

The Keeper
JT Kalnay

Published by jt Kalnay

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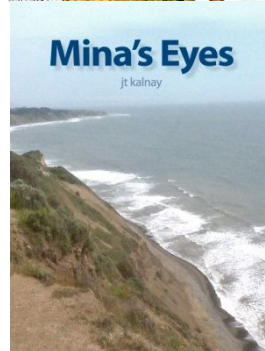
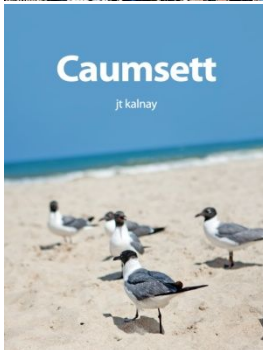
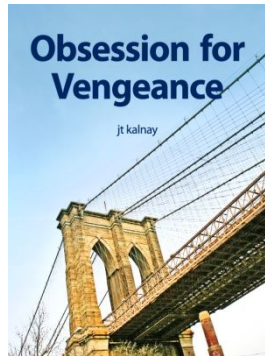
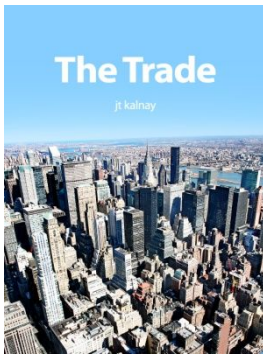
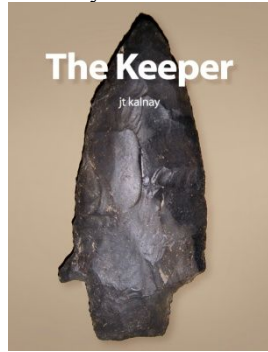
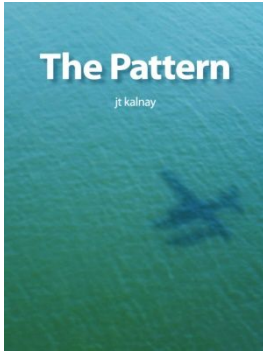
This is a work of fiction. While, as in all fiction, the story is based on experiences, real or imagined, all names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of my overactive imagination or are used fictitiously. No reference to any real person is intended or should be inferred.

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Madawaska Highlands
Summer, 1978

High atop a gray limestone cliff a copper-skinned boy watches the sun rise. Though the long June days have darkened his tawny skin to a burnished copper, they have not and will never warm the deep water. The sun reaches the boy. But the lake is still dark, shaded by the rock.

The cliff is nearly bare, adorned only by two ancient trees and a number of red pictographs. One is larger than the others. It is a hand, palm out, that sends its warning down the length of the lake. The cliff is older even than the lake. It shoots hundreds of feet straight out of the cold dark water.

The boy often finds arrowheads and spear points near the cliff. Most from his people, but some from the others who have passed this way. Some in friendship, some in anger. He looks out over the water and feels the telltale ripples. A pair of canoes move towards him, towards the cliff. Tourists. Cottagers. Their sounds carry across the dark still water. Though the words are indistinct, their tone carries feelings. The feeling of morning tiredness mixed with hope and anxiety for the coming day, for the adventure on the cliff at the end of the lake.

The boy repeats a silent prayer, words he has said to himself and to his Manitou a thousand times in this place, on this rock. Words passed on to him from his copper-skinned grandmother, whose people were keepers of this place before the cottagers, before the loggers, before the prospectors, even before the missionaries. Simply before.

He touches his necklace, a leather strap that carries a silver medallion that houses a large purple arrowhead. He tucks it under his shirt then slowly, precisely, gracefully, as though this vertical world was his natural habitat, he climbs down the cliff to await the canoes.

The girl dips her paddle again and again, with a delicate yet practiced and powerful rhythm. The last of the early morning mist hangs in clumps and patches just above the black water. She looks ahead at her father's narrow back. An open toothy smile spreads across her face and she tips her head back slightly in a quiet prayer. She thanks her God for all this, for the day, for her father. As she opens her eyes they track again to the cliff looming at the end of the lake. A flash of silver glints from the ridge line.

"Did you see that?" she asks.

“See what?” her father answers.

“Nothing,” she says.

She dips her paddle slightly deeper, pulls slightly harder, glues her eyes to the ridge.

Her father pulls the canoe all the way out of the water and onto the small rocky landing that clings to the cliff hundreds of feet directly below the petroglyph. Neither of them see the boy perched deep in an alcove in the shadowed ledge just above their heads.

“I thought he was going to meet us here?” her father says.

“He will. He seemed very trustworthy,” the girl answers.

“I don’t know honey. He seemed awfully young,” her father says. “And who really trusts a half-breed anyway?”

“Stop it,” the girl says. “If you didn’t want to climb, that’s all you had to say. Why don’t you just go back to camp? I’m going climbing.”

Her father considers, looks at her.

“I guess we can wait a little while,” he says.

The boy reaches down, picks up a fist sized rock, and moving slowly, soundlessly, tosses it from his perch over their heads and into the lake. As the girl and her father look towards the splash, the boy quickly and silently descends behind them, moving to within a few feet of the girl.

“What was that?” her father asks.

The girl is the first to turn back towards the boy. She gasps, causing her father to turn also. The boy seems to have simply materialized behind them.

“How?”

“Where?”

“Ready to climb?” the boy asks.

“I am,” the girl says, meeting and holding his gaze.

The father pauses a moment, “Me too,” he says.

The girl, her father, and the boy sit in the sun with their backs to the rock. Their feet dangle hundreds of feet above the water.

“This is beautiful,” the girl says.

“Yes,” the boy answers.

“And high,” her father adds.

“Yes,” the boy repeats.

“What’s that over there?” the girl asks. “The darker part of the forest? It’s almost round.”

“A group of spruce trees. It’s a special place. Important to my people. *All* my people.” He emphasizes the word ‘all’.

He fixes the father with a look. The father looks away.

“Can you take me there?” she asks.

“No,” the boy answers. “And you must not go there.”

“Important how?” she asks.

“Important in a way that people from *away* do not understand,” he answers.

The girl and her father share a perplexed look and an awkward moment gathers momentum, threatens to spin out of control. Before it can, the boy asks, “ready for the last two pitches?”

He stands up, hands the rope to her father, and heads up the cliff.

Rochester Township, Ohio
Spring 2005

The angle of the sun is higher today. The morning fog and its chill are quickly replaced with the hope only a spring morning after a long gray winter can carry. The geese are slowly muddying the pond, pulling reeds and grasses from its edges to nest.

He steps from the stoop and onto the lawn that curves down to the pond. On stiff legs, he moves carefully to not scare the geese. He approaches the freshly plowed field, and starts his ritual search.

As he walks, a cardinal perched high on a budding sugar maple tree sings out. It is in the tallest tree on the farm. Looking up from the furrow he is walking he searches for and then finds the cardinal. He mimics and answers its call. He remains convinced that in some way he really can talk to the animals. He knows they talk to him.

The cardinal is provoked by his returned call. He is looking for a mate and will sing louder and longer than any other to mark his turf. He whistles two more times then returns to his search.

Back and forth he walks, stooping whenever a rock appears too regular, too sharp. He picks and discards rock after rock. Mostly shale, some slate. He keeps the chert, though he is looking for flint, for arrowheads, spear points, artifacts. Spring after spring, after the plowing, he walks these furrows. Every fall after the harvest he walks them again.

Over the years he has collected many artifacts from these fields. They are housed in a lit display in the family room. Visitors who know nothing of the history of the area are amazed. Local farmers like to visit and bring their collections to compare. His sister-in-law, the archeologist, catalogues each and every one. She tells him their likely age, from where the flint was collected, how the sample may have come to be in Ohio, who likely knapped the points. He takes comfort in her voice, in her words, in her knowledge. She has been good to him, good for him, for quite a time.

He bends again, reaches out for a rock, thumbs a clump of mud from the stone. He turns it this way and that, then pockets it with the rest of the chert.

“Any luck today?” his wife asks.

“Not really,” he answers.

He takes the chert from his pocket, rinses it in the sink, and sets it out to dry.

“At least you had a nice day for it,” she says.

“Yes,” he answers.

He thinks about times they’ve walked the farm, hand in hand, or simply together. Thinks about their first walk around the farm on a crisp October night where each star seemed so bright and so close that the magic spilled over into him and he took her in his arms and kissed her for the very first time. A long kiss, warmth replacing nervousness. He remembers how she met his kiss, accepted it, and afterwards how she had leaned her head on his chest. Momentarily he can feel the weight, smell her hair, taste the kiss, is the autumn. He closes his eyes, lets it take him. Savors it.

“I heard you whistling at the cardinal,” she says.

He chuckles.

“I don’t think he likes it,” she says.

“I know he doesn’t like it,” he answers. “Until I let him win. You know I let him win every time.”

“Let him win? Oh really? I’d like to see who would win if you really had it out.”

“No contest,” he answers. “That cardinal would kick my ass.”

Their quiet comfortable laugh warms the room.

“Are you all packed for your trip?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“I’ll miss you,” she says.

“And I miss you,” he answers.

He looks at the pond that gathers the water from the creek that starts at the spring in the back near the rocks. He sees the geese preparing for the next cycle in the endless circle. “I really miss you.”

High Sierra, California
Spring 2005

A flaxen haired child runs circles around a cozy campfire. Having just arrived from my nearly sea level home in Ohio, I marvel at how quickly he streaks through the thin High Sierra air. As I gasp and gaze, the early spring sun sinks lower, throwing pink and salmon touches onto wispy clouds that float above towering snow capped peaks.

“Bonjour,” I say to the child.

“Bonjour,” he replies without slowing down.

Months of anticipation, and now I’m here. I still can’t believe it. I love my wife for letting me come, wanting me to come. I can’t wait to climb outside again, to climb here, with Katrina. I know everything you can know about a person you’ve never met. Everything you can read, every anecdote that can be told.

I drop my pack, lower into a green folding camp chair, and prop my feet next to the glowing fire. My toes begin to warm. The precocious boy continues his laps, which now include scrambling up, over, and down my outstretched flight and road weary legs. On each lap I catch his intelligent blue eyes. Intelligent, but with something different in them. Is it mischief? He graces me with a playful, trusting smile. My mind slips back to time spent running in my grandmother’s house. Bare feet on a dirt floor. Beauty, determination, poverty.

“William!” I hear from behind me. Turning, I see the voice belongs to a tanned, down-clad pixie wearing mirrored shades that throw back the last of the dying sunlight.

“Hi. I see you’ve met William. I’m Katrina.” The sprite extends a small hand to shake.

Stricken, taken, still not believing that I am actually here and that this is actually happening I manage weakly, “Yes, you are.”

Her nose crinkles and she slides her shades up in to her light brown hair. Powder blue eyes that have seen so much search me for guile. Finding only fawning amazement, the first of what will be many little laughs at my expense escape her.

“You must be Tom.”

Her grip is strength, balance, freedom, and beauty. What I'd expect from such a great climber. Somehow finding composure in her scrutiny, I also feel welcome.

"TK. Yes I am. It's nice to meet you. And William."

Morning breaks clear and cold in the high California desert hidden deep inside the Sierra Nevada. William nestles on his mother's lap and we three campers listen to the plan for the day. My camp mates and I share our "we're really going climbing with Katrina," looks. It's been so long since I've felt this anticipation. Perhaps since when I was a kid.

The River lies impossibly far below the rim of the gorge. We all climb, often, though maybe not so well, and maybe not as often as we'd wish. But for this week we will tether to rock and to each other, momentarily escaping the chains of our day-to-day. Not knowing exactly what will happen during our time here with the not completely retired world champion. Open to almost anything.

We begin the descent to the bottom of the gorge. I struggle to keep up with the group, but then yield to age, weight, and unsteady footing. The group politely waits by the river in the gorge. As it does so often, my mind brings things to me. I see my grandmother. I see her waiting for me at the end of her path, her back bent under her heavy pack, our fingers stained from the berries we've collected. Her satisfaction in a full day's work. I see my wife waiting for me at the end of a long run, her long legs glistening from the effort. Both so long ago, in such different places. I finally reach the bottom.

We climb. The rock feels like Teflon coated with Crisco. Faint chalk smudges mark what purport to be holds. Flailing artlessly I struggle upwards. My dry mouth fills with cotton. I know Katrina will laugh at me. She won't be able to help it. No matter how much class and patience and lack of guile she possesses, she will simply have to laugh.

Many falls and hangs later, I somehow reach the anchor. My forearms are flash-pumped, aching with the too sudden influx of blood. Didn't I once climb an 11a at Jtree? Back then? When Amy was new to me and I was new to her? Didn't I almost do the roof arch in the gym just last week? My embarrassment forces as much blood to my crimson face as my flailing ascent drove into my forearms.

Later, in a quiet moment, Katrina comes to me as I sit on a boulder basking in high desert sun that glints back from the river in a million winks and facets. She looks at me with her infinite blue eyes and somehow my shame recedes. I've found all my friends and all my comfort in women.

"I want you to try that again. Pretend you're back at home with your favorite partner, on your favorite warm-up route, on a beautiful day just like today." She continues to look into me, not at me. "Forget I'm here. Forget about that first try."

I nod. I'll never forget it. It has been burnt into my memory. Indelible memory. Non-volatile memory. Memory that holds its values even when the power is off. But memory that can be put aside for years at a time. Memory that can be lost.

Some things we simply never forget. Like the smell of northern pike frying over a spruce fire at my grandmother's summer lodge. Like the forest beneath your toes as you steal through the forest. Like the copper taste of blood in your mouth, and rivers of blood on your hands.

Her voice pulls me back.

"Look at your feet more often. You're a big guy so it's important to use those hoofs." She nudges a "hoof" with her approach shoes. She's teasing me to relax me. Somehow reads me. Connects on some subconscious level. Knows how to get through. I remember we're both children from families with absent fathers. Her teasing works and I feel lighter. The California sun feels warmer and softer. The burn in my arms recedes.

The do-over starts well. Holds appear where minutes before there were none. Looking down past my feet I see Katrina holding the rope. Surreal. I cannot forget that she is here, so I will try to remember her counsel. I pick a foot placement then another. My arms and fingers thank me. At the crux I start to crank then stop. I hear her voice. Is it in my mind? Is it drifting up from below? It tells me not to pull so hard. "Be gentle. Be just strong enough." Words my grandmother gently breathed out forty years ago while I worked a stitch through a thin hide. Words my wife whispered while I fumbled in our clumsy early intimacy. I breath, relax into the move, and float, connecting the three women through their gentle words. There is a merging, a gentle, effortless upward motion. A good moment, a perfect stitch, a complete togetherness.

Back on the ground Katrina looks as pleased as I feel. "Better," she says. "Let's go see what the others are doing." I follow her tiny frame along the path. She seems larger. And prettier than I'd gathered from her photographs. At this moment I know that I'm really here, and that this is really happening, and that this is exactly where I am supposed to be at this instant in time. It is a moment of clarity in a life so often obscured.

While I have loved her before knowing her, loved her for what she was, now I start to know her, in a tangible way, and feel the love change.

Joshua Tree National Park
October 1999

The coffee skinned man has walked through this desert before. Felt its warmth, felt its desolation, and felt its beauty seep into him. It rejuvenates him. He has come here each fall for years. At first, just to walk. To be in the immenseness and the silence. To be away for a few days. Away from her crippling illness, her need, her pain. It's selfish. But she understands, and encourages him to go. She knows he needs this time. That it sustains him through the inevitable and interminable northern Ohio winter. When the pain will be the worst. When she may not leave the chair. When her workers will meet her at the door and wheel her to her lab at the start of the day. When he will meet her at the end of the day, and carry her inside, and tend to her and love her and be loved.

She knows he needs this time. And she needs it too. To not feel like his burden for a time. To pray. Alone. Because she knows that very soon, when it is finally over, when her pain ends, his will begin. That prayers will end for him. That he will curse whatever God has made this happen. She knows he will survive this final sadness, but suspects he will be forever altered. So she sends him away each fall to the desert he loves.

On this morning he has walked far back between the rocks and mountains in the desert. The air is still, his footfalls excessively loud, intrusive. The colors at sunrise. The scents of slowly opening flowers. Peace. The desert at sunrise. Hope. Far from the trailhead. Solitude, farther from the road, closer to life.

He spots what could be called a set of steps in a dike on school-bus sized boulder. Set between the mountains, it is surrounded by Joshua trees. A pinon pine grows right out of a crack. Nolina brush against its base. He steps onto the rock, scrambles up, stands atop. He surveys the sea of sand and rock and plants. So many trees in the high desert. In the distance, biblical numbers of birds swarm over the water behind Barker Dam. For it has rained. Like it never rains here in the desert. Remnants of a hurricane have traveled up from Mexico and dropped a foot of rain in the previous week. And what has always been a brown and dusty place is for a while a green and watered paradise. Chola, Daytura, Nina Bigelova, Creosote, Joshua Trees, all in bloom. No two days in the high desert have ever been the same for him. But today could not have been more different in a dream.

He returns to the plants and trees on the desert floor. Begins to hike between the thousands of cactus, towards the birds, towards the dam.

“I’ve never seen it like this,” he says.

“Neither have I,” she says. They stand together and apart, backs to the rock, facing the acres of water hidden in the high desert.

She is much younger than he. Pretty. Lithe. More than a child, less than a woman. A climber. She turns away from the water, back to the rock. Traversing, falling, traversing, falling. From a shelf of rock inches above the desert floor. The rock is brown, light brown, dark brown, sandy brown. Featured, polished in places from too many hands. Disgraced with chalk. While this generation marvels at the nearby native carvings, later generations will wonder at the careless, senseless destruction wrought by the chalk. Chalk to dry hands while climbing rocks adrift in an ocean of sand. No grass grows in this spot. Too many footsteps and too many crash pads have destroyed too much.

A pony tailed boy lies slumped in the shade of a shed sized boulder. Climbed into submission. Returning to dust.

“May I?” the coffee skinned man asks.

“You may,” she answers, stepping back from the rock.

He touches it, feels its coarseness beneath his fingers. Momentarily closes his eyes and feels the morning's warmth flow into him. Morning has always been the best for him. The opposite of night, of dark, of cold. He opens his eyes, places a foot, and begins to move. The old ways are strong in him. He moves to the right. Hand over hand, foot over foot, balancing, counter-balancing, seeing, returning to that place in his youth. He approaches her crux, pauses, moves through, moves back, through, back, testing, probing, discovering. He passes through one more time, reaches the far end, steps off, rubs his fingers.

"Nice," she offers.

"Dude," the pony tailed boy adds.

"Thanks," he says.

He seeks the sand and the shade. Rests his back against a fawn colored rock. A small green and brown lizard with a blue belly races across legs. Disappears into the shade.

The girl returns to the rock. She reaches the same point where she has stepped off time and time again. She flicks her head towards him, sending her long brown sun-blond hair flipping over her shoulder and against the rock.

"I'm open to suggestion about this part," she says.

The man slowly rises, ambles over, looks at the rock, at the girl.

"Again please?" he asks.

She steps back up, reaches, steps, reaches, falls.

He catches her shoulders, keeps her upright.

She turns and looks into his eyes. He recognizes something there, knows that is impossible. He remembers all of them. Precisely. Exactly. Each face, each voice, each smile, each tear, each surrender and rendering and the inevitableness. He forces himself to look away from this teenage beauty.

"Your reach, your flexibility. Perhaps match your hands here. Settle. Breath. Consider a back step here, a slow slow slow gentle rock over. Balance. Slow. Gentle. Then turn your heel this way, just this much. It will open your hips. Free your foot to step, and your hand to move, here." He touches her hand, places it on a hold. "If you'd like, I'll spot you."

She visualizes, nods, steps on.

He tracks behind her, a finger tip resting between her shoulder blades to let her know he is there, ready, poised, trustworthy. He breathes louder than necessary, regular, audible. She picks up his cadence, breaths with him. Moves to their joint rhythm.

She reaches her difficulty, matches her hands, breaths, breaths again, back steps, balances, breathes, slowly passes through, completes.

Her smile comes quickly, spreads, erupts.

She steps off, approaches him, hugs him tightly. She tips her head back and once again looks into his eyes. She fits in his arms. Feels like she has been there before, belongs there.

“Thanks mister,” she says. She squeezes him again, then skips away, throws herself down onto her boyfriend. Kisses him. He wraps her in his arms.

The man looks away, memorizing her touch.

It could not have been more powerful. A certain specific power he is sure he has felt before, no longer thinking that to be impossible. For he knows there are some things he has forgotten and some things that cannot be explained. Things he sometimes remembers in the certain perfect isolation of the infinite silence of the trees and bushes and rocks and sand of the high desert.

Madawaska Highlands
Summer, 1978

The boy sits at the edge of the cliff, the rope tight in his hand, his tether tight to the anchor in the rock.

“Come on dad, you can do it,” the girl says.

The man dangles on the rope, slowly spinning some twenty feet below the boy and the girl.

“Just let me rest a minute,” he calls up.

The boy looks at the man, at the sky, at the girl.

“Can he do this?” the girl asks the boy.

“We’ll all find out together,” he answers.

She studies him.

She notices the silver medallion hanging around his neck. Sees that it houses a purple rock. She focuses, sees it is an arrowhead.

“What’s that?” she asks.

“What?” the boy answers.

“Your necklace.”

The boy looks back at her father, still resting on the rope. He looks at her briefly, then back to the sky. The tourists always ask.

“My grandmother gave it to me,” he says.

“And?” she prods.

He says nothing more.

“Does it have anything to do with the super secret place I can never visit because I can never understand?” she asks.

The boy examines her, scrutinizes. Thinks perhaps he sees something different, something unusual.

She feels herself shrink inside his gaze.

“Sorry,” she says.

“Yes,” he offers, not knowing why he would share either of these facts with this tourist, with this person from *away*.

She shifts her gaze out across the water, to the circular set of trees. She marks its distance and position relative to the rock and the channel she paddled to reach it. She resolves to visit the forbidden place as soon as possible. And to get a closer look at his necklace.

The angle of the sun changes, and beneath them the petroglyph hand catches the rays and shimmers ever so briefly.

Rochester Township
Spring 2005

“Why can’t you just climb here?” his nephew asks.

“Because we don’t have any mountains in Ohio, we only have valleys,” he answers.

“But there’s rocks over the by the creek. By the Indian painting.”

“True. But we’re not supposed to touch that rock. Remember?”

“Because of the evil spirits?”

He pauses. Wonders who has tried to scare the young boy.

“No. Because of respect. For the people who made the painting. And for all the people who’ve yet to see it. Like your children, and their children.”

The boy thinks. Scuffs a shoe on the fieldstone floor.

“There’s going to be other people there right?” he asks. “You won’t be alone?”

“Yes. A lawyer from Toronto, an engineer from Phoenix, and of course, the main attraction, Katrina Colina, the most famous rock climber in the world. She climbed one route that’s so hard and so long that nobody else has ever done it. Nobody,” he answers.

“Wow,” his nephew says. He looks out the kitchen window at the pond, covered in a thin film of ice on this early spring morning.

“Is it spring there?” he asks.

“It’s a desert where I’m going, but yes it’s spring.”

His nephew shuffles from foot to foot. Goes to the fridge, looks for and finds nothing. He walks back to his uncle. He scuffs his foot again.

“How long will you be gone?” he asks.

“Ten days altogether, including the travel back and forth. It’s a long way. You know how far it is to the Outer Banks? Well this is three times that far.”

“Will you be able to talk to her while you’re there?”

“I hope so.”

“Tell her hi for me,” his nephew says. Then he turns, runs out the door, starts and revs his four wheeler, spins the wheels on the frozen gravel drive, and tears off into the back fields.

He prays a silent prayer, prays that the boy’s pain will fade some day.

High Sierra, California
Spring 2005

The river bubbles and gurgles its way downstream. Crows, buzzards, and hawks ride thermals above the cliff. A bandana clad yellow dog languidly shuffles from climber to climber looking for snacks, looking for scratches. He is obliged by many. The sun climbs higher and I remove another layer.

We climb. I watch my feet and try not to pull so hard. Forty feet up I'm spread eagled and unable to advance. The guide subtly hauls and I sit back on the rope. I try to move. He hauls. I sit. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Finally the anchors appear and the guide floats me down.

Again she comes to me. I'm eating chocolate that someone snuck into my pack. Maybe I snuck it in there myself in an unconscious moment? She breaks off a piece too small for a hoo and then enjoys it more than the fistful I've managed to cram in my gaping maw. Again I realize that she is prettier than I'd thought. And the little instant delight of the chocolate makes her even more so.

"Your footwork is better, and you're not muscling up so much."

"Thanks," I say.

The corners of her mouth turn down the tiniest amount possible. Her eyes narrow almost imperceptibly. I realize I've interrupted. I promise myself not to do so again. How quickly I forget the lessons of my grandmother in this woman's presence. The lesson that to hear I must listen. The lesson that the most important words may be the ones not spoken. The lessons of a quiet woman of immense power surviving alone in both the natural wilderness of her northern home and the unnatural wilderness of living between two cultures. Not quite white, not completely Ojibwa. I force my mouth shut, compress my lips white with the pressure.

She draws an imaginary triangle in front of me.

"Think about staying in here," she says.

“Put your hands right over your feet whenever you can. You’re an engineer. I heard you talking physics and forces and other impossibly hard things with the others. When you’re all spread out, you’re making it too hard for yourself. You’re multiplying forces that can be minimized.”

She reaches out and gently taps my forehead. I do not shy from the touch, which surprises me.

“Use that math muscle. Visualize. See the force vectors your hands and feet are making. Then try that one again.”

She wanders away. Her touch stays with me. Warms me equally with the spring sun in the high desert.

I think. I am an engineer. Or was, before the years when I was almost nothing. I don’t recall saying that I was an engineer. I’m a lawyer now. That’s what I tell people. What I told her. What I put on the online registration form.

But inside, where the math lives, where it has always lived, I am an engineer. I remember that she was a science major as well. And her dad was an engineer. My dad? I was raised by my grandmother. What I know of him I know through her. That’s a lie. A convenient device for forgetting the truth, subduing the reality. At the threat of my father’s approach the math takes hold.

I retreat back into it, think about the math, and as I do a pattern appears in the rock. I relate it to the movements that will carry me up. Slowly, ever so slowly, sines, cosines, angles and vectors start to move, to resolve. The route changes before my eyes. It is a system, it can be solved. Equations flow out of my mind, through my hands and feet, into the rock. I see a handhold, connect it to a foothold below, to another handhold yet higher. Sister Mary Annette appears before me with her longish Catholic school ruler. Together we study the rock. Thankfully Sister Mary Annette slinks back to where all high school physics apparitions belong.

The route goes this time. Bottom to top. No falls. No hauls. No awkward spread-eagles. Integrals drip from my fingers and conic sections replace my feet.

From a small boulder at the edge of the river Katrina waves. Nods her approval. Absorbs my improvement. Tilts her face to the sun and smiles a satisfied smile.

I am at piece. The homesickness, the longing, the loneliness has not begun, has not yet infected this place. May it never appear.

I smile at her. She smiles back.

Joshua Tree National Park
October 1999

“Will you take our picture?” she asks.

The man takes the camera, centers the girl and her pony-tailed boyfriend in the frame, and shoots.

“That’s a fantastic arrowhead, on your necklace,” the man says.

The girl reaches down, grasps it, extends it away from her breasts and towards him.

He leans in and studies it. Sees how it has been knapped, worked. Wonders how it came to be lost, and then found, and then made into this necklace. He tries to not look down her top, fails, blushes.

“It doesn’t look like it is from here, the southwest,” he says.

“You can tell that?” she asks.

“Sometimes. Where I grew up there were a lot of arrowheads. And my sister is an archeologist, studies native Americans.” He shudders with the half-truth, though it is so much easier to call her his sister. This lie usually comes more easily. It is one that has been told for so long that he no longer consciously recognizes it as a lie. It is his conscious truth now.

“She studies the mound builders. In Ohio. So I’ve looked at a lot of arrowheads.”

“My mom gave it to me. It’s from up north somewhere, from her grandpa’s cottage. Where she used to go when she was a kid. I have others. One sort of looks like yours. Will you be out here tomorrow? Or maybe at the Crossroads Café tomorrow morning?”

His mind races. A breakfast date with this beautiful young thing? Can this happen so quickly? So casually? His mind returns to the arrowhead. He wants to know more about it, and about her. About her having one that matches his.

“Crossroads at eight?” he asks.

“Seven,” she responds. “Daylight is for climbing.”

“TK,” he says, extending his hand.

“Amy,” she answers, taking his and shaking with a climber’s grip.

The boyfriend looks as forgotten as he feels.

Madawaska Highlands
Summer, 1978

First one hand appears.

Then another.

A sweaty brow, two tired yet wildly excited eyes, and then the rest of him.

He gives one final heave and comes to rest on the ledge beside the boy and the girl.

“Dad you are *awesome*,” the girl says.

She throws her hands around his neck.

“Thanks,” he gasps.

The boy looks into the man’s eyes, says nothing, nods.

“Thanks,” the man says more quietly.

While he gasps in ragged breaths the boy’s hand remains on the rope.

“Dad? Are you off belay?” she asks.

“Oh. Sorry.” He clips a tether from his harness to the anchor.

“Off belay,” the man says.

The boy relaxes his grip on the rope. The strain comes off his own tether. He moves more into the wall, into the ledge. As he moves, the silver medallion shifts over his chest.

“Dad? Have you ever seen a stone like the one in his medallion?” she asks. She points.

Slowly, with his recently freed hand, he replaces the medallion inside his shirt.

“Can’t I see it?” she asks. “Not even a look?”

The man and his daughter share a look. Trespassers shamed at being caught in the act.

The boy prepares the ropes for the rappel.

“Is it something else we won’t understand?” the father asks, challenges.

The boy’s eyes narrow. He breathes deeply. Deliberately he removes the necklace, edges toward her, considers, drapes it around her neck.

She is pulled toward the edge by the weight. Cannot believe the incredible weight. And the power. A force flows out of the rock and straight into her chest, threatens to consume her. The edge looms. Her head swims. Her tether takes the strain, catches her, holds her. Her foot dislodges a pebble that cartwheels over and over before splashing soundlessly in the water far below.

The boy stares, his eyes narrow even more. Below them the petroglyph sparks brightly, senses the separation of his talisman, feels his malevolence.

“What?” she asks.

“Wear it until you think you understand,” he says.

“How were they?” his grandmother asked.

“Mostly the same, a little different.”

She waits.

“The girl wondered about the hand. I felt it.”

Once again he was taken back to that night, the first night, when his grandmother told him about the hand.

“And your stone?”

“With her.”

His grandmother slowly shakes her head, turns, leaves.

Rochester Township
Fall 1999

Brilliant reds, oranges, and yellows. The bright fall colors. The geese have raised their goslings. A chill can be felt in the morning. He knows any day now they will be gone. Gone south, with the others. Away from the frost.

“Sad?” she asks.

“I’m always sad to see them go.”

“They’ll be back.”

“You think so?”

“I’m sure.”

“When I get back, the leaves will all be down. The corn will be in. It will be lonely here.”

“Then stay longer. Stay as long as you want. Stay all winter.”

“No.”

“I’ll be here when you get back.”

It’s lovely, beautiful, and so painful to hear. Knowing it to be a simple statement of fact. But one he cannot bear to hear.

“Just a week, maybe ten days,” he says. “Then I’ll be back.”

He pulls on his jacket and steps out into a morning so clear he can see individual trees on the back tree line, a half hour walk away. He starts to walk. Knows on some level where he will arrive and lets his feet take him there. Head down, looking at the last furrow in the field. He walks.

At the back tree line he stops. The sweat is fresh on his brow, his breathing hard. Years ago he could run here and back. Now, so soon after, the walk is almost too much.

“You did great,” she says.

“Thanks. It’s a little better today.”

“Remember the first time we came back here alone?” she asks.

A smile creeps onto his face.

“Yes.”

The memory floods back, the way it always does when he makes it back this far. The feel of her skin, of her kiss, of her urgency. The wanting. The knowing. The loss. He surrenders, lets it flow over him, enters the moment, escapes the now.

The sound of an engine intrudes. It grows closer. It is a small engine. His sister-in-law has sent his nephew with a drink. To check on him, to offer a ride back. Moments later the young man arrives. He marvels at how quickly he has grown.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey.”

“She asked me to bring you a drink.”

He hands over a plastic bottle of mineral water.

“Thanks,” he answers.

He drinks, hands the bottle back.

“Did you talk to her today?” he asks.

“Yes. She said to tell you she loves you.”

The boy looks down, does not want his uncle to see what may be a tear.

“And she said to stop teasing your sister so much.”

The boy looks up and laughs.

“She said that?”

“Yes,” he says. He lightly punches the boy on the shoulder.

“Want a ride back?” he asks.

“No thanks. I think I can walk it today,” he answers.

His nephew watches him, sees the stiffness in his joints.

“If you’re not back in an hour I’ll come looking for you,” his nephew says.

He starts the four wheeler, heads back towards the farm.

He knows the boy will keep their secret, that he still talks to her. Because the boy cannot bear how much he misses her. It has been hardest on him. Even harder than on the man. He understands the loss of a woman to a young boy.

High Sierra, California
Spring 2005

After lunch we cross the river chasing the sun. I wonder if there will ever be another day like this. Warm sun, warm rock, warm people. People I want to know more. One in particular. And I ask myself. Who am I to tread so clumsily in this hall of climbing Gods? What have I done to earn this?

I realize I have done exactly what should be done to earn this. Have paid the perfect price. Have sought out those who seek, those eager to share. Have worked to surround myself with excellence. Perhaps one of them is the one who can know. I have overcome, in some small, the self-pity and loathing of the past year.

The route is hard. After a while it goes for the others. Katrina offers quiet suggestions. But no amount of beta, no set of normalized force vectors, no quantity of gentle directional pulling inside my triangle will make it go. $F = MA$, and with the current size of my A (Ass), there is a lot of M (Mass), and not enough F (Force) to accelerate it. Math cannot conquer the physics of overeating. This route on this rock remains an unsolved equation.

“It’ll go later in the week,” Katrina tells me in front of the others. It’s an observation to her but to me it’s an affirmation. In me, and in her. Perhaps she sees something in me that I don’t and perhaps she knows she can bring it out. What else can this woman bring out of me with the quiet confidence that flows out of her and into me?

Later, alone, I will still feel that confidence, and thank her for it. I suspect I will think of her often, like I think of other pillars of my life. I wonder whether I will miss her in the same way. I know my wife will not like me missing another woman. Yet another woman. Though not just another, a unique.

A teacher, a giver, someone somehow tied back to my grandmother. I can feel it. But can't touch it, can't place it. She won't mind that so much if I can just explain it the right way, about the connection to my grandmother. Because she met her, when she was young and still herself and she was old but still herself. She only agreed to marry me after a lengthy private talk in the house of my grandmother on my first and only trip back to her house after all those years. So she'll understand, if I can just explain it the right way. I know it.

Back at camp Katrina catches my eye.

"Did you have a good day?" I ask her. The others either do not or pretend not to hear. Katrina considers for a second. I don't think she was expecting such a question. Not from a camper. I suspect we were expected to be more selfish. To be part time climbers with not much time but a bankroll to afford this. Are we something different? Is this a species she'll seek out in the future? She answers my question with a simple "Yes, I had a good day."

"How so?" I prod.

"Nice people, nice weather, nice rock," she replies.

I note the order, it speaks volumes.

I slip off to my tent to sleep. I am exhausted. But it was a good day. Good people, good weather, good rock.

In the night I receive more ghosts than Ebenezer on Christmas Eve. Some are welcome. Some are not. Some are old. One is new. She floats above me, and no matter how I try to keep her away, she sinks onto me, again and again. Draining me, making me whole.

The Town of Joshua Tree
October 1999

The high desert early morning cold greets them before they greet each other. A half moon hangs low over the eastern mountains, waiting its dismissal by the day.

“Hi Amy.”

“Hi TK.”

The man and the lovely young woman stand outside the Crossroads Café on the 29 Palms Highway in Joshua Tree, California. The dust, cold, and sand of the desert are still hard, formidable, inviting.

“Right on time,” he says.

“You too,” she answers.

They search for the next words.

This outpost, this place, is not their element. Off the rock, in town, they are short one dimension, different.

“Looks like it’ll be nice today,” he offers.

“Yes,” she manages.

The togetherness from the rock has dissolved, has been replaced with a morning-after stiffness, though there has been no night before.

He’s bathed, something that is frequently optional on his trips to the desert. She’s brushed her hair out. The girlish pony tail is absent. Her blonde brown hair shines around her perfect tanned face.

“Shall we?” he says, motioning towards the door.

“We shall,” she answers.

He holds the door for her, follows her into the low wooden building.

“A Vegan Sunrise,” she says over the counter.

“Bacon and eggs,” he says.

Behind the counter, the white haired woman of the desert flashes her best smile, disappears into the kitchen.

They pick a table and sit.

Quiet morning music floats around them, young music, music he doesn't know, hasn't heard, with none of the complex rhythms he prefers. He looks at the pictures of goats on the wall, the mismatched furniture, the mostly young, mostly dirty breakfasters. He shifts from side to side in his seat. Looks everywhere but at her.

"What's TK stand for?" she asks.

He has a million answers for the frequent question. Never ever gives the real answer.

"The Keeper," he says. Shocked at the truth of it.

"Cool. Is it Apache?"

"Ojibwa, Algonquin."

"Like Algonquin Park?"

"You've been there?"

"No. But my mom talked about it all the time with her best friend. You know, remember this, remember that? Did I ever tell you this?"

"She's been there?"

"Yeah. When she was a kid. That's where their cottage was. Remember I told you yesterday?"

"Right," he says.

"So like Algonquin Park?" she repeats.

"Yes. My people are from there."

"You're Canadian?"

"I moved to Ohio when I was a teenager."

"Why?"

"It's sad. And this is breakfast. It's a story that needs frost and moonlight to tell right." Again he cannot believe he's foregone his standard lie, that he went away for college.

Amy looks at him. Considers.

"You want to climb with me today?" she asks.

"Yes."

The bond re-materializes. He settles into his chair, looks in her eyes.

They are perched comfortably on rustic Adirondack chairs padded with brightly patterned cushions. He savours his meal, sips his coffee, and sets down his glass.

He rises to clear the dishes. As he does, the silver medallion holding the purple rock slips out from under his shirt.

Her eyes are drawn to it.

“That stone is so cool,” she says. “Can I see it?”

He considers.

“I’ll show you mine if you’ll show me yours,” he says.

She grins, shakes her head at his weak flirt, reaches inside her fleece top, and produces her arrowhead necklace.

Unbelieving, he touches his grandmother’s stone, hands it across. Remembers the only other time it has left his neck, and the circumstances of its return. His breath catches in his chest. His hand trembles as she takes his arrowhead. She does not flinch from it. Does not gasp. It does not shock her. He barely breathes.

She examines it the way he suspects an artist or a scientist would. “It’s heavy. Because of the kimberlite no doubt. That diamond must be one hundred carats,” she says. She turns it back and forth, touches its edge, hands it back. In a moment, with no reservation.

“It’s beautiful,” she says. “Seeing it this close, I know mine is its twin. I inherited it.”

“Twin?”

He returns it to its place around his neck. How much easier its return has been this time. Not like the other. With the girl. The first. Her mother?

“Kimberlite?” he asks.

“Sure. Most diamonds are found in kimberlite. The pipe that stone came from is probably one of the pipes that was just ‘discovered’ a few years back in your part of the world. Though I’m sure some of your relatives knew about it for eons. Funny how my people say they ‘discovered’ something like that.”

He cannot believe it. Has never heard it explained so perfectly, so succinctly. Who is this girl?

“You know a lot about rocks,” he says.

“Yes. I have quite a collection. You can see them on my website. That picture you took yesterday will be up there too. My life’s kind of out in the open. What do you think about my arrowhead?” she asks.

He holds it up, squints. Feels along the edges. Fingers the knappings. Then hands it back.

“It’s either early Iroquois or late Algonquin,” he says. “The Algonquians learned this knapping technique from their more aggressive brothers to the south east. The Iroquois learned from everyone. Being somewhat more warlike, they encountered a lot of peoples. Frequently mine, to our detriment.”

“So is this a relic from a conqueror?” she asks.

“You’re a very interesting girl Amy,” he says.

While she bristles at being called a girl, she welcomes the compliment.

“Come on,” she says. “Daylight is wasting and there’s a lot more you need to teach me before you go back home to your wife.”

“My wife?” he asks.

“Your wife,” she says. “A man like you must A, be married, B, to some incredible woman who, C, for some unknown reason lets you run off to the desert all alone to encounter *girls* like me.” She emphasizes ‘girl’, says it the way he’d said it. “So yes, your wife. Don’t even pretend otherwise.”

“She is incredible,” he says. “Let me tell you about her on the ride up.”

“So let’s go,” she repeats. “There’s a climb I’ve been working for weeks, and I’ll bet you can help me puzzle it.”

“Okay. And I’ve got a puzzle I’ve been working. For years actually. A new set of eyes might help,” he says.

She extends her hand across the table.

“Deal,” she says.

He takes her hand and the feeling from the day before returns. It is the rich smell of coffee on a cold winter morning, a warm down comforter that cradles you in the desert air, a smile from the one you love most when they wake up beside you. He sinks into her grasp. Accepts it. Like he’s held that hand before and will again. Like he’s known her for years and they are meeting after a long absence and will rekindle their time. It doesn’t shock him today. He welcomes it, has been waiting for it, for the confirmation.

“Deal,” he answers.

Rochester Township
October 1999

“You’ve met someone,” she says.

“Yes.”

“A girl?”

“Yes.”

“Pretty? Young? Smart?”

“Yes.”

“What’s her name?”

“Amy.”

“Do you love her?”

“No. I love you.”

“You can love us both.”

A sharp pain, the sharpest yet.

“No. I love you,” he repeats. But she is already gone.

Madawaska Highlands
Summer, 1978

The boy finishes the rappel to the rocky shore. He holds the rope in a fireman's belay as first the girl, and then her father descend the last pitch.

"Off rappel," the father says.

The boy pulls and coils the rope. When he is done, a tight bundle lies across his shoulders. He nods to the man and to the girl and starts to leave.

"Wait," the girl says. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," the boy replies.

"Yes. Thank you," her father adds. He reaches for his wallet to tip the boy.

"You're welcome. That's not necessary," the boy says. "It's not the custom among my people."

The father hesitates, returns his wallet to his pocket, then steps towards the boy and extends his hand.

"Then please accept my hand, and my thanks," the father says.

The boy shakes it, looking the man square in the eye.

The father and the boy hold each other's gaze. The father seeing a confident youth stepping slowly but certainly towards manhood. The boy seeing a tourist, a client, a white man, a father. Yet a man unlike most of the rest. A man who returns a look straight in the eye. A man with a firm handshake. A man used to being respected, and a man who knows how to respect. A man who has produced this daughter. Yet a man who prejudices without reason. A man laden with contradictions.

"Thank you," the man says.

The girl steps forward, extends her hand.

The boy shakes it.

He notices her strength. In her grip. In her gaze.

"Can we go again tomorrow?" she asks. The question directed at the boy, not at her father.

"I have a client tomorrow," the boy says.

"And we're going to hike to the old mine," her father adds. She looks down.

"The day after tomorrow will work," the boy says.

High Sierra, California
Spring 2005

Another day. Another descent into the gorge. Katrina is more “Katie” today. Katie emerges slowly, offers a hug and affection. She has no idea about the ghosts. She makes me feel like part of her family. One with nicknames and hugs and smiles just because. One with jokes, and time spent together. A family with parents, and brothers and sisters who are with you in every way. A little tribe.

In these few days she has partially absorbed me into her world. Will I escape? Will I go back? Can anyone ever go back after this? I know I will go back, and be richer for it. I know after this I will hug a moment longer, smile more freely, listen more closely. I hope I will be better for having been here, having done this, having met these people. People who want nothing from me and who give so freely. Perhaps this oasis in time will sustain me in those other worlds, keep me from the murky waters from which I have so recently emerged.

Once again the group politely waits for me by the river while I finish picking my way down the approach.

Yesterday was faces, today is cracks. Katrina shows us how. We have no cracks in our Ohio sandstone, only faces. These jams, scums, and stacks are all new. I stuff my feet into the crack and torque. Mon Dieu it hurts. But it holds. I sink the hand jam and believe her when she tells me to trust it. It holds. Maybe because there were no bad habits to break, no lessons to unlearn, this crack climbing flows. I decide I will trust her.

I start a ninety foot crack. I stuff, jam, and torque. At the anchors I am forced to stop.

“Did I fall?” I call down.

“What?” echoes up.

“Did I fall?” I ask again.

“No,” drifts up.

Seated in the boulders in the shade Katrina can’t fight it anymore. “Did he really have to lock you off because you were going past the anchors?”

“Yes.”

“Did you really ask if you’d fallen?”

“Yes.”

She is awash in mirth. Mirth! It oozes out of her and bathes all those around us. Mirth in a pixie. Giggles in a little girl of a woman. I imagine warm California nights when she would laugh with her sisters. I envision campfires with her teenage friends where laughter conquered all. I suspect that this woman will mean much to me. How can this be? I know that it is wrong somehow, but know also that I am powerless to stop it. Know that when I return she will ask me, because she will know. As she always knows.

This is a feeling I must contain. I am committed. I love my wife. But soon, too soon, I may want this woman. A woman I cannot have. A woman who will not want me. A woman with a child and a partner and a life without me. A woman I cannot tell.

“Yes,” I repeat.

The story of the crack climb will become part of a collective consciousness. Of a time, of a place, of a group. Where so many came and went. Only my grandmother remained constant when I was young. And only my wife has been constant since. I will be constant. I will not waver. I know I have the strength, have had it before, and feel that I am beginning to regain it.

Joshua Tree National Park
October 1999

“This is it?” TK asks.

“Yes,” Amy answers.

The man approaches the boulder, examines it, walks around it, touches it. He traverses left to right, examines some more, then traverses back.

“It starts here?” he asks.

“There,” she answers, pointing to a flake and a crystal.

He approaches, touches, steps back.

“Can I see?” he says.

She approaches the rock. She bows to it, touches it, and steps on.

Left, up, right, over, she moves.

He notices that her eyes are closed.

She pauses, reaches, reaches, and peels off the rock, landing on the soft desert sand.

“I’d say you have that sequence wired,” TK says.

“Yes. But that’s all the further I can get. I can’t get past there.”

“Again?” he asks.

“Sure,” she says.

This time she does not bow, she simply steps on and moves. She falls at exactly the same place, her feet coming to rest in the same dust spots on the desert floor.

“Any ideas?” she says.

He pauses, thinks. Closes his eyes and visualizes her moving on the rock.

“Yes.”

“Well?” she demands.

“You may not like it, but I’ll tell you anyway. And it’s something you already know. You know this rock too well. You know this particular failure too well. You have embraced this failure, focused on the failure, and cannot see past the failure. The failure is your fixation. Yesterday’s problem was harder. You should be able to do this. You know that.”

“I know I should be able to do it,” she says. “That’s no help. What do I do?”

He thinks. Looks up, sees a red-tailed hawk slowly turning in the thermals coming off the desert floor.

“You have to make it new.”

“New? How? That’s impossible. This rock is billions of years old...”

He scans the rock, scans the desert, hears the Hawk kee-kee above.

“Try it topless,” he says.

Her brown eyes widen, take him in.

“Trying to help me or trying to help you?” she says.

“You,” he answers. “I’ll go over there, where you can see I can’t see.”

He starts to walk away.

“No,” she says. “Stay.” She strips off her top, and then her shorts, and then her panties. She approaches him, touches her necklace to his in a ritual-like motion, and then approaches the rock. He can’t help but notice the tone of her skin, the tightness of her muscles, the beauty and perfection of youth all tied together in the boldness. Her upturned breasts. He looks back up, to the hunter circling above.

She touches the rock, steps on, floats to the falling point, looks over her shoulder, and easily moves on, topping out a moment later.

She beams down at him from above. Naked. Unabashed. Glowing in the success.

He stares. Hard. Smiles. Collects her clothes and piles them at the base of the boulder.

“My project is over there,” he says. He points to a distant formation.

Meet me there. He sets off at a trot.

“Any ideas?” he asks.

“If you weren’t married I’d tell you to try it naked,” she says. “With me...”

He tries not to, but laughs. A little sound at first, but one that grows into a sound that echoes back and forth across the canyon.

“But it might help if I get naked,” she says. “It’s already worked once today. There’s nobody else out here, and I kind of like the feel of the desert on my skin.” She undresses and then once again touches her medallion to his.

“Now try,” she says. “While I suspect you’re thinking more about me than the rock.”

He touches his project.

It feels different beneath his fingers, beneath the thin sticky rubber of his shoes. He knows it will go. Knows. Dissolves into this moment, this spot. Becomes the motion.

It goes. He returns to the girl, touches his medallion to hers, mirrors her stylized ritual.

“Thanks,” he says.

She steps into his arms, kisses his chest, his neck, his mouth.

He lifts her, carries her to the base of the rock, deposits her gently on the sand.

High Sierra, California
Spring 2005

Today we rest. Building new habits must be more tiring than building the entire worlds I create every day. Aching thighs, scraped ankles, bloody knuckles are thankful. We watch video from the previous days' climbing. The other climbers are in turn graceful and determined, meticulous, precise, athletic, skilled, freer, better, more risk taking.

I fill the wide angle lens. All fourteen of my falls at the crux on a tricky face climb have been captured. Katrina tries, as do the others, not to laugh out loud. But soon she and they succumb to the comedy. She belly laughs with the rest as I fall over and over on tape. My face passes from blushed to pink to red and I simply can't help it anymore and join in the laugh. It makes the scrapes from all fourteen tumbles hurt less.

"You're stubborn," she praises. And praise it is. In the video I finally make the move. Applause greets the success and I take a bow. But my back is sore, so the bow isn't so deep.

"You're stubborn," I hear echoing back from that other time, that other place. I see my grandmother. This time she is cracking late summer corn in her summer shelter made of skin and bone. I am holding a single fish, a pike, enough for both of us, for tonight, and for breakfast. It is the result of an entire day at the edge of the lake. "You're stubborn," she says, handing me the flint filet knife.

The flint is soapy to my touch, in an instant I am there, with the wet flint in my hands. Then I am finally dry, safe, and warm. I sit waiting. My nana speaks.

“In the beginning, the great Manitou created the five peoples and gave each of them gifts and burdens. The people of the south received corn, tobacco, and gold. They must protect the sun. When they forget, the great Manitou sends the black bear or the wet wind from the south to remind them. The people of the north received the seal, and caribou, and copper. They must protect the moon. When they forget, the great Manitou sends the white bear or the frozen wind from the north. The people of the west received the buffalo and horses and flint. They must protect the ground. When they forget, the Great Manitou sends the brown bear or the great twisting wind filled with the earth. The people of the east received the fish and deer and iron. They must protect the water. When they forget, the great Manitou sends the awful saltwater fish, or the great white wind from the north east.

We are the people of the Hand. Neither north, south, east, nor west. We received the birch tree and the canoe. We also received the greatest gift and the greatest obligation. We received the stones that lie at the center of the earth. We must protect them and guard the entrance to the center of the earth. The stones work the copper, the iron, the gold, the flint, to draw out their special powers. Without the stones, the copper, the iron, the gold, and the flint have only their little powers.

“When we succeed, the great Manitou sends the other peoples to us in peace, with gifts to trade, with food to eat, with wives and husbands, for our people are few. When we fail, the great Manitou sends the other peoples to us in anger, with weapons to steal and kill. They can never be shown the portal. For only we, even among our people, know its location.

“My grandfather told my mother, my mother told me, I told your mother, and now that she’s gone I’m telling you. Our line will never end. Yes we have suffered. And as the ones who know we are always at risk, must always be suspect. Someone will always seek our knowledge, want to find the stones, want to journey to the center of the earth to find those they have lost. And so we live with other gifts and other burdens. Like being believed. Yet too often believing our own realities. Like being able to go days without food or water, and to travel great distances. Yet we are frequently restless. Like sometimes knowing what will happen to others before they know, but not knowing our own future, and being captured in our past. Like loving so hard, so completely, and expecting so much back that we consume our loves. Make them wither and die in the heat of our passion. Or become too much of what they are, lose their ability to moderate.”

She paused.

I saw memories flow through her.

She breathed a deep deep breath and went on.

“The great Manitou gave us four special stones, special even among the other stones. Stones formed into points, for weapons. To help protect us. To help protect the secret. Over the years, three have been lost. The last one is here, with me, and now I give it to you.” She removed her necklace, placed it around his neck.

The weight.

The power.

“You feel it now. Over time it will become a part of you, make you strong. At some time you will give it away. But it will return to you. And if you have chosen wisely, the lost stones will be returned to you as well.”

“How will I know?”

She paused.

Looked at me, then looked down, disappointed.

Some questions should not be asked.

“How were the others lost?”

She raised her eyes. Began again.

“The first was lost to the people from the east, when they came in anger. Many warriors appeared in the night, and they killed our people in their sleep. Only a few escaped. They scaled the cliff and would not be captured. For days our people held out, throwing down rocks on the people of the east as they tried to climb up. Finally the greatest warrior from the east made it to the top. He was killed by a spear tipped with one of the special stones. Dying, he fell over the cliff. His body, still carrying the spear point, was carried back to the east by his people after they gave up the fight. It has been lost to our people ever since.

The second was lost to the people of the west. To love, not to war. The people of the west came to trade. Their chief brought his child bride. The great Manitou had blessed her in every way but one. She had physical beauty, and strength. She was smart. But she could not love. Though many felt they loved her, she did not love back. The chief had made her a possession.

“Your ancestor fell under her spell. To prove his love, he gave away a stone. She took it and was overcome by it. By the power you just felt. It quickly drove her mad. Her people carried her back to the west, delirious, the stone still around her neck.

“The third is likely with the people of the south, where the traveler traveled.

He was a wanderer. Always traveling. Though he loved his home and loved his people he wanted to see all the peoples. After every visit from our neighbors, peaceful or warlike, he would become obsessed with traveling. Needing to know what lay beyond our lands, even beyond theirs. He traveled north and saw the seal and the great white bear and even claims to have seen green and blue fire in the winter sky. He traveled east and saw the great salt water and the terrible triangle toothed fish. He traveled west and saw the buffalo and mountains that reached so high into the sky that it could be summer at the bottom and winter at the top. Every time he returned with his stone and with other treasures and with fantastic stories of the other people. He became a legend amongst us, and amongst the others.

“His final journey was to the south. In the fall. Just before the snow came. He’d dreamed of an ocean of sand far to the south and west. Where trees grew from the sand. He never returned. Over the years we heard from other peoples who came to trade. We learned he’d been to the land of the giant armored turtle, of the giant freshwater fish, and beyond the river that runs north to the river that runs south where the giant whiskered fish lives. But then no more was heard. I’ve always believed he reached the great sand ocean, and then fell in love. With the place, and with a girl. Others believe he died an angry death.

“So this is the last stone. The last of the four. It is yours now. I thought it would be your destiny to live a quiet uneventful life in the shadow of the hand. But I was wrong. Your life is already too painful. Too much has been asked of you, but you have shown you have the gifts. It may be your destiny to find the stones. Though at what price I do not know. I cannot see that part of your future.”

“But you can see a part?”

Again she stopped, lowered her eyes deeper.

This time my shame at interrupting was too much.

A tear formed in my eyes.

My child’s body began to shake.

She took my hand.

“Yes.

“I can see a part. And I will tell you.

“You will love four women. Not as you love me, but as a man loves a woman. I know this. Two will certainly love you back. One may not. The one you love first will be forever lost to you. The one you love second will love you the most, and the longest, and bring you the most pain. You will be true to her forever, though you love later, after she too is lost. The one you love third will love you least, and only from time to time. But she will heal you. And she will guide you to the one you love last.

“I cannot see how that will end, or start. And I do not know whether she will love you back. But of all your loves she will be most able to withstand the power of the stones. You cannot destroy her. She will live a committed, unfettered life that may intersect with yours in ways unknowable. You will pursue her, and fight the pursuit. To love her you will need to let go of so much. But if you do, you may finally be free.”

She stopped.

The question formed in my mind, started to my mouth, and was stifled there.

I would not ask.

Free from what?

The Buttermilk Boulders
Spring 2005

It is sunny but cold in the Buttermilks. We are learning how to save ourselves with ropes and pulleys and knots. I thought I knew this stuff but realize my knowledge is limited. Katrina takes the lesson with the rest of us. Her face is open, her aspect curious. She defers to the expert. She reveals much in her silence.

Somehow she and I get talking about signs. I'm a Cancer/Leo cusp. She visibly drifts away on that news and then slowly rejoins me in the here, in the now of the High Sierra.

"You and Luigo have the same birthday then," she begins. With the cerulean sky above, the dusty dun sand below, and the sublime grained granite at our backs, we talk about him, about her, about his writing, about being a Cancer/Leo cusp and being with a Cancer/Leo cusp. Of course I know they were a couple. I've read her book, followed her career. And I've read all his stories, fiction and non. Looking for pieces of her in them. I've wanted to be him in his stories. But I don't think I've wanted to be him anywhere else. But maybe now I understand a little more about his writing.

I say that I feel a terrible, profound sadness lurking in his most action packed stories, particularly those from Borneo.

"I'm responsible for that," she says.

I wait. Sometimes even lawyers can simply listen.

"He left for Borneo the day I left him for New York. So those are from right after we broke up."

I wait and listen some more. Somewhere my Nana smiles with pride.

"Maybe that's what's been odd about you," she says. "The same birthday."

The rest of the conversation is private. We discuss ownership of feelings. We discuss people and versions of people. While the others tie knots and ascend ropes we are alone in the California sun, alone while the visitors we carry around with us caress us and get caressed. Alone with the thoughts that circle and twist and alight for a second or a year and never let us be, but shape us every moment.

Her story goes on. I feel that this is a story she's wanted to tell for some time. I can't presume that it meant so much to her, but it is an intimate moment with someone I've known a lot about, but suddenly know. The moment stays with me through the afternoon. It stays with me at the hot springs. It follows me back to camp and I know it will cling to me and I to it even when I'm home, surrounded by the familiar. The chapter about Luigo in her book has new life, new meaning. For there in the high desert, so many years later, it seemed like part of him was still part of her. That although physically absent a part of his soul was still in her. A feeling I've known, of being with someone who is far, too far away. Unreachable, though just at hand.

The night is cold. Nearly bitter. Asleep in my tent I shiver. The shivering goes on. Instantly I am ten, alone, outside my parent's house on the cold cold ground. Screams pervade and then escape the house.

I pull the sleeping bag over my head and force the shivering to stop. Thankfully the screams stop just in time. This time.

Madawaska Highlands
Summer 1978

The girl and her father move slowly in the thickening June heat. At times, clouds of mosquitoes and black flies threaten to block the sky. Rivers of sweat run down their necks, soaking their cotton clothes.

“Are you sure this is the way?” she asks again.

This time her father does not answer. Instead, he stops, swats another mosquito, and takes a long drink from his canteen. He looks one way, and then another.

“We’re lost,” he says.

His daughter looks purposefully in all directions.

“Dad? Isn’t that the cliff? Do you see the hand?”

“You’re right dear.”

“If we walk over there, we’ll know where we are.”

“Good idea,” he answers.

They work their way over the rocky ground, through the Manitoba maples, scrub spruce, tacky pines, and sumac. The sun reaches ever higher into the sky. Soon they are walking directly on their shadows.

“Maybe we can rest in the shade for a minute,” she says.

“Where?” the father asks.

“There,” the girl answers.

A circular group of taller trees casting liquid black shadows stands no more than a quarter mile away. They alter course and head for the shade.

“Dad? Do you think these are the trees we saw from the cliff?” the girl asks.

“They must be,” he answers.

“Didn’t he say this place was important to his people? And that we weren’t supposed to come here?”

“Yes he did. But it’s important to us right now too honey.”

“Did you hear what he said when I asked him to bring me here?”

“No. What did he say?”

“He said no.”

They sit in the shade, drink water, nibble on sandwiches in the noon day heat, and rest. The girl tosses her crusts into the woods. The father pops the tops from two bottles of Dr. Pepper. They toast each other and then take turns flicking the pop tops into the trees.

“Thanks Dad. What kind of rock is this?” she asks, holding up a rock flecked with purple and blue.

“I’m not sure,” he says. His eyes narrow in concentration.

“But you’re a geologist dad. You know everything about rocks.”

“Yes dear. But I’ve never seen a rock like this.”

The father takes the small rock with the purple and blue flecks from his daughter. He holds it up to the sun. He tastes it, smells it, places it on a boulder and strikes it with a baseball sized piece of granite.

“I don’t know,” he says. “But I know how to find out.”

He gathers several more samples into his pack. The girl collects one particularly beautiful rock and puts it in her pocket.

“It kind of looks like his medallion doesn’t it?” she says. She holds the necklace out towards him. Compares the rocks to the arrowhead.

“You’re right. It does,” he says.

“Come on,” her father says. “The sooner we get to the cliff the sooner we can catch a ride home.”

“Dad? Do you feel somehow different here?”

“Different how?”

“I don’t know. Just... different.”

Her father takes her hands in his. Kisses her forehead.

“I know I love you,” he says. “And that feels the same here as everywhere.”

She leans into him.

“I love you too dad.”

The boy sits quietly in the noon time shade in the alcove. His client sits quietly beside him, nibbling on beef jerky and sharp cheddar cheese.

The boy’s eye catch a reflection from the woods, and then another. As he focuses he sees a couple moving out of the circular woods. His copper brow creases, and his black eyes darken even deeper.

“What’s wrong?” the client asks.
He reaches for his necklace, feels its absence.
Grimaces.
“A storm,” the boy answers. “We should go down.”
The client looks into the brilliant blue sky.
“I don’t see anything. It’s a perfect day,” the client says.
“We must go down. Now,” the boy says. His look leaves no
room for discussion.

Joshua Tree National Park
October 1999

Condensation runs down a battered cooler resting in the dark sand in the desert night.

TK and Amy sit close together, near a campfire, with a tent pitched yards away in the dark.

“Did you feel it when the arrowheads touched?” she says.

“Yes.”

She pulls at her beer, empties it. He hands her another.

“I don’t usually drink this much,” she says. “But then again, I’ve done a lot of things today I don’t usually do,” she says.

“Me too,” he answers.

“My aunt would not be too happy,” she says.

“Your aunt?”

“She’s been looking after me since my mother died, in a plane wreck, in 1994.”

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I know a little about how that feels. I was raised by my grandmother after my parents passed away. I was ten.”

“I’m sorry,” she replies.

“Is your dad alive?” he asks.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. She had me when she was just a girl, a teenager. I never met my father. She never talked about him. But I always thought he must have died.” She fell silent.

A cloud moves across the moon.

A breeze rustles the desert plants.

“Tell me about the arrowhead,” TK says. “The twin.”

“She said she found it, after her father died. He died up north. Did I mention that? She said she got pregnant the day before he died. How weird is that?”

“That’s weird,” he says.

“How old are you?” he asks.

“Old enough,” she answers. She snuggles closer to him, kisses his neck.

“No seriously, how old are you?”

“What does it matter?” she asks.

He lets it go. Takes a drink of his beer, strokes her hair. Pulls her close again.

“I’m twenty,” she says.

“I’m thirty seven,” he answers.

“Old enough to be my big brother,” she says.

They laugh, toast their beers, stare into the fire.

“Is your aunt here with you? In town?” he asks.

“Looking for someone more your age?” she asks.

“No.”

“Then why?”

“I’m just interested in asking her about the arrowhead.”

“You’re more interested in that arrowhead than you are in me,” she says.

In the dark, under the sleeping bag, she feels him flinch.

She stands up, starts off into the night.

“Amy, wait, come back,” he calls after her.

His long legs quickly close the distance between them.

“Amy. No more questions. I promise. I’m sorry,” he says.

She steps into his arms and hugs him so fiercely he thinks, fears, hopes that she might never let go.

Madawaska Highlands
Summer 1978

The girl and her father paddle slowly towards the cliff.

"I'm not sure I like this idea," he says.

"I'm a big girl. I'll be fine."

"It's not you I'm worried about. It's him. They can't be trusted."

The girl stops her stroke, stares into her father's face.

"But you trusted him just two days ago. With your life. As you hung on the rope for like, forever. I don't even know who you are when you say things like that. You're not like that. Not you."

"Maybe I am and maybe I'm not," he answers.

"Well *I* trust him and today that's all that matters."

They finish the paddle to the rock beach at the base of the petroglyph in silence.

The boy sits waiting on the same ledge. As they approach he stands and raises a hand in greeting.

"How," the father says, raising his hand.

The boy does not respond.

"Don't you Indians say 'How'?" he asks. His hand slowly drops towards his side.

"In westerns the Sioux or Apache say 'How'" the boy answers. "The people of this land are Algonquin".

"What do Algonquians say?" he asks.

"Would you knock it off?" the girl says. "I'll be back before dark." She pushes the canoe back into the water. Her father narrows his eyes, turns the canoe, and paddles away.

"So what are we going to climb today?" she asks.

"What would you like to climb?" the boy answers.

The girl scans the cliff, left to right, bottom to top, then randomly.

"I don't know. Something beautiful and challenging," she says.

"Like you," the boy answers.

Her eyes widen slightly and she fights the urge to blush.

"No. Like you," she replies.

“That was amazing,” the girl says. She looks out across the lake from the shadowed perch high above the water.

“You did well,” the boy replies. He takes a pinch of pemmican from a pouch on his harness. She takes another drink.

“How was the mine?” the boy asks.

“I’m glad you asked,” she answers. She reaches into her pack and produces a rock from the circle of trees. “We found this. Do you know what kind of rock it is?”

“I think so.”

The girl waits for him to continue.

“Well? What kind of rock is it?” she asks.

“You say you found it at the mine?”

“Yes.”

“Then I must be mistaken.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought I recognized it. But if it came from the mine than I am wrong. There’s only nickel and lead and iron ore and granite slag and some pyrites at the mine,” the boy says.

The girl turns the rock in her hand.

“Well I know it’s not any of those. I’m going to study geology. Like my father. He’s a geologist. And I don’t think it’s nickel or lead or iron ore.”

The boy says nothing.

“It looks metamorphic, and very old,” the girl says.

“Your father is a geologist?”

“Yes.”

“And he couldn’t identify it?”

“No. But he said he’d be able to figure it out when we got home.”

The boy looks at the rock, the girl, the lake, and then slowly to the circle of trees.

“It kind of looks like your necklace,” she says.

She holds it up beside the stone slung around her neck.

He looks once, looks away.

“Done climbing?” he asks.

“Not hardly,” she says. “We’ve got hours left.”

The girl and the boy paddle into the small cove at the far end of the lake. The last lingering daylight clings to the western sky, in the east the dark sky is already flecked with the early planets and stars.

“Thank you,” she says.

“You’re welcome,” he answers.

She extends her hand to shake.

He takes it.

She feels something small and hard and sharp in his hand.

“What the?” she says. She opens her hand to reveal two Dr. Pepper bottle tops.

“I found them at the mine,” the boy says.

Poudre Canyon, Colorado
Early Summer 2005

Business brings me to Colorado. By coincidence, for those who believe in them, Katrina is climbing and teaching in Poudre Canyon. I've been to Poudre before, with Colleen. But we didn't climb. It was while I was still away, in the otherness, in the nothingness.

No, Colleen and I didn't climb that day in Poudre. It was very cold. But it was a first step that lead me back to the rock, lead me to back to some peace, and lead me away from the terrible places that could no longer be ignored.

Today it isn't so cold as when I visited with Colleen. I'm going to see Katrina again. Good fortune leaves me with a few free hours to wander around Poudre, and then to meet her at camp for dinner. I've brought a gift. A print from a promising artist in Palo Alto. The first print in a limited run. It's insanely expensive, completely inappropriate for an acquaintance. And an Elmo book for William. Elmo in Poudre with William. Here I am all the way through the looking glass.

I find a quiet spot near the river and prepare for the next day's meetings. Semiconductors and thousand foot walls, interrupt controllers and rushing white water, cache controllers and a mountain canyon breeze. Today "the office" isn't so bad. I pull the photo of my wife from my pack, set it upright on the picnic table, and wish so intensely that she could be here with me. That she could feel the peace that seeps into me in these places. She senses what is left of it when I return, but not this. This essential part. Once again I try to parse how I could get her to a place like this. How I could get to be like this with her, even if for just one moment. I try to imagine her without the illness, without the twisted limbs and fevers and lesions, without the agony and the relentless decline. I close my eyes, listen to the water, and pull myself back to her as she was before. At the farm, in the field, on the track, running, free, pure.

As I hike back down the canyon, I see them. A small group. But Katrina isn't there. They tell me she's off across the canyon on a multi-pitch route. I watch the guide work with the other climbers. I become a cultural anthropologist of what has led to my little transformation. After Katrina I eat differently, handle my business differently, love differently. I am different. In some way I am returning to the time with my Nana. I watch the campers to see if I can detect them being transformed. Are there chrysalises in which they are ensconced? I see none. But I recognize the tiredness and happiness and fulfillment in their faces. I watch for a while longer then hike back to my car to go to dinner.

Her partner is hard at work doing something he clearly loves. But I make him uncomfortable. Does he sense my feelings? Impossible. I can barely feel them myself. Refuse to acknowledge them. I am denial. He is the first to remark on how much weight I've lost. Over twenty pounds in three months from eating differently.

As I sit and talk and watch him cook I sense there is something wrong here. A sense I've so acutely had before. Of knowing when something is wrong. With weather, with places, with people. With my parents. Constantly feeling for the tremors. Sensing the eruptions. Then I see something that I suspect he does not. I don't see it in the way I saw things in my youth, when the smoke of the hot house filled me, and my ancestors visited me. I see it with the eye of an attorney who has seen it all before. While he is still with Katrina, he is no longer really with her. She is gone, and he does not know it. This sight is a gift, but in this moment it is a burden.

I wonder to myself how long this relationship will survive. I ask whether the relationship should survive? Is a child enough reason to be together, when it isn't right? Would I feel differently if I had a child? Being an attorney I've seen too many relationships go bad. Being the child of my parents I've seen the tragedy of a relationship gone very bad. I say my silent prayer to my grandmother who raised me and look forward to dinner.

The campers return and Katrina is with them. She's not herself right away. She's tired. Gracious, but tired. It takes a while. I can see she's been working hard. It's the fourth day of camp and she is tired. But she seems happy to see me. I didn't know how I'd be received. Stalker? Hanger-on? Someone who invited himself to dinner and wasn't turned away? I didn't know. She comes over and hugs me like a long lost friend. My worries are gone. Once again she has made me feel part of the tribe, and I am grateful. She immediately comments on my weight loss. I thank her for it.

She sinks into a chair, in a meal tent far enough from the cooking tent that her partner can neither see nor overhear. She takes my gift and I imagine that she sees the same tranquility that I do in the opposing images. But it is art, and no two people see it the same. Like a relationship. A first emotion to one is a second emotion to another. I worry that she will chastise me for such an extravagant gift, refuse it. After a while I realize she will not. She accepts it.

William likes the Elmo book and I sing to him as Katrina unwinds with a glass of wine while supper is prepared and while the other campers clean and rest. My eyes take on that calculating aspect so many have told me about as I wonder how his parents and their strained relationship will affect him. Will he be spared the horrors of my youth, of the utter destruction that parents can wreak upon themselves and all those around them? How will he deal with betrayal and suffering? For these are surely his fate if this relationship does not end soon.

Madawaska Highlands
1968

The ten year old boy lays outside on the cold ground. His hands cover his ears but do not stop the sounds. The fight rages on. He has escaped, but barely. Blood drips from his broken brow onto the frozen earth.

His fingers scrabble in the rutted earth. Then stop. Close around a rock that is irregular, sharp, soapy.

He brings the rock closer.

Examines it.

Stands and walks toward the scrub trees. Searches, finds two more stones. Granite. The hardest kind.

He sets to work. Scrapes, strikes, scrapes, strikes. As his Nana has shown him. The skill passed down from one to the other over the years. One final strike and the blade is complete. He draws it across the back of his arm, feels the razor cut, sees the blood rise in the wound.

His father leaves the house. Stops, scans the barren earth, squints as though looking into the trees. Departs.

The boy scratches a symbol into the largest of the trees. Digs. Buries his blade.

His mother comes to the door. Calls for him. He shrinks deeper into the scrub. Backs away, steals away towards his Nana's.

She brings him to her. Cleans his brow. Holds his forearm to her, wraps it. Raises an eyebrow.

"I made a knife," he says. "For next time."

"Keep it ready," she says.

Madawaska Highlands
Summer 1978

He watches from the rocky shore as she paddles towards him.

Knows that she would come looking for him today.

Wonders which way it will go. Angry words? Denial? Apology? He cannot see.

She nudges the canoe onto the pebbles.

He takes the bow in his right hand. Takes her eyes with his.

Neither speaks.

Slowly she looks down, then back up.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

He steps into the water, accepts its iciness, moves towards her.

“About the trees.”

“I don’t care about the trees,” he says.

She pauses.

“I’m more sorry about the lie,” she says.

“I cared about the lie,” he says.

He reaches her end of the canoe.

She feels the shivers going through his body.

He lets go of the canoe, reaches a hand out to her.

She takes it.

He pulls gently, suggesting, not demanding.

She sets her paddle in the canoe, removes her shoes, slips into the freezing water.

He holds her.

Together they swim away from the shore, ten, twenty yards.

Together they dive down, to where the water is even colder.

Together they return to the sunlight, to the shore.

He gathers driftwood, and then his fire making tools from the alcove, starts a fire, removes his clothes. Lays them near the fire. She does the same. Her white skin gone brown from the sun, blue from the water.

“Can we take these rocks back to the circle?” she asks.

“Yes.”

They move slowly towards the circle of trees. They say nothing. They arrive.

She removes the stones from her pack, offers them to him.

“No. You must return them. With your hand, and with your heart. You must have no regret about letting them go, putting them where they belong.”

She closes her eyes. Sways. Tosses the rocks one by one back into the trees.

“Tell me about this place,” she says.

To my people it is the center, and the portal. We believe this spot is the center of the universe. That the great Manitou created this place first and that everything else flows from this place. We believe that our people can travel from anywhere to here through the power of the stones.”

She listens, waits.

He thinks how his grandmother would like that.

“Even amongst our people, not all know the true power, the true story. Do you want to know? It is a great honor, but a terrible burden to know.”

Again she listens, waits.

“There were four stones...”

Joshua Tree
October 1999

The morning stillness consumes her steady breaths. He lays beside her, motionless, watching her breath, watching her dream. Thinks about their night, and the day before the night.

She wakes.

“Let’s go for a walk,” he says.

She rises, takes his hand. They move away from the camp.

Their quiet is absorbed into the morning peace. The most gentle of sun rays peak over the mountains to the east. They walk and walk. Holding hands. Barefoot footsteps in the coarse sand.

“This is my favorite time,” she says.

He nods. Agrees with his silence.

They walk on.

Deeper into a box canyon, until they can walk no farther.

She steps into his arms.

“Can it always be like this?” she asks. “Just us. The desert. The movement, the perfection.”

“I don’t think so,” he says.

She holds him tighter.

“I didn’t think so,” she says.

They stroll along the base of the cliff at the end of the canyon.

A brace of finches rustle up out of the brush.

“Look there,” she says, pointing.

They step closer to the brush, push aside the dry branches.

“Oh my God,” she says.

Before them, on the rock, carvings speak out their silent message.

“We have such things in the North,” he says. “Not exactly like this, but very similar. These are the markings of the people of the Hand. Though none could possibly have come this way.”

“The people of the Hand?” she asks.

“My people,” he says. “Our legends say that we are the keepers of the circle. The circle that leads to the center of the earth. We were blessed, with great powers, perception, wit, weapons. But we were cursed, because we failed in our duty to guard the circle. We lost the arrowheads.”

“All of them?” she asks.

“No,” he answers.

“Is yours one?” she asks.

“Yes. Only when all four arrowheads are back together will the curse be lifted.”

They step closer towards the glyphs.

“Do you feel that?” she asks.

“Yes,” he answers.

They hold each other tightly, gaping, amazed, together in the beauty of the morning and the discovery.

“What will become of us?” he asks.

“There’ll be time to talk about all that,” she says. “For now, let’s just be, out here in the desert. Just the two of us.”

She reaches into her pack, withdraws something bundled in flannel. Hands it to him.

He unwraps it.

“Now you have two of the four. Now you know that everything I think of you is pure and right. I don’t care that you’re married. And I don’t care that I can only have you for a few days at a time, here in the desert. I give you this gift so that you will always have a part of me with you.”

She kisses him.

Veaudavoo, Wyoming
June 2005

On Saturday morning Katrina and I go climbing at Veaudawoo. I have seen an article in Climbing magazine about the place and I am intrigued by it. She will be camping and climbing there in a few months. It is good to get out of Colorado. In the cold night my parents have come back to me.

I saw them as they were placed in the ambulance and driven away under a silent siren and no flashing light. I felt their blood as I washed it off my hands and clothes. I reconstruct the series of events. Like the iceberg was simply the instrument that pierced the Titanic, their ultimate demise was simply the logical and perhaps inevitable end to a series of mistakes.

But Katrina is safe and here and real and kind and in me in a way she cannot know, cannot even suspect. On Saturday afternoon she likely saves my life by catching an error I've made rigging my rappel device. Hundreds of feet up, with my life in her hands, she has saved me. I'll climb with her again if she'll have me. I'll talk with her again if she'll let me. I'll tell her about my grandmother, if only she'll ask. For this woman, I suspect I would do anything.

I see she is trying to make a decision. Risking much she has opened herself up to people like me. I must be careful not to ask too much. Must be cautious about assuming, or expecting. Must remember who I am, and who she is.

I think about who she is.
She is like no-one else.

I try to thank her for saving my life.
She shrugs it off. Like it happens every day.
She points at my necklace.

"I found one just like that in New York. At the Gunks." She says it matter-of-fact. I can barely breath. She leans closer, pulls my necklace out, touches it. "Exactly like it," she says.

"Where is it?" I manage.
"In a museum."

She looks more closely.
Then looks away, to the horizon, then back, into my eyes.

She begins to form a question, then is gone, rappelling with grace and ease down the face.

I follow.

Is it possible?

Another stone?

In the Gunks?

Home of the Iroquois?

And found by Katrina?

My head swims.

Back at camp, we sit together on opposite sides of a picnic table. A slow fire warms the evening air, throws light on our two little tents.

“I want to ask you something,” I say.

She pauses. A drawn out “okay” escapes her lithe frame.

“I want to ask if it’s okay. To write you. To think about you. To call you once in a while, to see you like this. I want to ask if you want to try to be my friend. I know that’s odd to ask. But I know how much of a mess I’ve made of so many things. And I suspect from the little I know of you that you might find it hard to let me know directly. So I’d like to know.”

“Because if it’s not okay. Then I have to stop. I won’t stop thinking about you. Couldn’t. That’s not what I’m asking. But I could stop inserting my life unwanted into yours. Could stop imposing.

“If it’s okay, then I promise not to infringe on your unfettered life. And I won’t ever again question that we might be friends. So, what do you think?”

Kindly she waits, considers the extent to which my feelings are laid bare before her.

Even the request is an impediment, a chattel, some form of claim.

She draws in the high Wyoming night air, nudges my paw with her tiny foot and gives her gentle reply by putting her hand on mine.

Crossroads Café, Joshua Tree
October 1999

They eat slowly, looking at each other, then looking away.
He sips from his water, she cradles her coffee.

The white haired woman of the desert stops by to chat, feels
what is between them, retreats to the counter.

“I can’t believe you have to go,” she says. “I mean, I knew
you had to go, but I can’t believe it’s so soon.”

“I know,” he says.

Takes her hand across the table. Looks directly into her eyes.
Begins to reach into his shirt.

“No. Stop,” she says. “It is yours, forever, to keep.”

He stops.

Holds her hand as gently as he can. Thanks her with his
touch.

“I won’t call,” she says. “Won’t write.”

He feels a tear begin to well in his eye.

“But I will be here. Next year. On the hunter’s moon. And
the year after that. I promise. Every year, on the hunter’s moon.”

He feels the tear spill out of his, run down his cheek, drip
onto the table.

“Me too,” he says.

Rochester Township
June 2005

“So she saved your life?” she asks.

“Probably.”

“I thought you said you were careful.”

“I am. I was.”

“So what happened? Were you distracted? Looking down her shirt or something?”

He has no answer.

“Was it like it was with Amy? Is that what you’re going to say?”

“No,” he answers. “It wasn’t like that. Nothing is like that.”

“Tell me again. About Amy,” she demands.

“It was 1999, in October, under the hunter’s moon. I still don’t know how it can be, how to explain it. But she is tied back to the circle, to my Nana, to my home. She might be the second.”

“My replacement?”

He cannot answer. Looks away, looks out the window.

She brushes past him, blocks his view. Turns, points to the fields.

“Is that what you’re looking for out there?”

“Not really.”

“Then what are you looking for?”

“For who I am.”

“Who are you?”

He begins.

Once again he tells her all he knows of the People of the Hand, of the stones, of the glyphs.

“So there it is,” he finishes.

“I’ve known all that forever,” she says quietly.

The man looks at her. Cannot believe. Questions.

“She told me. Your Nana. That time we met. Said I should know. And that it shouldn’t scare me.”

“All this time?” he says.

She comes closer to him. Takes his hand in hers.

“And the stone?” he asks.

“Yes. Even the stone. She told me everything.”

He pauses.

“Has she seen it?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“Touched it?”

“Yes.”

“Does she know?”

“No.”

“You have to tell her. I couldn’t have survived you if I hadn’t known.”

California
The Summer Solstice, 2005

Business brings me to California. Redwood Shores to be exact. Which is nowhere near Yosemite. I know she is there working on a project. On the map I see it is simply too far for a visit. And, I have not been invited.

My cell phone rings.

She has finished a first ascent. Of an impossible climb. And she has called me on my cell phone. She is practically breathless from the climb. I can see her on the summit, reaching for her phone, calling her new friend, calling me first. She is inviting me to help celebrate.

My meeting in Silicon Valley is over, and once again the map reveals that I am hours away from Yosemite. But the success, the celebration, the invitation. I jump in my rental car and drive the five hours to Yosemite Valley in four, arriving an hour before sunset.

I am early for the meeting in El Cap Meadow and cannot reach her cell phone. There is no service in this place. I wait. I stand transfixed in front of El Capitan. I had no idea such places existed. After seeing this, how can anyone ever leave the valley? Do people really climb here? Can I touch the rock that the immortals have scaled? Does this aging broken body have what it takes to ascend these monuments? Have my recent years of sloth, pity, and drink forever denied me this place? My expression must be the one I saw so often back then, on the rocky shore. The faces in the canoes. The disbelief in the beauty and the effort and the hard of it. The well-earned sense of self-respect for facing the beauty and the hard and rising above.

A ranger breaks the spell and I try to make a plan. I am in a national park with no camping gear, nowhere to stay, nothing to eat, nothing to drink. She has not come for me. I cannot reach her. Something indefinable yet tangible and wanted is slipping through my fingers. She must be certain that I have abandoned her. Yet I stand here in the meadow, my heart in my hands in the open. I ask the ranger if I can sleep in my car in El Cap Meadow. He says no. I explain my predicament and promise to leave very early. He considers.

Then something seems to click in his mind.
“Don’t I recognize you?” he asks.
I give no answer.
“Aren’t you that lawyer?” he asks.
“Yes.”
“The one whose wife...”
“Yes.” I answer.
The ranger bows his head, extends his hand.
“I’m sorry,” he says.
I take his hand.
“You’re the first person to ever mention her to me,” I say.
“In all this time?” he asks.
“Yes.”
He pauses. Considers.
“That’s odd. Because I overheard a group of people talking about it, about you. I mean about you and her, just the other day. Yesterday. Not far from here.”
I am stunned.
My blank expression compels him to continue.
“Some climbers. Women. They’re here for a first ascent. I gather that one of them is pretty famous.”
“And they were talking about my wife?”
“Yes. The famous one said she’d met you. That you’d never mentioned it. But she’d Googled you and read all about it.”
I stare.
“And this I remember perfectly. She said, ‘I could love a man like that, because I know that if he loved me, he would never leave me, never try to own me. That he’d make me more, not less.’”

Madawaska Highlands
Summer 1978

“You gave them back?” her father shouts.

“Yes,” the girl answers.

“How could you?”

“Because they don’t belong to us. They belong there.”

“You mean they belong to him?”

“Yes. To him. To his home. You don’t understand.”

“Then tell me.”

She considers, feels the weight of the stone around her neck, feels the power of the circle of the trees.”

“You wouldn’t understand,” she says.

Her father storms from the cabin.

“Where is he?” the girl’s father asks.

Nana stands just outside her breezy summer home of skin and bone. Her hands are dark with the berries she has been preparing.

“I said, where is he?”

She continues to work the berries, looks at him. Says nothing.

He steps towards her.

“I’m going to ask you one last time,” he says.

“And then what?” she says. “You’re going to do something? Hurt me? Hurt an old woman. Haven’t you done enough already today?”

He stops.

“What are you talking about?”

“I can feel it on you. You’ve hurt her. God only knows how badly. But in a way no father should ever hurt a daughter.”

“How do you know?” he asks.

“You wouldn’t understand,” she says.

“Nana!” the boy screams.

He runs across the clearing outside her summer home. Falls to his knees. Brushes her hair away from her eyes.

“I fell,” she says.

He jerks his head around to the sound of a motor starting nearby.

“I’m alright,” she says.

He jumps to his feet, runs towards the lake.

The girl’s father steers the motor boat farther into the lake.

The boy turns, runs back to his grandmother.

She is sitting.

“What did he do?” he asks.

“Nothing,” she answers

“I don’t believe it. He did this.”

“No. I did it to myself. Looking into him, seeing his anger, feeling his hatred, feeling his greed. I did it to myself.”

The boy helps her to her feet. Sits her on the stump outside the home.

Enters her home.

Returns with a bowl and towel.

Dips the towel, and gently brushes it across her forehead.

Joshua Tree
October 1995

The coffee skinned man has driven this road before. Each fall. After his time in the desert. But this time the pull of the desert is stronger, much stronger. He is barely able to escape it. Knows he must return to his Ohio home, but considers, just for a moment, not doing so.

The two arrowheads lie against his chest.

The weight of the second is still new to him.

It is powerful. The two together are more than twice as strong. They are maybe ten times as strong as just one. He feels them pulling him back to the desert, pulling him back to the highlands of his youth, pulling him back to his Ohio home. Pulling him in so many directions. Twisting, pulling. Like the twisting diving road down the hill from up above to down below. From the high desert of Joshua Tree to the low desert of Palm Springs.

He can still smell Amy, and the sand, and the desert.

Can taste her.

Feel her arms around him.

Feel her breasts against him.

Feel himself inside her, strong, complete.

But with each mile down the curving road, away from the high desert, the feelings diminish. Until they are nearly gone.

He hears her promise, to be there again, and again, on the hunter's moon.

He touches her rock, or is it his?

Forces his thoughts from the desert and back to his Ohio home.

Puts his wife into the front of his mind, keeps her there.

Red River Gorge, Kentucky
Early Fall, 2005

I arrive on Friday night at the end of her last trip for the year. She is tired, conflicted, exhausted by a week with twelve clients, four guides, three reporters, a hanger on, and an uninvited guide squeeze. She is annoyed.

I say hello, give my gift, Cleveland's best beer, kept cold directly from the brewery to the gorge, and then keep my distance. I sleep on the floor beside a couch on which a woman is having loud erotic dreams. Thus, I sleep very little. Which is nothing new. To sleep, perchance to dream...

In the morning the fog hangs low and thick in the meadow beyond the porch. I step out into it and walk, slow, then hard, the morning sweat that so often focuses. When I return, a camper is barefoot on the slackline that stretches from tree to tree across the meadow.

She wants to talk more. We had talked the night before. After the beer had loosened many tongues.

She is a girl.

She is conflicted about spending a whole week away from her partner. Another girl. Sensing no judgment, she talks. We agree that she needs to keep being herself, in everything. Thus, when they are together she will be completely who she is and won't be wishing she was somewhere else. When did I become a counselor? What gives me the right to assume I can help this girl? But, she did ask, and I simply guided her to where she wanted to go anyway.

My grandmother. Again. In the clapboard winter house. No advice. Just a question, a subtle direction, and patience to listen while the visitor talks. The bone needle passing slowly through the summer hides, the talker finding the answer. I smile.

I still have not seen Katrina this morning. Knowing that she knows is weighing on me.

We have written since the missed meeting in Yosemite. But we have not talked. For four months. How awkward will it be? Why do I feel as though she has hidden something from me? When the fault is all mine. I push the budding anger away. Decide I will ask about her arrowhead. Try to discover if it might be the third. It has to be the third. She said it was identical. And it was found in the right type of place. I can drive to the Gunks from here. Visit the museum. Steal it.

The guide and I leave for the gorge.

He has been smitten by a young girl.

But I have met the guide's wife. And his daughter.

I have seen them together.

We discuss men and being smitten and commitment and relationships. I believe he thinks I am smitten. With Katrina. I believe he thinks this makes me complicit somehow in his affair. Clearly he does not know.

I speak forcefully to the guide. Judgmentally. This is unlike me, and unlike my grandmother. I don't know why but his affair hurts me, and angers me. For a moment I am back in that dark room, the bodies on the floor. I return from that place and speak even harsher words. The guide blushes. Looks away.

Our day on the rock ends and a sadness descends on me. How could he? How can he? What is he doing? Why can't he stay in love? Why can't we all just be and stay in love?

My greasy fingers hold a frigid bottle of beer, not my first.

Katrina finally returns from dinner out after a day of climbing.

She is tired and tense.

I am upset. By the guide, by the smitter who sits beside him pretending not to hold his hand under the table, pretending not to be too close.

This cabin is not a place I want to be. I want to be home. With my wife. Where love and comfort and understanding and consideration abound. Not here, in this tense place. Not here where so many things are so terribly wrong.

We share a few words, and she moves away from me and from the others. There will be no talk of the stone.

In the night, as I sleep, a fight erupts. I hear the angry hurtful words through the thin walls. Half awake I replay other short words from the Sierra and Pouder. I see them differently, in context, and know that this has been in motion for longer than I even suspected. That it will end soon is obvious. To me. To them?

Her life is about to move in a different direction.

I worry for William.

I think of my parents, what little I remember. Before I went to live with my grandmother. The raised voices, the raised fists, the angry words through thin walls. The angry images on the grainy film of memory. The anger. The end.

When I fall asleep I am once again that hungry child, that cold cold frightened child, hiding outside as the voices rise and rise and then go silent.

Rochester Ohio
After Returning from the Gorge

“We thought you’d be home two days ago,” his nephew says.
“I took a little side trip. To New York.”

“New York City?”

“No, but near there.”

“What for?”

“I was looking for something.”

“You’re always looking for something.”

He pauses. Children always know.

“Did you find it?” his nephew asks.

“No. It wasn’t there. I knew exactly where to look. But it wasn’t there.”

“What was it?”

“An arrowhead?”

“What do you need another arrowhead for? We’ve got plenty.”

“It’s a special arrowhead.”

“Aunt Sue had a special arrowhead,” his nephew says.

He stops. Waits.

“She used to bring it with us when we walked down by the creek.”

He cannot believe what he is hearing.

“You mean she took my arrowhead?” he asks.

“No. She told me you had yours and she had hers and that’s how she knew she was supposed to marry you.”

He cannot form the next question.

“You didn’t know about her arrowhead?” his nephew asks.

“No.”

“Then you didn’t know how she could make the painting on the cliff change color?”

His mouth hangs open. He feels copper rise in the back of his throat. His vision narrows and stars began to dance in its periphery.

“She would hold it in her hands. One time she let me hold it. It was real heavy. And it kinda made me dizzy. Then she’d sing. She was singing some funny language. But she’d sing. And when she sang just right the painting would glow. She told me not to tell anyone. That if I told it wouldn’t work anymore. She said when she sang and it worked that she didn’t hurt. So I couldn’t tell. She was going to teach me how to sing too.”

He sits, breaths hard. Pulls the boy towards him and hugs him.

Madawaska Highlands
Summer 1978

The boy and the girl move up the cliff.
They work closer and closer to the petroglyph.

“Should we get this close?” she asks.

“Yes. You should touch it with the arrowhead. Then you will know that everything I have told you is true. Not some legend.”

“But I already believe you,” she says.

“I don’t want you to believe me,” he says. “I don’t want belief or trust to be any part of this. I want you to simply know. Like you know gravity and hot and cold. They just are. You don’t need to trust or believe in anyone to just know gravity and hot and cold.”

They move closer.

She feels the arrowhead become lighter until she wonders that it isn’t floating.

They arrive at a small ledge just below the petroglyph, from where its makers must have stood.

He nods.

She touches the stone to the glyph.

He begins to sing.

The glyph begins to change color.

She gasps.

The bruises on her elbows and knees change color, heal before her eyes.

The scratches on her hands and ankles drop their scabs.

Her breath becomes regular.

She smiles.

“What will become of us?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” he says.

“You could go to college near us,” she says. “We could see each other.”

He looks into the distance.

“But this place is so much of you. I don’t know if you’d be you without it,” she says.

He holds her closer.

“I love you,” she says.

“And I love you too,” he says.

“I love you so much. I know I can’t take you away from this place. But I can come here. I will come here. Every summer. On the solstice. I’ll be right here, in this spot. Waiting for you, looking for you. Hoping that you still love me and that you’ll always want to be with me. If even for a few days, or a day, or an hour. I’ll be here.”

Crossroads Café, Joshua Tree California
Late Fall, 2005

The coffee skinned man sits holding her hand.
A soft gentle comfortable touch that means to share, not to possess.

They are sitting in the Café. The white haired woman of the desert has welcomed them. Soon she will bring them their dinners without asking what they want. She knows. She has brought them the same dinner on the same hunter's moon each year for six years. Marvels at the power of the desert that has kept these two together over the years in their own strange way.

Tonight the white haired woman of the desert brings their dinners and a cupcake with a candle.

"It's not my birthday," Amy says.

"No, but it's your anniversary," the white haired woman of the desert says.

"Anniversary?" Amy asks.

"Six years. You two have come here on exactly this day of the hunter's moon for six years."

He looks at Amy, at the woman. Stands. Bows to her.

"Thank you," he says.

She smiles, returns to the counter.

"Six years," Amy says.

"Six years," he echoes.

"A lot has happened in six years," she says.

"Yet we're the same, at least to each other," he says.

"I meant on the outside. Away from here."

His grasp on her hand tightens, relaxes.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I know we never talk about the outside, about things that aren't us. But tonight it's six years. It seems like six days, six minutes. But the best six minutes. But so much has changed. I can't believe you don't want to know."

He can tell she wants to tell it. Needs to tell it. That their hunter's moon relationship will likely end tonight. That it may become something else, or may simply cease to be."

"So tell me," he says. His hand slips from hers.

"You mentioned a woman in Boulder," he says. "A climber."

“Sure. You should meet her. I think you’d like her.”

“Katrina?” he asks.

“Yes. How’d you know?”

“I could tell from how you described her.”

“You know her?”

“We’ve met.”

Amy’s brown eyes widen the way they do when she doesn’t like what she’s hearing, or when she is challenged.

“Is she another?” Amy asks.

“Yes.”

“Does your wife know about her?”

“Yes.”

Does Katrina know you’re married?”

“She knows I’m not married.”

“What?”

“I’m not married Amy.”

“Don’t be cruel TK. This is too much.”

“I’m not being cruel.”

“I don’t believe you.”

He considers. Pushes the leftovers of his food around on his plate.

He pulls a cell phone from his pack, flips it open, presses a few buttons, hands it to Amy.

“It’s Katrina. Ask her,” he says. “Ask her anything.”

He hears only Amy’s side of the conversation.

He looks around the café. Sees the white haired woman of the desert working on her laptop. Approaches her.

“May I borrow this? For one google search?”

She hands it across.

He returns to the table, brings up Google. Enters the search.

Amy hands him the phone.

She begins to read.

Looks up at him.

Her shoulders slump. Her body sinks into the chair. A sad tear comes to her eye. Is replaced by another, then another.

She finishes. Returns the laptop. Comes back to the table. Sits in his lap. Places her head on his chest and cries and cries.

Still sitting on his lap, she lifts her head.

Looks into his eyes for a long moment.

“You told her?” But you didn’t tell me?”

“I didn’t tell her. She found out.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I couldn’t.”

“Why?”

“Because telling makes it real.”

Amy tenses. Clinches.

“I get it now. You can’t let her go,” she says.

TK tightens his arms around her. Shakes his head yes.

“Why?”

“Because she promised that every year, on my birthday, that she would be at the rock on my farm. And she would stay with me from that day until I left the farm. Every year. And she has been true. She is always there.”

“Maybe you need to release her from that promise.”

“Like you want to be released from yours?”

“Yes.”

“I release you.”

Rochester Township

They approach the painting on the cliff by the creek at the very back of the farm.

“I used to love coming back here,” he says.

“Me too,” his nephew answers.

“I never knew she came back here,” he says.

“We came a lot,” his nephew says. “But she told me not to tell.”

They sit on the bank opposite the glyph. Watch the water flow slowly towards the north. Feel the breeze that rustles the leaves above. Feel the sun that dapples the water.

“Why did she have to go?” his nephew asks.

He has been waiting for this question. Knew it would come. Has prepared.

“She hasn’t left,” he says. “She’s still here. Not right here, not right now. But she’s still here. You just have to listen and wait. Walk where you used to walk with her. Think about her and how she looked, how she sounded, how she smelled. Think about what you talked about, about how you played together. Listen for her laugh in the leaves or grass or running water. You’ll see her, because she’s still here.”

His nephew closes his eyes hard. Moves his lips in a silent conversation.

“It’s not working,” he says quietly.

“Don’t try so hard. Just think about her. About how much fun you had. Good times. Just think.”

His nephew lies down. Closes his eyes again. Quickly falls asleep. Appears so much like a sleeping angel. The man tries not to think about her. Not to intrude. To let her come to the boy.

He feels the air temperature change.

Sees the painting glow the faintest bit.

Knows that she is here with his nephew.

He smiles in his sleep. Once again moves his lips in a silent conversation.

The sun moves slowly across the sky and the shadows move in the opposite direction.

His nephew wakes with a start.

He is trying not to cry. But he cannot bear it.

“She told me you have to let her go. That you love someone else more.

“But...but, if you let her go, then I won't ever be able to see her again will I?” his nephew asks. Tears well up in his eyes.

He stands, runs, disappears into the forest.

The man hangs his head in his hands.

The painting turns a dark shade of black.

Madawaska Highlands
Summer 1978

The girl paddles, both certain and uncertain at the same time. Knowing that she wants to see the boy, to be with the boy, yet uncertain she can. Aware they can never truly be together and resolving that this moment is more important than all the others she has experienced, suspecting it is more important than any that will follow.

The boy sits on his accustomed ledge. Shaded, watching, listening. Aware, more aware than usual this morning. Feeling that today, with the girl, his life will change, no matter which way things go. Whether they do or don't, from either decision there will be no turning back.

She strokes and strokes, luxuriating in the effort, breathing in the morning mist, propelling the canoe down the lake for what she knows is the last time this year, perhaps forever, despite her promise. The angry words her father shouted still sting her ears. She paddles faster.

He feels her before he sees her. Like he has so many times with the world around him. The feeling grows and then he picks out her canoe far down the lake. He stands, grasps the rock, steps up, then steps back down. He descends to the rocky beach and stands, waits.

She beaches the canoe, starts to step out.

"Wait," he says.

He steps into the canoe.

"Over there," he points.

They work the canoe along the base of the cliff. She sees the tiny landing and steers towards it. He leaps out, pulls the canoe ashore, helps her out.

Their hands touch, grasp, hold.

She stares into his eyes. Gasps at the intensity she encounters.

She steps into his arms.

"Not yet," he says, releasing her.

"First the rock. This route. It's never been climbed. I can't climb it alone. Together, maybe, just maybe, we can do something that no-one else has ever done."

It seems like more words than she's heard him speak all summer. She moves to the rock, and then prepares.

Morning stretches into afternoon as the route slowly yields. Pitch after pitch, ragged breaths mix with pounding hearts and shrieking falls. Fall after fall, catch after catch. Encouragement, dismay, and ultimately success.

At the top, together in the early evening, they feel the accomplishment together. Doing together what neither could have done alone. The pride, the exertion. The bleeding hands and feet. The bruised knees, elbows, hips. No words are exchanged as the sun dips lower and lower.

Then he takes her hand.

Feels a stone in it.

Accepts it.

Knows she knows, and knows that now is the exact moment for her to return it.

He places it back around his neck, once again complete.

As the evening eagles circle above and the loons call out below they became one.

Completely.

Forever.

Completely altered.

Forever one.

Madawaska Highlands
Summer 1978

“Where is she?” the father asks.

“I don’t know,” the boy answers.

“Yes you do. Where is she?”

“I suspect she is looking for you in the woods. Where you stole the stones. She says that’s all you care about.”

The father stops. His next words catch in his throat. He looks out into the forest.

He deflates.

“We fought,” he says quietly.

The boy says nothing.

“About the stones,” her father continues.

The boy remains silent.

“It’s kimberlite. A pipe. There’s diamonds there. She doesn’t want me to tell. She wants me to just leave it be. Go home. Not tell anyone.”

The boy’s eyes narrow.

“We’d be rich. Diamonds. I could give her anything.”

“Like what? What does she need? At what price?”

The father re-inflates. Bristles.

“The price? To who? Your people? This place?”

“No. To you. And her. At what price?”

The father pauses, his eyes harden.

“At any price,” the father says.

The boy strikes soundlessly. The club appearing and descending so quickly the father is down and dead before he knows he has been struck. He collapses to the ground. The boy throws the club into the lake. Shoulders the man, and starts up the path to the top of the cliff.

At the top, he places him down. Dresses him in a harness. Attaches the cut rope he’d prepared earlier. Changes him into climbing shoes. Once again he lifts the man, approaches the edge, drops him over. Watches him fall to the rocky shore below.

It comes rushing back yet again.

The boy shivers outside the small house. Though he tries, he cannot block out the cries, the screams.

“Stop,” he whispers.

The cries from within go on. Weaker, but more pained.

“Stop,” he pleads.

There is one last cry. Different from the rest. Unlike the others. Feral. Final.

He stands, inches towards the house. Hears nothing.

He moves closer, towards the door, still open, from where he escaped, ran away from the screams, the beating.

He still hears nothing.

Moves closer.

His father stands over his lifeless mother.

He knows that she is gone.

Another step forward, into the house, towards her, towards him.

His father turns, faces him. Blood on his hands.

Their eyes meet, but his father looks goes through him.

The boy feels the weight in his hands. Hefts the shaft on which he has spliced his knife. Another step towards the man, the killer.

“Go ahead,” his father says.

The boy thrusts with all his might. The spear plunges in. The father gasps, stays rooted over the woman.

The boy pulls. Removes the spears. Thrusts again.

The father grunts. Falls. Covers the woman he has killed.

The boy pulls. Removes the spear again.

Thrusts, pulls, thrusts, pulls.

Departs.

His mind carries him to the only place he has ever known safety.

“He’s dead,” the boy says.

His grandmother looks at the spear in his hand, the blood on his clothes, his face.

“He killed mom,” the boy says.

His grandmother takes him in.

Cleans him.

Wraps him in fresh clothes.

Holds him.

Takes the knife point from the shaft, binds it with leather, puts it around his neck.

“He was never one of us. Now that he’s gone, you are one of us. Completely. You are surely one of us. One of the People of the Hand. Forget your other names. Forever onwards you shall be known to me as the keeper.”

“He’s dead,” the boy says.

“Who?” the ranger asks. “Start at the start.”

“There’s been an accident,” he says.

“At the cliff?”

“Yes. He’s dead.”

“Tell me again,” the ranger says.

“He fell,” the boy repeats.

“Where?”

“Down there. I was bringing him up the last pitch. He fell. The rope broke over the edge of the rock. He fell all the way.”

The ranger examines the rope more closely.

“I’m going to keep this,” he says.

“Have you found his daughter?” the boy asks.

“His daughter?”

“Yes. She’s here with him. Cottagers.”

“His *daughter*? Why didn’t you say?”

The canoe churns through the water. Her hands are blistered from the paddle, sweat pours from her forehead, mixes with her tears. The ranger hears and sees her, hitches up his trousers, prepares for the worst.

He holds her in his arms, weeping, disconsolate.

The ranger stands off to the side.

“We fought,” she says.

“I know,” he answers.

“About the rocks. I wouldn’t let him...”

The ranger steps closer.

“You fought?” the ranger asks. “About rocks? What rocks?”

She buries her face in the boy’s chest.

The ranger adds a note to his book.

The float plane circles one last time then lands on the lake.
Its propeller winds down and the floats crunch against the rocks.
The father is lifted onto the wire stretcher, then onto the plane.
“Come with me,” the ranger says.
Neither the boy nor the girl moves.
“There’s only room for one,” the pilot says.
The ranger inhales deeply, decides.
He takes the girl’s hand, helps her into the plane.
“I’ll be at the park office tomorrow at ten,” he says to the
boy. “Be there.”

The boy runs to his grandmother’s house.
“I killed him,” he says.
“I know.”
“He was going to steal the rocks.”
“You did the right thing. It’s who you are. Who we are.
Keepers of the circle. People of the Hand.”
She cleans him.
Wraps him in fresh clothes.
Once again, as he had been ten years before, he is with his
grandmother, clean, safe, warm, after the killing.
“We are the People of the Hand.
“But the others will blame you. They will not rest until you
are found. Their search will lead them to the rocks. Will anger
the Hand.”
He knew she was right, knew he had to go. His heart
screamed to ask where he would go. His mind, trained in her
house, kept his heart and tongue in check.
She continued.

“You’ll want to know where to go. How to get there. I can’t
tell you. But I can tell you how you’ll know you have arrived,
and how to return.

“There are other hands. One in the east, where the warrior was buried. One in the south, where the child bride was burned. And one yet unfound, made by the traveler. I have seen it in my other sight, and its view confuses me. It is nowhere I have ever been, though I have been but a few places. None of our neighbors from the other peoples has spoken of it. All I know is that it rests in a vast deserted place, where few, if any, ever go. I feel that he hid it. Knew it would be a portal, to the center. He hid it well.

“Either of the first two will be fine for you, for a while. But your true home, the only place you will know peace, is at the third. I suspect somehow your loves will guide you there.”

She paused.

The boy waited.

She began again.

“The people of the east carried their great warrior back to his home. It was a long journey, made longer still by their loss and eventually by their guilt for the murders in the night. They have never attacked us since.

“The great warrior lived near a wide river that flowed south to the salt water. His people fished the river and hunted the highlands that overlooked the river. His people bury their dead near their favorite places. So they carried him to a rocky landing on a narrow portion of the river where the water ran fast and loud. But there was no place to dig. So they took him away from the river he loved to a band of cliffs some miles away. It was there he had met his wife, and where he had often come to think and remember.

“The men began to dig, and while they dug, the women prepared his body. It had been many weeks since his death and the body was badly decayed. Of the women, only his wife would even try to make the proper preparations. As she lost patience with the other women, some of whose husbands had been killed and not carried home, the sky grew angry. As the men dug, the earth became rocky, and they, too tired from the lengthy journey, would not dig properly. The sky grew angrier. Thunder rolled down the valley. Just as his body was lowered into the ground, lightning split the sky, and reached down into his grave.

“Some say the lightning came from the grave. The lightning ran through those women who had not prepared his body properly and through the men who had not dug deep enough and up into the rocks above his grave. Only his wife survived.

“Stunned, she lay under the cliff for hours until others of her people found her.

“Above her, above her husband’s grave, the lightning bolt had carved a hand that still smoldered. The smell of the charred flesh hung in the air. Those who were there insist they saw the great warrior spirit trying to enter the hand and wailing in pain each time he touched it.

“The people from the east say that when it storms you can still hear his spirit trying to enter the hand.”

The boy could see the hand, hear the thunder, smell the flesh, and for a moment could see the stone in the warrior’s body. Then it was gone.

“So you can see it also,” his grandmother said.

She gently touched his hand.

The vision came back much more clearly.

But the stone was no longer in the warrior’s body. It appeared to be housed in a glass box, laying on felt, illuminated from above.

She removed her hand, but the image remained.

“Yes. I see it too. But like you, do not know the location of that glass box.”

She dipped a metal cup into a skin bucket of water.

She drank, collected herself.

“I have an image of the stone taken by the child bride from the west. Her people also tried to carry her back to her home, but the stone around her neck ultimately drove her completely mad. In the night she wandered away from their camp in the land of the giant turtle and was drowned in the shallow water that ran in the bend of the creek near their camp. They found her body in the morning.

“Her people burn their dead. They gathered all the fire making materials and prepared a pyre on the shore near where she had perished. The shallow creek must run higher in the spring because it had carved a short rock wall into the far bank.

“They lit the fire. No storm evidenced the displeasure of the great Manitou. Instead, the kindest breeze carried the smoke and ash away from the mourners, across the creek, and into the sandstone. When the fire had burned down to only glowing ashes, the smoke and ash had stained a black hand onto the sandstone. In the glowing ashes, the stone she had worn around her neck shone brightly from the fire. Her husband reached into the fire and retrieved the stone. His hand sizzled. He stepped into the creek, submerged the stone, steam rising around him, still he held it while it cooled. When it had cooled, he stepped across the creek and began scratching into the sandstone. Outlining the hand formed from the smoke and ash. When he was done, and stood spent in front of the rock, his people crossed the stream and carried him back across.

“One of his brothers took the stone, lashed it to the end of his longest arrow, knocked the arrow into his heaviest bow, and fired the stone over the sandstone, over the trees, and deep into the forest where it was forever lost.”

The boy sat still, waited for a vision. He saw only darkness. Again his grandmother gently took his hand in hers. Now he saw the creek fly by below him, then the sandstone and the hand. Then the tops of trees, and finally the forest floor rushing towards him, then only darkness.

She removes her hand, and the darkness returns.

In the distance the boy hears the sound of an airplane motor. He wonders whether they have discovered the lie. Have begun to search. His grandmother pretends not to notice. Though as she begins the final chapter of her story, her pace quickens.

“This final vision confuses me. Sometimes I think it is the final hand, sometimes I do not know. But I am certain it is from the traveler. And I am certain no-one else has ever seen this hand. I am also certain the traveler’s stone is not near the hand. Because he told me so. When I was a child. His spirit came to me and told me what it knew. It had forgotten much and being a child I did not understand so well. So when I think on these visions I am often confused.

“He traveled south and west for years. Through strange lands. Beyond the lands of the giant turtle, of the people to the south. Beyond the wide river that flows south, the brown river where the great whiskered fish lives. He followed the river until he reached the warm salt water and then he traveled west. For weeks he met no-one. One day he came to another smaller river. There he met a strange short people, with wide shoulders, large chests, and deep bronze skin.

“He traveled with them up the river to their lands. Their houses were cut into cliffs that looked out over the river and over an endless plain. The only water for days and days ran in the shallow river at the base of the cliffs. They told him legends about the great sea of sand where men with upstretched arms grow as trees. They told him only one person had ever crossed from the great sea of sand. The legend said he was a short man with slanted eyes and long dark hair tied like the tail of horse. A man who spoke in strange sounds that no-one could understand. A man who walked out of the desert and right into the river and drank for two entire days and nights and then slept for seven entire days and nights and then set out to the east without a word of parting.

“The people of the cliffs tried to warn the traveler that there was no water.

“The traveler set out to the west as soon as it was dark. Carrying extra water in extra skins. He hid by day and walked by night, and after many days, days long after his water was gone, he came to mountains that sprang from the sand. For days he searched for a pass through the mountains. He discovered a spring. Tracks of some strange small animal lead him to the spring, and tracks of some other larger animal lead into the mountains. He followed these cloven tracks higher and higher until he stood in a cleft between two high peaks. To the west stretched a sea of sand, but not the sea of sand of which he had dreamed. There was sand with piles of giant boulders strewn about, but without the green trees, yellow flowers, and spiked plants of which he had dreamed.

“He continued west, day after day, until he reached an outcropping of rock that shot hundreds of feet straight up out of the ground. He sensed a connection to our rock. The rock had large scoops and holes. Some of the scoops held water. As he drank the water from the scoops, he felt the spirits of hundreds flowing into him. But he saw no people, and no signs that any had ever been there. For days he circled the rock. Rested in the shade, drank from the scoops, felt more and more power flow into him. On the third day he discovered a chimney in the rock, the chimney leading up and into the cliff.

“He squeezed into the chimney, and slowly worked his way upwards. Foot by foot he ascended, until he found himself perched on a small shelf. He felt a cool breeze blowing out of a crack in the rock. He squeezed into the crack and emerged into a round room whose roof was partially opened to the sky. In the room he found arrowheads and pieces of pottery. A circle of stones lined a fire pit. On the wall opposite the crack he saw a hand. Not a carved hand, a human hand. Impaled on a stick that was wedged into a small crack in the wall. Beside the crack a painting of a human face leered out at him. Drips from the roof pooled in a curved bowl sitting on the floor. His thirst drew him to the bowl, and as he bent to drink the next drip splashed dark red into the bowl. He stepped back, looked up, and discovered the owner of the missing hand.

“Climbing up to the roof of the round room he pressed himself out through the opening. Carrion birds squawked and flew off, circling high up into the sun.

“The dead man was unlike any he had ever seen. With pure white skin except for his remaining hand and face, which were a bright red. A gold helmet lay beside him, along with odd tools. The traveler raised his voice to the great Manitou, and it rang out across the vast plain that surrounded him.

“Far to the west, a thin breeze carried the dust raised by a dozen feet walking west. The traveler marked the spot, squeezed back down through the roof, descended the chimney, and headed west.

“For fourteen days he walked west until finally he caught up to the people he had seen from beside the white red man. In the dying light he approached the six. Using the language of the People of the Hand he announced his name, described his line, and described his quest. He repeated his greeting in the languages of the peoples from the North, South, East, and West.

“One of the six rose to his greeting. She spoke in a language he had never heard. Though the words were unintelligible, their tone was unmistakable. He was welcome. She offered food and water, motioned for him to sit in their circle. Sat beside him.

“He walked with them for fourteen more days as they returned to their land. He learned their words, their ways. Living amongst them he learned even more. He learned the woman was their leader, and the red and white man at the outcropping had killed her man with a stick that barked thunder and lightning. They had tracked him and killed him.

“He asked about his dreams about the sea of sand filled with green trees with upturned arms. She asked whether he hadn’t already traveled far enough? Whether he didn’t see that he was brought to her to replace her murdered husband? He said she hadn’t answered about the dream sea of sand. She told him she knew where it was, and that if he insisted, she would take him there, because she knew that now she belonged to him.

“After spending two moons with her people, she told him it was time to visit the sea of sand with the trees and rocks and flowers and spiked plants about which he had dreamed. But when they arrived, she changed. She grew distant. Left him alone for days at a time. One night she came to him in his sleep. Made love to him, then cut his neck and reached for the stone he wore there. She meant to steal it, and leave him to die in the desert. He struggled. She was strong, and he was slowly dying from the cut.

“Desperate, he reached for the stone around his neck. Plunged it into her heart.

“He staggered away from the battle, braced himself against a rock, scratched a hand into the rock, and painted it with his blood. With his dying words he prayed to the great Manitou to return him to his home.”

Madawaska Highlands
Summer 1979

The girl followed the path from the end of the lake, suspecting, but not knowing, that this was where his grandmother lived.

“I’ve been expecting you,” she said to the girl.

“Is he here?” she asked.

“No my dear. He’s gone.”

“Why?”

“You know why.”

The girl shuddered. Shook.

His grandmother stepped towards her. Took her in her arms.

“Come inside,” she said. “Let me tell you about him.”

“Did it have to be this way?” she asked.

“No. But it is the way that it is.”

“I promised him I would come here every summer, on the solstice. Told him that I would always love him.”

“That’s what true love is. A hopeless promise.”

“That’s so sad,” she said. “I don’t believe it’s hopeless.”

His grandmother took her hands. Looked into her eyes.

“I feel him in you,” she said.

The girl retraced the path she had taken with her father. Back to the circle. She feels different here this time, now that she had returned his stone, now that she knew what it was. She sinks to her knees in the middle of the circle of trees and begins to weep. For her father. For her lost innocence. For her lover. The afternoon stretched into evening, and still she cried. Only with the appearance of the evening star did she stop. And in its evening glow, so much softer than the harsh summer sunlight, she saw the reflection from under the tallest of the trees. Knowing somehow what it must be, she crawls on all fours towards the gentle glow. Reaches under the lowest bough, and retrieves the arrowhead.

Once again she felt its weight. Saw its sheen. Knew its power. She ran her finger along the still sharpened edge, then realized something was missing. It was just the arrowhead. It was not set in silver. This was not her lover's stone.

She returned to the center of the trees, raised the stone to the evening stars, raised the stone to the petroglyph on the cliff, held it against her stomach, repeated her promise.

Across the lake, the petroglyph glowed with the subtle color of early moonlight.

Rochester, Ohio
Late Fall 2005

It was the first truly cold day, the day he knew summer was over, and the inevitable cold and dark would soon take hold. A day when his breath blew white and thick in the early morning air. When cheeks turned red and hats and gloves were taken from their summer closets. A day that told of burning leaves, homecoming games, and unending blue skies.

As he walked, head down, eyes in the furrow, his thoughts went first to the desert. The cold in the mornings, the crunch of the sand, the animals and flowers hidden, hiding, waiting for the sun, for the warmth.

So many days in the desert. Days before Amy, with Amy, after Amy. Days together, days alone. Days when she walked with him, together.

Step after step in the cold, eyes in the furrow.

He stops, bends, kneels, picks the rock from the frozen ground. He flicks off a clod of nearly frozen mud, brushes the rock, stands, wipes it on his sweater.

He turns the rock this way and that. Holds it towards the sun. He steps out of the furrow and heads back towards the house.

“Any luck?” she asks.

He walks to the sink, sprays some dish soap on the rock. Rinses, brushes, rinses, cleans.

“Can I see?” she asks.

He takes the rock to the table, the glass topped table. Sets it on top.

She sees it is an arrowhead. She can't be sure, but she is sure.

He places it beside each of the other points in turn. Compares, turns, looks, stares, compares again. Then moves it on.

“Does it match?” she asks.

He finishes the first row, then the second. He goes to the library and comes back with the picture book that his sister-in-law the archeologist keeps. He flips to the first picture and compares.

“It looks familiar,” she says. “But not like these.”

He goes through each photo. Reaches the end. Returns the book to the library.

“You know where to look,” she says.

He stands, goes to the back room. Reaches up to the top shelf, takes down a small metal box. Carries it to the table.

He opens it.

There is no question.

“I didn’t know you knew about this,” he said.

“I’ve had a lot of time here by myself.”

Hueco Tanks, Texas
Spring 2006

Once again I am her client. One of many who have come to experience her, to touch her greatness. We will have a chance to talk. I will tell her about my wife, reveal what I know she already knows. But she will hear it from me.

I will apologize for being less than the friend I'd asked to be.

"There's a squeeze chimney here that TK wants me to show him how to work. I know none of you want to work it, so why don't you work that traverse down there and we'll be back in a half hour?" Katrina says.

The other clients are dismissed to the traverse with the other guides. None are insane enough to want to work a squeeze chimney.

So we climb together, alone again, up the squeeze chimney, and into the round room.

The glyph from the traveler is still there. I had felt it earlier, knew it would be. With the minutes of our half hour spinning quickly away I tell her as much as I can about the traveler.

"Wait," she says. "After the others have gone to sleep, I'll come to your room. You can tell me everything."

I feel her tiny footsteps before I hear the door slip open and shut. It is very late. The others have stayed up drinking and talking for hours. I am exhausted, but cannot sleep. Knowing that Katrina is coming to me in the night, in person, not as a dream.

She taps my shoulder, and I whisper that I am awake.

"Now tell me everything," she says.

These minutes have no limit, save the dawn, which is still hours away. So I begin at the beginning. Tell everything that I know. About the girl and her father. About my mother and father. About my grandmother. About the stones. About Amy. About my wife. Throughout the entire tale she remains silent, sitting quietly on the edge of the bed.

"So now you know," I say.

She reaches towards me. Brushes my hair from my eyes. Leans towards me and kisses me on the cheek with the gentlest wisp I have ever known. I start to reach for her. But she stops me. Stands. Moves away from the bed. Reaches behind her.

Suddenly, there before me, lit in the moonlight spilling through the open window is the fourth stone.

“I went to the Gunks and got it. Right after Veadavoo,” she says.

“I went right after the gorge,” I say.

“Too late,” she says. “But it’s not too late now. Please accept this gift from me. I want you to have it. Amy told me how important it would be to you. She said it would be more important than her, or me, or any of us. So I want you to have it.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“And now I need to say good-bye. I need you to leave in the night. I’ll tell the others you got an emergency call from home. But I need you to go. You know why we can never be together. So please, if you ever felt anything for me, please do this for me. Just go.”

Cleveland, Ohio
Winter 2006

The Ansel Adams book I'd intended to give to Katrina for her birthday was delivered after I returned from India. Months in Nepal, then months in India. Looking for something, but not knowing what. I touched the book, thought about her, her request to go, to go away. Her certainty that we could never be together.

I wrote a note, sent it along, figured this would be the last of it. That I'd always look back at '05 and '06 as the years I met and got to know Katie, not the year I'd lost both her and Amy. That selective memory would help me heal.

There was no response to the gift. No letter, no email.
A void.

Later, at Christmas, I saw the presents I had purchased months earlier for her, and for William. Gifts purchased before Hueco. I mailed them. Along with a landscape of an Ohio covered in snow. I included a short story I had written about the High Sierra, titled "Meeting Katie".

Weeks later she replied by email.

"I've been meaning to write to you for so long. My partner and I have separated. I know you picked up on the tension at the Red. It was so hard to let go, but it's getting better now. Sorry about the harsh words in Hueco, but you know it had to be that way. Ciao for now."

I could hardly believe it. Though the breakup was inevitable, that she would confide it to me was a surprise. And then I thought back to the little moments we had shared. How I'd listened like I don't usually listen. How I'd opened myself like I don't usually do. "Ciao for now." I had to look in an Italian dictionary to figure out what Ciao meant.

And then I realized that this supremely confident woman needed someone to listen. It came to me. She was home alone, with her son, in their house. Alone. Do the champions of the worlds feel lonely? Like you and I? Did the Gods make humans so they would not have to be alone? I replied instantly.

“I’m sorry that it didn’t work out. But in a way I’m not sorry. It wasn’t right between you. It hadn’t been right for quite some time. Forgive me for saying so, but the decline from the High Sierra to Poudre to the Red was painful to watch, even for someone who knows you so little. I, more than anyone, know how bad it can get. How is William?”

Days later she replied.

“He is well. Thank you for asking. You’re right. It hadn’t been good for a while. I feel bad, but I’m feeling better. Does that make any sense?”

The question invited a reply.

“Yes it makes sense. You’ve had so much going on in your life. You’ve had no time for yourself. No balance. You spent months in the past years with strangers like me. You started a new business. You traveled the U.S. and the world. I’m surprised you even have the energy to type. I really hope that you can have some “Katrina time” in the new year. Do less. Seek the balance. Do more for just you and William.”

The reply was instantaneous. She was on the other end of the electronic line.

“Thank you. Yes. Balance is what I’ve been missing. I think William and I will try to have some time alone. I’m planning a vacation. An artist has invited me to Hawaii. It should be a nice break. I think William will love the ocean. It’ll be nice to be out of this place for a little while. When I thought about it, I realized I haven’t had a vacation in three years.”

“An artist?”

“Yes, a friend. When you and Amy called me from Joshua Tree, you said something strange had happened. I’ve wondered what? We didn’t get a chance to talk about that at Hueco. And in the story you sent me, which I read, you said that from now on you would ‘love differently’. How?”

I stared at the email. The subject had been changed.

“What an extraordinary question,” I typed. And then I typed, and typed, and typed some more. I described again the times with Amy, with the girl, with my wife. I tried to describe the recent change inside. Tried to describe how much more I felt since knowing her. Tried somehow to apologize for a transgression I hadn’t made. This reply went on for pages. I reread it, hovered the mouse pointer over the delete button. Slid the mouse pointer over the send button.

To confide. To open myself to her. No-one else knew about Amy. No-one else knew about my grandmother, my parents, the girl, my wife. Telling it all to one was bringing all of those boys and men together, into one.

With the cursor hovering over the send key, and my finger pressing ever so slightly on the mouse button, I felt the ground slip away in front of me, like when you walk towards the edge of a very tall building, or a cliff, or the railing on a cruise ship. It was just slipping away. I sent the email.

Weeks later she answered. It probably took that long to read my message. For those weeks I checked my email every hour, sometimes more. With my soul laid bare, with the rawest part of me exposed, I waited, and wondered, and thought of her in Hawaii with the artist.

Her reply came on a Thursday in the afternoon.

“People only seem to change,” it began. “What really happens is they become who they’ve always been, with who they’re not stripped away. It feels like change, but it’s not. Here is a photo of William on the beach. I’m camping and climbing in the desert next month. Are you coming? I’ll be in the desert...”

Resolution

My wife holds me tight to her.

We are at the creek, by the hand.

Her arms feel as real to me now as they did when she was here.

“Don’t you see?” she asks. She holds my gaze, as she does so often, so effortlessly.

“Don’t you see? You’re in love with me in all of them. With me. The way I was, the way I might have been. You’re in love with me here. But I’m not really here. You’re in love with me before, in Amy. You’re in love with who I might have been, with Katrina. If I hadn’t left you. I’m so sorry I left you. It was my body, the disease, I fought and fought and fought, and I’m so sorry I left you. I can’t hate you for loving them, for loving me. And I don’t want to. It’s alright. You can love us all.”

Tears well, then start down my face.

She wraps herself even tighter to me.

“I do love you,” I say.

“I know,” she answers. And holds me so tight I can’t breath, even if I had dared.

My tears come faster, tumbling down my face, running in torrents and splashing on her tombstone.

“You have to go,” she says. “I want you to go.”

In her hand she holds out an arrowhead.

“I found it here just before you got here in 1979. Right here, in the hand on the cliff by the river. You see, I’ve always known. I was waiting for you my whole life, before I even knew you. But my life is over. And yours goes on. Like the hands, the rocks, it goes on. Now go. You have to go. I have to go. Let me go.”

Five stones. Though the legend only spoke of four. And two from here.

I kiss her.

She steps out of my arms.

She approaches the hand on the rock, raises her hands to it, slowly dissolves into the sandstone. The hand shimmers, changes from black to red to blinding silver white and then slowly back to black.

I place her stone around my neck, where it clinks with the
other four.

I turn.

Cinch my pack.

And start walking towards the desert.

The End



JT Kalnay is an attorney and an author. He has been an athlete, a soldier, a professor, a programmer, an Ironman, and mountain climber. JT now divides his time between being an attorney, being an author, and helping his wife chase after seven nieces and nephews.

JT was born and raised in Belleville, Ontario, Canada. Growing up literally steps from the Bay of Quinte, water, ice, fishing, swimming, boating, and drowning were very early influences and appear frequently in his work.

Educated at the Royal Military College, the University of Ottawa, the University of Dayton, the University of Cincinnati, Long Island University, and Case Western Reserve University, JT has spent countless hours studying a wide range of subjects including math, English, computer science, physics, and law. Many of his stories are set on college campuses.

JT is a certified rock climbing guide and can often be found atop crags in West Virginia, California, Mexico, and Italy. Rock climbing appears frequently in his writing.

JT has witnessed firsthand many traumatic events including the World Trade Center Bombing, the Long Island Railroad Shooting, a bear attack, a plane crash, and numerous fatalities, in the mountains and elsewhere.

Disasters, loss, and confronting personal fear are common themes in his writing.

While “boy meets girl” appears to be JT’s dominant genre, readers will experience a variety of styles and themes in his simple yet complex writing.

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