

The Heart of a Cult

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For all my teachers

Prologue

I never intended to join a cult. Like most people, I assumed that cults involved Kool-Aid and Nikes and dangerous madmen who would teach you that suicide was the most direct path to God. Cults were things that happened far away, to other people. People who were nothing like me.

I suppose none of us likes to think of ourselves as cult material. But there is in fact a type, a kind of person who is more susceptible to the influences of groups who may not always be what they first appear. This was the kind of person I suddenly became, just before my thirtieth birthday.

You see, one of the things that makes you susceptible to these kinds of groups is change. It happens all the time to everyone, but certain kinds of change can make you vulnerable. The job of change is to uproot us, to tear us away from the familiar so we can open our minds to the new. But in the space between shedding the old and discovering the new, the path is not always a clear one. It's easy to be tempted by the illusion of a group that seems to have all the answers that, ultimately, we need to find for ourselves.

For me, the catalyst was the loss of my job. It was such a simple thing, but it unleashed a cascade of reactions that undermined the stable framework of my life. In a very short period of time, I went from being a focused, levelheaded career woman to someone who was very confused about what to do with my life. I suppose I was just lucky that Heaven's Gate didn't find me first.

The group I hooked up with wasn't that bad, of course. There were no suicides, no surrendering of personal assets, no proselytizing on street corners. They would even deny that they were a cult—but then, people who are in these groups always do.

And at first, it all seemed so perfect. They offered me a wise and charismatic teacher, a loving and supportive community, and a sense of purpose I'd been sorely lacking. I truly thought this

woman and her group were the answer to my problems, the light that would lead me forward into the next phase of my life. And in a way, that's exactly what they did. It just wasn't at all like I thought it was going to be.

You see, the cult I joined, the guru I found, all that was really just a doorway. They seduced me gently in, then shoved me brutally forward into the depths of real growth, into the white hot fire of transformation that burned away everything I'd ever known about myself until there was nothing recognizable left. It was not at all what I had signed up for. But by the time I discovered what was really going on, it was far too late to turn back.

One

We are in a train station—an arched, gray building filled with loud echoes of wheels on metal. A train has just arrived, and we are walking against a flowing crush of people. It is just my mother and me, alone in this huge crowd, and I cling tightly to her trench coat. She is walking quickly, and I have to take two steps for every one of hers.

She stops for a moment, craning her long neck to search the crowd. As she does, I spy a penny on the ground and reach down to pick it up. When I stand back up, my mother is gone.

I look around at the swarm of people much bigger than I am, searching for her in a sea of unknown faces. But she is not there. A moment later, I see her coat. I push my way towards her and yank on her sleeve, but the face that looks down at me is strange one.

I panic, turning every which way in search of her. Each time I see a familiar coat I run towards it and pull at the fabric. Woman after unfamiliar woman turns to look at me curiously before brushing me aside. But I keep trying—trying, and failing—to find her.

I awoke, drenched in sweat, to sunlight streaming through the wide glass window in my bedroom. I blinked a few times, trying to shake off the heaviness I always felt after having that dream. It just felt so vivid and real. I wondered sometimes if it was more a memory than a dream, if I really had gotten lost in a train station when I was little. But my mother had died when I was five, so she wasn't around to ask.

Disentangling myself from the covers, I stumbled out of bed and over to the window. It was another glorious Colorado day, not a cloud to be seen anywhere in the sky. My forehead smudged the glass as I looked down at the busy street three stories below, watching people driving purposefully this way and that, happily embedded in the rhythm of their lives.

I envied them.

I let out a sigh and turned away from the window. Just a few months earlier, I'd celebrated my five-year anniversary working as the senior web designer for a small graphics firm in downtown Denver. The husband and wife team who owned the company hosted a party for me at the office, indulging the staff with several bottles of champagne and a cake decorated to look like a computer screen. An hour into the party, Diana, the wife half of the team, who I'd never really thought liked me very much, lauded me with a toast praising not only my impeccable design skills but the overall fabulousness of my personality. Though I knew a good part of that toast was fueled by champagne, I was pleased. I'd worked really hard for them, and I knew I'd been instrumental in the growth of their business. It felt really good to finally be acknowledged for that.

Not even a week later, I was alone at the office, working late trying to meet a deadline for some demanding urologists when Mike, Diana's husband, came back into the office.

"Oh, Michelle, you're still here," he said, barely looking at me as he passed my desk on the way to his private office. Mike was usually a picture of composure, a fit, balding man in his early forties who always neatly dressed. But that night, his tie hung loose around his neck, and his blue shirt was splattered with what looked like red wine. I watched him as he fumbled with the keys and dropped them on the floor. As he reached down to get them, he knocked some papers off my neighbor's desk.

"Shit!" he said as he sank to his knees and tried to bring some order to the sheets scattered haphazardly around him.

I'd never seen Mike like this, and my concern grew as I watched him fumble around. I got up and came over to help him. "Mike, are you okay?" I asked as I knelt next to him and reached for some of the papers.

"Oh, God," he muttered, as he covered his face with his hands and fell against the desk. I realized in one horrible moment that my boss was both drunk and crying.

"Oh, my God, Mike, what is it?" I said. We were not close, but instinctively I placed my hand on his shoulder.

He didn't say anything for a while, his chest heaving in silent sobs. Then, suddenly, he said, "That fucking Diana."

“What?”

“She’s cheating on me, Michelle,” he said, choking out a sob. He looked up at me then, his eyes full of total anguish.

“What? Are you sure?”

He looked away, wiping his hand across his face. “It’s been going on for months. Christ, what am I going to do?”

I stared at him, at a loss for how to answer. My mind was working overtime, trying to come up with some credible denial to make him feel better, while at the same time I was slowly nodding my head in understanding. Really, it made perfect sense. Mike was a workaholic; his wife had an overflowing need for attention. Surprise, surprise.

I was still trying to figure out what to say when he started speaking again. “I’m such an idiot,” he said. “I knew I’d never be able to make her happy.”

“Mike, I’m so sorry,” I said.

He turned back to look at me, a half smile on his face. “It’s not your fault,” he said.

“I know. I just wish there was something I could do.”

He looked at me a moment longer. Then he leaned over, pulled my face towards his and gave me a soft, lingering kiss.

My stomach flipped as I realized what was happening. A million thoughts rushed through my head simultaneously. One part of me was pointing out that this was really not a good idea because a) he was my boss, b) I wasn’t even that attracted to him, and c) he was married to my other boss. But another part, the one that hadn’t been kissed in longer than I cared to admit, was busy noticing how deliciously soft Mike’s lips felt against my own.

After a few seconds, rationality won out. I reached for his wrists and pulled my face away from his.

“Mike,” I whispered. “Please. This is not a good idea.”

He looked at me, hungry longing in his eyes. “No, I guess you’re right,” he said as he turned away and reached for the edge of the desk to pull himself up. “Why do you always have to be so goddamned practical?” he muttered as he as walked out of the office without looking back.

I sat on the floor for a long time after he left, stunned by what had happened. My office mate,

Lisa, had suspected for years that the reason Diana didn't like me was because Mike was attracted to me, but I'd never seen it. He'd been nothing but professional with me from day one.

Of course, I did tend to be oblivious to that kind of attention. I was okay looking, but my only really good feature was a rich mane of wavy, strawberry blond hair. My face was just average, and I was also ten pounds heavier than I should be, so I'd just never felt very confident around guys. So I usually missed any but the most obvious signs of interest in me.

It was hard to get more obvious than this. But I wavered, unsure what to think. He was drunk, and obviously hurting. It was likely just an unconscious reaction, probably trying to get even with Diana. But maybe it was something else.

I pulled myself to standing, and my eyes fell on the etched metal nameplate marking his door. He was kind of attractive, in a successful businessman sort of way. But I'd never really let myself think about him like that before.

Nor should I now, I reminded myself. Even if he wasn't my boss, a man in a troubled marriage was not a good risk. Even if my life could use a little excitement, this was not the way to get it.

I sat down at my desk, but was unable to focus on the work in front of me. My body was still tingling from the aftereffects of Mike's sudden display of passion. I gave up trying to work and went home, determined to put the whole thing out of my mind. It was a decision made easier for me by the fact that Mike barely acknowledged me for the rest of the week.

The following Monday, Mike and Diana called an office meeting. As Mike stood stiffly in the background, Diana informed us that they had decided it was time to take the business in a new direction. Meetings led by Diana tended to be long-winded and lacking in substance, so I was only half listening at first. I was thinking what an odd couple they made —crisp, professional Mike and flamboyant, overly made-up Diana. They were as mismatched as a Burberry suit and a hand-woven Guatemalan dress.

My attention was abruptly pulled back to the meeting by the word "downsize."

"As much as we hate to say goodbye to the family that you all have become," Diana was saying, "this is really what's best for Mike and I right now. We'd like you to complete your current projects, and we'll provide each of you with a severance package and whatever references you need. Our lease on the space will be ending at the close of the month, and we'll be moving the

business back into our home at that time. If you anticipate that your current project will take longer than that to complete, please see me about that individually.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Downsized? But we'd been growing like crazy over the last year, and just a few weeks earlier they'd asked me to help interview yet another employee. I looked over at Susan, another web designer who'd been there almost as long as I had. She was staring at Diana with her mouth open.

“Why?” Susan said. “I mean, this just doesn't make any sense. We've been so busy!”

Diana looked over at Mike, who was staring intently out the window. She sighed and turned back to us. “It's really a personal issue. The growth in the business has put too much strain on both of us and we need some time to rethink our priorities. We need to get back to our roots. I'm sorry.”

I knew then that this was all about Diana's affair. I felt a lurch in my stomach as I wondered if any of it also had to do with me. But neither of them looked at me as the meeting broke up; in fact, they didn't look at anyone.

I reminded myself that they were letting everyone go, so it probably didn't have anything to do with me. It made sense, given what was happening in their marriage, that they'd want to scale back. But still, I was completely unprepared for this. I'd never been fired from a job in my entire life, and I walked to my car that afternoon in a total daze. I felt like the proverbial rug had just been yanked out from underneath me and I was falling through space, just waiting to hit the ground.

It had now been almost three months since I'd lost my job. After finishing the urologist's website, I took a week off, and then threw myself into job hunting full time. But after weeks of diligent searching, I was still very much unemployed.

I was trying hard not to worry too much about it. There was a job I interviewed for last week that seemed promising, and I'd just sent off another resume for a position I'd heard about from a friend. But these were not good times, and there were an awful lot of people out of work. I'd already been passed over on 4 jobs I'd interviewed for, and it was hard not to take it personally. I knew I was a good designer, but apparently there were plenty of people who were better than me.

The ring of the phone cut through the startled air of my apartment. I stared at it with hopeful disbelief—maybe it was about that job.

“Hello?”

“Michelle, it’s me.”

My body stiffened. It was my father. He and I were not on the best of terms, and he usually only called with bad news. Not at all what I’d been hoping for.

“What’s happened?”

“Your brother’s gone into rehab. Court-ordered program.”

Danny. He was five years younger than I was, but a few centuries older from having lived on the streets since he was fifteen.

I let out a large sigh and sank onto the sofa. “Well, that’s good news, isn’t it?”

“Maybe. He’s already tried to get out, though. I want you to go down there and see him.”

My stomach tightened. “Me? Why do you want me to go?”

There was a long moment of silence. “He won’t listen to me, you know. You’re the only other family he’s got, and he really needs someone to put his head on straight.”

I closed my eyes and rubbed my fingers against my forehead. “Danny and I are not exactly close, Dad. We haven’t seen each other in over three years, and I don’t expect he’s going to be excited to hear from me now.”

“Your brother needs you right now, Michelle. Whether he knows it or not.”

“What Danny needs is professional help. People who know how to deal with his problem and can help him through it—the kind of people he’s going to find in rehab. What he doesn’t need is you or me badgering him about straightening up his life. As you may remember, we’ve already tried that.”

“Look, Michelle,” he said, his voice softening as he spoke, “all I’m asking is that you go down to the center and visit with him a little bit. Is that really so much to ask?”

I didn’t answer right away. It shouldn’t have been too much to ask, I knew that. But the last time I’d seen Danny was just after he’d gone into rehab the first time. He was agitated as he paced back and forth across the chipped vinyl floor of the treatment center visitor’s room. My dad had told him he could move back home if he took a job working for one of Dad’s clients in some kind

of factory, but Danny was having none of it. I was trying to help him see that it might be a good stepping stone while he got on his feet when he suddenly exploded. He screamed that he was sick and tired of my nagging attempt at mothering him and I should just go fuck myself. We hadn't spoken since.

"I'm sorry, Dad," I said quietly. "I just don't have time for this. If Danny wants to see me, he knows how to get in touch with me. But until then, I'm not going to run around chasing him. I'm still looking for a job, and that's taking up all my time."

"What? You're still out of work?"

"It's a really tough market, Dad. This career you thought would be so fabulous is just glutted with talented people."

"Well, what are you doing about it? You should be out knocking on doors."

"What do you think I'm doing?"

"What are you doing at home, then? You should at least get some kind of part time job. You've got to eat, for Christ's sake."

"Look, Dad, just calm down, okay? I've got unemployment; I'm not going to starve to death."

"You're living off welfare?"

"It's called unemployment insurance, Dad," I said, measuring my breath. "That's what it's for, remember?"

"Well, why aren't you—"

"Look, Dad, I've really got to go. I have to get ready for an interview."

I tossed the phone on the couch, wishing I'd never answered it. I was having a hard enough time staying optimistic about my current situation without any help from him. He'd always had a keen ability to make me feel worse about a bad situation. Once when I was eleven, I came home devastated because I'd gotten a B+ on a test. In spite of the fact that I was already crying, my father yelled at me for ten minutes about how lazy and stupid I was, doomed to a life of failure in spite of all his best efforts.

I felt a familiar anger begin to simmer underneath the surface of my skin. This was usually the prelude to an unpleasant headache, and I stood up from the couch, trying to snap myself out of it. My father was wrong about me, and he always had been. I was a talented professional, suffering

from a temporary career setback. I'd find a job eventually; I knew that. I let out a heavy sigh, and just hoped I would find one soon.

The coffee maker perked at me and I went to the kitchen to pour myself a mug. My kitchen was open to the main room of my airy apartment, and as I looked up from the counter, my glance was caught by the sun's rays pouring in from a large, east-facing window. Light was spilling across the wood floor and the wine colored sofa, highlighting an easel I'd set up in the corner when I first moved in.

I surveyed the image carefully for a moment, my eyes automatically taking in the angles of the wood, the depth of the sun's glow, the shape of the shadows on the wall behind the easel. The image was a striking one.

I took a sip of coffee. I'd been thinking for a while now that I should really use this time to get back into painting. That's what I'd always really wanted to do anyway, ever since my aunt had given me a set of paints for Christmas one year. I'd been disappointed in the gift at first, since what I'd wanted was a Princess Dream Castle. But I soon discovered I could paint myself the castle my practical father refused to buy for me, and my whole world changed. There was just nothing like being able to create whatever you could possibly imagine, coaxing an image to life from a blank page with the magic of color and a steady hand. It brought some much needed joy to my otherwise dreary childhood, and I spent every spare moment I could in front of a canvas from then on.

I was good, too. I'd even gotten accepted at the Art Institute of Chicago after high school, but my father flat out refused to pay for what he considered a frivolous education. He had only agreed to pay for school at all if I majored in computers. You'll always be able to find a job in that field, he claimed. Oh, how wrong he was.

Despite the total lack of parental support, I did manage to keep painting through my time in college, though I could barely afford supplies. When I first got hired by Diana and Mike, I was ecstatic that I'd finally be making enough money to get an apartment with decent light and buy all of the painting supplies I could ever want. I'd been so motivated back then, planning to do a painting every weekend, get myself enough work to submit for showing.

But it hadn't worked out that way. The great job I'd gotten that allowed me to pay for the

apartment and its amazing light started demanding more and more of my time, more and more of my creative energy. Designing web sites didn't take the same kind of creativity as doing a painting, but it took enough that when I wasn't working, I was often too tired to even think. So it had been years since I'd so much as picked up a brush.

I walked over towards my easel and settled onto the stool. The sun's rays perfectly framed the blank canvases resting haphazardly against the wall. I wondered briefly if someone was trying to tell me something.

Well, why not? It wasn't like I had anything else on my schedule.

I began prowling through the back of my closet, searching for my painting supplies. Behind a mountain of shoeboxes I found them, a couple of plastic containers filled with crinkled tubes and paint-splattered brushes. I ran my fingertips along the smooth wood of my favorite brush, a smile forming at the edge of my lips. I felt like a child again, awash in the infinite possibilities of pure color. I could create anything I wanted out of these materials, and I felt giddy with the excitement of it.

I reclaimed the small tray table I'd gotten for the easel from its current function as an end table and arranged my paints carefully on it. I liked to be able to see as many colors as I could when I painted, to always know my options. Then I sat quietly on a stool in front of the blank canvas I'd chosen.

I always took a few moments to settle down before beginning to paint, to give the image a chance to come forth. The first thing that came into my mind was a landscape, a spring mountain scene, bright bursts of color against a still gray backdrop. I was just reaching for a tube of paint when I remembered a picture I'd wanted to do of a woman's body, bathed in layers of light and shadow. But then that got me to thinking about candlelight, and the image of a still life I'd considered years ago pushed itself forward.

As I sat there, more and more images I'd thought of and ignored over the past few years began jostling for attention inside my head. I felt suddenly overwhelmed, drowning in a vast sea of possible projects.

I got up, took a deep breath, and walked around my apartment to clear my head. One step at a time, I reminded myself, then sat back down.

Arbitrarily deciding to go with the landscape, I reached my brush for the paint. I was just about to dab some gray on the canvas, but then paused. I couldn't quite get the image in my head. I sat for another few moments, then looked at the canvas again. I still couldn't see it. My eyes turned to the clock, then back at the canvas, glaringly white and intimidatingly large.

I frowned. I should have started with a smaller canvas. A glance at my pile of frames informed me that I didn't have anything smaller. I sat there, stewing in uncertainty, for another few moments. The image remained just outside my visual grasp. Frustrated, I threw my brush at the canvas and gave up.

Two

Having been abandoned by my muse, I threw on some clothes and went off in search of Lucy. She was a dancer, and we'd met our sophomore year at the University of Colorado in a required Science-for-Artists class. That particular year the class had been taught by a psychotic visiting physics professor who experimented on us by teaching graduate level quantum physics. A third of the class dropped out, but by pooling our resources and staying up very late before the final, Lucy and I managed to squeak through. We celebrated our success by burning all of our books and papers from the class in a ritual bonfire fueled by a great deal of cheap Chilean wine. We'd been pretty much inseparable ever since.

Lucy made her living waiting tables at an expensive Italian place while she struggled to pull together a dance company out of her high-strung performing friends. This meant that she had almost as much free time as I did. In the early days of my unemployment, we'd met for coffee nearly every day at a funky little café just around the corner from Lucy's apartment called the Inner Room. The place was full of once rich velvet sofas with arms worn threadbare by years of use; quirky chandeliers made from multi-colored teacups shed soft light across the scuffed wood floor. It had been our favorite haunt for years.

It was almost noon when I arrived at the café, a good time to catch Lucy getting her wake-up coffee. But an initial survey of the customers was disappointing. My only companions were a woman with spiked green hair who was hunched over a laptop and whatever bits of the newspaper happened to be lying around. I dropped my things onto a worn, purple velvet chair and headed over to the barista to fortify myself with caffeine and chocolate.

Several hours later, as I struggled to keep my mind focused on a self-help book that discussed how my father's judgments of me might be impacting my choices of men, I caught a glimpse of

Lucy's red suede jacket as she disappeared down the street in the direction of her apartment. I tried half-heartedly to get through the paragraph I was reading, but soon gave up. I gathered my things together and headed out the door after her, hoping I could talk her into having an early dinner with me.

Lucy's apartment was in a brown brick building rich in turn-of-the-century charms both good and bad, with leaded glass windows, built-in cabinets, peeling paint and deafening radiators. But her small one bedroom had a decent sized living room with relatively level wood floors that she could practice in, and the rent was cheap.

Her front door wasn't latched. I knocked twice, then pushed my way gently in.

"Luce?"

"Oh, hey Michelle, it's you," she said, stepping out of the bathroom, hairbrush in hand. Her hair was an utterly glorious mane of thick black tresses that she usually kept in a tight braid. The fact that it was down meant she'd be going out. "I thought you were Jeremy."

Jeremy was the new boyfriend. I hadn't seen much of her since they'd started dating a couple of weeks before, but we'd spoken enough for me to know that she was still all in a flutter about him.

I let out a sigh. "I was hoping I might be able to talk you into going to Tommy's with me, seeing as how I haven't seen you much lately. But it sounds like you've already got plans."

"Yeah, we've got a date," she replied, returning her brush to the sink in the bathroom. "I'm sorry I haven't been around much," she called out over her shoulder as she surveyed herself in an ornate tin mirror we'd found at a flea market years ago. "We've just been spending a lot of time together. I'm not sure where it all goes, really," she said, turning back to me with an impish smile.

I smiled back, despite my pang of jealousy. Lucy was an extraordinarily beautiful woman, with rich olive skin, deep brown eyes framed by unbelievably long lashes, and a curvy sensuality that drew men to her wherever she went. I'd long since grown used to the fact that her love life was far more interesting than mine. Most of the time, it didn't bother me.

"Okay, well, another time then," I said. "You doing good?"

She took in a big breath of air, nodding. "Yeah. Really good. You?"

"Yeah, fine," I mumbled, feeling suddenly lame about the lack of anything interesting going on

in my life. “But we can catch up later—you need to get ready.” I turned towards the door, but stopped just before it. “Oh, hey, don’t forget about next Tuesday, okay? I’ve made reservations for us at Cameo.”

Her eyes widened and she covered her mouth. “Oh, shit, your birthday! I totally forgot. Ma’s doing this special lecture and I promised Jeremy I’d go. I’m so sorry.”

I gave her a look. “Well, can’t you just cancel? It’s my thirtieth birthday, for God’s sake. Doesn’t she give lectures all the time?”

“Yeah, but this is a special one she’s doing on divine love relationships. It’s specifically focused on walking a spiritual path with a partner. Jeremy thinks it will be really important for us.”

“So you’re blowing off my birthday?” I stared at her, incredulity on my face. It was our ritual, celebrating our birthdays together. We hadn’t missed one in nine years.

She looked at me, an anxious expression on her face. “Can’t we do it the day after? Or the day before?”

“It’s not exactly the same, Lucy.” I was getting angry. She knew how important the actual day was to me. Particularly since my father only remembered it about every third year.

She walked over to me and reached for my hand. “Look, Miche, I’m so sorry. If it was anything else, I would cancel, I swear. But you’ve gotta understand—I’ve never had a relationship like this before, and I think it’s due in large part to Ma’s teaching. I just don’t want to screw it up this time, you know?” There was a pleading look in her eyes, one I was not good at resisting.

I steeled myself, eyeing her defensively and weighing my strategies. She did have a tendency to get in extraordinarily unhealthy relationships, and I hadn’t seen her this happy in a while. But she also knew how important my birthday was to me. I couldn’t imagine her not being there.

“Why don’t you come with us?” she blurted out. “It’s not just for couples, and the lecture doesn’t start until seven. We could do an early dinner up in Boulder, and then you’d get a chance to see Ma in person. I swear, it’s the best birthday present I could imagine having, a special lecture with Ma.”

Before I had a chance to answer, there was a soft knock at the door. She brushed past me and opened it.

“Hi, sweetheart,” she said, admitting a tall, blond man wearing khaki pants, a loose white shirt

and an earthy, African print vest.

Lucy had told me a little bit about Jeremy—that he was British, gorgeous and a musician. But her descriptions paled in comparison to the very intense man who now stood in her doorway. He was at least six feet tall, thin but muscular, and moved with incredible grace. Though she'd told me he was in his forties, he looked so young I hardly believed it. Straight, shoulder-length blond hair framed his finely chiseled face, and his blue eyes were so clear they practically sparkled.

“Jeremy, this is my best friend Michelle.”

“Hullo,” he said with a slight nod as he looked me over with an intent gaze. Half the guys Lucy dated couldn't even look you in the face. But as I felt those icy blue eyes boring into my own, I realized this one was different. Unsettlingly different. In a kind of thrilling, maybe even a little bit dangerous sort of way.

“Hi,” I managed to reply before I broke away from his gaze and looked back at Lucy. “Call me tomorrow?”

She nodded. “I promise.”

As I stepped out of her dark building, the afternoon sun hit my face with a shock. It was a crisp day in mid-April, a touch of mountain winter still clinging to the air.

Lucy had met Jeremy a few weeks earlier at a party held by a mutual friend. For their first date, he invited her to attend a talk given by his spiritual teacher up in Boulder. The next day, she'd told me it was one of the most fascinating evenings she'd experienced in a long time. Now I understood why.

Having known Lucy for over ten years, I'd learned to listen to her raves about the new men in her life with a certain degree of reserve. When we were roommates, she'd gone through a phase where she had a new boyfriend almost every month. I'd met enough of them then to realize that she usually chose men who were either exactly like or exactly the opposite of her domineering father, and hardly any of them were worth her time.

I tried once to point this out to her, but it didn't go over very well. She'd picked up some hippie musician at a coffee house who ended up moving in with us almost right away, and my irritation at tripping over his drums in the kitchen of our tiny apartment finally drove me to speak. She told

me flatly that I was in no position to be giving relationship advice (which was true) and if I didn't like Sun being there, I could move out.

It was the only real fight we'd ever had. I found a room with a woman from my graphics class and moved out three days later. We didn't speak for over a month, until Sun disappeared owing her six weeks' rent and over \$100 in long distance from calls he'd made to his "spirit music man" in Costa Rica.

She apologized to me then, and asked me to move back in. I forgave her immediately, but declined her invitation. I adored Lucy, but she wasn't the best person to live with. Life was just a lot more peaceful without the constant stream of changing men.

I stopped at the curb, waiting for the pedestrian light to change. Jeremy was clearly in a different league than most of the guys she dated. She said he had some kind of trust fund, too, so he didn't even have to work. At least he wasn't likely to stiff her with the long distance bill. Who knew, maybe this one would actually work out for her.

By the time I got back to the café, someone had taken over my chair. I stood in the doorway, not wanting to go back in, but not really having anywhere else to go. The barista looked over at me with a frown.

"Don't let out all the heat," she said.

Embarrassed, I let the door swing shut behind me. I slid into a corner table covered with sections of newspaper. As I was gathering them up to move them out of my way, I noticed a page of personal ads from the local weekly.

I pulled out the page, my eyes casually scanning the "Men seeking Women" column. I had been single for the better part of two years, ever since my on-again-off-again boyfriend, Harris, had decided to move to California. We had been "on" at that point, so I was shocked when he told me flatly that he didn't want me to come with him. Something about needing a fresh start, he'd said.

I guess I shouldn't really have been that surprised when Harris moved on without me. From the beginning, we had struggled with an eighteen-year age difference. In addition to the wide gap in experience, his pressing desire to have kids was a constant source of friction between us. I just

wasn't ready to give up my life for a family, and he felt he couldn't afford to wait.

We'd broken up twice over that issue, and the second time, I really thought that would be the end of it. But we'd decided to stay friends, and it wasn't long before we slipped back into being lovers. We had that kind of comfort with each other, that kind of ease. At first, we agreed it would just be casual. But at some point, it stopped being that way for me. It was only when he decided to move to California without me that I realized it wasn't that way for him.

I missed him greatly when he left. He'd been such a fixture in my life for so long that he left an enormous, empty space behind him, full of questions about whether or not I'd made a mistake. I called him not long after he left, hoping to see if there was still any chance for us. But he was too full of news about his new job and new girlfriend for there to be space for any lingering questions about us.

I hadn't dated at all for close to a year after that. Since then, I'd gone out a few times, usually on dates set up by Lucy. But I hadn't met anyone I really connected with. It was just so hard to meet people, anyway.

I looked down the column of neatly typed ads. Lucy and I had decided a while ago that personal ads were for losers, but as I sat there, alone at my corner table, I had to wonder if maybe they might serve a purpose after all.

I scanned the list again. I immediately rejected anyone under the age of 28, or anyone who claimed to be a student. I wanted someone who was together, someone who knew where he was going with his life.

An ad for a 35-year old DWM caught my eye. Financially secure professional who plays music on the side. Into old movies and good food. Hmmm.

I pulled out my cell and dialed the 900 number. I pressed in his box code, and noticed I was holding my breath as I waited for the ad to begin.

"Hello," a high-pitched, nasally voice began. "Thank you for calling on my ad. My name is Stu and I'm a very successful financial planner..."

The tone of his voice made my skin crawl. I hung up, wondering what the hell I'd been thinking. I shoved the paper aside and went to the bar for a cappuccino.

I was just getting out of the shower when Lucy called the next morning.

“Have fun last night?” I asked as I pulled on my bathrobe.

“Mmmm. Just like always,” she sighed.

I stifled a pang of jealousy. “So,” I began, “are all the guys that go to this thing as hot as Jeremy?”

“Well, not quite. He’s sort of the hottest. But there’s still a ton of really amazing guys there, Miche, I swear. Healthy ones, too, who are in touch with their feelings and are actually capable of carrying on a conversation about them. Really, I think you’d find it quite refreshing.”

I paused a moment, feeling my hesitation to go with her. She’d done nothing but rave about this group since Jeremy first took her there several weeks ago, and it was true that she seemed much more relaxed than I’d probably ever seen her. But still, there was something about it that made me uncomfortable.

“I dunno, Luce,” I said. “I’m not sure this is really my thing.”

“I know what you mean,” she replied. “I was hesitant to go at first too. But Ma is just a really amazing person. I think you’d really like her.

“What is she, some kind of guru or something?”

“Oh, definitely not. She’s really down to earth. She’s just someone who’s really skilled at helping people get to the next level in their lives. Most of her students are professionals, very career focused and all that. Meditation can be great for increasing productivity.”

“That’s what she teaches? Meditation?”

“That’s a big part of it. There are other things, too, but it’s all really pretty practical. I think you’d enjoy it a lot, Michelle, I really do.”

Despite her testimonial, I was wavering. I had never been much of a group person, and I didn’t know the first thing about meditation. I considered not going, but then flashed on what it would be like to face my thirtieth birthday entirely alone.

“All right, I’ll come.”

“I’m so glad, Miche. I know you’re going to love Ma, really.”

In spite of Lucy’s enthusiasm, I regretted my decision the minute I hung up the phone. The idea of spending my birthday in the company of a group of strangers felt just about as depressing

as spending it alone. I got as far as dialing the first three digits of her number to tell her I wasn't coming when my eyes fell on the canvas I'd abandoned the previous day. My flying brush had left one gray splotch in the middle of the canvas, surrounded by an empty ocean of white.

Three

I awoke the morning of my birthday to low clouds and heavy snowfall. It was not uncommon for it to snow in April in Colorado, but I'd been lulled into a false sense of season by the seventy degree temperatures we'd been having for the previous few days. I watched the heavy flakes hit the window ledge and found myself hoping that if it kept up, the lecture would be cancelled and Lucy and I could just celebrate here.

The first year we'd known each other, Lucy had held a surprise party for me on my birthday. I wasn't planning on doing anything to celebrate because I had so much end-of-semester work to do, so I nearly had a heart attack when the fifteen people Lucy had hidden in the women's bathroom in the basement of the Art building yelled "Surprise!" Vowing to get even with her, on her birthday a few months later I organized a pre-dawn raid on her bedroom. Half a dozen dancers and I all crowded around on her bed for a birthday breakfast of cake and champagne. I don't think she got out of bed that day before noon.

Our birthday ambitions had mellowed a bit since then, but not a year had gone by that we hadn't been together, even if we hadn't been able to actually celebrate. A few years back, Lucy's much loved grandmother died the night before my birthday. We had plans to go to Elitch Gardens Amusement Park, but instead we spent most of the day at her parents' house. Her family has always been incredibly volatile, more so in times of high emotion, and the constant arguing about funeral plans didn't take long to get to her. Eventually, I just pulled her into her old bedroom and wrapped my arms around her as tightly as I could, rocking her back and forth as she cried.

Regardless of what we did, being with Lucy on my birthday had become a valuable touchstone for me. Before my mother's death, she'd had a party for me every year with cake and candles and a

few friends. But my father was not the celebratory type. On those rare occasions when he did notice the day, I usually got something practical. The year I turned 12, he gave me a box of maxi-pads and a two-year subscription to Seventeen magazine. It was a sad substitute for my missing mother, and I cried the entire night. So when Lucy threw that first party for me, it meant more to me than she'd probably ever imagined.

My birthday snowstorm began tapering off around eleven, and by one o'clock the bright sun made it clear that I wasn't going to get my wish for a snow day. As soon as I realized that I would, in fact, be meeting a bunch of new people later that evening, I decided I'd better go shopping and see if I could at least find myself something interesting to wear.

Later that afternoon, Lucy showed up holding a bouquet of deep pink Gerber daisies and a plate of raspberry-chocolate brownies she'd made herself. We had first discovered this particular brownie recipe eight years ago, at a huge graduation party held by our friend Sam. I'm sure the pot that was in that first batch had a lot to do with why I thought they were the most amazing food ever created, but even since we'd abandoned the special herbal ingredients, they were still hands down my favorite food. Nobody could make them as well as Lucy, and she made them for my birthday every year.

"Don't you look cute," she said as she handed me the plate. I was wearing a pair of bright purple suede pants I'd found on sale with a white silk blouse and black sequined shoes.

"Yeah, well, I am turning thirty, you know," I said. "I couldn't start out my new decade with a boring outfit."

"Of course not," she replied. "God, I wonder what I'm going to wear for my thirtieth?"

"I wouldn't worry about it too much," I said. "You've still got a few months to figure it out."

"So," she said, perching herself on a stool by my breakfast bar, "how does it feel?"

I shrugged. "Not much different than twenty-nine and three hundred and sixty four days," I said.

"Oh, come on. You've got to be feeling something!"

"Honestly, Luce, I'm kinda trying hard not to," I said. "I mean, I'm single, unemployed and haven't gotten anywhere with my art in the last five years. I really thought things would be better than this by now."

She watched me silently, a thoughtful look on her face. “Well, how do you know this isn’t exactly what you need right now?”

I raised my eyebrows at her, unsure what she was getting at.

“I mean, maybe this is just a perfect opportunity for you. Don’t you always say you work best with a blank canvas? Instead of being tied down with an exhausting job, you’ve got total freedom. Who knows what can come out of that?” she paused, a mischievous grin on her face. “Honestly, to me it actually sounds kind of exciting.”

I stared at her, surprised by the insight. “I hadn’t really thought of it that way.”

“See, that’s what you need me for,” she winked. “C’mon, let’s get going. It’s rush hour, and I don’t want to be late.”

We were supposed to meet Jeremy at a Caribbean restaurant just off Boulder’s Pearl Street Mall, but we’d barely been seated in the brightly colored dining room when Lucy’s cell phone rang.

“He’s not going to make it,” Lucy said a moment later as I debated how risky it would be to order conch fritters a thousand miles away from anything resembling an ocean. “They’re having technical hang ups and he needs to make sure everything’s working before the lecture.”

I decided I wasn’t feeling adventurous enough for the conch fritters and ordered a vegetable dish. “I thought he was a musician,” I said as I handed my menu to the woman who’d taken our order.

“He is, but his primary job right now is handling all of Ma’s sound work. He’s good at it, and it’s really an honor to be able to work with her so closely.”

I eyed Lucy warily, unaccustomed to hearing her speak with such deference.

“Why is she called Ma?” I asked. “Doesn’t she have a real name?”

“Of course she does. I think it’s Carmen, or Carlotta, or something like that. But once she started teaching, people just started spontaneously calling her Ma. I think it’s fitting, really—all great female spiritual teachers are called Ma.”

I felt my previous sense of discomfort growing. Meditation was one thing—Harris had even done a little bit of that as a stress reduction technique. But the phrase “spiritual teacher” gave me pause. It conjured up images of the red robed Tibetans and fawning disciples I’d occasionally seen

wandering around Denver, or the ditzzy Hare Krishnas I'd run into who were trying to beam you with love or whatever it is that they do. It was a subject that just seemed so foreign and weird to me.

"So what is it, exactly, that she's teaching?" I asked, hoping for some kind of answer that would make me feel more at ease.

"Well, it kind of depends on the level that you're at. A lot of what she teaches is about how to be a better person, you know, more loving and centered and all of that. It's a really great foundation for everyday living. But her primary focus is really on helping her students develop their own direct experience of God."

I stared at her, not quite believing what I was hearing. "Since when have you been interested in that stuff?" I asked, knowing full well that much of Lucy's childhood had been spent rebelling against her Venezuelan father's ridged Catholicism. "I thought you hated all that religious crap."

"I do hate all that religious crap. But this isn't about religion. It's about mysticism. It's a totally different thing."

"Different, how?" I frowned at her.

"Most religions are designed to come between you and God. They're based in beliefs and rules and hierarchy. But if you dig a little deeper, you'll find that every major religion has a group of people who weren't satisfied with the intermediaries and wanted their own direct experience of God. For the Christians, it was the Gnostics. In Islam, it's the Sufis."

"So this Ma person is some kind of modern day Gnostic?"

"No, not exactly," Lucy shook her head, "though she's studied their teachings extensively. What she really is, is a pioneer. She's one of those people who are looking to help forge a new mystical path."

I stared at Lucy, wondering at what point my best friend had morphed into an esoteric spiritual scholar and how on earth I had missed it.

"Funny how your sudden interest in this blossomed about the same time you met Jeremy," I said.

Lucy ignored my comment, her voice softening as she spoke. "I've always had a hunger for something deeper, you know? I just didn't really know what it was. Until I met Ma, that is."

There was dreaminess in Lucy's eyes that I was unaccustomed to seeing there. It made me uncomfortable, and I shifted uneasily in my chair.

Just then, the waitress arrived with our meal. I'd ordered an experiment, a Jamaican invention called callaloo. The perfectly browned pastry was stuffed with a savory leafy green that was utterly delicious.

Not long after our food arrived, Lucy stood up abruptly and went to the bathroom.

"So, listen," she began as she sat back down in her chair a few moments later. "I have something to tell you."

I looked up, concerned by the seriousness of her tone.

"I've decided to move to Boulder."

My jaw dropped. "You've got to be kidding," I exclaimed, feeling a lurch in my stomach as I stared down the enormous hole her move would leave in my life. I had other friends in Denver, but no one I was as close to as Lucy. And though Boulder was only 30-odd miles away, it was just far enough that I rarely saw the friends who'd moved there.

"I can't believe you would want to live in this place," I said. "It's like everything we hate about this country."

"I know, it's such a white bread town," she said, shaking her head, "but I'm spending like half the week up here already, and the commute is killing me. If I get a job up here, it will be much easier for me to study with Ma, and it won't put such a strain on my relationship with Jeremy."

"Are you moving in with him? It hasn't even been a month!"

"No, no, it's too soon for that. I'm renting a room in a group house with some other students of Ma's. It's a really amazing place, actually—I was super lucky to find it."

I pushed my food around my plate. "We will never see each other."

"Don't be silly, of course we will. You always talk about getting to the mountains more—think how much easier it will be when I'm up here. And then when I come to Denver it will be so much more relaxed because it will be like a vacation for me. Really, Miche, it will be fine."

I didn't believe her for a second. But before I had a chance to protest, the waitress returned carrying a small, round loaf of ginger cake in which she'd placed three candles.

"Happy Birthday, hon," Lucy said with a smile.

As we headed back towards Lucy's car, I couldn't help cringing at the Disneyland feel of the town around me. Boulder's pedestrian mall was a cheerful, red-bricked zone of upscale shops and designer eateries. Toddlers wearing more expensive clothing than I could ever hope to own ran giddily in circles around a giant stone fountain. Nearly every person I saw was young, healthy looking, and white. I was convinced Lucy was going to hate it here.

We headed north out of downtown in her red Subaru. Sometime in the past month, she'd taped a photograph of an elegant, middle-aged woman to her dashboard and surrounded it with dried flowers and a long string of sandalwood beads. It seemed out of place in Lucy's car. I wondered what had happened to the plastic Hula dancer that had been there before.

I turned away from the photo and stared out the window. It's true that Boulder had a cute downtown, but as we drove past Target, Burger King and a series of chain store strip malls, I failed to see why it commanded real estate prices that were so much higher than Denver's. Maybe it was the mountains that ran impressively along the western edge of the city, and the fact that a progressive open space policy severely limited growth. Whatever the reason, when Lucy turned the car into an exclusive subdivision near the Boulder reservoir composed of custom built homes on two-acre lots, I realized that whoever the hell this Ma person was, she clearly had a great deal of money.

We left the car in a gravel parking area off to the side of the main house, a sprawling two-story with a slightly dated air of upper-middle class grandeur. I followed Lucy down a flagstone pathway to what appeared to be a large, white barn.

As we stepped inside, I felt like I had suddenly entered a different world. Even in the small coatroom, the smell of incense and the soft, ethereal music had a tranquilizing effect. I watched as Lucy kicked off her shoes and dipped her fingers in intricately carved silver bowl filled with water and rose petals. She then traced her fingers slowly across her forehead.

"It's to clear the sight," she told me, gesturing towards the bowl.

I didn't really want to, but she was watching me patiently. Deciding it was easier not to argue, I tentatively dipped my fingers in the bowl and tried to mimic her actions. It felt very silly, and I was glad no one else was watching.

Lucy pushed aside a rose-colored silk curtain and we stepped into a spacious room with a high, curved ceiling cut by wide beams. Plush white carpeting cushioned our feet as we headed towards the rows of round, blue meditation cushions lining the center of the room. The numerous windows were framed in wispy curtains of gold and white fabric, and a series of abstract, ethereal paintings in blues, pinks and purples lined the walls. At the front of the room, a slightly raised stage played host to an overstuffed white chair flanked by a potted ficus tree and two large vases filled with fresh flowers.

In the back of the room, Jeremy was staring intently over a table covered in purple fabric and sleek black sound equipment. He glanced up when Lucy turned to him and flashed her a dazzling smile, then nodded in my direction.

Lucy had wanted to get there early to get seats up close, but there were still a dozen people in front of us when we landed on our cushions. An overweight, middle-aged woman draped in a batik tent dress and no less than five different kinds of crystals turned to greet Lucy as we sat down.

“Are you just so excited that she’s finally giving this lecture?” the woman said as she gave Lucy a tight hug. “I’ve been waiting two years for her to do this. Who’s your friend?” she asked, turning to me.

“Melinda, this is Michelle. This is her first lecture.”

Melinda’s eyes widened. “I can’t even tell you how much you are going to love this,” she said, gripping my hand tightly as she spoke. “Ma is just the most amazing teacher. You’ll never be the same after being in her presence.”

I bit my tongue to keep from laughing. Melinda was a New Age caricature, the kind of person Lucy and I would have made fun of had we seen her anywhere else.

“I can hardly wait,” I replied, stifling a smirk and hoping Lucy didn’t notice. My sense of unease began to dispel, and I found myself relaxing. The whole thing was just impossible to take seriously.

“So when are you going to move in?” Melinda asked Lucy.

“It’ll be the end of May,” she replied. “My boss asked me to stay until then.” She turned to me. “Melinda is one of my new housemates.”

“Really,” I replied. Knowing Lucy as I did, I imagined she would not last long living with the likes of Melinda. Lucy was too edgy for all this airy stuff.

“You should really come by on Sunday,” Melinda continued. “Ma’s encouraged us to re-do the altar space, so we’ll be doing a ritual in the afternoon. You really should be there, since you’ll be a part of the house and all.”

“Oh, I’d love to,” Lucy said. “Do you know what needs to be done?”

“She wanted us to really focus more on the Earth element. I guess Simon and I are not grounded enough—too much meditating,” she said with a grin.

“You know, I have some heart-shaped rocks. Do you think that would be a good addition?” Lucy asked.

As the two of them went on discussing interior spiritual decorating, I couldn’t help feeling left out. I didn’t like this vivid reminder that Lucy was moving away.

Over the next half an hour, the room began to fill with several dozen more people. Quite a few were like Melinda, but there were some people in our age category and, true to Lucy’s word, a couple of halfway-decent looking guys.

At exactly seven o’clock, Jeremy picked up a golden-colored Tibetan bowl. Using a polished wooden wand, he rang it three times. As the high, clear tones sang out through the room, the chatter instantly dissolved. Everyone closed their eyes.

“We meditate before she comes in,” Lucy whispered.

Never having meditated before, I wasn’t at all certain what to do. I snuck furtive peeks at my neighbors, all of whom appeared to have developed sudden breathing problems as they struggled to take in as much air as possible. Grinning to myself, I crossed my legs, closed my eyes and took a deep, labored breath. At least I could look the part.

I sat that way for I don’t know how long, semi-impatiently wondering how on earth I’d let Lucy talk me into this. My thoughts were drifting between casual judgments of the goofy people around me and anxiety about finding another job when suddenly, I had the eerie sensation of being watched. The hair stood up on the back of my neck and my eyes flew open.

Sitting in the white chair at the front of the room was the woman from the picture. Dressed in an elegant pantsuit of silky, deep blue fabric with a long, matching coat, she sat in that chair with

the commanding presence of an ancient queen. Her hair was shoulder-length, deep black woven with streaks of white, and framed a startlingly youthful face dominated by full lips, a sharp nose, and penetrating blue eyes that were staring directly at me.

“Welcome back,” she said, a soft smile playing around the edge of her lips.

The moment the words left her, I felt as though I’d been hit by a lightning bolt. My stomach did a triple somersault and my skin felt electrified. I reached for the ground to steady myself, breaking away from her gaze as I did so. Totally unnerved, I struggled to regain my composure as the people around me opened their eyes, stretched and shifted on their cushions. By the time I had calmed down a bit and looked back at the woman on the chair, she was staring off into the distance with a pleasant smile.

“You’ve come here today to learn about love,” the woman began in a gentle, yet strangely hypnotic voice. “It is your very nature, this love, the core of who you are, but you have forgotten that. You have forgotten,” she paused, staring intently for long moments at several people in the crowd, “that you are this love, and so you think you need to learn about it. In reality, there is nothing you need to learn. You simply need to remember. But, since you don’t remember,” she said with a generous smile, “I will teach you. Until you do.”

A slight chuckle went through the crowd. The joke was lost on me, as was the majority of what she said for the next twenty minutes. I was still reeling from the impact of her pointed welcome statement. Had she really been talking to me? What did she mean, welcome back? I’d never seen this woman before in my life. True, there was something strangely familiar about her, but I was certain I’d never met her. Why on earth would she be talking to me?

I looked back at her, trying to figure out what it was about her that was having this effect on me. On the surface, she looked very relaxed, and her face radiated an inviting warmth. There was a nurturing quality to her, something very comforting about her smile and her grace. But at the same time, she brimmed with a focused intensity that was so strong it was almost frightening. It was as though she somehow had access to more energy than the rest of us.

Lucy had told me over dinner that Ma was enlightened, but I knew so little about the concept that it hadn’t really registered for me. Watching her now, however, and seeing how palpably different she was from anyone I had ever met before, left me with a suddenly powerful curiosity.

“In our dualistic Universe,” Ma continued, “love seems to exist only in relationship to hate. They are opposites, and they give each other life. So, we go back and forth between them, forever back and forth. That’s how duality works,” she paused again, continuing her focused survey of the crowd. “But when you learn to transcend duality, then,” she paused yet again, “then, you exist only in love. And that is God.”

I looked over at Lucy, who was staring with rapt attention at Ma, nodding every now and again with a sense of new insight. I felt envious of the ease with which she seemed to understand all of this. I turned back to Ma, and tried to pay closer attention.

“You know,” Ma continued, leaning forward as though she was about to share a great secret with us, “if you want to understand your relationship with the Divine, all you need to do is look at your relationship with the opposite sex. The issues you experience with the opposite sex are a mirror for how you experience God. And if you have not resolved your issues with God,” she stressed, “how do you think you will ever be able to experience peace in your human relationships?”

As I listened, I felt a sudden current of electricity prickle under my skin. Aside from Harris, I’d never dated a man for more than a few months. My history of abandoned relationships flashed before my eyes as I surveyed my non-existent connection with anything even remotely divine. Could that really be it? Was having so much trouble in relationships with men because I had no relationship with God?

If I’d felt off balance before, I felt even more so now. I had been raised entirely without religion, and I barely even had a concept of God, let alone any idea how to have a relationship with Him. Or Her. Or Whatever. I wondered nervously if God would even be interested in a relationship with me.

I spent the rest of the lecture in knots of internal confusion. Ma’s comments about using love relationships as a spiritual path—seeing the beauty in your partner even when you were angry, becoming aware of the tendency to project negative emotions onto your partner, and embracing all conflict as an opportunity for growth—all of that seemed remarkably logical to me. But underneath everything, her high-minded path seemed dismally unattainable. How on earth was I supposed to see God in another when I barely had any idea what that even was?

When Ma completed her lecture, she leaned back and closed her eyes. As if on cue, the class settled into a deep, reflective meditation. When Jeremy rang the Tibetan bowl signaling the end of the sitting period, Ma was gone.

A serene Lucy stretched out her legs in front of her before turning to me. “Well? What did you think?”

“Um, I’m not sure,” I began. “I mean, it was pretty intense. Especially the beginning, the way she was looking at me like she knew me or something.”

Lucy smiled. “She probably does know you.”

“But how can she know me? I’m sure I’ve never seen her before.”

“Oh, it’s not like a surface thing. She may not know your personality. But she knows your soul.”

I watched Lucy as she said this, wondering how she could be so at ease with all of this. “I dunno, Luce. I mean, she said some interesting things. But this is all kind of new for me, you know? I’m not really sure what all of this means.”

“I totally understand,” she said with a reassuring nod as she rested a hand on my arm. “I was completely overwhelmed after my first lecture. But Ma is truly an amazing teacher. It gets much clearer the more time you spend with her.”

I let out a sigh, feeling grateful for her understanding. It seemed like it had been a long time since I’d felt her emotional support, and I realized how badly I’d missed her these last few weeks.

“So, like, this God thing makes sense to you now? I mean, you never even talked about it before.”

“It wasn’t a part of my life before,” she said solemnly. “But Ma is just like a doorway into the divine. She’s really helped me connect with the spiritual side of life in a way that I never imagined was possible. My life is so different now, I can’t even tell you. I was so unhappy before, always searching outside of myself for things. Now, I’m learning how to look inside.”

Her comments struck a deep chord in me. I flashed on how many times in the last few months I’d found myself wandering around downtown Denver, fueled by the gnawing feeling that I was looking for something. But as I left each shop or café as empty-handed as when I’d arrived, I was never quite able to figure out what it was.

“You know, Ma’s doing a workshop this weekend,” Lucy began tentatively. “Jeremy and I are doing it, and it might help you get clearer about some things.”

“A workshop, huh,” I said. I looked up into the room, taking in all of the people laughing and hugging around us. I still felt kind of shaky inside, but I felt calmed by the fact that everyone around me seemed to be radiating this kind of peaceful happiness. Honestly, it was the most pleasant place I’d been in a long time.

Jeremy asked Lucy to stay with him that night, so I took the keys to her Subaru and drove myself back to Denver. I was distracted as I drove, my mind wrapped up in questions it had never even occurred to me to ask before. The whole question of God—what it was, and how whatever it was related to everyday life—seemed to press on me from all sides.

Unfortunately, I didn’t have much in the way of background to draw from. We had never gone to church when I was a kid, and, as near as I could tell, God didn’t make house calls. It wasn’t that I didn’t believe in God, or even followed the there’s-no-proof-so-I-can’t-decide agnostic thing. It was more that all that God stuff just didn’t seem to have much of anything to do with me.

But it was true that, like Lucy, I didn’t have to look hard to find a sense of deep longing lurking quietly in the background of everything I’d ever done. Existential angst, my philosophy-major boyfriend had labeled it in college. He’d given me the impression that there wasn’t anything to be done about it, that you just had to live with it until you were dead. I’d never been a particularly demanding academic, so I just assumed he was right.

Now, though, I found myself entertaining the idea that maybe it wasn’t necessary to walk through life with the feeling of a gaping hole inside of me. That maybe it really was possible to fill that hole, not just temporarily with good sex or chocolate, but permanently, with something more spiritual. What, exactly, I had to admit, I didn’t really know. But I was intrigued by the idea that it was something that this Ma person seemed to know all about.

When Jeremy dropped Lucy off at my apartment the next day to pick up her car, I grilled her for information about Ma. I wanted to know everything about this woman, why she was so different from anyone I had ever met before.

“Really, she was born that way,” she said. “But it took her a long time to accept her talents. She used to be an actress, when she was younger.”

“An actress? Would I have seen her in anything?”

“Mostly she just did commercials, I think.” Lucy was in the kitchen now, poking through my cabinets, looking for my junk food. “But Jeremy did tell me that she had a small part in one of the James Bond movies, as a cocktail waitress or something like that.”

It was hard to imagine Ma in a cocktail uniform. It was hard to imagine her as anything other than what she was right now. “That’s a pretty big jump, from actress to spiritual teacher.”

“Well, she worked as a psychic for a while first,” Lucy continued, turning towards me with a bag of pretzels in her hand. “She started out doing readings for friends to support her acting career, but I guess it wasn’t long before the word got out about how good she was. I guess she was one of the biggest psychics in L.A. in the eighties.”

I thought about the way she had looked at me at the lecture, the way she seemed to be able to see right through me.

“But then she had her awakening,” Lucy continued. “I mean, she’d always been interested in transformation, but she had this experience one day when she was walking on the bluffs overlooking the ocean and was just totally changed by it.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“Well, not exactly. But what Jeremy told me is that she became one with everything, you know, the sky and the sand and the sea. That she saw through the illusion of our separateness, and received a calling to help others achieve the same understanding. That’s when she started teaching.”

“When was that?”

“I think it was in the early 90’s, 1992 or so?”

“Wow. No wonder she has such a big following.”

“I guess it used to be much bigger, when she was still in California. She had such a good reputation that things just really took off when she started doing workshops. A lot of her students followed her when she moved here in 1999, but not everyone could. So we’re kind of lucky now that it’s smaller, since I guess it used to be a real zoo.”

“Why did she move here?”

“I don’t know. But a lot of the California people still fly in for the weekend workshops, so if you want to come, be sure to get there early.”

“How much is it?”

“\$550.”

“Wow. That’s a lot of money.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Lucy said. “I’m picking up lunch shifts just to pay for it. But it’s going to be so worth it, I can’t even tell you.” She paused a moment, chewing thoughtfully on a pretzel. “I bet it would just be the perfect thing for you right now, with all this change in your life. Oh, crap, is it really 10:15? I’ve got to get to work!”

As Lucy grabbed her coat, she turned back to me suddenly. “You know, you might want to listen to this,” she said as she handed me a white cassette tape she pulled out of her pocket.

“What is it?”

“It’s a recording of one of Ma’s lectures. I borrowed it from Jeremy because he said it was a really good one, all about spirituality and art. But maybe you should listen to it first.”

After Lucy left, I dropped the tape on the coffee table and sat on the couch. I stared out the window, trying not to think of the empty day spreading out ahead of me. Maybe the workshop would be a good thing for me right now. But \$550 was a ton of money, way more than I felt like I could spend with my small savings and meager unemployment benefits. There was no way I should even be considering it.

Letting out a sigh, I reached for the pink flyer I’d gotten at the lecture that had all the information about the workshop. In the center was a large black and white photo of Ma. I stared at it, thinking about how much she seemed to know. Maybe she really could help me. I was feeling pretty stuck where I was, that’s for sure. And Lucy really seemed to be benefiting from all this.

Still, I found myself hesitating. \$550 seemed like a pretty large fee for just a weekend. Wasn’t spiritual teaching supposed to be free? Or maybe on a donation basis, like a church or something. Charging so much money for this kind of thing seemed odd.

I took another look at the flyer. Boulder was a pretty expensive place to live, so I guess she had overhead like everyone else. But would it really be worth it? What could she really teach me that

would be worth giving her a huge chunk of my very limited cash?

As I sat there debating, I was startled by the appearance of a sudden thought.

“Just sign up.”

The thought appeared inside my head, in my voice. But it seemed to have come out of nowhere. It sliced right through all my normal chatter until it occupied the center stage of my brain, where all of my reasons for not taking the workshop had been just a moment earlier.

An involuntary shudder passed through me. I couldn't remember ever experiencing anything like that before. It was really weird.

It was also very strong. Signing up for the workshop suddenly felt enormously important. This was exactly what I needed right now, I was sure of it.

I took a deep breath, and reached for the phone.

The woman who took my registration was named Kali. She was very abrupt with me as she took my information, almost to the point of being rude. I was off the phone in only a few minutes, surprised at how unfriendly she was.

Despite the certainty of a few moments earlier, I wondered immediately if I'd made the right decision. I'd expected more of a welcoming response for signing up, not to be treated like an annoying interruption in someone's day. I got up and paced around my living room, more agitated than I could remember feeling in a long time. Maybe this wasn't the right thing to do.

I sat back down again, thinking I'd call right back and cancel. But that would be pretty embarrassing. I'd probably never even meet this Kali person, but I was concerned about looking like a total flake. The urge to sign up had been such a strong one. What if I cancelled, but then changed my mind again?

My eyes fell on the cassette tape. I decided to listen to it before doing anything else. If it was stupid, I'd know what to do.

The tape began with the ringing of the gong, and then a period of silence. I was too agitated to sit still, so I fast-forwarded the tape until I heard Ma's voice.

“How many of you are artists?” she began. “Raise your hand if you regularly work in a creative medium. All right, that's ten, twelve, thirteen, fourteen of you. Fourteen out of a room of sixty or so. Tell me, what do you do?”

There was a blank spot on the tape. I couldn't hear the reply.

"Pottery. Good. And you?" Another pause. "Acting? All right. Susan? Poetry. Good. Another? Watercolors? Lovely, yes.

"Now, all of you who did not raise your hands, I would like you to take a close look at those who did. Take a look at your neighbors who have opened themselves up to the creative force and who are expressing themselves through the arts. Look at them closely, because there is something that I would like you to see."

There was a long pause. "What I would like you to notice," Ma continued, her voice taking on a commanding tone, "is that there is no difference between you and them. Each and every single one of you is an artist, whether you are aware of it, or not.

"Now, let me clarify what I mean when I say artist. When most people think of art, they think of the tangible productions of the creative process—paintings, sculpture, dance, poetry. But these things are only a few of the manifestations of the great creative energy that moves throughout this universe. God is always at work in our world, creating art with every breath. If you do not believe me, just go outside and look at the lilacs blooming on the side of the barn. Look up, and see the masterful strokes of God's brush in the clouds that so beautifully decorate the sky. The world is his canvas, and he is painting on it every single moment.

"But it is not only nature that God is working on each day. We've all heard that mankind is one of God's greatest creations. But many people do not realize that this applies to them personally. I want to you to understand this. Each and every one of you is a creative expression of the divine thought of God, unlike anything that has ever been on Earth before.

"But, as with the rest of the world, God did not create us and then disappear. No, he continues to work on all of us, perfecting the human work-in-progress as he goes. Those of you who have worked in tangible artistic mediums should understand this best. No true artwork is ever done, it is always evolving. And that is true of human beings as well.

"Now, here is the part where it gets most interesting. Not only is God creating us in every single moment of every day, he is doing it with our help. We are made in the image of God, and that means we possess all of the creative talents that he himself does. As God creates the world around us, we use our creativity to create ourselves along with him. So your life is your own

unfolding creation, directed by you, but inspired by something much larger.”

There was a pause in the tape before Ma continued speaking with new strength in her voice. “Both you and God are holding the brush that is painting the strokes of your soul. You are both the creator and the created. The art and the art project of God. So don’t be fooled if you’ve never sat in front of a canvas in your life. You are the canvas, and the artist who is painting upon it. Whether you know it, or not.”

Tears had begun welling up in my eyes, and as I clicked off the tape, they began rolling down my face. Everything she was saying spoke directly to me, touching those parts of my soul that I only felt when I was holding a brush in my hand. As a painter I had always marveled at the feeling of something else painting along with me, an energy I could feel but knew was something other than me. To hear Ma speak about this directly was almost more than I could believe. I knew then without doubt I had made the right decision about the workshop. Whoever Ma was—whatever she was—I wanted to know more.