

## Chapter Nine

"Melody," her mother says.

Stunned to the core, she replies, "No, mama, it's me." Pause. "It's good to see you."

Her mother smiles and says, "They haven't left me alone, you know. I'd like to scratch out my eyeballs and eat them."

Laurel nods, smiles as well.

"Every fucking manatee that comes along goes straight up my ass," her mother continues, "and me with it, ha ha!" A laugh, like a cackle; if she wasn't restrained, maybe she *would* scratch her eyes out. "I swear, I swear to high heaven, there's a liver in the toaster, but I won't tell if you won't."

"I won't tell," Laurel says.

"Goodness, can you believe it? I'm walking on baby bunny rabbits! I've never bowled before in my life." She's not angry, she's not excited, she's just calmly reciting the day's news to her lovely daughter, who calmly breathes it in, calmly absorbs what she can. "And of course, the duck is the punchline, but that almost goes without saying."

She can see her mother scrambling desperately for lucidity, clawing and ripping at the dirty plastic wrap that covers her mind; or at least, that's what she thinks she sees. Laurel has never taken human communication lightly, and never has it seemed more sacred than in these moments with her mother. It has, perhaps, felt more vivid and more alive with others, felt more personal and more erotic, felt more intense and more inside, but only now is the pure holiness of human communication so fully realized for her.

"I've often wondered why I never gave a thought to bowling," her mother continues softly, sweat breaking out on her brow. "I've often wondered if such a simple sport might have brought meaning into my life. Of course, there are no bowling alleys around here."

"What a lovely blouse you've got," Laurel says, commenting on the stark white hospital gown that barely covers her mother's thin frame. "I love all the flowers, all the pretty colors."

Her mother swims in a smile, then continues rambling aimlessly it seems, "a dollar bill's a piece of art, you know," disjointed, disconnected, as though some crucial circuit isn't firing properly, "I used to swim in motor oil, used to masturbate with strawberry jam, some days I couldn't breathe what with all the flying souls in the air." Laurel concentrates despite

herself, each sentence takes her two whole steps to the left, while Mother rambles, Laurel pictures pleasant things, invokes her most beloved images and offers them to space, imagined scenes of introducing Gary to Mother, of Mother helping her prepare her wedding to Gary, imagined scenes of how the wedding would have looked, her mother and father together in the front row, imagined scenes of Gary and her honeymooning, traveling around the country and deliberately she leaves these images with a gaping, giant gap, presents them to her mother incomplete, and dangerously so, "the weather's bright and sanctified, and I can see my guts in the rearview mirror," it's up to her, Laurel knows, to finish the picture, to come into orbit, Laurel can't go any further out than she already has, it's entirely up to her, it's so much work, it's ridiculous pressure,

and then, her mother asks softly, "Well, how is your sister anyway?"

Silence. Laurel takes her mother's hand, clasps it furiously. Melody is gone gone gone, and I may never hear from her again, she is lost to all of us, dead to the world, Melody has flown and there is no way to find her, strange despicable happenstance that dared to take her from us, Melody was stolen, Melody ran away, Melody was kidnapped from us, Melody escaped from us. No more Melody, not for us. No more. "She'll be coming to see you soon," Laurel says, throat torn, heart stopped. "She'll be coming soon, I swear." A lie, an outright lie, but what good would the truth do in this situation? Does she need to hear that Melody remains missing, that Melody will never come back to us, that she and I will never see Melody again? She left the fairy tale castle we built together, slammed the door shut behind her, it was only a matter of time before her physical presence escaped me as well. (Is that how it actually happened, or just the order in which I choose to remember it?) She found something Out There, something no one here thought to offer her, and she is punishing us for our mistake. No, she was kidnapped, and most likely she was raped and killed and the body buried, a random crime just like all the rest. The criminals were probably ordinary criminals, had probably been convicted of a similar crime before and were released, were probably not so much clever as lucky to have gotten away with it, and justice will never be served, because we will never know. I guess I'll lie to my mother. As long as it means so much to her. As long as the truth remains worthless.

Her mother smiles an angelic smile, her eyes come into focus for the first time, and she says, "Thank you, Laurel dear. I love you, Laurel dear."

"I love you, Mother dear," replies Laurel. Their hands clasped tight together, the contact is electric, and Laurel believes she feels a transmission, a fading burst of Hope from her mother's direction, and then she sees her mother slipping again, she leans forward quickly and embraces her with all her might, but by the end of the hug, her mother is quietly raving once more. "I saw a mongoose walk a tightrope in its lingerie, it was something else to see," and Laurel feels as though she's vomited all her insides. The doctor behind her takes her shoulder, gently leads her out of the room, and the relief is numbing and existential. As the doctor closes the door, she leans against the hallway, chest heaving, not with tears, heaving for breath, and the doctor quietly slips away, for Laurel cannot be consoled.

She begins searching her mind at this point for a way out. "Out" is relative, of course, she doesn't herself know what it means. She just wants to get away, and she doesn't know to where. She just wants to escape, but doesn't know what she's escaping. These are genuine problems. She feels as though it's a lost cause, really, feels as though there's so very little left worth living for at this very moment, if she were able to muster the energy, she would remove herself from living. It's almost Shakespearean, what she's going through, and there simply isn't any rest from it. What do I go to do? she thinks, looking for a place inside herself that has the answers, and of course, if she has to look, she can pretty much guarantee herself that she won't find any.

Until, as it turns out, she looks up at the figure walking down the hospital hallway toward her. Directly toward her, in fact; as in, she looks up, and realizes that there is a figure walking directly toward her, looking at her, intending to make contact. For some entirely irrational reason or another, her mind decides to allow *this* strange occurrence to be one last gasp at Hope. Perhaps this dude, she thinks, will have something to offer me. He's wearing a black leather jacket, and has slicked black hair; he's a tall, strapping fellow, and he's incredibly attractive.

He comes directly up to her, and says, "Laurel, right?"

And my mind is *blown*. This stranger knows my fucking name? What in the hell is going on around here?

Slowly I nod my head, never taking my eyes off the dark stranger's face. There must be a good reason he knows my name, and I wait for the reason to show itself.

"My name's Cohen," he says. "I came here to help you."

A wave of strange seriousness and confusion washes over me. Am I in need of help? Define "help."

"Would you like me to help you?" he asks.

Of *course* I'd like you to help me. Talk, dark and handsome is what you are, Cohen, the kinda guy who never talks to people like me in school, only you have this sheen of intelligence and strange naiveté about you that suggests you might actually be able to help me. Because, Cohen, let me be perfectly clear: you have no idea the troubles I got....

I nod slowly once again. You know my name, after all.

"Good. I'd like to introduce you to a mentor of mine," he says. He takes my hand, and it is soft and warm, completely unexpected, you might have expected rough and icy cold, but not from this fellow, not from Cohen, the mysterious man in the black leather jacket who somehow knows my name.

He leads me down a hallway toward the hospital cafeteria, where we join a young woman at a table: extremely short, flaming red hair, with bold, stark make-up on her entirely angular face, she has an intensity of demeanor that belies her somewhat whimsical and colorful dress and jacket. There are symbols which I don't recognize etched into her jacket with some kind of paint, and a simple, holographic button on her lapel is like a doorway into another dimension in timespace altogether. Cohen sits down at the table immediately, but I can't quite do it, can't quite follow this chain of events as rapidly as I should.

"Hi, Laurel," the young woman says, her voice sharply accented with an aristocratic British inflection. And this is almost too much: it's not just this Cohen person now, it's an entire *group* of people who know my name. My mind is spinning, doing circles around itself, tying links that shouldn't be there between my family troubles and my troubles with Gary and the sudden appearance of two mysterious strangers in the same hospital in which my severely absent mother is present. "Sit down," the woman suggests, and I realize she's got a point: I am certainly dizzy, dizzy with desire and dizzy with confusion, dizzy with unfulfilled expectation and dizzy with a steadily encroaching despair that threatens to betray my every last strength. Sit down, she says, and I sit; what harm can come from simple conversation?

"My name is Courtney," the woman says. "I want you to know, Laurel, right off the bat, that we are your friends. Okay?" She smiles warmly at me, reaches across the table, touches my arm. I am only able to stare in return, no matter how much I desire such friendly contact, no

matter how much I am capable of accepting this day into my reality. "I mean," Courtney continues, "it's clear that you're in the middle of a severe trauma, what with your parents, and your sister... why, it's been how long since you've even been to the Dreamtime, Laurel?"

And suddenly, I am in complete free fall, in a state where there is literally nothing for me to hold onto. Courtney has in one fell swoop touched almost everything in my life that has any meaning -- and the Dreamtime is an inherent *secret*. It's *inherently* secret. Free fall seems endless when you're in it. Each individual moment of experiencing it seems endless; time seems to slow to the rate of the infinitesimal, while everything around continues moving at its regular pace.

"Why don't you tell me, Laurel," Courtney continues, "what else is giving you trouble. It'll feel good to say it out loud."

She's right, of course; there is more than just the collapse of my family to worry about. There is also Gary to worry about, with his Voices and his unfortunate angst. Gary seems to be caught in some kind of quicksand, and I can't pull him out myself. Maybe it's because I too am caught in the same quicksand. And maybe I can't pull *myself* out without help.

"Gary," I manage to say aloud, "he's hearing Voices."

Courtney's face suddenly changes colors, and she and Cohen exchange a quite serious look; for a moment, a deep and desperate concern threatens me -- but no, they aren't giving up on me, only consolidating their efforts.

"Yes, that is a problem, isn't it," Courtney says, her voice soothing despite all the unknowns surrounding her. But she recognizes, I'm sure, that this is the most pressing problem for me right now. My mother has already gone beyond the pale, and my sister will never willingly return to me, of that I'm certain... but Gary can be saved, there is still *time* to save Gary. "I'd like to help Gary too," Courtney says. "In fact, I'd like to help *you* help Gary."

A wave of relief passes through me like a warm front moving over and into my skin. I seem to be plummeting in free fall so fast now that I am actually quite motionless.

"I think that what I need to do, Laurel, is give you a way to talk to Gary about his Voices," says Courtney. This is a reasonable idea, very reasonable, eminently reasonable, completely and thoroughly reasonable. Why isn't Cohen, tall dark and mysterious, saying anything? Courtney

continues: "So that he won't resent your talking to him, but you'll still be able to help him."

I nod silently.

"And then, once we take care of Gary, we can take care of you a little better, okay?"

Yes, that sounds about right; it is about time someone took care of me. I nod, even manage to smile. Why do I trust them, simply because they knew my name? Why is my head spinning, and why is my world disintegrating? Truthfully I have no idea....

"Well, let me ask you, do you have some time right now to chat, Laurel?" she asks. "I mean, I get the feeling this is something we could get started on right now. We could start working out, you know, different strategies for approaching Gary about his Voices."

Cohen, finally diving into the conversation, says simply, "But you need to talk to us a little too, okay?" And he smiles at me, a gentle smile that wins me over completely, as though I were some innocent twelve-year-old developing her first crush on a school teacher. But still and all-- this is amazing, isn't it? "Courtney's worked wonders for me. I'm positive she can help you too." Aha, a testimonial.

"Okay," I say, smiling despite the shell shock. Pause. "This is pretty unbelievable."

"You're a pretty unbelievable person," Courtney responds, and she's probably right; *ludicrous* might even be a better word than "unbelievable" for the incredible mess I'm in.

"Let's get started then," she says. "Tell me a bit about Gary. What does he mean to you?"

And it is apparent that the games have begun....

After an hour or two of intense discussion, about the nature of teaching and the nature of learning, I must excuse myself, retreat to the hospital washroom, to have a private moment to reflect. There are nagging questions in my mind, about how this woman Courtney and her student Cohen know me, and know of my sister, and know of the Dreamtime, but by the same token, these are all good signs: these people are taking an extreme, metaphysical interest in me, and want to help me, and at the moment, I have no other options but to accept.

"You could run," my reflection says to me, as I stare into the mirror. My reflection looks a great deal like me, as I expected, but there's a certain way in which she holds herself, a certain kind of pride that eludes

me, which informs me that my reflection is, in actuality, *Melody's* reflection, speaking to me through this mirror. Ordinarily I would be wary, but I am much too exhausted for that now. Whatever *Melody's* reflection has to say, I am honor bound to hear it, at least for the time being.

"I don't feel like running," I reply. "There's nowhere to go if I do run."

*Melody's* reflection smiles, and immediately I am almost infuriated. Her smile seems to mock me, the way she holds her head and wears her hair -- amazingly long and full, cascading down her back -- it all seems calculated to antagonize me, the one who stayed behind when it was time to flee the fairy tale dream castle, the one who hid in the waking world while she was charting new territory (so I suppose) in the Dreamtime....

"Do you still miss me?" she asks, still smiling, still taunting me, though subtly. I am forced to admit that I do, and the knowledge burns me as the tears rolling down my cheeks burn my face.

"I suppose you know what's happened to Mother," I tell her, and this manages to unsettle her, if only for a moment. Soon enough, however, she is on the offensive again:

"Perhaps you should have taken greater care of her," says *Melody's* reflection bitterly.

"Perhaps you never should have left!" I exclaim, retaliating despite the truth of her words.

"I didn't leave because I wanted to!" she replies. "I left because I was *forced* to. I left because I had no other options. But you... you still have your freedom. You still have Choice in the matter. You could run... leave these two strangers sitting at their table and never see them again. There's nothing they can do for you that you can't do yourself, Laurel."

These two strangers... they did not come randomly, which is to say, there are *reasons* for their being here... those reasons will not evaporate should I run away now... and anyway, I desperately need a few friends right about now, and you, *Melody's* reflection, are not up to the task, I'm afraid.

"You never should have left," these are the only words I can spare for her now, her betrayal of the Dreamtime so blatant and so overwhelming -- and to think I had almost forgotten. To think if these two strangers had not literally blown my mind, I might never have remembered how much *Melody* is to blame for the disturbing violence of this situation.

*Melody's* reflection merely smiles sweetly, recedes into my own reflection, and I am left standing there, alone with myself and the bathroom mirror, alone with the simple knowledge that whatever comes next, no matter who remains with me, I will always be essentially alone, and no one will cross these bridges for me....

"Gary has fallen into quicksand," I whisper to myself. "Desperate times call for desperate measures."

I return from the bathroom slowly, deliberately, after waiting for the tears to subside and the hard shell to quietly begin reforming.

"Welcome back," Courtney says. "Are you feeling well? You took an awfully long time."

"I decided to stop and stare at myself in the mirror for a while," I reply. "I almost couldn't stop." Pause. "So let me see if I've got this straight. You guys are here to recruit me, is that it? I mean, help me, sure, but ultimately, you two are part of some larger thing, right? Mystical and big?"

"That's it," Courtney says. "I'm here to recruit you the same way I recruited Cohen. The two of you will be learning partners, on your way to initiation."

"And you can't tell me the details yet, I understand that much. It sounds like a cult, in some ways. But the fact that you know so much about me... about the Dreamtime... about my sister... there's something going on here. Mystical and big. And I need to know about it."

"It's not a cult," says Courtney. "It's a religion."

"Yeah, well, I could seriously get into that, if you're telling the truth." Pause. "Which my instincts tell me you are. So. I'm glad you're here. And I think I've really got it pegged. I mean, I should be able to get through to Gary. I'm ready to put myself in his shoes, so to speak. I wasn't empathizing with him well enough. I'm sure that made him feel threatened. I think if I let him know I understand his problems, that I'm not just curious about his Voices but that I actually understand them, then he'll be receptive to me, and I'll be able to talk to him. I'll be able to talk to them too." Pause. "And I think it would be a good idea if I went alone. And met you two afterwards."

"That would be a wonderful idea," Courtney says. She writes down the address of their hotel on a napkin and gives it to me. "We'll be waiting for you. Whenever you're ready to talk to us, just let us know."

I smile, and nod; I will indeed, I will indeed.

"I'm going to, uh, go see what's left of my dad before I go," I say. I turn to Cohen, making deep, direct eye contact with him, take his hand, hold it tight, and say: "Thank you so much." And Cohen rises, and my breath escapes me, and he puts his arms around me, and embraces me.

And then Courtney is there beside us, and she too intends to hug me, and as she does, she whispers words in my ears, ***words that cannot be recorded in this text***, and says, "A gift for you. Use it carefully."

"When?" I ask.

"You'll know when it's time," she replies. My head and my senses are buzzing; just thinking the words in my mind creates waves and fractal patterns of blue and green energy behind my eyelids.

And then, it's time for me to leave.