

Tidal Swans
James Welsh

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I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.
I do not think that they will sing for me.
-T. S. Eliot's Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

Give in to love or live in fear.
-Jonathon Larson, playwright

Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas?
-Title of a 1972 essay from Edward Lorenz, mathematician

Act I: The Set-Up

When God created the world, he said, Let there be light, and it was so.

When Io created the world for the Maori, he said Light and it was so.

When Tirawa – god among Pawnee – created the world, he sang Lightning and it was so.

When the Netsilik hare created the world, he said Day and it was so.

When Liz created Jacob, she said Hi and it was so.

The Hi was at 6:55 pm on a Tuesday night. There was no 6:53, no 6:54. It was not that time didn't exist before the Creation. It was just that the time didn't matter then. Every second had looked like every other second, drenched in a cold, wet darkness. When she said Hi, a flickery ceiling light nearby turned a solid bright, throwing light over her shoulders like bad luck salt. It was like someone spun the shutters open and let the morning in for coffee.

Hi.

Jacob looked up, saw the pretty girl standing next to his chair. The chair with the bad back. Had to be careful not to lean back too far, they said, else you'd make it a bed. And you'd make yourself look like an idiot.

Hi, Jacob mirrored back.

There was once a nymph named Echo. Caught having a fling with Zeus, Echo was cursed by the jealous Hera. Echo could only speak when she was repeating the words of someone else. There was also a man named Narcissus, who was in love with himself. Poor Echo was smitten, but could only regurgitate what Narcissus said to her. Not impressed, Narcissus left Echo heartbroken. The nymph cried until the only thing left was her voice. Later, Narcissus fell in love with his mirror in the water and paled to death, all the while gazing lovingly at his own reflection.

What started all of this? The prophet Teiresias said that Narcissus would live to be an old man, as long as he never knew himself for what he was. At what point did Narcissus give into himself? At what point did Narcissus put on a wig and cross-dress as Echo? At what point did Narcissus hallucinate his self-love into a nymph that could only repeat what he said?

Maybe that's when you know it's true love – when you can't tell your words from hers.

So, have we met before?

Um, n-no.

Jacob almost stuttered the word. Hard to quiver a word with one syllable. The old childhood stutter was back to haunt. He straightened himself out.

No, no we haven't. I'm Jacob.

I'm Liz.

So, uh, Liz...what's your major?

Art conservation.

That so?

Well, I used to be in chemistry. My parents wanted me to work in a lab the rest of my life. Make us proud and make some money, they said.

Liz said the last sentence mockingly. She rolled her eyes and continued.

Parents say so much. That bothers me. I just switched majors yesterday. To art conservation that is. Haven't told my parents yet. I don't know if I should. No...I don't think I will. It's none of their business. They aren't paying my way through college. Uncle Sam is. So who do they think they are, deserving answers? I've always been a question. Why? Don't answer that. It'll kill me.

Um.

But I just love paintings so much. Love how the shadows make the people move. That's why the eyes follow you when you walk down the main hallway upstairs. Funny how shades create light, I mean life. And I love, Love the way painters slather the colors on the canvas. You could run your fingers on the painting and feel the landscape. The hills, the mountains, the trees, the ocean. My parents don't understand. No one understands. I don't understand. I just feel. I feel the paintings. I can't feel DNA. You need a microscope to see these things. I want larger than life. But enough about me, I think. What's your major?

Jacob said, English education. Used to be English Education before switching.

Ah...you a freshman?

Yes, how could you tell? Is it that obvious?

You're optimistic. This university will beat the good will out of you. Give it a year. That's how long it took for me.

Oh.

Liz continued, And whatever you do, don't take a class on something you love. You'll hate it even quicker.

I'll try and remember that.

Jacob looked at the clock on the far wall. It was 7:00pm. It was changing of the guard.

Jacob said, Well, I'm about to head out. Have some homework I have to start working on.

Isn't it ironic?

What?

We work in a library and we never have time to study. That's the one thing I hate about all of this.

Oh. Well, like I said – have to get going. It was nice talking to you...

Liz.

That's right. Sorry.

It's okay. Names are overrated. Nice talking to you as well.

Good night.

Good night.

Jacob left the desk. He walked for the door, thoughts rattling in his skull. She talked too much. People who talk too much are afraid to think. Still, Jacob wished he had someone to talk to at that second. Because when you don't talk, you think. And all Jacob could think about was Liz. Her fervent redhair. Her little smirk. Her dreaming blue eyes.

And here was he was. The oakish hair. The muddy April eyes. The confused look. Like tails chasing dogs but never catching on like fads.

Jacob was afraid to think of it.

When Jacob – son of Isaac – was walking at night, praying to God that his brother Esau wouldn't kill him, he met a mysterious person. Jacob demanded the person's name. The person wouldn't give it. They argued, they fought. And they fought. And fought. It wasn't until

morning that Jacob walked away with a kosher limp. They say you never ask an angel's name. If you know their true name, you can evoke them in prayer. That's all it takes to break an angel, knowing their name. Just knowing a word can make you God amongst men. Perhaps that's why God is God – he knows the Oxford English Dictionary by heart.

And yet, so few English majors study literature for that reason. Jacob loved words too much to control them. Although it's easy to mistake love for fear sometimes.

And yet, so much of Liz was angel.

And yet, our Jacob – leaving the library that night – could name her but she already won him over.

Jacob tossed and turned in his bed like ship that night. The dark rain was tapping on the windows. The rain crackled like clock ticks, counting off the seconds, the minutes, the hours. And still Jacob turned, the bedsheets washing over him. He was a shipwrecked sailor and the tides were pushing him ashore.

It wasn't the rain that kept him up. He loved a little rain like drought flowers did. Rain never killed anyone. Besides, Jacob was Irish. The only water that could kill an Irishman is the River Shannon. The Irish poor rolling in their beds – then graves. The begging for water. The water turning steam from the pneumonic fever.

TV was on. Some infomercial about kitchen knives or something. Jacob couldn't go to sleep without the white noise of infomercials that all sound the same. Call in the next twenty minutes! was his rockabye lullaby.

Yet so many thoughts. He was getting too old for thinking. Only eighteen – yes – but cavemen got pensions when they were eighteen. First day of classes, he had gotten out of bed and his bones creaked like door hinges. Being late for class was the oil in his gears. He whooshed off to first class – Shakespeare – where the professor gave Othello for next week's reading, Twelfth Night the week after. The professor spoke in a thick Stanfordese – it was hard to understand.

Shakespeare was fun though. Linguistics, no. Philosophy, no. Latin, Ford no. Wished that adviser never talked him into Latin. In the dark, Jacob flipped the bird like an omelet in no particular direction at the adviser. Latin was a dead language for a reason. No point in bringing it back to life. Bloody language drowned in so many different tenses it was hard to keep track of it all. When the professor spoke, Jacob couldn't tell if she was speaking in the future, the past, the conditional, the imperative. She was everywhere – like the world – and the world confused Jacob.

Blah. His friends were just a week fresh. They were all rough, New Jersey-bred. They were starting to get stale though. One guy hallucinated, thought his well-to-do suburban home was the projects, that his lyrics that simply rhymed together were legendary. The rest were little better. The serious writer in the group evoked Jack Kerouac in all the wrong ways, rarely showing up for class and – when he did – he was drunk skunk. Smelled like one too.

There are countless ways for people to go sour. The one girl he knew was sour. Jacob figured it was because she was tanned leather. Anyone who sits out in the sun for that long is bound to go milksour.

He missed his high school friends. Missed how they didn't try to hug the world all at once. Sure, they were narrow, but they were happy. The more smart people learn, the more ways they have of killing themselves. The stupid people are all instincts and reflexes. They can't fight the

urge to eat, sleep, and so on and so forth. The smart people are always sad. The world has ruined the world for them. The smart people also know about hangman's knots, water's conductivity, drug cocktails.

Jacob missed his stupid people – people who believed that Philadelphia was the end of the world. Darfur was fiction to them. Rwanda was fiction to them. The Indian Ocean earthquake was fiction to them. No wonder they were so happy.

Sigh. I think too much. And I watch the news too much.

And Liz talked too much. He smiled to himself in bed, thinking of how she wouldn't shut up. He hadn't forgotten about her – he was trying so hard too. She was a dreamer, yes, but she wasn't a dream. He was awake and she still lingered stubborn. You're supposed to forget about dreams when you wake up.

Why couldn't he forget her?

Maybe because she was a redhead. Jacob had a thing for ladies with bloodrose hair. If a redhead is the first thing you see when you wake up, it's like the sunrise shining through the window. Better than coffee. Redheads were always slightly insane though – so much the better. Explained the last redhaired lady in his life...

Jacob groaned and got out of bed. He put his glasses on and pulled a chair up to the window. He could feel the chill pressing through the window. He brushed his hand against the glass. It was sticky with cold. The rain was still quietly tapping on the window. He tapped back. It was pillowsoft Morse code.

Jacob tapped, What should I do?

The rain whispered, Just fall where you fall.

Good rain. You were always the smart one. Not like that slow snow.

Lightning flashed deep away. It was so cold outside that when the lightning burst, it was an electric blue. It wasn't a forked branch either. It was a sudden flash, like the pilot light flicking on. The whole night became a cold oven warming up.

The thunder came three seconds later. It was a muted trumpet, dying before it could echo. Like a lady passing away before she could become a mother. Sad way to go. Quiet too.

The rain was beginning to fall slower now. A large raindrop cracked against the window and trembled slow down the glass. It reminded him of what Joyce said:

His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.

He looked back at his bed. He saw the rumpled sheets coming in like the high tide. He saw the TV beyond the bed, the bright screen a lighthouse across the bedsheets. There was no one floating in the water. No one but himself. All alone in the swirl, pushing closer and closer towards the jagged rocks.

A tiny voice murmured inside him. Taunting him.

That's why you can't forget her.

When Frankenstein created his monster, he never gave his beloved Creation a name. Why? He put life together, but couldn't bring himself to a name. Even the Dark Ages bred their Smiths, their Coopers. The monster roamed the world, lost without a name or a purpose. He

became the unknown. He was monster to some, devil to others, wretch on occasion. Because everyone's terrified of something without a name.

The monster took its vengeance, picked apart Frankenstein's family, killed Frankenstein's wife, Elizabeth, fresh from the wedding. It seems love doesn't love to love love. Frankenstein's obsession for dead ends killed his life, I mean wife.

And then Elizabeth was an angel.

Jacob had gotten his library job less than a week into classes. It was in the library's basement – called the Dungeon in some circles. There was only one window on the entire floor, the light somehow seeping in like spilt orange juice running off the table. The Dungeon was dark and gloomy and medical journals. The new computing site – just put in the semester before – was bright and warm and electric. On the cold mornings, you could gather around the computers and feed off the baked air the fans were spitting out.

The librarians called blasphemy at first. The idea of having electronics in a library was sin, right up there with using dictionary pages as toilet paper. Librarians were afraid that people would become illiterate if they used computers. Because – as we all know – people do absolutely no reading on a computer. They don't read e-books, news articles, word processors, and so on and so forth.

So the librarians attacked from a different side. They said computers are weak. You could wave a magnet over one and wipe years of hard work. They said computers only work for a few years. That books work for a few hundred or even a few thousand years. They conveniently forget how easily combustible a book is. Damn Nazis burned Kafka, Hemingway, Wells. Oxford University scorched Thomas Hobbes. Savonarola burned *Metamorphoses* at the stake. Caesar arsoned the Library of Alexandria, taking with it Homer's works along with tens of thousands of books. The Greek plays we still read today are the charred fragments of that fire.

So viruses destroy computers and madmen with torches destroy books. It's too easy to confuse madness with viruses. It's almost as if the world isn't perfect.

Dort, wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen

But moving on...computers had that certain allure to Jacob. He had grown up with one in his bedroom like it was his brother. He had nothing else to turn to. The speech therapist called it impediment when the preacher called it speaking in tongues. He almost wished the preacher was his speech therapist. At least then people would pay attention to the boy speaking tongues. But the therapist was his therapist, so no one could understand a word he was saying. The computer could hear him though. Nothing rings louder and clearer than keys clacking away. He could speak with his hands better than he could with his mouth. He was as close to being deaf as the hearing can get.

He missed the quiet. No silence – mind you – there's still the hum of the computer fans whirring. It was a soft, white noise though. Books were even quieter. The occasional rustle, turning the page over like a stone. It crackled merry like autumn leaves beneath feet. Firedry leaves love the attention, how people step out of their way for them.

Jacob missed a book when he didn't have one right in front of him. He loved knowing that the answer to everything was on the next page. A good writer never leaves you hanging, but has you wanting more still.

He hated his last job. Retail, psh. No next page, no answers. Just customers who check their smarts at the door like coats. Sales for the wrong days. The shoplifters with the bouncing eyes. The cash register algebra. Too much for a boy – no, Jacob supposed he was a man now – to handle. A man who nursed on silence growing up. Sounds and distractions are all the same. Silence is lustrous.

He wasn't Meher Baba. Baba loved the quiet, true. Baba also loved loneliness – although he did declare to the world he was the Avatar. Doesn't make any sense. How can you say you want privacy in one hand and proclaim yourself as a deity in the other? Jacob's heart had beat for silence, but it needed company to keep the hours. How else would it know the rhythm for pumping blood? Jacob was always bad at rhythm.

The library was always crowded. The library was always quiet. Maybe why Jacob always walked to the service desk with a smile. He knew that besides the occasional question (Excuse me, where's the bathroom at?) he would have the world to himself, hearts beating around him like an orchestra warming up.

It was a warm feeling.

This warm feeling buzzed in the back of his mind as he walked between classes. He loved people. He missed them too easily. That was probably why he agreed to the text message so quickly.

Party IvyRoad 42 @9 tonite.

Jacob smiled as he sauntered into Linguistics – a first. He suddenly remembered that he had homework due for class today. Something about the AAVE. He swore, startling a couple girls sitting near the door, chatting.

He wasn't looking forward to the drinking though. He was sober for an Irishman – another first. He was a control freak, hated feeling his smarts slip out as beer poured in. It scared him when he didn't have an answer. The writer in Jacob was easily amused though, taking notes while everyone acted out idiot. Would make for great writing material someday. While everyone was possessed by their demons after the party, he was sitting out in the gutter, drinking his water bottle, trying to find constellations in the murky skies. Every star you could see was a shooting star in a Delawarean's eyes. They were all rare – too rare.

He still burned for sitting at the party, sobered amongst the sick. It was enough to keep him going through Linguistics. Enough to keep him going past his TA's evil stare when he didn't hand her his homework.

The college was run by the frats. They were drunk with power, holding the monopoly on parties. These supposed parties were all about initiation, seeing how the new recruits could stand the humiliation. Jacob heard the horror stories for years. He figured that if the little brats wanted to have their stupid treehouse clubs, then it was best to leave them be. Let them be the douche lawyers later on down the road. Although how could you sell your soul to be a lawyer if you didn't have a soul to begin with?

Jacob never went to those parties. In his first week, he was invited to several frat parties. He got creative with excuses. He even got away with telling the one person he was sick with

polio. The friend must have thought that was some strain of the flu. Jacob still immediately changed the polio definition on Wikipedia – just in case. Jacob was a college student for less than a month and already he was thinking like one.

No, Jacob went to a different kind of party. The not-so-mainstream ones. The creek parties. Crowded with the art freaks. The impromptu poetry slams. Throwing paint at the bedroom walls, hoping the art was at least worth the security deposit. Huddled around the tiny TVs, watching vintage music videos that lived only at night like vampires.

These are the parties.

It was the evening, and Jacob was lounging in the living room, squished between people on the grungy couch. The front of the room was transformed into a stage. A rickety stool was a platform. The people who dared use it had a good sense of humor as well as a good sense of balance.

One of those people daring the squeaky stool was one of Jacob's New Jersey friends – the one with the Kerouac look. He was up front, wearing a flat cap to let people know he was a poet. He was intense as hell about poetry, dragging out metaphors until they were little more than crumbs. Jacob wished he could be as fervent about poetics as Kerouac was – Jacob loved song lyrics more. But Jacob knew the time would come, when he would adore poetics the same. There is enough time for everything, including death.

Kerouac finished, everyone applauded. He bowed deep – he had some box wine earlier – and sauntered off the stage, chattering with a friend close to the soapbox.

Someone nearby whispered, Excuse me, and pushed themselves off the couch. Jacob looked up and saw the girl from the other night – Liz was it? I think so. Yes, Liz – walk past and for the kitchen. Jacob's eyes widened. He got up from the couch – sinking like quicksand beneath the weight of a near-dozen people – and went for the kitchen as well. He said, Congratulations, to Kerouac and stepped into the next room. As soon as he did, he ran his foot into the cabinet hiding just around the corner.

Jacob swore. Liz – who was grabbing some popcorn to put in the microwave – was startled. She dropped the bag.

Red in the face, Jacob said, Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you.

Wellll, it's okay. I love a good scare every now and then...say, aren't you that boy I work with? Jacob?

Yup.

You having fun?

Definitely, yes. You?

Meh, could be better. I have a horrible headache though.

Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

Don't be.

What? Sorry?

Liz nodded, I hate when people say they're sorry for things they didn't do. Cheapens it, you know?

Oh.

Silence. Liz tossed the popcorn bag in the microwave and turned it on. They both stood there, watching the popcorn bag spin slow.

I love dancing.

I'm sor...I mean, well, what do you mean?

The popcorn bag's spinning. Reminds me of ballerinas. I used to be a ballerina, you know.

Used to be? What happened?
Got tired of it. Like I do of everything else. Had to move on.
Well, there have to be some things you still love after all these years.
Liz looked up, her eyes glistening. She said softly, There are. Have to have one love. Else you'll forget who you are.
Ain't that the truth?
The microwave dinged.
Liz gingerly picked the hot bag out, flopped it down on the counter.
Staring at it, she said, I shouldn't be eating food like this. Too greasy. It'll make my headache worse. Why did I choose popcorn?
I can help you eat the popcorn.
You will?
Jacob nodded.
Liz smiled, That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me.

You're from New York?
Liz nodded, Yup, born and raised right in Queens. You can see the skyline from my house some mornings. You know, if it's not too muggy out.
That must be wild, living in the city like that.
You ever been there?
Jacob cleared his throat, Yes, a few times. Went up there with my track team to run a few meets here and there. That was some time back though.
It's a lovely city.
It is. Too noisy, though. I can't stand the noise.
Personally, I don't see how you can stand it here.
Jacob laughed, You mean here, as in Delaware?
Liz nodded, It has such a small town vibe here. Everyone seems to know everyone. It's all six degrees of separation. It would drive me up a wall, people knowing every single thing about me.
Jacob leaned back in his chair, chewing on a piece of popcorn. He said slowly, Well, why did you come here for school?
Because it's hard for me to stay in one place for too long. I'd feel trapped. Wouldn't you?
I'd rather things feel like home and not a prison.
So you'd want to live here? As in forever forever?
Yeah. It's all I've ever known. I don't even leave the state too often. I get homesick too easy.
Liz looked at Jacob sadly. She said, I don't think you know.
Know what?
What you're missing. This world is so much bigger. And scarier.
I know. That's why I prefer living here.
Like I said before, I love a good scare every once in awhile. And you should too.
I'll rather be safe. This life is all I have.
Don't be silly. Because this life is really all you have. I hate that carpe diem crap that's playing on everyone's broken record, but it's true. I don't think you know what you're not getting yourself into.

Jacob smiled a little smile, If you say so.

They went silent and back to eating the rest of the popcorn. Out in the living room, someone finished performing a poem. Everyone cheered, the sound echoing around the corner.

Liz suddenly got up, stretched, and said, Well, I suppose I better get going.

You are?

Yep. I told a friend of mine that I would drink cheap wine with her and trade horror stories about boys.

Oh.

Liz shrugged, It's a way to pass a Friday night. Well, good night. I'll see you in work in a few days.

You too.

Liz started walking out of the kitchen. Suddenly, Jacob asked, Can I have your number?

Liz stopped and turned around. She looked at him questionably. She asked, Why's that, darling?

You're an honest person. My New Year's resolution this year was to be around honest people more.

Liz smiled, Is that so?

She scrounged around in one of the kitchen drawers for a pen and paper. She found a marker, but nothing to write on.

Jacob offered up his arm. He said, Here's something you can write on.

Good idea.

Liz took Jacob's arm and began writing her number on the inside of his wrist.

He couldn't help but ask, Why the wrist?

If you write anything on your palm, you'll smear the ink quick. This way it lasts a little longer.

She finished writing her number on the wrist. He could already feel the ink pumping straight through his veins. His heart remembered each number all the quicker.

Jacob said, Huh. Learned something new today. And I had Linguistics class today too.

Haha. Linguistics, what a joke. We'll have to talk about that whenever you call me.

Deal.

And Liz left. Not for the last time.

When Jacob called two nights later, they didn't talk about Linguistics. Jacob was glad. He had spent four hours earlier that evening translating IPA to regular spelling.

How did your we-hate-boys evening go?

Huh?...oh, it went well. We sat around and ate ice cream. I poured whisky all over my French vanilla. Whisky is the new hot fudge.

I'm surprised you don't have diabetes yet.

Liz laughed, Me too. I love food soooo much. I'm going into withdrawal right now, actually. I don't keep food in my apartment. If I see food, I must eat it. I can't help it. I'm addicted to things.

I suppose we all are...have to keep grounded somehow. So, what are you up to right now?

Just finished Italian homework.

Ugh.

Ugh? How can you say that? I love Italian.

I'm dying in my Latin class. I'm thinking about withdrawing.

Latin sucks. It's a dead language for a reason.

That's my same thought. Who speaks Latin nowadays? Besides the priests, that is.

Jacob could almost hear Liz shrug over the phone. There was a long pause. Jacob thought for a moment the line disconnected and he was about to ask if Liz was still there when he heard her ask in a small voice, Do you have a friend who's so great that they make you feel terrible?

Yeah, a good friend of mine from high school actually.

What's his story?

He had no motivation at all. I had to threaten him to get him to pass his last classes. If it was up to him, he would still be in high school. This past summer he was walking outside of a movie theater with his girlfriend. Mugger tried to rob them. During the scuffle, the mugger shot his girlfriend dead. My friend got shot up pretty bad too.

Oh my God, that's terrible!

He took it pretty rough. I didn't go to see him in the hospital.

May I ask why?

I can't see people I love in the hospital. If I do, I would lose my nerves. No one should see the people they love broken.

...I understand.

But anyway, I never really talked with him about that night since he got out of the hospital. He's quiet now, a lot more than he used to be. Now he's going to college, taking classes. I've never seen him so driven before. He's become a real man now. Shame it took death to wake him up. But I'm glad that something did.

Liz said, I have a good friend. She's always having horrible stuff happen to her. But she's always laughing it off and pushing on. I don't know whether to look up to her or hate her.

Hate her?

She makes me feel so insignificant.

Does she mean to?

No. She's too nice to do something like that. I just want to tell her to stop being so great all the time.

Might be easier to be like her instead of bringing her down to you.

What's that supposed to mean?

I mean...oh nevermind. It's just that you should feel inspired by her. It's rare to see someone make a good thing out of a bad thing.

That's too hard.

Well...

Jacob let the word hang. He didn't know what to say.

Liz said, I wish I was great. Then people would speak to me.

What do you mean?

When I was growing up, no one ever said a single word to me. My parents never talked to me. Though they were the social butterflies. I was the ghost in the corner. It got to the point where I was even hoping the girls in high school would pick on me. Just to prove I wasn't invisible.

You aren't invisible.

Yes I am. I am to you right now. All you're doing is talking to a phone. A phone that just walks and talks like me.

Jacob offered, There were times I wished I was invisible.

Be careful of what you wish for.

But it's true. You would be shocked how often I got picked on in high school. How often I got beat up. I remember laying in the snow in middle school, covered in blood and my glasses broken. I had people threatening to kill me all throughout high school. I've had people pull guns and knives on me. So believe me when I say that I wish I was invisible more than anything else. Because it's hard to kill a ghost.

Liz mused sagely, Ain't that the truth?

So why you think no one paid attention to you?

Well, I had a speech impediment while growing up. I couldn't pronounce S or T. I still remember in kindergarten, me wanting to play with kids on the playground. I would try talking with them, but – since they couldn't understand me – they would walk away. I still hate them for that.

But they were kids. Kids are stupid.

And older people aren't?

Jacob shrugged, Well...you have a point.

I know I do.

Jacob said, I had a speech impediment too growing up.

What was wrong with you?

You know the alphabet?

Liz said, Yeah.

I couldn't pronounce half of it.

Oh. I see.

Jacob continued, I had the same trouble as you. People would have a hard time understanding me. They would walk away. But I would try just that much harder to make them listen.

What would you do?

I would draw pictures. Say I wanted water. My mom would hear waaha. So I would draw a picture of a glass of water to make her understand. I would make hand gestures to make people understand. I have always needed people to understand.

So what happened over the years?

I grew out of the speech problems. I forced myself to evolve. Problem was, I overcompensated. I spoke too much because I knew people understood so little. I've found the more someone talks, the more trouble they get themselves into. That's why I got bullied all those years. Believe it or not, bullies have excellent hearing. It makes up for their tiny brains. They're like bats. If they hear you answering questions in class, that's like blood in the water.

Liz sighed, I hate when adults say it's so easy being a kid. Being a kid sucks as much as being an adult, but at least adults have manners some of the time. Etiquette is a pair of shoes a kid never grows into.

Tell me about it.

There was silence on the phone for a few moments.

Liz said, I just wish people would talk.

Jacob said, I wish people would stop talking.

Then what are we doing right now?

This? This is nice.

Liz laughed, I guess you don't have a lot of talks like this?

Not really, no. Some of my friends, I've known for years. The only thing we ever talk about are classes or something. I've only known you for a week and we're already being therapists. I feel I should be sitting on a couch.

Liz asked, When am I getting paid?

Not as soon as you would like, probably.

Dammit.

Jacob continued, But yeah, falling back on what we were talking about, words are sooo important. It's what distinguishes us from all the other animals.

Not so much.

What do you mean?

Liz said, Well, I don't know if I told you this, but I used to be a chemistry major.

I remember.

Oh. Well, I did learn a thing or two before I switched. Back when they were trying to figure out the definition of intelligence – the British scientists, that was – one scientist kept arguing that every definition they gave was wrong.

Wrong? Why's that?

Because every definition of intelligence would apply to bacteria just as well as it would for humans. A petri dish is just a smaller Earth, once you stop and think about it.

Huh. That sounds pretty interesting. Who was the scientist?

Uhhh, I forget the name. One of the reasons why I wasn't in the major for long.

Perhaps.

Liz sighed, Welllll, I suppose I better get going. It's late and I have class early in the morning.

You do? Sucks.

Yeah, yeah. I'm thinking about just sleeping in late. I'd probably sleep through the class anyway.

Good point. Well, okay then, I'll talk to you later then?

Okay. What'll be on the next episode of Liz & Jacob?

That'll be a surprise for our viewers, I guess.

Liz laughed, Ah, a cliffhanger. You clever son of a gun. G'night.

You too.

Liz didn't call until that Friday. When she did, Jacob wished she hadn't.

Jacob said, Heyyyy, how's it going? What are ya up to?

Drunk.

Jacob joked, Drunk? On a Friday night? Who gets drunk on a Friday?

Shut up.

Oh.

I was at a party. My boy – (she spat the word) – was making out with this whore. He only did that because he knew I was there. That rotten ass-hat. He knew I was there, he knew it. I bet you he didn't even know her name. I doubt he'll ever ask. That stupid little idiot.

Woah, woah. When did you start going out with someone?

I'm not going out with him. At least, not right now...

Liz sneezed twice.

Jacob said, Bless you.

He and I broke up a few weeks ago. A few weeks! And he's already going out for nights on the town with sluts. I can't believe him. I absolutely can't.

You didn't say anything, I hope?

What do you mean?

I mean...

I had vodka and stormed out. I would have thrown my drink on him. Waste of good vodka though.

Well, Liz, I mean, people move on. People fall in and out of love. You just have to wish them good luck because that's all anyone needs is luck...

You don't get it, do you?

Get what?

I don't want to wish him luck. I want to wish him back. I was his good luck and he used me all up! He wouldn't have met my friends if it wasn't for me. He wouldn't have gotten his apartment if it wasn't for me.

Well, I'm sorry...

Don't you dare be sorry. I told you before, only be sorry for things you do. And you don't even know what's going on. No one does. I don't even know...

Liz's voice broke. Jacob thought for sure she was going to cry, but she pressed on.

I don't even know why I bothered calling you. As if you were any help.

Well, I'm trying...

Oh, you're trying.

Jacob stopped a moment. He had to push down the anger. His insides were boiling. He hated being mocked more than anything else. He wasn't going to let her drag him down. He wasn't, he wasn't. He was going to swim. Even if that meant letting her drown.

Jacob said calmly, Listen, I know you're going to hate hearing this, but give it time. Sober up. You're at a low right now so you can only go up from here...

Liz snarled, You're a naïve fool. You know that, right? Goodbye.

And she hung up.

Hiiii.

Uh, hello.

How are you?

It had been two days since the drunk dial incident. Jacob strained his ear against the phone. She sounded sober enough.

Jacob said cautiously, I'm doing good. Just, um, just struggling with this English paper.

Eck. What's it on?

About the witches in Macbeth.

I thought you couldn't say that name?

That's only if you are performing it on stage. At least, I think. I hope so.

I never read Macbeth. I gave up on Shakespeare after reading Hamlet.

Jacob asked, Ah. Why's that?

He could almost hear Liz shrug over the phone.

I dunno. I suppose because he takes the whole play to make one decision. I'm too impulsive. I hate indecisive people.

If Hamlet was an impulsive person, that would have been a really short play.

Liz laughed, You're probably right.

Yeah.

Are you okay?

Yeah, yeah. I'm fine.

You sure? You sound a bit corpsy.

Corpsy?

Yeah, you know. Like stiff.

Oh. No, no. I'm good. Just tired. Long couple of days.

So what are you having trouble with on your Macbeth paper?

Well, in the story, there are witches, you see. They make a prediction that Macbeth will kill the king and take the throne.

Does he?

Well, yes. But it's ambiguous. Hard to tell if the witches saw the future, or if they planted the idea in Macbeth's mind.

So what's the problem?

Well, it's how you look at it. If you're a sci-fi or fantasy person, you'll read the play for mysticism and stuff. If you're realistic and look for psychology, you'll read it for manipulation and self-fulfilling prophecies.

What kind of a man are you? Sci-fi or psychological?

I'm not sure. I think I need witches to tell me.

A pause. Liz said abruptly, If I had to live by someone else's rules, I'll kill myself.

Well...that's a bit of an overreaction.

You mean you wouldn't mind living by someone's rules?

I wouldn't enjoy it. But everyone needs a hand every once in awhile. If we're all by ourselves, we'll get lost pretty quick.

But you're still having someone else live your life.

Yeah. It's a cold comfort. If only life was DIY.

Liz sighed, I hate having to rely on other people. Everyone has been breaking my heart for years and the warranty's expired.

Isn't pain fantastic?

I wouldn't know. I haven't felt it in years. I've been habituated.

Tell me about it. I wanted to be an astronaut when I grew up, but all I am now is one of Pavlov's dogs.

Liz snorted, That mean everytime you eat, you flinch?

A little bit, yes.

Liz laughed, You're so goofy.

That's what people keep telling me. It helps me sleep better at night.

You're a cool person. Don't ever let any witch tell you otherwise.

Oh how ironic.

Jacob's eyes widened. I didn't just say that, did I? He wished he thought before he spoke. The other night flashed back to him. When Liz was a witch, under vodka's spell.

Liz caught on, What do you mean? What's ironic?

Well...

Liz interrupted, Sorry, but I think we have to close up shop for the night.

What's wrong?

Starting to get one of my migraines. I'm going to take some medicine and go to bed.

Sorry to hear...

Uh uh, remember what I said about being sorry?

Jacob couldn't help but smile, What I meant to say was I hope you get better. Have a good night.

Thankssss. You too. Nights.

Jacob was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking his cup of coffee slow. All the clocks in the house chimed in 11 o'clock. The night was thin. He glanced out the window, could still see gray streaks in the sky. The town had sweated off its electricity, and now the wattage was thick in the air, waiting for morning before raining down.

Civilization was nothing more than a massive nightlight.

Jacob looked down at his paper, scattered across the table. He was four pages down, one left to go. He had to cut some paragraphs out, though. It was due tomorrow. His opening sentence on the witches didn't feel right. Don't want to change that though. That means starting over.

Jacob sighed and rubbed his eyes awake. He tried to keep focused on the paper, about how the witches formed Macbeth into a pawn.

But his mind kept coming back to Liz. Did she really forget all that she said the other night? Did she really have that much to drink? She had to have forgotten. Jacob could have told her. No, should have told her. What good would that do? Have her angry at him again? This time while sober? This time that she could remember?

Jacob looked at his murky reflection in the coffee and whispered, And this is why you don't fall in love anymore.

He promised himself over that past summer that he would never fall in love again. He had a lot of time to think that summer. He had made the mistake of taking a job at a department store. At least he had a lot of time to think while roaming lost in the aisles.

Jacob had something with this one girl he graduated with. Sort of something. It was complicated. Her name was Olivia. She wore thick glasses. She smelled faintly like oranges. She liked fun. But what she called fun, Jacob called stupid. But Jacob still liked her. He would have smoked cigarettes and drank tequila and got into trouble as long as it was with her. Olivia said no, that he wouldn't be able to keep up with her.

Jacob could still remember the last time they talked.

She said, I don't want you to change your life. I'm not worth changing your life over. Just be you, that's all I ask.

Jacob winced everytime he thought of her saying that. He wished that people would be more creative. He wished they didn't recycle lines from after-school specials. He wished that people put more effort into ditching him.

His friends kept him in the loop since. Said she fell in with some guy who rides a dirtbike. A real rebel without a cause. Olivia was supposed to be a teacher. But her shifts at the fast-food restaurants paid just enough for cigarettes. She was fine with that. Jacob wondered what would have happened, if she had chosen him over James Dean. Would she still be happy?

Probably not. People are happier being lazy. She wouldn't regret anything until she got old. Real old. Then it would be too late for anything bigger. Too late for everything, even an early bird special.

Jacob frowned. He thought about his promise: Thou shalt not fall in love. He wished he hadn't made the promise in the first place. Promises are made to be broken. And Liz was the bull in the china shop.

He wished he could forget things as easy as Liz did. Can't break a promise that you don't remember. Maybe that's why alcoholics drink. After a couple beers, who could remember their New Year's resolution?

Jacob casted his eyes downward. He knew he couldn't forget things. He was terrified of forgetting. His journals were mountaining in his closet. He didn't want to miss a single thing. Because at some point in life, that'd be all you'll have in the world. Jacob didn't have the heart to scatter his memories like grain in the September rustle.

And so he let the memories build up like trash heaps. Liz was everywhere he turned. He had to forget either her or the promise. Couldn't keep both. The promise never to fall in love was solid. It was consistent. But it couldn't smile the way Liz did in her little happy moments. Nothing could smile the way Liz did. Not even Olivia.

Jacob drank the rest of his coffee, hoping to wash the thoughts down. His tongue tingled as the hot coffee rinsed over it. The coffee's touch kept him awake, more so than the caffeine ever could.

Hi.

Hello, how are you?

Good, good.

How did your paper go?

Which one?

The one on Shakespeare. Macbeth, was it?

Jacob sighed, Meh, could have been better. I ran out of time.

That sucks.

Tell me about it. I've been watching old home videos all night.

You have? Why?

I miss 1992.

I don't see what's so special about '92. It was a mess, just like every other year.

Jacob turned from the phone and coughed. He said, Well, it was a good year. See, I was about four years old, and my family went on vacation. My grandparents came along. It was the only time I could remember my grandfather not being in a hospital bed.

What happened to him?

Cancer took him. Took a couple years, but cancer got him in the end.

That's a shame. I lost my granddad to a heart attack when I was about that old too.

It's sad to see them go when you're that young, isn't it?

Yeah.

I mean, all you really have of them in the end is memories. That's all that can outlive a person.

Yeah.

I was told...

Jacob chuckled.

...I was told this one story about my granddad. When he was a bit younger, his family owned a barn. It was old and filled with snakes. Really nasty ones. And they decided that it would be best to tear it down. Now, my granddad was one of seventeen...

Seventeen?

Yep. He was Irish.

Ah. That explains everything. Continue.

Well, like I was saying, he was one of seventeen and the only one to agree to tear it down. Now, he wasn't interested in tearing it down by hand, though. He had a more efficient idea in mind. He poured gasoline all over the barn, lit a match, and walked away.

Liz laughed, Sounds like fun.

Well, it probably was. Until the fire got out of control. Apparently, gasoline fires can get pretty wild. They had to call the fire department when the fire started creeping towards my great-grandma's house.

He sounds like quite the character.

He was. It's a genetic thing. My family passes down the crazy like it was an heirloom.

A pause.

Liz offered, I guess it's best if we have to lose people, we lose them young.

I don't know. I guess. I lost a good friend of mine in high school. I remember that. Too well.

May I ask how he died?

It was a she. Car accident. She got ejected, and the car rolled over her legs. It took her a couple months to die.

That's awful.

It was. She was a good person. She just fell in with the wrong crowd sometimes. It was the wrong crowd that talked her into the car that night. She was a wonderful person.

I'm sure she was.

Jacob continued, She was a writer. A very good one.

What did she write?

Poetry, mostly. I still remember the first time I heard one of her poems. Everyone had to bring a poem to class to recite. I had just started writing poetry at the time, and I was embarrassed. So I brought Kipling. She brought one of her own poems. It was wonderful – much better than Kipling's. She was amazing. I think about her everytime I write a poem. Also, everytime I get into a car. Might be why I'm afraid of driving, now that I think about it.

You're afraid of driving?

Absolutely, yes. I hate it with all my soul.

Maybe you should move to the city then. Take public transportation.

I would, but I don't think I'm cut out for the city. I'll take Delaware over the big town any day. Didn't we talk about this before? I'm getting déjà vu.

Me too. But there's no point to living life doing something you hate.

Isn't that what life is filled with?

Yes. So why add to the list?

You do have a point.

Liz snorted, I know. That's why I talk.

A pause.

Jacob started up again, I guess I just worry too much.

You guess? It sounds like you have OCD, for christsakes.

I suppose we all do. Everyone wants some control.

Not me. I love the surprise. Don't you?

Not as much of a gambler as you are.

Shame. Gamblers have all the fun too. What language are you taking?

Jacob was caught off guard, Huh, what?

What foreign language are you going to take, silly?

Ohhh. I'm thinking about taking French.

Take Italian. It's such a gorgeous language.

Is it?

Yep. And I'm not just saying that because I'm Italian.

I'll consider it.

Liz went on, It's just that English is such a boring language. It's so mechanical. No music to it.

Well, that's what happens when you borrow from German.

Guess so. But yes, take Italian next semester. That way we can be study partners. I need someone to hound me to study.

Jacob offered, We can use Italian as some sort of twinspeak.

Twinspeak?

You know – that secret language that twins use to talk to each other?

Liz burst out laughing, Ohhh I see. Well then, it sounds like a plan...twin.

And so it came time to pick classes for the next semester. Jacob picked up two English classes and some other random stuff. He gazed longingly at the poetry workshop class. He couldn't fit the fun stuff in his schedule though. Jacob didn't have the time. There were too many education classes, too much student teaching, and not enough time and certainly not enough money to compromise.

But then it came time for the foreign language. Jacob didn't have much of a choice – he had to take a language. University rules.

He had been thinking for awhile of taking German. He took a few years of it in high school. Some of the words had to have been still sticking to him, right? Even after all this time?

He saw the introductory German. He also saw classes for Portuguese, Spanish, French, Russian, Chinese, Arabic. And he saw an intro Italian course. And he remembered what Liz said about the language. How they could be study partners. How she could help him with the class.

So Jacob signed up for Italian.

And all with just a few sentences of thinking behind it.

Hi Jacob.

Hi Liz.

Having fun?

The two were sitting at the service desk in the library. 6:55 again on a Tuesday night.

Jacob inflated his cheeks and rolled his eyes, Can you please shoot me?

Haha. You have a couple minutes left of your shift. Be glad.

Couldn't be any longer.

Is sitting on your ass – I mean, your posterior – for a couple hours really that back-breaking?
Do you know how many people I told where the bathroom was tonight?

Too many, I guess?

If they put up a sign telling people where the bathroom is, I'll be out of a job.

You and me both, darling.

Someone's phone went off nearby. Ringtone playing some obscure electronica. The person quickly stifled the ring.

Liz's eyes widened, Ohhhh, let's dance.

Right now? In front of the whole library?

Liz smirked, Afraid of being the dancing rebel? What is this, a remake of Footloose?

No. I'm just not much of a dancer.

Well, here's the next best thing.

Liz reached in and hugged Jacob hard. He could feel all of his blood being pushed up from the squeeze, the red flushing his cheeks.

What? Now don't tell me you're much of a hugger, either.

I'm not. I can't help it.

You can't?

I'm part German.

Liz laughed, That explains you being such a stiff then.

I'm allergic to hugs. They make me sneeze. When I was little and my grandma would try to hug me, I would run and hide.

Really?

Jacob nodded.

How could you live like that?

Jacob shrugged.

Remember though...something can repel you, but it's only pushing you closer to something else.

Jacob wanted to say something. He wanted to ask, So why do you bother running away from things? He already knew how to deal with Liz, though. So he simply nodded.

Everyone's afraid of everyone, so they make everyone everyone's problem.

Jacob laughed, That makes...sense.

Hey, I'm just the scientist. Was the scientist.

That's right. Now you're one of us. You're an art major.

Noooooo.

Jacob looked up at the clock. It was almost time to leave. He didn't want it. He wanted to stay at work forever. He couldn't believe he was saying it, but he would gladly direct people to the bathroom for the rest of his life if he could. As long as Liz was there to keep him company.

Remember what you said about never falling in love.

Shut up. This is not falling in love. This is being friends.

Is there a difference?

Yes...I think. I don't know.

But it was time to leave. And he had stuff he had to do. He got up, stretched.

Jacob said, Well, it's about that time.

So it is, darling.

You able to talk on the phone tonight?

Liz's eyes glinted, Yes, that sounds lovely.

Good...good.

Someone suddenly stopped by the desk – a lanky athletic-type – and asked, Excuse me, where's the bathroom at?

Jacob pointed in the far corner, said, It's down the hallway just beyond that stairwell.

Oh, okay. Thank you.

The lanky athletic-type barely turned the corner before Jacob and Liz had burst out laughing. They couldn't help it. No one could.

Jacobbbbb.

Hey, what's up?

Looking out the window. Guess what?

What?

Liz said gleefully, I can see stars.

You can?

Uh huh. It's wonderful. Can't see worth shit in the city. I love New York, but it's hard to look past all the skyscrapers.

I love stars. I can't get enough of them.

I think you would love living out in the desert somewhere.

Really? You think so?

Yup. I can tell things about people. I figured out a lot about you today.

Do tell.

You hug like a statue, for one.

And?

Well, that's about it. You can tell a lot about people, the way they hug. You hug as if you wish you were the only person you ever saw.

Jacob played pretend-hurt, Ah jezz, that stings.

You sound so offended.

How do you think you hug then?

What's that? I'm sorry, I blanked out for a moment.

How do you think you hug? If I hug like a statue?

Liz deadpanned, I hug like a bird that poops on statues.

Jacob laughed, No, seriously.

I hug...like I want to love everyone. No, that's wrong.

Jacob asked, How so?

Only thing I remember from freshman English class was the difference between metaphors and similes.

Similes use like or as. Metaphors don't.

Exactly. Using like is the same as just talking about something. Waters it down, you know? With a metaphor, you are that something. So I hug everyone because...well, I have to love everyone.

Huh, interesting.

Jacob could almost feel Liz beam over the phone.

I know, right? Not bad for a silly girl. I just wish everyone loved me the way I love them.

What do you mean?

Liz asked, Have I ever told you about Ethan?

No. Who's that?

Liz sighed, Ethan was my ex. We broke up some time back.

Ohhhh.

Jacob suddenly remembered the drunk dial incident. He didn't say anything else, though, but let Liz continue.

When we were going out, we were always arguing.

Arguing about what, may I ask?

Anything. Stupid stuff really, now that I think about it. We would fight, he would leave.

Couple days later, I would see pictures posted all over the bloody Internet of him drunk with girls. He would come back. Rinse, cycle, repeat. Blah.

Jacob said helpfully, Sounds like he was a douche.

Same thing I thought. That is, until he left.

What changed?

Me. I realized I was being horrible to him. It's my fault he left all those times. He had been soooo good to me over the past year or two.

It doesn't sound like it.

He was. It's hard to pin someone down in a couple sentences. A good person anyway. The interesting people need the whole language to be explained.

So you think you can reel him back in?

I like to think so, yes. Even trying would help me sleep better at night. I think I can change him.

Change him? As in break him?

Liz said stubbornly, Not really. He's not some stallion. He's just a chubby boy with glasses. I think I can make him accept me.

I don't see why that's your problem. Sounds like something he has to deal with.

It's a monster I created. It's my responsibility.

You confuse me.

I do?

Yup. I thought you were one of the free spirits. Now here you are, chaining yourself to what this Ethan boy wants.

Love is too important for the little things. Don't you agree?

Yes...no...I don't know.

Don't be such a Hamlet.

Ah, an allusion.

Liz giggled, You noticed? I'm afraid I'm starting to become James Joyce.

I could never understand Joyce.

Liz said dreamily, I can't either. That's why he's amazing.

Anyway, back to the talk...this guy, um...

Ethan.

Ethan, that's right. So you really love him, then?

Yes.

Even if he's been knocking up every girl in town?

I wouldn't say that about him. That's a bit unfair. He subscribes to the hippie love.

You're okay with that?

I either have to forgive him or forget him. I'll rather forgive him. I heard he's been dating a new girl though.

Is that so?

Uh huh.

The memory of a weaker Liz, drunk and tearful, flooding over the phone was haunting Jacob. He could have sworn he was sleeping, and this was a nightmare. He shook it off and tried to come back to awake.

Liz continued, I've been throwing coins into the fountain outside the library.

Wishing on what?

That he would leave his new girl and come back for me. I know what you're going to say: that wishing fountains are only supposed to be used for good, not evil.

I would say that, but that would make me a hypocrite.

Jacob had thrown a fistful's worth of pennies into that same fountain awhile back. He hoped that would be enough for Olivia to come back to her senses, to dump her James Dean. It didn't work. You have to be richer to afford love.

Liz said quietly, I just feel like I'm being replaced.

That's not saying much for yourself.

What do you mean?

Well, you're saying if he's confusing someone else for you, then that means you weren't that special.

I suppose.

But you are special.

Liz laughed shortly, You're sweet. But I still think she's the new me for him.

You make it sound like love's an assembly line.

It is. If it's defective, you send it back for a new one. People think it's as easy as getting a toaster.

Jacob couldn't help but ask, So why not think of him as being a toaster?

Because he's the only one who can calm me down. I have...my moments.

That so?

Uh huh. When I'm with him, I can never stop hugging him. He's like a giant quilt.

Jacob wondered if it was possible for a person to smother a quilt, not the other way around.

Jacob?

Hmmm?

I miss him.

I can tell.

I'm so confused.

Jacob asked, I thought you liked the surprise?

I do. But I don't.

I see.

I just wish he would notice me. I've been dying my hair all different colors the past few weeks. Everytime I see him, all he says is Hi. Nothing about my hair. I would keep changing it colors if I wasn't so afraid I'd go bald.

I've noticed.

What? My hair?

Yup. I was going to say something at work, but I forgot.

That so?

Yes. I wish I could pull off having purple hair. People would look at me weird, though. At least they'll look at you. I don't even know what my original hair color is anymore.

Liz sighed hard, then continued.

A crazy person shouldn't have to be lonely. All eyes should be on them wherever they go. Not to say you're a loon.

Jacob reassured her, I don't mind. If anything, I take that as a compliment.

Liz said, Good, I'm glad someone does. I was starting to get worried about people.

Why's that?

If nobody acts silly, everyone looks the same. They're all shades in the night.

Oh.

A quiet.

Jacob?

Hmm?

I have to go. Good night.

Night.

The Greeks once believed that Orpheus civilized us. He gave us medicine, the sciences, mysticism. Whatever he did, the rest of humanity followed close behind, mirroring his steps. He was the pinnacle of us and thank goodness we never thought to walk past him.

Not bad for him being a poet and a musician.

One day, his wife – Eurydice – was walking in the tall grass when she stepped on a snake. The snake bit her. The fangs were sharp, but the poison was sharper. When Orpheus found her body in the grass, he played such heartbreaking songs that the world cried with him. The world was his groupie after all.

Orpheus decided to rescue her. He went to the underworld and confronted Hades himself. He won Eurydice back, all for the price of a song on his lyre. Hades warned him, though, that if Orpheus dared look at his wife before they left the underworld, he would lose her forever.

As they ran for the surface, Orpheus had doubts. Was she really behind him? Did she fall back? Was it all tricks on his mind? He couldn't help it. He looked back and saw his beloved get immediately snatched up by the darkness, this time for good.

If Orpheus couldn't bring his beloved back to his arms, who's to say the rest of the human race could?

Hiii.

Liz dragged out the syllable into a paragraph over the phone.

Hey there. How are ya?

Gooood. Just making spaghetti.

Jacob put down the book he was reading for class. He asked, Does it stick to the wall well?

Huh?

The spaghetti, does it stick?

Oh. I'm afraid to check. As long as it doesn't stick to the bottom of this pot, I'm happy.

So...?

Liz sighed, Nobody wants to talk to me.

Why's that?

I dunno. My roommate doesn't want to talk with me. Ethan doesn't want to talk with me. I called my mom earlier tonight. She said she was doing laundry. Can you believe that?

Jacob couldn't help but be honest. He said, Not really, no.
I'm an only child, but my parents ignore me like I'm one of the middle kids.
Just do what I do.

What's that?

I keep talking until someone notices. Works most of the time.

Liz laughed short, I'll stick with that. It seems to have worked tonight.

But surely they haven't always ignored you? They must have noticed when your mom gave birth to you.

Oh, my mom kinda had to. After that, they seem surprised when I talk to them. Almost as if they forgot about me.

Examples?

Well...like when we went to Key West last summer...

Ah, you went to Key West?

Yes.

Did you like it?

Jacob could almost see Liz smile on the other end of the phone.

Yes. The decline of Western Civilization never felt so wonderful. Although it could have smelled better.

Jacob laughed, Nice. But continue. Sorry for interrupting.

Not at all. But yeah, during the entire trip, they kept wanting to sit on the beach the whole day.

What did you want to do?

I wanted to walk through all the dorky little museums.

That so?

Uh huh. I love museums. But when I told them I wanted to visit the museums, they told me to go swimming in the water for a bit. As if I'm just some little kid.

Which you're not.

I know I'm not. I'm glad someone else thinks so too. Besides, there's sharks all around the Keys. You would think they were signing my death warrant. You know, by having me swim with all those horrible sharks.

How could you be so sure?

So sure of what?

Jacob shrugged, Well, when a fin's sticking out of the water, it's awful hard to tell if it's a dolphin or a shark.

I hate them both.

Oh.

Sharks have that constant snarl. Dolphins are just stupid. They're like a bunch of dogs chasing their tails and licking their junk.

I take it you're not a dog person?

I'm a crazy cat lady. Always have been, always will be.

Jacob couldn't help but ask, What is it that people see in cats?

I take it you're a dog person?

Jacob laughed, Yes.

Well, the cat is used to being alone. If anything, it's actually proud of it. I strive to be a cat. If I'm going to be lonely, I might as well be arrogant about it.

I see. It doesn't have to be like that though.

It does for me. The less people you talk with, the easier it is to run away.

Jacob asked, So why are you calling me?

Why?

Jacob immediately regretted it. He was afraid of igniting her temper.

Well, I was just curious...

Welllll, I dunno. I get confused easily. I guess...

You just need a second opinion?

I suppose so, yes. Let's go with that.

A quiet.

Jacob said, You know, Liz, when you need someone to talk with, I'll be here. I'm only a phone call away. Believe it or not, someone cares about you.

Thanks, that means a lot. You know what that means though?

What's that?

That you're giving me yet another reason to run away.

How does that work out?

Maybe some other time. I'm tired. I'm going to bed.

Good night.

Nights.

It was the middle of April. Jacob had one of those moments, the moments that everyone wants to forget. The moment which you tell people years later where you were and what you were doing when the trauma happened.

His grandparents could remember the Kennedys getting gunned down, Camelot shot dirty through a clean heart. His parents could remember Reagan's near-assassination, Lennon's murder. Jacob himself could remember that September morning years before when New York City didn't shatter, but it did get scratched.

Jacob would have to shoulder remembering this day too. He had to clean out old, good memories of his childhood and put this day here to remember. He wished there was nothing to remember.

He was sitting in the library. Jacob should have been studying. Instead, he was sitting at one of the computers, surfing the net. Jacob was a news junkie, he had to admit. He had to know everything going on in the world. Had to know about every broken treaty, every hunger strike, every daredevil stunt gone wrong. He had to know everything in the world. He was terrified of the world, but he knew the more he knew, the more he could make it home.

He saw a news flash on the one webpage. A couple students had been shot in Virginia Tech, deep in Blacksburg. Jacob frowned. That's no good. Nobody wants to send their kid to school to die.

When Jacob checked the news again a few hours later – he was still in the library – the number had jumped. Over thirty dead, almost the same number wounded. Jacob's eyes widened. He inhaled sharply. He didn't care if the people sitting nearby could hear him.

Stalin was wrong – a million deaths isn't a statistic. It is a million tragedies.

Jacob would come to see the pictures of the gone sprawled on all the news. He knew the media would run the story for weeks, if not months – long after the people had been buried. He wished they wouldn't do that. He wished that people would rest in peace, not in arguments

between news personalities over who was right and who was wrong. As if the personalities could sway leaders to better us all.

The candlelit vigils came. They swept across the country as the fastest wildfire on record. By the end of the week, almost every college was hosting moments of silence. Moments were all that many could muster. It's harder to hold back crying than you might think.

Almost every college had a vigil. Almost every one.

We should change that.

Change what?

The vigil. We should have a vigil.

Jacob and Liz were trading shifts at the library – Jacob leaving, Liz arriving. It had been raining. Liz was wearing her thin coat. Jacob had forgotten his jacket. He wasn't looking forward to the outside. Especially since Liz was here, inside. Her hair was dyed a faint green for some reason.

Jacob couldn't help but ask, How would we get one of those set up?

What do you mean, how? Have you been to one before?

Well, yeah, I have. I'm used to being on the sidelines, though. I'm not bred to be an organizer.

Liz said stoutly, Well, I am. We'll pull this off together. Both of us can't screw up on the same thing, can we?

Now that I think about it, not really.

Well, good then – it's settled.

There's still the issue of what we're going to do.

What we're going to do?

Liz rolled her eyes, You know, like logistics and whatnot. We need candles, for one.

We can collect from the churches around here. I'm sure they have a whole stockpile of candles hidden in their basements.

Good point. I'll talk with the priest at my church, see if I can get some candles off him. How many people do you think will show up?

Hard to say. Maybe a couple dozen. Maybe a couple thousand. Numbers don't matter. What matters is that people care in the first place.

Good point. You have a point.

I know I do. Spread the word. Tell your friends and have them tell their friends.

Jacob couldn't help but notice...despite how bohemian Liz was at times, she was a militant community organizer at heart.

Jacob asked, When and where should it be held?

Hmmm, good question. What do you think?

Thursday night, probably. Everyone will be drunk on Friday and Saturday. As to where, I say the sidewalk in front of the library.

Why?

It's a public place. We hold the vigil there, we don't have to worry about red tape elsewhere on campus.

It was true – the sidewalk running between the library and the main road was one of the few public places in the university. Jacob knew this because he had to walk past some lunatic every morning while going to classes, the idiot talking about how everyone's going to Hell.

Apparently, Jacob was going to Hell. Jacob was Catholic. And sure, Jacob wasn't gay – but he supported gay rights. So in that guy's eyes, Jacob was going to Hell twice. And sure, Jacob wasn't Jewish – but he had a lot of Jewish friends and loved them all. So in the preacher's eyes, Jacob was going to Hell three times. Jacob wished the university could shut the man up. Hate breeds hate, after all. The university said no, it didn't have the authority. So Jacob supposed that thousands of people walking around campus had to have their right to morning peace infringed by one madman with a bullhorn.

Liz said excitedly, That's a great idea! And you say you're not an organizer. Psh.

Thursday night arrived too soon. Jacob was still picking up candles on the afternoon of. He scrounged from all the churches. He had gotten a bagful of candles from the chapel, after promising the priest that he would go to confession in return.

But somehow, during the past few days, Jacob could feel a cold sneaking on him. He didn't know where he got it from – maybe he caught a virus from his computer? Anything's possible.

The cold was getting worse and worse until that night, when Liz stopped by to pick up the candles.

I'm sorry, but I can't go.

What? Why not?

Jacob's head was swimming. He was drowning on dry land.

I have a cold. I don't want anyone there to catch it.

Liz looked disappointed, Ohhh...well, I'm sorry to hear that.

Me too.

And after all the work you put into it. I heard there's going to be a couple hundred people there too.

I knowwww. It sucks. But I'm not that important. There's bigger things.

You're right.

I'll keep the lights on here though.

That sounds like a good idea.

Jacob handed Liz the bags of candles.

Jacob advised, Make sure you don't light the campus on fire.

Liz laughed, I'll make sure. Well, I'll talk to ya later.

She stepped up to Jacob to hug him, but Jacob recoiled.

Oh, that's right, m'dear. Almost forgot. You have a cold. I hope you aren't offended, but I don't want your germs that bad.

No, not at all.

Byes.

Bye.

Later that night – after the sun tripped and fell down – Jacob kept his word and then some. He turned on every light in the room until everywhere he looked was drenched in watts. Jacob felt like he was sitting on the sun.

Huh. I thought it would be hotter.

He picked up his notebook and began studying.

People walking past would look up at the window, see the brilliant light seeping through. Jacob hoped it was a lighthouse to them, guiding people around the clashing rocks in the heat of night. Miles away, the sidewalk outside the library was glowing even brighter, a sea of flickering orange juice. The waves of candles swelled in the breeze. In the words of Bovee:

The light in the world comes from the sun and the student's lamp.

And when you put all those students and all those lamps together, you would think it's the sun.

About five thousand years ago, people living in County Meath, Ireland built a mausoleum. Called Newgrange, it was a stone-and-dirt mound – a crowning achievement for any prehistoric people. Newgrange was a huge commitment to the dead, being several stories tall and took up a good acre of real estate. Unfortunately, time has weathered the writing off the stone like...well, like a gravestone. We know how it was built, but we don't know why. The archeologists of today have picked for answers. Some think it's a tomb. They've found bones – and where there are bones, there's mourning. Others go further, though – they say the tomb was a church to the sun. They say that yes, it is possible to worship the darkness of the dead and the brightness of sunlight in the same room.

Whatever the case, every year during the winter solstice, the sunrise floods the entire room with a warming light. As if to say there's nowhere you can be buried where the sun doesn't shine. And you know what? I sleep better at night knowing that.

The spring semester was already coming to a close and with it, Jacob's freshman year. He had survived – scraped and scratched – but he survived. And in the end, the end is what matters.

Liz needed help with cleaning out her room for the summer. She was going back to New York for a few months. Jacob offered to help with the move. He arrived to find himself the only willing soul. Liz's roommate was sitting in the open window, smoking a cigarette in a non-smoking dorm. Even Liz was listless, sprawled facedown on the couch and not feeling the urge to move.

Jacob took a TV remote off the endstand and poked Liz in the shoulder with it.

Jacob said calmly, C'mon, get up. You're making me look responsible. It's scaring me. Uhhhhhhhhhh.

Her roommate coughed and said, She's been like that all morning
Jacob couldn't remember the roommate's name for the life of him.

Liz murmured, No, no, I'm getting up, I'm getting up...

She didn't so much as get up as she rolled off the couch. Crumbled on the floor, Liz said, Okay, now I'm ready.

They started first by packing up Liz's room. All they had on hand were a few boxes, but Liz shook it off.

She said, That's all I need, really. Even that is too much.

And Liz wasn't lying. She haphazardly tossed her clothes into the one box. She was able to fit all of her fashion into it.

Jacob asked, Are you sure you're a girl?

I think so. Why?

Most girls bring suitcases of clothes with them.

Liz looked quizzically at him and then at the box. She realized what he meant and laughed, Oh, that. I'm into recycling clothes.

Oh?

Uh huh. I buy thrift clothes. Then I take scissors, some fabric, needles, and thread to it and change it up. When I can't change it anymore, I pitch it. Or use the leftover stuff as rags.

Ah. I've never noticed that.

Liz smiled, You're a guy. I would be scared if you did notice. Be careful with those paintings on the desk, by the way.

Okay, I'll make sure.

As Jacob was putting the paintings away, he noticed they were all ballet scenes. Some of the scenes, it was just a girl, either twirling or leaping. Most of the other scenes, though, had paired the girl with a guy, who held her up. Always close and always longingly.

Jacob mentioned, You really love to paint ballet.

Yup. Dancing is so gorgeous that it does all the beauty for you. All I did was watch ballet videos. I drew from there. Then I threw paint at it. Ta-da.

Jacob admired the artwork for a minute, then carefully put them in a nearby folder, ready to go. Liz began to rummage through her closet. He could hear her swearing.

What's wrong?

Liz was tossing books over her shoulder, each landing in a pile behind her. She said, These stupid textbooks. I paid hundreds of dollars for them, put them in the closet, and forgot about them.

So?

So it's probably too late to sell them back now.

There's probably still time.

They're books from last semester.

Oh.

Liz sighed, These editions are probably extinct by now. I hate how they do that. How they change a few words from edition to edition. Expect us to pay a hundred dollars for each book. They can kiss my ass.

Jacob snorted, Agreed.

Liz turned suddenly, asked, You know what?

What?

You've never shown me any of your poems before.

I haven't?

Nope.

Well... I have one memorized, I think. If you want to hear it. I want to warn you though. It's not that good.

Liz laughed, Oh, shut up.

No, I'm serious.

Liz pouted, Please?

Okay. This is called Where Fireflies End, Where Lightning Begins:

I can't tell where
the fireflies end and
the lightning begins –
they're all blank, jagged
splatters crowded
on the deep night
canvas. It's all an origami
landscape creped
around our world.

We can goodbye
across continents
and still the sunset that I sleep to
is the sunrise that wakes you up.

Our dusks and dawns
all look the same,
each a chord of our
black-and-white nights
and days – it's all songed together
into a sun that weathers down
as rains of rays that raise up
the cornstalks while at the
same time raze them down.

All these things are different – like you and me.
All these things are the same – like us.

Liz was silent for a moment, absorbing the last few lines of the poem. Then she smiled broadly.

I love it!

Jacob – blushed and smiled without showing any teeth – said, Thanks.

No problem. Now, let's get back to cleaning this place up.

Sure thing.

As they cleaned, Jacob was silent. He wasn't sure why, but he felt diminished yet bursting at the same time.

When Julius Caesar wrote his *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, he described some of the Gaelic culture. He mentioned a particularly gruesome practice known as the wicker man. Some may be familiar with this. The Gauls would make an effigy of straw and sticks and such around a person. When the person was completely blanketed with sticks, the Gauls would light him on fire. The druids offered the screaming man up to their gods – it was, to them, how they described their love for their faith.

Nowadays, such love could be expressed a little more humanely (not by much) through diamond rings and such. The idea has still stuck to us over the centuries like burning sticks though. The idea that if you give yourself to love, love gives you back to you.

It's not the best investment, but – over time – it can recycle plastic dolls into breathing people. And in the case of the thieves the Gauls sacrifice? I suppose they became fire-breathing people.

Act II: Babel's Raising

Jacob was feeling listless. And he wasn't sure why.

It may have been the afternoon heat. Summer this year in Delaware was being vicious. The grass was greening into brown hay and the flowers were blistering. Jacob had air conditioning, but the heat still seeped into the walls. The humidity gummed up his joints, made it hard to move about.

But that wasn't the reason why he was now lying in his bed, gazing blank at the peeling ceiling above him.

Jacob was thinking he was tired...because the room was quiet.

Jacob was confused. He loved silence, loved how there were no distractions. He had always burned for that long stretch of lonely highway, where he had only his thoughts to keep him company.

Didn't he love silence not too long ago?

Just last summer, he would have died for some silence. Sometimes it was so quiet he thought he had died. Now, the silence was alive – and it hurt. And he had a nagging suspicion why. He didn't have Liz's voice nearby, its dreamy and distant syllables making the day overcast. The days were sunny when she wasn't there. And part of him was hoping for the clouds.

Liz had made him hate silence, in less time than it takes some people to read a book. And he had to admit – the more noise she gave him, the more he craved. He wanted life to get to the point now where it blasted him deaf like Beethoven.

What a year a difference makes.

He absentmindedly rubbed his fingers on the bed comforter. It scratched at his fingertips. Amazing how something that was supposed to be so comfortable could be so rough.

Jacob suddenly sneezed into his sleeve, his body racking. He was always a hard sneezer.

Jacob settled back into bed and let the warm afternoon carry him. It took him awhile to drift off to sleep. When he did it was to the tune of a quiet hiss. He could have sworn he heard it speaking to him, but the closer he listened, the sleepier he got. Until he was deep asleep, having fallen head over heels into the words he could barely translate.

Guess what?

Jacob took a swig of coffee from his cup. It was a late night.

What?

I'm staying!

Staying?

Liz said excitedly, Yep. Right here in New York!

The cellphone slipped through Jacob's hand. He picked it up.

Liz called out, You still there?

Yeah. So you're not coming back to Delaware then?

Nope. I've been thinking a lot during the summer break.

Apparently so.

When I was applying to colleges a few years back, I got accepted to a couple schools right inside the city here.

So you're just going to be switching one college for another?

Liz was exuberant, Yes!

But why would you change? Why not just finish your last two years here in Delaware?

A pause on the other end.

Liz almost spat the word, Ethan.

Oh.

Everytime I think of Delaware, I think of Ethan.

He ruined things that bad for you?

Uh huh. And the only way to get rid of the gangrene is to amputate. So I'm cut, cut, cutting away.

Well, I'm sorry to hear I won't be seeing you this fall.

And the same with you. But you understand, right?

Sure, sure. I'm not going to stand in the way of people being happy? Your parents take it well, I hope?

Liz laughed, They're taking it.

Are you coming down to visit at all? I hope?

Liz hesitated at the end of the line.

Maybe. You can try stopping up here for once. You know, Delaware's borders aren't the edge of the world.

I know, I know...I might come up.

Liar.

I'm not lying. I promise I'll try to visit you.

I don't like that word try.

Jacob wanted to tell her that he didn't like the fact she left Delaware so abruptly. He laughed instead.

Okay, I promise I'll visit you.

That's the spirit, cap't!

Non, rien de rien

Non, je ne regrette rien

Ni le bien qu'on m'a fait

Ni le mal, tout ça m'est bien égal

Non, rien de rien

Non, je ne regrette rien

C'est payé, balayé, oublié

Je me fous du passé

Avec mes souvenirs, j'ai allumé le feu

Mes chagrins, mes plaisirs, je n'ai plus besoin d'eux

Balayées les amours, avec leurs trémolos

Balayées pour toujours, je repars à zéro

Non, rien de rien

Non, je ne regrette rien

Ni le bien qu'on m'a fait

Ni le mal, tout ça m'est bien égal
Non, rien de rien
Non, je ne regrette rien
Car ma vie car mes joies
Aujourd'hui, ça commence avec toi

In 1851, a man named William Henry was arrested under the Fugitive Slaw Law. He had escaped from slavery in Missouri and made his way up north. He had finally settled in Syracuse, New York. He had thought he was free of his chains. The government begged to differ.

The town was widely pro-abolition. When word broke out of the arrest, the good people of Syracuse took matters into their own hands. A couple hundred abolitionists ransacked the jail and freed William. He headed for Canada and was never bothered again.

No matter how far you run, the second you stop, your past will be waiting. You're the hare and it's the turtle. Every once in awhile, though, there is someone willing to offer you a hand. Someone who can pull you along, so fast that your past actually loses its breath for once.

We can call that person a human being.

Heyyy, guess what?
What?

Jacob was trying to get used to the surprises. It was hard, though – it felt like a constant catchup.

Me and Ethan got back together again!

What? But I thought...

Thought what?

Well, I...I thought you left Delaware to get away from him.

I didn't want to get away from him. I wanted to forget him.

Okay...

Let me finish. I wanted to forget him like he forgot me. He called me last night. Said he couldn't bear to live without me.

And you believed that line?

I know, I know. That line's been done to death in the movies...

Jacob added, And has been brought back to life as a zombie...

He could hear Liz shrug. She said, True. But every cliché is true. That's why it's a cliché. Everyone knows it's honest. There's no surprise to it.

But I thought you liked a good surprise every now and then?

I do...I mean, I did. I don't know. Everything's happening so fast. I'm just getting myself lost in it all.

So I guess that means you're coming back to Delaware then?

Lord no.

Then...

There's such a thing called trains, silly. I'll hop on the train on the weekends.

Does this mean we'll hang out then?

Liz paused, Well, like I said before, you can always come up to New York. I'll tell the city to leave the lights on for you.

But since you're coming down on the weekends, I figured...

That's time for Ethan and me.

Oh.

Yeah.

A pause.

Jacob started up the talk again, So...are you enjoying New York then? Was it worth the move?

Was it ever. God, life has never smelled better.

Smelled better? Are we both talking about the same city?

I don't live in Staten Island, silly goose. I live in Queens, the brighter side of town.

That's right. I forgot. So for your new school, is registration...?

Everything's going smooth. Too smooth. It's scaring me. I'm already set up with all my classes for the fall semester. The classes here are better for an artist. This city's filled with art museums too. Gives me an excuse for more unsanctioned solo field trips. Is Delaware treating you well?

Good I suppose. I just finished signing up for classes.

Any winners?

Does grammar count?

Grammar? Oh my God.

Jacob couldn't help but laugh, It's required. For my major, that is.

And you're going for English, right?

English Ed.

That's right, that's right. So are you looking forward to teaching a bunch of little brats for the rest of your life?

As ready as I'll ever be.

God, I could never teach. Everytime I would see a kid sleeping in my class, I would probably slap him.

I can imagine.

I hate when people don't pay any attention to me. That's the quickest way to kill someone you know. Laziest way, too. Not paying any attention to them, any attention at all.

Jacob said quietly, I know.

I was listening to the news the other day. Some poor bastard was carjacked and shot in the Bronx. He was laying there, on the street, drenched in blood, crying out for help.

Did anyone help him?

Police looked on the security camera at the gas station nearby. Dozens of people walked past. Not a single person stopped to help. Not a single goddamn person. The carjacker may have shot him, but those people killed him without lifting a finger. I hate it when people don't pay attention. Hate it, hate it, hate it.

You're preaching to the choir.

Amen.

Liz sneezed hard.

Bless you.

Thanks, love. So you still want to teach all those squirmy, rotten, little kids? Even after all I said?

Jacob smiled, Yes.

You're weird.

No. I'm interesting.
Liz laughed, You little revisionist.
Have to practice my grammar somehow.
Liz cleared her throat, Hey, listen, I have to get going.
So soon?
Uh huh. I'm getting hungry. This stomach isn't going to feed itself, ya know.
All right then. Have a good night.
Nights.
And Liz?
Yes?
I miss you.
Awww, I miss you too.
Click.

In the Odyssey, Odysseus spends some ten years lost in the Mediterranean. Mainly because he is too proud to ask the women he meets along the way for directions. His son, Telemachus, is lost too. He finds himself – literally – without a father figure, and must learn how to grow up. Odysseus's wife, Penelope, is lost too. She must learn how to trick and con a pack of suitors at bay – without any help from her infamously-mischievous husband.

All three people are lost for the vast majority of the story. At the start, they think they all need one another to save their identities and be comfortable again. However, by the time they are all reunited, they have all found their selves. They come back together as a completely-different family.

You have to lose yourself to find yourself. Can't find what you haven't lost.

How are you?
Liz sighed, Another headache.
Another one? You might want to get that checked.
Oh, I've been getting bad migraines for years. It's nothing new.
Jacob chided gently, Still, you only have one brain. It's not like it's a kidney.
Liz laughed, If only. Shame too, because I just used up the rest of my meds the other day.
Jacob asked, You had a migraine yesterday too?
Nope. I was perfectly fine.
Oh.

Jacob immediately understood. Liz, either ignoring or not understanding the significance of her confession, continued calmly, I'm kind of glad I get these headaches so often though.

Why's that?

It reminds me I still have a brain flopping around like a fish in my skull.

Jacob mentioned, It sounds like it's proven its point though.

Liz sighed, Yeah. But it's stubborn about me being stubborn.

Makes...sense.

It's also proof that the modern medicine doesn't work.

Ah. So I guess you're all for those alternative things? Like acupuncture and herbal stuff?

A bit yes. But I'd rather have a cigarette.

I don't think that counts as medicine.

The medicine's not in the black stuff that tars up your lungs, darling. It's the smell.

The smell?

Mmmm, it's a wonderful smell if done right. It's like sewing autumn into a blanket and wrapping it around you. Nothing quite like it.

And when you finally choke to death on it, it'll feel like winter.

Pooh on you. All these prissy girls want to die hiding behind mirrors. I'll rather die hiding behind smoke.

Jacob smiled, Fair enough. But addictions get you dead quicker.

Addictions are a highway, maybe. But everyone's an addict. So everyone's stuck in traffic then.

I take it you don't have much faith in people?

I have faith in people. For them to be people.

Jacob laughed.

You know what, though?

Liz asked, What's that?

What if the person is addicted to life? How will that get him...

...or her...

...or her dead sooner?

Liz paused, then said, Well, have you ever heard of mountain-climbing? There's a reason why people like that live like there's no tomorrow. Because there really is no tomorrow after you fall a couple thousand feet down a mountain.

I thought you were one of those carpe diem people?

Liz said defiantly, I am. I have no problem with people getting creative about death.

There's only one way to come into this world, but there's millions of ways to run your life into the ground. I say let people be artists. Like what Rand said.

Rand?

Ayn Rand. Don't tell me you haven't read her before?

I've heard the name. I can tell you that much.

Liz sighed, I adore Ayn. You must read Atlas Shrugged if you ever get the chance.

Jacob asked, What's it about?

Just that you as a person matter more than anyone else.

Jacob said, But if you preach that to the whole world, everyone's going to be the same.

Liz countered, But she didn't want the whole world to rise up. She only wanted the talented ones to.

So why did she publish the book? For any Joe or Sally to read? If everyone rises, no one rises.

I...I don't know. I'm terrible at debating philosophy like this.

I didn't mean it like that, Liz. I didn't mean to...

Don't be sorry for things you didn't do. You didn't mean it.

A pause.

Liz continued, Frankly, I don't know why I love Ayn so much. I think it's because I'm as stubborn as she was. Beyond that, I'm not much of a capitalist.

That so?

Uh huh. I hate how capitalism gives all the money to a few and lets the rest fight for a dollar like starving dogs. Adam Smith said that competition is a good thing. How can it, though, when competition causes war?

It's Social Darwinism at its finest. Let the strong survive and all that nonsense.

Liz asked, So, what's your views on the whole matter?

Well...you don't want to listen to those. You'll think I'm an old loon or something.

Try me.

...Okay. I believe in egalitarianism.

What's that?

Jacob explained, Means everyone is the same.

So you're a communist then?

Not in the sense you're probably thinking of. I'm no fan of the Soviet brand of communism. In fact, I'm glad it failed.

That so?

Yup. My idea is like an even more liberal United States. Where everyone has the exact same rights and the exact same access to happiness. You should be able to speak your mind on anything, travel anywhere, and do whatever makes you happy. No one has the right to deny anyone anything.

Liz asked, So you're a libertarian then?

Well, libertarians believe that you should get out of other people's ways. Let them succeed or fail on their own. I believe you should get in people's ways, but only to help them.

What if they don't want help?

Everyone needs help. It's just that not a lot of people ask for it. Damned egos and pride and all that crap. I say if everyone puts everyone else before themselves, then everyone rises.

Liz paused and said slowly, That makes sense. I guess.

Jacob laughed, I told you I would sound like a crazy person.

No, no, not at all. It's just that I don't agree with a lot of that. We're all different. I'm more of a feminist than a...what was it again?

Egalitarian.

That's right. Egalitarian. Well, like I said, I'm more of a feminist.

Jacob asked, In that you believe women should have more rights?

No. That men should have less rights.

Oh.

Men are a bunch of apes. If women had power, we would already be in the future. Men and all their dick—swinging keeps us in the past.

Um...

Liz added as an afterthought, No offense by the way. I just remembered I'm talking to a guy.

Jacob laughed, That's all right. Just remember, if women rise up and exterminate all the guys, make sure to keep me alive. I could make a good jester.

Liz said mischievously, Deal...maybe.

But I do agree though. Men are stupid. But hey, what can you do?

Exactly what a stupid man would say.

Jacob snorted, If you say so, it must be true.

All this talk is making my headache worse.

Did you want to get some rest?

Liz said, I think that's a good idea. Maybe you aren't a completely stupid guy after all. Well, thanks. That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me. Talk, same time, tomorrow night? You betcha. Hope you're feeling better by then. Liz sighed, Me too. I should pick up more meds. Nights. Good night.

F. Scott Fitzgerald is known for writing *The Great Gatsby*, *This Side of Paradise*, *Tender Is the Night*, among many other stories. All amazing, heartbreaking stories. Many writers have wanted to write the Great American Novel. For Fitzgerald, it was a gift and a curse that he had to write brilliant stories. Living in the Jazz Age broke better men – both psychologically and financially. It didn't help that mixed drinks were the new water. It took many people all the money they had to float at the surface while at the same time drowning in whisky.

Fitzgerald was to all eyes – or beer goggles – an alcoholic. So when his breath became more ragged and his eyes more hazy, people wrote it off as him having one too many at the bar. He died from a heart attack. The years of being judged as a drunk failure had finally broken his heart.

Fitzgerald lived as an addict, but he died as a human. Fitzgerald lived as a human, but he died as an addict. Who knows? It's so easy to confuse the two at times.

Hey Liz.

Hello.

Jacob asked, What's up?

Liz said shortly, Pissed as anything.

Oh, why's that?

I'm drunk. And I got in a fight with Ethan.

Jacob winced. Of all the nights he had to call her, he had to pick the Thursday when she was drunk and angry. He learned from last time not to talk, just listen.

So he asked, Do you want to talk about it?

Liz snapped, No. I'm just so pissed at the world. How Ethan's left me out in the cold. Again.

I'm sorry to hear that. Well, when you want to talk about it, I'm all ears.

It won't do any good. No good at all. What makes you think some words can...can fix this?

I...I...

Yeah, that's right. Just shut up. You're making yourself look stupid. You stupid little prick.

Jacob cleared his throat, I think I'm going to head out now. There's something I need to take care of.

Yeah, that's right, go...leave me, leave like everyone else has.

Jacob almost wanted to say something, but he thought better of it. Instead, he just ended the call with a sigh.

Just like beer can make ugly women beautiful, it can make beautiful women ugly.

You curve and twist with your bluster
and muster a thousand storms
that form off in the distance, a distance
that wisps with steam in the summer
heat and takes me back to my first
tomb in my mother's womb –
the warmth's rather fitting.

You shout and scream and pound
lean fingers against the lumber
table (make the wood crack
like trees left in the track
of the cold death of winter).
Your bold breath breaks like eggs,
but instead of birds, there's words
like "how could you" and "why won't you"
and it feels rather marvelous to
wrap myself in the blanket
of all of this.

You could
be screaming because you care,
or you could be screaming because
you aren't for or with me anymore.
Either or, it doesn't matter
since you brought my head
in on a silver platter as if
there wasn't any food left
from this winter frozen over
with vanity and pride and judgment
and – oh how the cold brings
out the clarity!

Ohmigosh, Jacob, Jacob, come over here!
What? What's up?
Isn't this the most adorable kitty you've ever seen?
Jacob walked to the front of the store and looked down at the plush cage. The muddy gold
cat was pacing the length of its claustrophobia. It purred and licked Liz's fingers through the
cage.

Liz looked up, beaming, I think he likes me. Kneel down and let him lick your fingers.

I'll rather not.

What? Don't say you're not a cat person.

Silence.

Liz asked, Well?

I can't say I'm a cat person. So I'm not saying anything.

Liz laughed while curling her purple-dyed hair.

She said, Don't be such a spoilsport. This is only the cutest kitty ever. Yes you are! Yes you are!

Liz finally stood up, her eyes still glittery. She said to Jacob, I haven't had a cat ever since I was little. Her name was Adele.

What happened to her?

A teen driver.

Oh.

I buried her in Central Park when no one was looking.

Oh?

Liz said proudly, She caught a mouse there once. It was the least I could do for her.

Liz stared wistfully off. She was looking at the pet store cashier without knowing it. The cashier shifted uncomfortably.

Jacob said, Well here, let's go spelunking in the back of the store.

What's back there?

You'll see.

Jacob dragged her away from the cats, past the dogs, to where all the lizards and birds were. They walked past an iguana cage.

Jacob said, You know, when I was little, I always wanted a pet iguana.

Mmmm, that so?

Yep. I kept thinking I was going to get one any day. So when I was working on watercolor pictures and stuff, I would keep the cup of paint water stowed away.

Eww. Why?

Because I thought that iguanas liked to drink watercolors.

Liz laughed, Well, at least it's safer than the tap water around here.

True that. Oh, so did I tell you what happened last night?

No, what happened?

Jacob began, Well, I was performing slam poetry. It was some charity benefit thingy on campus. Well anyway, I performed that one poem I showed you the other week. You know, the one that is written half in English and half in Italian.

Ohhh, I love that poem! Go on.

Jacob smiled, Well, everyone there loved it too. However, after the benefit was over, everyone came up to me and told me they loved how I worked Spanish into the poem.

Liz had burst out laughing. It took her a good ten seconds before she could work up the air to ask, Are people really that ignorant?

Well, Italian and Spanish sound a bit alike...

English is part-French and part-German and yada, yada, yada. Does it sound like any of those?

Jacob grinned, No, I guess not.

Exxxx-actly. Because as an art major, I'm fully-qualified to teach linguistics.

Jacob asked, So when do you have to go?

I told them I was going to meet them at 7 tonight.

Jacob said, I wish we could hang out for longer.

Liz shrugged, I wish so too. But what can you do? I'm only in town for the weekend. Delaware seems a lot larger when you have to visit every person from now until Sunday. You know what though?

What?

Liz offered, You can hang out with my friends and me tonight. We're going to get pissy drunk at a party.

Wellllll....

Liz frowned, You don't want to go?

It's not that, it's just...

Liz's eyes widened, Ohhh, look!

Jacob turned, saw a flowery parrot perched in a cage. It stared like a statue, barely moving a feather. Jacob couldn't tell if the bird was being noble or bored.

Liz oohed, Aren't parrots so cute? I wonder if it knows any cuss words?

Liz grinned mischievously, Well, let's find out.

She took a candy bar out of her purse. She walked slowly towards the birdcage while slowly unwrapping the foil from the chocolate.

Liz said, Hi there little birdy. Can you say Fuck This?

Jacob could barely stifle his laugh.

Liz slowly held out a piece of chocolate in her fingers. She weaved her hand through the cage.

C'mon, little birdy. Didn't the pirates you sail with teach you anything...?

There was suddenly a squawk and a sharp flurry. Liz yelped and snatched her hand out of the cage. She winced as she sucked on her bloody finger.

Jacob rushed over, asked, Are you all right?

She turned, looked at him with that what-do-you-think look.

The cashier from up front called out, What's going on back there?

Jacob said, Nothing, nothing at all. Just reenacting a scene from The Birds.

He turned to Liz and asked, Do you still think the parrot is cute?

A little bit still. Oh my Godot, that hurts like a bitch.

Well, I guess the parrot only speaks in sign language.

Why's that?

Jacob said airily, Well, you did ask him to say Fuck You. I think he just signed it out to you.

Liz couldn't help but laugh, showing her crimson smile from her bloody finger.

C'mon, let's get you a band-aid before your finger falls off.

Another summer come. The school year had ended too quick. He was now a junior. Jacob was scared by how quick that had happened. They say the days zoom by quicker when you have a routine. If you whistle while you work, life's even more fleeting.

Maybe that's why he never learned how to whistle. Or maybe it was because he had no idea how to make his voice into an instrument.

Jacob was looking forward to the first week of summer. He was going to Lake Raystown deep in Pennsylvania. It was the family vacation every year. They would sit in one of the cabins overlooking the manmade lake, fish, hike, whatever. They were going to be there for the better part of the month, a bit longer than most of their other vacations in the past. He wasn't looking forward to being without his computer for so long, but worse things have happened. He guessed.

The first day of the trip went well enough. When they pulled up in front of the cabin, Jacob was feeling a bit queasy. His family chided him.

Maybe if you didn't read that book while we were driving up and down those hills, you wouldn't be sick now.

Jacob took a deep breath and said, It'll clear. I just need some time.

It took a few hours for him to exhale his sickness. By then, he was already back to reading, leaning against a tree, his feet dipped in the Raystown waters.

He was reading Vonnegut. A friend of his a few months back insisted – upon threat of death – that he start reading Vonnegut's books. He had already read Slaughterhouse-Five, which was a great book.

This book was Sirens of Titan though. There was something about it – every page that Jacob read took his breath away. He wondered if he would still be alive by the time he finished reading the book. He hoped he was – he was tempted to read it again.

Jacob wondered if a good book could ever kill someone who read it. He knew there were plenty of books that have called on the reader to kill. Those books aren't good, though, at least not any more.

When Jacob finished reading the book, he cast a glance across the lake like a fishing hook. It was too quiet for a Saturday morning. There should be boats and people yelling and splashing and scaring the fish away, deeper to the cold floor. But the water was silent. There were no boats on this side of the winding lake, there were no dragonflies skimming the waters, there were no fish leaping up and out, wanting to know what it felt like to be dry for just one moment in time.

The lake was a sheet of mirror. Jacob took his feet out of the water. He was afraid to break the surface, to get seven years' of bad luck.

But who's to say that bad luck isn't an improvement?

Jacob called out, Hello?!

His voice reached out with both arms across the waters, taking everything he could see in a single hug. But his voice didn't echo back. It was the dog that went to fetch the stick and ran away instead.

Jacob put the book aside and leaned back. He put his arm behind his back, rubbing his fingers against the tree he was using for a chair. The bark was smooth, there was no roughness, no crags. He thought about how the distance between cells in his body was as far as stars were in the universe. He thought of how one crack in the bark was as deep and sprawling as the Grand Canyon. How the Colorado River roars as deafening as a raindrop hitting the tears in a tree.

But the tree was smooth and silent.

Jacob bit his lip and looked back out. His eyes were blank. He wanted someone to break the silence with. Someone who could rip this world, his world right down the middle with a laugh.

You're dancing around the who.

No, no, I'm not.

Then say the name, say it –

I won't.

You say the name, it's like an incantation. It'll bring the person to you, no matter what.

No, I can't.

What, say the name? Or want her with you?

I told myself I wouldn't love again. I don't want her to be with me. I want her to be her.

Don't dance around the why too.

She's in New York. I'm in Delaware. It won't work. Nothing works.

Why shouldn't you try?

Why should I?

If you stop trying to do things, you'll die. Trying is the same as moving. When a shark stops moving, it dies.

I'm not a shark. I'm a man.

You're not a man. You're Hamlet. Say the goddamn name. Say the name, or I will.

No. I won't, I won't say –

Liz.

The word escaped Jacob's lips. It fell into the water.

Liz...

She was the only person that he could talk to. That could talk back to him. She was the reverse seamstress that could unclothe the world. She was the only one who could fell the trees, drain the lake, flatten the hills. Until the world was smooth and blank as paper. And she was all the words, engined by her inky heart. All the words that filled the paper. She could destroy his world and rebuild it from scratch. She was his demolisher and architect, crumbling him up like a bad poem each time she said Bye. Smoothing him back out the next time she said Hello.

They had talked so many times, she had broken him and put him back together so many times, that he did not remember his initial self. He could not remember the Jacob from before 6:55 that fateful Tuesday evening when they first met. The Jacob before that time was as irrelevant as a counted number.

And Jacob put his head in his hands, as if he was some god molding the first man. He missed Liz. He...

Say it.

He missed Liz. She was all his senses. The world was dark and silent without her. He needed to come to his senses. He needed to close the distance between this lake and the borough of Queens.

But even a foot between him and her would feel as vast as stars in the sky.

And it was at that moment that he was edging towards discovery. A discovery that had to do with everything at once.

Jacob burst into tears. He couldn't help it. He could feel a pulsing glow somewhere deep inside him. He thought it was his heart at first. But it wasn't like the last ten minutes of every cheap chick flick. But it was.

The pulse was in his lungs. He could feel it bubbling up. His throat dried and crackled. His tongue was ashen. He...

I love Liz.

Jacob went statue, shocked by his find. Yet he was more shocked at the fact that he could feel the distance between two points beginning to narrow. He was still sitting there, but his soul was already seeping out of him, swishing between the trees, heading for the road, hoping to hitchhike to New York on the first semi.

Leaving Jacob still sitting there, numb to the look, silently mouthing the same words over and over again, flickery tears still running his cheeks, the drops roaring against his pores like a thunderstorm.

I love Liz. I love Liz. I love Liz.

According to some Greek myths, mankind looked completely different when it was first created by the gods. Each person had four arms, four legs, and two faces. No one was man, no one was woman. Each person was simply a one. With all these limbs and power, the people felt like immortals. They began scurrying to the top of Mount Olympus like millions of spiders. Zeus saw the ascent and was afraid. He split each person into two halves. He lost the halves in the wind and mankind got lost and civilized the world but never their selves. The men and women wandered lost, hopeful in finding their other half. The half that would let them become a one again.

After all, when you complete a rainy day puzzle, it's no longer a puzzle – it's a picture.

The rain sweltered later that night like the tears that were on his face. Jacob was laying in bed. The window was right next to his face. He could turn and see the billions of raindrops rushing toward him just inches away.

But Jacob wasn't paying the rain attention. He was staring up at the ceiling, the ceiling with rafters and beams and all the rustique he would never find back home. But he wasn't paying any attention to that. Jacob had future on the mind like mosquito on the nerve. It was sipping him up until he was less himself and more his future.

So why was he an English Education major again? Jacob used to have reasons for it. He could have studied to be a college professor. But he was going to teach high schoolers. He wanted to teach high schoolers. He wanted to give them a chance at a quality education, a quality education that they wouldn't have to break bank for.

Being a high school teacher would destroy you though.

I know. But other people are more important.

Shouldn't you be one of those people? What gives you the right to rise above the world and be godly? Why can't you be human? You're incomplete and flawed to begin with. Act your role.

Delaware needs me. I have to go back and teach the kids there –

Kids who only know Delaware, who are only taught by people who only know Delaware. Don't be a bastard. Don't turn more kids into the people you knew in high school – a bunch of cattle content and taking the taxi to the slaughterhouse. The only person who can show them the outside is an outsider. Show them how brilliant the sunshine is outside the house.

Jacob shook the thoughts away. He turned and looked out the window. He couldn't fine the sunshine. Unless it was hiding in the warm rain.

Don't ruin yourself because you have to. Ruin yourself because you want to. It's time to grow your legs, for christsakes. It's the only way you'll be able to run to her. Don't think about it. Think about her. Do this for her.

And the more Jacob thought about her, the more he wanted to try harder. And the more he wanted to try harder, the closer he got to Liz. And he was getting closer all without budging from his bed.

Hey there, m'darling.

Jacob said, Hi! How are you?

Liz said dreamily, Gooood. How was your vacation?

It was all right. I just wished there was wireless internet at the lake. And cable television with a thousand channels. And a coffeehouse.

Liz laughed, That's the whole point of a vacation, silly. It doesn't have any of that crap. Life becomes so much simpler.

So says the city girl.

I like complex things. I'm a complex lady. Or rather, I'm a lady with personality. Saying I'm complex makes me sound like a math problem.

Jacob pointed out, Thankfully, you're not. Otherwise, you would have scared me off a long time ago.

Like all the other boys in my life.

What do you mean?

Ethan.

Jacob asked, What about him?

Liz's voice weakened a bit, He left me. Again.

Again?

Uh huh. He's already dating another girl. It's only been three days.

Oh my.

Liz sighed, Yup. The funny thing is, well, I know her. And she hates me.

Jacob asked, What gives you that idea?

Because Ethan told me awhile back.

Oh.

Liz continued, He told me that she...goddammit, what's her name, I think Laura...was talking about me. She had said some stuff like I'm not a true vegan because I eat a hamburger every once in awhile...

You're a vegan?

I never told you that?

Nope.

Well, in Laura's eyes, I'm apparently not one. She also said I have way too many temper tantrums. I think her words were something like I'm a teenage girl hiding in a lady.

Jacob lied without thinking about it, You don't have tantrums.

I know, right? I don't know where she got that idea.

Jacob couldn't tell if Liz was being sarcastic or not.

Liz kept talking, saying, And you know what the worse thing she said about me is?

What?

She said that I'm an idiot for always dying my hair. She thinks I do it for the attention.

Hmmm, I see.

He'll be back though. Ethan. He has to leave if he wants to come back to me.

Jacob said confusedly, Oh?

Liz shrugged over the phone, It doesn't make sense, I know. It's just him and me...we...um, we...

Are always breaking up and getting back together?

Liz sighed, I wanted to say something a bit more memorable, but that works.

You know – you don't have to wait for him to come back. This isn't some war and he isn't a soldier. You don't have to sit at the front door, waiting for him to walk back up the driveway.

Liz hesitated, You know, I've been wondering the same thing too lately. I think I like losing things because, well, because finding something you've lost is the most wonderful feeling in the entire world.

And as Liz went on and on about how wonderful it was waiting for Ethan, Jacob couldn't help but feel that, once more, he was losing Liz to Ethan. But, like what Liz said, you have to lose something in order to find something. Jacob just wished it was a lost cellphone or camera, not a lost love they were dealing with that night.

And Jacob?

Hmmm?

I just want to say thank you.

Surprised, Jacob asked, Thank me? For what?

I've been bitching and moaning forever. Thank you for not running away. Thank you for listening.

Anytime. I'm more than glad to be your human punching bag.

Liz laughed, Well hopefully it won't come to punches.

As if this doesn't hurt enough.

Act III: Uneager Climax

Jacob couldn't take it anymore. He needed someone to talk to about Liz. Someone who wasn't Liz.

The first person who came to mind was Addison. Addison had been good friends with Liz for a few years. But that wasn't enough. Jacob needed someone with a quiet mouth. And Addison was as quiet as the moon.

So he texted her, asked if she could meet him at the coffeehouse just outside of campus. Jacob said it was about Liz, that it was urgent. Addison's text came back, simple and clean:

Tonite@8.

It was Halloween of all nights. The summer blanket was slipping off the bed and the winter chill was coming, falling slower than snow but it was coming. Still, Jacob sat out on the patio behind the coffeehouse for a good hour. He gripped his cup of coffee closer than a pen when he wrote. He was nervous. He had no idea what he was going to say.

Maybe that's why he came to the coffeehouse an hour early, sitting out in the cold evening. To gather his thoughts. At least, he should have been. Jacob was reading *The Great Gatsby* instead. Jacob wanted to know how much it would cost to win a lady's heart. He hadn't gotten to the part where Fitzgerald says no fortune can buy love.

All the better he hadn't gotten to that part yet. He wasn't ready, anyway.

Someone tapped his shoulder like it was a window. He turned, looked up. Addison was standing there. She was shortish, all freckles, long oak hair, and timber eyes. She had a hard look to her. But she was flexible enough to smile sunrise, curling it over the horizon.

She asked, Hey you. What's up?

Not much. You want to get a cup of coffee? I'm paying.

She smiled, Oh, you don't have to do that.

And you didn't have to come here. I feel bad for wasting your Halloween.

Addison laughed, Well, in that case, I'll take a French vanilla.

After he got her a cup of coffee, they sat back down at the patio.

Jacob asked, So how was your work this summer in...where was it...?

Sudan.

That's right. I knew that.

About as good as living in hell.

That nice?

No one deserves to live there. Not even the devil himself. Yet no one wants to break those poor souls free. They just want to break them. So if we can't bring the people in the Sudan to happiness, we can at least bring happiness to them.

What kind of work did you do there?

We dug up some wells here and there. It's amazing how much water is hiding underneath a desert.

I wouldn't be surprised. So, are you adjusting back to life in the States well?

I won't have enough time to.

What do you mean?

I'll be leaving this winter.

Surprised, Jacob asked, No way! Where to?

Cambodia. Remember those floods they had last month?

Yep.

Well, I'm going there to help with the reconstruction efforts.

Jacob couldn't help but ask, So you just came back from helping a dried-out nation find water, and now you're getting ready to help a flooded nation get dry?

Addison laughed mirthlessly, Something like that, yeah.

She took a sip and leaned in, looking worried. Jacob knew what was coming next. She asked, So what's up with Liz? What's wrong?

The moment had arrived.

Jacob said slowly, I think...I think I'm in love with her.

Addison's eyes widened slightly.

Jacob continued, I think I've been in love with her for a long time.

You think you are?

Jacob frowned, I don't like things being certain. If they are certain, then that means they can be certainly taken away. I like the hope of maybes and thinks.

Addison asked, Have you told her this yet?

Not yet. But I'm planning on it. I wanted your advice, your...your...

Blessing?

Well, you've known her for a lot longer than I have. I need your help in understanding her.

Addison took a slow drink of her French vanilla.

She said, You know, when you sent me that text earlier, I thought that something bad had happened to her.

Sorry if I gave you that impression. I didn't mean to.

That's all right. Text messages are always short and vague. Bytes always get lost in translation.

True. But, in a way, she is making a mistake. I think so, anyway.

What's that?

Her moving away. Her getting caught up in that clown Ethan.

Addison cocked her head to the side and asked, What's wrong with Ethan?

Liz hates him as much as she loves him. He treats her like dirt.

I think you may have gotten the wrong impression about him. He's a really lovely guy once you meet him in person. I wouldn't really trust the things that Liz says about people anyway.

Why's that?

Addison sighed, I love Liz like a sister. But she...well, she just sees things differently from everyone else. Red to some people is green to her.

So what are you trying to say?

That you shouldn't trust her with driving. Among other things. Don't let that scare you away from her though. I could have stopped talking to her years ago. But I didn't. I'm still friends with her after I've learned so much about her.

And why's that?

Because the more you learn about her, the less you know. That's the wonderful thing about a crazy person. You're always learning something new about them.

Jacob asked, So you think she's a bit loony too?

Only in a good sense of the word. I mean, everyone's a bit crazy every now and then. But she strives for it. I look at her and I see a soul. I look at her and I realize that not everyone is some machine. She's my memo to myself.

So...?

Addison looked at him for a long moment. She said, Let her make her own mistakes. Telling her how to fix something is the same as troubleshooting a computer. Don't make her a piece of hardware. And when you tell her you love her and she feels the same, please don't break her heart. She's like fine china – she looks beautiful until she falls. Please help her stay beautiful as long as possible.

I'm not a bull in the china shop, Addison.

Addison smiled, I know you aren't. I believe you. You wouldn't have asked for my help if you didn't want it. Just keep her on the pedestal you've built for her. Make sure the pedestal's solid to begin with.

I will. Don't worry.

Addison suddenly pulled a piece of paper and a pen out of her purse. She jotted down something quick on the paper and pushed it across the table to Jacob.

What's this?

Addison said, This is about a charity concert happening in a few weeks. They're having it right on campus. Last I talked to Liz, she said she was going to be there. Meet her at the concert and tell her you love her.

Jacob asked, What if she doesn't feel the same? I don't want to lose a friend over this.

Addison thought a long moment, If you do tell her, that'll prove you have courage. And darling, love is ninety-nine percent courage. Just remember what I said a minute ago – don't drop her on the floor. She's fragile goods – she won't look nearly as nice after the fall.

So the day came when the benefit concert was going on. Jacob actually dressed up for once – sort of. He stood in front of his mirror. He was dressed up in khakis and a button-down shirt. He had tried to comb his hair, but gave up after five minutes.

She must be important if I've gone through this much trouble.

The concert was being held in the college's recitation hall. It was a small, domed building with a miniature concert hall just inside. Jacob actually had a class in there before. Rather, the class was in the hall's basement. Him and his classmates joked about the basement, calling it The Ship. The hallways were a claustrophobic narrow and you felt like you were under water. The fact that the toilets and sinks in the bathrooms occasionally overflowed contributed to the sinking feeling.

As Jacob walked into the concert hall, there were students manning the doorways. They weren't collecting money for tickets. They were accepting donations.

One of them, a girl with a dazzling smile, called out to Jacob, saying, Do you want to donate to the fund?

Jacob felt like an idiot when he asked, What's it for again?

The girl said reverently, For the Darfur crisis.

That's right. Sorry, I forgot.

Jacob plunked a twenty dollar bill in the bucket and kept walking. He was usually more stingy, but he was distracted tonight. Maybe he was trying to bribe his way into good fortune? Who knew? Jacob certainly didn't know.

He got a seat towards the back. He was a bit of an agoraphobic and hated being in the crowd. So he always sat on the fringes, preferably by the nearest exit. He was nervous enough as it was – no reason to make things worse. He was two seats away from the exit.

He was also ten minutes early. He made up for the found time by scribbling away. He always kept a golf pencil and a scrap of paper in his pocket. You know, for the bored moments. Jacob was scribbling fiercely now, the pencil tip withering away as he stormed the paper. It was garbled poetry at best, but it kept his mind distant. Distant until he had trouble seeing the paper. And he knew they were dimming the light. The show was about to begin.

It wasn't the traditional concert. There were no bands. Instead, it was a series of acapella groups performing. Strange how this campus had so many of those groups. It was as if the school was stuck permanently in the 1950s. Not to say the groups weren't good or anything. They were. It was the first time Jacob had ever seen an acapella group perform live. He liked it. At least, he liked it when he was paying attention. His mind was bouncing between thousands of thoughts like pinball machines. He was worrying about everything at the same time.

By the time intermission rolled around, the lights buzzed back on. As people got up to use the bathrooms or talk on their cellphones outside, Jacob glanced around. That was when he saw her.

She was sitting a few rows from the front of the stage. He could only see the back of her head and wilting glimpses of her face. But that was more than enough. It had been getting close to a year since he saw her face last. But he could remember her after decades. Although he hoped it would never come to that.

And still he was rooted to his chair. Even as he saw Liz get up to go into the lobby. He was petrified and for once he had an answer as to why.

She'll think I'm a stalker. She didn't tell me she was coming to this concert. She'll think I followed her here. And I can't tell her that Addison told me. This was a mistake. I shouldn't be here. I should leave...

But he couldn't get out of his seat, not even to leave. He argued with himself like Hamlet until the lights dimmed again and it was too late for a graceful exit.

The rest of the show ended sooner than he wanted it too. And again the lights came back on. And again, he saw Liz get up. She was going to leave. Who knows? This might be the last time he would ever see her.

Jacob exhaled like a balloon and got up. He wobbled over to Liz, his teeth chattering in the warm room. She was walking up the aisle, he walking down.

As he got closer, her eyes widened. She cried out, Jacob!

She ran up and hugged Jacob. He could feel his cheeks redden.

Liz let go of him after a few moments and said, It looks like you're burning up.

Yeah. I always get like this when I'm stuck in a room with hundreds of people for a couple hours. So, I didn't know you were going to be here.

Yup! A couple friends of mine were in one of the groups. I promised them I'd see them perform, and here I am. You?

Oh, heard about it around campus. Figured it would be fun, and it would ease my conscience if I came here.

Liz laughed and asked, Say, are you doing anything tonight?

Nope. Why you ask?

Well, I'll be taking the train back up to New York tomorrow morning. Me and some friends of mine are thinking about painting the town red. You in?

Absolutely.

Liz beamed, Fantastic!

She dragged him by the hand over to her group of friends in the lobby. A few of them Jacob recognized. They were artist types, all surreal and serious. Jacob never met the one though. He was a tallish, chubbyish guy with wavyish hair. He was mannish and girlish at the same time. Jacob had no idea what to make of him.

Liz tapped him on the shoulder and he turned to meet the two.

Liz said, Jacob, I want you to meet Ethan. Ethan, Jacob. This is that friend of mine I was telling you about, love.

Jacob's knees spasmed a little. He was meeting Ethan for the first time. The man who had spoiled things for so many people over the years without meaning to. It's amazing how much chaos you can make without paying any attention at all.

That was Jacob's first thought. The second thought: why was Ethan there? Didn't he and Liz break up just a few weeks ago?

Ethan said shortly, How's it going, dude.

What's up.

And that was it. Ethan turned to Liz and said, I just called the others. They're waiting for us in the coffeehouse. We should get going.

Liz said brightly, Okay! You heard the guy, ladies and gents. Let's get moving.

They shuffled out of the crowded lobby and into the crisp November. The air was biting at them like thirsty mosquitoes. Jacob wrapped his jacket closer around him for warmth. The chill still cut through the thin fabric and stuck to his sides.

Liz and Ethan were walking a few steps ahead of the group. They didn't have jackets handy. Instead, they were using each other for coats. Their arms wrapped around each other's sides, they were warmer than Jacob's coat ever would be.

And Jacob's heart began to spill out on the sidewalk behind him, leaving a red, sticky mess like slug trails. He realized now why Ethan was at the concert in the first place.

They must love breaking up over and over again. I wonder if they have any heart left to break.

The group walked – their soft chatter frozen in the air above them – to the coffeehouse. The same place where, not even a few weeks before, Addison had given Jacob her blessing. They walked into the coffeehouse, a bell clinking as they opened the front door. Their cheeks flushed at the oven heat of the place.

They made their rendezvous with the others. The group, the number swollen now, ordered some coffee before heading out. Liz was the only person who ordered tea.

She gingerly tasted her tea and made a face. Jacob asked, What's wrong with it?

Liz wrinkled her nose, It tastes burnt somehow.

Ethan said grumpily, Don't be silly. Only coffee can taste burnt. Just let it sit for a few minutes. C'mon, let's get going.

The group left and braved the cold again. This time they were heading for the other side of campus, to one of the dorms there. Convenient distances.

As they walked, Jacob snuck in a bit of a conversation with Liz.

Jacob asked, So is Delaware making you realize how boring New York is?

Liz laughed, Yep, absolutely. It makes me wish I had stayed here where my options for a good Friday night are going to the mall, or going to the mall, or – you know – going to the mall...

You say that as if New York is the capital of the world.

Liz smiled, No, Jacob. It's the capital of the universe. It's the center, it's the Big Bang. I think a lot of astronomers would have a problem with that.

Pooh on them. They're just mad because you can't see any stars in the sky on a New York night.

They floated in and out of conversation. Jacob had to compete with the rest of the group for Liz's attention. They were excited that she was back, even for the night. Excited as...well, as postmodern artist types could be. Liz juggled their talk well enough. She was distant though. Well, her voice always seemed a bit far-off, true. But her eyes were darting in all sorts of directions like a compass gone mad. Jacob could tell that she was already thinking of places to run off to. From time to time, though, her compass righted itself and she looked longingly north. New York was north. Just like Jacob as a child used to think Heaven was north (before he learned the difference between up/down and north/south).

After a good ten minutes of walking, they had reached the dorm. By this point, Liz and Ethan had grown more and more attached to each other. It had gotten to the point where they were sneaking quick pecks on each other's cheeks. Jacob couldn't stand it anymore.

Right before they were going to walk in, Jacob said to Liz, You know what? I have to get going.

Really? Why? I thought your night was free.

It was. It's just that I'm really tired.

That's what the coffee was for.

Well, I have work in the morning too, so...

Jacob could tell Liz was disappointed.

She said, Well, okay then. Sorry we didn't have more of a chance to hang out. Next time we'll have more time. Promise?

I promise. Good night. Have a safe trip back up tomorrow.

Thanks! You too...well, you know what I mean.

Jacob laughed shortly, I do.

Jacob turned to walk back to the sidewalk. The group squeezed into the dormitory's narrow door and closed it behind them. As the door closed, the bright lights inside were cut, leaving Jacob out in the cold dark.

He sighed and walked. It was true – he did have work the next morning. But he was a born insomniac – every college student is.

He just couldn't tell Liz he loved her. He couldn't when Ethan was standing right there. When Ethan was in Liz's life, nothing else mattered.

Jacob walked. He kicked a pebble for a few feet. The pebble went rogue and hopped into the grass.

He was walking on the campus green. He looked at his watch – it was getting close to 11pm. He was all alone. This was the most important detail.

His lip began to tremble and his knees quaked more. He was shaking all over like hunger was taking him.

FUCK!

His voice rang out over the green. There was no one there to be shocked by the outburst. He almost wanted there to be. Someone, anyone.

He sent a text to Addison:

Liz is back together with Ethan.

Addison replied a minute later:

Really? I didn't know. Sorry to hear that.

Jacob walked with a growl into the dark and let the night take him home. The streetlights were twitching along the way, but he didn't need light to find his way back. He had walked around this town enough that he could retrace his exact footsteps, every print feeling like home all over again.

He almost cried at the thought of it. And he wanted to know why.

In Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra, everyone dies from a broken heart. Some hearts break metaphorically (Ahenobarbus dies from shame of deserting his commander Antony), some brutally (Antony dies windily after botching his suicidal fall upon his sword), and the bizarre (Cleopatra has a poisonous asp bite her breast).

All of these hearts wouldn't have broken if it wasn't for Octavian – the mastermind who would be crowned Emperor of the Rome Empire soon enough. He offered amnesty to his enemies, but all that did was shame them to their deathbeds.

Antony and Cleopatra may have hated each other at times – yes – but when they died with the other's name on their lips, a pained Octavian buried the pair so famous together. So that they could be in each other's arms into the afterlife and even beyond that.

While the doomed lovers each had their own heart to break and mend, together they had an even larger heart. And when that one shattered, there was not enough glue in the world to put it back together.

Sitting at his desk, Jacob began writing an email to Liz. It went something like this:

Liz,

Tonight I must have seemed a bit quiet. More so than usual. But just because I was quiet on the outside didn't mean I was silent on the inside. I was bursting to tell you something, but I couldn't. Not with the company you had.

Liz, I have been wanting to tell you this for longer than I knew it. This past summer I admitted to myself that I've been in love with you since the first day we met. I admit that when we first talked, you startled me a bit. I'm not used to dealing with free spirits. Being in such a small state, the odds of meeting one are small to begin with. It took me too long to come to grips with this. I promised myself long ago that I would never fall in love again. The fact that I'm breaking this promise to myself is amazing by itself. I am usually more disciplined than this. But love seems to make me more human, less machine.

Liz, writers over the centuries have lived a long life and died before ever meeting their muses. I've been lucky – not only that I met my own muse, but that I met her so early in life. I have churned out more inspired work since I've known you than any other time in my life. I don't know why that's the case – I guess it's because you remind me that I actually have a soul. It's easy to forget things like that nowadays.

You are the last creative spark in the world. Everyone I know is burnt out. Everyone I know is in the dark. You're the only light that can get me home. You're the light that I use to see myself. And I see a man who is a mess, but who can put himself together under that light. You're a wonderful light.

Please don't dim on me by leaving me.

I gather that you're back with that Ethan guy now. I know he makes you happy. I also know he makes you angry and depressed. I'm not going to stop you from feeding yourself to all these bumps in the road though. I may not be the love you're looking for in life. I strive for a consistency – I strive to be remarkable for as long as I can hold my breath. I know routines bore you. And I know that even love can become a routine over a period of time. Ethan may be that surprise of ups-and-downs that you're looking for in life.

All I can say is that even surprises can become routines over time as well. I think we discussed this before. You may not remember. But once the surprise is gone, so is all the fun. Then you're left with a guy who, frankly, doesn't give a damn about you. Do you really want to love someone who can't tell the difference between you and other girls?

Hopefully you read this and agree to this madcap business venture. If you don't, that may be best for everyone. I'd be sad, yes. But don't worry about that. I just hope this will shed some light on me. I hope you will finally understand why I have been the way I am over the years.

I'll await your answer by email, by letter, by phone, by horse, by pigeon. Surprise me... surprise me just like this email has probably surprised you too.

Jacob

It took a day for him to get a reply to his email. It went something like this:

I don't know what to say. Surprises are a wonderful thing, yes. I do love surprises. But I don't love you. At least, not the way you think. I love you as a friend. I know that's the rage these days – the girl leaves the guy out in the cold and says she likes him as a friend still. I'm not one of those girls. And I'll prove it. I'll still love you as hard as I did last week. I just can't love you anymore. Not that I don't want to or anything. It's just that I can't.

I would say this whether I was having a fling with Ethan or not. I know I bitch about him a lot – yes. It's just all part of the act, darling. He's a rollercoaster, and I have to play along and scream and cry for the sake of the ride. You have to understand this – it is possible to hate and love something at the same time. You say you would always love me the same? Don't lie to yourself. If the road isn't hilly, don't believe it's a road. Because it's not.

Just like you say in your email that I'll finally understand you, I hope you finally understand me in this email too. Losing words in translation is the real tragedy.

Expect a call from me tomorrow. I would call tonight but I'm busy. I will call. Just because there's no spark between us doesn't mean we don't need each other. We do. Trust me.

Liz.

P. S. My heroes always tell the truth. Please be honest more. I want you to be a hero.

A week later, Jacob made another confession to the world. He wanted to drop the Ed in his English Ed major.

When he told this to his adviser, Ms. Fields, he could almost see her tear up a bit. He couldn't blame her. It wasn't as if there were a lot of people in his major. Every person who dropped the program was putting another nail in the coffin.

She asked, Won't you reconsider it?

I have. I've gone over it in my mind for a long time now.

Well, what made you decide to change?

Teaching high school isn't for me. I want to be around people who love books as much as I do. A kid in high school hates reading. At least, they hate the books the curriculum assigns them.

Ms. Fields persisted, But you can make them love books.

You can point a gun at my head right now, and I would still hate Nathaniel Hawthorne with all my soul. I don't care for any of those postmodernists that are always making the bestseller's lists nowadays. The only books that matter to me...they won't let the high schools read.

Like what?

Like Eliot.

Ms. Fields asked, George Eliot?

No, T. S. Eliot. Ezra Pound. Sylvia Plath. James Joyce. Ernest Hemingway. E. E. Cummings. Robert Frost. Elizabeth Bishop. The schools won't let me teach them. Their books are filled with swears and atheism and paganism and big words and big ideas and poetry that doesn't always rhyme. I refuse to teach *The Scarlet Letter* when I know that I can be teaching *Prufrock* somewhere else.

Disappointed, Fields asked, So that's what you decided then? You're going to become a professor?

Jacob smiled, You make it sound so horrible.

Well, the high schools need you more. You have a passion. I can see that. And those schools need teachers with passion.

And the colleges don't?

Fields stiffened, Colleges are filled with professors who have experience.

Yes. But they traded that spark for tenure...

Oh.

Listen, Professor Fields, I don't want to argue this with you. I just want to know how to switch to being just an English literature major. Are you able to help me with that? Please?

I'll see what I can do.

Jacob sighed, Thank you.

Fields picked up the phone to make the necessary calls. As she dialed the extension, she said, I just wish you would reconsider.

Jacob thought, And I just wish you would let me make my own decision.

It took Jacob a couple weeks to talk the coward out of him and hear Liz's voice again. He was afraid of what she would say, but he was more afraid of never hearing her say anything again. He almost cried for joy when Liz picked up her phone.

Hiiii.

Hey, hey. How are you?

Good. It's been a forever, darling. I was afraid you'd forgotten about me.

Jacob laughed, I'm not that forgetful. Just give me another year or two.

I'll try to remember that. Guess what?

Jacob asked, What?

Liz said, I'm coming back to Delaware. For the day, that is.

You are? When?

This Friday. There's a concert happening on Main Street. You know the bar, Tibet Timber?

Yep.

Well, the band performing there, I'm good friends with the drummer. I told him I would be there. And I keep my word. Can I hope I'd see you there?

Jacob asked, You said this Friday, right?

Yes sir. Friday at 9.

Jacob said, Uh, sure, sure. I'll be there. I have nothing going on Friday night.

Jacob could feel Liz beam over the phone.

Great! I'll see you there then. I would stay and chat some more, but I'm actually heading out the door.

Oh?

Yup. I got a stray cat!

You did?

Liz said distractedly, Uh huh. Found him the other day. He's gorgeous. I'll love him until I die. I refuse to let him die first. That's why I'm taking him to the vet.

Jacob said, Well, hopefully he checks out okay.

I hope so too.

Have you given him a name yet?

Liz said triumphantly, Samson.

Samson?

When I found him, his fur was all dirty and matted. It was disgusting. So he had to get a haircut. Thus, Samson.

Makes sense. Well then, have a good night. And hopefully I'll see ya this Friday?

Definitely! Definitely. Buh bye.

So that Friday, Jacob was sitting at the bar counter in Tibet Timber. He was underage, yes. But who gets carded in a college town? The unwritten rule was the alpha, the omega, and all of the fraternities and sororities in between.

Jacob was sipping on a pale ale, or at least trying to. The counter was crowded, and elbows kept churning his ribs into dough. He took a step away and headed downstairs. In this particular establishment, the bar was topside, while the so-called party room was deep in the hull. And the way everyone was spilling puddles of their drinks everywhere, it looked like the hull had sprung a leak.

The party room – we'll just call it what it was: a cellar – was crammed with people. The fire marshal would have a heart attack if he saw the crowd crushing at the walls. The room was filled with damp couches – Jacob was afraid to ask why the couches were damp – and a few rickety, termites chairs.

Jacob decided to stand.

The stage was in the far corner. The band – they had called themselves the Thinkinistas – were setting up. There were, the drummer, the two bassists, the random piano guy. Jacob could have sworn he saw a set of bagpipes in the flurry of preparation, but he had a feeling it was the ale already getting to him.

People kept piling into the room, despite the fact there was no more room. What do you call a room that has no room left? Jacob had to stretch out on his tiptoes to see over the pack.

One of the bassists pulled the microphone stand close to him and called out, Hello, world! We're the Thinkinistas! That is, until we change our name next week!

The crowd roared.

It's a Friday night, and we all know you've done your drinking. Now, it's time for the thinking!

The crowd laughed and cheered.

As the band thundered into its first song, Jacob began looking around the room for Liz.

Where is she at?

It was hard. The room was dim for the atmosphere. Jacob wondered absent-mindedly if the atmosphere was a stormy one. It certainly sounded like one. He pushed through the crowd like a sailor. A wave of watery beer splashed on his shoulder. Jacob flipped an underhanded bird and kept walking.

Jacob had walked past every single person in the room and still he couldn't find her. Night had settled on the room and it was impossible to see.

It was when he was squeezing through the room a second time that he saw her. She was sitting on one of the soggy couches. He hadn't seen her at first because some guy was flanking her. His Irish cap camouflaged both of their faces, but Jacob knew what they were doing. Liz was limply holding onto a beer bottle. She let it fall to the ground – the bottle crinkling into shards – and moved that hand to cradle her kisser's face.

Jacob could vaguely feel the rest of the crowd moving about, like they were stormy waves crashing against the rock. Another person spilled some beer on his sleeve again, but Jacob didn't notice.

He felt numb at first. But as he turned and made his way for the stairs, he could feel anger prickling at his sides. It started as an elderly pain, but it became more youthful and growling with each step he took away from them.

Jacob made his way to the first floor. He ordered another beer from the bartender – although he wasn't finished with his first. No matter – he downed both of the drinks inside of a minute. He was rinsing his mind clean. Let the hangover the next morning wring out the wet.

Jacob went to the men's room, took a piss. As he clumsily washed his hands, he looked in the cracked mirror. There were a dozen men hiding in the mirror, all of them crying silent for him.

Jacob slurred soft, S'all right, guys. Don't worry. Don't worry.

There were no paper towels. Jacob wiped his soaked hands against his legs and stumbled out of the room. He forgot how two beers at once felt like drinking for half the night. He was never good at math. But he was good enough at math to know his money. He handed another five to the bartender and asked for another drink. The man looked at Jacob shrewdly, but silently handed over another glass. Jacob waved away the change and walked off with his drink.

He had to get outside. The whole bar felt pressing and his cheeks were fiery to the touch. Distant, Jacob didn't know if it was his claustrophobia getting to him or the crying. He didn't care. He didn't care with a passion.

He sat out on the front patio. The skies were beginning to ooze rain, thick drops of the stuff. As people ran for roofs all up and down the street, Jacob sat at one of the outside tables. He let the acid rain of Delaware baptize him. He was shaking from the cold, the raindrops bouncing off his drowned shirt. He still drank, but not as quickly nor fervently as before. The rain was sweeping away his fury, his depression, but it took away the rest of his emotions as well. It did not giveth what it taketh, leaving Jacob a shuddering shell.

He finished the drink and walked into the bar for the last time. He set the glass down on the counter for the last time.

Jacob was too drunk, too cold, too tired to walk home. But there was still some primal beginning deep in his brain that knew enough to call a taxi. Thank God. The town was rare with taxis – it was a town after all – so Jacob had to wait a good fifteen minutes for a checkered cab to show its face after he called it in.

While he waited, he hoped that Liz wouldn't come upstairs. And whomever she was with. He couldn't tell for sure, but he knew it definitely wasn't Ethan. Ethan wasn't that tall, that hulking.

Finally, the taxi pulled up in front of the bar, its yellows distorted in the water-pecked windows. Jacob shuffled out into the rain and awkwardly leaned into the cab. The driver, a gruff shadow of a lady with long, matted hair turned in her seat, barked, Where to?

Jacob told her and she turned around to start driving. Everything felt like silhouettes – it was hard to tell what was real and what just felt wrong. The streetlights zipped past the cab window like fireflies in the fields, their brief sparks of life not enough to upset the night. The buildings on either side of the street loomed over him like trees, shading him even more in the thick dark...

Shit!

The sharp swear slightly startled Jacob. He looked through the window closer, saw that they had just sped through an intersection. There was a car honking behind them.

He asked, What, um, what happened?

The lady said sheepishly, Sorry about that. The light was red. That car back there almost drove into your side. I wasn't paying attention. Shit.

S'ok. No worries.

The lady craned her neck and looked back. She pled, Please don't report this. I've been in trouble enough.

Don't kill me and I won't report you.

Thanks, hon.

The driver kept up her side of the promise. Jacob certainly didn't die. His legs were very much alive – and shaky – when they landed on the pavement. Jacob slurred up to his room and right into bed. He slunk into bed, damn the fact he was still wearing all his clothes. He didn't care if he would wake up the next morning, smelling like beer and repulsion. He hoped it was enough to keep everyone away from him. As he curled into a dream paralysis, his thinking was fleeting. It was nonsense, but still his thoughts. It was all he had and clung to them, proud as fathers.

That was a terrible cabbie. I could have driven better tonight. I will never go back to that bar again. What a miserable place. The band wasn't even that good. Why did they think they were good? What...

Jacob stopped thinking for a moment. The thought startled him, and it sobered him up enough to sleep.

What if I died and tonight was the last night I would have ever seen Liz?

They didn't talk again for a few nights.

When Liz did call, she said resolutely, I'm going to study abroad.

Jacob's heart sank.

Where?

Liz said, I'm thinking Italy. Siena to be more exact.

Italy? Why do you have your heart set on going there?

Because I'm Italian. And I speak Italian.

Sheepish, Jacob said, Oh. I guess you have a point.

Liz said brightly, Oh, I do! It's going to be a lovely program, provided I get into it. The study abroad stuff at this college is top-notch, and so of course everyone wants to join in on the fun. Must be why the program is drowning in enough cash as it is.

When would you be going?

Well, I'm looking at this upcoming winter semester probably.

Surprised, Jacob asked, Liz?

Yes, m'darling?

It's November. That's next month.

Of course, silly goose. The program director said that someone just dropped out of the program last week. She said since my grades are high enough, that seat on the plane ride over is as good as mine. Besides, it'll be cheaper to go for the winter rather than the spring. And why wait a few more months for spring?

Again with the good points and you making them.

Liz laughed.

She then sobered up for a moment and said seriously, I need to get away from all of this for awhile.

What? Are you starting not to like New York now too?

Oh no, no. It's nothing like that. I just need to hide behind the Atlantic for awhile. I need space to think and it's either going to Europe or crashlanding on a deserted island in the Pacific. And I'd rather be where there's an art gallery nearby.

You know, no matter where you run to, you're always going to be at home.

Liz asked, What do you mean?

I mean, you ran away from Delaware, and where did you run to?

Jacob...

He wasn't sure where all of this was coming from. He knew Liz's quick temper. He knew he was stupid to light a match near it. Maybe it was the frustration from the other night? That it may have seriously been the last time he'd ever see her again?

Jacob persisted, You ran back home. You ran from one home to another. If all you want to do is run away from home, then you're always going to be on the road.

Jacob...

I'm sorry. I don't mean to be so abrupt. It's just that I'm looking out for...

Liz said seriously, I can look out for myself. Just pretend for one moment that I'm not a woman and you're not a man.

Okay.

Are you pretending?

Yes.

Let me make my own decisions, hon. This is why I'm always packing. You and everyone else...you're all making me feel allergic.

I'm sorry...

Exasperated, Liz said, Oh my god, how many times do I have to tell you not to be sorry for stuff you don't do? If you say you're sorry one more time, I'll definitely give you something to be sorry for.

Why isn't it my fault?

Liz calmed down a bit and said slowly, Because you're one of the good guys. You have to look out for everyone. You can't help it.

Jacob wanted to ask if that was why she only dated evil bastards. He already made the mistake of saying what was on his mind once that night though.

Liz continued, I don't need your help. I need your support.

Isn't that the same thing?

Help means getting in my way. Support means you'll get out of my way, no matter what choice I make. And when you said I'm always running away from home? I can never run away from home.

Why's that?

Because...well, because everything is my home. How can I, um, leave everything?

The passions reasoned down and the talk became much calmer than it was. As they continued, though, Jacob had a nagging feeling about what Liz said to end the argument. How it sounded hesitant and unnatural coming out of her lips. He couldn't help but think that, in all the time that he had known her, this may have been the first time he ever heard her lie.

And so Liz eventually left. Gone for the winter to Italy. The day she left, Jacob found himself watching the news more than usual. And praying more than usual. He knew airplanes were the safest way to get around. That the movies make flying seem like the final frontier. But still he watched the news, praying that they wouldn't do a breaking news flash across the screen, cut to smoking wreckage in the Alps.

But nothing happened. Jacob exhaled until he deflated when he got an email from her. It was short, but safe and alive.

Hi Jacob! I'm in the hotel in Siena right now. Everything's well. We're leaving in awhile. Going to dinner. I'll talk to you later. Bye!

Telegrams from the 19th century were longer than that email. Yet still, Jacob couldn't help but smile a little, glad smile he almost forgot he had.

The emails in the days following were just a little longer. They went to Rome one day. Liz talked about all the churches they went to. She wasn't a Christian at all, but she was an art major in the end. And Rome sparkles in an artist's eyes as much as it does in a Catholic. How she got in trouble for chasing the pigeons around in St. Peter's Square (I wasn't chasing them, honest!...I was just pretending to flap around with them).

They visited Pisa another day. She mentioned that she didn't bother doing the touristy thing, pretending to hold up the Leaning Tower in a picture (this would be the second time she ever lied to Jacob about anything).

The days turned to weeks. She saw the aqueducts that have snaked through the countryside ever since the Romans propped them up thousands of years ago. She saw the vineyards. She saw the Mediterranean. She almost took a weekend trip into France (only to have a falling-out with some of her fellow classmates at the last moment). Liz said that she wasn't fretting too much over it. She had always wanted to walk around in France, but she still enjoyed strolling through Siena, walking in circles around the Piazza del Campo, pretending she was a horse in one of the races there.

And whenever Jacob read the little emails she sent him over the ocean like the sunrise, he couldn't help but smile a little each time. Not so much for himself, but for her. He was glad that someone he knew could break out of the continent and reach for the world like the ball in a game of jacks. Jacob could never do something like that though. At least, he was pretty sure he couldn't. He didn't know. He never tried. He doubted if he ever would. Or could.

And still...still little sparks were sprinkling through the hay underneath his feet. He had only Liz to blame for the friction. But who ever said that friction was such a terrible thing?

The best act of the whole play – like any play – was the final act. Not because the play was over, but because of the climax. Those were two separate things. The winter would be gone soon, and Liz would come back home and all would be enough again. It was no coincidence that she was going to get back at the same time as spring.

And still Jacob flinched at some of the emails he got from here. The first flinch was this one:

I met a lovely boy here. His name is Benigno. He hardly says anything and lets me talk the whole time. I want to marry him already.

Jacob tried to write it off in his mind. Like what Liz said, she loved to talk a lot. When you exchange talk for action, you lose a lot of money in the exchange. Jacob kept telling himself that.

As the season rolled on – and Jacob began wearing his winter coat indoors because the heater in his room was broken – Liz and Benigno were already starting to act like an old, married couple.

I wanted to take a trip over to Liguria. I wanted to see the Genoese walls. But Benigno wasn't having any of it. He said he already saw the walls once and that was one too many times. When I told him I wanted to go still, he ignored me and sulked off.

During the last week there, Jacob got another email about Liz's Italian sweetheart:

I was telling Benigno that the other girls in the group hate me for some reason. He told me to shut up. That I was being silly and imagining things.

When Jacob asked her if Benigno was worth all the trouble, she simply said that not every girl could claim to have an Italian boyfriend. And she didn't want to be like all the other girls in the world. Benigno was worth the trouble and more.

And Jacob was beginning to get worried. He had known Liz for just long enough to know what to expect next. The next came the night before she was getting ready to head back to the States.

I love it here in Italy. I'm thinking of moving back here when I'm finished with undergrad. How cool would it be to go to grad school right here in Italy? If school doesn't work out, at least I would have a cute Italian boy here, waiting for me.

Jacob clenched his eyes, trying to squeeze out the thought of losing Liz as soon as she came back. Again. But the harder he closed his eyes, the deeper the thought stuck. Until her homecoming became another goodbye.

In Athenian times, Theseus was regarded as being one of the true heroes. He survived being married to the witch Medea. He killed the Minotaur. He had the guts to abandon Ariadne – the princess who helped him escape the Labyrinth – by leaving her on a deserted island in the middle of the night.

Who said that a hero always had to be a hero?

Although he committed so many incredible feats, his legacy – like every other hero's – waned in the centuries after his death. Even the hero-cults die in time. However, one reminder of Theseus lived long after the hero did. It was his ship. Generations later, the ship that glided him around the Aegean Sea was still very much alive. If anything, it looked brand-new. How? Because over the years, workers cut out the decaying parts of the ship and patched the holes with new planks. Over time, the ship became a quilt, testament to all of its repairmen over all of those years.

It was still a ship. Yes. But was it still Theseus's ship? After how long of giving and taking does something transform entirely? How many times can the love of your life come and go before you are nothing more than a shade of your personality, a patchwork of tragedies?

The spring came with Liz and, like Liz, it was going to leave soon. Jacob's dread grew with the temperatures. Classes that semester were easy – a miracle. Because he was getting distracted left and right. Every girl who walked past him around campus looked like Liz.

And when they walked away, they looked like her even more. And they all liked to step on the sidewalk cracks, breaking Jacob's heart at each stride.

And Jacob tried not to look at the calendar. He didn't want the summer – and Liz's graduation – and her move to Italy – to creep up on him like a countdown. Jacob was looking forward to the surprise. Nothing but shock was strong enough to carry him through.

But Liz kept talking and talking and talking about it. If she wasn't sure about moving before, she certainly was now. She even had the perfect street to live on lined up. It was on the edge of town. If she was lucky, she could get a house with the doorway facing east. She could wake up in the morning and watch the sunrise while sipping her tea. Later, she could sit down at dinner and watch the sunset through the kitchen window. She didn't care if it was in a bad part of town. Although even the better – that would mean that the rent was cheap.

And although Liz was still there in the States, and although Jacob was still at home, and although the status quo wasn't rattling yet, he could still feel the end coming, like oil spills tiding towards the summer beach.

In Eliot's Prufrock, we meet our graying, balding man – I've always taken him to be a banker – standing outside of it all. Prufrock is watching the party through a window, trying to steel up his courage and walk into the party where the women come and go, talking of Michelangelo. But he can't. He's afraid of being laughed at. An old man trying to act young. He knows wonderful things lie beyond the door, but he's not strong enough to step through the doorway. All of his fears have gnawed away and made him hollow. And weak. Too weak to even turn the doorknob. What use is such a man? Hundreds of years since Hamlet, and he couldn't find the smarts to evolve even a decision ahead.

Can you still find the strength to hug someone, even if your fears are stronger than yourself? Or would the hug break all your paper bones?

It was the night before Liz was going to head overseas.

She had called earlier that night. She had the cell on speakerphone while packing boxes. She was puffing.

Liz said, So, I – I...ugh.

What's up?

Nothing. It's just that I tried picking up my suitcase off the floor just now. Too heavy.

Jacob asked, I thought you liked to travel light?

Well, if I go to Italy and forget something, it'll be hard for the mailman to deliver it.

Makes sense.

Liz continued, And I am leaving for a very long time too.

Well, it'll be for just a year or two. Unless you're thinking about living there forever.

Well...we'll see.

Jacob asked seriously, You aren't thinking of living living there, are you?

Again, we'll see.

Oh.

Liz changed topics to one slightly brighter, asking, So, um, should I bring my Italian dictionary with me?

Well, you are going to be living in Italy. I would highly recommend it.

Liz explained, Well, I don't want to spend all my time getting my nose all inky from burrowing through my dictionary. Besides, I'll learn the language all the quicker if I have only myself to rely on.

Well, you better hope you're not in a pop spelling bee while you're there.

Liz laughed, Well, I am a born illiterate. Why do you think I took up art?

I thought you took up art so that you could work at a supermarket like all the other art majors?

Har-har-har. So says the boy damned to working in bookstores...ouch! Goddamit.

Jacob asked, What happened?

Just dropped a stapler on my foot.

Why did you drop a stapler on your foot?

Because you should never put lotion on your hands before handling heavy objects.

So hand lotion is the new cold medicine?

Confused, Liz asked, Huh? No wait, you're thinking of operating heavy machinery.

Oh.

Liz swore again.

Jacob asked, You drop the stapler again?

No, I just looked at the clock. It's almost eleven. I have to be at the airport by five tomorrow.

Well, it's a good thing you didn't wait until the last minute to start packing.

I know, right? Else it could have been a real catastrophe trying to get it all done the night before I leave.

I could hang up if I'm distracting...

No, no. Stay on the line. Please?

Okay.

Liz didn't say anything for a few moments. Jacob could hear her taping up a box on the other end.

Jacob?

Yep?

Just because I'm leaving doesn't mean we're going to stop talking.

No one said that.

No one wants to say that. But just because I'll be away doesn't give you any reason to stop talking to me.

Don't worry. I won't.

Liz said half-seriously, If you do, I'll finally give you a reason to be sorry about something.

Jacob laughed, Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.

It sounds like that Shakespeare guy had the right idea.

I don't think it was Shakespeare who said that.

Liz asked, Then who was it?

I don't know. But this is going to bother me the whole night.

Liz smiled over the phone, Well then, that's my parting gift to you.

I thought you said you weren't going to leave me?

Well then, I guess it's more a see-you-next-time gift.

They talked for a bit longer until Liz finally had to go to sleep. She didn't want to sleep in for her departure time like it was some exam. Time waits for no man – or woman – and all airplanes were time.

While Jacob assumed that Liz was getting her sleep, he was sitting at the foot of his bed. He didn't bother to turn the light on. You don't need light to think.

Jacob was thinking of so many things – all of them Liz. He could still hear the linger in her voice when she talked about staying in Italy for longer than she planned. And that scared him.

I don't know how she can just pick up and leave like that. I don't have the courage to follow her around the world. Why can't she stay at home? Why won't love love me?

And still he thought. And still the midnight grew and the room darkened even further.

I can't lose her. She has made me question so much in life. If she leaves, who will help me answer all my questions? Who will help me take this test?

He had dozens of ideas simmering. All of them stupid. One idea he had was moving to Italy after graduating. He had taken enough Italian classes over the years – he could somewhat survive. He tried that idea on for a few moments before realizing that it was four sizes too large for him. He simply couldn't grow into the bravery of it.

And there's such a fine line between stupidity and bravery too. You'd either have to be stupid – or brave – not to notice.

And then he got another stupid idea. This one stuck to his mind for a bit longer.

It was an engagement ring.

If Liz said yes, she would stay.

If Liz said no, she would leave.

She was going to leave anyway.

The whole thing seemed insane, but there Jacob was, working out the logistics.

If I leave now, I could get to JFK before her plane took off. I can't afford a ring. I could promise her one. But she hates guys who were all talk. But she hangs out with art types – she knows what poverty means.

Jacob knew what her answer would be. It would be an ending No. The last time he would ever see her would be getting on that plane. She would never want anything to do with him again.

She still wants to be friends, even over an ocean. Why ruin that?

Because nobody can stay friends over the Atlantic. Nobody can stay friends across a creek from one another. Friends are supposed to get closer over time, not further apart.

You still have time to drive.

But he couldn't work up the stupid in him to drive through New Jersey to rescue his last chance.

Don't think of it as stupid. Think brave.

But what survives a hasty proposal? Only roaches survive the nuclear blast.

-That is the question-

Can I really break all these doubts? Can I?

-By opposing, end them-

And what if she said Yes? Was Jacob ready for the finish line already?

-Ay, there's the rub, for in that sleep of death what dreams may come-

If there was a Yes, then there was each fight to look forward to which...

-Makes calamity of so long life-

And what if she said No? The far more likely No? She would go to Italy.

-The undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns-

If there was a No, I would have ruined everything. I can't do that to her.

-Conscience does make cowards of us all-

If he could only drive himself to drive New Jersey, to the JFK. Make all new. These...

-Enterprises of great pitch and moment-

I can't. I can. If she says yes, we die dusty and wrinkled. If she Nos, she leaves...

-All my sins remembered.-

Jacob could feel a throbbing pain in his right hand. He looked down, saw that he was clenching his car keys, the edges digging into his skin like dirt. He felt like dirt.

He tossed the keys to the floor and laid down in bed. He wanted to sleep on the whole decision. Although he knew by morning it would be too late. It was always too late if you're between a J. Alfred Prufrock and a hard place.

Act IV: The Fall of Roma

The moment Liz put a time zone between them – several, in fact – Jacob was ashes scattered in the wind. He was everywhere and so he didn't know where he was. When most people go into a depression, they lay in bed, watching the wall, watching the paint sweat.

Jacob took to walking.

Every moment he had – whether it was between classes, on break from work, when he should have been studying – Jacob was walking. He walked the campus in circles – he was turning into a compass spinning at the poles.

When he wore his sole down from all the walking, he would retire to his room every evening. He would look at the blank paper on the desk. Before, he would write down what was on his mind. He still did – blank was on his mind and so blank was what he wrote.

The semester kept on without him. Jacob used to be the backseat driver to these things. He would let it drive him, speaking up only at times for it to speed or slow. Now, he was just in the backseat to it all, sleeping with his head resting against the cool pillow window.

When it came time to pick classes for the next – and his final – semester, Jacob signed up for a couple classes. Greek tragedy. Irish History. Religions of the world. Abnormal psychology.

An Italian class – any Italian class – was conspicuously missing.

Jacob stopped going to open mics in his free time. The muse for his poetry was slipped out from under him and Jacob was afraid of being on stage in front of the world, silent as the pages of nothing he kept on his desk. The people at the open mics knew him, would call and email him each week, asking why he wasn't showing up. He never returned the calls, never replied to the emails. The week that the messages stopped, Jacob had a sudden, bizarre urge to feel homeless. Homeless despite the fact he still slept under a roof every night.

He had the change coming. He was due.

The blank pages still haunted him, of course. They followed him in his sleep like some paper-mâché ghost you wear for Halloween. The pages were as pure as snowfall, and Jacob hated them for it. Jacob wanted them to be smeared with ink. He wanted them to be a grimy jet, a midnight to get lost in. He wanted to write mazes into it...

Well, you get the idea.

And the silence was back now. It was louder than ever. The phone was ringing less in the evenings now. When it did ring, it was someone from class, asking what the homework was because they were out sick. Or it was family, asking about this or that. Everytime he picked up the cell, he hoped to see a New York area code in the number. There never was. And he would sit there, letting the phone's ring wring out his heart dry.

What was he expecting? For Liz to dial in the whole way from Italy, burning up dollars by the minute just to hear his voice?

You know, you could always call her. You can't buy her love, but you can buy hearing her voice. At least for one last time.

And Jacob knew that wouldn't work. A phone call to New York was ruinous enough. A call to Italy would stamp his spirit out as if it were flickers of fire. At that distance, talking to Liz would be like talking to someone from beyond the grave. He knew it, but he couldn't say it. And he especially couldn't hear it.

That was not to say that they didn't speak at all. He got the occasional email from Liz. Letting him know how Italy was going. What sights she saw that day. What food she ate. How the Italian wind through the vines sounds so much more sonorous than American wind does.

But those weren't talks. Those were postcards. They were what you sent people when you were away for a week, even two. You never send people you love little cheap paragraphs about the place you ran off to.

When Jacob got each email, he would promptly delete it without even bothering to read it. The next morning, he would retrieve the email from the trash folder and read it. As if he could read them. He read them like an illiterate, his eyes skimming foreign words. Words that were English to anyone else, but exotic to him. He wondered the same thing everytime he read each email: *What was it that I just read?* He was seeing some sort of abstract art to the words. It was all beautiful nonsense.

The ugly logic was that, even if someone left you, you can never lose them. As long as you remember what their voice sounded like, you can never lose them. And already some nights, Jacob was having a helluva time trying to remember her voice.

If dreams were just waking, then Jacob never slept.

He used to love going to sleep at night. Now he hated it. Like when you were a kid and loved the snow. You would grow into an adult the first winter you hated snow.

Every morning when Jacob would wake up, his eyes would crackle with scarlet spiderwebs more and more. His eyes were going to look like red beet eggs soon enough. He was bleeding inside-out from being tired. But how he looked forward to the mornings.

At night when he closed his eyes, she was waiting for him. His mind was a house and Liz was haunting every stairwell, every locked, dusty room. There was no way for him to hide.

Every night the dream was the same. He was sitting on the edge of a bed. The bed was made, and somehow this mattered to him. Liz would come slinking into the room. His eyes would flood.

He would say, It's been forever.

Although last night's dreaming was no forever.

She would say, I know, darling. But you can't look forward to the hellos if you don't say the goodbyes first.

Hello.

Hello.

She would glide across the room. Jacob was facing east, she was skimming west like the sun. She was stepping over exotic lands, wetting her ankles in the seas along the way. The continents creaked like elderly floorboards and the seas splashed like puddles orange-squeezed from the leaky roof. The clouds all around them were as fluffy as radio-crackled paint.

As Liz got closer, she seemed to grow. Or the world seemed to shrink around them. Whatever the pushing or pulling, the world was fitted around them like a suit. Nothing else mattered. They could squeeze the whole world out of existence if they wanted, you know – and encore it back when this tiny moment slipped between their fingers. And then she would be gone. And the world would stretch into a goodbye. And she would be a world apart from him, and he from her. And his continent would be dimmed with tar, waiting for the next night when her sunrise would come around again.

Would her lips still taste as good as they did last night? The thought pressed against Jacob's mind like mountains. Would a brush of her lips craft heights taller than all of us?

And still she would walk closer and still the world would crush around them. Jacob swore he could reach out with his hand and touch the side of the universe. He did – it seemed to shiver at his tickle.

Liz would sit on the bed next to him. She would rinse the back of her hand against his sleeve. Inside of that moment, Jacob felt so much like water. He was falling apart being so close to her.

And she would move in close, press her lips against his own. His lips were speechless, hers were a roar. He couldn't hear anything over her kiss.

And after that long second, Liz would draw back slow. Jacob would lean forward as she drew away. He was caught in the fishing lure of the moment. She would then look at him steady and say:

I...

A white noise would settle over them like snow. Jacob couldn't hear the last two words of what she said. But he could make out the last word: you.

Jacob would call out, begging, You what me?

And she, patient, would say the words again. And still the white noise drowned her like an icy pond. And still Jacob couldn't make out the word between the I and the you.

And that would be when Jacob woke up, shivering and sweating in his bed.

It had been like that every night for the past few weeks. The weeks were becoming years now.

So the minute that Jacob took to sob in his bed after each dream was stretched out into months.

And still every night he went to sleep. And still every night he woke up, tired by the torture. Love is beautiful. Lingering love is torture.

One night – it was a Sunday – Jacob tossed in his bed, kicking the dust out of his sheets as he bucked and turned. He knew it was sometime deep in the night. He could have opened his eyes, looked at the clock. But what's the point – every clock is wrong. Every clock in the world has that little tic, where they all toc at different speeds. Everything human hands stitch together is flawed – even clockwork. When they ring in the hour, they're a deaf orchestra warming up. There's no point in picking one clock over all the others. What makes any given moment so special then?

Jacob groaned. He squeezed the pillow at his side, squeezed it hard, squishing the egg white out of it.

He knew he had work the next morning. That's where the insomnia was waiting for him. He knew the next morning, he would be a step behind all the other clocks in the world. The day would drag like exhausted feet. It didn't matter though. He wasn't sure why.

Blessed be the sleepy, for they will sleep well in the end.

Jacob fell into the pillow and sobbed. His tears made the pillow even softer, which made him cry all the harder.

He whispered only three words, three words that nothing in the world but that pillow would ever hear from his lips. Three words that he knew – that he thought – that he hoped – that Liz’s ghost was saying in his deep dreams every single night.

I miss you.

One morning, Jacob couldn’t take it anymore. He told every person he knew:

I’m moving to New York City.

And each person told him things he knew they were going to say:

You’re a Delaware boy. Why leave the only home you know?...

You’re not city material. They’ll eat you alive on those streets...

You can do the same stuff down here that you would do up there. Why not get a job here where it’s cheap? Why not just visit New York every once in awhile for vacation? I like the beach, but I don’t want to live at the beach for the rest of my life...

And so on and so forth.

Jacob was expecting all of that. He was expecting their words. The sentences still cut him all the same – as if no one has faith in ideas anymore.

And Jacob was full of ideas, so it would make sense that nobody could trust him. He had been working the logistics: he was going to apply to grad school sometime this year before he finished his undergrad work. He would hopefully get accepted, go for English literature, and walk out of New York with a doctorate. After that, a professorship. After that, what he hoped were easy decades.

He needed easy decades after this one.

People asked him, more out of curiosity than spite: what would you do if you didn’t get into grad school? Still, those questions cut with a hopeful condescension. And still Jacob had answers. He would get a job in publishing. Or marketing. Something that he could put his English degree towards. It was either get into writing or get a part-time job at a fast food place. Not much else for an English major to pick and choose from. But when you have options, you have to pick at least one of them. There is no none of the above. That answer would be gone with the multiple-choice tests he took so far in college.

And he had to break eggs to make the omelet. That was the painful part. Delaware was all he knew for these past twenty-one years or so. You can build up a lot of moss on your legs in that time. It would take all he had to shake that off. He had to shake all that off to move. If he didn’t, he would be a statue in no time at all.

So he stopped talking to people. He stopped talking to his childhood friends. Even his first best friend, the same guy who would play with him during recess when none of the other kids would.

Nothing’s going to keep me from New York.

Gone were his high school friends. The ones he used to run track and cross-country with. Even though they made Jacob the punchline of their jokes, they would at least talk to him. In high school – where every clique was a country club – Jacob was proud to say that he was a part

of a group. He was proud to say that, yes, he had a rudder to guide him through his turbulent high school years.

Nothing's going to keep me from New York.

Last to go were his college friends. The ones who went to school in Delaware and could easily go home between classes. There was nothing wrong with those friends. The only thing that Jacob could hold against them was where they had grown up. Delaware was all he could hold against them.

Nothing's going to keep me from New York.

And all Jacob did was simply stop talking to them. That was it. He didn't instigate fights with them. He didn't tell them off. Nothing violent at all. He just...scattered them. Never looked back really, after shaking them off. And of all the little gears in his master plan, this one terrified Jacob the most. How quickly people stopped talking to him as soon as he stopped. As if words were the only thing that kept all those bonds together.

Is that really all that kept me chained to Delaware over all these years? Just some words? I honestly don't have anything like memories or interests – anything more concrete – that kept me tied to them? It was nothing but words the whole time?

And this scared him because he thought he knew so much about words, but it was really the other way around. Every pore in his skin was a rabbit hole and for the first time he saw how far down each one went, grazing his veins like grass.

He was shedding all of his friends and his loved ones off him, like autumn trees molting their leaves for the winter. And it wasn't until his branches were naked that he realized how much he was beginning to look like Liz. All this time he wondered how Liz could float around the world so easy. He had always wondered how she managed without any anchors.

Now he saw how easy it was to cut the lines and let the anchors sink like the stones they actually were to the ocean's bottom. How easy it was, and how much it was still a sacrifice. How disconnecting yourself from each person was like pulling the plug on a loved one. It really was pulling the plug on a loved one. And he realized why Liz felt so lost and dazed all the time. Because he now felt the same way, lost and dazed.

Jacob thought to himself, Well if I get nothing else out of this, at least I'll feel like Liz. At least I might finally understand her.

But deep down inside, he was hoping he would never really figure her out. When you figure someone out, after all, the journey ends and the credits roll. There's really nothing after.

Lucky for Jacob, that moment never came. He would end long before the pain ever did. Pain is an immortal beast. And an end is the only hero against it.

JacobLarson: Hey there, how are you?

LizMaguire: Hiiii. I'm very tired.

JacobLarson: Living can do that. How's Siena treating you?

LizMaguire: Things could be better. A LOT better.

JacobLarson: Why's that?

LizMaguire: I lost my job working at the school.

JacobLarson: You did? What happened?

LizMaguire: They had to make cuts. Since I was new, I was first to go. This is fucking terrible.

JacobLarson: I can only imagine.

LizMaguire: You'll just have to. I'm ruined. Absolutely ruined.

JacobLarson: How bad is it?

LizMaguire: I have just enough money right now for either another month's rent or a plane ticket home.

JacobLarson: That's a hell of a choice you have there.

LizMaguire: I know. I don't know what I'm going to do.

LizMaguire: I can't ask my parents for money. I just won't.

LizMaguire: I won't go crawling to them.

JacobLarson: Well, if it makes you feel any better

JacobLarson: I would wire you money if I had any.

LizMaguire: That would make me feel better if you actually had that money – can't pay the landlord with your nonexistent money.

JacobLarson: Oh.

LizMaguire: I think I'm going to try staying here another month.

JacobLarson: You are?

LizMaguire: Yes. If it doesn't work out here, I'll find work somewhere else. I'll rather be homeless than come back home.

JacobLarson: By the sounds of it, you were homeless to begin with.

LizMaguire: What's that supposed to mean?

JacobLarson: It means

JacobLarson: that you don't have to run away from home all the time

LizMaguire: I refuse to come back home to my parents

LizMaguire: I'm a grown woman. I don't need them anymore.

JacobLarson: I didn't mean that home. I mean some home. Any home. An anchor. Some place you would never leave.

LizMaguire: The world is my home.

JacobLarson: You're not answering my question.

LizMaguire: Well, it's a stupid question.

JacobLarson: I see you're giving it a stupid answer.

LizMaguire: Listen, don't tell me what I should do.

JacobLarson: But you said you didn't know what you were going to do.

LizMaguire: As if you know anything more. Or anyone else. Let me figure things out. Let me make my own mistakes. I would do the same for you. Or anyone else.

JacobLarson: Yeah, because you don't give a shit about anybody but yourself.

LizMaguire: That's not true!

LizMaguire: I love everyone.

JacobLarson: Then why do you run away from everyone?

LizMaguire: I don't. I'm trying to love every single person. I'm just running from love to love.

JacobLarson: Don't cheapen it. Either you love one person, or you love no one at all. Don't water it down – that's utter bullshit.

LizMaguire: That so?

JacobLarson: Yeah.

LizMaguire: Well, we'll see about it.

And that was it. Liz disconnected, leaving Jacob there, staring at a computer screen. The conversation still lingered on the monitor, like some ghost. It was already haunting him.

And Jacob felt ashamed of what he had just said. Which was bad. And Jacob had no idea why he felt this shame. Which was worse.

Act V: Funeral at the Catastrophe

I'm terribly sorry for your loss.

If there's anything I can do...

He was such a happy man. Always sad to see the good go early. Always sad.

The murmurs were a pillowsoft crescendo that still rattled the windows. The funeral home was packed and swirling, people swathed in black shuffled about. The room felt so bitter. But the food was good. Whether the viewing made the food taste better or the good food made the viewing worse, no one would ever know. No one cared about those little questions that had big answers. There was no point to things on days like this. Buddha would have been proud.

People had finally understood the universe – at least until the next day.

Everyone seemed almost dead, honoring the gone in their way. There was a man, though, who jittered with a nervous energy. He was sitting uncomfortably in a wooden chair in the far corner. He was holding a platter of food. The plate was trembling in his hand. Not for the man who laid in the coffin. His hand already trembled enough earlier that week when he heard the news.

He was trembling because he saw her across the room. She still looked like a hurricane butterfly after all these years. Her eyes, those deepocean blues, were still warm enough to dream. The years hadn't chilled them. Her hair was beginning to whiten at the edges, but it still glowed across the room like lightning.

He hadn't felt old until that moment when he saw her graying hair.

Her dark chocolate dress swirled with her whitewash arms. She was camouflaged against the scene of ghostpale women, all of whom were dressed stern. Everyone around her looked caged to the earth. She was still Icarian though – always floating higher. It didn't make sense. None of it did. He knew that. Then again, the Amazon flows upriver and it couldn't look anymore wonderful.

He set his plate down on the table and stepped forward. He excused me through the thick crowd towards her. She was looking around, listless, like she was at the train station. He tapped her on her shoulder.

All he could say, after all those years, was, You look beautiful.

She was surprised to see it was him. She recovered quick though.

She cleared her throat, said, Hello. I wasn't trying to. It is a funeral, after all.

I know. I...I just feel you needed some good news.

She frowned, Not really. I'll rather wait to smile.

Oh.

Even after all that time, all he could ever say to her was that word. Oh. Jacob was surprised that he was still surprised by that word. It should have come as easy as breathing by now.

He cleared his throat, So, you were good friends with...?

She nodded, In a way. Friend of a friend. Met him at a party. He loaned me money.

That so?

Another nod.

Can I ask how much?

Can I ask why?

Just curious. Was it enough to buy a candy bar? Enough to pay the landlord?

Enough to buy popcorn at the movies.

When did you start going to the movies?

When did you become a detective?

He shrugged his shoulders, Just curious. You never went to the movies when we were, you know...

He paused. The past tense startled him. It was as if he forgot what got him to that moment. He had forgotten. The same guy who had constantly replayed their past – a record skipping the same stones over and over. If you keep going over something in the back of your mind – mistakes, love, good shot of whisky – it stays in the present. It's only when you forget that it's in the past.

I only went to the movies with him a few times.

Oh?

It was nothing serious. Just a friend of a friend.

He wanted to tell her – if it walks like a fuck, if it talks like a fuck, then it's a fuck. It startled him to be so rough around her. The years should have worn him down smooth. But they made him rough and catscratchy. Still though, she had never taken anyone serious enough.

She coughed hard. She thumped her chest.

He asked, You okay?

She waved it off, Fine, fine. Damn cigarettes.

You're still smoking, after all this time?

She shrugged, Well, yeah. They're going to kill me one of these days, you know.

A couple standing nearby looked at her oddly. She shrugged them off before turning back to him.

I wish people weren't so uptight at these things.

He said, Well, it is a funeral after all.

What, we can't talk about death? At a funeral? C'mon, you can't spell funeral without spelling fun, can't you?

He almost laughed. She was almost her old self. It was almost one of her good days.

He asked, So what have you been up to?

Oh, struggling. I'm a curator in a little art museum outside of Rome.

Do you still draw?

She said, Yes. It's not nearly enough to pay the bills though. I've been paying off debt with debt for awhile now. It works. I see you aren't a struggling artist anymore, though.

He suddenly felt embarrassed. Although he shouldn't have been. He still hid his fancy watch further up his sleeve with his other hand.

He said gruffly, There's a difference between being successful and being happy.

No, no there isn't.

He looked wistful, Sometimes there is.

She shrugged, Well, I guess one of us has to be lucky.

So says the lady living in Italy.

She suddenly said, I read about you.

Oh? Where?

Are you really in that many magazines that you can't tell one interview from the next?

No. But I like to think I am.

Well, it was a good write-up of you anyway. I thought your answer to that last question was a bit strange though.

What was the question?

She frowned, remembering.

It was...what inspired you to write. You said it was the forest, how...

...how it writes its history on wood. That I write my history on paper made from the same wood. I remember now.

That sounds too cheesy. I expected better from you.

Well, it is my stock answer. You're the only person who deserves hearing the truth.

Oh?

It was so strange to hear her say oh. It sounded almost sexy coming from her. When I say it, it sounds so grinding.

He said nervously, I think we should go somewhere else to talk about this. Can I get you a cup of coffee after this?

No. You know me, darling; I'm impatient.

He breathed hard. He was ready to say this ten years before. Not now.

He closed his eyes hard and finally said, You're my muse. You're my muse the way a bunch of damn oak trees will never be.

Scarlet colors martyred on her pale cheeks. She was quiet. She let him continue. So he did.

You were the one who told me to live for love. Before you, I already knew routines...

Now...

You taught me to live a little...

Listen, please...

His eyes flaring, he said, Let me finish.

Okay.

He calmed down for a moment, said, You taught me to live a little. So I decided to live a lot. Do you remember telling me those words?

No, I can't say I do.

He bit his lip, I became a writer because of you. You made me with those words. And you can't remember them?

No. I'm sorry.

Silence.

She coughed, asked, Is that it? Is that all you wanted to say?

He nodded.

How long have you wanted to say that?

Ten years.

Ten bloody years? And that was all you could think of? For christsakes, your last book was some eight hundred pages, wasn't it?

He frowned. This wasn't where he expecting it to go. He decided to make another confession. Damn the torpedoes and all.

I loved you. You remember that, at least?

Yes. I didn't love you. You remember that as well?

He said sadly, I don't forget things that easily.

I know you don't. I just figured you'd make yourself forget that tiny little fact.

He cleared his throat and confessed, I almost proposed to you.

When?

When you were about to move to Italy.

Well, why didn't you?

I was afraid.

It's a good thing, too.

Oh?

She said conversationally, I would have slapped you if you proposed.

That's why we would have made such a great couple.

Really? Why's that?

Isn't it always the couple who hate each other that stay married the longest?

She snorted, I suppose so, yes. Explains why my parents are still together.

More quiet. For the first time in his life, he wished someone would talk. Say something, anything. He looked down at his shoes for a moment. When he glanced up, she was looking at him curiously. She was seeing him in a light she never saw before. It lit up her eyes. He couldn't tell if it was mischief or intellect.

She finally asked, Why are you telling me this? Now? At a funeral home, of all places?

Ten years of silence have broken better men. You meant the world to me. You still do. I want to live in that world again.

You have your books. Live in those.

He winced. She was hiding knives in the words.

But books are proofread. You're full of misspelled words and forgotten commas. That's what I loved about you. You were so natural, so...so flowing. I would give up writing for you.

You would?

He nodded.

She frowned, I doubt you would.

Oh?

Because I'm about to tell you I never want to see you again. I can't have you for a lover. And I can't have a lover for a friend.

I had a feeling you would say that.

And when I say I never want to see you again, you'll have nothing but books to love. And you know what?

What?

You can live with that. I know you can.

Why would I ever love books over you?

Because...books will never leave you.

He left. He had to. She wanted to talk with the other people there. She was always stubborn granite. He couldn't be there anymore, so he slipped out the door. Like a puddle of water.

Coincidentally, it was a puddle of water that he stamped in walking down the street that made him remember. In his walk of shame towards the door, he had forgotten his jacket on the coat rack. It was his favorite. And it was supposed to rain later that night. The rain wanted to be fashionably late for the viewing. Still, he wanted to leave the jacket there. But he couldn't.

Goddammit.

He decided he would sneak back in. He would grab the jacket and leave.

He managed to sneak in.

So far, so good.

He found his lonely jacket on the coatrack. It was still sweating with that morning's rain. It almost looked as if it was crying.

Go. Now.

He let his eyes dart around. He shouldn't have. He saw her again. This time standing with one of her old friends from college. He squinted. It almost looked like...no, was it? Yes, yes it was. Her old roommate. The one she never cared for.

He couldn't help sneaking close. He had to hear her voice one last time. He stuck to the crowd for cover, listened hard. He could just barely make out the voices. That was enough – he just wanted to hear her voice for one last time. One last time.

The roommate asked, So who was that man you were standing with just a few minutes ago? He looked familiar.

Oh, just a friend of a friend.

Curtain.