

OPEN HEART

*A poignant and gripping historical novel
about the enduring power of love*

GREGORY D. WILLIAMS

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Praise for Gregory D. Williams

“In matters of the heart, a single lapse of judgment can prove fatal. In this wise and tender novel, a young man finds out if he can live up to his father’s reputation and his own expectations of himself. Greg Williams is a terrific writer!”

— RON CARLSON, author of the *At the Jim Bridger* and *Return to Oakpine*

“In the tradition of great physician writers like Chekhov, William Carlos Williams, and Walker Percy, Dr. Greg Williams proves himself to be a master chronologist of both emotional and physical matters of the heart. With a diagnostician’s keen eye for telling details, he brings the novel’s scenes into vivid life. He shows his beautifully drawn characters the same empathy, I am sure he once showed his patients. Sharply honed as a scalpel, *Open Heart* is mesmerizing and profound, a superb novel that is guaranteed to bring pleasure and a deeper understanding of the human condition to those who read it.”

— DALY WALKER, author of *Surgeon Stories*

“An actual heart beats in this novel from the first line to the last. Make no mistake about it, with care and grace, and an urgency you’ll feel on every page, Greg Williams has written a beautiful and evocative novel about a young man’s singular and authentic quest to make meaning of life.”

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When We Were Twelve

Guilt, Grief, and Other Things We Don't Talk About

For Linda, the love in my life, my inspiration

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The silence is broken: into the nature
My soul sails out,
Carrying the song of life on his brow,
To meet the flowers and birds.

When my heart returns in the solitude,
She is very sad,
Looking back on the dead passions
Lying on Love's ruin.

I am like a leaf
Hanging over hope and despair,
Which trembles and joins
The world's imagination and ghost.

— YONE NOGUCHI

Chapter One

HELP



August 1965, Huntington Beach, California

YEARS BEFORE GENE would hold a girl's heart in the palm of his hand, at a time when love was still a singular thing, he lay awake, unable to push thoughts of the accident from his mind.

Eyes closed, he was picturing his father running full speed away from their station wagon, and then Gene heard a muffled cry. He whipped his head toward his older sister, curled up in the other bed. Amber light, slicing through a break in the motel room's curtains, cut across her back. "Suzanne?" he whispered. She didn't respond. Unlike him, she was finally asleep, her rhythmic breathing riding the distant, breaking waves. She had been crying earlier tonight. Gene could tell by the sniffing and the way her shoulders shook after she turned away.

Slipping from his bed, he tiptoed to the door separating their room from his parents' room and pressed his ear against the panel. His mother was crying. Not his father. Gene had never seen him cry. There was talking. He couldn't make it out. When he shifted to the other ear, his knee knocked against the door. He held his breath. Uh-oh. Footsteps. Gene jumped back into bed,

pulled the covers up, and turned his head. The door creaked open. "Gene," his father whispered. "Gene, you okay?"

Gene played dead. But not really dead. He made sure his chest moved so his father knew he was okay. After the door clicked closed, he waited several minutes before he faced the brown stain on the popcorn ceiling. It looked like blood. He shut his eyes. Then shut them a little tighter.

Earlier, his father had said, *We're on vacation. Let's try to forget the whole thing.* But Gene couldn't. Eyes closed or eyes open, he couldn't stop reliving the day.

It had begun that afternoon. Gene rested in the far back of his parents' Chevy II station wagon as the vehicle sped west across the Arizona desert toward the beaches of southern California. The hum of tires on hot asphalt bled through the vehicle's frame, through the four-inch foam bed he'd helped his father fit precisely to the space, and through the green corduroy bedspread, which covered the foam. The vibration tickled his bones. Sometimes his bones ached at night. *Growing pains* his mother once assured him. He hoped so. He wanted to be bigger. He wanted to be older than eleven. Someday, he wanted to be just like his father.

For now, he'd like to be as old as his sixteen-year-old sister, although today their mother said she was acting like a sulking child. Suzanne flopped into the car at sunrise. During the breakfast stop in Wickenburg, she said she wasn't hungry. And now, despite having the whole bench seat to herself, she leaned her head against the window behind their father and pouted. She was missing a party at Saguaro Lake later tonight. All her friends would be there. But Gene knew this was about a boy. He'd seen Suzanne making out with Rodney in the backyard by the orange trees. At night, Gene sometimes exited his second-floor bedroom window to the slanted roof below. There, if the conditions were just right, he could pull in the San Francisco Giants play-by-play on the Heathkit short-wave radio he and his father had built.

This roof-top privilege came with stipulations, one of which he broke on occasion by venturing onto the roof after his parents were in bed. The hours after midnight felt like a place beyond his

horizon. He had yet to stay up all night, but the night he made it to one thirty was the night he discovered a clear line-of-sight to Suzanne and Rodney kissing in the backyard. He had no intention of squealing. He would like to be Rodney, but of course not with his sister.

Cool air from the air conditioner flowed between his parents, over Suzanne's seat-back, and settled onto his face and thin, bare arms. Gene drifted on the vibration and the A/C's drone.

"You kids have to pee?" his mother said. "Rest stop one mile."

"No," Gene said.

"Suzanne?"

"I guess not."

"You could get a Butterfinger from the machine."

Suzanne didn't answer.

Gene touched the ceiling with his fingertips. The sun, hidden from view, rained its heavy heat through the hood of the wagon. He sat up and squinted south across the barren, thirty-foot median. For as far as he could see, maybe a hundred miles to the gray, jagged mountains, an army of saguaros flexed their arms to the cloudless sky. His father called this *no man's land*. Which was why Gene's space in back was crowded with a thermos of water, a Craftsman toolkit, jumper cables, two gallons of antifreeze bungeed together, and a plastic crate loaded with motor oil, flares, belts and hoses, and of course his father's black doctor's bag. The bag held a stethoscope, bandages, a plastic box labeled *Suture Kit* in block script on a piece of surgical tape, and an instrument his father said he used in the operating room everyday called a laryngoscope.

He'd helped his father load the wagon the day before, placing a tick by each checklist item with a carpenter's pencil. Then his father closed the rear hatch and said, "I think we're covered." Gene liked the *we're* part of that. On a trip last summer, somewhere in the desert near Blythe, he'd helped pack icy-wet rags around the steaming carburetor. They were treating something called *vapor lock*. "It's the same as when air gets inside your heart," his father said. Gene had nodded as if he understood.

"Look at that," his mother said. "One hundred and three and it's not even noon." She tapped the dial on the gauge he and his father had installed. Gene rolled his eyes, lay back down, and lip-synced her next words: "This is my last summer in Arizona."

"You know," his father said. "I'm putting that on your gravestone."

"Carl, I'm serious."

A gust of wind buffeted the car and the thermos rolled into Gene.

"That was a big one," his mother said.

Gene set the thermos upright and braced it with the doctor bag. He opened the bag's mouth a smidgen and inhaled. Something about the hospital smell pleased him.

"I changed my mind," he said. "I have to pee."

"Too late," his mother said. "We just passed the exit."

"Who's that?" his sister said.

Her voice was different. Gene sat up and followed Suzanne's concerned gaze out the window. A woman in a yellow sundress raced back and forth along the median. She tugged at her raven-black hair as the wind whipped her dress. She appeared to be screaming.

"There's someone on the ground!" Gene's mother said. She turned the music off.

They zipped by so fast, Gene didn't see the person on the ground. But he kept his eyes on the woman as the station wagon slowed, jostled across the scrubby median, and picked up speed again. As they approached the scene, Gene noticed a white pickup truck parked off the shoulder on the right. The driver's door was open. He looked back for the woman. She was kneeling over the person on the ground. Suddenly she ran away with her hands on her head as if something had bitten her.

Gene's mother screamed. "Oh my God. Carl. It's a child!"

Suzanne shrieked.

They passed a Cadillac canted in the median. An elderly woman in the front seat held a towel or shirt or something on the driver's face. The station wagon skidded to a stop just past the

Cadillac. Gene caught himself against the back seat. His father bolted from the car. He ran across the hardscrabble earth toward the child, a bouncing tumbleweed crossing his path. Gene had never seen his father run like that — his arms pumping in his white t-shirt, the soles of his favorite traveling Hush Puppies kicking gravel and plumes of dirt high behind him. He ran about twice the distance as from home plate to second base, and with his back to Gene, knelt next to the child. A man in a black cowboy hat was already crouched there. Gene's father must have said something, because the man ran toward the rest stop across the highway.

Gene's father leaned down. Gene couldn't see his father's face or the child's, but he was sure he was breathing into the child's mouth. A couple years before, in their living room, he'd taught Gene and Suzanne how to do this. He had them practice on each other. Now, his father seemed to push on the child's body. It was hard to tell. He could only see the child's foot and pink sock.

"It's a girl," Gene said. "I think she had the wind knocked out of her." It had happened to him once. He thought the pushing might be another way to help her breathe.

After several seconds his father leaned over the girl again. The pattern repeated — breathing, pushing, breathing, pushing. Over and over and over. Gene grabbed the doctor bag and crawled across the seat back, nudging his sister aside. He pulled up on the door handle.

"No! Stay here." His mother's face was twisted.

"What if he needs this?"

"Stay."

Gene rolled down the window. The heat curled into the car like a wave. Other cars had stopped. People were shouting and running, while others stood around Gene's father, protecting their faces from gusts of sandy wind. Everyone looked confused. Several feet away, the woman in the yellow sundress was on her knees. She threw her head back and screamed again. Another woman ran to her.

Suzanne was crying. "Please, please, please."

His father continued: breathing, pushing, breathing, pushing. It went on and on as more cars stopped, but nobody helped his father. They stood or they knelt, but he was doing all the work. Was he getting tired? Maybe he needed some water. The cowboy-hat man ran back from across the highway. His hat flew from his head and tumbled across the desert. He was waving his arms and shouting. "They're coming," he said. He was so out of breath he could barely speak. The man bent over and vomited. Gene said, "Gross," and briefly closed his eyes. The girl still wasn't moving, but he was sure that at any moment she would sit up and take a deep breath just like he had done. Why wasn't anyone helping? Maybe he could do the breathing.

Finally, his father stopped. He rested back on his heels.

In a voice Gene had never heard from his mother, a voice balanced on a thin wire, she said, "Oh God, no. Please. No." She put her hand over her mouth. Her eyes were wet.

"He needs help," Gene said. He grabbed the doctor bag and thermos, vaulted over the seat, and opened the passenger-side door. His mother screamed his name. He ran as fast as he could with the heavy load jerking his arms. He was almost there, when his father turned and shouted. "Gene. Stop."

Gene obeyed, as much from the odd tone of the command as from the command itself. "Stay right there." His father said this calmly, stood, and trudged over to Gene. He knelt and took the thermos and bag from his hands. "Let's go back," his father said.

Gene looked past his father to the girl. Below her cutoffs, her bare legs resembled question marks. One foot had a white sneaker; the other, only a pink sock. Her tattered yellow shirt laid open, and her chest was flattened. Except for smudges of blood around her mouth, her face was the color of an eggshell. One eye was half-open.

His father grasped Gene's waist and gently turned him away. Gene looked at him for several hard seconds — at the smudge across one lens of his black-framed glasses (his father's flip-up shades were missing) and at the sweat blooming across his forehead and dripping off his nose, but mostly at the blood drying

within the morning stubble above his lip and on his chin. His father swiped his mouth and looked at the blood on his fingers. He poured water from the thermos and wiped his face, hands, and glasses. He took off his sweat-soaked t-shirt and used it to wipe his chest. "Here, take this." He rolled up the shirt. "Take this and the thermos back to the car. I've got to check on her mother."

Again, Gene looked past his father at the girl. Someone had covered her with a beach towel, but the wind tossed it aside. Gene's shoulders began to shake. His whole body shook and the tears that erupted seemed as far from his control as the shaking.

His father pressed Gene's cheek to his waist. "It's okay," his father said. "It's okay." The steady rub of his father's thumb against his head and the gentle, deep voice slowed Gene's breathing. Then, with a hand firmly on Gene's shoulder, his father walked him back toward the station wagon.

Gene wiped his eyes. He looked up and squinted against the harsh sun glinting off his father's head like a halo. "Dad," he said. "I feel —"

Then everything went dark.

Chapter Two

THE HEART ROOM



Summer 1974, Phoenix, Arizona

DAMN. He's going to be late. Gene glances up to his rear-view mirror and accelerates his yellow Jeep ten miles past Central Avenue's posted limit. He's practically the only car on this normally busy thoroughfare at...he checks his watch...5:07 a.m. The light at Camelback turns yellow...damn...he stops. Damn. Damn. Irene, Dr. Harrington's private scrub nurse told Gene on the phone last night, practically threatened him, not to be late. "It's not like baseball," she said. "With Dr. Harrington, one strike and you're out."

He's supposed to meet Irene by the scrub sink outside the open-heart room by five thirty. This job was a favor. Actually, it's a volunteer opportunity to shadow Dr. Benjamin Harrington until August, a man Gene's father called the *godfather of open-heart surgery in Arizona*. Normally the only outsiders allowed in the Heart Room were fifth-year surgical residents from Tucson. That Gene, a soon-to-be junior in college, had been granted this opportunity had everything to do with genetics.

On the Jeep's radio, KCAZ's disk-jockey introduces the next

tune — “Only Love Can Break Your Heart.” Gene shakes his head. The whole world must be conspiring to ruin this day. He turns up the volume and recites the lyrics in his head, something he couldn’t have done before Love-You-With-My-Whole-Heart Patty McLellan cut out his with a weed whacker last spring. But it isn’t just this song. Every song seems to tell his story of love, loss, and longing.

The light turns green, and Gene floors it. Up ahead the lights are timing out perfectly. He might be a couple minutes late...okay maybe more than a couple...but being Carl Hull’s son is sure to buy him a little time.

Then a red bulb between the speedometer and tachometer lights up. Gene slumps in the Jeep’s bucket seat. He might just be back to painting the trunks of orange trees this summer. “Damn.”

He slams the steering wheel with his open palm. The steam curling around the hood evaporates his imagined, glowing letter-of-rec from Dr. Harrington. So much for medical school.

Gene angles into the parking lot of Karsh’s Bakery and unlatches the hood. A dripping hose dangles next to the water pump. Why now? Why today? The bakery door is locked. He pounds on the glass, but nobody comes. A mile down, a Union 76 station lights the dawn. Gene’s hard-sole shoes clack along the sidewalk as he runs. A blond, curly-haired kid is opening up the small office. Not the owner, Jerry.

“Hey,” Gene says. His chest heaves. From behind the counter, the kid startles. “Sorry. You got a clamp for a water hose? ’65 Jeep.”

“Gimme a sec.”

The kid fiddles with a ring of keys, testing them one by one on the cash register.

“I’m kind of in a hurry,” Gene says.

The kid doesn’t speak. He shakes his head and saunters into the bay.

Gene taps his fingers on the counter. Come on. Come on.

The kid returns with five clamps. “One of these might work.”

“What do I owe you?”

"Come back with the others and we'll settle up."

Gene turns to run back but stops. "Can I use your phone?"

The operator connects him with Desert Valley's switchboard.

"Surgery, please," Gene says.

"You mean the OR desk?"

"Yes, I guess. I'm looking for Irene. She works with Dr. Harrington."

"Excuse me. Are you a physician?"

"No. I'm Gene Hull. I'm supposed to meet her there today and —"

"Dr. Hull's son?"

"Yes."

"Please hold."

The line is busy.

He calls back. The operator connects again. Still busy. Gene slams the receiver down. "Sorry."

"Hey, don't stress, man." The kid plops a two-gallon kitchen pail onto the counter. "Radiator water's by the last pump."

"I owe you." Gene runs back to his Jeep, water sloshing onto his cuff and shoe. He slithers under the Jeep. "Shit!" How could he forget? A screwdriver.

He rifles through the back of his Jeep and his glove box. Nothing. His father always had at least a small set of tools in the car. Not Gene. He left his in the garage. Think. Think. Run back to the gas station? He looks up. The distant light deflates him. Think. A dime. He checks the ash-tray. No dime. But maybe the penny. Working mostly by feel in the dim light, the third clamp he tries fits. Thank you. The penny fits as well. He tightens the screw as best he can, but the penny slips, and he fries the meat of his hand on the engine block. "Shit!"

He pours a little water onto his hand and the rest into the open mouth of the radiator. Without a funnel, some of it steams off the engine. It will have to do. He tosses the other four clamps on the seat and wipes his hands with an old rag stained with tree-white.

GENE SCREECHES into Desert Valley Hospital a nose behind the sun. He parks in the staff lot adjacent to the muscular cooling plant which, even at first light, rumbles and hisses, sending swirling columns of steam into the dry, tepid air. He angles into a space close to the coolers. Their shadow, as long and wide as a gymnasium, will delay the sun's inescapable intrusion upon the canopy-covered cockpit of his Jeep. Still, by late afternoon, the steering wheel will be hot as a skillet.

He races across the asphalt and slows as he reaches the back entrance. When he steps on the rubber mat, the electric doors swing out with a hiss. Still the same.

Gene is familiar with the hospital's six-story layout. So many Sunday evenings he waited in the lobby while his father made pre-op rounds. Never, in all those years or after, did Gene venture inside an operating room, much less the Heart Room.

He quick-steps down a gleaming, windowless tiled corridor which bends right, a space he remembers as being larger and louder, crowded with people in street clothes or white coats, a din of conversations bouncing off the walls. Now, at this hour, his shoes click and echo along the cream-colored linoleum. The service elevator is just around the corner near the kitchen. Clanging of dinnerware and muffled, good-natured banter permeates the hall, as well as the odd aroma of bacon and rubbing alcohol.

He presses the elevator's UP button in rapid succession until he hears the carriage mechanism's stark whine. Beginning with six, the red numerals above the door count down as the carriage makes its maddeningly slow descent.

Irene told him on the phone: "There's a chance this may not work out. A lot depends on you and, unfortunately, on Dr. Harrington's mood on any given day." She went on to explain that the previous spring the assistant administrator's son arranged to observe a case one day. They'd just opened the chest when the kid walked in. Without looking up, Dr. Harrington said, "Son,

perhaps your father has some menial office task you might perform that does not require punctuality. Have a nice day.”

The elevator dings, drawing Gene’s eyes to the lit numeral one. There is a pause, a silent moment when Gene’s heart almost stops. It just has to open. But the carriage whines and ascends... two, three, four...

“Damn!”

HE EXITS the stairs to the fourth floor, pulling air liked he’d just finished a set of first-to-third sprints. A corridor leads north and south to patients’ rooms. On the east side of this intersection, the rising sun beats against the reflective coating of a large picture window centered in the alcove’s waiting area. Across the corridor, double glass doors lead to the operating rooms. The lettering on the glass is still the same — *Operating Room Attire Only*. He walks around to the left of the electric doors to a small window and taps lightly to get the attention of a woman dressed in scrubs and shower-style cap. A bead of sweat trickles down his chest. She has her back to him and is chatting with someone else, a man similarly dressed, who seems upset about the workings of a long instrument the size of barbecue tongs. He tips his chin toward Gene, and the woman turns around in mid-yawn. She slides the window open and grins.

“So, what happened?”

Gene dressed as his father would have — slacks, short-sleeve dress shirt, and tie. But they’re a grimy mess now. “Radiator hose.”

“Eugene? Right?”

“Gene.”

“Irene’s been asking about you.”

“Did surgery start already?”

“Harrington cuts at seven.” She spins around and looks at the clock. It’s not quite six. “Irene’s been here since five thirty.”

Gene’s father usually left for work at about five forty-five. At

least that was the time on the bedside clock when he opened an eye to the touch of his father's hand on his forehead and aroma of his cologne.

"My God, you have your father's good looks. More hair, though. I'm Darlene."

She extends her hand, but Gene holds up his dirty mitts and shrugs. "Sorry."

"We were devastated. Everyone loved him."

"Thanks. Do I go through this door?"

"The place just isn't the same. How's your mother doing?"

"She's off to New Hampshire."

"It's got to be tough."

So, this is what he was in for, even though it's been nine months since the crash. Gene's moved on. "I'm kind of running late."

"Okay, okay. Scrubs are inside. Don't forget the booties." She stands and looks down through the window.

Gene looks at his dress shoes.

"They'll fit over those," she says. "There are masks in there, or grab one by the scrub sink. Pin the locker key to your pants, and don't lose it. Any questions?"

"Irene filled me in."

"And work on those hands...and your chin."

Gene starts to reach for his chin but stops.

"There's a smudge up there as well." She smiles.

A buzzing sound comes from the door. "Just push it open," she says.

The buzzing stops before he can open it. Darlene takes something from the man behind her and looks back at Gene. "Another thing. Use one of these." She passes the same style cap she's wearing. "You'll need this to tame that gorgeous, dark hair of yours." The door buzzes again. "Hey, there's coffee in the doctor's lounge."

Gene pushes the door open. "No thanks. I don't drink it."

She tips her Styrofoam cup to him and says, "You will."

CRAP. Look at all this. The scrub pants and shirts, the color of dried moss, come in sizes double extra-small to triple extra-large. After washing his face and hands, it takes Gene more time than he can spare to sort out his size, and in the end, he settles on medium tops and bottoms. He sits on a bench and fumbles with the paper booties. Then, instead of the nurse's bouffant cap, he tries on a regular doctor's cap, but Darlene was right: his hair's too long. From the boxes of masks, he chooses one like the masks he's used in the metal shop, pinches it at the bridge of his nose. He takes a step back from the mirror over the sink and sighs. He feels like a freshman wearing a varsity uniform for the first time. Like an impostor.

Gene hurries through the heavy door to the cool, empty doctors' lounge. Scattered across a long coffee table are plates of half-eaten sandwiches and cigarette-filled ashtrays. Sections of the previous day's newspaper cascade from vinyl-padded chairs onto the industrial carpeted floor. The carpet tugs at the bottom of his paper booties.

Irene said to meet outside the Heart Room. The doctors' lounge exits to a tiled corridor, a space as cool as the lounge. It's empty of people but crowded with equipment. In front of him stands a line of stainless-steel shelving packed with supplies mostly unfamiliar to Gene except for bags of intravenous solutions, boxes of syringes, and a stack of blankets next to more bouffant caps. As he walks toward the glassed-in OR office, he passes gurneys, stainless steel carts, IV poles, an oscilloscope similar to those in his electrical engineering lab, and another device on wheels that stands about chest high. He recognizes it by the green oxygen tank: the large glass cylinder filled with white granules (although a layer at the bottom is a purple color) and the black corrugated tubing. It looks like the anesthesia machine he's seen in an old photo of his father taken during his medical training.

"Gene." Darlene leans out of the open office door. "Irene's down there." Gene stands near the glass entry doors. The *OR*

Attire Only warning is now inside out. “The Heart Room is all the way down at the end.” She points past Gene to his left.

IRENE WASHES her hands at one of two deep porcelain sinks in an alcove. She works the nails of one hand with a soapy brush in fierce, rapid strokes, a nest of brownish-orange bubbles growing on the tips of her fingers. She’s short and sinewy, not what he expected from the sound of her voice on the phone. The cuffs of her pants are rolled up a turn or two. Above the sink hang shelves stocked with boxes of hats and masks. She wears the same style cap as Gene. A disposable mask, the kind with two sets of ties, the kind Gene isn’t wearing, hides her face except for her eyes. Maybe he chose the wrong mask. She looks over at him.

“You’re late.”

“My Jeep overheated.”

She gives him a hard look while continuing to scrub. “You’re late.”

If this had been baseball practice in high school, he’d be running laps now. She looks at him again, a long look that makes him uncomfortable. Here it comes. She’s sending him packing.

But her eyes soften. “You’re definitely Carl’s son.”

“Was he late, too?”

She shakes her head, and he knows she’s smiling.

“Not only do you have his eyes, you have his voice.”

She steps on a stainless-steel pedal. Water pours from the gooseneck faucet. She rinses each hand and then foot-pumps more liquid brown soap onto the brush and begins scrubbing her arms.

“I think you’re even taller than when I saw you at the service,” she says.

His mother told him that Irene had been Dr. Harrington’s private nurse as long as he’d been in practice. She must have come through the line at his father’s memorial service, but Gene doesn’t remember. So many doctors and nurses had offered double-

handed condolences that after a while they all blended into the same sorrowful face.

"Your dad was quite a guy. Like I said on the phone, we're not in the habit of taking on college students, but your dad was special."

Gene knows she means well, but he has the sickening feeling that in the belly of her compliment is a warning not to let her down...or his father.

"Be in the doctor's lounge dressed and ready to go by six-fifteen," she says.

"I thought you said five-thirty."

"That's just for today. I was going to teach you to scrub, but we'll hold off for now."

"Sorry."

"The girls and I start setting up at five forty-five." She looks at the clock. "Although more like six today. Depending on the case, there's about an hour of prep before Dr. Harrington cuts at seven. He can be late. You can't. This isn't college."

"Yes ma'am."

She explains that the team performs two surgeries a day except on Tuesdays and Fridays. On those afternoons, Dr. Harrington has his office hours. Gene can't shadow him then. Teaching would just slow him down. But, if Gene wants, he can follow Dr. Harrington on rounds in the afternoons when he sees his post-ops and the admits scheduled for surgery the next day.

"You might want to consider sneakers." She nods toward his bootie-covered dress shoes. "You'll be standing a lot."

That's some good news. His feet already ache.

"Have you met Dr. Boswell? He's our anesthesiologist."

"No."

"You'll be standing with him, just watching for the first week. If all goes well, Dr. Harrington will let you scrub in next week. You can do small things, like suction blood while he works."

She eyes him. "I hope you're not squeamish."

"Not at all." He fainted once while watching his father sew up

a gash on Suzanne's knee, and of course after he saw the dead girl. But that was ages ago.

"If you feel faint, sit.

"Got it?"

"Don't try to be brave."

"I'll be fine."

He had envisioned this job, if that's what it was, as just tagging along, retrieving forgotten charts or x-rays, hanging a few steps back from the profession's edge before diving into medical school. He hadn't planned on actually helping during surgery. That would look great on a med-school application.

"You've never been in the OR."

It isn't a question. "No."

She smiles. "You can lower your mask." He complies and wipes a layer of moisture from his upper lip. "You only need to wear it in there." She tilts her head toward the Heart Room door.

After a rinse and more scrubbing, she says, "You'll only scrub if you're going to be gowned and gloved at the OR table. And then you'll stand by Dr. Pereira. He's our First Assist. I'm sure he'll help you out. He's such a sweetheart. But then you know Rui," she says. "He was quite persuasive."

Years ago, Dr. Pereira and Gene's father trained at the same hospital in Galveston, Texas. He's from Portugal and still carries an accent. For years, when Gene thought of Dr. Pereira, he thought of his passion for the Cincinnati Reds and more recently his twelve-cylinder Jag. He loved to work on cars, always wearing surgical gloves to keep grease from getting under his nails.

Early last May, Gene called Dr. Pereira and asked if he could spend the summer shadowing him. Gene had taken a disastrous early stab at the MCATs, and according to Gene's counselor, his grades were more than a tick below the level of Cal Poly students previously accepted into medical school. She suggested he abandon the premed track and focus on engineering, a discipline where he excelled. Combining the two was challenging even for someone who hadn't missed time because of a death in the family.

No. Her recommendation was basically horse shit. He's wanted to be a doctor for as long as he can remember.

To improve his chance for medical school, he needed work experience and a glowing recommendation from someone who could attest to his character and aptitude for the career. Rui had listened to all of this over the phone and suggested Gene pin his summer and his hopes on Dr. Harrington instead. "He carries considerable weight with his surgical brethren down south at the University of Arizona. I shall speak to him. I am sure he will be receptive."

About a week later, on a Sunday afternoon, as Gene and his roommate Doug worked their way through a six-pack of Anchor Steam beer while burning Patty's letters and photos, Dr. Harrington called Gene. The conversation was short and to the point. He was in. Irene would handle the details. What stuck with Gene was the last thing Dr. Harrington said in his slow Virginian drawl: "It will be an *honah* and a privilege to have a *youngstah* of your caliber at my side." His caliber. Until recently, Gene had rarely questioned his caliber.

Irene rinses her hands and arms one last time and moves away from the sink, holding her hands at head level, arms away from her body. Then she nods to a white coat hanging opposite the sink. "That's for you. Wear it over your scrubs whenever you leave the surgery area."

Gene holds the coat at the shoulders. Red cursive stitching over the left breast reads *Desert Valley Heart Team*.

"We all have one," she says.

Then he notices C. Hull printed on the collar's tag in black ink. Gene recognizes the block script and swallows hard.

"Thanks," he says. He tries the coat on. It feels a size too large, the sleeves reaching to mid-palm.

"Maybe you'll grow into it." Irene walks across the hall and leans her back against the door to the Heart Room, her arms held high like the Pope in greeting. "Put it in your locker, and then come on in."

THE HEART ROOM is even colder than the hallway. Gooseflesh rises on Gene's arms.

"Sandra, Betty. This is Gene, Doctor Hull's son," Irene says. The masked women are opening packs of instruments onto Irene's two long, draped tables, but pause to shake his hand.

"I adored your father," Sandra says.

He recognizes her. "You spoke at the service, right?"

Sandra nods.

Gene sits on a rolling stool at the head of the empty surgical table, while Irene points out what Gene can't touch, which is most everything. Ceramic tile comes halfway up the walls. Gene asks, "Why's it so cold in here?"

"I don't want Dr. Harrington sweating into the patient's chest. Here. Put this on." She hands a surgical gown to Sandra who holds it open like a tailor waiting for Gene's arms.

A man walks in wearing a five o'clock shadow and a custom cap decorated with Valentine hearts. He introduces himself as Roger, the pump tech.

"I heard you'd be joining us. Your dad was the best."

He invites Gene to slide closer to the heart-lung machine and explains how the device works as he sets it up. Open heart surgery involves letting a machine do the work of the heart and lungs while the surgeons fix the problem. That's bypass — the heart and lungs are bypassed.

Roger guides clear tubing through the roller pump, fills the tubing with saline, and then taps at the tubing with a clamp to move any bubbles up toward a stopcock. "Air in your blood is like air in your car's fuel line," he says. "Not a good thing."

"Vapor lock," Gene says.

"Exactly."

Betty, the older (and considerably wider) of the two circulating nurses marks off a checklist as Irene runs her fingers and eyes over orderly rows of glittering instruments. Irene calls off, "Kellys. Two, four, six. Mayos. Two, four, six, and one on the floor makes

seven. Scissors. Straight. One, two. Curved. One, two....” It goes on and on. She counts what must be a hundred instruments as well as a stack of four-by-four gauze pads, laps (Dr. Pereira used these to wax his car), and every suture, every needle, everything that is on either of her tables or adjustable tray, right down to small, cotton bullets called peanuts, which are gripped by the tips of long clamps. “We’ll count at the end of surgery as well,” Irene says. “If the counts don’t match, we’ll search until they do. Don’t want a patient taking hospital property home.”

Sandra, probably the youngest in the room except for Gene, continues to move back and forth from the operating room to center hall — the area in the middle of the U-shaped surgery configuration. That’s where things are sterilized and stored until needed. Sandra moves about with confidence. She opens sterile packs of gowns and gloves in a prescribed way meant to insure there is no breach in sterility.

Soon, he realizes that his attention is focused on her eyes. As a matter of fact, all he can see of anyone’s face is their eyes. The caps and masks frame them. Sandra’s eyes aren’t like Patty’s. They aren’t blue, much less a blue you could swim in. Hers are olive with long mascaraed lashes. She’s taller than Patty, closer to Gene’s height. As she collects an armload of unopened supplies, a ribbon of her brown hair escapes her bonnet. Does her conditioner smell like Patty’s? When she backs up to the door leading to center hall, she catches Gene staring. Her eyes smile. He gestures to indicate the loose hair. He’s sure she mouths *Thank you*.

A moment later, the OR door opens, and a stocky man strides in. “I see y’all rounded up a new anesthesiologist?” he says.

Irene turns. “Gene, this is Doctor Boswell.”

He shakes Gene’s hand. “Call me Boz. Darlene said you were here. So, you’re trailing Dr. H around this summer?” He rolls a red Craftsman cart closer to the anesthesia machine, opens a drawer and lays out some syringes.

“It’s only for eight weeks until he goes on vacation,” Gene says. “Is that cart from Sears?”

“Yes.” Dr. Boswell pulls vials of medications from another

drawer and begins drawing the liquids into the syringes. "Irene," he says, turning. "Since when does Harrington go on vacation?"

"He tries every year, Doctor."

Dr. Boswell adjusts some dials on the anesthesia machine, holds a mask near his face and presses a button, causing a blast of air from the mask. "Ah, Halothane," he says. "Breakfast of champions." Gene catches a whiff of something pungent. Dr. Boswell then lays out a couple of instruments and an endotracheal tube on top of the cart, items familiar to Gene from his father's doctor bag. "I'll explain things once we get going," Dr. Boswell says, "but I suspect you know most of this from your dad."

He doesn't. Why exactly? He's not sure.

Sandra walks in from center hall carrying some kind of black paddles in her gloved hands. "Sandy, darling," Dr. Boswell says, "I'm going to need an epi drip for later."

"Okay." She hands the paddles to Irene, snaps off her gloves and scans the room. "I'm off for the patient."

Several minutes later, with the help of an orderly, Sandra wheels a half-asleep man into the room and transfers him to the table. The patient is already hooked up to an IV. Sandra attaches the electrocardiogram pads. The oscilloscope's green line comes to life — *beep, beep, beep*.

Dr. Boz straps a black rubber mask to the man's face, injects medication into the IV, and says, "Say goodnight, Irene." After another syringe of medication, Dr. Boz grips the mask and squeezes the black breathing bag. With each squeeze, the man's chest rises.

As soon as the man is out, Dr. Boz inserts the breathing tube — the endotracheal tube — through the man's mouth into his windpipe and tapes it in place. He also tapes the man's eyes closed and wraps the man's head with the towel.

Dr. Boz inserts a cannula into an artery at the man's wrist, something Gene's father must have done thousands of times. A second wave now bounces in synchrony under the EKG. Finally, Dr. Boz inserts an IV in the man's neck vein using a kit Gene had

not seen Betty prepare. It just appeared. The teamwork is impressive.

“Okay, Sandy,” he says. “Work your magic.”

In seconds, Sandra strips the patient of his blanket and hospital gown, revealing a man as large and unshapely as Camelback Mountain. His naked body doesn’t draw a glance. Using her gloved hands, Sandra lathers the man’s penis and testicles with a sudsy pink solution. She pulls the man’s penis upward and slides a lubricated catheter through the slit. Gene winces. Sandra bundles the items she’s been using and throws them into a large receptacle in the corner. Irene aligns instruments on her adjustable stand. Roger once again taps on his bypass tubing. Gene hardly knows who to watch. Like warm-ups before a game — hitting, fielding, throwing — every player is prepping for the first pitch.

After scrubbing the man’s skin with more of the pink solution, Sandra paints his mountain of flesh with Betadine. Now he is orange-brown from his chin to his knees. Small bubbles slide along the slope of his landscape and then pop. He looks cold.

Dr. Boswell writes in his anesthesia record, pausing every few seconds to glance at his monitors. Sometimes he injects a medication. Sometimes he adjusts a dial on the anesthesia machine, raising or lowering a bullet-sized float in an amber tube. Gene sits on a stool next to him. Each time the ventilator hisses, the bellows drop and the patient’s chest rises. As a boy, Gene asked his father to explain what he did at work. “Well,” he said, “I put the patient to sleep and then wake them up when we’re done.”

This is a bit more than put them to sleep. He should have pressed his father more. He should have asked to watch him work. Too late now.

Gene recognizes Dr. Pereira as soon as he backs into the operating room. Water and suds drip off his elbows. Irene hands him a sterile towel.

“Boz,” Dr. Pereira says, his mask billowing. “I see the administration has taken my advice and assigned a young man of impeccable character to monitor your activities in the operating room.” He dries his hands and arms while he looks at Gene over the top

of his half-frame glasses. He's run a length of white tape from earpiece to earpiece over the crown of his surgeon's cap. "Gene, a delight indeed to see you again. How did you fare with your final exams?"

"A draw at best."

"I have no doubt you will emerge the conqueror. So glad to have you with us." He drops the towel to the ground and kicks it aside with his foot.

"But I feel for you, Gene. For the next four hours you must suffer the company of the good Dr. Boswell."

Irene snaps open a sterile gown. Dr. Pereira inserts his arms into the sleeves.

"I take it you've got some history with Rui," Dr. Boswell says.

Gene nods.

"That's a shame."

While Sandra ties Dr. Pereira's gown, Irene curls her fingers under the cuff of a latex glove and stretches it open, the fingers dangling.

"Boz," Dr. Pereira says. "Have you heard this one: How do you know elephants have been making love in your alley?" He thrusts his hand into the glove.

"Gene," Dr. Boswell says. "Do you know anyone telling elephant jokes anymore?"

"Gene?" Dr. Pereira says. "Care to hazard a guess?" Dr. Pereira notices Irene waiting with the second glove and obliges.

"Give up?" He releases the tie-string at his waist and holds it out to Irene, who grasps it while Dr. Pereira pirouettes 360 degrees, drawing the full-length flap around his back. He takes the tie from Irene and ties it in a bow. "All your trash can liners, they are missing."

Gene smiles. His father sometimes prefaced a joke at the dinner table with *I heard this at the hospital*. Gene assumed he meant the doctors' lounge or the diner. He envisioned the operating room as all business. At least it was on television.

When Dr. Harrington backs into the heart room, the chatter halts. He accepts a towel from Irene, and with an elephant's grace

and power moves to the X-ray view box, where he examines the films already mounted there. Dr. Harrington has several years on Dr. Pereira. A neat line of silver hair protrudes an inch below the back of his surgeon's cap. Physically, he could have been a former home-run hitter twenty years past his prime — still the broad shoulders and massive forearms, but thick through the middle. "I trust the patient is surviving so far," he says in his hypnotic, Southern way.

"Cruising at thirty thousand," Dr. Boswell says.

Dr. Pereira moves to the side of the table opposite Irene. She hands him green towels the size of kitchen towels, and he cordons off a rectangle of skin the length of the man's breastbone. Then they cover it all with what looks like brown-tinted cellophane. With Irene's assistance, Dr. Harrington gowns and gloves. He takes his position next to her and accepts a folded drape. Together, he and Dr. Pereira unfold it the length of the patient, the near end taken by Dr. Boswell and affixed with clamps to IV poles on either side of the patient's head.

"Gene, you know what this is?" Dr. Boswell says, running his hand along the back of the drape. The top edge comes to Gene's mid-chest. "We call this the blood-brain barrier — the blood on their side, the brains on our side."

Dr. Pereira grins behind his mask. He attaches handles to the two alien-spaceship-looking lights overhead. "Gene, here is a sad truth. Were it not for Dr. Boz's hands, he might be a surgeon today." He focuses the beam of one light onto the man's exposed skin. "But, alas. The cost of manufacturing custom gloves with ten thumbs proved prohibitive."

Using a lap, Dr. Pereira wipes the illuminated narrow rectangle. Dr. Harrington palpates the notch at the top of patient's breast-bone — the sternum. "Eugene," he says. "This unfortunate man nearly expired while raking his pink-rock lawn in Sun City. He has elected to have us bypass two blockages in his coronaries so that his dear wife can once again place a rake in his hands." He looks up and laughs, the eyes behind his thick lenses as

large as quarters. Then he holds out his right hand. Irene snaps a scalpel's handle against his palm.

In a single, swift stroke Dr. Harrington incises the man's flesh over the length of the sternum down to the bone. Seconds later, the skin and fat bleed. Dr. Pereira touches a wand-like device to the bleeding vessels and steps on a foot pedal. The wand buzzes but nothing happens. "A little higher, if you will, Sandra," Dr. Pereira says.

Sandra turns the dial on a gray box near the foot of the bed. When Dr. Pereira presses the pedal this time, the blood bubbles and pops. As he continues to cauterize the bleeding, a swirling column of smoke rises like an apparition from the charred tissue into the surgical light. The smell is like fat burning on a grill. Gene breathes through his mouth. Dr. Harrington sews the thick skin edge back away from the underlying sternum. Irene then hands him a stainless-steel jigsaw with some sort of guide on the end. The saw connects to a black tank behind him via an air hose.

Starting at the patient's neck, Dr. Harrington angles the saw's blunt tip under the bone and pulls up. When he presses the trigger, the saw whines. He rips along the length of bone, a rooster tail of bone dust trailing the saw as the sternum splits in half. As Dr. Harrington exposes one edge with an angled instrument, Dr. Pereira uses the cautery to char the bleeding marrow. It simmers and pops, the smell like nothing Gene has ever encountered, far worse than an eighteen-wheeler's burned-out brakes. More like the stench he imagines from still images out of Vietnam — naked, smoking, burned-out bodies in a charred village. Breathing through his mouth isn't helping, but Gene doesn't budge from his standing position, looking over the drapes.

The surgeons switch roles. Now, Dr. Harrington begins long continuous torches along the bone's edge.

Jeez, the smell must be entering through his ears.

"Gene," Dr. Boswell says behind him. "You feel okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Take a seat if you need to." It's Sandra. She's moved behind him with an IV pole and hangs a bottle.

“What’s that?”

“Saline.” She attaches the tubing and studies him. “Should I hook this up to you instead?”

“I’m fine, okay?”

Irene passes a medieval-looking device to Dr. Pereira. “This is the chest spreader,” Dr. Pereira says. Dr. Harrington positions it under the edges of the split sternum, and with a few turns of the crank, the man’s chest opens like a carpet bag. The tapered edge of each lung surges from the periphery of the gaping chest, nearly meeting in the middle, before retreating.

Suddenly, heat floods Gene’s face.

“You’re not a smoker, are you, Gene?” Dr. Pereira asks.

“Smoker?”

“Observe this man’s lungs... There... One might postulate he worked in a coal mine.”

“What? No.”

“To have lungs young and pink. It’s a beautiful thing.”

“Gene?” It’s Dr. Boswell. “Slow your breathing.”

“What?”

“Sandy!”

Gene is turning, falling backwards down a narrowing tunnel. He reaches for the IV pole. It falls with him. Someone grabs his arm.

“Gene!”

In an instant, Sandra’s masked face, her worried, green eyes fade to darkness.

WHEN HE AWAKES, Sandra gives him some orange juice. He sits against the wall by the OR door as surgery continues in hushed tones and clinking of instruments. Kneeling next to him she says, “That’s a new one.”

“Fainting?”

“No. We’ve never had anyone go to ground and take the patient’s IV with them.” She tells him the glass bottle shattered

into several large pieces. Fortunately, he didn't pull the IV catheter out of the patient's arm. Instead, the tubing pulled apart at a junction point. The patient lost a little blood on the floor, but after a short delay, while she and Dr. Boswell hung a new IV, everything was back on track.

"You still look a little pale." She replaces a cold wash cloth on the back of his neck. "You eat this morning?"

"Not much."

"Just sit here for now. We're on bypass."

"I'm sorry," he says.

As the team focuses on their tasks Gene feels invisible. At least to everyone but Dr. Boswell, who calls out from his position behind the blood-brain barrier. "Welcome back, Chief. Glad you could rejoin us."

After a time, Gene rises and sits on a rolling stool by the phone. Between calls for instruments by the two surgeons, who are head to head, hunched over the patient, Irene glances his way.

"Gene," she says.

Her stern tone cuts right to his fear.

"Go home. I'll call you tonight."

HE DRESSES and drags what's left of his dignity back to the Jeep. The black vinyl seat threatens to seer through his slacks. Let it burn, just like his last chance for medical school crashed and burned today. No doubt, Irene's call will be to dis-invite him from the Heart Team. He rests his sore palm on the steering wheel, forgetting it's as hot as a branding iron. "Shit!"

He starts the engine and angles back, but before he shifts into first, before the red dashboard light blinks on again, he spots a large puddle of fluid where he'd parked, as if the Jeep had wet its pants. This isn't how the summer was supposed to start.

The sun presses down with near maximum heat, ricocheting off chrome and glass, and all around the full lot, not a single beating heart, except for Gene's, dares to loll in this no man's land

between one air-conditioned sanctuary and another. But he loves it. The superheated air feels like the blank slate of his best summer days. He reaches into the glove box for sunglasses and notices his tattered Citrus Care scheduling book. He pulls it out, flips to August 14, 1971 and reads the entry. And to think, he didn't even know her name.

Chapter Three

WHEN I SAW HER STANDING THERE



August 14, 1971, Phoenix, Arizona

A BEAD of sweat dripped off Gene's stubbled chin and plopped into the can of tree-white paint. He moved the can aside, balanced the wide bristle-brush across the top, and sat cross legged under the navel orange tree's canopy. On the tinny transistor, KCAZ announced the time as four o'clock, the temperature 101, and warned of a possible dust storm. Gene wiped his face and bare chest with his folded t-shirt. After an unending succession of cloudless days, the summer air, usually as still and dry as loneliness, was quickening. Dark clouds stacked one atop the other on the eastern horizon. They were moving west.

For the last couple days, he'd been painting citrus trees on this small tract of new homes. He still needed to meet the owners next door. They hadn't moved in, but it should be soon. The front and back yards were graded, a couple queen palms framed the sidewalk, and the orange trees had been trimmed. With their bare trunks, they looked embarrassingly naked next to Gene's white-clad army. Now, a boss Sapphire Blue Mustang was parked in the

drive. Must have arrived while he was taking a piss. After this last tree he'd head over.

He hoisted his thermos and drank the remaining water in long, eager draws. Across the street on the Grant Elementary School ballfield a group of boys yelled *mine, mine, mine* as a fly ball arched their way. A small black dog barked and scampered from batter to fielders. Gene had played the same game — 500 — during his grade school summers. In less than a month, he'd begin his senior year of high school, and this summer, like the previous two, he painted trees. He called his little business *Citrus Care*.

His subdivision and the surrounding neighborhoods had been carved from thirty-year-old orange and grapefruit groves, the surviving trees' canopies trimmed unnaturally to the hip, exposing the trunks. Without a coat of paint, the bark would burn. When he was fourteen his father put him to work on their trees — a small grove of nine in back and four in front.

"These are your trees now," his father had said. "Own them."

Gene had. The immediate neighbors noticed the job and hired him for their trees. Over the summers the business grew from the edges, his services spilling from house to house, and soon included fertilization three times a year. The work was simple and mindless, but he loved the way he felt after a shower, scrubbed of dirt and salt rings, his swollen veins coursing up his arms before diving deep to his heart.

Gene moved his equipment to the last tree. To protect the new grass, he draped an old *Johnny Quest* bedsheet around the trunk's base. Using his father's yellow-handled shop brush, he broke off the suckers, whisked away loose debris from the bark, and then sprayed the bark with a hard stream of water. He applied masking tape eight to ten inches out each main branch and then laid on a thick coat of paint from the base to the tape. When he was done, he peeled the tape away and stood back, admiring today's work, the trees resembling stout young men in white t-shirts, their sleeves bulging at the biceps.

Overhead, the leaves began to rustle. He removed his paint-spotted wide-brimmed hat and looked north toward a solitary,

three story eucalyptus — the Big Tree — rising from where the street ended and a dirt path began. The branches at the crown swayed west. This storm would strike soon, but it didn't smell like rain. He wished it did. More likely he was in for a towering dust storm, a fifteen-hundred-foot-high wall of dirt scooped from the surrounding desert and dumped into his family's swimming pool, which he'd have to clean. Better roll it up.

After loading his gear in the rear of his yellow Jeep, he climbed in back and sat under the vinyl canopy, making an entry in a small scheduling notebook.

A cry came from the direction of the ballfield. "Hey, mister! Can you give us a little help?"

Gene looked over and saw the batter tapping his bat on the grass. "I was just getting ready to go home."

"Your dog took our ball," the boy said.

"My dog? What dog?"

"The dog under your Jeep."

Gene hopped out and crouched down. Under the driveshaft, a muscular ink-black mutt the size of a large Chihuahua lay panting with the baseball between its white-stockinged paws. Gene grabbed his lunch pail and enticed it out with a chunk of his mother's apple crisp. He threw the ball back to the kids.

The dog padded in place and licked his chops. No tags. Not even a collar. His belly was caked with mud. Gene gave him the left-over corner crust from lunch and water in a plastic cup. Maybe the Mustang owner knew the dog.

Gene picked him up and hustled to the front door. He rang the doorbell and knocked several times, but nobody answered nor could he see anyone through the window. He jogged to the side of the house, where the gate for the redwood fence had yet to be installed. A gust whistled through the orange trees and whipped his hat from his head, sending it tumbling through the open fence into the backyard. With stabbing strides, he trapped the hat with his foot. When he looked up, standing at the edge of the rebar-lined pool...was a girl. Her eyes were closed. She fingered the hem of her peach-colored sleeveless top, while the frayed strings

of her cutoffs patted her thighs. Her thick dark hair rippled behind her like a beckoning flag. She just stood there as if hypnotized, a slight smile on her face, her slender body braced against the gusts. Later, he would recall that moment as if it were the movie poster for a love story.

Gene called out, "Are you okay?"

She startled and turned.

He shouted again over the wind. "Are you okay?"

She sidestepped to put more of the pool between them.

"I'm looking for the owner. I'm Gene. I was painting trees next door." She took another step back. He looked down at the dog in his arms. "I live about a mile from here." He nodded to the north. "I found this dog. It's lost." She remained silent, studying him.

"You live here?" he said.

"Not yet."

"Do you know who he belongs to?"

She shook her head.

The gusts thrashed the newly planted queen palms into a frenzy. "This is quite a storm. You want to get under cover?" He stepped back, trying to appear less threatening.

She faced the wind. "I love this weather."

"Yeah, it's nice." Gene sidled under the cover of the patio, the house a welcome buttress against the storm. "You go to Central? I don't recall seeing you?"

"We just moved."

Her hair whipped across her face and she swept it back. She was about a head shorter than him. The dog squirmed and barked once.

"Sure you don't want to get out of the wind?"

She shook her head.

"You a senior?"

"Yes"

"Me too!" He smiled and petted the dog's head. "That's got to be tough. I mean moving to a new school your last year."

She looked past him. Gene turned, expecting to see someone

through the Arcadia door, but the family room beyond the glass was empty.

"Hey, I could show you around. You know, before school starts."

She twisted her mouth.

"Just meet there sometime," he said.

"Sure."

"Right on." Gene stepped off the patio, shifted the dog to one side and extended his hand. "I'm Gene, by the way."

A dust devil blasted across the yard. They both turned their backs to the onslaught. Then she rushed past him and onto the patio. He followed and shook the dirt out of his hair. "You okay?"

She nodded while coughing.

"You really should get your Mustang in the garage. I'll give you a hand."

"It's my father's." She tilted her head. "He's working inside on the closets."

Gene looked through the glass. "That's great. I wanted to ask him about painting your trees."

She turned to the yard.

"I paint the trunks white," he said. "To protect them from the sun." He placed a hand on the door.

"Wait," she said. She touched his hand and recoiled as if he was on fire. "Wait here."

"Does he need a hand?"

"Let me check. He's going to be awhile."

"I could give you a lift home. I mean if you don't want to wait."

Uneasiness clouded her blue eyes. A timid smile. It worried him. Maybe her father was a bit of a hard-ass. But Gene was happy to wait. He'd wait forever if it meant driving her home.

"I'll just be a minute," she said and closed the door behind her.

The sky darkened. He looked down at the dog. "What do I do with you?"

He faced the backyard. The storm was peaking, every

molecule in the air replaced by dust and leaves and paper debris, reducing his squinting view of the pool to a mirage. The orange trees raked and screamed in gale-force spasms. One of the young queen palms along the fence uprooted and landed at the pool's edge, precisely where the girl had been standing. He smiled, thinking he could tell her he practically saved her life. He leaned against the wall and waited several more minutes before peering through the glass with cupped hands. No movement. Nothing. He checked the sliding door, but it was locked.

"Jeez." With the dog tucked under his arm, he ran around to the front.

The Sapphire Blue Mustang was gone. He stared at the spot where the car had been. A fleeting notion, a desperate hope really, entered his mind: maybe she'd be right back. Then he heard flapping. The Jeep's faded black-vinyl canopy, ripped from its moorings except at one corner, waved in tattered surrender in the waning breeze. Gene placed the dog on the passenger seat and checked the back of the Jeep. The paint-splattered bed sheet had blown against the house next door. He collected it, untied the canopy, and tucked both under the heavy paint can in the rear. Then he brushed dust from the driver's seat and climbed in. The dog, trembling, let out a yip.

Gene felt something new and inchoate, a connection to this girl, so profound and illogical that it must be love. He'd dated other girls in high school — homecomings and proms, a rented tux, close dancing, and a goodnight kiss. But he'd never had a girlfriend. For it seemed the girls he'd been attracted to were either too tall, too beautiful, too full of themselves, or too attached to someone else to give Gene more than a friendly glance. He was the guy they talked to about their guy-problems.

No longer the shortest kid in school, he was just the shortest on the varsity baseball team, embarrassingly listed on the roster as a five-foot-nine, hundred-and-twenty-five-pound pitcher and second baseman. He was, he thought, not unattractive; certainly not a cleft-chinned homecoming-king type, but pleasant enough to be within the margins of this girl's sphere. But what was her

sphere? Did she like sports? What were her hopes and desires? He didn't know anything about her, except that she was a senior and ran from him. Was it fear or timidity? Either way her escape was brilliant. And those eyes. He'd seen blue eyes before, but not this color blue. Eyes so blue, if you dove in, you'd never reach the bottom. But more than the color, her eyes ached, practically pleaded for help. And it wasn't just to escape him.

Gene pulled out his scheduling book and wrote a note. He had a feeling he'd want to remember this date: August 14, 1971. The day I first saw...

He looked over at the dog. "I don't even know her name."

Ears cocked and looking at Gene with pleading eyes, the dog whined.

"Mom's gonna have a cow when she sees you," Gene said. But what could he do? Abandon him?

Gene rattled the Jeep's stick into neutral, then completed his entry...*the girl I'll someday marry*. He pressed the accelerator and turned the key. The tachometer leapt.

FOR THE NEXT THREE WEEKS, each afternoon after painting trees, Gene ran past her house hoping to see her again. But each day her blue Mustang failed to materialize.

Then on the Saturday of Labor Day weekend with school beginning the following week, he left for his run in the mid-morning. He'd never been much of a runner but had settled into a routine. Already he felt in better condition for the upcoming baseball season. He turned at the dirt path, ran past the Big Tree and skirted around the red and white striped barricade and onto Third Street. Up ahead, at the curb of the girl's house, two men unloaded a couch from the truck of a small local moving company. A woman stood at the front door directing the two men inside. Gene, sweaty, in running shorts and an old Central High baseball practice t-shirt, ambled up the front walkway. He waved to the woman as she accompanied the men back outside. In an

instant, he recognized the similarity between the girl's and this woman's dark hair and blue eyes.

She looked suspiciously over Gene's shoulder and then back at him. "Yes, can I help you?" Smiling now.

"I'm Gene Hull. I don't know if your daughter told you about me, but I paint citrus trees. Fertilize, too. I've done the other four homes on this street, and I was wondering if you'd like me to handle yours."

"Oh, so you're the young man who scared her."

Gene's tongue thickens. "I didn't mean to — "

The woman placed a hand on Gene's shoulder and laughed. "I'm kidding. You hardly look the threatening type."

She stepped past the porch and looked left and right down the block. "I wondered why everyone's trees were painted white. Something about the temperature?"

Gene nodded. "It's not so much the temperature. Well, it is the temperature, but also the sun's angle." He used his tanned arms like a drawing compass and pantomimed how the low winter sun skirted under the tree's canopy and struck the trunk.

"You know your trees."

"Yes, ma'am."

"How much?"

For a date with your daughter, he thought, I'll paint them and pay *you*.

"Four dollars a tree. Three to fertilize."

She looked past him. "That was quick."

Gene turned. The Mustang was pulling into the driveway.

The girl eyed Gene a moment and then exited the driver's side and opened the trunk. The rear door opened. A surly-faced boy got out and immediately reached back in for a box.

"Dennis," the woman said. "Put that in the living room for now until they have your bedroom furniture unloaded."

He passed Dennis, a little bulldog-of-a-kid who looked Gene up and down.

"Why does Patty get the biggest room?"

"March," his mother said.

So her name is Patty.

Dennis huffed away. "He's going to be a sophomore." She pointed to Gene's shirt. "You play baseball at Central? Dennis wants to try out for catcher."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm Gene Hull. I didn't catch your name."

"It's Gloria McLellan."

Patty McLellan. Beautiful.

Patty, wearing a tie-dyed t-shirt that fell just short of her knees, carried a stack of hangered clothes.

"Let me help you," Gene said.

"No, I've got it."

"There's more in the trunk if you want to lend a hand," Mrs. McLellan said. Then she called back to Patty. "Are you drinking water?"

"Yes. I'm drinking water," Patty said. She sounded as if she'd been asked that question a hundred times.

Gene, Patty, and Dennis emptied the loaded Mustang of boxes, clothes, and odds and ends, while Mrs. McLellan directed them to this room or that, including Patty's bedroom, one of the rooms that looked out to the ballfield across the street. The powdery aroma of Patty's perfume rose from the armload of clothes he deposited atop her naked mattress.

They made three more trips to empty out a nearby short-stay apartment. Gene sat in back. During one of the drives, Gene asked, "So where's your dad?"

Patty and Dennis looked at each other.

"Probably with his girlfriend," Dennis said.

"Dennis!"

"Jerk," Dennis said.

Patty gave Dennis a hurt look.

"Not you. Dad."

A wave of heat spread up Gene's neck. He looked up at the rear-view mirror. Patty averted her eyes.

"He's in Van Nuys," Dennis said. "Mom divorced him."

Turning to look between the seats, Dennis said, "You're on varsity at Central?"

Gene nodded, thinking about the day of the storm, the day Patty told him her father was inside the house.

"What do you play?" Dennis said.

"Pitcher. Second when I'm not pitching. Your mom says you're a catcher."

"Catcher. First base. I'll play anything to make varsity."

"You may be a year from that. We have a pretty good catcher and first baseman."

Dennis turned back to face straight ahead.

"How about we go to Sluggers sometime?" Gene said. "It's a batting cage."

Dennis glanced over his shoulder. "Right on."

In the rear-view mirror, Gene caught Patty smiling at him.

After he'd carried in the last load, Patty's mother offered a tumbler of ice water in the shade of the porch. "Thought you might like this." And then she passed one to Patty.

"Thanks." He downed the full glass and handed it back. Perspiration bloomed across his back.

Patty held out her full glass. "You want mine?"

"Patty, you should drink that," her mother said.

Gene sensed he shouldn't take it. "No, I'm fine," he said.

Patty handed the glass back to her mother, who then gave Gene an exasperated look. "She's felt a little dizzy lately and — "

"Mom — "

"I was just going to say you're probably a little dehydrated. This heat and all."

"I'm fine. See. I'm standing."

Embarrassed, Gene looked out to the front yard, the newly planted grass, and the five mature orange trees. "About your trees," he said.

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry. Gene. Things are bit chaotic right now. Maybe next summer."

"How about I come over next week and give these in front a quick coat. Just the lower trunks. Free of charge. Move-in special."

The ones in back are fairly well shaded by the neighbor's oleanders."

"Well, that's sweet of you. Okay." Her hands rested on Patty's shoulders. She looked at Patty who kept her eyes on Gene. "I don't suppose you'd want to paint this door while you're at it?"

Gene wasn't sure what to make of her request.

"I'm only kidding," she said. "The builder likes it. He calls the color russet." She ran her finger along the door's edge. "I'm just happy we found the place." She looked down at Patty again. "Should we start unpacking?"

Mrs. McLellan went inside. Patty stopped the door from closing behind her. "I gotta go, too," she said and stepped into the air-conditioned entry.

"Patty." Gene stepped forward, and then seeing her shrink away, pulled back. "Would you like to go to a movie or something this weekend?"

She hid behind the door, drowning him with her lagoon blue eyes.

"How about Big Surf? Have you been there?"

She hesitated and shook her head.

"Maybe after school starts," he said.

She gave him a coy smile. "I don't know."

"So maybe, then?" he said.

She eased the door to only a sliver of an opening. "Maybe."

But Gene heard *yes*.

MEETING up with Patty during the school day proved difficult. They didn't share any classes, not even the same lunch period. But knowing her schedule, Gene came up with a plan. As a player on the varsity baseball team, he had PE last period during the off-season. All week he loitered outside the double-wide entrance to the boys' locker room and waited for Patty to walk by on her way to orchestra practice.

It wasn't hard to spot her. She walked with her shoulders

pulled back. With each step her knees locked for a brief, wonderful instant. Each day, she approached with a smile. While they talked at the confluence of walkways between gym and music, Patty held her flute case to her chest like a shield, but she never rushed off, never gave Gene any indication that she wished to leave his company until the second bell threatened them with detention.

On Friday, he reminded her about his invitation to Big Surf. "It's like a giant wave machine," he says. "Phoenix's answer to Huntington Beach."

She pursed her lips and twisted slowly from side to side.

"C'mon," he said. "Bring Dennis if you want."

She laughed and tossed her hair back. "Okay, two conditions."

"Name them."

"First. No Dennis."

"That's easy."

"Second. Not until you paint our trees. Remember? You promised you'd paint them this weekend."

"I'll be over at sunrise tomorrow."

BIG SURF WAS CROWDED. The last day of the season and it seemed every junior high and high school student was here celebrating the end of a short first week of classes. Fifteen feet from the water, Gene found an open patch of sand and spread out their beach towels. Patty removed her jean-shorts and gauzy white cover-up. In the powder-blue bikini, her toned figure looked even better than he'd imagined. She put on oversized sunglasses and sat looking out to the water.

That morning he had painted the trunks of all five orange and caught her stealing a glance from her bedroom window. And now, here they were.

"Tic tac?" he said. He held the container out to her.

"Is that peppermint?"

Gene looked at the label and nodded.

"No, thanks. I'll start sneezing and can't stop."

He hoped to kiss her when he took her home, but not with peppermint on his breath.

A six-foot swell grew from the front of the wave-wall painted to look like the ocean's horizon. The wave powered forward, never actually cresting but rolling toward shore as several surfers caught the bump and wobbled on their boards. Every few minutes another wave made its debut, and another row of surfers set off, dodging the bobbing heads in the water.

"Looks fun," she said. "You ever try it?"

The first dew of perspiration stippled her forearms.

"Only on a raft."

She nodded and smiled toward the action in the wading section. Mothers with toddlers raised and lowered their charges as each remnant wave died in ankle deep water. Young girls emitted roller-coaster screams as their boyfriends invented ways to touch and tackle them in the water. A whistle blew from one of the two lifeguard chairs, followed by a gesture from the tanned guard to a reckless surfer to paddle over for a lecture.

"You want to cool off?" she said.

Gene left his sunglasses and flip-flops on the towel and waded into waist deep water where a line of orange buoys demarcated surfing from swimming. Patty shivered. "Colder than I thought it'd be," she said. Gene wanted to take her hand, but his courage failed to crest in time. She dropped to her knees, chin deep in the water. "There, that's better."

As they crab-walked parallel to shore, someone bumped into his side and rose, sputtering to the surface.

"Sorry," a guy about Gene's age said. A girl surfaced ten yards away and yelled back. "I win."

"No way," the guy said. "I was interfered with."

"Hey, you bumped into me," Gene said.

"I know," the guy whispered. "But interference means a do over." Then louder toward the girl. "Do over."

"No way. You owe me a Coke."

The guy moved toward the girl. "Sorry, babe. Do over."

Patty waded close to Gene. "What's that about?"

"I think they were trying to see who could swim the farthest underwater."

Patty studied them a minute and began to hyperventilate. After a few seconds, she said, "Like this?" She torpedoed underwater the length of home to first before she surfaced and flipped her hair straight back. "See if you can top that."

Gene soaked up her smile.

As he started to submerge, she called out. "You may want to hyperventilate first."

"No need," he said and took off. He lasted a body length beyond her and blasted to the surface. "You owe me a Coke."

"Hey, we didn't have a bet."

"Do over then. What will it be?"

Patty considered this for a moment, looking to their towels on the beach and then out to the facsimile of the southern California sea, as if the answer lay beyond the painted horizon. She looked back at Gene. "Loser pays for the movie tonight."

Gene straightened. "You asking me out?"

Patty bumped him with her hip. "If your name is Eugene Hull."

Gene wiped away water dripping from his chin. "How'd you know my full name was Eugene?"

Patty's neck reddened. She put her hands up to cover her face and shook her head. Then peeking through her hands, her blue eyes apologized. "Sorry. I looked you up in last year's yearbook. In the library."

It was a moment. Only four weeks ago she'd ran from him. Now she was nudging his hip. Prodding him on.

"You're on, Patricia."

Her eyes widened.

"Wild guess. That's all."

He shook her hand. "You first," he said.

"Hey, that's not fair. You'll have something to shoot for."

"My surf. I'm the home team. I bat last."

She punched his arm. "I'm warning you. Flute players have

tremendous breath control.” She began her hyperventilation routine.

“I’m warning you. Guys who grow up in Phoenix spend all summer underwater in backyard pools.”

She took a last, deep breath, and sped off underwater. Her strokes were controlled and graceful, her rippling image growing less and less distinct as she moved away. There was no way Gene would win. He wouldn’t allow it. It was why he wanted her to go first. As she swam farther away, the water’s glare hid her shimmering form, but the movements of other bathers, pointing down, or hopping out of the way, identified her position. Finally, she popped to the surface, waist deep, and whipped her hair back with her hands. She spotted Gene and waved, a gleaming, affectionate smile on her face. In the next second, her smile sagged. She put both hands to head for an instant, and then her eyes rolled upwards as her arms dropped and she sank below the water like a wounded ship.

“Patty!” he screamed. Then to anyone and everyone, “Pick her up! Pick her up! Pick her up!” His heart threatened to burst from his chest as he powered toward her, sloshing through the water. The moment felt like a horrible nightmare, the water’s weight preventing him from running at full speed. A lifeguard blasted his whistle again and again. Gene reached her first and grabbed an arm, pulling her head out of the water as a middle-aged woman lifted Patty’s other arm.

“Patty. Patty!”

She sputtered and coughed. Her confused eyes looked right through him. She coughed some more. Between heaving breaths, she said, “My head.”

A male lifeguard arrived, and with Gene’s help, carried her to the beach and their towels. She was breathing normally and tried to sit up, but the lifeguard told her to lie back. Stretched out and breathing normally, Patty rubbed her temples.

“What happened?” the guard said. Bathers formed a circle. The lifeguard stood. “Everybody, please move on. Give us some

room, please. Everything's fine." As the crowd dispersed, the lifeguard knelt again, and took Patty's pulse.

"She was swimming underwater," Gene said, "and when she came up, she collapsed."

"My head hurts," she said.

A female lifeguard arrived with a beach umbrella and positioned it to give them shade. "Hyperventilation syncope?" the woman asked.

"The male lifeguard asked, 'Did you take a lot of deep breaths before going under?'"

Patty nodded. Her eyes were closed. "I think it's a migraine. I feel kind of sick."

"You have migraines before?" the man asked.

Patty nodded again. "Where are my sunglasses?"

Gene found them in her shoulder bag and handed them to her.

"You shouldn't hyperventilate like that before diving. Do it long enough, and you'll faint. We've seen it before."

Gene never had, but his mother had given him the same warning years ago.

"Can that bring on a migraine?" he asked.

The lifeguard shrugged. "I suppose it could."

"I just need to lie down in the dark," Patty said.

Gene collected their belongings, ran them out to the Jeep, and drove up to the turnstile exit, where Patty was sitting on a bench, slouched, yet aided by a lifeguard. Gene dropped the passenger seat, and Patty got in. On the drive back to her house, with her eyes closed behind sunglasses, she said, "Gene?"

"You okay?"

"I will be. I just wanted to say, I owe you a movie."

He couldn't speak. Moment by moment he was falling more and more in love with this girl.

STEADYING her with one arm around her back and his other hand under her elbow, Gene walked Patty to her front door. She felt weak in his arms. The door was locked, but after ringing the bell, her mother answered. She smiled, then quickly sagged. "Oh, Patty. Not again."

Together, they guided Patty to her bed. Gene stepped back into hallway. Mrs. McLellan removed her daughter's flip-flops and whispered, "I'll be right back with a washcloth, Honey," and turned out the light.

Gene sat at the breakfast alcove. Minutes later, Mrs. McLellan joined him and offered a soda. He accepted and gazed out the window. The swimming pool had been recently filled and reminded him of the moment he'd first seen Patty. Mrs. McLellan poured herself a cup of coffee. "Gene, I wasn't thinking. Would you prefer coffee?"

"No, thanks," he said raising the can of Fresca. "This is great."

She sat opposite him and looked out to the backyard, her hands cradling her cup. "A few months ago, I thought we'd beaten these migraines." She took a sip and sighed. "But apparently not."

She carried the conversation, looking at Gene only occasionally, not out of anger or disappointment, Gene sensed, but because she was picturing moments in Patty's life he'd yet to know. And he wanted to learn it all. So far, he only knew that her parents had divorced, she had migraines, and peppermint gave her sneezing fits.

"Maybe it was the move," Mrs. McLellan said. "Or the divorce. I guess you heard about my divorce."

Gene nodded.

"Ever since we moved to Phoenix, Patty's headaches are back in force. She's weak. Sometimes faint. I keep thinking it's the heat. She's getting tired of me constantly pestering her about drinking more water. My God, my sister said it was hot, but she also said I'd get used to it." She took another sip of coffee. "I'm not so sure. Don't get me wrong. Apart from the heat, I love it here. It's not nearly as congested as Van Nuys, and the cost of living is less, and

we're near my sister and her family, which is nice for Patty and Dennis, but I wonder if I would have actually moved here if I'd visited Peg in the summer." She tapped her index finger on the table to some inner rhythm. "Of course, I would. It's what my kids wanted, and what is love if it's not sacrificing for your children." She gave Gene a trembling smile. "So, tell this loving mother what happened."

Gene recounted the day and the suddenness of Patty's decline, wondering if Mrs. McLellan blamed him as he blamed himself for the silly underwater swimming game.

"I'm glad you were there." She studied Gene for a moment. "There are some people in life, whom, from the moment you meet them, you feel comfortable. I can't explain it, but it's a kind of trusting presence. And you have that."

Gene's face flushed.

"I'm probably way out of line here," she said. "But I have a feeling you're good for my daughter. You're exactly who she needs in her life now." Mrs. McLellan's expression became stern and inward looking. "The total opposite of her creep of a father." She took a deep breath and looked to the ceiling. After a moment, she shook her head and wiped tears from her cheeks.

"I should probably go," he said.

"What time is it?"

Gene checked his watch. "A little after four."

"Close enough." She retrieved a half-full bottle of wine from the kitchen counter along with two juice glasses and returned to the table. She poured. "You're nineteen, right?" She winked.

"No thanks."

She drained half her glass. "I divorced Husband-of-the-Year Frank after I found out he was having an affair. Turned out scuba diving wasn't so much his hobby as running around with a blonde from the office."

Gene shifted in his seat.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. McLellan said. "I shouldn't..." She took another sip and then tipped her glass toward him. "See. There's something about you. You're too good a listener."

Gene offered an embarrassed smile.

Suddenly, Mrs. McLellan's eyes widened. She looked past Gene. "Patty, what is it?"

Gene whipped around. Dressed in her nightgown, Patty stood in the middle of the family room holding her head, her face contorted and pained. She tried to say something, but her words stretched loose and wobbly as putty. Mrs. McLellan rushed toward her and together they collapsed to the floor. She screamed, "Gene!"

He jumped from his seat, sending soda splattering against the wall. Patty's gaze ratcheted across the room. She moaned with each quick breath. Her mother held her head and wailed. "Call an ambulance! Call an ambulance!"

Gene fumbled with the wall phone and dialed. On the other end it rang once, twice...Please be home. Please be home....a third time. "Dad! Patty's in trouble."

Chapter Four

LIKE A PLUNGE INTO AN ICY LAKE



JUST BEFORE NOON, Gene unlocks the back door from the garage to the kitchen. Apollo greets him with frantic tail wagging.

“Hey buddy,” Gene says. “Bet you didn’t think I’d be back this soon.” Apollo pads in place on the tiled floor. “Me either.”

Part Chihuahua, part honey badger, Apollo is twenty pounds of muscle wrapped in a short, black coat. He has slept between Gene’s feet each night since he returned home from Cal Poly for the summer, just like he did the day he rescued him, the day he fell in love with Patty. After no one claimed him from the lost-dog fliers, Gene kept him and named him for the space program. His mother said, “So you take care of him for a year and go off to school. Then he’s my problem.” Just like her to lay on a guilt trip.

After slinking from the hospital, Gene topped up the radiator and then sweated out his disappointment, anger, embarrassment, whatever it was, at Sluggers in the expanding heat. He needed some time in the cage, blistering fastballs past the pitching machine. It was something familiar. Like painting citrus trees. He wishes now he hadn’t sent that “retirement” letter to all his clients. No doubt Irene will call tonight, give him a nice-try speech, but tell him he didn’t make the team.

Gene sets his keys and tie on the circular oak breakfast table. He hangs the white coat across the rail of a ladder-back chair. His dress shirt, still soaked, sticks to his skin. He pauses. Brings the coat's collar to his nose, hoping for whiff of his father's aftershave. Nothing.

He checks the answering machine on the kitchen secretary. One message. He holds his breath and hits Play.

"Gene, I don't know where my head is, I forgot a couple important things. That Arcadia door in the kitchen sticks. You've got to really force it to close that last little bit. We don't need to be cooling down all of Phoenix. You should see my electric bill as it is!

I almost forgot. Did you bring that trap home with you? I'm tired of that damn cat leaving headless birds all over my backyard. It's like some kind of Hitchcock movie. Apollo brings them inside. He thinks he's doing me a favor. Last week I found one in my tub. I wish I'd remembered to ask you. I really wanted to see it. It sounded fascinating. An infrared activated trap. And your invention to boot. You're a marvel.

I'll write and send pictures of little Carlton. Hope you had a good first day. I'm sure you did. This will be good for you... working with Rui and Dr. Harrington. You'll stay busy. Maybe a nurse's aide will steal your heart, and you'll finally forget about Patty.

Okay, my flight is boarding. For thirty years, I've wanted to get out of the heat. Finally. Finally. Love you."

GENE CLICKS THE OFF BUTTON. She never accepted Patty for reasons only her twisted brain understood.

He looks down at Apollo. "Catch any cats lately?" At the word "cat" Apollo freezes and cocks his head. "Don't worry. We'll get her cat." And send it to her.

He pours a tall glass of ice water, sits and rereads the three pages of instructions written in his mother's impeccable cursive.

No stone unturned, she liked to say. She said plenty this morning while scurrying about in preparation for today's flight. Her nonstop chatter made it impossible to concentrate. By now she should be pestering Suzanne and Rodney.

Let's see, there's the trash schedule, the pool maintenance and lawn mowing (his chores through high school), the freezer contents (spaghetti sauce, briskets, those horrible steak sandwich things you like), how the washer worked, which soap to use, how the milk was no longer delivered to the front door, when the sprinklers come on, the watering schedule for the hanging plants on the patio, Apollo's feeding schedule, including where to place the bowls, and a list of specific cleansers for just about every different surface in the kitchen. It goes on and on.

He skips to the last item: Don't forget to check on the irrigation. You know where the board is. It posts every seven days. An hour of water seems to be enough. We're lucky to be on a weekend schedule now. But if you happen to be at work, maybe Doris next door can open the valve.

That's the one thing he won't forget — water for his trees. He Frisbees the pages across the table. A page flutters to the floor. He looks around the kitchen. A clock ticks two rooms away. Apollo stirs at Gene's feet. "What do you and Mom do all day around here?" Apollo offers a deep sigh. Great. A summer of house chores and silence. His few close friends are out of town, no trees to paint, and no Patty McLellan. Gene downs his ice water.

Might as well stay busy until Irene calls. He picks up the page from the floor. "Let's start with the pool. You swim. I'll sweep."

While Gene sweeps the pool, he tosses Apollo's tennis ball into the water more than two-dozen times. Then they walk down to the irrigation board and sign up for an hour of water this weekend. Worn out, Apollo sleeps under the kitchen secretary while Gene mows the front lawn and puts out the trash can. Finally, now that he has a screwdriver, he tightens the radiator hose clamp and makes a trip to Checker for coolant.

After dinner he takes his live trap out to the patio. While only a simple intro-to-engineering project his freshman year, it saved

him some money. His landlord knocked a half month off his rent for clearing out the stray cats around the complex. He looks around the yard. He's not seen any headless birds. His mother is no doubt exaggerating, but he'll catch her cat nonetheless. The nine-volt battery is dead. After replacing it, a wave of his hand across the infrared beam drops the gate.

Damn, he wishes Irene would call and get it over with. Apollo follows him upstairs and plops onto the bed. Gene exits through his bedroom window with a Michelob and folded aluminum chair. He steps onto the roof, to the eight by twelve plywood deck he built in stages during high school. He should have turned the light on in the pool. The shimmering blue glow looks cool from up here. No Giants' game tonight. They played this afternoon in Atlanta. And lost. Figures. Two blocks away, the ballfield lights are on in front of Patty's mother's house. A cheer carries through the hundred-degree air.

He's two swigs into the beer when the phone rings. Gene walks back and reaches through the window to the extension on his desk. It's Irene.

"Gene, I called earlier to tell you not to come in tomorrow, but you didn't answer."

"I must have been outside."

"Good thing. Rui changed my mind."

"Dr. Harrington's okay with this?"

"We have two cases tomorrow. If Sandra, Boz, or anyone tells you to sit, the sit."

"Yes."

"You could have contaminated the field."

"Thank you."

"And eat breakfast tomorrow."

No doubt his father's blood inoculated him from a quick exit. He's just not sure how far that immunity reaches, nor does he want to test it again.

DR. BOZ ANESTHETIZES the patient with the same send-off as yesterday — “Say goodnight, Irene” — and once again tells Sandra to work her magic. With the patient’s heel resting on Betty’s shoulder, Sandra scrubs the patient’s left thigh up to the blue towel that covers his scrotum.

“Sandra,” Dr. Boz says. “How much do you charge for that? Gene, here would like to get your card.”

“I don’t believe that for a minute,” she says. “Gene’s too much the gentleman.”

As she finishes, she looks over and smiles with her eyes. Jeez, he can’t remember if he thanked her for her concern yesterday.

When he first entered the room today, Irene reminded him to stay close to the rolling stool in Dr. Boswell’s domain. But when Boz arrived, Gene pushed the stool to the wall so he wouldn’t be tempted to sit. No fainting today.

Once the draping is complete, Dr. Harrington incises the skin. As Dr. Pereira cauterizes the bleeding edges, Gene begins mouth breathing.

“Here, let’s lather you up,” Dr. Boz says. He shows Gene a small bottle of peppermint flavoring, and then places a dab on the front of Gene’s mask. Patty would have run for the door.

Gradually Gene shifts to breathing through his nose, the peppermint aroma mostly blocking the burning-fat smell. Dr. Harrington takes the jigsaw from Irene, taps his foot a few times, and then exhales sharply. “Sandra, is it your intent to hide the pedal?”

“Sorry.” She finishes opening a sterile pack for Irene, hustles around to Dr. Harrington’s side, and crouches from view. “It’s right here.”

Dr. Harrington revs the saw with two coarse bursts and then hooks the blade under the patient’s sternum. Gene shifts his weight and swallows hard.

Dr. Boz leans into him and whispers, “*Timmberrr.*”

Gene glares at him. “I’m fine.”

Boz slaps him on the back. “Just checking.”

Gene rolls the stool a little closer anyway.

The surgeons split the sternum, char the bone's raw edge, and, after several cranks on the spreader, open the man's chest and prepare for bypass. During this time, another surgeon, Dr. Brinkerhoff, a rotund man with bushy, gray sideburns, toils to the left of Dr. Pereira. Curled over the patient's leg, he dissects a vein, tying off the tributary veins as he goes. When he's done, he hands one end of the sixteen-inch vein segment to Irene, who pinches the end with her fingers. Dr. Brinkerhoff attaches a saline-filled syringe to the other end and checks for leaks. After a couple tributary repairs, the long vein bulges, holding firm.

"Looks good here, Lee," he says.

Dr. Brinkerhoff backs from the table. "Have your girl give me a call when you're ready for the next case."

"Brink?" Dr. Boz says. "We still on for Friday?"

"Long as you don't crap out on me again."

"Katie doesn't get back until seven in the evening."

"I don't know who you're kidding."

"As long as she thinks I'm only riding the back roads I'm fine."

"Suit yourself. It's going to be hot — 105. You up for that?"

Gene's not quite sure what kind of ride Dr. Boz is talking about, only that he's hiding it from someone, a wife perhaps. Gene's mother didn't know his father was on the helicopter that crashed.

"Gene," Dr. Pereira says, reaching up to the sterile handle. He focuses the surgical light into the cavity. "Lean in. You cannot see from there. I will give you a tour."

Edging closer, he places his fingers lightly on top of the drape.

"Gene," Irene says, latching onto his eyes. "Careful."

Gene backs off. The woman misses nothing.

Dr. Boz raises the drape another few inches so it comes to Gene's upper chest. "You can look over. Just keep your arms back."

Gene's view of the open cavity is incomplete, but he can see most of the heart. It rests in a kind of tissue hammock. It isn't ruby red like in drawings, but is covered with a thick, glistening layer of yellow-white fat.

“We have already opened the pericardial membrane,” Dr. Pereira says. Using long forceps, he points to it — the thing Gene thought looked like a hammock. As he works, Dr. Pereira identifies the anatomy. He and Dr. Harrington insert cannulas, tubes a little narrower than Gene’s little finger, into the superior and inferior vena cavae. Using a loop of suture, they fasten each cannula in place and then attach them to the sterile end of the clear tubing running through Roger’s heart-lung machine. All of this information whizzes at Gene like ninety-mile-per-hour fastballs. One step blends to the next and the next and the next. Even if he had a notepad and pen, he couldn’t keep up with the three pairs of hands moving with the synchrony of a Giant’s 6-4-3 double play.

Dr. Harrington punches a hole in the aorta with something like an awl. Blood spurts from the hole. Gene flinches. Dr. Pereira cups his hand over the pulsing jet. In an instant, Dr. Harrington inserts a cannula (smaller than the ones in the vena cavae) into the hole. Again, using a couple loops of suture, Dr. Pereira cinches the cannula secure and then attaches it to another segment of clear tubing.

“There you go, Gene,” Dr. Pereira says. “We are ready for bypass.”

This is like nothing he’s ever seen. Deep within the rib’s cage, naked and shimmering under the harsh light, the heart rocks with each beat. The rhythmic motion lends it a sentient quality. A kind of being itself, awake and unfazed by the anesthetic which has rendered the larger being unconscious. The surgeons have prepared this smaller, more resilient soul for bypass, but with the cannulas strapped to its limbs, each contraction looks like a struggle, as if the heart is trying to escape its bonds. It’s practically pleading for help.

Dr. Harrington turns around where Sandra waits. While she removes his reading glasses and replaces them with shot-glass-like magnifying lenses, Dr. Pereira asks, “Gene, how is it that while Roger’s machine perfuses the brain, the kidneys, and other organs, we can isolate the heart, arrest it, and restart it later? Perhaps you know this.”

His father had never explained it to him. Gene shrugs.

"Supply and demand," Dr. Pereira says. "The heart demands oxygen. Its supply of oxygen is delivered by the blood. Stop the heart from beating, and it needs less oxygen. Chill it to ten degrees — that is Celsius, my American friend — and it needs even less. That is a beautiful thing, because we are about to place an embargo on its supply. There are more complicated aspects of myocardial preservation during surgery, but at its simplest, the same principles apply here as when someone is revived after being pulled lifeless from an icy lake."

"We're good here," Dr. Boz says.

"Roger?" Dr. Harrington asks.

"Ready."

Gene glances at Roger. With his clamps in hand, he looks like a drummer poised behind his drum kit.

"On bypass," Dr. Harrington orders.

Roger eases a black knob on the machine, and Gene follows the blood's course as it flows from the patient's chest through the clear bypass tubing, pushing the saline ahead of it, toward Roger and his bypass machine. The advancing red wave circles through the rotary pump and cascades down the large radiator-like canister — the lungs of the machine — and then, after dividing through other devices, merges and ascends back through a single tube over the draped chest before disappearing into the patient's aorta.

After a minute, Roger says, "We're at full flow."

"Cross clamp on," Dr. Harrington says. He ratchets a clamp's rubber-encased jaws across the aorta, pinching the large vessel closed. Just below the clamp, he sticks a needle into the aorta and injects the contents of a syringe.

"Cardioplegia," Dr. Pereira says. "It contains potassium chloride to stop the heart."

That it does, as if responding to a command from a backyard game Gene played as a child: Freeze!

Dr. Harrington pours a pitcher of iced saline into the bowl of

the chest. The heart does look like someone at the bottom of an icy lake. Gene lets out a breath.

"The clock ticks," Dr. Pereira says.

"What do you mean?" Gene asks.

"The heart, she can only hold her breath for so long." Dr. Pereira suctions the saline from the well, reaches up, and focuses the light to a fine beam over the heart. "The time on bypass is critical. Too long, and the heart may not start up again. Peanut." Irene already has a stiff cotton bullet clamped into a long hemostat's tip. She slaps it to his palm.

"Then what?" Gene says.

Dr. Harrington lays the vein that Dr. Brinkerhoff had excised across the heart.

"Then we are up to our ankles in alligators," Boz says.

Dr. Harrington cuts off a section of the vein. He and Dr. Pereira are forehead to forehead, nearly mask to mask as they work. There's a distinct shift in their demeanor. They could be defusing a bomb. Gene turns to Dr. Boz. "How long does bypass last?"

"As short as possible."

"How long?"

"For a cabbage? Less than an hour."

"Cabbage?"

"Coronary artery bypass graft. C...A...B...G. Cabbage." He nods to the opposite end of the room. "Sandra's our timekeeper."

Gene looks over to Sandra leaning against the table by the phone. She must have heard Dr. Boz because she unfolds her arms and, like a game show hostess, points to the large analog timer above her head. A cute gesture. The timer's second-hand sweeps silently, steadily around.

Using long forceps, Dr. Pereira names the arteries — left main, anterior descending, circumflex — and points to where the blockages lie. Dr. Harrington sutures a small segment of vein to the aorta using a curved needle the size of a parentheses. Stitch by stitch, Dr. Pereira keeps the suture taught. Then they connect the other end of the vein segment past the blockage in the artery. To

get to the next two blockages, they roll the heart to its right and stuff a lap under it, like using a pillow to prop someone on his side.

Hardly a word is said between Irene, Dr. Pereira and Dr. Harrington as clamps, scalpels, and hair-thin suture pass between them. They communicate in a silent language. Gene admires their economy of motion, their focus. Except for Dr. Pereira's comment about the heart holding her breath, it is clear that once bypass begins, they have no time for sentimental thoughts. This heart is an engine with bad plumbing. They had two hearts with the same problem yesterday and perhaps more later this week. It is work to them. The seemingly simple, mechanical nature of the repair is appealing. Their every move is coordinated, practiced, precise, and it carries Gene along by a kind of Venturi effect. He takes a slow breath and shudders at a thought. He would have loved to have seen Patty's heart.

"Cross clamp off," Dr. Harrington says.

Sandra looks at the timer. "Fifty-eight minutes."

The heart, previously motionless, now shivers. Irene hands Dr. Harrington two black paddles that look like salad tongs. He places them on each side of the heart. A dull pop follows. The heart flexes and then begins to beat. But the beats are slow and weak.

"You know how wiped out you feel when you just wake up in the morning?" Dr. Boz says to Gene.

"I usually feel pretty good."

"Well, you're still young." Dr. Boz turns a small wheel on one of the IVs. It begins to drip. "We're going to wake this heart with a little nuclear caffeine." He looks over the drape. "Epi's running," he says to the surgeons.

"Epi?" Gene asks.

"Epinephrine...adrenalin," Dr. Boz says.

Minutes later, after some back-and-forth conversation between Dr. Harrington and Dr. Boswell concerning flow rates, fluid boluses, FFP, and other things Gene doesn't understand, Roger says, "We're off bypass."

Dr. Harrington removes the cannulas from the heart and

passes the bypass-tubing off the table. Before the chest spreader is removed, Gene takes a last look at the heart. Its beats are no longer labored. They are crisp, like fingers snapping to one of the upbeat, big-band tunes his father loved.

The surgeons close the chest by looping heavy gauge stainless steel wires around the man's sternum, threading the wire between the ribs and then cinching the two halves of the sternum together. Dr. Harrington twists the wire using a blunt-nose clamp, the ring handle making popping sounds against his latex gloves as he tugs and twirls the instrument until the wire is a tight, six-or-seven-layer twist against the bone. Then Dr. Pereira cuts the waste end of the wire, leaving a three-quarter-inch tag. Using the wire holder, he buries the tag end between the sternal halves.

"Will those come out?" Gene asks.

"Only if we have to," Dr. Pereira says.

Dr. Harrington removes his gown and gloves and lumbers toward the desk by the phone. "Eugene," he says. "If those wires (it sounds like why-yahs) get infected, we'll know who put the hex on them." He sits at the desk and opens the patient's chart. A broad sweat stripe imprints the back of his scrub shirt.

Irene scoots her six-inch platform (a custom job of varnished wood with a black, non-skid surface) over to where Dr. Harrington had been standing and assists Dr. Pereira as he closes the tissue between the skin and bone. Then they pull the sticky drape off the skin, and with a wet lap, Irene wipes the open wound free of blood. She slaps a needle holder in Dr. Pereira's palm, who begins closing the skin. Irene blots away any bleeding ahead of him.

"Your impressions, Gene?" Dr. Pereira says.

"Pretty amazing."

"Surgery?...or that Boz stayed awake?"

Dr. Boz stands. "It's amazing I stay awake during your skin closures."

"He feels I devote too much attention to this last crucial step."

"Crucial?" Dr. Boz asks.

"*Sim*. Days, weeks, or years from now, my young Gene, the patient will gaze upon this fine suture line, this thin, white scar. It

is perhaps one-tenth percent of the surgery. But it is the last part. The only visible part. It is the surgeon's signature. And from it, the patient will form a judgment. He will think, What a fine surgeon my doctor is."

"You mean Dr. Harrington?" Dr. Boz says.

"All the more important I leave a favorable impression," Dr. Pereira says.

"Maybe you could put a little giddyap in your signature, so I can get this guy to the Unit." Dr. Boz sits back down and charts numbers and comments on the anesthesia record attached to a clipboard. Then he puts down his pen and looks over at Gene, seated on the stool.

"Congratulations," Dr. Boz says.

"For what?"

"You made it. Skin to skin without hitting the deck."

"I did, didn't I?"

Gene looks up to the EKG. An audible beep punctuates each peak of the waveform. A little over thirty minutes ago the machine was silent, the flat green line the electrical signature of a heart that looked as limp and pale as Gene felt yesterday. Yet when Dr. Harrington applied the paddles and shocked it, the heart beat. It had occurred to Gene that it might not. But something about the tenor of the heart room, the casual confidence maybe, diminished that possibility. There must be times, though, when it didn't. The heart, she can only hold her breath for so long.

Chapter Five

PLUCKING A PEARL FROM AN OYSTER



GENE SPED his father's Saab to the hospital, repeatedly looking in the rear-view mirror. Patty was in back, her eyes closed, her head resting on his father's shoulder. Mrs. McLellan, on Patty's other side, stroked her daughter's arm. They were silent for the most part, except when Patty whimpered and Gene's father reassured her with words Gene couldn't hear. Oh, how he wished he was the one in the back seat with her. At least he'd helped by throwing her bathrobe over her as they left the house. He looked in the mirror again and caught his father's eye.

"Slow down a little," his father said. "We're okay back here."

It hadn't seemed that way at first. Mrs. McLellan was in a panic until Patty's speech miraculously recovered in the minutes before Gene's father arrived. That he was home when Gene called was another miracle. He'd just returned from the hospital after a case. Once Gene mentioned headache and trouble speaking, Gene's father cut him off and asked for directions. He was there in less than two minutes, felt Patty's pulse, asked her Gene's name, the city she lived in, and the year, questions she stumbled to answer in a weak voice. Then he calmly said, "Help me get her in the car."

At the Emergency Room entrance, an attendant was taking a smoking break. Gene's father called out for him to bring a wheelchair. Together, they wheeled Patty through the double door toward the admitting clerk. "Knudson here?" his father asked.

"All night," the clerk said. She started to hand him a clipboard.

"I need him to see her, pronto." He nodded down to Patty, who sat slumped in the chair, her head bowed to one hand.

"Go," the clerk said. "Room Two. I'll get him." She lifted the receiver on the intercom.

There were perks being a physician in need of help at the hospital where you work. Gene had first noticed this when he broke his arm a few years before. Paperwork could wait. Lines could be jumped.

Gene started to follow his father, Patty, and her mother into the belly of the ER, when his father turned. "Best you wait here." Gene must have shown his disappointment. His father put a hand on his shoulder and leaned in. "Family only at this point. Besides, you need to move the car. I'll be out as soon as I know something."

Gene parked the car and ran back inside the chilly waiting room. For over an hour he paged through every magazine he could find and was back to where he started with a month-old issue of *Sports Illustrated*. The one with Fergie Jenkins on the cover. The TV silently displayed an *All in the Family* rerun. Two seats away, a baby cried as her mother teared and bounced her on her lap. Earlier, a young boy had sat there with his father and pressed a bloodied dish towel to his nose. Each time the door to the exam rooms opened, Gene got a hitch in his breath, hoping to see his father's smile. Please, a smile. The door opened again, but this time it was the boy, now being wheeled out with a schnoz full of gauze.

Gene moved to the soda machine and inserted twenty cents. He gave the Coke button a steady look before choosing Mountain Dew. The can clattered to the outlet.

"Gene."

He whirled around. "Dad!" His father wasn't smiling.

He motioned for Gene to come over and take a seat.

"She'll be staying at least one night. Knudson thinks it's consistent with migraines, but he wants to rule out some other things, like meningitis." He placed his elbows on the metal armrests and tapped his fingertips together. His jaw muscles were working overtime. Gene had seen this countless times before, like when the garbage disposal failed and when the car's engine stalled on a climb through a desert mountain range.

"But you think it's something else?"

"Zem's still in house working on our patient from earlier. I asked him if he'd take a look at Patty."

"Who?"

"Dr. Zemlicka. Chief of Cardiology."

"Her heart?"

"I'm going to run up to the ICU while he's with her. Hang in there." He patted Gene's thigh before striding back through the double doors.

Gene stared at the chilly can in his palm, wishing they'd never raced underwater.

Another tortured couple of hours passed. Just as Gene returned from the men's room, Patty's mother walked through the double doors with Gene's father, his arm around her shoulders while she dabbed her eyes. The sight of her crying hit him in the chest like a fastball. His father mouthed to him — it's okay.

His father and Mrs. McLellan sat on each side of Gene. He looked from one to the other. Then Mrs. McLellan, clutching her tissue in her lap, sat Emily Post straight and took a deep breath. She conjured a brave smile, and patted Gene's bare thigh. "Your father just saved my daughter's life."

His father shook his head. "I didn't save her life. I had a hunch. Dr. Zemlicka figured it out. He did an echo. She has an atrial myxoma."

"A what?" Gene said.

Mrs. McLellan nodded. "That's what I said."

"A tumor in her heart. It's probably been growing for years,

but now it's causing a problem. She likely had a small stroke tonight."

"She's too young," Gene said. "I don't get it."

"A small piece of the tumor or a small clot likely broke free and traveled to her brain. It seems to have resolved. Knudson doesn't detect any deficit. The big risk is that it could happen again. A bigger stroke *or worse*."

Gene wasn't going to follow the path to *or worse*, nor did he want Mrs. McLellan to.

"She needs surgery," Mrs. McLellan said.

Gene looked back to his father. "So they'll cut it out. Game over. Patty wins. Right?"

Mrs. McLellan gave a short laugh. "I like your attitude. You sound like the heart surgeon. He said it's like removing a pearl from an oyster."

"Dr. Harrington was upstairs," Gene's father said. "He came down and examined Patty as well. She's scheduled for tomorrow."

"Sunday!" Gene looked to Mrs. McLellan. She was biting her lower lip.

"Dennis is at a friend's," she said. "He'll stay there tonight." Then she rolled her eyes. "Who knows if her father can get here in time."

On the drive home, Gene's father assured Mrs. McLellan again that the surgery was straightforward. "How can I thank you?" she said. "If you hadn't stuck with your intuition, Patty might have walked out of the ER, and who knows..." She covered her mouth and cleared her throat. "Who knows what might have happened."

Gene walked her to the door while his father sat in the car. After she turned on a light, she faced Gene. "See you tomorrow?"

"Of course."

She waved to the car and paused.

"I'll just keep telling myself 'They cut it out. Patty wins.'"

She kissed Gene's cheek and walked inside.

Later, lying in his darkened bedroom, the gravity of the day weighed on him. Through tears, he wondered how he could feel

so much love — and so much fear — for a girl with whom he'd yet to complete a first date.

His father tapped on the door and opened it a crack. The hallway light leaked around his silhouette. "You awake?"

"Yeah."

"I need to make rounds before Patty's case, so I might be gone when you get up. Just wanted to let you know I'll take good care of her for you."

Oh, how his father knew him. It's exactly what he needed to hear.

Gene squeaked out a *thanks*.

"Goodnight," they both said.

So, what was he to Patty? Friend? Acquaintance? Tree painter? Certainly not boyfriend. He hadn't even kissed her yet. Her mother has kissed him though. He smiled and glanced at Mrs. McLellan seated next to him, working her needlepoint project. Then he looked across to Mr. McLellan who yawned while reading a hunting magazine. No, according to this guy, Gene was the kid who nearly killed his daughter. His only daughter. A girl, who will now miss the first quarter if not the first semester of her senior year.

From the sterile silence of this small waiting area, Gene could see the automatic glass doors with *Operating Room Attire Only* printed in threatening, black letters on the glass. He checked his watch (nearly one p.m.) and shifted in the vinyl chair. It complained, triggering another look, or more like a condescending stare, from Patty's father.

After he'd gotten the call from Mrs. McLellan, Mr. McLellan had driven all night from Van Nuys. He didn't have time to shower or shave. And the man's densely shadowed cleft chin rekindled all the anger Gene once felt toward a certain dim-witted upperclassman: a lineman on varsity who validated his worth by hazing Gene with a jockstrap to his face when he was a

freshman. At least that's how Gene's father had explained it to him.

Floating in this relationship no-mans-land, Gene had timed his arrival at the hospital to allow the McLellans a private moment before Patty was wheeled across the operating suite threshold. He was there, though, when Dr. Harrington lumbered past. Gene had met the surgeon a couple times, but Dr. Harrington didn't recognize him. In his soothing Southern drawl, he said, "Shouldn't take long. We're gonna open her hahrt and pluck out the pearl."

That had been three hours ago.

"They might at least give us a status report," Mr. McLellan said.

"It doesn't work that way," Mrs. McLellan said.

"She couldn't keep her eyes open," he said. "Maybe the anes-tho-gist gave her too much and can't wake her up." He smirked at Gene.

"Frank!" Mrs. McLellan gave him a hard look. "They're done when they're done. Game over. Patty wins. Isn't that right, Gene?" She smiled.

Gene nodded. Then he dropped his head and whispered, "It's anesthesiologist."

Mr. McLellan leaned forward. "Say something?"

"Nope." Rhymes with dope.

F-wing was at the east end of the hospital, and during the day, the sun's burning rays had heated the room. The floor-to-ceiling drapes were still closed across the room-wide picture window. Using his hand, Gene tested whether heat still radiated through the drapes — only a little — while his thoughts drifted here and there, finally settling on a horrible image: Dr. Harrington taking a seat next to Mrs. McLellan, cradling her hand between his large mitts, and saying, We did everything we could.

Gene blinked the thought away. He turned to Mrs. McLellan. "I'm heading down to the diner. Want anything?"

"Thank you. Coffee. Black." Her eyes were focused on the needlepoint project, music-themed throw pillows for Patty's bed.

This one was a large treble clef. The intensity of her stitching made Gene wonder if she had a superstition going: if I can get to the curlicue, then Patty will be fine. It was the kind of thing Gene did before baseball games. If I can make every green light, I'll throw a no hitter. He could never time them perfectly.

"You might want to stop by the lab and get checked for tape worms," Mr. McLellan said. He looked up, laughed, and went back to his magazine. "What's this, your fourth trip?"

"Frank!...Gene, don't listen to him. He says stupid things when he's tired."

Patty's dumbass father turned the page to a photo of a felled buck elk. "I was very tired the night I proposed to you." He smirked, still not looking up.

"And I was drunk when I said 'Yes.'"

He slammed the magazine down onto the floor. "I thought this show was only supposed to take a couple hours."

Mrs. McLellan dropped her hands and needlepoint to her lap. "Why'd you even come here, Frank? Do you even understand what's happening? This is our daughter. Not some fleet truck you're having repaired." She started to cry. Put her hands to her face. Then she sat straight, her face enraged, and pointed to the glass doors. "The doctor could walk through those doors any minute and tell us our daughter is dead. Dead, Frank." Spit flew from her lips. "Did that ever occur to you? Did it, Frank."

Mr. McLellan didn't budge. His face was a wall.

"I didn't think so. Why would a man who ran off on dive trips so he could doink his bookkeeper, and then proudly...no, arrogantly...flaunt photos of his trip to his wife, with this blonde bitch always smiling at the camera, a groping-reach behind him? Why would this man ever consider the consequences of any action?" A sobbing wave erupted from Mrs. McLellan.

Gene put his arm around her, embarrassed, yet relieved there was nobody else in the waiting area.

"Typical," Mr. McLellan said. "Always the theatrics." He picked up the magazine and raced through it, presumably looking for a dead animal.

“Bastard!” The word flew from Gene’s mouth like a snap throw to first.

For a few long seconds, the silence sucked all the molecules from the room. Mrs. McLellan raised her head from Gene’s shoulder. She seemed to hold her breath.

Mr. McLellan’s eyes locked onto Gene’s. “Careful, Sonny,” he said. “I’m here, ain’t I?”

“Be right back.”

Gene fumed his way to the service elevators between the waiting area and the surgical suite and pressed Down. His use of this elevator was an unspoken doctor’s-son privilege, a kind of legacy perk born from the times he’d joined his father on Sunday evening rounds, waiting either in the lobby where he watched *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, or here on F-wing in the usually quiet, empty Open Heart waiting area, itself a privileged space for family of the patients undergoing the most prestigious surgery Desert Valley Hospital offered. And his father was a part of it.

Prestige. Gene may not have it now, but he would someday. Someday he would be a doctor, and he wouldn’t have to suffer the condescension of a burly hunter-adulterer, who no doubt thought Gene wasn’t good enough for his daughter; as if he’d caused her heart problem. He wasn’t only good enough. He was perfect for her. He couldn’t say why exactly, but there was a connection, and right now he didn’t have the knowledge or experience to heal her heart of the growth inside, but he cared, just like Mrs. McLellan said Gene’s father cared, and Gene would do whatever it took to help Patty through this, once she awakened from the haze and went back to her room. God, how he wanted to stomp back over to that piece of shit, stand firm and announce: I may not be an animal killer, but I know where I’m going, I know who I’m going to be, and I know I’m in love with your daughter, and I will never, ever betray her.

The elevator dinged. Alone in the carriage, he pressed “L” and thought, if no one stops the elevator then.... He held his breath, counting down the numbers...three, two, one. He exited to the hallway where a kitchen attendant waited with two

towering lunch carts. Patty would be fine now, confirmed by his silly superstition. Besides, not once had his father ever told him about a patient dying in the Heart Room.

GENE ORDERED a coffee for Mrs. McLellan and a Dr. Pepper for himself, then waited several minutes for the elevator. It seemed to be stuck on four. Climbing the stairs might not be a bad idea. Exercise always relaxed him, and he hadn't fully cooled down after his encounter with Patty's jerk of a father. But the elevator whined, the red numbers descended to one, and the door opened. It took Gene a moment to recognize his father at the back of the carriage, dressed as he was in a surgical cap with an operating room mask dangling from his neck. He wore a white coat over his surgical scrubs. And he was at the head of a large bed. It was Patty.

"Gene," his father said.

Patty's eyes were closed. A tube exited her mouth, the tape contorting her lips slightly to one side. His father squeezed on a bag connected to the tube. A white blanket came up to her chin, and her dark hair flowed across the pillow.

A nurse pulled on the bed as his father pushed it out of the elevator with his free hand. IV bottles, hanging from a pole on the bed, clanged as the bed clunked across the threshold. A small box at the head of the bed made the beeping heartbeat sounds, Patty's heartbeats.

As the foot of the bed swung around and Patty paused beside him, his father touched his shoulder. "Meet me in the lobby."

Gene looked to the nurse at the foot of the bed. She offered a smile more hopeful than reassuring.

"Sandra," his father said. "Let's go."

Gene walked a step or two by the bedrail as they moved, his hands unfairly occupied with the two drinks. He wanted to hold Patty's hand, just for a second.

"Gene," his father said again.

Gene looked up.
 “The lobby.”

THE MAN with the tranquilizing dart took steady aim with a long rifle at the leopard in the tree. “He’s got one chance to hit his mark,” the narrator said. Gene sat in the tan leather couch in the lobby, watching but not watching, listening but not listening to this public television rerun. Something happened during surgery. That grim look when his father exited the elevator. He’d seen that before.

“Gene.”

His father, still wearing a white coat, took a seat next to him. Gene hoped for the big toothy smile or a comforting slap on the shoulder. It didn’t happen.

“We had a little trouble.”

Gene shifted in his seat and stared at the red cursive stitching above the coat pocket — *Desert Valley Heart Team*.

“She arrested,” his father said. “Her heart stopped...just before bypass.” He touched Gene’s knee as his voice accelerated. “But we were able to get her on bypass pretty quickly. Sometimes this happens.”

“I don’t understand,” Gene said. “Is she okay?”

“She’s in the ICU. So far so good.”

“But you cut out the tumor, right?”

His father nodded.

“When can I see her?”

“She may need an extra day in the Unit.”

“Can I go in?”

“Sorry, but it’s family only. Besides, she’s not breathing on her own yet.”

“Not breathing?”

“She’s still intubated. A ventilator is breathing for her.”

“For how long?”

“When she’s stronger. Look, I need to get back and check on something.”

It wasn’t in his nature to disobey his father and risk losing his respect. But Patty McLellan was no ordinary girl, and he needed to see her.

MONDAY, Gene sat in seventh period advanced English, *The Heart of Darkness* closed on his desk, and watched the second hand above the chalkboard click toward three o’clock. He should have skipped school. How could he concentrate? At three the bell toned, and by 3:05 he was speeding up Central Avenue toward Desert Valley Hospital. Of course, he hit every red light, had to stop twice for pedestrians in cross-walks where there wasn’t a light, and parked in the last row, the farthest point in the parking lot from the hospital. He didn’t try to shade the seat or steering wheel from the scorching sun, he just abandoned his books and notes and sprinted for the back entrance.

Last night at dinner, his father hadn’t had much to say. Only that Patty was still in the ICU, sedated, and the ventilator breathing for her. Fortunately, Gene knew the key to skirting hospital regulations.

At the ICU desk, next to the open door with the sign that read *Family Only*, he said, “I’d like to see Patty McLellan.”

“Are you family?” asked the unit secretary.

Gene straightened. “She’s kind of my girlfriend.” She doesn’t know it yet.

“Kind of?”

“We were on a date when she nearly drowned.” Maybe not nearly. “I’m Dr. Hull’s son, Eugene.”

The woman smiled. “Every bit as handsome.” She looked over toward the row of six or seven patients with curtains partway drawn between them. “Her parents just went down to the diner for a few minutes. Go right in. Number four.”

Gene wandered past beds one, two, and three. Bottles of fluid

and bags of blood hung on poles. Monitors beeped while squiggly green lines traced across the screens. Two of the patients could have been mannequins: a bedsheet covered them to their chins; their chests rose with each hiss of a ventilating machine. The middle patient coughed as a woman in nursing whites helped him press a pillow against his chest and encouraged him to cough again.

Gene paused at the curtain separating bed three from Patty. Then he stepped into view.

She was lying in bed, head up a little, and her hands were folded over the covers pulled to the waist of her gown. Her eyes were closed, and her beautiful dark hair spread across her pillow. Her mother had probably combed it. He hoped her face wasn't as pale as it looked in the low light. She had the cutest upturn to the right corner of her mouth. Each breath briefly fogged the green translucent mask. Mask. She's was breathing on her own.

From behind him, someone whispered: "Gene." He turned to see the nurse who'd helped his father transport Patty yesterday. He recognized her hopeful smile. Again, she was in scrubs but without her cap. Her brown hair was pulled back to a ponytail. She stepped beside him and kept her voice low. "I'm Sandra," she said, offering a hand. Then she nodded toward Patty. "She looks really, really good."

Gene gazed at Patty. "Yeah?" he said. "My dad had me kind of worried."

Sandra sighed. "We were all worried for a while."

"He said her heart stopped."

Sandra stared at Patty's serene face.

"He asked me to check on her," she said. "He's in the Heart Room."

"Don't let him know I was here. I was kind of supposed to wait."

"Under the circumstances, I really don't think he'll mind."

Gene winced. "He might."

"Our secret, then."

For several seconds his eyes wandered across Patty's face. Her

sweet expression hid even a hint of trouble in the Heart Room. "She could have died. Right?"

They were silent.

"I'm just glad he was there," he added.

"Me too," she said and touched his arm. "I've got to get back."

After Sandra left, he counted Patty's breaths until he lost count. He'd never watched a girl sleep before. It was a strange thought. He stepped closer, leaned over the rail, as if he was Patty's boyfriend, and kissed her forehead. She stirred. Slowly, her lids opened, heavy curtains rising. Her eyes moved laterally and Gene moved easily toward the foot to meet them. She smiled, started to speak, but a catch in her throat stopped her. She made a slow reach with an IV-burdened arm toward her mouth and stopped when her hand met the oxygen mask. She looked at her arm as if it was an alien being and let it drop. Then she ran her tongue over her parched lips, cleared her throat and tried again in a hoarse whisper. "Gene." She smiled a drunken smile. "Been here long?"

Gene wanted to say Only my whole life. But he couldn't get out a word. Not a single word.

Chapter Six

THE LAST DAY OF TRYOUTS



Summer 1974

It's four thirty a.m. and Gene's returning to an old routine this morning. Something familiar. Running.

"Apollo, scoot." Apollo yawns and jumps down from the bed.

With a grand sweep, Gene throws the covers aside. The air conditioner thuds to action, delivering a cool blast of air across his bare chest and legs. He hangs a leg over the twin bed and nibbles the carpet with his toes. Around his room, only one of his high-school posters remains — the Giants' Juan Marichal delivering his trademark high-leg-kick pitch. The modular shelves are mostly empty except for a few trophies topped with plastic batting or pitching figures, and beneath the window, sunlight had dulled the top of the faux walnut desk.

After that embarrassing crash his first day, Gene remained standing the rest of the week. He arrived early each day and stayed out of the way. What more could he do? But Irene has yet to give him any indication that he'll get to scrub next week. There's only one surgery scheduled for today, then the weekend is his, not that he has any plans.

Gene rises and opens the shutters. A few blocks south and east of his house, the lights of Grant Elementary's two ballfields are lit. For a grade school they are quality diamonds. That the lights are on at this hour means Mr. Parker, the PE teacher, is preparing the infields for the first Little League tournament of the summer, a tournament Gene participated in so many summers ago, when his father's cheering could be heard from the bleachers and there was only an orange grove across the street from the school. No homes. No Patricia McLellan.

DOWNSTAIRS, Gene tucks the house key inside his sock, adjusts the fit of his sweat-stained Central High baseball cap and heads out the front door. He runs east on Orangewood, passing under the amber glow of streetlights. The morning air, thin and almost body temperature, seems to flow through his bare chest. He's tried to explain the exhilaration he feels from this uniquely desert experience, but most responses are along the line of that's nice. It is nice. It's more than nice. Like the deep-breath nice of completing your last final exam.

He runs past single level block homes with shake roofs, past sprinkler heads popping up to quench the thirst of the carpet-like Bermuda-hybrid lawns, past acacia and olive trees, and past the citrus trees that were once his obligation, where now, like then, the whoo-whooping of mourning doves announces the coming day.

He turns south onto Central Avenue and a half-mile later right onto Maryland Avenue. He's settled into a rhythm. Each breath sounds like a saw sliding through soft pine. With every few heel strikes, sweat slides down his neck to the divot of his chest. His legs, initially leaden from not running for the past three months, surge with strength.

At Third Place he turns the corner and jogs another quarter mile, before slowing to a stop across the street from the Grant Elementary School's ballfields. On the far diamond, under the harsh klieg lights, Mr. Parker horses the infield grader between

second and third base. In the eerie predawn, light from both fields overshoots the school's boundary and bears down on Gene like searchlights. He faces the McLellan house. His chest heaves. His skin is slick with sweat. As he removes his baseball cap and wipes his brow with the back of his arm, two shadow hats and two shadow arms sweep across Patty's empty driveway. No Mustang. She's still not back.

He snugs his cap back in place and walks over to an orange tree by the drive. The largest of the young green fruit are the size of ping-pong balls. He runs his hand over a main branch. The paint, his signature, is fading.

He's about to jog home when the light in her bedroom comes on.

Gene eases behind the tree. In high school, she practiced her flute each morning about this time. A shadow walks across the room. His heart picks up speed. The shadow appears again. Patty? Could she have sold the Mustang? She seems to sit, maybe in her practice chair but he can't be sure because of distortion caused by the wavy curtains. He looks around, then staying low, darts across the lawn to a hedge beneath her window. Crouched there, he spies a slim crack in the curtains. Okay, just a quick glance.

As he starts to rise, the curtains fling open. Shit. He drops to his belly. His heart's about to bust through his chest. He tries to slow his breathing. Then he hears grunting, rhythmic grunting. He shakes his head. Oh, Jeez. So that's what's going on. He rolls over and angles his head enough for a view of the window. The grunting stops and a face appears, hands cupped to the glass. It's Dennis. He's looking out at the ballfield. He's between sets, lifting weights. He always did want Patty's room.

The eastern sky is lightening. Soon the neighbors will be collecting the morning paper. He can't just run for it, so he combat-crawls along the hedge to the property line and the house next door. Then he rises and races home, hungry, hollow, and late for work.

GENE, wearing his white coat, exits the service elevator on four. A lean black guy in scrubs pulls a six-foot cart of breakfast trays up to the carriage. Gene holds the door. A bouffant cap ensnares and tramples the man's Afro. His name badge reads *Jesse*. Gene has seen him on the floor while tagging along with Dr. Harrington between surgeries. They'd exchanged nods a few times. Jesse always seemed to be whistling a little four-bar melody, a sweet, nondescript riff, which he repeats over and over as he moves the cart up and down F-wing. Jesse stops his cart halfway across the transom. "You like waffles?" he asks.

"Sure," Gene says.

Jesse picks up a tray out and offers it. "Four-twenty-six checked out."

"Checked out?"

"Not one of yours, I hope."

"I'm sorry?"

"Died, man. They never tell the kitchen."

Gene doesn't feel right accepting the tray, but the smell of bacon is working on him. After the run past Patty's house, he didn't have time to eat. And the last time he missed breakfast, he fainted in the Heart Room.

"It's okay. Take it. It weren't the food that killed him."

Gene takes the tray with both hands. As the elevator door begins to close, he blocks it with his foot.

Jesse reaches around, punches a button, and the door stays open. "You a new resident or something?"

"Not exactly. I'm following Dr. Harrington around."

"You best follow a little closer. I seen him down in the Unit earlier."

"No, I only follow him in the afternoon, but I'm in the operating room with him all day."

"Heart Team, huh?" He nods toward the red stitching on Gene's coat. "That's heavy shit. Not for me...no way. I seen the scars you guys leave. Like they'd been had with some kind of

jungle machete.” Jesse looks at something on the clipboard hanging from the cart and then checks it off with a pencil. “I seen a heart...two hearts, once. That was enough.”

“What kind of surgery?”

“Weren’t no surgery. Saw it in Nam.”

“Vietnam?”

“Guess you never been. You got time for a story?”

“Not really.”

“Rest that up here. Won’t take but a sec.” Jesse takes the tray and places it atop his cart.

“We was on patrol once — ”

Just then, a barrel of a fellow with a tattoo peeking from beneath his scrub’s shirtsleeve, comes up pushing a patient on a gurney. “You got a flat?” he says.

Jesse turns around. “Leo. Where you headed?”

The patient’s eyes are closed, and she’s as pale as her white hair. A tube exits her nose. “X-ray,” Leon says.

Jesse balances Gene’s breakfast tray and pulls his cart back. The orderly moves onto the elevator while Jesse releases the hold button. “Send it back.”

“You got it, my man.”

The doors close. “That woman don’t need an x-ray. She need some blood.”

Gene checks his watch. Maybe Irene won’t notice if he’s a couple minutes late.

“This won’t take long. Like I was saying, we was on patrol once and came into this village. Place was empty, except for some pigs and chickens and shit. A couple pit fires was still burning. Add that all up, and you got trouble. So, we check things out, hut to hut, following our policy of shoot before entering. We ain’t finding nothing. Then outside one hut, we see these two poles, like bamboo, with something stuck on top. Well, you probably guessed it. They was hearts. Big as grapefruit and red as apples. Side by side like that, they looked like a couple old folk waiting for the bus. It was pretty clear what was going on with those hearts. Want to take a guess?”

“Some kind of revenge killing.”

“Nope.” Jesse’s lip began to quiver. “They was just having a heart to heart.”

It takes a second for Gene to realize he’s been had.

Jesse throws his hands on Gene’s shoulders and bends over, laughing. His breath smells like an ashtray.

“Oh, man, I’m sorry,” Jesse says. “I’m sorry.”

Gene’s face flushes. He’s never liked being the butt of jokes. “That’s a good one.”

“You should’ve seen your face.”

The elevator door bolts open, startling Gene. It’s empty. “Sounds like you’ve been there.”

“Oh, I did my time in Nam all right,” he said, wiping his eyes. “The heart stuff I made up. We was always pissin’ on each other like that. Be glad you weren’t five years older. You’d ‘a’ been pissin’ there with me.”

He presses the hold button inside the elevator. “You’re a good sport. Breakfast is on me from now on. I’m usually here by about six, although I’m running behind today. What’s your name anyway?”

“Gene.”

“Nice to meet you, Dr. Gene. You can call me Jesse. Not Jess. Jess-ee.” He hands the breakfast tray back to Gene. “Okay, I got mouths to feed.” Jesse puts his weight into the cart and moves it forward. “Man, you made my day. Check you later, Doc.”

The door starts to close, and Gene takes a step forward. “Jesse, I’m not a doctor.”

“Hey, I know. I know.” Jesse smiles and pauses the door. “You dressing like one, though. Shit, that’s a start. Stay cool.”

Gene hustles away with breakfast. Jeez, he won’t even have time to eat this.

CARRYING THE BREAKFAST TRAY, Gene rushes into the doctor’s lounge. Dr. Pereira, sitting on a couch, looks up from a quarter-

folded section of a newspaper and raises a long index finger to his pursed lips. He nods toward Dr. Harrington. The man's asleep in a vinyl chair by the phone, his doctor's cap untied and slanted on his head. An unlit cigarette dangles from his lips. His head bobs with each sibilant breath. Gene stops and reaches back with one foot to prevent the locker room door from closing with a bang.

For the most part, the Heart Team doctors have the lounge to themselves this early in the morning. The other cases in the OR begin a half-hour later.

"We had to bring yesterday's cabbage back," Dr. Pereira says. He takes a sip from a coffee cup. "Bleeding."

Gene sets the tray on the coffee table and whispers. "What time?"

"About two. Dr. H never got home."

"That's too bad."

"He loves it."

Still standing, Gene raises the heavy lid on the breakfast plate. Steam rises from scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast.

"Oh," Dr. Pereira says. "Irene was inquiring about your presence."

Gene gestures to the food. "You want it?"

"I see you've made Jesse's acquaintance." Dr. Pereira uncrosses his legs and leans forward, looking through his reading glasses to survey the steaming plate as well as the pint-size milk carton. "I consider it my duty to spare you the cholesterol." He lays the paper on the couch. "Studies suggest it is bad for your heart."

"I better see what Irene wants."

Dr. Pereira jellies a piece of toast, takes a bite, and holds up a finger for Gene to wait. "Next time we have a bring-back, I will call you. Once you start scrubbing."

Right. If he starts scrubbing.

"Before you go. Look at this. Do you ever do the Jumble?"

"I used to."

"The first three words, I unscrambled in seconds. This last one evades me."

Gene looks up to the clock. It's almost six-forty-five.

He takes the paper and works out various three letter syllables within the six available letters. "Misfit. I need to go."

"Ah, you saved the day."

The intercom clicks: "Dr. Harrington. Dr. Pereira. We're ready." It's Sandra's voice, booming from the scratchy speaker. "Is Gene there?"

Dr. Harrington stirs. The cigarette drops from his mouth. He pushes his glasses up to his forehead, rubs his eyes with his large meaty hands, and with some effort rises to his feet, placing the full bulk of his weight on the thin armrests. He plops his glasses down to his nose and looks over at Gene. "Eugene, please alert Deborah that I shall be right along." He lumbers toward the dressing room, but as he opens the door, he stabs his hip on the corner of the Formica coffee counter. "Damn." He stumbles and slams his fist on the counter. "I swear, I'm going to rip that from the wall someday."

Pressing the intercom, Gene says, "Sandra?"

"I heard," she says. "Glad you made it."

Then, through the background country music, Gene hears Dr. Boz's voice. "Hey, Rui, you Portuguese piece of shit, get a move on. The patient's asleep, and I'd like to open up the Harley this afternoon before Katie gets back in town." The intercom clicks off.

"The cowboy has his charm," Dr. Pereira says. "If I had surgery, he'd be my anesthesiologist, but Gene ..." He takes a deep breath. "I tell you, I miss Carl's spirit, and I miss his jazz collection playing while we work. A true gentleman."

Gene wavers under the weight and spotlight of Dr. Pereira's admission. If only Gene knew what to say. Something catchy and memorable like Jesse's four-bar phrase. But all Gene has to offer, all he can muster after nearly nine months of trying to understand his feelings on this, or anything for that matter, is: "Me, too."

Dr. Pereira remains silent. He claps Gene on the shoulder again, leaving his hand there until they clear the door into the chilly OR corridor.

GENE LEAVES the surgeons at the scrub sink and enters the Heart Room. It's even chillier than the hallway. He sits on the stool, and for several minutes, Irene ignores him while she prepares for the case.

Finally, she says, "You're late." Her back is to him as she lays instruments on her Mayo stand.

Gene's father once told him, "When your coach balls you out, and you know he's right, don't make excuses. Just take your medicine and do better next time."

Irene turns. "I wanted to talk to you about next week."

Dr. Pereira backs into the room. "Sandra, would you be so kind as to switch the music to jazz."

"My pleasure," she says.

Irene hands Dr. Pereira a towel. Oh great. Now Gene has to wait a few hours until his bitter medicine. He can sense it in Irene's rigid posture. For her, it's time to work.

While Gene stands behind the blood-brain barrier with Dr. Boz, the team prepares for bypass. Dave Brubeck plays in the background. Roger's Valentine-heart cap bobs with the groove as he taps the last stubborn bubbles from the bypass tubing. Gene recognizes the tune, "Blue Moon," from his father's reel-to-reel collection. Now, Dr. Pereira cauterizes the raw, bleeding edge of the split sternum. Gene's used to the smell and no longer needs the peppermint on his mask.

He folds his arms and looks around. He feels invisible, an outsider to the team, while they work. But it hardly seems like work. Dr. Pereira taps his foot to the music as he cranks the chest-spreader open. Irene yawns behind her mask before passing a needle holder to Dr. Pereira and a long-handled scalpel to Dr. Harrington. Her elbow bumps the stand and an instrument clatters to the floor.

"Sandra," Irene says. "I lost an Alice."

Gene squats down. "No, it's scissors," he says. "Metzenbaum I

think.” He only knows that because he’s watched every instrument count this week. Well, except for this morning.

“My young Gene,” Rui says. “A little review.”

With a Mayo forceps, Rui points to the heart’s anatomy as he and Dr. Harrington begin inserting the bypass tubes. Gene leans his head over the barrier, careful not to touch the top with his hands. One by one, he correctly names the major vessels, chambers, and the pericardial membrane.

Dr. Boz nudges him. “You have been paying attention.”

Dr. Boz stands and then sits back down. “Hey Gene-o. Take a look.” He pulls up a pants’ leg and angles his cowboy boot one way and the other. “Know what that is?”

Gene sits. “No.”

“Ostrich. Slow ostrich.” Dr. Boz’s eyes grin.

“How many different kinds do you have?”

“Dozens.” He smooths his pants’ leg back down. “Anything that can’t crawl, slither or fly away.” He stands and peers over the ether screen. “Take a look at this.”

Gene stands. As soon as he faces the surgical field, a jet of blood spurts over the drape. He ducks to his left, but the pencil-thick stream grazes his cap-covered ear. Something’s gone wrong.

Dr. Boz laughs and slaps him on the back. “Nice reflexes Gene-o. Pretty fast for a doctor’s kid.”

Gene looks around. Sandra, Dr. Pereira, Dr. Harrington, and even Irene, they’re all smiling. Their eyes don’t lie. He’s been had — for the second time today — and his face flushes.

“Eugene.” Dr. Harrington draws out Gene’s name as he sutures the aortic cannula in place. “We’re all a little sleep depraved...I mean deprived...so please excuse our little prank.”

The spurt of blood came from the puncture hole Dr. Harrington made in the aorta, but Dr. Pereira didn’t cup the spurt with his hand.

As a freshman in high school, before the results of varsity tryouts were posted, Gene found a cheerleader outfit in his locker. He knew then what he knows now — he’s made the team. They’ve accepted him — even Irene. For an unfiltered instant he

can't wait to tell his dad. Gene blinks hard and concentrates on the patient's pitching heart instead of his own. He's Carl Hull's son, not the late-arriving son of some hospital administrator. How could he not make the team?

"Gene," Irene says. "There's a book on the counter for you."

Gene walks over and runs his hand over the hard, green cover. *Principles of Cardiac Surgery*.

"Thanks. When do you want it back?"

"It's yours," Irene says. "We had an extra copy in the office."

"What ya got?" Dr. Boz asks.

Gene hefts the text in Dr. Boz's direction.

"When I was your age, my summer reading slanted more to carnal themes."

Dr. Pereira passes an empty needle holder to Irene, then looks briefly at Dr. Boz. "*The Last Picture Show* no doubt."

"Could have been my life. Dying town and only a single virgin left."

"The details, you can spare us," Dr. Pereira says. Then to Gene. "The book. Consider it a head-start toward a promising career."

Despite the warm feelings, Gene still has much to prove — to others and to himself. All he's done so far is watch. And of course, the face plant.

"WE'RE AT FULL FLOW," Roger says. Sandra turns off the music. Gene has learned that as ho-hum as the team might appear before bypass, once the heart-lung machine takes over and the clock is ticking, Dr. Harrington (through Irene) prefers a quiet room. But for Dr. Boz, the time on bypass is mostly down time. He turns off the ventilator. For the next hour or two, Roger's machine is the patient's heart and lungs. Once or twice during this period, Dr. Boz will hand a syringe to Roger. "Something to keep the patient from jumping off the table," Dr. Boz has told Gene. But for the most part, Roger seems to take control of the patient's well-being.

“Holding at thirty degrees,” Roger says. Here is one area, where Gene’s engineering background helps. Without thinking, he knows thirty degrees Celsius is about eighty-five degrees Fahrenheit.

Dr. Boz walks over to where Sandra stands by the phone. Hip to hip, they lean against the desk. When he brings his mask close to her ear, she rubs her tan arms. He tucks a stray wave of hair back under her cap, pats the small of her back, and lets his hand drift ever so briefly across her butt before folding his arms. This isn’t the first time Dr. Boz has flirted with Sandra. She never seems to dissuade him. Gene allows his mind to wander...to Patty’s sapphire eyes blinking like Sandra’s above the lip of her mask while a medical student whispers in her ear.

Dr. Boz catches Gene’s gaze. He looks back to the surgical field and then over to the monitor and the flat green lines of the stilled heart.

“Everything look okay, Gene-o?” Dr. Boz says. Gene nods. A lie. The weekend is ahead. That’s when he thinks of Patty the most — on weekends and at night — when he’s alone and he knows she isn’t.

Chapter Seven

I AM YOURS



Senior Year

GENE VISITED Patty in the hospital every day after school. On day three she moved to a regular room and by day seven she was discharged. While she convalesced at home, Gene acted as her liaison, delivering homework assignments and returning completed work. Each day as the sun set, they took short walks along her street. By the time football yardage lines had been chalked through Grant Elementary's baseball infields, she was strong enough to make it to the Big Tree, where they shared their first kiss.

On Halloween night, almost two months after their near disastrous first date, they hung out at Gene's house while his parents were out to dinner with Rui Pereira and his wife. Between dolling out candy to trick-or-treaters, Gene and Patty listened to albums on the living room stereo. Apollo curled at her feet. He had taken to her, buddying up whenever he could, a clear sign that Patty was indeed special.

When the action at the front door mercifully petered out, Gene placed one of his sister's Ricky Nelson albums on the

turntable. He'd driven out to Suzanne's ASU apartment just to pick up the record.

"This is for you," he said.

He dimmed the lights and returned to the sectional. She scooted close.

"It's called, 'When Fools Rush In.'

When the song ended, Patty turned to him. "That is so sweet." Her eyes glistened. "Why wouldn't I open my heart and let you rush in? In a way, you saved me."

Gene wanted to believe that. "My dad saved you, not me."

"You had a part." She brushed her thumb across his lip. "You still do."

He gave her a questioning look.

"The things you do. Like helping with my homework. The way you treat me. The things you say."

Gene rose, lifted the stylus from the record and returned.

He sat on the edge of the couch.

"The summer I turned eleven, I watched my father try to save a little girl who'd been hit by a Cadillac."

Patty's eyes widened. She put her hand over her open mouth and sagged. He laid out the whole story of his father's heroic efforts, every detail, even the part where Gene fainted. How cool his father had acted? Boy was he proud of his dad.

"And then to see him taking care of you, taking you to the ICU after surgery. And to learn that your heart stopped before the surgery started...well, he saved you. You might have died, but he saved you." Gene shrugged. That's who I want to be."

She hugged him, pulled her head back, and said, "No doubt, you will."

She was going to say something else, when the sound of the garage door stopped her. Gene jumped up and restarted the album. Ricky Nelson was rocking when his parents entered.

"Did the candy hold out?" his mother said.

Gene turned the volume down and returned to the couch. "At the end I let them take whole handfuls."

His mother looked to Patty. "So back to school tomorrow I hear."

"Doesn't feel like I missed much school. Gene saved me from having to repeat this semester."

He could kiss the grin she gave him.

"Big day tomorrow for Carl, too," his mother said.

Gene's father walked into the living room from the kitchen.

"Carl, show them the pen Rui gave you tonight."

Gene's father pulled the pen from inside his sport coat and held it up.

"Mont Blanc," Gene's mother said. "Rui said that now that he's got a nine-to-five job running Respiratory Therapy, he needed an executive's pen."

Patty said, "I was surprised when Gene told me you were leaving your practice."

"It's just a sabbatical of sorts," his father said.

She smiled. "Who's going to save me if I need surgery again?"

His father's face was almost grim.

Gene's mother encircles her husband's waist and pulls him close. "It was time for a change, right? For a couple years. More sleep. More evenings at home." She hugged him. "And now you can skip out when you want to watch Gene's ballgames this spring."

"Hopefully, now and then." He checked his watch. "I best turn in." He stepped over to Patty and grasped her hand with both of his. "I'm so glad to see how well you're doing. You look great."

"Thanks to you." She tipped her head. "And Gene."

He placed a hand lightly on Gene's head. "Night all."

After waiting for his father's bedroom door to close, Gene asked, "Dad okay?"

His mother gave a dismissive wave of her hand. "New job. New routine. Like the first day of school. Right?"

GENE'S senior year was magical. Patty was never far from his mind or his side. Her devotion inspired him. Each morning, his five-mile run before school took him past her house. Behind her backlit curtains, she practiced her flute. He occasionally left a song lyric under her Mustang's wiper, a phrase penned on a three-by-five card reflecting his burgeoning love for the shy girl from Van Nuys. Nothing gave him more pleasure than her hands-to-her-heart reaction after discovering the notes. In class, his grades excelled, and on the ballfield, seeing her in the stands, often next to his father, was good for an extra hit or a couple miles-per-hour on his fastball. On one memorable spring afternoon, he threw his only one-hitter, and after the game captured a photo of his two biggest fans.

They were Gene and Patty, Patty and Gene, and as the school year ended, their paths were set: Gene to Cal Poly for engineering and pre-med studies and Patty to the University of Arizona's nursing program. If their yearbook had an award for Most Likely to Live Happily Ever After, Gene was sure they would have won.

On graduation night, Gene's father instructed the young couple, dressed in their red cap and gowns, to cuddle up against the short chain-link fence encircling the lighted football field. In the background, white folding chairs extended from the end zone to the thirty-yard line. He took a photo with his Hasselblad, smiled without looking up from the viewfinder, then took two more. His father was so taken with the emotion of the moment, that his voice cracked when he said, "You make a beautiful couple."

THAT SUMMER, they often crawled through his bedroom window at night onto his roof deck. His freshman year, he'd leveled plywood across two-by-four bracing, strung a copper wire antenna, and pulled in the Giants' broadcast from San Francisco. Now, he listened with Patty, instilling in her his passion for the

most beautiful game ever invented. After the game they'd make out on a sleeping bag.

One night in early August, as they rested back on lawn chairs, listening to the Giants play the Astros, Gene looked over. It was the eleventh inning. Patty's eyes were closed, and she curled her toes and stretched like a contented cat.

He'd been on a sexual edge since graduation. And now her devotion to hang in there with him through extra innings only amplified his desire. Over the past year, they'd progressed through intimacy as far as two fully clothed lovers could. Although hesitant at first, she allowed his caresses through her clothing — thick cotton sweaters in winter progressing to fewer and thinner layers of fabric as the weather warmed, eventually down to a peasant blouse and bra in the high heat of summer. But Gene was eager for more. He'd tried playful finger-walks to her bra's clasp or down her tense abdomen to the edge of her denim shorts. Patty always halted his excursions with a soft "Gene" in his ear. She wasn't harsh or scolding yet offered no explanation to reassure him that eventually a time would come. There was something measured in her demeanor, something other than shyness that guided her. But she never explained. Tonight, he simply staked his position.

"Patty?"

"Hmm," she said.

"I want to make love to you."

She turned onto her side and sighed. She held out her hand.

"I know."

"Well?"

"Soon."

"When soon?"

"Gene, I'm not ready." She squeezed his hand.

"Is it your scar?"

"What?"

"Your scar. Are you embarrassed about your scar from surgery?"

She kissed his knuckles. "Gene, I'm just not ready."

What could he say? Soon was better than no.

He convinced himself that soon meant before she left for college at the end of the month. The next day he began expanding the roof-deck with another four-by-eight section of plywood. He worked shirtless in the invigorating heat. As he cut and drilled and fastened the planks, he recalled anecdotes of previous high-school couples consummating their relationship before heading off to college — in the back of vans, at an older sibling's apartment near ASU, in their parent's camper shell stowed in the backyard.

Gene smiled as he laid down a thick coat of spar varnish on the completed project. Then the final touch, something he'd "invented", a light dusting of fine sand to make the surface less slippery. Before crawling back through his bedroom window, he turned to look at his creation. Perfect.

Two days before Patty drove to Tucson, she called. "I have something for you. Can you come over?"

Her mother's car was gone when he arrived.

"Where's your mom?"

"Oh, evening shift."

"Dennis?"

"He's at the movies."

She curled her lower lip between her teeth and took his hand. She guided him through the cool air of the house to her bedroom. "Sit there." She motioned to the bed. "Close your eyes."

Gene's heart pounded.

"Now give me your hand."

He held it out, felt something light, and opened his eyes. A manila envelope.

"It's a kind of going away gift," she said.

He removed the envelope's content, expecting a clever map or maybe a modified reprise of the first lyric he left on her Mustang, something like, I'm ready to open up my heart and let you rush in.

But it was an eight by ten copy of the graduation photo his father had taken. He'd given each of them one. Gene's heart slowed to a trot.

"Check the back," she said. She sat next to him and turned the photo over.

On the back, in lavender ink, she'd written, *Love you with my whole heart* — *Patty*.

He turned the photo over and examined their faces. He remembered hoping they would succumb to passion that night. It was evident in his nervous bearing. Patty's expression was less expectant, entirely at ease with the boy whose shoulder her head tilted toward.

"You said, soon. We only have two days," he said.

"I know."

"Well?"

She looked down. He didn't want to have to convince her.

"I'm outta here."

"Gene."

He strode to his Jeep and in the TV version of this moment she would run after him. Then she'd lead him by the hand to her bed and turn out the light. He sat in his Jeep, engine running, and waited. He was about to pull away, when her door opened. She just stood there under her porch light, hugging the manila envelope to her chest and piercing his heart. He killed the engine and walked back to her.

She studied his eyes for several seconds. "Have you had sex before?" she said.

Gene took a half-step back. "No. Of course not. I mean —" He stopped. "Have you?"

Her serious expression didn't change. She shook her head. "No." And pressed the envelope to his chest.

They stood silent for some time, suspended in the still, dry air of summer's end. So, this is all she needed to know. That he wasn't some hound dog on the prowl. Why would she ever have that impression?

"I should go in," she said. She squeezed his hand and turned.

"Wait!" Gene tightened his grip. "That's it?"

She pulled her hand away. "Don't."

“So, you go back to your room and write in your diary *Gene’s a virgin?*”

She pointed to the envelope. “I mean every word in there. Every word.”

“I bet you do.”

“And what about you, Gene. Do you love me with your whole heart? Or only with something else?”

He slammed the envelope to the porch. “Keep it.” He walked backwards mimicking her voice from almost a year before, “Oh, Gene I’m so lucky. You saved me.” He waved. “Call when you’re ready to reward your hero.”

HE’D SAID some dumb things in his life. But this was Olympic caliber self-destruction. He sat on his roof deck after returning home, wondering what the hell had gotten into him?

He called the next day. Her mom answered and simply said, “I understand you two had a fight. Give her some time.”

At least it appeared Mrs. McLellan didn’t know what Gene had said.

“Tell her ‘I’m sorry’.”

Two days later, without a goodbye, she and her mother drove to Tucson. Patty was gone.

A little over a week into her classes, Gene received an envelope from her — their photograph. To his surprise his head hadn’t been scissored out. And on the back, she’d underlined Love you with my whole heart. She included a short note: I’m sorry, too. Can we start over? I hope you can come down to Tucson before you leave for school. I do miss you, Gene. Call me.

He dialed before his next breath.

SHE LIVED IN AN ALL-GIRLS’ dorm on the University of Arizona campus. He arranged to crash on the apartment floor of a former

Central High teammate. The thought of being separated from her by seven-hundred miles for the next three months frightened him. Or something close to frighten. Whatever it was, he pushed it aside and thought only of this weekend. He had a sleeping bag in the well of his Jeep and a speech in his head; a speech filled with respect and desire. He'd emphasize the respect, but the desire felt like an expanding balloon in his chest. When she's ready, she's ready, he kept saying to himself. And if that was tonight, well, he had protection in his pocket.

A desk clerk called up to her room and instructed him to wait in the lobby. When the elevator doors opened, she ran to him, dropped the sleeping bag she had under her arm, and gave him the passionate kiss he'd hoped for. "God, I missed you," she said.

He hugged her again. "Oh, I missed you." He pulled back and looked down at the sleeping bag. "What's with this?"

"Let's go camping," she said. "The Catalinas. It's six-thousand feet. Cool. Pine trees. And the stars will be fantastic." Gene must have looked befuddled. "You brought a sleeping bag, right?" she said.

She loaded her bag in the back of the Jeep and they headed toward the Catalina Mountains looming on the far north edge of the city. They stopped at a Sizzler along the way for dinner. Between bites of coconut shrimp, Patty talked about her classes, including Intro to Astronomy. But she was most excited about her nursing classes. She recounted the tour of the hospital, the pep talks (as she calls them) from nurses; not only those that worked on the floor, but those on obstetrics, the ICU, the operating room, recovery room, and even research. She hadn't fully considered the range of opportunities available to her.

"I'm flying, Gene. I'm flying. Your dad was right. He said I'd love the medical field. I can tell it's for me. I can't wait until clinicals."

Gene had finished eating. He thought only of the hours ticking down until he'd drive away from Tucson and not see her again until Thanksgiving.

"Patty, I'm going to miss you."

“That’s so sweet.” She grasped his hands across the table. “It’s only three months. We’ll write. We’ll call. I’m so busy right now, the time will fly by.” She raised off her seat and leaned over the table. “Come here.” She pulled his face close and kissed him like she owned him. “I could squeeze the stuffin’ out of you.”

It was dark when he parked his Jeep in an isolated camping spot in the densely wooded Catalinas. They zipped the two sleeping bags together in a small clearing between Ponderosa pines. Gene doused the headlights. Then they slipped off their shoes and jackets and crawled into the Coleman cocoon.

“Don’t you love that smell?” Patty said. She inhaled. “It smells like vanilla.” They were lying on their backs, Gene gazing at her profile. She pointed skyward, aiming at an opening in the trees. “Vega.”

Gene looked up. It was a sea of stars.

“That bright star,” she said, pointing. “That must be Vega. It was on a quiz yesterday. It looks so much brighter up here.”

Enough of the stars. He kissed her hard on the mouth. Her lips parted and he rolled partially on top of her. As soon as his hand charged across her sweater, she placed an open palm on his chest and gently pushed him away. He’d hoped tonight would be different. Should he push back? Maybe that’s what she wanted, what she needed. Let passion take over. But he couldn’t. His eyes, now fully adjusted to the quarter-moon’s light, saw in her eyes the same vulnerability, the same wariness from a year ago when she had escaped into her nearly completed home and out the front door. He rolled off of her.

She sat up. “You know what day it is?”

“Does it matter?”

“One year ago today, you saved my life.”

Gene ran a calendar in his head. “Big Surf?”

“You pulled me from the water. You took me to the hospital. You waited in the emergency room. You waited with my mother while I had surgery. You pulled me through that first semester. And you were patient. Mostly.”

Her hands disappeared inside her sleeves for a moment. In the

near darkness, he couldn't make out what she was doing... until she pulled her light-colored bra through one of the sleeves. Gene sat up. She took his hand in both of hers and guided it under her sweater, inhaling sharply as the weight and warmth of her full breast settled into his palm. It felt like a gift. An offering more tender and intimate than anything he'd ever experienced. A token of trust.

Gene froze. His heart threatened to slam through his chest. She held him there in the way she'd once clutched her flute case to her chest — his hand her shield now. He was about to ask the next question and the one after that, when she answered both with four words she exhaled into the crisp night air: "I started the pill."

Gene was beyond the breech. He pulled her blouse over her head and then removed her jeans and panties. His long-sleeved shirt got hung up on his watch until he yanked it free, the sleeve's button flying off into the dark. She unbuttoned his jeans and tugged them off as he raised his hips. The elastic waistband of his boxers caught on his erection. He freed his shorts and went for her socks, but she wasn't waiting. They made love in the clunky way two kids might attempt to ride a tandem bike, over-sized for their age: starting rough, straining to reach the pedals, and then swerving out of control. At most a couple of frantic minutes from start to finish.

A few moments after, with their chests colliding, Gene started to roll off of her, but she held him in place. "Don't go anywhere, you. I want to remember this." She ran her stockinged foot along his calf. "I want to remember making love with our socks on."

In the morning, with the sleeping bag's edge cuffed to their ears, they lay on their sides locked in a deep gaze. The air was damp and smelled of vanilla, the sky a soft gray slate above the trees. Sometime in the night, they'd both removed their socks. Patty rubbed her bare foot down his shin to his bare ankle. "Sorry," she whispered.

"Sorry?"

"I needed to be sure."

"Sure, that I'd taken my socks off?"

"You're impossible. I'm serious. I needed to be sure you were the one."

"The one what?"

"You're playing with me now," she said, smiling. "The boy who wouldn't leave me a day, a week, a year after I shared my body with him. Someone who would love me with his whole heart. Someone unlike my father."

"What changed your mind?"

"More like who."

"And..."

"My mother. On our drive down, I asked her if she'd ever get married again. She said, sure, if the right man came along. And I said, well aren't you afraid he might say he loved you, like Dad, and then go out and fool around. She said, oh it's possible, but if I loved the man, and I thought he loved me, I'd take the chance. She said, not every grape on a vine is sweet. Occasionally there's a sour one but you don't throw out the whole bunch." She turned onto her back and stared up to the light blue sky. Her face saddened.

"You okay?"

She sighed. "You grow up thinking your parents will always love each other. I was so naive." She turned her head to him. "I need to tell you something."

Her voice unsettled him. Gene braced.

"The year before we moved to Phoenix, I came home early from school. Another migraine. That's what we thought then." She looked back to the sky. "I heard a laugh and thought my parents were home. When I turned the corner into the hallway, I saw my father and another woman in my bedroom."

She took a deep breath.

"They were on the floor. Naked. Doing it like dogs. Saying things."

She began to tear. "He tried to cover up and started for me, saying, 'I can explain.' I was terrified, and I ran."

Gene placed a hand on her shoulder.

"He thought buying me the Mustang would shut me up." She

shook her head. "He had no idea how humiliating it was for me. I wasn't going to tell anyone, particularly my mother. I thought it would destroy her. But she sensed something was going on. I wasn't eating and couldn't sleep. Eventually, I lost it, and told her what I'd seen and made her promise not to tell anyone."

Gene kissed the top of her head. "I'm such a shit."

Patty pulled back. "No, you're not. Driving down here, she asked if I was worried that you would hurt me...not physically I mean but betray me if we ever married. I said I didn't think so. There was a time when she thought Dad wouldn't betray her. But she said the one thing she's gained with age is a good bullshit meter. She said from talking with you, from seeing how caring you are, the needle on her meter doesn't even budge. She also said, 'Look closely at his eyes. There's an old soul in there. A gentle soul.'"

Gene swallowed the guilt in his throat. "I can do better."

She smiled and looked from one eye to the other. "She's right. A gentle soul."

Gene's voice cracked. "As soon as I get back to Phoenix, I'm going to thank your mother for convincing her daughter to make love to me."

Patty poked him in the chest and arched with laughter. "Don't you dare." He laughed and she laughed even harder and then they were silent. Bluejays called and fluttered about in the trees. He combed a strand of her lush hair from her lips. "You haven't asked to see it," she said.

He pushed the cover aside, exposing her tense breasts to the crisp air. But his eyes quickly settled on the pink line running between them, and his heart ached, recalling all she had endured. He ran his finger along the full length of the scar. "It's so thin," he said. A year ago, she'd passed out and sunk beneath the water, and twenty-four hours later, she'd had this. He traced the scar back to her chin. "You know, had you really been drowning that day, I could have breathed for you."

"Really?"

"Mouth to mouth."

“Like Sleeping Beauty.” She crossed her arms and puckered her lips.

“I’m serious. “My dad taught me.”

Patty raised herself to her elbow.

“I was in third grade. We had just put our swimming pool in, and he wanted us to know what to do if someone was drowning. He didn’t have a mannequin, so he had Suzanne and me practice on each other.”

“You’re kidding?”

“It’s embarrassing now.”

“How old was Suzanne?”

“She would have been about fourteen. Now that I think about it, I can’t believe she put up with it.”

“What you’re telling me, is the first time you French-kissed a girl, she was your sister?”

“Don’t even say that.” Gene grimaces and rolls to his side facing Patty. “It’s pretty amazing to feel someone breathe for you, though.”

“So, let’s say you pulled me out of the water, and I wasn’t breathing.”

He smiled.

“Lie back.”

Naked and kneeling at her side, he said, “Breathe through your mouth.” Then he placed his fingers under her chin. “That’s it.” He pinched her nostrils lightly with his other hand. “Inhale... That’s right...Now exhale slowly, but don’t breathe in again. I’ll do that for you.”

As she breathed out, Gene breathed in. He placed his mouth over hers, lifted her chin, and gently exhaled. For a second, she resisted. But she relaxed, and it was as if a door swung open. The force of his breath flowed into her, and her chest rose to his cheek. When he separated his lips from hers, her chest recoiled, their warm, shared breath parting around his face. With his eyes closed, he repeated the cycle again and again, and soon the forest fell away. There was only the sound of his breath roiling through her lungs. Only his breath stretching her ribs like a yawn. She didn’t

shift her weight, cough, or lick an arc of her sweet saliva at the corner of her mouth. She lay still, dependent on Gene's breath for life. He shuddered and raised up.

Patty opened her eyes and blinked. "Wow."

She pulled him close by the small of his back and kissed his nose, and then each closed eye, before kissing his lips. His erection returned in a slow, steady rise. It crept across her abdomen, and he could tell by her sudden stillness that she felt it, too.

"Maybe we should put our socks on?" she whispered.

It became their code.

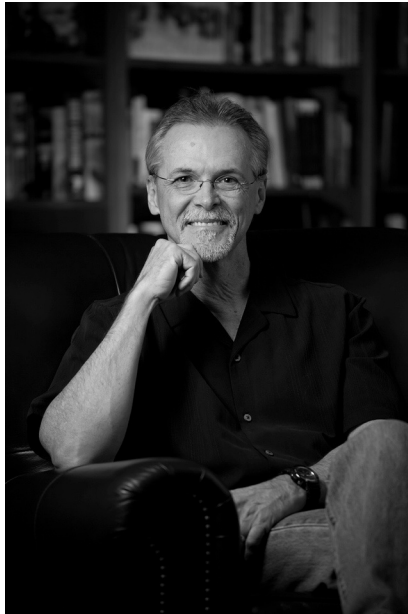
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Gregory D. Williams, M.D. is the winner of the *Arts and Letters* Prize for Fiction. His fiction, essays, and poetry have appeared in *Blue Mesa Review*, *Elysian Fields*, *American Fiction*, *Bosque*, and the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. A graduate of Stanford University and the University of Arizona Medical School, he grew up in Mesa, Arizona. Dr. Williams' specialty was anesthesiology, and he was the son of an anesthesiologist. The author passed away in 2020.

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