

Initial Reviews

“It made this grown man cry...

a few times. Fuckin’ hell. I’ve been to prison and count myself as rough and tough. And then this book knocked my head sideways, yanked my guts and ripped my heart open.”

“I don’t even read fiction, usually. A man I admire and trust handed it to me. It’s deceptive... a tonne of practically effective strategies and tools are packed into this gripping novel. It’s become a bible to me.”

“I didn’t think I could relate to Bill. Annoyed by some of his initial choices... But, gradually I was blown away by how much what he went through in these seven days is so close to what I am going actually through, right now. We’re so different and yet inside so similar. It’s astounding!”

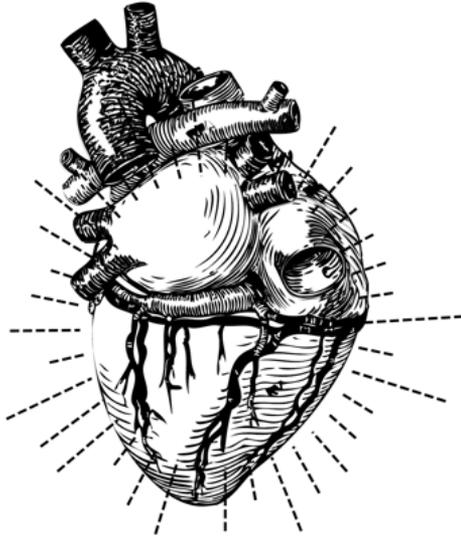
“I’m a friend of David’s and part of the PAL community, so I expected something rich and deep, but this whole world that Bill discovers. Wow, I am even more dazzled and grateful to be part of the real magic...”

“As a busy, sleep deprived dad, I have no idea where I had the time to read 450 + pages! But,

I could not put it down...”

My Heart Is A Muscle

My Heart Is A Muscle



By
David Jurasek

My Heart Is A Muscle

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Pause for a moment.

This book is *not* for
the faint of heart.

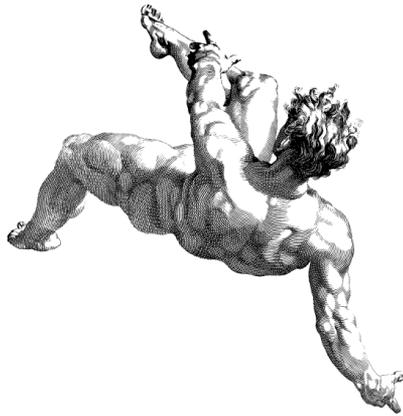
If you dare to delve into it, know this...

It will break
your heart,
open.

The events within
~ especially those that seem most
unbelievable ~
are, in fact, based on true events
which happened to me or to men
I know and trust.

Monday

When everything that can,
unravels...



My Heart Is A Muscle

Chapter 1

Deviating from My Plan

I bolt up, awake, beads of wetness running down my back, my night shirt drenched in sweat. My is heart pounding fiercely like it might crack open my chest.

What a strange feeling.

What was I dreaming about?

I can't recall. Grabbing my phone, I see it's 4:33am.

Shit!

My trusty alarm didn't go off.

I can't be late! Not today!

The events of today have been years in the making. I don't want to make such a big deal out of it, but the pressure in my chest and a fire in my belly call my mind's bluff.

One leg in pants, and another. Doing one thing at a time is like putting a shaken snow globe down, letting my mind settle and my nerves cool down.

Donning a clean undershirt and moving to the kitchen now, I seize the reigns of my mind and walk through all the steps I need to take this morning - again for the seventh time. I don't *ever* catastrophize, but today is the kind of day where one false move could have actual life altering consequences. All my ducks need to be in a row.

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I grind my jaw, irritated that my dad's open heart surgery has to happen the same morning as my big day at work.

Slow the fuck down, Bill. Breathe.

Back to basics. I usually start my day at 5am. Today, Monday, is an exceptional day. I need all cylinders revved up and working smoothly...

Focus. Bend time to your will.

For a moment, the tightly wound rope inside the centre of my body loosens. I really do believe that there is power in how we start and end something. And beginnings are the most important: setting the ball in motion for how everything will go from there on.

Would you not agree?

I like my routines. Well-worn grooves that keep the train on track.

After a piss, it's calisthenics and a run.

Followed by a cold shower.

The mind is my servant, not my master. I grab the steering again and review my agenda while I sip a cup of hot water.

Then, I prepare Julia's ~ my daughter's ~ lunch.
Done.

Now, Jess, my wife, is a nurse who works weird hours, and so is often unpredictable and grumpy in the mornings. Being a good hubby, I would normally go and massage her feet and wake her at 7am.

But, not today. After my shower, I down a protein shake, hastily prep Julia's favorite breakfast, a toasted blueberry waffle with cheese. I leave a kiss on Jess's forehead and one sweet one on the nape of her neck (her favorite spot) and then I rub her back three times, darting out the door by 5:32am.

I try not to rush now as I notice that I am catching up and only 2 minutes behind schedule.

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The fire in my belly is blazing with coal and my whole body feels like a steam engine, in full throttle now. I am on track and on route to pick up my dad at the home for seniors - run by the company I work for, Golden Years.

The staff there who know me say I'm a chip off his block. But, lately, he has really deteriorated into a more pale and miserable version of me, I guess. I hope to age more gracefully.

Thankfully, the residence is only a few blocks away.

I'm in his room now. He's even more cranky than usual. I visited him a couple of days ago to pack his essentials and set his alarm up.

But, he's snoring.

Surgery prep is in 37 minutes.

The hospital is also close by. It's no coincidence. I set it up years ago so as to have all the essential pieces nearby. I always plan ahead and for contingencies.

There he lies, not playing his part, refusing to move!

Heaving and snoring instead.

I don't think surgeons are flexible with their timing!

"Damn it dad!"

Getting him up is like grappling with a stubborn mule, with the added bite of an old rabid dog. He used to be such a reliable, overly accommodating type, a real people pleaser next to mom. Now, I need him to just get the fuck up!

He pushes me away. "Piss off!"

Good thing I'm stronger. I hook his arm and start pulling him up.

He growls, literally.

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Seeing him in his underwear acting like a toddler, I have to remember he's not an adult any more. He is more childlike. We're all going to be like that as we age. I'm reminded of this often at my work with seniors.

Compassion could be helpful here.

I can hear Jess' voice reminding me.

It's hard to find it right now. "You're going to die if they don't fix you up, dad."

He looks up at me, suddenly his expression shifts to look like that of a scared boy within a hunched and weathered body.

"Why? What's wrong?" He asks fearfully.

Where do I begin?

He does *not* have any degenerative brain or loss of memory conditions, that I know of. This whole "*I have no idea what's happening and I'm helpless*" routine is wearing on me.

I don't want to turn into my mom, she was always the bossy and critical one. But, I don't have time for this. I need to get him there so I can get to my meeting. I bet I sound petty and selfish, but I hope you'll understand soon enough.

Picking him up now and dressing him. Not for the first time. I've gotten pretty good at it.

Driving as if there were a fire under my ass. I am the engine that has momentum, hell bent and breaking through anything on it's tracks now.

Dropping him off at the hospital. A nurse is standing by, ready to take him in.

He gives me a look that says, "*How could you leave me here? My own son!*"

I roll my eyes.

Really? You were always terrible at playing the guilt card. That was something mom was a master at.

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I kiss his ornery head. "Love you dad." My hand on his shoulder, I feel his neediness. His frail and rigid body reminds me that this is also a huge deal. There is a chance he might not come out. We've already prepared ourselves and talked it over a dozen ways. I know he is scared but the nurse comes in and starts tending to him.

I give my reassurance one more time, "You're in good care. I'll be back to check on you soon."

He grabs me suddenly, very tightly, with an intense frozen glare, pulling me down, whispering in my ear, "You gotta take care of everyone. Don't drop them. Don't drop them."

A rush of a cold chill flushes through me. It's as if he's said out loud what's driven me my entire life. My core operating system. The primary directive is his contribution:

"Take care of others, ALWAYS"

And the secondary one, is mom's addition...

"Don't fuck anything up."

Hearing it spoken with desperation, I pull away, determined to not let that get in my way also.

Seeing him wheeled away, I nod along, pushing behind me the waves of worry.

Finally, alone.

Driving to my meeting, the inevitable swirl in the pit of my belly starts to dampen the fire that has been fueling me thus far. I know this guilt, creeping in, despite my trying to keep it at bay. A stream of *shoulds* fill my mind.

I push back against them, raising a wall, to clear my mind.

Fuck off! What am I supposed to do?!

Sit there all day in a hospital, helplessly fretting? And sabotage my life's work?

I tell myself a story.

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In his right mind, he would understand. We are both doers. Needing to have our hands building something or in the dirt making something grow. Helping people is who we are...

I have a mission, bigger than me, that has waited for years to launch. It happens to be that today, this morning in fact, is when my team and I get to unveil it. My focus shifts to the actual presentation, picturing our CEO, senior management team and the owner nodding along and giving us the final approval.

But, not till we bring it home.

I need to be at my sharpest and most compelling. Three years of research, asking everyone to work on weekends have gotten us here. The presentation is solid. Our approach tested and some preliminary results proven.

But still, the premise is innovative and bold, in a field that has not evolved in a century. We're also asking for a leap of faith and a huge investment.

My mind clears, thankfully, like a fog lifting, as I walk through the details of the pitch, for the hundredth time.

THIS is my PRIORITY right now.

Dad will be ok.

That's what I tell myself.

DING...

It's Jess, texting me. Hmm... Wants to meet me? Sigh. She's been acting strange lately. Doesn't she know what day it is? The whole reason I've stayed in this company so long: 22 years. I'm pushing mid forty. My whole adult life so far.

I don't like surprises... especially today.

I text her back:

What's up? Dad is at the hospital. All good?

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DING! She texts me a screen pic of where she is...
in the ravine down the street from my office. I reply,

Looks nice. Busy. Hon. Big
meeting, remember!

Jess:

Of course! I know. But I saw your
calendar. You have a window,
right now.

And I'm already here, on route.
Come on. You won't regret it.



This is not like her.

Somehow, I can't say no.

Is this my flaw or the better part of me?

Saying yes to her makes me feel less bad about my
dad.

I text back:

Ok. On my way.

Chapter 2

The Rug Pulled From Under My Feet

There's an entrance to the massive ravine system hidden just a block away from where the meeting will be. It cuts through the entire city. Once you walk down, there is a cool relief from the concrete jungle. Lush, green and buffered.

I tend to live in my mind - planning and evaluating. But my belly is churning and my body tingling now. Hard to ignore.

Maybe this will help to settle my nerves.

I meet Jess there. She's in her scrubs, assuming she's off to work next. After we discuss dad, I look at her confused about why we're here. She takes my hand in hers.

"Don't worry, Jules is with mom, remember."

I'm taken aback that I didn't even know that. Missed seeing her off to bed last night.

"I've been so wrapped up in this presentation and preparing dad", I blurt out to assuage my guilt perhaps.

"I know. Always taking care of everybody. It takes a village, remember?"

I nod, appreciating her understanding.

We walk for a bit without words. She breaks the silence, "So, how do you feel...?"

"I'm... good, I guess. It's not a big deal."

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"Everybody will be there and you finally get to share your brilliant plan. Not a big fucking deal?"

"I like..."

"I know... 'to manage expectations'... Well I'm excited and full of butterflies *for you*. You know what else...?"

I shake my head.

"I think since you have a couple of hours, instead of over-thinking things, as you tend to do, and get yourself wound up... I think the best thing for you to do right now is to..." She suddenly breaks contact and runs ahead, calling, "...follow me!"

I chuckle and chase her, leading us into a thicket of high grasses, eight feet tall, with cattails.

The sun is warm and it's really the first day in late spring that I've noticed the vibrant green of the foliage around me. I'm hyper practical but not usually so oblivious to the beauty that is around me.

But the ground is squishy. Wearing my best shoes, I hesitate.

She pulls me in and then weaves into the grasses and disappears.

"Jess... ! Come on... what's going on?"

She calls from one place.

"I'm here!"

And then seemingly another, "You have to find meeee..."

As I follow the sound of her laughter, I smell something that throws me. It's intoxicating... like a flower that is so sweet. Then a pungent smell, like that of a swamp.

My shoes are soaked. Arrrh.

"Ok, where...?" I'm getting a bit exasperated by this *game*.

"Here! " she grabs me from behind.

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I spin around. And find her stark naked.

My instinct is to shield her with my arms, but it's obvious we are alone and no one can see us here.

"What the...? Wow..."

She kisses me with full wet lips.

She reaches to unbutton my pants, while pulling me down with her other hand. She's always been skillful with her body.

"I don't..."

"Don't worry..." She mumbles and I see she's even placed a tarp and blanket to where we would fall. She's planned it all ahead of time, my girl has always been practical and crafty that way.

I admire her making this happen, but... I pull away. My mind reeling.

A boxer doesn't have sex before the fight. Doesn't she get that I can't lose my focus right now?! What's wrong with her? I can't tell her this. Don't need to start a fight right now.

She stops. Staring at me with her big doe-like eyes. I hate it when I've done something she thinks is mean or cold and she gives me that look.

But right now it's more like surprise.... and something else I can't describe... yet.

I stare at her.

My mind feels stuck now like a tight fist turned to stone, unable to open.

There's a vast space between us. A frozen wall goes up. I don't understand what's happening. Feeling cold all over. I can't seem to break through. Then it feels like something is blending my insides. My chest feels tight and sinks like a brick. My gut swirls with nausea and is full of thorns.

Finally, aware how my silence is making things worse, I blurt out. "I can't do this right now." I bite my lip as soon as the words come out.

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Her brow furrows and then her nose curls for a moment. And then her face flushes red and she turns to get her clothes on.

I look at my wet shoes and feel my socks, now soaked with swamp juice. That gross smell takes over.

Dressed, she sighs, gives me a peck while her hand slides in a caress across my face and falls to rest over my heart. She looks at me with so much emotion. I can't compute.

"I can't keep waiting for you."

She looks down briefly and then turns away, walking off, leaving the tarp and blanket.

I don't understand what's happening.

"Wait!"

My hands flail towards her, but grab emptiness. She's gone.

I chase her up the trail past a woman with a baby carriage and a bunch of people speeding by on mountain bikes.

Stumbling for words, "Jess. Please..."

She turns at last. Putting her arms in front of her.

"Don't. Don't apologize... or try to smooth things over. You always do that. You are a master at sounding reasonable and trying to do the right thing, Bill. I'm a big girl. Even if..."

She tears up.

More people walk by: a couple, one young and one old ~ I tend to notice and obsess about details and this is pretty fucking memorable...

My cheeks flush looking back at her.

"I'm okay to cry. You know why?"

I shake my head.

"Because I care about *us*. And this... This..."

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Gesturing to the space between us.

"...has not been working for a while now."

The words hit me as if I just walked into a brick wall.

"I know today is your big day. Oh my god. I was crazy enough to think that this could actually *help* you. To loosen up and feel joy together *before* you went into the lion's den. But there's always *something*. Some meeting or more plans in the works. Something that takes you away from me and *us*. And I thought, naively, I thought that going back to where you once took us... When we were so wrapped up in one another, something might happen..."

Frozen in place, my mouth full of cotton and my legs stuck in cement.

"You don't remember, do you?"

I search through my mind. *What is she talking about?*

The memory flushes in. Our first date... 25 years ago.

What's the date today? June 11th. It was today. Shit.

My face betrays how terrible I feel.

I remember now. Our first time out together without it being on a double date or with adults accompanying us. I just wanted to get out of the house, to not go home that sweet night. Lots of fighting at home. So, I took her for a walk here in this ravine.

But it was she who... no wait... I did lead us to the swamp... but I was not intending to seduce... or was I?

It's all kinda hazy now. Whoever started it, we made love. For the first time I could remember, I let myself go and forgot the world. I knew then she was special, and there was something I'd even call *magical* between us. Was I so sappy back then? Anyway, somehow I

could drop trying to be someone for a while and just lose myself, falling into her arms.

Jess snaps me out of it.

"It's fine..." She puts her palm on my chest. Then, her eyes close and she shakes her head, "No! Actually it's not fine, Bill!" Her hand slides down. Her voice becomes sharper. Her eyes pull together like those of a fox, fierce and protective. "We have no more spark. You have lost your balls and worse..." She pauses.

I am struck by the woman before me. So much has changed. She's older, hardened, worn down. We both are. At this moment, her attack reminds me of my mom.

And yet I know she is hurting and still the woman I love, but I can't hide the way her comment cuts and burns. I can't shake it off. My face turns red.

I should just walk away before this turns ugly...

Her expression breaks open, tears returning. "I'm sorry. I am *not* trying to attack your manhood... You are a great father and a good man. A reliable, trustworthy man..."

"But..." I spit back.

She pushes me back a step, with her open palm. The force of her strength is stunning.

"You don't feel anything!"

"I don't understand what you're saying."

She comes forward and cradles my head.

"Listen carefully."

Everything else disappears for a moment. This feels like a do or die moment.

"I am not *in* love with you any more, but that's not the problem. I still love you and I want to make this work. *But...*"

She scans my face trying to read me. I feel squirmy, wanting to turn away but hold my gaze steady, frozen in my body, with turmoil inside.

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She continues, "I need to feel alive with the person I am with. I need your heart to be open and beating more strongly. I will not have an affair or suddenly leave you. At the same time, I am telling you now, that we *both* have to wake this marriage up or I will..." Her eyes well up as more tears come... "...let it die."

She looks at me hoping for a sign.

The last words echo in me. Emptied and gutted.

She turns and walks back up the path.

Seeing her walk away, I have no energy or desire to follow her.

Bereft.

The earth beneath my feet feels like it's shaking, cracking open up to swallow me into a bottomless crevice. My legs buckle and I stumble a few steps off the path to a clearing under a large weeping willow tree. Grateful that the grass is dry... I feel vain to be thinking of my favorite shirt, but I need to be at this meeting and presentable, in 74 minutes. Aware that I've set alarms and reminders on my phone. I try to re-focus.

Ok. What's next?

My joints give way completely, like a puppet whose strings were cut.

I feel sleepy.

Like being sucked into a vortex I cannot resist, I lay back on the soft grass and the bed of moss under a willow tree, closing my eyes.

It's dark.

I find myself on a roof top of a tall building, the entire city around us.

Dark clouds ahead. I turn to look around and see blue skies behind me.

The wind is fierce pushing the ominous darkness closer.

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My daughter and wife are on the edge. I feel a wave of panic flash through me. I start walking towards them. They are talking and holding hands, pointing down ahead of them.

The dread tightens in my chest and gut, I start running. The wind forms a wall pushing me back.

I lean forward and push against its force, using every ounce of strength, reaching them just as they step off the ledge.

"Noooooooo!"

I lunge forward to reach for my wife Jess's hand, but it slips through my fingers.

They both look up as they are falling.

My body seizes and I can't breathe.

Then someone's hands come around my shoulders. I hear a woman's voice, familiar, yet strange and shocking, whispering mischievously, "You're it, mother fucker!" Cackling as she pushes me forward...

I'm falling...

I suddenly jolt awake. My body feels numb. Head full of cotton, again.

My phone alarm is vibrating, I'm drenched in sweat. I need to get to that meeting!

No time to go home. I'll grab a new shirt in my office. But my pants and shoes.

Damn it.

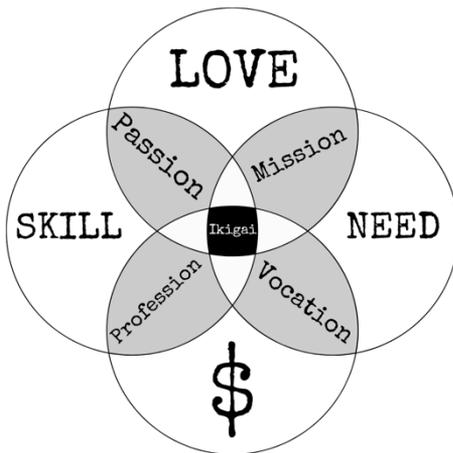
I stink.

Chapter 3

Stealing My Fire

Everything until now has felt important, yet also a competing distraction trying to keep me from what comes next.

It may be vain to admit it, but I have a mission in life, a vital purpose: my “IKIGAI”, as some would call



it, where all my gifts and talents, my calling to help others overlaps with what I get paid for, I am most passionate about *and also* with what is desperately needed in the world.

For 22 years, I have worked at Golden Years, being taken under the wing of the late and great

founder, Fred VanderHoooven. Working closely with him, as his protege, I got to understand the big vision he had -- to help seniors experience good health, ease, joy and renewed meaning late in life. Because Fred saw me as his equal and gave me room to test my ideas, I got to see my part in this vision. And getting to know the clients, many of them personally, I saw their heartbreaks. The loneliness. The void they face as

their younger families often forget them. Seeing almost all of them pass away, many with regrets, emptied husks of their former selves, I was humbled and heartbroken myself at times. But also, we saw ways to reach them and help them thrive.

4 years ago, after Fred died, it dawned on me that we could do much more. If we dared to do something radical and new. Something so simple and “obvious” that could change everything. We could bring even more joy, connection, meaning and purpose back into their lives, if we thought out of the box and expanded our sense of what care can be.

My pragmatic and evidence-based nature led me to spend these last few years doing the research to prove that this idea would not only double our social impact but certainly re-vitalize our business, lowering our costs and... Well, I'm here and it's time to tell *them* all about it.

“All dates are all in line with our previous targets. Now, I would like to present my plan for optimizing and innovating care.”

“Sorry Bill,” John cuts me off. He's the CEO and someone I am on good terms with.

I'm thrown off momentarily.

“We have limited time today and we've slotted in a prezì from Gary... Take it away hombre.”

This is our one chance. Once a year when everyone important is assembled next to John, including the owner.

What the fuck is going on?

My team is looking at me also, having prepared and trying to contain our surprise. Something is not right about this. My heart sinks and my body stiffens. For a moment, I stop breathing. My heart is thumping harder.

“Excuse me, John. Sorry, but this has been scheduled for months. We've worked on it for almost 4 years.”

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"Yes, but, it's been bumped." John looks annoyed. People defer to him and give me wide eyes. I don't want to seem flustered. Collecting myself, I inhale and lean forward.

"When could my team and I...?"

John puts his hand up to dismiss - "Next time, Bill, I promise. You have the floor next month."

That's a lower level meeting and a brush off.

Gary, the presenter, is an expensive consultant who's been at the company hovering around for six months. He's a young shiny rockstar, famous for founding some tech company and then cashing out.

He slides in to begin, "Alright, time for the unveiling of our golden egg. We've been cooking this up for a while also, doing all the R&D in secret because we believe," shooting John a knowing look, "this will not only massively *disrupt* but also *transform* the aging care and wellness industries."

A large screen shows a slide with a slickly produced video behind it. Dark scenes of seniors isolated contrasted with someone opening the curtain, letting the light in.

Ugh. So emotionally manipulative - like those drug ads in the US.

Now, we see their beaming smiles as a young man and woman wheel them around in the park.

Wow, like magic!

Besides my team being "bumped", something else feels array. My gut is twisting.

Gary shoots up from his chair, looming over us, "Question for you! How do we cut 32% of our skilled labour costs while improving the lives and longevity of our clients by 50% or more?"

He pauses for dramatic effect.

So cheezy and predictable.

Everyone is waiting to find out.

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"The same way we radically and positively disrupt the housing crisis in Toronto and eventually every city in North America."

He's using that word - *disrupt* - a lot.

I feel my body stiffen again. My pulse quickens, pounding in my chest like a fist.

Gary goes on to describe - in detail - a proposal which is exactly like the one we were going to present.

The essence of it is identical: pairing together young people in their twenties struggling with rent with seniors in a shared housing arrangement that involves volunteering and sharing of care with helping professionals.

Our proposal is further along, emphasizing exactly *how* we would do it.

His is more selling them on the idea, the benefits.

It's a surreal experience. I must be in shock. My body feels numb.

I try to temper myself. We spent years testing it *and* learning from the cutting edge work of care facilities in Scandinavia and Japan. I could write a book about what we learned. Again, the benefits are tremendous. A small part of me is glad that it's on the table and likely to move forward *but* not like this!

A gut punch hits me. A searing sense in the pit of my stomach.

They're stealing our project. My life's work, right in front of my eyes! And making it a superficial PR stunt rather than digging into the real potential of it.

I knew for months that he was up to something, but I held back from saying anything.

Why was I so stupid?

My mind races for answers and explanations.

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I guess I wanted to wait and flush him out. If I said anything, it would've made me look jealous, old and out of touch with the hip and new. He's also East Indian, apparently having risen up from the slums. Would not have been a good look on me, a middle aged white guy, to accuse him then, but...

I inhale deeply and sigh, angry at myself.

I decided then to save face and quietly and patiently plod on. Guess I assumed, the better man would prevail. "Keep calm and carry on" and all that feels like bullshit now.

Here I am now, glued to my chair, paralyzed. The stunned feeling is starting to wear off as my face flushes with shame.

Words ring in my mind...

"It's because of nice guys like you that
assholes like him rule the world..."

Who said that?

Seething and ready to explode, my palms turn into tight fists.

I'm flexing every known muscle of restraint I have. Breathing in. Breathing out. If anyone looked at me, they'd wonder if I was having a panic attack.

Think of the mortgage.

Expenses to pay for Julia, getting the help she needs.

That's my daughter. She's the most incredible girl in the world. And she needs help with her learning disability. I would die to protect and provide for her.

Overwhelmed, I put my hands under the table and stab a pen into the inside of my palm. Then the pain... Ooow...Fuck! That actually hurt. But, immediately, the pain rushes in and erases everything else. I hadn't done this since I was a teenager. A familiar trick. I become steely cold and calculated. My body is numb. My mind, a sharp razor.

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The pain re-focuses me.

I did this on purpose, taking control where I can.

My phone buzzes. I check. Unlisted number. I ignore it.

So, what can I do, right now?

Gary goes in for the kill, quoting every piece of research that my own team supplied.

“We’ve tested it. Thanks to 36 trial tests with 32 success stories. Annual cost savings for us run between 16 to a staggering 24% and here’s the best part... satisfaction and loyalty ratings have the potential to go through the roof, increasing 45 to a staggering 87%. Unbelievable when we first saw the data.”

I look up and I want more than anything at this moment to kill somebody. John, his accomplice, watches with a wry smile acting as if he wasn't involved in this but going to claim credit also. The owner, Evelyn, is next to them but I can't read her expression at all.

I turn and hyper focus on Gary's face. His every gesture. The sneer of his nostrils flexing pride and victory over me. I notice how manicured he keeps himself.

I see myself grabbing his perfectly coiffed hair and slamming his face against the desk. Blood everywhere. I'm sickened and delighted by the imagery.

The leash is off.

I can't keep it all bottled up. My whole fucking life I've played by the rules.

Suddenly, I jump out of my chair to speak. "Excuse me, I..." The vice grip around my throat and chest tightens. Words seem to come out but they fall flap before me.

No one seems to notice.

All eyes on the shiny man with the golden egg.

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I excuse myself.

As soon as I reach the bathroom, I check around to assure that I'm alone.

I pump my left hand against the wall of the first toilet stall.

A flash of rage and release.

Then the pain... *Ooow...Fuck.*

That actually hurt.

Again. The same trick.

I pour cool water and look it over: no cut or bruise (yet). Just stunned and sore.

What now?

Being a rational thinker, deliberate and strategic in my response, I pace around.

Am I over-reacting?

Hell no! Every single detail from his presentation is stolen from ours. He just made a slick cover for it all.

How did they get this far?

Was I too transparent?

Who leaked my data?

Stop being paranoid.

I spin around looking for something to do. To regain a sense of control.

Walking back down the hallways to the meeting, I feel blood rushing back into my body.

A buzzing. Ugh.

It's another call from an unlisted number. Normally a spammer, but they are usually not unlisted.

Shit.

Government.

Hospital.

I answer.

It's the voice of a reassuring young woman with a British accent named Monique, an assistant to the heart surgeon.

"...Dr. Greenfiled wanted me to update you as soon as possible, Mr. Stone..."

"Ok. Uh. Please, call me Bill. So, what's his status?"

"You may want to sit down. There's been an unexpected development. Of course, I can't disclose details on the phone but it's critical that you as the next of kin and with primary consent that we need your input, as soon as possible. Can you come in to see the doctor today?"

"Yes, certainly. Where are you?" I scramble to note the details she will tell me.

"Don't worry, I will send you the details to this cell number that we are speaking on right now... In the wing of St. Michael's... 3rd floor. Across the street from where you dropped him off."

DING...

All the details. Damn, she's good.

"Please call me if you need anything. Your father's care and yours also is our top priority."

I wish I had someone like that to manage my chaos right now. As I hang up, the smell of swamp returns, my armpits wet with rancid smell of high stress sweat. My entire body wants to hurl, but I suck it in.

It suddenly hits me that something life threatening has happened to dad. He's not ok. Why else the urgent call? It's like a punch to my head and a sharp stab to my chest.

Not intending to stay, I come back into the meeting to get my things and bow out.

Everyone is laughing and glowing at something I missed walking in. I shoot a look at Paula, my

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colleague. She has a good poker face but I sense she is furious. I guess she is on my side. Not a leak. The rest of the team is playing along.

I can't stand it. Walking over to where I was sitting, I stay standing, unable to let this go, I feel my grip on the back of the chair tightening.

I start to speak, but my voice sounds distant, my ears have popped, everything sounds like I am wearing ear muffs.

Gary stops and looks at me, grinning.

My face flushes as all eyes turn on me.

I push that feeling away. Rage finally boiling over, I lift my hand to exclaim...

"This is..."

But the room turns askew.

I feel my body going numb as I fumble and collapse to the ground.

Black.

Suddenly, something grips me by the chest and sucks me upwards...

I'm in the room. I see all the people standing up and huddling over my body, while I am floating upwards, pulled by a force that is determined.

What's happening to me?

Your heart has
stopped.

A deep and calm voice resounds all around me.

No. This can't be happening. I'm dreaming or I fainted or something...

No. You're dying.

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What?!

I look down and see the faces looking gravely. My friend Paula has opened my shirt and is palpating to check my pulse. The sounds are muted, but I can make out reading her lips that she is calling for a defibrillator on the 2nd floor. And telling an assistant to call 911.

It can't be.

It is.

The voice is so clear. Reality sinks in.

Yeah, but that's NOT what I want. Not now.

And yet, you
created this.

The response confronts me with a crushing sense inside.

What? But, how?

You're trying to control
what is out of your control.

Your heart has been
weakened and exhausted.

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I search for an answer. Something in me does want to give up.

But... Julia, Jess and dad. They all need me?

Do they?

All of a sudden, a dread fills me. I'm not so sure.

Paula is now pumping the chest of my body below, then breathing life into my lips. I can't feel any of it.

Anger and desperation ignite. This is not how I wanted to end it. I lash out.

How come you get to decide?!

I don't.

The response feels undeniable and true, taking the wind out of my sails. But, there is growing turmoil as I continue floating up and now through the ceiling. As if I am losing a hopeless battle, I want to collapse, but instead I summon all the energy I have left to protest.

Nooooooooo! I want to go back!

Why?

Everything seems to pause and hold. I'm caught off guard by the question.

I don't know.... Because there will be so much pain for them, if I leave now...

Yes. And that is life.

Why do you need to stay?

All of a sudden, I feel like a puppet whose strings are cut, free falling completely now.

I don't know why.

I guess, I never lived truly.

I never did what I wanted.

Something in my mind clicks like an old lock mechanism falling into place.

I want to let go of...

Trying to control.

And see what life brings.

Your heart is weak

but it can grow stronger...

I spin around, like a baby on its back, facing a warm and blinding sun. I am captivated by the light.

I will bring you back.

You will have seven days

to find your own spark...

I'm grateful and daunted.

So many questions swirl within me.

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What do you mean? My own spark?

I feel myself pulled down by gravity, like something has been settled and decided.

Wait! Who are you?

His deep voice resounds, with so much warmth and tenderness,

...Papa...

Suddenly, as if a vacuum force has sucked me back fully into my body laying on the ground.

THUD.

I am in darkness.

I have a pounding headache. And my body feels cold, numb, dead. Desperate, I beg for answers.

How am I supposed to...?

Another voice interrupts. This one sounds like my own, yet unlike how I feel, it is calm and certain.

*My heart will need to break, again and again...
So that it can mend and grow bigger, braver,
and stronger...*

A moment later, every nerve in my body tightens in an electric convulsion. I hear the "ZAP!" as the defibrillator jolts me awake making my entire body convulse. Another "THUD!" as it releases me and I land backwards.

Now I am gasping for air! My eyes flash open and I see the epipen pulled out of my arm. I hear the clicking of a stretcher being opened behind me and the voice of a first responder, "EMT! Paramedics! Clear the room, please!"

They crouch down to shine a light in my eye, but I push the hand away and stumble up to stand, buoyant.

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Every muscle in my body is on fire and my joints are aching painfully, but I feel such a surge of energy.

Holy fuck! I'm alive. I'm back!

One of the EMTs, a short woman with a serious expression, meets my gaze and confronts me, "Sir, your pupils are dilated. You're in shock."

"Yes, I am."

"Until we assess you for any damage, please lie down on the stretcher."

I argue for a second. Then I see Paula's face of concern and become aware of how high I am feeling ~ must be the adrenaline hit.

I comply. Being taken through the building on a stretcher, carried down the halls which I have dominated as a manager for 22 years, I might feel embarrassed, but instead ~ buckled in tightly and aware of my body ~ I am just elated to be alive and breathing.

We pass Gary, John and Evelyn, the chairwoman of the board, all huddled in the CEO's doorway. They look at me with mixed expressions.

I don't care.

They could be statues made of stone, but out of habit, I attempt to smile and inform them of my condition as I am carried past.

I take a split second to register John's expression of concern - can't tell if he gives a damn, feels guilty or is faking it.

Evelyn, I can't read at all.

Did I just seriously try to manage the situation?

This is all surreal.

I close my eyes. "Pinch me. Is this real?" I whisper.

Chapter 4

Good News Or Bad News

Having been cleared in ER, and through a battery of tests, I'm anxious to know about my dad. I feel perfectly fine. But, I am being held in a bed for observation. Wanting to talk to Dr. Greenfield, I call his assistant, who is very reassuring. She says that he's on his way to see me, apparently.

I only hate three things.

The first is waiting, indefinitely. It's been 3 hours and 12 minutes since they called me wanting my input on something related to dad. Over 2 hours since I was checked in and 45 minutes since I have been lying here on this bed. Feels like an eternity.

Check.

Second is not having anything I can do about what's happening around me.

Completely fucking powerless.

Sigh.

But that's what I agreed to let go of, wasn't it?

My body inhales deeply, of its own accord, and sighs.

I'm reminded of the vision I had after I "fainted". Seems like a lifetime ago and a crazy dream.

The third thing I hate is... hospitals.

Some exceptions over the years but this one, though adorned with beautiful art, is no different. Could be the smell of sickness and death. Could be the beige or dental green walls. Then again, I chose to work with seniors and the dying.

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I must be a masochist or something.

A thought for a later time, perhaps.

A terrible exhaustion settles in and my joints feel weak. I close my eyes.

DING...

What now?!

It's a text from Julia. My darling girl who I would die for.

"How did your big
meeting go, daddy?!
Cheering for you!!!

Followed by 7 lines of various emojis such as...



Don't know how to process this.

But I can't ignore her.

It sinks in.

She still believes in me. Naive and innocent, but her love is the only real thing I can count on at this moment.

Tears burn behind my eyes.

I crane my neck to check that there is no one around.

A damn of grief swells up, threatening to burst out of me.

I sob for a moment.

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This is unusual - for me. I haven't cried in decades.

Clearing my eyes, I see a tall man of African descent in doctor's attire standing at the foot of my bed.

Looking up at him, I feel small and very self conscious.

He looks at me with a sympathetic smile, "Mr. Stone?" He asks with a deeply resounding and warm voice, and with seemingly endless patience.

Embarrassed, I wipe my tears, "Uh. Bill..."

"Please son, it's okay to cry. I do so often."

He reaches out a hand, clasping mine with his left palm to hold me for a moment.

"Dr. Greenleaf. Call me Marvin."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" He jumps in. Sliding a chair to sit at my bedside. "I understand you had your own near death experience today."

"Yeah." It sinks in, still unbelievable. "It's been a hell of a day so far and..." Noticing fear rising up into my throat as I dare to ask, "How's my dad?"

"Yes. Much to talk about there."

I notice that I'm holding my breath.

"I'd like to know how you're doing, first." He lifts his eyebrows expectantly.

"Good, enough, I think. Physically that is. Great actually. What about my dad?"

"In a moment, Bill. I do have to go over some things about you and your condition." He looks down at his clipboard briefly and sighs with a half smile, "You do know that you have had the same heart condition as your father. Diagnosed in 2004?"

"Yes. And I take... try to take good care of myself. My family's counting on me. I..." I start listing

off all the vitamins and mineral supplements I take in addition to the heart meds, how often I do light cardio, details about my diet.

He cuts me off by raising his hand gently, "Bill. You look half your age. I'm slightly jealous in fact. And you strike me as a striver. Always trying really hard..."

I nod along. Not sure if that's praise or a criticism, yet.

"I wonder..." He looks thoughtfully, "Your heart has been arrhythmic and yet, now after several tests, it seems to be pumping regularly. Astonishing. I've heard it could happen with shock. But usually, that would cause a stroke or a deterioration, not a positive correction like this."

He looks back down to check and shakes his head, "And, then there are still weak areas, an artery is thinner than it should be, some blockages in another." Pausing thoughtfully, "Well, it's pumping strong... As if the heart attack you suffered didn't even happen a few hours ago. In the end, I don't know what to tell you. It's like a new lease but the car is still used and parts may need fixing..."

He looks at me gravely, with raised eyebrows, "Bottom line, we need to watch you. But, then again you won't get better lying around here. Have you ever tried relaxation and meditation, or prayer?"

"I'm a certified Mindfulness facilitator at work." I respond.

He chuckles. "Of course you are. Well, then, I guess that you know best how to take care of you. I'll back off. Now, about your father... Do you want the good news or bad news first?"

"Usually I'd take the latter, but give me something hopeful first, please."

"Alright. Your father is a real fighter." He smiles through his calm face. "He came through the CABG... coronary artery bypass grafting... open heart surgery... very well. Initially, we had more

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complications than we imagined, but something must have guided our hands because we got him closed up in record time and he stabilized, showing signs of a strong recovery. Bottom line is that his heart is stronger than ever."

Sigh.

A new and grave expression on his face.

"Here's the bad news. Unfortunately, during the surgery, he slipped into a coma. Suddenly. To be honest, we're not sure what's going on. I suspect an aneurysm. Unrelated or, by the grace of... (opens his arms out) may be part of his response to the stress. We don't know. That's why you can't see him, just yet. He's being tested and moved around in his condition so that we get to the bottom of this. But, I do believe that once he is stabilized, your presence at his side might be exactly what he needs to come back to the waking world."

A silence.

"I imagine this is a lot to take in."

"My whole day has been a series of shocks..."

He takes a deep inhale. "Tell me about it."

A long moment. He looks at me expecting a response.

"You mean you want to know?"

He nods, his eyes smiling warmly.

"I don't mean any offence, but I'm not used to a doctor having time or caring..." Sometimes I can't hold my tongue and be diplomatic. This is one of those times.

He smiles broadly and nods, "I know, son. I am not your usual kinda doctor."

I smile with him. Suddenly, everything wants to spill out. "Uh... my marriage is... I don't know. My life's work was stolen. I..." I go on to tell him way too much of the story, unable to contain or focus myself as I

normally would. I feel like a blubbering mess. "And of course, my dad.... Is he dying?"

When I look up embarrassed, I see him unfazed, like a rock of solace and understanding.

He leans back thoughtfully, "Wanna know what my gut tells me?"

Unrestrained, I nod intensely. I feel this childish feeling take over, of wanting to just fall into his arms and have him tell me everything will work out.

"Between us. I got a strange sense. As if he's in limbo. A sort of purgatory, if you believe in such a thing. I've seen people when they are ready to go and it feels very different. Of course, my colleagues who specialize in this tell me that every coma case is utterly unique. But, with your dad, I'm getting a sense of needing to pause. And maybe to process something. Might he be waiting for someone...?"

He shrugs. What a strange and disarming doctor he is. He looks at me, as if he suspects something for a moment, but then he smiles and looks away.

"Please." I nudge him.

"Well, it could be wishful thinking. No science to back up anything I just said. Now, please don't sue me. Just a father and a son myself trying to make sense of that which is mysterious, perhaps."

"I appreciate it. I really do." I don't know why because I don't know what to do with his suppositions, but I feel reassured somehow. Suddenly I remember the procedures I heard about in such cases. "Oh, was there something you needed from me?"

"Yes. I hate to have to bring it up so soon, but there are hospital regulations and arrangements that need to be made if he stays in the coma longer."

"Of course." I gulp down some saliva.

"I'm told by the lawyers - not my realm as you can imagine - that sometimes it's short and they

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recover but other times they need more time, in which case it gets... complicated as to what we do.”

A sense of dread fills me.

He pulls out an envelope set against the clipboard he has at his side. “Being his next of kin, you’ll have to read these and make some decisions. I would advise you don’t sit on it. If there *are* complications, well then some big decisions may have to be made rather quickly.”

I’ve dealt with this in my work with elders, but holding the package and thinking of dad, I feel utterly helpless and confused about what to do.

“Right now, I gather, is not the time to walk through it all, so please arrange it with Monique... That’s my daughter by the way, who called you. She or I can discuss it with you when you’re ready.”

“Thank you... for taking the time and being considera...”

“Only wish I could do more. Actually. May I ask you... do you pray?”

I shake my head. “No. I’m not religious.” Left the Catholic upbringing far behind me as a younger man. Never sat right with their blind faith in something invisible.

“May I have your permission to pray for him and for you and your family?”

I nod, feeling both strangely reassured and very awkward.

It seems like a natural place to end but he stares at me as if I was about to say something else.

I find my mouth opening and speaking almost involuntarily, “I wanted to ask you something else. I had these strange dreams and when I fainted...”

“Bill, your heart did *stop*.” He interrupts me emphasizing, “We *know* from the woman who was trained in first aid who tried to resuscitate you and from the first responders afterwards.”

"I find it all so hard to believe. Everything feels surreal."

"That's the shock, certainly. But, you're also wondering about something else aren't you?"

I nod. "I think... So when my heart stopped, I saw myself floating and then I heard this man... Who sounds like... you."

Dr. Greenleaf takes off his glasses and doubles over laughing to himself, while looking at me.

"That's not the first time someone's had a near death experience and heard a voice inside and then swore on the bible that it sounded like me. But I have to tell you, Bill. If you spoke to my 1st or 2nd wife, or even my current one, they would each tell you I am not that almighty and perfect."

He leans in, all laughter and tears easing back. "All that to say, I do believe he has spoken to you."

"Who?"

He points his finger up to the ceiling.

"But, I don't believe..." I protest.

He pats the bed, looking pensive, "Well... Before today, you had a heart condition. Likely genetic, nearly identical to your father's. And somehow, after your "fainting" spell or some other "event" today, there seem to be no signs of it. Could be a series of flawed tests - highly improbable - or may be a miracle. We'll just have to wait and see, won't we?"

He gives me another warm handshake, clasping with both hands. "We shall meet again, I am sure. Especially because I have an appointment with you next Monday." He smiles warmly, "May you and your family be well."

He begins to walk away, with a slow deliberate rhythm. Turning back, he winks at me and says the strangest thing, "You can see that I do things differently here. Please contact me or Monique, any time, really."

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His words hang in the air after he leaves the room. I have no reason to doubt him but it seems unreal that someone would care so much.

After getting dressed, I walk out of the hospital with the envelope of papers he handed me under my arm, squinting in the bright sunlight.

Everything rushes in on me.

A bubble of shelter evaporates.

I'm a powerless little man, and dad... What is he? An image of him frozen in a pod, asleep, floating in space somewhere in one of these massive concrete and glass buildings.

And then there is my career. I laugh at my naivety. 20 years of my life. Corporate bullshit lol.

What an idiot I've been.

My marriage... *Does it even exist any more?*

Everything is slipping away... the pieces of my life like flakes of clay crumbling in my fingers.

I feel faint. Sick to my stomach.

My legs are weak. My gut an empty hole.

I look around and see my shameful escape.

Chapter 5

The Ugliest Fish

They say that everyone has a guilty pleasure.

I wouldn't call this a pleasure but a craving that is never met.

An empty hole that is never filled.

I walk into the Krispy Kreme storefront.

I do this thing. Ever so often --less lately -- but at least once a month.

I find a fancy french bakery. The most expensive and tastiest one and stuff my face full, starting with croissants, pastries and cakes. Sitting there in plain sight, pretending to be savouring and waiting for a friend, ordering way more than any mouth and stomach can hold.

Right now, the hole in my gut is so raw and aching, I'd stuff myself with garbage waste if it was in front of me.

Sugar. Salt, oil, fats, creams...

I also happen to be lactose intolerant... so watch out for the aftermath.

I buy a dozen. Taking the box to the park away from glaring cashiers, whose eyes I avert, certain they are judging me.

I don't even care what it is. No joy as I stuff three donuts ~ one after another ~ into my mouth, foaming with cream and splattered with jelly. Wiping myself, I scan around to make this scene look normal and uneventful to any onlooker or passerby.

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The envelope of papers sits next to me.

I try to open it but it rips.

Fucking great!

I get red jelly and sugary cream stamped with my fingerprints on the pages.

Sitting here in broad daylight, I must look like a creepy dude, a fucking animal.

I feel out of control.

A wave of nausea comes over me.

Then, a moment of a switch clicking inside me. A sense of being interrupted.

What am I doing?

My arm reaching for another feels weak and too heavy to do it's job.

Why am I doing this?

The voice from earlier, it's spacious godlike presence, resounds within me.

May I show you?

It's unnerving. My breathing stops as my body rhythm slows down drastically, as if I were submerging in for a scuba dive. Then, my body inhales slowly and more deeply. My mind clears.

Papa?

I ask tentatively.

Yes.

I feel unnerved. Coming back to the donuts, packed like a tight fist in my belly, the hole is there still: insatiable. I let the nausea wash over me. There's a battle being waged within me: to give in to the blind

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devouring darkness or to listen to this voice that feels peaceful but which could very well be an early sign of dementia or madness?

Yes. Show me.

Close your eyes.

It's a relief to not have the bright sun in my eyes, tuning out the people walking by my bench. And most of all to hit pause on this ritual of binging and what usually comes after. Instead, I am here, oddly relaxed, held in a strange bubble of peace, awaiting instructions.

The craving is still there, calling me but I feel his presence. Though I see nothing but murky darkness.

Look up.

I tilt my head up.

In your mind's eye.

I see the darkness fade into a vast body of water which is clearer above me. There's a small silver fish flickering above me reflecting a rainbow of colours off its sheen. Incredible. To be seeing it so vividly and with lucid clarity. I want to touch it, and also feel myself hungry for it, wiggling up like a fish myself, I gobble it up.

All of a sudden, I feel caught and trapped, being pulled upwards.

It's ok. It's just me
helping you along.

I open my eyes and the "real" world rushes back in. People walking by, on their way somewhere.

My face flushes with embarrassment. What kind of a professional. A father. A son. A husband... A man... sits downtown in one of the busiest parks, in broad daylight on a weekday stuffing his face, with sweet, candied streaks, with dirt and swamp stench all over him?

Looking around, I realize that no one is minding me. The hum of the city goes on. I am just here, sobering up, confounded. Left to myself. Reassured, I close my eyes and the image is there again.

Pulled upwards, gently but firmly, I break the surface and gasp for air.

It's ok.
You can breathe.
Look around.

I see endless waves, in every direction, a vast ocean with no land in sight. Above us is the blanket of a calm blue sky with only a few clouds and the sun's warmth.

And there, a giant weathered hand approaches...

Look outside yourself.

I see myself now, the fish having been caught, from the bird's eye view, watching the scene from above. There is an old man with weathered skin in a small wooden boat. Reminds me of Hemmingway's story "The Old Man And The Sea". It feels so real.

He is holding me, as he unhooks my flapping body.

Disgust fills me as I see myself, a brown pock-marked bottom feeding scavenger. "What an ugly disgusting creature!" I hear myself commenting.

Look through *his* eyes.

Suddenly, my perspective zooms in to rest within the old man. Seeing myself through his eyes, I am overwhelmed with a feeling of tenderness and something vast and unfamiliar enveloping me.

Love?

Yes.

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Tears sting my eyes.

It can't be that he loves me.

I do.

Jolted, I pull myself out of this “reverie” and bolt up.

I can't be talking to an imaginary voice in my head!

I start walking. Anywhere. Just away from here.

A moment later, I turn back and grab the package of documents. Leaving the box of donuts behind.

Chapter 6

All Who Wander Are Not Lost

As I round the corner. Something clicks in me.

My girls.

What the fuck am I doing?

I go back into the Krispy Kreme.

Bathroom first.

One of those single family rooms. Thank god someone cleaned it recently. I douse myself with water and use up a lot of paper towels to clean up... Feel like a homeless guy who is "trying" at least.

I'm at the counter buying a couple of blueberry donuts.

The girl at the counter remembers me.

"Almost forgot. For my girl," I mumble.

I walk down the street.

I'm walking. I don't know where yet.

Feels good to move and feel the rhythm.

I need to get out of the downtown core. Endless towers of commerce. A sea of people, seemingly wound up and driven like robots on a clock, wide eyed and distracted, hungry for something. Under a spell.

I feel aimless.

Trying to clear my head. Not think too much.

A sense of being lost. Nothing to buy. Nowhere to go.

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But, glad to be wandering. Not looking back.

I get to the pier to be near the water. Sight of passing factories, ferries, and warehouses.

At the side of the road, now, cars zipping past me ~ important people heading home, I imagine.

As the sidewalk ends, I walk in the gutter to avoid a fence post sticking out and then on the rocky side of the road.

I feel utterly alone, as if no home awaits me. Knowing that is not true, I think this may be what feeling sorry for myself looks like, but it feels real enough.

I used to walk like this as a teen, by the railroad tracks... At night, staring into the windows of homes and buildings, looking for... don't know what... another reality other than my own.

Walking now reminds me of the vast emptiness.

The hole.

Still there... quivering and pulsing less intensely. Muted or eased somewhat.

Instead, my legs are restless.

Where can I go?

There's nowhere to hide.

I find myself in the residential areas now, staring and looking aside.

Families coming home.

Old people forgotten, sitting on their porches, with lonely stares as they soak in the evening light.

A young couple, holding hands. Shivering close and sharing a pulse. Now kissing...

Really? Ugh...

My heart sinks.

Thank God. I see a bench in a park I know. It's empty and quiet.

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I sit and hear a bird chirping. I don't know the kind.

Dad used to love watching them.

I never got into it. Too busy I suppose.

This one seems to be all alone.

He's calling out. I imagine he's talking to me.

What a fucking idiotic thought! Have you dropped your marbles, again, Bill?

Though the thoughts are my own, I realize that sounds a lot like my Mom's voice. She really knew how to tear you down.

No. I shake my head. *I'm...*

If you can't say nuthin' good, don't say nuthin'...

Now, my dad's maxim.

Fuck it. I'm 44 years old. Why am I debating the voices of my parents in my head? Haven't I gotten past all this? Made my own life?

I whistle back.

Pause.

No bird.

Flew away?

Then I hear a sound like a whistle back.

Haha...

He's copying me. *What are you... a Mockingbird!?*

I remember. *Yes, you are! You imitate other birds to steal their nests and food. Something like that. Hmm...*

Suddenly, I feel like not trusting him either. Crazy to be suspicious of a bird. *What could he steal from me?*

I turn the thought over, then:

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*Maybe I'm a mockingbird myself... homeless... a
fake.... without my own...*

*Enough bullshit! Stop feeling sorry for
yourself!*

I don't know what else to do...

There I go talking to myself.

Yup. I am talking to myself.

What do I do...?

Silence...

The bird is gone.

I stand up to go.

My feet stop in place. Something holds me there.

There's a cool breeze. I feel my hands holding
the bag of blueberry donuts. I feel my blood flowing
and the cool breeze on my skin.

My senses focus on a boy who's arguing with his
mom as they walk through the park. It looks to me like
she trying to micro manage and shame him. He is
fighting back, being stubborn and throwing a fit. I get
her frustration. But I also respect his anger.

I too need to stand up...

The only poem I ever remember comes to mind.

“Do not go gentle into that good night.

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

Is that about dad?

Or me?

Or both of us.

I get an idea...

It sends a chill of fear up my spine.

Chapter 7

The Fateful Email

I start to walk again now.

Pensive. Weighing whether to do this or not.

It's just a fucking email.

Think of your career.

At least it's something...

What about your family...?

I have to do something.

Don't be impulsive.

I can't let this go. If I do, I'll be cowering like dad used to with his tail between his legs.

I need to restore my reputation and my integrity.

I stop in the middle of the sidewalk. Pull out my blackberry - yes, I still use one. I may be dating myself or living in the past, but I prefer the keypad. And, it's a hack for avoiding touch phones, which are productivity destroying distraction machines.

Anyway! Here goes...

Dear...

No.

To John and Evelyn,

My Heart Is A Muscle

... I'm not going to attack Gary D... Don't want to look like the jaded and jealous co-worker. Besides, John and him have likely conspired. Need to keep it impersonal.

Who has the power to step in here and mediate?

Dear Evelyn,

I straighten up as I type, feeling righteous.

Get clear. Let it all go... Bill.

Remember your philosophy. How do you write to be most compelling?

ETHOS, LOGOS and PATHOS.

***Ethos.** Establish authority to speak... be honest and direct.*

I believe in your father's vision of Golden Years and though I don't know you, I imagine you were compelled by it also to step in to oversee the company last year. I left a higher paying job 21 years ago to work with your father because I also believe in providing the most effective, efficient and highest quality of life care for seniors.

***Logos.** My logical argument.*

The reason I am writing to you and eschewing protocol is because this vision is now being threatened by various actions which break with our policies and ethical standards.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Here's the tricky part. I need to keep it impersonal. Take the I out.

The presentation you saw today was one which described a bold new initiative which aligns with our mission, however, this proposal was...

- Stolen – too emotionally charged.
- Co-opted – not strong enough
- Swiped – makes it sound lighter than it is...
- Taken – too direct
- Poached – too colloquial.
- Misattributed or Plagiarized – we're not in academia any more.

Looking for the right word...

...misappropriated. My team and I have worked on this proposal for 4.5 years. It was common knowledge and encouraged by our CEO.

Pathos. Emotionally compelling...

If a culture is enabled where colleagues (and perhaps even supervisors) can take ownership over one another's work so brazenly, then the integrity of our work with clients is also in question.

Need to clarify and shoot down any dismissal.

This is not about wanting credit.

My Heart Is A Muscle

It is about handling this innovative, evidence based and highly promising proposal with utmost transparency and effectiveness.

Effectiveness – a word I have heard her use a lot.

Sincerely... No.

Cordially Yours...

I hate sign offs...

Bill Stone,
Senior Manager of Operations and
Development) for Eastern Canada

I hit send.

Gulp.

Did I really do it?

Chapter 8

In The Dark...

I wake up, finding myself lying in bed. It's dark out. The house is quiet. Must be that our girl is asleep. I forget how I got home. Must have fallen asleep.

I can't shake a bitter taste, the afterburn of anger, still seething and ready to lash out.

A moment later, Jess comes into the bedroom.

"What'd you tell her?" I ask.

"Daddy's a little under the weather."

"Hmm..."

I feel groggy but not wanting to go back to sleep.

"You brooding?" she asks.

A big sigh from me. "Yeah! I don't like this..."

"Mhmmm." She responds while changing in the closet.

"I'm serious. This is fucking unfair."

Now I know I sound like a sulking child.

She walks by picking up dirty clothes. I see a wry smile on her face.

"What?! What's that look?"

She stops and turns to me.

"I'm delighted that you're riled up actually. Finally. It means you give a fuck."

My Heart Is A Muscle

She throws a dirty sweater at me.

I block it, yet it whips me across the face.

“But, it's still all about you, baby. Unfair. Boo hoo.”

I can't fucking believe this.

“How about you bring that fire to fight for us...”
She dares me.

I can't hold back the rage now.

“Everything I do is for US!!”

“Really? Show me!”

I collapse, curling into myself. So much frustration inside but also exhaustion, “I don't have the energy to fight...”

I drag myself up and leave the room, feeling the weakness in all my joints, I plop my body on the couch.

Pull out my phone.

Woah. Evelyn responded.

Mr. Stone,

Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I will meet you in your office to settle this matter at 9am, sharp.

Something definitive about that. I tell myself that's a good thing, but I'm not sure.

I can't fall back asleep.

I lay on the couch for 3 more hours, tossing and turning like an endless washing machine, my mind going over my day, spinning. Everything that happened felt like a ball of yarn unravelling further and further till my hands were empty holding onto air. Nothing left. Everything feels empty and temporary.

And I do NOT want to talk to some voice in my head.

I sit up.

3AM...

Why the fuck am I on the couch?

I go back into our bedroom and hit the switch to turn on our bedside lamps.

I hate being woken up. But, she does this to me when she has a problem ALL the TIME!

My turn.

I clear my throat.

She squints, her face scrunched in a pillow looking like a sour lemon.

"Why do *I* have to leave?" I say it trying not to sound like I'm whining, but the words seem to convey so.

"Bill! For fuck's sake."

She's cranky. Good.

She turns over and screams into her pillow - not to wake Julia I imagine. But at this moment, I don't care about shaking up the whole world.

She rolls over, "You don't. I never asked you to. I don't want you to!"

That doesn't add up. "But, you..."

She collects herself, "Sit down and listen, babe..." patting the bed beside her.

Reluctantly, I sit.

"Ok, first, I'm not your sex slave or your dutiful wife... I am your partner. That is why I am the one who is here with you at..." She checks the clock, "3 fucking am. And... and there is a boundary with me in how close I let you get, until the time is up and you decide..."

"Decide what?"

My Heart Is A Muscle

“To LIVE your fucking life as if it wasn't a script you had to follow but an adventure where *we* get to write the next chapter together...”

She pauses, enjoying my stunned expression, “And to LOVE me more... It may sound greedy... but there is so much more in your heart that you have to give.”

A pang hits my core. She continues, on a roll now.

“I want it. ALL OF IT. Right now, the door is shut. See, no deep emotion but this crust of anger protecting your pride.”

She may be right, but I don't want to concede it.

A long silence between us. I feel frozen, unable to thaw. She sighs. Turning to me she clasps my face.

“Did you know that your heart is a muscle? Pumping 100,000 times a day, five litres of blood each minute.”

She stares into my eyes, waiting for my amazed response. Still frozen, I wait for her to get to the point.

“It is so powerful the force can squirt your blood ten metres. But that's just the biology...”

Her warm hands slide down to rest over my chest.

“It is a source of everything you seek and have to give...”

I feel something softening in me.

“Why are you hiding that power from those you say that you love the most?”

I'm speechless.

She falls back onto her pillow, dramatically, as if to say, “What am I gonna do with you, my thick skulled man?”

So much emotion floods me. But a sleepy haze takes over, too tired to process. I slide over next to her. We lay back to back. It feels good, but I want to be

in my own space also. Lying in the darkness, together and alone, our skin touching, but a universe of empty space between us.

Jess turns the lights off.

I close my eyes.

A flash of thought wakes me, a moment later. I can't let it go, like a dog with a bone.

"Did someone tell you to do this?"

"He told me you might want to blame someone."

"Who?"

"Robert."

I startle and turn the lights back on again.

"You sleep with him?"

She laughs.

"What?!"

She sighs and shakes her head.

"What is so funny?"

"Well, he's... nevermind... why don't you go and meet him? He asked me to invite you. I bet he's expecting you."

She reaches for her night stand and hands me a round piece of wood.

I grab it. A slice of a tree branch the size of a drink coaster. The name Robert Young is burned into one side, along with his phone number on the other. Nothing else.

What the fuck is this? Some fucking hipster coach brainwashed my wife?

I look back at her. She now has blinders on her eyes and looks like she's doing some meditation. All peaceful, or at least trying to look the part.

"Hm." I snort.

My Heart Is A Muscle

"I dare you." She reaches over and turns the light off.

I can't help but think that she was waiting for me to ask her... to hand me this ridiculous "card".

Too tired to suss anything else out.

My head is hot and pounding.

I turn over.

Stewing, now I cannot go back to sleep. I feel her restless legs shifting.

Is she cheating on me?

Does she really want to stay with me?

Self-conscious, I realize how insecure I am, and how I feel unsure of myself.

"Jess?"

"Yes, darlin."

She does still love me, I can tell by the tone of her voice, even after everything. I hesitate whether to tell her, but I fear the blowback of not sharing it and am too tired to try and hide it.

"My heart stopped today."

"What?!" She spins around, now the startled one, placing her hand on my shoulder. "What happened? Tell me everything, in detail."

I explain to her the events. All of what happened with dad, work and the incident in the meeting.

"...So yeah, dad's in a coma. I may be looking for a new job. But..." I try to reassure her, not sure she will buy it, "I'm ok. All the tests show I am in great health, actually. It's unbelievable, really."

She hugs me close and tight. "We have much more to talk about."

I agree.

But, at this moment, both of us are exhausted, we drop the conversation.

My Heart Is A Muscle

A few breaths and everything turns black.

What seems like a moment later.

I wake up. Lucid.

Buried up to my neck. I can't move, encrusted by the weight of the earth.

This must be a dream.

What the fuck?

I look up. The stars are out. Twinkling.

"Isn't it dazzling and beautiful?" says a voice. It's a woman, the girl from my nap earlier. I know her, somehow.

Her dress sways in the cool night air, brushing past my face as she dances around me. My skin tingles. Her laughter is... comforting.

Then lights, piercing from the distance.

Two of them, growing larger.

The sound of a vehicle... coming right at me!

My Heart Is A Muscle

Tuesday

When the tears come and
things get even weirder...



My Heart Is A Muscle

Chapter 9

Morning of Grace

5 am.

I am a "lion" usually waking inspired and driven to take these few hours to do my favorite routines, all of which set my mind and body up for the day.

This is not another day.

Rarely, do I give myself the gift of a snooze button.

Arggg...

Today is such an exception.

Yesterday was one hell of a day and a hell of a night. I need my sleep. The science is pretty fucking clear. But I don't want to oversleep. So I set it to wake me in 24 minutes... optimal duration based on my app, which is tracking my disruptions and current sleep cycle.

Back to oblivion.

* * *

What feels like a moment later, something is slapping my face.

So fucking annoying! I'm about to shove it back.

Then it's caressing my face... a small hand... so gentle... warm... it's real. Not a dream.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I open my eyes to see a pair of her large eyes looking at me.

There are moments in nature, like when meeting a deer in the woods and where you lock eyes together. Such is the moment right now staring into eternity beholding my daughter, Julia. As I try to describe it, I realize it is beyond words.

Her gaze is so open and innocent it's also a mirror. One I can barely stand right now.

My cheeks start to burn and my eyes sting. Tears burst out. A hot gush comes from God knows where.

I would throw myself in front of a bus for her. No question. My chest is so full drinking her in right now.

Lying on our sides, she rests her right hand on the side of my head,

"So, how did it go...?"

"What go...?" I play dumb.

"Yesterday ! Big day for daddy!"

She's asking again. My eyes move away.

Another wave of salty water pours out of my snotty face now.

How did I deserve such love?

I notice Jess is asleep and turned towards us on the other side of Julia, her arms snuggling her. What a contrast to feel this for my daughter and the invisible wall between my wife and I.

"It was... ok" I say. Not wanting to burden her. And trying to keep my voice down to not wake Jess.

"Really?!" She says loudly and in disbelief.

I'm reminded of Jess parroting the wisdom of some parenting expert she follows:

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"She's a big girl. We shouldn't lie to her to spare her feelings. She has her own big feelings which she needs us to model for her how to navigate."

She's right, as usual. But, I can't bear to unload all that is stuffed and buried inside me. Not here and not now.

So I do my best to contain the storm while giving her something.

"No. Not really. But, daddy's a fighter. I lost the first round, but I'll get back in the ring today and fight another. Don't worry..."

I've said the same to her plenty of times to shore up her own strength and courage being a sensitive girl who can be shy and overly cautious. I often play the role of me cheering her on, while Jess holds her tight when she is too scared.

She looks tenderly, her eyes glistening.

"I'm proud of you daddy."

God. Another wave. This time, I can't hold back. I start sobbing all over my pillow.

Jess is awake now and leaning her hand over, placing it on my shoulder. How much has she heard?

I'm heaving and sobbing.

This does not happen to me.

I never let my emotions get the best of me.

Sure, I have sobbed before.

Twice.

Both times in private.

When my mum died. She was a hard woman to love but she was my mum. Maybe the grief was also a relief in some way.

The second time. I got dropped by the girl I loved before Jess. That was a long time ago.

My Heart Is A Muscle

And alright now, I do remember a third occasion. It was when Obama was inaugurated as president, even though I am Canadian. Yeah, I used to be a sucker for idealism and hope.

Used to be.

Right now, I wish I could shut the valves and jump out of bed, override all this torrent of emotion. But something keeps me here with my two girls a little longer.

Something tells me that they need to hold me and see me in this as much as I need to let myself feel it.

Ugh.

I sigh deeply.

Closing my eyes for relief, I welcome the cool darkness, but images of

loss fills my mind. Everything is crumbling to dust. I see myself losing them both. And the home I financed and rebuilt. My career.

But all I can blubber out in front of them now is what I imagine they could hold with me.

“Papa is dying...”

The image of my father lying in a hospital bed burns in my eyes. The once quiet and gentle man who lost his life partner five years ago, became cranky and miserable, now wasting away... his life hanging in limbo...

I see him and then his face shifts slightly and I see myself in that bed.

More tears pour out. I let them come. No use fighting the current now...

“Papa is dying...”

I’m here.

My Heart Is A Muscle

The voice is so clear and close. I'm startled.

"Who's that?"

"What did you hear? We didn't say anything."

Jess answers.

Papa.

The tears stop suddenly like a tap that runs dry. A sense of being held in silence and peace comforts me like a blanket being gently placed over me.

My girls, Julia and Jess, just stare at me in silence, smiling, as if they feel it too.

Then I think to myself. *Do they know that I'm hearing voices... going crazy?*

I shake my head.

What do you mean? I ask him internally. *Who are you?*

I know you meant
your biological father.

I am here, also.

Always have been.

My chest feels a pang of pain to hear that, and then the feeling of grief returns, but it is being soothed at the same time, like a thirst and hunger being quenched by a warm and nourishing brew.

Your father is not dead.

He's in limbo.

Undecided.

Chapter 10

Take the time...

“Good morning.”

She nods, sitting in my chair.

It feels oddly wrong but I sit down across from my own desk.

What a strange morning already. And here I am, as the tables are turned, literally before me.

She waits till I sit where she wants me to and then speaks in a firm direct tone, “Do you know what the vision of Golden Years is...?”

I start to speak, but she lifts her hand up.

I don’t have the energy to play games or any desire to fight her demonstration of authority, at the moment.

“Our vision is to create a level of care that I would be pleased with in my last chapter. Do you understand what creating that will entail?”

“I believe so.” Swallowing saliva and clearing my throat.

Why am I so intimidated by this woman?

Being your daddy’s princess, I can imagine you have the highest standards.

Her eyes narrow, as if she just read my mind. I bite my tongue not wanting to risk coming off as presumptuous or condescending.

In the awkward pause between us, I imagine how she might have been raised. Her father working

tirelessly to build a billion dollar franchise and to pioneer and lead the field of elder care. Meanwhile, she rode horses and went to the best private schools. Her demeanour suggests that, but I don't really know anything about her. Usually, I'd say I am a good judge of character. She is different, testing all my faculties. Her face is a mask, a stone wall, while she holds her cards very close to her breast.

After a long silence, finally, I clear my throat.

"Evelyn."

"It's Madame VanderHooven." She pounces on my desire to connect with her.

"My apologies."

"Don't apologize. Just learn and get it right."

She really knows how to get under my skin.
"Madame VanderHooven. In regards to my email..."

She cuts me off. "I don't care at all about these squabbles, office politics, sibling rivalries. Not my circus or my monkeys, as my father used to say."

That's not what he used to say, to me at least.

"He was a great man." I think back to her father, Frederick VanderHooven, the every man's billionaire. The first time I came to this building, seeking a job, fresh out of my MBA, I expected an interview with HR but instead the receptionist sent me to the rec. room where he was playing shuffleboard with clients. Wearing khakis and a flannel shirt with rolled up sleeves, he introduced himself, "Call me Fred. We're all on the same team." He winked and asked me to jump in to play on an opposing team of seniors. I'm sure he was testing me, but from the first moment, I felt disarmed by his way with people.

She is silent and still as a statue.

I can't tell if she hated him or is just so emotionless it sucks the air out of the room.

"Let me get to the point. I'm sorry that you have had some health issues, and I've been told that your

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father is in the hospital. This is certainly the time for *re-evaluation*. With the stock market drop, it is also a time to be lean. There is no room for dead wood around here, Mr. Stone.”

The way she says my name seems so cold, and awkward, coming from her. As if she is trying to talk Canadian instead of the way she was raised, British.

Wait, is she suggesting what I think she is suggesting...?

“John has arranged for you to take leave starting immediately. I suggest that you take this week to... rest and sort yourself out. We will meet with you on Friday at 5pm to see what you have decided.”

She stands up to walk out.

What I've decided? Am I getting tossed here?

In the doorway, she turns back and sighs in a stiff manner. “I realize it may seem heartless of me to say this, but everything is a test - and right now whether we keep you on or not - will be based entirely on how you recover from this... misunderstanding.”

Without any courtesy, she walks out.

I'm left staring in my office. Everything feels dead here, all of a sudden.

I putter around and send a few emails, and notice my auto responder has already been set for my absence.

What do I do now?

Chapter 11

More than a friend

I knock on Paula's door.

She's packing up her office.

Another punch to my stomach.

She studies me carefully. "Oh my god, Bill," she says. "How are you? You look..."

"I'm good. Better than anyone expected. And yet, the world seems upside down."

Her face ~ normally positive and determined ~ softens with concern. "It sure is. How's your heart?"

"It is ticking along. Better, the doctors tell me in fact..." I'm taken back to less than 24 hours ago. A flash of my body on the floor and her tending to me, "Thank you."

"For what?" She replies.

"Saving my life." A bit surprised she doesn't see that.

"I did what anyone trained in first aid would do," She brushes her hair and looks away before turning her eyes back on me, pursing her lips in that stoic way she tends to do when facing challenges with gusto, "But you didn't respond. Nothing I did. The defibrillator and the epipen. You just woke up on your own. You saved yourself."

"Strange things happen, but..." I try to change the topic, looking around.

"Paula, what's going on?"

"I'm sorry, Bill."

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She stops moving about, looking lost for a moment.

“They didn't termi...?”

“No. I am proud to declare that I pulled the plug!” She smiles. “But, I'm really sorry. I feel like I'm abandoning you.”

“What? Why...?”

“Isn't it obvious?” She stops putting her things into a box. “I can't believe they did it so brazenly.” She walks over to me. “Especially how they're treating *you*, Bill. That put the nail in the coffin for me.”

“I can't even... I'm gonna find a way...”

“I can see you're in shock, still. We both worked on this for years. It was your ticket and my honour. But I had a sense that it was coming. I can't believe that I was so gullible to not be prepared for it. I'm sorry for letting you down.”

“Me too. But, *you* didn't. Don't take this on, Paula. We need to fight. You can't leave...”

Silence. She steps closer, holding in a lot of emotion.

“Trust is everything Bill. If there is anything I have learned in this life, it is to choose wisely who I surround myself with. Besides...” Straightening herself out. “They don't deserve either of us.”

She sighs.

“I've been trying to find the right place and time to tell you for a while...” Her arms go out in exasperation in a *'what the hell why not now?'* gesture. “I'm also leaving Alan.”

I take a moment to let that sink in. She's leaving her husband. This job. Wow. Paula is a risk analyst. And the most sure footed grounded person I know. She does NOT like to make sudden big moves.

“It's time that I reclaimed my life.”

A twisted and sinking feeling churns in my gut.

“Why? Now?”

“Really? You can't guess?”

I shake my head. Clueless. Then the look in her eyes. The longing.

“You were always more to me than a colleague and a friend.”

The feeling in my gut twists sharply like a knife. Is this guilt? *Did I...?*

“But, I never...”

“I know. I don't expect you to now... faithfulness is what I admire most about you. It might also be your greatest flaw...”

She comes right up to me, very close. “May I?”

I feel uncomfortable, but I nod. She has been one of my closest friends. She touches my face, a light caress but it's not sexual. Something tender.

“Bye...” She kisses me on the cheek and whispers. “I hope you find your north star.”

Her eyes well up with tears. She brushes past me and walks out.

I am standing there, feeling like a deflated ball, sinking. I collapse and grab onto her desk for support.

She stops suddenly to tap the doorframe, putting on a brave face.

I spin around...

“If you want to, you know where to find me...”

I'm left sitting on the edge of her desk.

I don't know how to come to terms with it all... no space to think and put things into the boxes where they belong. Nothing is making sense right now.

Twenty two years inhabiting this business. A second nail in the coffin. It sinks in that this place I

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called my second home, is not a place I am sure I belong in any more.

I notice the object in my front right pocket - the one where I put my keys and anything immediately important.

It's that round piece of wood. *Fuck it.*

A burning sensation takes over as I dial his number.

Chapter 12

On A Walkabout...

It turns out that the all important and influential Robert Young does not answer his phone. Instead, he asks me to text him. To which he sends me a picture of a park bench and a map.

Can you feel my rage bubbling up?

The location must be a mistake, I think.

It is in the ravine where Jess and I had our fight yesterday, conveniently just around the corner.

As I march down the main path surrounded by a swath of budding trees, I see an old man sitting on the bench, about twenty feet across from where I fell apart and napped after Jess walked away.

Despite my desire to forget, my mind flashes back again to yesterday morning, remembering the embarrassing scene. My face flushes as I imagine that he might have been sitting there watching us.

But where is he?

Another layer of anger as I consider he might be standing me up.

"Bill?"

Looking around there is no one around but the old man on the bench, who is smiling at me.

"You...?"

"Older than you imagined?"

I nod. Confused for a moment. *This may be harder than I imagined.* My anger whips me back to why I came down.

My Heart Is A Muscle

He motions for me to join him on the bench.

"No I prefer to stand, thank you."

Why am I being so freaking polite? This unassuming and rather old man has poisoned my wife's mind and...

"Suit yourself, it's a beautiful day. How can I help?"

He leans back and seems to take in the scene, with a warmth and calm I would envy if I wasn't so...

The image of my grabbing him -- or what I imagined as a younger version -- and taking this con artist posing as a life coach and slamming him against a tree before shaking him down is now seeming less viable.

"What do you want from me and Jess?"

"What do I want? Curious question. No one hardly ever asks. Thank you."

"For what?"

"Being interested... The answer to your question ~ and I can see it also comes from anger and hurt ~ is that I want to be of service, Bill. As you can see I am not as my surname suggests, any more. Time is sand slipping through all of our fingers..."

Somehow, his answer and the tone of ease and confidence completely disarms me. My main strategy is thrown off.

I go for plan B, not tossing aggression out completely, but it seems to be a flop at the moment.

"Name your price. I'll pay it."

As soon I say that, it feels desperate, even comical.

He winces a bit. I notice because I am looking for any sign of deception on his face - something I studied as I became a manager years ago. No sign of being two faced - which most people are to some degree, especially when confronted.

My Heart Is A Muscle

"I'm not in need of money. Thank you also for that. But what would you be offering to pay me for exactly?" Cocking his eye curiously.

I feel caught off guard, again. *Pull yourself together! Find a way to get him to concede the truth.*

He turns and smiles again, but this time there is something tender in his eyes that I find hard to look at.

I look away. "To leave us alone."

I see him nod and purse his lips thoughtfully.

"Do you believe I have the power to have swayed your wife? You may not know her very well."

He chuckles and looks at me to show me he means no offence. I know that gesture. Chimps do it in the wild to disarm aggression. This guy knows how to...

Suddenly he pulls himself up and starts walking.

"Come... join this old man for a walkabout, won't you?"

I do a double take as he walks ahead and past me.

Really?

For a moment I feel stuck in place.

He stops and turns back, "I promise not to hypnotize you either."

I grunt internally and sigh as I walk towards him.

"Thank you for joining me. I do love company, even if they are mad at me."

I look at his face, expecting sarcasm, but he's beaming a warm smile, the kind that comes through the eyes and is hard to fake.

As we walk ~ to hell if I know where ~ he starts chatting me up.

"So... tell me about you. What's your life like?"

I don't want you in my head.

"You know I can read you pretty well but that does not mean I will speak for you... Talk to me if you want to or let's just enjoy the beautiful nature all around us, shall we? I'll just ramble on to amuse myself..."

More grumbling from me.

As we walk, I hear birds calling to one another. He describes some of them, asking questions I cannot answer. "Wonder where the lark has nested this year? Maybe the reishi is ready, you think?"

Finally, I chime in. "My work. My marriage. My family. My closest friendship. Everything has imploded in the last 24 hours."

"I'm sorry to hear that. It sounds like your foundation is cracking and everything is falling through."

"Yeah. Like it's being taken from me."

"Must be enraging!"

"Yes! Yes it is!"

I can't believe this old man gets it. I feel my rage is fully boiling over now. It feels righteous and satisfying to be seen in it. My anger seethes and slowly settles as we continue walking onwards in silence.

He stops us in our tracks. "Where now...? Shall we try a new path? Up to get a view, down to the water, or deep into the thicket there?"

"A view would be good." I mumble, being a big picture guy and feeling totally lost at the moment.

"It's like the city has disappeared, eh?"

How did he read my mind?

I pivot to shift attention and to get some info on him.

"So, what do *you* do, Robert... How do you support yourself?" God, I sound like a dad scolding a twentysomething.

He chuckles. "Me? I'm a mentor. Mostly help men find their way."

"How did Jess find you?"

"The funny thing about men who need guidance is that it's often the women in their lives that seek me out, first."

I let that sink in, suddenly feeling hemmed here in the thicket of brush and on a narrow path with this old man who feels too close to me physically and too intimate in what he's implying.

"I never asked. I don't need your help." I speed up and walk ahead now, feeling like now I'm the teenager, rebelling against his dad.

He rasps from behind me, "If you say so."

Suddenly we clear a branch and I see that we are on a rise that overlooks the ravine before us. The city skyline in the distance is reassuring.

He hands me his binoculars.

"Want to see a being wild and free... even in this Big Smoke of a city of ours?"

I nod, despite my desire to act like I don't care.

Looking through the lenses, I am bewildered that a few minutes ago I wanted to kill this man. And now, somehow, I am letting him talk to me as if I were his buddy or something.

"Look left and down... in the poplars there... On the outermost tree, do you see him in his nest?"

I see a large bird. A feeling of awe takes me.

"A hawk. He never doubts his instincts. He knows when he's full to come home and when he's hungry to hunt and provide."

I'm curious what he means by that, turning to take in his face.

He's looking right at me, a few inches away, I notice the skin on his face weathered by age. His eyes

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are penetrating, yet warm and clear, how I imagine Julia's will be when she grows up.

"Yet, here we are, more conscious and arguably skillful beings. Most often navel gazing, trapped in our own heads, spinning our own wheels... often unsatisfied."

I do feel hypnotized by his words, captivated by the natural beauty around us and his wisdom, bare and undeniable.

"What do you want Bill?"

Like a slap, there's heat rising to my face. I find his gaze now unbearable.

"I don't..." Shoving the binoculars back in his hands I walk away. I am aware that I am behaving like an impetuous child, but my whole world has collapsed. What the hell can this old man and me in the woods alone do to change it?

Fuck what I am supposed to say and do. Fuck all the shoulds. Fuck everything.

Yup, even my thoughts remind me of the teen years. I never lashed out or talked back to my parents, but I wanted to. It was my brother who was the bad boy. Me, I had to keep it together.

"That's alright. You don't have to tell me. But I ask because it's my way. My passion..."

I turn back and point a finger to his chest, harder than I was intending to, "What game are you playing here?"

He nods and stands his ground. "I can see I've ruffled your feathers, Bill. To be expected, I guess. My game... is a simple one. Would you believe me if I told you?"

I size him up and shake my head.

"I thought so."

He puts his hand on my shoulder, as if he knew I was about to bolt. "Well here is my not so secret

agenda. First, to get to know you. And second, if you want it, to help you."

I chuckle at that. Not buying the story.

He continues, "You see what I am most hungry for, especially at this time of my life... What I thrive on is... intimacy. Into me see. And into you I see. In this moment we hold eternity together."

This guy is unbelievable. I scoff and roll my eyes. *What a load of bullshit!*

I scan around for a way out.

"How do I get out of here? Where's the path back...?"

"I can see why Jess..."

I imagine his sneer of judgment, spinning back to face him.

"What? What'd you say?"

The heat and pressure inside is unbearable. I need to destroy something.

"Careful..." I warn him, getting into his face.

"Or what? You'd hit an old man...? 88. Don't worry. I'm not afraid of your prideful rage. You won't believe this either but I can probably kick your ass."

He has no fear. The mother fucker! Arrrrr. I hit a tree trunk. Injuring my hand. I try in vain to mask the pain and the humiliation.

"I can see why Jess both loves you and considers leaving you."

"How about you enlighten me, then." A feeling of bitterness rises up.

His tone is soft and considered, tender even. "I think I see now also... what you want... this burning searing sensation in your face. You want to matter to her. Moreso, to be somebody in this great big world who stands out and does something important."

I'm frozen.

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"Am I getting you, yet?"

Torn. My body nods, yet I feel embarrassed by the way he strips me of all of my defenses, including pride.

"I understand. Believe me. I used to have similar appetites, Bill. Except I stopped believing in the lie that someone else needs to notice me and approve of my worthiness. No job. No higher ups or sea of fans... No accomplishment. No grand gesture can ever confirm who we truly are. The hawk does not question himself. He..."

I sigh, all tension in my body drops like a sack of rocks. I feel despair creep in like a vine sucking all my energy. I slunk down over a felled log. "Ok. I get your point."

You're as chatty as my wife and daughter.

"Please.. just shut up..." I mumble, half hoping he doesn't. His words feel like the only rope I have to grasp onto as I fall deeper into darkness.

Robert is quiet.

All I hear is the forest.

He places his left hand on my shoulder, ever so gently. It's weathered and warm. I get up.

We walk for what feels like a long time.

Putting on my sunglasses, I feel more tears burning through. Something about that hand was exactly what I needed and at the same time I fought the urge constantly to swat it off me, *"I'm not a child who needs this. I'm really not."*

But I let that voice of me as a proud boy, often left alone, to echo inside. A new sense of not being alone sinks in.

We slow down, finding a fork in the path, he waits and follows my slightest move in the direction I feel like going.

I have no idea where we're going.

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He seems to wait for me, trusting me and letting me lead.

We end up at the ravine bed. The creek runs clear and clean in a shaded area nestled amongst high leafy trees.

I step into the cool water with my Keen's - walking shoes which are half sandal and half sturdy walking and climbing shoes. I prize practical function and simplicity (the less shoes I own and choices I have to make every day)... comfort is a bonus. I digress...

The coolness sends a welcome chill up my spine.

Robert speaks. I welcome his deep and raspy cadence now. "Carl Jung once said..."

“What was *true* in the morning of our lives,
becomes a *lie* in the afternoon.”

I hear the words but not sure how to take them.

"You think my life is based on a lie...?"

"All of us get to a point where the operating system that got us here becomes obsolete. That's me trying to speak in a modern metaphor now."

I give him a half smile. He beams brightly back.

"So, what're you planning to do next, Bill?"

I want to stay here, shaded and hidden, standing in this cool water for a long time.

Feigning confidence, "Don't worry... I..." *have no fucking clue.*

A cloud comes over me. A sense of heavy dread returns. It's like it just hits me all of a sudden that I have nowhere to go.

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My central focus, my work, is a closed door,
locked tight, at the moment.

Coming home is a reminder of everything I am in
the process of losing, like the sand slipping through
our fingers, quoting him earlier. Jess and I are *better*?
Still feels like we are walking on precarious ground.

And Julia, the light of my life... We'd co-parent
amicably I guess, but I know the court would side with
her mother, if she left me. I'd be looking for scraps and
missing them both terribly. Sometimes the cards are
stacked...

Robert seems to see me in this and his hand
comes back to my shoulder.

My body sighs, relieved.

"Can I make a suggestion?"

Grateful to be ripped away from my thoughts.

I nod, hoping for a reprieve but then realize
where we are, standing in the water with tears on my
face. And this old man next to me.

*What the fuck?! I am NOT taking direction from
some old man in the park who I just met and who's
poisoned my wife's mind.*

He seems to be waiting for me to make up my mind
more fully.

"Ok. Yes." Rolling my eyes again like a teenager,
"So, what's your suggestion?"

"Looks like you're torn."

Was it that obvious?!

I scoff, but it feels *right* and good to be seen,
that he's not trying to cheer me up, tell me I am wrong
or jumping to tell me what to do.

"Rather than any fixes, may I offer you an
invitation? Two in fact."

Here goes. May have spoken too soon.

I look around, bereft of insight or options.

What have I got to lose, at this point. Why not hear him out?

I nod.

"First..." He pauses then.

This time the silence is killing me.

"What?!" I blurt out.

"Just taking a moment to try and read you..." He smiles. "Of course. I invite you to go and see your brother and your dad."

"I do see my dad." I retort in defense, "I go and see him every day."

"That's very loyal and considerate of you. I'm suggesting you go and "see" him. Really take in what he might be going through."

"You know he's in a coma...?"

"Even in a coma. Never too late to see what has always been there."

I'm confused but nod and sigh. "Ok. I'll try that, but my brother..." I shake my head.

"It's been a while hasn't it? I know him too, Bill. And he talks about you a lot."

My face screws up. He sees it. Fuck if I have any energy to hide what I feel any more.

"You got anywhere better to be? What have you got to lose? But everything I guess."

Another strange comment. My face must be really saying everything flashing through my mind - resentment, disgust, hopelessness.

I look up and see Robert smiling, "I can see my words perplex you, but you're smarter than you think sometimes. I know some part of you is intrigued and will understand what I mean, once you are ready."

Sounds like a dare, couched in a lot of compliments.

My Heart Is A Muscle

"Now, back to your brother, Daren. I do believe he has something to show you."

Piquing my curiosity too. He sure layers it. Trying to move me in the direction he thinks I need to go.

"And I can't think of anyone else as capable of revealing to you a piece of the puzzle..."

"What puzzle?"

"The question you've been agonizing over..."

"Which is...?" I'm hooked, but growing tired of how he builds suspense.

"How can you get Jess to stay? To save your marriage and family? Not only that... but how can you wake up and live a life you are damn proud of... one that is worthy of everything your parents and ancestors have done for you? And to keep that heart of yours strong and ticking long enough."

I swallow hard.

How do fuck does he do it? Reading my mind and seeing so deep inside me?

I don't want him to know he has this effect on me, crossing my arms, nodding but trying to look skeptical.

"Not sure about the ancestor part...?" He pats me on the back, with a playfully mocking expression, "Maybe that will come with time."

I can't help but wonder out loud, "The other thing. What is it?"

"Good of you to remember and remind me... well, when you're ready for the next step... after you "see" your brother and dad... I hope you come and see me again. Time is slipping through all of our fingers."

He tips his hat, as if to go.

"Wait! How will I find you?" I suddenly feel weary of being alone.

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"You will find me." He mimes a phone, "Or on the bench at all sorts of odd hours. If I am not here, I'm probably nearby. Sit and ponder a while. I'll always return..."

A bird screeches. A hawk...? I look up to notice him circling in the great blue sky above. Seeming to be looking over me. Ominous or majestic? Am I the prey or just lucky to see him so close. I can't decide. Probably both.

A moment later, I look down and Robert is gone. I hear a rustling and see movement from a bush by the creekside, but when I walk around it, there's no sign of him.

Chapter 13

Life in Limbo...

I don't ever think about death. Yet, it's so normal and even part of my work.

But, not until now, sitting with my own dad, do I smell it. It's kinda sour and off, but familiar and reassuring, like balsamic vinegar and the smell of sourdough bread. Like his life.

I'm in his hospital room in palliative care, staring at the monitor showing a heart beat, holding his warm, heavy and dry hand.

His face is wrinkly. His body feels dormant, more than asleep, vacant, sunken into the bed, frozen in time.

It's like he's half way there.

I realize I've been holding my breath, I sigh and take a deep gulp of air in.

I keep thinking of him when we were younger. Flashes of him being quiet. At the dinner table with my chatty-pants of a mom.

Now with me on a trip to the store. Even with him alone, he wouldn't say much.

Something reassuring and also at times unnerving about that.

Not knowing what was going on inside. At the same time, he had this solidness. Like a rock. Always there. To count on. Forever...

I notice that I'm biting my lip. He did that all the time, especially in the last few years, like he's constantly mulling something over.

Huh. Maybe I do that too?

DING!

My phone is set to only take notifications from the two priorities in my life. Will check it later.

Stay present and try to "see" him.

Feels like I am grasping in thin air and then like sand slipping through my fingers...

Gosh I'm so fucking sappy right now. I never get so philosophical and ramble on like this. Really, I am very organized. I have ~ used to have ~ everything planned, to the minute.

This morning was unusual. I'm embarrassed thinking about it. But also relieved.

His hand suddenly convulses and squeezes mine in a tight vice grip.

It's really uncomfortable. Like someone clinging too tightly. I hate that feeling. Then, just as suddenly, it goes limp, dead again.

Out of nowhere, I feel a whirl of emotion: heat and wetness behind my eyes.

"Snap out of it Bill. No need for sappiness. Just take care of it."

My mom, always the critic in my head, snapping me to attention.

I wipe away the tears and take a stiff and deep inhale.

Straightening up, I look out the window, at the grey sky...

Nothing but grey skies...

I stand up and look out below, seeing the expanse of the city. From so high above my mind travels to the edge of the ravine system far off in the distance.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I wonder about Robert and that other voice. So many voices. I really may be losing my marbles.

Papa, you there?

Always.

I can't shake the unnerving feeling that I am talking to myself and there may be something terribly wrong with me, and yet the sense of *him* is so calm... like an anesthetic.

Is any of this real?

As I think it, he replies almost at the same time.

What do you think?

You don't seem to give straight answers, do you?

I trust you will
find your own.

A shiver goes through me. I turn and my eyes lead me to gaze down on the bed to a clipboard at my dad's feet, sitting there with a pen waiting for me. The peaceful spell is broken.

The pile of forms and consents whips me back to reality. I need to decide what to do if he does not wake up from this "surprise" coma or if his condition deteriorates.

A deep sigh.

Why am I carrying them around?

I'm obviously not ready ~ yet ~ to sign anything.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I like to be deliberate about such things. All things in fact. Our lives are shaped by the details, the millions of day to day decisions, most of them seem small and insignificant but they have a profound impact, like compound interest or to be more dramatic, the build up from a few snowflakes packed together into an avalanche.

I spent my life managing complex situations and variables. I am a manager, right? My decisions can affect thousands of lives, in the smallest yet significant ways. Seniors like my dad. On their way towards the last exit. Or as the company slogan says "Be treated like Gold in your Golden Years".

Cheesy, but I used to believe in it.

There's someone in the room. I can smell a sweet scent and I hear movement.

I pull the curtains back looking around. No one. Just the wind from the open window swaying the hospital blinds.

Why am I so on edge?

I close my eyes. A hand touches my shoulder. I must be day dreaming again. That whisper again. A woman's voice. I know her. Not my mom. Younger, mischievous and raspy.

"Tell him..."

Can't be. It can't be her.

My sister. My dead sister.

Great. On top of everything, now I am hearing the ghost of my sister.

Chapter 14

Reclaiming Time

I arrive at home. Another surprise awaits me.

It's Daren, my brother.

What the fuck is he doing here?

After talking to Robert, I did *intend* to contact him (not just yet).

I can't help but wonder, *Are they all conspiring behind my back?*

Seems like he invited himself over for dinner.

Damned, if I know.

I'm spent emotionally, worn out and starved.

We eat. I curb my desire to binge in front of everyone. And the food is so good. So rich. Jess cooks like this when she's inspired. Otherwise, it's omelette, left overs or frozen dinner.

So nourishing...

I put my hand on my belly ~ satiated and safe ~ for the moment.

Julia is all over Uncle Daren who does impressions and acts the usual clown.

He pulls out a present, to her delight.

I hate feeling jealous, but I have no energy to hide it.

Not staying for the opening, I duck into the kitchen to wash up and clean everything. I do it to cleanse my mind and let go of self-importance. It also

feels good to have the warm water washing over my hands. Soothing.

A few minutes later, he walks in on my private ritual.

“Hey bro. You know, I came here, especially for you.”

I can't help but cock an eyebrow, incredulous.

“Got you something for your last birthday, which I wasn't invited to.”

Grunting, I turn and notice that he's not disappointed but beaming a smile. *What is up with him?*

He hands me a fancy looking box, polished mahogany with rounded edges. I wipe my hands dry and open it, with apprehension, expecting something to explode in my face. There's a certificate of authentication that I pull back. I cannot believe what I'm holding in my hand. It's a watch, made by Breguet, one of the oldest watchmakers in existence, established in 1775. The founding father, Abraham-Louis Breguet was a true visionary innovating the rotor system that is used in automatic (self-winding) mechanical watches still used today. He also invented the tourbillon which is one of the most coveted complications in the world of watchmaking. This is no knock off.

And, holy shit, it must have cost...

“I'm hoping it's like the one you always wanted.”

My throat is constricted, like a well that's run dry.

“I thought about you a lot the last few months. How much you've done for others. And how... ”

My eyes are getting moist. I'm flooded with memories of longing to hold one of these as a teenager. I stare at it, fascinated, still in disbelief, not wanting to look up at him, and have him see how much this moves me.

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"I remember how when you were in grade eleven - you really wanted this one because it was self-winding...swiss made.... fancy features. I thought it was the bling but I don't think I understood what drew you to it back then. I knew mom and dad could never afford it. You didn't even ask. You saved up instead and then like 6 months later when you had enough to put down a "deposit" for a used one. Not even half of what it cost. And then you gave all your money to that girl."

"Sharlene."

"Yeah, the single mom you were dating."

"No, I... we never got together. We were just friends."

"God, you were such a goodie two shoes." He leans in pat me on the shoulder, "The company that makes these, they still make them. A bit fancier nowadays but in..."

My chest cracks... aching. I don't want to have a repeat of this morning. Not here in the kitchen. In front of him. I lean on the sink counter. Trying to keep it together.

This is such a meaningful gesture. Why am I so guarded and reticent to take it from him?

"Daren. This is too much. I can't..."

"Afford it. I know. That's why I bought it. Don't worry it's a write off for me." He clicks his tongue twice. A cocky quirk he's taken on since we were teens.

"After two bankruptcies, I clear everything with my accountant. Really. It's the least I could do for being a shitty brother for so many... decades."

I can't hide how much I love holding this piece. My hand is clinging to it greedily. Daren is right. I hate status symbols. I dress minimally, but I like to think in classy ways. But, this is different. It's like a reclaimed relic. A reward for a childhood that I lost.

"Before you try and find a way to give it back, cause you feel unworthy or obligated to me or if you're still mad at me ~ which I totally get if you are ~ there

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is one thing that you can give me right now. It will not cost much... Promise.”

“What?” I am reminded of my brother’s games and lies, the years of shady schemes, small and big betrayals. How he always has an angle and something he wants. Back to being conflicted about receiving it, yet my hands don’t want to give it back.

“Just take me out for a drink will you?” He flaps his arms, “That’s it.”

“I’m not...” I don’t drink. Rarely. And besides, he’s a lifelong addict!

“No booze. For me at least. I heard a bit about what’s brewing in your life from Jess and I just thought you might want to get out and do something unconventional – for you – tonight. I know you don’t work tomorrow... So?”

I get the dig. And I know he has something up his sleeve. My brother was always a grifter, a master manipulator. And, he’s right. I don’t have anything to do tomorrow. Not wanting to sit at home with Jess. The watch ticks in my hand. A piece of glorious craftsmanship, reminds me of lost time. My time.

I nod, hoping I don't regret it.

Chapter 15

The Science of Risk

So, here we are... in a bar downtown, which Daren chose. It's more like a healthy juice bar, with some old brewery metal pipes and brick type ambience.

He gets a kombucha - some weird fermented tea which is non alcoholic apparently.

I get a beer. Pilsner is my taste. Budweiser is the fake version. The real stuff from Czech Republic is my favorite. Dry, full of flavour and less alcoholic. I'm discerning and simple when I drink too.

"So, Bill. What happened to you? You used to be such a preachy dogooder... hard worker but also such a dreamer."

I can't help but frown. Don't know what angle he's getting at.

"Not trying to ruffle you, bro. Just curious. When did you get so stuffy and jaded....? You wanted to change the system, not become it."

I would normally take that as a jab but oddly, at this moment I feel empty. No energy to push back. And when I look at his face, I see curiosity, even concern. This is not the sneering younger brother who always wanted to show off how he could be better than me.

I look down for a moment, unsure whether to engage. Then I sputter out flailing my hand in his direction "Daren, you're the disrupter... I've always been the steady one. The long term planner. The..."

He has leaned forward, crossing his arms on the table, "Yeah, it's true. That's always been your strength. I've always been one to turn the table over..."

stealing the candy and taking the risks... but something *is* missing. You... you used to have a..."

"Spine...?"

"No... Yes. I was gonna say it in a less judgy way. Maybe... uh... a stick up your ass."

His face shows a wide grin - the way apes do to show no threat. "But with principles and values that you'd take a loss for. Meanwhile.... I did whatever made me a filthy rich mother fucker."

"Who are you and what have you done with my brother?" I wonder out loud. "I'm not used to you being so..."

"What?" I wonder why Daren chuckles with delight.

"You never heard me be so honest? It's been a while, bro... I've changed a lot since you saw me last. When was it that we actually spoke more than a sentence of small talk? Two years ago now?"

It finally feels like we're stripping off the veneer and getting more real. I brace myself as he leans forward even more and nods towards the third bottle on the table. "Maybe you're..."

"Drinking too fast..?" I get self conscious for a moment and then brush it off. "I had a rough 24 hours. Spare me. I deserve it."

"Alright. Yeah. Who am I to judge or know what's best for you? But, look I see a problem and you being the master of problem solving, I'd love to point it out."

I scoff...

Right, that's what I was waiting for... a lecture from my younger and more "successful" brother.

"Please hear me out." He sighs with a pained expression leaning back and showing me his palms in a gesture of peace. "It comes from a place of love, Bill."

I roll my eyes and nod for him to at least humour me. But then it sinks in ~ he's actually concerned.

My Heart Is A Muscle

“At this moment, you're losing the game of life *because...* well *not* because you aren't smart... Hell, you're twice or three times brighter than me...”

Hearing this is a revelation. I can't hide my dumbfoundedness. He catches my surprised look, “To be honest, I attribute my success to stealing, or rather incorporating your brilliant way of analyzing hidden strengths... what did you call it in your thesis? Something potential...”

“Analysis of untapped potential in organizations and how to optimize it.”

My mind flashes to the years of deep study and research, getting my MBA. I did want to change the world and I had a pretty good plan to do it!

“Right, that was brilliant. And I owe you. I'm serious about giving you whatever cash to help you with the next...”

I recoil at the thought, waving it off profusely. “No. I'm... We're fine.”

I taste bitterness. And then rub my wrist, thinking of the watch, which I left back at home. What a generous gesture, yet which already makes me feel so uncomfortable to receive.

“I get it. You need to get back up and stand on your own two legs here. I respect that. Proud like dad. Not a bad thing. Ok, where was I...?”

He laughs to himself. Glad someone is enjoying himself. In truth, a part of me is also. Another part is raw and hurt like a boxer knocked out, sulking in defeat. Not sure which part of myself to side with at this moment.

“Right... so you are losing *NOT* because you don't work hard. Yeah, I work crazy hours, but I party hard also and I don't have a family. No matter how this plays out you will still have Julia. Me, I have half a dozen zeros behind some numbers and a teenage version of freedom. Yes... I did choose that. But, I'm re-evaluating a lot these days.”

He takes a long pause. Being dramatic or seriously regretting? I'm not sure.

"But YOU, what was I saying again..." He takes a drink of his strange brew, offering me some. I decline.

"ADHD sure works for you when you get to be a CEO, with many personal minions... ahem... assistants around."

I feel the alcohol making me feel heavy. I was always a sleepy drunk. But my tongue is loose. "So, you were telling me I am brilliant but I'm a LOSER, because..."

"Right. You're NOT a loser, but if we look at the current data, you are losing, correct, no?"

I spin my forefinger to show him I need him to speed up and get to the punchline already.

"I always loved your pragmatic sense, bro... you are losing because of one reason... only ONE and it is something you can totally change."

"Which is?!"

It feels hot in here. I drown my pity with another gulp of beer before he hits me with it.

"Courage."

Blood rushes to my face. I feel the sting of that word coming from him, "I really don't need this right now..."

"Look, let me enlighten you on some science... I know you like hard facts, right?"

Exasperated. I concede. Flap my arms open. *What else do I have to lose?*

"I know relationships are complicated ~ maybe that's why I suck at intimacy ~ but in my arena, that of business, it all comes down to transactional costs and benefits. The relevant science here is one of risk and it goes back to the Cold War. The government gamified and studied it, in depth. When you boil it down, there are three fundamental ways to transact in the world."

My Heart Is A Muscle

Daren introduces each of these.

One is to be a GIVER.

Another is to be a TAKER.

And the third is to be MATCHER.

I make connections as he speaks, remembering this research when I was in my undergrad.

"I am a matcher." I volunteer.

"Yup." He nods. "And Jess..."

"She's a giver."

"You got it. Something I admire in her a tonne."

He has an odd look. Then he catches me eyeing him. "You know I have had a major crush on her ever since you got together, don't you?"

"That's awkward."

"I think it's because I've been..."

"A taker." I jump in. Feeling righteous and not hiding it. Noticing a bit of jealousy behind that also.

"Ding ding ding. Yup. You got me." He seems to revel in exclaiming. "She's also very hot, but really why I admire her is because *I am* fascinated by givers. Anyway... Takers, like me, end up with more of the pie early on, but only until they get blocked or come to Jesus and realize how they've burned every bridge, eventually losing everybody who matters, being left with the suck ups and backstabbers who sticks around."

He seems somber about that.

"Meanwhile..." He scans my face, "Matchers, like you, take the safe road every time... protecting and conserving but you don't grow or rise up the ladder, unless..."

I feel unsettled.

"...As a matcher you learn two lessons: to take what is yours when it's right in front of you and to

give away that which you hold most dear." He stops to give me time to consider it.

"Hmmm. I do wish I was like her sometimes..." I look down thinking of Jess, "More of a giver. And I used to envy you... going after what you wanted."

He looks thoughtfully with a pained expression, "Must be why I failed at marriage twice. But didn't you go after Jess and win her over?"

"I guess I did." It feels like a lifetime ago.

"I guess you do have some courage, after all." He beams a smile and cocks his eye brows waiting for me to nod along in agreement, which I do reluctantly.

"Courage, coming from the French for '*of the heart*'." He nods and crosses his arms, leaning back, as if it's settled.

I feel disarmed, bare and open. My brother has a gift for being convincing, but I've never seen him this spot on about life and relationships.

"I can't believe that I'm saying this. Daren. Must be the alcohol. But being a planner and winning the race by being slow and steady, averting risks, maybe... maybe you're right. Maybe that's what's gotten me in this hole."

"I wonder what Becca would say?"

Her name. Hearing it spoken aloud hits me like a tonne of bricks. We don't talk about our sister in this family. But, I notice a sense of quiet relief that he brings her up. Weighing whether to open up and tell him, I swallow my saliva, "I saw her, I mean I felt her... uh... today in the room with dad."

There's a long pause between us. He breaks it, "I don't feel ready to see him. Feel shitty about that, but so glad that you're there." He clears his throat, "I've been seeing her myself too. What did she...?"

For a moment, I'm taken aback by his matter of factness about her. I even wonder for a split second if this is all some sort of a con, bringing her up to disorient and further disarm me. I see his eyes get wet.

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As do mine. I sense an ocean of grief that we are both on the edge of together.

"She told me. I heard her voice. *"Tell him..."*

"Tell who?... what?"

"Dad... I think. I was sitting holding his hand when I *heard* her voice. It sounded just like her."

Daren's face is flush and white. Like something has struck him.

There's a sense of a thick humid tension which is unnerving to hold, "Could it just be sleep deprivation and stress or something?" I throw in, grasping for some explanation to make this make sense and be easier to push away.

His head shakes definitively, "No. It's real." He drinks his entire drink in one long swig and promptly excuses himself to go to the bathroom.

I'm left with all my thoughts. Unnerved by this conversation, yet relieved to have everything out in the open.

When Daren returns, his mood has shifted. He's back to his intensely-in-your-face usual self.

"Can I tell you something else?"

"Ugh. Sure. When have you ever held back?" I test him.

He laughs good naturedly and leans in.

"I wanna help you in some way. Not to try to save you or fix you, but just help you find your mojo again. This genius you have is being wasted. I wanna do for you what you tried to do for me growing up... But I didn't have the courage and wisdom to take your help, back then."

"Ok. Ugh. I just don't know..." I look down, self-conscious. The last two days have been crushingly humbling.

I look up to see Daren checking his phone.

Something more important than me?

I can't believe that I'm feeling so jealous and needy. Again. Must be the alcohol.

"I'm sorry, Bill. I actually expected you to blow me off and throw the gift back in my face. And I have a commitment that is very important to keep in a few minutes."

"No problem." I shrug it off and pretend to not care.

"No, wait. Listen, you're probably going to say No, but what the hell. You wanna come?"

"Uh..." This day and this evening has been a rollercoaster already. I feel so full, like I'm going to spill over.

"What is it, *exactly*?"

"It's just around the corner and starts soon. I'm fully committed to this. Rare as you know for me. Others are counting on me. I'm sorry to be rambling... It's hard to explain."

It's odd to see Daren sweat nervously. "What, like a therapy thing...?" I inquire.

"No, more of a men's group... but..."

My gut is shaky, like the ground under me is shifting and I'm being displaced but I don't know why.

"Daren, it's been really good to see you and a long day, maybe another time." I feel disappointed, but relieved. I don't think I can handle anything else and yet there's a look on his face, one of a boyish yearning, that I have not seen on my younger brother since we were little and I was his keeper. And hell, maybe a men's group is what I need also.

He stands up and readies himself to go. "Of course. And please. There's no catch. The watch is the least I could do to show you the value you have. And given the way they treated you, consider it as my recognition of the years of work you have done."

I clear my throat, not sure I should say it, might be the booze talking again, "If you uh... meet again as a

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group, let me know. I would also like to hang out again.”

“I would love that. And as it happens, we meet twice a week, again this Thursday. Only if it calls you. And yes, let's hang out soon.”

He turns to leave, but catches himself, “Wait a sec. Give me a fucking hug, will you?”

He extends his arm to help me lift myself up. Woozily, I embrace him. It's awkward to hug him at first, but then, as he holds me tight, I feel his steadiness, grounding me. I've never felt him being a support to me like this. It's always been the other way around. Despite trying to act nonchalant, I release a deep sigh.

He squares me up, looking into my eyes, flipping our usual script and acting the big brother, “No fucking way you are driving. Text my driver, he'll take you home.” He gives me a card.

He pats me on the shoulder and as he walks out, I notice my chest feels lighter. I feel more alive.

Must be what Papa meant about finding my own spark...

What a funny thought!

Maybe, this is how my heart gets stronger...

Another strange thought.

I sit back down, lighter and happier, yet left with a growing sadness I can't describe. It's a kind you savour, like a wine.

I shake my head, unable to understand any further. Resisting the metaphor or any more glass filling, I walk out into the cold air.

Homeward bound!

Chapter 16

Love or War

After everything that's happened today, my mind and heart are so damn full. I feel the need to lie down and to be alone in the dark.

The house is quiet.

Making my bed on the couch, I nearly jump as Jess touches my shoulder. Taking a deep inhale, "I thought you were asleep." My voice feels softer than usual.

She's rubbing her eyes. "You're different. What's going on? Did you have a good time with Daren?"

"You could say that." I smile.

"You know you don't have to..." She gestures to the couch.

"I just thought I'd give you space."

"I don't need space. I need you..."

I feel the peaceful feeling fading away and something burning in my chest and face. The desire to turn away and curl in takes hold.

Jess puts a hand on my shoulder. "Listen, I need to talk to you."

I know what's coming.

Sigh.

I put my arms out. "No. Wait. Listen to me for a moment."

She exhales, crossing her arms.

Out of nowhere, or maybe the alcohol loosening the reins of inhibition, I dig into her. "What's up with

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you? Why are you risking everything we've built for some mid-life crisis... bullshit?"

Someone had to say it. But as the last word hangs in the air, I feel regret about how it came out.

She walks out. I hear her closing doors...

A minute later, my bed is made.

She returns to the living room. Breathing hard. Sweat on her forehead. I imagine she's been pounding pillows to release some of her anger. I'm too emotionally emptied to be upset or react. Her arms are on her hips.

"Listen here... Mr. I work so often and so damn hard and get shafted by my job that I have no time to love my woman nor spend time with my daughter because I am trying to save the fucking world... while I risk my health and nearly fucking die on us!"

She got me. I flap my arms out.

Revved up, she continues, "I know I'm brash and rocking our world at seemingly the most inconvenient time, for *you*. But, it's been far too long that you've been sleepwalking through this marriage. I've been awake for a while now. I love you but... AND... I won't keep waiting."

I take that in. "You're right." I nod.

She's taken aback, frowning. "I don't need you to *agree* with me, Bill."

"God damn it, Jess!" I roll my eyes. I know that sets her off but I can't hold back my exasperation, "So, what *do* you want?"

She steps forward and starts pounding my chest with her fists.

I fall back on the couch, stunned. "What the...?"

"I want to... To break through your fucking wall. You're too fucking reasonable right now!"

I lose it, pushing myself back up while holding her wrists. She rips out of my hold.

“You want to fight, is that it!?” My arms in the air. I know in the back of my mind that Jess has training in Jiu jitsu and could protect herself but...

“No! You may be a genius, but right now you are so fucking dumb. I want ALL of you, damn it! Even your rage! Everything out in the open...”

Locking eyes with her, I feel her like an animal before me, so alive, ready to pounce, wanting to bite me, wrestle and play...

There’s only the sound of our breath.

We both lean in at the same time, to head butt or bite each other.

Our lips meet, but we collide so hard, it knocks our teeth.

“Ow...” Funny to us how we both feel the same pang.

She grabs my neck and pulls me back for another. We suck face.

I pull away and then rip her shirt off. Or try to. It doesn’t rip as easily as in the movies. It hangs half torn.

She is so raw and aroused... As am I. We pant some more together.

She takes my hand and leads me jogging to our bedroom. I scoop up her legs and throw her on the bed.

I don’t want to worry about anyone walking in on us...

We fuck.

Fully in my groin I feel her, the sweat and the clawing and biting. The itch being scratched feels so fucking good. I feel unrestrained. Waves of heat flush through me. I feel so free. So wild and dangerous.

Everything is annihilated in the orgasm, as we come together.

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* * *

Afterwards, we lay there splayed next to each other.

"You broke your rule." I turn to her.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Cause I felt like it. It's my rule to break."

I'm delighted but also dumbfounded, my mind is a knot of emotions...

I suddenly want to get out. Go for a night walk. But I stay lying there next to her. My eyes close slowly.

* * *

I wake up. I am in bed. Next to her. The room is dark and silent.

Did I just dream this?

For a moment, I can't tell. I'm naked. Usually I sleep with some clothes on. The tip of my dick is wet.

Back to sleep.

A smile on my face.

Wednesday

When powerful new
allies emerge...



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Chapter 17

Dream or Reality

I'm standing in an alley at night. It's just starting to rain. I can feel the drops on my skin, going down my neck and back... Aaahhh, the tingling. I smell both the freshness of the night air and the smog of our city. I hear the patter on the rooftops around me.

It feels so real. Time is as it usually is. I suspect this is a dream, but the sensations are so accurate and vivid. I feel my feet on the ground. No shoes.

Then a flash. I see the woman in the red dress. Her. Just a few feet away, smiling as she sees me and spins away. It really is my sister. I see her and hear her laughter and know for sure. She's running through the alley ahead of me. I chase her.

"Becca!"

She leads me to a park.

Suddenly, she's gone. Then, her cool wet hands come from behind and over my face, covering my eyes.

"Don't worry. It's just me." She whispers close.

Her hands drop as she now stands in front of me.

I feel a sinking feeling in my stomach, as if a lead weight was thrown in there.

"I'm sorry."

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The words just blurt out of me. I'm not sure why.

She smiles her crooked and wry smile. "You don't need to be, Billy boy."

"What do you need?" I beg her.

I can't believe I'm actually looking at and talking to my dead sister right now. She's in her early twenties, the age she was when I last saw her. But, she is full of youth and passion, with a spark in her eyes, as she would have been if... if the drugs didn't turn her into a shell of herself.

"Shhhh." She puts a finger to my mouth. "Just listen. You are not strong enough, yet. But, what you seek is seeking you..."

The words echo inside me, reverberating.

What you seek is seeking you...

I recognize the reference to a poem, but I have no clue what that means.

I reach over to touch her.

Chapter 18

The Centre Cannot Hold...

I wake up, ripped from our reunion.

I notice that I'm wearing my night shirt and boxer briefs.

The vision was so lucid and real this time. I wish I could have stayed with her longer.

Jess is already up. Doing yoga in the living room. Earbuds on. In her own world. I guess last night we *didn't* make love? Still confused about that.

Our home is typical for Toronto, small, but we've also like that it's compact so we know where everyone is.

I see the food is already prepped. The family calendar reminds me that Jess is taking Jules to school and it's her day off. Our girl is still asleep. I stare at her but don't want to wake her.

I get my running clothes on and head to the ravine.

Should I be checking in with Jess?

Normally I would. Fuck it. This is not a normal week. So much on my mind. So much ~ like my career being paused and my dad's life and future and being asked to sign off on it ~ I don't even know how to make sense of any of it.

I find my feet taking me back to where I met Robert yesterday. Not sure why.

His bench is empty. But as I slow down and pass, I hear a whistling that pierces my attention, as if it was

sent directly to my ears. I whip my head around and see some rustling branches in the dark thicket off the main path.

I walk over.

Robert is picking something from a branch. Turning to me, extending his hand, "Mulberries?"

"No..." My first reflex with anything new and strange. The look on his face as he gobbles one up tells me it's delicious. I change my mind. "Ok. I'll try one."

He hands me a few and nods upwards for me to notice what is all around us. The tree is full of them. Holding one, I see a large cluster of compact little bubbles. I pop it into my mouth. Mmmm. Sweet yet different. My stomach gurgles.

"A wonderful surprise to see you again."

I start picking some also, gobbling them up, while standing next to him, "I need to ask you something."

"I bet."

"I'm serious."

"I know. That may be a part of the problem." He chuckles.

I scowl. His tone changes, "Not meant to insult you."

I believe him. He has this effect on me, pushing my buttons, showing me how reactive I am and then disarming me somehow.

"The answer to your question can only be found by going on a quest."

"Ok. I'm here. Where are we going?"

"I love your eagerness. To be honest, Bill, I don't have much time at this moment. Another friend is about to arrive soon. But, I know a shortcut which involves an unconventional approach. Are you up for it?"

I nod.

Suddenly, he grabs my shoulder and spins me around. It's completely disorienting. He's now on my side but behind me, in my blind spot, hands on my shoulders, whispering. "Would you trust me, a little more now?"

I grit my teeth. "Do I have a choice?"

"Yes, of course. You always do."

The level of familiarity between us is really bewildering.

"In precisely ten minutes I have another appointment on that bench..." I look over and see that now we are facing that way.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Close your eyes."

"Really? That's it?"

"Yes, and allow me to guide you more directly."

"Ok." I wonder if this is going to be some predictable trust exercise that life coaches love to do.

"Tell me, as you close your eyes, if you can imagine an atom in space?"

"Yes." As I say the words, the image comes to me pretty easily. A surprise to me, as visualizing isn't really my strong suit.

"Describe it to me."

"Uh. It has a nucleus, like a sun. And the electrons are flying around it in elliptical orbits, like the planets."

"Hmm. Seems like a pretty simple and elegant model, doesn't it?"

I nod.

"Now, I'd like your permission to show you something..."

I open my eyes to look around.

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“Keep your eyes closed. The vision is inside you.”

“Uh. Yeah, ok, sure.” I close my eyes.

“May I show you a deeper truth, now?”

Why is he asking me for so much permission?

I nod.

“Notice what comes up for you when I do this...”

Suddenly a jolt of great pain flashes through me. Quick as a surge of lightning, then gone. His thumb had pressed a point near the apex of my neck and shoulders. Now, my body weight is floating in space and my center of gravity is non-existent. I see all around me in every direction... Darkness and yet it's alive. In front of me is a mass of electric static, a messy cluster of fluctuating light and moving bits.

“What do you perceive now?” His body seems far away and yet his voice is right here, whispering in my ear.

“I see a... I don't know how to describe...”

“It's an atom.” As soon as he says it, it makes sense to me. “Yet, it's different now, isn't it?”

“Yes, it's a cloud of energy swirling and...” I see it explode and fragment then. Robert comments as if he is witnessing the same phenomenon:

*“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart.
The centre cannot hold.”*

There's an emptiness that feels like a void. But again my senses tell me it is full of life. Then, shards of light and something translucent whip back together and a new cloud is before us. It looks a little

different. Bigger? It's shape or the way it dances is somehow different.

I don't understand any of this intellectually. But, it's truly beautiful.

I open my eyes. The light is bright, even in the shade of the trees.

"That was..."

"Beyond words? Bewildering?"

I nod. Turning around, "How does the rest of that poem by Yeats go?"

"Look it up."

He's walking away now and towards the creek bed just a few feet away. Seeing him washing his hands, I notice the mulberries left a stain on mine. I swoosh my hands in the cool waters also.

"The water doesn't wash it out. You need an agent that comes from the same source as the stain," he hands me a bunch of green and white mulberries, "Squeeze them and see."

As I do so, the red stain goes away like disappearing ink.

He goes on, "I was mad at my teachers in high school. They taught me science that only showed me what we wanted the atom and reality to look like. The perfect elegant models we had constructed pleased our simple minds. But, then, in grade twelve, one day my physics teacher showed us a photograph of a real atom. A terrible and unstable mess. It looked nothing like the theories they wanted me to believe. Put another way, I discovered what Carl Jung once said,

'What was true in the *morning* of our lives, becomes a *lie* in the *afternoon*.'

"You told me that same quote, yesterday."

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"I'm not thick or forgetful, Bill. You need to hear it a few times."

"Touché! So, what did you do about that teacher and the atom...?"

"Well, I travelled the world and studied through my own senses. For a long time... And I lived as fully as I could. I created castles and saw them destroyed. I loved and I lost the love I cherished and... the more I have come to know, the more I am humbled and in awe. The world is a miraculous and mysterious place."

Something inside me is loosening, like a taut rope unwinding and a sober type of calm takes over. I'm empty of thoughts as I listen to the water running through the creek. I notice the sway of the trees and listen to the birds chirping to one another.

He smiles at me. "Now it seems that we're finally ready to ask and listen... so... what is your question, Bill?"

"Uh... How..." I struggle all of a sudden, even though I had clearly formulated it earlier, "Why... uh?"

"Why are all these terrible things happening to you, right now?"

"Yes. Kinda."

"What if the universe..."

I push back. "I hate that term. Too vague and unscientific..."

"I see your point. Thanks for the precision. What if your own *soul*, or if you prefer, that small voice at the center of your very being, your ever fluctuating and always present nucleus, was conspiring to help you?"

My face screws up. What he just said intrigues me, but I can't quite grasp it. Is it just a New Age trope or is he serious?

"I never had that sense before. Why now all of a sudden?"

“What if it was always trying to reach you, sending you signals. but you ignored it or looked the other way?”

I raise my eyebrows, “But why haven’t I?”

“Have you ever been open to such help or desperate enough to take it as you are now...?”

“No,” I laugh to myself. “Well maybe at key times in my life. But not for a long time, I haven’t.”

“Now, tell me this... did you intend to shake your head, just now?”

More confusion swirling in me.

“When I just asked you the question, did you think ‘No’ and then shake your head or was it more involuntary... Something spontaneous?”

“It just came.” I answer.

“That’s precisely what we are talking about...”

I *still* don't really get it. Sighing. Growing a bit exasperated.

“This conversation is not going the way you expected it to, is it?”

“No. It’s not.”

“Good,” he puts a hand on my shoulder, smiling that warm smile, “You’ve been rolling questions around in your head which are not questions at all. Like, *Why is this happening to me?* But, you’ve already decided the answer, haven’t you? That either *they* are to blame... Or that there’s some flaw in *you*. Am I correct?”

That last part feels like a series of blows to my gut. I nod again, the spontaneous kind. Something in me loves that he sees me and something in me hates him for it.

“What I am asking you to do right now is disorienting because I am guiding you to ask questions worthy of yourself and this precious life of ours... to risk actually learning something...*new*. And all that

said, I only have two more minutes left, my new and dear friend.”

I’m touched and confused by how much warmth he treats me with. Back to trying to understand what he’s talking about and solve my problems, “Ok, so how do I find the help I need?”

“As you see, I’m most pleased and honoured to be here for you. I am but one man, limited in offering you what I can. And I, unfortunately, don’t have infinite time. It really does take a village.”

The thought of meeting other people like Robert kind of freaks me out and also the image of them all together, in some kind of village, makes me chuckle.

“I’m glad something makes you laugh.” He’s beaming. “Don’t worry. None of this is personal and all of it is.”

I noticed him then enunciating with more precision and intensity. As if this moment will never come again and he *really* wants my attention on every word right now.

“Back to your question. Now, there are many more allies you will meet... soon enough... AND there is help coming from within you as well...”

“I don’t understand.” Becoming desperate as our time is about to end, I speak emphatically “HOW DO I FIND...?”

Robert replies calmly,

“Who and what you seek
is already seeking you...”

I feel a bell ring inside me as I hear that phrase again. And it strikes me that Becca said the same thing when I saw her in my dream, hours ago. This is too weird.

“Huh?”

“Daren for one. Let him in some more.” The old man looks away briefly. “Oh, there’s my other friend. Don’t want to keep him. Let me be more direct. Another zinger from Rumi, when he said,”

“Seek not love,
but all the barriers to it
and remove them.”

Perhaps sensing that I am not getting it, he starts drawing in the sand, “Ok, here’s the map, briefly...”

Pointing a stick in the ground, “This is you and where you are at.”

He walks over a few feet and draws a circle. “And here inside this circle is all you want,... love, loyalty, courage, intense passion, realizing your purpose of helping others in the unique way you can, profound sense of peace... EVERYTHING!”

His speech has sped up but is very clear. Turning to me, “Between you and this circle is what?”

“Not sure.”

“Ok. No time to be socratic. Allow me to just spell it out... obstacles that get in your way...”

“Right, like society, other people...?”

“No, those are farther off. And they may hold great influence but not like this. *Directly* in your way are forces more intimate and *within* you.”

He taps my chest. “They are the only obstacles which can really stop you cold in your tracks. Things we all do to fuck ourselves over and keep ourselves away from the circle... I call them the SABOTEURS.”

He picks up a stick and lays it down vertically next to the circle, “Here’s one. Now imagine that it is three dimensional. A wall infinitely high, wide and

deep, so you can't get over it or get rid of it, it's a barrier.

Right!" I exclaim, proud of my knowing this,

"The impediment to action advances action.
What stands in the way becomes the way"

...as Marcus Aurelius once wrote, or as is popularly termed,

"The obstacle is the path."

"In a sense, yes, we can realign it," He turns the stick from vertical into a horizontal line, "Like so and thus it becomes... an ally."

"And a guardrail..."

"Yes, and... there is a gateway of stuck emotional energy within every saboteur which when encountered, unleashed and mastered makes this shift possible. That which was blocking us can actually come along to *aid* us in getting to the circle of satisfaction..."

He laughs to himself, pointing to the circle. "But that is for another time."

"So..." I am aware of his need to go, but also desperate and greedy for some specific answers. "Who's sabotaging *me*?"

He chuckles. "You have a few characters that I can see." Shooting a reassuring look, "As we all do. The question is..." He puts his hand on his chest, "Are you ready to face them?"

I do want to know the truth and face myself but something in me stammers, "Yes, I think so."

I nod, my body more open than my hesitant words may seem.

“Well, then I have some friends I want you to meet.” He pulls out a few different business sized cards, rifling through them, “Each of them has been gripped by these saboteurs but they have evolved them also....” He pulls one card out, “I want you to meet this guy next.”

He holds out the card to me.

I take it and see it's a unique business card, made of thin sheet of metal and painted black, the stencilled writing states:

Dan Forte

Dan Forte Auto Repair/Body Work

2020 Danforth Avenue

I know the place and have driven past it.

Seeing me looking up confused at him, he leans in, clasping my shoulder.

“Dan can help you with your FIXER. He'll show you how to stop trying to control and fix things and instead to find your own power. If you are truly ready, you will summon the courage and go see him.”

He taps me on the back, “Till next time.” His eyes sparkle and then he brushes past me.

I look down at the card again.

Did I just get brushed off or dared? Again?

I flip it over and notice it's for something else. This side is inverted in design, the silver metal is polished to be mirror-like with engraved font...

Dan Forte,

Sensei and founder of
RELATIONAL AIKIDO:
where we train and grow
our relationship muscles.”

There's no other info.

I look back up and see Robert walking away with another man. I notice that I am obsessing about this “other friend”. Fancy designer outdoor clothes - wearing a jacket by ArcTeryx, I know it because it is the same style I once wanted to buy but could not afford. *What is this feeling? Jealousy?*

I shrug that off and make haste to get home and look this Dan the mechanic and Sensei guy up, hoping it leads to something more tangible than this conversation!

Chapter 19

Re-calibrating

I arrive back at the house. It's empty. Nothing happening. Like me.

I notice that I see a flaw in everything. The siding needs fixing. The raccoons are back at it making a nest under the porch - need to fence that off properly.

Jess left a big pile of dishes from the last two meals!

Grrrr....

I know it's a trap to look for what does not work. I know, because I just listened to a podcast or Ted talk or something recently about how we are biologically wired and raised for thousands of years to notice and key up to what is wrong or askew around us. I know it's a survival instinct. AND if we indulge in it too much, it leads to rage, then overwhelm, despair, and even depression.

I get it, but fuck...

Am I the only one who does them around here?!

I grumble away.

Where did she go? Off to her yoga or whatever...

I start tidying up the counters.

The garbage, recycling and compost are all too full. I take them out.

Next I dive into clearing up the sink.

Do I really want to be doing this?

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The sense is that I am avoiding something else. What's the term for it? "Productive procrastination" or something like that.

Yeah that's it. I put down a soapy dish. Dry my hands and close my eyes. I feel out of control. Too many questions swirling around in my head.

What can I do about it?

No answer, but posing the question itself, feels like cutting to clear an opening in a thick brush.

I look around. No one is home.

Somewhat desperate, I say his name out loud, "Papa?"

Yes.

I hear his voice resound within me, but he feels tangible, a presence that surrounds me.

"I uh. Need your help. What..."

Breathe. Notice how you ask the question.

How do I sort through it all...?"

Bring it out,
let's see.

His voice is so calm and all knowing, yet curious. I have a sense of myself as a child, held in the gaze of an adult who has infinite patience and wants to help me find *my own* way.

"Ok." relief washes over me. Not because I know what to do, but I think I have a way to figure it all out. At least, to sort through the madness.

I start walking downstairs into the basement.

There's a room I use for drafting and planning. I rummage through to find reams of paper, tack them up and pull out different coloured sharpies.

This is what I do. This is what I'm good at!

Staring at four large blank poster sized pages on the wall, a spark lights up in me.

"Of course!" I mumble. I see the structure it needs to take.

"I'll scenario plan it." I mumble again to myself.

Who cares if I'm crazy? I'm going to make plans!

Scenario planning is a way to understand and plan for the unknown where the complexity is overwhelming. I learned it from Adam Kahane's book, "Power and Love".

This way of thinking saved my ass at work a few times over the years when our team would get paralyzed and the founder demanded we have a plan ready to go.

My mind unravels as I start writing on different boards. After a few minutes, the speed of it all flooding out of me becomes exhilarating and almost feverish.

The first board is titled...

Dad -

Coma response & beyond

Everything seems urgent, but I dread most to think about him and his situation.

Let's go there first.

Worst Case ~ He dies soon.

My Heart Is A Muscle

- Plan funeral.
- Sort out his affairs.
- We grieve

Ideal ~ He comes out of coma
and recovers soon!

- No need to sign papers.
- we sigh in relief & Count our blessings
- Celebrate!
- Help him with recovery process...

Most Likely? ~ Stays in coma longer...

- A - Sign papers to keep him alive,
but he never wakes up
 - He stays alive for a long time.
 - We visit and watch him waste away.
 - He dies eventually.
 - Continue to take "Steps after death"(see Option B)

But, it's not so simple. Could go other ways...

- B - Don't sign and he Dies Sooner
 - He is taken off life support and dies sooner.
 - Steps after death:
 1. Plan funeral.
 2. Settle affairs
 3. Grieve.

My Heart Is A Muscle

- C - Sign and he Recovers - in time
 - He stays in coma longer, but Eventually wakes up!
 - Celebrate - count our blessings!
 - Help him with rehab & Recovery

Ok. This first one was exhausting to figure out, but I am so glad I have written it down. My brain relaxes.

I'm going to sign the damn papers and bring them in tomorrow.

Next, I tackle...

My Marriage

Worst Case ~ I refuse to change...

- She definitely leaves me.

That path is pretty clear. I laugh to myself to cope with the dread I feel.

Ideal ~ I change...

- A - She stays and we get better!

My Heart Is A Muscle

- B - She leaves anyway, but we co-parent well and find other people to love and it works out for everyone!

Hmmm.

Wish this could be.

The first option.

Most Likely? ~

I try to change, but...

- A - It's too late, no matter what I do. She leaves. It sucks and we break up.
- B - I can't change and feel disappointed and a failure.
- C - We try to work it out together and...
 - realize we do not fit together any more. It sucks and we break up
 - OR → We make it work!

Seems simpler than dad's situation. Less variables, more of a stark contrast. In the end analysis...

What choice do I really have?

I'm *fucking* gonna change whatever I can to see *if* we can make it work.

But, can I really change who I am?

What do I need to change exactly?

Lots of questions.

Need to talk to someone about that.

Robert?

Maybe, I should go see this mechanic/Sensei he mentioned...

More to sort out...

Work/Career (Golden Years)

Worst Case ~

I suck it up and let it slide

- I stay (out of fear), feel like shit and hate my job
- Golden Years loses integrity and more good people leave.
- Maybe -> I get revenge by sabotaging...
(fantasy like an 80's movie).

Yeah. Life is not an 80's movie or a TV show. Real world consequences. My gut churns thinking about the cost.

Ideal ~ I Fight Back & Win!

A - They restructure and I get a raise ?

- Low probability - bad blood. Enemy with CEO and outnumbered...

B - Most likely a pay out and leave

- Look for new job or career shift?

Most Likely?

~ I Stand up & Get Fired!

I speak up, have it documented. They don't like it.

A - Take to court - wrongful - constructive dismissal

- Likely a Win (Money) and a Loss (time and energy)

B - I take the package they offer. Signing an NDA (Non-Disclosure Agreement).

- Grrr. Feels like a surrender.

C - I threaten legal action and negotiate a higher settlement. → Look for new job -> career shift?

Sigh. Seems pretty clear where this is inevitably going, unless they change... I hold that hope. But then again, I didn't write it down on the board, not even in the ideal scenario. I shake this off. Don't want to think about it.

Last but not least, let's deal with the wild cards...

How do I even sketch this out? There's Becca my dead sister who seems to be haunting me and then there's Papa, the quiet voice inside that came when I guess I must have almost died. Still hard to believe all of that happened.

So... What do I know?

She overdosed when I was 22. Daren and I are now both having "dreams" or "hallucinations?" with her in them.

What did I do or not do? Why else would she be doing this?

I can't believe I am debating the logic of ghosts which do not exist...

Is this just some guilt complex, believing it's my fault for not stopping her?

I dismiss the idea and my trying to be an armchair shrink. But, my mind spirals deeper...

Could it be just symptoms of trauma from falling and having a heart attack?

Or something worse, a brain seizure or something?

Gulp.

I'm not a doctor either! But, Dr. Greenleaf cleared me of all the medical stuff. So, who can I ask about this?

Seeing a psychiatrist or psychologist comes to mind. We have them covered through work.

I don't want to be medicated or given some cuckoo diagnosis.

And then there's Papa...

What the fuck is going on?!

Sigh. Do I need to scenario plan this too...?

Am I going crazy?

Worst Case #1 ~ Psychological Flaw (I am losing my mind)

A - Will get worse if untreated. Start believing I am actually talking to dead sister and god.

- End up on the street mumbling to self, abandoning family or being in their care and a burden.

B - I get checked out...

- Diagnosis and meds - help some but life long disability/
- Risk losing family, reputation and ability to provide?

Worst Case #2 ~ Medical Explanation (Symptom of bigger problem)

A - Will get worse if cause is untreated

- could die or be invalid - burden.

B - I insist on more tests! get checked out & treated...

- B #1 - but does not help...
- B #2 - Or, I get better!

Ideal ~

Temporary Stress Reaction

Treat as a General stress reaction

- I limit stress
- Focus on family and good times
- Let go of any past emotions (guilt, grief, etc...)
- Feel better and voices go away

Most Likely ~

Psychological Symptom to Resolve

Becca ~ I have a guilty conscience

- Try to talk and listen to her (Becca)
- Reconcile and atone
- She goes away - feel better.

Papa ~ dad - guilt about coma and grief about his eventual death.

- I sign papers and tend to him.
- Continue to Grieve loss...
- Feel better - voice of Papa goes away.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I notice myself feeling sad about the last part. I feel solace when I hear Papa. As if... the dad I always wanted was here next to me now.

I am.

The presence of that voice...

I rush to the bathroom and splash cold water on my face. I look in the mirror.

Should I get checked out by a professional?

I did happen to do a psych minor.

I walk back to the scenario boards with my arms crossed, staring at it all.

Conclusion.

Given the risks and the variables, I feel like I *should, but...*

I am also pretty functional. No signs of impairment.

I don't want to dodge this because of stigma or fear but in terms of reaching out to professionals, I choose...

D.N.F.N. - Do Nothing For Now.

Gather more data and re-evaluate.

I sum it all up for myself.

I will sign the papers.

Do my best with Jess.

Wait and see what *they* do about work.

Personally, I will try to listen and talk to Becca.

Papa. I don't know... Maybe Dr. Greenleaf can understand? Or Robert?

Not ready to talk to either about that.

My Heart Is A Muscle

This is still unsettling and so I make a deadline. By week's end, if both voices persist, go see someone and talk about it. I promise myself this.

All of the sudden, my brain feels like mush. My eyelids are heavy. I stumble back and lay on the couch behind me, welcoming the silence as the beige blankness of the ceiling turns into cool darkness.

A moment later, I jerk awake, hearing distant ringing. Persistent. Upstairs.

It's the house phone! I thought we finally disconnected it. Few people have that number.

Grr...

I get up to answer it, picking up my own phone on the way and see that Julia's school has been calling for the last 20 minutes.

I answer. It's Julia talking. She's not feeling well.

I feel guilty that she couldn't reach me. And relieved for the change of scene. This process has been intense. "You ok honey bunny?"

"Daddy, I feel gross. Can you come and get me?"

Without thinking, "Sure. See you soon, raccoon!"

She retorts with glee, "Out the door dinosaur!"

Can't help adding one more, "Hitting the road, my sickly toad!"

Like her mom, she always has to have the last word, "In a shake, garter snake!"

Chapter 20

Playing Hooky

Walking through the parking lot, it feels good to be in the sun and moving. Nostalgia hits me as I notice birds chirping and the way the paint on the building has become bleached and cracked over decades, needing a new coat. It's the same school where I used to go as a kid. Funny how some things change and others seem exactly the same. My JK teacher is still here and taught Julia, what seems like yesterday, but 7 years ago now.

Julia used to be a very shy girl. But she's budding now, like spring all around us.

I find her in the front office.

I need to be firm with her - Jess tells me - as she often accuses me of giving our girl an easy pass.

That smile, disarms me. I touch her forehead - warm but not too hot.

Yet something doesn't feel right - she does seem off.

We're driving home and she says, "Daddy?" She seldom calls me that these days, as she tries to be cool or whatever the word is these days for fitting in and standing out. "You know what I think?"

"What's that Jules?"

"I think I felt this woozy feeling because I just needed to spend time with you."

My first response is suspicion - trying to heed Jess's words, but looking in my rearview mirror, I see anguish and longing on her face.

My Heart Is A Muscle

She's never been great at lying or faking emotions - too sensitive and honest. Maybe like me - inside.

I'm touched. "Me? Really?" I play along.

I see her nodding.

"I've been thinking about you a lot. And I know you and mom are not doing well..."

"Well..."

"I've sensed... a growing divide lately."

I start to feel the rise of guilt and a dread of where this conversation is going, I grip the steering wheel tighter and focus on managing the road.

"I... You know we... I want to bridge that chasm."

We often love sharing metaphors.

"Ok, great! But will you leap or build a bridge?"

"I might fly across... sometimes bridges take too long and you need to leap off the edge and get there sooner." Surprised by the boldness of my own analogy.

Jules seems concerned.

"Don't worry," I reassure her. "I have wings and there's time... it's not like Indiana Jones."

"Where the rope bridge is cut and there's..."

"Snakes..."

"No, daddy! That's a different scene... it's an endless pit of darkness below..."

"You have the memory of an elephant."

She makes an elephant sound. Haven't seen her be so silly and playful in a while.

"I got an idea, daddy. Me and you need to re-connect and..."

What is she? A therapist?

I love her wise heart.

My Heart Is A Muscle

She continues, "I was thinking we could go on a series of adventures... where you take me places and I take you places and..."

"How will we sell it to mom?"

"Quality time. Extra-curricular... Real world learning!"

"I'm in! We can also call it a 'mental health day'."

We both click our tongues at the same time - noticing and smiling.

"Ok. So... since we are officially playing hooky, where do we go first?"

Just then, we pass my work.

"Turn here..." She jolts up in her seat.

"Really?" Uneasy again, not wanting to stop here.

"Trust me, daddy."

I park around the corner, but she walks us back toward the large 8 floor complex of offices and primary care facility for the elderly. I hope no one sees us. She stops.

"Right here is perfect."

I look around. "What?"

"This." She touches the tree in front of us.

It's a great oak.

Elderly clients notice me. I feel self-conscious. Mrs. Meier smiles. Eddie the cranky millionaire who likes to smoke in the front scowls. The custodian looks out and seems suspicious. She is a protective hen. She comes out and then adjusts her glasses ~ and (shit) she recognizes me ~ then looking awkwardly away and screwing up a smile.

Julia breaks the spell.

"How come you're not working, daddy?"

I mumble and try to shift the focus by pointing to the sky, as a red-tailed hawk passes by.

“How did the meeting go...? Did they not like your brilliant idea?”

I pride myself on being completely honest, transparent with Julia. Growing up, my own parents taught us so very little. Dad was quiet and brooding. Mom would talk a mile a minute but hardly ever answer our questions or tell us how the world really worked. Daren and I went our own ways, but we were both too curious to settle for stock answers and stay in the prison of a box our home offered. And then there was Becca. She wanted to burn down the house itself.

I sigh.

All that to say... Now, I talk to my girl about EVERYTHING... death, war, sex, whatever she is wondering about.

How else can I help her discover her own intelligence and know how the world works?

It's also my not-so-secret mission to help her grow her wisdom.

There are limits of course.

Was this one of them?

No. The truth is that I'm just embarrassed.

I cough up some words, “No, they didn't let me speak.”

“Really? Did you stay quiet or speak up, anyway?”

“Oh, honey. I spoke up, but...”

She puts her hand on my back, “I guess we're both learning to be as outspoken as mom.” She beams a smile that is so innocent and loving, I cannot take her words personally.

“Yeah. Right... No, sometimes, you get... I don't know...”

My Heart Is A Muscle

She squeezes my hand, "That's ok, you don't need to explain or defend yourself. Just hug her."

I'm perplexed by her sudden prescription.

"The Great Oak." She says it with awe and reverence, "She's here to hold us all."

I look around, noticing the people still across the road. Wondering who else is spying us from behind the mirrored office windows above.

She quizzes my palm again. "Remember what you told me when we first found her? She's like the grandmother you never had, even older..."

"I said that?"

"Yeah. You told me about this tree when I was... younger. You told me a story about her. She's seen and heard everything and she can hold you and take on all your worries."

"Right. That was when you were 5 and you would wake up crying in the middle of the night often."

She takes my hand and brings me to touch the bark, "Try it... For reals."

I see John and Gary walking to the front waiting for a ride. They see me and Julia. John nods and tries to be good guy. It's hard to trust my eyes at that distance, but I swear I just saw Gary sneer at me.

Julia waves to them. Beaming.

They don't walk over. John waves. Gary ignores her, checking his phone.

You really see the character of people by how they treat your precocious daughter.

I feel embarrassed. Don't know why or for who more. Myself or Julia?

"What's the matter? You care what they think?" She snaps my attention back to us.

I said that to her just last week when the mean girls saw her new braid and scoffed.

My Heart Is A Muscle

"No." I shake my head. "I care about what *I* think and how *you* feel."

I shoot back, feigning confidence and winking at her. I close my eyes and put my hand on the tree. Something very quiet washes over me. I tune out everything that is outside of me.

"I want you to care about how *you* feel also, daddy. How *do* you feel?"

She's the only one I hear... then the wind... then my own thoughts...

How do I feel?

I wrap my arms more fully around the tree. A gust of cool wind hits us... Like walking through the ravine in the cool misty morning... feeling the water vapour tingling on my skin.

Internally, I notice that I just want to be held. There's a tender sense. Glad it is inside. Impossible to name or talk about. A tear comes. A deep sigh.... I feel held.... Didn't know I needed that so much.

I think about this tree.

She is an old wise being, I feel "her" presence.

This is weird.

I peek my eyes open and see the two execs are gone.

I close my eyes again, able to savour the silence.

The next few minutes extend and feel like a long stretch of time.

The sun emerges and warms us.

My mind starts thinking about "forest bathing" and some research I read about the powers of nature to heal. I've applied that to an initiative at work, getting seniors on a weekly stroll in the green spaces nearby, but right now I'm seeing how much I've been so thirsty for it and how nourishing it really is for me personally.

My Heart Is A Muscle

“Hey dad? Space cadet numero uno!”

“Yes, space cadet commander!”

“Where do we go next?”

Looking at her bright smile, I feel so good.
Clean and clear inside. My turn to decide. I have an
idea.

Never imagined bringing her, but everything is
upside down, today. Breaking rules and routines is
weird for me, but also refreshing.

Why not?

Chapter 21

A Different Kind Of Dojo

We drive up to the auto repair shop on Danforth Ave, the main strip on our side of town. Julia pushes the door to the sound of an old school bell ringing above.

A strong looking, sprite fellow looks up from a paper ledger, "We're full up for repairs. Sorry folks."

"Dan Forte? I called earlier. Robert sent me."

"Oh, right... Bill, is that you?" He says dramatically, "Welcome." He closes the book and comes over. "And who is this mighty warrior with you?"

"My daughter..."

"Julia!" She steps forward to introduce herself.

He looks at me worried, "I can tell she's very powerful. It's making me a bit nervous actually."

She beams.

He puts his hands out, "I'm Dan. You can call me Dan. Some call me Sensei or Mister D. I like that one. But, you young warrior, can call me pupil."

She squeezes his hand and he feigns her having hurt him. Julia giggles in a way I haven't heard since she was six.

Dan turns to me, "To be totally honest, I didn't expect you would come right away, most guys don't."

A firm handshake is shared between us.

My Heart Is A Muscle

"Before we go any further, I do have a test to see if you are in the right place."

He folds his arms, stroking his chin.

"So, here's the qualifying question: Are you here to complain or to train?"

I look at Julia and we both smile at one another. "The latter."

"Excellent! That's a big relief. I hate wasting time. AND you? Are you going to join us also, master Julia?"

"For what?"

"So, your dad hijacked you, did he?" Dan shakes his head at me playfully scoffing. "Well, I imagine you're going to kick my ass. But when that is *not* happening, I... uh... teach an Aikido class... up there in 17 minutes."

"What's that? I-ke-a-do?"

Dan laughs. "Well I think you're thinking of the place where you buy smoked salmon, play on furniture and jump in a room of balls: IKEA. A little different. **AI-KI-DO** is a martial art that teaches us to turn conflict into connection and respect. Are you up for that?"

She nods, captivated by him.

"Don't imagine you brought any clothes. No worries. Maiko will get you both a couple of loaner GIs. Those are uni..."

"...Uniforms, yes." I jump in wanting to show I know a thing or two. "Uh, I used to practice judo. Long time ago."

"Great. We'll still go easy on you old man." He pats me playfully on the shoulder, "See you upstairs and on the mats, pronto."

Dan nudges us up a round metal staircase while he finishes up some paperwork.

We come to a large space, a gutted industrial loft type of room with brick walls and large multi-paned windows. The floor is entirely covered with *tatami* mats, firm martial art pads. All except a small section of hardwood on which we stand on, with a few chairs, which I assume are for the visitors to sit and watch.

I see a poster on the wall, with a picture of a Sensei, a short man with white hair whom I don't recognize, with a quote:

“I will be your last teacher. Not because I'll be the greatest teacher you may ever encounter, but because from me you will **learn *how to learn.***”

~ Moshe Feldenkrais

“Also a great healer.”

I turn and notice Dan. He is there on the mats sitting in *seiza*, his knees bent under his butt, looking still and meditative, already dressed in a GI and a *hakama* – the black skirt worn by samurai and in certain Japanese martial arts, particularly Aikido and Aido (sword training).

How did he do that so fast and without us seeing him?

Jules and I duck into separate change rooms. Uncomfortable with the awkwardness of being half naked, I make small talk with a short Asian man named Jeff.

My Heart Is A Muscle

"I did a little bit of Aikido, a long time ago. And some Judo and Jiu Jitsu also. What's the style you practice here?"

"Relationships." He smiles, and looks at me openly, not trying to be glib.

Before I can ask him to elaborate, I hear Julia calling me.

I come out. She is being helped in tying her belt by a sharp eyed and stern looking woman with a hakama and a black belt.

"Domo arigato!" Julia responds.

"My name is Maiko and you are most welcome. Now, take it off and show me what you learned."

Julia is surprised by the directive, but eager to show off.

Standing by, I ask Maiko, "What forms does Sensei Dan teach?"

She studies me for a moment and forms a half smile, "We don't study forms. Forms are for those who are scared and wish to live in their heads."

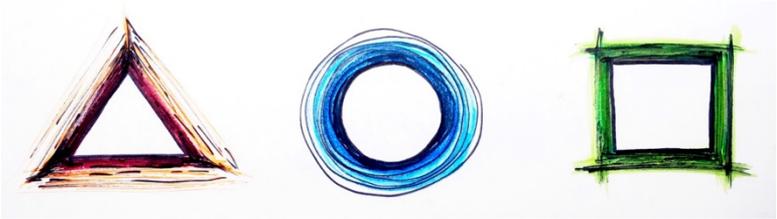
Her answer feels like a slap in the face. I used to love *kata*, practicing and trying to perfect certain movements exactly like my Sensei taught me and how his Sensei taught him.

Dan comes out of his trance, turning his head and speaking in a booming voice. "Today, we're learning about our power." He walks towards us, "While you wait, you might want to read a bit to catch up on some basics."

I scan around and see on the walls, between two large windows are teaching posters. The first of which he points me to is titled "The 3 Shapes of Conflict."

I look it over...

The 3 SHAPES of CONFLICT



In moments of conflict, we have one or more of the following reactive patterns...

TRIANGLE

I go on the pursuit and attack.

CIRCLE

I evade and try to appease.

SQUARE

I get stubborn and stiff.

“Which are you?” Julia nudges me.

I glower at her, playfully, but also not sure I want to have this discussion right there.

“You’re totally a circle, dad. And a square.”

“What about you smarty pants?”

"Hmmm... I can be all of these but... maybe circle too. I hate it when people are mad at me."

Dan comes over. "I share that trait too. I was the classic nice guy avoiding fights. It did *not* work in my first two marriages. Maiko, what about you?"

She responds with a straight face. "I'm a triangle first. And then I become square -- that's what circles tell me at least." One side of her lips curls into a tight smile.

"Good news, we circles can evolve into what I call..." He points to a woman stretching on the mats, "Jennifer?"

She responds grinning ear to ear, "A Love Ninja!" stretching and considering her definition "A master of cajoling, disarming and influencing..."

Sensei Dan seems to like her definition, turning, he asks, "Maiko, what are you working on becoming?"

"Love Samurai." She is on the mats holding a *katana*, Japanese wooden practice sword. Aware of us watching her, she swings it through the air with such speed and grace, it makes a woosh and becomes a blur of movements.

"My practice is to cut through deception and fear with precision." She holds still after a slice, "*And* compassion."

Dan seems to relish calling on his students, "Jeff, you want to out yourself?"

The short stout guy I met in the change room turns to us as he finishes fussing with his *gi*, "Of course. If it helps others to learn, always. I'm training to become a... Love Guardian... a little less stubborn and stiff over time and more reliable and reassuring." He gives us all a warm smile.

"Hmmm. Like a loving oak tree. That's how I'm starting to feel you, brother." Sensei Dan pats Jeff on the back with affection.

We hear the sound of a deep bell being struck. Sensei Maiko is holding a singing bowl in her hand.

"Look at the time!"

Chapter 22

Finding my Power

The class gathers.

Julia and I sit in a line with Sensei Dan and Sensei Maiko lined up in front of us. Behind them and before us is a *kamiza*, a ceremonial shrine made of fine wood. On the wall is a framed antique photograph of who I recall being the founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba, also known as “O Sensei”. What captures my attention is that all the pictures of O Sensei I recall are of him posed with a serious and penetrating stare. But this one as of him laughing with great joy.

The two Senseis bow to the shrine, to one another and then to us.

“Let's start with a warm up... Circle up everyone” Sensei Dan is not like any Sensei I have ever trained with. So relaxed and friendly, even casual.

He asks us each to lead by sharing a stretch.

When he turns to me, I shrug.

“We'll come back to you.”

“Julia?”

She starts doing a hip dance with her lips pursed. I roll my eyes at her revealing her inner teen, who watches too many music videos.

One of the students, a middle aged woman who looks toned and at home in a yoga studio, chimes in with approval, “Nice moves, Julia. Love the flow of this.”

My Heart Is A Muscle

Sensei Dan sees that I am standing around not getting into it, as everyone else is following along. I guess I feel too embarrassed.

“See class, Julia, our youngest student here appears as a white belt but is actually a master at Relational Aikido. She understands that the hips are not just fun to move, but also a source of great power and mobility... Love it!”

Sensei Dan nods and another student, a large muscular man, bows and runs onto the mats.

All the students sit back down on a line clearing the way.

Julia and I are standing confused. Jeff pats the ground and nudges us to sit next to him.

“Here we have our most delightful strong man, Boris, welcome back! It's been a while. Give us a push, dear.”

Boris grabs Sensei Dan by the lapel of his Gi and leans in to shove him. Sensei grins and holds his ground, not budging an inch. Boris sweats and his face begins to turn red as he exerts more and more effort.

Sensei Dan eases his mock attacker back and then calls Julia to come in front of the class, “Master Julia, can you show us that hip magic, one more time, s'il vous plait?”

She does so.

“Now watch!” Dan pauses her and nods to Boris who goes back to pushing him intensely. Suddenly Dan makes a small twist, which seems to ripple from his hips, making Boris fly in the air past Julia. The large man lands, slapping the mats dramatically and bouncing back up instantly.

I'm beside myself staring, my jaw has dropped. I remember the sweaty and effortful days of my own martial art training. I've never seen it so subtle and looking like it takes nothing to do.

We're back in a circle, as if nothing just happened. Sensei takes questions, but I am still

letting it sink in. Before I can ask a question, he briskly sends us off to train in pairs.

Jeff and I are partnered and he is pushing me off my place. I slide back. He's stronger than he looks. Then I try to do what Sensei Dan was talking us through - to bend my knees and roll my hips - but it doesn't work for me. I feel stiff. Jeff, who is really half my size, keeps sliding me back, as if I was a statue pushed on ice. I get frustrated.

Sensei walks by, eyeing us and booms to the entire class, "Take your time, relax and go at the speed of your own awareness. The slightest turn *in tune* with the force of your partner is all it takes..."

Julia is nearby throwing her partner, the middle-aged woman who looks like a yoga mom across the room. She sees me and tries to whisper but does so loud enough for most of the dojo to hear, "It's ok dad. you just feel ugh... embarrassed cause you're new and don't know how..."

"Thanks, Jules!" I look at Jeff relieved to be switching roles. As I try to push him, My height looming over him, he remains as still as a wall.

Sensei Dan relieves us. "Good appetizer. Now for the main course."

Everyone sits back down, on their knees, congregating to watch.

"They say that nice guys and gals finish last. What do you think, class?"

Many heads nod.

"Too polite to disagree or elaborate?"

Maiko speaks up, "They get kicked in the groin and stepped on."

"You don't mince words, Maiko. We love that about you!"

A younger woman in a stiff and bright white - likely new - uniform, like Julia and I, clears her throat and puts up her hand.

Sensei turns to her, "No need to put up your hand, Candace."

"Uh, sorry. But, isn't Aikido peaceful? A path of love and harmony?"

"Hmm. Let's explore that. Imagine I am a baddie and I wanna hurt you..."

Without warning, Dan lunges at Maiko who was standing by. He whips at her with a tight fist flashing towards her head. She turns to face him swiftly. Her eyes alight and ready, sliding under him throwing her hip out. Before I can make sense of it, he is flying in the air.

"If you practice Aikido..." He bellows out while flipping over in the air. And a moment later landing on the mats, without making a sound, "You'll teach me... a better way."

He then tries to get up. But Maiko is on him, pinning him like a fluttering butterfly, pressing down with two fingers against a point between his neck and collar bone.

"But if I change..." He puts his other hand up in a gesture of surrender and relaxing back.

Maiko releases her hold.

"Well, maybe we can even become friends."

Maiko gives him a hand and he pulls himself up, coming to put his head against hers in a friendly and intimate way. Then, facing the rest of us. Maiko seems to be blushing.

The woman who asked, Candace, is now looking as amazed as I was earlier.

Dan is slapping his hands together, "Ok. Enough entertainment. Time to test our centers!"

The room is suddenly full with other students I did not notice, who must have come in late. Everyone is paired up and Boris, the strongest one in the room, has apparently chosen me.

Dan comes over to us. "We're going to see how and where you hold your center of power, Bill. Where are you tight and protective and where do you collapse?"

He nods signaling Boris to walk around me pushing and pulling at me from different angles. I try to hold my ground and be strong, but every bit of contact from him makes me bounce around like one of those punching dolls that get hit and bob back up.

Then I fall.

Maybe it's pride or what I learned from Judo twenty years ago, but I try to be quick to get back up, even though I stumble.

"Good instinct." He looks at my body thoughtfully. "Seems like you need help to..." He puts his hand on my solar plexus, "May I?"

I nod, feeling kinda awkward and not sure.

"Easy. I come in peace. I'm going to increase my force and as I do, just hold your ground and relax, if you can..."

I feel him pressing into me. It's uncomfortable. My core shakes trying to keep him from pushing me over. He is slow but impossible to resist, like a train rumbling forward. I feel weakened and then collapse into his force, deflating me like a ball. I want to turn away, defeated.

"Stay with us, Bill." He then puts his other hand behind me, on the opposing spot at the lower middle part of my back.

"Gooood..." He nods smiling approvingly, "Having used up all your muscular armour strength to be tight, you've found a limit to that and collapsed. *Now*, let's try something else, shall we? It may be counter intuitive, but I want you to let all the air out. Deflate the ball fully..."

I exhale, pushing air out through my mouth. He's still pressing on me. I'm starting to feel a bit woozy and nauseous.

“Good. Now. Hold your breath. Resist inhaling. Be empty. Lost. And only when you feel it, let your body breathe itself... inhaling naturally.”

A pause. Tension building. I feel on the spot. Boris is standing by expressionless. And I have the sense that Julia and the rest of the class is watching me also. My body shakes involuntarily as I hold my breath. Then, I can't hold back, my lungs inhale, expanding more than usual. Then, I sense my diaphragm pushing out, like a small ball growing from within my core. I feel more alive, my belly soft, warm and full.

“Now...” He has my attention on what he is doing again. His left hand on my back shifts to add pressure with his right palm pushing even more into my now rounded core. “turn fully to check on your girl.”

I turn my head. *Where is she?* I have to turn my entire body to see her now. As I do, not knowing what to expect, the pressure disappears as his palms slide around my core and he flies into a roll. I'm left standing alone, surprised and shrugging...

Did I really do that... with so little effort?

Pride rises up as I notice that Julia also saw it happen.

Dan comes out of the roll, shooting a thumb up, “It seems you found your center!”

He turns and claps his hands together. The class stops and silence fills the room. “Time for *Kokyo dosa!*”

Then he pauses, “Wait, I've been a bad Sensei! I need a volunteer to explain something to our new friends... Master Julia, would you mind returning to teach us?”

Everyone is back in a line to watch.

As he is sitting back on his knees and bowing to my daughter who mirrors him, I focus on Dan, seeing him not only as a friendly and disarming dude, but also a great role model for Julia. His body seems so lithe and relaxed, yet powerful. Beyond his title and obvious experience, there's a thought of him having

some kind of “body wisdom” that I want and also need to learn. I look at the clock. 55 minutes have flown by.

And there’s a new feeling inside... Not exactly reverence, but a type of gratefulness. And a growing sense of surprise and awe.

How did we find ourselves here and get swept up in all this?

I shake my attention back to see him grabbing her wrists and explaining, “*Kokyo dosa* is a practice of sharing power in relationships. First, we choose to stayed glued to one another. Why?”

Jeff responds, “Because without connection there is more anxiety and chaos.”

“Indeed. Indeed. If I let go of Master Julia here...” He lets go and then nods to her. She responds by miming punches to his belly and then lifting his chin and pushing him back to slam against the mats, dramatically.

Where the heck did she learn that?

He gets back into an upright position, “Need we say more?... stay connected, friends!” He then grabs her wrists intentionally and pushes into her, making her fall onto her back. He holds her down and pins her wrists to the mat. She looks powerless with him over her. I feel a protective instinct, but she seems relaxed, with a half-smile.

He projects his voice for us all to hear clearly, “Now, I seem to have the upper hand. Muhahaha. But, remember, this is not about winning or losing. It’s about growing our power *together*. Master Julia seems to have forgotten at this moment how powerful she is.” He nods to her again, “We need to engage our core to grow it. That is why I push against her and she needs to lift herself up.”

It doesn’t seem fair that he is above her, three times her size. Yet, somehow Jules pushes up against his force, slowly rising. I see her entire body making an effort to do so. Feeling pride in her. *That’s my girl.*

“Also, there are dynamics ~ not tricks ~ but *dynamics* to master here, like...”

Maiko offers in her somber tone, “Do not lean forward. Stay centered.”

Sensei Dan nods, pursing his lips in silent contemplation, then grabbing Jules’ wrists again, he leans forward. She turns and flips him over.

Again, how did she know?

Jenn, the yoga mom chimes in, “And I also love how when you want to move your partner, you can try to go in directly but if that doesn’t work, you can go around...”

Dan has switched up to be across Maiko now, holding her wrists. Jules is at their side, standing by.

“Yes, Maiko, being a skilled Samurai is good at the direct path,” As he says this, she puts her palms together and slices into him, making him lose balance, rise and fall straight on his back.

Thump!

Back up again, he resumes, “Like honest criticism. Necessary but also.. Ouch. It can throw us back. And yet, if she tries again. I can work on making my core more relaxed and grounded, like a tree. I am rooted, as I practice being a Love Guardian.” he turns to wink at Jeff.

Maiko tries again to pierce his centre, but this time he holds her off, seemingly with little effort. She pushes harder.

“And as the tension grows, as it often does in disagreements and conflicts...”

Jules offers, “Can we see you do uh, what a Love Ninja would do?”

“Yes!” He turns his wrists and hips slightly making Maiko fly over his shoulder. She glides past and lands on the mats, this time without a sound, as gracefully as a fallen leaf touching the ground.

And in the same gesture, she is up and back to her prior position before it all adds up in my seemingly slow to comprehend brain. Again my mouth is open.

How the...? I want to learn this!

“That was all about letting them take *themselves* where *they* want to go... not controlling but *re-*directing the flow.”

Maiko and Dan bow to each other. He claps and everyone is quick to partner up. I look for Jules but she is bowing to Maiko.

I feel a strong palm slapping my shoulder. It seems Boris has taken a liking to me. We kneel, bow and start right away. I grab his wrists and as soon as I do so, I go flying.

I know he's stronger, but I try again to push him over or turn him to the side. Even doing so a tiny bit would feel satisfying.

No go.

He's like a massive boulder lodged in the ground. Again, I fly. Good thing I remember my judo break falls. I end up slapping and hitting the mats a half a dozen times before I hear a giggling I recognize.

“Laughing at your old man, eh?” Sensei Dan walks by.

I see Julia smiling at me and lifting up her hand to wave. As she does so, Maiko - holding onto her wrists - shoots up in the air.

Now it's my turn, as Boris grabs my wrists in two impossible strong vices. He is so strong that I fail to hold him back at all from pushing my arms in towards my hips. I feel like I've been handcuffed and under arrest. I push forward. Nothing. Start squirming side to side. No go. Trying to lift one hand even a little. Completely stuck. It's so frustrating. A hand lands softly on my shoulder and another on my lower back. “Remember your center, Master Bill.”

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I turn to see Dan already walking away towards another pair of students. I turn my attention back on Boris, who I see is making the classic error, leaning forward to keep me pinned. He's also grinning, very confident I bet.

I close my eyes and exhale. Holding myself in the emptiness for a moment. I drop trying to fight with his strength. There's no use. A moment later I feel my body sucking in all the oxygen it needs. It feels as enlivening as the first time. I remind myself to soften my arms and shoulders, as my belly fills up. Then, I turn, with my hips leading, playing with forgetting about where I was a moment ago and noticing my girl over there practicing. My entire body pivots. A blur of white and black goes past my face. Boris slaps the ground to my side, chuckling.

I'm so in awe that I forget to try and pin him. He is up right away and slapping my back, speaking in a thick Russian accent, "Good. Yes. You got it. Finally! See!" He seems proud of me. And it dawns on me that he wasn't trying to beat me, as much as playing the part so I could find my way to my own power again. I'm touched by that.

Dan claps. "Switch please."

Everyone shuffles to find a new partner. I try to grab Julia but she matches with Boris. About to cut in, Dan takes me aside. "This is more than a physical practice, Bill. Robert sent you because you're struggling, hurting, right?"

Stunned by the personal nature of his comment, I feel exposed.

"Just a guess." He continues, "Your wife?"

I nod, "And work. And life." Not sure why I am blurting out more. My jaw clenches firmly, not wanting to talk about it.

"May I offer some wisdom?"

I shrug, not sure what he could say.

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“Whatever has happened to you, you have the power to respond now.”

He kneels before me. I drop down to his level. We bow to one another.

He grabs my wrists and tries to push me over. I feel at ease and turn the same way I did with Boris a minute ago. “Yes. There it is...” I see Dan’s muscled legs flick over and past my face. It feels acrobatic.

Did I really do that?

Reminds me of when I was younger and more agile. I loved to throw and get thrown.

“You ready to fly?” We switch as he slips out of my hold and waits for me to grab him.

“Stay soft, stay connected with me. I have you. I’ll take care of you...”

He throws me over his shoulder.

Exhilarating lift. And crash. But he does it with such strength and softness, I land more gently somehow.

Feeling pressed firmly into the mat, I push up. My core is vibrating. I guess that it’s my inner core muscles, not having been used in a while.

Dan and I bow to one another to signal an end and to thank each other.

He claps again. “Ok, I know we’re at the hour,”

I see it is one o’clock. Time flies.

“But, let’s switch and do one more round.”

I jump up to grab Julia before she partners with anyone else.

Dan sees us bowing, “I’m not sure that’s a fair match, Bill. Seeing Julia with Maiko and your hhmhhh beer belly, maybe...”

I know he’s joking. My gut is not that big. I actually stay in decent shape and pride myself on eating well.

My Heart Is A Muscle

As soon as I wrap my fingers and palm around her wrists, Jules twists her open palms and I fly to her left, trying to brace myself for slamming against the mats.

“Haha....aaahhh. The youth surpassing us!” Dan laughs. “Nice one, Master Julia. Try to stay connected with your dad and lay him down more gently next time.”

This happens multiple times. She really understands it, better than I? I can't help but feel a little competitive.

“Dad, can I give you a tip?”

I frown.

How much feedback can I handle?

But, I nod to be gracious.

“You're so stiff.”

“Am I?” As soon as I say that I realize that she's right. That's why it doesn't work. But, I just learned. This entire class is the same lesson being repeated and re-learned, over and over again.

Why doesn't it always work? Why can't I get it every time?

“That's why we practice,” My old judo teacher, Sensei Taeji, a small Vietnamese man who would say this often with his gentle smile.

A humbling reminder.

Now I notice a couple of hakamas standing at our side. Maiko comments, “She's right. Strong and tight makes weak in real fight.”

Dan is next to her now, “Terry Crews once said,...

“You cannot love someone and control them at the same time.”

I roll my eyes. *Ok, I get it!*

They're still there watching us both. I feel my face flush, hoping they didn't catch my condescending expression. I turn and bow to them and remember how to say 'thank you' in Japanese,

"Domo arigato gozaimas, Senseis."

Maiko beams. Dan leans down, his hand on my shoulder, "We also say... *O ne gai shimas*. It means allow me to learn from you as well. That's what we do here. Learn together."

I feel my body soften even more by that gesture. Places in my shoulders and back that I didn't even know I was tensing release themselves.

This time, I grab Julia's wrists and feel very different. Nothing to prove. No ideas in my mind of how this will go. I just feel us connected. She's smiling. I notice a look in her eyes, how she wants to show me, prove to me, how capable she is. How smart and strong...

Meanwhile, my arms follow her like those of an octopus, while the trunk of my body stays still. She tries to cut in and I subtly redirect her force towards my side. She tries to lift me and I stay heavy and relaxed. Oddly, I'm enjoying the moments of tension between us. She tries several other ways to move me, unable to get me tipped over enough, but I'm delighted, appreciating how creative she is and how she does not give up.

Finally, she opens her arms and palms and makes a small twist, which whips me sideways. Another wave of joy and awe.

That's my girl!

Another clap. "Beautiful practice everyone."

Julia and I bow. This silent moment between us seems so full of meaning, it fills my heart.

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* * *

We get changed and meet back in the waiting area, which is packed with students, young and old chatting and hovering about.

“This was awesome, daddy. Best day ever!”

Sensei Dan appears. He seems to be always nearby, seeing and hearing everything. “Think you’ll come back? You are quite the dynamic duo... We’d love to have you train here.”

I look at Jules. She bobs her head so fast it looks like a blur.

“Psst... don’t tell anybody. This place is kinda of a secret. Only for the right folks ready for this kinda training.”

I’m not sure if he is serious or being contrary. We pick up a package with the schedule and some forms to sign, aiming to join the regulars in class next week.

Julia is beaming. “Maybe mom will want to come also.”

“Sure, I bet she would,” The thought kind of unnerves and excites me.

Looking out the window I see a bright sun outside. My stomach gurgles.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Sure am, Jules.”

Everyone starts walking out following Sensei Dan and Maiko.

As we all walk down the stairs, Dan waits for us and asks, “You like middle eastern organic food?”

“My favorite!” Julia offers. They high five and fist bump each other. I feel oddly shy, around them being so chummy and hip, nodding along.

“Delightful. I have a couple of friends, who I’d like your daddy to meet and being connoisseurs of

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beauty, I bet you both will love their place. Just down the street.”

Jeff walks by and adds, “You won't regret it. It's another reason so many of us come out for midday Wednesday practice.”

I feel swept up. A sense of camaraderie with these people that is so easy and relaxed. I like it, but am not used to it. It's wonderful and strange.

Seeing Julia so happy, I go along with it, trusting that these people who were "strangers" an hour ago are safe enough and worth spending more time with.

Chapter 23

Un-Believe-A-Bowl

On the way to lunch, we walk in the sun shining on the north sidewalk. Sensei Dan is really a whiz with kids, making Julia laugh in a way that I hardly often see. She is so impressed by him. I'm starting to get a bit jealous. A bit. A part of me is weary that this grown man is connecting with my prepubescent daughter. And yet, something deep within tells me she is safe with him.

Still, as a dad, I keep an eye on them.

What's the saying?

*Trust in God,
but always tie your camel.*

I'm not religious, but I like that phrase. Sounds terrible when applied to your child. Don't want to be seen as controlling ~ even if I feel like it sometimes. I smile guiltily to myself.

Everyone has stopped before a shop I have never noticed.

Dan swings the door open, "This..." he says dramatically, opening his arms "...is Un-believ-a-bowl!"

There are some signs in the window which catch my eye. Workshops to make bowls and cups. Another is a Kintsugi workshop ~ "The art of transforming that which is broken."

Maiko is next to me nodding and looking at it also.

“What is that about?” I wonder out loud.

“Pour gold into cracks and fuse the object back together. Make them stronger and even more beautiful.” Maiko pauses to explain.

I see a large brick oven inside and several long, thick wooden tables with benches.

Julia tugs at my hand. “Come on, daddy! It smells sooo good.”

I see another sign on the window about a prayer space in the back and I notice that the sign on the door says, “CLOSED for private gathering”.

As we follow Maiko in, Julia looks up and I follow her gaze up above us to take in a large Bowl with a sign underneath.

Un-Believ-a-bowl

One of a kind bowls and guidance

“What *is* this place?” I ask as the scent of many strange and some familiar aromas ~ like roasted vegetables, cinnamon, rosemary and sumac ~ fill our noses.

I see everyone is hovering and chatting. My eyes take in the rounded ceiling which is turquoise with aged wood and detailed patterns in sheets of bronze. It has the feel of a small temple mixed with hunting lodge and banquet hall.

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Julia pulls away from me and the group, drawn to a wall of rustic wooden shelves holding all kinds of bowls.

“Cool! Look at all those bowls. I love bowls! OMG!”

A man with curly hair, a wide brimming smile and the sparkliest eyes I have ever seen ~ kinda dazzling actually ~ greets our entourage with warm hugs and kisses on the cheeks.

He seems gushy to me.

Julia comes back, about to tell me about something she *needs* me to buy her, when she stops, also captivated, whispering too loudly, “Daddy his eyes are like diamonds.”

We chuckle.

Dan is embracing this man who then kisses him on both sides of his face. They both turn suddenly towards us, “Bill and Julia, I want to introduce you to Ezra... a teacher of mine. Helping me to be less selfish and more generous of heart.”

Ezra, the man with the sparkly eyes, makes a small bow and responds, “You’ve always taught yourself, Dan. Grateful to share the ride.” He turns to us, “You two look ready to be nourished. I am so grateful that you have chosen to join us. Welcome. Oh, and I hear we have a friend in common.”

He must be referring to Dan here, but both men smile warmly as if there is a secret they both hold.

A dark skinned middle eastern man enters and the room erupts in cheers calling his name “Farooz! Farooz!” He brushes off the adulation, waving us over to the largest table.

“Friends, it is *my* honour to see you all. The feast will begin shortly. Please make yourself at home.”

Dan, taps me on the shoulder. “Glad you are here. This is the next part of your search, Bill.”

Julia looks at me.

"I'll explain later." I tell her, not sure what I seem to have gotten myself into or how I'd explain it to her.

We look for a place to sit and it seems people have held us a space near the middle of the table, next to Dan on one side and Maiko on the other.

Boris, the large Russian man clasps my shoulders from behind, congratulating us, "You are guests of honour. First time is extra special."

Sitting across from us are a couple of empty spots. *I wonder who sits there?*

After some small talk, Farooz and Ezra return with large wooden trays carrying many platters and bowls. Everyone is silently rapt as the two men describe the delicacies. Looking at and smelling the food literally makes my mouth water.

I notice the tones of their voices and I am reminded of some time ago when I was part of a choir in my teens. Ezra speaks in a lyrical and light way, "What a gift that we have fresh pomegranates from Farooz's village which he's lovingly turned into a glaze on the seitan lamb cutlets."

When Julia sees they have largely vegetarian protein, she is bouncing on the bench, making it vibrate with delight.

Farooz takes over, bellowing in deep melodic tones and with a thick accent describing the various spices and herbs, many of which are foreign to me.

I suddenly notice that there is no menu or prices posted anywhere. I reach for my wallet and realize that I left it in the car. *That was dumb!* Something I never do. *Should I go now...?*

Dan squeezes my shoulder and leans in, "Don't worry about that. You are our guest."

How does he know what I was thinking?

My Heart Is A Muscle

Maiko declares with a hint of emotion. "Robert is here."

The old man I know from the ravine walks in from the street. I do a double take. It makes sense, but I never...

Julia runs to him to give him a hug.

He receives her and then they do some special handshake... slap, wiggle, fist bump explosion.

A sour taste in my mouth. Another tinge of jealousy?

He walks over and, as usual, seems to see me when I try to not be seen.

"She loves you like the sun loves the earth, Bill." Robert says as if to reassure me. His words make me sigh but also expose my petty insecurity. I blush, again. He beams back at Julia, "What a bright ball of sunshine you are, my dear!"

"How do you know...?" I blurt out.

Julia explains, "Mommy and I see Grand dude every Saturday morning when we go for a walk..."

"Hmmm." I nod, not knowing how to respond. I am getting really turned sideways by all this familiarity and how is it possible... that in a city of roughly SIX million people, my wife and daughter know this one man without me ever hearing about it. Guess that's the part that stings. I organize our family schedule, tracking our time and managing our resources.

How did I get excluded?

Then, it dawns on me. Saturday mornings. That is my time. I often need it to be alone and decompress from the week. Often, I go for a bike ride and do extra work, till we all gather for brunch.

Farooz stands up and calls out to Robert, "Would you like to sit, my friend? We've saved a special place for you and your guest."

Noticing the two empty spots across from us. "No need for an extra space. My friend is already here."

Robert replies, as he looks at me, taking his place while nudging folks to shuffle over to get closer and fill the empty spot.

Realizing he was expecting me makes me feel both special and also as if, on some level, he has cast a spell on me: a bit heart warming *and* unsettling.

A moment later, trays and bowls of food are brought in by many hands and laid before us. It is a bountiful feast with so much colourful variety and aroma, I bite my lip resisting the urge to grab.

Ezra and Farooz stand at opposite heads of the table. They bow their heads and extend their arms out with palms facing upward. They chant a prayer together...

“Al Rahim... Habib...”

I don't know what else they incant in Arabic, I assume, but something tender and beautiful, deep and strong gets stirred in my belly and within my chest. Might just be a ferocious hunger. And yet, the experience of sitting here with Jules in this strangely welcoming and beautiful space with recent strangers, about to feast, sitting across from Robert, with a prayer being sung to us makes *everything* surreal, dare I even consider, *sacred*. As if we have been transported to another time and place.

As the chant concludes, Maiko has kindly decided to play my translator, “Sufi blessing. Asking the Beloved and benevolent one to...”

Jeff, who sits next to Robert shrugs, “I don't get it either, but I love the sound of their voices.”

Robert is looking right at us, adding. “Yes, Maiko. Beautiful calling to our beloved to give us just what we need.”

He turns and extols, “Ezra! You have a gift for speaking to the divine! Farooz your heart is pure and your stomach a master of delicacies.”

Dan adds firmly slamming the wood table, "As my old grandpa used to say, Rub a dub dub, let's eat the grub!"

Ezra giggles, "Everything is sacred and also a human comedy. Yes, let's feast!"

A moment later, Robert speaks in his deep and raspy voice, softly yet in a way which stops the room, "Not to interrupt our hunger, yet, *as* we revel in this feast, I have a request to honour our guests..." Pointing to Julia and I.

The room gets more hushed, as people's ears prick up and listen, while they also continue to walk around filling their bowls.

"I would like to share the teachings of the 5 Bowls with Bill and Julia here. Whoever feels called to speak to each one please do..."

Now starving, Julia is shovelling food from different plates into her bowl and nibbling with her fingers while doing so.

"I'll start." Farooz holds up an earthen clay pot with both hands for us all to see.

"This bowl is empty. It is a symbol of our hunger for Trust..."

I didn't expect a performance or lecture. Intriguing.

He waves his palm, "Please keep eating, while I talk. It would honour me."

We continue filling our bowls, but I am captivated.

"The food I cook and put inside this bowl," He points to another one that is similar and filled with food on the table, "is what they call in Greece "horta" -

in many cultures it is the weeds of the earth... dandelion, chickweed, callaloo or amaranth, all doused with olive oil and lemon. It is bitter and rich with nutrients and minerals."

"Delicious." A woman calls out.

"Thank you." Farooz bows humbly.

"And what about the bowl, Ezra?" Robert asks.

Farooz lifts back up the empty bowl over his head for us all to see, while Ezra explains. "We made it as a spiral. It is our longing for certainty and safety... which we search for as babes from our mommies and daddies. Begging them to stay with us. To never leave us."

"Ahhhhh impermanence." Someone else calls out.

"Yes. Everything changes. And yet, as we grow, we look for things... money, stuff..."

Farooz exclaims with an empty hand and sad teary eyes. "But nothing gives us this certainty...it does not exist." Then, his finger and bushy eyebrows shoot upwards, "Except!"

Robert adds, "If we are lucky and wise, we learn to be resourceful... hence the weeds... and to find true sustenance in the bounty around us. And to trust one another. Tenuous though that may be..."

"I would add also, to trust our own senses." Dan offers.

"And for some of us, we find the trust we hunger for only in the arms of a beloved, a powerful and loving presence, greater than our own." Ezra opens his arms upwards in the bowed position of surrender, which he prayed in earlier.

"I cannot wait. This is too goooood." Boris ads. Everyone laughs.

"And good *for* you!" someone else chimes.

Robert steers us back, a teacher in his bones, it seems, "What's the next bowl?"

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All our heads turn as the door opens and a couple of men of striking appearance enter.

"Ahhh, gentleman... Most unexpected and always fashionably late!" Dan chides.

One is a black man with a mane of neatly braided hair with streaks of white and grey. He moves with grace, straddling a cloth bag over his shoulder, covering something long and narrow. He smiles and jokes, "I am always on island time, don't you know, brothers, and sisters."

Maiko turns to me, "That is Sensei Jean-Jacques. Master of Aido. Japanese sword. And Kyudo. Long bow archery. Rare to be master of both."

The other is a short muscly charmer wearing a leather motorcycle jacket. He seems familiar.

"That's Jack." She rolls her eyes and I see her lips curl up a bit as she turns away. Did she just blush and not want me to know?

"It would be an honour to take this next one." Jack projects his voice for all of us to hear, "I see some newcomers," he says turning to Julia and I. "It's an honour," and he nods his head slightly. "Some of you know me from film and TV and as a travel host. Sometimes I come home to wander these parts... That's mostly because I love my friends here and *also* because..."

He walks over to grab a large wide wooden bowl from the wall with a carving in relief of two wings spanned wide,

"...Ahhhh Freedom, alas
I know it well!"

He intones dramatically. He then turns to us. "But let us begin with the contents of this bowl... The

bread. Farooz... you have to introduce this deliciousness..."

Farooz seems shy and waves off the attention, then exclaiming, "No. Ezra's is better today. Not me. Bah."

Ezra points to the three wide wooden bowls on our table. "Ok, so I've been playing around with a gluten free version of sourdough... that is also the fluffiest and chewiest naan. Today's experiment involves chia, tapioca and oats..."

Julia snatches one from the table, jamming it into her mouth. "Soooo goooood!"

"Gives me great joy to hear it! Praise be!"

Jack continues, "I'm starving too, so I'll keep this brief..."

Everyone laughs. Apparently brevity is not his strong suit.

"So, this bowl is all about Freedom." He takes a dramatic pause. "And freedom, as I know it... begins with our yearning as a child to get away from yucky bad things... homework... chores... pain... and to suck the nectar of life..." He notices Julia and continues, "Candy... screentime... seeking thrills! We imagine freedom comes from no limits, but that only leads to suffering. For me, it led to the prison of addiction."

"Speak to us of where true freedom lives, Jack." Robert encourages him.

"I am not one to profess any wisdom, so I will quote the wiser George Bernard Shaw who once wrote,

**"Freedom means responsibility,
that's why most men fear it."**

"By which I surmise that real freedom comes from choosing a path and committing to it... every day..."

My Heart Is A Muscle

...every moment... Seizing the day. Carpe Diem and all that! Exploring more deeply the ways in which I can never stop learning and growing..”

“Well said!”

“Hear! Hear!”

Jack is swept up by a couple of students, one who brings him a chair and another who fawns over him.

Jeff exclaims, “Perfect bread. Chewy crispy, fluffy and good for the gut!”

Dan leaps up.

“I’ll take the next one.

My favourite. Power.”

He leans over and picks up a golden bowl, lifting it high up in the air, as if it was a holy relic, then banging it with a wooden spoon.

“Whoever made these bowls, I want to order a hundred of them and sell them at the dojo.”

“It even sings!” Someone calls out.

Julia, who has been stuffing her mouth stops, “Woah! Cool!”

Dan regains the focus and closes his eyes, shifting his tone. “POWER is often misunderstood.” His eyes flash open. “Many think it is about control. Making others bend to our will. Makes sense. We begin as babies believing we have control – when I cry, mommy comes with booby... or bottle.”

Julia laughs.

Dan shakes his head, “But, control is an illusion. Even when we get what we want, it’s a fast food filler, like factory processed Spam.”

He cringes.

Farooz adds, "That is why I prepared 3 kinds of organic protein from a local farm... with spices fitting each one. Sumac for the deer. Rosemary for the chicken. And pomegranate for the seitan."

The room erupts with sounds of mouth-watering hunger, like wolves baying before a fresh kill.

"Uh uh uh. You must wait for it!" He admonishes us playfully.

"Real POWER comes from staying in the tension and learning in the space between us. It emerges in how we influence and impact one another. It is both expansive and humbling... testing us, stretching us,... and making us more whole with dedication and practice... I guess it is the process which yields the delicious food, that is both yummy *and* nourishing. I'm rambling. Somebody stop me!"

"Thank you Dan. Now... who will speak to us of LOVE?" Robert asks the room.

There is a silence. A kind of potent waiting.

Finally, Ezra stands back up,

"The Sufi perspective is that when our hearts break open, it is an exquisite opening, a surrender to call out to the source, The Beloved, the One and All, to teach us what True Love really is..."

"Woah." Julia seems moved.

"Yeah, let's back up shall we... This bowl."

He lifts up a blown glass bowl with many colours...

"Rainbow... I love it!" Julia exclaims.

My Heart Is A Muscle

“The many colours here represent diversity in harmony... in CONNECTION. The ways since birth we feel close, held, intimate with one another. We imagine connection happens only through touch or through the eyes... but the threads which connect us are more subtle and much much deeper.”

He looks across the table. “In this bowl, Farooz, my love, has placed fruits and berries we've grown on our farm... goji, saskatoon berry... the juice of elderberry... Why, my love...?”

He says "my love" with so much tenderness I get weepy. Two grown men, so different and yet so much love between them. I'm not gay, mind you. Think I have to mention that. Maybe I questioned it briefly in university. No. Now is not the time. It makes me feel an ache in my heart. Wishing for that with Jess. So much heat and ice between us... I feel an ache to feel this closeness between us again. Longing for this tenderness...

Farooz just explained the significance of berries... and I missed it.

“Anti-oxidants are the bomb!” Julia chimes in. She's really at home with this crowd and they are so open to her outspokenness. Many adults take offense or try to silence her.

Ezra continues, “Indeed. A love bomb for our cells and our blood... And real love is a beholding... a way of accepting one another with warts and all in all the ways we are so different and even opposed. To bridge all the divides with a deep regard. For me that is only possible with the help of a greater presence. The Beloved.”

“The third body, as Robert Bly would call it.” Jack offers.

Robert across from us speaks up, “Mine is nature.”

Dan offers, “Mine is the practice of Ai-ki-do.”

Farooz smiles shyly, "I bow with Ezra to the divine... but my god is honestly good food and your good company!"

Everyone laughs.

Robert has not taken any bites I see, but he seems content, "Last one... please take your time tasting and digesting... no rush.... to plant a seed..." He holds up a wide rounded tray of glass with a silver sheen, with an engraved radiant eye.

"We leave this wide bowl empty... to be filled later. It represents RECOGNITION... what and how we give attention and attribute value."

He walks around, looking at us as he paces, "As a babe we see what gets attention as if to say, 'Hey, look at me! Do you see me? Do I exist?'"

He looks down somberly. "Now, the cheapest way to fill this bowl is to do what pleases or upsets others... Been there and done it all. I don't judge, not any more. But what we really hunger for and need to fill this place within us is to be SEEN and HEARD as deeply and fully as possible..."

"All the frickin' time!" Jack yelps out to another round of laughter.

I notice now that Robert is supremely relaxed and present with us, scanning and making eye contact with each person.

"Why? Because we are constantly evolving and on a search to find out who we really are..."

My stomach still gurgles, but I am so rapt in listening, I ignore my food.

"Into... me... see."

Robert's voice goes down an octave.

"Intimacy."

I've never heard it said like that.

"I see you."

As he says this, I feel his gaze on me, turning to follow him and seeing he is looking at all of us.

"You see me." He stops back where he started. "We behold one another."

He looks at the bowl in his hands, pausing for a long moment.

"And from the filling of this bowl... we open up more capacity to love, to increase our power, to discover real freedom, and to grow in resilience and trust..."

He hands me the bowl. Surprised, I hold it in my arms, not sure what to do with it.

His arms stretch wide. "And all of these bowls, within each of us, they represent our foraging natures, hungry and longing for those soulfully satiating moments."

Robert sits back down.

I hold the glass bowl looking at the eye, which has a star within its iris and a spiral around it. I'm mesmerized.

"Daddy. You haven't eaten."

I put the bowl down. Robert is sitting across from us, chewing and beaming at me. I smile back and dig into the food gathered on my plate.

"Thank you." I say.

"For what?"

I want to say for this presentation, for including me and introducing me to all these people, but what I say is, "For seeing me."

He puts his hand on his heart. "It's what I do. The gift I have to offer."

We eat together in satisfied silence.

Then, Julia returns with a bowl she found and chats Robert up. He's full of questions that make her think and be more curious. I should take notes. It's a passion of mine to help my daughter to develop her mind to become as brilliant as I imagine she has the potential to be.

I also watch as many passionate conversations spark around us. There's so much warmth and joy in everyone's faces. I have that feeling again that we have been transported to another world: one so foreign, and yet, one I'm not sure I want to leave.

Robert takes a serving spoon and dings a glass.

His tone is softer, "I don't want this to end. And not to rush anyone. Yet, I do wish to say this perhaps for any new friends around the table." He looks at Julia and I. "Our way here, after we finish feasting, is to honour our hosts Ezra and Farooz... and the space they tend here. Nothing in life is without consequence or cost. As honoured guests, I ask that we each consider giving something of value..."

I feel a pang of guilt, remembering that I left my wallet.

"That is all. Thank you, everyone."

Jack holds out his drinking glass and makes a declaration, "I owe you a great debt, Ezra and Farooz. Let me know how I can best repay it."

"What does that mean?" Julia elbows me. I imagine she feels as awkward as I do, but she seems more curious.

Robert hears us and asks the group, "Will anyone speak to the meaning of debt?"

Ezra responds, "Debt is a most misunderstood yet beautiful thing. Debt is an owing... We hate owing the bank money but to owe to one another is to accept that we are all interdependent... part of a larger web together... I owe you. You owe me. It's a sort of rain cheque. A sacred promise to keep giving and receiving from one another."

My Heart Is A Muscle

“Well said.” Sensei Jean answers. “I am a humble teacher and offer you my guidance in what little I know.” He bows his head.

Ezra beams at that and nods to Farooz, who looks put on the spot and torn, blabbering out “Ok. Ok. I’ll come and take some lessons. I’m needing to regain my focus. Yes. Thank you.”

“And I am grateful...” I say quietly, as Boris’s voice booms over mine, “I want to trade... I love working with wood. I can help fix this table and displays?”

As we all go around, I feel embarrassed. I know I checked before but I reach for my wallet again and find my pockets empty, reminding me:

What do I have to offer?

Julia burst out, “I offer my joy (she starts tearing up)... so glad my dad brought me here and the Aikido was awesome and grand dude is so wise.. And this food is so incredible... I have NEVER tasted anything SO DARN GOOD!”

“Praise be! My heart is full in receiving your gift, Julia.”

Farooz is beaming and looking drunk with pride and satisfaction.

Robert nudges me, “Bill, what will you give as a gift?”

I blurt out, “I feel like a beggar. I’m sorry. I left my wallet in the car a few blocks up. I can go and...”

Ezra waves me off. “Please know that money is the cheapest currency, the lowliest form of food for us, but we are also grateful to accept it. That said, your first time here, your gratitude is more than enough.”

I start to thank him and Farooz comes over to add, “And I would love the gift of meeting you and your lovely daughter again. To get to know you better would be a gift to us both.”

Chapter 24

Walking about some more...

After a lot of warm goodbyes with people we only met a few hours ago, Julia and I set out on a walk, holding hands, something we haven't done in ages.

"This is the best dad-ter day ever!"

"Dad and daughter?"

"Duh!" She giggles. "Which of your bowls are empty and which are full, right now, daddy?"

"Hmm... right now, I'm pretty full everywhere, especially in connection," I squeeze her hand. Looking up at the blue sky, "And freedom."

She looks at me intently, cocking her eyebrows, as if to say *That all? Tell me more!*

"Well, I sense, as I think about the rest of our lives..."

"Work? And Grandad?"

"Yeah... that safety and trust bowl is ok at home..." She gives me a skeptical look, and I realize she doesn't want nor need me to reassure her.

"Ok, maybe trust is kinda low... What about you?"

Julia tears up. "I felt full everywhere, but now I feel sad and angry a bit."

"Why?" I get a bit worried.

"Brida."

That's her cousin.

"She drives me crazy. My connection bowl was low but now it's getting fuller." Julia stops and hugs

me. "But with her it feels really empty. I definitely need to fill my power bowl up more when I'm around her, too."

"Hm. How can you do that?"

"I want to see her. Is that ok? It cuts into our dad-ter time..."

"Of course." I suddenly realize we are walking North, towards her house. "Oh, you mean now? But she's in school..."

"She's homeschooled dad."

"Oh yeah."

Where have I been?

Not knowing that my niece is being homeschooled and my sister-in-law is teaching her? Hmm. Not as on top of things as I thought I was.

"I need to make things right... Why wait, right?" She sighs deeply.

"Right." I retort.

So much wisdom in her.

Yes.

Hearing Papa affirm my thought, I realize that I could also use that nugget myself. Not sure how, just yet.

Catching Julia's frown as she struggles with this, I also want to offer advice, as I usually do, but then I remember the soft and full feeling in my core. It feels easier after such a fine meal to *not* lean in to try to fix this. I exhale and choose to stay connected and in the tension of not knowing how this will go.

"So, you want to make things right..."

My Heart Is A Muscle

She cuts me off getting riled up. "But, she's so bossy. And even sometimes... mean! And she said I was too soft and so easily hurt. Sheesh! Who does she think she is!?"

"Indeed!" I exclaim, learning a while back to let both my wife and daughter vent first, rather than trying to steer the train. "Sounds like she hurt your feelings and you want to stand up to her, also?"

"Yeah. Maybe." She fumes and steps firmly before taking a deep inhale, "I guess I want to stand up to her, but with love and forgiveness, you know?"

I nod along.

"Like a Love Warrior. To heal the broken bond... between us." She then looks up at me and smiles, "Thank you, daddy."

"For what?" I'm surprised.

"Helping me figure this out."

I put my hand on her shoulder, pulling her closer as we walk and give her a playful squeeze. "Hey, I did nothing. Just echoing back what you were..."

"...Thinking?"

We laugh together!

What an incredible daughter I have.

Yes.
You do.

How does she know already so much about life and relationships? More than I did at her age, for sure. And here I am, four times her age but feeling like a toddler, in terms of feelings and life wisdom, next to her right now.

"Hey, I know we were just talking about this, but..."

We're now only a few houses away from my sister-in-law's place.

"Yeah, I was kinda steering us here." She smiles.

As we get to their door, I wonder,

What am I going to do now?

Normally, I would stay and hang out, but instead I feel an unusually strong pull to be alone.

When the door opens, Julia hugs her aunt Jaki and bursts into the house.

Jaki hangs back smiling at me. I like my sister-in-law. I've even fantasized about swapping her for my wife a few times. She's extremely good looking and also generous and big hearted, but somehow more relaxed and sometimes easier to talk to than Jess can be.

But I know that's probably because the ones we love who are closest to us also stir up all the shit inside of us, pushing our buttons and pressing them, like pressure points, the hardest.

Anyway, even though I haven't seen her and had a real conversation with her for a while, I need to mind the boundary. I don't want to get too close.

I take her aside and give her an update of what Julia's hoping for with Brida, trusting her to know how to hold the space for the girls to talk it out themselves. It's her thing, being a social worker. She's very understanding and invites me in to hang out. I feel like if I go in, we'll drink wine and I'll end up spilling my guts out too much. I make an excuse... "Gotta run an errand."

It feels strange to be without a schedule or a purpose. Yet, I sense that I need the space to wander some more.

Thoughts of Jess, dad, work, life come flooding in again.

I feel reassured by the scenario planning done earlier and my body feels so relaxed and happy: sore a bit physically, but satiated and at peace.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Yet, emotionally, I sense there is so much I need to digest, still.

Where am I going exactly?

I stop and scan around, having walked a few more blocks northward. Wandering is new for me. It feels too aimless and unfocused. I try to steer my mind at least. How?

What if I ask a question, like Robert would suggest...?

What do I need to think about or do next...?

Heal.

How?

My mind is suddenly back to being skeptical of this voice of Papa. Something in me trusts him. Like I fell into trusting Robert, then Dan and even starting to trust this group of strangers.

I decide to engage. Even if it is all a hallucination, it seems benign. I ask again, truly curious.

How?

Your body
knows how.

My feet start moving again, this time turning left and taking me westward.

Scenes of my childhood flit through my mind, like pages of a book being flipped. Stopping for a moment with Becca, laughing after she splashed me and Daren with a water balloon in our living room.

My Heart Is A Muscle

"Who?" Her voice brushes past me like the wind.
"Who do you blame Bill?"

The question is unexpected. But my stomach churns and tightens. I know the answer.

Myself.

I stop walking. Looking around. Nothing but neat rowhouses and front lawns.

A man rides by on his bike and stares at me for a moment. My face flushes embarrassment, feeling self-conscious again about me standing around here, hearing voices, talking to myself, Papa, and to my sister. I shake my head sighing.

Just go with it. I tell myself.

But then it feels unbearable, so much pressure and confusion with all these emotions built up inside like a dam wanting to burst.

Who can help me heal?

"Good question." Becca replies. She was always cheeky.

Yes.

Papa is so affirming, but also not giving me any specific answers.

I continue walking.

Suddenly, I remember a side conversation over lunch. It was Jeff talking to the yoga mom. They are talking about "sabotage". My ears perked up. Jeff mentioned a healer nearby who often comes for lunch. The place he works from is... "The Healing Hut."

I stop and google it.

It exists. And it is actually very close. Strange. Nothing but residential homes around here. It says it's just around the corner, up a street I know well. Must be in someone's house. Huh.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I start walking with more purpose and curiosity. And then I feel woozy, like I'm a bit drunk and tipsy. Strange. I'm completely sober. Something is disorienting, yet my physical balance is fine. As I keep walking, it's an unexpected lightness that I feel.

I notice a flower patch in a yard. The smell is so intoxicating... I cannot *not* stop.

What is this flower?

Jess would know.

The colour of the petals are so vivid. Along the edge they are pink and purple ~ fuschia? ~ blending inward toward white, with a centre that is vibrant yellow with orange spots.

Suddenly, I think about my dad. And I taste acid in my mouth.

What does that mean?

"Regret." Again, she speaks. Her voice is not a memory nor echoing inside my mind. More like whispering over my shoulder. It's kind of unnerving to hear her and yet I realize how much I miss her each time.

For who? Him or me?

"Both." She says.

My eyes tear up. I'm not used to ruminating like this.

"Snap out of it!" I hear the echoes of mom. Her voice is a cassette tape playing in my mind.

"Back to earth, Billy boy." It's dad's voice with more ease, trying to bring me back.

"Papa?"

Yes. I'm here.

"Am I crazy?"

No. You're
in pain.

Another shot of self-consciousness. I look around wondering if anyone is watching me standing on the sidewalk talking to myself, looking like a mental case. But then again, we're so used to people talking to their hidden earpieces, I guess I won't seem out of place.

Then, the phone rings. It's Monique again from the hospital. I start walking briskly. Grateful for the distraction. Loving her voice. Is it the British accent I'm usually a sucker for or the attentiveness and care I am starving for at the moment?

No new news she tells me. But his condition is stable. She asks if I wish to visit him again so she can arrange it to happen smoothly.

I organize it for tomorrow. I'll bring Julia first thing, so she doesn't miss much school. She has a magic to her. Maybe it will rub off on the old man.

"Well, actually..." She interrupts, "I see now that your family has just been booked for today at 3:30pm."

I ask her to double check. Jess made it happen. Hmm. Ok. I make a note to ask my wife about it, booking another time tomorrow afternoon. "Thank you, Monique."

That's in 45 minutes. I have time.

Rounding the corner.

There it is.

Woah.

Chapter 25

The Healing Hut

I'm not an architecture geek, but this building is remarkable to me. Someone built this in a different way than all the other houses in Toronto.

First, it's round. Second, it's covered in wood. Strange in how it stands out and yet I have never seen it before, and I drive down this street nearly every day. Then I realize that it's hidden by a few cedar trees and farther back in the property.

I walk up the steps and enter through the front door, tinkling a wind chime.

What is this place?

It has the calmness of a spa ~ what little experience I have had dropping Jess at one ~ but it's more earthy. A half rounded entry space. The wooden floor looks aged and hand carved. Everything has branches and knotted wood that also seem hand crafted.

It's a bit like being transported into a fairytale cabin in the woods sort of feel to it. And the smell... pine? No, cedar.

A tall man with a white beard and a large belly arrives, kind of floating in towards me. He cocks one eyebrow, playfully.

"Hello there. What brings you here, good sir?"

I stumble for my words.

"Owen. That be my name." He smiles, waiting, "And you...?"

My Heart Is A Muscle

I blurt out mine. Still trying to place where I am. And he seems so eerily familiar. We both stare at one another a little too long.

He breaks the silence, "It's ok. Breathe it in. It often takes folks a while to settle into our space here. Alex, my partner here, calls it an alternate universe. A vortex of healing. Me, I think of it as our second home. And everyone knows it as The Healing Hut."

He stops and looks at me with an expression that seems to say. *Am I explaining too much?*

I nod and show appreciation for the introductions.

"Would you like something warm and nourishing to drink?"

"I would actually. Yes, thank you." I suddenly remember that my wallet is still in the car. "Actually, no thanks I..."

He looks at me and smiles, "It's on the house. I'll have one too."

"Sure. Ok." I really feel like a mooch today, but I'm also parched and grateful.

He goes behind a wooden counter, where he seems to cut something, placing pieces of it into a blender.

"So, what brings you here?"

Awkwardly, I start mumbling yet cough up, "Uh. Sabotage. And Robert..."

"Of course!" He waits, but I don't volunteer anything else, adding even more awkward silence than needs to be but I really feel like I said too much already.

"So you're curious to understand the path of the victim becoming a healer, are you?" He muses out loud in a relaxed and nonchalant way.

"I don't know. I guess so, Not sure. Just following the breadcrumbs which led me here to you." I'm surprised by myself talking in this way.

“Hmm.. breadcrumbs... Yes, it is like that isn't it... Robert designed it like this. One man talking to another can change the world and all that.”

He blends everything and a moment later brings me a green handmade mug with a bright yellow frothy drink. He stands expectantly, with his eyebrows cocked up, “One delicious Golden Turmeric Milk.”

I squint reluctantly.

“Try it and see.”

I taste it. It is unlike any milk I have ever tasted. I taste ginger and honey, cinnamon. It's oddly delicious and comforting. Earthy and grounding.

“Beyond the tasty stuff, it has turmeric and black pepper in a base of coconut milk with a touch of fresh lemon zest. Good fo...”

“Wow! I mean WOW!” I'm taken aback by my own enthusiasm.

“Happy to see it hits the spot... Shall we sit and I'll tell you my story, the highlights at least?”

I nod. Glad to not have to try and explain myself any further.

“Where to begin...” He sighs deeply, looking off in the distance, as if he has told the story before, yet it still stirs up a lot of emotion, “I was a sensitive boy. Violent home. Severe mental health issues in my family... Mom was always on the precipice or literally drowning in a dark hole. Meanwhile, dad was living in another world... dragging anyone who got close down. Lovely people but so broken themselves. They were children in adult bodies, hurt and incapable of raising a child themselves.”

His eyes become moist. I expect bitterness or grief but sense a lot of compassion.

He continues matter of factly, “And as they say...”

“hurt people hurt people”

He stops to look at me, as if he is hoping to not overwhelm me.

“So, to escape the hell hole that was called home, I became a drug addict by 13. I started robbing places by 15. Went to juvie... Eventually, I met a girl. Tried to clean up. Went through Recovery. Three time’s the charm. Then became a lawyer of all things... trying to save other lost souls...”

“What a life.” I mumble.

“Indeed. What a life.” He pauses and looks at me directly, “Life was on track and rather beautiful, a miracle in many ways really... but then, our only child, Samantha, died of a rare disease at age 8.”

My chest constricts. Imagining losing Julia would devastate me. Looking up, I see a clarity in his eyes, no pity but something else, a deep well of something I can’t put my finger on.

“And... I broke the marriage. Went wild. Ended up on the street. Many more failed recovery attempts. I was labelled “Treatment resistant”. Tried to end it. In the park, out of the way you know... not to cause trouble for anyone else.”

Looking down, his mouth forms a half smile.

“And that’s when I met good ‘ole Robert. We have a few unique scars that we share.”

He smiled looking straight at me, as if he knew a secret I didn’t, yet.

“And no, there was no magic pill, or flash or epiphany or anything like that. But, I met many people through him who changed my life...”

I sip my milk and he does also, savouring the flavours in my mouth, feeling the warmth of it going down into my belly.

“So, I started healing the wounds I had... uprooting the causes of my addiction and why I was so desperate to run away from the possibility of forgiveness and real love.”

Is that what I need to do?

Yes.

Oh yeah, brother! What he said!

Becca's wild voice chimes in.

I cross my arms, a little perturbed by their voices now seemingly directing me. Ironic, as when I ask for direction, they don't offer any.

Owen continues, “The last seven years,” knocking on wood. “I've not *only* been sober but never felt more alive and in a state of gratitude and grace. Every day is a miracle that I wake up to.”

That's it?

It seems too simple. I want to know more about his story.

“Enough about me. What are you in for?” His smile is so warm and relaxed.

I smile back, fidgeting with my glasses as I consider what to say, “Not sure. I mean I don't know what is possible or how this works. I have a million questions.”

I sip the milk again. I'm noticing how I am holding onto my ceramic mug so tightly. It comforts me, melting my insides... Can't drink enough.

“Can I have some more of this... tummy.”

“Turmeric milk. I wouldn't advise it.... strong medicine. Don't worry. No weird symptoms but anything in excess creates an imbalance. How about some water?”

“Sure.”

He comes back a moment later with a glass of water and an anxious smile.

“Well, I’m terribly sorry to say this but it seems that I have lost track of time. My usual weakness. I have to go in about a minute and I’ve spent all this time blabbing on about me. But, I would really love to get to know *you* better, Bill.” He holds out his hands, “Now, this may be a leap, but how about you come back for a session with me and my partner Alexandra...? She’s as perceptive and whip smart as you seem to be. I think you’ll be on the same frequency.”

“When?” I notice feeling disoriented by his sudden need to leave, as some part of me is intrigued and wants to keep talking with him.

“Well, we are booked up the next two weeks, but, we can make time...”

Unsure, he squints his eyes to scan a chalkboard with scheduled slots on it. Behind the counter. “Eh, would you look at that... tomorrow, if you are up for an early start?”

“Sure. How early?”

“7am. That’s how we roll. Gives us the rest of the day tomorrow to pursue our other passion, gardening... out back... You’re welcome to have a gander back there anytime when you’re in the neighbourhood.”

I suddenly feel like pushing back. It seems too big a step too soon. “What... uh... will the session entail...?”

“We’ll take a look under your hood so to speak... scan and help you identify where the healing needs to happen. The rest is a series of choices.”

He holds up a small dark green pocket book, with a gold embossed title, “To Heal or Not to Heal.”

His eyes pop, “Oh! One more thing! Your situation seems urgent. Big decisions this week, right?”

Did I tell him anything? I don't think so. Being with Owen reminds me of Robert. It's like he can see into me and read my mind.

Am I that easy to read or is there something about these men?

There's the feeling of unease with the familiarity between us. And yet, something about the way they seem to read between the lines and get what's really going on. I want that power too. To understand people in my life. I'd love to analyze Evelyn and John ~ hell, especially my wife ~ but she's so in my face.

I know what she wants. Or do I?

Owen cuts through my swirl of thoughts. "Sorry to break off so soon. So are you confirming a session tomorrow, bright and early?"

My head nods along, though my brain is still reeling and not sure what I signed up for.

He brings over a tablet with a slot to pay for the session.

Two hundred dollars!

I balk for a moment, but something inside me tells me to do it.

Trust. Hmmm... Really?

Looking at the door, as a family stands outside talking, I remember that he needs to go, but he seems patient with me as I fumble for my credit card, speaking in a reassuring way, "Just so you know, Bill. This is a powerful choice that you are making right now. I appreciate the trust you are investing in myself and Alexandra."

He waves to the family and turns back to me, "And another thing, as we assess you tomorrow morning... Once we do, you will have a choice as to how quickly this goes. You can take the more gradual path, which is deep and slow going for the first while. Or you can take the steeper, yet much quicker route. Ok?"

My Heart Is A Muscle

He nods to the booklet which he hands me, "You can take this and read it to help you understand the process."

I feel reassured in a way I did not even know I needed. Suddenly, I get a stampede of questions wanting to burst out.

He turns away, "Well well. Here are my guests." He turns back to me for a quick handshake, "We can discuss more tomorrow, Bill. Please, don't feel rushed to go. I just didn't want to suddenly leave you."

He taps on the small pocket book I am left holding. "This is your preparation for tomorrow."

I look it over and wander around the space as Owen escorts the family through the mysterious curtains. "Everybody here! Wunderbar! Let's go into the main hall of magic, shall we...?"

I feel comforted, protected somehow within this space. It feels like an oasis.

Time to go pick up Julia and see how she fared.

Chapter 26

The Power of Touch

The door is locked. Usually they leave it open. I ring the bell. My sister-in-law doesn't answer her phone usually so I bang on some windows and the back porch door.

No answer.

I call Jess.

She answers, "Hey, we're all at the hospital with pops."

"Oh yeah, Monique told me." I'm annoyed with her, perhaps jealous or feeling left out, "Why didn't you let me know?"

"I did honey. Voice mail. And I sent you a text."

I check and see the missed messages. "Oh. ok. Uh, wait a sec..."

I stall for a moment, feeling embarrassed to accuse so reflexively, but also something else. I don't think I want to see my dad right at this moment. I need a clear head to decide what to do.

The document package is still sitting at my bedside. I need a lawyer to decipher some of the legalese, but I know the gist. It's all about what I will consent to *if* he doesn't wake up and there are complications, given his age.

"Bill, darling...? Are you coming? Just know that we're here. Gotta go. Bye. "

I realize I am standing here kinda frozen. I spy the chimney above the fences. The hospital where he is

My Heart Is A Muscle

staying is just a block and a half away. Everything is so close, at the moment. I feel suffocated by my own life.

What kind of a son am I? He may not last long...

I feel a tightening in my core. I push the air out of my lungs like Sensei Dan showed me earlier, letting the inhale come. My belly softens.

Becca's voice is here again, *"Fuck being a good boy. Just go if you want to."*

She'd often say things like that to provoke me, challenging my dutiful nature.

I do want to and I don't.

What's best for me to do here?

Your body
knows.

Papa speaks! And I am grateful.

I let my body take over. My legs start walking in that direction. I feel pulled to be at dad's side. Right now, every day feels like it could be his last. And I guess I want to be alone with him. It feels selfish, but I don't want my girls to be there, also.

Why did they want to come?

They have a right to see him and say goodbye, I reason.

Walking through the hospital and into his room, I see Jess next to his sleeping body, holding her hands over his chest, intently.

The girls, Julia and her cousin Brida, are reading a letter to him. Jaki is also there leaning on her chair watching them and then waving me over warmly.

I stay removed from them, sit down on a chair and take in the scene. Thinking about how in the last

year, before he deteriorated and got super cranky, he was wanting to take the girls on trips which he called "ventures". It dawns on me how he was never really there for me much. Was he trying to atone, make up for lost time?

This is not about me.

What the heck is Jess doing? Some New age b.s.?

I guess I just scowled as she pauses, turns and gives me a look, "Reiki... its energy that heals..."

Why am I so critical? Why is this all bothering me so much?

A male nurse brushes past me. "Hello Teddy, how are you feeling today?"

He's talking to my dad as if he were awake and able to reply and with a familiarity and affection that feels really inappropriate to me.

Isn't this all a bit cuckoo?

The nurse then squeezes dad's shoulders and caresses his face, "Looking good, man."

I'm beside myself. Never seen this before.

Is this ethical? Is he really a professional?

The nurse turns to me and everyone in the room. He has a thick latino accent, "Affection, touch and our caring voices can stimulate his brain and help him heal."

I can't help but shoot a credulous look, rolling my eyes as I look away.

"It's called therapeutic touch." He says with a warm smile, turning towards me, "You can google it and see a mountain of peer reviewed studies."

I'm taken aback. Not just by his intelligent and confident air, but how he speaks without defensiveness. He extends a hand to me, smiling.

"Anjel."

I blubber back, "Uh, Bill... Stone."

My Heart Is A Muscle

"Teddy's son!? It's only been 72 hours, but I have to tell you he feels a lot when I ask him about his family."

I tune him out for a moment, staring at dad, lifeless and sunken into the bed, fitting his family name. Stone. Lying there, he looks like he usually does, stone faced. Stoic. Passive.

"Uh, not sure how you might know that..."

I want to dismiss this nurse as naive or intrusive, but he leans in closer to me still holding my hand.

"He cries many tears. It's quite touching. A lot is going on inside, even if he can't talk to us, *yet*."

I pull my hand away. The last word bothers me.

I grumble. *Who is he to stoke false hope?*

"I understand you might all be grieving... It's really beautiful that you are here to spend time with him at this time. It makes a difference."

Jess nods in a way like she is in some deep meditative trance.

Then her sister, Jaki, brings out a cake... "Hope you wake up, grandpa!"

What the hell!? It's not even her side of the family! Who does she think she is... such a goody two shoes!

I can't stand this. Everything here is TOO MUCH!

I pull myself out of the room.

Why does this bother me SO FUCKING MUCH!?

Sitting outside, in the hallway, I feel out of place. I'm torn, deliberating between staying and *trying* to cool down or just leaving and returning on my own, later.

Julia comes out, sits next to me and takes my hand. She doesn't say a word.

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I love and hate that she's here next to me. It's like she understands and feels me and yet I feel like the child. I'm embarrassed by our roles being reversed. I shouldn't be such a burden to her.

"This is not, for you to..."

"Shhh." She puts a finger to my mouth.

She just shushed me! If she weren't so wise and caring ~ with her eyes melting all my defenses right now ~ I would be affronted. I can't stand to look at her.

We just sit there, side by side, staring at the nondescript wall.

Suddenly, I begin to weep.

Not again.

I can't hold back the tide.

I am aware that the tears are not for the man called my dad in the other room. But for myself.

What a shitty son I am. What an inadequate dad.

And there is heat stewing in my core... A surprising amount of anger.

What a decent, and yet in some ways a totally inept and inadequate dad he was.

I try to shake it off but the resentment is burning in me and rising up.

I know he tried, but he failed.

Hell! He had decades of time to get it right. But, nope. He was always on the sidelines. Never stepping in. Never daring to break an egg, Never standing up for himself. Never stepping in to defend us against mom. Never daring to feel anything!

"It's ok, daddy. Whatever you feel..."

Who is coaching her?

I have a therapist for a daughter and some kinda spiritual healer for a wife. I shake my head. This feels wrong. So wrong.

My Heart Is A Muscle

"Arrrrrrrrrrraaaaaahhhh!" I exclaim with my fists in the air.

Then I sigh and shake. I start to chuckle and then cry some more.

Better to not explain and involve her.

She puts her hand on my back, her presence so steady and calm. I see she is good at this. Like it makes her feel helpful. I get that. I suck in some air, wiping my tears.

"Thank you, Jules. You have a gift for helping people."

"So do you daddy. You taught me."

I shake my head, not believing it.

"What? When? How?"

She is about to tell me, when Jess comes out.

"Come with me..." she beckons.

I hesitate. Julia nudges me to do so.

I get up reluctantly.

Jess walks me to dad's bedside. I notice that her sister and our niece and the nurse are all gone.

"Put your hand on his chest."

This makes no sense. I resist and reach for his hand.

"Trust me. He needs to feel you...." She takes my hand. Ever the bossy pants. "Right there..." Placing it on his chest.

I comply, skeptically. "How do...?"

Then I hear a gasp. His mouth opens and he draws in more air... his breathing accelerates.

I feel a jolt of aliveness surging through me.

Is this coming from me or him?

I don't know.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Suddenly concerned, I look to my wife, the nurse, "Is this ok?"

She looks at the heart monitor and it shows the strength and rate of his heart beating more intensely. I've had some experience to see elders go into cardiac arrest or through irregular heart rhythms, but judging from her confident smile, I gather that this is not the case now.

"He's actually more steady and strong with your contact." Jess puts her hands over mine, just a few inches above.

I feel the presence of heat growing through my hand. It's so intense I feel his chest warming up.

His chin quivers and then he gulps saliva. Never spent time with someone in a coma, not sure what is remarkable or normal. I want to dismiss this, but my hand being so hot?

The light outside brightens, as the clouds part.

Must be the sunlight heating up the space and my skin.

I take my right hand and touch my forehead, it is much cooler.

I'm startled a bit, "What is that... water running?"

Julia reports from the other side of the bed, whispering while trying to suppress some giggles, "He's peeing..."

We laugh together, realizing it's his catheter filling a bag that is making the sound.

I notice that his mouth is closed and he seems peaceful.

The heart monitor has shown his rhythm has stayed the same, registering a strong and steady tempo.

My hand releases.

I don't understand.

My Heart Is A Muscle

But I feel so much lighter myself. I can't shrug it off. Suddenly I feel hungry.

"Let's give him space to rest." Jess suggests. I also sense we need to go.

Jess comes around and holds my head, cradling my face, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Trusting me."

Chapter 27

Letting It All Hang Out

“What the hell!?”

I guess I overslept, taking a nap when we got home. I feel groggy. But, when I walk into the living room I’m transported to a teenager’s basement. My wife is on the couch, in her underwear eating from a tub of ice cream. An empty bottle of wine lays on it’s side next to her, while she is watching some TV show, holding a joint in her hand, with a fan blowing the skunky smell towards an open window. Quite a set up.

“What?” She pauses the show, “You expect me to be... perfect?”

“No. I just. Is Julia ok?”

“Of course our princess is fed, bathed, and in her golden slumber. And me. Your darling queen. I am a rising..”

“High.” I add.

“Yup.” She beams a smile so wide, it looks clown-like, “You want some?”

“I can’t...”

A pillow flies at me. I’m startled awake even more.

She laughs, reminding me at that moment of my wild sister, “What?! You can’t let go... and lose control, even a little?”

I don’t have an answer, sighing, and flapping my arms.

“Come on... let’s pull that stick out of your ass!”

Jess has always known how to rile me up, but she’s never talked to me so brazenly.

Exasperated, I grab a pillow and fling it at her, thinking it could make her stop.

She’s ready with another volley of smaller pillows. By the time I block the barrage, I’m getting whacked by a large sofa cushion, throwing me to one side.

Losing my footing, I reach over and grab her, throwing us to the ground.

We devolve into a wrestling match on the carpet. Trying to throw her back to pin her, I can’t quite get her off balance. I didn’t know her core was so strong.

Has she been doing pilates for real or am I getting weaker?

It’s been a long day, but childishly, I decide that I can’t let her win!

She tickles me and I burst into tears laughing, falling back. I scoop her up, hooking my arm under her thigh, and flip her over. Then I give her a zerbent kiss on her neck to throw her further off guard.

“Aww, fuck you... you’re giving me a hickey!!”

I laugh.

She throws a series of punches to my belly in a rapid fashion, like a jackhammer vibrating my core, which makes me holler with glee.

Finally, I throw my arms back in surrender and she pins me back, straddling me, “There I win!” A moment later she lifts her arms in a gesture of victory.

I flip her over ~ a jiu jitsu and judo move ~ but, as she goes down and I come up, we keep rolling over one and over one another, until we crash into the couch, like a barrel smashing as it hits a wall.

We are both delirious.

Fuck this feels soooo good.

She stands up and extends her hand. As she takes me into the bedroom, I notice that she's laid out new bedsheets and pillow covers.

How did she do that while I was sleeping?

Amazing woman or I am just not paying attention...?

Could be both.

"Wanna go on an adventure with me?" She slips off her top.

"Uh." I suddenly feel a frog in my throat, but the daze of joy is still with me, and I lay back smiling. "Sure."

"Not like you are busy these days." She crawls over me like a tigress.

I decide to not take that personally, though a part of me wants to take offence.

Seeing my squirmed up face, she goes to explain, "I just mean..."

But, then I put my finger over her lips. She opens her mouth and sucks on it.

No more between us needs to be spoken. We lie down together, with me spooning her, cradling her breast, our bodies pressed together, feeling her hips and bum pushing against my groin. So much heat and desire. I'm on fire.

"Take me" She growls and purrs as she strokes my head and then grabs my ass pulling it towards her.

I thrust and we undulate together. It's a deep and slow ride... I feel waves of great pleasure, layers of joy and longing and ecstasy... I sense her coming to greater and greater pleasure as well. Everything is **annihilated** in the orgasm, as we come together.

Afterwards, we lay there splayed next to each other.

"You broke your rule, again." I say.

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Cause I felt like it. It’s my rule to break.”

The feeling of deja vu and her playing along with the joke makes last night more real. But, I’m still not 100% believing that all of this is happening between us. I pinch her.

“Ow!” She turns over shocked.

“I was just checking it was real.” I reply in defence.

She needles my side, making me holler.

“I’m going to pee myself!”

Jess puts her palm against my mouth, suddenly concerned, “Shhh, don’t wake her up!”

Julia’s room is next to ours and she keeps her door open. Jess turns the lights off and closes the door, rushing back under the covers.

After a long silence, I expect to be falling asleep, but I feel wide awake. Closing my eyes to savour this moment.

Jess whispers, “Hey, are you asleep?”

“I was... just kidding.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“I don’t know, *can* you?”

“Smart ass. I want to know if you’d come to something I’m a part of...”

“What is it?”

“It’s an improv group.”

“You... when do you have time, woman!?”

“It’s what I’ve been doing Tuesday nights. I just told you it was girls night, which it started out as. Jaki brought me there, but it’s much more...”

“Ok. Ugh. Tell me more...”

"It's, uh, about really listening to one another and seeing each other... and then we're a group of actors and a musician who play it back on stage." She is often not this self-conscious, "You have to experience it to really get it."

I see the contours of her face in the half light, looking at me with vulnerability and depth. That's the woman I fell in love with; a bottomless well of love and... something else, which I can't describe.

"So, I'd really love for you to be there. To see me and maybe even share something..." She nudges me, "Hey, you still with me?"

I make snoring sounds.

"All right, wise guy. Anyway, I already asked nonna to watch Jules. Or you can bring her."

"Sure. I wouldn't miss it."

"Really?" She asks sincerely,

"Mhm."

"I love you."

"I love you too." I say as I grab her and land a wet puckery kiss on her lips.

We go back to spooning each other.

This time she holds me.

I feel strangely at peace.

As my mind fades into oblivion, the thought that another adventure awaits me bright and early comes to mind.

Oh yeah, I booked a healing thing?

Sigh. It's both exhilarating and fills me with a small panic. I didn't even read the booklet.

Wonder if I can cancel it?

My head shakes from side to side, as if my body is saying, "Don't do that."

What should I do? I ask.

Let go of
shoulds.
You can
choose
to heal.

I concede, rolling over and setting my alarm to
get me up extra early.

I close my eyes.

Soothing darkness.

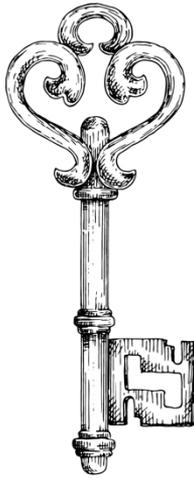
Then, I hear Becca's voice echoing.

"Time to rest, big brother.

You'll need every bit of it tomorrow."

Thursday

When healing comes
in many forms...



My Heart Is A Muscle

Chapter 28

Bigger Questions, Deeper Answers

First day I wake up early and don't feel like total shit. A bit of the fog is lifting. I'm up and vertical a few minute before the alarm: 4:43am. I expect to feel zonked, but I'm feeling spry, my joints light and finding it easy to move.

Sensing I need to prepare, like I am on a quest, I pack my journal. It's been a while since I actually noted down my thoughts. Whenever I do, it's full of lists: to do's, prioritizing matrices, visions and task ladders.

I pull out the book "To Heal or Not To Heal" which Owen gave me yesterday. I flip through it. There's a folded sheet of paper placed inside which falls out. It's titled "The Emotional Scan". Not ready to look at it, I tuck that into my journal, with a pencil and pen also.

My feet itch to move, but I take time to write a note to Jess:

*Was it just a dream or did I get
extremely lucky, again, last night?*

I'll be back and picking up Jules later.

Love, Bill

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Running freely without a destination, I find myself descending back down into the ravine. The cool air feels refreshing. There's thick dew on the grass and a light mist which lifts as I climb the same rise I scaled with Robert on Tuesday morning.

This time I go straight up through the thicket, dodging branches and making my thighs and calves burn with the effort. On top, I see a bright golden orange ball peeking through the treeline.

I sit on a fallen tree stump to catch my breath.

Opening up my journal, I start writing questions.

What the hell am I doing?

A smirk on my face.

*I think I am pursuing a trail of questions
and doing a rather... good job?*

Scratch that, I'm not a boy any more. Forget being good or pleasing anyone.

What are my real questions?

What do I really want to know?

How can I make Jess want to stay with me?

As soon as I write that, I think.

There I go... Always trying to control...

I remember and jot down a quote Dan shared yesterday:

"You can't control someone
and love them at the same time."

Before I continue, more questions need to be
spat out...

*What the hell do I do if - and when -
I leave Golden Years?*

*Is there any chance I can stay and
realize my vision, with any integrity?*

We're all going to die. I think to myself.

The wind rustles as if in response. My ears fill
up with her soft and raspy voice,

*"It's not so bad, being dead, big brother. Then
again, it's how you live that matters..."*

What does Becca want from me?

I expect her to answer back. Nothing but wind
and early birds chirping now. My mind's empty again.

Why is she playing these games?

*And why am I reacting so much to a voice in my
head?*

I don't write any of that down. What if Jess or
someone else ever open this journal. Don't want to be
seen as losing my marbles. Back to the practicalities.

What do I do about dad?

That last one tears me up. I wrote all this out in the scenario plan and know what I need to do next - though I haven't done it, yet - but there's a deeper question.

How do I feel about dad?

Papa responds...

Anger.

Disappointment.

Grief. Love.

My eyes well up.

Not now. Not ready...

I close the book and walk some more. The movement and distraction of my legs walking in good rhythm on the path lets me process, or at least beat back, whatever threatens to flood me. I like to stay clear and active. As more emotion threatens to sweep me up, I start jogging, then running. I put all my focus on my breath.

Stay calm and steady, Bill.

Needing to get out of the ravine, I keep running.

I push my muscles faster until my core, thighs and chest are burning, until I find myself at the strange rounded wooden house.

Doubling over, I pause as my breath steadies. After a few minutes, I walk up and I try the door handle but it does not budge. A sign hangs behind the glass:

Not quite ready, but with you shortly...

Cheeky and friendly. I check my watch and see it is just past 6am. I back off the steps and pace around on their front walkway, trying to keep myself moving. Then, I notice a stone path which winds off to the left. I remember Owen's invitation to go explore out back.

I follow it, yet as I round the house, the path narrows and comes to a wall of green. It appears that I have come to a dead end. As my eyes adjust to the low light, I see the glint of a brass handle. I reach in through the verdant green, grab it and pull. I'm drawing back a gate that is fully covered in vines.

A great disguise.

I walk through and suddenly find myself in a grand garden. In the morning light, I can see that this property snakes and expands, going on as far as my eye can see.

How is this possible?

I know the lot sizes for homes in this area. Yet this green space goes way beyond the bounds of any home I have seen in the neighbourhood.

I follow the stones in the ground. There is a swing next to a tiny waterfall and a pond. I come closer to behold a dazzling array of koi, large goldfish shimmering with bright yellow and orange.

I go scouting in further and see the edge of their property melts into the ravine which is a part of the Don Valley, a stretch of streams, hills and valleys which cuts through the city and goes on for many miles.

I decide to go back to the pond of koi and sit there. The book, "To Heal or Not To Heal" in my pack is so small and inviting. I open up and read.

The first part is titled...

To Know Thyself or Stay In Denial

I skim through and I feel unexpectedly drawn in. It's not another preachy or hyper inspirational self-help book, but written in an unexpected way... as a choose-your-own-adventure. I used to love those as a kid. Even wrote one myself in grade 5 when we were learning to bind our own books. I don't remember doing it as an adult, but we have it on our bookshelf as evidence of my younger self to remind me. It's Julia's favorite book.

Back to the present. This book in my hands. It teases me...

Don't you want to know who you are?

What hurts you? And what excites you?

Know what you *really* want?

And *why* you've been holding yourself back from

living more truly and loving more deeply?

I do. That's why I'm here in this strange garden early in the morning staring at exotic fish, having pre-paid \$200 for some "healing" with a strange guy -- who's eerily familiar, almost too familiar with me -- and his mysterious "partner".

What the fuck am I really doing here?

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I sigh and shrug.

I'm a curious bastard I guess.

The rest of the chapter fleshes out what happens when we don't "choose" to find out who we are...

You'll feel comfortable and confident to be jealous of others, to blame anything and anyone for your own lack of courage, and to live in the prison of your own certainties and judgments.

It may not be what you want, but it's a home of your own making.

Until, one day...

That same comfort will start to feel more *uncomfortable*, disconcerting even, like you bought into a scam. Like that house of your being is built on a foundation that is sinking. What you felt previously certain about and which your confidence was embedded, will feel as hollow and precarious as a house of cards, as false as a mask, crumbling in your hands, with no way to glue it back together...

A little heavy handed, but I get it.

Then it offers me a choice to get to know myself.

There are a few different options. One is to understand what drives me. I flip to that chapter and see "The 5 Core Needs".

I recognize the image of the five bowls which Ezra and the others described at lunch yesterday.

I flip back to the choices page and my eyes land on...

"Do you want to **know**
where you are most **stuck**?"

Which specific emotional issue(s) do
you need to heal in order to move forward?"

Yes, I do.

If so, go to page 13.

I flip to that section, where there's an
illustration of a man standing before a gateway.

We may each be unique and incredibly complex.

but we are not that complicated.

There are only so many ways to grow.

Are you ready to find out which of

The 5 Emotional Gateways

stand between you and what you want?

Mhm. Yup. I turn the page.

The first one described is...

The Gateway of FEAR

Has something terrible and **unfair** happened to you?

Do you **dread** the unknown?

Do you harbour suspicion and **mistrust**?

Does your belly twitch and pulse with **anxiety**?

YES, to all! Gulp.

*If you dare step in through the Gateway of FEAR and explore further, you will discover a growing sense of **peace**, **courage** and deeper **trust**.*

I see the next section looks like the original version of the copied handout folded into the book.

To understand how much fear is calling you, please rate its **intensity**, on a scale below:

0 = not at all,
Under 5 = manageable,
Over 5 = intrusive and persuasive
Closer to 10 = blinding and all consuming.

I want to be accurate. It's intense for sure.

But, at the moment at least, not all consuming. I place it at a 7.5.

I feel a shiver. Must be that I stopped moving
and there's a cool wind.

I turn the page.

The Gateway of GUILT

Do you feel **trapped** in some circumstance?
Hemmed in by others and annoyed by their
expectations?

Running from guilt?

Suffocated within a relationship?

This one doesn't connect for me. Maybe Jess feels this. Often she asks for and steals some space. I don't feel restricted. But then again, I did explode earlier this week and shut down when she confronted me. Was that guilt or shame driving my anger? Not sure. There's more...

*If you dare step in through the Gateway of Guilt, you will discover more **ease**, **joy**, and an expansive feeling of **freedom** to live and love as you please.*

Hmm... I'll come back to this one maybe.

I flip the page...

The Gateway of ANGER

Frustrated by things not going your way?
Impatient with how long it is taking?

Yup. I'm not one to think of myself as an angry person, but I sure have felt the volcano erupting this week.

Want to feel more **in control**?
Ever feel **powerless**?

Even more so these days. There is nothing in my control. But maybe that's just the current circumstance. Last week, I think I felt I had my hand on the rudder and was in charge.

Ok, I guess I have an anger issue. But, I don't see myself as powerless.

I never give up. I am NOT a quitter.

But, then again, maybe the way I am holding on trying to regain control is just the flip side of this issue?

I think about the moments yesterday with Sensei Dan. He's younger than me, so I'll just call him Dan.

When he showed me how much tightness I had in my core and how weak that made me. And how, when I let it all go, I had that sense of losing control at first but then an expanding base of power. I remember the practice, exhaling to push all the air out again. Holding curled up into a ball, as I am emptied. Then, after what seems like a minute or more, I gasp for air,

my back cracking as I unfurl into an upright position, inhaling more deeply.

*If you dare step in through the Gateway of Anger, you will discover a growing sense of **accomplishment, righteousness,** and a real sense of **power** to change and evolve the world within and around you.*

Ok, fine I give it a 5.5 - maybe a 6.

What else?

The Gateway of LOSS

Have you felt **rejected... cast out?**

Do you feel a deep **absence or loss?**

Do you often feel lonely and **separate** from others?

The well of tears bursts and my chest collapses holding the book.

Hot tears come. Images of Julia and Jess the last few days. The love is so overwhelming. I would like to say she rejected me but that is not how it feels. Yes, I feel cast out by work but the love of my girls... It's abundantly there.

And then, I see a flash of all the people in my life. Paula, my brother. My dad. Becca. I see her now clearly in my memories. And new faces. I see Robert, Dan, Ezra... I am surprised by how connected I feel to them all.

*If you dare step in through the Gateway of Loss, you will discover a heart warming sense of **gratitude, connection and love.***

This rings true. A sense of gratitude for everyone is filling me to the brim right now. I should take stock more often. My tears fall on the page... guess this also means that my bowl of connection is pretty full. I wipe my eyes.

Don't need to rate this.

One more, I guess...

The Gateway of SHAME

Before I read on, I close the book for a moment and remember again how this maps on to the five bowls.

This one must be the bowl with the eye. What was the need again?

I notice wanting to put away the book entirely and turn away.

Surprising, as I felt so engaged a moment ago.

I look around at the garden, noticing the evergreen trees surrounding me, hearing more song birds and wind rustling the branches.

What am I running from?

I take a deep breath in and open it again.

Do you feel **insignificant? Overlooked?**

Like you have to wear a **mask to impress**

or to get attention and be **accepted**?
Never feel quite **good enough**?

I don't want to answer.
It stings.

Take things **personally**?
Feel easily slighted or **hurt**?
Judgy and **critical** of others?
Ever feel nauseous or **disgusted**... with *yourself*?

The author really rubs this one in. But, the words grab me.

*If you dare step in through the Gateway of Shame, you will discover a sobering **acceptance, humility and respect** for all beings. Followed by a sense of **wholeness**, able to show up with full **integrity**.*

A wave of grossness bubbles up. I shiver and close the book.

Without thinking, I get up and start walking back.

They should be open by now!

I feel an irritation, searching for flaws in this goddamn perfect garden. As I come around to the front, suspicion creeps in.

What is this... a cult or something?

My Heart Is A Muscle

As I climb the front steps, I can't help but feel like getting out of here entirely.

What a desperate fool I must be coming here!

I see that the lights are on in the front room. The door has a new sign.

OPEN

for healing...

I shiver and hesitate on the doormat.

There's a second hand written sign underneath.

Welcome, Bill!

We're ready for you now!

Something touching and disarming about that.

I turn the door, hearing the tinkle of bells as I step over the threshold.

I remind myself to keep my guard up.

Chapter 29

To Heal Or Not To Heal...

Stepping in, I feel the warmth. There's a smell of something sweet and spicy.

From between some curtains, a striking woman appears. She is very tall and of strong build. Her skin is black and her hair is very long, in neat, tight braids. "Good morning, you must be Bill, my name is Alexandra."

She offers her hand and clasps mine firmly. She has a vitality and confidence that is undeniable. I find it irresistible.

"Owen has told me a bit about you."

"I wonder what. I hardly spoke about myself."

Owen's deep timber of a voice comes from somewhere hidden, "Only what I sensed, Bill. No mind reading."

I see him emerge from behind the dark green velvet curtain to stand at her side. "We are so fortunate that you have chosen us, as we have chosen you."

My radar goes off again as a *What have I gotten myself into?* doubt creeps in. But something about these two seems, I don't know. Real. They feel real.

Worthy of my trust?

My head shakes sideways, but the rest of my body feels warm and relaxed.

"So, why *are* you here, Bill?" She asks me, with bright inquisitive eyes.

"I am really not sure, actually."

"Come now, you seem more self aware than that. Time is always of the essence, is it not?"

I nod.

"I don't mean to tease you, just trying to establish that we'll need to be fully honest with one another for this to work."

I smile nervously. Not sure what that will mean.

They lead me through the curtains, entering a larger room that is entirely round and panelled with wood. It looks like west coast cedar. I'm a bit of wood geek, loving to build stuff around the house.

The ceiling is a cone with a natural wood pattern that draws a spiral to the point in the center. There are four round skylights which allow streaks of golden light to enter. Ahead of us there is a solid wall of glass facing the immense backyard garden. Two large picture windows on either side of double glass doors. I imagine now that they must have spied me at the pond reading their book.

Alexandra pats a massage table for me to sit on. "Thank you for trusting us this far, Bill. So, you've had a chance to read about the emotional gateways?"

How does she know?

Owen, watching me closely, steps forward to illuminate, "We could see you out there... and it's also where most people go to reflect before their first session. Can I get you some tea, water.?"

"What kind of tea? I ask.

"What you smell brewed already is bengal spice."

I know the blend. It's my favorite on a cold day.

"Mmm. Yes. Please."

Owen keeps me occupied with small talk, as he pours the tea and brings over my mug with honey and

maple syrup on a platter. Meanwhile, Alexandra holds a clipboard taking notes. *Of what?* I wonder.

“Shall we get right down to it?”

She doesn't waste time. Another trait I usually admire, but at this moment, I find it unnerving.

“What... How?”

She laughs to herself. “As you can tell, I am the focused one. So I will first walk you through the process and then be here to guide you at every single step on the path. Owen's contribution will be to accompany us both to tend to whatever you and I may need to stay as present as possible on the task at hand. How does that sound?”

“Great. Yes. Makes sense.” I blabber.

“Now, may I see the book?”

I feel stuck for a moment. Seeing no reason to say no, but not wanting to give her my journal.

Owen adds, “And it's ok, Bill to *not* want to share just yet.”

“I simply want to check the ratings you noted for each emotional gateway. It will help us understand you and to set our course.”

I suddenly realize she means the book they gave me ~ NOT my journal ~ which I am clutching in the same hand, tightly.

“Sure. No. I appreciate your book, the parts I read...”

Why am I sputtering awkwardly?

Sitting there as they both scan through the pages of the handout I filled out, I realize that I feel almost like I am half naked in a doctor's office, waiting for him to ask me to pull my pants off. Afraid of what may happen? What they might discover.

“Thank you so much for trusting us, Bill.” Alexandra declares in a way that I sense is fully genuine.

Owen is holding his own mug and sympathizing, "I can see that it's vulnerable to do so. It takes courage. Really. Especially for us as men. Believe me, we know."

Abruptly, she closes the book and puts down her clipboard. "Now that we have some initial understanding, are you ready to begin?"

"What exactly?" I know this is all about *healing* but I really don't grasp what is going on.

"Well, Bill, we are in the business of helping our clients to heal their emotional wounds. Seeing you have a few that you rated intensely and negatively impacting your life, the offer would be to address one of them today, beginning right now in fact."

Owen sips his tea and asks in a nonchalant way, "You still on board? If you are, it's also ok to pause or step back at any time."

"Why not," I say, wanting to end the suspense and see what I am dreading. Sucking in a dose of air and sighing. Didn't realize I had been holding my breath until now.

She is looking at me waiting.

"Yes?" I spit out to doubly confirm. "I think so." adding a face that may speak to my uncertainty.

Alexandra smiles and her eyes flash, "Good enough for me! A brave choice indeed."

Owen's eyes widen. "Alright then... let's get set up."

Alexandra explains while Owen readies up the space, putting down a clean new sheet and pillows while I hover about.

"Healing is a series of choices. I can explain each one as we approach it or would you like a quick overview?"

"Overview please."

She beams a smile, "I like to peek ahead, as well."

My Heart Is A Muscle

Owen muses as he works. "I prefer to close my eyes and leap in myself. Hate the anticipation."

Is it possible that I feel both ways? Part of me wants to stop the train and just hear a good story. Another part wants to get it over with. Like going to the dentist ~ just pull the damn tooth out and enough preamble.

"Have a seat." Alexandra points back to the massage table that is now ready. I sit down and feel like I'm about to be examined by a doctor.

"Healing is a process. You can start and stop at any time. Why? Because everyone needs to feel in control..."

"Which is an illusion really." Owen is on a rolling stool off to the side, sipping his tea again, looking chipper and excited.

Alexandra nods in agreement, about to continue when Owen wheels over and asks, "May I put my hands *near* your head, Bill?"

What a strange request. I'm beside myself for a moment.

"Don't worry, Owen is just scanning you, like an X-ray or cat scan."

I shrug. Guess I can tell him to stop if it feels weird or not ok.

Coming up behind me, I see him rubbing his palms together vigorously. Then out of the corner of my eyes, I see him placing them about a foot away from my head. I feel a surge of warmth and calm. I cannot see him but I feel the warmth spreading as he continues moving in a slow downward motion.

Alexandra waits for my eyes to meet hers again, "As I was about to say, Bill, we will lead you together through the process of making a series of simple choices. How you decide each one, will either lead you through a stage of healing or keep you at the place where you are..."

Owen offers, "Which is totally ok, too. To be stuck, that is."

"That is your choice." Alexandra says this in a way which is at once both unequivocally emphatic yet somehow also very friendly and accepting.

Even so, I can't help but blurt out. "It doesn't really feel like I have much of a choice."

Owen chuckles, as his hands hover over my lower back, "Amen! Isn't that the truth sometimes!"

Alexandra squints with a half smile, straightening herself and speaking with authority, "Actually. That is a choice also. In fact, we are making such choices all the time. Mostly to not feel. To not embrace something greater than the pain we hold tightly. To not heal."

"Well said, Alex." Owen affirms.

I pick up my tea and enjoy the warmth in my body as I sip, sensing Owen's presence going into my feet, which were cold, but are heating up quickly. At the same time, I start to feel uncomfortable and antsy sitting there, as if a part of me is dying to get started already while another wants to run out the door, and not look back.

"So, uh. How many stages... uh choices are there?"

"Five." She says. "Listen carefully if you want to memorize them. If not, this is all in the book - which you can keep." She is amused by herself saying that, "The first two choices you have already made, hence you are here. The first was to reach out or carry on alone."

"When I went to meet Robert."

"And came through our door." Owen is now seated next to her, arms folded with a look of bemusement.

She nods, "That is right. And then you made the second choice, which is to tune in or tune out. You chose to look within when you opened that book, when you read that chapter and decided to scan yourself for

what is wounded within you, looking for guidance and relief.”

“Now what?”

“Only three left!” Owen cheers me on with a smile and both thumbs up. But then his expression turns solemn and cautious, “yet, the next choice, can be for some, the hardest.”

Alexandra continues, “Yes, and... for each of us this journey is very unique and intimate. The third choice is to feel or not to feel. If you decide to feel the pain of what you wish to heal, that will take us through to where new emotions can emerge.”

I follow her words and imagine she wrote the book. I also notice that I am starting to feel a little queasy. I question being there and feel the urge to leave the hut getting stronger. The air in the room feels too warm, I crave to get outside somewhere.

“What if I don’t want to feel it?”

Owen seems to have read my mind. He’s already walking over and opening up a casement window on the back of the hut. A cool clean breeze comes into the space. I suck it in, and feel refreshed.

Alexandra responds, “If you don’t choose to feel, and choose to stay comfortable in your head, instead, well, everything remains on hold. Frozen, stuck. In limbo.”

Owen comes back and puts a hand on my shoulder. “We’ll be here to support you either way. And it’s just a pause. You can resume at any time, later on.”

“Right. And if you have the courage to feel it, though it will be intense for a few seconds...,” she adds confidently.

“It will pass.” Owen nods and purses his lips in deep sympathy.

They seem to have this process down pat. She finishes his thought, “Yes, especially if you choose wisely as you are given your next choice.”

“Which is...?” I feel uncomfortable still, but it makes sense to me and I’m hooked, wanting to know more.

Owen answers this time. “The fourth choice is to open up to a force that is greater and which can heal you...”

“...Or to stay only consumed with the pain. That is the default decision.” She adds. “Many of us can get stuck in what some call worshipping our wounds. That is the risk at this stage.”

I feel my throat constrict and get dry. Owen is handing me a glass of clear and refreshing water. “Staying hydrated. So simple. So essential.” He says as I gulp it down.

“And the final choice?” I break in.

Alexandra becomes more animated, her arms folding out and her eyes wide open, “To keep going, allowing more healing, continuing to grow... or... to simply stop the process, at any time.” She puts down the clipboard, “This is personally my favorite step. After surrendering to the start of healing, we begin to taste the benefits... it becomes easier and easier. We become thirsty for more!”

Owen seems somber as he relays, “And yet, even then, we can stop and say, NO MORE. ENOUGH. I DON’T DESERVE to FEEL so good. Or I AM NOT READY to FULLY evolve my life and let this old and comfortable pain go. That is my choice. How far I decide to go.”

“At the same time,” She turns to give Owen a warm smile, “Darling, you know this so well, that healing ~ like death and change ~ is entirely inevitable.”

She turns back to me. “It’s really a choice as to WHEN.”

I should be scared, but I feel lucid and more ready. Even though on some level NONE of this makes sense. On another, it does, completely.

My glass of water and tea mug are empty.

“Ok, I’m clear. Ugh. Where’s the bathroom?”

Chapter 30

Down the Rabbit Hole...

Back from the loo, I feel a mixture of dread and excitement. Looking at them waiting for me, ready, I have a strong sense that *something* is about to happen.

“Which one?” Alexandra glances at the clipboard now in her hand. “There are three that seem to stand out. The biggest one *seems* to be your fear.”

I feel no need to hold back, anything, “Yeah. Big changes are coming and I was lied to and tricked recently.”

Immediately I question my transparency.

Why am I telling them so much?

I guess I want to feel less fear, but I also do *not* want to get fucked again.

Owen grimaces in pain.

Is that for me or does he really relate?

I can't tell if he really feels so deeply or if he is manipulating me. Not knowing which it is, makes me think of the issue of trust again.

She goes down the list. “Your second biggest one, according to your ratings here, is the gateway of anger.”

Not sure about this one. I could use some help, but...

“Or what about shame...? Not feeling significant, good enough, important and worthy?” She looks up at me. “You didn't actually rate this one.”

My body recoils. *I don't want to go there. Not now. Maybe not ever.*

Owen reassures me, "Remember, this is your first time here. We don't have to go anywhere you don't want..."

"...or *choose* to go." Alexandra finishes his sentence.

Looking at Owen and turning back to me, Alexandra's voice seems to deepen an octave, "So, Bill Stone, which one do you choose? We're ready and at your service to take the next step together."

I gulp down my saliva, "I'll go with the first one."

"Great choice." She affirms. "You may remain seated or lie down to get comfortable."

I feel suddenly really woozy and tired. I lie back, feeling a strong desire to shut my eyes and wake up when this is over.

"We'll keep walking you through this, Bill, and both of us will be with you the entire time. Your only job is to NOT fall asleep!"

I smirk. But I wonder how I will manage that, as I really do feel so sleepy, even more so lying here.

Owen comes over, "Is this what you really want?"

I nod. No doubt left. I do want to have less fear and feel better, calmer, more at peace.

"I honour your courage, Bill. May I place my hands on you directly now?"

I nod, even though I don't know how I feel about it at the moment.

Am I too trusting? I wonder.

A moment later, I feel his warm and soft hands cradling my head and neck. I expect a massage - something I enjoy but have not received for a while. Instead his hands stay still. I feel my neck relaxing and my shoulders softening all on their own.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Owen's deep voice reverberates behind me, "If there's something that I'm doing which you *don't* like, or you want *more* or *less* of, or for me to bring my attention somewhere else, please *do* let me know, yeah?"

"Perfect." I say, finding what he's doing exactly that. His hands are so receptive, my body keeps melting.

Alexandra speaks now with a tone of even greater authority. Her voice is very close, so foreign yet strangely comforting, echoing in my mind. Her words wash over me like cool tingling waves rippling over my body, soothing my senses. Oddly, my mind becomes more awake and clear, as my body continues to relax deeper and deeper still.

How far can this go?

As far as you let it.

Hearing Papa just then, and remembering for the hundredth time that he seems to be *always* there when I call him, reassures me even more. I have no more energy to resist or fight...

"Now... I want to guide you somewhere very important. It will take some courage and a willingness to heal, which I know you have, even if you don't believe it just yet. Yet, before we set off, I need to ask you, would you allow me to be your guide?"

This seems like a formality, one I thought we had already gotten past. "Uh, sure." But the word sticks in my mouth.

Am I sure? What am I doing, really?

"This journey we are on together is all about trust and how yours has been broken. I realize now that we missed this step. Is there anything you can think of that I need to do or say to allow you to freely invest some trust in me?"

The word *trust* stands out as she speaks it, reverberating in my mind. "I don'..." But then an image comes to me. This is odd as I hardly ever visualize stuff.

"A rusty key." I mumble.

She chuckles.

I open my eyes to look at her. She's taking a necklace, which has been hidden behind her halter top, off and places it into my left hand. I feel the metal and the leather strap in my palm, holding it up to my eyes, I see a rusty antiquated key.

"That was a gift I received from someone very special and around my own learning to trust again. I want you to have it now, Bill."

I shake my head. "No. This is really too much." I don't know her or Owen. I'm filled with unease. *Is this some kind of trap?*

"Don't worry, you don't owe me anything in return." She reassures me. "Coming this far has been a gift to us already." Her eyes glisten and a confident half smile curls on her lips. "And it would make me very happy if you did hold on to it, for the time of this session, at least."

I don't know why, but this gesture means something important to me. Holding the key, my palm makes a firm grip and my eyes well up with tears. My stomach relaxes and I take a full inhale. Lying back down, I feel compelled to declare, "Ok, I'm super ready, now."

What a dumb thing to say.

I feel like a kid, getting excited about being on a trip. My eyes close again, but I feel fully awake and lucid, my legs and arms tingling with anticipation.

Alexandra is now asking me, in my mind's eye, to walk up to a door which leads to "The World of Trust".

My Heart Is A Muscle

She tells me that once we step in, we will explore, hoping to discover how my trust was broken and where I was wounded. Our goal will be to reclaim something invaluable and bring it back.

I see myself in a dark hallway leading up to a large door before me. It looks like a bank vault, thick impenetrable metal with many levers. I suspect that it was made to keep people out. Standing there, my feet begin to feel cold and wet. I see water rising up very quickly up to my ankles and now to my knees.

I try to pull the handle but it doesn't budge. The water passes my waist. I try the many levers, pulling and turning with all my strength. They all seem stuck, rusted from lack of use and maintenance, I suspect. Frustrated, I give up, starting to feel the water rising with a growing sense of panic.

"Stuck!" I exclaim.

This is so fucked! I can't even do this healing thing right!

The voice of Alexandra comes back into the foreground of my awareness.

"It makes sense that the door is stuck. It has not been used for a long time. But it is your door. You have everything you need. Look around you. Find a resource, something with you to unlock it."

I plunge my hand in the water and reach in my pockets.
Empty.

Then I notice the key she gave me is on the ground. *How careless of me? Losing it already!* I dive into the water.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Submerged, my hands grasp downwards but my legs are being pulled lifting me up, the feeling of being buoyed is not helping! I have to fight the feeling and swim harder to go downwards and get closer. I grasp the key, grabbing onto handles on the door, I look for the keyhole. But my vision gets hazy.

“Breathe!” Owen is massaging my jaw and cradling my head on the table. I hear his voice and feel my body grounded in the room. I inhale and find my awareness to shift back into the vision again.

I notice that standing before the metal door, it has holes and embossed symbols which mirror my body.

There is a hole within the image of a sun across my solar plexus. I try it, my key does not fit.

Then, one with veins leading to an anatomical outlay of the heart at the height of my chest. Again the key fails.

Fear, where are you?

I sense a tightening in my belly. I look down and see a spiral ending in a hole at about the height of my belly button. I place the key inside...

Suddenly, a vacuum force draws me forward toward the centre of a powerful whirlpool vortex. Water rushes past me, as I am sucked in through the open doorway.

And then the feeling of the sun, warm and peaceful. I see myself now sitting on the ground, in a field... I realize, when I look at my legs and hands, that I am a child, of maybe ten or twelve years of age.

My Heart Is A Muscle

When I look up, I see two adults. I can't see them exactly. Their faces stay in silhouette against the sun, but somehow I know that they are my parents. They lift me up and each one takes hold of one of my hands. As we walk, I am in the middle, skipping and laughing. A sense of ease and joy pervades the scene and a type of innocence fills me up.

My parents were many things, but joyful and lighthearted was not how I remember them, nor my childhood. I love holding their hands and want this idyllic moment to last forever.

My bliss is disturbed by a sharp poke from behind. I feel another boy's presence. He's younger, about kindergarten age, and I hear him giggling from behind us. He emerges briefly and I know right away that it's my brother Daren, the mischief maker.

Then, I hear a raven cawing loudly ahead, while flapping its wings in mid air, as if to warn us or call for help.

Suddenly, an orange blur on my right passes mom. It's a young teenage girl running past, with wild abandon but also on a mission. I know this is Becca right away.

"I'm coming to save you!" She calls, panting as she runs with a devilish grin, as if this is some sort of game. Quickly, she is ahead of us now and suddenly she drops out of view.

I try to break hold of my parents to see her. Their grip becomes tighter, their expressions more firm. I tune in to see my father's face, anguished with fear. Mother is angry and stern. She wraps both hands around my right wrist while dad kneels down and straddles my body with his large arms, as if expecting me to struggle. It's clear they won't let me go.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Meanwhile, Daren wanders ahead, "Becca? Becca! Where are you?" He's playful, but I see the raven diving down also out of view and sense something is wrong.

Tired of feeling helpless and trapped, I become more and more enraged, biting my dad's forearm and elbowing my mother's belly. A moment of shock and pain from them allows me to dart out and run forward.

I see Daren also disappearing ahead of us now. I run as fast as my legs will take me, desperate to get closer to the place where they vanished. Almost there, suddenly I step forward, my leg in mid air, failing to land on solid ground. My whole body drops. No more sunshine and peaceful fields.

Somehow -- must be by reflex -- I am dangling, grasping onto a tiny branch on the side of a bottomless hole below me. Gravity is pulling my weight, ripping my muscles, and testing my grip.

I am slipping. Dread and panic fill me as my legs and my extra hand flail, looking and failing to grab onto any other surface.

"It's ok to feel this..." I hear a voice.

Is the voice Alexandra or my sister? I can't tell.

**I am aware for a moment that I am in this
"visualization", yet it feels so gripping and real.**

Am I hallucinating?

Back into it.

I hear myself calling out, "Where did they go? Becca!
Daren?!"

My Heart Is A Muscle

"You are all alone and slipping. And it's all going to be ok."

It's her voice. My sister.

How can I hear her so clearly, so close, but not see her anywhere? Where is she?

I jolt for a moment as I feel Owen's hands leave my neck and shoulders. I gasp for air. Again realizing I've been holding my breath *and* that I am actually lying on a table in the large space of this strange round building... I suddenly feel his touch on my feet. That's grounding. I close my eyes again.

Back inside the vision, I feel a tight grip on my ankles, pulling me down. It's Daren holding on. How is this little boy so heavy. I crane my neck to see Becca holding on to his waist. The weight is too much...

My body seizes up.

I am falling, grasping the air. Now tumbling head over heels and flipping over. I see the light above getting smaller and the darkness all around. No more Daren or Becca. Everything is a rush as I plummet...

Alexandra's voice comes back, "Notice the air rushing past you... Notice your terror... thoughts and emotions ripping through you..."

Owen squeezes the soles of my feet, "BREATHE BILL, BREATHE!"

I gasp and start to breathe.

Owen coaches me now, "Good man. Now find your power. Push the air out... all of it... squeeze it all out like a flat ball. Hold it in the emptiness until you feel like breathing in..."

My Heart Is A Muscle

I know what to do. I am in control of nothing but this. I see myself falling, curled into a ball and feel the emptiness inside. The pressure to inhale grows.

“Then let the air come back in on its own... Your body knows how to breathe itself.”

My arms dart out as my chest and belly fill up.

I feel my fall is not slowing but my mind is not racing, nor afraid. Just hyper aware. Holy shit!

“Are you falling or flying Bill?” Alexandra asks.

I hear the echo of Becca and Daren laughing.

I begin to find a new sense of myself, like what I imagine it might feel like to jump out of a plane. At first, it was sheer terror and now it's like I've been falling for a long time, I have no wings, but I roll and tip side to side finding some way to influence *how* I flow with it.

“It feels alright, but I see the ground rushing to meet me...” I explain.

I brace myself, anticipating a hard collision. Eyes shutting.
Arms in front of me.

Nothing...

My Heart Is A Muscle

Still nothing.

My eyes reluctantly open.

I am dead still. Held in the air... my body is weightless.

Everything is white.

Alexandra's voice is asking me to describe it
all.

Though completely disoriented, I find the words
pouring out of my lips, "Saccharine... sweet... milky...
Swimming in a cloud of white..."

I find my feet dropping now so that I can walk on the surface
of this strange misty pool. There ahead of me is my mother, but it's not
her.

It can't be! It's her face and body, yet this woman is smiling so
sweetly and tenderly, beaming with a halo of great love.

I blink and there I am a few feet before her. She is quiet,
holding my gaze... "Come to me, Billy. Come to me."

*This can't be real. She's the opposite... NOT my mother,
but...*

I am teary eyed as a terrible longing to fall into her arms fills
me to the brim. My entire body is growing chubby and fat as I feel this. I
have always wished her to be this way: to be someone I could always tell
all my troubles to. I feel like a baby craving this embrace.

I'm aware that I have regressed and become a toddler, about
to step forward and reach for her warm bosom. But then, her eyes and

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nose twitch, just a little. I stop in my tracks, unsure. My legs become wobbly, arms limp. I hear a growl. Cold dread shoots up my spine. Suddenly, her skin and flesh are ripped open like a piece of cloth. A ravenous red wolf lunges from inside her entrails, its jaws open, leaping right at me.

I put my arms out to block, but the wolf dives lower, sinking its teeth into my belly.

Ugh. He is ripping out my guts. I see crimson blood and guts splashing everywhere!

"Aaarrghh!" I'm writhing with pain. A spasm. And terror.

Alexandra interjects, "It must be terrifying. But, you're doing great.. NOW, ready for the next choice?"

"Yes, yes now!" I call out.

This is all in my imagination, all inside my head. I tell myself to frantically soothe my terror.

But it all feels so visceral and real.

"I need HEEEELLLLPPPP!" I call out.

Alexandra's voice is close to my ear. "You can direct the flow of this movie. Use your mind to rewind..."

As if on cue, everything stops in time. The wolf's face dislodges and moves backwards in reverse time and then freezes hanging in the air, an arms length away. Its hind quarters are back now inside my "mother", who is suspended as a half ripped open costume of flesh.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I see in my left hand, a remote control, my thumb pressing down on pause now. My right palm touches my belly. It's warm and I look down to see it is whole.

Are those Owen's hands there now? I feel someone else holding me safe.

The word "Protection..." pops into my mind. I say it louder. "Protection!" I see a golden circle expanding out into a spiral forming what looks to be a shield. It grows larger and now surrounds me entirely. A force field.

Am I creating this?

I inhale deeply and feel my exhale shake and tremble the air in the space. I release the pause button and time starts again. I'm taken aback as the wolf, still vicious and leaping for my guts, hits the transparent golden force field. His nose stunned, he backs off momentarily. Shaking it off, he leaps again, and again. No matter how much determination or fierceness he musters, he is unable to penetrate my protective bubble. Snarling and frustrated.

Relieved, yet unsure, I look down again and this time find my guts are back to having been bloodied and ripped out of me. My hands are dripping with blood.

Meanwhile, the wolf is turned away, ripping and chewing the peeled carcass of my fake mother.

"How am I still alive?"

I wonder aloud, as my hands are desperately trying to hold the guts and blood all from flowing out.

My Heart Is A Muscle

It's Alexandra again, "You can feel this too, Bill. You are strong enough and brave enough and we are with you. Can you sense us there also?"

I look around and can't see them but I certainly sense their presence, somehow.

I nod.

Seeing my innards falling out, emptying my core, "*This is like a dream, yes. It's not real.*" I tell myself, but my guts are actually quivering with a real sense of dread and loss.

It sinks into a realization then. My work, my marriage, my life, every shred of certainty I thought I had to hold onto has all been ripped up. My guts have been shredded and torn out.

"Keep going, Bill. Reach in there..." I'm not sure what she means but I stay with the gruesome and unsettling imagery.

As I look down in apprehension and unease, my emptied belly is growing in size, into a cavern of flesh.

She asks me, "You still have the key?"

Reaching into my pocket, I grab it and pull it out. Holding it in my hand, the key has turned into a flashlight. As I shine the light in there I find myself losing balance, falling forward and doubling over.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Landing with a hard thud flat on my back, I find myself inside a large cave.

How strange... to fall into myself.

I shine the flashlight about. It looks like a real cave now more than what it was a moment ago – the inside of my gut. When I turn away from the darkness, back to the opening, it feels even hollower, emptier somehow. When I turn back to the darkness of the cave it moves, quivering and vibrating...

Alexandra chimes in, “You still with us? What’s happening?”

I describe the scene walking into the darkness. As I do, I notice something out of the periphery. Movement. But as soon as I flash the light, it scurries. And as my eyes adjust to the blackness ahead, I see something even more surprising. Tiny lights. I turn off my flashlight and behold a universe of luminescent stones marking the cave ceiling and walls.

As I stop and look around, I feel my mid section vibrating. I touch my own belly now, which is back to being intact and even relaxed, except for the vibration. When I turn away, it stops. As I face where the path of stones seem to be leading, the vibration increases and the walls begin to resonate in a way that sounds like human voices singing.

It's unnerving and soothing... hard to describe.

I try to talk about it to Alexandra.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Owen responds, "I 'm here with you, buddy." I feel his warm hands on my lower back, behind my belly.

As my eyes adjust and the cave grows naturally brighter, I continue walking forward until the sounds stop. I feel footsteps coming nearer and nearer, jolting in surprise as I see a boy appear before me. He's older than Daren was earlier, chubbier and yet very familiar. He reminds me of a childhood friend I had until I was 10. One who disappeared...

Suddenly, I get a shiver, "Owen... It's you, Owen."

Owen's voice answers, through the mouth of the boy on my left, "Yes. I'm here, Bill. Not going anywhere."

"No, I mean I knew you when we were kids. We used to play on Carlaw near the train tracks. You lived on Badgerow. My family and I were around the corner on Boston. Daren and Becca..."

There's a long silence. I feel the cave is vibrating. The boy looks at me, his eyes flickering with much emotion.

This is uncanny and surreal as the boy is speaking back to me with Owen's adult voice, "Bill. I had a funny feeling about you when we met. But, this is incredible. I'm beside myself."

"And you're here inside the cave beside me." I chuckle, wanting to open my eyes and see him but also drawn to see where this cave leads.

I'm dogged about finishing whatever I start. Hate leaving threads open.

Being here with Owen - the boy - beside me, we walk on. The cave becomes brighter and full of wonders, as we pass beautiful flowers which close when you approach them. Ferns which echo when you

My Heart Is A Muscle

speak. I'm reminding myself how incredible it is also that Owen, my childhood friend, is here, as my support on the outside and adventure buddy within, exclaiming and feeling awe with me.

Exploring each step, we see a place where the cave seems to end in a rounded space, where the multicoloured lights are brightest. As we approach the large cavern, I am bedazzled. Owen's jaw drops. The ground rises in a massive mound of bright shiny riches.

Stepping over gold coins, jeweled necklaces, and sparkling goblets, I grab a silver mask with intricate carving. Then, I notice a throne at the top made of intricate precious medals with many crowns tossed here and there, each one more resplendent in its wealth and craftsmanship. My eyes become feverish with wanting it all.

Suddenly I hear a painful groan and the spell of lust fades. We scan and notice an old man in chains, lying beside the throne. He is dressed as a beggar, in torn rags, all skin and bone, seeming to be close to death. I wish I had some water or food to give him. I reach for his hand and suddenly sense him as another person somehow familiar to me.

He lifts his head with great effort and with a faint expression he wheezes a few words, "You have one thing you can take. Choose wisely."

He falls back, eyes closed and still. Owen checks his pulse, confirming he is still alive.

Then, the scurrying sound which I heard earlier comes from behind us. We spin around to see a little green humanoid appearing from behind the throne. His body is that of a man sized bullfrog, yet standing upright and with sharp looking teeth. As he angrily pushes the throne over, we scamper backwards to avoid being crushed.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Owen drags the old man to a crevice on the side of the cave wall, while I chase the monster, to shoo him away. But he pays me no mind, leaping here and there, gobbling up whatever he can get his hands on. Everything he grabs, he swallows, growling feverishly and gradually growing larger and larger. Feeling out of control, I start to dread where this is going...

"STOP!" I scream it inside my mind but also in the room of the Healing Hut. Owen is by my side. I'm covered in sweat and leaning up off the table. I open my eyes momentarily. His hand is on my shoulder, I turn and see his expression of silent solidarity.

"You're so close, Bill." Alexandra is at my side, cheering me on.

"Close your eyes." The words come from within. "Let's finish this."

Back in the cave. Owen - the boy - is back at my side also, his body acting as a shield between me and the ravenous goblin who continues to devour everything in his way.

"Wouldn't leave you bro, I'm here to help." Hervoice echoes in the cave, and a young girl hops unafraid towards us. She is translucent, ghost-like, but with clear features and a glowing peach aura.

It's Becca, at the age I remember her most fondly, about 13. She comes to stand next to me putting her hand on my left shoulder. She leans over and whispers in my ear, "It's up to you now. You're the bridge..."

"I don't understand. What can I do?" I exclaim, helplessly.

My Heart Is A Muscle

"Close your eyes and listen..." She says as her other palm reaches over and rests on my chest. "You'll know..."

I feel torn. Seeing her up close. My eyes tear up. I feel so close to her. Wanting to get away from all this suffocating chaos and just talk to her. But, I obey, closing my eyes. I know I'm closing my eyes while in a vision, a dream within a dream, but it's disorienting nonetheless. All I see is darkness.

I hear more chaos and sense the cave trembling, like a small earthquake. I want to open my eyes and run, but I feel her stillness, standing with me while Owen reassures, "Do what you need to do. I'll watch over you."

An empty feeling and then a quiet stirring.

A growing vibration comes from my belly button, a type of singing which I experienced earlier.

Still in the dark, I keep my eyes closed betting this might not work if I open them again. I turn like a satellite dish looking for the strongest reception. There it fades. Turning the other way, it grows, a wave of tremulations and tones. I step forward and feel both of them walking with me.

"Watch your step..." Owen warns. I trip, refind my balance and continue.

Becca snickers. "Sorry, I couldn't help it!" She squeezes my shoulders, "Here, still at your side too, bro."

We walk several more steps and then stop.

"Open your eyes." My sister beckons me.

The vibrations have become full waves emanating from my core and flow up and down my body. One wave is cool and like a shiver, the other warm like fire.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I open my eyes.

There we are, at the edge of the cave with the old man, who is awake and shaking his head.

The goblin has grown to the size where he could swallow us all in one gulp. He looks drunk, bouncing off the cave walls. Stones are falling as the whole cavern seems more and more unstable.

I reach for the old man. Somehow he is the one I need to choose. I can feel it in my whole body. Becca nods in agreement.

"See you again soon!" She whispers in my ear and pulls back, blowing a kiss as she floats up and away into darkness, like a ghost.

I feel a sharp pang in my heart to see her go.

But, the cave is shaking and the goblin is rumbling more violently now. There's no time.

I turn and try to help the old man up.

"No, I will only hold you back." He waves me and Owen away feebly.

Alexandra's voice is heard. I forget that I have been describing the action to her throughout and that she is following us.

"Remember, time is your teacher, Bill. Look into his eyes, who is he?"

I crouch down and cradle his head, lifting it up to get a closer look. He's shrivelling before my eyes and the spark in his eyes seems about to go out.

My Heart Is A Muscle

"My dad..." My eyes lock onto his and for a moment I see someone else, "Me. Me too."

The ceiling starts crumbling down now. Owen looks worried and pulls us closer to the wall.

I reach under the thin arms of the old man to lift up his frail body, affirming, "I choose you."

He coughs back, "Save yourself. I don't deserve..."

"You're mine to tend." I shoot back with certainty.

Owen and I lift him up together. There's nowhere to go without the risk of getting crushed.

"Peekaboo!!" I hear the little boy again.

I can't help but smile to see Daren's little mischievous face appear from a hole within the rock wall. He reveals to us a tight crevice to duck into and we follow his lead down a narrow tunnel.

A massive crumbling sound behind us makes me assume the entire cave has collapsed in on itself.

The old man becomes lighter in my arms and smaller with every step.

We come into a well lit area and I behold that I am cradling a baby now, wide eyed and with a startled expression. I scan around and see that we are surrounded by blue skies and a lush green garden in full harvest. I feel my bare feet on moist grass.

The centre of my focus is the infant in my arms. He's smiling now and looking sleepy. Becca, Owen, Daren and even Alexandra who has appeared in this vision are all smiling and talking together.

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Everything seems to be right, except then my gaze is drawn to the crimson wolf who is only a few feet away, sitting tall and upright, facing us... his nose snarling.

"Come." I say to him. I don't know why, but I just know somehow that he is also mine to tend and I trust that he will not harm me or the baby. He walks over slowly and sits at my side. I pass the cooing child to Alexandra who looks surprised but in her element.

The wolf is licking my hand. I squat down and he starts to lick my face and neck, nuzzling into me with excitement. I fall over and roll back, laughing... He is a puppy now. I splay my arms in front and lunge for him playfully. He jumps in the air backwards, yelping with joy and then pouncing on me playfully.

Everything dissolves into light, as I lay, bathing in a deep sigh of relief and tremendous peace.

I open my eyes. The wood on the ceiling is what I notice first. Then the brilliant blue through the skylights. I can't believe how much I just lived through.

As I sit up, everything is so vivid and alive.

These two people before me, Alexandra and Owen are beaming. Even though I really just met them, I feel so close and grateful to them both.

My body is overjoyed, yet my head is shaking
"How did I...?"

"90% of it was you Bill. Ready to go where you needed to. The rest was a combination of hypnosis and healing touch and us being there with you."

I still don't fully grasp how vivid and real that experience was. I turn to Owen compelled by a deep remorse, "I'm sorry. I feel like I let you down..."

“How is that possible?”

“When we were kids. I remember you and your family disappearing. I didn't know or do anything to help...”

“That... was a long time ago. And, I kept my home life a secret for a reason. AND, this is a big one... we were just kids, for crying out loud.” He exclaims with great warmth and care in his face. “There was *nothing* you or I could have done to change it.”

Alexandra rubs his back with compassion and turns to me, “We've all been broken. It's part of growing up in this wild world.”

She pauses to look at me and I feel her soft gaze beaming deep care and wisdom toward me. “And, some of us,” she nods widening her eyes as if to include me, “are on a journey to heal ourselves and *also* to help others to heal.”

Owen slides over, squeezes my biceps, squaring my shoulders. “Another time, we'll catch up. But right now, how are *you*?”

I find it hard to explain, reaching for words to describe how I feel: so clear and light, tingly and alive all over. It's like my insides were a swamp that has just been cleaned up and now feel like a moving river of crystal clear water. I place my hands on my belly and feel it expand slowly with a deep inhale. A big sigh of relief comes. I cannot ever remember feeling so relaxed, so at ease, in my entire life.

“To be honest, you are quite exceptional, Bill. This session was very surprising. Given your first time... You showed so much courage and trust within yourself. And you went so far, much further than most people... *all* the way through in fact.”

“I surprised myself.” My arms go out and I share a dumbfounded expression.

The three of us huddle in delight and disbelief. "But seriously, what kept you there and moving forward? I'd like to understand." She presses.

"I guess I had to do it... for my brother and sister... and for my girls... and then noticing Owen and finally my dad. And maybe a little bit for myself also. I did not want to stay stuck in the fear, any more..."

"Bill, you have a deeply caring heart. I can see why you both were friends growing up." She muses looking at Owen and I.

I notice my phone vibrating, where I left it on top of the table nearby.

Owen exclaims, "I bet you have to go now... we went over time... a bit." He chuckles.

Alexandra smiles, "Good thing we left the day open."

"What time is it?"

"Almost noon."

"That was 4 hours long?" I exclaim.

Owen's eyebrows rise as he nods with an astonished expression.

I am amazed and suddenly even more grateful.

"How much do I owe you?"

Alexandra sips her tea and starts stretching on a mat next to us. "The fee you paid ahead of time for the initial consultation covers that. We made a decision to gift you the rest."

I feel a strong pull ~ not out of guilt or obligation ~ but a desire to give back, "But, I'd really like to settle...."

Owen comes closer and explains with some awkwardness, "We'd rather not. This way you are not an official client and you and I, we, can... get to know one another again."

Another wave of astonishment ripples through me.

They both really care.

The phone buzzes again. Not wanting to pick it up, yet, I notice my hand caressing the key as it's strap is still wrapped around my palm.

"Thank you for this... it helped." I look for a place to return it to Alexandra, who is in downward dog position.

She shifts into upward dog and smiles, flashing her bright teeth. "Oh no. Please *do* hold onto it. It may be a good reminder. That key is no longer mine. All I ask is when it has served it's time, you pass it on to someone else who can use it."

I inhale deeply and trust that she is right. "I will."

Owen notices my unease with all this generosity. "I am sorry if we are leaving you burdened today by a need to give back. Understandable. Anyone who needs your love and care today?"

I nod, thinking of dad and wondering about Jess and Jules.

I pick up my phone now. There are several calls from an unlisted number, which I recognize as coming from the hospital network.

Chapter 31

Floating Pieces

My ear is pressed close to my phone as I listen to a message from Monique, “Good day, Bill. We’ve trying to reach you. Some promising news! Please call me back to get details and instructions.”

What? Can it be?

I call her as I walk out onto the sidewalk, squinting as the bright sunlight hits my face.

Which way am I going?

I stop as she answers, “Good morning, Bill. Would you like the great news or the less than great news first?”

“Great news...”

“Your father woke up just a few hours ago. He’d like to see you of course, but here’s the not so good news... we are moving him across the street as we speak to do a thorough round of tests. Just to be sure everything is working tickety-boo. So, it’s advised not to fully celebrate just yet. Understand?”

“Yes.” My heart is leaping.

“But don’t worry, you can see him soon. How about tomorrow morning at 9:00am with Dr. Greenleaf briefing you both. Would that be acceptable to you?”

“Yes. I would love that.”

She texts me the details and I walk homeward, even lighter in my step. Buoyed by the news, I feel like I could fly.

Back at the house, I feel giddy.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I don't know quite what to do with myself. That sense of empty time feels less daunting and more exciting.

I go back to my office in the basement. The decision trees are up on the wall. Somehow, that's surprising to me.

Did I forget?

I realize that I have been trying to avoid making a decision about dad. I'd like to think that's because I am deliberate and thoughtful, wanting to choose the best path, but I see that much of it is due to actual avoidance. Of what? I guess it was a constant sense of dread and anxiety, which feels absent at the moment.

Should I pull down the one for dad?

No. Let's update it and see how it goes. The question is now about what comes next and how to best help him in his recovery.

What about Becca?

It's clearer now. She's trying to help. I'm not crazy. At least I don't think so.

And Jess and I?

I still don't know. Marriage is complex. Let's see where the next bend in the road takes us both...

No, that's a cop out. I do need more clarity.

So, what's been holding me back?

And why is she still pulling me in and pushing me away? Or has that been my pattern?

It's unsettling but I feel energy rising to want to talk to her and find out.

And my work at Golden Years?

Sigh.

I know I'll need to be brave. Either way, I can't allow things to stay the way they have become. I will choose to either stay and disrupt or I will leave.

My Heart Is A Muscle

A chill of anxiety runs down my spine as I consider that possibility. The fear does not stay in my belly however. It moves through me. Like a zap of electrical current going through a wire. I feel grounded and steady.

How do I make wise decisions when the stakes are so high?

I'm grateful that I have taken the fog out of all this, but deciding is still daunting.

Suddenly I feel exhausted.

Slept ok. Need to eat? Not hungry.

I'm surprised as I eat way more by this time, even when I'm not always feeling hungry.

Not sure what to do next. I remember Owen telling me to drink lots of water and rest today in order to...

“Integrate all the deep changes happening in your mind and body.”

I notice that I reek from b.o. also.

Usually, I take a quick hot shower. Don't feel like that either.

I draw up a bath instead.

Hot or cold?

I've been meaning to do the next level of the Wim Hof method, the cold bath immersion. Not today. Don't want to cook either. I put my hand in to make it room temperature and fill it up to the max that it can go before it would overflow with me in it.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I let myself sink into the tub. It's like I'm floating. A few full breaths and I exhale fully, holding still, letting my head sink also.

My eyes closing, first there is darkness. Then flashes of my life, but as soon as anything forms, I see it begin to defragment... breaking up into pieces like a mirror being shattered. All the shards floating and rearranging themselves...

It reminds me of the moments before falling into deep sleep, except I am lucid and fully awake. I notice my heartbeat slowing down and that I am still holding my breath underwater. Usually, I'd be proud of myself preening about how I had built up to being able to hold my breath for two minutes, but right now I just feel empty. Silent. At peace.

Now I see a mosaic forming. Can't make out exactly what the image is, but it's in the shape of a sphere in the centre of my awareness. Seeing it in my mind's eye is somehow extremely satisfying.

Everything is ok... It's all coming together...

As soon as I hear those thoughts, I turn and notice darkness all around me. Vastness of space.... The sphere, though still bright, seems so small in the blackness. Something seems to be slithering, like tentacles sucking onto the glowing sphere. A sense of recoil and grossness invades my good feelings.

Then, I hear the sound of laughter coming through the open window, of two distinct and familiar voices talking outside.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Jess?

My heart quickens, pounding harder, its sound echoing in the water. I feel the internal pressure coming from low oxygen. I want to stay here in this floating space to understand what it all means but, I can't.

Gasping for air, my torso swings upwards,
gasping for air!

Alive.

Awake.

Confused and curious.

Chapter 32

What Do I Do With You?

Drying myself, I throw on some comfort clothes and crane my neck to the window. There in our garden I see Jess wiping some tears. An older man is handing her his handkerchief.

Of course, who else would it be!

I see Robert leaning in close and consoling her. Looks like he's saying something to which she nods and then bursts into a cackle of laughter. He smiles in a sympathetic way.

They're sitting on a bench, made of cedar wood and wrought iron, which I restored. It only seats two. I built it for her. For us.

I can't help feeling weird spying on them.

What's going on between them?

Not sure how this hits me. Confused. I could be angry, jealous... I don't know what to feel. Feel a bit like an insecure teenager. I dare myself to come out and meet them.

I hesitantly open the screen door.

Jess flashes me an expression that holds a mixture of emotions I cannot make sense of.

Robert nods, giving her a squeeze and then getting up with arms open towards me.

"Don't need to get up on my account." I say to Robert, partly to be gracious.

He laughs, "What! You think my joints are too old to hug a new friend?!"

He takes my hand and pulls me towards him into a full body hug. I would normally resist or get a bit tense with a man trying to get so affectionate. I'd pat him on the back to let him know 'that's enough thank you'. But, I feel my body softening and drinking in his warmth and care.

"Good to see you... both." I say, smiling and really feeling it. At least wanting to feel it more with Jess.

"I heard about your father." He turns to Jess smiling, "Seems death has been sent packing... for now. What a gift!"

Then, his eyes widen and his head cocks, "And tomorrow's the big day..."

Taken aback by his remembering my situation and giving me so much caring attention, "I haven't been thinking about it much..." I confess. I have been feeling the clock ticking, but trying to put it out of my mind. That is, until I saw the decision planning board again recently.

"Too much thinking gets me in trouble too, sometimes." He chuckles.

Jess pats the empty space on the bench next to her, beckoning me to sit.

"What's up?" I say as I sit down and join her.

Robert motions to us both, "Shall I leave you two love birds or...?"

"No please stay a bit longer." Jess entreats.

I'm a bit relieved to hear her say that. A few days ago I wanted to punch him and now I'm glad he's offering a buffer, helping to diffuse tension between us.

"Well then. I will speak frankly because I know no other way to speak these days." He smiles warmly and crouches down into a squat position in front of us. "Like any two people who love one another and have woven their lives together, you've reached a point

where there is something between you, keeping you both at a distance.”

Gulp. I appreciate him naming the elephant alive and well in our marriage but I also feel a pressure building inside. Jess takes my hand and holds it tight. I turn briefly to see her solemn expression.

Is she going to pull the plug? Even after all the sparks we started to re-ignite?

Turning back to Robert, hoping like hell he has some guidance to help release some of this growing tension.

“I know you both want to be together, and it takes courage to traverse the strange new terrain you find yourself navigating. I know one way to do so. Are you open to it?”

We both nod, our attention rapt by his words and his presence before us.

“Here’s the simple invitation. The experiment is to look into each other’s eyes. And to do your best to not flinch, nor to turn away *until* you each name all that is between you...”

He takes a deep inhale. “You game?”

We both nod at the same time.

“Courageous hearts. Who will dare to go first?”

“I will.” Better to leap in then let myself get filled up with fear slowly.

Jess’s eyebrows shoot up. I feel encouraged also by my unexpected response. Turning to meet her eyes and lock onto them, I feel immediately a tidal wave of emotions rushing through my face. My eyes well up with tears and my chin and jaw start quivering. Out of control, I’m blabbering...

“I don’t want to lose you!”

She takes both my hands now in hers. Her face softens and she looks like she wants to speak, but instead she nods that she hears me.

I convulse with more tears, writhing in the agony of it all coming out between us with Robert watching, but also revelling in the relief of it all pouring out. Finally.

He puts his hand on my knee, "There's a lot of grief in there. We see you. Only the bravest men allow themselves to do what you're doing right now. Let it all come out, Bill. Everything else that may be there."

The tears begin to subside. And suddenly, I look around self consciously, wishing I had a tissue.

"Fuck the neighbors. This is your time to grieve." I hear him say, giving me permission as he hands me a clean handkerchief from his pocket.

He must be prepared for this with what he does...

The pain of dreading the loss of her comes in waves and then subsides again. It feels like eternity, but likely a minute or two. I pull myself together, sucking in oxygen and blowing out snot into Robert's handkerchief.

"Keep going," He encourages me, "Tell her why you would lose her."

I look back at Jess, wanting to turn away to look down. But I force myself to face her. The gross feeling I began to feel in the tub starts to fill my sinuses, my nose, my mouth. My core feels full of bile. I want to wretch.

"I don't know. I guess I feel inadequate. Not enough... for you."

Again, his strong and deep voice encourages me further, "And when you feel this shame seep in, what do you do to sabotage your loving connection, Bill?"

I feel a desire to vomit, my head swimming with nausea. His words remind me that this sickening feeling is really coming from the emotion of shame that has been trapped inside me, not a physical reaction.

"I hide... in my work... trying to be a good husband. Good man..."

“But you hide these other parts of you...”

“Yes. I feel ashamed and unworthy and I know that I’ve been pushing you away for years...”

More tears come. The grief rolled up with regret like a massive wave spinning me into turmoil. I fall in to curl forward into her lap, but she catches my face in her palms and pulls me up.

I feel her strength. Her core. All the pilates and yoga she does. A small smile curls on my lips at the thought.

She cradles my face and I see her so clearly now, a pillar of care and righteousness, the nurse and the mama bear, the fiery and generous woman I fell in love with years ago, holding me up and staring me down.

“That is fucking bullshit.” She begins, “You hear me? I know you *feel* this way. I get it. I’ve felt it too at times. But I *know* in my heart and in every cell of my body that I want you. I want you broken *and* whole. I want you imperfectly loving me and our girl as you have *finally* started to do *this* week. And I sooo fucking love you. I’m not going away, so you need to do something with this not good enough bullshit inside you. You hear me?”

My body starts shaking. What seems at first like more grief emerges as laughter roiling through me. More tears burst out but they’re ones of joy and release. “I fucking love you too,” I reply.

She shakes me playfully, “I fucking love *you*, my beautiful son of a bitch.”

It feels like my bell has been rung. I am awake and at her attention.

She continues staring deep into my eyes, intensely, “It’s your mother... She was who you got a lot of this from.”

I wipe more snot. “I know. And I know you are her antidote. My medicine.” I see her mixed reactions to that, so I clarify, “And I know that I need to save

myself and keep healing this. That's mine to own. Thank you for being my partner."

"Yes." She takes a deep sigh, "I got my shit to bring in too, Billy."

We squeeze palms and Robert then suggests we breathe together for ten breaths.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see him observing us, his presence like a bear, relaxed, massive and powerful, not needing to say anything.

"Are you ready to hear me?" Jess entreats.

I nod, wiping my tears, shaking myself off and letting all the emotion settle within me. "Yeah, bring it on."

"Oh, I've wanted to blame you for this and I guess I have this feeling that I've lost myself. In my work, in being a mother, your wife... But this resentment. That's it, resentment..." Her nostrils flaring, "Seems so petty and unfair to throw on you anymore. Especially now as I feel it unravelling. It's a deep disappointment and grief that I have let years... years go by and *not* done what I really wanted to do..."

I'm dying to know, "Honey, what *is it* you want?"

Her eyes narrow for a moment, as if I am supposed to know the answer, and then she inhales and sighs, "I'm sick of the hospital and the ways we live in routines, putting our lives into stupid fucking boxes. I don't know exactly... "

She screams, projecting her voice up and all around. There's something so relieving, to feel her voice released in broad daylight on a workday in our own garden with whomever else might hear us, clearing the air. "I want to be fucking wild and live our lives more in this way... To be more creative! To set our own schedules and follow our own rhythms."

"I hear you." I say it and it kinda terrifies me to imagine what that may mean, and yet I know it's what she needs to be happy. Maybe it's what we all need.

My Heart Is A Muscle

“Do you?” She shoots back, “Are you really up to what that might mean? Being with a wild and crazy woman who will not tolerate your bullshit and will demand you bear your soul with me every new and beautiful day?”

I nod vigorously but that does not seem to be enough confirmation. “Yes, my fucking god, yes! I don’t know how and... it makes me want to shit myself a bit, but hell yeah!” I squeeze her palms, “I want to be with you feeling this way and for us to make that part of who we are...”

She hooks my neck and her other hand pulls me towards her as I wrap both arms around her frame. We lock into a deep embrace.

“Don’t mind me.” Robert is looking up, seeming to be basking in the sun.

A long moment later, I feel his palms on our shoulders, “I bless you both for being so brave. Allowing your hearts to lead you back to yourselves. It’s a beautiful unfolding to behold. Thank you for allowing me to witness it.”

“I don’t know where we’d be without you.” I turn to say as Jess and I stay in our embrace, the sides of our heads pressed together.

“I don’t either. Your lives have enriched mine in ways you can’t imagine yet.” He gets up slowly. “Well, you both know where to find me. Until we meet again.”

Like that, he’s gone.

We stay on that bench, listening to the birds and the wind swaying the walnut and maple trees adjoining our backyard, feeling the warm sun on our faces, and the clouds passing overhead.

There’s a timelessness I have not felt for a long time.

We drink it in together.

Chapter 33

Free to Choose

Jess leads me back to the house and we fall asleep, spooning one another.

I wake up and she's gone.

It's 5pm.

Sitting up, I feel drunk from sleep.

I see my phone has been active again, but I ignore it.

Walking into the living room, I find Jules and Jess are playing ukulele together, strumming and guffawing.

"Whatcha doing?"

"Making up songs. Wanna join us?"

"Uh. You both know that I suck at playing... but I love to hear you laugh and... Please keep playing..."

I feel my belly rumbling, "I'm starving. Will rustle up some grub!" I stumble off to the kitchen, noting how odd it is to hear myself talking like a human bear.

Jess calls out to me, something I barely register, "Hey Daren has been trying to reach you... I didn't want to wake you."

I shrug it off and start pillaging the cupboards for snacks. There are none. Seriously.

I start cooking pasta. I pluck some ripe tomatoes and some herbs from the garden: parsley, oregano, chives, tarragon and lemon thyme. Chopping it up, I try to stay alert and *not* slice my fingers off ~

it's happened before. I sautee some garlic slices in olive oil, and throw it all in. Fuck, I'm so hungry I could eat my hand or bite into the metal pot.

What about protein!?

I rummage in the freezer. All we have left is frozen shrimp. I let them melt in a pot with lukewarm water, enjoying the warm current splashing on my hands. I wash more dishes. Then, I make myself some coffee ~ a rare treat ~ Turkish style with maple syrup.

A few minutes later, we're at the table.

"Mmmm. The shrimp is sooo good!"

"Thanks, Jules."

"I love it when you cook for us." Jess squeezes my shoulder. Feels so good, as I've been craving her touch. "It's been a long while."

I hear her words and they sting ~ *Are you saying I haven't been doing enough?* ~ but when I look up and see her face full of warmth and gratitude, I shake that off, smiling to myself.

Good catch. That's just the shame talking.

More mouthfuls, I savour the flavours from our garden and rub my belly, feeling satiated. I am finally starting to feel awake and more myself.

My phone dings far away in the house somewhere. Jess gets up and asks us if we want a refill of our drinks. A minute later, she comes back, "He's really trying to reach you... Urgent?"

"What? Who?" I stutter.

She turns to show me her lovely butt, with the phone wedged in her back pocket, winking at me.

I snicker, pulling it out.

Jules rolls her eyes at our play.

Sure enough, Daren sent 7 text messages.

My Heart Is A Muscle

So fucking glad
dad is ok.

Me too.

Have more news
about Becca?

Not sure what to share.

How's the watch?

*I realize that I haven't touched it since
Tuesday. The box is sitting on my bedside.*

You coming to the men's
group tonight at 7pm?
I can pick you up.

Ugh. I said I was interested. Sigh.

Whatcha eating for
dinner? Smells good.

FYI, I'm outside...
In the hammock out back.
No need to invite me in.

I shake my head. I can't believe it. All of it. He's
so ADHD.

"I haven't seen him in years and this is the
second time this week he's over." I exclaim.

"What! Uncle Daren's... here?" Jules shoots up.

“He’s commandeered your hammock, missy!”

Jules darts up to pursue, but Jess places a hand on her forearm, “Hey, can you ask him if he wants to join us?”

Jules nods and runs off.

I sigh and muse, “I don’t know. This whole week has been a...”

“...Whirlwind?” Jess finishes my sentence.

“Yeah, something like that. I can’t believe how much has happened....”

“Good things?” She scoots down next to me.

“Yes, some of the best,” I smile at her and squeeze her outstretched palm. “But, I don’t know about this... men’s group?”

“I think you’d... “ She starts and pauses.

I flash a suspicious look, “You know something about it?”

“Not exactly, but I’ve been part of a group of witches and...” She looks at me, with a curl of her lip, as if daring to see what I say to that last part.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. I’ve always been a wild woman... just owning it now. You have not been paying much attention, have you?”

Laughter bubbles up so quickly I snort water out of a nostril.

I wipe myself and stare at her, checking to see if she’s still recognizable to me. “I guess I was bedazzled by you years ago and now the spell has finally been broken so I see more clearly what I have gotten myself into.”

She’s so still and strong and her eyes so vibrant. There’s a magnetic pull towards her which I have not felt in a long time. I want to follow her around.

“So, you gonna go?” She confronts me.

“I dunno. It’s been an epically looong day.”

“Yeah, it’s hard not working, taking baths and three hour naps, I get it!”

I scrunch my face in mock anger and needle her under the arm to get a tickle. She squeals, like she did in rare moments of play when we were in our first years together.

“Seriously, sttttccccppp!” She puts her palm out with a stern expression, “I want to ask you...”

I pause.

“Do you remember what you told me earlier, about feeling not enough and all that? Do you think this group might help you with that?”

“I don’t know.” My face flushes with heat.

“Reason I ask,” She tilts her head, “Is Daren and I talk and you know he told me that this group tonight is especially about that, I think... that’s what he told me.” Her eyebrows shoot up as she puckers her lips. “Not saying you *should* go or that you have to prove anything, but just maybe it might be helpful...”

I suck in a lot of air and sigh, “You, you’re incredibly skilled at getting me to say ‘yes’ sometimes, you know that?!”

I can see her restraining great delight to show me a subtle smile. “I have my ways, yes, but really, it’s your choice, darling. Jules and I have bath time and a show we watch on Thursdays. All about princesses and rainbows. We know you’d *love* to join us...” She cocks one eyebrow even higher.

I wish I could do that facial trick.

“So, what’re you going to do?”

I tap the table, “I think... it’s better sometimes not to overthink it.”

Chapter 34

Not Your Daddy's Men's Group

On the brisk walk from his parked car, Daren is unlike his usual self, single mindedly focused, walking ahead of me.

“Come on, bro. We do NOT want to be late.”

The sun is setting and I'm suddenly dragging my feet, feeling sheepish and not sure why. “Why not? What could happen? Is there anything you haven't told me?”

“I thought you trusted me?” He shoots back over his shoulder.

I grimace and shrug, feeling the cool night air slowly waking me up even more. “What is this group about, again?”

“It's like a Mastermind, you know, but for relationships...”

I stop in my tracks. “You mean like therapy?”

“No.” He chuckles. “There's no shrink asking stupid questions about the past.” He stops and looks back at me, “But we do have a box of tissues, because you know, us men do have feelings.”

Something in his eyes, the tenderness gets me walking again, I follow along, trying to be playful with my own trepidation, “Well, I was imagining men sitting around bitching about their wives and giving each other advice.”

“Fuck that. This ain't that kind of men's group. Sounds like something dad would join and hide from us.”

I smile good naturedly but I suddenly want to turn and walk in the opposite direction. My legs keep carrying me forward, meanwhile in my core, I sense a hollow emptiness and dread.

“Is that the tagline – ‘Not your daddy’s men’s group’?”

“That’s right.” He ups his pace. I give in and speed up to not fall behind.

“Almost there.” We cross the street, stopping in front of a dark warehouse type building. “It’s up there.”

He pauses, dramatically, “You know Jerry Bryson?”

I shake my head.

“He’s a famous musician and comedian.”

“Oh yeah.”

“And Carlin Holt.”

I shake my head again.

“The tech guru?”

It dawns on me that I’ve heard of both men in the media. I start to feel even more uneasy.

“Yeah. He’s just a guy, like us. They’ll both be here tonight.”

I suddenly feel self-conscious. *How do I fit in with such company?*

“Are you trying to reassure me, impress me or intimidate me?”

He shakes his head to dismiss my implication. “None of the above, brother. I just wanted you to know.” He opens the door and starts climbing up a steep staircase. “And there are some less well known but equally extraordinary men.”

My Heart Is A Muscle

We get to a solid iron door with a carved lotus flower. "It's through here." I step forward but he puts his palm on my chest to stop me. "Listen, I would not have invited you if I didn't think you'd fit right in. Do you trust me that I have your best interest in mind?"

He waits for a response. I nod as I take a deep inhale.

He opens the door and we both step inside.

It's a wide open room with tall glass windows, brick walls and aged wooden floors, like a fancy yoga studio.

There are 7 or 8 men in clusters greeting one another. Nobody looks dressed up or intimidating, quite the opposite. There's a casual vibe. I also notice it's warm in here.

But I still have my back up, feeling nervous, shy even. This isn't a business thing. I've spent years learning how to put on a mask to network and shmooze. This vibe is more relaxed but I don't know where I fit in.

A tall bald man with a warm smile approaches me and Daren. They hug. He turns to me, "I'm Michael, the one leading tonight. You must be Bill."

I nod. "Don't worry, Bill. Daren *has* mentioned you but everything we share here is kept in strict confidence. We only share our *own* experiences."

Daren nods in agreement and pats me on the back. "It means a lot to me for you to show up tonight, bro."

A sense of foreboding returns. Could be him calling me bro and that he always has something up his sleeve.

Michael tries to reassure me, "We don't tell stories about other people. Keeps us honest and whole. Everything we do share, it all stays in the vault of trust between us. By the way, I need to ask if *you* are also willing to agree to that code?"

“Sure. Yes.” I didn’t think about it and now I’m hyper aware. Reassured but also more unsettled.

*What has he told them about his own experience?
What do they talk about here?*

Other men come over to say hello. I’m already aware of how I will likely *not* remember any of their names. They’re friendly though. None of them make mention of what they do or how important they are.

It’s oddly refreshing.

I notice a younger red haired man with tattoos all over his arms and neck. He’s jumpy and eager, stretching on the side. Men go up to greet him also. Must be another newbie.

“Welcome new men visiting us tonight, Bill and Cedric!” Michael’s voice is deep and fills the room. “Whatever any of us are coming in with is welcome here.”

I’m not sure I grasp what he means. The words seem pleasant, but the meaning is vague.

“Let’s begin by moving in a way that feels fucking good, shall we?”

Everyone begins stretching.

I feel strange and self-conscious. I expected I would but...

Are we going to wrestle? Am I dressed alright?

“Why do we do this, you may be wondering?” Michael looks at me.

Obviously I look out of place, right?

Another man answers, “To be in my body allows me to be fully here.”

Nobody seems to be noticing me. It feels hard to resist, and I find myself tilting my neck and rolling my shoulders, getting into it.

My Heart Is A Muscle

“Because this is about finding my own truth, my own freedom and connecting more deeply to myself *and* to one other.” A short black man with designer glasses adds, “How can I even begin to do so if I am *not* in my body?”

Next, we are asked to volunteer and lead our “own way of warming up”.

I swallow some saliva, but offer up, “I feel like rolling my neck and stretching my shoulders..”

Everyone follows me. Men sigh and groan. It feels even better to do it again and all together.

The next man encourages us to bounce and jump higher. I follow and start to wake up feeling more limber and alive.

“Feel free to mirror one another or go back to your own way as needed.” Michael intones.

Shit, I have gas.

Trying to hold my butt cheeks tight as I stop to go back to stretching my shoulders. It escapes with a squeak. My face turns flush with heat.

“It’s all part of bodily functions,” a man next to me chimes in as he bounces and farts also. Another man releases a loud burp.

Somebody cracks a joke, “Farooz, you serving beans today?”

I scan around and notice Farooz, the master chef from the incredible feast at Un-Believe-A-Bowl. He shoots me a look and smile of acknowledgement, while shrugging playfully.

Another man opens the window.

Seems to be normal and amusing.

“Are we warmed up?” Michael asks.

Men nod and affirm.

Michael asks us to go around and “Express any part of you that wants to represent you...”

My Heart Is A Muscle

I'm confused. He notices and adds, "Show us your *mask*. AND then if you dare, whatever may be hiding behind it."

Before I can consider it, Daren steps forward into the space within our circle, "I'm nervous with my bro here... I don't usually feel like wearing masks with any of you -- any more -- but with you here, Bill, I feel like bringing back this slick devil.. "

He puts his palms over his face. A moment later, he drops them to show a smiling confident head bobbing caricature.

I snicker, knowing this part of Daren. As a teen he sold drugs and stolen goods. That's his cocky, confident pose.

"Trust me. I've got you." He says pointing and clicking his tongue.

I notice now that we are encouraged to mirror his expression, like we mirrored the stretching. It feels foreign to me. As I do so, I feel strangely self-conscious, yet also a sense of relief ripples through me as I get into his skin more.

I then see Daren's face become sober and clear, "And here's my real face tonight. Nervous, vulnerable... how will I be seen by you?"

As he says *you*, his eyes land on me, before flashing away.

I feel something for my brother. Something new. Not sure what to do with this feeling. We mirror him again. I look around and see the men really seem tuned in to one another. Cedric is into it too. Me, I'm in and out, finding this group mirroring exercise both grounding and yet disconcerting.

"Thanks, Daren. Who's next?"

A tall curly haired older man steps forward.

"Bill and Cedric, welcome. I'm Jerry. Been here a while and want to project tonight..." His face changes, "A peaceful and self-contained buddha-like nature." We mirror him too.

My Heart Is A Muscle

His face drops the expression. "That's actually a part of me, you know. Not fake, but boy do I have a few *other* faces to show you boys tonight!"

He laughs and then shares a mixed expression of deep frustration and then tearful sorrow giving us context, "Some '*Are you fucking kidding me?*' energy and some grief also."

We mirror the dumbfounded anger which then turns to resignation and loss.

Going through the motions at first, I see everyone is in it and the feelings start to grip me.

"Don't let it flood you, Bill. Stay in control."

Who's voice is that? I wonder.

Shame.

Thank you, Papa.

Jerry wipes his eyes, "Thank *you* for sharing in my journey tonight."

We go around with more men sharing. I'm aghast and blown away each time. Another man shares fear.

Michael, the leader, expresses intense rage, with movements of vigorous shadow boxing.

The new guy, Cedric, shows us his bravado and then confusion and despair.

So much emotion. A work out to go through it with them. I'm surprised that I can handle it all.

And soon enough, the spotlight comes to me.

Ugh.

A screw seems to come loose as I become, unlike my usual self - again this week - a blubbering idiot, "I uh can relate to every single one of you... Wear so many masks I can't keep track of and so much stuff going on inside..."

I suddenly notice all the men are looking at me, at once. It's a stunning feeling. Their eyes clear, faces still. My body freezes and my face feels numb, but my mouth keeps speaking, "I know I have all this emotion, I think it's shame inside but I... uh, can't seem to feel it or show it."

"What's it like to have so much trying to get out? From here, it looks like a tight corset." The black man whose name I don't recall asks me, then adding, "I'm Carlin by the way."

"Fucking hell. It feels like I'm a fucking robot sometimes!" I exclaim.

Many of the men nod, as if they get it.

Cedric mimes being a robot, doing a hip hop dance. I can't help but chuckle.

Then tears come. I wipe my face with my shirt, quick to suck it back in.

"You can also choose to let it flow." Michael encourages.

"Or try to keep it in and contain it, I get that too." Carlin adds.

Daren turns to me softly, "Thanks for showing us what's real, bro."

I nod and flap my arms, "I'm good. Please, let's move on." Wanting to shift the spotlight away from staying on me.

"Absolutely! Thanks for asking for what you need. There's no pressure here to go where we don't want to go. *And*, your shame is welcome here too."

His words send a shiver through me, making me even more vulnerable and yet, somehow also leaving me more grounded and present.

I'm relieved to have the attention shift. The next few minutes men continue to share in the group, while everyone else continues to listen, some stretching, some sitting.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I am settled comfortably on a cushion with back support. My mind begins floating above my body. This is a familiar feeling, one I know from high school. My friends always called me *'space cadet'* or *'dreamer'*.

I am now seeing myself sitting there observing the meeting below, as my conscious attention continues floating up and turning left to leave the room. I see the scene outside the building now. This experience of being out of my body is so familiar and yet at this moment so oddly vivid and compelling to me. There is such a strong pull to see what's out there, I can hardly resist.

Meanwhile my body and a part of me is clearly still in the circle, listening and nodding along with other men, only their voices are muted. Somehow, I'm dividing my attention, a part of me still in the men's group, and yet my main attention outside...

I see that I am in the alleyway behind the warehouse building. And it's just starting to rain. I can feel the drops on my skin, going down my neck and back... aaahhh, the tingling. I smell both the freshness of the night air and the smog of our city. I hear the patter on the rooftops around us.

Then a flash. I see the woman in the red dress. I recognize her as Becca, right away. She smiles at me and spins away, dancing through the alley ahead of me. I follow her.

"Becca!"

She leads me to a park.

Suddenly, her cool wet hands come from behind and over my face, covering my eyes.

"I thought you were... gone."

"There's more big brother." She whispers close.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Her hands drop as she now stands in front of me.

I feel a sinking feeling in my core, as if a lead weight was thrown into there.

"I'm sorry."

The words just blurt out of me. I'm not sure why.

She smiles her crooked and wry smile. "You don't need to be, Billy boy."

I look down.

"It wasn't you or anyone else's fault. I chose my path."

I feel her words vibrate into my chest and my core.

"What do you need, sis?"

Her face reveals the complexity of shifting impressions - compassion and mischief, daring and peace.

A sense of déjà vu suddenly pulls my attention to whip around. I see that I have been here before.

This same park. Earlier this week... and maybe even long ago?

The sky cracks with thunder. A flash of lighting brings me back to face her.

"Shhhh." She puts a finger to my mouth. "Just listen. You are here to help them heal."

"Who?" I ask.

She smiles and...

Chapter 35

The Great Unshaming

“Bill?”

Daren is sitting next to me, his hand squeezing my shoulder firmly.

She’s gone. The park is gone. I am fully here, back in the room.

Aiiieeee. “My legs have fallen asleep.”

It’s all pins and needles.

I scan around and see that everyone is on a break, drinking and chatting. Daren helps me to stand up and get my blood flowing again.

“Where’d you go, buddy?”

“I just saw her again.”

Daren is silent.

He looks at me eye to eye, his face pale, “What’d she say?”

“She had... ugh... a message that I don’t understand...”

Farooz, who is standing nearby, turns to face us both. “Hello my friend. Good to see you again, Bill. I’m sorry if I dropped my ears in. I overheard and I sense something. May I share?”

His voice is so tender and deep, while his eyes look sad and clear. I look at Daren who nods. I nod also, though unsure about including him in our very intimate and private family matter.

"I felt sitting next to you a certain vibration. A calling. And something else. A sense of a great dark shell... like hardened lava rock encrusting someone's soul. Maybe more than one person. But there are cracks in it. Steam. Pressure... building up for a long time and now it is ready to burst, leaking light and the water of life..."

He stops talking and looks at us, "Not sure what that means." He adds, shrugging. Extending his arms out to his sides with palms facing upwards, as if in offering, he bows to us, "May it be helpful to you."

Daren seems to get it. I'm not sure what this vision means or what it has to do with anything.

Michael calls us back.

Farooz shoots a sympathetic smile while shrugging again, sitting back down.

I notice that Daren has had his hand on my back. He sits on my left.

I feel a strange sense that something is about to happen.

Michael is banging a drum. Other men start playing percussive instruments. Some are holding a shaker. One playing a flute.

"It's time!"

I feel swept up. Almost overwhelmed by the rising intensity of the soundscape, which climaxes and then falls into sudden silence.

"It's time... for tonight's chosen process, The Great Unshaming!" Michael scans the circle making eye contact with each man. Coming to me, I try to hold his gaze, not wanting to show any fear or doubt, but honestly - I am petrified.

What the hell does he mean by "unshaming"?

"For the sake of our ancestors who bled for us and our descendents who will carry on our struggles... With the intention to confront, wrestle with and release a certain shadowy beast named Shame... We

invite *one* man to step forward who feels called... to explore something too hard to face alone. Something you'd rather hide, but right now you feel brave enough and ready..."

Daren stands up and steps forward, breaking out of the outer circle and into the center, again. Everyone stands up also.

"I'm ready." He declares.

"Who do you choose to guide you tonight?" Michael asks.

"Jerry... and Carlin. Would you both be willing? This feels like a big one."

"I'd be honoured to track you." Jerry replies.

"Me. I'll be your guide, from the side, yeah?" Carlin nods and seems to have some agreement with my brother.

Jerry comes right up to and locks eyes with Daren, putting his hands on his shoulders. "What's coming up for you, young fella?"

Michael interjects, "Before this goes any further, I'd like someone to frame it for our guests."

Carlin puts his hand out, "I'll take a stab at it..." He starts pacing around addressing the room like a presenter on stage might do, "There is an ancient practice of making sense of a man's shame. A way of shedding his skin to see who he really is, behind all the illusions and masks. It's a type of process and ritual like that of stepping into a fire. A fire that is meant to burn away what is false, to cook our insides and leave us more bare, more true. This man is bringing the sacrifice. And we are all here as his fire keepers."

His eyes become wide as he turns to us spinning around.

"We need two circles to keep this fire safe enough and strong enough and hot enough. The large circle is made up of *all* of us here to bear witness, to be at the edge of this fire, to become the stones that hold the heat and the boundaries."

A long pause of silence follows, dramatic effect, but also making us aware of ourselves.

“Now,” He places his palms out, “Anyone who wishes to, you *may* always *step back* if you find the fire too hot. *But*, we ask that you don’t turn away or leave until it’s over. Do we all agree?”

“Yes.” I find myself saying so, along with the other men. My gaze is locked on my brother.

I’m here for you.

Carlin continues, “The second layer... which we shall call the “inner circle” will be a handful of us who are able and willing to get burned as we step *into* the fire with this brave man.” He nods to Daren, “You will need to be brave for this part. If you feel moved to do so, I will ask you to step forward, when the time is ripe. Not yet.”

I stay put, but have a sense that I am already feeling called and at the ready. I also sense unease, as I look at Daren, already in tears, whispering to the older man, Jerry. Whatever it might mean, I know I need to find the courage to help him somehow.

Another part of me is here thinking this is all so strange that I have not seen or wanted to see my brother for years, and yet, in the last three days, I have spent so much time and gotten so close to him. My head is spinning.

“So, what’s going on? Where are you?” Jerry asks loud enough for us to hear.

Daren flails about, as he lowers his head, as if trying to shake something off.

Is he ok? I’ve never seen him like this.

“Fucking hell! I hate this! I’m suffocating... from...” He covers his mouth.

“Stay with me.” Jerry holds him firmly, his palms on either side of Daren’s head, cradling him with a tender yet probing look. “Who is it you see? Who did you hurt so much you can’t forgive yourself?”

Daren freezes suddenly and his eyes go wide. "My sister."

Carlin circles around the two men, hands behind his back, pacing like a curious detective, "What's her name? What's she like?"

"Becca. She *was...* brave and proud. Smart and caring. And truly free and wild."

I hear how he describes her. A smile curls on both our faces. Then, my chest aches. I may see her in these visions and sometimes she talks to me, but I will never get to see her and feel her in the flesh, again. The pain of losing her and the longing makes my joints weak.

Carlin then turns about and asks the men standing near, "Who will step up to hold Becca's energy?"

Cedric, the younger man, steps forward from the back. "I got her. No need to pretend much." He laughs to himself, eagerly.

Carlin asks Daren to show Cedric how Becca would hold herself and speak, asking him, "What's the message she is trying to give you?"

"I don't..."

Jerry probes, "I sense you do, but you're too clouded by the shame and maybe also hooked by the guilt to speak it out loud. Could that be so?"

Daren nods, his body seems to be sagging.

"She... I think..." He closes his eyes while his face shows disgust, shaking his head again. Then his eyes open and his face goes still, "It's my fault. I made her die!"

He covers his face and suddenly his knees buckle as he drops to the ground. He starts heaving. Jerry crouches with him, following him down.

I don't quite know what is happening in front of me, but the need to be a part of this somehow is growing more urgent. Glad these other men know what to say and do. I stand there frozen, seeing him collapse reminds me of that feeling earlier, with Jess in the garden.

Carlin crouches down to his level, "Daren, what needs to come out of this pain you are holding."

"I killed you. I did it! And I'm a terrible, lying, cheating, selfish and evil brother."

"I hear you," Jerry echoes back, "You feel like a disgusting low life who caused your own sister to die. You can barely stand it, can't live with this part of yourself. Wish you could bury it forever or kill this part of yourself, but instead you dare to show it to us now."

Daren writhes and pushes Jerry away, starting to rock back and forth making fists. "I wanna smash my head open! I need to hit something...."

Michael shouts "SUPPORT! Something to hit please!" Two men dart off.

Jerry, "We won't let you hurt yourself."

Carlin, "But Daren, I invite you to follow that instinct. There's power and truth there."

The men return with three large cushions, which they lay in front of my brother, holding them in place while sitting to his side.

Jerry, "Yes, show us this fire inside you."

Carlin, "Start slow if you need to build it. And keep it focused and tight."

As if knowing what to do, Daren starts pounding the stack of cushions before him. Seeing the calm faces around me I suspect that this is not the first time they've done this. Daren's blows are at first deliberate and then becoming more and more an unleashing of a wild fury with complete abandon. Pumping harder and harder. More rageful with each blow. His mouth is foaming. His eyes are popping out.

My Heart Is A Muscle

He slows down to pant and catch his breath. Then continues again, harder than ever, but more precise and focused in his blows. Images flash through my mind of seeing him smashing the earth like a gorilla, then chopping wood as a lumberjack and now slicing through bodies like a samurai in battle. A few more cuts and then in the middle of a strike, something breaks, like the cracking of thunder before the rain.

Daren falls forward.

Jerry puts a hand on his back, "What's there now, underneath all the anger and the shame?"

Daren is sobbing. Jerry wraps his arms around him lovingly, like a caring father embracing his son, "It won't get her back... you hating yourself... will it?"

Daren shakes his head, quietly sobbing.

Michael comes closer, squatting next to my brother, "May I?"

Daren, face buried, nods.

"Daren, I honour you for your courage and love. Modeling and leading for us tonight."

Daren shakes his head upon hearing the words. "I'm not..."

"What kind of a man owns his deepest darkest secret and dares to face reckoning with how he's impacted others?" Michael asks in his booming voice.

A chorus of men respond one at a time... "Brave... Honest... Loving... Powerful."

I have a frog in my throat but I nod along. Daren looks up at me.

The men around the circle then raise their hands and wiggle their fingers splayed out.

Farooz leans to me and whispers, "It's a way of honouring him silently without interrupting..."

My Heart Is A Muscle

I do so also. There is something so crazy and unbelievable about what just unfolded and yet so brave and loving. Yes. I see it as an act of love to both Becca *and* Daren.

Daren scans around taking it all in. Carlin, pacing around, comes to a stop facing him “You’ve done the hardest part, now ready to see more clearly, brother?”

He nods.

“Ok, who here can hold your energy. All this shame, anger and grief?”

A few men step forward or signal their willingness.

My hand rises slowly.

Daren stands up now. Jerry encourages him to breathe in deeply and shake it off. His face seems to be releasing the pained expression he held a moment ago, but is still streaked with tears. He looks at me, “Bill?”

I step forward, feeling a chill run down my spine.

Carlin puts his arm around me and coaches me to crouch down into the spot in the centre of the room where my brother just wept. “Thank you for your courage in taking his place. Holding his energy. Just repeat what he said and do your best to step into his shoes, feeling what he is going through. Are you down with that?”

I barely understand what is happening. But crouched down in that spot with all eyes on me, I curl in also. Closing my eyes. I remember the moment of seeing Jess naked in the swampy reeds. Her tears on the path. My face in the mirror of the bathroom and the rawness of my throat after vomiting out donuts. I want to puke myself out.

This is *my shame*.

Carlin touches my shoulder, whispering in my ear. “Repeat after me.”

My Heart Is A Muscle

I echo the words he speaks, looking down and seeing Daren's feet in front of me, standing. "I feel like I killed you. I hate myself. I wish I could take your place and die. I miss you so much. My heart is broken and empty..."

Daren squats down to my level. He cradles my head now as Jerry held his before. "Look at me." He speaks forcefully.

I look at him, feeling the disgust and self loathing and loss - my own as well - and all that I imagine must be behind his words which I just spoke.

There's also bubbling lava, a searing heat rising underneath it all.

I try to contain myself from exploding, but also to not stuff it back down.

I must look like a mess right now.

So self conscious and exposed as the ugly wretched being I feel I am.

He is looking at me with clear eyes, a soberness and something I cannot describe, "I see you, Daren. And yes, you did introduce her to drugs. You were selfish and self absorbed for much of that time. But the truth is, you were also just as lost as she was. And who are you fooling? She was not someone anyone could dare to try and control. She was Becca."

Hearing his words feels like the earth beneath me cracking open and the lava coming through. Tears burn down my face. The kind that are cooling and soothing. *I know I didn't... It was Daren, but... Why does this affect me so deeply?*

Carlin speaks to us both, "Excellent. Now switch."

Daren gestures from me to take his spot crouching as he goes back into holding the position of shame which I just held.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Carlin whispers again, “Now repeat what he *just* said. I’ll help you remember..”

I speak the words.

Daren bursts open with hot tears, also, a smile beaming through his anguished face. I reach over to embrace him.

Jerry is on our side, asking me, “May I place my hand on your back also?”

I nod. He does so, holding us both, his deep and soulful voice begins to sing to us.

“Shame shame shame...”

Hiding who I am.

But my soul...

She’s begging me...

To speak my truth.

To say what is...

Say it now.

Sing it clear...”

There’s a raspy soulful cadence to his voice. It does not feel forced or a performance, but an invitation to soak in the bath of melody, which is cleansing.

Daren and I are hugging still. I hear his voice. “I wish I could have saved her. I wish I had the power. I wish I could have been there when she jumped.”

My Heart Is A Muscle

The image of Becca on the bridge where she stepped off burns in my mind. My eyes release another torrent of cool tears now.

I lean back to look him in the eyes, my chin quivering. "I did blame you also. But really, I blamed myself. She was lost and neither of us could've helped her find her way back."

And then again more tears. An endless ocean. We both heave with grief, mirrors to one another.

Holy fuck. When does this end?

I've lost all control.

You never had any...
And you are moving
through it...

Papa's voice pulls me out of myself. I look up and become aware that there are men around us who - a few hours earlier - were complete strangers to me. And yet, now as my body relaxes and breathes more steadily, I feel so close to them.

Daren then cradles my head and holds my gaze. I feel like a baby being beheld. I have to chuckle at that.

"Thank you. It means everything to me to hear *you* say that."

I see how much I've helped him and he's helped me. How much pain we've held for so long and how we've freed one another. I don't understand how this all unfolded but...

"I love you, Daren."

"I love you, Billy."

My Heart Is A Muscle

The sound of a deep bell. Michael is holding a singing bowl.

Men start singing, a refrain they seem to know by heart.

“Shame shame shame...

Hiding who I am.

But my soul...

She’s begging me...

To speak my truth.

To say what is...

Say it now.

Sing it clear...

Let it all come out...

Let it set us free... ”

After a moment of silence, Michael speaks, “Wow. I don’t know about you, but I was riveted and moved, deeply.”

Many men holler, nod, and stir, agreeing.

He places a hand on his heart, “Another powerful and loving fire... A Great Unshaming has occurred, and for now, as we leave this incredible space that we created together, how shall we come to celebrate and honour the miracle that’s occurred?”

Cedric exclaims, “Let’s dance!”

My Heart Is A Muscle

“Love this new guy! Hell yeah!” Someone yells out.

Other men howl and yelp in accord.

Michael responds, “Awesome. We have 5 minutes and then need to check out to honour our time, So be it!”

The drums beat in a fast and heated rhythm.

Men leap and jump. Some shake. Cedric is bouncing into others, like in a mosh pit. Some men move on their own, further back.

I don't feel like dancing. I would normally be worrying about how I look. Or judging these men for being so weird and wild. But to my surprise, I am not self-conscious right now.

I see Daren moving slowly and grooving to his own beat, like some kind of Tai Chi master.

I feel still. A peace I have never felt before.

The dancing feels like it goes on for a long time. The music ends eventually.

We're all back in a circle.

I'm still in an altered state.

Michael addresses us. “My love is a verb. My heart is a muscle... Thank you men for working out with me tonight. I judge that we moved a mountain together. I'm so delighted and just fuck, yeah, I don't have words....”

Men smile and chuckle, nodding.

“And to our guests, Bill and Cedric, where have you been all my life? I feel so grateful for how you gave us some of your own medicine. Cedric your wild daring and Bill I saw a deep loyalty and care.”

I'm surprised by his noticing me. We all go around in what they call a “check out” sharing a feeling and a point of appreciation.

Carlin speaks. "I learned A LOT tonight. And Bill, love your vibe, man! So brave and insightful and big hearted. I see a lot of power, truth, and love in you."

Jerry goes next. "Daren you are the most daring man I know. And I have come to know *many* men. You held the beating heart of this group tonight. And Bill, you seem to know how to step forward and weave yourself in... beautifully. We went to a place some of us have never been before, because of *you*. Beautiful. Thank you."

Farooz jumps in next, "I feel soo much... yum..." He rubs his big belly, "satisfying feeling from witnessing tonight. It's a profound gift."

He turns to me, "I hope one day you come back or our paths cross again so I may repay you humbly somehow."

When it's my turn, a desire to gush comes from within me. I hold it back with some humour. "Until recently I wouldn't be caught dead in a group like this. No offence."

Men burst into laughter, clapping and nodding in delight.

"What I mean is I'd be too terrified... my shame has kept my real feelings hidden... I had no idea what the hell I was getting into coming here. My brother and I have been estranged for a long time, but now I feel we are closer than we have ever been. I don't know what else to say. I gotta pinch myself. Is this real?"

Farooz slaps my back.

It feels real alright.

Finally, Daren's turn. He does not speak. He puts his hand on his chest and looks at each of us. There's a quiet power in him. He goes around the circle and touches each of us, taking a while to look deeply into our eyes.

My Heart Is A Muscle

* * *

We're walking outside. I'm sucking in the cool fresh air.

Daren is still quiet as we get to his car.

Inside, we settle. He's about to start the engine. I place my hand on his arm.

"That was fucking unbelievable." I say.

"Wasn't it?" He smiles, holding the key.

I feel the need to add, "Listen, about Becca..."

He turns to me.

I surprise myself speaking with certainty, "This will sound strange, Daren, but I know. I know she wanted you to know that she was never blaming you. And I think... she wanted me to be here to help us both move on..."

His eyes closed, re-open, "Thank you for passing that on." He nods and with a half smile and in silence, he drives me home.

Chapter 36

A Night Cap

Lying in bed, my arms folded behind my head, still at peace. This spaciousness has not left me. It's surreal.

Jess walks by and stripping off her clothes as she disappears into the closet. She returns and jumps on the bed, a tigress, a naked prowling fiery animal. But in her eyes I see the sweet and loving woman I cannot resist.

"You have some kinda magic don't you?"

"You have no idea..." one of her palms pull down the sheets and stroke my thigh and groin pulling down my underwear. Her head lunges and disappears in between my legs.

"Wooooahhhh!"

A bit of back story. I... we have not had oral sex in years. I loved it when it happened earlier, and I loved going down on her, but too many years ago for me to count, she started pulling me away and recoiled when I asked for it since.

Now this...

This is a total surprise, a true miracle. She seems to revel in it now... sucking, licking, taking it in deep...

Oh my god! This is so fucking goooood...

I'm stroking her beautiful hair and feeling like the luckiest man in the world.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I lean up to try and touch her, wanting to reciprocate, but she pushes me back down...

“Mmmmm... just enjoy....”

I lay back.

A wide grin forms on my face as I hear that famous song playing in my head. I can't remember so many of the words.

When I get that feeling

I want sexual healing...

As a hot gooey sensation of sheer pleasure fills my entire body, I'm writhing with joy. Humming to this song is so funny to me and so perfect. A part of me floats above and takes in the scene. I cannot believe my life is unfolding as it is. I don't recognize myself. Everything this week has been a great shock, a tragedy, a mistake, a surprise, or a delight...

I have not behaved the way I would have normally behaved. I have been totally out of character. My life is proceeding off script... I don't know where it's all going next...

At this moment, receiving this “gift” from Jess, I don't care who I am or who I become. I am delighted to see where life takes me next.

Inside my own skin, I feel more alive, my heart pounding deeply. I welcome this...

“Aaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhaahahhhhhhhhh...”

The universe explodes behind my eyes as a warm ecstatic rush ripples several times through my entire body, down to my toes. “That was the beeesstt... I have no words.”

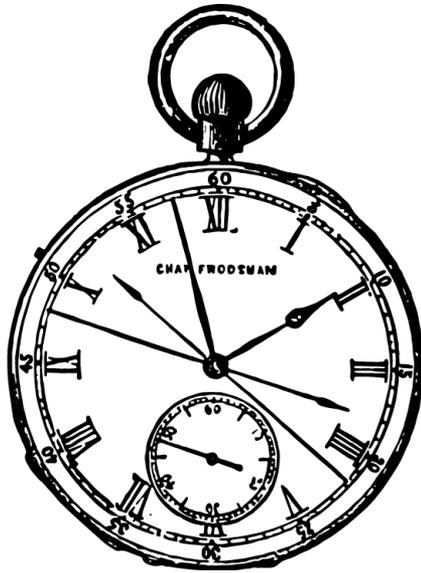
Jess's eyes pop up, beaming great joy and delight.

“Thank you. Thank you... Thank... you....”

My Heart Is A Muscle

Friday

Time to Decide...



My Heart Is A Muscle

Chapter 37

Can we talk?

Could not sleep. Restless. Tossing and churning...

I hope dad is ok. I hope he is really ok.

I can't wait to see him!

Noticing the polished wooden box next to my head. I open it and pull out the watch, feeling it's weight and placing it close to my ear. Hearing the whirring of a hand wound motor and the ticking of time makes me sigh. I turn it over and squint to catch in the half light.

4:23am.

Ugh. Really?

That's too early, even for me.

What am I going to say to the board at Golden Years?

Is my marriage getting better, or worse?

That last one feels strangely ok, at the moment.

But will that last or will the rug be pulled from under us again?

I sit up and go back to bed several times. Lying there wide awake.

Finally, the sun is up.

I text Robert.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Any chance I could chew
your ear and get some last
minute guidance this morning?
Or any time today before 4pm?

He texts me back.

Out of reach today, but
someone I trust will
meet you there in an
hour...

His response steels my spine and I sit up taller. I get up and hustle and to be ready to arrive exactly 60 minutes later. I like to be precise and I expect he meant exactly what he wrote.

Sitting back on *the* bench, where we usually meet, I'm appreciating having on my left wrists this Breguet watch, Daren's gift, ticking along.

We have so little time.

I inhale the cool morning air deeply into my chest and belly, feeling so damn grateful to be alive.

And yet, so much time.

I hear footsteps sneaking up behind me and turn to see a younger man in a leather jacket.

It's Jack.

His face beams a great joyful expression as he gets up and wraps his arms around me like an old friend, finishing a full and long embrace by patting me firmly on the back. "Good to see you, Bill. Now I know why Robert got me up at this god forsaken hour to be here."

I look at *my* watch again, grateful. It's 6:31am. Not that early, for me, but I see the bags under his eyes

and note Jack is *not* a Lion, the morning chronotype, like me. "I... I'm sorry that you had to..."

He cocks his head as his eyes light up and he smiles with a boyish grin. "No worries. AND... Life is an adventure! I wouldn't want to miss any part of it. Besides, I'm only in town for a short while. Seems our mutual mentor is wanting to use me up to my full potential."

He looks me in the eyes in a way that feels oddly intimate, "And, most of all. It's you... and you just met some of us and you're showing up in all kinds of ways." He shakes his head with amazed disbelief.

"How did you...?"

"Meet Robert? Oh, my god almighty, eight and a half years ago, but it took me over a year before I came back to see him again..." He chuckles with abandon. Shaking his head reminiscing... "Had to hit my rock bottom... or rather had to do it the harder way, I guess. But enough about me. What brings you to this fortuitous place?"

I find myself charmed and disarmed by Jack. And I am not a celebrity worshipper. Just something so warm and human about him trying to connect and to be so eloquent while he's at it.

"I uh... have a pretty consequential decision to make today."

"That's one of the hardest areas of growth," He makes a nervous face. "At least for me."

"Yeah, I was hoping Robert could help me..."

"Sounds like we could both use his sagely advice..." He chuckles to himself, "I was trying to channel him on the way here. You know, rehearsing how he speaks, his cadence, timber and mannerisms, all the acting tricks I've got under my sleeve, but then I just ended up feeling more of a fraud. So..."

He makes an inviting flourish with his hand... "Shall we do what we're here to do?"

"What... wander?"

He nods, smiling. "You know the drill..."

He puts his arm around my shoulder as we start walking.

"Don't worry... I got some *other* tricks up my sleeve which *may* help. So yeah, let's wander and see where it takes us. Embracing the mystery, and all that woowoo stuff Robert would say..."

He stops as we reach the main path. "Which way?"

There is a trail directly ahead of us going into the thicket, where Robert and I have gone a few times. And there is the main path we are at the foot of, which goes left or right. I choose left without thinking.

"Wonderful. Why not see where the rest of the world is going...? It's been some time."

I'm not sure he is being sarcastic. Seeing a good natured twinkle in his eye, I imagine he is poking more fun at himself than me.

We walk.

Gradually, I begin spilling my story. I get most of it off my chest.

He reacts with great sighs, grunts, and expressions of emotional reaction at times. Eventually, we stop at the creek bed, as he skips a rock in the water and looks pensively.

"My first time doing this. Not sure what to say, Bill." He pauses to touch his chin. "Hey, I got an idea. Bear with me. I think it'll help you make sense..."

He leads us through the brush and to a clearing, to a place where off road bike paths intersect. "Sounds like you're at a crossroads. Wink wink, nudge nudge."

He beams that smile. "And... the default option to stand in the centre deliberating is... well, you're running out of time."

"The centre cannot hold." I add.

“Ah W.B. Yeats... or was it Robert Young?”

We smile at one another.

He continues, “By not deciding, you will be forcing a decision and making a choice in some ways. So... you hoped that I or rather the Ole Wise White Bearded One had the compass to point you in the “right” direction this morning, eh?”

I nod.

“Ok, to summarize... At your workplace, the choice today is whether to fight and risk getting tossed or to stay quiet, keeping your job, but letting go of your integrity?”

Since you put it that way. I say to myself.

“And your wife... not sure about... staying or going?”

“No. I want to stay...”

“Good, so you’ve solved one of the dilemmas.”

“But I don’t have certainty.” I hear the words come out and realize just how nervous I sound. After the healing yesterday, I feel a lot less so, but a thin thread of fear still lingers.

“Does anyone, really?” He shoots back.

I nod and concede, “Ok. I can park the fear. But, what about the work question. How do I think...?”

He smiles to himself as if realizing something, then points a finger upwards, “Fear is a key factor that cannot be eliminated. It must be factored in. Something Robert once told me. Fear is that surge of electricity jolting us awake to all that we risk losing... It begs us to grapple with the question...

Is it even worth it?

Is *this* path most *right* and *aligned*

with who I really am?”

“I can imagine the loss of pay, but I can’t leave all those seniors in the care of people who...”

Jack pounces on me intensely, squaring my shoulders, looking me in the eye, “You don’t need to keep deliberating. Bill. You’re a wise guy.” He clicks his tongue, “with a deep conscience, by the fact that this is all weighing on you so much. I got a strong sense that you already have your answer. All that seems missing is courage and faith.”

Ugh. My breath feels knocked out of me. My legs feel locked and stuck in the ground like wood sticks stuck in sinking mud. I look down, ashamed that I feel absolutely no courage or faith at the moment.

As if he can read my thoughts, he squeezes my tight shoulders, “I feel your terror of making the wrong move.” With a sympathetic frown, “And I understand the multiple terrifying prospects. And, know this...”

Courage is not the absence
of feeling like shitting our pants,
but the act of stepping forward as we
may be shitting our pants...”

I sigh deeply and a shiver goes through me, feeling my shoulders loosen a bit.

“True, I guess,” I’m grasping for something to hold onto, “But, where do I get it?!”

“Your heart.”

Though I know deep down he is right, it just seems trite to hear it. He sees my dissatisfaction with that answer and continues, “The word *courage* comes from the French for *coeur*. Most literally meaning, coming *from the heart*.”

I look away, *It seems so natural for you to be courageous.*

He laughs, as if reading my thoughts. "Haaa. I am plenty scared, my new friend."

I turn and see an anguished expression on his face confirming that.

"You see I am petrified at staying in one place for too long actually." He gulps down saliva, looking paler, "This woman I am seeing, wants to have kids. Oh my God! Nothing more terrifying. Especially because..." His eyes glaze over and he looks like he's swallowed a frog, "I... love her. I *think*. I didn't grow up knowing what healthy relationships and real love look like. I slept with violence, addiction and neglect."

His eyes flicker with insight, as if coming to a new realization, "The familiar is what we know from our family of origin, Robert would say. And so... the thing most *uncomfortable* and scary may be what is actually healthy, real and what we most long for and need." He looks at me as his last words hang in the air.

He closes his eyes and nods to himself.

I nod back, not knowing what to say that won't sound trite or dismissive of his fear.

"I can't say that I've ever felt that way, Jack. Perhaps, we are coming at this all from opposite ends. For me, my entire life has seemed to be about being a stable rock, for others. Even at eighteen, I couldn't wait to settle down and lay down some roots, and be worthy of someone. But, now twenty..." I have to count for a moment to be accurate, "Twenty five years later, just a few days ago, I was so terrified to actually let go of this clinging to certainty. To actually show up and *fully* discover and love my wife, that I nearly lost her."

His eyes widen, "It seems that we are bizarro versions of one another."

"Yeah."

He checks his phone and bites his lower lip.

"Sorry to say, but our time is nigh." He places his hand on my shoulder again and I get the reassuring

and slightly unsettling sense that we are both here a little lost, yet figuring out the puzzling dilemmas we each hold *together*.

Jack seems on a roll now. "Back to the courage and faith. Ok? Maybe, just maybe, we aren't meant to have any of it in store. Maybe, the courage and faith that we need comes *through* those wonderful people..." he pats my chest. "Both mentors and fellow travellers which we meet on the road."

He nods to himself and I mirror, feeling the truth of his words. "That's been my experience at least," He adds. "So, let me give you some of mine."

The offer surprises me. He places his hands on the sides of my head. It reminds me of a moment I had with Robert and then another with Becca, just yesterday. My temple starts throbbing and tear ducts filling up. *Not again! Keep it together, man! Breathe!*

"Good man. The tears tell me you are brave and willing to take it in." He stares at me intently while seeming to be inhaling and exhaling very slowly and with great force.

Nodding, he speaks, "I am just a kid really. A pampered movie star but I have known death and illness and heart break and *this* feeling of dread, the dark hole of emptiness in my belly... that might just be that I am literally starving at the moment... but really, I *may* understand a shred of what you feel right now and as I look for an uncomfortably long time into your beautiful eyes trying to look in as deep as the man we are both missing here at the moment, I can tell you god damn it... that I believe in you and I have no fucking clue how things may go for you today."

What a strange, rambling monologue.

"*But,*" He continues, "All that said, I have complete faith in *you*... So take this shred of courage and faith that I have... Take it in..."

Papa's voice echoes.

Take it in.

I let some of his words sink in. After another deep inhale, we exhale together.

“Are you letting it in, Bill?”

I close my eyes now and feel the warmth of his hands. A surge of energy melts my face and then slowly the warm wave moves down into my neck and shoulders. I see ~ or maybe I am just imagining this ~ a golden fluid, like lava, oozing down my body.

Suddenly, I feel an intense fear and the sudden urge to open my eyes. Jack is still there holding me and beaming a satisfied and proud smile. I take another long and deep breath into my belly and chest. It feels good to be so alive and in my body, like after a long jog.

“I know you will do the right thing.” His eyes are clear, his body very solid and still.

I have no desire to argue with him.

“In the end, the thing that your heart tells you to do is what is best. You don’t need to explain yourself or justify it. Your integrity is on the chopping block today. Do what your heart bravely calls you to do, without pride or ego. Just *know* that *this* is what you are here to do.”

I sense a kind of certainty, that is astonishing to me. My mind feels quiet. I hear the wind and the hum of the city in the distance.

Jack clears his throat, “In a moment, I will let go and disappear into that thicket mysteriously...” He speaks in a dramatic movie trailer type of voice, and yet I sense his sincerity, “Leaving you all alone... so take a moment to feel it all, when I do. And, please remember my last words...”

My Heart Is A Muscle

I put my hands on his shoulders, now also, wishing he could stay a bit longer, ready to hold onto whatever he says next.

“I say, just fucking do what you need to do. And if the doubt or dread returns, tell them to sit next to you and shut the fuck up for a bit. You are the boss of you. Your chosen course of action today is based on what is best for you *and* for others you care about. Whether they like it or not, or approve of any of it, is *inconsequential*. As you begin to speak, know that courage *will* come at *that* moment to help you. Your heart is *strong* and it will aim *true*.”

His words resonate deeply with me. A cool enlivening shiver ripples into my chest and travels again down my body.

Jack lets me go. He takes a step back in silence, his face red and shaking tears streaming down his cheeks, his chin up and nodding slightly to convey a swell of pride... I felt a subtle vein of unworthiness stirring within me, much weaker than in the past...

But I haven't done anything to deserve this.

I close my eyes and sigh...

This man, who is loved and revered, sought out by many, is spending a chunk of his precious time, when he is most tired and hungry, with *me*.

And though we barely know one another, he's made a deep impact on me right now.

How is it possible? What can I give him back?

I open my eyes. He's gone.

Chapter 38

A New Dad

I'm back in the hospital, sitting in the same worn seat in the hallway facing the door to Dr. Greenleaf's office. I am early, keen to see him. I can't help but think about how a few days ago - what seems like a lifetime ago - I sat here in shock, a victim of circumstance and my own self-pity.

Now, I sit up, tall, relaxed and strangely exhilarated. So much has changed and so much is the same. But I am... not sure how to define it.

I brush my face with cold hands and lean forward. It's as if I have awoken from a dream. At times, a boring and ordinary dream and other times a disorienting nightmare. And all this time, I thought that this state of being asleep at the wheel of my own life, chasing this and that, being a good husband and father, that that was my real life.

And yet, slowly but surely, I was roused and now I am awake.

Everything is in flux, molecules vibrating with uncertainty, yet potency. My thoughts are dancing and I find my mind strangely poetic at this moment, as if I was high on something.

I sit back up, another deep inhale. *I hope I don't let myself fall back asleep.*

I exhale some weight with relief, focusing on my posture and staying up, present to everything that...

"Bill."

My Heart Is A Muscle

The doctor approaches and holds out his hand. I rise eagerly to greet him and he clasps my hand in both of his. The doctor's eyes look moist, as if he is also deeply moved by all this.

"You must be elated. I am too. It's something extraordinary which I cannot take credit for, nor assume to comprehend." He chuckles deeply as he pats me on the forearm.

I want to temper how I feel about dad until I actually see him, so I hold back showing too much hope.

"Must be some grace. I was going to talk to you here first, but then I checked on him an hour ago and he's very keen to check himself out, as soon as possible! And you, you must be dying to get a look at him. Why don't we walk and talk, hmmm?"

I could not be more pleased.

The good doctor tours me through the hospital maze, briefing me on the medical state of my father, but I can't seem to stay with the conversation. Logically, I listen and take note, understanding much of what he says, but my heart is beating intensely and I feel elation in my steps mixed with cautious anticipation.

A rising fear ripples through me,

What if I am being too hopeful?

What if the doctor is ahead of himself?

What if this was a blip and he's lying there dead asleep?

Or worse, awake but in a vegetative state?

Or all of this is brief, and he slips back into a coma or dies soon after?

As we walk in and out of elevators and more hallways, I notice the pockets of sunlight beaming through glass. I breathe and try to listen, staying grounded.

How is he really?

Watch your step.

Stay grounded.

You'll know soon enough.

We enter his room.

The first thing I see is a stranger asleep on a bed and the room is dark.

I hear my dad's voice further in. "It's too damn quiet, don't you think?"

A warm and gentle voice responds, "Frank... you'll wake up everyone?"

We walk in, pulling back the curtain, to witness my dad sitting up on his bed, holding a fruit cup and waving a spoon, animated with glee. I squint at the light coming in through the window.

"Hahhaaa... Well, god forbid that I wake up some of the sleeping beauties around here!"

The nurse, who I recognize as the one I met on Wednesday, Angel, is humouring him, as he notices me and lights up, "My son! My darling Billy boy!"

My mouth is agape. I am thinking this must be a joke, or a vivid dream. I am dumbfounded. This is not my father.

His body, face, frame? Yes.

His mannerisms and character? I shake my head in disbelief.

Who is this man?

His arms extend to hug me, as he tries to scoot off the bed. Angel is quick to prevent the move, while chastising him, in a very familiar and loving way.

"You'll rip your stints if you..."

"Ok ok." He relents and eases back against the pillow. He pats the bed, imploring me, "Come, please, son."

I look at the doctor, as if wanting permission or confirmation. He smiles and nods as if to say, *Yup, this is exactly what it looks like.*

I approach and stand next to him. There's something strange about him. Like a weight that's been lifted. His face is so flexible and tender.

"You know, I saw Daren."

"When?" A flash of surprise and maybe a bit of envy dance on my face.

"He was just here. Sneaky devil, he charmed his way in before visiting hour. Wanted to give you space with me too."

He looks up at me hopefully.

I pull a chair and sit by him.

The doctor and nurse stand back, staring at us, arms crossed with content smiles. Dr. Greenleaf steps in to tap my dad's leg, "You are experiencing a miracle, if I ever saw one. Your body has been healing nicely since the surgery. Perhaps the coma gave you a chance to get some deep and needed rest. And there are no signs of brain damage..."

"Yeah, doc. I feel brand new. Better than ever!" Dad exclaims. "Now, when do I check out of this hotel?"

I look at Dr. Greenleaf, Marvin, to confirm that I am not imagining things and dad is not delusional. He nods along, "Yes, it seems so. That said, I think it best for us to observe you a bit more to know how we may clone you and figure out what happened here. And be doubly sure, but we'll have you out as soon as we can. I promise. For now, Angel and I will let you both catch up." He walks out, shooing the nurse, who seems to want to stay and fuss with dad.

The man, who appears to be my dad - yet acts completely out of character - turns to me, mirroring the same content smile as them, "I'm so glad you and Daren are talking again. You used to be so close. Why are you so far away. I'm not contagious.

I'm not used to this much warmth from the man, even when he was younger and less miserable than the last decade. I turn my chair sideways to face him more

squarely, and let my hands rest on the bed. He clasps my left hand.

“What the hell happened to you?” I can’t help but blurt out, still in shock.

“Huh. Great question. I don’t know.” He shrugs frowning, then bursts into a chuckle to himself, “But does it matter?” Unable to stop the flood of laughter, tears come from his eyes. “Ohh, Bill, I have sooo much that I need to tell you.”

“I’m... ok... So, you’re not a cranky old man anymore. I can understand that, maybe... But the way you used to be before that either, when mom was...”

“Well, those days are done, son. I was... full of angst and fear. Not myself, most of my life...” He looks pensive and almost sad, but lucid as his eyes lock on mine intensely.

I break the silence. “You look younger than I have ever seen you... But, you were in a coma and almost dead. I don’t know what’s happening.”

He sighs, turns to look out the window and back beaming brightly. “Isn’t life fucking amazing?!”

I nod along, “I guess so. Yeah. I’ve been through a week as well, that I don’t regret. More humbled and grateful and...”

“Alive.” His eyes grow wide. “I can see it. You’ve been with Becca, she told me.”

A shiver goes through me. Another shockwave. Stunned, I wait for him to explain. He squeezes my hand.

“I had a lot of time... somewhere in between. And I saw her. Oh, we talked, went for walks and got it all out, you see. And I met... a friend...”

He pauses.

I can’t help but wonder.

Papa?

Yes.

Was he... with you?

Yes.

Dad doesn't skip a beat, continuing to unravel his story, "He helped me shed a lot of my own stuff. Painful stuff. I could see myself clearly for the first time and I thought a lot about you and Daren. I swore that if I got to come back here... What the hell would I do with this time... precious as it is, in my state?"

I shake my head, not wanting to consider losing him, again.

He squeezes my hand again, "It's ok. I am not going to live forever. I figure we got more than a few minutes. But how long? It's not up to me." He waves a palm upwards and shrugs. "Every time I close my eyes, I may not wake up. That's why it's so important that I just... spill everything out now... why wait. Right?"

My head feels heavy, filled with so many mixed emotions I rest it at his bedside. He holds me, stroking my hair.

"So, yeah. Here goes... I never really loved your mom."

Something painful about that, yet I have no energy to challenge it.

"I learned to care for her, as much as I could, given who we were. But, my heart never pounded for her. Not really. I played it safe. Had my tail between my legs."

I can relate to the fear part, though my life has been more proactive. I've plotted and built my way up,

not as resigned and defeated as he was, but maybe in my own way, I was still playing it safe and small.

I will not let myself be like that.

"I say holy fuck to all that now. My name is Frank. Let me act like it!"

I chuckle and close my eyes, relieved.

"You know that is actually true, right?... Teddy was my middle name and what Ellen preferred, but not who I was. Angel, the nurse here, he's been a real angel to me. You know I could feel him and you when you came and sat with me. Also Daren and the girls. I could feel you *all* being my *anchor* back into this world."

I find some new energy pulling me up, to sit straight and look at him again.

"Anyway, it was Becca who also brought me back. Making things right. I have to tell you... So many secrets. Things you ought to have known growing up. It would have been easier if you did, perhaps. Maybe not, but..."

He heaves inhaling and sighs deeply. "One thing I know for certain is that... it was me who drove your sister away. I thought at the time it would help her and Ellen make peace... the distance. But it only pushed her away from us."

His eyes are moist, but clear as he tells me.

"I'm sorry that you were in the middle of it all. It was not fair to you or Daren. I blamed myself for her ending her life, you know. I still think I did contribute, but I am so grateful that she forgave me."

In the silence after those words, my mind grapples with believing it possible. He spent time with Becca and she told him about what happened between us. So much of that is unbelievable. And yet, here and now something in me just knows it is certainly true.

"She demanded I let that burden be put to rest. Pounding my chest she slapped sense into me. Said that *you* needed me. I don't know how, but I did what I needed

to do so I could try my best to get back here to you and your girls and Daren and to show up for you, now. Maybe for the first time, I'm able to be there for you... like you always needed me to."

I see tears in his eyes, but he is smiling. Everything he says is a relief to hear. My head feels lighter.

"And, another thing." He chuckles and I find my belly pulsing along also.

"I've been hiding something from everyone, my entire life." He looks out the window and back at me squarely, "I love men. There, I said it. Ha!"

I shake my head. This piece is a shocker. But I look at him and it makes sense. Strange sense. "You mean you're gay?"

"Well... yes and no. I love women too, I'm sure. I don't know what to call it..."

"Bisexual?"

"Fuck the labels. I'm too old for them now. All I know is that I ain't normal in the sense of what used to be considered that, in my day."

I squeeze his hand, imagining the weight of that secret and having to bury it. How it must have been eating him up his entire life.

He pats my hand, as if to reassure me, "Ah, well. All's well that ends well. It's good to get that off my chest. Ready to die! Bye..." He closes his eyes and leans back pretending to keel over.

This time, I squeeze his hand, firmly.

He bolts upright and chuckles, squaring his face to mine and beams the biggest smile. One which I have never seen on his face.

"Every day I live from here on in, I'm gonna be true to who I am. I wish that for you also... Be frank with yourself..."

"Sorry, dad. I can't do that."

My Heart Is A Muscle

He looks blank and puzzled.

“You’re Frank and so being you is already taken.”

He chuckles and guffaws so hard he has to ease himself back. “Oh that’s so bad it’s good, it hurts... physically.”

We sit there and talk about everything and nothing for the next few minutes, before he is tired and falls asleep.

I am aware that some kind of emotional arithmetic has occurred between us. A sense of the truth having been laid out bare, makes everything inside me click. In ways I can’t ascertain fully, my life makes more sense.

Enjoying his presence, drinking it up, my body at ease, my mind at peace, I have the sense of wind passing through a tunnel... empty and clear... I wonder what comes next, but the space between us is all that is needed, for now.

Chapter 39

Wisdom of the Mechanic

Driving home after picking up groceries, it all seems so strange, to be doing something so mundane when the whole world, my world, has changed so dramatically. It's a relief and very grounding, in fact, to resume such an ordinary routine.

At the intersection, I creep in, ready for a left turn. Traffic is fierce for midday. Waiting. Light turns yellow and the lane is clear, I press down on the pedal, yet feel no thrust. The car doesn't budge.

I try to restart but no go.

Cars behind me honk and then swerve around in a blur. The light is red. A freight truck approaches quickly on my right. A scene of being hit and killed flashes through my mind, but the truck eases to a stop, about a car length away. And in a few seconds, the driver is helping me push my vehicle out of the way to the curb.

Grateful and relieved, I reach for my phone. It's dead.

Scanning around, I see that the repair shop and dojo are about a block and a half east from here, luckily on the same side of the street. Normally, I would call CAA or ask to borrow a phone, but I ask the driver if he could give me a pull.

He seems happy to do so. Says it makes his day to do something good and not just "drive this shit around."

Walking into Dan's repair shop, I hear the old fashioned bell of the door, and sigh with relief.

Dan appears jovial and hollers to a couple of guys to push the car into the garage. He turns to me, smiling wryly, "Even though I'm full up today, how could I *not* take at least a peek for my second favorite new student and friend... Where's Julia, by the way?" His warmth and humour is a welcome respite from the residual annoyance of being carless and on this detour.

Watching him testing the motor and sliding around under my car, I want to ask him. Not sure if it's appropriate but "fuck worrying about what's appropriate", as my *newdad*, might say.

"Can I ask you a question...?"

"No!" He gives me a serious stare down before cracking up. "Just kiddin'. Shoot! I'm all ears. This mechanic stuff sure keeps my hands busy, but boy do I get bored just grunting around with the other dudes or talking about cars."

I pause, not sure how to frame my question. Not sure he will get the only analogy I can think of, but I blurt it out, "Imagine that you sowed a precious and rare seed. And you spent years tending it into a strong but still young sapling, right... And then one day, before it could bear fruit..."

Forget being politically correct or nice.

"An asshole comes over and plucks it before you. And then, to make matters worse, he pisses on the tree to make it clear he has claimed any future harvests. What would you do? Would you just walk away?"

"Uh... Don't know much about gardening or fruit cultivating, Bill." He stands up and looks at me for a moment before reaching for more tools. "You know who would get this kinda conundrum?"

I shake my head.

"O Sensei! The founder of Aikido... he was both a gardener and a warrior. And he would say - I suck with quoting accurately so you may need to google it - something like..."

*A true warrior is invincible because
he or she contests with nothing.*

*Defeat means to defeat the mind of
contention that we harbor within.*

“Hmmm... So you’re saying I should give up and walk away? But what about the injustice of it and the precedent which shows that they can do that to others...”

Purposely not answering after a pause, he continues, “Old Sensei also said,

*If your heart is large enough to
envelop your adversaries, you can see right
through them and avoid their attacks.
Then you can guide them along the right path.*

“So I should stand up to them and fight? I’d like to, but how? They’ve seemed to close ranks and shut me out. You suggest a long legal process...?”

He pops up again, pointing his finger upwards. “Then again, it brings to mind a famous story...

A student approaches his samurai master and says,

"Teacher, you instruct me how to fight, yet you preach to me about peace. How do I reconcile the two?"

The samurai responds,

*"Because it is better to be a warrior in a garden,
then a gardener in a war."*

“Dan, I so appreciate your efforts to...”

“But...?” He looks up slyly from behind the wheel.

“You leave me more confused.”

“I have a gift for doing that.” He laughs heartily.

“Ok, so what do you do practically, Aikido wise, when someone has more power than you to decide over your life? They steal your work, in this example, suspend you for a week for challenging them, and then they summon you to...”

Wiping off his hands he interjects, “Power is relative, Bill. Do you have more power right now or do I?”

“Uh. Not sure. Neither? Both?”

“Practically speaking for a minute, one of the signal sensors on your car is dead. You need a new one to get your motor to sync up and start. I could be making that shit up and fleecing you for \$700. And you have the power to go somewhere else if you doubt me or want a second opinion. So, who has the power here?”

“Both of us.”

He nods and shrugs, which leaves me unsure if he is agreeing or looking not sure, or both.

“What do I know?” He continues, “But, I suspect you may be right. Your power increases in choosing to be in your centre, meaning by being in integrity with yourself as a whole. By doing so, you choose your own path. No one can take that from you, even if they try to cheat, threaten, bribe or dismiss you.”

The last words land like a blunt hammer...

“Now their sense of power is another story. If they think they can tell you what and who you are... That’s some fancy bullshit, an illusion... an inflated ball. Let them puff and blow themselves up. As my first teacher, Kung Fu Sifu Funk – yup, his real name and he

had a huge fro. Awesome dude... Anyway, Sifu Funk would say,

**“Be cool.
Just show up and be you.”**

He puts his hand on my shoulder, “You have nothing to prove. Everything to discover...” He scoffs and shakes his head, smiling.

“Everything I said could just be the medicine I need to swallow also. And, those are all the pearls of wisdom I can poop out today. Hey, what time is it at?”

I look at my new watch, grateful for a moment to have this symbol from my brother, “Uh. 12:15.”

“Yes, I know it’s time to eat. I mean what time is your meeting?”

“Oh. 4pm.”

“Gives you a lot of time to overthink things. I bet you’re starvin’. Why don’t you grab a bowl with me and then go to study sword with Sensei Jacques after?”

I hesitate, considering what I was going to do.

Looking back, I see that Dan’s on his phone.

Interrupting my indecisive pause, “As you’ve been pondering, I’ve ordered the part from a supplier, who happens to be near the park where Sensei teaches. Who says men can’t multitask? We should be able to get your wheels humming fine again by 3ish.”

I’ve got absolutely no reason or excuse to say no, except that I wish to go off and ruminate some more, which is lame. My belly grumbles. And Dan’s friendliness is disarming.

“Sure.”

Chapter 40

The Way of The Sword

After another warm and satisfying meal at Un-Believ-a-Bowl, Ezra and Farooz's place, Dan and I walk over to the park around the corner.

"What time does it start?"

"5 minutes ago." says Dan walking with ease, nonchalantly.

I get nervous, hating to be late.

"Don't worry," He pats me on the back, "Jacques' a pro. And, he operates on island time. We will not get razzed by the teacher."

We enter the park, with trees, a school and playground rounding the perimeter, walking into the middle of a grassy field.

Dan lays down with arms folded back, "Might I suggest we chillax. Let the food digest."

I haven't done this in ages. I join him in laying back, feeling the sun on my face, looking at the blue sky with one fluffy cloud passing by.

I close my eyes and inhale. Good to take a break.

A moment later, I sense motion and Dan is doubled back, doing a bridge yoga pose next to me. I sit up, self-conscious.

"Don't mind me. I can't stay still for too long." He goes into a ball and rolls backwards slowly and with grace, shifting into sitting up and doing calisthenic leg stretches.

"And so, the class gathers..." He intones dramatically, waving to someone in the distance.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I squint and look around, eventually noticing a cluster of people coming towards us from the main path and a couple more from the side. They are obviously students, as I can see them carrying long cloth covered weapon bags, slung over their shoulders.

A deep and accented voice speaks from behind us, "Gud mornin' gentlemen and gentlewomen."

Dan leaps to his feet. I scuttle to get up and turn around.

Jacques, standing tall with erect posture, a crisp white Gi and sunglasses, exudes coolness and stature. He fist bumps with Dan and then they embrace. I extend my palm, he clasps it and pulls me in for a shoulder bump.

As I draw back, he pulls his shades down and holds my stare, "Yuh dat Bill Stone, yah?"

I nod.

"Me hear good things 'bout yuh. Dem sey yuh ave promise. We see 'bout dat, huh?"

I make a nervous face. He busts out a belly chuckle.

As students converge around us, I feel self conscious. He claps his palms loudly and projects his booming voice in a way which seems to reverberate across the entire park, "We be starting inna two minutes. Time tuh ready yourselves."

Dan leans to my side, "I *think* he's just playing with you... Or not." He punches my bicep softly and starts to unwrap his weapons bag, passing me a wooden sword to use.

It's heavier than I expected, upon seeing it. I don't know how to hold it.

Jacques comes over and shows me how he holds his. Without saying a word. I mimic him.

My Heart Is A Muscle

He clicks his tongue, winces and nods for me to check again, drawing my eyes to the way his wrists come together and how the fingers wrap around the handle.

It doesn't feel natural, but I do as he shows me and he nods, moving on.

"Awright. Keep warmin' up, my friends. Ah limber body 'tis a happy body an a skillful instrument, yah?"

For the next twenty minutes, we do a lot of very slow and deliberate movements. Twisting the ankle, then the hips and letting motion extend through into the shoulders, arms and out through the swords in our hands.

I am entranced watching the way he demonstrates, without words, moving with his sword with elegance and precision. But then, I experience tension growing in my arms from holding the heavy sword. A growing frustration and boredom fills me as I try to awkwardly replicate his graceful movements.

Ugh.

He comes over a few times to correct me.

I really suck at this. He must see that and be shaking his head.

But there is no annoyance or critique on his face. His expressions are relaxed, like he has all the time in the world to be patient with me. A terrible beginner.

Gradually, I feel my own shoulders soften and I am able to do more of what he shows me. Each time I do, he smiles, nodding with satisfaction and going back to weaving between the other students.

After a while, I get into a trance. Still moving imperfectly, yet finding grooves, pathways of movement where it feels like less effort is needed, forgetting about time and how many reps we have done already.

A clap.

This time, he shows all the discrete movements we have been retracing in one unbroken sequence, in

slow motion. As slow as molasses dripping on the side of a jar, yet mesmerizing to watch. He begins with a parry of a direct attack, which becomes a sliding and shifting off of the line of attack, meanwhile his sword tilts and pivots into a diagonal slice, which continues cutting downwards and then coming full circle upwards as a rising block, settling into a disarming flick of the wrist. All of this feels so natural and he does it with perfectly smooth and controlled precision.

Then a second time, Jacques gives a small nod of his head and suddenly Dan's sword flashes towards him in a sudden blaze. The sound of hardwood clacking and sliding against another. Sensei Jacques is as quick as a lightning flash. One moment Dan is thrusting forward. Next his sword is at his side and his throat is exposed to the tip of Jacques' weapon.

Again, he shows us the slow version. Followed a second time by it all seeming to happen at once, defying the laws of time and human ability. What a contrast and yet the same thing.

Gulp.

I saw it just now. And my brain seems to get it. Yet, I shake my head, utterly unable to grasp how to actually get my body to follow along.

I look at the other students who nod along. No one else has any confusion or dares to show the same bewildered stare as me.

Sensei looks at us, with the infinite patience of a frog sitting on a lily pad. "Time's an illusion, don't ya know? There be no need to rush. Start at quarter speed. Then maybe gwaana half, but nuh yuh dare... Don't you dare guh faster dan di speed of your awareness. Dat be foolish, no?"

Everyone nods.

As I face another student in front of me, a young woman, who has a Gi and white belt, I am surprised by her starting the attack. My mind is confused but my body starts to move, making the parry. I jerk to speed

up nervously and she pushes me back. My arms get tight to defend her encroachment and I scuttle off balance.

At least she didn't hit me.

I hear the sucking of lips.

I turn and see Jacques. "Staat again."

I can't help but scowl, disappointed in myself.

My partner bows swiftly and resets.

Shit. I don't know what I'm doing

I tilt my sword down in the starting position, inviting the attack. Jacques puts his hands on the top of my back, between my shoulder blades. I sigh involuntarily and feel my face flush.

"Take yuh time an relax as yuh move *wid* her. Not ahead. Not behind. Be *wid* her.

She thrusts. I parry.

His hand, firm, yet soft and present, follows me. Not pushing or guiding, just there.

Feeling his support I find my balance more naturally, moving as she speeds up and slows down through all the movements, with ease and without thought.

Finally, I find myself raising my sword before her throat.

I sense a gentle pressure forward from his hand.

"Don't be 'fraid tuh make contact. Be clear dis a your space we are in."

I slide forward so that my swords' tip is just touching her skin.

Her eyes widen, but she smiles and nods slightly, understanding the dynamic.

Feeling his presence focused on me, I turn to face him. "How do you treat your guests, Bill?" He asks me point blank.

I'm taken aback by the question.

My Heart Is A Muscle

He elaborates, "When you are the host an' they come to your home?"

Grasping his analogy, I answer. "With respect and love?" I nod to confirm that I did not mean to say it as a question.

"Ya mon. That's the way. You know it."

I feel relieved by his resounding affirmation.

"Now practice being the guest some, yourself too."

We switch roles now as I attack my partner.

"Let yo' power an' presence be both humbling and humbled." He says.

I feel elated as his words sink in and I attack my partner. She moves a lot faster than I do, assured and practiced, but then she gets a look from him and slows down as well.

For the next few rounds, my partner and I become one and move in sync, keeping and adjusting our rhythms together.

Sensei Jacques claps again.

We all stop and turn to him.

"People tink that wielding a sword with any skill is about pow! Wow! Aggression and drama! Or all 'bout bein' clever and quick."

He makes the sucking sound with his teeth and a slight shake of his head, still carrying a half smile. "That not me way. I hope you get a taste today of sometin' simpler, more elegant, more graceful and o' course effective. What could that be...?"

He looks at us. A few moments of silence.

I realize he isn't being rhetorical. My practice partner raises her hand slightly. He nods to her and she offers, "I think it's... about listening and being in a flow together. Whether I attack or they do, I can influence them best when we're in sync."

“Yes indeed, dat be some good learnin’! Thank you for dat, Claire.”

She blushes and bows slightly.

“What ‘bout the new students, nuh tuh single yuh out...” He tilts his head and stares right at me with a broad smile, waiting for a response.

“Uh. What Clair said absolutely and I really don’t know much...”

He sucks his teeth again, at the last thing I said, but he doesn’t interrupt.

I continue, realizing I want to show him I have something to contribute, “I guess I do know something. I noticed that when I stayed connected with her and within myself, that I felt more able to move skillfully. Attacking or defending, it was the awareness of a connection that made the difference.”

Sensei Jacques beams a proud smile, turning to the group, then he comes closer, pulls down his shades, locking eyes with me again, he nods slowly, “Ya mon. You *do* have some real wisdom brewin’ in there. Tank you, Bill.”

He puts out his palm for another clasp and draws me into a shoulder bump.

We stick around for a while as the students congregate around Sensei Jacques and Dan to chit chat.

* * *

Eventually, I am surprised by my total lack of feeling at all rushed, we go to get the car part.

Back at the garage, as Dan replaces it, I start the ignition and she hums as usual. The time is 3:24pm.

“I should get to the meeting.”

I thank Dan and cannot help but sigh.

My Heart Is A Muscle

“Just be you.” He says as he raises his arms, placing a fist inside his other palm.

I bow and pull out of the garage, feeling myself moving ever closer to an event that will determine my future in a decisive way.

Chapter 41

The Decision Has Been Made

The late afternoon sun casts a golden sheen through the maple leaves brushing against the window. I came early and have been waiting alone in the boardroom on the top floor.

This is the same room where ~ five days ago ~ I...

My train of thought breaks as Keisha, one of the care coordinators who I have mentored for a long time, pops in to say Hi. She tries to look positive, but it feels like a strained performance.

I notice a stray thought that maybe she and everyone else is already aware of what's about to happen. I feel my nerves ratcheting up. Invisible threads of uncertainty and anticipation tighten inside me into a ball of tension. Soon to be unravelled. I hope.

She comes back with my favorite afternoon tea, mint and lemon. I'm touched by the gesture. That she remembers and got it for me without asking makes me feel taken care of.

"Good luck" she says, ducking out as Evelyn approaches with a thick leather folder.

I don't need luck. I remind myself. But, courage, to be true to myself and speak with integrity.

The owner has claimed the head of the table, nodding with her glasses down slightly and then claiming the seat.

I don't feel like forcing small talk, but the awkwardness between us builds, as she doesn't say anything.

John and Gary can be heard laughing in the hallway. As if there is no urgency for them, they saunter in tapering their banter and looking cool and collected. They sit at her side.

“Shall we get started?” Taking off her glasses austerely, she takes out two large envelopes.

I suspect one is a non-disclosure agreement and a severance package. The other? I’m not sure. My heart races with hope that it may be a way to allow me to stay while honouring my contribution going forward.

Placing her palms together, she points her cool eyes on me.

“Have you decided, then?”

I’m caught off guard by her brusque entry and punting the ball in my court. I expected her to frame this conversation and take charge. But, I guess this is good, right?

“I...”

Squeezing all the air out, slowly, I find my body taking a deep inhale.

“Consummate effort together.”

I say, looking her in the eyes. She looks like she doesn’t know what I’m talking about.

“Those were the words your father, Fred, had for me the first time we met.” I feel wistful as I remember him, “He had this way that was always warm and relaxed, yet also so deliberate and determined. It’s why I joined him here at Golden Years, twenty two years ago...”

The number still gets me.

“...Because I *trusted* him and how he ran things. I also know that he took a chance on me with my fancy degree, spreadsheets and big ideas...”

“Your point?” She cuts in, with a poker face. Gary reacts to her with unrestrained glee ~ as if she is a mad queen and I’m about to get my head chopped off.

I started, so may as well finish the thought.

“My point is that we grew to understand, respect and trust one another. You see, I learned from him how crucial it is to take the time to be with people we serve and to lay the foundation and build...”

I take in their stoic expressions, hoping to reach them.

“He’d often say,

‘It’s a thousand times easier to poop on the old thing. A hundred times easier to have a nice, shiny, new idea. To take what is there and to grow from that soil an oak tree, one that will take care of us *all* as we age, well that takes great care and a lifetime, maybe, *many* life times of **consummate effort together**.’”

“Consummate effort together.” John echoes. “I saw the T-shirts printed with an oak tree for the 50th celebration...” He nods along as if he gets what I am trying to say.

“That was twelve years ago, eight since he died and seven before any of you joined.”

Gary leans in, “The world has changed since the founder...” He is silenced by Evelyn raising her hand slightly.

“Finish your thought.” She says with clinical precision.

Am I hanging myself or getting through to any of them?

I don't know what else to do but lay all my cards out now. Clearing my throat I take my stand. "I would love nothing more than to continue to build on Fred's vision together with people I trust and respect."

"Well then," Her right eyebrow cocks up. She seems past any further patience, sliding the envelopes forward. "Here is the..."

This time, I interrupt raising a finger upwards, in a way Sensei Dan might do.

"The problem ~ for me ~ is that you three seated here, who are steering this organization neither seem to share this vision nor be worthy of my trust."

She looks at me blankly, devoid of any emotion. An empty shell. The air is electric with a charged silence.

"Well, that seals the coffin," She declares matter of factly, looking down and signing a document with a curled lip.

John turns red, "Actually. No. I see what you're trying to say, Bill. But, I take offence to the characterization. How ungrateful can you be after everything we've done? You talk about integrity, but..."

"Prove me otherwise." I respond calmly, sincerely hoping he will.

Instead, he stands up to try and hover over me, "None of what you've done here will be remembered as having anything to do with you. This is how..."

Evelyn talks coolly over him.

"Given your insubordinate attitude, we've prepared a severance package, with a binding non-disclosure agreement that needs to be signed within 48 hours. If we don't receive it by Monday morning, this offer will be invalidated."

My Heart Is A Muscle

She stares me down.

Gary raises his eyebrows, grinning, not hiding his feelings of superiority over me and being impressed with her swift bluntness.

I sigh and stand up. Walking over to the desk, I take the envelope and look down on them.

*Such small people thinking they wield power
but so cold, twisted and alone they each are.*

“You’ll be hearing from my lawyer.” I reply.

As I turn and walk out, leaving them behind me, a weight lifts off my shoulders and a feeling of tremendous relief washes over me.

I make my way through the building, saying bye to people I have worked shoulder to shoulder with, some for two decades. My feet seem lighter. I notice that my back ripples with a cool tingly feeling and my chest is warm and gushy.

Deep down, I had wished that they were coming to the table to really talk and be willing to meet me halfway, or even part way. But, I am glad that I did not compromise. My integrity is intact. I know it may sound grandiose, but I feel that I have just done something to save my own soul.

Seeing things as they really are and choosing where I stand is liberating, even if there is this loss. I am aware that a great ocean of sadness lays in my chest.

What will I do with all this grief?

What lies ahead of me?

I open the front door of the building. There’s a warm breeze. I hear birds chirping and now I know that I am really leaving this life behind me.

Chapter 42

Playing Back Our Life

“You’re not going to wear that, are you?”

I just spent a good hour, shaving, showering, and ironing a crisp shirt and my best suit.

“What? Why not?”

“Oh honey.” She comes in, squeezing me tight. I feel her leg wrap stealthily around my knees, making me buckle and fall backwards on the bed, our bodies pressed into one another’s.

We nuzzle and kiss.

“This is not the opera. And you’re free from the corporate world, remember?” She points out.

“Right.” I sigh, with relief, but there’s also this sense of emptiness.

She jumps up and goes to gather Julia.

A cluster of dread builds in my mid section as I get up and hang up my crisp outfit. I walk around the house in my underwear.

“*How are we gonna pay for all this?*”

The weight of a mortgage in Toronto, bills to care for dad’s ongoing care, Julia’s tutoring and therapy.

I’m in the kitchen puttering around, when I feel my wife’s hand rubbing my back, to soothe my worries. I give her a look and see her kind smile. A moment of silence between us says everything.

My Heart Is A Muscle

“We gotta go hun. I can’t be late.”

Rushing back to find some clothes, I find myself inhaling more easily, feeling better and better. My head is lightening up. I gulp a glass of water at the bedside.

Another deep inhale and reflexive sigh. “Ok.” I say to myself.

* * *

Two hours later, Julia and I are sitting in a theatre watching Jess on stage with her troupe. I turn to my girl a few times to take in her amazement, confirming that what we are seeing is real.

There’s an intense woman with white hair and a German accent, named Helga at center stage, who asks us in the audience to share some of our own impressions and stories.

I’ve never been to such an improv event in my life. The air feels electric with anticipation. And the people seem so friendly and warm, so far. I have been biting my tongue holding myself back a few times from responding.

Several people have already raised their hands and spoken. Each time they did, the actors and a couple of musicians turned what they said into a dramatic scene.

Jess tried to describe what we were about to see and be a part of, as we drove here in the car. It’s called Playback Theatre ~ a type of improv, where the point seems to be to make people’s true stories come to life, not to poke fun or just riff on, but to “play them back” in a way that reveals something deeper, more compelling and true. I didn’t get it when she explained it, but now...

My Heart Is A Muscle

“Wow! That was intense! Love it! Who’s got another feeling? Maybe a mixed one to share?” Says the elder host.

Julia raises her hand, stretching up high.

Helga points to her. Julia stands up and declares, “Well, I’m so proud of my dad!”

I feel my face flush with heat, wondering what she’s going to say next.

“Who just quit his job. So brave! And I guess I, uh, know he’s worried about money and all that but wish I could help him not worry so much cause we believe in him.”

I scan around the entire room of 50 people, noticing them all gazing at me as I sit next to her, I cover my face.

Helga’s voice booms to fill the room, “So... Julia. You feel proud of your father and it seems like you also want to reassure him. To show him how confident you are in him.”

Julia nods vigorously. It feels excruciating to hear the reflection. Wishing I could make the spotlight go away, I sigh in relief as the house lights dim.

A violin stirs some long mellow notes. A rhythmic shaker rattles in anticipation.

Jess steps forward into the spotlight, on stage, herself playing our daughter, with her hand on her chest and a fist up high, “I believe in you, daddy. You got this!”

As a steady and strong drumbeat is heard as another actor, a woman with frizzy hair comes in low, taking a knee and wrapping his arms around Jess, speaking with a gentler tone, “I know you carry the weight, it’s ok to share it sometimes.”

A tall and lanky black man in the cast then steps forward putting one hand on Jess’s shoulder while reaching with an open palm ahead, “I know you’re afraid. It surely takes guts to do this.”

My Heart Is A Muscle

The three actors form a moving scene together. Their emotion and the music accompanying it all peaks and crescendos as the scene ends.

Oh my god.

I just can't help the swell of emotion right now.

The actors, in a frozen position, re-animate and step back into a line. The house lights dim back up. I look at Julia who is beaming with joy, clapping like crazy and leaping on me to squeeze me tight.

"Thank you Julia. What an incredible faith you have in your father,"

I nod along, wiping back tears, recognizing the gift of her and Jess believing in me.

Helga continues, "We honour *all* stories and when someone tells one which involves another person in the audience, we offer you a chance to tell *your* story also."

The host is looking right at me. So is everyone else. I glance and see Jess on stage, winking at me with encouragement.

I wipe my face of tears and stand up, "Uh, this attention is overwhelming. The support of my wife and daughter... It's been incredible. I've always been a leader, I guess, but often alone chipping away at things, supporting everyone else from the background. Ugh..." I realize that I'm doing that thing where I've become a blubbering idiot, again, but I can't seem to stop the train. It feels like my mouth is too full of marbles which just need to be spat out.

I feel relief when Helga raises her hand to pause me. "This sounds like a wee bit of a longer story." She waves me forward to come up on stage. I look around at the crowd of people. All silently waiting. My heart starts thumping loudly in my chest.

I decline, edging to sit back down, but Helga entreats me, "No pressure, but you seem to have a longer story, and one worth telling." She spurs the audience who cheer me on, clapping more intensely.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Fuck it. May as well see where this can go...

The rest is a bit of a blur.

I don't remember how but I find myself sitting on stage, with lights in my tear strewn face.

"Please tell us the big events, the heart beats." She beckons.

I begin recounting the last five days.

Helga pauses me to name each one, as a chapter which they will play back.

"Chapter One.

The rug is pulled from under me"

They play the scene of my Monday, showing me trying to get to a place I call "my dream" but having my balance taken away three times. The work betrayal. Dad's coma. My marriage uncertainty.

When I spoke to it, I kept that last part discreet, only saying we were struggling.

As the troupe performs the scene, Jess plays herself, giving the actor playing me a daring shove, "Are you with me on this path or going your own way? Decide!"

Seeing the actor playing me, a man with a powerful stature, stunted, shocked, and then falling on his ass, as I did, really hits home for me.

I snicker and feel some lightness.

What a fool I can be.

And, some perspective which eases my judgment.

It was one blow after another.

The scene ends.

Helga asks me to describe what happened on Tuesday.

I relax into the chair. Somehow, this is the most vulnerable and exposing thing I have ever done and yet it feels ok, safe to continue to speak. I describe the next part of my week. It's a jumble that makes no sense in terms of facts or cause and effect, but I talk about Becca, Papa, Robert and all the confusion I felt.

“Chapter Two.

The Strange Man and The Dancing Ghost.”

They play the scene of me as I went to meet Robert for the first time, reluctant and angry. He is played by an older actor with white hair and a bemused smile.

Then, in a moment alone, Jess as Becca, comes out of the shadows dancing around me, while the rest of the troupe weave red scarves.

She whispers, “It’s up to you, brother. To wake up and help them!”

She disappears again.

“Is this for real... or am I losing my mind?” are the words they end the scene on.

Helga pauses and asks members of the audience, “Put up your hands if you’ve ever felt like *you* were crazy. Talking to trees, hearing voices, having unbelievable conversations with strangers on the street...?”

I swallow my saliva, expecting crickets. Gradually most of the people in the room shoot their hands up. A young woman stands up and starts sharing, but Helga asks her to wait till after my story ends. She defers graciously.

We continue on to Wednesday.

friendly and warm and wise and we had this *incredible* feast," I turn to see Julia in the audience exclaiming, "Yuuuummm!" Everyone laughs.

"And I didn't pay a cent. It was a gift..." More tears come, "For us, strangers. I can't describe how incredible this was."

"It sounds... if I may?" Helga checks in with me. I nod. "Like you had the feeling of being given an incredible gift. And maybe a sense of deep belonging. All the more profound, to be coming from people you just met."

I can't hold back the gush of joyful tears.

One of the actors, the black man, steps forward. All of a sudden, I recognize him from the men's group, feeling embarrassed for forgetting his name.

He raises his hand and speaks, "Uh. If I may... Lawrence. Here. We met recently. And I gotta say, it takes courage to be telling a story and a whole lot of balls for me, as a man, to let myself share the wellspring of emotion that is flowing from you right now, brother. I honour you for that. Peace."

He bows and steps back into the line of actors.

After a moment, Helga stands and asks us all to do so as well, taking a long and slow breath, to "Let us savour the richness of this meal. Being here and now together in a dark room with people who an hour earlier were mostly *strangers* and now we are here together feeling the incredibly delicate fabric of life connecting us all. Sounds woowoo. But we can feel it's real, can't we?" She asks.

Many heads nod.

She pivots turning back to me.

"AND... The show must go on. I am just on pins and needles wanting to know what happens next, Bill."

I continue to go over my week...

“Chapter Four Time for Healing”

A scene of me at dad’s bedside. Two women play Jess and Julia across from me, laying hands over his comatose body.

The ghost of Becca returns, dancing into the space with a red scarf. Whispering as she brushes past my actor, “You can help him heal too.”

The man playing me turns around and shakes his head, “I don’t know. I can’t...”

“Yesssss. You can, if you choose to heal yourself...”

I don’t recall that happened that way. The events are out of order.

But somehow what they are doing on stage feels accurate. It’s like they condensed it all to make more sense.

Suddenly, everyone leaves as the stage is left bare with just the actor playing me huddled and curled up in center stage.

Two actors playing Owen and Alexandra, enter. They’re wearing white angel wings. It makes me chuckle. *I guess they were like that.* Makes me want to see them again, to see if they were real.

Owen comes from behind and cradles the head of the actor playing me as he lays back. Alexandra lifts his feet. The rest of the actors come in to help carry him.

Holy shit, they must be in good shape to do that!

Then, it hits me. The most obvious though.

That’s *me* on stage.

That’s *exactly* how I felt that day. Carried by the grace of others. It’s really amazing to see

something I could barely put into words brought to life like this.

“Chapter Five

Not Dead Yet. Now What?”

A scene of me at dad’s bedside. He suddenly wakes up and starts dancing. The actor playing me joins him, shrugging, looking confused and in pleasant shock.

Dad dances off stage and I’m left alone, looking at all the broken shards of my life, picking up the pieces on stage as different coloured ripped shreds of fabric.

The actor playing me tries, yet fails to put the pieces back together.

The old man playing Robert returns.

Again, this is not what happened, today, but somehow it feels true, that he’s been with me, guiding me and helping me all along.

He takes the pieces and we use them to build a fire together.

I feel teary eyed. Deeply grateful to him. I wish he was here to see this.

The actor playing me is staring at the fire, with a half smile, rubbing his hands,

“They say that a man is the product of his choices.”

Jess steps out of the shadows and speaks, “They say you can’t love someone and control them at the same time.”

The man playing Sensei Dan appears in the background, “They say it is up to each of us to be the change we wish to see in the world...”

My Heart Is A Muscle

Robert speaks around the fire, "And in our relationships... like a beating muscle, the heart transforms what was once dead, pumping in new life. All this flexing and sometimes struggle gives us the rich blood we need to keep living and loving more fully."

The scene ends with the actor playing me nodding with deep realization, closing his eyes and holding his hands over his chest, miming the beating of his heart.

The lights go back on.

The audience is silent at first, then bursting into a blaze of applause as people stand up to give their ovation.

After a lot of clapping, Helga reigns it in.

"What do you call this story... that has not ended, yet?"

I consider for a moment the absurdity of trying to title your life but blurt out anyway, "My heart is a muscle."

Laughter and cheers. Someone whips and whistles in the back.

Helga's smiles at me and turn to the crowd, "And it's only Friday. I wonder what the weekend will bring?"

I feel abuzz with an incredible sensation. Of being seen and heard and *honoured* in a way I could have never imagined. Like being given the best gift in the world and one I didn't even realize I longed for so deeply. Maybe, I would have rejected this kind of experience, before. But now I am reveling in it so grateful and satisfying, sitting back down with Julia and letting it all sink in.

A thought crosses my mind.

Where does my story end...?

It doesn't. Not yet.
Remember, you asked
to stay here...

I smile. A sense of knowing why I am here,
blossoms slowly inside me like a flower opening up for
the first time.

...at least until Sunday...

Gulp. I swallow my saliva. Of course I want to
stay.

But will you let me?

I don't hear any response from Papa. I reassure
myself,

*It doesn't have to end. I still have lots to
figure out... unravelling the knots... how to proceed...
big unknown... who am I? How can it all just stop?*

You know who you are.
You know why you're here.

Finally he speaks.

Yes. I do. I... just don't know what comes next!

Papa doesn't say anything else.

I feel unnerved by the clock ticking. Suddenly I
have this sense that all of this is even more precious.
But I also feel his smile. Like he knows it's pointless

to comfort and reassure me and or teach me anything either.

As I look over at Julia and squeeze her hand, a sense of trust surrounds me like a blanket.

Robert comes to mind.

I wonder where he is tonight. I wonder if he knows these people also. Probably. I hear his voice whisper in my mind, remembering what he told me earlier.

"Keep walking the path... and trust that it will reveal itself with each step..."

I tune back into the room. Two more stories are told after mine.

One of a mother whose son was murdered and how she has dedicated her life to singing and raising money for at-risk youth to honour his memory.

Wow, I can't help but compare how my story is so trivial, perhaps, next to hers. But, then again, it's my story and I cherish being able to live it and tell the tale.

The next and last story of the night comes from a young girl, Julia's age, who has a chronic illness. But, the story is not dark or even about her treatments and prognosis. She talks instead about seeing the beauty and joy in every moment. I can see Julia's eyes light up.

To close the evening, Helga asks us to, "Take another breath, let the feelings come and go like waves. Sometimes, like the famous poet Rumi would say,

'the world is too full to talk about...'"

After another silence. "Let us bring this evening together to a close, by taking a moment to consider the stories *not* told tonight. Whose voice was not heard?"

My Heart Is A Muscle

She gestures to the actors and musicians, stepping into the shadows. "Let's watch!"

The actors go up one at a time.

When it's Jess's turn to step forward, she pauses and looks right at me, "Once upon a time, there was a wife who dared her husband to open his heart. She was terrified to do whatever it might take, even if she might have to leave him."

A shudder goes through me.

Julia whistles and whoops. I didn't know she knew how.

Seeing Jess up there, bearing her heart, playing back other stories, and being surrounded by such talented actors and musicians breaks my own heart wide open, again.

She's so brave. And to think, five days ago, I was feeling so threatened by her courage and realness, so frozen and stuck in myself. What an incredible life. I weep again, with joy.

I don't want it to end.

Chapter 43

Middle of the Night

Asleep, in total darkness and satisfied exhaustion, something is shaking me.

I roll over.

The lights are off, but the full moon casts an eerie light on the silhouette of Jess sitting up in bed next to me.

She's mumbling something.

I touch her knee and ask, "What? What's that, hon?"

Her voice cracks and then becomes very strange, deeper and calmer, yet almost emotionless.

"Keep TRUSTING... big opportunity coming soon..."

She rotates her neck, cracking her spine.

"Becca says, "Thank you and sweet dreams, bro. You did good."

She then rotates her face upward to face the ceiling and then bows downwards, nodding slowly, her voice getting even deeper.

"Papa misses you and winks."

Her head is now shaking side to side, slowly. After a silence and as if she is deliberating whether to speak,

"Says that Robert is leaving, very soon..."

My mouth makes a gulp. "When?" I ask her.

My Heart Is A Muscle

She falls back, suddenly. I lean over and nudge her. She's snoring.

Was this an act? A weird joke?

Not her style. A shiver goes through me.

Sleep talking?

I lay back, dazzled by the strangeness of what just occurred. Then it sinks in. Nothing this week seems ordinary or expected.

I don't need to figure it out. Not now.

So tired.

Thoughts defragment in my mind as I close my eyes...

When?

When is he leaving?

Who?

Robert.

Where is he going?

zzzzzzz

My Heart Is A Muscle

Saturday

When it starts
to all sink in...



My Heart Is A Muscle

Chapter 44

Waffles and Sea Legs

I must have been really needing to rest, not setting my alarm and having slept in till 7:30am. I know it's Saturday, but I make a point to not mess up my rhythm on the weekends.

I sit up, stretch like a cat and feel fucking great.

My girls are still asleep.

After more of my morning routine, I start whisking up a bowl of waffle batter.

Julia comes into the kitchen first, her hair disheveled and face asleep, like a bear coming out of a cave. A very adorable one in my view.

"Wazz going on?" She mumbles.

"I'm making waffles." I reply jovially.

"Hmmm. Good." She gives a thumb up and wanders off.

Half an hour later, Jess is up and exclaiming, "I'm starving!"

Julia echoes, "Meee tooo!"

They want me to come back to bed. As usual, wanting to suck me into our "Saturday Snuggle Vortex".

The table is set out on the deck. The waffles and blueberry sauce are kept warm for us, while the yogurt is staying chilled.

Why not!?

My Heart Is A Muscle

I jump into bed with them and we snuggle together for another half hour. Singing songs and being a lovey dovey family.

I fall asleep.

After what feels like a wink, my eyes open again.

The bed is empty.

I wander about and find Jess is pouring tea at the dining room table.

Julia slaps my bum. "Was about to get you sleepy butt, before we devoured this delicious brunch."

"Brunch?"

"It's 10am." Jess snickers.

"Today must be opposite day!" I exclaim, throwing my hands up, smiling.

We settle in and dig into the food.

They toasted the waffles before bringing them out, making them perfectly crispy on the outside and chewy on the inside. Just how I like them.

Mmmm.

"How was your night, darling?"

I look at both of them. Jess is distracted by her phone, responding to a text it looks like.

Julia offers, "Oh, weird dreams. Was I sleepwalking?"

"I don't think so. When you do, I usually notice, but I was knocked out cold all night, *except...*" I can't resist, ribbing Jess as I notice her putting the phone down. "Your mom was quite the psychic medium last night." I lock eyes with her, as she flashes surprise, "Don't you remember, hon, you sounded as if you were channeling..."

She looks at me blankly.

"You really don't remember?"

She shakes her head, with a disconcerted scowl. "Uh. Please don't put me on. That's kinda creepy. I know I'm becoming a decent actor, but that I could be possessed and *not* even remember..." She shudders.

"What did she say?" Of course, Jules the curious cat, cannot resist.

I weigh whether to share more, at the moment. Jess looks at me also dying to know.

"Something about... well three things. Four actually." I suddenly remember the words and tone clearly, "Keep trusting. More opportunities are coming soon...."

"That's awesome advice, dad!"

"I guess so. No job to go back to in a couple of days. New beginnings. Need to trust. Yeah..."

Jess squeezes my hand to reassure me. "Are you sure you didn't dream up me saying what you needed to hear?" She shrugs and smiles softly.

"No. I was wide awake. And you were in a trance..."

"What else?" Julia leans forward with her fork up in the air, demanding more info!

"Uh. Becca. That's my sister. She died when I was younger... She sent her well wishes. And..."

Her jaw drops. I guess it is pretty monumental to hear you had an aunt you never met and your dad was talking to her ghost.

I suddenly feel self conscious. "Papa misses me. Winking..."

They both speak at once, "Dad?" "Grandpa?"

"Uh. No, I call my father either dad or Teddy. Well now he wants me to call him Frank. You know that I saw him yesterday? He's doing unbelievably great."

"When do we get to see him?" Jules tugs.

My Heart Is A Muscle

“Later today, perhaps.” Jess winks at her. Before I can inquire, they shoot me a look, with furrowed brows.

“Who’s papa?”

I stumble with my words and bite my lower lip. “Ok, so I talk to... uh... a higher power, ok?! He’s just there. I call him Papa. When I...” I don’t want to scare Julia with the fainting spell, heart attack, brain pop, whatever that was that was cleared by the hospital. “He calms me down and I feel less alone. Anyway...”

I shift the focus, feeling relieved to talk about my imaginary friend briefly, noticing there’s no judgment and wanting to tell them about the last part, “Also, that Robert was going away, soon...”

“Who said that?” Jess asked.

“You did. You did, last night, saying Papa told you so and you were passing it on, I guess.”

She crosses her arms and leans back. “Weird.” Sighing in resignation.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, Jules?”

“Can I ask you something?”

I nod, “Of course. You don’t need to ask me if you can ask me something. Shoot!”

“Uh. I think Robert is dying.”

Her words hit me as if I walked into a brick wall.

“What?! How? Why would you think or say that?”

“I have a feeling.” She stares at me matter of fact. Her lips purse, in sympathy for me?

Jess mulls this over. “He did mention once that he has lung cancer. Been battling it for a while...”

I let that sink in.

Jess's face registers pain, nodding while grabbing my hand and Julia's.

"I'm sorry." Jules says and both of them lean in close to console me.

My head spins, as if waking from a knockout blow and also clearing the cobwebs of a deep sleep. I turn to look at my daughter and I see the emergence of a mature woman in her eyes. This girl of 12, going on 13, speaks with more wisdom, courage and honesty than most adults I know.

I swallow saliva. "I don't know, honey. I guess I will... ask him."

Making a mental note to contact Robert as soon as we're done brunch. I'm caught in a web of emotion. Feel like giving myself a few minutes to digest all this info.

Jess pours us fresh tea, smells like mint, licorice and orange rinds.

"I have an announcement also," She perks up straight and declares, "I want us to be a family that dares to do what really calls us and scares us too. I want us to travel and world school."

"Wow! I love it mom! Where should we go first?"

I feel like spitting out my tea as I put my mug down. Gulp it down.

"Uh. Do you mean taking a vacation?"

"More of a leave. A sabbatical, hon."

I try to temper my shock and deep worry that is indented, undoubtedly, on my face by asking questions to grapple with it.

"What's this... uh... worldschooling?"

"Learning by travelling and living all over the world." She sees my terror, no doubt, "There's a whole community of parents and kids, already doing it and sharing about their adventures..."

My Heart Is A Muscle

"I can show you." She takes a deep inhale, dramatically, as if encouraging us to follow her lead, "No matter what we do, it'll be time for us all to grow some sea legs," she adds with her fist pumping in the air as she cocks her head, reminding me of a pirate.

"Huh?" Julia perks up.

"That's a sailing metaphor." I add, feeling completely off kilter.

"Yeah, babe. I learned it in improv class actually... you know I fear water... maybe I should actually take up sailing! Ha. Maybe not. But, the idea is that we cannot control the waves of the ocean or even the current of life, that is meant to take us where we need to go. All we can do is develop sea legs to roll with it all."

Door knock.

I turn my head, surprised.

Jess exclaims, getting up and running to the door, "Oh, Sarah and Bob are here. Early!"

Chapter 45

The Garden of Lasting Love

“Oh don’t worry about us. We come fed. Ready to give you something, today. Remember, dear?”

Jess is at the door welcoming them.

I’m shoving an entire waffle into my mouth.

Bob calls out to us poking his head in. “No rush, please take your time. Savour the moments, Bill! We’ll meet you out back...”

I feel embarrassed being taken off guard and seen like this. Ok with it, I guess. The two are old friends of Jess’ who we haven’t seen in ages. I like them also.

Bob is a retired therapist, an old goat with lots to say, full of wit and kindness. Sarah is a frizzy haired witch of sorts, even sweeter than Bob. The two are a couple who Jess looks up to as role models for how she wishes us to become, as we grow old together.

I didn’t know they were coming over. At times, I have felt them too kind and relaxed and happy together.

Is it real? Or are they just like that in public?

I suspect so, but *is it even possible for us?*

Wiping my hands, I go out to meet Jules and Jess, who are already chatting them up in our backyard.

“Never too late to reinvent yourself.” Bob proclaims.

Did they tell him my predicament?

My Heart Is A Muscle

He winks at me.

Sarah chimes in, “Yes, indeed. So we don’t do retirement very well and travelling gets boring. That is why we’re here today. To show you our latest reinvention of ourselves, and what we want to offer the world next...”

Bob coughs and seems to complete her sentence, “...Jess here thought you all would be a ready and willing test audience. How about it?”

I nod along. Relieved that I don’t have to get into my story with them. Not that I feel ashamed. Not feeling that embarrassing sting or desire to hide intensely anymore. Just nice to *not* have to talk about all the unknowns.

“Settle in everyone.” Bob sits next to Sarah on the garden path as the three of us squeeze into the special bench I made together for Jess and I.

Sarah digs her hands into a garden bed. Pulling out soil which she squeezes between her hands, with relish and joy. Turning to us. “Well, we have this ‘work’ we want to share with the world and I guess it all comes down to gardening as a metaphor for Love. Real Love. Lasting Love which grows over time. It’s not a one time event. It’s a labour of love, just like tending a garden that needs daily care.”

She goes on to eloquently describe the many parallels between gardening and tending to relationships. I keep mental notes for myself. Making a list helps me organize and stay focused. Also keeps me from daydreaming too much...

1. **Weeds** in the garden are like those **negative habits** in relationships like blaming or finding fault with each other. They just grow on their own, unless we regularly notice and pull them out, and not let them take over and crowd one another.

This reminds me. I read somewhere that blame lights up the same part of the brain as cocaine.

But how do we weed out negative criticism and blame?

The experience of Robert in the garden with Jess and I on Thursday comes to mind. I want to text or call him now. But don't want to be rude and interrupt...

2. It's also **easy to neglect** "the garden" ~ like forgetting to check in, hiding parts of ourselves and avoiding each other with phones. When we neglect to water our relationships, they begin to wilt. We feel lonely and hungry.

Julia interjects about her friends, sharing about some of the challenges of staying connected. I'm struck and heartened by how she tends to her friendships, a more faithful and diligent gardener than I have been.

3. Also, there is the insidious challenge of **going on "autopilot"**. Just mechanically watering and being dutiful is not enough. In friendships and love, we need to show up and be spontaneous, follow our whims, delighting in the "magic" of what's happening...

I could use help with that!

4. **The consequences** of neglect, autopilot and not keeping negative patterns in check are subtle, yet accumulate over time. Bottom line, when we forget to tend the garden daily, it dies. The best parts wilt, nasty pests flourish and we get the overgrowth of what we don't want.

Eventually, I clear my throat and spit out, "This is rich soil. Pun intended. A lot of wisdom here, Sarah and Bob. I just have one question that keeps burning in my mind." I look at them to see if they are open to it. Sarah's eyes light up nodding. Bob crosses his arms and beams a broad smile.

"Who is this for? I mean it's really needed by EVERYONE... but who is your ideal audience?"

"Ha!" Bob exclaims, "That's where we need *your* particular feedback, Bill! Oh maestro of business planning and all around great marketing guy!"

I stumble, taken off guard by the high praise, chuckling, "Not everyone would agree, but thanks. Uh. I have a few ideas, but how about we each take a crack at it, first."

"Sounds like crowdsourcing. Brilliant!" Bob shoots back.

After a moment of everyone looking at each other, Sarah breaks the silence. "I guess... This is a path to finding our own rhythm. As women we often attune to everyone else's tempo and needs. I can imagine many women who already love gardening..."

"Or, who want to learn," Jess adds. I know she thinks of herself as a gardening novice but she has a green thumb. I squeeze her shoulder.

Sarah catches my look and comments to Jess, "I do have to say, dear, the way you tend this patch of land is quite amazing. The variety and vibrancy, well, it just feels so good to be here, surrounded by the love you've put into it all."

Jess gushes back. She rushes off to bring some refreshing tea, made from herbs in our garden. My favorite ones in fact: mint, lemon verbena and anise hyssop.

We drink together. A smattering of "Ahhhhhs". Sooo refreshing. After more appreciations are given to all, we resume the conversation.

Bob strokes his white gristle, "For me, it's about restoring our connection to our own true natures... The science of connection is one of moment to moment... tending a garden... daily habits..."

He shoots me a look, "Oh yeah, you asked about the *who*... Well, I would say there'd be some men who are in the deep end so to speak. Married for a while and wanting to refresh, deepen and enliven their bond." He turns to Sarah and squeezes her hand beaming.

"Can I take a stab... or offer a seed?" Julia lifts a finger shyly.

"Please do!" We encourage her.

"I would say that this would also be pretty awesome for kids and teens also, but they're not so into gardening, though I totally am..."

"You love eating from it!" I exclaim, teasing her.

"Hey, she helps out more than you do!" Jess elbows me playfully.

"Yeah, dad!" She rolls her eyes at me while smiling, "Anyway, I could see it as an app, too."

Sarah's eye brows shoot up and Bob strokes his chin considering.

Julia leans in to explain, "You know, like it's really about Friend-Tending. And you take care of your friend garden..."

"Virtually?" Bob muses.

She is so clear and confident in her idea, "Yes, because everyone is on there and it's like sending messages. Keeping track of birthdays and important things going on in their lives..."

Sarah looks about to burst, "Why that's brilliant, Julia dear! I'm not sure that we - at our advanced age - have the savvy or patience to build it, but I think that would be marvelous... Think of the impact that would make on so many kids and teens feeling more connected and close to one another!"

“Life changing!” Bob declares, then turning aside to me. “Did you know your daughter had a gift for business *and* innovation, as much as you, Bill?”

“Oh, she blows me away with her brilliant ideas!” I reply, as it sinks in again that she is actually growing up. Not just full of wonder and bright ideas, but tech savvy and so aware of her peers.

Jess offers, “I love all of these ideas. The one for women of course speaks to me.” She squeezes my shoulder now, encouraging me, “What was your idea, Bill?”

“Hmm. Well. There’s two ways to go. One is going big and wide. Offer this as a general salve, scaling it to reach millions of people with videos, apps, with the brand of Lasting Love or something like that. With you two at the centre of it all, as the role models and ‘experts’.”

Sarah looks uneasy. Bob looks at her pensively and scoffs at the notion. “Does stroke my ego quite a bit, but not really our thing...”

“I’d say we don’t have the stomach or energy for that also, dear.”

They nod in agreement. “What’s the other way?”

“Small, local, down to earth. You work one-to-one and in small groups. At least at first. No ads. All word of mouth. A special club you find and join through people you trust. Not my area of expertise, but something I want to learn more about.”

“Sounds lovely and up to our speed.” Sarah nods.

“Yes, indeed. And the *who*?” Bob nods back to me.

“That’s the part I think you might want to test out more. One possibility... Bob, when you used to practice as a therapist, I remember you telling me how much couples and families needed much more holding and care than usual therapists knew how or could provide.”

“Right.”

“Well, maybe, this is something you offer families and couples who are struggling or looking for deeper connection. And you invite them for tea, have them dig in your garden...”

“Or ours.” Jess throws in.

“Really?!” Sarah looks astonished.

“Oh please. We’d... I’d love it.” Jess throws in. She checks my expression.

I consider it and nod in agreement. “Why not?”

“Of course! You live on the West side. That’s a whole other world. We can and would *love* to host you here.” She offers.

“The other niche that I could think of...” Not wanting to overload them with more ideas but buzzing with this one, “Well, I bet this kind of work takes precious time for you both and so who else might really crave and appreciate it – as much as we do? I’m thinking about people who are caring, helping types, nurses, teachers, caregivers, therapists...”

Jess leans in, “Of course, as a kind of *real* selfcare!”

“Also as private and intimate mentoring from a seasoned couple...” I nod to them.

“We have wisdom and experience in spades.” Bob muses proudly. “I could see that paying for the yacht I’ve been wanting...” He slaps his knee guffawing.

“Ok, but, whatever you do, I want to build the app!” Julia offers.

We laugh and a boisterous conversation erupts about the possibilities. The feeling of synergy between us all and where this is going is dazzling to me.

I step aside, making an excuse to go to the bathroom, and walk to the side of the house, pulling out my phone. A heaviness grips me.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I can't believe it. Is it true?

Yes.

You mean he's dying?

Yes.

But, aren't we all?

Yes. Robert is
leaving you. Soon.

The calm and certain voice of Papa, makes it
sink in even more.

My legs buckle and I lean against the brick,
texting the old man.

Can I speak with you today?

Sure. Come meet us tonight.

Where?

The Mount Pleasant Cemetery.
South East entrance.

Ok. When?

Sundown. 8ish.

I'll be there.

I taste blood in my palette. Iron? A sense of things quickening. Dad is alive but Robert is dying. Soon?

My head shakes not wanting it to be true. As I walk back to the group, I muse about the end of my career at Golden years. Another death of sorts. But, here before me is a new opportunity. How easily and naturally I want to help others to bring their work out into the world. I may still be good at it. Maybe, I can even find a way to feed the family. Allow us to travel...

That shiver of fear ripples through me again.

Crazy to imagine a whole new life.

I tune back into the conversations.

"Well, dear, helping to feed ourselves and our loved ones without consuming more crap we don't need, burning oil, or leaving any waste is a form of activism..." Sarah is telling Jess.

I'm skeptical of any talk of social activism and critiques of capitalism, but Jess seems heartened by that, her eyes softening and getting moist as Sarah pats her knee with care.

Bob slaps me on the back, "There you are... You know, this teaches us men to bow with grace to the earth to accept her influence... leads to our love deepening, aging like a great wine.... fuller in body and soul."

My mind reels. "Sounds like hippie talk, Bob. But, I like the wine part!" I shoot back.

Jules shouts from across the garden, "Guess who's here?!"

I turn to see who is there.

Daren and dad?

And that nurse, Angel?

A drunken type of feeling takes over. Seeing everyone all together in our garden. It's surreal for me

to see all these worlds colliding. I'm used to keeping different people and parts of my life in separate boxes.

My brain can barely compute.

"How? When? What?"

Dad comes over and squares my face with his palms, kissing me on each cheek, twice.

Yes. That just happened.

"Always the head of the family. You always need to know." Dad nods at me and throws his hands up in the air dramatically, "Well, I said, if I am all tickety boo, why on earth would I stay a minute more to mooch off of the government taking up a bed there. But I also ain't going back to the dungeon for elders to die in! Ha! No sir!"

Daren puts dad in a headlock and lovingly gives him a kiss on the head, "I love this man. Re-made. Newly awakened. Can you believe it?"

I shake my head. No, I still cannot.

Dad erupts with more passion, as Julia squeezes him tightly. He speaks as if juiced up on a drug, "So, then! Daren comes in with his fat cheque book and asks me what I want. What a life!"

He then pats Angel on the back. Angel smiles and goes on to explain how they got here, "Uh. Dr. Greenleaf was nervous to let him go, unless he had a bit more care for the next week. And, to be honest, I was looking for an excuse to take a vacation." Looking at Daren who winks, "So, it all worked out."

I'm not going to question it. Dad looks more vibrant and alive than I ever have seen him. And I trust that Dr. Greenleaf must have checked him thoroughly.

But, they wouldn't have conspired the three of them and broken him out, would they?

No. Angel would look nervous and confess, his career and ethics on the line. I fully dismiss the notion, as my mind's automatic way of thinking like a criminal. Yes, I do that at times. Might as well 'fess up to everything to you.

"So... what's going on?" I ask, still not clear about why they all came together and are standing here.

Bob and Sarah interrupt my inquiry. They embrace dad and exchange well wishes. "Sorry to be ditching the party. We best be going..."

"...Have a few more friends to hit up today." Sarah adds.

"...And a nap to get in there, too!" Bob proclaims, seeming to be ready for one now.

We all hug and see them off.

I go to take Daren aside, but "my girls", Jules and Jess, surround him and exchange conspiratorial looks. Julia notices I feel left out of the loop and wraps herself around my arm, "Darling, we didn't talk about it but Uncle Daren, Julia and I, we were hoping you'd..."

"Let go of being a control freak!" Daren bursts in.

Jess elbows him to shush it. "To trust us a little and let us take you on an adventure."

"Ooooh, I love it!" Frank exclaims, obviously not in on the planning.

Angel at his side, agrees, "My week is booked to follow you wherever you take us."

Jess smiles, shooting up her eyebrows, invitingly. Jules squeezes harder, looking up with her big eyes.

Although I have tended to hate surprises - especially this week - we've made no plans and I find no logical reason to decline.

"O...k...?"

My Heart Is A Muscle

I throw my hands up to show I'm willing to go with it, sensing the good vibe from everyone. Feeling a tingling of excitement and also sensing like I'd be a major party pooper if I said no.

We head into two cars, and there is a nervous smile plastered on my face.

Chapter 46

Playful Detours

“Wow! It’s so free up there!” Julia exclaims, holding the tether for the kite that we’ve launched.

It feels like we’re a thousand miles away from our life, as we stand on a grassy knoll, on “the island”, just a ferry ride from the hazy smog scene of downtown Toronto. Surrounded by the great Lake Ontario, an endless horizon of water and sky, the wind is especially strong.

“I’m so impressed, dad!” Julia beams at me.

“Why?”

“Cause we’ve never done this before and you’re so... patient.”

I smile, musing to myself, as always, she is so perceptive and right.

She hands me the spool and gives me a tight squeeze, running down the field as she sees her cousin Brida and her family arriving.

Left holding the string, I crane my neck and am genuinely dazzled also by how our kite is over a hundred feet up in the air. It looks like a tiny bird hovering so high above us. I’ve never actually done this before, flown a kite. I guess I never thought I had the time.

Maybe good things do come to those who wait...

As soon as I think that, I spot a bird of prey – a hawk or eagle – gliding closer and circling it.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Jess comes and wraps herself around me from behind, silently like some kind of loving ninja.

I share my wonder, "I didn't even do this when I was a kid."

She affirms with a humm. "I like you better when you're relaxed and playful."

"Meee too..." I concede.

She whispers in my ear, "I have a surprise for you..."

"OMG! Uncle Bill! Auntie Jess! My faves!"

Brida is upon us. She's such a bright and shiny type of girl. A head taller than Julia and dressed in silver, a reflective fabric head to toe. The sunlight bounces off of her and is almost blinding. Looking closer, I notice her hair has been dyed silver and her skin is covered in sparkles.

We greet her. "Well, hey there, birthday girl and our favorite..."

"Only" shoots Julia with a broad smile.

"...Niece!"

Jess leans in to whisper in my ear completing her invitation, "I'll take you there later."

Strangely, Brida wraps herself around my free hand and flutters her eyelashes dramatically. "Uncle Bill, Uh. I heard you were good at climbing..."

I look around bewildered by who would say that about me.

She's staring right at me and I am genuinely confused, not used to her doing so, as she often is the center of attention herself. "Uncle Bill, I wanted at my 12 year celebration to go on LOTS of adventures one on one with people I love and so while everyone is setting up, I wonder if you would join me on one, right now?"

I rarely have a moment with my niece. She is a bit of an alien to me and also something about her always captivates me. Seeing how she draws a crowd and

My Heart Is A Muscle

how magical it is to be around her, she might be the most charismatic, unpredictable and mysterious person I have ever met. I imagine her one day becoming a pop celebrity. Her mom told me I should check out her youtube channels as she's going "viral" but I haven't yet.

All my thoughts burst like a bubble as she looks at me again, expectantly, "Uncle Bill? Earth to Uncle Bill. Are you there?"

Her charm is disarming.

"How can I say no?"

Chapter 47

Swinging Boughs

Moving like a monkey climbing a tree, Brida is nimble, quick and a good ten feet above me.

“This is my favorite one here...”

She keeps moving, without needing to catch her breath, like I do.

“It goes the highest.” She explains.

As I look down from the massive fir tree I am clinging to, I start to feel vertigo and nausea creeping in.

This is not what I bargained for.

“Are you ok? Uncle?”

Sigh. “Yeah.” I’m glad she noticed but also embarrassed, putting on a confident face. Remembering my years of rock climbing – indoors and with a harness.

Don’t look down.

Look around and up.

I wonder why she invited me on this crazy climb. I never told her I was fearless or oblivious to getting dizzy from heights.

Maybe no one else is foolish enough to do this.

My hand touches sticky pine sap. I pull away, not liking that feeling on my skin. Distracted, my right foot reaches for a branch and misses, slipping, hanging in the air. I grab a broken stump of a branch with the sticky hand.

Always have three points of contact at all times!

Good reminder and life lesson my climbing buddy Kevin taught me back in my twenties.

Needing to re-learn it! I haven't stayed in touch with him or any good friends. Where has the time gone? Must change that and reach out...

My attention is scattered.

Focus, Bill. Stay here now.

"Are we there yet?" I huff and puff, whining playfully.

She giggles and I'm not sure if she is laughing at me or that I am foolish enough to follow her up this incredibly tall tree.

As we get higher up, the branches narrow. Brida slides between them easily like a thread being woven. But I get stuck. Looking outwards, I see just how high we are. Except for a second pine on my left, we've cleared above the nearby trees. I see the lake and an endless horizon. It eases me to look ahead, not down. Another sigh.

All of a sudden, I feel Brida shifting her weight above me and I sense the trunk of the tree swaying, heaving us backwards.

Shit!

Cold fear shoots up my spine, my palms and pits wet with sweat instantly.

I pull myself in closer, grabbing and wrapping myself around the trunk.

"Weeeeh!"

Seeing us both toppling down a hundred feet slamming through branches breaking every bone, and hitting the ground, to our deaths, flashes through my mind. Everyone huddled around our bodies, thinking it was my fault. The adult who let it happen!

"Jump!" She calls down to me.

“What?!”

“To the sister tree.”

She leans left, making our tree sway towards the other pine tree next to us. She grabs onto a branch pulling it in closer. I feel totally off balance and terrified.

I think I grasp what she means. The second pine tree is a bit thicker at its trunk and the branches are more sparse. But, can I actually make it across and find purchase?

“I want to stay on this one.” She says in a calm matter of fact way, “You go on the other.”

Brida has always taken charge. Bossy girl. I’m kinda grateful and impressed. And my pride stings a bit to have her direct me.

“Yeah, it’s not great for us both to die.” I rationalize as my way of accepting her plan.

“Silly uncle. I won’t die and you don’t have to either. Just hop over.”

Ok. I get it. She’s got a good point. But as I reach through to the second pine’s branches to grab the trunk, I fall short.

“It’s too far...”

She leans more to help me. I hear the wood creaking now.

“Wooah!”

I don’t want to risk our weight and the angle cracking the tree we are on, yet the six or so feet between the two trunks seems too much of a gap still.

As if sensing my apprehension and the risk, Brida lets go of the other tree, sending us rebounding rightward.

Another creak!

She coaches me, as we start to swing back leftward, “Ok, ready... set... Go!”

My Heart Is A Muscle

I jump and grab for the branches, but suddenly I sense them slipping through my fingers. The stickiness of my left palm helps me secure a hold. But, my legs slip underneath and I am falling down. Grabbing for whatever I can, my left thigh collides against a solid branch. I hook my leg over it, spinning around sideways, about to go upside down, but catch myself by slamming against my left ribs. Umf.

As this new tree also bows with my weight, I lean in to tackle the trunk, holding on for dear life.

My face is buried in this sticky sap covered bark, glad to be hugging something solid.

A big sigh and inhale...

“Oh. My. You ok?”

Shit.

“Wow. Yeah. I’m alive. All in one piece. Just need a minute.”

I close my eyes, remembering the breathing technique Dan taught me. Been using it a lot.

Exhaling everything, out of my lungs and belly. Holding still, emptied, until my body “breathes itself” inhaling on its own so deeply and fully. Doing it three times, I feel a calm settling in.

Papa?

Yes, Bill.

Am I going to die?

Yes... But not today.

I was about to ask. It’s like you read my mind.

I’m always with you.

My Heart Is A Muscle

A half smile forms on my face. It may be crazy to trust this voice inside me, but it sure makes me feel better to do so.

Righting myself, I adjust to the way the tree flexes with the wind and my weight at this height. I'm reminded of Jess talking about developing sea legs, just a few hours ago. Swaying, I see Brida has climbed down, to be at eye level. She looks concerned and tender. I clear my throat.

"Uh, Brida. I'm... really scared." I lock eyes with her, "But also grateful that you invited me up here. Thank you."

"Thank you, uncle Bill. This is my secret place. I wanted you to see."

She turns her head.

I'm touched by her trust in me.

Looking out again, I see the vast water glistening, a ship with many sails on the horizon and the people down below and can't help but feel awe. Our two trees are swaying now more gently with the rhythm of the wind. There is a beauty and grace to this moment.

"This is where I go to be free..."

"Why me?" I ask, looking over and seeing she's climbed higher on her tree.

"I go here all the time. Mom and dad freak out when they see me go so high. I figured you're the only one who's... brave enough to follow me. And if something happens..."

"It's my fault?"

"No, silly. You can... nevermind..."

I wonder if I ruined this moment.

"Can you climb up a little higher?"

I try to go up one rung but it bends my tree too much. I return to my safe perch. "I can't." Happy to stay six feet lower and look up at her.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I can't help but think,

Our offspring are meant to surpass us.

This solemn thought is interrupted by the sound of a horn blowing. We both scan around. It blows a second time, unlike a trumpet or fog horn, more like a conch. In the field below, I can barely make it out. Something colourful. A man and a bird? Reminding myself I need to adjust my prescription.

"Uncle Daren!" Brida exclaims, barreling down so quickly, she is out of sight in seconds.

Alone up here. I cherish the moment.

The sound of African drums begins beating down below.

Rolling my eyes at what Daren, the king of drama, has staged.

Nonetheless, I have to go see this.

Chapter 48

Pirates and a Picnic

“What the...?”

I see Daren, holding a conch shell, dressed in a pirate hat, an eye patch, a pretty realistic looking ponytail, with a goatee, a cape, *and* a real live parrot on his arm.

He saunters over, winking at us, his voice booming to the crowd assembling around him, "Arrr. Ahoy mates! Who's up for a salty adventure?"

I can't help being somewhat serious, "Who are you supposed to be?"

"It be Captain Darin' to yee, land lober. I be casting off and daring to go where no lilly livered man, women or child has ever dared to go prior. Arrr!"

He points to the water where an antique looking wooden ship with many masts and cloth sails, manned by a dozen crew, all dressed as pirates, is setting anchor before us. I did see that earlier. My eyes can't believe it. That is a realistic replica of ships from that era. Must have cost a fortune to get it here.

It sinks in that I'm jealous. The man knows how to make an entrance and how to bring joy to everyone.

I bite my tongue wanting to make a snarky comment, instead congratulating him and looking about for Jess.

Nowhere to be seen.

Instead, I see dad under an umbrella in a lawn chair in the field under a willow tree. Coming over I find Angel is attending to him, pulling out a drink

from a cooler. This could not be more like a scene in a commercial. And yet it feels real and fills me up with satisfaction. Angel gives dad a cool cloth. "Time to check your blood pressure, hombre."

Jess appears from behind the tree, somewhat mysteriously, as if she was hiding something. "Oh, I'd love a cold one also." Angel hands her a beer.

I'm feeling lost for words. She takes my hand, "See you boys later."

We go down the field farther away, and then turn into a thicket of woods. Further in there is a spot between some trees with lots of sunlight, my stomach grumbles as I see a blanket on the ground, with food and glasses.

"A picnic just for us. Don't worry I won't pounce on you. Figured we could use the quiet time together."

"What about Julia and everyone else looking for us?"

"They'll be ok." She grabs a walkie talkie. "Got these in case there's real trouble."

"This is brilliant. How..."

"Robert gave me the idea... the rest I guessed you would appreciate."

We sit and she pours the beer into our glasses. We take a big swig together. I lay back and we look at the blue sky, framed by tree branches. Glad to be on solid ground.

Turning to her, I suddenly remember her *crazy* idea. "This homeschooling thing could really work." I muse.

"We learn best when we play."

I shake my head, not fully able to grasp how I deserve all this.

We kiss and everything unfolds from there.

Chapter 49

Making Friends with Death

Robert leans against a pillar at the gas station on the corner of the cemetery lot. With his white hair, worn flannel and jeans, looking so cool and relaxed, I think I must be in a small town. He's looking up. I follow his sight and see clouds passing over a glowing full moon.

Other men arrive and gather as I reach them.

He greets each of us personally and then begins walking, as I have come to know him to do, "Alright, men, let us venture to knock on death's door."

Leading us through the cemetery gates, he waves at the caretaker locking it up behind us. The man is in overalls with shriveled skin, and looks like he could be close to a hundred.

"Beautiful night to be alive, Carey. How are the great grandkids?"

"Causing trouble! The good kind, as always."

They guffaw together.

The rest of us, five other men, are silent. We snake through the lot to come to a spot in the middle of the vast cemetery.

Suddenly, I wonder.

Why am I here?

I'm not sure I belong amongst such company.

Robert crouches down and places his palm on a tree "This oak here is a friend. Her roots connect to

every tree for a mile or more... Sit." He gestures for us to find a spot.

Some men sit on the grass, which is wet from evening dew. Others on a wide grave stone. I debate it. Robert catches my thoughts, as usual, "nothing precious about the stones or the dead. They are asleep forever."

Nonetheless, I sit on the grass next to him on his left. It feels grounding. I take my shoes and socks off. The coolness on the soles of my feet is welcome.

When everyone settles, he speaks to us all,

"Men, thank you for accompanying me here. I have a great need to be witnessed tonight. I hope you can bear the ramblings of this old man.

Everyone nods.

I notice Michael is here, the tall bald man who led the men's circle on Thursday. I quickly count and see he is the sixth. How did he catch up and get through the gate I wonder. He's shaking his head smiling, "I never get tired of your ramblin'. Speak to us of death."

"Well. Let me get straight to the heart of it. Death is not just of the body. We die many times while walking this earth. That is unavoidable. Let that sink in for a moment. What death is already in your life as we sit here tonight?"

There is a long silence. I close my eyes and tune into the sounds of the cemetery. Crickets, wind brushing trees, cars passing in the distance.

He continues, "Do we grieve this death to make way fully for what needs to come next?"

Robert gets on all fours and crawls over to his right, touching a gravestone.

"This is my wife and next to her is my daughter's grave." He turns to look at me briefly and then at the others. "They died much too young."

My Heart Is A Muscle

Turning to the graves, he speaks, addressing them tenderly, "Did I love you fully when you were with me?"

He shakes his head slowly.

"But I've learned... to love fully since you left. Thank you for teaching me. For breaking my heart open."

Robert slowly bows his head and turns it side to side. A deep exhale and his chest begins to shake. His trembling hand reaches up to brush his face. Then, like a dam that was ready to burst, he breaks down and cries. Deep sobs.

I feel a warmth in my chest and a chill running down my spine. My arms get goose bumps.

A man comes over to put his hand on the old man's shoulder.

Robert stops and turns to him. "Thank you. And... I need some space." Tears cover his face as he wipes his snot and with the back of his sleeve and chuckles.

He scans around looking into each of our eyes, "No doubt... You are all caring men. Please let me cry. I just need to feel it and honour it fully."

His face transforms into a painful scowl. He pumps his fist into the ground. And tears break again as he doubles over. Wailing and sobbing, he lifts his hands in the air, imploring the night sky, bellowing a deep cry like scream.

Birds scatter nearby.

He bobs his head and starts to growl and sigh. "Yes."

Wiping his face again, he holds out his hands to us.

"I feel like walking. Shall we?"

As we walk, he asks us, "Have any of you ever heard of Bronnie Ware?"

Michael answers, "Yes, she's the nurse who worked with the dying for many years. Came to document their last words and write about their biggest regrets."

Robert stops and nods, "I had the pleasure and honour to meet her. Such a bright and loving spark in her eyes, having seen and lived so much with death." He puts his hand on my shoulder, "Can you guess what we all regret the most on our dying bed?"

Men call out.

"That I wish I had more courage."

"And confidence to do what I wanted."

"That I didn't love enough?"

"That I wish I took things less seriously?"

"And less personally?"

"Good guesses," Robert cocks his eye brow, "Close. But, what about making more money, having more toys or winning more fame?"

Another man retorts, "Said no one ever."

The group snickers, grumbles and laughs.

"Well. It was as you many of you guessed... Let's countdown..."

#5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.

Never too late to savour this moment, right now," he says.

We walk together in silence. I smell the sweetness of the air. Robert stops to sticks his face into a bush and breathe in deeply. "It's intoxicating, isn't it?" Everyone gathers and nods.

#4. I wish I had stayed in
touch with my friends.

Look at yourselves men. Each of you with a beating heart, longing to belong. To be witnessed in your agonies and in your victories. To lean on one another and to test yourselves, to push against each other and to know that another man loves you enough to catch you when you fall.”

I don't know these men, except for Michael, who glances at me and smiles.

He's right. I do long for that.

#3. I wish I'd had the courage
to express my feelings.

“Ha!” He screams out in a wolf howl at the moon. The hair on my back rises. The other men join in. My balls tingling, I feel a rush inside me rising.

“Awwwoooooooooo!” I join in.

#2. I wish I hadn't
worked so hard.

“So much bullshit about our worth as men being what we produce, bring home and how much shit we amass and hold onto. I have no money. No property. Gave it all up. So I could have more time. The most precious thing is to be able to show up here with you.”

One of the men, short and of East Indian decent, speaks up, “Not a robot doing but a human being.”

“Yes, Krishiv. Could not say it any better.” Robert affirms, stopping once more, “And...”

#1.

I wish I'd had the courage
to live a life true to myself,
not the life others expected of me.

“Gets to the crux of things, doesn't it. And leaves a lot of questions for us each to answer.” He strokes his beard. “I'm impatient with thoughts tonight. I dare you to go find a place in this cemetery, sit there and wait for your ancestors to speak to you.

Everyone nods in assent.

“We'll come back here in an hour to share.”

They wander off in different directions, each man on his own.

I'm left standing there, baffled by the directive.

I walk on my own and remember that mom is buried here. It's been years since I visited her grave. Guilt sets in. The lot is close to the fence on the north west corner. I'm grateful for the longer distance.

My Heart Is A Muscle

My mind wanders and a few minutes later, I notice that I have been walking North East.

I turn and force myself to go west.

Papa ?

As soon as I ask. I chastise myself for asking. Like a little boy checking to see if their parent is with them.

Yes,
Bill. I'm here.

Why am I avoiding seeing a grave? Her grave?

Because you feel trapped
by the guilt you've been
holding. And angry
towards her.

I feel a tear come and then a flush of heat in my solar plexus, both rising up into my chest and face while also spreading down into my belly and hips.

Yes, but...

She conditioned you to
feel selfish and bad if you
didn't reflect her and obey her.

My Heart Is A Muscle

The path bends left and I see her grave a few feet away. The grass is moved but there are no flowers or candles, like some of the gravestones next to hers.

I pause, then walk over, bound with new energy.

You can release her.

And yourself.

Standing over her gravestone, I feel all this pent up energy, but not sure.

What? How?

Talk to her.

But, I...

I kneel down in front of her stone.

“Mom... You... I’m sorry. Actually no. I’m not sorry I haven’t been here sooner. I was kinda relieved. Actually, very relieved when you passed away. Not that I wished you dead. But, it felt like most of my life, you...”

Tell her how
you really feel.

I look around. Wondering if anyone is listening to my “conversation”. Nobody is around. We’re buttressed from the rest of the city by thick cedar trees. So insulated, I can’t even hear the cars on the main street nearby.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I'm fucking angry at you.

Tell her.

“I hate you... for how you would dominate us
with your sharp mind and...”

“Don't be so delicate and selfish.”

Even in my mind I hear her words now. I shake my
head, brushing her words off me.

“...Cut off anyone talking, correct and shame us.
I respected you and I love you...”

My face is hot with emotion, tears burning my
eyes.

“And I hate how you treated us!”

I let the words settle. It's all true. Like a
volcano that wants to burst, I seethe but hold back.

Show her your anger.
It's a gift. It shows her
how much this
bond matters... still.

Clasping my palms together, I slam the ground
before me. They sting with the force of impact. I do it
again and again.

It doesn't
belong to you.
Give it all back.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I scream and howl my rage.

Eventually, something in me breaks, like a storm that has passed.

Cool tears come now. Snot. I wipe my face.

“I loved that you were so strong and smart but I needed you to care. To show some god damned...”

I don't take any
of this personally.

I know your
heart is true.

Please continue...

“Understanding. Mercy. Tenderness.”

A cool shiver flows through my body. I feel like putting my fingers into the ground, digging past the surface of dried cedar and moss into the soil.

“I love you, mom. I know what I take from you and what I leave here in this earth. All your shame, resentment and bitterness I no longer carry. May you leave it here as well and find some rest and peace.”

I feel my roots. I feel my love for this woman that dominated my existence and drove me to leave and want to be so different from her.

I don't have to try so fucking hard to be a good boy, a good man. A good husband and father.

No more.

I can just be me.

* * *

My Heart Is A Muscle

Walking back to rendezvous with the group, I hear footsteps quickening and getting closer. It's Michael jogging to catch up to my fast stride.

"Bill. It's so good to see you again. And so soon."

I'm delighted to see him and feel his interest in me. Something very appealing about him. The way he speaks is so eloquent and unassuming. We walk together.

"I'm..." Shaking my head. "...Still not sure what voodoo magic you and the men cast that night."

"It was all of us having the guts to drop into our hearts, no?"

I nod. "Guess so. What a strange and beguiling life I have been leading since..."

"...You met Robert?"

"Yes, and many other wonderful people."

"Hey, not to be putting *any* pressure on you but I'm wondering... Are you joining us at the sunrise celebration?"

"When?"

"Tomorrow. Happens the last Sunday of the month."

"I wasn't invited."

I try not to sound sorry for myself.

"You sure? Daren was supposed to pass it on."

"He can be a bit... you know..."

Michael stops and looks at me askance, smiling and waiting to see what I'll say about Daren.

"All over the place."

He smiles kindly and nods, "Aren't we all sometimes. I love the guy. I know you do too."

I take a moment to pull out my phone and check the time. I see that actually Daren did text me, this morning about tomorrow with all the details.

“What do you know?” I share it with Michael.

He pats me on the back. “He’s really been his brother’s keeper.”

“He sure has.”

We continue walking.

“I need your permission to put you on our community email thread. Your brother doesn’t *always* remember.”

I share my email and number.

We turn the corner and see Robert. The rest of the men have gone home, but he’s been waiting for us, looking content leaning against the great tree.

“See you both in a few hours.” Michael walks off.

I stick around. Wanting to ask Robert, but not sure how. Looking up at the moon, he breaks the silence, “Something ancient and also reassuring about you, old friend.”

I snicker to myself. An odd thing to be talking to the moon.

He turns to lock eyes with me, “Yes, Bill, I do talk to everything. Everyone. It’s not a cute gimmick, but what feels right and true, for me.”

My face flushes. He places a hand on his chest. Looking so peaceful and present under that tree. I see he did not mean to just rebuke me, but perhaps to teach me. I feel humbled, self-conscious of all that I don’t know or understand.

Clearing my throat. “Uh. Can we talk?”

“Always.”

“Are you dying?”

“Aren’t we all?”

“I mean soon.”

My Heart Is A Muscle

He looks down and about. Pausing, as if waiting for someone else to answer. Finally, speaking with his eyes glistening, with a tone that seems to be him trying to both reassure me while also being honest, "At my age. Yes, death may come at any time."

He gets up and puts his hand on my shoulder. "I'm not trying to be coy. Tomorrow we will talk more about this. I have something important to ask of you, as well, Bill Stone. But, now..." He sighs. "I need rest."

As he saunters off, it dawns on me that he is not only some mysterious, wise and seemingly timeless figure, but a real man in an old body. I imagine he has been up since the crack of dawn listening and walking with others.

As I walk home, I wonder... Where does he sleep?

Who, if anyone, does he go home to?

What will he ask me tomorrow?

Sunday

When death comes
for us all...



My Heart Is A Muscle

Chapter 50

Dancing At Dawn

There's a thick fog, settled in the ravine, mirroring how I'm doing. My legs are stiff, yet moving swiftly to get to the rendezvous in time, my mind still half asleep. Appreciating the cool air waking up my senses. This is my time when I usually revel in being awake, but today I wanted to stay under covers, to rest in warm darkness.

I come to the clearing amongst the trees where there is a fire pit. The fog shifts and moves with the breeze, revealing clusters of men standing around and many more standing alone, in silence. Some stretching.

As I join the circle, I see a couple of men crouched by the fire pit, one of them is crimson-haired, down on one knee and spinning a "bow drill", like the one I remember seeing in a YouTube video about outdoor survival. He looks up and it's Michael. I'm delighted to see him again. He introduces me to John, the man he's coaching who looks eager and new to the craft.

Me and the other men watch in wonder commenting. It's much harder than it looks. John tries and fails many times. I'm aware of the cold seeping in, bouncing in place.

John modifies his technique and spins harder with each turn. More men have gathered around, giving him words of encouragement. Finally, a spark is lit and a tuft of smoke in a handful of chaff.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Everyone cheers and now I notice the circle around the fire is two and three men deep. We are growing in numbers.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spy Owen who spots me, comes over and gives me a long bear hug.

“Not feeling like getting up today for some reason.”

“Me neither.”

“Something in the air, brothers.” Dan comes from behind - like a ninja - and squeezes our shoulders, before disappearing again.

Owen and I look at one another. He wishes me well and goes to say hello to other men arriving.

I rub my eyes and face trying to wake and prepare myself for whatever may come next.

I notice that Ezra and Farooz are here. And there is Angel... my dad's nurse. I still have not really digested that part.

A hand touches my shoulder. It's Daren. A deep inhale and sigh.

“Glad you're here.”

“Wouldn't miss it. Robert is the reason I'm alive.”

I feel a chill go through me when he says this.

His eyes are moist. And I suddenly grasp the gravity of what is happening. My brother, would have died if this man and this community were not around. I would be ... where...? alone... stuffing my face, letting my life implode... feeling sorry for myself... Sad to imagine.

It's so strange and unbelievable still that these men all know one another and do what they each do.

I feel awe.

And out of place...

Why am I here?

Grateful and confused.

Suddenly, Robert's low raspy voice reverberates with deep tones.

Men step back from the fire that is raging now, forming a huddle of at least fifty men.

"Top of the morning, to all you, dear men." One of those earthy and rich voices I could listen to for hours reading anything.

"I'm so fucking grateful... for each of you. And today I bring somber news. My cancer has returned. They say it's pretty terminal and should be quick. But then again I had it 12 years ago and beat it back this long."

He opens his arms and makes a wolf call.

Some men join and echo a response.

"Who knows... the day of our deaths. We're all dying... into oblivion or into a deeper living. But my condition is just a pretext for why I called you all here."

He holds a staff and slams it down into the ground to a resounding THUMPPPP.

"There is a storm coming. Many forces impacting all of us. Many forces from the outside and inside seek to corrupt us, divides us

all while this ravine, this planet will continue to heat up and burn."

My brows furrow. Daren is nodding as if he knows what Robert is talking about.

"All of us have children and/or loved ones..." He pauses and tears pours down his face. "Despite all that I lost when my wife and daughter were killed, the last ten years have been some of my best..."

My Heart Is A Muscle

He bows his head and goes down onto one knee. I never knew this about him. It shakes my core to consider the pain he must have suffered. I can't even imagine how I would cope with that...

"When everything is stripped away, we discover what is left. Thank you Mother Earth and great Creator."

Standing up, he points to his eyes and then to us all. "And I have seen each of you grow, in ways that fill my heart. Making me whole. The time we have shared already is so full and worthy of the lives we've each been given. And I know I have done what I came here to do."

He passes his banging staff to a man, who I don't know with grey hair next to him, before continuing,

"And so, I got a sense that I may be bowing out, quite soon actually..."

I feel concern and dread well up, but the air is thick and listening to him and seeing all these men something holds me steady and in place.

"What I can't help but wonder, is this circle of men, whom we call The Powerful And Loving... are we meant to become a larger wave, leaving a wider wake? Or are we simply the change we wish to see in the world. And is that enough?"

The question hangs in the air. I look over and see Daren with a fire in his eyes. Ambition?

"The need is so great and growing... I can foresee how each of you..." Expanding his arms's reach, to emphasize that he means to include all of us in his vision, sends a shiver down my spine. "...Will be called on to give more than you have ever given before. And none of us will be able to do it alone. We'll need each other. New men, original core founders and all of you who have woven in and out into our tapestry over the years... Each of you is unique... priceless and distinct... never to be repeated again in history."

He seems to have lost his steam and suddenly plops down on one of the stumps around the fire pit. He clears his throat.

“Enough of my ramblings... They say in some cultures when one becomes ill, the healers come and ask...”

He closes his mouth and reaches out a hand, as if asking for someone else to finish his sentence.

Michael comes forward and speaks loudly and clearly,

“When did you stop singing?

When did you stop telling stories?

And when did you stop dancing...?”

Robert starts to sway like an old willow tree in the wind. He rises from the stump and starts to skip and flow amongst the crowd.

“So, this morning... as the mist rises, LET US DANCCCCCEEEEE!!!”

I'm suddenly shaken out of the magic and incredibly self conscious.

Is he serious?

He weaves between men making contact and comes over towards me. “I'm serious, Bill.” He chuckles. Again reading my mind or more likely the anxious look on my face.

“Don't worry. Trust me. Close your eyes, forget about what you imagine others may think of you... no one is thinking of you right now but you...”

I follow his direction.

“Listen... to the wind.”

My Heart Is A Muscle

Doing so, my furrowed brow relaxes.

“Feel the earth beneath your feet.”

I feel her pulling me down, the weight of my body. Bending my knees.

“Let your body do what it does best... breathing...”

I've been tensing my belly and holding my breath. Noticing, I release the desire to control. My belly and chest expand naturally to greater fullness.

“Being... Here.... Now.”

A thought of that old white hippie guy, Ram Das, comes to mind. There is no sitar music playing alongside, but I feel that sense of being transported. I smile and snicker to myself.

“Notice the movement inside you.”

I feel the overwhelming desire to stretch out my arms in every direction... Making space!

Don't want to wack someone. I open my eyes and see plenty of room. And Robert is gone.

As I close my eyes again, out of the periphery I notice the crowd of many men moving in all sorts of ways, following their own rhythm, listening to their own music, I imagine.

I hear his voice again, like Papa's, this time, right next to my ear.

“Slow down and allow the movement to come out... at the speed of your awareness...”

I swing out my arms far and wide. There is no one near. I know I am free to move unencumbered.

“This is *your* dance... The music is inside you. Listen...”

My neck begins to roll itself and my feet start to lift and step slowly in a rhythm of their own.

“Your body, your soul, your heart pounding and breathing life... wanting to make a dent in the universe...”

Someone calls out, “Awwoooo!”

Wild responses echo back.

“Huzzah.”

“Shaaaaaaaaaaaaammsss...”

“Kiyaaaaaay!”

I raised my hands up and out, expanding in a circular fashion, turning my body left and then right. Clearing space with more fierceness and grandeur.

It feels fucking...

GLORIOUS.

I feel fucking G L O R I O U S..

Nothing can dim this light of joy and frenzy that takes over.

Where does this come from?

How...?

Speechless.

Drums begin pounding... Squinting, while I continue to move, I notice a dozen men scattered amongst the mass of us - about 50 men - spread out in the field, playing with all their might.

Daren is near me on the right, bouncing and jumping from leg to leg, like an ecstatic drunken monkey.

His eyes catch me with delight as he continues to revel in his dance.

Owen is on the ground, poised and prowling between dancing men, like a great tiger or lion.

I scan around, ever more curious. There are feet in the air shooting up and dancing... What? It's Dan holding a handstand and walking about.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Another man close and to my left is shaking with tears and moving in heavy swaying motion... looks like he's grieving. A powerful shiver goes through me, from my chest down into my legs, fueling me even more

Another man is pounding his chest and core making sounds... like a gorilla!

Another man, brown skinned with tattoos, looks like one of those Maori warriors doing a haka war dance.

Ezra is on Farooz's shoulders like a kid, his arms are out embracing the sky. I attune my ears to hear he is singing in Arabic, chanting and praying... It's melodic and hypnotic...

I come back to the rhythm of the drums... feeling it vibrating in my belly, my joints...

A flute and a clarinet weave into the symphony.

The scene is otherworldly yet so earthy and real.

I look for Robert. It takes a while to find him. He is weaving between the other men. I see him making contact with each man he dances past. He seems to blend with their movements and even sing along with some.

As if he sensed I was looking for him, he turns and starts coming towards me.

Suddenly he is opening his arms to embrace the sky with a dazzling expression of joy. He is copying my movement of expansive arms opening like a flower. He's with me in this. I feel it even more. My face hurts from the smile. My chest is so open. Heart beating. An incredible feeling surges through me... joy... unbelievable joy!

Chapter 51

Chosen

“This was... I don’t have words.”

“Sounds like you touched something greater than yourself.”

I nod. Robert and I are walking alone together down a trail in the thicker part of the ravine. So many men came to see him after the dance crested and came to a stillness. And after he spoke to them, briefly, he took *me* aside.

I hang on his every word. “There’s a reason why some of the tribes which survived and thrived for thousands of years believe that...”

ALONE, I MAY GO FASTER,
BUT ONLY TOGETHER,
WE CAN GO FARTHER.”

Grit and courage only take us so far. Deeper fulfillment is only possible in community.”

“I’m starting to see that.” I reply.

“The first question I have for you is, are you seeing yourself belonging in some way with our ragged band of brothers?”

My Heart Is A Muscle

I nod. Not having to think about it. Suddenly realizing that maybe I am presumptuous.

“Do I need to...?”

“No,” He reassures me. “Just showing up as you have been speaks volumes.”

I puzzle over that for a moment.

How did I weave into this group of men?

Where did it start?

Who was my gatekeeper?

Robert, or was it Dan, Owen, my brother, Daren. It doesn't matter. We keep walking.

“I need you to know something else Bill,” He stops and turns to me, “I chose you.”

I feel that touching me deeply, but my mind wants confirmation to understand it, “Uh. Why?”

“Because I see how much you have to give... and I wanted to help you to give that gift. You see, it's my path to help the helpers. To guide the guides and reveal to the givers the gifts they have to give. And...” He starts walking again, “There is so little time.”

He clears his throat as we come to a log at the edge of the creek. “I chose you... to get to know you, love you and care about your path...”

“I don't know what to say.”

“I hope you say, Yes.”

I let that sink in for a moment, watching the water slowly ebb and flow. Of course, I take it in. I'd be a fool not to, and there's a nagging sense that he wants something in return.

“To what?” I reply.

“To loving me back.”

I begin to cry. Not sure exactly why at this moment. He comes and embraces me. Holding me. I feel

like an orphan, who has been lost and abandoned, eventually finding a new home.

I put my arm around him, "I don't want to lose you."

He pulls back and holds my head, with both his weathered palms, the way he has done a few times before. It is so intimate and yet I have no desire to squirm or pull away, this time. My face, neck and shoulders soften and relax. This is exactly what I need at this moment.

"I say this to you knowing you know it to be true already. You can *never* lose what you put into your heart."

He holds my gaze and then motions us to take off our shoes, placing our feet into the cool running water.

"You have made my heart larger. And I'll never be the same." He says.

I nod.

He leans against me, wrapping an arm over me and pulling me in for a side hug. A fatherly embrace, so warm and complete, like I have never felt really so fully before.

"I'm sorry if this is happening so quickly... but right now I also need something else from you."

"Anything."

"Promise me this. No matter what happens from this moment on... you won't run or hide from your path... at least not for long. You will come back, again and again, to being true to yourself. And to do what you are here to do."

"I don't know what it is. I..."

"Bullshit." He picks up a rock and flicks it to make it skip on the surface. "Bill you are too smart for this and I'm sorry if I don't have much patience."

My Heart Is A Muscle

Taken aback. I stiffen a bit. "Ok, well I came here to talk to you... to ask..."

"You don't need me to give you that. You don't need my approval or my permission..."

My head is spinning. I am beside myself, confused about what is happening.

He slaps me with the back of his arm to my side, and looks me square in the eyes. "Bill. I have known thousands of men. Few as clear as you."

Everything settles. I have no thoughts. No mind. Just silence as I look into his eyes.

Papa ?

Yes. I am here.
With Robert.
As I am with you
and everyone you meet.

A momentary spell is broken.

Robert implores me. "Will you promise me that you'll do it?"

I don't want to disappoint this man. To make a promise which I can not or will not be able to keep. "But, to do what?"

"Well, if you must know..." He looks at me sideways and then back at the water. "I'll tell you, but here's a caveat first. This is my dying wish, not your destiny per se. Just a wish you can take or leave..." He looks at me. I nod. And then he begins to lay out for me the vision he has been trying to realize.

I scramble to pull out my phone and hit record. Every word he speaks seems well chosen. And I am keenly aware of our precious time together, as if the last few grains of sand in an hourglass begin running out.

Chapter 52

Time to go home...

After a pause in his thinking, "I have many more questions."

"Giver."

"Ok, why men? Why not both genders?"

"I love helping anyone who earnestly seeks me... but I especially seek men... lost and searching for a guru who will mislead them. You know, those men who don't trust anyone really, likely to end up as lone wolves dying sicker and younger. And those stubborn guys..." He looks at me, winking, "...who thrive within brotherhood, but also skeptical of everything and needing the space to find their own way..."

"Why me?"

"Well, I have taken the torch myself as far as I can, even with all these incredible men, a ragtag band of mentors... a web needs a spider... someone whose head was made to think like a system to weave the tapestry, and maybe organize the pack..."

This makes sense to me. That is one thing I know I am good at.

"Besides, I'll be going soon..."

I ignore that loaded statement for the moment, intent on getting clearer about the specifics of what he is talking about.

"What would we call it?"

"The words of brother Martin Luther King come to mind,

Power *without* love is
sentimental and anemic...

And **Love** *without* power
is reckless and abusive..."

I can't help but add,

"Power at its best is love implementing
the demands of justice, and justice at its
best is power correcting everything that
stands against love."

Looking taken aback that I know the rest, he
nods and turns back towards the water. "Lots of work to
be done, no?"

A sense of the weight and greatness of it lays on
my shoulders, I sigh. "Yeah, a pretty big mission."

He nods. "Well... Let's not get too inflated with
it. It's not a grandiose call to fix the world. It's all
gotta start from how we relate to ourselves, how we are
with our loved ones, friends, coworkers, and then
ripple outwards with integrity and heart..."

He shakes himself suddenly as if waking from a
dream, "You know Bill, it's true what some hippies in
my era said, 'We're all just bozos on the bus... trying to
get home'."

A terrible sadness and longing fills me.

Robert gets a phone call. Seems important.

He walks back to the stump and plops himself
down, looking haggard.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I step further into the water. Closing my eyes.
Immersed in the sounds.

Filled with a feeling of emptiness, at once
profoundly peaceful *and* unsettling and unnerving.

A shiver goes through me and I turn to go back. I
notice Robert is sitting on the ground, against the
log, his shoulders hunched over, his eyes staring
ahead at the water.

"Come sit, time for a longer wink..." He closes
his eyes. "My ride home..."

He takes my hand.

We sit for a long time in silence.

Another strange sensation - a shudder - moves
through me. I turn to look and his eyelids are sagging,
making him squint.

He seems sleepy or asleep. I don't want to wake
him, but something tells me...

"Robert?"

No answer. I squeeze his hand.

No response -- looking too still.

As if I knew it a moment ago, I reach over to
check his pulse. Nothing there.

I look away, unable to fully accept this.

I stand up, shake my head and take a sharp
inhale.

"I can't believe it. This is not happening." I
mumble to myself.

I crouch down and test his pulse again.

"Robert. Your pulse has stopped." I say it
outloud and it begins to sink in.

I reach for my phone and call 911, asking for an
ambulance, giving them directions on how they can
find us.

Maybe they can save him.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I sit back down next to his body. And an unbearable feeling of loss... My whole body begins to surge with grief.

I break down and cry. It's like I am volcano cracking and breaking in half. Eventually, heaving and sobbing ebbs and flows, like the water passing. My breathing smoothes out. I wipe my eyes.

Papa ?

Yes.

You were here the whole time?

Do you
need to
ask?

No. I guess. I need to trust. But...

Expecting me to
have done something?

Yes.

That's not
the nature of
our bond.

The grief swells behind my eyes and more hot tears burst through. I grasp Robert's hand, still warm, weathered, but lifeless.

What now?

My Heart Is A Muscle

I check his pulse again. Nothing. He's really gone.

What about you?
Here to stay?

Suddenly, I'm remembering that we had a deal. Seems surreal now and to remember that my heart stopped and I nearly died on Monday. I've had almost seven days to decide or discover or something...

How did I forget?

I stumble for an answer. Frozen, unable to breathe. Panic fills me.

What if he doesn't let me stay? I haven't...

You don't need to
prove anything, Bill.
I know everything you
think and feel before
you even think and
feel it, remember...

*I... my... heart is telling me this is where I
belong. And there is much to be done.*

Then you've
decided.

Chapter 53

All of it...

Jess holds me cradled on the couch. Julia is playing piano, a beautifully haunting piece that she seems to be improvising.

What a crazy fucking week.

I have no more tears left. My body is heavy, cold and so fucking grateful for the warm and soothing way Jess is holding me.

My mind is searching for meaning and direction. I feel like a hollowed out cave. The image of the cave from healing with Owen and Alexandria flashes in my mind.

As if she can read my thoughts, Jess asks, “A lot to process, I imagine. I wonder if you’d let me offer you something that *you* are actually really good at?”

Sigh. “Sure.”

“Whenever I get full with all that happens, overwhelmed even, you often tell me to lay it all out. Take stock of each piece...”

I chuckle from deep in my gut, doubling over, nearly falling out of her lap.

She looks at me expectantly.

I take her offer. “Well, darling. Less than seven days ago you were floating the possibility of walking away from our marriage.”

Julia stops dramatically. She gives us an intense stare, as if we just shook her world. Then she smiles gleefully and resumes playing.

“And now?” I look up at *her*, expecting a response.

“I’m here to stay,” she reassures me, rubbing my back. “You’ve proven beyond any doubt you can meet me in the ways I need. You are more *here* than you ever have been. As long as you keep your heart open...” She points to me and puckers her lips, playfully, “I am yours forever.”

That moves something in me. Warm tears fill my eyes. My chest feels soothed.

“Actually, it’s more intense than I could have imagined...”, she continues.

“Ha! Well get used to it.” I chuckle again. “Seriously though, I have never felt closer to you, either. Or more grateful.”

“That’s wonderful to hear.” I turn over and we share a long languid kiss. She taps my nose. “What else?...”

“Then, later that same day... my heart stopped. I don’t understand how, but a voice...” My eyes moisten, but gently so, with my breathing slowing down as a deep peace fills me. I still don’t know how to talk to anyone about him, including my wife and daughter, the two people I love and trust the most.

Papa, you came... Or rather I discovered you were there all along.

Yes.

You... saved my life. Allowed me to return for a time. And I took it.

You made
the choice.

Yes, I chose to come back and now to stay.

She waits for me to answer patiently, as if we have all the time in the world. The music trails off into gentle caresses of a few higher keys.

"I met Papa."

There is silence. Julia comes over and kisses my head, and dances off.

Jess hums. "Mmmmmhhhhmmmm." Caressing my hair, "And, what else...?" She asks.

"Uh. Well, oh yeah... Dad nearly died, but came back different, a new... renewed man. Gay. Uh. Yeah. Literally and happier than ever before. It still blows my mind..."

"Why?!" Julia shouts from the other side of the room.

"I guess I never imagined he could be in a coma and come out *better*.. I don't know..." I shake my head, "So much of this week is unbelievable. Like, I was having these visions of Becca. Hearing her voice. I thought I was hallucinating and started feeling like I was actually losing my mind."

"Well..." Jess and Julia, share a knowing look and belt out the refrain from the Seal song, "We're never gonna surviive... unless... we are a *little* crazy!"

"I guess so. Whether it was a real ghost of her or my memory, she has stopped haunting me. I feel lighter. At peace now."

I feel the need to sit up and rub my face, as if awakening from a dream and splashing water on myself, "AND, I lost my job." I pause and then exclaim, "NO, actually, I walked away from the agency... Which is a good thing! I think..."

"You are a man of integrity, Bill. I am proud of you for having the courage to be true to yourself."

Her words stir another deep chord in me.

She smiles deeply and hugs me, then pulling back grabs my chin firmly to stare me down, "AND... the most important piece... It's all important but..." Throwing her hands in the air and staring at me awaiting a response.

"Right! I... kinda saved our marriage..."

I look at her with a playful shrug and check to see if that's what she meant.

"Ding ding ding! You win a boobie prize..." She winks! "Later."

I blush. Julia seems to not get the innuendo or acts nonchalant.

The pieces we are reflecting on seem to snowball as I add to the list, "And... this is a long list. I reconciled with Daren. And I met some unbelievable people."

My eyes well up, thinking of Robert again.

"What a beautiful man he was." Jess says.

"Is. He is alive and lives on in us." Julia adds, coming over to place her hand on my shoulder. She is definitely the wisest person I know. The sense that his spirit continues in some way feels vague to me but moves me nonetheless.

"He changed my life..." I burst into tears, finally.

"May he rest in sweet and beautiful peace." Jess says softly.

"...finally back with his own family." Julia adds.

I wipe back the tears, taken aback by her words. Jess notices my curiosity and explains, "He told us once how much grief he has carried since his wife and daughter died in a car accident."

My Heart Is A Muscle

Just when I did not think I could feel any more, my heart cracks and breaks some more. Julia looks at me tenderly. We all look at one another. I pull them into a tight huddle.

"I am soooo glad that we have each other and this time together is... everything to me." I manage to utter as more tears strewn my face dappling on my pants.

The closeness of our warm temples touching and arms wrapped around each other, in silence is so sweet. I feel nourished. Don't want it to end.

After another minute, more words spill out of me. "There's so much more but I can't even hold it all..."

"I'll help." Julia pulls out of the huddle first and leans back on the couch next to us, counting off her hand, "You also got our car fixed. And we discovered Aikido, learned to grow our power with Sensei Dan, while eating a feast with Ezra and Farooz, Unbelievabowl is awesome! You helped me fix things with Brida."

"Wow! Yeah. That's a lot!"

I take a moment.

More from the week comes flooding in that needs to be spoken, "And then there's Owen, my old childhood friend, I want you both to meet him and his partner Alexandra. Incredible people."

"Anything or anyone else?"

"Of course..." I turn to Julia. "The light of our life... Jules. You are incredible. I see that even more now. You saved me."

Tearing up. She wraps her arms around me for a long hug. Jess joins in to make me the center of a love sandwich.

"I am just a gushing machine."

"Yup."

My Heart Is A Muscle

"This is what you meant about my heart being a muscle." I turn to Jess. "I feel EVERYTHING more intensely."

"Yessss. I did. I planned it all!" She grabs a throw pillow and starts hitting me with it while howling. Julia joins in. I am surrounded.

Dodging and receiving their blows, thrashing back, I feel so invigorated and alive.

And as we settle afterwards, the ache in my heart is still there. But it feels like a warm stretching and opening.

I have so much to feel and so much to learn.

As if reading my mind, Julia lifts her finger up and exclaims like the wise sage that she is, "And tomorrow is a whole *new* adventure waiting to be discovered."

"How do you feel about that?" Jess asks me, holding up an air microphone.

I sigh. "I guess... relieved *and* kinda unnerved that I have absolutely nothing on my schedule."

Chapter 54

Never Alone...

After dinner, I am lazing around. Restless, I have the urge to get out. After reassuring Jess and Julia that I am ok to be alone ~ that I actually need to go on a walk by myself ~ I lace up my shoes and take the long way down to the ravine, which passes right by Golden Years.

The streets are empty. I start jogging. The watch on my hand. I haven't taken it off. I think about time. How Robert spoke to it ~ just this morning ~ how it was slipping through our fingers. How the last few moments I shared with him this felt like a week ago. How yesterday feels as distant as a month ago... And Monday morning? Another lifetime.

My heart is racing, I take a pause at "Grandmother Maple". I remember the way I felt so grounded and peaceful here, when Julia and I played hooky on Wednesday. I lean into and wrap my arms around her massive trunk, which is so broad, we estimated it would take five of six people to link arms around her.

I speak to her in my mind and in my heart, letting go of thinking about how this looks or that she is a tree who cannot speak back to me.

Grandmother Maple. Thank you for holding me. You've been here for hundreds of years. Will likely be here when I'm gone. I know it sounds petty and small of me to worry. But, I don't know where I'm going. What am I going to do next? How will I take care of my family? And honour Robert's wishes... ?

My forehead presses against her bark. Desperate, I hope for some answers.

Look up...

I hear Robert's voice now. Not sure if it's the echo of my memory, or my imagination, or...

Who knows with all these voices I seem to hear!

I look up the massive trunk, noting how the main branches spread out wide and seem to hold so much. I'm reminded of Robert, who was the tree in the forest that connected all these men, including me. I'm shaking my head wondering...

How did you do it?

Keep looking up...

Not sure why that is important, but I obey, leaning my belly and chest against the tree for support. Remembering how Robert invested in me and asked me to take the torch going forward and that I made a commitment to him. I feel his dying wishes resting on my shoulders and pulling me down like a lead weight. At this moment, I'm certain that I do *not* have it within me to fulfill such a vast and bold promise.

I don't know *how* I can actually do it. As I feel a sense of foreboding, that I will only prove to disappoint him, his voice interrupts my thoughts...

Climb up to get to a higher vantage point.

Just like you to try and get me out of my own head!

My Heart Is A Muscle

I smile thinking of the old man. My hands feel the thick and jutting ripples of Grandmother's bark. A boyish longing to climb this tree and escape this heaviness I feel seizes me. I see a bulb of the trunk sticking out at my hip height and use it as a starting foothold. It seems like there's a path to climb her designed into this miraculous tree.

I am ten feet up now, discovering how the space where the branches join form a natural cradle for me to lie within and feel supported. Glancing up, I see the leaf bearing branches, like tendrils swaying in the wind, creating a living canopy. Then, I notice the thick main branches forming the structure of it all, each as wide as the trunk of a normal tree, splaying out like fingers from the trunk I am resting on. I feel so supported, held in the palm of this great hand.

Ahh. A tingling sensation goes from my chest all throughout my body. Something so perfect about this moment.

My phone buzzes.

Ugh.

I ignore it.

Again.

Does the world never stop?!

I check. It's Daren. I appreciate his reaching out but decide to call him back, setting my phone on "do not reply", wanting more time here alone.

He texts back, right away.

"Hey Bill. How you doing?"

"We're all grieving. I know it may be a bad moment to bring it up, but Robert left me in charge of his will and testament. There are his dying wishes, which include you and which he asked us to act on, within 48 hours of his death.

Sigh. The reminder of the promise I made.

My Heart Is A Muscle

“FYI, I also need to fill you in
on some of the politics.”

I don't want to hear about that, just yet.

Another buzz.

Being curious, I can't help but look.

“Some of the older men on The
Council are not so happy about a
newbie being handed the reins.”

I feel all sorts of tensions. Not ready to deal
with it, I shake my head and see one last text.

“Can you meet us at my office for a
meeting with the executor and the
board tomorrow at 9am?”

“Yes.”

I reply to get him to stop.

Things are rushing in too quickly.

But didn't I ask for this?

I chuckle to myself.

I am a constant manager...

Or perhaps becoming a gardener...

I appreciate that reframe from Robert, who seems
to have taken residence in my mind.

My Heart Is A Muscle

How reassuring.

But, the sense of apprehension and gut wrenching dread returns.

I close my eyes and imagine myself finding my center.

In the cradle of this massive trunk, the sense of being held makes my shoulders and back relax. Rather than trying to respond to the anxiety rushing through me, I am letting it rush through me like the water in the creek. Like the wind passing by. Like the roots, trunk and branches of the tree passing nutrients up and down. My mind settles and searches for better questions.

What do I need to focus on next?

I wait, without a ready made answer.

Without a plan, yet.

I put my hand on my heart.

It's beat is steady.

I turn and see out of the corner of my eye, the illuminated brick building of "Golden Years" across the street. A reminder of my past, but also of how far I have come and what I have learned so far. Whenever we had something go wrong at work and everyone was feeling stress and urgency, Fred, the founder, used to say to me,

"Bill, we're always in a crisis,
coming out of a crisis
or about to enter a crisis..."

Such is the nature of life, I guess. If this week has taught me anything, it is that when I embrace this truth, my life becomes an adventure. One which I have no control over. And I cannot see too far ahead. The path only unfolds, as I walk it.

And when I resist the calling, by...

Clinging to the way things *should* be...

My Heart Is A Muscle

Carrying the weight of responsibility, all on my own shoulders...

Hiding how I feel, numbing myself with food or being busy...

Or most often, by *trying* to be a good guy...

...life surely has a way of knocking me upside down and on my own ass.

Seems perfect that I am laying on my back now, held in the cradle of this tree, accepting this humbling and vulnerable posture. Keeping my hands over my chest, I realize what Jess told me earlier, how much my heart really is a muscle. I feel it beating intensely.

Seeing the clouds part in the night sky I turn to take in my surroundings. Being in the park at night, I feel tender, realizing that I am so small on my own. And all the wonderful people in my life, they are what is actually helping me find my place in the great order of things. It is my connections that form the branches and roots, part of a wild ecosystem, a web of...

As the thoughts come to me like poetry, I realize that I don't fully grasp what I am thinking, not yet. Not used to thinking about life in natural metaphors. There is so much I don't know. So much I still have to learn and experience. Humbled, I rest here.

My belly tightens, again, still begging for any shreds of certainty or some answers.

*Write down everything
that happened this week.*

I'm not a writer, but I recognize the simplicity and helpfulness of journaling. I know it will help me make sense of all that has happened.

My Heart Is A Muscle

In fact, that is what I have done in this book.
And to share it with you now, dear reader.

Back in the tree, I am listening, waiting for more inspiration, to give me direction. Just the sound of wind. And the a quiet sense inside. I don't have any more clarity about the future. Just possibilities - like seeds in my pocket. Another tingling of anxiety and anticipation mingles within me.

I guess this is what courage feels like. Being scared and stepping forward anyway...

Thank you, Robert. Thank you, Papa.... Are you still there?

Yes. Always.

My eyes moisten - AGAIN. I am getting used to this. Papa being here, so close and all around me, any time I call him.

Tremulations of emotion pass through me. The sense of inadequacy in my quivering chin. The grief behind my eyes, allowing soft tears to quench my face. Shivers going through my chest and a growing heat down in my belly.

As I sit up, feeling thoroughly tenderized, I look over and see how climbing down the trunk looks tricky from up here.

Without a plan, I roll over, slide down, then kick off and fall, landing into a nimble squat. Standing up, I'm surprised by my own coordination and vitality.

There's a growing conviction energizing me from the ground up.

I need to be a part of something bigger, wilder, more vital and alive than before!

I need it like I need oxygen.

I need it like a bird needs to fly.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I touch the great tree, thanking her and ascend
back up the grassy slope, homeward bound.

Walking in the night air, feeling every footfall
on the grass and then the concrete sidewalk, I notice
the motion of leaves rustling in the wind with every
breath I take.

Everything is more vivid. Every moment, the
sense that time is moving with me, in lock step.

The past is behind me.

The future is waiting to be written.

I am alive, a body that is moving, determined
and at ease, a ball of nerves with this muscle in my
chest, pounding clearly, ready for whatever may come
next...

The end

of this book

is the beginning

of another story...

What's Next?

First, I ask you for a favour...

→ turn the page.

To learn about how this story came to exist...

→ go to page 444

To read about the real people who inspired the characters in this story...

→ go to page 447

To help a man who needs it...

→ go to page 450

To find the real-life community this book is based on...

→ go to page 451

To preview more books on the horizon...

→ go to page 452

A favour, please....

Before we get to the bonus content, I like to humbly beg you as the author to leave an honest review.

Why bother?

One, I'm committed to continuing the tale and sharing other stories, and I can always learn *a lot* from readers who are passionate and engaged as you must have been to get this far.

Two, reviews are the best way to inspire more men to take a chance and pick this book up. Doing so might just change their life. I hear back from men all the time about how it already has.

I suggest you don't dawdle ;)
and go directly here:

www.powerfulandloving.com/review

Interview with the Author

To thank you for your honest review

(nudge nudge, wink, wink)

Why did you even write this strange & unconventional story?

I wrote it for three reasons.

One, I wanted to write this story to honour the incredible people in my life. Almost every "character" is based on someone real who has positively impacted my life. Either that or they are a combination of a few people I know. I was tired of stories about men especially that hinge on the main character either being a hopeless idiot (a tragedy) making a bigger mess of his life or a heroic tale where the male protagonist is almost super heroic in transforming his own life, doing so through sheer will and some change in his mindset. Just does not feel real at all. After working with boys and men - thousands of them - over 25 years, I wanted to show a character who is flawed but human and multi-dimensional who moves forward and evolves partly because of his choices -- many of them not even conscious to him - but mostly do to the quality of people in his life. I believe that we are more the product of our culture and the people who shape us than our own virtues and flaws. Bill and the perfect storm of his 7 days shows just how profoundly a life can change due to the people you meet and who choose to care about you.

The second reason was not a choice really. I was called. Restless and hungry for it myself. After starting and failing to write and complete t any satisfaction 5 other books, I longed to surrender to the muse and write a story which I would fall in love with and in which I would get lost in myself. One that made me laugh and cry, surprised me ~ especially as the author ~ and one which I would never want to end. One desperate and lonely night, I walked out in the cold rain, jogging and praying, begging the gods and goddesses to allow it to be birthed

My Heart Is A Muscle

through me and for myself to be trusting enough to allow it to unfold so naturally and become so rich with truth and humanity so as to become a world that was so real it paralleled my own life - like the way the dream world does.

Three, was strategic and became far less important as I got lost in the daily practice of my fingers typing on their own and me watching what arose on the page. Initially, I thought it would be of good service to write a story that would grip and move certain men in such a way as to leave them hungry for the adventures that Bill has. And maybe that would lead them to me and the community of exceptional men I am proud and eternally grateful to be a part of.

In my twenties, immersed in a career I needed to abandon, I read "The Peaceful Warrior" by Dan Millman and it had this impact on me. It grabbed my by the lapel and shook me, shaking loose notions I needed to shed enough to see there was a much deeper and more mysterious world awaiting me. I went on a search after that - for over a decade ~ to find mentors and dojos and healing adventures of my own. I found them. And 25 years later, I guess now I am ready to begin to write about the incredible people and experiences that have shaped me.

Are you and Bill alike?

Yes and No.

You never know how a character will develop. Initially, he was based on a real man I know and had the honour to mentor. His life story and background is eerily close to Bill's. But then as Bill Stone started coming alive, he took on parts of my own life. Many of the events of his life parallel my own as well.

At the same time, in many ways, he's also my polar opposite, in terms of his personality and life choices. I've been a restless creative guy who only settled down and had a family, owned property *after* travelling, living like a hippie and moving 37 times.

Yet, what Bill goes through and how he makes sense of it is close to my own heart and way of being. He's incredibly trusting - considered - and yet also very critical and rational. I love how he's a walking contradiction.

Reminds me of that Walt Whitman quote...

My Heart Is A Muscle

*“Do I contradict myself?
Very well, so I do.
I am multitudes.”*

This story seems unbelievable. Are any parts true or based on real events?

Many aspects of this story are in fact true. Some too personal to mention here. But, yes, I have spoken to dead people. I have had a few near death experiences that shook me to my very core, where I was in shock and floated out of my body. I also speak to Papa daily. And I still feel self-conscious about revealing that - not being religious or wanting to push that on others, but growing up through the church and having had that baggage to let go as well.

Then there are my experiences in hospitals, going through cancer and knowing doctors and med staff are close to what I describe in the book.

Every character in this tale is based on real people I know and love.

Many of the contexts that Bill discovers: Playback Theatre, the men's group, Dan's dojo, The Healing Hut, Robert and the ravine, men dancing at dawn, are close sketches of people, experiences, and even the locations that exist in the real world. One place - Un-believe-a-bowl is based on a place I wish existed but then again, the ceramic studio, the restaurant and Farooz and Ezra are real, just not all found in one store.

Still curious?

You may read more about the real people and organizations who inspired the book on the next page.

The Real People

who inspired and shaped the
characters in this Book

Jerry Brodey ~ Your deep friendship and way of relating to the natural world, allowing the mystery to unfold made up most of Robert. I also slipped you in as Jerry (the elder at the Great Unshaming). I have tremendous respect and love for you and undoubtedly I am here because of how much you've nurtured, challenged, cajoled and loved me into being.

Maria Solakofski ~ my wife and love of my life, your love, unrelenting and unshakable, fierce and proud and full of heart is the medicine I need to be like Bill, daring to show up fully. I see you both in Jess and a bit in Becca.

Sofia Jurasek ~ my favorite parts of this story (there are many) are the ones with Bill and Julia together. My dearest daughter, you and Julia are so close, in wonder, love, wisdom and courage. May our bond also be so close and deeply empowering as theirs as we age.

Pierre Gauthier ~ You crossed all the lines and loved me like a son. The first elder man who saw me and blessed me, boxed with me, laid healing touch on me and helped me grow out of adolescence into manhood. Parts of you infused the character of Robert.

Mark Silver ~ your teaching me the wisdom of the heart through the Sufi path, and your showing up with real compassion and care over the years through Heart of Business and 1-1 in my life, opened the door to me meeting Papa. There is a part of you that I see in the sparkly eyed Ezra, imagining you tending Un-Believe-A-Bowl, in another life.

Donavan Waite ~ You died last year but stay alive in my memory. You were the inspiration for the character of Sensei Jacques. I probably botched the cultural references and mannerisms but hopeful I honour your spirit of patience, grace, trust and clear authority.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Dan Millman ~ Your story The Peaceful Warrior changed my life 25 years ago. Sensei Dan is also an homage to your way of revealing and sharing through inspired story and practices. Robert is also cut from the same cloth as your mentor Socrates.

Owen Williams ~ Your wisdom, deep sense of people, loyalty and incredible warmth all infused the fictional Owen. May our friendship continue to deepen and stay strong as we age.

Jack Manchester ~ Your charm, humour, wit, and incredible hugs are all part of the fictional Jack. In fact, if you stayed in the acting world, that is who I imagined you would be.

Petr Jurasek ~ My brother by blood and love. You are different from Daren, in some very obvious ways, but the essence of his deep care, loyalty, honesty and generosity come from you.

Nadia Awad MacDonald ~ My dear sister from another. Maiko and the spirit of the dojo are inspired from training with you ~ your determination, precision, and dedication infuses her. Though personality wise, your courage and care comes through also in Alexandra.

Michael McCarthy ~ your way of holding space and the centre of gravity in moments of gathering inspired the "fictional" Michael. I honestly can't tell you apart.

Maya Chartrand Goodrich ~ you inspired Becca. Your wildness and deep care as the sister I never had infused her laughter and relentless desire to reach Bill.

Shannon Lynch ~ your friendship saved my life more than once and like Daren, you've wrestled your own demons to become a man I admire and respect beyond words.

Jesse Brown ~ Your fox-like cheekiness, your confidence and ease to be playful with everyone in all situations and a serious passion for real martial arts application inspired Dan, both a Sensei and a mechanic.

Barbara Forest ~ A dear friend, mentor, inspiration, fellow visionary and deep healer. I felt your presence with me as I wrote. I picture you as the spirit of the ravine that held Bill, Jess and Robert and many others in her wild embrace.

David Roman ~ You are a dear friend who, like your love Forest, wove into this story in the spaces in between the words. In the spine and fibre of Robert particularly and in character of the natural spaces.

Marc Gabel ~ You inspired the characters of Bob, as well as, in some ways the doctor, Marvin Greenleaf. You've also helped me to take myself less seriously, be kinder to others and to heed your prescription to nap, as needed.

Joanne Harrop ~ You inspired the down to earth, humble, loving and generous ways of Sarah. I love how she relates to Bob and shows up to reveal her own wisdom.

Jacob Nordby ~ Your mid-life burning of the leash and a fiery pursuit of wrestling the muse inspired both Bill's character and my desire to write and finish this unwieldy beast.

And further THANK you to the following incredible people who have shaped my own journey in life and I infused into the writing of this tale.

Pascal LaRiviere, Clive Hannah, Steve Sims, Ashwin Jiwane, Brian Lynn, Scott Simons, Jean Jacques Goulet, Bruce Lynne, Anthos Reynolds, Andrew Kay, Stavros Stavropoulos, Bar Cohen, Bartek Borowinski, Bradley Morris, Chris Friesen, Ayan Mukherjee, Chris Von Baeyer, Tad Hargrave, Scott Tavis, Ala Roshdieh, Rex Hagon, Paul Hamilton, John Giffen, Brandon Tallman, Paul Badali, Greg Angus, and Ben Zimmer.

And of course my parents and extended family. Let's add in all my ancestors. I would not be even here to write this without you!

I have to exclaim to emphasize my passion here:

“Holy fuck! How grateful I am to you all!”

Know a man who needs to read this?

It's simple. Give him a copy.

You can buy more (ebook and paperback) or
send him to get the free preview at:

www.powerfulandloving.com/muscle

Or give him yours. Let it be worn out, dog
eared, chewed up, with coffee stains.

And while you are at it...

Invite him to go for a walkabout together
with you...

Flex your heart muscles, be brave and tell
him why he matters to you.

Is Powerful And Loving (PAL)
a *real* organization?



Yes. I started it with a band of men, who ~ like me ~ were hungry to gather for adventures of the heart and soul, eager to learn and to train to be more powerful *and* loving.

You can find us at:

www.powerfulandloving.com

PREVIEW

of the BOOKS insisting
to be to written next...

I hated to see Robert's body laid to rest. There's too much story left in him to tell.

And also the muse is insatiable, waking me up at 3:30am, often. Like Becca with Bill, she can haunt me or help me to heal, if only I choose to listen and scribble or type down what is coming through me.

And so, what can I do but to keep writing...

On the next few pages are the synopsis of three books, honouring the origins of Robert and continuing the story of Bill in ways I can't predict.

I can only show up and see - like you as a reader - where the story takes us...

My Heart is a Compass

To honour Robert's legacy and dying wish, Bill has gathered 50 men in the community to form an organization called POWERFUL AND LOVING (a.k.a. PAL), initially funded by his wealthy brother Daren.

Power struggles emerge right away about how it should be run and what the vision really is.

Senior men in the community form a "shadow board" questioning Bill's leadership as the "new guy". They "dare" him to prove himself by personally mentoring five new men, each with a dilemma that beguiles him.

He has 3 months to help each man to make a very difficult decision in the most powerful and loving way or to step aside himself from leading the growing organization.

Meanwhile, a viral epidemic ravages the city, Julia hits puberty and dynamics with Jess go out of control.

The Path to Confidence

This is a *prequel* to the story you just read.

Finding his wife in bed with his business partner, six months later, Jeff is desperate to climb out of depression and finally find the one thing that he believes has always eluded him his entire life: “confidence”.

Meeting his idol, Daren Stone, known as the Phoenix of business ventures, sets Jeff on a journey of unusual lengths following the guidance of a mysterious mentor who promises him all he desires, and more.

Will he confront his demons and find the confidence and courage to love again?

Or will he be conned and betrayed by the men who promise to help him?

P.S.

In terms of delivering these and more future tales, I can't promise anything.

Life has a way of diverting my best laid plans and being consistently un-predictable.

If you want me to increase the likelihood that I publish these stories and thus satisfy your insatiable curiosity and reading pleasure, you can support me by...

One. Writing that review I keep asking you for. Mhhmmm. Thank you again.

Two. Buying more copies of this book for a friend. Feeds the fire while I write more.

Three. Personally encouraging me and occasionally giving me a loving kick in the ass at:

david@powerfulandloving.com