

Ghost Love

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

“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.”

“Yeah,” I said, laughing. “It was, though it didn’t start out that way. On a whim, we went on a road trip to New Orleans barely three weeks after we met. I think both of us realized it was a crazy risk - I mean what if we hated each other? Traveling with someone you know well can be testing, let alone a stranger. But I think each of us was afraid to chicken out, so we went through with it.”

My new friend Justin nodded, though not convincingly.

“It created a momentum that accelerated things,” I continued. Our chemistry - not physical as much as our worldviews, our values - was so good at first. We bantered, we clicked on food and music. And she was just so damn smart.”

He smiled but waited for me to continue.

“I’m a sucker for smart women, Justin,” I added.

We had stumbled upon the cemeteries in New Orleans, the ones where people are buried above ground, so they almost look like little cities. Nica - that’s what she went by, not Veronica - had shown her intelligence in the car on the way there already, but that was just the beginning on that trip.

“New Orleans is at or below sea level, of course,” she explained. “So, when the French, the Spanish, African, Caribbean and Creole cultures mixed, they all brought their traditions and fitted them to the geological conditions. Did you know in the mid-19th century, New Orleans was second only to New York for the number of immigrants entering the United States?”

“I didn’t know that” I said. “But it makes sense when you think about it, you know, being a major port and all.”

“Right,” she said, “and most of those cultures had above ground burial traditions, too. But I guess a big part of their ubiquity is due to some architect who settled there from Paris - he started building above-ground tombstones for rich people and it sort of became a thing.”

I had known something about these above ground cemeteries, and it not only impressed me she had a more in-depth knowledge, but that she knew about it at all. It suggested to me that we were kindred spirits somehow. It takes a certain kind of person to, one, be interested in things like that and, two, take the time to explore and do the necessary research - especially back in the eighties when you couldn’t just look it up on your phone.

“The rich living in nicer homes,” she added, “even when they’re dead.”

Then she did it for the first time. When Nica thought something was really funny, she laughed in a deeply joyful way, in a way that’s different than most people. It came from somewhere deep inside her and to say it was infectious is an understatement. My heart felt all melty whenever I heard it, right until the end.

I asked her how she knew so much about this topic, and her answer struck me as a bit odd, considering we didn’t even really know each other yet.

“I’m more worldly than you might know,” she said. “I know lots of things that might surprise you.

I passed it off as her being teasing and flirtatious, but I thought about it constantly afterwards, for years really, after things started going badly. And I’d say after a year, maybe a year and half, things started going downhill between us.

“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.

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 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 shoelaces, 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.

“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’ve been on my own for three years now and don’t even think about dating anymore. 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, though not like I did 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, later, 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.