

## Chapter Eleven

And Scotto then began to write the story that Gary had suggested, and the story was called, "Voices."

### VOICES

It's been a hellish couple of days, that's for sure. Seems like everything is going berserk all of a sudden, you know the feeling. And then, to top it all off, and after everything that's happened, Laurel calls and decides she wants to see me. And of course, I have no real choice in the matter, and an hour later we meet at Pour Richard's for a drink.

"Hi, Scotto," she says, as she slides into the booth opposite me. With her is a tall, Apollo-like figure, who nods to me and sits next to her. "This is Cohen."

"Hi, Cohen," I mumble.

Laurel gets a drink for herself, something green that looks like a glass of Scope. Cohen orders a foreign lager, and I settle for a Long Island iced tea.

"How're things?" I ask. "Things" is a nice, ridiculously vague term, of course, for Laurel and her life, but there it is.

"Groovy groovy," she says, nice and terse. "Listen, Scotto, I don't want to cut short the small talk or anything, but Cohen here...."

She trails off. Cohen's leather jacket crinkles, but not so you'd notice or anything. His hair is slicked back with some kind of super glue or something.

"Well, uh, Scott..." Cohen begins.

"The gang calls me Scottø," I interrupt.

Cohen blinks. "Oh. Right. Well, Scotto... I don't quite know how to approach this topic with you."

"Just say it," Laurel tells him. Her thick black hair makes her face stick out like a headlight. "I mean... look, Scotto's a fairly weird person. I think he'll understand."

An underhanded compliment, I think to myself. Remind yourself to spill a drink her direction some time....

"Yeah, well, anyway..." says Cohen. "Laurel tells me you've been... hearing things."

I glance at Laurel. Laurel glances into her glass of Scope. The Scope just sits there. Typical behavior for a glass of Scope, I guess.

"Is that so?" I say. I try to sound like Grand Moff Tarkin when I say it.

"Yes. Hearing things like... Voices. Some kind of Voices, you know?"

Cohen shifts in his seat, clearly a bit uncomfortable.

"Anyway," he continues, "I just wanted to see what these Voices were saying to you."

There's a burst of shouting from the other end of the room. Someone's having a fabulous game of pinball.

I glance again at Laurel. This time she makes eye contact.

"I know you said to keep it a secret," she says. "But I'm sick of secrets. All of Gary's secrets couldn't keep him alive, you know?"

"Believe me," Cohen says, "I understand your reticence to talk about this."

Reticence? Big word for a guy with glue in his hair.

"And," he continues, "I want you to know you can trust me."

"You can trust him, Scotto," Laurel says. It's unclear whether or not the Scope agrees.

"You see," Cohen continues again, "I'm hearing Voices too, and I just thought we could compare notes."

One more time I take a good look at Laurel, as if to dig up some kind of security there. The look on her face, though, is one of almost-terror, as though she's mouthing the words, "First Gary, then Cohen, now you..." And the obviousism here is perhaps we could try to... figure all this out, Scotto? Please?

"Well, Cohen, my Voices are named Vince and Gregory," I say. "How about you?"

"Gale and Jack," he replies.

"You know, I've heard Vince talk about Gale a couple of times. Sounds like a sweet Voice to have inside your head."

"Oh, she is, she is," he says, looking uneasily at Laurel. She shrugs. Cohen turns back to me. Some small talk, perhaps? "What do you do for a living, Scotto?"

"I run a psychedelic drug cult on the Internet," I lie. Smiling, of course; don't want to give myself away.

"Look, Scotto, for Christ's sake..." says Laurel, reaching across the table to grab my hand. She touches me, and suddenly, the contact is electric. Deja vu sweeps over me like a tidal wave, only it isn't deja vu precisely, or rather, I'm not "vu"ing backwards in time, I'm... looking

Laurel straight in the eye, and it's almost as though we can see right *through* each other's eyes. Suddenly, I'm mortified; suddenly, the curtains are beginning to draw back on the panorama of existence, and suddenly, Laurel and I are aware of something ridiculous, something purely aesthetic, something phenomenally intense and hard to think about.

"Scotto," Laurel says slowly, "surely you do more than run a psychedelic drug cult on the Internet."

And I begin to nod. I like to write stories, don't I, Laurel?

"You're a bit of a writer, aren't you, Scotto?" she asks. "Didn't you write a story about Gary and I once?"

And I continue to nod.

"Why, you might someday..." she says, trailing off.

And I finish the sentence: "I'll probably write up this whole conversation."

Cohen, unfortunately, has been left out of the discussion. He's getting nervous. He wants to say something, but we have a hard time hearing him. And you see, somehow my *deja vu* tells me that he has very good cause to be afraid.

"Listen," he says, "the air around you two is swirling," he says, and he gets up, tries to get some distance, "it's like reality is distorting where the two of you are sitting."

And I say to Laurel, "I think your friend's in trouble."

And the words jolt her hard, and she says, "Do something."

But Cohen is moving away from us now; as I turn to say something to him, his panic-stricken form is already out the door.

"He's into something big, Scotto," she says.

I shrug. "Isn't everybody in this story?"

The pinball machine in the back is ringing and dinging furiously, and a horde of people around it are cheering and shouting. A Village People CD is blasting out of the speakers. And reality is distorting around Laurel and me. Suddenly machine gun fire is zooming through the air, and the big front window is shattering, as Cohen's body flies into the bar, followed by a barrage of bullets that strike only his body. The pinball people don't mind a bit because they've got three balls in play, and the Village People don't miss a beat as I dive to the floor next to the bullet ridden body of Cohen, who stares at me in wonder and says, "You're some kind of post-modern miracle, huh," before shuffling off his mortal coil. And a soothing new Voice in my head says, "Fear not, fear not, fear not, fear not..."

But I'm afraid it's simply not her prerogative to tell me what to fear.

Improbably, Laurel and I escape.

"What are we supposed to talk about now?" I say, rattled, trying to keep my eyes on the road.

"How's your writing been lately?" she says. Needless to say, this is a sensitive subject. She's sort of staring at me, and sort of staring through me, at the same time no less. The way her bangs sort of fall down over her eyes a bit makes me wonder whether she even bothers trying to see things. She's sort of leaning forward and yet leaning away all at once -- Zen and the Art of Riding in the Passenger Seat.

"Oh, you know... I can't seem to hold a plot together for more than a page or two. My characters are underdrawn, and behaving in purely ridiculous ways. 'Treehouse' was sort of the nadir, as far as my writing goes."

"Nadir? I happened to enjoy it."

"Yes, but that's because you're one of the characters. And when I wrote it, I didn't know a damn thing about you. I mean, we hadn't met yet. So you were underdrawn, poorly developed...."

"And what about now?" she asks.

I'm not sure I know what she means.

"If you wrote about me now, after everything we've been through together... would you be able to write me any better now?"

I pause for a moment.

"That friend of yours," I say. "He was really hearing Voices, wasn't he?"

She nods.

It starts to rain. We decide to drive out to the cemetery where Gary is buried. We pull into the gravel driveway, and for effect, I shut off the headlights. I cleverly avoid a tree that somehow swerves into my path. The entire cemetery is black, except for a lone spotlight on an American flag that is flapping forlornly in the wind. Eventually, I stop the car. We sit in silence for a moment or two, listening to the rain and thunder, quietly being petrified out of our minds.

Then Laurel asks, "Do you remember where he's buried?"

To which I am forced to admit: "No."

"Me neither."

She sighs loudly. "He wanted you to write a tragedy, right? After you wrote 'Treehouse,' he wanted you to write a tragedy."

"Yeah."

"Do you suppose writing about Gary's death would be tragic?"

"Maybe," I say.

"Just the basic premise is tragic, isn't it?"

"Maybe," I say. "I mean, he sort of *imposed* this notion of tragedy on me. I didn't want to write tragedy, really. I was thinking to myself, I have this desire to write, and why should it be wasted on telling tragedies, or, or *horrible* stories? There are so many other things to write about."

"Ah...." she says.

"Like, why should I create some horrible universe for these people that I'm writing about, just because Gary asked me to? I would need a much more compelling reason to write up something so horrible."

"Yeah," she says. "Yeah."

"So I thought, I'll show you, Gary. When I write this story, *you'll* be dead, how's that for tragedy. And me too; by the end of the story, *I'll* be dead. Even your friend whom I barely knew, he'd be dead. And you too, Laurel. You'd have to wind up dead. It'd be nice and Shakespearean, you know?"

"Wouldn't have any emotional weight, of course."

"No, of course not; the story itself would have almost no weight at all. It'd just take up space on the page. But then I'd, I don't know, I'd hand the story to Gary, and he'd *get it*, he'd get what I was trying to communicate to him, about how he's been looking at life. He'd see that, and he'd cheer right up."

"He wouldn't drown in quicksand."

"Yeah. That was the plan, anyway." Pause. "Didn't work, of course." Pause. "I think I took too much time."

My throat tightens unexpectedly. I don't know why we came out here to begin with, now that I've stopped to reflect. Laurel's beginning to be upset as well, but who comforts whom? "I hadn't seen him in so long," I begin slowly. "And... it just doesn't seem real. It *still* doesn't seem real." I take a deep breath. "And sometimes I have these dreams, where I'm just going about my business, you know, and suddenly... there's Gary. He was never dead, you know, he was just... he had things to do, I guess. And I run right up to him, shouting, 'Gary, you're alive, fuck, you're alive!' And I hug him and hug him and hug him. My heart just wants to burst, you know?"

Laurel nods softly, keeping her tears to herself.

"And then... he's usually got a bottle of vodka or something, and he... he takes a swig, and he fixes that damn stare of his on me, and he says, 'Sorry, Scotto. You're only dreaming.' And then I wake up, and all I can do is cry and punch my pillows, you know?"

I'm on a sentimental roll. I can barely speak. Laurel grabs my hand, it's the thing to do, and the river of words changes timbre... it's *electric* when she touches me.

"Do you know why you're doing this?" she asks.

"Doing what?" I reply.

"Us," she says. "Doing us. This. I can't..."

Why is reality warping around us? Why has physics gone suddenly crazy on us?

"What do your Voices tell you, Scotto?" she asks.

Halting pause, then,

"They want me to build a space ship," I reply.

She nods slowly.

"They wanted Gary to build a space ship too."

My eyes grow wide. The coincidence -- the synchronicity -- is frightening.

"We're in trouble, aren't we," she says.

"I've got this whirlwind of images rushing through my head," says Laurel, as we drive away from the cemetery at high speed. Her hand doesn't leave my arm. Reality is bending twisting spinning and slipsiding all around us. Quicksand is the thing that Gary succumbed to, and we don't want to fall in ourselves. The Voices swear they've got Answers, but you can't administer a polygraph test to a disembodied Voice. The connection between my hand and Laurel's is intense, hot. I'm hallucinating an aura of protective energy around our hands. And more....

"This is the end," says Laurel's aura to mine. My eyes grow wide - - perhaps my pupils dilate. And she continues, "It's us, you and me, in this story, in these pages... I've been so wrong... I thought Gary was... but no...." My mind is reeling. I haven't felt like this since my last drug trip. Somehow the notion of Voices in my head is so much easier to entertain than the notion that Laurel and I are experiencing a warp clear through to another dimension in time and space. She is entering my head. She is joining my hallucination, and I am allowing her; no, I am *willing* her to join me, because she is the only one who can help me figure this mess out. "This is what they're afraid of, this connection." Can an omnipotent god

make a rock so heavy that even he can't lift it? "I have so much to learn, and so much to tell you... there just isn't time..." Where are you from? What is your stake in all of this? we ask you. And would you rather freeze to death or burn to death? "Please... say something... it's so hard to maintain...."

Am I even driving this car anymore? Even as I think those words I can feel the car spinning out of control, flipping, rolling madly. "Stay with me... Your perception shapes your reality. That's what they're afraid of..." My hand grips the steering wheel. My mind is reeling... "If we lose this connection, we're useless to them, and we'll never get what we need. Answers, all of them..." Is this a brand new trip or an old one?

The aura from our hands is so bright, so intense. I can't see the road, it's all a blue of water and air. A deafening roar fills the air, the thunder booms and the lightning flashes, my hand yanks the steering wheel and I can feel the car spinning out of control, flipping, rolling madly. "DON'T LOSE ME!" the echo of a voice I once knew screams. Weight on all sides crushes my body, warm blood covers my clothing, I land with my hand still holding Laurel's, and she cries, "We can swim in quicksand," before losing consciousness. Shadowy figures move outside the wreckage.

I'm in a bed, in a chamber. I'm awake now, yes. And I have company: a girl, who's brought me food, and an old man, dressed in long flowing robes that almost seem to be a part of his body. The girl -- she's got my complete attention.

"You look just like Laurel," I say.

She doesn't reply. After a brief hesitation, she sets the food down on a table near my bed, never taking her eyes away from mine, as if she's suspicious of something.

"I'm afraid I don't understand you quite yet," she says at last.

"Tell me what you remember," the old man says. His name is Father Time.

"Concerning what?"

"Your origins. Where you've been and where you're going. Who you are and from whence you came. And of course, the nature of our particular... situation."

"Ummm." My name is Scotto, born in a small town in Iowa, headed toward life as a writer, caught in an existential bind, currently trapped in a wrecked car and hallucinating wildly.

Father Time motions toward the girl who looks like Laurel. "She can help you remember. When she touches you, you seem to warp reality."

"You mean Laurel?" I ask.

"I'm not Laurel," says she.

"You're not Laurel?" I reply.

"I'm not Laurel," she affirms.

"Well, not-Laurel," I say, "why don't *you* explain what's going on here?"

She stares angrily at me.

"I think," she says, "we're dying in a car wreck."

"Ah," I say, nodding. "Tragedy."

"Yes, versions of you are dying," says Father Time, "and meanwhile, reality continues to warp all around you." Pause. "Would you like a tour of the cave complex before you go?"

And we wander through a complex maze of corridors, coming out eventually onto a sort of rock balcony. Through the center of the cavern runs a long, beautiful, multi-colored river. The water glistens and sparkles and changes hues constantly. But Father Time is pointing toward something else. Next to the bank of the river is a gigantic, gleaming, golden space ship, under construction, with enormous sums of bustling busybodies crawling all over it.

"Now what do you suppose we're going to do with that?" I ask.

not-Laurel is standing close behind me, close enough to whisper in my ear, "You have no *idea*, do you?" Suddenly, her hands clasp my head between them. I'm instantly consumed by an indescribable burst of energy; the reality warp is always strongest when we touch, because we're both becoming *aware*.... My body falls to the floor. She must be falling with me; we must be falling together. I look up toward the old man. He merely shrugs, walks away. And then, the fireworks begin. An infinity of towering not-Laurels parade around as I lie there gaping. She goes around to all my doors, throwing them wide open, peeking in when it suits her.

"Yeah, you sure are something," she says. "Throw away some of this, you know?"

Finally she stops at a door that won't open for her.

"You got the key to this?" she asks. I shake my head. "I suppose not." Pause. "We need to go in here." Pause. "I'm sure a little exploration will reveal your complete awareness. But you *must* open this door." Her urgency is striking. "It's about communication. But we can't do it here. Too many links still unrevealed. Can you understand?"

Suddenly the hallway changes colors. She glances up and down the hallway, furtively, perhaps desperately, perhaps not, hard to tell this far

in, and we both realize at approximately the same time that *We Are Not Alone* inside my head. Voices. Not an ounce of security drifts through the atmosphere. She turns to the forbidden door, struggling frantically, perhaps desperately, whilst I wheel about, scanning for trouble. I can feel their malicious ambiguity distinctly. Closing in, from either end of my brain. This would classically be considered mortal danger.

"Please," not-Laurel says, "I can't do it, I can't open it..."

I turn my attention toward the door. With a swift thought I yank the door open, and am nearly consumed by the release of memetic energy. The energy subsumes us, and not-Laurel acts as interpreter. "Listen closely. You are a natural gateway for the manifestation of Chaos. Inconsistency in *any* part of the model negates the validity of *all* parts of the model. Find where you live, and *live* there." To which I reply, "I don't understand! Almost, but not yet!" And she replies, "I have no words with which to communicate the complexity of this experience, save that it is at once real and illusory, at once true and false." And I ask, "Who are you, then?" and she replies, "But who can love a phantasm?"

And suddenly: "I think I've caught the thread here."

I caught it much too late, of course. Even as I realized the part that I was playing in this fiction, I also realized how well I'd played it: tragedy was coded in from the very beginning, and although I was indeed in a position of precarious power, the fabric of this creation demanded our demise, thanks to my agreement with my dead friend Gary. It isn't the Voices that eventually catch up to us. It's the car crash, of course. I'm swimming in pain. Can't tell if I've gone blind or if it's just very dark. I hear the rain and the thunder. I have the distinct feeling of being upside down. My hand rests on Laurel's -- soft, faint, indeterminate. A familiar taste in my mouth sets me to wondering which one of us is bleeding all over me. I'm practically screaming at Laurel to wake up, though I have no voice -- I'm trying to scream through my fingers. The top of my skull is beginning to feel cold, which is strange, since the rest of me is decidedly numb at the moment... cold, and dare I say, damp... the top of my skull is *wet*. Which means my head is leaking blood at an alarming rate, or... or I'm upside down, in a car, in a ditch even, and the thunder booms and it must be raining, and the ditch must be filling up with water, and I am going to *drown*. I can't swim my way out, because every part of my body is jammed in such a position that the simple act of breathing has taken on Herculean proportions. And Laurel is going to drown right along with me.

I hope you had a reason for suggesting tragedy, Gary. I hope you had a very good reason. Although I'm about to die here in this fiction, rest assured I intend to survive the next one, if only to give you a great deal of trouble about this.

**END**

And when the story "Voices" was complete, Scotto pondered the meaning of the words that had emanated from his hand and from his pen. It seemed to him as though his characters had realized their story-bound nature, and had actually become upset. He remembered Gary's outlandish claims regarding his "Treehouse" story, and he pondered possibilities again. He pondered things that only he could ponder, from where he sat within this tale. Had "Treehouse" predicted an actual event in Gary's life? Did Gary actually believe that Scotto could write such a story again? If so, was this, "Voices," the story? "Post-modern conceits allow us all sorts of cliches," thought Scotto. "I hate cliches. But. Denying reality is also a futile endeavor. Something is going on here. Maybe it isn't what it appears to be, but maybe it also isn't what it isn't appearing to be, and maybe it isn't what it should be appearing to be, which is simple fiction. I simply can't tell; I'm too close to the whole affair." It behooved him to call Gary and question him, now that his fictional self had presented him with such a dilemma.

Unfortunately, it was not Gary who answered the phone, but Gary's mother. There were distinct sobs in her voice, as she calmly informed Scotto of the news.

Gary, it seems, had committed suicide.