

Chapter Ten

Laurel feels obligated to say goodbye to her father, but to tell the truth, Laurel really doesn't feel like saying much of anything to him. Her father is quicksand. Her father, and her whole family, are a giant sinkhole, and you just gotta get out of the way or get sucked underground, where trolls can feast on your broken body. Anyways, there's tragedy here, certainly, but what can be said to her father that'll somehow cheer him up? Or rather -- what can she say *sincerely* to him that will ease his mind? The events of the past few hours, of the past few days and days and days, have taken all the familiar notions she grew up with -- oh, like "love," for example -- and transformed them into things so wholly unrecognizable as to make them something else entirely. So can she even allow herself to pause and tell her father, "I love you," to try to console him, or do you suppose he might feel the hollowness behind the words and thus it'd be better if she ignored him, left him to his private swamp? She stops in the lobby long enough to see that he's still sitting there, a dazed and miserable expression frozen on his face. He looks up, makes eye contact with her before she can avoid it. A long pause follows.

"I suppose you have things to do," he says, his voice a gravelly wreck from too much sobbing.

She nods, caught off guard by his attempt to communicate.

"That's too bad," he continues. "I was going to ask if you wanted to go get drunk with me somewhere."

A pause.

"Maybe you and Gary would like to go get drunk..." he offers.

"I got things to do, Dad," she says.

A pause.

"I'll see you," she says.

He nods.

Goodbye for now, goodbye forever....

She catches a taxi cab outside the hospital, gives directions to Gary's house. If this were the movies, the taxi driver would turn out to be some intriguing or inspirational character, a figure of momentary, transient wisdom in her life, offering insight by the baldest of metaphors and casually declining her tip. As it turns out, the driver is only some guy who isn't at all important to the story as it's developing. Imagine that, she thinks: an entire human being who has no relevance whatsoever, other than

to convey my passage. And if I were sitting up there, I'd have no relevance to him either. Entire worlds of human experience wash up on the shores of relevance as the tides change and contexts shift. Anyway, I just *think* I've got it bad. I could have been born in some part of the world where the food is scarce and disease is rampant. I could have sat in a dirty puddle and watched dysentery yank my family to its doom, instead of *this* mess. I don't have it so bad, she thinks, holding in the last few drops of her tears. I haven't been raped at gunpoint by a stranger, or raped at knifepoint by a friend. A civil war hasn't torn apart my life, I haven't seen sniper fire cause a child's head to burst, I wasn't raised to fight for land with all my might because such land is holy. I've never been aboard an airplane that hurtled to a spectacular doom as it smashed against the ground, I haven't known senility or paralysis or incontinence or frigidity, I haven't slept on the streets in the dead of winter and begged for change to buy food and liquor. I don't have it so bad. It could be so much worse. It could be so much worse. I've never lived near deadly radiation, and the U.S. Army has never invaded my village. I've never been carried away by secret police and buried in a hidden grave because I had this thought or that. I've never had cholera or the black plague or AIDS, I've never been assaulted because of my beliefs or because of my looks, and the discrimination I've faced has amounted to so much nothing in the face of those who haven't lived right here where I've lived. Yes sir, I've got it pretty good, when you get right down to it. If I felt like it, I could go home and watch the television and prepare a meal from cans and sleep in a heated waterbed tonight. Tonight, I could revel in the comforts of the first world, talk on the telephone to anyone I wanted, and tomorrow, I could go back to school and finish my first rate education; and in *that* context, any and all of my bitterness is absolutely *ridiculous*. It's a part of who I am, yes, it's a part of what's made me, but it *isn't that big a deal*, it's just another human life crawling across the planet. My DNA doesn't care one whit about this Melodrama or that Melodrama. I shouldn't care either. Bitterness is quicksand. Living is like a sinkhole, if you aren't careful. I might not be happy right now, but good fucking god, I'm not dead yet either.

"Here you are," says the cab driver, as they pull up in front of Gary's house.

She hands him his fare, and searches through her purse for a tip.

"You know," the cab driver says, "you should force yourself to smile occasionally."

She looks up, suddenly bewildered.

"Pardon me?"

"What I mean is, the body is hardwired to appreciate the smile. If you force yourself to smile, some biological part of your body recognizes that as a 'happy' signal, and actually begins to generate the appropriate feelings." Pause. "I'm not joking! Try it! I used to be a miserable man, until I just started smiling all the time." Pause. "Now, even though I don't have a damn reason to be, I'm happier than I've ever been."

Long, ridiculous pause.

"Would you like a tip?" she asks drolly.

"No thanks, dear," the man replies cheerfully. "Looks like you need it more than me."

"Uh huh," she says, getting out of the car.

Gary's car is in the driveway, so she knows he's home. She lets herself in the front door, lingers in the kitchen for a few moments and looks for a snack. The television is on downstairs, and she can hear the awful narration of one of his favorite movies, *Faces of Death*, a documentary about all the awful ways a human can shuffle off this mortal coil. She smiles despite herself; yes, irony is certainly a lot of fun when you're with Gary. Enough Melodrama, she says to herself, biting into a cookie. Melodrama is for kids. Melodrama is kids pretending. I don't feel like doing that anymore.

She leaves her coat on the table and heads down the basement steps, into the spacious family room. Gary watches her arrival with a bemused, semi-interested stare.

"Back so soon?" he asks.

She stops at the bottom of the steps, replies, "What can I say?"

Pause. "The note was right. My mom had a breakdown."

Gary doesn't blink. "Crying shame, that."

"I wonder," she says, "if that's going to be as expensive as a stroke, in the long run."

Slow smile creeps up on Gary's face.

"That's a pretty vicious sense of humor you got," he says.

"I learned it by watching you," she replies, quoting their favorite public service announcement.

A few moments later, Laurel fairly well pounces on Gary, as if to say, I've been having a very difficult time lately and I believe if we just remove most of these clothes, things will turn around rather rapidly. In the midst of a bit of frenzied groping and what not, Laurel manages to deftly

scoop up the remote control and get rid of that awful film; Gary tears his lips away from her long enough to remark, "Perhaps you'd prefer VH-1, I hear there's an Elton John special playing," at which point she bites him and gets his attention back on the event, which is her. Not meaning to be *aggressive* or anything, she realizes, it's just that I'm inspired by a certain *joie de vivre* that has your name all over it, and excuse me while I pull this over my shoulders, sweetheart. It seems as though you've had a little bit of vodka, not enough to incapacitate you hopefully, but enough to add a touch of, dare I say, minty freshness to the proceedings. In the old days, love, this was a tentative affair, remember? wherein physically, issues of control and care and comfort all came into play, hang-ups hovering like little asteroids around our intimacy, because, god knows you have to learn to do this *somehow*, but can I tell you what I figured out today? (tell you with my tongue and with my teeth, of course) I figured out that if we put our noses to the grindstone (and our lips to the sensitive spots) we might just navigate this whole infuriating reality with little more than some troubled memories and a migraine. This is the kind of frantic scrambling we always avoided in favor of more, ahem, *sen-shoo-al* pleasures, knowing the age old secrets of the wise ones boil down to "take it slow whydontcha" but in *this* moment, what I wanted to tell you, love, is that the pace is quickly increasing, and we are caught up in the midst of it; reality is going on a mindbender, and we are principle agents of it. I got a kind of joyous urgency, my love, ("how did you get *into* these jeans") and what it amounts to is, see this smile on my face? (you will, when you look up), it is generating the appropriate feelings in me, that's for sure....

As is always the case in situations such as these, one of them entered into the event with a hidden agenda of sorts, and that person this time around was Laurel; Gary, meanwhile, is experiencing the typical sudden drought of adrenaline that is propelling him towards exhaustion, and it is this precise state that Laurel hopes to take advantage of, whispering sweet nothings to him about how she hopes he'll be ready for a little more in, say, half an hour or so, calmly keeping his and her hands in motion in the appropriate places, smoothly and sweetly of course, and while his body scrambles to recover and his mind endeavors to compose itself, Laurel whispers a few more sweet nothings in his ear, along the lines of,

"We programmed ourselves to stay alive when everything was looking like hell, right?" "uh huh," this much is true, he admits, the world

was sure looking putrid for a while there, "and so it makes sense that we can program ourselves to be *happy* in the middle of it, right?" which leads to "uh huh," meaning, can't I find a way to be happy in the fact that she's with me and I'm with her? uh huh, uh huh, go on, "and certainly there are a few kinks, right? that we gotta deal with?" and he thinks, yeah, I can think of a few kinks, but "just listen, we already got rid of our parents, right?" meaning it was days and days and days ago when vicious fate allowed us to sever those links, so this medical disaster or that collapse of mental health shouldn't have any effects, "and that means you and I each have one hurdle left to get over, and then it's just us, it's just you and me, it's just the two of us defining our way into happiness, forever and ever amen," and he thinks, just one hurdle each, just one hurdle "each of us will help the other, okay? that's how it *should* be, shouldn't it?" and at some point he realizes that each of her sentences is taking up about twice as much time as it should, each word and syllable hanging there in space a little longer than it should, building a little more momentum than it should, digging its way right through his eardrums into his cerebellum a little easier than it should, and damn it if that ain't the *grooviest* sensation (or maybe this other sensation with your hand is the grooviest, or maybe the two together are causing such shivers up and down my spine and every other elsewhere). "So listen, I need you to talk to me about my sister for a while, so that I can put her to rest. Do you think you can manage that, love? That will be hurdle number one. Talk to me about my sister."

And you know, let's be honest here, Gary isn't stupid by any stretch. Gary can see feel hear taste smell touch the way this conversation is going, the way the past small stretch of time has gone, the way Laurel has charged into this basement like a changed woman, a uniquely sincere smile of acceptance and strength on her face; Gary can sense that something's happening inside the woman that he loves, and he's damned if it hasn't made her all the more attractive, hasn't made her more of a beacon of things he never believed in before, so hell -- he isn't stupid, he isn't gullible, he's diving into this wholeheartedly, and only because she asked him to, and that, he says to himself, is how you might define love if you ever had to write a crossword puzzle or something,

and so he shifts his weight slightly, acquiring a more active position than before, splitting his focus into a strictly biological component dedicated to becoming more and more aroused and to arousing Laurel more and more, and a metaphysical component, dedicated to

"talking about your sister, then," he begins softly, "and what we know of her. She was as beautiful as you, she surely was," and Laurel nods, lets her eyes drift shut, "and you were able to defy the laws of reality by meeting each other in your dreams, in a fantasy Dreamtime, a fairy tale dream castle. You met there each night, and you played there each night, and together you had the most amazing adventures," and Laurel smiles at the memories, and her lip trembles, so Gary kisses her to make it better, "and you had *rules* too, didn't you. Rules that you had agreed upon, rules that were designed to keep you both safe. And what, my love, was the most important of these rules?" And Laurel catches a quick breath, and says, "Never leave the castle." And Gary says, "Never leave the castle. Not just for the safety of the one who is suddenly outside the castle, but also for the safety of the one who is left behind, inside the castle." And Laurel smiles and nods with her eyes closed, breathing in and breathing out, and he says, "And it was she who left the castle, Laurel. She who left you behind. You didn't leave her, it was entirely the other way around." And Laurel breathes in and breathes out, breathes in his words and breathes out all the blame and guilt she's been carrying around, in one fell swoop literally exhales as much negativity as she physically can, and forces herself to smile, forces a smile to accompany this exhalation, allows her body to imprint the idea of blamelessness and the expression of a smile simultaneously, and he can see it, and it amazes him, and it is good.

"And so, my love, it's time you put your sister to rest. Because she's gone now. And it's just you and me, which is all we need, right? Just you and me."

And she smiles and gasps and cries sudden tears, tears of joy for the first time in a long time, and she opens her eyes, and pulls his face to hers and they explore a kiss now, meanwhile slowly letting their bodies touch tenderly under the blanket, and even as he's devolving towards his instincts on a slow and slippery slide, she pulls away slightly and says,

"there's one more hurdle,"

and he says,

"Voices."

"Uh huh," she says, meanwhile continuing contact designed to both relax him and stimulate him all at once, which does the trick for her as well, as this is a collaborative effort to be sure; and now she quietly places herself on top of him, with him inside of her, no motion yet, no movement, but simple alignment of their breathing, and they lie together in a frozen pose of static flux, and on the inside, Gary has succumbed to Laurel's

guidance, feels her hands on his chest and her lips near his ear, hears her whisper "I wanna talk to one of them" and stifles the burst of fear that threatens to rise right up and tear his little playhouse down. Split focus, is it? between the chakra in his groin and the chakra in his head, and he holds himself there, and feels what's there between them in a, laugh, and lovely way; while meanwhile, up above, he has surrendered to the presence of the Others that are within him.

Laurel, meanwhile, has drawn deep upon a wellspring of passion and direction, which well has roots inside her in the connection between her and her love; almost like a sacrifice, this pagan invitation of an "Other" into the holiness between them, and yet, there won't be peace until this "Other" is addressed. She says, "Tell me your name," and Gary's lips say, "Gale. My name is Gale. Thank you for asking." And she says, "You realize, of course, that you've been compromised." And Gale says, "How do you mean?" And Laurel leans in close, and whispers the words that Courtney taught her, ***words that cannot be recorded in this text.***

And then.

Calamity.

Laurel will never forget, of course, the searing violence that was suddenly emblazoned into her consciousness after that. They are moments that never left her, like acid burns across her skin. They are moments that ever after she kept incredibly deep inside her, memories that never again saw the light of day, because of the sheer impossible horror of their meaning; for just as she had finally expunged the useless guilt that had accompanied the loss of her sister, a new, more meaningful guilt arrived to take its place. It was she who said the words to Gary that brought about his destruction. It was she who toppled the fragile house of cards that he had constructed inside his mind to deal with what was happening to him. As the events of the next few moments unfolded before her eyes and before her naked body, she accepted with a sudden dim devotion the panicked flailings of an organism on its way toward final devastation. Sexual bliss turned to terrified carnal rapture as her body, unable to keep pace with manic agony, experienced first a wave of insidious pleasure like nothing she had ever known; and then, just as quickly, she felt herself hurtling through the air, her head crashing against the television screen in a shower of glass and blood. He was fighting them now, fighting for control and for survival, and it was not a fight she would survive if she did not quickly make her escape. We are not given to know how she escaped from that house, nor can we say in what state her mind replayed the action and the

reaction. We might wonder how much dead flesh will need to be shorn away before she ever feels a pleasant breeze again. As it turns out,

Courtney's taking a shower when the phone rings. Cohen snaps up the phone. Laurel's downstairs, and would very much like to come up. Cohen offers to meet her in the lobby, and she agrees. When he arrives, he sees that she is so visibly shaken as to be on the edge of hysteria. It looks to Cohen as though Laurel has suffered from repercussions, from shock waves, from being too close to the epicenter of an earthquake. Most notably, there is a scarf wrapped around her forehead, giving her a sort of "guerrilla" look; and the scarf is soaked with blood. She is attracting no small amount of attention from the manager, who is concerned about his guests, concerned about his carpets.

"I assure you, miss, it would be no trouble at all to call an ambulance," the manager is saying as Cohen arrives.

"I'm sick of hospitals," is Laurel's simple reply. She sees Cohen enter the lobby and her face brightens enormously, as though his arrival is permission to have feelings about what's just happened. Something yanks at his heart when he realizes the full extent of her position in time and space, when he realizes what she is surviving, in a way that he never could, when he feels how much strength is simply radiating from her without her even knowing it. He says, "Laurel, are you all right?" and she says nothing, just throws her arms around him, and he holds her tight until right there in the lobby she melts down into a puddle of everything that she is, all at once.

"Umm," says the manager to Cohen, "will you be taking care of the young lady?"

"Yes, he will," Laurel replies. "He's going to take care of me for a little while, if that's okay," looking up at him and forcing herself to smile despite the tears and all the Melodrama.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Cohen asks.

"Yes," she replies. She looks around for a moment, hesitant to break the embrace, and then she leads him to the hotel bar, where they grab a quiet table. She doesn't intend to stop crying, even while they drink, even while she slowly and smoothly explains how Gary went absolutely berserk. And Cohen feels a wave of guilt for ever having met this woman, but even as he does, she's saying things like, "Really, it was only a matter of time" and "He was hearing *Voices*, for god's sake, how long was I supposed to live with that?" and "I love him dearly, but it seems as though he's

quicksand, it seems as though he's dangerous" until he stops her with a touch and says,

"Laurel, please... slow down. Be still for a moment. You're here in a bar with me now, right?"

And she pauses, laughs a little, says, "Right. I haven't had a drink in a long time." Looks him in the eye and says, "And I'm with you now, that's right."

Meaning, she is effortlessly bridging a gap between what was and what's right here, as if to say, I wonder how much of my past I will have to sacrifice in order to have a present in which to live.

"What happened to Gary?" she asks. "What did those words do to him?"

"They set off a bomb in his head," he replies. "Figuratively speaking, of course. He has a chance now to escape them, to escape those Voices. A slim chance, to be sure. He has to do the work, if he wants to. You detonated the bomb, Laurel, gave him a *chance* if he wants it. That's all you could do. The rest is up to him."

She soaks in this information, information she already knew when she accepted that gift from Courtney. It was always ever going to have been a risk, she tells herself now. Gary was drowning in quicksand; now he's got a chance if he wants it. Unless the Voices don't let him go. Unless he doesn't let the Voices go.

Regardless, he is the past now, and she needs a present in which to live.

And then she asks, "What about you? What about your past, Cohen? What's sent you spinning this direction?"

And he says, "I don't seem to remember my past too well."

"Oh?" she says. "I remember every last single moment of mine."

"No," he says, "I really wasn't doing much. I was in Seattle for a while, with some very fine people, but... not much happened. And I didn't do much. I was sort of... floating through space, you know? Drifting."

"Mmm, that sounds wonderful," she says.

"Not to me, it doesn't," he replies. "And then I met Courtney. This was several years ago, mind you. Courtney introduced me to a group of her friends, who call themselves the Circle. I was already looking for adventure, you know," he says with a smile. "And I seem to have found it."

"The Circle?" Laurel asks.

"Of course I can't reveal the details. Not yet. But consider us a secret society, Laurel, a mystical organization that exists in the gaps and the

cracks and the fissures of reality." He pulls out a cigarette, asks her, "Do you smoke?"

She shakes her head.

"Courtney feels you've got enormous potential, Laurel," says Cohen. As Laurel watches, some kind of momentary blur covers Cohen's hand, not the kind of blur that results from something moving too fast to see, but rather a kind of blur that signifies spacetime itself just got tweaked, and to her astonishment, Laurel realizes that Cohen's cigarette is now, somehow, miraculously lit. He takes a drag, says, "We want to save the world from itself, Laurel." Pause. "Would you like to help?"

She nods slowly, starting to smile as she stares into Cohen's eyes.

"I haven't been initiated yet," he says. "I need a training partner, as do you. We'll be spending a lot of time together, it seems."

"I could use a good friend about now," she says. "I don't seem to have any friends any more."

"You've got one," he says simply. And then, "We should have a toast, you know."

"Right," Laurel says. "A toast." Pause. "Think of one."

Pause.

"I can't, really," says Cohen. "You think of one."

Pause.

"I can't either," says Laurel. "Maybe we should just drink and have a good time."

Cohen smiles. "Agreed. Another glass of wine, my dear?"

Meanwhile, clear across town, I come home from a play rehearsal that evening to find a very distraught Gary in my bedroom.

"Scotto," he says, "where the fuck have you been?"

"Gary," I say amiably, "to what do I owe the pleasure?"

He is a mess, I can tell you that. Not that Gary was ever particularly "orderly" or anything, but even by his own standards, he certainly looks as though he's been in a drunken brawl down by some pier or something. Of course, there are no piers like that in Iowa. In his hand, he is clutching the story I had written for him, the little "Treehouse" story that I had hoped would impress him just enough. Evidently, it has indeed made an impression.

"This story of yours," he says.

"Yes?" I reply.

"It's all right," he says. "I mean, it's not bad. But there's something very, I don't know, *strange* about it."

"Strange? In what way?"

"Well, listen... you swear you're telling the truth about not knowing I was seeing a woman named Laurel?"

Oh, *this* again....

"Gary, listen to me. It is *pure coincidence* that the woman I wrote about in my story has the same name as the woman you're seeing."

"And you don't find that in any way remarkable?"

"Well, of course I do, Gary, the same way I'd find any neat synchronistic confluence of events remarkable. But nothing to get *fixated* on. It's just a coincidence."

"Just a coincidence? This is your art, Scotto; you're willing to write that off as coincidence?"

"Umm, what are you getting at?"

"Look," he says, adopting that incredibly condescending tone and expression he always does when he wants to teach me something he believes is vitally important about the universe, "your art is your religion. It's the mystical center of your life. So when amazing 'coincidental confluences of events' occur, don't you think you oughta be a little more, I don't know, *intrigued*?"

"Gary--"

"Shut up for a second. See, what I'm telling you is, you claim not to have ever met Laurel, not to know anything about her, and then you write this nifty little story about her. And from *my* vantage point, what *I* see is a portrait of Laurel that's absolutely frightening in its accuracy."

"Frightening? It's supposed to be a love story."

"That's not what I mean. The story described her *perfectly*. Elucidated in words things about her that I've only been able to wonder about. Umm, it's a picture perfect snapshot of her."

"Well, Gary, *that* doesn't fall under coincidence at all."

"It doesn't?"

"How about this, Gary? I know you very well. We've been close friends for quite some time, I've gotten to know little quirks and traits of yours, gotten to see more of you than you might imagine, because that's what being close friends is about. So let's say that as a writer, I can vividly imagine the kind of person you're most likely to be attracted to, and then write about her. It's a coincidence that I got the name right, but it's not

much of a coincidence that you're dating the kind of person I imagined you might, after having known you this long."

"Bzzzt, wrong answer," Gary replies. "I mean, yes, that's all well and good, but."

"But what?"

"The *details*. Like, for example, setting the story in a treehouse."

Expectant pause; I am supposed to unravel the significance myself.

"I suppose," I say slowly, "your Laurel has a treehouse in her back yard?"

He nods.

"That," I say slowly, "is statistically within the realm of the likely. I mean, it isn't impossible." Pause. "It's just a coincidence."

"Uh huh. Also, the situation. You gave Laurel a backstory that's out of this world. Did you know my Laurel, just like yours, claims to be able to visit a fairy tale castle in her dreams?"

It's at this point that I suspect Gary of spinning an elaborate joke at my expense.

"Gary, maybe next time I'll write something a little more straightforward for you. I'll write a children's book or something."

"Bzzzt, wrong answer," he says. "There's something else I need you to write about." He's got a feral quality about him; it's hard to watch the contortions that play across his face, as though he's arguing with himself on a level that I'm simply not privy to. "This is good, actually. It's good that you don't accept the significance of what you've done; that way you can do it again without thinking, without self-consciousness."

"Do *what* again?"

"No, stop trying to think, it's obviously doing us no good here. What I wanted to ask you was if you could write another story like this. I mean, this was a good story, I liked it, and I want another one. Only, I'd like to help suggest a general theme or two, perhaps see what you come up with. Would that be okay?"

"Umm--"

"Scotto, Scotto, Scotto," he says, sweat all over his face, smiling an off center smile, "this will be a good exercise for you. I want you to use Laurel again as a character. And I want it to be the kind of story where if you look at it from one angle, it's a tragedy, but if you look at it from another angle, it's even more of a tragedy. All the main characters should wind up dead, dig?"

Pause.

"That's it? I can come up with the rest?"

"Uh huh. And I want to tell you something, Scotto: whatever you come up with is undoubtedly going to offer clues to a number of things that are happening to me, and to Laurel. You won't even know you're doing it. Just concentrate on putting together an absolutely weird and metaphysical plot, and make sure the internal logic of the story holds together, and then, when this is all over -- 'this' meaning what's happening to me -- there might be an explanation. A weird and metaphysical explanation."

"Gary, wait. What's happening to you? What are you talking about?"

"No no no. I don't want to tell you what's happening to me, because then you'll be self-conscious about it. I can't tell you what's happening, I can just point out what you already know. You know Laurel's a character. You know, for that matter, that I'm a character. Just write. Just make something up."

Spinning rapidly, trying to get a handle on his parameters, realizing that this story is more important than the last one, which was only an audition of sorts -- strange how it's my art that's keeping this friendship together at all, at all -- and so, "I'm a character too, for that matter."

He pauses, grins, says, "Yeah, maybe you can explain *yourself* in the process of all of this. Anyways, explanation is the wrong way to look at it. Make some art that you'll be happy with. It'll be the ground you walk on in the coming years, you know? I suppose Laurel will want to see it when you're finished, too." He seems to be twitching, really. Is he drunk?

"Are you drunk, Gary?" I ask him.

"No, but I'm about to be," he says. "Two bottles of vodka in my car. Anyways, get to work. Time's ticking away, tempus fugit, alla that crap. I gotta go."

As he starts to leave, I say, "You know, Gary, we should get together some time. Have a meaningful conversation or something, you know?"

Pauses in the doorway, looks at me closely. "Have we ever had a meaningful conversation, Scotto?"

"Well... not for a while, anyways."

"Yeah."

"You've been gone a lot, you know," I say, coming up with excuses, as it were.

Not quite an accusation. "Did you try to contact me?"

"A couple of times, at first." Pause. "Not much really, no."

"That's okay. I didn't try to contact you either. Not much, anyways."

Pause.

Time and distance have a way of making friendship slip away. People move in and out of your life with alarming frequency, staying for a while and vanishing before you know it, becoming important to you with surprising speed and then dissolving into nothingness right before your eyes, before you were ever aware that such dissolution was going to hurt. So I guess in that context, Gary, what I wanted to say was,

"I wish things could have gone a little differently."

And also,

"I miss you."

He looks at me closely, says, "You've got a strange look on your face, Scotto."

"Yeah," I say. "Uh huh."

"Have fun with your writing," he says. "I'll see you later." And then he goes.

And I say, "Goodbye, my friend," as best I can. With almost every sentence I say goodbye.

And still the story rolls and thunders....