

## Chapter One – A Letter Arrives

A few thin slices of eighteen-pound lay folded inside an envelope in the mailbox. Thin, so thin you could see right through it if you held it at eye's height, the thickness of knives he thought. It would hardly affect him. It was brutal but he would shrug this off just like everything else. He could tell it was from her but decided to keep his options open for the time being and vaguely ignored it for a short while. It was nothing, a flattened piece of bark. A branch fell down on the street in front of him the other day and had the same qualities as this letter, wood and bark and dryness and nothing else. He had not let the twigs enter his consciousness, brood there, plot and ponder, invade, destroy, infest—why would the letter?

He took a walk to break this incantation, this literary voodoo. He was not quite feeling right, at odds with the swaying trees, perennials, winter storms, a lizard seeking the sun, volcanos how they erupt every so often. He had no rhythm. He felt that wherever he went he could not escape it. He could barely take a step without feeling like he would fall right over.

It was Fall. The wind remained full, pushed stiffly on his face and chest, and not a gentle breeze you think might propel you along, but a malicious wind, conjuring the strength of nature against all, degrading the significance of man and spotlighting his frail dependence on luck. Every sunshot angle in the city unmasked a chapped face, a grimy set of teeth, or a taunted biceps. So many in the city cherished the winter's approach: greenish gray skies, rotting park pastures, the everslippery windy hill where red-blotched greedy faces stared from above. Not him. Far from it.

Then he got home. The same bland stale box for the last few years. It was an apartment listing posted by three roommates who needed a fourth, a short newspaper ad paid for by the management agent, which he found out later was written by Anthony Parmenti's grandmother. Tony was the owner of a pizza joint around the corner. Their pizza was very lousy. He ate it quite often for lack of better things to eat and because he had to say hello to at least someone, the Mexican dough-spinner there more amiable than most. Tony's grandmother was kind and probably the only honest soul Kyle had dealt with in years. She died soon after. From there on things went south, the hallways unswept, locks broken. The delinquent heaters whined and spewed into pools of putrid rust.

The roommates were raucous to say the least. Mick, son of an athlete, found out after fifteen years of running, pole vaulting, biking, climbing, that the only sport he truly enjoyed was pot-smoking. Brady was an aspiring alcoholic, news junkie, and an actor. Jose was the most normal of the crew, a writer for The Wall Street Journal, married with his wife raising his child in Marlboro, New Jersey; he could not deal with the commute so spent his weeks in this cheap apartment, mostly writing and smoking cigarettes outside on the lanai talking to his wife on the

cell phone. Sometimes he spent the weekend in the city and his wife brought his child into the city; they argued from time to time but appeared happy.

The letter in the mail had started across the Atlantic. With it, he imagined, myriad others crowd surfed in a mail bag and sweaty with import all the way to the Upper East Side of New York. There the wind blew swiftly messing the hair of Kyle's downstairs neighbor, the Chinese restaurant owner who kept his own share of the greasy grey world what he considered clean with a broom and hose. His rosy cheeks and yellow teeth shined sharply against the pavement, floating in a dream of happy work. Mr. Lee—not his real name Blythe found out one day speaking with him; *Jie Zhang's* was “too Chinese” for the average restaurant-going New Yorker—often ignored streetgoers when he watered down the sidewalk. Women in dresses, men in suits, he sprinkled their pant cuffs and doused the occasional freshly groomed poodle. Kyle liked him very much and never went to his restaurant.

Mr. Lee focused on his broomhandle and Blythe headed upstairs. He rubbed his eyes on the way upstairs—in the process dislodging mountains of soot, some would call it dirt although Blythe actually felt it was just an overly dry eye problem, not to mention that decades later the resolution on this problem—mind-numbingly simple—would bring to a head a long, protracted, poorly articulated mental/physical struggle inside of Blythe which most succinctly can be stated as minor health problems with easy and commonly available solutions but which he ignored, or failed to recognize, or did not have access to the part of one's intellect that can step aside and self-analyze to detect the absence of easy good living, and these would giving him suffering pains or just chronic background life-irritation—producing one gigantic globbery wet drop which fell slow motion onto the words “Paris, France” which adorned the letter around where its belt-buckle would be. Once in the house it established a presence right away. It laid there

curiously on the coffee table for a few days, balls of dust indolent below and rice embedded in its unsquare hinges; such marinades—a few ounces of chaos, some diced slothdom, a few pinches of pornography—took time.

He had much to attend to. The roommates—Mick, Jose, Brady, plus the dog—had made a mess and he had to clean that up, or get them to clean it up. There were one or two overdue library books, and in his closet the largest pile of laundry ever assembled in anything other than a hospital. His plant, one of seven he had killed in as many months, needed watering on a daily basis; this was an ongoing responsibility. Many other things, some smallish some larger, would occupy his time over the next months so he could forget about this silly little script.

He had always been such a regular person, no tics or oddities. There were no known psychiatric problems in the family. He had never even had an abnormal mole. No troubles with school or violating the law; it wasn't worth doing anything that made people pay so much attention. He was average build and average weight, normal intelligence. Clothes were not a problem for him. Dark-blond hair topped a slightly large head. Most people thought he was a good-looking man. He usually floated along just at the top of things.

But she had him just where she wanted, at least he thought so. To be in love, then to look askew at your love but for a moment, question it, deny its existence, scoff or dare laugh at it, glance at another woman or stick something unkind in your bag of deeds, sulk a day or two, these are the awful prescient reminders of lost love. Just by sight, a quick look at the script, then away, he could tell it would make him do something. He felt something press on his insides, a rekindled pain, which he had not felt for years. He tried to resist, to drive this feeling deeper into his gut where it would dissolve in the chaos of living things. But it persisted, like rain on a day you desire to go out, or a fever when you want to be well.

This little note did not have an aura of malevolence. Oh no it bulged a bit, exuded a scent of deliverance, pressed in good feeling and licked spit-shut to dirty hands. As with most things, the essential meaning of it was laden with temporality, the incompressible finity of existence penned through in just more than two dimensions, and from a certain viewpoint each inked symbol a skyscraper of meaning—a nonsensical “o” without a cunning vowel to woo it into existence—what powerless idiots we would be without words.

She had probably known he was in a state of extreme arousal, yet drugged down to the deepest kneel of urban illness. Signs of it were everywhere. He looked in some eyes and saw immediately their scams, their hands filled with the grease of lies. In others the misdeeds were worn in symbol. Unguilty men with flimsy shirts and slack arms slung on a pole, their teeth piercing lips freshly marked with hate. He hardly thought about prying it open. And yet he knew this could be what he had been hoping for all this time. He had waited so quietly, seduced specific paths of life and lied to women and cajoled his way into meals with repugnant men of power, proudly fended off all other circumstances; he had performed these menial tasks of self-preservation for years upon end, for if he was not alive, it would not come at all.

It hadn't always been like this, please be reassured. You may not like a tale with a miscreant or a loner straight out of the gates, not that we have a loner on our hands here, and you read on and on hoping to find the earlier essence of some good person gone awry only to discover the tale of a miscreant from birth. There's no excitement in that. No woman would fall for such a being, unless she was an abhorrent creature herself. There are such abhorrents alive in this world, believe me, not that the present we are about to describe fits into such a category, although admittedly there will be times when for dramatic reasons, she will be portrayed as such. Please be comforted that she is the most beautiful woman in the world, the touch of her hand more soothing than aloe vera or a slippery elm, and she is sometimes kind.

There was no clear reason to have this feeling, or not to have it. No matter. There was no need to even clarify the feeling. It was what it was. It was the acquisition of materials, writing supplies and transcription skills that really mattered at this time. What use was there for these transient messages yelps and texts which were void of lust? Out, spoken word, god of war! Try not to warp your mind or gouge out your eyes as you read this: nothing in these words (or any words) will help you, not ever, unless you burn this paper to turn cold into heat or raw flesh into something digestible or substitute it for low-grade cheesecloth. These words are smut, insane smut, not even the good stuff that turns you on. It is harsh internal suffering laden with satanic verse, the stuff of the cancerous and aged, the thing witches and paganism were born of, the ire of the ages, senseless shit, the bane of the church's existence, the murder of young women and children, the filth of the streets, pure trash and really good fodder for nightmares, nothing you would prep for any test with, no sense in reading this on the beach or in some back

alley while waiting for a blowjob, nor is it killing instructions or anything similar to mystery. It is pure crap and you can expect nothing less than that from it, if you have other expectations you might as well leave now.

How can one arrange affairs without the proper materials? Simple items: pens and a decently weighted telephone and a tablet of good paper, not legal so that you felt you were suing yourself, but a few nice clean-smelling sheets of twenty pound. Nothing more than twenty pound is required. Not drawing paintings here. There is no need for ink absorption of Rorschach effects. Simple missives, that is all. Come here. Yes, or no. Whens and with whoms.

The only matter of importance was to hear her laughter. The sickly sweet inside of an emotion. Hair, sweat, tears, red-faced blustery hot. The pristine calm of waking. A warm, touchable hand and sunshine in the eye. Fatigue after struggling to comprehend each other. The grotesque sound of one another eating.

It felt like nostalgia, but he remembered nothing. A few flecks of cognition nothing more. The closest approximation of a definition if you so require, might be a vague sensation of absence without knowledge of what was missing. It was a city, sure, that much was true, and he was pretty damn sure he was a living Human Being, not the aberration of someone's sick dream or the invention of some lunatic. But sometimes he felt that a shade darkened his perception, relegated him to a colorless, dizzy amnesia in this place with no culture, no history where no one meandered or wandered, no street conversations, no gatherings or societies, no streets music or celebrations, no none of that.

Anyways she had left in quite a hurry. The final image of her...wait a minute let's not quite go there quite yet. Finality and finity are such morose concepts. Let's focus on infinite things, like the universe, love, freedom, beauty. How about morality? What sorts of things can

occupy the mind better than these thoughts, these thoughts without edges? One could spend the rest of time pondering only one of these concepts, and even if he or she had been relatively immune from direct experience with one of them, for sure eventually one would be struck by a death of a loved one, or jealous thoughts, and would therefore be able to dissect his or her interactions with the concept. Whole lives are born from such ideas, are they not? Consider architects, engineers, painters, actors, right from the beginning searching for some single strong idea. One person might be inspired by a number such as Pi, another the sun or the appearance of crowds of people. One could spend an entire life studying or pursuing the making of money and he would be either a banker or an economist or a financier. Let's take this further: entire civilizations actually could be based on single infinite ideas. Take the concept of freedom for example, or say liberty to make it more historical. Have you heard of the United States of America? It would fascinate many people to discover the central ideas of old civilizations. We probably think we know them but I bet we are wrong. If we see New York City underwater in a million years, or any American town for that matter, will we think the central idea was money or freedom?

If we must: the final image of her is from behind a half-closed door and a fork falling from a box, quivering. It was the box quivering really, not her, and inside it were her belongings mixed with some of the things I used to think had been mine. They were no longer. He refused to help her, because at the time he thought she was not serious about leaving. The box rustled in her arms as she readjusted. Plates and bottles clinked. Please note that it was the plates and bottles doing the clinking, her hands and lips and hair were remarkably still. Actually she looked straight out gorgeous that day. Forget it, she was damn hot. Her cheeks were red as if having sex at that moment.



A fork fell. The fork hit the floor and she thought instantaneously of every episode in the past where she had disappointed her mother. I will tell you, there may still be a slight dent in the floor to this day.

Maybe I'll write you some day when I'm over these things, she said. That was the real kicker. It was conditional and it seemed finite, at least the way she sold it. But there was that maybe which we hung on to. He hung on to. Maybe I'll kick you in the head or shoot arrows through your eyeballs or cut off your arms and legs. Maybe. The timing of the whole thing was totally fuzzy. For a few days or weeks he even kept buying and chopping up food for two then he would scrap the whole meal and go out for a long walk, only to come home and forget that he was going to be alone again.

She may have left a few years ago, or a few months ago, he wasn't sure. He was unintentionally inflicting a cast on himself, intentionally. To keep thinking this way was punishment he did not deserve. He tried to move around, sweat, overeat, smoke, none of these things helped. The expensive bricks, the bland banks of flowers on Park Avenue, the queer statues marking expensive apartment buildings, the parades and skylines, perfect alleyways, their desired effects were useless on him. Artists, what scum. Entire museums rendered useless in his eye for he appreciated nothing and despised everything. Had every artist in existence simply substituted a sharp knife for a paintbrush and painted their internal carotid lovingly with a quick deep stroke of self-hatred, then, maybe then, Kyle would applaud them.

It's true that she left in quite a hurry. At the time her emotions had flowed, gushed rather in spurts of speech, only pausing for breaths and one sigh before she departed. She looked so content and well-hydrated. Included had been a flop of the hair and a unique gesture of the hand. But there was a trace of concern in her face too. Many nights Kyle has deluded himself

that it was a hint of regret, a pinch of uncertainty. These things practically make him nauseous now to even think of them.

And yet it was the last beautiful thing Kyle had seen. Ever since that day, as he crossed the avenues, perhaps a dull sunset setting in at the cafés down the block, he found himself sighing often and heavily. He would ponder patterns in brick and tile bathroom walls with hands clenched in his pockets, his most faithful companion the odd drinker who, pissing on the wall, discussed his rambles with no one. Blythe listened in as if he was his therapist all along, the thoughts in his own head far darker than the most disturbed of his clients.

The Fall had exploded like a bomb of sadness, the street littered with a shrapnel of leaves, mittens, chickenbones, broken hearts. At times during his walk home—coming from nowhere—he was convinced trees would fall right over. One might land square on top of him, desultory. There would be no surprise. It would happen in slow motion and without pain. If the pavement would cave in, crumble into soft sand and welcome him he just might take it. Underground, he would lie humbly and ponder his life's sequence of events and wait for the worms to watch him choke.

The final scene with her had been in the apartment hallway, from behind a fireproof steel door as we have probably mentioned. She was outside the door. Already, Blythe thought. No discussion or bargaining. He was sure she was leaving altogether. There was no odor on her breath, but a waft of ammonia from down the hall. There was a dingy yellow light in the hallway, and as the elevator descended it cast a brighter hue on the floor through the wire-laden window in the heavy door. He could not say whether she had yelled or whispered, or even screamed for that matter. She could have written it in the form of a goddamn ee cummings poem:

maybe

ill

write

you      some   day

whenimoverthesethings,

and still the phrase would stick in his mind.

And then she was gone. Her footsteps went pitter pitter pat pat pat so very rapidly down the stairs to the next landing and then out of earshot. These footsteps lingered in his head, not a voice or a situation, just the pitter patter. Sucking her breast was gone. Holding her hand was gone. Doing her dishes was gone. She was really gone, for she hadn't left a thing behind. Except for the dink of the fork. Well maybe there was a hair or two on further looking, perhaps a piece of soap which had touched her skin. But certainly, none of her belongings lingered behind. She had even taken what miniscule amount was left of her rancid sesame oil. She had left completely.

At various times she would return to him of course. After a prolonged meal, a flash of her from afar. Then sometimes bits and pieces of her body—an ear, an index-finger or a small toe, white teeth in a fraction of a smile—would appear then vaporize in his mind, just as he came out of the shower, or when crossing the long avenues. No matter how hard he tried, he could not picture her face. Of course, every now and then a waft of her shampoo on the street. He wanted the memory of situations, things she had accomplished and her ensuing reaction, but there was nothing there. Certain things would come to him though. Her mother, for example, had always

impressed him. She was such a kind woman, eerily smart. She rattled off a list of songs and musicians one day that left Kyle reeling. They were songs her mother thought she'd like to hear at their wedding. She and Kyle had been quite serious as a couple. Her father was a mathematician. He kept to himself at times in the basement with a book of Shakespeare, sometimes Russian books, but not Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. He had even written a book about business in Russian.

Sometimes it was one of those brownstone entryways which brought her in, the warm stones red and gray and then cold. Restaurants they had been to, bars frequented, mindless conversations, parks they had strolled alongside, emotions unfinished. These thoughts had vanished to some unclassifiable part of his mind which collected their essences and banished them.

## Chapter Two LOLA

It easily could have been Waikiki. Black leather boots, a tight red button-down shirt, and a short black skirt had raised the temperature in Lola's core to levels unsurpassed in recent hangover meltdowns. Nearly impaled by a surfboard-toting hipster getting on the subway, she sidestepped and dismounted the burly train. A brim of sweat nested on her lip as she stumbled from the subway up to a bodega on the sunlit street up above. A young toothy Indian guy sold her a pack of cigarettes but was so dumbfounded by her looks that he forgot to give her change for the twenty, and just handed her back the twenty. He held a smile for the duration. Lola didn't even look at the change but stuffed it into a self-hemmed poche inside her skirt usually inhabited by a modest stash of hashish that, with its inguinal intra-undergarment location, would test the political limitations of even the most stringent shakedown.

It wasn't Waikiki. It was West 108<sup>th</sup> Street. The buildings here were five or six stories high, just low enough to let the sun angle onto the sidewalk at this late morning hour. Across the

street a woman with brown hair, whom she thought looked Russian, tended to green flowerless plants. They were housed in low wooden buckets maybe two feet high with wooden flaps cinched by rusted iron bands – flowerpots they may be called. The woman barely had to bend over. She massaged the leaves and plucked rotten blooms.

Lola is a self-proclaimed filmmaker, despite the fact that she has never attempted to make a film. She decided that she would though, soon after taking care of this liver thing she'd come down with a few months ago, and began seeing a surgeon, Dr. Pardon, for medical advice and large quantities of medicinal marijuana. In reality, he didn't prescribe it, though he said he would if he could, but he assented to Lola's request that he give her permission to buy it from reputable sources. She had said to him: "Imagine someone told you that you had to bear the most unimaginable human suffering...incurable human illness, liver failure, certain death...and told you further that you could no longer partake in any of the stress-relieving remedies that mankind has stumbled upon a.k.a. cigarettes and marijuana...imagine that and tell me I can't smoke pot anymore?" Dr. Pardon nodded readily and told her to go easy on it, but admitted that alleviating stress would be beneficial.

She took a few moments to watch the lady. Years back she would have been jealous of her easy sex appeal, her fine untroubled skin. Now she simply took a few deep breaths and felt that she was happier than ever with whatever time she had left. Maybe Dr. Pardon could hook her up with a few more years, maybe even a decade as he had hinted.

She had just come in from overseas, Paris to be exact. This neighborhood reminded her of the *banlieu* surrounding Paris, the pervasive feeling of perceived oppression which flooded the area like a constant tsunami and drowned unfulfilled aspirations. The tragic part here is the perceived oppression. She was going to visit a few friends, almost brothers really, who lived on

the fourth floor across the street from the bodega. She took one last look down the street, one direction the park, the other a Baptist church, now silent, and some folks sitting out on their porches in the warm autumn sunshine. Hints of a jazz band that practiced in the afternoon caught her ear, though so faint that she wasn't sure if it was an actual practice session or her own memory.

She climbed the four flights and made her way right through the door always unlocked, which comforted her. At least some things stayed the same.

She entered the living room and kissed Mick, Jose, and Brady, the three roommates. After the kissing and excitement and bragging stopped, she sat down, lit a joint, and started in on her day in New York. Blythe had been in his back dank bedroom but strolled out when he heard all the commotion.

“What a cool thing Harlem is,” she said.

“Lola how the fuck are you babe?” Brady said.

Mick toned in: “Lola you look amazing sweetie.” He sat back further in a leather recliner chair, happy to see his old friend. Of course Lola protested being called sweetie.

She went off on Harlem and how enamored she was with its diversity. Her tight red shirt compressed her breasts as she leaned on her knees: “I called my friend. She agreed with me that it's like, wow, there you are, one moment you're not in Harlem, and then one moment you are. It's a very cool place. Lots of good eating and so forth. I saw a show about all the riots and devastation that took place during the blackout in the 1970s, what a fucking crazy fucked up night that must have been.”

“Cool?” Blythe said, dejected. He had always had mixed feelings about his neighborhood. “What’s so cool about this place? It’s all either getting gentrified or getting so scared of gentrification that it’s going backwards.”

She unbuttoned her shirt one button, to cool down and feel more relaxed. She blew smoke in Blythe’s face, mainly addressing him now, through teeth the color of milky coffee. He had always thought that Europeans started drinking coffee at an early age. She looks like she started earlier than most.

Nonetheless Blythe found himself drawn to her. He stood up, tired of the breast treatment, encircled her as if interviewing her for some role in his life. He looped around the back of her, inspected her hairdo, her straight neckline and simple posture. It must have been simple motivation. She was a speaker, an electric one. Her words seemed to amplify themselves, echoing against the bored walls and depressed chairs, and everything she said elicited a smile from almost everyone. Even as she sat there, limp hands across a subtle lap, the impression was profound.

Of course, she blew smoke again in his face once he was in front of her again.

“Oh you can’t start to think like that. You need a girl that’s what it is. You can’t resist the whole world changing. It’s inevitable. Things will change whether you like it or not.”

Blythe smiled. His cheek twitched as the smile turned back down.

“You’re probably right.”

“Once you start having sex again you won’t think about it so much. You have too many smart, frustrated chemicals right now. Get in bed and get dull, you know?”



“There you go. Poor people can’t have as much sex as wealthier people, they’re too busy worrying. How am I gonna pay the rent and is this job gonna make me miserably unable to afford my own goddamn neighborhood a few months from now?”

“Oh, there you go again. Go masturbate or something. What, you think capitalism makes people poor? Capitalism makes people rich. What’s making people poor is laziness. I think you’re quite wrong. Rich people are up all night pondering how to make more money. Poor people are having sex every moment they can or coming up with excuses on why to stay poor. It’s the only thing they’re motivated to do. Plus the sex makes their feet hurt less during the long day, I will give them that, that it’s cyclical. Tired leads to lazy leads to lack of motivation. It’s easier to stay poor than it is to make money, let’s put it that way.”

She paused and broke out a second joint.

“Look it’s all out there, unless you’re lazy anyone can make it rich, nevermind a few obstacles such as racism, nepotism, you know.”

She paused for a long time and all were silent.

“Anyways not everyone wants to be rich. They might talk about it but if their motivation isn’t there and they don’t try, well that’s not really wanting something at all. That’s just dreaming. That’s like wanting to live in Polynesia when you hate having your ass full of fucking sand. When you’re at the beach, sand is an all-consuming phenomenon. You can’t avoid it. If you think you can that’s called dreaming. Shit. Speaking of beer, do you have something to drink?”

As Blythe laughed, Mick called her over to check out part of his script, something he had written. She blew one last puff of smoke in Blythe’s face.

“We’ll talk more,” she said kindly.

N. grabbed a couple of Coronas from the fridge. Flashing bulbs that click and shut in the shape of the word Corona on a store front imitated his intellect in falsetto, reminiscent of islands and cheap weathered advertisements, scenes that resided nowhere except in the mind of an impetuous advertiser or a shiny boardroom placard. The constant acquisition and consumption made him feel totally alone in his body, his insides completely shut off from all else. He shut the refrigerator door and gazed past the Pizza Hut magnets for a moment, the mind dizzy. Lola was right in some ways, and wrong in others. He handed her a beer and she took it without looking up from Mick's piece.

Scratched linoleum had curved up at the rotten edges and the wastebasket was rotting. Another plastic bin overflowed with aluminum cans, plastic bottles, plastic caps, plastic wrap. Behind the bin four crushed cardboard pizza boxes stood precariously vertical, in mockery. This was sloth.

Blythe's filthy bare feet sloshed through water from the dog's dish. He was familiar with the feeling. A canine yawn caught his ear. The roommates talked hurriedly, as if their work was going to self-destruct if not soon, very soon, put into a less malleable form. Lola in the red sweater told some stories about her experiences over the past few months in New York. Blythe wondered if she was loose with the truth, reporting times and events within a few details of the actual event, embellishing overheard conversations to make them more palatable, cataloguing her life in magnificent detail and hyperbolic meaning, all to sell herself, to heighten her image in the minds of those around her to the point of idolatry. Or was she naturally attractive? Was she actually magnificent?

He did not know, but wanted to find out. New to her name, he had heard the roommates talk about her. Much excitement about her coming to town. She must be something special, an

abnormal person. There must be a way to find out the truth about her. What had she experienced that made us all want to be with her—and Blythe did not deny that he already wanted more of her attention—to try to suck in her pleasures second-hand, to tour her mentality with our mouths agape at her every statement?

Lola, what had you done? What had you found?

### Chapter Three POLYNESIA

He had put himself into numerous positions all at once—artist, drunk, egalitarian, scientist, politician, waiter, astronomer, geologist, esoterician—to sift through all the possible permutations of his being, to weed-out, filter-run himself through a purification, see which one would stick, in order to appeal to her sense of worth. But he sensed in all this commotion that the business he applied himself to may have obscured some central fact, a reason like gravity, an all-encompassing truth, a boiled-down belief of hers that was unshakable, that no matter what he

did, who he was, or when he had done it, she always reserved the right to change her mind in a finicky twitch. It was so frustrating to have love that wasn't always love. She could realign the cosmos with a sip, suddenly tilt the verve towards unlikely places, organic farms or undiscovered islands or thoughts of whales' gullets. And all in a half second, half a frigging second, all his plans and machinations and years of caffeinaceous dreams were brought down like the child's best idea ever.

He wished he had a chore, a responsibility, a call to make, something to take away this grumbling stomach. He looked around the apartment for anything that might take his attention, stopped half way into it because it made him feel even lonelier. Moving right on to a picturesque village, he envisioned themselves together for once, high on life, rearranging their priorities for a neatly planned escape from their routine success in high-power jobs while living on the edge of perfect fitness and happiness. They might jog six miles a day, rest one day on the weekends. A marathon was in the works for next fall. They had full sets of designer shirts and blouses with slightly intimidating collars, fashionable pant cuts, and esoteric collections of leather shoes guaranteed for life. They lived expansively with intense social lives in multiple cities across three continents. They thrived as the seasons ran by. In the end they would die with gasps and wistful words at their graves from behind thin veils of black lace.

This was madness and it was so terrible because none of this made him happy: not these thoughts, not the dinner, not the medications...but the letter. Now there was something about the fact that she had sent him a letter. He had put it aside a few days ago, out of fear.

There was some clue he had to wring from his present state of discomfort, faced with such impending decisions such as the one which lie not quite flat in front of him. So quickly

things changed from the unattainable specks of thought which classified his life before the letter. A dull existence where intrigue, even action seemed dreary dramatic pursuits to drown the boredom. Now he was in a perfectly precarious state, balanced like a raindrop on the oncoming air. He felt that he could go out on the street right now, grab several high-class beautiful women, and sweet-talk them into dinner and hitting up a sophisticated music scene where they would grind in the back corner, her fur coat stolen at the end of the night and lipstick and perfume on his expensive shirt. But that was the vodka talking which he had imbibed a few moments ago to quell the nerves.

It was not an announcement, nor an invitation. He guessed by its girth and weight that it contained most likely some kind of bonded paper, two or perhaps even three sheets. It lacked the quality of a letter written in haste; this had been pondered over. Official notices or complaints did not come with the address hand-written, and certainly not in such an informal envelope which was obviously licked by a human, not a machine. She was not formal, anyways. She never had been one for ceremony or excessive public attention. He didn't particularly recognize the handwriting, though it very well could be a perturbation of her old pen, with a bit of sophisticated angst thrown in there like a spice. He ran his dry hand over the indented envelope and unsmudged writing.

Small and squarish, the envelope was not the type used for invitations or proclamations of marriage, and certainly not for business or solicitations. But he couldn't rule any of these out quite yet; she had gone this far, who knows to what sublime or subjugated level she may have inflated herself. It was a straight licker, not the festive "V" which might indicate celebration. Palpable wrinkles adorned the browned sheath, evidence of an active journey overseas.

Hundreds or perhaps thousands of other dreams and perished loves had smothered it from every angle.

The envelope opened crisply, the sound may have even startled Blythe. He fondled the cheap French glue, yellowed and aromatically reminiscent of old cheese. What he had just torn open was a letter from France, and his hands shook slightly as he read the news that his ex-girlfriend would be in the city next week, along with her new British boyfriend, whom he instantly imagined to be a terrible person although admitted silently to himself that he wished to meet him. He grabbed his stomach, which now hurt.

She simply said “Matthew and I,” which was frightening because it sounded so formal, so proper. She had never described the slouch, nor spoke directly about him, presumably out of decency, but maybe even explicit tactics to inspire jealousy.

She was capable of such things, capable of the kinds of actions that were only discovered by the passage of time, the resolution (or the non-resolution) of events, murky situations, with feelings whipped to a froth, pride on the other hand congealed into something stubbornly hard. He wasn't about to give in. But there was something about the name. “Matthew.” She had written such an affectionate “M.” Blythe wanted to tear him apart. He was probably a tax collector or something else idiotic.

But then his feelings changed. It's a modern world they live in: facsimiles, electronic mail, hypertext, digitized voices, terabytes. Yet she had chosen to sharpen up an old gnarly pencil—a throwback to grade school, the taste of lead and chewed erasers—mark up a page with carbon which in the end would signify, in Kyle's mind, some secret meaning. He imagined her turning her world upside down, racking her brain for inspiration and the will to commit to some want. Maybe she was unhappy with Matthew? Maybe she had desired that he would see thin

and thick arcs, trailing scratches and unclosed loops, extraneous marks of passion, fits of compulsion, uncrossed zees, the generic beauty of her cursive, in sum all the vagaries and idiosyncratic meanings of handwriting. He took this all to mean something very good. He filtered it with his own lens. Perhaps she had written automatic prose. Perhaps not. In his mind each notch, crevice, and loop she had designed intentionally. Even if this was only his desperation, twisted lonely thinking, even then he was better off believing that she had intended to impart to him some message of urgency.

CHAPTER FAMILY – the story of Lola’s life, adoption, early education, remember she was abandoned by Kyle’s family due to liver disease age 4 due to cost of care and divorce and mental illness perhaps

Lola sensed the family breaking up. She had for years. It explained a lot: the stressful car trips upstate, the crying spells certain family members would have at family functions, the silent phone calls she would not be allowed to overhear. Her aunt, far removed on a farm in northern Montana with four midget ponies as her only occupation, her grandparents dying slowly, the offspring split up like a diced onion all over the country, several uncles dead now of lung cancer from heavy smoking, and multiple divorces, annulments, incarcerations, illegitimacies, and overall dysfunctional beings had drawn and quartered the family. The family was a rusting fence. It was still there, but held nothing in and scared everybody away.

Lola had not found the courage yet to tell Kyle that they are related. Despite her years of searching for him, relegated to discover her past, to reconnect, to heal, to find her family and repair her wounds, she found Kyle six months ago and had been socializing with him and his crew.

She does not know where she was raised from ages 4 to 10. She has vague recollections of Eastern seaboard beaches, Cape Cod feels right but she cannot place it even after numerous trips and research. Some vague familiarity in some areas of the New Jersey shore, the Cape, even DC. She knows she had been there but she cannot place the names faces of those she was with. It feels like a *déjà vu*. Incomplete memories, truncated and mildly sad.

When she was ten years old she was adopted by a California family, a teacher and a scientist, both mega hippies. They found Lola through a Koinonia adoption agency. Lola had been home schooled, she knows that much. She was well taught but had not been formally schooled. After adoption she entered formalized testing, was far ahead of peers her age, and entered the fifth grade as the smartest and youngest kid in the class.

Her newfound parents were very kind and open with her. They were open to discussing her mental trauma from day one, and were the kindest souls one could ever imagine to Lola. She was appreciative respectful back to them to the extent that child could be.

They fed her emotional support; she fed them teenager angst, knowledge, and grit.

She recalls many years of therapy, and had been on a first name basis with her counselor for many years. She had no real dark baggage, but a lot of abandonment issues, and thoughts of sadness about the fact that at least as far as she knew her parents had given her up for adoption.

She did not know much of the story, not did she really want to know. If giving a child up for adoption was justified somehow, she always thought there must have been a happier work



around. If there was not a workaround desired, then she would rather not know the reasons. If it was something as banal as finances, stress, depression, or substance abuse, she did not want to know. If they did not love her, she did not want to know. She knew in her heart that she had been raised properly until age 4 or 5, she knew there had been love until then she could almost remember it, she had had no broken bones and she was well cared for until then, she knew in her heart that something serious had happened, either to her or to them, which made parenting either a fiscal or mental impossibility. There was nothing she could do about it, so she moved on. She had the most vague sense one could have of what her birth mother smelled like, and some flashes of memories, more vague and intermixed with imaginary memories and self protection she thinks as the years pass.

She went through phases of rejecting herself and her adoptive parents. She took a decidedly Bohemian path through life, one year wearing mostly pillow case dresses when it was warm enough with a hole cut out for the head. For five years her back was always to the TV even in a social setting. She did not partake in fast food and tried to minimize exposure to addictive products and additives.

These phases came and went over the years. Lola joined several non-profit enterprises, rapidly ascending the ranks, raised money for housing charities and medical charities with ease.

Her adoptive parents were extremely supportive to say the least of her endeavors. In many cases she donated to her causes, and helped her with publicity at the university and beyond.

She knew there were secrets in the family. The fix was not in revelation. Some secrets were better left unsaid. She knew the only way to fix things was to rebuild. It would take effort, months or years of trying would go unnoticed, but maybe a flower would bloom here or there.

Like a desert flooded, there would be growth, there had to be growth. She hoped things would begin if only she could figure out where to start.

And then, like the break of dawn, it came to her.

#### Chapter Four DOCTOR PARDON

It was 1976 when Lola first found out she had a disease. Well actually, it was 1976 when her parents found out, but they didn't tell her. In fact, they never told her. She was too young, and wouldn't have understood, so they thought. It would have been a great psychological burden, they felt. What they wouldn't admit to themselves, however, was the real reason: they didn't have the right diagnosis. She had abnormal liver tests, which was assumed to

be benign. Her parents weren't really interested in advanced medicine, biopsies, that sort of thing. So they took the good old doctors advice and kept a close eye on her. Sort of.

Her mother died young; one of the nurses said she had seen this before in parents of sick children. Her father committed suicide several years afterwards. Perhaps it was all the predictions and permutations the doctors had made—premature heart disease, kidney problems, destruction of her blood vessels by her body's own forces—all these terrible possibilities that ate away at their hope. Whatever the case, both of her parents were dead long before Lola was old enough to comprehend her condition.

By keeping a close eye on Lola, yes we mean she was allowed to smoke large quantities of marijuana in the home, have frequent soft-core sexual intercourse with strange and borderline psychotic men and rarely women, engage in acts of profanity both written and performed on a regular basis, and in general have little to no rules in her home other than she had to sleep there every night for at least two hours. The two-hour rule was not arbitrary, it came from the family elders who had lived by the same rule. It was based on the belief that dreams were the essence of your cultural and moral formation, and most often your dreams centered around your geographical location, and if you dreamed of home or of the people who occupied your home, then you would most likely be a family-oriented person in the long run, and little could corrupt the family, mostly family itself. And yes she could take a nap in the early evening and then stay out all night long, that counted towards the limit. Her mother believe that as long as she could visibly see her sleep in the house form time to time, then she would end up alright in life.

Dr. Kenneth Pardon saw Lola the first Monday of each month, save for December when he went on his sole vacation of the year. Well, at least they had an appointment each month. Lola attended about annually over the last twenty-nine years, with more frequent blood tests in

between the annual visits. The Doctor had never seen a woman so young and healthy deal so well with the idea of illness. Lola was not ill yet, she was barely even sick. Her liver enzymes were hardly elevated. Had it not been for Dr. Pardon, who took such a meticulous family history, and uncovered a string of poorly defined liver disease coupled with psychiatric problems in the family, Lola probably would have died. It was a rare but known disease where copper was poorly handled by the body. But for sure, copper would accumulate in her blood, brain, liver, and kidneys, if she didn't eventually have the red organ "chopped out," as Lola liked to call it, and "a new one thrown in there," as she also liked to call it, she would die.

"Dr. Pardon, you realize it's very sexy, don't you?"

The Doctor looked her over, a hint of a smile on his face after her comment. He peeled back her eyelids, felt the sides of her face and neck in a solid grip, the hands warm and soft.

"What are you referring to sweetie?"

"Being a doctor. I mean the way you be a doctor. The..." She was cut off by Dr. Pardon lifting her shirt in the front to listen to the heart.

"I've got tiny tits, don't I?"

Dr. Pardon cleared his throat. He was used to this.

"How's it sound? Will I need a new heart, too, doc, from all this damn metal? Hey...doc, can I sell all this copper and make some mula? You know some of my old druggie friends steal copper pipes and copper plating sometimes to take to metal scrapyards to sell for drug money."

The Doctor was deep in the rhythm of the heart. His breath, now so close to Lola's face, comforted Lola with a trace of banana. He had a way of not answering certain questions, which Lola took as a sign of reassurance.

“What was that sweetie?”

“Oh nothing, I was just asking about my heart.”

“The heart sounds fine sweetie, and it shouldn’t be affected, as long as we transplant before you get sick.”

“Dr. Pardon what’s the chance I’ll die if I have surgery?”

“Lay back for me Lola so I can have a feel of your abdomen.”

She laid back, slightly dizzy. Fluorescent light above took her to the operating room all of a sudden. As Dr. Pardon tickled her lower belly with an unafraid hand, she closed her eyes and saw him with a scalpel in hand, gowned in sterile blue. No nightmarish quality, actually the opposite.

“There’s no chance Lola, I’m not going to let you die.” Dr. Pardon said this matter-of-factly.

Lola noticed that Dr. Pardon raised one eyebrow more than the other when he was answering a serious question.

“Ever?”

He simply gave her an underwhelmed glance.

“No chance?”

“A very small chance. Let’s put it this way. I haven’t lost someone on the operating room table in...well...years, and I operate on hundreds of people a year.”

“What’s it like?”

He probed for her liver gently.

“Losing someone?”

Deeper now.

“Slicing someone open.”

“Take a deep breath.”

Slight crampy pain as he edged into the gallbladder.

“Okay now let it out Lola. Breathe normally.”

“Okay, you can sit back up for me.”

Dr. Pardon seemed overwhelmed for a moment.

“Slicing someone open,” he said rhythmically, “as you call it, is one of the greatest experiences a man or woman can have.” He sat down at his desk, the color of cypress leaves in summer, and instructed Lola to sit across. Mrs. Pardon had recommended such a setup for patient counselling. She figured it was good to have some distance from the patient, to make boundaries clear.

“When you make an incision Lola, your mind races and races to figure out how to get exactly back to that incision. The entire time in the body, whether one hour or twelve hours, my predominant thought is how to make this all better again. How am I going to close this incision? Every step along the way is geared towards closing, from tying tight knots, to avoiding big blood vessels, to making a swift intervention with minimal exposure time. For you Lola, it’s going to be wonderful. When we are finished with your operation, you will have a one-hundred percent cure of your disease. It’s not very often I can say that! We will have to deal with immunosuppression from then on, but that’s not such a big problem anymore with the kinds of medicines we have...new medicines.”

Lola sighed deeply. She took comfort, for some reason in this rather technical description. She believed they would save her life. They would almost kill her, she was sure, by

chopping out her liver, but in the end it would be worth it. She had complete confidence in Dr. Pardon and his colleagues.

Dr. Pardon took a moment to write some notes, during which time Lola took a good look at him. He looked deteriorated from the years of hunched, early-morning hospital rounds, his cheeks ruddy and plump from zealous late dinners, the ears chafed. His lips were pursed tight. Lola imagined this was from never having expressed neither to his wife nor his secretary, who were one in the same person, his unending love.

Despite her chiding nature, her caustic approach to those with mere head colds and bouts of influenza, and her true lack of sensitivity to those who could not afford to pay for their bills, Molly Pardon was a very efficient diagnostician, and saved Dr. Pardon many a misdiagnosis over the phone. Not to mention, Molly was a workhorse. She turned backbreaking hours into heartwarming chores of love.

Now well-established as a surgeon, Dr. Pardon saw himself an emissary for death and desire. To tease them, the both of them, out of awful hiding was his job. He never approached quite close enough—sheltered by a chasm of hard brown wood—to get scorned by the hot fires he whispered into unwilling ears. To know a person was to see them at the news of their impending illness, hearty, or clenched shut. The hardest ones were the content, for on occasion he wanted to die along with them it seemed such a sweet repose.

Just then Mrs. Pardon poked her head in the office door.

“I’m with a patient, can’t you see?” Dr. Pardon beamed at her. He hated when she interrupted.

“It’s not just a patient, don’t call Lola just any old patient. Mrs. Johnson is coming in tonight. Her hip is bothering her more this week. Don’t you know it, she always does this to us on a Monday.”

“Just the hip? Ah, listen, I’m with Lola, can you please let me finish with Lola?” he said, quite rude.

“Hi Lola sweetie. How are you feeling?”

“Doin’ okay, thanks Molly.”

“She’s short of breath too…” which trailed off as Mrs. Pardon exited.

The phone rang and Dr. Pardon rolled his eyes as he heard his wife answer and deter yet another patient from coming in so late on a weeknight.

He leaned back and put his hands behind his head.

“Lola you look great. If it wasn’t for your liver I’d say go out there and tear them apart. You really look like you’re doing good, no problems that I can find on your physical exam. All we have to do now is schedule a few routine tests prior to surgery. But the way things are looking right now that will be a long-time off. Believe it or not you have to get a lot worse before we can get you better. We’ll talk more about it next time. Come back next month. Think about timing. What kinds of things do you have coming up in the next few years. Your life will change a bit, Lola. You will be healthy and happy, but you will always be aware that you have to treat your body well. No more pot, no more smoking, minimal alcohol. Actually, I’d rather you smoked a small amount of marijuana and less alcohol. Just start thinking about it. What are you doing to keep yourself busy nowadays?”

“Oh the usual, taking care of people.”



“Still that company you were telling me about? What was it, relocation assistance or something?”

Lola smiled in her mind. “Yeah relocation assistance. Uh huh. We help people move about in their lives.”

“Alright, well take good care of yourself and we’ll see you in a month or two.”

He hugged her briefly and left.

While she felt happy to have seen Dr. Pardon, she felt very angry about the liver situation. What the fuck is cirrhosis anyways, and who the fuck decided to spell it with two r’s, the same poetic motherfuckers who spell words like abhorred and diarrhea and catarrh and tichorrhine? But this was just the beginning of Lola’s day. She had many things to do and many thoughts to be thought about. She had to figure out how to get her back, then figure out how to make her love again and how to make him capable of being loved he had developed this horrible smelly breath and beer gut, then figure out how to get her bar to make more money so she could do more, then finally when she was done with all that she could sit and dwell on this goddamn stupid fucking cirrhotic liver, hopefully before it was too late.

## Chapter 6 Suangi

She made her way to Sasha's house, which was near Dr. Pardon's office. Sasha was home, two cans of paint deep into a huge canvas.

"Sash, I need your help."

"Wid what beautiful?"

Sasha was from Paris, but had spent a good deal of time living in New Guinea embedded with a small tribe as part of her doctorate of philosophy.

"Well, you see, I have this friend of mine, an acquaintance really, who it turns out is actually family, although he doesn't know it."

"OK, fine, no problem there."

“I didn’t even know about him, about the fact that I even had a brother.”

“He’s your brother?”

“True. Let me finish.”

“L’inconnu, comme c’est intéressant.”

“Well, let’s just say it appears to me that he has got himself all fucked up, depressed as hell, malfunctioning, a real waste of life really.”

“Is he a suangi? He sounds like he may be one.”

“No...well he may be. I mean no, for sure he’s not.”

“I’ll kill him if he’s a suangi. I’ll do that for you.”

“No you can’t kill him, he’s my brother.”

“Doesn’t matter. One of my husbands was a suangi and I killed him.”

“OK chill killer sister.”

“I will kill him if he needs to be killed.”

“Girl...if you kill him I’ll kill you.”

“Oh my god. You just told me that if I killed him I would become your suangi. You have just silenced me. OK. Je comprend. I will not kill him. Je ne le tuerai pas.”

“Jesus, you are a deadly girl.”

“So what do you want me to do? Are you sure I don’t need to...”

She glared at her, then laughed.

“Ok, so what I need you to do is just to scare the hell out of him.”

“Oh! So he is a suangi?”

“Damn it he’s not a fucking suangi!”

“Alright, alright, so he’s not a suangi. Are you sure?”

“Listen, he’s messed up in the head, and he needs to be changed. That’s all. Just frighten him, scare him, that’s all. No killing.”

“I tell you what. Tell me where he is located, and I will scare the suangi out of him. I do feel this man become a suangi one day soon. I will scare him so he will not need to become suangi. D’accord?”

“Yes. Oui. D’accord. Thank you Sashy. You look hot today.” And with that she let out a screech laugh and kissed her on her forehead.

## CHAPTER 7—A WELL-INTENTIONED MAN

Winter was bearing down fast. You could smell it through the windows. For the third time since he had abandoned a small dinner, now cold, Blythe eyed his medications. He had seen a doctor, some scam artist from the phone book. It had not helped, probably made him

worse. Dim yellow streetlight oozed through the windows. It shined sickly yellow on some magazines on the floor. A taxicab honked impatiently downstairs and Kyle could barely make out the sound of people on the sidewalk, deadened by the cold wind. The room smelled like cigarette smoke, but the roommates had not been home. He shifted regularly in a hard chair near the window and waited for the remainder of the night to happen.

There was no prospect of anything happening. And yet he was kidding himself. He didn't want to do anything. He wanted to plan, take notes, enliven his soul which had been...resting...for so long he couldn't believe it was happening again. He had grandiose images of romance, traveling, the sublime nature of food in foreign restaurants, beautiful clandestine cemeteries. But then just a few seconds later, a dejected feeling. A heaviness settled back into the room.

He didn't even want to go anywhere. It had been such a tiresome season for Blythe, replete with upped dosages and refills, a prescripational nightmare really. He dreaded the pharmacist's beady eyes and chapped hands, and after a profuse sweat would set in he would even consider querying the chemist about metabolic disturbances, but often lost the desire to do so with a hand swipe across the forehead and a convincing thought that perspiration was a natural phenomenon. Sometimes he'd find his shaky lip on the verge of blurting out some unanswerable question about nervous conditions. He found that after visiting the pharmacist he had to spend a few hours in a diner or some quiet sweet restaurant to calm himself. But it had not come all at once. It is really quite vague and indescribable. It was a negative symphony, a conspiracy by no one to form a swirling brew of nastiness. His grandfather was dying, along with him powerful currents of veneration. His girlfriend had left him for a Parisian man. Food had become disagreeable, so had going to the movies. Rashes and sores were commonplace

with headaches taking the lead from time to time. Of course, some of this can be blamed on the city. In its own desultory way, it was wearing on Blythe.

As for the rest, there is little that can be conveyed through description. It must be felt, experienced, driven through from beginning to end, like a chemical whose concoction depends not only on the ingredients and proportions, but on temperature, order, and speed. Otherwise lives cannot be understood—people stand next to each other all over the place, waiting in line or standing in awe, some happy some pondering their own death, their suffering unsurpassed. Their problems dissolve in the salve of the city, only to disappear into the endless sewer and resurge at times in pools of iridescent green. You might not know what we're really talking about here if you're a suburban type, if you feel breathless around poplar trees and picket fences, rather than burnt out eyes and gray faces and clothes worn thin as onion skin. You can peer into these city eyes, shine a light in their throats or stick them with something sharp and take their blood—you will not be close to mentality, opinions, feelings. And it all seems equal, the suburban and the urban, the togetherness of families counteracted by money and murder.

For Blythe the tenuous was commonplace. In fact he stood up loudly from the chair and made his way to a bar. Shortly thereafter, he found himself far from everything, comfortably slumped on a barstool. He twiddled his fingers while waiting for a drink. Already he was planning medication intervals, how and when he would take which pills in what order and with what kind of liquid to best avoid the uncertainties of malabsorption.

The bar was a local dive. He settled in quite naturally as he had done many times before. His liver hung over his belt, under a cheap, smoke-burned bar. A long ember in his hand flicked a spark onto his leathery arm from time to time. The wince and smother was delayed by some immeasurable amount of time, which after a moment was a source of embarrassment for Blythe,

since the average onlooker—not that there were any—may have confused this for a fit of freakishness, some syndrome, or perhaps a spasm. When an uncomfortable like Blythe frequents a dive, he strives for an outward appearance of goodness, a well-intentioned man out at night for a few alcoholic beverages after a hard week of work. Deviations from this image, upon realization by the uncomfortable, multiply—a patternless fractal beyond the scope of control—and the evening digresses into the unknown. Thoughts prey in this area, thoughts so malicious, so empty really, it is the stuff that inspires confessions to strangers, long swoon-ridden nights, and breathless early morning encounters with yourself when you dwell on dark secrets, observe your weaknesses of flesh firsthand through squinted eyes.

Yet this perch was his only inspiration. From here he watched lives unfold in front of him. Sometimes it made him feel better. Of course, the best part was that he could watch, and watch only. He didn't have to get his hands dirty in the nasty, blood-soaked affairs of others: other people's abuse, neglect, greed, ignorance, shame. He could stay clear of it yet absorb the vapors, analyze them through his foggy gaze, all the while lapping up his drink at the bar like a sick bird. Only rarely did his blood boil when a man grabbed a woman roughly, and at these times he felt lucky to have little courage for he probably would have slit several throats.

He took shallow breaths into sore, spongy lungs, seemed to wring them out with each exhalation. Later on, the spiteful stomach gurgled and chirped on the way home from the insidious bar it had despised for years. He had decided it was a good night to quit drinking early, get a step ahead of his heavy thoughts. For sure the roommates would rise late in the morning and be riotous and hungry, at least he had that going for him.

For four years Blythe had done this: a quick drink here and there after work, the flood of emotions which he quickly quelled with a wave of the palm or a shaky finger, hacked his way

through the continual ember between his fingers, and felt jolly most of the night long. Of course time has kinks in it. Nothing is fluid. Every now and then the music would stop, the humiliation of a complaint far more painful than clinks in the jukebox. It felt like someone had committed a crime. It was nonsense. The wound gaped, oozed shame. The break in his pattern reminded him of irregularity, mistakes, the awful passage of time, death essentially. He felt that his arm, resting on the sticky bar, might smell of rotting flesh. He steered clear of it, at the same time assured himself that the adjacent female patron wore no face of detection. There was no remedy around, not for thousands of miles. On these pathetic nights he would exit abruptly and trudge on home past the desolate alleyway where he often considered a deposition of vomit.

Trips home from the pub—often we get sick of calling it a bar, such a crude name—were sometimes the worst. Blythe pondered the ordinary to drown out other thoughts. Walks and food and bathrooms, light-switches and tables and linoleum, each thought comfortably lost in his mind. He was headed home, after all, not to some indecipherable location. He was not looking up at street signs, not even a glance. He had no need to even check his location. No wondrous contemplation of directions of any sort, not here. No gazes or confounded turnarounds.

So lost in the act of doing nothing at all, he forgot for a few moments that he was in misery. In fact he loathed himself, his own image he caught in barroom mirrors, the dark forehead angles he would see in glitzy store windows towards which he pretended to cast a pejorative glance, the down-turned lip he carried above and below his rotting teeth which, except for a few engraved items like a watch and a money clip, are the only things he would welcome in his casket as means of identification.

There came in medication. In their countless forms—the creams and medicated alcohol rubs, jelly pastes and absinthian oils, camphoraceous balms, acid washes, ant piss concoctions,



analgesics, stabilizers and tranquilizers, nullifiers and anti-depressants, inhibitors, inducers, antacids, salts, enzymatic emulsions, and other nonsense, and above all, for Kyle, the last resort, the cure of all cures, the medication of extraordinary potential: the picture of her with Colorado mountains in the background, her face far away yet distinguishable, set in an unburnable steel frame atop his musty dresser, neither of which had been moved in years—they were usually the only route left. Four years of acknowledged dust had accumulated on the tiny rub-worn ledge of the frame, a till upon the foothills of his imagination. Sometimes a cold draft would find its way through the glass and he would feel quite sure that he could smell mountain air. Rest assured, it is quite intoxicating. Despite the deluge of procrastinated phlegm that warm weather would conjure from the depths of his lungs, not unrelated to the many times he had considered depositing the chest on the corner of a nameless street, smashing the picture, never mind that its placement in the category of refuse would send it straight to a suffering-locked chamber in his heart, something was about to give.