

LOOKING FOR THE WAY

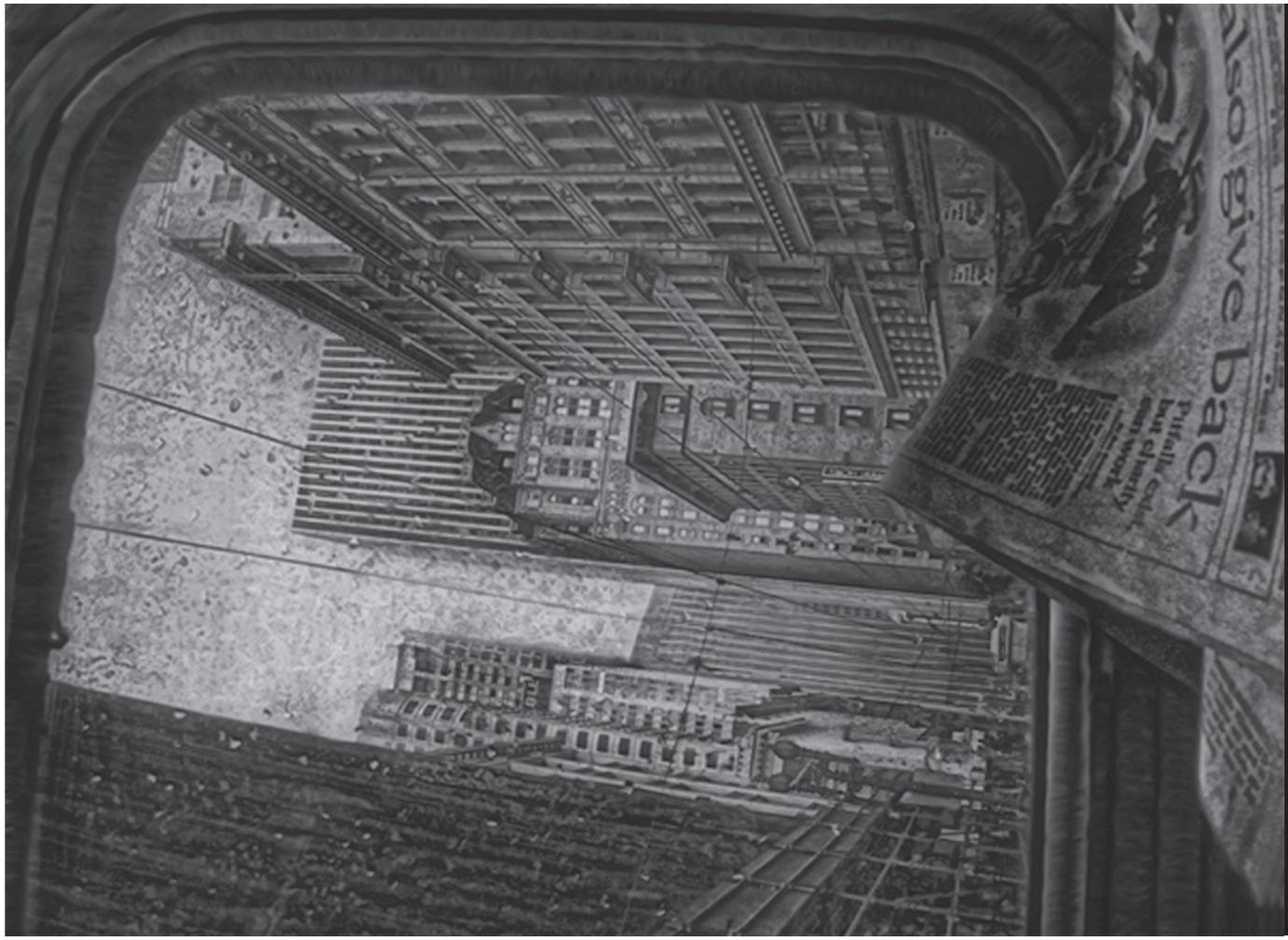
& other stories



by GABRIEL KUHN



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by **GABRIEL KUHN**

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I Didn't Know Anything About Philadelphia (or: Kristy, Lance, and I)

sent to: jecadam@tao.com
adam, hey, i'm here in portland. it's cool. sorry, got little time. i'll catch you later. be good! lance.
ps: i fucked kristy, you don't mind, right?

Kristy was the only girl I ever loved.

I met her at Golden Gate Park where I mostly hang out after my parents had died and I had finished high school and had moved into the city, sharing a room with two friends and mainly living off sketchy day jobs, panhandling and minor hustling.

Kristy had a home in Pacific Heights. Her parents were rich and she had everything she wanted. She was just bored out there and liked us semi-street-kids as company. I loved her so much I would have jumped the bridge for her. Or done something like that. Well, you know. The first night she kissed me on the grass in the park near the tennis courts, telling me that she thought I was really cute and that she wanted to make love to me right there and then, was the greatest moment of my life. No other came even close.

This was two and a half years ago. I was 18. Kristy and I, we had so much fun. Whenever her parents were gone, we hung out in their house in Pacific Heights and drank all their booze and ate all their food, and Kristy told me all the stupid stories she always sold them when they got back, about how all that stuff had disappeared, and how they always bought them 'cause of how clueless they were, and we laughed and laughed, and made love on their expensive carpets. And when her parents were around, we ran off to the park again for days and played music with buckets and sticks and rocks, and chased each other around the trees, and swung on the playground's swings until the cops chased us away, and scored free food on Haight Street and made love in the bushes. We pretty much lived like that for two years – even though Kristy supposedly went to school without ever actually going, but somehow she pulled that off too and her parents never noticed – and life was just beautiful.

The only thing that maybe wasn't all that great was that at one point we lost control over the drugs and went from experimenting to plain addiction, but at the time we didn't see it that way, and so it didn't faze us, and everything just seemed cool. And even once we did realize that the drugs had become a problem, and even once Kristy tried to get off them: in the beginning playing it down like it ain't a big deal, then more and more ambitiously, and in the end even kinda desperately, even then things still seemed great between us. But at this point I'd say that, yes, maybe then it was already more pretense great than real great, but how can I tell now? That was a long time ago. (And we were whacked out a lot, so I don't really remember all that much either, to be honest.) What I do know, however, is that I always loved Kristy like I never loved anyone else, and that, essentially, we were made to be with each other, and I don't care what happened, and I don't care what anybody says.

Lance was my best friend since I was eight years old.

We met in primary school, ended up living on the same block, had both nice moms but fucked up dads, liked the A's and preferred Pepsi over Coke, and that was that. From then on we went through thick and thin together, as they say. Lance was there when I stole my first CD at age eleven, scored my first homerun two years later and smoked my first spliff not too long after that. In fact, Lance was always there. Even when his parents moved to Lafayette when we were 15 and he went to a different high school, we saw each other almost every day: over in Oakland, or at the skate park, or one of us stayed over at the other's house, especially on the weekends.

Lance also moved to the city with me when we were just out of high school, hung out with me in the park, and we even both discovered new interests together, like literature or politics. I had no life without Lance. Wherever I was, he was. Closer than any brother could ever be – all that stuff. The memory was nice. But what it translated to now was appalling.

You don't mind, right? What an asshole. “No, of course I don't mind if you fuck the girl that broke my heart. In fact, I hope she had multiple orgasms and told you how much better it was than it was with me!” *You don't mind, right?* I should bash his fucking head in.

He called the next day. He was all excited and told me how cool Portland was. I said *yes* and *aha* and *oh, really?* Then he told me to be good again and hang up the phone. No word about Kristy. Probably they were fucking again. And I didn't mind. Ya, right.

I watched the Simpsons. That didn't help either. There was no other way. I had to get drunk.

I hit Tony's at 6.30. Anyone in there who was already hanging over double shots of whiskey at that hour was either one of the serious alcoholics or a pathetic loser seeking refuge in the poison like me. It wasn't a pretty scene. But if you're pathetic you can't ask for much, I guess. I ordered a double shot of whiskey myself.

Tony's had been my bar for a good year now. Mainly just 'cause it was the neighborhood bar. There's just a lot to be said for a bar on the corner three doors down. And the place itself could have definitely been worse: The juke box actually worked and had more choice than Chris Rea and Bruce Springsteen. There were even pictures of Louis Armstrong on the wall. And Tony was a compassionate owner, employing compassionate people. (All drunks themselves from what I could tell. But maybe that's why.)

I thought of Kristy. How she would laugh at little kids trying to catch pigeons in the park, and roll down the mounds, and eat cotton candy, and play some kind of Irish whistle at the drum circle. And how she would hold my hand while we ran up Strawberry Hill and then hug and kiss me and tell me how much she loved me. And then I would go to Lance and he would say how lucky I was, and that Kristy was a really great girl, and that he was so happy for me, and then we would get high and I felt so fortunate that I was blessed with such supportive and caring and loving people around me.

There was a woman on the other side of the bar who was sobbing incessantly. I had never seen her at Tony's. Tony was watching her too. His eyes met mine. I didn't do or say anything, so I guess he gathered that this night it wasn't my calling to be the Samaritan.

He walked over to talk to her. I couldn't hear what he said but he poured her another drink and got a smile out of her within seconds. Tony was a good man. He really was. ... Or had he ever fucked the woman his best friend was hung up on too? I didn't even wanna think about that. You gotta keep your faith in mankind, right? Even when your best friend who you thought was the best guy in the world just all but destroyed it.

Lance was always there for me. Like the day my mom overdosed on some pills in the bathroom and he got her down into the car and rushed her to the emergency room just in time, while all I had done was freak, not being able to do shit; or when he did the 170 miles drive up to Glass Beach that night at three in the morning to pick me up 'cause I had lost the keys to my car tripping on acid; or when he made up this elaborate story for the cops about how he had given me all this wrong advice on shopping at Target's which must have led me to believe that I could just take the electronic goods out through the backdoor (he really got me off the hook that way, believe it or not). He was the best friend anyone could have ever wished for. Which made me want to kill him even more now.

The problems with Kristy started when I tried to get off drugs. I don't wanna give you the whole moral spiel about how she was just a hopeless addict not being able to watch her boyfriend go clean, but it is true that it bothered her. Especially since I managed to do it within just a couple of weeks at my first serious attempt when she had tried so often but had always failed. I do think that I was neither judgmental nor smug about it, and that I remained there with love and support, but something was just off after those weeks. Well, this sounds like I'm blaming her for things falling apart. Well, maybe I do, actually. I don't know.

All I do know is that things just didn't work out anymore. Our contact lacked affection, we were short-tempered around each other, and we were bickering like old couples. However, it all happened really fast and I thought it was just a weird phase that maybe all couples had to go through at one point, and I really was still full of love for Kristy, and even the short-temperedness and the bickering seemed more like a stupid game to me than anything really serious. Mostly, even during that time, I just wanted to put my arms around her, pull her close, whisper nice things in her ear, make her food – even get her dope, for all I cared. But, as I said, we seemed to go through a phase where it seemed inappropriate to do any of these things, and so I didn't, yet never doubting for a second that different times would come around again and looking forward to those.

And then Kristy disappeared from one day to the next, leaving a letter that said that our relationship had run its course, that she felt suffocated, and that she would move to Portland.

Portland? We had always made fun of the new place for the hip and cool who just waited for the next town in the US to be declared the new place for the hip and cool so they could



move there. But I figured she was just on some weird trip and would be back soon. The notion that she could have actually left me for real took a long time to sink in. Even after I had figured out how to reach her by phone and we had talked a few times and she had repeatedly told me that things were indeed over for good, I didn't believe her. At least not until I ran into Jimmy, an old friend from the park, who said he had been to Portland recently and seen Kristy at a show with a guy she had introduced as her new boyfriend. That's about when I started to crumble. And when I found out just a few days later that Lance had not only known about this but had been in regular contact with Kristy ever since she had moved to Portland, I was falling apart.

To recover from those days to a degree where I could follow a fairly normal routine again took a good three months. But in the end I believed Lance's version that he thought it had been best for me not to know 'cause he had figured I had to realize things on my own and sort my own shit out, and maybe he'd been wrong by not telling me (in which case he'd be sorry), but generally he had really done what he had done out of consideration for what I was going through and the state I was in. I mean, if who you think is the greatest guy in the world and your best friend says that, you would believe it too, right?

So not only did I stay around Lance after all this, I even entrusted my recovery, and so my well-being, to him. Ain't that crazy? It was only a-month-and-a-half ago that I told him how glad I was that I had him, how lucky I felt that he was always there for me, and how grateful I had to be that he had helped me get through all this with Kristy – I even affirmed that it was only thanks to him that I was able to feel pretty good about everything now. He looked all like he was about to cry (just keeping the tears at bay 'cause he was tough), and he gave me a big hug and said that this was what friends were for, right?, and then he did this little thing with his fingers that we had invented in junior high as a childish bonding ritual and said "bear, bear, never let go!", which was part of the childish ritual, and we both laughed. Only a-month-and-a-half ago. Fuck that prick!

Tony was still talking to that woman. She almost looked happy now. Tony was pouring her drink after drink. Alcohol does wonders that way. Especially in combination with Tony. It was nice to see the woman smile though. Even lifted me up a little.

Lance told me he was gonna go to Portland about two weeks ago. I thought that was kinda weird since, for one, Lance never really went anywhere, and, for two, when he did, it was usually a big thing and he announced it like three months in advance. I did have thoughts that made me sick instantly but I just figured I was being ridiculous and that this just wasn't possible. Not Lance. No way. I bought the story about one of his best high school mates trying to get together his best friends for some kind of a reunion since he had just landed a pretty big job at NASA's Oregon office. (Don't ask me what they do there. I'm sure it's scary.)

Lance had never been around women much. He definitely wasn't a ladies man. He had had girlfriends here and there, but his relationships always seemed kinda funky and never really lasted any significant amount of time. It was like he was into girls but didn't really know

how to go about it properly. Plus, it seemed hard for him to really open up or to really like someone. Maybe it was just a longer process in his case. Like, maybe, in order for him to establish any kind of relationship that made him feel more comfortable, he needed to know someone longer. Someone like Kristy.

Tony finally moved away from the woman he had transformed from emotional wreck to happy drunk. She was getting up and putting her coat on, obviously ready to leave. I could see her getting her wallet out and Tony just waved it off, but she sternly shook her head and said something in mock irritation and put some bills on the counter, and Tony shrugged his shoulders and smiled and probably said thank you, and it looked like the woman said something like: no, thank you, and she blew him a kiss and walked off smiling the smile of, well, a happy drunk.

Tony came over.

"What was this all about?" I asked.

"Man, you wouldn't believe," he said. "This broad breaks up with her man like three months ago, then she has this affair with his best friend, then her old man finds out, gets his old pistol, and shoots his best friend dead."

"No shit," I said.

"Yes," Tony confirmed. "Ain't that wild?"

"You can say that again." I imagined me putting nine holes in Lance's torso. The thought was rather exciting but I wondered if its effect would remain. Didn't matter really though. In reality, I was not gonna kill Lance. I didn't wanna go to prison. I wasn't that tough. "You're a good man, Tony," I said.

Tony looked slightly bewildered. "What's wrong with you, man?"

"Nothing," I said, not caring a bit that Tony knew I was lying. "I'm just saying that you're a good man, that's all."

Tony got the message and left me alone. He knew that I preferred it that way and that there was no point in trying to talk to me about something I didn't wanna talk about. And he also knew that I wasn't the type either who wanted to talk about something but had to say like a million times he didn't before he finally spilled his guts like they were the purgatory's waterfall (if such a thing made any sense – I was never very good with metaphors).

I grabbed my coat and put the money I owed on the table. Tony looked at it for a second with that look and I said: "No way, man, you take it. You took it from the lady, so you can take it from me, right?" Again he just shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

For a moment I meant to ask him after all if he had ever fucked the woman that had broken his best friend's heart, but then I thought I better not. Certain things are better left alone, I figured. Like I said, we gotta keep our faith in mankind, right? Unearthing everything might not be the best way to go about this.

I didn't wanna go home yet, so I staggered through the neighborhoods till I ended up in front of Lance's house. I hadn't planned to, but it happened. I know it's some thing that can pretty easily be explained psychoanalytically, but my mom, whose family had fled some town in western Austria when the Nazis marched in, told me very early on never to trust a man from Vienna, even when he was Jewish, and so I never gave psychoanalysis much thought. And, in fact, what does it matter why I ended up in front of Lance's house anyway, I just did. His shitty old Chrysler was sitting there. It was worth just about nothing at this point but he was very attached to it. He had had it for eight years. I killed it instead of killing Lance. (Which can also very easily be explained psychoanalytically, but I just told you what my take on that is – or my mom's anyway.) I took out the lights, windows, keyed the body up and down, yanked out every single lever, bar or handle I could find, cut open the seats, even produced some sugar from a nearby 24-hour diner to pour in the tank. I told the guy, some Arab dude, why I was killing the car, and he said *hamdullah* and passed me a whole bag. When I heard the sirens, I ran. They never caught me. The neighborhood was full of tiny alleys you couldn't take a car into and I knew these alleys well.

I felt good when I was home. It was 4:30 am.

I saw the phone book on the table and suddenly everything was crystal clear. I called Greyhound and booked a ticket for an eight o'clock bus.

I grabbed the two bags I had and threw my most important belongings in. Then I put some bills together and scribbled down a note for the landlady saying that I was gone and that she could do whatever she wanted with the stuff that I was leaving behind. I put the keys in the lock, left the door open, and caught a cab to the station.

At 8:05 I was rolling westwards, headed all the way for Philadelphia. I didn't know anything about Philadelphia, but it seemed like a good enough place to make a new start.

Kristy and Lance? Fuck 'em both. If there is one permanent chance we get in life it's the one to reinvent it. I was down.

I threw my Iron & Wine tape in the walkman and fell asleep for a long, long time.

Crushed Soul

I never really thought it would happen, but I guess most things have to happen at some point. At least when they concern something you carry with you, something that is kinda bottled up inside you and which you can't endlessly carry around with you all bottled up like that because eventually that's just gonna make you sick. In short, I'm gonna tell you the story about the one girl that really broke my heart. In fact, that's not said right: A heart breaks fast, and, contrary to what most people seem to believe, it heals pretty fast too. What doesn't heal is your soul. So what's really tragic is when someone crushes that. So let me rephrase: I'm gonna tell you the story about the one girl who crushed my soul. You should listen well. Out of respect, I mean. I haven't told anyone before.

The one girl who crushed my soul was called Natasha. A beautiful name in itself. But maybe that doesn't matter so much (even though I think it matters more than what most people would want you to believe). I met her when I was going to film school. I did directing, she did script. We worked together on a project in our second year. I had seen her around before, but that was all. Unfortunately, as it turned out now. We seemed to share a very similar experience at our school: Mostly, the other students and their egos got on our nerves. And the professors and their stupid theories of art. We just wanted to make movies. Sure, Jim Jarmusch type movies rather than John Cameron type movies, but that didn't seem so much a question of art, just a question of common sense, good taste and an uncorrupted spirit.

So together we'd watch all these little wanna-be artists who either had not the slightest sense of artistic inspiration in them or who would sell out the second they got a chance – and the only way we could deal with it was to laugh about it, and, man, did we laugh! I sure had the best time of my life sitting with Natasha laughing not only about the other film school students, but soon about the art scene in general, the pretentious little town we were in, the stupid country of ours, the whole world. And for a long, long time I would have sworn that I knew that she had the best time of her life as well. But that changed about a year ago. You know, when she crushed my soul.

It didn't take long till we dated full time. Maybe three weeks after we started talking. It was pretty intense. I'm not gonna say it was the most passionate love affair ever 'cause who can rank these things, but it was up there. You know, one of the ones that might as well have been. That kind. We were tight. It lasted a good eighteen months.

What happened then, I still don't really fully know. If I did, maybe I wouldn't be where I was today. Let's see. What do I remember? Not much, actually. Maybe it was just that at some point Natasha got bored of me. Or something. Or maybe not even so much me but the life we were leading. Or me after all. I don't know. Things just started to be different from what they used to be, and some days Natasha was really moody, and she snapped at me, or not even so much snapped at me, but got impatient with me, or said she *already knew that*, or *you have already told me that*, or just *yeah, I know that*; you know, like it wasn't funny to listen to me



anymore, or interesting, but kind of a drag. It annoyed me, but I just thought of it more as a phase than anything really.

Then she got involved in this project about this guy wanting to make the ultimate short film, like a movie seven minutes long and all just stills, and I guess the idea was fine, but it was old, and I read the script and the guy's liner notes, and he was just some pretentious little prick without any real idea or vision, but since Natasha had somehow gotten involved I couldn't really say much, even though I didn't understand what she wanted to have to do with this in the first place, but you don't wanna be against something your girlfriend is really into, especially if you happen to respect your girlfriend, now, do you? I still didn't understand what this was all about though.

It didn't help much either that Natasha knew what I thought and was defensive about the whole thing right from the start. She told me those guys weren't as bad as I thought before I ever even said that I thought they were bad. ... They were though. And she knew it. Or I thought she did. But maybe she just knew that I knew. Or, from her perspective, knew that I thought they were, while, in reality, they weren't. I don't know. If you wanna know the truth, I still believe she knew how bad they were, but they got her a job in the movie, and they flattered her, and the guy was kinda big amongst the school's professors, and it was said that he might go somewhere, and maybe she was hoping for a ride along. Fair enough, I thought. But she should have at least been honest about it. Instead she just huffed, or walked away, or scolded me whenever I said something critical about our phony peers now. Like, the same remarks that made her go into hysterics just three months earlier (about that guy's new Johnny Depp haircut, or that girl's new retro sunglasses she bought for \$35 from a guy who got them out of a Goodwill's for two, or that professor's new theory on French cinema from the 1950s that amounted to those movies having been black and white and French) would now earn me nothing but rolled eyes, disapproving looks and exasperated sighs.

One day it got to the point where that shit became hard to tolerate for me and I finally went into the offensive. I told Natasha that I wanted to know what was going on and that she had really not been cool with me lately and that I thought I deserved a bit better. To my surprise Natasha sat down and looked kinda sad. "Stu," she told me, "I think we have to break up." The rest is not very clear to me since that second everything went kinda blurry. I think she continued explaining something about how we weren't good for each other, how we closed ourselves off, how we criticized others for being haughty when in fact we were, how you had to be open-minded and ready for new things, and how you had to accept other people's talent. That last part I do remember well 'cause that was when it occurred to me that the beforehand unthinkable was probably true: she was not only working with this pretentious little prick, she was also fucking him. That's when I lost it.

I trashed everything in the apartment that could possibly be trashed, doing a particularly good job on the TV and VCR and Natasha's CD collection, and when I was finished, I told her that she was a stupid little whore who deserved no better than a pretentious little prick.

Okay, no smart move on my part you might say, but then again, you weren't there, were you? In any case, Natasha grabbed her bag and left without a word.

I didn't see or talk to her for three weeks. Her brother came to get her stuff, or what was left of it, and even though he didn't say anything, I could tell that he understood and felt sorry for me. Jeff was a good guy.

When I spoke to Natasha again it was about the CDs. She said she needed to replace most of them since her music was really important to her and she thought I outta give her some cash. I told her to go to hell or ask that new little prick boyfriend of hers for some dough since he was gonna be such an indie movie big shot anyway. She hang up on me. Probably not that great a surprise. But what else was I gonna do? Give her money to re-buy Björk, Portishead or the Cranberries? Give me a break. Her taste in music sucked anyway.

That was generally my trip then. I had realized that Natasha had always been an ignorant bitch, a sell-out, one of *those* people, only that I, longing for a soulmate, had tricked myself into believing that she was in fact cool, perturbed by her cuteness and occasional (at least apparent) insight into the truth of things. You know, the things you do to fall in love with people you shouldn't fall in love with just 'cause you wanna fall in love with someone. Projection and all that. I'm sure you've read about it.

The bad part was that this trip I was on didn't really resolve all that much. Instead, I missed Natasha more than ever. It got to a point where it became unbearable. I couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't work. I basically – and believe me, I am ashamed I have to admit this in all its patheticness – could not do anything but think of her.

So one day I waited for her outside class. (I myself hadn't been to school in two months. I had arranged for some research credit with a couple of sympathetic professors to keep my enrolment and scholarship, but actually physically going to school to potentially run into her and the prick? You gotta be crazy. I might have as well just signed my death warrant. Or theirs. Depending on how shit would have fallen into place on that occasion. These things seem kinda hard to predict.) Luckily, the prick wasn't there. When she came out of class and saw me, she stopped for a second, then strode away fast. I walked alongside her telling her that I was really sorry and that I needed to talk to her. She said she had nothing to say to me. I said I really, really needed to talk to her and that she couldn't run away from me, not now, not like this, and that all I wanted was to talk! She stopped, looked me in the eye ice-cold and said: "It's a bit late for that now, Stu, don't you think?" The look really froze me. I stood there and couldn't say anything. Only looking for at least *some* warmth in her look. But there was nothing. She turned around and walked away. I felt my eyes getting all watery. I couldn't help it: "But I love you, Natasha!" I think I noticed her hesitate ever so slightly, but she instantly regained her pace and did walk away from me, and this time it really seemed forever.

So, I never tried to even contact her again. I knew she was gone. I saw her only one more time. I was walking around town on a cold winter night – which I had started doing as a curious means to heal my soul (you'll probably be surprised to know that it actually did work somehow

– at least a little) – when I walked past one of these quasi-alternative bougie restaurants where they serve four cubes of sautéed tofu over three leaves of lollo biondo lettuce with two drops of organic-honey-wild-parsley-homemade-flaxseed-oil dressing for \$13.90, and, for some reason, looked at the bougie diners. And there I saw Natasha and the prick, a bunch of other in-crowd students, and that one professor from our school who was pretty big and who I particularly hated. He (the professor) was obviously just telling a story, and everybody seemed to love it and laughed, and I could see Natasha clasp the prick's arm and gently lean against it, and I guess it would have been a nice social scene if you looked at it from a certain angle, but I just wanted to flatten the place right there and then. However, I just kept on walking and told myself that it wasn't worth it. As you can see, I had made some progress.

I dropped out of school by the end of the semester, and then I left town, and now I do independent animation stuff and I get by. I think the stuff I do is cool. At least it's not pretentious.

The prick did make some sort of a career. One of his shorts showed at Sundance, and he got a feature film deal now or something.

I lost track of Jamie, but she's not with him anymore, he's with some actress now. Sometimes I do take some comfort in that and hope she is really miserable, but most times I don't really care. See, once your soul is crushed it's not about the person who crushed it anymore. Like, anyone can tear down a house – but build one? You know what I'm saying?

What it is about, is your soul. And yourself. And about how you can live a life that can still know contentment, or even happiness, despite a crushed soul. That's what I'm trying to learn right now. And I think I'm having success here and there.

But don't get me wrong: It will remain a life with a crushed soul. Some things just don't come back. For real.



Paolo, Mozzarella Balls, and Love

Paolo had come to New York from Napoli five years ago. He worked at his uncle's little deli at the corner of Hudson and Ramsey in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. He was able to spend most of his time in the shop on the phone, talking to family and friends in Italy, thanks to the cheap international phone cards he got from the Korean store across the street. He didn't particularly like New York, but there were quite a lot of Italians there and the money sure was better than in Napoli.

It was about 5.30 on a hot late summer afternoon when a young couple entered the deli. He had never seen the two before and they were quite obviously visitors to the city. They bought eight little mozzarella balls. Paolo exchanged a few words with them and smiled when they left. They looked like they were in love. It made him think of his youth in Napoli. This made him smile even more. It made him think of his later life. He wasn't smiling anymore then. Instead, he got out his phone card and called his mother.



\$54.38, or The Drugstore Story

I was waiting in line at a drugstore in this small town somewhere in Upstate New York. I felt terrible. My girlfriend had just left me. Since she had been the only reason I had spent the last six months in this godforsaken town, I had no reason to stay there any longer. Besides, I had lived with her. In her apartment, to be exact. Okay, if you want, she had been paying the bills for the last six months. Our bills. Or hers. Or whatever. Anyway, I admit that this might have been one of the reasons she had finally had enough of me. But, that's not the story I wanted to tell. I wanted to tell the story about the drugstore. Or what happened in front of it. Sorry, I'm jumping ahead.

So, I'm waiting in line at a drugstore in this small town in Upstate New York, feeling terrible. I'm so broke I'll soon have to go back to stay with my mom. I had taken pride in moving out of home when I was 17, and now I was 24, and that was the only place left for me to go. Great. Not that I'm into being melodramatic and stuff, but being heartbroken and having to go back to live with my mom did make me feel like a bit of a loser. That, and a few other things. So, there I was contemplating what to do with my life while waiting to get my morphine. Why I had a prescription for morphine is yet another story. One I don't wanna tell either. Just let me say this much: it didn't help me feel much better.

Some fat lady packed a whole bunch of painkillers, cough syrup, sore throat lozenges and candy in her bag at the register. I always find it fascinating how many folks still believe people go to drugstores to get things that will actually make them feel better.

Ironically, the guy right in front of me definitely would have needed something to make him feel better. To be honest, he got a bit on my nerves while I was waiting for the fat lady to locate the Wild Cherry Hulls, and for the Mexican girl at the register to find the right fucking change. He seemed unable to stand still, stepped from one foot to the other, looked over the fat lady's shoulder every other second, and crumpled his prescription in his fist as if it was an evil curse (well, maybe it was). Besides (and, believe me, I hate to say this), he just didn't look good. His hair (kinda long, straight, black) was greasy, his jacket and pants dirty, and he looked quite skinny underneath it all. His face I couldn't see. Finally, it was his turn.

Without saying a word, he hastily handed over his prescription. The Mexican girl disappeared for a second, came back, and said it would be ready in a minute. She rang up the register.

“Okay. Your total comes to \$54.38.”

The guy pulled a twenty out of his pocket. “This is all I have.”

“Oh. I'm afraid we can't give you the medication then,” the girl said.
“But I need it.”

“Well, it's \$54.38. That's what I have to ask you for.”

“But I don't have that much. And I need that medication.” He was polite. But his voice was trembling.

The girl wasn't stupid. “Let me get the manager.” She disappeared.

The guy stepped from foot to foot again. A moment later the girl was back with a guy in his late thirties, on the shorter side, but in decent physical shape (he probably had a Stepmaster at home, or some of those fitness-machines they sell on cable TV), with rimless glasses (not too thick), neatly parted brown hair (only slightly receding at the corners), and the obligatory white coat (loosely hanging over shirt, tie, and pants).

“I'm sorry, sir, but we can only sell you this medication for \$54.38. If you don't have that much, we need to ask you to get the money from somewhere; or, if that's not possible, apply for some aid at the public health office.”

“But I need that medication.”

“I understand that, sir, but this is no free clinic. This is a business. We have to ask our customers to pay. Why don't you go to...”

“Because I don't have time for that! And I won't get any aid from no office. And I don't know anyone in this town I could just pump thirty-something bucks from. And I need that medication now. ... I'll repay you. I'll send a check.”

“Sorry, sir, we can't do that. We need you to pay now.” The pharmacist smiled. I still couldn't see the guy's face, but I doubt that he smiled, too.

Two thoughts ran through my head: One was that this was none of my business and that I was annoyed by having to deal with this before I'd finally get out of the place (drugstores ain't really my kind of thing). The other was that I wanted to help the guy out. He obviously needed whatever it was he had on that prescription, and I thought the pharmacist's friendly professional cruelty just sucked. Not that I had much money, but I could still bill those 54 (or whatever) bucks on my card, what the hell. The fact that I felt terrible also worked in the guy's favor. For one, I feel more sympathy for people in shitty situations when I'm in a shitty situation myself. For two, I start to think that nothing really fucking matters, and money is one of the things that matter the least. Yet, the first thought was strong, and I hesitated to step forward and pay for those drugs. After all, it didn't really seem like it was up to me to be a good Samaritan here and spend money I didn't even really have, especially when giving the guy a break of thirty bucks would mean nothing to the fucking drugstore.

Besides, it wasn't my fault that this dude had no money. I didn't even know what he needed the drugs for, what his deal was, who he was, not even if he lied about not having any money. So, why on earth should I get involved? But, somehow, this wasn't convincing. Actually, it all seemed real simple: Fuck all those rationales, it was just money, in the worst case, I would give away some for nothing (big fucking deal), but in the best, I might really help someone out.

And then the guy was gone.

There had been an awkward moment of silence after the pharmacist had given his no-free-clinic lecture and before the guy suddenly grabbed the prescription the Mexican girl had put back on the counter, and walked out without saying a word. I watched him walk away from the store. I hadn't bought him his drugs. Things had just happened too fast. Or that's what I told myself.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"Ah ... sure!" I put my prescription on the desk.

The Mexican girl disappeared, brought back the morphine, rang it up, put the drugs in a small paper bag, I paid, and that was that.

There was a coffee shop next to the drugstore. I had a hot chocolate. I had nowhere to go anymore in this town really. I still had to go back one more time to my girlfriend's (or ex-girlfriend's) to get my stuff, but then all I really had left to do was head back to my mom's in the city. I knew people in town who would maybe put me up for a couple of nights, but they were all rather friends of my girlfriend's (or ex-girlfriend's), so I didn't really wanna do that (besides, maybe they wouldn't wanna put me up anymore, anyway – what did I know what kind of stories she told about me?). So, I was wondering if I should just head back to the city that same night. I hadn't even called my mom yet. The hot chocolate wasn't very good. Life was a mess.

Boom! ... Boom!

The conversations around me stopped. Everyone looked out onto the parking lot. Had those been shots? Some people started to move over towards the window. The most fearless opened the door and peeked outside. "Oh, my god!" I heard someone say. Then there were the sirens of a police car in the distance. People started to trickle out of the café one by one. Apparently, the situation was under control. Finally, I got up and walked outside. By now, about fifty people had gathered around the cars at this corner of the mall. I could see the pharmacist and the other drugstore employees, including the Mexican girl from the register, in front of their shop entrance. Just fifty yards over, in the middle of the driveway, lay the guy who hadn't had the \$54.38. He lay there on his back and didn't move. A puddle of blood slowly got bigger underneath him. One hand was outstretched with some tubes next to it. In

the other he held a gun. Twenty yards from him stood a cop, his weapon still pointing at the guy.

A cop arrived, then another one. Then the paramedics got there. The cops closed off the scene with that notorious yellow plastic tape. The paramedics leaned over the body for a few minutes doing this and that. Then they brought out a duffel bag.

I looked at the pharmacist and the Mexican girl. He had put an arm around her shoulder. Then a policeman went to talk to them. I went back into the coffee shop.

From what I learned later, the guy had gone back into the drugstore twenty minutes after he had tried to get his medication. He pointed a pistol at the girl and demanded his pills. She handed them over. As he ran out the door, a motorcycle cop was just (believe it or not) on the way to the donut shop. He saw the guy running with the pistol in his hand, pulled his gun, and yelled: "Freeze!" The guy turned around without letting go of his pistol. The cop fired twice. The guy was hit in the lung and the stomach, and fell to the ground. When the paramedics got there, he was already dead. His pistol had been a starter pistol.

Nothing ever happened to the cop. How could he have known it wasn't a real gun?

I ended up going to the city that night. I stayed at my mom's for two months, then I found myself another girlfriend and moved in with her. I found a job as well and paid my share of the bills this time.

I never went back to that stupid town upstate.



A Letter from Essaouira

Essaouira, Morocco, March 13th, 2001

Dear mom, dear dad,

When you read this, I won't be here anymore. Alive, I mean. I've thought about many things to say, but in the end it's all very simple: The misery has outweighed the happiness in my life for too long now. Life has become a burden, not a gift. Where once might have been joy, now there is only despair. I have to go. I'm sorry. I love you very much.

Abby

Elizabeth and Robert Stern were on their way to Essaouira on March 30th, two days after receiving their daughter's letter.

Abby had left for Spain the previous September and had gone to Morocco two months later. She had been in regular contact with her parents, but had never expressed sadness or depression, leave alone suicidal tendencies. Or at least so it seemed to her parents. In 48 hours their world had been turned upside down.

The Sterns lived in a wealthy upper middle class suburb of Baltimore. Elizabeth was an accountant, Robert an attorney. Abby was their only child, and they had sent her to Duke for her undergraduate studies. She became a fine arts major. Maybe not exactly what the Sterns had hoped for, but Abby's life was her life and she had been a good student.

Equally, the Sterns weren't psyched when Abby told them about her plans to do a "gap year" in Europe, but, as good parents, they did support her generously in the end since it was what Abby wanted to do. And she had even convincingly argued that the Spanish language diploma she wanted to get could be helpful in whatever career she'd wanna choose after the graduate studies her parents hoped for her to do at Stanford. (The one-good-school-east-one-good-school-west theme was very well groomed at the Sterns: Elizabeth had been to Yale and Berkeley, Robert to Columbia and UCLA.)

They were a bit puzzled when Abby told them two months after she had left for Spain that she'd be going to Morocco instead. The Spanish diploma would be replaced with an Arabic course. None of this made much sense to the Sterns, especially since they considered it not very safe for their daughter to travel to Northern Africa by herself. But what were they gonna do other than wish her good luck?

Abby's emails continued to arrive regularly. According to them, she was doing fine, lived in Casablanca and attended Arabic classes five times a week. None of this was true, however. But how were the Sterns supposed to know?

When Abby first got to Madrid, she made but a fable attempt at any kind of course. She had never really intended to do a course anyway. Her year in Europe was meant to chase the freedom she had denied herself for too long.

At first, freedom mainly meant drugs, and Abby soon found herself amongst the trance scene along the southern Spanish coast. It was there she met Thierry, whom she then joined on his way to Morocco.

Thierry was a 30-year-old New Age adherent from Marseille who traveled and lived in his old Volkswagen minibus. He had lived in India for two years (or so he claimed), had been a Kṛṣṇa devotee for another two, and then realized that the truth actually lay in the Buddha. Abby could never remember all the monasteries and temples he had been to in order to push his meditation technique to higher levels, but she was impressed. Thierry was like no other man she had ever been with. He was knowledgeable, interesting, well-traveled, intriguing. She didn't really like all the things he made her do in bed, but she thought that was part of it, and not being able to overcome feelings of shame when being humiliated was only 'cause of her uptight upbringing.

Abby adored Thierry. He made her feel to be part of something. Something important. Something higher than the mundane lives ordinary people lived. At least that's what Thierry said. Other people suffered from ignorance. Their lives were controlled by greed and competition. The lives of the enlightened, on the other hand, were free. Of course his own life was an enlightened one. And through him Abby could live an enlightened life too. So he told her. And Abby believed him. Poor thing.

I knew Thierry. He was an asshole. An arrogant and egocentric patriarch in hippie clothes and no shoes, constantly babbling pathetic nonsense about *maya*, levels of consciousness, or spiritual liberation. I hated his guts. He came around Essaouira all the time. I spent six months out of the year there to paint. It was cheap and pleasant enough. I had no better excuse.

Thierry usually camped with his hippie friends in Sidi Kaouki, down the coast from town. That's also where he took Abby.

Thierry had many girls around Essaouira. Abby soon realized that Thierry screwed other girls all the time while she was there, but he told her that bourgeois norms didn't apply to their relationship. Of course Abby had to accept this. She found it a little odd that at the same time Thierry got mad at her almost every time she'd talk to another guy for more than ten minutes, but this wasn't 'cause he was jealous – a feeling he declared himself incapable of - but because the guys she talked to were all ignorant and imprisoned in *maya*, and if she socialized with such people she'd never advance anywhere.

I think Abby figured out that Thierry was an asshole very soon herself. But somehow he had become her master, and the little hippie community around him her family, and she felt like that's where she belonged. Or she didn't know where else she'd belong to now. Or she was just confused. I don't know how these things work. But I know I liked Abby. I saw her often enough around Moulay Hassan square. Unfortunately, mostly in company of Thierry, the asshole. When she had first arrived, I talked to her sometimes. I had lived in Philadelphia for a few years as a kid, and we talked about the East Coast, trips to New York City, favorite

cartoons on breakfast TV. She was nice, pretty, soft-spoken, with a winning smile. But soon, we wouldn't really talk anymore. When she came around by herself I might have gotten a smile and a few words out of her, but when the asshole was with her, I would be ignored altogether.

I was definitely on Thierry's shitlist. He knew what I thought of him. I had never bothered engaging him in an argument about his nonsensical Buddhist lectures when he still preached to me, but he wasn't stupid, I give him that much. After a while he realized I'd never make a disciple, and so I became a lost cause. Maybe even a dangerous influence on his followers. I don't know. I didn't care either. I just wanted to paint.

Once I found out about Abby's letter and about her disappearance, I thought I should have cared about Thierry, however. I knew that he used and brainwashed other people, mainly girls like Abby, but I just never considered it my duty to save grown-ups from situations they had maneuvered themselves into. It simply didn't seem like any of my business. If someone asked for help, sure. But if not – their lives were their lives, why would I interfere with them and tell them what to do? That's what assholes like Thierry did. But not me. I was no savior. I really just wanted to paint.

However, I thought that someone should have saved that nice girl when I first heard that an American couple was in town looking for one Abby Stern who had sent them a suicide note two weeks earlier. I instantly assumed that she was dead. I just had that feeling. But so far, no suicide of an Abby Stern had been reported to the police, and no body had been found. Besides, when checking for Abby in Sidi Kaouki, not only were there no traces of her, but Thierry and his van had also disappeared. Other campers there said he had just taken off one early morning without giving anyone notice. I then thought that, maybe, she was still alive, and that the letter had been a sick prank, or an expression of extreme distress, confusion, maybe craziness? Maybe she hid somewhere in the desert with the French Buddha reincarnated.

The Sterns stayed in Essaouira for ten days, keeping their hopes up that their daughter was still alive. Many locals helped with the search and collected information. Then two boys found Abby's body at an isolated beach a few miles south of Sidi Kaouki.

She had drowned. There was nothing indicating that she might have been drowned by someone else, and, given the suicide note to her parents, the police considered the case closed.

The Sterns spent another week in Essaouira, trying to gather information about Abby's life before her death. I guess they were trying to understand. But what was there to be understood? An overprotected childhood, a charismatic microfascist, the vast ocean. What else was there to say?

People had told them that I knew Abby, so they came to talk to me one day. We had tea.

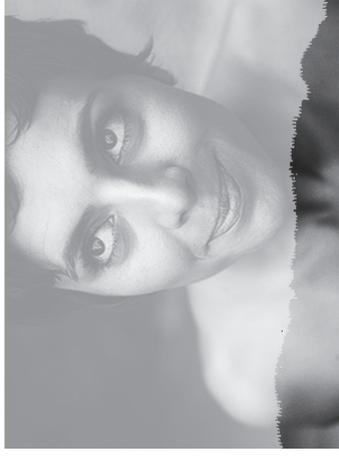
I felt very uncomfortable. I told them stuff I thought would help them feel like it wasn't their fault. I don't know if it worked. They asked me if there hadn't been any signs that Abby was getting worse? If nothing could have been done? I hated it, and I have no idea what I muttered as a response. Probably (hopefully) something that didn't make any sense. Finally, they left. I decided that I didn't wanna feel guilty, and so I didn't. After a few days it even worked. I still didn't like it, however, when the Sterns came around to thank me on the day they were leaving to go back to Baltimore. Elizabeth Stern giving me a hug was the worst.

Thierry reappeared in Essaouira about a month later. He claimed that Abby hadn't left him a note and that he thought she might have run off to the desert. He said he had been looking for her there, then a friend told him what had happened, so he came back. I thought it was all bullshit, but what was one gonna do? Thierry, the asshole, was simply around again. And there was still no law against being an asshole.

Whether Abby had left him a note and he freaked out over it, or whether he took off after a fight and she decided to kill herself, or whatever, I don't care. The story didn't make much sense, but it was bad. That's all that mattered.

I came back to Essaouira for six-month stints two more times. Thierry was around with new girlfriends. Young, timid, looking lost. I talked to them when they dared talk to me. Did I ever ask them if they were happy? No. That was none of my business. And I still was no savior either. Besides, they were grown-ups.

Eventually, I got bored of Essaouira. I went to paint in Italy instead.



Judy, or Just a Block with a Name

They tell me the cemetery is up the hill. I drive the car I borrowed from a friend up there and leave it at the parking lot. I take out the piece of paper another friend had scribbled directions to the grave on. I get lost a couple of times, but finally find it. Judy Yeats, 1979-1999. The tombstone is dark. Just a block with the name, nothing fancy. I think it suits her. Someone has left flowers. Looks like it might have been yesterday.

The cemetery is empty. It's early in the morning. I sit down in front of the tombstone. I don't feel sad. I've never felt sad in cemeteries. I've never felt sad during funerals either, and not even when hearing that someone had died. I find it hard to explain why that is. When I hear that someone has died, I usually have too hard a time to comprehend what this means to feel sad. Funerals are mostly bizarre and somewhat awkward social events to me, and I get too distracted to feel sad. And cemeteries feel in general too peaceful for me to feel sad. And in the end, death is just death. And sadness has nothing to do with it.

What's sad, is life. No, I have to correct that. Or at least explain it better: It's not life that is sad per se. But it's life where sadness can be felt, and so it's life that can be sad. In death, you feel nothing. You are dead. And the only link between death and sadness is the sadness of the living because they miss the dead. And why don't I miss the dead? I don't know. I just don't.

And if you asked me what I felt sitting down in front of that tombstone on that chilly morning up on that hill, I'd have to say hardly anything. Calm maybe. But, that's no surprise. I've already said it: I find cemeteries peaceful. And I guess that's why I wanted to come. For some peace. To think. About her, I guess. At least also. 1979-1999. That's young.

I hadn't even spent much time with Judy. Just about two weeks. And we never even had sex. I mean, not really. I mean, we never fucked. Somehow, it hadn't been about that. We just hang out. And we definitely weren't supposed to fall in love, and even more definitely didn't intend to. In any case, falling in love didn't seem part of our time together, and we never even remotely talked about it. After all, it was clear that we would only have these two weeks since I was leaving the country and had no idea when I'd be back, and Judy's plans were all over the place, and, well, that was it.

And then I left, and I knew I had fallen in love, but I wouldn't admit it, since it wasn't part of the plan, and I wrote to Judy, and the letters were nice, but they didn't speak of love, because I would have felt silly speaking of love. And her letters were nice, but they didn't speak of love either, because she would have probably felt silly speaking of love too.

And then Judy got sick, and I didn't know exactly what it was, but she was in hospital, and I thought it might have had something to do with the drugs, but apparently it didn't, or only indirectly, and then she was dead.

Rob, a common friend sent me the message. And a few days later he sent me another one saying that he had talked to Judy's closest friends and that they had said that all she had

talked about the last couple of weeks was me, and how much she missed me, and they didn't understand why we hadn't been together 'cause we must have loved each other so much, unless I hadn't loved her, which they didn't know.

I never replied to that message. What should I have written?

All this had been five months ago. Now I was back in the country earlier than expected. Even though it seemed completely pointless, visiting Judy's grave was one of the reasons that had made me come back this early.

I arrived in Portland, and then drove down to her hometown in my friend's car. I had never been there before. We had spent all our time together in and around the city. And now I'm sitting here in front of her grave feeling nothing.

"Are you Daniel?"

I turn around. An attractive woman, I'd say in her forties, dressed all in black, is standing behind me. Not sure if I've done anything wrong, I get up, brush the grass off my pants, and cautiously say "yes".

"Hi," the woman says and stretches out her hand. "I'm Karen. Judy's mother." I shake the hand that grasps mine firmly and nod. I don't know what to say. The woman, Karen, looks at me kindly. I can't look her in the eyes, and play with my hair instead. I don't feel so good.

"It's nice to meet you," she says. Even her voice is kind. It doesn't make me feel better. I choke. She gives me a hug. I cry silently on her shoulder. She finally lets go and asks me if I want to go for coffee. I nod, wiping tears from my eyes.

I put the candy I brought on Judy's grave. Her mom smiles. I can see tears in her eyes too.



Serene

They called my mom, my mom called my sister, my sister called her neighbor, and her neighbor came to get me. I didn't like phones. And I didn't like it when too many people knew where I was either. Sometimes, I admit, it'd make things easier for people if they knew better how to get a hold of me. Like in this case. But how was I supposed to know this was gonna happen there and then?

Serene had been a girlfriend once. Not for very long. I didn't have girlfriends for very long. (That's not talking tough. It's confessing to social and personal incapacibilities.) We went out together for maybe two months. Then I went into hiding and we didn't talk for half a year. Then we talked again (sometimes), and it was nice. And now she'd apparently gone crazy (again), and I was supposed to sort things out. Great.

I'd had to do this a couple of times before. She would fool around with a knife or a lighter ("fool around" – well, more accurately: hurt herself) and threaten to do herself in if anyone came close. She'd just sit there and slowly wound herself, more and more, and it could go on for hours. It was always in attics in multi-story houses where she would cut and burn her skin and flesh. Except for repeating her threats of slashing her wrists or jumping out the window if anyone came near her, she wouldn't say a word to the people around and ignore whatever clever approach they employed to get her to stop. For some reason, the only one she would talk to was me. (By the way, if you're asking yourself how one ends up going out with a girl like this: inspiration. That's all I can say. But maybe you wouldn't understand anyway. Most people don't.)

Her neighbor arrived. Ryan was a nice guy. He was always there to help out when there were problems with Serene. I think he really liked her. He just had no clue.

"How did they find her?" We were on our way into the city.

"Some guy saw her in the attic. He saw blood on her and freaked out and called the cops. They tried to get her, but then *she* freaked out and threatened to slash her wrists if they didn't leave the attic. Given all the blood already there, they didn't take any risks and called the paramedics. The paramedics couldn't get close either and had someone at the office check the data base. And since Serene has a history, they called her parents and ... you know the rest."

The city looked uglier every time I drove into it. I stared at the SUV in front of us. Why did people drive such cars in the city?

"Why does she do that stuff?" Ryan glanced at me.

The Ford pulled into a side street.

"I don't know," I said. "She gets bored, I guess."

We didn't talk anymore till we got to our destination. A ten-story apartment block in the city center. Quite a long way from Serene's home. I wondered how she had even found this place.

I saw an ambulance out front. We parked the car and ran up the stairs. I didn't trust elevators.

In front of the door to what seemed like a large, yet neglected attic, the worrying crowd was assembled. Serene's parents, her little brother, her grandma, a cop, and a bunch of curious bystanders hungry for sensation (tenants, I assumed, attracted by the cops and paramedics). Laurie and Brett, Serene's parents, seemed relieved when I arrived. "Nathan, thanks so much..."

"Is she in there?"

"Yes. It's really bad this time. She won't even let anyone see her. Last look we had was a few minutes ago. It was bad. I'm so glad..."

"Where are the paramedics?"

"They just went downstairs to..."

"You know they gotta leave, right?"

There was hesitation. "But..."

"No. They gotta leave. I'm not gonna go in there if you don't promise me to make them leave and stay away. Serene hates the hospital. One of the reasons she trusts me is because she knows I won't put her there. I'm not gonna go into that attic trying to get her out just to see her being taken away in a straight jacket. If I get her out, I will stay with her for the rest of the day and then bring her home. Then you can do whatever you wanna do. But I won't have any paramedics waiting here."

"Sir, I'm afraid this is not up to you to decide." Great. Now I had to talk to a cop as well. "We've got an armed, wounded, and possibly dangerous woman here. It's the paramedics' duty to remain on site, and I'm afraid I won't be able to let Miss Troutsky just leave the premises without supervision."

"Sir," I said, as calmly as possible, "you don't seem to understand. For some reason the only possible way to get 'Miss Troutsky' out of here relatively unharmed is for me to go in there and get her. But I might have to do that again, since I had to do it before, and if there are cops and paramedics waiting for her when she comes out with me, she'll probably never come out with me again. So?"

The cop looked uncertain. The others assembled look anxiously at him and me.

"Look," I added, "if it's your – and the paramedics' – 'duty' to stay on site, I guess there's nothing I can do. But for the sake of Serene's ... 'Miss Troutsky's' life, you gotta be discrete and stay out of sight. This is no joke, sir. I wanna help this woman, and you gotta help me do it right. If I get her out, she will be at her parents' tonight, and you'll be able to get all the information you need then. But if I do come out of this attic with her, you and the paramedics need to hide, and you need to let us go. I need you to promise me that."

The cop still looked uncertain, the others a anxious as before. Finally, the cop said "okay".

"I can rely on you?" I stretched out my hand.

It took a moment, but then he shook it, cautiously nodding and uttering a "ya – but now go in there!"

Meanwhile, the paramedics had come back. I made them give me some alcohol, an antiseptic cream, scissors, and a couple of sterilized bandages. I looked at the cop again. "Will you talk to them?" He nodded. "And now go, man!" I quickly looked at Serene's parents and felt her mom's hand on my hair. Then I cautiously pushed the attic door open, just enough so I could take a step inside.

The attic was indeed neglected. There was nothing in there but a few blocks of old wood. Half the windows were missing. It was big. At least 30 feet wide and a 100 long. Serene was sitting about half way into it by one of the missing windows. She sat in her extreme lotus seat that made my knees hurt just from looking at it, and was surrounded by books, garments, and unlit candles. She was carefully cutting her arm with a kitchen knife, with the expression of a carpenter doing a routine task. She glanced at me coming in, then continued to carve red lines into her arm. I quietly shut the door and leaned against the rotting wall. Serene ignored me – or pretended to. But she obviously tolerated my presence. This was a start. I felt confident.

"Hey," I started.

"Hey." I got another glance.

"What's up?"

"Nothing much."

"Nothing much, ha? ... What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Hurting yourself."

Serene laughed quietly. "It doesn't hurt that bad."

"I don't know. It doesn't look healthy."

Serene laughed again. "Healthy? ... Well, whatever."

"Why don't you cut it out?"

Serene stopped carving another long red line into her left forearm and gave me a proper look for the first time. "That's a pretty interesting choice of words, don't you think?"

Now it was my turn to laugh. In fact, we both laughed. Things were looking good. She even lowered her knife.

"Where have you been, dude? I haven't seen you in ages."

"Ah, come on, like, three weeks."

"Well, three weeks then. Still, where've you been?"

"Nowhere. I mean, nowhere special. Just around."

"So, just around. You should have called."

"I should have?"

"Ya, you should have. We should have watched a couple of movies or something."

"Oh, ya, like what?"

"*Donnie Darko*. And *Requiem for a Dream*. And *The Devil's Backbone*."

"Ya, we could have watched that. ... What about *Dream with the Fishes*?"

"Ya, we could have watched that, too."

There was a moment of silence. We looked at each other. Serene's eyes were kind.

"You should have that fixed up," I said, looking and nodding towards her arms.

She lifted them up and inspected her cuts while twisting them. "You think so?"

"I definitely think so." Her arms looked nasty. Lines of blood of all lengths and angles covered her soft pale skin. There was quite a lot of blood on her long white skirt and on the floor.

"Would you mind if I came over to take care of it?"

She looked at her arms again. "No, I think that'd be okay."

"Good." I got off the wall and made my way over to the garments and books and candles, getting the stuff the paramedics had given me out of my pockets. I kneeled down in front of her.

"Hey," I said again looking into a pair of kind, yet tired green eyes.

"Hey," Serene said again, smiling. I guess it was what they call 'a moment'.

I cleaned out the cuts with the alcohol, put the cream on and carefully covered her arms with the bandages. Once we were done she inspected everything as if we had just had an amateurish attempt at body art. She seemed pleased. Then she lay her arms in her lap and looked at me again with the kind green eyes.

"Why?" I said.

The kind eyes still looked at me. "I don't know."

I nodded softly. "Why me?"

The kind eyes looked very beautiful. "I don't know that either."

I nodded again. Then both of us smiled.

"Do you wanna go?" I asked.

Serene suddenly looked worried. "Are they gonna put me in hospital again?"

"I don't know," I had to say in order not to lie. "I don't know. But not now. Now we're just gonna go. I promised your parents you'll be home tonight. Then I don't know what they will do. You gotta sort it out with them."

Serene nodded softly. "But now we're just gonna go?"

“Ya, now we’re just gonna go.”

“Just you and me?”

“If you want to.”

“Ya, I’d like that.”

“Okay, then,” I smiled.

“Where are we going?”

“I don’t know. The park?”

“Watch the swans?”

“Sure, watch the swans. Haven’t done that in a long time.”

Serene looked content. I was happy.

We got up and packed the books, garments and candles into Serene’s backpack. Then she asked me to wait for a second and got a skirt out of the bag so she could change real quick. I cleaned the knife with a rug, and when Serene rolled up her blood-splattered skirt, I wiped little traces of blood from her face and bigger ones from her hands. Then we were ready to go.

We slowly made our way to the door and I pulled it open carefully. At the sound of it, everyone outside fell quiet and people parted to make way for us. I could feel the stares. Serene just kept her head down. I looked for cops or paramedics, but didn’t see any. All I saw was Laurie Troutsky with tears in her eyes. However, for some reason her face was none of relief, rather one of panic. But it took me too long to understand. And when I saw them, it was too late.

They had hidden behind the corner to the elevator shaft, and just as we passed, they jumped out, two cops towards me, three paramedics, straight jacket in hand, towards Serene. All I remember is yelling: “No!”, pushing Serene aside, throwing myself into the paramedics, while kicking the cops. I could hear Laurie Troutsky scream frantically, I could hear Serene struggle and cry, I could hear people in commotion yelling: “grab her!”, “watch out!”, or: “don’t let her get away!”, while I was throwing elbows at the paramedics underneath and kicks at the cops above, calling everyone “fucking bastards, you fucking bastards!” I lost sight of Serene, but I could feel the straight jacket underneath me, so I knew she wasn’t in there, which made me feel good.

Then I heard the most dreadful cry of “Nooooo!” I had ever heard in my life. It sounded like Laurie Troutsky. It was. I saw her jumping over me and the paramedics, followed by everyone else. Even the cops let go and followed, and then there was another bone-shattering dreadful “Nooooo!” and then there was uncontrolled weeping. The paramedics and I wrestled to our feet and saw the others gathered around an open window at the end of the corridor. More and more tenants trickled in from the stairways. Serene had obviously freed herself. However, in a very tragic manner.

Her death was a shock and instantly broke my heart. Like, I could feel it break. Right

there, on that corridor of some ten-story low-income city apartment block, surrounded by three gasping paramedics looking at a group of people leaning out a window or comforting a bitterly distressed woman who had just lost her daughter.

Yet, if you want me to be honest, I did believe at that very same moment that I had saved Serene from what was evil, and that I had protected her freedom. Even if it all had ended tragically. And maybe that was the only way not to feel responsible for her death that day, and I don’t even wanna deny that, but that’s what I believed. And, in a way, that’s all that matters to me ‘cause when do we ever really know why we believe what we believe anyhow?

Instead of leaving the street of that apartment block arm in arm with Serene, I left it handcuffed in the back of a police car. I got indeed charged with assault on a police officer, and even manslaughter in the second degree, but in the end the charges were dropped. Also ‘cause Brett and Laurie Troutsky never supported the prosecutor’s case. They were in fact really nice to me. I felt grateful.

Justin, Serene’s little brother, also got me the blood-stained skirt and the knife a couple of days after the funeral. He had always liked me and was a good 15-year old kid. He had loved his older sister dearly and obviously suffered a great deal. We hang out every now and again.

And every now and again I sneak into the attic of that city center apartment block and sit by the window I had found Serene that day, and I hold and smell the skirt. And hunt for a last moment, I suppose.

The window at the end of the corridor, though, I haven’t gone close to even once. And I’d like to keep it that way.



Nina and Me

I had taken care of her for two years. I couldn't do it any longer. I needed my own life and all that. However, it was difficult.

I had been terribly in love with Nina. And I still loved her. But things were different now. And not because of the illness. Just because they were different. Time maybe.

Nina hadn't been out of bed for six months. Practically. It was sad. But we still had good times. She'd spent most of her time in bed even way before. We would watch movies, I'd make her food, read to her. We made love too. Quietly and gently. There weren't any other ways to do it really. It often made Nina cry. But she said she still liked it. I don't think I ever really understood. In fact, there were many things I never really understood. And not only about Nina. About myself as well. And about everything. Like, how are you supposed to understand romance, and desire, and commitment, and goals, and needs, and dreams, when you know that the girl you're in love with is going to die? And not in any swift, spectacular, possibly romantic way, but in slow, excruciating, painful agony?

Nina often told me to leave her, to 'live my life'. But I had never been able to. Only now.

When I told Nina, she only smiled. She said she thought I should've left much earlier. I cried. For the first time in two years. Nina just kept on smiling.

Three months after I left, Nina died. Her father left me a message on the phone. I never called back.

Looking for the Way

He lived in a garage. He'd been living there for years. On the roof he had a little garden. The garage was in the middle of the city. The city was as ugly as it was beautiful, he had been heard saying.

He didn't have many possessions. A few books on Chinese philosophy, martial arts, and *ukiyō-e*. A few clothes. A radio. A gas stove.

He didn't talk much. He was known around his neighborhood. People thought he was weird. Not crazy, though. He never acted crazy. He just didn't talk much.

He liked to sit on the garage's roof. Especially at dusk and dawn. No one knew when he actually slept. Candles used to burn for a long time in the garage. And he was up on the roof by five every morning.

Hardly anyone ever dared talk to him. Only kids, occasionally. Sometimes he responded, sometimes he didn't. Once a boy called him "Ghost Dog." – "Ghost Dog was a Samurai," he said. "I ain't no Samurai."

There was some graffiti down by the bridge, done years ago. It was said to be his:

*Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water,
Yet nothing can better overcome the hard and strong,
For they can neither control nor do away with it.*

He walked a lot. Always slowly and absent-minded (at least, so it seemed). People were wondering what his walking was all about. And where he was going. But he never really went anywhere. He just walked.

If anything ever caught his attention it was alley cats. He'd been seen around the neighborhood taking care of them. Sometimes alley dogs, too.

He spent a lot of time in the park. Or, in parks, rather. He knew all the parks around the city. He'd sit on a bench for hours, observing. What, no one knew.

A girl once asked him why he never talked. He said, probably 'cause he didn't have anything to say. "But everyone has something to say," the girl insisted. – "Maybe," he conceded after a while.

Most people in his neighborhood respected him. Or feared him. Often, that difference wasn't clear.

Even the gangs left him alone. He could walk around the hood any time by himself and wouldn't be bothered. The brothers had even been seen taking a step back when he passed by. No one had ever seen him fight, but he had a reputation.

It was told that he had been a martial arts master. It was told that he'd gotten into many fights around town. No one knew for sure. But most believed it.

"Do you think he's a wise man?" a neighborhood boy once asked a neighborhood girl. – "No," she said, "I think he's a sad man."

