

Chapter Six

Laurel stayed in the treehouse for many days and many nights, seeking neither comfort nor companionship in the society that surrounded her. Her parents, already devastated in their own fashion by the loss of their daughter Melody, now were left stranded on the ground as their daughter Laurel mourned alone. Each night after her parents were asleep, Laurel made forays into the house for food and other sustenance, and occasionally she could be seen in the house during the day, washing up, moving about restlessly like a damaged automaton, a golem whose only emotional capacity was for sadness, but then, like a shadow, she would soon vanish once again.

The final dream she had had of Melody threw her situation into stark relief. For, without Melody's physical presence, there was simply no way to confirm if the dream, in which Melody fled the confines of their fairy tale dream castle, was actually one of *their* dreams, or simply a random dream, borrowing imagery she had stored in her head and using it for no real purpose. Until such confirmation became possible again -- if such a happy event were ever to occur -- the dream castle was suspect, no longer a viable avenue of exploration in her life. The enterprise needed to be shut down, left alone, abandoned, until and only if she and Melody ever saw each other again. Sleeping became the most dreaded part of her day. She became afraid of its implications.

And what could she think about, all day up there, alone? Hidden thoughts, private thoughts, deep and ugly, thoughts that had never before had room enough to breathe, what with Melody constantly in the picture. I am, she realized, a whole other person without her, a person more my own self to be sure, but how much of what is essentially me without her has atrophied from lack of use? She did not go to school during these many days. She took no phone calls from the very few acquaintances who wondered about her condition. Her mother and father's attempts to make contact with her were not merely ignored, but were essentially invisible, as though she had lost all memory of her relationship to them. Nothing they can do, nothing they can say, good god but the situation seems bleak. To have her *stolen* out of our bedroom window... perhaps whoever did it can steal me too, out of this treehouse. It will be easier here, of course.

And what path might a person's soul and heart choose under so extreme an assault? Laurel herself can feel it happening around her, "it" being something undefinable that is most definitely both a threat and

salvation, the hardening of celestial arteries such that her lifeblood doesn't *entirely* spill out all over the place. I'm going to be a statue someday soon, she believes, and people will be amazed that such a thing can move. She is in a place now where all the previous definitions and all the old habits are no longer functional. If she asks herself the age old question, "Just who do you think you are anyway?" the answer "Laurel" is no longer sufficient, "Laurel" an empty word, "Laurel" an empty idea, "Laurel" a collection of thrown together verbs and adjectives that no longer coalesce into a person. How do you determine the way you look without a mirror? and so on, the whole morbid exercise happening while she stares at the floor, quietly hardening.

Meanwhile, there are others in this story who are profoundly affected by the events of these many days and many nights, most notably one by the name of Gary, who has come to depend upon his fantasy image of Laurel as a means for survival against the constant, insipid barrage of Voices. We might recall, of course, that Laurel had scheduled a sort of date with Gary, and on the evening of that event, Gary found, for the first time, a kind of harmony inside his head: the "deal" that he had made with Gale and Vince and Gregory and Jack was proving to be a fairly wonderful arrangement, for all parties concerned. In his spare time, waiting for the date to roll around, Gary allowed himself to wander freely over the ideas his Voices had planted in his head, ideas about building some strange kind of space ship, far out science fiction ideas that would have driven him crazy if it hadn't been for the tempering sweetness of Laurel in his future. At this point, obsession isn't too strong a word for the way Gary approached his rendezvous with Laurel; certainly his circumstances were extreme, nearly as extreme as Laurel's own situation -- perhaps equally so, if just a couple of steps to the left.

And when the scheduled time of their date rolled around, Gary bounded up the steps to Laurel's house with a kind of enthusiasm unseen in him for years now, his Voices no longer chattering mindlessly, but humming soothing, gentle tones to him, in order to lend support. The door, however was not opened by Laurel, but instead by a figure who was, presumably, her father: a disheveled mess of a man, haggard looking and withdrawn. "I'm here to pick up Laurel," stammered Gary, only to be told by the unfortunate man, "Laurel isn't going out tonight. There's been a... bit of a... disaster...." And the door closed, and that was that.

Disaster? thought Gary. What kind of disaster? What kind of shock waves from Laurel's disaster were now provoking disaster in *him*? It

was nearly too much to bear. He was especially petulant with his family during the following many days and many nights, treating his parents not as human beings, complex and rich with experience, but as icons for the symbolologies he hated the most, representatives of a horrifying cult of madness centered around the insane martyrdom of a deluded crazy man who believed he was the incarnate son of some kind of mystical god force. He raged on and on against his friend Scotto as well, lambasting his childlike ways and his attentiveness to art, which alone of all the human disciplines adds nothing to human survival other than some kind of distraction from the imminent problems of living. And finally, he waged all out war with the Voices inside his head, arguing and provoking, ignoring the pain they were able to slide in under his inadequate defenses, accusing them of allowing Laurel to break her date with him and ruin his Hope for the future.

There are knocks on the door of the treehouse, the little panel in the floor. Knocks. An actual person. Someone's knocking on the door of the treehouse, the little panel in the floor, an actual person's knocking on the door of the treehouse. Knocking. What could they be thinking?

A long, long silence ensues. What could they be thinking? I'm very busy here. I feel drunk. I'm very, very busy here.

"Laurel, your parents told me you were up here."

A long, long silence; she recognizes his voice, is astonished by the arrogance with which her parents casually divulge her whereabouts, can hardly believe they're related any more, and what the hell is he doing here anyway? An actual person is at the door of the treehouse, and what could he be thinking?

"Laurel, it's Gary. Could I come in?"

Astonishment, bewilderment, anger through a haze, what the hell are you thinking? Are you serious?

"If you don't say anything, I'm just going to come in anyway."

Pause. "That's the kind of person I am, you know."

Yes indeed. Then I don't need to say anything, do I.

Moments later, the panel slides open, and Gary pokes his head into the treehouse.

"Close the fucking door," she says, leveling him with an agonizing stare. "It's cold up here."

Gary hurriedly climbs inside the house, slides the panel shut. Laurel is huddled in one corner, wrapped in a sleeping bag, next to a space heater. Her eyes are nearly swollen shut, the weird light in here makes it

look as though her face is pockmarked with giant splashes of shadow paint, hair a tangled mess... she looks him over as well, rumpled attire, frazzled, windblown hair, face frozen in what appears to be a simple caricature of bitterness, and she's, like, "Get over yourself."

"Pardon me?"

"I'm going to be very blunt with you, Gary," as he tries to get comfortable, "I don't know what you think you're doing here, but the precise reason *I'm* here, which is none of your business to be sure, involves a certain amount of privacy that I am unable to find anywhere else."

"I understand that."

"Apparently so, which means the moral universe in which you live involves no such generosity concerning privacy, since you have so blatantly disregarded mine."

Silence.

"This is a nice space you got here," he says.

Silence.

"Nice and quiet. No cars going by."

"It isn't so quiet any more. Shut up."

Silence.

"So? Get on with it. Why the hell are you here?"

"It's going to sound pretty ridiculous when I tell you."

"It's pretty ridiculous that you're here to begin with."

"Maybe, maybe not."

"Trust me."

Silence.

Silence.

"I'm not, uh... I'm sorry, Gary. I'm not trying to be mean."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are, you've been engaged in a calculated attempt to be mean to me."

"What I mean is, ordinarily I'm not... fuck you, you're right. I am trying to be mean."

"Anyways, it doesn't matter much, because I've decided I'm going to sit up here all night, no matter how mean you are."

Silence.

"Excuse me, but I don't believe you're the one who's in a position to make that decision," she says.

"Oh?"

"Yeah."

"Explain."

"Explain? Are you kidding?"

"You own the treehouse, I understand that much. And you don't want me here, I understand that too. But if you tell me to leave, I won't. That's the kind of guy I am."

Silence.

"What the fuck, Gary? I mean, really?"

"I'm just going to sit up here with you tonight, all right? This isn't that challenging a concept."

"Don't patronize me, Gary, for god's sake."

Silence.

"I don't really plan to talk to you, you know," she says.

"Plans change."

"Fuck you, 'plans change.' I am a rock. My plans are not changing."

"You are a huddled mass next to a space heater." Pause.

"Descartes invented analytic geometry while huddled in blankets next to his furnace. He went into a reverie and came up with a whole new branch of geometry. Pretty soon we were on the road to calculus and all of modern mathematics."

"So?"

"So, I'd like to be here tonight in case you reinvent mathematics."

Pause. "Or whatever it is you do up here. I'd just like to be here."

Silence.

"You shoulda brought a blanket," she says. "It gets cold up here."

"Is your family religious?" he asks.

Looks up suddenly, "Huh?"

"Is your family religious?"

"Why are you asking me that?"

"Because I'm curious."

"Why are you curious?"

"Because I know very little about you."

Pause.

"Did it ever occur to you that I like it that way?"

"Should I ask a different question?"

"No, this is a good question."

"So?"

"No, we're not religious."

"You never went to church or anything when you were growing up?"

"Never went to church or anything when we were growing up."

Pause. Silence.

"My family is very religious," he says.

"Oh."

"Can I tell you about my family?"

Pause.

"Just a little bit?"

"Am I going to find your family interesting?"

"How do I know? I don't know anything about you." Pause. "My father is a principal at a Lutheran school. My mother teaches first grade there. Very religious upbringing. If you can imagine having an hour of Bible study every day, five days a week, and then attending Sunday school and church service on the weekend..."

"I can imagine that."

"Horrible stuff, as you can see."

"No," eyes locking in with some kind of clarity, "why is it horrible?"

Pause.

"Because that religious stuff is pretty ludicrous."

"No, I don't see that."

"What?"

"In first grade, you have the capacity to decide that religion is ludicrous? I don't see it."

"What I mean is, there's so much of it. They stuff it down your throat."

"Sounds to me, though, that the very idea of a religion is that it's such a beautiful concept, this idea of God and the Messiah, that there really shouldn't be any kind of limit as to how much they can stuff down your throat."

"That's well and good, in theory."

"In theory' nothing. That sounds beautiful to me. That sounds like... I mean, if you're a person who truly has faith in a Messiah, that environment sounds wonderful. Was it... I mean, did they torture you or something? I hear nuns in Catholic schools push the kids around -- is that what they did to you?"

"No!" exasperated, "they just... before you even get a chance to form yourself as a person, see, they've already got this religious ideology

implanted in your head. It's insidious. It's all around you, and you can't get away from it."

"At what point did you decide that it was all insidious?"

"What do you mean, at what point? It was always insidious."

"What I mean is, if it's as insidious as you say, then it has to have been successful. It has to have worked; you have to have believed in God for a prolonged period of time. And what that means is, some other factor got involved, and took you away from that path. Something from outside that environment." Pause. "Kind of like you, being here tonight, affecting me." Pause. "What was it that really turned you away from religion, Gary?"

"I don't--"

"Wait, shut up, it's my treehouse, I'll decide what it was." Tight smile, hidden from him, "I have a theory, see, that most children inevitably go through a period of rebellion against their parents."

"This is hardly a new theory."

"And see, your parents are both religious educators, so in order to fully and wholly rebel against them, you have to rebel against the thing that they hold most dear, which of course, is a beautiful, substantiated faith in God. Right?"

"Wrong. There are all sorts of reasons for my not believing in God."

"Maybe so, but I'll bet you started looking for those reasons after you started rebelling, and I'll bet reasons just started popping out of the woodwork once you needed them." Pause. "Look at you: on the track toward science and rationalism and materialism and all of that, playing Dungeons and Dragons with your friends. You're a knee jerk reaction, just like every generation is, a knee jerk reaction to what immediately preceded it."

Pause.

"So the point is, Gary, I don't find this a fascinating topic. You're very predictable." Pause. "Kind of weird to throw your soul away just to get even with your parents for making you."

Long, long silence.

"You've managed to, in effect, dissect one of the great issues in my life, and then... discard it as... boring." Pause. "That's a rare and unique talent. One deserving of respect."

"Thank you."

"I'm just going to sit here and think for a while."

"Is it hard on your parents that you don't believe in God?" she asks.

Distracted, "Pardon me?"

"Is it hard on your parents that you abandoned your belief in God?"

Pause.

"Umm, yes. That's kind of the idea behind my doing it."

"Does it... I mean, how completely can you just 'give up' God?"

"Completely. Thoroughly." Shivering, realizing. "Of course, I had the tools to brainwash myself; I'd just seen how it was done over a period of years, and so I looked at people who seemed perfectly happy without God, and... headed that direction." Pause. "Tough on my parents."

"You got any older sisters or brothers?"

"I have an older sister and... an older brother." Pause. "My brother... he committed suicide a couple months ago." Pause. "My parents had three miscarriages before any of us were born."

Long pause.

"That's horrible."

"That certainly is."

Pause.

"So you're kind of adding insult to injury, aren't you?"

"I don't get you. It doesn't matter what my parents feel. It's intolerable that I should submit to such a ridiculous position philosophically. I feel much better about myself now that I've accepted reality the way it is."

"Oh? And you somehow know how reality really is? Better than your parents?"

"Definitely."

"Of course, your children will think the same about you and *your* antiquated ideas." Laughs, "And they'll be right."

"I'm not having children."

Small laugh, "Yeah, yeah, every boy your age says that."

"I mean it."

"Every boy your age means it, too."

Silence.

"Your parents say you haven't spoken to them for many days and many nights now," he says.

Silence.

"So?"

"So... I understand there's been a tragedy here, but... isn't now a time to come together? Figuratively speaking."

"I don't feel like it," she says.

Pause.

"Oh," she says. "I see where you're coming from. I'm doing to my parents the same thing you're doing to yours." Pause. "Still... this happened to me, whereas with you... you made the decision yourself."

"You decide to sit up here alone, Laurel. You're not a robot who's been programmed to do it."

"No, I think you're wrong. I feel *compelled* to be here, to experience this. It's pretty mystical, actually. But of course, you don't know much about mystical, do you."

"I don't think mystical is a good excuse to do this to yourself."

"Do what? What do you think I'm doing? What the hell do you know?" Pause. "About this, I mean. Obviously you know a lot in general."

Pause.

"You're the youngest child, right?" she says.

"Right."

"I'm the oldest. By about four minutes." Pause. "Four minutes makes a big difference in this kind of race." Pause. "Psychically, like, we can *feel* the difference."

Pause.

Sudden, sweeping tightening of the stomach, "Oh, fuck..." almost an outpouring of tears, until he says,

"Laurel?"

WHAM closed the gates, just in time too.

"I don't want to talk right now. Just shut up."

"What did you have planned for our date, by the way?" she asks.

Pause.

"What were you expecting out of this date?"

Long pause, sigh.

"Oh, I don't know..." he replies.

"Tell me. You were pretty taken aback when I called you."

"It was a pretty big surprise."

"So why did you say yes? What were you expecting?" Pause.

"Did you have any fantasies about what it would be like?"

Pause.

"I said yes because I'm attracted to you."

Pause.

"Yes, I had fantasies."

"Tell me."

"Why?"

"I want to know."

"Why? What good would it do me to reveal something like that to you?"

"What harm would it do?" Pause. "This fantasy wasn't... something disgusting or anything, was it?"

"No."

"Tell me."

"What about you? Did you have any fantasies?"

"No maneuvering about *my* fantasy life when you haven't said anything."

Pause.

"Well... all right, Laurel, I'll be frank with you. I had very high hopes for this date."

"You did? What kind of hopes?"

"Going into this date, I had incredibly high hopes for us as a couple. In my fantasy, I had allowed myself to extrapolate forward fairly far into the future. I pictured our first date as something surprising. Unexpectedly romantic. Like, we found out we had a lot more in common than we expected, and, we really enjoyed each other's company, and, all in all we saw a lot of each other over a very short period of time. That's what I pictured."

"We saw a lot of each other?"

"That's what I pictured."

"What else?"

"Oh, I don't know... the details sort of shifted around a lot. Pictured us out places. Maybe, like you said on the phone, renting a movie or something. Not too important what we did, necessarily, but that we were together."

"You pictured all this?"

"Uh huh."

"Before the first date even happened?"

"Yeah." Pause. "I guess I can be an optimist about some things, can't I?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

Long pause.

He: "Why *did* you ask me out?"

Pause.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know a more straightforward way of asking that question, really."

Pause.

She: "I don't know... I thought you were cute, I guess... Liked tutoring with you... What else?"

"You don't have much of a social life."

"What?"

"You spent a lot of time alone, right? And with your sister?"

Pause.

He: "Pretty brave to just suddenly decide to call someone and ask for a date." Pause. "I admire that, I really do."

"So?"

"So what inspired it, all of a sudden?"

Pause.

She: "I guess I just had this weird dream, Gary, and then I decided to call you. Is that a good explanation?"

"No."

"See? You're not mystical enough."

Silence.

Slightly different color in her voice, "What else did you fantasize about?"

Pause.

"Are you implying something in particular?"

"Maybe. What else?"

Pause.

"It's very cold up here, you know."

"Talk faster, it'll warm you up."

Pause.

"I'll be more specific. Did you fantasize about... something physical between us?"

Pause.

"Why is it so important to know the content of my fantasies?"

"Just answer the question. It's not that difficult, you know."

Silence.

"I will admit, I envisioned the possibility of physical contact."

Pause. "I mean, that's not so far out of the question when you're busy envisioning the evolution of a fruitful, wonderful relationship, which is what I was doing."

Pause.

Pause, leaps, "Did you picture us making love?"

White hot, "I don't think I'm going to answer that."

Pause.

"You didn't have any fantasies about how this date would have gone?" he asks.

"Yeah, I did, actually. I pictured us being sort of bored by each other, not having much to say. I pictured us leaving each other that night relatively unsatisfied, and then I would have gotten back to the business of my life."

Pause.

"That's a fairly rotten way to approach a date."

"I know. Between us, there ought to be a reasonable middle ground."

Pause.

He: "I did picture us making love. I'll admit it. I pictured it as being kind of awkward the first time."

"The first time?"

"And then, eventually, I pictured us as really being able to move well together. Does that bother you?"

Pause.

"Are you *trying* to bother me?"

"These are my fantasies. You asked."

"Right."

Pause.

"Have you ever made love to anyone, Gary?"

"Yes." Pause. "You?"

Pause.

"No, we've never made love to anyone, Gary."

"We?"

Pause.

"My sister and I."

"Right."

Make the leap, sweating a bit, anger, let me cry,

"Tell me something weird about yourself you haven't told me."
 Pause. "Tell me every weird thing about yourself you haven't told me."
 Dam breaks, without hesitation, "I'm hearing Voices in my head."
 Wants to crawl around a bit, "What kind of Voices?"
 "You know, just Voices, really."
 "What do they say?"
 "They want me to help them build a space ship."
 "Mmmmmm," this blanket is slick with sweat, "that's pretty weird,
 Gary."
 "It's pretty cold up here, Laurel." Pause. "What about you? I
 want to know something weird about you."
 "I'll bet you do, Gary."
 "You and your sister..."
 "We were pretty weird."
 "I'll bet."
 "My sister and I used to pretend that our house was a space ship,
 and someday we'd both blast off into outer space." Pause. "Pretty weird,
 huh."
 "Not so weird. Not weird like Voices inside your skull."
 "My sister and I could dream together."
 "Oh yeah?"
 "Yeah," big smile, for the first time in many days and many nights,
 pure, powerful relief. "Yeah, we could dream together." Sweeping
 heartache arrives on a wispy cloud. I need to cry, Gary, you will have to
 excuse me for a moment.
 Long silence, only her sobs between them, quietly
 and you can look at me with bloodshot eyes, and make this
 sadness your own?
 obsessed,
 "Laurel..." Nothing to say, really, I certainly can't cry like that.
 and you don't *know* what it is to lose her. She was once inside of
 me, shared my me in such an intimate way, beyond intimacy really,
 intersubjectivity inside each other's dreams, "for many days and many
 nights I have tried to dispose of this,"
 "this what?"
 "this *feeling*, this feeling of *helplessness*..." for I have lost her, truly
 lost her. "This feeling of helplessness, loneliness, I haven't got anybody
 now... we could dream together, Gary." Self-pity, looming madness, oh,

Melody, where did you go? "I don't have any dreams any more, Gary. I
 don't have *any*."

"I want to hear more."

"We had a castle together, and we played there...."

"Grew up together?"

"We never grew up, did we...."

"Hey...."

Furious streams of tears, it doesn't stop now that it's started. "I
 feel so insignificant, as if every last thing I'd allowed myself to Hope for
 has suddenly turned to dust and blown away." My heart just wants to
 burst, from the ridiculous angle in which it suddenly finds itself. "Do you
 understand? Or am I just..."

"I understand. I understand."

Is he moved? Is he moving? Toward me, it's what feels right to
 him, but I can't take it.

"Just shut up, Gary. This is my treehouse. Just shut up." Cry her
 away, watch her float downstream, cry her away. "You're hearing Voices?"
 Clear my throat, what does *that* mean?

"I'm hearing Voices," he says, smiling through his own tears. "I'm
already crazy, Laurel." She laughs and cries, such bittersweet ridiculous
 twisting by two little people high up in the hills, away from all the troubles
 and the worries of the world, two little kids stuck up in a treehouse
 underneath the stars, in the middle of the weirdest universe that ever came
 into being. We could slide right into a black hole tomorrow and Melody
 wouldn't matter a bit after that.

"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*..."