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Water from the Moon

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WATER FROM THE MOON
a novel

Christopher A. Duggan, B.A.

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Lindenwood
University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

2000

ABSTRACT

During the scalding, dry summer of 1988, it would appear 23-year-old Dennis Dearborne is at a crossroads. More accurately, he is not on a road of any kind. The only child of affluent parents in suburban Minneapolis, Dennis finds his carefree existence at home unceremoniously ended when, after a string of lost jobs on his part, his parents decide to evict him from their house. At the same time, his father, an influential bank president, lands him a position as an illustrator for a small greeting card company. Dennis can handle the technical demands of the job because of a natural ability (in which he had never taken much interest) with the pencil and the brush.

He feels disconnected, however, from his artistically pretentious coworkers and no closer to a direction for his life than he was before. Slowly, things begins to change when, at an estate sale searching for used furniture, he comes across an old drawing of a woman that touches him in a way he can't explain. The drawing is inscribed only with the signature of the artist, J. Grawer, and a cryptic phrase, "Water From the Moon."

* * *

Growing up in Chicago during the Great Depression, John Grawer turns to art as a refuge from the harsh realities of his life, particularly after his father abandons the family when John is only 12. John is forced to go to work at a young

age to help support the family, but through a stroke of luck he later winds up in a job as an artist for a department store advertising department. His newfound happiness is short-lived with the United States' entry into World War II, and in 1943 he enlists in the Marines in order to force his younger brother, who wants to enlist himself, to stay home with their mother. In 1944, John is wounded in a freak accident before his platoon is to land on the beach at Saipan, of the Japanese-held Mariana Islands, and while recovering in a military hospital, John discovers that his entire platoon was wiped out during the fighting.

Wracked with guilt because he was not there to fight with them, John does not return home immediately after the war, instead volunteering for duty in occupied Japan, and when he does return, he decides to follow a job lead to Minnesota, leaving his family, his art and his old life behind. Some time after the move, he meets a charming and beautiful young woman, Catherine Dempsey, and quickly falls in love with her, particularly with her way of embracing life in a manner he had never been able to do. He senses, however that something is not quite right with her, and she eventually reveals that she has terminal cancer.

In her final weeks, he draws a portrait of her and titles it "Water From the Moon," from a Japanese saying that means "Something you can never have." He never finds the courage to tell her he loves her, and he never finds out if she loves him or if he was simply a diversion from her illness. After her death, the drawing is returned to him, and he retires it to a box in his closet.

* * *

While taking the drawing out of its old frame, Dennis discovers a note Catherine had written to John and had intended for him to find. A short while after, Dennis discovers John is in a nursing home, suffering from serious health complications after a stroke. Dennis struggles about what to do with the note, which he feels contains information John would want, even more than 40 years later. Finally, Dennis brings the portrait and the note to John, whose memory has been ravaged by the stroke.

After a frustrating exchange, in which it appears John does not remember anything, John breaks down and admits ownership of the drawing. Over the next several months, John's health continues to deteriorate, but he has taken some comfort at Catherine's note, which, after years of disappointment and unfulfilled potential, provides him with a single shining light that makes his life seem worthwhile. In his last months, he begins drawing again with Dennis, who eventually realizes that he, like John, is an artist.

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of Master of Arts

2000

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Tess, Anna Marie and Carolyn

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INTRODUCTION

Some psychologists contend that when a person dreams, all the characters in the dream are derived from the dreamer, not from the people they appear to represent, because they are subconscious extensions of the dreamer's consciousness. When writing *Water From the Moon*, I came to a similar conclusion with respect to the characters in a work of fiction. That is, any character that is created by a writer, from the main character on down to the most peripheral, is to some degree an extension of the writer and his or her sensibilities. In this way, creative writings, such as novels, while dwelling in the realm of fiction, are almost always partially autobiographical. An effective fiction writer, I believe, must maintain a balance in which he or she keeps the fictional story aloft while using enough influence from past experience to make the work ring true.

Throughout this paper, I will attempt to show how *Water From the Moon* is both a product of my imagination and my real life, in addition to other more common sources, such as targeted research and literary influences.

I began to get the idea sometime in 1995 for the short story from which the novel grew. I remember wanting to write a story in which a discovered message in a piece of art comes to provide some benefit for the artist, as well as the person who discovered it. I had it in my mind early that the central character

would have lost someone he cared for very deeply and that a portrait of her would contain the hidden message. I had no idea at this point why the loss of this person should be so devastating to the artist or how the message in question could wind up entombed in the drawing in the first place. Establishing these two elements while trying to keep them from appearing contrived went a long way toward driving the development of the rest of the story and the development of the characters. Because of other commitments of my time, I did not actually attempt to write the story for more than a year, and when I did, I hated the finished product. The characters and the various turnings of the plot all seemed very convenient and unbelievable. I put the project aside for several months and thought about some of the issues that were problematic, along with possible solutions.

I decided the main character should have endured some other significant tragedy, aside from the loss of his love, and that the woman appeared to him as a sort of salvation, so her loss would be much more profound for him. Because I wanted the modern portion of the story to take place in 1988, during the summer of a significant drought that ravaged a large section of the Midwest, I determined that the probable age of the older character in 1988 would make him a natural to have served in World War II, and I was closer to choosing my tragedy.

My mother had told me a story long before about her brother, Art, who served with the Marines in World War II and the Korean War. He survived some of the most horrific battles in modern history, including the Battle of the Bulge and the Chosin Reservoir in Korea, and he would have landed at Iwo Jima as

well, but he broke his ankle in a freak roller skating accident and had to stay behind. His entire platoon was wiped out in the ensuing battle, including a friend of his my mother had been corresponding with regularly by mail. I've never spoken to my uncle about the incident, although I wanted to. I simply did not feel comfortable enough to ask him.

Similarly, my uncle Les (my father's brother), who passed away in May of 1998, was a B-17 pilot in Europe in World War II. He flew 30 bombing missions over France and Germany, many of which had a 50 percent casualty rate. At his memorial service, I heard for the first time a story about how he was ordered to stand down one mission so a newer pilot could get a mission in. The plane was shot down, and every member of the crew was killed.

For the story, I decided to construct something like my uncle Art's story, using the battle of Saipan of the Mariana Islands, instead of Iwo Jima. The half of the story that takes place in 1988, with the first person narrator Dennis Dearborne, remained pretty similar when I began rewriting the short story in 1997. By the time I was finished, I was happier with the end product, but I had a story that was really too long to sell to a literary magazine. Most of the publications that entertain submissions from unpublished writers prefer works under 5,000 words. *Water From the Moon* was almost 10,000 words, and I felt as if I were leaving massive portions of the story untold. Those who read it were telling me they wanted to know more about Dennis, more about Catherine, more about John and more about everything. One person suggested I turn the story into a book, which had occurred to me already, and when I discovered that the LCIE culminating

project could be in such a format, I felt I had the sufficient motivation to complete such a work.

As I indicated earlier, the principal theme of the story deals with loss and redemption. J.D. Salinger published a great short story in his *Nine Stories* collection titled "For Esme With Love and Squalor" (Salinger, 87). The story is told from the perspective of an American soldier in World War II who is having breakfast at an English tea room in the first part of the story. There, he strikes up a pleasant conversation with a 12-year-old English girl who sports a very impressive vocabulary. He notices she is wearing a man's wrist watch, which she tells him belonged to her father, who had been killed in the war. The man is a writer, which he reveals in the conversation, and she asks for his unit number so she can write to him. In the second part of the story, he has suffered a severe nervous breakdown from battle fatigue. He had been among the allied forces landing in France on D-Day. That part of the story lays out an excruciating number of details regarding how emotionally unhinged he has become, and at the end of the story, he spots a package from Esme (the little girl) among a stack of parcels he has not bothered to open. In it is a letter from her and the wrist watch, which she indicates he could use better than her.

At the end, this simple gesture from a young girl he had talked to only 15 minutes was enough to bring him back from the depths of total despair. I felt that Catherine's letter could mean the same kind of thing to John Grawer in my story, since he learns from it that she truly loved him and that he was a profound comfort to her in her final painful months. Dennis indicates in chapter nine that as

a child he would dawdle away the summer and spend the last few days of it frantically looking for something to make the time off worthwhile, and that is the sort of thing the letter does for John near the end of his life by answering the question of whether or not she loved him, which had haunted him for years. Throughout the story, this redemption theme comes up numerous times for the various characters, including Catherine, who feels redeemed through her time with John, and Dennis, who finds some missing pieces in his life by the end of the story. Another reason I set the earlier story around World War II is that I can not think of another period in modern American history in which so many people's lives were so profoundly interrupted, altered or halted. Every man of fighting age in both my mother's and father's families went into active combat duty, either in the air or on the ground, and, even though they all returned, my father said there were houses on his street that had five stars in the window with two or three gold ones. (Families with members in the war would hang white window flags with one blue star for each person in service. A gold star indicated a person who had died.) If nothing else, this era seems a natural illustration of how little of our lives are actually under our control, which was another main theme of the book.

In addition to those themes, I wanted to use Dennis' part of the story to tackle another theme on the balance many of us struggle to maintain between the things we have to do to support ourselves financially and the things we do to feel fulfilled. I suspect an artist who is sentenced to drawing cartoons for a greeting card company is not substantially different from someone who considers himself a creative writer and must operate as a newspaper article and press release factory.

I will touch on this issue more in the section of the paper on influences.

Ultimately, I wanted to stress in Dennis' story how important it is for people to be true to themselves and to follow their dreams. This is the only way they can live up to their potential. That issue surfaces in John's story as well, as he allows his tragedies to obscure art from his life until almost the end.

Another branch of that theme is illustrated in a few specific places in the book in which characters are hesitant to take a chance that could bring them real joy for fear of failure. Dennis has a flashback to a little league baseball game in which he does take such a chance and ends up humiliating himself. That is not the whole reason, but he does not take such a chance in any facet of his life for years after.

John is afraid that if he tells Catherine he loves her she will not respond the same way. He finds it easier not to tell her, except through the symbolic gesture of his drawing of her, and she ends up dying before he has the chance. Finally, Catherine says in her letter that she is afraid of thunderstorms but fascinated by them at the same time (a reference to a trait of the character Miranda from Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest* (Shakespeare 1,369)). These storms are the turning points in our lives that we sometimes shy away from. In Dennis' case, he holds the key to making successful Catherine's plan to tell John how she feels about him, and that responsibility frightens him.

At one point in the story, Dennis witnesses a fierce thunderstorm. At first, he ventures outside in anticipation of it, but it intimidates him indoors. There, he watches it from the relative safety of his kitchen. None the less, he states that the

“really smart people” were taking shelter in their bathrooms, so he shares in that fascination with storms as well. The sequence is supposed to indicate something of a turning point in Dennis’ emotional development.

Dennis is surrounded by people who are comprised mostly of surface features, and he even dates one of them—Heather. He is perceptive enough to recognize the falseness in these people, but Heather represents the temptation to be more like that. He almost gives in, but when he tries to draw her picture, he realizes he does not love her. At the same moment, he starts to get the feeling that perhaps he is an artist. So, the theme that modern society has little patience or encouragement for people of substance is also present in the story.

In the opening monologue of Tennessee Williams’ play, *The Glass Menagerie*, the narrator, Tom Wingfield, explains that the play is memory, is “dimly lighted,” “sentimental” and “not realistic” (Williams 29).

“In memory, everything seems to happen to music,” he says (Williams 30).

While the story of *Water From the Moon* is far less a product of my real life than “The Glass Menagerie” is of Williams’ experiences with his family while living in St. Louis in the 1930s, my memories populate these pages. Just as in Williams’ world everything seems to happen to music, the summers of my memory are filled with fireflies and the early evening sound of cicadas droning in the trees. The three primary characters’ childhood memories are included in the story, and I wanted to try to represent the way children perceive things, in particular matters from the world of adults. Because they are usually sheltered

from the harsh realities of adult life, they seem to see the periphery of everything. They hear muffled snatches of conversation from their bedrooms at night when they are supposed to be sleeping. Perhaps they pick up on the subtle signals their parents pass to one another. They also manage to look with wonder at simple things, like fireflies, bubbles and shadows from starlight. My own childhood memories served to lend what I hope is a measure of authenticity to those parts of the book.

Very little of the book is taken directly from my own life. One passage (the one in which Dennis runs the wrong way after getting a hit in a little league game) actually happened to me in first grade. Aside from that, John's relationship with Catherine and Dennis' relationship with Heather are both influenced by my own experiences as a single person. Additionally, I have had some experience as an artist. I was very active in art in high school and intended to study art in college, but I decided I was not good enough at it to make a career in it. I still draw the occasional picture, but I have only used a couple of drawings for any kind of publication. My experience, however, affords me the ability to write about the technical aspects of painting and drawing with enough authority to satisfy the needs of the book.

Most significant is the parallel between Dennis' job as a greeting card illustrator and my career as a journalist and, later, a public relations professional. I am not suggesting that I consider myself a great writer by any means, but I have long had aspirations to publish some of my work. I earned my undergraduate degree in English and loved reading the works of great writers, from Shakespeare

to Dickens to Steinbeck. I took one course in fiction writing as a sophomore in college and wrote a lot of fiction over the next couple of years, but after college, when I started my journalism career, much of my creative writing came to a halt, primarily because I no longer had the time and, after sitting at a computer writing all day, writing is usually not the first thing on my mind after arriving home in the evening. Every so often, I would have the opportunity to write a newspaper article that used the same intellectual muscles as my fiction writing, but for the most part, that portion of myself remained unfulfilled for years.

I believe that, too often, people allow themselves to be defined by their careers. If their careers are such that they provide for intellectual and emotional fulfillment, that is fine, but most of the time, people earn their living in whatever manner is most readily available or most effective for them. Dennis struggles with the concept of his very identity, not just in terms of his career, but in general. His discovery of John's drawing touches off a series of events that leads him to the realization that he is an artist, regardless of whether or not his job gives the artist in him much play on a given day or in a given year. By bringing his vision of the frozen beach into physical reality as a painting at the end of the book, he is being completely true to himself, finally.

Earlier in the paper, I mentioned being influenced by a story by J.D. Salinger. I also drew some inspiration from Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, mostly with respect to Holden Caulfield's narration, which influenced slightly the somewhat cynical tone of the first-person narration in Dennis' part of the story. I also felt some general influence from other 20th century American writers like

Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck. While those two wrote very differently, I think they did at least one thing similarly. That is, neither of them felt the need to tell the reader how he or she should feel about the story in question. They simply laid out the plot and the setting in their own unique ways, revealing the characters' thoughts, emotions and motivations where necessary and never "giving the reader the answer."

The most profound examples of this I can think of are Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* and *The Sun Also Rises* and Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. All four of those books end in the same manner, with the stories reaching conclusions that are neither definitive nor climactic and with the characters having passed a crossroads at which they followed (or were forced to follow) one path or another.

I have long been impressed with the work of a more contemporary author, Anne Tyler, in particular her books *The Tin Can Tree*, *The Accidental Tourist* and *Breathing Lessons*. For whatever reason, her characters are frequently recovering from loss, whether it be from the death of a loved one or from broken relationships. She seems interested in the psychology of survival, which was a large element in *Water From the Moon*. I think a person's character is most profoundly revealed in times of loss or trial, which is probably one reason the characters in the book are often depicted having to deal with tragedy.

Structurally, I was drawn to works like *The Joy Luck Club*, by Amy Tan. Tan's book deals with the lives of four Chinese women and their children and crosses numerous time periods. The central character is the daughter of one of the

women, who has passed away by the start of the book, and the stories of all of the characters unfold throughout the book. The fractured chronological structure of *Water From the Moon* was preferable for me to the straight linear approach and, I hope, more compelling. My intent was that when Catherine's letter is discovered, its contents would provide the reader with basic information about the story of John and Catherine and that the ensuing chapters would fill in the blanks.

Similarly, I chose not to tell John and Catherine's story from the beginning, rather starting near the end in chapter two, then working back through it, finally returning to the end in the second to last full chapter of the book. The prologue was actually added after I had established the way the chapters would be laid out. I decided that since so much of the story was driven by the existence of the drawing, it would be nice to start the book by showing the creation of the drawing. Also, by doing so, I could begin to introduce the reader to some of the story of John and Catherine.

A similar chronological approach (the telling of various intertwined stories through disconnected flashbacks) is also taken in two recent movies in know of—*How to Make an American Quilt* and *The English Patient*. (The latter was a novel before it was a movie, but I had not read it as of the writing of this project.) Like *The Joy Luck Club*, *How to Make an American Quilt* tells the stories of a number of aging women in a quilting club and engages in repeated flashbacks, which ultimately are tied to the present day and the story of the central character, a young woman (the granddaughter of one of the quilters) who is struggling with quandaries of her own.

The English Patient is told from the perspective of the title character while he lies in bed, slowly dying. In addition to his story, the background stories of a number of other characters are told and intertwine in some cases with his story as World War II is winding down all around them.

I wanted to remain very careful about point of view in the book. The limited nature of the characters' points of view in the various chapters, I hope, lends to the flow of the story and aids in keeping the structure intact and maintaining a certain level of mystery as the story progresses. I am impatient with works that violate their own rules with respect to point of view. For instance (though I hate to use another movie), the recent film *Titanic* is structured so that characters in modern times are hearing a story that is being told by a woman who survived the wreck, and the 1912 story is told through flashbacks with her narration over parts of it. Therefore, the flashbacks should be completely from her point of view if the framing device the screenwriter had set up is to maintain credibility. However, the 1912 flashbacks contain numerous scenes that the narrator could not have seen or even known about. I have yet to encounter anyone, even those who agree the situation exists in the movie, who have a problem with it, but I see it as sloppy and lazy writing. Then again, the movie was the most successful of all time, so who am I to judge?

I heard the phrase, "water from the moon," for the first time in a movie called *The Year of Living Dangerously*. A character states it is an old Japanese saying that means "something you can never have." The poetry of that metaphor was so profound that it stuck with me for several years, until I started thinking

about the story and thought that would be a perfect title for it. I spent a lot of time after that trying to verify the meaning of the phrase through other sources, without success. I even tried e-mailing people in Japan, but to no avail. I remembered that in the late '80s I came across a record by a pianist named David Lanz that contained a song with that title, and I was sure if anyone could verify the meaning of the phrase, he could. That phrase is simply too unusual to have come up twice by accident, I thought.

Coincidentally, I did a newspaper article about Mr. Lanz in November of 1996, prior to a concert of his in St. Louis. This was before I had begun writing the story, so it did not occur to me to ask him about the song title, but I had kept the business card of his record company's publicist, and when I got the idea of asking him about the song title, I sent an e-mail to the publicist asking to get in touch with him. She very graciously offered to forward my message to him, in which I explained what I was looking for and why. A few days later, I received a card from David Lanz's wife (he was recording in London at the time). She explained that she and David first heard the phrase during an Academy Awards broadcast in which actress Linda Hunt said during her acceptance speech that winning was unexpected, "like water from the moon."

Mrs. Lanz wrote that David Lanz also appreciated that sentiment and later wrote a song with the title. She also said the phrase is personally meaningful to him, since he records in a genre that is not as commercially lucrative as some others. Interestingly, the movie for which Linda Hunt won the Academy Award was *The Year of Living Dangerously*. Discovering that Lanz and I had essentially

taken the phrase from the same place was so ironic to me that I decided to keep it as the title with no further verification. Even if it does not represent a real Japanese saying, it fits the story very well and follows the main themes of the book.

I elected to title the chapters as well because I thought it would help to drive the themes of the book more effectively. Initially, when I was trying to verify the meaning of the title for the short story, I thought about removing references to it from the story and changing the title to something else. At that time, I thought of several other titles, including “The Museum of What Should Have Been” and “The Frozen Beach.” When I decided to keep the original title, I thought I could use those as chapter titles where they fit the best. For the other chapters, I simply tried to pull out a key concept or image from the chapter in question.

Finally, one of my main influences for the story came from a friend of mine, Greg Strong, who passed away from terminal cystic fibrosis when he was in his early 20s. When I met him, we were both employed at a bowling alley in Chesterfield, Mo., and he already had the disease. We were both in our middle teens at that time, and he was a few years older than me. Over the next couple years, it became increasingly obvious that he had a very serious case of the disease and that he would almost certainly die from it. Not everyone does, apparently. His brother, for instance, was very athletic and had the disease, and today he is a very successful radio executive.

By the time I met Greg, I had already, unfortunately, experienced some death within my family—an uncle of mine—but I had not had the perspective of watching someone as young as he was waste away the way he did. It was interesting to me to watch the manner in which he handled himself, even after it was pretty obvious that he did not have long to live.

He continued to work at the bowling alley where I knew him. His doctor told a story about how he looked through college brochures, planning a degree path. He had a girlfriend. This last detail interested me the most. I wondered mostly what her mindset was on the whole situation. She had to have known their relationship was not long-lived. Did they talk about the inevitable? Did the certainty of their situation change the way they behaved toward each other or the way they spent time together? What happened to her after he passed away? It occurred to me that any man who came into her life after that would face the daunting prospect of living up to the example of her relationship with Greg, which never had the chance to sour from age—not that I am suggesting it would have. Greg had the most incredible personality I have ever encountered, and I think that he made the people around him better for it. I never once heard him say anything to indicate that he felt sorry for himself or that he even had any regrets.

Years before I had even the basic concept of the story in my head as I described earlier (regarding the picture and the hidden note), I knew I wanted to write something based on Greg's situation. Ultimately, Greg's attitude about his life and his impending death became the model for the way Catherine's father, Catherine and even John face their final days in the book. More critical to my

overall point here, it is the way I like to think I would behave under the same circumstances.

When we write fiction, we assign names and personality traits to the characters we create. But do we really create them? Some writers say they base their characters on the people they know. Others contend that they have more complex methods for building characters. I believe that, regardless of the method, the writer is always in evidence to some degree within the characters he or she creates. A friend of mine once told me she would like to write more fiction but her stories always end up being far too autobiographical for her own comfort. Just as most artists find it next to impossible to draw pictures strictly from the imagination, I believe it is a truly unusual writer who can craft characters that ring true without some residue of the writer showing through.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Whether it be in a run-down apartment building in Depression-era St. Louis, in the stately home of a garment monarchy in southern Missouri or in the midst of a boundless field of softly swaying India grass near an obscure Southern town, literary characters have struggled with questions about where their futures lie, how to live in stifling family situations, what it means to be true to themselves, and that the past is not so easily left behind.

In Tennessee Williams' play, *The Glass Menagerie*, narrator Tom Wingfield takes the audience on a tour of his own history, into a time all too vivid in his memory when abandonment by his father forced him to take on a role in his home that he never wanted. As a young man, he lives in a growing state of resentment, mainly for his mother, a former member of the Southern social set who refuses to let go of her past, even amid the cramped quarters of their St. Louis flat. His soul, that of a poet and adventurer, is trapped in the body of a lonely warehouse worker who struggles to support his mother and his socially stunted sister, Laura, taking what little opportunity he has to write poetry, watch movies or idly gaze at the moon between the rooftops from the fire escape.

As time passes and he can feel his world constricting around him, Tom

makes the unconscionable decision to leave his family in St. Louis, following his lust for adventure and turning his back on his mother and the sister that he truly loves. In the final monologue of the play, Tom admits that the past has followed him closely.

The cities swept about me like dead leaves, leaves that were brightly colored but torn away from the branches. I would have stopped, but I was pursued by something. It always came upon me unawares, taking me altogether by surprise. Perhaps it was a familiar bit of music. Perhaps it was only a piece of transparent glass. . . I pass the lighted window of a shop where perfume is sold. The window is filled with pieces of colored glass, tiny transparent bottles in delicate colors, like bits of a shattered rainbow. Then all at once my sister touches my shoulder. (Williams, 137)

Lanford Wilson's play, *Talley and Son*, is set during a hot and tumultuous July 4 evening in 1944 in the elegant home of the Talley family in Lebanon, Mo. The family, led by Eldon Talley, has gathered to discuss the future of the family's garment business, which has grown fat with a government contract for army uniforms, and the rapidly failing physical and mental health of the family patriarch, Calvin Talley. All the family members have arrived (including Kenneth Talley, who has returned from service in the war for the meeting) except for Eldon's youngest son, Timothy. Only the audience knows at the start of the play that Timothy, who is narrating the play unseen by everyone, has been killed in combat on the small Pacific island of Tinian.

Through his narration, Timothy indicates he had spent his life looking merely for love and acceptance from his father, who had seemed too preoccupied with the

family business to notice. (Wilson, 6) Later in the play, the family receives a telegram about Timothy, and each of them learns in his or her own way that the past and the dead do not fade away so easily and that the future is sometimes a complicated place to chart.

In Truman Capote's novel, *The Grass Harp*, young Collin Fenwick is learning that adolescence in the home of his two aunts, Dolly and Verena, is not consistent with what other young boys experience. The sisters have a stormy relationship in the first place, but a dispute over a small family business endeavor creates even further estrangement, prompting Dolly, Collin and Dolly's eccentric friend Catherine to move to a tree house next to a field of India grass that serves as a sort of resting place for the memory of all those who have come and gone in his life.

Eventually the sisters realize that, in spite of their disagreements, their bond of family is not to be put aside. Years later, after Dolly has died, Collin is ready to leave his home and the collection of characters that has become his family. He has dreams of becoming a lawyer, and law school awaits. Finding his old friend, Judge Cool, he takes one last walk through town, closing his eyes as if to burn each image in his memory. He discovers, however, that even if he could forget, the Indian grass will remember and will be there to remind him.

It was as though neither of us had known where we were headed. Quietly astonished, we surveyed the view from the cemetery hill, and arm in arm descended to the summer-burned, September-burnished field. . . I wanted then for the Judge to hear what Dolly had told me: that it was a grass harp, gathering, telling, a harp of voices remembering a story. We listened. (Capote, 97)

As much as the future is filled with questions, uncertainties and inescapable quandaries, the past is even more perplexing. Those decisions we make, the people we leave behind while looking toward the horizon, are not so easily forgotten. Those memories can be effortlessly conjured by a piece of music, a fragrance, a quality of light or a picture. And they can bring persecution or comfort, often at the same time.

Prologue

Drawn From Memory

June, 1946

It was light outside when he started the drawing, but by the time he applied the finishing touches it was well into night. It had been so long since he had drawn anything, he wondered if he would remember how. Earlier in the day, after he decided to do the picture, he had bought new supplies—soft pencils, an eraser, acid-free paper and a mat and frame. He set them all down on the small work desk in his bedroom, which had originally been a drawing table but had not been used as such for quite some time.

As he always used to, John felt the same exhilarating anticipation just before starting. The blank page and all the corresponding possibilities were waiting. In these moments, he thought, all artists are equal and absolutely every pinnacle is within reach. Slowly, he lowered his hand, anchoring the heel of it on the corner of the paper. He took a deep breath and, relaxing his grip on the pencil, exhaled and drew that first line.

Thus, it began.

He worked from memory, recalling the way her face was shaped, the nature of her eyes, the texture of her skin—the way she used to look. Specifically, he was thinking of a day in late spring when they took a picnic together. The sunlight filtered through the leaves of a massive oak tree and played across her

face and hair. The grass was still damp under their blanket from a rain shower that morning. He could feel its coolness through the fabric. He had just told her a joke, and she looked up at him with that smile. On that day, the possibilities seemed as open and limitless as with the blank paper.

As he continued working, he found himself getting lost in the wonder of seeing her face materialize in front of him, almost as if he were not responsible for it. He went back time and time again, working without pause, meticulously capturing the details that would make the drawing truly a picture of her. He made sure the sun showed the exact manner with which she tucked her hair behind her right ear, the precise shape of her high cheek bones, her ready smile and the brightness of her eyes. In this way, perhaps he could afford her a measure of immortality.

As he sat, hunched over the drawing, the room grew dark with the setting sun, until it was near blackness except for the illumination from the desk lamp. It almost appeared, in fact, as if the drawing were lit of its own fragile, internal source and he were protecting it from being obscured by the darkness pressing in on his back and trying to creep around his arms and over his shoulders.

Finally, he signed the drawing according to his old custom, with his first initial and his last name. Above that, he wrote the words, "Water From the Moon." Placing his pencil to the side, he leaned even further forward, resting his forehead against his fingers and studying the work. Sometimes, he thought, he remembered the strangest things—bits of music, snatches of inconsequential

conversation, the way the wind felt on a particular summer evening and her face on that day, when the world seemed ready to forgive.

It was late, and he decided he would mount and frame the drawing in the morning, for now leaving it on the work desk. Then, he rose and switched off the light, finally allowing the darkness to move in.

Chapter One

The Frozen Beach

Summer, 1988

It was late July, and I had been sleeping with the windows open for the past several weeks. During that scalding summer, people dreaded going outside during the day for fear of being boiled alive, and if in Texas they were bragging about frying eggs on the sidewalk, we were watching them explode violently from their shells. Walking down the sidewalk, you could hear above the traffic the buzz of millions of air conditioners straining impotently to maintain their little pockets of coolness amid an ocean of torridity. As cold as Minnesota gets during the winter, the population was collectively yearning for November.

The heat was not the worst of it. The entire Mid-West was in the grip of a months-long drought. The farm community had given up on the growing season weeks before, and people walking on the street could feel the moisture being sucked from their pores.

The apartment was my first place away from home, outside of campus housing, and I had recently discovered, via my first summer utility bills, that comfort often comes at a high price. Thus the open windows. Even in the absence of the sun, the night offered no break from the heat. It was impossible to sleep in the true sense of the word. The best one could hope for were fragmentary snatches of unconsciousness in between long stretches of endless writhing and sheet

kicking to take full advantage of the microscopic wind currents moving through the room (not to mention perpetual pillow turning until the cool spot had vanished for good).

In the stillness, I could hear the sounds of the night through that open second-story window. Even from two miles away, the soft, steady sighing of the interstate was clear and regular, like the ocean surf, offering the auditory illusion of moving air. A family of crickets had set up housekeeping somewhere outside, and every so often a dog would bark a few times and then go quiet. From the other open windows in the apartment complex I could hear the muffled sounds of televisions or the occasional frantic shouting of a late-night domestic squabble.

These details are only significant because somewhere among the sweat, tangled sheets and nocturnal noise of one of those agonizing nights, I began to turn into an artist. It happened in my sleep, which was in keeping with the rest of my life. I was already working as an “artist” for a small greeting card company, a job I had backed into, mainly because of a dwindling assortment of post-graduate employment options and a natural, inexplicable skill I have always had with a pencil or paint brush.

I went through most of my college career with “undecided” printed as my major on my grade reports. To be honest, I am not exactly sure what I wound up getting my degree in. I think it might have been communications. After graduation, I worked in a long succession of retail and restaurant jobs, staying as long as my unimpressive attention span allowed. I was still living with my parents, but I wasn't even sure they noticed me there. I was gone most of the time,

although I wasn't doing much of anything. I was just "out," as they say—the nonspecific "out." I did not have many friends. This could have gone on indefinitely, but for the night of "the talk."

One evening, my father came to my room, where I spent most of my time when I was home, and asked to speak to me; I could tell from his ominous tone and the way he was fidgeting with the buttons on his shirt that something was up. I followed him into the family room, where my mother was waiting, gripping the arms of her Queen Anne chair, her knuckles turning white. He lowered himself into his recliner in the slow, painful manner emblematic of people at the far edge of middle age and spoke first.

"Dennis, we were wondering what your plans are," he said, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees and pressing his fingers together at the tips.

"What?"

"Your plans," he repeated. "What do you want to do?"

"With what?" I asked. Actually, I knew what he was driving at, but I felt like making this one difficult for them for some reason.

He took a slow, deep breath, and suddenly my mother started crying. It is kind of sad, now that I think about it, but since I was born, it appears they had hoped I would do something extra special when I grew up. I am an only child, and I guess that from an early age they expected me to be a financial genius, like my father, or at least a genius of some sort. The only thing I ever showed any aptitude at was drawing pictures, and I didn't even do that in a very inspired way.

After the evening of the talk, when my mother started crying in that uncontrollable, heartbreaking way that mothers have, two things happened: my father helped me to find an apartment and I received a mysterious, unsolicited telephone call from the personnel director of NorthStar Greetings, stating he wanted me to come in for an interview. I was to bring a portfolio. I didn't even know, really, what a portfolio was, so I asked.

"We want to see some examples of your work," he said, seemingly unaffected by my ignorance. So, I tried him again.

"What kind of work are you talking about?"

"Drawings would be fine, although you would be working in paint as well. Our art director will conduct the interview."

This had my father's fingerprints all over it.

Virtually every other job I had taken since high school had been the product of one of my father's many connections in the world of commerce. He's the president of a bank in downtown Minneapolis. While it was very nice of him to continue to use his influence to land employment for me, this approach to parenting is precisely the thing I had experienced my entire life. Growing up an only child, I was given pretty much everything I wanted, even if I didn't know I wanted it. I didn't even have to ask. The bicycles, toys and other knick knacks just showed up, mysteriously. But there was never anything attached to them. My father did not help me to learn to ride without training wheels, I don't recall any afternoons at the zoo and my mother did not read stories to me or sing lullabies at bedtime.

I began to get the feeling this was not the way most children were brought up when I was in seventh grade, when my class was doing some activity that involved our parents' first names and I didn't know mine. After that, I began to notice more and more the way my friends' parents behaved toward them and toward each other.

As much as I disliked the prospect of working and quitting another of my father's offerings, I decided to go ahead with the interview. I sat down with a pencil and pad and a news magazine and did several drawings from the pictures on the advertisements, and that was my "portfolio."

The "interview" was unusual, even for me. I came into the front room, which had a small reception desk with a telephone and was open to another large room off of it, where a group of six or eight people were hunched over tables whose tops were tilted toward them. Each had a nifty carousel-type stand with a bunch of pencils and markers in it and an L-shaped pair of walls joined at the corner that isolated them from their neighbors in a fashion. My interviewer emerged from this group, a comical man in his late 30s with thick, horn-rimmed glasses and wild, brown hair that was poorly combed, thinning on the top and bushy on the sides. I imagined this was what clowns looked like without make-up. He was even thinner than me (which is pretty thin) and he walked in a bow-legged fashion that was accentuated by the fact he was wearing Bermuda shorts and a blue T-shirt. He looked sort of like a cowboy on vacation in New York.

"Dennis? Nice to meet you," he said, extending a bony hand. "Why don't you come back to the lunch room and I'll take a look at your stuff."

The rest of the people quietly working in the room watched us suspiciously as we headed toward the lunch room. I considered leaving at that moment, but I decided to hang on a while longer. The walking stick figure (his name was Edward) sat down and opened my folder with the drawings, leafing through them quickly and nodding. Without looking up, he asked me if I could work in charcoal, pastels, watercolor, acrylic and oil. I said that I could, even though I had only done most of them once or twice in high school art class. He asked if I could work on deadline. As imposing a word as that is, I said, "Sure," and he offered me the job, explaining at the same time that the salary was not princely and the benefits were even worse. I decided to take it, concluding in the manner similar to that of recently released convicts that it was strictly temporary—that I would surely later find a career more suited to me after an interlude of sorts. I started the following Monday, and as I walked in the door that first day, the others in the main room were still watching me like the saloon customers in a cheap Western movie when the hero walks in with a silver six-gun on each hip.

Almost immediately, the differences between me and my new colleagues became apparent. Essentially, we all do the same thing. We are given pretty specific instructions about the picture that is needed for a particular card (usually a cartoon), and we produce it. Yet, my colleagues all think of themselves as "artists." They speak of art in high, confident terms. They talk in a maddeningly inaccessible manner that includes words like "affectation," "fatuous" and "midden" (which I have since determined means trash). They keep their favorite

work hung on their little walls like small, self-indulgent art galleries, and they doodle as if, because they are artists no doubt, they can not stop the flow of artistic imagery from their fertile minds.

During the course of a 12-minute telephone conversation, I saw one of them produce in the corner of her sketch book a panorama that included a small gathering of penguins, each of which was holding an umbrella to ward off the steady rain of smiley faces that was coming down from the margin. This, I assumed, must be the difference between people like me and real artists. I never thought in creative little images like they did, at least not until that hot night with the windows open.

It was just after sunrise on a Saturday, and I was dreaming in still pictures, because, I think, my little, jerky stretches of sleep on those nights were not long enough for the traditional moving pictures. Outside, a rain shower had begun to fall, the sound of which played the role in my subconscious of a steak on the grill, a sputtering log in a fireplace, a high school classroom during a typing test and, finally, an ice storm.

I started to dream this picture of a beach crowded with people who are all having a great time, playing volleyball and Frisbee in their bathing suits, tanning, jogging and reading through their shades. The only thing out of the ordinary is that the beach is covered in snow and more is coming down. The water is frozen solid, too, waves and all. There are even some surfers perched on their boards, suspended in the frozen curls. All of the half-naked beach-goers are seemingly oblivious to the freezing temperatures, except for one little guy down in the

corner. He is decked out in a parka and the full winter regalia, looking on with his back to us with his arms extended to the sides in obvious disbelief.

It was gone as quickly as it came, and as I lurched into wakefulness one final time, the rain was still falling past the open window. The sun was out, and it was shining through the drops, making them look like diamonds or little chunks of ice as they fell with a rustling sound on the long-dead, brown grass in the courtyard of the apartment complex. I swung my legs over the side of the bed and shuffled over to the window, where I watched it until it stopped a few minutes later. That little rain, which seemed to fall magically without the benefit of clouds, did not by itself break the drought, but perhaps it was a sign of things to come. And the frozen beach—I have attempted since then to explain it away, but I think it may have been art.

Chapter Two

The Warm Spell

June, 1946

The halls of the hospital were deserted, even though it was the middle of the day. John was running as fast as he could, still trying to follow the directions he had only half listened to from the clerk at the front desk. His work shoes slapped noisily against the hard tile floor and echoed loudly off the walls so that each footfall reverberated three or four times, like machine gun fire. None of the room numbers were right; he was going the wrong way. He stopped, breathing heavily, and ran back down the hall to where another passage branched off. Finally, the numbers looked right, and as he felt he was getting closer to Catherine's room, he slowed down, suddenly conscious of the noise he was making. He swallowed hard, trying to get his breathing under control. When he did see her, he wanted to be in control of himself. He did not want her to think he was falling apart, even for the panic and despair he was feeling. Up to the moment he had seen the message, he had almost thought things could still be different.

It had been a very hot day, only the latest in a long, merciless warm spell, and he had been out all morning on a series of sales calls around the city. In the morning he had felt fresh and ready to take on the day, but before long the steamy air was clinging to his skin and had him dripping in sweat that soaked through his shirt and plastered his hair to the skin under his hat band.

By the second call, he felt drained, and the sample cases were heavy in his grip, their handles wanting to slip from his fingers. Two more stops, and he would be able to head back to the office to regroup. There he could see what his afternoon schedule was and he would be able to call Catherine at the hospital, where she had been for just over three weeks.

The third call was a good one; he felt like he was hitting his stride, and they bought more than they typically did, restocking on their standing supply and purchasing a new product his manager had told him to push. One more call, and he would be able to get in out of the heat. At the last stop, he had to park a couple hundred yards from the building and walk across acres of dark pavement, then through a lengthy expanse of the factory floor before he reached his contact. Along the way, one of the handles of the heavy sample cases slipped from his sweaty grasp and the bottles scattered across the burning blacktop. Cursing, he picked them up and rearranged them in the case.

At last in the office, he went over the supply list with his contact and checked off the order. The sweaty, overweight foreman looked at a bottle of the new cleaner and unceremoniously tossed it back into the case without opening it, shaking his glistening head as he did and loosening his tie even more than it already was.

“Okay, then,” John said. “I’ll see you next month.”

“Right,” the foreman grunted.

John mopped at his forehead with his damp handkerchief, put his hat back on, scooped up the sample cases and started on the long walk back to his car.

During the drive back to the office, he could think about little other than the cool drink of water he would get from the cooler in the corner next to his desk. At each traffic signal, he became acutely aware of the lack of moving air in the car and he impatiently hit the gas pedal to get moving again.

He eased into a spot in the parking lot, yanked on the brake and slid out of the seat; he decided to leave the sample cases and his paperwork in the car. Once inside the door, he felt immediate relief from the shade and the moving air from the fans stationed in three corners of the big room. He started to make his way toward his desk, but his manager stepped out of his office door and flagged him down.

“John, I’m glad you’re here,” he said. “Henry at the main office wants everyone’s figures for the week; can I get yours?”

“I left them in the car,” John said. “Can it wait until later today?”

“No, sorry. He wants them before noon.”

Without a word, John turned and plunged back out into the heat of the parking lot, crossing to his car and retrieving the sales book from the front seat. He considered running back to the building because of the urgency that Ralph had impressed on him about the figures, but he thought better of it. Once inside, he saw Ralph still leaning against the door frame to his office, talking to the secretary. They were both slouching wearily in the manner indicative of mid summer. He handed Ralph the sales book, which was marked on the appropriate page with the business card of one of his clients, then started to head toward the water cooler.

“Oh, Mr. Grawer,” the secretary said. “A woman called for you while you were gone this morning. It sounded important. I put the number on your desk.”

Rushing over to the desk, John picked up the note and dialed the number while holding the scrap of paper in his other hand and cradling the receiver between his ear and shoulder. Catherine’s mother picked up on the second ring and sounded relieved to hear from him.

“Oh, John,” she said quietly. “You need to get here right away.”

Catherine’s condition had taken a sudden turn for the worse, and she had been moved to another room.

“I’ll be right there,” he blurted, hanging up the phone before he heard a reply, and without a word to Ralph, the secretary or the water cooler, he was gone.

Nearing the door to her room, which was closed, he suddenly felt very aware of how disheveled he looked. Slowly, he walked the rest of the length of the hallway to her room and, leaning his head close to the door, softly knocked.

“Come in.”

It was Catherine’s mother’s voice. She had come into town to be with Catherine when she found out about the illness. He turned the knob and slowly pushed the door open. There were two beds inside, but Catherine was the only patient. She was already looking in the direction of the door when John came in, and she smiled weakly when she saw him. She had lost alarming amounts of weight in the short time since being admitted, and she seemed almost to disappear beneath the bed sheets. The skin on her face was drawn tight, and her beautiful

brown eyes looked unnaturally large. He walked to her bedside and placed his hand in hers; she closed her fingers on it. Her hand felt like a small, lifeless bird in his grasp, such that if he squeezed at all the bones would shatter.

“I knew it was you,” she said, still smiling, “from the sound of your shoes.”

Wordlessly, he sat in the chair on the near side of the bed, smiled and tried to look reassuring. Her mother sat on the other side, next to a small oak night stand. There, John’s drawing sat propped against the wall. He had given it to her just after she went into the hospital, when the cancer had made her too weak to live on her own. It was his attempt to tell her that he loved her without using the actual words.

“Water From the Moon?” she said when he had presented it to her.

“What’s that?”

“I can’t tell you,” he said ominously. “It’s a secret.”

“Ooh, mysterious,” she said with a grin.

He closed his eyes and remembered the picnic from which he drew the picture. It was a beautiful day, and she was in marvelous spirits the entire time, laughing at practically everything he said. At one point, they were giggling almost uncontrollably when he stopped and became quiet. She reached over and warmly touched his hand.

“What is it,” she said.

“Nothing,” he replied, smiling again. “I’ll tell you later.”

At her bedside now, he wanted badly to tell her how much he loved her, how much she meant to him. They had agreed that they would not talk about the future, living strictly in the present. Even now, he felt bound by it. Under the terms of their agreement, such a declaration under the terms of their agreement would be the equivalent of a goodbye, and he was not ready to let her go yet.

Chapter Three

Rumblings

The morning of my vision of the frozen beach I had planned to spend some time searching for a good used sofa. My apartment had not come with furniture, and the only thing my parents had given me to help set up housekeeping was a pair of dilapidated lawn chairs. They had recently bought new ones, and I suppose they thought I could use them for all of my lawn parties. As much as my parents were free-spenders in most areas, they really got their money's worth out of the lawn chairs. These babies were manufactured somewhere in the middle of the Kennedy administration, I think. The structure consisted of aluminum tubing that was connected at the joints by rusted, creaky hinge contraptions that had seized up years ago so that the chairs would not fold without the coordinated effort of three people. The occupant of either chair is supported by some frayed, interwoven nylon material that looks as if it might give way at any moment. Oh yes, lawn chairs such as they have not been built for quite some time.

To be honest, I did not mind them all that much, but they were murder on my love life. Since moving in, I had gone out with a few different women, and, invariably, the relationships inexplicably ended the day after I brought the woman

in question to my place and she saw the turf seating apparatus. They all reacted in the same horrified, if not subdued, manner, suggesting they had discovered a dismembered body in my bathroom and were afraid to say anything for fear of becoming the next victim.

So, aesthetics aside, it seemed if I were to take a relationship beyond the second or third date I would need a sofa of some sort and possibly a recliner.

I could not afford new furniture, so I had been making the rounds of the garage sales until one of my big-headed, doodler co-workers suggested the estate sale route. He said prices are often reasonable, and since a person's entire household is up for sale, the selection is often pretty good. I had looked through the newspaper and found one in a suburb relatively close to where I live. The sale was to begin at 10 a.m., so I gave myself a half hour to get there, providing my usual cushion for getting lost. By the time I left, any moisture derived from that brief rain shower had re-entered the atmosphere at just above ground level, giving a palpable, physical, bullying presence to the heat.

My car does not have working air conditioning, so there was no relief there. In fact, when I got into the car, I immediately felt as if the pattern on the vinyl seats had been permanently branded onto the backs of my legs. I had to touch my steering wheel with my fingertips only, because it was so hot. Only after I got the old Honda rolling did the moving air alleviate some of the discomfort. During the drive, the semi-urban area in which I live gradually gave way to the suburbs and then a more wealthy set of suburbs. Finally, I arrived at the location

of the sale, a neighborhood of wide lawns and sidewalks on both sides of the gently winding street. The name on the mailbox was Grawer.

I had not become lost on the way, so I arrived a little early. The folks from the company handling the sale were still setting some things out on tables in the yard and around the house, which was a somewhat modest and well-kept ranch—not a shack by any means, but not quite on the same level as most of the other two-story houses on the street.

A small crowd had already begun to gather, even though it was rare to see many people come out for an outdoor event in the past few weeks. The heat seemed to keep most people inside during the day. I noticed a couple of couches over next to the house, so I headed over to check them out. A couple of people were already looking at them—sitting on them and checking out the cushions, so I thought I should make a move quickly if the price was right. I could not, however, find a price on either of them and thought they had simply not been priced yet until one of the other shoppers told me the sale was to be handled as an auction.

I made a quick mental note to slap my doodler friend across the head the next time I saw him and began to head back toward my car, which I was sure had already regained its earlier interior temperature. I did not relish the idea of standing around in the heat all day, waiting for my couch to come up for bid, only to have it bid out from under me by someone else. By this time, the yard was mostly filled with tables covered with old junk—typewriters, radios with knobs missing, rusting bicycles with decaying seats, birdhouses, baskets, books, fishing

poles, kitchen items (including a mixed assortment of eating utensils) and several things I couldn't even identify.

People were looking the stuff over like it was the lost treasure of the Sierra Madre. There was something about the way they were rooting around that stuff, knowing it had been the everyday possessions and keepsakes of somebody until recently, that unsettled me. It would be a shame, I thought, to have one of these sales as a last hurrah. Let's say you live a good long time. You make lots of friends. You have a big family. You really leave your mark in a great way. At your funeral these people all get together and tell stories about you. They reminisce about how great a person you were. They talk about the time you helped them out of this jam or that. In their eyes, you were a living saint. Then, at your house, a bunch of strangers—bargain hunters who did not even know you—are poking through your things, trying to decide how much they are going to bid for your collection of corn-on-the-cob holders with all the state names on them.

I was almost back to the part of the yard that had been transformed into a parking lot when I was walking past one of the tables and saw something out of the corner of my eye. In between an old, rusted desk lamp and a green metal adding machine with several absent keys was a framed pencil portrait of a woman. She was looking back over her shoulder at me with the sun shining in her hair, and she was smiling with her mouth open, maybe even laughing. She was really beautiful, too—not like so many women today are beautiful. She was beautiful in a great way. I could tell it was something that was a part of her, not

something she put on every morning from a collection of little glass bottles and compacts.

I walked over to it and picked it up. It looked pretty old; the paper had taken on a slight yellow tint, but in general it was in good shape. It wasn't disintegrating or anything. More than anything, it just looked really out of place in the middle of all that junk. A drawing like that, I thought, should have its own auction. I decided I would stick around and try to buy it. I took out my checkbook and looked at the balance to see if I had enough to cover it, because I was sure the bidding was going to be steep. Actually, even though payday was not for another 10 days, I was willing to spend all of the \$110 I had left in my account to get it.

Maybe I was just getting used to my recently hatched artistic sensibilities, but I thought it was the most sincere piece of art I had ever seen. I wanted to take it home and put a nice new frame around it, hang it from one of my bare walls and invite everybody I knew over for a big party, just to show it off. I wanted to look at their faces and see their reactions to it, particularly the doodlers.

I stood around for the next two hours waiting for the drawing to come up for bid. It was maddening. I did not want to relax for fear it would come up without my noticing, so I stood by it until the time came. Some guy, the auctioneer, wearing a cowboy hat the size of my first car, was in charge of how items were to be grouped for bid. Larger and more valuable items, like those couches I had looked at, were bid out separately. Smaller items, like pots and pans, knick knacks and mundane items, were grouped together in bunches, according to their category, and bid on that way. Ultimately, my drawing was put

in with a box of old, beat-up picture frames. My only competition for them was a large woman in a really gaudy home-decorated T-shirt, that said “World’s Best Grandma,” who kept raising the bid on me.

I, by the way, had no idea how much I was bidding. The auctioneer spoke in a language I couldn’t even begin to understand; it all sounded like “bling, didi-daddy, bling” to me. I occasionally heard the word “dollar,” but for all I knew, I could have been bidding \$10,000 for the drawing. By the time the T-shirt lady gave up, I was out six bucks.

“Christ Jesus, I can’t believe you want to spend so much for a bunch of crappy frames,” the woman said to me after I went over and carefully picked up the box.

I considered explaining the drawing to her, but instead I pulled it out and handed the box with the rest of the frames to her. That stopped her cold. Her expression was appropriate for someone who had recently been struck by a hammer. On the way home, I stopped at an art shop to buy a new frame for the drawing. The one around it, probably the original one, was in decent shape except for some deep scratches in the lower left corner that went all the way through the finish to the wood. After I returned to my apartment complex, I carried all of my supplies with the drawing on top, careful not to damage it, into my kitchen and placed them on my beat-up, second-hand table.

Before I set about the task of taking the drawing out of the frame, I sat down and took another close look at it, as I had already done some 10 or 20 times. It was signed “J. Graver,” and above the signature were the words “Water From

the Moon.” Even to the untrained eye, the way the artist had drawn the picture said a lot about him and how he felt about the woman. I noticed his attention to certain details: the way the light shone in her hair and in her eyes and the way it highlighted the incredible, joyous expression on her face. I gathered he felt very strongly for her; I nearly fell in love with her myself, just from the picture.

The back of the frame showed how old the drawing was. The glazing points had a hint of rust around the edges, and they were the old, flat type you never see anymore. They are absolute murder to put in. I pulled them out with a pliers and carefully lifted out the mat, drawing and backing from underneath. I was being careful not to damage the drawing, so I was moving very slowly, like a demolitions expert defusing a live bomb, but the cardboard backing slid off anyway, stopping when its bottom edge hit the table. There were two sheets of it (the backing), and they had separated a little when they slid off the drawing. When they started to slide, I froze with a sharp intake of breath until they stopped, and I could see a blue sheet of paper sticking out from in between them.

I gingerly pulled the drawing and mat from under the backing and dropped them into the new frame, then I picked up the top sheet of the backing to see the folded sheet of paper underneath. I picked it up and unfolded it, not even suspecting what it could be. It was a note in a woman’s handwriting. This is what it said:

June 23, 1946

Dear John,

I guess you decided to reframe my picture. I confess, I am responsible for the scratches in the corner. I'm sorry, but I couldn't think of a better way to get this message to you. When my father died, my mother gave me a note that he wrote to me, but I was too upset at the time to appreciate it. My mother is going back to Rochester, and I don't know anyone else who I trust enough to give this to you when I want you to get it. You're such a perfectionist, I know you won't let that frame hang there for long with those ugly scratches on it. At some point, you will begin to notice things like scratches again, and that is when I want you to see this.

It's getting late, and I can hear a big storm coming. It just occurred to me that one like this has not hit the entire time we've been together. You know, I'm terribly frightened of thunderstorms, but I'm fascinated by them at the same time. No matter.

I found out what "Water From the Moon" means. My uncle was also in Japan after the war, and when he came to visit me yesterday, he noticed your wonderful drawing and commented on the inscription. John, it breaks my heart that you think this about me—about us. I know that our time together has been short and these last weeks have been very painful for both of us, but

something like what we've shared these months most people never find in a lifetime.

What you have meant to me has nothing to do with the cancer, and I would have loved you at any time in my life. I'm scared, and every day I wish that I could magically get out of this bed and be well, but if someone told me I could live a long and healthy life with no more pain, trading nothing more than having met you, I would take these past three months with you.

At night, when it's quiet, I keep thinking back to that first night, when you asked me to dance. It was such a sincere and innocent gesture, and I felt that you were as scared of me as I was of you. Since I found out about the cancer, I had been very scared about a lot of things, and I felt very angry and cheated. But in your arms on that dance floor, suddenly the world felt a little less big and frightening. That's what you have done for me John, without even trying. I'm at peace now about the future, and I owe that to you.

I only have a few regrets. I would like to have gone to see the ocean with you, and I wish we could have watched the snow falling together.

I know you will live a long and healthy life, and you will find the happiness you so richly deserve. Thank you, here at the end, for helping me find mine.

Love,

Catherine

When I was 10, I stole a candy bar from the drug store down the street from my house, because I didn't have any money and my friends pressured me into it. They went in, one by one, and they each came out with a Butterfinger or a Snickers bar. Finally, it was my turn. I walked in the door and over to the candy rack, pretending to look at some magazines along the way. I could feel the clerk's eyes on me as I walked out the door with the candy bar tucked up the sleeve of my jacket in the manner that my friends had shown me. I was uneasy the entire way home, and later, even inside my parents' house, I was convinced the police would come bursting in, led by the clerk pointing and shouting, "That's him," as I was in the act of consuming the ill-gotten gains.

Standing in my kitchen, reading that note, I felt exactly the same way, like someone was standing behind me, looking over my shoulder. These people weren't even alive, for Christ's sake. I had to wonder, if this woman, Catherine, were dying and wanted to get a message to this John Grawer character, why did she have to do it in such a cock-eyed way? Obviously, it didn't work. If she didn't want him to see it right away, she should have sent him a letter in an envelope marked, "Don't open until Christmas."

Regardless, I was not so thrilled to have the drawing on my wall anymore. It was just too . . . not for me. I thought seriously about throwing the whole package away, note and all, just like I eventually did with the candy bar, but with it poised over the trash can outside, I could not bring myself to do it. I could hear

occasional thunder booming in the distance, an unsettling forecast from more than 40 years ago, and with Catherine's thunderstorm bearing down on me, I started to think about J. Grawer and whether or not he had ever found that happiness. I went back inside and up the steps to my apartment, where I placed the drawing and the note back on the kitchen table, along with the scattered glazing points and the box and wrapping from the new frame.

I noticed amid the scattered debris on the table the receipt from the auction company. I picked it up and looked at the number on back. Hesitating a few minutes, I decided to call it. I'm pretty sure the guy who answered was the auctioneer with the hat. I was relieved he did not do that "bling didi bling" number all the time. I told him I had bought an antique item from the sale and wanted to know a little about the previous owner, such as "Is he from Minnesota?" "Was he ever married?" and "What did he die of?"

As it happens, he was not dead. His family decided to sell off his estate and move him into a nursing home after a severe stroke savaged his memory and left him unable to safely live by himself. As for marriage, the auctioneer said Mr. Grawer had no spouse at this time. Whether or not he had ever been married, he did not know. He did not know specifics about Mr. Grawer's background in the area, but he said the amount of stuff in the house seemed to indicate he had lived there for a long time. He could not tell me which nursing home he moved into, but he gave me the number of Grawer's nephew, who had been his contact for the sale.

I hung up the telephone, walked back over to the kitchen table and picked up the drawing, which was now loose from the frame, since I had not finished framing it. I had the picture in one hand and the telephone number for Grawer's nephew in the other, and I sank down in one of my lawn chairs to think about the situation. It creaked in protest, or perhaps in sympathy.

Mostly, I was thinking about how disappointed Catherine would be to know how her plan worked out. On the other hand, it seemed to me it was almost sure to fail in the first place. I could not believe it was now up to me to make it work. For that matter, what good would this information be to Mr. Grawer after all these years, anyway? He might not even remember her, for all I knew. How in hell can you bank on someone reframing a picture?

The thunder was growing louder and more frequent as that squall crept closer, and I had Catherine's lovely, doomed face looking up at me the whole while. Afraid of storms but fascinated by them at the same time.

Aren't we all?

Chapter Four

Hands

Spring, 1931

John was partially aware of the curious stares he was receiving from his neighbors working in their yards or perched on their front porches as he ran headlong down the sidewalk, his shoes slapping loudly against the rough concrete. His school books were tucked under his left arm like a football. Held together with a leather strap and a worn gray metal buckle, two of them had secured between them the precious cargo he was so anxious to get safely home. It was early spring, and already the air was beginning to grow warm.

The Johnson brothers, who had tormented him and his brother, David, since he had been in kindergarten, were on the corner up ahead, but he could see they had their backs to him, probably throwing rocks at a cat or something, and once he got past them his house was only two blocks farther. He ran faster, trying at the same time to run more quietly. John had stayed late at school and was making his way home alone; he knew that by himself he did not stand a chance against them. Jody was John's age, 12, and his brother Robert was 14. He raced nearer, and they still had their backs turned, looking down the side street at something John could not see yet. For a fleeting moment, he thought he would be able to get by them without them noticing, but then Jody turned and saw him.

"Hey, it's Grawer," he shouted. "Let's get him."

Robert turned as well, and they both rushed across the street to try to cut him off, but they were too late, reaching the gutter just as John ran past. They gave chase briefly, but he had built too much of a lead and they soon gave up.

“You sissy,” they shouted at his back. “Come back here you little bastard.”

Soon, his street came into view, and he slowed down a little. John’s family lived in a small house on a blind street, three lots from the corner. Crossing the yard, he loosened the leather strap around his books, and as he climbed up onto the warped boards of his porch, he carefully slipped the drawing he had been carrying out from between them. He had stayed after school to finish it and was anxious to show it to his mother.

He had drawn the picture from a photograph in the *Tribune* that showed a bum sitting on the curb with his head down. People walking by on the sidewalk behind him seemed to be trying not to look at him. The article that the picture went with had something to do with rising unemployment in Chicago, but John had been more concerned with the man on the sidewalk. He looked as if he had lost everything, not just his money, but any reason he had for even trying to go on. In the caption, he was identified as “one of the city’s growing population of unemployed.” No one had even bothered to find out his name.

John’s mother was in the kitchen, cradling his baby sister Elizabeth in her arms and expertly feeding her a bottle.

“Well, hello,” she said. “How was school?”

“Good,” he said, sliding the drawing onto the kitchen table in front of her.

“It was good.”

She leaned forward and carefully studied it, adjusting her grip on Elizabeth and the bottle and looking as if she were watching a play or reading a book.

“John, this is wonderful,” she said finally. “You get better with every one.”

“Thank you mom,” he said. “You can keep it.”

“I will, honey,” she said warmly.

John knew that she kept his drawings in a box in the corner of her closet. He had started drawing in first grade, and his teacher, Mrs. Winston told him he had talent far beyond his age. His mother told him so, too. When he first started bringing home drawings from school, she looked at them with a sort of amazement and she took his small hands in hers.

“My goodness, I think you have an artist’s hands,” she said.

He wasn’t sure what she meant, but he nodded in agreement. He looked at how his smooth skin contrasted with hers, which had become lined and creased from years of housework. It made her so happy when he brought his drawings home from school that over time he became as excited to show them to her as she was to see them. She told him once that she used to love to draw, but she had not done anything in years, since before she had been married.

John’s father was a traveling salesman who was away from home a great deal, and when he was there, he did not speak to his sons much. In the evenings

they would usually gather in the front room and listen to their small box radio until it was time for the boys to go to bed. Their father would slouch in the chair closest to the radio so he could occasionally fiddle with the tuning. He would keep an amber-colored drink in a small glass by his hand, sipping it slowly, then gulping the last little bit before getting up to make himself another one.

John wondered if his father would ever be happy. He was unhappy when he left on his trips, and he was unhappy when he came home. He complained perpetually from his chair about business. The companies he sold to were doing less and less and needed less and less from him. In his chair at night he seemed almost lifeless, like a deflated balloon. If his complaining got too loud or persistent, mother would stifle him effortlessly.

“Richard,” she would say sternly, leaning forward in her chair, as if disciplining a dog.

At once, he would stop and everyone would be quiet for a few anxious moments. Eventually, mother would make some matter-of-fact statement about one of her woman friends.

“Bernice said that her tomato plants are doing very well this year.”

“Really?” father would reply. “Maybe she’ll give us some.”

“I think she probably will.”

After John and David went to bed in the little room they shared, John would often lie awake, and as David breathed deeply in slumber on the other side of the room, he would listen to his parents talking low in a clipped, tense manner. Finally, mother would come down the hall and turn into their bedroom, shutting

the door behind her. Father would stay in the parlor in silence until long after John fell asleep. In the mornings, he would walk into the kitchen for breakfast, and mother and father would both be there, her at the stove and him sitting at the table, reading the newspaper. There were never any signs of whatever they had been arguing about the night before, and when father got up to leave he would give her a quick kiss on the lips before going out the door. It was the only sign of affection he ever witnessed between them.

Once, when John and some of his school friends were out combing the streets with their ball gloves looking for enough players to have a game, John spotted something glittering against the curb, even though the sun was hidden behind gray, autumn clouds. He stopped and walked over to it as the rest of the boys continued on.

“Hey Grawer, what’s up?”

“Nothing,” he shouted back. “I just thought I saw something.”

The boys were not interested and continued on as he squatted and picked up the glittering thing. It was a small, round locket on a broken chain with some swirls engraved around the edges. It sat, heavy for its size and cold against his palm. He shoved it into his pocket for later examination, then ran to catch up to his friends. That evening, alone in his room, he took out the locket and looked at it again. Inside, the metal took on a completely different quality, picking up the light from the dim desk lamp, instead of the sunlight. It seemed to become newer, its scratches less evident. On one side was a small protruding catch with a notch

in it, so a person could push on it with his fingernail. John obliged, and the locket popped neatly open.

Engraved on the left side in fancy lettering were the words, “My One True Love,” and on the right side was a woman’s photograph no larger than John’s thumb nail. She looked young and had dark hair and wore it close to her head with elegant little curls coming down from the sides to frame her face. John could tell it was an old picture and that the woman probably looked very different now, if she were even alive. He was awestruck by her beauty and stared at the picture for a long time, searching out the minute details. Eventually, he closed the locket, only to open it again a few seconds later and stare at her again. John felt sorry for whomever lost the locket, because it was so exquisite. He wondered if that was the way it was supposed to be between a man and a woman—one true love, and you’re the luckiest person on earth if you manage to find it.

He heard his father come in through the front door and grumble a hello to his mother while she cooked dinner in the kitchen.

“Hello,” she replied. “How was your day?”

No response. John heard the sample case land with a thud in the corner where his father kept it and the springs squeaking in his chair as he settled into his nightly slouch. John wondered if there was a time when his parents smiled and laughed together, if they took pictures together and if he kept her face in a locket that said, “My One True Love.” He heard the chair seat springs relax with something like a metallic sigh and his footsteps as he walked into the kitchen, got

a glass down from the pantry and the bottle he kept above the icebox. Then his footsteps returned to the parlor, and the chair once again took on his weight.

John held the locket delicately in his hands, as if he thought a harsh move might break it, and carefully snapped it shut. He placed it in a small wood box in his closet where he kept all his treasured possessions. Then he left his room and walked down the hall toward where his parents were in separate rooms.

“Hi, dad,” he said. “How was your day?”

* * *

Once, John took out a small piece of paper and a pencil from school and tried to draw the woman’s face in the locket. When he was finished, he felt he had stripped the woman of her beauty. In frustration, he crumpled the attempt and angrily threw it in the waste basket in the corner.

One Sunday in July when John was 12, his father boldly declared at the breakfast table, “Let’s go see a baseball game.”

John was somewhat taken aback, since he and David, who was only 6, had never been to see a baseball game, although for years they had pleaded shamelessly to go. It seemed the Cubs would be playing the Brooklyn Dodgers.

“My dad used to take me to games all the time when I was your age,” he explained. “You’re old enough now.”

John was beside himself with excitement as he and David prepared to go, gathering their caps and their ball gloves from the corners of their closet. Their mother stayed behind with Elizabeth, their baby sister, and smiled as they went out the front door.

“Have a nice time,” she said brightly.

The car rumbled and bumped as it went over the worn pavement. Father raised his voice to talk over the engine.

“Your old dad used to pitch, you know,” he said proudly. “I was good, too, but I had to quit in high school after I hurt my arm. Once, I struck out 12 batters in a single game. My coach told me some pro scouts had asked him about me. Then one day, I was pitching late in a game and I felt something snap, and that was it.”

John recalled for years after what it felt like the first time to see the enormous green expanse of the playing field when it opened up before them as they walked to their seats. The players were out on the grass, stretching out their legs and casually throwing balls back and forth. After they found their section, their father gave them their tickets to hold, and during the game he bought them each a hot dog and a Coke and some peanuts from the vendors that strolled around the stands. Previously, he had only heard the Cubs and the White Sox on the radio, but his imagination could not measure up to reality. The players were larger than life size, and they ran and threw the ball impossibly fast.

In the third inning, a foul ball sailed high over their heads and landed in the crowd 20 rows behind them. None the less, as the ball descended John's father and the men around them all stood up and reached up their bare hands as the ball descended in a futile attempt to catch the unattainable prize. The Cubs won the game in the ninth inning on a hit that rolled fatally between the scrambling Dodger outfielders all the way to the ivy wall as two runners crossed the plate.

After the game, their father took them to the park near their neighborhood, where John and David played on the swings while he watched quietly on a bench in his shirtsleeves with his tie loosened and his arm resting on the back. They expected him to tell them it was time to go, but he never did. Eventually, they came to him on their own, sensing that they should not abuse the rare privilege they were being granted. They climbed into the car once more, but instead of driving them home, he took them to the ice cream shop down the street from their house and bought them each a cone and sat with them at the small, round table while they happily tried to keep the melting ice cream from running down the sides to their fingers.

“Okay, boys,” he said finally when they finished. “I guess it’s time to go home.”

Their mother asked what had taken so long as they walked in the door, but father quietly explained about the park and the ice cream shop. They waited anxiously to see how it would be received, but she seemed to take the story in stride. Emboldened, the boys excitedly told her all about the game as they gathered around the dinner table and climbed into their seats, embellishing the details into mythic proportion.

“Can we go again sometime?” John said, carried away with the excitement of the tale.

John’s father quickly looked over at him, his face expressionless, and John was worried he had overstepped his bounds and sounded ungrateful.

“Sure,” he said, finally, smiling slightly.

The boys were so tired, they went to bed almost right after dinner, even though it was summer and they had no school the next day, and for once, the walls of their room were still and quiet.

John awoke in the middle of the night; he was not sure what time. He thought he had heard a sound in the hallway—a floorboard creaking, perhaps. He heard it again, closer this time, and the door to his room began to open. He was frightened at first, but silhouetted in the little light from the hallway was his father's unmistakable frame. He closed his eyes, pretending to be asleep, because he knew his father would be angry if he were still awake at such a late hour.

John could feel him approach his bed and stop next to it. After a pause, he could hear the rustling of his clothes as his father bent over and kissed him on the forehead. His lips were surrounded by a scratchy, rough day's growth of whiskers. Next he was crossing to David's side of the room. John wondered if he was awake, too, but he doubted it. Throughout the whole episode, he could hear the air whistling loudly in and out of David's nose. John opened one eye and silently turned his head to see his father down on one knee by David's bed. After he got back up, he left the room, turning and taking yet another look at the two of them before quietly pulling the door closed and heading furtively down the hallway toward the kitchen. John could tell nothing further after that, although some time later, under the drone of the crickets and other night noises, he thought he heard the sound of an engine starting.

Wide awake, he laid there for quite some time. He sat up in bed and looked out the open window. A small wind met his face and the dim starlight and

the fireflies that crisscrossed the yard made the outside look enchanted. The breeze was playing with his hair, and he could hear a dog barking frantically and solitarily a few blocks away. In the dimness of the yard, everything looked like a ghost of its daytime self: his old, battered bicycle lying on its side by the garage, David's toy fire truck, the old box elder tree with its column of 2-by-4 rungs nailed to the side and the fence with the broken pickets on one end that his father had been promising to fix for months.

He laid back down and tried to fall asleep. He thought about the kiss from his father and wondered if it was something he did every night that he had simply slept through every other time. Musing on this, he eventually drifted off.

The next morning, he walked into the kitchen, where his mother was sitting at the table by herself with a scrap of paper in her hand. She looked up at him suddenly, as if he had surprised her. She had a pained expression on her face, like David did any time he hurt himself and was trying to keep from crying because men aren't supposed to cry.

"What is it, mother?" he said, walking toward her.

She said nothing but folded the paper in half and put her arms around him, squeezing him tightly for a long time. Eventually, she released him and made him a bowl of cereal as, confused, he took a seat at the table. When David came in, she fixed his breakfast, too, and fed Elizabeth from a bottle after she was finished. They went about their normal routine that day and into the evening. She did not explain her behavior from that morning in the kitchen until two days later, and they never saw John's father again.

After she told them he had gone, John hurried to his room and recovered from the clutter on his dresser his ticket to the Cubs game from that Sunday afternoon and placed it in the wood box in his closet with the locket and all the other things he would keep for a long, long time.

* * *

John's hands worked quickly and deftly, pulling out new papers one by one from his bag and tossing them underhanded on the yards as his bicycle wheels made a rhythmic sound on the sidewalk. The bicycle was new, a gift from his grandfather, who was helping the family pay for the things it needed. John's mother had taken on two jobs, one at the laundry on the corner and one typing at home in the evenings. John took the money from the paper route and gave most of it to her, keeping a little so he and David could go to the movies on Sunday and watch Humphrey Bogart, Boris Karloff, the Marx Brothers and Tarzan. They would sit with a box of popcorn that they shared and get lost in the world of the films, pretending they were the heroes who always beat the villains. Then, afterwards, they would step back out into the unforgiving sun and walk slowly back home.

In the winter, when she was two years old, Elizabeth became sick with a fever that came on in the middle of the night. Frantically, mother called Dr. Stankowicz past 2 a.m. after she tried to bring the fever down with wet wash cloths on her face and forehead. He arrived not long afterward, looking like he always did, day or night, in his black overcoat and narrow-brimmed hat, carrying his black bag that somehow held everything he ever needed. John wondered if he

ever slept and remembered thinking that with his presence everything would be alright.

He listened to her chest, looked in her throat while holding her tongue down with a flat wood stick and held her eyes all the way open one at a time. He turned and confidently stated she had some sort of infection and that the following day he would get some medicine for her. In the mean time, he said, she was to stay in bed and they were to continue with the cold wash cloths. He told them not to worry, then he disappeared into the cold, windy January night.

Elizabeth died before the sun came up the next morning. John stood by his mother's side at her funeral and tightly held her hand as Elizabeth's tiny casket was lowered into the ground. He did not cry, because he wanted to be strong for his mother, and neither did she.

Once, she did cry in front of the boys, on a night four days after Elizabeth died, when she forgot herself and prepared four plates of food, the fourth with smaller portions that were cut up already. With the plate already on the table, she realized her mistake and did not know what to do next as John and his brother looked at the plate, then at her. Silently, she turned to the sink and leaned forward against it with one hand over her eyes and her shoulders quaking as her sobs searched for a voice.

John jumped to his feet and threw his arms around her from behind, as if trying to hold her still.

"It's alright momma, it's alright," he said, crying himself.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she said repeatedly, her voice broken by her tears.
“I’m so, so sorry.”

* * *

The following year, at the far edge of 16, John exchanged his paper route for a job selling shoes in the evenings at a department store in the city. John had little time to draw between work and school and occasionally sketched idly during his breaks at work.

“That’s real good,” his manager, Mr. Feeney said, looking over John’s shoulder while he did a simple drawing from a picture in a magazine. “I should tell the guys in advertising about you.”

John did not know what to say. He felt as if Mr. Feeney had pulled a shiny gold coin from his pocket and started flipping it in the air. To be paid to draw would have been for John the same as a 4-year-old being paid to eat ice cream.

“Oh, Mr. Feeney,” John started, not sure if he were serious. “You don’t have to do that.”

“No, I’m gonna do it,” he insisted. “I’m gonna do it.”

Two weeks passed after the incident in the lunch room and John, who had been hopeful at first, passed Mr. Feeney’s comments off as inconsequential banter. Then, one evening while sizing the foot of a gentleman who had been wearing the same pair of socks for much too long, John saw Mr. Feeney motioning urgently for him to come see him in his office.

“Uh, Jimmy,” John said, calling to one of the other salesmen, “can you take over here? Mr. Feeney wants to see me.”

“Really,” Jimmy said, walking over. “I hope its nothing serious. I heard he was pretty agitated about this month’s sales figures.”

John felt a burst of nervous sweat leap from his pores. His mother had become accustomed to his income, and he did not want to lose it. Once he was inside, Mr. Feeney excitedly urged him to sit down. The big man looked excited much of the time, actually, mostly because he was almost always sweating profusely, even when it was cool outside.

“I told you I was going to do it, and I did it,” Mr. Feeney said with a big grin on his face.

There was another man in the room already, sitting quietly and apparently studying John through pair of thick, wire-rimmed glasses perched on his slim, hawkish nose. The man was built like a coat rack—rigid, severe and angular.

“I told Mr. Glaser about your drawing,” Mr. Feeney said. “He’s from the advertising department.”

After the overt visual inspection, Mr. Glaser appeared unimpressed with John, but then John thought anyone would look subdued next to Mr. Feeney’s manic mannerisms.

“I apologize for the short notice,” Mr. Glaser said in a poisonously lethargic deadpan voice. “Mr. Feeney told me he is quite impressed with your artistic ability, and he told me I would be making a mistake if I did not come down here at 8 p.m. in the blessed evening to take a look at what you can do. Do you, perchance, have anything here in the store that you have drawn?”

Mr. Glaser acted as if he were only there as a favor to Mr. Feeney and that he would leave without a word the moment he felt he had met even the barest resemblance of Mr. Feeney's request.

"No, I'm sorry," John said, frantically searching for an alternative offer to keep Mr. Glaser interested.

Mr. Feeney finally spoke up.

"Shoot, why don't you have him draw something now?"

Mr. Glaser sighed dramatically, as if someone had actually suggested he stand on one foot and flap his arms like a giant penguin. He glanced at John, as if to see if he were interested.

"Well, certainly," John said, frisking himself for a pencil. "What did you have in mind?"

Mr. Glaser produced a plain, yellow pencil with a number 2 lead from his coat pocket, and Mr. Feeney handed him a legal pad from his desk with half the pages peeled around to the back and curled at the edges from his sweaty paws. Mr. Glaser glanced around the room, looking at the various office gimcracks without locking in on anything.

"Why don't you draw something from memory?" he suggested finally.

John thought for a moment, then sat down at Mr. Feeney's desk and started drawing the woman's face from his locket. About 15 minutes into the job, he felt he was doing terribly. The pencil was too dull, and the lead was too hard, and paper was the wrong texture for drawing. Beyond that, John's years of practice since his first attempt at the drawing had not, as far as he was concerned,

helped him in the most critical area. Her beauty and the love that showed so plainly in the little photograph were miles away from his paper. It was as if he were looking at her through a sheet of glass.

“That’s enough,” Mr. Glaser said in that same empty tone.

John’s heart fell.

“You’re obviously talented,” he continued. “I will talk to the art director about getting you an interview. In the mean time, can you assemble a more formal representation of your work?”

That last was said as if to imply he should have had a portfolio with him in the first place.

“I certainly can, sir,” John said, rising and shaking Mr. Glaser’s hand and returning the pencil to him.

Mr. Feeney, grinning uncontrollably, also shook Mr. Glaser’s hand very vigorously, as if trying to shake the last bit of catsup out of the bottle. Mr. Glaser indiscreetly wiped the palm of his hand on the breast of his suit coat before putting on his hat.

“Gentlemen,” he said, even smiling a little. “A good evening to you.”

After the door shut, John stood there mutely in disbelief until Mr. Feeney clasped one of those big, wet mitts around his shoulder.

“Way to go, kid,” he said. “Way to go.”

A little more than three weeks later, John walked into the quiet art room of the advertising department early in the morning of his first day. He was the first person there, and the lights were still dim, although he could see the neat rows of

drawing tables and could smell the unmistakable aroma of creativity that rose from the pastels, the oil and acrylic paints, the thinners and the primers. A stiff new pair of shoes squeaked on his feet—a gift from Mr. Feeney.

He closed his eyes and tried to remember his father's face, but the memory was as elusive as the man had been. It didn't matter.

"You can stay away now, for all I care," he thought. "We don't need you anymore."

* * *

The audience was laughing on cue as Abbott and Costello went about their antics. It was the first movie in a double feature. John, David and their mother were taking in the film, as had become their Sunday custom. It felt good to be together, laughing at a common joke. They would exchange glances at the key moments as they broke into uncontrollable chuckling.

"Did you get that one? Of course you did."

In the middle of one of the gags, the screen suddenly went blank, and with some of the audience still giggling, a voice came over the loudspeaker.

"We've received word that the Japanese have attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. There is no word yet on damage or whether or not anyone has been hurt."

There might have been another sentence in the message, but John did not hear it. The movie came back on, jumping back a few seconds from where it had stopped before, but no one was laughing anymore. There was a soft murmur among the crowd, and a few people got up to leave, John's family among them.

Out in the white glare of day, everything looked the same as it had when they went in, from the intermittent Sunday traffic to the Christmas decorations in the store windows.

The people on the sidewalk looked anxious as they walked along uncertainly. Periodically, a young boy would run, almost out of control, down the concrete expanse toward some unknown destination. What could have happened. Surely, our boys were able to turn them back.

Throughout the day and all that night, the details filtered in through the speaker grate of the radio in the parlor, each one more horrifying than the one before. More than 5,000 casualties, 2,000 dead, the fleet and airfields in flaming ruins. They sat up much of the rest of the night, even after the radio stations signed off, and looked at each other, speaking only occasionally. The following day, the lines at the military recruiting stations downtown went out into the street as young men hurried to sign up.

John nearly joined them but decided he could not leave his mother to take care of herself and David alone, so he returned to his table at the department store and drew many more fine pictures for the upcoming catalog. He was tempted to enlist several more times as the first six months of the war produced only defeat and disappointment for the allies and more and more of his friends rushed off to join the fighting. In the spring of 1943, David, who had matured into quite an athlete, was graduating from high school with a full college scholarship on the table for baseball and the country firmly entrenched in fighting in the Pacific and

Europe, and he announced to John and his mother that he intended to enlist and fight in the war.

Mother said nothing, but John could see the tears gathering to roll down her cheeks, undoubtedly at the thought of losing her youngest again. John argued with him.

“David, what about your scholarship? You can’t just throw it away.”

“I don’t care about the damned scholarship,” he yelled, standing up from his seat at the table and making John and his mother flinch. “My friends are going. I can’t let them go off and fight while I stay here and play baseball.”

The following morning, John got up early and caught a bus downtown to the Marine recruiting station, where he volunteered for service. His hands shaking, he filled out an endless series of forms for a gaunt, pale woman with stark, black-rimmed eyeglasses. Gray clouds were hanging in the sky, and thunder was quietly rumbling. John stepped back out onto the street and headed for the bus stop, hurrying because he had forgotten his umbrella and was not sure how much time he had before the storm hit. Arriving home, John climbed the front porch steps and pulled open the screen door; David and his mother were at the table eating breakfast. Between them was a newspaper with the headline, “US Troops Move in on Solomon Islands.”

“Where have you been?” Mother said, nervously eyeing the papers in his hands.

“David,” John said, approaching the table, “you can’t sign up to fight in the war.”

“Yes I can,” he said, slamming his spoon down on the table. “We’ve been through this.”

“No,” John said quietly, dropping the papers on the table in front of him. “You can’t. You’re going to have to stay here with mom. I’m sorry.”

John knew that with the war effort on and with so many men fighting overseas, David would be able to find work and support himself and their mother. He would miss out on his scholarship, but it was the lesser of two evils.

No one said anything, and the newspaper headline clattered for everyone’s attention. David would not meet John’s gaze, and their mother swallowed hard. Finally, she got up from her chair and wordlessly took his hands in hers, and he could not help but notice how the lines on her skin stood out against the relative smoothness of his. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held him tightly, and then, after a somewhat definitive clap of thunder, the first drops of that spring rainstorm began to hit the ground.

Chapter Five

Crayons, Pastels and a Swing for the Fences

For all of its rumbling and swaggering, the storm did not hit full blast until later that evening. The sky was still clear overhead as the sun went down. I pulled one of my lawn chairs onto the terrace and, thus illustrating its versatility for outdoor *and* indoor use, sat down, stretched out my legs and watched the line of thunderheads that had been making all the noise strolling in from my left. As they gradually obliterated the twilight, I noticed a remarkable thing—a nearly full moon was coming up over the buildings on the other horizon.

That image of the stormy sky juxtaposed with the rising moon against the dusky sky was so striking that I actually wished for a moment I knew someone well enough to call and say, “Take a look outside. You’ve got to see this.” The moonrise by itself was quite impressive, but the wall of clouds it was squaring off against made it a once-in-a-lifetime event. I noticed a guy walking across the courtyard toward one of the ground floor apartments with a can of beer in his hand. I surmised that the scene would take anyone’s breath away, so I stood up and gathered myself to call to him.

“Isn’t that amazing?” I yelled, startling him as I leaned over the rusty wrought iron railing and pointed vaguely at the sky. In retrospect, I probably should have been more specific. He looked up, blankly, scratching his forehead with his free hand.

“Yeah,” he said after a pause, staring broadly at the sky. “Looks like it’s finally going to rain.”

He continued walking, and I let it pass, resisting the urge to say, “No, you idiot. The moon and the clouds. Are you blind?”

I decided I was not going to let my apparent solitude in the matter destroy my enjoyment of the scene, so I settled back into my chair and watched it until the clouds struck the moon head on and engulfed it. I imagined them boiling like a bucket of water after a white-hot piece of metal has been plunged into it, but I could see no evidence of such interaction. The clouds continued past the moon, stretching to the far horizon, and in the process it grew very dark and the temperature dropped several degrees. There was still no rain, however, and the air became quite still. I could hear the same rumbling as before, and parts of the clouds would light up from time to time like a flash bulb under a bed sheet.

Suddenly, with absolutely no warning, a bolt of lightning hit so close to me that I almost wet my pants. With the air still crackling with electricity, the wind picked up, pushing me backwards and filling the world with millions of hard, tiny projectiles. The first heavy drops started to loudly hit the deck of the terrace like miniature bombs, and I decided it would be best to watch the rest of the show from inside. I plunged into my kitchen, dragging my lawn chair with me and banging it against the door frame in my haste as the rain started to slam into my windows. I yanked the door shut and ran into my bedroom to pull the window closed, then headed back to the kitchen. Another 20 seconds went by, and the lightning was pummeling the ground from every direction and so much water was

coming down that it was gushing overwhelmingly against the storm sewer opening in the corner of the courtyard. I couldn't even see through the rain to the windows on the other side of the complex. I might as well have been looking through the murky water of a neglected aquarium.

The thunder was incredibly loud. If there had been someone for me to talk to, I'm not sure a conversation would have even been possible over it. There were 10 or 20 lightning strikes every second, and the really close ones were so bright they tricked the electronic eyes on the lights around the courtyard into thinking it was day so they would go off all at once, then slowly flicker back to life until the next time.

The really smart people were cowering in their bathrooms, but I stayed in the kitchen for a good 45 minutes watching that show until it started to die out. Finally, the lightning was showing someone else the good time, although I could still see it blasting away off to the east. The rain tapered off to an insignificant drizzle, then to nothing. I went to bed, confident that the drought was finally over and that all the dirt, rust spots and ugliness had been stripped from the sidewalks by the downpour. The next morning, however, every mark and blemish was still there, except for a rough chalk mural that had grown along the walk next to the complex throughout the duration of the drought, courtesy of a group of bored neighborhood kids on summer break from school.

One section of the drawing, which had been done with crayon, presumably when the chalk ran out, remained. It was the word, "Wonderful," written very stylishly in multi-colored 14-inch letters with beams coming from it, the likes of

which are most often drawn coming from the sun. It looked kind of strange, out of context like that with the rest of the mural gone, and though I had walked past it every day for more than two weeks, I could not remember how it fit into the rest of the drawing.

As for John Grawer, Catherine, the portrait and the note, I had no idea what to do, so I elected to do nothing for the time being, depositing the whole package in one of my empty kitchen drawers. That was how I dealt with most difficult decisions. Except for that, I followed my typical Sunday morning routine, eating a couple of bowls of cold cereal and listening to the only radio station on the band that played music on Sunday mornings. The rest of the dial was filled with church services or real estate tips shows. I glanced at the calendar hanging on the inside of my pantry door while I was returning my cereal box to the shelf when I noticed the word "PICNIC" staring out at me from the Sunday square.

My family holds a big picnic at one of the suburban parks every summer. All my aunts and uncles gather under a pavilion and compare notes on the various accomplishments of their children (something I'm sure my parents don't look forward to) while eating pork steaks and potato salad on flimsy paper plates.

I hated going. I always have. My cousins are all girls, and ever since we were kids I was never invited to play with them, not that I wanted to. As we matured into semi-adulthood, nothing changed. They would sit at their picnic table, casually discussing across the peeling paint their romances of high school and college. This exclusion left me vulnerable to the probes of selected adult relatives who were not locked in a conversation of their own. They all conducted

roughly the same interrogation—how was I doing at this or that? This became increasingly difficult to take as I got older and it was harder to figure out what exactly I was doing in the first place.

My mother had called two weeks earlier to remind me about the picnic; that's when I wrote it on the calendar. I told myself at the time that I would have to figure out a way to get out of it, but by the morning of the event I had nothing. I decided that I would go, but as soon as an opportunity presented itself I would slip away.

I arrived at the park a little early, thinking it would be easier to make a premature exit that way. I was dismayed to see the white Lincoln my parents drove pulling into the parking lot right in front of me from the other direction. My mother waved enthusiastically at me as the front end of their car swung past mine. Since I left the house, I got the sense every time I spoke to my parents that they were secretly trying to figure out whether or not I had quit my job and, ultimately, if I would be elbowing my way back into their home.

I got out of my car first and dutifully waited for them to extract themselves from their plush bucket seats before heading over to the pavilion. My father completed the process first and walked over to me, leaving my mother to corral an armful of plates, plastic utensils and other picnic paraphernalia by herself. He extended his hand and shook mine as he approached. Before he even let go, he asked the question.

“So, how's everything at Northstar?”

“It's fine,” I said. “It's going well.”

I elected to leave out the more pointed observations about my co-workers, most of which were more shallow than a child's inflatable wading pool. This exchange gave my mother time to get to me.

"So, how is everything at your new job," she said, her giddy enthusiasm breaking my heart.

"It beats driving a cash register," I said.

They both laughed, I suppose satisfied that it did not appear I was planning on leaving another job.

"Who knows?" my father said. "You might find yourself a nice little niche there. Something you can build a career on."

"Who knows?" I echoed with a smile.

With that, we headed toward the pavilion, where a small smattering of relatives had already begun staking out territory among the uneven wood tabletops. We approached my uncle Ken, an astonishingly practical man who once told me that if I wanted to make any real money, there were only two industries I should consider pursuing—computers and electronics.

"Hey, Ken," my father said, extending his hand as he neared him. "How the hell are you doing?"

"Great," Ken responded, grinning like a gambler with a whole extra deck up his sleeve. "Did you hear Jenny's been accepted to Northwestern for graduate school?"

He said "Northwestern" as if he were firing a Howitzer.

“No, I didn’t,” Dad replied, searching his own pockets in vain for an extra card or two. “You know, Dennis here is working as an artist now for NorthStar Greetings.”

He tried to say “NorthStar Greetings” as if he were firing back a Howitzer of his own, but it came out more like a cap gun. It was the equivalent of a weak tennis serve that begged to be slammed back across the net with a vicious forehand. Ken obliged.

“Northstar? I’ve never heard of it.”

“Well, they’re a small, but upscale operation,” Dad said.

“Yeah, well. I guess you have to start somewhere.”

Possibly for the first time, I had a sense of what my parents went through regularly with this family. I felt bad for my father, having to deal with this bully of an older brother with nothing but me to defend himself with.

“So, uncle Ken,” I said, prying my way into the silence. “I guess if Jenny’s going to Northwestern she got all those incompletes from last semester figured out.”

The look on Ken’s face at that moment as he tried to figure out what to say was more satisfying than the bloody nose I had originally envisioned. I had always despised Jenny, anyway, and I had overheard her talking to the female cousins about her academic woes the previous Christmas.

“Well,” he said slowly. “She’s still got some things to work out with some of her professors. You know how it is. How do they expect you to be interested in the useless subjects—history, literature? You know.”

“Oh, of course,” I said. “I’m sure she won’t have to deal with anything like that in grad school.”

“Absolutely,” Ken chimed enthusiastically, a big, stupid, unknowing grin on his face. There was a kind of awkward silence as we all stood there, him bobbing his stupid, smiling skull up and down like one of those silly dashboard dogs with the swiveling heads. I was hoping the moment would give him enough time to figure out what a moron he was, but I doubted he would.

“Well,” he said, beginning to back toward his clan’s corner of the pavilion, “it’s been good talking to you guys. Good luck at NorthStar, Dennis.”

I turned to my parents, who were exchanging befuddled looks.

“I wonder if the pork steaks are ready,” I said, turning and heading off toward the smoking barbecue pits.

I was still planning on sneaking out of the picnic early, but the meat wasn’t close to being done and most of the side dishes had not arrived. I continued my stroll past the barbecue pit, which was being manned by a great uncle of mine whose name I could not remember. He waved a spatula at me and gave a hearty “Halloo.” I waved back and continued on my way away from the gathering collection of my relatives and toward the vacant ball fields, where you could say I had staged the first of my many big disappointments.

In third grade, I played right field for my school’s little league team and had a less than stellar season, striking out frequently and going hitless for the year. The last game of the season, however, I had the chance to redeem myself, coming to bat with two out and the bases loaded in the bottom of the ninth with

my team down by one run. My coach called me over from the on-deck circle and told me very emphatically to take the first pitch.

“The pressure’s on him,” he said. “Make him throw a strike. Besides, you haven’t exactly been slaughtering the ball. Take, take, take, take, take, take, take.”

I nodded, certainly intending to do as I’d been told, but when that first pitch came at me I couldn’t help myself and I cut loose with a mighty hack. To this day, I can still remember the way it felt when the bat hit the ball. It was like it wasn’t even there. The rest is kind of blurry. I could see the ball flying away from me, as if in slow motion. The outfielders were scrambling in vain to catch up with it before it got down and skipped past them.

In the seats, my parents had been listening to their peers as I came to the plate, “There’s that Dearborne kid. He never gets on.” Then the blast came, and they and the rest of the bleachers erupted with a boisterous cheer as the base runners charged toward home and I ran the wrong way. I’m not sure if I was called out for running outside of the basepath or if they got the ball into first before I got there. Regardless, it was the third out and the end of the game.

I don’t remember them, but I’m sure jeers were raining down on me from the stands and from my fellow players. I gathered up my glove and walked back to the car, where I didn’t have to wait long for my parents. They didn’t talk to me on the way home. It was probably better that way. They would have only made it worse. I didn’t play the following year or ever again.

Standing back on the field as an adult, or something that passed as an adult, I was surprised at how small it looked. Back then, it seemed immense. I

wondered if, had that one moment gone differently, things might have been better for me and my father would have some real artillery to use against uncle Ken. Maybe I would have been involved in more activities. I would have been less hesitant to be around certain groups of people and I would have gotten into a track that might have led somewhere.

Glancing over toward the pavilion to make sure no one was looking, I walked over to the plate and struck a batting stance, waving my imaginary stick across the plate and sending a withering gaze out to the mound. I took the first pitch—strike one. Another—strike two. I stepped out. You have to try to knock the pitcher out of his rhythm in 0-and-2 situations. I stepped back in and readied myself. A third strike zipped across the plate, and the bat never left my shoulder.

On that fateful day in the summer between third and fourth grade, with the sun setting behind me and the cicadas greeting the dusk with their nightly drone, I walked away from that field, feeling ridiculous in my baseball uniform, and decided that almost succeeding was worse in the end than failing outright, and that ill-fated swing for the fences represented the last time I tried to do anything extraordinary.

* * *

When I got back to the pavilion, many more relatives had arrived, including the sorority of my cousins, who had already gathered at one of the far tables for their exclusive discussion. A couple of them had spouses now, who were quietly sitting at the table, leaning back slightly with their legs crossed and their hands folded dutifully on one knee.

I gathered up a plate of food and headed toward one of the empty tables. My parents were still standing, talking with some distant cousin I didn't recognize. I was almost settled in when I saw Jenny furtively waving me over to their table, as if she were summoning a tourist to buy a hot watch on a street corner. This had never happened before, and I was not sure what to make of it, so I cautiously headed in that direction, half expecting them all to shout, "Nyah, nyah, nyah, nyah" upon my arrival and laugh hysterically afterwards.

"Dennis, how are you doing?" Jenny said in the manner in which I imagined she might greet an old friend whom she previously thought had died.

"I'm good," I said, setting my plate down on the warped wood tabletop. "How are you; I hear you're going to Northwestern."

"Yeah, I'm excited," she said without elaboration. "Dad told me you're working as an artist for some greeting card company."

I sensed this was headed somewhere, but I couldn't ferret it out, so I went along.

"Right. NorthStar Greetings. Although I wouldn't say I'm an . . ."

"Listen. We were just talking about Nancy's husband Rich's cousin and how neat it would be to set her up with someone. She's *really* into art, and when I heard about your new job, I thought, 'What a perfect fit.' So, what do you think?"

"Well, I . . ."

I was going to say, "I have lawn chairs in my living room," but I managed to stop myself. So many things can go horribly with a blind date, but, on the other hand, I hadn't exactly been fending off women with a stick, lately.

“Sure, I’m game.”

I gave Jenny my number, and she assured me she would have Nancy’s husband Rich’s cousin (Heather was her name) call me. Several days went by with nothing, and I forgot about the whole thing. I figured, “Easy come, easy go.” During that period, however, I did have my second “artistic” experience in as many weeks. At work, the other illustrators and I have very little opportunity to interpret much of anything. Generally, the writer or freelancer has very well-defined instructions, and sometimes even a rough sketch, for the artwork for a given card. The illustrator must simply be able to follow the directions.

I had just become caught up on my assignments when I got one that bucked the trend. The company had begun to experiment with a line of cards for “alternative occasions,” namely divorces and break-ups. Edward came to me with one of these, probably because I had nothing in my box already. He walked over to my table and leaned his elbows on the edge. With that bow-legged stance, he still looked like a cowboy caricature, and it appeared that he was getting ready to order a whisky from me.

“Could you do a pastel that says, ‘Nothing lasts forever?’” he said. He didn’t have a work order or any of the other trappings that typically come with an assignment.

“Okay,” I replied. “What should it be a pastel of?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “We’re just looking for some concepts right now. Use your imagination.”

After he left, I tried to do just that, but all I could think of was the time I left a carton of cottage cheese in my refrigerator two weeks past the expiration date. My co-workers were beginning to look suspiciously in my direction; they had heard Edward's directive, and I had not even pulled out a piece of paper. I thought about going to Edward and telling him I couldn't think of anything and that he should give it to someone else. They would have appreciated that, I'm sure. It would have been a nice verification of the artistic pecking order in the office. Behind me, I could have sworn I heard cicadas droning.

I pulled out a crisp, new piece of paper and unboxed my pastels. I glanced around the room, looking for inspiration. Over by the front entrance, on the receptionist's desk, was a vase packed with new, red roses. She was a quiet young lady who was working her way through college, I think, and I remembered her saying she had just started a new relationship, which was, apparently, in the "flowers delivered to work" phase. I had an idea.

When I was a sophomore in college there was this girl who I sort of admired from a distance but did not have the courage to talk to. Her name was Jessica, and she was an English major, but we had a class together—speech or some damn thing. One day, after class, we wound up sitting on the same bench in the commons and somehow just started talking about the class, and I thought we were hitting it off really well.

After almost 30 minutes, she said, "Well, I've got to run, but I'll see you Wednesday," as if she simply could not wait to see me again.

The following day, much to my surprise, a delivery guy shows up at my dorm with a vase full of red roses. They have a card from her that says she likes me and wants to go out with me. I am, of course, beside myself. The following day, I dress a little nicer for class and make sure my hair is combed and everything.

“Well, don’t you look nice?” she says as she walks into the classroom.

I’m there early, because I am so anxious. I’m nervous; you know, my heart pounding and my throat dry and all that, and eventually, when she doesn’t say anything, I decide to mention the flowers and her proposal.

Of course, she doesn’t know what the hell I’m talking about, because a couple of my asshole friends, who I had told about her, sent me the roses as a joke.

Once she figured out what had happened, she got this heartbroken look on her face, as if she had just witnessed a puppy being run over by a tractor trailer truck, and she probably would have gone out with me out of pity if she hadn’t had a boyfriend already.

I kept the flowers, though. I added water to them and tried to keep them alive as long as I could, but eventually they turned a deep red color and started to unfold and wither. I took the bad ones out, one by one, until finally there was only one left. At my drawing table that day, I could remember precisely what it looked like.

I drew the vase on the receptionist’s desk, empty except for about three inches of cloudy water in the bottom and one remaining rose that leaned

haphazardly against the rim, its head beginning to bow, no longer bright red, but a deep mauve. Scattered about the base of the vase were a few of the rose's loose petals and some wisps of baby's breath.

I finished it by the end of the day. I looked at it and could hardly believe it came from my hands. Looking at it made me want to cry, actually. Instead of tagging it and dropping it in the box like normal, I walked it over to Edward's desk and handed it to him. For the first time since I'd been there, I wanted to see what he thought of something I had done.

"Hey, not bad," he said, studying the drawing at arm's length. "Nice job."

"Thanks," I said, turning around quickly and hoping he did not ask me to do another one.

* * *

The call came in the evening, about three weeks after the picnic. I had just exercised a bulging trash bag from the kitchen garbage can and was struggling with it down the hall of my building toward the exit by the dumpster when I heard the phone ring back in my apartment. I decided it could not be important enough to go back and continued on. I thought it was more than likely my mom or dad calling to see if I had quit my job or something. I could still hear it as I made my way down the hall. It rang a third, fourth and fifth time. Finally, I broke down and rushed back down the hall, the trash bag banging against my leg as I went.

I had not locked the door and was able to go right in. I set the bag down against the wall by the pantry and picked up the phone, probably on the ninth or tenth ring. I was out of breath as I said, "Hello."

“Hello, is this Dennis?” said a female voice.

“Yes, that’s me,” I still was not thinking about my exchange with Jenny at the picnic.

“This is Heather Reynolds,” she said. “Your cousin gave me your number.”

“Oh, right.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I would have called earlier, but I was trying to work up the nerve. I’ve never gone out with a real artist before.”

“Well, that’s okay,” I said. “I should tell you, though. I’m not really what you’d call . . .”

“I hope you’re still interested,” she said, interrupting me. “I mean, I’ve never been a fan of blind dates, but I’m willing to give it a try if you are.”

We set a date for dinner the coming Friday night. I went to pick her up at her apartment, which was in a nicer building than mine. She worked in advertising sales for a local rock and roll radio station. I had only been on a couple of blind dates before that one, and they were both, without going into too many details, unqualified disasters. For me, the most critical moment in a blind date is at the first face-to-face contact. Everyone has an image of what his or her ideal mate looks like, and the date is judged in those first few seconds according to how much he or she resembles that person. I think it is safest to proceed with the assumption the date will be on the homely side. Then, if she turns out to be, you will not be disappointed.

When Heather's door opened (she had the advantage of a few seconds, having seen me through the peep hole) I think I actually said, "Wow," involuntarily. She was gorgeous to the extent that the image of my ideal mate immediately skittered off into the back of my mind because it couldn't measure up. Her medium-length blonde hair was pulled back away from her face, and she had these incredibly expressive eyes. Ironically, she looked really nervous (in a way that was kind of cute), but she smiled and said, "Hello," and we were off.

The dinner conversation was sort of slow in starting, but it wasn't bad. She mainly asked me about my work. I explained what I do, and I must have made it sound much more exciting than it really is, because she acted as if she were talking to a movie star.

"I think that's wonderful," she said. "I can't draw at all, and I really admire people who can."

"You might surprise yourself," I told her. "It's really not as difficult as it seems once you know a few things."

"You're just being modest," she said.

I didn't start counting until it was too late to get an accurate reading, but I'm estimating she used those words ("You're just being modest") 300 or 400 times during the course of the evening. I didn't hold it against her. She seemed very nice. We talked a while after dinner, and I drove her home. I felt a little self-conscious about the age and condition of my car, but she didn't seem to mind. We arrived at her place, and she asked the question.

"Would you like to come in for some coffee?"

“Sure,” I said, shutting off the engine.

One is never positive whether or not the coffee invitation actually means coffee or something else. Once again, I think it is safest to err on the side of discretion and take it at face value. Her apartment was very nicely, if not modestly, furnished, and there were prints of paintings by Renoir, van Gogh and numerous others all over the place.

“Why don’t you have a seat on the couch and I’ll be right with you,” she said, heading off into the kitchen. It appeared “coffee” meant coffee after all in this case.

“Alright,” I said, sitting down. “I like your place.”

“Thank you very much,” she called back over the loud hum of the microwave.

A couple minutes later, she was walking back into the room with a cup in each hand, glancing nervously from one to the other and back, as if watching for potential spills. She set them down on the table in front of the couch and sat next to me. I picked up the cup closest to me and blew on it. I could tell it was still too hot to drink, so I carefully put it back down. She did not touch hers, possibly because she knew already that it was too hot.

“So,” I said, turning toward her, “I see that you like . . .”

Without warning, she flung her arms around my neck and kissed me fiercely on the mouth. Before I even knew what was happening, I could feel her fingers unbuttoning my shirt, and the next thing I knew, we were doing it right there on the couch with the steam from the coffee still climbing unperturbed

above the rims of the cups. Afterwards, she was quiet and was just holding onto me very tightly, although not uncomfortably so. I didn't know what to say. To begin with, nothing even remotely like that had happened to me before. How are you supposed to respond? For some reason, I could only think of one thing.

“Heather,” I said, “I have lawn chairs in my living room.”

Chapter Six

Footfalls

July, 1928

Catherine often found it difficult to sleep.

Her mother told her that it was because her mind was too active—that she worried too much about things.

“You need to stop thinking so much,” she would tell her with a smile while putting her to bed and tucking in her covers. “Your head won’t let you sleep if it’s too busy.”

For four months during the summer when she was five, her father was switched to the second shift at the automobile plant where he worked as a foreman. It was only temporary, until some imbalance in the personnel could be straightened out. In the mean time, she simply could not fall asleep until she was sure he had made it home safely. She would wait each night until she heard the sound of his car entering the drive, the opening and closing of the front door and the creaking of the steps as he softly crept upstairs in his work boots.

Without fail, the door to her room would crack open and he would tiptoe inside on the unlikely chance she was asleep, then cross the room to her bed, where he would get down on his knees and give her a kiss on the cheek. He carried the oily smell of machinery on his clothes, and his breath smelled like coffee.

“Hi, Daddy,” she would say, brightly.

“Hey, Sweetie, aren’t you supposed to be asleep?” he said every time.

“I know, Daddy.”

“Well, you need to get plenty of sleep so you’re ready for tomorrow,” he would say, making it sound as if it were Christmas eve.

“What’s tomorrow?”

“You’ll have to wait and see,” he would whisper mysteriously as he straightened her covers and gave her another kiss.

“Okay, Daddy. Goodnight.”

The only good thing about his work arrangement was that he had the daytime off that summer, and he and Mother often took Catherine and her three older brothers to the park or the zoo or someplace fun. Everything was an adventure with him. They were a band of explorers, looking for new lands to conquer, even if they were only in the park across the street. He was her hero and her protector, and she was his little princess. Somehow, she always got to sit on his big shoulders. She felt as if she could see the whole world from up there as she gently swayed back and forth with his strides.

Even if they stayed home, something special always seemed to happen. One afternoon, seemingly making it up as he went with a comically intense look of concentration on his face, he concocted a solution of soap and water in a pie pan. He carried the pan out to the back yard, cradling it in his big hands and walking slowly so it would not spill. Then, using a piece a wire bent into a circle

at the end, he blew bubbles with the soap and water that would float magically through the air and glisten in the sunlight.

If the light hit them just right, Catherine and her brothers could see swirls of reds, blues and yellows in them as they chased them across the yard. Eventually, the beautiful orbs, filled with their miniature rainbows, would drift down to ground level and just disappear. Try as they might, Catherine and her brothers could not halt the bubbles' fate, but they would glance back at their father, who, grinning broadly, would send another flock of bubbles hurtling into the air.

Being the only girl in the family, Catherine learned most of what she knew about boys from her brothers. She remembered the day her oldest brother, Robert, who was 16 at the time, came home from school with a pretty girl his age named Rachel. He was smiling in a way she had never seen him smile before as he introduced her to Mother and Father. Rachel ate dinner at the house that night, and afterwards they walked outside to sit on the porch together. That was when Catherine noticed they were holding hands. The only people she had ever seen holding hands were her mother and father. Later, after Robert walked the girl home and came back inside, Catherine went into the boys' bedroom and asked Robert if he and Rachel were going to get married. He laughed.

"It's a little early to be thinking about that," Robert said. "We only just met."

"But you were holding hands," Catherine persisted. "Doesn't that mean you love each other?"

“Isn’t it past your bedtime, halfpint?”

Two months later, Robert came to the door with a different girl, named Becky. He introduced her to Mother and Father, and she ate dinner with the family that night. Afterwards, Catherine snuck a furtive glance outside to the porch, where she could see they were holding hands. Later, after he returned from walking Becky home, she crept into her brothers’ room, where Robert was lying in bed with a faraway look in his eyes.

“Robert,” she whispered, even though there was no reason to. “What happened to Rachel?”

“What?” Robert said, looking over at her. “Oh, that didn’t work out.”

“Aren’t you sad?” she said.

“That’s just a part of life, halfpint,” Robert said. “Say, isn’t it past your bedtime?”

Catherine promised herself, even though she was only eight, that when she got older, she wouldn’t hold hands with anyone unless he were the boy that she was going to marry. In fact, still struggling with the concept, she suggested to her father that when she grew up, she could marry him.

“Me?” he said with astonishment. “No, you’re going to find someone much better than me. You’ll see. Besides, I already told your mother I would marry her.”

Catherine was disappointed, because this meant she would have to find a boy on her own and possibly face being tossed aside like Rachel. Perhaps, she thought, she would still be able to talk her father into marrying her later on.

* * *

In the winter after she turned 10, Catherine's father became sick. At first, everyone thought he just had a cold, but days and days went by and he did not get better. Catherine would lie in her bed awake practically all night long, listening to his periodic coughing and saying a little prayer after each that it would be the last one for the night. It never was. Catherine remembered the day they all packed into the car and drove to the doctor's office, where they did a lot of tests on her father as the rest of the family sat in a quiet waiting room, where the other strangers in the room looked at them and each other suspiciously. When father came out, they all crowded back into the car and went home. Nobody said anything, which was normal. If ever there were troubles in the family, the children never heard about it.

A few days after the trip to the doctor, the telephone rang while Father was still at work. Catherine's mother answered it and spoke very little during the call.

"Yes," she said at first. "This is his wife."

Then there was a long silence, during which she appeared to be listening intently. Catherine was sitting at the kitchen table working on her homework and watching her mother's face. During the long silence, mother's eyebrows, which had been raised in hopefulness, fell slowly and her face darkened.

By the time she spoke again, her head was bowed and resting against her hand and her eyes were half closed.

"No, I understand," she said, taking in a long, ragged breath after. "Thank you for calling. I'll let him know."

She hung up the phone and continued standing by the wall, looking at some point on the floor for a few moments. Finally, she looked over at Catherine, who was still watching her and was now waiting to find out what the call was about.

“Catherine,” she said. “Could you please go study in your room for a little while.”

“What is it Mom?” Catherine said.

“Please honey,” she persisted. “Just go now.”

From her room, Catherine could hear her mother pick up the telephone again and dial a number, then ask for her father. After that, her voice lowered and Catherine could not tell what she was saying. Finally, she could hear the telephone being placed back on the cradle, but she did not dare leave her room or she would have to admit she had been listening. As for any other indication of what her mother was doing in the kitchen, there was only a lengthy silence and then the clanging pots and utensils that indicated dinner was in the making. Catherine stayed in her room until her father came home from work and she was called down for dinner. The brothers all came in from their outdoor activities, and the whole family sat down at the table for the evening meal. At their father’s suggestion, the boys told of their after-school exploits outside, and then he asked Catherine about her day.

“I don’t know Daddy,” she said quietly. “I just played in my room.”

“You boys should take your sister with you when you go on your outings,” Father said, turning to them. His suggestion was received with a lukewarm protest.

Catherine glanced over at her mother and was surprised to see her looking intently at her from across the table, but she looked away as soon as Catherine saw her. After dinner, the boys and Catherine all got ready for bed, and Catherine’s father came into her room to tuck her in and kiss her goodnight, as always.

“Daddy,” she said as he was pulling her blankets up to her chin. “Are you going to be alright?”

He stopped and was quiet for what seemed like a long time after the question, looking down at his hands and avoiding her gaze.

“Sweetie,” he said gently while looking up. “The doctor says I’m sicker than we thought . . . but you don’t need to worry about that right now. Be a good girl for me and try to get some sleep.”

“But are you going to be alright?” she persisted.

He was quiet again, this time looking her in the eye the entire time.

“Yes honey,” he said finally. “I’m going to be fine.”

Then he kissed her on the cheek, stood up and walked out of the room, closing the door as he went.

As good as it was to hear him say he was going to get better, Catherine could hear his voice and her mother’s in their room at the end of the hall long into the night, and she knew it wasn’t true.

* * *

As the weeks went by, Catherine's father grew weaker and weaker, until he could no longer carry her on his shoulders and, eventually, he had to stay in his bed. She would go sit with him for hours on end, reading him her lessons from school and talking to him. He had a strict rule for all his visitors, especially Catherine and her brothers. There was to be no talk about the sickness. Often they talked about nothing at all. They would simply discuss trivialities or gossip about Catherine's friends. One day, while she was sitting by his bed, going on about her day at school, it began to snow lightly.

"Look, Catherine," he said, stopping her and pointing weakly to the window. "Look at that. Isn't that beautiful?"

It was, and they just sat there until it was dark, watching it fall silently across the panes.

Throughout those weeks, Catherine kept in her mind his promise that night that he would be fine, and a small part of her still hoped that it was true, because she didn't believe that he would ever lie to her.

He died on a Wednesday morning. At his funeral, their mother stood quietly among the trees in the cemetery, listening to the pastor's eulogy with Catherine and the boys all standing around her with their coats wrapped tightly around them. As he was talking, little snowflakes began drifting down out of the sky, something to which none of the aunts and uncles and cousins paid much notice. But Catherine simply closed her eyes, imagining that if she could hear the snowflakes, she could possibly feel him again near her. At first, she could hear

only the pastor's words and her brothers sniffing quietly to themselves. Then, one of the soft flakes brushed past her cheek like the goodnight kiss she had become so accustomed to. She opened her eyes, half expecting to see him, standing there in front of her, but there was nothing—only the trees and the tombstones and the gathering snow.

Back at the house, the relatives all gathered and ate off little plates of food as they spoke consolingly to Catherine's mother and her brothers. Somehow, the noise and activity were comforting to her, but as the day wore on, they all left Catherine and the family there in the quiet of that house as darkness encroached outside. Catherine got ready for bed without being asked and could not believe as she pulled on her nightgown and climbed into bed that there was nothing more—no more shoulder rides, trips to the park and the zoo, bubbles in the yard and bedtime kisses. She felt as if she had been cheated and that, ultimately, he had lied to her, letting her think he would get better.

She was sitting on her bed when her mother came into the room in her robe and asked her if she needed anything. Her eyes were red around the edges, and she looked very tired.

“No, thank you Mother,” she said.

“Your father wrote this for you,” she said after a pause, producing a white envelope from behind her back. “He wanted you to read it after . . . Here.”

She handed Catherine the envelope and hugged her hard.

“Try to get some sleep sweetheart,” she said, giving her a little kiss.

“We'll all get through this just fine.”

Mother stood there for a few moments longer, as if trying to think of something more to say. Eventually, she hugged Catherine again, told her goodnight and left the room, walking across the hall to her brothers' room. Catherine opened the envelope and read eagerly, almost expecting to see that he had not really died and that he was going to meet up with them all at some secret location where they would spend their days telling stories and entertaining one another. Instead, he simply apologized for leaving her and told her how proud he was of her, urging her not to be sad and to remember him when times got hard.

She read the letter quickly and then tossed it into one of her dresser drawers, leaping into bed and pulling up her covers herself. She tried to sleep, but she could not manage it. Instead, she lay awake half the night, listening in vain for the sound of the car in the drive, the opening and closing of the front door and the sound of heavy work boots making their way quietly up the stairs.

* * *

When the war came, Catherine's brothers went off to fight. Mother's brother Harry and his wife and little boy came to live at the house, and a bright white window flag with three blue stars was hung in the house's living room window. The family would hang on every piece of mail that came from the boys, cross referencing the locations in the letters with the news stories about the fighting, hoping that they were safe. Up and down the street, blue stars on the window flags slowly began to be replaced by gold ones, and a new set of headlines landed on the driveway each morning.

Catherine went to business school in the afternoons and learned to be a legal secretary along with a score of other women who would gather in skirts and blouses in a room full of typewriters and listen to their instructor, a small, balding man who wore round glasses and paced back and forth as he spoke, pressing his fingers together in front of him as if fashioning the roof of a tiny cathedral.

At night, she would lie awake, thinking about her brothers, their sweethearts and all the other boyfriends, husbands and fathers out there, as well as the women and little children they had left behind. Her friends all had young men in the fighting as well. They would sit by themselves and write long letters to them, checking the mailbox every day for news. Every so often, it would arrive in airmail envelopes, red and blue around the edges, which they would tear open and read while still standing out by the street.

Catherine kept to herself. After Harry and his family retired for the evening, she and her mother kept each other company listening to the radio in the parlor while she drilled herself on shorthand. Even after her mother went up to her room, she would remain and turn the radio down low, listening in the dark until the stations signed off for the night. Then she would slowly and quietly make her way up the creaking staircase by herself.

Somewhat intentionally, she kept men out of her life, brushing aside their numerous advances like mosquitoes on a warm summer night. It had been more than 10 years since her father died, and her mother had not remarried. She said she did not intend to either, for her own reasons. Catherine wondered if her own reluctance to commit to a man might have been for the same sort of reasons.

Aside from that, she did not want to be like the dozens of girls Robert had left on their front porches over the years after sharing the night sky with them. In her heart, she believed that when she met the man she was meant to be with, she would know it.

The war finally came to an end, and the three blue stars, though faded from the sunlight, were still there. One by one, Catherine's brothers returned home and she and her mother drove to the train station to meet them. Robert came first, strolling regally onto the platform in his gleaming white Navy uniform, which seemed visible from miles away. Later came Stephen and, finally, Gerald, both in their Army dress green.

Stephen, the youngest, had changed the most, Catherine thought. He looked more sure of himself now. As he walked through the station, he seemed so much less like a boy, but when he saw Catherine, he grinned in his old way, ran up to her and threw his arms around her, lifting her off the ground and spinning her around as she laughed.

"Good God," he said, almost beside himself as he put her down, holding her out at arm's length by the shoulders. "When did you get so beautiful?"

Now that they were home, all three of the brothers had male friends that they wanted Catherine to meet, but she resisted, watching the steady stream of females that rolled through their house and not wanting to share their fate. By winter, she was finished with business school, but beforehand, her instructor told her and her classmates about the job bulletin board in the building, which held postings of openings at firms all around the region. She checked it regularly and

noticed that opportunities in small Minnesota towns like hers were few. The big law firms were in Minneapolis, and eventually, that is where she decided to go.

After a half dozen attempts, she obtained an interview with one of them, not telling her family about it until after she made the trip to see if there were anything to it. Just nine days later, she received a letter offering her a position as a legal secretary. That night, she lay awake until nearly morning thinking about it, and the following evening at dinner, she decided to tell her family that she would be leaving. There was an awkward silence around the table as she broke the news, grinning uncontrollably in a way she had not done in quite some time.

“Cathy,” Robert said, finally, putting down his fork. “I don’t know. Minneapolis is pretty big.”

“Yeah,” Stephen and Gerald chimed in simultaneously. Stephen continued, “Cath, the city can be pretty frightening.”

“You act like I’m going to have to live in an alley or something,” Catherine said. “I’ve got some money saved. I’ll get a place to stay, and I already have a job waiting for me. I can do it. Besides, you went to war. I’m just going to Minneapolis.”

The boys seemed to back down. Catherine looked over at her mother, who was sitting quietly watching the exchange.

“You can do whatever you want to do, honey,” she said finally, smiling a little bit as she did.

The boys helped her move her things to a boarding house in Minneapolis where she had arranged to stay. On the doorstep they all hugged her and told her their farewells.

“I can’t believe our baby sister is going to live in the city by herself,” Gerald said with a smile. “What is the world coming to?”

The three of them climbed into the car they borrowed from uncle Harry, and she watched it until it disappeared around the bend. That night, she hardly slept for the excitement of starting a new life. Finally, she willed herself into it, not wanting to start off her first day at her new job trying to recover from a sleepless night.

The following morning, she got up early and ate breakfast downstairs, chatting with the landlady and two of the other boarders—a young man named Walter who had a tattoo of an American flag on his forearm and said he had served as a sailor in the war, and an older man, possibly in his 50s, who did not introduce himself as he sat, mostly concealed behind a newspaper.

She walked to the corner and caught the bus that she would ride to her job, watching the cross streets carefully as it made its way downtown. Seeing the one she needed, she jumped up and left the bus with a small group of other passengers. The day at work went well as she met her supervisors and became familiarized with her duties. It was time to leave before she knew it, and as she walked out the front door of the building, she nearly succumbed to the urge to dance with the next passerby.

Instead, she walked back to the stop and stood waiting for her return bus, even though a bench was available. That night, she sat up in bed reading a book, reveling in her success. As happy as she was that her life had begun, she was equally anxious for other parts of it to get underway. She wondered if, somewhere in that big city, her soul mate could be waiting.

She was nearly asleep when, just before midnight, she heard the unmistakable sound of the front door opening and closing, then being locked. A heavy pair of shoes traversed the floor from the foyer to the stairs and walked up them furtively. She heard the stairs creak as the unknown boarder climbed, and then the hallway performed a verse of the song, the floorboards playing a chorus as he tiptoed. The footfalls passed her door and continued, until they arrived at a room farther down the hall, where she could hear the door gently, but unmistakably, open and close.

Long after the sounds faded and the stranger settled himself in his room, Catherine closed her eyes and could see her father's face there, smiling reassuringly. She could almost smell the oily machinery on his clothes and feel his lips on her cheek.

"Goodnight Daddy," she said quietly. "I love you, too."

Then, at last, she drifted off into a deep and undisturbed sleep.

Chapter Seven

The Tabletop Mona Lisa

Some things were my fault; I know that now. Perhaps I focused too much on Heather's obvious physical charms. On the other hand, I'm not the one who was so eager to cross the line on the first date. Maybe she came into the relationship with some misconceptions about me, the shattering of which was just too hard to take. All of these things aside, we could have come to each other with no human weaknesses or preconceived notions whatsoever and, in the end, we still would not have been right for each other. It's as simple as that. My biggest regret was that I had finally found a woman who did not have a problem with my lawn chairs and we wound up being incompatible.

Actually, she thought they were somewhat artistic—a representation of my right-brained, outside-of-the-box thinking, not an indication of my horrid taste in interior decorating schemes or my economic shortcomings. We spent a lot of time together at first—weekends and a few weeknights. As impressed as she was about the seating options in my place, she was shocked at the lack of anything on my walls. Unlike her apartment, there was no art, especially none of my own, hanging around. She questioned me about it, and I explained that I had not been in the apartment long enough to really get established. She was even more astonished

that I did not have any of my work on hand at all, not even in a box somewhere. I told her that I was not into collecting my own stuff, which she seemed to accept, but she made it clear that she would not be satisfied until she saw some of my work.

“If you would like, we can go to the card store and I’ll try to find some,” I said.

“Very funny,” she replied, playfully grabbing me and tickling my ribs as we stood in my kitchen. “Just so you know, you’re not off the hook mister.”

As ominous as that last comment sounded, I let it slide. We had a lot of fun together when we were alone, but when we got around groups of people she seemed to change. Suddenly, I was expected to perform, like a circus juggler. One Friday afternoon, after about a month, she appeared in the art room at work, saying she had been out on sales calls and decided to drop by and say hello. The others watched warily as she came over and gave me a hug and a little peck on the cheek.

The guys, in particular, were fun to watch during those few moments. They had heard me speak to Heather on the telephone, so, although I had not said a whole lot about her at work, they knew I had been seeing someone. When they actually caught a glimpse of her in her professional skirt-and-suit sales attire, they were visibly taken aback. I seriously doubt any of them thought me capable of landing someone who looked as striking as she did, and I can honestly say that those few minutes permanently changed the way they treated me. For one thing, they said “hello” to me in the mornings after that.

“Hey, this is a surprise,” I said, hugging her back. “I didn’t realize you had any accounts out this way.”

“I don’t,” she said in a mock whisper. “I just couldn’t resist the urge to come see you.”

I had the funny feeling her explanation was full of it, but I went along with it. For one thing, as she was talking, her eyes never left my desk. On it was one half of a pen drawing of a barbershop quartet (composed of zebras in bow ties), singing the “Happy Birthday” song. There was a punchline connected to it on the inside, but I did not know what it was. I don’t typically do the lettering.

“Go ahead with what you were doing,” Heather said. “I don’t want to interrupt.”

“At last you see,” I said, continuing with the drawing, which I was basing loosely on a photo of some horses standing against a fence, “the exposed underbelly of the high-powered art world.”

She laughed quietly through her nose and continued watching what I was doing. After another few minutes, I started to feel a little self-conscious and I wanted to say something to make the whole scene seem a little more normal, but I was blank. Finally, perhaps sensing it herself, she straightened up, seemingly satisfied I had been telling the truth about myself, and said she should be going.

“Well, thanks for stopping by,” I said, setting my pen down and standing up. She started walking toward the door, and I walked with her.

“You’re going to meet me at the party tonight, right?” she said when we reached the door.

“Absolutely,” I said. “I’ve got the directions at home.”

I gave her another hug and walked back to my station as she headed out to the street. Two of the guys, Doug and Jerry, who had been the least hostile to me since my arrival, were openly grinning at me as I swaggered back to my chair. I grinned back at them. “Eat your heart out fellas.”

They both laughed.

“Jeez, Dennis,” Doug said. “I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“It just goes to show you,” Jerry added. “You don’t need good looks to catch a babe like that.”

“That’s true,” I said. “A personality is necessary, however. Sorry.”

Doug and three or four others all said, “Ooooooh,” as if they had just witnessed an outfielder catch a pop fly on the dead run right off his shoe tops.

The party Heather mentioned was at the apartment of a friend of hers who was celebrating something or other. I was to go home after work and get ready, then meet her there at 8 p.m. She had asked me if I were interested a few days earlier while we were walking through one of those enormous shopping malls.

“Sure,” I replied. “That sounds like fun.”

“Great,” she said. “It will be a nice opportunity to show you off.”

I didn’t say anything, but I guess I laughed nervously.

“Don’t worry; I’ll make it worth your while,” she said seductively, sliding her arm around my waist.

In matters such as this, she was frequently promising to “make it worth my while.” As much as I would have been willing to go to the party (or do any of the

other activities that she had made worth my while) without the promise of lasciviousness, I did not, of course, tell her that. What I did not realize at the time, however, was that the offer carried a reverse clause in some cases.

I get lost frequently when trying to follow directions. I like to think this is at least partly caused by the fact that safely operating my car in motion is sometimes as involved as piloting a nuclear submarine with a leaky reactor and the car's demands often pull my attention from the landmarks and cross streets I have been instructed to look for. Sometimes I manage to find a place on the first try, but the night of the party was not one of those times and I wound up arriving nearly 45 minutes late. Needless to say, I was the last to arrive and I had to knock on the door several times before someone came to answer it. It was opened by a guy in chinos and a Polo shirt who greeted me like we were old friends, even though we had never met before.

“Heyyyy,” he said, enthusiastically. “Come on in.”

I stepped into the foyer and began looking for Heather, who I eventually spotted standing among a group of four or five people in one corner. Music was playing pretty loudly from a stereo, and the room was filled with little groups like the one Heather was in. I stopped just inside the door, the greeter heading off toward the kitchen, and stood there, a small island among larger ones. I was about to proceed to Heather's group when she looked over at me. She did not immediately recognize me, perhaps because of a combination of the dim lighting and the fact that she had obviously begun celebrating without me. When she did achieve recognition, she threw her arms up in the air, sloshing against the wall

some of the contents of the glass she was holding, and began sprinting in my direction.

“Dennis,” she yelled with glee.

When she reached me, she literally leapt into my arms, throwing her hands, drink and all, around my neck and kissing me quite a bit longer than I am comfortable with in front of a group. The taste of that kiss left no remaining doubt that she would be needing a ride home.

“Ah, rum and Coke,” I said with her still clinging to me. “Good choice.”

“Everybody,” she said, turning to face a portion of the crowd, “this is Dennis.”

Only about a fourth of the people in the room took any notice of her announcement, but I don't think she realized it. She took my hand and led me back over to the group she had been talking to. One of them, a young woman who looked more sober than the rest of the bunch, was attempting to wipe Heather's mixed drink off the wall with a napkin.

“This is Tim, Jack, Keri and Pam,” Heather said, the last referring to the domestic one with the napkin.

“It's nice to meet you all,” I said, shaking each of their hands. Pam took a break from her tidying long enough to take her turn, then took another couple of swipes at the spill before deciding she had handled it sufficiently.

“So,” Jack said, “you're the artist we've all been hearing so much about.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” I responded. “Although, I'm actually more of an illustrator.”

“Oh, he’s just being modest,” Heather said, fanning my comment away with her hand as if it were some foul stench. “Dennis, why don’t you draw something for them?”

“Gee, I don’t know . . .” I said, beginning to search myself for a pencil, none the less.

“Heather, Heather,” Tim said, as if trying to whoa a skittish horse. “It’s okay. We believe you. The man doesn’t have to perform like a dog.”

Everyone laughed, except for Heather at first, then even she joined in. I was laughing, too, not because I thought Tim’s comment was particularly funny, but because I was happy not to have to doodle for this crowd. As the conversation wore on, I concluded that Keri, who looked like a clone of Heather with the same haircut, was with Tim, a tall, thin man with short, curly hair and a common sense, if not slightly drunk, way about him. Jack was shorter than me and stocky, like a wrestler—the type of guy who tries to see how many bones he can break when he shakes someone’s hand. He was with Pam, the domestic one. She was pretty, too, but in a more understated way than the other two with subtle features and darker hair. I gathered that she was the only one of the group who was not involved in some type of sales job.

Our little group remained intact for about an hour as Jack went to and from the kitchen to keep everyone supplied with booze. I thought it safest to go light on the alcohol, otherwise Heather would have had me doing caricatures on the kitchen table before long. Jack, Keri, Tim and Heather told “funny” stories about their jobs much of the time. Actually, in a different context and in front of a

sober group, the stories would not have been funny at all. Heather also spent an uncomfortable amount of time talking about how talented I was, although she had seen me at work for a little more than 3 ½ minutes. Regardless, she was making me a little embarrassed with all of the superlatives.

In the process, she continued to throw back rum and Coke as if our famous drought were personally affecting her, so much that after a short while I was trying to figure out if it were appropriate for me to tell her I thought she was drinking a little too aggressively. Needless to say, this was a side of her I had not seen before. As luck would have it, she was not a pretty drunk. For one thing, she tended to laugh a bit too loudly and shrilly and with too little provocation.

Throughout all of this, I never figured out whose apartment we were in and what the occasion for the party was. I think that (the second part, anyway) was not a concern for most of the people there. At one point, in mid-sentence, Heather stopped talking when a new song, a slow one, came on the stereo and told me we had to dance. There was no one dancing at the time, nor had anyone been dancing the entire time I had been there, but that did not seem to bother her. As soon as she started to pull me out to the middle of the room, Keri and Tim started laughing, and Tim yelled, "Wait, you have him mixed up with Evan."

I could only assume Evan was some past boyfriend and that the song had some significance to him. Another possibility was that Evan also had a tendency to get drunk at parties and make a spectacle of himself in front of groups of people. When we did start dancing in the middle of the room, I was only too aware of the people around the periphery of the room staring at us and snickering

among themselves. Needless to say, we were a far cry from one of the duets from a '40s movie musical. No one would be clapping at the end of this dance—guffawing, perhaps. She had her arms flung haphazardly around my neck, and my hands were joined around the small of her back. Occasionally, I had to grab her around the waist to keep her from falling and dragging me down with her. Thankfully, she had put down her drink before we started.

The irony of the whole scene was that I had never danced with her before and had been looking forward to an occasion when I could. The way she typically carried herself, I imagined it to be a much more elegant scene than the one we were locked in. We didn't speak during it, although from time to time our eyes would meet and she would give me a drunken, adoring little smile. Toward the end of the song, her face clouded up and I think she started to get a little motion sickness.

"Dennis," she said gravely, "I think I'm going to throw up."

I started to frantically steer her in the direction of the hallway where I imagined the bathroom to be, and Pam, seeing what was going on, took up chase, passed us and directed me toward the appropriate door, waving me on like the guy with the flashlights on the runway at the airport. I guided Heather through the door, and she gestured that she could handle it from there, which was fine with me. I shut the door and tried not to listen too closely. I guess Pam felt she should stay nearby to make sure everything went alright, and the two of us stood there awkwardly for a few minutes.

"I guess you know Heather pretty well," I said.

“Yeah,” she admitted. “Since high school, actually. She works with Jack, and she set the two of us up.”

I gathered from her delivery of that last information that she was not exactly swept off her feet by Jack. There was another pregnant pause; the situation seemed to beg for one of us to say something about Heather’s behavior thus far that evening, but I wasn’t comfortable with that, and I don’t think she was either.

“So, who is Evan?” I said, stepping down the hallway a short distance to get out of earshot of the bathroom.

“Oh,” she said, smiling suddenly and following me down the hall. “Nobody. Evan is the last guy she dated. He was a musician in a band and he liked to dance. That’s all.”

“A musician, huh?” I said.

“Yes, well . . .” Pam started. “Heather tends to go through phases. She becomes intensely interested in one thing or another and immerses herself in it. Evan was during her music phase.”

“Really?” I said. “So you think art is a phase for her?”

“I don’t know,” Pam said. “Let me just say she doesn’t do hobbies in the same way most people do. When she started to get interested in art . . . Well, you’ve seen her apartment. She didn’t have all those prints hanging up a few months ago.”

“Hmmm, that explains quite a bit,” I said, smiling.

“I wouldn’t worry too much,” Pam said. “I think she likes you and would, even if you were not an artist.”

“It’s funny you should say that,” I said. “Because I’m not, really. There is a huge difference most of the time between what I do and ‘art.’ Think of an artist who creates beautiful and creative paintings or sculptures as a chef in a fancy restaurant. My job is more like a short order cook at a diner.”

We both laughed, and for a brief moment that I am not proud of, I wished I could simply trade girlfriends with Jack.

“It shouldn’t matter,” Pam said. “You seem like a very nice guy, and I think Heather would be smart to stick with you. It’s funny—since high school, she’s always been able to get anyone she wanted.”

She paused for a second and looked thoughtfully up toward the dead hall light on the ceiling.

“Between her and me, she has always had all the luck,” Pam continued, then sighed dramatically. “Yes, Heather is flighty, pretentious and shallow . . . but she’s beautiful.”

I was not positive how to respond, and I didn’t have to think about it for long. Pam excused herself after a few seconds of silence and headed back over to our group. I thanked her and told her I could handle Heather from there. Eventually, she emerged from the bathroom and I suggested we call it a night. She did not protest. I drove her back to her apartment in her car and stayed there to make sure she was okay. I was pretty sure she would be, since she had already regurgitated much of the alcohol she had taken in. None the less, she went to

sleep right after I put her to bed, and the next morning we drove back to get my car. I told her I had some things to take care of at home, and she suggested she could take me out to dinner that evening to make up to me the trouble she had been at the party.

“You were no trouble,” I assured her, preparing to get into my car.

“Although I have to say, you’re one disgusting drunk.”

She laughed and kissed me. All traces of the rum and Coke were gone, and her breath was still fresh and minty from her morning tooth brushing. She told me she would pick me up at my apartment that night and would choose the place for dinner. I told her that was fine and I was looking forward to it, and we drove off in separate directions.

On the drive back to my place I was thinking about what Pam had told me about Heather and her phases. I wondered exactly how long it would be before her art phase expired. I had no illusions that I was the man Heather would stay with for the rest of her life, but I was just selfish enough to want our relationship to last as long as possible—for the same reasons that I think most men could identify with and because she provided at least the illusion that someone cared for me.

I spent much of the day napping, because most of the night before I had sat up watching Heather for signs of alcohol poisoning. I woke up in plenty of time to get ready for dinner, and by the time I heard the buzz from the front door I was like a new man. I opened the door, and Heather had obviously left her

hangover behind. She was wearing an emerald-colored sleeveless dress and looked even more beautiful than usual.

“Hey,” I said. “You look great.”

“Thanks, so do you,” she replied brightly. “Are you ready?”

“Sure,” I said. As it turns out, that was a loaded question.

She drove to a restaurant called “Doodles,” of all things. It was pretty nice inside, even though the name made it sound as if it were a restaurant for 3-year-olds. From the décor and the lighting, it was obviously an adult place. The distinguishing feature of this place is that each table was covered in white, 70-pound text-weight paper and there was a jar full of well-worn crayons at each place setting. It seemed kind of strange to me, since the last time I had colored at a restaurant I ordered a hot dog and fries and played a game of connect the dots on the back of my menu.

The waiter took us to our table, and Heather held my hand on the way. We took our seats, and I scarcely had time to look at my menu when I glanced across the table and noticed Heather with this expectant smile on her face, as if she thought I would just produce a Rembrandt right there on the table. On the other hand, she had done so many things for me, was it reasonable for me to deny her this thing she wanted so badly?

“Alright, you sneak,” I said. “What do you want me to draw?”

“Let’s see,” she said. “How about me?”

I shrugged. Why not? It now appeared obvious she had dressed up in anticipation of this exercise. I slid my menu out of the way, grabbed a dark blue

crayon (I thought it would be best to go mono-chromatic on this.), pointed it with my butter knife and started in. It was easy enough at first. I set the eyes and started filling in around them. I have to say, she was practically beside herself as the process got rolling.

“Do you want me to sit a certain way?” she said.

“No, just be natural,” I said, not looking up but every few seconds.

She ordered for me, and when our food arrived I was roughing in the outline of her face and shoulders. I took a break to eat, careful not to spill anything on the drawing, then set back to it. A woman sitting with her husband or boyfriend at the next table over saw what I was doing and motioned in my direction to get her companion to take a look. He gave a momentary glance and turned his attention back to his linguini.

The drawing was going pretty well. Actually, it was the first time I had drawn a portrait from a live model, and as her face started to come together, I began to think about the drawing in my kitchen drawer and the note that sat on top of it. The nuances and subtleties in J. Grawer’s drawing of Catherine were not there in mine, nor would they be. My drawing would show the beauty that everyone could see in Heather. Grawer’s drawing showed that beauty in Catherine, as well as that which only he and a select few others could see.

His drawing showed in every pencil stroke the wonderful feelings and affection he felt for her, and mine was just a drawing—a crayon drawing of a woman who sat across from me who I did not love and who did not love me. I

may as well have been doing the drawing from a photograph of a person I had never met.

“What’s wrong?” she said.

I had stopped drawing with her chin, neck and shoulders still not shaded. I put the crayon down on the table across the drawing.

“You’re not finished, are you?” she said.

“Uh, no,” I said. “I just . . . Suddenly I don’t feel very well.”

“Well, couldn’t you finish?” she said. “Then I’ll take you home and take care of you.”

“I don’t think I can,” I said.

She did not respond to that, but sat there in silence, looking as if I just told her she had been diagnosed with a rare skin disease. Without making eye contact with me, she grabbed her purse and got up and walked out of the dining room. I waited for about 10 minutes, the unfinished tabletop portrait and two empty plates sitting in front of me, before I decided she probably had not just gone to the bathroom.

I called for the check and paid it, leaving Heather’s drawing to be crumpled up and thrown in the trash before the next diners were seated. I called a cab and went home. After I arrived, I took Catherine’s drawing out of the drawer, as if to make sure I had been correct in my memory of it.

I had.

I tried calling Heather’s apartment to apologize, but there was no answer, nor was there the entire next day or the day after that. Among the bills in

Tuesday's mail was an envelope with her return address label on it. I climbed the stairs back to my apartment, jamming my thumb under the flap and opening the envelope on the way; it was a card.

I didn't recognize it at first, because I was focusing on the message in the card, not on the card itself, but the artwork on the front was the pastel I had done at work of the single wilted rose. Considering the circumstances, I thought it came out kind of nicely.

Inside she had written, "I think it would be best if we didn't see each other anymore. It just isn't working out between us. Take care, Heather." The card had no words on the front. The designers had chosen to let the picture speak for itself.

I actually expected her to break up with me. I was pretty sure we were over when she left the restaurant, and I thought after that she would either call me or send me a letter breaking it off. She didn't strike me as the "leave him alone and maybe he'll go away" type. Unlike the numerous other times I had been let go, there was no suggestion that we remain friends.

I was disappointed, of course. Regardless how much a person thinks the relationship he is in is unhealthy or has run its course, being dumped never feels good. I wondered if she would ride out the rest of her art phase in search of a replacement or if her experience with me had been enough.

Regardless, I couldn't help but appreciate the irony that, since I had met her, Heather had been trying to get me to create a work of art for her and, in the end, without her even knowing it, I had. I nearly tried to call her again, just to let her in on it, but I decided that probably would not have been appropriate. Instead,

I took the card and impaled the corner of it with a thumbtack on the bulletin board next to the telephone in my kitchen. I like to think that Heather would have been pleased to know that I had finally hung a piece of my work in my apartment.

Chapter Eight

The Museum of What Should Have Been

June, 1944

The sun was turning the boat deck into a large frying pan as John and his platoon went into "hurry up and wait" mode. Their transport ship bobbed up and down on the waves, and they sat, anticipating the order to board the landing boats. Across the long expanse of water sat the beach of Saipan and thousands of Japanese soldiers hidden somewhere among the rocks and jungle. John and his bunch sat, ready to throw themselves at them and the island's defenses, along with 125,000 allied troops. They had sat through briefings, taken part in the massive troop movements and listened to the ferocity of the preliminary allied air strikes on the island.

Now, all that remained was the waiting.

John mopped the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his fatigues. Most of the men had settled onto the deck and had pulled out cards or dog-eared writing tablets. John removed his sketch pad from his pack, perched himself on the canvas bag and started leafing through it. It was filled with drawings he had done of his platoon mates. Most had been created at times like this one, when they were all trying to busy themselves in anticipation of a fight. Several were rough or partially finished because they were interrupted by the order to move. They showed soldiers sitting cross legged, smoking cigarettes, laughing. He tried to

focus on the things that made the men unique.

Davis was a high school English teacher, and his eyes were always obscured by his reading glasses while a book sat in front of him. Lancaster, a police officer, sat with his back straight as a ramrod, like that of a hunting dog on alert. Nelson, an iron worker, had muscles that strained the fabric of his sleeves almost to the breaking point, and Parker, the practical joker, wore a perpetual broad grin, as if he always had something up his sleeve. Some of the drawings had a star neatly drawn in the corner, like the one of Mulvaney, who had been walking point and tripped a land mine; or Doyle, who had been shot by a sniper while on watch; or Stokes, who they had looked for until long after sunset without ever finding him.

John turned to a clean page and began scanning the deck for a subject. Wilson, the biggest man the group, was leaning back against the deck railing with his long, beefy legs stretched out in front of him and his eyes closed, though he was not sleeping. As if he could hear the pencil scratching on John's page, he opened his eyes and smiled.

"Hey, Rembrandt," he said, using the nickname the soldiers had adopted for John. The sun was shining directly in his face, forcing him to squint. "I've been meaning to ask you, if I give you a picture of my girl, can you draw a portrait of her—a nice one?"

"Yeah, you bet," John said, still scratching away at the page. "Just tell me when."

"Great," Wilson said, closing his eyes again. "I will."

John continued drawing the big man, noticing how the sunlight completely washed out his features. In his early days with the unit, John had caught a lot of ribbing from the others about his drawing until one afternoon when he saw some of them looking with awe at a magazine with a foldout photo of Betty Grable in a bathing suit. Later, when no one was around, he confiscated the magazine and reproduced the Grable photo in his sketch book, without the bathing suit, and left it where everyone would see it. Their whole attitude toward him changed after that, and he was astounded at how easy it was to open their eyes to the wonder and beauty of art.

The time on the deck continued to drag, and a couple of the guys started roughhousing good naturedly. John looked up at them momentarily. A handful of others were cheering one or the other of them to pin his opponent. He went back to his drawing of Wilson, and while he was looking down, the two careened out of control, stumbling haphazardly in his direction. Everything seemed to move slowly as he saw them from the corner of his eye and tried without success to scramble to his feet. The two men crashed down on top of him, and his left leg twisted beneath him at an unnatural angle, snapping like the pencil in his hand under their combined weight.

Men rushed to his side as he thrashed about and screamed uncontrollably and his vision was obscured by a white, blinding glare. The leg was broken in two places, the bone penetrating the skin at one of them.

“Jesus Christ,” he heard someone say as the men pulled themselves off of him.

He was attended to by some medics that were slated to land with the troops, but he was not evacuated to a medical ship until after the soldiers boarded their phalanx of amptracs and ploughed off toward the distant shore. He remembered lying in a gurney on the deck as they left. He remembered the almost unbearable throbbing of his leg and the sound of the engines of the amphtracs as they pushed the boats landward and churned up wakes behind them. He remembered the formation of airplanes that passed overhead after the boats launched to provide one final assault on the Japanese positions. Finally he remembered the sound of staccato machine gun fire and the booming of explosions that told him the landing had commenced. It made him uneasy, knowing his friends were in the battle and he could not help. Later, he was taken to the hospital ship with the bloody first casualties from the fighting. There he was put off to the side and given a shot for the pain while the doctors and nurses worked on the endless succession of battle-wounded.

It was not until much later, when he had been sent to a land-based military hospital, that he found out his platoon had been cut off in the jungle on the second day of fighting and were wiped out to the last man, the 30 of them hardly even worthy of notice next to the 3,000 American soldiers that died by the time the island fell on July 9. For hours after he heard the news, John leafed through his sketch book in his hospital bed, drawing a neat star on each one of the pictures, then turning the pages from front to back and back to front, over and over again, until long after his fellow patients fell asleep and, finally, it was too dark to see.

* * *

Weeks later, he went back on duty, this time working in a series of clerical positions. Even after he could walk without a cane, John was still deemed physically unfit for combat and did not see any more action the rest of the war. When the fighting finally stopped in August of 1945, John volunteered for duty in occupied Japan. The hero's welcome, parades on Main Street and anxious questions from all his old friends seemed profoundly inappropriate to him. So he put off going home with the first wave of returning troops and facing the task of going back to his family, his art, and his former life—a world in which he had been mistakenly allowed to keep on living.

In Japan he saw the anger and hate from the people there, who were facing the first conquering army ever to set foot on their soil, but he also saw among some a quiet dignity. They carried on their shoulders the despair of defeat but also a measure of relief after 15 years of a war they had not wanted. In defeat, these were a people who had lost something they would never be able to fully replace, but they were a people who could finally stop watching their sons, brothers and fathers die.

John returned home in March of 1946. On the train, he sat in his street clothes, indistinguishable from the civilians that surrounded him, watching the country slide past the window. In the towns and the little train stations the banners and the window flags had been taken down long before. He turned from the window and pulled his sketch pad from his bag and began thoughtfully leafing through the pages. Each drawing was inscribed with his customary "J. Grawer," except the last one, which was half finished with a dark slash cutting through it

from one corner to the other where the pencil had been jammed against the page by the impact of the two doomed men.

An old man was sitting one seat away from him with an empty space between them. John looked over at him when he noticed he was looking at the sketch pad. The man smiled and straightened his hunched shoulders as much as he could.

“Those are real good,” he said admiringly, his head bobbing involuntarily in that old-person’s way. “Are you some kind of artist?”

“No, sir,” John said. “A buddy of mine did these.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the old man said hesitantly, scratching his head through his thinning gray hair with a ragged set of fingernails. “Is he . . .”

“Yes sir,” John said, flipping the cover of the sketch pad closed. “He died.”

At Union Station, John hitched his bag onto his shoulder and looked for his mother and David. An anxious crowd was standing around the platform, watching for their loved ones. He heard a squeal of glee and looked over to see a young woman running toward the back end of the train, where she threw her arms around the neck of a soldier in full uniform. He hugged her warmly in return and squeezed his eyes shut as the two stood there, holding each other. John was thinking about Wilson and the girl he had promised to draw for him, then he spotted David and his mother.

They were watching the soldier and the young woman and were undoubtedly looking for a man in uniform as well. His mother looked just as he

had remembered, and his heart broke to see the almost euphoric look of expectation on her face. David, on the other hand, had somehow turned into a man during the time John had been gone. From their letters, John knew he had assumed responsibility for the household nicely, taking an office job during the day and going to night school, and he looked the part in shirtsleeves and a tie, loosened at the neck. They continued to watch the back doors of the train, growing visibly more anxious with each passing stranger's face. John just watched them until, finally, he took a deep breath, adjusted the bag strap on his shoulder again and started toward them.

* * *

"You're what?" David said, suddenly gripping his fork tightly as the three of them sat around the dinner table that evening.

"One of my buddies in Japan told me about it," John said quietly. "He's got a connection. It's a good opportunity. I'm leaving next week."

"But why Minnesota?" John's mother said, bewildered. "That's so far away, and you just got home."

"Right," David said, his anger obviously building. "What about your job here? You said you could get it back when you came home."

"I don't know," John said after a pause. "It's complicated. It just doesn't feel right anymore. I need a new start. I just . . . I need a new start."

"John, I just want you to be . . ." his mother started, but David interrupted her.

“That’s great,” he yelled, jumping up from the table and knocking his chair backward. He started to walk toward the front door, continuing as he did. “That’s just great. You’re gone for two years and now, you just take off. First dad, now you. That’s great.”

“David, c’mon,” John said as David walked out the door and slammed it behind him.

He started toward the door, but his mother stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Wait before you talk to him,” she said, still seated. “He’s upset. He’s missed you very much. So have I. What’s going on, John? Why do you have to leave?”

Even as he thought about what he would say, John knew the words would sound irrational, and he began to think perhaps he should stay after all, but as he looked around the room at the familiar, well-worn furniture, at the photos on the wall and out the window at the old box elder tree with the rungs nailed to the side, he realized once again that if he stayed, he would merely be walking in the shoes of a dead man.

“I can’t explain it,” he said quietly, sitting back down. “You and David need to understand, I love you both, and I would love to be able to stay here and just pick up where I left off. I just can’t. It wouldn’t be right. It wouldn’t be fair. I promise, I’ll keep in touch and I’ll come back to see you as much as I can, but I can’t stay.”

David refused to see John off the day he left. As his train laboriously rolled away from the station, he looked back to see his mother standing there, abandoned again. She didn't cry, probably because she wanted to be strong for him, and neither did he.

Before starting his new life, John made a side trip to a military cemetery where four of his platoon mates had been buried. One by one, he searched out their graves, walking among the long rows of stones and studying the names carefully, along with their birth dates and their common last day. At the last one, he kneeled and gently placed the sketch book at its base, leaving art behind there among the acres of stone markers, where the grass had already grown quite thick on the new graves.

* * *

The late Minneapolis winter eased into spring, and toward early May, John developed the habit of walking in the evenings in the park near his apartment building, still dressed in his work clothes. He enjoyed the quiet and the serenity of the setting, not to mention the solitude, and he took some comfort at the emergence of the flowers along the paths in the park, as well as the way new leaves unfolded in the same manner on the branches of the young trees as they did on the towering, 100-year-old majestic oaks.

Late one Friday afternoon, John was sitting at his desk finishing up his paperwork for the day. He was one of the only people still in the office, save two other younger salesman who were talking a few desks away about a dance they were going to that evening at a local American Legion hall. John was only

marginally listening to what they were saying. Suddenly, they lowered their voices, which prompted him to pay closer attention, although he kept his eyes on his work.

“I don’t know,” one of them said. “Why don’t you ask him?”

“All I’m saying is, it would be a nice thing to do,” the other replied.

“Fine, I’ll ask him,” the first one said. “Hey, Jim.”

The last had been said more loudly and in his direction. John looked up, but he didn’t say anything at first. The two young salesmen were both looking at him expectantly.

“You mean me?” he said finally.

“Yeah,” the spokesman said again. “Isn’t it Jim?”

“No, it’s John.”

“Oh, geez, I’m sorry,” he said. “Look, Mike and I are going to this dance tonight. We know you haven’t been around real long, and we were wondering if you want to come with us. You know, it’d be a chance to meet some people.”

“Women,” Mike said, apparently thinking some clarification was necessary.

“Thanks a lot fellas, but I really don’t feel like it,” John replied.

“You’ve got something else going on?” Mike asked, appearing hurt at the refusal.

“Well, not exactly,” John said, hedging. “I just . . .”

“C’mon, it’ll be fun,” the first guy said. “Look, you can drive yourself, and if you aren’t having a good time, you can just leave and there will be no hard feelings.”

It was a difficult argument to counter. To refuse with no good reason at that point would be a high form of insult.

“What’s your name,” John asked.

“Martin.”

“Martin, you’ve got a deal,” John said. “Tell me how to get there.”

John went home first so he could change clothes and wash off the smell of the factories he had been touring all day on his sales route. He had no expectations of the evening and was anticipating taking Martin up on his suggestion about leaving early. Nevertheless, he saw no point in going without putting up the appearance that he was taking it seriously. The dance was supposed to begin at 7 p.m., but John took his time and arrived at 7:15. He drove into the parking lot to the building, which had a string of colored lights festooned across the front. It seemed to John at that time that dances like this were going on all the time. Everyone seemed to want to celebrate.

The room was dimly lit, and the tables and chairs had been pulled off to the sides of the room to clear the dance floor. A band was set up in the corner on a small set of risers, and it was playing a lively Benny Goodman number intended to entice the party-goers out onto the dance floor. It wasn’t working; the men and women were divided into two clear groups, each staking out opposite sides of the

room and eyeing each other warily. John spotted Mike and Martin standing by a table and headed over to them. They saw him approach and waved heartily.

“We weren’t sure you were going to make it,” Mike said when John reached them, “what with the way you were talking in the office. Good to see you went through with it.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it,” John said, unconvincingly.

“Well, let’s see what we’ve got here,” Martin said, gazing toward the female side of the room. “Not bad. Not bad at all.”

He was nodding appreciatively, and John looked over, following his line of sight. There was a group of five or six women standing near the bandstand and talking easily with one another. John noticed one of them in particular, a brunette in a yellow dress with a striking sort of look about her. Aside from her beauty, John was taken by her carefree manner, the way she smiled and laughed so naturally. It seemed to him the very thing he had grown incapable of—the ability to let go, to be frivolous. He continued to watch her, hoping she would look in his direction, but she merely continued talking with her friends, her attention squarely on them.

“Well, here goes nothing,” Mike said, lifting his shoulders and starting out across the dance floor toward the group by the bandstand.

John was not even sure which woman Mike had set course for, but he did not want to take any chances. Hurrying after him, John passed Mike and found himself standing right in front of the brunette in the yellow dress. Mike had been heading in a slightly different direction after all and was now approaching

someone else. John, on the other hand, had made his move a little too quickly and had not thought about what he would say when he arrived. The woman turned toward him when he stepped up to her, but he just stood there in silence, his mind blank. He was sure she would grow tired of his presence shortly and turn back to her friends; then the band started in with a slow number.

“Dance?” John blurted, unwilling to attempt anything longer than one syllable.

“I’d love to,” she said, smiling as she took his hand and led him out onto the dance floor.

Striding across the floor with that hand in his, John felt for the first time in as long as he could remember that something made sense, that he belonged somewhere. It was a simple thing, but he appreciated that it was there. When they reached a point near the middle of the floor, she turned to him and placed her other hand on his shoulder. Face to face with her now, he placed his other hand on her back and they began swaying back and forth to the music, which, frankly he didn’t even hear anymore. Their presence there seemed magically to pull many other couples out onto the worn, hardwood surface.

“I’m Catherine,” she said after a brief silence. “Catherine Dempsey.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” John said. “I’m John Grawer. I hope you’ll forgive me. I haven’t done this in a really long time.”

“I haven’t either,” she confided. “Actually, I wasn’t going to go, but some of the girls in my office insisted.”

“That’s funny,” John laughed. “That’s my story, too. And I don’t even know the guys who invited me here. Anyway, I’ll have to thank them.”

She laughed as well with a sincerity that, with help from her perfume, made John’s knees weaken.

“What a nice thing to say. Maybe I should thank them, too.”

They continued talking throughout the dance. The song ended, and they each took a step backward, applauding appreciatively. When the next song started, she stepped back up to him automatically to continue dancing. John was pleasantly surprised, still used to the USO dances, in which the women were often instructed not to spend too much time with the same man. Free from that restriction, John and Catherine danced together the rest of the night. They were cut in on a number of times, but she always came back to him afterwards. They talked with ease about the music, their jobs, their families and the things they liked to do.

“Actually, I have been spending a lot of time in the park,” John said. “I don’t really know anyone here very well, and it’s a nice, quiet place to walk.”

“I love walking in the park,” she said. “My father used to take us to the one near our house all the time when we were little. It’s one of the things I like to remember about him. He passed away several years ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” John said, worried that her past would reveal some other detail that would make her suddenly unavailable to him.

“It’s okay,” she said. “It was a long time ago.”

The band was announcing it would be playing its last number of the evening as John and Catherine sat at a table, taking a breather and drinking from paper cups punch that had been spiked at some point in the evening. He looked down at his wrist watch; it was almost midnight.

“You’re joking me,” John said in astonishment. “I had no idea it was so late. I don’t suppose you want to dance again.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” she replied, her face beaming.

Later, as the band members were packing up their instruments, John and Catherine lingered for a while by their table.

“Do you need a ride home,” he said. “I have my car here.”

“No, that’s alright,” she said. “I have a ride with my friends already.”

“I had a great time tonight,” he said.

“Oh, me, too,” she replied quickly, although her answer seemed to imply a “however” that was left unsaid. She was holding her purse in front of her in both hands and was looking down toward the floor as she spoke. John suddenly felt lost again.

“Listen, maybe we could get together again,” John said, feeling like a high school boy, his heart pounding.

There was a long pause, and Catherine did not say anything, instead continuing to look down with an expression of intense thought on her face. John was confused, because this behavior was so out of sorts from what she had shown the rest of the evening.

“That sounds nice,” she said finally. “I’d like that.”

“Could I get your number?” John asked, producing a scrap of paper from his billfold and a pen from his coat pocket.

“Sure,” she said, taking the paper and pen and writing her first and last name on it, along with a telephone number, in an elegant, flowing handwriting. “I live in a boarding house, so you’ll have to ask for me.”

She handed the paper back to John as the group of women she had come with stood by the door, motioning for her to join them.

“I have to go,” she said. “It was really nice meeting you, John. I guess I will be hearing from you.”

“You can count on it,” John said, grinning.

After she walked out, he scanned the mostly deserted room for Mike and Martin, but he did not see them anywhere. He walked outside, where his car was one of only a few still left in the parking lot. He could see the tail lights from Catherine’s group disappearing around the corner. He crossed the lot to his car and yanked open the door, but before he slid behind the wheel, he looked up at the sky. There was a slight breeze in the cool night air, and there was no moon. The lights in the parking lot had gone out, and the stars, with no competition for the eye’s attention, scattered brightly across the black midnight sky, seeming almost close enough to touch.

* * *

John was standing by the telephone next to his kitchen, wondering if it was too early to call Catherine. It was 8 a.m., and in spite of his eagerness, he knew that he should wait. To pass the time, he pulled on his coat and walked three

blocks to the news stand on the corner. There, he bought a newspaper and headed back to his building, leafing idly through the pages in the news section. He stopped when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw something shiny against the curb. An old memory stirred in him, and he walked over to get a closer look, folding the paper and securing it under his arm as he did. It turned out to be just an old bottle cap that had been bent in half and flattened, probably by a car tire, then kicked to the curb.

When John returned to his apartment, he shed his coat and sat down at the kitchen table to take a more thorough look at the paper. It was getting on toward 8:45; he decided that he would call at 9 a.m. In the intervening 15 minutes, he couldn't concentrate on the articles he was reading, mainly because none of them were as interesting to him as the prospect of talking to Catherine again. At two minutes until 9, he decided he had waited long enough and headed over to the telephone, extracting the number from his wallet while cradling the receiver between his ear and shoulder.

He dialed the number and listened to the rings; after three of them, a woman with an older sounding voice answered. It threw him for a second, until he remembered what Catherine had said about living in a boarding house.

"Yes, I am calling for Catherine Dempsey," he said, his voice quavering as he considered all manners of changes of heart she could have had in the prior nine hours.

"Oh, are you?" the woman said. "Then you must be the young man she's been waiting for at the breakfast table all morning."

John heard footsteps rapidly approaching across a wood floor, then a voice away from the phone that said, "Mrs. Reilly, you're going to embarrass the life out of me. Thank you, though."

John could feel the receiver being passed from one hand to the next against his ear, then her voice.

"John?" she said.

"Yes, it's me," he said anxiously.

"I thought you'd never call."

* * *

They spent most of the next two days together, visiting the parks and the zoo. All the things that they had both done before dozens of times suddenly seemed new and fresh. Everything either of them had ever seen or heard was ripe material for discussion. That Sunday evening, they sat on the front porch of the boarding house, talking and looking at the night sky until he realized that it was nearing midnight.

"Look at that," he said, staring at his watch in disbelief. "I should be going or neither of us will be able to get up for work in the morning."

"Oh, my goodness," she said as he showed her the glowing numbers on his watch face. "And I thought it was still early. It's so easy to talk to you, like we're old friends. Don't you . . . What is it?"

She stopped when she noticed him staring at her vacantly. Watching her talking, he could hardly believe she had just dropped into his life, like the gold locket he had found lying against the curb. He wondered, with all those GIs

returning months before he did, how come no one found her before he did? Was she just waiting all that time for him to come along with so many holes in himself, knowing that she could fill every last one of them without even trying—without even knowing it?

“John?” she said.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I was just thinking that I . . . I need to thank you for this weekend. I love . . . I’ve loved the time we’ve spent together.”

“Oh, thank you,” she said as they both stood up. “I have, too.”

She put her hands on his shoulders, pulled herself up a couple of inches and kissed him on the lips for the first time since they had met.

“I guess I’ll go try to get some sleep now,” she said, with a little laugh. “Don’t just toss me aside for some other girl, now.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” he said, astonished. “Who could do something like that?”

“I’ve known a couple of people who might,” she said.

“Well, I’m going to call you tomorrow, when I get home from work, if you don’t mind,” he said. “I’d really like to see you again soon.”

“Me, too,” she said, kissing him once more before she turned toward the door. “I get home around six. Goodnight.”

Before leaving, John stood on the front porch for a few moments after the door closed, listening to her turn off lights and climb the noisy old staircase, which only protested a little with her slight frame.

The following morning, he walked into the office and headed toward his desk. Mike and Martin were both at theirs already and they whistled loudly when they saw him. The spectacle was enough to attract the attention of everyone else in the big room.

“Will you get a load of this guy,” Martin said, perching himself on the back of his desk chair. “Here, we invite him to come with us to this dance Friday night, and we’re not even there five minutes when he goes and snatches up the prettiest girl there. Talk about gratitude.”

“Martin, you have no idea,” John said, gesturing with his hands as if trying to describe a mountain range. “You have absolutely no idea.”

* * *

They saw each other two more times that week, but the following weekend she said she had to make a trip back to Rochester for some commitment with her family that would keep her there through Wednesday. They did make arrangements for an outing the following Saturday.

Though he had seen her a number of times already, he felt the same sensation he always did when she opened the door to greet him that morning. Every new thing she wore accented her looks in a different way, showed him a different facet of her beauty and managed to steal the breath from his lungs momentarily. Though she had refused to tell him where they were going, the basket she held in her right hand took away some of the suspense.

They drove to the park and spread a blanket under a large oak tree, where she produced a lunch that appeared too voluminous to have fit in the basket. They

talked as they ate, then talked a good while more. They went for a walk around the park, returning to the blanket and the tree, where she sat down again and, leaning back against the base of the tree, took a book from the basket and began to read aloud while he reclined on the blanket and rested his head against her leg. Eventually, they traded places with him reading and her using his leg for a pillow.

“You know,” he said, pausing in his reading. “Give me a day like this one and tell me it will go on forever, and that would be fine by me.”

She did not answer, and he looked down at her. She was asleep. He closed the book, put it off to the side and began gently stroking her chestnut hair with his fingertips.

“I love you Catherine,” he said quietly.

She did not awake, and he wondered if he would be able to feel confident enough to tell her that when he knew she could hear him. He leaned his head back against the rough bark as the sun slid across the sky and waited patiently for the moment when she would return from her slumber.

* * *

It was getting toward late afternoon when they packed the basket and the blanket into the car. It was so pretty outside that they decided to take one last turn around the park before sunset. The sky was still mostly clear, although there were some clouds on the horizon and John could see some heat lightning flashing around in them. They were both being uncharacteristically quiet as they walked, except from time to time he noticed her coughing and wincing as she did. He had

seen it earlier in the day as well, not to mention a smattering of other times when they were together.

He asked her if she were coming down with something, and she did not answer, instead looking down at the path.

“Catherine?”

She stopped walking and turned to him, taking both of his hands in hers. She stood quietly for a moment, then told him about how she had gone to the doctor with a cold a month earlier and how he had noticed a bump under her arm while examining her. She had noticed it herself before that but had thought nothing of it. She told him how the doctor poked the little bump and stuck needles into it and conducted a number of tests on her and it. She told him how the doctor called her at home and told her to come to his office so he could explain the test results to her. She told him how when the doctor walked into the room, a dark, rangy, invisible, uninvited guest walked in with him.

At each turn in the story, he kept waiting for her to tell him that she would be all right, that she would recover and would live a long, healthy life with him, but the story ended and she never did. He stood there, holding her hands, unsure what to say for a half minute. A chilly breeze kicked up and whistled through the park, and as it hit them from the side, he instinctively put his arms around her in a vain attempt to fend off the elements. Standing there, in that somewhat desperate embrace, they began to hear the thunder of some distant storm, but to John's ears, it sounded exactly like the booming of a firefight from the deck of a boat anchored a mile off shore.

* * *

He thought about leaving—cutting his losses and moving on. He decided at the very least he would break it off with her. This was more than he could take. But he would see her standing there, smiling at the sight of him, and he couldn't. Whenever they got together, he would find himself in an almost euphoric state, then, when he returned home at night, he would lie awake, wondering why this thing had to happen to him.

She had one simple rule. They were not to talk about the future or the cancer. They were to live purely in the moment, for as long as the moment lasted. When she went in the hospital and Catherine's mother came into town, he thought he could surely leave her then, but every time he saw her she asked him when he was coming back.

“Tomorrow.”

And he always did.

When John gave her the drawing he thought she was going to cry. She told him she loved it. He thought she might tell him she loved him, too, but she didn't. He thought about telling her, but the prospect of making such a bold leap and watching her stare back at him, uncertain what to say in return, was too much to think about.

He decided that he would tell her eventually, consequences be damned, the future be damned, but she died before he had the chance. She just went quietly in the middle of the night. He hurried to the hospital after the late-night call from Catherine's mother.

The doctor said he had not expected this. He expected her to hold on longer, but, he said, at least her suffering was over.

“Yeah,” John replied. “Of course.”

Before she went back to Rochester, Catherine’s mother stopped by John’s apartment to give him the drawing. He suggested she take it, but she insisted that Catherine wanted him to have it. After she left, he sank into an arm chair with the drawing in his lap. He remembered the pencil strokes, the exhilarating anticipation that comes every time with the blank page and the way it felt as her face took shape beneath his hands.

It would have been tempting, he thought, to draw another one, simply so he could feel that way again. If so inclined, he could have drawn a hundred pictures of her and hung them all in his own personal museum of what should have been. He sat there while the room went dark and he could hear the sounds of a party gathering in the courtyard of his apartment building. As the evening wore on, the sound of music drifted in the window into his silent apartment with the steady hum of voices from the crowd. Every so often, he could hear a woman’s high-pitched laughter above the rest of it.

He looked down at the drawing again, and the room had grown so dim he could barely see it. Rising from his chair, he searched out the box the frame had come in and carefully packed the drawing in it, placing it on a shelf in the corner of his closet. Then, he walked deliberately to the front door and headed in the direction of the party noise, deciding that he should go and see what all the fuss was about.

Chapter Nine

The Language of the Soul

“What do you think art is?”

Doug and I had been sitting silently across from each other in the lunch room at work for about 10 minutes when I tossed him that question. He looked up at me from the homemade lunchmeat sandwich he had been eating and almost spit out partially chewed fragments of it with his reply.

“What?” he said, as if I had just asked him something more like, “So, do you think President Roosevelt was gay?”

Doug was the only one of my co-workers with whom I had fashioned any kind of a friendship. Not coincidentally, he was the least pretentious and the most talented of the lot. He looked to be about 45, and he grew his hair long in back, tied in a ponytail, even though it was kind of thin on top.

“I’m serious,” I said, holding my own sandwich just below my chin.

“When you think of art, what do you think of?”

“What brought this on?” he said, putting down the sandwich and folding his arms on the edge of the table.

“I don’t know,” I said. “A lot of things. Mainly, Heather broke up with me, and I’ve had a lot of time to think the last few days.”

“That girl who came here that one day?” he said. “Oh, man, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I think we were both kind of a disappointment to each other. I’ll tell you what, though. She’s probably in the market for a replacement artist. I could give you her number.”

“A replacement artist?” Doug said, an eyebrow raised.

“She’s very interested in art,” I explained. “At least she is for the time being, to the extent she wants to date an artist. Only I don’t think I met her definition of ‘artist.’”

“I see,” Doug said, smiling as if he had just solved a tricky math equation. “So now you want to know what I think art is to see if you match *anyone’s* definition of ‘artist?’”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“It’s kind of funny,” Doug said, smiling. “When I started doing art in high school, it was because there were a lot of girls in art class. I wasn’t bad at it, but I wasn’t really into it. I went on to the next level class, because I liked it more than a lot of the other electives I could have taken and, after all, the girls were taking the next class, too.”

He took another bite of his sandwich and a sip of a pop he was drinking from the can, as if to refuel for the rest of the story.

“Then, one day, Mrs. Kemplemeyer walks into class and says she wants us to draw a picture of a concept—love, hate, whatever, due the next day. I had no idea what to do, and I sat there half the hour while everyone else was just sketching away. I tried to draw a couple of things, but nothing seemed right. That night, my father and stepmother were having an argument about something. I was

in my room, and I could hear them. I just started drawing a couple dancing. Before they split up, my mom and dad were kind of famous for their dancing. At weddings and things, they were always dancing the entire time. They were great together. People used to stop and watch them. I was 12 when they got divorced, and it came as a surprise to most people because of that front, because of the dancing, but not to me, because I would hear them arguing every night.

“When I finished the drawing, I wondered if I should turn it in, because it was so personal. It was to me anyway; no one else would be able to tell what the hell it was all about. I decided that I would, and that is when I realized I was an artist.”

“I don’t follow you,” I said.

“It’s as simple as this, Dennis,” Doug said. “Art is not about drawing, painting, writing, music or any of those things by themselves. It’s not even about being good at them. Art is all about letting go. It’s about letting go, being yourself and speaking from your heart. Everyone is doing art on computers these days, and you hear people sometimes wondering how long it will be before computers will be able to do art by themselves. They never will be, because computers don’t have souls.

“Art is the language of the soul.”

“Really?” I said.

“Really,” he repeated. “I’ll tell you what. A lot of these yahoos around here think they’re artists because of something they read in a book. But that’s bullshit. So, what do you think now? Are you or aren’t you an artist?”

"I don't know," I said. "I really don't. I know this one guy who definitely is, though."

"Oh, yeah? What's his name?"

"John Grawer."

"Who's that?" Doug said, starting on his sandwich again.

"Just a guy I know. I doubt you've met him."

"Oh," he said, not pursuing it any further, although I sort of wished he would. "So, this ex-girlfriend of yours. Do you really think she'd be interested in me?"

* * *

There's a park near my apartment. When I got home that night I felt like taking a little walk. It was getting on toward twilight, and it was a nice night to be outside. It was clear, except for the occasional wispy, decorative clouds and a stray vapor trail or two. Though it was still summer, technically, I could feel an occasional sliver of cool air in the breeze. The leaves would be turning before we knew it, and it wouldn't be long after that until the snow came. The end of summer always makes me think of the things I did not get around to doing in the prior three months. As a child, in the days before school let out for the summer, I would make a mental list of all the things I was going to accomplish before classes resumed. But with each passing week, goofing off seemed to be a higher priority, and I would put off my goals for a while, because, after all, there was so much time.

By the end of it, I had done nothing that I had intended to, and I would spend that last few days in a frantic attempt to find the one thing that would make the whole summer worthwhile. I think life can be like that, too, if you're not careful. In the absence of school and the prospect of returning to classes, the feeling of late-August urgency remained for me. I had been hoping that I could fall in love or finish *Moby Dick*—anything.

I sat down on a park bench and waited for the sun to go down. In the trees that were scattered throughout the park, I could hear a band of cicadas begin to tune up their instruments. They would buzz rhythmically for a half a minute, then another group in a different tree would answer in the same fashion, and the cycle would go on and on until, I guess, they found each other. People, as luck has it, do not have the same tools that cicadas do to find each other and have to rely on skill or, more likely, luck. I was thinking of how nice it would be if Heather just appeared on the path, sat down next to me and told me that she realized I meant something more to her than just another facet in her art obsession. Needless to say, I had to look elsewhere for that one thing to make the whole summer worthwhile.

* * *

I had left the receipt for the drawing, with Grawer's nephew's number on it, in the kitchen drawer. It was a long distance call, and I did not recognize the area code. It turned out to be Cook County in Illinois. A woman answered the phone, and she said he was outside and offered to get him. I took her up on it. I heard her put the receiver down and cross the kitchen floor and open a sliding

patio door. The sound of a lawn mower rushed into the phone, then her voice, trying to shout above it. It was a Saturday morning and the entire scene sounded very much so. The lawn mower stopped, and I could hear him say, "Who is it?"

"I don't know," she said. "It's a guy. Paul, maybe."

"Hello," he said, sounding like he might be a few years older than me.

I told him that I used to live next to his uncle and wanted to know which nursing home he was in so I could visit him. I was hoping it was not in Chicago, although I would have gone if it had been. He was very helpful and did not even question my story. Even so, I had prepared a number of back-up details for such an inquisition. Mr. Grawer was in a home in the suburbs about 10 miles from where I lived. He even gave me directions. In preparation for my visit, I took the drawing out and reinstalled the backing (without the note, of course), after which I shoved new glazing points into the wood with a putty knife to hold it all in place. I kept the drawing in the original frame, because I thought it might be important or helpful for him to see the scratches in the corner that Catherine referred to in the letter.

I neatly folded the note the way it had been for so long and put it and the drawing in the bag that I had brought the frame home in. On the way there, I didn't even get lost. Somehow I was able to follow the directions while keeping the car from popping out of gear and/or dying at stop signs. The nursing home was in a very nice one-story brick building with a fountain in the front lobby. A smiling woman with large, artificially colored red hair sat at a desk on the far side of the room.

"Can I help you," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," I responded, closing the distance between myself and her. "I'm here to see one of your residents—John Grawer. I used to be a neighbor of his."

"Oh, how nice," she said. "Is this your first time here?"

"Yes, it is," I said.

"Let me show you how to get to his room," she said, getting up. She motioned to a tablet of paper that had something like two people's names written on it in different handwriting. "Also, if you could, sign in here, please."

As we walked through the catacombs of the complex, she explained that the facility was divided into two sections—an apartment building and a health center.

"Typically, when a resident moves in, they live in the apartment complex," she said. "Then, as they get older and need more regular clinical care, they move into the health center, which is set up more like a hospital."

"How convenient."

"Unfortunately, when Mr. Grawer came to us, he needed so much help he had to move directly into the health center," she said. "He has a lot of health problems that require a lot of attention."

As she wrapped up her explanation, we crossed through a set of big double doors from the apartment wing to the health center. There was a small buffer zone between the two sections and another set of double doors. It was probably necessary to protect against unnecessary shocks caused by going from one section

to the other. While the apartment section was carpeted, had decorative lighting and a nice, warm feel, the health center was so white it hurt my eyes, and it smelled like disinfectant, bad cafeteria food and several other things I don't even want to think about. As we made our way down one of the harsh, tile hallways, I could hear a woman shrieking in ungodly fashion from one of the rooms. Staff members scattered throughout the hallway, delivering meals, circulating clean bed linen and the like, but I appeared to be the only person who could hear the yelling.

"It's nice you've come to see Mr. Grawer," my guide offered over the din. "He doesn't get many visitors."

"Does he get to draw much?" I asked on a whim.

"I didn't know he draws," she said. "But I don't know everything about our residents. We do have arts and crafts activities from time to time, though."

I hadn't been thinking in terms of making Christmas ornaments from pine cones, but I decided not to pursue the inquiry any further. We stopped outside his room, and she asked to go in first to let him know I was there. I could hear her from the hallway; she was talking to him as if he were a 2-year-old or a cocker spaniel.

"Mr. Grawer," she said, drawing out the last syllable of his name. "There's a friend of yours here to see you."

If he responded to her, I did not hear it. She reappeared.

"You can go in now," she said. "If you need anything, just hit the buzzer in the room. I'll go ahead and leave you two boys alone."

With the wailing still bouncing off the walls of the hallway, I took a few deep breaths and entered the room. I still wasn't quite sure what I was going to say. I walked, and he was just sitting there in the chair by his bed. He had a TV mounted on the wall near the ceiling, but it was not on. I was actually a little surprised at his looks. He did not appear nearly as frail as I expected him to. His skin did not have that transparent, glassy consistency you see in old people a lot of the time, and he seemed pretty fit—not a body builder, but thin, healthy. His hair was mostly gray, but he had plenty of it, and he did not wear glasses.

He was looking intently at me, as if he were trying to place me, but he didn't say anything. There was a very awkward silence, at least for me, as outside the window a couple of lawn sprinklers were going full blast, chattering like a nest of angry rattlesnakes.

"Mr. Grawer, you don't know me," I started. "My name is Dennis—Dennis Dearborne."

I walked across the room and extended my hand. He shook it without getting up.

"Hel-lo," he returned. His voice made up for any misconceptions about his age. He sounded about 150—slow and skaky, even with that one word. None the less, he managed to bounce the conversation back to me with very little effort. I decided to just bull through and tell it like it was.

"I'm here because I came across this drawing," I said, pulling it from the bag.

I held it up so he could see it better. He didn't say anything; in fact, his face betrayed no recognition. I wondered for a second if I had the wrong guy. As much as he did not react the way I had hoped or expected, he was definitely studying the drawing closely. He leaned forward, and his eyes were darting around it ferociously.

Eventually, he leaned back and reached over to the side of the bed, resting his hand there and curling his fingers under to his palm.

"I know it was done a long time ago," I said. "Maybe you just don't remember it."

"That's a good drawing," he said, finally. "Did you do it?"

It took him about a minute to say that.

"No," I said, perhaps a bit too tersely. "I'm pretty sure you did."

"Hmmm. I don't think so."

He sat, blinking stupidly, and I'll admit his routine was getting on my nerves, mostly because the visit was not going as I had anticipated. Additionally, I felt like an idiot, standing there holding up the drawing the whole time.

"It's good. Did you do it?"

"No, sir," I said. "Listen to me. Isn't your name John Grawer? That's what it says right here."

I meant to point to the signature but fingered the inscription instead. That caused me to remember a question I had intended to ask in my rehearsed version of the conversation—the one in which he recognized the drawing right away and was eternally grateful.

“What does ‘Water From the Moon’ mean, anyway?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” he said, shifting in his chair. “It’s good, though. Did you . . .”

“No,” I cut him off, rudely. Then I remembered the note. “Wait, I found this in the backing when I took it out of the frame. I think it is for you.”

I pulled the note out of the bag and walked it over to him. He reached out and took it and tried about 20 times to unfold it, but his thumb kept slipping off the edge of the paper. It looked as though his left hand did not work very well. I was about to help him, but he got it and started reading. I was watching his eyes as he did. For a while, he almost had me thinking he wasn’t the John Grawer I had been looking for, but as he read that note, all my doubts vanished. I could see he had finished reading; his eyes were not on the paper anymore, and he was thinking about something, looking at some invisible point a few feet in front of his face.

“See, Mr. Grawer, I didn’t feel right keeping this,” I said, holding up the drawing again.

He looked up at me and continued with the same song as before.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “It’s good, though. Did you do it?”

This set me off.

“Dammit! Your name is John Grawer, right? I talked to your nephew on the phone. You’re telling me you did not know a woman named Catherine? You did not draw this?”

I stopped. His expression was unchanged, but a tear slid down his cheek and landed with a little pop on the letter, making a small, dark ring in the ancient ink. I, of course, felt very proud of myself. I had succeeded in verbally bludgeoning a poor, old, grieving man until he cried. I stood there dumbly, not sure how to get myself out of there. In the awkward silence, he jerkily raised the back of his left hand to his face and tried to wipe away the tear with it.

“Look, I’m really sorry,” I said, backing across the room. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I just wanted for you to . . . I’ll just leave this for you and be on my way.”

I put the drawing on a table on the other side of the room from him and started toward the door. Right at the threshold, his voice stopped me. I turned around to face him.

“Dennis,” he said, slowly. “Den-nis. ‘Water . . . From . . . the . . . Moon’ is an old . . . Japanese . . . saying. It means . . . ‘something . . . you can never . . . have.’”

Then he smiled.

Epilogue

Letting Go

Late Spring, 1989

I visited him at least once a week over the better part of the next year. The weather cooled before long, and we settled into another bitterly cold Minnesota winter. At Christmas, I saw Jenny for the first time since the family picnic the previous summer, and I had to explain to her what happened between me and Heather. She didn't hold it against me. The following spring was very wet, making the losses of that summer little more than an unpleasant memory. On my second visit, I brought John a drawing pad and some pencils, and he and I would spend much of the time during my visits in those early months drawing quietly. I guess he hadn't done any drawing for more than 40 years, but it was surprising how well he still handled a pencil. His left side was very impaired from the stroke, but he was right-handed, so it did not really affect his drawing that much. He'd lost quite a bit on the technical side since he drew Catherine's picture, but the most important things were still there.

One day, we were idly sketching and I looked over to see what he was doing, and he was drawing my hands. Instantly, I could tell they were mine. The bends in the fingers, the veins, the nails, my grip on the pencil—they were all exactly right. It was amazing.

We also talked quite a bit. He told me about his time in the war, about his father leaving when he was a boy, and about Catherine. He liked to talk about her the most. It's amazing to me that, after all those years, the three months he spent with her still had such a profound effect on him. With his memory as compromised as it was, he may not have been left with much more. Mostly, he told me the same stories over and over. I'm not sure he realized he was doing it, but I didn't mind. He liked to tell them, and the more he did so, he seemed more and more at peace.

During those months, his mind and his body deteriorated steadily. He knew it, too, as he was able to do less and less over time. Eventually, he could not really draw anymore, and I would draw for him, or we would just talk. One day, as I was leaving, he produced a small wood box and gave it to me, saying he wanted me to keep it, in spite of my protests. He wouldn't tell me why, either. I opened it when I got home and it was filled with an odd assortment of items: a couple of marbles, a gold wedding band; a prayer card that said, "Evelyn Grawer, 1896-1974"; a ticket to a 1931 Cubs game; a slip of paper with Catherine's name and a telephone number written on it, and a little gold locket with a woman's picture inside.

From time to time, I would come and he could not remember my name. After a while, that became the rule, rather than the exception. It was a difficult thing to watch as he lost the ability to feed himself and to talk. I continued to come and would simply do the talking myself, telling him stories about myself and reading the newspaper to him. During the entire time I was visiting him, I

never saw anyone from his family come see him. It was their loss. They never got to know the artist that he was.

He had been bedridden for several weeks when I finally came to realize that he was gone. They continued to feed him through a tube and bathe him, but it was only his rapidly diminishing physical presence that remained. I eventually made the agonizing decision that I could not stay to watch even that fade away. On April 21, 1989, I made my usual visit and read almost every article in the newspaper aloud, watching his vacant eyes in vain for some hint of comprehension. I stopped.

“You know, I’m thinking about maybe going back to school,” I said. “Work is going really well. Apparently my rose card is a hot seller. It *is* depressing that I’m helping to break up couples all over the greater Minneapolis metropolitan area.

“I might get a cat. I don’t know yet. I had one as a kid, but my mom was allergic and I had to give it away.”

I got up from my chair, walked over to his bedside and put my arms around him; he did not return the embrace. I released him and told him “goodbye” and “thank you” while he just continued to stare straight ahead. Then I walked out. As I did, I glanced at “Water From the Moon” where it sat on the table, leaning against the wall. I thought for a moment about taking it with me, but I decided it would be more appropriate to leave her with him. Perhaps in some small way she still gave him comfort.

My eyes were watering so badly that my shoulder bumped the doorframe hard as I walked out into the hall, and I had to sit in my car for several minutes before I felt steady enough to drive. I went to the park before going home and took a short walk. The flowers were blooming along the walking path, and I was fascinated at how the new leaves come in the same manner on the young trees as they do on the big mammoth ones. I headed back to the apartment and immediately looked to the wall behind the lawn chairs, where the drawing of my hands was hanging. I decided I would go and find a cat at my next opportunity.

That night, I sat at my kitchen table with some newly purchased brushes and tubes of watercolors and a large, blank paper. I squeezed some of the colors onto my palette and, readying myself, I reveled in the exhilaration and anticipation that the undisturbed whiteness of the new page brings. Then I began to lay the first strokes of what would become a merry group of beach goers, playing to their heart's content at the frozen ocean's edge as the snow fell all around them.

THE END

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