

# PLASTICITY

A Novel By

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Dedicated to You, My Reader

**plasticity** (plās-tīs'ī-tē) n. The ability to be de-formed without breaking.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### The Reader Quits Reading

And this is the bathroom. The place where the oral sex and the showers and the thing called love happened, where it was made, where it was fostered, where it was believed in. The room is filled with 409 and it smells like green onions. And the smell is still in my hair, in my clothes, and it won't go away. And all those little tchotchkes—the shampoo and the conditioner, the things that I gave my “loved one,” to Tom, to make his smell disappear, to make my loathing disappear; everything fake that I bought to escape from thinking or feeling the truth—those things fill this room. This room on the top of a Brentwood apartment complex that I cleaned so much, so much, because I was unclean, because there was no love behind all the sex I had with him, because every fantasy I had while we were screwing was with someone else, although this person, this Tomcat, lay in my arms, covering my body with his heavy fat, sucking all the energy out of me.

And this morning, this mauve PT Cruiser almost ran me over in the Ralph's parking lot in Westwood. I swear, for a second, I saw Tom behind the wheel. I saw Tomcat with Laura in the passenger seat—she was wearing a neon yellow tube top, like in those pictures of her that Tom keeps on top of his wooden dresser. Pictures from when they were still dating. The car honked and I swear I heard Laura cheer, *Mow 'er down!* But it wasn't Tom driving; it was a little old woman barely able to see above the dashboard. Homeless men near the store's automatic doors yelled to me, *Honey, baby doll, you gotta save yo'self. Watch out for that car behind you, it's gonna kill you!*

There's a gun in Tom's top dresser drawer. Statistically, men shoot themselves, not honeys, baby dolls. Go out with a big boom. Statistics. I shouldn't have gone back to Tom after I left him. The night we broke up, I went out with this great bang of a eulogy. We were sweating in the 100 degree heat outside a fancy restaurant in Brentwood Village and I performed this melodramatic rant for the rich restaurant goers waiting along the sidewalk for a table. I defended all those little morals—all my little Joy Elizabeth Townsend-isms—like not having sex without love, not being with someone just because I was lonely—those morals that I held so dear. I flicked sprinkles of spit on his face as I lapped cliché over cliché: *We need a break, You never loved me, I never meant anything to you, You're still in love with Laura, and I was just something to fill the void when she dumped you.* My mind sifted between syllables. *I don't love you.* I felt pride in my words and the weight of my voice when I refused him, when I drove alone, watching the street lights flicker and blur around the city that night.

I went back to Tom when I found my old love letters, those things that 90's songs told me to hold onto instead of bank statements. Crumpled letters on notebook paper were supposed to give my life meaning, purpose. But I was sick of reading, of all words on all pages. I went back to Tom because when I was stuck in traffic on the 405, a week after the break up, the songs on the classic rock station said that I should cry and beg and plead *Please don't leave me.* When I didn't think my words at the restaurant had any weight, my sweaty fingers dialed his number on a 3<sup>rd</sup> Street Promenade payphone. I came over to his puny apartment that his parents bought him in Brentwood. I stood on his tacky shag

carpet. I told him, *I thought it was just a fight*. I thought Tom would be waiting to hear that. He stuck his tongue in my mouth, pulled it out and said *I'm glad you came back because I was afraid you were going to do something stupid, real stupid—like be alone*. Be alone? That's all I ever wanted, to be left the fuck alone. But instead I ran for his blonde haired arms and his tan skin and that pungent cynicism and that goddamn negativity that bit me every time I went for something soft and flavorful. In the shower that night he grabbed the goose-bumped skin around my ribs like there was something underneath he wanted to clutch. He didn't say *I love you, Joy*, he never did, but I wasn't thinking about him. I was thinking about that same conversation outside the restaurant in the heat—*Well, you don't support me; Well, you aren't even the one I wanted to be with, I don't love you, I just don't want to be alone*—I invented phrases that I would have said, just going and going and going as if a carnie strapped me in to an endless rollercoaster ride, complete with organ music.

There's a gun in Tom's top dresser drawer. At the end of the day it's just about two bodies pressing up against each other and being able to smile and pretend like everything is so goddamn all right. It's about being able to go through the motions without feeling anything; that's what the pills above the sink in Tom's medicine cabinet are for. He took me to his bed the night I came back to his apartment and every night for the next two weeks and he got what he wanted and now he is asleep, snoring on his bed stained with that thing people refer to as love. I want to get dressed, to leave, to never call him again, but I know no matter how many fabric cleaners or soaps I use, his stench will still be in

my clothes, his saliva still perspiring from my skin. I want so many little things that get torn and eaten away like a cloth curtain in a desert wind.

So I got up and left the bedroom and now I'm in the bathroom. And the smell still won't go away. This room is filled with mostly toothbrushes and soap holders painted mint green. I look up and the bathroom window above the shower is open, as if Tom wants the whole neighborhood to know all the fun he's having. I sit on the cold linoleum floor, realizing that the sun will rise in a few hours. Tom will wake up and want to do it again. I won't want to fuck again—but I won't say, *no*. Breathing heavily through my mouth, I rock my body back and forth against the wall. I close my eyes and imagine a place by the ocean. There is no music. In my mind, I see myself standing along the Santa Monica shoreline at sunrise. The ocean-carved layers of the hills are behind me and I can hear cars gathering on the Pacific Coast Highway. I feel the rising warmth on my back and the pink hue brings out the green of the Santa Monica Mountains to my right. On my left, the street lamps and lights on the Ferris wheel of the Santa Monica Pier start to turn off. I stare at the dark, thin-lined horizon in front of me—the sky and the water fold into each other, my perspective drifts into nothing. I used to believe I was perfect, I could accomplish everything I set out to do, and back then I didn't settle for anything that didn't make my time worthwhile. I imagine that the sky is completely clear over the ocean and I drape my parents' old comforter—the one I threw away a year ago because it was full of holes—around my shoulders as the wind passes by, playing with my hair. I wish I could go there—that place on the shore. I wish someone could create it for me, write it so that the words spoke to me off the page instead of washing me away. I want



words that can move me. I open my eyes and I see mildew growing on the edges of the shower tile. A clump of my wet hair rests on the drain of the shower. I throw up and Tom snores louder.

Fuck it. There's a gun in Tom's top dresser drawer; take that for a statistic. And the beach melts away because I hate my body and I imagine that if I run away, only heaven must have an answer. And I can't stand the vomiting after sex and the man next to me in that bed. Burn it. Take the gun out the drawer, ignore the new rustling in his bed, massage the cylinder, stick it to the back of my throat—and I imagine the pieces of teeth and scalp covering the mint towels and staining the bathmat, staining the shower curtain. Taste it. So I suck the metal, lick the hole.

But before I can pull the trigger, I hear something approach me from behind, screaming. I turn to find Tom's fist slamming down on the top of my head. The gun falls out of my mouth and fires near my face. As a bullet tears through my cheek, a dark circle waxes around my visual plain until I cannot see. The last thing I feel is the cold floor against my cheek as I breathe artificial air...

## CHAPTER TWO:

### Welcome to the Library

LIBRARIAN:

Look up from the page. Welcome back to the library, reader. I'm your librarian, Kirk.

READER:

What am I doing, sitting at a table in a library? Why is everything beige?

LIBRARIAN:

You've finished reading your book—let's see, what does the name say on the cover? Ah, here it is—*The Book of Joy Elizabeth Townsend*.

READER:

Wait. I thought I just passed out in my boyfriend's bathroom... I just finished reading a book?

LIBRARIAN:

Yep, that's what I just said.

READER:

You mean... every book is a life? What do you mean I'm done? I'm not dead yet... What kind of a library is this?

LIBRARIAN:

Look, I just work here, I don't run the place. Save your big questions for someone who can really answer them. Here, I'll get you another book from my cart, that's my job after all. Couldn't stand the last one, could you?

READER:

No.

LIBRARIAN:

So let's take a look at your required reading list.

READER:

Required?

LIBRARIAN:

Hmmm... you have a lot of books to read

READER:

I don't want to read anymore.

LIBRARIAN:

So... you want to make my work more difficult?

READER:

I don't want to read anymore.

(Silence)

LIBRARIAN:

...you want to take a break?

READER:

Yeah. I guess.

LIBRARIAN:

All right. Maybe I'll take a break, too. Do you mind if I sit down next to you?

READER:

I don't care.

LIBRARIAN:

Okay.

READER:

Okay.

(Silence)

LIBRARIAN:

Hmmm. Kind of boring just sitting here, huh?

READER:

Kind of...

LIBRARIAN:

—Wait! I have an idea!

READER:

What?

LIBRARIAN:

You said you liked beaches didn't you?

READER:

When did I tell you...?

LIBRARIAN:

There are these three books! Here, I'll get them out of my cart.

(Pause)

Here they are: *The Book of Marcel*, *The Book of Sea Boy*, and *The Book of the Waitress*.

These books just came into library circulation. I don't think anybody's read them yet. But there's a rumor going around that these books have really amazing beaches.

READER:

So?

LIBRARIAN:

So, what if we snuck a peek? Curiosity never hurts, right?

READER:

I don't want to read, though.

LIBRARIAN:

Who says you have to? *I* was going to read them.

READER:

What am I supposed to do, watch you?

LIBRARIAN:

Well, I could read the books aloud.

READER:

Aloud?

LIBRARIAN:

Yeah, I'll keep my voice down. Nobody will notice. You can listen.

READER:

This doesn't sound like much fun for me.

LIBRARIAN:

Well, here. I'll let you choose which sections you want *me* to read, okay?

READER:

How?

LIBRARIAN:

You could touch the pages you want me to read. You know what? Here, I'll move my chair closer. You could even just look at the pages. I will follow where your eyes look and read the sections you choose.

READER:

I don't know...

LIBRARIAN:

This isn't going to be like reading your last book. I won't read the books all the way through, just pieces.

READER:

Just pieces?

LIBRARIAN:

Yeah. How about you pick three small sections from each book and I'll just read those?

READER:

Just some small sections?

LIBRARIAN:

Yeah. It's better than doing nothing, right?

READER:

I guess.

LIBRARIAN:

Just sit back, relax. That's right. When you are ready, look to the text and I will read on.

Let yourself get lost in the sound of my voice.



**CHAPTER THREE:****Excerpts from *The Book of Marcel***

Marcel's vein seized. He pushed the cloudy fluid into his lower arm, until it emerged like mucus into his blood stream. The dark hair on his arm jutted upward. He released the needle from his skin and handed it to Diego.

Diego squatted on the floor beside him. As the needle changed hands, a drop of liquid landed on the stained beige carpet.

"Watch it!" Diego yelled above the loud blare of Metallica on the radio. "Let me tie off."

Still sore from the plastic blue seats of the Santa Monica #6 Bus, Marcel turned away from him. He untied the broken rubber band on his upper arm using his left hand. As his muscles loosened, he let out a deep breath. Without waiting for Marcel to hand it to him, Diego took the rubber band and tied his arm, imitating Marcel.

Ignoring Diego, Marcel let his left hand fall onto his lower arm, touching his self-inflicted puncture mark. Marcel's head rested against the disheveled sheets on his mother Trudy's mattress. He let his eyes fix on the twisting smoke of his incense burner. As the lethargy kicked in, he watched the smoke warp Trudy's small wooden dresser, cluttered with VHS fitness tapes and Cher cassettes. He started to play with his new tongue piercing, slowly massaging his inner elbow and the protruding veins.

Diego let out a long sigh and Marcel slowly turned his head to face him. Marcel examined the glossy, dirty-window texture of Diego's eyes. He watched as Diego untied

the broken rubber band placed on his upper arm. Marcel sucked in his thick lips and touched the newly placed metal against them.

“Let me see it,” Diego muttered, and Marcel stuck out his tongue. Marcel’s gaze shifted to the full-length mirror behind Diego, which now appeared as uneven as a fun house mirror. He became entranced with his own reflection. The dark stud matched his oversized black sweatshirt, accentuating his pale hue in the dim Southern California sunlight. He watched his thick lips deform—contracting and expanding gradually under a thin hue of dark facial hair stubble. He thought he looked as ugly as Leonard Nimoy. He let the words conglomerate in his mind and then disperse like the drug in his vein. Marcel imagined his vein, but the image transformed into a drop of milk in a cup of weak tea.

Diego snapped his fingers, trying to get his attention. Marcel looked back at Diego and they both laughed. Diego placed the empty needle on a white paper bag labeled *Fred’s*. “You got balls, man. I can’t believe you did it.” Diego’s eyes rolled to his side, focusing on the mattress. He started to wobble his lips as if he were blowing into a trumpet. Spit flew in Marcel’s face. Diego hummed an unidentifiable grunge song. Marcel laughed and Diego shuffled next to him on the floor, allowing his back to press against the mattress.

Marcel smiled, “So when do you find out—when do you get in? I mean... when does UCLA tell you?” He stared in front of him as though the words he grasped at flew away from him before he could utter them.

Diego sustained a long, breathy note between his lips. He let the note descend suddenly. “I didn’t get it.”

“What?”

“I didn’t get the music scholarship.”

“What?” Marcel coughed, raising his head from the mattress. “How do you know?”

Slowly lowering his body, Diego allowed his shaved head to rub against the soft mattress behind him. “I got a letter.”

“But you’re the best trumpet player in Hamilton High’s jazz band. You get all the solos! Doesn’t that mean anything?”

“I guess not.”

Marcel sat up. His stomach grumbled and he poked it with his index finger.

Diego took in a long breath, “Ah, who gives a shit about this stupid city anyway. They always say it’s so beautiful and all that... blonde surfers and all that movie bullshit... you can’t even see the ocean from here.” He closed his eyes and rested his hand behind his head on the mattress. “You can only smell it and it smells like shit.” Marcel gagged.

Diego opened his eyes. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Marcel answered. “Just a minute.” He wiped his hand across his face. His eyes watered.

Diego shrugged his shoulders. “I mean, you’re not going to college.”

“So? My mom can’t afford college.” Marcel lowered his eyebrows.

“Neither can mine.”

“But I never got good grades. You made them a tape of your performances and everything. You worked so hard, you didn’t even smoke, let alone shoot up, until I...” Marcel took a deep breath, his thin body filling out into the sweatshirt. “It’s not fair.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Diego muttered.

Marcel looked at him. “What are you going to do?”

Diego seemed to sink into the mattress, shrinking.

“Work in Venice with my cousin.”

Marcel heard something scratch at the lock of the front door of the apartment.

“Fuck!” Marcel wrapped the edges of the white bag around the syringe and ran into a small bathroom, locking himself inside.

“Marcel,” Diego lightly called after him, “don’t leave me hanging...”

Inside the bathroom, Marcel placed the needle on the outer-windowsill, his usual hiding place for the paraphernalia he stole or concocted from his mother’s nursing supply. The sky was mauve. Marcel heard the front door of the apartment open.

“Diego?” his mother’s voice echoed into the bathroom.

Marcel heard Diego slowly rustle against the mattress. Diego seemed to be stumbling around the apartment.

Marcel sat on the toilet. He closed his eyes, imagining Venice Beach: people protesting around merchants selling henna tattoos on the boardwalk, pale men in torn jeans and tie-dye shirts selling Marcel heroin, girls with long dreadlocks smoking on their backs, black and blue paintings on display, and poetry engraved on the side of a large rock structure in the middle of the sand. He pictured a large apartment complex made of clear, blue windows. Diego crouched on the top of an unsteady ladder outside, wiping the windows.

Marcel listened to the private jets from the Santa Monica Airport swoop in from the bathroom window. Opening his eyes, he looked at the twenty years of neglect that

had allowed iron oxide to stain the tub. There were lime stalactites hanging from the faucet on the sink. He heard the front door slam.

When Marcel opened the bathroom door, Diego was gone. Trudy sat at the kitchen table in front of a magazine. The top of her green nurse's uniform was stained with some yellow solution. Marcel walked into the kitchen towards the refrigerator, hiding his face from her. "You're home early," he said.

"He's a goddamn bad influence."

Marcel turned around to find his mother staring straight into his eyes, grimacing.

"All those filthy illegal aliens bringing in drugs across the boarder..." she muttered under her breath.

"How would you know, Mom?" Marcel glared at her.

"Because I know!" She slammed the magazine on the table, making a harsh cracking noise. "You could have been a good kid if it weren't for him!"

"He's a better man than I am."

"*Man*, ha!" Trudy got up from the table, pulling her chair back. "You're just a couple of goddamn children!" She shook her head and sucked in her lower lip, tightening her face. "No good kids."

**CHAPTER FOUR:**  
**An Interruption in the Library**

READER:

Stop reading, Kirk!

LIBRARIAN:

What?

READER:

Just stop!

LIBRARIAN:

What's the matter, reader?

READER:

Look, I know that I picked this scene, it's not your fault—you didn't know what was in this book, you couldn't have stopped me from hearing this scene, but... I'm just sick of this.

LIBRARIAN:

Sick of what?

READER:

Sick of the pain. I'm sick of experiences that don't mean anything. That's what this scene was—Marcel's meaningless, painful experience...his suffering. Marcel corrupted and deserted his best friend. I don't want to watch people suffering.

LIBRARIAN:

Suffering?

READER:

Yes, suffering! I'm sick of suffering. It has no meaning, no justification.

LIBRARIAN:

I think... you're right.

READER:

What?

LIBRARIAN:

I don't think suffering has any meaning, either. It's just interesting...

READER:

What?

LIBRARIAN:

Oh, just... the language. I mean, the way that “Diego sustained a long breathy note” and “let the note descend” when he was telling Marcel that he was rejected from UCLA and lost the scholarship. It’s like his inner disappointment matches his outward expression—just the way he leads up to saying it.

READER:

You think that’s interesting? That’s not what’s interesting—what’s cool is how Diego is talking about being rejected for a music program and he expresses that rejection through music. It’s a contradiction, you would think that he would reject music now that an institution has dismissed him, but he’s using music instead, to show his sadness. What makes it sadder is that even though Diego is still a musician at heart, because of everything around him—this rejection letter, his economic problems, Marcel is right—Diego is going to be washing windows for a living. And that asshole Marcel just left him to get caught. He didn’t even really defend Diego when Trudy said that Diego was the one bringing in the drugs—it was all Marcel’s fault—Marcel was the addict. All Marcel said to his mother was “He’s a better man than I am”—because Diego wasn’t a bum, he had higher aspirations, but then when he was rejected he turned to Marcel. And that ignorant, racism mother was right, they are still children.

LIBRARIAN:

So Marcel’s attempt to put his friend in the clear had no weight?



READER:

Right. Marcel abandoned his best friend and he couldn't come to his rescue. Not much of a hero, huh?

LIBRARIAN:

Who said all texts needed the same hero with the same capabilities? He's a *human* character—not some idealized man. He's more like who you were in your last book than any comic book or epic superhero.

READER:

What's that supposed to mean?

LIBRARIAN:

Think about the actions in this scene. Marcel's stomach hurts, right?

READER:

Yeah, he gags.

LIBRARIAN:

And in your last text, you threw up, didn't you?

READER:

Kirk, a lot of people throw up—that's not really definitive of some unique connection between Marcel and me.

LIBRARIAN:

But you both got sick at some climactic moments.

READER:

Look, I threw up because I had sex with Tom...

LIBRARIAN:

No, that's too simple. You were too immersed in the actions of your own book to truly see what was happening—the plot, the order of events.

READER:

Ugh... fine. So know-it-all, when did I throw up?

LIBRARIAN:

You threw up when you opened your eyes from the fantasy on the beach that you created.

You got sick when realized the reality of pain that you were going through, instead of trying to cover it up with some false reality.

READER:

Well, I guess that does sort of link to Marcel. I mean, he was getting sick when Diego was starting to become disillusioned. I mean, Diego obviously had high hopes and aspiration about being a musician and he just rejects them. Diego debases himself. Marcel gets sick when he realizes the reality of what UCLA's rejection has done—it's stripping away all of an individual's confidence. Marcel can't do anything but watch it happen.

LIBRARIAN:

So he's inactive.

READER:

He's as inactive as I was before I got the gun. He doesn't see anyway that he can change the situation—maybe that's why he goes to the bathroom and just sort of laments. I guess nausea is linked to inaction and a realization of the reality of pain, or something like that—that's what he and I had in common.

LIBRARIAN:

Yeah, maybe... It's different when you read it like this, when you can see these characters from afar.

READER:

Yeah, it's different. Is this what you do all the time, as a librarian?

LIBRARIAN:

No, only the readers are really allowed to read. I'm just supposed to shelve books and distribute them to readers. I mean I can take breaks and we're supposed be aware of when readers finish books so that I can get the next ones. So I was able to read over your shoulder just for the end of you last book.

READER:

Oh. So you don't know my entire last book.

LIBRARIAN:

No.

READER:

Okay.

LIBRARIAN:

Well, I'm not allowed to take a break forever, do you want me to keep reading or not?

READER:

I guess it would be pretty boring otherwise. You can keep going.

**CHAPTER FIVE:**  
**Excerpts from *The Book of Marcel***

From behind the cashier counter, Marcel watched the pastel painted teenage girls gawk over the pop section near the front entrance of the Sherman Oaks Galleria Tower Records.

“Marcel,” Mike Yu snapped his fingers. His white manager’s tag glistened in the florescent lighting. “Go to the magazines.”

“Again?” Marcel whined. The lighting brought out the wrinkles that had started to emerge on his forehead.

“C’mon.”

Marcel spotted the black baggy pants of 13-year-old faux thugs, prowling the porn section. Half of the boys sported the same Che Guevara t-shirts and trucker hats slanted to the side. One boy wearing a shirt with a black and blue dragon started manhandling a stack of *Playboy* magazines.

Another boy wearing puffed-out boxers with faded iconic Rolling Stones tongues tapped the dragon-shirted boy on the shoulder. “Watch out,” the Rolling Stones-shirted boy whispered to the dragon-shirted boy, trying to warn him of the 30-year-old Tower employee behind him. A few boys immediately ran for the DVD section, which gave Marcel some relief—that was Anya’s section.

“All right,” Marcel said to the remaining teenagers. “That’s enough...” the pitch of his voice dropped as if he were trying to imagine what one of their fathers would have sounded like. But Marcel stopped when he realized that he didn’t know what a father

sounded like. Adjusting back to his regular demeanor, Marcel lightly tilted his head towards the door and a few of the boys started to walk. To the few who remained, Marcel raised his voice and took a phrase out of the employee handbook, treating the kids as if they were older than they were. "If you're not going to buy, get out." The boys rolled their eyes, muttered a few slurs, and left the store.

Marcel returned to his place behind the cashier counter. To his left, Mike stood at the end of the row of cash registers. Customers started to herd into the check-out lane. Marcel went on auto-pilot; he scanned the bar codes and removed the plastic security cases. He couldn't tell if he had done this twice or fifteen times that afternoon. He only momentarily admired the images of artists underneath a shield of plastic wrap. For some amusement, he would guess each customer's selection before it was slapped onto the counter. For the middle-aged man with his daughter, Led Zeppelin, for the middle-aged man alone, Pink Floyd. The elderly woman with long white braids was getting Celtic Thunder or Loreena McKennitt. Nothing surprised him. The colors on the CD covers on display seemed to blur together into a boring, pale mauve. Marcel's hands barely seemed attached to his brain as he went through the motions of scanning, removing, and bagging.

She walked in. Marcel had seen her around the store before, waiting for another bubbly teenager in a high-school sweater to show up. They all wore the same powdery white upper middle-class attire. Nice clothes, nothing too dark, nothing controversial, and no holes. But on this occasion, her clothes were completely different. She looked more like a dominatrix than any Valley Girl he had ever seen before. She wore black fishnets, heavy eye liner, and a short skirt revealing her brown skin. She was stick thin. Her dark hair was a mess. She wore a zipped up burgundy sweater and kept her hands in the

pockets. Marcel thought of the Tower Records on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood. If she had walked in there, he may never have noticed her—her appearance would have been the norm. But she was in the Valley and she stuck out. Two years prior, after 9/11, Marcel's former boss sat him down in the backroom and told him to "look out for suspicious characters" (an ironic request due to Marcel's recent stint in rehab). But even though this girl looked like a Middle Eastern punk, she didn't fit that description—she wasn't suspicious.

She was alone and nervous. She kept opening her blue-mascara lashes toward Marcel. Each time she did it, it was as though her pupils were expanding making her brown irises turn into black holes. She sucked him in as though saying she knew that as out-of-place as she felt, Marcel felt the same way—and if he didn't, he wasn't really living. She seemed attracted to that part of him. No, she seemed to embody that part of him in her new attire, as if daring him to come out of his Tower-vest-and-nametag shell.

Marcel wondered if she just wanted to get into his pants. She seemed nervous. He imagined she got wet in the car on the way over, rubbing her fishnet thighs together along with the monotonous drones of some techno band emanating from her parents' radio. Her parents' dashboards would be stained with the lubricant of her sweaty palms.

Marcel thought he knew the truth. He tried to transmit this knowledge by maintaining her glance. She looked away from him quickly.

Pretending to ignore him, the gothic teen lingered near a central rack of magazines opposite the cash registers. The images on the glossy magazines were of girls just like this one: rich and lost. Marcel imagined that this girl must have dressed for parties with fancy silk combinations her parents could afford. She must have worn name

brand perfumes and lotions on her infantile skin. Skin too young to understand the use of the pheromones newly planted.

She peered at one of the CD's and picked it like a ripe grape off the shelf. As Marcel started to ring up the next customer in line, he wondered which one she'd chosen—probably something perky. She was standing in the alphabetical-by-artist-section "S" so he didn't know the genre. She must have grabbed folk, emo, or pop. She probably had Carly Simon or Saves the Day in her sweaty paws, he guessed. In no way was she going to live up to the gothic dress she was wearing. He figured she didn't have the guts.

She entered the checkout line and stared at Marcel the entire time. He tried to stall the transaction with his current customer. Could he make the receipt come out more slowly? How could he avoid getting her? Perhaps if he had to type in the credit card numbers... the wrong numbers. That would take longer. He stared at the barcode numbers on the Perry Como CD before him. He started to fiddle away, extending his interaction with the elderly man in front of him.

"I can take the next customer." Mike got her. Marcel turned his head to see her slam a CD by the Sex Pistols down on the counter.

Marcel heaved a sigh of relief and released the old man in front of him. The man took the yellow bag off the counter and stood in place in front of Marcel. The man peered into the bag, checking that both the receipt and the CD had made it safely inside. He did not move, but let his head fall to his chest, his eyes circling the bag. A few moments later he looked up again, nodded to Marcel, and exited the store. The checkout line was empty and Marcel stared into space.



“Excuse me,” she said, suddenly standing before Marcel with a yellow plastic bag in her hand. Just his luck, she’d waited for him. “Excuse me...” She stopped once she realized that she had his attention. “Hi, my name is Trisha.”

“Um, hi, Trisha,” Marcel looked around nervously. The last thing he needed on his muddled police record was a pedophilia charge.

“What’s your name?” Trisha asked.

“Umm, Marcel”

“Mmmarcel?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s nice to meet you... Mmarcel.” Trisha blushed.

He smiled nervously. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m interested in getting a job here. Can I get an application?” In two sentences, Trisha broke the invisible barrier Marcel had placed between customer and salesman.

Was that really it? He wondered, was that all she was after? She suddenly seemed older, professional. Marcel wondered if he had misjudged her age and intentions—maybe this get-up really expressed who she was and she was just brave enough to wear it. Shuffling his feet, he felt immature for misjudging her intentions and unprepared to help her. “An application? I dunno...”

Mike stepped in, his Axe Deodorant wafting in before him. “Actually, we’re not hiring at this branch.”

“Oh,” she frowned. “Well, you know it’s actually for my friend, Becky. She doesn’t live around here anyway.”

For a friend? Yeah right, Marcel thought. Maybe he was right the first time.

“She really wants to work here, though.”

“Yeah, like I said, we’re not really hiring at this branch, but if you go online...”

Trisha looked at Mike. “Isn’t there anything you could give me that I could give to my friend, Becky?”

“If you really want, I can get you an application—but you can get them online, you know.” Trisha watched Mike walk towards his register. Trisha stood still in front of Marcel. She did not seem interested in interacting with Mike.

Trisha turned to Marcel. “I might try and work, too. I need a summer job. How much does it pay?”

“Minimum wage,” Marcel said. He stared at her thick lip gloss. He tried to remember the last time he actually had a conversation with a customer that included words other than “how much?” Trisha didn’t seem so bad, sort of like a little sister. He watched as Trisha’s smile started to disappear. She shifted her eyes downward, following the line of the counter. Something wasn’t getting through. He could feel the invisible tension oozing from the walls around him, caging Trisha in. She no longer wanted to be there, he could feel it. Trisha was vulnerable to this public pretense; Marcel had become immune. She looked at him from the corner of her eye and he realized that she wanted a connection. She wanted Marcel to acknowledge that she had come to talk to *him*, not to Mike. It was unspoken and yet Marcel knew it. Her attention was a compliment and Marcel realized he had to pay it back. He had to tell her that he knew she’d acknowledged him, without saying anything of the sort. “But you get to work with some really cool people.” He smiled suddenly. He never smiled at work.

Trisha seemed to perk up and looked back at him. “I guess that’s a plus,” She said, laughing nervously.

Mike returned with a white and yellow legal-sized paper. “Here’s the application.”

“Great!”

“Make sure you apply for a different branch because you won’t get work here.”

“Becky lives farther in the Valley, so maybe that’s a good thing.” She started to turn her body away, but stopped. Looking only at Marcel, Trisha asked, “Oh, do you hire people under 18?”

Marcel raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know, I don’t think so.” He frowned. How old was she? Was she really a baby? “Why, are...”

“Becky is underage,” Trisha quickly said. “That’s all. Her birthday is in March, but she hasn’t turned 18 yet.” Trisha spoke faster now. She became more nervous. “This application is for her, that’s all.”

“Well, it’s really hard to get a job here,” Mike said in his usual insulting tone of voice.

“Thanks for letting me know.” As she stuffed the application next to the Sex Pistols CD in her yellow Tower bag, Marcel thought he saw Trisha scrunch her nose in irritation. But she turned to exit the building too quickly for Marcel to tell.

Marcel smiled. Anyone who thought Mike was a dick after a five minute conversation was worth some attention. “Good luck... for your friend,” Marcel told her.

“It was nice meeting you, Marcel.” Trisha left the store.

“Yeah,” Marcel answered, pulling his chest over the counter to see Trisha leave. Was she trying to solidify some momentary bond? Marcel wondered. “Bye.”

Annoyed that he hadn’t received a goodbye, Mike stared at Marcel. “Get back to work,” Mike barked and then walked away.

**CHAPTER SIX:**  
**A Digression in the Library**

LIBRARIAN:

Well, nobody got sick this time.

READER:

Nope. Uh, so I guess this scene takes place when he's older, years after that scene with Diego. He's 30 now, and in the scene prior, he was only 18?

LIBRARIAN:

I guess. It doesn't seem like much has changed in that time.

READER:

I wouldn't say that. I mean, he has to act like a figure of authority to those sneaky kids in the store.

LIBRARIAN:

He's not very good at it.

READER:

But he has changed. I mean, if anything, in this scene he really has taken on something new...

LIBRARIAN:

Like what?

READER:

I think he has a new perspective. It's like Marcel sort of awakened because of that girl who walked into the store. As if suddenly this girl treats him like a human being and he's woken up to his own existence as a human.

LIBRARIAN:

But he was always human. What's changed?

READER:

He's perspective changed—and then his demeanor changed. Marcel started to see himself as a human being and treat others like human beings also like when he said, “But you get to work with some really cool people” and smiled. That was unusual and different for him. He doesn't have to treat the other characters like the CDs he's selling—they aren't objects.

LIBRARIAN:

I guess your right that he used to treat objectify the costumers—it seems like the people come in don't have any faces or personalities before Trisha stepped in. But the customers objectified him to begin with...

READER:

Right, so finally Marcel meets someone who doesn't treat him that way and so he reciprocates that type of respect. This experience really changed him—it molded him and gave him a different texture, demeanor.

LIBRARIAN:

But how long is that going to last? I mean, she left the store and Marcel is stuck with Mike telling him to "Get back to work."

READER:

I don't know if it will last. I'm not sure that it matters.

LIBRARIAN:

What do you mean?

READER:

I mean, yeah, maybe it's nice to be respectful to other people or to see the world in a different way, but Marcel could walk out of that store and be hit by a car.

LIBRARIAN:

So you don't think it really matters if he treats people differently in the future?

READER:

I do think it matters that this experience shaped him—even though he couldn't control all of the events that took place. I'm just saying that maybe he should just appreciate this moment and the change that occurred in this brief space, because you know never really know when life is going to end.

LIBRARIAN:

What if you did? I mean, you almost knew the exact end of your life.

READER:

But I didn't. Even though I had planned on committing suicide, I didn't succeed. In fact, the opposite of anything I could ever want happened—I mean Tom got the last laugh, that bastard. I really think that I just fainted, are you sure that I'm dead?

LIBRARIAN:

Look, all I know is that you just finished your book.

READER:

This is so strange.

LIBRARIAN:



Come on—stop thinking about your last book. You're not in it anymore. You're a reader, you're removed from it. Let's just talk about *The Book of Marcel* before my break is over, okay?

READER:

Okay. Well then maybe we should appreciate this for what it is—a scene in the text. I mean, that's what it is, just a momentary change in this character's book and it doesn't exist anywhere else. And it's just interesting for what it is, in that space, in that time.

LIBRARIAN:

So what are you saying? Do you think Marcel should just live in the present moment?

READER:

Just for that moment's sake. Who knows what will happen?

LIBRARIAN:

Well... maybe it will affect the future. We can find out...

**CHAPTER SEVEN:****A Final Excerpt from *The Book of Marcel***

Marcel tapped the mic a few times but then let his sweating hands drop to his side. His tight pants bit into his crotch and as he slightly leaned back to loosen them he caught his small, smoky reflection from a nearby light. In the plastic and metal image, Marcel watched his effigy. He appeared to hover over the microphone like an apparition, emascuate and pale.

Every few minutes, a thin woman in a tight black skirt and blue pleather leggings kept poking her head inside of the large hall from behind a glass ticket booth. Finally approaching Marcel from below the stage, she looked at Marcel as though she wanted to make sure he wasn't going to steal anything.

“Are you the lead singer for Père Lachaise?”

“Yeah, I'm Marcel. But we like to be called P.L.”

“Oh. Well, welcome to the Whiskey-A-Go-Go, Marcel. My name is Ayano Kawasaki.” She lifted the side of her mouth, as if she were about to smile, but changed her mind. “Get your stuff ready. Auditions start in twenty minutes.” She lowered her eyes and walked away.

Marcel backed away from the microphone and looked at the other members of P.L. Sitting at the drums, Louis put in his ear plugs. “Hey, Frankie...”

“Yeah, what?” Frankie crouched underneath his keyboard.

“Thank God your cousin is dating the office manager,” Louis raised his eyebrows referring to some sort of sexual gesture that Marcel couldn't catch onto.

Marcel watched as Frankie tightened his shoulders and looked around the room. He must have taken Louis's remark as a cue that the group was being watched. "Is the booking agent here yet?"

"No," Marcel responded. "Not yet."

"What was his name again?" Frankie took out a deep breath.

"Carlo Casteddu."

Marcel watched Frankie loosen his muscles. "Can you believe we're playing on the same stage as Jim Morrison?"

In the air, a short riff from a hazy guitar fluttered, catching Marcel's attention. Marcel looked to his left and Christina winked at him. "This sure beats working at the Guitar Center, huh?" She tightened her grip around a blazing red guitar tattooed with the word EKPHRASIS in white-out.

Getting up from underneath his keyboard, Frankie looked at Marcel. "Hell, this beats playing 'Glycerin' at the lounge near the Long Beach Airport." Frankie sat at the keyboard and played a few jazz licks. Louis laughed.

Marcel started to adjust Christina's amp. Working at the Guitar Center paid off in certain instances. The guitar made a screeching noise as the amp started to pick up feed. Ayano appeared again outside of the glass ticket booth, raising her eyebrows to get a better look at Marcel. Attempting to smile, Marcel reassured her, "Everything's fine. I'm just setting up."

Marcel watched as Ayano tightened her lips and then adjusted them to the right side. He wondered if she was questioning his sobriety. She went back inside the box-office window. A guitarist and a roadie entered from the blinding light outside and

required her attention. “No, no,” she called out, “Are you The Tangible Musical Objects? You’re scheduled to go last.”

“I can’t believe we’re first on the audition list,” Frankie said. More musicians poured into the room with equipment, waiting for their chance to play after P.L. Marcel looked back at his band. Wide-eyed, Frankie and Christina seemed mesmerized by the bands about to play—their equipment, their torn, tight clothing, their spiked hair. Louis, on the other hand, kept playing with his drum sticks, oblivious to the world.

Marcel took a big gulp from a bottle of water. He knew this wasn’t a done deal—the chance to play at the Whiskey for a public audience could slip through his fingers as easily as his sweat-greased mic.

Carlo Casteddu walked in. He was a plump man wearing rimless glasses. An older, shorter woman followed. Ayano walked behind them.

“Hey,” Carlo addressed the band and quickly lifted and lowered his chin to acknowledge their presence. “I’m Carlo Casteddu and this is Paula Tisza.”

“Hi,” each member of the band echoed weakly.

Directly below the stage, Carlo, Paula, and Ayano sat down behind a large black table with a lamp on it. Paula slapped a pile of papers on the desk. The sound reminded Marcel of a set of CDs being slapped onto the counter at Tower.

“So this is P.L.” Ayano muttered as the band shuffled around the stage. “They’re going to play two songs for us,” she added.

“Wait, *P.L.*?” Carlo interrupted and Marcel looked at him. “Where’d you guys get your name from?” Carlo looked at Paula. “Is that a stupid question?”

“No.” Marcel put his mouth towards the mic. “P.L. stands for Père Lachaise.”

“Oh, Jim Morrison’s grave and all that...” Carlo rolled his eyes, “Do you guys sound like the Doors?”

“No,” Frankie added, “we sound like a bunch of American tourists in Paris.”

Louis made a comic drum shot breaking the tension. Paula laughed along with Louis, Frankie, and Christina. Marcel was silent.

Carlo looked seriously at Marcel, revealing some wrinkles. He must have been the same age as Marcel, late 30’s or early 40’s. Carlo took off his glasses. “Have you ever been there?” He asked Marcel.

“Yeah.” Marcel answered. It was the trip Marcel had spent all of his money on, after Tower went bankrupt and he lost his job.

In Marcel’s mind, the Whiskey was transformed into the dark caverns of the Parisian Métro. The hot light focused on the stage became the sunlight as Marcel wandered out of the Metro, blind and unsure of what he would see. The upper balcony of seats morphed into the large stone gate he had spotted. He imagined the woman selling tourist maps at the corner. It was so windy some girl’s skirt flew up in the wind. There was a pack of men unloading a drum set from a small European car parked next to a bus stop. Marcel stopped along the sidewalk outside and saw a man shuffle past him with an instrument in a rectangular case strapped to his back. Marcel seemed to surround himself with musicians—visiting a graveyard or working in a music store. Yes, he had come to see Jim Morrison’s grave but he became mesmerized by the people he saw along the way. A series of long-haired guitarists disappeared behind the large stone walls like phantasms.

One man, tall with olive skin, lingered around the outside of the wall smoking a cigarette. He wore a leather jacket. The man looked at Marcel, and Marcel realized that he was watching himself. The same slumped shoulders, the same facial hair, the same forlorn look. Looking away, the man threw the cigarette on the ground, blew out the smoke, and licked his lips. Grabbing the guitar case next to him, he walked inside the cemetery's gates.

Empty handed, Marcel peeked inside of the cemetery walls. Reflecting colors filled his eyes as if he'd never seen color before. He observed pinks and greens rustling together in the trees above him like a halo or a Roman crown. Below, gravestones clamored for space so crowded that some lay cluttered on top of others, like casualties in a war. He imagined that he had been dead, walking amongst these other ghosts, and suddenly he had wandered upon heaven.

More musicians huddled in pockets walking in and out of the cemetery gates. Marcel followed the man with the guitar to the grave he'd come to see. James Douglas Morrison was crouched in a small, walled-off area, surrounded by tombstones with graffiti of lyrics from his songs. Marcel huddled around the grave with a pack of American Baby Boomers wearing cargo shorts and cameras around their necks. He stared at the grave; Morrison was no longer a legend, just a man. At a large circle north of the grave, the younger musicians seemed to watch the grave from afar as they took out their instruments. They would not play their instruments, just watch the grave through the trees as if Morrison's powers would transfuse into their hands. Walking towards the cemetery's exit, Marcel had looked up to the sky, hidden by a shroud of trees. His eyes

fixed back to the stage lighting of the Whiskey. The sweat on his forehead felt cool in the air-conditioning.

“You ready?” Carlo asked Marcel.

“Yeah.” He said. Christina dropped her pick and quickly bent over to grab it. The woman at the table made some type of joke and the manager and the older man laughed. Marcel put his hand over the mic. “Hey, Louis,” Marcel whispered. “Do you believe what people say?”

“What?” Louis shrugged, looking at Marcel.

Marcel moved his body closer to the drum set. “That you have to lose everything in order to know who you really are?”

“I don’t know.”

## **CHAPTER EIGHT:**

### **Back in the Library**

LIBRARIAN:

Well, we finished our first book—one down, two to go.

READER:

Well, I guess he did become active. I mean in the section we read before this and the very first scene we read, Marcel seemed a bit passive—instead of engaging with opportunities he just sort of let them pass by—maybe it had to do with the sickness you were talking about. But then he sort of became awakened to his ability to receive and give respect to other people in this world and then he started to engage with opportunities, even if he might fail.

LIBRARIAN:

Yeah, I mean he made it seem that he believed that “you have to lose everything in order to know who you really are.” I mean, he lost his job at Tower and then he went searching for himself in Paris and look, he found out that he wanted to be a musician.

READER:

But he runs the risk of losing that again. What if he doesn’t get this gig? Then what will he become? Will he stick to this profession or will this experience change him again and he’ll morph into something different.



LIBRARIAN:

I don't know. But at the beginning you had some things in common with Marcel, so maybe you'll figure it out.

READER:

No, I don't think having things in common with Marcel has anything to do with my ability to understand this text. I mean, Marcel's book is very different from my last one, and I can still perceive what was going on in his quite well. I don't think this book really pertains to my past situation at all.

LIBRARIAN:

Why not?

READER:

I mean, Marcel's first seen showed his inaction in the face of hardship—I'm not saying that his inaction was morally right or wrong or anything like that, but in the next scene he came to some sort of awakening where he could value experiences. Then this last scene shows how he fully realized that he can value experiences and engage with the mystery of his future.

LIBRARIAN:

So what's the problem? You have to engage with unknown of your next texts pretty soon.

READER:

I know that I have to read a text soon and I won't be able to know everything, but that's not the issue.

LIBRARIAN:

What's the issue?

READER:

Don't you think it's arbitrary to value or accept *any* experience? I mean, there was no justification or value in Diego's experience of rejection, does that really have value? I don't think that just because this event may have shaped Marcel and Diego, that they had "to lose everything in order to know who" they are. That's ridiculous. A lot of people experience pain and loss and they don't know who they are—and why should we define someone by events that we out of their control?

LIBRARIAN:

I think you're making some pretty big value judgments.

READER:

Texts are full of value judgments.

LIBRARIAN:

I'm just saying it's very subjective and relative. You've put a lot of your own interpretation into this text.

READER:

Well maybe interpretation is integral in the reading process.

LIBRARIAN:

Maybe... So I guess you took apart that last book pretty well, but it didn't quite get you in the mood for reading on your own?

READER:

Not quite.

LIBRARIAN:

Well, should I read to you from the next book then?

READER:

Go ahead.

**CHAPTER NINE:****Excerpts from *The Book of Sea Boy***

Roy woke to the sound of his father, George Durant, slamming the front door and the mumbling voices of angry men following. Roy sat up in the net hammock he had used as a bed for all eleven years of his life. His breath was white in the cold of the small, smoky shack. Bereft of warmth and light, this was the room that George had made their home since Roy's mother died. Trying to make sense of what was happening; Roy let his eyes adjust to the darkness. He saw the nets and hooks along the walls.

*They* came for George in the middle of the night: a group of men from the nearby bar that Roy couldn't identify in the dark. He only recognized their demeanor. They were dressed in thick layers with the smell of alcohol on their breaths.

"I got your money," George muttered. "Just wait a minute!"

One voice yelled, "You've been saying that since World War II, Durant! Wake up! It's 1952! There's another war on!"

Another added, "Maybe you should stop gambling." The whole group laughed.

"He ain't got it!" another said seriously.

The first one paused. "Enough is enough!"

Roy hid underneath his blanket in his hammock, surrendering himself to his senses. Blackness, the smell of dead oysters, and the sudden warmth of the night; the foghorn in the distance blared underneath the commotion.

Roy could hear some men approaching his cot. They lifted off the blankets on top of him. When they saw him shivering, another said, “we don’t want him—we just came for George.”

“Leave him,” added another.

Roy looked to his side. His father kicked and screamed, tearing one of the rods from the wall. George tried to stab the men. They wrapped him in a large net. Roy saw his father stare at him from inside the nets, wire, and string. George screamed as the men dragged him out of the shack. One man hit George over the head with a brass hook. And then silence. Roy held his hands over his ears.

The alarm his father regularly set for five in the morning went off. Roy waited to find nothing but the electric lights dimming across the small docks as the sun rose and light began to fill the cracks in the walls. Wiping his eyes, Roy layered on his raggedy clothing. He opened the front door and walked outside of the small shack. He stood on the corner of a bleak fishing town along a cove on the coast of Southern California.

Sounds echoed out of the closely built shacks as though they were made out of cardboard. Roy heard Mr. Yogato yelling from the shack next door and Mrs. Lorenzetti nearby emptying out a smelly container into the thin area of land between the shacks. Mrs. Brown’s baby started crying again three shacks down the way. Mr. Yogato exited his shack and slammed the door behind him. The entire row of shacks shook.

“I’m leaving!” Mr. Yogato yelled.

“Like hell you are,” his wife called back, “you son-of-a-bitch!”

Walking towards the small pier, Roy approached the refuge of the sea and crawled into his father’s ice-encrusted, wooden canoe.

His father's voice echoed in his mind. "One hell of a wake up, huh?" Roy paddled out. Although slightly sheltered by the cove, the freezing waves of the Pacific knocked against the boat. Roy sneezed and pulled his coat more tightly around his body. "Those boys back on the shore are damn lazy bastards, son. You see them hanging around the ale house at all hours of the night." Roy looked out at the sides of the cliffs. He saw water pool into a small cave along the side of the cliff, hidden from the shoreline and the town. "You see that, Roy? Some of those caves have land inside and are large enough to stand up in." The water kissed the opening of the cave. Roy sat up in the boat.

He rowed the boat closer and the waves pushed him in. He was unsure if he would find a safe hiding place from the men who'd taken his father or be smashed against unseen rocks inside. He paddled harder until finally the water became still. Roy heard his fast breathing become amplified in the cave. The canoe stopped. He stuck his hand out before his eyes he realized that there was nothing in front of him. Roy put his hand down in the water and found that it was shallow.

In the darkness, Roy felt ahead of him. His foot touched the sand in front of the canoe. He stuck his leg out in front of the boat, followed by his entire body. He used his feet to feel the strength of the earth beneath him. He pulled the canoe onto the land inside the cave and then flipped the boat over so that it wouldn't drift away. Blind in the darkness, he felt the walls of the cave, measuring out the space around him. Roy had to duck slightly underneath the cave's ceiling. He imagined where some sheets could go or a hammock bed. He took a dark rock from the ground and drew a stick figure, a self-portrait. He wanted to write his name, but he didn't know how. He finally sat down on

the wet sand and took a deep breath. This would be his new home for as long as it had to be.

**CHAPTER TEN:**  
**A Digression in the Library**

LIBRARIAN:

That's so sad—his father is kidnapped and now his “new home” is a cave.

READER:

Nice little cave metaphor there, don't you think?

LIBRARIAN:

What do you think it means? Do you think he's retreating into the womb?

READER:

Don't you think it's interesting that his father is taken away from him and Roy decides that he's going to go into a cave for shelter? Even through the process of trying to escape from the loss of his sole guardian, he confronts the issue again, by seeking this maternal comfort. It's more hopeful than anything else.

LIBRARIAN:

Or you could see Roy as entering a cave of ignorance, where he will be blinded by the light of reasoning in the rest of the world. He's becoming an outsider, he might die.

READER:



That would make this a very short book to read.

LIBRARIAN:

Yes and probably one of the most depressing. Maybe we shouldn't go on; I mean you've just come from a very difficult text to read.

READER:

Wait. No. Don't put the book away. You can't judge a book just from the first scene we picked out.

LIBRARIAN:

You want me to keep going?

READER:

Yes. Not all books are happy; it doesn't mean that we shouldn't read them. Happiness isn't the point. Just keep reading.

LIBRARIAN:

Okay, I'll keep reading then.

**CHAPTER ELEVEN:**  
**Excerpts from *The Book of Sea Boy***

Sick of fishing, Roy started to paddle down to the shore, watching the gliding waves. He approached a flat sand bank which harbored a large pile of rocks leading down to the water's edge. He pulled his father's canoe onto the sand and flipped it over. Crawling along the rocky mound to tie down the boat, he heard an unfamiliar voice coming from the other side.

"Don't worry!" The voice was thin and high pitched. Roy followed the voice, continuing to mount the rocks. When he reached the top of the structure, he realized that he was just a few feet away from a little girl, who was climbing the rocks toward him. She wore fancy black-suede shoes with a little strap on top. With each step upward, Roy watched as she dropped a collection of shells and black rocks nested in her small hands. She wore a white sundress. He looked at the shore below.

"Stay off of there! You're gonna hurt yourself!" A thin woman wearing large sunglasses and a yellow scarf called to the little girl in an accent Roy had never heard before.

The girl tripped, forcing her shoe to fall off. She cut her foot on one of the rocks. "Ah!" She started sliding down the rocks and sucking in a large gust of air, Roy quickly grabbed her hand. She looked up and saw him.

"Hi," Roy noticed that she was about his age.

"Thanks." She pulled herself onto the top of the rocks next to him. "Who are you?"

“Megda!” The woman called from the beach, “You get down here this instant! Don’t tell me that you lost your shoe again!”

“Hold on, Momma!”

“This instant!” her mother repeated and Megda started to head back down.

“My name’s Roy,” he whispered as she headed down.

“Are you that Sea Boy that all the fishermen talk about?” Megda stopped for a moment, looking at him. “They told us to watch out for you... that you hang around and might steal our things.”

“That’s not true.” He lowered his eyebrows.

“But you are him?” Megda asked. “You’re Sea Boy?”

“Megda!” Her mother called again.

“You’re skin and bones,” Megda ignored her mother. “When I heard about the famous Sea Boy surviving on the scraps of food and clothing that people gave him, I was expecting more.”

“What?” He pouted. “Who are you?”

Megda lifted her head and fixed her light brown hair. “Miss Megda Chadwick.” She extended her hand, “how do you do?” Roy stared at the hand. Megda grabbed his hand and shook it, hard. She let go. “You need a firmer grip, Sea Boy.”

“Where are you from?”

“All over.” Megda looked behind her at her mother, “That’s my Momma. She’s from Jackson, Mississippi and my Daddy is a real estate investor from the Big Apple but he moved to Boston—that’s where we last lived. And that’s where I’m going to go back someday and live in a big brownstone and go to college and marry a Yalie.”

“What’s a brownstone?”

Roy stared down at Mrs. Chadwick on the flat shoreline, a few yards in front of his rocky perch. A tall man in a suit joined her, trying to calm her down by putting his hand on her shoulder. Megda perked up and continued without listening to Roy, looking at the man below, “My Daddy’s come to reinvent the shoreline! He’s going to make all new types of laws and build houses and hotels and stuff. My Daddy’s going to fill in the gap in the highway—you know, the Pacific Coast Highway... Where do you live?”

Roy pointed to the cave hidden along the cliffs away from the shore.

“In *there*?” Megda gasped.

“Yeah.”

“In a cave?” Megda’s eyes went wide. “You really do live in the sea, don’t you? Do you go fishing, too?”

Roy nodded his head affirmatively and looked over at his old canoe. “That’s mine.”

“Megda!” Mrs. Chadwick called again.

“I got to go now, Sea Boy... Are you in the sixth grade, too? Will I see you in school on Monday?”

“School?”

“You don’t go to school?” Megda’s voice deepened.

“Maybe we could go swimming sometime,” Roy suggested, hoping to raise her voice to a higher pitch.

“I got a new bathing suit!” Megda smiled. “It has blue and white stripes and it’s from Manhattan!”

“What do you need a bathing suit for?” Roy asked her.

“Because I’m a girl!” Megda climbed down from the rocks.

When Megda reached the bottom, Roy watched as her mother pinched her shoulder with pointy red fingernails. “Ow!” Megda called out. She waved goodbye and her mother lowered her sunglasses. *Is she trying to get a better look at me?* Roy wondered.

“Do you want to introduce us to your little friend?” Her mother asked loud enough for Roy to hear. “Just say, these are my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Chadwick, like a good girl?”

Megda turned away, hiding her face from Roy. He quickly snuck to his right and climbed onto the cliff side overlooking the water. Walking along the cliffs, he followed the Chadwick family. When the family got further down the shore, Mr. Chadwick attached himself to one of Megda’s hands. Watching Megda skip around the shore as the light dimmed, Roy waved.

Megda declared loudly to her father, “It’s just not fair!”

“What, sweetie?” Mr. Chadwick asked. He looked up at Roy.

“I have to go to school and learn my times tables and Sea Boy gets to sit in his cave all day and go fishing!”

“Well, we’ll see about that,” he replied and waved back to Roy. Mr. Chadwick tugged Megda towards a walkway going up to the cliffs. Roy stopped following them and stared up at the newly-built mansion that seemed to loom over the shacks along the shoreline.

**CHAPTER TWELVE:**  
**A Digression in the Library**

LIBRARIAN:

See—there's an alternative to life in the cave!

READER:

So?

LIBRARIAN:

So maybe your “maternal” cave was not Roy’s final destination, maybe it was a cave of ignorance after all and now Roy has been enlightened as to life beyond this state. He could have a new type of life through this family—especially through that powerful father whose come to “reinvent the shoreline.” Reinvention is always positive right?

READER:

Not necessarily. That last image was rather ominous—“the newly-built mansion that seemed to loom over the shacks along the shoreline.” That building seems so strong and powerful; by saying that it “seemed to loom,” the language insinuates that the mansion might try to constrain and control everything under it.

LIBRARIAN:

You don't know that. It's just a single image—one sentence. Besides, maybe Roy will take this chance—by choosing to interacting with Megda and perhaps even enrolling in school. Maybe it will give him more opportunities and experiences than shielding himself in a cage.

READER:

Choosing? It didn't sound like Roy would get to choose anything at all. Mr. Chadwick seems like a powerful man. It sounded like he was going to force Roy to go to school—and for someone like Roy, who's been abandoned and separated from society for a long time, maybe that isn't the best option.

LIBRARIAN:

What? Why not?

READER:

Maybe this alternative life isn't right for Roy.

LIBRARIAN:

Well, I don't think I agree.

READER:

Look, I get it—my last book is over and now I'm separated from books in this library, I'm not living through them. You're trying to show me an alternative to the past through

these texts, but what if the route you want me to follow isn't right or doesn't suit me?  
Like Roy, I'm not sure that I really have a choice in the matter.

LIBRARIAN:

I'm not trying to show you anything. You're picking up on these connections on your own. Like I said—it's all your interpretation. I certainly don't agree with it. I just want to read these texts on my break.

READER:

That's all? That's your only intention?

LIBRARIAN:

Yeah. Look it's just my job to distribute the books and shelve them. I don't aim to solve any major crises.

READER:

So what do you think will happen to Roy?

LIBRARIAN:

I hope that he'll choose the alternative lifestyle he sees with the Chadwick family. And if he doesn't, I think that he will be stuck in the cave. What do you think will happen?

READER:



From Roy's perspective and the language you read aloud, I don't think he's going to choose an alternative, I think it's going to be forced upon him. I think a huge change is going to be forced on the entirety of the cove—I mean Mr. Chadwick is planning on changing the Pacific Coast Highway right?

LIBRARIAN:

Yes. He's going to change the geography of the area, not just Roy.

READER:

Once it's over, there will be no cave to return to.

LIBRARIAN:

There's only one way to find out.

READER:

Keep reading.

**CHAPTER THIRTEEN:****A Final Excerpt from *The Book of Sea Boy***

Couching on the pier, Roy tied down Mr. Lorenzetti's boat. He bent down lower, allowing his stained t-shirt to touch the fringes of the torn shorts clinging to the backs of his thighs. The aging rope rubbed against his callused fingers like sand paper. He heard someone galloping down the dock towards him and he turned, staring at the slender woman running towards him.

"Sea Boy!" Megda called out. He noticed that she had pulled her hair back, away from her face. She wore a large hat and white gloves. He recognized the gloves. They were the same white gloves that Megda had bragged about her mother giving her for her sweet sixteen, a year prior. She had brought them in a box tied closed with a turquoise ribbon to her room one day, to show off to her girlfriends. She didn't seem to notice that Roy had been staring at the wrapping.

"Megda? What are you doing out here?" A clump of hair fell in front of Roy's eyes and he kept it there, watching the sun play with the natural highlights in his hair.

"Well, you see, Daddy wants to build up the pier a lot. In a few months, this dock won't even be here any more. He bought up all the land that he didn't already own in the area, including that property." Roy swept the hair away from his face. She pointed to some shacks near Roy's former home with his father. "There."

"So?" He squinted in order to see her pale face clearly in the sun.

“So I wanted to let you know, that’s all.” Megda sat down next to him on the dock’s prickly wood. She took off her slip-on shoes and stuck her toes in the water. “And there’s this dance tonight.”

“Huh?” Roy looked at her.

“There’s a senior dance, *tonight*. They’re going to have it at the hall my Daddy just built along the water, over there.” She pointed to a new one-story structure half a mile down the beach. Resting along the cliff, the hall was covered in long windows reflecting the setting sun. Roy remembered when the cliffs were empty—just a haze of yellow and brown sprinkles from newly growing poppies after fire season—not infected with metal and wood. He could barely see the olive-green earth underneath the newly sprouted white and orange blemishes. “Haven’t you heard of it?”

“Oh, yeah. I guess so. Mrs. Monahan told our class about it on Tuesday, huh? I don’t know... I wasn’t going to go.”

“What!” Megda’s head jutted back. “Is Mr. Lorenzetti not letting you? Ugh! I know that you feel like you owe him some labor now that you’re living with him and his family, but haven’t you done enough work, already?”

“No, Megda that isn’t it.” Roy stroked the back of his neck with his palm. “Well, I don’t know how to dance, so I wasn’t going to go,” he explained. “You’re going, aren’t you?”

She looked at him with wide eyes. “Yeah, I’m going.”

“So?” He lifted his shoulders.

She blushed. “So,” she gritted her teeth so that no one else would hear, “I was hoping that you might ask me to go with you.”

“With me?” Roy jolted back. “Why would you want to go with *me*?”

“Because... I don’t know... I’ve known you the longest.” Megda answered.

“Why not with Bobby or Kevin? I mean, they’ll probably have nice suits and all that. Their parents are loaded. Heck...Megda. You didn’t give me any notice. Tonight?”

“Fine!” She stood up and started putting on her shoes. “Be like that! You don’t want to go, don’t go!”

“Megda—it’s fine. Okay, all right. I’ll go, if you really want me to take you. You could have just asked ahead of time.”

“If you were a normal boy, you would have just asked me ahead of time!” Megda put her hand on her hip.

“I mean,” Roy lifted his shoulders and put his hands behind him, leaning back. “I don’t even know how...”

“No! We can’t go now, this is all wrong... If you had asked ahead of time then my father could have helped get you some clothes and flowers, but now it’s too late! You said you didn’t want to. Fine! I’ll go alone.” Megda looked away from him and started crying. “You know, you really should talk to my father. You can be a beach bum all your life or you can take advantage of the business opportunities given to you and work for my father’s company.” She started to walk away.

“That’s funny,” Roy glared at her, “I thought I already did. Doesn’t he own everything now, anyway?”

As the sun finished melting into the water, the canoe approached the shore of the cove. Roy, shoeless, jumped out of the boat and brought it towards the shore. He turned it

over so that it wouldn't go back out. "Damn it," he looked down. His pant legs were all wet. He was wearing Mr. Lorenzetti's old suit which hugged him tightly around the shoulders. He looked up at the beach and that's when he saw her. In her pale pink dress her mother probably imported from Los Angeles, Megda waited, alone. He walked towards her outside of the hall on the beach. She wiped her face. Roy turned to Megda and handed her a hibiscus flower. No other girl in the senior class is going to have such a beautiful corsage, so original, so wild, as the one she'd wear.

"You're late," Megda said.

Roy wiped his feet on a handkerchief and then put on some uncomfortable looking shoes. "Well, if the dance hall had been closer to the pier than I would have been here sooner."

"The dance started at eight."

"I know."

"It's eight thirty."

"I know."

"I was sure that you weren't going to come. Some other boys already asked me to come inside with them and I was about to accept when I saw the faint outline of..."

"I'm sorry! Okay? I'm sorry! Besides, aren't you supposed to make a dramatic entrance, anyway?"

"You can say that again!" She laughed. "Did Mr. Lorenzetti give you that suit?"

"Yeah, and he found the shoes at some sort of sale... they don't really fit me right."

She chuckled, "Come on; let's go in, *Sea Boy*."

At the dance, everything was made out of tissue paper and crinoline. All of the boys wore suits and the girls had gloves on. Megda ran off to show her friends her new flower and Kevin and Jimmy came up to Roy.

“For a second I didn’t recognize you,” Jimmy smiled.

“Well, you clean up well, don’t you?” Kevin shook Roy’s hand. “You even greased back your hair, didn’t you?”

“You’re going to be the talk of the senior class,” Jimmy added and Roy looked around the room at all the couples whispering to one another.

“Come on,” Megda returned to Roy’s side. “Let’s dance.”

On the dance floor, Roy couldn’t dance at all, there was no pretending. So Megda taught him how to dance. Some new music was brought in, apparently from Hollywood, and it was faster and catchier than the older swing music that most of the parents had supplied. It had electric guitars in it and Roy liked to move around to it. He’d never been exposed to anything quite like it. Around eleven thirty, Megda had to lead for a slow song. He swung close to her, as if he never wanted to let go.

After that song, Megda took Roy outside. “Do you want to go somewhere?” She panted, exhausted from dancing.

“Won’t your father get upset if you’re not home soon?”

“Not tonight... he’s been out all week on a business trip. He’s been traveling a lot ever since he completed the highway gap. Isn’t it wonderful? Now people from all over will come into the cove! It’ll be a real city! And Momma won’t notice... She’s too busy with the new baby. She wanted me to have fun anyway.” Megda grabbed one of the camping lanterns sitting next on the porch of the dance hall.

“All right,” He blushed and turned over the boat. “I want to show you something.” Roy put the lantern in the boat. Megda stepped inside of the canoe. Taking off his shoes, he pushed the canoe into the water and then jumped inside once he got past most of the waves. He rowed the boat along to the rocky cliffs past the pier.

“Where are we going?” She asked.

“You see that cave, there?” He pointed near the cliffs, “That was my old home. I want to take you there.”

As Roy rowed the canoe farther out from the shore, he paused to look at the view of the emerging city. Bright lights beamed from the hillside. “You live there,” he pointed a tan finger to a larger home near the hillside, away from the shacks and the pier. “Do you recognize it?” They looked away from the shore, towards the expansive ocean behind them. Near the horizon, the waves reflected the stars. They were silent for a moment.

“Where are your parents?” She asked him.

“My father was taken away one night. It was the winter after my eleventh birthday. These men grabbed him. That’s when I ran away. I tried looking for him later, but I was still scared of the people in town—I didn’t know which ones were responsible for taking him. I don’t know where he is...”

“What about your mother?”

He looked at her. “My Mom died when I was five... So I guess she’s in heaven.”

She was silent for a long time before saying, “I think that when you die, you just sort of go into your dreams, you lose your body but something from inside remains. I think it’d be really scary—I mean to be cut off from your body like that, or cut off from what’s real.”

He touched her hand. Their silhouettes escaped into the nighttime waters.

“To be cut off from feeling,” she added.

Roy continued to paddle until they came closer to the edge of the cave. He ducked his head underneath the mouth of the cave and Megda imitated him. As the boat knocked against the land, he touched her lips with his fingertips and then her lips with his lips. They pulled the boat onto the land. He found some old things there: pictures, nets, tools, blankets, and clothes.

“How could you live here all of that time?” She said.

“I just did—I had to,” He answered.

“But weren’t you scared? I mean, I’m scared just standing here.”

Roy looked around. “What are you scared of?”

“I don’t know. You, me, this cave... the future.”

“I don’t understand, Megda. Do you want to leave?”

“No,” she bit her lips and walked towards him, “Aren’t you ever scared?”

He shrugged. She was just inched away, centimeters. He could see her glassy eyes.

“Isn’t there anything that you’re afraid of?” Megda pressed against him. She was cold and soft, smoother than the sand beneath his feet.

“I don’t want to die—”

“What?”

“I don’t want to die alone.”

She kissed him tightly. It was his first kiss. As she swept away her clothes and then his in slow, gradual waves, he touched her thin back, so thin the bones stuck out.



She was not a tangible thing to hold on to but merely a remnant of a dream fading out of his memory in the early morning. She was a shadow already. As they lost their virginity together, the temporality of each moment finally broke into Roy's consciousness. The movement of each fleck of skin was as uncontrollable and unpredictable as the motions of the waters around them. And all he could think was; Death couldn't be worse than this.

When Roy woke up in that cave that morning, Megda was gone. She took the canoe and left him stranded. He wondered in she left early so that he mother wouldn't catch her for being out all night. He would have liked her to stick around—not only because he had to swim back to shore in his underwear, holding the suit and the new shoes over his head, but because he would have liked to wake up next to her as the sunrise approached the mouth of the cave. He wanted to experience that with her. Instead, Roy knew, she wanted to keep up appearances. She probably wanted to see her friends before the senior retreat. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath. She probably thought she needed to appear perfect and innocent to her parents, so they would still love her. She was probably right. But knowing what had happened, Roy still thought she was innocent.

Still naked, Roy folded the clothes around the new shoes. Using his right hand, he held them upward, balancing them on his head as he swam back to shore. When he got to Mr. Lorenzetti's new one-story house, no one was home to yell at him for getting the clothes and the shoes wet. He left them on the kitchen counter and walked to the room he shared with Marc, Mr. Lorenzetti's 26-year-old dock assistant.

Roy packed a small canvas bag that Mr. Lorenzetti had given him a few months prior. "I think you should take Mr. Chadwick's offer." Mr. Lorenzetti's voice rang in

Roy's ears. "But if you decide to leave the cove," he had once added in Marc's presence, "you should leave like a man, not a child runaway." Roy filled the bag with some old pictures, shirts, pants, a suede jacket from Mexico that Marc had passed down to him, and a blanket. When Roy was finished, he put the bag on his back and looked up.

Marc stood in the doorway. "I don't blame you for leaving, Roy."

Roy walked out the front door and he could hear Marc following behind him. As the sun beat down his scalp, Roy stared at the city that had developed with him, filled with clothing stores, a perfect row of newly planted palm trees, orange houses, window splattered offices, and apartment buildings. The entire area was enclosed by an expansive highway and freshly laid asphalt. The clouds were thicker, making the sky mostly white during the day instead of blue. At night the sky turned mauve rather than black closer to the hills. There were fewer stars. The ivy and natural vegetation had been scrapped away leaving the cliffs dry and bald.

"This really is a city, now," Roy commented, "isn't it?"

"It was manufactured into one," Marc noted.

"It's something completely different from the home I ever wanted, Marc. I don't think I've ever grown accustomed to it."

"This is Mr. Chadwick's empire," He placed his hand on Roy's thin shoulder, "if you stay, you'll turn into the man that Mr. Chadwick dreams you to be."

"I wonder what my father would have dreamed me to be."

"I don't know, Roy."

Roy walked away from the house.

Marc called out to him, "I'm going to call Mr. Lorenzetti, and let him know you're leaving."

"Will you do me a favor," Roy turned around, walking backwards, "will you call Megda and tell her first?"

Marc went back inside of the house and Roy started to walk the two miles to get up to the main highway. His limp shoes did better on the sand than they did on the hard gravel around his feet. He wondered if he should have taken the fancy shoes, but didn't want to turn back.

When he got to the main road he saw a car speeding towards him. As the car approached, it stopped on the side of the highway. A figure emerged from the car and ran towards him. It was Megda in a print dress. News sure traveled fast in this town, Roy thought.

"You can't leave!" She yelled and slowed down as she got closer to him. "You're making a huge mistake! You can't dismiss all the opportunities my father has given you! You can't leave me," she put her arms around him. Roy's body was limp.

"You're leaving *me*." He said quietly. She pulled away from him, looking at his face. "I love you and you're going to an East Coast college and you're never going to come back."

"That's not true," she said. "I'll come back sometimes. I won't be gone for that long."

"I've got to get out of here..." He started to walk on, away from her. He turned his back to her.

"Stop, *Sea Boy!*"

“My name is Roy Durant!”

He turned back to see that Megda stood still, letting the tears stain her dress as she looked at him from a few feet away.

Roy added, “And you already left me.” He stepped on to the newly paved highway, the one that Megda’s father built from his own pockets. He thought about the men in the town who shoveled the asphalt. He put on the worn suede jacket Marc had passed down to him.

“How long have you been planning to leave?” Megda asked.

“I knew I wanted to hit the road as soon as the highway was built.” It was the same highway all the fishermen called “a monstrosity” and Mr. Chadwick referred to, with a glimmering smile, as “the biggest tourist train ever imaginable.” People really were driving all the way out to the cove now, driving up and down the coast, exploring and reinventing themselves, not just the territory.

Roy stuck out his thumb down the road a ways. He started whistling.

“I don’t recognize that tune,” she said. “What is it?”

“Nothing.” He stared at how the road disappeared into a wide, man-made cave carved into the side of the cliffs. Looking up, he spotted a group of three female deer, running around the bland hillside, scrambling for food and shelter. They were as lost as he was, but full of terror. He looked at the lack of contrast between the bare hills and the cleared asphalt. A flat, sandy area bereft of plants and insects surrounded the newly paved road. He tried to press his feet into the ground but it was packed so tightly that nothing shifted but a thin top layer of dust. He heard Megda continue to cry. He couldn’t stand in silence anymore, waiting for a car to pass by and pick him up.

He walked towards her and grabbed her hand, drawing her closer to him. He hugged her and kissed her, but felt nothing, as if her warm skin were evaporating around him, escaping into the hillside and the beach with each passing breeze.

“What did I do wrong?” She cried. “What’s wrong with wanting to stick with the plan, to keeping up appearances? Why can’t you join the army, like Daddy wants you to? Why can’t you stay and work for his business?” Tears rolled frantically down her cheeks. “Roy, if my father knew what we did—he’d never let us... I just wanted to fulfill what everyone wanted of me at the same time—to be in three places at once.”

“That’s not it, Megda.” He looked back at her and the growing coastal town and then pressed his mouth close to her cheek. “Shh...”

“Aren’t you ever going to come back?” She said.

“I don’t know, Megda.” He brushed her wavy hair away from her face. “We don’t have to plan the future.”

Megda pushed away from him. She nodded to herself and then turned, walking back to the car she came in. Roy looked down and found some of her tears had stained the suede jacket. He heard the engine start and she made a U-turn, driving away from him, back towards her father’s mansion. Roy started walking down the road, the bag over his left right shoulder. He stuck out his thumb and if a car passed without stopping, he would stick out his forefinger and just shoot them away.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

### Back in the Library

LIBRARIAN:

I guess you were right, reader. He didn't take Mr. Chadwick's offer and he didn't return to the cave. He got to decide what he wanted to do with his life in the end. What do you think?

READER:

This is just too uplifting. Roy is abandoned, he retreats to a cave, he sees an alternative to the cave, and then he chooses to leave the area to form his own identity.

LIBRARIAN:

But then why is the book called *The Book of Sea Boy* if that was a name that other people gave him—that Roy didn't choose or even seem to like. He did yell at Megda when she called him "Sea Boy."

READER:

Well, maybe the sea is still a part of who he is.

LIBRARIAN:

So he's being defined by the cove? By a geographic location and the things that happened to him there? How is he defining his own identity then?

READER:

I don't have all the answers, but he can change and travel, like the tide. In that respect, it's still like a fairy tale—Roy was successful in the end.

LIBRARIAN:

What do you mean he “was successful”?

READER:

At the end of the excerpt we read, he was about “to form own identity.”

LIBRARIAN:

I don't think that's a good measure of success in life.

READER:

Oh yeah, then what is: love, happiness, wealth?

LIBRARIAN:

Maybe, if you look at success as love, happiness, or wealth than Roy really wasn't very successful. He had to endure a great deal of hardship. I mean, he lost the love of his life.

READER:

Roy said that he loved Megda but he didn't treat her like he did. It didn't really seem like they were on the same wavelength.

LIBRARIAN:

You mean, economically?

READER:

No, not just that. Yes, Megda obviously had more money, but just their personalities didn't seem to mesh. I mean, Roy didn't ask Megda to go to the dance with him—it was like he wasn't even conscious of it.

LIBRARIAN:

But when Megda reminded him of it, he went with her.

READER:

But even then he was late. I mean, at the end of the scene, Megda didn't even recognize the tune that Roy was whistling as he walked down the road.

LIBRARIAN:

So you don't think he really loved her?

READER:

Wouldn't he have stayed if he really loved her? Wouldn't he have worked for her father?



LIBRARIAN:

I see, so you think he would have sacrificed the ability to form his own identity to be with her if he loved her and valued love above all else. So no matter what the story has to be successful? I mean, if he stayed in the town then he would have succeed in love and because he left he succeeded by forming his own identity.

READER:

I guess. It just seemed like Roy's ending actions were defining his value system—he finally had the freedom to have his own beliefs and objectives in life.

LIBRARIAN:

What about Megda? Did she have that freedom, too? Roy left her against her wishes. Megda acted like she loved Roy—crying so much as he left.

READER:

But she never said that she loved him.

LIBRARIAN:

Do you have to say, "I love you," in order to be in love with someone?

READER:

I guess not.

LIBRARIAN:

Besides, you just claimed that Roy never really loved her and he said, “I love you.”  
Maybe all of our actions don’t define our emotions.

READER:

But she called him things like a “beach bum.”

LIBRARIAN:

She did that in anger.

READER:

She drove away, leaving Roy alone on the highway!

LIBRARIAN:

She drove away in anger because Roy didn’t understand the complexity of her situation.  
He told her she didn’t have to plan ahead. Of course she had to plan things out or else her  
father was going to control everything.

READER:

Her father would never have approved of their relationship, like when she said, “if my  
father knew what we did—he’d never let us...” It makes it seem like Mr. Chadwick

would never have let them be together. I mean, they weren't economic equals. Why did she try to be with Roy at all?

LIBRARIAN:

Ever heard of *Romeo and Juliet*?

READER:

This sure as hell isn't *Romeo and Juliet*—and we both know that that didn't end well.

(Silence)

LIBRARIAN:

What, was she supposed to avoid any sort of hardship? Are you saying that she should have been inactive her whole life and have done nothing about her emotions? Was she supposed to become a drug addict like the young Marcel and desert all of the people around her—even those that she cared about? Should she have shielded herself from any sort of pain or pleasure?

READER:

It would have worked for me.

LIBRARIAN:

No, it didn't work for you. In your last book you attempted to shield and numb yourself from any sort of feeling—you created all sorts of routines and false meanings to justify a relationship with a man you didn't love. You listened to “the songs on the classic rock station said that I should cry and beg and plead *Please don't leave me*” and bought “the shampoo and the conditioner” to shield and mask your repulsion to Tom's actual smell.

READER:

I thought we weren't going to discuss my last book—I thought we were going to take a break.

LIBRARIAN:

Look, you did all of this so that you wouldn't have to experience pain and in the end, you failed—you felt something and you became aware of your pain and lack of control over it. Your environment seemed to encourage you to return to your relationship with Tom after you left him and to value the love you created above all else. But this value was false, falling apart.

READER:

How in the hell would you know! Stop lecturing me! You are making me feel sick to my stomach!

LIBRARIAN:

I'm not done! You even said that "At the end of the day it's just about two bodies pressing up against each other and being able to smile and pretend like everything is so goddamn all right. It's about being able to go through the motions without feeling anything." That "goddamn" said it all, reader. That diction shows that you thought that this belief that the meaning of life was to press up against another body was a contrived, meaningless value which you could never buy into.

READER:

That's just your interpretation!

LIBRARIAN:

You knew how ridiculous these false meanings were that you created and then never protected you from the pain you felt. You attempted to commit suicide to escape from that realization of your powerlessness in that situation and you failed at that, too!

READER:

So?

LIBRARIAN:

So don't give me this bullshit of what would have worked for you and what wouldn't have. It's too late. Rationalizing what happened or trying to justify your moments isn't going to reverse time. There are no more "what ifs." What happened happened.

READER:

Isn't everything you just said a rationalization in itself? You just made a bunch of broad claims about the nature of failure and tried to explain *why* I tried to kill myself. Didn't you just make a huge value judgment and assessment of what happened? Didn't you just apply a meaning to my attempted suicide—to what you claim is a meaningless act? Kirk, you're a living contradiction. I'm tired of this. Can we stop talking about *The Book of Joy Elizabeth Townsend* now? Please?

LIBRARIAN:

What do you want to talk about?

READER:

Mr. Chadwick.

LIBRARIAN:

What about him?

READER:

What if he was trying to give Megda the best lifestyle he could.

LIBRARIAN:

Maybe that wasn't "the best" for her.

READER:

But Roy knew that she was not going to be with him—whether her father intervened or through her personal choice—she was going to leave him and in the end, she *did* drive away. It doesn't matter what her intention was for driving away—we don't know what she was thinking, this wasn't her book. What matters in the end is the course of action she took. She didn't stick around or choose to leave with Roy.

LIBRARIAN:

Maybe that wasn't a choice for her.

READER:

Well, we don't know that for sure. I'm just saying that Roy knew what was happening in this situation and he was successful because he was able to escape from it and forge a lifestyle of his choice. Marcel's book was about overcoming suffering and in his last section he comes to value his experiences and engages with life's unknowns. He becomes a musician—he also forges a lifestyle of his choice.

LIBRARIAN:

So you connected *The Book of Marcel* to this text because Roy has to endure his painful experiences and finally enters the unknown by hitchhiking on the highway.

READER:

Yes. I'm just wondering if there are any books you could show me that don't have this optimistic outcome. They are a bit unrealistic. While these texts are full of unique emotions, thoughts, and images, I just haven't been fully moved...

LIBRARIAN:

Your perspective of your situation hasn't completely changed?

READER:

I guess so. I'm not really looking forward to what's going to happen after this break—about reading another text. I thought that by taking a break, by doing what you were suggesting—by just hearing these texts instead of experiencing them—that I might change my mind about my predicament.

LIBRARIAN:

We do have one more book left. Should we read the last one?

READER:

Sure.



**CHAPTER FIFTEEN:****Excerpts from *The Book of the Waitress***

Trisha's short, 9-year-old legs dangled from her chair. Imitating the movement of the expensive yachts outside this shack on the Long Beach marina, she swung her legs back and forth to orient them in the early afternoon sunlight. She and her camp counselor had taken over the home of the obese dock manager, who walked around outside the doorway. A fresh baseball cap with the name of a boating club and the year 1996 crowned his bright white hair.

"Corporal," she called out to her counselor. It was the name that all of the campers called him that summer because he was in the Army Reserves. She didn't know his real name.

Corporal didn't respond. He merely slouched his tall, fit body over a large bee-sting kit, complete with antiseptic, razors, and Band-Aids. His short blonde hair disappeared in the rays of sunlight that beamed in, between the wooden boards into the shack. When he was ready, he placed a razor on the chair next to her.

"Let me see that splinter."

Watching the razor resting beside her, Trisha gave him her bright red index finger.

"That's one of the largest splinters I've ever seen," Corporal said. "We better make sure your finger doesn't get infected... How'd you get it?"

The dock manager left the hallway, and his son, who appeared to be her age, stared into the room from the doorway. He wore a ponytail and had a pierced ear, which

Trisha thought was strange because he was a boy. She wondered if it was because he lived in a shack next to a bunch of boats and could get away with whatever he wanted.

“I was sitting on the dock next to the boats waiting for a ride on that...” she explained to Corporal, “What is it called? The water motorcycle...”

Corporal tried to close the door to the room, but it didn’t latch, so it slowly crept open again and the dock manager’s son continued to look in.

She continued, “And I put my hand down behind me on the dock to lean back and then it started to hurt. It felt like something had stabbed my finger.”

“I guess something had stabbed your finger.”

“Well, I looked down and I saw something brown was in there and my finger was all red.”

“Try to get the splinter out by soaking your hand in warm water,” Corporal said. He got up and left the room and returned with the dock manager.

The old man showed Corporal how to turn on the hot water at an old sink near a window in the small room. Trisha got up and soaked her hand in the water.

“If this doesn’t work,” Corporal looked at her, “we might have to use the kit.”

She rubbed her red finger furiously. “It’s not coming out.”

The boy snuck his head into the room from the doorway like a cartoon character Trisha had once seen on Nickelodeon. The character was a spy with a large head and a thin body. But when the character overheard a conversation, he would duck his head into his jacket, shouting commands through a hidden radio to people in an office or a car nearby. The boy didn’t move. He stood still watching, eyes glazed over with wonder.

“Let me see it,” Corporal said, trying to get the boy out and close the door yet again. He was more successful this time.

Trisha turned off the water. The sink was clogged and the soapy water, motionless. She stepped toward Corporal and showed him her finger.

“It’s stuck in so deep,” he said. “I’ve got to cut it out or else it’s going to get infected.” Corporal ripped off the plastic that covered a metal blade razor in the bee sting kit. She started crying. “Do you get faint at the sight of blood?” he asked her but she didn’t answer. He took the finger and placed it in his hands. He shifted his body away from her, so that his shoulder blocked her ability to see the wound.

Trisha moved her head to the side and saw that the splinter had already made a large incision in her finger, but Corporal cut in deeper, exposing more of the dark wood. It was longer than she had imagined. Continuing to cut farther inside, he reached inside the wound with some tweezers. He dug around the skin, trying to grasp and pull out the wooden fragment, but the splinter was lodged in, refusing to move.

“I can’t get it out,” he said finally.

She cried harder. After taking a deep breath, she wiped her eyes and looked back at him, “Sorry.”

“It’s okay to cry.” Corporal stopped and got up. “I’ll be right back.” He left the room, leaving the door open.

The boy looked in, “What happened?”

“I got a really bad splinter. See.” Trisha put her exposed flesh up to the light.

“Did he hurt you?”

“Yeah, but it’s not his fault. It’s the splinter.”

The boy looked at her. “I usually just put my finger under hot water to get out splinters.”

“I tried that,” she said.

He walked towards the sink, staring at the soapy water inside. “Did you soak it in the hot water or did you just pour water on it? You have to soak it.” The boy added, “That’s what I have to do...I get them all the time around here.”

Corporal came back in the room after muttering with the old man in the baseball cap.

“Come on,” the old man told the boy, moving his hand towards his body in a sweeping motion. The boy quickly left the room followed by the old man.

Corporal closed the door almost fully. He revealed a box of tissues. “Do you want me to try to cut deeper?”

“No, that’s okay. Let me try to put it under some water, maybe it will work.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded.

He threw away the dirty blade. “If it doesn’t work, we’ll just have to go back to camp and try a different kit or wait until you get home or something.” He paused. “Will your parents be home when you get there?”

Trisha shook her head no. One of her routine babysitters would be; she wasn’t sure which. She highly doubted that one of them would break off the plastic safety piece of a razor and cut into her hand to get out a splinter. It depended on which babysitter was at the house that evening and even then, the babysitter wouldn’t do it, well.

It was the realization that came over her that numbed the pain. It was the realization that made the red finger no longer matter, the shack invisible, the fear dissipate. Her father would never cut into her delicate little finger to get out a splinter. He would not touch her, let alone slice into her in order to save her from a more painful condition. He would come home late and go to his office. He would smoke a cigarette and close the door. She would knock on his door to tell him what had happened that day at camp and he may not answer. He would go to bed later than she and wake up earlier to leave the house than she. And Trisha would barely see him except on her birthday when he would give her a stuffed animal, big and soft, large enough for her to fall into and be protected from all pointing objects everywhere, and feel nothing and be cushioned and never grow.

Corporal left the room and started talking to the boat manager. Trisha put her hand under the warm water allowing it to soak for a long time. She stared out the window above the sink at the blurred image of the other kids in her group, wet from water games around the pier, some of them heading back to the vans to return to Pacific Palisades. Some of them singing, “The Real Slim Shady.” Trisha watched a pack of older girls outside. They huddled around in an uneven clump, examining Emma’s new braces. A week prior, Emma had told everyone the epic of how she ate too many jaw breakers and broke the wire one of the braces off. Her mouth started bleeding everywhere and her parents were so mad at her—they yelled and yelled. They had to call the orthodontist to get instructions as to how to stop it. Emma’s father had to get a big rusty wire cutter—the size of her head—from the garage, open her mouth, and cut off the pointing wire. Then she had to put a ball of wax right on the pointing end—and it did stop bleeding—and go

to the orthodontist the next day. Trisha examined the girls now, looking at the new braces in awe. Emma pulled out her lip and showed them the large scar on the side of her mouth. The girls then touched their own cheeks and lips, unknowingly as they continued to talk, one by one, each grabbed at the skin around their mouths, moving as if the others wouldn't see, ignored by everything else around them, except for Trisha, who was mesmerized.

The boy in the pony tail stood alone, not wearing one of the white shirts distributed to the campers. He stared in the blurry window at Trisha as she wiped her eyes to stop crying. She wanted to say something to him—something to thank him for the advice or about how they weren't that different or maybe to tell him to go away, but she never got a chance.

Trisha squeezed the bottom of her finger and watched as a small cloud of blood emerged into the soapy water. She desperately wanted the splinter out. She started to tap her foot against the floor at a rapid rhythm, hoping Corporal wouldn't return. The splinter finally came out of her finger and sat on top of the water on the sink. It was dark black and  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch long.

When Corporal returned, she showed him the long splinter in the clogged sink. She was afraid to touch it, thinking that it might slip back under her skin.

"You must feel relieved." He said with a deep sigh and hit a knob on the sink, draining it.

"Yes." She watched the splinter flush down the drain.

He gave her a hug and told her, "Get your butt outside and into the van because the group is leaving."

**CHAPTER SIXTEEN:**  
**An Interruption in the Library**

READER:

Wow, what happened to reading uplifting stories?

LIBRARIAN:

What do you mean?

READER:

I mean, at first I thought it was stupid—some rich girl crying over getting a splinter. All this melodrama over no big deal—it was almost funny.

LIBRARIAN:

But then?

READER:

But then, it wasn't funny at all. The way she reflected over the absence of her father in contrast to her relationship with Corporal. Just the way she focused on Emma's relationship with her father—it was very intense. I got the sense that Trisha craved any sort of attention from her parents, even if it involved cutting her open.

LIBRARIAN:

Well, it wasn't just attention. I mean Trisha's reflection over Emma's story shows how a father helped his daughter through a painful experience.

READER:

It was just sad that Trisha's father wasn't there to do that. She received more love from a camp counselor than from her parents.

LIBRARIAN:

But the entirety of this scene wasn't pessimistic. I mean, Trisha got the splinter out, she didn't have to go to the hospital and Corporal even gave her a hug.

READER:

But I think she was finding something out—I mean her perspective of the world was shifting.

LIBRARIAN:

How? She was still little upper class girl with parents who could afford to send her to a nice summer camp.

READER:

But that's exactly it—she was finding out that her family and her class weren't her home. That was why she was staring at the boy with the ponytail outside of the shack—why she wanted to say something to him “about how they weren't that different... but she never



got a chance.” She felt a connection to him and the saddest part is that she made that discovery and instead of being able to express it she’s trapped behind the glass parameters of this shack. The shack could be a metaphor for her social or economic class—it’s imprisoning her.

LIBRARIAN:

How can you say that Trisha completely connects to this boy? She doesn’t even know his name and she also wanted “to tell him to go away.” She sounds confused and I think you are sympathetic to her because she has the most in common with your last book.

READER:

How’s that?

LIBRARIAN:

*The Book of Joy Elizabeth Townsend* is set around the same time period, near the same area. Joy obviously lived in a wealthy area and could afford to go to expensive restaurants.

READER:

Her boyfriend could.

LIBRARIAN:

But she was living with her boyfriend. She could go out to do things with him.

READER:

Look, I don't want to talk about *The Book of Joy Elizabeth Townsend*. I was just trying to explain that what I find upsetting in *The Book of the Waitress* is Trisha's overwhelming sense of loneliness. It's brutal. What an ugly realization for such a little girl to have.

LIBRARIAN:

She is young.

READER:

Does she live to be much older? Could she live much longer without someone like Corporal watching after her?

LIBRARIAN:

I'm not sure. Let me keep reading.

**CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:****Excerpts from *The Book of the Waitress***

Trisha stared at the white, heart-shaped pill, resting on the marble dinning room table in front of her. It was identical to all of the other pills being passed around the table by her friend Lucy, but for Trisha it seemed to have more weight. Thinking about what her parents might say; if they could have known what was happening, her limbs went numb. She was oblivious to everything else in the room, only the pill existed in front of her.

“Here, take these,” Lucy announced to the room, attracting Trisha’s attention. “My father is trying to get them sold on the market.” Without hesitation, Trisha watched as most of the girls gulped them down like lifesavers or vitamins. They all attended the same private high school, only a few miles away, under the watchful eye of paid security guards. She watched Lucy waltz around her parents’ dinning room, distributing diet pills like presents on Hanukkah.

Sitting beside her, Becky placed her pill next to Trisha’s.

“Look,” Becky said, “they’re kissing.”

They laughed: Pills kissing. Without another word, Becky and Trisha hid the pills in their Seven Jeans pockets. They were the only ones who didn’t take the pills.

“What are you doing?” Lucy asked Becky.

“We’re going to take them later,” she replied, smiling at Trisha. Trisha knew from her tone of voice that they would actually throw them away.

“Oh, that reminds me!” Lucy called out. “Everybody, you are supposed to take the pill *before* you eat. Not after!”

“But I just took it,” Rachel said from across the table.

Inching along in her tight Juicy Couture sweat pants, Lucy walked into the living room and turned on her Wii.

“What happens if you take it after?” Rachel looked at Becky and Trisha.

“Nothing,” Trisha said, trying to make her feel better, “I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

“Don’t be such a prude, Rachel.” Lucy sat down next to Trisha. “I heard you had an eventful weekend.”

“What?” Trisha looked up.

“Oh, come on,” Becky said. “Tell them about the guy at the Tower Records!”

“You mean the one at the Galleria?” Rachel perked up.

“Oh,” Trisha ducked down, “it’s not as exciting as the time I saw a woman steal something at an Abercrombie & Fitch.”

“What?” Lucy got sidetracked.

“I never told you?” Trisha smiled; she was avoiding their initial question. “This woman went running out of the store and all of the alarms went off. A male cashier ran after her for a few steps but then called out, ‘Oh shit.’ He just stopped and watched her go. She got away with two *big bags* of stolen goods.” She outlined the size of the bags using her freshly manicured fingertips. “Later in the food court, I saw the cashier and the woman eating lunch together—the clerk and the thief.”

“Oh, come on, Trisha-Joon!” Becky seemed to egg her on. “Tell us about the guy you were stalking!”

“I wasn’t stalking him.”

“Well you had a major crush on him.” Becky touched her shoulder. “Why else would you drive to the Valley from Beverly Hills just to talk to him?”

Rachel perked up, “Is he Jewish?”

Trisha shook her head down slightly. “I don’t think so.”

Rachel gasped. “Do your parents know?” Her eyes went wide and she put her hands on her chin.

“What was his name?” Becky asked.

Trisha blushed. “I think it was Purcell, something like that.”

“Like the composer?” Rachel asked, putting her hands down.

“Yeah... you know, Becky,” Trisha smiled, “I still have that paper application left over. If you want it...”

“Ew, no!” Becky pushed her wooden chair away from the table making a loud scraping noise. “He’s all yours.”

“Oh, gosh,” Rachel said, “can you imagine what would have happened if your parents found out?”

“They wouldn’t even let you come over until they knew that there would only be girls here, right?” Lucy muttered as she walked into the kitchen.

Ignoring her, Trisha mouthed to Rachel, “It was worth it.”

Trisha watched as Lucy’s housekeeper emerged from the kitchen. She was a plump woman in her late 40s wearing a t-shirt and faded blue slippers. As she started clearing dishes from the table, Becky got up from her chair with her Gucci purse and

moved into the living room. She took out a portable mirror and started applying thick the thick Sephora lip gloss she bought with Trisha that morning.

“I can’t believe you did it!” Leaning her elbows on the table, Rachel rested her chin on her hand.

“He wasn’t that good looking when I saw him, Trisha,” Becky said. “He sort of reminded me of that guy my dad likes...Leonard Nimoy.”

“Besides,” Lucy stuck out her head from the kitchen, “he probably just thinks you’re a horny J.A.P... I can’t believe you chased after him...”

Becky added. “You can do so much better than that.”

“Yeah,” Trisha murmured, “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

**CHAPTER EIGHTEEN:**  
**An Interruption in the Library**

READER:

Do you see how people tie status and sexual practice so closely together? She can't even talk to a guy in a store—who I'm assuming is Marcel—without her friends' objections.

LIBRARIAN:

I'm not sure that their objections were based on social status or class—they seemed to be mostly based on appearance.

READER:

Don't you think appearance is linked to economic class? Becky is there putting on her expensive lip gloss and carrying around her couture bag. They are all sitting around in name brand jeans. Besides, only one other person has even seen this man and that's all it takes for the network of "friends" to form an opinion about him.

LIBRARIAN:

He's a total stranger! Reader, he used to be a drug addict. Maybe the other girls are just picking up on the fact that Trisha knows absolutely nothing about this man.

READER:

But they won't even give him a chance before they meet him!

LIBRARIAN:

Why are you taking Trisha's side so quickly?

READER:

I never said I was taking her side.

LIBRARIAN:

Your last book ended in a Brentwood apartment, right?

READER:

Look, I told you that I didn't want to talk about *The Book of Joy Elizabeth Townsend*, all right? Why are you bringing this up again, it's a non sequitur.

LIBRARIAN:

But isn't Brentwood a nice part of Los Angeles?

READER:

Tom lived there.

LIBRARIAN:

So, technically Joy lived there for a while.



READER:

They fucked there. She didn't live there.

LIBRARIAN:

I'm just saying that it's not a completely foreign destination. I mean, Brentwood isn't that far away from Beverly Hills, is it?

READER:

How would you know? You're just a stupid librarian trapped in a library!

LIBRARIAN:

And you're just a stupid reader trapped in a library... Why are you getting so defensive? What's wrong, reader?

READER:

This is just...

LIBRARIAN:

It's close to home, isn't it?

READER:

It's just difficult to hear. It doesn't exactly remind me of my last text, but... I think that I might empathize from the character.

LIBRARIAN:

But you're not experiencing this text. You are completely detached from it. These events aren't happening to you. We are just reading about Trisha from pieces of paper.

READER:

That doesn't mean that I can't empathize with a character. I mean, especially when Lucy revealed that Trisha's parents would not allow her "come over until they knew that there would only be girls" attending Lucy's party. Trisha's in high school and she's not allowed to be around boys after school? Not to mention that this restriction almost stopped Trisha from attending. It's so irrational.

LIBRARIAN:

What do you mean?

READER:

Look at these girls that she is hanging out with—especially Lucy. These girls are not good influences for Trisha. And her parents must be oblivious to this to allow her to attend this party. And yet they won't let Trisha be around guys?

LIBRARIAN:

Maybe the guys are worse.

READER:

Maybe, but a pack of middle school and high school girls can be far more dangerous to the female psyche. I mean, Lucy is distributing diet pills! It's just all about control.

LIBRARIAN:

How?

READER:

Trisha's parents are not only controlling where she goes out at night but also her future spouse. The fact that Rachel had to ask if Marcel was "Jewish" in order for Trisha's parents to approve should the constraints of Trisha's options for love. Her parents probably planned everything from her future education to her occupation.

LIBRARIAN:

Do you really think these girls have no agency?

READER:

Oh, they have agency all right. They express all of their frustration over the lack of control in their lives by trying to control their own body size. When they can't assert control over anything else, they stick their claws into their own digestive tracts.

LIBRARIAN:

Now aren't you making a value judgment? Trying to rationalize a situation?

READER:

Look there are some things that you said about the end of my last book that I felt at the time—the loss of control and numbness, especially... But I'm not sure that you can capture everything.

LIBRARIAN:

You are right, reader. My perspective is subjective.

READER:

That's not it, Kirk. You're allowed to have your own point of view. There's nothing wrong with having a unique way of looking at a text. Everyone's perspective is subjective.

LIBRARIAN:

But I admit that in this situation, my point of view is also limited. I hadn't read all of *The Book of Joy Elizabeth Townsend* the way that you did.

READER:

I'm glad then that we get to look at these texts together. We're on a more even playing field.

LIBRARIAN:

We still disagree—we still have our own ways of looking at things.

READER:

But I like that. It makes it more interesting than just agreeing all the time. Sitting over these texts and really examining them and arguing about what they are conveying—it gives us more time together during this break.

LIBRARIAN:

Or at least there is a greater quality to our time together.

READER:

Yes.

LIBRARIAN:

Well, let's keep going.

READER:

Okay.

**CHAPTER NINETEEN:****A Final Excerpt from *The Book of the Waitress***

Trisha coughed. Smoke from the mansion-littered Malibu hills traveled down to the shore of the Pacific Ocean and into The Dawn, the restaurant where she now worked as a waitress. Located in a gated cove of Malibu, away from the Pacific Coast Highway, the restaurant was surrounded less by the whizzing of passing cars than the by the crashing waves and sunset. During the fire season, The Dawn always felt the damage the most. The smoke threatened to interrupt the twenty reservations and the one-hundred and twenty-seven guest wedding party taking up the floor level that summer solstice, the busiest night of the year for the restaurant. When the sky darkened with ash, all the restaurant windows had to be shut.

“Where’s the waitress!” She heard Ed McDougal, the manager of The Dawn, bellow from the first floor seating podium. She knew that according to Ed, it was the waitress’s job to go around to each of the 24 windows located throughout the restaurant for the patrons’ sea viewing pleasure. His assignment forced Trisha to position herself awkwardly near each guest’s table, adjusting the dusty shutters near them. Little flecks of ash brushed onto the white tablecloths.

“I can’t imagine why anyone would want to have a wedding in all this dry heat!” Trisha overheard a plump elderly woman at table ten announced to the younger woman across the table from her. The older woman used her napkin to wipe the sweat beading down her neck onto a long golden chain and her fancy dress.

Trisha stared out the window at the guests who rushed inside the restaurant, seeking shelter from the smoke. The remaining few danced to a klezmer band on the beach outside as if they were mad with lust. She noticed that there were three men in the klezmer band: a clarinet player wearing a baggy hat with a small brim, a balding bassist, and a violinist in a vest with a ponytail. The bride danced in an off-white couture gown next to a man with a fiddle. She didn't seem to care that the sand she was kicking sprayed all around her expensive dress.

Although The Dawn was still crowded with the usual elite patrons, as Trisha closed the shutters, the restaurant became nearly silent—except for a few lingering coughs. She watched the light squeeze through the venetian blinds, highlighting the restaurant's pictures of the same shoreline, over 60 years prior. Each wall exhibited a classy black frame exhibiting a black and white photo of a bleak highway, bereft of mini-malls, cars, restaurants, and homes. Black and white pictures of plump fishermen with perplexing haircuts cluttered the wooden ceiling beams of the restaurant. The Dawn advertised Malibu's past, a time of desolation. A thing she imagined that Roy Durant, the 65-year-old chef, might have seen in his infancy. While waiting tables that summer, she would wonder about—more than the price of the movie star's blouse at table nine or whether the busboy still had a thing for her—what it really must have been like to walk those shorelines barefoot and sculpt a city out of all that sand.

“Waitress!” Ed called again.

Her anger simmered like the soup under control in the kitchen. Her name was Trisha, she thought, not Waitress. She didn't get a B.A. in advanced physics to be something for him to pick up and throw away like a dirty dish towel. Why couldn't he

call her, Trisha? That was what he should have called her! Rolling her eyes, she knew why she couldn't remind him of her name; why she couldn't yell back "Manager!" or anything else that would set him straight. He would have fired her and that would have meant that she would lose her apartment and have to go back to living under her parents' roof and control.

"Waitress!" His voice became more impatient and she ran down the stairs from the second floor to meet his cries. "You!" Ed hissed as her foot tapped the bottom stair. "Get in the kitchen and fill table seven's order immediately! They've been waiting for over half an hour for soup and salad. Don't forget about the tuna tartar on table eleven! Can't you do anything right? "

Trisha escaped to the steam of the kitchen; reminiscent of the sauna at her parents' mansion back on the West Side, except the kitchen smelled sweeter and hot water didn't drip from the ceiling.

"How're tricks, Trisha?" Roy winked at her. "Ed still constipated?" He snapped a dirty dish towel near the sous-chef—"I remember when he had your balls in a grind last week, Juan!"

"Don't get me started!" Juan responded. Something on the stove next to him erupted into flames.

"Well, it's hot as hell in here. Maybe the devil should come simmer in the kitchen." Roy smirked.

Smiling, she leaned in, "I need the soup and salad for table seven and a tuna tartar for table eleven."



“All business, huh? Hmmm...” He put his first finger to the air, turning his body away.

Trisha caught Hector, one of the busboys, staring at her as he wiped a wineglass from the corner of the room. She lowered her eyebrows and Hector quickly looked away. He had been eyeing her for a while. She knew what that look meant.

Roy returned and put the soup and salad on the counter. He then wiped the tuna-steak tartar plate and pushed it towards her. “Voila!”

“Perfect. Thank you, Roy, just what I needed. You’re the best.”

“Yeah and don’t you forget it, kid!” He drew his head in closer and spoke in a lower tone, “and don’t let the man get you down. You’ve got a lot more things going for you than he’ll ever have. And I think he knows it, too.”

“Thanks,” she whispered and exited the kitchen, feeling brave enough to finish the rest of her shift. She made it successfully past the whirling dancers, drunken wedding guests, and children embroidered with flowers to table seven.

But emerging from her blind spot was the groom—a short, thin man wearing a golden bracelet around his wrist. He emerged from the bathroom and walked to the dance floor, taking large optimistic steps—as if each step were a strong step into the future—and then a step tripping Trisha as she turned. He escaped untouched but she dropped a dish of tuna-steak tartar and asparagus in the main dining room.

Each customer paused as Ed’s voice echoed into the room, “That better not be the Waitress!” As if he knew that the only person responsible for any type of mistake had to be the only female on staff. Ed immersed into the dining room, “Damn it! You are so

close to being fired! Almost hitting the groom! What were you thinking? Clean up this catastrophe!” He immediately walked away, hoping to catch the groom to apologize.

She imagined that he would approach the groom from his right side and say, “She’s new” or “she’s slow” or something of that sort to embarrass her further.

Hector wasn’t there to help clean up, meaning that she would have to fix this mess, alone. Trisha ran into the cleaning supply closet in the back of the restaurant near the kitchen. She turned on the light and put her hand on her hip, looking around. Leaving the door open, she bent down, grabbing the broom and shovel.

After a few seconds, she heard the door shut behind her. As she lifted her head, Hector was right next to her, touching her hips.

She turned, “I dropped a plate and you weren’t there and I had to…”

Hector’s eyes were wide open, receiving each small particle of light that reflected off of her body. He put his mouth near Trisha’s, as if waiting for her to make the first move. She didn’t. He moved in closer and she tilted her head to the side. Hector kissed her neck and pushed her up against the wall. She kissed him back. For a while, she just watched this happening, removed from the scene. She hid behind her waitress uniform—a veil that separated her body from her realization of the scene. She wasn’t herself, she thought. She wasn’t who she was supposed to be. She was far away from where she knew she wanted to be at that moment, behind the glass, outdoors in the sunset dancing on that beach next to the man with the ponytail and the fiddle.

Instead, she was in a crowded supply closet, dressed like one of her parents’ maids. A black blouse, buttoned all the way up, and a black skirt. As Ed put it, “something classy,” she knew he wouldn’t have had it any other way. She tried to remind

herself that Hector had been staring at her all day, subtly putting his fingers near her hand as he reached behind or in front of each table. Today, she told herself, his hands and her body were constantly in the way of each other; or was she just imagining that? Was he staring at her at all? What was behind his glances?

“Waitress!” Ed called from the hallway nearby. “Roy! Go find her. And where’s the busboy?”

Hector paused. She could see through the crack in the closet door that Roy stomped out of the kitchen with his grease-splattered apron. He hated to leave the kitchen—he wasn’t a “people person” according to Juan.

“Trisha!” Roy called out. He turned the corner away from the supplies closet, heading towards the dumpsters outside.

Trisha kissed Hector again and he quickly rolled up her black-skirted waitress uniform. He unzipped his pants and unbuttoned the bottom of her blouse. She felt him touch her, but she still wasn’t consciously within her body. Her mind was removed, watching her body from afar. She never thought she’d lose her virginity in a cleaning supplies closet. Not while Ed banged on almost every door searching for Roy’s busboy and for that god-damned-waitress-who-couldn’t-do-anything-right. She didn’t want this, but she didn’t move. She went into a familiar place of passivity—one that she had been comfortable in for most of her life prior—except that this was the most intimate of physical actions, happening to her, at that present moment. And she wasn’t there—every part of her but her physical body was far away, completely withdrawn from the situation.

Thirty minutes later the customers were audibly complaining. After he finished, Hector shuffled out of the closet as soon as he could. She imagined how she would account for absence—a long break? Could she claim she was ill?

“Where the hell is that waitress?” Ed continued to call out.

Trisha used some paper towels and disinfectant to clean the closet. She paused. Why did she clean the supply closet first?

As she continued to fix herself up, she felt the thin fabric of her shirt. She was wearing a blouse her parents had bought her for job interviews her freshman year of college. She was standing alone in a cleaning supplies closet in a Malibu restaurant.

Following Hector’s example, she left the place, too.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY:**

### **Back in the Library**

LIBRARIAN:

What are you thinking about, reader?

READER:

I think that in the first scene we read, Trisha felt like her economic class was not her home. In the second scene she learned that sexual practice is linked to class. And in this past scene, I think that she was trying to rebel against her original social class—by getting a job as a waitress so that didn't have to live with her parents and by having sex with a busboy. But I don't think she was successful.

LIBRARIAN:

What do you mean?

READER:

I don't think her rebellion was successful. I mean, she obviously didn't enjoy sex with Hector—she was distancing herself the entire time, she had little to no agency.

LIBRARIAN:

It's true that she only mentions that she kissed him twice.

READER:

I just thought that she would try to escape from her past experiences and create a new identity for herself, but instead of creating her own lifestyle, she's just sort of upholding another patriarchy under Ed's control.

LIBRARIAN:

What do you mean?

READER:

Trisha is the child of upper class yuppies and she was raised on a mixture of consumerism and liberal ideologies so she's just sort of applying those beliefs to her current situations. She's money driven in her occupation and wants to experiment with having relationships with people from different backgrounds—but she doesn't actually allow herself to have those relationships, it's all sort of superficial.

LIBRARIAN:

I think I know why this book is called *The Book of the Waitress* rather than *The Book of Trisha*.

READER:

Why? Because Trisha had the opportunity to make a name for herself and instead she let other people label her?

LIBRARIAN:

Yes, in part. Do you think that Trisha sees this? Do you think she names herself or recognizes her name as “Waitress”?

READER:

No. I don’t think so. She responds to the name, subconsciously. She wants to fight against it, but she doesn’t seem to. And I could only see this because I was separated from this situation.

LIBRARIAN:

You weren’t living her life.

READER:

That’s right. I was just reading it.

LIBRARIAN:

So you had a unique perspective of the scene because you were distanced.

READER:

Yeah. Sitting in a library, completely removed from the scene—there’s no question that I had a different perspective of the events than the characters living through it. I could see the bigger picture. I felt like I was able to perceive the fact that every character has a unique value system and that those value systems don’t mesh with each other.

LIBRARIAN:

When I was reading this scene, I definitely felt like Ed and Trisha had completely contrasting priorities. Ed definitely seemed to only care about pleasing customers and getting things done. He had no respect for Trisha and he had no right to treat her that way.

READER:

I do think that Ed and Trisha had contrasting goals, but I interpreted this scene differently. For one, I thought that at the beginning, Trisha was being lazy. She could barely get her job done. She just seemed to slack off and care more about the musicians outside than being responsible. She did seem like an awful waitress and I don't think that Ed wasn't justified for yelling at her.

LIBRARIAN:

What did you think about Hector's desires?

READER:

I'm not sure. He obviously came from a different background from Trisha—he has more responsibilities, especially. I definitely think that he was extremely attracted to her and maybe even loved her...

LIBRARIAN:



Loved her! Bull shit! He barely even cared about whether or not she was enjoying what he was doing to her!

READER:

He was obviously incredibly shy and not used to some social cues—otherwise, maybe he would have asked her out or talked to her beforehand. He wasn't "normal" to begin with, but that doesn't mean he didn't have feelings for her.

LIBRARIAN:

I think he just wanted to have sex. This was bordering on rape.

READER:

But we can't be sure that this was rape! She kissed him and she didn't move—cry, scream, tell him to stop—she didn't do anything. Maybe he just wanted to have some intimate human contact. Maybe they will end up being in a relationship together!

LIBRARIAN:

I highly doubt that.

READER:

Well, I guess we're allowed to have our different interpretations.

LIBRARIAN:

I should hope so—just as we should be allowed to have different lives and values and eyes to see them with.

READER:

But if everyone has different perspectives and beliefs—what is the point of having value systems—I mean morals or meanings that apply to all people? Everyone has a subjective value system, why do we even try to create objective values, meanings, or truths?

LIBRARIAN:

I don't know.

READER:

Surely certain rules or laws aren't going to apply to certain people, or those people won't adhere to them. Maybe we should reject value systems...

LIBRARIAN:

But by saying, "we should reject value systems" isn't that a value in itself? I mean, isn't that a standard system that you are arguing a collective should conform to?

READER:

Ugh, you're giving me a headache. I don't know, Kirk. I don't know if I've lost meaning or if I'm searching for it. I don't know if my morals are objective morals or if they are

just my personal beliefs—I don't know if there is a truth. If there is, I certainly haven't found it.

LIBRARIAN:

There may not be a truth, but maybe searching for the truth is better than finding it.

READER:

I think you're right in that, what's important is the journey, not necessarily the end conclusion. Thank you for taking a break with me, Kirk. These books were interesting and they definitely passed the time well. I only wish that Trisha, Roy, and Marcel could have seen themselves as characters in a book.

LIBRARIAN:

Why?

READER:

I think it would have helped them. I think they would have been able to better endure life without retreating into a state of inaction or routines that allowed them to avoid any experiences, even pleasurable experiences, because they were afraid of pain. I wish they could have seen the bigger picture and the roles they were playing. How even as all of the events around them shaped and changed who they were, there was still a part of them that remained fixed on unchanging.

LIBRARIAN:

What about you? Who are you underneath all of the changes?

READER:

I'm a reader. Through all of my different experiences, moments and events that made me beautiful and exquisite or deformed me into something ugly and putrid—that was still the part of me that remained unbroken.

LIBRARIAN:

So no matter what text you enter, you will always be a reader?

READER:

Yeah. And while that may not give me the greatest sense of pleasure or happiness all of the time, it makes me feel like I can keep living in the present without having to be numb to life. I feel sensitized to everything around me and I want to open my eyes to perceive nuances instead of closing myself to life's unknowns.

LIBRARIAN:

I have your next book here, reader. I cannot read this one aloud to you.

READER:

What is it called?

LIBRARIAN:

*The Book of Joy Elizabeth Townsend.* It is the only book on your required reading list.

READER:

I don't understand. You mean I have to read my life over and over again?

LIBRARIAN:

Exactly, moment for moment.

READER:

Thank you.

LIBRARIAN:

Why are you thanking me?

READER:

Because even though I know that some of the moments in my life are dreadful and painful—and I can't control them all—I want to live my life and you are the one who is letting me.

LIBRARIAN:

This is your opportunity to read your life, to see yourself as a character in a text.

READER:

Kirk...

LIBRARIAN:

Yes, reader? Why the hesitation?

READER:

What about *this* book? Do you think that by taking a break, we've created a book ourselves?

LIBRARIAN:

If we have, thank you for creating this book with me.

READER:

You're welcome.

LIBRARIAN:

Will you do me a favor?

READER:

What?

LIBRARIAN:

I'm not allowed to read with you, but I'd like to imagine your next book, just a piece of it. Will you read a sentence or two of the beginning of your book aloud to me?

**CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE:****An Excerpt from the Beginning of *The Book of Joy* Elizabeth Townsend**

This is one of my earliest memories:

I am a small kindergartener sitting behind a beige desk at St. Martin Catholic Elementary School. The classroom is empty except for my teacher, Sister Marina, and me. All the other students are outside playing with the tricycles and running down the hill. I am watching them from the open doorway on my right. I desperately want to finish my assignment so that I can join them. My assignment is to copy the alphabet into a booklet. It is the stupidest task I have ever been assigned. I must write each letter in capital and lower case five times on a single line and then move on to the next letter. There are 26 letters. My teacher cares about how neat we are, so I have to slowly write each letter, a space apart. After I have completed that, I have to copy a sentence printing on a handout into my booklet. I imagine rocks and mud traveling into the holes of my worn sneakers. I want to feel my heavy backpack pull my shoulders behind me as I run with my fellow classmates. Eyes closed, mouth smiling, feeling the wind push against my body, supporting me from falling...

A few girls have brought their Barbie dolls with them today. I hear them talking about how their mothers gave them each a different variety based either on the girl's or the mother's individual preference. Some wear bikinis, others ballroom gowns. Most of the girls strip the dolls of their clothes. Some of them swap outfits. I am mesmerized by how these girls bend and shape these dolls. One girl pushes her legs perpendicular to her back, turning her Barbie into a fish or a boat for the other dolls to swim on. The other



girls imitate this. They twist her arms backwards, they pull out her hair—she doesn't look so glamorous anymore, she doesn't look like the picture on her outside packaging, but Barbie moves with the changes and she's still Barbie.

“Are you having trouble concentrating, Joy?” Sister Marina stands behind me. I remember that I am still trapped in this classroom, alone with her.

Rosemary's shouting voice travels into the room from outside, “Come on, Joy! Aren't you done yet?”

Sister Marina walks towards the open door. “No, you have to leave her alone so that she can finish.” She walks back, looming over my desk. “Do you want me to shut the door?”

“No,” I say. I try to scribble in the thin manila booklet quicker so that I can play as well, but that makes my letters even sloppier and Sister Marina leans closer. She tells me, “You need to start over again with this letter.” She sighs and distances herself slightly. “Joy, if you can't finish this assignment then me might need to talk about whether you can move onto the first grade.” I gulp.

I started the booklet with my left hand, but my teacher told me that I had to switch to my right because that was clearer. She told me I might be “ambidextrous”—the first time I have heard this word—but she is not sure. My handwriting has to be clear so I can't press down on the pencil too hard or too softly. There is not enough room in the booklet for my large handwriting. She gave me a small red eraser to correct my mistakes, but I have used up most of it.

“I don't know how to reach you, Joy.” She says. I turn around and see that she is watching the children play outside.

“I am right here,” I say, but it makes no difference.

“That’s not what I meant,” she smiles and starts to clean the chalk board. “Do you remember when I came over to your house and talked to your parents about how I wanted to learn how to teach you better, because I was having trouble?” She looks at me and notices that I started using my left hand to write, again. She walks over and corrects me. “We all have trouble learning sometimes,” she says and returns to the chalk board.

The classroom is silent except for the high-pitched, joyful screams which come into the room from the playground. I have never been so frustrated in my life before this moment.

“Don’t rush, Joy.” my teacher says.

I cannot escape so I concentrate on copying the letters. Suddenly, I am far away from the classroom, far away from my teacher. I am just sitting, alone, with the booklet and my pencil. Everything slows down. I am digging into the pages, curving each letter around the surrounding lines.

I finish the alphabet and I stare at the sentence on the paper handout. Sister Marina told us we didn’t have to read the sentence, just copy it down—but I want to know what it says. I try to recognize the letter that I have just copied, within this sentence. The first letter is T, it is next to A. I sound out “ta” in my head.

Sister Marina walks outside to the playground and calls out, “You have five more minutes, kids!” Some of my classmates groan. “Then you have to come back inside for math!”

She reenters the room and looks at my notebook. “If you finish up, then you can join them.”

“Only five minutes?” I say. “But everyone else got more time to play.”

“Yes, Joy. But if you finished earlier, then you could have had more time to play outside.”

I look down at the sentence. The letters materialize as sounds in my mind. “Ta,” “boo,” “an,” “re.” I connect the other letters and I realize that I don’t want to hand my notebook back to her. I just want to stay there, sitting at that desk, and write. I don’t want to do anything else. I care more about the feeling of the pages on my finger tips than handing the booklet to her, then getting to the next step. I imagine that if I do, I won’t remember anything once I enter the blinding sunlight of the playground. I won’t even know what the tricycle felt like in the palm of my hand before Sister Marina would call out, “recess is over.” I imagine that the tricycles would be too small anyway, and that my long legs would be forced to dangle on the sides. I would never quite fit into that generic sized playground equipment.

Copying the handout, I write down the first sentence I will ever read perfectly without another person helping me. The sentence reads: “Take up the book and read.”

**CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO:**  
**An Interruption in the Library**

LIBRARIAN:

Reader.

READER:

Kirk? Why are you interrupting my reading?

LIBRARIAN:

I have to tell you something.

READER:

What?

LIBRARIAN:

You didn't die yet.

READER:

What does this mean?

LIBRARIAN:

Flip to the page where you left off when you first entered the library. Start reading from the next page. You must continue reading.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE:****The Reader Reads Again**

Warm air fills my lungs. It tastes like a mixture of ammonia and ethanol and smells like an air conditioner recycled the exhaust from a car, motionless on the 405. I feel something plastic on my face and the lenses of my eyes seem as opaque as Japanese screen doors, presenting me with a haze of blurred images and shadows.

“She’s awake! Doctor!” A male voice calls out. “Can you hear me, Miss?”

“Where am I?” I say, but my voice sounds muffled and faint.

“You’re in the UCLA Medical Hospital Emergency Room.”

My eyesight clears and I can see the plump, pale man in scrubs standing over my body. I am lying on a white bed in a small room with a window. “I’m in the hospital?” I ask. “How long have I been here?”

“About two days,” he answers.

“Where’s Tom?” I ask, scared that he might be in the room, unseen.

“Oh, don’t you worry about that bastard. The condition that you came here in—we know an abuser when we see one; he won’t be bothering you anymore.”

“No. Listen to me. It’s not that simple—what happened is more complicated than that...”

A Black woman enters the room in a white coat. Her graying hair is braided in back and she wears small golden earrings. He turns to her and I notice that that man has a large mole on the back of his neck. “Doctor,” he says, “she’s conscious.”

The doctor sits down on the bed and stares at a machine that shows a series of numbers and different colored lines bouncing up and down. She looks into my eyes. “My name is Dr. Bronson; can you tell me your name?”

“Joy Elizabeth Townsend.”

“Joy, can you feel this?” She pinches my arms, legs, stomach and the left side of my face.

“Yes,” I say.

She gently touches the right side, but it hurts and I jut my head back. “Okay.” She turns to the man and makes her voice lower, “did you check the stitching on her cheek and jaw line?”

“Yes, Doctor. Everything has been holding together nicely and there is no infection. But I think there is going to be permanent scarring.”

I attempt to move my hand to touch my face but Dr. Bronson turns back towards me. She moves my hand down, stopping me. “Joy, do you remember what happened? Could you tell us?”

I stare at them and then I look around the room. I’m not sure that I’ll be able to capture all of it—I’m not sure they’ll understand. I see that there is a plastic cup filled with water, a pen, and a yellow pad of paper on the end table next to me. I reach my hand towards it. “Would you mind if I wrote it down? I’d like you to read it.”