

2003

## Saturn return

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SATURN RETURN

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Marilynn Elizabeth Benson

August 2003

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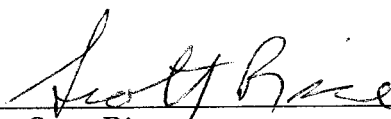
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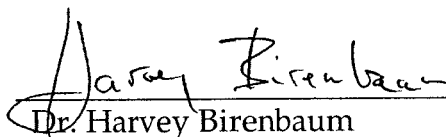
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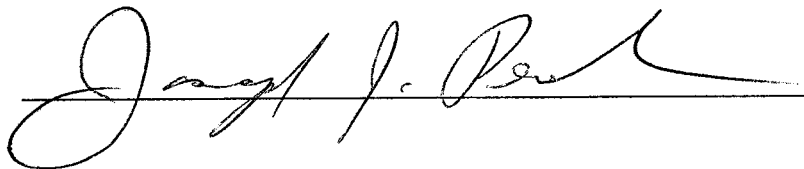


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ABSTRACT

SATURN RETURN

by Marilyn E. Benson

Lynn believes in God, or tries to. But when a three-year prediction keeps coming true, she finds loss in all of her pursuits: her business, her church, her girlfriends, her neighbors, her family, her health, and her housemate. Lynn must keep up her hopeful spirit or die trying, beginning for real with Good Friday, 2002, when she is pulled from her cabins in the Santa Cruz Mountains for a week like no other. The mistakes she makes and the truths she learns serve as lessons about God, human nature, and herself.

A near hermit after the dissolution of her neighborhood, Lynn's reclusive lifestyle collided only with her MFA courses, where she wrote this non-fiction story, an unlikely heroine's journey, *Saturn Return*.

## Dedication

For my family,  
and Francine, because  
Alex would have wanted it that way.

## **Author's Note**

All the names are changed,  
except for those that aren't or couldn't be.



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## Chapter Zero: Saturn Return (1999)

Ping-pong night on Allerton Street never started until Alex got home. We did it Wednesday nights because Thursdays I advised the junior-high youth group at my church. Every Wednesday there'd be a crowd of us standing around, mostly from the block but a few others too, drinking beer, maybe passing Nor-Cal's finest green in a brass pipe, and looking over our shoulders at the ping-pong table inside the garage. As the neighborhood's social director and embodiment of competitive spirit, Alex had to be there before the game could begin.

Tonight he'd been delayed by his friend Davey, whose bottle-green 1957 Ford pickup truck — the inheritance from a long-dead father — had died on the freeway yet again. Alex had bailed Davey out three times this week; questioned about it on his way out the door the night before, he told me, "What can I do? It was his Dad's." Alex never did much to clean up around the house, but I did admire the way my housemate would drop everything to go help a friend.

Tonight's gathering brought the usual group of neighbors and friends: Abby and Charles, who lived in separate apartments in the Victorian house next door; John and Jim, roommates a couple of towns over; Tony, who was establishing himself as the brilliant young Turk of prototyping and designing in Santa Clara; and Kim, Alex's girlfriend, whom he'd dated in high school, corrupted, broke up with, and then picked up again a decade later.

Alex had a kicker box in the back of his black 4-Runner, so we could hear the pounding bass of his rap music all the way up the block, like a herald from the modern age. As he approached, it drowned out the Sublime CD we were

playing. Kim turned her head toward the noise. "I hate that fucking thing," she said.

I nodded. "Join the club."

Alex pulled into the driveway but stopped five feet before the garage, so as not to impede anyone's ping-pong prowess. He leapt out of his truck — Alex was a study of perpetual motion — kissed Kim, looked to me. "Got any beers?"

"Yeah, in the fridge."

"Cool. Be right back," he said, and sprinted up the stairs to our second-floor landing. The ground floor of our house was garages in front, and a laundry room and a guest suite in the back. I'd appropriated the guest suite as office space for the marketing company I started a couple of years earlier: Motormouth Marketing, marketing with personality. The second floor was our living area: family room, kitchen, bathroom, and front and back bedrooms. Mine looked out over the street, Alex's looked out over our other neighbor's bilious yellow house.

I heard John greet Alex on the upper-floor landing. "Big Al Danger," he called, followed by the slap of a high-five. Alex earned the nickname in high school when he started riding dirt bikes. Indeed, Alex was no stranger to danger, which might have been genetic. His father, Dave, raced cars, and his older brother Ethan was a championship go-kart racer. Alex wanted to play football in high school but his dad had put the kibosh on that. "Football's too dangerous. Race dirt-bikes instead." Alex took to the competition with great abandon. He liked anything fast: cars, motorcycles, women, you name it. When we started to get to know each other eight years earlier he was fighting a drug addiction to speed. I didn't learn that until much later.

Alex and I had lived together for four years and I'd known him for eight, which made me the newcomer in a group that was already pretty tight-knit. Abby and Alex were particularly close, not only because they were the only blue-eyed blondes in the neighborhood, but because they had the same last name. Sometimes her mail got delivered to us, especially when the envelope was addressed to her first initial and last name, followed by her address.

Alex came back downstairs and joined us in the garage. He'd changed his shirt, held a beer in his right hand and competition ping-pong paddles in the other. "All right, baby, let's get it on," he said. "Who's up?"

"I am," I said. My ping-pong skills were meager at best, and I preferred to get the humiliation over with as quickly as possible. I faced off against Abby. Ping-pong, back and forth. I gave her a run for the first few points but after that she beat me soundly —John had given her a few pointers the week before. I didn't mind losing and did so as dignified as I could, to let the real games begin. The best part of Wednesday night, for me, was watching everyone else play with their tricky shots and fierce competitiveness, plus the beer drinking and pot smoking. The championship usually came down to Tony and John, or Tony and Alex. Alex never played until the rookies had had their turns.

Abby faced off against John next, and waggled her hips as she waited for him to assume his stance. The neighborhood's worst-kept secret was how Abby had a thing for John. Abby didn't do much to keep the rumor quiet, and I noticed that she'd styled her hair for tonight's tournament.

I sat down on the sofa next to Tony, who told me about the new design he was working on. Tony was that guy in the college engineering classes who showed up for midterms with a skateboard under his arm, stoned, and yet

managed to set the curve of the exam every time. Tony and I had gone to the same state college, and, with one exception, were the only people in this crowd to hold college degrees.

Alex held a pipe in his left hand and took a hit, then offered it to me.

“What the hell,” I said. “Memory’s overrated.” I coughed on the exhale.

I heard another car on the block and looked up. Brian and Nancy were parallel parking across the street. They’d hosted my twenty-eighth birthday party the month before. Brian was Alex’s best friend, and he’d lived with Nancy for more than a year now in the condo they rented a couple of towns over.

“Hey, LB,” Nancy called to me. I waved. She was wearing black pants, probably a size zero. The only person thinner than Nancy was Charles, who’d hit his full height in junior-high but never added the bulk to compensate. Give him a black hat and a musket and he’d look like a Pilgrim, which was fitting because his family had come over on the Mayflower.

I hugged Nancy. “Haven’t seen you since my birthday party,” I said. “Where’ve you been?”

“Work and the kids are keeping me busy, running around,” she said. Nancy had two kids from an earlier marriage. She’d been an Air Force wife and hated it so much that the enormous diamond she wore on her left index finger was Brian’s promise ring. It represented the promise that he’d never ask her to marry him.

I shook hands with Brian and took a moment to play hostess. “Want a beer?” They both nodded.

“I’ll come up with you,” Nancy said. “I have to pee.”

I got her and Brian beers from the vegetable crisper drawer, and was opening them when Nancy came into the kitchen. "How've you been?" she asked me.

"Better. Grandma's not doing so great. She's been moved from her apartment to a place with more care. It sucks she can't live on her own anymore."

"And Motormouth?"

"We just finished two trade-show contracts so I'll relax for Christmas."

"That's great," Nancy said.

"Thanks. It is." We walked down the steps to rejoin the crowd. "But, I don't know, I'm feeling this sense of . . . negativity. It's not quite strong enough to be doom, but near it."

Nancy studied me. "You're twenty-eight now?"

"Mm-mmm," I said.

"Blame Saturn," Nancy said.

"The car?"

"The planet," she said.

"Astrology?" I asked. It surprised me that Nancy was interested in astrology — she seemed a little too put-together to truck with such theories. Not like Abby, who had a big book with everyone's birthday and how that pertained to their personality, and little books about hippie-dippy dream interpretation, which Alex didn't agree with at all. "What do dreams mean?" he'd ask rhetorically, and I'd say my line without missing a beat. "Absolutely nothing."

"Saturn return," Nancy said, like it explained everything.

"What's that?"

"Bad."

"It's bad?" I repeated.

"The worst," she replied.

I noticed the cadence of our conversation matched the ping-pong game going on back-and-forth behind us. John took out the Sublime CD and replaced it with the Red Hot Chili Peppers. A ball whizzed past my ear — Jim had gotten a little too enthusiastic. Nancy and I whirled around. "Hey, we're talking here," she said to him.

"Sorry, LB," Jim said. Alex had started the trend of calling me by my initials and it stuck; I was LB to this group. Nancy and I stepped away from the line of fire.

"Saturn return," Nancy said. "It's where your life totally changes, turns upside-down. It usually lasts for a couple of years, between the time you're twenty-eight and thirty. It's something about Saturn coming out of retrograde."

Abby caught the last part and came over. "What are you talking about?"

"Saturn return," Nancy said.

"I thought so," Abby replied. "They say it's when most people get divorced."

"Good thing I'm not married, then," I said.

"You turned twenty-eight in November, right?" Abby asked. I nodded. "God, I was so happy when I turned thirty-one because I knew it was over."

"Mine hit early," Nancy said.

"So it's doom and gloom for the next few years?" I asked.

The girls raised their eyebrows at each other before looking at me, somberly. Kim joined in. "Get ready for a wild ride." Eavesdropper. It didn't surprise me. After finding out that her second job was dancer at the local bikini bar, and hearing her moan about how sexy this creepy bald guy was in a horror movie she saw with Alex last summer, my opinion of her had lowered. She didn't have the temper of Alex's last girlfriend — never thrown anything at him that made a hole in the wall — but Kim didn't come off as very bright, even though she was the other person in the group to graduate from college.

"OK, Nostradamuses," I said to the assembly of my girlfriends. "Back off. The stars have no hold over my life." In the background I heard Tony rejoice as he sliced one past Alex to win the game.

"Nice shot," Alex said to him. "Ping pong, baby. Game over."



## Chapter One: Good Friday Morning (2002)

For months I floss my teeth for Gordy while he battles brain cancer. Also *Cousin Gordon* and *Gordo* to me, Gordy continues working as a dentist while undergoing five-day-a-week radiation treatments. We live four hours away from each other and I want to acknowledge his recovery effort. Flossing, the most appropriate sacrifice and also good for my teeth, is my most enduring New Year's resolution.

I don't lapse until the week before Easter. Today I'm up early because I'll be driving to the Central Valley, to spend the Easter and Passover weekend with Auntie Lynn. After being widowed, she married Lee, a Jewish orthodontist, so we start with a Friday-night Seder and end Sunday morning with brunch and an egg hunt. We call it the EastOver weekend, after agreeing that Pass-ter doesn't sound as good. My mom had arrived at my aunt's place days before to assist with holiday preparations, and to help Auntie Lynn with Gordy, her son, who'd moved in with her after his brain surgery. Mom stayed in the second guest bedroom — and drove my cousin to a couple of his weekday radiation treatments, two hours round trip.

"How's he doing?" I'd asked her on the phone a couple days ago.

She paused. I filled it in. "Tired?"

"Tired," she said.

So I am up early on Good Friday morning, ready to try my luck at the radio contest I woke up to. And Steve, who knows more about basketball than anyone since Grandma died, is a sure thing. Steve manages a go-kart shop in San Jose called CalKart. In 1992 he introduced me to Alex, whom I lived with for

longer than anyone but my parents. But I moved away from the house on Allerton Street in 2000, choosing to live in cabins in the woods of the Santa Cruz Mountains with no roommate, and no neighbors but my landlords and their big, loud dogs. After what happened on Allerton Street, after becoming the poster girl for Saturn return, I prefer the solitude. It's better this way.

"Good morning. CalKart."

"Steve-Steve-Steve."

"Ly-ynn." His syllables ring with surprise; it's no secret that seven o'clock is early for me.

"Steve. Who's the only NBA player to win three championships in a row?"

"Michael Jordan," he says.

"I guessed him already."

"Wilt Chamberlain."

"They said it was more recent than that," I say.

"Who said?" He's sounding like he has better things to do.

"KMBY. It's for a radio contest."

"Well, it's not Shaquille O'Neal. The Lakers haven't won three in a row . . . yet." Steve is a huge Lakers fan. He names another possibility, someone I don't know. I thank him. "Call me later," Steve says, and we hang up.

Before I can call the station, though, someone else provides the right answer. It's a player Steve hadn't mentioned, another one I didn't know. I climb down from my sleeping loft to brush my teeth. I consider flossing. It's been days. I'm breaking my vow for the first time in four months. But it can wait until later.

Fifteen minutes later I sit outside with a big cup of water on a porch step and call Steve back from my cordless phone.

"CalKart."

"Hi Steve, it's Lynn."

"Well?"

"Steve Kerr," I say.

"Steve Kerr!" Steve says. He sounds bemusedly amazed, as though he'd known it all along and was just pulling my leg.

"They said he played for a couple different teams," I say.

He thinks for a minute. "The Bulls and the Spurs."

"Yes!"

I can almost hear him shaking his head. "Kerr-ses." We share a love of word games, but his pun sounds obligatory.

"Currrses," I echo, and for parallel's sake I tack on a "Steeve."

He hears his name, takes a breath. "Are you sitting down?"

"Yes, outside," I say, clipped, wary. Steve doesn't kid about stuff that matters. "Porch step. Downstairs." If I stall long enough I'll talk my way out of it — sobriety-test logic. But I can't think of anything else to say.

He takes one more breath, then the words come out in a rush. "Two days ago, Alex committed suicide."

**Chapter Two: Bunker (1995)**

The night Alex told me to “put on your boots, we’re going to the Bunker,” I wasn’t about to refuse. This would be our first major adventure since we’d moved in to our three-month-old apartment. We used to run around San Jose together; well, I’d run, and he’d skateboard alongside, my pace car. I beat him once and still feel pride about it. Alex lacked grace but was blessed with loose knees — he skated casual and walked jaunty. “I should lead a parade,” he said once, high-stepping down the street, crossing his arm up and down in front of his body, drum-major style. “I would be an excellent parade leader.”

But since we moved to San Carlos? Nothing. He grew up there for fifteen years, but hadn’t taken me to the places he’d told me about: this hidden lake, that excellent burrito place, the shop that his grandfather started, now run by his dad and co-managed by Alex. It supplied Silicon Valley with its smallest, most durable pieces for computers and centrifuge machines. Alex was proud of his job.

Could his Bunker invitation suggest that he was indeed rejoining the world after being dumped by his dream-girl, who chose college over him?

The dumping hit him hard; nobody knew that more than I. He’d broken down in our kitchen earlier that month and I wrapped my arms around him as he sobbed, “Why doesn’t she love me?”

I had no answer. I didn’t understand it, either, although I knew that I wanted to see her one more time just so I could punch her in the mouth. He broke down crying a couple of times, passed his time arranging the word magnets on our fridge into despairing or obscene poetry, or else he’d sit on the

sofa and stare at the TV, or feed the fish that she brought him from her uncle's fancy pet shop.

"I just wish I could get high," Alex said with a deep sigh the afternoon before our Bunker adventure, reclined in the green-leather sectional couch he'd bought shortly after we moved in. I went to my room and pinched the rest of my bag into his pipe, which I'd taken from the end-table drawer where we decided it would live for communal use. Going back to the living room I extended my hand to him. Alex took the gift, looked closely, smiled mutely before pouring it out into his hand. His face sank as quickly, like learning the biggest present under the tree didn't bear his name. He transferred the contents from his palm to the pipe's brass bowl and handed it back to me.

"Can't smoke this," he said sorrowfully.

"Why not?"

"Stems and seeds. Nothing but headache."

"It was all that I had," I said.

"You're one of the best, Lynn Benson," he said.

Though my offer was rejected, it was the least I could do. We'd agreed before we moved in together that we'd be strictly platonic housemates, so there would be no pleasures of the flesh to help him snap out of it. Besides, last week I'd scraped his pipe, hoping to cop a cheap buzz after a crappy workday. The resin made me so out-of-my-head stoned that for an hour I couldn't do anything but recline on his sofa and breathe.

Alex had dragged around the apartment for months; his break-up with Francine (rather, her dumping of him) had devastated him. They had seen each other the week before, but they both knew that it would be the last time. I

guessed that they'd had some break-up sex, maybe given some personal items back to the original owner. It killed me to see Alex so upset, especially after he'd always been so jovial when we lived in San Jose. I prayed for him a lot, and though it didn't seem to be helping, I figured that it would, eventually.

To distract himself from his depression, Alex bought a brand-new, professional-quality dirt bike. He bought his helmet and then schemed to have it professionally painted. He splurged on top-of-the-line riding gear that would maximize flash and minimize injury. His dad, Dave, offered some sponsorship money, and I threw in for a Leatherman, a multi-function tool that Alex could snap to a belt loop for quick repairs in the field. The motocross season was coming up. Tonight he needed to break in the new riding boots, which had just arrived mail-order at the machine shop where he worked with his dad and the machinists he'd known all his life.

We changed into dark clothes that could stand getting dirty. Alex wore his new racing jersey. "Got to get some sweat into it," he explained, then pulled a dark-green flannel shirt over it. I put on a dark purple sweatshirt and dark gray sweatpants, tied back my hair and laced up my Army-surplus combat boots. We grabbed his four-cell Mag-Lite from his black Toyota 4-Runner and strolled down the hill toward the homes of San Carlos. On our walk, Alex filled me in on the particulars of this assignment.

"OK. I haven't been to the Bunker since I was 14. It's a series of storm drains and culverts that replaced the area's original creeks. To get to the open drainpipe, we'll have to hike down behind some apartment buildings and possibly wade through a creek or two." He eyed my boots. "Are those waterproof?"

I shrugged. "I think so. Guess we'll find out."

We passed the apartments, then doubled back to evade suspicion. Crossing over the parking area, we snuck through the fence and hiked under the cantilevered carport. Alex grasped its overhead beams for support. I followed his example.

Fifty feet later we had our sketchiest encounter with people who might want to hinder our adventure. Light from an uncovered ground-floor window spilled onto our path, and we heard a man and woman talk about grocery shopping. Alex was first to pass through the beam, then gave me a thumbs-up sign that I could safely follow. The "Mission Impossible" theme coursed through my brain and in my moment of illumination, I blinked.

Successfully surpassing that danger, we hiked through the bulrushes and I thought about Moses. Alex pointed to some dead plant branches.

"Don't touch those," he warned. "They'll grab your clothes."

Carefully avoiding the sticker bushes below, I walked into another.

"Lynn, what are you doing?"

"Avoiding the bush on the ground!" I replied, mimicking his hiss. "You need to be more clear — I can't see for shit!"

He only said, "Oh."

We continued on. More sticker bushes lined the narrow stone ledge, two feet above the creek. "Just keep your back to them and let them brush your clothes," Alex said. I did, and we followed the ledge with no problem. We leapt over the creek and finally waded through three inches of water in a gully toward the entrance that now loomed before us: six feet tall and not round but oval, a

yawning maw. We faced the expanse and Alex took a breath. “Wow. They’ve done a lot of work on this.”

Casting final hesitancy aside, we entered the drain. I straddled the foot of standing water but Alex gleefully slogged through its deepest part, to test the waterproofing of his new boots and to make some noise, now that he was more free to do so. “We used to come here after school, to smoke,” he said. I didn’t ask whether this was during high school or junior high. I didn’t ask whether he was smoking cigarettes or weed. I didn’t want to know. His words echoed off the curves of our enclosure.

After seventy-five feet of easy tunneling, we stood in a room lined above with more storm tunnels, fed by lead-ins raised six feet from the ground and five feet in diameter — pretty reasonable for further tunneling. Alex gave me a boost. I clambered into the new pipe and reached out my hand to Alex, who waved it away. He leapt to the wall and grabbed hold of the ledge, but the steel tips of his boots allowed no purchase. His feet motored like the roadrunner escaping Wile E. Coyote’s buckshot-laced ACME birdseed.

“Uh, Lynn, little help here?” he asked. I extended my hand without a word. Alex grabbed hold and I helped heave him up over the side. He stabilized himself with his elbows but took a moment to get his feet up over the ledge, further scratching his boot tips in the process. I swung around and pulled his ankles up to the ledge. He gained his feet, panting. Then he lit a cigarette and smoked for a minute before we continued.

The swinging beam of his flashlight, more pronounced in this smaller, darker pipe, illuminated Day-Glo orange numbers at each new section, the arc of an eight, the slash of a seven, like cave paintings by prehistoric extraterrestrials.



Twelve sections later we came to another juncture room. This one had a feeder six feet above our ground level; this time, I bolstered Alex and then he gave me a hand from above.

The numbered sections continued. The pipes were smaller now, maybe four feet in diameter; we walked bent over, careful not to bump our heads. Alex picked up a two-by-four beam about my height and carried it in his left hand, Mag-Lite in his right.

The burning in my upper quadriceps told me that we were ascending a small but steady slope. After crouch-walking for what was probably only one hundred yards but felt like a quarter mile, we reached a small square juncture topped by a manhole cover twelve feet above. When Alex and I stopped to rest beyond the juncture, he turned off the Mag-Lite and we peered up the void, searching vainly for light at the end. There was none.

We continued. Two junctures later we found what Alex called a “breaker bar,” a steel rod with a sharp point at one end — he’d abandoned the two-by-four many football-fields ago. He’d dropped the beam in the murk and declined to pick it up.

“Cool,” Alex said. “I think we can use this to bust out.” After two more juncture rooms he put his hunch to the test.

He wedged himself up the wall and opened the manhole cover. “Come on, Lynn. Brace the bar against the wall at an angle, get a grip on it with your boots and then wedge yourself up the wall till you reached the top.”

I saw fresh air but could not smell it. “Alex, there ain’t no way.” He tried to convince me, but I refused to budge, having no faith in my wet boots or short legs. He sighed and dropped back down into the dark.

We chose to double back and, soon after, found a more suitable exit. Steel-ladder rungs to the manhole cover began six feet from our floor and stretched an extra six.

I hung back in the drain until Alex moved forward. Then the Mag-Lite hit my head and I realized I'd made the wrong move.

"Lynn, what are you doing?" Alex asked.

"Trying to get out of your way," I said.

Gentlemanly, he apologized for my own stupid mistake, then clambered up like a monkey and popped the rusty manhole cover from its fitting with grace and aplomb. He kicked up his legs and the bottoms of his boots from my view, disappeared for a moment and then peered down at me, commanding, "Hurry up, Lynn. Now!"

I stretched to the first rung and wedged the toe of my left boot into the crevasse between the top of the storm drain and the wall. I willed my body up to the second rung, and then braced my back against the pipe's small round wall, climbing up with my hands and feet. Emerging, I sampled fresh air and looked up at the stars. A car driving past slowed to peer at us, the underworld alien visitors to San Carlos, California.

"Man, that guy was trippin' on us," Alex said.

We grinned at each other and walked back home, satisfied with the excitement level of our subterranean journey, satisfied to be walking upright. Once we arrived home, after carefully wiping our feet, we went straight to the balcony where we stripped off our outer layer of filthy, cobwebby clothing. Underneath his flannel shirt, Alex's jersey remained pristine. He sighed and lit a cigarette. I joined him.

“Alex,” I ventured, “I’m sorry I wimped out at that first exit.”

“Forget it, Lynn. You’re tough as shit,” Alex said. “I’m impressed.”

Beaming, I toddled off to bed.

**Chapter Three: Particulars (2002)**

My body slackens and all I can say is, "Jesus Christ," which comes out between a prayer and a curse. Steve's message penetrates my brain, races straight to my heart and then circuits through my veins to the rest of my body, but first it shuts down my balance and motor skills and I slump to the step in a position of fetal catatonia. My head rests against a support beam, never before so aptly named, and I cradle the receiver between my shoulder and ear. It is the first time I've ever palpably noticed the pull of gravity on my body. It is all I can do to breathe. In. Out. Repeat. I have grown cold and rub my hands together, but they are too numb to feel each other so I stop.

"When?"

"Two days ago. Wednesday. Dave just found out yesterday." Dave is Alex's dad. I can't imagine finding out that your child has already been dead for a day and nobody could find you or reach you until twenty-four hours after the act. "After Dave found out, he immediately went into 'protect-Ethan' mode," Steve says.

"Well, yeah. Sure," I say.

"Dave called me to ask if Ethan had talked to Alex, if they'd fought or anything, something that might have driven Al over the edge."

Ethan was Alex's older brother. For years I thought that Alex was the eldest; it was something in the way Alex carried himself. He spoke to Ethan in this self-assured way — Alex was always more of a smart-ass. It wasn't until Ethan's twenty-ninth birthday party that I learned that truth. We all met for

pizza. Alex got there late and walked straight to me. “Francine’s pregnant,” he said.

“Oh my God. When did it happen?”

“The last time we did it.” His shoulders slumped.

“What’s going to happen?” I asked. I held on to some idealism, though I knew the answer before I asked it.

Alex exhaled through his lips, like a horse. “Well, it’s not like she’s going to have it. She’s just starting at UC.” I could tell the words were Francine’s. Before turning away he looked in my eyes. “The funny thing is, I never knew I wanted a kid.” I watched him go and silently asked God how this could happen. Alex had already been devastated by the break up. The news of Francine’s pregnancy, the realization that he wanted to have this baby with her, and the knowledge that she didn’t want the same thing — it was more than Alex should have to handle, I thought. God wouldn’t have anything to do with this, would He? I thought about the basic tenet that God was in charge of everything, and then the Book of Job popped into my head. Where was God then? Watching TV?

Steve continued talking and I pulled my attention out of my mind and back to the phone. “So it became my job to find out, in some natural way, whether Ethan had said anything that might have pushed Alex over the edge.” His words were bitter; it was a crappy assignment.

“Had he?”

“No. Turns out they haven’t spoken in a little while. I called Dave with the news, and then last night Dave and Michele came over after dinner to tell Ethan.”

Michele, the boys' stepmother, pretty much raised them once their mom, Chris, split. Michele was the only person on my side of the argument when I left the house in Redwood City, after I tried to get Alex thrown out. I'd run into her at a movie theater a few weeks after Alex came back from the hospital. I'd been afraid of how she'd react when she saw me, and nearly wept with relief when she scooped me into a big hug. Best of all, she was the only person who agreed with me. "Alex fucked up," she said, "so Alex should move." I told myself then that only Michele's opinion mattered — she was the smartest of anyone in the neighborhood, for certain.

"So," I asked Steve, "you knew before Ethan?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, Steve," I want to tell him how much I think that sucks, but I feel certain he can hear that in my voice. "How are you doing?" The silence on the other end of the line tells me what a stupid question that is.

"Anyway," Steve says, clearing his throat, "Michele asked me to tell you. Like, after she and Dave told Ethan, she said, 'God, someone has to tell Lynn.'"

"How's she doing?"

"I think it's tough. I mean, she raised Alex, but she's not his biological mother. Dave and Chris have been talking about it so I think maybe . . ."

I finish his thought. "Michele's having a hard time fitting into it all?"

"Yeah," Steve says.

"And Ethan?" I ask.

Steve sighs. "I'm on Ethan watch. It's pretty bad."

"Did he go to work?"

"Early this morning. Then he called me from the parking lot, crying."

The idea of Ethan crying is almost more than I can take. I've seen him happy, I've seen him pissed, I've seen him high, but I can't imagine tears running down his face.

I do what I can to sit up a little and ask the question that stems from every suicide. "How'd he do it?"

"Punched a big hole in his arm," Steve answers euphemistically. I don't want to know what that means and I don't ask. Alex is dead. At this point, how he got there isn't material; every option is equally horrifying. Steve adds a verbal punch in the gut. "He meant to do it, Lynn."

I say the name of God just to make sure He's listening, and then ask Steve whether there will be a service.

"I don't know. Dave said something about burial at sea, but I don't think they've decided anything. Still numb."

"Well, yeah." I know the feeling, try to imagine it magnified five-fold but can't.

"You going to be around?" Steve asks.

"I'm supposed to drive to the Central Valley today, you know, for Easter. But I'm not sure now whether that's going to happen. I don't think I'll be able to drive for a while." I shift the focus from myself back to where it belongs. "Do you think there's anything I can do?"

Steve hesitates for half a second and then says, "Maybe call Michele." I hear a commotion in the background. "UPS," he says. "I gotta go."

"I'll call you later," I tell him, then hang it up. The moment the connection severs I keen, the moan coming deep and low from my belly, my spleen, resonating through my body cavity. My heart has dropped below my

diaphragm and I feel my organs tingle with numbing grief. My heart has dropped from its cavity to join my lower organs and resonates in my body cavity. This sound has come from my body only once, when Grandma died. I barely survived that loss. How will I get through this one?

Finally I am able to sit up. I soothe my slagged throat with a drink of water, then sit back against the porch post, and dial Michele and Dave. It's early, but I'm pretty certain someone will be up, because Dave usually leaves for work before most people, on normal days. Their answering machine picks up and I find myself without words, am glad that their message runs for a minute so that I can think of something to say. "Michele, Dave, this is Lynn. I just talked to Steve."

The phone picks up and Dave asks, "Hello?" I should have known. They always screen their calls.

This is the first time I've spoken with Dave since the day he and I met to talk about Alex's hospitalization, the only time Alex went to the hospital in what I referred to as his "long illness," like, "He was sick for a long time."

All I have to do is say his name, take it slow. "Dave?"

"Yes?" He sounds fogged. I feel retarded.

"It's Lynn." No comprehension from Dave. "Lynn Benson," I say.

"Oh," he says. "Lynn."

We both know why I called but neither of us wants to say it. I summon my will. It comes from where my moaning did earlier: my heart, belly, spleen.

"I just heard . . . about Alex." I squeeze my eyelids shut. Now is not the time to cry. "I don't know what to say."



"Who told you?" Dave asks. I hear defensiveness in his voice, like he's afraid it's front-page news, like he'll be hearing from reporters all day.

"Steve," I say. "I talked to Steve."

Dave breathes; I can hear the effort in it. "I'm so sorry," I say.

There is a long pause as I think about what to say next. What is it about shock and grief that severs the tongue from the speech center of the brain? Only the most pedestrian phrases, the clichés, can slip through the fissures between the back of my head and my lips. "Um, is Michele there?"

"She's sleeping."

"Don't wake her up." *Dumbass*, I think. *Like he would, like they weren't up all night already.* "Well, could you let her know that I called?"

"Sure," he agrees, thickly, like his tongue is too big for his mouth.

"Dave, I wish I knew what to say. I wish things were different. I'm so sorry, for all of it."

"I'll let Michele know you called."

We hang up. It could have gone worse.

**Chapter Four: Halloween (1992)**

The night I met Alex I was dressed as Tasmanian Devil from the Looney Tunes cartoons. Steve, my neighbor at the apartment building where I lived with my friend Julie, had just started working for CalKart as their marketing guru. It was through him that I met Ethan. Ethan's brother, Alex, was dating a girl who was having a Halloween costume party. Steve, the ultimate neighbor, one who always had weed but hated to smoke it alone, invited Julie and me to come to the party with him. Steve and Julie dressed as nuns, which was funny because they were both smoking, and you haven't lived until you've seen two nuns, one in drag, smoking cigarettes. Steve in particular looked great in his costume, complete with a disciplinary wooden ruler. He was delighted that Julie had assented to be his costume date.

Ethan was the first person I saw once we arrived at the party, which was nice because he was the only person I knew at the bash besides those I'd carpooled with.

"Hey, Lynn, good to see you."

"Ethan. Happy Halloween."

"You, too. Want a beer?"

Julie answered for me. "Sure."

"My brother's here somewhere," Ethan said as we maneuvered through the house full of strangers, past the floor-to-ceiling spider web in the living room, toward the root of the noise in the garage. We passed a door that was slightly ajar and Ethan rapped on it, then entered.

"Girls, come meet my brother."

Alex heard Ethan's voice and leaned up from the dresser he'd been bent over, a dollar bill rolled up into a tube in his right hand. He took his eyes from the mirror and looked at us, then put the ivy wreath back on his head and adjusted the strap of his toga.

"All hail the mighty Alex," he boomed.

"Hail, hail, the gang's all here," I replied, then waved. "I'm Lynn, this is Julie."

"Steve's neighbor girls," Ethan clarified.

"Hey, any neighbor of Steve's is a . . . yeah," Alex said. He tipped his head back and took a deep breath. "Want a beer? Have you seen the place?"

"I was just getting to that," Ethan said.

"Cool." Alex's girlfriend tugged at his toga and he turned his attention to her. "I'll see you later. Maybe in Hell." I was disturbed by his throwaway comment until we reached the door to the garage, which sported a big sign that read "Hell." We pinched the keg's spigot and filled four red plastic cups from the keg. The music was exsanguinatingly loud and I heard the blood thumping in my ears. We gathered around the ashtray on the coffee table. Steve and Ethan lit a couple cigarettes. Julie bummed one from Steve and I took a drag off of it, too. The music was too loud to talk over it so we swayed together, smoking. I stubbed mine out first, and by the time everyone had done the same we topped off our beers and went back into the house. Once we made it to the family room, Steve took off and Julie and I stood around until she found someone worth talking to. I noticed a tall, blond man with cheese-grater cheekbones wearing a flight suit that fit too well to be a mere Halloween costume. I walked

into the kitchen to talk to him, although later he'd remember that he sought me out.

"What are you?" he asked me. "A mouse?"

"Mouse? Taz."

"What?"

"The Tasmanian Devil," I tell him.

"Look like a mouse. You know, with the ears."

I let it drop. "And you?"

"I'm a pilot. Cheapest costume ever."

"For you, maybe. My tax dollars paid for it. When'd you fly?"

"A few years ago." He held his hand out to me. "I'm Link."

"Lynn," I replied, shaking the hand he'd proffered. It was smooth and warm and big, his grip confident but not bone-crushing. "Nice handshake."

"I was taught how to shake hands with a lady from an early age."

"Very noble."

"It's my middle name," he said.

"Yeah, right."

"No. Really." He unzipped a pocket at the front of his suit and removed his wallet, unfolding the brown leather. He flipped past a couple of credit cards and pulled out his driver's license, which wasn't from California.

"Lincoln Noble," I read. His last name was Scandinavian and I pictured his family sitting around the fjord at the end of a long day of fishing, grating their daily cheese on their cheekbones and passing a platter of lutefisk.

"Pleased to meet you," he said.

"Likewise."

"Who do you know here?" Link asked.

"Nobody, really, except you. My neighbor brought my roommate and me. His friend is here, too, and I think his friend's brother is dating one of the housemates here."

"Lot of that going around. I'm seeing a girl who lives here, too."

"Where is she?" I asked.

"Beats me." He shrugged, leaned in closer to where I stood against a wall of kitchen cabinets. "I don't think she's home yet."

"Then she's not the same girl Alex is dating."

"Good thing," Link agreed.

"Nice to throw a party and have your guests show up first," I said. "Why go through the pre-party jitters if you don't have to?"

"Yeah." Link looked around, as though it seemed as strange to him as it did to me. "I'm sure she'll show. Eventually."

We reached a conversational impasse. His blue eyes were starting to mesmerize me and his cheekbones didn't help much, either. Anyway, I didn't want to get into it with his girlfriend if she ever showed up to her own party, plus I wanted more beer so I left Lincoln Noble and went back to Hell. Alex and Julie were dancing on the coffee table and I was liquored up enough to join them. Together, we boogied to the thumping techno.

"See you in Hell, baby," he told me during a pause between songs, sweaty from the dancing, or maybe the drugs.

I swiveled my gaze around the bleak garage, at the white sheets draped over the shelving units on the far wall, then looked back into Alex's face, his pinpoint pupils swimming in a penumbra of blue-sky eyes.

"I think we're already there," I said, but couldn't tell whether Alex nodded to my statement or the beat of the song that had just started.

Alex and his girlfriend broke up that night. Link and his girlfriend spent the night in her bed, where she had unprotected sex with him and the next morning told him she never wanted to see him again.

**Chapter Five: Telephoning (2002)**

Is it really only eight o'clock in the morning? Too early to call the church, and I'm not ready to talk to Mom yet – she's got her hands full in the Central Valley with my aunt and Gordy. It's too early for anyone to be calling me, and I never hear from telemarketers: I spend five dollars a month to keep my number unlisted, and the good thing about that is, my phone doesn't ring very often. The bad thing is, my phone doesn't ring very often.

I dial my father's number. Dad and I are too alike to have been very close when I was growing up, but once I started my business and could call him for advice we grew closer. I told my friends, "Starting a marketing company was the best thing I could have done for my relationship with my father." It wasn't far from the truth. Dad and I are both stubborn, and it doesn't help that we're both always right, even when one of us is obviously wrong. This made for tremendous rows at the dinner table when I was a kid — rows that usually ended with my running to my bedroom in tears, hearing Mom tell him to "go after her." He'd wait until I'd firmly shut my bedroom door, and then I'd hear his footsteps coming down the hall. He'd knock three times before entering, say something comforting that didn't console either of us because he didn't want to say it and I knew he didn't mean it, and then I'd wash my face and it would be family life-as-usual again.

Things are better these days. Dad's mellowing out and I guess so am I. He has a pretty cool head in a crisis; plus, his girlfriend leaves for work before six a.m., so I won't have to worry about somebody else picking up the phone.

His telephone rings. I think I have myself under control from the initial crying jag but when my father picks up the phone and says, "Ed Benson," I can only shudder.

He tries again. "Hello?"

"Dad?" I squeak.

"Marilynn?" He drops his professional tone, hearing the tone in my voice.

"What is it?"

"Alex committed suicide."

"Who?"

I like to think that he didn't hear me. "Alex. My former roommate."

There's a pause and then he says, "How?"

The same question I asked Steve and yet I resent hearing it from Dad.

"Steve said he punched a big hole in his arm."

"You mean he bled to death?" Dad asks.

Until now, I haven't thought about Alex's mode of departure. Suddenly I see him curled broken in the corner of San Francisco tenement, his body surrounded by dirty sheets and week-old newspapers and covered in blood, his own, gushing from his arm, then a stream into a trickle, his pale eyes closing from the effort of succumbing. Succumbing never came easy to Alex but he was good at it: especially when it involved self-destruction.

"Jesus, I don't know," and the minute I say it all I want is to know exactly how he died, get it from Steve or the police report, maybe. The truth has to be easier than my imagination.

"When?" Dad asks.



Mr. Fucking Fact-Finder. Did I really expect consolation? Or does the situation transcend consolation? If I don't want to hang up on him, I better give Dad the benefit of the doubt.

"Steve said Wednesday." On Wednesday I was having lunch with my former business associate, John, who is also my dearest friend from college. We'd gone to the new chi-chi restaurant next to the mailbox rental shop where I get my mail. John had greeted me with an Easter basket stuffed with living plants. Then we went into the restaurant and enjoyed one of our trademarked three-hour lunches. I'm feeling guilty; I can't believe that I was enjoying a beautiful lunch and a fancy gift the same day my longtime roommate killed himself. My telephone handset suddenly weighs three hundred pounds. Life seems too unfair to continue with this conversation and I ring off, but before I do, Dad tells me to call him if he can do anything, and I thank him even though I know he can't help; he can't turn back time and he can't make it go any faster. Right now time feels like it's stopped. I need to make it move again. There is no noise in the oak trees above me, the finches and jays having left me alone in my time of grief. I equate bird song with the voice of God, so the silence unnerves me more than I want to admit. I know that only I can get myself through this, but first it's going to take a little more information and help. But first I need a little more information. I dial Steve again and he answers on the first ring, like he just sat down by the phone with a cup of coffee.

I get to the point. "How did it happen?"

"Overdose," Steve says. "But, he left a note. It wasn't an accident."

So that's what he meant. "I'm supposed to go to the Central Valley today, but I don't know if that's going to happen," I tell him. "Would it be OK if

I came by the shop? It would be a good place for us to meet if I can get someone to drive me.”

Steve assents, reluctantly, though I know it’s from a desire to push the news away — he won’t be able to do that if I’m there. He sounds like I feel: numb and heartbroken. I thought numbness killed pain, but it doesn’t. My shoulders shake with cold.

As I dial my church from memory, I remember one day when Alex was reclining on the couch in our house on Allerton Street as I was rushing around, preparing to leave. It was fifteen minutes before my weekly youth-adviser gig at Trinity, my church, Presbyterian. Everyone there said there’d be “a special place in Heaven” reserved for me for spending my Thursday nights with a passel of junior-high kids.

“Where are you off to, Miss Benson?” Alex asked, pulling his gaze from the TV screen, which was tuned to some Nazi show on The History Channel, which we called “The Nazi Channel.” Alex couldn’t get enough of that stuff. “Hey, I can stomach it,” he’d say. “It’s my job to watch it and preserve it for other generations.”

“Alex, if the Nazis ever showed up at our door, they’d recruit you and arrest me.” I wasn’t Jewish, obviously, but my dark hair and dark eyes proved my lack of Aryan blood. My glasses would do me in if my coloring didn’t.

“Youth group.”

“What’s happening at youth group tonight?”

“Among other things, dodge ball.”

“Dodge ball? I used to kick some ass in dodge ball,” Alex said.

“Join us! It’ll be fun. Take it out on some seventh-graders.” At this point Alex spent his time sleeping, working, or arguing with the girlfriend he’d recently resumed contact with, a woman he’d dated in high school, took her virginity, took her to prom. Alex always argued with his girlfriends, after Francine. It was funny because he avoided conflict with anyone else. I couldn’t remember the last real fight that we had that wasn’t about more than cleaning the house.

One of the youth-group girls, Lorig, asked me about him for years, convinced “You and Alex are gonna get mar-ried.” She even wrote about Alex on my going-away card when I moved up to the mountains from Redwood City. When I fled my neighborhood for the relative solitude of the Santa Cruz Mountains, Lorig wrote about Alex in my going-away card.

“Maybe I will,” he said, as he turned his head back to the dark TV screen. The aquarium’s bubbler was the only sound in the room. We used to have fish but they’d died the same day I went to the SPCA looking for my lost cat. I came home and opened my front door to a huge tank of clouded water, and lifeless, bloated fish bodies, eyes gaping up at me. I had to call Alex to tell him, only daring to put a sheet over it with Charles. The tank was Alex’s domain; my only fish in the aquarium were a couple of feeder goldfish that I’d had for three years. They died, too.

Walking out the door to get into my truck to leave for youth group, I heard Alex rummaging in the drawers of the end table for his pipe. Even though we lived in a new house and I had a pipe of my own now, given to me by my best friend, Sean, for a 28<sup>th</sup> birthday present, we held to tradition by keeping his pipe in the end table. If I got hard up I’d offer to clean Abby’s pipe, which

always seemed to need it. I could never understand how it developed a thick resin coating so quickly, figuring that she and John were smoking better weed than I could get. Although we all lived on the same block, we all had our own sources for herb.

Anyway, I knew that Alex wouldn't show up for dodge ball at youth group, but always wished he had. Would it have made a difference, or was he already too far-gone for God? As I dial the church's number I realize that now I'll never know, never be able to ask him, never be able to apologize for being so fucking blind about the whole thing. Alex is dead and it's un-effing-conscionable. The only thing I have left is cold and questions. Did God make us in His image, or do we make Him in ours? And what about eternal damnation for those who throw their lives away? I'd always believed that before, but now? Alex burning in Hell? Could God really do that? Alex had his faults, but we all have our faults; that's part of the human thing He built into us. Why was it Alex's job to suffer for them? I shiver, grab an afghan from the back of the sofa, and throw it over my shoulders as I wait for someone to answer on the other end of the line.

The secretary picks up the phone and I blurt my name and ask for Pastor Mary, the senior pastor, who'd asked if I'd apply for youth director when the woman with the job got called to a church of her own.

"She's not here, Lynn. This is her day off."

"You're not holding Good Friday services, then?" I ask. Usually they pick one church in the area and do an inter-denominational service. That's what they did last year, anyway. I can't believe I'm going to have to go through this alone.

But the secretary comes to my rescue. "Would you like to call her at home?"

I agree and she gives me the number, which I immediately call, only to be subverted by an answering machine. I leave as coherent a message as possible, which is impressive considering that it's almost too hard to breathe. By this point I'm out on the front porch of the upper cabin, looking at trees but not seeing them, numb to the early spring sun on my arms. A few birds have returned, but my ears are too plugged to hear them scratch in the fallen leaves, prospecting for acorns missed during wintertime. For a second I wish they'd fall down dead. I want the silence again.

My phone rings and I lurch to answer it.

"Lynn? It's Mary. What is it?"

Momentary warmth suffuses me and I can barely acknowledge her, so I take a deep breath to prove that I'm there and she had the right number.

"Alex committed suicide," I say, when I can.

It's not what she expected, I think. Pastor Mary grew up in the same town where Gordy and my aunt live. She knows about his brain tumor: more likely I'd call about that. But she knows about Alex, too.

"Oh, Lynn. I'm so sorry."

"I'm supposed to go to the Central Valley today, to see my mom and Gordy, but I don't know how I'm going to get there. I can hardly walk, let alone drive. I've been crawling around on my porch for half an hour. I can't think."

"It's unconscionable," she said.

"Yes!" My fervor startled her. "I was just thinking that as I dialed your number. How could he do it? How could it be that he felt bad enough to take his own life?"

"And to learn about it on today, of all days. It's like a portent."

Good Friday has always been important in my spiritual development. It was a Good Friday service thirteen years ago that first moved me to being a stronger Christian. I hadn't really understood about Jesus' sacrifice before that, before I saw it acted out. Pastors and parishioners each took roles of somebody there the day of Pilate's judgment and the Crucifixion. Ever since, Good Friday's been the only day I always go to church. Well, maybe not today.

I think Pastor Mary knows I needed a break from the topic. "How's Gordy doing?"

"OK. Mom's there now. She says he looks tired, but that he's looking forward to seeing me."

"That's a blessing."

"You know, it really is. I mean, I've always drawn parallels between Gordy and Alex. They never met, but they had so much in common: addiction issues, you know. Gordy even has a daughter named Alex."

"Coincidence."

Pastor Mary knows the Anne Lamott line about coincidence being "just God working anonymously," so I let it pass. "It will be good to see him."

"Does that mean you're going to the Valley today?"

"I don't see any way out of it."

"Do you have a way to get there?"

"I think I know someone I could call," I admit.

"Lynn, I'm so sorry. You will be in my prayers today."

"Pray for his family too, would you? His brother's not doing very well. This is the first family member he's know who's died." I don't know why I asked her to pray for them. Where was God when Alex spiraled down the

rabbit hole? I am relieved not to be leading the youth group anymore. God is love, sure, but love hurts. I realize now why Alex bought the dirt bike after Francine's abortion. He needed a strong distraction, something he knew he was good at. What will I use as my consolation prize? How can I think of redemption when Christ hasn't risen yet? It won't be Easter for two more days.

Pastor Mary exhales, hard. I realize how hard it would be to serve the spiritual needs of a community, understand why the pastor at my other church left after having an affair with one of the parishioners, why another became an alcoholic. Without the faith required of the job description, I believe that the job could tear you apart. Fortunately, Pastor Mary has the faith required, the living water Jesus promised. I need to wash my hands in that: submerge my face, open my eyes, and watch the bubbles rise to the surface.

"Have you prayed?" Pastor Mary asks me.

"No." I shake my head and close my eyes.

"Do you want to?"

"Yes."

She leads us in prayer over the phone, and I kneel on the patio. After "Amen," she takes a breath. "Do you feel better?"

"A little. It helped."

"Good."

I spit out the question that hit me the minute Steve gave me the news, the question I've been too chicken to ask her until now. "So, if Alex took his own life, does this mean he'll suffer eternal damnation?"

I hear her collect her thoughts for a moment and weigh out what to say, like a bag of tomatoes, before speaking. "Lynn, I think what we need to focus

on here is what we know about God. There is no mention of Hell in *The Bible*. Yes, the God we read about in the Old Testament is vengeful. But Jesus' presence alters His disposition in the New Testament. All that we know of God is his love, his forgiveness. More than that," she continues, "he forgives us for our sins, because he's been there. He knows how hard it can be. Focus on that, not on the stories that proliferate outside of scripture."

I'm not sure whether I believe her but I'll chew on it for a while. "Thanks, Pastor Mary."

"Happy Easter," she says, a glimmer of promised hope in her voice.

"He is risen, indeed," I respond.

We hang up, and I leave a brief message for Mom at Auntie Lynn's, saying I didn't know whether I'll be there today or not, then hang up fast. Though plenty dehydrated, I can't help but cry some more: for the stupid, senseless waste of Alex, his potential, talent, and vitality . . . and also for the part of me that can't help hating him for pissing it all away.



**Chapter Six: Winter Vacation (2000)**

"I wish it were winter," Alex said as he looked out the window onto Allerton Street.

I couldn't understand his desire — winter sports were anathema to me. "In order to ski, snowboard, cross-country or snowshoe, there has to be snow. In order for there to be snow, it has to be cold and wet. When I go away I want to wear as little as possible." I'd bikini-swim in the Pacific in October, but lacked enthusiasm for *swush*-ing down a mountainside.

But Alex lived for the wintertime. He usually bought a new pair of boots in October at a pre-season Ski and Snowboard Expo, and then spent the next 30-45 days being haunted by their box on the top shelf of his closet. Sometimes I'd come home and he'd be wearing them around the house. "Gotta break them in," he'd say. The winter after Francine dumped him, El Niño dumped white stuff at Kirkwood for months longer than usual. Alex boarded for forty-two days that season, forty-seven the next, fifty-two the year after that. Some of us wondered if he ever went to work. "On a good day, when you're cruising down the hill, taking jumps when they come at you, it's like . . . it's like surfing on clouds." It was the only metaphor I heard him use for the sport. It hooked him quickly and just held on. Alex already had one of those thrill-seeker mentalities.

The next year when we moved to Allerton Street, he fired up the neighborhood. Most of the guys — Brian, Nik, and John — were already pursuing the sport with great abandon. Alex talked Abby into strapping on a board and she converted from skiing. Charles and Jim preferred to ski, but were happy additions to a neighborhood jaunt to the slopes, and not only because

they always had weed. The way Alex drove — like the sun would melt all the snow if he didn't get there quickly — he could get from Redwood City to Tahoe in three hours. One time Alex got pulled over, the cop looked him dead in the eye and said, "Son, next time, we're just going to shoot you." When Abby procured a ski cabin in South Shore Lake Tahoe for a weekend, I was glad that work plans would keep me in the area until well after Alex would want to leave.

We decided that Charles and I would drive up together in my truck. We'd been spending a fair amount of time together watching strange independent films, and his bookshelves contained some titles I'd never read. I'd thought about asking Charles out but never did; I could never date anyone I outweighed. Even at thirty-five, Charles looked like a gangly seventeen-year-old. Alex was so eager for me to go on the trip that he called Charles to set up our driving arrangements. It surprised me that he took such an interest, but I realized he probably wanted to trick me into strapping on a snowboard and careening down a slope.

I called Charles that afternoon. "Hey Charles, what are you doing?"

"Well, I just finished listening to a message from you about driving up to Tahoe together, now I'm listening to a message from your exceptionally long-winded roommate about driving up to Tahoe with you, and now I'm talking to you. Let me guess why you're calling."

We made the carpool arrangements and all was well. I spent most of Friday packing every piece of clothing I own, mourning for my tank tops. I lacked the high-technology clothes that kept out the cold without adding bulk and as such would go to the mountains dressed as the Michelin man, only without the ability to change tires or award stars to snooty restaurants.

But my friends were going, and who was I to miss a good party, anyway?

Alex, Abby, Brian, and Jim (whose roommate John had just stopped dating Abby) all left work early and drove away in Alex's black 4Runner, which was plastered with snowboard and wakeboard and motocross stickers. Nancy would drive up with her kids a little later that day. I waved goodbye and wondered what might happen between Abby and Jim on the trip. She fell hard for John, and when they stopped dating her alcohol intake went up. The way that Jim looked at Abby made it obvious that he had feelings for her, and Abby didn't like to be alone. Of course, with her perfect figure, blonde hair, blue eyes, and party-girl personality, solitude wasn't something she faced often. She didn't tramp around, but she liked being on the arm of a man, having a good time. Who could blame her? John was handsome and funny and had a good body, plus the money he made was enough to merit a new BMW sedan. He drove as fast as Alex, sunglasses on, but wouldn't drive it to the slopes. I guess John figured that a ski-cabin love-triangle wasn't how he wanted to spend the weekend. I watched Alex's truck drive away. "Dear God," I prayed, "don't let anyone's heart get broken."

Charles's dentist appointment ran until 4:45, and I got to his place around 5:00. I wanted to be on time; a first trip with somebody is always touchy, especially with someone of the opposite gender. Charles would be as always: laid-back. And we liked the same music and enjoy more-than-occasional laughter. He was an optimal travel companion.

The traffic was heavy on 101 north past Oracle on the way to the Bay Meadows racetrack, where we'd spend the occasional Friday night making two-dollar bets while drinking dollar beers and eating dollar hot dogs.

"I hope we're not stuck in this all the way up," Charles said, beginning to worry.

"I'm in no real hurry," I told him.

We hit an open stretch by SFO and I smiled. "We'll have light traffic the rest of the way."

"Sure, Lynn," he replied.

We took Highway 101 to get to 80. Traffic was thick getting on to the Bay Bridge, but lightened once we reached the span.

"Ugh," Charles sighed.

"Come on, this wasn't so bad," I said. "We left San Carlos less than an hour ago. This will be fine."

He turned his head and looked at me. "You're one of those 'glass-half-full' types, aren't you?" I laughed.

Charles' face was waking up from the Novocain and he couldn't keep his hand off his beard. "Does your beard feel like it belongs to someone else's face?" I asked.

We arrived at the cabin faster than Alex had. I think that all the Tahoe-bound drivers think the traffic will be awful if they leave from work at 5:00, so instead they all get off from work early and, as a result, get stuck in traffic.

"Didn't need chains until now, huh?" Alex asked me when we pulled into the driveway. But there was enough snow on the driveway that we had to attach the chains to drive ten feet to park.

"Nope," I said, "and the truck didn't, either." He laughed. We both enjoyed a dumb joke.

Alex and Jim heard us pull up and came outside to meet us. Alex brought a shovel and began shoveling as Jim looked on, smoking a cigarette.

"Being a Marine taught you to supervise, eh Jim?" I asked.

"Naturally."

Alex wisened up. "Hey, Brian!" he barked. "Get'cher self out here for some shoveling!"

"What?" came the muffled response from inside the house. A moment passed, and then Brian appeared at the door.

"Shovel, bitch." Alex commanded him. Brian took the shovel from Alex's hand and, freed from the shoveling duties, Alex picked up his beer and leapt into his 4-Runner. It started right up and he drove back and forth along the length of the driveway to better pack the snow. Then he backed out of the driveway and took off up the street a long, long way. We heard his tires squeal. Alex had snow tires and four-wheel drive, so he hadn't needed to put on any chains.

Abby came outside, beer in hand. "Where's he going?"

"Beats me."

Our question was answered as Alex's headlights approached us, then arced one hundred eighty degrees of a bootlegger's turn.

"Alex, are you crazy?" I hollered into his open window.

"That was fun!" he said, and drove back up the street to do it again.

Everyone helped us bring stuff into the cabin. My luggage included a big soup pot and my PowerBook. I'd also brought a three-wick candle I'd gotten for Christmas, and the picture of ABBA that usually graced the top of Alex's 40-gallon aquarium. I set up a shrine in the center of the table and waited for Alex to notice it. It was like playing Spoons, that card game where you pass cards to

the left until you have four of a kind, and then you surreptitiously steal a spoon from the middle of the table. The last person to notice is left without a spoon and loses the round. Alex was the last one to notice the ABBA shrine. Once he saw it, the drinking really began.

I knew I didn't want any beer, and I was pretty worn out from the week, so I poured myself a Jack Daniel's on the rocks with more than a splash of water. I'd found that people don't keep track of what you're drinking when you tell them you're drinking Jack Daniel's.

Little did I know that we'd be playing Dixie that night.

Dixie is a drinking game that Sabrina's (Don's wife, from France) brother taught us when he visited from his home in Bordeaux. It's kind of like Three-Man; or, depending on where you are, Three-Man is kind of like Dixie. If you roll a six, you're Dixie. The only way to get out of being Dixie is to roll another six. If anyone else rolls a six while you're Dixie, you have to drink. Additionally, if you roll a four, the person to the right of you drinks. If you roll a five, the person to the left of you drinks. If you roll doubles, everyone has to drink. If you roll doubles three times in a row, you get to make up a rule (i.e. no saying of any derivative of the word "drink," no crossing your legs, no putting your arms/hands/elbows on the table, etc.). It warmed my heart to know that the youth of today was learning so much from our global community.

I could have predicted that Alex would be the last to notice the shrine and also that I'd be the first person to roll Dixie. The game went around twice and I drank many drinks before I relinquishing the title. I started to think about the fact that I'd quit smoking the weekend before, and hoped that I'd be able to last the night without lighting up.

Across the room, Jim started giving Alex a bad time.

"You wanna fight me?" Jim sneered. "C'mon," as he got up off the couch, "I can take you." I backed away and watched Jim humble my roommate

"Oh, Jim," I cooed, fluttering my eyelashes, "I love the way you make him squeal 'mercy.'" Jim took a moment off from pounding on Alex to give me a bright smile. Jim was the most attractive of our bunch, in my opinion: tall, blond, with good teeth and broad shoulders. I didn't blame Abby for thinking about making a play for him.

While Jim and Alex wrassled, we resumed the Dixie game. After a few turns, Alex got tired of being pummeled and walked over to me. I showed him my new navel jewelry. I'd gotten pierced a few years prior but bought a new ring for my belly that week. I knew that Alex would appreciate it: Francine had pierced her nipple before they broke up. Alex had his done the next summer. As always, I was the last to know.

"Can I tug on it?" he asked, tugging on it.

"Uh, sure," I said, after the fact.

He pulled on one of the knobs and his fingertips brushed my belly.

"Ooooh," he exhaled, pulling me around to him. "You've got really soft skin on your stomach. Do you know that?" His voice went deeper and he spoke slower, continuing to trace up and down around my navel.

"Yes." I said, laughing, extricating myself from his grasp.

Nancy and her kids showed up and we spent a while getting them unpacked and acclimated. I got to bring Gigi, the four-year-old, her stuffed Eeyore.

“Say ‘thank you, LB,’” Nancy prompted. Gigi looked up at me with moonbeam eyes the size of CDs.

Despite — or perhaps due to — his belligerence, Alex was the first to pass out. I went to the room that Abby and I were sharing, leaving Abby and Jim giggling together in front of the fire in the living room.

At 6:45 Saturday morning, I was the last to awaken, so by the time I got dressed, most of the butterscotch schnapps was gone. It added to the “Twin Peaks” mood of the cabin. I felt like I wasn’t quite me. *Maybe it’s just the snow*, I thought.

“It’s called a ‘slippery nipple,’” Alex explained, mixing schnapps and hot chocolate. He was getting anxious, whining, “it’s time to goooooo.”

Charles and I were the first people ready to leave, which I found to be particularly amusing as I wasn’t even planning to ski. Nancy and Brian had already left to put the kids in day care and ski school. “Alex, you’re going to keep your speed down so that we can follow you, right?” Charles asked.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha, sure,” Alex responded. Then he peeled out of the driveway and taking off at fifty miles per hour, leaving me and Charles to fend for ourselves.

Charles drove us out Pioneer Trail to Highway 50 and linked over to Highway 89. He kept it at thirty miles per hour and the chains held tight, while I breathed a sigh of relief that I’d had my oil, transmission and differential fluids changed the day before. We hit the highest altitude yet at the summit on 89: 7725 feet. After a few more miles, though, traffic stopped. We saw a CHP car a few lengths ahead. Charles got out to see what was the matter. He came back looking grim.



“Highway 88 is closed. Has been since five this morning.”

After a nanosecond of deliberation, we opted to turn back. We were feeling pretty pleased with ourselves when we looked at each other, aghast.

“Do you have the key to the cabin?” we asked one another.

“No. Abby was going to give it to me but she didn’t.” I told Charles.

“Damn.”

The god of road-trip adventures was looking out for us, though. We turned around and headed back down the mountain. Suddenly Alex’s black 4-Runner came into view, driving up the way we’d just come. We both stopped in the middle of the road because there were no cars behind us. “Alex! Give us the keeeeeeyyss!” I whined.

Abby tossed the keys to Alex, who tossed them from his window into Charles’s lap.

“Wait a minute,” Charles said. “You guys took off like demons, and yet, we beat you to the highway.”

“Yeah,” I said, clueing in. “How’d that happen?”

Alex looked sheepishly at us. “Well,” he said with false bravado, “I had to buy a pack of smokes.”

“And . . .” I prompted.

“And I kind of got lost.”

“You got *lost*?”

“Well, I made a wrong turn,” he admitted.

“Alex, you made a wrong turn on your way to *Kirkwood*?” We were astonished. It was a memory that popped back into my head a year and a half later, on the afternoon that Brian finally came by to tell me what in the hell was

going on with Alex. Because Alex getting lost on his way to Kirkwood would be like me getting lost on my way to my mom's house, or to school, or the grocery store.

"So, anyway, why are you turned around?" Alex asked us, ready to change the subject.

"The highway's closed. Can't get through to Kirkwood," Charles explained.

"Fuck that. I'm not believing that shit," Alex said.

"Well, we're going back to the cabin," Charles said.

"That's cool. See you tonight!" Alex said, rolling up his window and turning around to find a more fruitful route to the resort.

On our way back to the cabin, Charles and I stopped to get provisions. I was happy to see that the little store had all the ingredients required for split pea soup. Charles paid for the beer and I paid for the food and a bottle of champagne, which worked out about evenly. Brian and Nancy and the kids were back at the cabin when we arrived, and were most jubilant that Charles and I had keys to the place. Nate, Nancy's nine-year-old, was itching to get out into the snow and I was eager for some exercise, so we took off for a hike around the perimeter of the house and back yard. Nate was one of those really cool kids who's old enough to think about real topics of conversation. We talked about snow and snowboarding and school and all sorts of stuff. He wasn't quite junior-high age and therefore unscathed by the politics inherent in seventh and eighth grade. A white Akita dog bounded towards us and gleefully peed in the middle of a pure white snowscape, happy to make his mark, even if it wouldn't last for very long.

We returned to the cabin refreshed. Nancy and I drank juice and smoked a joint and talked at the kitchen table while Brian laid down for a nap. Nate and Gigi played together and watched cartoons. Charles was reading his book. It was snowing outside, not too heavy but enough to qualify as the first snowfall I ever remembered seeing in my lifetime.

After a couple of hours, Brian and Nancy took their brood home to beat the traffic. Charles continued reading his book and I cooked up a huge pot of split-pea soup for the impending cold and hungry sportspeople. As it simmered on the stove, I opened my backpack and pulled out the two-foot-tall stack of mail I'd brought from home. Founding Motormouth Marketing put me on every magazine and direct-mail list ever created: computers, trade shows, graphics, business strategies, even a direct-mail circular about how to do direct mailings.

I'd been good up until then, eschewing buttery nipples for coffee, but it was time for a dram. I heated some General Foods International Coffee cappuccino and hunted around for its appropriate companion. Nothing was suitable until I opened and smelled the contents of a Southern Comfort bottle. I'd never been near it until that moment, but it smelled good so I added half a shot to my coffee. I tasted it, then added a bit more and smiled.

I doggedly read through my magazines, tore out articles of interest. The coffee was finished by the time I was ready to file the articles in appropriate folders, so I cooked up another mug's worth. As I worked, Charles breathed steadily on the couch as he turned page after page of his science-fiction novel. After my "Wish You Were Here" CD played itself out, KOZZ radio provided the soundtrack. "Comfortably Numb" was on, prolonging the Pink Floyd rush in the cabin. "Eerie," Charles said.

The snow fell all day long. Hurtled, actually — big fat buds hurtling themselves toward the ground, as though racing with one another. We remembered that before Nate left, he knocked all the snow off of our porch rail. Every hour or two Charles would poke his head up and peer at the rail to gage how hard the snow was falling. By the end of the afternoon, two feet of snow was piled up on the rail.

The troops returned around six, already warm from drinks at the bar. They were thrilled to discover the soup and fell upon it like hungry animals. Alex had met some chickadee, a Heavenly employee (where they all ended up skiing because the road to Kirkwood was impassable) who had his head so turned around, he'd forgotten to bring his snowboard back to the cabin. At least, that's what he said happened. He drove away to reclaim it and returned empty-handed.

"I'm sure she has it," Alex said. "I'm going to stay home, just in case she calls."

"Come on, Alex," I said. "Why not party with us tonight?"

"Maybe she'll come over."

"You'll see her tomorrow," I said. "Let's go out." I was the only person to press the issue, as though he had an understanding with everybody else to which I was not privy. I told myself that was a ridiculous idea. Alex was just worried about his snowboard and spun around by a pretty girl. Kim was working at the bar that weekend and we'd all keep our mouths shut. She'd never know.

Charles, Jim, Abby and I wanted to go gamble in South Lake Tahoe, but Alex held fast that he was staying home, so we left without him. He let us drive

his truck, though, because we couldn't fit that many people in mine and besides, his had four-wheel drive. The four of us went to a really expensive steakhouse where the butcher cut our steaks by hand. When he put the cuts on a scale, not one varied from eight-point-oh ounces. Was the scale rigged, like they say the slot machines aren't but you know that some of them really are? I wondered if both were regulated by the Nevada Gaming Commission.

After dinner we went to a hotel casino and I played video poker until my gaming budget ran dry. Right about then Charles found me. We went towards the exit in search of Abby and Jim, who were coming back into the casino from the parking lot.

"Ready to go?" Jim asked. Abby giggled. It looked like Charles and I should be asking them the same question. We stopped at the liquor and gas store and returned to the cabin, where we watched bad TV. Alex was already asleep in the room he shared with Jim. When I went to bed, Jim was giving Abby a back rub.

When I woke up Sunday morning I looked to see if Abby's side of the bed had been slept in. It had. I showered and headed out to the kitchen. Jim was outside prospecting for beers. After arriving back from snowboarding the previous evening, the boys dumped a bunch of cans of beer on the front porch. The cans were covered with snow within hours, and deeply buried by the morning. Alex stood smoking by the doorway, encouraging Jim. "Hey," Alex said, "at least they'll be cold."

I went back in and did a bunch of dishes. A window over the sink allowed me to survey the day. The tall firs were heavy with snow, and the sky was a deep cerulean blue, so clear that you could nearly see the heavens.

Alex approached me. "LB, I'm really glad that you came."

"Alex, I've been so happy to be here. Before yesterday, I'd never seen snow fall. This has been the first time I've ever really seen the beauty in winter."

He paused and we did this handshake-into-a-snap thing he's been trying to teach me forever, a ritual we used only for special times of understanding.

We gathered our suitcases and cleaned the cabin. Alex vacuumed. Abby was sad to watch me disassemble the ABBA shrine. "Relax. You'll see it at our place. It's not like you don't know where we live," I told her. A lost sleeping bag was found. I located Nancy's gloves, and was walking toward my truck to put them away for safekeeping when Alex stopped me.

"I've been thinking about what you said . . . 'the beauty in winter.'" Alex told me. "I really liked the way you put that. It was moving."

We gazed at each other, enjoying the weight of the moment. I loved it when my roommate expresses that side of himself to me. We used to talk like that all the time, especially when we lived in San Jose and would talk for hours, but once we moved to Redwood City our friendship changed. We rarely explored the topics that first brought us close anymore. These days we were more housemates than friends. I was glad he'd made such a fuss about me coming along on the trip.

Within two weeks John and Abby were dating again, and soon after that he moved in with Abby, and Charles moved in with Jim.

**Chapter Seven: Kevin (2002)**

Kevin was my boyfriend but now he isn't; we're just lovers. He'd been a good boyfriend for a couple of years and we talked about getting engaged back then, until I realized that he'd probably drive me to alcoholism. I don't do it well, taking second-place to a job; I did it for long enough when I was growing up. Dad was always off on some business trip.

Alex summed up the Kevin situation after I broke up with him. "Kevin just doesn't know how to treat a woman." It was mean, but mostly, I had to agree.

Before we dated, Kevin worked every day for five years. He ran his own company in San Francisco and dreamed of making it big. It seemed a cruel joke that he offered no support when I announced my decision to start my own company. I dropped him, moved on to my own life and my own firm, Motormouth Marketing. The joke was on me, though; Kevin went on to become the only dot-com millionaire I knew. He retired, bought toys, and enjoyed life. My business died when the dot-coms did; I lost \$6,000 of contracted fees when one client went bankrupt and another went on the lam, which didn't do much for my appreciation of human nature.

We stayed in touch after our breakup, though, and a few months before I turned thirty I invited him up to the cabin to take some portraits of me. He'd studied photography before pursuing technology. The portrait session started demurely and ended with sex on the front porch. It had never been so good. Neither of us were seeing anyone so we became lovers.

Now, six months after that day on the porch, I figured he was the person I could call to drive me to the Central Valley. Kevin knew Alex, but left my life before the block turned upside down. He is the clear choice for this errand. I call him, even though it's 10:30 in the morning and I am without-a-doubt certain that the call will awaken him.

When he doesn't answer after four rings, his home phone rolls over to his cellular phone. Kevin is a slave to his cell phone: he'll even answer it when he's getting his hair cut. True to form, although he's asleep, he picks up the cell phone on its second ring. I apologize for waking him up and tell him what happened.

"Oh, Lynn. That's terrible." I hear crackling on the line as he adjusts the phone, crooking his elbow to rub the sleep from his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Thanks."

"What can I do?" he asks.

"I was really hoping you'd ask that," I say. "I'm supposed to go to the Central Valley today. For Easter with the family, and Gordy." Kevin knows about the brain tumor. "But, with the news this morning, there's no way I can drive. I'm having a hard enough time just talking on the phone. Reality seems pretty unreal at this point."

"You need a lift?"

"Yeah. If you could. It takes about three-and-a-half hours from San Jose."

He thinks for just a moment before assenting to the trip.



“Great,” I say, relieved. “I talked to Steve and he said we could meet at CalKart.” I give him the directions and we agree to meet at noon, an hour and a half from now.

After I hang up the phone I go downstairs to pack. I have two cabins: the upper one is my primary living/cooking/working space. I keep my clothes and my bed in the lower cabin. Both have toilets, though the lower cabin has a bigger bathroom with a bathtub/shower combo the likes of which you’d see in an RV.

The first thing I do is go to the curio cabinet and pull down a brown paper lunchbag that holds two sandwich-bags full of weed. I don’t usually have that much pot around, but my best friend and primary supplier gave me an offer I couldn’t refuse — he was leaving the country for points East and made me a deal for taking it off his hands. It doesn’t seem right, for some reason, to keep it. I bundle it together to give to Steve so that he can pass it on to Ethan, who will need it more than I do, I imagine. Then clothes, an Easter dress that I scowl at — now is not the time to be wearing pink sundresses — my long cargo shorts with a U.S. Marines patch covering a bleach stain, a couple of tank tops. It is likely to be warm at Auntie Lynn’s; two days earlier Mom said it was eighty-five degrees before nine in the morning. Tennis shoes, dressy sandals and Birkenstocks join the clothes in my duffel bag, along with a pair of finger cymbals given to me by my wacky soul sister Becky, and also my red Hawaiian shirt because I figure I’ll need a pick-me-up. I rifle through my dresser drawers and pull out the Alice’s Restaurant sweatshirt that Alex gave me when we lived in San Jose.

“It’s too small for me now, but it’s cool,” he said. “That’s Steve McQueen on the front there, taking the motorcycle jump in ‘The Great Escape.’” He

offered me his Stanford sweatshirt, too, but I declined, knowing it was his favorite. I grimace at the memory because it's better than crying and besides, my eyes hurt.

It takes just half an hour to pack and I driving to CalKart will take at least that long, so after one last look around I get in my pickup truck and drive through my gate to my landlord's. Tasia, their Leonberger bitch, rushes forward growling and snarling, and I feel compelled to run her over just for fun, but instead I make the three-point turn and head up the driveway, through the second and third security gates to the road that will take me into San Jose.

It takes twenty-eight minutes to reach CalKart. From there it's one mile to San Jose State, where I don't have class today; I'm a year into its year-old MFA program. Usually I make the drive down the mountain on automatic pilot, which today is a good thing because my heart and brain swirl with blinking hazards. I stay in the slow lane all the way to the shop.

**Chapter Eight: Backstory (2000)**

Just past midnight, New Year's Day: my midnight dessert buffet, after copious champagne consumption on my part to celebrate the not-quite-new millennium. "It's kind of like when your car flips from 99,999 to a hundred-thousand miles," I told Alex that week.

The odometer had flipped, the New Year in effect, and I stood next to the ping-pong table talking with Davey. He perched on the battered arm of the loveseat. All the furniture in the garage was on its ninth life.

Davey spoke in the voice of a drunk just drunk enough to tell the truth: a voice of fatal desperation, the need to be heard. "You wouldn't believe some of the things I've done," he said. "Alex would fucking kick the shit out of me if I told you some of the shit we pulled, if he even knew I was bringing it up. Lynn, you wouldn't believe it."

I am frightened by the look in his eye and go next door.

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July 2000: A&E's *Investigative Reports*. Not my standard TV-watching fare, but the subject appealed: Suburban young women addicted to heroin. One captivated me: a 19-year-old in Pennsylvania who had a ritual with her best friend. Every Saturday they'd wait by the mailbox for the best friend's relief check, then hop in the car and drive in to deepest inner-city Philadelphia, score crack and go back to the best friend's house. Her best friend reached across from the passenger side to steer the car as the girl behind the wheel lit a glass pipe and took a hit from it.

The best friend, while steering the car, turned to the cameraman in the backseat. "Now that I'm on methadone, I prefer crack," she said.

My best friend called twenty seconds later. "Oh my God, Sean," I said. "I am so glad that you called. I just heard the most shocking thing I've ever heard on television."

"Oh . . . watching *South Park*?" Sean asked.

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Early September, 5:00 p.m.: A knock at the door. I got up from the couch. Brian stood on the landing.

"Hey B," I greeted. "Just get off work?"

"Yeah," he replied as he walked through the door. "Kind of a late day for you, isn't it?" Brian worked with Alex at the machine shop; Dave was the boss of them. I sat at one end of the L-shaped sectional couch, he on the other.

"LB. I wasn't really at work." He looked out the window into the street. "Dave and I just got back from taking Alex to detox."

"Alcohol?" I asked.

"No," Brian said. "Heroin."

Staring over Brian's right shoulder at the fish tank, I listened. The top of the tank was covered with Alex's motocross trophies, mostly firsts but some seconds and thirds, too. The one he called the gay-pride trophy, the second place one with the rainbow decal, stood in the center.

"He's been smoking it," Brian said. "With Davey, mostly. He tried quitting this summer but it didn't take."

I realized that must have been when Alex was supposed to go houseboating with some buddies from Concord. Instead, the host called me. "Is Alex there? Because he's not here." I told him I thought he went up to the lake. "I'm there now," his friend said. "Alex isn't."

"He got clean at E and J's." Alex's brother and sister-in-law. "But he started up again. He'd come to work and spend the first hour throwing up. Then he'd go home. You must have heard him?" Brian looked me in the eyes.

"I thought it was the cigarettes," I told him. I knew he was retching — the bathroom was directly above my Motormouth desk, and the pipes ran behind my computer chair. "Vern used to cough like that."

Oh, Vern, my beloved back-fence neighbor. He'd died two weeks before, the night of the first-season *Survivor* finale. Sixty-three when he died, Vern looked older, probably because of his ever-present pipe or brown cigarette in his mouth while tending his massive garden plot. Vern's death was ruled inconclusive. I wanted to know more about it, but John P, who had ties with all the official agencies of Redwood City, told me not to.

"I figured Alex had lung cancer." He smoked two packs of Marlboro Reds a day but never in the house, always on the landing or in the workshop. "I mean, what do I know about heroin?" I realized one thing I knew about the drug. "Was he injecting?"

"No. The doctor says that's a good thing. He was just smoking it."

"I didn't know that was possible."

"Probably if he'd been shooting you would have known."

“His eyes got so red from the pot,” I trailed off. “We used to laugh that they were such a dead giveaway. I mean, I knew he was getting high a lot but I thought he was just getting really good weed and not sharing.”

“Well, now you know, uh, it was more than that. Anyway, I’m here to throw away his stash. He told me where it is in his room. And I need to pack him a bag.”

I suddenly remembered walking up the stairs to the front door one night that summer. Our phone ringing, answering “hi” to Ethan, who asked me to jiggle the knob on Alex’s bedroom door.

“It’s locked,” I said.

“Pound on it. Anything,” Ethan said.

“Alex? It’s your brother.”

Nothing.

“Lynn, do something.”

“Ethan, I’m not going to bust into his room.” Now it fell into place and I understood his adamancy.

Brian knew more. “What happens now?” I asked.

“They think he’ll be in detox for five to seven days. Then he’ll probably go into a home-based setting for ninety days.” Everything in recovery is measured in days. “He won’t work at first but then as he recovers, he’ll be able to do more.”

I heard John get home from work and climb the stairs to our landing. He and Abby had lived together for eight months now. John had kicked Alex’s ass at a Club Moto practice earlier that summer, but still couldn’t catch him at a race. Peering through the screen door, John said, “Hey LB, B. What’s up?”

Brian said it again.

“Well, it’s good he finally went to the hospital.” John displayed no surprise; he’d been expecting the news. “How was he?” John asked.

“Messed up. But he knew it was time.” Brian said. The guys went into Alex’s room, where it would be.”

“I want to see,” John said, leaning forward. Brian held out a brown waxy ball. It wasn’t quite the size of a dime. To me, it looked like a ball of hash. Brian cupped it back, gathered it up with a pipe and a paperclip and tossed the lot into a Baggie he’d asked me for. I added the pipe from the end-table drawer. He packed Alex’s duffel bag and left, securing the drug detritus deep in our outside garbage can on his way out.

John left at the same time. I stepped onto the landing and looked down at him as he passed between our houses. “So, LB, looks like you’ll have the place to yourself for a long time.” He sounded amused.

I closed the door and keened the loss of my housemate. Then I prayed that this time his effort would pay off. *God, please, let Alex use his stubbornness, his competitiveness, to kick this addiction.* But I knew we wouldn’t be able to live together anymore.

The next morning I called my church and made an appointment to speak with my pastor. Pastor Mary wasn’t around but Pastor Bob was. Our talk was like cotton candy — felt good for the moment, but not much substance remained after I left. He gave me a book called *Good News for the Chemically Dependent and the People who Love Them* and told me to “move or get him out of the house, pronto.” After consulting with my father and my mom, I called my landlord a couple of days later and told him about Alex.

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I checked my e-mail on the exhibit floor of a trade show I was working:

*Date: Wed, 13 Sep 2000 17:49:59 -0700*

*X-Priority: 1 (Highest)*

*Why would you want to live in a neighborhood where you have no friends and are not wanted?????*

*P.S. please do not ever contact myself or Abby, i.e. Phone, mail, email or any other type of contact. You are not welcomed in our lives ever!*

It was a punch in the gut, though I took consolation in John's shitty grammar. Walking back to my client's booth I fidgeted with my exhibit-hall badge, which hung on a woven cord around my neck. I pulled it away from my body. When it's loose, it's more likely to snap your neck. *Better than twelve minutes of strangling*, I thought, pasting on a smile as I entered the booth.



**Chapter Nine: Holiday Traffic (2002)**

I enter CalKart with my customary, "Hello, gentlemen." I am sure that Steve hasn't told the boys who work for him what's going on, or the hell of his past twenty-four hours, so I surreptitiously touch his hand as I ask him for a cigarette. The physical contact is the first I've had all day and thaws my numbed fingertips, like a gas stove cooking omelets on low. The cigarette scrapes against my nubbed throat but it's better to feel discomfort than nothing at all. We smoke in silence, and when we're done I toss the butts in the trash. I know the rhythms of CalKart pretty well — Alex worked there in 1992 when I met him, and I'd spent a lot of time there after Steve took over the place.

"Where are your keys?" I ask.

"You can get them. Top desk drawer." Steve is working on a busted kart in the back of the shop. I grab them and go outside, get the dope from my glove compartment (which is why I don't carry my registration and proof of insurance in the glove box, but the storage armrest), and put it into the trunk of Steve's shiny red car, a car we'd flown down to Los Angeles to pick up from a dealer whose name I remembered from the game shows of my youth.

I pass Steve on my way back through the shop. "I put something in your trunk, something for you and Ethan."

He raises his eyebrows in understanding, and after I put back his keys, I stand at the divider between repairs and retail. There's a map of the United States on the wall with a handwritten "You Are Here" label stuck on it.

"I wrote a 'you are here' sign and stuck it to the map by the phones," Alex said one day after work eight years ago.

Kevin shows up a few minutes later. He's one of those men who think their manners are perfect. Regardless, he usually botches something up. He enters the shop and walks to me in the demarcation doorway. Steve comes up front and Kevin, true to form, immediately offers condolences in a strong, confident voice.

"Steve," Kevin says. "I was so sorry to hear about Alex." One of the shop boys comes along and looks quizzically at Steve. Steve thanks Kevin quickly and then goes away. I take Kevin's hand and lead him through the shop out to where my truck is parked. I grab my duffel from behind the driver's seat and he takes it from me. Kevin's parked out front so we have to walk through the shop again. He loads my bag into the trunk of his sports car, and I go back into CalKart one more time.

Steve is in his office. I shut the door behind me, rest my fingertips against his arm. "I'll be checking my messages when I'm away," I say. "Will you call once you learn whether there'll be a service?" Steve nods.

"Don't forget about your gift in your trunk," I remind him.

"Don't worry," he says. "I won't."

I don't want to leave, even though I'm more likely to get support from my family if I go to the Valley. "I'll come home on Monday," I tell Steve. "School's back from Spring Break on Tuesday and I have to turn in a bunch of scholarship apps." CalKart is closed on Sundays and Mondays so I know I won't see Steve when I get back.

I need to do something to give him a smile, so I add, "By the way, I would have taken you to Utah with me."

"What?" Steve looks up from his desk.

"The prize. For the radio contest I called you about. This morning."

"A trip to Utah? Gee, thanks."

"A mountain-bike trip through Utah."

Steve brightens. "Oh. Well, yeah, that sounds fun."

"Let me know if I can do anything long-distance," I say. Steve nods and I walk towards the front door, flashing the V of peace behind me. The bell over the door jingles as I leave the shop, and it makes me think of the famous line from my least-favorite Capra movie. *Every time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings.*

When I get into the car, Kevin and I share an awkward hug over the gearshift. "Are you hungry?" Kevin asks.

"Not really. I haven't eaten yet today."

"You probably should," he says, ever the pragmatist.

"Yeah." Might as well. "There's a burger joint up a couple blocks."

Kevin pulls away from the curb and I navigate, but, besides that, we don't speak until we've ordered food and found a table. I pick at some French fries as he eats a chicken sandwich. Kevin doesn't eat hamburgers anymore because of mad-cow disease.

"Lynn, I'm so sorry . . ." he begins.

"Can we not?" I stop him and change the subject. "Can I borrow your phone? I need to call Mom."

He hands me his tiny cellular phone. I excuse myself and step outside, dial Auntie Lynn's number from memory. Mom picks up on the second ring.

"Where are you?" she asks after saying hello.

"I'm on my way. Kevin is driving me," I say. I dread her next question, predictable as a 4:30 Kentucky thunderstorm in July.

"What's going on? Why aren't you driving yourself?"

There's no way around it. If I want support, I'm going to have to own up to what's happened. I ask God if he's sticking around in my head before saying, "Mom, Alex killed himself two days ago. Steve told me this morning."

There is silence on the line, and then her tone shifts from anxious-Mom to concerned-and-sympathetic Mom. "Oh, honey," she says. "I'm so sorry."

"Thanks. I can't really talk about it now. We'll be on our way after Kevin finishes lunch. It's 12:30. Hopefully we're leaving in time to beat the holiday traffic."

"I love you," she says.

"I love you too," I reply. Alex will never again say those words to his mom, to his dad, to Michele, to Ethan. For some reason, I feel guilt at the thought. I walk back into the restaurant. Kevin is finishing his sandwich.

"Thanks," I say, handing back his phone. "Can we go now?"

He nods. We do. Four miles down Highway 101 the traffic begins and Kevin starts to talk about Alex. "I can't believe it came to this," he says. "Do you know what he'd been doing before that?"

"Steve said that he'd been to the hospital again after I moved out, but a rehabilitation program, not detoxification.

"Where?"

"Napa, I think. The wine country."

"How ironic."

"I guess," I say, wincing at the ugly observation, turning to look out my window at the semi truck next to us, wishing we were already in the Valley. I have never felt so compelled to be with my family. But, despite my desire, it takes us an hour and a half rather than my usual forty-five minutes to get to Casa de Fruita, the tourist trap outside of Gilroy. Even when the traffic lightens at the San Luis Reservoir, Kevin keeps the speedometer at a steady sixty-three miles per hour. At this rate, the trip will take us five hours — a trip I usually make in three-and-a-half. I keep my mouth shut, though, the "he's doing me a favor" mantra patters through my brain.

The only radio stations along this stretch of 152 are either Spanish or preachy, and I'm not in the mood for either, especially the Good Friday sermons. I'm too busy living a Good Friday of my own. Kevin, unnerved by my uncharacteristic silence, breaks the reverie.

"How's your cousin?"

"Gordy? Mom says he looks tired, but between radiation and his dentist practice, who can blame him?"

"It's really something, that he's going to work through all this."

"It's probably better than moping around the house. He lives at Auntie Lynn's now, plus his girlfriend is renting the house next-door. He's got some good support around him."

"Is he getting treatment in town?" Kevin asks.

"No, an hour each way. His friends from A.A. have been pitching in, driving. Mom took him there a couple of times this week, too." I close my eyes. "I need to floss my teeth when we get to my aunt's house." Kevin knows about my daily floss-for-Gordy ritual; he didn't even laugh when I told him it would be

my New Year's Resolution, though he's too logical to make one of his own, as far as I know. "I've been bad this week. I haven't flossed for days."

"Hmmm," Kevin says, as a camper trailer passes us. It's like we're standing still. I want to mash his acceleration foot, secure it with duct tape. "Well, you've been thinking about him."

"Sure," I agree, and then pop a CD into its slot on the dashboard panel to end the conversation. The almond trees wave along the highway. I remember the drive was more beautiful the weeks before Grandma died: it was early spring then, with all the trees in bloom. Grandma would have loved it as she loved all flowers; I inherited my green thumb from her. My mom and Auntie Lynn agree that Grandma's gardening prowess went straight to me. My aunt sometimes calls herself "Black Thumb," like it's her Indian name.

Kevin and I stop for gas in Fresno after being on the road for more than four hours. I never dreamed that this would be the longest road trip of my life: a three-legged marathon, twenty-two miles down with four-point-two to go. I am loopy from grief and oxygen depletion, and my back hurts from sitting so long. I get out and stretch my arms, watch Kevin pump premium gas into his car.

"I'm sorry I don't have any money to pay," I tell him.

He waves it away. "We must be getting close," he says.

"Should only be about another hour," I say. "If there's anything you could do to drive faster, I'd appreciate it." I'm being a bitch but my patience is worn through. I want to be with my mom. God's too far away, busy at church, maybe. Kevin shrugs. When we get back on the road, he sets the cruise control to sixty-seven miles per hour.

The offramp to my aunt's house has changed, but we manage to make it to her street without getting lost. Auntie Lynn and Uncle Lee live in the house where Lee raised his children. His wife died in a car accident, and even though my aunt is pretty great, they never got over the loss of their mom. Lee's kids are the outwardly odd side of the family. The rest of us try to keep our oddities secret. And it's not because his kids are Jewish liberal Democrats, but because they're, well, weird. *His oldest son will be there tonight and there will be a Seder*, I think, and for the first time I remember that today is not only Good Friday but Passover. They usually fall around the same time; that's why Christ's judgment was in Pilate's hands. In preparation for the holiday, Jews couldn't conduct business, so they got the Roman guy involved. Anyway, even though I think I remind everyone too much of my father for Mom's family to hold unconditional love towards me, I am confident that they will offer the support I need in this crisis. They've all lost people they've loved. They know how it feels. When Grandma died, Mom, Auntie Lynn, and I rallied together with my cousins, her sons, which made the loss less visceral. I put my hands on the dashboard, as if pushing the car forward will work, will make Kevin drive this last bit a smidgen faster.

Kevin and I curve around the lovely street where my aunt and uncle live, passing the huge oak tree that divides the street, the pillared mansion that always reminds me of Tara from "Gone With the Wind." We drive past the house where my cousin Bob, the eldest of my aunt's four sons, lives with his wife and their four kids. Finally, we drive past the final curve of the street that signifies we're almost there, more than five hours after we left San Jose. My relief turns to icy dread when I see the parking area in front of their house. It's

blocked with oversized vehicles, sirens off but lights flashing. I can't believe what I'm seeing, or what it means.

"Which house is it?" Kevin asks.

My head is in my hands and I quiver. *Not today.*

Kevin repeats himself. "Lynn? Which house?"

I summon words against the onslaught of shock. "It's the one with the ambulance out front," I say, lifting my chin. From the periphery of my vision, Kevin turns his face to me. His look of horror says it all.



**Chapter Ten: Grandma (2000)**

Grandma had been comatose for twelve hours already when I made it to the hospital. My mom was already there, sitting by her bedside and trying not to cry. We stayed all day, alone. Auntie Lynn and Uncle Lee were out of town, but heading back that afternoon. I was staying at the hotel that night, but secured my own room for privacy purposes.

Grandma had been living in an assisted-living home for a couple of years. The family decided that would be the best course of action. She couldn't drive anymore but constantly asked where her car was, or her checkbook.

"I just don't know where I put my keys," she'd say. Auntie Lynn got tired of explaining that Gordy was driving her car now, as a replacement for his unreliable truck. Everyone but me breathed a sigh of relief when she moved from her cute garden apartment with the koi pond into a house for assisted living. Not that I felt it was wrong, her moving out to a care facility. She was obviously becoming more addled by the day. Nonetheless, she'd been pretty lucid whenever I called her, which was frequently when she lived on her own, but not so frequently now that someone had to go get her and bring her to the phone. I didn't want to bother her. I sent a few letters, but that wasn't the same. Standing by her hospital bed now, guilt covered me and made it hard to breathe.

I'd brought my guitar and settled in next to Grandma's hospital bed, plunked away as Mom worked a crossword and chuckled at her beatnik daughter. I ran from John Denver to Counting Crows but Grandma didn't stir. Maybe I should have sung louder — she didn't have her hearing aids in — but I didn't want to disturb the other ICU occupants.

As darkness settled outside I asked Mom, "Want anything?"

"Vodka, please."

I went to the Smart and Final warehouse store. The checker laughed when I unloaded my items onto the conveyer: a 1.75 liter bottle of Smirnoff and a two-pack box of Cheese-Its. I drove to Auntie Lynn's house and walked into the backyard. Was it a sin to get high when your Grandma's likely dying in a hospital across town? It had been a long day and I wasn't ready to ponder the ramifications, so I quickly packed the pipe and took a long hit. When I walked back into the house my oldest cousin, Bob, was on the phone with Auntie Lynn. I hung back in the doorway, not wanting to startle him, not wanting to get caught or accused. Of all my cousins, I think Bob would enjoy that the most.

"I'm just saying, it looks bad. I don't want you to be surprised when you see her," Bob said into the phone.

Our relationship was sketchy since Auntie Lynn and Uncle Lee announced their engagement. One of Lee's daughters was crying against her father's shoulder. I walked out of the room, and when I returned three minutes later they were still at it.

"What, are they going for the world's record?" I asked, ignorant of the family crisis the engagement had caused. I thought they were kissing, so happy. Wasn't marriage happy news?

My dad was the only one who laughed, perhaps driving another nail in the platform of the "We Hate Ed" club. Cousin Bob grabbed me by the arm, hard, and dragged me into the other room. I was dumbstruck. We ended up in the guest bathroom, where he spoke to me sharply, and explained to me that Lee's daughter was crying and that I hadn't helped matters.

I seethed. Maybe I'd said something stupid — I get this from my father — but it's not like I'd known what was going on, or that news of an engagement could be met with anything besides joy. It didn't seem fair that he got to scold me. I wonder if he remembers, or if it was only a childhood memory.

He hung up shortly thereafter and I made my presence known. "Hey."  
"Hey yourself," Bob replied.

I drove back to the hospital to relieve Mom, who'd been there all day.

"I left the vodka at Lynn and Lee's. I hope they have lime: I couldn't find any at Smart and Final," I said.

"It doesn't matter. Believe me," she said as she left.

I'd brought a Harry Potter book with me and read aloud to Grandma, in between asking her, "please wake up." She didn't listen to me. Actually, she didn't stir until I heard the familiar steps of high-heels, and my aunt's voice ringing in the hallway. Grandma's eyes fluttered on the cue. She was awake, groggily awake, by the time Auntie Lynn walked in to her room.

"Well, hello there," Auntie Lynn said to Grandma. Grandma's mouth was too dry to respond, but she smiled at her oldest daughter.

I think Mom's feelings were hurt. I mean, she'd been there all day.

We left that night and I went back to my hotel room, cleaned myself up. The next day I stayed at Grandma's bedside until 3:00. I took particular pleasure in swabbing her mouth — her tongue was so dry it felt reptilian. At 3:00, I took her hand and leaned over to look her square in the face.

Her hand around mine felt like a cool satin pillowcase. My hands are small, but they dwarfed hers.

"Hi, Grandma," I said gently, smiling.

She was still pretty foggy from the medicine. "Hi, honey," she said.

"I love you," I told her. Her eyes were the color of Windex diluted with milk.

"Love . . ." she said with effort.

"I'm praying for you, Grandma," I assured her. She was always the most religious of all of us. Auntie Lynn thinks prayer is a bunch of bunk.

"Pray . . ." she said.

I hugged her, then left before I could cry. The tears started before I could get to the elevator. I drove home, wanting to turn back all the way, knowing it would jeopardize my business if I did so. There was a big client meeting scheduled for Monday, and as I'd just hired another friend, bringing my company's head count up to three, I didn't feel I could afford the time off. Grandma would have wanted me to go about my business. She was like that.

Monday night my Mom called.

"Hi, honey, I'm home."

"Hi Mom. How are you?"

She sighed. "O.K."

"How was Grandma doing?" I asked.

"Do you know what she did today?" Mom answered my question with a question of her own. I didn't know, and told her so.

"Well, Auntie Lynn was at the hospital visiting her this afternoon, and when she was getting ready to leave, Grandma took Lynn's hand, brought it to her lips, and kissed it."

I couldn't get the image out of my head all night, and the next morning, Leap Year's Day, I called Auntie Lynn. "I was thinking of driving up today," I

wanted to come back to the Valley, to see Grandma. The meeting had gone well and I had the time. But my aunt dissuaded me. "I don't think there's any reason for that." I tried a couple lines of persuasion, but didn't want to be a bother so I let it drop.

Mom called me that night, crying. "Grandma's gone."

It is a testament to Grandma's perpetual ladyhood that she died on Leap Year's Day, so that we'd only be bothered with the anniversary of her death every fourth year. If she could have ascended into Heaven without letting us bother with funerary plans, I'm certain she'd have done so.

Her funeral was my first in a decade, ever since a high-school classmate died in a motorcycle accident the summer after our graduation. I had no idea what to pack: I'd be starting in the Central Valley, where it would be hot, and then traveling to Indiana, where it would not. The Indiana trip was necessary so that we could bury Grandma next to Grandpa Guy, who died fifteen years before I was born. I have a picture of him that attests to his status as a pipe-smoker and owner of exceptionally bushy eyebrows, so I guess that although we never met, I have a couple of his traits. If I'd been born a boy, I'd have been named for him.

"What am I going to pack?" I asked Nancy, who'd come over for ping-pong the night before I had to leave for Grandma's memorial service. She arrived with Brian, the man who, six months later, would break the news to me about Alex's heroin addiction.

"Did you pack a swimsuit?" Nancy asked.

"No. It's March. I'm going to Indiana," I explained.

"It doesn't matter. Always pack a swimsuit. I do. They take up no room in a suitcase, and you never know when you might have the opportunity to use it." She looked in my eyes and said, "Trust me. It's a lot easier than trying to find one once you get somewhere."

We talked a minute longer, then went upstairs and tossed the Speedo left over from my triathlon days into my suitcase.

Mom's brother and his wife came along, too. He wore his cowboy hat everywhere, but stuck his wife with an insulin needle like a pro. He and his sisters are not close; Mom and Auntie Lynn call him their mother's son. My aunt must have liked him at one point — she named her second-born son for him. It was a very tense plane trip to Indiana.

Once Mom, Auntie Lynn and I arrived in Indiana and checked in to our Best Western Express hotel, I gave thanks for Nancy when I saw the sign pointing to the indoor pool and hot tub. It proved that I would have had a nervous breakdown without the daily release of chlorinated water on my skin. I have always loved to loll in hot water, a bubble jet positioned somewhere along my spine. I spend days in my bathtub when my schedule permits.

The morning of the funeral, Mom's best friends drove up from Kentucky. Bitsy stuck by Mom's side at the funeral home. Jeff drove me to the gravesite.

"This is going to be tough on your mom," he told me. "You need to be strong for her." I nodded.

The reverend gave a nice talk under the tent that shaded the coffin and two rows of folding chairs. Cousin Don brought his wife and small sons, who behaved impeccably. After the service, before she was lowered into her final

resting place, I peeled the sticker from the foot of Grandma's beautiful coffin. I showed it to Mom when we were having drinks before dinner.

"I wondered what you were doing down there," she admitted.

"I didn't want it to be buried with her. I mean, how fucking tacky can you get, putting a marketing sticker on a coffin? Really. Who's going to see it?"

Mom smiled weakly. "I'm sure Grandma appreciates it."

The next day, we all gathered at a rest home to celebrate Great-Aunt Marguerite's ninety-fourth birthday, where we ate yum-yum cake and watched her play bingo. She won some brightly colored Mardi Gras beads and we called her the Birthday Queen. The attention delighted her, and it was nice to have a bright spot in an otherwise dismal trip. Her daughter, Elizabeth, was graciousness incarnate to the walking wounded from California, but how do you tell someone that you hope to have the opportunity to repay such a kindness? You can't. At least, I couldn't. I sent her a thank-you note for the yum-yum recipe, though.

The morning we were flying out of Fort Wayne Airport for points west I bummed around Bluffton and did a little shopping. The first thing I found, in a junk store that smelled like coffee and cat pee, was a clear Lucite keychain emblazoned with "Mildred," which was Grandma's name. It was too eerie a coincidence not to plunk down my money on the spot. In an antique store I found a candy dish in the shape of a dolphin. Remembering that Nancy loved dolphins, I bought it in a snap, smiling as the shop clerk packaged it in some bubble wrap so that it would survive the flight. Once I got home, I made a special trip out to Nancy and Brian's San Mateo condo to give her the gift and

offer my sincerest thanks. Once I reached Nancy's place I was as enthusiastic as I could be, despite the jet lag and hangover of grief.

"Nancy, your advice to bring a swimsuit . . . I swear to God, it was the best, most well-timed advice I've ever gotten. Thank you," I told her, handing her the gift, which I had wrapped in shiny pink paper.

"LB, you didn't have to . . ." she started to say, taking her hand from her hip and using it to push her dark hair from her eyes. She was growing her hair long and it always got in her face.

I interrupted before she could say anything more. "Stop. I assure you: I did. You pretty much saved my life out there."

She unwrapped the dolphin and gave me a hug. I showed her the mark on the back that said it had been made in the 1920s. Jim was there and knew a little bit about porcelain glazing of that era, which surprised the hell out of me; I mean, as fond as I was of Jim, that wasn't something I expected him, an ex-Marine, to know anything about.

"Jim, you should be one of those guys on 'Antiques Roadshow' on PBS," I said, smiling.

The next time I went to Nancy's place, she was using the dolphin as an ashtray. I tried not to mind, certainly didn't say anything about it. She was too slim to be a candy eater. It suited her better as an ashtray; she smoked a lot. Besides, it was her gift. She should be able to do with it as she pleased.

Two weeks later, I wrote a how-to poem and posted it to the spill-my-guts directory of my Web site.

*Lynn's Guide to Grieving*

*Work till your eyes are bleary.*



*Eschew assignments for mp3 hunting. Play the same 10 tracks from your collection of more than 200.*

*Turn up the volume so nobody hears you sniffle at your desk.*

*Sleep incessantly.*

*Watch all the late-late shows that you're usually asleep for.*

*Step over your suitcases rather than unpacking them and putting them back in the closet.*

*Scrub the front door's threshold.*

*Convince your housemate that rearranging the furniture would be a good idea.*

*Wish you could call everyone you know. Opt instead for eating Easter candy.*

*Don't have lunch until 4:00. Instead of eating lunch, go for a run.*

*Lie around the sofa imitating the cat.*

*Breathe. Drop your shoulders down from your ears.*

*You might ache for a while, but it will be all right.*

*Someday.*

**Chapter Eleven: Arrival (2002)**

"Where should I park?" Kevin asks me. A police car, a fire truck, and an ambulance block the parking area, but his question pisses me off.

"Anywhere. Stop the car. I need to get out."

I step up from the low-slung seat onto the driveway and stare open-mouthed at the ambulance, not daring to think about what it symbolizes.

Mom appears, from nowhere it seems. I feel her hand on my shoulder, hear her say, "Hi, honey," the way Grandma used to.

"Mom? What is this?"

She looks at the fire truck. "It's Gordy, honey."

"Is he going to be OK?" God wouldn't let anything else happen today.

Her voice softens. If it weren't so close to my ear I wouldn't hear what she says. "Honey, I think he's dead."

Catatonia grips me and my knees would buckle, hit the pavement, if Mom hadn't put her arms around me. Her words have plunged a tap into my heart and I feel my rich, oxygenated blood pour out of me onto my feet, as it puddles up in the gravel patch I'm standing on. Kevin walks to us, having parked his car across the street. "Gordy's dead," I tell him. I look down at my feet. There is no blood. "I can't believe it," I say, as much about my cousin's death as the fact that my blood remains in my body. My hands hurt. I can't cry. The street is silent. I can't hear anything inside the house. There is no activity, no uniform footsteps rushing to one of the official crisis vehicles, nobody talking to dispatch on radios. Nothing bodes well. There is nothing more to do.

"I know, honey," Mom says. "I wanted to be out here when you pulled up."

"Marge," Kevin says, "what happened?"

"He collapsed about fifteen minutes ago. It was really sudden. He'd been lying down on the sofa in the front room. My sister went in to check on him and I heard her gasp and call for Lee. He rushed in and started performing CPR. But it was too late. By the time the medical officers came in they tried to revive him but there was nothing they could do."

Nothing they could do. Christ on the cross saying, "I am thirsty." The lost cause above all lost causes. Is it really still Good Friday? Does God's immortal perspective mean that my double-suffering is unimportant in the grand scheme of things? I want to spit, to throw up, to beat my breast and rend my garments.

"I'm so sorry," Kevin offers. "What should we do?" I am mute. Let them figure it out. I am past the point of caring. I want to lie down in the road, let the fire truck and police car and ambulance roll over me. Third time's a charm.

"I don't know. I think you should go to the hotel." I knew I had a room reserved — there were so many people staying at Lynn and Lee's house that I was dispatched to the hotel a mile away. Pretty typical for my visits the past few years. Even though I was named for my aunt (Mom's acknowledgment that Lynn had four boys, while she herself had a girl on her first and only try), I had the idea that she didn't like me a whole lot. It doesn't help that I manifest so many my father's habits: the inappropriate laughter, the stubbornness, the blindness.

"Where is it?" Kevin asks.

"I know the way," I say, extricating myself from my mother's embrace.

"Honey, I'm so sorry," Mom says.

"Thanks. Me, too," I tell her. Kevin walks back across the street to get in his car.

"Why don't you call me on my cell phone once you've checked in. Actually, go ahead and check both of us in. I've got a room reserved starting tonight because Alan and his family were scheduled to come down. I don't know if I'm going to use it, though."

I nod assent. All my words have left me. That's never happened before, until today. Kevin brings the car around and I open the passenger side door and slide in. Once I have my seat belt on, Kevin puts his hand on my knee.

"Lynn, I'm so . . ." he begins, but I cut him off.

"Kevin, don't. Please don't. Let's just go to the hotel." As we pull away from my aunt's house, I stare at the ambulance in the rear-view window. It disappears as we turn the corner, going back the way we came. I direct him to the hotel — I am always the navigator and he's always the driver on our trips; even in France I held the map as he commanded the rental car and its stick shift — and we pull in under the overhanging carport area by the lobby. I put Mom's AAA road-club card on the reservations desk and woodenly go through the motions of securing the room. Kevin pipes up with his license plate number when asked. We are given two rooms, four doors apart, and drive to the back of the hotel to assume residence.

The room is nice enough, with two beds and bigger-than-average television set. I go to the bathroom, brush my teeth, wash my face to clean the day out of my pores. When I return to the bedroom, Kevin has turned on the

television, but then he leaves to wash up. I flip it to a sitcom, press the mute button on the remote control, and call Mom on her cellular phone to find out what's going on.

"Hi. Get checked in OK?" Mom asks after answering.

"Yeah. Nice room."

"Good."

"What's going on?" I ask.

"Well, they've taken him out in the ambulance."

"And he's . . . for sure?"

"Yes, honey. I'm afraid so."

My shoulders drop from my ears and I tighten my stomach muscles against a double sucker-punch. First Alex, now Gordy. Is this to be borne?

"How's Auntie Lynn?" I ask.

"I think we're all in shock. They gave her something for it."

"And Alan and Diane?"

"They were already on the road when Lee reached them. I think they'll be staying at the hotel tonight."

"What about you?" I ask. "We checked you in. I have the key."

"I don't know." She sighs. "Why don't you two go get some dinner. If anything happens, I'll leave you a message. Give my room key to the front desk on your way out, so that if I do leave, I won't have to bother you." She pauses.

"Honey, I'm sorry it's been such a terrible day for you."

"The second-worst Good Friday on record," I tell her. We say goodbye and I hang up, stare at the TV, glad that the sound is muted against canned laughter and other false emotions.

Kevin comes out from the bathroom and I tell him what Mom said. "I don't know if you want to stay. I didn't know this was going to happen."

"I'll stay if you need me."

"I don't know what I need."

Kevin suggests that we find some dinner, so I change my clothes and we take off. I leave the key to mom's room with the receptionist, who is biting her tongue against asking me, "who died?" She wouldn't believe me even if I told her — who would? Life is stranger than fiction. I couldn't make this up.

Kevin and I drive down the road to a restaurant I remember having lunch at the day before Grandma's California memorial service. The margaritas are made from fresh fruit so I order one. The sour lime slips easily down my throat and I can't help but say *aah*.

"Good?" Kevin asks after a sip of his mineral water. He doesn't drink alcohol. In the years I've known him, he's tasted champagne once, and then only after I badgered him.

"Getting there," I say. Though the restaurant is crowded, the hostess finds us in the bar and seats us in a quiet back room. We look at the menus. When the waitress approaches us I order an innocuous chicken dish, nothing spicy or exciting, because at this point, I'd rather be eating dirt. I knock my fork to the floor and Kevin grabs a new one from the unoccupied table next to us. I smile at him. I have four bites of dinner and ask the waitress to box up the rest.

"Was it OK?" she chirps.

"It was fine. I wasn't as hungry as I thought."

She whisks away with my plate. Kevin looks at me and I hear the disapproval when he says, "You should eat more than that."

I shake my head. "I can't." When the waitress returns I give her my best imitation of a smile, to let her know there's no hard feelings. Kevin pays the bill and we leave. I walk past the candy dish on the hostess station without grabbing so much as a mint. Kevin notices, and takes a couple of mints along with a toothpick. He offers me a candy when we get into the car. I put it in my pocket. What business do I have, eating candy? People are dead, for God's sake.

"I'll save it for later," I explain.

We drive back to the hotel and when we enter our room, the red message light on the telephone is blinking a steady tattoo. I retrieve the message: Mom, calling to say that Alan and Diane have arrived and checked in to the hotel, and that she'll be staying at Auntie Lynn's, and that we should call over there in the morning after breakfast. "I love you," she says before the message ends.

I relay the information to Kevin, who is picking his teeth with the toothpick he got at the restaurant. Then, even though it's only 9:00, I get ready for bed, paying particular attention to brushing my teeth. I don't floss. It's too late.

Kevin sits on one bed and I climb into it and roll over to look at him. "I'm not up to anything, I'm too exhausted to even breathe, but you don't have to sleep over there," I tell him. He prepares for bed and then climbs in beside me. I shift away. I don't want to feel better. I don't want his arms around me. I don't want to be warm. Before I expect it, I slip into dreamless sleep.

**Chapter Twelve: Gleek (1982)**

I was in fourth grade when Gordy cleaned my teeth. He'd been out of dental school for about a year; I'd gone to his graduation, which was held in Moscone Center and I remembered his commencement every time I went to or managed a trade-show booth there. After his graduation his fiancée held a reception at her flat in the nicer part of Oakland. She was one of those true type-A personalities. She freaked out when my dad drove up in the Firebird convertible that Auntie Lynn bought Gordon for a graduation present.

"No! Ed can't park there. My parents are parking there!" Laurel cried, and wouldn't shut up about it until my mom clued her in.

She and Gordon married six months later. I was the candle lighter and took my task very seriously, even if the two-hour rehearsal the night before had dimmed my enthusiasm. Dental school lasted longer than his first marriage. From what I could overhear (it's true that little pitchers have big ears), nobody was very surprised. I think maybe that's when he started to drink. His second wife wasn't much better and compounded the damage from the first one.

But I think that he and Laurel were still married the afternoon Gordy cleaned my teeth. My family was down in the Central Valley to celebrate Easter that weekend, and Mom had arranged the cleaning the day before. It was Saturday after Good Friday and we were alone in the office. I settled myself in the chair as he fastened a bib around my neck.

"Never too old for a bib, are you, Marilyn?" he joked.

"Not when you're around, I guess."



This was in the days before dentists wore gloves and masks. I felt his hands in my mouth. He asked me to hold the suction nozzle once he started the polishing process. "Move your tongue to the left," he said as he finished cleaning the teeth on the right side.

I was thinking how I wished he'd brought his Sony Walkman to the office: the first time I listened to one was in his basement apartment after my parents and I had dinner with him when he was finishing his DDS degree. He had a cassette tape of an airplane flying overhead. The stereo sound was so convincing with the headphones that the first time I listened to it, I ducked. It sounded like it was flying directly over me. Everyone had a good laugh at my reaction. Gordy was always a joker like that. Maybe because he was born on April Fool's Day. He spent one birthday with my family and to honor him, I wrapped a penny in ten different boxes, nested together like Russian dolls. It took him ten minutes to get through it and he laughed long and hard once he did.

While I was thinking about that, a stream of liquid nearly hit him the face.

"Whoa-ho!" he said. "Looks like we hit a gusher!"

I took the suction nozzle out of my mouth and demanded, "Is that blood?"

"No, doofus," he said. "You gleeked."

"Gleeked?"

"You know, when you move your tongue a certain way it activates the spit glands. Like one of those lizards that shoots poison out of its eyes."

"Only it's saliva, and from my mouth," I said. "Not poisonous."

"Hope not. I'm not wearing gloves."

I gleeed again, just to try it. "Cool. I hope I can remember this for when school starts again."

"You've learned an excellent new trick, Marilyn," he said before going to back to his task at hand. Gordy loved a good bodily function. During his undergraduate days, he became famous in his dorm for his flame throwing technique, which involved a lighted candle and a strong fart. Gordy's only single friend told the story as delicately as he could in front of 500 people at Gordy's memorial service; I hadn't known before.

I put the suction nozzle back in my mouth, and he expeditiously finished polishing my teeth. "Look Ma, no cavities," he told me.

"I've never had one." I was proud of my strong teeth.

"Yeah, I can tell. They teach us how to look for that in dental school before they let us loose on the population."

"You got your money's worth."

"So did you." Then he paused, pondering. "Well, almost."

"What do you mean?"

"Ever had Novocain?" Gordy asked.

I shook my head no. "I've never needed it," I told him.

"Want to try it?"

I thought for a moment. "Will it hurt?"

"Not the way I do it," he said, with a pride I'd never heard from him. "It just makes you feel numb."

"How can you feel numb?" I asked. "Aren't those opposites?"

"Oxymorons," Gordy said.

"What did you call me?"

He let it drop.

I thought a moment. "What the heck." Excepting springtime antihistamines, I was drug-free without thinking. I'd certainly never taken something just to take it, and I'd never "felt numb," whatever that meant. It could be fun. Besides, Gordy seemed hip to the idea, and he was older and wiser and everything, so how bad could it be?

He filled a syringe that looked like it could be used to pierce ears, and grabbed hold of my cheek between his thumb and index finger before bringing the needle close to my lips. "My patented method," he said. "You won't feel a thing." He put the syringe in my mouth. Before I felt the needle penetrate my gum line, he shook my left cheek near where the injection site would be. He moved the flesh back and forth like a Jewish grandmother bestowing adoration on a pudgy young grandchild as he stuck me with the needle and plunged the numbing agent into my bloodstream.

It was over quickly, and as he pulled the syringe from my mouth he raised his eyebrows and said, "Well?"

"You were right, I didn't feel it."

"And now?" he asked.

"I don't feel anything." I ran my hand along my jaw line. "Where's my face?"

He laughed. "It's still there. I promise. And you've got clean, shiny teeth to boot."

"Coo'," I slurred with my half-functioning mouth. I wouldn't get my Ls back for hours.

Mom met us at the door to Auntie Lynn's house. "Well? How was it?"

"No cavities," I said as best I could. I sounded like I'd just polished off a few mid-afternoon cocktails with the pre-teen set. Mom got cross in a hurry.

"Gordon," she demanded, "what did you do with my daughter?"

"A little shot, that's all," he said, shrugging as he tried leaving the room.

She blocked his exit, crossed her arms, raised an eyebrow at my cousin.

"I'm afraid to ask, but a shot of what?"

"Novocain!" I piped up.

Mom looked at me, aghast but amused.

"He did a good job," I assured her.

"Didn't it hurt?" she asked.

"Not the way Gordy does it. He's a pro."

She turned back to my dentist. "I can't believe you drugged my daughter."

"Who drugged whom?" Dad asked, walking in to the room.

"Gordon gave your daughter a shot of Novocain."

"Oh, goody!" Dad said, clapping his hands together. He found it hilarious and said as much. "Ever had it before?" he asked. I shook my head. "It's kind of neat, until your face starts waking up. Then it's not so fun."

"How long will that be?" I asked Gordy. Mom continued blocking his exit.

"Oh, a couple of hours," he replied, cavalier enough that Mom calmed down and stepped aside to let him leave the room. My face didn't tingle until we were nearly to the Altamont Pass. The new sensation made me feel more awake, alive, aware.

The next day at elementary school I tried to gleek, but couldn't remember the tongue position for spraying saliva. My friends, disappointed, walked across the blacktop yard to the swing-set, long hair and ponytails swinging behind them. I stayed behind and tried to replicate what had worked in Gordy's dentist chair, where we had laughed so hard about it. Unsuccessful, I walked to my classroom, let down by myself and the recess bell.

**Chapter Thirteen: EastOver (2002)**

Saturday morning and my first thought upon waking is, "Good Friday is over." I roll over to face Kevin, who is already awake and half-hard against my leg.

"Hi," I say.

He puts his hand on my shoulder. "Good morning."

"I wouldn't go that far," I tell him. "I need to take a shower. I'm sorry I can't help you do anything with that," I nod toward his lower midsection. "I'm too cold." The shivers grip me again and I snuggle back down into the blankets for a moment before casting them off and heading toward the shower. The water feels wonderful, but once I step out and dry myself I'm back to feeling numb again. Kevin takes a shower of his own and we decide to walk to the coffee shop for some breakfast, but upon entering there's nobody to seat us and white-trash talk-radio plays on the stereo, and I say, "I can't," and bolt out the front doors.

"Let's call Marge," Kevin suggests. We return to the hotel and I phone Mom for instructions.

"Is Kevin staying?" she asks.

"I don't know. We haven't talked about it."

"Well, there's food here, if you want to have some breakfast."

"I'll come by soon." I hang up the phone and turn to my lover. "Mom wants to know if you're sticking around."

Kevin shrugs. "What do you want me to do?"

"I'm thinking that you've already done so much, driving me out here, only to be met with more grief . . . I release you from further obligation."

He looks at me quizzically. "You want me to go?"

"I'm just saying, if the roles were reversed . . . yeah. I think it'll be better. Besides, you've got Easter with your family tomorrow."

I watch him as he packs his toiletries. Kevin always has a toothbrush with him. We get in the car and drive to my aunt's house.

"Should I come in?" Kevin asks.

"Kevin, I don't know. I don't know what to expect once I go in there."

"I'll come in and say my goodbyes."

"That'll be fine," I agree.

We walk in to the main foyer where, to the best of my knowledge, Gordy hit the floor and died fifteen hours earlier. I try not to imagine Uncle Lee administering CPR. "Hello," I call.

Mom comes in to greet us, gives me a hug. "Hey," she says. "I'm glad you're here."

"Kevin's not staying," I tell her.

Mom releases me and turns to Kevin. "Thank you so much for driving her out here."

"I'm glad I could help," he says.

I walk him out to his car, give him a hug and he kisses my forehead.

"Lynn, I'm so sorry. I'll be thinking about you, and your aunt, and her family."

I tighten my grip around him. The ice around my midsection starts to thaw. "Thanks. I'll give you a call once I'm back in town."

"When will that be?" he asks.

"I have no idea. I have to be at school on Tuesday to turn in some scholarship applications. Besides that, I don't really know." He gets in his car and drives away; I stand on the street until his taillights disappear, then turn and walk towards the house. It is time to face the music. I shudder against the double agony, magnified by the fact that only my mother knew Alex, that to the rest of them, he's just a heroin addict whose actions made me move up to the mountains without heat or a dishwasher.

I walk through the front hall into the family room. My aunt and uncle are there: she's on the couch, he's on the phone. I see Lee's eldest son, Alan, and Alan's wife. Their kids are outside playing with my aunt's gentle-giant Doberman.

"Well, hello there," Auntie Lynn greets me. She sits up on the sofa but I stop her with a wave of my hand.

"No, don't get up." I cross to her and bend down to give her a hug. "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you," she says, wearing a brittle smile. It's the same smile she uses whenever my father's name comes up in conversation. We break the hug and I take her hand, give it a squeeze before going to Alan.

"Hey, Marilyn," he says, giving me a hug. "How are you doing?"

I shrug. How should I answer? I have no idea. Fortunately, Diane saves me from the question, gives me a hug after Alan releases me. "It's good that you're here," she says.

I try to smile but it doesn't reach my lips. "Happy EastOver."

"Happy EastOver," she repeats. She does a better job at smiling than I do, but, then again, she's got kids. She's better at keeping a brave face.



Uncle Lee gets off the phone and walks over to me. "Marilynn." Only people who knew me before eighth grade can call me Marilyn — that was the year I got fed up with the endless misspellings of my name and shortened it to Lynn.

"Hi, Uncle Lee." I hug him tightly. "I'm glad to see you."

"You, too," he says, and then the phone rings so he leaves me to go answer it.

I spend most of my day answering the door to florist deliveries. By five o'clock everyone except for Mom and me has left the house on errands.

"Is it time for a drink?" Mom asks. I nod and head to the bar. The only whiskey they have is Gentleman Jack, but when I pour it into my glass it looks oily. I sip it and make a face.

"What, Marilyn?"

"It's weak. It's been watered down," I tell her. We change the subject, because I know the only person who'd do this is our dearly departed.

Mom sighs. "He had a rough week this week," she says, by way of explanation, and there's nothing to say to that so I dump my drink down the sink and settle for a beer. Mom and I drink without speaking, as we look around the room at my aunt and uncle's books, art, family portraits. With five kids on Lee's side and four on Auntie Lynn's, there are a lot of pictures to look at. And that doesn't even count the grandkids, which everyone of this generation has had except for me. Even the lesbian adopted a daughter. I've always been the youngest, but the feeling is compounded when I realize that everyone's in a committed relationship that's resulted in children. All I have is an ex-boyfriend lover. I don't even have a cat.

“He seemed angry this week,” Mom continues. It reminds me of how Grandma was upset the day before her death. “She just wouldn’t keep still. She waved her hands as though blocking something,” Mom told me on the trip to Indiana. I can’t believe it’s been only two years and there’s another funeral already, to be followed with another. And Gordy’s is the warm-up act to Alex’s. And I’m not feeling the comfort of God; in fact, I’m so numb that I’m not feeling anything. Maybe this is all written in the stars. Maybe God had nothing to do with it. Maybe He’s not even here. I close my eyes at the thought.

People return to the house with Seder supplies. The question all day has been whether we’re having a Seder and it appears that yes, Passover has won out. Uncle Lee gets the Haggadah, booklets that contain the Seder prayer and songs, from a cupboard and sets them next to the table’s place settings. My young Jewish cousins, from the subsequent generation, pop in from their bedroom where they’ve changed into dressy clothes. Diane, Alan’s wife, makes the charoset, a sweet mix of apples and nuts and cinnamon. It’s my favorite part of the meal, except for the four cups of wine we’ll consume. Usually we just take sips, but my aunt puts the kibosh on that idea. “Tonight, we’ll be drinking four cups of wine,” she announces, settling the discussion. From the corner of my eye I can see that Mom is relieved. My aunt and uncle share a glance. Four cups of wine is just what the doctor ordered. They should know; they’re both doctors.

Uncle Lee leads the Seder. His granddaughter recites one of the prayers in Hebrew; she’s being Bat Mitzvahed this year. Her brother deigns to take off his heavy jacket, which he’s worn the entire day despite the fact that the temperature never dropped below seventy-five degrees.

We're following the Reader's Digest condensed version of Seder tonight, so we drink the first cup of wine, say a blessing and then it is time to eat the Karpas. I dip parsley from the Seder plate into salt water.

"We dip it into the salt water and remember that even though we have painful circumstances in our lives, we will always have the hope of God to free us from our tribulations," Uncle Lee says. Auntie Lynn takes another sip of wine before she eats her parsley. I swirl it around in my mouth, making sure that I don't get any caught in my teeth.

My young girl cousin asks the four questions of Passover and Uncle Lee answers them quickly, so as not to hinder our progress toward the second glass of wine, which we gulp as though dying of thirst, or the plagues that are symbolized by this cup.

He blesses the matzah as food, which makes me laugh inwardly when I think about the lamb we've got coming. We eat bitter herbs with the matzah and pass around the charoset that Diane prepared earlier. The evening is beginning to feel surreal: I'm participating in a religious event outside of my religion, on a night when I feel that God is gone.

Uncle Lee frees the kids to find the Afikomen, the piece of dessert matzah hidden away somewhere in the house. My young cousins scamper through the different rooms as the rest of us drink some more wine and laugh at their lack of progress. Usually my boy cousin finds it but this year the girl comes in for her gender. The ladies at the table congratulate her. My boy cousin's nose is out of joint.

"You didn't hide it where you normally do," he accuses Uncle Lee, who shrugs and offers more blessings, which we follow with cups of wine three and

four. Then we all sing a song or two, and then it's time to eat for real. The food looks wonderful and I clean my plate without tasting a bite. Auntie Lynn eats next to nothing, four forkfuls, if that. Mom shakes her head at Lynn's full plate, even though she hasn't eaten much more than her sister did. It reminds me of dinner with Kevin last night.

The Seder glow leaves the table as we finish the meal and I am selfishly relieved when enough time has passed that I can go back to my hotel and be alone. I realize I haven't told my father about Gordon's death, so I get an outside line from the hotel and dial his number. Dad answers and I tell him what's happened.

"Oh, sweetie. I'm sorry," he says.

"Thanks," I say. Enough time has passed that I can think of yesterday without crying. "The second worst Good Friday on record."

"What was the first?" Dad replies. I laugh for the first time in two days until I realize that he's not kidding; he really doesn't know. I say goodbye and hang up, revel in the quiet of my bleak hotel room.

It doesn't last long enough. Mom calls before ten the next morning, Easter Sunday. "Come over," she says. I take a shower and put on some clothes — no Easter dress this year because I want to wear my Birkenstocks — and drive back to Lynn's, where my older cousins are already hiding Easter eggs. I go to help but first have to answer the door, to a florist holding an enormous bouquet of balloons, which seems the most inappropriate gift ever until Mom says, "Oh, good. The balloons are here."

"They are here, yes," I say, "But why?"

"The kids are going to release them in memory of Gordy."

*So a bunch of birds can choke on them and join him? I hold my tongue. It's a sweet gesture, I tell myself. Leave it at that.*

The cousins who live down the street tumble in to the house at noon and Auntie Lynn tells everyone the color of plastic egg they're looking for. I stopped hunting eggs a few years ago, when I couldn't find the last two, and instead walk the yard playing Hot and Cold with the young'uns.

"Warm, warmer, getting hot," I tell one of them as she approaches one of her eggs, which is hidden in a low-growing shrub. Then she turns and starts walking the other way. "Oh, cool, cooling, getting really cold now." She spins in circles until she finds the egg, then runs off to find the next one. I think back to how much my dad loved hiding eggs for me to find, how he was the hardest hider ever. But there's too much running around to stick to any topic for long. I'm thankful; I haven't thought about Alex for at least half an hour.

We're all sitting around eating brunch, eggs found, when I overhear Mom talking about a woman we know.

"She's been dating this guy for years, and I think they're living together now, but he's so cold and she's so affectionate. She wants kids and he doesn't, it seems." Mom shakes her head. "I don't understand the attraction," she says.

I know this woman's father and he's not particularly warm himself, so I join in. "It's said that women marry men who remind them of their fathers."

Alan turns to me with a severity bordering on whiplash. "So, Marilyn, is that why you never got married?"

His comment hits me like a fist to the solar plexus and for a minute, the room spins. I don't think of the perfect comeback ("Gee, Alan, that sounds just like something my father would say") until two days later. Reaction delayed on

account of grief. I laugh it off but the mood in the room has changed. My father is best talked about behind my back, as I'm the only one on this side of the family to hold any remaining affection for him. As Auntie Lynn proclaimed at her seventieth birthday party, "Ed Benson's an asshole." And, really, what can a daughter say to that? I'm half him.

Alan's wife approaches me later when we're alone. "My daughter thought that was a really mean thing for her father to say," she says.

"I like your daughter," I reply.

Her voice grows softer. "Hey, your mom told me about what happened with your friend," she tells me. I look at her. "I'm really sorry. What a weekend, huh?"

"You could say that," I tell her. Then her son barges in and ruins the moment, proclaiming that it's time to release the balloons. We get up from the sofa and walk into the bright backyard sunshine. Auntie Lynn holds a bouquet of one dozen white helium balloons and her grandchildren mob her to get one.

"Hold on to them," she admonishes. They're itching to release the balloons into the air but heed her order. Once every young cousin has a balloon, Auntie Lynn suggests the operating procedure. "Think something nice about Uncle Gordon before you let go, and follow your balloon until it's too high to see anymore." The kids seem to do as she says, at least, they close their eyes tightly before opening them and loosening their fists, and then crane their necks up to follow the flight of each balloon. I watch the sky fill with rubber clouds, reflect on all the religion of the past two days. After all the enlightenment, prayers, cups of wine, and Easter candy, all I can think is *Bite me, God*. This thought is compounded when I check my voicemail after dinner. "Hey, Lynn, this is Sean.

I'm at LAX right now, getting ready to fly out of the country." I hear airport noises in the background. He must be calling from a pay phone — I think he gave up his cellular when he went down to southern California to spend time with his maternal grandparents before moving to the other side of the world. "Anyway, just trying to reach you, to say goodbye for the time being. Catch you on the flip side," his recorded voice tells me before the connection breaks. I save the message, look around the dining room and wish I were anywhere but here and anyone else but me.

**Chapter Fourteen: Sean**

Most of what I know about drugs I learned from Sean. He grew up in an affluent suburb of San Jose, before San Jose was a place that merited suburbs. His aunts and uncles were all interested in pharmacology and pretty soon Sean was, too.

“You would not believe what I learned today,” was how he usually started our phone conversations. Most of our friendship involved the telephone. The distance between the South Bay and the East Bay is considerable when neither party holds a driver’s license.

We met because our fathers worked together at a consulting firm. Once he told me that my dad won the first job that his dad applied for.

“I hated you that Christmas, and I didn’t even know you yet,” he said. But his father was hired a few months later and we became the smart children of the company, along with the Boss’s son, who was a few years younger than Sean and drove him up a wall. One night Sean was so frustrated with him, he banged his forehead against the wall until he had a headache.

“Can’t . . . take . . . any . . . more . . .” Sean said, banging his head to the beat. I think the Boss’s son ended up at boarding school Sean was thrilled to see him go. Then it was just us again — at company picnics, pool parties, and partner trips to France and Philadelphia, where we ran up the library steps just like Rocky.

Our friendship was never of the norm. We saw each other about four times a year. When we could hang out at my house we went to a lot of movies. But we never lived close by. One of the reasons I went to San Jose State (besides



the fact that both my parents went there) was that it would put me closer to Sean. But he left to study theater in a big Midwestern city.

We did see more of each other once he got his driver's license. He came out to our new house in the fancier East Bay suburbs, driving his white car with a paneled rear-view mirror that stretched across his windshield.

"There is no such thing as a blind spot in this car," he said proudly.

By this point, Sean had been smoking pot for a while now. My only drug experience to date was sips of Dad's Miller Lite ("Marilynn, get me a beer." "Can I have a sip?" "Alright," he'd sigh) and the aforementioned Novocain trip.

Sean drove down for my birthday, which was the day before my friend Lara's. We went to her party but cut out early so we could drive to The City and see the Pink Floyd show at Morrison Planetarium. But we got lost and ended up driving back towards home on the lower deck of the Bay Bridge.

"Open the front pocket of my bag and see what you can find," he suggested. Sean carried a green Army-messenger bag. It was in the backseat. I rifled through the pocket.

"There's nothing here," I told him.

"Give me it," he said. I pulled it by its strap and swung it between our seats. Sean kept one hand on the wheel as he dug around in his bag, pulling out a streamlined bit of brass.

"What is it?" I asked.

"What do you think?" he replied. My pseudo-naiveté never worked with him; Sean always saw right through me. He swiveled the cap aside.

"I think it's what I think it is," I said.

He smiled. "You'd be right." Still driving, he packed the bowl. I'd always thought that pot would look like oregano but this looked more like its own Christmas tree, glinting with red tinsel and micro-fine crystals that lent it a sheen. He handed the pipe to me.

"What do I do?"

"Stick this end in your mouth and light the other end."

"How do I light it without burning a finger?"

He took back the pipe. "I'll show you." He lit the bowl and inhaled. When he blew out the smoke he didn't cough. "Try it."

I did but I couldn't get the angle of the flame right. He took the lighter from me. "Here," he said. "I'll light it and you inhale." We tried it and it worked. We weren't quite across the bridge yet and I tried it again. Then he hit it. "I'm pretty stoned," he said.

"I don't feel it," I told him.

"I didn't my first time, either," Sean said. "Smoke some more."

I did and I did but it just didn't work, though I did develop a craving for some peanut-butter cups, which Sean said was a good sign.

We got back to my house in the hills and snuck in so we wouldn't wake my mom. Dad was away on a business trip; he traveled a lot for his job. We crept into my bedroom.

"Sean?" I said.

"Hmh?"

"Let's kiss."

He had to be talked into the idea, but even in high school my powers of persuasion were considerable. We kissed and kissed and kissed some more. We

kissed until our lips puffed up and it started to hurt. They were his first, “first real ones, anyway,” he told me, years later.

We became each other’s drug journals. He enjoyed pick-me-ups and later, hallucinogens. He was delighted when I called him to say I’d done acid for the first time. “How was it?” he asked.

“Ohhhh,” I replied. It had been a good trip.

He suggested I try magic mushrooms, so I did. Shrooms never worked for me until the last time I took them, when I went into my bedroom in Redwood City and spent an hour watching paint melt from my windowsill. I told him so.

“It can be pretty gentle,” he said, “Too bad they taste like shit.” I had to agree.

Sean graduated with a degree in drama and I stuck around the South Bay after graduation. When Alex and I moved to Redwood City, Sean rented a house in San Carlos with a few roommates. They converted the downstairs bedroom into a marijuana farm, which made their house feel hot and sultry, like a rainforest. He was a better gardener than I was, although his methods were also more prescribed.

“If you put it in a big enough bucket to start, it grows a taproot that goes straight down. After that, it’s hard to kill,” he explained. Then he laughed. “There’s a good reason why they call it ‘weed.’” A year later his housemate got HIV, so they pasted a paper from the Oakland Cannabis Buyer’s Club on the wall of the grow room. I always smiled to see the seal of the City of Oakland on the periphery of his illicit jungle.

I did Ecstasy for the first time at the Greek Theater in Berkeley. William Randolph Hearst built it in 1903 but I don't think he laid the bricks personally. Sean and I carpoled there, stopped for lunch first in Berkeley. I'd told him I wanted to try something new and he told me he had an Ecstasy capsule. I told him to bring it along. We talked about it over lunch.

"I guess, if you wanted to, you could pour out some of the powder from the capsule," Sean told me over bites of hamburger.

I shook my head. "Sean, if I'm going to do it, I'm going to do the whole fucking thing."

"That's exactly what I wanted to hear you say," he replied.

I'd never been to the Greek before, and it was so beautiful that I stopped dead once we really entered the amphitheater. Sean was striding ahead and I called to him. He looked back at me mid-step. "What?"

"I've never been here before, give me a minute." He obliged and we looked around, then set off to find his friends, who let us sit on one of their blankets.

"Can I do it yet?" Sean shook his head no and made me wait. Then he changed the subject. "I had a chai, a chocolate truffle and a piece of bacon for breakfast."

During the opening act (the North Mississippi All-Stars, better than expected) the two of us walked over to where his other friends were. We helped them hold the real estate because their friends were lagging, but once they showed up we returned to our other spot. Only after the band was over did Sean let me take the Ecstasy, a white caplet that looks like it could contain

vitamin C. He told me it would take about an hour to kick in, and I'd know once I started feeling warm, tingly or mildly nauseated.

First I took off my big leather coat, then my boots, then my socks. I stowed all my jewelry and everything from my pockets (cell phone, ID, loose change and money) in my left boot, prompting Sean to call me "battle-ready" as we were driving home. I beamed with pleasure. "Psychiatrists use it sometimes..." I interrupted and asked, "for breakthroughs?" and he confirmed with the same statement even as I asked the question. "For breakthroughs." We're like that. I realized the truth that God really does have a plan for me and he's always there beside me, so I should just relax and enjoy the ride of my life. And also to stop worrying so much about what I don't have and spent more time being thankful and capitalizing on what I do have. Very head-clearing.

My body has never felt so good to me. It was difficult to keep the rest of my clothes on. I compromised by tucking my little T-shirt up into my bra so my midriff was exposed. I danced for four hours. While coming down (and rocketing up) it's good to drink a lot of water. Sean and I had two Anchor Steams with our 3:00 lunch. Anchor Steam is the best-tasting beer on Friday afternoons. At the concert I had one Miller Lite, the beer with the least amount of heaviness and alcohol, when we arrived and then drank a huge Sprite. It was so large that by the time I drank all the soda the remaining ice pebbles felt like cold, clear beach glass. I moved them around my mouth with my tongue, feeling their smoothness against my teeth and upper palate. I realized that I need to stop worrying, that God is on my side. No matter what happens I'll be provided for, so long as I just ask Him. *The Lord is my Shepherd. I. Shall. Not. Want.* I am sorry that I no longer advise a youth group, that I moved too far

away to attend my church every Sunday, and want to fall on my knees and praise the glory of God.

Later, much later, he looked at me and raised his eyebrows. I took it as a call for response, so I leaned towards his ear and shouted over the concert, "I'm in love with everybody!" He smiled and bade me welcome.

Everyone there was so great, except for two girls near Erin who wouldn't stop talking so I danced back over to Sean. A little Asian woman named Noelle was stoked to hear what I was doing. She danced through the whole concert too and I smiled to see the irrepressible tapping of the tiny toecaps of her black boots. At one point I sat down in front of her. When I looked up, I saw her peering down at me.

"You OK?" Noelle asked.

I smiled and gave her a big thumbs-up. To reply, she played with my hair, which reminded me of my favorite hairstylist in San Jose. She used to follow a shampoo by washing my face.

After a minute, Noelle said, "stand up, it's really cool." So I did, resuming a dance that would get me arrested in other, more conservative states. Sean looked at me in astonishment that a Republican could dance in such an unfettered manner.

"How are you?" people asked me.

"It's my first time at the Greek, I haven't seen Trey play for seven years, and I'm on Ecstasy for the first time," I told them. Their responses varied, but shared a wistful quality. A month later I ran into a friend of Sean's who'd been at the concert.

"I was so jealous of you that night," he said, "You were having so much fun."

After the show was over I milled through the crowd in search of tactile experiences. A man in a deep corduroy shirt smiled at me when I asked, "May I touch your shirt?" My fingers traced his shoulders and he grinned proudly.

"Wide wale," he announced. He stretched the syllables like taffy.

"I'm stoked for you," I said.

Deep breaths and exhales helped me come down. Got to de-gas from the bends, basically. More water helped. So did the tryptophan (post-turkey languor without that uncomfortable fullness) I took when I was stretched out on Sean's sofa. His roommate covered my body with the knitted Jerry Garcia blanket so I could relax and be warm. Sean let me sleep in his bed; I tire out before he does. I took an Ibuprofen for my coming-down headache and once I was alone tried to get myself off but it just didn't happen. Besides, it felt better to stretch out and listen to my joints pop. I imagined all the little nitrogen bubbles releasing into my bloodstream like an animated film called, "Know your Body," that I might have seen in fourth grade.

I told him that night that I'd thrown away my pipe as a knee-jerk reaction after I learned of Alex's heroin addiction. Sean gave me a beautiful, hand-blown pipe for my birthday the next month. It fit comfortably in my hand but tended to let bits of ash suck through into the mouth of the smoker.

It was two months later, early 2002, driving to the MacWorld conference when Sean told me his plan. "I think I'm going to move out with my folks," he said.

Though I wasn't happy to hear the news, it didn't surprise me. His job had amounted to what he described as "fuck all," and his girlfriend lived on the other side of the world. His roommates alternated between being worthless and pulling Sean down with them. It was time for me to be the supportive one.

"I don't think that's a bad idea," I said.

"There's just nothing to keep me here, except for my friends."

"Thanks for that," I told him. "Your folks are developing a cool business that sounds great. Exciting. I don't blame you. I'd rather do that than technical writing."

"Especially since I'm not doing any actual writing." He shook his head.

"Total misnomer," I agreed.

The night of his going-away party I took one of the Ecstasy hits I bought from one of Sean's buddies. Sean approached me a couple hours in to the party with a glass vial of white powder.

"Marilynn," he began, "Don't you think it's time that you . . . say, branched out a bit?" He waved the vial in front of my face.

"Sorry, babe," I told him. "Before I ever did drugs, I always told myself I'd never do anything that required sniffing or injecting."

"I respect that," he said, backing off a bit, "But there are other ways to get some."

"What? Rub it on my gums?" I asked. He nodded. "Then all I get are happy gums. No point to it. If I'm going to do something, I'm going to do it all the way. But I'm not going to do any of that." His face fell. "Come on, Sean," I continued. "I'm already doing a hit of E."



He brightened. "Oh! I didn't know that. Cool!" I fell asleep in his bed around three the next morning. He didn't come to bed until seven or eight. We looked equally fried upon awaking, and went to see the latest Tolkien movie that afternoon.

"One of the two best ways to survive a day-after is going to the movies," he philosophized.

"What's the other?"

"Never getting out of bed," he grinned, wicked glint in his eye. But we both knew we wouldn't follow that path. Backrubs, sure: I learned how on him. The occasional kiss, maybe, but nothing more. I couldn't do anything that might squander our relationship. He's the brother I never had: well, the brother I can kiss without offending society's dictates. More than that, he became my drug guru during my impressionable prime, who taught me that numbed or revved, I wouldn't do drugs if I hadn't always felt so good on them.

**Chapter Fifteen: Home Again (2002)**

It's Monday, April First: April Fool's Day; Cousin Gordy's birthday; also Tia's birthday, her 28<sup>th</sup>. Tia was my first girlfriend from my first real job after college. We'd always been close, but would go six months or a year between seeing each other, though we always pick up right where we left off. She proved her mettle last summer when a guy I thought was going to marry me used, lied, and cast me aside, instead. I cried on the phone to Tia, who straightened me out.

"Come on. He doesn't want you? What a loser." Tia continued despite my sniffles, "It's like he's all, 'Jennifer Aniston is my girlfriend, but I'm not happy with her so I'm going to *dump* her.' You're great. Amazing. Better off, definitely." As always, she was right: I was. Nobody's wiser than an empathetic girlfriend, and they're convincing liars, too. One more reason why it was such a blow to lose my friendships with Abby and Nancy.

I have to rent a car to drive home today, so I say my goodbyes until tomorrow when I'll drive back. Mom grabs a book on tape from the kitchen counter and takes me to the municipal airport, where I rent a car that I've been in but never driven. The dash features CD and radio but no cassette player, so I relinquish the entertainment Mom provided. Once I hit the road I realize that the headrest of my rental car cannot be adjusted to fit me comfortably — the lowest notch is too low, the next highest hits me square in the back of the head. Insult to injury? Guffaw to grief.

There isn't much traffic and the way is pretty straight, so I'm able to daydream until Los Banos. All the way home, all I can think is that I'll be driving back tomorrow, and that *It will be a long drive back to San Jose*. The sky is blue as I

tool down Highway 99, and the day remains bright all the way through Gilroy and back up Highway 101 to San Jose. I make the trip with minimal traffic to slow me down, though traffic's been a lot better since the population lost its job. Nonetheless, all the way home I can't shake the feeling that time has slowed, that I'm driving through Cream of Wheat. My sluggishness transfers to the steering wheel and the road, but I don't let it slow me down. I reach CalKart in just over three hours — two fewer hours than Friday's trip down.

I shake my head to wake up my face and loosen my shoulders, open my door, and check out my truck. Nobody's touched it. I unlock the passenger side door and toss in my duffel bag, then make sure I've cleared out the rental car. Satisfied, I drive the car to the San Jose International Airport, drop it off at the proper agency. It takes half an hour for the shuttle bus to the light-rail station and my shoulders slump in the collective reaction of everyone who's ever waited too long for a bus. The skycaps regard me sympathetically. One even touches the brim of his hat with his thumb and first two fingertips, like this is George Eliot or something.

When it finally arrives, I step up into the bus and put my duffel on the baggage holder. The bus arrives at the lightrail station, and the train arrives shortly after I do. Then it's three quick stops to the middle of downtown San Jose. I walk up past the Pavilion shops and then cross over to Third, where the protestors are plying their trade outside the Federal Building — Steve and I used to joke that all they wanted was a hot cup of coffee and their pictures in the newspaper. I walk past them on the opposite side of the street where the artsy movie theater is and look up at the marquee to avoid direct contact with the malcontents across the street, nearly running into a vagrant in the process.

"Sorry," I mumble, but he hasn't noticed me and so continues walking dizzily up the street.

San Jose looks stark at 4:00 in the afternoon. The sun hits the low buildings and bleaches them to nothing, while shadows from the high-rises a few blocks over darken the sidewalks, like I'm in a 1920s silent feature about the downtrodden urban locales. I am happy to arrive at my truck without further incident.

Never have I been so relieved to drive home to the cabins. I'm so anxious, the thirty-minute trip feels as long as my drive from the Central Valley. I walk in the door, wish the upper cabin *hello* and turn on my computer. All week I've been wondering when I last heard from Alex.

I remember calling him at work the year before. "It's snowing!" I chattered. "It's snowing where I live. And it's actually sticking."

"That's great, Lynn." He sounded like he meant it; usually my name was saved for the truth.

"It's only the second time I've ever seen snow fall," I said.

"I remember the first time," Alex said.

I paused and then asked about his folks.

"Michele's snowed in — Dad's in Mexico."

"Funny how that works out," I said. We laughed. And that was the last time we talked. We ran a spate of e-mail messages after that, and then nothing.

I sort my "Alex" folder in chronological order and start reading.

**Chapter Sixteen: Correspondence**

Date: Fri, 23 Feb 2001 13:08:01 -0800 (PST)  
From: Lynn  
To: Alex  
Subject: Friday funnies

Happy Friday Alex,

Sorry it took me so damn long to get these to you. Going boarding this weekend? Based on the rain I've seen in my mountains, your mountains must be thick with fresh fluffy powder.

I took some cool pics of last week's snow -- I'll see what I can do about scanning them in.

Oh, and I think I left my tent and snow chains in your garage -- if you come across them could you let me know?

OK, here are the long-awaited jokes:

\*

What's the difference between a Harley and a Hoover?

The size of the dirtbag.

\*

A Russian village decides to pool its money to buy something that will support the prosperity of its town after WWII, so they decide to buy a cow. They do some shopping and learn that they can either buy a 2,000 ruble cow from Moscow or a 1,000 ruble cow from Minsk. They choose the cow from Minsk.

They buy the bull, but then start to have terrible problems -- the cow won't have anything to do with the bull. Distraught, they go to the wisest man in the village: the rabbi.

"Oh rabbi, what a problem we have with our cow. When the bull approaches her from the front, she backs away. When he approaches her from behind, she walks forward. When he approaches her from the side, she turns and wanders off into the pasture. Rabbi, what can we do?"

The rabbi strokes his beard in thought for a few moments, then raises a finger and asks, "By any chance, is your cow from Minsk?"

The villagers are amazed. "Rabbi, you are indeed the wisest . . . how did you know that our cow is from Minsk?"

The rabbi replies, "My wife is from Minsk."

Ha ha! Take care and I'll talk to you soon,  
Lynn

---

From: Alex  
To: Lynn  
Subject: Fw: what a trip! You have to try it!  
Date: Fri, 23 Feb 2001 13:43:29 -0800

this one I really liked, write back asap and let me know what you think.

Do the following exercise, guaranteed to raise an eyebrow.  
There's no trick or surprise. Just follow these instructions, and  
answer the questions one at a time and as quickly as you can! Now, arrow  
down (but not too fast, you might miss something).

Think of a number from 1 to 10

Multiply that number by 9

If the number is a 2-digit number, add the digits together

Now subtract 5

Determine which letter in the alphabet corresponds to the number you ended  
up with (example: 1=a, 2=b, 3=c, etc.)

Think of a country that starts with that letter

Remember the last letter in the name of that country

Think of the name of an animal that starts with that letter

Are you thinking of Kangaroos in Denmark?

If not, you're among the 2% of the population whose minds are different enough  
to think of something else. 98% of people will answer with kangaroos in  
Denmark when given this exercise. Freaky, huh? Keep this message going.

Forward it to people you know and see if they can see if they are usual or  
unusual.

---

Date: Fri, 23 Feb 2001 14:02:20 -0800 (PST)  
 From: Lynn  
 To: Alex  
 cc: Lynn  
 Subject: Re: Fw: what a trip! You have to try it!

Nope, I'm thinking of Koalas in Denmark! Still very cool, though . . .

--LB

From: Alex  
 To: Lynn  
 Subject: Re: Fw: what a trip! You have to try it!  
 Date: Fri, 23 Feb 2001 14:18:19 -0800

That's the animal Jim came up with, it seems like it is psychic but it's pretty straight forward, the math always works out to 4 and there are not many countries that start with D. Dahomey in Africa is the only one I can find on the map. Koala is good though (the Koala sleeps 22 hours per day) other than that the only other animal I've heard anyone come up with is "killer bee" although Killer whale would be legit. There is a bird called a kite, can you think of any others with yer 2% persona?

From: Alex  
 To: Lynn  
 Subject: Fw: Kermit Jagger  
 Date: Fri, 23 Feb 2001 13:45:43 -0800

I love to tell this one, So,,,,,, do you like the juice?

-----Original Message-----

From: Tom's Humor List <humor@lundeen.org>  
 Date: Thursday, January 25, 2001 9:54 AM  
 Subject: Kermit Jagger

>A frog goes into a bank and approaches a bank officer. He can see from  
 >her nameplate that the officer's name is Patricia Whack. So he says, "Ms.  
 >Whack, I'd like to get a loan to buy a boat and go on a long vacation."  
 >  
 >Patti looks at the frog in disbelief and asks how much he wants to borrow.  
 >  
 >The frog says \$30,000. The teller asks his name and the frog says that  
 >his name is Kermit Jagger, his dad is Mick Jagger, and that it's OK, he  
 >knows the bank president.  
 >

>Patti explains that \$30,000 is a substantial amount of money and that he  
>will need to secure some collateral against the loan. She asks if he has  
>anything he can use as collateral. Kermit says, "Sure. I have this," and  
>produces a tiny pink porcelain elephant, about half an inch tall. Bright  
>pink and perfectly formed.

>

>Very confused, Patti explains that she'll have to consult with the  
>president and disappears into a back office. She finds the president and  
>says, "There's a frog out there called Kermit Jagger who claims to know  
>you and wants to borrow \$30,000, and he wants to use this as collateral."  
>She holds up the tiny pink elephant. "I mean, what the heck is this?"

>

>The president looks back at her and says, "It's a knick knack, Patti  
>Whack. Give the frog a loan. His old man's a Rolling Stone."

>

Date: Fri, 23 Feb 2001 14:16:22 -0800 (PST)  
From: Lynn  
To: Alex  
Subject: Re: Fw: Kermit Jagger

It's so funny that you sent me this, because I told a truncated version of this joke on KSFO radio when I was in second grade and won tickets to the Mills Brothers concert at the Concord Pavilion -- the first time I won anything worth anything. What comes around, goes around! :)

--LB,  
mountain woman. Was Michele snowed in last Monday, too?

From: Alex  
To: Lynn  
Subject: Re: Fw: Kermit Jagger  
Date: Fri, 23 Feb 2001 14:22:15 -0800

Yeah she was snowed in and at the time she was very sick w/ bronchitis. She had already made two trips to the emergency room and was in poor shape. I was on standby as her vehicle couldn't get out of the driveway but her buddy Sam has an SUV and went up and took care of her. I'll look for your chains today . . . . . any Idea where in the gay-rauge they are?

Date: Fri, 23 Feb 2001 14:46:43 -0800 (PST)  
From: Lynn  
To: Alex



Subject: Re: Fw: Kermit Jagger

Wow! Sounds like a TV drama. Hope she is better now and that Dave had a great time in May-hee-co. No idea where the chains/tent are . . . I don't anticipate needing them anytime soon so please don't go to any trouble. I know the chains are in a square vinyl package with handles, and the tent is either in a box or in its carrying tote.

Steve and I went to the Great Mall last Friday but didn't see Tony at the skate park, bummer.

--LB

From: Alex  
 To: Lynn  
 Subject: Fw: Fw: Fw: Bitch/Bastard Test  
 Date: Fri, 23 Feb 2001 14:09:42 -0800

-----Original Message-----

From: Ethan  
 To: 'Alex'  
 Date: Friday, February 02, 2001 10:51 AM  
 Subject: RE: Fw: Fw: Bitch/Bastard Test

>Yousis#1bastardbrotheralmotherfuckershowssomesacktoabitchtolickit

>

>Ethan

>>> >> >> > After you finish the test, sign

>>> >> >> > your name at the bottom

>>> >> >> > and forward on

>>> >> >> > be sure to copy the person who

>>> >> >> > sent it to you so they

>>> >> >> > can see your

>>> >> >> > score).

>>> >> >> > BASTARD TEST: <http://www.thespark.com/bastardtest/>

>>> >> >> > BITCH TEST: <http://www.thespark.com/bitchtest/>

<first 169 results snipped>

>> 170. Scott 41% Bastard. Not too bad, I guess . . . . .

>>> 171. Ethan 50% Bastard, so what's the other 50%?

>>> 172. Alex 82%Bastard you stupid Motherfucker, Now lick my ball-sack.

You could not believe the life I've led, however I want you to know that neither you or your stuff was ever in danger as I'm actually more protective of you that you would believe. so tell me Little Miss Benson, how/what are you doing?

Alex

---

Date: Fri, 23 Feb 2001 14:43:04 -0800 (PST)  
From: Lynn  
To: Alex  
Subject: Re: Fw: Fw: Fw: Bitch/Bastard Test

Dear Alex,

I feel bad that we never had a talk before I moved. It wasn't so much you I was afraid of as the rest of the world. The deadbolt on my office showed evidence that someone tried forcing it while I was out of town for a trade show . . . who knows?

I'm sorry I couldn't be a better friend to you when you needed it. My actions were driven by anger and ignorance (I really had no idea what you were into, and was not only stunned to learn but angry when I found out everyone had left me in the dark) and the knowledge that running my business from the house just wasn't going to work anymore. Please know that my prayers and good thoughts were with you always and are to this day and on beyond.

I \*love\* where I live. Picked up some new clients so Motormouth is back on its feet after 2 1/2 months of a whole lot of nothing. My vacation to London in Dec. was amazing, hooked up with a 20-year-old London native and had a great time hanging out with him and his buddy. I'm taking a 20<sup>th</sup> Century Poetry class at SJSU and it's great -- the teacher is actually a visiting professor who has a Pulitzer Prize in poetry and she's so sharp and funny. It's great to be in school again, I didn't realize how much I missed it, though I think most of the others in the class wish I would just shut my freakin' mouth (imagine that :). I haven't heard about my MFA application yet and probably won't until March; if I don't get in I'll be really bummed but probably won't go postal or anything.

The truck is getting more of a workout than it's had in its life, driving Bear Creek and the one-lane roads I take to get to and from my cabins. I've been hearing my fair share of Ted Kazinczky (sp) comments -- told Tor that my Mom spent Christmas with me at the cabins and he replied, "making plastique?" Heh.

And you, Alex? How are you? Working with good people? What was it about last year that made everything so shitty (that's more of a rhetorical question than anything, as everyone I know had a particularly crappy y2k)? Lou sent me a "ending of tenancy" agreement a couple of weeks ago and mentioned that you have a new roommate -- I hope that is working out splendidly for you.





**Chapter Seventeen: The First One (2002)**

I awaken to a glorious, sunny Wednesday in another Central Valley hotel room in the same Central Valley hotel. It feels wrong, a crime against nature, to wear black on such a lovely spring morning, but I iron my blouse, slip on a skirt, some hose, and my black pumps. *I better not spill on my black skirt because I'll need it tomorrow.* I am glad for the warmth of my freshly ironed blouse, and grab my leather jacket on my way out the door to my aunt's. Even though it's so warm I wish I had a pair of gloves. My blood is frozen Slurpee sludge.

It's not quite 10:00 and a spread of bagels and coffee cups line the kitchen countertop by the sink. I pour a cup of coffee. "Is this the flavored stuff?" I ask Mom.

"No, it's regular,"

"But decaf, right?" I persist.

"Right."

I'm pushing it, I know, but everyone else is so quiet. Usually, Auntie Lynn's house is ablaze with noise. *Just doing my part.* I'd rather be difficult, to take our minds off this morning's agenda.

Mom and I get a ride to the gravesite with my cousins, after which we'll go to church, one across town because their usual choice would be too small. Gordon had lived there for forty years; between high school, dentistry, and his family, he pretty much knew everyone in town.

We step out of the minivan into blinding sunlight. Without tinted windows the day is disgustingly beautiful — fresh as the Easter flowers dotting the gravesite — and yet washed out, like an overexposed 16-millimeter film

from the Seventies. The mourners wear sunglasses. A couple of women have big dark hats. It's all very Hollywood.

I turn to my cousin, Lee's other son Charlie, the wiseacre of the bunch.

"Jeez. Could this be any more California?" I whisper. "All we need now is cocaine."

"That was Mom's funeral," Charlie says, smiling wryly at the memory.

Gordon had been a big guy: tall, carrying a little too much weight. Besides being a handy nickname, Gordo also means *fat* in Spanish. I have to walk past a lot of graves to reach the tented, freshly dug hole, which doesn't seem big enough to hold him.

We take our places and wait, like patient theatergoers before a play they know is going to stink. Alex, his daughter, is up front, but nobody is standing near her. "Isn't somebody going to stand by Alex? How heartbreaking," says a woman behind me and to my left. I know that Uncle Lee couldn't hear her, but he stands at that moment and goes to Alex, puts his hand on her small, thin shoulder. She's built like a rail, which has helped her lead track, basketball and tennis teams to victory in junior high and now high school. Her mother, Bess, isn't there. *Is that because of her feelings for Gordy or the family's feelings for her?*

The preacher talks about the usual stuff you hear at a funeral: ashes to ashes, dust to dust, all that stuff. You'd think they'd be able to come up with something new, death's been happening for so long. The moment the service is over the crowd disperses around the closed coffin. I inspect it for a manufacturer's sticker. I'd taken the sticker from Grandma's. I locate Gordon's at the foot, but the sticker is stuck fast. I can't peel it off. I scrape it with my fingernail but *no va*, and I can't spend any more time there without arousing

suspicion. My mission aborted, I just want to leave, and find the first person who appears to be getting in her vehicle and beg a lift to the memorial, wave to Mom that I've found a ride. She nods in acknowledgement. I'll be spending enough time in graveyards tomorrow. Why couldn't Gordy's number come up two weeks after Easter? Two funerals in two days is too many.

Miracle of miracles, the woman I'm riding with is also a smoker, so I bum a light and take a couple of drags, though not enough to make me smell of it. I'll blame it on the car. We arrive at the church too soon. I sign the book and wait for the family to arrive, step in to the sanctuary. It is enormous, and extra rows of folding chairs have been set out. Looks like they're expecting it to be standing room only. There are large floral arrangements on the raised platform in front, and a microphone at a clear Lucite podium, like you'd see at the Academy Awards.

Weddings and funerals never start on time and this ceremony is no exception. I sit in the second row with Charlie and his flashy blonde wife. They look amazing together, like celebrities in *People* magazine. I try not to notice their open affection.

I can't believe how my aunt is holding it together. She addresses the crowd of five hundred like it's a Soroptomist luncheon, not the memorial service for her second-oldest son. I muse that maybe she should have been an actress.

Three friends and one brother eulogize Gordon. They're all funny and heartfelt, just like Gordy was. Aaron, the only single speaker, tells about one of my cousin's tricks. "He could, uhm, flamethrow. All he needed was a lit candle and a strong . . . flatulence." I think it's how Gordy would have wanted to be

remembered. I think he would have liked it, being remembered for being funny. I think about the watered-down whiskey in Auntie Lynn's bar.

After the service there's lunch for five hundred, set up in the hallway, buffet-style. I help one of my younger cousins fill a plate. We sit outside in the blazing sunlight. It's starting to get warm, but I keep my jacket on. It feels like a garden party, except for the death in the air. An Indian Summer garden party, maybe. Oblivious, my little cousins chatter like baby birds.

After the lunch we head back to Auntie Lynn's house for another reception and even more food. Baskets of flowers have been arriving all week and are spread helter-skelter around the house. We drink 1.5-liter bottles of mid-priced white wine from clear plastic cups, dab at the corners of our mouths and eyes with little cocktail napkins. The kitchen is clear and I use the phone to check my voicemail. There's a message from Stacia, my other across Allerton Street neighbor.

"Hello, Lynn. Uhm, when you get a chance, call me. I'm sorry I missed you," her voice says. She leaves her number and ends the call before a minute is over. I save the message and call her. Once we say our hellos, she takes a deep breath, the same deep breath I heard from Steve on Friday morning. I cut her off.

"It's OK, Stacia. I already know," I tell her. "Steve called me."

"When did you find out?" she asks.

"Last Friday," I say. It takes her a minute to respond, I think because her feelings are a little hurt that I knew the news before she did. "Is there going to be a service?"



"Tomorrow. In Palo Alto. I think you should be there. I think everyone's over it." By "it" she means me. She gives me the address. We let the rest lie unsaid.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I say. We hang up and my arm hangs like a mushy cold noodle.

The phone call has left me exhausted. "I'm going back to the hotel. Just for a little while."

"Come back after your nap," she says. But when I get to the hotel I'm too wound up to sleep, especially at the idea of having to do this all over again tomorrow. I turn up the heat in the room, watch an afternoon talk show and a cartoon program. Gordy loved the Coyote and Road-Runner cartoons.

"Look, there he goes over the cliff, and yet he'll spring back up," he said once after spending the night at our house in Clayton. "That's so great. Marilyn, let's go try it."

"You first," I said. The memory brings a smile to my face for the first time since Dad asked what was the first-worst Good Friday. It's the same sort of smile, too: rueful, lightly wistful.

Only the die-hards are there when I return to Auntie Lynn's. The three eulogizers who aren't family sit in a corner of the family room, getting progressively drunker and louder while reminiscing. One of the eulogizer's wives comments to her friend about Aaron, the single eulogizer. "He always goes for the pretty ones," she says, drying a dish. I have taken this as a challenge. Besides, I'm tired of feeling so cold. I look to him and I see the surprise in his face, so I take his hand in mine. Before I know what I'm doing, I lick his index finger. I want to feel warm again. I've been cold for five days.

"You want to?" he asks.

He raises his eyebrows.

I nod.

"How about you leave first. I'll go a few minutes after. You're staying at the . . ."

"Yes."

"We can meet in the bar."

"See you in a minute," I said, standing to say good-byes. I hug Mom first. "I'm beat. I'm going back to the hotel."

"You've had a long day," she agreed. Neither of us mentions that tomorrow will be longer, with my four-hour drive to Palo Alto for Alex's funeral.

I hug Auntie Lynn, offer something lame in condolence, how nice the reception was, how gracious she had been. She smiles a brittle smile. I back away calmly, like I'm escaping from a dog that can smell fear. I hug my uncle and the remaining cousins, and wave to everyone else before beating a hasty retreat.

I drive back to the room, brush my teeth, wash my face. It's the best I've felt all day — one down, one to go, plus maybe some nice warm nookie. I step out my door and walk across the parking lot to the bar. I see his large sedan swing in to the parking lot. It stops before me and he rolls down the passenger-side window with the touch of a button.

"Get in, we'll drive there."

I slide in to the car. "You southern Californians. It's like you don't have any feet." We're at the bar before I can finish the sentence. He looks down at my feet in their Birkenstocks.

"Pretty toenails," he says.

"Thanks. I painted them last night. Needed something to do in the hotel room. You know, to pass the time."

"I know how that goes," he replies with a bit of a leer.

Once we find the entrance to the bar we sit toward the end and order drinks. I have a Jack Daniel's on the rocks with a splash of water.

"Whiskey, huh?" He's impressed.

"Uncle Jack. He's been good to me in the past."

He orders something with vodka in it and we drink. My cocktail goes down smoothly and I'm finished well before him. The whisky — not bourbon because bourbon only comes from Kentucky, and Jack Daniel's is manufactured in Tennessee — warms me as nothing else has, and is much more satisfying than the watered-down Gentlemen's Jack that Gordy left as a legacy in Lynn and Lee's bar.

"Want another?" he asks me.

"Yes, please." I'm not quite drunk enough to do what I want to do with him, but one more cocktail ought to do the trick. I've never had a one-night stand before.

"My kid is at home," he tells me.

"How old is he?" I know he has a son from hearing him talk about the kid's soccer prowess during the reception, once I got back from my nap, once I set my eyes on him as a potential short-term bedmate.

"Seventeen," he says.

"He won't miss you," I tell him.

"Hell, he's probably happy I'm gone."

I get my second drink to go. We drive to my hotel room and I let him in, flip on the light. I don't want this to be that tender, darkened-room sex. He's going to see my flaws and I'll see his. I double-check that the drapes are closed and say, "I'm sure that Gordy's having a good laugh."

"About what?"

"About what's about to happen."

And once we take off our clothes, I suck on his dick and he tells me, "you give really good head." Then I climb on top of him and I close my eyes and I fuck him. His belly is built like a barrel and straddling him makes me think of cinching a saddle to a horse. His body hair feels smooth as I rub up along his torso, but scratches on the way coming down, and I think to myself, *he must clip it*. I imagine him alone in his bathroom in front of a mirror, running a rotary trimmer with blade-guard number six — slightly longer than military issue — up and back, shoulders to thighs, like a neighbor kid who mows the lawn real straight for an extra three-dollar tip.

I ride him harder, but I am too wound up to come, which is strange because, usually, I can orgasm at the drop of a bra. He finishes, though; upon feeling the warning spasm at the base of his cock against the opening of my vagina, I clench at him inside of me. He moans in return. I stay poised on top of him for a minute before getting up. His wet penis is still half-hard and thwocks against his stomach after I pull away from his body.

"What, is that it?" he asks.

I nod. *You want to cuddle?* I say nothing and get off the bed, walk toward the bathroom to pee and wash up.

"You're saying you're done with me?"

"I guess if you want to put it that way," I shrug. It's not like either of us thought it would be any more than it was. I grab my pants and shirt on the way to the toilet. When I return, I'm fully dressed. He fastens his pants, then slips on his shirt and buttons the row of buttons up his front.

"Will you at least give me your number?" he asks.

"I live more than three hours away," I say. "How about an e-mail address?" I write mine down and he scrawls his on the hotel notepad by the telephone. He never uses it. I send him one message, six months later, after hearing from my mom that his mother has suffered a heart attack, but is recovering nicely. He doesn't write back.

I bum another cigarette from him as he leaves, then walk him out and sit on the bench next to my hotel-room door. He lights my cigarette and I smoke while watching him drive away in his big truck. The cigarette is better than the sex was: hotter, muskier. Warmer. After I've smoked it down to the nub, I stub it out in the ashtray and walk back into my room. I put the chain on the door, brush my teeth, set the alarm for seven o'clock that same morning, take off my clothes again and go to sleep, thinking of Gordy.

**Chapter Eighteen: Antoine's (2000)**

Alex forewent the 90-day heroin-addiction halfway-house treatment route and instead was back at our house after seven days of hospitalization for detoxification. I couldn't look at him for three days. We conducted all of our conversations with a closed door between us — usually mine. I was spending a lot of time in my room, having just dislocated my shoulder during a Pacific surf-zone kayak class. The day I went to the doctor Alex came home from work at lunch. He saw that my arm was now in a sling and asked if I'd been to the doctor. I nodded.

“Oooh. What kind of drugs did he give you?” Alex asked.

“Soma and Darvocet and big Ibuprofens.”

“Darvocet, huh? That's horse tranquilizer.” I don't think I imagined the glint in his eye. “Where are you keeping them?”

“In my nightstand. Of my locked bedroom,” I told him.

“Aww. You're no fun,” Alex laughed. I couldn't laugh along with him, and this made him laugh all the more.

In his defense, he attended Narcotics Anonymous every night. His NA friends started hanging out around the house. I noticed that one of them had an “Easy Does It” keychain and rolled my eyes at the idea that a keychain could help someone kick heroin, until Alex picked it up. They were his keys.

I saw his stepmother, Michele, at the movies the last Saturday in September, and waited by the side of the lobby, opening and closing my fist in a shy three-year-old's wave. The moment she noticed me she waved me over

with a large sweeping motion. She spread her arms wide as I approached and at first I wasn't sure if she was going to hug me or slug me.

"Lynn! How are you?"

She gathered me into a huge hug, as the first relief I'd felt in weeks washed over me. After letting me go, she asked, "What's happening?"

"I'm moving."

"God *damn* it! I can't believe that Alex is the one who ruins his life and you're the one who has to move." She went on, enunciating every thought I'd had in my head for the past three weeks. I was glad I wasn't there with a friend, glad she was there alone, too. Her gestures became grander and her voice louder as she continued. "I remember when Dave came home from work and told me that you told your landlord what was going on. Dave was furious and I said, 'now, wait a minute. Lynn's not the one who, pardon my French, fucked up her life. Why *should* she have to move?'"

Finally, she took a breath and asked, "What do the neighbors think?"

"Michele, nobody's spoken to me since Brian told me Alex went to the hospital."

This stopped her. "So, you didn't know? About him?"

"No. I knew something was wrong and asked around but nobody gave me a straight answer. The closest I got was, 'Oh, he's having some substance-abuse issues.' I learned what it was the day Brian came over." I closed with my now-common refrain. "Christ, what do *I* know about heroin?"

"Oh, Lynn," she said, real sorrow in her voice. "See, I thought you knew." I shook my head and she winced. "Nobody's spoken to you since then?"

"Well, Nancy called. We're getting together tomorrow night." Nancy was Brian's live-in girlfriend with the kids, who'd told me to bring a swimsuit when I went to Indiana to bury Grandma.

"Yeah, Nancy's cool," Michele said, adding, "She's a grown-up."

Nancy and I agreed to meet at Antoine's, a dive bar near where she lived. I rolled up promptly at eight o'clock that evening, having first stopped to copy a story about Crazy Horse. Nancy's son recently did a report on South Dakota and was wild about Crazy Horse. I left the photocopied pages in my truck and walked past the ever-present doorway full of smokers to enter the bar.

It was as I remembered: too dark. The patrons looked like they'd been paroled that morning. My eyes adjusted to the dim and the first person I recognized was Jim leaning against a rail. Jim and Alex met in high school. He served as support crew for Ethan's mountain-bike races. I received my first inkling that this would not be a pleasurable evening.

Nancy spotted me a moment later. "Hey LB, thanks for coming. Can I buy you a beer?"

"Sure. Anchor Steam." She ordered our drinks and we sat down at the curve of the bar: me, Nancy, Kate, whose father-in-law once tried to date me, and Jim. Kate was at the apex, with Nancy closest to me. Nancy waited until our drinks were served to begin.

"So, Lynn, I guess I asked you here tonight to find out: What the fuck were you thinking?"

She spent the next five minutes railing into me for my lack of compassion in Alex's hours of greatest need.



“Charles wanted to come tonight but decided not to, because he said he thought if he saw you, he’d kick your ass. I mean, I’d expect this kind of shit from Abby or even Alex’s girlfriend, but never you. I always held you on a higher pedestal,” she said mixed metaphorically. “That’s why I asked to host your birthday party last year, even though everyone was skeptical of why I’d want to in the first place. I told them, ‘Because LB is the only real person I know. What you see is what you get with her.’” She took a sip of her drink and continued. “You’ve proven me wrong and I want to know why. Why did you try to get Alex thrown out?”

“Nancy, look. I’ve witnessed my cousin Gordy’s battle with alcoholism and,” I started to explain about how rehab had kept him away from his children for months, and if alcohol addiction was so strong, what would heroin addiction be like? No. Alex got himself into it.

“No,” Nancy said, cutting me off. “You don’t get to bring any of your *personal* experiences into this. I mean, I used to be a heroin addict, too. Did you know that?” I shook my head no and kept silent. “Does that change how you feel about me?” Nancy asked.

I looked at her sorrowfully. “You and I are not roommates.”

“That doesn’t matter. Used to be I thought that if I ever got into trouble in Redwood City that I could always call LB, that you’d help me out, no question.”

“Nancy, you still could.” I sighed at the futility of the argument. *Coulda, woulda, shoulda.* It’s all the same. *Blah blah blah.*

“No, I couldn’t,” she said. “I really couldn’t. So why? Why try to throw Alex out without even talking to him about it first?”

*Because if his life was so out of control he had to be hospitalized, I wasn't going to get anywhere by talking to him. Besides, he had more important things to do, like getting off of heroin.*

"Look," I said instead, "the first I knew about any of this was when Brian told me. Nobody felt they needed to mention anything to me before that, not even you, Jim." Jim was the one who vaguely 'fessed up to Alex's "substance-abuse issue."

"I couldn't tell my folks, they'd flip out, and I was already doing enough of that on my own. So the next day I went to see my pastor."

This set them off. They rolled their eyes and spoke as one voice.

—Oh, he told her Alex was bad.

—Wicked.

—Evil maybe.

—No wonder.

"No, it wasn't like that."

"Sure it was." Nancy said.

I knew then that nothing I said would make a difference, not even explaining that if Alex backslid and the cops showed up, they'd impound every thing I'd built with Motormouth. Two years of building, demolished. No more commute down the hallway, through the kitchen to the back landing, down eighteen steps to the back patio and garden. The door to the office suite opened away from the ground-floor landing.

"Believe what you want; you're going to anyway. But you weren't there," I said.

Jim piped up, "I just can't believe you'd turn your back on Alex when he needs you the most."

That was enough. "*Look*. Nobody's praying harder for his recovery than I am."

"There, now, that's the sort of thing I'd expect from LB." She went on a while longer and I let her — one of us might as well feel better by the end of this confrontation. I kept my mouth shut and just let her talk. Finally she reached her limit and stormed off to the back of the bar. Jim took a long look at me before following. Kate stared at me as I gathered my purse and jacket to go.

"Sorry," she said.

Yeah, right. I spread my arms and shrugged. "Shit happens." Kate followed Jim and Nancy. I got down from the stool and the bartender came over.

"Leaving so soon?" he asked.

"Looks that way."

"Come back again."

*Not bloody likely.*

I pushed past the smokers at the door and unlocked my truck. The Crazy Horse story I copied for Nate was right where I left it. I drove as far as the Belmont train station, called my mom on my cell phone, told her "I miss Grandma," and started to cry. Half an hour later I was together enough to drive the few remaining miles to Redwood City.

Two months later I found my cabins and moved away. The weekend before, I spent an hour scraping off Magnetic Poetry tiles so I could clean the front of the refrigerator. I left the poetry for Alex — Francine gave him the

original set, and my former boss gave me “Cat Talk” and “Personal Ad.” All told, there were 1,000 different words and punctuation marks on our fridge, rearranged during all of our parties and the more out-of-control ping-pong/barbecue nights. Most of the words were mine but I didn’t want to take them with me. Neither did I want to leave them up in the kitchen, the sacred ground of my relationship with Alex.

Using a pastry scraper, I dispatched the words as quickly as possible into a carved box Alex kept in the sideboard. The last three read *we, mean, friends*.

**Chapter Nineteen: Driving Back (2002)**

After the unfulfilling sex and the satisfying cigarette, I sleep from just past midnight until two in the morning. Then I lay awake for three hours listening to the toilet fill its tank. The noise is random enough to seem intermittent, though I realize that I might have something to do with the timing: every time I'm about to fall asleep, it starts up again. *Might as well blame God for this, too*, I think, so I do.

When I fall asleep again I slip into an anxiety dream: I have to drive my second cousin to the airport, but first I must finish moving out of the Allerton Street house I shared with Alex. Even though new tenants live there and the interior floor plan is completely altered, this is the last day that the house would be locked. Mom and Auntie Lynn show up as I frantically sort through lamps and papers and garbage. There is too much to do in so little time. Mom clucks at me and shakes her head. I know I'll be late and that maybe my cousin will miss his flight, but I have to retrieve my remaining belongings as new tenants filed in and out. I awaken, gasping, at 6:30, then roll over and sleep dreamlessly until the alarm rings at 7:00.

I have already packed most of my things, so I slip into cargo shorts and a T-shirt, hang my clothes for Alex's funeral on the rail of the passenger-side headrest in my truck, make sure I've cleaned out the bathroom of my toothpaste and toiletries, then close my door and drive to the lobby to check out.

"You need to have a maintenance worker look at the toilet in my room. It was running all night," I tell the clerk as I sign the charge slip. Then I drive to Auntie Lynn's for what seems like the fiftieth time in five days. She's got some coffee on and I help myself. The cousin I'm driving to the airport appears. So

far, my nightmare has not come true. It seems as though we'll reach the airport on time.

"My truck's out front. It's not locked," I tell him. He picks up his suitcase and disappears into the front yard, returning a mere moment later.

It is time to say goodbye to my family. I hug everyone. Mom holds me especially tight, to bolster me against the crappy day I have ahead of me. Auntie Lynn is still in her nightgown. I see the smooth flesh of her back when she turns away from me after wishing me a safe trip back to the valley.

"Guess it'll be good to be home," she says. "Be sure to call us when you get there, OK?"

"It will be a long time until I'm home," I say.

"Why? It's what, four hours?"

"Well, usually. But first I have to go to another funeral."

She blanches. "Oh. I forgot. Great week, huh?"

"Sparkling," I say.

Despite my anxiety nightmare, which amuses my cousin while also scaring him a little, we reach the Fresno airport and I wish him bon voyage.

"It was great seeing you, Marilyn. I wish the circumstances could have been better," he tells me as he grabs his bag from the bed of my truck.

"Yeah. Me, too. Have a safe flight."

"I intend to." He smiles and waves before turning toward the airport's entrance, and I loop around to the exit and get back on the freeway before imploding. I drive in silence, thinking about what I'll say when the preacher opens the service to comments. In Los Banos I buy a deli sandwich and a bottle of water. I'm so dehydrated from crying the past week I'm surprised my

fingertips aren't puckered. The air is clean and warm until I reach the San Luis Reservoir, at which point the fog socks in everything and the sky goes from blue to a mottled twenty-percent gray. I remember the tone from my college photography class. The fog doesn't lift the whole way and it even starts to rain, as if willed by the funeral powers-that-be.

I make it to Mountain View in time to stop at Safeway and buy nylons — the ones I wore the day before have runs in them. I bring my clothes in to the supermarket to change in their bathroom after I make my purchase. But before I can leave the line, I punch in the code for my discount card. I pay in cash.

"Thank you," the clerk says, assuming I'm married because she calls me Mrs. Alex's-Last-Name. I'd forgotten about that: when we lived together and had the same phone number, Alex signed up for his Safeway Club Card before I had the opportunity to do so. All of my purchases with that code would ring in under his name. I know she was just trying to help, but I want to vault over the grocery-conveyor belt and throttle the clerk. Instead, I tell her, "I don't need a bag," and go back to find the restroom and change into a black pleated skirt, gray silk top, black pumps and my new nylons. I pin back my hair, slip on my leather jacket. Good enough, considering the week I've had, and considering I've just changed in a supermarket bathroom.

I'd hoped there would be time to get my truck washed but there isn't, so I buy gas and get a car-wash code to use later. Then I head into Palo Alto to the cemetery, where, I still can't believe it, Alex will be buried. I am glad the sky is gray. I want it to pour down rain, hail, thunder, lightening. It would be poetic justice if it snowed; he loved it so much, it should fall hard, thoroughly coat his grave, like a benediction.

"Alex, do you believe in God?" I asked him one evening.

"I believe in snowboarding," he answered.



**Chapter Twenty: Wants (1999)**

More than Natalie Wood in the film "Miracle on 34th Street," Alex wanted a house. We'd drive around Belmont's hills and he'd reminisce about childhood, "before my parents split up." They'd had a place with what sounded like a great view. "Mom moved to the San Carlos flats and I went with her," Alex said from the driver's seat of his black Toyota 4Runner. He'd drive and do a hundred other things at the same time: light a cigarette, turn up the radio, change the station, put on his seat belt. When Alex drove me up around Belmont, the year before we lived together, he didn't have the subwoofer in his truck yet, so instead of being pummeled by rap music, we'd talk and look out the windows, Alex lighting another cigarette.

"I will never have a home here. I'll never have it as good as my dad."

"Never know," I'd say. "Something could happen."

He'd close his eyes, gun the engine a little to make me squeal. Then we moved in together and after the summer, he started to slide. Soon after was when I scraped his pipe and got so high. Now I know why: I smoked heroin.

People ask, "don't you notice he slept all the time?" Well, that was pretty standard for Alex, anyway. There was one time, though, when I woke up at 2:00 in the morning and realized that I wasn't alone, that Kevin was at his apartment in the City. It then became this interesting assignment to discover who was in the bed with me. I put my hands to the body's back and it turned out to be Alex. I shook him. When he turned around I looked close into his face because I wasn't wearing my glasses.

"Alex?"

"Huh?"

"Go to your bed," I said.

Alex crawled out of my bed and started walking to the door but first he turned and looked at me. I swear to God he scratched his head and tilted his jaw, like a befuddled drunken uncle too late to get the joke. He caught my blurred gaze before going. He went to his room and I got up and I closed my door but didn't lock it. The lock wasn't installed until he was away at the detox hospital.

Shortly after that he rode his dirt bike all the way to the series championship. The top of the fish tank was already covered with trophies, and he came home that night with two more. One was a first-place for that day's race, the other a plaque for winning the series. I had made spaghetti for when he came home and we ate with the relish only victory provides.

That Tuesday, Tony came over for ping-pong. Don hadn't moved to France yet, but he had his ticket and it was one-way. The games ended early that night so the four of us walked up to the seedy bar next to "our" liquor store. We never went to the bar because it was easier to drink at home. Plus, it wasn't a dive so much as a jump from the edge of the swimming pool. Great place to pick up a trailer-park date. Nothing against trailer parks. After shooting doubles' pool and drinking Budweiser at El Drecko, we came back home. Alex's trophies shone in the halogen lamplight and we congratulated him again. I decided my plea to put some of the older trophies away should wait for another time. I disappeared into the kitchen and came back with cups and the cognac I bought in Cognac, from when Kevin and I spent two weeks in France.

"We're going to drink this tonight," I said.

"LB . . . for what?" Alex asked.

"For winning the series."

He beamed. "Let me help."

I poured the drinks and he handed cups to Tony and Don. "To Alex, number one-forty-nine, for kicking motocross butt," I said.

We all drank. I sat next to Alex on the floor; the other guys were on the sofa.

"Now I want to propose a toast to you," Alex said. Something in his tone made me turn to face him. It lowered and softened in a way I'd never heard. Tony and Don were talking about other things and didn't notice us. "To you, LB . . . Lynn. Marilynn." He'd never called me that before. "For being my favorite roommate, for your support, for the things we've talked about . . ." As he spoke, we bent closer to one another until our foreheads touched. Our eyes widened to take each other in. By the time he finished speaking, mine had teared.

"So, here's to you." Alex pulled away to drink but held his hand on my shoulder. I sat up a little but didn't raise my arm.

"Come on. Drink up," he said.

"I can't."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because," and I knew this was going to sound stupid but even so, I had to say it, "it's not polite to drink to oneself."

It wasn't what he was expecting to hear. He laughed. "But you toasted to me, and I drank. So we're even."

I wavered. He hugged me. "We're cool," he said. "Drink." So I did.

We finished our cognac, which tasted as good as you'd imagine cognac from Cognac to be, and I stood. "Put your cups by the sink when you're done.

I'll put them in the dishwasher tomorrow," I told the guys, leaving to brush my teeth. When I finished that and opened the bathroom door, Alex was just coming out of his bedroom. I had to walk past him to reach my bedroom door, and I turned to him as I flipped on the light in my room.

"Thanks for the drink," he said.

"It was my pleasure."

Alex stepped closer to me, cupping his hands around the sides of my arms so that his fingertips touched my shoulder blades. We tilted our heads mirror-style and he pulled me to him for a kiss on the lips, our first, our only. His lips were warm and committed. Mine acquiesced after initial surprise.

I am a good kisser and so was he; it was a short kiss but I could tell. I opened my eyes, keeping my head tilted. "Goodnight, Alex."

"Goodnight." When he turned the corner toward the living room, he was still smiling.

## Chapter Twenty-One: The Second One (2002)

I find the gravesite by following the signs marked “Funeral.” My windshield is a Rorschach test of dead bugs but there wasn’t time to drive through a car wash — buying stockings and changing my clothes in the bathroom of the Safeway was more important. I pull up and park, close my eyes, take one final deep breath and step out of my truck. The wind pricks at my lungs and the fog makes the air feel heavy on my shoulders. A bagpiper plays under a tree and I could be on a Scottish moor if I only closed my eyes. I pull my black leather coat around my body and walk slowly up the grassy incline, shivering, feeling the fist around my heart clench tighter with each surreal step toward the open grave, trying not to think about what a bastard Alex is for making this happen.

The gravesite is flanked with chairs on one side and seven enormous flower arrangements on tripods on the other. *Would there be that many flowers at my funeral?* A few people have already arrived, though I don’t recognize anyone but Chris, Alex’s mom. I don’t trust myself to say anything. I look for my former neighbors when an image pops into my mind: Alex’s blue desk from his time with Ethan in San Jose, the desk he let me use when I was starting Motormouth. A small sticker above the right-hand drawer proclaimed that LIFE IS WONDERFUL. PEOPLE ARE TERRIFIC. He laughed every time he looked at it, but it was honest laughter.

The grave is just an open hole, no Astroturf to pretty it up. The casket-lowering machine is ready to go. The grave seems big enough today. Alex was shorter and slim, not like Gordo.

I wonder whether Alex had preferred cremation. It had to be Chris who wanted Alex to be buried. She always wanted him close, tried to keep him in one place, keep him, as it were, grounded. I shiver with irony. The cemetery is an Amish cocktail party: we don't belong there and could all use a drink. I sure could. Two funerals in two days is too much. My brain is fraying. I see Steve and want to thank him for introducing me to Alex, but touch his arm instead.

Tony hugs me. It's been a year, though he'd sent me an e-mail on my 29<sup>th</sup> birthday. "You look good," he says. My smile stretches my face like a full sheet on a queen bed. We look to the grave with a jerky compulsion. We don't want to see it but we have to look. I think Tony could use a smoke, though he quit more than a year ago.

More neighbors, my former closest friends, park on the street and walk up the hill. Nik pulls me into a deep hug. I feel his open hands rub my back. It takes me a moment to return the gesture, I'm so surprised. His black car coat is nylon, which smoothes my fingertips. He holds on a little longer, tighter, but I let him break it first. He pulls back a few inches. "Sorry." The look in his dark eyes says *for everything* and he walks away crying.

Dave and Michele appear in matching dark suits. Dave in a tie is startling. He walks straight to me and I am still. Putting his hands on my arms, above my elbows, he looks down at me from a paternal force I've never felt.

"You did what you could to wake him up," Dave says. "We all did." The second part doesn't sound as convincing as the first, but I nod and try to speak, because I know he needs to hear something from me, some reassurance from Alex's living companion.

“Dave, we loved him. Everyone did,” I say. We speak as though it’s just the two of us there; Dave’s on Death Row with minutes to state his message. The urgency with which he speaks astonishes me, and helps to loosen the fist around my heart and the clamp around my tongue. We lock eyes, then he turns to attend to the other guests at his youngest son’s funeral. I look for Ethan, whose hand is being held by his wife who’s starting divorce proceedings, who moved out of their house a week before Alex committed suicide. She holds Ethan’s hand as though it’s an expensive purse. More of my old neighbors arrive and most of us hug, though Jim, Nancy and look through me as though I’m a blur in the fog. The sky gets a little darker and the temperature dips. I’m thankful that it didn’t have the audacity to be a warm, sunny day, wonder what God maybe had to do with that, if anything. “Only a hundred and eighty days until Kirkwood opens,” he’d say June first, and I’d smile, and ask him for a cigarette. But now it’s only March: plenty of snow on the mountain. I can’t believe he killed himself before snowboarding season was over.

At first I don’t recognize Kim because her hair has grown so long. She comes to me with a middle-aged woman in tow. I take the passive approach and wait for her.

“Lynn, this is my mom,” Kim says.

I shake hands and then give Kim a hug. “I’m so sorry.”

“Today I told my mom, ‘I can’t believe this afternoon they’re going to bury the only man I’ve ever loved.’”

I don’t know what to say to that. Kim turns into her mother’s open arms and begins to cry. She isn’t wearing mascara today. Neither am I.

The funeral is going to start soon and the older guests take seats at the gravesite. Tony stands next to me and I'm thankful for the company. I met him through Alex when we were all living in San Jose. The continuity is comforting. The mourners have achieved critical mass and we all stand around in our dark clothes in the fog, but there is no coffin yet. I look across the graveyard to the driveway where the hearse is likely to appear. I tell myself *I won't react, I won't say anything when I see the hearse*, but then I'm trapped in the beam of its headlights from half a mile away and *Oh God* escapes my lips.

Why in the hell are we here? How did it come to this? I don't know; I hadn't heard from Alex in more than a year. His last e-mail to me simply read, "thank you." Then he moved away from Allerton Street and we never spoke again.

The hearse is black and ponderous, winding around toward its final destination. The men closest to Alex take pall bearing positions: Jim, John, Dave, Ethan, Brian. The hearse driver stops and opens the tailgate. I see the coffin emerge from the hearse like a wooden torpedo. I watch Ethan as he grips the railing of his brother's casket. The pallbearers carry the casket to the grave and rest it on the pneumatic machine that will eventually lower Alex into the ground. I look for Steve in the crowd but can't see him.

The officiator never knew Alex, that's obvious from his vague platitudes. He wisely keeps it short, opening the opportunity for "those who knew him best" to say a few words.

Ethan begins. "It's been tough. Nobody in my family has ever died. For it to be my brother, well . . ." His wife takes his hand when he steps back to her.



A couple of men from the shop speak, and then I inhale to speak but Aunt Linda beats me to it. Michele has heard my gulp and looks back to me, then joins me. "Do you want to say something, Lynn?" she whispers. I nod. We murmur supportively before she pulls me forward.

I hear the end of Linda's memory.

—Our family had rented a cabin in Tahoe for the weekend a few weeks ago, and of course we invited Alex to go to the ski resort with us. We skied and snowboarded all day — it was great. When I told Alex I'd give him a lift back to his place at the end of the day but he said no. I said, Alex, that's silly. We'll drive you where you need to go. Alex stood by the side of the road, saying, 'I have to go my own way, Aunt Linda.' And I guess that he did. Go his own way.

Linda's a rancher, so tough that once she punched a horse and it went down with one blow. "She got down from it and punched it in the face. She punched the horse," Alex told me a couple of years ago. But today she just looks small and scared, tears dripping down to her rabbit-fur coat.

Dave's noticed me. "Lynn Benson would like to say something," he says. I open my mouth and speak.

—I lived with Alex for five years. Longer than anyone except for my parents. We worked out our differences and I'm thankful for that. When we lived together he spent a lot of time in the workshop or garage, but I always associate him with the kitchen. Dinners after winning another trophy. Weekend breakfasts with the neighborhood.

I see my neighbors glance at each other with half-smiles on their lips.

—Whenever we talked heart-to-heart, it was always in the kitchen.

Linoleum redemption.

*God, don't let me botch the ending.*

—The Alex I knew was so full of life that I'll never get used to talking about him in the past tense.

*Phew.* Dave takes a beat and then says, "Thank you, Lynn."

I do not let go of Michele's hand and although I felt pretty calm while speaking, now my heart is racing and my legs can hardly support me.

Alex's grandfather, who is sitting in the front row of chairs, rises to speak, assisted by the man standing behind him.

"Dad?" Dave invites.

We wait until the old man reaches his feet, but his shoulders crumple. "I want to, but I can't." Sitting down, he starts to cry. I step back from Michele and the other lead mourners, cover my mouth with my hand and sob as soundlessly as I can.

Once the last words are spoken the bagpiper resumes. We gather around the coffin, and some set gifts atop its lid. Tony balances a small toy skateboard on a red rose. Blaise offers a cigarette and someone places a lighter next to it, perhaps the only lighter Alex didn't steal. Alex was the "pocket Nazi." Every ping-pong night he'd end up with one or two lighters in his pocket not belonging to him. Whenever one of us was missing a lighter, Alex was the primary suspect. Plus, if he didn't have yours, he'd have an extra he'd loan to you. I founded an economic theory on this practice, that some people always buy lighters, and others always steal them, so that people who buy lighters are obliged to buy more lighters. I nearly had Alex convinced that this is what kept the United States economy afloat. Now he'll own one forever.

I circle the coffin to look for its clear manufacturer's sticker but there isn't one. *Finally, tact over marketing.* The wood is as smooth as Auntie Lynn's back where her nightgown doesn't cover her shoulder blades. Searching around, I pass John L. He looks at me but doesn't say a word. If he doesn't have the maturity to be a grown-up about this, it's no problem of mine. We stand around waiting for Alex to pop the lid and send the tokens and flowers skittering down the wood; maybe top it with a little song and dance, his "Me and My Shadow" with a putter and some Wiffle-golf balls.

Alex's mom joins us graveside. Tony's little skateboard makes her cry. And through it all, the bagpiper pipes his mournful tunes — now it's "Danny Boy." I want to throw a big rock at him, or maybe a brick, or grab a knife and slit the bladder of his instrument.

After Chris composes herself a bit, I approach her. She introduces me to her fiancé and gives me a hug.

"You know," I tell her, "I've been thinking a lot this week about the night that Alex had you over for dinner, when we were still living in our place in San Carlos. He was so nervous, and worked so hard on the meal. I remember him putting the salad together with great care so that you'd like it."

"Thank you. Thank you for telling me that," Chris says. She wipes her eyes before continuing. "You were such a good influence on him. I always told him that you were the girl for him, the one." I am shocked that she would ever tell Alex that, and then tell me about it. "But he'd laugh it off. He didn't listen." She sighs. "He never listened."

I look around surreptitiously: I don't want Kim in earshot. She's on the other side of the grave, introducing Tony and John to her mom.

Alex couldn't have been the one for me, because if he were, he'd still be here. God wouldn't rob that from me too, would He?

The funeral director asks the mourners to step away from the grave, then pushes a button that makes Alex's coffin sink into the ground. Alex would have been fascinated. Charles stands next to me: Charles, who Nancy'd told me a year ago wanted to kick my ass; Charles, whom I drove to Tahoe with that weekend eons ago.

I wait to see if he'll speak to me. When he does, it's just one word.

"Lynn," he says, as though it's a sentence, or a novel.

I squeak, "Charles." Hardly any sound comes out but I can tell that he's heard me because he flinches. Whatever. He started it.

Once the casket is settled in the earth, we form a ring and look down. "Don't you just kind of want to jump in after him?" Stacia asks, eyes wet. I shrug. Her question isn't silly, though; I see agreement in my neighbors' faces. Stacia hands me a flower that I toss into the grave. I couldn't peel the sticker, so at least I have something to offer. I go over to Ethan, offer my condolences.

"I know you thought it would be a good idea, but I couldn't find Francine," he says.

"I'll take care of it," I tell him. He thanks me.

Then I turn to leave. Brian stands by the curb. I hit him up for a cigarette and we smoke, talk about what he's been doing, talk about my decision to go back to school.

"That's great, LB. That's really great." I can tell that he means it, and the encouragement helps to clear the fog from my head, loosen the fist around my heart. Tony approaches us. "What's the plan?"

"Is there a reception?" I ask.

"Nah," Brian says. "Dave took a bunch of us to lunch before."

I turn to Tony. "Want to do something?"

"Yeah. Let's go back to San Jose. You can see the apartment I moved into last weekend.

"Sounds good to me, but I have to get my truck washed first. It's too filthy to drive anymore." I leave out that it's from 400 miles of highway bugs. Tony agrees and gives me his address. I look for Steve but he's not there — probably had to go back to CalKart. They're open late on Thursdays.

I follow Tony out of the cemetery and then lead the way to the car wash. After waiting my turn, I punch in the code I bought earlier and drive into the tunnel. The water on my truck is a baptism. I wish I could get out and let it wash me, too, smack my face and knock me around. I want to be bruised, to justify the ache I feel. Coldness has given over to physical soreness.

Ever since everyone's jobs went away, the southbound traffic on 101 is no big deal. We arrive in good time and Tony shows me his new apartment. It is nice: pretty big, new green carpet. When I see one of Alex's go-kart trophies standing near the windowsill it takes my breath away.

"It's funny," I say. "I used to bug Alex about keeping every single dirt-bike trophy on his fish tank, and now . . ."

"Now you wish you had one," Tony ends the statement for me. I nod and rub the helmeted head of the little figure on top of the trophy, for luck, like it's not too late. "I heard you say something when you saw the hearse." I nod. "Want to get high?" I nod again.

Tony's bedroom faces the street and the window offers a view of a beautiful tree. Tony packs the bong and we lighten our heads of this crappy day, then head out to Japantown for Chinese food at the best Chinese restaurant in San Jose.

Once we are seated at a private table, I tell Tony about my crappy week, about what I did yesterday. Then we don't speak, except to tell the waitress our dinner choices.

"I always thought that drugs, hard drugs, were like an emotional credit card," Tony says after we're nearly through with the meal.

"What do you mean?"

"You know. You take a little out, and then a little more, and after years you can't make the minimum payment anymore."

It's the most profound statement that I've ever heard from him. "Chris cried when she saw your skateboard on the coffin."

"I didn't want to make anybody cry," he says.

"I think it's good. That someone knew him well enough to leave that."

Tony shrugs. "I figured he'd need something to play with."

I smile. "Bigger air in heaven, right? Less gravity." We laugh but then stop, as though we're breaking a code of behavior, which I guess we are.

"You can't tell anyone this," Tony says, "but I always wondered if something like this would happen. You know that when Alex was living with Ethan in San Jose, it was so he could give up the speed?"

"Yeah. Dave told me after Alex went in for heroin detox."

"Well, Alex and I were talking one afternoon about some rock star who'd just killed himself, OD'd or something. Alex got this faraway look in his eyes

and said, 'I could picture that. I mean, if things ever got too bad, too out of control. It would be a way out.' But then he changed the subject and we never talked about it again, like Alex was afraid it might come up." He takes a drink of water. "I remember what he said because I thought one day it might be important."

"I figure he did it because he knew he'd end up in jail," I say. "Alex wouldn't have done very well in jail. Too boyish." Tony's eyes close at the thought.

He pays the bill and drives us back to his place but I don't go in. "I want to see Steve before he closes the shop."

"Tell him hi," Tony says. I thank him for dinner and drive the mile to CalKart, where Steve is at work fixing a kart in the back.

"Want to smoke?" I ask, then fetch the cigarettes from his desk and meet him at the back door. We watch cars drive up the street.

"Talk about what funerals are supposed to be," Steve says.

"I was surprised the bagpiper didn't play 'Amazing Grace.'"

"He did — at the end." His voice rings with *duh*. "After they lowered him into the ground."

"Is that what that was? I've never heard it on the bagpipes. I couldn't tell." We finish our smoke. "What are you doing after work?"

"Going home and going to bed."

"Want to go get a drink first?"

Steve shakes his head. "I'm beat. It's been a hell of a week."

He's blowing me off, but I can't blame him. I leave CalKart and drive downtown, almost glad to be here after Alex's funeral, this city where I was

neighbors with Steve, met Ethan, went to that Halloween party back in 1992. I park underground and take the elevator up to the Irish pub on First Street. The bouncer checks my smiling photo against the dour expression on my face.

"Come on, things can't be that bad," he says, upbeat. I snarl at him. "OK, maybe they are." He leans away from me while extending my driver's license.

First I go to the jukebox, then I go to the bar. I sit in the darkest corner of the room and wait for my songs to play. "Fairytale of New York," by the Pogues, because it starts so sweet and ends so bitter. "Pulling Mussels from a Shell," from the Squeeze CD that Francine gave to Alex when they were going out. They end and I finish my beer. As I gather my coat and purse, "The Boxer" fills the bar. I would have picked that one if Simon and Garfunkel didn't always make me cry. I clip back to my truck, the only person in the underground garage, and I remember what Linda said at the funeral. "He always had to go his own way." The tears don't start up again until I crawl up to my loft and lie in my bed, feeling more alone than I did during last night's one-night-stand. I wish Alex were sleeping across the hall so we could meet in the kitchen and break down together, but then I harden. *Forget it. If Alex isn't in my life anymore, then neither is God. They both let me down. Assholes.*



**Chapter Twenty-Two: Ever Since (2002-2003)**

When I call her family's business to give Francine the news, I learn that they've just sold it to someone else. The owner refuses to pass along a message to Francine, and I don't know her last name so I can't look her up in the phone book. Brian doesn't remember it, either. I wonder if somehow she already knows that Alex is gone. Stranger things have happened.

Two months after the burial, I go to Alex's grave. The tombstone, a bronze relief of Lake Tahoe, was laid only two days before, and the grass around the marker hasn't grown in yet. I use my bulb-planting tools to bury the pipe that Sean gave me for my twenty-ninth birthday. I make sure to bury it near the head of the grave. I figure that maybe Alex will appreciate the gesture.

Although sometimes delayed, bad things always happen in threes. Tia, my girlfriend from my first real job, who told me that the ex who broke my heart "probably wouldn't be happy with Jennifer Aniston, either," died October first on her twenty-eighth-and-a-half birthday, and Gordy's half-birthday as well.

I couldn't make this up. Unfortunately, I don't have to.

Tia's boyfriend, a sweet computer programmer named Brian, is gracious at her funeral, although obviously deep in grief. They were together for seven years. I think about what it must be like to be loved by somebody to such a degree. I think to myself, *I wish I had a Brian of my own.*

Two weeks later, I meet one. We are presenters on the same panel at a Northern California graduate-student conference. This Brian is deep in the study of Thomas Pynchon's novel *The Crying of Lot 49*. Forty-nine was Alex's number before he ran his three-digit motocross plate. I am intrigued, and soon after, his

girlfriend. We're crazy about punk rock but make love to the blues, or the Beatles.

On the morning of what would have been Alex's thirty-second birthday, Brian tells me, "I love you." I say it back. He meets my parents.

So now it's one year later and nearly everything that reminds me of Alex and the week of Good Friday is tucked away into an old utility closet: the lei from Tia's funeral; the July Fourth pictures where Alex put a firecracker on a paper airplane and made it fly; the orange origami crane left over from my twenty-eighth birthday party, three months before Grandma died and Saturn Return took over and turned my life to garbage.

My long run of astrologically induced bad luck snaps the day before my 31<sup>st</sup> birthday when Brian asks me to be his girlfriend. Any further doubts about Saturn Return leaving my life are eradicated on the six-month anniversary of our first date. Brian takes me out to dinner that night and, after not saying anything since sitting down, even after I knock over my water glass, gives me a look that I've never seen before.

"Can I just ask? Will you marry me?"

My entire single life flashes before my eyes, like a DVD on 800x fast-forward. After a studied moment, I give him a look I've never given anyone and say, "Yes."

Two weeks later, Brian and I catch a televised showing of that horror movie Alex and Kim had seen, way back when. I am astonished to realize that Kim was right: the guy in the movie is hot, smoking hot. I can barely watch the movie for the realization that Kim was right all along.

Nancy was right, too: Saturn return is real and the stars do influence my life. The stars made the past few years of hell happen, yes, but God made the stars. And I've been talking to Him about that. Although we haven't spoken for a while, I'm pretty sure He remembers me. I'll be hurt if He doesn't.

\* \* \*

Not much longer after that revelation, Brian and I walk out of a Safeway supermarket together. Brian looks puzzled. "Why did the clerk call you Mrs. Alex's-Last-Name?" Brian asks with a puzzled look on his face.

I laugh because I've been waiting for this to come up. "Oh, yeah. That threw me, too — especially right before Alex's funeral when I stopped at a Safeway for pantyhose."

"Well?" he asks.

"See, when we moved to Allerton Street, Alex signed up for his Safeway Club Card before I did, so our phone number got tied to his name. I didn't want more junk mail, so I kept (650) 364-7536 as my Club Card code. I thought about changing it, but decided not to. Maybe it's stupid, but this way, Alex lives on, even if it's in a corporate database." Brian gives me the sweet, heart-melting look I earn for saying something particularly surprising.

The next morning, I turn to him, resolute with my first thought of the morning. My movement wakes him and his eyes open enough that I can see the clear blue of his irises: bluer than Alex's, bluer even than Grandma's.

"I'm going to finish my book with our conversation yesterday. About Alex's Safeway Club Card keeping him alive," I say, resolute.

Brian's blue eyes crinkle as he smiles at me and answers, "Cool."