

Living On A Bubble

A novel by
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CHAPTER 1

Five hundred light years from where we live is a dark hole in space, a frigid molecular cloud called Bernard 68. If it were closer to earth we would have a night sky completely without stars. We might not even know about stars. We would assume nothing was out there. We would assume an infinite arctic loneliness was our destiny. This is what happens when things like that surround us. We see no reason for hope.

In a suburban house, five hundred light years downstream, and heavily mortgaged, I run from Annie, with my grip still on her, money thrown into the ocean from all the times I tried to save us. It's over. Not all her fault, not by any means.

Our son, Wes, just finished his second year at the University of Berkeley. He's studying physics to become an astronomer. He is also studying a younger Annie, one who was far more physically daring than any Annie he had ever known. She liked to water ski, parasail, roller skate, wind surf, anything that took her to the edge. A thin blonde tom-girl type, slightly freckled, green eyes. She is studying sociology but has no idea what she wants to do after she graduates. Every long recess, during the holidays or over the summer breaks, she's off to Hawaii or the Caribbean to play in the world of radical sport.

I can't go. I'm not young anymore, and I'm stuck with the Annie I'm married to, until the divorce goes through. Wes can't go either. Papers to write.

I tried to talk about love and relationships to Wes during the last break, but he began to talk about things like Bernard 68, or Perseus A, a black hole that sings the note of Bb fifty seven octaves below middle C -- a million billion times deeper than humans hear. I was losing him. He didn't want to talk about what was really going on -- teenage language barrier. I wasn't helping much, wasn't much in the mood to hear about his outer space trip with a divorce on my hands and my business blowing up.

Wes was sadly left to his own perpetual amazement, the mind-tripping equations and the enormity of the numbers involved. He knew not to expect much from someone like his Annie, whose main concern was for people here and now -- here on earth -- not for planets and stars whose light and encoded secrets were cast our way millions of years ago. There was nothing present tense at all about these firefly messages in a mythological bottle which Wes tried so methodically to dissect.

Nor could he expect anything from his mother, the other Annie, who was miles away, reading her romance books to escape planet earth, which wasn't treating her too well.

Fifty miles away from the University of Berkeley, the real estate and equity markets fell apart on my computer screen. More than thirty percent of my investors' capital gone, I tried to feel nothing. My lips were parched every day when I awoke. My world felt like the surface of Pluto. Moaning on to myself each day I waited for the devils in my head to drive me out to the edge of town and push my car over the colorless cliffs into the ice

below. Having misguessed the direction of the economy by a wide margin for the first time in my career, decade-long accounts, some of whom I had considered close friends, were now redeeming their assets, saving their asses from the man gone mad. Apologetically they would drone on with some lame excuse they had spent days manufacturing to get their money out of my hands.

I felt sure they were bailing out at the lows. But then again I thought the lows occurred six months ago. I kept stumbling – chumps roll every time -- my shaking hands letting go of the dice only long enough to eat and sleep. Dragging them all down with me, I had lost my touch. It was over.

Hadn't I been a good provider for my mess of a family, and my scared to death clients for years and years before I was pulled down into this nightmare dimension?

When was the last time I smiled or laughed without telling myself to? Oh that's funny I guess, show them you think it's funny with a smile, there you go, not too big though -- so they see you are well under control. Or, show them you're one of the gang, laugh hard at that one, *laugh hard!*

Not that these thoughts were ever completely conscious or planned. It was just that laughter and joy were no longer a spontaneously combustible event. My heart in your presence, Annie, used to blow my dreams into the sunshine like a car radiator flaming down the highway on a Saturday dawn post-party jag. Ringing still in my mind are all the raging passions we felt on our cross country trip in the sleet of winter, shining through night windshields, in New Hampshire, with its cold purple skies, and in Idaho, in the yellow-lit cabin there in the snow with the car awaiting sunrise since the headlights were dead, so we could get to Feather Lake, across many borders, through dead dry Nevada terrain, across the hills into the sparkly skies of California, where the rest of the crackpots and geniuses and failures and outcasts and gamblers thrived so sweetly; all ringing in my mind, echoing like wind chimes in the wind storm that I now must think through, thinking about you now, gone, kidnapped because one of us fell into another dimension somewhere along the imaginary timeline -- where the other can't go.

Now it's no, no, instead of now, now, *now*, and the friend I always wanted and depended on for twenty years is gone even though I throw out the life line to you from time to time, and you throw out yours to me. Neither of us reach back.

The world is tough. And far less organized than we imagine it to be day to day. No one anywhere is in control. Not the President. Not the CIA. Not the richest of the rich. No person. No family or group of families. Don't give me this conspiracy crap, humans are not that loyal, not that disciplined to pull something like that off for generations. No group has any real say about the direction humankind is taking in the overall. No group of people, not even one country. Not anymore.

Maybe religious institutions will some day stop declaring war on other religious institutions. Maybe the people will dethrone the religious leaders and go back to the

brilliant simple words of their original master teachers who didn't ask for churches or mosques or temples to be built in Their name -- but not in this lifetime.

Maybe developers will start thinking about the value of open space and builders will decide to green all their buildings and governments will share their energy grids world-wide and food will revert back to a pure organic healing thing-- but not in this lifetime.

Humans are what humans are. A chaotic mess. Stupid sops, or sycophantic pedantics, or psychopathic parasites, or psychedelic idyllic idlers praying for a real mother-- even though what they really need is a father. All are still mostly animal, motivated by animal needs, dressed up in these things called clothes, wolf-like, that hold the promise of civility, kinship, friendship. Nice suit. Nice tie. Beautiful dress, Ms. Habersham. And those ear rings. Jade? But each must devour the other when necessary. The Superdome in New Orleans was not just about desperate poor people trapped in a governmental failure of massive proportions. It was about people becoming themselves when trapped in a desperate situation, in a place where civilization is obliterated. Would any of us have fared much better if we were there, without food or water or shelter or sanitation or medical help, or physical protection from each other, or protection from the police, who patrolled hell's fires like mad dogs, badges shining in the firelight, flashlights bursting through the night like SOS flares, then foraging for themselves whatever sanity and power and raw perversions their guns allowed them to steal? This was the unstripping of civilization back down to its true nature. Beyond morality, beyond gold as a currency in times of chaos. The only currencies of any value were weapons, ammunition, food, sex, shelter, and body guards. Gold and dollar bills were as laughable as a pocket full of yen. Whatever it could buy would be quickly taken by those with "the real currency."

Wes, do you hear what I'm saying or are you still lost in the Ring Nebulae? Your mother wants half of what I made. Twenty years of work, minus insane annual taxes, minus spending millions of dollars on her and you, and now your college education -- and what's left then gets divided in half.

Wes, your Annie may want the same half of everything from you someday -- half your brain, half of your sanity, none of your insanity, half of your skin and bones and the soul wrapped inside of it like the mirror of a ghost, and half of the galaxy of all you are or wish to be. Here's the funny part -- you may grow up one day and come out of your galactic cloud, and want the same of her!

Is it worth it? Is it worth the sensually vast life explosions when two worlds collide? Worth feeling like you *are* the movie for once, not just watching one? Worth feeling connected, plugged into the all-consuming primordial moment?

You're the stars shifting, angles recomputing, angels in dreams hiding, until once again you sit here some day decades hence, just like me now, alone.

Is it worth it?

Not from this state of mind, no. But that's my point.

I have a better plan.

A shifting of perceptions.

Because this state of perception, though true in it's own way, isn't working. Never has. It serves only the loneliness that hovers above my empty sky. Bernard 68 has absorbed me. Made me a believer in dark fantasies.

Yet over there, through a telescopic dimension shifting machine we dream up, a hole in the empty sky appears, and there are a billion galaxies glimmering.

Chapter 2

Every gesture, and all the hope, you saved for me.

You welcomed me home despite my failures. You held me despite my disheveled clothes, hair a mess from rubbing my head with my hands in the car in the parking lot outside the office before sliding defeated onto the rumbling, vibrating, truck-lined freeway. Home to you.

I forgive you for the darkness I perceived from your words. I forgive you for the harm I felt from your needs. Please forgive me too.

Why should we throw away one hundred seventy five thousand hours of light and darkness kaleidoscoping through our veins? We are too many connections deeply helixed together. We are three days from filing papers after four days of arbitration and five fingers touching for the last time, a deathly goodbye.

I saw it in your eyes as you turned to go. I know you still love me, Annie, there hidden inside the safe room of your silence. We've traveled across rivers through timelines down to the crossroads, so many crossroads, each one taken together — don't you see?

Have faith in me again. I can make it back.

And Wes, my boy, the searcher, the seeker of higher ground, always pondering, writing in his notebooks, always wondering, asking me questions I couldn't answer, and had never thought of myself. My little boy, trying so hard to understand what it is to be grown up, saying to me at five years old, "Daddy take me out with you so I can learn all the things you know." So hard these lessons, many levels removed from school required reading. The lessons are in the streets of your billion synapses firing, crisscrossing, strobbing, searching, earthly desires, people dying from their desires, from love, from hate, and from the inability to grasp the mystery of the misery it all causes, and the losses from the winnings you thought you'd banked long ago – the calculations and manipulations that seemed to have worked to get you here -- the money now blowing away in the wind, robbed at lifepoint from the safe deposit you had put the last of your fragile thoughts into, hoping to grow them, only to be bankrupted by the obscene pain of life unbending, unwinding, love ending, without your consent, without your knowledge, without a mouth to shout with –

sitting on a park bench, a little boy, sitting next to your mother, and ghosts come down from the air and try to pull you away from her, and you resist, you try to scream, *scream*, "mommy" but nothing comes out of your little mouth.

You wake up from the dream in a sweat, panting, can't catch your breath. Was it true? Did it happen? Did the ghosts steal you away from her and drop you *here*, in this reality, all grown, no mother to hold you? Where did she go? Where did your childhood go? And the girl in the bed sleeping next to you, who is she? She is not a part of your family. She is a stranger. You are pretending. To escape

the loneliness.

Wes, love is not easy.

It took so long for your mom and I to replace the family we were born into with our own. It took a son. A daughter dying. Memories, in the hospital, no one to save you from drowning but me, Annie. No one to save me from my own terror but you, calm, glowing, in bed, with a dying baby in your arms. You were glowing as it took its final breaths and turned ashen gray. You were in shock at holding life, life from your inside, made whole in this world only to disappear, a few grains of sand down the hourglass stillborn.

And all the other times, remember? Remember the night we talked on our cell phones while you were driving home, talking about our day as I awaited you, and you surprised me, still talking, until you were standing behind me, with your jeans half unzipped and your shirt unbuttoned, and we kissed, still connected by satellite, and ended up making love while moaning to each other over the airwaves. Did that really happen or did I just make that up? My love for you is – write down the words you want to hear and I'll type them up, Annie – you are better at that kind of thing than me; I have not been much for letting my yearning melt into that kind of openness.

I need to surrender to joy more, need to spend money instead of counting it, and open it all up to shine. Never learned that. Always tried to hoard for later. But it's clicked now, Annie, why leave in the middle of growing and having and breathing and still being able to run with you on the beach?

I had a moment of surrender last night, while talking to Wes in my half-sleep, while reading my book by night light. In the margins of the page I was riveted to, I saw a shadow flickering, of some other mind, some other life, another way to live. Why live in a way that's unchosen? It's not the only answer.

So twenty seven Annies later, as you morphed into person after person during moments I thought of you, and the years we traveled through, and ghost after ghost haunted my brain, I finally realized they were more of *me*! None of them you. I'd never given you a fair chance to really get through to me. Too scared you would break me, break my illusions of myself. Are you the one I've been seeking all along? Are you the life force behind whatever light there is left shining in me? Have I misinterpreted you – filtered you through my failures? I don't want to die knowing I never saw you.

Down on the river across from the grain tower, in the shadows of the rocks on that empty beach, where we had our first picnic, I watched you swim, imagined you naked -- twenty year old body, shoulders freckled and tan, body so fit and perfectly shaped in those shorts you wore, face white and smooth like a Greek statue, so perfectly carved, with your sculpted features, I pledged allegiance to you as you walked towards me dripping wet while smiling a smile that transcended all the beauty I had ever understood in my pathetic mathematical little brain. Where did anyone get gray eyes from anyway? Piercing through my imagination all the way to reality.

Three thousand days later we were married with a five year old son. Your love amazed me, like finding a place to live on a star. No, how can I say it? . . . I want to put my faith in the truth that happened in those first three thousand days.

Hair turned to water wind that day on the river. How do we lie down there together again? Why do we let science or the mind tell us that can't happen? We could drift back there. Timeless. We could rest there. Steal our way back through the ghosts on that park bench, twisting back through that little boy with no voice, to get to the middle of it, to the center of whatever message love offers up, with no more outside world. Ghosts dying all around us as the sun comes up over the water.

So many hours I slept after I told her all this. So many ways to think about everything, so many truths in the mind to choose from, if we become the chooser instead of the receiver of the message, life can happen.

The world, so ugly, yet so beautiful at the same magical mad morosely moving moment, throughout all time. I hated her still, a part of me, hated her-me, hated me for hating her; loved her with no way to live it; lived in here with no way to love; love exiting me, escaping me; and love confirming love still existing in me, exciting me. All is true at the same moment, eternally.

I awaited her answer. I waded through the warnings and wonderings of my attorney and accountant, trying to clean up the dirt I had thrown at the windows of our church, covering our sky with a muddy rain. Breaking the stained glass windows. Why, they wailed, would I want to rewind the unwinding of the marriage after all the trouble they and I had gone through to get to this point, now just days away from the legal end of it?

And I told them: I sold myself on a devil I created in my head. But I have to save myself before I pull the rope I put around the devil's neck, before the floor drops away, or it will be certifiable suicide. Because it was my neck in that rope. Memories of stained glass, I have to build a monument with those windows facing, not smash them into a thousand multi-colored glittery shards. They understood less afterwards than before, which is so typical of answers to questions when the answers are too logical, internally logical. It made them ill with logic. I wasn't concerned.

At the end of life we're left with a thousand random opinions of ourselves and others, and all the spirituality and politics that filter through by way of our senses. The answers we come up with make us drunk with what we think is wisdom. The water is red. The fire is blue. The brain turns to milky swirls as we age. . . then suddenly realizes it knows nothing. The mind is nothing more but a long dream waiting to get busted up by the oncoming train of reality.

This is your dream, and when you wake up, you'll see God.

Is that it?

So a few days later, Annie called me at the office and said one word: “Yes.” That’s all she said and hung up the phone.

She would let me try again. I didn’t have to beg or explain or go through hell. She was just going to open up another, still deeper, place for me and let me in. She knew my will was like a wildfire. Once I had made up my mind to be depressed and murder life, there was no changing me. And now that I had decided to become the opposite of that, a life bearer, a love sourcer, she knew I wouldn’t change my mind just because things got tough.

We watched the birds at sunrise singing in the tree limbs outside our bedroom window, that had been closed so long, so sadly. Like a mirror with no reflection. We ignored the sanctity of our bed, books went unread on our nightstands, words went unsaid just before sleep, words that I need to say to you tonight. I want to emerge with you, back to the beach where you and I first touched.

I called Wes to tell him: “Wes, a day before your mother and I were to be divorced we’ve decided to become re-married.”

He laughed. A laugh harder than any he had allowed in a long time, which ended in a quiet cry of: “Glad you came to your senses, dad.”

So the crisis ended in an envelope signed by us stating that what we were about to do wasn’t going to happen.

Then I officially gave up my job as money manager, financial planner – a funny concept, financial planner -- how can you plan for the next hour? Why? I cashed everyone out and went home.

The shift in me was seismological, from this beautifully illogical dance I was creating. What do you call this thing? This rotation of the entire picture one creates of their life?

Never trust things when you see them through the eyes of the mad reality of this world. Busting through the rain and the anguish of our self-destruction we are capable of creating self-revolution, change that devolves the despotic mind buried somewhere within our pathetic little reptilian nervous system, dissolves it, de-solves it, de-selves it, revives the dim light, star lit pathway to the oceanic everyness we swim above, until it just feels right to breathe and be in the world again.

Day to night, lovely hours came, where I would close the door and see Annie like a flower to hold, and then give back to her.

I need the will to stay here in this place of sanctity, where the human heart shines brighter than a gamma ray burst, joyful triumphant, blindingly emerald-white, like an x-ray of Sagittarius A.

Don't underestimate the size of the lie our mind spits into us, that tells us danger and death, and all the drinks of poison the heart gulps, can only end in darkness and turmoil. Life is homeopathic.

Surfing the molecules across the universe we find some of my son's favorite imaginary friends – like NGC 346 and the Cloverleaf Quasar. The risk of this reality is that we lose touch with the molecules we are, the ones right in front of us. We can be blinded by the bigness, like cosmic silence hypnotizes us from the beauty of sound. Reverently touching a piece of rock from the surface of the moon won't give you the passion you would feel at the touch of a her skin, Wes. Never. I know you don't believe that. I know you're wanting to escape. From me? Is that it? Did I screw you up that badly by ignoring you, by punching buttons on the computer screen and not looking at your sweet young face? Daddy can I sit with you? Not now, no. I should have picked you up and kissed you and pushed everything else aside. Forty grand in the hole, sixty grand up a few hours later, calling it right, knowing the Fed would pull the trigger. Did that blindness of accuracy turn you away from me forever?

Remember back in the day when we would watch cartoons early on a Saturday morning so mom could sleep in? Quiet together in the flickering static of the television, chickens turning into gray ghosts on the farm. Red roosters shooting blue arrows at yellow birds. The story line wasn't as important as my arm around your tiny body, and your sweet face so innocent, with the images of the screen reflected in your unblinking eyes.

I remember when you were maybe three and a half, I was on the phone placing an early trade overseas one morning while you were eating cereal at the kitchen table.

You politely waited until I was off the phone and then asked, "Daddy, would you keep me company?" your head cocked, staring at me.

My heart broke – as usual I had been ignoring you all morning, letting time slip away, blue flames rising on the gas stove -- I forgot to shut it off after making my morning tea – I simply wasn't there -- and so I said, "Sure, Wesley."

I sat down in a chair across from you.

You said, "Dad, could you come closer?"

I slid my chair right up next to where you sat.

Then you turned your head up to look at me, and said, "Dad? What's 'company?'"

I burst out laughing. My heart loved you so.

I wanted to kiss you but the phone rang.

Up the black and purple mountain we still go, hear the sloshing of our heels as we stumble through time, looking for connection, feel the click onto solid ground as your heart suddenly locks in tune with the landscape. Open it up for yearning, Wesley! Open up and don't shut down like I did. Whatever your reason, it's never going to work. The loneliest man can tell you that it was only his failure to love.

CHAPTER 3

Beautiful skater girl Annie shifted her weight slightly to allow Wesley inside. Wes closed his eyes, feeling the ecstasy, seeing random colors racing across the black screen of his mindsky. He loved her. He could feel in these connective moments that this girl, so different from him in the way she saw life, was good for his soul in every way. He had spent his life living in his head. She had spent her life connecting to the earth with her body. He wanted to feel that with her. It threw him into a magical state of joy when he did – like the first time she took him bicycling through Tilden Park, with the smell of redwood trees bursting in his lungs like cosmic perfume, or when they ran into a rain storm and danced around Sproul Plaza with lightening flashing, splashing each other with puddles, pulling at each other's clothes, falling, laughing out of control. Then, much like this moment, they ended up back at her apartment off-campus making love as if the ending of love had no correlation with human time. Talking endlessly, breathing some other air, atmospheric eternity, as they sunk back under the sacred waters together.

Was this love? Or teenage genetics? Was there a difference between the two? Was it all in the perception?

Was there nothing before the Big Bang? Or everything? Was it all in the perception?

What if the answer to all of the above is yes?

A glass of water sits by my night stand. A train speeds by – a whistle crying in the night, noise we long ago de-registered from our consciousness, piercing beneath the river of our dreams and not heard anymore, for some reason awakened me tonight. I gulped the water down. My Annie sleeping next to me again is nothing short of a miracle.

No work in a few hours! No need for me to go in. All my clients are seeking someone else's services. All accounts closed. Income from fees stopped last month. Thirty percent of my own small personal fortune gone due to several miscalculations that blew up my business life, each miscalculation still trying to surface up into my present state of mind to haunt me, but I won't let them in. This is how I deflect them: I say, "Without the hideous failure that befell me, do you think I would have dropped the surety of my analysis, and my explanations, and the logic I lived in, and the lies I was telling myself, about me, about her, and would ever have seen Annie again?" What is that worth?

And oh those first few weeks back together were a revelation. Free of work, free of resentment, she became the beautiful girl at the river once again. So many internal morphings of Annie since then, all in my own mind. Never again will I trust a word of it. Just the feeling now.

Annie traveled down another road to get here. Having loved me for so many years she was faced with the lonely choice of perpetuating the monstrosity of a person I was becoming, or breaking me to save myself.

That was the divorce for her. Breaking me one way or another. The minute I awoke from the nightmare and wanted her back she saw the egg had cracked open and she accepted me with open arms, innocently, with nothing more to say.

My Annie was also blonde, like Wes' Annie. So many coincidences, Wes. Or was it imprint? Is your Annie so much like your mother because you were never able to completely express that love for her?

Do you know the story of how we met? I know I never told you – and you never asked.

She was the most beautiful girl in our high school. I have no idea what possessed her to look my way and give me a chance when every boy went after her first before settling for someone else. Even today at forty five she looks like a gracefully aging movie star, does she not?

Ice cracking under her gaze, the bursting lamp post lights, melting the songs on the car radio, more awake than every one else in the world that night, as we drove spinning past other cars in a blur. The purple orange L.A. sky cracked open and the full moon lit the landscape and we ended up on the beach running full speed into the ocean, spitting salt water at each other, laughing so hard that the sea saltiness slid down our throats, which only made us laugh harder, as we tried to catch our breath. Cold sea birds squawking at us, jealous, as we heard bells ringing in our head from the laughter that wouldn't stop until tears reached our eyes. We lay on the sand breathing hard, panting like lion cubs, and suddenly, Annie, remember? -- without the slightest warning, you climbed onto me – I was stunned, feeling your body on me for the first time – my heart screamed to be careful, I was losing something, you would steal me, leave me, and I would never find myself again, but I threw the thoughts deep into the ocean and held you there as you pressed into me, your jeans rubbing against mine, and we kissed for the longest time it seems until a few stars broke through the violet dome, dancing gray yellow on the smoggy horizon.

The next night, a Saturday in late October, yes, we found ourselves under the sheets of my bed in my loft room while my parents were out at The Golden Slipper on a late drunk. Naked, soft and silky as a feather your skin was, I pushed against you so hard, trying to stop myself from laughing at me crying from your deep kisses. I was lost to you forever. We were married there. Bodies like electric fields interweaving atom by atom at the alter.

My loneliness vanquished, life skipped a beat, pushed past chronological time, and turned into incense on Orchard Street, our first place together, as I lurched after a job to pay our weekly expenses, and came flying home recklessly for you each night. You were awaiting me with flowers and slices of fresh summer fruit. We were waiting for you to get pregnant. We tried each night, each morning, but secretly hoping not yet, not now,

another month of this, or a year, another year of this month. We were chemistry not aware of its own reflection, shining in our little bubble world. Work and money meant nothing to us.

College had flown by as if it were a passing reflection in a pond we bicycled by, with faceless teachers teaching every single thing I would never again need to know. Follow your instincts, you said. They're idiots compared to you. You will stand them in line one day and tell them the meaninglessness of all this. You were proud of me before I was anything. We both graduated on the same day and threw the black tasseled hats in the garbage can next to the stage, and moved to Orchard Street together. What we had to show for our time and efforts were two degrees we couldn't use for anything more than paper megaphones, yelling our phony little sales certificates out to the world, bark, woof, bark. We were reduced to selling ourselves like puppies yipping in their cages in a pet shop, after all that. All those years. We vowed never to waste our time again.

The images I saw in your eyes each time I dared to look told me everything I needed to know about life, about liking myself, about having the confidence to do whatever I wanted to do.

Anything. . .

I could have invented eternity with you. I could have signed a peace treaty with God on the golden summit while kicking the missiles of the world off the edge of the earth. Could have written a song for the clouds. Could have turned low ground to high, or vacuumed up the air and turned it into water if you needed a drink to soothe your beautiful white throat on a summer day. But I became a money manager after day-trading us into our first million. Why did I waste your love on that? Why did I think that would get us what we needed? Was it the baby? Was I trying to protect our newborn child from the cold hands of the world? Was I jealous of those with money but no love? Was I feeling myself getting older?

Still, you cheered me on. You said, "If you're going to spend this much time trading, helping friends with their investments, talking about all this madness incessantly, why don't you make a part-time living out of it?" Little did either of us know: there is no part-time anything in the world of finance.

Ten years of victories were not sweet enough to sooth the pain of one bad year. I hadn't the nerve to continue through the failure. Because it wasn't my dragon to slay. I didn't care about it, ultimately. Had no ego invested in it. Yet the agony of letting down my friends and other clients during that last year dragged me into a shadow so hell-deep that I smoldered in the fires. Burned my heart. Felt the fear falling down my throat like swallowing hot mercury. I turned into a toxic man, a broken soul, causing trauma and accidents along the way as I stumbled across the terrain of my life like a Frankenstein.

Where have you gone? Annie said to me one day. Slapping at the wind I stumbled out the door and slammed on the gas pedal until dogs panicked at the noise and barked as I raced

through the neighborhood towards the freeway. Where have you gone? she called out in my burning ears. My twisted brain became fragmented into weeds and guard rails and white painted dashes blurring by on the freeway rolling beneath my eyes.

And that was the beginning of the end for her. My name became just another word to her after that. Magazines thrown around the house instead of making a neat and welcoming home. No dinners waiting. I was slowly becoming invisible to everyone including myself. She was leaving me. Where have you gone? I had the only answer. The only right response – I died. I died. I am dead to you. I will drown you with me by closing my heart to you, locking myself further away from you than you are hiding from me.

Rebirth never occurred to me until a few minutes before the burial, with the divorce papers snailing through the mail, a signature away from oblivion.

We squeezed through a crack in time, through a worm hole of what should have been the end, and wound up back at the beginning, before the madness began.

And that, Wes, is the story in case you wanted to know.

CHAPTER 4

I remember autumn on the east coast during the two years I lived there as a child – leaves of soft yellow, red, orange, gold, twisting down hypnotically from the sky like a kaleidoscopic ticker tape parade – a parade in the middle of nowhere, in endless random forests, and quiet tree lined streets. The parade was honoring the heroic summer for holding out as long as possible before its inevitable end.

I believed in time back then. The coming and going of the seasons, holidays -- one following another throughout the year, all gave the illusion that time and order existed. Reason and meaning were not man-made concepts. If a thing was true therefore its opposite was false. All reasonable child-like beliefs.

Now, of course, I know better.

We confirmed many illusions of reality with his studies of astrophysics. Apparently the universe is like a bubble that time sails along the surface of. Time curves with space.

We don't yet know if what is outside the bubble of this universe is nothingness, or millions of bubble universes, or something else. But what we do know is this:

Our experiences, real, mathematical or otherwise, are all we know, but they don't necessarily include things like "the truth" outside of our little bubble. All the physical laws might change beyond our little bubble; in which case our math and our perceptions and intuitions would be rendered meaningless.

In the end we may be left with far more mysteries than when we first began to try to solve them thousands of years ago.

Concepts of God would have no basis other than the fact that the mystery of "not knowing anything at all" would leave us in complete spiritual awe – like an ant holding on to the side of a rocket; or a fish being told about sky.

Maybe life in all universes is an eventless random happenstance in God's eyes, a supercilious occasional movement in the cosmic wind -- a pebble high above the desert falling from its mountain ledge from a northern breeze, dropping onto an empty piece of hot gray land, laying there for ten million years or more for no reason.

Maybe there are some universe bubbles where gravity is time. Space is balled up into nothing. . . . Just like in this universe, in this life, some things seem senseless.

The astronomers a thousand years from now may be aghast when they realize the destiny of the human mind-- ruminating and pontificating and disseminating and recreating and dominating over seven millennium: The third millennium's scientific conclusion? Whatever you think, is wrong.

Through the rain out my window I think about these things. Takes my mind off things. Sometimes it's hard to carry on, thinking of Wesley now, with so much life fading from him, just because random wilderness came smashing through the walls of any sense this world once made.

I can't save anyone. Can't change any time. Can't cast any blame. Water slopes down tidal wave hard, like a tower of primordial rubble, and destroys things sometimes, on its way to crashing with such white foamy beauty onto the shore. . . .

Chapter 5

Wesley was a wildly physical child, ironically – for someone who ended up so in his head as a young man. But when he was a boy he was like a wild horse running through a forest fire, jumping from couch to couch, throwing balls through windows, hammering holes in the garage wall to find out what was behind it.

He was not cuddly; more like a cat slithering out of our arms. This was especially painful for Annie who desperately wanted a baby to snuggle with. Our second child died in her arms four months before it was due to be born – the girl she had always wanted. And the boy was off running in every direction except back home into her embrace. Painful beyond feeling -- after our daughter died – nights when we sat together wordlessly, hardly breathing, still as mannequins, anesthetized in the TV light.

I don't know how the mind refreshes itself, fills in the blackness with light and carefully creates quieter softer things. But eventually a smile came back to her face, not the perfunctory one to assure me she was still sane, but a joyous broad smile where she jumped in the air a few inches, clapping her hands together like she used to do. I don't remember why she was so happy that first time after. But the day I saw that, I knew she was back.

Somehow we got used to Wes not needing much from us. We gave him the space he seemed to crave to become himself. We tried to be there every time he wanted us to listen, or pat him on the back, or hug him on Christmas night and tell him he meant the world to us. But then Annie and I would go back to being just the two of us, with a boy living in the same house. He never let on, but it seems to me now the still-birth must have affected him too. He was expecting a sister. Then one day he wasn't. He was too young to be told what happened, but too old not to know.

When he was in high school he met his first girl, Sarah Devory, and he seemed to soften overnight. He began collecting CDs and listening to music for the first time. She was a pale skinned dark haired girl with brown eyes that looked like warm pools of coffee. They would hide up in his room, or disappear on weekend nights until midnight. We liked her. But then, Wes was suddenly on his own again. She didn't come around. He didn't want to talk about it, but from what we could extract from him, he had broken up with her, not visa versa. He wouldn't say why. He didn't reveal much emotionally. I tried to talk to him causally one day -- years later -- and asked him what happened. He shrugged, "Nothing, I guess," and smiled. The smile said – that's all I'm going to say so don't ask anything more.

Nothing I could do to get him back. That's what I said to myself anyway. He wasn't about to reveal his life to me. After all, I never revealed mine to him. He was reflecting back the personality of his father. That was my nightmare now.

He really didn't seem to connect with his mother either beyond perfunctorily honoring her as "the mother." After he broke up with Sarah he seemed to toughen, not care much about the holidays, not hold the embraces he received from his mother or me. He was gone long before he graduated high school.

At Berkeley, even before he met Annie, some changes occurred in him, subtle at first – a bit more openness, a bit more laughter. The wonder he would express to me about the physical make-up of the universe, a world beyond our senses, actually made him less concrete in his thinking.

Then he met his Annie, and after a bit of reclusiveness in their beginning months, he emerged even stronger, more confident, more physically adventurous than before. This time he reached out to us, and we were ready. We also had grown into being ready. Especially after the "re-marriage."

It's as if we stumble into adulthood with missing pieces waiting to be filled. Sometimes we find them ourselves, sometimes it takes more than one person to fill them – this person helps fill one hole while another fills some other hole – until finally we become somewhat whole, somewhat stronger. Many times we never find all the pieces to our soul's puzzle, and sometimes we don't even know they were missing in the first place. But Wes was certainly finding some missing pieces with Annie. And with us. His heart was opening a bit more to everything.

As summer approached and the long grueling journey of taking finals was over, Wes informed us that he was going away for the summer with Annie. This was the end of their junior year. They were going to wind surf in Hawaii, to be vagabonds until the fall semester.

We were sad thinking we wouldn't have his company for the very first summer since he was born. We would now be permanently without a child at home. But we liked his Annie the few times we had met her. She was a real spark in his life, she seemed to care for him, and certainly she was unique enough and strong enough as a person to hold his attention.

That's the attitude we had going into the trip. The dangers were not apparent. But the fuel is overfilled in the tank – and when it explodes, there's always a yearning for the past as soon as the present takes hold. The arc of white gas fills the sky like some odd angel wreath. We watch motionless until all the pieces scatter down.

Nothing can stay kind for long on this crazy planet. Did I see the danger? Of course not! I wasn't ignoring anything. He was a grown boy and knew what he was doing.

Thrown high into the air, capturing what little oxygen he could find before slamming down into the next oncoming wave, he turned too quickly, felt the snap, turned too quickly indeed, into a cripple like his hero, Hawking. Brain still good, but legs gone. Phantom limbs, shooting pain through nerves that were supposed to be deadened.

The split second of touch and movement versus a killer wave; the wrong angle of entry, no angel around to shift his weight slowly one way or the other. Under water he twisted like a dead weight. Annie dove under and somehow pulled him to shore. No lifeguard. No people around. She couldn't drag him to the car half mile away so she had to run all that way and leave him there unconscious, to her cell in the glove box, and call 911.

Out came the rescue team and the ambulance. He was still unconscious but breathing lightly. Annie was crying madly. She saw the big wave break him as he reached out for the board, knocking him out while under water. She saved his life, after possibly ruining his life. She was told he was not likely to ever walk again.

Her life had turned into Bernard 68, as did his, as did ours.

After Wes first told me that the universe was like a bubble and we lived on the surface of the bubble, rather than saying something gratuitous I asked him to tell me more.

He said, one of three possibilities were true beyond that. Either we had a twin shadow universe possibly just millimeters away from us, where dark matter lived, keeping gravity in equilibrium.

Or, there was a twin bubble virtually attached to our bubble: a brane.

Or, we were one of many bubble universes, like the bubbles we see in a pot of boiling water. . .we were just one of the bubbles that happened to have formed. This was called M Theory, or "The Theory of Everything."

There could be thousands, millions, billions, trillions of bubble universes! Most of which would not have the same physical properties or numbers of dimensions as ours did.

Whatever the truth was about the other universes, *we* were apparently living on a bubble that had time curving along with space. Then a quark inside a neutrino inside an electron orbiting around an atom of a molecule of some fragment of stardust from a supernova somehow gained an awareness of itself and became a guy in a suit. . . .Something like that.

These were the things he wanted to talk to me about when he came home in the wheelchair. He wanted to have a day without thinking about his physical world. Instead, he wanted to live in the bubble of his astro-physical world.

The pain was horrible. It was hard to be around him sometimes. He was drugged with pain killers. Annie came by a few times that first month, then came less and less. We realized she was just a part of some past that had a future that never became realized.

He tried to go back to Berkeley next semester, but he was in too much pain to concentrate on the work. The drugs made him sleepy and attracted to the dark.

It will just be a delay of a year or two, until you're out of pain, we told him. But the doctors said the pain might just as easily get worse over time. So our life became this – Orchard Street long gone from our waking memory. This was another life with a massive challenge.

Doctors are often wrong. People are often wrong. And we were wrong, about Annie. She gave him space for a while because he demanded it but she finally refused to give him space any more. She spent the following summer with us, worked with him through physical therapy, and promised a miracle.

His mind and body were willing participants, yet the doctors said it was impossible. He would never walk again.

Fly, she would whisper to him. If you can't walk, fly.

“What?” he swatted her away, desperately trying to get up, to no avail.

If you can't walk, fly, she repeated. Use your mind to travel where you want to go. Every day she would push him. She gathered film of others who had miraculously transitioned from wheel chairs to walking.

We were sadly mistaken *again*, taking Annie for a bit of a foolish dreamer. We thought she was just feeling guilty for what she did to him. It was her fault. She pushed him too far. And now she was expecting too much of him again. With equally frustrating results, we feared.

At times Wes seemed suicidal. He screamed in anger. He cried for hours at a time. Then one day, he got up from that goddamned iron prison machine and took two steps before collapsing on the floor and spraining his wrist. He was never so happy in all his life.

Rain in California. Annie had graduated from school but delayed finding a job so she could work with him, be with him, stay with us. Slept in his room at night. His wrist was in a splint. He felt like a failure, a fool. But he had done it. He knew that as well. His face changed slowly. His set jaw became more relaxed. Smiles appeared at the dinner table. He thanked us for caring for him in all of his various incarnations since he was a little boy. He hugged his mother at least once a day and kissed her with an completeness that was never there before, for either of them.

He kissed Annie on the mouth in front of us and said she was a wonder woman. She told us one night she was set on marrying him. She saw a bravery in him that matched his intellectual brilliance. She was determined to walk with him down the aisle. The injury changed both of them equally. Annie became more serious. More focused. He became

more accepting, his heart opened in ways we never would have assumed he was capable of. He was truly happy for the very first time.

I learned a lot about the mind watching him traverse the minefield of pain with no hope guaranteed. Nobility arose amidst those graven days. Slowly, one inch-day at a time. Wes proved himself to me.

A year and a half after the injury. He had taken steps on some days. Collapsed before getting out of the wheel chair on other days. Until the amazing New Year's Day. The amazing start to a year, when his body decoded something inside his particular nervous system that has nothing to do with medical logic. Some synaptual process connected the final dots clearing an avalanched road cut off long ago.

He got up, walked over to Annie where she was reading a book, eyes averted, and surprised her to tears with a calm hello!

From that day his progress became exponential. Annie was the girl to end all girls in his eyes. He walked over to her one day, with his cane and a slight limp, and asked her to marry him. She said yes. And suddenly we were a larger family. My Annie finally had a daughter, a namesake, in fact.

I often think this progression of events was the only progression that could have created this family, and taught Wes how to live. He suddenly found compassion for those in pain, for those who were sick. He didn't ignore them by dreaming about a super nova or the event horizon of a black hole. He didn't abandon his feelings by retreating, retracting into a telescope. Nor did he abandon exploring those realities. He lived in both worlds now.

The next semester he was back at Berkeley for his senior year. He voraciously dug back into his studies. With a professorial cane and a slight limp, he moved quickly from being a curious boy to being a master student in the eyes of his teachers. He was honored by having one of his papers published in a major physics journal discussing "branes" and how they and gravity might interact with theoretical universes beyond it.

I, on the other hand, was still out of work, otherwise known as retired. But wanting more. Wanting a challenge. Wes' injury had superseded all other desires and interests I'd had for so long. But now it was time for me to take a big step forward myself. Knowing that steps forward can look a lot like steps backwards and visa versa, still I jumped back out into the world with both feet.

I did that for a short while before the next tidal wave appeared. This one bigger than the last.

Chapter 6

One night long ago, when Wes was four years old, I decided to eat at a restaurant and catch a movie alone one Friday night. The stress of my business was getting me down even though things were going well. There were very few days of no stress. Annie told me to take some time for myself for a few hours to regroup. We had a nice weekend planned.

When I got to the theater I had a compelling feeling to call Annie before I went in and thank her for sending me off to breathe some fresh air, and get my perspective back. The restaurant food had tasted good, but I wanted to share it with her. Just being able to drive around downtown had gotten my juices flowing, and I was feeling better.

When she picked up the phone I told her I loved her. She laughed, and said, “You called at a perfect moment. Wes and I just sat down to dinner, and I said a short prayer to thank the farmers and truck drivers and cash register workers for bringing us the food, and when I was done Wes asked, ‘Is God true?’

“Then you called!”

I laughed and said, “Put him on.”

I had rarely talked to him on the telephone. He came on the line and I said in a deep voice, “Is this Wes?”

He said, “Uh, huh.”

“This is God calling to tell you I *am* true.”

There was a stunned silence.

“Have you been kind today, and good to your mother?” I continued.

“Yes, God,” he said slowly.

“Good!” I boomed. “And to your father to?”

“Is this really God?” he became a bit suspicious.

“Yes, don’t you believe me?”

”It’s just that you sound a lot like daddy,” he said haltingly.

“Well, we’re close friends, your dad and I.”

“Oh,” he said.

Then I said, “Ok, Wes, it’s dad. I was just kidding.”

He began to laugh in a way I had never heard before. More adult-like.

“I knew it was you. I knew it.”

“Did you think that was funny?”

“Yes,” he said. “Dat was a good joke!”

I was thinking about this story because the irony of this world seems to preclude such a simple and intimate God.

Annie was one of those beings blue birds gathered ‘round when we walked in the park. Her modest constant love stupefied me. She found joy in the smallest moments.

Life was at its peak for us. Wes was becoming a young super star in the world of physics and astronomy, his young wife by his side. They loved us and visited us all the time. Annie and I had never gotten along better. She had never seemed more fulfilled, now that she had both a son and husband that clearly and deeply adored her.

And then, she died.

How can that be?

When the entirety of life meets a perfect moment, it ends? Is that the joke we’re supposed to laugh at when we look at life from some enlightened state?

We sometimes slept apart. I slept in my home office on the couch downstairs, and she in our bed. We did this because we were both restless sleepers. This night, that is where I chose to sleep. I am not sure if I would have heard her cry out, or if she did cry out, but she died of a stroke at the age of forty eight.

How could a beautiful energetic woman with a slim figure and a calm saint-like demeanor die of a stroke at forty eight? Would God think that was a good lesson for others to learn? Annie was not a lesson, *God damn it!* She was. . . becoming more and more of a Goddess to *me* every day. She died . . . leaving me here, Godless.

I had awoken that morning with a smile on my face, feeling peaceful, and made us some tea. I was about to enter our bedroom when I noticed how silent it was. I thought she must be tired and I would let her sleep in. I turn around while still in the hallway and went back to the kitchen to read the paper. But an hour later I got concerned. When I entered the room I knew immediately. Something in the air. Then I touched her body, cold, graying, ice still, curled in a fetal ball. She must have experienced pain before she

passed away. Her arms were hugging herself, as if she had been chilled, or enduring something terrible.

Of course, grief and panic struck at the same moment I was falling out of an airplane without a parachute. One hundred percent inevitability before it happens. . . . *Call 911! Call the police!* But realizing she was gone, and there was no saving her, I instead decided to do nothing.

Instead of calling Wes, or her aging parents, or a friend, or her friends, or our doctor, or an ambulance, I just decided to sit. First, I sat next to her for a long time. Then I sat in the living room. Then I sat at the kitchen table with my arms over my head.

Have you ever experienced not wanting to move for eighteen hours straight? I don't mean deeply sleeping for eighteen hours because you had the flu. I mean sitting with no impulse from the brain to move a muscle or to answer a ringing phone. No impulse to go into the kitchen for food, or to step outside to bring in the morning paper, or to watch the frighteningly crimson sun setting, or to gaze at the pin-sharp annoyingly bright stars blazing? No impulse to go to the bathroom. No need to turn your neck to look at all the dark and ugly things that mocked the end of your life. I blinked, I breathed, I suppose. But mostly I just sat thinking. Of what, I'm really not sure, as I look back. Random flickering images of thoughts that tried to bubble up and immediately turned meaningless.

By dawn the next morning, or some morning, I arose, back aching, bladder aching, stomach empty, nauseous with fear and aloneness. How must a little child feel at the death of their mother? Could it be like this? For one moment in time I convinced myself I was dreaming. But then I looked around and oriented myself and realized I was here, at the scene. Unchangeable.

I pounded my fist hard on the table. Screaming out to the wind. Blank. No echo. What is wind anyway? Where does it go after it carries you off? Wilderness with or without you. Withering here, winding down the golden steps of memories that bring me back to air tight circles of you in me. And when the wind tries to steal time, and blow your face away from me, I reel against it with the strain of one trying to blast through the rain with the entire weight of their body, claw through the darkening clouds, to feel the sun burst through the gray and warm, sunny face, melting through eyes and clothes to warm the bones to re-find you. Soul rejoined. Free flowing tears from one who never cries leaves my sleeves wet and the table damp; sweat soaks my clothes as I try to melt drop by drop back into you.

And what were your last words to me, or the last movements I saw, or the last smile you gave me from the last joke I told? And what was the meaning of the last hug you gave me, or the last kiss you gave me from the last sadness in me that compelled it?

All the free flowing, wind driven juxtapositions and paradoxes left to unlock from the river's edge with you, from time's first streaming, to futures unwritten, from histories stolen.

What kind of fucking stupid crazy senseless god damned horror-ridden universe is this anyway? Wes only studies the outside of the bubble. *Inside*, this bubble of life and death churns on like a mindless conveyor belt. It doesn't give a damn about the heart, or logic, or what we discover or care to know. Or whether it's time for us to go or not. It churns and shifts and darkens and lightens like a million sunrises twisting together into a random cauldron of senselessness.

So now what am I supposed to do? Call Wes in the middle of his life and tell him his mother is dead, come home for the funeral, drop your inquiries and inspection of the outermost regions of reality and deal with the deepest regions of this innermost reality? Should I call Annie's eighty year old parents and tell them you're daughter is dead? She died before you. You have nothing left to do with your life but to grieve her now. You watched her from beginning to end, and that's all there was. Nothing else would come of it. And you might blame me secretly and tell yourselves I caused her so much stress being the crazy directionless failure that I am that I killed her. Well, maybe you're right.

Maybe it's true. Maybe she secretly never forgave me for me heartlessness when I was going down, drowning deep under the ocean and about to take a breath in and surrender and let it all go. Maybe she never forgave me for having to fish me out. No, she forgave me. I know that. But maybe her body didn't.

Golden doorway to everything alive in me; wild night at the ocean, mouths filled with sea salt and star light, first silken touches of your skin in my bedroom loft, promised forever, not knowing what time meant, or the roads it would travel down; and the first night on Orchard Street aware of the stirring it caused amongst our parents and friends as we settled down for our first meal, two egg sandwiches I prepared by candlelight, as you studied for a college final.

As I drove off to take my Series 7 exam in the city you were there standing on the porch, waving as I backed the car out of the driveway, rooting for me, your hands clenched in a fist over your head, mouthing the words of something as I looked at you through the thick windshield with the radio news blaring. What were you saying? I hunger to know that now. The first year I made a million dollars you told me you couldn't care less about the money, but that you were proud of me, you had always believed in the power of my mind to do whatever I set out to do. What was it I was supposed to do? Make a million dollars? Or . . . something else. Something truly great? For you. In your honor. For believing in me.

. . . You were in pain, breathing ferociously as I held your hand, alternately smiling and gritting your teeth. When the midwives arrived I felt like angels had come to save us in the middle of a long journey through a tree darkened sacred jungle. You asked if you could sit in the bath. We helped your over-ripe body into the water and set you down into

the warm mirrory liquid. I held your arms and massaged your shoulders as you gave birth. I was whispering, "It's OK," as the baby came out, submerged in a red river now, coming up into planet earth, lifted up into the atmosphere of the midwife's arms still in the caul, auspicious they claimed, lifted above the dimension of the swirling waters by an angel's experienced hands, laid on your chest as they peeled away the cellophane-like gauze that left a perfect golden glowing child at your breast, skin heretofore untouched by earth air or human hands. It must have been ten minutes before we remembered to ask, is it a boy or a girl? They smiled and said, look for yourself! We named him Wes after the grandfather you had loved. If it was a girl she would have been the name I picked. The name I whispered to you one night, and that I made you promise not to tell anyone unless we had her . . . And now you were a mother. And I was a father without a clue.

The second day of his life you turned to me and said, "How do you feel about being a dad?"

I said, "I don't know yet."

"Isn't he amazing?" you said so proudly.

"I don't know," I admitted, "I mean, I'm glad to be a father, but he just looks like a generic baby to me, the baby from the old Gerber baby food jar, dropped down from the sky and into your arms, and now someone is telling me this is mine too."

You were a bit hurt at first, I saw it in your eyes, and I was about to lie and therefore feel even more disconnected from my heart than I already was, by saying, "On the other hand. . ." -- but you saved me.

You said, "That's ok, Josh, it's going to take a few days for it to all settle in. You'll grow a new heart, just for him. You'll see." And you were right. You had faith in me; you knew me better than I did. Almost always.

Two days later I scooped him from your arms and brought him out into the backyard. It was his first moments out in the world. I showed him flowers and wind chimes and strawberries growing. I pointed out the sky to him and told him about the sun and how we love the warmth it gives us, almost as good as a mother's warmth, especially if you have the right person beside you under that sun, and you're holding hands, I said. And he looked up and kicked his legs at that sky, as if to say, I will know this very well some day. And he looked at me through still half-blind orbit black eyes, and he sucked me into his timeless vortex and I lost sense of time; I fell in love, just as you predicted.

You stood there with oatmeal on your apron, smiling like a glowing blonde movie star, hands on your hips, watching him devour his mush as he held the spoon on his own for the very first time, all the while looking up at your face for approval.

When we found out you were pregnant again we were ecstatic. I was making plenty of money and enjoying the challenges of my work. You told me it was a girl. You just

knew. No need to verify it on the sonogram. You knew. Then the tragedy came. Going into labor in month five. No one could stop it. No doctor. No drug could slow down the movement of the birth of this being, who wanted you way too much, way too soon, couldn't wait, couldn't wait to hold you. Would die on the spot just to kiss you once. We held her in our arms as she passed through the atmosphere like a pulse of light. Shifting sand.

I didn't get to do that with you when you went away. I didn't get to hold you while you left me. Why? Why did you go like that?

Incompletion rules my life. . . . I quit my job. I quit on you. I quit on my own son, blaming work at the time. I could have done so much better, could have given so much more. What made me want to save myself despite myself? The answer is easy, Annie. It was the fear of losing you. In the end, not even my mind could find a way to trick me away from you. Nothing could have done that. Except this: Death. I can't find you there; yet.

And I don't feel you here inside of me. You are simply gone. And I am left here, having to be reborn, having already delayed the birth too long. Not knowing what I wanted. Except you and Wes and his sweet wife, the love they gave me, and perhaps a grandchild someday. We made a great team, the four of us. But without you, we are all separate and lost. I will wander like a ghost to their Christmas dinner. I will wander like a lost soul through the days that are left me. . . . But. . . no. . . I will keep searching for something. Something great, because you would expect nothing less of me. And then I'll find you inside me, somewhere, some day; then.

But what is that I'm searching for? Would you have known if I had asked you when you were still here? You always knew. And if you knew, would you have said it aloud? Or just smiled and shrugged those beautiful cloud soft shoulders of yours, knowing I needed to figure things out for myself?

I can spend a lifetime thinking about death. Or I can try to do something with this time left to me. First, I bury you. How absurd. How crazy is that? It makes no sense to do something like that. But what choice is there? First, I go through the motions of being present for all of that.

I don't want the attention, the false hope, the condolences and tearful smiles of all those who pretended to know us, pretended to know anything about you. Only I knew the depth of your brilliance, your true grace, your greatness. Everyone else's story's about you will cheapen who you were compared to what I know. You were much better at handling things like this than I ever was.

And how will I face Wes? How will I look into his eyes without falling apart and having him realize that suddenly I have collapsed into a ruined empty dying man, standing alone before him? I don't want to burden him with that. Yet I doubt I have the strength to prevent it. Whereas if everyone would just leave me alone, let me bury you in private. . .

. . .if I didn't tell Wes, if I just smiled and told him you ran away with a dark handsome boy from Brazil. Yes, that's a better way to go. Wouldn't you just love that? Wouldn't you get a laugh? I would be playing God again on the phone with him, making up reality as I went along.

Chapter 7

A season of spring went by with nothing blooming. I tried to find a place to rise up but no seed appeared. I feared the worst. I always do. I thought that never seeing you again would turn the light out in me. I thought there would be no need for the rest of the story. But once again, something regenerated in my brain. Just like the time when I knew I had to get you back

This is the kind of thing impossible to create without the help of some grace. You cannot map it, decide it, demand it, will it. That's the real mystery. The inner universe defies psychology and physical science. Could these thoughts of ours be messages from another universe talking to this one? Another universe where the physics are not about physical, or mathematically map-able probabilities, but instead are emotional dimensions? And we are the transducers?

I am feeling you here with me. It's clear it's you. . .encouraging me to get on with it before I die and it's over.

There are a few days or years or decades left. One never . . .but it's senseless -- what is the meaning of hours? Hours are not the point. I have no idea how my mind reversed electrical impulses to jump back into the world and see life through a bigger lens. But here I am.

Now I better understand the concept of jumping in with both feet, to some abyss somewhere, that I pray lands me in your good graces.

Annie: These are the things I've tried in the last few months:

Yoga
Guitar
Meditating
Poker
Drums
Tennis
Photography
Volunteering at a food kitchen
Helping the county with their massive mess of a budget
Dating once

Also, just for kicks:

I traveled to New York to see a play.
Visited Wes and Annie for a weekend at their new house.
Went to a Police concert
Body surfed.

The two things that have held my interest the most have been the study of Buddhist philosophy, and psychology.

I am interested in the beauty of the mind. How it can rise out of the darkness of the primordial brain. I want to help people feel more connected to this world. It has become my fascination – how to feel connected to life regardless of the swirling clouds of disconnectedness that travel tumultuously through time, through our veins.

A counterpoint to Wes' interest in what is beyond the sky in some proven equation. And a counterpoint to his wife's continuing interest in physical movement. She took me to some yoga classes when I visited them. It was. . . *hard!* But I should really do it more.

The big question that has occurred to me is, what exactly is the mythical synergy of mind and heart that everyone searches for? My instincts tell me that you can't really understand or truly access one without the other. But I guess that's obvious. See I'm just a beginner at this.

There also seems to be one bigger question: What keeps us vibrant and questioning and hopeful about life, even during the worst of times? Why do we continue, even against the backdrop of so much unease and suffering?

And what's the difference between the kind of mind that loves to search, attempt, inquire, versus a mind that is simply traversing the darkness, living in the dark matter dimensions of life, where nothing makes sense, and even the attempt at finding a better life seems senseless?

One could say it's environmental, family upbringing. Another could say it's genetics, the make up of the brain chemistry. There are statistics to prove these things.

But is it also possible there is something more going on parallel to these truths and effecting the results more than these known factors?

Is it also possible that in the end, Wes, you can't discover the universe without finding the connection between spirituality and the mathematical equations? How can any astrophysicist find answers beyond what is already known without an intense thirst to know the heart and mind of God? It's all connected. All connected. Not sure how yet.

Is that the message you whisper to me tonight, Annie? The question is my destiny. Is that what you are trying to tell me?

Chapter 8

That is how and why I became Doctor Joshua Evanson, PHD.

I tried to leave nothing important out. I tried to tell you why I am who I am, and how I got here.

The rest of the story is what happened next:

It's reminiscent of an event horizon at the rim of a black hole. Whatever escapes the black hole lives in this dimension we know about. The rest becomes merged with the another dimension inside the black hole. Nothing can ever be known about what got pulled into the black hole. Nothing can be known about that history where time becomes out of sync with itself.

All the other memories of my life live within there. . . inside the black hole. . . I have told you everything that escaped.

But there are those memories forever hidden. Memories that the subconscious tries to ingest, digest, and obliterate.

In my years as a therapist I have heard so many sad, sometimes horrifying, tales of childhood.

I had one woman client ask me if I knew that the word "therapist" spelled "the rapist." I told her it hadn't really ever occurred to me "but that I did come to realize that 'doctor' was 'rot cod' spelled backwards, yet, I still made the conscious decision to eat fish."

She kept coming to therapy, because I made her laugh. I pulled her out of her nightmare by being real.

Which brings me to the point – no matter how screwed up things have become in any relationship, whether it's a marriage, parent-child, sibling, or even the relationship we have with ourselves, my theory is that we have to start the therapy from the present time and go forward. Rarely backwards. Rarely.

We need to use our awareness of the present and of the way the mind works, to create the mind we want, and the kind of life we wish to lead, and the world we want to see, right now.

Dredging through the past, re-living trauma that cannot be erased, can indeed create an awareness that's important; a better understanding of why we feel the way we do, yes. Processing through anger and resentment in a marriage, or from a relationship with a parent, can be purging and enlightening in many ways. But it can also lead *mostly* to feelings of being victimized by life, or by others. Because we have no way to change that past outcome. We can't pull the worst and most forgotten parts of it out of the black hole

no matter how hard we try. It's been written wordlessly into our cells. The outcome simply occurred. It always comes down to how to move forward.

Our reflection upon past events can change us, can heal us in many ways, but we're still all the while focused on the trauma rather than what life can become. So why not allow each person the freedom to start anew? (Assuming brain chemistry is not an issue.)

Why not skip the WHYs and WHEREFOREs and just get to a new life now? Allow that to be okay. Give one the freedom, free choice now and in the future instead of digging up graves to see "who we are?"

Do you want to know who we are? Do you really want to know that? We are nobody We are nothing. And we are anything, and everything. Nothing more or less is true. All of it is true. That was what my research came to at the ancient age of fifty nine.

I was a widower, an ex-money manager, a griever of a lost daughter, the father of a famous thirty-five year old scientist with a limp with a baby on the way! All of it. And now, I am in my next incarnation, as we all are or soon will be.

I spend most of my days rigorously testing my clinical therapy technique called "Present Therapy" on my clients.

Here is how it works.

My past? I had a live-in nanny growing up -- from the time I was three years old until I left for college. I hated her. I think she probably hated me as well. She had dark hair, as did my mother, who was brilliant, but spent most of her time doing other things than being a mother. Dark haired women hold no attraction for me. Not then. Not now. So, ah ha, we all know why now.

The problem with that knowledge is two-fold: It doesn't change the fact that I still to this day am only attracted to light haired women, and it doesn't change the fact that what happened happened. I had a mother who was unavailable. My father also did not give me the time of day, preferring to give his attention to my older brother, my only other sibling. He was eight years older than me, not as sensitive and picky as I was, and he could stand with my father toe to toe as a brash twenty year old, while I was still twelve and pretending to be an astronaut named, "Mike."

(Obviously it was appealing to me to have the capability to escape from the mean nanny and the parents who ignored me in my rocket ship -- as soon as I could learn to build it.)

Yet I did not become a pilot or a rocket builder. The literal interpretations of the metaphorical only go so far.

All clearly good observations, yes?

But exactly how do I grow from there? By re-living and re-hashing through those times blow by blow with you, or friends, or a therapist? Or by moving on, moving forward? Because, without setting that goal to let go and move forward, that optimism to make that positive change may never occur

My wife died young. I almost divorced her by mistake because I went temporarily out of my mind. I was a terrible husband at times. I ultimately failed in my business career. My son is a cripple. He spent most of his childhood trying to avoid me. My parents ignored me but loved my brother. I have allergies. I can't find another person to love; she might not exist.

All of these things are absolutely true about Joshua Evenson.

Seen in this light, I am a victim, a perpetrator, and a failure. Hopeless. Nothing good can come from a man like this.

But it's not the entirety of the story. It's not fully true – therefore, it's not really “true” at all. It's only true if I insist on looking at it that way.

It's like taking a few lines of a drawing out of context!

That's the way it is for everyone.

People are who their minds define them as.

Therefore, the key to a healthy mind is to make sure we define ourselves with balanced judgment, seeing the whole picture, not just choosing a few apparently badly drawn lines.

We are each victims, perpetrators, heroes, failures, truthful and manipulative, pessimists and optimists. The big picture allows it all to be true, but the big picture also knows that defining someone as only one of those things is never true.

Definitions are never true.

They are too limiting. If we get rid of all the definitions and aim for bigger goals rather than simply defining who we are with words, good or bad, life can be better.

That's the “Present Therapy” theory in a nutshell.

In practice, the idea is to allow someone feel whole enough to approach the present with big goals – ultimately, to find their own personal meaning in life. If they were to say their meaning is to find someone to love, I might challenge them to dig deeper. That's a wish, a wish for company on the journey, not the journey, not meaning.

Wishes are tougher. Because, despite “positive thinking,” God, or the universe, are not Good Fairies. At worst, they are agnostic about what happens to us, at best, they are

teachers. . . Not suppliers of pleas to fulfill our sensate desires, or mask our longing, or band aid over our loneliness.

So, taking the optimistic view that God, and/or the universe, is our teacher, what are they hoping we learn here?

THOSE things that we are supposed to learn are the big goals!

Yes, easy to say and think all these things. I know. Far harder to live the life.

And what if everything I am saying isn't true?

Let me ask you this: Do you care how you get to "better?" Do you care that it may be a little hypnotic hoax?

Why?

Don't you just want an end to this shit you give yourself every day? Happiness shakes up the room if you lie deeply enough!

Cover up the other less beneficial lies you already concocted for yourself in the first place with new and better lies! Lie yourself out of it!

Dig deep. Dig into the freedom we have to do this. Allow the rules to be smashed like suburban china, the pure crystal ways of the mind you have been told is so precious. Smash it! Sell yourself something better. Bootleg light into the darkness!

Down by the river, where Annie and I used to let our passions run free, before Orchard Street, midnight, east wind blew down the mouth of the river far off into the sea, summer wind whipping, diving down over the top of our shushed bodies lying in the grass between the trees, as we looked up at the gauzy outline of the milky way. We were allowed a moment's vision into the truth of things. Flowing there inside of us.

Then we interpret. Arrange. Rearrange. Fluid rolls up the spine, caught into the brain's electrical maze, rising higher, rising sign, synapse snap shots. All in the way you designed it, or it designed you. Signed you. De-signed you. All in the way you spell it out. Spill it out to yourself, drink deeply the liquid dreams you present to yourself about this mosaic woodlands with river and an endless sky's starry night, among the weeds, serenity inside your body. . . is everything, it's the only answer.

Everything is made up to get me back here to your love. I pull you as deep under my skin as I can, on through the reflection of the moon on the river, falling into you, bells ringing, up into the moonlight, spiraling us higher, into the Emerald Nebulae -- pushing up into the outer limits of ourselves.

That's God. She is in that moment. What you seek there. And suddenly what you seek there *is*. Seeking anything else but that love is a waste, a joke, like trying to count the bell's ringing high up on a church steeple instead of falling into the message its overtones carry.

It's your church. Your choice. Your interpretation. Your sermon. Your sacrifice. Choose.

Slugging it out with reality, the mind tries to pull you back into the world of words and worldly worries, fear and doubt and energy-less carelessness, and away from wandering through wonder.

Don't.

Don't!

Don't come . . .back so fast from that lush state.

Don't be in such a rush to know. . . .There's nothing to know. Shhh. See? There's no way to know, nowhere to go, and there's no no to say no to.

Just stop! Stop or it's your misfortune. Stop and listen.

I'm just a voice here trying throw out a lifeline to your inner faith. I'm not here to do anything, or get you to be anything, or take on the role of anyone else.

Don't obey me. And don't blame me. And don't prosteletize me to anyone else. I want none of it.

Just stand in the light and feel it, and set your brain on fire until it becomes only what it feels like when the two stars of life and God collide in you, and nothing else.

Isn't that enough? Or do you have to know *everything*, from your account balance to the fact that we're whirling around the Milky Way at 600,000 miles per hour? *Does any of that help?* That won't save anyone! Won't save you.

Only your anti-gravity lightness can save you. The light you create in this darkness we were born into. From under the red river. No other effort is worth a damn. Everything else is unknowable, untranscendable, unsingable, unthinkable, unable to help you do anything but go under another wave.

Chapter 9

I did this counseling work for as long as I could until it was time to leave it. It met with some success. It's like anything. I helped some, and prayed for others. You help the people that are ready to hear it, and the rest hear nothing, mesmerized by the roar.

It was time for me to go away. Time to try to be in the present myself again.

So I became a vagabond.

I slipped in and out of lives who tried to possess a part of me, from Jennifer the girl who lived below my apartment and wandered up to my door one night to scoop some dream out of me, loving my humor and calm, needing the yearning I had for her.

And Allison, a doctor like me, we slept away an entire Sunday after two days of wandering the city looking for great music and bagels and ice cream and hot coffee. Then we went back to work on Monday and turned into doctors again obliterating the rest.

I was a vagabond to Wes and my grandson as well. I went to visit them occasionally, and opened my heart and my arms, and gave them all I could think to give them. I sat on the rug of their living room and played with little Corey until the train set was put together, and the locomotive was actually working, and Annie, pretty as ever, bent over us to button his little shirt and came so close I could smell the sweetness of her skin; could feel the magnetism of her smile on me. It made sense. Matched the sweetness of her personality.

Wes had gained more of a sense of humor because of his son. He was learning to be a dad. The stained glass of information in his mind, all about the outer space he considered "reality," was like holy chalk, snowflakes of equations falling on Christmas day – beautiful. But not where he wanted to live all the time. When he was with his son he was happy just to see him scribble something resembling the alphabet. It was all just great fun.

I loved them. I loved him. I held him. Felt his heart beating, just like when he was a child in my arms kicking at the sun amongst the wind chimes, as he put his face against mine to say goodbye. His still soft face against my scruffy unshavenness, just as it had always been.

I left in a downpour. I stopped before I got in the car, closing my eyes to taste the droplets falling in my mouth, fresh, as if those drops were falling from their first cloud, for the first time. . . .

I flew off to Paris with Jennifer. She was half my age. Beautiful face. No memories furled in her forehead. No cryptic past to decode. Everything was fresh, for the first time, free falling. Annie was the air. Annie was the constellation. Jennifer was a star breath I

took. The one star I could absorb into my skin. No use being a slave to my own ghosts. No use assuming Annie wouldn't have wanted me to go on living, tasting, finding whatever was meant to be found.

Bags unpacked in a hotel on the Left Bank. World bursting with new music. Culture slaves burning and gossiping back home with their judgments of us. We were there, shining from the inside out.

Life goes on, tiptoes onward through the wind, staying low to the ground so that we don't get blown away from the rain and bright lights and fog and sleet that it sweeps across us. Science doesn't measure this storm accurately. It's so much more than something timed and ticking in perfectly balanced increments. If you believe in time you have to believe in death. Not a good trade-off.

The absence of touch and love prevents the seeker from lying down in the rain, so that only thing left is to measure the water as it falls, and then you find yourself watching the measuring cup alone from a rain dappled window.

Sleep. Lie down. Here in the rain it's possible to lick the answers it refuses to give up to the window observer. *Five minutes* without language will allow you to fight through the stupidity of logic, maybe forever.

At a Paris café she tells me she's splitting to be on her own. Wants to be free here in Paris, a free girl with her heart wide open; awaiting perhaps a cynical Parisian boy with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth to make wine out of her lips and drink her until she's warm rain in someone else's sky.

So I resign myself to write poetry about her. But I can only write about the sensual electric. The sexual ecstatic. Nothing specifically about Jennifer. Just the passion we set up for each other's bodies. We were each other's pallet. It's okay. One would have had to search a long time at my age to find more than that.

Paris is a perfect place to lose if one must lose. So much to see. So much life from so many centuries, enshrined. So much art, sculpture, architecture, revered creations moving through their suffering and exploding into higher realms of existence right before your eyes.

I bowed to the masters of suffering exploding. The Muse De Orsay carried me through time to their pain, joys, heartbreaks, filled in with a thousand dabs of paint. Renoir, Monet, Van Gough, each with the intensity and passion echoing through their cells as they touched wild colors to canvas.

They knew! The sculptures knew too: Annies had died in their life too. Jennifers had left them in Paris, kissing them gently on the cheek before closing the door behind them. Lonely. Transcending. Longing. Art is the longing. Art is the longing made electric.

It was time to fly back home.

I knew that.

But I refused to go.

Instead I watched my mind darken, a delayed reaction, an aftershock of having been dumped, abandoned, first by Annie dying, now by young Jennifer lying, using my money apparently to get herself here, giving me a few weeks of joy while I took her to fine restaurants, as we ate and drank until midnight, then made love as if we were sipping champagne, slowly, long devouring hours of love in the dim hotel light as we fell asleep near dawn each day, awaking at noon, to begin again. Drenched in senses. But this was not love. This was sensual madness setting up a big fall from Nirvana into the depths of me. The depths of incompleteness, the aloneness we feel from endings that should never have begun, in a perfect world.

So now I had turned from vagabond to empty handed wanderer. Beggar. Coat pulled tightly up around my neck as fall fell away and winter arrived, and rain came. Giverny in the fog. Wind caressed. Bicycle wobbling. Monet painting his lily pads floating on the pond, as if one could still-life this kind of endless peace, before the World War blew up all the flowers on earth.

Firing on all cylinders now darkness reigned. Evil arose from the depths of the world's vast soullessness and flooded the landscape. This is the other side we all must know and bow to when the pain flows like soldier's blood. Dreams so dark crowd the space where her body used to be. Dreary dungeons imprison time where the beauty used to gleam. Where the beauty used to coruscate over the dappling river, now the river is a cavern. Vast. Deserts beyond there.

And now I knew once again what they all felt as my words of wisdom tried to touch their ember glowing pain. All the patients nodding and trying to believe and live.

It was up to me to re-paint the self-portrait. Up to me to lie myself back down into the beauty. As I asked them to do -- no reason to care about the past that threatens to burn me. Watch the raging fire. Just watch. Just burn. Watch the colors arise in the flame. Wild colors artists use. Go there.

No reason to seek answers. There were no questions to the answers I was coming up with!!!

Only this moment here with myself in a strange place where not even language made sense. No one knew I was here in this room, or cared if they knew. Even if Jennifer walked back through this door – possibility = zero – nothing would change. No one would care in the slightest about my existence here.

I understood that now. And that the love we made was fireworks for the absurdity parade that marches on throughout time amongst a million small towns of lonely people. Down the dusky streets of all the paralyzed practitioners like me who for some truly noble but clinically insane reason, still await the beauty of the pageant to move me enough to join in. As a clown.

The float I make would be seen by no one. The music I make would be danced to by no one. All the others, the cops and crazy dancers, seem to have the crowd's attention. The crowd salutes the soldiers as they march by synchronized to unhearable anthems. I bring up the rear after everyone has dispersed. A victim of the parade. Still marching. Shoulders slumped. The old dusty clown, tears real.

And *still* I refused to leave Paris. I refused to bury myself back into the womb of Wes' love and Annie's glowing young embrace, and Corey's toothless laughter. That was a time I wanted to know again. But not now. To the extent they may have needed me to give them anything, including time, I surely would have, if they needed me. But they were fine. This was my battle, my time to find the way out of yet another deep hole I had dug for myself.

I thought with my clever little Present Therapy theory I would be impervious to lasting anguish. I thought I had invented a ladder with which to climb out of such things. So what did I do? I gave myself yet more challenges by smashing the ladder to bits. But the theory is not meant to be tested in some cavalier way. Not meant for a destroyer of ladders. Not meant to replace a sense of responsibility and purpose with philandering and prayers to Peter Pan. The test had gone too far.

I allowed myself to experience all the blackness my thoughts could offer as I sat alone in the small hotel in the Left Bank, washed away from the shore in a dark fog. I was seen by my friends as a wild man, a maverick therapist who ran away with a twenty five year old to Paris because it was there for me to do. They despised my nonchalance, my Epicureanism, but envied my luck, and the freedom I had. . .until now. If they saw me now. . . .But when you touch the lightning life blazes before you then you have to accept the consequences when laying in shock on the ground electrocuted. Feeling stunned as if a hand grenade had gone off a few feet away. Love hadn't the heart for this. It really can't grow in a drugged out war zone amongst the uninitiated and the uncommitted. It didn't flourish in a French alleyway with black overcoats hiding lovers, and lipstick smearing, one high heel pressed against the wall reeling from a kiss. Love was more subtle.

Love was more subtle. And it demanded everything.

Optimism is my religion.

My God can be beaten out of me, but, no, not this easily. I have had it easy.

Where is the core of silence now? I need to be there for a while. Where is the center of the love I can find in this world? I need to go back there, by airplane, or mental plane.

I know where both the silence and the love is. I know.

I meditated and went back to her. Annie. Why did we never go to Paris together?

Chapter 10

The fragileness of the mind, the earth in orbit, the very things we are made of – are all like a bubble shimmering mid air.

Any moment the bubble bursts back into a billion micro-drops of liquid falling. Until then, all is well.

The bubble shimmering mid-air could worry about bursting at any second, and miss the wild beauty surrounding it; miss all that's reflected in the fragile looking-glass of its big round eye. Why waste that beautiful moment?

The earth, a blue glowing bubble in space. It too will burst in time. The sun too. The supernovas, by the billions, cascading star bursts as the universe recreates itself in a slow motion fireworks. All exploding back into vast open space.

Through tears -- tiny bubbles of grief escaping from my earth-round eyes -- I become reconnected to the loneliness everywhere.

On the streets of Paris, despite the young couples walking arm in arm, I could see the separation between them. I remembered the loneliness in Corey's eyes, with big tears falling as grandpa left. Grandpa was going on a long trip. He'll be back, Corey boy. And maybe Corey believed that, but his eyes didn't.

And the loneliness of those living in oppressed nations. Or of the parents whose sons or daughters were away at war. Or of a marriage failing. Or of a parent losing their son or daughter only because the words couldn't be found to reconnect them while they were still alive.

The loneliness of the planets, still as bubbles of ice, in silence and eternal darkness.

Sometimes there is beauty in loneliness; the lightning powerful beauty in the longing for connection. A spiritual wise man once said that the longing we feel is God. When we are in that state of longing we can feel the fragileness of all of life floating everywhere around us. The beauty is overwhelming. *That's it*. That's God captured, in a heart's moment.

Where life thrives is in the middle of joy and longing. That is the homeostasis that keeps life afloat. Otherwise, the gravity of longing smashes us down into the ground, or the lightness of joy pulls us up too high; we burst with no anchor.

Annie is longing and joy all at once!

Beautiful still, yet no longer achievable.

Do I cry when thinking about her because I can no longer touch her? Or do I try to feel the love she reflects so powerfully through me now?

What would she tell me about the answer?

How much love can my mind absorb? How do all the threads turn into one beautiful story of life while spiraling headlong towards death?

I may be a long way from knowing the end of the story. But I've traveled as far as I can through this foreign land. I need to go home, back to the reality beyond here.

I am carried away one gust of wind at a time, away to the next point mid air, to watch more reflections and colors form onto the phantasmagoric mirror of my eyes.

And for this gift, I bow with great thanks, and a sense of wonder.

- GM