

# Blue Sun, Yellow Sky

by Jamie Jo Hoang



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This book is dedicated to my sister,  
Dr. Kimberly Kay Hoang, who supported  
me throughout this journey. Thanks  
for making my pipe dream a reality, sis.

“From the moment I held the box of colors in my hands, I knew this was my life. I threw myself into it like a beast that plunges towards the thing it loves.”

—Henri Matisse

## CHAPTER ONE

### Color

HAVE you ever noticed that fire hydrants are rarely alike in shape or color? I have. Most people associate them with the color red, but that's not always true. For example, looking around my neighborhood of Venice Beach, California, I can tell you the majority of them are, in fact, white.

Before I knew their function, I thought these oddly shaped, metal objects bolted down into the sidewalk were street art. I grew up in Houston, Texas, and at the tender age of three my dad took me to an opening at the Rothko Chapel. Located in the Museum District, the chapel sat just off the main strip of museums, so it was more like being in a neighborhood than the center of a city. Nestled inside quaint, single story homes, the grassy area surrounding the chapel made it easily mistaken for a community center, and rightfully so. In honor of whatever they were celebrating, a team of local artists had gotten together at night and painted every hydrant in the town black. My dad noticed them first as he walked me to one and said, "Look honey, it's a Rothko fire hydrant." He meant the artists had painted the hydrants black as a tribute to Rothko, but being three, I thought he meant the physical hydrant was for Rothko. I remember growing more and more fascinated as I noticed them on every street.

Taking an immediate interest in what I imagined to be a worldwide phenomenon, I spent hours scouring our library of coffee table books at home (known to me at the time as 'picture books') for photos of international monuments. It was a "Where's Waldo" type search for fire hydrants in iconic places. I looked for hours and hours and when I didn't find a single hydrant within the covers of my books, I drew them in myself. My mom was furious when she found out, yelling at me and slapping my hand to get me to understand what I did was wrong. Meanwhile, my dad stood in the background cackling so hysterically that his laughter became contagious and my mom couldn't help but join in. She didn't so much care about our books, even though they were quite expensive. With the start of preschool the next day she was afraid I might deface all of the books in the classroom. Which I did.

Years passed before I realized the two-foot high objects bolted into the sidewalk were lifesaving water pumps used to put out fires. But by then, I'd already spent so much time studying fire hydrants that it was impossible to pass one by without taking notice, and on the rare occasion I came across one decorated like Super Mario or engineered to double as a drinking fountain, I'd take a picture and send it as a postcard to my dad. Our inside joke became a small-scale version of what later emerged as Banksy or Space Invader art

pieces, a duly oxymoronic sense of community amongst art enthusiasts who found unity in bearing witness to a public secret. I personally wasn't the trespassing or graffiti type artist, so my subtle form of artistic expression with the hydrants was to include them in every single one of my paintings. They were hidden in plain sight as part of the landscape; like trees in a forest, viewers just expected them to be there. I'd only ever had one person recognize the black fire hydrants in my work, and he happened to also have been at the Rothko celebration that day.

At my gallery openings, nearly two decades later, I made a habit of wandering about the room and listening to see if anyone ever recognized the motif. Not many did, and even if they took notice of one, they never thought to look for another. People rarely notice fire hydrants.

On the night of my biggest gallery showcase to date, I nervously stood in the back room of the Michael Sanders Gallery watching the event from afar. Typically at openings I moved around, studying the expressions of strangers as they connected with or dismissed my work, but this night was different. Champagne and bite-sized quiches floated about the room on large platters, carried by waiters who deftly weaved in and out unnoticed by the clusters of patrons gathered to examine my creations. My paintings had shown in galleries before, but this was the first time an entire space was reserved solely for me.

The layout was strategic, designed to move the viewer from one painting to the next and a break in sequence was delineated via a wall separating the rooms. Weeks of interior design, light installation, bulb testing, and precise placement of the artwork all culminated in this one evening. But as I stood watching people, both familiar and strange, my pinky finger strummed the ridge of a dime-sized, shallow hole, where someone had nicked the doorframe chipping the paint. All I could think about was the imperfect floor-to-ceiling crack in the wall behind Dr. Rostin's diploma from UC Irvine. *Retinitis Pigmentosa* (RP)—those words were the last thing I remembered him saying. I stopped listening after he said there was no cure, and my body numbed as it felt everything and nothing, all at once.

"Aubs," Michael Sanders called, in a slightly-too-loud, perhaps intoxicated, greeting.

He was the gallery owner and my biggest supporter. From across the room he motioned for me to come over. I took a deep breath, lifted the hem of my long black chiffon dress and moved toward him with a glass of now-warm champagne. As I approached, he began the introductions: "Aubrey, you remember Mr. and Mrs. Gibson?"

"Of course," I replied as we shook hands.

"So tell me. Is this a love story?" Mr. Gibson asked, cutting right to the chase.

Being that art was subjective, no right or wrong answers existed, yet people wanted affirmation that their interpretation was the same as that of the artist. Michael explained to me some time ago that people bought art that spoke to them, so if the artist was available, why not double-check that you "heard correctly," so to speak? "If I dropped \$7,000 on a painting, I'd want to know that what appeared to be a symbol of unity was not simply a walrus," he'd said, making me laugh.

"Depends on your definition of love," I said to Mr. Gibson.

"I love your use of color here. The painting simply exudes romance. But there is a

darkness to it too, a foreboding shadow if you will,” Mrs. Gibson chimed in.

The Gibsons were looking at one of my favorite paintings, *Midnight in Paris*—an abstract cityscape with a couple dancing underneath the Eiffel Tower. I’d never actually been to Paris, but my mother often talked about dancing underneath the iconic symbol of love with my dad on their honeymoon.

“I painted this in honor of my parents, on their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary,” I said. I knew better than to say, *On what would have been their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary*. Not many people want paintings that have any kind of connection, however remotely, to death, and so for good measure I added, “If you come at it from the angle of love, then the darkness symbolizes marital struggles, but you’ll notice that the dark is only on the periphery, never seeping into the core. On the other hand, the argument could be made that couples cripple themselves by disengaging with what’s on the periphery in exchange for each other.”

Mrs. Gibson squeezed her husband’s elbow and I knew I had sold them this painting. Couples who had been together as long as the Gibsons, or my parents, knew that in a relationship, one kind of love did not exist without the other.

Just behind them, I caught a glimpse of one of the first paintings I created in graduate school at Columbia University. A juxtaposition between poverty and gluttony, the piece was aptly named *Poverty and Gluttony*. The scene took place at night in the back alleyway of a row of high-end restaurants, where every night, high-quality food was thrown out. In a corner, curled up in a ball, was a little boy exhausted from starvation. I painted *Poverty and Gluttony* not long after my parents’ death. It was the darkest time in my life.

Drawing from the pain in Picasso’s Blue Period, more specifically *The Old Guitarist*, I mimicked Picasso’s technique of bodily distortion to convey loneliness and isolation. My painting hung in the Michael Sanders Gallery for two years before the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art asked to display it in a traveling exhibit showcasing emerging artists. Too dark a subject matter to be hung in someone’s home, the painting never sold, but it had a tremendous museum and gallery run because it directed the viewer to a place of uncomfortable contemplation.

*It’s rare to see signs of it this young.*

The words rang like deafening bells in my ears as my smile stiffened and I started walking to another piece of art, with the Gibsons following closely behind. What started as occasional blurred vision and patchy peripherals had culminated in a diagnosis with no treatment.

*Six to eight weeks...a genetic disorder affecting the retina.*

I had only recently started to gain recognition in the art community. “You’re sitting at the tipping point, Aubrey,” Michael had said to me on numerous occasions. I remember being on cloud nine and wishing the clock would start ticking at half-pace so I could enjoy the moment. But I no longer wanted time to simply slow down. I wanted it to stop.

I remained aware of the people moving around me, but in my own thoughts time moved at a rapid pace. No one knew what was happening to me and even if they did they probably wouldn’t care. In the art world, save for the select few who were lucky enough to die before their time, artists moved in and out faster than the fashion trends of the New York Runway. Michael stood less than three feet away from me discussing how my

paintings were a juxtaposition of life's many facets—precisely the reason he found my work so fascinating—but his words registered as faint and far away.

I looked at him and smiled, unable to stop myself from reminiscing about the first time we met. I was in a low place when Michael stumbled upon me. Stunned by the sudden passing of my parents, I had dropped out of graduate school after only one semester and obtained a permit from the city to be a street vendor. Weeks went by with tourists asking me to paint them New York City skylines, which I refused to do until my landlord squashed my pride with an eviction notice. If catering to the lowest common denominator meant being able to pay the bills, then I wasn't above it. Michael had just made a small fortune buying up the re-make rights of Southeast Asian horror films and selling them to the major motion picture studios in Hollywood. Atypical of a gallery owner, Michael was a jeans and zip-up sweater entrepreneur first and a suit-and-tie art enthusiast second.

At the time we met, my body of work included: ballerinas on skid row; cityscapes with churches next to brothels; a boy dressed in a suit sitting on a bench reading the newspaper; and a homeless woman carrying a Birkin bag—images that offered multiple meanings depending on what the viewer brought to the conversation. For instance, on a normal day, seeing the boy sitting in a suit, reading a newspaper might evoke laughter at its absurdity. But look at the painting on an especially trying day and the boy becomes a symbol for the end of youth and loss of innocence... or something like that.

I often wondered if I had missed the mark because no one ever paid attention to those pieces, even though I made a point to display them in front of the cityscapes. On especially slow days, I'd dream about a bigwig executive buying a piece for his penthouse office in the financial district. Michael was not that guy. At least, I didn't think so. New York was a business-suit city and Michael's casual attire suggested he was either a tourist or vagabond. So when he offered me \$500 cash for *Ballerinas on Skid Row*, I laughed at him. He gave me a confused look, handed me the money, and asked for my number.

"I have a boyfriend," I lied. I was 23 and certain he had just propositioned me for sex.

"I'm happy for you," he said, dryly. He handed me his business card. "I just bought a gallery in California. Call if you're interested in how this piece does."

Just shy of two weeks later (ten days to be exact), I called to find that the painting sold. That call marked the single greatest leap in my career and was how I ended up driving 3,096 miles to a new residence in Venice, California.

Had it already been four years? The time passed so quickly that I wondered if I had taken it for granted. Looking right at the Gibsons, who were talking to me, I smiled in blind acknowledgment of compliments I didn't hear. I knew I wasn't dreaming—the champagne glass and Michael's hand on the small of my back leading me to another painting were proof of that—but I wanted to rewind and reverse the news I'd received earlier. I wanted to go back to not knowing. It didn't matter that the disease was genetic, predetermined before I'd even had a chance to fight it. I simply wanted to get out of this phase of excruciatingly slow acceptance.

*Unfortunately, there is no cure.*

Other than an experimental vitamin A palmitate, a drug that could, at best, slow the process, I saw no reason for regular office visits. Short of a miracle or divine intervention, it seemed the battle had already been lost. When the thoughts in my head

calmed, I realized the Gibsons had begun negotiations for *Midnight in Paris* and excused myself.

I spotted Jeff Anderson, an old friend who was both familiar and strange, in a far corner looking pensively at a painting I'd entitled *Home*. One of the few paintings in my collection with no subtext, it was literally a painting of my childhood home, only instead of a frontal view it showed an obscure angle from outside our kitchen window looking into our 1970s-style living room. A home void of its people, it remained the only still life in my collection.

As I approached him I said, "You actually came."

Jeff dressed up for the occasion in a suit and tie, but the look didn't fit his personality and I wished I'd just told him to wear jeans.

"I did," he smiled.

"Nice boots," I said, looking down at the black cowboy boots he wore beneath his cuffed dress pants. The boots gave him a rugged demeanor closer to the guy I remembered from high school.

"Just keepin' it real," he smiled.

"Are you having a horrible time?"

"No, but I did overhear a conversation that could've come straight out of a Daniel Clowes comic," he said. Of course he did. I smiled.

That Jeff showed up at all to an event he probably considered pretentious, playing the part of an interested patron, was a whole new level of maturity. He was never a fan of art. In fact, in a heated debate about the value of art, I remembered him saying he thought collecting art was a wealthy person's game of who could pay the most for the least comprehensible painting. Being around him was familiar and distant all at the same time. Jeff had always been my forever friend, the one I thought I'd never lose. But time and distance changed us and now our relationship was just a shadow of the childhood friendship we once shared.

There was a bit of an awkward silence until Jeff said, "Where's the fire hydrant?"

I grinned, thrilled that he remembered. "It's there," I said. "Look closely at the texture of the exterior wall."

Jeff stepped forward and squinted. "No kidding," he said, as he searched until he found it.

"Do you mind if I borrow her?" Michael asked, coming up beside me.

"No, of course not," Jeff said.

"I'll be right back," I said to Jeff.

"Want to grab lunch tomorrow?" he asked, as I walked away.

"Sure," I said, turning back to him with a smile.

"Who's that?" Michael asked me.

"Just an old friend," I said. "How are we doing?"

"Eight! Eight of your paintings have minimum bids placed on them and three have multiple bidders. You're going to be up there with the likes of Mike Kelly and Douglas Gordon in no time," he said. And I couldn't help but think, *If he only knew how quickly.*

"If you're lucky, they might even include your name next to mine in the history books," Rusty Coal said, breaking into our conversation. A slender five-foot ten inches, he sported a tailor-made, gray Dolce & Gabbana skinny suit and black tie. Sleeves rolled

up to show his mural of tattoos, he looked more like a rogue runway model than an artist.

Michael rolled his eyes. “I knew that line in the New York Times about being the perfect blend of Warhol and Jasper Johns was going to go to your head.”

“Ah yes, if only I could be so lucky,” I added, giving my favorite arch nemesis a hug. “How are you?”

Rusty was my contemporary—an artist who broke out onto the art scene alongside me. Reviewers often pitted us against each other like horses in a race to the finish line. But our relationship was more akin to that of siblings; we were competitive, but at the end of the day we always looked out for each other. I loved him because he was one of those people who constantly broke the mold of stereotypes placed upon skinny hipsters covered in tattoos.

“I’m good. Working on a series for MOMA in New York,” he said.

“Holy shit Rusty, that’s awesome. Congratulations!”

“Pshh, what kind of traffic does MOMA get?” Michael said. “It couldn’t possibly be as prestigious a showing as the Michael Sanders Gallery, Aubs.”

“Only about three million people walk through it a year,” Rusty said.

“Exactly, small potatoes,” Michael replied in jest.

Best known for his pieces that combined Neo-Dadaist and Pop Art concepts into the more specific theme of love, or sometimes the lack thereof, his name was quickly becoming commonplace in artistic circles.

I first met Rusty at an art convention in Downtown LA where we were two of 231 artists from 73 different galleries nationwide. We were both looking at Willem de Kooning’s 1941 painting *Seated Man (Clown)* when he turned to me like we’d been friends for years and said, “Not a good painting, but proof that with time a craft can be perfected. Even still, it should probably be in the back of someone’s garage and not on display. What do you think?” I agreed and we spent the next hour ripping it apart like catty teenage girls at the prom. He made you feel like you were important and your opinions mattered, regardless of whether he’d known you for 20 years or five minutes. However, harsh judgment applied to everyone, including me, and he didn’t hesitate to tell me I needed to push things further: code for *I don’t like it*.

He and I often joked about how each of his pieces was the result of a broken heart, so much so that when I asked him, “How many?” he knew exactly what I referred to.

“Sixteen.”

“Sixteen!”

“I had a few repeat offenders,” he smiled devilishly.

Rusty was the most emotionally vulnerable guy I knew. One of my favorite pieces of his was a 10x20-foot canvas littered with newspaper headlines about people murdering for love. The words and phrases varied in size from actual nine-point newspaper font to large, 12-inch letters, weaved in an abstract painting of a nude couple making love. Unlike so many of our peers who focused on abstract expressionism and making art weird for the sake of being weird, Rusty sought to create meaning through the conventional form of symbols. *Headlines for Love* was an expression of absurdity in the modern dating world: It touched on obsession, lust, and deadly romance.

Unlike Rusty, whose body of work was driven by emotion, I was hailed as being one

of the best technical painters. When I was interviewed by the LA Times, the writer called me a chemist of colors because I had demonstrated how I created “Cadmium Red” by combining cadmium sulphide with selenium, which produced a warm and opaque hue. Knowing I would never again be able to mix my own colors was maddening.

My friends knew me as a bulldog with thick skin. It was they who turned to me when life slapped them in the face with public criticism, unexpected death, betrayal, creative fear, and self-doubt—not the other way around. Convinced that they wouldn’t know how to react, I vowed not to tell anyone until I myself was okay with the situation. I planned to deal with it like I did my parents’ death, by making it a non-issue.

Mentally exhausted, I was just about to excuse myself when Mr. and Mrs. Gibson approached.

“Frank and Ellen have officially added *Midnight in Paris* to their collection of Aubrey Johnson pieces,” Michael informed me.

“Thank you so much for your support. I’m glad you enjoyed the opening.” I shook their hands and walked them to the door. “It was so great to see you both again.” As they headed out, Mr. Gibson wrapped his arm around his wife’s shoulders and kissed her on the forehead, reminding me of my parents who, even after 20 years of marriage, walked like they couldn’t get enough of each other.

At 2:15 a.m., after the gallery had emptied out, Michael and I sat down for a breather. Of the 26 canvases on display, 11 sold. Exhausted, but proud, Michael offered a half-dozen times to get me a cab home, but I assured him I was fine to walk. I liked to be alone after my openings, to absorb and reflect on the events of the evening.

Closing up shop wasn’t my job; in fact, no other gallery ever allowed it, but Michael and I were friends, which warranted unprecedented access. I liked to spend some time alone with my pieces in the quiet atmosphere of an empty gallery. They were my babies and, like a mother at graduation, I was proud to see them succeed but sad not to have them in the house anymore. I did my customary stroll through the gallery and stopped at the one Jeff had been looking at earlier, *Home*. I had painted it just before moving from Houston to Manhattan, as a kind of cathartic sayonara.

It occurred to me then that Jeff had slipped out at some point without saying goodbye. I hadn’t meant to leave him alone for so long. Looking at my phone, I sent him a text: *Sorry I didn’t get to say bye. Lunch tomorrow at Urth Cafe sound good?* Twenty seconds later he replied: *Sure*. I texted back: *12:30. Cool?* His reply: *K*.

I locked up and started the walk toward home. *Disintegration of the retina...* I thought the walk would lessen my anxiety, but it didn’t. *Transition programs and support groups available*. How could I hope for things to get better when told with scientific certainty there was nothing they could do? As I wracked my brain for any kind of upside, a horrible stench invaded my senses, making it hard to breathe, let alone concentrate. At the end of the block I found its source: a homeless guy squatting in the shadows with his pants around his ankles. He seemed to be finishing up and used the front lapels of his soiled, button-down shirt to reach under his crotch and wipe up. The pile of human excrement was foul to see and putrid to smell. Yet, it was appropriate, seeing as how the universe seemed to be taking a massive dump all over my life.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Change

MY apartment, a hole in the wall studio that once served as the third bedroom in someone's house, was small but cozy. When I arrived in Los Angeles, I had only one requirement: that I be near the beach. It was an incredibly naive desire considering my entire net worth at the time was equivalent to a beat-up, fifteen-year-old Pontiac Sunfire.

On the upside, coming from a three-bedroom apartment shared among four women in Manhattan, this was an upgrade. Rectangular in shape, my apartment featured a carved out nook for the kitchen to the far right, my living/sleeping area in the center, and a disproportionately large bathroom on the opposite end. I painted in my apartment, so where someone else might have had a TV console I had a simple wooden easel and stool on top of a large brown tarp. Next to that stood a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf full of color pigments neatly arranged in jars, a row of paintings stacked in the adjacent corner, and a small leather couch. Forty feet from my doorstep, the sand marked the beginning of the beach, and 150 feet beyond that, the Pacific Ocean. Perhaps it was the astrological Pisces in me, but the moment my toes sank into the sand, I knew I was home.

On nights when I was plagued by insomnia, caused either by stress or the terrible choice to drink caffeine before bed, I tossed and turned until the sun peaked above the horizon. Then, throwing on sweats, I'd head to the beach to watch its light slowly illuminate the earth. The morning after my gallery opening was one such day.

Before the tourists could crowd the boardwalk and jam the bike lanes, I grabbed my family photo album off the shelf and headed for the shore.

The sun was already burning through the morning Pacific fog as I sat listening to the sound of waves crashing gently into the sand in front of me. Two playful dolphins surfed the breaking waves near the shore. It was a day just like this one that I got the phone call about my parents' car accident. They'd been hit by a teenager who was texting with her boyfriend instead of paying attention to the red light in front of her. The Jeep Grand Cherokee she was driving went barreling into my parents' Infinity sedan like a monster truck running over a go-kart. Four years had passed and I still missed them all the time.

I opened up my family album to the only photo of my dad and me. I'm seated on his lap with a cup of hot chocolate in my hands, as he tells me a story from the album. The two main characters are he and my mom. After getting married, but before they had me, they traveled around the United States and to a few foreign countries together and the album was a timeline of their love story.

I turned to a photo of my mom and dad at the top of Half Dome in Yosemite.

Standing on the peak, my dad is posed to jump and my mom is standing behind him with both hands on her cheeks and a look of horror in her eyes. The first time I remember him telling me that story, he said my mom was scared but he told her not to worry. My dad apparently knew how to fly. And together they soared down the mountainside gliding over waterfalls and rivers and even saluted a roaring black bear before returning to their campsite.

My dad liked to embellish his stories. Sometimes they'd be regular travel log type stories and other times he'd add in mythical creatures or give himself superpowers. Another story he told involved him having to defend Mom from a hungry tiger. "You can't tell from this picture, but just to the left, only a few feet away was a massive, larger-than-life Tiger. And boy was he hungry. Lucky for me, I had a bologna sandwich in my backpack, and everyone knows that tigers love bologna. I held it out and he delicately stuck it between his teeth before disappearing down the mountain." I could still hear the intonations of his voice as I repeated these stories to myself time after time.

As I got older the stories stopped—I don't remember when or why exactly. But looking back I regret not asking for more. Rich in memories, I valued the real as much as I cherished the fiction. When I felt lonely, the stories connected me to them and I felt their presence like a warm embrace.

I thought about how my parents would react to my news. My mom would worry—she'd give me a practical list of things I needed to do: learn braille, count steps, organize my apartment, acclimate to using a walking stick, and maybe get a dog. My dad would embrace the positive—he would tell me I'd be like Daredevil with heightened senses of smell, touch, taste, and sound. He'd tell me to pay attention to the small things and see as much of everything as I can. He'd want me to soak it all in so that I could paint it later.

I took a quick look around me, closed my eyes, and breathed in deeply. I could taste the saltiness of the ocean air. I listened to the wind blow around me, kicking up sand. I heard the waves break rhythmically as they crashed upon the shore. I could picture all of it and I smiled. Behind me, a new sound emerged: laughing children. I tried to incorporate them into the image I had built in my head by visualizing what they looked like, but I came up empty. There was no image to remember.

Before I could even attempt to blink them back, tears rolled down my face. A resigned apology from a body that knew it was failing me. I didn't want to feel sorry for myself, but I let the tears fall until my ducts dried and my body could let go of the built-up tension my mind so badly wanted to ignore.

Back at my apartment a couple of hours later, I showered, threw on a long, navy blue cotton dress, my brown wraparound bracelet, and gold feather earrings. I slung my flower print crossover hobo bag across my chest before heading out the door. Having arrived at Urth Cafe early, I ordered my favorite things on the menu: a green tea latte and the chicken curry sandwich.

Venice hipsters gravitated to any outdoor coffee shop that sold organic, fair trade, love-the-earth products and Urth Cafe was no exception. As a result I had to wait twenty minutes for a two-top table. Despite the crowd, I liked the laid back atmosphere, but on this particular day I was nervous. Jeff and I were childhood friends, but we grew apart in college. We drifted, as people tend to, each focused on our own lives at opposite ends of

the country. I went off to NYU undergrad to study art and he left for UCLA to study... well, I wasn't sure exactly.

Just a week before my gallery opening we had reconnected at the Department of Motor Vehicles, of all places. I had gotten a ticket for rolling a stop sign and Jeff had gotten one for speeding. He had actually been issued the ticket three months prior and was only there because one more day meant he'd be facing jail time. The Jeff I knew never drove more than five miles above the speed limit. Even at 4 a.m. with no car in sight, he would still chose to wait for the green light before entering the intersection.

I hadn't seen him in person since high school, so I barely recognized him behind his scruffy beard. Wearing bootlegged Levi's jeans, a 2006 Rise Against concert T-shirt, and Pumas, he was a typical 27-year-old, 6'2", All-American farm boy. When I entered the traffic school auditorium, I saw him slouched down in his seat toward the back of the small auditorium, eyes glued to the bright images on his phone. I started to walk toward him and just as I was nearly convinced it couldn't be him, he chuckled at something on his phone and his skin creased around his eyes. Like James Franco, he had three distinct wrinkles that appeared on the sides of his eyes when he smiled.

Sitting down next to him, I said, "I rolled a stop sign, what are you in for?"

Without looking up from his phone, he said, "Speeding."

"Jeff, you've never been above 65," I say, genuinely shocked.

Recognition slowly set in. "*No way.*"

"Yes way. It's been forever, how are you?"

"I'm good, you look great!" he said.

"Thanks," I replied and I instantly regretted not keeping in touch all those years. His light blue, almost gray eyes were piercing, and when he smiled at me my stomach fluttered. I still had a distinct impression of the Jeff who, at the age of five, wrote, "You're the prettiest girl in skool" on my valentine. We dated for a half of recess before I declared holding his hand to be yucky and broke it off. Our kindergarten romance ended and we went back to being sandbox buddies. No relationship after that would ever be as simple.

"Where-- what are you-- *how* are you here?" he stumbled.

I told him I moved to Venice a few years prior and that I was an artist, which was no surprise to him. He was a high school teacher, but didn't offer any more information. Jeff always played his cards close to his chest. In college, our friendship drifted from chatting every other day to sending cards on holidays, but when I saw his mom at my parents' funeral and he wasn't with her, I considered our friendship to be over.

The lecture had just begun when he took one of my info sheets and wrote: *I'm having déjà vu, are we in Driver's Ed again?* I smiled. Taking the paper, I drew eight dashes and the Hangman; category: mascot. Immediately he guessed Bulldogs. I looked at him and he whispered back our high school chant: Go Big Red! I laughed as quietly as I could. The last clue I wrote, I thought was an obvious one: Rendezvous. I put in enough blanks for the word "water tower," the place where we would meet when Jeff needed a break from the arguing in his house.

His parents fought all the time until our sophomore year when they decided to get a divorce. Had I paid attention before, I might have noticed they were never home at the same time.

“They’re better off without each other,” he had said. For as long as I could remember, Jeff had been this way—always opting for logic over emotion. Their relationship lacked passion and he told me he suspected they had only stayed together for him. So one night when I was over for dinner, his parents started bickering and he flat out said, “You guys should get a divorce. Don’t stay together because of me. I’ll be fine and I’ll live here with mom because she needs me more.” I was shocked. What kid says that to his parents?

Between the two of us, I was by far the wild one. I could almost guarantee anytime we got into trouble, the blame could be traced back to me. But Jeff was loyal, always taking equal blame and never once ratting me out to get a lesser punishment. Our kindergarten stint aside, a relationship between us never progressed past anything purely platonic, though now I suddenly wondered about our compatibility as adults.

As class came to an end and he still hadn’t guessed the word, I was disappointed that the memory meant more to me than him, but that went away as soon as he asked when he would see me again. I gave him my phone number and invited him to my opening.

I was still reminiscing about our day at the DMV when Jeff arrived carrying a bouquet of flowers. “For you,” he said, kissing me on the cheek. I stood up to hug him and mistakenly reached up around his neck rather than under his arms, which would have been more appropriate given our 14-inch height difference. He lifted me into a bear hug, as he’d done a million times before and we laughed before sitting down.

“Y’all throw quite the party,” he said, tugging on the knees of his pants to make himself more comfortable. In rugged jeans, a polo shirt, and aviator sunglasses, Jeff made me nostalgic for Houston, especially when “Howdy” or “Y’all” slipped out of his mouth.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice you bolting early,” I chided as I laid the flowers on the cast iron patio chair beside me. “You didn’t even say ‘bye.’”

“And risk getting trampled by your adoring fans? No way,” he smiled. “Actually, Shawn called. He had a flat tire, needed me to come to the rescue.”

Shawn was Jeff’s older brother, and, like most siblings, they were polar opposites. Jeff had memorized  $\pi$  to the 200<sup>th</sup> digit by the time he was 14, while Shawn mastered the art of single-handedly undoing a bra in the backyard shed of his parents’ ranch.

“How convenient. Speaking of which, how is Shawn?” I asked.

“He’s great. As of six months ago he’s officially licensed as a professional pot grower,” Jeff laughed.

“Seriously?”

“He’s got this crazy formula that calls for coconut husk instead of soil, can you believe that? Coconut husk,” he said, his tone a mixture of disbelief and adoration.

“Are you a pothead?” I asked, wondering if I had mistaken sadness for being high. Never in a million years would I have imagined my nerdy elementary school friend giving me tips and tricks on growing marijuana—medical or otherwise.

“I smoke on occasion, but I wouldn’t classify myself as a ‘pothead’...” he replied sheepishly.

“Ever been baked while teaching...what is it you teach again?”

“World History and Computer Science, and yes, but only once,” he said, looking

ashamed and guilty. I laughed.

"I knew it. You're a stoner," I smiled.

"You would know considering you live in the marijuana mecca of the city."

"Touché," I laughed, giving him a two-finger salute. The residents of Venice were not shy about supporting the legalization of marijuana and on 4/20, the smell of ganja in the city was as ubiquitous as barbecue on the Fourth of July. "I'm glad Shawn's doing well," I said.

Shawn Miller was Jeff's half-brother, whom neither of us knew about until our junior year of high school when Shawn showed up at school. Jeff and I had been walking towards the parking lot when we saw a guy standing in front of an illegally parked, cherry red 1992 Dodge Shadow convertible. He was impossible to miss, especially with his handmade sign that read "*Looking for Jeff Anderson.*" Jeff and I looked at each other, confused, and I asked, "Did you win something?"

"I don't think so..." Jeff said.

"Are you Jeff?" Shawn asked, making eye contact.

"Yeah."

"This is probably going to come as a shock to you, as it did me, so I'm just going to come out and say it. I'm your brother. Well, half, anyway. I'm Shawn." He stuck his hand out and they shook, and when he introduced himself to me-- I hate to admit this-- I swooned a little. He had this older, bad-boy confidence I found extremely attractive and later became the type of guy I'd sought out in college. One of my many dating mistakes.

"I'm Aubrey," I said, feeling shy as he shook my hand and smiled with his eyes. He matched Jeff's 6'2" height, but that's where their similarities ended. Shawn had spiked blonde hair, two giant holes in his ears the size of dimes, which I guess classified as piercings, and tattoos peaking out from under the sleeve of his leather jacket.

"Is this a joke?" Jeff asked, looking around. I'd be lying if I didn't say I did a quick 360 scan of the area myself, but Shawn didn't laugh. The look on his face held both compassion and amusement.

In one surreal and long conversation, we learned that they shared the same father, that Mr. Anderson didn't know about Shawn until he was asked to sign a parental release form (which he did), and that Shawn's mother, Celeste Miller, married Shawn's step-dad, Joe Miller, soon after Shawn was born. Two years older than Jeff, Shawn was a wild card. He wasn't a bad person, but he lived with reckless abandon, throwing out-of-control house parties and often being dropped off by the cops for disturbing the peace. After an especially exhausting night, Mr. Miller let it slip that Shawn was not biologically his. Thus began the search for his father.

By the time Shawn showed up in our lives Jeff and I were an inseparable duo. Sometime in the first grade our parents took advantage of our fast friendship by creating Thursday night play dates that turned into Thursday night dinners as we grew older. My first Thursday night dinner with Shawn as the newest member of the family was not as awkward as I expected. He seemed to fit into the dynamic easily.

But as Jeff started to spend more time with Shawn, so began the drifting of my relationship with him. Nothing dramatic or sad about it really, just time for our lives to diverge. We'd spent our entire childhoods together and having accepted admissions at colleges on opposite sides of the country, our friendship was bound to fork regardless of

Shawn's emergence.

Outside of an occasional random text, months, sometimes years, apart, we hadn't really been friends for almost nine years.

"So I'm supposed to believe you left my raging party to rescue your brother? That after all these years, you're still a good guy?" I chided, as he looked over Urth Cafe's menu.

"No, you're right, I'm a complete asshole," Jeff said, deadpan. "Can we eat now?" A dry sense of humor accompanied his endearing nerdiness, which I found comforting.

"You were late and I felt weird sitting here without ordering so I got the curry sandwich and a green tea latte, but I told them to hold off prepping it until you got here."

"Doesn't that defeat the purpose of ordering before me?" he asked as I waved the waiter over.

"What can I get you?" our waiter, a Brad Pitt look-a-like, asked.

"I'll have the chicken sandwich and a large coffee," Jeff replied.

"And two chocolate chip cookies," I added.

"Good choice," the waiter remarked, before taking our menus and walking away.

"You haven't seen me in nearly a decade. What if I've developed an allergy to peanuts? You could kill me," he said.

"Did you?"

"What?"

"Develop an allergy to peanuts."

Jeff didn't say anything; he just looked at me with challenging eyes that told me I missed the point.

"If you don't like it, I'll eat yours," I said, knowing that chocolate chip cookies were his favorite.

Sitting back and folding his hands across his stomach, he made himself comfortable in the stiff chair. "About my tardiness: you're new to LA, so maybe you don't know this, but there's a 15 minute rule. Unless it's a first date."

"First of all, I've been here over four years. And second, I did know the rule, I just don't abide by it. You know why? Because it makes no sense. Friends deserve as much consideration as some random girl you're trying to impress. Period."

Our waiter came by with our sandwiches and drinks. Popping off the lid, Jeff added creamer and honey to his coffee.

"You put honey in your coffee?" I asked.

"Sounds strange right? It's really good. You should try it."

"You just randomly decided one day that adding honey to your coffee would be a good idea?"

"No, Veronica got me into it and it just stuck I guess."

"Oh, how is she these days?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said and I knew I wouldn't get any more information. "What about you?"

"Single. Have been for a while."

I was trying to come up with something clever to say when a pretty blond hopped off her cruiser bike and began locking it up. Jeff glanced at her and started laughing.

“What?” I asked.

“Do you remember that time we thought we could be like Evil Knievel and we built that big bike ramp?”

I laughed. “Yes.”

“I still have the scar on my left arm,” Jeff said, pointing to a small bump just below his left elbow.

“Well, I cleared it and you still owe me a snow cone,” I smiled.

“How about I cover lunch?” he said. “But actually, I kind of have to eat and run.”

“Oh,” I said, trying to hide my disappointment.

“I’m leaving the country tomorrow.”

“Going on the lam?” I asked.

“I’m taking a much needed vacation from my life.”

There was something sad about the way he said it, but I looked over at him and said, “That sounds amazing. I’d love to do that.”

“Yup. Jordan, India, China, Brazil, and Peru.”

“Can I stow away in your suitcase?” I joked.

He was quiet for a moment. “Actually...” he started but didn’t finish his sentence.

“Yeah right,” I replied to what I thought he was about to suggest.

“Why not?”

“Uh, because I’m an adult and I have responsibilities.”

“I’m sorry. I think I must’ve mistaken you for someone else. The Aubrey I used to know was all for an adventure and wouldn’t miss an opportunity to escape for anything.”

“You show up after all these years and I’m supposed to just throw caution to the wind and go globe trotting with you?”

“Sure! I don’t even know why we stopped talking in the first place,” he said.

“Because you weren’t at my parents’ funeral and I stopped talking to you,” I said. I did my best not to sound accusatory but I couldn’t help it. A large part of me feared the conversation might lead to an irreparable argument, but I had to get it off my chest.

He bit his lip nervously and said, “I wanted to be there.” Then for a long moment he was silent. “Vee’s best friend was getting married that same week in Hawaii and for a hundred stupid reasons our relationship was already teetering on the edge. But I wanted to make it work and choosing not to go to the wedding would’ve meant letting her go. It’s not a good excuse, especially given that we’re no longer together,” he sighed.

“You were my best friend growing up. I *needed* you to be there.” The words came out as more of a necessity than an actual desire for a response. It was a phrase I’d turned over in my head hundreds of times over the years and hearing them only reaffirmed what I already knew. Nothing he could say now would change the resentment I’d harbored all these years.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said.

A long silence lingered between us as we ruminated on our feelings. Me, angry with Jeff for abandoning his duties as a lifelong friend, and him...well, I didn’t know what he thought, but I hoped he was plagued with guilt. I had aunts and uncles who were supportive, but they lived far away and I hardly ever saw them. Of course Jeff’s parents were there, but their apology for Jeff’s absence was formal and disconnected, and being around them made the loss of my parents exponentially worse.

“I’m so sorry Aubs. I really am. I know I fucked that one up. But I’m here now. Let me make it up to you.”

“You’re leaving tomorrow.”

“Come with me.”

“So you’re asking me to come along just as a travel companion?”

“Yeah, we’d be two old friends on a mission to see the world. How great would that be?”

Given my current condition, I wasn’t sure that it was a good idea, let alone a great one, so I smiled but said nothing.

That night, I pulled a coffee table book of famous pictures from around the world off my bookshelf. The book covered the Seven Wonders of the Modern World and a few other majestic places. I flipped it open to read a few passages before bed, but found myself engrossed. I stayed up all night shredding its pages into a giant galaxy of photos I glued to the main wall of my studio. I knew tearing out the pages of a perfectly good book was sacrilege, but it was oddly therapeutic.

Starting with China, I created a road using the Great Wall. Along the road came the Taj Mahal, which floated above water I added using images of the Dead Sea. Next came The Treasury, the Temple of Buddha, the Colosseum, then as the wall wound southward I added Chichen Itza, and at the end was Christ the Redeemer. Although it wasn’t the entire world, it did feel like a flattened, scaled-down version of it.

Six weeks was a long time to be traveling with someone, and as I lay in bed the next morning I made a list of the pros and cons of traveling with Jeff. The awkwardness of our last conversation aside, he had an annoying habit of making his bed right before going to sleep—not in the morning like a normal person, but literally right before crawling into it and snoring all night. Also, he took showers both in the morning and at night. On the flip side, he was considerate, knew all of my quirks, and to be honest, his cons weren’t exactly deal breakers, considering none one of those neuroses negatively affected me. I could sleep through earthquakes. The number one pro on the list was not having to deal with RP alone in my apartment for the next six weeks.

Flipping open my phone I sent Jeff a text: *I’m in.*

His response: Great! I’ll e-mail you my itinerary. Meet at my place at 4?

Me: Done.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Spontaneity

“ART is spontaneous. Brush strokes are not meant to be calculated, but to have free flow.” I read that quote in a *Quarterly Arts Magazine* weeks before I even knew I’d be traveling to China and it lingered throughout my visit. What struck me about Cai Guo-Qiang, the man behind the quote, was the subtext of his words. Cai created a literal explosion of art titled *Odyssey*. Using 42 panels, he created a massive, site-specific installation in a warehouse with a large stencil and gunpowder. Once ignited, the gunpowder exploded and left behind a powerful imprint—a dark gray Chinese landscape complete with a waterfall, mountain ranges, a coastline, and a detailed garden full of plants and flowers. By putting down the paintbrush and letting go of his learned discipline he pushed the boundaries of his own work using an unstable element, which created a unique and unexpected image.

The piece represented life’s explosive quality: its ability to burst and change.

Anxious and excited about exploring a culture I morally respected and artistically admired, I could hardly believe that in a few hours I’d be on a plane headed for China.

Following the directions on my GPS, I wondered if I had entered the wrong address. All around me were multi-million dollar homes: P-Diddy-style mansions with large pillars, sprawling lawns, and driveways so enormous they had designated “Enter” and “Exit” street markings. *This can’t be right*, I thought as I parked my car on the street and walked the 200 yards up the driveway to ring the doorbell. I had an entire speech planned out in my head (“I’m sorry to bother you but my friend Jeff gave me this address...”), but when the door opened, Jeff stood before me.

“Uh, hi,” I said.

“Hey,” he replied, not at all aware of my confusion. “Come on in. I’m almost ready. Can I get you anything? Water? Soda? Juice?”

“You can give me an explanation,” I said, as I followed him through the foyer.

“For what?” he replied casually.

We walked down a couple of steps and into an ultra-modern room with black and steel Barcelona chairs that looked like they belonged in an office building rather than a living room. A huge bar stood to our left, complete with bar taps, top shelf liquor, hanging wine glasses, and LED lighting.

“Wow, all you need are some girls in tight dresses, the guys from Jersey Shore, and a DJ,” I said.

“One of the guys from Jersey Shore is a DJ, I think.”

“Even better.”

“There’s a dining room over there and the kitchen, but I’ll show you my favorite part,” he said. On the far side of the living room stood floor-to-ceiling windows with a shallow pond dug out at the bottom so it was partially inside the house and continued outside. Lightly pushing on one of the glass-paneled doors, it spun open 90 degrees to let us pass through and then made the complete 180-degree turn to close again.

“So when we come back in the door will make a complete 360 degree turn?”

He nodded. “Yup. Both sides of the door are symmetrical so there are actually two locks. One on either side. Double protection.” It took me a second to understand that the design was basically a revolving entrance without the typical carousel in the center. Palm trees lined the most brightly lit and colorful walkway I’d ever seen, which led to a huge backyard. Along the right side was a two-foot-wide moat filled with a rainbow array of coral and fish. The best part was that the aquarium followed along the walkway to the pool and then surrounded it, creating the illusion that one was swimming among the fish and coral.

“It’s definitely not what I was expecting for a school teacher,” I said, looking at him suspiciously.

“Well, let me show you where the magic happens, then you’ll really be impressed.”

We walked back inside and down a flight of stairs that opened up into a basement living area.

“I didn’t think houses in L.A. had basements,” I remarked.

“They don’t usually, it was an add-on.” The basement was minimally furnished with what looked like leftover pieces of mismatched, cheaply made college furniture. On the walls hung 80’s movie posters: *Back to the Future*, *Weird Science*, and *The Breakfast Club*. A long, rectangular, foldout table served as a workstation with a large computer tower, some random computer parts, an old PC monitor, a stack of external hard drives on top, and a plastic folding chair pushed in underneath. “What do you think?” he asked.

“So you’re renting the basement of someone’s house?”

“It’s Shawn’s place.”

“What?” I asked, unbelieving.

“Like I said, he’s pretty good at what he does.”

“He makes this much money selling weed?”

“Yes—and no. He’s a doctor, like a real one, with a M.D. after his name and everything.”

“Shawn,” I repeated his name. “One-handed bra-popping Shawn who got kicked out of the dorms for building a greenhouse on the roof and selling weed on campus?”

“That’s the one.”

“Wow. So...why are you living in the basement?” It seemed odd to me that in a house this large he couldn’t have a room upstairs. The basement was big, with a living room in the center and three smaller rooms off to the side. Two empty or used for light storage and Jeff’s bedroom, which had a master bath and walk-in closet.

“I’ve only been here for six months,” he replied, as if that answered my question. My guess was that the move was temporary.

I looked at the lonely desk in the corner. Wires snaking everywhere, computer parts broken open with the insides spread across his workstation. “Are you a hoarder?”

“App developer.”

“I thought you were a teacher.”

“They’re all free apps. Just a side hobby for fun,” he said. “They’re all knock-off apps.”

“What do you mean?”

“I take a concept that already exists, like Angry Birds for example, I copy the code, change the graphics a bit, so instead of pigs I’ll use women’s high heels or something, and voila, I’ve got ‘Burn ‘em heels.’ Or take a game like Bubble Burst, change the Bubbles to a cartoon image of my ex-fiance’s head and poof we’ve got--”

“Are all of your games misogynistic?” I interrupted.

“Actually, I have a really cool Facebook app called “Top This” that generates fake status updates like, ‘I just landed my dream job!’ or ‘Check out my new puppy!’” with a picture of a super-cute dog, or ‘I’m having lunch with Obama! So excited.’ Stupid shit,” he smiled, clearly proud of his invention. “It’s my most popular app. Twenty thousand downloads and counting. In fact, I’m pretty sure Veronica even used it after we broke up to make me jealous.”

“And did it work?”

He looked down sheepishly, “Maybe.”

“Awesome,” I said, handing him my phone. “Download it for the trip. We’ll make her jealous.”

Jeff laughed and started downloading. “Just out of curiosity, do you still do that awful grinding thing in your sleep?” he asked.

I made a face. “It’s not like you can hear it over your snoring. Besides, I have a super awesome \$600 night guard and references from four ex-boyfriends.”

“I’ll be sure to call all of them,” he said.

After he finished packing his toiletries, we headed to the airport, crossed through security, waited for two hours in the terminal, and at 6:20 p.m. we finally boarded the plane.

I spent the first few hours of the flight reading travel books I had downloaded onto my Kindle. I learned about the Forbidden City, studied a map of Beijing—a place full of roads laid out in loops, not unlike Houston—and stared in awe at satellite photos of the Great Wall. Sometime after reading about William Edgar Geil, the first foreigner who explored the whole length of the Wall in 1908, I fell asleep.

Awaking to a chime and the sprightly captain’s voice over the intercom, I turned to Jeff who was just waking up as well and I was horrified to see that I had drooled on his arm.

“Morning sunshine,” I said, glancing at the puddle. But then I couldn’t contain myself and suddenly burst into apologetic laughter. “I’m so sorry!”

He looked down at it and grimaced.

Still laughing, I handed him and a napkin. “It must be the airplane or something. You know, being so high up and the gravity...” He surprised me by using the napkin to wipe the drool off my face before cleaning his shirt.

“You might want to stick in that night guard thingy when you take naps too. I kept trying to move my hand away ‘cause I thought you were going to grind my fingers off in that machine you call a mouth.”

“Now how is it possible for me to be grinding and drooling at the same time?” I protested. I laughed it off, but I was thoroughly embarrassed.

If walking through the terminal of Beijing Capitol International Airport was any indication of China’s size, I was in for a rude awakening. I lived in a big city, but standing in the airport’s enormous glass tunnel, my own physical being never felt more insignificant. A high ceiling made of metal buttresses combined with a long central nave gave the airport an aura of cathedral importance in a modern day setting. Sleek, barely there, tandem sling seats were neatly arranged around equally modern reception desks. Brightly lit duty-free shops boasted upscale brands like Chanel, Louis Vuitton, and Yves Saint Laurent for wealthy travelers. Flight numbers, times, and gates flickered across large LCD screens floating on crystal center islands. I watched the information switch between familiar roman characters and intricate Chinese symbols that looked more like art than words. Some of the destinations were familiar but others were totally foreign and suddenly the world became exponentially larger. *Where was Xingtai, Jixi, or Nanyang? What were they like?* I wondered.

Once we picked up our bags, we were funneled into customs—a huge room divided into two categories: citizens and non-citizens. Airport security was abundant and I saw signs everywhere prohibiting the use of cell phones. Even though I obviously wasn’t smuggling anything illegal into the country, I was apprehensive about talking to the stern-looking customs officer, and became even more nervous when I discovered Jeff and I had to speak to them separately.

“Are you here for business or vacation?” my customs officer asked.

“Vacation,” I replied.

“How long are you staying?”

“Four days.”

“Where are you staying?”

I had no idea, so I gave him my best “I’m innocent” half-smile and light shrug and said, “I’m not sure, my friend Jeff booked the hotel.” I gestured to Jeff, who stood about ten feet away talking to another officer.

He yelled something to Jeff’s officer, who curtly said something back. The other officer did not nod or give any form of approval, so he very well could have been saying either “Yes, this man booked a hotel” or “Detain them both!” My fears were assuaged only when my officer stamped my passport and said, “Okay,” gesturing for me to pass through.

Finally outside, a wave of heat poured over us as we hailed a cab and Jeff gave the driver directions to our hotel. We sat in the back with our small daypacks between us expecting an easy ride into the city, but we ended up on the edge of our seats the entire time. New York City had nothing on Beijing: cars were bumper to bumper with only inches of space between vehicles.

Once on the crowded highway, another cab lightly rear-ended us. Our driver got out, yelled at him for 30 seconds, hopped back in the cab, shook his head in irritation, and continued driving. No swapping of insurance or pulling over to assess damage—the verbal lashing was the end of it. The lack of consequence made me so certain we were

going to be hit a few more times before reaching the hotel that I kept my eyes on the road, unable to fully focus on the bustling city we were passing.

The Beijing Inn Hotel (either a bad translation or tourist trap) was the Chinese equivalent of a Best Western. By the time we finally arrived, it was 7:00 p.m. local time and my body was wide-awake.

“We made it!” I said, plopping down on the bed. “So, whatcha wanna do?”

After we each showered, we changed, grabbed our packs and headed out.

The second we stepped foot outside our hotel lobby, we were thrust into a mosh pit. Pedestrians, bikers, motorcycles, and cars moving in every direction dodged each other like they were in a game of *Frogger* on speed. Utilizing every inch of space, the city was like San Francisco without the hills. Buildings were erected only inches apart from one another (if not actually touching), streets were exactly wide enough for two small Toyota Corollas to pass each other, and it wasn't uncommon to look up and only see a fraction of the sky for entire blocks because of signage hung vertically from upper level awnings or poles and advertisements strung on wires stretching from one building to another. The air trapped between buildings was thick from lack of circulation, making it difficult to breathe. The oppressive heat made my clothes stick to my skin and I was glad I decided to change out of my jeans and into shorts.

“Let's go this way,” Jeff said, taking initiative.

“After you,” I replied. As I followed him, we passed by a squatting, middle-aged woman rotating skewers of meat over a barbecue that barely emitted any smoke at all. The round grill was maybe 14 inches in diameter, and next to the cooking meat she flipped pieces of sesame flatbread using a pair of bamboo tongs. She used swift and mechanical movements, and I noticed that the flick of her wrist was similar to mine when trying to create texture in my paintings.

“Do I need to hold your hand?” Jeff asked, looking at me. “I almost lost you.” Without realizing it, I had stopped.

“Sorry,” I said, breaking my gaze and continuing to walk with him.

“What were you looking at?” Jeff asked as we reached the sidewalk surrounding Beihai Park.

“Nothing,” I said. The significance of watching the flick of someone's wrist was personal. Pocketing the image in my memory, I continued on.

In the center of the park stood a large white pagoda surrounded by lush green clusters of trees, and encircling the island was a lake. I came across a large golden plaque with a photo of Beihai Lake. The plaque described the white pagoda as a reliquary containing Buddhist scriptures, monk's mantles, alms bowls, and bones of monks. I learned that Pagodas were a common part of Chinese architecture, but this was the first time I'd ever seen one and it made me wonder how many other things I would never see after going blind.

I closed my eyes and tried to recall the image I had just seen.

“Am I boring you?” Jeff interrupted.

“No,” I laughed. “I'm really glad I decided to come. Thank you.”

“You're a pretty good travel companion so far,” he smiled.

“Were you supposed to come here with Veronica?”

“No,” he said, surprised. “I booked this trip after we broke up.”

“Why did you break up?”

“I asked her to marry me, and she decided we weren’t right for each other. Then a couple weeks later she was dating someone else.”

I turned to look at him, wanting to comfort him with a hug like I used to do when we were kids, but we weren’t that familiar anymore.

“What?” he asked, catching my stare.

“Nothing. I was just thinking you haven’t changed much since we were kids.”

“You either. In fact, I was thinking I’m probably still faster than you and I bet I can beat you to the next Pagoda,” he said.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“One, two—go!” I shouted already running toward the building.

“Cheater!” he yelled sprinting after me.

I smiled to myself as I reached the Pagoda. Victory.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## Grit

IF I had to describe the Great Wall in one word it would be ‘grit.’ Stone by stone, the Great Wall was built on a determination so fierce that well over two thousand years later, after the advent of the light bulb, the car, and a walk on the moon, it is still considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Modern World. At the base of the Great Wall, I looked up and thought about how naive I had been to think the three hundred-plus steps to the fourth, and highest, tower along the Badaling section of the Great Wall would be easy.

Most people came see the Wall, walk a few hundred yards of it, and then turn around. Not me. I wanted to walk until I couldn’t walk any longer. If I thought it possible, I would’ve tried to walk from one end to the other, but apparently it was the equivalent of walking from New York to Los Angeles. *Don’t attempt it, because you will die* was the impression I got while doing my initial research. After climbing about 20 steps, it was definitive.

I was unprepared to climb the jagged and uneven steps. If my first step was four inches, my next was fourteen. Forget about mechanical movements. I had to watch every step I took, and at some sections, the wall became so steep I had to crawl. It was impossible to navigate with any sort of grace. We stopped when we reached a plateau near the peak of the mountain and perhaps it was delirium, but I think I saw God for the first time. He was sitting in the sky, legs crossed and looking down on me with pity. The image lasted only a second and then it was gone.

“How is it possible that I’m this winded? I run two miles a day,” Jeff said, as we collapsed on the ground, each draining an entire bottle of water.

“The locals seem to be struggling too, it’s not just us,” I said, panting. I watched as several Chinese people passed us before I realized the ones who were struggling were older, and by older, I mean senior citizens. One lady was so tiny, I was certain she didn’t clear four feet, but she briskly passed us, moving slow and steady. If I weren’t so tired I might have been embarrassed.

“Wow,” we said in unison, watching the lady ascend.

As I continued up with my attention fully focused on clearing one step at a time, I barely noticed the view beyond the wall. But once at the top, I turned to look over the edge and found a landscape that opened up like a lush pop-up book of green sprawling mountains. Treetops of an endless variety, from deciduous pines to smaller shrubbery, all blended together in shades of green as endless as the ocean and disappeared into the horizon in much the same way.

After a while I said, “Jeff, I know this is going to sound weird, but could you leave me alone for a few minutes?”

“No worries, you were cramping my style anyway. I’ll do a little roaming,” Jeff said, walking back down the steps.

I pulled out my iPod nano and turned it to my painting playlist. The list was full of soft, melancholy melodies that helped me focus. At random, Tan Dun’s “For the World” from the *Hero* soundtrack began to play. Talk about serendipity. The long, drawn-out violin notes were as epic as the view in front of me, but embodied an undertone similar to my internal feelings of fear and sadness. Fierce, yet humble, the notes came at me strong but never sought to overwhelm me.

As the drums were introduced, signaling the beginning of battle, I walked up a few more flights of stairs to a second plateau. Slowly gliding my hand along the wall I caressed the rough and, bumpy stone with my fingertips. Each stone was individually placed by the hands of men, and though their time had come and gone, a legacy remained in this wall that emanated warmth absorbed from the sun. I stopped to look out at the landscape. Then, stretching my fingertips as far as they could reach on either side of me, I leaned forward so my entire torso lay on top of the Wall. Relaxing my neck, I closed my eyes. There was a rolling breeze that I could hear before I felt, and it comforted me the same way the ocean did, by being constant. The sounds of waves crashing and winds blowing were rhythmic, repeated beats, like breathing.

The song finished, and I was no closer to finding an answer—or even the right question for that matter—but for the first time since I learned I was going blind, I felt calm. I had read that in Thailand, monks walked barefoot for 25 days in meditation over scalding hot roads and rocky surfaces in an effort to purify the land. They were so focused on their task that they ignored their own physical pain and limitations. On a much smaller scale, I noticed that my personal focus on the goal of reaching of top was how I overcame the challenge of climbing hundreds of steps, and for a split second I felt a glimmer of hope that I would be able to work through the challenge of losing my eyesight.

I lifted myself from the Wall, opened my eyes, and came face to face with Jeff. Leaning easily against the wall with his backpack slung lazily over one shoulder and his Nikon camera strap looped around his neck, he stood watching me.

He cleared his throat. “Are you one with the wall now?” Jeff asked.

I smiled. “Did you get any good photos?”

“I want to show you something,” he said. We walked up and into one of the towers, and Jeff poked his head out of a window and pointed off in the distance. “What do you see?”

“Umm, the Great Wall?”

“Remember our green and black snakes?” he said.

I looked at him and smiled. “Yes,” I said. At the rodeo one year Jeff and I got two toy snakes made out of plastic pieces clipped together so that the body of the snake wiggled about. Returning my gaze to the Great Wall I saw that it snaked through the mountainside with a similar mechanical roughness. On the car ride home that day Jeff kept trying to get his to bite mine and ended up breaking my snake in half. When I cried about it, he gave me his. I had it in my backpack for a week before taking it out to play at

the park and forgetting it in the sand.

“Are you seriously still mad I left it at the park?” I asked.

“You always were careless with my feelings,” he said, flippantly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m kidding,” he smiled. “C’mon, let’s go.”

Turning away from the window I rammed my shoulder into the cement, “Ow!” I yelped.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, rubbing my shoulder.

“How did you miss the giant stone wall?” he laughed.

I looked back at the huge wall in front of me and thought, *How did I miss that giant wall?*

“Hey, everything alright?” Jeff asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine. But I am getting kind of hungry. Do you remember seeing any places around here?”

“I know the perfect place,” he said with a mischievous smile.

Two hours later we stood in a Beijing night market. All kinds of animals hung from canopies, on display for eager patrons: fried soft shell crab (not bad), frog legs ready to be fried on kabob sticks (gross), snake, also on a kabob stick (really gross), and live tarantula, again to be deep-fried (absolutely disgusting).

“That is not exactly what I had in mind,” I said.

“Oh come on, it’ll be fun. You have to eat whatever I pick and I have to eat whatever you pick.”

“Okay,” I said. “Whoever pukes first buys drinks.”

“Deal. And to be a gentlemen I’ll even go first,” Jeff says, untying the bandana from his neck and wrapping it around his eyes.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Just because I have to eat it doesn’t mean I need to see it.”

“You are a sick human being, Jeff.” This adventurous side of him was new to me, and I found myself amused.

Handing me his Nikon, he said, “Make sure you get all of this...for my app.”

“No one wants to see you puking up spiders,” I laughed.

“They’re gonna love it. Take the photos.”

I led him through the market as the local vendors laughed and pointed at us. Red and white striped awnings lined the street, lit by dangling, bare light bulbs attached to the tent tops. Raw poultry hung from hooks while fried and candied insects stuck out like lollipops at Disneyland. I looked up and down the rows trying to find the perfect snack.

My eyes lit up when I saw them: fried scorpions on skewers. I gestured to the vendor, grabbing a skewer and handing him a bill.

“Open up, here it comes,” I said, sticking the scorpions into Jeff’s mouth as I snapped a picture. He chewed like a champion as I cringed.

“Not bad. Crunchy.”

“Do you want to know what it is?”

“Let’s see, too big to be grasshopper or roach. Crab?” he guessed.

“You wish. Scorpion,” I laughed.

“Let’s go two for two. I’m feeling good about this.”

“Done,” I said. Drinks seemed a small price to pay to not have to endure this awful eating extravaganza.

I took his arm and walked a little further along until I spotted my next victim: boiled worm.

Jeff held his mouth open patiently as I dangled the worm above his lips. I had to retake the photos several times because I was laughing so hard the images came out blurry. He looked like a bird waiting for dinner. I dropped the worm into his open mouth, and his facial expression said it all.

“Uck, I wasn’t expecting an explosion of poop to ooze out of it,” he said, still trying to choke it down. “And the outside is chewy in the worst possible way. This has to be the snake we saw earlier.”

“Nope.”

“Worm?”

“Yeah. Juicy, boiled worm,” I taunted.

“Do we have water or something? God, the aftertaste is...I can’t even describe it, it’s so bad. Awful to the tenth degree,” he said, pulling the bandana off his face and reaching for his bottle of water. “Your turn.”

“Do I really have to wear this thing?” I asked. “Can’t I just close my eyes?”

“Yeah right. You’ll take one peak and the jig will be up,” he said, reaching over my head to secure the fabric. As soon as it was on, I froze; blinking my eyes open, I still couldn’t see anything.

“You ready?” Jeff asked.

“K,” I said, afraid my voice might crack if I dared utter a longer syllable.

He took my hand to guide me and I begged it not to shake. As we moved along the street a rush of sounds came at me: voices, the clamoring of metal, the repetition of a singular bang of a hammer and toss of something—shells maybe—into a pile, firecracker pops, bells, horns, engines, and too many others to identify. My nostrils filled with the scents of: rosemary, mint, lemon, and a very light odor reminiscent of the inside of a shoe, which I assumed was the raw meat.

We stopped and I waited for Jeff to order and pay for whatever I was about to ingest. I heard him say, “Thank you,” as he let go of my hand. “Ow, it’s hot,” he said, blowing into what sounded like a container. “Hang on a sec,” he said. I heard a light tapping and crack, more blowing, and then the feel of something slimy at my lips. “Open up wide,” he said. I opened my mouth halfway and heard the shutter of his camera open and close several times before I felt the spoon slide into my mouth. The consistency was similar to chicken. Still, I cautiously chewed, tasting the salt, lemon, and pepper seasonings. Honestly, it wasn’t all that bad, until I bit into something hard and heard a crack.

“Ohh!” Jeff said.

“What was that?” I asked, mouth still half full and ready to spit.

“Swallow,” Jeff warned.

Reluctantly, I ground the meat up a little more before swallowing hard. “Done,” I said. “Now what was it?”

“Duck fetus,” he laughed.

I gagged. Gross. “That bone—”

“The beak.”

I was instantly sorry I’d asked.

He led me a little further and then, without notice, I felt something slimy and bumpy part my lips, which instinctively snapped shut. I reluctantly opened them again. The texture was thick, rubbery, and...wait a minute... was I imagining things or was it still moving?

“Uck, nope. I can’t do it,” I said, spitting out what was left and pulling off the blindfold. Jeff laughed hysterically and took photos as I turned to see what it was I’d had in my mouth: live octopus.

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” I grumbled.

“That was fantastic, but nowhere near as disgusting as the worm, which by the way was the most foul thing I’ve ever tasted. I win.”

“Remind me to get you a trophy when we get home,” I said. “Drinks?”

“Drinks.”

There wasn’t much in the way of hard liquor near us so I bought us each two Tsingtao beer bottles, which were popped open and served warm. When I asked for ice I received a curt “No,” in response. Warm beer wasn’t at the top of my list of favorite things, but the taste of octopus still lingered in my mouth and I was desperate to dispel it.

We took a seat at one of the many brightly colored foldout tables surrounded by mismatched plastic stools.

“Cheers,” I said.

“Cheers,” he replied, clanking my bottle. He took a long swig and I waited for the verdict. “It’s surprisingly smooth.”

I, too, was startled at how light and smooth it tasted. There was no bitter aftertaste I’d come to expect from beer. “I’m surprised you like it,” I said. “Weren’t you always a Guinness guy?”

He laughed. “I don’t know if stealing a couple of Guinnesses from my dad constitutes being a ‘Guinness guy’. But you’re right, I do like darker beers.”

“Honestly, I can’t even remember the last time I had a beer. I drink cosmos,” I said, hanging my head in shame.

Jeff laughed. “Well if it’s any consolation. I’m pretty ashamed to admit that I get the reference.”

“Jeff Anderson, you watch Sex and the City?” I gasped.

“Watch-ed, past-tense, and not by choice.”

“Aha! Amazing. What other dirty little secrets are you hiding?” I asked and waited. As Jeff thought for a second, I blurted, “Why are you really on this trip?”

“Why does anybody travel? To see the world,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Alone?”

“Why not?”

“In my experience, people who up and travel the world are usually running from something.”

“Only women think that,” he said.

I smiled. “You mean, only women are willing to admit that.”

Jeff took a long swig of his beer and said, "I'm not running, I'm re-evaluating."

"Was it that bad? Your break-up?"

"I mean, it wasn't fun."

"No, I guess not," I smiled.

"What about you?" he asked. "What are you running from?"

"Who says I'm running from anything?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but you bought a ticket to China with less than 24 hours notice, which by your own calculations makes you the Usain Bolt."

Jeff always was good with the logic games, but I wasn't ready to talk about RP, so I said, "Same reasons."

As we walked though the rest of the market, watching others nervously order something new and mysterious and then take a bite of it, Jeff became uncharacteristically quiet.

"Whatcha thinking?" I asked.

"Huh?" he said, looking down at me. He shrugged a little. "Nothing. Should we head back to the hotel?"

I could have pressed it, but I instead I said, "Sure."

Back at the hotel, we got ready for bed in relative silence. In the bathroom I brushed my teeth and changed into my oversized T-shirt and gym shorts. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and instantly wished I'd brought cuter pajamas. As I opened the door, Jeff was getting into bed, bare-chested, wearing a pair of boxers. He looked at my ensemble and said, "Nice jammies."

"Wait, aren't you going to remake the bed?" I asked.

"I don't do that anymore," he replied.

"Oh. Why?"

"Veronica hated it."

"Gotcha," I said, wondering what else I didn't know about this new Jeff.

"Night Aubs, don't forget about your night guard," he said turning out the light.

"Night."

After a quick continental breakfast at the hotel, we walked for miles and miles all around the city, going from neighborhoods with narrow alleyways to wide streets full of shops. Beijing was so dense and vast that in the two days we spent wandering we only covered a small part of the city.

The sun had already begun to set as we walked home, but the streets were busy as ever. Vendors selling food, glow-in-the-dark toys, T-shirts, magnets, and other theme-park-type souvenirs lined the street before a set of huge, cast iron gates that led into a giant garden. Once inside, there were only a few carts selling candles and giant paper lanterns; the rest of the area was full of people taking photos of the colorful lotus flowers permeating the scenery. The lotus was everywhere: in the hands of kids as a glowing lotus wand; as a giant, ceramic art piece in the center of the garden; carved into the wooden railings of the 30-foot bridge crossing from one side of the small lake to the other; and even clipped onto women's ponytails and buns. A British lady next to us explained that this was the end of a week-long festival celebrating the return of the lotus.

She told us the Chinese had a high regard for the lotus because it grew from mud to become a pure, beautiful flower, and poets often used the lotus as an analogy to inspire people to push through difficulties. They believed the bendable nature of the stalk represented love, because although you can bend it, it is very difficult to break. “In eastern religions as a whole, it represents purity, divine wisdom, and the individual’s progress from the lowest to the highest state of consciousness,” she said.

*Was this the universe talking to me?*

The woman was a writer for BBC, there to cover a story. I wanted to talk to her more but she got a call on her cellphone and had to leave. I will be forever grateful for the last piece of advice she tossed our way as she left: “Make sure you stay until the end, even if you’ve got a flight at 3:00 a.m. It is absolutely worth it.” Then she was gone.

We shuffled through the crowd, taking photos of the different lotus flowers. All the various colors—red, pink, white, and pale yellow—were on display and in mixed stages of bloom. Then, in the dark of night, a single, shining lantern floated upward followed by three more, then ten more, and before we knew it the entire sky was filled with them. For a moment, everyone was silent as they gazed at the lanterns. It was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.

As the lanterns rose higher and higher into the sky, they shrank in size. Joining the ranks of the stars above them, the floating lights fused with the night sky as man’s addition to the universe—at least for the moment.

“Have you ever seen anything like this?” I asked.

When Jeff didn’t answer I looked around for him. Surrounded by strangers all speaking a language I didn’t understand, I started to panic.

“Jeff?” I called. “Jeff?” I began to walk around when he tapped me on the shoulder. “What? I’m right here,” he said. In his hand was a flattened paper lantern. “Here, hold this,” he said as he pulled the paper lantern from its flat two dimensions into its full three-dimensional form. The two of us held it up as he lit the fuel cell at the bottom and we waited as it filled with hot air. As it slowly rose to the height of the others, we watched until we could no longer tell which one was ours.

“Can I borrow your camera,” I asked?

“Sure,” he said, handing it to me.

Lifting it to my eye I pointed the camera at the lanterns and took a photo. When the image reappeared on screen the picture was far away and distorted. The photo looked nothing like what I saw.

“You have to turn off the flash and use the manual focus. Try to get the closest lamp in focus,” Jeff said, adjusting his camera and handing it back to me.

I set the frame, retook the photo, and saw that the image was clearer, but still only an abstract image of what I was actually seeing.

“Thanks,” I said.

I started clicking back through the photos, smiling at how well they turned out, but Jeff stopped me. “I think it’s time to put down the camera and just enjoy the moment.”

Turning my head, I saw that he was looking at me intently. Our eyes locked and he took a step toward me—I could tell he wanted to kiss me, but I wasn’t ready for that and all it entailed.

“I can’t,” I said, stepping away from him. “I’m sorry, but I came on this trip to kind

of sort out some personal things and I don't want to make things complicated.”

“Yeah. No, of course. Me too,” Jeff said.

Quickly lifting the camera to my eye I took a photo of him, and then said, “I really want a photo on the bridge. Will you take one for me?”

I saw his face fall, but he said “Sure” and followed me to the bridge. I could hardly breathe as I walked, trying to imagine what he must have been thinking. I wanted to kiss him but I had so many questions. If Jeff knew I was going blind, would he still want to go there? When I reached the bridge and turned to face him, he already had the camera up to his face, “Ready? One, two, three.” Snap.

The next morning, still quite early, I quietly grabbed my brushes, mixing plate, dry color pigments, a bottle of distilled water, and a pre-primed canvas, before slipping outside to the balcony of our hotel room to paint. Using a metal fold-out frame, I stretched the canvas and clipped it tightly into place. I grabbed a sheet of paper from inside and began to fold it into the shape of a crane. Creasing the paper with the lines I would need to later bend it into the shape I wanted was a ritual I'd practiced since my dad taught me origami as a kid. My fingers moved automatically and when I was done, I set the crane down on the table next to me. Time to work. Pouring a tablespoon of magenta pigment onto the mixing plate, I mechanically stirred the mixture while I focused on the blank canvas.

I painted a lone lotus bud floating in the Mekong River with glowing lanterns littering the night sky behind it. Next, I set the river in the middle of Downtown Beijing. Ancient Chinese art used the same techniques as calligraphy, so I used long, thin brush strokes, but still painted the modern society as a city sprawling along the famous river. At first it didn't sit well with me, and I thought I might have to scrap it, but the painting transformed the longer I sat with it. Turmoil had created ripples in the strokes. It was an emotional juxtaposition of my life, captured in a flower. Neglected and forgotten by modern society, the scene begged the question of whether or not the bud could come to term and bloom in unfamiliar conditions. At the bottom of the painting, strategically placed just outside of a downtown skyscraper, was my signature—a red fire hydrant.