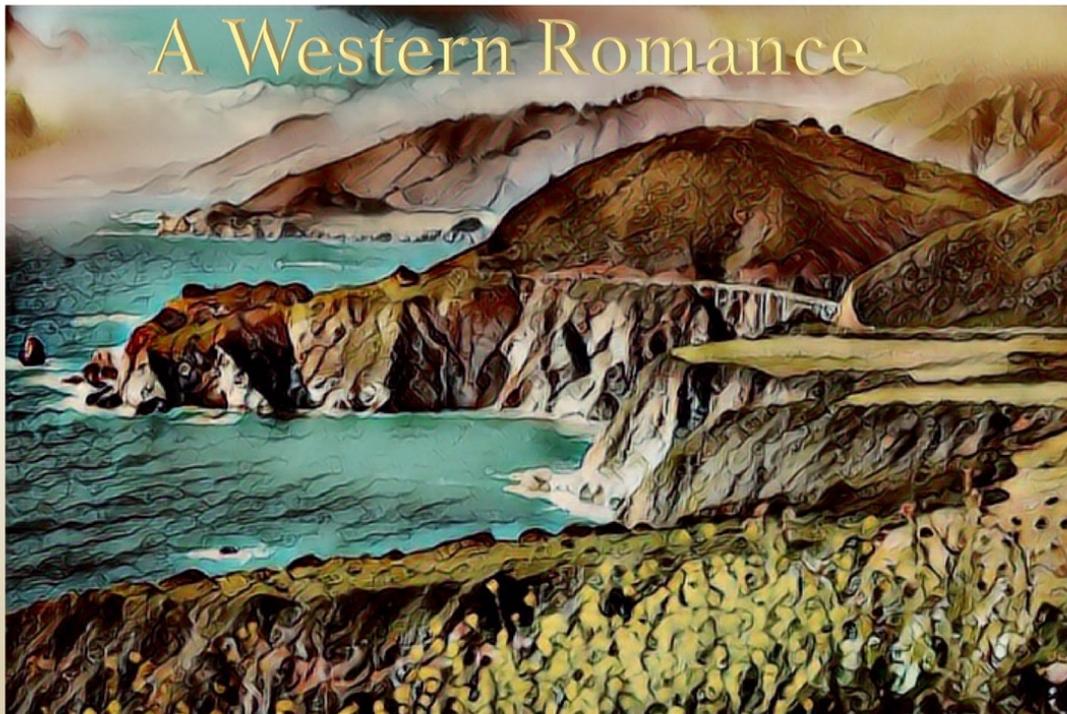


BONAVENTURE POINTE



A Western Romance



*Beachcombing in
a Liminal Zone
of Postmodern
Hyper-Reality*

A New Novel

by

KONRAD VENTANA

BONAVENTURE POINTE

A Western Romance

*Beachcombing in a Liminal Zone
of Postmodern Hyper-Reality*

A New Novel

By

Konrad Ventana



The solution of the difficulty is that the two mental pictures which experiment lead us to form—the one of the particles, the other of the waves—are both incomplete and have only the validity of analogies which are accurate only in limiting cases.

—Werner Heisenberg, circa 1930

Table of Contents

Themes and Chapters

I. The Benightment of Everett Durant

Chapters 1, 2, and 3

II. On the Road to Island Big Sur

Chapters 4, 5, and 6

III. Angels and Intellectuals Underground

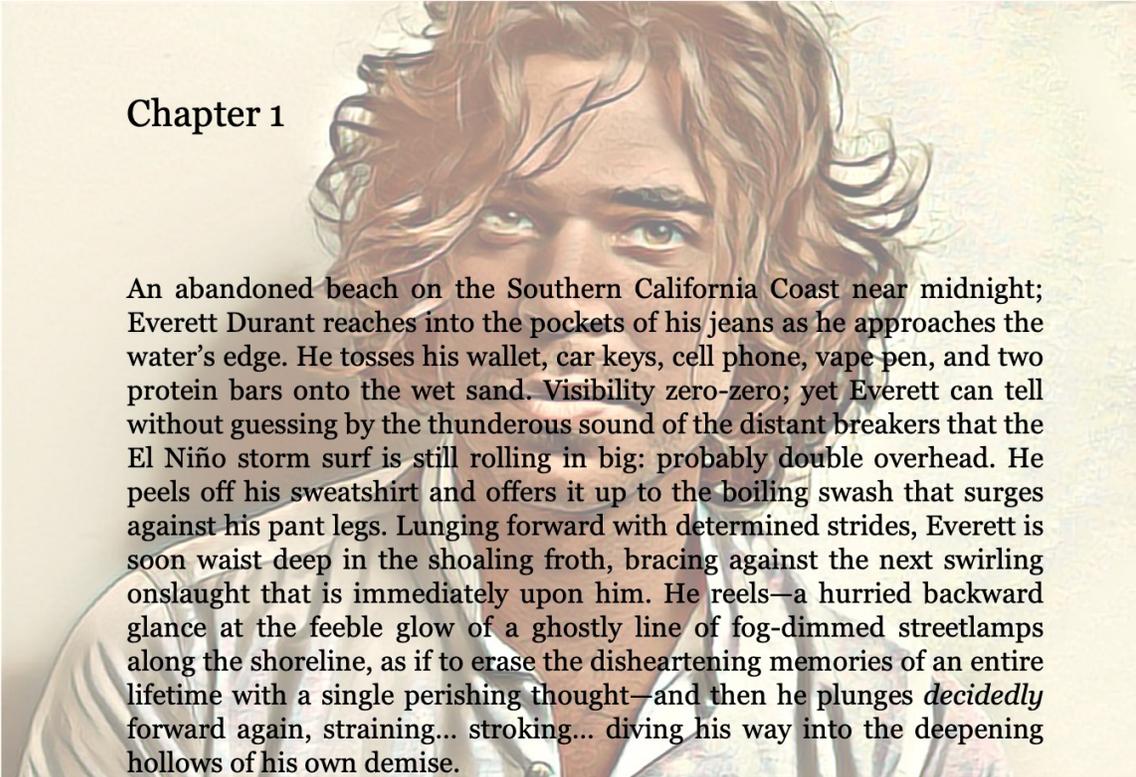
Chapters 7, 8 (Chiasmus), and 9

IV. Tending to the Wounded Under Fire

Chapters 10, 11, and 12

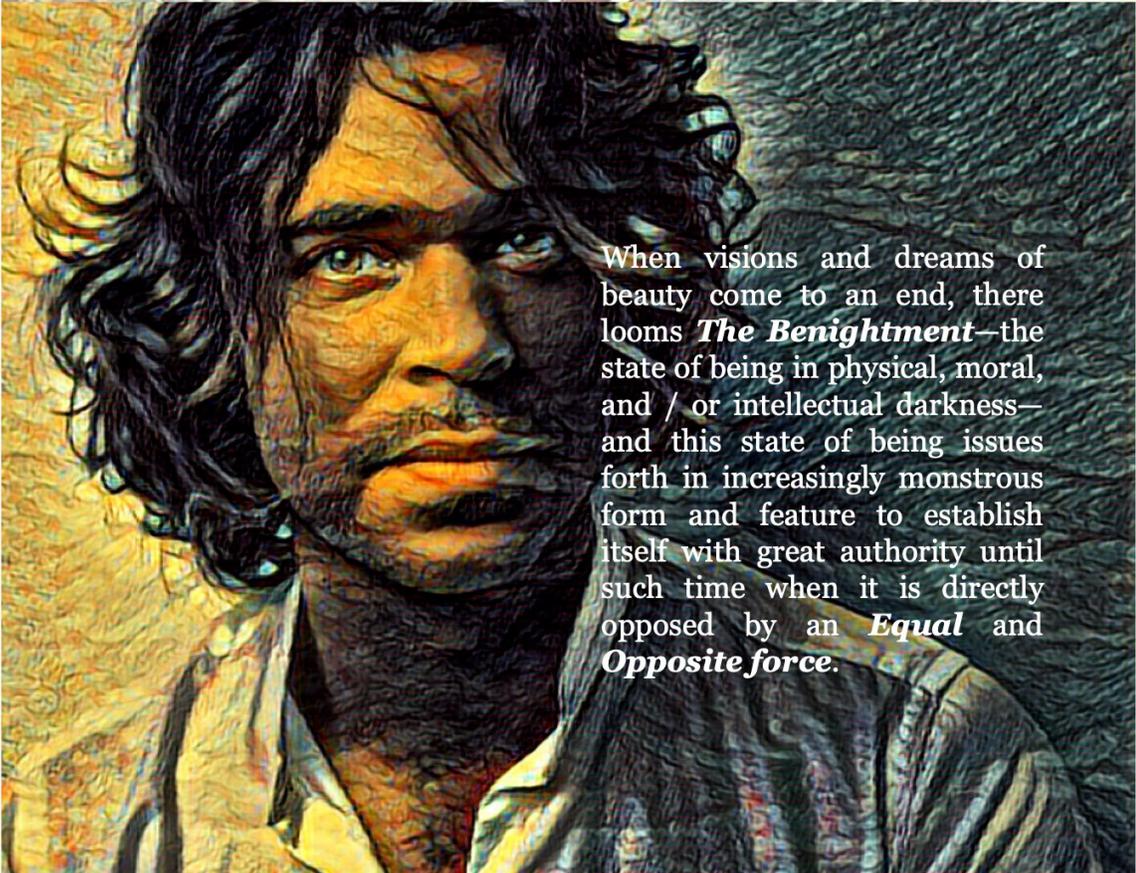
V. Epic InterContinental Cliffhanger

Chapters 13, 14, and 15



Chapter 1

An abandoned beach on the Southern California Coast near midnight; Everett Durant reaches into the pockets of his jeans as he approaches the water's edge. He tosses his wallet, car keys, cell phone, vape pen, and two protein bars onto the wet sand. Visibility zero-zero; yet Everett can tell without guessing by the thunderous sound of the distant breakers that the El Niño storm surf is still rolling in big: probably double overhead. He peels off his sweatshirt and offers it up to the boiling swash that surges against his pant legs. Lunging forward with determined strides, Everett is soon waist deep in the shoaling froth, bracing against the next swirling onslaught that is immediately upon him. He reels—a hurried backward glance at the feeble glow of a ghostly line of fog-dimmed streetlamps along the shoreline, as if to erase the disheartening memories of an entire lifetime with a single perishing thought—and then he plunges *decidedly* forward again, straining... stroking... diving his way into the deepening hollows of his own demise.



When visions and dreams of beauty come to an end, there looms *The Benightment*—the state of being in physical, moral, and / or intellectual darkness—and this state of being issues forth in increasingly monstrous form and feature to establish itself with great authority until such time when it is directly opposed by an *Equal* and *Opposite force*.

Chapter 1

An abandoned beach on the Southern California Coast near midnight; Everett Durant reaches into the pockets of his jeans as he approaches the water's edge. He tosses his wallet, car keys, cell phone, vape pen, and two protein bars onto the wet sand. Visibility zero-zero; yet Everett can tell without guessing by the thunderous sound of the distant breakers that the El Niño storm surf is still rolling in big: probably double overhead. He peels off his sweatshirt and offers it up to the boiling swash that surges against his pant legs. Lunging forward with determined strides, Everett is soon waist deep in the shoaling froth, bracing against the next swirling onslaught that is immediately upon him. He reels—a hurried backward glance at the feeble glow of a ghostly line of fog-dimmed streetlamps along the shoreline, as if to erase the disheartening memories of an entire lifetime with a single perishing thought—and then he plunges *decidedly* forward again, straining... stroking... diving his way into the deepening hollows of his own demise.

When visions and dreams of beauty come to an end, there looms *The Benightment*—the state of being in physical, moral, and/or intellectual darkness—and this state of being issues forth in increasingly monstrous form and feature to establish itself with great authority until such time when it is directly opposed by an equal and opposite force.

The roiling waters of the Pacific Ocean—once warm from with radiant heat of the summer sun—are noticeably colder this midnight hour due to the violent upwellings of wind-driven seas: an oceanic heaviness born in some far away tempest that sent these great waves rushing forth, burgeoning, cresting, breaking, churning towards the overcast reaches of the So Cal surf zone. The penetrating chill prompts Everett Durant to swim even harder, arm over arm, against the gnarly shore-break, outwards through the foaming saltwater remnants of those unseen giants arising now in succession, each with a mounting fury of raw kinetic energies... each watery leviathan advancing, announcing its threatening presence with an audible gathering-*hiss*, before cascading down and exploding in a deafening, disorienting convulsion of unbridled turbulence.

Diving headlong into the rising face of an ominous apparition looming large, Everett plunges forth—the cresting wave rushes hurriedly past—he experiences a profound quiescence within the silence of this watery tomb. Moving deeper still, the sound and the fury of all prior commotion ceases; it feels constrained, as though space and time and sensory phenomena are all compressing upon him, enabling him to recall his singular purpose in the midst of the chaos and the disillusionment that has brought him to this tragic brink: the brink of his own annihilation.

Suspended now in this watery womb beneath the breaking waves—a *lone figure in a thoughtless, tossing sea*—this unfortunate down bound swimmer is fully intending to fill his lungs with seawater, relinquishing all obligation and responsibility for breathing on one's own, returning back to the thoughtless umbilicus of nature and fate.

Everett opens his mouth wide with a brazen effort to inhale, but his breath is clenched in his throat—it moves neither in nor out! A wordless scream is held in check!!! The pungent seawater floods his mouth; it astonishes him—evoking a sudden memory of Alderwood-smoked Sea Salt crystals, crusted *ever-so-lavishly* upon the rims of two long-stemmed margarita glasses.... His mind follows the reminiscence: the chunky crystals dissolve in his mouth, tasting like the salty kisses he would eagerly, breathlessly, share *en masse* with Stella when they were still touring together... back then, when she was still alive... it was her favorite party drink, after all....

In the gathering darkness of a deepening sea, Everett can see her clearly again, as clearly now as then. To her many fans, she was known as *Celeste Emo*, a dazzling up-and-coming Diva of the Los Angeles indie music scene emanating, at the time, from the local neighborhoods of Hollywood, Koreatown, Echo Park, Los Feliz, and Silver Lake. But to Everett, the “emotional hardcore” persona of her ascendant celebrity was more than an angst-ridden *stage persona* that signifies a collective subculture and, by so doing, intensifies the relationship between an artist and her fans. To Everett, it was always much more personal. To Everett—who actually is, *in essence*, the emotional, sensitive, shy and somewhat introverted person with intense feelings of apprehension and vulnerability characteristically arising with acute articulations of melancholia, philosophical nihilism, and/or existential despair—to which the *Emo* of this particular genre of alternative music refers—she was simply and emphatically *Stella*, his one and only shining star.

Stella's captivating eyes sparkled with a pale tourmaline blue-green hue, perfectly reflecting the shallower waters of the Pacific Ocean, while constantly flashing ever more tantalizing facets of dark indigolite blues and grays, conveying an evocative insinuation of deeper mysteries and inscrutable emotions that lie still hidden beneath the surface. Stella was beckoning Everett to the roadhouse dance floor, yet again, with the slightest elevation of her delicately arched eyebrows, a subtle broadening of her luscious heart shaped lips, and a practiced turn of her girlish head that set those appealing waves of golden-brown tresses in motion. One could not help but follow....

Indeed, Everett had been blissfully following Stella's lead as long as he could remember. It was with her encouragement that he left his poetry teaching position at the university to follow the dream. It was a fantastic dream, to be sure; and it was unimaginable without her. Far beyond the pale of ordinary life, practical career choices, creature comforts, and material gain, it was an artistic dream of beauty laced with a passion for mitigating the emotional suffering of a young person *in extremis*. Together, they would elevate the nurturing mantra "*Primum nil nocere*" to a new form of lyrical self-expression that would serve the alienated youths at risk as an uplifting elixir for life. In contrast to the lyrical declarations of anger and the threatening machismo demeanors of its punk rock predecessors, the post-punk underground Emo bands—and *Celeste Emo* in particular—worked diligently, purposefully to frame the impassioned lyrics of youthful alienation and grief expressed within this subculture as a legitimate form of literature.

In composing each new song *Celeste Emo* had combined her flaming love of life, her stunning talents as a musician, and her ultra-feminine sensibilities for vocalizing the *emotional patois* of dire yearning, as she fashioned lyrical verses with melodies and chords into a fresh new wave of *Alternative musicality* that soars... an affective musicality that awakens... a cathartic musicality that both enlivens and restores... a compelling musicality that transcends the surging chambers of the human heart as it reaches out to the saddest, the sickest, the loneliest of souls.

It was often Everett's own poetical words that were on the line: impassioned starry-eyed words of romantic longing, scorching confessions, burning desires, and/or unbounded devotion; and yet these poetic expressions of Everett's hardcore emotional fervor were delivered with an angel's voice... they were delivered with *Celeste Emo's* unearthly angel's voice... and it was perfect while it lasted....

"*Memento Mori... Memento Mori,*" Everett repeats the thought, which carries connotations that are all too familiar to the broken-hearted. He welcomes the future imperative—*remember*—and the all-encompassing infinitive—*to die*—as he clings to his memories of Stella. He clings until the last vestiges of her reflection passes into the depths, fading out like the chorus of a song.

And then there is silence: the anxious rhythm of his own heartbeat recedes like a stampede of frightened horses pounding somewhere off in the distance. Still, Everett's will is resolute: he

struggles to calm himself, forcing his mind to focus on the grimly uninspiring task at hand. His mounting desire to breathe in, and die, versus not-to-breathe and not-die, is somehow held in check; he begins to tremble uncontrollably, alone in the cold, alone in the dark....

And then the drowning comes upon him.

It comes upon him in waves. Strong intoxicating waves of heightened sensations, building in intensity, growing stronger, stronger, stronger: Waves of tension... waves of disorientation... waves of fleeting pleasure then pain... waves of glaring insight... waves of confidence warming him, embracing him, and inviting him to surrender his body and his being into the welcoming enormity of the chaos that abides outside of himself, beyond his troubled mind. The drowning comes upon him in disorienting waves of nausea... followed by an unnerving wave of anxiety and an unspoken pressure urging him to “*move further into this, the endless abyss.*” But try as he might to ease himself gracefully into that boundless bottomless realm, a dreadful *wave of fright*, along with a major case of panic ensues, leaving him frozen, terrified, floundering in the depths of delirium, frantic and struggling for reason as much as air.

Realizing too late that he is losing the connection with his physical body—which is growing increasingly limp, increasingly numb, and is starting to sink into the bottomless darkness of the deep—Everett strives to find some refuge in the far reaches of his brain. There too, he finds with whatever waking clarity remains that he is neither swimming, nor drifting, nor dreaming; he is sinking deeper, ever deeper into an inky black void that surrounds him now, engulfing him, closing in upon him with the relentless *long-drawn zippering-up* of a body bag. At this particular point in the drowning, Everett’s will to resist, or to do anything but die, is all but extinguished.

Suddenly, as if jolted awake by a bolt of lightning, Everett harkens to the thunderous sound of a massive audience clapping in a great domed room. This sharp crackling sound spreads like electrical energy... Everett experiences what appear to be visual hallucinations, complete with dozens, at first, and then many hundreds of brightly colored sparkles of light floating effortlessly around him—each moving, flowing, swirling, merging into complex shapes and mesmerizing kaleidoscopic patterns amid the otherwise abject darkness. Everett attempts and fails to focus on the bright contours of lucid formations emerging within these fantastical patterns. He finds himself struggling to keep up with the whirling constellations of pixilated lights continuously streaming and changing direction, like a collective consciousness of *sprightly monads*, all pouring forth in a brilliant and breathtaking metamorphosis of sparkling evolutionary forms.

Everett’s fascination with the sprightly monads becomes satiated and quickly dims as a stifling wave of inertness overtakes him... carrying him deeper in to a fluid space that appears to be widening, expanding into a nebulous vacancy which exists in-between the floating particles. In this calm abiding state, he no longer cares to move, to think, nor concentrate on anything but

the vastness of this dilating space that lies betwixt and between the sprightly monads, this unlit space where naught but emptiness prevails. There is no time for Everett; there is no place but here for him; there is no joy remaining within him. That part of him has already died. Even his fondest recollections of *Celeste Emo*'s angelic voice rising and resounding in the manner of her heart-rending musical compositions—using words that she had encouraged him to write, emboldened him to write, empowered him to write. All these beloved words have vanished into nothingness... vanished into the stillness of an ever-deepening silence... vanished in a voiceless hush accompanied by a giant swell of immense sadness and a silent stillness that is tantamount to death. It is into this crushing wave that Everett commends his crestfallen spirit as he attempts to seize a hold on to the pressing substance of this immense sadness; only to feel a tremendous billowing surge of remorse arising up from somewhere deep within him... and then it is draining away from him... as the great wave hollows him out and rushes on past.

At long last Everett Durant is empty of despair.

In finally letting go of everyone and everything that ever mattered to him, including his own personal sorrow, Everett becomes aware of a strange and intensely unbearable pain: a pain that is not his own pain, but the unbearable pain of heaven's sadness for every worldly wonderer who has lost their way home; it is the unbearable pain of heaven's own heartache for all whom have forfeited the dawning of inspiration and thus the meaning of their lives.

• • •

In the seaside village of Bonaventure Pointe, the nautical stained-glass lanterns that define the cobbled streets of the harbor district appear to be waging their own antiquated battles for visibility and purpose against the windblown incursions of a murky layer of sea fog that is thickening with the chilling of the midnight hours. Two shadowy figures: a man and a woman walking arm in arm, swerving together, and stumbling at times, are making their way in the vaporous marine layer along the cobblestones of the Avenue of the Violet Lantern. The sounds of their laughter, though somewhat estranged by the obscuring denseness of the fog, are heard now and again, until the couple stops turns and disappears into Monarch's Quay, a local tavern.

"It sure took you long enough to get here," barked Jack Raulston, a large red-cheeked man balancing on a barstool. The man was wearing a white dress shirt, a double-breasted navy-blue blazer, and a nautical captain's hat embroidered with gold ropes and an anchor patch. With tufts of silver-gray hair showing at the temples and a trimmed gentlemen's mustache, Jack Raulston looked every bit the part of a Hollywood Yacht Club Commodore, when in point of fact, he is the President, CEO, and weekend Captain of *The Good Ship Pequod, LLC*, the last remaining

whale watching tour boat operation sailing out of Bonaventure Pointe. Captain Jack Raulston raised a mug of foamy beer dregs, as in salute. “I was thinking that you two might have gotten lost in the fog or something, and I was about to call for an official search and rescue mission.”

The beer-dregs salutation was offered up to the smiling couple, who had just entered the warm soft light of the barroom looking like they were affectionately joined at the hip. The wetness of sea fog, still upon them, glistened in the lamplight.

“We had some urgent business we needed to attend to, Captain Jack,” replied Julian Montgomery (aka Monty) while smoothing his scruffy goatee with his left hand, attempting to stifle too broad a smile. Monty’s right hand was nestled beneath the sweater and around the slender waist of a local waitress named Kristin, who sported a swimsuit model’s body, a sun-kissed shamble of golden blond hair, and a pair of outstanding breasts.

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” said Captain Jack, grinning. “You did the urging, while Kristin did the attending... or was it the other way around this time?”

The couple just looked at each other; Kristen shook her head sideways, somewhat embarrassed; her full bee-stung lips were pursed into a semblance of a frown.

“More importantly,” continued Captain Jack, “where in the world did you find a place to hook up between Pelican’s Roost on Ruby Lantern and Violet Lantern at this time of night?”

“As you well know,” declared Monty jokingly, “a man and a woman in pursuit of hot crazy love might not travel in a perfectly straight line, as a beam of light is normally expected to do.” Monty pulled Kristen closer to him as he continued: “No siree, Jack! In my experience, a couple with such irresistible hotness in mind might take a slight detour to experience the fullness of Mother Nature’s sumptuous curves in supreme luxury under the velvet cover of darkness.”

“You say another word, buster...” warned Kristin, placing her hand playfully over Monty’s mouth, “and it will be the last time for you and me!”

“You heard the lady,” said Monty, attempting to regain his former purchase on Kristin’s shapely hip. “In matters of hooking up, I have learned that chemistry often trumps physics.”

Kristin wheeled around to escape Monty’s grasp and she took her seat on a barstool.

“Where’s your daughter, Captain Jack?” asked Monty with a smirk, while checking the time on his chronograph. “I thought she was planning on meeting us here.”

“Don’t call her that!” snapped Captain Jack, glancing around the barroom. “You know Jessica doesn’t like people to draw attention to the glaring difference in our ages.” The captain holds up three fingers to the bartender, indicating a round of draft beers. “It turns out, my lovely First Mate decided to study marine sciences with her college friends tonight, so she left early.”

“Poor Captain Jack,” taunted Monty. “When are you going to realize that ambitious girls like Jessica are just using you to gain *wildlife experience* in open waters, so she can move up the academic food chain? It’s like you’re just another box to check on her professional resume.”

“And why is that a bad thing?” mused Captain Jack for a moment; then he chortled lustily.

Three empty beer mugs sat on the bar; the captain ordered another round; the conversation shifted to a table along with a fresh bowl of salsa and a basket of tortilla chips. Kristin checked out of the present conversation as she checked-in with virtual friends on her ‘smart’ phone.

Captain Jack Raulston leaned in and spoke softly, nearly in a whisper: “So, are you still feeling up for it tonight? This weather’s pretty dicey and the big surf is definitely an issue.”

“The weather is really no problem, dude,” said Monty with bold though hushed assurance. “This is the perfect weather for a midnight run.... Everything is right on schedule, and no one will be watching!” The backwards orientation of his baseball cap did little to inspire confidence.

Kristin shifted in her chair; casually removing Monty’s wandering hand from the area of her lap, while she proceeded to rummage through her emails.

“And the big surf? And the small craft warnings??” warned the captain nervously.

“The big surf might be an issue,” nodded Monty.

Captain Jack removed his officious captain’s hat and placed it on the table. He ran his fingers through the furrows of silver-gray hair and rubbed the side of his neck. He looked worried. “Do you think you could use some additional help tonight, Monty? It’s going to be hard enough for you to handle the little Zodiac in these swells—let alone snagging that slippery cargo out there in this pea soup, all by yourself.”

“Are you offering to motor out there with me tonight, Jack?”

“Hell no!” exclaimed the captain. “That’s a young man’s game! I’ll just help you to stow the soggy bundles when you retrieve them, as usual.” The captain emptied his beer mug and shook his head. “Seriously, are you certain you can handle the transfer all by yourself tonight?”

“Look, Jack; if the Mexicans can manage to hammer their funky Panga boats all the way up the coast and back, come hell or high water, I can manage a little local shore-break.”

“That shore-break you mentioned. It’s not so little tonight, Monty.” said the captain. “What about your friend Everett? I understand that he’s helped you out a few times before.”

“Have you seen Everett lately? He’s a freaking mess!” exclaimed Monty.

Kristin looked up from her smart phone. “You mean Everett Durant? She asked. “I thought he had it made in the shade, with all the royalties he gets from the music they wrote together.” Kristin pocketed her ‘smart’ phone, indicating that she was ready to join in the conversation.

“He’s a mess, as in morose,” confirmed Monty.

“What do you mean, sport?” asked the captain. “You mean he got sick or something?”

“No, but he looked absolutely bleak the last time I saw him,” explained Monty. “The dude is totally heartbroken.... You might think he’d gotten over it by now; but no! He’s getting worse!”

“I wouldn’t mind cheering him up, chirped Kristin. “He’s a doable hunk, you know!”

Taken aback by Kristin’s blatant declaration, Monty pursued the motivation behind her groupie-esque desires: “Was Everett a doable hunk before he had a famous girlfriend... or is he a doable hunk now because he had a famous girlfriend who suddenly and mysteriously died.... I’m curious, Kris, doesn’t a hunk tend to lose one’s *hunk-ness* status when the famous girlfriend flies off a cliff, for no good reason, and bites the dust, so to speak?”

“Don’t be crude; it was an accident, or at least I think it was.... Anyway, everybody says it was.... And to answer your question—to answer it honestly—I think Everett Durant is still a hunk... just an incredibly sad hunk... and I really think that it would be a very good thing, if I, or someone like me, could try and cheer him up, in some positive way... that is, to help him overcome his terrible loss, and his heartache... you know, to help restore the brilliant hunk of a man he once was...” she sighed longingly, “and possibly could be again!”

“Maybe you should go find him and tell him you want to have his babies,” scoffed Monty, feeling dejected, if not totally put off, by the unabashed openness of Kristin’s feminine urges.

“That’s not fair, Monty! You asked the question. And I was just giving you an honest answer. Besides, what are you complaining about? Didn’t you just get lucky less than an hour ago, in the back seat of my boss’s BMW?”

“You’re kidding?!” exclaimed the captain, incredulously.

“I can’t fight it, Jack. I am so hot for this wild woman!” admitted Monty while he deftly maneuvered his hand back and down along the appealing curves of Kristin’s hourglass waistline. “Now, if only this steamy seductress can help restore me, J.J. Montgomery, to the pinnacle of my doable hunk-ness, before I head off into the dangers of the raging deep-blue sea...” Monty smiled broadly at Captain Jack with what is humorously described as a fish-eating-grin. “By the way, Captain Jack, can I borrow the keys to your Cadillac for a few minutes!?”

“Forget it Monty,” said the captain. “Get your sled out of the shop and you can use your own back seat!”

“Forget it Monty,” said Kristin laughingly. “We’ve already been there, done that!”

“Shucks, babe, you can’t blame a guy for wanting more,” Monty quipped with a carefree chuckle. He theatrically emptied his half-filled beer mug with a grand gulping swallow and slammed it down *hard* on the table. He slowly turned his head to face the captain with that same broad fish-eating grin. “Well then, Captain Jack, the very least you can do for this brave and willing sailor tonight... is to drop this reluctant honey off at her apartment, on our way back down to the boat docks.”

• • •

Far out in the So Cal seaways, beyond the surging breakers, beyond the blurred illumination of the harbor lights and the towering headlands of Bonaventure Pointe, a Mexican Panga craft struggled to make its way northward in the ubiquitous darkness, in increasingly unsettled seas. The design of the Panga was minimalist, with no inside floor, no cockpit, no creature comforts. The low-slung fishing vessel was laden with two disorderly heaps of plastic-wrapped bales piled in the spaces between the fixed bench seats, followed by a dozen neatly stowed canisters of gasoline. Five hunched and hooded passengers clung to the flared gunnels of the open-hulled skiff; the helmsman sat upright, centered, with one hand firmly grasping the wheel and the other hand on the throttle. The angry growls of two outboard motors roared to a high-pitch repeatedly as the engines were throttled up and dialed back in accordance with the confused demands of the rough white-crested seas. A barrage of salt spray pelted the unprotected passengers as the rising prow hammered down hard, slicing into wave after menacing wave.

“Ahora! Es hora!!” shouted the helmsman of the Panga boat above the roar of the engines.

Suddenly, the speeding Panga veered sharply in an eastward direction as the skiff pitched to the starboard beam. The radical change in course—from taking the waves handily at an angle on the bow to that of a following sea—meant that the skiff was now heading in the same direction as the steepening swells, which comes with its own set of dangers. The radical change in course also meant that the Mexican Panga craft, with its water-soaked passengers and its mysterious cargo, was now traveling directly towards the So Cal coast on a heading to Bonaventure Pointe.

The Panga skiff had been running without lights, save for the dull phosphorescent-glow of a GPS-screen that was clamped beside the helmsman. Far off in the distance, the faint amber glow of city lights came eerily into view along the fogbound coastline, appearing like huge translucent clouds of cotton candy dimly lit from within. Ahead of the Panga skiff the coastline was inky-black—unlike the tranquil boat harbor to the south of Bonaventure Pointe, the massive headlands projecting far out into the ocean were largely undeveloped and absent of navigation lights. The Panga craft advanced toward the dark coastline; the bow spotlight came on, reaching, searching.

Running hard and fast in a following sea, the helmsman worked the throttles frantically in an attempt to match the speed of the larger sets and avoid stuffing the bow into the troughs of the waveforms. Too fast, and the Panga would run up the backside of the leading wave and over the top, with both engines and propellers shrieking. Too slow, and the Panga would get caught bow-down in the trough, where a large following wave could easily breach the stern and swamp the small boat. The skillful helmsman worked the throttles with intense concentration—as though all lives depended on it—keeping the bow up largely by feel in the prevailing murkiness of their surroundings, applying just enough power to stay on the back of a monstrous leading wave.

One of the passengers groped for a life vest; the others remained glued to the gunnels.

At a specified point along the vessel's designated navigational course—as indicated by an illuminated arrow on the GPS-screen—the helmsman pulled a cell phone from the pocket of his parka and thumbed the illuminated keypad.... He held the phone close to the side of his face and shouted: “Estamos aquí, señor! ... Estamos aquí!” ... The helmsman squinted against the windblown sea spray and shouted, “El Seagull se acerca a los promontorios!”

At the other end of the electromagnetic cell phone line, Julian Montgomery, was listening intently.... “Bueno! Bueno! Amigo!” Monty shouted into his cell phone. “Estoy saliendo ahora!” he added, indicating that *he was leaving right away*. Monty, ensconced in the driver's seat of an inflatable powerboat, was wearing a diving headlamp and a full wetsuit. Misty wisps of fog with the appearance of wood smoke streamed past the nautical lanterns and the foot lights on the walkways leading to the boat docks. Standing dockside on a floating platform was Captain Jack. He looked nervous yet ready like a rodeo cowboy, with a coil of rope suspended in one hand.

Monty ended the brief phone call and nodded *yup* to the whaleboat captain; he pocketed the cell phone. “Time to party, old friend,” he shouted up to the captain.

“Guess there’s no talking you out of this misadventure!?”

“No way, Jack. We’re good to go, and I’ve got mucho bills to—” The cocksure explanation was interrupted by the explosive sound of a massive wave crashing against the granite boulders of the breakwaters. “Now quit your worrying, and cast me off!”

“Show me you got the *kill-switch*, before you start the engine!” demanded the captain, holding fast to the rope line.

Monty grabbed hold of the elastic lanyard and held it up with a dramatic flourish before securing its Velcro loop firmly around his wrist. He started the outboard motor with a turn of the key, switched on the running lights, and smiled that familiar grin back at the captain.

The captain swung the rope coil into the boat and pushed the bow out from its moorings.

Monty slammed the outboard motor into gear; the water churned wildly and kicked up behind the engine; the lightweight Zodiac lurched forward and headed out along the harbor breakwaters with an increasingly high-pitched wail. Moving rapidly beyond the rock jetties of the protected harbor and out into the thickening brume, the receding lights of the Zodiac traced the violent contours of the tempestuous ocean swells until the headlamp faded out in the fog and disappeared into the darkness.



Chapter 2

The kiss of death is not at all bitter, nor is it cold for Everett Durant. For one so ripe with tragic desolation, so riven by material loss of dream and beauty as to snuff out the lights of his own inauspicious stars and welcome the convulsions of an all-engrossing death, there is mercy in the affliction. Not his: that bottomless hole in the world left by a futile longing for impossible things; that pale nostalgia for what never was; that lame desire for what might have been; that eager willingness to escape into an imaginary landscape that is seen only dimly through an ocean of tears. Such fanciful longings are not the character nor the substance of Everett Durant, who has gazed upon the glory of feminine beauty incarnate, beheld the unattainable, achieved the unthinkable, and experienced the majesty of such a triumphant and benevolent articulation of love as to lose oneself in the measure. Those desperate emotions that Everett once recognized as the bottled-up sufferings of countless others *in extremis*; those heartfelt yearnings for love and affection *in articulo mortis*, to which he had graciously, shamelessly given his *lyrical yawp*, return to him now, at the point of his own death, with the eloquence of an angelic innamorata.

The kiss of death presses slowly, tenderly upon Everett Durant; it presses upon him with the intoxicating warmth of a lover's embrace. His quivering lips meet her warm luscious lips once again; his languishing tongue finds her soft velvet tongue once again; his last clenched breath willingly opens wide to the ebb and the flood of potential energy that comes part and parcel with breathing in that same sweet ambrosial breath together and *falling in love* once again....

He didn't feel the booming bass percussions of the breaking waves.... He didn't hear the impetuous clamor of the ocean surf rising all around him in a crescendo.... He didn't notice the resonating melodies peeling out in tintinnabulation upon such lucid overarching apprehensions that would enable thousands, if not millions, to reclaim the metaphorical mission and remissions of the rainbow within the torrents of a deathly squall. He didn't sense the all-encompassing sweep of the powerful rip currents that were carrying him forcefully away... and then fiercely up... and up... and over the falls of a gigantic breaking wave....

He didn't feel the impact when his body hit the rocks... and washed up on the shore....

He was with her, once again, with the adjoining proximity of a French kiss....

Everett knew he loved Stella when he first saw her smile, before she transformed herself into *Celeste Emo*, before the big concerts and the damnable record deals; he loved her alongside her dream. He was happiest when it was only a notebook of lyrical phrases, an acoustic guitar or two, and her bare-naked talent to summon the angels with that haunting voice of hers. The best of their songs took on a life of their own in the highly active underground music scene, where rock music, specifically evolving punk rock music, was putting authentic thoughts and feelings back into the message of the music and was looking inward for inspiration. And they found all that and more in *Celeste Emo*, who added a vital nuance of personal struggle that targeted the emotional heartstrings of a larger audience; thereby transiting the initial pejorative phase-one, where "*Emo kids*" were viewed with skepticism in a wholly negative light, and progressing artfully through the various phases of development, new waves, and revivals of *Emo music*, which eventually crossed over into *Alternative Rock* to the point where the prehensile overlords of the pop music scene took notice.

And that's when the killing began.

One by one the most promising avant-garde Emo bands in the Los Angeles area were gobbled-up by contractual relationships and spit-out by underhanded maneuvers and broken promises in a masterful display of crony capitalism that can best be described as Machiavellian. The sad fact is that big business, through pay-to-play airtime, aka *payola*, totally controls the types of music one hears on the radio and the artists that get exposure and become popular. The

major record companies jealously guard the totality of the market, employing a sleazy cabal of promotion companies as middlemen to skirt the payola laws; and these ‘arms-length’ radio promoters, with no obvious talent but a feral cunning for business, play ball with the major record labels in a manner that keeps unwelcome competition to a minimum. Heaven help the rising, raging Emo band that makes just enough noise to get noticed by big music: they may get signed, they may get contracts, but they rarely if ever get airtime.

In the tragic case of *Celeste Emo*, it was even worse than that. Her sound was so unique, her message was so poignant, and her hooks were so huge, that they ruthlessly absconded with the song-rights and uncoupled the woman from her music in one fell swoop; content to capitalize on the latest *Emo revival* without her, flooding the radio and video shows with a bevy of hollow sound-alikes and look-alikes that played like they came off an assembly line. Rather than contend with an authentic, gifted, impassioned prima donna of an indie-leaning band, the music companies preferred to prop-up and mass-produce their own senseless simulacrum that looked and sounded agreeably “artistic” because they were painting by Stella’s numbers. The separation of the musician from her audience, *the artist from her oeuvre*, proved to be too much: they might as well have strangled Stella’s breathing and driven the coffin nails into the sinews of her heart.

• • •

Outside the protective harbor of Bonaventure Pointe, a nautical *pas de deux* was taking place on the high seas, where two unlikely dancers—two motorboats with spotlights, the Panga and the Zodiac—were seen coming together and peeling apart due to mysterious unseen forces. Upon closer inspection, the passengers of the low slung Panga skiff were frantically off-loading bales of the smugglers’ cargo into the inflatable Zodiac craft, in a wild scene that was eerily illuminated by the dull green light of a dozen or more chemiluminescent glow sticks. Beyond the blurred glow and shifting shadows of the frantic off-loading scene, the beaming spotlights of the two cavorting vessels reached out pell-mell into the surrounding darkness.

The largest swells of the turbulent sea were cresting far out, and the inflatable Zodiac was struggling to keep abreast of the low-slung Panga boat as each successive wave would hurl the disparate vessels up and away from each other. The Panga swirled around and turned seaward again to face the oncoming swells; Monty was working hard to maneuver in close enough to the side of the Panga craft to make the increasingly dicey transfer of imported goods even possible.

Overlooking the spectacle, the towering sandstone palisades of the Bonaventure Pointe stood motionless and austere, with towering bluffs that fall away in sheer drops. These coastal headlands jutted boldly out into the sea and, by their massive girth, separated the breakwaters of the protected boat harbor to the south from a series of picturesque lagoons and sandy beaches to the north. It was in a picturesque lagoon just north of the headland bluffs, at the approach of the Sea-Cliffs crescent beach, where this nautical *pas de deux* was dramatically unfolding.

Without warning, a much larger set of waves appeared in a billowing fusillade that carried both vessels closer to the shore with astonishing surges of power, if not rogue will. It is at this climactic point in the drama that everyone aboard the Panga skiff knew that they were *caught inside*, having been carried by the massive breakers much too close to the surf zone for comfort. And that's when the green fluorescent glow sticks began spreading-out like luminous lily pads upon the surface of the deep. Some of these floating glow sticks were apparently still clutched in the hands of the frightened Panga skiff passengers, who had disembarked in unison.

Moments later, the two powerboats appeared to be separating more widely: both hammering their own way through the massive swells to relative safety beyond the surf zone. Gradually, the searching beams of the spotlights grew farther and farther apart as the two vessels were taking different courses: one was heading back out to sea, the other for safe harbor.

Meanwhile, the luminous lily pads—embodying human hopes and fears—spread out upon the waters amid the unbridled consternation of powerful breaking waves. The feeble lights of the ghostly glow sticks periodically dimmed and disappeared into the turbulence of the engulfing shore-break, only to reemerge again a few seconds later in the foamy spindrift appearing much like an elongating string of luminous souls being pulled and stretched-out lengthwise by the vehement streaming of powerful rip currents that run parallel to the coast, while the relentless directional impulses of the surf-zone ultimately prevailed in driving the imaginative string of luminous souls to the shoreline near the base of the headland bluffs.

It is in the liminal zone between the barren headlands and the restless sea—between the clarity of consciousness and the span of endless slumber—between the imposing cliffs of conformity that could lead a sensitive soul to the brink of despair and the watery world of aesthetic possibilities wherein the familiar gives way to the completely unknown, wherein the old world falls apart and a grander world is revealed, wherein future outcomes that were once taken for granted, like life or death, might now be thrown into doubt. It is in this liminal zone, between the barren headlands and the restless sea, that the body of Everett Durant lay screaming.

It was the morning of the very next day.

Lying close beside him was the lingering impression of an angel, a *sand angel* to be more specific: a familiar, generally youthful, artistic design made in the sand (or fresh snow) by lying on one's back and moving one's arms up and down, and one's legs from side to side, to form the distinctive shape of an angel with wings. However intentional, however perfect the angelic impression appeared in the sculpted beach sand, it was not at all clear who could have made it, nor why? Any traces of drag marks or footprints emerging from the sea had been washed away by the encroaching sweep of the rising tide. The only other indication of human activity anywhere near the immediate sandscape was the plastic tube of a nearly-exhausted glow stick that was resting at the very center of the perplexing sand impression: the glow stick was resting at a place where the consoling bosom and perchance the compassionate heart of such an imaginary angel might be.

Everett coughed and heaved repeatedly, bringing up spurts of bile-tinged vomit and foamy bilge water from his lungs at the same time. He rolled over on to his stomach and tried to rise up, but the withering pain from his fractured hip and his dislocated shoulder, combined with the sharp stabbing sensations emanating from a number of broken ribs, prevented him from doing so. He kneeled, coughing and panting at the figurative feet of the disembodied angel, unable to fully catch his breath. The artful impression of the *sand angel* was not of his making: he knew that much! He also knew that such beatific impressions in the sand and the mind do not materialize all by themselves. Still, the muted sunrise of the misty morning burning through the maritime fog painted both the sand and the sky with such preternatural shades of rose-colored light as to call such definitive conclusions into question.

Everett remembered how it was for him: he remembered how his entire universe was unbearably empty without Stella in it. He remembered that he had been intent on dying for some time. He remembered most of the details of his unsuccessful drowning experience. And yes, the very last thing he remembered upon entering into his own drowning with such dire intent: *she was right there with him, and they were soul kissing—those warm luscious lips of hers, that soft velvet tongue; the full force of her divine presence pressing upon him from an unearthly realm with the form and features of an angel.*

Everett gazed in amazement upon the empty shell of an angel that was no longer there; tears fell from his eyes as he clutched at the amorphous sand. He cried out to the highest heavens with what strength he could muster and collapsed in a heap with his head in his hands.

The dawn patrol—those dedicated early morning surfers who arrive at daybreak and brave the cold to ride the unsullied swells in the pristine solitude of the early morning hours—were the first to partake of the ocean's latest bounty. No less than a dozen plastic-wrapped bundles of contraband were rounded up and nonchalantly transported away from the tidewaters in a matter of minutes, before the surfers began to paddle out and over to the various point breaks where the

waves rolled over into surf-worthy barrels under the grooming influences of the shifting winds. Apparently, the daily combing of the beaches is a civic responsibility that is taken very seriously in the village of Bonaventure Pointe.

No one noticed Everett Durant at first, nor heard his bellowing cries above the sounds of the waves that were crashing upon the half-submerged boulders and beach sand at the base of the soaring headland bluffs. From a distance, it looked like just another basking sea lion; or perhaps it was a homeless person who had decided to sleep it off on the public beach, rather than make the long trek back to the designated campgrounds on the sheltered harbor-side of the headlands.



Farther up the seacoast to the north, the steep headland palisades of Bonaventure Pointe eventually gave way to a series of lower cliffs and terraced slopes, where a tony fashionable ultra-posh residential development was presently under construction. This was one of the last beachfront developments in Southern California to offer custom home sites with such splendid multi-million-dollar views. However, the outlandish purchase prices for the beachfront lots, at the time, were such that the wealthy clientele who could afford to buy and build their very own immense imperial-modern architectural masterpieces by the side of the sea tended to use them only occasionally, merely as second or third homes, and then only sparingly, for vacations. Thus, the newest portion of the residential development was largely designated lots-for-sale or under-construction in the near term, and was largely if not entirely uninhabited at the time.

This worked out well for the drenched and bedraggled passengers of the Panga skiff, who had hastily decided—after a certain amount of confusion—to take up temporary residence in one of the completed super-sized McMansions, never having thought that their arrival in the U.S. would be so well received, and that they would have so little, if any, trouble with the neighbors.



The rising sun proceeded to burn through the last lingering remnants of the marine layer; the joggers, power walkers, and stand-up paddle boarders began to arrive on the beaches; a vintage

Retro-Cadillac convertible was on patrol in the village of Bonaventure Pointe, with Captain Jack Raulston at the wheel and Julian Montgomery (Monty) riding shotgun. They were on a tactical mission: to find the missing passengers from the Panga boat, before anyone else does.

“How in the hell did you let this happen... again?” barked the captain.

“I’m telling ya, it wasn’t my fault this time. It all happened like somebody planned it.”

“You mean those poor people planned to drown themselves in the dark of night?!”

“No, I mean someone planned to get them close enough to shore, so they wouldn’t necessarily drown, but not so close as to actually beach the Panga.”

“That would require great skill, don’t you think?”

“Mad skill.” said Monty.

“And you couldn’t manage to rescue any of them!?” admonished the captain.

“I circled around, but they waved me off, Jack.”

“How could anyone possibly wave you off? It was pitch-black out there!”

“They had glow sticks, man,” said Monty emphatically. “You know, they glow in the dark!”

“And you’re sure none of those poor people drowned?”

“Not as far as I know.”

“And how far is that?”

“Horse’s mouth, Jack.”

“Then, where the hell are they?” inquired the captain as he turned the Retro-Cadillac onto a public parking lot that overlooked the beachfront developments, the beaches, and the coastline.

Monty looked down at the blank screen of his cell phone.

“We’ll know soon enough,” he said.

Arising from the south, a squadron of California brown pelicans skirted the verge of the headland bluffs before dropping down in linear formation to a cruising altitude just above the surface of the ocean. The undulating line of seabirds advanced gracefully across the coastal panorama: from the headland bluffs, along the adjacent beaches, past the new mansion construction, to the more established residential terraces, beaches, and lagoons further north.

A ringtone sounded. Monty cupped the cell phone to his ear and listened intently....
“Si! ... Si!” said Monty to the caller. He listened again, thought for a long moment, and then he said, “Me haré cargo de ello!” affirming that he would *take care of the matter personally*.

Monty pocketed the cell phone.

“Well, what did he say?” asked the captain with a rising degree of impatience.

“*No Problemo*, Captain Jack. “said Monty. “It turns out, we only have to feed them.”

“What does that mean? Where are they?”

Monty pointed to the residential development that was currently under construction. “See those fancy new villas over yonder? Our Mexican friends have set up shop in style.”

• • •

Later that morning, Monty and Kristin are walking inconspicuously along the coastal access trail that leads from the parking lot—where Captain Jack dropped them off, with a large take-out order from the village taqueria. The couple made their way casually along the upper portion of the coastal access trail that meanders past the new residential development on its path to Sea-Cliffs Beach. Monty and Kristin appeared like any other beach-bound sunbathers with a So Cal state of mind and a personal burden of assorted leisure items to carry: be it a beach bag full of towels and whatever, a beach chair with cupholder and a matching umbrella, a surfboard, a standup paddleboard, or an expedition-size backpack stuffed with tacos, burritos, and fajitas.

As the couple crossed an intersection where the paved road of the lower terrace leads into the construction zone, Monty smiled, and winked, and silently turned away from Kristen. He stepped casually, nonchalantly over the sawhorse barricade posted with a sign that read ‘Private Property, Absolutely No Trespassing’ and headed down the empty street at a jog. About midway down the block, he turned, smiled back at Kristin, and disappeared into the gated courtyard entry of an oceanfront mansion that featured gas lanterns, working water fountains, and newly planted tropical foliage that graced the entire fantastical facade of the newly constructed property.

Kristin continued to stroll on to the beach, where she spread out two huge towels, removed her sleeveless sundress, and presented her swimsuit model's body to the glimmer of the sun.

About thirty minutes later Monty found Kristin on the beach. He stood over her smiling, beaming behind reflective wrap-around sunglasses with his backwards oriented baseball cap. Monty relished the vision of Kristin *au naturel*, and this skimpy bikini ensemble in ripening sun-tanned peach was astonishingly close to that. He joined her happily on the towels.

"Are you finished with your risky business?" asked Kristin, turning sideways to face Monty.

"It's all good, my little chickadee. All is well, the sun is shining, and I am all yours again."

"Until next time," Kristen said disappointingly.

"Until next time," he acquiesced. "But don't worry; these folks will be gone by noon."

"Then why would you have to bring them food?" asked Kristin, with some indignation, as she turned over onto her back again and placed a stylish straw hat over her face.

"I didn't have to, Kris. I wanted to.... I volunteered to help out, knowing that they have been through a lot... and they still have a long way to go."

"So, you volunteered to help by bringing Mexican food to a group of Mexicans who just took to the high seas and risked their lives to escape from ... Mexico? Is that it?"

"It may seem ironic to you," said Monty, sitting upright, "but I didn't think of it that way." He stood and repositioned himself on a large rock that jutted out from the sand. He adopted the familiar pose of Rodin's statue of *The Thinker*, with his muscular body leaning slightly forward and his knuckles on his chin. "I prefer to think like its Christmas, and there's Christmas presents, and glad tidings and good cheer all around; and if you want to get to open those Christmas presents, you've got to take good care of the elves."

"So, you volunteered to feed the elves?" asked Kristin with sarcasm steeped in amazement.

"Exactly," said Monty.

Kristin sat up, giggling like a schoolgirl, which escalated into outright laughter. And then she mellowed and smiled fondly at Monty with bedroom eyes. "Baby, you can light my fire any time you please, but I think it would be better for me, sometimes, if you just don't talk."

The hours passed. Monty was sitting on the rock outcropping again, but this time the would-be *Thinker* was munching on the remains of a taco. Kristin was applying a fresh luster of sunscreen lotion onto the glowing contours of her skin. Monty licked the last remnants of the taco from his fingers as he eyeballed Kristin's every move; her feminine mannerisms, not to mention the exquisite curves of her alluring female physique, were mesmerizing to him.

"If I were a millionaire, and you were a lady, would you marry me anyway? Would you have my baby?"

"Is that a trick question?" Kristin remarked. "You're neither a carpenter nor a millionaire."

"No, but sometimes destiny opens us up to an entirely different kind of opportunity."

"And what kind of opportunity is that?"

"An opportunity for us to experience in our lifetimes what it would be like if we had everything we needed to live like kings and queens, or even better, like movie stars."

"I think you've had enough sun for one day, Monty dear."

"Seriously, Kristin, what if you and I could experience what it would be like to live like royalty, to be loved and to make love like famous movie stars, but just for one day."

"For me to feel that way, it would have to be real."

"It is real, if you want it to be, Kris. It is real for me."

"And you know a guy who could make me feel like a movie star?"

"I am that guy," he said.

Kristen and Monty found themselves at the front gate of the aforementioned imperial mansion. It was a grand ultra-contemporary oceanfront home with the stately facade of a Tibetan temple, with four garage doors tastefully disguised with massive mahogany framework flanking the grand entrance. The gate was unlocked: a smaller set of mahogany doors, which spanned the entrance, yielded to their will. The couple walked hand-in-hand into a palm-lined passageway with the tranquil sounds of fountain waters whispering and tittering beside them. The couple approached the threshold together, where Monty bent low and lifted Kristin, and carried her *dashingly* into the wood-beamed interior of the fully-furnished mansion with all the theatrical pomp and circumstance of a silent-era film star—which was apparently the way she liked him.

The mansion was otherwise unoccupied. Monty set Kristen down tenderly upon the closest of two beige oversized sofas arranged within the formal living room, framed by a panoramic wall of window glass as big as the Ritz. The huge plate glass window was one of several such windows of the open floor plan that looked out over the vanishing edge of the Pacific Ocean, each like a postcard panorama from a local gift shop, editing out all mundane human activities on the beaches that lie beneath the architectural frames, in favor of an uninterrupted view of an expansive watery world of virgin sea and sky: a limitless world that is untarnished and empty of all but the alluring inundations of the ocean waves, the sensuous susurrations of the freshening sea breezes, and the ever-changing complexions and blush of the endless summer skies. It is a pristine world in which one might be tempted and even encouraged if not compelled to indulge those burgeoning desires that rise up from the loins and incite the body to mount up and ride roughshod among the extravagantly rich, the exceedingly famous, and the wild-at-heart, beyond the boundaries of discretion.

Monty's lips moved from Kristin's mouth to her arched and heaving breasts, where he lingered with the fullness of appreciation. Slowly, with her hands on his shoulders Kristin pushed Monty downwards, encouraging him to explore all the delightful nooks and crevices that could be found among the crumpled segues of a spandex string bikini. She was a starlet nearly naked on the casting couch: she was ready for her close-up and he was preparing to close the deal, when Monty remembered the *cinematic treatment* of the screenplay he had enticed Kristin with.

Realigning her bikini bottom gently with both of his hands, Monty kissed Kristin tenderly on the lips again, and then he stood up politely beside her. Without hesitation, in an overtly *gallant* and charmingly *exaggerated manner*, he took his puzzled and panting lover by the hand. "If you really want to know how it feels to live larger than life... just follow me!" he said.

The inspired couple stumbled up the floating staircase to the master bedroom that must have been made for a giant, with its vaulted beams and soaring ceilings, a spacious sitting area with two giant-size chairs set beside a massive fireplace, and one enormously oversized canopy bed. A flick of the wall switch, and the beige wall of curtains parted to reveal yet another expansive wall of plate glass looking out over the same panoramas as the windows of the lower floors; only the ocean views seen from this multimillion-dollar master bedroom seemed that much closer to Valhalla, the abode of the fatefully chosen, the tragically heroic, the fallen, and the dead.

The immediacies of the moments that followed are somewhat difficult to adequately capture with words on parchment, given the irksome flatness of cold print. However, if one were to dip one's quill in magical waters containing all the florid colors of the sunset, all the far flung music of the heavenly spheres, and all the bonfires of passion and desire that rage unfettered within the cauldrons of the human breast, one might well imagine and indeed begin to convey the inordinate extremes to which a man might go to have and to hold this opulent woman who

prances before him: this starlet who lights up the stage, and slowly strips off her swimsuit, and drives him wild with a flashing spine-tingling spreading of her legs... as she beckons to him, reclining seductively with a come-hither look and a captivating smile that says, “*Discover me!*”

Monty flung himself into the drama of the beckoning starlet like a moth into a flame.

Lights! Camera! Action! Without a word being spoken, the role playing began in earnest. The method was pure Stanislavski. Nothing was faked, nothing was forced; it was sense memory at work; it was emotion and imagination at play. The experience of life and love by the actors within the fiction of the story was as true as if it were happening to them for the first time.

The first pressing of the lips sent waves of electric impulses coursing through the actors’ naked bodies, drawing them together like magnets with the fullness of their first embrace. The man instinctively groped and found and fondled the woman’s breasts for the first time—and found them to be good, and found them to be perfect—as she offered herself up, a virgin maiden to the persuasive pressures of his manly meanderings. In a masterful display of self-control, the all-powerful casting director held himself up at arm’s length above the writhing starlet for a timely beat, a pause, a frozen moment in time—what one might refer to as a spell-binding caesura of anticipation—before he allowed himself to plunge more deeply and decisively into the upshot of the dramatic arts with a riveting performance, brandishing a seemingly endless series of confident strokes that were received and returned to him, oh, so vigorously, with passion.

Before Monty’s star-enamored eyes, Kristin began to change in a shimmering blur from a girl he once met, to the woman he was dating and trying to impress, to every lover who was ever laid on a casting couch, to every woman who ever lived, to a beautiful goddess with a thousand hands, a thousand faces, a thousand lips, a thousand mercurial forms, a thousand private places of delight that were waiting, wanting, needing to be kissed and/or caressed.

With each exquisite stirring of his larger-than-life persona among the warm and willing embers of Kristin’s feminine splendor, now in full bloom, the imagined drama of the regal movie stars in love became more real to the lovers. The whispered sentiments of casual romance that normally issued from their lips were transformed by the grandeur of the setting and the majesty of the moments into an epic scene of *faire l’amour*, raising the newly-discovered actors up in both prominence and stature with such powerful and moving orchestrations of the art as to transport the copulating couple to the realm of the immortals: where they would reign supreme and unfettered in a world of their own making, a world at their command, world in which every carnal desire on the edge of the mind, every erotic fantasy on the tip of the tongue could be expressed and realized to the fullest extent; where it would be met and matched with towering surges of inwardly thrilling, upwardly soaring, ecstatically straining fits of pleasure and bliss, accompanied by the fulminating moans of love’s climactic culminations amid the incessant rhythmic pounding *plussshhhh* of waves upon the shore.



Chapter 3

My name is Travis. I live in Bonaventure Pointe. I live eight blocks from Sea-Cliffs Beach, in case you've seen me surfing there before. If you want to know what happened next to Everett Durant, you've come to the right place. You see, I'm the one who found him by the rocks that morning at the beach, coughing up his lungs and screaming bloody murder. I'm the one who called 911 and dragged him up on dry sand.

Everett Durant was immediately declared the victim of a non-fatal drowning incident, but not everyone agreed. There was no doubt that Everett had in fact initiated the physiological process of drowning. That was clear enough to everyone present. However, he hadn't finished it and there seemed to be some confusion about the manner of his resuscitation. To some, the idea of drowning without mortality was simply unfathomable. There were vigorous discussions about dry versus wet drowning, *active* versus *passive* drowning; and terms like silent drowning, delayed drowning, and possible secondary drowning were bandied about. Theoretical arguments concerning water temperature, immersion time, and hypoxia were presented in terms of fatality.

According to the senior lifeguard and the EMTs at the scene, the new millennium came with a fresh new consensus definition of drowning: one that is sanctioned by both the WHO and the Aquatics Institute, and it includes both fatal and non-fatal outcomes. Drowning itself is now defined as *the process of experiencing respiratory impairment from submersion/immersion in a liquid medium*; and then, in a fortunate case where the subject or casualty does not actually die, but recovers, the nature of the outcome is graded more precisely—that is, *with or without morbidity*. In the case of Everett Durant, it was officially determined that the subject had experienced a *nonfatal drowning incident* with significant *structural morbidity*.

He wasn't bleeding too badly, as far as I could tell. But he was pretty broken up inside and it took the medics a while to assess all the damage and to set the broken bones. I visited Everett in the hospital a few times, even though those places give me the creeps. And after that, we kept in touch: partly on account of my having sort-of rescued him and all, and partly because of the angsty coolness of the songs he wrote; but mostly it was because Everett Durant is one seriously radical hombre in terms of good vibrations and it would be good to get to know him better.

I wouldn't say Everett Durant is crazy: it's more like he's a precision clock that was dropped and damaged and is in-need of repair. While he might not be entirely accurate in his thinking, and his method of self-expression these days leaves something to be desired, on account of his attempted self-inflicted drowning and all; the point is that the music they made together still remains alive and well in this world. It has a beat, it has a heart; it's still ticking.

I wouldn't say he's old-school: Sure, there may have been a time when the term "*Emo*" was an insult you hurled at introverts to mock them; but no more! By the time *Celeste Emo*'s music made it to the mainstream, we were all wearing a lot of eyeliner.

But the way *Celeste Emo* died: man, that was crazy! There was no way that was just an accident! Not at the high point of her career; not under those circumstances. First, there were no skid marks! And it just and so happened to be *on*—or rather *directly off-of*—Mulholland Drive? Really now: the iconic winding roadway in the Hollywood Hills that is so deeply steeped in legends, movies, and popular songs that you can actually *feel* the history of Hollywood on it?

I'm not buying it.

Everett refuses to talk about it with me. He just won't go there.

I don't blame him.

At Dawn, I would find him sitting on the same cement bench overlooking Sea-Cliffs Beach: the one closest to the parking lot—on account of his injuries and all. From there, you could see the Bonaventure Pointe headlands, the surf breaks, and a good part of the lantern village. Everett was constantly looking over to the sandy spot by the rocks and the tidepools where he washed ashore. From where he stood pacing, you could make out the submerged rocks at the base of the headland cliffs, depending on the tides, and the yonder beach where he finally ended up.

I would come dripping and trudging up the foot path with my wetsuit peeled half-off and my surfboard under my arm—feeling naturally stoked if the winds were offshore and the waves were good—and Everett would be sitting/standing there almost every day with his walking cane and his Maui Jim sunglasses, whether the sun was shining yet or not, staring off into the distance at the scene of his fateful return from the sea. It was as if he was trying to figure something out, but couldn't get a handle on it. It was the same thing, and nearly the same time, every morning.

I know why I get up before the dawn, grab my surf gear, head to the beach, and summon the courage to jump headlong into a cold black ocean. For me it's the call of the Dawn Patrol—the time of the mission and the hunt—that twilight zone of shadows and mist that exists between the darkness of the night and the promise of a brightening sky. It's a righteous time, when me and my surf buddies are the first to hunt down, drop in, and carve our lines on epic barrels, which we might have only dreamed about the night before and have now come up to greet us. In classical rhetoric, it is a quest for *kairos time*: a passing instant when an opening appears which must be driven through with skill or force if success is to be achieved. For me, surfing is much like that.

What I didn't understand, at first, was why Everett Durant, the rhetorically wounded and washed-up songwriter, the survivor-with-morbidity of an unsuccessful drowning, was now as vigilant as the local dawn patrol at the break of day, and why he was always so watchful.

You could tell that Everett was focused intently on something far, far away—perhaps on another kind of world or another place in time—and yet he always appeared genuinely happy to see me, like he was thankful for the interruption.

We talked about angsty cool things that most people don't even consider. Like I would come crawling out of the water, totally stoked with positive energy if the waves were happening, and Everett would tell me *he sometimes feels like ol' Prometheus chained to a rock*, or he would

smile and nod with appreciation at my youthful exclamations of surf-drunk empowerment, and then he would remind me: “Oscar Wilde once wrote that *a dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world.*”

Its stuff like that that makes me stop and think. Am I too absorbed with the Dawn Patrol and my day-to-day routines to appreciate the creative contributions that we all take for granted: the attendant sufferings if not the plight of the visionaries, the inventors, the artists, the songwriters who brave a different kind of territory—one with far reaching social implications—knowing that the source of their creative inspiration is, often unavoidably, even darker than the dawn?

Here I am surfing, chasing every breaking wave, living moment-to-moment, riveted in the zone; and Everett in one sentence, in one word—*punishment*—reminds me that there is a wider world beyond the Sea-Cliffs surf zone that I am entirely unfamiliar with: a world of real pain and sickness and suffering that needs to be understood, and confronted, and counteracted in a form and format that will spread out like a wave and propagate until it reaches the ends of the earth. After thinking about it for some time, I finally got that part about *punishment*. Seeing new things before the rest of the world does: it means you get to know how it feels to be standing all alone; it means you get to know how it feels to suffer like ol’ Prometheus up on the rock; it means you get to know how it feels to be ahead of your own time. Like the man said, “*punishment.*”

One day, Everett asked me something out of the blue. “Did you happen to see anyone else near me, when you found me over there?” he asked, with his beat-poet hipster-professor voice, pointing with the tip of his cane. “Did you see anyone run away... or float away... or fly away?”

“No, man. It was just you, or what was left of you. You were pretty much out of it.”

“And I was definitely breathing when you found me?” Everett asked me rather seriously.

“Well, yeah. You were breathing for the most part,” I reminded him. “But before we go any further down this road, tell me again what you were trying to accomplish in the first place.”

“It’s something *only the lonely* could know.” he said matter-of-factly. “Now tell me, Travis, didn’t you see the impression made by a woman lying there beside me at any point in time?”

“All I saw was a lot of thrash marks,” I told him. “You must have been thrashing around for some time before you regained consciousness.”

“And you’re sure there was nothing else? You didn’t even catch a glimpse of anyone else?”

“There was nobody but you retching up seawater and a dying glow stick lying in the sand,” I assured him. And then something strange occurred to me, that I just had to ask: “Everett, were you trying to hold up a flare?”

“No, Travis, it’s not about me,” he said. “It’s about someone I’m still looking for.”

After that, we didn’t talk much about Everett’s near-death experience; nor did we talk about *guardian angels*—which I’m pretty sure is what Everett was referring to. You don’t have to be an adventurer like Ernest Shackleton the polar explorer, or Reinhold Messner the mountain climber to get to feel some kind of unseen presence in your life—some kind of *third man factor* or *guardian angel* that provides comfort or support during a strenuous or traumatic experience. There are a good number of credible solo sailors and shipwreck survivors who have reported experiencing the same kinds of imaginary friends. Every surfer who has ever faced the toothy end of a great white shark up close and personal in the predatory darkness just before dawn has simply got to have some kind of coping mechanism. I’d go as far as to say that anyone who knowingly dangles his or her extremities like shark-bait in the Pacific Ocean at twilight must have, at some point in time, either cultivated or conjured an inner *surf dude* that lends real or imagined support.

It just so happens that Everett Durant conjured up a *surf dudette*; and I say, “lucky him!”

After a while, when he had healed up enough, Everett Durant stopped showing up at the same cement bench every morning. Sometimes, I would see him hiking up the trails with his old-school college professor cane and his tragic desperado-limp, and I kind of missed talking with him. Other times, I would spot him from the water, where me and my buddies would be sitting, bobbing like ducks in our full wetsuits, waiting for a choice set to arrive. I could see Everett walking alone on the upper trails or, more-often, standing alone on the verge of the headland bluffs overlooking the tumultuous surf zone. Although it was too far from the point breaks where I was surfing to tell for sure, it appeared to me that he was still on the lookout for his misplaced *angel of the morning*.

. . .

The turning of the seasons at Bonaventure Pointe is marked by the summer vacations of the postmodern industrial society-at-large and the migrations of the Pacific grey whales. By the time autumn turns to winter around here, the tourists have largely departed the village—with its nostalgic nautical architecture that is reminiscent of a simpler time, and its carefree seaside lifestyle that is largely if not entirely based on the refreshing simplicity of recreational play—

returning back again to the real world where serious money is made, one's mettle is tested, and careers are up for grabs. For me, it means going back to school.

By the time autumn turns to winter around here, the migratory whales are passing close-by, heading southward on their journey to the warmer waters off the Baja Peninsula, using the massive headlands of Bonaventure Pointe for navigation.

It must have been sometime in December when I realized that Everett had stopped climbing the trails up to the headlands every morning. I had mixed feelings about not seeing him up there every day on the bluffs, looking out to some far-away place or time that exists only in his mind. On the one hand, just the sight of him standing there all alone on the headlands, with no one to greet him but a pale sun; it was too pathetic for words. I felt kind of sorry for him. My buddies and I would be toasty warm in our wetsuits, yet I can't imagine that Everett was feeling anything but cold and alone. On the other hand, it was strangely comforting to know that someone like Everett Durant was up there, standing watch. I sometimes wonder why that is.

I would see Everett in the lantern village from time to time, over at the coffee shop or outside the taco joint where my buddies and I would hang out. He was always friendly and charming to me, and yet there was that far-away look in his eyes that told me Everett was still living in some kind of limbo. I don't mean *Limbo* in the religious sense, but in a more general sense, with a broader definition: that of an unfavorable place or condition of neglect or oblivion to which persons or things are consigned when they are regarded as worn-out, useless, cast aside, out of date, forgotten, and/or absurd. At this mid-point in his life, which I imagine is around 35 years old, Everett should be happier, for a whole lot of reasons; but he was no longer living in *La La Land*, as far as I could tell: rather, he was apparently living in *Limbo Land*, a situation characterized by the distressing uncertainties of an *intermediate* or *transitional* state of mind.

As examples of *Limbo Land*, you might recall the uncanny sensations that you felt when you interrupted your marathon cross country road trip to buy coffee and pretzels at some rest stop in the middle of nowhere at two in the morning; or the time you found yourself all alone in the eerie yellow light of an unfamiliar laundromat, for whatever reason, sometime after three a.m. In these examples, the wee hours of the morning serve to intensify the transitory weirdness of the strange sensation that creeps up on you, alarming you, forcing you to look more carefully at everything around you, forcing you to ask yourself: "*Where am I, seriously?*"

You might recall the feelings of strangeness and confusion that you felt, for no apparent reason, like you're standing at a threshold waiting for something to happen, but you have no idea what that is. Some of these places, or *liminal spaces*, you might recognize as playgrounds after dark, abandoned buildings, parking lots, deep in a forest, bathrooms at concert venues, hospital waiting rooms, hospitals in general near midnight, school buildings during the summer break,

empty warehouses, empty stairwells, empty museums after hours, and even empty rooftops anytime around dawn or dusk. You never know exactly what places will have this *liminal quality* until you actually feel the eerie discomfort, the abject weirdness, the creeping anxiousness that comes upon you while waiting for something to happen....

Maybe you wake up in your bed the day after your graduation from high school or college, and you find yourself wondering: “*Who am I supposed to be now?*” Or perhaps you find yourself standing alone at the altar of your own wedding, and there is a complete stranger coming down the aisle towards you, and you find yourself fleeing from this terrible cloud of uncertainty along with the piercing admonition that asks: “*What the heck were you thinking?*” Or perhaps you find yourself at the threshold of some epic journey that is neither here nor there, and you ask yourself: “*Where am I going to?*” And you ask yourself: “*What am I supposed to do now?*”

That’s pretty much how I summed it up when I saw that Everett Durant still had that same far-away look in his eyes. Surely, he was standing at some kind of threshold: between one season of his life and the next, between the non-fatal wounding and the remote possibility for healing; between the previous ways Everett had of structuring his identity, his time, and his sense of community, and a new way of thinking that everyone in Bonaventure Pointe, including me, was hoping he would find.

Then one day Everett told me he was working on a new project as a form of therapy. It had something to do with the homeless situation. He said he was talking with the homeless people, living among them, breaking bread with them, and writing things down; asking these transients to say how they feel about life in general, or to say how they feel about being social outcasts in particular. Apparently, Everett was inviting the homeless people that migrate like the great grey whales past Bonaventure Pointe every year to be his collaborators for a new book of post-beat poetry he was actively compiling. Talk about giving a voice to the post-modernly disenchanting.

When it came to immersion journalism, Everett Durant went deep, about as Gonzo as one can go. He dropped below the radar and disappeared for the better part of a year. I actually tried to find him several times, but he wasn’t to be found at the beach, or the headlands, or the harbor, or even his home in the village, as far as I could tell. He just disappeared into the mist.

The next time I saw Everett—about a year later in the village coffee shop—he was wearing conspicuous raggedy clothes, a thick boho headband, a weathered vagabond’s backpack, and he was sporting a full, appallingly untrimmed beard. I recognized him right away, though, by the distinctive sound of his off-beat Poet’s voice and the familiar glint of his Maui Jim sunglasses.

“Howdy Travis; hey surf dudes,” he said, with a smile that was badly in need of a dentist.

“Howdy yourself, stranger,” I shrugged, on account of his leaving without saying goodbye.

“Ah, don’t be that way, Travis; you’re still my hero...” he told me, “and I’m grateful you were there to help me.... Besides, it was good for me, healthy even, to get away for a while.”

“What brings you back to our humble point break,” I asked, sounding surprisingly sarcastic, if I do say so myself.

“I’ve come back to *The Pointe* this winter to compile my notes—along with the prose and free verses of my many collaborators—into something really special,” he said as he shifted the Maui Jim sunglasses up to the level of the headband. Everett’s eyes sparkled brightly as he spoke: it was as though the time at present was fleeting and he was trying to share the very gist, if not the whole, of some vital and valuable collection of historical artifacts with me, my surf buddies, and everyone else who happened to be in the coffee shop—before it was too late....

Everett Durant placed his vagabond backpack on a large table where we were sitting, and he opened the cinch slowly, theatrically, *as if a wild animal* was somehow constrained inside of it. Everett widened the opening of the satchel a little bit more; and then, when he was certain that all of us local surf dudes, etc., were riveted to the spot, he pulled out a large well-worn leather-bound notebook that looked like it must have been Dante’s original travel journal documenting the author’s memorable trip to hell and back, under the influence of various escorts.

Everett paged theatrically through the journal, paused at certain places, and read selected passages out loud as though he were reading revered holy passages translated from a sacred text. He explained to everyone present that the next important step for him, as a poet, was to compile and compress the raw language and colorful expressions of his myriad street-collaborators into a stream of lyrical prose that sparks and sparkles as it naturally flows like molten lava until the shared meanings gradually solidify into a series of poems and even songs of the disenchanting.

It sounded like a lot of work, if you ask me; but the way Everett read the spontaneous sing-song utterances of the homeless poetics aloud as he paced the floor with his grungy street-person attire, his scruffy mega-beard, and his tragic desperado-limp: we all thought it was totally cool.

And so did the *social media* and the *local press*, which managed to repair Everett’s image in the village to some extent. The next thing anyone knew, there were major publishing offers for the *Vagabond Post-Beat Poetry Book*, followed by a surge of fundraising efforts, while new humanitarian grants were announced in a furor of philanthropy. Local politicians came to bask in the usual fifteen minutes of limelight, speeches were given, and minor celebrities came to call. And that’s when Everett Durant first met Beatrice Rutherford, otherwise known as *the heiress*.

The heiress, as she is entitled, is the great granddaughter of the original developer of the nautical village concept for Bonaventure Pointe, way back in the 1920s. Back then, the nautical village was conceived and laid out as an upscale seaside getaway designed primarily with the recreation of the beautiful people and the well-to-do of Hollywood-land in mind. Historically, the master-planned community project went bankrupt, along with everything else in the financial crush of the Great Depression; however, some of the ambitious development scheme, including the quaint lantern village layout and the protected yacht harbor, would eventually emerge from the ashes in post-modern times as the idyllic nautical village of Bonaventure Pointe.

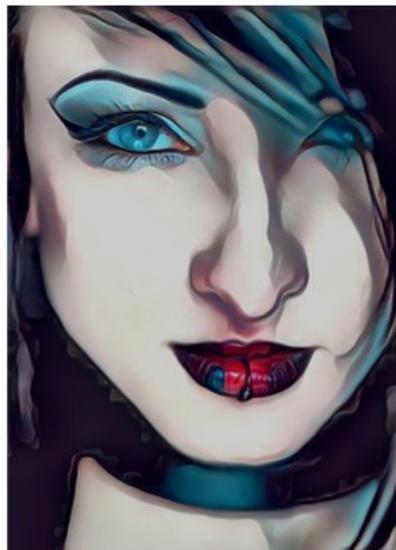
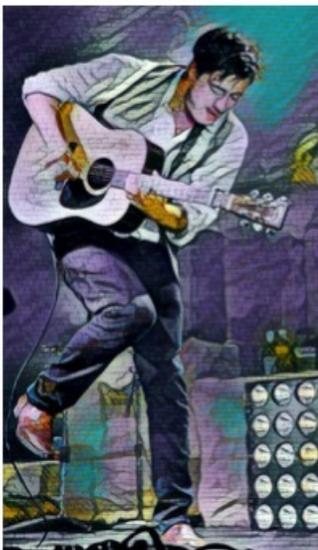
The way I heard about it, Beatrice Rutherford called up Everett Durant personally one evening, and asked for him to meet her alone out on the undeveloped headland bluffs: which Beatrice happened to own outright on account of her inheritance, and which Everett knew quite well because it happened to be his lonesome lookout post at one point in the story.

I should mention that the disposition of the headland bluffs was the subject of considerable controversy at the time. According to the village *scuttlebutt* (a nautical term akin to gossip around the office water cooler), there was a major push going on among the civic leaders to complete the development of the original 1920's plans for Bonaventure Pointe. The original plans had included the erection of a working lighthouse on the farthest reaches and a hotel and visitor's center on the plateaus of the headland bluffs. And yet, after all these years, there was no consensus agreement as to the proper size, scale, the architectural designs, or even the cultural socio-political function of any new construction on the land, which was still privately held.

Through the years various factions and special interests lay siege to the headland bluffs: a profusion of officious petitions, superfluous surveys, preposterous public relations campaigns, and heated local elections were held—none of which accomplished anything. In terms of the lighthouse concept, there were those who opted for nostalgia: that is, familiarity of form over function; others opted for ultra-modernism, energy efficiency, and/or sustainability as a prime directive. And then, when it came to the nature and scale of a new seaside hotel complex and/or a visitor center that could adequately accommodate the special needs of the rich, the poor, the young, the old, the retirees, the émigrés, the disadvantaged, the recreating, the medicating, the rehabilitating, and/or the homeless in suitable style, there were more competing factions than one might imagine.

I guess I'll have to leave it there, because that's all I know about Everett Durant's first meeting with Beatrice, the heiress, that I can say for sure.

End Chapter 3



Chapter 4

It was about six o'clock in the evening, mid-June; the golden eye of the sun was descending ever-so-slowly to the vanishing edge of the Pacific Ocean, setting the sea and sky ablaze with a glowing palette brushed broadly with unearthly hues. Viewed from the elevated headlands of Bonaventure Pointe, the splendor of the setting sun appeared as a *Saffron Boulevard*, brightly daubed with wavy brush strokes, drawn thereupon the reflective surfaces of a gloaming sea.

The profusion of intensely illuminated vistas on the horizon would soon darken with the sunset, changing from the flaming crimson flourishes of a ghastly open wound—too intense for human eyes to view—elaborating thereafter into purple-grey velvet curtains of a slowly healing bruise. The continuous chorus of fresh sea breezes passing over the elevated headlands this particular summer evening was strangely mild, almost hushed.

Everett Durant, the watchful wayfarer, was leaning slightly forward, seated squarely on a weather-beaten wooden bench perched at the crest of the headland's nature trail, within an elevated clearing surrounded by coastal grasses and low-lying chaparral. He was marking time with music, waiting for the so-called *heiress* to arrive. Everett was wearing stylish black jeans over brown boots; he was wearing a gray leather vest over a clean white shirt. He was neat, clean, shaved, and sober, and he did not appear to be at all self-conscious about it. Everett was sitting alone strumming chords, somewhat rhythmically, on the vibrating strings of an acoustic guitar—fingering, at times, a series of melodic notes—while uttering bits and pieces of what sounded like the first prospective verses of an unwritten song early in the making. There was no other musical accompaniment, and there was no audience, with the exception of a small colony of seagulls that found either the musical sounds or the singer/songwriter to be of general interest.

A black limousine pulled slowly into the parking lot cul-de-sac that marks the upper limit of a scenic drive leading from the boat harbor at sea-level to the precipitous heights of the headland bluffs. Two doors slowly opened. Out-stepped a uniformed driver and a well-dressed bodyguard wearing a black suit and tie. The bodyguard opened the passenger door and held it open.

Out stepped Beatrice Rutherford—an astonishingly cultivated woman with tinted black hair wearing a black form-fitting designer dress with glitter lace bodice, a black hooded sweatshirt, and canvas low-top sneakers. The decorous woman arose effortlessly up and out of the limousine with the muscular gracefulness of a Russian prima ballerina; she proceeded to sashay up the rustic footpath that leads along the slopes of the headland bluffs to the clearing where Everett Durant was picking and strumming. The driver and the bodyguard remained motionless, standing silently like two gargoyles next to the limousine; until the graceful heiress sashayed beyond their direct line of sight. Then they climbed back inside the stately limo.

When Beatrice rounded the crest of the headland bluffs, the colony of seagulls in attendance suddenly took flight in a fulminating commotion of wings and feathers, alerting Everett Durant to the approach of his *celebrated date* for the evening. Everett stood, turned, and swung the acoustic guitar onto his back by its leather strap; he took three courteous steps forward to greet the approaching heiress.

“I see the seabirds love you,” announced Beatrice, presenting herself with the elegant bow and courtesy of a ballet *Grand Révérence*.... “And if I knew nothing else but that about you, Everett Durant, that would be enough for me,” she said smiling, staring deeply into his eyes.

“I guess it’ll have to be, your heiress... I mean, Miss Rutherford,” he said, stumbling for words. He was taken aback by such declarative diction along with the astonishingly graceful dance-like movements of this curiously cultivated woman, who was known far and wide as *the heiress*—that being, the formidable henchperson wielding substantial hardcore financial assets. And yet this elevated phraseology and this lissome body language that confronted him now with such unanticipated refinement would more likely appertain to the sublime and artistically gifted. “Unfortunately, heiress, most of the rumors you’ve probably heard about me are true,” Everett admitted, bowing at the waist while steadying the guitar still slung behind him. He reached out and received the assuring warmth of her hand; he pressed it politely. Beatrice did not let go.

“Please, Everett, call me Beatrice,” she entreated. “For goodness sake, I already know too much about you and your adventures to judge you anything but *brave*,” she said, placing her free hand lightly, almost tenderly, on Everett’s re-located shoulder. “But then, grandiose dreams and suicides do tend to run in my family,” Beatrice said, laughing nervously, as if she was suddenly startled by the inescapable nuance of her own gallows humor.

“I’m really sorry to hear that, Beatrice,” said Everett sympathetically. “Nevertheless, I am pleased to finally meet the *celebrated heiress* in person,” he declared. “Although I do not envy your position in fending-off the latest Lighthouse Hotel Theme-Park development controversy.” Everett took a polite half-step back and slid the fingers of his hands into the back pockets of his black jeans. The reflective lenses of his Maui Jim sunglasses mirrored the wider world.

Everett studied the elegant heiress not-so-discretely from head to toe. He figured that she was somewhere between thirty-something and forty-ish, although Beatrice appeared to have a certain lithe and ageless quality about her. He noticed that her hair color was not simply dyed black, but was artistically streaked with stylish highlights of scarlet and purple that stood out distinctively in the glint of the setting sun. Her pleasing facial features and gestures, enhanced by the flickering lights in her eyes were, in a word, captivating. Her classical dancer’s body, arrayed in that black form-fitting designer dress, glitter lace bodice, and cropped zip-up hoodie, was an appealing a display of feminine perfection that might *still* inspire new sculptures to be carved in marble, not to mention ardent verses and songs of pure admiration. The exquisite shape of her legs was that of a much younger woman: the slim smooth thighs, the well-defined hamstrings, the high, round seat were clearly the legs of a dancer.

Everett stared at the black Converse all-star sneakers Beatrice was wearing; they reminded him of the *Post-Punk / Emo genre*—not to be confused with the *Punk / Goth genre*, which also prefers to dress in basic black, but is more typically angry than sad, and is more closely related to

gothic horror themes of the Victorian period of history. Judging from the neon purple laces of her Converse all-star sneakers, Everett surmised that these were definitely an indication of *Emo-style* leanings, with a stylish touch of *Scene (Emo-hipster)* or *Scenester ethos*, which tends to be less a musical preference and more of a fashion statement. Taking all his in, Everett moved his gaze slowly up from the telltale sneakers of the strangely fashionable women, following the elegant lines and shapes of her legs, to her form-fitting designer dress with its expressive glitter lace bodice, to her approving smile, back to the level of her eyes.

“I like your style, Beatrice, but I have to ask: why did you choose this particular time and place to meet me. . . . And what, if I may be so bold, is the intended purpose of our meeting?”

Beatrice started to respond, but she seemed hesitant. She covered her mouth with her hand. She turned her head slightly sideways, and closed her eyes, as though she was waiting for a troubling stir or swarm of extremely negative emotions to pass. Her eyes were wet when she opened them again.

Noticing her obvious distress, Everett softened his tone: “Whenever you’re ready to tell me, that is. . . .” Everett slid the leather guitar strap off of his shoulder and leaned the acoustic six-string up against the backrest of the old weathered bench anchored firmly in the ground, facing due west, near the very brink of the headland bluffs. He politely escorted Beatrice to the bench; Everett sat down beside her, overlooking the silent pageantry of an acutely setting sun.

“I really don’t know where to begin, Everett, or even *how* to begin. . . . Much of this is a mystery, even to me. I’m not a person who is enamored with fanciful thoughts. I am not a poet, like you, Everett. . . . but I am as much a victim of tragic circumstance as you are. Each of us are more victim than ruler of our individual fates. And we have more in common than you know.”

“Uhhhh, okay, if you say so, Beatrice,” said Everett, incredulously. “I get it, you’re an heiress, and not a poet; but could you please try and be a little less vague with me on our *first date*. . . a little less philosophical. . . and perhaps just a tad more *descriptive*?”

“I can’t possibly explain everything you need to know just like *That!*” Beatrice exclaimed, snapping her fingers loudly. But I can tell you that this has something to do with the symbolism of loud brassy instruments and the meaning of locusts—which are not simply all-consuming locusts, but locusts that have managed to acquire the power of scorpions: that is, the power to sting. . . to do harm. . . to inflict pain and suffering!” she cautioned, pleading in a breathless rush.

“Okay, Beatrice. I think I’m getting the picture. . . . But maybe you could try for a simpler explanation of your intended purpose: one that is a little bit more *concrete*?”

Beatrice sighed deeply, with a brief flutter of frustration. “I can’t seem to explain it adequately in my own words, but perhaps I can share a portion of the relevant *folklore* with you,” she said as she pulled a folded piece of parchment from the pocket of her hoodie, opened it up slowly on her lap. Beatrice tipped the printed surface of the parchment slightly downward to catch the illuminating rays of the setting sun as she read these prophetic words out loud: “*There will be times like these—(referring to the stinging locusts)—when the suffering and tormented will seek death, and shall not find it; they will desire to die, but death will flee from them.*”

Everett stood up haltingly as Beatrice completed these ominous, nearly-fatal lines. He rested his foot on the edge of the wood bench seat as he turned to face Beatrice, somewhat bewildered.

“Did you invite me here to this *lofty place* of yours to mock me, Beatrice?” Everett shifted his boot off the bench seat and dug the toe of his boot aimlessly into the crust of the dry barren ground, looking down at the earthen scar he was making. He shook his head sideways in a display of disappointment, and then he bent down and began to place the acoustic guitar back in its case, as though he were intending to leave. He paused and stepped forward, facing the heiress. “I am fully aware of my own desperate folly, Beatrice. I don’t need a bleeding literary allusion... I don’t need a full-blown biblical revelation to twist the knife and pour salt in my wounds!”

“I didn’t come here to mock you, Everett Durant!” Beatrice spoke emphatically. “Nor to upset you in any way.... Far from it, dear poet! Whether you realize it or not, you are greatly admired... even envied... by people in high places, I should add.” Beatrice remained seated on the bench, and yet she stretched out her arms one by one and gracefully flexed her torso side to side in the practiced manner of a classical ballet dancer performing a preliminary *port de bras*. “Whether you realize it or not, Everett, you are now a part of the history of this *lofty place*, as you poetically refer to it. And you are now as much a part of this history as I am,” she affirmed.

“Then what’s with these redundant revelations, Miss. Beatrice? And what does any of this archaic mumbo jumbo have to do with the likes of me?”

Everett clipped the latches on the guitar case closed, flipped the case onto its side by the handle, and left it standing there. He returned to the front of the wooden bench, where he stood flat-footed, completely baffled by the incongruence of the imagined brutish persona of a tycoon-hardened heiress and the fine-spun gossamer countenance and bearing of the woman seated before him. Moreover, he was troubled by the distressing implications of this dire prophesy she now held folded in her hands. “Well!” he insisted, waiting impatiently for Beatrice to answer.

“I invited you here tonight to share a deeply personal secret with you, Everett,” she began. “There is an inexplicable mystery about this place that haunts me as much as it does you... and I am hoping that we might find some way to work together... to help each other find some real

answers... without the whole world watching us, and casting aspersions on our lofty mission!" Beatrice reached out and captured Everett's hands and held them tightly as she spoke. "I want to assure you Everett, that we are both on the same side of this high drama that people with pure hearts, sad hearts, broken hearts, downtrodden hearts, and desperately disconsolate hearts are forever drowning in, it seems to me."

"How are we on the same side of this *hellish drama* that is my real life, Beatrice? How are we on the same side of this *hellish sorrow* that I have to struggle and contend with every day?"

"Because both of us have seen *her*, Everett... Both of us have witnessed her saving grace; and you of all people should know intuitively, if not instinctively, what that means," she said.

Everett nearly swooned with the dizzying remembrance of that deep French-style kiss that somehow reignited his soul; and yet it had left him all alone again, languishing on the chains of this unrequited love—which he could neither hold on tightly to, nor disregard entirely for the sake of his own sanity. Everett's knees buckled; he willingly surrendered to the gentle pull of Beatrice's hands that guided him to be seated, this time more closely, and intimately, beside her.

"How could you possibly know this?" he asked her outright, removing his sunglasses.

"It's called *due diligence*, Everett, and it informs me of the most amazing particulars."

"I still don't get what you're trying to tell me, Beatrice," he said, squinting against the glare of the sunset. He turned his face to the heiress and was pleasantly distracted by the scintillating facets of sparkle and light reflecting in her champagne eyes—framed by an artful application of smoky eye shadow, thick black eyeliner, and lush eyelash-lengthening mascara. Everett averted his gaze from her emotionally expressive eyes to the soft and lovely contours of her otherwise pale and flawless complexion. Her appealing lips were partly opened: burnished by the black and cherry highlights of a multicolored gloss, and pierced through the ripening fullness of the lower lip by a distinctive vertical labret piercing known affectionately as an *angel kiss*.

Everett lingered in a state of confusion beside this strangely enchanting heiress until he sufficiently gathered his thoughts. "Maybe, for the sake of argument, I can try and imagine what mysterious phantoms you might be referring to, Miss Beatrice," he acquiesced. "But any actual memories beyond my immediate drowning... any actual meaning that this mysterious apparition might have for me now, in the real world, in my post-apocalyptic mindset—Any such significance has escaped me!"

"That's not entirely true, Everett, and I think you must realize that on some level."

“How so?” responded the washed-up songwriter, questioning the depth of her insights.

“It is written on every page of the *Vagabond Post-Beat Poetry Book* you published,” she reminded him. “You might think you were breaking free and getting away from it all. You might think you were simply escaping from the tepid tide pool of your own despair. But *in reality*, you were still *actively fighting in the trenches of human suffering*, attempting to use your educated voice to help the emotionally crippled, the metaphysically infirmed, and the homeless, after all. You see, Everett, my considerable earthly inheritance has forced me to become an astute judge of character. There are simply too many people that are wanting and too few deserving for me to be arbitrary in my charity—in my philanthropy. You, dear poet, are among the most deserving.”

“Deserving of what, your heiress? Deserving of mercy, deserving of assistance, deserving of love regardless of fate, deserving of a second chance to live alone, to drown alone, to die alone, yet again? Am I deserving of a miracle, Miss Beatrice? ... am I deserving of a helping hand-out to ease someone’s conscience... am I deserving of recognition, even though my best work has always been submerged behind the scenes? Am I deserving of any kindness or consideration, when I feel nothing but a huge debt to those who have lived their lives more heroically than I have on the proscenium stage of life and have thereby died more nobly than I have ever lived?”

“Ah, there it is,” she said. “You’ve simply got to let go of that self-effacing survivor guilt, Everett! The burden of debt that you feel so acutely at times is simply a natural reaction to the saving grace you received when you were *Blessed by the appurtenance of an Angel!* And you of all people should know intuitively, if not instinctively, what that means,” she repeated the phrase.

“Look Beatrice, I assume you mean well. But I am not the only traveler who feels he has not repaid some kind of debt. I know I’ve been searching for a guiding light to follow, again, but it always takes me back to that miserable night of missing persons, disembodied angels, and deep passionate life-affirming soul kisses that have no basis in reality. When I think about all that had already been accomplished: all that was tragically lost forever, it’s just too real for me to ignore. Sometimes, it gets too depressing for me to even bear.” Everett shuttered with a raw quaking dread, a panicked flashback to his worst nightmare; he lowered his head as to shield his face.

Observing this soulful expression of grief, Beatrice reached out and gently clasped Everett’s downcast chin, encouraging him to lift his face upwards into the warm, softening glow, as though she were encouraging him to lift his gaze beyond mere appearances of a setting sun.

The trace of a tear appeared on Everett’s cheek, just below the frame of his sunglasses, extending slowly downwards. “It’s like we had it all... and then most... then some... and now none of everything we ever wanted,” he lamented. “Haunted by the ghost of Stella, I can’t seem to find my way back into the waking world that we once shared: I can’t go back to those shining

times, when we made the kinds of music that mattered, with meaningful repercussions. I can't go back-in-time and change that fateful curve in the road where everything veered and accelerated out of control and we were forever parted. I don't know what I'm supposed to do; I can't think of any practical plan of thought nor action that could take me *back to the night we met.*"

"And that's where I think... where I know... that I can help you, Everett Durant," she said.

Beatrice reached into the pocket of her hoodie, withdrew a cell phone, and proceeded to tap the glass panel with both thumbs in the prodigious manner of texting. Within two minutes, the limo driver and the bodyguard silently appeared at the clearing. The limo driver placed a wicker picnic basket on the seat of the old wooden bench; the bodyguard draped a plaid woolen blanket on the backrest next to the heiress. They came and they went without saying a word. The sun dipped below the horizon.

"This sure is a nice bistro, Beatrice," said Everett examining the orderly contents of the picnic basket, which included a loaf of French bread, a variety of seedless grapes, an assortment of sliced cheeses, and a bottle of California chardonnay. "But I'm still not sure what we have to celebrate, exactly; and I'm still not at all certain how we can help each other, as you say we can."

"You can help *me* by helping to honor the memory of a young girl who either jumped or may have fallen from these very cliffs one dreadful night not so long ago," she said bluntly.

This unanticipated announcement was attended by a sudden chill that swept across the headland chaparral in the manner of a restless breeze, rustling the woody shrubs and flattening the grasses as it swirled around the weathered bench where the poet and the heiress were seated.

Sensing the disturbance, Beatrice paused momentarily, and then she proceeded to refill Everett's empty goblet with a fresh dollop of California chardonnay. "And, if you would agree to do this selfless task for me, Everett Durant, I will use my considerable resources to help you in every possible way to revisit that *special time and place* you mentioned."

"I was speaking figuratively, on my part, Beatrice," he said, admiring the *legs* of the wine.

"I wasn't," she replied as the delightfully engaging span of her lips widened into a smile.

The evening twilight slowly dimmed by degrees, fading from the *golden hour* of soft diffuse skylight that is highly favored by landscape photographers into a somber shadow-less dusk that the French refer to as *l'heure bleue*, a time when the diminishing twilight begins to take on a predominantly bluish hue. It is a waning time when the sky's spectral luminosity draws artists out of their studios to study, perchance to capture the evanescent remains of the day on canvas.

Famous for its romantic connotations, particularly in the arts, this fading hour of bluish crepuscular twilight is often a time of confusion and mystery; it is a time when it is nearly impossible to determine with any certainty where and whether one is situated nearer to the perspicuous aspects of the day or nearer to the perspicuous aspects of the night.

Observing these somber tinctures of the twilight deepen by the minute, and recalling all his prior cold, fruitless searches on these barren headland bluffs, Everett felt an ominous shiver of trepidation run up and down the full length his spine. “Isn’t this the kind of bleak and mournful out-of-the-way place where one is expected to *abandon all hope*?” he asked Beatrice, the heiress.

“No, Everett. That would be the *Vestibule of Hell*, which is reserved for the anguished screams of the uncommitted: those who took no sides in life, those who made no valiant stands, no meaningful contributions to the arts nor the sciences; you know, the cowards, the poseurs, the opportunists, the colluders, the imposters, all those whom are merely concerned with either enriching or aggrandizing themselves.... And that would certainly not be you, dear poet.”

“Look, Beatrice, I’m still not at all clear why you’re even meeting me here tonight. Who, may I ask, is this young girl who might have slipped, but supposedly jumped off these sea cliffs to her death?” Everett stood up and started toward the verge to look down, but he hesitated....

“Death did not come to her immediately, Everett.... I mean, she didn’t die right away.”

“What? What are you saying, Beatrice?” he said, returning to the bench beside the heiress.

“She didn’t die immediately from the fall, Everett, although she should have, poor thing.”

“How do you know this poor young girl survived the impact of such a fall?”

“She managed to live long enough to leave a distinctive impression in the sand where she fell, Everett. And if I am not mistaken—in my *due diligence* concerning your own drowning experience—I suspect that you of all people might recognize the exacting impressions of the angelic figure that she made in the sand before her artistic spirit departed this place for good.”

Everett was stunned by the ramifications of this new information, in relation to his own *sand angel* experience, but he kept his cool this time. “Wow, this sure is a slippery slope we’re on, Beatrice—may I offer you some seedless grapes?”

“You may.”

“And may I assume that this young girl who stumbled off the cliff that night is related to you in some way, Miss Beatrice? May I further assume this unfortunate young girl child is your *big secret*?”

“You may, and it is,” Beatrice admitted.

“And you want me to help you honor her memory, in some thoughtful and artistic way, without exposing your family’s dirty laundry to the glaring spotlights and invasive tabloids of Hollywood-land?”

“I wouldn’t put it exactly that way, Everett,” said Beatrice, munching on a seedless grape.

“Exactly how would you put it then?”

“I want to ask you... I want to empower you to take over the Headland Development Project, Everett. I am just too close to the contentious political situation; and there is too much conflicting emotion involved and too much family history involved for me to make a clear-headed business-like decision befitting the heiress and steward of such a high-value property.”

“Look, Beatrice. Why don’t you just donate a new wing to a local children’s hospital, or a psychology building at a community college, or even a medical library at any given university, to honor the life and death this poor unfortunate girl-child—whoever she is... or was.”

“Oh, Everett, you have no idea how hard it is for a *true philanthropist* to work with the college and university systems in this postmodern day and age. No matter how well-intended the prospective donor, no matter how well-intended the donation, it is bound to get caught up in the generalized pilfering of grants, charitable funds, and intellectual property rights that has plagued both universities and non-profit institutions in postmodern times and has perverted the mission of academic institutions and medical research hospitals, in favor of clandestine corporate interests, profiteering, and unseemly business dealings that require extreme due diligence to expose.”

“I’m no fan of the University system, Beatrice, having spent some time slumming in the Humanities Department.... But isn’t academic compliance the responsibility of the *trustees*, when it comes to preventing and correcting such heinous conflicts of interest?” he asked.

“Heavens: No! I happen to know far too many university trustees and charitable board members, for that matter, to think for a moment that they aren’t taking every advantage of their trusted positions to make strategic alignments for nefarious purposes: aligning their personal business interests with university business to profit from the crony capitalism, while making timely donations every so often so that the university will turn a blind eye to the scams. Sadly,

Everett, the dullest and dreariest of university trustees are often among the worst offenders—pilfering vital faculty rights under the protective cover of a donation and a smoke-filled room.”

“Yikes, it sounds a lot like the music business to me! I’m glad I’m no longer a part of it!” Everett placed a thick slice of Gruyere cheese between two thick slices of French bread, and he took a bite of the sandwich. “So, let me get this straight, Beatrice: If the measly *Vestibule of Hell* is reserved for the anguished screams of the uncommitted, I’m almost afraid to imagine what horrors might be in store for *university trustees* and charitable board members who have actually betrayed the mission and purpose of the very institutions they were entrusted to faithfully serve.”

“Oh, yes, Everett! I completely agree with your thinking! *Treachery* is much worse than simply being uncommitted! Now let me see: if I recall correctly, the frauds and their counselors would be relegated to the *Eighth Circle of Hell*. However, in this case of crony capitalists, who knowingly perverted the missions of children’s hospitals and universities: those rich fools might actually make it as far as the *Ninth Circle of Hell*, where all sorts of traitors are cruelly exposed.”

“I’m impressed, Beatrice. You sure know your way around some unsavory places.”

“Sadly, yes—it comes with my being an heiress, Everett. It reminds me what *not to do*.”

“Okay, heiress, I see the picture you’re trying to paint for me. . . I hear you when you tell me, in no uncertain terms, that there aren’t too many people you can trust. I understand, though not completely, why you would want to honor the life and times of this young girl who fell and then died at the bottom of these sea cliffs. Moreover, I fully appreciate the ideal of a tasteful and artistic memorial that reflects a young person’s aspirations—as opposed to approving any of the grotesquely planned metro-urban development projects, presently on tap, that will ultimately embody all the bells and whistles and distorted-realities of yet another surrealistic theme park!”

“That’s it exactly, Everett. And that’s why you are the perfect person. I couldn’t possibly think of anyone better equipped than a *tragic poet* to understand the negative emotions of a dying child well enough to translate these negative emotions and behaviors into something positive.”

“And by positive I assume you mean something *other than* any of the past-or-present plans to commercially develop this lofty place of yours,” he said thoughtfully.

Everett unfolded the woolen blanket and spread a measure of its length over Beatrice’s shoulders with a courteous and protective extension of his arm. Beatrice smiled and nodded her permission, as Everett added his own broad shoulders to the enveloping span of the coverlet.

“Yes, Everett, this lofty place,” she affirmed, leaning in to him slightly, allowing her appealing feminine head to rest gracefully upon Everett’s re-located shoulder. Beatrice tilted her face upward to meet Everett’s gaze and she said, “According to esteemed nautical experts who have sailed far and wide in times gone by, these barren headlands of Bonaventure Pointe might possibly be the most romantic of all dramatic settings on the entire California coast.”

“Judging by the unfamiliar way you make me feel tonight, Beatrice, I am inclined to agree.” Everett studied the thin inviting curve of her silver lip ring in the blueness of the twilight, and he felt something stir within him. And yet as much as Everett Durant would love to lose himself in the rarified splendor of this one inviting *angel kiss* that was right there waiting to happen... he found himself... *borne back ceaselessly into the past* ... at which point he thought better of it.

“I’m not sure I could be trusted with such an important task, heiress,” he said. “Look, Miss Rutherford, I know from my own personal experiences that I shouldn’t be trusted.... Someone like me, who says what he feels, and willfully does what he thinks he must, while wearing his heart on his shirt sleeve, should not be put in a position of social responsibility!”

“And why is that?” she asked. “I trust my intuition: you are the perfect someone.”

“Seriously, Beatrice: I’m not the one you want! You say you’re looking for someone who is never weak, but always strong; someone you can depend upon to be right and never wrong; someone who clings to life and nothing more. But that ain’t me, Beatrice. I’m not the one you’re looking for. Maybe you should just let them build the lighthouse, the hotels, and the theme park.”

“No Everett! No! No! No! You don’t understand!” declared Beatrice as she turned defiantly to face the tragic poet with tears welling in her eyes; she began to pound her fists pleadingly against his chest, exclaiming: “She was so young ... she was so beautiful ... she was so intelligent, so delightfully artistic, so girlishly wild... I know she was brimming with unbridled passions and youthful romantic dreams... and she had her whole life ahead of her!”

“If you feel that strongly about this, Beatrice....” Everett spoke softly, gently grasping the wrists of her trembling hands and holding them tenderly, like two frightened kittens, against his chest. “And you really want to empower someone like me—of all people—to help you out of this jam...?”

“I do,” the heiress softly said.

Everett steeled himself against a flood of compassion, against his own woebegone world, and looked deeply into her eyes: “Then the best advice I can give you—in keeping with your stated mission, of course—is to leave these lofty headlands *just as they are! Right here! Right*

Now! My best recommendation would be to take the legal steps to ensure that these beatifically barren headlands will always be just as wild and lofty and compelling as *she* found them to be!”

“Yes! yes, yes, yes, that’s exactly *it!*” Beatrice said, suddenly smiling. The heiress turned gracefully around-and-away from Everett Durant in a nifty bench-side *pirouette*—slowly, theatrically, tactfully drawing the tragic poet’s empty hands, and thus his empty arms, along the lovely contours of her glitter lace bodice, around the exquisite slimness of her ballet dancer’s waist—as she turned and leaned delicately back upon the poet, nestling tenderly in his arms. “Thank you, Everett,” the heiress whispered softly, closing her eyes, her body reclining, her thoughts drifting far, far away, “I know she would like that.” she affirmed.

The first of many evening stars appeared in the western sky.



Chapter 5

Jack Raulston awoke from a deep satisfying sleep to the harsh, “Kee-oh, kee, kee, kee, kee, kee, keo, keo” calls of a raucous seagull stationed on an exposed post on the back porch of his nautical captain’s house overlooking the harbor town. Beside him, all but lost among the pleasing plethora of Egyptian cotton sheeting, the nearly naked figure of a young woman lay sleeping, softly heaving with the tranquil in and out associated with her breathing.

Captain Jack slipped out of bed cautiously, without disturbing the sleeping woman. He ran his weathered hands through a disorderly mop of salty grey hair, stretched his arms out wide, and donned a vintage navy-blue bathrobe. He casually slid his feet, one-by-one, into the worn leather arches of a pair of old house slippers. He crowned the weathered thatch of his head with the peaked and gold-braided cover of a nautical captain’s hat with practiced nonchalance.

Captain Jack shuffled quietly across the bedroom floor; he stood briefly in front of a free-standing mirror that had been strategically oriented to reflect any images of lovemaking between the compliant layers of the Egyptian cotton sheets that might have come to light the night before. He looked critically at his own image in the mirror: in many ways, he looked like a gnarly ancient twisted stump of driftwood that has weathered badly over time; in many ways, he felt that he could and should, at this particular stage of his life, be doing something other than simply watching whales and dolphins, smuggling contraband, and shacking-up with young, beautiful, concupiscent marine biology graduate students overflowing with ambition, milk, and honey.

But then again, a more penetrating captain's squint into the reliable reflections of the bedside mirror—moving from one's own displeasingly aged and grizzled countenance to the appealing figure of a nearly naked woman sleeping peacefully among the soft billowing sheets and pillows of one's nautical captain's bed—this subtle shift in perspective enabled Captain Jack Raulston to waylay the undue harshness of any such self-defeating criticisms, allowing him to accept the wholeness of the world he sees, allowing him to go with the flow.

Captain Jack was standing in the galley waiting for the coffee to percolate and the toaster with bagel slices in it to *pop*, when there was a knock on the door. It was Julian Montgomery, carrying his skateboard.

"Hey Jack. I see you've still got your lounge lizard uniform on—must have been another good night for you." he joked, suppressing a heartier laugh. "Is Jessica still here?" he whispered.

"Yeah, yeah, she's still sleeping," said the captain.... "Let's talk outside."

Captain Jack poured two mugs of piping hot coffee and slid the bagel slices onto a plate with crème cheese and strawberry jelly. They carried the semblance of a breakfast outside, beyond a battery of windows that look out over the harbor, to a porch with a picnic-style bench.

"Have you told her yet?" asked Monty.

"I didn't have to... she told me. Well, she sort-of told me that she's making other plans."

"No shit? She told you first? That's pretty *ballsy*, if you pardon my French."

"We both knew the score before we started, Monty. And now she's graduating, and she's moving on with her life. It was only a matter of time for me and her to realize what's what."

"It's a dangerous game you're playing, Captain Jack," he said, sipping coffee. "Come the end of every dreaded graduation class you stand with your apprentice like two gunfighters at

high noon, each one struggling to hold off until the very last moment, but each knowing—when it comes to love—you either learn to dodge bullets, like in virtual reality, or you *learn how to shoot that somebody who outdrew ya.*”

The captain leaned in whispering: “So, in your mind, you’re saying Jessica outdrew me?”

“She outdrew you, dude.”

A cloud of realization creased the captain’s brow. “And what does that make me?”

“Human,” nodded Monty flatly.

“Way it is, I guess” agreed the captain, slowly nursing his coffee, suddenly lost in thought.

Monty meticulously layered crème cheese and jelly onto a bagel slice. A lone seagull cried.

“You know, Jack, it’s different for me. I fall head over heels in love from the get-go! Fearing neither death nor dismemberment, I dive headlong off the cliff and into the arms of the most beautiful woman who will have me—and in this life, it happens to be Kristin—and I hold this fortunate woman up to the high heavens and face the end-of-days from the very beginning, constantly fearing that she will shoot me down on day-one or day-two or day-ten, and will find someone better to replace me. Every day our love is like a Mexican standoff in the movies.... Every day, every year our passion and desire for each other survives, it grows stronger. It’s like having a real relationship to protect and defend. I cherish the way we celebrate that simple joy. You know, Kristin tells me that I’m *overly romantic*—and she’s probably right—but I like to think it’s more like I’m *overly heroic*. With all the more casual options and inconsequential relationships we have in these postmodern times, I like to think that I’m *overly heroic in love.*”

“I’m happy for you, Monty... really,” said the captain sincerely. “You and Kristin really-are good together: It’s like you’re both keeping some big secret from the rest of the world,” the captain said flatly. “By the way, when it comes to keeping secrets, you and me and *The Good Ship Pequod* had another bountiful year, Monty—thanks to your late-night rendezvous and my unofficial import / export clearances. You know, it might be time for you to think about settling down, maybe moving in with Kristin, and raising a family with her?”

“I’d do it in a minute, without hesitation if she’d have me, Jack. Problem is, this girl of my dreams—this reluctant hotness I’m always trying to impress—is still looking for mister right.”

“And so, if I understand you correctly, and according to your own terminology: the lovely Kristin *outdrew you* from day-one. No Mexican standoff, really; just you *boom, down.*”

“Bingo!” said Monty with a mouthful of bagel, crème cheese, and strawberry jelly. “I let my baby *shoot first* every time. But every time I see her again: Wow! And every time we hook-up, it’s like the first time! It’s like giving Kristin awesome power to love-me or leave-me from day-one to the aching present makes every day and everything that follows that much more intense.

“In that case, I’m not sure which one of us is worse off!” barked the captain sarcastically.

“Seriously, Jack, I can only make a suggestion, as a friend—being that I am admittedly *heroic in love* and you are... *romantically challenged*.”

“And what’s your suggestion, Monty? —I’m almost afraid to ask.”

“Dude, don’t you think it’s about time you stopped hooking up with the first available Barbie off the school bus every couple of years, and started looking out for a long-term woman? Look, Jack, I’m only telling you this as a friend, but young and beautiful doesn’t last a lifetime; only beautiful does.... And if you ever want to try and grasp that elusive golden ring that is hanging out there just beyond your reach on this circus carousel you’re riding up and down on, Jack, my man, you’ve got to show up in person with some kind of commitment!”

Jack Raulston wiped the crumbs of toasted bagel from his chin with a weathered hand and drained the mug of its coffee. “You know, I normally wouldn’t mind, Monty. We all know the score. We’re all adults with our own agendas. But this one is different from all the others....”

“*And just how is this one different from all the others!?*” queried an unexpected voice. It was Jessica, the graduating marine biology student; she was standing in the kitchen doorway at the entrance of the captain’s house, wearing Captain Jack’s white shirt like a light summer dress, draped with all but one button unbuttoned. She was standing in the doorway, holding a steaming hot mug of coffee in her hands like a smoking gun.

The men looked at each other chagrined. There is a certain time and circumstance when an appealing twenty-something woman wearing an oversized man’s dress shirt and nothing else would be considered a thing of beauty, if not mouthwatering desire, for a salty fifty-something sea captain. But here on the porch of the captain’s house in the idyllic village of Bonaventure Pointe with the morning mist still rising with the morning sun and the sail-like fabric of the dress shirt wafting suggestively in the sea breeze, there was more than a hint of embarrassment.

“Earth to Captain Jack!” extorted Jessica. “How is this one different from all the others?” she repeated, only this time the tone of her voice was more insistent than inquisitive. Jessica proceeded to walk barefooted onto the deck of the far-flung porch like a fashion model on a runway where less-is-more in terms of fashion. She placed the steaming mug of coffee on the

picnic table directly in front of the captain and kissed him affectionately on the cheek. “You were saying, Oh Captain, my Captain...?” As if encouraging a formal response, Jessica seductively undid the last remaining button on the white dress shirt she wore, allowing the woven fabric to fall away at the front, exposing the fullness of her perfectly tanned and well apportioned figure to the flirtatious ebb and flow of the misty morning breezes.

“I plead the fifth,” exclaimed the captain. “Monty was just leaving....”

“Ah, come on, Captain, my Captain,” prompted Monty with obvious delight. “I’m curious to find out myself: How is this one different from all the others?” he taunted his friend playfully.

The captain looked down at the scant and waterlogged grinds in his empty coffee mug. He looked up to this misty vision of loveliness arrayed in the billowing shirt dress like a statuesque figurehead of a proud sailing ship—and he sighed. He found himself staring listlessly up at his departing lover, while Jessica was looking outwards beyond the confines of the sheltered harbor into the vastness of the future and the deep blue sea.

“This one is tragically different from all the others...” explained the captain, with a pained and dispirited expression of sorrow on his face. “This one is gonna hurt!” he said.

• • •

Time passed slowly thereafter for the whaleboat captain; a dirge-like melancholy followed in its wake. One lonely night, the captain stumbled across a familiar bridge. The captain had crossed the arched footbridge leading to *The Good Ship Pequod* many times before, but not so all alone, not on a night like this. The rain was misty enough to be almost fog-like; a cold gray curtain fell, separating the sea captain from the winsome multi-colored lanterns of the nautical harbor village. Even the stately yachts and sailing vessels rocking silently in their births were reduced to shadowy hulks of canvas-shrouded mourners in a grim procession of gloom and dread that had no end in sight.

Somewhere in the parking lot, the captain had left his Retro-Cadillac and started walking, burying his head in the collar of his rain slicker with the night pulled around him like a blanket. He walked and he smoked and he flipped the spent butt out over the handrail into the air; he shuddered as he watched the glowing ember arch and fall into the seawater where it fizzled out conclusively with one last wink.

The captain reached the middle of the footbridge leading to the tour-boat moorings; he stood leaning on the handrail with a new lit cigarette nested in his fingers, listening to the low throaty tones of a distant fog horn, when his cell phone rang with a familiar ringtone. The cell phone screen read, ‘*J.J. Montgomery.*’

“Hey Monty,” said the captain, holding the cell phone to his ear, and speaking loudly:

“What’s that? Oh, yeah, I should’ve told you... I’m down at the docks....”

“—What are you, my mother? I’m not planning on coming home tonight, Monty, that’s all!”

“Is that Kristin with you? Say *howdy* for me! Tell her that you guys can use my guest bedroom and any munchies you can find, but I’m in no mood to party tonight!”

“Yeah.... Uh-huh.... Uh-huh....”

“You’re kidding, Monty?”

“You’re not kidding....?”

“Was this your idea, or hers!?”

“No way; I couldn’t possibly do that!”

“What do you mean it’s for my own good?”

“So, when did you schedule this outlandish event!”

“And you expect *The Pequod* to sponsor this nonsense?”

“Oh; oh, really? That’s interesting. You’re saying’ this is Kristin’s idea!?”

“Uh-huh.... I see.... So, you’re both up to your eyeballs in this sinister plot!”

“I’ll have to think about it, Monty.... I said, I’ll think about it! ... *later!*” shouted the captain, pocketing the cellphone.

The captain smoked and flipped the spent butt out over the handrail and quickly looked away—not wanting to witness what inevitably happens when the dying ember of a cigarette meets the seawater... not wanting to see anything fizzle out so damned abruptly ever again... not wanting to re-experience for himself that final death-like wink of his lover’s last goodbye.

The downcast Sea Captain stumbled across the footbridge in the misty fog-like rain to the Bonaventure wharf, where *The Good Ship Pequod* was moored. The Captain climbed aboard the old tour boat, commandeered a makeshift bunk among the stacks of US Coast Guard-approved floatation cushions, and pulled the night around him like a blanket in a vintage state of pure noir.

• • •

The attacking cyclists careened around the ninety-degree turn at high speed: a maelstrom of spinning wheels, straining muscle, and surging willpower. Leaning steeply five-abreast into each hair-raising curve of the *Bonaventure Pointe Criterium Race*, the attacking cyclists jockeyed aggressively for position, followed by row after row of racers peddling fiercely shoulder to shoulder on cobblestone streets through the lackadaisical lantern village in a passing barrage of aerodynamic helmets and multicolored jerseys that extended more than ten rows deep.

Monty was seated at an outdoor table of a coffee house situated at a particularly severe corner in the race course, where the asphalt roadway transitioned abruptly to bone-jarring cobblestones at the *Avenue of the Amber Lantern*—cobblestones that are just quaint enough, that meaning just irregular enough, to knock the dental fillings out of a straining cyclist's clenched teeth. Each whirling circuit of the peloton around this particular bend in the road brought with it the rising thrill and impending dangers of an all-encompassing entanglement. Each whirling circuit of the peloton onto the cobbled roadway was preceded by encouraging cheers from the crowds arrayed along the sidewalks flanking the race course. Thereupon the race leaders charged into the turn at a very severe angle, guiding the serpentine procession onto the weatherworn cobblestones in a brawling coterie of cyclists that was followed by a discernible trailing breeze.

Travis, the surf dude, drifted up, slouching casually on a long skateboard.

"It's good to see you, dude," said Monty, slowly sipping a vanilla latte.

"Same here, Monty," said Travis, dismounting the longboard. "I'll be right back."

Travis leaned his skateboard up against the side of the building and disappeared inside.

The serpentine pack of road racers veered, and streamed, and pounded on past, accompanied by a heavily-punctuated uproar. Travis reappeared with an iced green tea lemonade and a large chocolate chip cookie. He took a seat at the table beside Monty and shifted the chair at an angle to better observe the criterium bicycle race. "How come you're not with your surf buddies today?" asked Monty. "The waves were cranking earlier this morning, as far as I could tell."

"Right on, Monty-man. The swells were firing nicely off the headland point earlier this morning, but by the time I left the beach to shower and take on food, things had already petered-out to knee-high, at best."

"You still surfing every day, Travis?"

"Yeah, pretty much... sometimes twice on Sundays, now that school is out."

“I hope you’re steering clear of those men in grey suits, Travis! You-know, there’s been a lot more sightings lately, and some actual biting in these local waters, dude.”

Travis brushed off the warning about predatory sharks with a suitable proposition of his own: “Tell you what, Monty... I’ll steer clear of the hungry men in grey suits if you promise to steer clear of those dangerous men in black.”

“You have a deal, dude,” said Monty with a knowing smile. “So, what brings you into the lantern village today?”

Travis dispatched a mouthful of chocolate chip cookie and explained, “One of my buddies is seriously into extreme cycling, in addition to occasional surfing with the Dawn Patrol. He’s the one with the plain red and black jersey.”

“You mean he doesn’t ride with a professionally sponsored cycling team?”

“No way, man... he’s much too independent-minded for that. In a sport where professional athletes *ride purposefully for the money* and feeble-minded amateurs ride mindlessly for some elusive *prestige*, my friend rides for the *sheer joy* of it. But seriously, Monty, when it comes to carving radical and original turns—like in surfing and cycling—this peerless dude excels. He considers himself a *Criterion Specialist*, but it’s more than that: It’s like he willingly spends his life living on the hard, sharp edge of some nearly-impossible line that you need to carve for yourself and hold tightly; and if you lose that authentic line, if you lose that precise mental concentration and control, even for a moment, disaster inevitably follows. However, if you can manage to hold that originating line against all odds, against all unworthy competition, you can indeed make history. Believe me, Monty, I’ve seen this guy do it more than once!!”

“That’s so über-cool-sounding,” chuckled Monty. “Which one is he again?”

The bike racers careened at breakneck speed around the sharp corner yet again, jamming the leaders into a tight phalanx that bounded across the cobblestone surface in a pandemonium of angular momentum on wheels that were testing the very limits of traction versus trajectory.

“It looks like he’s making his move toward the front of the pack!” announced Travis.

The commotion passed and receded again into the background.

Monty took a slow reflective sip of vanilla latte. “Have you heard from Everett Durant lately, I understand you guys have gotten pretty close?”

“I haven’t seen him lately, but it was nice to get to know him before he went *on the road*.”

“You know, Travis, it’s really good you were there to help him when he needed it.”

“*De nada*,” said Travis, sipping his iced green tea lemonade. “I was happy to help him and to get to know him personally. . . . Everett Durant certainly *es un hombre imprudente*,” he added.

“An outstanding vagabond poet and *Hombre Imprudente*,” confirmed Monty. “Ya know, it’s funny: Everett once told me that the best times of his life were when he was *on the road* making alternative music with *Celeste Emo*—*better medicine*, as he called it—and now I understand he is on the road to god-knows-where with Beatrice, the heiress, the banker’s great granddaughter, and I don’t know what good could possibly come of it.”

Travis leaned in and lowered his voice to avoid being overheard: “You know, flaunting a rich cultural inheritance is one thing, but creating new and better alternative music is quite another—it’s a totally different road!” And now that you mention it, Monty, I do recall Everett Durant once told me he could never write meaningful songs again, the way he did with *Celeste Emo*. . . . The man said *never*, as in *no freaking way*.”

“So, what do you think they’re up to?” Monty inquired in earnest.

“Heaven only knows,” replied Travis, with more than a modicum of concern.

The crowd cheered, announcing the arrival of the race leaders. The advancing phalanx of racers jostled and dove headlong five-abreast into the severe turn; however, only two bicycle riders managed to successfully complete the veering maneuver, while three of the lead cyclists swerved and went down skidding across the cobblestones—much to the dismay of the closely following pack, which collapsed upon itself like an accordion in a loud cacophonous harrumph.

Amid this abrupt convergence of man and machine, the unseated cyclists struggled to disentangle from the wreckage and rejoin the bicycle race. Meanwhile, the two lead cyclists and a few stragglers hammered furiously along the *Avenue of the Amber Lantern* with renewed effort in an all-out sprint, leaving the fulminating pile of human flotsam in their wake.

“Whoa there,” exclaimed Monty, noting the crash. “That’s some serious road-rash!”

“Serious as a philosopher’s stone,” agreed Travis, standing, as he surveyed the outcome of the cycling catastrophe. “Yo, Monty, I gotta go see how things turned out at the finish line,” he announced, sipping the remains of iced green tea lemonade through the elbow bend of a straw.

“Was your surfing friend involved in this horrendous pile-up?” Monty asked.

“Yes and No,” said Travis. “But it looks to me like he successfully held his own authentic line, at this point, and avoided the chain reaction.”

“You mean...?”

“I mean, when it comes to surfing, cycling, and psychoanalysis, I agree completely with Doctor Sigmund Freud on two counts: *One*, there are defining stages of development and proficiency; and *Two*, there is no such thing as an accident!”

Travis cordially nodded goodbye to Monty, dumped his empty cup into the trash container, retrieved his skateboard, and proceeded to glide clickety-clackety down the village sidewalk in the direction of the cheers and the finish line.

Monty sat there alone, observing the machinations of the remaining racers and the ruminations of the disbursing crowd, reflecting on the scene in a thoroughly detached and dispassionate manner, when he saw Captain Jack Raulston approaching. It was not a pleasant sight. Sadness and loss had done some serious damage to the captain’s physical appearance: ever since Jessica had graduated from graduate school and left the harbor village; ever since she said “*Au Revoir, Jack*” and launched her own career in marine sciences; ever since *the loneliness of the number One* had become so glaringly apparent, Captain Jack Raulston had not fared well.

“Hey, Captain Jack.... you just missed the annual criterium race.”

“Yeah... who won?” asked the captain, pouring himself into a chair.

“I really couldn’t tell you, Jack; some radical surf dude on a bike.”

“Do you even know who was racing, Monty?”

“No, Jack, I honestly can’t say that I do.”

“So, what actually happened here today?”

“They came and they went,” Monty offered.

“They came and they went... just like that?”

“They came and they went, just like that.”

“I guess that’s what cyclists do.”

Monty and the captain sat together in silence, not knowing what else to say. It had occurred to Monty that the captain of *The Good Ship Pequod* was not in the business of watching the whales quite as earnestly as he was before Jessica left him.

“How come you’re not out with the leviathans on the high seas this weekend, Jack?”

“There’s not enough customers these days to schedule a whale watch safari,” he lied.

“Tell me honestly, Jack.... Have you even been answering your business phone?”

“Not lately,” admitted the captain.

“Jack, my man, when was the last time you took *The Pequod* out on a whale safari?”

“It’s been a while,” admitted the captain.

Monty thought for a moment, and then he asked, “Do you need some help, dude?”

“Maybe so,” admitted the captain.

“Well, whatever you do, Captain Jack. Don’t you dare forget to show up for the Standup Paddleboard Yoga Contest we have planned for next weekend. You do know, you do remember, that Kristin and I made all the arrangements just for you!”

• • •

It was one of those So Cal mornings when the misty evening gloom, i.e., the low-lying clouds and morning fog that cloaks the seacoast with an overriding coolness, gives way to the all-encompassing promise of a perfect summer day. This perception is often associated with the need to commune with nature in some meaningful way, along with the desire to engage in fitness and/or recreational activities, not to mention a renewed craving to breathe-in the fresh sea air.

Skateboarders of this idyllic So Cal beach town drifted down the sidewalks with hard-rock music beating in their earphones; dog-walkers ambled along the village sidewalks to the accompaniment of joyful tail-wagging dogs; joggers conducted personal business with their smart phones on the run; lifeguards arriving at their stations along the coast yawned and stretched in the manner of high-knees and push-ups, while construction workers warmed-up collectively, moving together in slow controlled motions with the practiced postures of *T’ai Chi*.

Within the breakwaters of the village yacht harbor, a sizable flotilla of muscular suntanned standup paddle-boarders assembled along the span of protected harbor beach. Captain Jack was seated alone on the flying bridge of *The Good Ship Pequod*, smoking a cigarette, scrutinizing the impending action. *The Pequod* rocked and rolled alternatively in its moorings. A squadron of pelicans patrolling the coastline beat-on silently overhead.

Suddenly, the sharp sound of a starter's pistol-gunshot pierced the seaside tranquility. The annual stand-up paddleboard race to the nearest offshore island had begun. The first flotilla of racing paddle-boarders left the beach in a disorderedly scramble of flailing limbs and paddles, appearing like a hatch of sea turtles paddling frantically off the sandy beaches into the shallows, thrashing their way into the main channel the harbor breakwaters as they bounded out to sea.

The stand-up paddleboard racers strained and stroked hurriedly by *The Good Ship Pequod* rocking at its moorings, and its captain, who sat motionless, expressionless, in stark contrast to the elite athletes that were splashing and flailing wildly out of the mouth of the yacht harbor and beyond, in an animated blur of sun-tanned hides, zinc oxide noses, and well-muscled hard-bodies in directional motion. In a matter of minutes, the sounds and the fury of the annual standup paddleboard race vanished into a bleary-brightness of a mist-blurred horizon; and then all was still again, motionless and calm in the harbor.

At this point in time, a second flotilla of paddleboards emerged from the protected harbor beach—moving much more slowly than the first hasty racers. In many ways, these slower stand-up paddleboarders were much more engaging from the point of view of the whale boat captain. First of all, there was no frantic haste, no violent flailing of limbs, no behaving like a frenzied free-for-all, no acting like it's *rush-hour* on a So Cal freeway. There was no aggressive veering nor jostling for a superior position; rather, there was a calm Zen-like detachment with each graceful statuesque movement performed within this new-wave of purposeful paddleboarders, the majority of whom where attractive bikini-clad females of a certain age.

The noticeable exception was a single mixed male / female couple that was leading the well-formed flotilla slowly out of the Bonaventure harbor on a single broad paddleboard. It was Monty and Kristin: Monty was standing upright, shirtless in his board shorts, working the long-stemmed paddle into the seawater like a gondolier, sporting a fish-eating grin that was evident, even from a distance. Kristin was seated in front of Monty on the same paddleboard with her shapely legs held together on the board pointing forward and her arms held straight out to her sides like she was presenting her stunning swimsuit model's body to the wide world from the prow of the *R.M.S. Titanic*.

“Ahoy there, Captain Jack,” shouted Monty, the shirtless gondolier in board shorts. “Kristin and I are happy to present eight lovely contestants of the *Stand-Up Paddleboard Yoga Contest*, sponsored this year by *The Good Ship Pequod*... sailing proudly out of Bonaventure Pointe!”

Kristin introduced each of the eight young, beautiful, serious-minded contestants one-by-one, by nick name, contestant number, bikini color, and academic affiliation as they paddled slowly out into the harbor channel—passing close by *The Pequod* and its wide-eyed captain—each beauty stroking confidently within the confines of the channel out to the southern bay where the aforementioned *Stand-up Paddleboard Yoga Contest* was scheduled to begin.

Captain Jack climbed down the ladder from the flying bridge of *The Pequod*, shipped the dangling dock fenders, and began to unleash the rope lines from the dockside cleats, when he paused. He waited until the last of the lovely yoga contestants had paddled well out of earshot, before he called out: “Hold on, Monty! Before you and Kristin go and *emcee* this festival of female pulchritude, you gotta tell me how you two arranged *All This!* How come each of these agreeable yoga contestants are hailing from local colleges and oceanographic institutes? I mean, how did you possibly amass such a uniquely-qualified collection of fresh seaworthy talent!?”

“It’s called *the Internet*, Jack. It’s useful for hooking up people with similar interests.” Monty explained. “Now get a move on, Captain Jack! You, alone, will be expected to pick a lucky winner of this up-and-coming water sport by the end of the day!”

Monty motioned the captain to follow him with a wave of his hand; then he dug the stand-up paddle into the seawater with long powerful strokes, striving, as a copasetic couple, to catch-up with the slow-moving paddleboard regatta that was making its way out of the yacht harbor.

The captain released the rope lines, climbed back up to the flying bridge of *The Pequod*, engaged the drive shafts, and headed out of the harbor at a slow wake-less crawl, ostensibly to observe the various poses, or *asanas*, and to officially judge this new-wave newfangled stand-up paddleboard yoga contest for himself.

Beyond the protective boundaries of the Bonaventure Pointe harbor, there is a watery expanse of emptiness where the sturdy bulwarks of the granite breakwaters come to an end; where the deep-water channels turn westward, descending outward into a bottomless sea; where the great headland promontories decline in height along a crescent curve of coastal land that goes on for miles in the form of sandy beaches and rustic camping grounds that extend far to the south. Protected from the surf by the massive headlands and the harbor breakwaters, the watery expanse of the sheltered southern bay—where the *standup paddleboard yoga contest* was about to begin—was as placid a setting for this morning meditation as a decorative planting of lotus flowers might be on an old mill-pond.



The octet of female contestants formed a single chorus line across the bow of *The Pequod* at a distance of approximately 50 yards; the sun shed new light on the old man and the sea. The whale boat captain leaned hard on the taffrail of *The Pequod*; he gazed out into that all-pervading azure-mist that blurs the physical boundaries between sea and sky and he jettisoned all his extraneous thoughts. Floating effortlessly, drifting aimlessly without anchor, inhaling the heady ambiance of salty sea air mixed with scented sunscreen among a bevy of feminine beauties gliding upright upon the dreamlike surfaces of a tranquil sea, the captain of *The Pequod* was soon at a loss for words, and then thoughts.... *Meditation occurs when we find our inner awareness and/or our quiet places expanding; turning off all distractions from the outer world and connecting introspectively to our mind.*

The first contestant in a lime green bikini paddled silently towards *The Pequod*, closing the distance by half, before shipping the singular oar and adopting the breath-taking lunge/pose of *Virabhadrasana* (the warrior) as she glided slowly past the captain's visual field on a 10-foot paddleboard (which was roughly as wide as a yoga mat) and drifted slowly to a stop. The next able-bodied contestant wearing an electric-pink string bikini performed a solid *Urdhva Mukha Svanasana* (upward-facing dog), arching upwards from a prone position with an appealingly open décolletage and a seemingly dispassionate upward-looking gaze. The next contestant, in cobalt blue, performed a stately *Vrschikasana* (scorpion pose), a precarious back-bend inversion supported solely on her forearms with her pelvis held aloft by the backward curve of her spine;

her feet jutting overhead with toes pointing forward like stingers. The next contestant, minimally clad in saffron yellow, dropped down into a breathtaking yogic leg-split in the graceful manner of a *Hanumanasana* (monkey pose) with one hand extended gracefully over her head, the other hand trailing lightly upon the glistening contour of her shapely back-stretched calf.

There was an intense seriousness associated with the assumption of these timeless yogic postures with such solemn determination: a kind of seriousness that is rarely seen outside the confines of a high-level performance of ballet, or perhaps an athletic locker room at half-time involving some high-power contact sport. Chastened by the palpable solemnity of the occasion, the whale boat captain lowered his gaze to a nearer vision: that of his own transpicuous shadow appearing all alone in the seawater, sinking even further into the depths of his personal despair. In a rare moment of profundity, the captain felt again like an abandoned child whom though his own cantankerous disposition had been cruelly deprived of feminine love. Reflecting upon the life he has led, the futility of the endless chase, the sorrow for which he himself alone is to blame—Captain Jack dropped a single salty tear into the vastness of a pitiless sea.

The appearance of a perfectly executed *Ustrasana* (camel pose) floated on by in a floral two-piece swimsuit, with a back that was arched fully backwards such that the upwards-facing breasts were pointing prominently upwards, as the name implies, in the direction of the bright blue sky. Not to be outdone, a *Back Chakrasana* (hollow back wheel) wearing a scarlet red bikini approached *The Pequod*, and was astonishingly transformed into an *extended hollow back wheel*, with the upward positioning of one lovely leg, indeed the pointing of the toes of this particular leg straight up, revealing the feminine glories of creation to the incredulous eyes of the captain. Two more contestants floated effortlessly by *The Pequod* unnoticed—at this point in the contest, the astonished boat captain had already entered into a meditative state of consciousness known as *Samādhi*, a state in which he lost all track of the swimsuit colors, let alone the names and counts.

The octet of yoginis paddled silently into a picturesque convergence, of sorts: a convergence in which the noses of the eight paddleboards met at a single point, thereby forming the visual image of a huge aquatic lotus flower with eight exquisite petals. The following choreography was synchronized to such an extent that it would be highly unlikely that it could be performed so fluidly without extensive practice: The petals gracefully arose *on que* into a stand-up posture of *Tadasana* (mountain pose), which transitioned elegantly into the *Urdhva Hastasana* (upward salute) resembling an unopened lotus flower that is gradually blooming... signified by dropping half-way down on one knee into an *Anjaneyasana* (crescent lunge) before rolling gracefully over onto one arm in a *Vasisthasana* (side plank) pose and returning to a state of tranquility, wide-open and receptive to enlightenment, in a fully reclining position of *Savasana* (corpse pose): that is, in a state of total relaxation, where they remained together in a unified raft of serenity: one lovely lotus flower floating on the inscrutable surface of this deep, boundless brine that supports and pervades both mankind and nature; this deep, boundless brine that that is *in and of the Sea*.

The effect of the lotus flower unfolding in such an illuminating manner was dramatic; the union of nature, humanity and this watery world was powerfully felt; the captain was transfixed.

Monty paddled Kristin to the starboard side of *The Pequod*, where they glided to a halt.

“Well now, Captain, my Captain,” queried Monty, “which *lucky lady* is it gonna be!?”

Overwhelmed by the collective beauty and grace he just witnessed, the powerful visceral attractions he now felt, and the renewed seriousness of intention he was presently faced with, the whaleboat captain refused to judge the so-called yoga contest at all. At the end of the day—with the graceful image of a lotus flower still shimmering vividly in his mind like a transcendent mystical experience—all the Captain could muster, on this particular day and time, was to log-in the following nautical observation: “These gorgeous sea creatures, each and every one, are simply too beautiful to judge one against the other,” declared the captain, quite sincerely in his heightened state of amazement. “Each and every one of these maritime beauties is as off-the-charts awesome as a lonely old sailor like me could ever even hope to meet and greet!”

“He’s finally back to normal, Kris,” quipped Monty with a smile and wink. “He says they’re all perfect!”



Chapter 6

“*Nothing behind me, everything ahead of me, as is ever so on the road,*”—wrote J. Kerouac, aptly reflecting the immediate temporal context of the *liminal state*, embracing the need to embark and to experience the most outlandish journeys, moment to moment, while pursuing an exhilarating freedom of mobility that leads a traveler away from death and loss, meter by meter, on a wide-eyed, white-knuckle joy-ride.

Gone on the Road with Beatrice the gossamer heiress at the wheel read the hand-written note that was tacked to the front door of Everett Durant’s cottage in the lantern village. It was an ocean-view cottage with pastel blue-grey siding and oyster-white trim, set on a sloping hillside bedecked with a profusion of scarlet-red paper-flowers cascading down a landscape overflowing with woody Bougainvillea vines. The massive accumulation of papery red bracts on the steps to Everett’s front porch—swept there by the action of constantly shifting sea breezes—suggested that Everett and Beatrice had *gone on the road* some time ago. The sunbaked weathering of the poet’s hand-written note into *parchment* and the physical curling of the notepaper into the distinctive shape of a *scroll* indicated much the same thing.

One sunny morning in June, a Bentley Continental GT convertible, decked out in basic black, pulled up to Everett's cottage. Everett stowed a single leather suitcase into the trunk and climbed inside on the passenger's side; and then they were gone—*on the road*—just like that.

"You know you don't have to do this for me, Beatrice. I was happy to help you honor the *life* and the *loss* of your darling girl-child without any compensation whatsoever." Everett gazed out at the slow-moving traffic on the Pacific Coast Highway as they rolled northward along the pristine lagoons and the far-flung asphalt fringes of the So Cal beach cities; heading northwest, to be sure, yet Beatrice was gracefully skirting the most seething, writhing, sprawling traffic of metropolitan Los Angeles by clinging tightly to the coast. "With that said, Beatrice, are you ready to tell me exactly *what it is* you have in mind for this *road trip* of ours? You can start by telling me exactly *what* we're trying to accomplish, and exactly *where* we're plannin' on going?"

Beatrice worked some controls on the dashboard console. "I'm *taking you back*, Everett... I'm taking you back to the time you met your rising star, the woman you called Stella... the dearly departed diva everyone else knows as *Celeste Emo*."

"I'm not sure I want to go there, Beatrice. Maybe we should just do-lunch with some beautiful people in the shallows of Malibu, perhaps, and simply call it a day."

"Nonsense, Everett Durant! A deal is a deal—especially an astonishing heart-stirring life-affirming agreement like ours! You played your part so spontaneously, so eloquently, so memorably, and now I fully intend to exceed your expectations in return."

"You should know that it's relatively easy for me to empathize with the desperate ones, Beatrice... you know, the lost ones... the overly sensitive ones... the most painfully passionate ones... the ones who have tried everything on the contemporary socio-political fast-food menu and have come up desirous of something better. Seriously, you don't owe me anything but a smile in return, Beatrice."

"I allow my closest friends call me *Bliss*," she said, beaming. "Even if it was a casual agreement between us, I have no intention of reneging at this point. That's not the kind of heiress... that's not the kind *person* I am," she said, while changing lanes and accelerating briskly to cruising speed. "And besides, you already surpassed all my expectations, and now it's my turn to use my considerable resources and influences to do something marvelous for you."

The hypnotic rhythm and strains of the 'slow-core' song, "*Fade into You*" played inside the cab of the Bentley with remarkably clarity of tone and verse: "*I want to hold the hand inside you,*" proclaimed the sultry female singer. The slow repetitive melody, wrapped in sorrowful

strings, evoked a feeling of deep desire: “*I want to take a breath that’s true,*” affirmed the vocalist with a longing that flowed with the rhythms of the music into delicate spaces, wavering alternatively between hopefulness and despair. As the melancholy slow-core rhythms of the song faded to a close, the Bentley cruised into Bay City gridlock, decelerating rapidly... in a blur.

Everett looked over at Beatrice and noticed the stylish glint of black sequins woven into fabric of the designer dress she was wearing beneath her denim jacket; he shook his head and smiled approvingly. “What I’m trying to tell you, heiress, is that you don’t owe me anything!”

“I heard you; Everett, but you did *your part!* In fact, it turned out to be a great thing to do: everything went swimmingly; nearly everyone was pleased, and many students around her age applauded the idea of conservation—it’s like you struck a perfect chord with the young people!”

“It was more like a lyrical impulse than a musical chord at the time... more like a verbal response to the physical and emotional distress you shared with me *at that very moment.*”

“I remember.... Is it always like that for you, Everett?” Do such lovely ideas for lyrics come to you from out of the blue? Are these brilliant lyrical ideas always revealed to you in some urgent or dire context—like it was when I was pleading my own desperate needs and wants?”

“Yes, it’s pretty close to that, Beatrice. If I had to reduce it to the simplest terms, I would say that the ‘idea’ of an alternative headlands’ development plan was suddenly *given* to me, to share with you, for you to share with the world. The most significant thing I actually *felt* at the time was the empowering, nearly overpowering sincerity of your request, and the high key pitch level of your actual *heartfelt empathy*—it was as if the openly-expressed *Act of Caring, itself,* was the vital catalyst that triggered my compassionate response. As strange as it seems, my artistic sympathies appear to be reserved for the desperately stricken souls, the ones who are most perilously in need: those who have lost all confidence in external authorities, irrational bureaucracies, white-coated experts, senseless docs, and ineffectual apothecaries, and are very nearly, if not entirely, beyond all hope... in other words, when everything else has failed them.”

“And that’s when the *Alternative Music* comes in? When everything else has failed them?”

“I believe so,” said Everett, explaining: “The thing about *Alternative Music* is that it keeps generation after generation moving forward deliberately; moving forward in *time* and *style* and *substance*; moving forward, regardless of prevailing social norms and cultural restraints; moving forward artistically, like the implicit *meter* in the progression of an *epic poem* used to do....”

The cadenced stop-and-go progression of the road trip through the long-standing grid-lock of Bay City traffic was accompanied by the driving beat of *The Airborne Toxic Event*, a local

indie-band from Los Feliz performing their evocative hit single, “*Sometime Around Midnight*,” with scintillating orchestral sound quality of the Walt Disney Concert Hall.

For a minute or two, Everett managed to lose himself in the poetic imagery of the music as the band played this song about forgetting oneself for a while. He realized that he hadn’t seen or even dreamed of Stella for quite some time—when she suddenly came to him as a vision in a dazzling white dress: she was laughing... turning... holding up an elixir, of some kind. However, just as Everett was actively visualizing Stella, as *Celeste Emo*, alive and well, looking as radiant as ever, approaching him, smiling and lying naked in his arms... she rises up and turns and bolts with someone else in tow, leaving Everett hopeless and homeless and completely disheveled, while his heart is breaking and his world is falling to pieces all over again....

“What’s wrong, Everett?” regarding the poet. “You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

“It’s nothing, Beatrice... nothing I haven’t experienced many times before.”

Beatrice eased the Bentley Continental GT convertible into a pull-out just beyond the Pacific Palisades—the place where Sunset Boulevard meets the Pacific Ocean—and brought the sports car to a complete stop. She pushed a button on the polished walnut console: the front and rear windows rolled down automatically, the convertible roof rose up from its clamps, a rear panel opened out of nowhere and swallowed up all traces of the folding top. Likewise, Beatrice casually removed and gracefully stowed her denim jacket, revealing the sleek sleeveless lines of her black lace designer dress; Beatrice looked over to Everett and she flashed a heavenly smile.

“And so, Everett, do we simply cruise into Malibu, do-lunch with *the beautiful and the damned*, as they say, and call it a day? Or is the tragic poet up for a real live flesh-and-blood adventure: one that begins once you choose to accompany me... *further on up the road*.”

Everett didn’t have to think about it for very long. He gazed out across the intersection where the infamous Sunset Boulevard dead-ends abruptly into the surf of the Pacific Ocean. Distressing waves of emotions, shattered dreams, and painful memories surged within his mind. Everett donned his Maui Jim sunglasses as he turned, nodding his head up and down to examine his designated driver; she was smiling confidently and sparkling brightly in the midday sun.

“What particular *Road* did you have in mind for this epic journey of ours, Beatrice?”

“Why, *California Highway One*, of course,” exclaimed the gossamer heiress, sparkling with delight as she pressed decisively on the gas pedal and coquettishly ‘chirped’ all four tires.

Motoring northward on the Pacific Coast Highway, the confident open-road manners of the Bentley Continental GT came into its own—straightening the curves and bending the headwinds around the travelers to the point of a pleasant whisper—the gossamer heiress and the tragic poet cruised in handcrafted luxury along the long and winding exurbia of Malibu, where multi-million dollar homes cling precariously to the steep hillsides and a seemingly endless series of garage doors, masonry walls, and wrought-iron gates converge to form an inelegant barricade that blocks-out all but an occasional peek-a-boo glimpse of the Pacific Ocean.

Traveling diagonally across the Point Dume promontory, leaving the urban sprawl of Los Angeles and the overwrought shambles of Malibu Lagoon behind, the traffic lessened and the ocean views broadened again to panoramic. Beatrice deftly coaxed the powerful twin-turbo engine of the Bentley convertible up to the level of a contented feline purr; Everett gazed far off into a nebulous vapor cloud of azure haze where the physical boundaries between sea and sky could not be so easily discerned.

“I see you’re smiling, Everett,” said Beatrice. “Can you tell me why that is?”

“I was just thinking about something you shared with me today?”

“And what did I say that is still making you smile, long after I said it.”

“Is it true that your familial nickname is Bliss?”

“Oh, that,” she laughed, turning down the music. “Yes. You see,” she explained, “Bee or Bea, Trish or Trixie simply wouldn’t do... they didn’t fit my personality. And since my given name was formally determined to be Beatrice—due to certain historical considerations—my nickname growing-up as a debutante and heiress came to be Bliss.... Why do you ask?”

“That’s what I was thinking about, Beatrice—when I was smiling,” he said. “*Bliss*: that’s what I was feeling for a brief moment while I was gazing off at these colossal clouds forming on the horizon, wondering where in the world we might be headed together, and it made me smile.”

“Let’s hope there’s more where that came from, handsome,” Beatrice giggled. “This is only the beginning of our journey together on this legendary *less-traveled road!*”

Transiting the broad coastal plains of Oxnard at a heart-quickenning pace and returning to the solemn majesty of the Pacific coast at Ventura, one is reacquainted with an unobstructed ocean panorama along a thin terrace of asphalt that defines the extreme edge of the coastline, where breaking waves surge upon the austere mountain ranges of the looming Central California coast.

One commonly experiences an uncanny feeling of elation upon encountering this picturesque transition from semi-urban congestion and blight to such astonishing wide-open spaces. Gazing off at the vanishing edge the Pacific Ocean while driving briskly along this constantly-curving roadway—mindful of what inscrutable dramas might yet come to pass amidst these outré coastal mountain ranges that rise high above the endless churning of the sea—it is often described as a feeling of excitement and adventure that borders on exhilaration: a state of mind wherein a wide-eyed passenger finds oneself gazing outward with something akin to awe and wonder, fixating upon the rapidly changing contours of this ever-winding road that appears only fleetingly in the foreground as it curves away, runs on ahead, and disappears from view.

The tragic poet and the grateful heiress motored blissfully upon the Pacific Coast Highway pleasantly ensconced in sensuous diamond-quilted leather seats and musically entranced by the tantalizing sounds of a rhythmic drum machine, layered keyboards, and haunting vocals of *Au Revoir Simone*, an indie electronic dream-pop trio performing “*Lark*,” a bittersweet song about the emotional throes of letting someone go.

The sprawling sun-drenched slopes of Santa Barbara floated into view: that Old Mission ambiance; that distinctive Spanish-style architecture, red-tiled roofs, and whitewashed courtyards reminiscent of times long past. The bleary-eyed road-trippers agreed to a metaphorical *pit-stop* for munchies rest and refreshments. Beatrice eased the Bentley Continental GT convertible nimbly away from the Pacific Coast Highway and onto the exit ramp. They made their way inland on surface roads connecting to the picturesque palm- and flowering tree-lined promenades of State Street, where the throaty Bentley sports car motored downtown and cruised, ever-so-slowly, into the center of Santa Barbara’s Arts and Entertainment District: embellished, as it is, with stately art museums, historic theaters for music and performing arts, and trendy restaurants nestled amid a bevy of vintage bookstores and tony art galleries.

Beatrice valet-parked the Bentley convertible, rapidly typing-out a text message on her cell phone before handing the valet key, along with an overly generous tip, to a wide-eyed young man wearing black chino pants and a bright red polo shirt.

Beatrice escorted Everett along a quiet side street with a youthful, almost child-like spring in her stride. “When I was young, my family would vacation here in Santa Barbara, seeking health cures along with many other robber barons and petty industrialists of the age... My goodness, Everett, it seems like ages ago!” Beatrice clung playfully to Everett’s arm as she explained: “The wealthy visitors attracted all sorts of artists, spiritualists, and exotic medicinal practitioners catering to everything wellness and spiritual self-improvement, with a special emphasis bent on refurbishing the tarnished souls of the exceedingly well-heeled.”

Everett chuckled as they strolled along, acknowledging the obvious yet delicate pun.

“Alas, Everett, all that changed when my family turned their attention to Hollywood-land and then to Bonaventure Pointe. However, through the years, I have managed to maintain some useful connections....” Beatrice guided Everett into the charm and ambience of times gone by.

Arriving at the entrance of a prepossessing restaurant with stucco walls, red awnings, and small sign that read, *Artful Letters Café*, Beatrice and Everett were immediately greeted at the doorsteps by a broad-smiling hostess with a stunning matronly appearance—somewhere between a Picasso portrait revealing the deeply-discerning visage of the modernist author Gertrude Stein and a vintage music video recalling the warmhearted stage-presence of singer Mama Cass Elliot. Apparently, the gossamer heiress was not a stranger to this particular establishment.

The physical crush of an overly-affectionate welcoming hug reminded Everett that his injured shoulder and his broken ribs were still painfully far from healed. The matronly hostess, name-tagged Alice, ushered the travelers through the main restaurant out onto a private courtyard patio where a Cantera stone water fountain stood timeless and majestic, burbling in the center of a quatrefoil pool surrounded by clusters of empty dining tables and wrought-iron chairs. Alice adjusted two sprigs of purple freesias gathered together in a cut-glass vase. She pointed out the nearest restrooms and disappeared into the main restaurant, closing off the French doors that lead to and from Alice’s restaurant in the process—leaving the two travelers alone in the courtyard.

The continuous murmurings of the classical Mission-style water fountain, reflected by the masonry walls, were reiterated within the courtyard. The afternoon sunlight filtered through a gauzy canopy of white linen and played upon the glistening surfaces of the faintly falling waters. By analogy, *the conscious mind*, according to an eminent psychotherapist, *may be compared to a water fountain playing in the sun, before falling back into the great subterranean pool of subconscious from which it rises*. In similar fashion, the *romantic notion* that love and affection is never lost nor wasted, but may be recycled, was poetically expressed with consummate concision by Henry Wordsworth Longfellow, who wrote: *That which the fountain sends forth returns again to the fountain*. Everett Durant stared blankly at the glistening sandstone pillar of the hand-carved Cantera stone fountain, lost for a moment in thought: he was imagining how this shapely sculptured sandstone fountain was formed out of nothing but volcanic dust, sand, and ashes gathered, combined, and compressed over millions of years into malleable quarry stone.

“I have asked a good friend of mine to join us for lunch, Everett,” announced Beatrice. “I hope you don’t mind.”

Everett returned to the present; he turned to face the heiress. “What? Why would I mind, Beatrice? I told you earlier, at the intersection of Sunset Boulevard and... well... the Pacific Ocean, that I am seriously *all in*... I am totally in favor of this epic road trip of yours!”

“Really, Everett? she said, biting her lower lip. “That’s splendid... if you really mean it.”

“Really, Beatrice,” nodded Everett. “I am more than willing! I’m willing to take a trip upon your magic swirling ship... at least for a while. I’m ready to follow your lead, whatever it takes, and wherever that may take us... at least for a while.” Everett removed his sunglasses and gazed into the vibrant Champagne-color eyes of the gossamer heiress; he felt a deepening connection, what might be referred to as a closeness, an emotional proximity to *Bliss*, when he declared, “Wherever we go; wherever this road-tripping takes us; simply do what you do, Beatrice; cast your dancing spell my way... I promise to go under it,” he assured her.

Her black and cherry-glossed lips widened into a smile as Beatrice reached across the table: “I want you to remember that we are both in this together, handsome,” she whispered, tenderly clasping both of Everett’s hands.

“So, this accidental/on-purpose meeting is simply a part of your Grand Plan?”

“But of course, Everett. My friend, a distinguished *visiting professor from the East Coast*, will join us briefly... perchance to provide some historical perspectives for our journey... and then we’ll be on our way.”

“And why would a distinguished *visiting professor from the East Coast* suddenly drop everything to do-lunch with two random vagabonds traveling on-the-road like we are?”

Beatrice laughed heartily as she confessed, “Why yes, silly, it might have something to do with the fact that I am personally funding the professor’s sabbatical; but I like to think that there is something valuable and important in his scholarly re-examination of American Literature and History... something that *once-was* and *still-is* deeply and uniquely *American* at its core.”

• • •

Alice appeared in the doorway leading a distinguished-looking man with piercing blue eyes; the man was wearing a brown tweed jacket over a pale-yellow dress shirt, casually open at the collar; his fine silver hair receded from a prominent aristocratic brow, descending downwards at the sideburns along the manicured contours of a closely-cropped white beard. Although it was early-summer, he wore a brown woolen scarf draped around his neck like a perennial graduation sash, and he sported a clutch of hefty olden books in one hand: the indelible calling cards of a scholar. “We’ll have one of everything on your special chalkboard today, Alice,” announced the visiting professor, handing the luncheon menu back to Alice unread. “But make the portions modest, my dear; you know that even learned *philosophers* are advised to *take small bites*.”

Alice looked to Beatrice, who nodded nonchalantly, affirming her informed consent.

“*Let us advance on chaos and the dark!*” proclaimed the visiting professor, allowing Alice to seat him prominently, books and all, at the dining table. The professor extended a time-worn hand to Everett as he boldly introduced himself: “Hi! I’m the resident expert from out of town who has been summoned here today to christen your attempted journey to Paradise,” he reported. “What do you think about that?”

“I haven’t had much time to think much about Paradise, dude,” replied Everett, shaking the professor’s hand. “We’re traveling on the road on some kind of mission, as far as I can tell.”

Beatrice simply beamed and glittered in the filtering sunlight, enjoying the introductions.

“So, you really have no idea what Miss Beatrice has in store for you...? No idea where you are actually going to...? What marvels you might possibly experience when you get there...? That is, if you even manage to get close....”

“No man,” confirmed Everett. “We committed to do this particular road trip together more or less spontaneously.”

“Oh, to be young again, Miss Beatrice, or even so young at heart,” lamented the professor, openly mourning the span of a scholarly lifetime spent alone in endless searching, inscribing, interpreting tiny impressions made in cold hard print. “I can see why you chose this particular man—this *tragic poet*, as you artfully named him—for your latest epic philanthropic journey.”

“Tell me what you see, professor,” asked Beatrice politely, “since we haven’t ever discussed the actual details of Everett’s tragic personal history.”

“From my perspective as an Emerson scholar, I can tell you that *what lies behind him and what lies in front of him are much less important than what lies within him....*” The distinguished professor framed the drama: “You see, for Emerson and his crew, it was not the length of a life but the depth of personal experience, however intense, however tragic, wherein one might indeed approach the territory of the Timeless and the Eternal.” The professor examined Everett Durant critically. “I can tell you this, Miss Beatrice, merely from the look of the young man: this tragic poet’s eyes seem to me to be *like glowing coals that continue to glow in the ashes of ruin....*”

Everett Durant shrugged off the literary allusion to Herman Melville, intended as an obvious complement. “I like Emerson,” said Everett. “He was a fine, high-minded American poet and philosopher; but what in the world does Ralph Waldo Emerson have to do with our random road trip to Big Sur, California?” Everett looked over to Beatrice for an answer.

Beatrice looked over to the visiting professor and she smiled, encouraging the distinguished professor and noted Emersonian scholar to *sing for his supper*, so to speak.

“Since this is a luncheon and not a lecture, I will strive for extreme brevity,” announced the professor, welcoming his modest portion of the appetizer salad consisting of roasted beets on a delicate bed of arugula with pistachios, local tangerines, goat cheese, and a lemon oil dressing.

“Imagine, if you can, that you are sitting at your own graduation ceremony at the Harvard Divinity School (the nation’s first nondenominational divinity school) in 1838—which would mean that you are sitting with just a handful of other students, and their families, and the faculty members, of course—and by just being there, you can assume that you are pretty much up-to-date with all the classical studies of divinity of all times—when along comes this brash invited speaker who dares to upset the applecart of American religious tradition, as everyone knew it, with the following admonition: *Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to experience Divinity first hand without mediator or veil!* I can assure you, you would be shocked! And while it took a good while for American Transcendentalism to percolate through the puritanical subculture, it appears that this religious admonition, *this intellectual challenge to live with the privilege of an immensurable mind, and thus to refuse the temptation of traditional authorities and claims to truth* was very much akin to the revolutionary zeal associated with another *shot* that was heard around the world—that is, the call for American intellectual Freedom and Independence!

“All in all, and in the context of the American Revolution, Emerson-style self-reliance demanded a new form of academic scholarship that was free and unfettered by external authority: *Free should the scholar be—free and brave*, he declared, eschewing any slavish dependence on European philosophy and/or the courtly muses of Europe. By encouraging these graduating preachers to move beyond *historical Christianity*, with its canonized literature and its Puritanical leanings, Emerson was advocating for a democratic and radically individualized form of spirituality; beckoning his audience to a new species of thinker, a new intellectual age that is open to present and future revelations, and not just collected records of voices from the past.”

“Great sermon, professor,” exclaimed Everett, who was himself well-versed in Emerson’s poetic dialogues. “But, at the risk of repeating myself: what in the world does Ralph Waldo Emerson have to do with our random road trip to Big Sur?” With this question posed—his intention to focus the historic philosophical conversation on the present—Everett turned his attention to a Jidori chicken club sandwich with house-made bacon, tomato, avocado, butter lettuce, and aioli, on toasted sourdough.

“Oh that,” continued the professor, somewhat grateful for the guidance. “My studies have convinced me that Emerson’s mystical humanism, as well as his strident, courageous, even

transgressive individualism, are currents that run deep within America's psyche and have greatly influenced our cultural, psychological, technological, philosophical, and religious histories."

The professor carefully dissected a shrimp summer roll into bite-size translucent segments, revealing fresh avocado, butter lettuce, and pickled vegetables about to be lavished in a spicy peanut sauce. He looked up briefly and explained, "Emerson's intellectual distinctions between *inspired spirituality* and traditional *religious dogma* are deeply ingrained in the cultural landscape of America—and that, I believe, is what Miss Beatrice has summoned me here today to tell you about," he said as he looked, somewhat anxiously, to the heiress for approval or dismissal.

Beatrice did not look up. She appeared to be concentrating her attention on a cucumber salad with mint and feta, watermelon, radish, toasted pepitas, pickled onion, arugula, and smoked yogurt vinaigrette.

"Ahem!" the professor continued on nonetheless. "I believe I am supposed to inform you that the metaphysical landscape Miss Beatrice is escorting you on, Sir, resides at the extreme far-flung fringes of our Western culture, where the gentle flow of wisdom from *East to West*: through the Bostonian underground, through Emerson's transcendental naturalism, through the beat-writers and the human potential movements of modern times, where it reached the physical end of the continent at Big Sur and reflected back upon itself like a giant wave upon the shore."

"Please continue, dude," encouraged Everett, chomping on a mouthful of Jidori chicken.

"What I am trying to say is that any road trip to Big Sur with Miss Beatrice is likely to be nothing less than an ecstatic communion with the primal forces of nature: that is, while you may think that you will be traveling *on the road* into the wild environs of the Big Sur Wilderness; in reality, in these uncharted territories, where you and Beatrice are actually headed to, there are no established roads... only the fading glow of Emersonian lamp posts to guide you on your way."

"That is such a lovely introduction for our intended journey, professor," exclaimed Beatrice.

"Thanks for the tutorial, professor," said Everett smiling, wiping a tad of aioli from his chin. "I appreciate the warning, but I already know enough about the heiress to trust in her judgement. Besides, when it comes to Ralph Waldo Emerson and his influence on American sensibilities and popular culture, you just have to *listen carefully* to catch the latest drift. Today's kids already get it, Professor!"

"What in the heavens do you mean?" asked the distinguished visiting professor.

Beatrice, the gossamer heiress stopped chewing; she appeared to be equally intrigued.

Everett motioned theatrically to an eager dark-skinned busboy and a pretty blond waitress, both in their teens, who were waiting dutifully in the wings, standing-by in matching light gray T-shirts and black aprons in the spaces flanking the French doors. “What does *Weezer* have to say about the topic of religion this summer?” Everett addressed the young people, demonstrating supreme confidence that one of them, if not both of them, would surely know the answer.

The eager busboy frowned as he thought for a long moment, and then he suddenly announced: “*It Feels Like Summer!*” he shouted. That’s what you’re talking about, right!?”

“Right,” said Everett, “*Feels like Summer,*” he repeated the song title, leaning forward with encouragement. “And what does *Weezer* have to say about the topic of religion, bro?” Everett asked again, prompting the boy, more-specifically, to recall the actual *lyrics* of the song.

The professor mumbled between mouthfuls, “Who is this *Weezer* person?”

“Oh yeah,” cried the busboy. But before he could get the words out, the waitress chimed in.

“*I’m spiritual, not religious!*” shouted the girl, jumping up and down and clapping her hands with glee. “*I’m spiritual, not religious... I’m a Libra, if it matters....*”

“Yeah, it feels like summer! Womp bomp bomp!” sang-out the busboy, accompanied by a dramatic air-guitar rendition, which served to amplify the point Everett was making—that new ideas can move through a culture at breathtaking speed, and that young people have an ability to assimilate and communicate the rhapsodic language of mystical ideas at nearly the speed of light.

The distinguished professor marveled at the logic of the philosophical positivism as he consoled himself with several mouthfuls of a wild salmon salad comprised of mixed greens with tomato, red onion, soft potato, capers, haricot verts, and tapenade dressing.

Alice appeared at the table, leaned over, and whispered something discretely to Beatrice.

Beatrice smiled; reaching out to clasp Everett’s hand, she said, “As incognito as we may appear to be traveling today, there is a young man who immediately recognized you, Everett—and he would very much like to meet you in person... to pay his respects, I am told.”

“No worries, Beatrice, I generally consider myself to be more *inconspicuous* than *incognito* in my travels,” said Everett with a grin. “Please, Alice. Let us meet this observant young man!”

Alice left the patio through the French doors and soon reappeared with a hipster guy in his mid-twenties sporting a full beard, a tapered slick-back pomp hairstyle that fades to zilch at the

sides, and a silver ring in each ear lobe; he was wearing a black vest over a blue denim shirt that was closed at the collar by a black bow tie. The hipster guy had recently applied just enough eyeliner for Everett to trace the evolution of the man's *Emo ethos* to the more contemporary *Hipster subculture*, which comes gradually with age and the accumulation of sufficient irony. Alice introduced the young man as Cosmo, the Artful Letters bartender, as he approached the luncheon table proudly bearing a salt-encrusted margarita garnished with a single wheel of lime.

"Thank you kindly, Cosmo..." said Everett, realizing that the bartender had prepared this particular drink especially for him. "Thanks for trying dude, but I haven't had a drop of hard liquor since the day my whole world ended!"

The hipster guy seemed enormously disappointed, dropping his shoulders, not knowing what to do with this awkward margarita glass... now balancing precariously on the tray.

"I'll do the honors," exclaimed the distinguished professor, swiping the brimming tall-stemmed glass from the serving tray with the swiftness of a hungry cat. "And whom, may I ask, are we toasting?"

The dreadful silence that followed was prevented from deepening by the resonating grace of the faintly falling waters that continued to sparkle and to murmur faintly in the background.

"I'm really sorry if I offended you," offered Cosmo the bartender, whose confused emotions wavered between the necessity for civil politeness and the emotional tendency toward outright defiance: "But you, of all people... Everett freaking Durant! You of all people should understand the massive scope of the tragedy! You of all people should realize..." he explained, struggling to hold back a veritable cloudburst of raw emotion, "*When Celeste Emo died, her fans lost her too!*"

The rising blush of Alice's complexion betrayed feelings of shock and embarrassment, tintured with strains of disapproval; but before Alice could manage to stifle or chastise the unwelcome impertinence of her employee, Everett stood up and heartily embraced the hipster.

"I like that you're broken, broken like me," said Everett, diplomatically breaking the ice. "Pull up a chair, dude, and sit with us a spell... that is, if that's alright with Alice here."

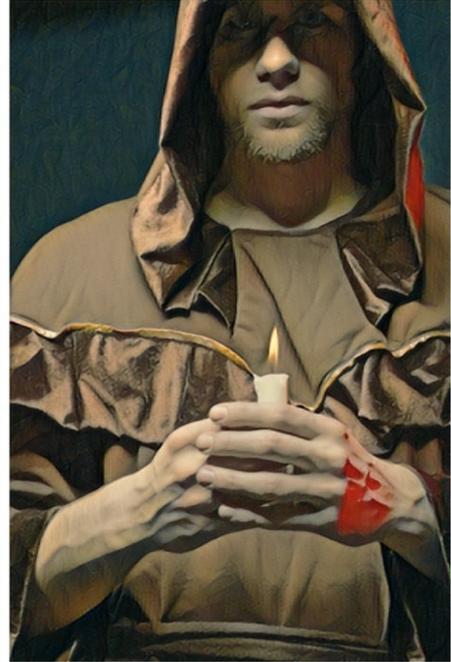
Alice looked over to Beatrice for approval and then disappeared into the main restaurant. The visiting professor casually sipped from the margarita glass; Beatrice casually sipped from a jeweled goblet of sparkling water. Cosmo and Everett reveled in the glow of treasured music and concerts and personal remembrances for nearly an hour; that is, until Cosmo asked Everett a personal question that he just couldn't answer: "There is one thing that still bothers me, Everett... one thing that still bothers a lot of people..."

“And what is this one thing, that still bothers a lot of people?”

“I don’t mean to invade your privacy,” Cosmo entreated, “But *where were you*, man? ... And why the hell weren’t you with her?”

Everett had no words for Cosmo, no words of his own making could be offered in reply. There simply were no words, no deliberations, no more tears. The only notion of emotion that stirred within the tragic poet was the ever-simmering anguish of a lingering regret.

End Chapter 6



Chapter 7

It felt good to be moving again: Everett, with nothing behind him and everything ahead of him. The sleek Bentley Continental GT convertible was running topless, gleaming in the Southern California sunshine, burgeoning brightly with unperturbable style, confidence, aplomb; rolling briskly forward, ever onward with the gossamer heiress at the wheel. Everett breathed-in deeply. He exhaled expressively—perhaps too expressively, for this particular exhalation was accompanied by the audible traces of a moan.

“Do you want to talk about it?” asked Beatrice, turning down the music volume.

“No need,” said Everett.

“As you wish,” the heiress assured him. Beatrice reached and advanced the alternative rock music to the next recorded track, and she turned the volume back up to symphonic levels.

Everett followed the enticing glow of afternoon sunlight as it enlivened the fine downy hairs of the enchanting woman’s forearm. He watched the mesmerizing sunglow flicker, retreat, and then reappear with the graceful movements of her delicate hand reaching, attending expertly to the audio controls and back again to the steering wheel. From the relative discretion afforded by his Maui Jim sunglasses, the declining angle of the afternoon sun, and the *close-up* vantage point of the passenger seat, Everett studied the ultra-feminine contours of his lovely designated driver from the tips of her ring-less fingers to the shoulders of her sleeveless designer dress ... pausing for a pleasant moment, or two, to fully appreciate the statuesque line that ran downward to her bosom, revealed, as it were, within the tastefully tantalizing confines of an *illusion décolleté*.

The digital soundscape suddenly vibrated with the mounting chords and curious lyrics of a familiar song. The female vocalist asks a compelling existential question (“?”). The compelling question goes unanswered. The haunting lyrics evoke strong emotions of dread, specifically about living life on the edge: —“*Slip and fall if I take one more step!*”— such words were belted out stridently with high-pitch and rising urgency in high fidelity surround-sound.

Everett shifted his gaze to the center console looking for the determinate source of the music, which led him to the glove compartment, where he located the disc player. He ejected the active disc. The music instantly stopped. Everett read the hand-printed label out loud: “*Bliss Mix.*” He paused, shook his head in amazement and smiled as he re-inserted the audio disc.

“You didn’t think the soundtrack accompanying our epic road trip to Big Sur would be composed of *elevator music*, did you?!” quipped Beatrice, resuming the same familiar song.

“I guess not,” Everett said agreeably. “But this is highly significant stuff! This is ‘*Wild West*’ by Lissie!” exclaimed Everett, referring to the powerfully evocative song at hand. “This song happens to be one of my latest all-time favorites,” he explained excitedly.

“This particular song means a lot to me too, Everett,” Beatrice reminded him.

The driving music rises to a sustained climax, the haunting lyrical phrase repeats, the vocalist asks one final existential question before the issue resolves and fades to a close.

“I guess it would at that,” acknowledged the tragic poet.

The sky overhead —previously a clear crystalline blue with a flourish of petticoat clouds drifting along the sea breezes like a chorus-line of stage dancers flashing crinoline under-slips— was turning noticeably grim and darker now. The deepening haze of the coastal marine layer was slowly creeping in upon the speeding motorists, and with it, the first smatterings of rain fell with dramatic impact, foreshadowing an impending storm. The sun itself faded into the haze.

Beatrice guided the Bentley Continental GT convertible to a halt on the shoulder of the road near Morro Bay, where she gracefully donned her denim jacket; and then, just as effortlessly, she raised up the convertible top. Everett Durant climbed out of the car, stood up, paced about, and stretched his beat and damaged frame as he gazed out at ‘El Morro,’ the Spanish name for the majestic picturesque *crown-shaped lava dome*, the last remnant of an extinct volcano that can be seen extending its bold heavy-metal finger defiantly up through the sedimentary sands into the saltwater marshes of the seaside estuary. Everett retrieved his leather jacket from the trunk of the waiting motorcar and they were on the road again.

The journey followed California Highway 1 inland, rounding the headlands of the dairy community of Harmony: human population 18, give or take. The grassy hills of Harmony provided a protected microclimate for man and grazing beasts. This afternoon the coastal bluffs appeared to be holding back a massive fog bank, allowing only occasional whiffs of the maritime layer to escape at low points, where it was seen streaming across the grassy landscapes with the appearance of wood smoke driven by the wind. The intermittent windshield wipers swept into action, keeping pace with an incessant drizzle, while the weather turned increasingly ominous.

“There’s something really eerie about these smoky vapors racing across the highway right in front of us!” remarked Everett. “Make that, all around us—” he added, turning his head.

Beatrice quieted the music with a slow fade to address the issue of impending weather.

“The distinguished visiting professor once told me that the Osage Indian People, an ancient Native American tribe, referred to select members of their clan as the *Moh Sho Tsa Moie*—which is literally translated as, *Travelers in the Mist*.” Beatrice turned and smiled at Everett demurely, making a pleasant eye contact before continuing to explain: “According to the distinguished professor, it is these elite adept elders of the Native American culture who were called upon in perilous times of great tribal uncertainty.”

“You mean they were good at tracking or finding their way in the *midst of uncertainty*?”

“Not exactly, Everett.”

“Well, what did the good professor mean by *Travelers in the Mist*, exactly?”

“The professor explained to me that this oral tradition was referring to tribal shamans who were especially adept at cavorting, communing-with, and/or summoning the primal forces of nature for the benefit of the tribe. For example, these shamans might attempt to influence the winds, the dust, or the fog itself to aid or disguise the strategic movements of the tribe, to escape detection, to improve upon a situation, or to conceal the purposeful movements of a war party.”

“I’m not sure I follow your line of reasoning, Beatrice,” said Everett. “We’re definitely traveling into some kind of nebulous deepening and mysterious mist, as far as I can see or tell. But, seriously Bliss, I’m not too sure about *Shamans*.”

“Think Moses, and you’ll get the professor’s point,” Beatrice said candidly... expectantly.

“Oh, I get it!” quipped Everett “—*Travelers in the Mist* are the ones who help-make the seriously cool-stuff happen?!”

They entered the pine forests of Cambria, a dripping canopy of mixed coastal oaks among a more ancient stand of ghostly Monterey pines along the Pacific Coast Highway. The two-lane roadway veered sharply to the west, and then sharply to the north again, paralleling the shoreline again at Moonstone Beach, where natural jade, agate, and jasper tumble like sea glass.

It was raining harder now as they transited a remote seaside span of exposed low-lying pavement. They cruised along beside deserted beaches populated largely by elephant seals from San Simeon State beach to the light station at Piedras Blancas, where the rock outcroppings are painted guano-white by the breeding colonies of brown pelicans and lesser seabirds. The sure-footed automobile neatly parted the rainwaters that were scarcely draining from the highway in a heavy and increasing downpour that had no end in sight. The thunderous volleys of rainfall pelting down on the convertible top made further conversation impossible.

A faded yellow road sign spelled out a silent warning: ‘*ROCK SLIDE AREA, Next 60 Miles,*’ drawing attention to a dramatic change in scenery, identifying a transition point in the journey—a point where the low-lying pavement, which is historically ‘*Subject to Flooding*’ (as noted on the road sign), narrows to a minimal two-lane ribbon of impossibly elevated roadway. After winding for miles through the pastoral hills of seaside grazing lands, the flanking bike lanes and paved shoulders of the highway came to an end; the gentle slopes of the exposed grasslands gave way to the imposing rock cliffs of the Santa Lucia Mountains at a place aptly named Ragged Point, forcing the narrow two-lane rain-streaked ribbon of roadway to precipitous heights, up to the very brink of a breathtaking adventure, out on a ledge above a stormy sea.

Twenty-three miles north of Ragged Point, Miss Beatrice eased the Bentley Continental GT off the Pacific Coast Highway with a series of nifty downshifts... turning decisively to the right, with a splash, onto a narrow strip of cracked and weathered asphalt that appeared to be the antiquated remains of a driveway, the poor condition of which suggested *a less traveled road*.

Ascending through a sentinel stand of Monterey pines, the remaining vestiges of pavement appeared to be more antiquated, more fractured. Powering steadily up the steep hillside in the down-pouring rain, the sure-footed automobile issued a determined leonine growl—capable of performing well in such inclement weather, to be sure, yet mildly inconvenienced this afternoon by the soaking rainfall and the occasional slippage of all four tires churning their way forth amid the physical deterioration of the hillside. The entire mountainside appeared to be percolating downwards, filtering through the fractured pavement in visible rivulets of sandy loam.

The ascending driveway led the wayward travelers up the exposed rain-swept mountain, angling sharply southward now, and then northward again, to complete the first of a series of steep dizzying switchbacks which left the tragic poet white-knuckled and quaking in his seat. Everett found himself marveling at the visceral impressions of his own natural fear of heights *vis-à-vis* the ironic implications of his tragic personal history. Rain pounded down hard upon the sodden vestiges and seeping connotations of this perilous cliffside drive.

Everett wiped the side window clear with the sleeve of his leather jacket and peered out: there was no guardrail, there was barely any paved road to spare. One front wheel was crunching gravel by the side of the mountain, the other was courting disaster.

The nimble Bentley Continental GT confidently ascended the steep mountainside, climbing through a dense layer of maritime clouds into a thin vaporous layer of greater visibility and loft where the travelers appeared to be floating—two wanderers floating above a sea of fog.

Beatrice gingerly rounded another steep hairpin-turn and motored bravely out across the exposed rocky face of the rain-soaked mountain. Everett swallowed hard and tightened his grip on the passenger hand-hold, straining to see—and then Everett actually *saw* an alarming perspective: that the only visible road ahead appeared to run *straight off the edge of a cliff !!*

Nevertheless, the agile Conti GT slowly churned its way upwards into the blind curve at a steep and unnerving angle into seemingly thin air: revealing, by its absence, the vanishing edge of a rarified roadway... the vanishing edge of a less-traveled roadway... the vanishing edge of a nearly forgotten roadway that ushers aspiring travelers up and safely around the sharp bend.

Looming high above the sea of fog, above the rocky cliffs of the Santa Lucia Mountains, massive rainclouds gathered and roiled along the vanishing edges of the western world.

And yet, the gossamer heiress continued to drive the epic adventure bravely forth across the astonishingly exposed ridgelines accentuated by breathtaking vistas and sheer drops.

Traversing the mountainside high above the earthly echelons of sea and fog, the antiquated remnants of a roadway led the travelers upwards to a high mountain terrace, whereupon the landscape flattened and the pavement widened into what appeared to be the entrance of a rustic camp compound of some kind. The Bentley Continental GT came to rest.

The facade of a modest one-story building stood out from the mist; it was flanked on both sides by a seemingly incongruent planting of stately Italian cypress trees standing tall and spaced apart; that is, planted precisely in a manner resembling a Tuscan colonnade. The Italian cypress trees stood tall, singular, upright, in contrast to the native species of coniferous evergreens of the Big Sur coastline, which tended to be more naturally gnarled, more horizontally-sculpted, more cruelly distorted by the punishing lashes of oceanic winds bearing stripes of salty sea spray.

Everett Durant surveyed the wild scene around him, realizing that daylight was rapidly turning dusky with the rain and that further travel in these environs at night would be perilous.

“What kind of place is this, Beatrice!?” he asked, raising his voice against the tempest.

“The very best kind of place,” Beatrice answered matter-of-factly. Turning off the engine, she added: “The kind of place to get our epic journey started off on the right foot, that is!”

“Tell me more!” Everett insisted, noticing what looked like a bell tower in the foreground.

“See that wooden sign over here...” said Beatrice, pointing out the driver’s side window.

“Yeah, I can sort-of see something over yonder in the juniper bushes. What does it say?”

“It says, ‘*Welcome to the Hermitage,*’ Everett... reservations are by personal invitation.”

“I see,” said Everett, speaking above the percussive din of the rainstorm.

“I hope you’re not disappointed with me already,” said Beatrice coolly. “I really do have the best of intentions, Everett.”

“Well now, pretty lady, let us summarize our epic journey to Big Sur thus far—” Everett began as Beatrice leaned in close to him, unbuckling her own seatbelt in order to hear his summary narrative more clearly: “Well, we opted-out of brunch in the shallows of Malibu, in favor of a high-minded luncheon in Santa Barbara with a distinguished Emersonian Professor,

who provided me fair-warning regarding our so-called *epic road trip to Big Sur*, which I willingly committed to, with you leading the way, of course; that is, until you shockingly veered off the beaten path and headed straight up this lonesome mountain road—make that, zig-zagged crazily back and forth, clawing around freaky blind curves up this lonesome mountain road—only to find ourselves dead-ended into some kind of far-flung hermitage that is literally miles off the grid! No five-star hotels, no seaside mansions, no Club Med packages, no luxury vacations for the two of us wayfarers tonight!?”

“Tell me what you *really* think, Everett. You know very well that the stakes are high!”

“I think I have a serious decision to make: right here, right now!” Everett announced with feigned vehemence, struggling to hold back a smile until he felt like his face was going to crack. “I can either walk back down this humongous mountain and hitchhike my way back home... or I can get ready to meet some far-flung monks at this remote edge of the earth!” he said cheerfully.

“Splendid!” exclaimed Beatrice, joining Everett in outright laughter at his predicament.

Stifling his own hilarity to some extent, Everett added: “—Far-flung monks whom I can safely assume you have already contacted beforehand and are presently awaiting our arrival!?”

Before Beatrice could confirm or deny Everett’s assumption, a young bearded face appeared *close-up* within the rain-smearred frame of Everett’s side window; and then, it disappeared.

The face re-appeared at the driver’s side window. Beatrice rolled the window down.

The face belonged to a bearded young man—a man in his mid-to-late twenties. It was a *humane face*, full of presence and character and a calmness of facial expression that bespeaks kindness and good will, even at a distance. The bearded young man was holding a large umbrella overhead, bending forward to keep the torrents of rain outside as he peered into the car window.

“Good evening, Miss Beatrice. I am so pleased to see that Everett Durant has decided to accompany you on your latest sojourn.” Bending further inward the young bearded man with a humane face added: “Hi there, Everett. I’m really happy you decided to join us this evening.”

“Howdy, far-flung monk dude,” said Everett, with a wave. “But it seems to me that Miss Beatrice knew I would be coming this way long before I actually decided the thing for myself.”

“Yes, yes indeed,” said the young monk, beaming. “I hear Miss Beatrice does have the tendency to do such amazing things.... By the way, Everett, you can call me *Brother I-Heart*. Everyone else does.”

In lieu of further explanation, the young monk stood up and stepped backwards—the image of a welcoming face framed in the driver’s side window was replaced by the image of a white tee-shirt emblazoned with the iconic expression, ‘I *Heart* Jesus,’ whereon the word ‘*Heart*’ was replaced with a *red heart-shape* ideograph. Overall, the figure of a far-flung monk standing serenely with an umbrella in the pouring rain, brandishing the boldest of all graphic tees beneath the monkish raiment of a zip-up hoodie, was both curious and impressive.

The young monk’s bearded face appeared *close-up* in the driver’s side window again.

“Now let’s get you two out of this storm and settled into your quarters,” he said. “There’s still plenty of time for us to get acquainted before this evening’s Vespers.”

• • •

The hooded monk handed the umbrella to Beatrice, who proceeded to sashay into the monastic compound with her rolling travel bag in tow, disappearing under a wooden pergola covered-over with flowering wisteria vines with large clusters of purple blossoms, heavy laden with rainwater, bending low in the deepening twilight like clusters of ripening grapes.

“Apparently, Miss Beatrice knows her way around this neck of the woods,” remarked Everett, raising the collar of his leather jacket against the harsh volleys of the blustery squall.

“You’re right about that,” replied Brother I-Heart. “Miss Beatrice has her own private digs with a magnificent view.... It’s a little larger than our minimalist cells, but no more luxurious.”

“I’m not too comfortable with your use of the word *cell*, Brother I-Heart,” cautioned Everett. “It sounds a bit threatening, a bit punitive, don’t you think? ... as in *prison cell*!”

“Oh Heavens! Don’t worry, Everett; this place is nothing like that! We just like to call our private rooms *cells* because it sounds really serious and humble, and because it’s part of the monastic tradition of this particular order. In practice, this place is all about individual liberty and personal freedom. You’ll see.”

Standing there in the rain, casually parsing the semantics of a hermit’s cell versus a hotel room with a curious monk he just met, who was by now every bit as soaking wet as he was, Everett offered up a compromise as an expedient to dryer quarters: “How about we agree to call my digs a *sanctuary* for the time being, so that we can both get out of this rainstorm!”

“Sounds good to me, Everett. Your *Sanctuary* is right this way.”

Brother I-Heart led the way into the rustic compound along a narrow garden path redolent with the freshly-awakened muskiness of the earth, the heightened windswept fragrances of wild pines... juniper berry balsamics... and jasmine flowers... amid the tempestuous smacks of a cruel pelting rain that tasted very much like seafoam.

Everett followed Brother I-Heart into the lush hermitage gardens, striding briskly in the unremitting rainfall, passing a dozen unadorned hexagonal cottages: each one constructed of cinderblock walls and timber-frame lumber, such that a generous overhang of roofline formed the structural basis of a covered porch. Stepping up out of the rain onto a redwood deck they peered through a window into the tranquil dim-lit interior of Everett’s designated *sanctuary* space. Everett nodded appreciatively: he was pleased to find a clean, dry, low-key lighted place.

There was a central living area with two chairs, an adjoining sleeping cove with a half-bathroom, along with a minimal hot-plate kitchenette, a writing desk and chair set, and a separate nook for reading or prayer. There was a hooded Big Sur “guest sweatshirt” hanging on a wooden peg by the entranceway; there was a neatly-folded stack of towels on the bed; there was a three-tier Indian Tiffin-style lunch box on the counter of the hot-plate kitchenette.

Everett left his suitcase on the floor by the door; he slipped off his leather jacket and placed it over the back of the desk chair to drip dry. “Make yourself comfortable while I test out the indoor plumbing,” he said, heading over to the bathroom with a noticeable limp.

Brother I-Heart unzipped his rain-drenched hoodie and hung it on a peg by the door, before easing his young athletic frame onto the plush cushions of a well-padded armchair.

When Everett returned, he couldn’t help but notice a six-string acoustic guitar leaning up against the wall by the side of the desk beneath a large picture window. He stepped and turned and leaned hard upon the desk, staring out the window into the tempest with unseeing eyes.

“I’ve got to be honest with you, Everett: your reputation precedes you around here... It’s not a big secret that everyone is hoping, and most of us are praying, that you will see your way clear to write more pure meaningful *cutting-edge* song lyrics again someday.”

“That’s not likely to happen for me anytime soon, Brother I-Heart,” said the tragic poet, as though the weight and the sorrow of the entire woebegone world were bearing down upon him.

Everett returned to the central living area where the young monk was seated; he shifted his suitcase to the bedside, tipped himself into the matching armchair, and he sighed. “I fully realize that I’m a sick and damaged puppy, *Brother I-Heart Jesus*, but what’s your story, bro?”

Before answering Everett directly, Brother I-Heart reached into the pocket of his jeans and retrieved a small box of matches. Everett watched the practiced movements of the young monk’s hands as he meticulously withdrew a single wooden match from the match box and rolled it thoughtfully between his index finger and his thumb. Meanwhile, the monastic chamber was illuminated to some extent by a dull amber light emanating from two mission style wall sconces: one located above the writing desk, the other within the sleeping cove. The tee-shirted monk proceeded to ignite the match and to light the wick of a single beeswax candle contained within a glass enclosure on a low table that stood before them; the candleflame danced to life in the spaces between. The facial features of the far-flung monk sharpened dramatically as the resulting *chiaroscuro effect* of direct light and deep shadows played out upon his youthful countenance, in artistic agreement with the portrait painters of old, who taught that portrayed solidity of form and feature is often best achieved by the light falling upon it.

“My story is similar to just about anyone my age,” brother I-Heart began. “Anyone who might find themselves looking for something farther-out, or even out of the ordinary; something intensely moving, beyond the mundane, that is. Anyone who might find themselves with a healthy sense of adventure, or even misadventure; anyone with a natural hankering for some kind of personal cosmic connection; anyone my age, but especially someone like me and my spiritual brethren here, who share a deep abiding love of hardcore scriptures music and poetry with elevating connotations, including the propensity for *getting high* in social situations.... By *getting high*, I mean becoming heightened *psycho-physiologically*... That is, I mean to say that the *social* and *psychological values* ascribed to a *heightened experience* can be of momentous—”

“I know just what you mean, Brother I-Heart,” Everett interrupted, nodding cheerfully in the proximate luminosity of the flickering candlelight. “I was once a young man myself...” Everett rocked forward in his chair, squinted hard into the wick and oil of the candle for a long moment, and continued in a somber tone: “I was also a fledgling graduate student once upon a time....”

“How’d you know? How could you possibly know?”

“Wild guess,” said Everett smiling; he was beginning to suspect Miss Beatrice at work here.

Inside, the candleflame flickered and played upon the faces of the tragic poet and the young student / apprentice monk. Outside, the torrential downpour continued on unabated. Frenzied volleys of windswept rain splashed against the exposed windows, instilling a chilling sense of immediacy and a ubiquity with the whirlwinds prevailing just beyond the window panes.

“So, what manner of *calling* brings young Brother I-Heart to a Big Sur hermitage?” coaxed Everett, “The majesty of the natural setting; the serenity, the comradery of the monastic lifestyle; the isolation of the hermitage environs which informs the human spirit as much as it encourages the devotions of a scholarly lifestyle and/or a creative *life of the mind*.... Seriously, just what manner of *calling* are we talking about here, bro?”

“I’d like to say *all of the above*, Professor Durant,” replied the young monkish apprentice. “But now I really don’t know what to say to you at all.” The young monk shifted in his chair. “I’m embarrassed by my own sophomoric temerity,” confessed Brother I-Heart. “You obviously see right through me—not only as a novice inexperienced monk, but as a clueless *wanna-be* original songwriter... someone who earnestly wants... someone who *seriously* wants, to do what you once did!” he cried out, declaring his innermost deep-down romantic artistic intentions with clenched fists quaking expressively. “Nothing more! ... nothing less!” he added, visibly shaking.

Everett looked directly into the candleflame again to escape an eerie ghost-like parade of spectral memories, complete with distorted *visual bokeh effects*, which accompanied his personal recollections of all those shining times of wonder with *Celeste Emo* gone by.

“Now hold on, pilgrim,” exclaimed Everett, returning with renewed compassion to the present conversation: “I feel we’ve both come pretty *far-afield*, Brother I-Heart, to *accidentally* meet each other here on such a wild night as this—although it may not actually *feel like far* to someone your age, someone with nearly their whole young adult life still ahead of them.”

Everett touched his thumb-tips together dramatically with both index fingers point up, framing the young chiaroscuro monk in a visual frame like the Director of a motion picture: “But I can tell you this, Brother I-Heart: you’ve got the courage of your convictions, brother—it’s printed right there on your dripping wet tee-shirt—and that’s more than I can say for most of the upstanding people, persons, and personalities I’ve come to meet on this long strange trip I’m on.”

“Thank you, Everett. Coming from you, it really means a lot. You know, sometimes I try so hard to write it all out... all my deepest feelings and fondest longings, all my secret fears... only to find that there is nothing new under the sun; only to find out that I have essentially wasted my time; knowing that I have nothing the least bit interesting or original to write, let alone say, to a gorgeous girl, a mysterious woman or any romantic person of interest, no matter how hard I try.”

“Hang in there, *younger brother*,” sighed Everett, shifting in his chair. “I can remember *exactly* how it felt when I felt how you feel *right now*—this tremulous urge you have to reach beyond the comfortable classical song lyrics of the distant past; this compelling desire to pour yourself out upon new blank pages with the emotional agonies of fresh arterial blood! Surging

artistically skyward with all the breathtaking, devastating eloquence of new intoxicating wine; yet it bleeds you out, leaving you *psycho-physiologically disheveled*. Allegorically, you are left *Desperate*—in search of either a medical tourniquet or a more-reliable wineskin to hold it all in!”

The tragic poet rose up reluctantly from the armchair, stretched his *beat* and *vagabond* frame, and slowly paced the floor, limping as he continued: “But then again, Brother I-Heart—from my humble perspective as an *older brother*—I believe you are right where you should be: that is, deep in the heart of things that matter, contemplating the *Grace of God* on yet another misty mountain. You see, Brother I-Heart, Charles Bukowski was right-on target when he opposed the withering pessimism and conformity of our modern age with a heroic *call-out to artists*, reminding a new generation of trust-fund trekkers, would-be dharma bums of the Next Generation, in no uncertain terms, that *isolation* can be a powerful kickass *gift of the gods!*”

Everett pivoted sharply on his heels and continued pacing as he spoke. “Realizing, of course, that isolation, like meditation, is a pretty cool hand to play, regardless! Realizing that the mindful cultivation of an interior stillness, a *wordless cognitive awareness*, can be a productive force artistically. Verily, the *beats* of a fatalistic drum, and the *sounds of silence* created within a lyrical work can be as important to creating *Poetic Rhapsody*, on any given windy night, as are the words of *Memory* that *softly sing*... as important as the words of *Eternity* that *loudly roar!*”

The wind outside rose to the level of a high-pitched scream. Overhead, timbers creaked and groaned with the unbridled cadence of the tempestuous blasts. The storm-driven rainwater lashed fiercely against the window panes, worrying the candleflame, in a lyrical manner of speaking.

Everett Durant limped onward rhetorically: “Thankfully, the mindful cultivation; that is, the artistic, visionary cultivation of an interior *stillness* often expands one’s *cognitive awareness* into something intense that is akin to *Knowing*—and this *noetic quality* may develop into something too powerful to ignore: a tiny pinprick-point that bursts all your protective bubbles. Suddenly, you realize that you can’t possibly hold back all these powerful, undeniable realizations—not one second longer! Potentially, a countdown begins; ignition happens; and something wild and free-wheeling comes bursting out of the depths of your soul, rising up like a solid-fuel rocket—and this rip-roaring realization comes on so strong that you find yourself shedding all your old skins, tearing all your fashionably-tailored seams to shreds, until— *At last! Eureka!* — *”

* Footnote: “Eureka!” California’s State Motto (Eureka, from Greek, literally, “*I have found it!*”).

“Your own authentic *yowls*... your own pristine *vowels*... your own original *howls* come roaring out of your heart and your mind and your mouth from your guts?!” Everett raised the palms of both hands upwards in unison as he spoke, as though he were summoning the courage to reach, perchance to behold the majesty of poetry in the service of beauty once again.

“Bravo! Professor Durant!” applauded Brother I-Heart. “I, myself, have three of your classic *Beat-On Poetry Lectures* on video. Some of your early *Bukowski / Chinaski lectures* entitled *Literary Lowlife* are already considered to be collector’s items.... I got mine on eBay.”

“I’m thrilled to hear that, Brother I-Heart,” said Everett with obvious sarcasm, while seating himself on a corner of the writing desk. “However, under the present circumstances, I might be more interested in what you’ve learned *since* this old worn-out washed-up poetry professor left the ivory towers and joined the circus to follow an impossible dream. In other words, I’m way more interested in hearing what matters most to *You*, and *Tonight*, Brother I-Heart, including this here *Saving Grace* situation you’re basically advertising on your wet tee-shirt.”

“That’s easy,” replied the aspiring songwriter and/or novice monk, fingering his scruffy chin whiskers as he spoke. “The *heightened experience* I was blubbering about earlier is essentially a deeply personal search for *Gnosis*, as it is sometimes referred to in modern times—a catchall term that refers to *direct personal ecstatic experiences* that appertain to the divine.”

“Hold on, bro,” If you are referring to *Gnosis*, as in Gnostic religious practices that sprung up in the first centuries following the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth; weren’t those religious practices actively and effectively suppressed by the early church, whom happened to be more interested in stabilizing social structures and addressing pressing political issues at the time?”

“Yes, exactly: *the lost Gnostic ceremonies*,” stressed Brother I-Heart, *nearly whispering*.

“I don’t mean to pry into your personal affairs, dude,” said Everett, “but isn’t that old-school *Gnostic spirituality* sort of frowned upon as being somewhat *heretical*, if not forbidden, by scholarly monks of your particular ilk?” the tragic poet wondered out loud with genuine concern.

“Forbidden? Heavens No! Not here; not at Big Sur! This old hermitage is like the Library of Alexandria, Everett. Sacred scrolls from all over the world are being revived and translated and brought to the brink of a new understanding right here at Big Sur! I mean it, Everett, I’ve been studying the modern translations of the Nag Hammadi codices discovered in upper Egypt circa 1945—like anyone would who was interested in following up on, say, a favorite author or even a favorite historical character—but especially important red-letter texts like the Gospel of Thomas, a text of recorded sayings, aphorisms, and parables thought to be as old or older than the earliest New Testament gospels. You see, Everett, I have this great idea for a scholarly Ph.D. thesis—”

“Ahahaha! A Ph.D. Thesis!” announced Everett theatrically. “I mean, of course you do.”

“I have this cool thesis,” continued the apprentice monk: “I’m convinced that the so-called *heretical* Gnostic rituals promoting heightened personal experiences were *affectively* similar to personal and shared rhapsodic experiences so often associated with modern rock concerts.”

“That’s a mighty good thesis, Brother I-Heart. And what is your working title?”

“I was thinking something like ‘*Our Gnostic Heart Beats.*’ Four separate but concordant words—what do you think, Everett... I mean, Professor Durant?”

Everett turned the phrase over thoughtfully in his mind; he glanced at the young man’s graphic tee-shirt and granted his unofficial academic approval: “I think it would do just fine!”

Emboldened by Everett’s academic approval, the apprentice monk continued: “The problem I see in integrating re-discovered Gnostic elements and chants into modern church services...” announced the young candle-lit monk, “is that so-called Christian Rock music is simply lame.”

“Whoa there, cowboy!” exclaimed Everett. “I’m in complete accord with your high artistic intentions, Brother I-Heart, but you might want to consider modifying your artistic criticisms to read something like: most of contemporary Christian Rock is musically and lyrically lame, *but not all!* That way you leave a little wiggle room for someone like *you-dude*, to create a better *alternative expression* of the lyrical impulse. Verily, Brother I-Heart, I still believe that impassioned lyrics which somehow manage reach further and *deeper than the superficial jive* become better love songs and indeed *better social medicine* in time.”

Everett stared briefly into the candleflame again to staunch the *ghost-parade* of memories.

“Is something wrong, Everett? Is it something I said?” Is it something you just said to me?”

“No way, bro; you’re doing fine. It’s just that you remind me of someone I knew a long, long, long time ago.” Everett perused the vegetarian snack contents of the Indian Tiffin-boxes. “Meanwhile, what’s the latest greatest things you learned at Stanford, or is it Berkeley, bro?” Everett sampled a handful of dried fruits, nuts, and chocolates and he smiled. “Never mind—regardless of where you hail from academically, Brother I-Heart—would you kindly bring me up to date on your personal research interests ranging from the Beats to the Beatitudes in 200 words or less? Preferably less....”

“Well Now,” Brother I-Heart began enthusiastically, “there is Aldous Huxley, who started the whole *Human Potential* movement, inspiring a generation of psychedelic tour guides; that is, when he wasn’t cataloguing the common features and properties of all the religious faiths in an anthology he called *The Perennial Philosophy*. Of course, there is Sigmund Freud, who rescued

us from occultism; and Carl Jung, who rescued us from Freud, mostly by revealing cathedral-like *structures*, accessible doorways, mandalas, and stained-glass windows of the human mind; not to mention it was Carl Jung and his scholarly friends who were partly responsible for rescuing, translating, and publishing Codex-1 of the Gnostic texts. Add to the list Abraham Maslow, the American psychologist, who proceeded to catalog and sort-out the *wide-ranging facets* of the mystical experience in modern terms, as it relates to Jungian depth psychology, pointing the way to an insightful life-affirming ecstatic experience: a so-called *Peak Experience*; and he would proclaim the virtues of this *Peak Experience* to the high heavens, without leaving so much as a practical cartographer's map, a useful clue, a hint, a breadcrumb, or even a basic recipe for spiritually *leavened bread* for a would-be spiritual *seeker*, like me."

"Seeker?" queried Everett.

"A seeker of Jack Kerouac's *IT-factor*, that is," added Brother I-Heart, for clarification.

Everett returned to the armchair and thoughtfully considered the literary allusion for a beat before responding. "As I recall, Brother-I Heart, if my aging memory still serves me correctly, wasn't the freewheeling delinquent cowboy basically doing all the describing of the notorious *IT-factor*? And didn't he have to explain to his friend, the clueless tag-along diary-writer, that the very nature of this so-called *IT-factor* is considered to be among the grand '*Imponderables*' of life, in terms of philosophical hermeneutics and interpretations of sacred texts?"

"Yes. Yes. Exactly that!" exclaimed the candle-lit monk, whose animated expression brightened as he leaned forward in the chair. "Jack Kerouac masterfully draws the reader into that memorable bar scene, laced with a potent mix of Dionysian sensuality; fueled more or less by nicotine, uppers, and alcohol; graced by the sublime mastery of a music created, captivated, and expressed as an unbridled *spirit of soulful jazz*, which resonates with the listener as it strives for a freedom of expression beyond musical formalities, beyond form. And here's what I think that Jack Kerouac was striving to tell us: Although the writer's authoritative *IT-factor* is certainly to be considered among the *Imponderables* of life, it is vicariously observable, on occasion!"

"What are you trying to tell me, dude?" asked Everett encouragingly.

"I'm trying to tell you that those original songs with *Celeste Emo* have the *IT-Factor* going on *Big-Time*, Everett!" The young monk leaned far back in the chair and gazed up at exposed rough-hewn timberworks overhead. "Those soul-piercing lyrics... the sound of that angelic voice... *Celeste Emo* had-IT *Big-time*, for me!" The young monk snapped forward: "*Celeste Emo* had *IT big-time bright, with neon lights*, and I'll never forget that feeling as long as I live!"

Stunned momentarily, yet not too surprised to find that the mere flutter of honest praise can be mutually redeeming, Everett glanced at the bright whips of flame that flickered and smoked; then he looked deeply, sympathetically into the sparkling eyes of Brother I-Heart, and he smiled. “Might I ask what *You* and *Miss Beatrice* have planned for us tonight, in terms of Vespers, bro?”

“You won’t believe it, Everett. Miss Beatrice not only convinced the *other brothers* to indulge my academic inclinations,” he boasted excitedly. “They have even agreed to let me introduce some Gnostic elements and motifs into our group prayer sessions—allowing me to choose any kind of music that might fit my general thesis and advance my scholarly agenda.”

“Nice going, scholarly-monk. So, what kind of *Poetic Rhapsody* did you choose for us *prayerful petitioners* tonight?”

The young monk smiled and said. “Tonight, for Vespers, I have two versions of “*Thunder*” by Imagine Dragons on tap. I spliced-in an official remix featuring K. Flay, adding relevance to, well... my demographics. You really don’t have to attend Vespers if you don’t want to, Everett. Nobody is required to do anything or to be anything, but quiet—during the specified quiet times, that is.” The young monk’s head bent forward as he pocketed the box of matches. “But I was really hoping you would come and help me set things up musically in the rotunda tonight.”

“Now you’re talking!” Everett shouted, leaping up from the armchair onto the plank wood floor. He peered out the picture window: whirlwinds raged beyond the rain-streaked glass.

“After we set things up electronically, you can just relax and enjoy the show,” said Brother I-Heart, beaming with pride. “And then, when the music starts, all you have to do is clap your hands together *three times real loud*—when the time is right, that is—I’ll let you know when.”

“I know the song, dude!” Everett assured Brother I-Heart, nodding his head with a smile.

They headed to the door laughing, venturing out together like children sneaking blissfully off to stage a hither-to-forbidden alternative rock concert, as they grabbed their respective / matching *Big Sur hermitage hoodies* from the wall-pegs and headed bursting-out into the furies, the mysteries, and the sanctities of a seriously dark and stormy night.

• • •

It felt good to be off-the-grid again, even for a little while; even as an upper level *Atmospheric River* poured itself out onto the Big Sur coast in the form of continuous heavy rain. Everett, the one-time college professor, presently a washed-up songwriter with a highly regarded vagabond voice, was a big hit with Brother I-Heart and the scholarly monks at the isolated old-school Big Sur hermitage. When called upon in humanistic discussions to parse, interpret, and expound upon the nightmarish dreamscape lyrics and iconic symbolism presented by the youthful female vocalist in a hit single entitled, ‘*Everything I Wanted*,’ Everett rose to the occasion and politely explained: “The term *The Golden*—presented early-on as a *stepping-off point* in this particular lucid dream—is an erudite reference to the Golden Gate Bridge.”

The following evening, while helping to orchestrate another musically-enhanced prayer service, Everett found himself parsing ‘*Paradise*’ together with Beatrice et al. More specifically, they were co-experiencing the repetitive lyrical impressions of a powerful postmodern *Rock-song* describing the plight of an innocent young girl who is feeling lost in the world, and is only capable of escaping her personal disappointments and doom through flights of her imagination and in dreams. Everett was with Beatrice et al. in the Big Sur chapel, standing together beside an electronic sound mixer watching, listening, simultaneously hearing and appreciating these eerily anonymous song lyrics: “*When she was just a girl she expected the world, but it flew away...*”

Brother I-Heart was bent over the mixing console adjusting signals and blends for the song, entitled “*Paradise*” by Coldplay, which he had intentionally queued for the prayer service. He was bent to the task of differentiating the narrative lyrics of the verses: ‘*In the night, the stormy night, away she’d fly*’... from the repetitive chant-like elements, which were strongly amplified by Brother I-Heart and progressively reinforced audibly by the attending monks, in unison.

Much like a sympathetic chorus commenting on critical aspect a classical Greek Tragedy, the resident monks all sang: “*She’d dream of Para-para-paradise... Para-para-paradise... Para-para-paradise... Woha oh oh oh oh, oh oh oh!*”

The rains fell upon the postmodern *mise-en-scène* like heaven’s tears, every drop a waterfall, saturating the Californian coastline to the point where a coastline-changing landslide event was simply bound to happen... and then it did happen! ... It began with a loud unsettling seismic bass-tone rumble—the kind of bass-tone rumble, which is more felt in the chest than is heard with the ears—followed by a series of alarmingly loud percussive bangs heralding a more discordant cacophony, followed a huge conclusive far-reaching whoosh!

A large swath of the mountain had simply moved! And Big Sur became an island!

Eye-witness reports of catastrophic damage along the Pacific Coast Highway sounded surrealistic, and yet they were all confirmed. Yes, the newspapers were right: this Big Sur landslide was catastrophic, the mountain itself had moved, the land had drifted thickly over the

roadway. The tabloids moreover, were graphic: *a monster landslide obliterates the Pacific Coast Highway beyond Ragged Point, cutting the Big Sur Wilderness off from the rest of the world!*

Beatrice was unperturbed by the practical necessities of extensive road construction, much less deconstruction, of her personal philanthropic mission. Beatrice, the heiress, resorted to her own artful methods of *appropriation* and *montage*—she bowed her head and began the concerted act of texting. . . . Otherwise, this epic road trip to the Big Sur Wilderness might have to be placed on hold, perhaps for years, while extensive civil engineering permitting and funding is proposed and debated and road repairs are initiated and completed in the fullness of time, perhaps forever.

Nearly everyone at the isolated Big Sur hermitage, including Brother I-Heart, was perplexed by this huge and daunting obstacle; and yet Everett Durant remained committed to the so-called *road trip*, supremely confident in the good intentions of his designated driver. Finally, one rainy day, Beatrice looked up from her texting and smiled demurely over at Everett, who was idly marking time. “I think it’s time for us to consider *Alternative Modes of Conveyance!*” she announced. “I also think it would be best if we both return to Los Angeles immediately!

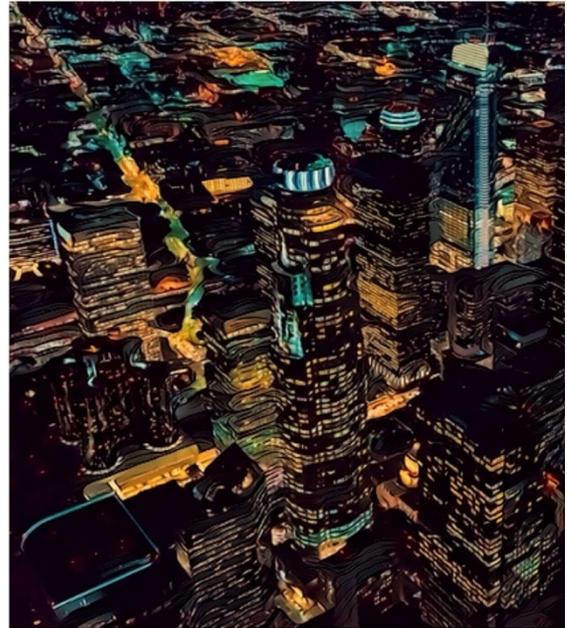
“And just how do you suggest we do that, pretty lady? The mountain has swallowed the road!” Everett stared out at the down-pouring rain, *wondering* to himself *how in the world is this even possible*.

Hearing this, a mutter of meditative monks within earshot of the cryptic conversation gathered, drawing nearer to the influential heiress at the brink of this epic disaster, circling around Miss Beatrice and Everett Durant in anticipation of more high drama, and to better hear her latest travel announcement.

“Using my emergency authorizations,” Beatrice explained, “I managed to make VIP arrangements for us, Everett. I chartered a private helicopter-taxi, a luxury limousine, and an out-bound train connection just for you.” But we will have to hurry and leave right away. . . . My sources inform me that *time is of the essence* with our specific aims and romantic goals in mind.”

“I get the fast-paced-celebrity-rock-star-helicopter-taxi-ride-limo-into-Tinsel-town-stardom situation, Beatrice,” said Everett dismissively, sounding somewhat downbeat. “I’ve been-there, played-that air-taxi megastar arrival scene before, he added. “But I am rather curious about this mysterious *Train-Ride connection* you just mentioned—it’s your magic swirling ship after all, Miss Bliss—but tell me this much, pretty lady with the sparkling eyes: am I going to like it?”

“I do believe so,” Beatrice responded demurely with a girlish laugh. “There is only one train station I know of where *Angels* bearing such awesome *Dreams of Beauty* might yet depart.”



Chapter 8

It felt strangely familiar for Everett to be flying into the glittering night lights of Los Angeles again: flying *ever-so-slowly*, and yet, *oh, so effortlessly*—cresting the dark ridgetops of the Bay City mountains, dropping down upon the dim-lit palisades and coastal foothills, flying low and beating blatantly into the nighttime brilliance of the sprawling LA basin—Everett gazed out through blurred reflections at everything sparkling without saying a word. Beatrice continued texting on-and-off throughout the private flight. The helicopter pilot beat-on without comment in the midst of occasional heavy rain, following just above the serpentine freeways of streaming LA traffic before climbing steeply up in altitude at the approach of the skyscrapers of a glistening skyline: ascending tangentially beside these soaring glass-eyed giants amid a crisscrossing gyroscopic swirl of helicopter blades, glaring strobe-light reflections, and flashing navigational lights—landing squarely on the rooftop helipad of the iconic Bonaventure Hotel—which is well regarded for postmodern architecture and attitudes, as well as heavenly boudoir bedding.

C8, to be Continued...

Konrad Ventana © November 4, 2021