

MOVING ON: A NOVEL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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By

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ABSTRACT

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Hank Fossett had the perfect life with his girlfriend, Liz: a steady job, a promising career as a local artist, a healthy relationship with a wonderful woman, all while living in the cosmopolitan city of Blophoton. But Hank was just dumped and didn't see it coming. Now, after four years with his girlfriend, he's alone and must figure out how to get over the girl who broke his heart. turns to his friends to help him try to get Liz back. Instead, they help Hank get over Liz in a series of twelve steps crafted by Hank's old friend and war veteran, Chuck.

Many of these steps are intuitive, such as feeling sorry for yourself and remembering the bad times. Other steps lead Hank back into the direction of his friends and then encourage him to make new friends. Eventually, with the help of his friend Cheryl, who introduces him to the world of online dating, Hank dates again.

As Hank follows the steps to move on from his relationship, he begins to realize that his friends, and his father, have more serious problems: Chuck has Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from his time in Afghanistan, Cheryl is trying to get over being sexually assaulted, Hank's father, a physician, still blames himself from the death of Hank's grandfather.

While Hank is moving on, another narrator fills in the past, moving backwards from days just before Hank was dumped to the very first time Hank

and Liz met. In these passages, we learn that his relationship with Liz wasn't as solid as he thought it was. Hank accepts his mistakes and moves on from Liz as the twelve step program leads him in new directions in life he never expected to go.

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INTRODUCTION

The first week, I do nothing.



Let's get one thing straight: this is not a love story. Don't forget it. This is a story about falling out of love, about a man with a broken heart who's trying to deal with it.

The names of people and places have been changed to protect the innocent and the not-so innocent. The story of what actually happened took place in a well known east coast city in Massachusetts. It's the story teller's prerogative to change location, and they do, often to New York City. But this story teller isn't going to do that because too many stories already take place there. Yet, there are things about a big city that are integral to the story, such as subways and historic buildings that can't be found in any random town such as Jerkfalls, IA. Instead, this story teller will make up a town.

Screw it, let's just call it Blophton. Yeah, *you* try to rename a city on the spur of the moment, let's see how good it is.

As for characters, people come and go. There are only two people you really need to know. Henry is the man with the broken heart, and Elizabeth is the

woman with the hammer, or chainsaw, or whatever is used to break hearts.

Henry goes by Hank and Hank calls Elizabeth “Diz,” but you’ll work that out.

Now, for plot: forget boy meets girl—this boy has already lost her. Boy is trying to get over a girl. Not intellectual enough? Here’s a metaphor: Love is dead. If Eros, that incarnation of emotion, physically resides in our hearts like that jerk Plato said, then the corpse is rotting in Hank and everyone can smell it. This story is the composition of the decomposition of Eros. That’s not literal enough for you? Try this then: the story deals with a single event, a splash in the waters of Hank’s life with the concentric water rings rippling the present, future, and the past.

This story follows Hank through his healing. Nothing remarkable happens. And no, there is no traditional happy ending. And if you’re looking for some heartfelt reunion, forget it: he doesn’t get her back.

CHAPTER 1

STEP 1

It's finally Saturday and I've called in sick to work everyday since Wednesday. I haven't left my apartment. I can't eat, can't sleep. The TV is on but I can't focus for more than a few minutes. She left me on the vernal equinox. Winter ends when Persephone leaves Hades after a long winter to return to her mother. How fitting: only five days into spring and I'm dying while everything else is being reborn.

I'm not really dying, but I smell like it. Heartache has an all too familiar scent, reminiscent of a reclusive elderly neighbor who's passing-on isn't discovered until our olfactory glands tell us something's not right. I'm sure people would avoid me, if I were around them. I haven't showered or eaten in days and it hurts to move.

I know I need to get out of this apartment. My phone has been ringing, but I don't answer because none of the calls are her. As for the voicemails, I know who they're from and what they're concerning. Word spreads fast.

Pulling my body out of the sofa, I stand to turn off the TV (I don't even care what's on and I can't find the remote, but I just want some noise to drown out the noise in my head), and walk out the door. I'm going to the studio—maybe I can paint something, anything to get my mind off of her. I walk like a zombie.

I stare at the ground during the five block that separate my apartment from the studio, marveling at all the cracks. They're intricate and everywhere. I see the section that turns to brick and wonder if the bricks were ever level and when. Then there are the curbs, well worn granite eroded by rain, strollers, and old-lady shopping carts.

I arrive at the studio and stop in front of the entrance. I can't escape her. My apartment is filled with reminders, pictures, her lingering scent. The studio, where we first met four and a half years ago, bears the burden of our first memories.

It's the alpha and nearly the omega. I was painting when she called to break up with me. She wanted to me to come to Walters Playground, the halfway point between our apartments, to end our relationship. I didn't know she was going to do that, she just said to meet her immediately. Of course, I dropped everything and haven't picked up yet.

I'm standing outside the building that houses my studio. My legs resist, but it's my place, my creative center. My feet drag the rest of me to the door and up the stairs to the second floor.

Cheryl and Miriam are there. It's sometime in the late afternoon and the sun is setting in the bay windows overlooking the waterfront. They're drinking coffee and talking; they stop as soon as they see me come in. I want to be alone, but they pay their share of the rent and have a right to be here. Miriam doesn't

hold eye contact and I know she knows everything. Miriam is Diz's best friend, so now that she knows, Cheryl knows.

They swarm me, hugging me and Oh-Hank-we're-so-sorry-ing me.

"We tried calling," Cheryl says. She hasn't let go of me and we're standing in the foyer of the studio.

"Yeah." I say my first words to anyone in two days. "I haven't felt like talking." Miriam, Cheryl, and George have all called—the entire studio knows my situation. How long have they known, especially Miriam. Did she know it was going to happen?

"We're glad you came out Hank," Miriam tells me. "We were worried. You okay?"

"I'm alright," I breathe out. It hurts. I've been avoiding people because of that very question. No, I am not okay. I feel trampled, squished flat, and there's this corpse of a god decaying in my chest. But these people are my friends, they deserve an answer even if it's a lie.

"It'll get better," Cheryl says, rubbing my shoulder. I don't agree, it can only get worse. Every day is now one without her. By suffering her absence, I'm at least holding on to something of our relationship.

I owe my friends a conversation. "How are you both?" I ask.

"We're good," Cheryl says. "Just talking about some new projects."

"Yeah, Cheryl's deciding who to mooch off of next, me or you." Cheryl is a photographer and likes to take pictures of people interacting with art; most of her work comes from gallery showings when people first react to a new work.

“That’s not true. I know I don’t want to shoot your latest sculpture. It’s too weird, even for me.”

“Well, Hank, it looks like she’s doing you again. Unless she can come up with something original.”

“Hey!” Cheryl slaps Miriam’s shoulder. “I have original ideas. I don’t have to always rely on you guys to provide me with inspiration. I can shoot what I want.” She pauses and her eyes spark. “Excuse me.” She races to her studio space.

The studio is a converted three-bedroom apartment in a four story brick building. The first floor is all retail shops while the remaining three floors are artist spaces. The layout of the apartment allows the two painters—George and me—and Miriam (the sculptor) to use the three bedrooms while Cheryl can set up in the dining room, where she can lock her cameras in the china hutch. The whole studio is huge and expensive, but George knows the owner, so we get a good rate. The kitchen is fully functional, with a slop sink and every room has a solid, lockable door. We use the living room as our gallery and sometimes open the whole studio for larger showings. Standing in the foyer, I can see through the living room and into the dining room where Cheryl is scribbling at her desk.

I have Miriam alone for the moment “How is she?”

Miriam doesn’t look at me. “She’s okay, a little beat up emotionally with everything going on. I’m sure you know how it feels.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Mir, I don’t understand, why? Why did she do it?”

“I don’t know Hank, she hasn’t talked about it with me.”

Bullshit.

“But then she’s told you something. She won’t tell me anything.” She said she can’t be in this relationship right now, like I’m just something that can be tossed aside when she feels like it. She won’t even tell me if that’s the case.

“Hank.” She says. “I’m sorry this happened. I loved you two as a couple. But she’s decided it’s over now. Maybe it’s best you don’t know everything, it might hurt more.”

“But you could talk to her for me. She hasn’t answered any of my calls and won’t respond to my emails.” I say emails like I’ve sent hundreds. I’ve only sent the one, and that was yesterday. It was beautiful, something poets would envy. I don’t even know if she got it, the message could be floating out in cyberspace somewhere, drifting aimlessly.

“I am not going to get caught in the middle of this, to be used by both of you. You’ve called her, you’ve made your move and now you have to wait for her to make hers. Maybe she’ll call you, maybe she won’t, but I am not going to be playing double agent.”

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Me too.” She checks her watch and says, “I have to go.”

She’s going to see her and I look at her to call her on it. “Don’t ask me where,” she says. Hugs me and leaves.

“Tell her I love her,” I say. Miriam pretends no to hear me. Cheryl shouts bye and she waves.

A camera clicks behind me. I turn to look at Cheryl. She takes another picture. "Sorry," she says. "I haven't used this camera in a long time. I want to use it for my new project. It still has some film on it and I want to use it all. One more, please?"

"What's this project of yours?" I ask as she shoots me, capturing an image of me dejected and rejected, now timeless. If it only took my soul, maybe it'd take away some of the heartache too.

"Well, it's a surprise," she says, polishing the lens. "I can't tell you, but I think you'll like it when it's done."

"Why this special camera?" She's winding down the film.

"I use it for portraits only, it shoots a larger format to get all the details of the face, down to the pores."

"Oh," I say. I prefer the low-tech way, where my only tool is the brush.

I start to walk to my space. "Oh, by the way, George left an invitation for you on your desk. He's invited us to a little get together at his house tonight. I hope you'll go."

On my desk is George's envelope.

Henry,

I'm very sorry to hear about you and Liz. I'm sure you're down and out, feeling heartbroken, and wanting to die. I have a better plan: I'm inviting you out. This Saturday, I'm holding a

small celebration for Stephen and his boyfriend, or should I say fiancé. They're getting married next week. It's a complete surprise, but Stephen proposed suddenly. I realize the last thing you'll want to do is be around a bunch of couples, but it'll be fun and maybe take your mind off of you-know-who. If you get this by Sunday, stop by.

George

"You going to go?" Cheryl asks.

"I don't know."

"Come on, I'm going to be there."

"What time?"

"It says 'eight-ish.' You know how it is." Show up after nine.

"Good, we can go together. Now, get home and shower up and I'll meet you at River Street station in an hour."

"Okay." I didn't feel like painting anyway.

My bathroom is loaded with reminders of her: shampoo, shower gel, deodorant, lotions, razors, and other "feminine products." I can hear Chuck saying "come on, be a big boy and say 'tampons.'" Fuck you, Chuck. This is proof I loved her, opening up *my* bathroom, which contained simply soap and magazines, to that big blue box tucked underneath the sink next to the toilet paper. It's a variety box, with inconsistent descriptions of sizes. There's no progression of small, medium

and large. No, it goes from light, normal, to super, when the natural progression should not end in super—“super” is what kids say when their parents tell them they’re going to the beach. “Super” is the guy you have to wake up at three a.m. to fix your broken toilet because he fixed it with duct tape the last month so he wouldn’t have to spend money even though you still have to tip him a hundred bucks every Christmas just to make sure he comes at three a.m. instead of next Tuesday.

No, if the smallest tampon is “light,” then the largest should be “heavy”—but perhaps that’s too descriptive. The marketing is too sanitized, telling women they should be discrete about their bodily activities, that there’s shame in being a normally functioning woman.

I shower, letting the hot water pound my skin to numbness. I shave peering through a foggy mirror, not caring if I cut myself. Let this physical pain, these small droplets of blood, purify me.

George’s house is beautiful, like all the other houses in Bleakon Hill. It’s a triple-decker and he owns the entire building, renting out the first floor and keeping the top two for himself. We are the first ones there and George’s boyfriend opens the door.

“Hank, Cheryl, so good to see you both!” He hugs Cheryl and kisses her, then me. Eliot’s 6’2” and looks un-pretty enough to pass as straight. “Hank, I’m sorry to hear about your break up. It’s really awful. How long were you together?”

“Four years.”

“Ouch. How the hell are you still standing up? Come in, we’ll fix you a drink to make you feel better.”

“Thanks.”

“Cheryl, look at you. You look great. What have you been up to?”

“Thanks, so do you. God, I wish I was a gay man, just so I could be all over you!”

“Maybe in your next life, sweetheart.”

I head straight to the drink table, in the dining room. George is setting out platters, but I’m eyeing the vodka, only an arm length away. “Hank, I’m so glad you came.”

“Hi George.”

“Come here.” He approaches me and gives me a hug. “I hope we can get your mind off that woman for a while.”

I doubt it. Why are people afraid to say her name? Do I consider her the villain of my story? I don’t know. I don’t hate her for breaking up with me, maybe I’m still too much in shock to be angry. He hugs me again.

George is still hugging me when Cheryl and Eliot enter. “Hey Eliot, looks like Hank is rebounding already.”

“Cheryl,” George says, letting me go. “Be nice. Poor Hank’s had a rough week. Can I get anyone something to drink?”

“I’ll get it, thanks.” I pour myself some vodka then add a splash of tonic, fighting the temptation to drink it straight. Cheryl gets a glass of wine and begins to help George set out the remaining dishes. I drink.

“We’ve got something special for the lucky couple,” says Eliot. “You’ll love it.”

“It’s a surprise,” George whispers, heading in from the kitchen.

“Oh, no one’s here, I don’t see why I can’t show it to them. Besides, I’m so proud of the work you’ve done, I just have to share.” They kiss, and I am strangely jealous. I don’t recognize the envy at first, but then I notice it: the freedom to kiss your loved one whenever you want; I no longer have it. The long locking of eyes, reading each other’s thoughts in a gaze or gesture—it’s all walled off to me.

“Okay, fine,” George says. Eliot leads to the living room and a large object covered in a white sheet. He holds the sheet up and we see it: a large framed picture of the couple. Only it’s not a photograph, it’s a collage, it’s a painting of a collage—like the ones they have computers do now, only done by hand. I have always admired George’s technique. Somehow he found time to perfect his technique and still pass the bar. The frame is intricately carved wood, stained mahogany with an engraved brass plate, stating “Adam and Stephen” then the date. George made the whole thing himself, it’s definitely his style. It’s a painting that must have taken weeks of intense focus. I don’t say anything, my throat is all catchy at seeing the depictions of the happy couple. The words “excuse me” mangle from my throat as I head to the bathroom.

“Wow, it’s beautiful,” Cheryl gushes.

In the bathroom, I see my eyes are red and swelling. I swallow back the tears. I won’t cry here, I won’t. I press the heels of my hands into my eyes, then

get some tissues to wipe away the starter tears that are pooled in the corners. I splash some water over my face, take a deep breath and imagine what it'd be like to flow down the drain into the Harbor and out to sea. That would be nice. I take another deep breath and step out.

Another guest has arrived and Cheryl is talking to him.

“Hank, Eugene. He’s Eliot’s friend from work.” Great, I hate being introduced to people. It’s pointless and takes too much time with all the small talk.

“Hi, Hank, nice to meet you.”

“Hi,” I say, not meeting his eyes.

“How’s it going?”

“Not well. I’m getting a drink.”

“Sorry to hear that,” he says to my back. I see Cheryl lean into him say something. Fuck it, can’t the subject of the evening be the couple who is celebrating, not me.

I eat cheese and drink vodka tonics, though I’m not even hungry or thirsty. My stomach’s rejected the need to eat all week. Every once in a while, someone comes in, but I don’t care who they are. The guests of honor arrive and there’s singing. Happy people always sing; I drink.

At some point, I decide to speak with Stephen and Adam.

“Congratulations, guys. It’s really great, what you’re doing.” They thank me. They know, by know, they’ve got to know—so they thank me for congratulating them and for coming out. I shake their hands, or hug them, I don’t know. I’m not

drunk, no matter how many vodka tonics I've tossed back. Call it a side effect of heartache.

They ask me how I'm doing, how I'm holding up. I tell them 'I'm trying,' that it's 'difficult,' but 'I'll get by.'

"That's the spirit," says Stephen. "You know, Adam had his heart smashed to pieces years ago, and look at him now—he couldn't be happier, right?"

"Of course, sweetie." They kiss. "God, I thought I was going to die!"

"It's a good thing you didn't," Stephen says.

Most of George's friends are older than me by a few years, so they offer me advice and stories of their experience with heartache. They didn't have what I had. They offer me platitudes as solace and I am sick of it, but try not to show it. They try to inspire me, offer me hope, try to tell me I'll find someone new.

I don't want anyone else. I want Diz. I liked what we had, I want it back. I'd trade anything to do so.

I'm waiting for the Devil to pop up. "Anything. *Anything* for your Diz? I think I can arrange that." A contract appears in his red hand. "Just sign right here." He points to the bottom. Blood trickles from my finger and I sign.

This doesn't happen, of course. But I'd do it.

"Hey Hank, how are you doing?" It's Eugene again. I remember being rude to him earlier.

"Eugene, sorry about before. I'm—" I stop to shake his hand. "I'm not all here."

“I know,” he says.

Of course he does.

“It’s good of you to show up, very brave. I know how these couple things can be.”

Oh great.

“If I were you, I’d be in bed, covers over my head. Probably crying.”

“I just got out today,” I say. He laughs but I’m somewhat serious. “I was minding my own business when a white van pulled up beside me and Cheryl jumped out with chloroform and a net. Next thing I know, I here.”

“Well, it’s good to have friends, anyway. Doing things is the best way to get over someone. Having friends who really care helps.”

Here we go. My turn to play along. “Yeah, I know.”

“And you paint, right? You’re part of that studio with George, I’ve seen some of your stuff. It’s good—you been selling a lot since your show?”

“Some. I haven’t really been in the mood to paint lately, though.”

“Well, try it anyway. Creative things help. Paint away that pain. I tried writing a novel last time I was dumped. Well, it was more of a journal. I didn’t finish it, but it got some of my feelings out on paper. If you don’t feel like painting, you can try writing—and you won’t even have to leave your room.”

“Yeah, thanks.” I’m not going to write some stupid novel about a relationship. It’s been done before.

“Don’t worry about it.” He smiles at me and hands me his card. “They’re doing a toast in the other room soon, come on.”

I follow Eugene into the dining room and George is talking about love; I feel like vomiting. They toast; I raise my empty glass to the happy couple. George unveils the painting and there's gasping at its beauty, then clapping. Brav-fucking-o. I want to go home. I don't even want to tell anyone I'm leaving, but I know I should. I find Cheryl and tell her I'm leaving, that she should stay and have a good time. I thank George and Eliot for having me over, then congratulate Stephen and Adam once more and make my way to the door.

At home, I don't even turn on the light, I just sit on the couch and turn on the TV. I tell myself I should take Eugene's advice and write, but I don't get off my ass. There are dating shows on and I think I should join them, but I don't really want to because I'm no longer young and crazy. I sit until I fall asleep. Sometime, late at night, I get up to go to bed. There's a documentary on TV about World War II. Black and white bombers are dropping bombs over the microscopic cross-hatchings of Germany's streets. I know there's people down there and they're going to die and no one will be able to love them again.

I don't know what Diz is thinking, I hardly know what she's doing. She is a stranger once again.

The bombs explode and I think about that scene in *Slaughterhouse Five* where Billy Pilgrim comes unstuck in time and watches a movie like the one I'm watching, only in reverse. The buildings spring up from rubble, craters are filled as bombs are sucked out of the ground and back into the planes. The planes fly back over seas and deliver the bombs to factories, where they are dismantled,

refined back to ores and metals and then hidden deep with in the mountains where no one can get to them. Everyone is safe and the world is at peace. I imagine a relationship in the same way: two people, alone and crying. They confront each other, arguing their way back to the blissful honeymoon period, before separating with no animosity: alone and unaware of the existence of the other. Just as wars should go the way of Vonnegut, relationships should end my way.

But it doesn't. Everyday apart shortens our connection, every item she will give back to me, everything she will take back adds space between us. We are as we started. The effect is like a pinhole leak in an air mattress. Only, I'm the air mattress, collapsing in on myself.



Alright Hank, if that's the way you want it. Let's go to three days before the break up, the night she became certain she had to do what she had to do. It was Saint Patrick's Day; Hank and Liz had spent the night out with friends, barhopping. A town like Blophoton has a large and very active Irish community; March seventeen rivals Independence Day.

Hank and Liz came home and got ready for bed. They were nice and tipsy, ready for sleep. The lights were out, but Liz couldn't sleep.

"I'm so worried about Mom," she said.

“I know,” he said. “Don’t worry, it’ll be all right. She beat it before and she’ll beat it again.” Don’t worry. How many times in the past week had he said that to her. It’s like saying: don’t breathe, don’t blink.

“I know, but it’s still scary. What if it’s stronger or drug resistant. I can’t lose her.”

“You won’t.”

“Sometimes I feel like I’m going to lose everyone close to me, that I’m destined to be alone.”

“You’ve got me,” he said. “I’ll always be here.” The answer was meant to be comforting. It said two things: Even if the world collapsed, he’d still be there for her, and when your world collapses, there’s only him to rely on. Now, which way did she take it? Or did she take it both ways?

“Mmm,” she said and decided.

At this time, five years, three months and seventeen, no eighteen, days have passed since Liz’s father died, almost to the hour.

“I can’t stop thinking,” she said. Hank pulled her in close.

“It’s okay. There’s a lot going on, a lot on your mind.” They were lying on their sides, bodies interlocked. He rubbed her hip and was sure she was crying, but didn’t say anything.

What could he say that he hadn’t already said before a hundred times. Hank didn’t know Liz’s mother, Felicia, as she was before chemo. He hadn’t known Liz then, either; they might as well have lived on separate planets. He didn’t know what—or who—got her through the last time. She was in college

then, going home every weekend to visit a person that she knew was her mother, but looked less and less like her. The phrases “a horrible time” or “worst senior year ever” never do anything to adequately describe the day by day of a past event. The past has passed and memories are only vivid to the person remembering. There’s no way to connect people to your head to make them feel, to make them understand.

“I talked with the doctor,” she said in the darkness, continuing a conversation from another night. Talking about that was better than talking about her mom.

“What did he say?”

“The same as you. He offered me something else, but I don’t want to take it. I don’t trust him or any doctor anymore. It’s my decision. All they do is give you pills and hope the problem will go away, ignoring you while your body rots with some disease they didn’t bother to diagnose, often a side effect of what pill they gave you. Then they send you a bill.”

“Diz, I think you should think this through. With all that’s going on, you need to be clear headed.”

“They don’t clear my head, not in the way you’re thinking. They wipe it clean, like a slate. I’m not putting that stuff in my body, not anymore.”

“Okay.” What could he say. They had talked about it before. Hank was tired and he wanted to sleep; she hadn’t been sleeping well lately. “Goodnight Diz,” he said. “Love you,” and he closed his eyes. She didn’t say anything.

Moving Further Back

Rewind, play again.

Moving on, further back, just a day because no one wants to be too far behind; who knows what you'll miss. Like everyone, Hank will look back, searching for clues and hints for that pin-point moment when everything fell apart. But it didn't happen that way. I can tell you some clues.

Witness this: five days before Saint Patrick's Day.

The scene: Liz just told Hank she had stopped taking her medications.

Action:

"When?" he asked, stopping in the middle of the crosswalk. They were walking back from Sunday brunch.

"I don't know. Three weeks ago, I think." It had been longer than that. She knew the exact date, the day she found out her mother's cancer returned.

"Diz, I don't think it's a good idea."

"Why, afraid to see the real me?" She continued walking and pulled Hank out of the street. She felt good, the best in years. Maybe it was the euphoria of being off dependency, maybe it was just because she was off the medications completely. "Are you afraid to see the crazy me?"

"What are you talking about?" Hank has never known a non-medicated Liz. It had started out small. The doctor gave her a little something to help her deal with her father's death. Situational Depression, he called it. She was on it for a few months and then went off, but the feeling never went away. So the

doctor, like any good doctor, referred her to a psychiatrist, who gave her a prescription.

“Those drugs, all of them. They mess with the body’s natural chemistry which makes us perfect. Maybe I’m supposed to be neurotic and crazy and depressed. Maybe that’s who I am, and this construction of happiness from some pill is really the farce.”

“I don’t think so. You always described yourself as miserable before the Exuberin.”

“Well, I thought that too. But I realize I was happiest when I was the most depressed, when I felt with the entire range of my natural emotion. With the Exuberin, I felt walled behind plexiglass.”

“At least talk to your doctor. It can’t be good, going off suddenly.”

“It’s not, but the withdrawal period has passed. It was short.” She said it was short to give him the idea it only lasted a few days. But even then, she was feeling the withdrawal from the drug: head aches and dizziness. But the high of being off Exuberin was so much better than a little dizziness every now and then. “Besides, I know what he’s going to say.”

“Maybe he’s right.”

“He’s not. None of them are. No more pills for Lizzy! No more Exuberin, no more ortho, not even aspirin.”

“Wait, you stopped taking birth control with out telling me.” This was the way for Hank, always being taken by surprise. You’d think he’d have gotten used

to it or that he would have started asking questions sooner or have been more suspicious. He didn't. We've all got character flaws.

“Do I have to?”

“Yeah, what if you get pregnant?”

“Relax, I've been taking that crap for so long, it'll be months before I get a regular period again. Besides, I'm not worried about pregnancy, we don't need drugs to prevent it. I just don't want to end up like Mom.” Liz had read the reports, the ongoing studies about the uncertainty of long term hormone treatment and the statistics. If cancer was a time-bomb, she was spinning the clock faster just by playing with it.

“You won't.”

“How can you know?”

“Things are better. There's better treatment, earlier detection. It gets better everyday. Your mother won't have to go through what she went through years ago, you won't either.” Hank truly believed in the advancement of medicine. But he didn't know that when the new stuff didn't work, the doctors always went back to the tried and true methods: poison.

“You still can't know that. What if mine's different?”

“Then we'll go through it together. We'll deal with it.”

“But you won't be the one with the cancer, you'll be off painting somewhere with no concern, just stopping in every once in a while to visit your muse to make sure you can still paint.”

“Is that what this is about? Last night, the art show?” He was angry, she could see it in his face. “Look, you can go to the hospital any time you want to visit your mother. I shouldn’t always need to go in for you while you wait outside on some bench for me to see if she feels healthy enough to come out.” That wasn’t true and he knew it. She’s been terrified of hospitals ever since her father died in one. This cut too close to the bone. She stopped, turned around and walked the other direction.

“Diz, I’m sorry.” Hank caught up to her, putting his arm around her. She stiffened. “Why didn’t you tell me this earlier.”

“You were so busy with the show. I didn’t want to bother you with it.”

“You are more important than any painting I do, more important than all my paintings, past present and future. You can rely on me.” They stopped walking and she let him kiss her.

CHAPTER 2

STEP 2

On Sunday morning, I wake up feeling awful. It's not a hangover; I'm thinking of Diz. It's ten something and we'd normally be getting ready for brunch. Four days—and I'm counting Tuesday. I decide to call her.

No answer.

I want to talk, I want to change her mind, to unsettle it from her decision. I want to see how she's doing and find out what she's doing. I wait an hour or so—hell, I wait exactly an hour. Nothing. But, her phone is not off, so it's a good sign that she might want to speak to me, that:

1. She can't get to the phone right now.

--Her cell phone? Right.

2. She's in the shower.

--For the past hour? Sure.

3. She's out, eating brunch.

--So, she has an appetite and you don't? Hmm.

4. She's doing something with a friend.

--Still, she's not with you.

5. She can't hear her phone.

--Because she's always been one to get up and go on Sunday mornings.

Fuck you.

--Hey, just trying to be realistic here, pal. You've still got options.

I need to talk to someone. I don't talk, I'm going to erupt—a Vesuvius of hurt. I call home, hoping my mother doesn't answer the phone.

She doesn't.

“Hi Dad,” I say.

“Hank! It's good to hear from you.”

“Where's Mom?”

“She's doing something.” He pauses and it sounds like he's taken the phone from his ear for a second before he comes back. “Do you want me to get her?”

“No,” I say. “That's alright. I kind of wanted to talk to you.”

“Oh,” he says. I can tell he's checking his watch. I never call this early, and they know not to call me before noon. “What's wrong?” I'm also sure he can hear it in my voice. It only takes a few words—if anyone understands heartache, it's him.

“Liz,” It's hard for me to say it. I haven't actually said the words to anyone yet. They catch in my throat like I'm trying to swallow thistles. “Liz and I broke up.” There, it's out.

I hear his sigh. “Hank, I'm so sorry.” He pauses, empathizing. Then he asks the question, “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” I tell him. I really don’t, I tell myself.

“When?”

“Thursday, just out of the blue, she breaks up with me.”

“I guess it happens sometimes,” he says. “Sometimes, we lose the one we love for unclear reasons.” There’s silence, the comforting kind of silence that really says, “I’m here, feeling your pain with you.” It’s why I’m glad to talk with Dad. Mom would be asking questions, as if she can pinpoint what went wrong and tell me how to fix it. Dad just accepts the news as fact, intractable. I know he’s thinking about the death of his father. We sit at the opposite ends of our static lines, measuring our losses, knowing that distance and time don’t lessen the pain one bit.

We both feel we are at fault, responsible for losing that person. Somehow, I’m responsible but all I know is it’s something I did or something I didn’t do—not very specific, is it. With Dad, he feels he should have been there, at the operating table. Our losses are different, perhaps it’s not right for me to compare the two, but pain is pain—it doesn’t matter how you got hurt, it just hurts.

Finally, after a few minutes, he asks me about painting. I tell him that’s going well, but I haven’t been able to paint since, to really do anything. He tells me it’s understandable. “You shouldn’t give up on everything, just because of this, Hank. It’ll get better.”

“I know,” I say. “I’ll get back to the studio soon.”

“Good.”

“How’s work,” I ask.

“It’s okay. It’s just different from when you were a kid. These parents come in and demand that their kid be tested for everything, for me to prescribe anything to make their child something more than normal.”

“Yeah,” I say. I’ve heard this before and I know where he’s going with it.

“These parents think because they have the internet they can diagnose their kids and just come to me to verify it. They want Ritalin or Aderal and most of the time I tell them no. I tell them that their kid seems hyperactive because he doesn’t have free time of his own, everything is structured from the time he gets up, to after school activities through bedtime. But they don’t listen, they hardly let me talk to the kids and answer for them. I don’t think I’m cut out for this anymore.” Here it comes. “I think I should have gone into general practice, adults only.” He’s been saying that ever since grandpa died.

“It’s not going to be any different with adults, except that they’ll want more. They’ll want Paxil and Viagra. Plus, you’ll have to look at people’s bumps and moles all day.” He laughs, good. “Dad, you are a great pediatrician. Look at me, I turned out fine.” Except that there’s something about me Diz did not want.

“Thanks,” he says. “But still.” And I know what he wants. He wants to have known enough to operate on his father, to have saved him during the bypass. My father became a pediatrician because he knew he wouldn’t trust anyone else for his children. He never thought he’d have only one child or that his parents would get old.

My whole body from chest to stomach has been aching and I wonder if it’s because I haven’t eaten or if it’s something more serious. In the mirror today, I

noticed my navel looked like a gaping hole in my body. I want to ask him if it's possible for the body to create its own black hole.

Instead, I ask him about the kids at the shelter, to change the subject. He volunteers at the free clinic a few hours a week, vaccinating, treating scrapes and runny noses. It's a relief to change the subject and I hear it in his voice too.

We end our conversation. I know Mom will call later, wanting to comfort her baby, to ask endless questions. It's inevitable. Dad has changed since Grandpa died. He's living in "if only," where if only he'd done this or done that his father would still be here. I can't blame him. I'd hate to lose one of my parents and I'd feel guilty for not being able to do enough. We can never do enough.

I want out of the apartment. There are too many things in here that remind me of her: the pictures of us, gifts from her, the things she uses, the sofa where we sit together. I put on a clean shirt, even though I haven't showered, and am reminded again: her clothes, in my closet and the drawers I cleared for her. She's everywhere. I want to clear it all out, to rid my apartment of all things Diz. I resolve to go to the studio and if I don't feel like painting, I'll organize, clean or something. I just can't be here right now.

On my walk to the studio, I call her. No answer again. I don't leave a message and haven't all day. There's a deli close on the way to the studio and I know I should eat something, but the thought of food closes my throat. I stop in

anyway and buy a bottle of drinkable yogurt. It's nasty, but my body needs some fuel even if the spirit isn't willing. I can drink only half of it.

Miriam is at the studio, sketching designs for another sculpture. We say hello.

"How was the party," she asks.

"Okay, I guess. I didn't really want to be there."

"I'm sure, but it's good you got out and did something."

"Yeah. Did you see her?"

"Uh-huh."

"How is she?"

"All right."

"I've tried to call her."

"Hank, that's not a good idea."

"Why not? We were together for over four years, talking or seeing each other everyday. I can't just stop."

"Well, you're going to have to." Practical Miraim, with the good advice no one wants to take.

"But I want her in my life,"

"She has a say in this too."

"Mir, she won't tell me anything. How am I supposed to know what to do?"

"She hasn't talked to you since Tuesday, right?"

“Not at all.” I don’t need a reminder. I’m aware of the my phone’s continual silence.

“She hasn’t returned a phone call, sent an email or communicated in any other fashion?”

“No.” I don’t like where this line of questioning is going.

“Then she’s telling you something: she’s not ready to talk.”

Great. “What am I supposed to do, just wait?”

“That sounds like a good idea. If you push her, you’ll just be confirming that what she did was the right thing.”

“But I can’t accept that.”

“You don’t have a choice.” Isn’t that the way it always is?

I leave Mir to go to my studio space and close the door. I feel like I’m going to turn inside out from the internal pressure in my chest and head. I sit at my table, thinking about everything and anything from our relationship, trying to determine where it went wrong, what I did. I am lost in my own wallowing world of self-pity, doubt, and confusion.

At some point, I decide to leave, to take a long walk, like Eugene suggested. I end up walking for two hours in the same ten block area before going home. It’s nine and I go to bed early.

The next day, work is not smooth. I hate my job anyway: Captain of the cube-farm, Admiral of Admins—that’s me. There’s a pile of backed up work,

forms that need printing, sent or signed, thousands of phone and email messages. No one covered for me. It's all boring crap anyway. I can do it in my sleep.

At two o'clock, she sends me an instant message asking if I'm going to be out of my apartment tonight. The correspondence goes like this:

Diz: Hi

Hank: Hi

Diz: Going to the studio tonight?

Hank: I guess, why?

Diz: Good. I'm bringing some of your stuff to your apartment.

Hank: Can't I be there?

Diz: No.

Hank: Why not?

Diz: I don't think it's a good idea.

Hank: But I want to see you.

Diz: I know.

Hank: And if I am there?

Diz: I won't come. I'll leave and drop it off at the studio. I'll have you bring my things to the studio so I can pick them up later. That'll be the end of it.

Hank: It?

Diz: You know what I mean. I'll be there at 8. Don't try it.

DIZ HAS SIGNED OFF .

I don't get anything done for the rest of the day and sit in the studio until nine-thirty without painting. At home, I turn on the light and see a stack of boxes and a note saying she'll be back tomorrow. I don't open the boxes, I know what's in them: duplicates. They're things I use—used—at both places: toothbrush and bathroom stuff. There are clothes, books and cds. They are like the small bomblets in a clusterbomb, unexploded and waiting for something to trigger them—like the ones in Afghanistan that Chuck mentioned.

The next day, I email Chuck and ask if he'll be at O'Doyles tonight. "You bet," he writes back. "Everynight!" I tell him I'll see him there and that Diz dumped me.

O'Doyles is one of the oldest Irish bars in Blophton, at least one that isn't a tourist trap. Chuck is there. He's always there.

"Hey Hank, What up!"

"Hey Chuck."

"I didn't expect you out. It's good you stopped by."

I shrug. "I had to. She's coming over to bring some of my shit and doesn't want me to be there. Apparently, she's trying to drag it out as long as possible by taking several days." Maybe she just can't bear to part with these pieces of me.

"Locked out of your own home. That sucks." I don't have to tell him anything, he's that type of friend.

"Yeah."

“Man. Women,” he says and shakes his head. We sip our beer.

“I didn’t know she could be so cruel,” I say.

“I did,” he says and shocks me.

“Dude,” he continues. “She had you wrapped around her finger the minute she crawled into your pants. Now she’s gone, you’re lost.”

Chuck’s my best friend. He’s a good guy under the layers of machismo. He’s blunt and I like that, but he’s always wrong. I give him the look.

“Okay, so what have you been doing the past few days. Anything?”

“I went to a party.”

“Bullshit. You were dragged to a party and you didn’t stay.”

“I’ve been painting too.”

“Liar. You look like shit. Have you even been eating?”

I haven’t. I know I should, but I don’t feel like it.

“You’ve go to eat,” he says. “Something, anything. It doesn’t matter what or how much. You’ll feel better when you do.”

I feel stupid. “There were probably warning signs it wouldn’t work out. I was just too blind to see them.”

“Such as?”

“Well, even in the beginning she was weird. After we slept together, she said things felt awkward, because we barely knew each other.”

“So what, no big deal. You can’t review your entire relationship for clues, you’re just torturing yourself.”

“Yeah, but what if it was a sign. She hadn’t been with anyone since her Dad died, so, that was, like two years.”

“Poor girl.”

I look back. “How could I not have seen this coming.”

“No one sees it coming, except for the one doing the breaking up. Who knows when she decided to break up with you—it’s always a surprise. But we look back and see it. Hindsight. I’d prefer to call it heinie-sight, because that’s all I want to see is her heinie, walking away.”

Chuck’s longest relationship was two and a half months. Back before he joined the army and before Diz, he and I were always out. He’d point out a lady and convince me to talk to her, saying she’d been giving me the eye all night. Or he’d introduce me to someone saying we were perfect for each other. I stopped believing in Chuck after I met Diz (without his help, thank you very much). I smile thinking about that, how he doesn’t know what he’s talking about.

“Hey, a smile. That’s good.”

I stop smiling. “Do you think there might be someone else?”

“I don’t know, do you?” he says.

“How could there be? We spent so much time together.” When we weren’t working, I’d be in one of three places: my apartment, with her, her apartment with that damn dog—Sir Stinksalot—or at the studio. I picture her, how she’d be “out with coworkers” on the nights I’m painting or the possibility of her running into someone while walking Stinky. “Aw shit, maybe there was. Maybe we spent too much time together and I drove her away.” What’s too much

time, what's too little? My hand goes to my stomach and I feel that indentation—it feels bigger than normal. But when was the last time I truly studied my belly button? I can't remember.

“That would explain it.”

“But no, she would have told me. We talked. We were open about that stuff. If there were problems, we talked them out. We were close.”

“Not close enough.”

I level him again. “Thanks for the reassurance, dick.”

“Just being honest.” He swigs a beer. “It's my policy.” Chuck's new policy, one he won't shut up about since he was in Afghanistan. “Look, I know this is hard, but you've got to move on. You've got to get over her because she's already over you.”

“You think?”

“Isn't it obvious? She won't talk to you, won't see you, and doesn't want anything to do with you. She's done with you, face it.”

“I can't.”

“You'll get over her,” he says and I shake my head no. “You will. And you'll look back at all this and realize that her breaking up with you is the best thing to happen to you.”

I give a weak smile.

“Face it, she set you free. We're free men again. The team is back! And now we need to get you laid!”

I can't bear the thought. I can't think of other women. When I think of kissing, I see her lips. I think of sex and I see her body, our bodies. I want to die in my beer. My eyes water.

No one wants to see a grown man cry. It's one of the saddest things. Chuck would say he's never seen a *man* cry. But what did I say about Chuck?

I tell Chuck I'm leaving and he tells me to take care. I decide to walk home. Eugene was right about walking. I pass darkened parks and store windows, closed for the night. I pass Covery Street and Anderson playground there before turning onto my street. My apartment lights are off, which means she's gone and I can safely enter my apartment again.

I don't want to go home yet. I feel hungry for the first time and I go to the Occidental Asian for Chinese. I think I can eat Chinese. It won't remind me of her or the meals we had. She hates Chinese.

The guy that's always there is at the counter. He says hi and asks if I want the usual: General Tso's. I do. I usually eat from the Asian on nights when I'm painting and won't see Diz, on those nights she could have been cheating on me. But I know she didn't. I hope she didn't.

I carry my Chinese home to eat it there. In the apartment, there's a box stacked on the other boxes: another bomb. I avoid it.

I can only eat a few bites of food before my mouth denies me the right to swallow. I open the fortune cookie: "You are lucky in life and in love." I'll put it in the jar with the rest of my fortunes.

For the next two weeks, this is my routine. The first week, she took her time bringing stuff back to me: a box here, a box there. The next week, she removes her things. We're dividing and separating, and there are rules. She doesn't want me in the apartment when she comes by and I'm not allowed to go to her apartment. I follow the rules because if I'm obedient, maybe, just maybe—I don't know, it's stupid to think that she might want me back. I keep hoping anyway.

In my bedroom, I know the drawers to my dresser are empty. They're the ones she used. I cleared them out for her years ago, and now they've returned to their natural state, empty. Only pictures of us remain. I want to burn them. I want to fumigate my apartment of every trace of her. I'd do my memory too.

There are intangible things: places we visited, food items, favorite things. They must be extricated and divided. There are mutual friends caught in awkward places and there are the things we had before each other that we shared. We opened our lives like houses and now are asking each other to leave. I want to lock the doors, to keep every bit of her in, but she's squeezing out through any crack she can find. I can't even walk down a street with out thinking of her.

A relationship needs a will, to sever things off cleanly. Ours would read as follows:

The Last Will and Testament of Henry and Elizabeth

I, being of unsound mind and body do prepare this last will and testament in case of irreparable and unexpected demise. I bequeath the following:

To Henry, you shall receive: The Public Garden on Mondays, Wednesdays and every even-week Fridays for lunches; Sommer's Independent Movie

Theater; Cannedbeer Square; St. Marvin's Park and everything South; the Circle Dance.

To Elizabeth, you shall receive: The Public Garden on Tuesdays, Thursdays and every odd-week Fridays for lunches; Kenwould Movie Complex; Blarvard Square; New Years Eve.

My passing hereby nullifies any filial or familial connections and obligations to each other's family and family members. All existing mutual friendships shall exist independently of one another without discussion of the other party.



Further Back, Still

Are we getting closer now? Closer to that one moment that sent the ripples, that roughened the seas of Hank and Liz? If that's all you're looking for, that one fight, that one moment of tension that let Liz know things weren't going to work out, then too bad. You won't find it. Catastrophes aren't always isolated events and that myth about the butterflies flapping their wings creating a storm? Well, it might as well be true.

Flap to the art show: March 11.

It was the biggest exhibition of Hank's career. He received a write up in *Blopton Journal* and that was big in itself. Sure, it was the second to last page in the arts section, but the *Journal* had a circulation out into the suburbs and some

neighboring states. So this was huge when compared to those independent free mags with a circulation of three blocks of glances.

The gallery show ran from one to five. People began to show up by one-thirty. By closing, Hank had sold more than half of the thirty paintings on display, with a few of the larger ones costing five thousand dollars. He was stunned. A lot of the buyers were local restaurants and boutique owners, others were private individuals, shelling out a few hundred bucks for a smaller canvas. He even sold most of his free style paintings that he did to warm up, which sold for under a hundred. He wasn't going to display those paintings, but George insisted, saying they were lovely *avant garde* pieces, plus: "people like good cheap art," he said. "What else are you going to do with them?"

Liz, for the most part, enjoyed the show and watching Hank as he received attention. She stuck around for an interview by the local free press. The interviewer asked a lot of the typical questions: how did he get started, what were his influences, etc. He gave the usual response: he'd been interested in painting since he was a kid and always wanted to make it his line of work. His influences ranged from Turner, Van Gogh and other surrealists, El Greco and neo-classicist such as John Currin. "My biggest inspiration is this lady," he said, gesturing to Liz. "If there was a muse for painting, she'd be it, the 10th Muse."

This answer bothered Liz. She didn't like being responsible for anything other people did, whether it was good or bad. Can you blame her? Perhaps she had seen too many award shows where celebrities dedicated performance to people she's never heard of. Can't anyone do anything for themselves?

So, it bothered her for a long time, until she was able to ask him about it.

“Why did you say that, the whole Muse thing?”

“Because you are.” He kissed her forehead. “Every painting I do, I paint as if I’m painting it for you.”

“You shouldn’t do that.” She was thinking of the painting that brought them together which hung in her apartment. It wasn’t the painting that mattered, it was the memory that she associated with it: the night they met. Behind that painting was Hank in his pure form, trying to make something beautiful, trying to impress an unknown audience. So, when she told him he shouldn’t paint everything for her, she really was scared for him: If you lose me, then you’ll lose your art.

Hank was astute enough to pick up on their private language. That’s what most good couples do, mind reading.

“Diz, my work has really taken off since I met you, it’s a good thing. Don’t worry.”

“But if I’m gone, what will you paint for?”

“Your memory, your honor.” But we can see that perhaps he didn’t really mean these words. Or that he was thinking of a different type of loss. To be fair, so was Liz.

“Still.” She was about to say something, but was interrupted.

The person who interrupted their conversation was none other than *the* Adolph Apoul. Adolph Apoul rented a gallery in the downtown shopping district

and painted for a living. Repeat: he painted *for a living*. His paintings were in every posh restaurant, upscale salon and contemporary museum in the city.

Maybe once in your life, or more if you're lucky, you'll met the person who is doing what you want to be doing. It's like they have your life and you want to take it from them. Hank felt this way about Adolph Apoul.

"Henry," Adolph Apoul said. "Wonderful show, you've got some great work here."

"Adolph Apoul?" Hank said. They had met at one of Adolph Apoul's shows years ago, when Hank had just moved into the studio. But Hank hadn't expected Adolph to show up, let alone remember his name. "What are you doing here? Thanks for coming."

"Well, I have to check out the competition. Normally, I want to break any painter's brushes who puts on a semi-decent show, but I don't think I can do that to you. This," he gestured around the room. "Is truly good. In a few years, looks like you'll be taking over my territory." Of course, this was why he came and why he knew Hank's name. Adolph Apoul knew he had to see what this Henry guy could do, what type of crowd he could draw. He didn't remember meeting Hank all those years ago. He knew he had to compliment Hank, but Adolph Apoul could still relax, just a little.

"Um, thanks." The thanks was for the complement, the um was for the back handed delivery of "in a few years" that was used to serve the compliment.

"No, I mean it. I'm about done with the Blopton scene. Time to move back to Europe. That leaves a big space to fill. A *very* big space. You might be

able to do it.” Any other artist would have said “shoes” instead of space, but Adolph Apou’s ego was bigger than his feet.

When Adolph left, Liz was by the refreshments, drinking some wine, talking on her phone.

“Who was that?”

“My sister, she wanted to know if I was going to visit Mom today.”

“Today?” It was three-thirty, midway through the show and it was an hour train ride to the hospital, visiting hours were over at eight.

“Yes. She was there and Mom was asking for me. Let’s go. Come on.”

“Diz, I can’t leave.”

“Come on, no one will miss you. No one will know you’re gone. Just say family emergency, they’ll understand.”

She picked the fight:

“Why are you doing this, you know I can’t leave,” Hank said.

“I thought I was your muse.”

“You are.”

“Then do what I say.”

“Just because you inspire me doesn’t mean you can order me around. You know I’ve got to sell these paintings.”

“Well, you know I need you to help see my mom.”

“I’m sorry, I can go tomorrow or maybe after the show.”

“It’ll be too late after the show. Fine. I’ll go by myself.” She left the show. She won’t really go to the hospital because she can’t do that by herself.

He won't see her until the next day, when she tells him about her medications. Her sister hadn't called to tell her to visit her mother, just for a progress report. Let's flutter on.

CHAPTER 3

STEP 3

I can't stop thinking of the lost things. I don't mean the material things she's been removing from my apartment for the past five days, I'm talking about Potential, Possibilities, Things that could have been. That's all gone and any future we could have had is gone. I'm left with that ghost.

It's Saturday, sixteen days since she's broken up with me. Sixteen days and no phone calls, no sweet voice of Diz, sixteen days and only terse IMs. She hasn't responded to my emails, not even to the one I wrote last Wednesday, the only productive thing I've done at my cube. It's floating out there in cyberspace like Voyager.

Work has been shitty. If my job didn't require all the skill and technical savvy of a trained fax monkey, I'd be fired. I thought I was doing the bare minimum before. Shit.

I haven't picked up a brush or touched a canvas yet. Every time I think I've got something, I lose my desire and I think of her. I think about what went wrong and what could have been better. I think of her family—another thing that's lost.

There's this tattoo shop, Jimmy's Ink Joint, and it's the premier place in Blopton for original artwork. Jimmy does all his own flash and posts it on his wall. When someone picks a piece, he takes it off the wall and retires it. No two people will ever have the same tattoo from Jimmy.

Loving Diz was like getting a tattoo from Jimmy. Not that I have a tattoo. Everything we did was for us and us only. No one else used the pet names we had for each other, we had our rituals and our places. I dread the thought of someone taking her to Jacque's Bistro for month-versaries. I shudder at someone calling her Diz. No one will ever call me what she did.

I'm brooding, thinking too much, so I call Chuck and get his voicemail. I leave a message asking him if he wants to meet me at O'Doyles then scan my apartment: what a dump. I start picking up the clothes I've been throwing on the floor. I gather all my dirty glasses, the empty beer bottles on the tables. I vacuum, change the sheets. I haven't changed them since the last time we slept together.

There are long strands of hair everywhere. It's stuck to my pillows, in my drains. There is no escape from her. She may take everything she's ever owned from this apartment, but I'll still have all these little pieces of her. I could extract her DNA, make a Diz clone, one that won't leave me. Instead, I throw it all in the trash. Even a perfect clone wouldn't be the same.

Just as I'm getting ready to move the boxes Diz left me—well, thinking about getting ready to prepare myself to move them—Chuck calls. Saved. He's already at O'Doyles. He wants me to join him for a drink. I hear a toilet flush in the background. Reception is horrendous in the bar and the only place to get a signal is in the bathroom. This makes O'Doyles a good place to go to avoid people contacting you, or an awful place when trying to gather a group.

I walk the three blocks to the bar and find Chuck sitting at his usual table. He starts telling me a story about being in the bathroom. “So, I’m trying to listen to your message and there’s some dude in the stall wrestling with the tissue paper seat cover. I ask him, ‘hey man, having trouble getting your tampon unwrapped?’” He stops what he’s doing and sits down. There’s nothing like calling someone out with their pants down.” He’s smiling proudly, a man who loves confrontation.

“I guess,” I say.

He sets down his beer. “Oh, come on, I know you’re broken hearted and all, but all of this moping around shit has got to stop. We need you to come back to the living.”

I need Diz. “I’ll settle for a beer, right now.”

“What you need is a twelve step program,” Chuck says.

“I don’t think they exist for this sort of thing.”

“Yeah, probably not. But I bet some jerk made some sort of list on the internet.”

I smile, only a little. I’ve already looked. There are 333,000,000 matches in Google for “How to get over a relationship” and they’re all useless. No one has gone all the way to create twelve steps and the most I saw was someone listing eight steps. It was all dumb advice.

--Don’t talk to him. Like I’ve got to worry about that.

--Remember your time with that person fondly. Isn’t that part of the problem?

--*Move on.* If it were only that easy.

--*Get a pet.* Yeah, so I be a disappointment to Fido. Probably will forget to feed it.

--*Pray.* Everyday. I think God's stopped listening.

"Stick with me," Chuck says. "We'll get you onto the road to recovery."

"I don't think I'll ever recover." I feel down to my navel. It's definitely bigger, if that's even possible.

"Well, that's the first step."

"What is?"

"Feeling ass-sorry for yourself."

"I got that covered pretty well. What's the next step genius, 'stop feeling sorry for yourself?'"

"No, that's later. The next step is." He sips his beer. "The next step is to do what you're doing right now: go out."

"And then the next?"

"All in due time, Grasshopper, advanced knowledge of the twelve steps will only hinder your progress on the path—one must not think of the destination when one has yet to complete the journey."

"Thanks, Lao-sy Tsu. You just don't know the next step, with all your bullshitting."

Chuck laughs and pulls out a pen. "Hand me that napkin," and he starts writing. He always keeps a pen with him. "You never know what prospects you'll find," he always says.

He scribbles and I go to the bar for another round for each of us. He's done when I get back, folding the napkin and placing it in his pocket.

I hand him a beer. "Here you are, Master."

"Thank you, young Padewan. We will now go to you next and final lesson of the day. The third step is to reconnect with old friends, such as you are doing now. Buy them many drinks as apology for your lassitude towards friendship while being entangled in a relationship."

"Lassitude?"

"What, I don't have a vocabulary?"

"Fine, then what?"

"Practice these steps. When you are ready, I will tell you the next."

We then talk about meaningless shit: sports, work, not working. A girl walks by for the third time. She was here last week too. I don't think I've hung out with Chuck this much in years and it's good.

"Ask her if she's single," he nods towards the girl.

"I can't."

"Yes you can. Hit on her and you'll feel better."

"She's not even looking at me."

"Man, she's walked by three times."

"We're sitting in the direct route between the bar and the bathroom, she doesn't have a choice."

"Fine, be a pussy."

I can't stop thinking of Diz, and Chuck knows it. "Fuck man," he says. "You're so busy thinking about the good times and hoping to get them back that you're ignoring how she's treating you now. It's not fair to you, not returning phone calls."

"I'm sure she has her reasons."

"Yeah, like being a selfish bitch."

"Hey," I say. No one has the right to call her that yet, not when she can still fix things.

"Sorry, that's how I feel."

We talk a little more, about some of the girls Chuck's been seeing. The bar closes and I go home.

At home, I pull out a sheet from my large sketch book and tack it to the wall. In marker, I write down the first step "1) Feel sorry for yourself." I write down the other two. I think I can do this.

Sunday morning, I decide to go to the coffee shop and read the paper. I usually only read the Life section and the comics, but I'm trying to kill time so I read every damn page, including the business section. My apartment is clean and those boxes are the only things left to touch. Not yet. I manage to sit for an hour before my butt loses patience.

I walk downtown and watch people shopping, their Sunday worship. There are women everywhere, and couples. I hate it. I want to point at each of

them and shout “You only think you’re happy,” like some street preacher. I don’t because they probably are happy.

Then again, I thought Diz and I were happy. I guess I’m wrong. I’ve replayed so many events in the Zapruder film in my head but can’t find where it went wrong.

I just wish Diz would call me. So we could what, talk? It’s been over two weeks, aren’t we supposed to be talking by now? Shouldn’t we be sorting things out? Not if she’s following her own rules—remember internet rule one, don’t talk. She’s got that down pretty good.

I feel like I did when I first moved to Blophoton, years ago, fresh out of college. I expected every corner to reveal someone I knew—only now, I expect to see her. I think I see her everywhere. If someone stands too close to me, I first think of her. But it never is, and I’ve caught myself several times reaching out to put my arm around some stranger. It’s not right.

Perhaps if I stop turning to look, she’ll be there. But I understand Orpheus, how easy it is to look and forget that you’re not supposed to be doing that.

Of course, I think I’m just wandering aimlessly around the city, but my feet are taking me to the studio. I stand outside it and just want to go back home. I remember step two and I’ve got to practice it. I’ve mastered step one—I do it my sleep.

In the studio, Cheryl’s taking pictures and shoots me as I walk in.

“You’re a tough one to get a hold of.”

“What?” I look at my phone, it’s off. The battery died. It’s good I keep a charger here. “Damn, it died. Sorry.”

“I just wanted to see how you were doing and to see if you were coming into the studio. I was thinking about our next exhibit.”

“Already? You must be excited about this new project. I don’t know if I’ll have anything for it, you know.”

“Yeah, it was stupid of me to think about it. My project it pretty exciting, but I don’t know when it’ll be ready. I guess I just wanted to call and see how you are. How are you?”

“I’m alright, I’m alive so that’s something.”

“Oh, Hank,” she hugs me. “It’ll get better.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Come with me,” I motion for Cheryl to follow me to my studio. “I need to plug in my phone. How are you?”

“I’m fine,” she says. She tells me how she’s working hard on this new project, but that it’s a secret, so she can’t reveal too many details about it. “What about you, Sir-Mopes-Alot, you doing anything?”

“Well, I’m almost eating full meals.”

“Great!”

“And not getting calls from you know who.”

“Maybe it’s better that way.”

Wrong. You can't just push someone out of your life. "Yeah," I say.
"But I just want to talk. I keep feeling miserable and I normally talk to her about it. So I get the urge to call, but what do I have to talk about? Her."

"That's why she's not calling."

"I just want her back in my life, even if it's just friends."

"Would you take the friendship seriously and not try to get back together?"

"Of course."

"Liar."

"Okay, I wouldn't." I'd scheme for ways to win her back: roses, buckets full of puppies, anything.

"You can't be friends with someone you're in love with—you'll be bringing more to the relationship than the other person. It's not fair to her."

"What about me?"

"Or you."

"Fine, what do I do, just sit around waiting for her to call?"

"You could read while you're waiting."

"Okay." I've been devouring books, Nick Hornsby, Adam Davies, even Jennifer Weiner. The thing about books is that they never tell you what to do to get the person back, normally the person falls ass-backwards into it and real life never works that way. But the upside is that there are so many books about breaking up and getting back together that I'm bound to stumble upon one with the perfect solution. "Then what do I do when I've read all the books, call her?"

“No, you get on with your life, learn to be happy.” She sounds like one of those people from the websites.

“And if I see her somewhere, what do I do?”

“Be nice, if you really want her back, she’ll have to decide. You catch more flies with honey.”

“Chuck says you catch more with bullshit.”

“God, all you need to do is listen to Chuck, then.”

“What?” I say. “I’ve been spending a lot of time with him lately. He’s been pretty helpful, listening and all that.”

“Really? I guess that’s good. It gets you out of your apartment, even if you have to spend time with him.” She’s met Chuck before. He was drunk and hit on her, hard. I’ll even say it was excessively hard. When he’s super-drunk, he’ll continually make those annoying “if you know what I mean” comments after anyone says anything.

For example: Cheryl’s talking about a project: “I think it’s been going well. I’ve been getting a lot of good shots and can’t wait to see how they develop.” Chuck responds: “I know I’d like to take a couple of good shots at you and see how that develops, if you know what I mean!”

Or, Cheryl mentions witnessing a fender bender: “Then, the cab behind the Volvo rear-ended it, all because some ass pulled out in

front of him.” Chuck says: “I know a Volvo I’d like to rear-end, if you know what I mean!”

Even if she’s talking about taking out the trash: “Hank, I took the trash out.” Chuck comes up with: “When your done with those bags, I got a sack for you to handle, if you know what I mean!”

Even I was annoyed with him. So, I still haven’t told Cheryl that he’s not normally like that. It must really mean something for Chuck, to still be interested in her after what she said about the war and the people who fight in it.

As my phone charges, I turn it on.

“Yeah, he can be good to talk to, when he’s more sober, that is,” I say. “He listens sometimes and is always willing to go out no matter what time. He hasn’t to me to cut out the whining, yet. Though, he has told me I need to get laid so I’ll shut up.”

“We all need to get laid.”

“No luck in dating?” I ask.

“Nope. I keep hoping that it’s true and there are really plenty of fish in the sea. But I think the water’s been poisoned by some chemical factory and all that’s left is bottom feeders.”

“Relationships suck.”

“Yeah.” My voicemail pings.

“Two messages?” I’m surprised. Maybe one’s from Diz.

“One’s me,” Cheryl says.

“Well, I’m going to listen to these, been expecting a call from, you know.”

“Yeah. If you don’t mind, I’m going to play with my camera. You’ve got these big windows, maybe something’s happening on the street.”

I nod. What the hell, Diz probably didn’t call.

The first message is Cheryl. She’s taking pictures behind me. The second is Diz. It sounds like a script:

Hi Hank. Sorry about being so out of touch. I think it’s easier for us both—for me, anyway. I wanted let you know I’ve finished bringing your stuff over to your apartment. I didn’t want to leave your key outside your apartment, so I’ve given it to Miriam. I’ve also got all my things. Sorry it’s taken so long to get them out of your hair. There is one more thing, but I wanted to talk to you about it first, to see how you’d take it. Call me.”

I don’t even need the last command.

“Who was that,” Cheryl asks.

“Diz,” I say. “She wants to ask me something.” My heart soars and I lose my breath for a second. Maybe she wants me back.

“Okay,” Cheryl says. Her camera goes off. “Sorry, I just loaded new film and I had to advance it forward.”

I’m still thinking of Diz, of her asking me back and how good that will be. I’ll be different, I’ll change. “Why don’t you just use digital? Save yourself the expense of film?”

“I don’t like it as much. It’s not as physical of a process. I like to develop my own film and see the negatives come out—it’s practically an art in itself.” She prints digitally, scanning the negatives. “Sometimes I crave instant results, but I like waiting.”

My easel is collecting dust. I sort through some sketches looking for something to put on canvas, but I don’t feel like painting. I know this is a test, to see how soon I’ll call her back, to see how much I need her. I have to wait, be patient, not appear too desperate.

I can’t paint. I pretend to sketch something, make notes until Cheryl leaves. When she does, I wait two minutes and lock up the studio. I walk, listening to the voicemail again. She wants me back. She has to.

I stop at the Asian and eat half a plate of Moo Shoo and drink a lot of plum wine. My fortune reads “Something once lost is found” and I hope it’s true.

I leave the Asian and walk. I call Diz, her phone is off. I look at my watch and know she’s gone to bed. My message has to sound like I’m in control. I hang up, practice my speech and call again. Rings, voicemail. “Hi, it’s me, just calling you back. Call me when you can. Bye.” I almost say love you, it’s caught in my throat.

I walk some more and pass the playground, double back and look at it. I’m dumbfounded, stumbling like a stunned cow. I sit down and try to gather my thoughts, but this damn playground reminds me too much of Diz and all I’ve lost.



Back Again

Here's a typical scene: Sunday morning on March fifth, fifteen days before the break up. It's nine-thirty and Hank is up, Liz is still in bed. Cue the action:

“Diz,” he said. “Time to get up.” He was sitting on the bed, rubbing her back. She was face down in the pillows, Lancelot—the dog Liz has had since she was fifteen and a King Arthur nerd—was whining at the foot of the bed, too old to jump up in bed anymore.

Their usual Sunday, and “usual” meaning the idealized version, was that they'd have an early brunch at one of the hot spots in the neighborhood. Today was more unusual than usual. “Dwangrup,” Liz said into the pillow, shrugging his hands off.

“I guess I'll have to get breakfast all by myself then,” Hank said. “Sure will be lonely.”

“Rwrrr,” she said. “Takelance.” Lancelot whined. He had been wanting to go out for the past half hour. Hank hated taking him out.

“I guess I have to.” He got off the bed. “Come on Stinky, looks like it's me and you again. Can't wait to see what you'll leave me today.” Hank always complained that the dog saved the largest dumps for him.

An hour later, Hank would return with Lancelot, two coffees and a sack of bagels du jour from Pain Aujourdhui and the *Sunday Times*. Liz was normally up by then and they'd spend the morning drinking coffee, reading the paper or winding up back in bed.

This Sunday, however, was a week before Hank's premier art show and he had to cut short the coffee and canoodling to go to the studio. "Okay, I've gotta get," he said.

"I thought we were going to the hospital today."

"We are, but you didn't tell me when. I figured I'd get some varnishing in while you wake up."

"Oh," she said and slid her arms around his waist. "Are you sure you don't want to stay with me for a while? I promise it'll be much more fun than varnishing."

"I know, but it'll only take a couple of hours and I've got to get it done today so they'll dry. I need to frame those paintings this week."

"What's it matter? It's not like they're super-nice frames." They weren't, just cheap pine strips painted black.

"I don't want it to look like an amateur show, meaning each painting goes in a frame, no matter how shitty the frame is. I'll be back by two."

Hank returned at three. "George convinced me to sell my warm-ups."

"So you had to varnish and frame those too?"

"No, those will be cheap paintings. I just had to sort through them to figure out which were worth selling."

CHAPTER 4

STEP 4

I'm on a seesaw. I'm back at the playground and I'm sitting on that seesaw, feeling like I've been cherry bombed. I've been coming to the playground a lot and always sit on the seesaw to think and remember what it's like, having the bottom drop out from under me. It's been a day since I called her back, 22 hours. Nothing.

I replay scenes in my head—I'm sure everyone does this—where she's telling me she's decided not to see me for a while. I fantasize about saying the right thing at the right moment. The problem is I still can't get it to work right. I can't say the right thing when reality hits:

Version 1: Sly/Persuasive

Fantasy Diz: I don't think we should see each other for a while.

 Hank: How long is a while?

 Diz: We'll know.

 Hank: Next week?

 Diz: Um, I don't. . .

 Hank: Great, I'll see you next week.

Reality Diz: What’s wrong with you. Don’t you get it? I don’t want to see you. Not for a while. Maybe a long while. Meaning months, not weeks.

Version 2: Romantic

Fantasy Diz: Hank, I don’t think we should be around each other for while.

Hank: But Diz, I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to be away for a long time.

Diz: What do you mean?

Hank: Being away from you, I might forget who you are, what we were. It’d be like being drowned—lungs struggling for air but finding nothing but water. I’d drown if I was away from you for too long.

Diz: I know what you mean

Hank: Really? Does this mean. . .

Reality Diz: Yeah, I feel like I’m drowning now. I still don’t want to see you.

Version 3: Forceful/Authoritative

Fantasy Diz: I don’t think we should see each other for a while.

Hank: Sorry. I can’t let you do that.

Diz: What?

Hank: You heard me.

Diz: Hank, I've never seen this side of you.

Hank: Yeah?

Diz: I don't believe it.

Hank: I know. . .

Reality Diz: You don't really have a choice in this matter.

Hank: Yes I do.

Diz No, you don't. Good-bye Hank.

Actual Version: Pathetic

Diz: Hank, I don't think we should see each other for a while.

It's not good for either of us.

Hank: How long do you think it'll be? (Sobbing)

Diz: I can't say. I'm sorry. I know this hurts, but having me around isn't going to help. And being around you isn't going to help me.

I can never win an argument.

I deserve to be cherry-bombed.

I hate parting, it's harder than the actual breakup. Parting lingers.

Breaking up is a jolt, an earthquake; parting is a long tremor, constant aftershocks.

It's the physical separation, it's the emotional separation. Everything hurts.

It's a weird thought, but parting with someone is similar to the beginning of a relationship, during the early dating phase before the first kiss, when there is a charge in the air whenever skin touches skin: an accidental brush of hands while walking; it's anticipation, excitement, a positive charge. With an ex, it's a negative charge, sucking away happiness, replacing it with doubt. Doubts about how real the whole thing was in the first place creep in to fill the empty space.

We're supposed to have a final meeting, a final discussion of our relationship. We're supposed to have break-up sex. It's supposed to be a weight lifted off our chests. So far, there's none of it. I sit here, crushing beneath the weight. I am robbed of closure, of a fair trial—sentenced to rot. I think about our lasts: Last kiss, last romantic evening, last I love you's, last sex. I can't remember when they were. Everything is blurred and I can't pinpoint any of these in the last weeks of our relationship. This omission is another stone weighing me down, pressing me to death like the Puritans did to witches. Call me Giles Corey. For these crimes, I deserve to have my heart broken.

I think of all the movie premises where the guy gets the girl back, all the sleazy things they do—from stalking her to saving her life and how they work. It's all the fault of the screenwriters. One movie starring John Cusack makes good money, so everyone writes movie-with-John-Cusack clones. And everyone thinks they're telling an original story when it's really just a rehash of their own pathetic lives. If screenwriters could get and keep a girlfriend, we'd have better movies.

If I were a character in a movie, I'd be Jack Nicholson in that Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt vehicle, I'm sure you know the one I'm talking about.

I'm younger than Jack, of course. Also, I'd take a lot longer to say all the good lines—like the lines he stayed up all night to think of in order to have a response for an argument that happened the day before. Take, for example, the one about being a better man, I'd say that just before the credits roll, or maybe during the rolling of the credits. That's a solid ending. It leads a lot to audience conjecture: "What's he mean? Is she going to kiss him? Will he be a better man?" and all those sort of questions.

But this sort of ending doesn't happen. In my version of the movie, we'd sit at that table in that restaurant and time would pass in awkward silence while I mull over the proper word choice of "You make me want to be a better man": "I'm a dog, help me become a man?" no; "I want to be a real boy?" no; "You make me feel like a natural man?" no, etc. Hours would pass. At some point, Helen Hunt would get up and walk over to the writer and say, "Hey, this isn't working. There's nothing going on, nothing's being said."

And the writer would sigh as if he's heard this a hundred times from overpaid actors who think they can make a better movie, then reply, "It has to happen this way. This is what actually happened. It's all true, and truth is art. Everything works out in the end, trust me."

"But we've been sitting for two hours waiting for Hank to say the last line. Nothing's happening!" Helen Hunt would shriek, yet somehow maintain her composure. "The movie ends just when the movie is starting to get interesting, no one is going to know how it ends."

“Ah, but you don’t know anything about real life, now do you?” the writer would say to Helen Hunt. “Real people are always looking for the right thing to say. We never know what’s going to happen. This is just like life. And like life, I can’t write the ending because it hasn’t happened to me yet. How do I know I’m going to get her back if I don’t say the right thing?” And it slips out. The writer is guilty of doing what writers do: writing about themselves. He had been so wrapped up in envisioning this “she” watching the movie, being moved by it (interesting choice of words, move and movie). But she won’t know who wrote it until she sees him standing on the stage at the Academy, giving his acceptance speech using the phrases “This really belongs to Emily” (or whomever she is), “If she had not broken my heart, I would not have been moved to write this script. Thank you Emily” (or whomever), “Through the turmoil of writing, I finally understand. Please come back to me.” And everyone would applaud and stand. Emily (or whomever) would be moved to tears and leave her cave in Utah, where she fled to be away from the heartache, and fly to L.A. to meet him. What a sweet reunion, and that would be the real film. Oh yes, he had it all planned out.

Helen Hunt could see through all of this. “It’s not going to happen,” she’d say and poke a finger at him, with shreds of dream-bubble lying at her feet. “This is all so fake, Holden Caulfield must be spinning in his watery grave.” Helen Hunt can say “watery grave” because she’s well read and knows enough to be convinced that Holden killed himself. Holden didn’t do it at the end of the book, no, but many years after the book ended, when he became tired of all that

migrating, not knowing his own home and drown himself in that stupid pond in Central Park with all those dumb geese.

The writer would be on the verge of tears. “But, but, but,” he’d stammer, unable to find words to rebut Helen Hunt’s claims.

“Look,” she’d level with him. “You’re trying to write a love letter, not a movie. Write the love letter, I’m sure it’ll be something great, maybe even a great book. That’s what writers do when the one they love leaves them. They don’t make a movie. There are too many people involved in movies to make a good love letter, but books, all books, are love letters.” And she’s right, because she’s read *The Frog King*, and the character in the book who said it was a publisher, so it must be right.

With assigation, the writer would bow out of the movie. They’d pass it off to a writer in a healthy relationship to finish things up and resume shooting later in the year. And the writer, he’d go home from that day all inspired, not even noticing the L.A. traffic on the 405 or whatever congested route he took home. He’d have the entire plot for the book planned out, only to forget it all on the way from the car to the typewriter or laptop because he didn’t write it down immediately, and if you don’t write something down immediately, all is lost.

I’m not an actor or screenwriter, so I’m safe from Helen Hunt. Painting doesn’t work that way. Painting isn’t like this, thankfully. You can’t lose a painting because it’s just a picture, and those stay longer than sentences. No, a painting comes to me in one big orgasm of inspiration and I savor it, seeing it clearly every

time I close my eyes. Every brush stroke is just an after image taking form from what's in my head.

In paint, I can't do anything to compare with the magnitude of writing a love story to get Diz back. Painting is just as personal as writing, but doesn't say as much. If my paintings were worth, say two hundred to nine hundred and fifty words, and short of what I'd need to say. I guess I could paint her a thousand paintings: portraits, scenes from our life together, paint her living her dreams and such like that. Didn't Marc Chagall always paint a tribute to his wife in his paintings? I could do something like that, I guess, but I might hurt sales. Is it worth it? Hell yeah. I vow to start painting again.

The phone rings. I think of the fortune cookie: it's going to happen this time. I answer. It's Mom.

"Hi," I say. It's a little late for her to be calling.

"Hi Hank," and we go through the awkward pleasantries. She's calling because she didn't want to disturb me in case I was in the studio. Fat chance of that.

She tells me she ran into Sue Anne Tso's mother today and that she's getting married in July. Sue Anne was my high school sweetheart. I haven't seen her since the last reunion. "Anyway," Mom says, "I gave her your new address and phone number, so expect to receive an invitation."

I thank Mom for letting me know and we say goodnight. There's nothing on TV, not that it's prevented me from watching it before. I resign to go to bed, she's not going to call.

The phone rings again, and maybe I'm wrong.

I am. I say "Hello" and a voice I don't recognize repeats what I said, followed by "Hank?"

"Yes?" Is it too late for telemarketers? No, it's never too late.

"Hi, it's Sue Anne." Then her voice clicks in my head: how could I have not recognized her.

"Wow," I say. "Hi, my Mom had just called and told me about you, congrats."

"Thank you. I was hoping I'd be able to tell you myself, but you know how moms are."

"I do."

"Yeah, well how are you? You're in still in Blophton?"

"Haven't had reason to leave yet. But I'm alright, I guess."

"My mother told me that you just got out of a relationship."

"Yeah, that's the news. It wasn't my decision, though."

"Oh, sorry. How long were you together?"

"Four years," and it was over in four minutes.

"Ouch. It hurts now, but you'll get over it. I remember getting dumped hard by a guy I was certain was the one. We went everywhere together, completed each other's sentences. Then one day, in college, he said we shouldn't be together anymore because we were too far apart. I was devastated. It took some time, but look at me now."

“Yeah, that’s great,” I say. “That guy, who broke your heart, it was me, right?”

“Yes.” I feel guilty. I’ve never stopped feeling guilty. I dumped her for stupid reasons, after I went to school. I thought there’d be so many girls dying to get with me. I didn’t want some high school girl hanging on.

“Was I a good boyfriend?”

“Henry, we were kids.”

“You didn’t answer.”

“No, you broke my heart. But yes, because you were my first love. My memory of you, of us together, is the litmus test for every man since.”

“And this guy?”

“Mark.”

“Yeah. He passed the test?”

“With flying colors. So much, that I’ll never have to test again.”

“That’s great. I’m happy for you.” I really am.

“Thanks. I’ve got your address and I’ll be sending you a card with the date for you to mark your calendar. July twenty-first.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“Take care, Hank.”

Before we say goodbye, Sue Anne asks me if I know a friend of a friend, who recently moved to Blophoton. It’s Eugene. I haven’t talked to him since the party, what, nearly a month ago. Has it been that long?

I feel good having talked to Sue Anne. Who cares if the fortune is wrong, I've got a million of them.

Let's talk about fortune cookies for a moment. No, let's not. Let's talk about the fortunes inside these cookies. I have this to say about them: I believe in them. They're like a guide to me, and I'm not talking about that silly "in bed" antecedent everyone uses, like "Pleasure comes in great quantities (in bed)." Tee hee. It's only funny for so long. "One man's joke is another's tragedy," another cookie advises. How true.

I don't keep every fortune I receive. If I did, I'd have jars full of them around the apartment. Besides, I received a fortune that said, "unclutter your life from trivialities." I hear and obey, O Great Fortune Cookie Writer. Now I keep the important ones tacked to a board near the door of my apartment. Not all fortunes need preserving: "Success is the rack on which you hang your hat" is one of them. What does that mean? "You are gaining popularity and respect as you follow your calling" is one I keep. I like to think it true. I keep them as a reminder of what I'm owed.

The lucky numbers printed on the back or below the fortunes, however, are dumb. Who would try to base their future on a bunch of arbitrary numbers scratched on a strip of paper, let alone bet money on them.

What do fortune cookies have to do with false hope? Everything. After Diz dumped me like a heavy load of bricks (harsh, I know), I thought about seeing a psychic. I almost did. I stood outside Madame Bovary's or whatever her

mystical name was, pondering if she was worth spending the five bucks on. If she was running a special, how good could she be? Then again, maybe she had finally helped all of her regular customers and needed to attract new ones. It's plausible.

But then again, all a psychic will do is tell me what I want to hear. She'll be like "Oooh, I see true love in your future," and I'll say, "you mean in my past. I've been dumped," and she'll say, "no need to state the obvious, kid. I'm talking about new love here." And I'll tell her the only love I'm interested in is the love I had previously, can she get it back? She'll ignore me and proceed to tell me of my new love: Tall and thin, a perfect match in personality. He's attractive and polite, tall dark and handsome. "He?" I'll stammer. "I meant she," she'll correct herself. "She'll be tall dark and handsome?" and she'll say "um, yes" then proceed to tell me that our time is up, but can I come back next week and we can talk about my confusion. It's a racket, I'm certain.

So I don't go into the psychic. Instead I rely on my fortune cookies. The cheapest places have the best fortunes. More "fine dining" Chinese food is where you find the dumb ones. It works in an inverse proportion: the higher the price of food, the lower the quality of fortunes. Of course, fortune cookies are all chance. How do I know I'm getting the fortune meant for me, and not for my dinner partner, or my neighbor even? Karma, I guess. That's always the answers the monks give: karma.

CHAPTER 5

STEP 4, STILL

The next day, I email Eugene:

To: Eugene

From: Henry

Subject: Mutual Friend

Eugene, seems like we have someone in common, an ex girlfriend of mine is a friend of yours from college: Sue Anne Tso, soon to be Mrs. Sue Anne Whozit.

Hank

A half-hour later, I receive his reply:

To: Henry

From: Eugene

Subject: re: Mutual Friend, OMFG!

IM me, Eugielon1@AIM

So I do. Screw work.

Hank: So

Eugene: You know Sue Ann?

Hank: Old high school girlfriend.

Eugene: Really. I dated her best friend in college for a while.

Surprise for me

Hank: Interesting, and then?

Eugene: I found out I was gay.

Surprise for her

Hank: Of course.

Eugene: How are you?

Hank: All right. You?

I'm such a liar.

Eugene: Splendid. You want shocking news?

Hank: Sure.

Eugene: When's your next break? I have to tell you this face to face.

Hank: Whenever. Coffee or lunch?

Eugene: Lunch. You been to the new place on Farlington and Boilstown?

New place? What happened to Copperhead? Before Diz, I'd meet some people from my department at Copperhead every Friday. When the did it change and who said it could? That place was an institution.

Hank: Nope.

Eugene: See you there in twenty.

Will do.

We meet at Meat. It's what the new place is called. They've changed the whole decor to make it more modern. I guess the traditional pub is dying out.

Meat is a carnivorous restaurant, specializing in, well, all sorts of meat. "Wouldn't it be great if this place turned into a gay bar at night?" Eugene says over his plate of prosciutto wrapped turkey breast.

"I thought it did," I say and bite into my chicken wrapped in smoked turkey strips.

“Not yet. I’ll get my people on it.” He raises his eyebrows and I can picture everyone from George’s party showing up on a specific night. Critical mass, like that biking movement.

“So, I’m sure you’re dying to tell me the news, but I still can’t get over the Sue Anne connection.”

“Me neither!” he says. I still can’t believe they went to college together.

“I thought Holyoke was an all women’s school.”

“Oh, it is.” He pauses, “Didn’t anyone tell you about the operation?”

I don’t say anything.

He laughs. “I went to Umass Amherst. The girls from Holyoke can take classes at Umass if they want. That’s how I met her. What, you think I liked dick so much that I had to have one of my own?”

“Something like that.”

“Come on Hank, lighten up or I’ll have to give you another hug.” I put on a fake smile. Not that I have a problem with hugs, or even man-hugs. I wasn’t expecting Eugene to give me a full bear hug the second he spotted me today. I went for the traditional and masculine affirming handshake to one-arm slap on the back. Eugene dodged the outstretched hand and threw both arms around me.

“I was just thinking,” I say. “How many times I’ve been asked if I know so-and-so from some place, like school or when I’m somewhere out of state and I instantly say no. But here we are, able to say ‘yes’ to that stupid question. What are the odds?”

“I don’t know. I’ve stopped asking people if they know someone. It’s got to be, like, one in a thousand. I’m not a statistician.”

“Me neither. Sometimes, when someone asks if I know a person from my college, I want to say ‘are you kidding? There are thousands of people there, just from my class. Of course not.’” This yes, though, is like some crazy ripple effect. When it rains over a pond, the water drops ripple out. The energy from one drop merges with the energy of another. It’s like those drops are break-ups and each one will eventually lead to someone else’s break up. Odd.

“So,” I bring us back to Sue Anne. “Have you met her fiancé, Jim?”

“Yeah, he’s a great guy. Does real estate in the Berkshires, the big houses.”

“That’s great. I’m sure the wedding will be a good time. You’re going, right?”

“Yeah. It’ll be good to know more than a few people there.”

“I agree. So, tell me about this news.”

“My god. I can’t believe no one’s told you yet. Haven’t you seen George?”

“No, he’s in Ohio or someplace like it, trying to overturn the ‘marriage protection’ law so couples can at least keep their health insurance.”

“Well, I’m glad he’s fighting for us.” He takes a sip of water. “Adam and Stephen are splitting up.”

“What?” Didn’t they just get married?” There’s a point where I want to feel sympathy for them. But it means I have to give up some of my own pain and recognize that we all go through this.

“I know. Apparently, things have been rocky for a while and they thought that getting married would solve the problems they were having. Guess not. They had a commitment ceremony five or so years ago, marriage was a way of renewing their commitment.”

“It doesn’t give much hope for the rest of us, you know. Looks like that rule about half of all marriages ending in divorce applies to everyone.”

“Yeah. Who wants to be the first gay couple to divorce. All those people will be ‘told you so,’ and ignore their own statistics. Hypocritical bastards.”

“What went wrong?”

“Don’t know. It’s not like anyone’s cheating. It might have been too much time together, but neither are talking about it a lot. Stephen’s gone up to the cottage and Adam is just moping around the house.”

“I know how that is.”

“Yeah. Sorry to spring the news on you, having your own wounds and all.”

“It’s okay. At least I’m not suffering alone.”

“That’s the spirit,” he says. “You been journaling?”

“A little. Doing the livejournal thing.”

“Great. What’s your handle?” I tell him. “I’ll check you out. It’s good to develop a community, so when you write the depressing stuff someone can chime

in and tell you the cheer up, maybe even buy you a drink.” I’ve registered zero hits on my journal. I don’t know how I feel about people reading something “private.” But at least I can type at work.

“Thanks.”

After work, my phone rings and it’s her. I’m not sure what to say, my heart drops, so does everything I’m holding.

“Did I call at a bad time?” she asks. It’s always a bad time.

“No, no I was just. . .” I don’t finish my sentence.

Surprised? Even though I’ve been expecting and dreading her call? “It’s nothing. How are you?” Stupid question.

“Not so good.”

“Sorry,” I say. Why am I being so sympathetic? Didn’t she break my heart?

“It’s just been a rough month,” she tells me.

“Yeah. Did you want to talk about that?” What about me, what about me?

“I don’t think it’s good to do that. The reason I called is, well, I want to,” she pauses and I fill in the blanks: A) work this out.

B) get back together, for one last time

C) borrow a cup of sugar

D) reconfirm that I still hate you

E) rip your heart out a little more and dance on it

She continues. "I want to return your painting."

E. Shit.

The pyramids collapse, the Great Wall tumbles, Rodin's statues look up confused. If I were as stronger man, the phone would be dust in my hand. But I'm weak. "No, you can't return it. It was a gift."

"I don't feel right having it anymore."

"It's yours."

"Hank, every time I look at it, I think of us. I can't have it around me."

"Then burn it, sell it, whatever you want to do. I can't have it either."

"But it means so much to you."

"I don't care."

"I'm bringing it back, it's what's best for me right now."

"It's not good for me either!" I say, loudly. People look up from their walks. She breathes that long breath of hers that says she's going to do it anyway.

"Look," I say. "I know it's hard on you but I'm hurting too. I haven't slept well, I don't eat. I can't do anything. My life's all fucked up and this is the first conversation we have?"

"There are other things too, Hank. We broke up for a reason." She says 'we' like I had a part in that decision.

"What was it, then?"

"I can't talk about it now. But there are several reasons, and not all had to do with you, alright? I've got to go, but the painting is going back to you. Bye."

She ends the call before I can say anything. Wonderful, our first conversation as an ex-couple.

I don't eat dinner, I go home and sit. My apartment has plenty of gifts from Diz. I want to smash them, return them all to her in a giant garbage bag, get Public Works to haul it over to her in a big truck and send it all through her window with a big conveyer belt. I'll tell her, see, these are my feelings for you too, this is how you treat me, and I'd let the trash pile up around her and bury her deep in all my crushed whatever.

But that'd be cruel. She'd be feeling what I'm feeling. Despite how much she's hurt me, I don't want anyone else to feel this, ever, except Tommy Kroccus, from fourth grade. He could feel this, for kicking me in the balls during recess as a large group of us played freeze tag. I was frozen in mid sidestep, giving him a wide open shot. As horrible as the pain was, I was more embarrassed about crying in front of everyone. It was the first time I'd ever been hit there. Kroccus can drown in a shit storm of misery. But no one else.

For some reason, I decide to go through the boxes Diz left me, the returns. They're scattered around the apartment. Hmm. That's the first time I thought of that: apartment = apart + meant. As in this is what it means to be apart. Or what did she mean by wanting to part? Or what did it mean to be a part of us?

The first box I come to is clothes, ones I've forgotten I own. It's good to have them back, these old ones are like buying new clothes without having to shop. The only thing better would be to find money in the pockets.

I check: nope.

The next box has some socks, underwear and toiletries. Then I remember, I'm missing something, a shirt. She's kept my shirt, the one she liked to sleep in, a long sleeve T from my college, the last of its kind, a dancing Native American in war regalia. I bought it right before the mascot was changed to something more PC. It's holy, worn thin.

So, she can pick and choose what she keeps. That's bull shit. But now I'm too upset to go on, to call her about it. I watch TV instead. There's nothing on, it's Friday and people are out, so there are tons of crappy sci-fi movies and shit on the history channel. Which I watch anyway.

I do the same the next morning and then decide to shower around two. When I come out of the bathroom, I see The List. I've got the first four down. Number four, "Remember the Happy Times," is difficult now. So I'll have to move on to the fifth. I call Chuck and there's no answer. I get online and journal for a while, surf around, look at porn and get bored.

Chuck calls back, saying he's in Jersey. Crap. "What's step five?" I ask.

"Huh? Oh, yeah." It's like he's forgotten, but Atlantic City will do that.

"Step Five: Make New Friends."

How the fuck do I do that?

"How?" I ask.

“There are groups out there, social things, sports teams, and even charities, volunteer work, if you’re into that sort of stuff. The point is to just do something, it’s along the lines of remembering your old friends.”

Good advice. “But I don’t want to do anything.”

“Too bad. Quit whining.”

There’s a lot to whine about. I tell him about the painting and how she wants to return it.

“Man, that’s cold,” he says.

“Yeah. Has she always been this way?”

“Sounds like you’re backing in to Step six: Remember the Bad Times.”

“Really?” I say. I’m ahead of the learning curve.

“Yeah. I shows you’re starting to get out from under her thrall.”

“Thrall?” I say. Who is he trying to be, Homer?

“It’s those spells women put onto men that make them fall hopelessly in love with them, like the, the. . .”

“Sirens.”

“Yeah, then, once they’ve lured you in they kill you and eat you, or just hold you captive for a while and suck out your soul.”

“I’m no Odysseus.”

“Tell me about it. Look, I’ve got to go. I’ll be back on Monday, drinks on me.”

“Okay. Thanks for being there, man.”

“No problem, I’ll bill you at the end of the month.”

I end the call and then go to my sheet to write down Steps Five and Six:

5) Make new friends

6) Remember the bad times

Now what? I call Eugene, he might be up for a drink or two, but he's already got plans but says he'd like to meet for brunch. I guess I'm stuck here for the night.



When Hank and Liz had been dating for a year, Hank decided to give her an anniversary present: the painting that brought them together. She insisted she pay full price for it, though. Eventually she did, writing a check for one dollar and placing it in a frame. Cheryl snapped a picture of it.

The Elusive Meaning Behind The Circle Dance

The pigeons were always Hank's favorite part of lunch. Most people hate them, you know, the whole rats with wings thing. Hank thought of them as doves with urban camouflage. During lunches in the public garden, Hank and Liz would watch the birds, hobbling with their mangled feet. But what truly endeared Hank to the pigeons was The Circle Dance. Male pigeons courting rituals differ very little from those of the human male at a club: guys like flashy and impressive ways to get a girl's attention. They puff themselves up to look bigger. They attempt to dazzle with fancy moves, pursuing her relentlessly. When their efforts

are rejected, they tirelessly move to the next nearest girl. A male pigeon's signature move is the Circle Dance. He'll fix his sight on a female that catches his fancy, follow her (sometimes chase her) until she is looking at him or in his general direction, then he'll turn himself around in one complete circle and continue pursuing her, pausing intermittently to twirl in a circle. The dance consists of one single spin. You'll never catch a pigeon twirling like a top. Nope, it's step step step, spin, step step step, spin. Inevitably, the female pigeon is not interested and continues to walk away from the male, but he'll catch up with her and spin, then continue following until he's in sight again.

Liz had never noticed the Circle Dance until Hank pointed it out for her. She had preferred to ignore the pigeons.

"Watch this," he said.

"Watch what?"

"The pigeons. Look at that one over there, with the puffed up chest. He's trying to score."

The pigeon spins.

"He's smooth."

"She wasn't even looking," Liz commented.

"Yeah, he's so smooth, he can will the Circle Dance in her general direction and still enthrall her. You can't tell, but she's smitten."

"It looks like she's running away."

"Playing hard to get," Hank rationalized, like all men. "Look, he's doing it again. How could you resist? If you were a pigeon, I mean."

“So, she’s in love?”

“Yeah, but she’s running away for appearance sake. She doesn’t want to be a hussy.”

“You mean like a sled dog? I’d think even a pigeon could tell the difference.”

“No, not a husky, you turd.” Liz laughed at him, deep and throaty. “She doesn’t want to appear easy, otherwise all the studs will be after her and she’ll never be left alone with her soulmate.”

“Yeah, not much room for privacy when you live in a flock. He is one pigeon hottie, I guess.” She looked at Hank. They joined hands and walked toward the garden gates.

That’s when he does it, circle dances, for her. They were walking together when he took a few quick steps ahead of her, stopped to face her with his head sticking out in front, then did an eleven step spin. But she was already past him by the time he completed the circle so he raced ahead and did it again. They were both cracking up by then and she asked Hank to accompany her back to her building where they parted with a nice long kiss.

First Year’s Holidays

Winter is overweight with holidays. Not that summer doesn’t have its fair share: Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, of course are the big ones, then there’s Mother’s Day and Father’s Day along with other holidays like May Day and Cinco de Mayo. But compare those holidays to the blitz of Thanksgiving (two days off!), Christmas, New Year’s Eve, Martin Luther King, Presidents Day,

and Valentine's Day. Winter takes the prize for having more family and loved one associations. Of course, almost all holidays involve the shedding of blood (Fourth of July, Memorial, Veterans, Valentines, MLK, Easter). It doesn't really have anything to do with Hank or Liz, but it's kind of interesting to think of it.

By the time Valentine's Day rolled around, Hank had been dating Liz for a little over seven months, five of which had holidays (excluding Halloween), two being major family occasions and two more being couple focused (Valentine's and New Year's Eve). Even if they were a serious couple in September, they wouldn't have observed Sweetest Day because, really, what was does it mean? Anyone?

Valentine's Day was really easy. Hank spent all day preparing and trying to cook an elaborate meal, so elaborate that it was a surprise for Elizabeth. When she arrived at Hank's apartment, he wasn't able to play the cool entertainer/chef and regale Liz with witty jokes as they sipped Champagne. Instead, Hank would shout conversation from the kitchen while Liz was relegated to doing the crossword puzzle as she waited.

About thirty-five minutes after she arrived, Liz was finally allowed to sit at the candle-lit table so Hank could serve her. "Here we are," he said as he entered the room. "The best chicken parmigiana in the building." He set the plates down, gave Liz a kiss and sat down next to her.

"Wow," she said. "What a surprise."

"I know, unexpected, isn't it?"

“Yes, especially because the smell in the kitchen changed from burnt potatoes to garlic tomatoes as I filled in a five letter clue for ‘a set of alternate arrangements.’”

“Oh, let me guess ‘back up’? No that’s six. How about ‘carry out’? No.”

“Plan B,” Liz slid a forkful into her mouth. “It’s a good plan, though.”

“Thanks. So you could tell I charred my roasted potatoes?”

“Oh yeah, from the moment I left my apartment. But you played it cool.”

“Good,” he picked up his wine glass. “Hey. I toast to us. We made it this far, burnt ‘taters and all.”

They clink glasses. “What’s for dessert?”

“Not until you finish your dinner,” he said. They kissed.

For dessert, they had chocolate cake (from a box) and the Champagne (from France, via New York). Liz spent the night, having arranged a sitter for the dog. It was their first holiday they spent together by themselves and they loved every minute of it.

CHAPTER 6

STEP 6

When I sit down at the table for brunch, Eugene says, “I’ve been reading your journal. Lighten up a little, write something positive, like puppies or kittens.”

“You’re reading my journal?”

“Yeah. You should check out my journal sometime. If you can stand reading about all the hedonistic sex.” He tells me his handle.

“I might be able to manage it.”

“It’s quite a change, not so desolate and self loathing. But hey, we all can’t be winners.” He smiles.

“Thanks.”

We talk a while, about relationships, of course, why they fail and all that stuff. We decide that people suck, that’s all. We all get greedy and selfish, forgetting that there’s someone else and then they just fall apart. Entropy is the word.

This sort of routine goes on for a few days: I’ve been staying out late, getting drunk with Chuck or Eugene, sometimes both. Sometimes George comes out and sometimes Cheryl. I don’t like this last move by Diz and I’ve been purposely avoiding going home because I’m afraid I’ll see it, the painting that brought us together.

Steps four and five have been all consuming. Chuck listens as I figure out how I'm coming along with the steps while Eugene and I have things to talk about like Sue Anne and her wedding. Cheryl and I corroborate on broken hearts. I'm trying to find out what it is about men that makes women leave them. Cheryl's no help. But yeah, the steps are coming along nicely, as long as I'm sober enough to remember them.

Step six, though, is hard. It should be easy, really easy, to remember the bad times. I guess we all want to remember things as best as possible, especially when we're hurt and don't want to believe the person we loved could hurt us like that. How can I be a Diz-detractor when we were together for so long?

It's May, the month of my father's birthday, of Mother's Day and Memorial Day. I think I'll have to go home to visit my parents.

As for the bad times, I'd like to think there weren't any, but I'd be delusional. There's no such thing as a perfect relationship, one without fights or arguments, no push and pull, no testing grounds, no make-up sex. I've known couples whose entire relationship consisted of make-up sex—every two weeks or so, they'd break up then get back together, then break up a few weeks after that. I guess it's their way of keeping things passionate. Diz and I weren't like that. Things were always great. They were perfect.

It's been over a month and a half since Diz and I split up, so I guess any chance of reconciliation, make-up sex, is out. Of course, I'd still take her back, hell yes, I would.

“Dumbass,” Chuck says. “There are always conditions when a girl takes you back. Even if they’re not mentioned, they’re implied.”

“I don’t think there are.”

“Yeah, what about moving in together?”

“I could do it,” I say.

“At her place, with the D-O-G.”

Damn, the dog. Sir Stinky (doesn’t every pet deserve knighthood?) is the reason we’ve lived apart. Diz has had that dog since college, when she rescued it from a shelter. Now the dog’s on his last leg, well, legs, and has been, it seems, for years. The problem with these old dogs is that they smell bad. Well, there are two problems: they smell and they don’t move. Stinky sleeps on the bed at night and on the sofa during the day. No one sees him move from one place to the other, he just appears. He leaves his dander everywhere and the place smells like a musty wool sweater. Plus, there’s also the issue of compatibility: Stinky and I don’t get along because he’s jealous of me. Or maybe I am of him.

Another reason for not moving in with Diz is clutter. She keeps everything, from newspaper clippings to cards, letters, to shiny objects found in the streets. I’m not exaggerating. She has stacks of WB Mason boxes dated by year because she wants to make scrapbooks, something she hasn’t done since her senior year in high school. She still thinks it’ll be neat to have a chronicle of her life from when she was a little girl and then give the scrapbooks her grandchildren.

The boxes deserve an apartment of their own instead, she takes up enough space for two people. If we were to move in together, where would I fit?

I enjoy my one bedroom apartment. It's not far from work or the studio, or O'Doyles. It's the center of the universe, located within walking distance of Diz's place near Hayward Square, where all the Hayward students hang out, but has some nice restaurants. I love my apartment, so we've stalemated.

Then, there's always New Years Eve. How morose, this gesture of love and remembrance turned out to be. What if they're still doing it in ten years? I realize that it's her father, but move on just a little. Enjoy a night out. But I also enjoyed, if that can be the word used for such a situation, my time with her family. I always wondered what it'd be like to have siblings and I felt what I was missing when I was with Diz's family.

Speaking of family, Diz and I hadn't even gotten around to arguing about that. Not that I hadn't thought about proposing. I was going to do that, eventually—and she knew it too, because she asked if I wanted to marry her. I said yes, I did. She liked that answer. It fucks everything up, to be so damn sure of someone and the future you may have only to find out that you betray yourself. What a let down.

I had plenty of opportunities to take a step in commitment. We could have found a new place together, a three bedroom apartment with a separate room for Stinky. That'd be fine. We could have bought a new car together or opened a joint bank account. We could have consolidated our music and dvd collection so we didn't have two copies of *Princess Bride* or Norah Jones. But every time, I

balked. Or she did. I don't remember. That's the problem with problems: you don't always know how they started. But I know I didn't want to merge with her slowly, but fully and instantly so I could lose myself in her entirely. And she in me.

Instead, I'm swimming in a shit sea trying to figure out when everything went wrong. I'm miserable.

But at least I'm not the only one going through this. Not that anyone deserves to go through it, except Kroccus. That fucker.

Speaking of people going through it, George tells me that Adam moved out a few weeks ago and that Stephen is taking it hard. He'll come out with us sometimes, but isn't himself. He's mopey and depressed. I can hardly stand to be around him.

"Like looking in a regressive mirror, isn't it?" Cheryl asks me.

"What? Come on, I wasn't that bad," I say.

But I was. My journals at home are filled with constant distress and sorrow. How can anyone get so low? Easy. I'm not there anymore, I've got a public persona back.

I still cry a lot, especially when I'm watching TV. The stupidest commercials, showing family together just tears me up. I've even stooped so low to cry at an Adam Sandler movie, when everyone comes out to cheer Sandler's loser character, telling him they believe in him and love him. How nice, how touching. You can do it!

And of course, it's when I realize this that the worst happens. I go to the studio and it's there, my painting.

Miriam doesn't look at me when I come in, then Cheryl doesn't say anything. All I have to do is assume the worst, then I'm prepared.

Of course, as much as I try to prepare myself, I'm full of shit. I see the painting. I say Jesus. I say shit. I say fuck.

Of course, Cheryl is there, taking pictures.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"Sorry," she says.

"No, seriously, can't I have a moment?"

She leaves and then Miriam comes in to say she's sorry.

"What are you sorry for, you didn't do anything."

"But I knew this was going to happen."

"Big deal, you knew a lot of things. What do I want, you to choose sides?"

"Hank."

"It's alright. Girls have got to stick together. Sis's before. . .whatever is your equivalent of 'bro's before ho's' is."

"She does have a lot going on."

"Oh, I know," I don't think I need to iterate that I'm upset. "You can't go cutting someone out of your life by yourself. You need someone to help in case you miss a spot, you know, help twist the knife. Well, this is it, the last snip.

Now she can just go on living guilt free with no reminders of me or us or anything in her life. She's wiped the slate clean."

"Hank."

"Fuck, I'm leaving." I should wipe my own slate clean. But I can't bear to do it. Instead, I'll work on my memory using beer erasers.

I leave and Cheryl follows me out, walking by me without saying anything. Smart move.

I walk to O'Doyle's and Cheryl is still quite. Then, as we enter the bar, she says, "Sorry about the picture thing, I get carried away sometimes and forget what I'm doing."

"Forget it, you can buy me a drink."

"Done."

We have a few drinks and I'm hammered again, and that's when Cheryl lays it on me. "I didn't want to tell you this, but it's about Liz. Miriam says she's seeing someone else."

"Of course," I say. It explains enough. How did I come to amount to so little? "Fuck it. Fuck her. I don't care."

"You don't?"

"What's the point?" There's no hope in us getting back together. She's separated herself from my life. "I guess that's why Mir's been around the studio so much lately. She's no longer needed either. I'm surprised she didn't rub it in."

"She didn't want to tell you."

“I guess that’s nice of her,” I say. And I’m again an ass. “Tell her I’m sorry if you see her.”

“Tell her yourself.”

“Okay, if she’ll speak to me.”

We take a break from drinking to get Chinese. I’m not really hungry, but I eat a little and drink a lot of plum wine. We get our fortune cookies, but she won’t tell me hers. Mine is stupid, something about the breeze being enough to break the strongest trees but not the reeds which sway in the wind. We go back to the bar, listen to music, and dance and forget purposely about Diz. Instead, I focus on Cheryl’s smile, the way we dance together, the jokes we share, the way her arm hangs around my neck and the feel of my hands on her waist.

“Tomorrow is another day, always count on tomorrow,” she says, finally reading her fortune to me. Great, ancient Chinese wisdom stolen from the Musical *Annie*. Tomorrow.



Hank's First New Year's with Diz

The first New Year's Eve, they spent apart. By then, Hank knew that her father had died that day three years back. "I'm sorry," she told him a week before Christmas as they sat for morning coffee. "I won't be any fun on New Year's Eve. We do a family thing, sort of a memorial for Dad. I don't think it'd be very comfortable to be at."

"That's alright," he said. "You should spend that time with your family."

"But what are you going to do?"

"I don't know, I'll probably see what people at the studio are doing.

George will probably be having one of his parties."

"I see, well just don't get too wild and crazy."

"I'll try not too." Hank could tell by the look on Liz's face that she was thinking of her father. "Hey, did you get all your shopping done yet?"

She looked at him, "Most of it, why?"

"Maybe you could help me finish mine. I'm trying to figure out what to get your mother and Paige."

"You don't have to get them anything."

"But I want to. Besides, are they getting me anything?"

She smiled, "I can't tell you."

“See, what kind of guest would I be if I showed up on Christmas empty-handed?”

“A very bad one; I might not give you your present.”

“And you know I want my present.” Hank motioned towards the door. “Let’s go.” For the rest of the day, Hank didn’t think Liz thought about the upcoming New Years or her Father. Really, she didn’t stop, she just hid it better.

And so, a couple of weeks later, as the year ended with the count down, Hank and Liz celebrated in their own ways in different cities. For Hank, it was just like any other New Years of the past few years: surrounded by a few friends and a lot of strangers who all seemed to disappear just moments before the countdown began, leaving Hank alone with Miriam, Cheryl, George and Eliot to toast each other.

“Happy New Years,” they all said to each other before going through their resolutions. Cheryl was up first.

“Come on guys, I thought if you told your resolutions, they wouldn’t come true,” she said.

“That’s birthday wishes,” Eliot responded. “You’re not getting out of it that easily.”

“Damn. Well, I resolve to explore photography from a more personal vantage point and not be afraid to put myself out there.”

“That’s what you said last year,” Miriam butted in.

“No it’s not!”

“It is,” everyone else replied.

Miriam said she felt resolved to a life of spinsterhood and was OK with that.

Hank resolved to not procrastinate so much, to which Miriam responded, “You’d better not, especially with Liz.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

“Speaking of Liz,” George said. “Where is she? I figured she’d show up sometime tonight.”

“She’s with her family,” Hank told him.

“Oh, well, maybe next year,” George said, took a drink and stood up.

“Eliot and I have a joint resolution. Actually, one we made a while ago.”

“It doesn’t count!” shouted Miriam

“Quiet, Lady!” Eliot hissed. It was all in good fun.

“As I was saying, Eliot and I have resolved to take our relationship one step further. We’re moving in together. In a house.” He paused a second longer. “In the South End!” Then everyone cheered. It was the kind of drama they had all come to expect from George, but they were happy for him.

Meanwhile, Liz was with her family celebrating in her own way. It didn’t involve Times Square or a ball dropping. They didn’t even bother to look at the clock because it didn’t matter. They had some things to celebrate and some things to be sad about, but nothing Hank would understand until the next year. And that’s just the way it went.

Merry Christmas From the Family

Christmas in Liz's family was a more joyous event and Hank was glad to be a part of it. They had just spent Christmas Eve in Smallton for dinner with Hank's parents. They rented a car, which Hank normally did to visit his parents because owning a car in Blophoton was not cheap. He figured that renting for one weekend a month would equal the cost of car insurance alone.

Hank's mother was thrilled to meet Liz and his father seemed to perk up once he met her. They had arrived early in the morning, so as to be able to spend the majority of the day with them. They would take Liz on a short tour of Smallton, stopping by local hotspots like the bakery, the town square's Christmas display and the coffee shop for some lunch and house-made real hot chocolate.

"What more could you want?" Hank's father asked.

"I don't know, maybe a twelve story movie-plex right in the center of town, a couple of more bars next to those two churches." She pointed as they walked, all smiling. "I could really see a Vegas style casino right next to the highway. Oh, and I think the town could really stand to update. This 1800's style architecture is so last century."

Hank's father laughed. "I'll talk to city council, see what they think."

"A movie theatre would be nice," Hank's mother said. "As long as they showed tasteful movies." She wrapped her arm into Liz's. "You know, we've been seeing a rise in tourism because we're near the center of everything good in Western Mass. I hope you haven't been listening to what Hank has said about Smallton. It's not Blophoton, but it was the perfect place for us to raise him."

“I think you did a pretty good job, despite not having all the temptations of the city.” Hank could say nothing in his defense because there was nothing really to defend.

Back at the house, Hank’s mother pulled Liz into the kitchen to help out. “Don’t worry,” she said. “Everything is already done. We’ll just stay in here and snack on some things. That’s the trick to being a good cook, making people wait for the simplest meals while you graze in the kitchen. Anyway, now we can talk. I hope you don’t mind, but I’d like to get to know you better. Hank says nothing but good things about you.”

“Really?” she said. Hank never told her how much he talked about her.

“Yes. And I can see why. You’re a delightful young lady, the perfect person to help him get motivated about his life.”

“I don’t know about that, he seems to be doing just fine.”

“Oh, you haven’t known him that long. Soon enough, he’ll start talking about how he needs to be more serious about his art. He’s been doing that for years now. I just want to tell him to go for it.”

They more they talked, the more they liked each other.

On the car trip to Liz’s family, Liz told Hank how much she liked his mother. “She’s a lot like you, you know.”

“You think so? I always thought I took after Dad.”

“No, you’re much more upbeat.”

“Oh, that. Well, he’s been down lately.” And he told her all about his father and grandfather.

“Is he doing anything, like therapy?”

“He won’t go.”

“Yeah, there’s a stigma about seeing a therapist.” Liz figured she might as well tell Hank. “That’s why I don’t tell anyone I’m seeing one.”

“You are?”

“I always get down around this time. It’s not a seasonal thing, though I think I have that too. It’s my dad, you know. I sound like a kid, but I see everyone with their families, both sets of parents and I look at mine. It seems to get smaller and smaller.”

Hank placed his hand on Liz’s knee, rubbed it and then laced his fingers in her hand.

“I suppose I should also tell you that I’m on medication for depression,” she says.

“You didn’t have to. It’s not like I would ever have known.”

“Yeah, but I feel like a freak sometimes, having to take pills so I don’t go crazy. I just want to be normal.”

“When you find out what normal is, let me know.”

“Deal.”

Christmas at Liz’s house was a big deal and Liz told Hank that Felicia tended to get carried away in her decorating. When Hank could spot the house from two streets down, he started to understand what Liz meant by “carried away.”

Connor greeted them at the door with his youngest daughter in his arms. For once, he was smiling. “Come on in, good to see you.” He gives Liz a hug and holds his hand out for Hank.

“Good to see you, too. Merry Christmas,” Hank says.

Liz is already all over her niece, taking her from Connor’s arms. “Hi Amelia, how are you? Are you ready for Christmas?”

Amelia shakes her head, says yes, and then hides from Hank by ducking her head into Liz’s shoulders. “Don’t worry, Hank. She does this to every one she meets. It’s a two-year old’s prerogative.”

Hank wasn’t too worried. He never felt comfortable around kids, at least the few he’d been around. Within an hour, he was swinging Amelia and her older sister, Kate, around by their arms, holding them upside down, and having a good time. It was so easy, he surprised himself.

Every room in Felicia’s house was fully decorated with its own Christmas theme: snowmen in the living room, Santas around the tree, stars in the bathroom, carolers in the kitchen, and pictures of her children opening presents throughout years everywhere.

“How long does all this take,” he asked when they all gathered around the fireplace, sipping eggnog and hot chocolate.

“A long time, but I do a little bit each day and it all gets done.”

“She could get it done faster if she’d let us help,” Paige said.

“You kids never do it quite right.”

“That’s what you always say,” Liz said, getting up to add another log to the flame. “You could always teach us the right way. That way you wouldn’t wear yourself out.”

“But I like doing it,” Felicia said. “Connor, do you need some help putting the girls to bed?”

“Do we have to,” Kate asked. “I want more hot chocolate.”

“I think you’ve had enough. Besides, we all have to go to bed so Santa can come.”

That was enough to convince Kate to get up and run circles around everyone shouting “Santa! Santa!” Amelia got excited too, even though she still didn’t have an idea about who Santa was.

“Alright, let’s go brush our teeth.” Connor stood up, snagging a girl in each arm and carried them to the bathroom. Felicia followed, leaving Hank with Liz and Paige.

“Where’s Hank sleeping,” Paige asked.

“With me, in my room. Where else?”

“That’s not fair! Mom’s never let my boyfriends stay over.”

“Paige, Hank and I are a lot older. Besides, where would he sleep? The girls are in the guest room.”

“It’s still not fair. Now I have to be kept up all night by the sound of you getting freaky.”

“We’re not going to be having sex in Mom’s house!”

“We’re not?” Hank asked.

“Sorry. Paige, you see, your sister and I aren’t having sex at all. We’re waiting until marriage. In fact, we’re both wearing solid steel chastity belts.”

“Hank,” Liz started.

“I don’t believe you.” Paige was starting to crack a smile.

“You don’t?” Hank said. “Go ahead, Liz, show her.”

“No,” she said.

“Come on,” he said, reaching over to her and wrapping his arms around her. Let’s see your locked-up underwear.” Liz let out a playful scream as Hank reach into the back of her pants. Paige was cracking up, so was Hank.

“Be thankful I don’t make him stay with you,” Liz said to her sister.

“No thank you!” she said.

Christmas came with a vengeance. At some point in the night, Felicia had loaded the tree and stockings with presents. It took a while for Liz’s nieces to open all of them, but it was entertaining. Connor made coffee and Hank volunteered to cook pancakes. Everyone was happy, relaxed, and grateful for another holiday together.

CHAPTER 7

STEP 5 & 7

Tomorrow. Shit.

Everyday, I dread waking up because it means I'm one day further from Diz. It's my first conscious thought, "shit," ending some dream where Diz and I are back together and all is right with the world. Waking up doesn't mean the dream is over.

This "shit" is different: I don't know where I am. Or, I know where I am and it's not where I should be. I open my eyes and I can only see out of one. Out of that eye I see photographs of people I don't recognize and of some people I might recognize. Out of the other eye, I see dark blond hair, scattered across a pillow, tickling my nose. I'm next to a woman and it's Cheryl.

I'm in her bedroom. There is plenty of art, decorations and the walls are red. We're in sunburst yellow sheets that are smooth against my skin, which means I'm naked. I have a hard on. I feel like Achilles, my weakness exposed. Or like Samson without his hair. My clothes are on the chair. I move to get up and Cheryl stirs.

"You awake?" she asks, turning to me, the sheet close to her chest.

"Yeah," I say.

She brushes the hair out of her face. "Sleep well?"

"Yeah, like a log."

“Much better than sleeping on the couch, don’t you think?”

I don’t say anything, I don’t know what to say. Beneath the sheets, our legs touch.

“Hold on,” she says and turns her back to me. She’s thin, thinner than I thought.. I see the dots of her vertebrae and her scapula push against her skin. She has a freckle on her lower back next to the two dimples at her waist. She bends to pick up her shorts, pulling the sheet around her, but I catch a glimpse of cheek.

“Why are we naked?” I ask and she slides on her shorts and reaches down again.

“You don’t remember?” she asks, fishing her shirt from the floor.

“No.”

“You said you always sleep naked.”

“Oh.” I can hear my voice, saying it triumphantly. I remember pulling off my shirt and pants, hopping into bed then removing my shorts. “I was drunk.”

“Really?” She peeks at me over her shoulder, her arms laced into the shirt sleeves. I can see the arc of her breast and she slips the shirt over her head. “I hadn’t noticed.” She laughs and stands, dances around to adjust her shorts. “I’ll let you get dressed. Coffee?”

“Sounds good.”

I’m holding the sheet up to my neck, my legs are bent up to try to hide the bulge at my hips.

She's looking at me and gives me a devilish grin. "Maybe you should get dressed first."

"Go make coffee." She leaves and I throw on my clothes, hit the bathroom to piss away my boner. I wash my face and see the pink shades of my eyes.

When I come out of the bathroom, Cheryl is standing in the kitchen with two mugs. She hands me one. Her breasts are poking against her T-shirt.

I think of Diz and the mornings we shared. There is nothing more beautiful than a woman first thing in the morning, fresh out of bed.

"Breakfast?" she asks.

"Yeah."

"You were pretty drunk. And you're fucking heavy!"

"Thanks for taking care of me, for putting up with me."

"No biggie."

"I didn't do anything stupid, did I?"

"No, not if you consider rolling in the dirt and crying to be your normal thing."

"Oh."

"Hank." She hugs me. "I'm just teasing. You were fine." At her touch, a dream comes back to me: Diz and I were making out, hot and heavy. I remember feeling so good to have her back, to taste her lips.

I look at Cheryl. "It wasn't a dream." Her lips are red, like they've been rubbed, stretched.

“No.” She looks down, then back at me. “Don’t worry. It’s fine, you’re not the only one who misses companionship.”

“Shit. I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“Nothing happened,” she says. “We passed out once we crawled into bed. Sure, we kissed a little, but that’s not such a bad thing, is it. I mean, I’ve been out of practice.”

“I just feel like I took advantage of you,” I say. I feel like I cheated on Diz.

“Well, maybe I took advantage of you.”

I smile. “Let’s go eat.”

Brunch isn’t as awkward as I thought it would be.

“Sorry about earlier,” I say.

“Stop apologizing.”

“Sorry for apologizing.”

She smiles.

“What I mean is I shouldn’t have freaked out like that. I haven’t, you know, done anything with anyone else in over four years. It’s just different,” I say.

“I’m sure it is, Hank. I think you’ve got to get back out there and meet some new people.”

“Step number five,” I say.

“What’s that?”

“Just something that Chuck made up for me, a twelve step deal. Step number five is to meet new people. I’ve been hanging out with Eugene lately.”

“No. I mean girls. Unless you’re switching sides.

“Not yet.”

“Yeah, then girls. I’m talking about dates.”

“I don’t think I’m ready.”

“If you don’t think you are, then you’ll never be ready. You just got to get out there and do it. You don’t have to be looking for the next love of your life, just someone to take your mind off of her.”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to let go. I mean, what if?”

“She’s not coming back. After all this, after all she’s done and put you through, you’d still try to get her back?”

“Of course.”

“Are there any signs she’s interested.”

“No, but how can you just stop loving someone?”

“You’re a habitual lover.”

“That’s why Chuck drew up the twelve steps.”

“Where are you now?”

“Between step five and six.”

“What’s step six?”

“Remember the Bad Times.”

“And?”

“It doesn’t mean I’m over her. Yeah, she’s a moody, absolutist, self-centered demanding person. But who can’t be? She’s also sweet and vulnerable.”

“You’re rationalizing. What’s the next step?”

“I don’t know. Probably go on dates.”

“Ah, that’s why you’re stalling and being resistant. You don’t want to move on.”

“Why would I? I was happy where I was.”

“But only you.”

“I guess.”

“Well. It’s time then. I’ll help you. I mean, you’ve already dipped your toe into the figurative dating pool with last night, it means you’re capable. I’ll show you how the rest works.”

We finish eating and head back to her apartment.

“This,” she points to the black box and monitor, “is a computer. It connects to what technologically advanced people call the internet, which is not only a great tool for distributing porn at alarming speeds, but it can be used for various communication needs and even dating.”

“Har har.”

She logs on to MutualMate.com. “Here is one online dating site.”

The opening page features a happy looking couple and the headline reads “There’s someone out there for you!” All I can think is how there was someone for me. How is a computer going to find someone to replace Diz?

Cheryl clicks around. “Online dating is a lot like shopping, just type in what you want: age, sex, location, weight, height, hobbies, and anything in particular. Say you like women with six fingers, you can find her. All you have to do is create a profile and you’re all set.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah, it’s one of the more complex ones out there that’s strictly designed for dating, not for marriage. You have to pay to be able to communicate with people. But there’s also Craigslist. It’s a lot easier, but more saturated. It moves at a much faster pace. You just read a few ads, respond, then go out that night. All that good stuff to find the person who’s right for you for that moment.”

“But how do you know they’re really who they say they are?”

She clicks away on the keyboard. “There’s an element of trust, that the person is telling you the truth. I mean, you’re going to find out sooner or later, so why not just be honest?” She finishes clicking. “Let’s set you up with a profile.”

The website has all these empty boxes to fill out. The first step is to think of a user name.

“What’s wrong with my own name?” I ask.

“You can try it. But ‘Hank’ doesn’t really spark a girl’s interest.”

“Well, what do you use?”

“Photographic,” she says and leans over me to open a new window and signs in her profile.

“See, you can read my answers. Witty is good, but don’t be too obscure, just pique the reader’s appetite, don’t be giving yourself away before you start. You’ve got to have something to talk about when you meet.”

I think about my username, something to describe me. I type the words “painterman,” and the computer spits back that the name is already taken. The screen suggests me trying Painterman12785.

“No way.” I type in another name. Surprisingly, it’s taken too. “Who would have Sisyphus?”

I don’t want a number to follow my name, implying that there are hundreds of people out there who think like me. What do I do that’s original? Finally, I get it and type it in. It takes and I type a password *****.

I immediately regret my username: PigeonDancer. Too late to change it now, so I answer the questions:

I am: M F
Male

Looking for: M, F, MM, MF, FF, Any
Female

For: Dating, Relationship, Marriage, Friendship, Networking, Sex, Kinky Sex, Stalking

“What’s this?” I ask.

“It’s for the type of relationship you want, what you’re hoping to get out of this. I mean, you don’t want to be looking for marriage and find a someone who just wants sex,” Cheryl says.

“Of course, I’m sure you wouldn’t complain.” I say, smiling at her. “It’s for compatibility, I get it.”

For: Dating, Relationship, Marriage, Friendship, Networking, Sex, Kinky Sex, Stalking
Dating, Relationship, Friends

Cheryl slaps me. “Don’t choose all three. You’re sending a mixed signal already.”

“Fine!” I’d be happy to just hit ‘friends,’ but Cheryl won’t be satisfied unless I’m actively trying to get over Diz. Everyone is pushing that one me.

For: Dating, Relationship, Marriage, Friendship, Networking, Sex, Kinky Sex, Stalking
Dating

We go to the next section titled “Your Stats.” I can’t wait.

Height
6 ft.

“No way you’re six foot,” Cheryl says.

“So what? I’m close enough.”

“Hank,” she says, standing up. “I’m five seven. I know six foot when I see it. So will other girls. You can embellish other things, but not this.”

Height
5’ 9”

Weight
160

Cheryl clears her throat.

“What,” I say. “I haven’t been eating much lately. I’ve lost a few pounds.”

Cheryl shrugs.

Body Type: Slender, Athletic, Average, A Bit Heavy, Big and Beautiful
Average

I look for any objection. None.

Hair
Brown

Eyes
Blue

“How much more of this crap?” I ask.

“Just skip this and come back. You’ll have to do a lot of typing soon to describe yourself.

“Great,” I say. “I suppose I can’t bullshit my way through that either.”

She smiles. “We’ll see.”

I get to the first text box and it ask for a “headline.” Cheryl explains that it’s the first thing people see next to my picture.

Headline
Exciting Headline

Cheryl slaps me again. Hard. “Don’t do that. It’s stupid and over used by every person out there who has nothing original to say. Do it right.”

“Okay,” I say. I can’t get away with anything.

Headline
Hey, Date Me, I’m Artistic!

“You could still do better,” Cheryl says.

Describe Yourself
How boring! You’ll find out soon enough.

What’s in your top five?
Huh?

What do you like to do in the dark?
--

Um, sleep?

How does your bed look?

Empty.

Describe your best attribute.

Of my bed?

What are you looking for in a partner?

These questions are a bunch of crap. They're nothing but partially veiled sexual allusions.

I stop typing. "What the point in answering these?" I ask.

"They're stupid, I know. But they show your creative side. How well you answers the questions is pivotal to keeping a girl's interest in reading your profile."

"But I don't know what to write," I whine.

"Fine," she says, pushing me aside. "We'll see what other guys have written."

Cheryl's logs on her profile and does a search. "The first thing you've got to learn is that the girls are in control here, okay?" I nod. No different from regular dating. "There are about nine guys to every girl on the internet, so we decide if we want to contact you or respond to you. We decide whether to meet

you, where to meet you and if we still want to meet you after we first see you.

And we decide when to cut it off, got it?"

“That shouldn’t be too hard.”

“Good. Now look at these guys. One is pretty good, one is too good to be true, and the last is hopeless.

Profile	Great	2Good 2 B True	Hopeless
Name	Anthony59	Nine_Inches	SingleGuy
M/F:	Male	Male	Male
In Search of:	Female	Female	Female, FF, Any
For:	Dating, Relationship, Friends, Networking	Marriage, Relationship	Dating, Relationship, Marriage, Networking, Sex, Stalking
Height	5'10"	6'3"	5'7"
Weight	165	200	200
Body Type	Average	athletic/toned	A bit heavy
Hair	Brown	Shaved	Receding
Eyes	Green	Brown	Brown
Income	N/A	\$100,000	\$25,000
Pets	Dog	Dog, Snake	None
Children	0, would like some	0, loves kids	0

	eventually		
Your Place	Rent	Own	Rent, With Parents
Piercings	None	One	None
Tattoo	2, visible, not visible	2 visible	0
Occupation:		Doctor/Lawyer	Self Employed
Headline	Enter headline here	Come and Get Some!	Won't hit you
Describe Yourself	I'm your average Blophntonion. Minus the bad accent and constant drunkenness. I still love the Sox— Yankees suck!	You'll just have to come and look yourself. You won't be sorry.	I'm funny, interesting, quirky and filled with useless knowledge.
What's your top five?	<i>Amelie</i> , <i>Hi-fidelity</i> (the book), Public Garden, NPR, my Prius.	Sex, face, rack, ass, legs	
What do you like to do at night?	Hang out with friends, drink a little, watch movies, see shows and concerts.	Spend time with special people and cuddle.	MST3K Marathons and choose your own adventure novels
How's your bed look?	Big, soft, fluffy, but missing something.	Inviting. Sometimes it's smooth and	Like a couch

		gently, other times, it's rough and hard.	
Describe your best attribute.	My personality.	See user name.	My mom's a great cook.
What are you looking for in a partner.	Intelligence, personality, a sense of humor and a sexy smile and laugh.	Someone to go all night with.	Some who'll put up with me.

“There, you see?” Cheryl says.

“I guess.” Can't I just copy what Guy 1 says?

“And no copying!”

“Fine, can I work on it at home? I feel too much on the spot to create a winning profile.” I don't feel like talking about dating.

“Sure, I'll be watching you.” Great. I tell her about my blog and she asks to pull it up.

“Can't you read it some other time?”

“Fine. We'll talk about dating then.” Shit, I never win.

“Okay.”

“Hank, you have nothing to worry about. If something doesn't go well, what are the chances you'll see that person again?”

“You're the expert, you tell me.”

“Hardly any. I’ve gone tons of dates through MutualMatch and Craigslist. Most of them were boring. I would die if I found one of my dates were as interesting as you.”

“Thanks. But you already know me and I’ve never had to sell myself to you.”

“Isn’t that the point. You’re thinking of dating as being some game, like hunting or real estate. You don’t have to convince anyone you’re worthy of them. It’s just the opposite, if they’re worthy of you, they’ll see it and want to spend time with you.”

“So, what do you do on your dates?”

“I’m in it for the meals. A gal who can work the system never worries about having to pay for a meal again. Sometimes, I just meet people for coffee, to see if they warrant a dinner. Those are better because they’re short and low pressure. Plus, you can tell a lot about a person by what type of coffee they drink.”

“Really? I drink mine with cream. What’s that say?”

“Can it only be cream, or will you accept milk, and what if neither is available?”

“No, Yes, and I’ll just drink it black if I need to.”

“Then you’re a regular guy, flexible and not too demanding, though you might have a caffeine addiction.” We laugh. “The problem people are the ones who want a flavored half-caff, cappuccino with skim milk, light foam with caramel on top. Ridiculous. No one should be that high maintenance.”



Holidays

The first big family holiday Hank and Liz spent together was Thanksgiving. It was a multiple day eating tour. The plan was to spend Wednesday night and part of Thursday at Liz's house then have dinner with Hank's parents. It helped that Hank was an only child, things were flexible. "You're sure your parents don't mind eating until late?" Liz asked him on their way her mother's house.

"No, not at all. They're just thrilled they get to meet you."

"Good. I can't wait to meet them, too."

When they arrived, Felicia greeted them. "Hi," she said welcoming them in. "Paige is out tonight with some old friends. Connor said he'd come tomorrow."

"Will he have the girls," Liz asked.

"No, but the good news is that they'll spend most of Christmas with him."

"Oh, then maybe he won't be in such a crappy mood tonight," Liz said.

The three of them spent the night playing board games and drinking too much wine. The next morning, Liz helped prepare the meal while Paige nursed a hangover and Hank tried to find something to do that to help but stay out of the way.

Hank's parents were excited to meet Liz. When they arrived, Liz was greeted by a hug from Hank's Mom and a smile from his Dad. That's about as

warm a welcome anyone gets from them. They spent the evening by sticking to the formalities of introductory conversation: What do you do for work, what do you do for fun, how do you like Blophoton, where did you go to school, etc.

It was pleasant. It was peaceful compared to Liz's house where someone inevitably got in an argument with his or her sibling. But it was quiet. Not that quiet is bad, it's just different.

Later, Hank would tell Liz she was a success, that his parents really liked her. "How could you tell," she asked.

"Mom didn't turn the stereo on. Normally, when there's company for dinner, she puts on some classical piano. Then she'll pay attention to that, making all everyone listen."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah," Hank said, kissing her. "She really likes you."

"Good." And it was.

Hank sticks his foot in his mouth

Autumn was cresting its peak of beauty and the leaves were falling. Everything looked beautiful from the train that carried Hank and Liz to the hospital to greet Felicia as she went for what would be her last check up for a while, the one where doctors could say the magic word "remission."

After the hospital visit, they went out to dinner, elated with the fact that everything was going to be alright. That's when Hank unknowingly dropped a bombshell. "So," he started in. "What do you normally do for the holidays?"

Thanksgiving's coming up, so that means people will start decorating for Christmas way too early."

No one said anything for a second or two. Hank didn't notice the pause, but it was monumental for Liz and her mother. The holidays are the only time where Rob's absence is made glaringly obvious. The rest of the time, they can think of him in a better place, get on with their lives, but whenever there's a birthday, or Christmas, or New Year's Eve, things change. Someone has to fill in for his roles but no one wants to take on the responsibility because that'll mean he's permanently gone.

Of course Hank didn't know this and within a few heartbeats, Liz was able to recover and say, "I'm not sure. I think we have something extra to be thankful for. Holidays haven't been particularly fun the past few years. But maybe things will change."

Hank smiled and Liz smiled for similar, but different reasons. Both were thinking of Thanksgiving, but Hank was thinking of it as an indicator of how solid their relationship was becoming while Liz thought that maybe she'd enjoy a holiday for once. But it wasn't like that for anyone else. Liz's mother would celebrate and be thankful for being around another year, but wishing her husband could be around to see it, to support her through it. Paige was most likely thinking about whether she'd stay at school or visit home. She never liked the silent awkwardness that followed little things, like setting the table for one extra seat or remembering just after she said she was thankful that they were all safe, healthy, and loved that something wasn't quite right about it. Connor would sulk

about his divorce and wonder if he would even see his children for the holiday.
But these feelings come and go, and they were gone in another instance as the
clock ticked steadily forward.

CHAPTER 8

STEP 7 (CONTINUED) & 8

So, here I am, rebounding. My personal profile is up and running with mild enthusiasm from myself and apparently from others. Cheryl is an invaluable source of dating information. I've been out of practice for four years. Okay, over four years, since I was lucky enough to have Diz fall in my lap. It just happened for us, neither one had been looking, but we knew from the first moments. I had a gut feeling about her.

Internet dating works pretty much like any other dating: find someone who looks attractive and try to start a conversation. If that person doesn't walk away, you're okay until someone better comes along. Of course, being online differs from approaching someone in a bar because there is a limited number of people who could be that someone better. Plus, you don't get to check out the competition like you can in a bar. Being online makes it easier, because a person can approach several people in a short time. The rejections, I mean, responses, are delayed. That takes the sting out of it a little. And people don't lie as much as you would think. How's that for irony, a girl will lie straight to your face about why she can't talk to you, but will be polite and honest when typing out a response to someone she can't even see. How old fashioned and quaint.

The basic rules I've learned are to keep responses short and mildly intriguing. Don't expect a reply right away, just be patient. Some people don't

have all day to hang out online. At first, I thought it'd be hard to say the right thing, but it's not so bad.

How to Respond to a Personal Ad:

For activities and interests, try to relate to her through a common bond and always be sincere.

If the ad says:	I like hiking
Good responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) I love hiking. b) I just got back from a twelve week trek in the bush. c) Have you been to Mt. Washington? I'm dying to go.
Bad responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) My ex hated mountains, I'm so glad you do. b) I like to hike, naked. c) I have allergies, but there are plenty of activities for indoors!

For other interests, such as movies, try to give examples of what you like or ask if she's seen specific movies. It's a great way to set up a date.

If the ad says:	I love horror movies!
Good responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Didn't you love <i>Saw III</i>? b) I can't wait for (insert horror movie of the month here).
Bad responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) My ex loved horror movies too, she dumped me because I wouldn't take her to any. b) Mom says they'll give me nightmares.

For topics of politics, always follow her lead. Don't reveal yourself too soon and match her fervor. But always stay true to your political leanings, unless you love to argue.

If the ad says:	I lean left / I lean right / I'm not sure.
Good responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) I agree / I respectfully disagree, maybe you can change my mind. b) I agree / I respectfully disagree. c) (don't even comment)
Bad responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Grow up, you baby killing communist! b) Bush is a nazi! c) Come to the darkside.

Always try to find common denominators regarding her hobbies. The more you can share, the more you'll have to do and talk about on dates. But don't forget to try something new, unless it's knitting.

If the ad says:	My favorite hobbies are going to movies, shopping, celebrity gossip
Good responses	a) Shopping is not a hobby!
Bad responses	a) Shopping is not a hobby!

Once I've found some common bonds, I'll type up a little response that goes something like this:

To: PersonalAd1

From: PigeonDancer

Subject: Hi / Is that a banana in your pocket?

(OK, not that, but some witty response to her ad is your key to getting her to read your message)

Message:

Hi. I think your ad is great. I don't think I've met anyone who's enjoyed the MFA's post-modern expressionism exhibit as much as you. My favorite piece is [Insert undeservedly popular piece of art that's been reprinted and hanging in dorm rooms across America here]. Did you study the artist, or are you just interested?

Talk to you soon!

And that's that. Once someone replies to your response, that's first base.

Second base is instant messaging. IMing shows your willingness to take time to talk—chat—and proves you can carry on a conversation. But like responding, it's important to not be too eager. Be patient.

The problem that comes with IM dating is that conversations diverge from a line-to-line volley into a two or three line dodgeball match. These aren't, um, actual transcripts:

June 8, 10AM

ADD Hyperactive: Hi!

NoCoffeeYet (Me): Hi

ADHD: You're moving around early. What are you up to?
Working hard or hardly working?

NCY: Yeah, working, or putting off working. You?

ADHD: LOL! Me too. I don't like to really start working until I've checked all my email, had a couple of cups of coffee, eaten breakfast and then settled in. Otherwise, the day just drags by if I haven't had any coffee, you know.

NCY: Yeah. I haven't had mine. I got slammed right when I got in.

ADHD: OMG! I hate that. I'm always like, give me some time, then give me the work. I'll get it in by the deadline, cause I type really fast and it's not like this job is hard, you know. So, I feel I deserve some time online to chat with people. I mean, I don't smoke or anything and the people who smoke get, like, five minutes every hour. I deserve that too.

NCY: I agree. I've got to go, though, my boss is calling.

It's even worse when the person sends the message after every thought. I don't know what to respond to or how quickly to do it. By the time I have one

thought halfway typed, trying to be the good conversationalist, a new one comes up. I don't want to be too far behind:

June 8, 3:00 PM

SpeedoMan (Me): Hi

OliveOy7: HI!!!!

007: What's going on?

SM: ~~How are you?~~ Not much. How are you?

007: I'm fine.

007: Just avoiding work.

SM: ~~Good to hear. What are you up to?~~ Me too. Glad
to hear you're doing well.

007: I hope my boss doesn't come by.

007: Thanks!

SM: ~~It'd be funny if he did. You're welcome.~~

007: Where do you work?

007: I'm at GiAmeriCom.

SM: I work for MegaGlorp.

007: How funny, we're competitors ☺

SM: ~~Yeah, hilarious~~

007: I hope you don't divulge company secrets easy,
it'd be fun trying to get them out! ;-P

SM: My boss is coming, I gotta go. Bye!

007: I can be very persuasive.

007: Oh, C-ya!

Then there's the solicitors, the prostitutes and strippers looking for an easy

mark:

June 9, 4:30

SweetTartDynamo69: Hey there.

SuperObvious (Me): Hi

STD69: How's it going?

SO: Not bad. Just finishing up for the week. How
about you?

STD69: Same thing.

STD69: Where do you work?

SO: I work at MegaGlorp.

STD69: Ooh. What do you do there?

SO: I'm an admin assistant.

STD69: Do you like it?

SO: It's alright. It pays the bills for my painting
habit. What do you do?

STD69: Sounds stressful.

STD69: I'm an exotic dancer. Wanna relieve some
stress?

SO: I'm not too stressed.

STD69: You should see my act. I'm at LeggyBoobs.

STD69: I'll give you a free lap dance. . .

SO: But we just met.

STD69: That's okay. Cum see me! xoxo

Those are just some of the types I'm dealing with (I didn't go see the dancer, by the way). When the messages aren't coming at me at lighting speed, I'm usually waiting a webternity (a few minutes) for a response only to get a two word reply. It's not worth the wait. Either that person is holding multiple chat sessions, too busy, or a lousy typist—and shouldn't be using the service for any of those reasons.

Not one of my IM's from MutualMatch have lead to third base: an actual face to face meeting. It could be something as simple as coffee, but that never happens. Usually, I find myself getting ready to steal third, only to get picked off. The emails and chats just drop off or we run out of things to write about.

Craigslist is another story. We usually skip second base and round right to third: a triple. Usually, after a few messages and a picture exchange, one of us will say "I'm tired of the lengthy chats and getting-to-know-you periods. Let's just meet and decide if we like each other." And we'll meet. Sometimes. Flakes abound on Craigslist and what looked like a triple, or even a home run, fouls out and she doesn't show. Oh well. I don't really expect any of these to lead to home plate: actual dating, where I'll have to round the bases again.

Fuck these baseball metaphors, I hate dating.

Dating is too stressful, too much about first impressions and selling yourself. Who needs all this shit? I say, if there's no initial chemistry in the first meeting, it's not meant to be. That's how speed dating works—not that I've gone on any of those, either, because people flake out there too. Dating would be great if it didn't involve other people.

Besides, what is there to really talk about? It's either me listening to her talk about herself, or her listening to me talk about myself—and I'm not that interesting, so guess who does all the talking and who does the listening? Oh sure, there's topics like politics, religion, pop culture and sex, but those waters only run so deep before they get too shallow and unsafe to sail (what's with these awful metaphors?). And what if those topics have been covered in previous emails and chats? You know what's left that's safe: Myself or herself, and of those, there are only three safe topics:

Topic	Pro	Con
1. Job	Everyone Works. People will talk about what they do whether they love it or hate it, and we can all relate to our date's work experiences. And if it doesn't work out, sometimes you'll find out juicy gossip, like who's the office slut and what building she's in.	Most people's jobs are boring, so who wants to hear about office politics for the next hour, regardless of whether they love it or hate it? I don't care what that bitch Kelly said in the elevator to Brad the MailGuy about his bald head.
2. Background (including college)	Everyone has a background! We're all from somewhere and have been places.	It can be a sensitive topic to some people, such as ones with abusive parents, traumatic pasts, etc. Or, their background can be incredibly lame and boring.

Hobbies/Pets	They can be interesting and provide good insight as to who she is. Pets can be nice	Sometimes embarrassing or boring. Sometimes Topic 1 takes up her entire life. I don't want to hear about Fluffy's incontinence.
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The topics that one doesn't necessarily want to bring up on the first date are past relationships, sexual techniques, vices, personal problems. Save those for the second date. A first date is like reading the back of a book, it's a synopsis targeting a certain audience: most of it is true, but not what the entire book is about. But that's all I'm saying. You want dirt on what my dating life is like, watch the opening of *Kissing Jessica Stein* and find out. Got it?

Really, my heart's just not into dating yet. I'd like to think that the more people I meet and date, the more I'll see that Diz wasn't right for me. That's not the case. like I only have a capacity for knowing so many and that by filling that capacity, Diz will be pushed out of my head, or at least cover her up. It doesn't seem to work, or perhaps I'm not at capacity. I find myself comparing each new date to Diz, how I felt about her, what I still feel. It's no good for the date either. But at least she gets a free meal—we'll call it seeking cheap counseling. I've met some wonderful people who have similar interests, but none I would consider dating, and some who wouldn't consider dating me. Maybe they can sense I'm on the rebound. Some know because I told them. There are a lot of people trying to

get over someone, it seems. Sometimes it's good to just tell a stranger how much it still hurts. We'll commiserate, hug each other good bye and never see each other again.

But still, I like to look at the personals, even if I'm not planning on responding to an ad, I like to look. I guess it's because I'm looking for Diz. I'm reading the ads for clues that she's out there, looking for the same things I am, maybe even me. Sometimes, I think I spot her, but I doubt if it's her. What would I say, anyway. I've thought about setting up a fake email account and surprising her, trapping her into realizing we're meant for each other. But I don't think that'd work, either.

If only I . . .

No, I need to drop those thoughts.

It's not that I'm going without physical comfort. I mean, I am, but not really. The first person I have sex with (after four years of being only with Diz) is Cheryl. Yes, Photographer Cheryl. We were both drunk, sad and lonely. Mistakes were made, as Nixon said.

We were both in the studio, only us two. Who knows what would have happened if either George or Miriam had been there, I joke with Cheryl now. I was painting the phone and Cheryl was working on some story boards after having been dropped by some guy after the third date the night before. We decided to go for a drink when we were done. Now, this is a few weeks after I woke up in her apartment. I'm sure both of our interests were piqued. After all,

I'm a man who was in a four-year relationship, so there must be something desirable about me. And Cheryl is a woman, that's all the qualifications she'll need to be desirable.

Here's the scene: Dark bar, sitting in a booth. Cheryl was sitting on my side, next to me (so we could actually hear each other over the music). She was leaning into me. I think it's safe to say we were both thinking of someone else. Even with out the few pitchers between us, our touching, that always leads to something. First are the kisses. Next, I found my face between her legs. Soon after, I was inside her. It was glorious. It was odd. Here I was having sex with someone who was not Diz, after many months of not having sex. Here I was, fucking a friend. But let's back up.

Before that I was thinking, "here I am, having sex with my friend." Before that, I was thinking about my hands on the very nice breasts of my friend. Before that, I was thinking about the hand of my friend on the inside of my leg. Before that, I was thinking about my tongue in the mouth of my friend and how she was making me hard. Okay, I was probably a little hard before we began kissing. You try not to be after not touching anyone sexually in several months and see how well you fair. Neither of us really know how it all started, who kissed whom first. We're not looking to blame the other person for anything. I'd say we're handling this pretty well, considering how quickly we sobered up when I entered her. We were too turned on to care at that point; we had our animal urges to grind out. Twice.

Relationships are never quite the same once you've put your mouth on a part of a person's body to which you had never given any thought until your mouth was there. I think we've weathered it fine. It's not like we committed some dastardly crime, but still, we'd like to keep it on the DL. I told Chuck, of course, and I'm sure she's told some of her friends. But Miriam and George can't know—just our best best friends. So why the hell did I tell Chuck? Two reasons for Chuck to know: He has a little thing for her, though he's only spoken to her once or twice (and I thought it'd be fun to rub it in); and I can't tell my best friend, because that's Diz.

Chuck really wanted to know details, cause Cheryl's got a hot body (he doesn't really know much else about her). So I told him a little bit. Nothing too graphic, like the intricacies of her pubic region, or the whimpering noises she makes when she's about to come or even the way she dug into my shoulder when she did. Those are for me to savor. But he can have a fuzzy silhouette of her nude profile and can definitely have Lord Lard Bottom.

“Lord Who?” he asks.

“Her cat. Lord Lard Bottom. He's not really a Lord, he just acts like one. You know, lording over you.”

“I get it, I get it.” Chuck Nods. “Man, a cat. I never would have thought. . .”

I was expecting a pussy joke to be inserted here. This is Chuck, after all.

“I always figured her for a dog person.” We laugh, he buys me a drink and says, “You think she's still upset with me?”

“I don’t know, Chuck. You’re not exactly the hot topic of conversation with us right now.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s all about Liz. Liz this, this that. Wah wah wah, I’m going to cry now because of Liz.”

“It hasn’t been that bad, c’mon,” I say. He just looks at me. “Has it? Well, perhaps I’ll try to change the subject next time, and maybe steer it towards you. But you know she wasn’t too blown away with your first impression.”

“Hey, I was just speaking my opinion. Every once else was saying their piece about the war, I felt I had to defend it.”

“But you could have mentioned how you were actually there, maybe that would have gone a little smoother, help her see your position.”

“That’s suicide, and you know it. I might have well just said I voted Republican.”

“When?”

“Just a hypothetical. You know, a comparison. I haven’t done anything like that.”

“Well, how do you expect her to warm up to you if you never explain yourself.”

He clasps my shoulder. “Isn’t that what friends are for?”

“So it’s that easy, then. You think you’ve got an in.”

“Predestination, my friend. That’s the word of the day, predestination.”

There are other things I don't tell him, things that Cheryl told me. She'd been assaulted in college and has avoided a lot of relationships since then. "A lot of people think I'm a nympho, but I haven't had sex in years." That's right, it's all a front to for her to feel normal. I guess we've all got scars and wounds.



Hank meets Liz's Family

Everything was going well in the first couple of months Hank and Liz dated. They were getting to know each other very well. It was that honeymoon period, where we all like to spend as much time together during those magical moments as possible. Hank wasn't painting a lot and Lance didn't get as much attention. They hadn't met each other's family yet, but their families knew of the other person's existence. There would be time for that, soon enough.

Back then, neither was cynical enough to believe that they only had so much good time to use before there was only bad time left. Back then, there was no need for space or alone time, these two love birds loved spending time with each other. That was before Liz's mom had her first brush with cancer.

She had known for months, but took her time telling Liz until the biopsy reports came back. Maybe that was because she saw her daughter happy for the first time in years and didn't want to ruin it. Everyone handled it coolly and calmly, maybe because the doctors treated it like it was so routine. The family

could handle it. After all, they had lost a member a few years ago, the prognosis looked good here. And they had time to prepare. The doctors decided on a mastectomy followed by a few rounds of chemotherapy just to make sure. Boy, were they ever sure.

Among other famous last words, “we’re sure we got all the cancer,” are phrases like “that will never happen to us,” and “look, the Greeks are gone and they left a present. Let’s bring it inside, what harm could come out of it?” But no one was thinking about it at that time.

What’s this got to do with things? Hank hadn’t fully established his credibility yet. Sure, he was good in the eyes of Liz, but not in the eyes of the rest of the family. You can’t really blame the family. They didn’t know him like Liz did; they hadn’t even met him yet. Soon enough, Hank’s repeated visits to Liz’s mom made all the difference. He was there for the operation, holding Liz’s hand. He was there during most visits following chemo. It helped that she was only a short train ride out of Blophoton.

It was early fall when Hank met Liz’s family. Liz’s mother decided to host a dinner so they could all meet and discuss her upcoming operation. By then, everyone had known about it.

Hank and Liz were the last to arrive. Liz’s brother greeted them at the door.

“Liz,” her brother said and gave her a hug. “How are you?”

“Great, Connor,” she said. “Are the kids with you?”

“No,” he broke from the hug. “They’re with their mother this weekend.”

He turned to Hank. “You must be Hank,” and held out his hand.

Hank took it, giving it a shake. “I am. Pleased to meet you.”

“Yup,” he said. “Come on in. Mom and Paige are in the kitchen.” He walked ahead of them, then turned into the office where the computer was on and shut the door.

“Don’t worry,” Liz said. “He’s always in a bad mood when ever the kids are at his ex-wife’s house.”

“I see,” he said.

Liz’s mother and younger sister were more enthusiastic about meeting Hank. Liz had warned him about it: “I haven’t had a boyfriend in a while, so everyone’s going to think it’s a big deal. Paige is still a college know-it-all, she’ll try to embarrass you. Just go along with the inquisition and you’ll be alright.”

Hank didn’t even step one foot into the kitchen before the ladies were on him, shaking hands, smiling, asking him if he needed anything from a chair to a foot massage. Well, not the foot massage, but it was the sort of fawning that seemed like it would lead to that. After the initial questioning of his well being, came the probe into his history about where he worked and what he did for fun. Only, it came out more like this:

Felicia: How is life in Blophton?

Hank: I enjoy it a lot. I’ve been there for—

Paige: Yeah, what do you do there for fun? Is it really exciting?

Hank: I try to see some bands or movies, but I'm really kind of boring, just work and some play.

Felicia: How do you like your job?

Paige: What's it like moving there?

Hank: It's okay. Moving was easy, I did it right after college. I'm an admin, so I don't have enough responsibility to not get in trouble, but just enough so I'm not bored.

Felicia: How long have you been with the company?

Paige: What do you pay in rent?

Hank: ah, five years. No, six.

Too much.

Felicia: Liz tells me you paint. I took some art classes a while back.

What's your medium?

Hank: I like oils, but they take a long time to dry, so I use acrylics mostly. I'll use oils only if I'm doing something special and want to take some extra time.

Paige: How'd you get your job?

Felicia: Have you sold anything recently?

Hank: I'm lucky, I was temping for a long time and then just fell into the job. I sold a few paintings at the art show we had a couple months ago.

"That's where he met me," Liz interrupted. Time slowed down again.

“Oooh, was it love at first sight,” Paige asked, looking to Hank and smiling.

Liz and Hank hadn't yet told each other they were in love. Hank still wasn't even aware that sharp pain he felt in his stomach was love when they first met. But he'd learn. But in this moment, when they faced the question directly and Liz's faced glowed in a combination of embarrassment and anger at her sister for asking such a direct question while they still stood around the kitchen table, with the oven timer ticking away, Hank was able to salvage everything. “Isn't it always?” he said, looking at Liz, then back to her sister and mother.

“I guess,” Paige responded and was left speechless for the first time.

Just in time, the oven timer went off and Felicia went to remove the oven's contents. Connor came away from the computer and presented fairly friendly conversation over a slightly more comfortable dinner than most have when meeting their girlfriend's family. Maybe it was because they all wanted to avoid talk of cancer. Maybe it was Felicia's looming mastectomy that made everyone intermittently jovial as each person tried to change the subject after any lull in conversation. But they did talk about it, eventually. Felicia assured everyone that it was routine, that everything would be alright and she wouldn't be in the hospital too long and would only have to go back for some Chemo. She expected everyone to visit, including Hank.

So it was this continued discomfort with Felicia's cancer that made Liz think about the conversation that occurred before dinner. As they were riding home, Liz asked Hank what he meant by his response to Paige.

“Hank, do you believe in love at first sight?” They were one couple of only a few on the train. The only light came from the overheads while the rest of the night flowed in from the windows with the occasional illumination from a street light or a car’s headlights.

“I don’t know. It was more of a comment to try to stump your sister. I guess I haven’t really thought of it.” They were silent for a moment while both Hank and Liz replayed the first time they met and tried to remember what they were feeling.

“I can say this,” Hank said. “I know for sure that I really liked you from the moment you stood next to me and started talking.”

“But you didn’t even know me, then. I didn’t know you. We both could have been dating someone else, or married and we wouldn’t have known.”

“I know, it’s odd. I only glanced at you, but when we talked it was like we had some connection.”

“We did. That’s never happened to me before.”

“Me neither,” Hank said. He was trying to think of the right way to say it. Liz was waiting, patiently, hoping she wouldn’t have to say anything first. No one likes to be the first one to tell someone they love that they love them. There’s anxiety about the feeling not being reciprocated, there’s eight hundred connotations and possible insinuations when you tell some one you love them, from simply meaning “I want to keep seeing you” to “I want to marry you, have children with you and never leave your side until we’re both rotting in the grave.” There’s the baggage everyone carries from previous relationships, ready to be

unloaded and equally distributed between the new couple when they confess their love.

So Hank formulated his thoughts and then spoke, “I still feel that connection between us. If anything, it’s gotten stronger. So, to say I love you now would have to acknowledge I was in love with you back then, right?”

“Hank, are you saying you’re in love with me?”

“Yes I am.”

“Well good, because I’m in love with you, too.” They leaned in for a long kiss and held hands the short ride home.

CHAPTER 9

STEP 8, AGAIN

It's Fourth of July Weekend and I'm visiting my parents in Smallton. It's good to be away from the Blophoton craziness. Plus, there are memories. Every year, Diz and I would get a nice spot on the lawn that runs along the river where they launch the fireworks. We make a picnic of it, the entire day, sitting in the sun, reading and talking. Smallton's display won't be the same—most people just watch Blophoton's on TV.

Mom and Dad aren't home when I get there. There's a note saying they're at the grocery getting food. "If the phone rings, answer it," my mom's hand writing advises. Of course.

The phone rings. I, the obedient son, answer.

It's a Telemarketer.

Me: Hello?

Telemarketer: Hello, may I speak to Mr. Fossett?

Me: May I ask who is calling?

TM: Yes, this is BlankBank.

Me: Oh, well I'm his son. I can speak to you.

TM: I'm sorry. This call is in regards to his new MasterofCharge Card.

Me: Well, I happen to be the executor of his estate and hold power of attorney. I control his assets, so anything concerning him will be directed to me. It's been this way since the accident.

TM: Accident?

Me: Yes. Auto-Erotic Asphyxiation gone wrong. It's very dangerous, you know. But I don't like to talk about it, since I'm the one who found him and revived him. He's never been the same.

TM: Oh, I'm sorry.

Me: Thank you. You were saying something about a new credit card?

TM: Yes, our new card offers a zero percent APR for three years on all transfers and no fees.

Me: Sounds nice, but what about cash investment options?

TM: Excuse me?

Me: Well, I've been looking at redistributing his investments.

Turns out, his are all in porn. And I just received an offer in my electronic mail account that there are billions of dollars waiting for me from Nigeria if I just send some a few hundred dollars to ship it over. It sounds solid to me. Can you counter this offer?

TM: Sir, that's a scam.

Me: Of course you'd say that. You're just trying to get my father's money. Well, good day to you, and don't telephone me again!

That's as exciting as it gets the entire day. Mom and Dad come home a while later and ask if anyone called. I tell them, but they don't find the humor in it. I don't know what's less funny: telling your parents a joke about auto-erotic asphyxiation or not having to explain what auto-erotic asphyxiation is.

I'll skip the crap about sleeping in my old room and all that stuff. It's not the same. My parents have converted it into a guest room. Everything is gone and I'm fine with that. They do have a few of my paintings up, which is nice.

I'll also skip the descriptions of Smallton, which is pretty much the same as any sub-suburban place outside of reach of normal routes to a larger city: fast food, strip malls, gas stations, maybe one decent restaurant and a few stop lights (maybe). So that's that. I'll give a tour next time.

The most significant thing about the entire trip is Dad, who finally opens up. The scene is simple enough: my parents and I are sitting in lawn chairs on the back porch while we wait for the fireworks display to be set off from a field on an old farm. Smallton is located on a fairly flat spot in the state, so everywhere is a good seat. A lot of people go to the high school football stadium to view the display en masse, but we've long outgrown it. Mom likes to go to bed right afterwards, anyway.

So, I'm sitting drinking a light beer, Dad with his NA beer and Mom with here wine cooler. We watch and ten minutes later, it's over. Mom goes into the house to read before going to bed, leaving us men outside to talk.

There's the warm glow of light from the house that silhouettes my father perfectly. And, just like in the movies, he doesn't turn to look at me. "We're glad you came out, Henry."

"Well, it's good to be back," I say.

Silence for ten seconds.

"Must seen pretty tame, our little display, compared to Blophoton's. Course, we don't have the budget and the T.V. incentives to pull off something that big. I like the smaller displays anyway. It really fills you with town pride to know that we did it all ourselves, with no corporate sponsorships or anything like that."

"Yeah." I wait for him to mention something about Diz, about how we always were in Blophoton and how I must miss her. But he doesn't say anything about that.

"Your grandfather, he hated fireworks, though. Said they were getting too uppity, taking over the meaning of Independence Day."

"I didn't know that." I can't remember Grandpa ever watching the display.

"He liked the parades though, because they honored the people who made this country great." He sips his NA beer and chuckles. "Course, he always had a spot in the parade with the Veterans group. He never shut up about the time he

was Grand Marshall and got to ride in the back of a Cadillac. He said the car was nice, but it was even nicer not to have to walk the parade route.”

“I wish I could have known him the way you did,” I say. I don’t remember him very well from when I was younger, but I know that as we both got older, he became sicker and spent most of his time in the hospital. From my sixteenth birthday until his death ten years later, I didn’t visit as often as I should and when I did, he was usually asleep.

“He was a good man. Perhaps a little more troubled by his time in the war than he let on. That’s probably why he drank as much as he did. The Fossett men have a habit of drinking too much.” He holds his NA beer, which he started drinking sometime after Grandpa was diagnosed with liver cirrhosis. Strangely, it was the heart attack that killed him. The nurses weren’t able to bring him back. “He hated that nursing home. Felt he should be able to die at home. He kept forgetting Mom wasn’t around anymore.”

“I’m sorry Dad,” I say. “I should have visited more.”

“Well, you were doing your own thing in Blophoton, starting up your own life. I think you’ve done alright for yourself, you know—getting more and more famous each day.”

“Thanks.”

“That’s something you didn’t inherit from me, your artistic talent. No, it seems my side has given you the health problems. If only I could have known about liver disease and my dad’s alcoholism, he could still be around.”

“Come on Dad, it’s not your fault.”

“I know, but there’s always something that clicks inside me and says I should have known better, done something, visited him more. I wasn’t there when he died and I hate to think of him dying alone, like that. No one getting to see him off or telling him they love him. I don’t think I ever did, you know.”

And what do I say to that? Nothing.

Silence.

“Well, who knows how he’d react with someone telling him something like that. He was never that open about his feelings—that’s something I’ve inherited from him. Sorry, Henry.”

“Dad, don’t worry about it. I know.”

“You know, your mom and I married young and had you right away. We always meant to give you a brother or a sister, but we couldn’t get the money straight. I was always traveling. By the time we were settled, you were ten or so. We just didn’t have the energy. Now, you’ll have to go through what I did with my dad.”

More silence.

He continues, “I’ve been seeing a therapist for a few months now. Your mother made me do it. She said I’d been moping around the house long enough and it was time for me to move on.”

“How’s that been going?”

“I’m moving. Or trying to. I’ve got good days and bad days. I see my therapist once a week and she’s helped me sort a few things out. She says it

might take some time. But I've been able to talk to apply some of it to your grandma and I feel better on most days than I did."

"That's good."

"Yeah. How are you doing?"

"I'm dealing with it. It's getting better too."

"Yeah. But never fast enough."

"Right."

And that was the scene. After about five minutes of silence, we both go inside and go to bed. I watch some TV but I don't pay attention to what's on. Instead, I think about the first real man-to-man with my Dad. We didn't hug or anything like that afterwards. There's still a wall around him, but it's smaller. Maybe it's not even a wall anymore, but a fence—a picket fence or a chainlink one that I can see through and almost reach my hand through.

I leave the next morning, early. Mom makes a small breakfast and I say good bye to both and "I love you guys" and close the car door to drive the normally two hours, but three and a half in rush hour traffic, drive back to Blopton. I go straight to work, spending twenty plus bucks on parking, but hey, it's sometimes worth it.

The next two days are playing catch up.

I go into the studio Saturday. Cheryl and Miriam sitting in the kitchen, looking over the calendar. Neither get up. Aside from the stereo, the studio is quiet—as if the subject of a conversation has just walked into the room.

“Hi,” I say. “What’s going on?”

They look at each other before Miriam looks at me, in one of those quick glances from the waist up before locking eyes on me. Cheryl’s told her, I know it. Maybe not all of it, but some of it. Not that Miriam wouldn’t already know everything about me from Diz. Maybe not. Who knows how much girls talk about that sort of thing. Maybe some talk about it more than others. Miriam’s full body scan would have gone unnoticed if I hadn’t known there was a reason to scan me. Women are the masters of the scan. As guys, we get caught doing it so much there’s no need to pretend to hide it anymore.

“We’re just planning the next exhibit. We’re thinking everything should be ready by August.”

“Oh. I guess I’d better start getting some paintings going, then.”

Cheryl speaks. “We were thinking of featuring my project.”

“In that case,” I say, “I’d really better get some paintings done, so you can shoot them.”

“Hank.” Miriam smiles. “She’s got something original. Something that’s completely new and top secret, no one’s ever seen any of it before.”

“Thanks,” Cheryl says.

“How was the Fourth for you both?”

“Good,” they say at the same time.

“Okay, then. I’ll just be painting then.”

Nothing. So much for conversation.

My easel still holds the last crappy painting I was working on. It’s not finished, some of the paint is dry and cracked, there’s a huge unpainted spot, which is unusual for me, because I’ll often paint a base over the whole canvas. I must have been blocked bad.

I scrap that painting and pull out a fresh canvas. I pick an un-gessed fine linen canvas—the expensive kind. Someday I’ll get around to mastering stretching my own canvases. Someday. I want this to be a good painting, because it’s the first time I’ve felt inspired for a long time. I’ll be painting my father, the way I say him on Tuesday night, the way the windows let out just enough light for me to see his face.

Why’d I wait so long? Because I wanted time to process the image, separate from all the memories in my head, to isolate the perfect image from a single celluloid frame in the movie that plays from that conversation. I think I have the right image and I’ve been playing with the lighting and angles. I’m ready.

I’m going to do this painting a little differently than the others. I locate my light source and paint that, paint the dark around the house, and outline the silhouette of Dad. Van Gogh did the majority of his masterpieces in one sitting (point for him). He painted with the fury of a manic depressive to get those images from his head (no point for him, none for me). He also cut off his ear (Ah, point for me). We’re tied, for now, buddy.

I call it quits for the day and head back out to the kitchen. It's empty, but there's a note:

Hank, sorry we weren't too talkative. Meet us for drinks tonight?

We're celebrating Cheryl. The date for the exhibition is August

19. Will that be good? Everyone gets space, but Cheryl gets the big room.

Love, C & M

Drinks aren't too exciting, but it's good to drink anyway. The Fourth in Blopton was crazy, as I predicted. Miriam watched the fireworks from a friend's rooftop apartment, while Cheryl sat at her favorite spot on the Whitman Bridge.

When Miriam gets up to go to the bathroom, I mean, to freshen up, Cheryl stays and I grill her. "So, did you tell Mir?"

"About what?" She turns red. "Oh. Just a little. Not everything. Don't worry, you're secret's safe. You're still the same brooding Hank."

"It's not that, I thought we'd keep it quiet. Not everyone needs to know what we've done. I mean, it was only a one time thing, right?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"You guess, what?"

"I don't know. I just thought that maybe by now, you know, we'd be able to forget and move on. That you'd forget all about her and could be yourself again and I could forget, too."

“I don’t know what’s going on with me. I’m not sure I’m ready for anything. Cheryl, you know I love you, but we both decided that it wouldn’t work out between us.”

“But we shared so much.”

“I know. That’s not being taken away.”

“Do you want to do it again?”

“I don’t know.” Her face falls and I can see that she’s about ready to cry.

“Cheryl.” I take her hand. “We’ll see, alright, sweetie. We’ll see what happens.”

“Okay,” and she smiles. Her face is still red. Miriam comes back.

“How many has she had?” I ask.

“I don’t know, quite a bit.” Cheryl starts laughing. “Yeah, she’s drunk.”

“I’m not drunk yet, a few more drinks and I will be.”

Miriam escorts Cheryl home fifteen minutes later, after she throws up in the bathroom.

The next day, she calls me apologizing.

“Cheryl, there’s nothing to apologize for. It’s okay.”

“But I feel like I put you on the spot. I know it was only supposed to be a one time thing, but god, doing that again after so long, it just makes you want it more. It’s addicting.”

“I know. I just don’t know if it’s good for us to start up a—”

“Fuck, Hank, I don’t want a relationship,” she says. “Ok, I do. I just feel so sterile and cloistered. It’s not fair for me to ask it of you, and I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry,” I say. And there’s the obligatory seven seconds of silence.

“Dating hasn’t been working out, then?”

“Nope. Sometimes I wonder if I’ll ever want to get close to a stranger again. I guess that’s my thing, falling for people I already know. How’s it going for you?”

“I’m not really into it right now. I think I’ll just focus on art, family and friends for now. Dad and I had a good talk last week and it’s the first time he’s ever opened up to me like that.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah, hey, you want to meet up for breakfast? We can talk more.”

“No, I’m not out of bed yet. Don’t think I’ll get out all day,” I can hear the smile form on her lips. “You want to join me?” She starts laughing. “Sorry.”

“Be careful. I just might.”

“Don’t threaten me. Bye, Hank.”

“Talk to you soon.”

Instead of breakfast, I stop by Dunkins and get a bagel and a coffee, then head over to the studio. I’ll try to finish the painting I started yesterday, if only I can get the image of Cheryl in bed out of my head. What a trade off.

Before I know it, it’s Thursday. Chuck calls me. “Hey man, where you been?”

“Painting and working. That’s about it.”

“Well, come by O’Doyles when you’re done.”

“Will do.”

I meet him at O'Doyles. Chuck's eating a sandwich and drinking something that's not beer. I sit down, order a Guinness and point to his glass.

"What gives?"

"I'll tell you in just a minute. I want to give you this first." He slides a folded sheet of paper across the table.

"Is this a love note? Chuck, I'm flattered, but I don't think it'll work out"

"Shut up. It's the last steps of your twelve step program."

I open it and see steps eight through eleven. I say, "Hey, what about twelve?"

"It will come to you naturally, once you get over step eleven."

I read.

Step 8: Stop feeling sorry for yourself.

I do that intermittently

Step 9: Forgive Her.

Eventually.

Step 10: Forgive Yourself.

This stops me. Aren't I the one who's been wronged? What did I do but get my heart broken?

Step 11: Meet Someone New

"What's with step ten?" I ask.

"It's part of self reflection. There's always something you learn from every relationship. This step helps you find out what it is."

“But she won’t talk to me, so how can I find out what I’ve done wrong in order to forgive myself?”

“You’ll see. It’s not something that you can try to do, it just comes.”

“Yeah.” I don’t see it.

“You will,” he says and points to his drink. “I’m trying something new.”

“G & T?” he shakes his head. “Vodka Tonic?” No.

“Soda water,” he says.

“Are you feeling alright?” I ask.

“Actually, yeah, I am.” He smiles. “I’ve been getting drunk every night for the past two years, since I got back from Afghanistan. My shrink convinced me to quit. Pulled some reverse psychology bullshit on me, betting me I couldn’t go a week without drinking. It’s been two.”

“So, you won the bet. What do you win?”

“My independence. I didn’t realize how much the war, being over there, fucked me up. I guess I tried to drink it away.”

“I didn’t know either.”

“Yeah, I hide it well.”

“How long have you been seeing the doctor?”

“My shrink? Since I got out. It’s part of some touchy feely thing the Army has going now. Most of the time, I just sit there and don’t say anything. But for some reason, I started talking. I guess it’s because I don’t really have anyone to talk to about it. I mean, you’re great and all. You’re my bro, Hank, but you just won’t understand it.”

“I know.”

“This guy was in the Persian Gulf, so he’s seen the sands and the people. He understands. I guess if I wouldn’t have been so stubborn earlier, I might be doing better.”

“Hey, I didn’t know you were doing that bad.”

“I’ve thought of killing myself every morning for the past two years.”

“What?” I’m stunned. “Why?”

“Don’t know. I mean, I’m proud to have served my country and all that. But there’s something that’s not clicking. I feel like no one gets me anymore, you know? So, what’s the point in living if no one gets you.”

“Come on, man. Where would I be without you? Still crying in some gutter over what’s-her-name.”

“You still are. I read your blog.”

“You’re ruining my point. But hey, why don’t you start one too?”

“Maybe I will. My shrink has been harping on me to go to some support group for people, some Post Traumatic Support Group. It’s for all sorts of people. I’m gonna do that next week.”

“How long have you been saying that?”

“Every week.”

“Do it.”

“Is that an order?”

“Affirmative,” I say.

“Yes Sir.” He salutes me.

Doesn't it seem like too many people in my life have problems? But why shouldn't we, I mean. We're real people, not like people in books or movies that just walk off stage and come back when needed. Everyone has a past. But, of all the people, the last one I would figure to have a problem is Chuck. I guess I'm lucky, only having to deal with a broken heart, not a broken spirit like Chuck or a broken self-image like Cheryl. It's just not fair, sometimes.

Without planning on it, I go back home again to drop off some paintings. One of Mom's new friends visited and saw some of my work on the wall and wants to put some in her gallery. Even a small town has a gallery, it seems. Maybe I'll sell a few. Who knows. And since the gallery is run by Mom's friend, this first set of five paintings is commission free, no gallery fee. That's always great. One actually sells while I'm there, which is nice. I wrote out a quick artist statement about the piece, personalized it for the What's-His-Face who bought it, then signed it. It was the smallest of the pieces, but that's 300 dollars in my pocket. It'll pay for the new suit I'm buying for Sue Anne's wedding. Yeah, I could wear my old one, but this will be something like a high school reunion. Why not splurge on myself, after all, I'm feeling more like me. I might as well give myself a welcome back present.



Their first real date

Hank wasted no time calling Liz the next day, after they had gone dancing the night before. He waited until the afternoon, which was very kind of him, considering he wasn't even awake until sometime past eleven. What Hank didn't know was that Liz and Miriam were already awake and had a lengthy discussion about him over brunch.

During brunch, Miriam filled Liz in on more information about Hank: "You know, in the two years I've known him, he's never gone out dancing. You must have some pull with him."

Liz smiled as she sipped her mimosa. "You know it." She set her glass down. "I told him the only way he could see me this weekend was if he came out. He did, even though he risked embarrassing himself in front of me and our friends. He's passed the first test."

"Good," Miriam said. They had already discussed Hank's personal history since Miriam has known him: He hasn't had a girlfriend in at least two years, though he's been on a few dates. He doesn't talk about them that much, but he's always given impression that he's a die-hard romantic, which Liz liked.

"So," Miriam leaned in. "Are you going to see him again?"

"I think so, if he ever calls me. He said he was going to."

"He will. He's a good guy." Liz gave Miriam the look, and Miriam continued. "I know, 'if he's such a good guy, why aren't I dating him?' You know I have strict rules: no dating coworkers, friends, or friend's friend. Even at the beginning, he filled two categories because I consider the studio a business

and he went to college with George. But now, he's also a friend. He's completely off limits. For me."

"Aren't I violating your rules, by dating your friend?"

"These are my rules. You don't have to follow them. I set them up because I was tired of having to change jobs, get new friends or move out of state every time I broke up with someone."

"You've never moved, apartments or jobs," Liz laughed.

"I meant making other people change jobs, get new friends or move out of state. It's a tough job, driving someone away."

"I hope I never have to do it," Liz knocked on the table. It was metal, but she went on talking. "So, are you alright if Hank and I see each other?"

"He has to call first."

"I know, it's only been twelve hours. Don't guys usually wait two days or something?"

"Completely immature, we're not in high school."

"Yeah, if you want to see me, call me."

"Exactly. And no, I don't think it's a bad thing. I mean, it's your life and if you want to tangle your friends up in it, that's fine, but just don't ask me to choose a side if it doesn't work out. I may not."

"OK," Liz said and raised her mimosa. "I give you permission to remain neutral with whatever happens between me and Hank. You are the Switzerland of inter-friend dating!" They clinked glasses.

Elizabeth made it home in time to walk her dog, return to change her shoes and wash her hands before Hank called. Liz didn't recognize the phone number on her caller ID but answered it anyway. She recognized his voice right away.

"Oh, hi Hank. I was just walking Lance, I almost didn't answer."

"I'm glad you did," he said. "I've got a great deal for you on replacement windows."

"I rent, you'll have to talk to my landlord."

"Alright," Hank said, accenting each syllable like he was reading from a script. "but Ma'am, if you act now for our new credit card, you can save point one-five percent on your new Masterofcharge card with new security features like fraud alert alien abduction protection."

It's difficult for Liz to keep a straight face or even tone in her voice.

"Sorry, not interested."

"OK Ma'am, are you interested in an enchanting evening with one of our eligible bachelors?"

"I don't know. Is he cute?"

"Ma'am, I can assure you personally that he is not only grade A cute, but funny."

"Alright, I'll relent, just stop calling me ma'am!"

"Really?" Hank said in his regular voice.

"What, no one's ever made it that far before."

“Never. They always hang up and block my number. I have to climb up the balcony just to talk to them. It’s very dangerous.” Liz can almost hear him smile over the phone.

“Sure you have, Mr. Smoothie. What have you got in mind?”

“Well, I was thinking Wednesday, we could hit the North End for some Italian and then maybe catch a play in the theatre district.”

“Ooh, a play. How cultural.”

“Yes. There’s these guys that paint themselves blue and don’t speak. It’s fascinating. Or there’s some Shakespeare thing going on, called *A Dreamy Summer’s Night* or something. It’s about Donkey Kong.”

“I love Shakespeare,” Liz said, when she stopped laughing. “Are you serious about *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*?”

“Yes, I am. I haven’t seen since it college. This is a college production, too, so it probably won’t be any better. Are you seriously into Shakespeare?”

“Absolutely. Didn’t Miriam tell you I was an English major?”

Miriam hadn’t. Needless to say, they arranged for their first real date, where Hank went through the proper channels of asking Liz out with plenty of notice, having planned everything in advance, from dinner to entertainment. He wanted everything to go right, so did Liz.

They didn’t last past dinner. As they were leaving the restaurant for the show, Hank leaned in for a small kiss. It was returned. They dropped their plans of mediocre theatre and ended up at Hank’s.

The details of that evening are private. But it's interesting to note that Diz didn't spend the night. She went home to tend her dog. Hank offered to come over, but she didn't want him to. Perhaps it was because she felt it was all moving too fast. Maybe Hank felt the same. If they could have known how each other felt, maybe they could have talked about it. Then they'd realize they were both scared of the same thing, that it was too good to be true, so therefore it wasn't. But they'd get over it.

CHAPTER 10

STEP 9 & 10

Today, I am famous. I am flipping through the local ‘zine, disinterestedly interested in reading the personals (the way one is supposed to read them), when I see my own ad printed, with my picture and everything in CMYK color. They’re posted in the ‘zine to advertise MutualMatch. I can’t say whether it works. Anyway, this is about as famous as I’ll ever get. Sure, I won’t be holding a party and breaking out the champagne, but it’s enough to make me smile. Somehow, some editor or editorial intern thought me

- (a) good looking enough to be featured,
- (b) interesting enough to be featured,
- (c) the only choice left for a three o’clock deadline and hadn’t taken a break for lunch yet, or
- (d) all of the above.

So, here I am. In print. While there’s no such thing as bad publicity, there are more favorable forms, like, say, an article on my painting. I’ve been mentioned before, in a blurb about local painting when another artist hit it big. But I was a side bar. I’d like a feature, and I very well can’t put up this “article” in my studio space to entice buyers.

Downside to my new found fame: It’s an old ad. I haven’t updated since last month—that’s ancient history in cyberspace. Oh, but when I was actively

searching, I was king. I spent at least half of my office time shopping, with the other half livejournaling. Instead of preparing for tomorrow's big meeting, I'd be cruising the sites for new faces, picking which lucky gals I'd write to next, then avoiding writing to them at all.

So, I'm not expecting a flood of emails, but it'd be nice. Instead, I have to live with the thought that all my friends know I'm desperate. But I guess that's better than being suicidally depressed.

Not that I'm feeling that bad anymore. It still hurts and I'm pissed that Diz won't talk to me still, but I guess it might be for the better. You can't just write someone out of your life, there's a process (not that I know what it is). I've been incorporating some Fiona Apple into my Pete Yorn music repertoire. I think my MP3 player would revolt if I didn't mix it up. Eugene pointed out that the music selection on my livejournal has gone through Pete's album twice. "You'll never get over her if you keep reliving it," he commented.

Then he sent me some angry music. That helps.

I'm not sure that there's any one certain way people go through heartache, but maybe there are steps we take at different speeds. Speaking of steps. I'm not sure what the next step is. I've been dating, but I'm not looking to fall in love. Who needs that anymore? I feel like I've moved on.

"You haven't moved on," Chuck tells me at O'Doyles

"What do you mean? I just told you that I don't care about being in a relationship anymore. I feel independent and happy."

Chuck's drinking a beer tonight, sipping on it lightly. "Becoming gay doesn't mean you've moved on from Diz."

"Celibate," I say. He rolls his eyes. "Like a monk, who doesn't need sexual contact."

"Because they've got God filling that need. What have you got?"

"My art," I say, believing it.

"I stand by my previous statement. Besides, have you completed all the steps?"

I nod, just to get him off my back.

"Really? What's the last step, then?"

I've been thinking a lot about this and I know it's all been leading a natural progression of get over one relationship and get into the next, get over that one and then get into the next. I don't think that's something I want to do.

"Okay, so if step eleven is 'meet someone new,' then step twelve is repeat steps one through eleven."

"You think?" Chuck asks, raising his eyebrow.

"Yeah. It's all a cycle. You get into one relationship and all goes well for a while. Then she gets unhappy, or I get unhappy, and we call it quits. Once of us breaks the other's heart, but we both feel individually wronged. We have to go through the steps again and again to realize we both let it die."

"Great. So, what was Diz's part?"

"She broke up with me," I say. After all, that's the big thing, right?

"And what was your part?"

That's simple: "I loved her too much to see it coming."

Chuck shakes his head. "You fucking liar, you're nowhere near step twelve."

"But I feel better," I say.

"But you've not moved on. You haven't completed the steps. You have forgiven her and you haven't even admitted you were part of the reason the relationship ended. Once you do that, you'll figure out step twelve." He smiles at me. "'Repeat one through eleven,' man, that's too cryptic for an artist. Where's the romance?"

So I'm wrong, big deal. I change the subject: "How's your group therapy coming along?"

Chuck's smile drops. "Tired of talking about yourself, finally?"

"I didn't mean it that way. Sorry."

"It's not fucking good, man. It sucks. You go in saying you were in the war and people look at you thinking that you deserve it."

Chuck takes a big drink of his beer. "It's just the same as it was in my unit. We all saw what was happening, but they were like 'you're a soldier, suck it up.' But sometimes, you can't. So, I try not to say anything. The group leader wants me to talk, but I can't do it yet. Those eyes on me don't feel comfortable, they're accusing and judgmental. Except for a few people."

"Sorry, Chuck. I didn't know it was so bad. I can't imagine it."

"Damn right, you can't." He downs his beer and goes to the bar. I sit. He's done this before. So much for his own recovery.

He comes back with two beers and hands me one. “You know, that’s the problem with the fucking thing. To understand, you had to be there. It’s that way for anything big and nasty that fucks up your whole life. People just sit there and listen, saying they understand. They don’t understand because they weren’t there. And no one wants to go through it, so I’m stewing in this shit and every time I open my mouth about it, people jump on politics. I’m not thinking about politics, when you’re over there, it disappears and it’s all about me, about my friends, about the fear of being blown up by some guy you can’t see.”

I nod.

“You know, drinking doesn’t do much. Fucking only takes my mind off it for a while. I can’t escape it. I did things, *we* did things, and things were done to us. Now I’m back here and people act like I haven’t been gone, that no one is over there and no one’s dying. Fuck that shit. But you know what, I’d do it again. Yeah, knowing what I know. I’d do it again.” He raises his beer and I raise mine. We clink glasses.

“To you,” I say.

“You know, one good thing about group therapy?” Chuck starts to tell me something and he’s got a sly smile on his face.

“What’s that?”

Then he reconsiders. “Never mind. I can’t really say it without violating confidentiality. Forget it.”

We sit for another hour. It’s mostly quite and I like it. Neither of us is asking questions or trying to come up with bullshit answers. It’s a good feeling.

Most nights, Diz and I could sit together for hours without saying a word. It was before we started fighting. I thought we had a strong connection because of the comfortable silence. I still don't think I know what went wrong with her.

This is the point where, if he were telepathic, Chuck would kick me for that thought. He'd probably say something like "it takes two to mess up a bed" or something like that. So we sit. I stop thinking about Diz for a moment and wonder just what Chuck saw in Afghanistan. Because he's never told me what it was like, I always assumed it was nothing. I was wrong. War movies run through my head, but all I can imagine are scenes from *Saving Private Ryan* and *Platoon*. I can't think of things that would portray his experiences in the Middle East into something that I'd understand. It's impossible for a guy like me to understand what I haven't been through.

"I'm sorry I wasn't around more," I tell him

"Don't worry about it. There's nothing you could do."

"No," and I'm experiencing what I think is real regret. "I wish I would have kept contact with you, so you'd have someone to talk to when you got back. Hell, I wish I would have kept in better touch when you were over there."

"Wouldn't have changed anything," he says and props an elbow on the table, resting his head in his palm. "It's not like I had reliable access. Besides, what could I tell you: 'went out today, got shot at by some Arabs. Sweated my ass off today, again.' A lot of fun that'd be. Meanwhile, I'd be hearing all about what you got going on at home, the things I'd be missing: birthdays and

Thanksgiving. Even stupid shit like this, just hanging out at the bar. You can't keep up."

"Yeah, well maybe I could have talked you out of going in the first place," I say.

"You wouldn't be able to. Besides, if I had to do it all over again, I'd still go."

This surprises me. "What. Even with what you're dealing with now?"

"It sounds stupid, I know. But I'll never do something that incredible again. Sure, I was scared out of my mind most of the time, but to see the good things we were doing over there. We may have been afraid of the Taliban, but so was everyone else living there and we stopped that. Hell yeah, I'd go back and do it again. Maybe I wouldn't come out of it such a nutcase the next time, but who's to say?"

The next day, I avoid actually working to read about other people's accounts of their time in Afghanistan. It seems to be a universal sentiment, that they'd all go back. I haven't even been overseas. Reading what some of these guys wrote stuns me. Things about finding buddies with parts blown off, getting trapped in a firefight, the uncertainty of everything. It's a wonder anyone comes home sane.

I think about what would happen if I went to one of these support groups Chuck goes to. I'd probably get rocks and shoes thrown at me. I guess trauma is all relevant; I haven't gone through shit compared to what Chuck has gone through. Or Cheryl or Dad. A broken heart, a shattered dream. That's nothing

compared to being raped or losing a parent. I haven't even had the fear of losing a parent.

I hear a ding, the sound of a bell. It jars me out of my thoughts and I look at my computer screen. I see the IM icon flashing and open it.

Eugene: Hey! How's it going? Ready for the wedding?

Me: I'm fine. Got a new suit and ready to go.

Eugene: Good. Bringing anyone?

Me: Nope. You know that.

Eugene: Sorry, didn't mean it that way. Just wondered if you wanted to ride together.

Me: Sounds good. I'm staying at my parents though.

Eugene: Not a problem, staying at a bed and breakfast near the church.

Me: OK. I know that one. It's nice.

Eugene: Good. Call you later to discuss details.

Me: Sounds good.

(Eugene has logged off)

I log off too and try to get some work done before lunch.

I leave for lunch and head over to the public garden. It's a nice summer day and I haven't been there since last fall. I stand by the pond and realize what I've

avoiding. I haven't wanted to see the ducks. I didn't want to see the vacationing families, the happy couples lounging in the grass. I missed the ducklings taking their first swims. They've lost their baby down and are in their "awkward teen" phase. That's all right. They seem fine without me.

I find a seat on a park bench, one that's not under a tree. I'd like the shade but don't want to take the risk of being shit on by some bird. Happens all the time. I'm right by the walkway, but there aren't too many people around for me to worry about being stared at by tourists: "here's a native, eating his lunch." Almost as soon as I sit down, the pigeons start gathering. Some are pecking the ground for food, and others are puffing out their chests and approaching them. I never know how they tell males from females. Then it happens: the circle dance.

Fucking birds.

These guys just don't learn and keep trying and trying to impress someone. It's like watching the creepy old guy at a dance club try to pick up college girls. They must have the same sized brain. I watch one bird move from one pigeon to the next, then to the next.

"Give it up, Romeo," I whisper. "She can tell you're a loser."

The pigeon stops, looks at me for a second, then moves on to the next and is ignored again.

I unwrap my sandwich and start eating. Poor pigeon Romeo, not so great a lover after all. Do pigeons mate for life or just for a season? It's probably once a season. I'm looking at this sad-sack of a lover as he waddles over to another would-be mate closer to me. Romeo's missing part of one of his left toes.

“So, you’ve got some war wounds, too, Romeo. It’s a shame girls don’t respect that.” Then again, maybe he lost his toe from doing something stupid such as not noticing a cat while he was pecking away at some bread crumbs. Maybe it was a self-inflicted wound, like he was so down and out a couple of years ago that he pecked his own toe off. I’ve heard of caged birds who go crazy and rip out their own feathers. Maybe solitude does that to you.

I throw the bird some crust and he picks it right up. Immediately, another pigeon, this one almost brown and white instead of gray, runs over, doing that stupid pigeon walk where the head moves back and forth with every step. The bread’s gone and so are both birds’ attention spans. Romeo puffs his chest and catches the attention of the other pigeon. Turns out the brown and white pigeon is a girl. They get close: Romeo and Juliet.

I’m not expecting it. I hear a bell and some jerk on his bike rides by scattering all the birds. They flap into the air then settle back down to the path. I spot toeless Romeo wandering around lost and alone. His Juliet isn’t that far away and he waddles over to her, puffs his chest, circle dances. Juliet walks away.

“Go after her,” I hiss at him. “Don’t just stand there, do it again.”

Romeo tracks her down. “That’s it. Now, puff up. OK. Circle, circle, damn it!” I watch them. “Shit.” And she walks away.

The pigeon stands there for a second, turns, then waddles away. “Come on, try again. One more time,” I coach him. “You can’t give up. So what, you’ve had a few bad breaks.”

Romeo waddles over to another pigeon. This one is mottled gray and white. He puffs up, circles. The other pigeon flies away and then Romeo takes off, too. A few benches down, I see someone scattering a bag of popcorn.

I finish my sandwich and head back to work. The rest of the day flies by and it's not until I'm ready leave and go over to the studio that I think about that pigeon. It seems ridiculous that I was so engaged watching a pigeon trying to get laid.

If this feeling, this mild heartache that I try to convince myself and others I'm over, is the worst I've ever felt, then I'm pretty damn lucky. At the same time, it also scares the shit out of me. If it hurts this bad, what will it be like when I lose one of my parents, like Dad and Diz have.

I might as well get hit by a bus at this moment. If there was a choice between losing Dad and losing Diz, who would I chose? That's not a choice I would want to make.

My parents, they're everything to me, aren't they? I would choose them. This is that moment in movies where music swells and doves fly out from trees, where the lead character, who has been dealing with the antagonistic potential love interest, sees something of himself in her and she recognizes herself in him. They meet up on a bridge somewhere, that is, after a short montage that involves looking through year books or home videos, and kiss.

That's not going to happen here. I'm only walking to the studio to paint. Nothing miraculous is going to happen.

I open the door to the studio and see the answer staring me in the face: it's me, looking back at myself, behind that a picture of my parents. I start to say "what the hell" but Miriam jumps in front of me.

"Hank, we didn't know you were coming over."

"Yeah. What's going on with the picture?" I look behind Miriam and see Cheryl scrambling to pick up frames.

"Oh, nothing. It's just one of Cheryl's pictures she's displaying for her exhibition."

"Great," I say. In the picture, I look horrible. It was on of those early days after Diz and I broke up. "Couldn't you have found a better picture of me, though?"

"Oh, well, we really like the lighting."

"OK," I say and try to step forward. "Can I come in now?"

"It's OK," Cheryl shouts from the back room. "I've got them all."

Miriam looks at me. "We're trying to keep the exhibition a secret. Sorry."

"Fine."

I sit in my space and look at the picture of my parents, the one from Cheryl's shot. I think for the first time that I felt what Diz felt. She was losing her Mom. I don't see why she had to make the choice. Maybe I was too wrapped up in my painting. I wish I could go back and change that. I wish that even knowing what I know now that I'd be able to act different.



Their first date: how Diz became Diz

So, the first time they meet seemed pretty innocuous. It would be a wonderful story if they went on that first date and vowed never to leave each other's side again. But that's not what happened. Here's what did happen:

Hank and Diz went back to their regular lives, unlike Cinderella, and focused on work during their days and social life during the evenings. They wrote to friends and told them about their weekend, about the nice person they met. Hank was going to call her that day, but he became a little nervous. He asked Miriam what she thought. She replied, "Hank, she didn't really mention you, but then again, she knows that we're friends and what she tells me might get back to you."

"But should I call her?" he asked.

"Sure, why not." And that was that.

Hank resolved to call her that night, but he didn't. He ended up going to the studio after work to paint off his pent up energy. He saw the painting, the one that brought them together, reminded himself to call her, but then reconsidered it as being too soon: he didn't want to come off as a stalker.

He didn't call her until Thursday.

"Elizabeth?"

"Yes."

"This is Hank, from the art gallery."

“Hi, Hank.”

“You know, Miriam’s friend. We talked for a while.”

“I know who you are, Hank. Why didn’t you call sooner?”

“Oh, uh sorry.”

“No need to apologize. Miriam told me all about you.”

“All about me? Okay, what did she tell you?”

“Everything.”

“I see, then you know why I’m calling.”

“Of course, to ask me out for an evening of overpriced food and mediocre theatre.”

“Right,”

“But my Saturday is already booked because you took too long to call me. You can’t keep a lady waiting like that.”

“Well, there’s always Friday.”

“Friday, as in tomorrow? I can’t have a one day warning, and what about reservations?”

“What if I had already made them in advance?”

“That’s very presumptive of you, what makes you so certain I would have said yes.”

“I talked with Miriam.”

“Liar.”

“No, I did. She told me everything about you.”

“Now I know you’re lying.”

“Okay, you got me. I guess it’s too late to see you this weekend.”

“I didn’t say that. I said it’s too late to ask me out for this weekend. It’s not too late for me to ask you out.”

“What if I already have plans.”

“You’d be lying again. Besides, what man passes up an opportunity to spend a night out with a gorgeous girl?”

“You’ve got me there.”

“Great. You can meet us at the club.”

“Us?”

“Yes, my friends. We’re going dancing. We’ll also be judging you.”

“Dancing’s not really my thing.”

“Well, just wear comfortable clothes, then.”

Hank went dancing, despite his conscience. Miriam refused to tell him anything about her. “If I tell you, then you’ll have nothing to talk about and that would be boring.”

“But you told her about me.”

“That is different. She has to know about you in order to decide whether she’d like to go out with you. You, on the other hand, have already decided you want to go out with her, which should be considered a luxury.”

“Yeah, but what about conversation, if she already knows about me.”

“You’ll find something to talk to her about. You’re a guy and guys love to talk about themselves.”

Dancing was not something Hank did regularly. He didn't like the club scene: too many people groping each other on tightly packed dance floors. He didn't like touching strangers or being touched by them, so he danced by himself a lot. He was willing to risk the discomfort to spend some time with Diz.

“Hi Elizabeth.”

“Hank, you came. Don't call me Elizabeth. Only my co-workers call me that.”

“And your mom, when she's angry.”

“Yeah, that too.”

“So, Elizabeth is your professional name. . .what do you prefer, Liz or Beth.”

“Call me whatever you fell like calling me.” The music pumped harder and they danced.

It's a good scene, to be the only man in a pack of women, it's what guys aspire to be when admiring from far away. They'll try to infiltrate, but this pack mentality thrives and the women will box out the unwanted from their group. For the accepted man, it's a great feeling, until he realizes he's being scrutinized.

Diz's friends were nice to Hank, but they were also there to keep an eye on him.

The dance floor was packed, they were sweat and thirsty. The beat went on. Diz

was a good dancer, encouraging Hank to dance with her. “Spin me,” she said.

“It's my favorite part.” And they spun.

“Don't you get dizzy, Liz?” His mouth was inches away from her ear. He had decided on Liz, that's what everyone else called her.

“That’s me, Dizzy Lizzy. It enhances the alcohol.”

“That’s a perfect name for you: Diz, Dizzy Liz.”

“I like that.” They leaned in closer, heads touching, cheek to cheek. They didn’t kiss.

One of Diz’s friends had pulled her away, under the premise of going to the bathroom, under Diz’s strict orders not to let her do anything stupid.

CHAPTER 11

STEP 11

It seems like I'm spending more time in Smallton than I have in years. Don't get me wrong, I like the town where I grew up, I like seeing my parents, I just thought I was bigger than this.

I drop Eugene off at the B & B after an awkward conversation about stopping by my parents' house first:

Me: You sure you don't want to stop by the house?

Eugene: Don't you think it's a little too soon to be meeting your parents?

Me: What do you mean?

Eugene: Well, we're not officially dating or anything

Me: What? Oh, I see. Look Eugene, I like you. . .

Eugene: I know, I know, you just got out of a relationship. . .

Me: . . .as a friend.

Eugene: . . .and you're not sure if you're ready for this type of commitment.

Me: But not that way.

Eugene: It's hard enough to know you were dating the wrong person for so long, but to realize you were dating the wrong gender is even more difficult and you don't want to come out in front of your parents. For shame, I thought we

were closer than that. Who cares what you're parents think, when we have what we've got!

Me: You ass.

Eugene: Hank! Henry, don't do this to me!

Me: You done?

Eugene: Almost. Remember, they can take our lives, but they can never take our freedom!

Me: Finished?

Eugene: Yes.

Me: Great, here's the B & B, now get the fuck out.

Eugene: I know you're angry, but don't be that way. Though, I love how your eyes sparkle when you're angry.

Me: What was that?

Eugene: I felt like doing Scarlett O'Hara. You like?

Me: No.

Eugene: Me neither. I don't even think she said those lines.

Me: See you at the wedding.

What a crazy guy. I pull into the driveway and greet Mom at the door. She tells me the good news, that all my paintings at the gallery have sold.

"It's mostly tourists that buy them," she says.

"That's good," I tell her. "It means I have a steady market."

“Yeah. Must be all those people stopping by after visiting the Norman Rockwell Museum over in Stockbridge.”

“My paintings are nothing like Normal Rockwell,” I say.

“Well, still. I like them and so do a lot of other people.”

The wedding’s not until three, so I hop in the shower and get ready. I hate going to weddings, for lots of reasons:

- 1) There’s a lot of people I don’t know or barely know, which wouldn’t be a problem except for a) you constantly have to explain your affiliation with the couple, and b) some jerk is always trying to one-up you on said affiliation to prove her or she knows the couple better.
- 2) There’s always at least one (and sometimes a series) of inside jokes that I never understand and no one explains or when they’re explained don’t make much sense anyway and only serve to bolster the stance of reason #1b.
- 3) Some people go to weddings for the specific purpose of meeting that someone of their dreams, as it’s always portrayed in the movies, which never happens.
- 4) There’s no guarantee of an open bar.
- 5) There’s a possibility of an open bar, which leads to a) some guy getting drunk and being an asshole, or b) some girl, particularly a bridesmaid getting drunk and expecting reason #3.

- 6) Girls in bridesmaid dresses are rarely attractive, and made more so by reason #5.
- 7) There will either be a band or a DJ. Either way, they're going to try to get everyone to dance to some version of the Hustle, Macarena or Electric Slide.

OK. Maybe it's not the weddings I hate so much as the reception.

When I'm putting my suit on, Dad comes in to the bathroom. "Hey, how's it going?" I ask.

"Not too bad," he tells me. "Things are getting better. How about you?"

"I'm all right," I tell him, and I think I'm telling the truth.

"Have you met this fellow of Sue Anne's?"

"No, have you?"

"Once. We ran into her at Albert's a few months ago. He seemed nice, but we didn't talk much."

"Yeah, it can be pretty awkward running into the parents of your fiancé's high school boyfriend," I say.

"I know. That was a long time ago, back then. Your mother and I knew you'd move on to bigger things."

"You never thought that Sue Anne and I were going to stay together?"

He shakes his head. "Not really. You both had your lives ahead of you and were going different directions. We thought, maybe, but knew better."

"What about Diz and I?"

“That’s tougher. We thought that soon enough, it’d be you and her walking down the aisle. But things change, you know. Nothing’s permanent, things are always changing. Sometimes it’s all about adapting and if one person isn’t adapting, things don’t always work out.”

“I guess so,” I say and finish tying my tie. I realize that it wasn’t all about Diz and her mom. I was adapting too, we were adapting to different things and not together.

Maybe it’s all right that things worked out this way. I wish it wouldn’t have, but maybe, just maybe.

* * *

The wedding is a nice ceremony: short, meaning not Catholic. There are no drawn out exchanging of hand written vows, no self-indulgent music performances by friends. Sue Anne is radiant and I’m happy for her.

That’s when it hits me. I’m sitting near the back of the church, for a multitude of reasons: I’m not family to either side, I’m not even a close friend, I’m just some guy she dated in high school for a while and that was over ten years ago. I don’t feel like I fit in, yet I’m here because Sue Anne asked me to be here.

But why?

Furthermore, why did I agree?

I don’t want to go into some long exploration about first loves and how we never forget or really stop loving that person because that’s bullshit. I had scarcely thought of Sue Anne once I got out of college. I’ve had too many other

experiences: other girls, different friends, other break-ups. And sometimes I'd wonder what she'd be up to at Holyhoke, but I never went out of my way to contact her.

I'm sitting in this church trying to figure out what ties me to Sue Anne so much that I'm here, attending her wedding and feeling happy for her. What does it all mean? What did we mean to each other and why did that lead us back here?

Months ago, she told me I'd been a wonderful boyfriend. I don't know what it means to be that anymore. I hear the church pastor leading them through the vows and they're simple: to love, to honor and cherish one another no matter what. Is this all that separates a wonderful boyfriend from a wonderful husband? If so, where did I go wrong?

If this were a movie, I'd be running back to everyone I've ever dated and asking them what went wrong. In that movie, I'd look like John Cusak. But that movie's already been done. Instead, I can only think of Sue Anne and Diz, the first and the last. I guess there is a connection linking those two. After all, if I'd never dated Sue Anne, I probably wouldn't have found Diz.

My heart flutters as I think about that and for the moment I forget all I've been through in the past months. There's a moment of panic, a fear of losing all those years with Diz, that they could have never have happened. Where would I be today? Who would I be?

Could everything in my life have hinged on whether or not I kissed Sue Anne Tso for the first time while sitting in Mom's Buick parked outside Sue Anne's house? If we hadn't kissed, I would have had some other high school

sweetheart, or maybe even have dated several girls but not been in love. And so on, all the way up to Diz. I wouldn't even be here, in this church at this wedding. I'd be somewhere else, thinking about some other girl, a complete stranger. Hell, we might not even have broken up, it could have been us at the altar.

I shake my head at the thought of this other life. I don't want any of it, even if it means I'd never experience a broken heart. It was all worth it. There are memories that can never be taken away.

The pastor introduces the new couple and I'm smiling as they walk back down the aisle. I think, for the first time, that I'm OK with everything.

At the reception, I'm sitting at a table with Eugene and six other strangers. They all know Sue Anne from Holyhoke and Amherst. They all act like they know me once I explain the high school boyfriend thing. We're actually having a good time—and I include myself in the “we.”

So far, there have been no excessive usage of inside jokes, the bar is ajar, open for beer and wine but the liquor is COD. That works for me. There's a live band playing a mixture of Sinatra and a better version of elevator Muzak while we eat and toast.

We're all talking and I'm getting to know these people, just not their names. Then someone asks me the inevitable question: “So, Hank, what do you do?” I don't know why we have to define ourselves by our occupations. We're no longer in a caste system where your occupation became your name, like Smith

or Butcher—what would that make me, Adminy? I don't even want to think about work.

“I'm a painter,” I say.

Some guy, Biff or whatever, follows up, “houses or canvas?”

“Canvas,” I say.

“Nice,” says the girl sitting next to Biff. “How's that working out? I always thought painters were broke.”

“We are. I work a side job for now, but things are picking up. I had a good showing during the last exhibition.”

“Oh,” they say and seem ready to move on to the next topic. “So, Eugene, how are things in Blophoton?”

My two seconds are over and I get up to get a drink from the bar. Sue Anne and her husband are visiting a table next to the bar. As I walk by them, Sue Anne grabs my arm. “Hank,” she says and pulls me in for a hug. “Thanks for coming. It's really good to see you.”

“You're welcome. You look wonderful,” I tell her. “Congratulations.”

“This is Mark,” she says, as her husband stands next to her. We shake hands and I wish him the best. “Well, we've got to move on to the next table. I'm sure I'll be able to sit sometime. I just wanted to stop you. You're looking good, Hank.”

“Thanks,” I say and watch her move across the floor.

There's a short line for drinks and some people fill in behind me. It looks like we're the single drinkers. No one is carrying anything back to anyone else

and each person holds his or her glasses as if they're life preservers and we're in the rough sea of coupledness.

We get to me and I order a Bombay and Tonic. I watch the bartender tip the bottle upside down and measure out a shot. He looks at the remaining drops of gin into the bottle, looks at me, shrugs his shoulders, pulls out the pour spout and splashes it in then fills it with tonic. He hands it to me and I give the bartender five dollars for the three dollar drink (cheap, I know).

"Don't tell me that's the last bottle," a woman behind me says.

"Sorry," says the bartender, "We've got someone making a run for more, but it'll be a while."

"Well, fuck, how am I supposed to enjoy the reception sober?" I turn to look at the speaker. She's an older woman, probably around my mother's age. But she looks to be in good shape, or else she wouldn't be wearing the dress she is wearing.

"Here, you can have this one," I tell her, handing my glass. I turn to the bartender, "I'll just have a Sam's." As the bartender reaches into the ice for a Sam Adams, the lady behind me starts gushing.

"Oh, thank you. You know, if it were the other way around, I wouldn't have done it. You're so kind. What's your name?"

"Henry," I say. "Or Hank." The bartender hands me my beer and we step to the side of the bar.

"Well, Henry. I'm Dara, it's a pleasure to meet such a fine young man, and polite, too."

We shake hands and she wanders off.

By the time I get back to my seat, they're ready to cut the cake. For the first time, the couple doesn't smear or smash the cake into each other's mouths. But just when I think it's beginning to be a cliché-less wedding, the band announces that it's time for the couples' dance.

What happens is that all the married couples get on the dance floor and the band starts playing some sappy love song like Whitney Houston's version of Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You," or that song from *Titanic*. And as the couples dance, the MC starts saying, "If you've been married less than one hour, sit down," and then the bride and groom sit. Then the MC goes up from there: "If you've been married for a week, sit down. If you've been married for a month, sit down. If you've been married six months," and so on until there's some old couple on the floor who's been married for sixty years and everyone gives them a round of applause. It's not really a bad cliché, I guess. I just drink my beer and wonder what it's like.

After that, it's time to throw the bouquet and catch the garter belt. I refuse to participate in either. I'm just sitting at my table while all the single women and guys (including Eugene) and gather up front for the tossing. That's when the lady from the bar sits next to me.

"Henry," she says. "I was hoping you'd be up there, but it seems that you're taken." She scans my hand for a ring.

"I'm not. I don't feel like participating, that's all."

"Oh, good then. You're not dating anyone, are you?"

What a fucking loaded question that is. I had almost, if not quite, put Diz out of my head for a few moments only to have her flood back in. “Not by choice,” I say.

“I can’t see why. Just look at you.”

Sue Anne tosses the bouquet and some girls scramble for it while others stand back and let them. I don’t know if I’m ready to be picked up by someone my mom’s age. “Thank you,” I say to her as she watches the victor rise from the floor with the bouquet. I’m glad I’m not out there to risk the chance of sliding the garter belt on to her. “It’s very kind of you to say that. But even though you’re very attractive, I don’t think it’ll work out.”

Then she starts laughing. “I must be older than your mother. But I’ll take a compliment when I can get one.” She turns to look at me as the guys prepare to dodge the garter belt. “So, Henry, tell me what you do and how you know Sue Anne and Mark.”

I explain that I live in Blophton and that I know Sue Anne from high school. There’s no need to go into the high school boyfriend thing.

“It’s so nice of you to come all this way for the wedding.” The garter belt flies and some teenager ends up with it. Better him than me. “Sue Anne is like a second daughter to our family. They both started teaching at Amherst High School the same year and became roommates. I had thought we were done helping them move once they graduated. Anyway, we live only a half an hour away, so the girls were always stopping by to visit or borrow things.”

The MC announces that the teen has to slide the garter belt on the bridesmaid's leg. The higher up he gets it, the more prosperous Sue Anne and Mark's marriage will be. The band starts playing a burlesque tune for a few bars then stops as the crowd lets out a collective groan. "Go higher," someone yells.

She continues after the noise dies down. "Perhaps you noticed my daughter, Claire, in the wedding party? She stood next to Sue Anne's sister." Oh great. I pretend to think about it and then nod my head. I have no idea who she's talking about. I know what's coming. I should have told Dara that I am taken, but I was caught off guard.

"You don't remember, do you? Perhaps had your eye on another girl." Eugene comes back to the table and sits next to me and says "Did you see, Hank. I was this close to catching the garter belt. I would have put that thing up so far on her leg that Sue Anne and Mark would be stuck with each other forever. All I'd have to do is tell her 'it's okay, I'm gay!'" Dara looks at Eugene, then at me and makes that face that says, "oh, I see."

"Eugene, this is Dara, Claire the bridesmaid's mom. Dara, this is Eugene, Sue Anne's friend from college."

They shake hands and for a moment I think I have a cover to avoid being set up. Let Dara think I'm gay.

Then Eugene asks, "So, Hank, how'd you pick up Dara?"

"Oh, we go way back. To the bar," I say.

Dara interrupts, "I was about to say he should meet my Claire when you arrived."

Yes! It's working. I wait for her "but he's obviously taken after all."

It doesn't come. Instead, Eugene lights up and says "That'd be perfect! Bring her over her!" Dara smiles and gets up.

"I'll be back. Eugene, make sure he doesn't go anywhere."

"Will do," he says.

I stare at Eugene. "We couldn't pretend to be a couple? I don't want to meet her daughter. I don't want to be set up."

"Too bad," he says. "It's the perfect opportunity. If you don't like her, you're not committed into anything and there's hardly chance you'll ever see each other again. It's time to try, it's time to move on."

"But I'm not ready to move on."

"You never will be. It's safe to stay put." Damn right. "That's why I'm giving you a push. Here she comes. Don't forget to smile, and don't be a prick."

Dara walks up, holding her daughter's hand. Claire, who's looking at Eugene and me, isn't smiling either.

"Henry, this is my daughter, Claire. Claire, this is Henry. He's an artist in Blophoton. We reach out to shake each other's hands and say our mutual "pleased to meet you." As our hands touch, the band starts to play—I swear someone is scripting this like a movie, the bastard—the singer sings some Otis: "I've been loving you for too long, I don't want to stop now."

Eugene says to Dara, "I guess we should leave them alone." He holds out his hand and asks her "Do you want to dance?" and they head to the crowding floor.

“I’m sorry,” I say to Claire. “This wasn’t my idea.” I look at her and I’m not sure if I find her attractive. Her bridesmaid dress doesn’t seem to fit right and she looks like she has too much make up on. But she’s not unattractive.

“I know,” she says and her voice is nice. “My mother is always doing this. I should be apologizing.”

“No, don’t worry. These things happen at weddings.” God, we’re already stalling. I can feel Dara and Eugene’s eyes on us. Time to resort to the first area of small talk: work.

I’m about ready to ask her what she does when Claire asks me “How’s the art scene in Bloghnton treating you?”

“Not bad,” I say. “It’s just something I do on the side. But I’m selling some paintings. I had a gallery showing a few months ago that went really well. There’s another one in a couple of weeks, but one of the other artists in the studio is being featured.”

“So you paint? Great,” she says. “Now we have something to talk about rather than the usual bullshit of asking each other what we do. I hate that.”

“You enjoy people defining you by your career?” I smile.

“No, but if you want to know, I’m a junior high art teacher.”

“What a coincidence,” I say. “I paint like a junior high student.”

“I doubt that,” she looks over her shoulder. “You want to hit the dance floor? Maybe we can get out of their view.”

“Yes,” I say. “Somewhere on the other side of the floor.”

We step on the floor and the band is still going strong with Otis, the back up singers are belting out “so long” while the singer belts out “don’t make me stop now, I love you, I love you!” We link hands and I place my right hand on her back.

We don’t say anything and I breathe in her perfume. It’s a faint scent, something I’m not familiar with and so different from the way Diz smelled. Claire smells like spring.

The song stops. Everyone claps and then the band launches into an upbeat song. “Let’s stay here,” I say, unlocking our hands. And we dance, leaning into each other every once in a while to say something.

“I’m glad it was you and not your friend,” she says. “When I saw him smiling, I thought that Mom had built up someone’s hopes.”

“No, she only said you were a nice girl, but incredibly easy.”

“Shut up!” She laughs. “She did not. She probably told you how worried she is about me becoming a crazy cat lady.”

“Come to think of it, she did have a look of concern. Do you like cats?”

“No. I mean, I like them as other people’s pets. But they’re not for me.”

“Oh, you prefer something more exotic to collect, like Llamas?”

“How did you know? My apartment is filled with them.”

“Sounds very clean,” I say.

“Well, you get used to the smell after a year or so,” she’s still smiling.

We finish one song and I'm halfway through some version of the Hustle before I realize I'm actually enjoying it. "Damn," I say and she looks over.

"We're trapped."

She looks surprised, then says "You're right! What are we going to do?"

"Maybe we should stop," I say.

"Is that possible? I mean, are we allowed?" She plays along perfectly.

"I don't know, it's a risky move. We have to step out at the right time, or else you'll get entangled with the guy next to you, setting off a chain reaction leading to disaster."

"OK, I'm ready." She reaches her hand out to mine. I take it. "On three."

We count together and step out of the Hustle.

"We made it," I say. "I seem to be OK. Are you all right?"

"Nothing broken or dislocated, so far. But there could be long term effects."

"You're right. We should get a drink and sit down." Then it happens.

We're almost to the bar when another bridesmaid comes running up to Claire.

"There you are," she says. It's the one who caught the bouquet. She pulls Claire to the side. All I hear is someone shouting "We've got to get ready!" before Claire turns to me.

"I've got to help with them send off," she says. "I'm sorry, Henry. It was nice to meet you."

"It was nice to meet you, too." I say. "I mean it. It was real nice."

She smiles at me before the other bridesmaid drags her away.

I don't talk to her the rest of the night. When I'm giving Eugene a ride back to the B & B, he asks me if Claire and I hit it off.

"Yeah," I say. "I was surprised, but we did."

"Good. Do you think you'll talk to her again?"

"Probably not, seeing as how I didn't get her number. It's for the best, maybe. I mean, it's not like we live close enough to date."

"Well, you never know," he says. "Sometimes I think it's worth taking a risk for something. Even if it doesn't work out, at least you took that risk and know it didn't kill you."

I think of Diz, all the risks I took and didn't take. For the first time, I'm glad I took those risks, even if I ended up the way I am. As for the risks I didn't take, I'm sorry I didn't take them. But I wasn't ready. Maybe next time.

"I guess you're right," I tell Eugene as I pull up to the B & B. "I'll pick you up tomorrow, OK?"

"Sounds good. Sleep tight!"

"Thanks." I go home and tell my parents about the wedding. I even tell them about Claire. They seem happy and it's the first conversation I've had with them about something other than Diz.

They also seem relieved. I wait for one of them to ask me more about Claire, if I'll call her or even if I got her number. I expect them to ask if I think I'm ready to start dating again or if I think it'll work out. I'm ready for those

questions because I've got answers this time: maybe, yes—if you count email, not sure, and doesn't matter because I haven't thought about it.

Like they'd believe that.

The next morning, Eugene and I head back to Blophton. It's early and the sun is peaking into spots in the Berkshires. Usually, the drive seems quicker going back than coming in. I attribute this to the shape of the state. It's for the most part, a rectangle. There's more weight on the Blophton side than on the Smallton side (even though there's mountains), causing the Blophton side to tip down like a scale or see saw. Going home is literally driving up hill. The drive doesn't seem as fast this time, and it really drags once we hit Springfield. Strange.



Shortly After Their First Meeting

Hours after meeting Diz, Hank's first art show ended. It was sometime after ten o'clock when the artists closed the studio and opened the remaining bottles of wine that were originally for guests. There were eight people: Miriam and her boyfriend, Cheryl and two friends (one being Diz), and George and his boyfriend. There was also Hank, whose friends had left earlier. Everyone seemed to be naturally paired off, like it was meant to be this way.

They sat on the floor, drank and talked about the show. The artists were glad they had managed to sell at least piece (more people strolled in during the evening). The conversation played like a movie:

Hank: "Well, I am glad that went relatively well."

Cheryl: "I'm glad for the left over wine."

George's Boyfriend: "You weren't expecting it to?"

Hank: "It was my first showing, so yeah, I was nervous. But we all made sales."

Miriam: "Some more than others, right George?"

George: "Hey, I can't help it if I'm good. Besides, I pay more for this studio."

Cheryl: "Only because you make, like, three times what Hank and I do."

George: "Like I said, I'm good."

George's Boyfriend: "Yes, he is."

<Laughter>

Diz: "Which piece did you sell, Cheryl? I'm sorry I missed that."

Cheryl: "The one of Miriam sculpting George W. Bush's head."

Miriam: "Too bad he didn't buy the finished sculpture too. I feel ripped off."

Hank: "Don't worry, Cheryl's ripped off all of us."

Cheryl: "Hey!"

George: "Where's my cut. I demand a cut of the royalties!"

Cheryl: "I can't help it if the process of art is interesting. I shoot other things too."

But perhaps that's not near enough to get an idea of how things were for Hank and Diz. Have some more.

Their First Meeting:

They met at an art gallery showing, Hank's first show. It was the studio's first exhibition with Hank as a new tenant of the Studio. Diz was walking around the studio and stopped to look at the very painting Hank was admiring. Sadly, it was an awful piece of work. Even sadder, it was Hank's.

His plan was to stand by it in hopes that someone would think that if it were interesting enough to him, then that person might purchase it, therefore getting that ugly thing out of his sight forever. The turnout for the showing was nine people, which included the four artists.

She stood next to him, and they both were standing about five feet away from the wall. The price tag on the painting was \$250, the most he had ever asked for something he did. "So," he whispered. "Do you think it's worth the price?"

"What was that?" she responded, looking at him for the first time. Their eyes met and nothing happened, not yet. "I'm sorry, I wasn't listening. I'm trying to figure out what the artist was trying to accomplish."

"Um, well, I think the artist was trying to say something about love. It least, that's what I get out of it." Hank thought that girls loved it when guys talked about love.

"Really? Love, you say." She looked back to the painting. "Just what about love is he trying to say?"

“I don’t know. I’m not an artist or anything. I just like, uh, art.” He was off to a good start already.

“I guess we’ll have to ask the artist. I’m a friend of Miriam, she’ll know this guy,” she peers at the name. “Henry Fossett.”

It was time to talk himself up, defend his reputation. “I’ve heard good things about him,” Hank says.

“Like how he paints about love.”

“Exactly,” he says. “Really, aren’t all paintings about love? You know, I’m thinking I may buy this one. That is, unless, you’re interested in buying it.”

“Me? Oh no. It’s not my thing. What would I do with it?”

“Use it to scare children at Halloween?”

Yes, it was a corny line. But here’s the thing, and the most important thing: she laughed. She actually laughed at his joke, not at him, which meant that Diz got him and his sense of humor.

“I’d rather not kill them,” she said. “Why don’t you get it, on a wall that faces an outward window and then you’ll have instant theft deterrent, kind of like the club. You’d never have to lock up again.”

It was Hanks turn to laugh. But instead, he doubled over in pain. It was Love sucker punching him. He started coughing.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said between breaths. “I’m fine, I just forgot I can’t breath and swallow at the same time.”

“Happens to the best of us. I’m Liz,” she held out her hand.

“Hi, um, Hank.”

“Hank, eh? Pleasure to meet you. I’ve never been in the presence of a great artist before.”

“Pardon?” He said, massaging his stomach.

“You sure you don’t have appendicitis?”

“No, taken out long time ago.”

“How about humblitis?”

“What?”

“Inflammation of humility. It’s definitely not egoitis. Look at this painting.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come on, you’re Henry,” Liz said. Putting on British airs, she continued, “Mr. Fossett.”

“Me, no, no. Certainly not. I could paint better if I were colorblind.”

“Oh,”

“But if I were, what would you say about shameless self promotion?”

“I’d say you could get away with it, as long as it’s with a pretty lady like me, wouldn’t you say, Hank?”

“Ah, what gave it away?”

“You,” she poked him in the chest, “are a terrible liar. Besides, I’ve seen you in some of Cheryl’s projects.”

“Oh, a fan of Cheryl’s work, too. Well, we’re all glad you came.”

“Thanks.”

“So, you’re not going to buy it?” He gestures to the painting.

“No.”

So there it is, their first conversation. What do you think? Did you see it, that spark of something special? Was there something that was missing that would lead them to where they ended up? Who knows.

CHAPTER 12

STEP 12

Weeks go by since Sue Anne got married. I've been painting some things to bring to the Smallton gallery next week and preparing some work for the exhibition, but it's hard when Cheryl kicks me out of the studio so she can prepare the big room. What's the big deal anyway? I guess I'll find out later today when the exhibit opens.

Things have been going well. Maybe it's because it's late summer and I'm settling into my new life—or reacquainting myself with the old one—that I'm enjoying myself. I've been doing some things I haven't done in a while, like visiting the MFA to look at the recent exhibits and some of my old favorites. I haven't been drinking as much. Perhaps that's because Chuck hasn't been at O'Doyle's every night. Maybe the PTSD group is working.

I told him I had a good time at the wedding and a little about what happened, but I didn't push the issue about finding out step twelve. Screw the steps. As far as I'm concerned, I'm content with hanging out beneath eleven. I'll meet someone new eventually, I'm in no rush.

Claire and I have been in communication. She's sent me an email and I wrote back. Then I joined Myspace and was added to her list. So now I've got two friends. I'm not on it that much. Other people seem to spend all their time

and I don't really know what they do. To me, the page is static, it's not really a living entity. I don't get it.

The studio exhibition opens at one-thirty. I called around to see if anyone wanted lunch before, but no one wanted to go. Oh well. I'm pretty good at eating by myself now. I just take a book or a crossword puzzle and I'm good to go.

I decide on Chinese, what the heck. I get the usual, but have to tell the guy at the counter what that is. He must be new. Or I haven't been there in a while. My fortune reads: "Expect something to happen." I am in awe at the detail of the fortune. I slip it into my pocket and head over the studio.

It's one-twenty five and I see people going into the building. I haven't even unlocked my space door yet, damn. But it's Cheryl's show, I guess that's alright.

It's not alright, because when I step inside, I see that the studio is pretty full and the placard says the exhibition "A Photojournal of Healing: The Half-Life of Heartache" opened at one o'clock. I walk in, trying to find Cheryl to ask her what gives when I'm confronted by what looks like a thousand sets of eyes. Some people look at me, but it's the photos on the wall, mainly. I feel like I'm looking in the mirror. Nearly every photo is of me.

The captions are all dated, nothing before March twenty-first. I recognize the dates and I know the significance. The pictures are printed and matted really well, but I look awful in most of them. Now I know why Cheryl was taking all those pictures. I don't see her in the gallery. She must be in the kitchen.

I walk across the room and see a large picture titled “The Halfway Point.” It’s a picture of me in bed, light streaming in from a window. It’s not my bed, but Cheryl’s. I’m partially covered by shadows, the lower half, thankfully. Someone else is comes up to the picture. She looks at it, then at me. I walk away before she says anything.

Cheryl’s in the kitchen, along with Miriam and Eugene. And Chuck. It’s the first gallery show he’s been to in a year, and he’s talking to Cheryl. They’re both smiling. I don’t get it.

“What’s going on, am I in the *Twilight Zone*?” I ask.

“Hank!” Cheryl says and gives me a hug. “Do you like it?”

“It’s surprising, that’s for sure.”

“Oh,” she says and loses her smile. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. But I wanted it to be a secret. I’ve never done anything like this before, trying to capture someone’s emotional state as it changes.” I don’t say anything.

“When he gets over shock, I think he will,” says Eugene.

“Yeah,” I say. “Cheryl, it’s really good. I mean, I’d like to forget those days, but you did some great work.”

“Really,” she says.

I nod my head.

Chuck comes up, shakes my hand. “Welcome to step eleven, buddy.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about. This is the *Twilight Zone*.

“What’s with Cheryl and Chuck?” I ask Miriam. “She’s never liked him.”

“I don’t know. It seems odd, though.”

“I agree. Let’s ask them what’s going on.” Mir and I corner Chuck and Cheryl in the kitchen and ask them point blank: Are you two a couple?

The look at each other then Chuck speaks. “We met in group therapy. At first, neither could believe each other was there. But once we both started talking in the group, we really opened up to each other. She called me one night and went go out. I guess I should thank you, Hank.”

“Why?”

“Two reasons. First, if you wouldn’t have talked me up, she never would have given me the chance. Secondly, she decided to go after that night with you.”

“That’s me, sending girls to therapy.”

“Hank,” Cheryl says. “Be nice to yourself.”

“I am, I’m just joking.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell us!” Mir says.

“Sorry, but we wanted to be private for a while, without anyone butting in,” Cheryl says. “Besides, we’ve all been busy.”

“I bet,” I say to Chuck. He only smiles.

Then Cheryl smiles and I think there’s some inside joke between the two, but Miriam looks over my shoulder and says “Eugene’s here. Looks like he brought a friend.”

Of course, I look. Of course, I expect to see him with some guy. It takes me a moment to register who it is, but I know her face, her hair, the shape of her eyes. Claire.

She's looking around at all the pictures and then back to me as Eugene walks her through the room and over to our group.

"Surprise," Eugene says. "I brought a friend. Do you want to introduce her, Hank?"

I finally stop looking at Claire and do my duties. I have to give Cheryl praise for her work and Claire gives her compliments before we can head off alone.

There's the requisite hi's and good to see you before I settle down and remember that I've talked to her before. I show Claire my own work.

"It's good," she says, looking at the portrait of Dad.

"Is that the objective critic in you, or the teacher speaking?"

"Both. You could kick my students' asses."

"Thanks. How long are you here?"

"I don't know. I came up today, but I packed for the weekend. Eugene invited me to stay with him. He's really sweet."

"Yes, he is."

"Of course, I can't take up all of his time, you know. That'd make me a bad guest."

"Completely. If only there was someone else in this city to show you around, take you out and have a good time."

“Well, I do have some old friends from college here. I could look them up, I’m sure they know some places. But they’re all married and you know how that changes things in a group.”

“Not really,” I say.

“Well, it makes it really difficult to pick up cute guys when there are so many husbands around.”

“That’s a shame,” I say. “You know, I could take you out to dinner tonight if you were up for something different than the usual hanging around married couples.”

“That’d be great,” she says. I feel a familiar twinge in my stomach. It hurts a little. But it’ll go away, eventually.

It feels like I’ve been away for a long time. I’ll tell you why: love. That persistent deity.

I never thought it would happen, could happen to me, after all of these months. I didn’t think I was capable of loving again. But here I am, sucker punched by Eros. See, Plato says love lives inside us. The only way to get inside us is to force its way in, so Eros comes up to us and punches you right in the gut.

A broken heart heals in secret. You don’t notice it so you don’t try it out before you’re ready, like a leg or arm. I guess there is a half-life to heartache. The pain gradually reduces, but the radiation’s effects are so long lasting that you don’t notice it. There is no waking up, suddenly noticing, “hey, this no longer hurts.” There is no thinking of getting better.

A broken heart isn't the same for everyone. The one who does the breaking hurts too, but not as long. They've braced themselves. The more we step away, the better we feel.

Look at Romeo and Juliet, the people, not the pigeons. Both took their own lives upon knowing the other had died. They felt so strongly they couldn't live without the other and made a rash decision. If Romeo had waited, or if Friar Lawrence's letter had reached him, things would be different. Of course, this is Shakespeare, so it worked out the way it did.

If Juliet would have waited or was too chicken to kill herself, she would have found her self a week out, still regretting not having died with her love. A month later, it would still hurt, but years later, she'd be glad to be alive.

We like to think we will/can do great things for love, like staying by a bedside, nurse someone back to health, give up organs or a life, but when faced with the reality, would we? I can't say.

I think back, sometimes, to what people have said to console me, that it's meant to be. I don't remember it helping. I remember the pain, thinking they don't know what they're talking about. I remember the confusion. I wouldn't want to put anyone through it. I don't believe the tough guy adage that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. If that were the case, there'd be a lot of invincible people. No one should be invincible. We'd lose our capacity for pain and when we lose that, we lose empathy. That makes us human.

While we're at it. This new girl, the one with whom I've found love when I didn't expect it, it wasn't love at first sight. I don't really believe in that either.

I believe it's possible, but not maybe the best thing. Love at first sight is pretty rare and it's one soul saying to another "ahh, I know you," in that karmic way of multiple lives. The moment you let that happen, your soul is leading your life. Now, maybe these two souls had unfinished business, but maybe they're just being lazy and picking up their lives where they left off instead of forging on in their new lives. We go back to things because they're familiar. Newness is scary.

In the same instance, if someone were to ask me if I'd take Diz back if she asked, pleading and begging, for us to get back together, would I? I can't say. It's an unfair question. There is the part of me that loves her and will always love her—but I know that it's the memory of her I love. It's the same way I can love Grandpa even though we haven't spoken or seen each other since his death. Love, it lives inside us.

I know it's another Hollywood cliché for someone to say they'll always love someone, but there's some truth to cliché, I guess. In two months, it'll be time for New Year's Eve. She'll be facing it alone, again. I want to be there for her, but I know I can't. I guess I'm okay with that now. She has her life and I mine. But I can't say that I won't be thinking of her.

I wouldn't be the man, the boyfriend I am if not for her. I guess I should thank her for that. Afterall, what are we but a sum of our experiences? It's how we learn. I don't expect this new relationship to be perfect. I don't expect it to last a million years or to end tomorrow. I just let it be. I don't expect anything but what she and I bring to it. Once I bring my expectations into play, I'm limiting all potential. It's one day at a time.

Damn clichés.

This new girl, she's not Diz. She's not like her and there is no way she can be or I should expect her to be. But it's hard, to resist the habits of a long relationship, to expect she'd like the same things, to get things confused. Our relationship, we're starting fresh, building from a new foundation instead of from the ruins of an old one.



I'm sorry, I can't do this anymore.

Hi, it's me, Elizabeth/Diz. That's not my real name and I'm not going to tell you it—I'll try to preserve at least one thing for you.

Anyway, I'm stopping this thing because it's gone on long enough and I can't do it. You see, I'm responsible for this whole thing, the last 200 or so pages you've read. Both parts. All those words after we broke up are Hank's, I swear. How can you trust me now? I've pulled everything from Hank's blog. I saved all our emails from the time we were dating. Cheesy, I know. But I thought it'd be nice to look back on when we were older.

That's right. I never expected the break up either. But it happened. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done, mainly because it was my choice. Now I have to live with the consequences.

You know that scene in *The Princess Bride*, where Buttercup dreams she's married Humperdink and as she's being introduced to her subjects some old lady with a huge wart on her face starts yelling at her? I wait for that to happen to me,

for some old witch to scream at me about throwing love away. It hasn't, yet. But I worry that it could be a huge mistake.

I know, I know. How can I ask you to feel sorry for me after all I've put you and Hank through? I'm a cold hearted bitch, right, and now I'm manipulative. But I had to do this, to write this story so I could understand how Hank could get over me so easily, and perhaps how I could let him do it. I'm sure you've been thinking, "Ha! I knew it! There's no way a man could be this sensitive and caring, there had to be a woman behind this story. What bullshit, what a work of cockamamie fiction!" That's where you're wrong.

I hardly changed a word of Hank's blog, except the names. And I left out the dates. But I've archived them in the back of the book. Go ahead, take a look. I also asked Miriam, Cheryl, Chuck, and Eugene to forward emails to me. It took some convincing for the last two.

I can't really tell you why I started writing all this, but I know it began with me trying to piece together what went wrong. One day, I'm completely reliant on him and then next I'm breaking up with him. I was a crazy time: everything was going great for Hank and the world was falling apart for me as I faced the risk of losing my Mom. She's doing well, by the way. Chemo worked and the cancer is in remission.

After Hank, I took a leave of absence from work and spent time with Mom. She slept most of the time, leaving me with a month of nothing to do but think about Hank. I started retracing our relationship and trying to pinpoint the moment it all started going wrong. I did that, but couldn't find it. Was it when

Hank got his first big break and I was no longer his full focus? Maybe the huge crack in our relationship started out as a small one, like when we decided not to live together? Or we could have been doomed from the start? I don't know and I couldn't find it. All I know is that as I traced it back, I began to miss it. Not just Hank, but the routines we developed and the freshness of everything when we first started dating.

We were stagnating. I was sure he didn't see it that way, but wanted to find out what he thought of it. I wanted to see him come to the realization that our break up was a good thing. So, I found his blog (through my series of informants) and followed it. But he stopped updating. The last entry before all this is the last one.

Did I get my answer? Am I satisfied? No. I saw that I was the only one stagnating.

I don't really know where Hank went. Someone else is living in his apartment. Mir said he pulled out of the studio and moved closer to his parents. I guess his art is going well out there enough for him to leave Blophoton. It's not like I can call his parents to find out, I've deleted their number. I guess I could drive out there. And if I ran into him, what would I say? I'm sorry? I don't know if that would cover it.

But I'm glad he's happy now, if that's anything.

God, I wasn't ready for him to be so happy, so comfortable with someone else. You're never ready when a former lover has found someone new. It's only

right for me to encourage his growth and healing after what I've put him through. I can only hope someone is as kind to me when I find someone new.

Sometimes, I think, maybe I shouldn't have done it. Or that I shouldn't have cut myself off from him like that. I was cruel to him for hiding. The truth is, I didn't trust myself enough to let myself see him. I would want him back and I was so damned convinced I had to remain firm. I broke up with him in my head before I broke up with him in person. I guess I never really broke up with him in my heart.

I'm a jerk, I know. Miriam has told me so many times.

By not letting myself see Hank, I was being selfish, protecting myself from my stupid feelings. I didn't care. I don't even know why we broke up, why I broke up with him anymore. I just seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Maybe it was because it slowed me down. But still, I think I should have talked to him.

What was I expecting, that he'd try to win me back? That's not Hank. I guess I was somewhat hoping he'd fight for me. Looking back, I think he would have if I'd have told him.

I am my own Iago.

Even if we had gotten back together, would it have healed the pain of our time apart? Would we still be the same people we are today, having learned and grown from all of this? I can't say.

There's nothing left for me to do but try to move on myself. I've got to kick myself out of living in "if only," so I can forgive myself. And man, there's a

lot of things for which I've got to forgive myself. For one thing, I've got to stop living in the past—it's part of being in "if only." My mom's alive and healthy. I've got a good job, some wonderful friends and a stinky dog (I can admit it now). My therapist says there's just a few more steps I need to do to get over some things. One is to move on from feeling lost without Dad.

So, this year, I'm going out for New Year's Eve. I've already made plans with Miriam and Cheryl (she's bringing Chuck, and that's all going quite well). Perhaps I can convince Mom to come out with us, too. I think she's ready to move on.

We're going to go out and have fun and not apologize for being alive. Dad had his time and loved us. Now it's my time. I think that's part of forgiving myself, too.

Maybe then I'll be ready to meet someone new.

Maybe then I'll be lucky enough to fall into step twelve, which—by the way—is "Fall in love again." So, perhaps Hank was right all along, about repeating the steps. But the comforting thing is if you're lucky, you won't have to.

