

## Chapter One

*“If she’s amazing, she won’t be easy. If she’s easy, she won’t be amazing. If she’s worth it, you won’t give up. If you give up, you’re not worthy. ... Truth is, everybody is going to hurt you; you just gotta find the ones worth suffering for.” ~ Bob Marley*

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“Hi there,” said a young man with shoulder length brown hair that tousled in his face, covering one of his eyes.

“Hello,” I replied, waiting to see if he’d ask me for money.

“I wonder if I could ask you a question,” he said, “and video you for a psychology project I’m doing for school,uh, if you’re cool with that?”

I raised my chin and looked him over. I lived in Portland at the time, newly retired after selling the electronics supplies business I had operated for nearly 20 years. I was sitting on a bench in Mills Ends Park, famous for being the smallest park in America. Or so the locals claimed, anyway.

He looked like a lot of the other twenty-somethings in the city, with a disheveled, grimy look that seemed like a purposeful affectation more than a genuine expression of being poor. I’d been warned about the young people begging all over the city and found it to be even worse than advertised. I had assumed he was just another one of the minions, so his approach intrigued me.

“Are you a Psych major?” I asked.

“No, no,” he said. “I’m a junior in high school and it’s just for my psychology class that I took as an elective. We’re currently studying the life span in human development and I chose to focus on the elderly.”

He seemed to realize that I might take offense to that and I could see his pale face blush.

“Sorry,” he said.

“What for?” I said. “It’s not your fault that I’m old.”

He laughed, but it seemed forced.

“Anyway,” he said. “It’s only for 60 seconds.”

“What is?” I asked.

“Sorry, the video,” he said. “I’m asking people to limit their responses to 60 seconds.”

“Can I hear the question first before I agree to be on video?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said. “I’m asking senior citizens to tell me about their first loves.”

I was taken aback by the question because I thought of her immediately, and I had done my best to not to think about her for almost 35 years. By this point, I only thought of her occasionally, but it always hit hard and was unexpected. The littlest things would remind me of her, like when my kitchen got messy. Her kitchen was always so dirty, dishes, pots and pans, half eaten meals strewn about. Or when I put lotion on my hands, it would remind me of how I used to put lotion on her feet as we laid on the couch watching TV.

I don't think the kid picked up on it, as I have a good poker face and have learned how to hide my feelings from people. Then again, don't all of us? You don't get to almost sixty years old without scars, scars others can't see. Scars you don't want them to see.

I inhaled deeply.

"That's more than a 60 second story ..." I said. "What was your name again?"

"Sorry," he said. "I'm Justin."

"Don't be sorry so much, Justin," I told him. "I didn't ask earlier."

"Yeah, sorry about that," he said, almost immediately realizing what he had done, making his pale face blush even more than before.

I smirked and angled my head to the side.

"I realize a story like that is complicated," he said. "But I'm asking people to just hit the highlights ...a thumbnail sketch, I guess. I think it will be interesting for people my age, who are just having those experiences - or haven't yet - to hear from older people about what it was like for them, but through the perspective of experience and time."

"How old are you?" I asked, laughing. "That's pretty wise for a teenager."

"Yeah, it was my idea," he said. "But my teacher has helped me, I guess, refine it," he added, smiling sheepishly.

"Okay, Justin," I said. "I'll be a part of your project. You ready?"

"Yeah," he said. He pulled out his smartphone and tapped on the screen for a few seconds before holding it up. He moved back a few steps and centered me on the viewfinder.

"Okay," he said. "Whenever you're ready. I'll give you this signal when you have about 15 seconds left," while swirling his index finger in a circle above his head. Then he pointed at me, signaling to speak:

*I didn't truly fall in love until I was in my mid twenties. Her name was Veronica and we didn't have immediate chemistry, that's for sure. But we soon fell in love, hard and fast. We were together, off and on, for over two years, but we couldn't find a way to do ordinary life together, drove each other crazy sometimes. Even*

*after all these years, once in a while I still talk to her in my head and feel her presence. I don't have any idea where she is, though.*

I stopped and looked up at Justin. He looked confused.

“That was, like, 23 seconds ...” he said before hesitating. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know your name.

“It’s Jeremy,” I said. “That wasn’t long enough for you?”

He put his phone in his pocket and sat down next to me on the bench. He looked as if he would begin to speak, but then held back.

“It’s just ...” he finally said. “Didn’t you tell me earlier it was more than a 60 second story? She sounds interesting. Your relationship sounds complicated.”

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“Nica, I just want to have some idea when you might get here,” I said.

There was a pregnant pause on the other end of the phone, but I had learned to wait these out. Otherwise, I ended up having conversations with myself and walked away more confused than ever.

“Jeremy, I expect you can live your own life without me,” she finally responded.

I felt the familiar piercing in my heart when she would say something insensitive. Nica, short for Veronica and a nickname she gave herself, was mostly a kind person. When she was not, she was distinctly unkind.

“It’s insulting that you would even say that,” I responded. “I’m not a child or some kind of parasite who doesn’t know what to do without you. But if you’re going to be an hour versus three hours, I can at least plan how to use my time.”

I heard her exhale into the phone.

“Nica, it’s just showing someone respect,” I continued. “I’m not trying to control you or restrict you or whatever. Take an hour, take three hours, but just give me some idea ... Not to the minute, for God’s sakes, but at least some kind of ballpark time?”

I reminded myself to stop talking. Nica waited me out for a bit, but then relented.

“Fine,” she said. “Sevenish.”

It was my turn to exhale. I considered reminding her to let me know if things changed, but decided that might be pushing it. That was the funny thing about Nica; what seemed absolutely ordinary with other people became complicated with her. We had engaged in long and sometimes heated conversations about time, for example. On one level, I enjoyed that kind of thing - we both did. It was one of the things that drew us to each other. Street philosophers, systemic thinkers and learners, whatever you wanted to call it, we clicked that way. But, Jesus Christ, I thought, just give me some idea when you might be here!

“Thank you,” is what I landed on.

“Okay, goodbye,” she said.

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I always had a lot to do, but usually no single thing that was imminently pressing. I was helping manage a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm in Kingston, New York, but had started college at the business school at Indiana University. The second accounting class I took convinced me I'd chosen the wrong path so I dropped out and bounced around from job to job for a while, convinced by the romantic notions of literature and youth that this is how I would find my calling: truck driver, sous chef, telemarketing, selling real estate ...more than I could remember sometimes.

It was at one of these jobs that I'd met Nica two years before when both I was 25 and she was 21. We met at the shoe store where they make the sales associates wear referee shirts.

“Nice shirt, Red” she had said to me the first time we ever laid eyes on each other.

I had thick, wavy red hair that naturally went up as it got longer, creating a kind of pompadour style. I wore it longer like that when I was younger, but in those years I'd worn it clipper cut short because I thought it drew less attention. Like a lot of red headed people, I felt a kind of stigma about my hair color, what with strangers and friends alike calling me ginger and asking to touch it, stuff like that.

Though Nika worked for the same shoe company, she didn't have to wear the referee shirt. She went from store to store setting up the displays and monitoring sales of the ancillary products like shoe laces, tee shirts, socks, and so forth.

“First thing I told them,” she shared with me once we started to get to know each other, “I'm not wearing that stupid shirt,” she said, reaching up to twist the collar like she was snapping her fingers.

We were not drawn to each other immediately. Neither was the others' type, physically anyway, we confessed after we'd become intimate. I was usually drawn to women who were taller, like me, and brunettes because I thought they went better with my red hair. I'm tall and thin, six feet, two inches, and just assumed I should have a partner who matched that to some extent. I'd once dated a woman who was six feet tall and enjoyed that we could look directly into each other's eyes.

But Nica was a full foot shorter than me and was more curvy, which was accentuated by her petite stature. I eventually grew to love her “gymnast thighs” as I called them, but it wasn't what I was used to.

She had never dated a redheaded man, she told me, and didn't think that, generally, they were very attractive. That was Nica, in a nutshell. No filter sometimes.

She also usually dated men that were at least ten years older than her. Younger guys, she said to me once, “bore the fuck out of me.”

The shoe store where we met was located just outside Indianapolis, Indiana, and our first date wasn't exactly a case study in explosive chemistry, to say the least. We met at the Tegry Bistro, a sushi restaurant she had suggested after we discovered both of us enjoyed that kind of food.

But the conversation was stilted and choppy. We kept interrupting each other with meet and greet style interview type questions ...how many siblings, what were you like in high school, what are some things you like to do ...blah, blah, blah. And we sat upright at the booth, even pushing away from the table, not leaned in with “come to me” energy. After the date was over and we both went home, I texted her that I enjoyed our time together and liked her laugh.

“Thanks,” she texted back, and nothing more.

“Ouch, “ I remember thinking. “So much for that.”

In spite of this, we made plans for a second date, this time an alternative music festival a little further away in a small town called Franklin. Like sushi, it was a common interest and I think we both hoped that might lead to more of a connection. At first, I thought I'd make some excuse and not go with her, thinking it would likely be a waste of time. But mostly because I didn't have other plans that day, I said why not. Tellingly, in terms of our mutual expectations, we both suggested we meet there rather than drive together.

When I arrived in the parking lot, I walked around looking for her car, a black 1984 Ford Escort. There seemed to be a lot of those, or small cars like it, and I was unsuccessful in my search. I had my hands on my hips and was looking to my left when I felt a soft hand on my right cheek apply pressure to turn my face in the other direction while another hand pulled roughly on my shirt collar and jerked my head down. As you might guess, I was a bit startled. But somehow the rest of my body remained still and, eventually, my eyes met hers at a closer distance than they had ever achieved, not three inches apart.

“Hey, you,” she said and leaned in to close the narrow distance between our faces. She planted a long, soft kiss on my lips, our mouths parting just enough to feel the tips of each others' tongues.

I felt an electricity shoot through my entire body after we had pulled apart back to a lovers' distance and was looking in her eyes again.

“It's nice to see you,” she said with a wry smile.

Just like that, she had totally transformed the energy between us. I would learn in time that this event was a harbinger of things to come in our relationship. In ways that were both healthy and toxic, Nica was the driving force between us, the impetus for our path, for better or worse. Her restless spirit and willingness to take chances thrilled me and nudged me out of my protective shell, but she was also like a black hole,

sucking all the energy from the room, from our relationship. It was all about Nica and I sublimated myself to that dynamic. I couldn't see how not to, and I had thought about it many times.

She was both incredibly freeing and confining to me. I loved her deeply and resented her deeply. I couldn't imagine a practical way to either live with her or without her. We had talked frequently, too frequently really, about the depth of our love and our relationship, had spent more time talking about that relationship than actually living it. And though we had broken up twice for about six weeks each time, one time at my behest and once hers - here we were together, still, a little more than two years later.

But for the moment, I figured I had about two and a half hours to get some of the items on my never ending to-do list checked off. Or maybe longer ...but for sure not less. Nica was never early but she was very frequently, even nearly always, late.

I sighed and looked out the window. I saw dark clouds mixed with sun and wondered if it might rain.

## Chapter Two

I grew up on the west side of the state of Michigan in a little town called Niles, not far from the better known Kalamazoo. I'm the classic middle child, as I have an older brother and a younger sister, each of us spaced almost five years apart. I asked my mother once why that happened, if it was a deliberate decision or not, and she was equivocal.

"I don't know, son," she said. "It was just God's plan, I suppose. You'll be happier in life if you don't question why so much, Jeremy. Accept God's plan."

We were in the car driving somewhere, the store or something, and she took her eyes off the road and glanced sideways in my direction, but just for a moment before looking straight ahead once more. Her expression suggested to me, even at that young age - I was maybe 9 or 10 years old - that she had not fully accepted God's plan, whatever that was.

Later, Nica used to say things that reminded me of my mother this way, only she attributed the plan to "the Universe." Things work out the way they are supposed to, she often said. Tell that to parents whose kid gets cancer, I used to think but not say out loud.

Everyone has shit - I learned that long before I met Nica, though our trauma collided in spectacular fashion. But, you never know the burden the man carries who you walk past on the street. You'll never see the inner turmoil of your kid's kindergarten teacher, or the psychological pain of the woman behind the counter at the DMV.

Despite your ignorance, they carry it nonetheless, more burdensome in its own way than a bag of rocks strapped on their shoulders.

And if that's true for individuals, then it's just as true for families. Tolstoy's Anna Karenina principle states that every happy family is alike, while unhappy families are unhappy in their own way. But I always felt like the vast majority of families are neither all one or the other. Most have happy moments - some more than others, of course. But each has shit, too. Each has dysfunction and pain.

This was no less true for Nica and me. I wouldn't understand the importance of that for many years. Long after we parted ways, actually. I wouldn't see how both our connection and our dysfunction was set in motion years before by things that happened to us long before our paths intersected.

My mother's expression in the car that day betrayed her unyielding efforts to hide her dissatisfaction. It was an unhappiness, I would discover later, owing in large part to the fact she didn't really love my father. For his part, my father loved her truly, if not deeply, though it was hard to tell sometimes. They rarely displayed affection for each other, physically, certainly. I don't think I ever saw them kiss for more than a peck on the cheek, no loving caress of the shoulders, nothing like that.

When I was in college I came home for a visit while my father was away on a fishing trip with his buddies from work. He was an inside salesman for a plumbing supply company, working his way up from driving a forklift in the warehouse. It was a company he'd worked for since he graduated high school, and though he was somewhat of a loner without many close friends, he had come to know a few of the guys he worked with and would take trips with them occasionally.

I was having dinner with my mother and we were drinking wine and discussing politics and poetry, family gossip and philosophy. It was something we shared uniquely. She didn't ever do this in quite the same way with either of my siblings or my father, that's for sure. It made us close in a way that they would take note of, a hint of admiration mixed with jealousy apparent in their comments.

It was during this particular dinner she shared with me her theory about the inequity of transactional relationships, as she termed it. I don't know if she got that from an article she read in *Psychology Today* or something, but she didn't cite any sources. Anyway, she claimed that in any relationship, be it family, friends, but especially romantic ones, the two parties never love each other equally. One person always loves the other more and this, in turn, creates a power dynamic that favors the one who is loved more. He or she has power, if you will, over the other.

"What does one do with power like that, son?" she asked rhetorically. "Use it? Or abuse it?" she added. "The choice a person makes in that position will tell you something about their character."

I was a little older now, not greatly experienced in the ways of love - this was just before I met Nica - but more than I had been as a teenager when these types of

subjects might arise from time to time. Even so, it didn't take a therapist to recognize she was talking about my father and her. Maybe it was because he was away; maybe the wine was flowing just a little more than usual, but she seemed, not only in a reflective mood, but a sharing one.

"What accounts for two people getting married?" she continued, not wanting an answer from me but getting ready to supply her own. I knew her that way, knew her that well, knew her in ways my father did not. "It's not love, son," she added, raising her eyebrows for emphasis. "At least not only love."

"Sure," I said. "You mean practical considerations like money, family background, stability? You're not going to want to marry someone who is addicted to drugs and can't support themselves."

"I'm not sure you're right there," she said. "I've seen people - women mostly - hitch their wagon to some real losers."

I didn't ask her if she was talking about my father.

"But of course you're right about that, too," she said. "Many people do consider those kinds of things. It's only logical but, still, I'm not sure they're the most important - at least not for most people."

"What do you mean?" I asked, the dutiful, inquisitive son. She was imparting wisdom now and it was my job to receive it. This was probably a big part of why she liked talking with me so much. I knew my role.

"Most people see their lives as a kind of movie in which they are, of course, the star," she said. "And they are constantly seeking out people to be supporting actors in that movie, some playing a bigger part than others. Your friends, your co-workers, your neighbors - they usually play smaller supporting roles. Your spouse, your family of origin, your kids, they play bigger parts."

Most people, I thought? You do mother ...you see your life as a movie with you as the star.

"And your spouse?" she said, "They play the biggest supporting role, so you want to find someone who fills your needs this way, I suppose is a way to put it. Someone who helps address something you want or need, whether it's giving you the love or security your parents never did, or tells you how attractive you are and helps the insecurities you've always had about your looks."

I took a sip of wine and struggled with whether or not to ask the question hanging obtrusively in the air.

"Or whatever," she added.

Like diving into the cold water in the deep end of the pool, I spit out the words before I could chicken out.

"So what needs of yours did Dad fill?" I asked. "Or still fills?"

She was, of course, ready for me.



“Not me, son,” she said. “Most people ...but not me. I’m not most people” she added, holding up her wine glass to her mouth in a jaunty, showy manner before taking a long sip.

“So you and Dad getting married was part of God’s plan?” I asked, mustering my best troublemaker smirk. “And you’ve accepted God’s plan that way?”

I had a contradictory relationship with my mother. I adored her and was clearly one of the supporting actors in her life’s movie. And it was something we both knew even though we never spoke of it and, in fact, a transaction we were both satisfied with, to use her term. But I could also give as good as she could, was as sharp and witty as she was, would absolutely challenge her. Not all the time. I had to pick and choose my spots. But I could call her out - not with anger in my voice but a playful smile on my face. Or, as in this case, a playful smirk.

“Clever boy,” she said, with a smirk on her face almost exactly the same as mine.

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“So you fell in love with Nica because she reminded you of your mother?” asked Justin. “My mom says you look for a partner that reminds you of your father if you’re a woman and your mom if you’re a man.”

“I knew you’d think that,” I said. “But like most things in life, Justin, it’s not that simple.”

“Maybe it is,” he replied, a toothy smile taking over his whole, pale face. “Did you guys ever get married?”

I considered how much of this to share with Justin. I had married a wonderful woman when I was 35 years old about 10 years or so after Nica and I broke up for the last time. She was the sister of a woman who clerked for my electronics supply business. Her name was Lauren, which I loved. The clerk, whose name was Barbara, was always telling me I should let her set up a date with her sister and I always put her off, saying I was too busy. One day, just to be polite, really, I asked her to tell me a little bit about her, which she did.

“What’s her name?” I asked.

“Lauren,” she said. “And don’t call her Laurie, by the way,” she added. “It’s Lauren.”

We were married for twenty years, but she died from breast cancer when I was 56 and she was 53. I’d been on my own for three years now and don’t even think about dating anymore, or even female companionship, if I’m being honest. I figure I’ve had my two great loves, and how many men can say that?

We dated for less than a year before getting married. I loved her, but not like Nica. But she gave me things Nica could not. I often thought of my mother’s theory of

transactional relationships while dating both Nica and Lauren. What did each one give me that I needed or wanted? What did I give them?

Lauren had two children, a boy and a girl. She was eight years younger than me, so her kids - they were from a previous marriage - they were little, maybe 5 and 7 years old or something like that when we first started seeing each other. They never really warmed up to me, partly because Lauren didn't try very hard in that regard for reasons I don't think even she fully understood. We used to fight about it, sometimes fiercely, but I eventually gave up and accepted the situation for what it was. Her kids and I get in touch around birthdays and holidays now, but we still aren't close.

"No," I said to Justin. "Nica and I were together for just two years or so, off and on, but we never came close to getting married. We used to talk about it all the time, though, and right from the beginning. We were going to get married near the ocean and wear white shirts and jeans, do something unconventional."

I stopped for a minute, the pain I'd felt only now and again for over thirty years resurrecting itself. It was amazing to me how, even after all this time, I could feel like crying when I thought of such moments with her.

"Nica was unconventional," I said. "Sometimes just for the sake of being so," I added.

## Chapter Three

"They adopted me when I was fourteen," said Nica. "I lived in a bunch of foster homes before that."

I was at Nica's apartment about three months into our relationship and we were just beginning to break through the initial walls people put up when they first meet and start seeing each other. I had told her all about my family by then, about the age distance from each of my siblings making it hard for us to be super tight, but still loving each other, still getting along and close in our own way. About my parents' complicated marriage. Even about some of my cousins we were pretty close to from my mother's side of the family.

I didn't recognize it at the time, but Nica was good at deflecting the discussion away from her family, away from her younger years. She would ask me about my family by starting with a general, open ended question and then follow up with more specific ones. She had a way about her that kept it from sounding like an interview, with a tilt of the head, a smile at just the right point in the story, a nod indicating her full attention.

Later in our relationship, it was so obvious to me what she was doing. I mean, don't get me wrong, I think she genuinely liked to hear stories about my family, but I could tell it was a defense mechanism she used to avoid talking about her own.

“I don’t have stories like that,” she would say. There was a hint of sadness in her demeanor when she would say it, but not dramatic self pity. Like the way someone might say they never went to the prom. Disappointed, but not devastated.

But she was also steering the conversation away from me asking questions about her family background.

“I’m not hiding anything,” she replied tersely when I eventually broached the subject with her. “I just don’t have those stories.”

She eventually told me the whole story, or that’s what I thought at the time. How her parents divorced when she was six years old, how her father wasn’t really a presence in her life and her mother stopped raising kids after the divorce even though she had three young ones left.

Her birth family consisted of seven kids altogether and Nica was Number Five. The state stepped in and took the last four of them away from her mother and, at first, found a foster family that kept them together. But Nica said that didn’t last long and they were sent to separate families and eventually lost touch for many years.

“We found each other after we all grew out of the system,” she told me, “but the connection was gone.”

She rested her narrow face in the delicate fingers of her right hand, her elbow propped on the table.

“There’s this intense cultural pressure to be close to your blood relatives,” she continued. “But that’s medieval thinking, a remnant of a long time ago when your family name and ties did mean everything. But now?” she asked. “Not now, even though people still romanticize it.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, playing the same role I had so many times with my mother.

“You know what I mean,” she said, smiling and pissed off at the same time. It was an unnerving combination.

She took a deep breath and pulled her head up from her hands and sat up straight. Her dark brown hair looked almost black in the dim light of her apartment and I noticed how beautiful she looked just at that moment. She had green eyes that were usually enhanced by eyeliner that she rarely went without wearing, even when we were alone on a Sunday morning. And her skin, which could sometimes appear blemished with scars from teenage acne, at this moment, looked silky smooth.

Nica was funny that way. She was like a car with flecks in the paint, appearing as different colors in the sunlight versus a cloudy day. Sometimes she was stunningly attractive and at other times, from different angles, much more plain, asymmetrical in a way that was less appealing.

But not just then. For whatever reason, she was stunning.

“Fucking family everywhere in the culture,” she said. “Movies and TV, especially,” she added, an acidic tone practically dripping from her mouth.

“Look at my beautiful family on vacation,” she said derisively. “See us at the beach, smiling, hugging? Aren’t we the perfect fucking family?”

The contradiction was jarring, actually. The physical beauty she projected clashed with the bitterness she embodied.

“Meanwhile, the husband is flipping through *Penthouse* in the basement and jerking off while the wife gets drunk with her coworkers and has emotional affairs,” she added. “But family, family ...I love my family ....family is so important ...I’m very close with my family.”

Her eyes met mine directly. “Am I right?” she asked.

I hated when she asked that question - and she asked it a lot. There was only one answer she wanted, which I resented.

“I take your point,” I said. “But, personally, I think it’s more complicated. Sure it’s bullshit on TV or in the movies sometimes. But it also matters, you know, your family. There’s a reason you let your hair down with them, show them your ugly side in a way you don’t anybody else.”

I couldn’t read her expression but plowed ahead anyway.

“Family can’t leave you,” I said. “You’re stuck with each other. No matter how hard you fight, no matter how long you don’t talk after an argument, you make up eventually and end up getting back together at some point. You might grow apart as you get older, gossip behind each others’ backs or whatever, but when Christmas rolls around or someone has a baby, you put it behind you and move on. You can divorce your spouse, but you can’t divorce your family.”

I laughed meekly.

“Of course, you don’t ever talk about the fight or process it together in a healthy way,” I added. “But you find your way back to the tribe eventually.”

Nica shook her head almost imperceptibly and smirked at me. I’ve since come to believe only emotionally intelligent people smirk and the two most important women in my life smirked a lot.

“Not every family,” she said. “Some families leave you and don’t come back. Or you leave them and don’t come back, or you forget who left who and don’t come back - and after a while it doesn’t matter anyway.”

It hadn’t occurred to me how my take on family would look to Nica until then and, when it did, I couldn’t understand how it had not. I guess not all people who smirk are emotionally intelligent.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and then she got up to go to the bathroom.

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It was 7:30 and, of course, Nica wasn't at my place yet. When I pressed her for a ballpark time she might arrive, she had said "sevenish" precisely because it was not precise. It could mean she would be on time, though usually not. It could mean she'd be a few minutes late. It could mean almost an hour late, though if she got there at eight o'clock that would make it "eightish" and would leave her vulnerable to criticism for being late. And Nica had a way of working a situation to her advantage, of pushing boundaries but never quite obliterating them.

What had looked like rain clouds passed and gave way to the sun, allowing me to do some long neglected chores around the farm. I met with some of the new volunteers for a few minutes. I gassed up my truck and bought some food for the dinner I anticipated making for us later.

If I knew she wouldn't be there until eight o'clock, I would have stopped to get some supplies at the hardware store, but what if Nica was actually on time? That's the thing about people who are notoriously and consistently late. They assume you will be on time, but it's optional for them. And you don't have the ability to plan how to use your time because, what if they are actually on time?

It drove me crazy and we fought about it a lot. A lot. In calmer moments, we would have philosophical discussions about the nature of time. Nica would bring up the fact that Native Americans had a different concept of time than the Europeans who conquered and slaughtered them, that it frustrated the white men when they wouldn't show up at the appointed time for a treaty negotiation because, to them, they would get there when they got there. It didn't take a genius to see that I was the genocidal white man and she was the noble indigenous person in this scenario.

I would, in turn, tell her about how Malcolm X was known to have driven around the block a few times so he would show up for an appointment precisely at the appointed time. Not five minutes early. Certainly not five minutes late. He would show up exactly when the two parties had agreed to meet. It wasn't about time for Malcolm X, I would say. It was about respect. Then we would laugh at the notion of two white people so brazenly using oppressed people of color to win a lovers quarrel.

But we didn't laugh when she was actually late, which was most of the time. I would get so frustrated, I could feel my blood pressure rising and, though I never yelled, I would get angry and terse when she finally arrived. She would see this and react to it and the downward spiral would begin until, usually, I retreated and asked her if she would please just be more considerate of my time in the future.

She would never agree to this because to do so would be to admit she had done something wrong. But she would tacitly recognize my submission and change the subject and, somehow, we would move on. Eventually we would have dinner, watch TV and cuddle, make love and fall asleep in each other's arms and the ugliness of the fight would fade. Until the next time.

I had been sitting on the front porch having a beer and waiting for her when I saw her car turn into the long driveway that led to the house. It was late July, so it was still quite light out, but she had the headlights to her Ford Escort on just the same. She stopped the car, but did not shut off the engine. She turned the headlights off but stayed in the car and I could see now that she was reading something. I expected her to only do this for a moment but she continued with no indication she would stop. I felt my blood pressure rise and looked at my watch.

It read 7:53 P.M.

## Chapter Four

I stood on the front porch for a few minutes assuming she'd wrap up her reading session if she could see I was waiting for her. But she turned off the engine and kept her head looking downward instead.

She finally looked up, waved at me before putting her left arm up on the open driver's side window, and then she leaned into the side of the door and tilted her head back into her arm, looking down once more. The whole production reeked of intentional theatricality, but it was meant by her and perceived by me as a signal...I'm taking my time, she was saying. And I don't care what you think of that.

By this point, I knew Nica well. She wasn't targeting me, per se, but the "patriarchy." Men have been treating women like shit since the dawn of civilization and she hit back whenever she could. Since I was her boyfriend, I was often the target of microaggressions or thinly veiled verbal jabs, but not exclusively by any means. Nica had a love/hate relationship with men that was ...complex.

And unrelenting. Only long after our relationship was over would I comprehend it was the defining struggle of her life. Each of us has such an inner conflict. For me, it's being able to form close male relationships owing to the fact I never did with my brother or my dad. I'm troubled by it still, even at my age, and it's why I often find myself alone on a park bench instead of having a beer with my buds.

In this sense, our life traumas were a toxic mix, something that we eventually named quite consciously. I'm not sure why we pushed each others' emotional buttons, but we called it the 90/10 rule because, 90 percent of the time, we got along great, had this great connection, soul mate shit, we called it. But the other 10 percent of the time? We were explosively ill matched and hurtful towards each other, not in a consciously mean spirited way, but in a way that's even more frustrating and painful: we didn't understand each other.

And 90 percent soulmate and 10 percent callous, incomprehensible stranger is a mind bender, pure and simple

For Nica, her inner conflict was over how to feel about men. She used to share with me, quite crudely sometimes, how much she liked sex with men, and then graphically describe what she liked. This was one of those microaggressions, meant to hurt my feelings - which it did. But I also believe it was a manifestation of that inner turmoil and, in a way, she was expressing sincere wonderment. How can I want and like men this much when they have hurt me so?

I suspect she suffered some abuse as a child or young girl in her many foster home experiences, as she made vague allusions to that effect every now and again. But she never talked about it directly, and I never asked her about it explicitly. Nica built her walls and I soon learned not to try to breach them or she would simply build them higher.

We didn't have yelling fights very often, but one time when we did, I brought this emotional tactic up and the frustration it caused for me.

"Those walls have worked for me," she said.

"I get that," I replied. "But they're not working for me ... and they're not working for us."

She shrugged her shoulders nonchalantly and walked away.

After a few minutes of watching her "read" in the car, I turned around and walked back into the house, not because I had a reason to go back inside, but in a feckless attempt to feign nonchalance and preserve some dignity. I fumbled with the salt and pepper shakers on the kitchen table and the internal questioning began.

Was it me? Was I wrong to expect her to respect my time and give me some sense of when she might be there? Was I being clingy and, as she had suggested before, unable to "live my own life?" Or were my feelings simply hurt because I missed her and was anxious to see her, hug and kiss her, and she appeared not to feel the same about me?

By this point in our relationship, I had considered these questions many times, as this situation was repeated over and over. Maybe she was right, something that made me feel embarrassed, even ashamed, whenever I considered it. Or maybe I wasn't unreasonable to have these expectations, and we were just ill matched. She needed a guy like her, that was distracted, not present, which I don't mean as an insult but as a true characterization of her orientation.

I used to ask her how she'd feel if I did to her what she did to me, time wise. How about if I just showed up whenever I showed up and you couldn't make plans or know how to use your time, I asked her once.

"I'd deal with it," she said derisively. "I'd find something to do."

I always wanted to test her on this, but it always felt petty and childish to me to do to her what I didn't want done to me. I thought to myself, bullshit, you'd be pissed - as you should be. It's inconsiderate.

But what if I was wrong? What if she truly didn't care and didn't think it was inconsiderate? Maybe we just needed to find partners who felt the same way we did? Early in our relationship, I compartmentalized and put my concerns about, not just the time issue, but Nica's general selfishness over in a tightly sealed box. I didn't want to upset the apple cart. But by this second, and it turns out last year with her, that became increasingly hard to do.

I thought about fixing the broken upper rack in the dishwasher, a task that had proved trickier than I anticipated. Just get out the tools and do it, even though it might take a while, might even necessitate calling one of the volunteers, Tim Ridley, who was a plumber, to give me advice. And when she finally walked in, I could just tell her it was going to take a while to finish. See if she would indeed just "find something to do."

I should have, but I didn't. She'd recognize what I was doing and it would lead to a fight later on. And on some level, it would have, in fact, been childish. If we needed to do that kind of shit - play those kinds of games - instead of just talking it out, our relationship was doomed.

I walked back out to the porch instead and saw that she was already halfway up the driveway, carrying a couple of paper grocery bags.

"Hey, baby," she said. "What's up?"

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Justin looked at me from his side of the bench out of the one eye that wasn't covered by his sweeping bangs. I could tell he wanted to say something.

"What's on your mind?" I asked. "Go ahead."

"Well," he said. "I do have a thought ...a question really. But I'm afraid it will come off as kinda rude."

I chuckled softly. There was something about this kid I liked. We do that in life, don't we? Have an instinct about people we don't know well, total strangers, even. There was something in him I was drawn to but I couldn't put my finger on it yet.

"Go ahead," I said. "We've come this far, haven't we?"

"I guess," he said, but he didn't seem reassured. He licked his lips, sat up straighter and angled back a little.

"I don't get why you loved her so much," he said. "She doesn't seem ...all that nice, I guess."

I understood immediately why he would think this.



“Have you fallen in love yet, Justin,” I asked him.

He cast his eyes downward and then back up at me again.

“No,” he said. “Not really, I guess. At least I hope not.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” I said.

“Sure, I’ve had crushes on girls or whatever,” he replied. “And you think about them, you know, sexually, I guess.”

All of the sudden his pale face was flushed red.

“But I sure as hell hope real love has more to it than that,” he added. “More depth or whatever.”

I really did like this kid.

“You’re pretty smart for someone your age,” I said. “You don’t know the half of it, Justin. Love, that is. Neither did I at your age. Neither does anyone.”

I tried to make eye contact with him, but his one open eye was fixed on his hands while he picked at his own fingernails.

“I still don’t understand it,” I added. “And likely never will.”

He looked up from his fingers and swept aside his bangs so I could see both eyes and looked directly at me.

“I get it,” he said. “But you still haven’t answered my question.”

I smiled deliberately so he could see I welcomed such challenges from him.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll try to do that in a reasonable amount of time. I’ll give you the Cliff’s Notes version, okay?”

“Sure,” he said. “That’ll work.”

I settled in on my side of the bench, but put my arm over the back of it and leaned in a bit toward him.

“The reason I asked you if you had ever been in love,” I said, “is that, if you’ve never been in love, then you can’t know what it’s like to have your heart broken.”

I was struggling to find the right words, to explain something so elusive in a concise way to someone who had no real understanding or background in such a complex topic. I imagine it would be similar to a nuclear physicist trying to explain thermonuclear dynamics to me.

“It’s like a wound that never fully heals,” I told him. “Actually, it is a wound that never fully heals.”

He looked as unsatisfied hearing that explanation as I was in speaking it.

“That’s trite and cliched, I know,” I continued, “but I can’t think of another analogy at the moment that you might understand. To have your heart broken by someone you were deeply in love with, in my case with Nica, someone who pledged to me her heart, mind, body and soul, someone where we talked about being each other’s “person” on this earth, someone who you were planning to spend the rest of your life with ...”

I let my words trail off because I could see he understood this particular point.

“The pain of that never fully goes away, Justin, especially if the circumstances were ...acute and not chronic.”

I could tell by his expression that I had lost him again.

“Especially if the breakup was sudden and dramatic, due to some hurtful event like an unexpected death from a car crash or an affair or something like that, ” I said.

“Especially if you didn’t see it coming.

Again, he looked like he had a question but was afraid to ask it. I was getting to know this young man well enough that I could already read him in certain ways.

“Go ahead,” I said. “Ask your question.”

He smiled at my understanding that’s what he wanted to do, but didn’t speak. He started fidgeting with his nails again, but stopped suddenly if not dramatically.

“Did she die or cheat on you, or something like that?” he finally asked.

“No,” I said without hesitation. “I wish it were that straightforward, to be honest with you. But like all things Nica, her dramatic exit was more complicated, more confounding.”

He shrugged his shoulders almost imperceptibly but, again, I knew what he meant.

“It’s been over 30 years and I’m still bewildered by it,” I said. “I’ll never not be bewildered by it. And if you want to stay here for even longer than you’ve been sitting with me and hear about it, I can get to that eventually. But, first, I’d actually like to address your original question, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure,” he said, then raised the eyebrow over the eye I could see. “What was it again?” he asked, laughing.

“You wanted to know why I loved her so much when most of what I’ve told you so far makes her seem not so nice,” I said.

“Right,” he said, nodding.

“I’m going to go back to my wound analogy, if that’s okay,” I said.

He nodded again.

“You may not have been deeply in love at your age, Justin,” I said, “but I take it you’ve been hurt or injured at some point?”

“Sure,” he said. “A few times.”

“What was the most serious?” I asked him.

“I tore my ACL playing basketball last year,” he said. “I played JV basketball last year, even though my real sport is baseball. Anyway, I was going up for a layup and landed on one of the other team’s player’s foot.”

I tried to be as good a listener for his story as he had been for mine. I nodded and attempted to convey a facial expression that told him I understood the seriousness of his injury.

“It wasn’t just a tear, either, I snapped it in half,” he added. “It hurt like a motherfucker.”

We both laughed, and I could see he was relieved that I joined him in that.

“And when you felt the initial pain,” I said, “I bet there were no other thoughts going through your mind. You weren’t also thinking, hey, what just happened, or I wonder how serious this is, or I wonder what body part I just hurt - nothing like that, right?”

“I guess,” he said.

“I don’t mean later, even just a few minutes later,” I said. “I mean when it first happened, the pain blotted out everything, right? And then 10 minutes later, the pain was still overwhelming, but the shock of it was already fading enough for you to start asking those other questions I just referred to. And then an hour later, two hours later, all that night and into the next day, you still felt pain but it was starting to wear off and gradually you could have other thoughts.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Pretty much like that. And the pain meds helped with all that, too.”

“Exactly,” I said. “The pain meds ...hold onto that thought. I’ll get to that part in a minute.”

I could see that he raised both his eyebrows at that, but decided to put that side of my story with Nica off until later. I leaned in a little closer.

“When you are deeply in love, Justin,” I said. “And you have your heart broken in this acute way I describe earlier, in a sudden and dramatic way, the process plays out very much like your injury. Except, it’s not your ACL that’s hurting so much, but your heart.”

I thought I saw the hint of a smirk on his face, but I decided not to say anything.

“And just like with your ACL,” I continued, “at first the pain of it blots out everything. But then, with time, although the pain is ever present, it starts to fade and you can start to have other thoughts. Only instead of hours, days, and weeks like with your injury, think in terms of months, years and decades.”

If it had been a smirk before, I could see it was gone now.

“Also like your ACL, people who’ve had their heart broken this way often seek out pain meds, if you will,” I added. “Although, frequently, these don’t help and, some, like drinking or drugs, make your life worse.”

He was as still as I’d seen him be the whole time I’d known him and, this time, I couldn’t read him. He was looking over my shoulder and I hoped his expression suggested he was trying to absorb what I was saying, but it might have been confusion. I was pretty certain it was not disinterest, so I let the silence linger.

“So you aren’t gonna tell me what she did?” he asked.

“Not yet,” I said, smiling. “I hadn’t realized I was only saying bad things about her before until you pointed that out. I can rectify that and give you a few examples of why I thought she was so amazing. After all, I’m the one who told you a moment ago that you

can't understand heartbreak if you haven't known love, but our story, Nica and mine, is not just about heartbreak. We had an extraordinary love, too"

I took a deep breath. "At least, I want to believe we did," I added. "You want to hear a little about that part of the equation," I asked.

"Sure," he replied quickly. "Like you said, we've come this far, haven't we?"

## Chapter Five

"It's almost 7 o'clock," I said. "You sure it's not too late?"

"What time does it get dark?" asked Nica.

We had been dating for a half a year at this point and were already in love but, now that I think about it, we were still learning about each other. It was late July in Indianapolis and we were considering going to a nearby lake to swim and enjoy the cool summer night. Nina suggested we go to an area northeast of Indianapolis called Lake Kesslerwood.

"I don't know," I said. "After nine, I'm sure, maybe later."

She was bent over looking in the fridge and stood up straight and looked me in the eyes. I melted a little whenever she did that, right up to the end.

"It'll take us a half an hour to get there," she said. "Let's go."

I hesitated a moment. The practical side of me thought, was it really worth it, by the time we arrive? We'll get, what, maybe an hour, hour and a half by the time we get settled?"

Her position didn't change and I wondered what she was looking for.

"All right," I said. "Let's hustle then."

That was my way of nudging her a little. Nica wasn't just late to everything, she took a while to actually be ready to leave. That's probably part of why she was late all the time, and it's funny, it wasn't because she fixed herself up or whatever. Whenever we would be getting ready to leave to go somewhere, she would wander around with a slight grimace, as if she was looking for something.

"It's a man made lake," she said. "A human made lake," she added, correcting herself. "A friend of mine used to take us out there."

She did this all the time. Said something out of the blue that felt like an abrupt shift that might be tangentially related to what you had been talking about, but took things in another direction.

"It's actually two lakes," she said. "And they don't allow big boats or jet skis, so it should be quiet."

"Sounds great," I said. "Is this back in high school or something?" I asked.

“What?” she said, looking confused.

“That you used to go out to this man - sorry - human made lake,” I said.

“No,” she said. “Later,” she added and then pursed her lips. “You wouldn’t know them.”

Nica grew up in the Indianapolis area shuffling to different foster homes, some in the city, some just outside. She wasn’t just tight lipped about those experiences, though, but was like that about her past in general.

“We should get going, then,” I said. “You almost ready?”

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We took Nica’s car because mine was making a funny noise and we didn’t want to chance that we’d break down at night on the way home, especially. It was tiny with a small engine that, although it was an automatic, shifted gears in a clunky way. The back and forth motion this created was accentuated by Nica’s driving style, which was ...frenetic.

Sometimes she asked me to drive when we took her car, but not this time. The fact I was tall for this little Ford Escort, combined with the rocky gear shifting and Nica’s driving technique, made for an uncomfortable ride out to the lake, but she was right about how long it took. Twenty-seven minutes on the nose.

“We’re almost there,” she said. She was peering out the windshield as if looking at birds flying over the car or something.

“There,” she said. “That’s it.”

“What?” I said. “This looks like a regular neighborhood. How is there a lake nearby?”

She ignored me and kept looking.

“I think that’s it,” she said. She hit the breaks and I lurched forward.

“Yeah, that’s it,” she said. “It’s bigger than it was, but that’s it.”

I took a deep breath and thought, I’m not playing this game today. I pursed my lips and looked directly at the right side of her face. She looked different to me yet again, her hair less dark, her profile an angle I rarely glimpsed.

She backed up the car and then pulled forward to park in front of a colonial style house with olive green vinyl siding. After she turned off the engine, she looked up at me. I was still staring at her.

“What?” she said.

I sometimes couldn’t tell with Nica. Was she really lost in thought or something? Her lack of presence frustrated me sometimes, to be sure, but it also intrigued me. Did she do this deliberately as a form of testing me or something? Was she trying to goad me?

“I couldn’t remember where we’d park, but I finally recognized the tree,” she said. Or was she just a unique and intelligently strange bird who operated on her own terms, her own schedule and sense of time? I was always too sensitive to the needs of others, often ignoring my own in a way that did not feel assertive or independent, but weak and obsequious. There was always a part of me that wanted to not give a fuck what others think, but I could never get there. If this is what she was doing all the time and not being manipulative by playing stupid mind games, I could live with that, even admire it.

But I could never be entirely sure which one it was.

“Look,” she said, pointing to a path that went along the side of the house without the driveway. “We can take that trail to a little beach area that’s not so crowded.”

We gathered - what seemed to me - our excess of supplies ...beach towels, a cooler, chairs, a blanket, blow up pool innertubes, a bag of hers that contained some extra clothes for her to change into - never mind where she’d do that. We could barely carry it in one trip, but we managed with some struggle.

“What if they’re in the backyard?” I asked about the homeowners whose yard we were cutting through. She didn’t acknowledge my question and my wondering began anew about whether it was her attention span or intentional disregard.

Or her hearing ...maybe it was her hearing.

“Oh good,” she said, “there aren’t too many people.”

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Nica popped up like she was jumping off hot coals or something.

“Oh!” she wailed, “I knowwww!! It kills me sometimes!”

We were talking about how boring our jobs were, which led to a discussion of the centrality of purpose in a meaningful life.

“Sometimes I just want to say to these store managers, who gives a fuck? They ask me about sales projections, upselling, product placement. I mean, who gives a fuck how many socks you sold?”

She had been laying down on the blanket we had spread carefully in the small beach area that was more dirt than sand. One family with small children and one other, slightly older couple were our only companions. Her floppy garden hat had been covering her face as we conversed until she cast it aside amidst her vertical explosion.

“You do what you have to to pay the bills, I get it,” she said. “But I will not live without meaning and purpose, not just in my work, but my life.”

She looked straight into my eyes as she spoke and I realized she was ...present. Present in a way that was not the norm for her, though I didn’t stop to analyze it at the time. Her energy in these times was palpable, exciting.

“I was put on this earth to exude connection and foster meaningful relationships. To live with purpose and intentionality,” she said.

She looked out at the water.

“I just haven’t figured out exactly what that looks like yet,” she added.

I nodded because I didn’t know what to say. We were in our early twenties then and no one else I knew our age talked this way. My mother and I would broach such philosophical topics now and again, but I always considered them theoretical discourses, not roadmaps for living. Nica embodied a kind of genuine search for meaning when most people that age, hell at any age, have blinders on, unaware of what has always been there but they don’t see.

“You and me both,” was all I could come up with.

She turned her gaze from the water toward me and offered a sweet smile where her thin lips didn’t completely cover her large, white teeth. Then she reached out for my hand, held it up her mouth and kissed my knuckles softly, parting her lips so I could feel her tongue faintly.

“Come on,” she said, moving my hand down from her lips but still holding it. Then she stood up and tried to pull me up with her. I reached down with my free hand and propped myself up so I could go where she was leading me.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“In the water,” she said softly. Then she let go of my hand. “Grab the innertube,” she added.

She walked a few steps ahead of me, turned around in the shallow water and grabbed the innertube from me. Then she turned back toward the deeper water and waded further out until she was submerged up to her neck and holding onto the innertube. For some reason, I halted when the water got up to my waist and watched her.

I saw her reaching down with her free hand and struggle a bit. I thought maybe she was adjusting her bikini bottom but, no, I could see she took it off under the water when she plopped it onto the innertube. Then she reached behind her back with her free hand - the water was still up to her neck - and removed the top and put it next to the bikini bottom she had removed a few moments before. She was skinny dipping in broad daylight.

And in front of other people, including kids, it occurred to me suddenly. I whipped my head around and looked behind me. Yep. The older couple and the young family were still there, though they seemed oblivious to Nica’s adventure.

That’s when it hit me. This was clearly her adventure and, for a change, I didn’t know my place. Should I go out to join her? Do I stay here and just watch? Do I go back to the blanket?

She had seemed to invite me along when she pulled me up off the blanket and said to bring the innertube, but now she seemed as oblivious to me as she herself had

been to the other people on the beach a few moments before. I was hoping she would yell out or wave me over to join her, but she had turned around and all I could see was the back of her head.

The sound of the young children in the beach area screaming with delight rocked me out of my indecisiveness and I dove head first into the water and swam out to join her. I maneuvered myself to the other side of the innertube and then reached down with my free hand and removed my swim trunks and placed them next to her bikini.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” I said back.

“Doesn’t the water feel great?” she asked.

“It does,” I replied.

Her green eyes sparkled next to all that water and reflected sunlight. They were all the more intense because her dark hair, which was usually parted on the side and swept over her forehead, was not competing for attention. She was all sparkly, green eyes.

I looked into those eyes directly, but she seemed to be looking over my shoulder off into the horizon behind me. I was trying to think of ways to ask her what we were doing skinny dipping like this when her eyes finally met mine. When they did, however, she spoke before I could even open my mouth.

“For the first time,” she said. “I can see a life with someone else. I can see us searching for meaningful work and lives together, see us thinking big and living overseas, in Central America or something.”

I didn’t hesitate.

“Me, too,” I said. “Me too.”

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We spent an hour in the lake talking like that, sharing visions of where we might go, what we might do to make a living, valuing experiences over owning a house in a neighborhood like the one by the lake we were in. This was the 1980s, so we talked about Reagan and the nuclear arms race, tax cuts for the rich, urban decay or other issues we might engage in and what that might look like. We talked about communication and sex and vulnerability and what else makes a good relationship with your partner. We talked about our love of writing, our favorite authors - Umberto Eco, Alice Walker, Isabel Allende - and the importance of creative pursuits in the human experience until it was almost dark and the few other people there had left.

“I’m getting cold,” she said. “We should probably get going.”

I nodded, reached to grab her bikini and handed it to her.



“It’s going to be harder to put these on out here than it was to take them off,” I said.

She smiled at me, turned around and waded toward the shore with her bikini in her left hand. I held on to my swim trunks with my right hand and the innertube with my left and thought, she wouldn’t ...

But, of course, she did. She walked casually over to the blanket, toweled herself dry and started to put her sundress on over her naked body. My head darted in all directions as I looked for onlookers; it was getting darker out, but it was not dark. I didn’t see anyone so I replicated her exit strategy from the lake, though considerably more quickly.

I wanted to say something about her brazenness, but it felt out of place, inappropriate for the moment.

“Do you see my shirt?” I asked..

After we had gathered all our possessions, we walked back to the car and packed everything away.

“You want me to drive?” I asked.

“No, I’ll do it,” she said.

After we navigated out of the neighborhood and eventually on to Fall Creek Parkway, the main road back home to the southside of Indianapolis, I turned the radio on and fiddled with the dial to find some music.

“Hey,” she said. “Do you mind if we just drive without music?”

“Of course not,” I said. “Do you want to tell me all the reasons you love me until we get home?” I asked, trying to be charming.

She smiled ... no, she smirked at me while glancing back and forth from me to the road.

“I might think of a few,” she said, “but I actually have something else in mind.”

“What’s that, baby?” I said.

She extended her right hand, her left hand on the steering wheel and reached for my left forearm. When she had a hold of that, she spidered her fingers down to my hand, held it up to her lips and kissed it as she had before we went skinny dipping.

I expected her to let go of it, but she did not. Instead, she moved both our hands down to her right thigh and, in concert but with her taking the lead, our conjoined hands proceeded to hike up sundress until I could see all of her on the car seat. Then she put my hand down between her legs.

## Chapter 6

“What would you change?” I asked Nica.

Later that night, after our day at the beach, we were laying in her bed, the room pitch dark so that we couldn't see each other, couldn't even make out the broad outlines of the furniture or see the Toulouse Lautrec posters she had hung up all over her room. Darkness so complete we couldn't see anything at all, only hear each other's voices and feel our naked bodies pressed against each other at the sides.

“I'd change everything,” she said. “Everything's fucked up. Everything needs changing.”

I raised myself to lean on my right side and extended my left hand across her body to caress her right thigh.

“Then what would you start with?” I asked.

I could hear and feel her inhale softly as she reached her hand down to clasp the top of mine, our two hands working in concert once more as I continued to caress her.

“I'd get rid of Reagan,” she said, “or more accurately, the assholes who make his policies.”

She paused before adding, “That idiot's a frontman for the rich. Never had an original idea in his life. Can't even talk without a script, I'm sure.”

Nica was not a Communist or a Socialist by any stretch of the imagination. She wasn't political at all, at least in an academic, intellectual sense. She was what I'd describe as a hazy leftist Europhile who knew she hated unbridled capitalism and corporate greed. The nuclear protests in West Germany thrilled her because they combined so many things she admired: environmental awareness, anti war and empire building, youth protest and 1980s style insouciance, disdain for the powerful in all their incarnations.

“Wouldn't they just be replaced by people who would make the same policies?” I asked.

Silence hung in the air for a moment.

“I know,” she said. “I meant to replace their hearts and minds with people who are right with the world, who care about justice and love.”

I couldn't tell if she hadn't thought about it or just didn't express herself clearly. Nica was like Reagan himself that way. Not a detail person. She had a vision for how the world should be and was strong in her belief that this vision was the “right” one. The irony of the situation was not lost on me, but I kept it to myself. This time it was me who let the silence linger as I tried to think of a good way to ask my next question. Not thinking of one, I went with transparency.

“So, I can’t think of a way to ask this that doesn’t sound like I’m discounting your initial answer,” I started, “but I’m genuinely curious about what you have to say.”

She squeezed my hand a little tighter, a gesture I took to mean, go ahead with your question, it’s okay.

“What’s the first thing you’d do for real?” I said. “You know, tangible, like a policy or a law or whatever,” I added. “I agree with what you said about our leaders having good hearts, but that’s an ideal scenario.”

I felt her chest rise and fall slowly under the blanket we were sharing.

“I take your point,” she said softly. “What’s the old saying? You can’t legislate morality or something like that.

“I don’t agree with that,” I said. “Laws influence norms, and norms become beliefs, eventually.”

“I agree,” she said. “Look at Brown vs. Board of Education. I’m not an idiot, I know there are plenty of people who are still racist, maybe even most people. But how many today are hard core in their insistence that schools be completely segregated by race?”

“It’s still a lot, but I see what you mean,” I said.

“I get it,” she said. “Policies influence behaviors, which influence beliefs.”

“Which influence behaviors, and so on,” I added. “It’s a cycle.”

“I see it,” she said, “but you aren’t going to change the world by intellectualizing it, my love. You have to start with the heart, with connection to each other’s humanity and, above all, to God’s plan and our place in nature.”

I had such ambivalent feelings about when Nica talked this way. On the one hand, she was right. I intellectualized things so much so I wouldn’t have to feel them with my heart, as with my relationship with my older brother. We weren’t close because of our age difference, because structural forces related to chronological age like school and marriage and careers made it hard for us to connect. We were at different stages of life, unlike siblings who were closer in age and were experiencing similar things. That made it hard for us to connect - or so I told myself.

That made it easier, I understood, than acknowledging what I knew to be true, what I felt in my heart, as Nica would say it: We simply did not have much in common in terms of our values and interests. Easier than admitting that, if he wasn’t my brother, I wouldn’t have much in common with him or want to spend time with him - nor him me. It hung in the air between us, unacknowledged, in words or in the heart.

“An Indian guru called Nanek,” she continued, “who lived in the 16th century I think, said that man is the medium of his message, which is awareness of his relationship with nature and, therefore, can’t be at cross purposes with it.”

On the other hand ...sometimes I didn’t understand her worldview, or even lacked respect for the naivete it suggested. And, yet, I did admire her knowledge of and curiosity about ancient cultures and prophets. She was well read, not comprehensively,

but in the subjects which held her interest. She was, like my mother, a woman of substance and depth if, also like my mother, egocentrism and manipulation.

Mostly, though, I was energized by her quest for meaning and deeper understanding. All my intellectualizing could be a defense mechanism, she had told me once, and I knew there was some truth to that observation. Nica was more aware of other people's defense mechanisms than her own, it's true, but who else at our age - or any age - even contemplated such things? She broke through my pretenses and made me think. How many people in your life do that?

Rather than resent her for it, I admired it.

"That's a little too deep for where my soul is in the cycle of samsara," I said.

"Explanation, please."

She moved her hand out from under mine and grasped my forearm gently.

"You know I have such admiration for how smart you are," she said. "You're brilliant, I really mean that. But, you know that cliché, you can't see the forest for the trees?"

I waited for her to continue, making sure to control my breathing or refrain from sudden movements.

"It's like that," she said. "Only with you, the trees are all your knowledge, all your facts and information. They prevent you from seeing, not the big picture, but the true picture."

I could tell she thought I might be angry with what she was saying, but I wasn't. I liked when she challenged my thinking.

"Okay," I said. "Tell me the true picture, then."

She leaned on her side to face me, but in the complete darkness I could only see the outline of her head.

"I can't," she said. "That's the thing. You need to find it for yourself. Everyone does."

There was a pause, but I suspected she had more to say. I waited to see if she would continue.

"But Guru Nanek would say your truth is grounded in nature or, more accurately, your relationship to nature, to God's creation," she added.

A rush of that familiar ambivalence washed over me once more. I could appreciate what she was saying - what Guru Nanek was saying. But it did not resonate with me because ...what the hell did it mean? Stop and smell the roses? Compost? Take more nature walks or live in the woods like Thoreau?

To voice these questions would have been insulting to her, yes, but on another level I recognized they were proof that she was onto something with her observations about me. The mountains, the oceans, they've been here for millenia. Human civilization has existed for 5000 years and our modern, industrial way of life for, what, a hundred and fifty? Nature was here before us, it will be here after we are gone. What

that meant, exactly, I could not say, but I could intuit its significance on some level. And what Nica was saying is that I didn't put enough effort into pondering that significance. I, probably like most people, was distracted by temporal, man made issues.

Human made issues, that is.

We laid there, not in silence, as we could hear the occasional car drive past the window, her neighbor next door yelling something indistinguishable to some unknown person, the old plumbing creaking intermittently. Wordlessly, we reached for each other's hand and interlocked our fingers. She knew I was contemplating her words, and I knew she knew I was. We did not need to reassure each other that everything was okay between us because we felt our connection from throughout the day wash over us - at the lake, in the car on the way home, at the dinner we made together, making love, considering the wisdom of Guru Nanek.

Just then, one of the blinds moved ever so slightly, but it was enough to let in a sliver of light from the streetlight outside. I raised my head enough to look around the room and could see the general shape of everything now, if not the details. When I turned in her direction I could see Nica smiling at me, her teeth catching the small amount of light and reflecting it outwards.

"Hi, baby," she whispered.

"Hi," I said back, raising my left hand up to cradle her cheek.

## Chapter 7

We woke up in the morning, made love again, and then she went into the kitchen to make coffee. It was another sun filled summer morning and I laid in the bed, half awake, in that slumbry haze unique to partners early in their courtship. The novelty of our love obscured early signs of trouble, like when she made derogatory comments about labor unions being just as useless and exploitative as corporations during one of our many conversations about injustice in the world.

I was from a strong union household and my father promoted unions from the time I was a young child. Later, as a student in college, I learned about the crucial role unions played in working for social reform, not just raises and better working conditions. Martin Luther King, Jr. was in Memphis the day he got assassinated, I had told Nica, supporting a strike by sanitation workers. If he recognized the significant role unions played in uplifting the disadvantaged, that told you something. Economic justice is social justice, I added, like it was my own original thought.

She doubled down on her position with what I perceived as an insufficient amount of time to truly consider the merits of my own and, just for a moment, I questioned whether we possessed a complimentary worldview. Then again ...she was

pretty and she made me feel alive. Maybe best to just sweep those concerns away and hope for the best. If only I could go back in time and whisper in my own ear to more fully heed that unquiet stirring. She came into the room with two mugs of coffee and set them on the end table next to her side of the bed, and I sat up straight and pulled the covers around my legs and waist.

“What do you have going on today?” she asked.

By this point in our relationship, I had quit my job at the shoe store and was driving a forklift at a building supply warehouse. Nica still had her same job but talked about quitting on a daily basis. She told me about a lot of help wanted signs she saw or classified ads, but she never seemed to follow up on them.

“I have to work at three,” I said. “But no plans before that.”

She slurped a sip of coffee but was looking out the window now that she had raised all the blinds. The bright rays of the sun obscured her expression.

“I don’t work today,” she said. “I should do something productive, but I probably won’t. Maybe do some yoga, maybe some journaling.”

Her last idea gave me one.

“Hey,” I said. “How about we do something creative? If we get up soon and get dressed we should have plenty of time before I have to go to work.”

She turned in my direction, which moved her head enough to obscure the sunlight so that I could see her face clearly now. Her smirk made me melty.

“Okay,” she said. “You have my attention.”

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We were in her car once more and I was, again, the driver. Nica had a spiral notebook on her lap and a pen with purple ink in her right hand. While she looked out the passenger side window she kept tapping the head of the pen on the notebook, making a spasm of purple dots all over the lined, white page on top.

“So what do we actually write down?” she asked.

“Anything you want,” I said. “Anything that catches your attention. A building, people, litter on the streets. But don’t prejudge, or whatever.”

She angled her head to the side and pursed her thin lips.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

I chuckled at my own confusing directions. I had suggested to Nica that we drive Michigan Road from Carmel in the north all the way downtown, writing down notes about images that captured our attention, for any reason at all. Carmel would later develop into one of the wealthier and boujee suburbs of Indianapolis, but in the 1980s it had a blue collar vibe, replete with hippies and artists and the like.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m not explaining it well.”

I turned my head to the right, taking my eyes off the road long enough to notice her sweet smile.

“Clear your mind of any expectations or desire to construct a theme or that you are looking for something in particular,” I said. “Just observe and see what strikes you as noteworthy or attention getting.”

She turned her head in my direction but looked at my hands on the steering wheel.

“Have you done this with other girls?” she asked.

“No,” I said, laughing. “But I’ve done it in my head a million times. Then I use the images that stick with me in my poetry, or I just think about why something stands out to me, try to appreciate the beauty of everyday things instead of just passing them by.”

“That’s nice,” she said, stroking my forearm.

Nica turned her head back the other way and was staring out the passenger side window, as if practicing for when we got started.

“So what is it for?” she asked.

“What?” I said.

“The list we compile,” she said. “Our observations ...our notes or whatever you want to call them. Is it just for its own sake, because I can’t write poetry.?”

I saw a funky looking atrium to an newer looking warehouse type building that said “Everton Plumbing Supplies” on the side of it in large, block letters. I activated the blinkers and quickly turned into the parking lot, jolting the car enough to provoke a look of alarm on her face. I pulled over to the side so as to be out of the way of any cars that might come along.

“You see that atrium?” I said pointing at it. “Its overall shape is kind of dome-like and it’s made of glass panels. It almost seems out of place, kind of this old fashioned entrance to a modern looking, utilitarian warehouse full of plumbing parts.”

“Okay,” she said, waiting for me to explain why that mattered.

“There’s a story in that,” I said. “Or maybe there isn’t. But it’s unusual, wouldn’t you agree?”

Her expression suggested she still didn’t get my point.

“Who made that decision?” I asked. “And why did the owner or whoever paid for building it sign off on it? Is it an intentional homage to the company’s first warehouse or something like that?”

I was on a roll now.

“Maybe, for example, the plumbing supply business started downtown in the early 1900s but they had success and needed a bigger place and so they relocated out here in the 1960s and had this building built. Except the son wanted to honor his now dead father and founder of the company by having the entrance look similar to the original building downtown.”

“Or maybe it was the 1970s and the architect was high,” said Nica. “Maybe they were all high and said, shit man, it looks sooo cool!”

We both laughed, me silently as was my custom, and her melodious chuckle, like a young school girl. God, I loved her laugh. It was the kind of laugh that made other people smile.

“Okay,” she said. “I think I get it now. This is fun,” she added, stroking my arm again.

“I wish I could claim credit for this being entirely my idea,” I said, “but it’s really just a variation of something my mother would do with me when I was a kid.”

“Like what?” she said.

“In the summer months, I would beg her to take me to the ice cream shop.” I said. “She would usually relent and often we would sit in the car, me with my mint chocolate chip on a sugar cone and her with her butter pecan in a cup, and we would play a game she called ‘Who Am I?’ where we would pick a person or a couple and describe everything about them. Married or single, job, did they have kids, how many, stuff like that.”

“How old were you when you did this?” she asked.

“Pretty young,” I said. “Maybe nine or ten years old. But the funniest ones were their hobbies! My mom was so good at that one. She’d come up with the funniest shit, like a big burly dude who collected garden gnomes.”

Nica looked at me like that wasn’t so funny.

“It was the way she would say it,” I said. “She’d make up voices for them, act it out.”

She nodded her head and stroked my arm again.

“It’s one of those things where you had to be there, I guess,” I added. “Anyway, we all have those childhood memories that stay with us,” I said, instantly regretting the words as soon as I remembered Nica’s childhood situation.

“Yeah,” she said. “I get it.”

I tried to give her a look that said I’m sorry without actually saying it. The scars from her childhood clearly impacted our relationship, but she didn’t like to talk about her experiences either directly or explicitly. It felt to me like she was burying trauma instead of processing it, but I didn’t see it as my place to tell her that. Looking back now, I wish I had.

“Let’s try one together first,” I said in order to move things along. “Then once we have the hang of it, you can write down whatever you want and I’ll tell you what to write down for me when I can see you’re not writing something down for yourself.”

“Sounds good, baby,” she said. “Not just buildings, right? It can be people like with your mom, or lawn ornaments, litter, junk cars ...anything?”

“Exactly,” I said.



We drove for a few blocks in silence and a bit of awkwardness until she sprang up in her seat and shouted, "There!" she said, pointing. "Look at that building! The one in psychedelic colors! Pull over so we can really look at it, would you. baby?"

I looked in the rearview mirror, pulled over, and parked on the other side of the street about half a block down. It was a one story building all by itself on a huge lot, at least two blocks from any other buildings. As Nica said, it was painted like the Partridge Family bus or something, a swirl of rainbow colors on every wall, nook and cranny. Only the roof and the glass door and windows were exempt from the hippy dippy color scheme. And painted in gold, cursive writing on the glass of the storefront were the words, "Uncle Willie's Smoke Shop and Other Curious Items."

"Should we make up the story of the building now?" she asked.

"That's not usually how I do it in my mind," I said. "First, I don't usually write it down because I'm driving or walking, or whatever. I usually just remember it later and then think up the stories. Like I said, sometimes I might use something for a poem or something, but most of the time it's just a game I play in my head."

She nodded and smiled.

"But we can do it now," I said, laughing. "It's not like there's rules. I've never done it with someone else besides that thing I told you about with my mom."

Nica looked at me sweetly once more and then looked down at the notepad and began to write intently but in controlled strokes.

"Just a minute, baby," she said. "I got an idea about the building and I don't want to lose it."

I was going to ask her what it was but knew that would disrupt her focus, so I watched her face instead and waited patiently. She was muttering and laughing under her breath as she wrote and I could tell she was enjoying herself. That made me feel good inside, but I didn't understand why until later, after everything blew up and I started replaying our whole relationship in my mind: In that moment, she got me, or that creative part of me, at least. She saw me.

I felt like she saw me.

We continued all the way down Michigan Road until we got downtown, but I can't remember any other buildings or people we put in the notebook, though I know there were lots of them. I remember laughter and that our conversation would go off on these tangents and then circle back to our observations. I also remember that we stopped at a diner and had a late breakfast and then rushed back to her place so I could get to work on time.

It's funny, though, I can't remember anything from the rest of the day after work or the next few days. But that part of the day is as clear to me now 30 years later as when it happened.

## Chapter 8

“You went away for a while there,” said Justin.

I’d stopped talking and he had the discipline to see if I was finished speaking. His words served as a kind of wake up call and I turned in his direction and studied his expression without worrying if he would find it awkward. The corners of his mouth were turned downward, not in some kind of frown, but more like to say, hey, it happens.

“Sorry about that,” I said. “That’s what you get for sitting with an old man on a park bench.”

We both smiled and he nodded his head.

“No,” he said. “This is exactly the kind of thing I had in mind with this project. There were a couple times I wanted to ask a question or whatever, but I didn’t want to interrupt the flow.”

He looked at his feet again, a sign I’d already come to know meant he had something to say he considered important.

“I could see you going back in time,” he added.

I rubbed my chin as if I still had a beard, which I had worn for most of the time I was married to Lauren. I decided to shave it off the day after her funeral as if to signify a new phase of my life had started, but old habits die hard and I still went to fidget with it in times of thought or reflection.

“Yeah,” I said, “I think I told you earlier, it’s not that often anymore, but I still do think of her sometimes. And when I do, if I’m alone and it feels safe, I let myself relive it ...the good, sure, but also the bad sometimes.”

He looked up from his feet and our eyes met.

“She’s still in me,” I said. “For better or worse.”

What sixteen year old knows how to respond to such a statement? How would anyone know what to say? I recognized it was my job to fill the void and keep the ball rolling.

“How long have we been here?” I asked, looking at my watch. I knew the answer - 50 minutes - but I wanted to see if he did.

He picked up his phone and looked at it.

“About an hour,” he said. “Maybe a little less.”

“You need to go?” I asked.

He shook his head and set the phone next to him on the bench.

“No,” he said. “Our family doesn’t really eat dinner together or anything like that and I already texted a friend I was maybe going to meet later that I wouldn’t be coming.”

“I hadn’t even noticed,” I said.

He shrugged his shoulders but didn’t speak.

“If you have to go,” I said, “I can just skip to the end and summarize.”

“No,” he said, “I want to hear it the way you want to tell it, and if I had something important going on, I’d tell you. But I am getting a little curious, if I’m being honest.”

His expression was a confident one.

“How so?” I asked.

“I keep remembering,” he said, “how you said the relationship ends abruptly or something like that, you know, when you were telling me about what it feels like to have your heart broken.”

“Yeah?” I said, “and you want me to get to that already?”

He picked up his phone and, from what I could tell, checked to see if he had any texts or something like that, and then looked at me.

“I guess you could say that,” he said.

I smiled and nodded.

“Yeah,” he added, “like I said before, I’ve been curious about it since you brought it up..”

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Like I was saying before, she was in her car this one day reading something while I waited for her and I went back in the house. Eventually I walked back out to the porch and saw that she was already halfway up the driveway, carrying a couple of paper grocery bags.

“Hey, baby,” she said. “What’s up?”

I never knew if she was toying with me, teasing me about her lateness, or whether she was just that unaware of time and how that lateness impacted others. And she never said, as I think most people do, hey, sorry I’m late, but ...you know, offer some kind of explanation for it. And I mean never, not even once.

“Hey,” I said, refusing to play the role of bad guy, the one making too big a deal out of her being late again.

I also decided not to ask her about why she was in the driveway in her car for ten minutes reading. That was the thing about Nica, if you asked why she was late or what she was reading in the car she would gaslight you in a way about asking, suggest you were a control freak or something. There wasn’t anyone else I knew that, if they were almost an hour late, wouldn’t offer some, if not apology, explanation unprompted. It’s like a social norm or something, but not Nica.

“Is that dinner?” I asked, reaching over to take one of the bags from her.

She handed me both bags and moved to put her purse down by her shoes, which she had kicked off by the door.

“Yeah,” she said, “I thought we’d have a kale salad with some grilled salmon on top.”

“Yum,” I said, “Thanks for stopping by the store to get that.”

“Of course, baby,” she said. “What have you been doing all day?”

I hesitated because I knew a laundry list of tasks would be boring for both of us, but it was also becoming more unusual for her to actually ask about my day, to express a curiosity about the farm, about me. When we first started dating we spent a lot of time talking about what we might do in the world, especially together but now about a year and half into our relationship, that almost never happened. Slowly, gradually, in a way I didn't notice and then all of the sudden I did, Nica was drifting away. Or we were drifting away from each other, I don't know, but I thought I should give her some details or she might think I didn't care if she showed an interest.

“Nothing special,” I said. “You know, just stuff around the farm. The big thing I did was work on recruiting new members. We're losing people and I'm not really sure why. You can't really do community supported agriculture without community support, you know?”

That was my way of inviting Nica to help me speculate about that issue, discuss it, maybe help me figure out some solutions.

“Yeah,” she said. “Well that's good you did that.”

It's funny how we expect our partners, our friends and family, to know what we want and need but don't tell them. I should have asked her if she could help me process the issue a little, talk with me about it, that I was anxious and doing that would help me. And that I wanted us to play that role for each other, that this is what partner's do. But I didn't. Instead, I offered more hints.

“Yeah,” I said. “I'm a little worried about it.”

She had been unpacking the groceries on the counter, but stopped to look up at me.

“Can you help me get ready for dinner by chopping the vegetables?” she asked.

I looked into her pretty green eyes, the same ones I gazed into at the lake that day, but I felt something different this time.

“Sure,” I said, reaching for the vegetables.

“You know what?” she said. “On second thought, you do a better job cooking the salmon than I do. Can you do it on the grill pan the way you do? You know, with the lemon pepper spice thing.”

I went into the living room to turn on the radio for some music and then we essentially switched places in the kitchen so I could reach the pans and things I'd need to grill the salmon. She, in turn, brought out the cutting board and knives she would need to prepare the salad and then we both went to work.

“So what did you do with your day?” I asked.

She looked up excitedly from her task and said, “I had a really productive day!”

She then proceeded to tell me about her activities, but the thing with Nica by then is, I could never tell exactly what she had done or where her efforts were leading. From what I could decipher she spent a lot of time with her friend Lisa, who she had become

close to since we came to New York and the farm. She spent a lot of time running errands. And she was applying for jobs or heard of various opportunities and explored those, though I was never really sure of what exactly they were, nor did they lead to anything concrete.

She was running me through her day in this way while we each worked on our part for dinner. I was doing my best to follow her when I noticed she was moving around a lot to the music playing from the radio in the living room, but I had turned the volume up loud so we could hear it in the kitchen, a little too loud, it turns out.

Nica said something I couldn't hear during the chorus of Duran Duran's song Hungry Like the Wolf and so I leaned over, resting my hand on the counter so I could ask her to repeat what she had said.

And that's when it happened.

The funny thing is, I don't think she understood what she'd done until I held my hand up and she could see the blood squirting out. Strangely enough, it didn't really hurt and I didn't realize she'd cut off my pinky finger until I saw it resting in a larger piece of kale, like a lettuce taco or something. Thinking about it later, as I have done so many times, I was surprised and I have to say a little proud that I didn't panic. But I was also wondering why she wasn't freaking out when I could tell she didn't see what she had done and that my reaction offered no clue.

Or that's what I thought, anyway.

"Nica," I said calmly but in a breathy way, "we have to go to the hospital."

"I know," she said. "Let's put it in ice and then maybe they can reattach it."

She looked into my eyes and I hers. I saw no sign of panic, no freaking out, for sure. Instead, I saw something I could not identify. My eyes moved from hers to the rest of her face ...her mouth, her cheeks, her neck. All were soft, for lack of a better word. No tension anywhere. No strained muscles.

I had been calm, but her calmness confused me, made me anxious. Shouldn't she be acting a certain way, I thought? Not that I wanted her to feel bad, because it could happen to anyone, but still. I was further unnerved by the amount of blood on the counter, the sink, the floor.

Still, she remained calm and even took the lead, grabbing a dishcloth from the sink and wrapping it around the wound. I worried about bacteria or germs or something leading to an infection but I was the one in shock now. She led me to her car, opened the passenger door for me and it closed it after I was seated. She started the engine, thrust it into reverse and proceeded in an exaggerated form of her herky jerk driving to the hospital emergency room.

The rest of it is a blur to me, but they couldn't reattach it. Didn't even try, actually. They told me almost immediately that it wasn't possible.

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We were on the park bench as we had been for the last hour, but I wasn't looking at Justin when I told him this last part of the story and I'm not sure why. There was a kind of emotional intimacy to that event where I thought eye contact would make the situation...weird for him.

Occasionally, people would ask about my finger when they noticed it was missing, which wasn't as often as you might think. To those people, I would just say it was from an accident when I was a kid and usually that was the end of it. Other times, I can see them notice it but they have the social grace to not ask about it. I suppose I've also learned to hide it, though I don't think about doing that consciously. But you keep your hand in your pocket, you hide it behind a bag you're carrying, even just roll your other fingers over the scar by making a fist. You feel ashamed, even subconsciously, and you learn to hide the source of that shame. We all do it, whether it's something about our bodies or some experience deep inside us. Or both.

In all our time together, Justin hadn't noticed it either, and I had my hand - it's my right hand, though I'm left handed - out and exposed several times. Now I looked at him and, to my surprise, he wasn't looking at his shoes or the ground, but straight into my eyes. I could practically see him willing himself to not look down at my hands, which made me smile.

"I can show it to you," I said. "It's not gross or anything," I added. "Most people don't even notice."

He raised his eyebrows as if to say, why not? And then he said, "Sure, why not?"

We both laughed and then I raised my right hand, which was the one closest to him, but I made sure not to move it too close. He glanced at it quickly and then looked at me and shrugged his shoulders, again, as if to say something. Not a big deal, is how I read the gesture.

"Yeah, that's no big deal," he said. "But, still ..." he added. "That's such a terrible way for a relationship to end, I would think. Most people break up or get divorced or whatever."

I noticed he was looking at his shoes again now.

"And I know I'm young, but I get that it can be messy," he said. "People have affairs, they grow apart. Sometimes I think my own parents can't stand each other. It's one of the things that made me think of doing this project, actually, but I can't imagine you can get much closure or whatever when it ends that way, you know, be able to say we just didn't work together and move on."

He looked up from his shoes and I smiled for him.

"It didn't end that way," I said. "We stayed together for another six months after that."

I understood the confused look on his face. I expected it, of course.

"That's not the dramatic way it ended?" he asked.

It was my turn to look down at my shoes and then look up again.

“I wish,” I said. “This,” I said, holding up my hand with the missing pinky finger, “this and her reaction to it was only a prelude.”