

First Snow  
Word Count: 4,164

## One

Define this whirlwind: As lips touch after that moment of decision at the precipice when verbal and visual relating confronts the desire for completion, expressing emotional need and physical desire with a singular act that makes me think *eternal*. Online met, Syracuse and the City separate us and could not get the time to meet until discovering we would be in Oregon. During the intense conversation at a café the snow began, reminding me of Manhattan in January when the big storms come roaring in. We step outside waiting for our ride as the snow began to accumulate.

That first kiss, bussing momentarily brushing lips before wrapping hands around necks, open mouthed deeper was unplanned, just boom here we are with nothing else to say, and left with the accomplishment of closing a circle, without spoken words. Assumed she thought the same; told me later before sleep she had stopped thinking, listening to the music playing in her head. Her pouting, delicate lips too small to trace but cannot help but pull her lower lip down with my thumb, cherub features screened by the ginger red strands crossing diagonally over her face, nose scrunched up, flesh tickled, batting eyelids, smiling happily, lips traces of pink lipstick, eyes sparkling reflected under the street light. Skin so clean, white, not porcelain but cream; she blushes easily, wiggles her nose expressing sweetness without self-awareness of deceit. Yes, sweet, not innocent or virginal, but in the manner of presenting herself without attributes, unpretentiously. Cute, but naturally so; appearance younger than age, keeping her scars to herself, left uncollected on every table she rises from. Wears pink without irony, and

darkness doesn't become her; heartbreakingly redhead, achingly so with each strand falling over her face.

The snow melted on her glass lenses, droplets obscuring walnut shade, staring up, shivering, soft lips lifted parted slightly thinking, appraising me, her, situation; what lies beyond initial connection, the hinting at open doors daring to peer in but hesitation at reaching out following through. Hands in mittens, crocheted, brace on wet black leather motorcycle jacket slipping softly, wanting to hold and hesitant, perhaps waiting for me.

I grasp her cheeks with gloved hands. Gently, communicating to her I honor the softness, beauty, herself. Kiss her again as her arms slip to her sides, yielding instead of indicating passivity, standing on toes, pushing her mouth as if seeking a redemptive connection while December snow dusts hair and coats.

## **Two**

I dreamt of whippoorwills calling in the woods behind the house I lived with my mother, grandparents as a child, before Mom found a job at Texas, moving a month after turning 15, to a different world, new adjustments which decades later continue to fine tune, often from frustration. I had thought little of those woods: lady slippers poking through the ground amid pine needles, wild holly, oaks and pines, terrain sloping to boulder-strewn Appalachian summit. Yet—however—I have triggered a memory, sentimental recollections, boy alone staring at the constellations amid the forest rising around me as a basilica framing windows to the stars through the jagged edges of tree tops.

Awaken, our bodies warm, having found the places where to meet. Under black comforter, and a plaid wool blanket, my left arm under her pillow, the right over her waist, under covers, against skin, hand resting near hers, curled in a half-open fist. I slip my hand underneath hers, positioning thumb against the back of her palm, and hold.

She sleeps with open mouth as if prepared for a conjoining embrace but I want her to sleep. In the silence of this room, the only sound the silky crinkle of snow falling against the window above the bed. No whippoorwills calling except in dream, but evoked. I watch her sleep, feeling the rhythm of her breathing, rising stomach against my arm, and kiss her shoulder with gratitude. I miss North Carolina. Yes, I miss those mountains now invoked here while finding my heart so close to hers.

### **Three**

Morning accompanied by big dogs barking and automobile engines idling. The house belongs to my old as dirt friend David, but today it was ours. I wanted to think so, taking up on his comment that mine is yours when he invited me to stay. She agreed to meet in town, having traveled far from home, stacks of trade paperbacks Amtrak cross-country on the empty seat beside her; me intended as a way station of dinner and talking before on to Vancouver and the Trans-Canada, gifting to herself the time and the experience, saving money for years, taking a leave of absence from her job, a solitary excursion which hours ago became temporarily diverted. She had rail passes, but she worked it out that she only another day before she could get the next train to Canada before the Amtrak pass expired on her return to her home in Syracuse.

Therefore, our home was a ramshackle three-bedroom David always seems to be working on with his never-finished improvements, painted beige in a subdivision at the foot of a grassy and treeless slope, sharply rising, perfect to roll down in summer, and slide in winter snow.

Remnants of her warmth, her scent remained where her body had been. With a sense of respect that experience taught me, and the instinctive desire to have another memory to hold on to, my palm brushed against the sheet, touching, my eyes closed, hours before making love in near silence, wordlessly kissing lips that could not be traced, conjoining intertwined connecting reaching across miles from home, holding tight, desperation.

I rose, sliding on boxers and a t-shirt. The house was hot, dry, David leaving pans of water in front of the floor grates. The wood floor was warm, though the bathroom tile was not. After washing up, I entered the kitchen.

Morgan is framed by light, reflected from sun to snow. She is wearing a blue velour bathrobe; hair pinned up, facing the window above the twin porcelain sinks between two unfinished cupboards, watching kids slide and snowboard down the slope.

“Morgan,” I said softly. I didn’t know what else to say, feeling I was in church.

I touched her shoulder, placing my hand on the bathrobe. I kissed her at the nape, lingering while Morgan takes my hand from her shoulder, putting my fingers to her lips, head nodding back and forth while caressing.

## **Four**

Coffee: light with organic milk and, judging from the packaging, boutique sugar. Fortunately David isn’t cheap and while asleep he remained generous. Morgan and I are spoiled

on Starbucks, therefore mutually immensely appreciative across red checkered tablecloth in the kitchen. We grasp our mugs with both hands. We share silence at the table, just stare, mutually apprising and shy, or in shock that we had fucked. I had a growing misgiving at this silence, thinking that it was, as writers, that we communicate best by writing sight unseen, tapping away on laptop keyboards, and meeting last night we talked ourselves hoarse. I wondered whether we are here at this juncture because we ran out of things to say, which moved to the troublesome question of where to go from quietly sipping coffee at the kitchen table, neither of us breakfast people, staring. Self-confidence taking a hit, ebbing, staring into walnut eyes thinking that this is a sign we cannot relate in person. Her eyes peer into mine, faraway albeit beyond that remaining inscrutable. The thought crosses my mind that I am missing something, not getting it.

Morgan leans forward and kisses my cheek. “You need to shave,” she says, pulling back, cheeks adding color. “I love a man, but you’re scratchy.” Morgan tilts her head, lips curving to acknowledge a smile. I start to relax, but my doubt remains. I do her bidding, rise to shower, and shave.

## **Five**

For all the years I have known David, years adding up to decades strung together like abacus beads, one sliding over to account for the first ten marked on the calendar, then another he constantly referred to himself as a technopeasant. This is only accurate when it came to his music collection, all vinyl, hundreds of LPs neatly arraigned on custom built oak shelves in his living room. Any piece of music not pressed in that form—and increasingly so for more than twenty years—he loaded into his Macintosh hard drive.

As neatly presented as his rows of plastic covered record albums are, David eschewed organization. He knew where to find what he was looking for. However, I did not, and it took a while to find something for my mood. Wanted to show off for Morgan, and I knew David had the Karen Dalton record. I found Scott Walker's, *Scott 3*, instead, and put the record on the B&O turntable, with the vintage Marantz tube set-up that David maintained for nearly as long as I knew him. I lounged in David's leather chair, dressed, black jeans stuffed into motorcycle boots, in my pullover hoodie, listening, daydreaming while Morgan showered.

David finally came out of his room dressed to work on an art project he had going in his garage, spoke briefly to me about it excited enthusiastic while knocked about the kitchen. He was in the garage when Morgan came out.

I was replaying side one and I sat watching her stand at the turntable, looking intently. Morgan turned to look at me, her expression giving off what I termed a little Glaswegian: gloomy—gray and stark, and wanting to get out.

Finally, she spoke, softly, her voice distant, revealing.

“She stands there, in her fire escape in the sky.”

## Six

The afternoon: She led me mitten grasping glove, probably looking from a distance like Seventh Seal final scene, slipping in our boots in trampled, packed snow up the ridge, as kids, teens, parents cavorted and slid down to the subdivision below. The sky had return to gray but it wasn't so cold. Scarves, not hats, Morgan in earmuffs, pink fluffy matching her scarf.

We stood watching people climb the ridge to fling themselves down on cardboard, plastic and metal. An hour segued toward two.

We talked about bands, interspersed with Bert's Bees waxen against chapped lip kisses. Although 35, she looked so young in pink, especially the earmuffs, playful, unpretentious. I remain significantly older. That fact worries me, but I hide it with the bravado inherent of borrowing a plastic saucer. Arms, legs wrapped around me, skidding, bumping down the icy slope, Morgan screaming, laughing until I lost my grip on the straps and we tumble in a human avalanche.

We linger on the ground, me afraid to get up and show my age while I assume Morgan stares at the fire escape in the cloudy sky.

Finally, she turns over, smiling broadly than in the morning, arms on either side, her face close to mine, her glasses and earmuffs askew. "C'mon," she says, pulling me up. Morgan picks up the saucer. "They want this back."

We ascend the ridge, and I am reminded of my age and how out shape I am, but endure.

We return and David makes dinner. Afterward we go to a factory by the river to hear an industrial music show. We watch, standing at the iron railing with David as bemused spectators, looking down, minds elsewhere. This is not our thing, but it is David's. I still view it as our house, but it also David's, and where I come from we make an effort to be appreciative of kindness, despite my longing for melody.

## Seven

I wake to Morgan watching me sleep. I grab her with both hands.

**Eight**

Age has its advantages. No, scratch that—experience. Remain scared, however.

**Nine**

On the drive to the train station, Morgan holds up her phone, takes a self portrait and sends it to mine. I sit in the back seat, looking at her looking at me through the screen, glancing up to dark eyes framed with black plastic frames. David didn't mind that Morgan moved the rear view mirror to stare at me. Texans like us have a preference to look through the side mirror or to the road ahead. What is there appears smaller than actuality, as paraphrased in the worded warning stickers we invariably ignored. As for the road ahead, it is straight, ends when it ends, yet we are the curious kind, particularly interested in that which lies beyond the horizon. Pioneers, who would be us Texans, migrating, always moving on.

I want her to stay.

Morgan is a French Canadian New Englander, some Irish, some Italian maybe a wrong turn at Lisbon, Mohawk balancing on steel beams high in the New York City sky; different and distinct, reserved, cool. However, I am hot, fraught with anxiety, fearful of insult and hurt, of not measuring up and being nothing more than a station stop before dream vacation on the Trans-Canada, two-night stand as a postcard she might share with her friends, nothing more than that.

Yet I sense she has a Southern soul. Writes like one and she watches me sleep, reserving the New England standoffishness when she did not wish to reveal before unveiling when it mattered. Morgan scratches. Morgan bites. Morgan throws herself in with desperation. Why?



I want to know. I want her to tell me more about herself—where that comes from. Not leave me with the impression I could be wildly wrong about. I want her to know me, too.

Inside the station we take photos of the neo-Italian Renaissance interior. David tries to get us together to stand for a picture, but we demur. I begin to get the fear that Morgan is beginning the process of separation. Kissing goodbye was not the same; was thinking because David was watching.

I never saw someone off on a train before. It's different, not at all similar to an airport or waving goodbye to relatives from a driveway. I couldn't quite place why other than maybe because it's slow, on a fixed rail, and in Morgan's case, a long, extensive journey ahead and far too much time to think.

## Ten

Aftermath: three days of David and I listening to records, reading a book to review, helping him with a slide presentation for an upcoming gallery show, uploading on to his website. We try not to talk about Morgan. When we do, it is understandably terse. David is an old friend, and he's seen a lot, good and bad, never one to hold back with an opinion.

We drive to the mountains. I see Mount St. Helens. I am distracted, thinking that I am too macho, too old for her. I tried to convey otherwise. I get hurt, historically often and easily. I respond defensively by becoming I am too hard to know, reticent; unapproachable is an old issue, been told of that frequently.

David chose this as the time to bring Morgan up. “You haven’t heard from her, have you?” Sometimes he cares; sometimes he projects the experience of his failed relationships on me, with passive aggressive nasty. I continue to respond defensively.

“No, I haven’t. She said she was going to be busy with friends in Sea-Tac and had a day in Vancouver—also said she might go to Victoria.”

“So, she would be on the train today. Interesting that she didn’t think to let you know she made it on the train okay.”

“She told me she would try to call when she got to Kamloops.”

“Yeah, Kamloops. Don’t you know someone there?”

“Not anymore. She is in Indiana now.” We let the pause last for a couple of downhill curves.

David asked, “Did she tell you she loved you?”

“Yes, that last night. She was—er, crying.”

“You know what that means.”

”Yes, I know.” *Shut up, David.*

“You’re obsessed. Again.”

“I fall in love with every guitar, and every bass drum. There, I said it for you.”

“We are at the times of our lives when our peers begin to die not by choice. We are 50, beyond the midpoint of our lives. Morgan is nearly half your age.

At a crossing, David added, “Should I say more? Oh, there you are again, with the look of the man who is not there.” He returned his attention to the road, nodding.

Even so, one has to admire David’s coolness in his precision and clarity in his language; I am heat and light, and talk fast with twang and syrup, stumbling over words, skinning adjectives

and descriptive nouns, bruising verbiage. Reflected our class differences—rich kid artist, trailer park boy street Marxist with not a helluva lot of an oeuvre. However, we remain both deeply insecure, thus our alliance.

I let it slide and stare out the passenger side window lost in my thoughts, just like the old days with David in Texas. Back then it was a 1970 Buick with a four-barrel carb, though this Volvo shall do.

After dinner, David passive aggressively brings her up again, by playing Big Star. Morgan wore their t-shirt when she left. I get the hint while sipping his gourmet coffee; my heart is rising and sinking at once, me wanting to be elsewhere.

From my standpoint, I listened to Big Star and Alex Chilton as a kid because I knew how it felt to never get the girl, and then after getting to know him as well as I have through people who were very close to him for much of his life, and mourn him in ways that deeply touch me personally, I listen to songs like September Gurls and it hits so much harder now as an adult. One starts to understand that “When I get to bed late at night” is actually more like a Pretty Ballerina lyric “close your eyes and she’ll be there.”

*I get it, David.* Alex would do these pop genius things about when you come across someone who you instinctively feel connected to, but deep down you realize that, for whatever reason, it is not going to happen. Failure visualized as an artist’s palette, counting off the colors squeezed on the board: missed connections, bad timing, impossible geography, age differences, incompatibility of moods, mediocre lover, probably has someone else in mind always someplace else, the list is endless, unwinds. She may everything you ever wanted—but, no, sorry. Go to bed late at night. Close your eyes.

That was one of Alex's themes, either being ironic or painfully honest. He did it in such a way that was complex—some of those songs come across as held together with spit and tape, as overwhelmingly vulnerable and insecure as the songwriter. An inability to communicate clearly—I listen to Radio City, Sister Lovers, and Like Flies ... like I am in an airplane in a thunderstorm with an engine out.

*I love you, oh never mind.* That's how Alex talked. I now know the context. That's how we men, after being boys for a while, sometimes too long, talk when you realize dream baby love of your life is a mountain moving without you.

Love and lost. Love never attained. Love you could have had if you shut the fuck up and listened. *Yes, shut up, David. You too, Alex.*

## Eleven

That night I sleep on the left side of the bed.

I stare at Morgan's picture on my cell phone.

As we get ready to leave for the airport, David tells me he took a photo of Morgan and me going up the ridge. He sends it to my email. From my phone, I forward the photo to her.

## Twelve

When the plane lands at JFK, I turn on my phone to check my account. No response. I'm guessing she is still in the Rockies, out of wireless range, or that she is busy enjoying her

journey. Or asleep, lips slightly parted, wrapped in a blanket, head against pillow, against window economy class thousands of miles, the train rumbling toward the Canadian prairies.

### **Thirteen**

No, it's the fourteenth, I realize. Morgan arrives in Syracuse on the fifteenth. No texts. No email. She doesn't update her blog. I write her a letter, trying not to sound needy. I tell Morgan I love her. I wish her well.

Vancouver to Toronto is five days, another to Montreal. She's staying there for an extra day, then Amtrak to Syracuse. I check the schedule online once, telling myself Morgan gifted me two nights. That's what I was good for. I try to accept.

I force myself to sleep. I remain curled on the left side of the bed, fingers spreading over an empty space.

### **Fourteen**

I write Morgan a poem.

### **Fifteen**

I check blog, Facebook, email. Nothing. I go to the movies intending to leave the phone turned off until the next morning, afraid.

**Sixteen**

In the empty space beside me on the bed I line up the books I have Morgan wrote she liked; evoking a shade of her, not wanting to let go, at least just not yet. I do not believe in my power to conjure, to change fate. Not my job. Never was.

I printed off her self-portrait, and stared. Morgan's air falls across her face, behind and in front of her frames, her eyes expressing both weariness and appraisal, judging possibly. I dwell on the paper image, questioning whether Morgan is tired, sad, or about to break into a smile; showing me who she is, paring back personal boundaries for me to see what lies underneath. Was she indicating leaving or staying? Though at first I wanted to believe seduction I interpret the formation of her lips that she wanted to kiss before doubt forms. Guess she was telling me good bye. Damn.

I lie back to face the bland oblivion of the ceiling. Taking a cue from *Pretty Ballerina*—I close your eyes and Morgan is there. I focus on her eyes, brows curving. I imagine again my thumb pulling down her lower lip. When I do I realize I forgot the sensation, confusing them with other memories.

I drift off. Morgan is no longer in color. She is now in grays, pixilated, fading.

**Seventeen**

I wake to Sunday morning. Make coffee. Take a shower. Shave. Get dressed though I really don't know why I should bother. Have a book review on a book I like, but I decide on the avoidance ritual. I do that less now that writing has become an imperative. I rely on it now.

Writing is work, my entire career—such as it was when I was younger—seemed predicated in an inability to finish a 150 word record review. It is intensive labor that requires accepting failure often. Sure things falter like horses in the stretch. In rejection, it is a form note in where you know—many novice writers and those in denial are unaware of this—that it was likely the first reader did not get past the opening sentence, at best the opening paragraph. That’s a tough thing to take, but take it you must. Also, as in the case of my first novel, you can have an A-list agent who runs you through six drafts and then she throws up her arms in frustration. I am far from the singular in that experience. The conclusion is you have to like what you are doing to put up with the negative and that is true in all endeavors. However, it was my responsibility to have worked harder, earlier. Now I work like a bastard to catch up with those years with book reviews, interviews, and articles for magazines I would brag about if I had actually read them. Morgan laughed when I told her that. She was delicate with my snark, did not find it at all arrogant or condescending toward my self-described craft. Wonder, though, in thinking about it that she considered stuff like that on the train ride, concluding I was bitter. Women are not attracted to bitter—or old. Add Elvis Costello to the list: *I hang around dying to be tortured. You'll never be alone in the bone orchard.*

I am now beyond belief.

*Shut up, Elvis.*

With my mood half in aging angst mourning, the other portion in self-deluded denial to look at Morgan’s blog.

She updated.

## **Eighteen**

“I have another week,” she said. “I stopped talking myself out of this in Rochester.”

Morgan in battered riding boots, black pea coat and beret, wheeled duffel, shoulder bag beside her on the curb, cab pulling away.

She looked at my apartment building. “No fire escape?”

“Interior stairwells.” Pause. “Disappointed?”

“No.”

Her expression is as she was in the car until eyes close for an embrace. We kiss and look to the sky, catching the initial flurries of the snowstorm rolling in, the wind swirling about us, holding hands, hers in mittens grasping mine in gloves.