

## Chapter Seven

Gary is the confidant I've never had, the one who has to say things out loud because I'm not inside his head. We don't dream together, he and I, and for my part, I don't hear Voices that tell me to build a space ship. We have to converse. We have to touch each other, remind ourselves we're real. We have to say things, *do* things....

I begin then to experience a new awakening in life, discovering this which part of me has never been explored, these tactile pleasures always overshadowed and obscured by mysteries that swim within my dreams. "What do you want to do tonight?" he'll ask, and I'll say, "Kick my childhood in the head one more time," but you know, that's a joke, of course. I wanna wallow naked under the covers, Gary, I wanna be promiscuous with you, whaddya say? We joke when we talk about it, because words are so ridiculously inefficient to describe the wonder of what happens when we do such things as I haven't done before; but while we're doing things, and words are no longer needed, there isn't such levity at all, at all. Even inevitable fumbblings seem glorious in contexts that spin so swiftly. Gary, you're my one and only, you know that? (Sister? I never had a sister....)

For Gary, the relief was amazing. For you see, Gary had finally found someone worthy of his attention, of his efforts to explain and understand the strange phenomena that enveloped him. There hadn't been anyone before this, you realize. His pal Scotto the aspiring writer was fun on occasion, but not up to par; and his *parents*, for god's sake.... He can remember the time he first told them he wasn't a Christian any longer. He figured they'd go insane with anger, rail at him for throwing his soul away, rail at each other for failing to raise him right. Instead, they opted not to believe him. They laughed a bit, and he said again, "Mom, Dad, I don't believe in God. I never have, really. Sorry." And Mom just sort of laughed and said, "Pass the corn, honey." And he passed the corn and said, "This is serious, you know. There's no God. I can prove it if you want me to." And Mom just scooped the corn onto her plate, spoonful after spoonful. Dad said, "The ham's really tender tonight," and he said, "Yes, it is, but GOD DOESN'T EXIST, don't you get it? It's all physics, none of this lighting candles and singing hymns business, because God doesn't exist. It's just me alone in the universe, you get it?" And Mom said, "Pass the rolls, would you, honey?" Worthless.

So. There's a lot to do, right? in terms of catching up, a whole world of experience to cram in. It's readily apparent that we are caught up in something here, not to be Melodramatic or anything, but. Everything (defined as what we two can have together) is happening much too quickly. I (we either one of them and both) am able to much too freely show you (each either one another) what I haven't shown anyone before. Risk is not a factor; we're like tightly wound coils of rope (and we shall dangle), intertwined spider weaves (that drip with nascent poison, pure and sweet), and Gary's Voices tell him,

"Listen, big boy," Gale the tough one whispers, "consider this your honeymoon. We're all celebrating here. It's joyous wondrous that you've found another someone, but you mustn't forget our *deal*..." which deal is,

What the hell do we need a space ship for anyways?

"Are they talking to you again?" Laurel asks in a plaintive tone, and Gary nods. (Space ship? What *kind* of space ship? Like the Starship Enterprise or the Millennium Falcon? What's our mission, and where are we going? I'm a cynic, you know? I'm having a hard time here.)

"Do you think," Gary says, "I'm just deluded?" He is shaking, but only slightly, because Laurel is like a damping field that calms him in a mystical way... mystical, good fucking god, what am I getting myself into...?

"What do you mean, deluded?" she asks.

"I mean, do you think I'm crazy?"

"Because of Voices?"

"Because of Voices."

"You ain't crazy," says Gregory the disembodied thug.

"Clinically speaking," says Gary, "I've done the research, and it sounds like a classic, straightforward case of schizophrenia, right down to its onset just as I approach adulthood."

"Approach' adulthood?" says the suave and debonair Voice of Vince the candyman, every brain's friend. "Gary, you are everywhere and always the picture of placid maturity, dig? Sit back and *relax*, whydontcha...."

"Well," replies Laurel, razor sharp analysis slicing through the mysticism, "if it *is* schizophrenia, then there are probably drugs that can help you. Treatments."

Gary shakes his head violently. "This is my brain. Who knows what else I'll lose if I tamper with it pharmacologically?"

"Besides which," says Jack, the fun loving wild Voice, "who knows how these crazy drugs will interact with all the alcohol you drink?" reminding us of all the vodka Gary used to drink before he met Laurel, vodka being classified as a more trustworthy kind of drug, the kind of drug that even sane people can get away with having in largish quantities. No sir, no "treatments" for me, thanks.

"But in another context," Laurel says, "I'd like to tell you a little more about my sister--" (Sister? I never had a sister...) "--and how we used to dream together."

And Gary pauses, blinks, considers. Dream together? Come on, that's gotta be bullshit, right? says the cynic, but the newly born mystic, assaulted by Voices from the chapel of his cranium, listens closely, takes the appropriate notes....

"We could," Laurel continues, "find each other, each night, in a shared space in our dreams. The Dreamtime. We could recognize each other, hone in on each other's presence, each other's essential emanations. We built a fairy tale castle there, and inside that castle, we cavorted and explored and lived a fairy tale dream life each night after going to sleep." This is why, she now knows, I feel so unprepared for all the *real* things that are starting to happen. I have *so* much catching up to do. "And also, we met beings there."

"Beings?" asks Gary.

"People came to live inside our castle," she says.

"People came to live inside her castle?" says Gregory the thug. "And you wonder if *you're* crazy?"

"What kind of people?" asks Gary.

"There was," she says, smiling at the memories, "Dawson the butler, a clever man who loved to run the house. And there was the beautiful singer Airee Macpherson and her drummer friend Sierra. Sometimes the two of them would make music for hours and hours and hours and you wouldn't get bored. And there was the boy genius Tanner Mildew..."

"Tanner Mildew?" Gary says, smiling at the name. "Boy genius."

"Come to think of it," Laurel teases, "he reminds me a lot of you." Going on, "And there was Derald and Janszen, the interdimensionary psychics who always knew when you were feeling down and wouldn't mind playing parlor games with you until you smiled. And of course, there was Susie Satori, who gave off blissful vibes and never said much of anything."

"And these were actual beings to you?" asks Gary.

"My sister and I came early to the conclusion that these beings were not being generated by us as part of the shared space we were creating. We were quite convinced that they had come from Somewhere Else, had come to *share* our space. We never knew why they came, nor where they came from, but we knew, we *felt* that they belonged, and evidently, so did they."

And Gary knows where this is leading: if Laurel and her sister can experience beings from outside of themselves, then so can he, and clearly solipsism and schizophrenia are right straight out the window, thank you very much. Not so bad really. But I don't know how to build a space ship, that's for sure. Beings in your dreams, Voices in your head, "I swear, Laurel, it's amazing that we found each other," and you know how suddenly the merest of memories can trigger a quick little burst of tears? "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Laurel says, crying quickly with a fair amount of frustration, "I'm not really sad, I'm not, I just..."

haven't been there since Melody left, and won't go there again, will I....

"Don't worry so much," says a remarkably empathic Gary, "you don't need that place. It was part of your childhood, right? Part of what we're finished with, right? You can hold on to those memories and"

"cherish them," she finishes, "but don't regret what's become of us,"

"no regrets," he says, "because here we are."

"Here we are," she agrees.

"Here we are," Gale chimes in, "and the question on everyone's mind is, now what the hell are we going to do?"

The abandonment of all which is superfluous to their union, to their trials, includes all manner of socializing with the outside world. For example, Gary's friend Scotto had tried calling on numerous occasions -- I should phrase it, "I tried calling Gary on numerous occasions." I did, but Gary was either simply not home or simply not interested. Oftentimes, his mother would try to ask *me* what was happening in her son's head, as though I had some kind of answer. Other times, Gary would simply say, "No more role playing, Scotto, the world has gotten Melodramatic enough for me, thanks." Once I asked him, "Did you ever read that story I wrote? The one called 'Treehouse'? The one I wrote especially for you?" and he merely snapped, "I don't have time for your fictions, Scotto. I don't have

time for fiction. Reality is enough for me as it is, thanks." Gary was a goner. Maybe someday we'd run into each other again, maybe at parties, you know, I'd see him and we'd shoot the shit like old pals who naturally drifted apart as their interests began to diverge, but nothing deeper than that. I can honestly say I felt a very great loss when I realized that Gary and I were no longer going to be close; but I can also say that in those moments, I decided I was going to grow up too, and find a few friends of my own. I was getting deep enough into other things, to be sure. Deep enough, deep enough.

But Gary wasn't interested in what I was doing when he wasn't around. He also wasn't interested in his family any longer, not caring to maintain even the slightest pretense of membership or familiarity. Laurel, too, who hadn't spoken to her mother or father since Melody's abrupt departure, endeavored to avoid not only speaking to them but seeing them altogether. Laurel was climbing out of her depression one rung at a time, and for the time being, it didn't pay to stop and make conversation with everyone she met on the way up. Laurel and Gary, intertwined, are all they need to survive. "I feel like things are moving much faster than they ever have before," says Laurel one sunny afternoon, and Gary says, "Reality is indeed accelerating. The pace is increasing and increasing. And you and I are just now becoming aware of it." Spending every waking moment together, wandering the woods outside Laurel's house, visiting cemeteries and playgrounds and shopping malls and tabernacles, and all along, the only things to talk about, really, are

"I get an image in my mind when they say space ship," says Gary. "But it's so abstract, so obscure... I can't place any specifics."

Tonight, however, that's exactly what Laurel wants. "Use your head, Gary, concentrate. You've got to stop avoiding this. It's here, it's inside you, it's a part of you."

"What do you mean, avoid it? I'm not avoiding it. I'm living with it every single day."

"Living with it, yes, but not addressing it with the concern and attention it deserves. Every single conversation we have about these Voices hovers around all the ramifications of their presence, and how you might escape your fate, but the fact is, it's time to accept the responsibility they've given you." Tonight, finally, something clicked with Laurel, remembering the night she and Melody first locked into focus with each other. "It was so terrifying, Gary, the implications, but we knew that the next night, we were going to try it again, despite the terror, and we *did*, and it was *wonderful*."

Was wonderful, Laurel; your past tense is in no way reassuring to my present tense, but

"All right, all right, all right," and Laurel takes his hand, and

"Hel-lo, who is *this*?" says Vince the smooth one.

"I think this chick is on to something," says Gregory the thug.

And here's what Gary sees: a giant, gleaming, golden space ship, shaped like an enormous whale, sailing through space and time, a milky sea of red and orange and yellow, and the space ship is full of people,

"and I can't tell," he says, "if this image is... I mean, it feels as though the image isn't just a random image, it feels as though it's a snapshot or a, or video footage, from the future or something."

"From when the ship is actually complete," Laurel suggests.

"Yeah," Gary agrees. "In the future, the ship is complete, and this is what I'm seeing." I'm seeing the future? I'm seeing the future quietly slipping away from me. I am *not* prepared for this kind of weirdness. Feels as though I'm sinking in quicksand, yes indeed.

"Are you inside the ship?" Laurel asks.

Pause.

"I don't think so," says Gale.

"I don't think so," says Gary.

And just when you thought things were already intense enough, on one of their occasional visits to Gary's home, they find a note on the door, handwritten, it's his mother's handwriting, and the note reads:

"Your father's had a stroke. Come to the hospital."

The mind reels: how'd it happen? which hospital? wait a minute, a stroke?

Gary stands there, frozen.

Laurel takes his arm, "Are you all right?"

And he just stands there, quietly reeling.

What can you do? Laurel sees so many questions on his face, but she has no answers. Her heart is tied to his, she almost feels it more intensely than he does,

except,

I don't feel a thing, is why I'm reeling. I don't feel a thing. I have already done such excellent work disconnecting myself from that which is superfluous that I simply have no reaction. An appropriate reaction here would be some kind of shock, or some kind of sorrow, but what is the use of *that* in the face of everything I'm already a part of?

Meanwhile, Laurel is on the verge of tears: "Oh, Gary, I'm so sorry this had to happen. It's going to be okay, you know? It's going to be okay." Wondering, is his father okay, or is this going to be another in a strange series of tragedies that has been cutting a path through our lives? "It's going to be okay, you know?" Like, duh, Laurel, it's gonna suck, for a few minutes at least.

Gary turns to her. "You're right, it's okay." Just kinda, you know, looks at her. Withdrawing. The same way he always does, you know?

Laurel, disbelief creeping into her voice, says, "Gary, it's all right to be upset. I understand."

"I'm not upset, Laurel. I feel fine. I think we should get something to eat." Starts to unlock the door,

and she grabs his arm, says, "Gary! We're not getting something to eat. We need to go to the hospital!"

"Why? I have no real need to see him."

It's like a bucket of cold water splashed all over her, she realizes now how far they've come, and maybe this *is* an interesting direction and then again maybe it isn't, "Gary, don't be absurd. Your father might need you." She is not arguing for Gary's sake, she realizes, acknowledging that - he is a lost cause? And that means... me too, right? "I don't buy it. I don't care if you don't want to show me how much it upsets you, that's your prerogative. But your family might need you at the hospital." She's furious, yes. "Let's go."

And Gary shrugs, agrees, simply to placate Laurel, also because there's not much else to do.

We step out of the elevator on the third floor.

"What room is it?" I ask again.

"2317," Gary replies. "They said take a left at the first intersection."

As we round the corner, we see Gary's mother coming out of, presumably, 2317. She looks incredibly disheveled, haggard; it seems as though she's crying and not crying at the same time. Gary hesitates, and I give him a nudge. He starts forward and awkwardly embraces his mother.

"He's asleep right now," his mother says. "I was going to get some coffee."

"What happened?" Gary asks. It's an obligatory question for him.

"We were at the church, doing some painting. He just... collapsed."

If this affects Gary, it doesn't register on his face. Once again, he asks, perfunctorily, "How is he?"

His mother sighs heavily, nearly crying again, and says, "He'll be all right, they say. He's sleeping right now." Pause. "He may be paralyzed. We don't know."

A strained pause follows. Then, they disengage, mechanically, and his mother says, "I'm going to get some coffee." She wanders off.

Gary looks into the room, looks back at his mother as she rounds the corner, looks at me.

"I suppose we should go in," he says. The matter's decided, and he goes in, and I follow him. Gary's father is lying asleep on a bed, hooked up to various monitoring devices. We stare at him for a few long moments. I want to take Gary's hand or something, try to do the consoling thing, but I get the feeling that would be more for my own sake than for his. Because we are

intertwined, and just *look* at what's happened to him, happened to his family, and just

*think* what has happened to mine....

We head back to the elevator. The door closes, and I sag against the back wall, suddenly gasping for air and sobbing uncontrollably. There's nothing I hate more than the way doubt spreads like raging disease only minutes after exposure.

"Laurel, what is it?" asks Gary. "What is it?"

"I think," I reply, "somewhere along the line here, I really blew it..."

As they park the car, and slowly start up the front walk to her house, Laurel's eyes are wide. As they come up the steps, it becomes apparent that there is a note taped to the door.

"Holy shit," says Gary.

And there's a long, long pause after that.

"I don't want to read it," says Laurel.

Resolutely, Gary takes a step forward, takes the note down, reads it silently. Laurel cannot quite tell if Gary is betraying himself, if Gary is allowing himself to feel this. If he is, then he is learning what she just learned; if he isn't, then this whole situation is very fucked, right? Anyways,

"What's it say?" she asks.

"Your mother," he replies, "has had a nervous breakdown of some kind." Pause. "We need to go back to the hospital."

Now how do you fucking like that? Laurel clammed up right after that. She didn't want to speak, she didn't want to say anything to me. She got, I don't know, seemed self-righteous to me, did it seem self-righteous to you? "Definitely," says Jack. "What's she know, just because she gets all caught up like that and you don't?" Right. We had agreed to sever those links. Those links were dragging us down. Those links were dragging us down. She wanted me to drop her off at the hospital, and she didn't want me to come in with her, and she didn't want me to wait. For the first time in literally days and days and days we are not together. She has regressed, that's for sure. It's disappointing. She wants to be with her family. She actually *cares* about what happens to these people who have no value any longer. I don't understand her at all. And all of this stuff about fairy tale castles is suddenly very suspect. "Very suspect indeed," Gale says. "Sounds like bullshit to me," says Gregory. My house was desperately silent, there was absolutely no one about. I was, dare I admit, and despite the presence of Others inside my head, suddenly *lonely*. I called my old reliable friend Scotto, only to discover that Scotto had gone out with some of his friends. Friends? I wondered. Since when did Scotto have any other friends?

And then, in my boredom, I was reminded. I was reminded of the story Scotto had written. To cheer me up. A story whose title was "Treehouse," and whose subject was a woman named Laurel and a man named me. I had never read it, having discarded it upon realizing its subject matter, although he later claimed never to have known I was seeing a woman named Laurel. And I went into my room, and I found the story, a very very short story, actually, sitting on my desk. And I could feel from across the room that something very strange was in the process of going on, and the words verily shimmered on the page as I lifted the story up, and sat down at my desk to read...

...and I can't tell you if the story is well written or not. Because. The subject matter.

Is dead on. In this story, I meet a woman named Laurel, and after various sundry tragedies, I visit her in her treehouse. It's as though Scotto followed us that night, it's so alarmingly accurate. He knows about her dreams with her sister. He knows about my Voices. And he wrote this story before any of that happened. And the last paragraph begins with

"I just want someone to talk to who *isn't* disembodied," says Gary earnestly, and they cry and laugh some more at how ridiculous it all is.

"What do I need a fairy tale castle for anyways?" she says, determined, "I gotta grow up now, don't I?" He moves a little closer, "Listen," he says, eye to eye with her, her face shining with tears and perspiration, "I'm willing to be obsessed with you for a while here, since it looks like that's what you need," and she says, "Yeah, that's what I need," and he says, "It's really cold in here," and she says, "None of your fantasies, man," laughing, crying, "Are you kidding?" he says, smiling like a silly boy, "It's too cold for that," and we can cuddle under the sleeping bag, next to this space heater I thought to bring. I have *never* been so close to a human being I wasn't related to, *never* not since babyhood been under a blanket with anyone but Melody for *whatever* reason, "Can I hold your hand? I fantasized about that, but it's pretty harmless," and she does, electric skin on skin, the sweat makes a good conductor of their empathy, and she says, "Tell your Voices to be quiet a while and let us have some privacy." And he says, "My Voices are quiet now, it's just you and me out here." And she says, "This is all happening faster than I could have predicted." All of this. This is all happening so fast. Can I keep up? Do I want to? "Yeah, yeah," smooth she says, rocking back and forth, his arm around her shoulder, "this is happening way too fast," and he says, "but I like it," yeah, yeah, gentle laughs then louder louder, SCREAMING laughing and *that* feels good, "can you believe this?" he says. "Can you believe this? I can believe this. This is something I can believe in, that's for sure." And she says, "Too fucking weird. I lost my sister, Gary. She's gone, Gary, gone." Don't force it, let it flow, just laugh and cry it all away. Quietly hardening, quietly hardening, but such that he is *inside* her rigid walls, and that's pretty fucking weird when she gets right down to it. "Don't leave me, okay?" she says. "Don't leave me." And he makes the decision right then and there that he will *never* do such a thing. And deep inside his skull, in the places he can't possibly pay attention to, those Voices of his are humming their relief, and their warmth, and their praise to what has happened. "What's happened to us?" she asks. And he says, "Disaster everywhere," "yeah, disaster everywhere," "and then--" pause dramatically,

"it seems like we caught *fire*..."

And it's ridiculous to wonder how he knew. Even my Voices are suddenly caught by surprise. Even my Voices suddenly wonder what the hell is going on. I call Scotto's house, but he's still not there. Laurel's still at the hospital. So is my family. What in the hell is going on? Why do I feel as though I'm suddenly sinking in quicksand? Why isn't Laurel *here*? I'm

beginning to panic, I can tell you, and I *refuse* to let it get to me. I refuse. I refuse to let this get to me.

What the hell is going on?

If this is how Laurel is going to play, deserting me just when things get weird, then so be it. I have enough to think about. "You have to build a space ship," suggests Gale. I have to build a fucking space ship. "Find Scotto," Vince suggests. Fuck off, I tell him. I'll build this thing on my own time, thank you....

I find my father alone on a bench in the lobby of the psychiatric ward. He isn't expecting me. He's amazingly surprised. Exhausted, and emotionally spent. He isn't himself. He isn't really there, I get the feeling. I sit down next to him. He looks at me, but he doesn't see me, there isn't really anything behind the eyes. I can feel my whole entirety beginning to explode, and quick as the devil I lock it down, clamp down hard, chain myself to the ground, I will *not* lose my composure, and I will *not* be torn apart. He isn't really there, I get the feeling. He says, "Laurel," and I say, "Dad," and then we sit there, and I haven't got a thing to say, and there's no one there to do much saying either. We sit there quietly for quite some time. At last, he starts to ramble slowly.

"I don't think... we were prepared. To lose Melody. Of course we weren't. How could we be?" Flat, emotionless, like a robot, a golem. "And then we lost you too." I feel as though he's suddenly strangling me. "We could understand it, of course. But it was a very devastating blow. To your mother, of course." And where was I? What was I *thinking*? How could I have been *so help me, god, what have I done?* "Anyway, she isn't able to think clearly any more. They're going to... keep her here for a while, see what they can do. They suggested you go in and see her, if you're up to it, but... it isn't a very pleasant sight." Pause. "It's a rather nightmarish sight, actually." He isn't really saying this, I get the feeling. He's completely out of the loop. And he didn't *choose* to be, like Gary did; he was *blown* there by the force of Something Big.

I've lost my sister, and I've lost my mother, and here I've lost my father too, and I can't go back to Gary after all of *this* or god knows what'll happen next....

"You should go in and see your mother," my father tells me. "Maybe, if she sees you, she'll snap out of it. Come to her senses. You might give her something to hold on to emotionally."

Hard to argue with that. I'm all over numb and it's just getting worse, uh huh. My father doesn't get up from the bench, just sits and lets his eyes unfocus as a doctor leads me down the hall to the small room where my mother is, lying on a clean white bed with clean white sheets and clean white restraining straps. The doctor slowly opens the door, allows me to enter the room. I take a few steps to my mother's side, incredibly hesitant, incredibly shaken and anxious, and she turns to me, with those almost hollow eyes of hers, and I can tell that a gulf as wide as the universe itself keeps us apart, and she seems so tired, and she looks at me, and she flashes recognition, and she smiles, and I take her hand, and she says,

"Melody."

and it feels as though i've been stabbed, and the blood fills my throat