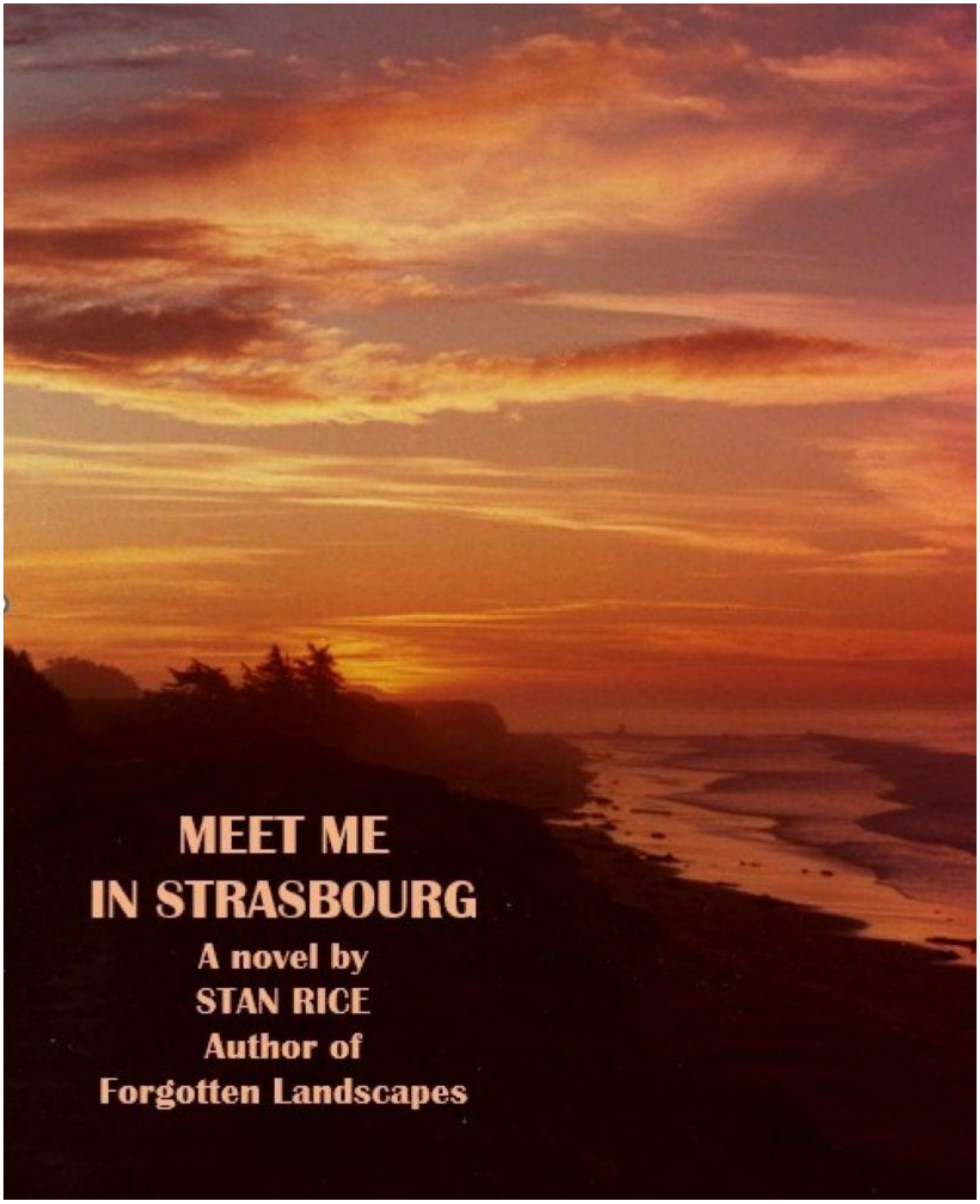

MEET ME
IN STRASBOURG
A novel by
STAN RICE
Author of
Forgotten Landscapes

MEET ME IN STRASBOURG

A novel

Stan Rice

Copyright 2026 by the author. All rights reserved.
No part of this novel has been generated by AI.

Other fiction available or soon available by the same author:

Novels in Sets:

Trail of Tears: Three Novels of Cherokee Identity:
Nancy's War: A Novel of the Last Cherokee Warrior Woman
Elizabeth's Exile: A Novel of a Cherokee Refugee
Edd's Land: A Novel of Four Cherokee Brothers in Early Oklahoma

Individual Novels:

The Princess of Kashgar
Deru Kugi, a novel of an alternate Japan
Rima, a Modern Retelling of Green Mansions
River Weeds: a Novel of Love, Lust, and Poison Ivy
Confessions of Conseil: What *Really* Happened in Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea
Billy Stormfield's Visit to Hell
Glass Cathedral
Plantation Odyssey

Short stories:

Blood-Brain Barrier: Stories from the Borderlands of Science
Stars in the Daytime: Stories of Disruption

For the updated list, see the author's website, https://stanleyrice.org/books/.

Table of Contents

Summary
PART ONE: GOLETA, AUTUMN
PART TWO: GOLETA, WINTER
PART THREE. GOLETA, SPRING
PART FOUR. STRASBOURG, SUMMER
Author's Notes about Meet Me in Strasbourg
About the Author

Summary

When the university-bound Native American science student Tony encounters the brilliant and painfully shy French humanities student Aimée in California, he has no idea that their love would drag him halfway around the world.

Tony and Aimée discover their shared passion for music, particularly the love-lieder of Schubert, and then for one another. Tony quickly leaves the social circle that scorned Aimée for her plainness and quietness and becomes her defender and protector. And does she need protection—from the poverty and malnutrition of living alone with her unlucky father, and from her father's unscrupulous associates in the shadowy world of smuggling. Aimée (French for *beloved*) finally discovers what it is like to be loved. Just when her joy seems inevitable, she and her father disappear. Tony alters the entire course of his life to go look for her in France.

PART ONE: GOLETA, AUTUMN

Chapter 1

"The fire is definitely coming closer," I said to Roald, the tenor sax player.

"I wouldn't worry about it, Tony," he answered.

We were all nervously watching the chaparral fire on the mountains behind Santa Barbara. It was the last Goleta High School home football game before the winter break. The fire was not directly in our line of sight, but its yellowish glow was distinctly visible behind the distant cliffs. The dry, strong Santa Ana winds were rustling our sheets of music paper and pushing the fire westward toward us rapidly.

"The light from the fire looks much brighter to me than it did before." I shifted inside my band uniform as we sat on the metal bleachers. I clutched my baritone horn. "It's on its way."

"You're not worried, are you?" asked Roald. "The fire won't come anywhere close to us." Roald was the common-sense thinker. We all knew he would be the business executive that he aspired to become. The rest of us had definite interests but no clue about our future employment. "Amy certainly isn't worrying about it."

I looked at Amy. "She seems to live in her own world," I said.

"We all live in our own worlds," said Roald. "What we see out there, so to speak, is not the real world but a model of it created by our brains. If the model fits what is out there reasonably well, we call it reality; if not, we call it delusion. But reality and delusions are just models created by our brains."

"And Amy? Reality or delusion?" I asked.

"Does it have to be one or the other? Most of us live somewhere in between," answered Roald.

Between musical pieces, Amy Zeitgeber was reading a book and taking notes from it with a little mechanical pen, ignoring the teenage hyperactivity around her. She was the only one with a backpack. A worn backpack, in which she carried her book and notes. This was the same thing she did during lunch and during each break at our high school, and in the classes that I shared with her.

Amy seemed neither happy nor sad, but indifferent to what the rest of us did, or said, or thought. This was the impression I got the one time I saw her while she was working at the fast-food place, Rolando's Burgers, where my family and I stopped to eat one evening when we were in an unusual hurry. She looked slightly down at Dad as he ordered for us. Her eyes, well-guarded by glasses, were dark and her face gaunt. Her hair was dark, straight, and dull. She took Dad's order with a blank expression. When it was ready, she called his number with a weak voice that Dad would not have heard over the customer noise if he had not been standing near the counter. Even though she knew me from classes, she did not look at me. Nor did she look at me or anyone else—at least, not in the eye or with recognition—at the football game.

The first quarter break in the game began. The announcer said, “The fire is now ten miles east of Carpinteria.” Goleta was ten miles west of Santa Barbara, itself ten miles west of Carpinteria. The chaparral fire was up in the mountains, not on the coastal plain where we lived. It was still twenty miles away.

“So, what did your Native ancestors do when a fire came? They lived up in these mountains, didn’t they?” asked Roald.

I seldom thought about my Chumash-Barbareño ancestry. The Chumash tribe lived in the local mountains behind Santa Barbara, and just about nowhere else. There were dozens of other native California tribes, from the Yokuts in the Central Valley to the Modoc in Yosemite. But my family inherited nothing of the Chumash language and culture. We always attributed the slight darkness of my skin to my Italian ancestors. As nominal Catholics, we certainly inherited none of the native religion.

“I don’t really know much more than you do,” I said. “I learned my California history in elementary school, just like you. But they lived in grass huts and ate a lot of acorns. When a brush fire came through, they just picked up their blankets, tools, and baskets full of acorn meal, and ran away. They built new grass huts wherever they went. My uncle has a big house up in the mountains. When a fire comes through, he can’t just pick things up and run. He has a sprinkler system to protect his house.”

“The smoke must be the reason the sunset is so red,” Roald said. The red light shone on the brass instruments: the trumpets, cornets, saxophones, trombones, a tuba, and my baritone horn, creating a color that was neither sunset nor brass. The red wavelengths of light showed up every dark smudge on our white band uniforms. I felt as if we were ancient Babylonian soldiers holding brass spears and approaching the flames and glowing coals of a fire that immolated our sacrificial victims.

Our director, Mr. Beaumont, stood up and glanced over his shoulder at the mountains. He turned back to us and announced that we would play *Time to Hit the Road,* a band arrangement of a recent hit song.

My baritone horn was a small tuba, pitched an octave higher. I played in the same range as the trombones, but with a much mellower (some would say, duller) tone. Rick played a Sousaphone, which was like a tuba but wrapped itself around him so he could carry it in parades. Not a large guy, Rick looked like a hermit crab holding a conch shell. Our brass section had trumpets and cornets as well. As an aspiring music composer, I knew the difference: cornets had smooth tones like the baritone horn, while trumpets were bright toned like trombones. The way the players blasted them, however, no one could hear the distinction between trumpets and cornets.

We finished Time to Hit the Road. Mr. Beaumont looked at the countdown clock and decided we had time to play the *Can-Can*. The trumpets and trombones had the melodic line of the Can-Can, a melody so well-known that some of the parents and siblings of the football players, sitting on the bleachers near us, sang along. The baritones and French horns, however, only had sustained chords. I usually just played the melody, ignoring my sheet music. The snare

drums were very loud, and the bleachers nearly shook from the bass drums. One could hear the flutes and clarinets, but only because there were so many of them.

Amy put her book and notebook into her backpack and raised her instrument from where it sat beside her on the bleacher. She was the only oboe player. She played conscientiously, but it was impossible to hear her. Ever. Made of dark wood, her oboe reflected the sunset colors only from the silvery levers and stoppers along its length.

None of us talked to Amy, ever since the day she showed up, three weeks into this fall semester. She was French. When we called her Amy, she corrected us: the French pronunciation of *Aimée* sounded like ay-may, but not quite. Not wanting to mispronounce her name again, we only talked about her, not to her. She was Amy to everyone except me. She seemed to create an anti-gravity field around her. The only thing we ever saw her doing at school, aside from writing and reading, was that when she saw a piece of litter in the lawn or on the sidewalk, she picked it up and put it in the nearest trash receptacle. Over and over, compulsively.

Aimée was easy to ignore. She was just tall enough to be ungainly, like a scrawny blade of grass in the wind. Her hair was just long enough that she could cut it herself. As it blew in the wind just now, her hair seemed to have a red and gold sheen, although that must have been a sunset illusion. The sunset was refracted in her wire-rimmed glasses. Her small but sharp nose looked like a clamp had pulled it. Her mouth was small, but large enough for the tiny double reed of her oboe.

I kept looking at Aimée even as we began playing the Can-Can. She seemed contented to play the sustained chords rather than the melody. Without thinking, I realized I, too, was playing the sustained notes. I also realized that I had probably never looked at Aimée this long before. The wind stirred her hair into complex waves that reminded me of the graphs of equations we studied in Mr. Hanigan's pre-calculus class—that is, those of us, like me, Roald, and Aimée, who planned to go to college. The University of California, UCSB, was only a few miles away, in our town of Goleta, not in Santa Barbara itself.

Aimée generated no romantic interest even in the most hormonal of us straight guys. This seemed strange, since we assumed all French girls were supposed to be sexy. After all, France is where the Can-Can came from. Some of the baton girls on the sidelines were kicking their legs to our music, as if we were at the Moulin Rouge in Paris a century earlier.

"You know," Roald said to me after we finished the Can-Can, "I'll bet Amy is really sexy if you get to know her."

"Where did *that* come from?" I asked.

"The French, you know, love every kind of physical indulgence. They want everything to be as intense of a pleasurable experience as possible. Their food drips with butter. A whole bunch of gourmet foods—even the word *gourmet*—are French. You know, *éclairs* and *meringue* and *bonbon* and such like. And as for sex? All French men go around acting like Pepé LePew."

"But," I said, "Aimée?"

"She's French, so I wouldn't put it past her," said Roald. "It's like Mark Twain said. Now, Mark Twain, there is a classical writer I like. No one was beyond the reach of his ridicule. He's been dead over a hundred years, and he's *still* funny. Anyway, he said, 'For someone to say a piece of writing is so bawdy that no Frenchman could stand it would be like saying there is a food so delicious that no Frenchman would eat it.' Something like that."

"Still doesn't sound like Aimée," I said. The swirls of sexuality left Aimee untouched. Life passed around her like crème around a dull little raisin.

We perched our instruments precariously on the bleachers as the game restarted. None of us paid much attention to the game, except during spectacular moments, such as Russell's ninety-yard run to a touchdown last year. He had now graduated and had a job in which the ninety-yard run meant nothing. The game itself was the best time for us to sneak off for a break. Brad locked his trombone slide and set the bell where he had been sitting, the mouthpiece up in the air, as he left. Aimée also stood up. She created a little nest out of her worn sweater and placed her instrument and backpack in it as she also left.

This was just enough time for Kevin, the brilliant class clown and one of the trombonists, to leap into action. He took ice left over from his soft drink and placed it in Brad's mouthpiece. The ice melted and the water accumulated in the vertical slide.

Then Kevin ran over to Aimée's oboe and grabbed it. He held it into the air and said, "Look, guys. I'm Amy!" He pulled the reed from the oboe and started blowing through it. It created a plaintive hell-ghoul screech that penetrated the crowd noises. Several band members started laughing. I just watched, wondering what would happen next. He kept squealing on the reed. "I'm playing whatever it is the shepherdesses play in the Alps." He was referring to a story Aimee had written and read in our creative writing class.

"You'll get her germs," said one of the drummers.

Roald spoke up. "Amy? Germs? She's as pure as melted snow!"

Aimée returned and saw what was going on. She tried to grab her oboe from Kevin. He was taller than she was and kept the instrument out of her reach. With a frantic look on her face, she said quietly, "Oh, that you would give me my oboe."

Keven stopped waving the oboe around and looked into Aimée's face. "What?" he yelled. We all laughed. Aimée said nothing. Kevin then turned the oboe carefully in his hands and presented it to her. "Prithee, take your oboe, my fairest one," he said, making fun of her odd manner of speaking English. I did not join in with the laughter. Kevin still had the oboe reed in his mouth. Aimée took the oboe and sat down. She placed the instrument carefully on her lap and held her face in her hands.

Mr. Beaumont said nothing to Kevin. Instead he looked down at Aimée. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a little package of oboe reeds, and handed a clean one to her.

"The rest of us have to buy our own reeds," Roald said to me. His own saxophone reed looked like he had chewed on it a little too much. "But Amy gets hers for free."

"School budgets used to provide free reeds," I told him. "Budget cuts. Now you buy your own. Sheesh, now we even have to rent our instruments."

"I guess that means that Mr. Beaumont buys Amy's reeds himself," said Roald.

I looked at Aimee's old clothes. "It must be because she is poor," I said.

"Well, of course she's poor," said Roald. "She has to work after school at Rolando's."

Aimée installed the new reed. She placed the oboe on the bleacher beside her, got out her book and notebook, and continued reading and writing by the light of the floodlamps. Her brass mechanical pen reflected the last of the sunset. Then she sighed and put the book, papers, and pen into her pack. She sat and looked at her oboe.

Brad got back just in time for us to play another piece—the theme from a recent movie—during a time-out, when the countdown clock stopped. We watched as he brought the mouthpiece to his lips and discovered it to be very cold. Then when we started to play, the air inside Brad's slide bubbled very audibly through the water at the bottom of the slide. Mr. Beaumont, who smiled while the rest of us laughed, stopped the band and gave Brad a few seconds to press his spit valve and dump the water from his slide on the smokers and makers-out who were under the bleachers. Aimée remained at attention, ready to play.

We played the piece, then had some free time to do whatever we wanted. For Aimée this meant more reading and more notes.

"What *is* up with Amy?" asked Roald.

"She's ugly," said Kevin, making sure that Aimée could not hear our words. "And flat." It was true that Aimée appeared to have no bosom. No adult, whether school official or employer, was supposed to notice this, but us hormonal teenage guys certainly noticed. Actually, this fact helped me to not look at her. I did not wonder what was inside her clothes.

"I don't think so," said Roald. "Flat, but not ugly. She's plain, but that's not the same thing. Now Clara, she's ugly. But Amy is just weird."

It was quite true that Aimée was plain. This made me wonder even more about her. She was plain, like paper upon which my imagination could write.

"Nothing wrong with being weird," I said.

"Course not," said Roald. "You just can't expect any kind of social life if you're weird. And those notes she is always taking."

"In pen," I said. "And she never seems to make any mistakes. I prefer pencil, so that I can erase my mistakes. Actually," I admitted, "I don't bother to erase my mistakes. Weird she may be, but apparently perfect."

"I asked her to a dance one time," said Corey. Corey Minor was, well, minor, but not an outcast. He looked like an insect as he twiddled the three pistons on his trumpet.

"Really? That's interesting," said Roald.

"Yeah," said Corey. "She turned me down."

"I don't blame her," said Kevin.

"She said that she was a very private person, and would not feel comfortable at a dance," said Corey.

"Especially if you danced the slow one with her," said Kevin. "She's a nerd."

"Hey, man, watch who you're talking to," said Roald. "Me and Tony here, we're what you might call nerds too. But we're not beyond social redemption."

"That's why we invited you and Tony to that party," said Kevin.

"You mean, the one at Cheryl's house?" asked Roald.

"Yeah, that one," Kevin answered. "I wanted to see if maybe you could break out of your shells a little."

"Wasn't too hard for me," said Roald.

"I wasn't comfortable, but I did it," I said. "I even asked Cheryl to dance the slow one with me. She said no, of course."

"That didn't go over too well," said Kevin. "But, you did okay. We invited Amy too."

"Why?" I asked.

"We thought you two might get together," he said to me.

"Really?" I asked.

"Well, who knows?" Kevin said. "Also, I figured, give her a chance. Deep down, all French girls are sexy. The French invented sex."

"Get lost," said Roald. "The Italians invented sex. Right, Antonio?"

"Actually, sexuality is a property of most animal species…" I began.

"Don't start one of your biology lectures," said Kevin. "Anyway…" Then he turned to Corey. "I dare you to give Amy a French kiss."

"What if she doesn't want me to?" said Corey.

"I double-dare you," said Kevin."

"Just leave her alone," I said. "She'll come out of her shell when she feels comfortable."

"I wonder what she's writing," said Roald.

"Probably more stuff about alpine shepherdesses," said Kevin.

With five minutes left in the second quarter, Mr. Beaumont announced, "Get your stuff and gather behind the goalpost." This was our signal to be ready to do the halftime show. The end zone was not an entirely safe place to be since victorious teams from other towns usually kept the scrimmage line close to our goalpost. We fantasized that the audience would finally notice us if the players ran into the end zone while we were there, or if the football zoomed between the tines. Rick fantasized about catching the ball in the huge bell of his Sousaphone. This, of course, never happened.

A paper slipped from Aimee's pack as she walked. I was surprised, since she usually kept perfect control of her papers and books. Kevin walked over, picked up the paper, and headed toward a trashcan. I intercepted him.

"What are you doing?" I challenged him.

"Throwing out Amy's litter," he said. "Just like she does with everyone else's. Why should it make any difference to you?"

"It looks like something she was writing," I said. "She was working really hard on it."

"But why should *you* care?" Kevin challenged me.

I had no answer. Why *did* I care? "Just give me the paper," I said.

He resumed walking toward the trashcan. I stepped in front of him.

"Why do you want this piece of paper so bad?" he said.

"Why do you want to throw it out so bad?" I countered.

"Have it your way," he said, dropping the paper where I could pick it up.

Aimée left her pack in the shadows behind the goalpost. She did not seem to notice the missing paper.

I began to read the paper, I told myself, to make sure it was hers. I found that, as I suspected, there was nothing crossed out. Aimée had been taking notes, in English, on nineteenth-century German poetry. It was the first of the twenty-four poems by Wilhelm Müller in his cycle *Die Winterreise,* the winter journey. I would never have recognized it except that the great Austrian composer Franz Schubert based one of his most famous pieces of music on these poems, a piece of music that meant a lot to me.

Who could think about German poetry during a football game? Aimée. Was she, perhaps, German? With a last name like Zeitgeber, maybe she was, despite having come recently from France. Who could tune the world out and concentrate on literature and writing, whether during a football game or during the lunch break every day at school? Aimée. I felt a little thrill that I knew something about her, or thought I did, that nobody else knew or cared about. Her notes were in English because, I assumed, she was trying to learn our language. She was especially fond of Dickens. She rarely talked, and when she did her voice sounded like an oboe. One day in a class she intended to say, "By the way," but it came out "By the by," in Dickensian fashion. This was, for a couple of weeks, a source of derision among most of the students. Another time she said "Prithee" instead of "Please," and Kevin, of course, would not let her forget it. And tonight, she used another example of formal diction, *Oh that you would give me my oboe.*

*

After missing the first three weeks of the semester, Aimée showed up in school. The rest of us in the creative writing class recognized she would have to work hard to overcome the language barrier, but none of us guessed how hard it would be.

We could all tell right away, from her worn clothes and shabby backpack, that Amy was poor. All class assignments, including for creative writing, were to be completed on a computer and submitted to the school website. We all had our computers with us, from which we read our compositions. We had computer bags rather than backpacks. But Amy had a backpack and wrote everything on paper, with a mechanical pen. She must have gotten special permission to do this. For poor students, computers were available in a special lab after school, but Amy worked at Rolando's Burgers. It was more work for the teachers, who had to print out assignments for her, and then scan the ones she turned in.

Every afternoon after classes, Aimée met with the creative writing teacher, Mr. Hashimoto. Rumors began to circulate that they were having an inappropriate relationship, but the classroom door was always open, the lights were on, and nobody, even the janitor Mr. Lee,

ever saw anything suspicious. Aimée almost never smiled except when she met with Mr. Hashimoto. Their almost daily meetings seemed her sole joy in life.

Mr. Hashimoto, unlike Aimée, smiled a lot. He had just come out of retirement to replace Ms. Cronon, who had previously taught creative writing. Ms. Cronon was acerbic and critical of student writing, often complaining that red ink from her correction pen spilled on their pages as if her hands were bleeding. She was the last faculty member to grade assignments on paper with ink. She got tired of this and quit just before the semester began. Mr. Hashimoto was very different. The first day, when he called roll, he found witty things to say about the subject and about us. We liked him right away. He had a big white beard, and he was round. A *sansei*, third generation from Japanese immigrants, his first name was George. Roald asked whether he wanted to be called Mr. Hashimoto or George, since some teachers preferred a first-name basis. Then Kevin said, since Mr. Hashimoto was portly and jolly, maybe we could call him Santa. Mr. Hashimoto smiled. When I suggested that we call him Hashimoto-sensei, he smiled bigger. I did not notice whether Aimee smiled.

Then Mr. Hashimoto said, "Why don't you just call me *Generalíssimo*?" We all laughed. Even Aimée. And that was what we called him. He insisted on the accent mark on the first I, and he actually deducted points if we turned in an assignment without it.

Aimée was always the first to arrive at Mr. Hashimoto's class. We always knew class was about to begin when we heard the click of Aimée's pen.

One day, Mr. Hashimoto began a series of class sessions in which we had to read our writings to the class. He explained that the purpose of reading our work aloud was to make us aware of the audience when we wrote. For of what use is writing, he said, unless there is an audience? We had to try our best to get inside other people's brains. Furthermore, he said, there has to be a plot which drives us compellingly to a conclusion, not just an interesting premise.

Most of us read our short pieces with varying degrees of clumsiness or cleverness. My piece took the viewpoint of an oxygen molecule, who lost and then regained his identity as he migrated through the ecosystems of the Earth, until he was breathed in by a handsome baritone horn player. Roald's stories were always about detectives sleuthing out financial crimes.

Aimée began to read her piece. It was a fantasy about green people who lived in a distant land of mists and clouds. We listened as her oboe-like voice droned on and on. I kept waiting for the story line to begin, then realized that there wasn't one. The people in Aimée's fantasy were green because they had tiny photosynthetic algae in their skins, which produced sugar from sunlight.

I whispered to Kevin, "Since their skins produce food, they do not need to eat."

"They don't need to poop, either," he whispered back to me.

Aimée's story irritated me. I finally realized why. In the discussion period that began when she stopped reading, I spoke up, completely inconsiderate of what her feelings might be. Everyone knew that I was the best science student, and that I could be pretty blunt in pointing out scientific errors.

"Amy," I said, "your piece was very insightful. I've heard about photosynthetic animals, but never imagined that humans could be photosynthetic."

"Thank you," Aimée said softly.

"But there are some really good reasons why such chlorophyll people could never exist."

Aimée said nothing, nor did she look up from her paper.

"Photosynthetic algae inside of skin could produce sugar, no doubt, but how much? Certainly not enough sugar to empower people to jump around and talk the way your green people do. The animals that I know that have algae in their skins are all small, sluggish invertebrates, such as corals."

"And flatworms," said Aimée. "I have beheld them myself. Up in Brittany, on the North Sea coast of France, near Roscoff, there are tiny green flatworms that sit in the sun on the sand. They look like green slime, until they hear you walking up to them. Then they burrow down between the sand crystals and vanish."

"You mean sand grains, not crystals," said Mr. Hashimoto. Then he smiled. "I've never heard of such a thing. Green slime that hides from you when you walk up to it? Old I may be, but I learn something new every day. Good advice for the rest of you."

Apparently, that day, I acted as if I was the only person who did not have to learn something new. "Those algae could not produce enough food to keep anything larger or more active than a coral, or a flatworm, alive. Certainly not green people jumping around and talking.

"Not only that," I continued, unable to stop myself. "Just like corals or flatworms, your green people would have to live in water. In order to get enough light, the algae would have to be in the outer layer of skin. In land animals, the outer layer of skin is dry and dead. Algae could not live in dead skin."

"The outer layer of my skin is dead?" asked Kevin.

"And scalp, too," I said. "Not down in the hair follicles. It is just the scalp that has dead cells."

"Are you going to scalp us?" Kevin asked me. This was one of the few times that anyone ever mentioned my Native American ancestry.

"Dead cells on the scalp," I told him. "That explains your dandruff."

As everyone except the silent Aimée laughed, Mr. Hashimoto said, "That's enough of the scalping jokes, Kevin."

"So, that's two reasons, Amy, why your green people could not exist," I finished, as if my conclusion had not already been obvious. "Not enough food, and not enough water."

It was time for Mr. Hashimoto to put me in my place. "Tony," he said, "maybe Amy's green people lived in shallow water. Besides, of course Amy's green people could not really exist. That's why we call it fantasy."

In the silence that followed, I spoke to Aimée. "I didn't mean to embarrass you or anything. I think I went a little too far."

Aimee continued looking down at her paper.

The next time we read our assignments, a week later, Aimée went last. She had worked very hard to make her English impeccable. She wrote a story about a shepherdess in the Alps of France who breathed in the cool, fresh air and noticed every flower that emerged through remnants of snow in the meadows. I mean this literally; she described each species separately, and, perhaps, from direct knowledge. I very much doubted that she had actually ever been, or seen, a shepherdess. Her sheep were always so obedient and quiet, which is where we get our word sheepish, but this cannot really be true. Sheep, as in the Bible my Catholic family revered but seldom read, go astray. This is, after all, the reason a shepherd's staff has a crook at the end—it allows the shepherd to reach out and pull clueless sheep by their necks back to the fold.

"She even used French names for the flowers," I whispered to Roald.

"At least she didn't use Latin names," he whispered back, "the way you would have."

After about fifteen minutes, we all, including the Generalíssimo, assumed that Aimée had almost finished. But she just kept going. One of the sheep crossed a limpid stream. Roald and I looked at each other, wondering if this was finally the beginning of a plot, rather than just a setting. At the twenty minute mark, we looked at the Generalíssimo.

"He's about to fall asleep," said Roald. We all snickered. We knew how much Mr. Hashimoto liked Amy, but even he couldn't stay awake. Aimée did not notice.

Just before starting to snore, the Generalíssimo twitched and woke. "Amy," he said, "class is almost over." He looked at his watch, which his plump wrists had reset. He looked at the clock on the wall. "You'd better finish up." He shifted in his seat. Aimee stopped, leaving a couple of pages unread. Mr. Hashimoto continued, "Thank you, Amy. I want you all to know that Amy's writing is the best I have ever read, even when I was the creative writing instructor at UCSB."

As we left the classroom, Roald said to me, "You know, I think you might need to talk to Amy. Offer a little apology for that time you verbally attacked her in class."

"But I didn't…" I began.

"Not in so many words. But try to look at it from her viewpoint. She was probably very embarrassed already, and then you had to come along and embarrass her more. You know, Tony, for such a smart guy, you can be pretty clueless at times."

"You're right, Roald," I said. "I'll keep my eyes open for a chance to talk with her."

Aimee continued to meet after school with the Generalíssimo and talk about her writing. She, and the athletes, were the only ones who stayed after school.

And me, sometimes. I was very serious about writing band music. I did this mostly at home, using the band arranging textbook Mr. Beaumont leant me. I learned a lot about the ranges and tones of the instruments, and how to transpose the music into different keys. I met with Mr. Beaumont once every week or two to review my work. Someday—not during the fall marching band season but the spring concert season—he would have the band play through one of my pieces.

Then, one day, we showed up at the Generalíssimo's class. The outside door was locked, and the room was dark. We stood around, except for Aimée, who sat on the ground, her back propped against a wall, as she read. Soon the rest of us were trying to find some way to waste time. Most of us played with our phones. Some guys kicked cigarette butts around in the mud, pretending to be soccer players, and some jumped up to whip the tender branches of the small locust tree, pretending to be basketball players. The girls gossiped about the guys showing off. This went on for ten minutes.

Then we saw the principal, Dr. Bishop, walking toward us. We all turned to him. Aimée looked up.

"I have bad news for you," he announced. "Mr. Hashimoto has just suffered a massive heart attack."

We were stunned. Aimée stood up, staring vacantly in the direction of the principal.

"How is he?" I managed to ask.

"He didn't make it," said Dr. Bishop.

He told us when the celebration-of-life service would be, then he explained that our substitute teacher would be Mr. Wieger. Then he left. We had all had Mr. Wieger before, in some class or other, and knew that he was a pretty good babysitter but not good for much else. We would, in due time, come up with our own smart-aleck assignments, and Mr. Wieger would approve them. But for now we could not think of anything except the big holes in our hearts.

I noticed that Aimée was missing. I looked around and saw the principal walking out into one of the lawns near the fence. He walked toward Aimée, who lay face down in the grass, beating the ground with her fists. Even at a distance I heard her sobbing very loudly.

For the rest of the semester, Mr. Wieger allowed Amy to spend class time in the library. Once or twice, I saw her talking in the library with Ms. Exmann the school counsellor. Most of us went to Mr. Hashimoto's celebration of life service, including Aimée, who sat silently in the back weeping. She left immediately at the conclusion of the ceremony.

*

As the halftime show drew closer, I followed Aimée and called her name. She turned and looked at me without surprise or interest.

"You lost one of your papers," I said, handing it to her.

"Thank you," she said, slipping it into her pack.

"I couldn't help but notice," I said.

"You read it?"

"A little. I had to make sure it was yours."

"Of course."

"German poetry."

"In English."

"Wilhelm Müller's *Winterreise*."

She looked confused as she looked at me. “I do not recall having written the title on the sheet.”

“I know the poems.” I saw her look of surprise. “Not that I read much German poetry, in translation or otherwise. Matter of fact, I don’t really like poetry.” The time-out was dragging on. This gave me the time to say more to her. “The *Winterreise* poems are almost totally forgotten today. But millions of people know about them because Franz Schubert set them to music. You probably knew this.”

“I did not,” she said. “I must know more about it.”

“You can find performances—for male voice and piano—on the internet.” Before I realized what I was doing, I said, “We could listen to them together.”

“When are we supposed to do that?” she asked.

But right then it was halftime. Mr. Beaumont was running around, lining us up for our entry onto the field. Bill the drum major tweeted his whistle and the drums began a march cadence. We walked in mostly straight lines onto the field. *Left, left, left right left.* When we approached the middle of the field, we dispersed to our predetermined locations as specified on the diagram we had all memorized. The percussion formed an outline of a car body, while the rest of the band formed two large wheels with spokes. We played the introduction to the theme from the recent movie release of *My Mother the Car.*

Then we started marching. The spokes of the wheels turned, which meant that the players near the center barely moved, a very small circumference, but the players at the outside like me had to move fast, a very large circumference, and we were soon stumbling instead of marching. Some of us from pre-calc knew how to calculate the velocity at which a person might move at each radius, but at this moment we were just trying to keep from tripping over each other.

It got worse. Both wheels were supposed to turn counterclockwise, which would make the car appear to be moving forward when viewed from the home bleachers. It looks easy enough on a diagram, but when you are out on a field, with a big audience watching, or not watching, under bright floodlights, the difference between clockwise and counterclockwise is not as obvious as you might think. On our wheel, somebody went the wrong way, and all the rest of us followed. The two wheels, therefore, spun in opposite directions, as if digging the car into a mudhole. At the end of one of the spokes on the rear wheel, I was almost running as I spun clockwise. Aimée was at the end of a spoke in the other wheel, moving counterclockwise. As chance would have it, I saw Aimee moving rapidly toward me, and we almost collided. Each rotation of the wheels, I almost brushed against her again and again. She kept playing even as she ran. I did not play, because if I ran into someone, the metal mouthpiece of my horn might bash my front teeth in.

During the rest of the game, we played only a couple of pieces. One of the pieces was David Rose’s *The Stripper,* which for some reason I never understood the conservative parents let us get away with. Aimée resumed reading and writing. I sat near her. She looked up from her writing at me with no more expression than before.

“We never finished talking about *Die Winterreise*.”

"We did not?" she said. "I will listen to the music. I am sure it will be beautiful. I do not have internet access, but I can listen to it at the library."

"It's not quite that simple," I said. "Schubert did not just set the poems to beautiful music. He wrote the music to reflect the meaning of the poems, in every little detail. I have studied this piece carefully. I would love," I said, thinking about what I was about to commit myself to. "I would love to listen to the music with you and explain it." I was surprised that, starting just now, I really wanted to spend time with her. And I was not otherwise occupied with girls at the moment.

"I cannot expect you to devote so much time to explaining music and poetry to me," she said. "You have a lot of other things to do."

"I really want to go through the music and the poetry, and I would be happy to know someone, namely yourself, would be willing to share it with me. I wouldn't be doing it just for you."

Aimee thought for a few moments, perhaps also assessing the commitment of even a little bit of time to me, a stranger. Then she said, "I think that would be very auspicious."

"You could practice your English on me," I ventured.

"I already study the classical works," Aimée answered.

"That's not the best way to learn a language," I said. "Especially Dickens and such like. We don't talk that way now. And if you want to practice English on me," I continued, "you should know that I don't like poetry very much. Other than Ogden Nash. I love his poems. You know, like his classic, *There's a Cyprus citrus surplus…*" Aimée looked at me impatiently. "Citrus surplus Cypriotic," I continued. "Just a surface citrus surfeit, said the cryptic Coptic skeptic." But her face softened when I said, "He pushed the limits of the English language in order to make bad wordplay. But maybe bad wordplay is exactly what you need to study, rather than classic poetry."

Aimee smiled faintly. "That's not a bad idea."

"Listen, Aimée," I said. "It sounded really weird that time when you said, *I prithee*."

"That is the way we say it in French," Aimée said. "*Je vous prie.* I pray you."

"And tonight, when you said, *Oh but that you would give me my oboe*."

"Once again, that's what we say in French. *Que vous me donneriez mon hautbois*."

"I see your point," I said.

"And I see yours," answered Aimée.

Very little else happened during the remainder of the game. Aimée resumed her quiet study. I interrupted her. "I see you walking to school every day," I said, though I had only noticed her a couple of times. "I walk also, since my home is nearby, though in the opposite direction from yours." She just looked at me, not drawing any conclusions from what I said. "I would enjoy walking you home tonight. So that you will be safe."

"I walk by myself a lot," Aimée said. "I have never experienced any danger."

"Oh, there's danger everywhere," I said. I knew Roald would have been able to recite the actuarial statistics of crime in our city. "I could protect you from dangers that, perhaps, you have not suspected." I felt like Liesl's Nazi boyfriend singing "I'll take care of you," in *The Sound of Music.*

"This sounds like an excuse to walk with me," Aimée said. "But I don't see why not." She stopped and put down her writing. "Except that I am a little uncomfortable with the way you were being risible with me tonight."

"Risible?"

"Is it not an English word? We use the same word in French. You were laughing at me."

"When was that?" I asked.

"You were all talking about me and laughing," she said, turning her face away from me.

"But we weren't laughing *at* you. Or, at least, I wasn't." Then I added, "But I can see why you would think so. Please forgive me for making you uncomfortable."

Aimée nodded assent. Linda, the only female trumpet player, had been missing, but now she showed up. She was stoned for perhaps the only time in her life. She wore dark glasses in the night and had no expression. She was Roald's girlfriend. He drove her home.

We put away our instruments and prepared to leave. We walked to the band rehearsal room, where our instruments would be locked away for the night. I walked with Aimée toward her home.

I turned on streets when she turned. The direction she took brought us closer to some shabby apartments. Then she stopped, faced me, and said, "I think this will be far enough." The wind was now very strong and blew her hair straight back, revealing little dried-apricot-shaped ears in the light of the streetlamp. The wind tore through the long loose fragrant leaves of a eucalyptus tree and almost ripped loose colorful strips of bark that would have been cinnamon-brown and green in normal sunlight. I suddenly, very much, did not want our time together to end. I felt like I was falling into a gravity vortex, the event horizon at the center of her galaxy.

She stood facing me. This was a special moment that may not occur again. I had not planned what to do next, but I knew what the next move was supposed to be. I drew closer to her.

She stepped back. "Not now," she said.

I waited a moment then moved again. "How about now?"

She stepped back again, with what seemed like an expression of annoyance.

"I know what you are thinking," she said. "Just like all of you boys. You are thinking of *Herzen und Küssen.*" Hearts and kisses. "But that is not until song number eleven in Die Winterreise."

"*Frühlingstraum*," I said. Spring Dream.

"And we haven't even started the first song. Please wait." She sighed and slumped her shoulders. "I am confused. Why do you like me?"

"I don't know," I said. "There's something about you which I had previously overlooked. That, I think, everybody has overlooked. I want to find out what it is. That means getting to

know you. And letting you get to know me. Once you know me, Aimée, maybe you will understand why I want to get to know you.

"I trust I am making myself obscure," I concluded.

"Perfectly so," Aimée answered. "To get to know one another? It would be unwise for me to simply throw away the possibility of a new friendship. It's not as if I have very many other friends."

"Or any at all," I said, thoughtlessly as usual.

She ignored my comment. "Just remember," she said, looking into my eyes. "The wanderer was just *dreaming* of hearts and kisses in song number eleven. They were not real. In our case, please be prepared in the event that our relationship…"

"Our friendship."

"Very well, our friendship. In case it does not go that far. Remember also that friendship is more powerful than hearts and kisses. You might, like most guys, be frivolous about hearts and kisses. But I hope you are serious about friendship."

"I am serious. We can start tomorrow. We can listen to the first song, *Gute Nacht*." Good Night. "My house?"

"Someplace more neutral," she said. "Outside, at school, using your phone."

"We will be very conspicuous there," I said. "Would that embarrass you?"

"Would it embarrass *you*?" she asked. "To be seen with me."

"No. No, I would not be embarrassed," I said. She looked down at her feet as I continued. "But I must say that the acoustics would be better at my house, with the stereo system. That is, unless my little sister Brenda is blasting her music."

"There is only one way we can find out," she said, looking me in the eye. She smiled big enough for me to see her perfect little teeth.

"Some time we can also listen to the music at your place," I ventured.

"This would not be a good idea," she said, frowning.

"My place will do just fine," I said, my words vanishing into the strong wind. "After school?"

"I work after school, and some evenings. Including tomorrow afternoon. But I do not work that evening," she said.

"I can come by your house to get you," I said.

"I live in an apartment. But I think it would be better if we met some other place."

"At this tree?"

"No," she answered. "You can meet me when I get off from work."

"You work at Rolando's,' I said. "I saw you there once. What time?"

"I finish work at seven," Aimée said. "The manager allows me to have time for my homework. He usually doesn't need me in the evening. There are enough associates who have day jobs and who can arrive at seven."

"And your reading and writing?"

"Right now, my reading and writing about Der Winterreise means that I should meet with you." She smiled briefly. "I am caught up on my homework. You may meet me when I get off from work."

"I am so glad I get to talk with somebody about this music," I repeated.

"Tony," she said. "Or would you prefer Anthony?"

I laughed. "I'm Tony Albinoni. Can you believe it? What a name. You have probably heard I have indigenous ancestry."

"No, I had not," she said.

"But my great-grandfather was the last to have a Chumash name. Actually, my name is Antonio Albinoni, which doesn't quite sound so hokey."

"Or maybe it does," she said. "What do you prefer that I call you?"

With a sudden rush of insight, I said, "Call me Generalíssimo."

The smile stayed on my face even when I could see that her smile had vanished. She nodded her head, *no, no,* and turned. She ran down the sidewalk while the stupid grin was still on my face.

Chapter 2

I knew I had some serious damage control to do, and there was no better time to do it than immediately, before school the next day. I waited on the side of the school from which Aimée normally approached. I saw her, and she saw me, but she did not look at me, nor did her impassive expression change.

I ran up to her.

"Aimée."

She kept walking, not acknowledging me.

"Aimée, I have to apologize. What I did last night was really stupid."

She kept walking.

"Aimée, please talk to me. I want you to understand. I wasn't thinking when I spoke."

"Well, we're getting somewhere on the honesty spectrum," she said.

"I was really stupid."

She stopped and looked at me. "No, you were not. You are never stupid. Stupidity would be too convenient an excuse for you. And it would not be honest. I can believe you, however, when you said you were not thinking."

"You must understand, under the circumstances, how could I think clearly? Here we were, on the cusp of a friendship…"

"We were," she said simply, starting to turn away.

"That time I ridiculed you for your story about the green people…"

She turned at me. "Oh, yes. I had forgotten about that." She began to walk even faster in the direction she had been going.

I caught up with her. "I should have remembered how close you were to Mr. Hashimoto."

"At the time, he was my one friend." She did not slow down. "Now I have zero."

"Furthermore, Aimée, you must understand that I was also grieved by Mr. Hashimoto's death. I did not make as obvious a show of it as you did, but I felt grief. I walked around in a daze for a week afterward."

She stopped and looked down into my face. "You did?"

"How could I not?" I said. "It would have been hard to not like him. To not revere him."

"Do you mean that? *Revere*?"

"I do," I said.

"Perhaps now I am the silly one, neh-pah?" She was saying *n'est-ce pas* in French. Is it not so? "I had not even considered this possibility that his death had affected you. Perhaps I misjudged you."

"Then our friendship is back on," I said.

"A friendship does not go on and off like a torch," she said.

"A flashlight?"

"Yes, what Americans call a flashlight. Our friendship was, and might have remained, in an eclipse. But now we will have to start from fundaments."

"You mean, fundamentals. A fundament is a buttock."

She looked down, ashamed.

"You can speak freely with me," I said. "I will never ridicule you. At least, never again."

"Not in public, neh-pah."

"Not in public."

"Nor in privates?"

"Nor in private."

"Then it is decided. We can try friendship again. Why not? I have no other friends."

"When can I meet you this afternoon?"

"So soon?"

"Why wait?"

"As I told you, I work after school. You seem to already know where. Meet me, as we originally planned, at 7:00."

"That sounds like close to dinnertime," I said. "Shall I ask Mom to set an extra place?"

"I fear we do not yet know one another well enough for that," she said.

"This isn't a date or something," I said. "Mom is fixing dinner anyway. A good dinner."

"As you wish," said Aimée. "I can hardly say no to good food."

But it did not take that long for me to see her again. I saw her walking between classes, looking down at her feet. Kevin, with Styrofoam cups and greasy papers from snack bar lunches in his hands, approached from the side and left a napkin on the sidewalk ahead of Amy. She did not see him do this, but when she approached the napkin, she picked it up and put it in a trashcan. Then he dropped a cardboard plate and a broken spork in the direction she was likely to walk. She picked them up and took them back to the same receptacle. The third time, she saw him deliberately dropping a wad of papers. She stood and stared at him defiantly. He just gave his goofy, but not stupid, smile.

One of the janitors, Mr. Lee, approached Kevin and told him to pick up the trash.

"You don't have the authority to make me," Kevin answered.

Mr. Lee was very quiet and friendly. Everybody liked him and greeted him whenever he walked past, the scent of disinfectant following him. Nobody ever made fun of his first name, which was Monard. A very religious man, Mr. Lee considered janitorial work to be a perfectly good way to spend his life in service to others. His religion was also why he did not enjoy confrontation. He tried persuasion on Kevin. "Aren't you proud to be on this campus? You should be. You should want to…" But Kevin walked away. Mr. Lee was so meek that persuasion didn't work either.

Amy walked over to pick up the litter.

"You just let me do it," said Mr. Lee. "That's what I get paid for. If you do it, that kid will just keep deliberately dropping more litter."

Amy looked at him with a little smile and walked politely away.

I phoned my father and mother, both at their jobs, and told them I was bringing a friend home this evening. *Oh-ho,* said Dad. *Am I supposed to fix dinner for her?* Asked Mom. I told Mom yes, and said it was as much a surprise for me as for them. When I saw my little sister Brenda, a freshman, I told her I wanted a little bit of quiet at home this evening so I could bring a friend over. I did not want her to play her pop music, at least not loudly.

"It's not pop! It is serious music! Besides, what have you got against it? If people want to bring a little happiness into their miserable lives," said Brenda.

"Well, Brenda, I guess I don't think life is all that miserable. What reason do you have for being miserable?"

"I'll play whatever music I want," Brenda told me.

"Remember, she might be your sister-in-law someday."

"God, it's that serious?"

"I have no idea, but don't assume it can't happen."

"Who is it?" When I told her Aimée Zeitgeber, she said, "Her? Gag. I'm not sure I want people to think I'm the sister of the guy who is going out with Amy Zeitgeber."

*

Mom, Dad, and Brenda went ahead and ate. I just had iced tea as I watched the clock during our family dinner time.

"The leftovers will be in the fridge," said Mom.

I didn't want to be late. I felt that my new friendship with Aimée was fragile enough already. I wondered if Aimée might use a delay as an excuse to run away if I was five minutes late, from what was surely at least a minor invasion into her world.

I entered Rolando's Place, Home of the Rolando-Burger. I was the only customer at the counter. A man who appeared to be the manager greeted me to take my order. His round face looked tired.

"No order," I said. "I'm just waiting for someone who works here."

"Whozit?" he asked.

"Aimée," I said, pronouncing it in what I thought was the right way.

"Nobody here by that name."

"But Aimée said she worked here," I said.

"Oh, Amy," he said. "Yeah. You gonna walk her home or something?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"Amy?" the manager called back into the kitchen.

"She's helping to clean the stove," another worker said.

"She'll be out in a minute," said the manager.

I saw Rick the Sousaphone player and someone I didn't know sitting in the corner of the seating area. I could not get out of walking over to talk with them.

"Haven't seen you here before," said Rick.

"I haven't seen you here, either. Which is not strange, since I've only been here a couple of times."

"So, what brings you here?" asked Rick.

"Long story," I said.

"Does the story involve Amy?"

"Matter of fact, yes."

"I've been thinking about asking her out," said Rick. "But I can't think of anything we might have in common. How about you?"

"Oh, Aimée and I…"

"Who? Oh, Amy."

"We just found out we have a shared interest in music."

"Both in band," said Rick. "Me, too. So?"

"It's more than that," I said.

I heard what must have been Aimée's voice in the kitchen, louder than I'd ever heard it. It sounded like what, for her, was a scream. I dashed up to the counter. The manager yelled back, "Mason, what the hell are you doing?"

"Cookin' up my free food," answered the worker.

"Amy's cleaning out the exhaust vent," said the manager. "Here you go and turn on the stove and the fan."

"I didn't see her," said Mason, turning off the fan and stove.

"I can believe that, Mason," said the manager. "You never see anything ever until it's too late." He turned to a pair of pants that must have been Aimée standing on a metal chair. "You okay, Amy?"

Aimée extracted her upper body from inside the vent and turned around. Some smoke and grease smudged her face and light blue food service uniform blouse. She took off her glasses, looked for something to wipe them with, then gave up and put them back on.

Not waiting for Aimée to answer about whether she was okay, the manager said, "That vent clean in there?"

"Well…" Aimée started to answer. She saw me and told the manager, "Yes, it is clean." She carefully stepped down from the chair, almost slipping on some grease on the floor.

"Young man waitin' for you out there," said the manager.

"I see him," said Aimée. She walked toward the swinging door nearest to me.

"Don't forget to check for trash on your way out, and don't forget your sack," said the manager. "And make sure you wear a clean uniform tomorrow." He turned his attention to the other worker. "You're not supposed to cook any new food to take with you, just whatever is left over."

Aimée looked around the seating area and picked up discarded sacks and napkins. When she got to Rick's area, he held out a plastic fork. "Looking for this?" he asked. Aimée grabbed the fork and said nothing to him as she threw the garbage in a big bin that said "Thank you" on the flap.

She headed for the outside door, looking back to see if I was following her. She held up her little greasy sack and said, “This is my repast. Or, would have been. Perchance I’ll eat it later.”

We went outside into air that did not smell like grease. I said, “They give you a little bit of food. That’s nice,” I said.

Aimée sighed. “That’s in return for not paying me minimum wage,” she said. “Papa and I live alone. We do not have much money, if you have not already guessed. These free meals help immensely.”

“What were you doing in that greasy vent?” I asked, looking at her smudged face.

“I was cleaning it out, a little,” she said. “I’m the only one small enough to get in there.”

“Isn’t that a little dangerous?” I asked.

“Not unless somebody turns on the stove when I’m in it,” she said.

“I caught that part,” I said. I checked my cell phone. “It was after seven when you were cleaning the vent. And picking up the trash.”

“If you mean I was working off the clock, you are correct.”

“How can your manager expect you to work off the clock?”

“Please, Tony,” she said. “I need this job. I will not complain. I hear the others talk. Every other fast food job in town is worse. And the people who work the evening and weekend shifts have it worse. Or at night. The cemetery shift.”

“Graveyard.”

“That’s what I said. As for me, I could not work the greater hours if I had them. But the adults on the other shifts, they need the money worse than do I. The manager gives them almost a full shift, but not quite. That way they have no benefits. As for me, I earn just enough that we do not have to pay the taxes.”

“Well, that least that part is good,” I said.

She looked down at her uniform. “I could only afford to purchase one uniform. I guess I have to launder it tonight. In the sink.”

“Your apartment doesn’t have a washing machine?”

“Of course it does. But to spend a dollar and fifty for such a small amount of laundry?” Then she turned to me. “Tony,” she said. “I was so much looking forward to tonight. But I was not anticipating the necessity of laundry. Also, I am a mess. You do not want a greasy girl in your parlor. This time does not look so auspicious after all.”

I suddenly realized how very, very much I wanted Aimée to come home with me. “You can use our washing machine. Dryer, too.”

“The uniform will dry on a hanger overnight,” Aimée said.

“And you can wash up in our downstairs bathroom,” I said. “My kid sister Brenda might be hogging the upstairs one.”

“Tony,” she said. “I fear this is not convenient…”

“We already fixed dinner for you,” I said. I sighed. “I really want you to come over.”

She looked down at her feet. “I will admit that I want to come, also. While we talk about it, we are losing the time.”

*

“So, is that Amy’s stuff in the washing machine?” asked Brenda. “And I assume she is in the bathroom.” I nodded yes. “So, what kind of a name *is* Amy Zeitgeber?”

I looked it up online. Zeitgeber meant time-giver, that is, a timer, as opposed to a clock.

Aimée came out of the bathroom, wearing one of my pairs of flannel pants and one of my T-shirts. She had heard Branda’s question. “My name was supposed to be Aimée, with an *accent aigu* on the first e,” she said. “But my parents forgot the accent mark on my birth certificate. Legally, it is just Aimee.”

“Your name spans the alphabet, from A to Z,” I said, smiling. “And to me, you will be Aimée. With the accent.”

“I thank you.” She thanked me again after we practiced the pronunciation of her name a little more, and I got the pronunciation good enough for her. She smiled.

“But Zeitgeber is a German name,” Brenda said.

“I am Alsatian,” she answered. “Right on the border with Germany. Along the Rhine, you know it? I am originally from Strasbourg. The Alsatian language is a form of German. Look at a map sometime. You will see lots of Alsatian towns with German-sounding names.”

“I will.” I did.

Brenda returned to her room, started her loud music. By the time Aimée and I had finished eating, Brenda had turned off her music. Aimée and I did not talk much. I just made sure she had plenty of food. I offered her cold iced tea, but she said in France they often drink lukewarm water with meals. I was happy that the cold snap in my relationship with Aimée had begun to thaw. While she ate, she asked me to explain the music to her, but I said it would be better if we waited until we listened to it.

In the parlor, Aimée got out her notebook and pen and an old book of Müller poetry. She explained that the book was from her childhood. I looked online and found a recording of *Gute Nacht*, the first song in the Schubert cycle. She expected me to begin playing the music, but I did not. Instead, I walked to the far corner of the room and said, “Imagine this is a stage set. This is the forest. Snow and bare trees.”

“What kinds of trees?”

“Whatever they have in Germany, I suppose. Snow and moonlight. And here,” I indicated the part of the room close to us. “This is the gate of the loved one’s house.”

“The beloved,” she said. “In French, that is what *Aimée* means. Maybe that was her name too.”

“The loved one’s name is never given in the poems. The wayfarer could not speak her name. The gate, of course, was closed. Dogs growled inside. The young woman had spoken of love. But now she has rejected the young man. He is thinking, Yeah, right. I can just walk away

and find somebody else. So this is what he starts to do. The piece is in march tempo, and in a sad minor mode. Three verses of this, each time he gets a little angrier.

"Then in verse four, everything changes," I said.

"No such change is apparent in the poetry, or else I never noticed it."

"That is the genius of Schubert," I said. "The wanderer turns back to the gate. He cannot just walk away. The music shifts to a pleasant major mode. He says…"

"I will not disturb your dreams," said Aimée, quoting the poem. "And in the snow on the gate, he writes *Gute Nacht*. Had he not done that, there would have been no other poems in the cycle. He would have just walked away forever. *C'est fini*."

"So that you will know that I was thinking about you," I finished the quotation. "Then his body walks away, forever, but not his spirit.

"He also says, Love loves to wander," I said. "God has made it so. You believe that?"

"I don't know what to believe about love," Aimée said. Tears were starting to form in her eyes.

While the music played, I stalked around, like the wanderer impatient to get away from the village where his beloved lived. Then I came back to the gate and got a pathetic look on my face, pretending to write with my finger in the snow on the gate, before turning to walk toward the hallway, where I saw Brenda watching us.

*

By the next week, we had reached song number three, *Gefror'ne Thränen*. Frozen tears. We had only reached song number three and it was already starting to be a little heavy. Aimée admitted that, even in her private notes, she found it difficult to take this poem seriously. Frozen tears!

But I knew what to do about this. I wrote my own English words to it.

A frozen tear is falling, it from my eye descends,
Or can it be that I—have lost my contact lens?
Have lost—my contact lens?

When Aimée heard this, she smiled more grandly than I had ever seen. The thaw in our relationship had up until now been gradual, the ice warming by a few degrees but remaining ice. But at this point there was a sudden melt, like icebergs calving noisily from a glacier into dark blue water. We were playful, but still, the hearts and kisses had to wait for song number eleven.

The next day, at school, when we greeted one another, we raised our left hands and pressed them together, doing a kind of slow country dance, singing very loudly, "Or can it be that I—have lost my contact lens?" Dozens of our classmates stared at us, totally perplexed.

Brad the trombonist told me, "You two are totally lost. No matter what happens around you, all you see is each other. Sheesh!"

I did not realize how suddenly, and obviously, my relationship with Aimée had begun. "But you are jealous," I said.

"Of course I'm jealous," he answered. "I mean, not for Amy, God no, but to be able to feel whatever the hell it is that you two are feeling!"

So here I was, openly dating the plainest girl in the school, and people envied us.

*

Aimée and I started having lunch together. When I saw her sitting outside with a cafeteria tray, I walked up to her, singing, "And can it be that I—have…"

"Tony, please sit down." She sounded serious. "I don't really want to say this, because I really like you. But maybe we're going a little too fast? Everyone thinks we are, how would you say, an item? I overhear people talking about me and Tony. Maybe this is no problem, but I'm not ready to be pressured into a relationship." The ice shelf froze again.

"I'm not trying to pressure you," I said in a brief panic.

"Of course not," she said. "It's not you. It's the situation about which we must be careful. It could sweep us along before we know what has happened."

"And here I was, feeling really, really comfortable with you," I moaned.

"Nothing wrong with that, so long as we don't make a big public display of it." She studied her hands.

"I'll be careful," I said. "But you must understand me. We fit together perfectly, like it was foreordained. Aimée and Tony, A and T, just like the two bases on opposite strands of a DNA molecule."

Aimée looked at me blankly.

"Adenine and thymine?" I tried to ask helpfully. "They fit together perfectly, allowing the two strands of the DNA molecule…" I could see that she understood nothing of what I said. I decided to go ahead with what I intended to say to her, without muddying the waters with tidbits of science. "The more I think about it, Aimée, I realize that I am in love with you." I spent the previous night lying awake and thinking about how hard it would be to say this to Aimée. But when I said it, it was over before I knew it. I pressed on. "Call me crazy, but I am being honest with you."

Aimée did not look up. "I am not calling you crazy. You are waiting for me to say that I am in love with you," she said.

"That might be too much for me to expect right now," I said.

"I will treasure all of these things in my heart," she said.

"What?" I was expecting a simple yes or no.

"I read it once in a book," she said. "I think it was something Mother Mary said. It can barely remember it. We do not go to the church. Church is not part of our family heritage. Besides, Papa is very busy. And I usually work the Sundays." She looked up at me. "I am saying nothing. But please understand that I am always thinking about you."

*

Later that week, Aimée and I walked together across campus. We had begun to do this all the time, though without what I referred to as PDA.

"What is PDA?" Aimée asked me.

"Public display of affection."

"Ah," she said, nodding.

We looked over at the circle of concrete benches. Only us seniors sat on them. And we always sat on the back, with our feet on the seat. We saw Kevin reading a letter. He seemed agitated at its contents. He stuffed the letter back in its envelope as he got up and walked away.

"Must be something important," I said. "An actual letter, on paper, rather than a text message." Then I pointed to him. "Aimée, look. He dropped it."

"Maybe he meant to."

"I don't think so."

Aimée walked over and picked it up. There was colored—and scented—ink on the papers inside. Aimée walked straight for the nearest trashcan.

"Maybe we should give it back to him," I said.

"I am throwing out his garbage just like he wants me to."

"I don't think it's garbage," I said just as Aimée sank the letter into the trashcan. "It might be important. Like your paper I picked up at the football game."

She stopped and looked into my eyes. "I'm glad you did that," she said.

"You could say that our whole relationship has resulted from that act, which I did almost without thinking." I assumed a philosophic pose. "Isn't it almost frightening how whole new directions in our lives can result from something as insignificant as picking up a piece of paper?"

*

We were in sociology class, taught by Mr. Picciuto. Nice guy, and the class had some really interesting things. One of them was about the sociology of imprisonment. America had more prisoners per capita than any other country in the world. Mr. Picciuto thought this was morally wrong.

"But we have to isolate dangerous people from the public," said Roald.

"That's not the point," said Mr. Picciuto. "The point is that, in our so-called civilized cultures, we feel the need to punish dangerous people, not just isolate them. We send them to what we call *penitentiaries*. The word comes from penitence. Like we can make them repent or something."

"It works, doesn't it? I mean, sometimes," said Roald.

"The recidivism rate is very high," said Mr. Picciuto. We all wrote down *recidivism*, suspecting it, and a bunch of other isms, would be on the test. Along with a bunch of stuff about

Émile Durkheim, who thought about sociology as clearly as anyone could way back in the nineteenth century. “Sometimes they put prisoners in solitary confinement, where they have almost no contact with people other than jailors, janitors, and medical staff. Some of us think this is cruel and unusual punishment, which is forbidden by our Constitution.”

Roald, being a reasonable guy, said he would think about this.

What we did not expect was what Aimée said. “What is so bad about the solitary confinement?” she asked. “They let you just read and write all day, and they never disturb you. That sounds like my idea of Heaven.”

We knew she was perfectly serious. We looked at her notebook and mechanical pen. Her eyes were downcast.

At first, Mr. Picciuto was nonplussed. Then he came up with an answer.

“You don’t seem to understand, Miss Zeitgeber. Solitary confinement is in no way comparable to the kind of life you imagine it to be.”

“How so?” Aimée asked.

“You like to be left alone to read and write,” Mr. Picciuto said. “I can understand that. But you are still surrounded by a world with which you have occasional contact. You would miss it if it were to disappear. For example, if Tony were to disappear from your life, you would…”

“I would not miss him if I had never met him,” said Aimée.

“Good point,” said Mr. Picciuto. “But the prisoner in solitary knows what he is missing.

“This topic has been addressed by mythology in several cultures around the world,” Mr. Picciuto continued. “Take, for instance, the mythology we are most familiar with. Adam alone in the Garden of Eden. He had everything he wanted. Which does not mean he just sat on his ass all day and ate grapes. The garden was not just an unlimited locus of resources.”

We wondered if *locus* would be on the test.

“It was his studio of creativity. Like your little world, young lady. All to himself. But then one day, God said, *It is not good for man to be alone.* Notice, God said this, not Adam. Adam had no idea what he was missing out on. God had to create Eve. She was one hot woman.” We laughed. “Well, the Bible doesn’t say, but everyone who has ever read the story of the Garden of Eden has assumed that Eve was really, really hot.

“Then Adam realized what he had been missing. And there was no going back to solitary confinement for him. And you, Amy. You were happy with just books and papers before Tony. Could you ever be happy alone again?”

“I hope I never have to answer that question,” she said quietly. I smiled, and everybody smiled along with me.

*

“You’re in it pretty deep, my man,” Roald told me.

“That’s what everybody tells me,” I said.

“It makes sense,” he said.

"To me, yes. Aimée …"

"I mean, falling in love makes sense."

"No, it doesn't," I said. "Falling in love is a form of craziness."

"Well, if that were the case," said Roald, "then natural selection, working on pure Darwinian principles, would have cleared it out of the human mind. Natural selection does not permit crazy stuff to persist for no reason."

"Have you ever been in love?" I asked him.

"Linda," Roald answered. "But that's not what you would consider crazy love. See, we're both headed to Cal Poly in SLO-town." He referred to California Polytechnic Institute in San Luis Obispo.

"Okay, Roald. Then explain it to me. Love, like you and Linda, makes sense. But exactly how does evolution explain this universal phenomenon of *falling* in love?"

"Well," he began, "the alpha males—you know, the top males—they can get a whole bevy of females, have sex with them, and produce offspring. They do not need love for this. All they need is power and lust."

"But, do alpha males—seals or humans—*fall* in love?" I asked sincerely.

"I hadn't thought about that, Tony. Alpha male humans? They act like such jerks that it's hard to tell. I suspect they just want to make conquests, for which lust is enough. Anyway. Being an alpha male is not easy," Roald continued. "Think of male elephant seals on sandy beaches under the midnight sun. They gotta go around all day and maybe all night to drive away the challengers who want to fuck their harem. Lust is enough to keep them going. But lust is not the same as falling in love."

"No, it isn't," I said. I tried to remember any lustful thoughts I had ever had about Aimée.

"I think—and this is just my guess, see—that the males in the middle, not the alphas, and not the losers, but the ones who just might have a chance with one or two of the females, have their chances of success improved by falling in love. See, when they fall in love, nothing can stop them from winning the companionship of *their* chosen females. If any of them give up partway through the pursuit of love, they have zero fitness. But if they keep pursuing their ladyloves, they just might succeed."

"Do middle-level male sea lions fall in love?"

"Unless they grow fingers and wrote love poems, we will never know."

"And females?" I asked. "Humans or seals. Why do *they* fall in love?"

"If a middle-level male and female fall in love with each other, the forces of Hell could not keep them apart. They would, and sometimes do, die trying to come together. But sometimes they succeed.

"Now, you, Tony, you are definitely not an alpha male."

"God no."

"Love consumes your mind, and makes you pursue a girl whom the popular guys don't want. For guys like you who are in the middle, falling in love is the best way to win."

"You almost make it sound sensible, falling in love with Aimée."

"Things that don't make sense usually don't last very long in the struggle for existence," said Roald. "There has to be a reason—an evolutionary reason—for it, even if you do not realize it. It may feel crazy, Tony, but trust your gut. You certainly didn't choose Amy because of her appearance."

"So, tell me something I don't already know," I said.

"You read the Bible much?" Roald asked.

"My family is Catholic, but we don't know much about the Bible. What did you have in mind?"

"There is a little book in the Old Testament that the preachers don't like to talk much about, especially with horny juveniles."

"I think I know this one. *The Song of Solomon*."

"That's the one. It's so full of sex that bluenoses have been trying to get it removed from the scriptures for thousands of years. So far, I am happy to report, without success. It's got some vivid descriptions of breasts, and navels, and…I don't remember what else. Pretty mild by modern standards, but this is the Bible we're talking about here."

"I could probably find a Bible and read this part," I said. "Or online. But what good will it do? Other than get me horny."

"It isn't pornography," said Roald. "It also has descriptions of how beautiful the woman is in ways not directly sexual, for example, her beautiful teeth. It says her teeth looked like white sheep."

"That's beautiful?"

"Back then it apparently was, Tony. But toward the end of the Song of Solomon, it describes a different woman, one that even today, or especially today, we would consider to be *not* hot. The scripture comes right out and says she has no breasts, but she deserves to be loved anyway."

"Sounds like Aimée," I said, suddenly very interested.

"See, Tony? That ancient piece of literature has an insight into what it means to be in love. It is not something that depends on the sexiness of body parts, separately or collectively. The same is true of the evolution of love. The alpha males don't have time to do anything but pick out women with hot tits. But men in the middle…"

"Like us," I said.

"Yes. Like us. Falling in love has to do with the whole person, not with superficial appearances. See, Linda has a hot body. Her face, not so much, but, like I should brag. But I would love her even if she was as flat as a pancake. And I'll still feel the same way when we get to Cal Poly. God or Whatever willing."

"What are you going to study at Cal Poly?" I asked.

"Pre-law and business," he said. "Darwinism explains why people do what they do and feel what they feel. Law is all about controlling what people do, and business is about making a profit from what they feel."

*

Every afternoon, I walked with Aimée to Rolando's Burgers, and every evening I walked with her either to my house, if she got off work at seven, or to the eucalyptus tree, if it was late and she needed to go directly to her apartment. Every time, she told me she appreciated my protection.

Then one day it was time for song number five: *Der Lindenbaum,* the linden tree. I showed her to a seat in our living room.

"Nice little poem," said Aimée.

"And a really nice melody," I said. "You'll probably remember having heard it somewhere. Schubert sang lots of his songs for his friends. He was a genius. He could knock off five songs in an afternoon. His friends didn't like most of the songs. But this one, they really liked.

"Just how much do you know about linden trees?" I continued.

"You're the biologist," she said. We had already applied for admission to UCSB, I as an environmental biology major, she as a writing major.

"You've seen them in Europe," I said. "There is a species in eastern North America, but not in Santa Barbara. In late spring, they produce a big crop of white flowers, and the sweet fragrance descends from them…"

"Oh, those!" she said. "I always wondered what those were."

"Well, that makes the song particularly poignant. Because the tree in whose bark the wanderer inscribes his initials, together with those of his lost love, surrounded by a heart, is the sweetest tree of the forest.

"Notice the triplets in the piano line," I continued. The notes fluttering in groups of three were, I explained, an interval of a sixth apart, which creates beauty but also a feeling of emptiness. "The gentle breezes of spring are happy major sixths, but the fierce winds of winter are sad minor sixths. His hat blows away…" Later, when we listened to the music, I threw a hat across the room.

"And then, at the end, the gentle breezes return," said Aimée. "*Komm' hier, zu mir, Geselle, du fändest Ruhe dort.*"

"But notice that the verb is subjunctive." I just assumed she would know what this meant, which she did. "It means, *you would have found rest.* But he didn't find it."

"No, he did not. He had to keep searching."

"He almost didn't keep searching. From what I've read," I said, "the gentle breeze was calling to him, inviting him to…"

"To rest? It sounds like a kind of trance."

"Inviting him to suicide. That would have been the end of the journey, of course. But he kept going. Aimée, have you ever wondered what it would be like to be dead?"

"I never thought about committing suicide," she said. "But I have sometimes felt that being dead would not be such a terrible thing. The struggles of life would be past. Nobody wants to go through the process of the dying, of course. But once dead, the soul is at peace."

"This is a common feeling among adolescents," I said. "Must just be teenage hormones and stuff. You know, Aimée, it's amazing that anyone ever gets through adolescence."

*

"If I get through adolescence," said Brenda, "I'll be surprised."

"You'll get through it," I said. "What alternative is there?"

"None, I guess," she said. "But that's why I blast my music. So I can get lost in it." I had just knocked on her door and asked her to turn her music down.

"Well, *I* don't want to get lost in *your* music," I said. "I want to play my music, quietly, in my room, where I won't disturb anybody."

She looked at my recorder, which was like a small flute made of dark shiny plastic. It had seven little finger-holes along the top and an octave hole on the bottom, for the thumb. I played a scale on it, ending with the top note, with no holes covered.

"Ew," said Brenda. "That last note doesn't sound right."

"It isn't," I said. "That's why the fingerings on a recorder can get a little complicated." I played the last note with my finger covering just the second hole. Now the note was in tune.

"Can you play any higher notes?" she asked.

"Sure. You have to use the octave hole on the bottom. Try it."

"Germs?"

"I just brushed my teeth. Have you?"

"Yes," she said.

"I don't want to get grunge inside of the instrument," I said.

Brenda took the recorder and played the scale, with the octave hole covered. Then she tried the next octave, with the thumb hole open. It sounded awful and she almost dropped the recorder.

"To play a recorder, you can't just toot on it. To reach the next octave, you have to half-cover the octave hole," I told her.

"Like this?" She tried again. It didn't sound quite as bad.

"Sort of. You have to flip between the octaves as quietly as a flower opens. Let me show you." I played another scale.

"But I did what you said," Brenda observed. "Why didn't it work when I did it?"

"You have to get everything just right," I said. "You have to tilt the instrument just right. You have to have just the right amount of moisture on your lips."

"Ew," she repeated. "Spit?"

"Yes." I played it again, but this time the notes squeaked. It was even worse when I tried the higher notes. I kept trying, and kept squeaking, though never in the same place twice. "It's not like the piano," I said. "On the piano, you press the key, and you get the same note every time. But with the recorder, just changing the tilt a little bit will make the note go sour." I showed her. She covered her ears.

"The problem is," I said, "that the holes are not quite in the right places. If they were, you couldn't reach them with your fingers. Even Janice couldn't." Janice was the flute player in our band with famously long and clumsy fingers. "That's why the professional instruments, like the ones we use in band, have keys that you press with your fingers, but they move levers that cover the holes that are in exactly the right places."

"Then, why does anyone play the recorder?"

"A recorder is a lot cheaper than a flute," I said. "And when you play by yourself, being slightly out of tune is not so bad. But get two recorder players together, and it's really hard for them to be in tune with one another."

"So that's why flutes and clarinets and saxophones have all those levers and pads," said Brenda.

"And oboes," I said.

"Of course," my sister said. "Like Aimée. Can she play well?"

"I've never heard her play. I can never hear her in band rehearsal, and she always leaves her oboe in the storeroom."

"She never takes it home to practice?"

"Why should she? Nobody would be able to hear her in band."

"Well," said Brenda, "she probably plays perfectly. She does everything perfectly."

"So, you don't dislike her as much as you did," I said.

"Well, I never actually disliked her. I just thought she was weird. I still do, but, hey, that's your business. You just play your recorder, then." She turned and left.

I closed my door and started to play. I chose something simple: *Song of the Seashore,* a Japanese melody. But I had trouble with the high notes, and with the one note in the middle that was not part of the scale. I had to keep trying over and over.

Brenda pounded on my door.

"Do you realize how annoying your music is?" she said.

"Sorry. But I have to practice to learn how to play even the simplest things."

By the time I had resumed practicing, Brenda was blasting her music.

Chapter 3

Finally, it was time for the hearts and kisses part. Aimée thought I would, as usual, invite her to my house.

"I'm not sure if, even now, we are quite ready," she said.

"I'm not inviting you to my house this afternoon," I said. It was a Thursday. "I'm inviting you to take a little trip with me. Up into the mountains. Just a few hours on Saturday. That will give you time to ask your papa. And your manager at Rolando's." She had told me that her mama did not live with them.

"The manager will probably say yes," said Aimée. "There are plenty of grownups who are desperate for extra hours on Saturdays."

"And your papa?"

"Papa's out of town," said Aimée.

"You mean, you are by yourself in your apartment? I mean, is that even legal?"

"Please, don't tell anybody. Things are hard enough as they are. I certainly don't want the school administration to know. I'll leave Papa a note."

"Where is he?"

"I do not know, nor would I tell you—even you—if I did know. Something to do with his business. He never told me exactly what he does, other than he is in sales and has clients." Then she added, "And creditors."

"You'll be eighteen soon," I said. "Almost an adult. You're old enough to decide for yourself what to do. Almost."

*

"So, where are you taking me?" Aimée tried to sound cheerful.

"As I said, up in the mountains. Just trust me."

She still did not want me to know which of the shabby apartments she lived in, so she met me when I drove my parents' extra car up to the corner with the big eucalyptus about nine o'clock Saturday morning. We drove west on Highway 101, which led to a tunnel under Gaviota Pass. We took a highway to the town of Solvang, which had a genuine Danish heritage, but which had also remade itself into a tourist trap. Here we stopped for lunch. The split pea soup, the meatballs, and the fudge were wonderful. But we both knew this is not why we had driven into the mountains. I did not tell her why I brought my recorder.

We left zones of vegetation behind us as we drove into the Santa Ynez Mountains, first the grasslands, then the sage bushes. These were actually sage, the spice, not the inedible bushes that give the interior American "sagebrush" its name. The little gray bushes and the scent reminded Aimée, she said, of the maquis in the mountains near the Mediterranean Sea, where she

had spent her very earliest childhood, before Strasbourg. Then we entered the band of chaparral bushes, manzanita and deerbrush, above which the scrub oak forests began.

The chaparral had been totally burned in the same fire we had seen from the football game. The ashes still smelled a little like smoke, and the bushes were black skeletons. We parked at a rest stop and walked out into the ashes.

"Usually fires I have seen leave a little bit of wood and brush unburned," she said. "But this fire was, as it were, a total devastation. Not one thing was left unburned. This is more like the fires in the south of France—from what I have read—than the forest fires of Alsace."

"This is only part of the story," I said. "Look around you and tell me what you see, besides the ashes."

"Well, some things are starting to grow back," she said. "I think that is what you wanted me to see."

"It is."

"These bushes are sprouting back. Little green twigs coming from what used to be the bases of the old trunks."

"You see, Aimée, for these bushes, the fire was not just death, but also life. They were still alive underground. After the fire, they start to grow back.

"And they grow back more vigorously than before," I continued. "With all the old wood burned away, the nutrients that were in the old wood are now in the soil where the roots can get them and reuse them. The sunlight can get to the soil surface and warm it up. Fire is not an unmixed blessing. There is always the chance that a bush will die. But neither is it an unmixed curse."

"Yes, I know. Life goes on, you are saying." She sighed.

"It's not just me saying it," I responded. "It is nature's way. See it for yourself."

We walked a little further and almost ran into a big garden spider in its intricate web.

"*L'araignée!* It is so beautiful!" said Aimée. "Not only its beautiful web, but even its body. A beautiful pattern of yellow, black, and white."

"That may be your opinion," I said. "Spiders have a few too many eyes for me to fully admire them. Eyes all around its head so it can see prey from every direction at once. I know, it is very functional, but I do not think them beautiful."

"You have not fear of them?"

"Some people have arachnophobia. It is not, strictly speaking, fear. It is a phobia. It is like fear, but it happens too fast for the mind to process it logically. Our evolutionary ancestors had to jump away quickly to avoid the venomous spiders, even though most spiders are not dangerous. They have to jump back too quickly to think about whether the danger is real or not. And scorpions too."

"Now, there is something I fear," she said. "There are a lot of them in southern France."

"And in the southwestern deserts here," I said. "They glow a dull green color in ultraviolet light. If you shine a blacklight at night out in the desert, you can see eerie green scorpions everywhere. Sometimes the entire food chain seems to be scorpions eating scorpions."

We then found a little cave and ducked inside. “We might find some cave paintings,” she said. “From the…which tribe was here?”

“We’re still here,” I said. “I don’t know whether the Chumash painted their caves or not. Certainly nothing like what you have in Lascaux.” These were the famous Cro-Magnon cave paintings in France. We sat on a rock shelf just inside the cave.

She saw a spider clinging to the cave roof. Then she looked around and saw another, and another. She started breathing heavily. She grabbed my arm.

“I thought you weren’t afraid of spiders,” I said.

“Not when they are out in the open. But here in a little enclosed space, they might get desperate and jump on you.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” I said. “It appears to me, Aimée, that it is not the spiders that you are scared of, but the way they are crowded together.”

“I remember very little of my early childhood,” she said. I had not expected to hear her talk about this, but I was interested in any stories about her childhood. “We lived in some lowlands, I do not remember where. It was in a big house. A flood came. The waters kept rising. We moved our belongings to the upper floor, then to the attic, before the waters receded. The spiders also gathered themselves into the attic. I was afraid of them. Spiders in corners, hunting bugs, are harmless. But if they have to flee from a flood they might be as mistrustful of other animals as we are of them. I am not scared of a spider, unless it is a scared spider.”

Aimée seemed aware that the hearts and kisses thing was supposed to happen right now. She said, “I still don’t know what you see in me.”

“Your soul is so beautiful…” I began.

“Enough about my soul,” said Aimée. “I mean, I’m ugly.”

“Beep,” I said. “Undefined term. But I think you are beautiful.”

“Beep, undefined term,” Aimée responded. “Okay, maybe I’m not ugly, but I am, shall one say, plain.”

“Schubert was pretty plain,” I said. I pulled up a sketch of him on my phone and showed her. “Kind of dumpy. If you saw a guy like that, you would probably agree. Most girls stayed away from him, not giving themselves a chance to experience how beautiful his music was. And maybe how loving a partner he could be.

“So, you see, Aimée, I kept pestering you so that I could find out what kind of beauty our souls could create together. And I have found out.”

We sat together and held hands for a few moments. Then I rose and guided her back out into the sunlight.

“And now,” I said, “are we ready for song number eleven in Schubert’s cycle?”

“I think we are,” she said.

The *Frühlingstraum* music from my phone depicted the wayfarer stopping at a farmhouse. As he slept, he dreamed about May flowers and birdsong. Luscious notes in major. But then he woke and realized that winter was all around him. Angry notes in minor. Then the man looked at the window and saw that the frost had etched what looked like leaves and flowers.

This part was in a gentle major. It switched to minor as he realized that everyone ridiculed the man who thought he had seen leaves and flowers in the winter when he saw only frost.

Then it started all over again. This time he was dreaming about a fair maiden, and, of course, *Herzen und Küssen.* But then he awoke and found himself alone. In the final, heart-rending minor phrase, he wondered when, if ever, the leaves of frost would turn green, and he would hold his *Liebchen im Arm.*

Aimée and I hid ourselves behind an oak tree that had escaped the fire. The branches were twisted, and from them hung strings of lichen like a bead curtain. And it was here that we kissed, long and slowly, and held each other for what seemed like an hour. We had joy that the *Winterreise* wayfarer could only fantasize about.

*

It was late afternoon on the day of our trip into the mountains. The winter days, while warm, were short. By the time that we got to Point Concepción, the sun was already low in the sky over the Pacific Ocean. The roads were narrow and winding. I did not want to drive after dark if we could help it. The ocean haze made the sun reddish even a couple of hours before sunset.

But at Point Concepción, jutting out into the ocean, the Pacific is not only in the west, but also in the south. The shore between Concepción and Ventura faced south. One's line of vision went past the Channel Islands and, if it were to curve with the Earth, would not encounter any land until Antarctica. Aimée and I looked at the Channel Islands, steep and mountainous. The haze on the ocean made it appear that the islands were floating in mists.

"This is really beautiful," said Aimée. "I've seen the Channel Islands frequently, but never looked closely."

"They look like they could float away," I said. "There are legends about islands that appear in the sea and then vanish. There's a whole list of phantom islands…"

"Les Îles Fantômes," Aimée said. "I've heard of them."

"Some of them were imaginary. The early cartographers made them up and put them on their maps. That way, if another mapmaker plagiarized their work, there the fake island would be. Caught red-handed.

"But some were real. For example, Arran, an island in a Scottish bay. There is a song about it. The Arran Boat Song."

"I suppose you are going to sing it for me," she said.

"I don't know the words. Or if there even are any words. But I can play it."

"So, that's why you brought your little recorder."

"Yes."

"In France we call it *flûte-à-bec*. Flute with a beak."

"I warn you," I said, "I cannot play very well. Just ask my sister. This song sounds like it is in minor, but there is something different about it. Not sad, but haunting."

I had to start the melody several times. I had practiced this melody often enough that Brenda began to hate it, especially the beginning, which had low notes with fingerings that were difficult for me. But when I reached the upper notes, after squeaking a few times, the melody unfurled like a seabird launching itself into the breeze.

Aimée wanted me to play it over and over.

We did not kiss but held each other very closely for a long time. We ignored other people who parked in the lot and pretended to not see us. The sun was just going down as I delivered Aimée back to our meeting place at the eucalyptus tree near her apartment.

*

A brief rain had moistened the soil and sidewalks. So had the campus sprinklers. It seemed odd to me that Mr. Lee turned on the sprinklers when it was raining one morning during the break between classes.

"That's exactly the right time to use the sprinklers," he said to us. Aimée and I were walking across campus after the rain ended.

"But, it was raining already," I said.

"You're the science kid, I'm just a janitor," said Mr. Lee. "But let me explain. You can't just half-water the soil, with rain or with a sprinkler. The water comes in at the surface, and drains down into the soil, saturating it until it can't hold no more. Then, when the water has finished draining, the soil beneath it is just as dry as it was before. So you get damp soil on top of dry soil. If you use a sprinkler, even during rain, the water goes deeper than if you don't."

"I'm missing something here," I said.

"He usually does," said Aimée. I looked at her, surprised even now that she felt comfortable enough to joke with me.

"Why is it better to use a sprinkler during rain than at other times?" I asked.

"Because when you use a sprinkler on a dry day, most of the water just evaporates. But if the air is humid, more of the sprinkler water drains into the soil. That's important to us in this county," Mr. Lee continued. "The first time I voted was back in '76. It was a special election for the Santa Barbara County Water Board. I voted the conservation ticket. Right now, there's enough water in Cachuma." That was our reservoir up in the mountains. "But we've got practices in place to save water."

"I just felt my brain grow a little bit, Mr. Lee," I said. "Thank you."

"You two have a nice day. Watch out for the worms."

He was right. The water had driven the earthworms out of their shallow burrows. "Earthworms can drown," I told Aimée, although she probably knew it already. "They don't realize they are crawling out on a sidewalk where they can get squished. I guess there's no evolutionary advantage for a worm to be smart, so they never evolve bigger brains."

"Enough about evolution," said Aimée. She bent down and picked up an earthworm. It wriggled in her fingers before she threw it onto the grass, where it immediately dug its way into the soil underneath. "By your way of thinking," she continued, "saving one earthworm life is not worth it, compared to the hundreds or thousands of worms already in the soil."

"I imagine you are going to tell me why you did it, then."

"It's what St. Francis of Assisi did," Aimée said. "Picking up worms from the road. He felt sorry for them. Everybody thought he was an idiot for doing it."

"I don't think you are an idiot," I said. "But you didn't do it *just* because St. Francis did."

"No," Aimée answered. "I didn't do it for St. Francis, who is dead, or for the worm, which very soon will be. I did it for me. I am the kind of person who enjoys rescuing worms."

"You are the very embodiment of love," I said. I stopped and took her hand and kissed it.

"You just kissed a hand that probably still had worm slime on it," she said.

"Made blessed by your touch," I said.

"Thanks, Tony, but that's going a little bit too far even for me. Like my touch makes things holy. You make me sound like some kind of Jesus. I am no holier than that worm."

We resumed walking. "But you seem like it," I said. "You seem like a Marian apparition." She did not ask me what I meant. She must have read it in a book somewhere. "You seem unsullied in the flesh. Tell me, have you ever had a boyfriend before?"

"Of course not," she said. "How could I? I always created my own little world, just like you saw me do here, because I was afraid of what would happen if I formed any connections with friends, especially boyfriends. We moved so often. How about you? Any girlfriends before me?"

"I guess it depends on your definition of girlfriend," I said. "I've taken girls on dates before. Then we held hands and kissed goodnight. Pretty much by the book. But every time it happened, we could tell that it wasn't leading anywhere. The one time I asked the same girl out a second time, we both knew it was just for an innocently pleasant time. I suppose I am just as sexually innocent as you are. Except in my fantasies. But let's not go there." I grabbed her hand and pulled her toward me. Our hips touched as we walked. "I've never done anything like this, walking this close with a girl out in the open."

Chapter 4

The snake in the Garden. I think that's what they call it when, just at the time that everything seems perfect, suspicion and evil begin to infiltrate themselves into our perfect lives.

I told myself I was totally fine with Aimée keeping her home life secret from me. But what was she hiding from me? How could her apartment be so bad that she would not let me see it? What was so mysterious about her father's line of work that she would not let me meet him? He might be my father-in-law someday. And this situation was not likely to get any better. We assumed that, when we were students at UCSB, we would both be living at our respective homes, thus saving the cost of dormitories, the wild parties of which we both disliked anyway. Or perhaps we would get married? The way things were going, marriage seemed more likely than not. The student newspaper even did an article about us, for God's sake. Cutest couple. Can't get to be much more of a couple than that.

I could not trust our good luck until we were formally engaged. We were not yet eighteen years old. I planned to propose to her, so that we could perhaps be married after we were eighteen and live together when we went to college. I wanted these plans to be definite. I did not want to trust our lives to momentum.

This is when I started to have insomnia. It was not mere sleeplessness, but a tension that sometimes made me tremble. I would get up at night and try to read, but I was unable to concentrate. I tried running a filter fan, but its supposedly uniform motor sound actually had what in pre-calculus we called autocorrelation, in which the sound seemed to react to itself in a spiral of slightly increasing volume, until it reached an equilibrium point. Then it would start all over again. It seemed to be saying, "Aimée! Aimée! Aimée!" until it reached its summit, when in our pre-calculus class we would say the first derivative of the curve equaled zero, at which time it would almost scream out, "Aiméééééée!" Then it would start its chant over again. Insomnia was a cycle that fed upon itself. It made me tired during the daytime, cranky, clumsy, and in this way I introduced tension into my partnership with Aimée. She must have noticed it but chose to ignore it.

Mom sent me to a hypnotherapist. Unlike a sleep doctor, a hypnotherapist needed no certification. This particular one was a big-haired man in a little office with a big lounge chair for the client and a little plastic chair for him. Besides a microwave and a CD player, there was almost nothing else in the room.

After I paid him (he was not reimbursable on medical plans), he told me to relax on the lounge chair. He used the microwave to warm up a neck pillow filled with pellets. Once the neck pillow was in place, he played some dreamy music on the CD player.

"You are getting very sleepy," he said.

"No, actually, I'm not."

"Just keep trying. You are getting sleepy."

"No, I'm not. I'm alert because I want to see what you are doing."

"Well, I think it will work out fine," the man said. He had displayed a diploma from the School of Higher Order Metamerism in Hawaii. "Let me give you a couple of CDs. You can keep them. Try them when you are falling asleep."

I did. But they didn't work. On one of the CDs, the man's gentle voice said, "You are standing at the edge of a deep blue lake. Tall trees are all around you, with snow-capped mountains in the distance. There is a lodge built of huge logs of dark wood, and that is where you are going to go to sleep. You look up into the deep blue sky, and you see an eagle circling, lazily, gently…

"And then the eagle swoops down and grabs a fish in its claws, drops down to the lake shore, and begins to tear the fish open, spilling its guts on the sand…"

That last part was not on the CD but it popped into my mind. Now fully awake, I fast-forwarded on the CD player to the next track.

"You have now gotten very sleepy. You are in the lodge. You are climbing the stairs to your silent dark room. You smell the richness of the wood. You are so sleepy and just want to lie down on the bed.

My mind added, "Then your foot slips and you fall down the stairs and call out for help. The paramedics come rushing…"

I tried one more time.

"You are lying in a hammock near the beach, behind a little barrier of tall grass. The wind whispers, and the ocean waves murmur. You hear the susurrus of the palm leaflets.

My mind added, "Right then a naked woman walks through the grass and comes over to your hammock…"

Not only did I become fully awake, but so also did a part of my body that had until then been quiet.

The next night I decided that the only way for me to sleep would be to find answers to my questions about what was going on with Aimée and her father. I couldn't bring myself to just *ask* her earlier. I was afraid of driving her away by such directness.

And now it was about eleven o'clock. I decided to go look for her apartment. Either there would be more for me to worry about, or nothing. I knew a way to sneak out of my room and away from my house. My bedroom window opened onto a part of the roof near a Moreton Bay fig, a decorative tree from Australia. A large branch overhang the roof, from which I could climb down into the yard. I had used this branch since childhood. Then there was a little passageway through the bougainvillea vine that covered a gap in the fence, and out onto the sidewalk.

I walked toward the shambled apartments in one of which Aimée lived. Streetlights allowed me to find my way most of the time, but through one stretch of darkness I kicked a piece of concrete and almost fell. Catfights spooked me. I went past the school and into Aimée's neighborhood. For the first time, I went past the big eucalyptus tree. I found a little dirt path beside a ditch that went behind some apartments.

Two men were having an argument outside of one of the apartment buildings. They spoke with a slight accent that, in southern California, could have come from any continent except Antarctica.

"I'll get you the money," said one of the men. "I just have to collect from my clients."

"And if you don't?" said the other man. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Don't worry about it. I said I'd get the money. Just not now, Loïc."

"You got anything of any value you can give me? In case you don't get the money."

"No. My apartment is pretty bare. I'd give you a computer if I had one, or a television."

"You don't got a television?"

"No. I'll show you if you want. But not right now. My daughter's asleep."

"Daughter, eh? Maybe she can be of some value to us."

"You try that, and I swear I'll kill you."

"I didn't mean it that way. I didn't mean the sex trade or anything."

"Then what the hell did you mean?"

"Maybe she can work for us."

"She already does work for us, after a manner to speak. She brings in a little income."

"From the burgers?"

"It's not nothing, Loïc. And she already does stuff for free for me. She's got a head for numbers. Look, man. She's going to college next year. Bet she'll get a scholarship and all."

"You might not have any choice but to have her work for us."

"She's a lot more valuable to us if she moves up in the world with a college degree."

"You got a point there, Pascal. But we're talking years and years. We don't have so much time. We'll talk again tomorrow. Hope you have better news for me then."

I saw the men walk away from each other. I noticed which building Pascal went into.

It was easy for me to imagine that the man called Pascal had to be Aimée's father. Of course, I had no idea if this was true. What were the odds of that? But how many men around Santa Barbara would be named Pascal? Or Loïc, for that matter.

I sneaked out of my room and went to Aimée's apartment for several more nights. Even in the total absence of evidence, I was becoming frantic about her safety. Nearly every time, I saw nothing but nameless apartments and an empty parking lot. But one time, when I was returning home, I saw a man going in the same direction by a slightly different route. I was sure that it was the one who went by the name Loïc.

*

When I saw Aimée the next weekend, after work, she seemed completely at ease with me. We planned our next few Winterreise sessions. We even talked about which classes we would take in our freshman year at UCSB, a campus we now wanted to explore.

I drove us to the campus, and we paid to park. We walked around the buildings, especially the large round Campbell Hall where they had conferences and concerts. We bought food at a convenience store called The Arbor, and sat next to a hemispherical Eternal Flame, no longer eternal, which had once burned in memory of John F. Kennedy. We strolled around a saline lagoon that might have been beautiful, but it was filled with slimy green algae. A world not too different from the green algae-people Aimée had written about in class. We fantasized about what it must be like to immerse ourselves into what we imagined to be a university world of concentrated student and faculty brain power and sense of wonder. College the way it was supposed to be. I considered us to be the most fortunate people in the world.

We walked out along Lagoon Road to the Goleta city park, where families sat on the shallow sward of grass tight like a rug over bright tan dunes. We walked in the sand, which was hot even on this winter day. The wet sand in the intertidal zone was cool, as the California Current flowing from the north always is. It would have been very pleasant except for the annoying sand flies and the globs of petroleum that stuck to our feet and which, later, we would have to use organic solvents to clean away.

"They say this oil is from the 1969 oil spill. An explosion on one of the offshore rigs," I said. The rigs stood like long-legged spiders in the shallow water offshore. "They supposedly plugged up the hole, but I don't believe it. The year 1969 was a long time ago, yet there is still petroleum here. They claim that it is natural seepage."

"Seepage? It sounds indecent," observed Aimée.

After walking barefoot in the sand, we stepped into the cool water of a slough that emptied into the ocean.

"You are walking in a sewer," I told Aimée.

She started to run away until she saw that I did not.

"*Un homme qui blague!* Surely you are a man to joke," she smiled at me.

"No. The city of Goleta dumps its partially treated sewage into this slough. The slough is large, but the city is not. There is plenty of room for the biological processes that normally happen in a slough to finish cleaning the water before it reaches the beach."

"Must be lots of nutrition in it," she said. "Nitrogen especially. This is why the stringy algae is such a deep green."

We returned to campus and walked along a dirt trail at the top of a cliff, past grasses and fennel clumps and coyote bushes. We looked down at swirls of water that fizzed with organic matter.

"This reminds me of you," I told her.

"Pardon?"

"I mean, not the stuff floating in the water. What I mean is, you have a purpose in life, while some people just let their lives float around like flotsam in the water. That is not what you are like. Nor I." Aimée was by now used to talking with me about the meaning of life.

"I try to do what I can," she said. "But sometimes the waves are just too big. Big waves might carry my life away someday. We need to be prepared in case this happens to us. I cannot imagine it and I do not want to try. Just promise me that you will not abandon me."

"I promise. Who would ever abandon you?"

"I do not know. But it must have happened. Besides my papa, I have no idea who or where the rest of my family is. I feel like one of those little fragments of kelp down there in the water."

"Your mother?" I asked.

"I do not remember much about my mama," she said. "She left, maybe because of my papa's business problems. Why I am with him, and not with her, I do not know. I think she is still alive, but even this I do not know. When I think of her, I have a vague recollection of an orange dress in the sunshine."

"I will do everything I can to keep you with me," I said, moving up very close to her. "Even if I have to follow you someplace neither of us wants to go." My hand found no place to rest as I put my arm around her snake hips.

"*Mon chéri*," she said. "What do you see in me?"

"We have talked about this before," I said. "My mind and spirit come alive when I am with you."

"And body? Do you find me possessive of bodily allurement?"

"You talk really sexy, Aimée."

"Answer my question." She stopped. "Look at my chest. Go ahead." I looked at her flat bosom hidden inside a tight shirt. "You cannot possibly say that this is a breast. *Sois honnête.*"

"Very well. I will be honest. You do not have much of a breast. Hey, I'm not that great looking either. I'm short, like Franz Schubert. I never go to the beach without a shirt. My chest is not what one would call athletic."

She ignored me and continued. "And my face. It is ugly, neh-pa."

"As I said before, it is not," I whined.

"But it is very plain."

"You keep saying that," I said. "Are you trying to get me to think you are ugly? It won't work."

"And my skin. It is dry and sallow."

"If you got out in the sun and used suntan lotion…"

"We are into mutual exclusives, are we not. I don't want anyone to see my skin. So I never go out in a swimsuit. I never wear shorts. I almost always wear long sleeves. No suntan lotion for me."

"Ultraviolet light causes wrinkles. Perhaps by hiding your skin from the sun while you are young you will have a middle and old age with skin better than other women your age."

"But my skin is already cracked. Too late to save it. And these moles. They are all over my body." She looked at me very seriously. "I do not want to have you, at some later time, decide that I have not enough allurement for you. If this is so, tell me now." She turned away,

with tears in her eyes. “Before it is too late, before I fall without hope in love with you.” She kept her back to me and looked out over the waves, the tidepools, the sea anemones, the crabs, the gulls, the sandpipers, the salt spray greasy with decomposed seaweed. “Perhaps it already is too late for me,” she mumbled. “I love you, totally.”

I put my arm around her shoulders from behind. We listened to the surf.

Chapter 5

The marching season was over, but our band still had to do a Christmas concert, the same night that the choir gave their Christmas performance.

Despite my lack of overt religious convictions, I had a weakness for Christmas. It was such a heartbreakingly beautiful experience, the light of love coming out of darkness. The King of Heaven, born in a barn. Even if the historical events of the Nativity were not real, we would have to have invented Christmas anyway. The pagans invented Yule, after all. While the shortest day of the year was the solstice, which means that the sun (sol) stands still (stasis), it took a few more days, Christmas Day, before ancient astrologers leaping around their henges would notice the lengthening daylight.

Mr. Beaumont wanted it to be a spectacular concert. I later realized that he had his eye on a better job for which this concert would be a good recommendation, but it didn't matter. The result of his efforts, however they were motivated, would be some really good music.

In addition to the old standbys of the band repertoire, such as *A Christmas Festival* by Leroy Anderson, we were going to play *Sleigh Ride,* also by Leroy Anderson. Everybody knows Sleigh Ride, but few realize how complicated the key changes are. Our parents and friends would never know how hard we worked on this music.

In addition, Mr. Beaumont wanted to perform pieces that included both band and choir performing together. The choir director, retired Rev. Julius Menninger, was all on board with it. Our main piece, ending the first half of the concert, would be a band arrangement of *Journey through Snow Country* and *Waltz of the Snowflakes,* which ended the first half of the Nutcracker ballet by Pyotr Tchaikovsky. Tchaikovsky knew how to write some thrilling low brass parts, where I could blast my baritone horn. Usually orchestras would have trumpets play the simple, beautiful Waltz of the Snowflakes, but we had a real choir to do it for us.

The two directors also found an arrangement for tenor voice and band of *O Holy Night,* written by the openly anti-slavery French composer Adolphe Adam during the time when American slavery was setting the world, not just America, into enemy camps. "The slave is our brother," he wrote in verse three. We brought in the best tenor from the Santa Barbara Symphony to sing it.

Mr. Beaumont found an old record, apparently now unavailable, of Styrian choir music with orchestral accompaniment, arranged many decades ago by someone named Lois Steiner. Styria was a province within Germany, just north of Austria, and they had their own dialect of German. The choir members were willing to sing the lyrics in Styrian, since it was no stranger to them than German would have been, and English did not fit the melodies. Every afternoon after classes toward the end of the semester, we could see the two musicians discussing their arrangements at a table in the cafeteria.

The two men also found, or made, an arrangement of a Byzantine Greek Orthodox Christmas song, *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence.* Over a millennium and a half old, it certainly had a hauntingly beautiful melody. I was excited about this concert, my last Christmas concert in high school, possibly my last one ever.

And Aimée's. My family would be there to hear me not have a solo for once. I asked Aimée if her father would come.

"He's usually busy with business," she said.

"But you are his daughter," I said. "His only child, his beautiful daughter…"

"He said he would try to come."

"Does he know about you and me?" I asked.

"Not everything. But he knows I spend a lot of time with you and your family. He would have to be naïve to not realize how serious of a couple we are."

"I hope I see him," I said.

"How would you know him?" Aimée asked.

I could not say, *because I saw him when I sneaked over to your apartment.* But a perfectly credible response came to me and was out of my mouth before I knew it. "I'm sure you will point him out to me."

Night after night before the concert, I kept thinking of how I was going to "bring up the subject" with Aimée. I assumed she would accept my proposal. But I did not want to leave anything to chance, or merely assume what our future would be.

The night of the concert, as the choir sang their warmups ("Many mumbling mice are making merry music in the moonlight, mighty nice") and we tuned our instruments, the two directors announced a last minute change in the score of Let All Mortal Flesh. In the last line of the third verse, a passage that we had previously played as quietly as the other two verses, we were to begin playing loudly.

I stood with Aimée before the beginning of the concert. I came up behind her. She faced away from me. I spoke into her left ear.

"Aimée," I said. "The time has come. We can talk about it later, but I need to say it now. I would be the happiest man on Earth if you would accept my proposal of marriage. I don't know exactly when, or even how. But please say yes."

"I knew you would ask," she said. "And you knew I would say yes."

When she turned to me, I saw that she was crying. In fact, she had been crying even before I had spoken to her.

"I just can't believe it, Tony," she said. "Everything is going so well for us. I just cannot trust this happiness that we are feeling. The powers of Hell are so great and can so easily overwhelm us. I don't know what God is, or what Hell is, but I know we are navigating deep waters in a little skiff made of human feelings.

"Tony, did you read the words to the last song? Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence."

"No, I didn't," I said.

"The part about the powers of Hell vanishing. I wish I could believe that, Tony. I wish I could believe that everything will turn out right for us, and for everybody in the world.

"If I were God," Aimée concluded, "I would simply do away with Hell, all the hatred, all the violence, even the little difficulties that take a man's attention away from his daughter." She spoke quietly into my ear. "If God will permit it, if He or It will give this poor human being her best and perhaps her only wish, I will marry you." She turned and looked out over the audience from behind the curtain, but her face showed no sign of recognizing her father.

The concert began with the two Leroy Anderson pieces. The baton twirlers danced around to Sleigh Ride. The lead twirler pretended to be a horse. Then came the Lois Steiner arrangements. I was not prepared for how beautiful the choir parts sounded. *Drei Reiten daher,* about three horsemen riding to Bethlehem to find out what all the ruckus was about, had a gentle loping rhythm and was one of the most delightful melodies I ever heard. In contrast, *O Jesulein zart* (O little Jesus) was much slower, almost simplistic. But the girls' voices in the choir were not simply soprano and alto, but three soprano lines and three alto lines, creating huge chords suspended upon nothing. Then on the refrain, the tenor line created a countermelody. The bass line came in only on the last four notes. In these pieces, the band played very quietly.

I thought nothing could be better than the strong melody of the tenor in *O Holy Night*.

Our last piece was *Let All Mortal Flesh*. Both the band and choir were quiet through the first verse, in a haunting minor mode:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand,
Ponder nothing earthly minded, for with blessing in his hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full homage to demand.

The middle syllable of "descendeth" outlined a four-note chord. The second verse was similar. *As the Light of Light descendeth from the realms of endless day.*

Then came the part of verse three where the choir and band were to sing and play loudly. Kevin's trombone line stuck out like a porcupine quill. I am sure he did not intend to sound heavenly. But that was, perhaps, God's little joke on Kevin, and on all the rest of us pitiful quotidian players, singers, and audience. The chords sounded as if Judgment Day—a salvation, not a condemnation—unfurled like one of the Scrolls of Revelation.

That the powers of Hell may vanish as the darkness fades away.

I forgot to play during the fourth verse. It had something to do with winged seraphim. I didn't care. All I cared about was that, for one brief moment, it seemed to me almost certain that the powers of Hell really could fade away and leave a cleansed realm in which everyone loved their fellowmen the way Aimée and I loved one another.

I looked at Aimée the same moment that she looked at me. Then I saw her look toward the audience, which was clapping and cheering. She smiled, jumped a little, and waved. I followed her line of sight. I saw Pascal standing in the back, a smile on his face.

PART TWO: GOLETA, WINTER

Chapter 6

My family's last full-blood Chumash ancestor was my paternal great-grandfather. While this was enough to guarantee our tribal membership, it made little difference in our daily lives. My more recent ancestors had ignored our Chumash roots. It was a white man's world, they said, in which the Chumash-Barbareño language, stories, and religion had little place. Scholars had even declared our tribe extinct. They meant, of course, two things. First, the last full-blood Chumash was a woman who died somewhere around 1965. Second, the language and culture. The language persisted but was only a second language to the few who spoke it at all.

Then, suddenly, native tribes everywhere in America started discovering that they could have casinos, and that white people loved to throw their money away at casinos. By the 2000s, the Chumash tribe had a casino on Highway 246 not far from Cachuma Reservoir. It was big and just kept getting bigger. We milked those white people, not only with the jingling, flashing slot machines and green felt gaming tables, but with fake native décor. Like most other tribes, we had a One Fire resort, and a Lake Spirit marina. Perhaps whites thought that they were getting close to nature by coming to the casino.

While my Dad thought little of our native roots, his brother Guglielmo was different in practically every way. He was and looked no more Chumash than my father, but decided he was legally entitled to embrace the culture. He was one of the early investors in the casino expansion. He now lived in what seemed to us like a mansion in the Santa Ynez Mountains. It was not as large as the mansions of the other casino executives, but, as I had mentioned to Roald, Guglielmo had the good sense to install a sprinkler system to protect the house from chaparral fires, a system that cost almost as much as the house. When fires, such as the one a few weeks earlier, passed through, he still had to evacuate, because the fires were so intense that they consumed all the oxygen at ground level. But the house itself remained unharmed.

Guglielmo had always been what the cliches call larger than life. He had a big smile and loud voice. And he liked me as long as I can remember, back even when he dressed normally. Now he wore feathers and beads and other things that many tribes, but probably not the Chumash, traditionally wore. When he started wearing a Cherokee turban, he knew he was outrageous, but he enjoyed it. I was the unconventional little boy who always went birdwatching and played music on my little plastic recorder, and he liked me a lot for this.

Since Uncle Guglielmo had no life partner or heirs that we knew of, we assumed that his wealth would eventually come to me and my little sister. But this was probably decades into the future. Because of my father's food service management experience, Uncle Guglielmo had invited him to run the Italian restaurant at the casino.

"I don't know anything about Italian food," Dad told him.

"We're Italian. That's enough," said Guglielmo. "You know the food business. All you have to do is to open cans of Chef Boyardee ravioli and sprinkle some Parmesan cheese on it. Iceberg lettuce salads with black olives and olive oil. Of course, you can do better than that. But

you don't need to. People will love it anyway. They'll be in a trance thinking about getting back to the slots." He was right. I had been in one of the restaurants once and the *ka-ching ka-ching* of slot payouts was always sounding in the background.

Dad thought about it. "I'd have to come up with something original," he said.

"So, come up with something original."

I happened to be in on this conversation. I was a little boy but had taken a school camping trip in the mountains. One of the counsellors was an environmental biology student at UCSB. Looking back on it, I realize that he might have been the person who influenced my decision about what to study. He pointed out that the sagebrush in the mountains really was edible sage, a relative of mint. I spoke up. "You can use sage from the wild bushes behind the casino and tell everyone that it's Native American sage. And it's no lie."

My father and uncle looked at me. "Brilliant," said Guglielmo.

My father, who knew a little more food safety science than my uncle, said, "It might be toxic. A lot of wild plants are."

"Probably not in small quantities," I said. "Just sprinkle a little bit on the food, even if most of the sage flavor comes from a packet."

"The kid's brilliant," my uncle repeated.

And that was how the Amerigo Vespucci restaurant at the casino got started. I had another idea, for including acorn puree in the pesto, but that one didn't go over too well.

*

And now Uncle Guglielmo wanted to see me. We didn't need much of an excuse to go see him over Christmas.

"What does he want to see me about?" I asked.

"You know Guglielmo. He won't tell us," said Dad.

During the silence that followed, my heart rose into my throat. I decided to speak.

"Can Aimée go with us?"

Brenda came into the room and joined us. She did not wait to be asked her opinion. "Why not?" she asked. "Amy is so scrawny that she can probably fit in the glove compartment. Except that she's too tall."

I figured that Dad would have no hesitation in agreeing. But he asked Brenda to leave, and he looked at me seriously.

"Son…"

This was not a good sign. But we had to have this conversation eventually.

"You've been seeing this girl a lot."

"She's the most wonderful person I ever met." He knew I would say this.

"I have nothing against her," Dad conceded.

"It's her family, then?"

"What family? Her Dad, and who else?"

"I don't know." Then I added, as he knew I would, "And I don't care."

"You're serious about her."

"Of course."

"Then you should be serious about her family as well." Dad shifted and sighed. "Her father is in some kind of business. I've asked around among my associates…"

"You did *what?*"

"It's not too early," he said. "If there are any problems, we should know them before you get even more serious about her than you are already."

"And?"

"I cannot determine what sort of business it is," Dad continued. "But none of my associates believe that he is, as we say, credit worthy. Mind you, we don't know if he is involved in any shady deals." He waited for me to respond, which I did not. "Well, maybe it is a bit early for you to be bringing her home for Christmas."

"She doesn't really have any other place to go."

"What?" asked Dad in genuine surprise.

"She asked me if she could spend Christmas with us. Her father has a business trip planned and cannot take her along."

"So, you are telling me that her father, also, would find it convenient if she spent Christmas…"

"The whole winter break."

"Really? You see what I mean. I just don't want him coming to me and asking for a loan."

"Aimée has said nothing about needing any money."

"Then what does she need?"

"Love," I said. "And not just from me."

Mom heard the conversation and entered the room. "She can have the guest bedroom."

*

When we got to Uncle Guglielmo's mansion, Aimée got more than a guest bedroom.

"Little Antonio's special friend?" Guglielmo grinned at us. Both Aimée and I looked down at our feet. "I guess we'll have to put her up in the Eyrie." We looked up at his face.

"I was hoping *I* would get the eyrie," said Brenda.

"You get it every year," said Guglielmo. "Besides, there's enough room for both of you up there if you like."

"No, I was just saying," mumbled Brenda.

The Eyrie was a separate wooden building with eight sides and approached by a wooden walkway. Nestled among live oaks, it had windows on every side. It had its own little half-bath but was otherwise just a bedroom with a small couch.

"What's all this?" Aimée asked when I carried her small suitcase up the walkway to the Eyrie.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," I said. "Every window has a hummingbird feeder, and some of them have two. If it bothers you, we can always…"

"Is this the best place I have ever been or what?" Aimée responded. Hummingbirds darted among the feeders, which had big red plastic flowers as well as red dye in the sugar water.

We watched for a long time. Aimée said, "There are bugs in the feeders."

During lunch, we asked Guglielmo about the bugs. Maybe the feeder fluid needed to be changed.

"No, that's deliberate," said Guglielmo. "No animal, including hummingbirds, can live off of sugar alone. Wild hummingbirds also catch insects, for protein and fat. Only it is winter, and there may not be enough insects for them. I provide the insects."

"Speaking of winter," I said. "Why are there so many hummingbirds here? There's not much blooming outdoors." In a residential area in Southern California, something would have been blooming besides fake flowers. But this was up in the mountains.

"They get enough food from my feeders. They never leave until the spring flowers start blooming."

Later, I was alone with Aimée in the Eyrie. The curtains were all open, and the grownups, as well as nosy little Brenda, would notice if we closed them. We were contented to stay at the Herzen und Küssen stage as we decided the right time to announce our engagement. The hummingbirds were very, very busy.

Aimée mentioned something about the hummingbirds being carefree.

"This is the one thing they are not," I told her.

"Explain," she said.

"Well, little birds like those," I began, repeating what I'd seen on an online nature video. "They are very small, and they lose a lot of heat through their skins, despite their feather coats. They are on the cusp of survival. They have to keep eating all day. They don't have time to stop and rest, nor to be polite to one another." We watched one hummingbird chase another away from what, to them, was a better flower than the rest.

"And at night?"

"They rest," I said. "They can't get enough energy to keep warm. So they enter a kind of torpor. Not just sleep. They let their body temperatures drop not quite enough for them to die, but almost. I wouldn't want to be a hummingbird. They're too busy to appreciate the beauty of nature."

"I never thought of that," Aimée said. "But I can fantasize that they are happy, anyway. When I write my next story."

*

Then Guglielmo called me in to talk with him alone.

"You're not a particularly practical-minded boy, are you?"

"No, sir, I suppose not. I write a lot of music and read a lot of science."

"I like that."

"Sir?"

"Don't *sir* me. Anyway, you're really smart. I hear you want to go to the university."

"Yes, uncle. I want to study biology."

"You would make a good doctor and get rich."

"That's not the kind of biology I want to study."

Guglielmo smiled. "That's what I was hoping you would say. What kind of biology, then?"

"Environmental biology."

"UCSB is a good place for that kind of biology, too," he said. "And while you are there, you will have to take some history courses. I knew a couple of the historians there. You can take a course in Native American history. I took that course from Wilbur Jacobs. He's dead now, but somebody must still teach it. Also environmental history. I took that course from Rod Nash. He retired a long time ago.

"And don't worry about money. Do what brings you joy." After a pause, he added, "I like your little friend too."

"She's hard to not like," I said, although there were some people who did not, in fact, like Aimée as much as he did.

"You're serious about her?"

I had only heard that question a couple of dozen times. But, hearing it from Uncle Guglielmo, I made a decision. I would tell him what I have not told my own family.

"My dream," I said, "is to marry her."

"Nice dream."

"I mean, soon. Next fall, when we begin our classes, I want to live with her."

"So you have to marry her for that?"

"Mom and Dad would insist on it."

"You'll both be adults by then, I take it. Not that it matters. Hillbillies get married at thirteen. Anyway, you could just tell Guido and Nellie that you two are going to shack up together."

"I don't think either Aimée or I would choose that option," I said. "I want to make a commitment to Aimée. She deserves it. She wouldn't like it if we formed a sexual bond and then I decided to discontinue it. She's spent most of her life in uncertainty."

"You come to the point most nicely," said Guglielmo. "Guido has told me about her family, or lack of it."

I stood up and looked at Guglielmo. "I will not leave her."

Guglielmo smiled. “Who said anything about leaving her? Not I.”

“Sir?”

“Don’t *sir* me. Have you ever heard of an inheritance trust?”

That night, at Christmas Eve dinner, Guglielmo announced that he was establishing an inheritance trust for me, starting at age eighteen. Which would not be very long. And one for Brenda, but she had a couple of years to wait. “And, as a legal adult, Tony will be able to spend the money as he sees fit.”

Dad looked at Aimée as he said, “Are you sure Tony is ready for such responsibility?”

“Guido, Guido, Guido,” smiled Guglielmo. “He has never done a mischievous thing in his life. He has never violated our trust. You have raised him well. I trust him.”

Aimée could not look up from her hands.

After a turkey dinner (turkeys are Native American and guess where the sage in the dressing came from) catered by Amerigo Vespucci but at Guglielmo’s expense, I found Aimée sitting outside in the chill nightfall up at the Eyrie. I could barely see her.

“Don’t expect me to cook like that,” she said to me. I imagined that she smiled meekly.

I followed her eyes into the starry sky. Far away from city lights, with even the casino lights hidden behind the house and trees, we could see every point of light visible to the human eye, that is to say, about a trillionth of the total stars and galaxies.

We sat together quietly, arm in arm. It was such a wonderful time, we might have sat on the little wooden bench until we got frostbite. Fortunately, along came Guglielmo with a tripod and telescope.

“Am I disturbing anything?” he asked, but he didn’t wait for an answer. “Best place in the world to use a telescope.” He set it up and focused on some stars.

Aimée said, “The stars always give me a comfortable feeling. They remain the same forever.”

“No, they don’t,” I said. “Old stars die, and new stars are born.” I said to Guglielmo, “I’ll show you. Find the belt of Orion.”

“What is Orion?” asked Guglielmo.

“A constellation you can only see in the winter. See those three stars lined up? That’s the belt of Orion,” I explained.

“Oh, that? We Chumash call it the tongue of the rattlesnake.”

“Where did you hear that? You don’t have any Chumash culture, any more than I do, Uncle Guglielmo.”

“I just made it up,” he said. “I’m Chumash, so I can make up Chumash stories.”

“Anyway, see those three stars that hang down from the belt? The sword of Orion.”

“Yes,” he said. “I won’t tell you what I call it.”

“The middle one is smudgy.”

"They're all smudgy to me. I'll take your word for it." Guglielmo then turned the telescope toward it. "I'm not very good at this," he said. "I can't aim worth a darn." He moved the telescope systematically up and down, then moved it a little to the side, and moved it up and down again. "I can always find stars, but not any particular ones. Oh, there they are."

"That middle smudge in the sword is actually a nebula."

"Which is like a cloud?" asked Aimée.

"Yes," I said.

"A cloud of water?"

"There's probably some water in it," I said. "Little ice crystals. But it's mostly dust and gas. Hydrogen, stuff like that. And napthalene."

"What's that?" asked Aimée.

"The main ingredient of mothballs. But it's also in outer space. The universe, Aimée, smells faintly of mothballs."

I looked at the nebula, then she did also.

"There's stars inside of it," she said.

"Or between it and us," I said. "But astronomers say there *are* stars inside of it. New stars. Stars forming, right now, from dust and gas."

"*Pépinière stellaire.* A stellar nursery," she said. "But what I meant was, on the time scale of our lives, the stars are eternal. A supernova is when a star dies, right, Tony?"

"Right."

"When was the most recent supernova?"

"They happen all the time."

"When was the most recent supernova that the unaided eye could see on Earth?"

I had to think about that one. I could have checked it on my phone, but I did not want the screen to disturb the perfect darkness. I knew the answer from a science podcast. "It was about 1600."

"As I said, to us, the stars last forever," said Aimée.

"Sorry I can't find any planets right now," Guglielmo said to us. "Merry Christmas." He left us. Aimée started looking around different parts of the sky with the telescope.

"Are you looking for the Star of Bethlehem?" I asked.

"Every star is a Star of Bethlehem," she said.

*

Aimée and I spent a lot of time together during the winter break. Not as much as we might have, given that she was basically living in our guest room. Aimée worked almost every day and picked up a lot of extra hours. I even became familiar with her fellow workers at Rolando's, and she mentioned that they were now treating her with more respect. At least, not making her crawl into the ventilation chute anymore. She spent a couple of evenings with her papa, before coming back to our house. She seemed more energetic and even prettier than before.

I told her that I was working on a piece of band music that we would play in the spring semester. Maybe even for the spring concert. Mr. Beaumont would be happy to feature a piece by one of his very own students.

What Aimée and I did spend a lot of time on was French.

"Since you will probably never be going back to France…" I told her.

"How can one know?"

"You don't have enough money for it, I'll aver."

She actually knew what *aver* meant. Must have been in Dickens or something. She said, "Papa has an emergency fund in case we ever need it. Of course, I do not expect we will return to France. But we didn't expect to leave, either."

"You won't return any time soon," I said. "You're going to stay here with me, aren't you?"

"Of course. As Mrs. Aimée Albinoni. No more spanning the alphabet for me. I'll just stay at A."

She reminded me that, earlier in the day, I had expressed the desire to study French.

"I see you already have a book," she told me.

"Yes, but it is mostly conversational French, about how to order baguettes at a boulangerie, things like that. I thought we might study things that only you could teach me."

"Such as?"

"Such as things that French lovers say to one another. French is the language of love."

"Not as much as you might think," she said. "We usually just say, *Je t'aime.* I love you. And you can find that in any book."

"There must be other things one can say," I prompted her.

"One can," she said. "By the way, we don't often use the *we* form. One usually says *On y va,* one goes, instead of *allons-y,* let's go."

"*On aime?*" I suggested. One loves.

"That's going a little too far. For love, we get more personal."

"Other verbs than *aimer*?"

"One could say, *je t'adore.* I adore you. Or *tu comptes beaucoup pour moi.* You are everything to me."

I tried this about ten times on her. She smiled and laughed.

"How about, I'm crazy about you?" I asked her.

"Je suis folle de toi."

"Now we're getting somewhere," I said. "Love is a kind of craziness, I think. Or not. Roald and I had a discussion about that once. How about, you're beautiful, charming, nice…"

"*Tu es beaux,* I would say. You would say, *Tu es belle.* Then there's *charmant* and *sympa*."

"Do you have any silly nicknames you use with a lover?" I asked.

"*Les surnoms niais?*" she asked.

"Well, cute, not silly."

"*Les surnoms mignons*," she answered. "Well, sometimes we say, *mon chat*."

"My cat?"

"Or *chaton*. I am your pussy."

"Kitten," I said.

"*Ouais*." Yeah.

"Somehow none of these seem good enough for us," I said. "How about, we have the same priorities in life?"

"That's love talk?" she asked.

"For you and me it is."

"On a les mêmes priorités dans la vie."

"You are my dream come true."

"Tu es mon rêve devenu réalité." She smiled and laughed.

"Let me write those down," I said.

She said, "And one more that is very important to me."

"And it is?"

"I know that you will always come back to me. *Je sais que tu me reviendras toujours*."

Chapter 7

The spring semester began. Aimée went back to living in her papa's apartment and coming over for dinner only once in a while. We all missed her. And she said she missed us as well. One day, she wanted to have a serious talk with all of us, even Brenda.

"I have been talking with Papa," she said. "He has to be gone so often. He knows it is not legal for me to stay alone in the apartment while he is gone. And, to be honest, the money from my job is very helpful to him. Even the leftover food I bring to him when he is in town and when I am not having dinner with you. His business problems, you know, are always bad, and they are getting worse. It is such a relief to him when I can be with you." Aimée began to struggle for words. "I talked with him, I mean, an idea we had, I mean…"

"I can see where this is going," said Dad.

"Please, Dad," I said.

"I meant it in a nice way." He smiled. "Let me make Aimée's job a little easier by saying it myself. Aimée, we would be happy to be your foster parents."

Aimée breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"And now is the ideal time to do it," Dad said. "If we wait for an emergency, the authorities will intervene and take Aimée to a foster home, that is, to somebody who is already on their list waiting for a foster child. Usually they are nice people."

"But they are not you," said Aimée, not looking up.

"And sometimes they aren't nice people," I said. "Even if they aren't criminals, they are sometimes religious nuts who have a dozen foster children whom they raise to believe some very screwy things."

On a later evening, Dad held up a printout of some forms he had filled out at the county courtroom officially requesting that he and Mom be Aimée's foster parents. "Of course, Pascal Zeitgeber will have to sign them, indicating that this is his desire. And, of course, Nellie." Mom nodded agreement.

"I do not think he would approve of anyone else," said Aimée. "I have been telling him all about you. You make him very happy. He just doesn't want me to tell you anything about him."

"But don't get in a hurry," Dad said. "This process takes months. Until then, Aimée, you are welcome to stay overnight when you wish."

"This is the, what do you call it, the couch-surfing?" asked Aimée.

"We could call it that," said Mom.

"No," said Aimée. "At least, not all the time. All of my stuff, though there is not much of it, is back at the apartment. I can wait until the foster arrangement is final."

"I will still meet you at the eucalyptus tree," I said.

*

In the spring, there were no more marching band, halftime, or Christmas shows. It was concert season. And I made a major adjustment to my class schedule. I had never taken French. Mr. Festima offered only French II in the spring, but I told him I had studied French intensely over the Christmas break. He allowed me to skip French I.

"You'll ace the class, with a tutor like Amy."

"Don't get me wrong, Mr. Festima," I said. "I think you have it backwards. My purpose is not to have Aimée help me do well in your class. My purpose is for your class to allow me to communicate more intimately with Aimée."

"Of course," said Mr. Festima. "That's what I would do if I were you. You have a treasure, young man. Do everything within your power to keep her."

*

Our family, like thousands of others, had a tradition of Movie Night: Friday evening, with a downloaded movie and pizza. This tradition had grown infrequent in recent months, as Brenda started having a social life. My social life, before Aimée, could not be said to truly exist. But we decided to resurrect the tradition. When Brenda found that the party she was going to go to had been cancelled, we decided it was the perfect time for all of us, including Aimée.

"You can't mean *that* movie?" I asked.

"It is *our* movie," said Mom. "Your father and I."

"It's pretty mooshy, isn't it?" I asked Dad.

"Yes, and I don't know why I like it, except that I saw it on TV at grandma's place when I was dating your Mom." Dad continued, "It can't be all bad. It was really popular, and all those people who liked it can't be totally wrong."

When we started the movie, Mom and Dad sat behind us. "Don't look back," he said. "Your Mom and I will be making out."

"Gag," said Brenda.

"Well, then, don't look back," said Mom. "We'll be quiet."

Brenda still did not look happy as the movie started. After a while, Aimée asked her, "Are you rolling the eyes?"

"Majorly," said Brenda.

Aimée looked at me confused, until I assured her *majorly* was not really a word.

Aimée and I moved closer to one another.

"Not you, too," said Brenda.

"Is that any way to talk to your future sister-in-law?" I whispered to Brenda. She jumped up. I told her to keep it a secret for now. Not that our parents, twined together on the couch behind us, noticed anything.

"You mean it?" Brenda whispered to us intensely.

"Majorly," responded Aimée.

"When are you getting…"

"When we figure it out, we'll let you know," I said.

"Notice anything about the movie theme song?" I asked Aimée.

"The notes have a big empty space between them," she said. "They sound sad. They remind me of the intervals between the notes in Der Lindenbaum."

"That's right," I told her. "The minor sixth is the interval of love found and lost."

"No, not lost. Not for us."

"Of course not, Aimée. You know, you look a little bit like Ali McGraw."

By the end of the movie, Brenda was no longer gagging. Her eyes were moist.

"Perhaps I do look like Ali McGraw," said Aimée when *Love Story* was over, and we were alone. "If you use your imagination enough. But that movie does not really express what I feel about love."

"Is there a movie that does?" I asked.

'You have probably never heard of it," she said. "It is called *Manon des Sources*. It is my favorite movie. That is, out of the approximately eight movies I have seen in my life."

"I think Mr. Festima is going to play that one for us at the end of French II," I said. "It means *Manon of the Springs,* right?"

"Yes. Manon is a girl who grew up in the dry southern part of France. Where the water of springs is precious and harder to find than true love. Her parents lost the house, her father died, long story, but she stayed on the land. She lived in a cave, I think. She was a shepherdess, as I recall."

"So that's where you get the shepherdess you write about," I said.

"Maybe, but this part of southern France is not alpine. Because of her experiences, with the worst of the human spirit, Manon was afraid of other people. She lived alone. The way I feel as if I am living alone. Then out of nowhere came this young man, who rescued her from her perils. You see, as I describe it now, maybe it is not so very different from *Love Story*."

"Or from our story. Or from any love story that has ever been written," I said.

*

My father was silent when I told him Aimée and I were definitely going to get married. Then he said, "I will not give my approval. At least, not yet."

"When I turn eighteen, I will not need your approval."

"Technically, you don't need it now. But approval of the marriage is not what we are talking about. It is inheritance. That is, after Guglielmo's trust money runs out." The trust money was substantial but not a princely sum.

The trust money, however, was enough to embolden me. "If I have to get a job to support her, I will do so. I don't need your money."

After a few moments of silence, we both started laughing. He said, “That sounds like something right out of *Love Story.*

“I’m not threatening you, Tony. But I want you to think carefully about something. There’s nothing wrong with Amy. She is the finest young person—except for you—okay, and Brenda—I have ever met. But we’ve already discussed her father.”

“I’m marrying her, not her father…”

“She cannot just walk away from whatever problems she has with him. And if you marry her, you cannot walk away from them either.”

I smiled. “Actually, Dad, I can. Legally, that is.”

“You are serious, then.”

“Dad, you would not believe how serious I am.”

*

“So,” said Uncle Guglielmo on the phone. “I understand we are going to have to cater a wedding.”

“Looks like it,” I said.

“You gotta pay for it yourself, young man,” he said. “And for the engagement ring, too. You’ll have the trust money before the wedding. But not for the ring.” Before I could say anything, he assured me, “I’ll pay for it. I’ll just take it from the trust fund.” We had not yet signed the final paperwork.

“I’ll pay interest,” I said.

“You’re already talking like a businessman,” he said. “The businessman you will probably never be, but who knows?

“Now,” he continued, “what kind of a wedding are we talking about?”

“I think Dad wants a church wedding,” I said. “Maybe at the Santa Ynez mission.”

“The missions are mostly gift shops, but they do weddings. Sunstone Winery has a contract with them. Say, what do they eat at French wedding receptions? Rabbits?”

“Gimme a break, Uncle,” I said.

“And stinky cheese,” he said.

“Now there you’re probably right,” I said. “What about Chumash reception foods? Acorn pesto?”

“Now you give *me* a break there, Tony. Say, is Amy okay with a Catholic wedding?”

“A marriage is between two individuals,” I said. “We’ve talked about our religious beliefs. They’re pretty vague. But a *wedding* is between two *families*. So it should be a church wedding.”

“You talked to her old man?” asked my uncle.

“I still haven’t met him,” I said. “I imagine that if he had any objection, he would have told Aimée, and she would have told me.”

“Or not. If he said no, she might just tell him to go take a hike.”

"That doesn't sound like Aimée," I said. "But she would not accept an answer of no from him. She would be polite about it, but I don't think she will let anyone stop us. Except the forces of Hell."

"Well," said Guglielmo, "most French are Catholics. Except for the Huge Nuts."

"Huguenots," I said.

"That's what I said," answered my uncle.

*

"This score is extremely neat," said Mr. Beaumont. "I never saw any manuscript this neat."

It was true. Each of the full-sized sheets had lots of parallel musical staffs, the measures all lined up. I had the key signatures right, as well as the transpositions. I filled each solid note with a fine black felt pen and wrote the bars and stems with black ballpoint and a ruler. It did, indeed, look as if it had been printed.

"Have you written out the parts yet?" he asked me.

"No. I wanted you to check it over first."

"I did find a few things that would have been marked wrong in a university music theory class," he said. "Those parallel fifths will make it sound like a Gregorian chant, which I take it is not what you intended." I met his gaze with a blank look. "But this manuscript is so neat, we might want to just leave it as it is, until we hear it. So, go ahead and write out the parts.

"If you had used a computer program for this," he continued, "you could have made the changes without having to rewrite the whole score."

"I don't mind rewriting it by hand if I have to," I said.

"And this part," he indicated a long-held note in the center. "This is a brilliant idea." It was a note played by all of the instruments for which it was in range, which meant everything except the piccolo and the tuba. They all played it, but not all at once. Different groups of instruments gradually faded in and out, causing a change in timbre, which is sort of like color: soft woodwinds, shifting into soft brass, then into hard brass, then into hard woodwinds, ending with the oboe. It was like an unchanging landscape, with clouds passing over. "Did you come up with this yourself?"

"I think so," I said. "Although, there are never any really new ideas in the world."

"Where did you get the melody?"

"I found it in an old book at the library. It is the Hurrian Hymn number six. It is from a Mesopotamian clay tablet and is over 3,400 years old."

"It is not much of a melody. Just a descending line, then back up to where it started."

"There may have been more to it than that, but much of the tablet had been damaged. Scholars are not even sure of the intervals."

"You wrote it in minor," said Mr. Beaumont.

"Right."

"But the part of the melodic line that you wrote yourself is not in minor. Not quite. One of the notes is a half-step higher than it would be in minor. That changes the whole feeling of the piece. Why did you do that?"

"It sounded right," I said.

"It sounds haunting rather than sad."

"Yes."

"It sounds like a love song," he said.

"Most scholars think that is exactly what it was. Historians call it the Hurrian Hymn, but it doesn't sound like a hymn to me," I said.

"I was planning to have us perform the theme from *Love Story* for the spring concert," said Mr. Beaumont. "But with this piece you've written, it might be redundant.

"It is not in the minor mode. It is in the…" He looked up "musical modes" on the internet. "Ah, yes. It is in the dorian mode. The lower notes are just like minor, and sound sad. But the upper notes have a little breath of hope and happiness. That's the difference. Even if the cuneiform tablet had the whole scale on it, you could not know whether it was meant to be minor or dorian. You get to choose. I think you made the right choice.

"So, the world's oldest song is a love song? That's what the dorian mode is usually associated with. Just don't overuse it. People get tired of it after a while. It says here…" He read more on the computer screen. "The most famous folk song in the dorian mode is something called the Arran Boat Song."

"I know that song!" I exclaimed. "That explains why it sounds the way…I mean, I played it for Aimée…It was almost sunset, we were watching the Channel Islands…I mean, I think I said too much already."

Mr. Beaumont smiled. "That was the best place in the world to play that song.

"You might consider—later—extending this piece a bit, using your own musical invention. When you take music theory classes at the university. Oh, wait. They don't let non-majors take those classes. They don't have room for students to just sit in unless they are serious about composition." When he waited for me to not say anything, he added, "Maybe I could write them a letter, when it comes time to register for your university classes, requesting that they make an exception in your case. At least then you could compose on their computer."

*

Finally, everything was ready to rehearse my concert band piece. Mr. Beaumont wanted to get us in the mood for the serious and emotional music I had written.

"We have to think and feel the same things all together," he said. "A wind ensemble is like a body, with all the parts functioning together. That's what *ensemble* means. It is French for together." He nodded at Aimée, who glanced back at him.

Brad took it as an opportunity for a joke. "If the band is a body, I know which part Kevin is." Everyone, even Mr. Beaumont, laughed, except Aimée, who smiled quietly.

I had not told Aimée anything about this piece. The plaintive, haunting melody at the beginning was a solo for oboe. In Aimée's part, it was clearly marked "Solo."

Aimée was ready to play. Her eyes were bright as she looked up at Mr. Beaumont. The first note of her solo was clear and strong. I had not imagined that her oboe, which I had never clearly heard against the pep band background of loud trumpets and trombones, could be so expressive.

Immediately she stopped playing and looked around in terror. She was, as I intended, but as she apparently had not expected, the only person playing. She must have assumed "solo" meant no other oboes, or nobody else with the melody besides her; but in this case it meant a melodic line suspended in space like a lonely nebula or a spiderweb clinging to a leaf.

"That was fine, Amy. Beautiful. Just keep doing it. Let's start over," said Mr. Beaumont.

But Aimée put her oboe down on her lap and closed her eyes. She did not move.

"Amy?

"Well, does somebody have cues to that line?" asked Mr. Beaumont.

"I do," said Joan, the first-chair clarinet player, for whom I had written the solo melody in small notes.

"Amy," said Mr. Beaumont, "be ready for the next solo you have to play. It's near the end. There will be accompaniment to it. Right?" He looked at me and I nodded.

I almost missed my own solo because I was thinking intensely about what was going through Aimée's mind. But when her next solo came, against a quiet background of other instruments, she raised her instrument. Her melodic line was simple and clear.

Rehearsal was over for the day, and we started putting our instruments away. A couple of the trumpet players started playing a jazzed-up version of the melody.

Aimée was out the door before I could reach her.

I ran to meet her. She walked homeward without looking up at me. I walked beside her. While she did not acknowledge me, she walked slowly enough for me to keep up with her. "Your solo was beautiful," I told her several times while we walked.

When we got to the eucalyptus tree, and I said it again, she whirled at me.

"Why did you do that to me?" she said, with a voice as close to a yell as I had ever heard from her.

"I know it is called Hurrian Hymn, but it is actually a love song," I said.

I thought that would placate her, but I was wrong. "Why did you have me play all by myself like that? It made me so conspicuous."

"That was the point," I said. "I wanted everyone to hear how beautifully you can play."

"How long have you known me? Here we are, engaged and everything. And you still don't get it, do you! I don't want to be conspicuous. I don't want people to notice me. I even have a hard time accepting *your* attention."

"Look, I know you are painfully shy…"

"You know? Or you infer? The *shy* part is obvious; everybody knows I'm shy. But *painfully* shy? Only I could know if it was painful. Well, for your information, it was."

"I wrote the piece for you," I said.

She stopped and looked at me.

"That's what I've been doing all these weeks. I worked really, really hard on it. I thought maybe you would appreciate that."

She slumped. "You meant well," she said. "Just, next time, you might ask me if I feel comfortable with it."

"Will you feel comfortable with it if we do it in the concert? Now that you are past the initial shock."

"I suppose I'll get used to it. Yes, I will do it. For you."

"Everyone thought you played beautifully," I told her. After a few moments, I asked, "Herzen und Küssen?"

I assumed we would go behind the eucalyptus tree to kiss. But she came right up to me and pressed a kiss onto my lips right out in the open.

*

Aimée had dinner at our house again. She helped Mom out with making bœuf bourguignon. Before walking back to the apartment with her, Aimée and I sat together on the couch.

"About that band piece you wrote," she began.

"I already apologized…" I said.

"What I was going to say is that the melody is very nice."

I explained that it came from an old Mesopotamian clay tablet and that we did not actually know what the notes were.

"The intervals you chose certainly sound Middle Eastern," said Aimée. "They sound Jewish. Like in the *Hava Nagila*."

"Why do you know so much about Jewish music?" I asked as I turned to her.

I wondered if this was more than she had planned to say, but maybe it wasn't. She said, "I have a little bit of Jewish culture. Some of my ancestors were Jewish. I mean, most of them. I mean, all of them."

"How very interesting," I said.

"Not as interesting as Chumash," she said.

"I guess that means that both of us are descendants of people who have suffered oppression at the hands of people of European origin."

"I don't like to think about it," she said. "Papa and I don't have any involvement with Jewish culture around here. I know there are synagogues here, but Papa doesn't have time and I am uncomfortable going by myself."

"I could…

"And you probably would go with me to a synagogue, but I have never been involved with them, and I don't feel like starting now.

"I do have some very faint memories of my childhood in France," she continued. "Not of religious services, but of…I think it was a wedding. And one of my friends played the piano. An old clunky one. But she could play the Hava Nagila! If you have a throbbing rhythm, and play the keys loudly enough, it doesn't have to be a good piano, non? I wish I could remember the melody." She sat silently with her eyes closed and appeared more relaxed than I had ever seen her.

I checked the internet from my phone and found an image of the sheet music for Hava Nagila. It, indeed, had the extremely Middle-Eastern sounding intervals that I had, without knowing it, used in my reconstruction of the ancient melody.

Then Aimée began to sing the notes, not words. I had only that day heard her play her oboe. I had certainly never heard her singing voice, which was smooth and rich, unlike her speaking voice. I looked at the music on my phone. Aimée got it all right, all the notes, all the rhythms. She had to have drawn them from deep in her memory. Her eyes remained closed.

In less than a minute, a second and greater surprise emerged from her. Right when the melody had six strong, sustained notes, she stood up. When the melody resumed, she began whirling around, slowly at first, then faster, as she continued the wordless melody. She held out her arms and acted as if robes flowed from her movements.

Then she stopped and sat back down beside me, looking away into an imagined distance.

"That was wonderful!" I said. "Let me get my recorder, and I will play while you…"

"I don't think I could do it again," Aimée said quietly in her normal voice.

"But you just did it," I said. "I checked the internet. You got it perfect. And your dancing…"

"I was dancing?"

"Yes, of course. You are very graceful."

"Nobody has called me that before," she said. "And I would be too self-conscious to do it again."

"Aimée, it's just me. It's not like you would be dancing at a band concert or something."

She smiled. "This is true," she said. "But it is a memory that came unbidden, from deep in my soul."

"Your subconscious mind," I said without thinking.

"Whatever," she said. "Now all I can remember is that darkness was all around. If it was a wedding, it was inside with the windows closed. Just like when my friend played the piano. There was some reason we had to keep it secret."

"You mean, World War Two? Your papa isn't old enough to have been alive then. What reason could there possibly have been for Jewish culture to hide?" But I knew the answer before I finished speaking.

"There are still people in Europe who hate Jews," said Aimée.

"America, too," I said. "That is, if they know you are Jewish. I certainly did not know."

"I have told you more about myself than I have ever told anyone," she said.

"Not for the first time," I added. "Nor the last. We have a lifetime to discover things about each other."

"Speaking of which," said Aimée. "I have no objection to a Catholic wedding."

*

At the next band rehearsal, Mr. Beaumont passed out old sheet music for a big band piece, *Everybody Eats When They Come to My House.* It was a nice melody that sounded like all the other nice melodies from the 1950s. Even Kevin liked it.

"But why are we playing cues?" asked Joan the principal clarinet player about the little notes on our scores.

"Because there is going to be a singer," answered Mr. Beaumont. "You won't be playing cues when he sings."

"Who is it?"

The next rehearsal, Mr. Beaumont introduced Ernest Malone. He was old enough that he might have been alive in the 1950s, though he would have been a kid. He must have remembered his parents liking this music and dancing to it.

This time we did not play the cues. Ernest sang the lyrics. We all cringed at the puns, which included things like *Have a banana, Hannah; Try the salami, Tommy; Get with the gravy, Davy.* Okay, those weren't so bad, but there were some real screechers such as *Try a tomato, Plato.* Plato? Who would be named Plato? *Pass me a pancake, Mandrake* was even worse. *Pass him the latke, Matke.* Of course, I liked *Taste the baloney, Tony.*

Ernest Malone even danced around a little.

Aimée played quietly until the singer came to *Have a hors-d'ouvrey, Irvy.* Then she wrinkled her nose and bowed her head.

After Ernest left, we all sat in silence.

"Do we really have to do this piece in concert?" asked Roald.

"Mr. Malone is an important friend of the school," said Mr. Beaumont. "Translate, donor. How do you think we could afford those new uniforms?"

Everyone was surprised when Aimée started laughing long and loud. Nobody had ever heard the volume of which her voice box was capable. Sitting in her chair, she kicked and stamped her feet. Once she caught her breath, she spoke up. "Can't we leave out the verse with the *hors-d'oeuvry?*" She started laughing again, even louder. Tears pressed from her eyes. She slumped. The rest of us joined in her laughter.

"Mr. Malone is an important member of the community," said Mr. Beaumont. "And, did I mention, he is a major donor?"

*

The Schubert sessions with Aimée were the only things I looked forward to. I savored them and didn't want them to end.

In song number thirteen, *Die Post,* a mail carriage came to town with a jaunty fanfare. The wayfarer got excited about maybe getting a letter from his beloved. Which was silly, of course, since she didn't know or care where he was. *Die Post bringt keinen Brief für dich, Was drängst du denn so wunderlich, mein Herz, mein Herz?* The mail isn't bringing anything for you! Why are you beating so wildly, my heart? The rhythm was lub-dub, lub-dub, just like the systole and diastole of a heartbeat.

Song number fifteen was The Crow. A simple enough idea in the poem. A crow, the bird of death, was following the wayfarer on his journey. What astonished Aimée was what Schubert did with this idea. We could actually hear the circling of the crow overhead, with gentle triplet notes that outlined a simple sad melody. Then, partway through, the wayfarer stopped and looked up at the crow, which continued circling. The wayfarer said, *Crow, wonderful animal, why are you following me? Are you waiting for me to die?* I do not know what made me do it, but I extended my arms and began gliding slowly around the room. When the song finished, I saw Brenda sitting beside Aimée, watching me with wonder as I came to rest on the final note.

Both Aimée and Brenda agreed that song number seventeen, The Village, was funny. While dogs were growling and rattling their chains, the wayfarer walked through the village. He was angry at the people who dozed with sweet dreams while he had to face the depressing realities of his journey. But yet…Maybe these people were really happy and deserved their sweet slumber. When the wayfarer stopped to think about the people dreaming, the music became utterly sublime. Even Brenda loved it.

When Aimée and I were alone, she said, "I wish I could sleep like those villagers. With such sweet dreams."

"Do you have nightmares?" I asked.

"You might call them that," she answered. "I dream I am back in Alsace, walking on a pleasant trail, then I am aware that someone is following me. Then I fall off a cliff and wake up. Or maybe off of a castle wall. Or, I am here in Goleta, and I fall into the ocean. Over and over."

"And I, Aimée. My dreams aren't so bad, if I can ever get to sleep. I think I know what this means."

"Oh, now we are a psychoanalyst, are we?"

"It means that we cannot be fully satisfied until we are married. Not just engaged but married. I cannot think of anything that can stop us from getting married, but I cannot help being apprehensive about it."

"And my papa," said Aimée. "He keeps assuring me everything is fine, but the more he insists on it, the less I believe him."

"All we can do," I said, "is to not lose hope. Most of these Schubert songs are hopeless. The last one is *Der Leiermann,* The Organ Grinder. At the end of the journey, the wanderer sees a poor man grinding an organ and asking for alms on the cold street. The wayfarer decides to join this man and become a beggar. You will soon hear the music Schubert wrote for it. The music is really bleak. I shudder whenever I hear it.

"Schubert died poor and unknown. He would never have guessed that millions of people would not just listen to but be uplifted by his music. The wanderer lost hope. But swear to me, Aimée, let us swear to each other, that *we* will never lose hope."

"No Leiermann for us," she said. We kissed, but it was an entirely different kind of kiss than we had in our *Frühlingstraum*.

Chapter 8

One morning, at school, the women's physical education teacher, Andrea, wanted to talk to me. About Aimée.

"Something's not right," she said. "You spend a lot of time with Aimée, right?"

"Yes," I said. "What's the problem?"

"I don't think she's getting enough to eat," said Andrea.

"I've been a little concerned about that myself," I said. "That's why my family has been having Aimée over for dinner once in a while." Aimée was getting free school lunches, but this made little difference if she did not get adequate nutrition at home. The school lunches were simply inadequate. Even decades earlier, when the school lunch program started, ketchup was considered a vegetable. And it went downhill from there. Then I said to Andrea, "Maybe we should talk to Claire?" Claire was the school nurse.

"We might have to, eventually, but if Claire becomes concerned about Aimée's health, she will be required, by law, to report Aimée to county health officials."

"What happens then?"

"The county juvenile authorities might find her father guilty of negligence." When I did not respond, she continued. "Then they would have to take Aimée into protective custody."

Alarm showed on my face. "You cannot imagine," I said, "how much Aimée would hate being taken into any kind of protective custody. She is very secretive about her home life. She doesn't even tell me much about it."

"I assume you have been to her apartment," said Andrea.

"I have not," I said.

"I assume you have met her father," Andrea continued.

"I have seen him, from a distance," I said.

"Oh, dear, this could become serious. I think you need to do something right away. You say you have already been having her over to dinner?"

"Yes."

"Then it would be a small matter to have her over more often," said Andrea.

"That's correct. But you'd better tell me what you have seen that has alarmed you about Aimée."

"Well," said Andrea, drawing her fingers through her short dark hair. "She's pretty skinny."

"We're working on that," I said.

"Not morbidly skinny. Otherwise I'd have already told Claire about her. I don't suspect anorexia. But Aimée seems to get very fatigued no matter how much or how little we do during physical education activities. Badminton, tennis, basketball, calisthenics. She gets shortness of breath and becomes dizzy."

"I deeply appreciate you telling me about Aimée," I said. "I'll talk to her about this right away."

As I started to turn away, Andrea said, "This is a potentially serious matter. Very serious. If Aimée gets visibly weaker, I will have to tell Claire, at which point she will have to take action."

"What kind of action?"

"Aimée might have to go to the hospital. As in, be forced to go. And there is always the possibility that her father would be found negligent of her health." Andrea paused to let the words sink in. "Criminally negligent."

"Look," I said to Andrea. "We haven't told people about this at school yet, but Aimée and I are getting married."

"Like I'm surprised," Andrea smiled.

"Right. Then, she will be my responsibility. As I will be hers. If we can just hold off long enough for us to graduate before anyone official gets involved."

"That makes all the sense in the world to me," said Andrea. "And I'm sure it would to Claire, also. But you know how bureaucracies are. Your parents have no guardianship of her? Not yet? That means No. Then the county health department will step in if they feel there is a problem. And it won't be pretty." She whispered to me again, "Criminally negligent."

*

"Aimée, I don't think you are getting enough to eat." I avoided saying *we*. I had no intention of telling her that the P. E. teacher had noticed her symptoms. Having become more than a little alarmed, I made myself late to class by doing some online research in the library about the symptoms of malnutrition. "This is potentially a very serious situation." I did not give her a chance to ask me any questions. I continued, "On the nights you don't come over for dinner, what do you eat?"

"Papa doesn't cook," she said.

"Do you cook?"

"I never learned. I told you that I hardly remember my Mama."

"Then, what *do* you do?" I touched her chin and turned her face to look at mine.

"I eat the free food from my job," she said. "Those bags of food I always take with me when you meet me after work."

"Fast food?" I asked. She nodded. "Once in a while, it is all right, but all the time? God, that's terrible! Prodigious amounts of fat, salt, and sugar. High-fructose corn syrup that you can't even taste, for example in the buns. The sugar and salt cancel each other out taste-wise. I saw a podcast about it once. One explanation for it is that both salt and sugar help to prevent bacterial contamination. But the commentator said that it was part of a vast conspiracy by food corporations to addict us to salt and sugar, as well as fat. I don't know whether to believe that or not, but this much is clear. Fast food is terrible for you."

"That must be why I hate it so much," Aimée said. "That's why…" She whispered into my ear. "That's why I don't eat very much of it. I leave most of it for papa."

"You need to eat more," I said. "You're starving yourself."

"Tony, I can put up with a little privation. Maybe here in America, you don't know much about privation. But us Europeans…I grew up hearing all about the starvation and suffering at the end of World War Two. That generation has pretty much passed on, but *La Seconde Guerre Mondiale* left a permanent scar on us."

"Oh, I'm not questioning your ability to put up with privation. But I want you to be healthy. You do realize, of course, that insufficient nourishment will eventually affect your brain."

"Tony, that's not something that will happen unless I am starving." She almost smiled. "Which I am not. The body will break down whatever it needs in order to supply the brain with the energy that it requires. You know that. The brain is the last thing to go."

"But that applies only to the brain keeping your body *alive*. Keeping your heart and lungs going, things like that. But the part of the brain that you value the most is the cerebrum. You want to give up your astonishing intelligence and creativity? All that writing in your notebooks. That's going to start degenerating someday…"

"Very well," she sighed. "It's not someday. It's now. I've noticed that I cannot think of the right words, or remember what I just wrote, or…or…My handwriting is getting crabbish."

"Crabby."

"That's what I said."

"And when we…" I looked into her eyes. "When we embrace, I can feel your heartbeat."

"Of course."

"You have an irregular heartbeat."

"That's called love."

"No. I mean, not when it happens every time. An irregular heartbeat is not good. Aimée, you aren't getting enough to eat. You need to come over for dinner. Like, maybe every night."

"Can't we wait for the fostership?" she asked.

"No," I said. "That will take too long."

"Very well," she said. "Meet me as usual."

I embraced her closely. I nibbled her earlobe a little. It was just as I suspected: the skin at the base of the lobe was cracked. A clear symptom of Vitamin C deficiency.

"What's for dinner?" she asked.

"Evolution," I answered.

*

"Evolution—It's what's for dinner," I announced at the table.

"Why do I have to have the weird brother?" asked Brenda.

"You see," I began. "By eating, we are part of the food chain."

"That's ecology, not evolution," said Dad.

"It's both," I said. "Like that broccoli that's so far untouched on Brenda's plate…"

"And which she had better eat," said Mom.

"I hate broccoli!" exclaimed Brenda.

"Try some mayonnaise on it," said Mom.

"The broccoli wants you to hate it," I told her.

Now I had everyone's attention.

"Well," I began. "Broccoli is part of the mustard family of plants, along with cabbage, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts…"

"This is why sprouts have the appearance of the little cabbages?" asked Aimée.

"Yes. Their wild ancestors were just mustard plants. We have bred them into lots of different forms. But they all still have small quantities of mustard oils, which some people don't like. The mustard plants produce these oils to keep animals from eating them."

"So, vegetables don't want us to eat them!" Brenda said triumphantly.

"We have bred other vegetables to produce less of the offensive chemicals. Potatoes and tomatoes, for example. Their wild relatives are poisonous."

"So, we have, so to speak, enslaved food plants to grow into things we like to eat," said Mom.

"Plants don't want animals to eat anything other than their fruits and seeds," I continued. "And then only if the seeds are mature. In that case, the seeds get a free ride inside the animal's intestines and get pooped out, in a new location, and with a little pile of fertilizer to give them a healthy start when they germinate."

"Tony said poop," smiled Brenda, pretending to be a little girl.

"Plants have evolved defenses against animals that eat them, except for fruits which have seeds in them."

"Well, then," said Brenda, "we can eat the blackberry pie—it even has seeds in it—and leave the broccoli alone."

"I'm missing something here," said Dad. "We get vitamins from eating vegetables. But the vegetables get no benefit in return. If I were a plant, I would not invest in being a vegetable."

"There's more to the story," I said.

"There usually is," said Mom.

"We let vegetables go to seed, then we plant the seeds. The result is our vast acreage of farmland. No wild plants would ever have such spectacular success as our crops have. We give them whole fields to live in, and they feed us. It's a great big example of mutualism."

"Mutualism means that everybody is happy," said Aimée.

"Except me," said Brenda, still looking at her limp broccoli.

"And cows," I continued. "The cows we slaughter do not individually benefit from us eating them. But we breed the cows that we do not eat, and they have lots of calves. There must be billions of cows in the world because we raise them. No way could there be that many cows in the wild. But in return, we have bred them to be docile."

"That means stupid," Brenda said to Aimée. Everybody laughed.

Except Aimée, who began to weep very loudly.

"What's wrong, dear?" asked Mom.

"Why should something be wrong?" asked Aimée. "These are tears of the joy. This meal has been so much enjoyment!"

Brenda stared at Aimée in amazement as she continued to cry.

We started to clear away the dishes. Aimée, her eyes still wet, raised her head, looked around, and then started to carry her plate and cutlery to the kitchen sink. She started to stumble. The dishes did not crack too badly when Aimée dropped them.

*

The next night, Mom made steaks and loaded potatoes for all of us.

"Can we afford this?" asked Dad.

"It's cheaper than eating out," answered Mom.

"Well, of course it is. Still expensive, though."

"And we won't be having steaks every night," Mom ended the conversation.

When I brought Aimée home, she smiled rapturously. It was a perfect evening for grilling outside, and the Neanderthal scent of barbecue wafted under our noses. Aimée ran out to look.

"I have read," I told her, "that flame-kissed meat has what are called Maillard compounds."

"I'll bet bread crust does, too," she said.

"You are right," I said. "But browned meat has the most of all. They cause cancer."

"It won't hurt one time," said Mom. "It's not like we eat this way every night. I want Aimée to discover how good food can be."

"Fast food places have what they call flame-kissed hamburgers," said Aimée. "Like the Rolando-burger, neh-pah. But it's just not the same."

Aimée was filled with joy as she ate with us. Not just the steak, but the potatoes with *le beurre extraordinaire* and sour cream. The carrots were candied.

About a quarter hour after we finished eating, Aimée got a strange look on her face. "Tony," she said, "I think I took this a little too fast." She excused herself to our downstairs bathroom. I heard her vomiting.

"Good try, Mom," I said. "I'm sure one of these days Aimée will enjoy a big, delicious meal. But for now, I'd better go check on her."

I tapped on the bathroom door. "Aimée? You all right in there?"

Aimée's voice was raspy. "Tony, that was—*waaaaaap!*—a stupid question."

"May I come in?"

"If you don't mind seeing your fiancée with vomit all over her face."

I entered. She looked up from the porcelain bowl with a pitiful look. The skin of her face was various shades of green. “Your face looks like one of those green people in your story,” I smiled.

She sighed as I kissed her lips, not expecting that I would be greeted with a little chunk of potato. “Green people, neh-pah? Thanks for trying to make me feel better. It won’t work, but thanks anyway.”

“You gonna feel like walking home, or should I borrow the car?” I asked.

She stood and steadied herself. “Let me wash my face and have some cold water, and I’ll be fine. I will have to walk slowly, but I’ll be fine.”

As we left, Mom told us, “I guess now isn’t a good time for the chocolate cake I made.”

*

The next night, Mom said she had a special treat for Aimée. French onion soup.

“It is one of the gourmet foods that Aimée must yearn for,” said Mom.

“What is it?” asked Brenda.

“First,” said Mom, “you brown some onions in salted butter. Then you add water. That’s about it. It tastes better if you use stock from some kind of meat.

“No meat?” asked Brenda.

“I will have some *charcuterie* on the side,” said Mom.

“Some what?”

“Cold cuts. *Saucisses*, things like that. I thought that maybe Amy would like something with a little more brothlike tonight.”

“Actually,” said Aimée, “the onion soup is not such a gourmet food. Onions are very cheap—*bon marché,* as we say—because one can store them up in a cellar. One can use little shriveled onions for this soup. And if one does not have the butter, one can, I mean, you can use whatever grease you have.”

“Like the fat on top of the stock in the fridge,” said Mom.

“Oui.”

“And we will have croutons and cheese on top of the soup,” continued Mom.

“The croutons,” said Aimée, “is that for which we use the stale bread. That is, yesterday’s bread. And the cheese? When you cut the cheese…”

“You mean,” I said, “when you trim off the edges of the cheese.”

“Oui. Where the mold has begun to grow. Old onions, old grease, old bread, old cheese. It is our comfort food, and we like it much. But, this is what you think is the gourmet food?”

“When I was in Scotland,” Dad chimed in, “we ate some of their traditional meat. Any part of the sheep, like the lungs, that nobody would choose to eat, just throw it in the grinder and call it haggis. After mixing it with oats, of course.”

“Thanks for cooking this dinner for us, Mom,” I said. “But it might be a little short of…” I looked at Aimée. “Of Vitamin C.”

"We are having citrus fruits for dessert!" said Mom.

When it was time for dessert, Mom had oranges, tangerines, grapefruits, lemons, limes, and even an Ugli fruit.

"Why is it called *that*?" asked Brenda.

"It is a cross between a tangerine and a grapefruit," I said. "I think it got the worst of both."

Before we noticed, Aimée picked up the knife and began slicing a lemon. She shoved a slice, rind and all, in her mouth. "This is delicious!" she said.

"Amy," said Mom. "I intended the lemon for making lemon water. Same with the limes. Lemons and limes are too sour to eat directly…"

"They taste fine to me," smiled Aimée, who chewed the rind. "Except the seeds."

"Have you eaten lemons before?" I asked her.

"Oh, yes, a long time ago. You see…" I sat down with her to hear her story. "When I was very young, before we moved to Strasbourg, we lived in the Mediterranean region of France, the Côte d'Azur, You know it?"

"I've heard of it," I said.

"It is warm and sunny. And dry. Lots of shrubs, like around here in Santa Barbara. They raise lemons there. Menton lemons. I did not know what kind of lemons they were when I lived there. My papa—and I think Mama was still with us then—picked lemons. I helped out. I was skinny and I could climb between the branches, sliding past the thorns. I could reach fruit that others found difficult. I remember enjoying this. A lot of nice days outside.

"I remember Papa being very sad one afternoon. I sat with him. He said that, no matter how many lemons he picked, or how fast, even with my help, he could not earn enough money to provide for us. He said that it was not the people who picked the lemons, but the ones who bought and sold them, that earned the money. I think it was at that time that he got into marketing the produce and then of other things. I suspect that he found no more money in marketing than in picking. He mentioned to me recently that he has nice memories of those days when we picked fruit in the sun.

"The few memories I have of that time have come flooding back to me as I eat these lemons."

Aimée ate lemons every night at dinner, except when she substituted limes. But when I smooched Aimée's earlobes I could tell she still had Vitamin C deficiency. I told her about it.

"Oh, is that what you are doing?" Aimée said to me. "I thought you just loved me."

"Loving you. That is exactly what I am doing," I said. "I love to smooch you, but I also love for you to be healthy."

"Thank you," she said.

"We might also try some Vitamin C supplements," I said.

"We do not want to have too much of the vitamins," she said. "Some of them, you can get too much, especially Vitamin A. People can die from overdoses."

"But not Vitamin C," I said. "It is water soluble, and if you get too much, you just piss it out every day.

"Remember back when I was concerned about your bad skin?" I continued. "I thought all you needed was some lotion."

"And a suntan," added Aimée.

"I think it was just that you needed more Vitamin C. It was collagen deficiency. That might also explain your dry-looking hair."

"And brittle fingernails?" she asked.

"Yes, though I had not noticed them."

"I keep them short, but it is not always good enough," she said. She held up a hand. One finger had a cracked nail on it.

"I think we just need to give your body a little more time to adjust," I said. "For example, the fingernails that are visible now started growing weeks ago. When new ones grow out, they will be fine." I kissed her. "Won't be too long before the other guys are going to try to get you and push me out of the way."

Aimée smiled grandly. "They won't get very far," she said. She became suddenly very serious. "Tony, you might have saved my life."

"I might very well have done that very thing," I said. "Meanwhile, let's give things some more time. Now, how about a little more dessert?" I pulled a bar of chocolate out of a little sack. It was dark chocolate with pieces of orange and almond.

"Oh, but it has been so long since I have had a chocolate bar!" Aimée did not wait for me to pull the cardboard open and unwrap the bar from its aluminum foil. She quickly had a square of chocolate in her mouth. She moaned in pleasure. I must have been the only person to hear her moan.

"Why is it," she asked, smacking her lips, "that chocolate is so good?"

"It's not just the chocolate," I said. "It is also cocoa butter. It melts right at body temperature. This is what makes it…" I kissed her again. "…such a sexual experience."

"I know not much of the sexual experience," Aimée said. "It has much pain, this experience, neh-pah? Pain that I have avoided. And much pleasure, which I will share with you before very many more months. And then for a lifetime."

Chapter 9

I had now, for several weeks, been able to sleep again, not deeply, but without the deflating insomnia that I had the previous fall. So much, after all, had changed. Aimée and I were engaged, and people knew it.

But some things had not changed. In particular, I still worried about her papa's business connections, and the constant stress that must have afflicted Aimée as a result. She spent many nights on our couch, but still mostly lived with her papa. She hid her stress well, even from me. Or else I was imagining everything. Soon I began doing what I started to do last fall: to sneak out of my room and watch her apartment building. I did this four or five times and saw nothing happening. I wasn't even sure which apartment was hers, but I felt like a guardian angel keeping watch over her. Not one of fourteen, as in Humperdinck's *Hänsel and Gretel,* but just me, me alone.

One night, I saw a car drive up to Pascal, who stood outside the building. It was Loïc, who engaged him in conversation. Pascal then walked over to his own car. I didn't know he had one, but how else could he engage in his business of selling things? He had no store, as far as I knew, so he must have run his business from the trunk of his car. Loïc left his trunk open as Pascal moved some small boxes into it.

Pascal had left his apartment door unlocked. While Pascal was not looking, Loïc walked toward the apartment. I continued to watch. A few minutes later, I saw Aimée at a ground floor bedroom window on the other side of the building, near the ditch. She bent the loose screen as she pushed her way out. She was wearing a loose, frayed nightgown, the same one she brought with her when she stayed in our guest bedroom. She clung to the clothes and shoes she had been wearing that day. She wore slippers. She began running toward me. I did not think she knew I was there, but the only way she knew to run was toward my house, on the other side of the school, in the direction she had so often walked. I started running after her. Her gown looked like a fluttering moth.

Not looking back, Aimée ran even faster along the sidewalk outside of the school fence. When I came close to her, she whirled at me and said *"Rhââââ!"* At least, this is the way it was spelled in the graphic novels I read in French class. She gasped for breath and croaked, "Tony?"

"I'm glad I came in time," I said, gathering her in my arms.

"You mean, you came here in the night to my apartment…"

"Yes."

"Just how often have you done this?"

I now held nothing back from her. "A few times." Before Aimée could become alarmed, I added, "You know I just worry about you all the time."

"How did you know which apartment was mine?"

"I didn't," I said. "I figured it was not too far from our tree. I have seen your papa and Loïc…"

"You know his name?"

"I have listened to your papa talking with him several times. I do not know what is in the little packages in the trunks of their cars…"

"I didn't know either until recently," said Aimée. "Papa kept it secret from me. He was trying to protect me from the brutal reality of his business. Well, it was more brutal than I had imagined."

"So, what is the merchandise that he is transporting?"

"If I told you, you might have to testify."

"Please, at least tell me what happened tonight."

"Loïc came into the apartment. When I heard him, I thought it was Papa. He came into my room, grabbed me, and covered my mouth with his hand."

"Oh my God," I said. "Did he rape you?"

"I do not know what he might have done," said Aimée. "He said he would not hurt me, even called me *ma cherie*. Then Papa came in and saw what he was doing. Papa told him that he would kill him if he hurt me. But Loïc was calm and reminded Papa that neither of them wanted the police to become involved. We cannot let the police see the merchandise. It brings in the only money we get, which pays the rent, or not. We cannot tell the police about Loïc. If they arrested him he would tell them everything. Papa would go to prison, and I…I? Where would I go?

"This has never happened before," Aimée continued. "Any physical danger, at least to me. You just happened to come at the right time to rescue me." She looked down at her gown and her bare legs. "I do not want to stay outside dressed, or not dressed, as I am. What can I do?"

"You were running toward my house anyway," I said. We continued walking rapidly.

"Do your parents know you are out here?" she asked me.

"No," I answered. "They are asleep. I hope. I sneaked out of my room."

"Sneaked out? How?" she asked.

"Like this," I said. By this time we had reached the fence beside my room, slipped through the bougainvillea, and looked at the silent house. Aimée followed me as I climbed the tree. It was in almost complete darkness. I knew where the handholds were, but Aimée did not. I held her hand and brought her onto the roof and into my room.

"I think we should wake my parents and let them know what has happened," I told her.

"No," she said. "I am so tired that I am about to faint." She dropped herself onto my bed. "I think I need to have you hold me tonight," she said to me, and was soon asleep. I removed her slippers and glasses and drew the sheet and blanket over her. I placed the clothes she had carried on my chair. I removed my shoes. I slipped in the bed beside Aimée. She woke just long enough to shift her body next to mine and snuggle her head into the crook of my arm.

I imagined that Aimée was sleeping more peacefully than she ever had before in her life. Her hair tingled my face. But I did not move my arm to feel or caress her. Just after I had fallen asleep, however, she twitched. It happened again about twenty minutes later. She started breathing erratically. I assumed she was having a nightmare. I held her tightly each time she did this, which is why I got no sleep that night.

*

We did not wake up until Mom opened the door and entered my room. I stirred and saw her angry eyes staring at me.

"Antonio Frescobaldi Baldasare Albinoni, what is going on here?" she asked firmly but quietly. "Your cell phone alarm is going off. Can't you hear it?"

I heard it. Finally, Aimée heard it too and pulled the covers aside. "I've overslept," she said. "I hardly ever do this. Where are my glasses?" She felt with her hands around to where, I assumed, she would normally have placed them. Realizing that she was in an unfamiliar room, she opened her eyes fully and looked around. She gasped first when she saw Mom, and again when she realized she was in the thin gown she had been wearing when she climbed through her window.

"I'll explain everything to Mom," I told Aimée.

"We'll be late to school," Aimée said. "Oh, God, I'll probably sleep through my first period history class." She jumped out of the bed, grabbed her clothes, and went out into the second floor hallway. Brenda was just entering the upstairs bathroom, so Aimée leapt down the stairs to the ground floor.

"You were about to explain what is going on," said Mom.

"It's not what you think," I said. "Aimée and I didn't, like, sleep together, I mean we did but it was not sexual, I didn't feel her up or anything, she just needed somebody to hold onto. It's been a really hard night for her."

"And for you, too, apparently," said Mom. "What is that girl doing here? Of course, I'm glad to see her the way I do almost every evening. This might also be the safest place for her to be, I am guessing."

"Like I said, Mom, we haven't been touching each other. I mean, we have, but not, you know, in *that* way."

"I wouldn't be angry at you if you did do something sexual," Mom said. "It's just that you may not realize what you are getting into. At least you are engaged. See? You've already pretty much shot your school day to hell. Hers too." We heard the front door slamming and knew that Aimée had already left for school. "Did she have her backpack with her?"

"No," I said. "She grabbed the clothes she had removed before going to bed in her own bedroom. I found her running down the sidewalk. I brought her here."

"What were you doing outside?"

"I've been going to her apartment building some nights," I said. Mom's shock made her speechless. "I have been worried about her being in danger from her papa's problems."

"Just business problems?" asked Mom.

I should have caught what she meant by this, but I was very confused from my sleepless night of being repeatedly awakened by Aimée's spasms and nightmares.

"You don't think Pascal has been mistreating her?"

"You mean, abusing her? No, Mom. But one of his business associates advanced on her…"

"I was going to make breakfast for her. Well, let's go down to the kitchen. Your father is probably wondering why Amy just ran out the front door."

At the kitchen table, Mom and Dad listened to my explanation about what had, and had not, happened.

"I guess it was lucky that you happened to go to her apartment," Dad said. "But now we have to figure out what to do. Should we let her stay here all the time? I think we could just say she is couch-surfing. Not in your bed, of course, or at least not with you."

I told Mom about Aimée's troubled sleep.

"Then the best thing is to give her a safe bed to sleep in. By herself. Meanwhile, we really need to talk with her father. We need a commitment from him about a time to meet and sign the papers for us to be her foster parents."

Dad asked me what I thought we should do, at least today.

"I think I will walk her home and wait for her to tell her papa that she will be staying with us tonight," I said. "If he's not there, a strong possibility, then she can leave him a note. She might be able to call him. He probably has a burner phone. No other way to do business. But he doesn't have a long-term phone number."

"Let's take it one day at a time," said Dad. "Tony, just be careful, okay? You could get dragged into something over your head. Her father and his business associates sound like a rough gang."

"Life never goes as we plan it," said Mom. "You get on to school and bring that girl back here tonight. And," added Mom, "tell her that we love her too."

Chapter 10

By the time I had walked to school, having only missed my first hour study hall, I was feeling much better. I sighed in relief that Aimée now had a lifeline—my family. I thought about how happy I was with Aimée. We'd both recently gotten our acceptances, and scholarships, from UCSB. Damn if my family didn't, maybe, save her life by, sort of, adopting her. She was happy. I was happy. There seemed to be no possible future calamity that could strike us.

We were making quick progress on improving Aimée's health.

But not quickly enough.

I did not see her during the morning break. I ran to the classroom just as her second period literature teacher, Mr. Griner, was closing the door.

"Where's Aimée?" I asked.

"I can't tell you," he said.

Right then, Rick was walking by. He told me, "She fainted."

I rushed to find Claire, the school nurse. She told me Aimée was at the county hospital. I had heard the ambulance but had not imagined it was for Aimée.

"What happened?" I asked frantically. "I know she fainted."

"It didn't take me long to figure out that she is undernourished," said Claire. "I asked her a few questions. Some of her symptoms could be due either to not getting enough sleep or not getting enough food. Or both, of course. I saw a bruise on her arm. She said she got it at work. I asked her how long she had had it. She said two weeks. Two freaking weeks without healing! That's not insomnia. That's malnourishment. And you! I can't tell you anything more."

"Unless I can be part of the solution," I said. "My family has been having Aimée over for dinner. It's only been a week or so. It will take a while for her to get healthy."

"What do you feed her?"

"Healthy food," I said. "She is particularly fond of lemons."

"Looks to me like Aimée has Vitamin C deficiency," said Claire.

"Aimée has only recently started citrus fruits and vitamin C tablets," I said. "Hasn't been long enough yet.

"And I should tell you that Aimée and I are engaged," I added.

Claire grumbled congratulations. "But you have no legal authority to help her yet. It's out of my hands now," she said, touching up her coiffure and looking at her long, painted fingernails. "If the hospital releases her, then she can go home and have dinner with you, if she wants to. If they determine that her father has been negligent, then they will not let her go."

"If they will just let her go, we will take care of her," I said.

"The county health department makes that call," said Claire.

"I'm going to go to the hospital and wait for her to be released. Or to not be released," I said.

"You have some way of getting there?" asked Claire.

"My parents are using both cars today."

"Tony, it's five miles!"

"I can run," I said. "And I hope, for Aimée's sake, that my family and I get the chance to rehabilitate her. Love can accomplish what laws cannot. First Corinthians, chapter thirteen," I said, quoting almost the only scripture I knew.

*

A nurse pushed Aimée out the hospital door—whoosh!—in a wheelchair. When Aimée saw me, her face lit up. Then she saw my Mom also, who came as soon as she could, but not until I had run and stumbled the entire way to the hospital.

"Aimée! What happened? You're in a…" I started.

"Hospital rules," said the nurse. "We have to bring her out in a wheelchair, so she won't trip and sue us."

"What do we do now?" Mom asked.

"She's been released," said the nurse. "Not our responsibility any longer."

Aimée stood up from the wheelchair without the slightest hesitation. She told the nurse that she would leave with us. The nurse turned the wheelchair around and vanished into the corridor.

In her hand, Aimée had her discharge papers. She handed them to me.

"What happened?" I asked. "We already know it had something to do with malnutrition."

"They gave me medical tests all day long," she said. We sat on a metal bench beside a fountain outside the hospital. "Some of the tests I know I didn't do very well on. Tests for the mental acuity."

"I'm sure you did well," Mom said. "You're very smart, Aimée."

"Normally, but not under this kind of stress," I said.

"They asked me who the president was," said Aimée. "I said, America or France? They thought I was not taking them seriously. What day it was. To name ten animals. My mind switched to French. I timed out with a score that gave me a mental age of either five or seventy-five. They said my brain was malnourished."

"I see it on the list here," said Mom. "Mental acuity test."

"It was in English," said Aimée.

"You speak English well. You probably even think in English a lot of the time," said Mom.

"Have you ever had to think quickly under pressure?" Aimée asked me. "Like now." She turned to me. "Name ten American cities in the next eight seconds."

Four of the seconds passed before I stammered, "Los Angeles…"

"See? It is like being some poor squirrel in the middle of the road. When the car is coming toward you, it is hard to think of where to run, or even whether."

"Okay, Aimée. You're right. But the medical personnel used it as evidence that you are not getting enough to eat," I said.

"Of course," continued Aimée, "they took the pulse and the blood pressure. Then I had to have the BMI test."

"I've heard of that but remind me again. What is that?" I asked.

"The body mass index," said Aimée. "Then they made me take off my clothes and they dunked me in water to determine my body fat. Their conclusion was…"

"It says here, you're skinny," said Mom.

"We knew that, didn't we?" I whined.

"Well, now we have a number telling us *how* skinny," said Mom. "The BMI is 17.5."

"It says here the normal range is 18.5 to 24.9," I read from the printout. "That means that Aimée isn't very far out of the normal range."

"Until you remember that 25 means obesity," said Mom.

"Then they took some of my blood," continued Aimée. "They told me, *this is going to hurt a teensy weensy little bit.* I told them I was not afraid. But then they couldn't find a vein. They poked all over both wrists and elbows. That's when I started to get scared. My muscles tensed and that made it worse. Finally they poked me in one of the very obvious blue veins on the back of my hand."

"It says here, *difficult intubation,*" said Mom.

"They told me I had low blood sugar," said Aimée.

"You ran out before having breakfast," observed Mom. "And you missed lunch because you were here at the hospital." She looked at the printout some more. "Looks like they tested you for every possible vitamin and mineral," said Mom. "Calcium, phosphorus, vitamin A, all the B vitamins separately, vitamins C, D, and E. And a whole bunch I don't even recognize. You recognize any of them, Tony?"

I looked at the printout. "But your thyroid function is normal. That means…"

"That means I just need to go have a nice dinner. Again," said Aimée.

"Says here," continued Mom, "you are to be admitted to the hospital again for a more thorough examination in two weeks."

When we got Aimée home with us, Dad looked over the printout. He whistled in amazement. "They are required by law to give some price ranges for these tests. Why should a body fat content test cost five hundred dollars? Pulses and blood pressure, four hundred dollars?"

"Our P. E. teacher Andrea measures the pulse and blood pressure in class," said Aimée. "She uses those little desktop units. They can't be very expensive. One can use them over and over."

"Four hundred dollars for a single use?" said Dad. "And all the other prices are higher. Sheesh. I'd hate to be whoever has to pay this bill. I assume the taxpayers will pay for it."

Aimée's dinner with us that night seemed like a homecoming.

*

The next afternoon, Aimée was at my house again, and I had my recorder out. I had found another Jewish folk song, as different from Hava Nagila as any song could be, except that it was also in the minor mode. But it did not have the abrupt musical intervals. *Tumbalalaika* was smooth, lyrical, and romantic.

I played it for Aimée. "Have you heard it?" I asked.

"No," she answered. "At least that I remember. But it is hauntingly beautiful. I don't think I shall forget it. Do you know the words?"

"Here is one translation I found for two of the verses," I said. The young man was looking for a young woman who would be a good wife because she was wise."

"Wise? That does not sound like anything that most men, especially centuries ago, would be looking for in a wife." She smiled.

"Except maybe a Jewish man," I smiled. "He asked her these questions.

Maiden, maiden, tell me true, What can grow without the dew?
What can burn for years and years? What can cry and shed no tears?

And the young woman answered:

Silly boy, I'll tell you true, a stone can grow without the dew,
Love can burn for years and years, A heart can cry and shed no tears.

"And this, in part, is why I love you, Aimée. You are wise. That is not high on the list for things that guys find hot in gals. Although I seem to remember some passages in the Old Testament in which poets praise the wisdom of women."

"I don't think I would ever call you a silly boy," she told me.

"You might have to someday."

*

For weeks we college-bound students had been preparing our scholars' fair posters and models. It used to just be the science fair, but it expanded to include the humanities. It took a lot of time, which is why I was glad Aimée and I could work together, helping each other. My project was chlorophyll, hers was *Romeo and Juliet*.

My poster told about how chlorophyll in leaves intercepted sunlight and created electric currents that converged and, finally, stimulated the formation of sugar. I wanted to make it interesting, so I tried to think of some Batman substitute for *stimulated*. Zapped? Whapped? Whopped? I decided to stay with stimulated. I probably wouldn't win the science category,

because my demonstration, on a little platform surrounded by the three information panels, would just be a little jar of chlorophyll extract.

I had to ask Mr. Eschbaugh the chemistry teacher how to extract chlorophyll from a leaf.

"The right way," he said, "is to use acetone and pet ether. Then you not only have a good extraction, but you can separate the bands apart."

"Separate the bands?"

"Sure. There are actually two chlorophylls in a leaf. One is chlorophyll a."

"And the other must be chlorophyll b. What's the difference?" I asked.

"They are slightly different colors. Chlorophyll b is a nice olive green. Chlorophyll a is a beautiful emerald-green color."

"Ooh, I'd like to extract that one."

"Oh, no. We're not going to use pet ether," Mr. Eschbaugh chuckled. "It would vaporize away and leave the air toxic. We always use it in a fume hood here at school, which sucks away the vapors. But you won't have a fume hood at the fair. The pet ether might even explode."

"What else is there?" I asked.

"There's a solvent called dimethylforamide," Mr. Eschbaugh said, pronouncing it for-amm-mid. "But it is so toxic we'd need a special license to use it. Causes cancer and birth defects. The good part is, though, that if you slip a leaf into DMF, literally all the chlorophyll comes out, leaving a leaf ghost behind. So, what's left? I suggest we use alcohol," Mr. Eschbaugh concluded.

"What kind?" I asked.

"Oh, just the plain old rubbing alcohol you have at home. It will get enough of the chlorophyll mixture out that you will have a nice display. So you don't need any help from me. Just get a jar with a lid, some alcohol, and some leaves."

This was easy enough, so I had time to help Aimée with her presentation.

"Nice display," I said. Aimée had written an outline about Romeo and Juliet. I was surprised to discover, however, that she had written all the reasons that Romeo and Juliet was a stupid play.

"Stupid?" I asked. "Everyone seems to think it was a masterpiece. Shakespeare, like, he da man, the Bard, and all such like. A genius."

"That's all true about Hamlet," said Aimée. "Hamlet has beautiful language, a compelling plot, and deep thoughts about life. But Romeo and Juliet? She drinks a potion to make her unconscious, so that she could be thrown into the crypt. Then Romeo finds her and thinks she's dead and stabs himself. You'd think he would have checked her pulse or listened for her breath or something. And then she sees him dead and stabs herself." Then Aimée got very dramatic and moaned loudly, "*Oh happy dagger…*

"I mean, is that stupid or what?" Aimée continued. "And this love at first sight stuff. Ridiculous! Tony, we love each other as much as any couple could, right?"

"God, you are so right," I said.

"But it was not love at first sight. And that famous passage from the balcony scene. *Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?* Most people think she was asking where he was, but wherefore means *why*, not *where. That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."*

"That part is pretty good," I said. "What that means is that, no matter what family—or country—you are from, it doesn't matter, so long as you have love. You could perform just that little speech. I mean, they do require you to give some kind of interpretive performance with your project, right?"

Aimée fell silent and looked down. "Tony, sometimes you are Mr. Clueless. Silly boy. Don't you remember my oboe solo?"

"But, you got over that, didn't you?"

"I said I'd do it for you," she answered. "Not for anyone else. If I tried to make a speech at the scholars' fair, I would probably just run out of the room."

"You're still going to the fair, right?"

"I can't just have somebody else put up my poster. And I want to be there with you. Let's wear green. Wait, scratch that. I don't have any green clothes."

"Borrow something of Brenda's," I said. "It might not fit quite right, but it will do.

The morning that the bus was going to take us to Santa Barbara for the fair, I was saving the other half of my seat for Aimée. Roald came on the bus and asked me if the seat was taken.

"I hope so," I said. "Linda's not coming?"

"No," said Roald. He looked around and saw Aimée outside of the bus. "There's Aimée," he said. "Later, Pal." He sat across the aisle from me.

When Aimée joined me, she did not look well.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I just feel really weak. Maybe I'm just worried about even standing by my poster. Or yours. I just don't like being in front of people."

Roald overheard us and spoke across the aisle. "Say, Aimée." He pronounced her name right. "What kind of job do you think you might want after college? Lit majors usually end up teaching."

"I can't do that. Getting up in front of a class? I mean, even if I could get a word out of my mouth, how could I ever get them to do what I say? They'd walk all over me." She looked down, almost fainting.

"Especially if you had a student like Kevin," Roald said.

"Even someone like you," I told Roald. "You're not a clown, but you don't let any teachers get by with nonsense. Aimée could make one little mistake and a student like you would be all over her."

"I think I'll just be a writer," Aimée said.

"Nobody is just a writer," said Roald. "Just like in any other job, you gotta sell yourself. You have to convince an editor to accept your article idea, or that you are the right person to do the article. And getting a literary agent? You gotta fight for one. It's as hard to get a literary agent as it is to get elected to office. Maybe harder, since literary agents don't accept bribes."

"Technical writing?" Aimée mumbled.

"That's really, really boring, Amy. That is *not* what you read literature for. You want to be uplifted. And, in writing, you want to uplift others. Can't do that with technical writing." He raised his falsetto voice, "Insert plug A in widget B and turn clockwise a half turn." He returned to his normal voice. "You inspired yet?"

"Maybe she can translate English technical writing into French?" I ventured. "Or vice versa."

"I don't think I'm feeling so good," said Aimée. "I think I'd better go home. Sorry, Tony, I was really looking forward to this. I mean, to your project. I mean, to being seen with you."

"That's your decision," I said to her. "My love, I don't want you to be miserable."

"You might feel better after we get you a cup of hot chocolate or something when we get there," said Roald.

"Just be ready for me to bring you to dinner tonight," I told her. "Special celebration. Brenda said she'd make a green casserole with a red Romeo heart in the middle. I think she means broccoli and a beet."

Aimée left without a word.

"Hope we didn't scare her away," said Roald.

"Yes," I said. "I hope you didn't."

"Look, Tony," said Roald. "Maybe this is for the best. Aimée isn't comfortable with any kind of competition. Like when we have game time." This was a time, about once a week during band class, when we would all play a warmup line in unison. Whenever anyone made a mistake, he or she would drop out. The last person playing was the champion. It was usually Joan the clarinet player, but once it was me and once it was Roald. "She told me she never wins game time because she isn't a good enough player. But we know better, don't we."

"Indeed," I said. "It would be unbearable to her to be the last person playing."

"D'you think she deliberately klutzes out?"

"No," I said. "But she has very high standards of perfection. What would seem to you or me like such a small error that we would just keep playing, she considers it a big mistake and drops out of game time."

It wasn't a terrible day at the scholars' fair, but Aimée's absence made it pretty dull. I did enjoy Roald's presentation. He'd written a computer program to calculate the actuarial probability that a person would become clinically depressed, based on the frequency of certain words in their free-style writing. This would allow, he said, pre-emptive intervention before depression might lead to what he called negative outcomes. I found myself vaguely uneasy at the thought that he would ever get hold of some of Aimée's writings and analyze them. At the

thought of pre-emptive intervention. Of course, such computer programs already existed, but I was sure Roald had a great future writing even better ones.

Roald fell asleep on the way back, sitting in what was supposed to be Aimée's spot. Aimée had brought a book to read because, she told me, even though we planned to keep one another entertained, you never know when something would happen. It happened. I was bored out of my skull on the return bus ride.

That was the kind of desperation that made me start reading Romeo and Juliet from Aimée's book. I found a little sheet of paper in it on which Aimée had been writing. I had to read it several times. I wondered if, perhaps, she had intended me to read it.

I have been such a lucky girl to have Tony. J'avais de la chance. I don't deserve him. But he seems to be folle de moi. How can this be? It makes no sense. I will just enjoy every moment of it that I can. But I cannot trust that it will continue. Romeo and Juliet thought that nothing could stop their love. But something did. The delay in the priest getting the message to Romeo. Just that little thing was enough to ruin their plans, ruin their lives. I am so afraid this will happen to us. I have been so happy, I wish that I could believe in a God to thank. But if there is no God to thank, there is also no God to beseech, to supplicate. I heard a priest once say that if I had but the faith of a mustard seed, I could make Mont St. Michel rise into the air and be deposited in a cornfield in Lorraine. But even the few people I know, certainly the miserable masses of poor people on the news, ask for such small blessings, and receive nothing. Oh, that our love would continue forever. My name is Aimée, beloved, but I am beloved by no one except him and his family. And maybe my papa. And, largely due to Tony, I am befriended by a few others. But in whom can I place trust that it shall continue? And I feel sick so much of the time. Is this just my nervosity, or a true malady? I must talk with Tony about this, about all of this. God, how I love him.

*

That night at dinner, Aimée said, "Tony, I'm sorry I didn't go with you today. I was deflated."

"We would say, I chickened out," I told her. She looked at me in confusion. "You know, like a chicken running away."

"I am not a chicken," she said. "Except just at that one moment. Then it was too late."

"I put up your poster for you at the meeting," I said. "And brought it back. It is in the living room. And I brought back your book." I handed it to her. She said nothing about the note in it.

"I am not ill, at any rate," she said. "I will help you to cook. What is it?"

"Fried chicken," I told her.

We had to watch Aimée closely so she would not cut herself while peeling potatoes. We didn't peel them very much, actually; we left as much skin on them as possible (that's where all the nutrients except starch are), removing only the eyes and the bad spots. Mom showed her how to bread the chicken and put it into hot oil in the pan. She covered the pan with a metal lid.

Aimée left the chicken too long in the skillet. It started to smell a little bit burned. She yanked the lid off the skillet, and instantly a big ball of fire puffed out, along with spitting drops of grease. Aimée almost screamed and ran to get some water with which she thought she could put out the fire.

"Somebody stop her!" said Mom.

Brenda stopped her, and slipped the lid back onto the skillet to deprive the fire of oxygen. Brenda then proceeded to guide Aimée through all the rest of the dinner preparations.

Aimée announced that there was one thing that she remembered how to cook. Not that she had ever done it, but she knew it was all the rage (a new phrase for her) in France. Artichokes.

The next night, Aimée came early and a half dozen artichokes waited for her.

"I know you asked for different kinds of chokes," Mom told her, "but in America we only have one kind."

"We can make use of these," Aimée said. "To cook them is easy, or else I would not remember how. You just boil them, but not too much." While the artichokes cooked, Aimée melted some butter in little dishes, and put mayonnaise in others. Each artichoke looked like an angry scaly green iguana head, getting even angrier as it cooked. "And you know they are ready when you try to pull off one of the scales, and it dislodges, like so." She pulled one loose. *"Comme ça."*

"You eat the whole thing?" asked Brenda.

"This was the question I expected Brenda to ask," said Aimée.

"Well?" asked Brenda.

"No," said Aimée. She dipped one of the scales in butter and scraped its base between her top and bottom incisors, and smiled with the green paste in her mouth. She disposed of the scale on a plate. All of us, except Brenda, already knew how to do this.

"The artichoke looks like an unopened thistle head," observed Dad.

"That is exactly what it is," I said.

We gathered around the table, where Mom had also provided cheese and crackers. The last one to try an artichoke scale was Brenda. Her eyes widened and she jumped up from her chair. "This is amazing," she said over and over. "I'm going to have my friends over and we're going to have these. And you," she said to Aimée, "will be our chef."

*

Before dinner another night, Brenda talked with Aimée.

"Hey, Amy, you're starting to look a lot better."

"This is true," Aimée said, instead of *Thank you*.

"It's your skin," said Brenda. "Your face. Your hands. They're a lot smoother."

"My skin, it feels much better, too," said Aimée, stroking her arm.

"I've noticed it too," I said.

"And if you feel better, you look better," Brenda continued.

"I'm still scrawny," said Aimée.

"That's genetic," I said. "A petite body is not a defect, the way bad skin can be."

"You know, I could give you some advice," said Brenda. "Cosmetics and things like that." Brenda's red hair was natural, but she made it glisten with conditioner. She used a little bit of blush on her face. "You should get your nails fixed like mine."

"I've no interest in cosmetics," Aimée said.

"They'll make you look more attractive," said Brenda.

"I don't care," said Aimée. "If Tony likes me, I am contented. You do like me, don't you?" Aimée asked me.

"I answer that question every day," I said.

"I meant, my skin."

"That's what I meant, too."

Brenda persisted. "Your hair looks like you just hack it off."

"I do," said Aimée.

"I think you could do something with that hair."

"I've no interest in it, so long as my hair is not fragile and unhealthy."

"Which it was, before you started eating with us," I said.

"If the other guys start to think you are attractive," said Brenda, "then you will feel better about yourself, and Tony can be prouder of you. What do you say?"

"No, thank you, for the nails and hair advice," Aimée said to Brenda.

"But you will accept this, will you not?" I handed Aimée a little decorative sack.

"What is this?" Aimée looked inside. "Lotion!"

"It is botanical lotion," I said. "It has essences from some of the plants around here. Mint oil extracted from the local wild mint *Salvia mellifera*."

"Saliva?" asked Brenda. We ignored her.

"And the lotion has avocado oil," I added.

"And those moles," said Brenda.

"Des graines de beauté," said Aimée. "Beauty marks, we call them."

"You should get them removed," said Brenda.

"Insurance won't pay for that," I said.

"Uncle Guglielmo paid for mine to be removed," said Brenda.

"Well, he wouldn't pay for Aimée," I said.

"You could ask him," said Brenda.

"No," Aimée said with an air of finality. "If Tony likes me as I am, I am contented."

"And why should I want other guys to think Aimée is beautiful?" I asked.

*

"You should want the other guys to think Aimée is beautiful," said Mr. Loach, the biology teacher. "It's all about status and image. And evolution."

"You mean," I said, "like survival of the fittest?"

"That is a very dull summary of evolution," said Mr. Loach. "That makes it sound like evolution is all about animals fighting and killing each other. Top dog wins, devil take the hindmost. Well, that's not what it is all about. Didn't you pay attention when you took my class last year?"

"You seemed to talk about sex all the time," I said.

"Oh, so you *do* remember. It doesn't matter how healthy or strong an animal is. Or a plant either. What matters is the production of successful offspring."

"To have as many kids as possible," I said.

"No. I said, *successful* offspring. If you have too many kids, you can't provide for them."

"Aimée's father has only one child," I pointed out.

"Think how much worse it would be if Aimée had hungry little siblings. She'd probably have dropped out of school and be flipping burgers full time for the rest of her life *if* she was lucky. Anyway, look at it from her selfish viewpoint."

"She doesn't have one."

"Everybody's got one," said Mr. Loach. "Aimée has selfish interests, even if she pretends that she doesn't.

"Like you, for example," Mr. Loach continued. "You're probably the best thing that ever happened to her. Right?"

"Probably," I conceded.

"It was in her interests to make herself as beautiful and loving as possible toward you."

"That's not the way it happened," I said.

"Well, it's happening now. She wants to keep you."

"She knows I won't leave her," I said defensively. "We're engaged." By now everyone at school knew. "Now, explain. Why should I want other guys to think she is beautiful, when even I don't care?"

"You should care," said Mr. Loach. "Beauty is, as we all know, undefinable. Except for those physical traits associated with health."

"You mean, like nice skin, things like that."

"More than that," said Mr. Loach. "Clear eyes. And facial symmetry."

"You mean, her eyes lining up with each other. I've never noticed."

"Well, start noticing. I've noticed. I did a term paper on it in college. Asymmetry—that is, lopsidedness—is an indicator of poor genetic health. You got a photo of her?"

I handed him my phone. One of the images of Aimée showed her looking straight at the camera. Her eyes lined up, but her smile was a little unbalanced. He pointed it out.

"Should I be worried about that?" I asked.

"Probably not. During the adolescent growth spurt, the parts of the face grow at different rates. No wonder you kids are so sensitive about being ugly. You *are* ugly, at least in terms of asymmetry. But don't worry. We call it fluctuating asymmetry because it fluctuates. You grow out of it. Although she should already have done so by her age, what is it, seventeen?"

"Yes," I said. "And Aimée is pretty scrawny."

"You mean, undernourished. I could tell it at a glance. So her development has slowed down a little. It may take longer, but she will probably grow out of it. Do you have any image manipulation software on your computer at home?"

"I've never used it, but we have it."

"Tell you what, Tony. Take that image of Aimée. Then slice it in half vertically. Flip over both sides and reassemble them, so that you have three images: One of Aimée as she would look if both sides of her face were just like the left side; another as she would look if both sides of her face were just like the right side; and the original. It will look like three different girls. We all have some asymmetry, even after our growth spurts have finished.

"I'll do that," I said. "But you never finished telling me why I should care about whether she is beautiful. Besides health."

"If you have a beautiful girlfriend," said Mr. Loach, "*your* status will be higher."

"What would I want with status?"

"You never know," said Mr. Loach. "Could come in handy. We all need a little help from our friends, except when we need a lot of help from them. And think of Aimée. If the other guys think she is hot…"

"Like that's ever going to happen," I said.

"I wouldn't presume to guess," said Mr. Loach. "Now, if you know that the other guys think she is hot, she might be able to get more favors from *you*, so that you won't lose her."

"But I won't lose her."

"This is all subconscious, Tony," he said. "In primitive society, it might have been out in the open. She could tickle the fantasies, so to speak, of the other guys, even if she has no intention of leaving you. Incidentally, you could do the same. If the other guys think she is hot, then she will know that she is not your girlfriend simply because she has no other choice. And the same with you."

"You know," I said to Mr. Loach. "In primitive society, whatever that is, Aimée would not have survived, or reproduced, very well. She never stands up for herself. She just lets everyone walk all over her." I was thinking of Kevin with Aimée's oboe at the football game. "I can just imagine what the other girls say about her, and to her, in the locker room. Natural selection would really do her in."

"No, I don't think so. She's got you."

"It would probably do me in, also."

"You're really smart, Tony. That's an advantage you have over others, don't you think?"

Something about the way he said the last three words made me suspicious that he did not believe his own statement.

"Being smart is not necessarily a path to social status," I said.

"You're right," he smiled. "It is not so important *what you know* as *what you can make others think you know.* Right there, you have the whole history of religion and politics. That's why the world is so f… so screwed up."

"Both Aimée and I always tell the truth," I said, thinking briefly of my one or two exceptions. "Aimée is pathologically honest. I guess that means there is no hope for us in the struggle for existence."

"I wouldn't say that," said Mr. Loach. "Natural selection is not operating on you, or on Aimée. It operates on *the two of you together.* If you hold one another up, you form a team that prevails in the game of life."

That evening, I tried the photo manipulation Mr. Loach had suggested to me. I was astonished that Aimée really did look like three different girls, all beautiful (to me) in different ways. And this time, when I brought Aimée over for dinner, I took Brenda's side about cosmetics. Aimée did not change her mind.

*

The next day, Aimée came running up to me at lunchtime. I turned and smiled, until I saw the grief on her face.

"This bill was delivered to the principal's office," she said.

"Bill? What bill?" I asked.

"The bill for the day at the hospital," she gasped. Rather than to tell me any more about it, she thrust the envelope at me, found a place to sit, and began to weep.

After I sat with her a couple of minutes, Aimée calmed down a little. I looked at the bill. I gasped. The total was $9,471. When I read the amount to her, she added, "And thirty seven cents. Tony, you know we can't pay this bill."

"My family and I couldn't pay it either," I said. "Uncle Guglielmo could, but he wouldn't."

"What do you mean, he wouldn't? One must, mustn't one?"

I tried to remain calm. "This happens all the time," I said.

"That doesn't make it any easier for us," she said, the tears beginning to flow again, this time quietly.

I looked at the bill again. I didn't know what I was looking for. But something struck me as strange.

"This body fat test," I read to Aimée. "Nine hundred dollars? Aimée, tell me how a body fat test could possibly cost nine hundred dollars."

"I don't know, Tony," she said. "The nurse had me change into a swimsuit behind a screen." She smiled just briefly. "It was a really ugly swimsuit. Probably one that could not legally be re-used by someone else."

"And it probably cost a couple of hundred dollars," I added.

Aimée got serious again. "Then I got into a tub of water. Well, it was vertical, so it looked like a body bag or something. It filled with water, then drained, and I got out, dried off, and…"

"How long did this take?"

"Maybe twenty minutes. Why?"

"It says here it took an hour and a half."

"Well, the nurse talked with me a little while."

"What about?"

"She said she wanted to know about France," said Aimée. "Only I didn't talk much. She told me about her trip to Paris." Aimée made a face. "Paris. It is dirty, rude, expensive, and everybody is in a hurry. Pickpockets. That nurse must have taken ten minutes to tell me how she finally worked up the courage to try the escargots."

"A twenty-minute test, and they billed you for ninety."

Aimée looked at me with curiosity. "Why would they do that? Do I look like I am, as you say, made of money?"

"They probably thought that the taxpayers would foot the bill."

"Foot the bill?"

"Moreover. Just because your name is on the bill doesn't mean that you agreed to incur these charges," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Did you agree to have these tests?"

"They were forced upon me," she said.

"By the county, which means *they* have to pay the charges. I wouldn't worry about it." I continued looking at the sheets. "Wait, what is this?" I looked at the last page. *Maybe I should have stopped while we were ahead,* I said to myself.

On the last page, there was the statement, "I agree to pay all the above charges." There was a box with some black marks in it. "This is the box with your signature. Wait, this is not your signature."

"No, it doesn't look like it," she said.

"Anybody could have written these chicken scratches."

"Chicken scratches ? *Égratignures des poulets ?*"

"Random marks. This, my dear, is not a legal signature. Somebody forged it. Which is, as you can guess, a criminal act. Did you write anything while you were there?"

"I think I remember writing something."

"What was it?"

"They told me to write my name. They gave me what looked like a pen, but it had a plastic foam tip. They told me to write my name in a box on a computer screen."

I sighed and deflated. "Maybe that *is* your signature, then."

"The foam stuck to the screen. The screen was vertical. And there was a little delay between when I moved the pen and when the lines showed up. I could not tell what I was writing. How could I sign my name like that? Look at that printout. Does that look like my name?"

"No, it does not," I said. "For now, just relax. And I would advise you to forget all about the pen and the screen. Let the burden of proof be on the hospital that this is your signature."

She looked at me with her pure gaze. "Are you asking me to lie?"

"No," I said, drawing the word out. "I just mean, don't say anything."

"But what is truth? The whole truth and nothing but the truth. Isn't that what they say in the court?"

"What it means is this." I grabbed her face in my hands and kissed her, knowing that all eyes were upon us. The paper fluttered to the ground and landed in a spot of ketchup. I picked it up to dispose of it securely.

*

Later that week, I was at UCSB. Aimée and I had gotten permission to check books out of the university library. Sometimes we would meet just to walk among the books, mostly old ones. We loved the scent. New books were mostly electronic, in a different part of the building. But when we were in a hurry for something, we went separately. I met Aimée as we were coming separately out of the building.

I smiled and showed her the book I borrowed. It was an old book about the history of band arranging, written by Richard Franko Goldman, a famous band director from the early twentieth century.

"You're serious about band music," she observed. "More than I already knew."

"I'll be too busy studying science next year," I said. "Hey, this book has some interesting stories in it, including examples of band arranging gone wrong. Here's one. During the Crimean War in 1852, bands from several British regiments got together at a place called Scutari to play at some important official function. They were all supposed to play *God Save the Queen.* The problem was, each band had the music written in a different key. When they all played it together…"

"Ouch," said Aimée.

"Right. I think they quickly figured out the problem. It's not that difficult of a tune, and they probably just transcribed it in their heads to all play in the same key. So, what is the book you have?"

Aimée did not smile as she showed me the book. It was a French book titled simply *La Gynécologie.*

"Probably out of date," I said. "But, of course, you don't have a computer to check the latest online information, maybe from Health and Human Services. You could just use my computer when you come over."

"I didn't want you to know I was reading it."

"Why?"

"Check page 147," she said.

"I'm still not very good at French."

"You'll understand it well enough."

I turned to it. The topic was *l'aménorhée.*

"You have amenorrhea?" I asked. "Ask them about it when you go back to the hospital."

Then she looked at me and saw me smiling just slightly.

"Pour quoi est-ce que tu souris ?" she asked. Why are you smiling?

"Did you just ask me if I was a mouse?" *Souris* also means mouse.

"Tony, this is a serious matter!" Aimée said. "Maybe you think female problems are a cause for jesting…"

"Not at all," I said. "But I bet that all you need is a few more weeks of good nutrition at our house and that will solve that problem as well as all your others."

"You think so?"

"Read it for yourself," I said.

"My hospital tests are next week," she said.

"By then you will be fine. Just keep eating." We sat on a metal seat. I looked around at the text. I could not understand most of it, but one noun phrase caught my eye: *pénurie d'alimentation.* Food shortage.

"But that means, like, a country having a famine," Aimée said.

"And that is why so many women, during a famine, miss their cycles."

People looked at us as they walked by. They heard what we were talking about, but they kept going.

Even when we started talking about sex.

"Tony," she said. "You have probably noticed that I don't know a lot about sex."

"Does it matter?" I asked. "We'll figure it out as we go along."

"My Mom was already gone before I reached *ménarche*. You have this word in English?"

"Yes," I said.

Aimée continued. "My Dad knew almost nothing about the sexual development in girls. He didn't think I was old enough to learn where babies come from. Of course, I quickly learned. I read it in this very book when we were still in France."

"Really?" I said.

"Well, that's better than learning it from Jane Austen or *Little Women*!"

"Well, learning it from a book is better than learning it from some guy who wants to lie to you to get you to lie with him. Us males—not including me—can tell lies like the devil when we want to get a girl to lie in bed with us."

"That is why I am so hesitant about physical contact," she said. "I know that the intercourse can produce pregnancy. But I'm not sure, you know, the intermediate steps. If a boy, you know, pulls out, can I still get pregnant? Things like that."

"You need advice from a biology major to whom you are also married," I said.

We stood up, put down the book, and she clasped me. "What would I do without you?"

"You could probably figure things out," I answered.

"Tony, it would be difficult to overestimate my naïveté. None of which will matter if I don't get my periods back," she said. "I assume that we will want a couple of little Albinonis running around." She smiled vividly. "Tony, you gave me my life back." Then she began to cry. I sat beside her.

When Aimée had cried herself out, she looked up into my face. She saw me smiling and knew I was about to tell her something.

"Another thing that textbook cannot tell you about sex," I said, "is the answer to the question, Why is sex fun?"

"I did not realize it was supposed to be fun," said Aimée. "I knew it could be very fulfilling, based on what I have read. But fun?"

"Yes," I said, "though I do not speak about the sex act itself with any more experience than you do. But it must be the most intensely pleasurable experience that humans can have."

"So long as it results in offspring, isn't that enough?" Aimée asked.

"You've been reading too much Victorian literature," I told her. "There is a story about Queen Victoria herself. I have no idea if it is true. Someone asked her what she thought about sex. She and Prince Albert had lots of kids, you know. She said she would lie on her back and think of England."

"What is that supposed to mean?" asked Aimée.

"It's supposed to be funny," I said. "It means, I think, that Victoria did not enjoy sex very much, but she knew it was important to the future of England that she produce princes and princesses. And of course it also meant that Albert was on top, facing down.

"It is very important," I continued, "to the evolutionary fitness of both partners…"

"There you go with evolution again," Aimée smiled. "Always sex and evolution."

"Some people think sex and evolution will both get you sent to Hell. But I'm quite serious. The partners have to have as many offspring as they can support, or, if they are rich and powerful, that they can get others to support. The only way for this to happen is for them to get some kind of reward out of it other than just the offspring, mewling and puking in the nurse's arms…"

"Shakespeare, I seem to recall."

"The Seven Ages of Man," I said. "Natural selection favors anything that rewards the act of sexual reproduction. The partners will try more often and try harder if it is fun than if it is not.

Our brains are built to enjoy sex, because anyone who did *not* enjoy sex was less likely to be one of our ancestors. Being in lust is not the same as being in love, but this much is true of both: they will inspire the partners to get together and produce offspring."

"That explains why it is fun," said Aimée. "But can you explain why it is funny? That's different."

"Sex is so awkward and embarrassing that nobody would ever do it if it weren't fun. Awkwardness is at the very basis of humor."

"Tony, you know everything, don't you?"

"I can propose an answer to almost every question," I said, "but that doesn't mean I'm right. I have a lifetime of opportunities—with you—to find out if my ideas are right. I guess it's a good thing that we will get started pretty soon. This summer! It's coming up.

"Meanwhile, I will come by when you get off work to take you to dinner at my house."

"What's for dinner this time?" asked Aimée. "And don't say evolution."

"What you wanted to have," I said.

"You mean, *bœuf bourguignon* again?"

"And *pommes de terre gratin dauphinoise,*" I said. "If you come early, you can help fix them."

We drove to her apartment building. We got out of the car and started running. I started humming a melody before I realized what it was. Then I started singing. "*Have a banana, Hannah, Try the salami, Tommy, Everybody eats when they come to my house.*"

"Taste the bologna, Tony!" she started singing. We danced our way back to the eucalyptus tree. I jumped up and clicked my heels. Aimée smiled and waved as I ran back to the car.

*

I walked Aimée home after dinner. She still spent about half the nights at her apartment. We stood for a long time at the eucalyptus tree. She looked into my face. The moonlight made her glasses and eyes glisten. I could smell the mint lotion. I could feel that the skin at the base of her earlobe was now whole. The eucalyptus leaves poured their scent down upon us.

"You are healing," I said. "Your hospital visit a couple of days from now will confirm this. You have nothing to worry about."

Aimée did not speak right away. She must have been thinking of things other than hospitals and nutrition. "I wish this moment, just as it is, could last forever," she said. "I wish we were in a painting, maybe. Where this feeling of love could just be unending. It is like magic. Perhaps it is the moonlight."

"Moonlight does things like that," I said. "There is music in my soul right now. You know *Clair de Lune*?"

"One of the most famous pieces of music in France," she said. "Claude Debussy. Yes, I can hear it in my mind."

"Moonlight is soft, not just dim," I said. "I do not understand the physics of it, but you can tell the difference between a photographic image taken in sunlight and a time exposure moonlight image, even when they are equally bright. In the moonlight, all the edges are softened. Everything seems to blend together. Like the rolling chords in Debussy's piano music."

"I wish we could just merge together in this moonlight," Aimée said.

I kissed her and breathed her breath. Then I stuck my tongue into her mouth. She pulled back.

"It is a way of merging together," I said. "You French invented this kind of kiss."

"I suppose so." She opened her mouth for my tongue.

"And later we will have a much better way of merging," I whispered once our kiss ended. "And we will have that joy soon."

"If we can trust the future," she whispered back.

I pulled away from her just slightly. "What?"

"I mean, Tony, that I simply do not trust the future. We have done everything right. Our plans are made." We even had a place and a date and had chosen the food for the rehearsal dinner and the reception. "But God or whatever can always throw tragedies and disruption at us."

Aimée pulled me back into her. "I agree," I said. "I trust the future no more than you do. But we do not have to trust the future for very long. A few more months, and we will, in fact, be married."

"A lot can happen in those few months," she said. "Every night when I say goodbye to you, I have this persistent fear that it will be for the last time. There are a lot of people who count on an immediate future of good luck, then find it gone."

"Perhaps, then, we should not trust even the immediate future?" I asked. I slipped my hand under the bottom of her blouse.

Aimée retreated. "Do I understand you correctly? You mean, we should have physical intimacy now?"

"I don't know what I mean," I said. "I didn't plan on doing what I just did." But I did not pull my hand back. "I just know that we have one another right now, and that we cannot be sure of what tomorrow will bring." I started massaging her vertebrae. "Does this frighten you?"

"Yes," said Aimée. "If we got physical with one another right now, though, it would be too rapid of a transition for me. We would be all tangled up…if we did it right now, sex would be neither fun nor funny for me."

"We don't have to go that far," I said. "I just want to hold my flesh against yours."

"We do that already," she said.

"I meant, do it more." I started another kiss. "More flesh."

"Tony," she said, turning her mouth aside from mine. "We can't do this. I'm not ready. Through these last months we have been sweeping away every barrier between us. First, when we became friends. Then, step by step, as we allowed our hearts to come together. But each one of those steps has been a transition for me. I cannot just suddenly let go of this last protective

layer. I have to prepare for it. By that blessed wedding day, so soon to come, I will be ready to merge with you.

"I am worrying too much," she continued. "But we should think ahead. What happens if we are torn from one another?"

"Then we will defy fate," I said. I felt the music of Debussy reaching its climax. "If we are torn apart, I will look for you, sparing nothing, until we are together again. And you?"

"I will also," she said. "We have made our choice: to wait. Not because we fear some God in Heaven, but because this is right for us. And if something happens, we will make every effort to get back together." I was thinking about what Roald said about the evolution of falling-in-love. "No force of Hell can keep us apart." Aimée whispered, "We will act, my love, as if the future is certain. We will defy it if it fails us. *Mon amie, mon aimé…"* This meant, My friend, my beloved. "You will come for me. Neh-pah ?"

I said, "*Tu sais que je reviendrai toujours pour toi*." I recited the sentence told me was so important to her.

PART THREE. GOLETA, SPRING

Chapter 11

I was going to surprise Aimée with the news in class the next morning. A letter had just arrived informing me that I had won a Regents' Scholarship to UCSB. This was one of the most exclusive scholarships. I ran to school.

This happened in February, just as the deerbrush in the unburned part of the chaparral on the mountains was beginning to bloom, creating a white mist.

Aimée was not there.

Mr. Picciuto in my first period class said that she was probably just sick.

"But surely she would have told me!" I blurted.

"Calm down, Tony. She will probably call you," said Mr. Picciuto.

"She doesn't have a phone."

"Well, there you go. That's why…"

"She would have found some way to get a message to me."

Was drängst du denn so Wunderlich, mein Herz?

"We're studying today about the social contract."

"I don't give a damn about the social contract," I said. All the others in the class were staring at me with gaping mouths.

Word had already gotten to Mr. Hanigan in second period before I arrived.

"We're studying the second derivative today, Tony. Maybe that will get your mind off of…"

"I don't give a shit about the second derivative!"

"What's gotten into Tony!" somebody said. "He can't he even spend a day without Amy…"

Was drängst du denn so Wunderlich, mein Herz?

"God, I didn't realize Tony was into her so deep…" said another.

I left my books and papers on the desk at the end of pre-calc and ran off campus, panting hoarsely. *God, Tony,* I told myself, *there's got to be some reasonable explanation. You didn't sleep very well last night. That's got to be it. But it couldn't hurt to look around her neighborhood. Actually, it could get me in trouble, since I'm not supposed to be off campus during class.*

I ran around to the front of her building, guessing which front door was hers. Of course I knocked on the wrong one.

"Get lost, man. No one named Amy is here. No Pascal either," said a man who was obviously not dressed for work. Then he said, "No, wait. Pascal. He's next door."

I pounded on the door like a beating heart. I raged against the fate that, just the previous night, Aimée and I had dared to tentatively trust.

Was drängst du denn so Wunderlich, mein Herz?

*

When I ran back to campus, the principal met me outside the door of my third period class.

"Look, Dr. Bishop," I said, "I'm sorry I skipped classes and left campus, but I have to find Aimée. If you only knew how I felt…"

"Tony, everyone knows how you feel about Amy."

"Do you know where she is?"

Dr. Bishop took me to his office and told me to sit down.

Was drängst du denn so wunderlich.

Bishop sat at his desk. "I'm not supposed to tell you anything about the other students or their families, but I will, because you might have some information that would help us." He looked down seriously at his hands. "Amy and her father have left town."

I was in too much agony to respond other than with a grunt.

"We don't know anything more. The police informed us. No, the police have not arrested her father, nor are they looking for him. But the departure was so sudden that some neighbor must have called the police. The Zeitgebers apparently moved out very quickly."

"Was it foul play?" I asked, knowing I would get no answer.

Officer Pembroke, who had brought the news, was still on campus and came into the office.

"I think I know where she is going," I said.

The principal and policeman gave me their full attention.

"Anything you can tell us would help," said Pembroke.

"They're going back to Strasbourg."

"In France?" asked Pembroke.

"Yes," I answered, surprised that anyone would not know. A city with a German name, of course it is in France.

Bishop sighed. "Big city, Strasbourg. Well, that narrows it down, doesn't it."

"We cannot legally interfere. The father has custody," said Pembroke.

"I'm gonna find her," I said breathlessly.

"Why don't you take the rest of the day off?" said the principal.

"Maybe that's not such a good idea. We should keep an eye on him," said Pembroke to the principal. Then to me: "Don't hurt yourself, Tony. We're here to help."

"I'll be fine," I said.

"Does she know how to get in contact with you?" asked Bishop.

"She doesn't have a phone."

"We knew that."

"She knows my mailing address. She didn't use email."

Was drängst du denn so wunderlich.

"You let us know the moment you hear anything from her," said Pembroke.

The secretary whispered something to the principal, who said, “Well, we called your house, Tony. Your Mom is off work today, and she answered. We thought Amy took refuge at your house. But she isn’t there.”

Pembroke thought for a moment, then said, “I wonder what precipitated the sudden departure. Her father probably owed someone some money, based on what little we know about his business dealings.”

“I think I might know who he owes money to,” I said. I had their undivided attention again. “The county health department. It was that big medical bill that had Aimée’s name on it.”

“I knew about the bill,” said Pembroke. “One of our officers had to deliver it to Pascal Zeitgeber’s apartment. But I didn’t realize it was a big bill. How much was it?”

When I told Pembroke the amount—including the thirty-seven cents—he whistled. “That’s enough to scare the bejeesus out of anybody. But the county would have to arrange for terms of repayment, maybe even a reduced amount. Surely Aimée and her father knew this.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” said Dr. Bishop. “Besides, sometimes hospitals and clinics *don’t* negotiate an affordable charge.” He turned to his computer and typed in some search terms. “It says here that there are 100 million Americans with unpaid medical debt. Of these, 14 percent plan to declare bankruptcy. Medical bankruptcies account for 62 percent of all bankruptcies.

“American citizens—which Mr. Pascal Zeitgeber was not—might have some protection. But I can see that he would have cause to be worried. He might have feared deportation, and decided to leave while he still had some measure of control over the situation. Also, as you said, Pembroke, maybe he owed somebody else some money as well.

“They were probably frightened out of their skulls, both of them,” Bishop continued. “In France, they don’t have such huge medical expenses. The expenses aren’t usually negotiable, but I don’t think anybody goes bankrupt in France from medical bills.” He was still looking at his screen.

“There is nothing here that we can do anything about,” said Pembroke.

“And maybe he finally had to pay up what he owed to Loïc,” I said.

I once again had their full attention. “Who’s that?” asked Pembroke.

“The name of the man to whom he seems to owe money,” I answered.

“Anything more? Last name? Residence? Even business?”

“No,” I mumbled.

“There is still nothing here we can do anything about,” said Pembroke.

My pleasant smile surprised both men. “I’m going to find her,” I said, with what I intended as a perfectly calm voice. I didn’t even fool myself with it. “And I know how I am going to do it, or at least try to.”

“How?” asked the principal.

“I’m going to Strasbourg.”

Bishop and Pembroke looked at one another, hiding their grins. “How are you going to find her in Strasbourg?”

"I'll figure it out," I said. "The first step is, I'm going back to class right after lunch. French II. I have to know French if I'm going to France."

"It's the best idea I've heard so far," said Bishop.

"Which isn't saying much," said Pembroke.

*

Just before sixth period, I went back to see Dr. Bishop.

"Since I'm going to France, there isn't much point in me doing anything else except to study French."

"What will you do in France, besides looking for Amy?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"No," said Dr. Bishop. "You can't just drop everything in your life. Now, here's a plan."

"Yes?" I wanted to hear this.

"You were going to go to UCSB."

"Well, that plan is shot."

"Do they have any universities in Strasbourg?"

"Well, sure, I suppose."

"Let's check." He motioned me to his computer screen. It was not long before we located the website of the University of Strasbourg.

"That's a high-power university," I said. "Unless I get a special scholarship, for which I assume it is too late, I won't be going there. Not with my French. Says here, classes are taught in French. Oh, by the way, can I just study French all day the rest of the semester?"

"And quit your other classes?"

"If I flunked them, I would probably still have a high enough GPA to graduate."

"You're probably right, Tony. I think I see what you're getting at. You don't need any more classes to get your high school diploma. You can take all day for study hall, with French books. Easy A. Might work. Meanwhile, get online and look for a different university that might let you in. Then you can get a student visa."

*

A couple of days later, right after classes finished, Mr. Festima caught the principal outside of his office. I followed close behind and listened.

"About Tony," said Mr. Festima. "He's hysterical. He's such a nice guy, but he wants to study French all day! And *I'm* supposed to teach him."

"Let him learn on his own."

"That's the idea, but he has all these questions."

"Would a little bonus pay help?"

"I'll hire you as a tutor, evenings and weekends," I said. I had just now thought of this and had not yet asked my father if he would spend the money on it.

*

When I went to the apartment the next afternoon after school, the door was open and there were men inside. They seemed to be cleaning up the apartment. I assumed that they worked for the apartment manager and were cleaning it for the next tenant.

"What are we supposed to do with all these boxes?" said one to the other.

"Manager said, we have to dump them," said the other man. "We got no forwarding address, and even if we did, we got no place to store them. The guy owed back rent." Then he turned to me. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"I knew the people who lived here," I said. "The girl, anyway."

"Oh, yeah? So, what do you want?"

"You said something about boxes," I said. "May I see them?"

"You're trespassing," the first man said, but not until after I had slipped in to look.

"Yes, I was right. These boxes are full of notebooks. Aimée's writings. They were important to her."

"Yeah? Well, why didn't she take them?" asked the second man.

"That's a dumb question," said the first man. "They left in a hurry."

"They were *very* important to her," I said.

"You're trespassing," said the first man again. "They're not your boxes."

"What are you going to do with them?" I whined.

"We have instructions to take them to the dumpster."

"You think maybe you can leave them outside the dumpster? I'll come back in my car and get them."

"Against the rules. We can't leave trash outside the dumpster. So get lost."

The other man intervened. "We have to put the boxes in the dumpster. But that doesn't mean we have to *throw* them in. We can put them in nice and neat. Then you can come back for them."

"He would still be trespassing," said the first man.

"Makes no difference to us," said the second. "So long as the manager doesn't catch you."

"Why should he care?" I asked.

"Because," said the first man, "if you slipped on your hiney, or scuffed your shins in the dumpster, you could sue."

"No, I don't think so," I said. "The sign on the dumpster says, stay out due to risk of injury. That covers the manager's ass."

"Whatever," said the second man. "We got work to finish. Sooner we finish, the sooner we can get home. We work by the job, not by the hour. Hey, kid," he said to me as I slipped past him. "You can't just go snooping all over the apartment."

"I'm looking to see if there is anything else Aimée might have left," I said.

"Just because you know her name doesn't give you the right…"

I couldn't find anything that looked like Aimée might want, other than a few boxes and books. She must have borrowed most of her books. But I found the little volume of Winterreise poems, with some of her notes inside. And three boxes of her tiny, scribbled writings.

"We're calling the police," the first man said.

"Ask for Officer Pembroke," I said. "Tell him I'm Tony Albinoni."

I ran home and found Brenda.

"You want me to *what?* Go dumpster diving?"

"I'll be inside the dumpster and hand the boxes out to you," I said.

Once Mom got home from work, we borrowed her car, and filled it with Aimée's belongings. I left the few toiletries, which would be of no use to her or to anyone else. The vermilion sunset lit the flame of Brenda's red hair as she swung her head around to see if anyone was watching her while she piled up the boxes—and one black plastic bag—outside the dumpster.

When we drove home, Brenda said, "Poor girl. I guess it was good that we fed her and taught her to cook while we had her." She turned to me. "I acted like I didn't want her around, Tony. But now I really miss her."

Mom said when we got home, "I miss her too. But where are you going to put all this stuff? No room in the garage."

"There is always room," I said.

"I saw you looking in front of the heater and water heater," she said. "We can't block that door."

"Better not look in the hall closet," said Brenda.

"Tony?" said Mom.

"I'll put it all under my bed."

"You've already filled that space with your own boxes."

Then I looked at Brenda. She opened her eyes wide and said, "Oh, no you don't. Not in my room."

"Besides," said Mom. "What is in that black plastic bag you brought? It's still in the car. It smells like garbage. Please do something with it."

"Mom, trust me," I said.

"I always have trusted you."

"This is true. Mom, you need to let me bring the boxes and that black bag into my room. And leave me undisturbed."

When I was alone in my room with my door closed, I opened the black bag. My fingers were trembling, and I could not get the straps apart. I ended up cutting the top of the bag open

with scissors. The bag was full of Aimée's clothes. A couple of pairs of pants, and four blouses, well worn; socks with holes; and underpants. No brassieres. I had seen all these items in the laundry pile when I was in the apartment.

What I did next was perhaps the only truly intimate act I would perform with Aimée, unless I found her, which now seemed less likely than seeing the Transit of Venus. I told myself that what I was about to do was nothing short of perverse. But I would only do it once.

I pulled out handfuls of clothing and pressed them to my face. I inhaled deeply, over and over. I used my imagination as much as I could. But I finally concluded that there was no scent of Aimée. Not even in the exact spots where I might have expected it. The scent of other people's garbage overwhelmed whatever faint residue there might have been of my beloved.

I think Mom understood everything as I took the bag, which I partially re-closed, outside to put in the trashcan. I made sure the lid was secure. I did not want the little bit that remained of Aimée to be desecrated by feral animals. I then showered, to remove the grime of the dumpster and the sweat of terror from my body.

*

"You look pretty cold," said Roald from the rolled-down window of his car. "Not a good day to be walking."

The winter had been warm, as they usually are around Santa Barbara. But on this day a chilly wind had come through, part of what the meteorologists called an "atmospheric river." Everything was damp under the leaden clouds. While there was none at our elevation, the mountains were mantled in snow, hiding the white deerbrush flowers that had so recently opened.

"I'm almost home," I told him.

"That's not what I meant," Roald said. "I mean, I was heading to Hot Shots for some coffee. You look like you could use a hot drink."

"Coffee in the afternoon would give me even more insomnia than I already have."

"Then get some hot chocolate. Or herbal tea. My treat."

"Well," I said, "that's an easy choice, then." I went around the car and got in the passenger side. The car was old, and the heater rattled. I looked out through the cracked windshield.

Roald could see me looking around his car. "This old car only has to last until I'm off to Cal Poly," he said. "Dad said he'd get me a new one when we graduate. Which won't be long."

"A racing car?" I asked, not serious.

"Of course not," said Roald. "You seen the actuarial statistics about those things?" Roald and Linda were the only college-bound seniors who did not take pre-calc. They did not care about derivatives and integrals, or anything theoretical. Roald thought only about statistics and common sense. "Kids get behind the wheels and suddenly they think they are immortal." He stopped at an intersection for which he had no stop sign. It was near the housing projects, where

the cross street had a stop sign. “People run that sign every day.” I was almost surprised that no one ran it right then.

Once we were inside Hot Shots, Roald ordered a cappuccino, and I had lavender tea.

“Lavender?”

“Reminds me of France.”

“Speaking of which,” said Roald. “Update: Amy. Any news?”

“No,” I mumbled. “I’m not sure I want to talk about her.”

“Of course you want to talk about her, Tony. You need to face the facts.” He looked at me over his foam. “Trust me. Saying her name in public a few times will make you feel a whole lot better. Unlike hiding her away in your secret little heart.”

“I’d talk to you about her, but there’s no news, as I said.”

“Did you ever sleep with her?”

“She slept in my arms in bed one night,” I said.

“No sex?”

I briefly rose in anger but sat back down.

“I won’t tell anybody,” he said. “As if it matters.”

“No,” I said, more calmly than I might have guessed possible. “We didn’t go all the way.”

“Did you ever do anything else sexual with her?”

“No.” I almost smiled. “Unless by sexual you mean nibbling her ear.”

Now we were both relaxed. We took our coats off.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Our parents…”

“You really think her Dad would have cared or noticed? And your parents. I bet with them forgiveness would be easier than permission. Did you ever feel Amy up?” Roald asked. “When you were lying beside her.”

“I respect Aimée,” I said.

“I respect Linda. I would never have tried to talk her into sex. When we did it, it was a mutual decision, all the way.”

“I don’t think Aimée would have agreed to it.”

“Did you ask her?”

“I hinted at it once,” I said. “We were waiting…”

“Tony.” He slurped his drink. “That’s noble of you. But you can see what happens when you wait too long. It was reasonable to wait a little while. It might not have been a good idea to jump on her that first night after the football game…”

“How did you know that was the night we got started on our friendship?”

“Everybody could see it, Tony. What were you waiting for last fall?”

“For song number eleven in Die Winterreise.”

Roald looked at me in exasperation, but also in wonder. “You gonna explain that?”

"Die Winterreise is a German song cycle. Twenty-two songs. Aimée and I started listening to the songs right after we started dating. But the *Herzen und Küssen*…Know what that means?"

"My grandparents are German."

"The hearts and kisses were not until song number eleven. We decided to wait until then before we even kissed."

"Did you get to song number eleven?"

"We did. And we kissed."

"That's a wonderful story, Tony. Keep going."

"It was a beautiful Saturday last winter. We were up in the mountains. We were behind an oak tree."

"Nice."

"The lichens hung from the branches like bead curtains."

"That sounds like it would have been the perfect place to, you know, go further. But you waited for months…"

"Only a few months."

"But look what happened. Now she's gone. You had your chance. Now, me and Linda, we have the future all planned. We could say that we had plenty of time to wait before having sex. But who knows? Linda could catch covid, or I could have gotten smashed by a drunk driver back at that stop sign. Reality sucks, Tony. Plan for the future but don't ignore the pleasures of the present moment either." I could see that he was utterly confident. He would make a great insurance executive someday, I could tell.

"Maybe you should have sketched out a little actuarial table for Aimée," said Roald.

"What?"

"You know, probabilities. In her case, she looked like a really good bet. But her father, not so much."

"I didn't know anything about her father. Still don't."

"That's just the point," said Roald. "You could trust *her* with Fort Knox, but he seemed just the kind to fall off the edge of the world, which is just what he did." He stirred his cappuccino with the little straw that was too narrow to drink through. "Well, nothing to do about it now. There are no actuarial tables for the past. But what is your plan now?"

"You don't know?" I asked.

"I've heard, but I don't believe it. I gotta hear it from you."

"I'm going to move to Strasbourg and look for her."

"That's it? That's your plan?"

"It is."

"If that's where she went."

"It's the best guess, Roald."

"Let's use some numbers. How many people are in Strasbourg?"

I made a wild guess. "A half million."

He checked his phone. “You hit it right on the nail. Depends on which suburbs you include, of course. If you include Bischheim and…my God, there is actually a village called Souffelweyersheim! And you are looking, at random, for one person out of a half million.”

“Not quite at random,” I said. “There must be someplace I can look where she is more likely to show up. Maybe a bookstore.”

“Now you’re talking.”

“Except she can’t actually afford to buy books. A library? Or someplace, like a tram station, where lots of people pass through.”

“That helps, too. But let’s say you see a thousand people a day, and that each day it is a different thousand people. Which is unlikely. That means it would, by chance, take you five hundred days to find her.”

I smiled. “I think you calculated wrong, Roald. Five hundred days, if I find her on the last day. One day, if I find her on the first. The average would be two hundred fifty days.”

“My point exactly! Two hundred fifty days!”

I smiled again. “That means that I’d better get started the moment I arrive in Strasbourg. Two hundred fifty days? We are not talking about finding a needle in a haystack here.”

“Another little problem, Tony.” Our cups were empty. “Want more?”

“You wouldn’t believe how much lavender tea Mom has got stored up at home, so, no.”

“I think I’ve reached my caffeine limit,” said Roald.

“Another problem?” I asked. “Just remember I’m the one in the thick of the action.”

“That is exactly why my outside viewpoint might help you,” he said.

“Good point. What new problem has your actuarial brain identified?”

“You are going halfway around the world to look for her. As if she is the only young lady in the world who could possibly be your companion in life.”

“She is,” I said defensively.

“Get real, Tony. That is, about this, too, as well as your other delusions. That lady over there…” He glanced at a barista. “Ignoring the age difference for just a moment. That lady might, for anything you know to the contrary, turn out to be as companionable a spirit to you as Amy.”

“I think you are wrong,” I said, suddenly feeling sick at the thought of intimacy with someone other than Aimée.

“Let’s do the numbers again,” said Roald.

“Why am I not surprised that you said that?” I asked.

“Reality consists of numbers. Now, how many young women are there in the world in an approximate age range that you would find acceptable? No kids, no middle aged…”

“A billion?” I ventured.

“Close enough. Now, how many are smart, interested in understanding the world, and artistically sensitive?” He did not use the undefinable term *nerd*.

“None as much as Aimée,” I said.

“Bullshit,” said Roald. “We need a number. Say, one percent?”

"Certainly no more than that," I said.

"Let's go with it. Of those, how many would speak English?"

"I don't care about that so much," I said. "If Aimée's beautiful lips spoke only Romanian, I would love her as much."

"But you would never have gotten a relationship started," said Roald. He checked his phone. "It says here, 1.5 billion people speak English as a first or second language. Divide by two, for females. Bracket it for age ranges, brings us to maybe 250 million. Sensitive and artistic, one percent, that's two and a half million."

"Let's make that for within two years of my age."

"Let's go with a million, then. One percent brings us to ten thousand. Ten thousand girls out there just looking for some guy like you, Tony. Amy was just a geographical accident."

"That's for the whole world, though," I said.

"My point exactly," said Roald. "Amy just happened to be in our high school. But when you consider the whole world. You just keep looking and you're bound to find a few."

"How?"

"Use a dating service," Roald answered. "Computers can match people. Why leave it to chance? Insurance companies sure as hell don't trust to chance."

"But there's nobody exactly like Aimée," I said.

"Of course not! But does that matter? Take some of the other things that you like about her. She plays oboe. Would you have cared about that if you hadn't met her? Course not. And some things that make you really care about her, but which aren't themselves good. Like that father of hers. You insist on having a girl whose father is on the brink of trouble all the time? Sure, you love to feel sorry for her, and scoop her up in your arms, shower merciful love upon her. To rescue her. You're the kind of guy who would fantasize about rescuing a girl. But I'll bet you would just as soon that hadn't happened to her. So, I'll stick with the ten thousand figure."

"We are engaged," I said, information that must by now have gotten around to everybody.

"You were," Roald said. "Then things beyond your control…"

"The powers of Hell?" I asked.

This took Roald by surprise. He said, "If you like."

"We swore to each other that even the powers of Hell would not keep us apart."

*

Officer Pembroke called ahead, and my parents and I were there to answer the door late the next afternoon.

"Turns out," he said, "it was a mistake for the landlord to throw all of the Zeitgeber stuff in the dumpster. Tony, we're glad you saved as much of it as you did."

Dad observed, "It seemed strange to me that, in a missing person case, you would throw out the evidence."

"The landlord did that," said Pembroke. "We couldn't stop him. There was, and is, no evidence of foul play. Or that Mr. Zeitgeber had done anything wrong, by local or state law, as far as we know. But we just got a call from the federal Department of Commerce. They want to know if there was maybe some shady interstate business. They hinted the Department of State might want to know if that shady business extended to France. Of course, the Treasury department wondered about tax evasion. But by then, it would have been too late.

"It is not too late, thanks to Tony." He nodded to me. "You saved the papers?"

"They were hers, not her father's. All about literature, as far as I can tell. I cannot see of what interest they might be…"

"The Commerce office told me to send them all the papers. They will decide if there might be something of interest in them."

"They are private," I said. "I think I am the only one Aimée would have trusted to look at them."

"Once again, not my decision. Sorry. You are to deliver the papers to the police station by next Tuesday at noon."

Mom and Dad were surprised to see me relax. "No problem. That gives me plenty of time to look through them. Just promise me Commerce will send them back to me once they find out how boring they are."

"I don't foresee any problem.

"And there's one other thing," said Pembroke. "A black bag."

"Of dirty laundry," I said.

"His?"

"I was kind of frantic while digging through the dumpster. When I found hers, I didn't look any further."

"Either one will do," said Pembroke.

He went out to our trashcan, opened the black plastic bag, and removed a few items of clothing. He put them in a small plastic bag and zipped the seal.

I went with Pembroke out to the apartment complex. Another policeman, and a dog, awaited us. Pembroke took one of Aimée's underpants and held it to the dog's nose.

The dog ran directly to the dumpster. This was of no use to us.

Next, the dog ran directly to me. Also, of no use to us.

Finally, the dog started running down the street. Pembroke whistled and the dog stopped. We got into the police car. When the dog started running again, we followed it. It ran more slowly and hesitantly as it approached Hollister Avenue, the main drag of Goleta. The dog stopped at the corner, where busy traffic swished by. It sat at attention, looking east toward Santa Barbara and Los Angeles. We looked all around the vacant lot and the parking area. We finally concluded the Zeitgeber scent trail disappeared at this point. We saw the silhouette of the dog against the setting sun.

*

I had no idea just how many papers Aimée had. As soon as I began looking through them, I realized I would have to be more of an archivist than merely a reader. I was happy to find that they were all more or less in chronological order. The earliest notebooks were detailed notes about classic French literature, in French, then after she arrived in America, she switched to English notes about English poems and novels. And the Winterreise notes. She had four or five notebooks full of stories and poetry that she had written before we met. I did not read these closely.

Down amidst the papers was a small box of photographs. I opened the box eagerly. The faded color photos were clearly of her as a little girl, with whom I assumed were her parents. Could the police use a photo of Pascal Zeitgeber? They could run it through an age adjustment program. Aimée was a darling little girl, always skinny. There were monochromatic photos of people who had to be her ancestors in some way or other. She had told me she knew nothing about her extended family. This was probably true; the photos were unlabeled. I went to the city library to scan them onto my very personal and very secret flash drive.

When I got to the notebooks written after we met at the last home football game, I read them closely. At first, they seemed just the same as the others. But she started using my name in more and more of her stories, and always for good men. My heart throbbed as I read her recent stories, in which Tony was a gallant hero who rescued an unnamed beloved young woman from all manner of danger and disgrace. They reminded me of Sir Walter Scott novels, in which I was some knight or other. Ivanhoe? I wanted to find out how each story ended, that is, with what kind of togetherness the lady had with Tony. There were embraces and occasional kisses. I was hoping for something like a bodice-ripper, though this would not have been the Aimée that I knew. As Tuesday grew closer, I had to stay up later and later to read her notebooks. I was exhausted and my hands trembled the next day after a night of reading. The muscles in my eyes twitched. I took a lot of the notes to school and pretended they were French II or Study Hall. All this reading had a tremendous impact on me because this was direct evidence that in her secret soul she loved me. Perhaps, by writing these stories in such a small script and hiding them in boxes, she was trying to shield herself from the intensity of her own feelings. For me.

Finally, I was left with one little packet of loose papers, which I expected to finish quickly. I soon discovered that they were in code. I was immediately alarmed and excited. What could be so important that she would hide her words even in secret notebooks? Much of the code was a simple numerical transposition, with 1 for A and 26 for Z, with dots between letters, slashes between words, and double slashes between sentences. I made out a chart at first but got to where I could transpose the numbers pretty quickly without the chart. The notes in Morse code took considerably longer.

These pages were about her intense emotional experiences. She wrote, at first, about how she worried about her father's business connections, how he was always short and late on paying his creditors, and how he pawned everything they had until they had nothing. She agonized over her inability to help him.

Then, when she started dating me, she had new sources of agony about which she had only hinted. She wrote repeatedly about how much she loved me, and how she did everything she could to make sure her father knew little about me until we were actually engaged. Then there was no point in concealing her relationship with me.

I got to the last couple of sheets. These appeared to be a jumble of letters, some capital, some lower case. They were, however, all perfectly lined up in both dimensions. She also had a light cardboard index card with slots. The slots were too small to be made with scissors and must have been made by a very sharp knife. When I placed the slots over the crammed letters, and moved the card, I could suddenly read everything. When the slots revealed positions 1, 4, 7, and 10, I could read a paragraph. When I held the slots over positions 2, 5, 8, and 11, I could read another paragraph. The same with positions 3, 6, 9, and 12. I marveled at how difficult it must have been to have written these few lines. And how important the information in them must have been to her.

She briefly wrote here that she had looked at some of her father's merchandise. It could only have been drugs. I could see now why she encoded this information in her notes, and why she kept this secret even from me, lest I accidentally reveal it or be forced to.

That night, back at home, I found a Bible and read the Song of Solomon. It was as intense as Roald said it was. In the eighth chapter, I found the verse that seemed to specifically describe Aimée, about the girl with no breasts. But there were a couple of other verses that Roald could not have known would apply to me and Aimée.

First, there was the verse in which the woman seemed to be speaking. She said that her lover's arm was under her head. This brought back the full intensity of my memory of Aimée's head resting on my arm that night in my room.

Second, another verse said, *Many waters cannot quench love.* I thought of the many waters of an ancient mountain stream. But this verse could also refer to the waters of the Atlantic Ocean, over which I would fly in pursuit of Aimée. I cried myself to sleep that night.

The next morning, Tuesday, I delivered all the notebooks to the police. I had considered holding back her most private notes, but they asked me to swear that I had given them everything. I felt so drained afterwards that I asked Mr. Festima if I could just go home, a request he gleefully granted. When I went to bed, my head throbbed with the knowledge that Aimée's own deepest secrets were, in fact, so mild and innocent that nobody would believe that she had worked so hard to hide them. It wasn't as if she was herself a smuggler, a thief, or was hiding a sexual liaison. She didn't even have any impure thoughts. I almost felt like laughing, but I fell into a deep sleep.

*

The next morning Pembroke called me in to the police station.

"We had a drug-sniffer dog out at the former Zeitgeber apartment," he said. "New tenants have started to move in. The dog located a closet that, now empty, had once been used to store cocaine. Did you know anything about this?"

"Aimée might have known, but she refused to tell me," I answered.

"If Pascal Zeitgeber was a major drug smuggler, we would have quickly found out," said Pembroke. "He must have been a minor one, though."

"He wasn't rich enough to be a major smuggler," I said.

"That's why we did not investigate this possibility right away. Why didn't you tell me right away about what you suspected?"

"Aimée asked me not to," I said. "We were hoping to wait things out until we got married, then she could be with me rather than being left high and dry if and when her father was arrested. And as for what I knew? I don't think you could get a warrant from that." I did not mention the bags I had seen in the trunk of Pascal's car.

"The sniffer dogs detected no trace of cocaine or other drugs in the young lady's boxes," continued Pembroke. "Clearly, she was not involved in smuggling.

"We found Pascal Zeitgeber's car," Pembroke then said. "It was at LAX. The dogs acted like it reeked of cocaine. Of course, there was no cocaine in the car. I suppose the remaining merchandise must have been his last gift to the creditors he was presumably fleeing from. We contacted the airlines and found that the plane he and Aimée boarded had already landed in Europe. This is exactly the kind of thing the U.S. government is concerned about, but they would have to get INTERPOL involved. Because Mr. Zeitgeber is a French citizen, and because of the small scale of the smuggling, an international effort is not warranted."

"There is nothing more to be done, then," I said.

"It looks like it, Tony," said Pembroke. "Mr. Zeitgeber showed up on no international criminal databases. My guess is that he will start over in France—you said Strasbourg, right?—and one can only hope it will be with legitimate merchandise this time. Or maybe a while new line of work."

"Maybe he could go back to picking lemons in the south of France," I said. "I sort of hope he does. Aimée might be happy there, too. But, not right away. Please, God, not right away."

"Why not?" asked Pembroke, looking up at me.

"I want her to stay in Strasbourg long enough for me to find her," I said, with a confident smile.

*

Gil, the son of the police chief, started spreading rumors at school, based on what he overheard from his parents.

"You know why Amy's dad had to leave? It was because he was a smuggler. And I think I know what it was."

I listened with growing irritation. Gil was the most obnoxious kid in school.

"It must have been some kind of stinky cheese. They have a special name for it. I bet Tony knows what it is."

"Le fromage qui pue," I said.

"Poo is right," said Gil. "That's what it smells like. As in *cut the cheese*. Only they are proud of it."

My muscles tensed up.

"There are some kinds of cheese that stink so bad that it is illegal to import them," continued Gil. "But there are some devoted francophiles…"

Where did he learn this word?

"…who love it so much they will buy it on the black market."

"If it smells so bad, how can the smugglers sneak it in?" asked Roald, who was always the first to spot flaws in logic.

"They probably pretend their carry-ons have soiled diapers in them. Anyway, I heard that these cheese-lovers have secret meetings where they eat the stuff. You know, each part of the human body surface has its own kinds of bacteria." He had been the best biology student the previous year before I took first place. "The ones that create armpit odor are different from the ones that create crotch odor which are different from the ones that produce the odor of stinky socks. And the French have different kinds of stinky cheese with bacteria that originally came from undershirts, underwear, socks…"

I was finally fed up with Gil, perhaps because he might have been right. I stepped up to him and gave him a punch on the jaw. Gil was not a fighter, and just shielded his face with his forearms. I was not a fighter either, and I pretty much just hit him the way I thought a girl would. A teacher, I don't remember who, saw us and intervened.

"Dans ton cul," I yelled to Gil as I was dragged off. I had been waiting for a chance to use the phrase I got from a French news story: *Up yours.*

Chapter 12

Following on Dr. Bishop's suggestion, I found a website that listed all the institutes of higher learning in Strasbourg. At first, it was quite discouraging. Besides the inaccessible University of Strasbourg, there was the University of the Rhine, which offered only a degree in Art. National School of Water and Environmental Engineering? An architecture school? I thought about just going to France on a tourist visa and looking for Aimée, but I did not want to limit myself to three months. I was about to give up on the student visa idea when I found a private university called—I had to read this over and over to make sure I'd read it right—Université de l'Aurore, the University of the Sunrise.

Private and expensive.

But the more I read, the more interested I became. Sunrise U had no courses that one might find at a "normal" university. The science courses, for example, focused more on the role of scientific thinking in the improvement of the individual mind and of society. The philosophy courses focused mostly on helping the student develop, articulate, and defend a personal philosophy of life. The music courses focused on the intersection of music with literature, art, and even science. The only math course focused on statistics "telling it like it is," to get students to think critically about the evidence available to them. Focus? It did not appear that any course actually *focused* on anything. It was quickly apparent to me that neither a degree from this university—if they even offered one—nor any of the courses in the curriculum, would help me get a job. And yet there was not a single course listed that I did not want to take. Sunrise U had no majors; every student designed his or her own major. There were no grades, either. Every student received a paragraph summary from the instructor, detailing their strengths and weaknesses. Instead of a transcript, upon graduation, each student received a gigantic PDF file with all the comments in it. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like what I had read about the College of Creative Studies at UCSB, to which a brochure had encouraged me to apply, or like Sarah Lawrence College in New York.

Students were also expected to keep a daily notebook, at first just random thoughts but increasingly refined over time. Classrooms were round and, except for one of them, outdoors. Clothing was casual and, in very prescribed circumstances, optional. Disagreement was encouraged. The website said the university was accredited but was pretty vague on the specifics. "International students and synesthetes particularly encouraged to apply." The language of instruction was French, although extensive help was available for those of us who could not speak French well. The only foreign language course was Esperanto.

Maybe taking courses from this place wouldn't get me a job, but it might make me a hell of a good thinker and writer. That must be worth something. And maybe the same would be true for Aimée. Wouldn't it be nice if I could take some, or all, of these courses with her? This was, however, even less likely than me finding her. The only thing I could do was use enrollment at

this university as an excuse for looking and waiting for Aimée. To attend this university, instead of UCSB, would change the entire direction of my life. But, I decided, it was worth it.

*

I was eager to get my student visa. But before I could get a visa, I had to have a passport. The U.S. federal government rejected my application.

I searched their website but found no way to access information about my personal application. I called their telephone number. I never got anything but a recording. *Your call is very important to us. Press 1 to speak with a representative.* But this took me right back to *Your call is very important to us.*

It finally became apparent that I would have to go to their Los Angeles office and talk to them in person. To do this, I needed to schedule a meeting. This website interface, at least, worked well.

A week before my meeting time, I talked with Uncle Guglielmo on the phone.

"Artificial intelligence," he said. "AI is the opposite of intelligence. I should know; we use it all the time at the casino to generate customer profiles so we know exactly how much they can afford to spend. That determines the advertisements we send them. We even use it at the Amerigo Vespucci. If a menu item does not sell well, it instantly vanishes from the digital-interface menu boards.

"But the guv'mint," continued Guglielmo, "thinks that AI can do all their work for them. Take the post office, for example. Someone sent a letter to…I think it was actually to Strasbourg, Tony. The letter ended up in Delhi. Know where that is? Of course you do. It sounds like something that no human letter sorter would be stupid enough to do. But AI did it. Another letter was supposed to go to St. Francis Hospital in Tulsa and ended up at the Vatican. And that's just the ones I know about.

"So I'm not surprised that the State Department can't tell you why you can't get a passport. When's your meeting? I'll go with you.

"Of course I have time. Sounds fun. I gotta hear this story."

It was a story worthy of Guglielmo's sense of humor. There was apparently a smuggler named Antonio Albinoni. He didn't smuggle arms. He smuggled cheese. Gil would have felt a little vindicated if he knew this. And the other Antonio Albinoni was at large. I tried to explain to the official in Los Angeles that it had to be a different Antonio Albinoni. But the official, who seemed to have nothing else to do, just said computers are always right.

"The birthplace is wrong," I said. "I was born in Ventura. This guy is from Hoboken."

"Can you prove you were born in Ventura?"

I showed him my birth certificate. He did not seem impressed.

When Uncle Guglielmo started to give an impassioned speech about free enterprise and tax money, the official just called in a security guard.

Before we left the meeting, Guglielmo had a quiet talk with the official. Thereafter, he seemed a little more relaxed.

"You think this is bad? The IRS computers still use Fortran. That's the software they used when *my* uncle was in college," said Guglielmo.

Three weeks later, my passport came by registered mail. I think the casino credit Guglielmo offered the official had something to do with it.

Meanwhile I applied to Sunrise U and was accepted. From there, the student visa was easy to get. I think. Guglielmo had his office staff process the application. I enrolled in a course: selected topics in music and poetry.

*

And then it happened. The letter arrived from Stuttgart, Germany. It was scribbled, unlike the invariably neat writing I had known from Aimée. It was on a piece of scratch paper.

Dear Tony. *J'ai qu'un bref moment.* I am at the airport. I do not know where we are eventually going, but probably Strasbourg. I think I told you, Papa had an emergency fund in case we needed to leave. We have now used it. I cannot let you know where we are, now or later; thus, I may not be able to write to you again. *Die Post bringt keinen Brief für dich.* We are so deep into problems, Tony. I can't involve you in any of this. I know that I said, No *Leiermann* for us, and that the forces of Hell could not keep us apart. But I was wrong. I do not see how we can ever meet again. Aimée. PS I do not deserve your love. Please forget about me.

*

Mom, Dad, and Brenda could tell that the letter had terrible news. We went out to eat, during which time I just stared blankly at the wall. Brenda seemed especially empathetic with me, something I thought I would never see.

"Don't give up, Tony," Brenda told me.

"Why not? She told me to."

"Sometimes, when us girls say *Please, forget about me,* we don't really, down in our heart of hearts, want you to."

"That makes no sense," I said.

"Well, it happens that way sometimes. Do you really think Aimée would want or expect you to simply give up the dream you two had created together?"

Brenda wanted to play chess with me, something she was really terrible at, but she won. She didn't even realize she had checkmated me until it was my turn, and I was trapped.

"That's what I feel like right now," I said.

"Don't talk like that," she said, pulling away the rook with which she had cornered me.

I put the rook back where it had been. “No, I’m trapped by fate. I love Aimée, and I will never see her again. Checkmate.”

“Tony, it’s just a chess game!”

I consulted the internet on my phone, then said, “When a chess game starts, there are about ten to the fortieth power possible moves. And that’s just the legitimate moves. In chess, there are more different possible futures than there are atoms in the universe. But once you get cornered, that number drops to zero. No choice about the future then.”

Next we tried Scrabble. I put down a G. Brenda followed it with an E.

“I have a bunch of E’s to get rid of,” she said.

I put down a B, and Brenda used another E.

I put down an R. GEBER.

“I can see where this is going,” Brenda said. She put a U under the G, trying to start a new column of letters. But I put a T before the G.

A couple of moves later, I scored a lot of points from using my Z.

ZEITGEBER.

“Tony, you made this happen.”

“How, Brenda? I didn’t choose to have a G, B, or R. Certainly not a Z. Nobody wants a Z.”

“Tony, you can’t use names in Scrabble. So there.”

“Zeitgeber is not just a name. It means *timer* in German.”

“It has to be English,” Brenda tried again.

“It is a term used in science,” I said, based on uncertain memory. “Something to do with biological clocks.” I sighed. “It’s fate.”

“You don’t believe in fate, Tony.”

“I don’t know what to believe any more,” I said.

I walked around for days with Aimée’s letter in my pocket. I imagined looking for Aimée. My dreams at night were a *mélange* of fast cars, slow trucks, fast boats, slow canoes, chases on foot, chases on horseback, mountain hiking, mountain biking, flying on hang gliders, flying in balloons, running from one car to another as the train sped across versts of Siberian steppe, going up Andean trails on mule carts, rickety airplanes, fast jets. I dreamed of just missing Aimée; then of finding her and begging her to come with me; and finally, of telling her, *You say you do not deserve my love. Well,* I *will decide whether you deserve my love or not. You can flee it, you can refuse it, but you cannot not deserve it.*

*

Joan smiled at me. She was the principal clarinetist, the one who played Aimée’s solo that first day, and was now playing all of them for the concert. “I’m glad you decided to stay in band,” she said.

“Just for that one piece,” I said.

"No ordinary piece," she said. "Your solo is pretty good, too. Performing that piece is the least that either of us could do for Amy." She moved to a chair near me and propped her head on her hands against the back of the chair. "Remember, Tony, the rest of us miss her too."

"Thanks for saying that," I said.

"You should join back in with the rest of society," she said.

"No time for that," I said.

"You aren't even going to the prom?"

"How could I do that? I think about Aimée all the time."

Joan got serious. "Tony, listen. She's gone. At least, open yourself up to other girls."

"They all think I'm a fool for continuing to love Aimée, a love that didn't make much sense even when she was still here."

"We don't all think you're a fool," said Joan. "Well, speaking for myself. I just think that, well, you could look around at the rest of us a little."

"You mean, at you."

Joan laughed. "Oh, Tony, you are so sweet! Thank you. But I had someone else in mind."

"Who?" I asked.

"You know Sara, the little flute player?"

"Of course," I said.

"She's such a darling, isn't she?" Joan's eyes smiled into mine.

"She is really beautiful," I said.

"Well, I was talking with her about different things. The subject of Tony came up. I think she likes you."

"Why would such a beautiful girl be attracted to me? Also, she's a junior, isn't she?"

"What difference does that make, Tony?"

"She couldn't go to France with me when I look for Aimée."

Joan laughed again. "Aimée's gone," she said. "You will never find her, or if you do, she will have moved on with her life. At least, you can forget about her for, maybe, the rest of the semester? Then you can go to France. Then when you come back…"

"Come back with Aimée?" I said, a little harshly.

"I'm just trying to help," said Joan, a little irritated. "So, maybe you and Sara would not stay together very long. But think how much going out with you would do for her confidence. And she can help fill the hole in your life for a while. Do you want me to give you her phone number?"

I talked to Brenda about Joan's offer.

"Really? Sara? She's hot. And smart and talented and…My brother, going to the prom with Sara? That would be totally awesome."

"Better than Aimée?" I asked.

"Totally. I mean, get real. If you're still waiting for Amy…Girls like Sara, and me, we're more practical. We don't have our heads in the clouds. I know I said to hang in there with Aimée, but that was, like, last week?"

Before I called Sara, I talked with Joan again.

"Don't call her," said Joan. "We both know, everybody knows, that you aren't going to be satisfied, for even a teensy weensy little bit, with someone other than Amy. So don't waste your time on Sara."

Chapter 13

Uncle Guglielmo was not surprised when I called him. My parents had forewarned him. He invited us up to his mansion.

When I met with him, he seemed to already know everything about Sunrise U. I had prepared a nice written proposal for him, explaining how attendance at this university would open lots of doors for my future. He waved it away.

"I checked out the website," he told me. "University of the Sunrise my ass. I love it. You'll be such a wise and clever thinker by the time you're done there. Nobody could pull any BS on you, not after taking *those* classes. Come back here and I'll hire you. You would be a great manager." He leaned closer and whispered loudly, "Don't take that math class too seriously. We make all our casino money because the waddling masses don't understand statistics and probability."

"You'd hire me? Without any experience?"

"OJT," he said. "On the Job Training."

"You know, sir," I began.

"Don't *sir* me," he interrupted.

"You know, Uncle Guglielmo, I've heard stories about casino managers. The stories aren't pretty."

"Gotta start somewhere," said Guglielmo.

"Managers have to be the bad guys," I said. "Like when someone comes in and wants to pawn a wedding ring for casino credit. The manager has to tell them no. Or tell them yes and put up with their whines and moans when they come back, sober, and want the wedding ring back."

"Where did you hear that?" he asked me.

"Never mind," I said. "Is it true?"

"It might happen. I'm not sure about that particular story."

"I could, of course, send them to a pawnbroker. But late at night, pawn shops closed, and you have people desperate to gamble…"

"Enough of that!" Guglielmo said. I was suddenly afraid that I had gone too far. He was, after all, my only hope of finding Aimée.

"Or maybe you'll find that girl," he said, resuming his normal voice. "I hope you do. Bring her back here and I'll hire her too. Just not her father.

"Running halfway across the world to look for a girl whose location you know only to the nearest hundred miles. Sheesh! I love it. One of my favorite novels was *Small World,* by David Lodge. British writer. The plot is, a scholar—sort of like you—kept chasing a brilliant and beautiful woman all over the world, and just missing her, time and time again. Then the man in the novel finds the woman, too late.

"Love of a particular person is worth running around the world for, even if you fail. May you have better luck than Lodge's character did. That Amy of yours may not be too beautiful, as the world judges beauty, but she is certainly brilliant, and a hell of a nice girl. Which is more important anyway. What do you want when you are old? A wife who is as mentally alive as you are, or one who *used* to be beautiful?

"And you're gonna need insurance," said Guglielmo.

"I have insurance," I said. "Dad's."

"Until you're eighteen," said my uncle. "And it's only domestic."

"Sorry I didn't think of that," I said.

"We'll get you some overseas insurance. Just for emergencies. The trust fund can probably pay for it easy.

"Just let me know how much you need. We'll make all the arrangements, ready to hop on the plane on your eighteenth birthday."

I started to leave, but Guglielmo seemed to want to say something more to me.

"We're having a spot of trouble here at the casino," he said.

"Financial trouble?" I asked.

"Not directly. You see, your Dad and I aren't very Chumash. Neither of us speaks a word of the language. The casino generates a lot of income for the tribe, but the individuals who get high salaries are mostly white.

"Well, something happened."

"When?" I asked my uncle.

"Back in 1824," he said.

"How could that matter?"

"There was a massacre of Chumash people at Mission Santa Ynez."

"Massacre? How many?"

"About nineteen," he answered.

"That's a massacre?"

"It's enough of a massacre that the place where it happened is sacred ground to the tribe."

"Mission Santa Ynez?" I asked. "That's just down the road here. It's preserved, right?"

"It's been rebuilt. A fire destroyed the original during the 1824 uprising. But that's not where the mission was in 1824. The original site was down near Lompoc. And that site, Tony, is where the tribe was going to build a new casino. We already bought the land, hired contractors, the whole shebang.

"A delegation of Chumash who have just a little more Chumash blood than we do are suing us. And they are holding demonstrations, vigil fires, powwows, etc. If they win the suit, there might be some cutbacks. We stand to lose a lot of money."

"You mean, you."

"No, I'd just retire. But by then I might not be in a position to be quite so generous with the trust fund, insurance, and such like. Better go now, while you can."

*

Then one day I received a text from Aimée. It was as if my life had been given back to me. I ran around the house almost screaming with joy. My parents were relieved, if only to see me happy again.

All I needed to do was find some money to send to her. Then she would be able to fly back to see me.

To get the money, of course, I called Uncle Guglielmo. I did not understand why he did not share my excitement.

"Copy me the text," he said.

Dear Tony, Guess what! I'm coming back to California from Strasbourg! No time to explain. Just send me five hundred euros. The link to my account is below. I can't begin to say how exited I will be to see you again! Aimee

As soon as I sent him the text, I was immediately suspicious about it myself. But I was so exited—exited?—that I had overlooked the obvious warning signs until my uncle pointed them out to me.

"Tony, would that girl have misspelled *excited*?"

"Of course not. Unless she was in a hurry…"

"Have you sent any account information?"

"No."

"Don't even click on the link. What makes you think the email is from Amy?"

"Who else would know about us? Tony and…She left off the *accent aigu.* Of course, the text program might have taken it out. I mean, the message has information in it that nobody could know unless…"

"Unless your text messages have been hacked."

"Oh."

"Not even by a human being. An artificial intelligence could have picked up your name, her name, California, Strasbourg. And of course your text address. Have you texted anyone about her leaving?"

"Of course. No details, but just about her leaving."

"Tony, delete the text. Now."

"I guess you're right. That was a close call. Wait! There's an attachment."

"Tony, don't open it."

"Too late. It's her picture! It's her! How could an artificial intelligence…"

"Since you opened it, you might as well look at the picture a little closer."

"It's of her in Strasbourg! The Cathedral is in the background."

"Not like there are no photos of cathedrals online."

"But her face? Wait. Let me zoom in. That looks just like a photo I took of her."

"A photo on your phone?"

"Yes. It's the one the biology teacher and I used to study her facial asymmetry."

"The photo attachment is fake. The AI program cropped the face out and put it in a photo…"

"I see now. That's not her body. It is *so* not her body."

PART FOUR. STRASBOURG, SUMMER

Chapter 14

I finished high school. I gave the commencement address. I couldn't do better than Sir Winston Churchill, whose entire script for a graduation speech was: *Never give up. Never give up. Never, never, never, never.* The audience all knew my story and that I was certainly not going to give up. I had a pretty good GPA, considering that my entire last semester was an attempted mastery of French.

And that's how I ended up in a jet headed first to New York. The student visa turned out to be almost impossible to get, because of the paperwork. French bureaucracy. As Uncle Guglielmo would say, sheesh. But, by classifying me as a future employee, he could use his departmental funds to hire a lawyer who got my birth certificate, my empty criminal record, and God knows what else. The visa arrived by express mail only a couple of days before I left.

After I got myself settled in the first class seat on the plane, I looked out over the Mojave Desert. It looked utterly desolate. I marveled that the Native peoples had been able to eke out an existence there. They had constant privation. But, unlike the rest of us, especially their casino-running descendants, they could look at the dawn in the morning and breathe deeply in satisfaction. Or so I imagined.

Then I looked out over the Great Smoky Mountains. It looked like smoke filled the hills and vales. The mountains shifted into and out of view. But it was not smoke. It was mist, exhaled by the process of transpiration from the trees themselves. For a moment I marveled again that not only did the weather control plants, but the plants could create the weather.

From La Guardia, the Air France jet took the shortest route to Paris. But on a flat map it looked like a loop. The shortest route over the curvature of the Earth took us over the southern tip of Greenland, where I saw mud and icebergs where there were once solid glaciers.

It was an overnight flight to Charles De Gaulle Airport. I tried sleeping in one of those first-class seats that converts into a couch. My earbuds were plugged into relaxation sounds on my phone. The sounds were all annoying. Tinkling water drops, bird calls, even Buddhist chants. They were not as annoying as the self-hypnosis CD, at least.

At dawn, the plane headed straight into a blinding sunrise. I looked out and saw a little patchwork of farms, bordered by shrubs, that made up the Normandy landscape. I took the TGV (*Train de Grande Vitesse,* the super-train) through fields of wheat and corn in Champaign and Lorraine. I thought maybe I was dreaming I was in Nebraska instead of France. I finally felt like sleeping, but I was afraid that I might sleep right past the Strasbourg Gare and end up in Colmar or Stuttgart or someplace else.

I talked to a train attendant. "Wake me up in Strasbourg," I said.

"Pardon?" she asked, giving the final syllable a beautiful emphasis.

"*Est-ce que vous pouvez réveille-moi en Strasbourg* ?"

"*À Strasbourg*," she corrected me. "Oui."

Then the landscape got interesting and I was less sleepy: industrial yards on the west side of Strasbourg. Soon I was in the train station, the Strasbourg Gare, blinking my eyes as I tried to figure out which tram to take to the office of the apartment I had rented online, with the lawyer's help, near Sunrise U.

*

I was exhausted when I found the apartment. It was a walkable distance (for a marching band member who carried a large brass instrument) from the train station. I took a tram to the Broglie stop, and started walking in what looked like the right direction on the street map the lawyer sent to me. The brick street was narrow. Pedestrians almost brushed against very slow cars and delivery vehicles. A mail delivery bicycle swished around me. I was walking toward the Cathedral, in which I did not, as yet, have any interest. I was at the corner of the Rue des Juifs, the street of the Jews, and the Rue Brûlée, the street of burning. I kept walking, a little confused at the street names. I assumed Rue Brûlée referred to some event during the Revolution. I found myself right in front of L'Hôtel Joham de Mundolsheim, with boutique shops on the first floor and apartments above. As the street names suggested, this used to be the Jewish part of town. Jewish people lived in the building as early as 1290, until Valentine's Day in 1349, when the authorities rounded up the Jews and burned them. This explained the Rue Brûlée. And this was to be my home for the duration of my stay in Strasbourg.

I knew my uncle was rich, but I wondered how he could afford an apartment for me in this prime section of the city. Once I found the manager and showed him the phone image of my contract, he became very friendly and took me to my room. I then understood why the price was lower than other apartments I had researched online. The small apartment had a scuffed wooden floor. I discovered "furnished" meant just the bare essentials, which fortunately included an electric stove, microwave, couch in the main room, and small bed frame in the bedroom. Like all French apartments, the water closet (toilet) was in a separate room from the sink and shower. Also like all French apartments, heat came from a radiator by the window, which was probably the worst place to have a radiator in the winter. As it was still summer, I didn't worry about this. There was no air conditioning, but the August heat wave wouldn't last too long, I had read. At night, I had to close my window against the street noises and to keep out the insects, since I never saw a French window with a screen.

But the main reason for the low price was that it was a historical building. The city required that a portion of the walls have their original structure remain visible. Even the little boutique downstairs had a portion of their wall exposing the wooden beams, with rocks between them, over which plaster had originally been spread. In my room, one entire wall was wood, rock, and plaster.

I was glad for my electric fan, which also created a soothing sound that helped me sleep. The electric wiring was completely different from that in America, so I had to buy a French fan as soon as I arrived. For things that did not require much voltage, such as my laptop or phone

charger, I had a plug adapter. Plugs all look like faces. American plugs had squinty eyes and a round mouth. French plug adapters looked like the gargoyles on the cathedral.

My apartment was not too far from the Place Kléber, a plaza with fountains and a big statue of a Revolutionary general. People of many ethnicities (all of them from France's former colonies in Africa and Asia) sat near the fountains and let their kids wade in them. On the first morning after I recovered from jet lag, which is to say my third morning, I sat on the low cement shelf that surrounded the statue and breathed in deeply the scent of the greatest satisfaction I had ever known. My favorite place in this plaza was the Librairie, the bookstore. I bought a few books so I could practice French while sitting at a boulangerie, the way everyone thinks the French spend their time, and which in fact many of them do, while sipping coffee. I was absorbed by the absurdly insightful science fiction novels of René Barjavel. Having a fixed address, I could get a library (médiathèque) card, at which time I stopped buying so many books.

My main motivation for visiting the bookstore and library at least once a day is that I assumed there was no more likely place to see Aimée.

"Est-ce que vous connaissez une jeune femme qui s'appelle Aimée Zeitgeber ?" I asked a few times. I pulled out my phone and showed her photo. After a few times of this, one of the clerks told me, "C'est ce que vous m'avez demandé hier." That's what you asked me yesterday. And they always said, "Desolée," I'm sorry. It sounded to me like *desolated*. But none of them could have been as desolated as I was upon not finding Aimée.

Of course, I checked the internet for Aimée Zeitgeber twice a day. I never found a match to her name.

I thought that, perhaps, Aimée would be drawn to some group where she could associate with people with similar interests. That would mean, perhaps, groups that studied English literature. I found some but did not find her. The Daniel Defoe Society met for barbecues where they could pretend they were among Caribbean cannibals. The Charlotte Brontë society ate flummeries at reception tables until the crazy wife (which each of the women took a turn at being) in a white nightgown chased them away. It was always a dark and stormy night at the Bulwer Lytton Society. I never found Aimée at any of these, even among the caterers, for one of whom she might have worked because of her Rolando Burger experience.

I went almost every day to the cathedral. It was a little smaller than its namesake Notre Dame in Paris but was larger and older than any other building I had ever seen. In fact for centuries it was the tallest building in the world. It had lofty ceilings, and stained glass windows that depicted Bible stories for illiterate medieval peasants. I never missed the Horlogue Astronomique, the astronomical clock, in a little alcove to the side. It not only had a little spinning diorama for each quarter hour, but also a working model of the solar system as it was known during the 1843 renovation, the first six planets. It had a portrait of the early scientist Copernicus, who was considered a heretic in his lifetime for saying that the Earth moved around the sun, or in fact that it moved at all, but who was a hero by 1843.

Another thing I did every day in the cathedral was to drop a coin in the box and light a candle to leave on the prayer table. A sign said in French, “You don’t know what to say when you pray? Let the candle pray for you.” But I had no difficulty in deciding what to say. My prayer was the same every day: *Oh God, if you exist, help me find Aimée.*

I gradually got used to the pace of life in the center of town. I learned when and when not to jaywalk across the tram tracks. I had to swim through the crowds while avoiding bicycles, including delivery bicycles. Even La Poste (the post office) used delivery bicycles. It was all orderly, except for the *trottinettes,* the rapid little electric scooters that considered themselves free from any of the laws that cars, trucks, bicycles, or even pedestrians had to obey. They even considered themselves free from the Laws of Newton. They brushed against me at high velocities.

Of course, I had no idea if Aimée lived in or even went to the part of town I lived in. Maybe she was in one of the suburbs to the north, with the cheaper houses and apartments where many immigrants lived. I took tram line B up toward Hoenheim. At the Parc de Contades tram stop, there was a gigantic synagogue, Synagogue de la Paix. I knew Aimée was not a religious Jew, but it couldn’t hurt for me to walk around the area as often as I had time.

There was a gigantic public park, the Parc du Contades, right behind the synagogue. I thought this would be a good place to sit and watch people. At first I sat in the big metal gazebo in the center, but it was far away from where most of the people were. I started sitting on various benches. There were lots of playgrounds for little kids.

One day I continued on Tram line B until it ended at the Hoenheim station. I walked around a little, finding mostly junkyards, parking lots, *ronciers* (brambles) and weeds, a supermarket, and American fast food places. So I went back and took the tram a couple of stops back, and got out at Le Ried. It was early evening as I walked amidst apartments and first-floor stores: a pharmacy, a food store, a boulangerie, a middle eastern restaurant. Outside of the restaurant, a man was going crazy and had been tied to a chair. He screamed and arched his back. People, including me, stood around unconcerned as an ambulance took its time approaching. He was just a man who missed his meds, apparently. It occurred to me that nobody, maybe even the ambulance driver, had a gun. In America, this would have been the scene of a mass shooting.

But in none of these places did I find Aimée. Just as Roald had predicted.

*

One day, I believed that I saw her. I stood near the Maison Kammerzell, which some claim is the oldest restaurant in the world, on the brick plaza outside the cathedral. I then noticed that some musicians had begun to assemble near the base of the cathedral. I saw the baritone horn player first. I was going to approach him and chat, but he was clearly organizing the other musicians. A trumpet player, a tuba player. Accordion, Tambourine. One violinist. Clarinet, Flute.

And oboe.

The oboe player looked so much like Aimée that, at the moment, I was certain that it must be she. I started running toward the musicians until a gendarme delayed me for reasons not immediately clear to me. The musicians started to play Jewish klezmer music. I stopped to watch the performance, planning to intercept Aimée at a time when I would not interrupt the performance. Klezmer music is, quite simply, funny. One cannot hear it without feeling good. The baritone horn player turned around in a circle as the band played.

Hitler had stood on this very spot about 1940. I remembered seeing the photo online. He was smiling or trying to. His forces had taken over Alsace very easily, having bypassed the line of machine gun nests down near the Rhine River by passing through Belgium. He chose, for one of the few times in his career, to use diplomacy instead of force. He told the Strasbourgeoise that Alsatians were not really French at all, but were Germans, and why not join themselves in Germany's embrace? The Nazis tried to exterminate the Alsatian Jews, just like all the other Jews, but it was hardly worse than the centuries of oppression the Jews had experienced for hundreds of years in places like the street I lived on.

Having found Aimée, I smiled and was profoundly contented as I watched these musicians play happy music in the very spot where they had been beaten to the ground for centuries. But when they finished, they immediately dispersed into all different directions. The oboe player was gone.

Why did the Jewish musicians flee? I was to get my answer as soon as I read the news. There were no small number of Nazi sympathizers in Alsace. Not enough to make up a significant force, but enough to vandalize Jewish buildings by spray-painting swastikas on them or kicking over Jewish gravestones. I never heard of violence, or even Nazi heckling. But the Jewish performers must have thought, why stay around in case it happened? Maybe the gendarme who restrained me thought I intended violence toward the musicians.

There had been no notice given of the performance, nor any signage to indicate who they were. I assumed they were a private, maybe secret, group of musicians. They, including Aimée, could not be contacted. And seeing Aimée at the base of the cathedral did not in any way indicate to me where she lived. Assuming that the young woman was, in fact, Aimée. I did take a photo of the group. The next day, as I looked at the image, I could tell that it was not Aimée.

*

Maybe, I thought, Aimée needed to work now that she was no longer in school. Probably food service. So I checked every boulangerie and pâtisserie—of which there are more than you can shake a baguette at—in Strasbourg. I hoped I would find Aimée working at one of them. Every day for lunch I would eat at a boulangerie, and every afternoon I would eat pastries at a pâtisserie. I was quickly astonished at the variety of pastries in France. Fine desserts are a national religion. This is the country that actually has a patron saint, St. Honoré, of pastry chefs. Most saints got martyred in some way or another. I liked to imagine that St. Honoré was stuffed

into a large, body-bag-shaped éclair filled with rum nougat and sprinkled with sugar crystals, or wrapped up in a chocolate crème croissant, on his way to Heaven.

I finally settled into a routine in which, each afternoon, I ordered a madeleine, which is a little bell-shaped cookie partially dipped in a flavored coating. I remembered hearing that this was what Marcel Proust was eating when he experienced an "involuntary memory" of "things past." I decided to give it a try. I would try a different flavor each day and think about Aimée. Maybe this would help me have a vision of where she was. At least, it took me to a lot of different pâtisseries where I could ask about her.

When I had a chocolate madeleine, *le chocolat,* I remembered back to when I baked the five-dimensional chocolate experience for Aimée and my family. It was one of our best dinners. My creation was famous more for the concept than the execution. It was a big chocolate brownie, with chocolate pudding and chocolate chips mixed in, and a white chocolate A and dark chocolate sprinkles on the top. But when I ate this madeleine, I had no vision of Aimée.

When I had a lime madeleine, *le citron vert,* I remembered back to Aimée eating whole slices of lemons and limes. But I had no vision of Aimée.

When I had a kiwifruit madeleine, *le kiwi,* I remembered walking with Aimée near a tidepool on the Santa Barbara coast. The sea anemone animals were of a whitish green color similar to this flavor. I told her the tentacles had stinging cells on them and I dared her to stick her toe in one of them. She did. The tentacles grabbed it, but the stinging cells were too small to stimulate her toe's pain sensors. But I still had no vision of Aimée.

When I had a coffee-flavored madeleine, *le cafè,* I remembered a time when Aimée and I had studied pre-calculus together at the coffee shop. We tried to come up with equations that would describe the swirls of cream on top of our drinks. But I had no vision of Aimée.

When I had a madeleine made of choux, I was expecting it to contain cabbages, which is what *choux* means. But choux was just one more kind of pastry material which, like all the others, contained milk, egg, sugar, and flour. Again, no vision of Aimée.

*

One day I took the tram over the Rhine River into Germany. Within the European Union, no passports were needed. From the Kehl station, I walked to the Peace Park along the bank of the Rhine, from which place I would see a corresponding park on the French side. I mounted the steps to the passerelle, a gleaming white footbridge that crossed the river. I was suspended halfway between France and Germany, the frontier of millennia of war. Instead of war, I saw hundreds of padlocks attached to the fence wire along the sides of the bridge. They were supposed to represent the bi-national love of French-German couples. But there was no law that said some other kind of love could not be represented by a padlock. I brought a padlock on which I had *Antonio and Aimée* professionally etched, attached it to the fence. I threw away the key and hoped it did not land on one of the tourist boats passing underneath me.

*

My small apartment had a separate bedroom that I could offer to Aimée if I found her and where I could sleep with her, or apart from her, whichever she decided. Once the mattress was delivered, I got pastel sheets and pillowcases that were almost plain. Light green. I figured that we both shared a hinted love of chlorophyll. I passed up blankets with paintings of big lions in favor of blankets with patterns of leaves. A lamp that had a bright light to focus on a book, rather than decorative lamps that created diffused light. I planned to get furniture that I could assemble myself, until I thought about my inability to make things fit together.

I kept the apartment as clean as one could keep a room with a whole wall of timber and rocks and moldy plaster. I fantasized that she would walk in at any minute. I immediately cleaned up grease from the stove, and never left dirty dishes out overnight, which might attract ants or roaches. I caught several mice in live traps, which I carried in my pocket (still inside the trap), then surreptitiously released them in the Orangerie. This was a park where storks lived. I cleaned the bathroom weekly. In fact, after each shower, I wiped away the drops of notoriously mineralized Strasbourg water. I imagined her delicate feet on the tiles around the drain. I did not dare to imagine her nakedness in the shower. Why invite the torture of desire for her upon me? I had the bedroom perfectly made up for her. But I always slept on the couch.

Chapter 15

I received regular email updates from University of the Sunrise. One of these updates was about the special topics in music and poetry course in which I had enrolled. “Special topics” meant that each time the course was offered, it would have different content. This upcoming semester the instructor was someone of whom I had not heard, Dr. Josef Appelbaum. But I jumped in excitement when I read that he was the world’s foremost authority on the music and poetry of Franz Schubert’s *lieder*. I went to the university, which was very near the Orangerie, to find his office.

The university was just a single building, and not a big one; it had once been an apartment complex. Its sole air of history was the medieval German beams and plaster, which almost every other building had, along with tiles on the sloping roofs. Even worse, half of the building was a doctor’s office. The former living room was the waiting room, and a former bedroom was the examination room. The university had just one faculty office and one classroom. The course for which I had signed up was the only one they were going to offer in the fall semester. If I had expected an actual college education, I would have been very angry, especially after giving up UCSB. But I reminded myself that University of the Sunrise was an excuse for a student visa.

The first two times I visited, the building was locked. Apparently they had no summer courses. Then, one day, I found the door unlocked. I went to the single office and found Dr. Josef Appelbaum just as he was about to leave.

“Professeur Appelbaum,” I said. He looked up at me from locking his door. “Je m’appelle Antonio Albinoni. Je suis étudiant d’Amerique. Je suis étudiant dans son course de la musique et la poésie. Est-ce possible que…”

“You speak English?” he asked me in English.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then let’s talk in English. Your French is terrible.” He unlocked his door and showed me to the visitor’s seat. His blue eyes sparkled under a mop of gray hair.

“I don’t want to take up too much of your time,” I began.

“You are enrolled in my course?”

“Mais oui!” I said. “I mean, yes.”

“Then you are not taking up too much of my time. They pay me to do *something*. Not, as you can probably guess, very much. But I do it for the love of education. I am retired from the University of Kehl, just across the river.”

He had a computer and a few books and papers. There was one small book in the middle of his desk.

“Die Winterreise!” I exclaimed.

He looked at me in surprise. “Why, yes. We will be studying it this semester.”

I began to tell him everything I knew about it, completely oblivious to the fact that he was the world expert. He stopped me.

"Your knowledge is impressive," he said. "You might find that you will have little more to learn about Die Winterreise in my course." He looked thoughtfully at the ceiling then said, "If your French were better, I would even ask you to give a couple of little presentations in my course. Maybe you can anyway. Especially since you said that you and your friend studied it together out of sheer interest and passion. What was her name?"

"Aimée. And you are right about the passion part."

"Is she a student here also?"

"No. But she should take your class also."

"I'll let her sit in the class. But she has to be registered in order for me to write any records about her."

"I'll pay the registration," I said.

"It's pricey," he said, using English slang.

"I will pay it," I said. Then, I admitted, "I don't even know where she is. I came here to find her."

He smiled grandly at me. "So you are a wayfarer in pursuit of your woman's love."

"I am."

He told me that we would spend about three weeks on Die Winterreise, then three more weeks on *Die schöne Müllerin,* The Fair Maid of the Mill.

"I haven't studied that one," I said.

"Same old same old," he said, expecting me to appreciate his mastery of English slang, which I did. "Twenty poems, same poet as Die Winterreise, male voice and piano, about a wanderer who was in love with a pretty maid. Even the poems are very similar. The first one is Das Wandern…"

"The journey? Wandering?" I asked.

"That's what it means today, but at the time it meant the young man was a journeyman, that is, an apprentice in the miller's trade. Then come movements with titles like Evening's Rest, Rain of Tears, Withered Flowers, and so on. Then, with The Brook's Lullaby, he is home at last. In his grave."

"Almost as bad as Der Leiermann," I said.

"You'll love it," said Dr. Appelbaum. "Then we will do Gustav Mahler's *Songs of a Wayfarer.* I don't know as much about Mahler as I do about Schubert, but probably more than any of you students do."

"A safe guess," I said.

"With Mahler, you have a whole orchestra, not just voice and piano. Same thing with Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde,* Song of the Earth. See, Mahler had a fixation on death in his later years…"

We finished the conversation in a restaurant overlooking the Ill River and La Petite France, a very old and picturesque part of the city. There were beautiful begonias in planter boxes. Of course, most buildings in Strasbourg had planter boxes with begonias. Dr. Appelbaum told me about how Mahler was very sure that he, like Beethoven, would die after writing his ninth symphony. So Mahler thought he could trick fate. He called his tenth symphony Das Lied von der Erde instead of a symphony. "It didn't work," said Dr. Appelbaum. "He dropped over dead anyway.

"And, after we study *The Trout,* perhaps Schubert's most famous song—a song that even someone who just listens to popular music could like; for Chrissake, there is even a brand of washing machines and dryers that use the theme to signal that the laundry is finished—we end the semester with *Death and the Maiden.* A short but powerful song. Schubert based a quartet on it. It is about a young woman who receives a visit from the Death Angel…What is that look on your face?"

"Sorry, sir. It's just that I would rather not think about Death visiting a young woman. You see, not only do I not know where Aimée is. I don't even know if Aimée is alive or dead."

"Why would she be dead?" he asked me. "Certainly not from a lack of medical attention. Health care is so cheap here that you can afford it even without insurance."

"I wouldn't presume that what seems affordable to us would be to her.

"My family barely rescued her from dying of malnutrition," I continued. "Her father was very poor. And one time…" Tears sprang to my eyes as I remembered my conversation with Aimée not so very long ago. "One time she said that she once felt that death would not be such a bad thing. Dying, yes; nobody wants to go through that. But beyond it might be land of rest…"

"Serious depression," said Dr. Appelbaum. "You got help for her, didn't you?"

"My family and I were helping her," I said. "But she suddenly vanished."

"Look, Tony—if I may call you Tony. If the subject matter of *Der Tod und das Mädchen* disturbs you, you can skip it. No grades, you know, at Sunrise."

"No," I said. "I need to deal with it."

I walked with Dr. Appelbaum across the passerelle to Kehl. He had, like me, walked to the university. We stopped on the passerelle to look at the padlock I had placed there for Aimée.

*

I listened to *Death and the Maiden,* the song, on my computer. I had to start over several times because the initial chords were so depressing. A slow plaintive chant in minor. Then, briefly, the maiden's voice rose in a complex aria, telling Death to leave her alone. But the minor chords returned, even more chilling than before. He said he was not coming to harm her, but just to let her sleep in his arms. The fact that the final chords were in major, not minor, made them even creepier. I sat down on my couch and wept for a long time.

I rose to my feet and spoke to myself. “Tony, you bozo, if you sit around crying alone in your apartment, you will certainly never find Aimée. Go out and get another madeleine. You are more likely to find her that way.”

The next evening, I listened to the Death and the Maiden string quartet. The website said that the quartet encapsulated the Christian myth of death and resurrection. But when I started listening to the music, it left me with a sense of power. From the very first chords, Schubert’s string music was what I could only describe as angry. He was *furious* at death, a death that Schubert saw coming for himself and quickly when he wrote the music from his hospital bed. I stood, then almost danced around my room, facing and denouncing Death, beating him with my little fists. I stopped the music and panted. I had never before thought of anger as a response to Death.

I listened to the next two movements of the quartet. The second movement was variations on the original song. All the pathos and sadness of the song remained, but the variations were so beautiful. Unbidden to my mind came visions of a postfire chaparral blooming, like the one I had visited with Aimée—Death can burn us, but we will defy it by growing beautiful. How nice. But I was not satisfied. Death itself is ugly.

The fourth movement of the quartet gave me yet another view of Death. This movement was a frenzied *tarantella*. That is, an Italian dance with rapid kicks. Legend has confused tarantella with *tarantula*. You have to keep dancing, crazily, to either keep the tarantulas from biting you or to shake out the poison if they do. Yes, that was Schubert’s response, was it not: to dance defiantly even as Death marches slowly over the world.

But somewhere in the middle of the tarantella, the melodic lines that had thus far gracefully woven themselves together started to fall apart. I could hear it very clearly. They were incompetently written, as if for just a few moments Schubert was losing his grip on reality. I stood in amazement as the music gathered itself back together into a beautiful conclusion.

From that moment, I swore again to myself that I would stride through the Valley of Death to find Aimée. Even Death could not stop me.

I looked out my window and saw people walking along the street. Young lovers and people just getting chores done, buying things to eat or for their kids at the little shops. None of them was angry. I felt that I had glimpsed the passion of reality behind *la vie quotidienne,* daily life. I breathed quietly. Aimée almost certainly was neither dead nor in danger. I just had to keep looking for her. I carried a little piece of paper with my address on it, just in case I ever found her.

Chapter 16

I spent more time at the Homme de Fer, the man of iron, than anywhere else, sitting at a table with light food, reading Barjavel. The waitstaff knew me so well they asked me what kind of madeleine I wanted this time. I felt it was time for a change, and I asked for a crêpe. The "man of iron" was an eighteenth-century statue of a knight in armor. The original statue was now in the nearby historical museum, but an identical replacement stood about six feet—two meters, I told myself, beginning my adjustment to the metric system—above one of the sidewalks. Here is where five tram lines met. Above the central location, a ring of what resembled smoked-glass panels formed a tiara, a sort of halo under which I imagined my angelic Aimée would appear.

And one day she did. It was Saturday just before classes were to begin on Monday. Aimée was in a hurry as she walked right under the Iron Man's hatchet. She looked in my general direction but did not seem to see me. After my experience at the cathedral, with the Jewish oboist, I doubted my own ability to recognize Aimée. I had to let her recognize me first. I left my crêpe and coffee and Barjavel novel on the table and ran up to her. She looked up at me and stopped in surprise.

"Aimée! I found you!" I said quietly.

She allowed just a momentary expression of joy. Then she hardened her face. "I don't want anyone to see me talking with you, Tony. I can't drag you into this. My papa and I have to leave town. Again. His creditors will not wait any longer."

"Where are you going?"

"Perpignan."

"That's west of here?"

"Mostly south. On the Mediterranean coast. Lots of imports and commerce there. His creditors…"

"Creditors?" I asked. "I have some news for you. That huge medical bill? You don't have to pay that."

She looked intensely into my face.

"Was that the reason you and your papa left America?"

"That was one reason," she said, looking away. She began to walk. She looked undernourished, again, but no worse than in America. "But we would have had to leave sooner or later anyway."

"Your papa owed money to Loïc?" I asked, following her.

"Not just him, Tony."

"But you could maybe have stayed long enough that we could have gotten married…"

Aimée whirled to face me. "We can't do anything about that now!" People pretended not to notice us. "Don't make this any harder than it is!"

"You thought that even the powers of Hell could not keep us apart," I said.

"Well, I was wrong, Tony. I was deluded. No one can resist the powers of Hell." She was actually screaming this time.

"I still want to marry you, Aimée. Don't you love me?"

Aimée yelled, "I've been trying to stop loving you, can't you understand?" Then she sighed and spoke quietly. "It's not you, Tony. Anything other than the powers of Hell, and I would be in your arms in an instant."

"But why do *you* have to leave *this* time?" I asked.

"Papa needs me," she said. "And I have no other way to live."

I moved close. "Oh, do I have *more* news for you," I whispered to her.

Her eyes widened. She looked around, and said, "I have to catch the tram that is just now pulling up. Come with me and act like a stranger who is sitting beside me. Then we have two and a half minutes to talk before I get off."

"To go where?"

"Home, such as it is." She moved toward a tram that had just stopped. Its doors swished open. "Two and a half minutes," she repeated.

I spoke quickly as I followed her. "I have enrolled as a student at University of the Sunrise."

She looked at me in wonder as we found the last seat on the tram. "That place?"

"It gave me something to do while I looked for you." I gave her the little piece of paper with my address. Luckily, it was in my pocket, not stuck back in my Barjavel. She slipped it in a pocket inside the threadbare vest she was wearing. "It is a small apartment," I continued. "One bedroom. I have had the bed set up for you for a month. You can have it to yourself. I've been sleeping on the couch. You don't have to pay for anything. Food, utilities. My name is on the lease. Nobody has to know where you are."

She looked at me with interest.

"The problem is," I said, "you will be hiding right under their noses here in Strasbourg."

"It is my papa, not me, whom they seek. They might leave me alone. I am not important enough to them to be in any danger myself." She looked off into the sky beyond the glass of the tram car. "I think."

"Will you come?" My entire future hung upon her answer to these three words.

"I don't know," she said, which was the second-best answer I could have expected from her. "And you will not know until, once again, you suddenly see me."

"My class at the university is Monday morning at ten. The one about music and poetry."

"I cannot register at the university," she said. "I have no money."

"The professor of the course wants to meet you. And…do you remember Uncle Guglielmo? He will pay for you."

She smiled painfully as the tram stopped. She stood and turned from me.

"Can't you give me any idea of what to expect?" I asked.

She looked back. "We're supposed to leave town tonight or tomorrow. If I do not leave with Papa, you will find out Monday morning."

In the final few seconds I had with her, I said, “I have already put a padlock with our names on it on the passerelle.”

She looked at me with tears brimming in her eyes. She turned to leave. I sang out, quietly and plaintively, the tune to the Hurrian Hymn. I saw her face in profile before she vanished.

I took the tram back and found my cold coffee—still good—and my Barjavel.

“Another crêpe?” asked the waitress.

“No,” I said. “I will have no more until I share them with the person I came to France to find.”

“Bonne chance,” she said. I was filled with a sense that every moment of my life had been, to this point, well spent.

*

I continued lighting prayer candles. I sat on my couch and read, ready to jump and answer the door every second. But she did not come.

On the morning of my first class, I woke before dawn. I made my usual café-au-lait. Then I dressed and took my *sac-à-dos* on my back with me as I walked east on the rue Brûlée. The shapes of the buildings and trees were barely distinguishable in the lamplight and glow of the dawn. I crossed the canal on the Passerelle des Juifs and walked through the roundabout, without traffic at this hour, into the Place de la République. Not a breath of wind disturbed the gigantic ginkgo trees that had been a nineteenth-century gift from the Emperor of Japan. I crossed the Auvergne Bridge and continued northwest on a little street parallel to the River Ill. As I reached the huge building of the Council of Europe, I looked across the river at the European Parliament building, the secondary capital (after Brussels) of the European Union, and the Court of the Rights of Man. The buildings, shaped like a boat, gleamed in the rising sun. The buildings, now silent, would soon hum with the activity of people who worked hard to preserve world peace, unlike those of us who would just be learning Esperanto. I continued west into the Orangerie, a park where storks mutely clapped their beaks together around the pond. I found a boulangerie and bought a chocolate crêpe. I nibbled at it while I watched a big building that had once been the summer residence of Empress Josephine, or was it Marie Antoinette, of “qu’ils mangent de la brioche” fame, I could not remember which. Above the chimneys, stork platforms were perched. Storks loved to build nests over warm chimneys in the winter, and their nests would fall into the chimneys and cause fires. Since there was no way to stop the storks from building their nests, the caretakers placed platforms above the chimneys for them. I sat for a long time, filled with a powerful sensation of peace and health.

I was the first person to enter the classroom at the University of the Sunrise. The windows were emerald green, creating a sublime world such as my chlorophyll extract or the world of Aimée’s green people. I took a seat. Gradually, other students entered and sat around the table. One young man had a dazed, what-am-I-doing-here look on his face as he stared into a secret distance. A young Asian man read a book, the front cover of which was what westerners

consider the back cover. A young woman, well-dressed with a green scarf, sat nearby and held her purse close to her shapely body. She looked at me suspiciously as I smiled at her. Maybe this class would be an opportunity for me to get to know her. Another young woman, block-shaped and blonde, looked at me as if I were someone she was about to overwhelm with her opinions, many of which were printed on her T-shirt. I was surprised that four students besides myself were in the class.

Professor Appelbaum entered the room. He walked to the podium, moved it aside, and took a seat at our level. He looked at me and nodded his head in greeting. Then he began to address the class in French, telling us what a privilege it would be for all of us together to explore the beauty of the human spirit and so on. I stopped listening. The class had begun, and Aimée was not here. My future unrolled before me like a gaping chasm that even the beauty of Schubert's music could not redeem.

Then Professor Appelbaum looked up, not at me but at a blur of slow movement behind me. I heard a slight rustle, followed by silence. The other students looked toward me also. Appelbaum smiled. Then I heard the click of a mechanical pen.

THE END

Author's Notes about Meet Me in Strasbourg

This novel almost got recycled. When I was sorting through papers before moving to France, I found the scribbled notes to a 1976 novel I never finished. It was my first novel. I had just finished my freshman year at UC Santa Barbara. As I glanced over the notes, I saw that it was a terrible novel. I was a fundamentalist Christian when I wrote it. Which does not mean that the novel had to, for this reason, be bad; but my desire to evangelize dominated what little there was of the plot. Tony's younger sister Brenda was going through the throes of repentance from the sins of, not the deep pit, but the shallow pit. The scenes managed to be both melodramatic and silly. I knew that I would never look at these notes again during my retirement in France.

And I did recycle the pages. But there was something about the main characters, Tony and Aimée, that I could not let go of. I decided to find time to write an entirely new novel based on these characters and a few vivid scenes from the original (e.g., sunset colors reflecting on brass musical instruments). The more I wrote, the better the novel became. I finished it, 45 years later.

In both the original and final versions, I created a fantasy girl who was not at all like what young men, such as I was in 1976, wanted to fantasize about. I shied away from the social scene around me, in high school and at the university. I wanted Aimée to be shy. But also not what most guys would consider attractive, especially not sexy. But why was she shy? Because she had just moved from Europe and was intimidated by American culture. Also, she was poor, and wanted to hide this fact. In 1976, virtually all young adult romances had sexy protagonists. Since that time, writers and publishers have pretended to become more inclusive in their characters. They throw in some flaw in the main character, a flaw about which the author seems to have no familiarity. Except for this and for skin color, the 2023 protagonists are still just like the ones in 1976.

I drew my ideas from scenes and experiences I actually had, primarily when I actually was young. The characters are based loosely on people I actually knew in high school, especially the janitor, whom I modeled after Monard Leewright, our neighbor and school custodian. And the sympathy which I show for Aimée is based on true empathy (though imagined; I never actually knew anyone like her) rather than on a literary trick. And, occasionally, from my own experiences. I was in fact the person who kept coded notes and hundreds of pages of scribbles. And "Please forget about me" came from a letter I actually received long ago.

I borrowed a couple of ideas from other writers. The comment about the green people in Aimée's story not needing to poop came from the Barjavel novel, *Le voyageur imprudent,* in which future people lived solely on milk and metabolized it so efficiently that they didn't have any, um, trous de cul.

I realized as I wrote this novel that it was a longshot. I imagined it for readers of any gender who like The Gilmore Girls.

About the Author

Stan Rice is the internationally celebrated author of six books of popular science. He got his Ph.D. in plant ecology at the University of Illinois in 1987, and held several academic positions until he retired from Southeastern Oklahoma State University as Professor Emeritus of Biological Science. His writings are acclaimed for their insight and humor, especially the Creationist Funhouse series in the magazine Skeptical Inquirer. His science and religion blogs and his YouTube channel (StanEvolve, in which he is Charles Darwin) have collectively had a million and a half views. You can connect to his publications, including novels and stories, at his author website https://stanleyrice.org/.



No part of this book has been produced by or with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence. Everything is based on the author's direct knowledge, insights, and experiences.