

Chapter Twelve

Laurel takes the news relatively well.

Hanging up after a conversation with Gary's mother, there's now a sense of calm that intercedes for her, that mediates between the horror of the actual event and the full emotional reaction of which she is capable. There is a sense of calm, a fluid, viscous barrier inside her now, serving some of the functions of a wall, but in a deliberately more porous fashion. After all, what good would it do you to hide entirely behind walls all your life? And yet, you do need protection in a world such as this. She is aware and awash, she is calm and capable, there is an appropriate reaction for this, and she wants to have this reaction slowly.

They've been spending the past few days in one of the town's nicest hotels, relaxing in hot tubs, ordering movies and watching cable, exercising and spending time in the sauna, enjoying evenings at various bars and clubs in the neighborhood. As Courtney said to her, "I know everything is looking a little weird right now, so maybe we can just hang out and have fun for a little while, okay?" And Laurel was certainly keen on that idea. Distance was required, you see. Distance like a river between her and her immediate past, that's what she needed. Time to start thinking clearly again. So close she was to Gary that it's a miracle she herself didn't slip into such quicksand. (She bears scars from this close call, to be sure: a scar runs across the side of her left temple, from her collision with Gary's television set. She covers this scar now with a simple black bandanna, always wrapped around her forehead.) Thus, in this moment of sadness, she finds also a moment of light, a moment of purity, a moment of happiness. Tonight, she decides, I will mourn his passing, and then, I will *celebrate* his passing. But one thing I will *not* do is linger.

She makes reservations for three at a fancy restaurant, and orders a limousine to pick them up. The three of them have been using Courtney's credit card, which is apparently limitless -- "Inherited wealth from my mother's side," explained Courtney, "goes a long, long way toward self-fulfillment." Laurel finds herself intrigued by Courtney, finds Courtney to be a model of self-sufficiency. Courtney is a very amusing person to spend time with, quite sarcastic and witty but in a tongue-in-cheek sort of way, almost never mean-spirited. She's an incredibly small person, with clipped red hair, a thoroughly bizarre manner of mismatching her clothes on purpose, discrete and tiny tattoos -- "I know they're small," she says, "but you wouldn't believe how *many* I've got" -- all of which

creates an image that is very intelligent, very self-aware, very driven, and also, thankfully, very in tune with what it means to be a human being. At least, that's what Laurel has picked up over the past however many days. "What it means to be a human being" is a phrase that doesn't hold much water ontologically, but sure resonates hard with her nonetheless. Most importantly, Courtney seems to be genuinely *friendly*, genuinely enjoying the game, genuinely enjoying Laurel's company, without any particular reason to other than innate friendliness. It's hard for Laurel to accept at first, but it definitely grows on her as time passes.

And then, of course, there's Cohen: tall, dark and handsome, and apparently on a journey through life that's turning out to be one hell of a ride. Cohen himself doesn't like to talk much; it's not that he's the brooding type, but rather, that he's too modest to believe he has much to offer. While Laurel and Courtney spend long hours talking and laughing and telling strange stories, Cohen sits back and observes. And Laurel enjoys his observations, to be sure. Whenever it seems as though he's been out of the loop for too long, Laurel enjoys dragging him into the conversation, or going outside for a walk with him, getting inside him bit by bit.

Tonight, the three of them ride in style to the fancy restaurant. Tonight, they realize, is a party for Laurel. Courtney and Cohen take their cues from Laurel's behavior; she hasn't told them the specifics, but they are aware that something is up. She is cool and composed, full of bittersweet joy which she shares with Courtney and Cohen even as she pours wine in the back of the limo.

"I've never been in a limousine before," she says.

"Ghastly wastes of energy," says Courtney, "but of course, absolutely necessary. You cannot be rich without them."

Laurel's eyes are bright as they head into the restaurant. The maitre d' takes them to a secluded table, and they spend a few minutes making jokes about the decor, and studying the menu and the wine list. Eventually, food is ordered, doesn't matter what exactly, and they begin to settle in.

"So," Laurel says at long last, opening the floor for discussion, "I suppose it's obvious that I've had an emotional experience today." Silence greets her, and it's very sweet, their attention is. "I decided to call and check up on Gary, to see how he's been doing since his... eruption a while back." Pause, deep breath. "I spoke to his mother. She... informed me... that Gary..." Directly now: speak your truths, just the facts ma'am. "Gary committed suicide last night."

The silence changes timbre as the news sinks in. It's a kind of respectful silence, respectful of Gary and his life, respectful of the things that Gary must have been dealing with (Voices in his head and all), the kind of silence reserved for fallen comrades in a valiant, outrageous struggle, a shocked silence that reminds them how close they always are to the brink, these Melodramatic young souls.

"How do you feel?" Courtney asks at last.

Laurel smiles sadly. She says, "This town is empty now."

"No, it isn't," says Cohen. She looks at him, and he says, "This town isn't empty. This is *your* town now."

And Laurel catches a breath as she hears that. Truly Cohen has offered her a powerful way to think about all her memories and all the *everything* that's ever happened here; truly she can take a look around these streets, remember playing in the woods behind her house, treehouses and shopping malls, playgrounds and nature trails, and claim those things as a part of her now, instead of holding them at bay.

"Gary's father was the principal of a church school," Laurel says. "And Gary was able to acquire a set of keys, without anyone knowing. And sometimes, late late at night, we'd go over to the church, and let ourselves in, and play. We'd stage little dramas up by the altar, you know... give little 'sermons' from the lectern. Play hide and seek in the sanctuary, in the basement, in the balcony. Sometimes Gary would play tapes over the church's PA system, really loud, the stained glass windows would vibrate." Pause. "Gary was something else."

I don't know why I told you that. I just wanted to eulogize, I guess.

"He had his own sit-down Asteroids game. He knew how to program computers, which I never bothered to learn. He showed me what a computer bulletin board was."

He heard Voices. He was crazy. He loved me, I think.

"He claimed to hate his parents, but I don't know. He claimed he hated Christianity, but there was something compelling about playing around in the church. I think he loved it all in a different way, like he... wanted to *revel* in the sacred instead of sitting back and passively observing it. But who knows?"

He didn't leave a note. I don't even know how he did it.

"We'd drive around, and sometimes he'd complain about all the gas money he was spending on me. He wanted me to know, I think, how

beholden I was becoming to him. He liked that. So did I, of course. Weird way to be in love, but it felt pretty good at the time."

This town isn't empty. It's just that I'm alone in it. Or am I?

Take a look at Courtney's face. She isn't sitting here with you because she *has* to, is she? She *chose* you, for whatever reason. You could really get to know her, really get to like her, you could use a breath of fresh, smiling air who isn't confused by the simple fact of existence. And Cohen takes her hand, and simply holds her while she speaks. Is that some kind of parody, or does he actually care what happens to me?

"I think his funeral is in a couple of days. I think I'm going to go. I'd like to go by myself. To put him to rest, you know? After that, we can do... well, whatever." Courtney nods, smiles, as though a certain amount of tension has been released. "I'm going to say goodbye to him, properly, and then we can get on with whatever it is you've got planned." She is indicating, to herself, to Cohen, but especially to Courtney, the level of trust she feels -- completely unpredictable and spontaneous, undeserved at some core level and yet totally supported by faith and the energy in the air. Now Laurel smiles too. "Does that sound okay to you?"

"That sounds wonderful," breathes Courtney.

"Good," says Laurel. "Then I'm convinced." Pause. "Now tell me: what is it you have planned, Courtney?"

"Metaphysical training," Courtney replies, her eyes suddenly lit with a strange kind of fire, an ethereal intensity. The smile on her face is much more meaningful now than it originally appeared to be. "The Circle is my home away from home. Hidden underground for hundreds of years, the time is now approaching when all of our resources will be needed in a desperate and dangerous struggle." She takes a long, serious look at Laurel, evaluating her resolve, says, "We can offer you tools to rise above the ordinary and experience life on a new level entirely. And in return, you can help us when the time comes." Pause. "Notice I'm saying all this with a straight face."

"Sounds extraordinarily unusual and risky," Laurel says.

"Definitely," Courtney says. "No path is without risks."

"And why did you choose me?"

Courtney smiles, and says, "To be honest, Laurel, it came to us in a dream."

The morning of the funeral, she takes a cab back to her parents' house, in order to get an appropriate dress to wear. She could have gotten

a new one, of course, but she has one black dress in particular that Gary bought for her, that he thought was evocative of her character, the flattering devil. So, allowing herself this moment of sentiment, she's decided to wear it one last time, and then get rid of the thing. Her father's car is in the driveway, which is strange; he should be at work, or at the hospital -- somewhere, anywhere, but here. She lets herself in the front door, steps into the living room, and sees him sitting on the couch in front of the television, asleep, or rather, passed out, still holding a bottle of whiskey in his hands.

Good, she thinks with a smile, I can sneak in, sneak out, I'm like the *wind*. Into her old bedroom, stop, look around it one last time: our beds, and our dressers, and our posters, and our little eccentricities. Gets the dress out of the closet, ignores all her old clothes, I'm gonna buy an *all new wardrobe* uh huh, quickly changes into the slinky little thing, thinking, "He sure had a nasty sense of humor" and "This thing isn't just skin tight, it *bonds* with the skin at the molecular level," and then she wanders back out through the house, hoping to make a clean escape.

Unfortunately, he is now awake.

"I heard you come in," he says, haggard. She stops, stares at him.

"What are you watching?" she asks.

"Oh, you know..." he says. "Different shows. Morning shows, it looks like."

Long, uncomfortable silence.

"So... are you back for a while?" he asks.

"No," she says, shaking her head quickly. "I'm taking off for a while, actually."

"Oh," he says.

Another pause.

"Why are you all dressed up?" he asks.

"Funeral," she says.

"Anyone I know?" he asks.

"Gary," she says.

His face falls. As if to say, dammit, there's *another* thing I couldn't keep away from my little girl.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," he says.

"That's okay," she says.

Pause.

"Your mother's doing fine," he says.

"That's good," she says.

Pause.

"I'm going to be late," she says. "And there's a cab waiting outside."

"Okay," he says. "Give me a call every now and then, okay?"

Pause.

She smiles. "Okay. Every now and then."

He returns her smile. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

And then she goes, thinking, burning a bridge provides you with no way to cross the river, but it's beautiful to see the flames.

The funeral is at the same church in which she and Gary used to play hide and seek; she arrives a few minutes late and has to sit clear in the back. She feels as though she knows this church in an especially intimate way, and it makes her uncomfortable to see all these people here. She gets the feeling that Gary's friends are undoubtedly outnumbered by those who came here out of sympathy for his parents -- of course, Gary kept few friends after a certain point in his life. She sees his mother sitting up near the front, but has no desire to make contact with her; for all she knows, the woman blames *her* for Gary's demise, rather than blaming him, which would be more appropriate. It's an open casket funeral, but from here, she can only vaguely see the silhouette of his face in the casket, calm and reposed, cosmetic and quiet. Presiding over the affair is a Reverend Clive Something, she didn't quite catch his name. He stands up at the lectern and begins a simple sermon.

"I regret that I did not have the pleasure of knowing Gary while he lived," says Reverend Clive, a strange unseemly smile on the man's face as he launches into a rehearsed patter. "But after talking to his loved ones, I feel that I've become close to Gary in a special way. Gary was born..." he continues, reciting vague factoids, adhering to a template, a stock service that can send *any* soul on its way to the afterworld, never mind the name or the actual identity. But Reverend Clive loves his job, you've gotta give him that; he's infusing this speech with some kind of strange twinkle that keeps Laurel off guard for a few moments, before, thankfully, her eyes and mind begin to wander....

Do I have any other feelings about this that I'd like to address? she thinks. Is there anything else I'm missing? I would hate to have some hidden wellspring of emotion suddenly surprise me at an inopportune time. Run through the checklist: Am I to blame for this? No, he is to

blame, if anyone. I could not be responsible for him; loving him did not amount to responsibility of any kind. He was an intelligent, thinking person who made a choice, and I accept his choice for what it is. Do I miss him? Yes, I miss what I used to know of him, but he was already gone before his body died. I had already severed my links to him -- the moment this scar was formed on my temple, she realizes, those links were cut. So I did *not* slide into quicksand with him, and I do *not* miss what was left of him. Do I regret having known him, having loved him? No. No regrets. *Never* regrets. I could not be the me I am now if I had not been who I was then. I would not be facing the world for the first time with a sense of maturity had I never had a chance to say goodbye to my childhood, with him. I am in the twilight of my childhood now; tomorrow, I will wake up, and my face will face the world with a brand new surety. And that surety is as much because of Gary as because of anyone else. Never regret. Never linger. This is the moment in which I live, and now it is time to live in this moment; I am *here* now, and this is what *here* asks of me. Amen.

As her eyes wander, she notices a peculiar sight, a boy approximately her age, sitting across the aisle from her in the same row, staring straight at her as though he's seen a ghost. She makes eye contact with him, and stares back; but instead of turning away, he continues to stare. He acts as though he recognizes her, but of course, she's never seen him before. He may be one of Gary's friends, certainly, but that doesn't mean much to her. He doesn't intend to stop staring, that's for sure. The rest of the assembly is now singing a hymn of some kind, and this boy now decides to get up, cross the aisle, and sit next to her. A strange kind of energy field, a static flux, surrounds him inexplicably. She handles it very coolly, that's for sure.

"Were you a friend of Gary's?" he asks.

"Yes," she says.

"Close friend?"

"Girlfriend," she says.

Long pause. Realization dawns over his face, as though he's been hit by a bus, only *slowly*.

"You're Laurel, right?" he asks.

"Uh huh."

Long pause.

"I'm Scotto," he says. "It's about time we met."

"Oh?" she says.

"Yeah," he says. "Can we go somewhere and talk after this?"

She gives him one of those penetrating looks, the kind that say, listen, bub, you're out of your league here.

"I've been writing about you," he says.

"I don't think that's a good idea," she replies.

After the service is over, he follows her into the basement of the church, to a small reception. She sticks out in a most amazing fashion. Gary's mother recognizes her right away, of course, but makes no effort to communicate with her. That suits Laurel well enough. I'm staying for cookies and punch, she thinks, and then I'm out of here.

Scotto, meanwhile, manages to sidle up next to her with his own plate of cookies, and once again attempts conversation. His expression is one of bemused nonchalance, as though Gary's death simply rolled off his back, as though a part of him will forever be devoted to processing this information but the rest of him has quite simply moved on to other things. It's rather disquieting.

"Did Gary tell you about me?" he says.

"No," she replies.

"Yeah, that's like Gary," he says. "Very secretive. He didn't tell me about you either."

"Oh?" she says. "But you've been writing about me?"

"Yeah, well, I got a pretty good imagination."

"I bet."

They don't say much after that. At one point, Reverend Clive Something, making the rounds, pauses next to them long enough to smile and say, "Someone died on the cross for you," to which Scotto replies, "I didn't ask him to, dig?"

And this Reverend Clive, he's a strange bird all right, he fixes Laurel with a near lecherous stare, grinning quite widely now that Scotto has engaged him in a verbal duel of some kind; his clothes are severely reminiscent of some backwater fundamentalist, Laurel supposes, and as he begins to speak, his voice takes on the tone of someone attempting to whisper in a revival tent and still somehow miraculously be heard.

"How about you, Missy?" he asks her. "Did anyone die for you, or are you all alone in the world, too?"

My twin sister died for me, she thinks; not as dramatic as my only begotten son, but I believe it does the trick.

Reverend Clive's grin twists itself into a sinister little knot. "Oh, and I suppose it should have been *you* instead of *her*, is that right?" She

gasps, a tiny gasp that Scotto notices despite her best efforts to seem unperturbed; Clive merely smiles and nods and wanders off, as if to say, "You'll be seeing me again soon enough, Missy...."

The momentary weirdness of the Reverend's visit departs with the Reverend, and Scotto is suddenly back to the business at hand.

"Listen," says Scotto, "I don't suppose I could convince you to read a story I've written."

"I doubt it," says Laurel.

"Actually, Gary suggested I write this particular story," he says, "and in fact, he said when I was finished that I should show it to you. Of course, I had no idea then that we would ever run into each other. But since we have, I think it would only be appropriate."

"How do I know," asks Laurel, "that you're not completely full of shit?"

"Pardon me?" he says, seeming to miss the point.

"Gary never mentioned to *me* that he thought I should look at your story, so how do I know you're not making this up?"

Pause, gears spinning, suddenly he understands.

"You mean... making it up, to like... hit on you or something?"

"Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men," she replies.

"Umm," he says, "well, let me tell you a little bit about the story. It's called 'Voices.' And it's about, umm... well, these people who hear Voices in their heads."

Long, long pause, the kind of pause Sir Alec Guinness could build a bridge across if such metaphors were applicable.

"How much did Gary tell you?" she says.

"That's just it," he replies. "He didn't tell me anything. I seem to have a penchant for guessing well."

Pause.

"You wanna go get a donut or something?" he asks.

She nods.

"Good," he says, smiling suddenly. "Don't worry. The story is a quick read."

They sit in Donutland, and he sips hot chocolate, while she sips coffee and reads.

First impressions: a little juvenile, not much plot to hang onto here, writing is jerky, a little spacey for my tastes.

Second impressions: *jesus fucking christ*, this kid is writing about *me*.

It's as though she reads it first through the same filter by which she sorts all art in her life, and then, suddenly, a certain gestalt rips away that filter and allows the undersides of the story to crawl inside her brain and nest.

"So what do you think?" he asks.

She tries to frame a response.

"No, wait," he says. "I can be more precise about how I ask that question."

"Good," she says.

"You see, before I wrote this, I wrote a story for Gary about you and Gary spending the night in your treehouse...."

"You did what?"

"I'll show it to you some other time. And then, he asked me to write a new story, only he wanted it to be a tragedy. And, see, he claimed that the story I wrote about you and him in the treehouse mapped back onto reality in an almost isomorphic fashion. I didn't know anything about you and your treehouse when I wrote the story, of course, but there it is. Now, judging by your reaction, it looks as though you recognize certain elements in this story. And since we've never met, and since Gary never told me *anything* about what was going on in his life, I'm curious to know what you thought, or rather, what elements stick out." Pause. "How does this story resonate with you? That's what I'm looking to know."

"Well," she replies, "I think I would like to get a cinnamon roll or something."

He nods, goes to the counter to get one for her, giving her time to think. How does it resonate with me? Well, you see, it struck that one chord -- you know, *that one chord*? -- that makes me just sit here and shimmer. Does that answer your question? Umm...

All too soon, he's back. "It's heated, too," he says. And then, he simply stares at her, expectantly.

"Well," she says, "this story affected me on many levels," she says.

"Uh huh," he says.

"Umm... well, for starters, Gary was hearing Voices."

POW -- it's as though she clubbed him with a baseball bat and then shouted "BOO!" into what was left of his skull.

"And were they..." he says, trailing off.

"Uh huh," she says, nodding, "named Gale, Gregory, Vince, and Jack."

CRASH -- it's as though this huge safe suddenly materialized above his head, and crushed him in his chair.

The door to the safe opens up so we can see his head in there, and he says, "That's just fucking *crazy*."

"Yeah," she says. "And of course, I'm assuming you wrote this story before you knew Gary was dead?"

Pause. He hadn't thought about that. The whole story assumes Gary is dead, assumes Gary has drowned in quicksand.

"You also picked up on a metaphor I use to describe Gary's situation, which is quicksand," she tells him. "You talk about quicksand. That's mine."

BOOM -- it's as though somebody stuck a stick of dynamite in that safe and then slammed the door shut again. When the door reopens, his hair is frazzled and his face is black with powder burns.

"*Man*," he says, "this is fucking *crazy*."

"Also, I assume you've never met Cohen," she says.

"Cohen?" he asks.

"Yes, Cohen," she says. "I've got a good friend named Cohen. You described him perfectly, right down to the glue in his hair."

CRUNCH -- it's as though his head, inside the safe, is now on a highway and a truck just rolled over top of it.

"Un-fucking-believable," he says.

"Let's see, what else," she says. "I mean, there are so many things... Umm, the space ship. Gary's Voices wanted him to build a space ship."

"I *wondered* what the fuck that space ship was about," he says.

"And I think you've characterized me fairly well, if that's any help," she says.

Long pause. They are both thinking at high speed.

"Of course, you've got a lot wrong, too," she says.

"Depends on how you look at it," he replies. "Temporally speaking, some of it may be in the process of happening, or developing, right now. You know?"

"Mmm, right, of course. Some of it may be predictive as well as descriptive."

"Right. Of course, who knows how much that would strain believability.... Even as it stands, though, it's a fairly unique document, right?"

Pause.

"Right," she says.

"Right," he says. "So, listen... one of the other premises of this story is that you and I are close friends. Now... I don't know how that's going to happen. Organically, I mean. But... I think we should give it some thought. I mean, uh... Gary's death could bring us together as friends, you know?"

Pause.

"Yeah," she says at last. "That might be possible."

He smiles.

"I've got an idea how it might work, too," she says.

"Oh?"

"Yeah," she says.

Laurel's getting one of those *big* ideas, the kind that sweep across a conversation like a river invading a floodplain.

"I think you should write a story for *me*," she says.

Pause, while he quickly considers the ramifications.

"I mean, you *like* to write, don't you?" she asks.

"Uh huh," he says.

"Okay, then," she replies.

Pause.

"What should it be about?" he asks.

"Well," she says, "don't think I'm changing the subject here, but... I have a sister named Melody."

"What happened to your sister?" he asks.

"I don't know what happened to her," she replies. "That's what I want your story to be about."

You can imagine the length of the pause that followed.

"A story about what happened to Melody," he says, getting used to the concept.

"Yes," she says. "I won't give you any other limitations or suggestions. I don't want to influence you any more than that. I just..." Sighs. "I'd just like to *know*, and no matter what you come up with, it's better than nothing, right?"

"Better than nothing," he says.

"Yeah," she says. "Your fiction is better than nothing. I'd at least have that. And we'd be a lot closer for the effort, you and I."

"That's for sure," he says.

"So what do you think? Will you do it?" She is expectant, hopeful.

"Well," he says slowly, "I think it might take more than a short story to describe what happened to Melody," he says slowly. "I think it might take an entire novel, you know? I'd have to get in-depth."

"Right," she says, smiling. "All the details."

Long, long pause. The subject seems to need changing.

"Listen, Scotto," she says, "how do you feel right now? I mean, about Gary..."

"Oh," he says, almost too nonchalantly, "I put that to bed, you know? It's over. It's closed." Closure. I've got closure, no matter what it takes. "I saw his body at the funeral."

"Do you know how he did it?" she asks.

"Uh huh," he replies. "He hanged himself."

And the image of Gary dangling takes her by surprise. I didn't need to know that, she realizes.

"So how do I get in touch with you?" he asks.

"Oh," she replies, "I'm staying at the Holiday Inn for a while."

Pause. "Can I keep this story?"

"Uh huh, it's your copy. I wrote my phone number on the back, so you can call me anytime you want to talk or anything."

"Okay, Scotto. I will. Thanks."

"Thank *you*, for reading it. For coming here with me."

Awkward pause.

"I'm going to go now," she says, "before this gets any weirder."

"Right, right," he says, smiling. "I'll catch you later, Laurel."

"Later, Scotto."

In the cab, on the way back to the hotel, she can't concentrate on anything much. Her mind fairly well wanders all over the territory of existence. And for the first time in a long time, she is tuned into herself, such that she can actually hear some of her default programming, some of the programming that keeps her alive when she isn't thinking. And she can tell that it's changed, that the programs have been rewritten. These are programs that run underneath anything else she might be thinking about, supporting her, and now, since she isn't thinking about anything at all,

she's actually able to hear them. And they are programs to the effect of "It's great to be alive," and she smiles, for she is convinced, and she believes them. It *is* a great thing. *Life* is a great thing, and I am having mine, and despite all that has conspired against me, I am coming into my own as a person. I am flowering, she feels, coming into bloom. I will be able to dance in the rain again with all kinds of abandon, and I will be able to appreciate the Melodrama that is my past in a brand new light, as nothing more or less than the natural evolution of the organism that is me into the next phase of its journey.

I am alive, she says to herself, taking a deep breath. I am alive, and only *now* does the adventure actually begin....