlet emptiness that drowns and buoys my mind's eye as it bounces and blinks from one dot to the next in a dash to bottle up the correct message as it floats by.

“Don't feel bad if you have to give up. I caught a whole swarm of bees in my web once,” he boasted as he combed the hairs on his back.

It occurs to me that each component of the riddle has a primary element in mental, physical or spiritual awareness. I see the metaphorical possibilities as a colorful, undulating pyramid looping möbiusly in circles of infinitely predictable three-dimensional extravagance. For a moment I'm dazzled by the color, texture, patterns, lights, energy, and gigantic calm of the archetypal ballet. In the midst of the tangled quantum of these sacred shapes I recall an idea I had about the circle of all things.

A few weeks ago at work I was sitting and thinking about something for at least two hours to effect prior removal of any future distraction of my work that day. I became aware that all circles of life begin small and simple, get as big and complex as they can in the middle, and return to small and simple at the end in order to begin again with grace. When I presented my miraculous findings to relatives, co-workers and strangers the consensus reaction was indifferent agreement. How could something so simple matter?

It matters more than a college textbook. It matters more than the policies of whatever job in whatever place. It matters more than anything because it describes the one thing that matters more than it - a love connection with the numberless points of limitless light as long as pi that glow as a single speck as large and bright as everything that exists with itself added as a multiplier. Have I taken the simile farther than even Homer could carry it? No. It matters that much. It's the skeleton key to truth.

Wading through possibilities like a robot was a singular mistake. I take off my thinking cap for a minute and spend the next sixty seconds in a slowdown toward knowing. The answer has to be short and simple. I do what someone smarter than me used to do when she beat me at Scrabble at least 51% of the time. I log into the official online Scrabble dictionary and scan the three-letter word list. I stare into the scarlet until nothing appears. Fifty-nine seconds later a dot wanders into my mind. I try to keep it level like a NASA pilot in a flight simulator. Difficult. The less I try the easier it becomes. I don't chase it, just imagine it as the solution I've been waiting for. Maybe if I give it positive energy it will return the same to me? Wait. What if the return is inverse? In the midst of three seconds of turmoil I lose the dot.

I breathe a sigh and continue the mundane search through reams of passionless data like a stock broker drunk on the dogma of some short, fat and ugly guy on TV that made some money for someone. As the reality of that picture washes over me I resign myself to give up.

“Hey, I think the answer is a dot! It just flew back into my head!” I yell in a hushed rush. My breakfast is over and my routine has been re-routed due to a clogged sink. No dish washing means I might make it to the parking lot on time today. Yet the allure of a dot in my imagination as a deterrent to responsible behavior is growing in strength. I accept that

the Sphinx has outlasted most major corporations and retain my seat at the blind man's table. The dot becomes a growing circle. Then a sphere. It alters movement from a path toward me to orbital floats around my sense of me. I'm just a hazy cloud of ball lightning these days. My power animal looks better in her feathers, but I can still travel faster without them.

I gaze closely at the ball, enjoying the morphing hues that make a soft sound as they do. There are no words written there. No pictures that tell a parable or a documentary. No math. Nothing. Yet the beauty of the sight and the sound is too much of everything to look away. As the orb rises it showcases an increasing amount of sparkle. It fades away leaving only my smile behind.

“Man. That's the answer” I say with a shit-eating grin. I say “Excuse me” and excuse myself before Mister Mom can congratulate me for being the Cuckoo that bested the bees.

Traffic is light and the road is wider than usual as I break 100mph on the road to work. I bottom-out the front fender on the corporate asphalt at 9:01am. Progress. I spin out of my seat, reach for my computer bag and close the door as I whirl. It's nice to have a car again after so many months on the bus and walking a mile to the grocery store. At least it was in good, warm hands while I couldn't drive it. After a quick trip to the desert the day after my last meeting with Sile I was once again a tin man with a lead foot.

Work projects are back under control. My eruption of effortless competence is an oddity that Jim Rose might appreciate, but not some, or one, of my co-workers. Having shouldered a 5-hour phone meeting two cubes away a few days ago I was feeling like Mr. Lifto Jr. Attach whatever, wherever. I can make it rise. Except for one thing - I remain consistently tardy. The blemish that paints the entire face of my broken

multi-function Swiss Army watch. Maybe a Rolex would help. I place it on my mental list below the IRS and living room furniture. At the top of my checklist is another round of Awareness or Consequences with Sile Smithwich. I can feel her magic mounting from one session to the next. In another blink I am climbing into my Swedish spaceship for the short trip to Cloverdale.

I pull into the patient lot five minutes early. Most spots are filled, except for one next to a gold Prius with a torrent of rainbow stickers glued haphazardly to the trunk. Auto-neurotic fixation I suppose. As I exit my car it occurs to me that I didn't whirl. I get back in, shut the door and start over. Whirling feels more gay than the dizzying projection of the academically hypocritical expectation of homogenization I've grown flaccid with. I'm not sure I'll do that again unless it works.

I prance into the waiting area with the confidence that only the tumescent bulge of a man's car keys in his pocket can pitch. My mind is back. I've studied the failure of the past seven sessions and honed my patience on the stone of Kayla's silence. Gab made Blarney famous. Kayla's resilient resistance to basic communication and embrace of a complex and anguishing pattern of everything that hasn't worked the previous few decades in its place makes her infamous to every man who wonders aloud on a lonely night where one of her aliases has disappeared to and when the unfair deity will bring her back lest the sack of bones will smite him with a waving fist or taking his name in vain, etc. The true confidence that was merely mirrored by the return of my car is awareness. A 10-step program of behavioral modification written in stone by a probable epileptic who seized the power of his misfiring thousands of years before men with guns and longest-sleeved jackets would have dragged him off that mountain is not about the recipient of those actions. In an interconnected universe a curse thrown can be a web caught in the face.

The stress of my pet misery and the dogmatic explanations that tag along in every separate but equivalent conversation seeking pity for my protests makes me chew at my gums. I stop before the revered Smithwich can see me walk in to the place where I worship her. Did I just think that? Note to self: bring up the issue of an emerging split personality with her today. I hope the self that doesn't forget is the one I just reminded. Dammit! I'm feeling like myself again.

Nothing else of consequence happened that afternoon. There were a few memorable moments. Symbiosis of cute and alluring pried the prism of Sile's sparkle. This punk, however, couldn't light it. She wore less makeup today, allowing her glow to step forward and dance. She had no idea how I saw that part of her. Maybe she forgot it was there. Or was persuaded to believe it. It's my gift for capturing the ghost on a Polaroid. The flipside of that gift is a binder full of Polaroids and no one to look at them except me and whoever finds it and throws it in the garbage when I'm gone. My treasure is worth no more than the cost of a Hefty bag of someone else's loot. At least mine is full of wonderful memories. What's Kayla's half-empty of?

I catch myself in another net of protest before spiraling down to the bottom of the pitiful sea. Floating among mermaids and driftwood alike I realize I'm the only dog responsible for the saltiness of what life dishes to me. Filled to the brim, please.

9

# Armor a Primera Vista

Another seven days of sit ups and my tally is seventy-four. Now that the cobwebs and dust are cleared from the attic and I'm seeing with all three eyes I have a need for respect. Credibility. Not from everyone. Just Sile. I decide to gift her a few CDs and annotate the hidden meaning in them. If she listens she will hear the facets. Once that spigot is turned on the flow is perpetual. We'll be birds of a feathery boa snaking in every direction. I could wrap my arms around that notion.

Kayla is less of a frustration. More of a concerning mystery now. How has she set herself up for a downward spiral this time? Which psychopathic fetishist from the past will she rely upon to recreate it in her present? Will she ever care? Her value as a human being is more a priority for me than for her. How she bestows higher rank on lower men is all the reasons why it isn't. Secondary to only the ritual of tweezing her legs in the sun that she turns into a spotlight.

The Richard Dawson of garden nomads has been oddly sober and quiet these days. Survey says appeased, with an off-camera butt fondle for luck. Kayla walks quietly into my mind with eight long, silky legs tickling my shaved head like a Tingler. Yet while four of her sexy limbs are massaging me to a purr the other four have twisted their branches into my kitty. A few years of that equals a bankrupt, heart-broken, invincible dumb ass. At least I'm invincible. And I have a 'wich on my side.

Making the bed I lie in has become an easy habit. I can taste the eggs and turkey bacon before I'm halfway down the hall. I forget the first half of my drive by the time I'm nearing completion of the second. The mundane has become instinct. Mystery is reserved for the things I find inspiring or which have placed a spire in my cardiac region. A tattoo of pain that's no fantasy to land in. She was armored up the first night she jumped in my car. I didn't realize it when I woke up with a Li'l Senorita that ended where I began. We even toasted the occasion. A day later she was making my dress shirts into her night gowns and seductive concept art of the runway legs that grew out from underneath. She took breakfast on the back deck under the redwoods and invited hummingbirds to perch on her finger as she fanned them with strawberry breath. The ultimate scam by a comedian of unknowing self-deprecation in a one-seat show with a line of bouncers waiting outside the door and a boy in the front row who thinks he can fly if he jumps high enough.

In week nine I arrived to work each day before the hour of the same name. Holding intentions not just as a moment of prayer but as a decision of prayer request that returns a call to actions colored in the mind as stepping stones, wasted time and mistakes. Now I realized that wasted time is another way of saying waiting for the right time. And mistakes in the flow of a heart path are merely uncomfortable situations you'd rather not deal with. They lead to success anyway. From a high view of a soul's life line there is no failure. An entire life spent naval gazing is a blink to

a third eye. Things considered evil are motivation to improve. There is no evil. Or good. Just progress and the way we feel about the popcorn kernels that garland our tree of life. The girl who helped decorate mine donated her Indian corn.

Starting to digress. The return of my need for respect of the quips I'd been stuttering away for free thus far was building resentment when the respect didn't appear. I didn't count on any when I called Kayla's number. In the fog of paranoid delusion I thought perhaps my medical coverage reference was a Bingo card. Smithwich would say it's like looking for a loaf of bread in a hardware store or something like that. Sometimes her metaphors were more cute than relevant. I had spent so much time adding style to my truths while holding the image of our impending relationship in mind I began to resent her for rose colored attitude in tandem with her creation of my thorny dissed position. What do I have to do to get the doctor to kiss me on her couch already?

In an unthinking moment of perplexed focus I grabbed two capsules of headache medicine that were rolling around the bottom of my drawer and slammed them back with a rush of filtered water. My tongue noticed that one of them was different than the other. I remember having stashed a bit of something in a capsule once to get past security somewhere. It had been a good idea at the time.

All would be uncovered in a few hours. I hoped. Knowing that I had thought that for eight of the previous eight weeks dulled my quickening pulse. Without skipping a beat, pessimistic winds rushed in to build invisible walls around awareness seconds before understanding would have fallen. I analyzed the possible solution from a different angle. Like a nerd instead of a fisherman. Thinking of the metaphorical riddle of man and how I arrived at the answer by never leaving my seat in the unbalanced, feigned fatal contraption of a one-legged stool in a circular room with a DNA-strand of question marks rounding the pie. I decided it

was the giving up part that worked magic.

I meditated on failure. That didn't work out. I took a walk around the building to see if a positive distraction might take away the static cling of her importance and the depressing dryness of my sheets. No sooner than I had trapped the spooky action that was careful to keep its distance in a crossed cage of logical Tron bikes, the multi-verse was riding on a stream of quantum force and I was straddling bowling alley bumpers with a south Florida white hat that cultivated as much respect as the Quran gives to the cowboy sons of Adam.

I got a reminder from self that I needed to buy my genie the musicological proof that my pudding tasted better with Cosby-cardiganed arms wrapping her snugly like a compassionate Huxster as we listen together using all of our senses. With knees now of Jello I set out for the firm and tanned shores lapped by gentle waves of silence so clear that I could taste the sweet drops of sparkling salinity on the tip of my tongue slid through a pear-shaped waterfall of icy flame. I don't even know if the wedding ring on her hand is genuine or synthetic. I just like the way it shines in her reflection. Maybe if I reach out for her hand it will initiate something. It's a risk, but at the moment I'm a superman. Could a hero fueled by a noble, yet tasteless, gas land a woman of refinement whose flavor lingered in white steam sparkles on my palate? I wondered. Then again, just as muscles may reveal psychic wounds, insulating the mind with too much exercise can be a substitute for knowing. Why bend a spoon with your mind when you've got two hands? Why lift a stone with your back when you can build a lever? What was the flavor of her rose? Fine white? Coarse pink? There was something in that pill.

I'm on a spiraling orbit of her delicate rice-paper surface fueled by the graphite in my prized Palomino Blackwing 602 with a moth man-resistant, fire-crackling cedar shaft that's begging her to sit by the fire

Indian Hindu Sanskrit style and list to my tall tale of deep drama during an extended allegory season between the peaks of Mons Veneris Hibernia. Whoa. I think I just felt sweat drip down my head. I'm screwed.

Before she can look up from her lap I jump up and take my sub-lingual tap dance to the bathroom. My sixty-nine second luge takes twenty minutes down the falls in a barrel. My red lying head with smoldering smoke antennas beeping from my ears to a chirping foot that are all draining the batteries of my patience in a perfect cadence. The pulse of the pain becomes an awareness of the rhythm. I lower my head with disgust while dropping to a knee for a closer look at the stigmatic prism of pain throbbing in array. I kick off the loafer and massage the damage site. My callous thumb carefully tracks the clickety-clackety rail of the bone along the outside of my pedal. After the second or third pass something tickles my attention. The ups and downs along what I expected to be a straight and narrow surface seem to indicate a pattern I've felt before.

I shift my eyes to the left and then the right. No body there. The AC clicks on and the rush of air that might provide the cover for a small, polyester-covered earpiece to slip in through a vent is at once a threat. I shift my binoculars up and to the left. Scan around. Nobody there. Finally safe, I scoop up myself and the pieces of uniform around me and slide into a stall.

Like a life guard who sees his last hope sinking out on the horizon I quickly strip off my clothes and begin to slide hands across every pencil-wired component of my person. The ups and downs reveal character. A pattern that progresses as I trace it from arm to leg. I've felt this unending wave before. But this moment, in this section, of all the times that I remember remembering the one time that begins to unravel into every time first feels like a comfort then feels like a pattern, then feels like a

prison and then feels like a rope longer than the distance between the longest silky roller coaster and the ground.

I play back the braille written in calcified dots that were buried and hidden in code by some ancient species of sadistic origin. Was it their intention to have me come all this way through the laughter, crying, accomplishment, bliss, frustration, calm and heart ache of life to find myself curled up in a cold tile corner of a bathroom? What's the point of climbing a ladder of success? Is it any more meaningful than steps down to failure if they both end in a lonely place?

The occasional drip of the faucet caught my attention and left a cadence in my ear. The weight of these questions that whizzed around my head began to slow them. Then still them. Then the stillness washed over me. The hints of emotion erased from my face and I turned straight into a stare with my own eye reflected in one of the porcelain tiles on the wall as the questioning continued.

Thoughts of how my present state might seem to any number of friends or family drifted in. They were real, yet whispered. Louder was the pain of the shorter sentence that I had caged for so long. Why bother to love her? Every day without her was agony. Every other week with her had been without her. The consistency of the swim had been merely the saltwater smack in the face whenever I came up to smile.

I couldn't remember the embarrassing sweats or the sweet feminine compliments she had crumpled and burned. All the moments that had ripped and torn at my confidence melted into a single file line and swirled down the drain as I gathered and brushed off my clothes. I was standing up before I remembered standing up but the thought didn't bother me. I just stared and darted my eyes toward the next stare like a searchlight looking for a lost child in a haunted castle that no longer echoed.

Stopping to stare at my eye in the mirror one last time before I opened the door I did find something. My stare was leaking and the drops rippled the surface of my face. The single moment of guilt and embarrassment I could remember was questioning the torture that brought me here. Love is never a bother and neither is she. She's who I love.

I marched back into Sile's office and sat down in the pool of concern she had waiting. She brought her best efforts to bear, but could not paint my problems or my feelings with anything darker or lighter than the clear coat of calm. I disturbed her with the serenity so much that she reached out and touched my hand as if to knock me out of a daze. It was no hazy place I was in. It was the place the wise and compassionate maker had expected at this point in my life of bouncing from mansions by the water to apartments in the desert. The point beyond faith and loss of faith and the disgruntled meaning of reading your own runes.

Awareness. The faith that requires no ritual or reading. The place found through years of singing songs and following your neighbor's lead when you forget your song book. The years of practice failing and succeeding at the motions of life give way to an ability to move within it as one of its own waves. Surfers talk about the zen of the ocean. The ocean just is.

# 10

## Wok This Way

I had to see her again. I fell asleep with that dream and it woke me with no alarm each morning. Every barrier imaginable had been erected to prevent such a thing. Not the least of which was her insistence on scurrying away from the storm she precipitated. I didn't know how. I didn't know when. I only knew my patience and kindness would last until that moment.

Sile's office called as I was eating breakfast the following day. She had to miss our next appointment due to a family emergency back in Ireland. I made a note of the change on the back of my hand and thanked the receptionist for letting me know. I cleaned up my dishes and washed my hands, careful not to scrub off the reminder. It reminded me of my own family. I had been excited to return when this all began. A mixture of duty that carries its own momentum and the fear of living alone in that anxious and brittle cell walled with memories of her smile laughing and hissing at me from every corner.

I let my muscle memory take the wheel and continued to sink deeper into hurtful waters. I felt the squint and raised brow of critical eyes on the notion that standing my ground was merely a different kind of duty.

I'd felt guilt when told of my grandfather's trip to the hospital weeks ago. In my manic state I whistled a hokey rationale back at the breaths on my neck. That there were enough people on call to tend to doom. Would one more crying face help or add to the agony? I'd rather return and share some time that could be remembered fondly.

Maybe the truth was that I couldn't take any more doom. But I kept taking it from her. I don't know the answer. Whatever answer I end up with I don't expect excellence from anything surrounded by intense emotion. Maybe that's the feeling I'm meant to carry temporarily to ensure that my quick thinking leads to an action in the long term. It would be comforting to know that negative emotions have a positive role to play. Sometimes.

As each new day rolled by I built a one-of-a-kind Cadillac just like Johnny Cash. Only mine was based on the blueprint of the smooth ride I enjoyed before I got stuck in the mud. Today's part was the 12" omelet pan which formed the foundation of the culinary graveyard that had piled up under the counter when I began warming everything up in the same small pan. Kayla loved the rolled omelets that were the centerpiece of our breakfasts. Today I remembered that I did too.

Cooking is one of my greatest joys. The week I spent waiting for the used set of pots and pans I purchased with months of saved coins and solitary lunches at my desk was one of the few times in life I felt cool. The plate became my canvas. My palette was cups of cleansed fruit, turkey bacon, English muffins, and a frost-rimmed glass of grapefruit juice. Once her palate was thrilled to perfection we made dessert together with a delicate strawberry-flavored kiss.

It was the Memorial Day holiday, so I decided to take a walk around the neighborhood. The homes and the trees that framed them were different from this angle. I had only ever driven by them before. Notably

present were the people. I had seen one occasionally when they got in the way of my exit or return. I'd wave to let them know they were seen. Today, they said "Hello" to let me know that they could see me. As I made my way to the Main Street and rounded the corner into the wind I noticed one who didn't.

This particular neighbor wore a black leather cowboy hat. He didn't look up from where he had planted his knees to pull weeds from the curb in front of his home. Sweat streamed across the faces of somewhat scary tattoos that decorated his shirtless back. He reminded me of a guy I saw every time I heard a song that made me think of Kayla. He was focused on clearing the rough from around his roses. I knew the feeling so I didn't interrupt his. I wondered if he was that guy. Before I could finish the mental question his bowed head whispered back another beautiful name. One by one I was forgetting to feel alone.

Nearing the water, and parties of tanned and purposeful friends and families, I began to hear her voice off in the distance. I jumped onto the curb of the little bridge I crossed to get a better view of her voice. First it was to the left and laughing. Then it was right and crying. My quickening pulse begged my legs to move faster. I navigated the winding paths and streets trying to triangulate her location as the people with places to be where ringing the lunch bell. Whenever I thought I had cornered her, the sweet sting of her voice would be down the street from where I had come. In a moment of despair I sat down under a sapling and let me head fall into my hands.

The fruitless search had shaken me. Tears dropped into puddles as convertibles, baby strollers and song birds passed by. I wondered if I looked like a fool. The siren of her voice morphed into the snickering of people on their porches trying to make sense of my dark predicament by making light of it. The weight of embarrassment gathered. I picked up a leaf and wiped my eyes before continuing on. I dropped the dripping leaf

with a whispered “Thank you.” to whoever might be listening. When I looked back the ants were already carrying it away. A rare, seasoned salad for their queen. They were lock-step in line with the pace to the exact moment of my offering to their tribe. The idea amazed me as the sun dried the rest of the fear from my face. As the ocean, so were the ants.

11

## Irish Vamp

The extra week without the crutch of Ms. Smithwich's couch to lounge on was the best medicine I could have hoped for. The pattern of therapy had begun to seem boring. As the calendar ticked toward the day I reckoned might be our last together I felt indifferent. I could come up with useful things to say. I could offer her an ear to ease the tension of her recent trip. I could cancel and spend the hour readying my notes to spit in the rhyming battle that was on the horizon as happened every month when the chick from Japan flew in to lay her golden eggs of sarcasm in my nest. She was one of many on my team that worked from wherever the wind blew them, except for the few days a month when all descended into this green valley. The last sip of Earl Grey entered my straw as it dawned on me that I was the only member of our remote team that worked onsite. Weird.

With respect for the objectified professional at the helm of my desired outcome, I kept the appointment. The new issue of Popular Science lay untouched in her waiting room. I spent the few minutes before the hour perusing the articles about life-bearing planets. Thousands or more of them existed according to the consensus. If that's what they think. They're probably right. I was more concerned with bringing more life to

the one I was on. The way she had always done for us.

The door swept open and Mrs. Smithwich appeared. She scratched her nose with her finger and sniffled. I was unsure of the source of her spell. Better to wait and see, I thought.

“How have you been?” she offered as I found my own seat. “I’ve been feeling a bit like you these last few. Like the cat that ate too much clover.”

Something had changed. Her five senses weren't what they had been. I didn't even feel like plagiarizing that saying. Not that I would do such a thing.

“I’ve had ups and downs. It’s hard to recall without any notes,” I replied. “There was only room on my hand to remember to forget our last meeting. Even so, I almost scrubbed it!”

I laughed lightly at the pun. She didn't.

“At least someone was thinking about me,” she said with a sideways stare into the eyes of an image looking back through the wormhole that twisted and smoked next to me. “Did you get out of the house and make some friends?”

“Yes, actually. A rock and roll guy that lives nearby. They don't talk much. But we bonded. I'm thinking of getting some bling. If things work out tattoos may follow,” I smiled at the telepathic connection that helped bring about a more audible order to my chaos. Were we friends? Felt more like comrades. Fellow travelers that enjoyed a surprise upgrade to First Class and found themselves sitting next to the same fascinating woman whose number was missing the following day. Of course, they were different women. I would never snake another man's woman.

Especially a man in a black leather hat.

“Ooh, that sounds like fun. Things are looking up for you then. It doesn't seem long ago that you were crying like a... guinea-fowl,” she said trailing back off into the darkness of her mind's eye.

“You remind me so much of a bloke I knew from Edinburgh. He loved John Wayne movies. Fancied those hats,” she mused as her glassy eyes began to reflect a sparkle that was looking for a way to sink in.

“I was raised in a Clint Eastwood house. With a little Smokey and the Bandit on the side. I'd always assumed my in-laws would be partial to outlaws. Now I'm an only child out here on the left coast willing to travel if the girl who needs rescuing will say the word.”

My daydream of her wrote the last line, and began to circle my heart again with an arrow that felt friendly. Only time would tell. “Come to think of it, my mother was a Perry Mason aficionado. Maybe I have a knack for justice too.”

I helped Sile as best I could that afternoon. She needed a friend more than a patient. Awareness comes and goes just like the ocean. Tsunamis aren't generally considered fortunate. Mine didn't feel that way when it crashed over my head and left me cold and fearful. But the sun rose again. It dried me out and gave me warmth. Just as the projection I held of Kayla Silverman had done. I cast that bright shade on Sile Smithwich in error, and in her moment of weakness she paid the price by succumbing to its weight. Lucky for her, awareness crashed into me when it did. Next time she'll recognize the warnings when the birds and the bullfrogs run for higher ground. As she's meant to. Now it's my turn for what I'm meant to do. To chase stillness inside my own mind in order to attract the inspiration for my rose-colored projection of Kayla and whiten the false teeth of her biting projection on me.

Ewan Lillicii

On the way home I bought a bottle of high pH water and some fancy dark chocolate for Kayla in case she appeared. It replaced the previous one which I ate while waiting. Sweets are getting expensive. To minimize the damage I grabbed this package blind from the assorted bin. Raspberry filled - her favorite. What can I say? I'm lucky!

Sile Smithwich

# 12

## Gentle Seamstress

Much can happen when your mind is allowed to dance in search of its silent partner. There were women in my life everywhere I looked. Yet my wife was nowhere to be found. Rather than sustain the fib I cut my gains and separated from my day job with only \$5,813 in the bank. Not precisely my choice, but the moment the mistake felt successful I realized it was a successful step back into the desert to follow my true paths. The decision wasn't easy, but my bad decisions made it easier.

Two things I never mix were brought together in a communion to depression and fear - pizza and a horror movie. Gluten takes my energy on a nosedive, only to wake delirious several hours later. A rogue Netflix hidden in a red jacket in the hall closet was my entertainment - The Creeping Flesh . Tame by some standards, perhaps. But by 2:18am that skinny flute player had me in a crawl space sliding my arm into a dark, suspicious hole to save the damsel that screamed vaguely inside. I became anxious to find the paranoid angel and joined her quest for

separation anxiety. Then the anxiety became tiring. Then it became boring. Then it became expected. That's when I became aware it couldn't be real. Life is unexpected. Then I added expectation to the mix.

I don't remember the drive to Las Vegas. I remember it was fast. I was fast. I was going 62mph when I slammed on the brakes ten meters from a ditch that marked the beginning of an orchard at the end of a paved road on the underside of Bakersfield. I caught some air but the ground caught more of me. I was thankful and more kind to the gas pedal after that. She was counting on me. Taking side roads and back alleys had become a comfortable diversion and now I had paid the price of that reliable complexity. I checked the map, took two right turns and got back on the highway.

Veiled omens had warned me of a return to Nevada. My mother, for instance, said "Don't go." Or did I dream that?

During the Transformers movie I could swear one of them turned outward from the screen and said "Be careful." Whatever the danger I was already there. Two miles from home the radiator needle spiked and my robot car told me to pull to the curb and cool off in the 113 degree heat. I decided to turn off the AC instead. My sweat cooled the engine just enough to slide into home base.

In a frenzy of steam and purpose I thought I could a little too much and ripped a few shirts on the door of the car. I gave up trying and allowed the things that clearly wanted to remain in the light to stay there as I strained to carry the mountain of stuff into the shade of my previously interrupted life. I tripped over a shoelace at the threshold and an eruption of unessential things I couldn't live without rained down on the floor. I left them there and headed for the AC control, a short glance away from the kitchen I had left looking like hell. The responsibilities were already piling up as the dew on my forehead grew thicker than my

hair used to be. Maybe clear was the new grey?

I headed for safety in the shower while the industrial revolution took over the details of a proper temperature. The tub needed cleaning. From the look of everything my doppelganger had left in a hurry. His clothing still filling drawers. His computer on my desk. A stained undershirt in the bathroom trashcan. His last words to me a few months before were a description of a towering beauty tapping at the chamber window. Perhaps the raven-haired eyeful chased him out? Whatever it was left a strange energy in its wake. Strange energy was becoming normal on its decline to boring, as expected.

After washing the impatience off my body I surveyed the piles of varying chaos around my home and prioritized them. Then I sat around and weighed the options with a bottle of water in one hand and an old cigarette butt in the other. I wasn't usually a smoker, but I heard it helped those with Glaucoma. Why waste the gifts left by the guitar hero who fiddled and fled? My smoky moment of clarity was made possible by a grant from the cookie monster.

After considering my short list of to-dos I felt like following my attention out the window. The sun was starting to set and the temperature was cooling to below 100 degrees. I manufactured a need to repair the shirts that had ripped earlier. With the wind at my back I raced to the car as if on a deadline. Then I remembered it was Sunday. The only dry cleaner I knew would be open was across town near the place I used to meet my sweet for Scrabble and cocktails. Not the finest or the friendliest except for the nights we were there together.

I rode with the windows down to contain the raging engine and welcomed the new scent of her in the air. The dry cleaner was open as I remembered. They did not do alterations. But they did accommodate substitutions. I must have looked pitiful or poor or maybe I was in the

right place. Whatever the case, the man at the counter pulled out a box of clothing that was left unclaimed and offered to swap with me before the other employees got their chance to sift through the treasures within. I took him up on the offer and left with a freshly-pressed white shirt and one with stripes for backup. No charge.

The humidity was taking its toll, so I donned the striped button-down in typical untucked fashion. Then took the scenic route past the river near the place she worked. It wasn't far off the Boulevard, but it was barely the beaten path. Luck traveled out into the sticks too. I took a detour under two of them - one of our movie night locations. The Palms.

I traced our steps from the lot to the concession area and around the theater entrance. I could hear the tables calling to press my luck.

After initial hesitance I walked away from the soft memories toward the shouts and pouts of roller coaster riders mesmerized by the sweet song of the royal numbered feathers flapping and floating to rest on the smoothest green a gambler ever felt. I searched for the loudest table with a dealer wearing gold. The divine component of a couple that had accompanied my past wins was also present. I sat down next to the wife and sure enough she commented on my skill at tossing the chips in my paw. Shuffled up. Dealt. I didn't feel like wasting time so I dropped my bankroll and flipped two uprights against a nickel. I pulled out the reserve cash and doubled down. No need for a second hand after all. The first deficit was perfected by the single chance and she busted anyway so there was never any danger. I knew that when I sat down.

I colored up and breathed out the uncomfortable red that I pulled in for special occasions. With no will to gamble and no weakness to drink I decided to continue my journey home. Just then, a drunk man put his hand on my shoulder and yelled to his wife, "Hey honey look. This is the kind of shirt I'm talking about." He lost his balance and I helped him

steady his tilt. Then my eye bounced to his wife, standing up from a dark, unlit segment of the shopping wall. Tarot card reader. Not my usual kind of superstition, but my superstitions had gotten me single so why not try something new. The casino was paying anyway.

I sat down next to a polished and competent professional. No cat hair in sight as she pulled out the deck. Then she paused and asked if I'd like an astrology reading first. Of course I would.

"So you're an Aries. With Cancer Rising," she whispered with a raised note of interest and a matching eyebrow. "OK, Gotcha."

My expectation was met with disappointment. The dates were changed but the vibes were the same. Mixed. I'm always mixed. A jumble of right angles braced hard against each other in a muddy supernova of elemental homes. I'm used to it.

The tarot cards were another story. Within minutes they painted a lifelong picture of second chance citizenship. I paid her the customary fee and walked away with a dozen roses in my beach hat. A satisfactory excuse for a graduation cap assuming the commencement speech doesn't put us all to sleep like a sickly road of poppies.

I followed the back trail all the way home. It wasn't fast but it was comfortable. Just like her trust. As I passed our favorite Pho restaurant it reminded me of the fun times we had afterward. Then an ugly picture of the night I met her there after an extended silence. She was nervous. I didn't know to where she had disappeared. She never gave me a clue or left a trail, except for the false ones that led down a narrowing rabbit hole of increasingly wicked supposition. Always enough to fuel frustration. Just enough to avoid a deposition. A delicate that rubbed my heart raw. I tried to hand her a CD that night. As soon as my hand extended toward her, five feet from the dire consequences of my touch, she moved

backward like a smooth dance step clutching her purse and biting her lip.

That was the moment of truth and I missed it. After all the trouble she had caused, the agony of worry, the suspicion of the details of her certain deceit, I got frustrated at the one truth that felt true to me. She was riddled with fear.

Where I'm from they tell you to rub some dirt on it and keep walking. I offered her a demand of certain safety and approached her. She backed away in kind like a bug evades a spider. The insinuation she projected onto me was disgusting. As the sour grape on top of a cottage cheese sundae it made me want to hurl. Instead I let my frustration boil over and reacted in one of the worst ways. I shattered the CD case with the tension of my hand. Then I broke my spiral and dropped to the ground.

Replaying events that barnacled the hull of our sunken relationship was the tragedy to me. Why she disappeared was a mystery. The effect of her disappearances, her past trauma, or just her unique and senseless sensibilities was not. I projected senselessness on her the same way I projected sex, love, and a trip to the movies onto Sile Smithwich. The same way I projected the strength of her fear onto her persona as a sense of courage that she covered up with a distressed damsel in order to evade irrelevant scrutiny or intentional mutiny. I was wrong to break my own principles. I tried to inspire her with a striking likeness of fear and I expected her reaction to it to be an act. Then I expected her to harbor a guilty conscience for it all that would turn her ship around. All emotional reaction. All fake. All wrong.

I hadn't worked out where my isolated understanding of these missteps fell within the bigger picture of fair play, but I knew her ball was still in a terrible lie somewhere beyond the rough. The question was whether she launched it there or whether a bullfrog scooped it up, hopped it over, and then puked it out. Either way she was a victim. An

abusive one. But I was already hardened by torture and it outlasted my hair while keeping a soft underbelly. She and all her secret air force liaisons could pile it as high as they wanted. I ambled here to be and that's all I am. Whatever she needs. She silver chord that connected my heart to the golden lasso girl would not be broken.

# 13

## Reupholstered Room

Something magical happened. In between important things I keep checking personal email hoping to see a new message from her. Nothing. I decide to distract myself by looking at photographs of Kayla I keep on my hard drive. I go to the folder where I hid that archive of photos and videos and enter the password. My nose starts to itch while the file is decompressing. It's allergy season year round in this dusty coffin of frogs and crickets. Luckily I have a lifetime supply of Off! and an extra strength nasal spray. I spray it and then remember - it contains diphenhydramine. My mind immediately begins to spin and I imagine the police bursting into the office. They're coming. And now my archive of the life I shared with Kayla is about to unfold onto the computer again. There's no time to cancel the operation. I have to shut it down immediately.

Minutes later I calm myself as the spritz sprints to its fin. There were no police. No animal behavior. No enforced commitments. Nothing that has to be done while life is waiting to happen. I reboot the machine and discover a horror. The file containing all the evidence of my past with Kayla was completely erased. A tingling wave washes over my body. My mind begins to spiral as it realizes that the imaginary actions I feared were threats to my future weren't as destructive as my reaction to them. The infinite mistake. I could feel the clouds gathering in my mind and I walked quickly straight to the parking lot so that no one would see me when the storm of my eyes began to pour down with the flood of my emotions. When I got out the door I ran to my car. There standing next to it was Kayla.

“Felix!” she wailed. I saw her lips tremble and then she spoke through her tears. “I love you, too.”

We both cried and hugged each other for an eternity. I left everything except a backpack, jumped in the car and we turned right on the first road we came to and didn't worry about the rest.

We talked and laughed and cried and looked at each other with the loving eyes of innocence reborn. Then it hit me like a feather that took decades to drift until it slammed into the thin wall at the bottom of my thick head. Recognition of the difference appeared like a movie in my head.

The first time, I fell backwards off a cloud into the quick and sandy arms of the desert. She soaked me up like a cactus and the barbs grew around our hearts until pricking each other became the only way we could feel. This time, I dove from the moon carrying a star with me that showered us both in the warm spring of a Nevada rain. A rose grew between us and we cared for it until the flower had risen around us to reflect the life that we tended.

I looked over at my Muñeca and started to cry. I thought about pulling over and asking her to join me for a moment in the park. Then I realized we were already outside. I looked at her beautiful brown eyes, ruby radiant smile and knew my life would always live in her brilliant amber glow.

A knock at the door interrupts my dream. Yet so dainty a hand can only rouse a ghost. She knocks again on the bell and my eyes open. My tired body springs up in a quasi - motion past the watchful eye of the gore that could have been. Instead I look onward to the future behind door number one. The saints and sinners breathe a sigh of relief as our solemn kiss of commitment ushers in release that only death would find unimpressive and my soul whispers to hers in echo with my tongue, arms, and heart, “I love you any way and all ways.”

We respect ourselves and each other better this time around. We love each other more from one day to the next. How things work out is anyone's guess. To us it's a certainty. We become the answer to the riddle that held us both hostage for so long. Instead of sitting in obstinate denial or vengeful suffering wondering how it could ever work again we both decided to allow love to work its magic out without our smartest attempts around it. Communication was the missing element. The decision was the moment of clarity. The agreement was the softest, warmest hug I ever felt.

She's the best woman in any world.

④ EWAN

Ewan Lillicii

# Proof

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