

# Concepts

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Concepts by David Rolland

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## Chapter One

I should be famous by now. It's frustrating as hell. I'm 23 years old and nobody has any clue who I am. There should be magazine articles celebrating me. There should be beautiful groupies willing to desecrate their bodies for my approval. There should be so much. But instead of glamour and paparazzi, I go to bed early so I can wake up for my eight-dollars-an-hour job.

Don't let my delusions of grandeur get to you. I'm just really tired and can't fall asleep. When that happens, I ramble about my unhappiness to an imaginary audience. As a writer even when I am thinking I tend to phrase my thoughts as though I'm addressing a group of people who I have never met before. See, there I go again.

Alright, alright... who am I fooling? I'm not a writer. At least not in the professional sense. Sure, I've written two novels, a bunch of short stories, and a script for a movie, but I've never sold anything. I haven't even had anything published. All my work is sitting in my desk drawer waiting for a kindly publisher to read it and take it and give me a fat check and a whole lot of publicity in exchange.

I think what I have written is pretty good. It's not perfect, but there is a good aura surrounding it. Unfortunately, not too many other people agree with me. By all the rejection notices I've received I'm under the impression that most publishers and agents think I am pretty shitty. But I don't care. I write for myself and for people who happen to enjoy my work. If I happen to get rich and famous through my writings, so much the better.

Yeah... that's what I keep telling myself.

There is some force inside me which makes me need to feel appreciated. No, not appreciated. Worshipped is a better word. I need to constantly be told how great and wonderful I am or else I don't feel too great and wonderful. I know that is a ridiculous and childish attitude, but what can I do? When I can afford it I will hire a psychoanalyst to guide me to self-sufficiency.

Whatever... in reality I'm a very lucky guy. I have someone who I really love that I can share my life with. Her name is Ana and she is everything that is good in the world.

Sometimes she can be kind of annoying, but that's OK because I'm annoying too, so we make a good match. We know each other pretty well, sometimes we even understand each other... except for my having

one quality that Ana can't comprehend. She can't fathom why I want to be famous, why I want people who I have never met to be talking about me. She probably thinks I am insecure.

I can't be thinking about this now. I need to be at work in a few hours. I'm going to start counting sheep.

One... two... three...

## Chapter Two

This is where I work. Natural Foods, an enormous, overpriced health food store in Miami Beach. I work at the store's deli, but not as a cook. I'm a food preparer which means I'm not qualified to use a stove or oven. I might burn myself. My role is to serve the food that people point at through the display case. Then I write the price on the outside of the packaging. You won't be the first to tell me my genius is being wasted at this job.

My time's being wasted too. I have to show up at nine when the store opens, but all we have is lunch-type foods, so no one needs my service until about eleven-thirty. I usually hang out in the stock room until the rush hours start. But don't worry, customers can ring the bell at the deli if they need me.

Right now I'm sitting on a box of organic applesauce jars, shmoozing with a fellow employee. Josie's bus got here a few minutes early, so she's killing time telling me her dream last night before she clocks in. "Yeah, so my ex-boyfriend just started choking me and I started hitting him back. We kept on wrestling and I would hold on to him. I'd say, 'I'll let you go if you promise to stop fighting.' But then he bit my cheek and we'd keep fighting until I restrained him again and I'd be like, 'If I let you go will you promise to stop fighting.' But he'd hit me again and the cycle just wouldn't stop. I just wanted to get to the next part of my dream."

"That's awful," I nod. I've really been attracted to her ever since she dyed her hair that fruit punch red.

"I've been having these kinds of dreams for weeks. I don't like adrenaline rushes when I'm sleeping."

"At least you're having dreams," I tell her. "I can't remember the last time I had a dream."

"Jacob, I'd love to switch places with you."

"No, it's just you know I write, right? I like waking up and writing down my dreams. It's good practice. But I haven't had a dream in weeks. I feel really empty like I'm missing a part of my soul."

"What soul?" Mauricio, this stupid stock boy wisecracks as he grabs a box of chamomile shampoo.

I ignore the dreadlocked jerk's remark, but I keep quiet because his comment makes me self-conscious that I sound pretentious. Josie takes the comment as a cue to leave. "I better clock in."

"Yeah, I'll see you later."

She leaves the back room for the store. I take out my composition book and draw little cartoons. I should be adding more to my novels. Make them more appeasable so someone will publish them already. Unfortunately, nothing's coming out of my pen but ink.

"Jacob!" I hear that unmistakably whiny voice of my employer, Morie. He's a short weasel with a shiny bald spot and a thick mustache. Every time I see him I want to give him a backhanded slap. Among his annoying pastimes are harassing his employees and advising any good looking woman who walks in the store about which health products she should purchase. "What are you doing back here? There aren't any tofu avocado sandwiches out there. Make about seven of those and seven veggie burger pitas.

"Alright, Morie." I groan. I put my book away and head out the double doors to my space behind the deli counter. The black handled knife cuts the mushy avocado and tofu as well as the tomatoes, carrots, and sprouts. I mush the whole confection into whole wheat buns and spread eggless mayonnaise on it. It's all a brainless routine that I used to daydream my way through, but even during the day I can't dream any more. My brain goes on vacation. My body stays in hell. I'm working hard on the veggie burger pitas when I hear a voice saying, "What's up Jacob?"

I turn around and see a bleached, spiky haircut on the long face of Sergio... I have a real problem remembering people's last names. I really like Sergio. He's a good guy. We're at a perfect level of familiarity. I tend to not like people I don't know and when I know a person too well I get too caught up in what I don't like about them. But there's a stretch of time after you meet a person when all their jokes are new and their psychotic qualities are hidden. It's a nice little honeymoon period.

"Not much. How have you been?" I ask.



“Pretty good. Mind making me a Bananarama smoothie?”

“Cool. Cool.” I take the frozen bananas from the freezer, cut some strawberries and add that with apple juice into a blender. I try figuring out how to make small talk with him. Then I remember I met Sergio through my girlfriend. She had a class with him. “You got class today?” I ask.

“No man, I’m taking the semester off.”

Over the roar of the blender I warn him. “You better watch out. Those semesters off are addictive. I started with one and now I’m on my fourth consecutive off semester.”

“Thanks Pops. I’ll keep that in mind.” he says as I pour out his red smoothie. I give him a little extra, even though I know better. Morie fired another guy at the deli for being too generous with the portions. “Are you up to anything tonight?” he asks.

“No.”

“We should hang out,” he suggests.

“Definitely. You got my number right?” He looks confused, so I tell him. “It’s the same as Ana’s.”

“Have you guy’s been living together for a while?”

“About a year.” I’m glad I got to work her name into the conversation. Any time I make plans with a guy I don’t know too well, I like to mention I have a girlfriend, just in case.

He stands there like he doesn’t know how to end a conversation. I don’t care right now since I got six hours to kill until I get off work.

“Well alright, Jacob. I’ll give you a call tonight.” He kills the dead horse and walks away. I clean out the blender. Then the store gets really busy. People ask for samples and then they ask for full servings and it goes on for hours and hours and hours and my life is fucking monotonous. This job didn’t seem so bad at first. I make eight dollars an hour and I get a 30% employees discount at the store. A lot of pretty girls walk in and this job didn’t contradict any of my personal philosophies. But I didn’t expect to be working here for six months. I thought something would come up and I’d be famous by now. But you know the story.

Finally my day ends. I take my bike from the stock room and wheel it outside. Miami's in a sad state when you can't leave a locked bike unguarded. A few weeks ago a customer locked his bike outside the Health Haven, was in the store for maybe ten minutes, and when he came out the bike was gone. All that was left was his broken lock. I keep my bike in the store after that incident.

But now I'm bringing it outside to the beautiful weather. It's such a nice day that I have to go out of my way and pedal along a scenic asphalt path that overlooks the beach. Even Miami Beach can be occasionally kind of cold in November, but that's not stopping the tourists from bouncing around in short shorts and stringy bikinis. The sea breeze is cold enough to feel painful against my nose, so I don't know how these freaks can be exposing so much skin.

I dodge the rollerbladers and derelicts and I've got that Marvin Gaye song I heard last night stuck in my head. He's singing loud enough to eclipse the sounds of the nearby traffic. I turn left and cross a busy intersection and see Ana's little gray car that could be parked outside our apartment building. I carry the bike up three flights of stairs. This dump of a building doesn't even have an elevator. But you can't beat the location. We're just three blocks from the ocean and just a couple of blocks away from the hip and glamorous action-packed nightlife in South Beach. Woohoo!

I unlock the door and wheel my bike through our wooden floor. I hear her talking on the phone in Spanish. I lift the bike on my suspended wall rack as she waves her hand at me while deep within her conversation. I kiss her plump cheek and let her speak her secret language on the phone. After a hard day's work the least she can do is hang up the phone when I come home. I walk into our bedroom and collapse on the futon. I close my eyes and try sleeping, but my brain is too hyperactive. I think too much about Ana and our relationship. It's not healthy. Especially since I'm thinking about a different Ana. The Ana that I fell for.

I know every couple in the world says their first meeting was strange or funny or crazy, but in our case it is true. One of these days a

character in one of my books will have to meet his lover the way I met Ana.

It was during my third year of college. I was sitting on the steps of a dormitory waiting for a friend to come down. As I was sitting there I saw her. She was wearing a pizza delivery-person uniform and a baseball cap. She was too beautiful for her job. If it wasn't 1:00 in the morning I would have been sure she was just an actress modeling as a pizza delivery girl. She climbed the steps past me and reached for the phone. I was staring at her long black ponytail peeping out of her cap when I knew I could not let this moment pass by me.

"That's my pizza." I told her.

She hung up the phone and said, "You're Lori Mangicotti?"

"No. That's my friend. I'm just waiting..." Then of course the friend I was waiting for came downstairs. "Hey Lori!" I yelled at him. Rob gave me the most confused look, then he saw Ana and kind of caught on.

"Oh... good, our pizza came." Rob said.

I was about to pay for the large mushroom pizza when the real Lori Mangicotti came out and ruined my whole scheme. She took her pizza and left me really embarrassed. I apologized to Ana.

She in turn yelled at me, "You know what you just did could have gotten me fired."

By this point Rob wisely wandered away. I began apologizing. "I'm sorry. I was stupid. I'm just not good at talking to people I don't know. I should..."

"Just stay away from me." Ana screamed. She pulled out a small canister. "I carry pepper spray." I started cursing the movies. I only pulled that stunt because I told myself that's what the cool cat in a movie would have done.

As she made her getaway, I told Rob we had to follow her. So we hopped in his car and followed her to the pizza parlor where she worked. I didn't want to get arrested for harassment or sprayed with Mace, so we just sat in the car staring. For a few weeks I could not get her out of my mind. I ordered pizza many times, but it was never Ana who delivered it to me.

Months passed and I almost completely forgot about her. But then a new semester started. I was taking an astronomy class. and who sits in front of me, but that beautiful pizza delivery-girl. She was wearing a polka dotted, sleeveless dress. I spent the whole class talking myself into confronting her again.

When the teacher quit yapping I tapped her shoulder and said, "Hi! Do you remember me?"

She took a hard look and said, "Oh... were you in my sculpting class last semester?"

I told her that was me. I figured I had a better chance with her as a sculptor than as the pervert who plays games with the pizza-girl. We then went to get a sandwich together and the rest is history.

See, that would have been an amusing story if I ever told her that I never took any sculpting classes and reminded her about our real first encounter, but I can't. We've been together for over two years and it seems like it's too late to start telling the truth now.

My reminiscence ends when I feel Ana snuggle beside me. Her now short black hair rests on my shoulder. She whispers into my ear, "Jacob, are you awake?"

"Yeah baby." I face her. She's too close to see.

"Gabrielle is getting married." she says with a smile.

"Why? Did she get pregnant?"

"Shut the fuck up." She kicks my stomach softly with her bare foot. "I can't believe she's already found someone she thinks she can spend the rest of her life with." She shakes her head. "My baby sister is getting married."

I poke her knee. "Guess how I spent today?" Her shoulders shrug as though she doesn't care. I recount my day anyway. "I made sandwiches. Lots and lots of sandwiches."

"That's great," she says and I know she isn't listening. "Do you want to go out with us tonight?"

"Who's us?"

"Gabrielle, her fiance, and me."

“Sounds cool. But... oh shit, I forgot I saw Sergio at work today and he wanted to hang out. Is it alright if he tags along? Where are we going anyway?”

She’s falling asleep as she mutters, “I don’t know. Some place where they’ll serve minors.” Then the sandman wishes me a good afternoon.

## Chapter Three

Naps are killers. You shut your eyes for a second, but the second lasts hours and it's dark when you wake up. We would have slept the whole night if it wasn't for the phone ringing. Sergio called followed by a call from Ana's sister. We arranged to meet at Jazid, a seedy little bar, a couple blocks down the street. Ana and I are hand in hand walking there right now. Again, I didn't have a single dream. It's like I was dead for four hours. Out of curiosity I asked Ana if she had a dream.

"Yeah. I was in a hot air balloon with you. I didn't want to go, but you made me. It ended up being kind of nice though." Before I can interpret the dream to mean that she should listen to me more she sees her sister outside the bar and brushes me aside. They do that Hispanic kiss on each of their cheeks that is a required greeting by county ordinance.

Ana and Gabrielle could be twins, but they couldn't be more different. Ana in her jeans, t-shirt, and waif figure could pass for sixteen years old. Gabrielle, three years Ana's junior, looks voluptuous, sophisticated, and a bit sleazy in her tight, black dress. She kisses me hello and then she introduces me to her fiancé, Luis. He shakes my hand like he wants to hurt me. Then we walk into the bar and true to Ana's word the bouncers don't check if Gabrielle and Luis are underage. Through the cigarette smoke I search the bar for Sergio.

The bar's pretty empty so it isn't hard to spot him in his corner booth nursing a mug of beer. We run over there and introductions are made. He gets kisses from the girls and handshakes from the men. When I tell him that we're celebrating Gabrielle and Luis's engagement he offers to buy us all drinks. Ana politely refuses but Sergio insists and I'll be damned if I'm turning down free drinks. He doesn't stop at one drink though. He buys the next couple rounds too. So while Ana and her sister are discussing wedding plans, Sergio and I are sloppy drunk. The fiancé, Luis, is sitting next to me bored as fuck, smoking a cigarette. He excuses himself to go shoot some pool. The girls follow him, leaving Sergio and myself at the booth with a bottle of cheap wine.

"I love this song." Sergio says as Portishead plays in the background. "Did you hear that Pablo Chiste is speaking at Books & Books next week?"

"Pablo Chiste? The Ernest Hemingway of our time?" He can't be serious.

"Yeah. He lives out here. He's got a house on Key Biscayne. You like his work?"

"I'm a big fan. Big, big fan. You know I write, right? He's one of my biggest influences." Always got to promote your work. Never stop.

"I didn't know you wrote. You write poetry?"

"Fuck poetry. I write epics like Pablo Chiste does. The novel I'm working on now... it's finished, but it needs a little more fine tuning... you want to know what it's about?"

"Sure."

"It's about this amnesiac kid an old farm couple find in their field. He looks healthy, so they adopt him. They figure he'll make some cheap labor. But as he grows older they notice he can do miracles like walk on water and turn that water into moonshine. The boy starts hearing voices too. The kids at school make fun of him because he talks to himself, but the voices are from God. And God tells him he's Jesus Christ and he's here to save the world. But the voices don't tell him how to save the world. When government agents come knocking on the door after they hear about his powers, he jumps at the chance to join a branch of the US military for superpowered people. It seemed like a good way to save the world, but all the drug busts and coup d'etats of socialist regimes seem unfulfilling. At the end he rebels against a direct order from a commander and he is crucified for it."

With all seriousness Segio says, "Wow! That sounds really good. I'll have to read it sometime."

"Yeah. Pass by Natural Foods tomorrow. I'll give you a copy. It's called *Jesus Christ Superspy*." I told him the title just to emphasize what a witty son-of-a-gun I can be. He pours the remaining wine in my glass and orders us another bottle. No one can be this nice. "Are you sure you want to treat us to all this?"

“Hey, it’s no problem.”

“How can you afford this? You got a high paying job?”

He’s got a painful look in his eyes like I slapped his sunburnt back. “Well, when my parents passed away, they left me a lot of money. There was a lawsuit too, with a big settlement.”

“What happened?” I ask with the bluntness of red wine. “I mean if you don’t mind me asking...”

“No, it’s alright. When I was thirteen I went to Disneyworld with my parents. When we got in line for the Peter Pan ride this guy said we skipped him. My Dad told the guy to fuck off and thought that was the end of the argument. My sister and I were even laughing at him, but the fucking nut had a gun and he shot my mom and dad and this other little girl in front of us before security could take him down.”

“Jesus! Are you joking?” I can tell he’s not. “That’s rough.”

“Yeah Disney gave me and my sister a big settlement too if we didn’t go to the press about it. We can go into any of the Disney theme parks for free now.”

“You’re fucking kidding me, aren’t you?” Maybe if I drank one more drink I would lack any common decency by changing the subject and asking if he wanted to invest some of that money into making me a superstar. But he’s got to be joking. Has to be. Maybe he’s throwing an idea for a book out at me. Maybe... a girl in the bar just screamed. It’s so loud it’s surreal.

We look through second-hand smoke to see Luis getting hit in the face with a pool stick. Gabrielle was the girl screaming. Luis protects himself from the cuestick by smashing a beer bottle into his pony-tailed opponent’s cheekbone. Blood is everywhere and Luis starts kicking the guy as he falls down. Gabrielle stomps the guy’s face with her high-heeled shoe until Ana pushes her away. Then an enormous, skinhead bouncer pushes them all outside to the sidewalk. Sergio and I are in disbelief. Our reaction time was shot, but maybe we’re instinctive cowards who stay away from danger. Sergio grabs the bottle of wine before we run outside.



Gabrielle hugs Luis with all her might and cries hysterically, "I'll kill that motherfucker. I'll claw his eyes out for hurting you. I'll..." All the pretty boy pedestrians give her a cross-eyed look.

"Don't worry baby. He couldn't hurt me." Luis says with a lisp probably caused by his bloody lip. It's awkward for Sergio and myself to be standing around here because we don't know the reasons behind the violence.

Sergio waits a diplomatic second before he nudges me, "I think I'm going to party somewhere else."

"Damn, I wish I was going with you." Ana flashes her dirtiest look as she hears that comment. We stand around for another twenty minutes until Luis finishes calming down Gabrielle.

Everyone else's mood for celebration eroded so we walk past the nightclubs and late-night pizza parlors to Luis' car. During the drive home the only sounds come from Luis' rusty engine. When the car stops I leap out to escape the intensity. Ana has to be pushed out of the vehicle. "Gabby, do you want to come upstairs?"

She looks at her silent warrior sucking the blood off his lip. "No thanks. I'll call you tomorrow." The sisters kiss each other's cheeks and the car rattles toward the expressway.

"Man, Luis is getting some action tonight." I laugh as we enter our apartment.

Ana is in a very different mindset than I am. "You're an idiot."

"Well I'm an idiot who makes great sandwiches." She still doesn't laugh. I hate when I'm not on her good side. "What the hell happened tonight?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"I don't understand because you won't tell me." I mutter some curse words to myself, before taking off my shoes and lying on the bed. I'm a bit too drunk for any serious verbal sparring.

A few minutes later as I'm drifting in and out of consciousness Ana crawls up to me and in all seriousness asks, "Would you fight for me?"

"Why do you even need to ask that question?" I mumble through the pillow.

"Sometimes I just feel you don't care about me like you used to. You don't show any passion for me." I'm no idiot, I know this is my cue to pounce on her and fuck her like a tiger, but I'm half-way asleep. All I can muster is putting my arm around her and hugging her. She turns her back on me and I soon fall asleep.

## Chapter Four

I try to open my eyes, but someone must have pasted them shut. After many futile attempts I decide to rest a second to let my strength recuperate. Then I use all my powers to break my eyes free. My strategy was successful. I now have the sense of sight. Ha ha! Soon I will rule the world!

I better wipe my eyes before I further my plans of world domination. After picking away all those disgusting little things junior high kids call "eye boogers", my eyes start wandering the room in search of red digits. The numbers on the small screen read, 8:47. I woke up 93 entire minutes earlier than I needed to. Well, I'm wide awake so I might as well prepare for another frustrating and exhausting day.

As I try to get out of bed I notice a beautiful girl using my left arm as a pillow. I believe the best way to loosen my arm from under her head without waking her up is by yanking my arm away from her head as quickly as possible. This method is half-way successful. My arm is free, but sleeping beauty has risen. Ana shifts her body in my direction with only her face and bare shoulders not covered by the sheets. She flashes a smile and then her underlined eyes close. Man, a good night's sleep makes you feel really good about yourself.

I jump out of bed and walk to the other side of the bedroom to turn off the alarm clock. I pull the lever up a notch so no obnoxious beeping noise will flare. Every morning I question whether waking up is worth my sanity.

These thoughts are getting too deep for this early in the morning. Time to wash them away with a warm shower. I hop my naked body into the bathtub and almost slip on my memories.

The birds!

It all clarifies and I remember it was a dream, but what a dream it was. I run out of there. The dream is so inspiring that I don't even curse so much when I smack my big toe into the door.

The dream is too fantastic. I get back into the bedroom, but Ana is still sleeping, so I run into our walk-in closet which doubles as a study.

I force open the top desk drawer, grab a fat stack of loose leaf paper and a ball-point pen, rest my backside on the cushioned chair, and I write.

And I write.

And I write.

And I write.

My hand cramps up so I shake it out and I write some more.

This is a new experience for me. Usually when I write, I struggle so hard for the words. I remember once being so excited when I wrote five pages in a single day. But this morning I am breaking all the records. The dream is so vivid and inspiring that it possesses me. My hand moves at speeds that even a video game master can't match.

I'm writing and writing and writing and my only worry is that I will run out of paper. Then I get showered with a couple dozen cool kisses pressed against my neck.

"Do you mind telling me why you are sitting at the desk naked, this early in the morning?" I should be glad she's not still mad at me, but I don't really care.

"I had this crazy dream in my head and I didn't want to forget it." I tell Ana while writing. "I was going to tell you about it, but you were busy sleeping. Now you are going to have to read about it, baby."

"I'm going to take a shower." She walks off and I keep on writing about this world I've lived in all my life, but it was never so sure. I am what I am and everyone else might know I'm a bird, but that's because they don't know me.

Next thing I know Ana is yelling at me, "What time do you have to be at work?"

"11:00" I say after almost reflexively saying to Ana, "Shut up, you stupid bird!"

"It's 10:30 now."

"Could you call Natural Foods for me and tell them I'm sick. Tell them I can't talk because I've got laryngitis from throwing up so much last night... from some kind of a stomach virus. I don't want them to think I'm hungover. Tell them I'm too sick and weak to show up for work."

"I don't have time for this shit. I have to go to class."

"Please?" I whimper. I don't know if she ever calls the store because I start ignoring everything she's saying. I want to concentrate. Only I'm not really concentrating. It is more like I am just writing down my memories. It's almost like I'm writing about something that happened to me yesterday. Every little detail is so vivid. But no event in my life has ever been so powerful and meaningful as what I am writing right now.

I guess this what is missing from my life. Nothing seems significant and nothing I ever do defines who I am and what my place in this goddamned world is. But in my dream, man, I was me.

"You're still writing?" Ana came home without me noticing.

"Yep." I answer simply.

"Are you almost done? How much have you written?"

"I've written a lot... I'm sorry I'm not in a very talkative mood."

"May I have the honor of asking you one more question. Then I will leave you alone, your royal highness." As a rule I don't respond to people using a phony British accent. "Have you gotten up from this desk at all today?"

"No. Wait... what time is it?" I ask her.

"It's 4:30," she laughs. "That must have been a great dream." Ana walks into our bedroom and turns on the stereo.

"Hey, you know I'm working in here. Do you mind turning that shit down?" I hear the volume sink to nothing so I yell, "Thank you sweets." And I get back to my dream.

But she starts cursing at me like an evil gnome. I don't really pay attention because you can't win when a girl is that mad at you and I want to finish writing my dream, but she's really mad. She marches out of the house with an emphatic slam of the door.

I write a little bit more and then that's it, I finished. I give my knuckles a crack and then start counting all the pages with writing on them. One hundred and three pages...front and back. Unbelievable!

## Chapter Five

I eat one sandwich and begin making another when Ana returns home. It seems like she is going to try to ignore me so I decide to pick a fight with her.

"Why were you in such a bitchy mood?" I ask her as I take my first bite from sandwich number two.

"Bitchy?" she scoffs. "I was in a bitchy mood because I come home to a person who does not respect me at all. I had an awful day and the only thing that really kept me going was thinking about you." Let me tell you something about Ana. She loves portraying herself as the more loving part of our relationship. Any chance she gets she implies that she loves me more than I do her. "Finally the stupid day ended, I come home and you're busy being naked, so I decide to play some music. But I forgot there are certain things that I can't do in my own house."

"Sorry about that Ana." I say while chewing. "What happened that made today so bad?"

"Nothing in particular," she says as she takes off her shoes and socks. "I'm just sick of dealing with so many stupid people and having to do so many stupid chores. Man, I'm telling you Jacob, I think the only way I can ever make it through life is by becoming a pill-popper. Oh... guess who I heard is speaking at Books & Books tomorrow?"

"Who?" I ask not really caring because I'm so self-absorbed. I can't believe I wrote an entire book in one day!

"None other than the Ernest Hemingway of our time."

"Pablo Chiste? That's right. Sergio told me last night."

Ana shakes her head. "Isn't he your hero? I thought you would go ballistic."

I get to throw my feat for the day into the conversation. "Well after writing an entire book in one day, even someone as great as Pablo Chiste can seem a little unimportant."

"You wrote a whole book? I thought you were only writing about last night's dream and spent the rest of the day playing with yourself." She stops for a minute to laugh at her stupid joke. "So what's this new book about?"

I stick my dirty dish atop a stack of dirty dishes sitting in the sink and look for anything else I can nibble on. I grab a banana and unpeel it before I answer Ana's question. "This book is just my dream from last night and somehow that's enough to cover two-hundred-and-six pages. In my dream I was me. I was the same Jacob Fielding I have always been. Everyone else though, was different. Everyone else was a bird. It was crazy. I didn't know if everyone had always been a bird or if I was just insane and that I was a bird who was under the delusion that he was human. I had to know the truth, so I started harassing other birds by asking a lot of questions which disturbed them. Finally, the authorities took me away and did anything they could to rehabilitate me. They gave me medication, they took me to a sea gull psychiatrist. Right before I woke up I was staring at my reflection. I saw my human body in the mirror, but I was convinced that I was a bird who was just mentally unbalanced."

"Blah-blah-blah-lah." Ana said.

Ana has these really big, beautiful blue eyes and sometimes I don't listen to what she is saying when I'm staring at them. See, how can she think she loves me more than I love her. "What did you say?" I ask her. I'm glad I stare at her eyes instead of some other part of her body because that would be kind of crass.

She smiles. "Were all the birds sea gulls or just the psychiatrist?"

"I'm not answering that question. You are actually going to have to read this book." Ana still hasn't read my last book which I finished six months ago. Any time we get into an argument I have to bring that up because it hurts me so much. I spent so much time and sweat and crammed my sanity into that book. I figure the least she can do is spend a few hours humoring me by reading it. Her excuse for not reading the book is the subject matter.

It's about a character who is a not very well disguised version of me. He has a girlfriend he loves, a promising future, and a high-paying job at a bank. He throws it all away though for this crazy girl he knew in the fifth grade who returns to his hometown. Everyone in town knows about her return because she hangs outside the supermarket and propositions herself to anyone who will listen.

Arthur, the main character in the book, is fascinated and aroused by this. He's sure the only reason Donna humiliates herself is because no one's ever loved her. So when she asks him if he wants to fuck her, he gives her a hug and tells her, "Whatever you do to yourself, I'll always love you." They have an affair and Arthur slowly learns what led Donna to her present lifestyle. In the last chapter Arthur gives a dramatic speech to his ex-girlfriend, ex-boss, estranged family, and the rest of the disapproving town. Arthur teaches them that just because Donna is missing teeth and doesn't care whose dick she sucks, it isn't wrong for him to love her.

Personally, I think it's a masterpiece. So what if Ana thinks the plot is stupid? I spent eighteen frustrating months writing that novel. I spent so many hours crying over this book, trying to pick the right words to convey my feelings. Writing is the only way I can honestly communicate, so if Ana really cared about me she would read my writings the first chance she had. Well at least she seems willing to read my newest work.

I run into the closet and grab the pages. "Have you eaten? I'll make you a sandwich anyway. Just sit down, read the book, and tell me what you think."

I know exactly how she likes her tomato and cheese sandwich. A little bit of mozzarella, three slices of a ripe tomato, and some basil and oregano.

I bring Ana her sandwich. She starts eating it and says, "This is really good."

"Thanks. I put more basil in it than usual."

"No, I'm talking about your story. It's very different from all of your other writings."

"You don't like my other stories?" I ask.

She hesitates. I knew she didn't really like them. "It's just this is your first story that I can identify with. It's so honest and lonely... I mean your other stories were good, but this is amazing."

"Probably because I didn't really write this story."

"What are you talking about? You worked all day on this."



"Yeah but my other stories were a struggle. Every fucking page came from so deep within me. I mean I put so much effort into them. And this one was nothing. I didn't put an ounce of effort into it. It was like writing about my life, but it wasn't my life. You probably just like it because there's a character named after you."

"Not quite. From what I read this Ana bird is how would you describe it, bitchy? You'd never describe me that way, would you?"

I wasn't in the mood for an argument. "No. I told you. The whole two hundred pages is just a dream I had. I put no thought into it. It's like I watched a movie and wrote down everything that I remembered about it."

Ana puts down the loose pages I wrote the book on and hugs me. "Come on Jacob, we'll go out and celebrate the book that *you* wrote today."

So now it's a few hours, six shots of sake, and twelve vegetarian sushi rolls later. We're sitting in the dark Tokyo Club. I gave the karaoke DJ my song request about an hour ago and he still hasn't called me up again. I think my earlier performance really offended him. I picked a Japanese song and just went up there and screamed some mumbo-jumbo with a Japanese accent. Come to think of it, the waitress hasn't attended to us since I sang the song either.

"Wow," Ana sighs from across the table. She was straining her eyes reading my book from the table's lone candlestick. "That was intense."

"I never heard anyone describe a book like that before."

"It was beautiful! Do you really feel so alienated and disgusted by everyone? After reading that I just want to hug you," she smiles.

"I'm glad you're not mad at me anymore. What happened last night with Gabrielle and her rough rider?"

"It's stupid. I just got mad at how stupid people can be and I took it out on the closest person." She completely dodged my question. With a seductive smile she fumbles around the table and throws her arms around me. Hot liquor radiates from her kiss. "I love you." she whispers.

"Now we have Jacob Fielding." The Japanese DJ announces. I don't feel like getting up there right now, but I already made a commitment to the crowd.

I elude Ana's grip and strut upstage to get the microphone from that slurring lady who was torturing us with her Madonna imitation. The television monitor flashes the name of the song I'm singing. It's my cue to start wowing the audience. Words spit from my mouth. "I'd like to dedicate this song to my burning love." I look in Ana's direction. I start shaking as the music cranks up. I follow the bouncing ball on the monitor and sing the song better than Elvis ever could. I unbutton my shirt and work the small crowd. I get on my knees and I sweat. "Hunka Hunka Burnin' love, Hunka Hunka Burnin' love. Hunka Hunka Burnin' love." It is beautiful and the audience recognizes it. I walk to my booth with a bruised back because of all the pats.

She laughs at me. I laugh back. Our sake has been replenished so we sip.

"You should show your book to Pablo Chiste when he comes to town."

"Yeah. I think I will." Tears are falling down my cheek. That's how happy I am. "Baby, this book is taking us to the big time."

"You mean it will take you to the big time," she says as she gargles the sake.

"No. I mean we. Anyone who lets me stick my tongue in their mouth becomes a we with me." I'm drunk and I'm rambling and she's so beautiful when she laughs at me. We kiss a kiss that's always going to last. It inspires us to pay the check so we can hike home and make passionate, drunk love.

## Chapter Six

"What do you mean you didn't call?" It's nine o'clock in the morning already. Hours move too quickly when you're sleeping.

"What am I? Your mother? I'm supposed to come up with excuses for you?" She says as she brushes the late night out of her hair.

Sun rays invade our bedroom trying their hardest to wake me up. "You're not my Mom, but you could have called for me. I was busy doing, maybe the most important thing in my life. You know all you had to do was dial seven digits or tell me you weren't going to do it."

"Fuck Jacob! You're always blaming me for everything. You should have done it."

She's right. "You're right." I pull myself out of bed and look for my jeans on the floor. They stink of cigarettes. "It will be alright. I've been working there for what... six months now and I haven't had one complaint yet."

"Well, I have a feeling you're getting your first complaint today." I put on my shoes and shirt, kiss Ana good-bye, and drag my bike out of the apartment.

I have to admit I'm scared. Morie can be... he can be the stereotype of a power mad boss. Probably got his ass kicked in school all the time and is still looking to get revenge in any way he can.

Natural Foods is within my sights. It's a rather large, square metallic gray building. I lift my bike onto its hind wheel so we can go through the door together. I push the bicycle through the store. Josie is working at the cash register. I stop to say, "Hello."

"Hey, Jacob," she says in her smoky voice. "Watch out for Morie. He was really pissed yesterday that you didn't come to work."

"Yeah, I was really sick yesterday." For some reason in order for me to lie to anyone I need to tell that lie to everyone. "Did you hear Pablo Chiste is speaking at the Books & Books on Sunday?"

"Pablo Chiste is? The Ernest Hemingway of our time? I'm not a big fan."

"You don't like Pablo Chiste? He's the greatest writer of all time." A bearded customer coughs and hands Josie an organic orange. "We can talk about this later."

I wheel my bike through aisle three towards the kitchen. I hear a high, whiny squeal, "No bikes allowed in the store!"

I turn around to see my boss, Morie. "What are you doing here?" he says in his New York accent.

"I'm sorry about not calling yesterday. I was really sick and..."

"You think you can just show up when you feel like it? I'm running a business here. I can't have a worker who's vital to this operation skipping work so he can go out on a drug run."

"Drug run? What are you talking about Morie? I was sick yesterday. I didn't want..."

"You were sick? You're fired. I can't have sick people working at a health food store."

"Fired? Morie, I didn't..."

He points his hairy finger at me. "Make whatever purchases you wish to make and then get out."

I stare right through his contact lenses and see the personification of evil. There's no way to argue with evil so I turn my bike around and peacefully walk towards the exit. But then I remind myself that I'm not a loser. I'm going to be larger than life one day, so I've got an obligation to give my former coworkers a story to remember me by. At the end of the aisle there is a pyramid of canned tomatoes. I can't resist ramming my bicycle into the orderly rack. The cans come tumbling down.

Morie growls at me, "Hey you little fuck, if any of those cans are damaged, they're coming out of your last paycheck."

"Take this off my paycheck too." I push some jars off the shelf. They shatter purple goop all over the pristine store's floor. Seeing that fight the other night really inspired me to join the cause of senseless destruction.

"Don't come back here asking for any references from me either, you punk," he yells as I finally exit the store.

That felt great. I should start applying to a ton of jobs just so I can make a violent scene when I quit. My only regret is Morie won't even have to clean up the mess. He'll order one of his minions, probably Josie, to sweep up things.

I pedal against traffic to the beach. I dare the oncoming cars to get in my way. As I near the sand I jump off the bicycle and roll it toward the ocean. At the border between dry and wet sand I drop the bike and sit cross-legged next to it.

After the adrenaline and the realization of what just happened settles in all I can do is laugh. An old beachwalking couple stares in my direction, so I politely control the laughter. It will be impossible to find a job to cover next month's rent. Damn, I also lost my employee discount.

Well, now would be the perfect time to move to California. No one ever makes it big in Miami. This is where people move after they've made it big and want to reminisce about the glory days. But in California there are talent scouts waiting at bus stations looking for the next matinee idol to arrive from Nebraska. It might take a while or it might never happen, but there's definitely a better chance of becoming a celebrity in California than here.

The only problem is Ana. She has another few months until she graduates from college. She won't move out there anyway. We've had this discussion too many times. For some reason she doesn't want to move too far away from her family, which I can't understand since her parents have already basically disowned her for living with me.

Maybe it will only take a few months to get really rich and then I could commute between California and Florida. Ahhhh, fuck it. A few months would be way to long to be away from Ana. I'd be too miserable. Why can't anything good ever come my way?

I bike home and Ana is sitting on the couch doing a crossword puzzle. She smiles at my entrance. "Hey Jacob. Oh... your Mom called earlier."

"Did you tell her to stop calling?"

She gives me an evil eye. "No. I told her I'd tell you she called. Why don't you make her happy and call her back?"

“That’s easy for you to say. You never met these people.” For everyone’s personal information my parents disowned me when I dropped out of college. Now for the last couple months they decided they want to make up. Fuck them! Why couldn’t they talk to me when my student loans dried up and I needed money for a place to stay. They didn’t understand that all college does is teach you how to be another bee in the hive. No university can teach you how to be something special. I’d rather be down and out than be one more starch in the white collar world college prepares you for.

“No. But I’d like to meet them.”

“You don’t. I spent eighteen years in close quarters with them and look what it did to me. Besides what should I tell them? That I got fired from another job.” She continues her puzzle for a second until she realizes I subtly dropped a hydrogen bomb. “Can you believe that jerk-off Morie fired me for not going to work yesterday?”

“So how are we going to pay the rent?”

“I don’t know. How about we move to California?”

“Yeah... OK Jacob. I’ve only got six months left of school so why don’t I drop out and move to California so you can be another waiter with big dreams?”

“Thanks for the support. If I wanted my daily dose of pessimism I would call my parents.” She ignores me with a sneer and returns her attention to the little puzzle book.

I don’t like feeling so alone in the world so I try being nice to her. “Sometimes I wish I didn’t love you. Then I could just pack a backpack and ride my bike to the Pacific Ocean.” I tell her with a kiss. Man, she struggles to ignore me but my charming ways won’t let her.

“What’s stopping you?”

I dive on top of her. “You are. You’re the only thing that makes life livable. Everything else makes me want to throw up.” I tickle her ear. “Everything else except for the fact that Pablo Chiste is coming to town.” I get her laughing and my life feels better.

## Chapter Seven

"Ready to go?" Ana asks me.

I'm wearing my Sunday-best clothes so all I can say is "Yes, indeed." I grab Ana's hand as we walk out the door.

I've been in the ranks of the unemployed for almost a week now. I haven't found a new job, nor have I really looked for one since I've spent the better part of the week typing up my manuscript. It was crucial to have it typed by tonight. Tonight is so important I even shaved for the first time since being fired. Tonight I get to share the same room as the greatest writer who ever lived.

I'm sure you have heard of Pablo Chiste. He's the Ernest Hemingway of our time. At least that's what anyone says whenever Chiste's name is mentioned. He's the writer whose mastery of storytelling is only surpassed by his mastery of orchestrating a publicity stunt. Even those who never read Chiste's classic novels should remember his refusal to accept the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Remember? He's the guy who pissed on the trophy after he received it. He said he didn't want any award also given to economists and chemists since his writings are so much more important to humanity than anything those number crunchers could provide. Of course his refusing the actual reward didn't prevent him from collecting the prize money.

I don't believe the man is as arrogant as the persona he presents to the media. But who could really blame Pablo Chiste for being arrogant? Any person who can create such powerful emotions from scribbling lines and curves on paper has every right to have a gargantuan ego. Just thinking about Pablo Chiste's books tears up my eyes. Like in his book, *Silhouettes*, when Catherine realizes she just prostituted her body to God... Fuck! I couldn't speak coherently for weeks after reading that.

I stick the key in the keyhole and lock the brown door of apartment 3F. Books & Books is not too many blocks away, so we walk there despite a light drizzle.

"Are you excited?" Ana asks me.

"I'm having trouble breathing. Do you really think Pablo Chiste might read my book?"

Ana laughs. "It's funny how with some writers, like Pablo Chiste, you have to call them by their full name. But then there are people like Kafka. Nobody ever says... what is Kafka's first name anyway?"

"Jimmy."

"Jimmy Kafka? No, it's not."

"You're right it's Dick. Or maybe it's Harry." I stop talking because a tall woman with gobs of make-up and her brown, poodle-like dog who looks way too much like her walks right in-between us forcing me to let go of Ana's hand. At that second I make a decision. "Hey, Ana. I think I'll apply for a job at Books & Books."

"Yeah? What happened to your master plan of moving to California?"

"This would only be for a few months. I'm not going to leave you while you still have a couple months left of school. After you graduate I'll take off for California. But I'll steal something of yours so you'll be forced to come too."

"What are you going to steal? My car?"

"Nope, your heart."

She smiles wide. "You're the undisputed champ of bad jokes."

With perfect timing we enter the bookstore because a second later the rain really starts falling. The layout was rearranged so there would be a large space in the middle where Pablo Chiste could address the audience. Shelves were pushed to the store's side to make room for rows of wooden chairs and a couple tables with Pablo Chiste's many books and other related merchandise. I buy a paperback copy of *Silhouettes* with the hope that Pablo Chiste will autograph it later. Ana buys a bookmark with a caricature of Pablo Chiste's face on it along with many tidbits about his life.

"Do you want something to drink?" I ask Ana.

"Yeah. Let's check out what they have."

In the corner of the store there is the obligatory booth selling coffee and pastries that every bookstore has now-a-days. We get in line and I stare at the cranberry scones and chocolate muffins in the display



case when I hear the voice. The voice with the fake Spanish accent that I've heard quite a few times on the airwaves. I look up and the voice is coming from a skinny, bald, hairy man with those famous Buddy Holly framed glasses and I can't control myself.

"Pablo Chiste!" I jump up to his face.

"Yes. How do you do?" He gives me his hand to shake.

"Oh, I can't believe it. I love your work. It's so amazing. I'm your biggest... maybe not your biggest fan, but I get so much out of what you write."

"I am glad to hear it."

I don't know what to do and I see Ana with a smile on her face.

"Oh, this is my friend, Ana."

She says, "Hi. I'm also a big fan."

Pablo gives her a kiss on each cheek. "A pleasure."

I start blabbering. "I know this is a ridiculous thing to ask, but I have this book here that I wrote and I was wondering if maybe later you could take a look at it."

"Sure, I would enjoy that very much, but first allow me to pay for my tea. I must speak in a few minutes and I do not want my voice to give out on me. Come see me after my lecture."

He drifts away and I'm amazed. It's our turn in line and the cashier asks us what we want. Ana orders her drink and I pay for it. After recollecting my composure I ask Ana an important question, "Did I just act like a complete idiot?"

We seat ourselves and Ana kisses my lips. "No. You acted fine."

"I mean I'm a complete stranger and I ask a busy, important person..."

Ana sips from her coffee and says in a voice that could calm a Chihuahua, "You did great. I'm sure he wants to read your book, but right now he's got to concentrate on this speech or whatever he came here to do."

I'm almost convinced, but I can't help feeling a little stupid. I grab her bookmark and read the facts about Pablo Chiste's life.

--Born in Miami, Florida on June 2, 1949.--

--His younger brother Scott is the star of the television drama, *Drippy Faucets*--

--Pablo Chiste surrendered his US citizenship in response to US invasion of Grenada.--

"Excuse me ladies and gentlemen, if you could all please take your seats. Our extra-special speaker is ready to begin." says a silver haired, new-age woman in the middle of the store. I stroll with Ana and her cup of coffee to a second row seat. There are forty... maybe fifty other people in the room. Miami is so pathetic. If Pablo Chiste was speaking in any other metropolitan city people would have to sit on each other's laps for there to be enough room. As everyone sits down the lady continues, "I'm glad so many people showed up tonight. Our speaker tonight really needs no introduction. Here he is... the one and only Pablo Chiste."

Everyone claps. Pablo Chiste in his black suit and red tie stands up and lifts his left arm. "Thank you. I am very pleased to be here. When Jennifer invited me to speak here, I couldn't refuse, especially after she threatened my family." Everyone laughs as Pablo Chiste smirks at the lady who introduced him. "I was going to give a boring motivational speech slanted with my unique political perspective, but I think instead I shall read a short, short story which I wrote just yesterday. Afterwards I will take any questions which you might be brave enough to ask. The story is tentatively titled *Litter*.

*"Pelicans wade over me. As my head reaches the surface the birds scatter. I breathe and return to the ocean's tricky floor. She would have me searching all day. She always could make me do anything. Even make me waste twenty-three years of creative energies on her aerodynamic German automobiles and truffles. Now she has me searching the entire ocean for a cloth bracelet.*

*"Once, we were great. We would walk on the beach and our hands and eyes would hold private conversations. They stopped talking when she moved to the Greek Isles with Peter Kapotika. My Peter Kapoitka is my tropical bracelet. It was a present. A way to say something without explaining what that something was. The bracelet left a sliver of skin pale as the rest of my body darkened. I never let go of it until this afternoon's swim. I search and search but all that is down there are rusty beer cans and sting rays.*

*"My lungs won't take much more, nor will my eyes which feel permanently scarred from the salt water. I retreat to the shore on my back. Every scissors kick brings back a memory of that bracelet and the woman who was mine. I stumble aboard dry land, nearly tripping over this shirtless boy digging a hole. I ask him if he has ever buried a grown man. He flashes a toothless smile. I lie in the hole. As the sand scratches my chest I remind the child to make sure my eyes are covered."*

It takes a second for everyone to realize that was the end of the story. There is then polite, unenthusiastic applause.

"Did you all really like it?" Pablo Chiste asks in a painful contorted face which you would feel really mean saying no to. So everyone says, "Of course we loved it." without really meaning it. Pablo Chiste shrugs and says, "Alright then I will now answer any questions which you might have."

A guy in the back asks a pseudo-intellectual question and another lady asks another question. I'm not paying any attention to that. I'm busy comparing Pablo Chiste's story to the story I wrote last week. Could I actually be a better writer than him?

Then Ana's voice brings me back to reality. She asks the author, "What advice would you give an aspiring writer?"

Chiste's cheeks fill up and exhale. "Good question. But I think if you must ask that question then you have no hope of becoming an exceptional writer. Yes, you could follow my example or some other writer's example and put out some decent, professional work but you will never write a masterpiece by following other people's advice. Great writing throws out all the rules and the people who dictate the rules into the trash can. So my advice to writers is just to write and not to listen to anyone's advice about writing. You will become a much better writer through writing than through listening."

The next twenty minutes are really tedious. People flatteringly ask Pablo Chiste's obvious questions about his past and future which obviously bores him as much as it bores me. Then Sergio, who I noticed drifting in as Pablo Chiste was reading his story asks, "Do you think there are only so many stories a writer can tell?"

Pablo Chiste explodes. "How can a person be ignorant enough to ask such a question? Every minute in every person's life could be the basis of a story. How then can any writer have the time to run out of the millions of stories he is exposed to throughout his life?"

Sergio strokes his chin hairs and asks, "Then do you think there are only so many meaningful stories a writer can write without repeating himself?"

"No."

A few more questions are asked but in his answers Pablo Chiste would harshly insult the askers, so people stop raising their hands. Finally, Pablo Chiste thanks everyone for showing up, there was applause and then people get in a line to get their books autographed. "Can you believe what a dick he was?" Ana says as we stand up. "Telling me that I could never become a writer."

"I thought you hated writing."

"But he doesn't know that! If I did want to be..."

"Hey guys!" It's Sergio with a short girl with horn-rimmed glasses. Sergio gives Ana a hug and threatens to hug me too. "What did you two think of this joker?"

"I think he hates you," Ana says to Sergio. "He went ballistic."

"I think it's because we stole his parking space," says Sergio's mystery date.

"Well I didn't know it was him until I got out of the car."

I excuse myself from the thought provoking conversation and get in the back of the autograph-seeker line. While waiting I figure out exactly what to say when it's my turn. When faced with Pablo Chiste though I turn into a mute. I can't think of anything to say so I silently slam my manuscript on the table. He grabs it and is about to autograph it when I shout, "No that's my book. I wrote it. Remember, I talked to you earlier and you said you would read it. I know you don't believe in giving other writer's advice and I'm not asking for advice. Your books have given me so much pleasure and the only way I can ever repay you is by giving you my book to read."

Pablo Chiste laughs like Satan. He rubs his temples with his thumb and index finger and says, " Right now I am not in the mood to

read but I'll tell you what, write your name and phone number on the cover page and I'll give you a call when I finish it."

I search the store for a pen and then hand Pablo Chiste the only copy of my masterpiece. Later that night as I drank until I got stupid, Ana, Sergio, and his lady friend gave me a hard time about giving away my hopes and dreams so casually.

## Chapter Eight

I'm waiting for a bus. One day I'm stealing a car because too much of my life is wasted waiting for buses. The wait today is especially agonizing not just because of the heavy rain, but also because Pablo Chiste is at the end of the line. He called me this morning and I swear the conversation went exactly like this. . .

Pablo Chiste: Good Morning! Is Jacob Fielding there?

Me: Yeah, what do you want?

Pablo Chiste: I'm sorry. Did I wake you?

Me: Yeah. . .uh, who is this?

Pablo Chiste: This is Pablo Chiste. You gave me your book yesterday and I just finished reading it. Amazing. Amazing. If you're not doing anything today I was hoping you could come to my home and we could discuss your book.

He told me he lives on Key Biscayne and that I should take my time but get out there as soon as I could. I jumped out of bed and put on some slacks and a nice, flowered shirt so I would look classy. Unfortunately waiting for the bus in all this rain has soaked my clothes.

Finally the bus arrives and a couple minutes after I get on God laughs at me by stopping the rain. I start thinking that maybe Pablo Chiste didn't give me a call and Sergio, Ana, or someone else who knew I gave him the only typed copy of my manuscript is playing a practical joke.

If anyone but Pablo Chiste called me at 9:00 this morning I would have told them to go fly a kite. Last night was rough. Sergio and his date, whose name I don't think I'll ever know, kept Ana and me in a bar for way too long. I got sloppy drunk since Sergio bought all the drinks again. Ana seems to think that Disneyworld story of Sergio's is true. She knows for a fact his parents are dead and he does walk with a slight limp that could be because a stray bullet hit his knee. Here comes my stop.

I get off the bus in Downtown Miami and walk to the corner where I'm supposed to catch another bus to Key Biscayne. The bus is there waiting for me. I hop aboard and show the driver an expired

student identification card so I can get a student discount on the fare. I sit in the back of the bus because some lady in front is wearing cheap perfume.

The day is turning into one which makes me glad to live in South Florida. The gray sky is making way for blue as the bus takes me away from the grime of Downtown Miami. We drive over bridges with water so colorful it could make you cry. I look at the scrap of paper with the directions to Pablo Chiste's house written on them. *Get off at stop following the house with anchor on front lawn.* A couple minutes later I see the house and push the "stop requested" rope. The driver swerves to the side of the road. I get off and read my next instruction. *606 Harbor Drive. It's the glass house that looks like it's made of building blocks.*

I look left and then right and see a house fitting that description at the end of the block. While walking there I consider asking Pablo if he ever throws stones in this house. I push the doorbell.

I jump back when I see a beautiful girl open the door. She is really tan, got long, black hair, and a birthmark under her freckled lips. I can tell she doesn't like me staring at her mini-mini-skirt by the way she says, "Can I help you?"

"Yeah. I'm here to see Pablo Chiste."

She turns around and yells, "Poppy, someone is here to see you." Pablo Chiste runs to the door in shorts and a shirt not buttoned past his saggy breasts. "Jacob! I'm so glad you could come. What are you doing outside? How could you not invite him in, Elena? Please come in Jacob." My wet sneakers squeak on the marble floors. "Jacob this is my daughter, Elena."

I stick my hand out for her to shake but instead she kisses my cheek. "Nice to meet you." She then turns around and gives Pablo a kiss. "Poppy, I'm going to Fabrizio's house. I'll be back by six." She walks out the door and yells, "Ciao, Poppy. Ciao, Jacob."

"Ciao." I say as she shuts the door.

"Don't get any ideas." Pablo says. "She's only seventeen."

"Doesn't she have to be in school now?"

"Her mother and I are home schooling her. Her modeling career forces her to miss too much school. Besides the public education system

is horrible. Just awful. Can you believe that not one of her teachers required her to read any of my books? Not one. Ahhh... Here I am ranting again. I'm such an awful host. Have you eaten yet?"

"No, I woke up and came straight here."

Pablo Chiste darts out the room. I follow him to the kitchen where he grabs a fruit from a ceramic bowl and throws it in my direction. "This papaya was grown in my backyard. Papayas are the best thing in the world to eat on an empty stomach. Cleans out the whole system." he says as I examine the fruit. "Come, we'll eat at the beach. We can talk there without any distractions."

He slips on leather sandals and escorts me out the door. We hop into his shiny, red sports car and away we go. We drive through backroads listening to tropical drum beats on the radio.

"You want to know something, Jacob? I haven't been this excited in a long time. Reading your book really did something for me." He parks on the grass at the side of the road and I worry this might be a seduction. But instead of approaching me he gets out of the car. I grab my papaya and follow him. We get to a path of sand and both take off our shoes. The path takes us to a crowded beach. I follow Pablo to an unpopulated area. We sit side by side facing the ocean.

"Such a beautiful day," he says as he pulls a stocky, little banana out of his pocket. He hands me a Swiss Army knife.

"How come you're not eating a papaya?" I ask as I cut my papaya in half.

"I already ate breakfast. The banana eases my digestion." He takes off his shirt and sticks it in-between us. "To be honest when I took your book last night I had no intention of ever reading it. If anything decent was on HBO last night I would have thrown it in the trash." As I sloppily scoop out the black papaya seeds onto the sand I tell him, "It's a good thing you didn't because that was my only copy."

Pablo Chiste laughs and laughs and laughs. "It's wonderful. Otherwise we would have robbed the world of one of the greatest works of art ever produced. Once I started reading I went to a world which I have not been for quite some time. I only wish I could write something of that merit."



"You're kidding, right? You're Pablo Chiste. You've written stories that have changed people's lives. Your books have won awards. My stuff is a piece of... it's nothing compared to what you write. In fact my girlfriend and I wouldn't have made it past our first date if we didn't get into a huge argument about what your book, *Casual Deaths*, was all about. Up to that point she thought I was really shallow."

He looks into the horizon. "You're probably right. My writing is better, but still... this book is tremendous." As he talks I peel into the flesh of the mushy papaya. It's so sweet that I take bite after bite not caring about the pink juice running all over my face. Pablo Chiste continues talking, "When I finished your book I had a vision last night. See, normally it takes months for a first time author to find a publisher willing to publish his novel. Doesn't matter how great a masterpiece it is. You could have written the Bible, but unless they've heard of you most publishers will turn it down. Then, once a publisher agrees to publish a book by a first time author, they wait one or two more years before distributing it to build up publicity and to make sure the book is still relevant. But one or two more years is too long. In those one or two years where your book is in publishing limbo a lot of people will have died without reading your book. That would be too great a tragedy, so what I'm thinking is... please hear me out before you answer. I was thinking we publish the book under my name. You would get 100% of the money. Complete creative control, I won't let an editor make a single change in the book without your approval..."

"Pablo! Um... can I call you Pablo?"

"Of course. That is my name."

"I didn't write that book for the money. I don't..." I stick the papaya away from me because it distracts me from the message I want to send him. "This book is my dream. I've always wanted people to take my opinions seriously and to respect me. And now with this book I've written, I've got a chance to get that respect and love. No one's name is going on that book but Jacob Fielding's...unless... unless you want to publish it under your name and right after all the critics read it you hold a press conference and tell everyone I wrote it."

He laughs. "No. I don't think so. Excuse me, won't you? I think I will go for a swim."

He walks into the waves. I finish the papaya and think maybe I should accept his original offer. Let him publish my book and then I'll sue him for plagiarism. No, I can't do that. This guy is trying to do me a favor and I'm thinking of ways to fuck him over. I walk to the water to wash the sticky juice from my hands and around my mouth. The water's a great temperature and seeing Pablo's head bob beneath the surface makes me wish I brought swimming trunks. Pablo swims toward me, walks ashore, and towels off his dark skin.

He says with the towel draped across his shoulders, "I must make a confession. I didn't want my name on the title page just so we could get the book published. I also wanted the praise that you're looking for. I wanted the world to see my best work is not behind me. That I can still tell a story. But it has been some time since I've done a good deed..."

"Wow, thanks Pablo!"

"I'm not doing this for you. I'm making sure this book gets published so the rest of the world gets a chance to read it. And as your agent I'll make quite a fortune from this good deed." He walks away. "Come, let's return to my house. I must make some phone calls."

## Chapter Nine

After dinner Pablo drops me off in front of my apartment building. I climb the steps two-at-a-time. Soon as I open the door and see Ana lying on our bed reading I can't contain it any more. I scream it all out at once. "I did it!"

"Did what?" She says amused with her finger holding her place in the book.

"Pablo Chiste called me this morning. He loved my book so much that he's working as my agent. He faxed *Bird of a Different Feather*, that's what we're calling it, to the publishing house he always works with. He thinks it's only a matter of them reading it before they agree to publish it."

"Damn, how come nothing exciting ever happens to me? My sister gets engaged. You get a Nobel prize winning literary agent. I spend the day in Japanese and economics class."

"Don't get too depressed. I'm taking you out tonight to celebrate my forthcoming wealth. Call up your sister and her fiancé too. I feel bad about the other night." I also still want to know why that fight started.

"I don't think she's too ready to go to another bar or night club. I don't want to drink tonight either. I can't go to class with a hangover two days in a row."

"Come on baby, you've got to drink until it hurts. Something good has finally happened to me."

She looks at me the way a mother tells her child, "Come on Jacob, Mommy's tired. Why don't you go play with your stuffed animals instead." Really she told me I should go out and have a good time with someone else. She's not in a going out mood. So I call up Sergio he's always in a going out mood.

I meet him at The Abbey because last time we were there he noticed a lot of really good looking women and so did I actually, but don't tell Ana. When we settle in a booth and get comfortable with our beers as the TV screens show sports highlights. We get right back into a riveting conversation as Sergio asks, "So was Pablo Chiste as much of a jerk as he was at his reading?"

I tell him. "He's an egomaniac. But I can deal with him if he gets my book published. Just like I can deal with you when you buy the drinks."

"I take it this new book is better than that other piece of shit you wrote."

I slurp down the bitter white wine. "Ana thinks so. So you really didn't like my book?" I hope I can take negative reviews from the critics. Right now I can't. It feels like a splinter on my pinkie finger when someone doesn't fall in love with my writing.

"It was alright. I really liked the ending when Jesus was crucified for not following the government's orders, but for Jesus Christ he seemed really one-dimensional." He's silent for a brief second before reassuring me, "but it was funny and pretty easy to read."

The book wasn't supposed to be funny, but that won't stop me from trying to sell my work. "You should have paid to get it published." I tell him with gusto. "I would have let you keep all the profits. I mean you've got all this money laying around, you should do something meaningful with it."

Sergio won't look at me as he talks. "Funding your novels are not how my parents would have wanted me to spend their money."

I don't want him to become a sentimental mess on me. "I'm not asking you to serve as my patron, now that I've got Pablo Chiste on my side, but you should consider buying other things besides liquor and marijuana with your money. We could make movies or something."

"I only spend the interest that I make from their money. I never touch their actual money..."

I never heard any passion in his voice before. It's kind of disturbing when you hear a laid-back person aggravated. You fear this is how some serial murderers got their start. "Look bro, I didn't mean anything negative by what I said. I just wanted to give you some friendly advice."

He taps his bleached head. "Well I appreciate it, but I don't need it."

Comic books have really fucked people up. When kids read that one instance in your life should completely change you and that you

should always be aware of that instant, it makes people really one-dimensional. For Spider-man that instance was when a radioactive spider bit him and gave him spider powers. For Sergio that instance was seeing his parents gunned down at Disney World. It's really tragic and everything, but he shouldn't curdle his life with guilt over it.

Anyway, the night continues being awkward and I wish that another beer brawl would start. Anything to break the monotony of me being so careful with our conversation so I don't offend Sergio anymore. He's not the only one with a rough life. What about that fucking nut in jail who killed his parents? I'm sure he had a rough life too. Anyone who brings a gun to an amusement park had to have had a screwy past. Finally, I just tell Sergio I've got to go. I thank him for buying the drinks again and start walking home. The biggest moment in my life and I celebrate it by thinking about a murderer.

## Chapter Ten

Alright, I'm getting impatient. It's been three days since I've heard from Pablo Chiste. The fucker never even gave me his phone number so I could contact him. Three wasted days sitting by the damn telephone.

Meanwhile, Ana is having a great time reminding me how idiotic I am to give the jerk the only typed copy of my manuscript in the first place and then when I had the chance to get it back I let him keep it.

She also loves telling me that I should get a job since our rent is due soon. If I wanted this kind of aggravation I'd move back to New Jersey with my Mom and Dad.

## Chapter Eleven

Four days without making any contact with me was just too inconsiderate, so I return to Pablo Chiste's house. I push the doorbell. There's no answer. I sit on his doorstep clenching my fists just waiting for that two-timing book thief to show up.

A lot of time passes. My anger is building and building when a jeep blasting techno music rolls into the driveway. Pablo's daughter and a tall, blond Euro-hunk carrying shopping bags get out of the car. She's wearing a wifebeater that leaves her pierced bellybutton exposed. I'll tell you, nothing pacifies a raging man like the sight of a beautiful woman... I mean seventeen-year-old girl.

"Hey...um....um...Elena!" I say remembering her name. "Do you know where your father is?"

"Hello, Jacob," she says before kissing my cheek. "He's probably at the beach."

"Would you mind giving me a ride?"

"Not at all." she says as she puts the bags inside the house.

"Come on Fabrizio. Fabrizio, this is Jacob."

"Ciao," he says from behind his sunglasses.

I sit in the back of the jeep. The electronic music hisses from the speakers as Fabrizio drives us away. As Fabrizio plays with the volume knob Elena tells me, "My Dad made me read your book. It's probably the best book I ever read."

"You're joking, right? I can't believe someone could think that."

"Don't be so modest. The narrator... the guy stuck in this world where he is supposed to be acting like a bird... there was so much to him. You must have put a lot of thought into it."

"Actually, I wrote it all in a day."

"No? You lie. How could you write so much in a day? I can never write more than one page at a time without running out of words."

"You write?" I shouldn't be surprised considering who her father is. "I'd like to read your stuff sometime." Fabrizio stops the car and I hop

out. "I'll probably be at your house a lot, so I'll see you soon Elena. Thanks for the ride, Fabrizio."

"No problem," he says in a Terminator accent.

I walk the path to the beach and realize Pablo is a genius. Any time he expects someone to be mad at him he sends his beautiful daughter to flirt with him. She can completely mellow anyone.

I see Pablo floating at the same spot where we met last time. I peel off my sneakers, socks, and T-shirt and descend into the sunshine heated waters. I dogpaddle in his direction. Without his glasses he has to squint before recognizing me, "Jacob? What are you doing here?"

I'm still mad but I try to refrain from any sarcasm. "I missed you Pablo."

He treads water. "I tried calling you, maybe an hour ago. My editor just called. He loved your book and is working on a deal for us."

"Holy shit!!!" I do a backflip. Good thing I was in the water when I heard the news because otherwise I could never do anything so acrobatic. "How much money do you think I'll get?"

"Probably, quite a bit, but don't let this distract you. You must make sure you continue writing. Once you achieve the high level of writing which you accomplished with *Bird of a Different Feather*, you don't want to regress. Right now you might be at your peak, so I want you to promise to continue writing."

I float on my back and tell him, "Sure. I'll write about all the cocaine and whores I can now afford." He doesn't laugh so I tell him, "I was only joking. I've already got a couple ideas for my next novel. Though until *Bird of a Different Feather* came into mind, I really couldn't think of anything important to write."

"Don't you dare start complaining about writer's block to me ever again. I've had it for so long that I'm beginning to fear the only book I'll ever write is a diary about a writer with writer's block." Personally, I was not enjoying hearing Pablo Chiste tear himself down. It was bad enough to find out he was a petty schmuck, but to hear him admit he is washed up is unbearable. "One of the reasons I've moved back to Miami from Spain was because this is where I got the ideas for my greatest works. I remember swimming perhaps half a kilometer down this beach



when I started thinking about where my family would have to move if a hurricane destroyed our house. I imagined I'd have to live with my friend Robert, who had this really beautiful twenty-four year old stepmother. Those thoughts of course evolved into my novel, *Broken Homes*. I was fifteen then. Years before I adopted the pseudonym of Pablo Chiste. Back when I was Pablo Chipstein."

I laugh, "Your real name is Chipstein?"

"Yes." he says without further explanation. "In Spain I was so sure that if I just returned to Miami, I would find some inspiration. I thought this ocean was magical and if I swam in it again I would have an imagination again. But I've been back in Miami for almost a year. Every morning I swim in this water and I still haven't a damn thing to say."

I remind him, "Maybe all the pollution from the past 30 years have robbed the water of its magic."

He laughs and walks on to the beach. I follow him ashore. He puts on his glasses and invites me to his house for lunch. I cordially accept because I'm going to need to learn how to properly socialize with other celebrities.

## Chapter Twelve

Listen to this review, “Saying *Bird of a Different Feather* is a literary masterpiece would be as much of an understatement as describing the universe as big. This is a novel which challenged me intellectually like no novel I’ve read since my days in Paris as a doctoral student reading Pablo Chiste’s *Silhouettes*.”

If you think that review was a fluke, than how about this one, “Imagine a world where there were no people. There were only birds. Except for you, but everyone insists that you too are a bird. Sounds like another retread into *Planet of the Apes* territory. But if *Planet of the Apes* was as honest and fulfilling as Jacob Fielding’s *Bird of a Different Feather* there would have been no need for them to make 5,000 sequels.”

I could read another review and then another after that, but I think you already get the idea. Everyone loves my book. The closest I’ve gotten to a negative review was when some critic called me the next Kafka. But he made up for it when he said, “The mistake that was made by Kafka’s peers should not be repeated by us. We should celebrate Jacob Fielding now, instead of waiting until after he dies. “

Fine with me. I’m always in the mood for a celebration. Right now, in fact, Pablo Chiste is planning a nation-wide celebration for me. I’m going on an ego promotion tour.

“Right now the way it’s planned is New York on the 3rd, Boston the 5th, Chicago the 7th. I think we should fit Philadelphia in there somewhere. I have a beautiful friend there that I have not seen in quite some time.:

“Wherever you want Pablo. As long as it leads me to fame.” I take a sip from the icy glass of coconut milk and look out at the bay.

“The more you write, the more recognition you will receive.” He says with the wisdom of a Franciscan monkey. “Have you been writing at all?”

“Yeah! And when it’s done I will let you read it Pablo.” My new book is going to be out of sight. It’s based a little bit on my friend Sergio’s life. I started thinking about what kind of a guy would bring a gun to Disney World. So this book is a fictional autobiography of that nutcase

who killed Sergio's parents. I'm giving him a rough dysfunctional life just like anyone else's in the world. Jimmy Scabini, that's his name, is sick and tired of all these Disney movies which feature perfect people with perfect lives. He thinks the company is purposely mocking him, so he decides to kill Mickey Mouse in retribution. When he arrives in Disney World though, he falls in love with the place and decides to let the mouse live. Jimmy Scabini just loves how everyone is equal in that everyone has to wait in the same line to be happy. The lines seem indiscriminating until a family cuts him. Their cheating is too much for Jimmy and he decides to punish the family for all the injustices he has ever suffered.

I'm making decent progress in the book. Pretty much every day I write a page or two. I still haven't told Sergio that I'm writing this book. I'm scared he might find the humorous touch I gave the book to be in bad taste.

Pablo commands, "Continue your writing. It would be a travesty to let the creativity you have right now waste away." A ring in the other room prevents him from insulting me as he customarily does after a compliment. He puts on his glasses as he walks toward the phone. I try to eavesdrop, but after yelling, "Jesus, Scott!" he shuts the door on me.

Several minutes later he walks out of the room with a purpose. "Jacob, I must excuse myself there has been a family emergency. Elena will take you home."

"That's alright I can take the bus or a taxi."

"No. She will take you home." He screams, "Elena!" She pops her head into the hallway. "Your Uncle Scott has found himself in jail again. I'm going to bail him out, hopefully before the press receives word of this." And like that, he's out of the house.

Elena walks into the living room with her back thrust in a model's stance. "You don't have to go out of your way to drive me Elena. I can take the bus."

"No, I'll take you home," she insists. It gets silent so I have to say something stupid.

"Does your uncle get arrested a lot?"

"He's got a drug problem." The way she says it makes me feel

like an asshole. "And a prostitute problem... and a bad credit problem." Her dark eyes must have liked my smile because then she said, "When I first met you, you promised to read my stories. It's like months later, and you still haven't read them."

"Well you should have reminded me." I say lamely. I can't decide if she's flirting with me or not.

"Come on." I follow her into her bedroom. The walls are plastered with posters and doodles drawn directly on the wall. There is a man looking out at the blue marker sea and a bunch of psychedelic mushrooms on her door.

I ask her, "Who drew the mushroom patch?"

"My friend when she visited from Spain."

"You used to live there, right?"

"Yeah. Until my dad gained custody over me last year. I hate it so much here"

"Why? You've got the beach and..."

"Everyone is so full of shit. I haven't really made any friends since I moved."

"What about that big, blond guy I always see you hanging out with?"

Fabrizio? He's so full of shit." She doesn't look at me. Instead she crouches on the floor looking for something.

"Why are you always hanging out with him then? I thought he was your boyfriend."

"No," she spews. "He's awful. I just hang out with him because I get sick of always being with myself. With him I can pretend I'm someone else. He's so stupid. He..."

"You know you complain a whole lot more than you have any right to. I'm sure someone as beautiful and as smart and as... you should have it so easy making friends."

"It's easy to find people who want to fuck me... but to find real friends... it's impossible. You're probably only humoring reading my stuff because you want to fuck me."

"No! I'm in love with someone else. I'm only here because... because you told me to read your shit. So... so give it to me." I grab the

composition book out of her hands. and prepare myself to hate this spoiled brat's writing. All these insults formulate in my head about how great writing isn't hereditary, but then I start reading.

It starts with a little piece in bubbly handwriting entitled, "*The Sun Sets Early.*"

*All she can think about is Sweden. The evil, shifty-eyed history teacher can ramble all he wants about Mercantilism and the benefits of Alexander Hamilton's financial system, but she will remain focused.*

*Sweden, the land where happy, blond men roam. Sweden, the food is good, conversations are great, and the IQ's are frighteningly high. Things are almost too good because they have the highest suicide rate of any sovereign nation. Imagine a life so grand you can't comprehend anything else life can offer, so you enter the macabre, wonderful world of death.*

*What a change of pace that would be! No more suicidal tendencies from boredom or angst, instead they derive from curiosity and an overkill of happiness. Ah... Sweden! Just one hundred and twenty-seven lonely school days to go.*

All of a sudden I'm in love with this girl. Then I read a longer story of hers about a girl who traveled into outer space to protect her father's honor. Elena puts Nirvana on the stereo to ease my journey into her world. The girl's father was an aspiring astronaut who immediately before his first mission realized how terrified he was to leave Earth. So the daughter put on her dad's spacesuit and snuck aboard the shuttle while everyone thought it was her father going into space.

"This is a pretty good story." I tell her reminding myself about the benefits of a loving monogamous relationship and the cons of jailtime for statutory rape. But officer, she's mature beyond her seventeen years.

"How do you think I can make it better?" she asks with her hand on my knee. I tell her and she listens to me. She really cares about what I have to say or at least she does a good job of pretending. Complete lust is a difficult impulse to reject but I keep telling myself temptation will make me a better man.

So I make it home that night with a stainless conscience. I got home and try to bring my relationship with Ana back to the high level it

was at when we were just boyfriend and girlfriend and not asexual roommates. "Hey baby. How was your day?" I ask Ana to the sound of her chopping carrots.

"Whatever. Normal."

"Is normal good or bad?" I ask looking for any passion within her.

"Normal is normal. Do you want some split pea soup?"

"Uh.... sure." That question soured me. Does she want us to be the stereotypical squabbling American couple? We'll eat our meals watching game shows. Our excitement for the day will be when our favorite contestant gets Double Jeopardy.

We eat our soup and on the tip of my burnt tongue is a need to tell Ana that a certain teenaged writing prodigy is dancing in my brainwaves. I thought a confession might flicker some passion in this corpse we're calling love. But the rational part of my brain slaps my mouth shut.

Eventually Ana and I make our way to bed when I have my most vivid dream since *Bird of a Different Feather*. I'm lying in a colorful field. There were all these waist-high toadstools. And there was Elena naked with her long, Spanish black hair covering her breasts.

"I'm leaving to outer space," she tells me.

"But it's so beautiful here. Why would you want to leave... me?"

The sun lit the prairie as though night would soon conquer all. "There are other beautiful places. I want to know them all." She lays on the toadstool next to me where she touches me everywhere. Then I awaken to the mess I made of the sheets.

Scared to go back to sleep I write a little. As the hours grow later I realize I didn't have a damn thing to say. So I call a taxi to get to Pablo's house. A couple of knocks and Elena opens the door.

It was important for me to pretend that I didn't come out there to see her. "Hey, Elena, is your Dad home?"

"No. He'll be gone for a couple days. He's...uh... he's helping my uncle flee to Cuba. But don't tell anyone. He could get in trouble if the police find out." She looks around the neighborhood. "Do you want to come in?"

Is there anyone with the discipline to reject a beautiful girl's invitation into an empty house? If there is it's not me. I follow her little jean shorts into her bedroom. The same Unplugged Nirvana album from yesterday is still playing. We talk about writing. A subject that has always been difficult to talk about with Ana. It would bore her and sometimes, I think, make her jealous. She never liked me spending hours with a pen and paper instead of with her.

When Elena listens with such enthusiasm to my rantings about writing, I couldn't help but be even more attracted to her. She has so much energy and talent and humor and an awesome body and then she actually makes the first move on me. She asks, "Do you want to go swimming?"

"I don't have a bathing suit," I say pointing at my corduroys.

"Even better."

She pulls me toward her bony hips and unbuttons my shirt. I helped her slither out of her shorts. With a kiss she pins me to the waterbed and we wrestle for a couple seconds before I fall to the floor. To the sound of her laughter I grab the condom that I conveniently placed in my pocket hours earlier and we have some very energetic sex.

Up to that point I forgot that you can only really have fun when you're sweating. Unless your hair is dripping wet and you smell of body odor then you're not really enjoying yourself. Regrets and thoughts about Ana didn't come until after the sweat evaporated. Elena and I were lying side by side with my arm caressing her sticky shoulder.

"Man, Elena you have the life. No worries at all. When I was seventeen, I would have killed for your life. You get to wake up whenever you want, do whatever you want, and you have one of the great creative minds of the twentieth century as your private teacher. Not to mention that you're having sex with a stud like me."

"I don't know. Sometimes I wish I could go to high school. Poppy.... He's not as smart as you think." She says while rubbing my belly. "What were you doing when you were seventeen. What were your parents like."

"Fuck... you don't want to know about them. They're too crazy. Especially my Dad. Any time he was disappointed with me he

threatened to commit suicide. One time when I was nine or ten I got in trouble for making fun of some fat kid. When my dad found out he dragged me into his bedroom and started crying about what a failure he was since he raised the antichrist. Then he pulled out this little gun he had and stuck it in his mouth. I started crying too and I promised never to do anything bad ever again."

Elena looked at me as though she didn't know whether to believe me or not. "Your father... is he still alive?"

"Yeah. He's a fucking accountant in New Jersey." I needed to change the subject. "Do you still want to swim?"

She nodded. Naked, we raced through the house and cannonballed into the pool. Despite the chlorine hurting my eyes I had so much fun that I returned the next couple of days for more sex and skinny-dipping.

I was quite a hypocrite. Living one life with Ana as a faithful boyfriend and another with Elena as a sex toy. Then I had this crazy double life when Pablo returned home where I pretended to visit him for his wisdom, but really I just wanted to see more of his daughter parading around in boxer shorts. I got a \$100,000 check for my book, so I could afford to pay for hotel rooms whenever we wanted to have a mid-afternoon romp. Usually, Elena would pick me up at a supermarket by my house, then we would find a place where we could have sex and conversation in private, and then I would be back home before Ana returned from school.

After awhile all the sneaking around got boring. So yesterday, after three weeks of a lurid sexual affair, Elena and I called it quits. She didn't seem very upset. Probably because I turned out to not be as deep a person as I seemed from my writings. I came home that day ready to recommit myself to a relationship with Ana.

"Have you decided if you're going on the book tour with me?" I ask Ana.

"I don't know," she responds.

"I've got to tell Pablo soon. So he knows whether to buy you extra plane tickets."

"I know. I've just had other things on my mind."



"You should come. We'll get to visit a lot of cities we've never seen and when we're in New York I'll let you finally meet my family."

"It's tempting but I probably should stay here and start looking for a better job. I have a college degree now. I shouldn't be waiting tables any more."

"Job? You don't need a job! I'm rich now."

"You might have money, but I'm still poor. By the way you still owe me your share of last month's rent."

I take out a fat wad of cash from my wallet and hand her \$250. That night I sleep pretty decently. Although I did wake up a couple times to see Ana's eyes wide open.

The next morning I jump out of bed to soak my skin with sunscreen and then leave to the beach to write. Lately, I've been doing that whenever the weather permits. I walk to this quiet part of Miami Beach which is populated mostly by gay men and topless women sunbathing.

The roar of the waves, hot sand, and relaxed energy of the beachgoers are really inspiring. It's a great atmosphere for writing my new book. Before I get too deep into the book, I should probably get Sergio's permission. I guess Ana was right, talking frankly with people is my major weakness.

She reminds me of that in the letter I found atop the toilet seat when I return home from the beach. It is crammed inside an envelope that screamed, "Jacob, this letter is going to tear out your heart." For what other motive other than a bomb threat would someone you're so close to leave you a message in a sealed envelope?

I am in no rush to read it. I'm scared I know exactly what it will say, so I fill the bathtub with scorching, hot water and plunge my body into the tub before opening the letter. It was two messy handwritten pages long.

*Dear Jacob,*

*I love you. I really do. I know my moving out is a funny way of showing it, but you left me no choice. You're where you always wanted to be. You're rich and soon you will be famous and I can't be a part of that. With you*

*being so successful anything I ever accomplish I will always feel I didn't earn. I can't live such a paranoid life.*

*But that's not the reason I can't be with you any more. It's more that me being with you isn't healthy. You don't treat me as though I'm a person. You think I'm like a backpack that you can just carry along if you want to move to California or go on a nationwide book tour. I'm an independent person and you should have always treated me as one. I need my own identity, but you keep on pushing me to become a spectator who hangs around you while watching all your dreams come true. You never once thought about me, did you?*

*I'm sorry for being so harsh in this letter, but we have never been too open with each other. We'd always avoid talking about our problems, insecurities, and secrets and instead talk about stupid, funny things. That's why I feel I couldn't tell you everything I'm writing in this letter to your face. Every time I tried to tell you I was unhappy we would end up talking about something else instead. Maybe I'm just confused and I need time to be by myself. Whatever it is, I need to be away from you for a while.*

*Ana*

*PS While you're on your book tour I'll pick up all my stuff. I'll leave my phone number too, in case you still want me to pay half the rent.*

Reading the letter numbs my body. I know it can't be real. It has to be some kind of new-age exercise that Ana read would help her vent her frustrations about our relationship. I promise myself that when she comes home I will do whatever it takes to make her happy. I will even tell her about my fling with Elena. I wait in the bathtub for hours for her to come home. She never does. I finally pull my pathetic, wrinkled body out of the water and call her parents' house.

Ana's sister, Gabrielle, answers the phone, "Di me," she says in Spanish.

I thought that was good. Gabrielle loves me. She'll help me out. "Hey, Gabrielle, it's Jacob. Is Ana at your house right now?"

She is too quiet. For a second I think she hung up. "Jacob...." It was hard for her to talk. "Ana isn't here."

All these paranoid feelings rush free. "Where is she? Is she with some other guy?" I mean it's alright if she wants to leave me, but does she already have a new me. I don't like to think I am so replaceable.

"Jacob, I don't know where Ana is." She's lying. Those Velazquez sisters don't hide anything from one another.

"If you see her could you tell her to come home? Tell her I love her and I'll kill myself without her and fuck... don't tell her that. Tell her to fuck off, if she's got to write a letter to... oh don't tell her any of this. Just tell her to call me."

"OK Jacob." Gabrielle then leaves me alone with the dial tone.

Fuck her. Forget it. New stage of my life. Moving on. I don't like those options but it's how I'm going to have to live. That's my new mantra, but I feel like I've got a hole in my stomach. I'm missing a vital organ. I know that's a lame metaphor, but that's how it is. I lost my passion to eat. To sleep. To live. I scream into the mirror for hours. I know I need to talk to someone. To keep my suffering all bottled up would just be selfish, but the past few years I've sort of run out of friends. When I left New Jersey for Miami I didn't look back. I haven't talked to anyone from my hometown in four years. Since I've been with Ana I've associated less and less with other people. I call Sergio because he's the only person in the world that qualifies as a friend right now.

"Hello." He answers the phone as though I woke him up.

"Hey Sergio. It's Jacob."

"What's up, buddy?"

"Um... Ana just left me." I get straight to the point.

"That sucks," he says as though my grief bores him.

"You wouldn't know where she is or... you never fooled around with her, did you?"

"What? Where did that come from?"

"Did you?"

"No," he says and I have no choice but to believe him. "Why would you accuse me of doing something like that?"

"I'm sorry. I've been fooling around on the side and my dishonesty, I guess, left me believing that everyone is as evil as me."

He thinks for a second and then asks, "Is that why she left you?"

"No. She just finally realized what kind of a person I am."

"Come on Jacob. Talking like that will just get you believing what you're saying is true."

"I'm scum, Sergio. I've been writing a book based on what happened to you at Disneyworld."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"I'm making the book really funny."

"Well, you should stop doing that. There's nothing funny about my parents being dead."

"Yeah, I'm sorry," I say remorsefully. "But it's really funny and it could make a lot of people's lives better by laughing at..."

"At my misfortunes? Maybe that's why Ana left you. You worry more about entertaining people you have never met than about the people around you."

He was making me feel really bad so I make a promise I don't intend to keep. "Alright I'll stop writing about it. Do you want to hang out? Get something to drink?"

"No. I'd rather not." and he hangs up the phone.

I call him back because I forgot why I called him in the first place. "Sergio, hey it's me again, I forgot to ask if you wanted to come with me across the country on my book-signing tour. All expenses would be paid."

"No." He says immediately. "I don't think that would be a good idea." and he hangs up on me again.

Man, I'm hoping this tour will help me forget myself. The company publishing my book is paying for me and Pablo to publicize my book in Miami, Boston, New York, Chicago, Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. I guess this is my cue for me to tell you, if you live in those areas look for me at a bookstore near you and look for *Bird of a Different Feather* at fine bookstores everywhere.

## Chapter Thirteen

"Thank you all for coming out today. If anyone has any more questions, I will be sitting at this table for the next hour."

The scene is a New York City bookstore. A packed house listens to me babble about baloney. It's the fourth time I've done this routine. I sell myself and my book to the audience, read from my book, and then sit down and autograph two or three copies of my book. I don't agree with the format. I should get a band and scream my ideas like a rock 'n' roll star. I feel really boring and nervous just talking about myself to all these starstruck losers. Especially since I know they didn't come to listen to me anyway. I hear their coughs and yawns when I speak. They all came to catch a glimpse of Pablo Chiste. It's so pathetic of me that this is already mundane to me. A couple months ago the idea of me having any kind of publicity would have gotten me more excited than if I had smoked PCP.

Maybe I should hash out what's happened on the tour so far. Pablo Chiste and I have been spending an awful lot of time together. To be fair if I was travelling with anyone for this long we would have our squabbles. And it just so happens that Pablo is the person I am travelling with, but day by day he's aggravating me more and more with his attitude about my tour. He didn't join me on my tour to promote my work of art, instead he came along to steal the spotlight from me. Pablo's using this tour to portray himself to the public as a prophet. New talent speaks to him and him only and Pablo brings the talent to the attention of the people. At this interview we did the other day that was intended to publicize my book, the interviewer asked Pablo more questions than she asked me. When she did address me all her questions had to do with my relationship with Pablo. This tour was supposed to be my debutante ball.

After the interview, when we are flying in first-class seats from Boston to New York, I blatantly tell Pablo, "I don't want you coming to my book-signings anymore. Or to my interviews."

He is drinking a Bloody Mary. I remember the drink because his lips and tongue are bloody red when he says, "Jacob, how could you say such a thing? Here I am going out of my way to do you a favor..."

"Doing me a favor?"

"My presence draws a lot of attention away from you. This way you won't feel all the pressure that your next book must be as extraordinary as your first. One masterpiece is never enough for the people and the media. They always want more. You'd think after all the pleasure and enlightenment I'd given the world, the critics would lay off me. But they don't!"

I stop thinking and I just start talking. "You know, I'm getting real sick of your bullshit Pablo. Stay away from me, you're fired! I'm getting a new agent. I'll get someone who realizes my career is the top priority not theirs."

"Fired? You think you can fire me, Jacob? If it was not for me, you would still be in Miami Beach trying to get anyone of any importance to read your book. Because of me and my abilities to manipulate the media I have managed to get your godawful book to become a critics' darling. Always remember the man who can make you, can break you."

"I think you got it wrong Pablo. If it wasn't for my godawful book you'd still be in Key Biscayne swimming in the ocean, deluding yourself that you'll ever be able to write anything decent again."

Oh yeah, I also remember he is drinking a Bloody Mary because a red stain blossomed on my new suit after he threw his drink on me. Then he loosens his seat belt and starts wailing at me. For a skinny guy Pablo can punch pretty hard. Dodging his bony knuckles is tough work in the cramped space of an airplane. I have the window seat so I have to push Pablo in the aisle to get him away from me. His head slams into the overhead compartment. As he charges after me a stewardess demands that we return to our seats.

Pablo returns me to my seat alright and starts biting my wrist. I try pushing him away, but his jaw is locked tight. Finally a couple of kind arms restrain Pablo.

It's a pilot whose hat hides his face in shadows. "Do you gentlemen realize you're putting every passenger on this plane in grave danger! You could break..."

As the pilot loosens his grip on Pablo, Pablo throws a cheap punch right on my nose. The pilot grabs his ears. "That's it. You're coming into the cockpit where I can keep an eye on you."

"You can't do this to me. Do you know who I am?" Pablo said as he was being plowed into the cockpit. "I am Pablo Chiste."

"Never heard of you."

I sit back down and immediately regret what happened. I felt really guilty because I seem to be pushing everyone away from me. First Elena, Sergio, and Ana and now Pablo. As the plane descends I know what has to be done. I run into the cockpit. Pablo is on the ground handcuffed to a metal bar. The two pilots are still clicking switches on the dashboard.

My entrance caught their attention. "Excuse me, what are you going to do to him?" I ask pointing at Pablo.

A lanky, red haired pilot says, "I'm not sure. This is a new scenario for me. Eighteen years of piloting commercial flights and I've never once had to use these handcuffs before. We'll probably turn him over to airport security." He said it as though he was considering keeping Pablo as a political prisoner.

"Would you mind letting him free? I mean I'm the one he attacked and I'm not going to press any charges."

"He still violated a federal law by inciting..."

"Come on, you've got to let him go! It was my fault. I told him... I told him that I was sleeping with his daughter and he went crazy."

They look at Pablo sitting with his back hunched over his shoulders. His hair, normally neatly combed atop his bald spot, was pointing upward. The pilots imagine being in his situation where their daughter was with a guy like me. They pity Pablo enough and set him free. In gratitude I gave them each a free copy of *Bird of a Different Feather*.

Pablo and I journey on moving sidewalks to the baggage claim area in silence. Then Pablo erupts. "How could you say such things about me?"

"About Elena, I'm sorry..."

"I'm not talking about Elena. How can you say I'll never write again? I'll think of something. I always have and I always will. I've written eight novels, hundreds of short stories.... what have you done? Written one mediocre novel. Big deal. Bah." He walks away. He meant to show his importance by leaving me on my own to find my bags and hotel room. It isn't very hard. I tell the taxi driver where I want to go and he takes me there.

I have the night free so I spend it walking around the city. I hike down to Battery Park and see the Statue of Liberty. I eat pizza and do some thinking. I realize I don't want to be like Pablo Chiste. He has family, friends, people that care about him, but he doesn't want anything to do with them. All he cares about are these fake people he's created for stupid stories and this fake persona he's created for the media. It's a shallow life that became meaningless when he ran out of ideas for stories. I suddenly want to spend time with someone, anyone, only there was no one I could call.

Even though I grew up a bus ride from the city, I hadn't talked to anyone from New Jersey since I left home to go to college in Miami five years ago. I don't even talk to my parents anymore because all I get from them are complaints and nagging about how disappointed they are that I dropped out of college and wasn't doing anything with my life. I rudely told them they shouldn't talk to me anymore if they didn't have anything nice to say.

But last night I was scared and lonely enough to stick some coins in a pay phone and dial their number. A recording of my Dad's nasal voice answered, "You have reached Saul and Lorraine Fielding. We can not come to the phone..." I hung up and eventually wander into a theater showing pornographic films.

Somewhere in the middle of the double feature the theater's odor of lubrication, the freaks sitting next to me and my lonesomeness gave



my stomach a sick feeling. I exit while this naked woman with dangerously large breasts was whipping a midget. I walk really fast back to my room with the paranoia that some street toughs might try to attack me since I'm now rich.

All these anxieties don't help me get a good night's sleep. I feel so alone. By six in the morning I'm wide awake, giving me seven hours before I need to be at The Strand for my autograph session. Why not take a risk? I go downstairs and ask a taxi driver, who has a mustache instead of an upper lip, how much it would cost to take me home. Eighty dollars. I climb into the back seat and leave a city which hadn't yet awakened on this polluted Sunday morning.

The entire drive the cabbie tells me how Manhattan should secede from the US and become an independent Communist nation. As he rants I nod my head a lot and tell a stupid joke about how Karl was my favorite Marx Brother, but for most of his monologue I was trapped in Memory Lane. As we get closer to home the images were more vivid. I remember graduating high school and driving around town hitting mail boxes with a baseball bat and lying on my bed dreaming of being famous and Penelope Barg and before I knew it I was in my old neighborhood.

I direct the driver to a street and house which has not changed enough. I pay the Communist his money and walk on to the sidewalk. Here I am. My bedroom window on the second floor has its blinds shut so I can't peek in. I pick up the heavy Sunday newspaper sitting on the poorly manicured lawn. It is such a long walk from the cab to the front door. A year later I get there and knock rather meekly. When there was no response I knock louder.

I hear a distant, "Hello?" It is my mother. I then realize what a weird situation I put myself in. I had not talked to these people in over a year, maybe two, and here I am at their front door. The door opens.

"Oh my God, Jacob!" I give her a hug. She steps back and says, "How good of you to finally acknowledge our existence. Look at you, wearing a suit and tie and thank God you don't have that silly ponytail anymore."

"Yeah, I had to cut my hair to get a job at this health food store, so I shaved it all off. You look different too, Mom." She had dyed her graying hair to a brown, almost orange hue.

"This will be such a nice present for your father on Father's Day." I swear to God I didn't know today was Father's Day. I walked into our brown carpeted house. They got a bigger TV in the living room. The same black leather couch was still there.

"I'm not kidding Jacob with your short hair you look like Paul Newman before he had to get old."

"Thanks... I guess." What's this? A copy of *Bird of a Different Feather* was lying on the glass coffee table. "Mom, you bought my book?"

"Yes. I just finished it last week. I didn't know you were such a good writer."

"What are you talking about? You read my other books."

She looks away. "I didn't particularly care for your other books. You curse so much in them. And why did you have to write a story about Jesus? Are you ashamed of being Jewish?"

"What? No! The book wasn't about... I don't know where you get these ideas."

"Well, you wrote a story glorifying another religion. Why couldn't you have written a story about David or Moses?"

"Or Henry Kissinger." It is my Dad standing on the staircase in his underwear and a T-shirt. "Hello, Jacob."

"Hey Dad. Happy Father's Day."

"Your mother and I heard about your book signing on NPR. We were actually thinking of going." He plops down next to me on the couch. "You made it to the big time, huh Jake?"

I hate when he calls me Jake. "Yeah. I guess."

My Mom walks out of the living room and yells, "I'm going to make some pancakes. Are you still on that health kick Jacob, or can you eat my pancakes?"

I don't really reply. My Dad then starts telling me that since I'm making big time money I'm going to be paying big time taxes, so if I want him as an accountant, he'd be oh so happy. He stops talking for a second and sees through my eyes or my ears that my mind was

someplace else. I think for a second that he might admit he was wrong about me dropping out of college to write and apologize for not seeing what a special son of a gun I am. Instead he asks, "Is everything going OK for you?"

At that moment I wish I'm a little kid, so I could start crying and run to him or away from him and scream until everything was better. Until everything was the way I wanted it to be. Unfortunately I'm trapped in my 25 year old body and have to reply calmly, "Yeah... yeah... everything is great."

"Are you still with that Cuban girl?"

"Her name is Ana. No... she... we broke up."

"Oh." He strokes his salt-and-pepper beard hoping to find a new topic of conversation in there. "That's a hell of a book you wrote. Everyone else seems to think so too. Your mother went to a newsstand when your book came out and bought every magazine and newspaper which reviewed your book. Must have been fifty of them. Not a single one had a bad thing to say about your book," he says grinning.

"Really?" I'm surprised even though I too have copies at home of every review of my book.

"Yes. It's really something. I couldn't believe my son wrote a book that after reading it... forced me to reexamine my life. I'm really proud of you."

Proud of me? For what? Writing down a dream I had. Tough work. "Thanks Dad." The stench of pancakes grilling controls the room. I excuse myself to use the bathroom. I climb the steps and make a right instead of a left. to catch a sneak peek at my bedroom. The Led Zeppelin posters were down and where were my comics? There was flowered wallpaper and a neatly made bed. I guess it's been a few years since I lived in the room but couldn't they have left the room exactly as it was? As a shrine to the great Jacob Fielding, so in coming years tourists could pay a buck-fifty to enter my room and see what makes a great writer tick.

In the bathroom it completely hits me, the almighty Lord pushed my parents to redecorate my room so I could realize I've entered a new stage in my life. No longer can I be a dreamer, someone who thinks he is

different and will be able to rebel from society and maybe, just maybe, change it. I've got to be a doer. A person who works within society to make it a little bit of a better place.

Then I realize, fuck, I'm already neck deep in society. I'm living this society's ideal life by making lots of money doing something I love. I wouldn't mind it if I could substitute the lots of money for lots of happiness, but you can't. And you won't be happy just by being around people you love. I learned that the hard way by being back home for all of ten minutes and already being as miserable as I'd ever been in my life. Happiness must come from fulfillment, and the only way I will be fulfilled is by making the world a better place for dreamers and the only way I can do that is by becoming even more famous. Not just this subtle fame I now have in literary circles, but the kind of fame that when I voice an opinion on the nightly news, the people are persuaded to do whatever I say.

I run down the steps with a renewed sense of purpose. My Mom and Dad are sitting at the kitchen table oozing honey out of a bear on to their flapjacks.

"Come on Jacob, pull up a seat. There's fruit in the refrigerator if you don't want the pancakes," my Mom says.

"That's alright," I tell her. "Mom. Dad. It was great seeing you, but I really have to get back to the city."

"But you just got here."

"I know, but I have a really busy itinerary. I had to really pull some strings just to see you guys. So I love you and I'll call you soon."

"Don't be silly Jacob, we'll give you a ride to the city. Your father and I can occupy ourselves while you're busy and then we'll meet you at the book signing." Fuck, how was I going to get myself away from these people? I am going to go crazy if I have to spend any more time with them.

After a futile attempt of persuading my Mom to let me just take a taxi back to the city, we march to their car. To prevent them from nagging me further I tell them I need quiet so I can write while we commute. After an hour passes of doodling large-eyed cartoon characters, they deliver me to my hotel and I kiss them good-bye.

At the hotel I rehearse this incredibly inspiring speech. People everywhere will soon learn from me how fucked-up the world is. I am going to tell them how our whole lives are just games. Games that shouldn't be taken so seriously. If people will just drop their stupid pretensions than everyone could be so much happier.

I arrive at the crowded bookstore an hour early to get a feel for my audience. I am greeted by an older gentleman in a bow-tie and a young woman in a black mini-dress. They introduce themselves as representatives of the media conglomerate that published my book. I laughed because I envisioned them shitting their pants after hearing my revolutionary speech. Their first question after asking how I enjoyed New York and how the book tour was going was, "Where is Pablo Chiste?" Right as I'm about to tell them how I fired him and they need not worry because my writing doesn't need a washed-up egomaniac to promote it, who walks in but the Ernest Hemingway of our time.

Looking rested in a brown, cashmere suit Pablo shakes the bow-tied man's hand and kisses the woman on each of her fleshy cheeks. He charms the hell out of them until they feel the need to leave the two great writers alone.

"What are you doing here?" I ask Pablo angrily.

"What kind of a friend and agent would I be if I left you alone. I am too hotheaded. You are young and immature. You didn't mean what you said on the airplane." The hell I don't! But I have no desire to pick another fight with him. I don't have the desire to give my monumental, world-changing speech either. Instead I give another meaningless talk about myself and my book. I can tell people only stay because they hope that Pablo Chiste might do some talking. No, he keeps quiet and they have to approach him during my autograph session to receive his wise insights.

The lowest point is when a silly, older man tells Pablo, "Your book, *Silhouettes*, really changed my life. I used to be a devout Christian, but your book, it was like a letter written directly to me. It helped give me the strength to give up on God."

This is a sick fucking world we're living in when someone will give up on God because of an idiot like Pablo Chiste. If you're going to

give up on God wait until I tell you to do so. A skinny guy with hair dripping oil interrupts my loathful thoughts, "Excuse me, Mr. Fielding would you mind signing my book?"

See this is all I really need. Just a couple decent people to pat my back for a job well done. He hands me a just bought copy of *Bird of a Different Feather*. The cover shows a man flying in a v formation with a flock of birds. I press enough ink on the inside cover to sign *Enjoy, Jacob Fielding*. He thanks me and then hands the book to Pablo Chiste. "Excuse me, Mr. Chiste could you sign this book. I'm such a fan of your writing. I went to another of your signings and got all your books signed, so I hope you don't mind autographing this."

"It will be my pleasure." Watching Pablo sign my book is as painful as helplessly watching someone rape your Mom.

I always wanted to be famous. Maybe this is the price I have to pay for making it big so easily. I'll always be known as Pablo Chiste's protégé who wrote one great book which he didn't really write.

## Chapter Fourteen

My book tour ends on a strong, positive note. I punched Pablo Chiste in the face and he bit off his tongue.

No, I do a good job of controlling my hostility and jealousy. As a reward for keeping my cool God sends me a special visitor at a Los Angeles bookstore. Edgar Enzo Jr., the acclaimed film director, is sitting in the audience. Like every other prominent person in the world he seems to know Pablo Chiste intimately. So as I'm sitting behind this long, wooden table he greets Pablo with a lukewarm embrace. At first I didn't recognize Edgar Enzo Jr. because he's much shorter than he appears in interviews and his skin is much paler, but that could be because he's all dressed in black. I'm not really listening to what they are saying because some lady is telling me how great it is that my generation finally found its voice.

After the lady's compliment Pablo introduces me to Edgar.

"Edgar, this is Jacob Fielding."

A handshake so soft you could spread it on bread. "I'm such a big fan of your book," he says.

"Your flicks aren't half-bad."

"Half-bad? Do you know who you are talking to?" Pablo sneers at me.

"I'm just kidding Pablo. I'm a big fan of some of his movies.

*Indecent Espionage* was awesome. As a kid I'd always really wanted to see Cheryline Black's tits."

"Jacob! This is a friend of mine."

"No, that's OK, Pablo. Jacob just explained the reason why I made that movie. The script was goddamn horrendous, but when I heard Cheryline Black was cast for the role of Missy I knew I had to make that movie just to capture her body on film in as many erotic poses as possible. I was doing a lot of drugs then so my pretentiousness was lower."

Pablo and I laugh uncomfortably. Edgar points at the back of the store. "I'll be sitting in the comic book section until you guys are done."

"Until we're done? You're going out with him later Pablo?"

Edgar responds before Pablo had a chance. "Actually Jacob I was hoping you would come too. I want to pick your brain a little."

"Sure. Why not," I tell him.

So I'm expecting a power lunch at a chic Beverly Hills restaurant, but instead he drives his BMW through a McDonald's drive-in.

I decided to order nothing and to let my stomach grumble really loudly as they eat on a green picnic table in Griffith Park under the shade of a tree. In the background a happy kid climbs up the playground's slide. In the foreground Edgar Enzo Jr., halfway through his sandwich, remarks, "I don't care what you say, nothing beats eating a Big Mac in a beautiful park on a day like today." Neither I nor Pablo, who ate just one of his half dozen Shrimp McNuggets, are honest enough to tell Edgar he's got no taste.

Then Edgar starts his pitch. I try looking into his eyes as he talks, but his bushy eyebrows are so much more interesting. "I'm going to tell you something Jacob, which you have probably already heard over a thousand times. Your book is amazing. It's a phenomenal piece of literature. Now I'm going to tell you something you probably have not heard yet. I want to make a major motion picture out of your book." He paused for emphasis. "What do you think?"

"Sounds great." Edgar breaks into a smile which then cracks when I add, "but I want to star in it."

"No no. That's not possible I don't see you as that character."

"What are you talking about? The narrator is me. And if you want to play that way then I don't see you as the director of the movie." I can be really obnoxious when I'm hungry.

"Jacob, there is no way you can star in it. There is only one human actor in the entire movie. No studio will bankroll a flick whose only actor is an unknown."

Pablo chimes in, "Come on, Jacob be reasonable. You will get a lot of money from this which will free you to write some more literature. Don't be such a primadonna."

It's so easy to argue when you're hungry. "Me a primadonna? You're the one who has stolen all the attention you possibly could away from me. I'm sorry Edgar for having to whine like a bitch in front of you,



but for the past two weeks Pablo has done anything he can to make it seem like he had more to do with writing the book than I did. I mean this is my chance to tell the world things I want it to know and you've done everything you could to mess it up."

Pablo talks toward my chin. "If what you're saying is true, Jacob, I must apologize. I had no clue..."

"What are you talking about? We got in a fistfight on an airplane over this. Are you the devil or something? You tempt me with my deepest desire and then you keep me away from it like it's a... like it's ... I don't know... You're a good writer, Pablo come up with your own metaphor."

I didn't know what kind of a reaction I would get, but I sure didn't expect what next came out of Edgar's mouth. "You know Jacob if you could perform like that in front of a camera, you would be perfect for a film I'm shooting before *Bird of a Different Feather*."

"Really?" Good news like that eases hunger as much as food would.

"Sure. It's a pretty silly movie. It's a sequel to *Underwater*."

"But everyone died at the end of the first one."

"Everyone but Crystal Shane's character. See, in the first movie she left this necklace at the bottom of the sea. This isn't a dime store necklace though, this necklace was a present from her father who she has never met. She will do anything to get it back including pretending to be in love with an underwater archaeologist who is planning a dive at the site where she left the necklace. Eventually they go to the bottom of the sea and not only find the necklace, but also find the lost continent of Atlantis, whose king is Crystal Shane's father."

"Sounds awfully cheesy," I tell him.

"It is, but it will be a good time. The studio should make a lot of money off of this which will give me more freedom to make *Bird of a Different Feather* the way it should be made. So do you feel up to portraying a hot-headed underwater archaeologist?"

"If I have any love scenes with Crystal Shane then I'm in." Edgar laughs and then runs to his car.

Pablo disrupts the silence. "Jacob, if you don't want to see me again... I understand quite well. My behavior during the tour has been inexcusable. I consider myself to be more than your agent, I consider myself your friend. As your friend I should never have used your talents just for the benefit of my ego."

I'm too forgiving. "Forget about it Pablo." Immediately after saying that a thick stack of papers are placed in front of me. The page on top reads, "*Underwater 2: The Reunion.*" A paper cup is also placed in front of me.

"Gentlemen," Edgar says, "This calls for a celebration. Do you remember that weekend in Sicily, Pablo?"

Pablo smiles as though he has just traveled through time. "Parts of it I do. Other parts are best forgotten."

"Well I just happen to have some very similar tasting Grapa to what we drank that weekend." Edgar grabs my cup and pours a very fermented smelling, clear liquid into my cup. He called for a toast by lifting up his cup. "Here's to my good luck in getting to work with the two greatest writers of my time." He swallows as do Pablo as do I. The potion burns my throat and taste buds, but tickles my empty stomach. There is a pleasant, sweet aftertaste leaving me wanting more. Somehow Edgar senses this and refills my cup.

Before I drink again I ask Edgar, "When did you and Pablo work together?"

Pablo wears the face of a guilty man as Edgar answers, "We're working together right now. You didn't realize Pablo wrote the script for *Underwater 2*?"

I drink my second cup which is instantly refilled. I stick the cup in the air and make a toast, "Here's to the three of us working together to make the biggest piece of shit movie the world has ever seen."

The comment is meant to be a spiteful insult but Pablo keeps his cool. "Hear hear," he says as he bangs his cup into mine. "May our collaboration bring forth the most corrupt work of art ever conceived." We all take another sip.

Let me tell you it is weird day drinking with old men. When they are drunk they are as immature as college frat boys, but they are joking

about times from before I was born. It makes me want to go back to Miami and celebrate with some people my own age. Someone who would... alright, alright, not just someone. Ana is the person I want to celebrate with, but I discover that is not an option when I return to Miami.

I get home and my apartment is empty. I realize it's because I'm not materialistic. I might be shallow, but no one could ever call me materialistic.

I'm just not into owning things. The only tangible thing I buy with my hard earned money is food. Just about everything in the apartment was Ana's and all of it is gone. The stereo, the posters on the wall, the telephone... I was just glad our apartment came furnished or else I would have had to sleep on the floor. The pillows were hers, so I rested my head on a folded towel.

It's rough being alone in a space you're used to sharing. I should probably move out of this dump. Too many cockroaches and too many memories of my life with Ana. Too bad *Underwater II: The Reunion* is being filmed in South Florida or else I would have a real excuse to move out.

I know it's nuts, but I've got to keep reminding myself how excited I should be that I'm going to be a movie star. Something in me won't let it feel real. None of it feels real. I can't really have accomplished something, could I? It's too easy. I feel like I must be a character in a book someone is writing.

But if that was the case my life would have much more meaning than it does. I wouldn't just be some fuck-up who had a great dream, wrote it down, and became successful. I would be a fuck-up who was injected with a superstoryteller serum by some mad scientist who was recording my life as part of an experiment. I would discover this from the scientist's beautiful lab assistant. We would have wild sex and then spend the rest of the book tracking down the scientist.

In the climax I'd confront the scientist and ask him who made him God to mess around with my life like that. I'd probably wind up killing him and wandering into the sunset with the beautiful lab assistant by my side, but with my luck, she probably would have been killed.

I shouldn't be so depressed. I should go out tonight, drink a few beers, and buy some new friends, but I'm a brooder by nature, I guess. I'll stay home and write.

## Chapter Fifteen

"Wonderful news, Jacob! I have some wonderful news." Pablo called me to his house on Key Biscayne, this afternoon. I got here in a flash. I step into his living room and make myself comfortable on his leather couch. "I just made an agreement with your publisher to have your first two novels published. They think since you're going to be a movie star that any property with your name on it could become very profitable."

"Don't you have some other news for him, Papi?" Elena asks from behind me. I turn around. She's wearing that tight t-shirt with Big Bird on it, she wore it that day we went to the beach at Hallandale.

"Hey, Elena. Long time no see."

She bends down and kisses my cheek like she always did. "Hi Jacob. How are you?"

Before I can answer Pablo says, "I too am having a new book published."

"I thought you were suffering from a severe case of laziness?"

"I got better Jacob. You are not the only one who can whip out a story in no time. My next great work will be published along with your trash this November."

"Well that's great Pablo. What's the book about?"

"Come on Jacob, you know I don't enjoy giving short little synopsis of my writing. It cheapens my work. I'll give you a copy later and you can give me a synopsis."

My stomach hurts. "Yeah, I can't wait, but first let's eat. Do you guys want to go out and get something?"

Pablo answers first, "I have some work to take care of. I was hoping we could go over your schedule so we could arrange for another tour this winter."

"Shit Pablo, my bruises are still hurting from the last one. How about I eat first and we can talk later. Um... you want to come Elena?"

She thinks it over and then nods. She sticks her feet in some soft looking shoes and we walk out the door. I unlock the sleek car I bought last week. She sits shotgun while I sit behind the steering wheel.

"So, how are you?" she asks as I reverse out of the driveway.

"Pretty good. I'm sure you've heard I'm going to be in a movie. The shoot starts in two weeks." The car's a convertible, so her long hair is flying all over the place. "Do you like Indian food? There is a place with an all-you-can-eat lunch buffet."

"I heard you broke up with your girlfriend."

"Yeah, she got fed up with me." I fiddle with the radio. It's a good drive to the restaurant. I don't want to talk about Ana for the whole ride. "I'm really shocked that your father wrote a whole novel."

"He didn't."

"He's publishing an old manuscript he had lying around?" She shakes her head and I remember who we are talking about. "He didn't write the book, did he? He fucking tried the same shit with me. Told me he would publish my book under his name. God, I wonder how many of his books he actually wrote." I notice Elena is not paying attention to me. "I'm sorry Elena I shouldn't talk like that about your father in front of you." She still won't look at me. The skyline of Downtown Miami isn't why she's looking away, it's because "You wrote the book? Wow! Why didn't you tell me you were writing a novel?"

She sniffles the sticky air. "You were the one who didn't want to talk anymore."

Fuck, why does everyone have to have feelings. "I thought we both agreed to end it."

"I didn't agree to anything. You told me you were sick of feeling dirty and didn't want to see me anymore."

I search the street for a parking space. A blinking meter stands alone. I direct my car towards it, so it won't be so lonely. "Fuck, Elena I'm too hungry to talk about this now. It's too complicated. Can we...let's talk about something happy. Let's talk about your book. When did you write your book?"

"I don't go to school, remember? I've been writing all day, every day for the past year."

I stick some dimes in the parking meter. "Your father is running a sweatshop for writers."

"Why do you always talk like you're better than my father? You two are the same."

We enter the dark, air conditioned restaurant. Traditional Indian music of sitars and screaming women is playing. A bespectacled Indian man greets us. "How many?"

I flash him the peace sign. He asks, "Smoking or non-smoking?"

"Non-smoking," I say. He directs us to a table. "Can I go up to the buffet right away?"

"Please do."

It's a pleasure to avoid conflict for a couple seconds. I pile my plate high with rice, vegetable curry, and greasy spinach. I return to the table to feast. Elena is sitting there with an empty plate. "Aren't you going to eat?"

"I'm not hungry." She says as she stares at the spinach goop on my plate.

I shovel vegetables down my throat and journey to a seventieth heaven. It's a little bit spicy, but I got a cup of water by my side. "Why didn't you tell me you don't like Indian food?"

"I didn't come to eat." She says in her Spanish accent. "What do you think of me?"

"I think you're stupid to let your father take advantage of you, but other than that I think you are amazing. If everything wasn't so complicated, I would kill to be with you."

"You keep on calling everything complicated."

"It is complicated. You're seventeen years old..."

"Eighteen."

"Well happy birthday then. But you're still really young, I'm friends with your father, and I was with someone else when we started our relationship."

"Why didn't that stop you before?"

"Because you're so sexy and interesting and until today you treated me a lot better than Ana did. Why are you so upset now? You didn't seem bothered at all when I told you I couldn't be with you anymore."

"I didn't know how to react. I still don't."

I continue eating. "Well, I'm sorry. You're so sophisticated. I thought... I don't know what I thought."

"You're only the second. How many women have you..."

"I've only got you beat by one." I say as I shovel the last morsels of rice on my plate. "Who was the other guy?"

"My uncle." She starts laughing before she finishes the sentence. I hope the laugh means she's joking, but I'm not entirely sure and I laugh too. All of a sudden I want nothing more than to get her naked. Why couldn't I have met her sometime else, somewhere else?

I run up for seconds. After gathering more rice, bread, and vegetables I weave through the tables back to my seat. Then I respond aloud to my internal dialogue. "Maybe it was because you fell for me when I was already successful, and Ana stayed with me through all of my failures...."

"Why do you look for reasons for us not to be together?"

"It just doesn't seem right. I don't... I mean... I want to fuck you so bad and that's not fair for you because that's all I want from you. You're too awesome a person to have that kind of a relationship with someone."

She scoops rice from my plate into her mouth. "You're an asshole."

"You're right." I tell her "Your father and I don't deserve someone like you in our lives."

"You won't feel that way when you read my... my father's new book. The character I based on you... but you'll never think he's anything like you."

"What's he like?"

"Oh, he's such a jerk. All he cares about is what other people think about him. He's a comedian. When an audience doesn't laugh at his jokes he takes it personally. He turns crazy. He starts carrying guns and one night on the road the crowd boos him and he just shoots them all."

"You think that's going to happen to me?" I say smiling.

"Yes. My father is crazy. You should have seen him after he read my book. It was so... wrong. I had to let him have my book. I think it



stopped him from killing himself for at least a little while. You have to promise me, you won't tell him that you know."

I want her so bad. "Do you want to just have a completely physical relationship. We could just fuck and..."

"You lost your chance."

With that response I return to the buffet table for thirds.

## Chapter Sixteen

"So what you're saying is that *Bird of a Different Feather* is your worst work?" says the slender brunette with the winding tape recorder on the table.

"Yeah." I nod as I eat my second slice of pie. I ordered the exotic sounding boysenberry this time. "I didn't put that much thought into it. My next two books which are coming out in November. Those are masterpieces."

"But how can you so casually dismiss *Bird of a Different Feather*? It's the most acclaimed book by a new author since..."

"It's like comparing a meal that took a world-class chef hours to prepare with a microwave dinner. The meal with more effort put into it is going to taste better." I chomp my last piece of crust and look at her watch. "I've got to go. I'm due back at the film shoot in a half hour."

"Well thanks for talking to me Mr. Fielding."

"Hey, it was my pleasure." I tell her as she returns the tape recorder to her purse. "Make sure to send me a copy of the article when you finish it."

"Actually, before you leave do you mind if I ask you a personal question?" Before I have a chance to answer she asks, "Are you involved romantically with anyone?"

She's kind of cute in an intellectual waif librarian way and I'm on a hot streak with the ladies so I ask, "Why? Do you want to get together later tonight?"

"No." she says as she sticks her wedding band in my face. "I was asking in reference to the rumor that you and Pablo Chiste are lovers."

I have to laugh, "I don't know how you found that out, but you're right on the money."

I walk out of the diner letting her pay the bill. A toothpick in my mouth and my nose feels the humidity in the air dropping. Finished another interview. I'm definitely improving. Just takes a bit of practice and know-how. Now whenever I think of anything remotely clever I keep it in the back of my head. Then when the next interviewer asks me anything that allows me to enter that tidbit into the conversation, I take

advantage. Although that Pablo Chiste rumor did knock me on my ass. Must be some publicity stunt that Pablo conjured.

From all the interview requests I'm getting, I guess I'm making it kind of big. Or maybe it's because there are so many magazines and only so many celebrities to write about? I'm not really a celebrity yet because people in the street still don't stop me for an autograph or for split pea soup recipes, but since I'm going to be in a big movie that's all going to change.

The film shoot is going really well. I have a lot of time so I've been writing a lot. One of my costars, an old pro, told me, "They don't pay film actors to act. That we do for free. They pay us to wait."

Whatever they are paying me for I'm still getting rich so it's all good. I'm going to be even richer when my two previous novels are published. The publishers wanted me to rewrite much of the books. I told them to fuck off, because what they wanted me to do would have destroyed the tone of the books. I try to write my stories like they were pop songs. You know, make them short, sweet, and chockfull of energy. What they wanted... well to be honest I don't remember what they wanted me to change, but those two books are masterpieces and any changes would have been for the worse. Pablo argued on my behalf and we won. Partly because he convinced them it would show the world how much I'd grown as a writer and partly because they want the books in bookstores before *Underwater II: The Reunion* comes out.

The movie is so much fun. I really get into my character, Richard Barnes, the young marine biologist. I grew a close-trimmed beard and earned a scuba diving license for the role. My lines are pretty hokey, and I give Pablo Chiste a hard time for writing them, but I try to give it as much emotion as I possibly can. I usually say my lines in an over the top way. I emulate Charlton Heston in *Planet of the Apes*. He's my hero.

Sorry I'm so giddy. Last night... well let me start with what happened yesterday. I was shooting one of my scenes with Crystal Shane, the lead actress in the movie. In this scene I'm teaching her how to dive. So we're shooting on a boat, a couple hundred meters away from shore. The two of us had some scenes together and we've rehearsed our

lines a few times, but we'd never really talked. She's a big movie star and a real looker so she pretty much kept to herself.

I mean I knew she looked great in the movies, but I figured camera angles, lighting and make-up had everything to do with that. No, she's out of sight in reality. Her high cheek bones are sculpted just right to showcase her neon blue eyes and that long, almost white hair could be sold as a wig. So it can be intimidating to start a conversation with a girl like that.

But yesterday we're shooting in the middle of the ocean. The crew was preparing the equipment for the day's final shots. The sun was setting and if you've ever been in South Florida at that time of day you know how magical it can be. The air is pink, the water a deep blue, and nothing seems real.

Crystal was sitting in her skin-tight wet suit staring at the waves shaking our boat. I told myself the only way I could really get into my character was to be comfortable talking to that character's girlfriend. I decided to talk to her exactly as Richard Barnes would.

"The ocean is beautiful, isn't it?"

Biting her lip she nodded. "I love the water."

"Do you swim a lot?" I asked. I couldn't think of anything else to say and I wanted the conversation to continue.

"I used to. I was on my high school swim team for a few months. You're going to think I'm weird when I tell you this, but during one practice I heard screaming. I stuck my head out of the water to see who was screaming. No one was, so I kept swimming. A couple strokes later the screaming came back. It was so loud. I kept swimming a little longer. I thought maybe the screams would push me to be an Olympic swimmer. You know, during races they might motivate me to swim faster just so I could get out of the water and get a kind of peace of mind. But the screams were so horrible. I went to practice the next few days and as soon as I started swimming the screams started again. I had to quit. I told the coach I was getting migraines. I didn't want people to think I was a schizo."

"Hey, my Dad's schizophrenic." I'm not sure if she is playing her character or pouring her real heart out to me.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"No, I'm just joking. I'm sorry. It was a bad joke." I say embarrassed. "So you haven't gone swimming since?"

"No, I'll jump in a pool. I just won't swim laps or snorkel."

"Well you picked a great movie to star in." She doesn't laugh at any of my jokes. "You should try swimming again. See if you still hear the voices."

"They are not voices. They're screams," she said agitated.

"Nothing wrong with voices. That's how I wrote my book. I just wrote down what a voice in my head told me."

"You wrote a book?"

"Yeah. That's why I'm in this movie. Before this my previous acting experience consisted of playing Mercutio in the Short Hills High School presentation of Romeo and Juliet. Edgar wanted to make a movie out of my book so badly..."

"Hey do I hear my name being thrown around?" The director, Edgar Enzo Jr., puts his arm around my shoulder. "Sorry it took so long kids. We needed to make sure this shot looked just right. Are you guys ready?" We were born ready, so they shoot a couple takes of me asking Crystal if she is sure she wants to go back in the water after the traumatic events that took place after the first *Underwater* movie. They then motor the boat back to the docks.

As we walk ashore Crystal taps my shoulder. "Jacob, if you don't mind, I'd like you to bring a copy of your book tomorrow."

Crystal Shane restarted the conversation with me! My self-esteem was growing by leaps and bounds. "Hey Crystal, if you're not busy..."

"Please don't call me Crystal. It's Christina. My stupid agent came up with Crystal and it stuck."

"Well, Christina, I just thought if you're not busy, maybe I could drop by your house, or you could drop by mine and you could start reading it tonight."

"It's that good? I should drop everything and start reading it right this minute."

"It will blow your mind." She believes me and follows me in her car. At this point I start feeling disgusted with myself. I have complete faith that once she reads my book that she won't be able to resist me. I feel like one of those schmucks who drives around in an expensive car so he could get laid easier. I really hate the idea of using my writings to get people to like me. It should be the other way around, people should want to read my books because they're fascinated by me as a person. Then they could be even more amazed by me because I write such beautiful stories.

As we get to my apartment, I have half a mind to give Crystal one of my earlier novels, but I want to make sure I impress her so I hand her *Bird of A Different Feather*. She sits down in one of the plastic, inflatable chairs I had just bought. They are uncomfortable and squeak awfully loud when you fidget, but they're neon purple so I had to buy them. I ask Crystal if she wants anything to drink.

"Wine," she says as she opens my book.

"I'll be right back," I tell her. I run the two blocks to the closest liquor store, buy a twenty dollar bottle of wine and a pack of condoms at the convenience store next door, and hustle back to my apartment. The entire time Crystal is deeply engrossed in my book. I go to the kitchen to pour her wine. My most sophisticated glass had the Miami Dolphins logo on it so I wash it out only to discover I have no cork screw. I take a knife out of the sink, dig a hole in the cork, and pry it away from the bottle. Some crumbs of cork fell into the wine, so I have to pour it through a spaghetti strainer. Feeling like a first-class dork I hand Crystal her glass. "It's from Italy," I tell her.

She grabs the glass without looking away from the book. I turn my stereo on to play some cocktail lounge jazz. Crystal doesn't comment on the music. She continues sipping and staring at my book. I get sick of being ignored. As I refill her glass with a large helping of wine I interrupt her, "What do you think?"

"I never read anything like this. All these feelings the narrator talks about are exactly what I feel. It's like you got in my head and translated all my thoughts into English." She takes in a slow sip of wine.

"I don't want to stop reading it. I've got to talk to Edgar to see if I can play the part of Ana in the movie."

"Ana's a bird though."

"So they can stick paper mache wings and a beak on me."

"Well let me hear you read some of Ana's lines," I say amused.

She sticks her head down and slowly raises it. "Why do you try to pretend you are not a bird?" She massages my shoulder blades with overblown, theatrical movements. "I will never understand you. You are always pretending to be something that you're not."

Her hands are still touching my back so when I said the next line my voice cracked. "But Ana this is the first time in my life that I'm not pretending. No matter what it might look like, no matter how many feathers I have, I'm a human being."

Reading from the book she approaches me and says, "If you were a human being you wouldn't enjoy this." She kisses me. According to the book I should back away because my character thinks it's disgusting to kiss a bird. But this isn't a bird I'm kissing, this is Crystal Shane. So, I keep my tongue in her mouth and sip the wine off her teeth.

It all happens so quickly that before I know what is what we are both naked and a used condom is in the wastebasket. I'm combing her hair with my fingers when I get stupid. "Did you... uh... just...uh.... make love to me because of my book?"

With a jerk she inches away her body. "What kind of a question is that? How would you like it if I asked if you just fucked me because I'm a movie star?"

I would have said no. I just slept with her because she's a beautiful movie star. But the weird thing is that while I'm banging the woman who played Bimbina, Princess of the Matriarchs, the whole time I was imagining she was Ana. I didn't tell Crystal any of that. Instead, I tell her, "I just feel like Arthur Miller."

"Who?"

"You know, the writer of *Death of a Salesman*. A real ugly guy, but a great writer. So great a writer that Marilyn Monroe married him. I don't know if it was because she fell in love with his writing or because she wanted a more intellectual image..."

Crystal jumps off the bed. Pulling underwear past her thighs she says, "So I'm the dumb blonde looking to improve her image. Don't you tell me it's better for you to want to get with a girl because of the way she looks then it is for me to want to be with a guy because of the way he thinks." She buttons her shirt and slides on some tight, black slacks. "You jerk," she says as she leaves my apartment, but not before picking up my book.

I feel a little guilty. To forget my guilt I wander out of bed and flip through the television stations. A karate movie is on. The kind where the actor's mouths don't correspond with their words. Towards the end of the movie my eyelids start sinking until the phone rang.

"Hello."

"Jacob, it's Christina."

"Hey, you made it home alright. I want to apologize..."

"No. I should apologize. I can get really defensive." A brief pause. "When I got home I started reading your book again and I just finished it."

"And you liked it so much that you're willing to ignore the fact that I'm an asshole?"

"I don't know about that," she says laughing. "I just wanted to tell you that I really admired it. It must be nice to be really good at something."

"Hey Crystal... Christina... you're a very successful actress."

"But it's just because of the way I look."

"You're so obsessed with how you look. I know why. It's because beautiful women are considered freaks in our society. On the street people will stare at a beauty exactly the same way they would look at a three-legged troll. They will have a different look on their face, but they will still stare for a beat too long then they'll make sure to look away, but not before taking one last peek. Strip clubs are the freakshows of today. People pay the same amount to look at beauty queens as they would once upon a time at bearded ladies."

She laughs. Nothing makes me feel better than getting a pretty girl to laugh even if I don't get to see her laughing. Maybe that's what life is all about, getting people to laugh. Not just the pretty girls. The ugly



girls and the orphans too. But I got the prettiest of all the pretty girls laughing. I soon hung up the phone to stay on a high note so she would be excited to see me when we shoot our scenes later today.

So I'm driving to the shoot. I'm not needed for another couple hours, but I've got nothing else to do. I leave my car in a parking lot of pebbles. I walk to Crystal's trailer and knock on the door. There's no answer. I turn around and who do I see walking, but my friend and yours, Pablo Chiste.

"Pablo." I yell and he does a doubletake. "What are you doing here?" I run up to him.

"Hello Jacob," he says, "I just wanted to see what Edgar was doing to my script."

"I heard you've been around here quite a bit."

"Well, yes. I've been thinking about making a movie. A movie of my next book."

"Really? Walk with me to the catering truck. I want something to eat." We change our direction. "You really want to be a filmmaker?"

"Yes. I think I am making a transition. This might be my last novel and at the same time my first film. I have written enough stories for the world. It's time I use a new medium to express myself."

I decide to have a little fun with him. "I don't know how comfortable you will be making movies. You know it's not like writing where you and only you write the book. When you make movies you have to collaborate with actors, editors, and all these other people. It will be very tough since you're not used to working with other people."

"I work very well with people, thank you."

"But Pablo, I'm just warning you it's not like writing. When you write a book you can't depend on other people to write for you but..."

"Jacob..." He says with a gruff, "I must go." He walks away without daring to look at me. I order a complimentary veggie burger and laugh aloud at the high and mighty Pablo Chiste.

## Chapter Seventeen

Edgar has some nerve. I'm on set writing my new book. My brain is really moving. I am inside the head of the protagonist of my book. The book, in case you forgot, is about Jimmy Scabini, the nut who slaughtered my friend's family at Disney World. I'm writing about this psychotic episode where he's watching *Pete's Dragon* on television.

Something about that singing dragon sets off every sick, frustrated emotion he's ever had. He turns off the TV but Jimmy's neck won't stop twitching, so Jimmy thrusts his fist through the screen leaving shards of glass inside his knuckles. The self-inflicted wound forces Jimmy to miss a day's work which gets him fired from the factory. But I didn't get to write all that down because Edgar demanded I get in my position.

"One minute," I say.

"We don't have one minute Jacob. We're running behind schedule as it is."

"Crystal gets her one minute. Why won't you just let me finish writing down my thoughts."

My pen draws a line down the page as Edgar steals my sketchbook.

"Crystal gets her one minute because she is a movie star. You, buddy boy, only got your job because of my kind heart. So get in your place or we'll get a body double to replace you for the rest of the film." I stand up straight and stare six inches down into his brown eyes. "You do that and you're not going to be the director of *Bird of a Different Feather*."

"It's too late to be making those kinds of threats. You already signed the movie rights for that property over to me."

It seems like he has me, but then I remember who is pudding in my hands. "Edgar, you better start treating me with some respect or..."

"Or what Mr. No Name?"

"Or you might have some problems finishing this movie." I immediately get in my position, so he can think my ultimatum is an empty threat. He films the laboratory scene where I look over all these

artifacts. My only line in the scene is when I say, "Fuck a duck!" when I notice the 2,000 year old ring I found underwater had the same insignia as Crystal's necklace. It should only take twenty minutes to film the scene. But Edgar has nothing else to do so all the retakes take up three hours of my time for a thirty second scene.

At the end of time I race to find Crystal. She isn't in her trailer so I call her hotel room. She answers the phone, and I immediately tell her what a jerk Edgar is, not just to me, but to all the actors.

"What can I do about it?" she asks innocently.

"Are you kidding? You can tell Edgar to back off or else you'll see that he's fired."

"I can't do that."

"Sure you can. People aren't going to pay to see this movie for Edgar Enzo Jr's direction. They're paying to see you in a tight wet suit." I immediately know that's the wrong thing to say if I want her on my side. "Christina, if you back me up next time. I'll make sure you get the part of Donna when they make a movie of my book, *Propositions*."

"Donna? I don't want to play Donna. I didn't like that book that much. I want to play Ana in *Bird of a Different Feather*."

"But she's going to be... fine, fine, fine. If you back me up I'll do everything in my power so that you can play Ana. Now that we got this resolved, what are you doing tonight? Want to go with me to get a bite to eat?"

"Sounds fantastic. Pick me up at my hotel at 9:00."

I drive over there without much preparation. I feel like a little boy when I pick her up in blue jeans and a nine dollar shirt while she wears a black cocktail dress that constrict her to taking short strides.

"Where would you like to eat?" I ask as she enters the car.

"How about Fico e Cazza?"

A short drive later brought us to her restaurant of choice. It's one of those trendy super expensive bistros with lousy modern art framed on all the walls. You know the kind of place where the clientele consists of greedy, balding, Viagra dependent men taking out sleazy, busty women.

I thought a place that charges seven dollars for a basket of bread could afford waiters that spoke English, but that wasn't the case here.

Here was the epitome of trendiness and materialism and I never felt so at home.

Crystal twirls her pasta with her fork and tells me how she is a front runner to play Wonder Woman in the new motion picture.

I tell her, "An actress of your talent. You should be able to get any role for a young woman that is available."

She blushes and I continue, "I'm not bullshitting you. I see you on the set and every scene you do I can't keep my eyes off you. You make this one-dimensional character so captivating. Without you this picture would completely stink and Edgar knows it."

"Thanks.' She's used to flattery, but not the appetizer that I feed her. "Maybe you could write a script with a character for me? Maybe you could play the lead. Something with a bit more depth than all the junk that my agent always gives me. I try to do the best with what I get, but it's hard to act with any honesty in all these big-budget special effects movies."

My tongue tries dislodging the spinach I feel between my back teeth. "Well I'm working on a book now, but maybe afterwards, I could write a movie about... women."

"What are you writing now?"

"Oh. It's going to be a masterpiece. It's a fictional biography about a man who's got a shitty life. His whole life he watched Disney movies and always set his standards by the happy lives that those cartoon characters lived. Finally he goes completely nuts and he decides to go to Disney World and shoot Mickey Mouse for setting these impossible standards."

"Sounds fascinating."

That's enough. I understand why I'm so full of shit. I'm using her to help me piss off Edgar. I can't understand what she has to gain by being phony. "Why did you have to use that word?"

"What?"

"Fascinating. That's such a bullshit word. I haven't even described the interesting parts of my book yet and you're throwing out words like fascinating." She doesn't know what to make of this. She probably hasn't been criticized to her face in years. "I already know

you're a great actress, so you don't have to pretend that you think I've got good ideas. If you don't like it you should just tell me."

"I thought it would make a good story that's all. I didn't think being fascinated was an insult."

"Well just be honest with me that's all."

At that point of the meal I know I have her. Right now she will go directly to hell for me without stopping to drink at a water fountain.

We don't talk too much after that. The bill is a hundred and eighty bucks and I still can't believe I can afford it. After the light meal we hike towards the car.

Who do I notice limping in front of me, but my old buddy Sergio? "Hey Sergio, what's up?" I tap his slender shoulder.

"Jacob! How are you doing?" He says softly. His eyes are glazed with red. "This is Jennifer. Jennifer this is Jacob Fielding." She is a cute little redhead, but she couldn't star in the movies. I introduce them to my date who can. Everyone shakes everyone's hand. Then Jennifer points her finger at me. "You're his friend who wrote that book about the bird world, right?"

"Guilty as charged."

"That was really good. Are you working on anything new?"

"My first two books which I couldn't get published before, are coming out this fall."

"Why don't you tell her about that other book you're writing?" Crystal chimes in. Before I know it she has sculpted a comedy scene. "The one you were telling me about where that guy hates Mickey Mouse and ends up shooting everyone in Disney World."

Sergio wishes he can vomit on me. "Yeah... um... that's what I'm working on." I want to slide into the gutter away from this awkwardness. "Well, it was nice meeting you Jennifer. Crystal and I have to get up early, so...uh... we'll keep in touch Sergio."

I want to get away from everyone, but Crystal invites herself over to my place. A couple hours later I'm talking to her in the darkness. She insists on all the lights being off when she's naked. "I'm sorry I yelled at you at dinner."

"You sounded like a madman." She's really too nice to me. It hurts to use her as a status symbol.

"I've just been tense. Yeah... rub my back just like that. I'm not used to people treating me the way Edgar does."

Her knuckles untie my knotty back. "You should come out to California with me after the shoot is over. I'm renting a beautiful house out in the hills. You could relax, sit out there, look at the view, and write all kinds of stories and plays and..."

So that's her agenda. She associates with me so I can write her an Oscar winning role. I rest my hand over her mouth and decide to use her as a tool too. She's my sexual fantasy fulfillment tool. As we get into it I start imagining her as Edgar Enzo Jr.'s true love. It makes the feeling doubly satisfying.

I can't wait to get my revenge. Who does that hairy midget think he is, calling me a nobody?

My opportunity for payback comes before I am truly ready.

The next morning we are setting up for my first shot and Edgar walks up to me and yells from afar so everyone could hear. "Are you ready to work today Mr. Big Shot? Or are you going to be playing that primadonna act again?"

"That's it," I tell him, "I quit. And so will Crystal Shane. You are creating a hostile work environment."

"Quit joking Jake. The Screen Actors Guild loves me. No actor in their right mind would walk out with you. I work great with actors."

"Well, at least two actors will." I say with a huff.

I drive home praying that Crystal wouldn't renege on her promise when she finds out I quit. When I get home I write a little more in my new book. I'm working on a chapter where Jimmy Scabini is sitting in his easy chair watching *Cinderella* for the umpteenth time. Throughout the movie he has flashbacks of the times he spent with the one true love of his life, Tanya. Tanya was it for him. She gave him a reason to wake up every day. He ate his three daily meals for her and brushed his teeth after every one of those meals just because he loved her. He wanted to settle down and live happily ever after just like all

those other Disney couples. Finally, he asks her to marry him. Without a moment's hesitation Tanya said, "No."

"Why not?"

"Jimmy, I don't think getting married at the age of fifteen is a good idea." She never returned Jimmy's calls again after that fateful afternoon.

"Fucking Disney! Fucking Disney!" is Jimmy's mantra as Prince Charming fits the glass slipper on Cinderella's working class feet.

I can't think of what to write next so I sit down to watch some cartoons of my own when I hear a knock on the door. I jump up to answer it. It's Pablo Chiste.

He greets me by saying, "Jacob, you're too old to be playing these silly games. Go back to work and tell your new girlfriend to return too."

"If you understood the circumstances, you would not be saying that Pablo."

"Edgar is a friend of mine and a friend of yours. He is making you very rich and because of him your work will be exposed to a whole new audience."

"But at what price? I was in one of those flows. You know what I mean when your mind knows exactly where your story is going. I just needed one more minute to write my thoughts down so I wouldn't forget them, but that fascist..."

"You made a commitment, Jacob."

"But those moments are so rare. When they come it's torture for anyone to take you out of that state of mind. You know what I mean... or at least you used to when you wrote."

"It hasn't been that long. I finished my last book two..."

"You mean your last book was finished for you, don't you?" Pablo dies. "Elena told me how you stole her book. So you can get the hell off of your high horse. You're the last person I need to tell me how to live my life."

"You may live your life how you like, but I won't let you destroy other people's lives. Edgar is the one who will be held responsible if the movie is not completed and I don't want to know how you manipulated this Crystal Shane, but you are going to ruin her career."

"Whatever. Their careers are bullshit. What I was writing down was important."

"I advised you to refuse Edgar's offer. I knew you couldn't stay happy working on thoughtless drivel."

"Thoughtless drivel that you wrote." I remind him. "Listen Pablo, don't ever try telling me my ethics are out of whack. You are the scum who steals ideas from your teenage daughter. What did you do? Threaten to cut off her allowance or tell her to get out of your house or did you beat the shit out of her until she let you claim the book as your own."

He grabs my collar and points a finger at my nose. "Don't you ever talk that way about Elena again."

I push him away. Normally I'm scared of fights, but Pablo is just begging for a knuckle sandwich.

Pablo backs up and gives a melodramatic speech. "It's a shame that a mind as primitive as yours must possess so much talent. One day maybe you'll understand why what I am doing is not as wrong as what you are doing. Good day." He walks out the door and I know exactly why his evil act is less evil than my evil act.

Night comes and I try to sleep. But I can't. I'm feeling too guilty for walking out on the movie. Not for Edgar or Pablo's sake. They're both bums. I feel guilty for inadvertently trying to maim my own career. I signed up for the movie so it would be easier for me to distribute my ideas to the masses. The only thing walking out on this movie will accomplish is getting me blacklisted by the media conglomerates which secretly rule the world.

I show up at the shoot the next day and dishonestly apologize to Edgar for my egomania. "I don't care about you! Where's Crystal?" He wants to know. I call her and she is back on the set lickety split.

She is such a good sport about the whole thing I have to tell Edgar, "I don't know how you're planning on making *Bird of a Different Feather*, but I really think you should consider Crystal for the part of Ana."

"Actually, Jacob I'm thinking of dropping the project."

"What?"



“After getting to know you I’ve developed an interpretation of the book which frankly makes me sick. I’m thinking of making a live action Mighty Mouse movie instead.”

I don’t like being insulted. “You know what makes me sick? Being around a man who’s had cosmetic surgery on his penis. You sick fuck. I’ll be in Crystal’s trailer if you need me.”

I’m two for two in completely alienating rich, powerful men. Sometimes it feels good to know you’re good at something. I sit on the steps of Crystal’s locked trailer prepared to piss off any other millionaires passing by.

”

## Chapter Eighteen

"You'll really love Fabian. He's got a sense of humor that doesn't stop." I'm driving to a Palm Beach party in a Ferrari with Crystal Shane. Let me repeat that for you. I am driving to a party in a Ferrari with Crystal Shane. One of these days I'll have to slap myself. I feel like I'm going to be the fucking featured attraction at this party. Just to make sure all eyes are on me I'm wearing a too tight Italian shirt that shows off my pecs which have developed since the movie studio got me a personal trainer.

Crystal's been trying her hardest to convince me that I should go out to California with her. I guess she wants to show me off to her hipster pals. I figure she's entitled if I still had any friends I'd be showing her off.

We drive to a house with a totalitarian gate surrounding it. She opens her window next to a fizzy speaker and screams, "It's Crystal." The gate magically opens. She parks on the large estate and suddenly I'm intimidated. I feel like I'm on a king's manor, but then I remember I'm the one bringing the princess, so everyone has to at least pretend they love me.

And I was right. We enter the party and despite the noise and jazzy music everyone instinctively knew we arrived. They all turned their heads in unison and admired the hippest couple on Earth.

"Crystal, I'm so glad you came." said a middle-aged effeminate with too much gel in his hair. He smiles in my direction. "This must be Jacob. I read your book and it was so heartfelt." I laugh in his face. I realize he's not joking, so I turn my laugh into a cough.

"Well thank you..."

"Fabian." he introduces himself. "This is my house, so please make the most of it."

"We certainly will." I say as I spy the fully stocked bar in the corner.

I glide across the marble floor and smile at all the beautiful people and the ugly ones. "What do you want to drink?" I ask Crystal.

"Manuel!" she shrieks. A bearded man in a shirt tighter than mine embraces her. They talk for a couple seconds before I'm introduced to Manuel and his voluptuous date. They both say they have heard wonderful things about me. I thanked them and that was the point I think I realized the only way I could make it through this night was by getting drunk. If there was Novocain, I would have shot myself up, but you've got to make do with what you can.

I ask the bartender, he's a surfer kid, about my age, for some vodka. He obliges, but he doesn't keep his eyes off my date, neither do I. She's wearing a dress so short and tight you could confuse it with body paint.

I don't know the social mores for a party with such rich and glamorous people, so I start ingesting enough alcohol so that I don't give a fuck. I order my next drink, but I'm interrupted.

"So you're the talented kid who's making books cool again?"

I turn my head to a guy in a linen suit with a close trimmed mustache. He certainly knows how to get on my good side. "The name's James Eggart. Maybe you've heard of me?"

"Maybe I haven't." I inform him. The surfer bartender refills my glass. I throw a five dollar tip in his face.

I give James Eggart's deeply suntanned face my full attention. He talks. I chew ice. "I'm a producer. Right now I'm producing a movie that could use a hot, young star like you." I smile at his flattery. "It's a vampire movie. A bunch of horny, teenage vampires want to raise hell at a sorority house, but since they're vampires they can only get in the house if they're invited. The vampire tells a security guard, which would be you, that if he lets them in the sorority house, then they will make him immortal. He says, 'All right, if you can do that then you're in.' They bite him, turn him into a vampire, and terrorize the sorority girls who are in various states of undress. There is a happy ending. The girls kill them." He smiles "So do you want me to send a copy of the script to your agent?"

"Right now my agent, Pablo Chiste, hates me." I tell him. "He's pissed because I know he plagiarized his latest book."

"That's no good." he laughs. "I'll send a copy to you. What's your address, Jacob?"

I ignore his question. "Since you're a fan, are you interested in making movies of my books?"

In return, he tries to ignore my question. "Well, right now I'm trying to get this vampire movie made."

"What, you didn't like my books?"

"No... I.... I just haven't read them."

"But if you haven't read my books, then how do you know that I am talented?"

"How do I know? Everyone knows. You're the cat's meow."

At that point I walk away from the conversation. But the conversation won't walk away from me. James Eggart stopped talking to me, but everyone else starts where he left off. I don't think many of the people there could read, but that didn't stop them from telling me what a wonderful book I wrote. I couldn't take any more. I step outside where there is a cold wind, but the vodka keeps me warm.

A woman in a strapless, sequined dress sits below me in a lawn chair. I would flash her a smile but I can't see her face. I actually don't want her to see me because then she might talk to me and I might infect her with my sickening thoughts of the world.

I'm where I always wanted to be. At a glamorous party with a beautiful woman and everyone respects me. But they don't really respect me because they don't know me, they respect my work, but not really because they haven't read it. They have just accepted without question that I and my work are respectable.

I never dared to think about what it would be like once I achieved my goal of fame. I was scared to ask, "And then what?" Once you achieve all your goals, what is left to live for. All that is left is death.

I down the rest of my drink and attempt to think of why I am living in this world. I look at the woman sitting by the pool. She's looking at the stars when I recognize her face. I run down the limestone stairs to get a closer look and what do you know.... it's Ana! I sit next to her on the cushioned chair and give her a hug. "Ana, what are you doing here?"

She looks in my eye. "I've been looking all over for you. I can't live without you. But I saw how everyone at the party loves you. Especially all the beautiful women, so I realized I have no chance with you."

I laugh. "You've got every chance. You don't understand. None of those people love me. They love my reputation. You're the only person who loves me for who I am." I get closer to give her all my love with a kiss.

"Jacob!" Crystal's champagne bubble voice booms from the balcony. "What are you doing?"

How will I explain this situation? Easy. I tell her the truth. Wait... where did Ana go? "You are really drunk, aren't you." Crystal asks. "I'd never seen anyone talk to themselves before. Come on, let's go inside and dance." She pulls me by my hand into the party where I feel a lot more alone than I did outside by myself.

## Chapter Nineteen

The sun doesn't rest. In all its fury it shines in my bedroom. I try ignoring it, but I've got a lot to do before Crystal and I leave for California tomorrow. Pack my bags, wash my dishes, got to do all that. I roll out of bed wishing I didn't have such a late night. Since it was the last night of the shoot, Edgar milked us for all we were worth. He kept the cameras rolling until four in the morning. They're having a wrap party tonight. I was invited, but it was implied that I shouldn't show up. Edgar gave me the reputation of being hard to work with, therefore everyone in the cast and crew hated me. That's the way it worked at this film. Whatever Edgar said was in total agreement with everyone else. Don't upset the boss. Fuck them!

I take a drive out to Key Biscayne. I figure I should let Pablo know I'm leaving town for an extended period. Who knows? I've always wanted to move to California. Maybe if I love it there I'll stay. I think maybe when I go out there I'll head out to the desert. I'll bring nothing but a guitar and I won't leave until I master the damn instrument.

My little car pulls into Pablo's cracked driveway. Pablo's convertible isn't here. I should have called first, but maybe Elena is home. She is, I discover, when she opens the door.

"Hey Elena! Is your Dad home?"

The air conditioning from the house flees into the hot atmosphere. Her hair is wrapped in a ponytail except for the one strand that she's sucking. "Poppy's having lunch with a friend who's in town for the day." Her slim figure blocks the door.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" She leans to the left of the doorway. I pass through and she shuts the door. "I mean if you're busy, I can leave."

"I was just filling out college applications, but I need to take a break. What do you want Jacob?"

"I had to talk to your Dad, but he's not here. So why waste the drive. I miss talking to you anyway."

She starts inexplicably pulling down her pants, baring her young, chiseled legs for me to see. "What are you doing?" She throws her blue jeans at my face.

"This is why you came out here. That's all I'm good for, isn't it? Isn't that what you said, 'I'm just a good fuck'. You want to fuck me and that's it. Here you go. I'm yours." The t-shirt begins coming off.

I don't let it get past her shoulders. "No. I want to talk to you. I want to see how you're doing. I want to talk about your book. It was... it was..." Her pants lay on the floor. Dignity completely left the room. I collapse on the rumpled couch. "I just want to talk."

She keeps her pants off and sits next to me. She starts caressing my chest. "All right. Let's talk dirty. I want to fuck you up..."

I'm about to cry. "Please Elena! don't do this! I just want to talk normally."

"So now I'm not even worth fucking?"

"I'm sorry I said that.. I'm... I'm going to go." I start walking out of there but Elena hooks my arm.

"Don't leave. I want to know what you thought of my Father's new book."

"It was... it was... come on put your pants on, you're distracting me." She curves her body back into them and I have to start lying. I couldn't bring myself to read *Gruddy Waters* yet. Partly because Pablo's a dick for stealing the book from his daughter, but mostly because I don't want to like it as much as everyone else does. But I read enough reviews to fake it. "It was a beautiful story. Very moralistic, but ..."

"Did you see yourself in Gregory?"

"Besides you describing him as good looking, not really. No."

"That's exactly what I would have had Gregory saying, if I gave him a book about Jacob Fielding and asked if he saw himself in you."

"I was joking about the good looking part."

"Gregory would have been joking about that too." I got to hand it to Elena. She's a great conversationalist. Her dialogue always keeps me two steps away from a felony.

“One thing that you did wonderfully was that you created a happy ending. Letting Gregory fall in love with a deaf girl... I don’t think I’ll ever be able to paint my characters into such a happy little corner.”

She nods her head like a wise hippie chick, so I ask for a hint of her wisdom. “What do you think that says about the two of us. Are you going to have a happy ending and I’m going to die with a frown on my face?”

“I don’t know. Are you really that unhappy?”

“No. I mean... no I must be happy. I’m just not appreciating my happiness. I’ve got money, I’ve got respect, I’ve got all that tangible shit which should put a smile on my face. I just have to start smiling. Right? That’s all there is to it.”

“That’s what I thought.” Elena says. “But my father has everything you have times ten.”

“Hey, you don’t have to try getting me down when I’m trying to convince myself that I’m content.”

She leaves her seat for a moment without a word. As I start wondering where she disappeared to she returns. “I just want to show you something. Something that shows that all those things you were talking about like money and fame, won’t necessarily make you happy.”

“Elena? Are you saying I need to put Jesus in my life? If that’s all it takes to make me happy then I’m a believer.”

“Well get on your knees and start praying then. No, it’s not Jesus. I don’t know what it’s called that makes people happy, but it’s not money or fame because my father has all that.” She hands me a stack of typed papers. I look down to read the title page.

*My Obituary*  
by Pablo Chiste

“Is your father writing again or is this another of your stories?” I ask.

“He wrote it.”

Her tone demands that I start reading. It’s about ten pages. I’m not in a reading mood, but I don’t have a choice. Was it only a year ago when I would have killed to read an unreleased Pablo Chiste story?



*I was born Pablo Chipstein. I will die Pablo Chiste. I am a man who has created himself in his own image. I am also a man who has invented his own demise. Therefore it is only fair that I write my own obituary.*

*My father was a hero. Enough of one that Webster considered running his photograph as the definition of heroism. Eli Chipstein was his name and he left Brooklyn in 1938 for Spain as a Jewish, communist orphan. He returned seven years later as a Jewish, communist orphan only with one less eye and one more wife. He left for Spain with a late faction of the Lincoln Brigade in order to fight Franco's fascists. A piece of shrapnel struck his eye. He had no depth perception, so he could fight no longer. He wandered Spain for years with an eyepatch as his companion.*

*My mother, Elena Cervantes Lopez, was a nurse. She was too young to have been the nurse who treated my father's injury. So instead they met at a tapas bar after the war in Barcelona. She was intrigued by the foreign cyclops, he was lonely. I assume a brief courtship ensued for after three weeks they were married. My father moved in with my mother's family. They were a rustic people and after several months of picking olives my father reminisced of indoor plumbing. He convinced my mother to move back to Brooklyn with him. She wanted to see the world, so she consented. They lived with my father's cousins for some time before my father found a job.*

*He would be a writer. A reporter for the Miami News. My parent's migration ended in Miami. Their lives became static as my father reported and my mother became an elementary school Spanish teacher. It was in this city where I was born on June 2, 1949 as Pablo Joshua Chipstein. I was so successful that I inspired two encores, my brother, Scott, and my sister, Carolina.*

*We grew up in Miami as a troubled happy family. My father never spent much time with us. My mother expected us to be as perfect as a Valencia orange. Anything less was a waste of her time. In this environment I grew up to be what children today call a nerd. I had many feelings, but few friends. I spent my afternoons at the beach writing poetry and sketching pretty girls that walked by. The water was my love and inspiration. I swam with the stingrays and sharks whether it was 98 degrees or if the heavens were pouring rain. Those were days of smiles.*

*In 1967 I went off to Jetshire College with a pure soul. It didn't take many poetry readings at that Massachusetts school for me to lose my purity. I*

*discovered that poetry could get the prettiest of girls to lose their inhibitions for a night. Words could be sneaky and so they were. One night they snuck a short haired beauty into my dormitory. Under the covers she told me I had a gift with words and suggested that I work as a reporter for the Jetshire College Press. I entered my father's world of reporting and felt I immediately eclipsed his shadow when I became the star reporter of the small pond. From unprecedented perspectives I covered the weekly protests. Response to my writing was positive enough that I foolishly applied for a prestigious internship under the tutelage of the master reporter, Rupert McCoy. Only one college journalism student in the nation would travel to Vietnam for the experience of a lifetime to learn the ropes from a premier reporter. The powers-that-be picked me and I foolishly believed I deserved it.*

*I arrived in the hot, sticky mess of a conflict expecting to survive war stories to rival my father. Instead, I spent my time in a little Hanoi cabin. My freedom was restricted to only leaving McCoy's sight to fetch him coffee and women from the local brothel. The lazy, old man only left his bed to rewrite the press releases he received from the US military. This Pulitzer Prize winning poser's reporting consisted of minor rewording of government propaganda. My misery ended when McCoy accidentally ate a shrimp. His allergy exploded his intestines. I wrote a little article about the details surrounding his death.*

*This gave the Boston Herald enough faith in me to write four more articles before McCoy's replacement arrived. I wrote about the American soldier's exploitation of the Vietnamese prostitutes which convinced my editors to allow me to continue reporting until my summer internship was completed. I saw brutality and horrors and explosions and all the other gore associated with war.*

*I returned home at the end of the summer feeling like a man. I must have felt more of a man than I was because I made some obnoxious comment to my father about how stupid he must feel to have been surpassed by his twenty-year-old son. I asked him what it was like to cover Miami school board meetings while knowing his son was covering the biggest event of a generation. Over the dinner table in front of my younger brother and sister he told me, "It feels good knowing that I got my son the opportunity of a lifetime." My father proceeded to tell me that he had worked with Rupert McCoy on a story and gave the very good word about me.*

*My father thought those words would buy me a little humility and we would finish the meal in silence. My ego wouldn't allow that. I left my half eaten paella at the table, packed my bags, and informed my father that he had just lost himself a son. I stayed at a friends house for a couple days. It was there that I decided I would no longer be a Chipstein. My father's name would never get me anywhere again. My name was now Chiste, Spanish for joke. I picked a name that would get me nowhere unless I had the ability to give the name a new meaning.*

*Out of the house I was a man of my own. I returned to the university, but after Vietnam I felt I should have been teaching my teachers a lesson. I abandoned my studies and planned on receiving a real education from the cranky professor known as life. I rebelled so much against my father that I didn't even want a part of his society.*

*I broke into my savings and purchased a one way ticket to Paris. My beard and hair grew long as the styles of the time permitted. Living out of a suitcase and sleeping at train stations I saw the backroads of the old continent. When my stomach grumbled, I stole. When my heart ached for companionship I would converse with the nearest beauty. Otherwise I would write. The notebook I brought with me to Europe filled up quite easily with my rejections and humiliations. But somewhere in those emotions were a strong, cohesive narrative that "defined a generation" as some critic was keen to say. The novel was Broken Homes. A tale about a teenager whose family, house, and every earthly possession are destroyed by a hurricane. He is invited to stay at a neighbor's house which survived a disaster from God only to receive turmoil from this boy. What was written was golden. I slept with my arm around the notebook to ensure that it would not run away from me.*

*I returned to the States only because of the book. I lived in New York City with an American girl I had met at the train station in Rome. I had a job at nights as a security guard at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. By day I was hustling to get my writing published. After hundreds of rejections I found an ally. A literary agent known as Mort Welkington. He did not get me a fortune, but he got me published. To that I was forever grateful and in return for his faith I employed him as my agent until the day he died. This loyalty is one of the few acts in my life which I consider noble.*

*The response to Broken Homes was immediate. I was “the Ernest Hemingway of our time.” An adventurer. A self-imposed exile from America. A damned good writer. Suddenly I was larger than life. My abbreviated journalism career in Vietnam grew legendary. The antiwar movement requested my support. I gave it to them indirectly by saying, “If certain people want war, let them have war.” Revolutionaries around the world took my quote as their slogan. I knew I made it when I discovered I was on the enemies list of Richard Milhous Nixon.*

*None of this affected me in the least. I returned to Paris living a life of wine, women, and literature. Royalty checks were coming my way as was inspiration. Then I received a phone call from my sister, Carolina. My father was dead. I returned to Miami for the funeral. My mother was very angry. She accused my ego of murdering a gentle man. My father was devastated that his name was gone. I disowned his name, my sister was getting married, and my brother joined the Screen Actor’s Guild and since there was already an actor registered as Scott Chipstein, my brother changed his last name to Chiste as well.*

*Guilt settled into my head. I wanted my mother to learn to love me. I suggested we travel to Spain where I could meet my people, her family. I visited the country on my previous journey through Europe, but only as a tourist not as a Spaniard. They are a lovely people, filled with vigor and arguments. On that visit the seeds of my second novel were sowed. In the Valencia bedroom where my mother was raised I began writing *A Branch Above*. This was an epic told from the perspective of a fig tree. The tree recounts seven generations of a family on whose property its roots were grounded. The success of this novel forever sealed my nickname. Anytime the words Pablo Chiste, were spoken or printed, it was undoubtedly followed by *The Ernest Hemingway of our Time*. I wanted to strangle that dead, bearded bastard.*

*I stayed in Spain even after my Mother left. I bought a little house near the sands of Barcelona. The love of life from these people was contagious. But none was more virile than Guillermo Colon. At the age of 29 I finally found a man whom I could call a best friend. We met while drinking cervezas in the same neighborhood bar. We started talking. He was a painter with a disposition that seemed as even as a great chef’s cutting board. But as the day wore on I observed the fury he had within him. A one-armed patron of the bar was being*

harassed by a six-foot bruiser. Without a word Guillermo picked up the goon and bashed him into the bar until his only words were, "¡No mas! ¡No mas!" Guillermo continued to punch until his knuckles could take no more than he threw the thug out the back door. From that day on he continued earning my respect. But I truly consider him my greatest friend for inviting me to one particular picnic.

Beneath the shade of the oak trees and during the course of the meal an angel arrived at the party. I asked Guillermo if that heavenly creature had an earthly name. He replied, "That is my cousin, Teresa Diaz Colon." Hers is the first woman's name I have mentioned outside of my family. For after her all other women were anonymous.

I introduced myself as the great Pablo Chiste. She was not impressed. Since my last name meant joke she wanted me to make her laugh. A beautiful afternoon was wasted reciting bad jokes and tickles that provoked nothing. Frustrated, I surrendered. "If you need a clown, then I am not your man." My pompousness finally brought her to tears of laughter and she didn't cease until the sun came back. My heart was in her care. We united in marriage after several months. Our love was so abundant that we wanted everyone to acknowledge it, even the church and state.

After a year of marriage my Teresita was growing restless. I had my writing but her role as my inspiration was not keeping her satisfied. My brother, Scott was visiting us at the time. He was burgeoning into a successful actor, so he suggested to Teresa that she move out to California to become an actress. He told her she had the beauty, presence, charisma, and most importantly, the connections. We returned to my homeland. There Scott introduced her to every person of any importance. Her success was immediate. Every audition she engaged, she won. One month she was a nurse in a soap opera, the next a teacher in a drama, the week after a lover in a Mexican feature film. She was enjoying herself immensely and I was caught in another world. This world of Los Angeles. I was fascinated by all these women who were willing to barter their bodies in return for a little camera time and I remembered the Vietnamese women who would let American soldiers ejaculate in their ears so they could afford some meat to go along with their rice. The novel, *Silhouettes*, was my reaction to this behavior. It is the story of a young prostitute who is forced to rethink her world when she discovers one of her customers to be the

personification of God. I knew this tale was why I was put on this Earth and my agent agreed with me. It was put on the fast track of my publishing house.

Around this time, Teresa earned the breakthrough role of her lifetime. The title role in Edgar Enzo Jr.'s epic production, *Joan of Arc*. The happy times evolved into the supernatural as the love Teresa and I shared was going to have a face. Teresa was pregnant with my daughter Elena. Her birth gave my belly a joy it never would know again. It also developed a conscience within me. The world was sickly and at its current state was not a worthy place for my innocent Elena.

After the United States invaded the tiny island of Grenada, my soul would not permit me to stay idle. I invited a cameraman to join me at the US embassy where I shredded my passport. I yelled into the camera and at the men who represented our country, "Any nation willing to invade an island paradise for the benefit of its own ego is too ridiculous for me." I partook in the first flight to Spain. There we raised my lovely daughter. As a vine watches its fruit become fine wine, she aged and I aspired to be a beautiful example for her.

When I received word that I was to win a Nobel Prize in literature for my writing of *Silhouettes* my innards told me not to accept it. This award named after the ogre who invented dynamite was also being bestowed upon a capitalist who believed poverty should be encouraged and a philosopher who was so close-minded that he accepted the physical world as the only reality. The prestige of the prize scared me from speaking my soul. It was only when I was sitting on that stage in Sweden when my integrity shined. I asked myself whether I was a cowardly lion or a brave sheep.

My name was called on the podium. A trophy and applause were awaiting me. I accepted the ovation, placed the trophy on the stage and urinated upon it for all the world to see. Every drop was as satisfying as the next. By creating a night of awkwardness for all those self-important buffoons, I wrote my greatest masterpiece. The sales of my books soon peaked, so many, including the Nobel Prize honoree in Economics, accused my behavior of being a marketing scheme. All I can say is if all publicity is orchestrated with such a pure heart, let them be.

The energy from that event and all the criticism it harnessed was wonderful. Electricity developed through my pores and I wrote like a madman screaming at the Gods. In fifteen months I wrote the two novels which are as

*dear to my heart as any to which I have ever been exposed. Finesse and Rivers Forgot Laughter are pure Pablo Chiste. No outside influences. Just a crazy author locking himself in a room responding to all the insanity and inanity in our world.*

*Years passed. The waves of time eroded my hairline, but youthful passion circulated through my veins. Life was love and love was life and then Teresa told me she loved somebody else. "Well, I love everybody." I told her.*

*"As do I," she said, "but there is a man I love even more than you and everybody else. It is he with whom I wish to live." I grew old that day. My reflection showed wrinkles. My body now ached. Late nights were no longer a possibility.*

*I wrote another novel. Sales were good, criticism was positive, but it was of no importance to me. After much time of nothingness, change was necessary. A return to the city where I was born and where my father was buried and where my mother was remarried, Miami. Here I have spent my days looking for that youth which is so elusive. It is here where I too will die. Many years will probably pass before that day comes. But I am quite aware that nothing of importance will emerge from those years. So this obituary might be considered a finished work in progress. I hope my life brought you some diversion as you finish your morning cup of coffee.*

*Pablo Chiste is survived by his brother, Scott, his sister, Carolina, his daughter, Elena, and the thousands of pages chronicling his creations.*

Elena was watching for reactions throughout my reading of the manuscript. I tried keeping my cool as best I could. "Your father has a real flare for the melodramatic."

Elena opens up to me. I can tell because I've never seen her knees shiver like this. "I found it laying on his desk while you two were touring around the country. I thought it was a sign that he was suicidal. I read it to my mother and she said writing something like that was typical for him. He always wants attention whether it's pity, love or hate. She thought he left it out for me to find."

"So why did you show this to me? Are you trying to ruin my day or something? You think if I keep going this route I'm going to end up like your father?"

Sinking to my level is not an option for her. "I don't know why I showed it to you. I thought maybe it would make you understand why I gave him my book. I thought maybe it would give you some insight. I thought maybe it would give you two a better relationship. I thought it would do something."

"It did something," I say out of politeness. The mock obituary moved her so much. It would just be wrong for me to pretend it did nothing for me. I think I understand why she gave it to me anyway. She thinks it might encourage me to ask her father for guidance which would boost the old man's ego. No thank you. "I still can't understand why you gave your father your book. You deserve the recognition for what you wrote."

"Recognition doesn't matter. You see how much recognition Papi receives and that's not enough for him. He needs attention, I don't. Besides people wouldn't appreciate it as much if they knew I wrote it."

"So you're going to let your father do all your living for you? It's just not right. Your father should treat you better than this. He bitches and moans in his little obituary but..."

"You should have treated me better too," she says.

The way she says it I know it's more than a statement of regret, it's also an invitation. A chance for me to profess my love and admiration for her and also to sully her with my lust. But for once in my shitty life, I act selflessly. "Elena, I better go. I've still got to pack my bags."

I destroy the moment. She acknowledges that by telling me, "I've got to go too. Take care of yourself in California"

I really need to understand the people of this world better. Then maybe I'd feel more comfortable and understand what I'm doing here with them. Then I start thinking about whether I should write my own obituary and whether this past scene would make the cut.



## Chapter Twenty

Nothing justifies Karl Marx's theories like first class seating in airplanes. For double or triple the price of regular seats you get to breathe the same air as other first class schmucks who throw away money for a couple more inches of leg and butt room. Our society is hurting if some people can afford to waste so much money for inches while others are willing to suck anything for some more drug money.

I move my first class seat back and look out the window as the engines prepare for a higher altitude. Crystal rests her head on my shoulder as I watch the ground get smaller and smaller and smaller. When we soar above the clouds the scenery grows boring. I look through Crystal's purse for diversions. I grab her Walkman, but her music selection makes me question why I'm letting her use my head as a pillow. I take the five magazines she bought instead. Normally, I wouldn't touch these rags no matter how bored I was, but my new books are coming out this week, so I'm curious if they have reviews.

My fingers smell like perfume from all the fragrant advertising, but eventually I find a review of my two books. Yikes! The title of the review is *What Hath Pablo Chiste Wrought?*

*Remember last summer when the whole world was buzzing about Jacob Fielding? He's the young author that Pablo Chiste discovered that wrote the divine Bird of a Different Feather. Everyone wanted to take Mr. Chiste out for dinner for finding such a gem of a book. Well now that Jacob Fielding has emptied his desk drawers of his old stories, the Ernest Hemingway of our time might want to hide or he's liable to get hurt.*

*Imagine substituting all the ingenuity and freshness of Bird of a Different Feather with pretentiousness and clichés and you get a feel for Propositions and Jesus Christ Superspy. Propositions tells the story of a retarded, grown-up Holden Caulfield type character named Arthur Blaine. All this character does is whine. I am not exaggerating when I say you can't get by three sentences without reading another of Arthur's complaints. Some minor things happen to the narrator. He decides to rebel against everything and demands the people of his community to stop giving him so much to complain*

*about, but who cares? See what this book has done to me! It's got me complaining.*

*Jesus Christ Superspy doesn't come from a whiners point-of-view and it does have a stronger plot, but with a subject so sacrilegious I don't understand how I was genuinely bored reading it. This book that has the subtlety of an Archie comic book chronicles the story of Jesus Christ living in the twentieth century. He's a good man but the only teaching he does is at his town's Denny's and his miracles are confined to turning a keg filled with water into a keg of beer. This could be some funny material, but Mr. Fielding must think he's divine when he tries turning this lightweight story into a moralistic piece that suggests it can change the world.*

*We can only pray that Pablo Chiste's newest novel which comes out next week will make up for this trash he has unleashed on the world.*

*Grades: Propositions-F Jesus Christ Superspy-D+*

I figured this was an exception. Some old crank who wouldn't know a masterpiece from a dirty sock wrote this. But then I flipped through the other magazines for some praise. The only other magazine with a review of my books is written by someone else I've never met that hates me. He writes, "Just because Jacob Fielding has been hailed as a genius, doesn't give him the right to slap together some half-baked ideas and sell them as \$24.99 hardcovers."

These jerks.

I spent so much of myself into those books. I'd give anything to find their dearest possessions and spit all over them. I slam Crystal's bagful of magazines back on her lap.

It shakes her awake. With her eyes still shut she talks into my ear. "Are you OK, sweetie?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Why do you ask?"

"Because you just woke me up, dummy."

"I'm fine." Her phony, capped teeth highlight a smile.

"Christina... do you think I'm pretentious?"

She sits up and says, "No, you're cool."

Fuck. She doesn't even know what pretentious means. A stereotype of a male flight attendant swings into the conversation.

"Excuse me, are you Crystal Shane?"

In a tone I never heard from her before that's both demeaning and flattered, "Yes."

"Oh my. I'm such a huge fan of yours. I was all over *Bimbina, Queen of the Underworld*. You gave such a great, campy performance." He would be jumping for joy if he wasn't already so high in the air. "Would you mind terribly if you autographed this for me?" He hands her a napkin and a blue fountain pen.

Her tisk is so full of disgust. "Ok" She honors the napkin with her name. Her signature should be bubbly and loopy instead it's harsh like a near-sighted old man.

The flight attendant cradles the napkin. "Oh, this is so wonderful. Can I get you guys anything. Hey...." He looks at me with a Haven't-I-seen-you-somewhere glare. "...are you that actor she's going out with.... uh... Steven Stein?"

"No, I'm not." I smile.

"Oh. Well I'll bring you guys some champagne." He whispers so all of first class can hear. Now they're all eyeballing Crystal.

"I didn't know you were seeing Steven Stein," I mutter.

"We were just really good friends."

"Whatever."

"Here you go guys." The flight attendant whose name tag reads Adam hands us champagne glasses filled to the peak.

"Thanks a lot, Adam." I tell him. Crystal says nothing. Adam walks off into his happy little stratosphere and I almost blow up. "How can you treat someone like that? He appreciates you so much that he's willing to make an absolute fool out of himself and you treat him like he's nothing. Is that how you would treat me if I walked up to you on the street and started talking to you and you didn't know who I was?"

"I didn't know who you were when I met you and I was really nice to you."

"But you knew I was starring in a movie. Otherwise, you would have treated me like any other loser. Someone's got to be like a Steven Stein or a best selling author to get any respect from you."

She keeps the conversation to as low a volume as she can with there being so much tension involved. "I would have gotten to know you

if you just walked up to me on the street and you were a nobody. You've got an aura that most people don't have. You're so deep and spiritual."

"Are you fucking kidding? I'm one of the least spiritual people in the world. I don't believe in anything. I even think the Dalai Lama is full of it." She sobs a little. This is going to be a long flight. I'm going to have to find someplace else to stay in California too.

A few minutes pass. She's sitting there crying. All the eyes in the airplane are on me. I decide to act like a war-weary politician and make some dishonest peace. "Crystal, I'm sorry. I'm an asshole. I let all my frustrations beat you up." I take out the magazines from her bag and open to the appropriate pages. "I never read a bad review of my work before. It just pissed me off at everything. It's no excuse, but you know I just have a low self-esteem and an overactive imagination. I just got scared that you would treat me like shit if I went back to being no one." I hate when I say something that is so contrary to what I'm feeling, but when you deal with other people you can't be true to yourself.

My speech melts her like tuna. She's too proud to forgive me right away, but her tears stop getting everything wet, so I know I'm closer to her good side. "Jacob, you can't do this to me. You've done it to me before and it's just not right. I love you and you can't let what other people say interfere with my love for you." Her knuckles clean up the mascara dripping down her face. "It's awful what critics can say about you, but I'm not a critic. I love everything you do."

"Except when I yell at you."

"Except when you yell at me." She giggles like it was a line in some romantic comedy. I'm counting the seconds until our approximate time of arrival. I can't wait to get the fuck off this plane.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Elena really wrote herself a nice little book. Seeing Pablo Chiste's name on it isn't right. It's one of the biggest injustices since some big guy called God stole all the credit from whatever modest author wrote the Bible.

Elena's book is called *Gruddy Waters*. It's about a character who I guess is me. I get pushed on stage by some friends of mine at an open mic night at a comedy club. I'm a little nervous, but... I should stop confusing the character with myself. It's not me. His name is Gregory and Elena just told me he's me.

Anyway, everything Gregory says to the audience is hilarious. He just says whatever thoughts are in his head and the crowd laughs like maniacs. An agent sees him at the show and signs him immediately. The agent tells Gregory, "Anyone as funny as you deserves their own sitcom." Gregory quickly becomes a phenomenon, but it drives him a bit crazy. It's understandable, I would go nuts too if any time I said anything people would break into hysterics. There's one scene where Gregory is at a party and he asks his hosts where the bathroom is, but they laugh too hard for him to get an answer out of them.

Everyone always laughing at him drives Gregory mad, but not as mad as when the people finally stop laughing at him. Gregory's stand-up comedy shows, which used to be so loud with laughter that you could hardly hear his routine, become awkwardly silent. People's senses of humor change and nobody thinks his thoughts are funny anymore. The sudden rejection shatters his rationality. He fucks up all his relationships with everyone he cares about and goes from being an easygoing cat to a violent nut. I've got about a hundred pages left in the book and right now Gregory is bringing a gun with him to his show. Elena's got me so I'm actually scared that if people don't laugh at him, Gregory is going to start shooting.

"Whatcha reading?" Crystal wants to know.

I turn around to face her. "I'm still reading *Gruddy Waters*." The house Crystal calls home was furnished by a madman. Her bed is a king

sized circle and her TV screen is pasted on the ceiling. It's a crazy perspective. I was watching a basketball game yesterday and I almost fell off the bed. The vertical viewing experience makes the boundary between reality and TV even less distinguishable.

Crystal twirls my chest hair. "I was watching that station, *Always Entertainment*, and I caught a glimpse of that big party Pablo Chiste was throwing in honor of his book. It looked like a lot of fun. We should have gone. They had a swing band and a dance floor that was surrounded by a giant swimming pool."

"I made the right decision by not going. He doesn't deserve any attention for this book."

"I thought he was the guy who got your book published. Without him wouldn't you still be struggling?" She leans over to light some overpriced "holy" Indonesian incense. Smells like the same cheap shit we would get in college.

"Maybe. But life is a struggle. I would have still made it." That's what I've got to keep reminding myself, I deserve any recognition I get. "I never asked you how you broke into your business. How did you become a movie star?"

"You're going to laugh at me and not believe me when I tell you."

"No. I'll believe you."

"I was just in the Los Angeles Airport with my parents. We were coming home from visiting my cousins in Connecticut and this talent agent saw me. He went up to me and asked if I ever modeled before, my Dad thought he was a kind of pervert, so he told him to get lost, but he gave me a business card and he turned out to be legit. Did you ever see that milk ad about ten years ago where the dog jumps over a table and through a burning ring of fire to get a glass of milk?"

I nod my head. "Yeah, I think I remember that. Were you in that ad?"

"That was my first gig. I was the girl who poured the milk and had to leave it because my Mom told me to pick up my room. My line was.... wait, wait, wait." She closes her eyes. I guess, to get in character. "One second Mom." she screams and then giggles again.

"I made a lot of money from that commercial and a lot more money was thrown in my face so I decided to drop out of high school and pursue it full time. It was a good choice, I mean, I was never that good at school. But I wasted a lot of years doing runway shows and catalogue work before my agent enrolled me in some acting classes. I made a lot of money modeling, but it's not as respectable as acting. I went to the classes for only a couple months and then one day a casting agent for the movie *Explosion High* came to my acting class and they hired me on the spot to play Jennifer Vixen in that movie. I mean all the movies that I do are trash. They're not as avant-garde as the stuff you write, but it's better than doing runway shows and milk commercials or being poor."

"So what did it feel like when you became famous?"

"Why are you asking me?"

I'm annoyed with her false modesty. "Don't pretend you're not famous."

"I know I'm famous, but you're just as big as I am. Every interview I do now I get asked about you. What are you working on? What kind of a mind do you have, stuff like that. You know you're famous. They wrote an article in *People* magazine about you."

"Yeah, but I'm not famous like you. People don't walk up to me on the street and tell me how much they love me."

"Only horny teenagers do that to me. Will it make you feel better if one day I walk up to you on the street and tell you how much I love you?" She puckers up and gives me a deep kiss. It hurts when she says she loves me because I don't think she even knows me.

"So you really think I'm famous? Do you think anyone is talking about us right now? Like a couple of housewives who might have seen our picture in a tabloid?"

"I don't know." She doesn't know anything. All of a sudden I get these awful images in my head of how Crystal might have really made it to where she is. I imagine a fifteen-year-old version of her being seduced by a sleazy casting agent and I think of her propositioning that casting agent who "discovered" her in the acting class. I can't respect myself if I

associate with someone who I've decided is a whore. I finally replace my finger with an actual bookmark and put *Gruddy Waters* on the floor.

"Christina, do you mind if I use your car? I was thinking about maybe driving somewhere to get a bite to eat."

"I thought you went to the grocery store today and bought all that food?"

"Yeah I know but I need some air."

"Awwww!" She strokes my torso with her fingernails. She scratches in circles and circles all around my body then she purrs, "I was hoping we could have a nice night at home." I couldn't refuse. I'm weak. We made love, but it wasn't enjoyable. I felt like I was another face in a long line of lovers all being made love to for the benefit of Crystal Shane's career. She puts her arm around me after we exhausted ourselves, but I tell her I'm still hungry.

"I'll come with you then." she suggests.

"No no no. You have to be up early, so you should get some beauty sleep. I'll be right back too. Where are the keys to your car?" I pick up *Gruddy Waters* for the trip.

"In the kitchen I think."

I kiss her. "I'll be back soon." I walk down the staircase to retrieve the keys to her car. For one of the modeling shoots she worked on last year, she was paid with a Humvee. It's a monster. You're ten feet off the ground when you're driving. And it's so big and sturdy that you lose any consideration for the other drivers on the road. If they do anything to aggravate me I'll drive over them and crush them like tin mice.

My headlights pierce the dark road. Every rock or little pothole vibrates the whole car, but I still push down the gas pedal as low as it will go. I don't really recollect where that diner I spotted earlier is. It looked like a decent place to finish a book and pick up some late night indigestion. I just hope if I keep heading downhill I'll bump into it. But I better be careful. If I bump into the diner with this tank I'll tear the building down.

Here comes that crossroads. I'm guessing I want to go to the left. I take the turn at full speed and leap over a rock. My head kablam into



the metallic ceiling. Another mile of driving and I have to give my sense of direction its due. There's the unlit sign, "Jesse's Diner." It's a tiny square, steel establishment that's either withstood the ravages of time or is one of those businesses that tries to remind customers of a past that never was. Crystal's car can't help but occupy two parking spaces. I walk toward the diner and am surprised how packed it is. There's not a line or anything, but for a dirty out of the way place it pulls in quite a crowd. The rust on the door makes me believe this place is genuine. I swing through and the Black man greasing up the grill invites me to sit wherever there's room. I opt to waste space by taking up the only empty booth instead of a counter seat.

The red booths remind me of this phony, train shaped diner in Miami Beach. The Miami Beach diner is one of those places where they try as hard as they can to make you think you're in The Leave It To Beaver 1950's. I like this place more, it tries convincing you you're in the Jack Kerouac 1950's. None of the clientele here dresses the part though.

The only time I stepped foot in that Miami Beach diner was with Ana and a couple of her friends from school. Sergio was there too actually. We went dancing at a couple clubs and we were all fucked up. Sergio took something like four rolls of Ecstasy. It was five in the morning and most eateries were closed, so we settled for the tourist trap diner. There was one cool thing about the place. When you ordered french fries they served them to you in a big metal bucket. We had a few drug induced laughs about that. I remember that night we had a big conversation about what we wanted out of life. I had to really defend myself when I said all I wanted was to be famous. I told them everything else you could ever aspire for could be possible as a result of being famous. If you wanted riches you could endorse some products. If you want world peace you can make public service announcements. So now that I'm supposedly famous I guess I'm responsible for deciding what the hell I should do with my life.

A waitress with a really bad excuse for a beehive haircut throws a laminated one page menu on my copy of *Gruddy Waters*. "Hi. Our specials for today are fried fish and... uh... potato surprise." She talks like her brains been fried on the grill.

"That's alright. I think I know what I want. Could I have a bucket of french fries and some juice?"

"Orange, cranberry, or grapefruit?"

"Give me your best sweetheart." She's had too hard a life to smile. She takes my menu and talks to the people in the booth behind me.

I try to get involved in the book. It's not fair to me to try to make myself miserable. I'm on a California vacation. I should be enjoying myself instead of living in a land of bad ideas. Let me see, I'm on page 221 of *Gruddy Waters*.

*The stage is full, but the audience is empty. Must be time for the pre-show auditions. Every comedian's version of Dante's Inferno. All these jokes without the slightest possibility of gratitude in laughter. If you think a fellow comedian will laugh at one of his brother's jokes, then you have never experienced jealousy.*

*Dust shares the spotlight with Gregory. The light fills his eyes with near blindness as he empties his soul into his jokes. With every punchline he falls deeper and deeper into desperation. Am I this unfunny? Tell them about the rabbi and the vibrator. Am I this unfunny? Ask them what love has to do with rings. Am I this unfunny?*

*Just ten seconds of uncontrollable laughter is all he wants. Say every curse word you know in rapid succession and see how far you have sunk. Not even rapid profanity can get the people to laugh. Your brothers in their skinny ties, ripped jeans, and bushy sideburns look at you and see a man who is funny no more.*

My waitress shakes the table with the juice. The dark red glass looks like it's filled with dirty dish water, but the tart taste tells me it's supposed to be grapefruit juice. Out of all the fruits in the world why would anybody pick grapefruits? I drink anyway, just to kill the time until my french fries arrive. People come in and out of this place. Must be some trendy hotspot for people with a lot of worries about what's hip. Some very glamorous women and men with very expensive clothes are eating at this dive. I start really doing some people watching. Then this one guy who I know I've seen before walks in. He's got black, bushy hair that he keeps combing with his fingers. He thinks he owns the place. He

asks the dirty cook manning the grill, "Hey what's up Alonzo. Any empty seats?"

He flips up a pancake. "Hi Jonny. What you see is what you got."

Jonny looks all around and then he walks toward my direction. I try pretending I'm reading.

*The fools. Have they no pity for a man who can feel the laughs as though they were pools of ----*

"Excuse me do you mind if I sit here. I'll be really quiet. You can keep reading I just need to get a bite to eat before I die." He mumbles with a Jack Nicholson accent.

He's got a really tan face and a finely tailored polo shirt. He's so well-groomed and familiar. I know he's got to be some kind of actor. "Yeah, go right ahead."

He takes his seat and I try to read, but it's hard to find your place when a stranger is so close to you. He lights up a cigarette with a red rimmed match. He shakes out the match like it's responsible for a forest fire. His eyebrow arches when he sees me trying to place his face. "Do you not want me to smoke? Do you want a cigarette?"

I don't think about the fact that I haven't smoked a cigarette since I was fifteen years old. Since I'm at the diner at the end of time I figure I might as well act a part. I put out my hand and he puts the cigarette between my two forefingers. After the match lights me up, I inhale some rancid smoke and exhale like a dragon. I put out my hand. "The name's Jacob."

"What's up, Jake, I'm Jonny." I know him! He's Jonny Steele, the action star. He knows I know who he is, I wonder if he knows who I am. He asks, "What are you reading, Jake?" I show him the cover. "Pablo Chiste, huh? I had the honor of meeting him once, believe it or not. I went to a big dinner party and had a little chat with him. He's a genius. I haven't read that new book yet, but that's one man who understands the universe."

I figure I won't disillusion Jonny by telling him the universe isn't that meaningless. The waitress comes with a red basket of skinny little french fries. She lights up when she sees Jonny sitting at my table.

“Jonny, so good to see you. What do you want me to get you?” When she smiles she’s not that old and hopeless.

“Hi Bernice, how about getting me a medium rare hamburger and a nice little salad with oil and vinegar and lots of sunflower seeds.”

“Sure thing Jonny. Can I get you anything else?” She asks me as I nibble on the fries.

“No. I’m doing great. Thanks.” I put out the cigarette in the dirty, black ashtray.

Jonny tells me, “You know it’s illegal to smoke at restaurants in California. That’s why I love coming out here. They don’t give a fuck. You had a tough day all you want is a cigarette with your meal. There’s nothing wrong with that. No reason to make a man a criminal because he had a hard day.”

“No sir.”

Our waitress brings Jonny his salad and he starts tearing up lettuce with his knife. “What do you do Jake?”

“I... write. That’s what I tell people at parties anyway.”

“Well, keep going for it kid because anything you want can come true. Who knows maybe in twenty years I’ll bump into some kid in this diner reading your book.” He talks as he chews his cherry tomatoes.

“Can I give you some advice Jake?”

“Sure Jonny.” This is what I need. Someone I just met telling me how to live life the right way. I consider telling Jonny what a big shot I am. Then maybe I’ll become a figment of his conversations. Oh, I met Jacob Fielding once. He understands the universe. We had a little dinner party at Jesse’s Diner. I decide not to tell him since he’s not bragging about all the karate movies he starred in.

“Jake, I see you spending this beautiful night reading a book and it appears from my personal point of view that you’re wasting your time.” He pushes his salad plate away and lights up another cigarette. “If you want to write like Pablo Chiste then you can’t just be spending your nights staring at ink on paper. You should be looking at Alonzo over there behind the counter. He’s got bacon grease between his fingernails at two in the morning because he’s got to feed all his kids and all his ex-wives. That’s the problem with most books. I don’t read too often

because books don't describe life. They waste so much time and words discussing the way the curtains are arranged instead of talking about how to get bacon out of your fingernails,"

"Actually there's a book called *How to Clean Practically Anything* that might help Alonzo."

Jonny puckers his lips into a smile as he ashes his cigarette. "You're a funny guy, Jake. A funny guy. Maybe I'm full of shit, but I think there's a big reason why nobody in America reads anymore." I bit my tongue to stop from mentioning that *Bird of a Different Feather* is already on its seventh printing. "No one reads cause movies and television are like life but better. Books are like life, but boring." His hamburger arrives, he puts out his cigarette and digs into it.

"So you think the only purpose of books and movies are to entertain people?"

"Hell yeah. I know Pablo Chiste would back me up on this too, if he were here. Any idiot who thinks writing a book is going to do anything else for people besides entertain them is stupid. People would read more books if the writers realized this. It would help the writers out too. They wouldn't delude themselves into thinking their work is so important. It's like a book is a book and there are more important things in life than books. You should communicate more with other people than with books. Get to know your fellow man. If I thought books were so important then I wouldn't be giving you the advice right now that you need to hear. I would be at home writing a book about this advice and the people who need to read this message, probably wouldn't get around to reading it. If all the authors realized a book is just a book, nothing more nothing less, like they know in Hollywood, then we would have a lot more people in diners reading."

"Since you know the secret to writing books for the people why don't you get off your ass and start writing?"

He polishes off his hamburger. "Maybe I will Jake. Maybe I will. Maybe that's what the world's readers need right now."

He's so sure of himself that he doesn't speak for a moment. It gives me time to pick up my check and make a getaway. "Well Jonny, it's been a pleasure." We shake.

“Hold on Jake. Do you have a pen and a piece of paper?” I grab the pen out of my pocket and give him my bookmark. “Would you mind giving me your autograph in case you follow my advice and make it big one day?” I humor him. “Alright Jacob Fielding, keep it up. I’ll be disappointed if I don’t hear jackshit about you again.”

I wave him good-bye, pay my check, and drive the Humvee back up the hill. Crystal is sleeping and it only takes me a few seconds to join her.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

The salt in the water keeps me floating. I stare into the clouds of fluff and watch the two sea gulls circling above me fighting over the same fish. They look like they're getting the most out of life. One of the birds suddenly changes directions and dives toward the water for another fish. It's too late for me to do anything when I realize I am the fish. But at the last second the bird slows down and floats next to me. When the bird says in Ana's chirpy voice, "Hi, Jacob." I jump out of the water.

My startled leap got her feathers all wet. She shakes herself out as she flies next to my head. "Why did you do that?" she asks.

"Don't tell me I'm dreaming the sequel to *Bird of a Different Feather*, because if I am, when I wake up I'm not writing down a word."

"What are you talking about?"

I look as far as the eye can see. We're the only ones around. Not a soul is walking on the prettiest beach I have ever seen. The sand is the whitest white with colorful gems littering it. I might as well enjoy this dream since I spent the entirety of the last dream being miserable. "Nothing, sweetheart. Nothing."

"I think the sun is getting to you. Let's walk home and eat mangos and pie."

"Sounds like a plan." I paddle ashore and take advantage of the salt water not hurting my eyes. I spy a crab scurrying below and wave hello. I get on the shore and walk shirtless and barefoot as Ana flies by my side. "It's so nice being with you again. Maybe we just needed a break from each other and now we can be happy again," I tell her.

"Jacob, you're making no sense!"

"That's right. I'm talking gobbledygook." I turn to smile at her and see a human version of Ana. She's barefoot in a bikini with a towel wrapped around her waist. She's so pretty I can't help but to hold her hand as she leads the way.

We're in my hometown of Short Hills, New Jersey. It isn't an exact replica, but enough of the landmarks are similar enough that I know where I am. The hot sun should have coerced the sidewalk to burn

our bare feet, but it feels pleasant. We walk through the daffodils of Nathan Homeister's front lawn. As we walk up the porch I ask Ana, "Do you know Nate? Man, I haven't seen him in forever and a half. Do you think he'll be home? I mean he did join the marines."

She smiles at the excitement I'm wearing on my face. I have to smile too. Before I realize it's kind of weird that Ana is barging into the Homeister household without knocking, I hear a big yell, "SURPRISE!"

The lights flicker on and I see everyone I've ever really known. Behind the huge stack of mangos on the coffee table are my parents chatting with all my aunts, uncles, and cousins. Pablo Chiste is sharing a slice of pie with Penelope Barg, the girl in my social studies class who devirginized me when I was seventeen. I start questioning Pablo's motives when I feel a tap on my shoulder.

"Jesus!" I scream. It's Jesus Christ, but the Jesus of *Jesus Christ Superspy*. I can tell because he's wearing the uniform I designed for him to wear as a government operative.

"Greetings Jacob. This is quite a nice party. Except the only thing you had to drink was water. Most people don't like to drink water at parties, so I took it upon myself to turn the water into wine. I hope you don't mind."

"No that's great Jesus. Thanks." I turn to Ana. "Why are all these people here? It's not my birthday, is it?"

She's about to answer but Sergio comes from behind and cuts her off. "It's not your birthday Jacob. We didn't want to wait until your birthday to tell you how much we love and appreciate you. But I would have loved and appreciated you more if you didn't invite Jimmy Scabini. I already didn't like the guy for killing my parents and that was before I even knew him. Now that I met him I really despise him. All that jerk does is complain about how evil Walt Disney is. It's so irritating."

I look into the corner and see an unshaven Jimmy Scabini trying to harass Josie, the girl who worked at the Health Haven with me. "Sergio, you really can't stand Jimmy even though he's just a fictionalized version of your parents' murderer?"

He says, "It's taking everything I've got not to strangle him or you for inviting him."



I walk over to Jimmy. He's wearing a Mickey Mouse t-shirt. "Excuse me Jimmy, you're going to have to leave."

"Oh come on Jacob! I haven't even done my Jiminy Cricket impersonation yet. I thought we were good friends. You spend so much time writing about me. Let me stay and party."

I do what's right. I grab his shirt's collar and throw him outside like bad milk. "If my buddy Sergio doesn't want you here than you've got no business being here."

Sergio gives my hand a high-five and all these people I've known through different stages of my life approach me. It's not like a normal party in your honor where I imagine you would feel obligated to socialize with every friend you invited. This was nice and comfortable. One person would walk up to me and talk about old times and before the conversation wandered into boredom someone else would start yapping in my ear.

Eventually the party strolled outside to a backyard. It was a tropical garden. There were rows and rows of hammocks held up by papaya trees. I laid down on one and felt like I was floating on air. Elena was lying in the hammock next to mine with a beautiful smile on her face. It felt tremendous knowing everyone was having such a good time because of me. All my guests dance to a jungle beat until the beat suddenly drops to nothing.

Pablo Chiste comes out of the dancefloor with a coconut in his hand. Through a straw he sips the coconut water as he talks. "If I may please have your attention. I would like to propose a toast to a dear friend to us all. Some of us he invented. Some of us he loved. Others, he gave us a hard time. But all of us have always respected his genius and felt a great hunk of love towards him. Without Jacob Fielding all of our lives would be a much darker and emptier place. So I ask you all to take a drink in honor of our friend, Jacob." He lifts up his coconut as do all my other friends. Ana hands me a goblet of chilled wine. She hugs me as I gulp.

Then I hear a voice in the foreground. "Tell us a story Jacob." It's Jonny Steele, the guy I just met at the diner.

Crystal is by his side, "Yeah Jacob tell us a story."

I hear my Dad yell, "Come on Jake, do us proud."

Everyone chants, "Jacob! Jacob! Jacob!" Even Spider-man is there screaming my name.

I lift myself up with perfect balance on the shaky hammock. With my hands I motion for silence and they all obey. I speak with confidence and create a world. They all listen with child-like smiles.

"The black sky is lit up with the fullness of the moon. A boy looks out into the sea and the clouds and the earth and thinks. He thinks about that pretty girl who smiled at him earlier in the day. He thinks if he is ever fortunate to see her again he shall offer to share the world with her.

"His thoughts stop when he feels that great change in the universe. He looks up to the moon which has always been so kind to him. 'Follow my way.' the moon commands.

"What do you mean, oh great flashlight of the sky?' the boy asks.

"Follow my way, son, follow my way."

I pause and everyone starts cheering. "Bravo, Jacob, bravo!" I didn't think it was the end of the story, but everyone I know is cheering madly. I think about the story again and I guess that was a nice way to end it.

Donna from my book *Propositions*, whispers in my ear, "Thank you, for such a wonderful story." She gives me a powerful hug, but Ana pushes her away.

"We are perfect together." Ana tells me.

"Do you really think so?" I ask and my eyes open. I see Crystal's giant TV screen above me. She's by my side. All that happiness was just a dream. I cry myself back to sleep.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

I know I'm wasting my life away by Crystal's pool. She's got a really nice view of the valley, but it's not doing anything for me. She thought the location might motivate me to write, unfortunately I've got nothing to write about except self-pity. But no one, not even me, wants to read about that. So I sit and stare through my pathetic life that I would have once killed for.

I don't understand why Crystal wants me around. She must understand by now I think she's a brainless plaything. Yet she insists I stay with her. I don't know what to do. I'm sick of her, but she's been so nice and supportive of me. But she's an actress, how can I trust anything she says?

"How's your day been?" Crystal came home. Sunglasses cover her eyes and a tight turtleneck dress hugs her body. "Have you written much?" She knows better than to ask a follow-up question when she sees only doodles are on my paper.

"I've just been thinking."

"About what?"

"You wouldn't understand. How's your day been?"

"Great. My agent says I'm a shoo-in to play Wonder Woman in the new movie." She keeps talking about her plans for the role and I dutifully nod my head and silently wonder if anyone would care if I just hiked through those hills until the end of time.

Crystal's still blabbering about Wonder Woman so I interrupt her in mid-sentence.

"The black sky is lit up with the fullness of the moon." I start reciting the story from my dream the other night. Crystal isn't quite sure what to make of this, but I continue the story. "A boy looks out into the sea and the clouds and the earth and thinks. He thinks about that pretty girl who smiled at him earlier in the day. He thinks if he is ever fortunate to see her again he shall offer to share the world with her."

“His thoughts stop when he feels that great change in the universe. He looks up to the moon which has always been so kind to him. ‘Follow my way,’ the moon commands.

“‘What do you mean, oh great flashlight of the sky?’ the boy asks.

“‘Follow my way, son, follow my way.’”

Crystal doesn’t realize it’s the end of my story. When I stay silent for a couple more seconds I thought she realized I finished. She didn’t. She asked, “That’s what you’ve been working on today? You’re stuck on that sentence?”

“Yeah, I’m stuck.”

“You’re so creative Jacob.” Her lipstick tattoos my lips. “I was wondering if you could do me a favor. I’ve had some ideas and I was wondering if you could teach me how to get them together so I could write a book.”

“I’m the wrong person to ask.”

“What are you talking about? You’re the greatest writer ever.”

“Not anymore.”

Crystal laughs at me. “Are you still moping about all those bad reviews? Who cares what the critics say. They’re just jealous of your talent. I used to get so down when those fat morons on TV said I couldn’t act my way out of thin ice, but then I realized they’re losers. A lot of people must think I’m a great actress or else I wouldn’t be so successful and the same goes for your writing.”

“But these guys are right. I was lucky as hell to write one book that anyone besides me would like. I just don’t have anything that does any good for anyone else.”

“Well as long as you enjoy it.”

“That’s not true.” I notice a vulture is flying above us. “Being an artist is a very selfish lifestyle. Unless other people enjoy your work or change their lives because of your work, than your life is fairly meaningless.” I can see through her sunglasses that she can’t comprehend what I’m saying. I continue complaining anyway. “So what if people want to talk to me at parties now. It’s not because they want to

talk to me. They want to talk to the brilliant writer of *Bird of a Different Feather*."

"What are you babbling Jacob? Have you been drinking again?"

"No, but maybe I should. Being sober isn't making me any more creative." It's making me hateful. Here I am hating the California sunshine, California girls, and everything else in this state. Beauty has become another genre of ugliness. What's wrong with me, I have to wonder. Why does it seem happiness doesn't exist? Crystal seems content which is close enough to happiness, so I try to get in her mindset.

"What were you thinking about writing?" I ask her.

"There's this neighbor I played with when I was a kid. When we were seven he got a buzz cut and you could see a big, red circular birthmark on his scalp. I always imagined he had a horn like a unicorn and his parents ripped it off. So I thought I'd write a story about his parents finding a unicorn kid and their dilemma about what to do with the child."

"That's an interesting idea," I tell her. "Now what you do is write whatever you can about it. Give it to a publisher and because you're Crystal Shane, no matter how shitty it is it will be in bookstores this fall next to the books by Ethane Hawke and Jimmy Buffet. Why don't you record an album while you're at it?"

"What's with you Jacob? Why are you so negative?"

I want to express to her how meaningless life is and how happiness seems inaccessible, but I just say, "I hate LA. I've got to go home."

"Your flight doesn't go back for another week."

"I've got money now. I can afford a new ticket." I stand up and walk barefoot across the pool deck. "I'll just pack my things. If you can give me a ride to the airport I'll take the first flight back."

She wears her bemused face. She has only one facial expression for every emotion. "What did I do to make you want to get away so badly?"

I don't answer because the truth will make her cry. "You don't have to give me a ride. I'll take a cab."

She grasps my elbow. "You're going to tell me what's wrong or I'm not going to let you go." Her dramatic training has obviously prepared her for climactic scenes such as this.

I push myself away forcefully. I open the sliding glass door and walk upstairs to her airy bedroom. My black, nylon suitcase is laying on her bed. I throw my dirty clothes into it. I walk downstairs. She's sitting on her couch looking right through me. My conscience tells me I owe it to her to explain my emotions and hopelessness, but my practical side knows she can't cheer me up. She can only distract me with her beauty. So I look into her mascara laced eyes as I walk out the door and down the hill into town. The momentum of walking downhill makes the mile journey seem like nothing. I dial for a taxi from outside the convenience store. In the movies people always walk out from their obligations, but they never show where those drifters go. Since TV didn't prepare me for this situation, when the taxi came and the driver asked me where I wanted to go, I didn't know how to answer.

"Where to sir?" he asked again.

"The airport." I thought about my packed suitcase and my fat bank account and the endless possibilities that combination could provide.

As the driver zoomed through the freeway I couldn't think of anyplace I could go. "Which airline are you flying?"

I couldn't make up an answer so I told him, "I don't care."

He dropped me off at the far end of the airport so my fare would be higher. I wandered through the airport and I considered the thousands of destinations awaiting me. I thought about going to Spain and learning how to play guitar from an old master. I thought about going to Israel and joining their army. Maybe structure and discipline is what would give my life meaning. Then I decided I was going to spend the rest of my days wandering the Los Angeles Airport. I could start conversations with foreign tourists who wouldn't know how to talk back and I could read all the magazines people leave behind as they fly to another land.

I sit down to rest my imagination. I make sure to sit away from everyone else because I hate them all. A television broadcasts sports

highlights and I so desperately want to be stupid. I want to stop thinking, so I can be content and enjoy football on Sundays and whatever else lets other people make it through their days.

Then through my gloom I hear the name Pablo Chiste. I wonder how that creep followed me even here, but then I realize his name is being mentioned on the television. The gray-skinned newscaster is reporting, "Pablo Chiste, the former Nobel Laureate for literature, has been accused of stealing his latest critically acclaimed novel, *Gruddy Waters*, from his eighteen year-old daughter, Elena Chiste.

"So far there has been no comment from Pablo Chiste. But with his history of self-promotion, it is a near certainty that Mr. Chiste will soon comment on the matter. In other literary news... international action hero, Jonny Steele has just signed a million dollar deal to write his first novel..."

No one else in the airport cares. But I do. I want to ask the newscaster what the hell happened, but he's too busy talking about other garbage. I wonder if one of those people who I told at the party about Elena's ghost writing, finked out to the press. I need to know what happened so I pay an exorbitant amount to take the earliest flight to Miami. With my ticket in hand I walk to the gate and waste several hours thinking about death.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

I'm too hungry to eat. I had a choice of tuna melt and meatloaf on the plane. I declined both options. Then the airline's SS women wouldn't let me eat peanuts because the grandma sitting next to me told me she was so allergic to peanuts that she would lose control of her bodily fluids even if she only accidentally inhaled one. Now I wish I told her that the meatloaf she was eating was making me suicidal.

It's six in the morning, Miami time. My plane was delayed but at least it brought me where I wanted to go. I stick the key in my door and unlock. It's late enough for me to go straight to bed, but I couldn't sleep. After six days away I need to get readjusted to my home. I look at my phone and there's two messages for me.

The first message is from Crystal. She says she'll never understand me, but that she loves me and I should call her and tell her what's bothering me.

The second message is from Elena. She said to the machine, "Jacob, it's Elena. I don't know if you're checking your messages from California or what. It's 12:30 Tuesday... um... I just want to know if you know where my father is. I don't know where he is... and I don't know if you do. Call me."

She didn't say if it was 12:30 in the morning or the afternoon. I risk calling her anyway. The phone rings five times before she picks it up and mutters something in Spanish.

"Elena? It's Jacob. Sorry to wake you, but..."

"OK, I can pick you up."

"Pick me up? What? Are you awake Elena?"

"Huh." She doesn't talk for a second. "I'm sorry I must have fallen asleep."

I give her another second to wake up. "I just got in from LA and I got your message. Did your father ever come home?"

"No. I haven't seen him all day. My mom said he used to do this all the time. When something didn't go his way, he would disappear for



days. But he's never done this since he gained custody over me. I don't know what to do. I called all the numbers in his phone book..."

"Did you check the beach? He always seems to be there." She doesn't say anything. "I'll go check it out for you, so why don't you chill out at home and start writing another best selling book."

"Fuck you Jacob."

"That's what I like to hear." And the click means she hung up the phone without telling me how Pablo got caught.

I get in my car and drive. The sun isn't up high enough for me to take off my sweater. I switch on the AM radio stations and listen for any more news about Pablo Chiste. Since we're living in a glorious age of information, I immediately find a radio recording of a relevant interview. I'll let you listen in.

"Good morning this is Jim McPhongy of *Everything in Consideration* and today our guest is Richard Starr of *Seventeen Magazine*, now better known as the man who uncovered Pablo Chiste's plagiarism. Good morning Richard."

"Please call me Dick." Says a high pitched British accent.

"Dick, you wouldn't happen to be related to Ringo, would you?" The announcer guffaws.

Obviously annoyed the other chap says, "I believe Ringo's maiden name was Starkey."

"Sorry Dick. I had to ask since you've got the British accent and everything. Let's get down to business. How exactly did you uncover that Mr. Chiste swiped his newest novel from his teenaged daughter?"

"Well Jim, I was writing an article about celebrities' children for *Seventeen Magazine*. One of my subjects was Elena Chiste, Pablo's daughter."

"And also the true author of *Gruddy Waters*."

"Yes, Jim. Anyway, I was asking her the normal, fluffy questions. Do you have a boyfriend? What are your hobbies? Blah blah blah and eventually I asked her if she wrote. She brought me this journal and what I read was quite extraordinary. So I asked her if I could borrow the journal to possibly publish some of her writings in our magazine. Everything was of such a high quality that I read through the entire

journal. Somewhere along the way I found a story in there that had uncanny similarities to *Gruddy Waters*."

"By similarities what do you mean?"

"What I bloody mean is the plot is exactly the same. The names of the characters were different. They both involved a troubled young man who would go up on stage and say what was on his mind and everyone would laugh. I shouldn't reveal any more because it is a wonderful story and I don't want to ruin any of the book's surprises."

"But Dick, isn't it possible that Elena just copied her father's story in her journal or he just got the barebones idea from her?"

"I considered that possibility but after rereading *Gruddy Waters* and Pablo Chiste's past works it became obvious that *Gruddy Waters* was written by a different fellow than whoever wrote *Silhouettes*. And after comparing Elena's journal with..."

I turn off the radio because I'm where I know Pablo Chiste has to be. I park my car on the grass on the side of the road. My shoes are off and I walk down the familiar path of sand. I see a shadowy figure sitting alone watching the sun climb above the ocean.

I stand over him without saying a word. We wait there forever without acknowledging each other's existence. I break first. "Pablo, Elena called me this morning. She's really worried about you."

He grabs a metallic flask that I didn't notice by his side and takes a gulp. "I bought this off a man in San Sebastian. He told me it was Ernest Hemingway's. I never believed him until now."

"You're drunk, Pablo? You can't do this. You've got a daughter worried sick about you. Come on, let's go home." I try pulling him up but he crashes me down into the sand.

"Elena. Elena is so much like her mother, Teresita. Now she was a beauty. Why did I ever leave her. Oh yes I remember. Because she was sleeping with that Greek piece of shit! You don't want to hear this Jacob. I could go for hours listing my regrets. Let's go swimming instead."

"No. Let's talk some more about all your fuck-ups. Maybe it will cheer me up."

An early morning jogger runs past us. I grab Pablo's flask and take a swig. It's disgusting. Sweet rum with a subtle taste of aluminum.

"I always thought when you write a couple masterpieces like you have that you would be entitled to sit back and have no worries. I figured people like you and Paul McCartney made their contributions to the universe so your lives would be fulfilled."

"Nothing changes Jacob. You're always trying to prove yourself. We try to make ourselves better or at least fool other people into thinking we are better people than we are, but we're always going to be the same people. We can change our names, I changed mine to Pablo Chiste, but I'm always going to be Pablo Chipstein. That silly kid who will do anything to get noticed. You know how it is Jacob. You wrote a great book and that didn't make your life that much better, but then you write three shitty books and you feel like a failure."

"You don't know what I'm feeling," I tell him.

"Yes I do." He takes another swig. "I'm sorry I disappointed you. I know how you looked up to me. How everyone looked up to me. The pressures are too much. I needed to have one more great book under my belt. I'm the Ernest Hemingway of our time, for God's sake."

"It's no big deal Pablo. In a couple years no one will remember this. It's not like you stole Elena's book. She let you publish it under your name. You can always say you did it just to get her book published."

"It's still an embarrassment. They're taking away my Nobel Prize."

"But I thought you didn't accept it in the first place."

He looks at me like I was mad. "It doesn't mean they can take it away from me. I've received news that some goon is suing me because I stole *Silhouettes* from him."

"You didn't, did you?"

"No, but now everyone will suspect I did. I'm through, Jacob, through."

"You knew that months ago. You told me that the moment I first met you. Even if you are through you've accomplished more than you probably ever dreamed. Your books have motivated thousands of people, not just to write like they have for Elena and me, but to live."

"All right. So I've served my purpose in life. I've given the world wonderful stories that people will love and cherish forever. Where does that leave me?"

"Dude, don't be so selfish. You've written thousands of pages of beautiful literature. What about me? I got lucky and woke up one morning and wrote a great book which has only shown me that I'm not a good writer or a good..." I was about to say person.

"Bah. You are young. You will have new experiences that you can't even imagine. They will shape you into a great writer. I am older and it is hard for me to sit by and realize my time is almost done. It's very hard to live when you only experience hope through your memories."

"So now it's your daughter's time. Which gives you a purpose. You can help her keep her sanity by not running away from her and by giving her the top-notch advice you gave me." I only flatter Pablo's ego for Elena's benefit. She doesn't deserve the guilt associated with a depressed father.

I stare at Pablo and see all he feels is self-pity, but all I feel for him is envy. He got caught. He doesn't have to live a lie. I'll never get caught. Even if I told the world, *Bird of a Different Feather* isn't mine, they would laugh. "Of course you wrote it" they would say.

"It wasn't me." I would retort. They would lock me in a padded room and chalk it up to another case of a genius developing into a madman.

"Let's go home Pablo."

I lift him up and he sings into my ear, "Love, love, love. Love, love, love." He pours liquor down his throat. "Love is all you need." I put his limp arm around my shoulder and we walk away from the sun into my car. He sings the same line over and over and over.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

"Love. Love Love. Love is all you need." Pablo's still singing his throat dry.

The sun continues creeping up. Nothing's worse than a sunrise when you're still owed a night's sleep. I push my car's brakes as we roll into Pablo's driveway. The house's front window glitters with powered light bulbs. Elena stumbles into the driveway with sleep in her eyes and knots in her hair. I've got to admit Elena is a brave little trooper. If one of my parents came home this drunk I would hide in my embarrassed little corner until the alcohol sweat out of them. Instead she's standing out here thinking of what she is supposed to do.

Pablo burps. "Elena, you forgive me, don't you?"

No reply. I invite myself into the dialogue. "Do you want me to help bring him in?"

"No I'll do it." Like a pro she puts Pablo's dead weight arm around her skinny shoulder. He stumbles into the house with her.

After they enter the house the door shuts. I don't know if that was a subtle sign from the wind or from Elena for me to get lost. A sick part of my brain imagines them having incestual sex. I'm sure they're not, but I always assume people are doing the most sickening things when no one can see them. Like if I see someone showing their dog too much affection or attention I just know they violate that dog's private areas.

I should be angry at Elena for not even thanking me or inviting me in, but I'm having trouble feeling anything, except for the wind floating through my convertible. As I drive I wonder what would become of me if I drove off the bridge. There's a nice 200 foot drop and I could scream all the way until I drown. I consider it but I know the concrete sideline would save me.

As I look at the sun sailing over Biscayne Bay and inhale the salty air mixed with carbon monoxide I can't understand my unhappiness. I own a car! I'm in movies and yesterday I was fucking Crystal Shane. But none of it seems important. I know I should end it all if the only way I can be happy is in my dreams. I've accomplished

everything that I thought would fulfill me but I'm still nothing. Pablo has a reason to continue living. He has a daughter I have nothing but dreams. If only I wasn't afraid to pull in front of that eighteen-wheel truck, slam on my brakes and let my body get mutilated. I could move on.

I hate being afraid. If I want something so bad I should be able to do it. Everything else that I've wanted has come true. I am famous. People want my advice and attention now. It's all because of a stupid story that I had nothing to do with. The stories that I lived and put some thought into have been ridiculed. I mean I thought if I became famous people would start to love me because I'm such a great person. But I'm shit.

I park my car and walk upstairs. I get in my apartment and look in my mirror. My reflection hurts. Why am I so pathetic that I can't finish it? I'm so pathetic that I even have a pathetic reason for wanting to die. I can't look at myself. I'm disgusting. No one should have to look through me. I pull open the mirror and look through my medicine cabinet for some kind of pills that Ana might have left behind all those months ago in case I planned to kill myself. Nothing. So I grab the scissors I use to cut my toenails. They're sharp so they should be able to slit my wrists. I slightly poke my left wrist with the tip and I get a little blood to drip out of my skin. I drop the scissors and lick my salty blood. I don't know if my stomach will be able to take me slitting both my wrists. But I remind myself, that's the point.

I sing to myself that this will be my claim to fame. I inject the scissors as deep into my wrist as it can go. It hurts. I can't help screaming. This will be my claim to fame. I fucking use all my strength to shift the scissors through my wrist. The sound of the metal scraping the bone is the worst. This will be my claim to fame. I should have written a good-bye letter. It would have made all the newspapers. I pull the scissors out of my arm. Some wormy substance is attached to the blood on my scissors. This will be my claim to fame. I try to stab my right wrist but my left hand hurts so much and it's so bloody, it's slippery. I scream. I hurt so much and I'm losing so much blood, but I'm not dying. I need to die. I try sucking the blood out of my wrist maybe it will run out quicker

that way. I need to die. This will be my claim to fame. I run out the apartment. Down the stairs. The sun is out. I ask an old Cuban guy if he'll kill me. He'll never forget me.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

My eyes flicker and I'm drenched in failure. It's what I'm all about. Can't think of a word to say. Being in a hospital room lets me know I'm not dead.

If this is the afterlife I'm really disappointed.

I guess I might have reincarnated into a newborn baby child and only the Buddha and I remember our previous incarnations. A glimpse of my heavily bandaged wrist lets me know I'm still in the body of Jacob Fielding.

"Look who's awake."

I feel weak but Pablo Chiste sitting with a bouquet of flowers demands a response. "Hello Pablo." I can't speak too loudly.

"Hi Jacob. I just got word that your parents are coming down."

"Shit." I notice a tube is in my nose. "How did they know?"

"Your attempted suicide made the national news. I guess you're happy you got everyone's attention."

"I'm such a fuck-up." I start crying. I can't help it. "I can't do anything. I can't even kill myself."

"Why did you do it?" He asks a few times. "What was going on in your little head?"

I scream as softly as I can. "I don't know. I hate myself. I can't do anything. I've always been so close to happiness. But there's always a wall. My whole life I thought if I was famous and everyone really loved and respected me then I'd pass that wall, but it's still in my way."

"Jacob, you are one of the greatest writers who... who I have ever read."

"No. I'm an awful writer. You read my other books."

"So they weren't as good. *Bird of a Different Feather* is something... something so special. You don't know how proud I am to be a part of it."

"You don't understand. I was just the monkey with the typewriter who accidentally pushed the right keys in the right order. I had nothing to do with the book. It wrote itself and that's the only reason anyone will care if I live or die."



"This is the reason why you killed yourself? To hate life for such petty reasons is...is... well regardless you're going to live Jacob. Next time you try slitting your wrist make sure to stick them under running water so the blood doesn't clot." He stops himself. "Elena wanted... and I wanted to give you these flowers to thank you for bringing me home that day." He walks toward me and hands me the yellow flowers. I feel them.

"These are plastic."

"Yes. A plethora of real flowers have been sent to you, but real flowers aren't allowed in hospital rooms, so I thought I'd give you something you can see."

"Who would send me flowers? No one likes me."

"Since you tried killing yourself, everyone assumed the unlikeable Jacob Fielding isn't the real Jacob Fielding."

"Why do I hate my life so much?" I fall apart. Tears are all over my face. "Where did I go wrong?"

He pats my head. "You didn't. You just got lost."

"Death will be so nice. You won't feel anything. You won't care."

"And no one will take away Nobel Prizes you didn't accept in the first place. Yes, death will be nice. But we still have a long way to go, my friend."

He hands me his handkerchief. I wipe my eyes without questioning whether he had ever blown his nose with it. "Yeah, we do. It's funny, it kind of reminds me of... I guess it was a dream that I just had while I was unconscious. These two old men meet on the top of a mountaintop at the end of time and... and one of them asks the other "That was life?" and... shit it was a really great dream. One of them was a miner and the other a sailor and they both know... um Pablo, you don't happen to have a pen and paper?"

He reaches into his pockets. "I have a pen and an... address book."

I take them and even though my hand hurts so much I start writing and writing and writing and writing and a doctor walks in. "I see you're up Mr. Fielding."

Pablo tells him, "Excuse me, Doctor, I am Pablo Chiste. Right now your patient is writing. Could you come back later... with a lot of paper."

And I write.

And I write.

And I write.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

For every great book there are a thousand bad ones. That becomes obvious when you're searching through a used book bin looking for a good read.

I'm at the Miami Book Fair. I'm going to be speaking a bit later. I'm the featured speaker. Well, I'm not actually the star speaker, Jonny Steele is, but I've been told a hell of a lot of people are coming to hear me.

Anyway, right now I'm roaming from tent to tent searching for something to invest my time and brain cells into.

Here's an interesting book. *The Real Profiler*. The back of the paperback says it's about two FBI agents searching for the world's deadliest assassin.

"Jacob?" A hand lightly taps my shoulder. I turn around expecting an autograph seeker, but instead it's Ana.

She's as beautiful as she always was. Even in blue jeans and a crummy t-shirt. The sun sparkles into her blue eyes. I forgot her scent and how true it was that a writer would rather be alone, unless a beautiful woman is around. Only beautiful women are worth wasting your time because they'll drive emotions into you that no one else could ever provoke. As you can tell I'm thinking, but I can't speak.

Then I notice the dark, clean-shaven man, I say man because he's got to be over 30, in pleated clothes by her side. "Jacob, this is Herman." I shake his hand. I try to hurt him, but his grip is stronger than mine.

He says without irony. "You were great in *Underwater II: The Reunion!*"

"Thanks. That means a lot to me." I lie.

It gets awkward so Herman politely excuses himself to buy some coffee.

"How have you been doing?" she asks. "How's life among the rich and famous?"

"Well, I'm not really that rich. I don't know if you heard but... but I tried killing myself and I didn't have any insurance. So much of my

savings has gone toward hospital bills. And taxes. I'm voting Republican next election."

"I heard all about it." She says pulling my wrist. "Let me see..." She rolls up my sleeve. The jagged scar makes her turn away. She asks angry, "What were you thinking?"

"I don't know. I have to go to court ordered therapy to find out. Did you know it was a criminal offense to attempt suicide?" Her finger traces my scar. "I think I did it because I missed you."

"Don't say that. That's an awful thing to say to someone. Besides aren't you shacking up with that actress Crystal Shane?"

"We're on and off. But I do miss you." It gets quiet but silence is scary. "So what are you doing with yourself besides hanging out with well-groomed senior citizens?"

She kicks my shin. "Same old Jacob. You've always got to be talking shit about everyone." She can't hide that smile.

"Same old Ana. You always have to kick first and answer questions later. Come on, this is our big reunion. You've seen it in the movies. When an old couple bump into each other on the street. They're supposed to tell each other what they've been up to."

She humors me. "After I graduated I got a job and realized I wanted to go back to school. I decided to go to law school. I got a full scholarship to Florida State University. I'm moving up to Tallahassee next month."

"You never told me you wanted to be a lawyer." I try hiding my disappointment. I always had dreams of us being a barefoot bohemian couple.

"You never asked."

"Silly me," I say as I look into her eyes and remember another era.

"I've got all your books at home. Even the one I never read that you always bothered me about. I was right not to read it. It's your worst one."

"Thanks." She's the only person whose insults feel good.

"Are you writing a lot?"

"Yeah, after I awoke from my self-induced coma I wrote another book."

"I guess you went through some powerful emotions."

"Well, yeah, but that book had nothing to do with them. No one wants to read about my emotions. They're just not marketable. This book is another dream that I wrote down that probably you and the rest of the world will really connect with. But right now I'm more interested in this other book I'm writing. It's inspired by a lot of feelings I was scared to think about before."

"That sounds frightening!" Ana says with a laugh. "What's it about?"

"It's about fifty pages right now. It's about the luckiest guy in the world. He gets anything he wants, but he always wants more."

She looks at her watch. "Aren't you speaking in ten minutes?"

"Yeah. They can wait." She's my soulmate. "Do you ever think about us getting back together? I mean we were special, weren't we?"

"Jacob, don't get into this. We haven't seen each other in a while."

"You don't have to answer. I didn't want to put you in a spot. I think we had something special." I get an idea. "Could I ask you a favor? For old time's sake."

"I guess."

"Since your letter saying good-bye..."

"I'm sorry Jacob. I just knew I couldn't break up with you any other way. If I said it to your face, you would have persuaded me to think I was happy when..."

"No. It's cool. I understand. I just thought since we never had a chance to say good-bye properly. That I could give you a farewell kiss."

"What? Here?"

"Yeah! Why not? Herman will understand. For old time's sake."

I put my arms around her waist, pull her body close to mine, and open my mouth to give her a big surprise. It's a moment I don't want to end because it feels so right. This is why Allah wouldn't let me die. But maybe I did die and this is heaven.

There is one second where everything that could have been is. But adrenaline vanishes and I notice Ana's hands desperately pushing me away.

I let her go.

Before she has a chance to call security I walk away from her into the crowds.

The crowds that are united by only one thing, their love for me.

THE END