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Existential Masques

A fictional coming of age story of friendship, love, tragedy, and quests for answers.

Steven J. Furr

Dedicated to Gloria, Lauren, Gabrielle, and Adam, the ones closest to my heart.

In memory of Professor Pratt. The lessons he conducted in the most wondrous classroom of all fueled my love of music and literature. Ultimately, those seeds led to the composition of the story contained in the pages that follow.

Foreword

Thank you for taking the time to consider this story. Set in the late 1970s, while fictional, it is inspired by many personal experiences during that era. To be true to the period in which the narrative takes place, and its inspiration, certain dialogue and circumstances presented may seem insensitive under today's social norms. Hopefully, when taken in context, the words on the pages that follow will tell a captivating and entertaining tale without offending.

This book depicts numerous fictional incidents wherein the characters find themselves in various crises that resemble real-life situations. Should you or someone you know experience a similar traumatic event, please refer to the resources page at the end of this book for the contact information of hotlines that might prove invaluable.

Chapter 1

Despite feebly mimicking the sparse sources of available light, the wet pavement beneath the young boy's bare feet was nearly as black as the moonless midnight sky above. As he braved the cool thick air, it wick'd through his pajamas, weighing him down. The rhythmic sound of pounding steps in cut time, pierced the hour's usual silence, like ghost notes striking a snare drum.

Still, to him, the cadence seemed to echo off the encroaching white edifice in slow motion. If only his pace could match that of the metronome pounding within his chest. Out of breath and time, he lunged forward toward the closed door, only to be denied entry. His fist punched through one of the wooden door's nine panes of glass, immediately followed by agony and streaks of warm red blood.

Startled awake by the sound of shattering glass, he bolted up in bed, drenched in sweat and gasping for air. The vivid images lingered in his mind's eye, accompanied by the horror that resonated in his soul. "*That nightmare again,*" he said within. As his mind began to clear, he continued aloud, "But the sound of breaking glass was clearer than usual, and why did it wake me up after the pain and blood?"

"Sorry dude," Neil said rather sheepishly, "Dropped a glass. That same late show again?"

William nodded as he attempted to wipe the sleep, and perhaps the nightmare as well, out of his eyes.

"Totally bogus. Maybe you need the exorcist. To exorcise you, not for you to watch, that is," Neil remarked, trying to be supportive and cheer up the other boy.

William yawned and replied, "Maybe."

"Next time I drop something, I'll try to do it in the forest when no one's there to hear it, bud."

"I'd appreciate that, Confucius."

It was the best retort William could come up with after having an experience in bed that was anything but restful, or enjoyable, for that matter.

"Actually, that reference more closely relates to quantum mechanics, not so much philosophical concepts. However, if such a quote had historically been the work of a philosopher, I could envision it being attributed to Thoreau's *Walden*."

"It's too early for this crap Neil. I haven't even poured a cup of coffee yet. I need that and some tunes to wake me up first."

"Truly, but you've got to book it. Psychs in less than forty-five, and your feet haven't even hit the ground, dude. Your run through the *Zone* doesn't count, man."

"NEIL!"

The room fell silent for several seconds. The boys stared at each other. One saw an exasperated face, and the other observed a serene one.

"I'm sorry Neil, I just—,"

Yes, William wanted to apologize and to do it his way. He felt the need to come up with the most precise collection of words to tell Neil how much he genuinely appreciated what his friend was trying to do, but they were entirely out of his mind's reach. William was right when he said, "It's too early for this crap."

If you knew him long enough, you'd realize that it is one of the few logical reasons why William could not find those words he sought. Libraries full of them usually fell out of his mind as effortlessly as rain falls out of the sky, whenever he might choose to let them escape.

Seemingly never unable to say precisely what he wanted to say, Neil spoke.

“Exactly, bro! We’re tuned in to the same jams!” He punctuated his sentence with an exclamation mark and a big smile that was instantly reverberated.

William’s mood was transformed, and his day was now as bright as that particular morning. The tunes and coffee flowed in that order, and they would actually make it to psychology class early.

Autumn of 1977 was in full vigor. William and Neil strolled across the campus green of Foxmeadow Grove Academy, a small, private university. The teens, just entering their seventeenth year, were freshmen in their ninth week on campus. In addition to educating the typical coed, the university had a program for integrating advanced younger students into undergraduate studies and college life. Full and partial scholarships were awarded to traditional and younger students and were needs based.

The university was situated on rural land with rolling hills still enveloped by dense woodland. A small church had been constructed at the turn of the nineteenth century. Within ten years, a convent and boarding school for girls were added to its campus. Due to the convent's shrinking and aging membership, accompanied by declining enrollment in the school, the property had been sold and converted into a private university by the late 1960s. Although now a secular institution of higher learning, remnants still remained of its religious past.

The ground floor of the building that formerly served as a convent had been converted into classrooms. Its second story now functioned as a dormitory for males. The building that had been the boarding school provided the same function as it once had. The main difference being the age of the young ladies that now resided on its second floor. The students were separated by sex only in so far as the university's residential quarters are concerned.

Structures on the campus were eclectic, having served different purposes and constructed over a lengthy period. The most recent additions to the collection of buildings were a row of tiny two-story houses that were once separate from, but adjacent to the campus on a short winding road. These homes, dating from the 1930s, were acquired when the site became a college. They had since been converted into duplexes that now serve as private living arrangements for some faculty members.

Various materials were used to build the structures, the oldest of which were wood lap construction with stacked stone foundations. The most prominent buildings were of block or brick. Some included wings or other additions that incorporated odd angles in certain instances. The educator residences had the most modern look, having been the subject of recent renovations.

As the two cohabitants and friends sat in the classroom waiting for Professor James to begin, Neil listened to music through his headphones, and William’s synapses began to fire as well as the spark plugs of a cherry Trans Am. He wondered if someday, through Professor James’s efforts, he might learn how Neil was able to improve his mood and do it with so few words.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen,” the professor said upon entering the room. “As you should recall, we ended our last session going over a list of some psychiatric diagnoses. Refer to the projection here from yesterday to refresh your memory.”

Professor James’s list displayed via the slide projector included depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, phobia, and schizophrenia. The sight of the last item—*schizophrenia*—made William shudder.

The professor continued, “Can I see a show of hands if you know someone who is affected by one of these conditions?”

“Your uncle. Reach for a cloud, dude,” said Neil quietly.

William acquiesced and reluctantly raised his hand.

“As you look around the room, we see many people impacted by such mental health issues,” Professor James noted before telling those assembled, “Now let’s examine a summary of a case study for an individual who experienced one of these maladies, schizophrenia.”

William suddenly felt lightheaded and queasy. “*Hold it together. Studying schizophrenia is one of the reasons you took this course,*” he said to himself.

The professor displayed and read aloud the first of several slides of a case study for a patient he identified using only initials.

“J.D. was a nineteen-year-old woman brought to the emergency room by the campus police of a university. A professor had called and reported that J.D. was disrupting the classroom, accused him of making false accusations against her to various members of the faculty, and refused to cease the behavior,” he concluded, reading from the first in the series of slides.

“J.D. had been an excellent student in previous years. However, she started to exhibit strange behavior over the past eighteen months. The young woman had become withdrawn and no longer seemed concerned with maintaining a proper appearance or personal hygiene,” read the second.

“J.D. developed a delusion that staff members of the college were conducting secret mind-control experiments involving the students. Furthermore, she claimed that they were trying to ruin her reputation because she was on the verge of exposing the clandestine operation. J.D. would frequently speak quietly while alone in a manner that appeared as if she were having a conversation with someone who was not physically present,” the professor recited before moving on.

“Family history indicated no use of either alcohol or drugs by J.D., and her drug screening results were negative. J.D.’s grandfather was institutionalized for mental health issues beginning when he was in his mid-thirties and remained confined until his death. However, current family members were unable to offer anything more specific regarding the grandfather’s condition or diagnosis,” he quoted from the fourth.

“Eventually, J.D. consented to treatment in a psychiatric unit. J.D. was experiencing persecutory delusions, auditory hallucinations, and negative symptoms that had persisted for over a year. The diagnosis of schizophrenia was justified given her specific symptoms,” the professor finally concluded at the end of the presentation.

“Before proceeding to another case history with a diagnosis of an antisocial personality, are there questions regarding this presentation?” Professor James inquired.

William’s hand shot up without hesitation this time.

“Yes, William,” the professor said, acknowledging the teen.

“Isn’t it true that there are no tests that can conclusively indicate a diagnosis of schizophrenia?”

“Excellent point William. That is indeed true and not only for schizophrenia. Tomorrow, we will discuss a recent study conducted by a Stanford University professor and psychologist, David Rosenhan, concerning the methods and accuracy of psychiatric diagnosis. The diagnosis begins by ruling out other potential causes such as injury, medical illness, and alcohol or drug use. Once eliminated, gathering symptomology and history via interviews with the patient, family, friends, and associates is required. Finally, identifying patterns that fit known indicators of a specific condition is necessary. All of this can be time-consuming, and the information obtained may be inaccurate by accident or design. Furthermore, the mental health professional must be careful not to draw any conclusions that are not based on the data gathered, and to be cognizant of the

potential of incorrectly interpreting the information. The final diagnosis literally could result in knowing how to save a life or a mind,” the professor concluded.

At this instant, William had an idea that could be educational and a tool to help unravel a mystery that had dogged him since he was only eight years old.

After classes concluded for the day, William and Neil listened to their favorite hard rock station on the radio in their room, and their light discussion took on a more serious tone.

“Today’s psych class was the best that I’ve experienced, regardless of the subject, since I’ve been here. What do you think?” asked William.

“Totally. I was more tuned in to those case studies today than I am when my favorite jam is playing.”

“You know what I think would be cool? If you and I start a psychology discussion group of our own. We could each choose and investigate a case study, then have a weekly discussion about it, just like the way a book club operates.”

“Righteous and totally awesome light bulb moment, dude. I’m in.”

“Great. Now let’s each find and research a case to discuss, then next week, we can have our first meeting.”

However, William had already selected his “case study.” It was the same one he had been investigating during both the waking and sleeping moments of his life ever since he was a young boy. He would put those nightmares to good use and hopefully to rest once and for all. The answer to his most serious question might reveal itself along the way too.

Although it was Saturday, and they would typically venture into town, the two friends found themselves in the campus library. The massive room’s walls had ornate, dark wooden panels that revealed themselves wherever the shelves filled with books did not hide them. There were rows upon rows of shelves, some of which made right-angle turns before permitting the seeker to escape the maze. Neil and William stuck together during their quest for information.

“William, I am stoked that you want to help me with this most righteous of adventures, but shouldn’t you be conducting your own search? We might end up with only one head case if you don’t, bro.”

“Actually, I have been studying an interesting case for a while. I’m quite prepared to present it already.”

“Wait, we just came up with this radical plan last—,”

William blocked Neil’s remark with a book.

“Look at this one. I bet it has some good information in it.”

It was an intentional diversion. Neil didn’t distract so easily, and with a puzzled look on his face, he examined William’s for clues. Deciding he must have a good reason for the tactic employed, Neil left it alone.

As the two companions rounded a sharp left turn in the present row of bookshelves, Professor James suddenly appeared from around the corner.

“It’s good to see you both in here this morning in search of something interesting to investigate. However, after locating the appropriate resources, I would suggest doing your reading outside on such a lovely day as this one. The fresh air and bright sky will help clear any mind, which will be necessary for your challenging quest,” said the professor with a grin.

William and Neil looked at each other with astonished expressions. It was evident to them that he knew exactly what was afoot. Perhaps he overheard enough of their whispers in the library to reveal their plans to him. The professor bid the pair good luck then left them to continue their agenda.

They were headed for the exit to the library with books in hand when William suddenly stopped, causing Neil to run into him.

“Look over there. It’s the girl I’ve been telling you about,” William said as he gestured to a young woman with long brown hair dressed in black.

She was sitting alone with her face buried deep in the pages of a hefty tome.

“Oh, the one with the gnarly hair. You like her. Cool.”

“Hold on. Wait here for a minute, Neil.”

William approached the isolated young lady and whispered hello. To this, she raised her head to look at him, then her hand followed afterward. She displayed a slight odd wave by bending her fingers at the hand to flap them up and down several times.

“I know it’s not a good time to talk right now, but I’d like to do so the next time we see each other on campus,” said William.

The shy young girl nodded as if to say okay before she dropped her eyes to focus on the book once more.

“Goodbye. See you later.”

She raised only her hand this time and gave him the same unusual wave to say goodbye.

William returned to his friend near the library’s door.

“Come on, Neil. Let’s go.”

They walked down the hall outside of the library’s quiet environment, where they could freely speak.

“I didn’t mean it in a bogus way. You know, gnarly can mean cool too. I think her hair is cool, and so is the fact that you’re into a babe that attempts to hide by trying to stick out,” said Neil.

“I know you well enough to realize that’s how you meant it. Thanks for not thinking I’m a dork. I don’t know what it is, and I can’t explain it.”

“I think I do. You love mysterious things like the stuff on the *Zone*. Also, you are into intelligent babes. I think we both see there’s definitely more to her.”

To this, the boys smiled at each other. They were undoubtedly tuned in to the same jams.

William and Neil exited the building that housed the library and proceeded to their dormitory. Along the way, they encountered many peers, some of whom jokingly referred to the pair as twins. The reason for the moniker? Both teens were frequently seen displaying similar fashions, which currently consisted of unbuttoned flannel shirts, T-shirts depicting popular rock bands, blue jeans, and sneakers. In colder temperatures, they added fleece-lined jean jackets to their ensembles.

At times, William would exchange the flannel for a primary-colored dress shirt, possibly checkered or with stripes, and wear a complimentary shaded plain tee beneath. Neil, on the other hand, would rarely modify his look.

Clothing, however, marked the termination of a shared physical resemblance. Neil was mustached, with long blonde wavy hair, and a six-foot lanky frame. In contrast, William was clean-shaven, had medium-length brown straight hair, and stood a mere five-seven, with a slight but rather muscular body for someone of his stature.

Once settled in their room, the two young men dug into the research materials obtained from the library, and their psychology textbooks as well. After becoming engrossed in the task for hours, they soon found it to be dinnertime. Upon finishing the evening meal, William and Neil spent the remainder of the night relaxing, while rock music emanated from the radio.

Since they had spent most of the previous day together preparing for their first psychology discussion, the young men agreed that they would go into town on this particular Sunday afternoon.

As expected, the village was much calmer than when they would usually grace its streets. There were only individual students or groups of two or three milling around. Each of the eclectic collections of shops had a handful of patrons inside. The young men went into some of the businesses that they usually would visit. The record store had the most customers. The teens stayed there for a considerable time, perusing the selections, talking to their peers, and listening to music.

By late afternoon Neil and William were hungry. They decided to get a pizza to take back to their room on campus. While waiting for the order, the pair sat at a booth in the restaurant adjacent to one of the establishment's large windows with a clear view of the sidewalk. Suddenly, William jumped to his feet, declared he would be right back, and headed for the exit.

Neil peered out of the window to see what had demanded his friend's attention.

"Ah, it's the girl. Go for it, dude!"

William didn't want to startle the young lady by calling out for her, so he tried to catch up to the girl before losing sight of her. She rounded a corner, but when William made it there, she had vanished. Undeterred, he decided to look in each store on that block in an attempt to locate her.

After exploring three shops without any luck, he entered the next one. It was a small store that sold used clothing. William approached the older woman working at the cash register of the establishment.

"Pardon me, but did you see a young lady with long brown hair enter the store?" he inquired.

"Oh, you must mean Claire. She's in the dressing room trying on an outfit," said the woman.

"Thank you. I'll just wait for her outside," he replied before exiting. "*Claire, I like it,*"

William thought to himself.

Shortly, Claire emerged from the store. William, who had been pacing while deep in thought trying to decide what he would say to her, pivoted back towards the door and bumped right into the girl.

"Oh my, I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

She nodded yes.

"I saw you and hoped you might have time to talk now. Do you?"

She shook her head no, then whispered, "Sorry."

"Can you tell me when you might have time to talk?"

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," he echoed back to her with a huge smile, then continued, "See you tomorrow. Bye."

Claire waved goodbye to William in her unique manner. He turned and began to walk away. When William reached the corner, he spun around to look at the young woman. Claire was still standing in front of the same store looking back at him. He waved to her enthusiastically, and she waved back just as he had done.

Soon, William and Neil were reunited in front of the pizza shop.

"I'd have to say that you must have found her, and it was most excellent," said Neil, after taking note of the huge smile on his friend's face.

"It was most excellent indeed, dude. Her name is Claire. Let's go celebrate with some slices."

"Okay, but one more quick stop on the way, man," replied Neil.

With that, the two friends headed in the direction of the campus.

Once they made it back to their room, the pair of friends sat down for dinner.

“Tunes, friends, beer, and slices, a totally awesome time, dude!” exclaimed Neil. “The only thing that would make this better is a couple of righteous babes to share it with, right bro?” asked Neil.

William merely nodded in agreement. With a beer in one hand, a slice of pizza in the other, and chewing on a mouthful of ambrosia, it was the only way he could respond to his friend. Being tall and having quite a full mustache, Neil had no trouble buying the beer they were consuming despite his age.

“In due time, my bud. I’ll work on the missing pieces for both of us,” said Neil.

William found sleep to be elusive that night. He was anxious to start the discussion group recently established with Neil. How would William describe his own experience with schizophrenia and his fears? Should he forget his plan and open up to Neil and perhaps Professor James? William felt guilty about the prospect of deceiving Neil to openly discuss his horrifying experience and the fears they inspired. He was concerned that no matter how he exposed his deep dark secret, it could result in losing a friend.

If that wasn’t enough to keep his mind racing, there was the mysterious girl. William perceived that his thoughts of her were occupying his gray matter more each day. Every brief interaction with Claire made him desire more of them. He was also determined—no, driven—to extend the length of their interactions, but was at a loss for how to make it happen. William realized that the tossing and turning he was doing in bed wasn’t helping put an end to the incessant thoughts. Perhaps a walk around the grounds of the deserted campus would help quiet his mind.

The crisp, clear autumn night was cold. That, combined with the early dew and still air, enabled a heavy frost to form that looked almost like a dusting of snow had coated the ground. The light from a nearly full moon overhead made the icy blanket sparkle and shimmer all around the teen.

As William traversed the grounds, he noticed white puffs emerging from around the corner of a distant building. Curiosity led him to seek out its source. As he approached the structure at an obtuse angle, he was able to peer around its edge. A dark form revealed itself. Although he did his best to maintain the stealth of a wild animal stalking its prey, William realized that he had been spotted. The figure had taken a few steps backward. Calling out a soft hello to the unknown person caused the form to freeze in place.

Finally, the moonlight revealed the features of the person transfixed upon its source. “*It’s her!*” William exclaimed to himself. Maybe his efforts to talk to her without other ears around to hear would bear fruit.

He had only recently discovered that her name was Claire. She held her hands close to her chest clasped together, perhaps in a futile effort to warm them. Finally, William was close enough to speak with her.

“Hi Claire. Isn’t that your name?”

The timid young girl nodded in reply.

“My name is William. As you know, I’ve seen you around and have wanted to talk to you. I guess we are both a little shy.”

The girl stood there silently as she exhaled, forming miniature clouds that disappeared into the night.

“I suppose you can’t sleep either, right?” he asked.

She replied in the same manner as before to indicate that William was correct.

“I thought I could keep you company. It probably would be a good idea to stick together rather than being out here alone at this hour. Is that okay?”

To William’s delight, she squeaked out a yes.

“Since it’s after midnight, it is tomorrow. We could chat or just stand here quietly together if you’d prefer.”

“Quietly,” she whispered.

To that, William smiled in reply.

They stood there for about an hour before Claire finally began to walk.

“Would you like me to accompany you home?”

She replied with a nod.

When they reached the building in which she resided, Claire murmured, “Night.”

“I enjoyed being with you tonight. Good night.” William meant it as a parting phrase and as a description of their time together.

The shy young woman disappeared inside.

William’s Journal Entry Thoughts on Claire

I don’t know much about Claire because she seems beyond shy, but I sense a certain mystique about her. I have tried to engage in conversation with her but can’t seem to get past short exchanges of pleasantries. I did once ask what her major was, and she squeaked “lit” in reply. I’m reasonably certain that she used the word as a noun and not an adjective.

She keeps her personality under wraps, in much the same way as she does with her form, buried deep under layers of garments. Claire’s intelligence is another matter altogether. I have heard numerous adjectives from her classmates indicating that this unassuming person’s quotient must easily extend quite far into genius territory. I could bear witness to several of the typical signs of a superior intellect that would constitute additional evidence. What I do know about Claire is intriguing and has led to my admiration. She doesn’t appear to have any friends. However, despite having limited, encouraging results at present, I am committed to increasing whatever that number may be by one at a minimum.

Some might easily dismiss her outright appearance as unremarkable, if not do so in harsher tones. Claire has brown hair that hangs past her shoulders, seemingly fashioned to serve as a makeshift veil to hide behind. On occasion, I can discern a pair of glasses peeking out. This has led me to deduce that they are not a constantly required visual aid. I can’t fathom an apparent alternative explanation of contact lenses being applicable in her case. I haven’t sensed the slightest indicator of vanity in Claire.

I shared one memorable encounter with her while crossing the campus on an otherwise ordinary day. As we were about to pass within the customary distance suitable to swap perfunctory greetings, a sudden gust of wind permitted me a nearly unobstructed view of Claire’s face. Sans glasses or the adornment of any cosmetics, it was more breathtaking than the natural force pushing aside the obstruction. Her wide-eyed emeralds blinded me, momentarily, to the expression of shock and embarrassment radiated by her gaze.

Our mutual reactions were as if I had inadvertently seen her partially disrobed. My behavior was a mirror of what it would be, upon the actual revelation of such a glorious example of God’s creation. A male, teetering upon the sinuous precipice that separates boys from men, in truly

biological terms only. Said adolescent boy's head reacted much the same way the knee joint does upon being introduced to the physician's rubber mallet. I suddenly jerked my head to look away.

Perplexing it was to me. Yes, the experience in totality, but also the resultant questions that were its outflow. Is Claire hiding her beauty for some reason, and if affirmative, what might it be? Could she be keeping a secret chained up below under lock and key? Is it something as terrifying and hideous as the legendary lycanthrope? Intangible, yet more horror-inducing, twisted, distorted, and grotesque. Might it, without warning, mysteriously manifest itself via an expression that she can't suppress, causing the young woman to keep the dark, dismal draperies drawn closed for hours all, both before and post-midnight?

Too easy is it that the same precise collection, proportion, and arrangement of the elements can differ so much in appearance when viewed from a slight alteration of angle. Up, down, right, left. Obtuse? Acute? Remarkable! All of His humbled creations below. Upon yet another view, being that of the reflection, I saw the entire experience as an unexpected gift that I unknowingly desired, but would indefinitely treasure.

Claire's clothing is bohemian and reveals nearly no skin, even on the early fall semester's hottest days. Aside from small revelations that hint at lighter colors or paisleys, these are covered by numerous nearly universal layers of dark, dreary fabric more accustomed to All Hallows Eve. During inclement weather, she selects one from a minute number of hats that match her apparel to wear for protection against the elements. Black maypops complete her ensemble. Inexplicably, I find the site of her clothed in such fashion mystically alluring.

As for jewelry, insofar as I can tell, she possesses a singular silver necklace. I have frequently seen Claire tightly grasping its apparent pendant in her delicate hands during what may possibly be prayer. Usually, she performs this ritual when sitting alone outdoors on the fringe, or tucked away in some obscure corner at the juncture of a campus building's exterior walls. Otherwise, she keeps it unseen, safely ensconced beneath layers of clothes.

I have a distinct impression that she has surpassed her freshman year, or perhaps even more. I have yet to encounter any faculty or student unknowing of Claire's presence. She navigates intuitively in these surroundings, whether on the campus proper, the dense woods that envelop it, or on the nearby town's streets.

Stories I have overheard describe her being observed disappearing among the trees by people present nearby, and not emerging from the cloak of the mingling branches until several hours have elapsed. A few of her reappearances have taken place after dusk and were accomplished without any apparent source of light.

I see her as an enigma. The desire to solve the mystery that is Claire seems to be waxing faster than the coming full moon. Might it someday eclipse the drive to unravel the mystery that has been my own quest for so long? Are the answers in the stars, the classroom, or existence? The only certainty to me at this current hour is that the sun will shine again soon.

End of Journal Entry

Chapter 2

The sun did shine again that morning, but another star was about to blaze inside one of the classrooms. William, as it turned out, would not be present to see it. He would only hear about it later that day in excruciating details that would make his heart and soul burn.

Professor DeMarco's literature class began as usual on this particular morning. The attendees filed into the space in spurts then dribbles until the room was nearly at capacity. The pedagogue slid the glasses onto her face in the proper position to be able to clearly read both the text of the book in her hands, and the students in the room before her.

She spoke in dramatic fashion while espousing the words from the tome in her grasp.

“ ‘If a man loses pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured, or far away.’ ”

The professor paused, then scanned the faces of the youth before her.

Resuming, in a softer yet clear voice, she expressed, “Thoreau carefully selected these words to convey a thought to the reader. Listen attentively to this sentence, ‘Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured, or far away.’ Taken in context, what meaning do you derive from this phrase?”

A smattering of hands shot up in unison, and following a brief consideration, the professor selected one of the pupils to respond.

The chosen young man confidently declared, “He is saying that you must listen solely to your voice.”

“True, but can you expand upon that and provide a precise, detailed translation?”

Almost on cue, the doors at the rear of the classroom sprung open, and the form of a scantily clad, petite young woman with short black hair strutted into the class. A chorus of gasps erupted. As the lady walked, a large purse that hung on her forearm swung to and fro. After arriving at the first unoccupied chair, she pulled it back away from the desk before it. Rather than sitting on the appropriate piece of furniture, she sat upon the desk, using the chair as a footstool.

Once situated, the young female announced in a loud and confident voice.

“Thoreau was stating that each individual should not simply listen to their own voice, but create their own tune, tempo, and intensity. Then, you should step ONLY to that music, regardless of what others are marching to, or what they may think of your song!”

The declaration this woman gave was awe-inspiring, not only in an intellectual sense, but also in more physical terms. She was a beautiful young woman, small in stature, graced with features most appealing to all whose eyes might have been granted the pleasure of viewing them. Wearing only a bra, a plaid “school uniform” skirt, knee socks, and Mary Janes, she appeared both sexy and innocent at the same time.

Seemingly stunned by the answer that the young woman expressed, and the image she projected while doing so, Professor DeMarco addressed all in attendance.

“That was an excellent response and done in such a remarkable way. I must request that the other students in attendance exit, so the two of us may continue this discussion in private.”

As the students withdrew from the classroom, the professor pulled one of their numbers to the side and instructed them to summon the dean for assistance.

Shortly thereafter, Dr. Constance, the dean of the school, appeared. Following a brief consultation with Professor DeMarco, the dean cautiously approached the lone figure perched upon the classroom desk. Once close enough to discern the details of the spectacle before her, Dr. Constance spoke.

“Claire, is that you?”

The young woman shifted slightly to face her inquisitor.

“No one can fool such a wise woman as yourself. Yes, I am indeed Claire.”

“Claire, I’m not sure what prompted such a sudden departure from propriety. Can you please explain its purpose?”

She leaned in toward the dean as close as she could manage, then replied in a breathless, sexy voice.

“I will only talk to that hot, new professor, or else.”

“Or else what?”

Claire clutched the large purse in her hands before responding.

“ ‘Then I’ll be brief. O happy dagger!’ ”

The young woman’s reply intimated that she possessed a knife and would stab herself with it.

The professor that Claire insisted she would only speak to was Dr. James. He was a licensed psychologist recently hired to teach psychology at the university. This fact resulted in Dr. Constance’s quick acquiescence to the demand, and the professor was summoned at once.

Upon his arrival outside of the classroom, the dean addressed the young professor.

“My apologies for disrupting your class Dr. James.”

“That’s Professor James, thank you,” he replied firmly but politely.

“Professor James, there is a student in this classroom who appears to be experiencing a psychological breakdown. Furthermore, I have concerns that she may also be planning to harm herself.”

After being provided with the series of events that had transpired prior to his arrival, Professor James entered the nearly empty classroom. As Dr. Constance and Professor DeMarco observed from a distance, the professor approached Claire, who was now smoking and sitting on a desk with her feet resting on a chair back. Professor James sat down in the chair of the desk in front of Claire to speak with her.

Before any words are exchanged, Claire removes her bra, but the professor appears unperturbed. His eyes remained locked on her face. Then he began to speak to the young woman.

“Although I have no idea why, it is my understanding that you wanted to speak only to me. So, now that I’m here and prepared to listen, are you ready to talk?”

Claire smiled coyly. “I’m impressed. Yes, you’ve convinced me that you are exactly the person who I should engage with in conversation.”

The young woman returned the bra to her body, then the professor and Claire proceeded into a deep discussion that lasted for nearly two hours. Although Dr. Constance and Professor DeMarco were present during this time, their distance was sufficient to discern only an intermittent word. Finally, Professor James and Claire both stood.

While unheard by the others, a remark made by the male educator to Claire as she reached into her bag, resulted in a round of laughter. She retrieved a white T-shirt and quickly pulled it down over her head, covering the top portion of her body. As Professor James and Claire approached the doors to the egress where the two women anxiously waited, he gave them a reassuring nod that everything was going to be okay.

Soon, the entire campus was awash with a flood of details concerning the events that had unfolded in the literature class earlier. Some were more accurate. Others were full of hyperbole or outright fabrications. The one commonality was the identity of the main character of the performance, that strange, quiet girl named Claire.

The descriptions of her physical appearance were similar enough in remarks to indicate that she had suddenly become sexy. Some said Claire entered the class barely clothed, partially naked, naked, or stripped naked after entering the classroom. Many said she began smoking in class. Some said she smoked a cigarette, others said it was pot, a few said it was a “Chong sized” joint.

Her behavior was consistently described in words that would be a radical departure from that of Claire. Terms such as bold, provocative, and brazen were frequently utilized. Several referred to the occurrence as bizarre, a breakdown, or even insane.

Eventually, most, if not all of this information found its way to William. Unsurprisingly, it wouldn't be long before the students on campus would be gossiping again. However, the next time the subject would be William, but recycle some of the same adjectives.

What is going on with Claire? Why did she do it? I feel so confused. Did she have a mental breakdown? Was it the stress of college and lack of friends? Wait! No, it couldn't be! He wouldn't do that! Or maybe, J.D., Jane Doe? William's thoughts were racing.

The feelings he experienced in class during the lesson regarding schizophrenia had returned. However, now they were much more intense. Lightheadedness became vertigo. He broke into a cold sweat. The queasy stomach became nauseated, causing him to retch.

“Where is Claire? What is her state of mind and body? Is she safe? Is she free? Is she near or far? Am I asking these things out loud or only in my mind? I need to do both repeatedly until I find the answers. I should do that and more! I must act! I have to do all of these things immediately, incessantly!” exclaimed William, although he himself didn't know if these were merely thoughts or actual declarations.

“William! William!! William!!! WILLIAM!!!!”

Neil screamed louder each time, and with each plea, he shook William harder until finally, he began to respond, as if slowly regaining control of his conscious mind.

“Neil? Neil?” William meekly uttered.

“Neil! NEIL!! Where is Claire? What is her state of mind and body? Is she safe?”

“William, you have been repeatedly screaming the same questions over and over even before I arrived five minutes ago, and I have been trying to stop you the entire time. Please stop and listen for a minute, PLEASE, YOU'RE FREAKING ME OUT!!!”

“Okay, okay, okay,” William said as he slumped to the floor, weary from exhaustion.

“Stay calm, and I'll tell you everything I've learned. First, Claire is good.”

“OH, THANK GOD!!!!” William exclaimed before freely sobbing.

“Next, I had to call an ambulance for you because you were REALLY OUT OF IT. Do you need the medics? Are you sure?”

William shook his head no in reply to Neil's first question, then nodded yes following the second.

“Cool, okay now, when I first got here, you were holding a note, and you shook it in my face. I took it away from you, and it said, ‘James knows everything. Left class when Claire—,’ then it became illegible, but I understood its meaning,” explained Neil before continuing.

“You believed that Professor James must have the answers to the questions you kept asking. The campus contacted James. He is actually with Claire right now, and, you know, as I already said, everything is cool.”

Finally, Neil felt he had conveyed enough information to William that he could momentarily stop to catch his breath before continuing.

“I’m not going to overwhelm you with more information. Professor James is coming and will be here soon, so I’ll let him fill in the blanks. Besides, I don’t think either of us can take any more without a third. He’s still on the phone and wants to know if you need anything before he hangs up to come over,” Neil explained.

William replied by imitating drinking a beer.

“Wicked idea William, but prepare for a psych, double meaning expressed.”

Then Neil raised the telephone to speak to Professor James. “William says beer, a twelve-pack, more if you’ll be chugging too.”

After a brief pause, Neil chuckled “Sweet,” into the receiver before hanging it up.

“James says, and I quote, ‘I’ll bring something better,’” Neil said suspiciously.

The young man completed his transformation back to the ‘real Neil’ again.

Not long afterward, Professor James arrived. He was true to his word. The professor entered with a brown paper bag. Its contents? A fifth of vodka and several bottles of Gatorade. Directions: Pour two shots of vodka in a coffee mug, then fill it with Gatorade, mix, top with news that Claire would be back in class the following day. The result? “Totally awesome,” as Neil said.

The alcohol’s effect needs no explanation. As for combining it with the Gatorade? That was to “regain and maintain a homeostatic state. You know, chill, buzz, rehydrate, and maintain hydration” for both William and Neil. Being an actual MD, Professor James knew based on what he heard over the phone that the boys would require the effects of both ingredients.

Professor James’s special recipe required more instructions applicable only to the current situation. One, “I will never do this for you again.” Two, “Do not ever ask me for it again.” Three, “Tonight’s little ‘party’ stays between us.” Four, “The ‘party’ will only extend until I decide that you have achieved relaxation.” Five, “I will not let you achieve inebriation.”

Once Professor James declared the party was over, he collected the remaining vodka. Just before leaving, he handed William two Polaroid photos.

“These are pictures of Claire’s new look to prepare yourself for tomorrow when you’ll see her in person. DO NOT ruminate over this tonight, because if you need something more for ‘medicinal purposes,’ you WILL go to the hospital, even if I have to drag you there myself!”

William nodded in agreement, then began to examine the photographs of Claire. One was a closeup, and the other was from a distance that permitted a head-to-toe view. After Professor James paused for a minute while observing William’s reaction, he turned to Neil.

“Call me immediately if events warrant.”

“Will do,” replied Neil.

He bid the teens goodnight. Once those final words were uttered in the wee morning hours, Professor James departed.

Yes, Professor James proved that he was true to his word. William believed what would occur if he did not mark the educator’s warning, causing the teen to follow the instructions to the letter.

William studied Claire’s two photographs intently, searching out every fine detail. By the time he determined that none remained to be discovered, Neil was already asleep and snoring prodigiously. His mission complete, and with the details of Claire’s new look, along with the professor’s words burned into his memory, William followed suit. Exhaustion and the effects of the alcohol left him no other choice.

William’s eyes strained to open in the light of the new day that fell upon his face.

“Morning? TGIF, right? Wait, no, it’s Tuesday. What time is it?” asked William. In actuality, he was speaking only to himself.

He struggled to get his eyes to focus on the hands of the clock that sat on the bedside table. Finally, he determined that the little hand was a bit past one, and the long hand was almost on four.

One-twenty in the afternoon! William thought. He briefly surveyed the room and realized that Neil was not there.

“Ugh!” he grunted.

With that declaration complete, he rolled over in bed to face the only wall of the room that was not permitting light to encroach and went back to sleep.

Following an hour and a half of additional slumber and many cups of coffee, William picked up his journal and began to write.

William’s Journal Entry Revelations

A series of extraordinary events began to unfold shortly after the literature class’s commencement when Claire made her grand entrance. I am not in a position from which I can refute those consistent details, from the tongues of those in attendance for Claire’s magnum opus, that have sought out and found my ears, despite my repeated protestations.

The statement is in no way to be considered a judgment of her. It is only a conclusion that I have reached in this instant of time, based upon all of these events, the information that I have collected, willingly or not, and as the result of my breakdown after receiving the “reviews” of Claire’s performance. The latter of these being primarily due to my overwhelming concern for “her state of mind and body.” It was a statement I had screamed so many times mere hours ago.

My distress sprung from the shock of an apparent overnight transformation. It’s such a radical departure from the appearance and behavior that I had known Claire to be until now. Did she have a mental break of some sort, or was there another explanation that my mind could not constitute in its current condition? If it was a breakdown, did she physically harm herself? Is her mind still intact or beyond hope of repair? If I had been burdened with such harsh phrases, what were the words Claire might be enduring? Oh, the agony! What will she confirm or refute regarding my remaining fears and the information I have received over the past twenty-four hours?

I can still reason that today will end so much better than it began, as I will see her in the flesh very soon. Her own words will be articulated directly. The clock ticks ever so slowly for me now as I wait for Claire.

If not for the thorough preparation received beforehand, and the location and method in which it was delivered, recognition of Claire by way of appearance or personality would certainly fail during our upcoming encounter following her dramatic change.

The photographs revealed that Claire’s brown veil had been discarded, replaced by short hair that was now as black as her former wardrobe. She had presently exchanged those stitchings for a white, form-fitting T-shirt and a light blue skirt that hugged the appropriate region. Now, there was no longer much effort required to imagine what lies beneath. Her form was petite, but adorned with round, ample features in places that most men would find pleasing.

In the close-up picture, the singular silver necklace hung hidden, to the extent that it could, beneath the skin-tight tee. The outline of a small crucifix revealed itself, fittingly, over the bearer’s heart. When I contemplated the totality of the apparition in the photos before me, I perceived a surreal juxtaposition. Interestingly, the silver crucifix necklace and the maypops were the only tangible items remaining of the previous Claire.

Claire's face is still breathtaking, although her skin is now coated. I interpret it as a continued effort to hide something. Her lips stand out more now, the result of a sheen of bright pink that had been carefully applied. Those emerald green eyes were now outlined in black, still shining brightly, but under the recent addition of rainbows above. She had bypassed outer beauty and went directly to sexy. Claire's physical appearance now left me feeling confused. She was undoubtedly sexy, but did I find her new veneer more beautiful too?

End of Journal Entry

Claire approached William confidently now. Previously, she was only seen walking towards intellectual matters with so much apparent conviction. He felt strangely weak and apprehensive. Her pace quickened, as did his heartbeat. Then, she flung her arms around him. William was suddenly receiving the most enthusiastic embrace from a woman, and it was apparently outside of the passion of love. It was the first time that Claire and William ever touched.

"Hi William! It seems like forever since we saw each other. I've been looking forward to talking to you today! Are you free now?" Claire asked.

William opened his mouth to speak. His tongue tripped itself, but he finally was able to summon a whisper like "Yep" in reply.

"Are you okay?" The young woman was surprised by an apparent insecurity never before detected in him.

"I'm good, but dumbstruck at seeing such a radical change in your appearance and personality, literally overnight." Having retrieved his composure, William was able to respond with his typical delivery.

"We're good. I mean between us. That is to say that, umm, I'm not trying to answer for you. That is, awe, jeez, can I be any less articulate? So, we're good. So, are you good, Claire?" William resumed stumbling again.

He wanted to ask about everything that had transpired over the past day, not just the radical changes. However, he didn't want to push too hard for answers. The fear of saying something inappropriate or open to misinterpretation left him at an even greater disadvantage.

"Everything's cool," Claire replied with a big smile. "I get it, but please try to chill a bit, okay? You did want us to get to know each other, right? Cause that's what friends do, right?" she said so naturally, so genuinely.

As he stood there, William nodded in agreement. A smile on his face appeared and gradually grew broader as the thoughts merged in the deepest crevasses of his mind.

No need to impress everyone within earshot all of the time by selecting each word and pronunciation to achieve the greatest intellectual impact. A person may own a tuxedo, but do they wear it every hour of every day simply to impress everyone they may encounter? No, they put it on when they go to the Top of the Mark, not when they go to slurp a slushy. Why should a person use their brain the same way, always, and in every situation if that's not what they want to do? She knows what she can do and wants to do. She knows how to do it and when to do it. Right now, she just wants to talk to a friend without any hint of pretense. Some might expect pomposity from a genius, especially an attractive one, a girl who they may describe now as 'having it all.' If I can figure it out this quickly, Claire must know this, all of it, and so much more. After all, she is a genius, not I!

William was correct about her intelligence and so much more. Perhaps he knew even more about Claire and himself than he had thus far processed internally.

“Everything’s cool. It’s totally awesome to see you and hear you say those words. We ARE friends, so let’s do what friends do. Let’s get to know each other. Show me your favorite spot to chill. I’ll hang out and chat with you as long as you want,” replied William.

No pretense or pomposity. Circumstance? Obviously, but presently involving only these two friends, their smiling faces, and their four tear-streaked cheeks. Their blossoming friendship steered them into the light and away from their shadows, leaving the awkwardness behind. They proceeded toward the fringe and beyond to continue their first real conversation.

The place Claire chose for their discussion was far enough into the woods that they could talk without fear of being overheard. Yet, it was still close enough to hear the muffled din from the campus.

There was a mixture of the reds, oranges, and yellows of autumn at their feet, but an adequate amount still clung tenuously to the trees and filtered the rays of the setting sun. The small clearing contained a once majestic, now fallen sentinel of the forest. It proved to be a wonderful place for them to sit while they conversed.

After arriving at this spot, William and Claire sat close facing one another. They held each other’s hands softly but securely. While staring into each other’s eyes, Claire began to speak.

“So, I know how concerned and confused you are right now, William. I’m going to give you a basic explanation, and you can ask me whatever you want. I promise I won’t get upset by any of your questions, okay?”

“That sounds great. I was so worried about you. I’m relieved that you are good.”

“You’re so sweet. You’ll see it is one of the keys to the story. First, the ‘new Claire’ is pretty much the real me. This all began after my mom told me I would be coming here about a year and a half ago. I decided that the way people began to treat me ever since being forced to take an I.Q. test would only get worse once I started attending classes here. I was treated like some kind of oddity. Even worse was the expectation that I should behave differently. I should be more serious and always project my intelligence. No matter how much I resisted, they would not let up on the pressure. So, I decided to give them what they wanted, but in an exaggerated way that they still wouldn’t find acceptable. First, I changed my look. I threw out all of my makeup. I dressed in the darkest, most bizarre way that I could. I grew my hair long, let it become out of control, and ‘styled’ it so that it would hide my face. Then, I changed my personality. I intentionally became withdrawn and used only single words or gestures to communicate. I stopped socializing or doing anything that I used to like to do. I only studied or simply walked around for hours but was more observant while I wandered. I quit smoking except for an occasional joint. The only behavior that pretty much stayed the same as before was that I didn’t act like an idiot in class or stop praying. However, I didn’t go to church anymore and only prayed when I was alone. Basically, I was saying fuck it in my own way. Being dramatic is something I’ve always liked to do. I started enjoying the ‘other Claire’ so much that I began to wonder if there would ever be a day when the real me would return. Then I met you. You were so nice to me. The harder I made it for you to get to know me, the harder you tried to do it. You helped convince me that it was time to show everyone here who I really am. I wanted to get to know you as much as you wanted to get to know me. We couldn’t do that unless I dropped the act. I decided to do it in the most dramatic way that I could. Unfortunately, this ‘genius’ didn’t think, and you were hurt by what I did. I am SO SORRY, William. When I found out what happened to you, I was so fucking pissed at myself. It was then that I was certain what I had been suspecting was true. I love you, William!” exclaimed Claire.

By the time Claire stopped talking, tears were streaming down both her face and William’s.

“I love you too, Claire!”

Then they shared a soft, sweet kiss. It was only the first of many more to come.

Chapter 3

When William arrived back at the place he shared with Neil, the room was dark, and his friend was already in bed. Since it was a weeknight and extremely late, he immediately stripped down to his underwear and quietly slipped into bed. He had just gotten comfortable when Neil spoke.

"I'm guessing the reunion was awesome, bud."

"Completely awesome. I really feel like I know Claire, and she is amazing. Everything makes sense now. I am so excited."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Neil before continuing. "Oh, I almost forgot. When I came in tonight, there was a letter on the floor that some dude or babe had slipped under the door. I read it, and it's a real *Scooby-Doo*."

At that point, Neil turned on the lights and handed William a note. It was typewritten and contained the following message:

I think that you should ask Claire to join your discussion group.

After reading it, William said, "Hmmm, I wonder who wrote this note. Somebody other than Professor James must have found out about our group."

"Maybe, but after a head-scratching, I figured it must be James."

"It would make sense, but I can't imagine that he would do something like leaving us this letter."

"I don't know, but I never thought the dude would party with us either. It doesn't matter, though, because I think it's an epic idea. Invite her to partake, bud."

"You're not suddenly interested in her because of her sexy new look, are you? You wouldn't want to do this because of that, would you?"

"What a bogus idea, William. I know your head's still spinning, but you can't think I would mess with your babe. That would be most uncool."

"You're right. Sorry, Neil. What makes you think that it would be a good idea?"

"I believe having your babe in would give our chats an awesome angle. It would be a most excellent way for you to see Claire more too. Besides, if I'm right about James leaving us the light bulb, he must think it's a righteous idea."

"Yes, great points. Okay, but this is still going to be a group to discuss psychological cases. We can't use it to ask Claire about recent happenings. If she brings it up, okay. I don't want to hurt Claire or make her uncomfortable."

"Most awesome and completely excellent terms."

"Great, we'll ask her when we see her tomorrow."

The lights went off, and the teens settled back into bed. Shortly, Neil was fast asleep, but William was so happy and excited, his thoughts of Claire prevented slumber for some time. When he finally did fall asleep, all his dreams were fantastic ones about his new love.

They didn't have to wait long to ask Claire if she would be interested in joining the group. When Neil and William exited the building the next morning to venture out to classes, she was waiting near the front doors. The teenage boys looked at each other and smiled. They nodded and approached the young lady.

The three bid one another good morning. Then Claire and William hugged, and she kissed him.

"Whoa, this is going to be a most excellent day, bud," said Neil with a big grin.

"You're such a child, but funny and nice. It's a pleasure to meet you, Neil," replied Claire.

“Cool, my reputation has preceded me. Excellent lady. Let’s ask her now, bro.”

“Ask me what?”

“Neil and I have formed a psychology group. We each choose and investigate a case, then gather to discuss them. That’s what we were researching in the library the other day. You don’t need to be taking psychology. If you don’t want to proffer a case, we still think having a woman participate in the conversations would provide an invaluable perspective. What do you think?”

“I think the two of you have an unusual way to pick up girls. Just kidding, sounds interesting. I’d love to join. When do we start?”

“It would be most awesome if you come over tonight. We can hang and talk more about it then,” replied Neil.

“Yes, can you?” William asked.

“I’m there,” answered Claire.

“Awesome,” both young men said in unison, as though they had rehearsed it. All three laughed.

They walked together until Claire had to split off to proceed to literature class. She gave William a soft kiss on the lips, prompting Neil to say, “Sweet.”

Claire replied, “Child.” She smiled.

Neil and William chuckled and headed off to psychology class.

“Closer to the heart, right dude?” asked Neil.

“What are you up to, Neil?”

“A most righteous plan, bud.”

All three of the teens were thinking what “a most excellent day” it would be, and they were right.

Around six in the evening, the trio rendezvoused. They decided that Neil would present the case he had studied first. Then if time permitted, they would proceed with William’s. Tonight, Claire would contribute only to the discussion. At the next meeting, she would participate as a presenter.

Although the discussion of the first case was quite long, Neil and Claire still wanted William to deliver his presentation. However, he was reluctant. First, he tried to say that it was too late, before shifting to blame a lack of preparation as an excuse to delay.

“Come on, bro. This isn’t going to receive an ABC like in class,” said Neil.

“Please, William. I want to hear it,” Claire implored.

It was hard enough to refute Neil’s logic, but Claire’s plea and her emerald eyes made him melt. William couldn’t say no to her. Thus, he began to lay out his case.

“Okay, so this story is actually timely, since we just discussed psychological misdiagnosis in class with Professor James.” Claire edged closer to William, while Neil leaned in with interest. It was exactly like he was telling a ghost story.

“Although many have tried, there has yet to be a diagnosis that can be agreed upon. The man was having certain symptoms consistent with schizophrenia accompanied by depression. However, other signs didn’t seem to fit. He lost his job after several bizarre occurrences at work. He became severely depressed and was unable to find employment elsewhere. Soon, he fell into a catatonic state. The man attempted to commit suicide and was briefly admitted to a mental health ward at a hospital. He cooperated with his treatment until he was released. Then, he refused to take his medicine or keep his scheduled appointments with mental health professionals. Eventually, his wife couldn’t take it anymore, and she left, abandoning both the man and their eight-year-old son. The man’s sister moved in to take care of both of them.

Background information collected turned up no indication of mental illness in the man's family until he started displaying symptoms in his late twenties. There was no history of drug or alcohol use. In fact, the man was a devout Baptist and never drank so much as a beer or glass of wine. Drug tests were clean. Unfortunately, one night he left the house undetected and entered a detached garage where he successfully committed suicide. His aunt and uncle took the boy in following his father's death," William finally concluded as tears welled up in his eyes.

Neil's mouth hung open, and he displayed a look of shock and sadness on his face. Claire had her arms wrapped firmly around William as she cried. The room remained quiet for many minutes, except for Claire's muffled sobs, and William's heavy rapid breathing.

Finally, Neil expressed, "A totally bogus and uncool ending for that kid."

William spoke next and said, "Maybe that was too intense to both hear, and talk about tonight."

Claire nodded in agreement. She was still trying to mute her whimpering.

Neil headed to the small refrigerator in the corner of the room.

"I'm glad I picked up a dozen, plus one for refreshments tonight. I'm assuming wine for you, Claire, and beer for us guys, correct?" he asked.

Claire and William confirmed Neil's conclusion. It wasn't long before the room was filled with cheerful words, smiles, laughter, and tunes.

"So, Claire, is it true that you lit up a joint in Mrs. D's class the other day?" asked Neil.

"Neil, we had an agreement!" exclaimed William.

"An agreement about what? If it's that certain topics are off-limits, I disagree," Claire replied. Amused, she asked, "Is that what people are saying? No, it was only a cigarette."

"Yeah, some even claimed it was Chong-sized. She's a most excellent babe! William, you better hold on tight to her, or someone else will."

"If you're referring to yourself, I don't date children!" Claire exclaimed.

"She's feisty. No way, I'd never take my best bud's babe, especially when I went through so much trouble to get you two together."

"What are you talking about, Neil?" asked William.

"My most excellent plan. I wrote the mysterious note suggesting we ask Claire to join the group. Then, I had to convince you that it must have been James who wrote it."

"Sorry you went through so much trouble, Neil, but William and I beat you to it last night."

"That's cool. I figured you two would get around to it by yourselves, eventually. But I wanted to make sure."

"You better hang on to Neil. He's a great friend," Claire said to William.

"I intend to hang on tightly to both of you. A toast to the three of us!" William exclaimed.

It was "a most excellent" toast. Neil, feeling emboldened by Claire's openness and level of comfort, spoke up again.

"Okay, I don't know if William would ever ask you this, so I will. How were you dressed? There are more versions of that part than any other."

"Well, first of all, it was only done to make the real Claire's debut on campus as shocking as possible. I entered the class dressed like a Catholic school girl; except I was wearing only a bra up top. After Professor James sat down in front of me, I took off my bra. He was unfazed and continued to look straight into my face."

"Bodacious! You're my new hero. Your nerves are stronger than steel," replied Neil.

Claire turned to William and said, “FYI, I don’t date old men like Professor James either.” Then she whispered, “You’ll see them when the time is right, AND it will be for the best reason.”

William started to whisper back but suddenly jumped to his feet and screamed, “I LOVE YOU CLAIRE!” as loud as he could.

Claire jumped to her feet and screamed, “I LOVE YOU WILLIAM!”

Neil jumped to his feet and screamed, “EXCELLENT!” as loud as he could while pumping his fist into the air.

Soon Claire told the two young men, “I’d love to stay and party more, but I’ve got an exam in the morning,” then asked William, “Will you walk me home?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Goodnight, Superwoman,” said Neil.

Claire replied, “Goodnight, child.”

The two young lovers walked back in the direction of the building where Claire resided. She noticed that William wasn’t very talkative.

“Is everything okay, William?”

“No. I lied to you tonight.”

“You lied to me?”

“I lied to both of you. That wasn’t a case I found in a book from the library. I lived it. I was that eight-year-old boy in the story! I’m afraid I’ll end up just like my dad!” William cried out in agony.

“Oh William, I’m so sorry! I love you! I wish I could ease the pain. You’re not going to end up like him. I won’t let it happen!” Claire exclaimed through tears of her own, as she hugged William securely.

“You ARE easing my pain. I love you so much! I have to tell Neil too. Will you come over tomorrow? It will be easier for me if you’re there when I do it.”

“No, let’s go do it right now. I don’t want you to suffer while waiting.”

Claire gently tugged him back to where they had come from just moments before.

When they entered the room, Neil was still drinking a beer and listening to music. He looked at his two friends. It was apparent to him that they had both been crying.

He stood and asked, “Whoa, what happened to harsh out a good buzz so fast?”

“I just told Claire what I’m about to tell you. I lied to both of you tonight. It wasn’t a case I described earlier. I was the boy from the story. It wasn’t my uncle who experienced a mental breakdown like I told you before. It was my dad, and I could end up going crazy like he did!”

“Bud, by the time you finished the story, I knew. Remember, we’re tuned in to the same jams. It’s also why I know you aren’t or ever will go crazy, man. That’s what those late-night horror flicks in your head are all about, right?”

“Yes.”

The three embraced in a group hug, holding on tightly to one another for a minute or two before letting go.

“I believe your case is a totally mysterious anthem that’s missing a righteous finale. We should all collaborate and compose one for it, bro,” said Neil.

“I think so too. Are you okay with us doing it, William?”

“Yes. However, it may be a waste of time. Many professionals have tried to figure it out and failed. Why would we do any better?”

“I’ll tell you why dude, because we are the best rockin’ power trio ever!” exclaimed Neil.

“That’s right. The three of us also have something going for us that the others didn’t. We are emotionally invested and won’t give up until we have the correct answers. We could even ask Professor James for help if necessary. He can be trusted. He proved it to me,” Claire added.

“Okay, but we’ll have to pick this back up later. I need to get Claire home. She has that test tomorrow,” replied William.

“No, I’m staying right here with you tonight, William. I can sleep here, and that won’t interfere with my exam. Are you good with that, Neil?”

“Totally good!”

With the trio in agreement, the lights went out. They all settled down for the evening, Neil in his bed and Claire and William in the other. The couple held each other in a comforting embrace throughout the night. William’s soul was soothed, and his heart was filled with Claire’s love.

Morning came too soon for William. Claire’s presence was so heartwarming that he wished the school week was finished so she could stay longer. Realizing it was unavoidable, and not wanting to cause her any negative consequences, he kept those feelings to himself.

William and Neil were ready earlier than usual. They both escorted Claire home so she could prepare for her first class. On the way out of the building, they encountered Shawn Thomas, a sophomore who lived a few doors down the hallway from Neil and William.

“I know that she stayed in your room all night. That’s a serious breach of the rules,” he said.

“Shawn, you should keep your nose out of other people’s business for your own well-being,” warned William, even though he was about half a foot shorter than the other young man.

“That’s right, dude. Quit acting like you have a gold ring floating above your melon. We both know you don’t,” interjected Neil.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Shawn.

“Einstein here can’t add. Figure it out, man, before I have to spill it.”

“Whatever, but if she gets caught, this place will be much improved if the three of your asses get thrown off campus.”

“Fuck off, you limp dick prick!” exclaimed Claire.

The trio left Shawn behind in the hallway with a battered and bruised ego.

“Wicked put down, Claire. You’re a feisty babe. William, you’re a lucky dude. She’s a most excellent and wild ride!”

“You’re such a child,” Claire responded with a chuckle.

“I’m glad you two like each other so much. Otherwise, I can imagine how difficult it would be to act as a referee and having to stand between the two of you,” said William.

“We’re all tuned in to the same jams now. That’s why we make such a rockin’ trio,” said Neil.

“That’s so true, Neil,” replied Claire with genuine sincerity. “Well, this is my stop,” she said as they arrived at her dormitory. “I’ll be quick if you guys want to wait.”

“We’ll wait. We don’t want to break up the band, right Neil?”

“Indeed, bud. This tour is just beginning.”

Claire smiled at the two teen boys then disappeared into the building.

The day seemed to drag on for William. Although psychology studies remained a crucial tool in his quest, his mind wandered that morning. His next class, history, felt like it took centuries to end. During literature, one of his favorite subjects, William was tortured by the words as they leapt from the anthology of the day. Fortunately, the mid-day break was next, and he would be able to regroup with Claire and Neil.

It wasn't until three in the afternoon that the drudgery concluded for the day. The reunited trio set off together and reached William and Neil's room. They decided to complete their assignments, study, break for dinner, then focus on William's case. At least they were together, which made the initial tasks much more tolerable than the classes earlier in the day.

In due time, they were able to move on to different matters. The three teens relaxed and enjoyed some friendly conversation before the topic became serious in nature.

"I think we should come up with a plan first. Since you guys are currently studying psychology, you need to identify the steps required and the order we should do them. Basically, we will develop an outline, and whenever possible, divide up the tasks," explained Claire.

"Brains, beauty, and a great personality. I'm so glad we found each other, Claire," said William.

"You're so sweet, William, my love."

"There'll be time later for kissy faces. Let's get started. Professor James said that you should rule out injuries, illness, alcohol, and drugs first. Tell us these things about your dad, bro. If you're not sure, we need to state it in the outline," Neil began.

"Well, at least you're a smart child, Neil. Okay, William, any injuries? Any illnesses? Drugs or alcohol use?" she asked. Claire wrote down the questions and William's answers; they were all no. "So what's next guys?"

"Symptomology and history. I'll list the symptoms that I know, but then I'll try to get my dad's medical records as well. We will have a more complete picture if we have access to the information they contain. It may permit consistencies and inconsistencies to appear. If I can get the records expeditiously, we may want to review them before conducting the interviews. However, mine can be done tonight. We'll need to make a list of questions and who to query. Next, create assignments for which of us will speak to each person. I'll schedule the interviews after we've developed the questionnaires and contact list. We can then parse for what is congruent or not in the histories we collect, and try to identify links between the symptoms and history. Hopefully, we'll see patterns emerge," concluded William.

"Brilliant, my love. What's next?" asked Claire.

"I believe that's an excellent and complete outline, babe. We may need to use the professor's noggin along the way," replied Neil.

"I guess when you're ready, we can start your interview, William," said Claire.

Following a short break, William's interview commenced. They used Neil's portable cassette player to record it. Claire offered to transcribe it later using her typewriter. Once the interview concluded, William and Claire went for a walk. They invited Neil to join them, but he made up an excuse not to go. Being a wonderful and thoughtful friend, he wanted to give the couple some alone time.

They walked to a short brick wall near the tree line at the edge of the campus and sat down. Claire leaned in, and the two shared several kisses. After exchanging declarations of love, William began to talk.

"I feel like I know you so well, but there's so much more I want to know."

"I feel the same way about you. Can I ask you a couple of easy questions first? Then, you can ask me as many as you want, even hard ones."

She took out a cigarette and lit it. It was the first time William had seen her smoke.

"Okay, you can ask me whatever you want," said William.

"Easy one, when is your birthday?"

“November 18, 1960. It’s funny, you always call Neil a child, but he is actually a few months older than I am. I hope you’ll make an exception regarding your rule about dating children, and keep going out with me.”

“Wow, that doesn’t give me and Neil much time to plan the party. Oh, and the child thing? I mean that I think he’s a child when it comes to his level of maturity. You are much more mature, perhaps even more so than me.”

“I think it’s kind of like a mask that he enjoys wearing. I call it the Real Neil because that’s who he wants to be. He’ll take it off when he needs to though.”

“Yes, I thought so. I really do like him, he’s nice and a good friend. We all have masks that we use depending on the situation. Sooner or later, people will figure out the real you. I’m a dramatic example of it.”

“You’re right about everything. FYI, he likes you too and obviously thinks you’re good for me. He’s right. I love both the introverted and extroverted versions of you, even though they seem to be so different on the outside. I’m so glad that you took off your mask for me. I love getting to know you. So, is there something else you want to ask me?”

“Hard one. Have you seen your mom since she left?”

“No. I don’t know where she is, or even if she is still alive. It’s strange because I barely remember anything about her.”

“Yes, it is a little odd because you remember so much about your dad. I wonder if you subconsciously choose not to remember her because she left.”

“That makes sense.”

“You said during your interview that you have two aunts that are your dad’s sisters, one uncle who’s your dad’s brother, and two uncles by marriage, right? Any others, perhaps from your mom’s side?”

“That’s right. They’re the only living relatives I know of, but there may be some from my mom’s side. I can’t remember.”

“Are your aunts and uncles nice? How was growing up with them?”

“Both of my aunts and the uncle I lived with are really nice. I haven’t spent much time with the uncle who’s my dad’s brother, but he seems okay. The other uncle is a total asshole. It was pretty good growing up with my aunt and uncle. Although it didn’t really feel like I was part of a family, I guess because they weren’t my own parents.”

“That’s good for now. What do you want to ask me?”

“When is your birthday?” he asked.

“January 25, 1959.”

“How long have you smoked? How long did you quit before you started again?”

“I had my first cigarette when I was fourteen and smoked pot for the first time a few months later. I’ve never smoked that much of either. Only a few cigarettes a day and pot a couple of times a month. I stopped smoking both when I began my transformation after taking that motherfucking I.Q. test. Along with the exception of one joint, I’ve only smoked a few cigarettes since then. Actually, I only bought a pack so that I could use a cigarette as sort of a prop during my reveal. I figured I’d finish the remaining ones then quit again. I don’t really need them. I might still smoke a joint if a social situation arises that presents the opportunity. At least with pot, I get the point. Does it bother you that I’m smoking?”

“No. Where did you grow up?” he asked.

“Fairview, it’s a little town that’s just about as far from here as you can go, and still be in the same state.”

“What’s your favorite subject?”

“You, of course! My favorite classes are literature and drama, obviously. Ask me something harder.”

“Tell me about your mom. Do you get along with her?”

“She is nice but overprotective. I think it’s because she feels like I’m the only one she has now. My dad left when I was a baby, and I don’t know anything about him. I’m not sure who’s to blame for either of those facts. Although my mom has one sister, they don’t see eye to eye and have been estranged for a long time. My mom and I used to get along really well, but that changed after that stupid I.Q. test. What a bunch of bullshit. You take a test that has you compare and contrast a bunch of pictures that look like something that a bad cubism artist created. Somehow that’s supposed to separate the ‘genius’ from the idiot. The idiot is the dumbass son of a bitch that came up with the fucking test! Things only got worse between my mom and me after I came here. I haven’t been home since I started school last year. Hell, I can’t even talk to her anymore to beg her to let me come home. The phone has been disconnected. I guess in a way, we have a lot in common,” answered Claire.

“Yes, I agree completely. You may or may not be a genius, but you’re awfully fucking smart. I’m so sorry about what happened between you and your mom. I’ll always be there for you for as long as you want me to be.”

“Forever then! Shit! I’ve got you cursing already.”

“I like the way that you are strong and forceful when you express your convictions. I find it endearing.”

“You like it when I cuss like a sailor? Wow, you really do love me!”

With those words having been uttered, the kissing commenced once again. Soon they returned to join Neil back in the room.

Neil said that all bands, especially heavy metal power trios like theirs, needed to spend plenty of time engaging in what he called “band unity.” He explained it as time for the group to sit and party together while listening to some awesome jams and talking. It did indeed prove to be a unifying time for the trio. However, it was getting late, and Claire was ready to head back to her room.

Upon his return from escorting Claire home, William had a big favor to ask of Neil.

“Can I borrow your van on Saturday? I need to go to Fairview, Claire’s hometown. She hasn’t been allowed to go home since starting school here last fall. She can’t call her mom either because the phone has been disconnected. I want to find out what’s going on. I’ll be careful and bring it back with a full tank.”

“No problem, bro. Do you want me to come along on the road trip?”

“I’d like you to stay here and keep Claire company. I need you to make sure she’s okay while I’m away. I don’t want her to find out where I’ve gone. I’ll fill her in when I return with news. You can just tell her I went to do some research. It will sound like it’s about my case and not her situation.”

“Check. You can stack your chips on the table. I guarantee it’s a sure thing, dude.”

“Thanks, I owe you one.”

“No way, man. You’d do me the same solid. If you had your own wheels, I mean.”

Chapter 4

Early Saturday morning, before the sun rose, William set out on his quest. It was a long trip, and even if he could locate Claire's mom quickly, it would be well past sunset before he could make it back to the campus. Even though he didn't consider himself to be religious, William prayed the entire way to Fairview. *Please God, let me return with the answers for Claire that she needs.*

He did return with answers, but the news was not what he wanted to deliver to his love. When William entered his room back at the university, Claire and Neil were listening to music and having a drink. His dear friend was doing exactly what was asked of him. They looked at William and could immediately tell by the vacant expression on his face that something was amiss.

"William, are you okay? You look like you're in shock," Claire said.

"I think you need a brew," Neil declared as he headed to the small refrigerator in the corner to retrieve a beer for him."

"I am, Claire. I do, Neil," William replied.

"Please tell me what's wrong," implored the young woman.

"Yeah bro, don't Hitchcock us!"

"I will tell you both. Neil, step out into the hallway for a moment. I need to talk to Claire alone first," William requested.

"No problem, dude. I'll be right outside of the door if I'm needed." Neil exited the room.

"So, Neil told you why I was gone, right?"

"Yes, he said you needed to take a trip to do some research, and you asked him to stay with me until you returned so that I wouldn't worry. You found out something disturbing about your dad, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did take a trip to do research." William paused and took a deep breath. He wrapped his arm around Claire, pulling her close to him as they sat together on the edge of his bed.

"Claire, remember I said no matter what, you'll always have me. Please, Claire, it's true, please believe me! I love you so much."

He could feel Claire's entire body begin to tremble. Her voice broke as she spoke.

"I remember, and I believe you. I love you so much too. Please, tell me what's wrong!"

"Claire, I did find out something disturbing today, but it wasn't about my dad. I went to Fairview. I went to your house. Your mom's sister is living there now. Claire, she told me that before you came here for college, your mom had more than one reason to send you here on the full scholarship that you were awarded. She was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Your mom refused treatment because she knew it wouldn't save her life, and the side effects would make the rest of it worse. She was in a lot of pain and was taking morphine for it. Your mom couldn't stand the pain anymore, even with the drugs. Just before Thanksgiving, a year ago, after getting a refill of morphine, she swallowed the entire bottle. She died," William concluded, then hung his head.

Claire's tears became frequent and flowed more freely with each word that William struggled to express. His tears synchronized with hers. When he finally uttered the words "She died," Claire broke out into wails of boundless grief.

The couple's tears became a deluge, and they collapsed on the bed together. They held onto each other as if their own lives depended on it.

"Sorry! I Love you!" William repeatedly declared.

Suddenly, the door to the room burst open. William lifted his head just enough to look at Neil. "Claire's mom is dead!"

Neil flopped into a chair and buried his face in his hands. The outpouring of emotions continued for over an hour, gradually lessening in degree until finally trailing off into light weeping.

Exhausted, the trio fell asleep in place. Claire wouldn't be sleeping alone tonight. William would make sure that he gave her as much consolation and comfort that he could offer for as long as she needed it.

The following day was unusually warm for the middle of November. It was overcast with intermittent light rain. It matched the mood of the three people in the room that day. It was not as depressing as the night before but gloomy. Without even conferring, the boys decided that it would be up to them to improve Claire's outlook. They would be supportive and reassure the young woman that she would never be on her own.

The unspoken plan was gradually set into motion. It started with words of love from both William and Neil.