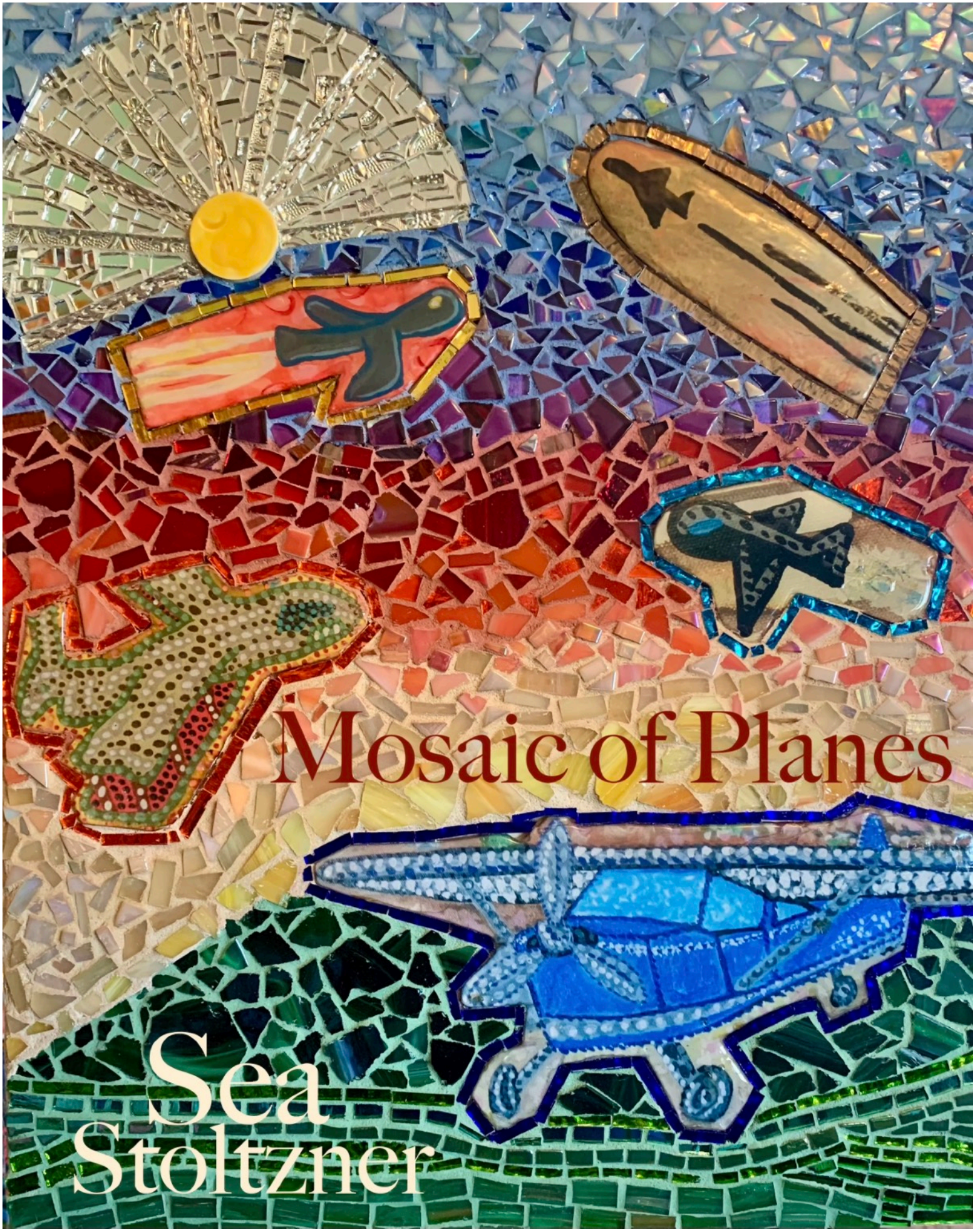
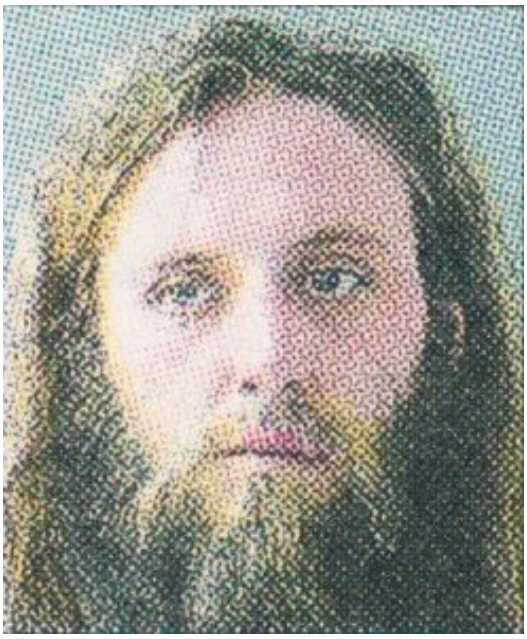

Mosaic of Planes
Sea Stoltzner



A small noise woke me up, it was followed by a flawed understanding of what had happened. Then, the fine details of the last two weeks seemed important. A fiery tornado, those two hippies in the VW beetle, and the strange decorative lights in the neighbor's backyard. They all rushed back as I cringed under the fluorescent lights in this small drab room imprisoning me. In two weeks, I will be charged with murder. But first, I have to figure out how the door works so I can get my breakfast.

It’s too soon to bring Her up. I should have something singular to say about myself instead of how concerned I was that yesterday's events would affect our relationship more than they would the course of the rest of my life. Some things are too hard. Even with 2000 miles and this cell door between us. We'll get to Her later.



But first I have to navigate this day in jail before I can allow myself to feel the pain I've caused. After oatmeal, canned peaches, and french toast I went back to sleep. Morning inspection hardly phased me. Once again as I drifted to sleep, while my current situation seemed no more real than the dreams that occupied my overactive mind. Suddenly, I was rudely jolted back to reality by a guy out in the Dayroom who rattled my door with the newspaper in hand.

He was short and too gaunt to accurately guess his age. He wore his mustache as he'd never seen a day without it. I never got his name. I never wanted it.

“Hey, that’s you. Boy … You’re screwed,” he yelled as he held up my picture, with some sort of sick joy that he had lesser problems to deal with.

“Artist charged with attempted murder.” The headline read.

I had the first taste of the guilt and remorse that would soon define me, but I only had a short rope to draw from this poisoned well. These things take time. I didn't know how to believe the reporter's account. I couldn't wrap my head around the exaggerated quality of it. It felt unjust. But at that moment, all I wanted was for this strange man to stop reading it. So maybe, by the end of the article, my sentence in this alternate reality would be served. And I could return to Her.

But he just laughed as he sat on the metal table outside my cell, spouting off the highlights of the article. I laid back down on my bunk and tried to repel the reality that was obvious to everyone else in the county jail or at home reading their morning newspaper. Something was very wrong with Sea Stoltzner and a jail cell was where he belonged.

This story has eight chapters, with three separate narratives.

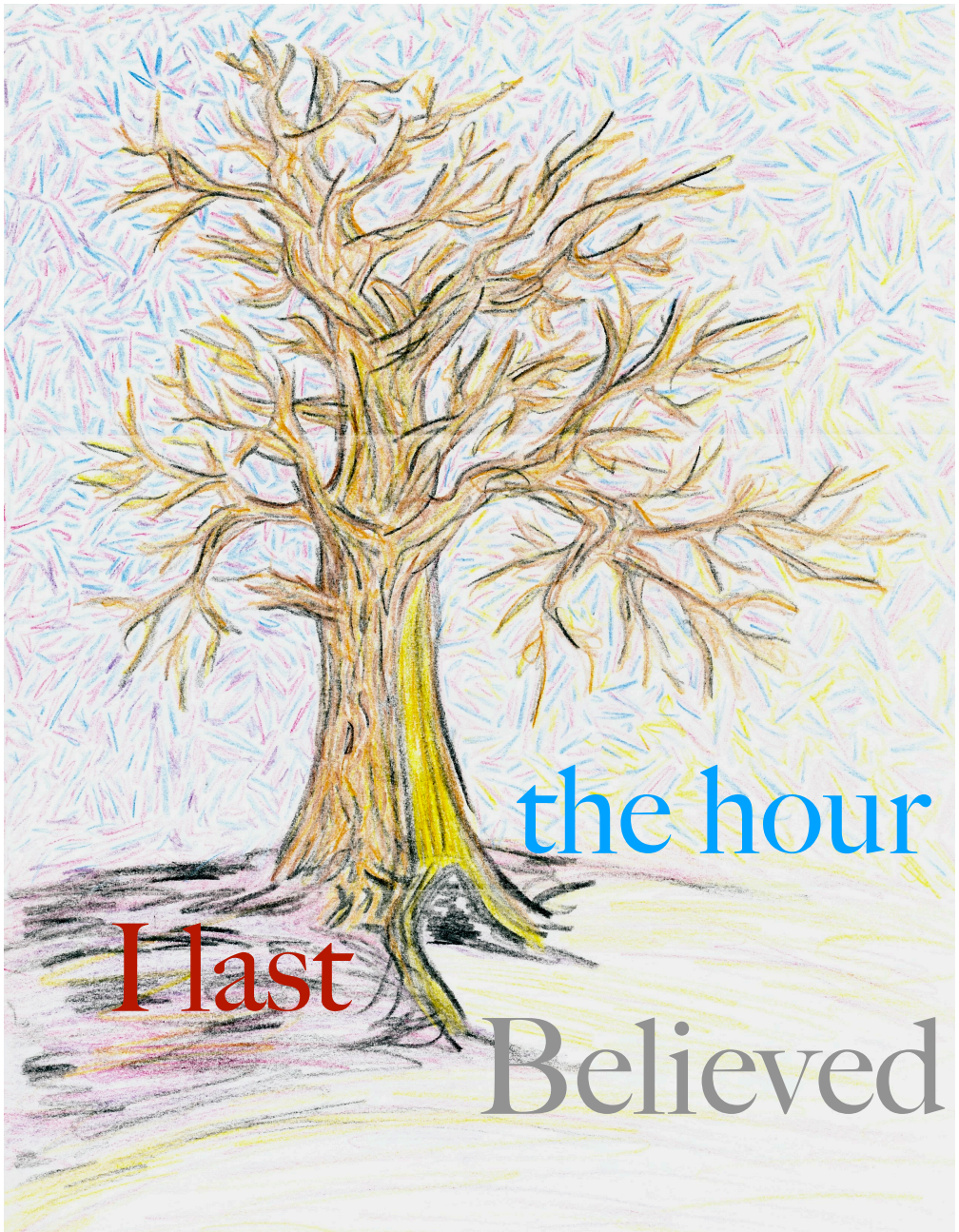
These chapters and narratives are woven braids.

Consider each chapter to be their own songs. With a verse, a chorus, and a bridge.

To keep things tidy, the narratives will be announced by a date and brief musical theme.

I have given the three narrative titles.

“The Hour I Last Believed,” Is the ‘verse’ of this story and follows the aftermath of my crime and subsequent recovery.



“The Imaged Rise And Unfathomed Fall of Cobra Industrey's," is the chorus’. It sounds much different. This story shines a light on the circumstances that contributed to the decline of my facilities.



“The Meaning of Life Experience,” is the ‘bridge’. Listen to it now. It’s a brief explanation of my young adulthood and the factors that developed into illness.



This is a brisk account of events.

I've changed everyone's name.

I make no claim that the many conversations are precisely accurate, but instead suggest that they are in the spirit of what was said, as I recall, years later.

Keith Daily recorded the audiobook at his studio Airplane audio.

Robin Stoenner blessed me with the Mosaic cover collaboration.

Dr. Suuzi Hazen TCM, was greatly important in the editing process, and support.

There were a few others that gave feedback and contributed to the editing.

The musical themes are all from different iterations of my band Metalujah. I'm responsible for all the art too.

This book is dedicated to T.X.T.X.

I'm sorry for the great effort I've put into telling our story, but it felt important to do so.



Mosaic of Planes

by Sea Stoltzner



Copyright 2026 Sea Stoltzner

Chapter One
Out of all the days, months, and years–I expected more to happen.



(2007-2009) An average me in an imagined, but accurate vision.

I stood six feet tall with long brown hair that reached to the middle of my back. And my ‘sideburns’ as I called them, full check, foot and a half long, free-flowing rivers of glory. Old man glasses, western shirts, and tight Levi's with cowboy boots pulled over the outside of the jeans. On my large frame, it was an intimidating, yet comical look. All from the thrift stores as I was always too broke to invest in new things.

I smelled of coffee and cigarettes unless I was giving a hug where you'd probably smell the sweet musk of my deodorant too. Conversationally, I didn't require or give many explanations. But once stimulated by an idea, I could talk your ear off.

I had a lot of introverted charisma and a surreal, disarming sense of humor. This energy drew many people in and even though my inborn nature was to remain standoffish, I still made many good friends. People also like to observe the joy I found in the things I loved to do, which I think was nicely summed up by an old friend.

“You're so inspiring. Not because of your natural abilities, but because you don't know what you're doing but you do it anyway.”



At this time I lived in Nevada City. It's a carefully maintained relic of California's gold mining heritage. A would be ghost town that nobody wanted to abandon. Small and contained, home of the arts and many artists. A great place to find inspiration and companions.

To my friends in the Nevada City music and art scene, I'd become known as Cobra. A nickname that started as a joke then seemed fitting as my sideburns grew to length. I was at my core a fiercely authentic

person, who was always chasing his artistic muses. But I could always be bothered to stop for a minute to have a smoke and to laugh about something.

During my late 20's I had a lot going for me, but I was caught up in avoidant patterns. I would wake up when I felt ready too, somewhere in the late morning between 11:00 and 12:00. I put on last night's clothes, grab my blue American Spirit cigarettes, an orange lighter, Burt's beeswax peppermint lip balm, keys, and wallet. I'd step out the door of the manufactured house I live in, just up the hill from downtown Nevada City. Once the car was in gear, I'd light my first smoke of the day before engaging the gas pedal and deciding where to go for coffee.

I'm still amazed by a certain chain of events that got me free coffee at a couple of the places around town. Basically, I met the right people in the right order on my ascent to becoming a local go-to coffee house artist all-star. The regular baristas would tell the new blood to not charge me for my meager coffee. I thought little of it at the time. Sierra Mountain Coffee Roasters in Grass Valley was where I liked to start my day. If I went to Cafe Mecca in downtown Nevada City–yes, the coffee would still probably be free, but I'd get caught up in a random conversation by someone I wasn't yet in the mood for. Plus I'd need a place to come back to in the late afternoon for a second cup.

"Oh hey, it's you," I said to the familiar girl behind the counter. Unaware of her name.

"Yep, we meet again. Do you want you're regular?" She asked, already knowing the answer.

"You got any shows coming up?" She said loudly over the steam of the espresso machine.



“I don't know, maybe. I'm playing with Eli next week,” I mumbled, always foggy before my morning caffeine.

“Art shows. When are you going to bring some pieces here?” She asked.

“Maybe when you get some decent wall space. Everywhere you look there are books,” I tried to ignore the request.

“OK, I get it,” she playfully responded. “Do you need anything else from me?”

“Yeah, I could really use a bagel.” I asserted.

Two shots of espresso in a large coffee, a little half and half, and if they still had it, a pizza bagel with butter. Most of the time I'd have to accept whatever bagel was left in the display case. In the morning I can manage a little banter, but the real jokes didn't start coming till the coffee hits. With my first sip, my eyes brightened and I was back in the car with new momentum and on to my second smoke as I drove to my art studio in Grass Valley.

On its own, Grass Valley is a thing of wonder. It begins 2 miles south of Nevada City and is a more modern take on how to update the 1800s. Lots of schools, grocery stores and a picturesque downtown. It's happy to serve the needs of the larger area and the growing population.

I'd often fantasize about getting up early and engaging with normal productive society. But it never felt right, so I learned to create my own rules. I understood that the great achievements of my generation wouldn't come from someone like me. I accepted that underground folk albums and half attended art shows were the most I could hope for. I was okay with that, I hadn't set my sights any higher. Occasionally, I'd try to get to my art studio early to see if it improved my output, but whenever I did so I'd usually end up in some leftover drama from the night before.



I learned a lot from Jen. She was just old enough to understand what was going on in this world, and still young and able to be an active part of it. She never hid her femininity and she was always near her Tarot deck. She had thick brown, long wavy hair, wore red lipstick, and smelled of three flowers at once. On the rare occasion when we'd hug, I'd always be surprised by how small she was. She contained much sorcery. Yeah, I learned a lot from Jen.

“Cobra, I'm so tired of this! Drew and Francis were up till five this morning playing piano and singing all sorts of weird lyrics. I could hardly sleep with those two yammering on. I was finally able to get to sleep, but when I got up this morning I found them both passed out in weird places. I had to jump over Drew's legs sticking halfway down the hall from his studio door. You need to help me do something about them!” Jen exploded on the porch while she bummed a smoke.

“Do what? I don't rule this place. But those two are sure on a run. We should talk to Cole, maybe he has some ideas,” I told her as I lit my third cigarette.

This was never a productive way to start painting, so I gave up and made my way to my dad's house in Alta Sierra 15 minutes further south,

eating my bagel as I drove and wiping the remaining drips of butter on the underside of the driver's seat.

Alta Sierra is a large housing development on the outskirts of Grass Valley. Out of a desire to get the most profit out of the hilly landscape, Alta Sierra feels like a maze to newcomers. With around 2,500 houses, it also has an elementary school, golf course, and a private airport.

As I'd pull into the driveway my dad would somehow instinctively know I was on my way and he'd be out front with a cigarette in his mouth.

His hair was looking much grayer since he'd become a widower. Sandy would tell him it was just getting blonde from their trips to the creek, but we all knew the truth. He wasn't a picky man. He ate whatever was on hand, watched whatever came in on the T.V., and bought whatever coffee was on sale. He did however insist on American Spirit cigarettes, no matter how broke. He was a hard worker, a trait he tried to instill in me. A trait that would take me years to develop. He loved to laugh and to him, anything could be a joke.



He helped build the house. With a government loan and support from my grandparents, we put down roots. I was three, Starla was one and Sandy was yet to be born in the house. Three bedrooms, two baths, and an attached garage. The standard American dream. Over the years we made it ours. Added a deck, converted the garage to an office/music room, and ripped out the carpet to acid stain the cement. Or that was the plan at least.

It was a bit run down by now. The gate to the deck didn't latch anymore, which was fine. The more urgent issue was the missing board you had to step over. We were still missing a couple of the liquid amber trees that a drunk driver took out, even though he paid us to replace them. They were glorious in Autumn when they all changed.

I had done a poor paint job in the early 2000s. The mint green looked fine from the street, but up close, my lack of experience was obvious. Funny, I still had some of the paint samples in my studio and whenever I was too broke, I'd mix some in with the good paints.

“I didn't know if I'd see you today, your phone was off.” Dad opened with.

“Yeah, I need to pay it,” I said as I lit up my fourth smoke.

“Are you in the mood for a little bit of running around?” He asked.

“Where about?” I questioned.

“Penn Valley,” My dad snuffed out his butt in the black plastic ashtray he'd had since he started back up when I was in high school.

“Alright. I like a couple thrift stores out there. Is it all ready to go?” I asked.

“Yep, the clipboards in the house, I also need you to go up to French Corral.” He added.

“What? No way. That'll take me all afternoon,” I said in an uproar.

“Sea, come on, don’t buck me here. I need this shot. It's not that far,” he told me.

“Aghhhh. Fine. Let me finish my smoke first.” I said as I accepted my fate.

The plan had always been to help make my dad's work-life easier. That's what he paid me for, but I was a demanding employee. I protested every bit of work he put before me, then after a lengthy argument, I'd give in and go back into town to take a few pictures. He worked in real estate. I now know he could have thrown a rock and found someone better suited to help him, but I wasn't a good candidate for much of anything else, so the dysfunction continued.

A couple of hours of work. A couple of days a week, I can do that. He'd have a pot of coffee going and some scraps in the fridge. Usually leftover Hawaiian pizza from my sister Sandy that lived with him. I always knew I shouldn't and I would get chewed out for it later, but that never stopped me from taking a slice. Before trying to leave, I'd rant about a recent minor social interaction that baffled me. My dad would smoke and try to get a word in edgewise. Then I asked which of his two cars I could borrow to get me back home. He had an early 2000 Buick and an early 2000 SUV. Before I left, I'd be sure to get a few bucks for my wallet and be on my way after a reluctant thank you.

After buckling up, I checked the rearview mirror before I started up the semi steep driveway. Good thing I did. Sandy was just getting home from her day at the salon and I wanted to check in on her progress with something.

Sandy was a fighter and as a pretty young thing growing up, life kept giving her reasons why. It was our mother's idea for her to go to beauty school. A tangible trade that met her interests. She enjoyed popular culture. She loved the life of Marilyn Monroe and the music of Tupac Shakur. She liked to wear bright cheery colors to match her bubbly personality and she often tried out different perfumes. If my calling was developing artistic concepts and Starla's skills were

implementing useful information. Sandy's gifts were connecting with the real value of people. With Sandy, there was a lot to love, and I wanted her fingerprints on my next musical project.



“Look, it’s not hard. Once you get into the flow of it,” I said behind dad's old keyboard.

“Yeah, I can do it now. But once you leave, I instantly forget it,” a frustrated Sandy admitted.

“I know, I know. That's why we're going to keep at it,” I hit the off switch.

“Anyways, what are you up to tonight? Did you eat? I'm having the rest of my pizza, I think we've got something else you could heat up,” Sandy generously offered me sustenance, not knowing I'd already eaten half of her dinner.

“No, no, that's fine. I should probably be getting back to town. But keep with it on the keyboard. I'm sure it will come together soon.” I said as I found the exit.

After ‘work’ I'd grab that second coffee in town and maybe have a smoke with someone random standing out on the street. Then, when all excuses were as lifeless as the cigarette butts under my cowboy boots heel, I'd make my way back over to my studio at St. Joseph’s Cultural Center in Grass Valley and to get to painting.

I never had a true desire to become a painter. After high school, I bought some art supplies and made a few messes on cheap, thinly

braced canvases. I'd have fun for a few hours, making something colorful to put up on my bedroom walls, but it wasn't a calling. I was taking music theory classes at the junior college and figured I'd find success that way. I thought my whole life had progressed to be a serious musician and I tried to play the part. The paintings didn't stay up on my walls for long, they got replaced by a taste for minimalism and it would soon be forgotten that I ever tried.

After the failure of my first album and in a period of general malaise, I dusted off my old art supplies and with a newfound intention painted over an old canvas. But instead of rushing for some sort of artistic satisfaction in a few hours, I kept going for a few weeks. By the end, it looked like a very vividly colored cellular cross-section. The whole canvas was covered in a micro-pointillism style. I lacked skills but had a lot of free time and determination. The effect was colorful, fun, and entertaining; almost video game-like. I brought it to show my art friends at St. Joseph's third-floor artist studios. I got a bunch of positive feedback and a chance to sublet an art studio for a few months. With my foot in the door, I kept at it.



“Sounds like you guys put on a wild show last night,” I said to Drew as I walked by his studio on the way to mine.

“So, you talked to Jen,” he said in a low tone as I unlocked my door and turned on my light.

“I got a text from Cole, they're doing drinks on the balcony at seven,” Drew told me as he followed me into my studio.

“Do you want to go?” I asked.

“I'm pretty hungover,” he paused as I settled in. “I think I'm going down to walk to the gas station, pick up a forty and reconvene my thinking, I don't really have the cash for the balcony. But people will be downstairs in the bar after. I figured if you were going I'd come along,” he told me as he looked at my half-finished painting. “You've done a lot to this one since I saw it last.”

“Yeah, it's not giving me any trouble,” I said as I grabbed the plastic cup I used to clean my brushes. “I'll go tonight, but later. It's early and I've got some things to do.”

Since I avoided developing the necessary skills of an artist, the dots quickly became leaned on. I was OK with that. I had a basic understanding of what an outside artist was and I was fine with that as a description when need be. I had no interest in getting a formal education in anything. It hadn't gone well for me in the past. I’d paint until I needed to eat something substantial, most often a burrito. Then go home, take a shower, and put on a new day's clothes. I'd get into my dad's car and light up my 12th smoke of the day as I drove back to my studio in Grass Valley to try to get one more color dotted before the evening social event. I say one more color because I hadn't the ability to mix colors with any consistency. I knew the basics and I would just start mixing paints till I liked something and use that till whatever pattern I was making was complete. It was common for me to be the hold up to drive a crew over to the bars in Nevada City.

Nevada City is designed for two things, tourism and nightlife. All of its shops, restaurants, and bars are contained in a few short streets. Any time of year the weekends are a busy place for Nevada City, so the weeknights had become popular for the local scene to meet up for a few casual drinks. This was a truly independent collection of friends, musicians, and artists, there is no official association of names I can read off. No one was in charge of anyone but themselves. But most nights the word would be the same, to meet up at the historic National Hotel Bar.

Drew was a singer-songwriter and an audio engineer that, like me, worked out of one of the artist studios. He'd been a long-time frequent flier in whatever beat-up car I was driving. He kept his long red hair neatly out of the way in a well-worn trucker hat. He should have been a better poker player because he was good at hiding his emotions. Even when he drank, which he enjoyed too.



Once seat belted in, I'd put on a classic rock station and used whatever song that came on as cosmic motivation for the evening. Since Grass Valley and Nevada City are only a few miles apart, we'd usually only get one song. Unless that song was sung by “The Eagles,” and then I'd quickly turn it off.

“Man, you’ve got to get over your detest for the Eagles,” Drew pleaded.

“I hate Don Henley. But Joe Walsh, he's OK. He's definitely the lesser of two Eagles,” I said as one of my favorite punchlines.



On a weeknight after nine, there would always be easy street parking and we'd effortlessly walk through the double doors of National Hotel Bar to see who was out. Tonight, Cole and Francis were talking as they occupied the end of the bar by the payphone.

Cole was at the center of the Nevada City art's venn diagram. You'd always find his name in the thank you sections, back when people still made CDs. He brought a carefully planned vision to the projects he was involved in. He was a songwriter, guitarist, vocalist, and a producer. Cole, like me, also moved past the parts of conversations that he didn't want to engage in. Straight to the point. I liked that.

Francis on the other hand was a creative free radical. He played in as many bands as he could, stayed out later than the last after-party, and always saw the person in the corner of the room that thought they were invisible. Francis lived with morose feelings, but they never seemed to bring him harm. He loved movies, aggressive music, and board games. He couldn't escape having a thick beard.



“Cobra! You're never going to believe what Francis told some girl working at the gas station after band practice,” Cole opened with from the end of the bar.

“I'd met her before, I just couldn't remember her name fast enough,” offered Francis in protest.

“Just let me tell this one, Francis. Cobra, you be the judge,” Cole continued.

“Well, what did he say?” I'd asked with a smile on my face.

“He said that she looked sad tonight, and if she wanted to meet up in the graveyard later they could cry together,” Cole said with delight, and maybe a little jealousy that he'd never made anyone such an offer.

Cole and I laughed at the direct and solemn offer, but Francis laughed loudest, knowing that it would probably work out well for him by the end of the evening.

From the corner of my eye, I saw that Eli had arrived. I had to talk to him.



Eli had a strong presence with his guitar. His brown hair was locked in a never-ending cycle of growing out until he was frustrated by it and haphazardly shaved it off. He was one of 7 children and he had a family of his own, but couldn't give up on his musical gifts. He was one of my closest friend.

“Dude, I need a cigarette,” I told Eli as we walked out the front door to the smoking section.

“Weirdest thing, I was talking with this woman named Charlotte at a show. I guess I pissed off some random dude bumming smokes off people because he spits at my cowboy boots and then gets in my face.” I started my story off with.

“What'd you do?” He asked.

“Well, what could I do? I had this beautiful woman standing next to me and I didn't want our fists to start flying and maybe end up hitting her, but also I needed to be in control of this situation. I mean he spit next to my cowboy boot.” I elaborated.

“Come on, what did you do about it?” Eli asked again.

“So, he's right in my face.” I continued.

“Yeah, you said that part already,”

“I know but it's important to remember that he's two inches from my face, and we're staring each other down. But I didn't flinch, I'm just trying to wait him out. But his breath stank and I was worried this encounter was going to ruin things with this new woman, so I just intensely told him to get the hell out of here.” I fiercely answered.

“Did it work?” Eli inquired.

“Sort of, he backed away and then threw his arm up in the air and started yelling that he could spit wherever he wanted to. I took a step towards him and told him that no one had a smoke for him and it was time for him to leave.”

“So, that did it?” Eli asked.

“Not really, he got back in my face and I thought, here it comes, but right then his buddy grabs him from behind and pulls him away from me and the rest of the group. He kept barking about how he was going to beat me up as they walked up the street,” I finished my little story.

“How did things go with the new love of your life?” Eli asked me.

It was dangerous for my pack of cigarettes to hang out in the smoking section. I had too many good friends that didn't seem to smoke

unless I was around, and whom I couldn't ever say no to. So when I could break free, I'd be back in the bar talking to whoever else I hadn't gotten to yet.



Jon always made his presence known whenever he was back in town. He'd been living out on the Pacific coast for years and as much as he liked the solitude, he was happy to see everyone on his trips back. He always rolled his own cigarettes. He called the ones from the stores ‘tailored’. Jon could be abrasive, or more accurately said he could be too perceptively honest. We got along alright on those days he'd be back in town.

“This last year changed things for me, I finally started eating the oysters and clams on the cliff below my house. They're pretty good over an open fire and it keeps me from having to go to town when I'm not in the mood,” Jon told me.

“Yeah, I've never really gotten into shellfish,” I replied.

“You know they're not bad, I've started to get a taste for them. If you ever make it out to my place, I'll whip us up a batch,” Jon said as an open invitation to anyone in the scene.

On occasion, my sister, Starla, would decide to make a weeknight appearance with her boyfriend Tommy.



Starla was born two years after me. She was the most intelligent of us siblings and always knew how to stay out of moody parental crosshairs. She had been a committed competitive gymnast until she was hurt in 8th grade. For her, school was easy. Then came going off college, getting a degree, and returning home to a promising career. I think she was a bit jealous that I still had dreams that I struggled over. She made things look easy. She loved cats, hot tea, and quoting old movies. Her favorite was Safe Men. That always put a smile on her face.

Tommy was a very involved partner. He knew his way around the kitchen too. He couldn't help but change song lyrics as he sang them and he could get magic out of a microphone and speakers. He had black hair, a warm demeanor, and stood a few inches taller than me. We'd had our ups and downs, but regardless of the circumstances we always believed in each other.



“I thought they were doing Karaoke tonight,” Starla said with disappointment.

“I think the guy does every other Saturday night now,” I remembered.

“Shoot, I wanted to sing a Beatles song,” Starla sadly confided.

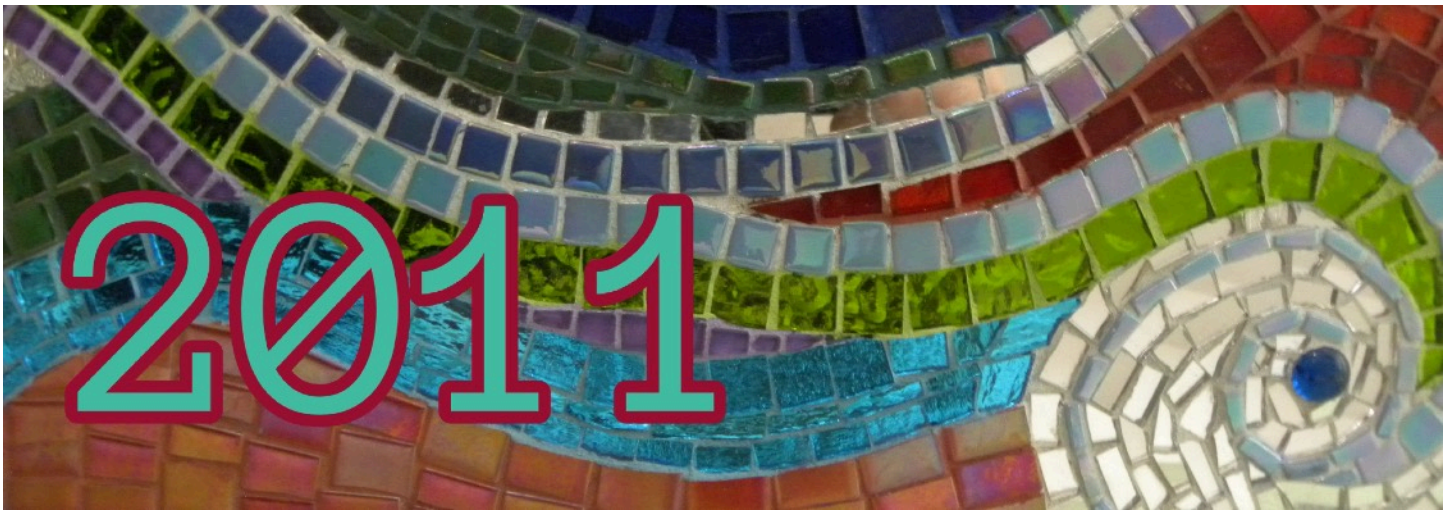
“Babe, if you want, we could go back over to my studio and I could get you set up with a mic and we could sing some karaoke songs over there? You'll come too, right Cobra?” Tommy offered a solution.

“Yeah, we could sing ‘Baby you’re a rich man’, but Marilyn Manson style,” I spiritedly replied with the hope of getting Starla on board.

“That's alright, I can wait till Saturday. I’m supposed to get dinner with Sandy and maybe we could all go together,” Starla asked.

Once the evening reached its crescendo, the talk changed from who's coming out, to where do we go from here. Since I'd usually be completely sober and the reliable designated driver, I'd make a few short trips around Nevada City dropping folks off. Sometimes a dance party would break out. Other nights would lead to a low-key hangout with some freshly picked barbecued garden vegetables. But most often, the drunkest people would take a ride with me back to the third-story artist studios in Grass Valley and drink out on the porch as their talk echoed through my open window as I painted inside.

Late at night was when I got the most work done. During my smoke breaks I'd look through my open window and I'd try to figure out what the hell I was doing with painting and subconsciously, my life. Once satisfied by one or another, I'd shut it down. I’d see if there were any tired drunk people left that needed a ride, then drive back to my manufactured house in Nevada City to have my 20th smoke of the day as I looked up at the stars. Then I’d collapse into my bed to try and get some sleep.



(2011) Late morning, Friday, February 11th. County Jail.

With a case like mine, there was no question on where to house me. I'd have to serve my time in administrative segregation. This section had four cells on the ground level and five more up a stairway. There was a Dayroom between the cells and the door to the pod officer. The Dayroom had a shower, a T.V. with basic cable, a light beige plastic chair, a big steel table with built-in stools, and a book cart. There was a computer kiosk to order canteen items, send a message to the medical wing or a commanding officer. It also had a microwave and a pencil sharpener. A small janitor's closet for when needed, an electric razor attached to a wall with a razor head soaking in a bucket of blue cleaner, and every morning the local paper.

I was quick to learn that jail had a routine, but I'd be slow to learn what it actually was. Most importantly was the rotation of the Dayroom. Everybody in the section got an hour out of their cell to use however they'd like. On my first day, I got the second block, right after the guy who had read me my article. Without any warning, the lights in the Dayroom flashed and I heard a cell door slam. Next, a voice over the intercom said “Dayroom” and my door lock popped open.

I pushed my intercom button and asked what Dayroom meant. After a short education on the subject, I thought what I really needed out of this new found freedom was to wash all the gold make-up out of

my hair. What I needed was a shower. I had been given a small bar of soap and a pink towel in booking. “Those will do,” I thought. The water was good and warm as it should be. I didn't know that this would often be an issue. After my shower, I found a small black plastic comb in my box of jail property. I used this comb to slowly untangle my long hair as I tried to flip through the different cable stations. But everybody started yelling from their cells as soon as I changed it off the county music video channel, so I fearfully turned it back.

Sitting there, I didn't feel the same electric vibrations as the day before. I wouldn't say I calmly sat at that metal table, but I tried to retain the strength I'd need to be an effective courier for Wikileaks. The comb I used on my horribly knotted hair did little and so I switched to my fingers to try to make some inroads. As I worked, I watch the country music videos with some curiosity. I guess my recent life had insulated me from the types of culture most people engage in. Fine for them, but I found it all kind of obvious and boring.



As I looked around the room, the jail reminded me of the public schools I'd gone to. Mostly due to the softly painted industrial building supplies everywhere. Yeah, they were of a higher grade but everything looked clean and intentional.

There was a cheap plastic clock hanging over the Pod door. 10:45. I knew what that meant. I had 15 more minutes till I had to go back to my cell. I got up off the metal table and looked around with a bit of urgency. I was fine with the T.V. as a babysitter, but this was my first realization that I didn't want to go back in that small cell. As I quietly freaked out, a man in another cell called me over. He wasn't much for small talk and asked me for some hot water.

Without going into the tutorial, I got this man a cup of microwaved water through his door in a folded-up Cheetos bag and only burned my fingers a few times in the process. My reward was a shot of freeze-dried coffee wrapped in a clean piece of toilet paper. I used my tan plastic mug to heat up some water and then as I stirred my morning cup of coffee the lights flickered for me and without any protest, I was back in my cell.

It wasn't long before the Pod Officer interrupted me again.

“Stoltzner, visit,” she said.

As a precaution for the staff and myself, two guards entered the Dayroom and shackled my legs, wrists, and waist. Then I was led past the Pod Officer and down a short hallway to the tiny visiting booths. This took a while and once I was inside I saw my dad, sisters and Tommy waiting for me on the other side of the glass.

I immediately felt all sorts of extreme emotions for my situation and my only response was to burst into uncontrollable tears. The kind you know aren’t soon going to stop. I sat down on the metal stool and

picked up the black telephone receiver, put it to my ear, and started talking to my sister Starla who had done the same.

“Please enter your administrative ID and password,” the prerecorded voice instructed.

With tears still in my eyes, I looked up at Starla with confusion. Starla pointed at the bright orange wristband I had on. I noticed the ID number and punched that in, but messed up a few times in the process. After finally getting it right, the voice asked for the 4 digit password. Now I was so overwhelmed I dropped my head to the metal table in front of me and cried even harder. Starla got up and walked out of the visiting area. A minute later one of the guards came in and helped me, pushing some combination of numbers to get the visit started.



“Hello sweetheart, I want to let you to know that we love you and accept you completely, and whatever happened, you're going to have to wait till you get assigned a lawyer to talk about it,” Starla told me with tears also in her eyes.

“I'm so sorry, I don't know what happened. I read the paper this morning and it said I was looking for a golden sword or something,” I began as Starla interrupted me.

“I know Sea, but we can't talk about any of that. Are you OK? Are you hurt at all?”

After a difficult and tear filled conversation with Starla and then sharing some brief words with Sandy, we all instinctively knew that time must be running short, but my dad had something he had to get off his chest.

“I'm sorry I failed you,” he said as he struggled to fight back tears.

This hit me hard and brought me back to the reality of what I was facing. I was much happier talking about Sandy’s new kitten. Tommy and I got a second to talk before being interrupted.

“One minute remaining,” the prerecorded voice warned.

Tommy handed Starla back the phone.

“I put some money on your inmate phone card so call whenever you can. I don't know how that works,” she said.

“They have a thing where I get out of my cell for an hour,” I told her.

“Yeah, call me then. I heard that they'll be bringing you into court soon. Just know that we'll be there,” she told me in a hurry. “I just need to know that you’ll be alright?” She added.“I'm not going to speak in code anymore, you're going to have to dig at it a little bit. I used to be alive, but now I'm a dead point,” I said with a complete change in affect as the phone disconnected.



(2007-2009) my life, from the view of my mind.

“Cobra, I don't know... You try too hard with people that aren't working for you. Do something simple, make it as much about you as possible, the stage loves you and people will eat that up,” Cole told me.

“I know, I know. I want to, it's just we’re so close to getting this backing track up and running and it'll give the whole performance a cinematic feel, then I think I'll really be able to channel a pure presence up there. You'll get it, so will others, it'll be a whole thing!” I replied, missing the entire point.

“You're an authentic guy, Cobra, but you put all this work into trying to make people think you're something different, which never really works the way you intend but is always entertaining. All I'm saying is skip the middleman. Just do you, without the grand vision of who that is,” Cole expanded on his message, knowing I'd need the doubling of his point to counter what I didn't want to hear.

I liked that my artistic friend group took over most parts of my life. It was a pretty tight crew of about 50 people, with another 50 that came and went often. As I've mentioned this was not a group that lacked direction or needed leadership. As I made connections and developed as an artist I internalized my role to be an artistic trickster. A coyote for the group to amuse in. From complex lighthearted musician, pop art pointillist painter, daring stand-up comic, and conceptual performance artist. I kept busy with the above and made lots of close, valuable friendships.

Even with the different successes going on in the group, people found time to get together for a few days out at a lake. But you needed a boat to get to the forested campsite. Since this was everyone's vacation, nobody added any unnecessary creativity to the event's name, and ‘the boat party’ was born. The excitement for the boat party rivaled that of

Christmas for a child, and the highlight of the boat party would be walking on to the Tiki bar on Saturday afternoon right as a stool at the bar became vacant.



“Cobra! What are you drinking?” Cole asked from behind the bar.

“Are you doing those blue drinks today?” I replied with fingers crossed.

“One round of Windex? Coming right up,” Cole said as he sprang into action.

“I'll take one too!” Drew exclaimed as he turned around from the stool next to me.

“Cobra? You're drinking! Better make it a stiff one Cole, he's making up for a whole year of designated driving,” Drew continued, who had obviously had a couple already.

After a few minutes of light conversation about everyone's casual wear, I was passed a joint and took a hit like everyone else. Now my Blue Windex drink would be set before me and I'd take a sip, completely changing the intoxicating flavor in my mouth. And then quickly the change would come all at once.

“I didn't like it at all, it was a dumb record. What pissed me off the most was I was excited to hear it and then it was just blah! I know you know those guys Cole, and I'm still a fan of the old stuff. Why'd they have to get so boring and obvious all of a sudden? It just pisses me off,” I exclaimed after being asked.

“Well it's fine if you didn't like it, but people can't just do the same thing their whole careers, they've got to change and take risks,” Cole said as he tried to talk me down.

“But I liked what they used to do. I wasn't


Photograph by Simon Weller

ready to hear something new," I woefully admitted.

"Forget about 'em', they've been washed up for years," Drew changed the subject. "Cobra, when are you dropping your album?" He said as he threw down the gantlet.

"I'd like to do it soon, I just need to sit down with Tommy for a few days. I'm ready to move on to something fresher. He just keeps putting me off. It drives me crazy," I openly admitted.

Cole topped off our blue drinks with the leftovers in the blender.

"You've got to just get it done, while people are still interested," Cole told me.

"Yeah, it would help if I had a little money. With these bro deals you get what you pay for," I agreed as we then moved on to a lighter topic.

Even though I worked for my father, the idea of going into real estate myself hardly ever crossed my mind. I briefly took the introduction to real estate class, but it wasn't my kind of information. So I dropped it and watched the business world from the sidelines. Between my light duties with my dad and the occasional job I'd get trimming marijuana, I got by, but with little margin for error. I knew my art was good enough to believe in and as soon as the right version of my band came together I'd see a change in my finances. It was just taking a long time getting there.



(1998) A technical adult



My parents met on a Greyhound bus. Mom had just given up on college and dad had been living out on a hippie ranch. After a brief courtship, my grandpa insisted they wed and my mom agreed. My dad was happy to just keep going along for the ride.

They were both musicians. My mom was classically trained on the piano, while my dad could keep a beat on guitar and improvise on the flute. Their journey together brought them to Jesus, then Grass Valley, and then into a Christian Rock band. As 1980 rolled around, I was born, and then shortly after were my sisters, Starla and Sandy. Music was in abundance at our home. It was often hard to find some silence to make some.

But I was a difficult child. I struggled in school. I always fought my parent's authority. It was hard for me to give up and give in to the programs presented. I was at my core, a rebellious child of non-conformists. As I grew up I turned inward and avoided large developmental life decisions.

Without dragging too much of my childhood into this story, I turned 18 at the start of my senior year of high school on September 11th, 1998. I guess due to my age I should have been in the previous class, but even with this extra year of maturity, I was still behind in most of my classes. When I think back on high school I don't remember putting much effort into my school work. I happily allowed my documented learning disabilities to be the culprit for my borderline scholastic failures, but I also don't remember trying all that hard.

I always had good friends that looked out for me. I have a temperament that doesn't thrive well in groups but does so in making meaningful relationships. It must all stem from that early shame of being one of the dumb kids that didn't allow me to open up more to new people. When I got older I never felt comfortable enough with myself to pursue any of the young women that obviously favored me. I wanted to, but was always too down on myself over my perceived deficiencies.





(2009), let the devolution begin.

“Fine, then tell me what I just said. If you were listening it should be easy. What are we talking about right now?” Kim shouted as she stood over me.

“I don't know, you were talking about your friend,” I said softly, unsure of the correct answer.

“My friend? Which friend? No, Sea we're not talking about my friend. Would you like me to give you a clue?” She prodded.

“Yes, if it will get you to stop! What are we talking about?” I said boldly.

“Don't you yell at me!” She defend.

“But you're yelling at me!” I countered.

“That might be so, but you started this,” Kim said quietly and intensely.

“How did I?” I asked in the same manner.

“You weren't listening. I asked you a question and you weren't listening,” she continued.

“Well, I'm listening now! What's so important that you've got to ruin my night?” I told her as hard as a weightlifter dropping his rep after he misgauging his limit.

Kim was too young for me. I can see that now. She brought up Pokemon too often. I'm more of an old-school Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle fan. She had the long black hair that was fitting for an artist girlfriend. If arguing equated with trying, then we sure put in a lot of effort to make it work.

Watching my mom wither and die was heartbreaking, but dating Kim over the following year left me exhausted and with little hope. Once it was finally over, I had to live with her tentacles still attached to my circle of friends. I'd become enraged when I'd get to a party or small gathering and see her car parked out front and I'd have to instantly turn around and leave. I went to pick up my sister Starla from her house one night to discover Kim had started dating one of her roommates. I also couldn't handle the social media side of things. My response was to block her from my account for a few days, then add her back, and then block her again. I was starting to see how someone could totally lose it by the inertia of a failed romantic relationship. But before things got too bad, I discovered a solution.

Marijuana. One hit and I was cool with whatever she wanted to do with her life and quickly forgot that she existed at all. I also started a new art project that I'd been mulling over for a few years and was able to regain my genuine laugh after hiding behind the forced white knuckle smile that my sad existence had become.

It started by me removing a half-inch out of the tip of a cigarette and putting a small nugget of weed in its place. A few weeks later I'd have a second, midway through the evening. A month after that I was rolling joints and needing a beer to help me fall asleep at night. Soon I was smoking during the day and had completely given in to the lifestyle of this newly needed medicine. I hate to say it worked for me, but for a short while, I was able to move on from the painful stings of my recent bad memories.



(2007) The lost beacon

My mother had aged into a very spiritual woman. She was learning to play the harp for therapeutic purposes. She had lots of ideas to encourage her children with. She allowed her hair to go gray in her late 40's but she had an infectious laugh. She had escaped the clutches of her family back east, and out of pity gave them her California phone number. I loved her cooking as all grateful children should, and miss it every day.

When my mom first got sick, I needed an electric guitar for some upcoming shows. This coincided with my mom watching a video on the law of attraction and getting motivated to fight her cancer with a new intention.



"I wonder if Bill still has that old Fender guitar," my dad rhetorically asked the family as we sat around after the video.

"What, the Telecaster?" I said as I tried to remember anything else about it.

"Yeah, the Telecaster, he never liked that thing. I think I have a picture of it with the band photos," he said as he left the room to look for it.

Then my mom and I talked about the ways she could change her thinking to be better suited for her new journey. Even this early on, none of the doctors were giving her much hope and it was inspiring to see someone committing themselves to such positivity during a time of such despair.

"I found it!" Exclaimed my dad as he returned to the living room.

"It is a Telecaster, but the pickguard is different from a normal one," he continued.

"Let me see," I asked.



Once my eyes focused on the image of the guitar, I immediately loved it but just as quickly dismissed my feelings due to the extreme absurdity of this request on the universe.

“Yeah, that's a cool guitar, but he wouldn't want to sell it,” I said sheepishly.

“I don't know Sea, you’ve got to use the law of attraction if you really want it. We all need to start doing it. Look at the photo again and imagine it's yours,” mom strongly suggested.

Twelve hours later, I was standing on the side of the road looking at the same guitar in the trunk of Bill's car.

“How about six?” He asked me.

It seemed like a rushed decision. I didn't even get to hear it plugged in. But I was on my way to band practice and low on cash.

“Can you do five?” I asked.

Minutes later I walked in the door to find the rest of the band waiting around for me.

“Well, I got an electric guitar,” I said as I opened the case.

The guys flipped out! I unknowingly got an incredible deal on a popular vintage guitar. I was more worried about getting made fun of for a misguided impulsive decision. I plugged it in, it sounded great and it played great too. The last thing I needed to do was somehow show my gratitude to the universe so I could continue to bask in these sorts of blessings. Once I got home, my mother was just as inspired to see my success with the law of attraction that this new guitar became the unofficial mascot of her fight. Too bad everyone's self-defeating skepticism and darker demons prevailed and the symbolism of my new guitar would turn to a lost beacon that once glimmered of hope.



(2009) Searching for my pillar of light

Now that marijuana was changing my thinking, I tried to redirect some of this energy into finally getting what I wanted out of my life.

Meaning, it was time to use the law of attraction again but for something better than a guitar. I was tired of watching all the happy and healthy romantic relationships around me. Now it was my turn to find someone special.

I imagined myself as a pillar of light in the darkness, moving quickly as I passed by other pillars of light. I visualized a diagram of how magnetism works out of a science book and I had and applied that image to my pillar of light in the darkness. Now all the other pillars I passed by moved slightly towards or strongly away from me. After applying this method to my waking mind for a few months, I felt that she was close and about to draw near.

“How did things turn out with the new love of your life?” Eli asked me.

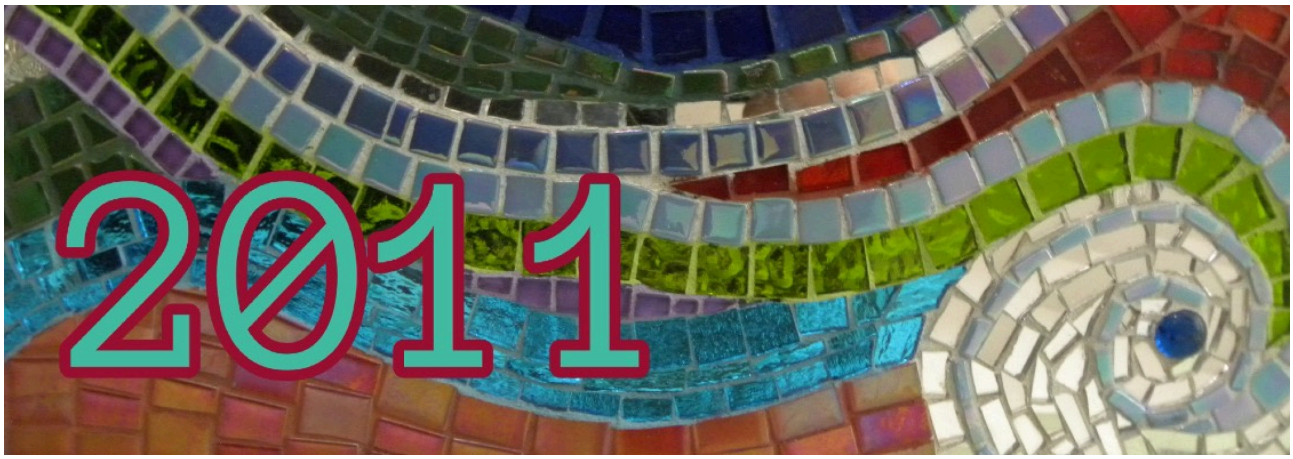
“I'm sorry, I got distracted. With who?” I asked Eli to continue our conversation.

“With Charlotte, the woman from the show, where you almost got in a fight? Are you going to see her again?'” Eli wanted to know.

“I hope so, I sent her a message, but I haven't heard back yet,” I told him.

“Well if you like her this much, I hope it works out. You deserve something great after everything you've been through,” Eli replied.

“Yeah,” I said. “I think the universe owes me one.”



(2011) Early Monday morning, February 14th.

Just waiting in the solitary holding cell was as much as I could handle. The shackles were too tight. The guards had made a big show of force when securing them on to me. All I could do was continuously twist the tight handcuffs in hopes of finding a spot on my wrist where they didn't hurt. In the silence of the forced air, I found no spot, but with nothing else to do, I kept at it. My mind had to chew on something more palatable than what came next.

There were no vacant seats in the courtroom and many more were motivated to stand in the back and watch on that cold Monday morning. As I was brought in, I faintly heard that there were people crying. I recognized about a third of the people in the room and felt comforted by seeing the faces of a few friends. But that comfort quickly vanished as I wondered who the rest of these people were. I noticed a group of people up front who weren't trying to hold back their emotions. They all had the piercing eyes of what must have been my victim's family. I had to turn away.



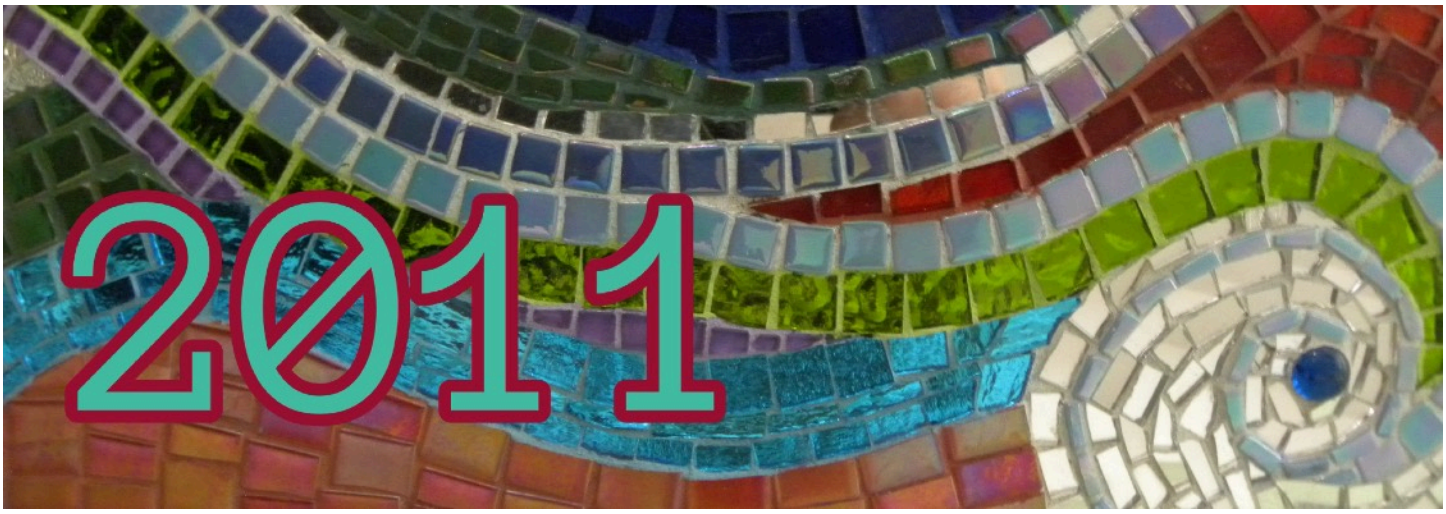
Lilly introduced herself. She was the lawyer that would be assigned to my case. She told me that the proceedings were just getting underway and how to continue from here. I agreed.

"The court calls to order the People Vs. Sea Stoltzner on a charge of attempted murder." Commanded the judge. "How does Mr. Stoltzner plead?"

Lilly stood up, walked over to me, put her hand on my shoulder and addressed the courtroom.

"Not Guilty!"

Chapter Two
Being good at being with each other



(2011) Mid February. County Jail.

I woke up cold. It was the dead of winter with a snowstorm fast approaching, so those both seemed like good reasons for me to be cold. But that wasn't it. The sting of my first court date was fresh. Even with the layers of madness still running through my head, I could see that I caused a lot of pain and social disturbance. It was definitely unsettling to be in the center ring of this circus I created, but that wasn't the chill I was feeling. It was something else.

I knew I'd see Her today. At some point a guard would call my name, apply the shackles, and present me to Her. And then I'd have to somehow communicate the truth of what really happened. All while they're listening to every word.

“Maybe it's not safe for Her to see me,” I said aloud in my cell. But were they listening to me here too?



Just to be safe, I decided to keep my voice to the inside of my mind but I kept on talking all the same.

“But wait? Wasn't She dead? Or a clone?” I discussed within.

“If I was wrong and She really is alive, was I wrong about anything else?” My thoughts were going too deep.

“I mean I could be in real trouble here, they're telling me a man is in a coma and I'm responsible. That Psy-Op's team must be behind this whole thing. How I'm I going to get the password out when I'm stuck in here?” I continued this line of thinking on repeat.

The guard called me on my intercom. “Stoltzner, visit”.

The shackles went on, I was led a short distance to the booth, I sat on the hard metal stool as I watched Her walking down the hall towards

me. Now the whole world faded as She sat down too, locked my eyes, and put the telephone receiver to Her lips.

“Are they feeding you OK?” She asked after a shy hello. I complained about not being able to smoke.

“I don't know what to say, Sea, this is a lot to try and handle,” She told me with complete understandable honesty.

“It's kind of hard for me too. I'm not even sure what's going on,” I protested.

“I don't know how to make sense of this, what happened to you while you were out at Jon's?” She pleaded for the reason for all of this suffering.

The pain in Her eyes was more than enough proof of how dearly She loved me. This quickly put to rest any fear that the Psy-Op's team or whomever else could be listening may ruin my life even further. I needed to give Her a little clarity. So I thought for a second and went with the first thing that came to mind that She’d understand.

“It was all in that book, The Matrix Energetics. It worked!”



(2010) Early April. A thrift store in Grass Valley.



“Hey Eli, What's up?” I answered mechanically before it was illegal to talk on the phone and drive in the state of California.

“Oh nothing much. What are you doing?” He asked.

“I just bought a sweet leather wallet from a thrift store. It's got a kind of tropical floral print on it, I think. I don't know, I'm driving and I only checked it out for a minute,” I told him to no related response.

“I've got that show in San Francisco tonight, are you coming with?” He asked with panic in his voice.

“Well, I don't know...” I started to say but got interrupted.

“I'll get you dinner. How about one of those burritos from the place by the college, sound good?” He pressured me for an answer.

“Yeah... Okay... When do we need to leave?” I asked.

“An hour if we can,” Eli answered.

“An hour!! Okay, I'll meet you at your house. I've got to go home and get ready.” I said as I returned to focus on my driving.

We made pretty good time to the city, but the local traffic slowed us down some and we arrived at the venue with little time to prepare. As Eli was setting up his musical gear, I stood alone in the empty wooden hall and waited until we could go outside for a cigarette. From across the room, I saw Mary and Frank enter and approach the stage.

Mary had set up the evening's entertainment and would be playing after Eli. She was another folk singer from Nevada City. She wrote convincing lyrically descriptive music. She had long black hair and a caramel complexion. She allowed other's perceptions of her to be their realities.

Frank was a little bit too friendly, as if there was an urgency for him to make new personal connections. I found it off-putting, but he was a cool enough dude beyond my first impressions. He was around my height with a head of wavy brown hair. He liked to talk of his eclectic taste in new age music as he passed around his glass-blown weed pipe with a baby blue dolphin on it.

Eli struggled to get his samplers up and running, so Mary saw to his needs. As she did, Frank reintroduced himself as we stood off to the side of the stage and casually talked as new people came and went around us. Then suddenly, I lost his complete attention.



“Hey, Roxy! You made it! It's so good to see you!” He shouted so She'd hear him over the noise of Eli's samplers.

She walked into the room in a slim white dress covered in black polka dots and approached me from my blind spot, not being reviled until I heard her name. All of the atoms in the room, which had previously lay dormant in wooden planks, came to life and warped around the heavy cosmic weight of this heavenly manifested, earthly inhabitant. Her golden blonde hair and half faded sunglasses hid a good part of her face. Once She drew near, I got the first scent of the perfume that would immediately start to intoxicate me. She was happy to be among friends and smiled brightly.

As everyone fawned over Her presence, I felt too insignificant of a human being to be a part of Her world and kinda just wanted to wander off. But once I heard Her southern accent, I decided I needed to fight my introverted urge to leave and wait my turn and be introduced.

“So your Roxy, I'm friends with Jon. He’s mentioned you,” I said as I shook Her hand softly.

“Yeah, I've heard of you too. You're that Cobra fellow,” She replied.

The show was about to start and the performers only had a few minutes to finish sound checking, so Roxy asked me if I'd like to get a drink. I ordered my beer, but when it came time for me to pay I opened the elaborately crafted floral wallet I had just bought and realized I forgot to put anything in it. Most importantly being the ten dollars I had to my name.

“Hey, this is going to sound stupid, but I just got this wallet today and I forgot to put money in it,” I coyly started to explain.

“Yeah man, no problem,” she told me as she paid the bartender for my drink.

I did have cigarettes, so we took our drinks out to the patio as she made note that she rarely indulged herself with them, but that she would tonight.

“Jon? I've known him for a while now, same with Mary. I met them both around the same time I started hanging around the Nevada City scene,” I told Roxy as I took short drags off my cigarette. “I've known Eli forever. We work on each other's musical projects when we can. He's going to be helping me out with my new band Metalujah.”



“Metalujah! That's a righteous band name, what kind of music do you guys play?” She asked.

“It's turning out to be some kind of a metal band, with an air of whimsy, programmed beats, and a bunch of synth keyboards,” I explained.

“Yeah, I just gave up on my band. It was too much work and headache. I don't really want to talk about it,” she said shyly. “But tell me more about Metalujah, that sounds like fun!”

“Not much more to tell, if I had a guitar in my hand I'd play you some. When I'm not doing that, I've got my art studio at St. Joseph's.” I said.

“I've been there, years ago,” Roxy commented.

“Oh, cool. So you know the vibe there. I make a kind of psychedelic, pointillist, pop art. I've done a few album covers for Eli,” I said.

“Oh yeah, I've seen those,” She told me.

“My other plan is to do an outdoor pot grow this summer to pay for my Metalujah record. I've done indoor before, but never outdoor so I'm excited to give that a try.” I explained.

“Well that all sounds great, the music business is such a different game if you own your record,” she said,

“What about you? What occupies your life?” I asked.

“Well, I was staying at Jon's place. He was a great host and I had a lovely time, but I got a house-sitting gig in the Berkeley hills I couldn't turn down. It's a lovely house with a good vibe and a sweet cat. I'm just now getting settled and waiting to see what comes next,” she vaguely elaborated.

Just then Mary found us.

“There you two are, we're all set up and have drinks waiting at the bar. Come on and join us,” Mary asked.

Now that the cigarettes we'd smoked were nothing more than ash, we took up a couple empty seats at the bar with Mary, Frank, and Eli. As the opening act was getting going, Roxy and Mary were busy in each other's ears. This was when Eli had some news he had to share with me.

“So you and Roxy seem to be hitting it off,” he noted.

“Yeah, She's great. Why?” I asked, hoping not to jinx anything.

“You know She's from the band Pure Silver, right?” Eli enlightened me.

My eyes suddenly lost all focus as my head turned sharply back to the left as if I had bitten into a ripe lemon. I wasn't sure how to process this.

When Roxy told me she had retired from her band, I just assumed she had given up on the grind of trying to make it. I never thought she was retiring because she was sick of the life she had been cursed to, after already making it. Pure Silver; I have never given them much attention. I'd heard a couple of their songs and seen them on a few music magazine covers. My last girlfriend Kim liked them, but I'd often dismissed her taste due to her younger age. Pure Silver, Eli gave me a moment to think about it. Her hair and the polka-dotted dress were a departure from her former psych hippy style. I liked her a lot, but I kinda didn’t think much of her band. As I thought about it more, Eli and I were interrupted so I had to file these thoughts in the ‘to be continued’ section of my mind.

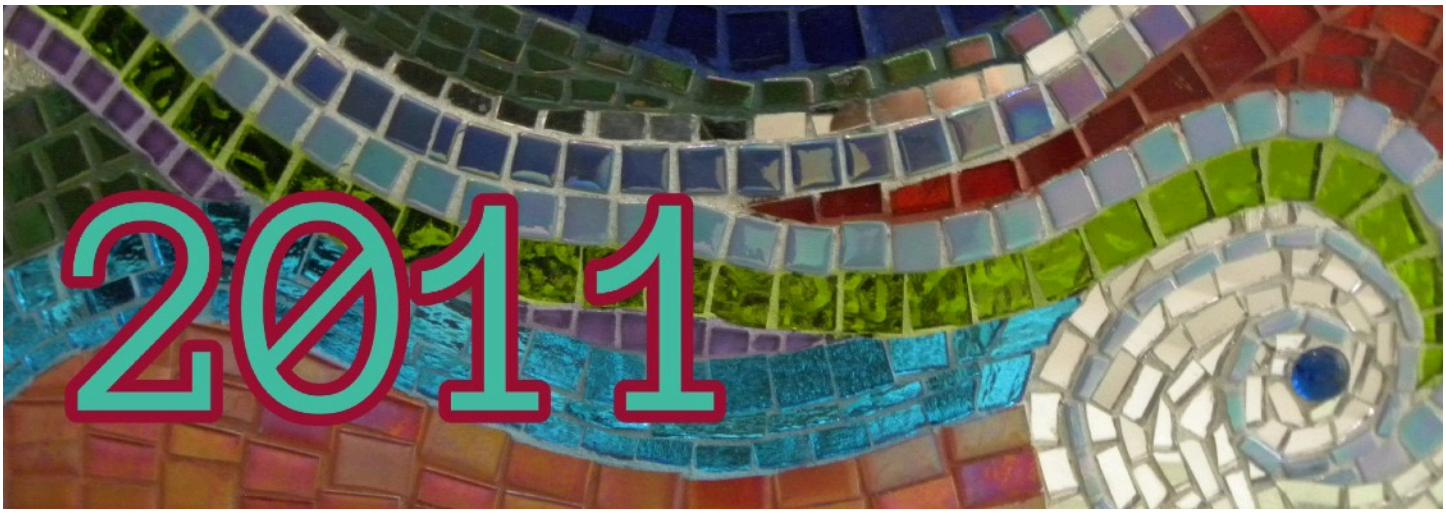
The next few hours of music were a quiet celebration of Roxy and I just standing there, then dancing while our eyes met often as we shared immediate smiles. She carried a relaxed and upbeat vibe about Her. She could appreciate humor and had a genuine laugh. I liked Her. I thought since I'd probably never see Her again, my best and only course of action was to try and kiss her by the end of the night. But as quickly as the music ended, I was standing in an alley with Roxy, Mary, Frank, and Eli who were all waiting to get paid. I didn't have a good moment to try that bold kiss, then a homeless man started yelling at us all and Roxy made an urgent goodbye to everyone and left.

“This sucks!” I told Eli in the car. “I met a woman I like and she's got to be way out of my league.”

“I don't know Sea, She seemed pretty into you tonight,” he disagreed strongly.

“Yeah, I can only woo a woman in short bursts, but the overall arc of my life is probably tanking. She might not see that tonight, but I can only juggle my shortcomings for so long before I'll scare her away. I'm not sure it's worth the trouble,” I explained my inevitable conclusion.

“Don't get all defeated over nothing. You're the guy everybody wants to bet on right now. Pretty soon Metalujah will be up and running, you'll have your garden growing fat and you'll finally get that first big art show, I know it. You're going to have your pick of women. I don't think you'll need to find a better way to woo Roxy, I think She's going to have to find a way to woo you!”



(2011) Mid February. County Jail.

After my visit with Roxy, it was all I could think about. Mostly because I couldn't really remember what I actually told her. After her first couple of questions, it quickly dissolved into a giant rant about Wikileaks, the emerald tablets, children's valentines day cards, and protecting God from something. I guess the newspaper had more right

than I was ready to admit. But she was coming to visit me again. Now I needed to focus, I needed to say the right things and give her a good reason to stand by my side. I needed this do-over to help her understand what was really going on.

The snowstorm had finally moved in and was interrupting my visit. I couldn't see anything other than how important this visit was going to be to Roxy and my future. With just enough time for a full thirty-minute visit, Roxy and Starla showed. But on both sides of the glass, this visit would be directed by our agendas over the harsh emotions of it all.

Roxy graciously allowed me to try to explain it all again. For a few minutes at least, I could tell that she would have been open to some version of our shared lover's reality, but I was giving Her little to work with. She told me was out of money and had lined up some more work back in Mendocino and that She'd be leaving after the snowstorm. She reminded me that she didn't get any cell reception and then She asked if I remembered her new number. I tried to pick up my explanation where she cut me off. But She stopped me again.

“I need to know that you're going to be alright,” She said.

I just looked at Her for a quick second.

“Why wouldn't I, this is all going to turn out fine and soon everyone will see that I'm not crazy...”

She gave me a little more time to speak my peace. I would have liked to have heard more of Hers, but She started to put back on her mittens and reminded me that She needed to get going before the snow storm outside got worse.

“The only thing I need you to know is that you're my sister in

Christ, and I'll understand whatever you have to do," I told Her in all sincerity.

With that, She mechanically told me that She loved me, handed Starla the phone, got up, and walked down the narrow hallway to someplace far from me and the impending problems.

"I did pretty good," I thought. "I'll see Her again soon after I release the password and all this court stuff gets settled. She probably thinks she needs to hide out a bit, to keep me safe in the meantime".

That made the most sense, so that's what I went with.

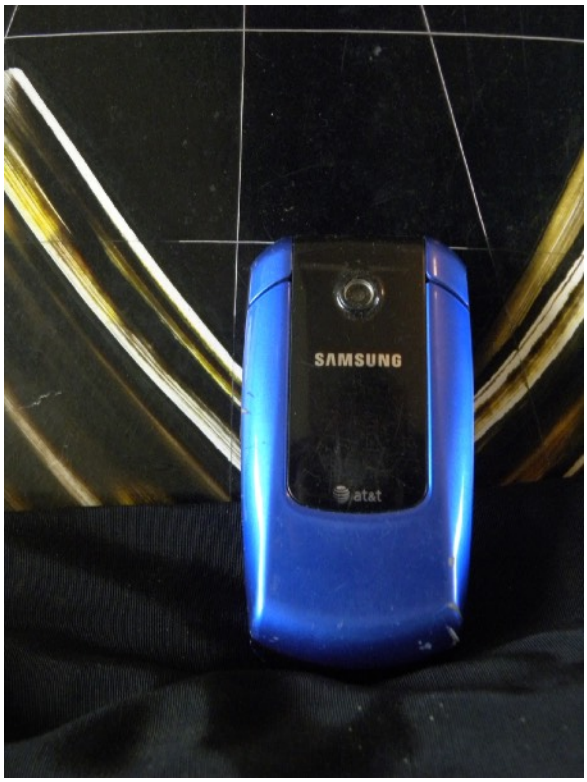


(2010) Late April. Nevada City.

Tommy and my sisters, Starla and Sandy were over at my manufactured house watching something funny on the T.V. It seemed like we were all in a better place than we were after mom died. My current emotional stability was now reliant on my recent marijuana habit and because of this, I was oblivious of how my sisters were actually coping with the loss. Just as long as we were all finding something to laugh about, I figured things were fine. I was also making

some good progress on some new Metalujah music with Tommy, which eased tensions between Starla and me. I liked Tommy and was fine with him as a partner for Starla, it just took a while to get over everything.

I had a problem with my last cell phone. Mostly revolving around the fact that I never had the money to pay the bill. My dad talked me into replacing it with one of those prepaid burner phones.



“It will be much cheaper for you, I'll even buy you the phone,” he told me.

Now instead of missing a payment and not having a phone for a month, I'd have to constantly buy phone cards and when I was broke, I’d be without a phone till I could come up with an extra ten dollars. It was a slightly better system in theory, but involved a lot of extra leg work.

So, we were watching something funny on T.V. when my roommate interrupted us.

“I just got a text from Eli that say’s, ‘Tell Cobra that Roxy is at the show at the Crazy Horse!’”

“Let's Go!” Tommy exclaimed.

Almost a month had gone by since we met, and my friends were aware of the situation. I'd talked about it enough to show my hand and desire for Roxy. I had even sent messages to Mary and Jon asking them about her and for whatever reason, she was currently right down the

street. The four of us were quickly on the move.

The show was ending when we arrived, and we easily found Roxy standing outside the Crazy Horse with Glen.

Glen was another artist from the area, he mostly did music video work. He was tall, thin, and obviously too intelligent to say the words in his brain fast enough. He'd usually drop in on the Nevada City scene a couple times a year and sometimes stir up minor drama–I liked him. He was fun.

Now here he was with Roxy, who he had just met out at Jon's place on the coast. He was without a car and trying to make his way to his mom's house in Nevada City when Roxy volunteered to drive him. It seemed to be a convenient cover for her to run into me again, but she wouldn't admit this immediately. Glen told us about an after-party, so we grabbed a few beers at the gas station and met them there.

As the night progressed, Roxy and I couldn't stop finding stuff to talk and laugh about. My sisters, Tommy and Glen all played their part and helped keep the night casual. As the after party died down, I moved the whole operation over to my garage where I was beginning work on a music video project. I was asked to design a background set for a music video idea a friend had, and I was using my childhood Lego's as the medium. After some encouragement, everybody there got to work building me Lego things to use, as Roxy and I kept talking.

"The stars are still out. Any moment now we're going to see the first evidence of the sun," I told Roxy after a fun, late-night of entertaining as we walked out of my garage onto the driveway.

"Oh, I love this time of night. When the whole thing starts changing over," She said.

"I think I'm beat!" Glen said as he got into the passenger seat of

Roxy's car.

"Yeah, I'm coming," She said to Glen. "Thanks for having us."

"You know where you're going?" I asked.

"Yeah, Glen's Mom lives down the street. I think he's with it enough to get us there," She said softly.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" I asked.

"Nothing. Why? Do you want to do this again?" Roxy questioned.

I used the faint light from my nearby bedroom window to lean in and finally kiss her. This action was received warmly, and I quickly surveyed a map of her mouth.

"That's what I really wanted to do. But yes, you should come back tomorrow." I told her.

"OK. I've got your number, I'll call you later," she took a step back and grabbed her car's door handle. "Now get some sleep, it's late."

"I will once I see this sunrise". I took a step back as she fired the engine and watched the car climb my steep driveway.

There was just so much to say before giving in to the inevitable coupling of our souls. For now, an early morning kiss would be plenty. It also helped that my sisters had fallen asleep in my bed. I could wait for that level of escalation. I had forgotten my cell phone didn't work because I needed to buy more minutes, but I gave this up as a problem for later in the morning where I'd have the whole day to figure it out. But now, I was going to bed satisfied in knowing that I'd found someone as apparently as into me as I was into her.

"Hey, sorry I'm just calling now. We went over to Glen's Dad's for dinner and my phone gets shoddy service out there in the sticks. What are you doing? Should we head back over?" Roxy told me over the phone around 8:00.

Tonight she wore her black Gravedigger T-shirt with an olive green skirt. As always, she hid her eyes behind her brown faded prescription sunglasses and her recent blond hair that she was getting sick of.

“I think I want some bangs,” She said half-jokingly and half inquisitively as she opened the tequila.

“I'll do it,” I said. “My sister Sandy cuts hair. I think it runs in the family.”

There was a lot at stake, I didn't want to mess things up, but I wanted to show I could handle some pressure. The tequila kept things lively as I made a few choice cuts. She was happy with my efforts and I was ready to relax after a hard fifteen minutes worth of work. We socialized a bit after this. There were a few other people over and we didn't want to make things too obvious. After the beer ran out, the tequila bottle ran dry and the mood finally mellowed, I grabbed Roxy's hand and gently pulled it back towards my bedroom. I didn't get any resistance. We kissed until we fell asleep completely forgetting there was anything more for two human beings to delight in.

I woke up the next morning to Roxy's big brown eyes looking directly into mine.

“Come to Berkeley with me.” She asked.

I had to postpone a few minor obligations to go and when she stopped to pick up her stuff from Glen's Mom's, I called my dad and begged him for some cash. He agreed and we made another quick stop with him, then some food and coffee. The last thing I needed to do was send a few texts that I'd be gone for a few day’s, then I turned off my phone and we were on our way.

Once we were on the interstate, we held hands till Alameda County. As we drove I picked up bits and pieces of who Roxy was and what I was getting into. First the car, it wasn't her car, belonged to Liam. He played drums in Faith's band. It was Faith's house that Roxy was taking care of. They were currently on tour. Faith had a big hit in the '90s and Liam played in one of my all-time favorite bands. This wasn't my first glimpse of success, but still a big one. It was definitely a reminder that even if being in Pure Silver didn't mean much to me, it did to others.

I was so in awe of what I was feeling for her that I paid little attention to the surrounding details. Until now it had been three nights of drinks, parties, and laughter but we were finally alone, driving 70 miles per hour to somewhere new and in the pauses between each other's sentences imagining our new life together.

Even though I'd only known her a short while, I discovered how to read her mood by her expressive laughter. It was a language unto itself. The key was inadvertently stumbled onto as I held her hand while we drove. A quick little finger tickle into the palm of her hand would get me the most delightful squeal, but I knew enough not to take advantage of it. Also, when she got excited about something, she couldn't help but laugh through the end of her sentences. And then sometimes to acknowledge an obvious point she gets really boisterous and ends her conclusion with three short deep chuckles, just a few things I was noticing.



Narrow streets led us up the Berkeley Hills. She parked Liam's gray Volvo in his spot in the driveway. There was a new gate to the

small courtyard in front of the house. It had just been installed while she was with me. But it was left unlocked and the key waited inside. This was Faith's second home. She was burnt out in L.A. and needed a change. It was still a work in progress, but there was no need to improve the view she had of San Francisco. As we entered and walked down the glossy hardwood floors to the musical instrument laden living room, it was all over. The perfect place to fall in love.



I wouldn't say we were tired from the drive, just happy to have been freed from the tease of only getting to touch each other's hands. We took up residency on the couch and just stared into each other's eyes while smiling for a bit. And then I heard a new laugh, one I'd never hear again. A laugh that told me she was giving herself to me completely. So I gave her a new name, our code to each other.

“Tah,tah,tah,tah, It's kind of like Morse Code when you speak it. But I think we should spell it differently,” I told Roxy on the couch.

“Spell what?” She asked.

“Your new pet name. It's just four tah's when whispered or four taps on a table at a party. But I think we should spell it differently. T.X.T.X. I like that,” I explained.

“What does it mean?” She wanted to know.

“It's our secret to each other and my promise to you. One we don't need to explain to anyone.”

As we sat together on the couch and looked out on the whole San Francisco skyline. I was aware that I'd discovered a personal treasure so vast and radiant, that for me at that moment, there wasn't another in the nearby cities or other places I've traveled to compare to her and the expanding love she had awoken in me.

“Do you really need that cigarette?” Roxy whispered as she turned to me under the white cotton sheets.

“I guess not,” I said as I stood up out of bed and started putting on my pants. “I'm just going to the bathroom real quick.”

“Don't be gone too long. I miss you already,” Roxy said a little bit louder.

Once I returned, I took a drink of water from our communal glass on the edge of the table and picked up my pack of smokes, giving them a shake.

“I thought you didn't need that cigarette?” Roxy said as she opened her eyes again.

“I saw the clock. Can you believe it's almost 3:00? I haven't had one since breakfast. All things considered, I think that's a big enough

accomplishment. I'll just be gone for a second. You'll hardly notice I'm gone," I explained as I rummaged through our pile of clothes on the floor to find a shirt.

"You're not just leaving your butts on the ground, I don't want to be responsible if Faith finds one of those things," Roxy rolled over, exposing me to her bareback.

"Come on, I told you I'm on my best behavior. You've got nothing to worry about," I said as I checked my pockets for my orange lighter.

"Yeah, famous last words," Roxy muttered as I left the room.

We spent three blissful days together before she returned me to my now seemingly void of an existence. But the love I discovered in Berkeley would be my motivation to keep going.

On the drive home, I was comfortable enough to ask questions about Banner, the creative force behind Pure Silver. Roxy was hesitant to say much. I didn't want to push her, it had just come up in conversion. She grabbed a Bible from the back seat and opened it up to a couple of pictures of them she liked. She told me Banner had given her that bible and deep down he was a good guy, but on the surface, he was troubled. I was happy to let the topic drop.

Once we got to my house and settled in, I got a call that a bunch of people were getting together at the National bar. This was not uncommon for a Wednesday night and I asked Roxy if she wanted to go out for a bit. We both tried to seamlessly rejoin civilized society but were still in our own little world together. It was like every other voice but hers was just ringing in my ears. We still couldn't keep our eyes off each other. I think we stayed for forty-five minutes.

"Cobra, looks like you finally got yourself out of town. How did that go?" Cole asked me candidly at the end of the bar.

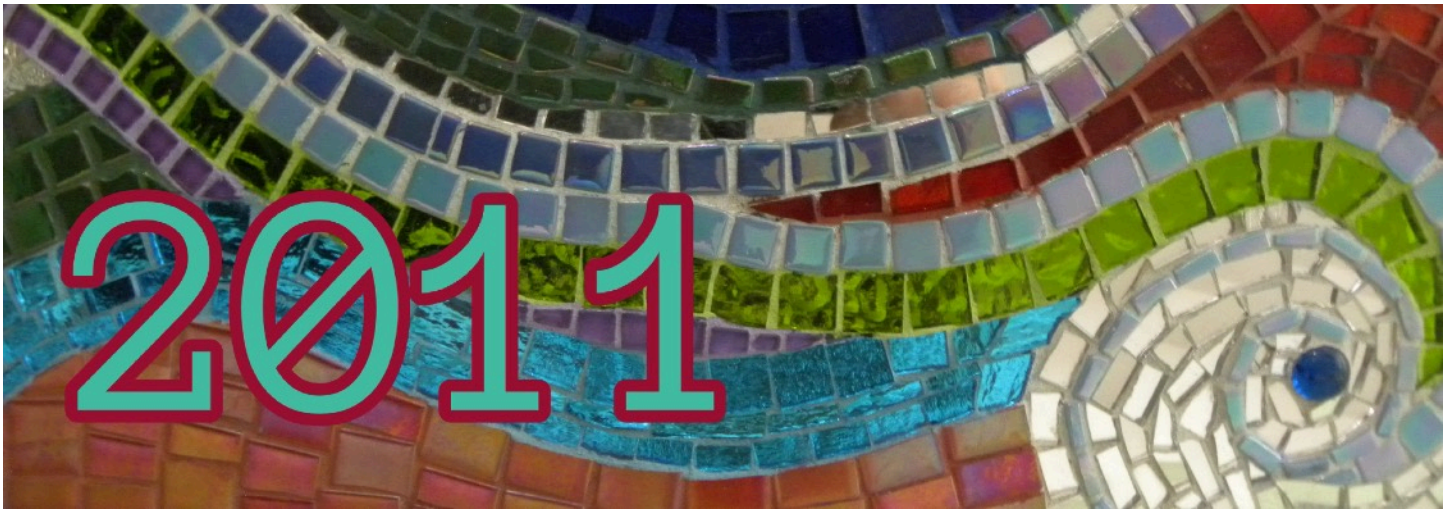
“Great! I'm crazy about her,” I told him.

“Wow, I'd never thought I'd see the day that a woman finally caught her hooks in you. It's a pretty wild pairing. Be careful,” Cole advised.

“Yeah, I guess. It's been kind of a whirlwind thing. I haven't had the time to think about it all.” I replied.

By the next afternoon, Roxy really had to get back to the cat she was supposed to be watching. She had used up all the goodwill Faith's friend would lend in coming by twice a day for Roxy to be out gallivanting around with some new guy. Part of me was glad to get a break. I was exhausted from being so happy all the time. Before she got in the car she took out a white handkerchief with an embroidered R, sprayed it with her perfume, Egyptian Musk. She gave it to me as we kissed and whispered soft goodbyes. I waved as Liam's car climbed my steep driveway, hearing the motor work and coast until She was briefly visible through the trees at the bottom of the property. After all the sounds of the engine died away, I put the handkerchief to my face and the memory of the last six days rushed back.





(2011) Late February and onward. County Jail.

Now that Roxy had left town to pursue her financial needs, I didn't know how to keep motivated. Jail was a constant head trip. Nothing to do for twenty-three hours a day but think about all facets of what had happened. Hours of nothing but replaying the tape. The sweat lodge. The fire tornado. The story of King Cat. I had bear witness to the inner working of God's universal mind. Why had it all turned on me? And then the story would change from one of pointless suffering to my life as a sacrifice to the greater good. A needed vessel in the aid of Wikileaks. I could rest a little easier if I knew it wasn't all for nothing. Then a random noise, like the flush of a toilet or the slamming of a cell door would startle me, and I'd have to start my grand delusion over.

When I was arrested, I didn't have my glasses. The first few weeks of jail were difficult without them. Right before her trip, Roxy and I had recently bought ourselves new pairs. This was the most distracting part of my visits with her. Seeing her in them, she didn't look like the woman I fell in love with. Starla had dropped off my new pair, but they took a little while to get to me. Once I had them, It was like I had a piece of Roxy with me, because she'd picked them out. I'd set them on my little metal desk in the corner of my cell and I'd wave to her. Thinking that she'd be able to see me from the pair I'd picked for her.


WBCF
THE
Cobra

At one point the guards shackled me, put me in a van, and brought me to the local hospital to get a CAT scan. The driver took a corner too hard and my new glasses flew off my face, coming apart when they hit the floor. From then on, they were always problematic and a good representation of what our lives apart were turning into.

If I sat on my small metal desk and looked out the window sharply to the left, I could see the parking lot of the county building where Starla worked. I'd often see her walking with coworkers and driving in to work. Sometimes I'd see my friends meeting up with her directly in front of the jail. As they'd talk, I wondered what these uninducted new visitors were thinking about my situation. Then, as a sharp pain would stab my neck, I'd have to turn it back away from the window.

I was in a surprisingly good mood when they called me down to booking. Two plainclothes detectives were waiting. Just the two of them being there was a show of force, so they forgo any more theatrics and just told me.

"You're being charged with Murder." One of them said as they handed me an official document, to remind me that it was really true and I was being held responsible.

This was devastating. I'd been praying nonstop that God would miraculously spare me from my misguided actions. I just stood there for a minute, knowing it was true but hoping the detectives would just finally end my suffering. But they did no such thing.

I made it back to my cell before the first rush of tears hit me. But coming to terms with this charge would take a long time to accept. I reluctantly pressed on.

Lilly worked for the county's public defender's office. She could

wear a stern face. She had brown, shoulder-length hair that accompanied a blazer and a black skirt. Her voice carried the weight of the authority that had been trusted to her. I needed every bit of the council she could spare. When I was finally able to sit down with her, she opened with the harsh reality of my case.



“You're in a lot of trouble, Mr. Stoltzner. I just saw the interrogation video and you basically confessed to the whole thing,” she said harshly.

I protested that I'd been tricked by the detectives

“You were not, you told them you would talk for a cigarette,” she reminded me.

This was true. During my time waiting to see her, she'd done her homework. Then she laid out the basic evidence. I don't think to berate me, just to show me that it was a pretty open and shut case. Then she offered a potential solution.

“If this was some sort of mental break, there are other options we could look at, but they're difficult and take a while,” Lilly paused.

I remained silent for her conclusion.

“I'm going to send a psychiatrist I work with, he's a good man. Feel free to tell him anything,” she told me in a confident tone.

“The guards brought me to their doctor on a T.V. and he told me I was probably Schizophrenic and I needed some medication,” I replied.

“Did you take them?” She asked.

“No, I don’t think my girlfriend wants me too,” I said recalling a random conversation I once had with Roxy.

“Sea, we need to build a case for your insanity, let's wait and see how you do in here. This has to work, you won't make it in prison,” Lilly packed up her case of files. “Hang in there Mr. Stoltzner.”

Even without Roxy, I had the support of my family and friends. I was getting as many visits as was allowed and got to see a wide variety of the people I've known. On one occasion I got to talk with Cole. He too was trying to wrap his head around everything and had a poignant question for me as our visit was coming to an end.

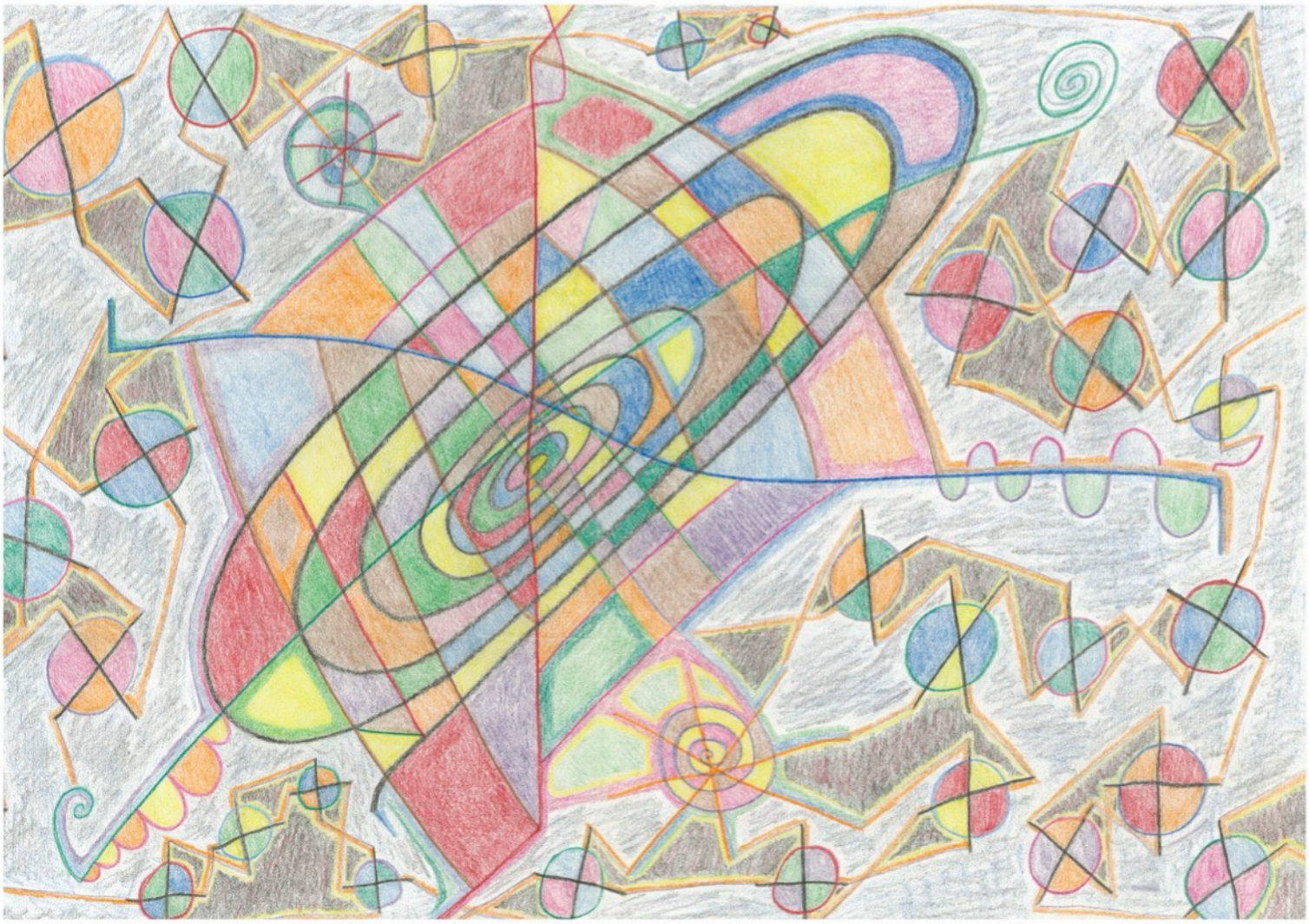
“I wonder what you think about,” he asked, mystified.



Minutes later, when I was back in my cell, I thought I'd pay attention to my thoughts so I could report them to Cole. With this new found intention, I was able to get a glimpse into the window of my insanity. All I did, over and over again, was retell the story I wanted to hear. A story that supported the idea that I was working for Wikileaks. A story where I was special and that things were going to work out to my amazing benefit. As I lay there observing my thoughts, I began to question them.

“If it's all really real and I am working for Wikileaks, why did I have to feel that overbearing depression out on Jon's cliff? And was that

a real UFO in the neighbor's yard? And that voice I heard, was it really mine from the future or just my imagination?" It was a lot to suddenly be thinking about.



It took over a month for Lilly's doctor to have the time to see me. Over a couple hour-long sessions, I told him everything about my offense I'd been running through my head. I was genuinely interested in his conclusion. I was still monitoring my thoughts and questioning my sanity most of the time, but then I'd see something random like an ad for a particular hardware store or a certain episode of the Andy Griffith show and be back in the reality of Wikileaks. A reality where I'd become a twenty-first-century American pop culture shaman.

Lilly's doctor was kind and let me explain what I thought had taken place. I brought up Roxy's pair of heavy-duty goggles, I said I was wearing during the incident. I told him that it's possible that the Psy-Op's team played the whole event behind the lenses and I really didn't do it. That was enough for him to conclude that I was incompetent to stand trial for my actions.



(1999) The end of the Millennium. Around Nevada County.

The summer after my senior year was quickly coming to an end while I was ignoring that I had my whole life ahead of me. My mother very kindly informed me that the community college was starting in 2 weeks and I should stop by and see what classes they still had available. Most classes were already full but I was able to enroll in nutrition, earth science, music theory, and ear training.

Now that I had taken this decisive action, a friend from church told me they were looking for courtesy clerks at the grocery store where she worked and I should stop by. I did and filled out the application. My interview went well enough and by the time summer was over I was working and in school.

Bagging groceries was enjoyable and I did it well. All of the

cashiers were appreciative when I'd be at their check stands helping out. I came home tired after every shift, but I was developing a good work ethic. School was school and it didn't take me long to start to struggle in nutrition and earth science. I really connected with the instructor of the music theory class. He was effective in teaching students how to think about a subject and even as I sat there loving it, I did little homework and performed below my needed ability.

One night after work, I bopped over to the diner and saw my friends sitting in their normal booth, so I just went over and joined them.

“Did you see him?” One of them said.

“Who?” I asked, not knowing if I was interrupting an ongoing conversation.

“Eli, from when we were kids. I told you he was back in town. He’s got a new band. I guess people are really into them. He's sitting over there.” They explained.

I looked, it was him. I wanted to go over and say hello, but I felt dirty and gross in my work clothes. I ordered a hamburger and had an empty nagging thought about it all.

“We already said hi, go on over, I'm sure it will be cool,” I was encouraged.

Eli was sitting in one of the big booths with a bunch of hipsters I recognized from around town, he had on a faded brown t-shirt and wore his thick black hair neatly parted off to the side. I sheepishly went over.

“Excuse me, Eli, do you remember me? I'm Sea, our parents used to be friends,” I said.

“Yeah, we’ve got baby picture together.” Eli reminded me.

After a few minutes of becoming reacquainted, Eli told me we should play some music sometime. I took the torn corner of a napkin with his number and told him he'd hear from me soon. I went back to my table where my burger was ready and with an extra sense of satisfaction, I ate.

Even though I had grown up with Eli, it took a while to get accepted into the music scene. It even took a while to realize the extent of the music scene. One day I was rounding up grocery carts at work and saw a show flier promoting Eli's band the upcoming weekend. He hadn't told me about it, plus I hadn't heard back after leaving a few messages on his machine so I figured I should just show up. I said my hellos, met a few new people, and found out when and where the next local show was going to be. It was very awkward standing off to the side by myself, but this was the only way I saw to be in the vicinity of like minded people, so I kept at it.

Even with work, school, and the occasional show, I had a lot of boring nights and went to many movies by myself. It's never taken much for me to feel like I was worthless, but this period of my life had a lot of the needed ingredients. But I persisted.





(2010) May and June. Downtown, the River, and then Big Sur.



Over the summer Roxy and I found ways to get together every couple of weeks. Money was a problem, I had no proper employment and had placed all my eggs in the pot cultivation basket. It sounded like

an easy enough plan at first. Plant the clones in the large canvas bags with dirt from last year, drive out and water a few times a week, then when they are ready, cut them up and make money. What could complicate that?

Gas. I was driving around way too much. Twenty minutes out to my dads, another twenty minutes in a different direction to the garden, then thirty minutes home. I know that doesn't sound like that unreasonable routine, I just had too little cash to support myself in doing this. Roxy could see the big picture. That this was my chance to have the money to pay for my own record and not be beholden to anyone. At least she got it.

Mid May, Roxy found a couple days to break away from feeding Faith's cat and looking out across the bay at San Francisco. After trying out the domestic life at my house for most of the trip, I thought we should go out and do something different. I was aware that she'd been downtown Nevada City plenty of times, so instead I took her to Grass Valley's downtown area for a change of scenery. As we milled around, she noticed a small little shop that sold a treat she'd never heard of.

"Pasties, what's a Pastie?" She exclaimed with humor in her voice.

"You mean to tell me you've been coming to Nevada County for years and you've never had a pastie? Who have you been hanging out with? Pasties are great! That's what the gold miners used to eat down in the mines. It's a food from Cornwall, England. Meat, potatoes, onion, veggies, and seasonings all wrapped up in pie dough, baked, then served with malt vinegar and ketchup," I explained with sincere passion.

"I like that the ladies working here have funny hats, I'll give it a try just for that," she said as we walked past the door.

The Pastie shop mostly does carry out, and only have three small

yellow tables to eat at. We ordered off the old yellow menu board that's been around since I was a kid, then grabbed one of the empty tables.

“You know I lost all my good rings. I used to have the coolest rings. Banner threw them down the hills in Laurel Canyon,” Roxy bravely told me.

“Why'd he do that?” I asked.

“You know, I'd just quit the band and he was mad. He knew I loved them. I had taken them off and they were sitting on the edge of a table and he did it to get back at me,” she explained.

The food arrived and I started to eat as she kept talking about the difficulties of working with Banner in Pure Silver. It's funny how food quickly lowers a person's attention, or does with me at least. Roxy took small bites of her food as she talked and when she did, I'd offer words of support and commiseration for her difficulties in the past. I was putting together that for her, my sometimes rowdy reputation made her feel safe and hopefully, it would help keep Banner out of her new life.

We went on with the rest of our day and I was strongly heartened that she would feel comfortable to share so much. I thought that over time we’d continue to address these feelings, but that never happened. After she was done talking and had finished eating, This was the only time Roxy would ever talk about the band and her old life with any detail and openness. What I thought was something new growing between us was the closing off of her past.

She left that afternoon and I was back to counting nickels to hopefully buy a cheap beer at the end of the evening. But my visits with her made everything I disliked about my life worth it.

Nevada County's crown jewel is easily the Yuba river. Winding forested canyons that meet in piles of large granite boulders and the cool rushing waters of the Sierra Nevada mountain snowpack.



Besides her love of crystal clusters and the small vinyl record collection she was able to leave the band with, the south fork of the Yuba River was quickly rising on Roxy's list of favorite things.We went as often as we could when she was in town.

“I don't think I've got many more years in me. So I'm getting my money's worth now. We're having too good a time for me to be stuck sitting under an umbrella,” Roxy said as she applied sunscreen. “Do you want me to do you too?”

“I don't know, doesn't it all just wash right off when you get in the water? I think I'll skip the middleman,” I said with a responding look of

disappointment. “But don't think that lets you off the hook. I'm still expecting your hands all over me later tonight.”

“And you'll get them too!” Roxy put away the bottle. “Are we jumping off any rocks today?”

“Rocks? Who do you think you're dating? Tarzan?” I playfully asked her.

“No, he swung on vines,” she challenged me. “You’re thinking of someone else.”

“I don't think I ever saw a Tarzan. Are you sure he didn't ever jump off any rocks?” I tried to defend my position.

“He might have, a couple of times,” Roxy said, chuckling. “But he's the vine guy. Everybody knows that.”

“Okay, I give,” I stood up. “I’ll jump off the regular-sized ones. But nothing crazy, or even semi-crazy, I only look like a wild man,” I took Roxy's hand to help her up.

A couple of Roxy's friends were putting on a music festival atop a cliff in Big Sur and asked her to be a part of it. She was hesitant. Pure Silver’s break up still ached like a fresh wound. But they were able to talk her into playing a set of Gospel music on her acoustic guitar early that Sunday morning before everyone left the campground. In her mind, this would be her proper retirement as a musical performer. Roxy's friends were going to play with her and she asked me to sit in too.

I hadn't traveled much since becoming a stoner. I wasn't even sure what the laws were regarding marijuana possession. I'd been given a big black garbage bag of last year's pot trimmings from my outdoor grow partners. Given the time and motivation, you could pick through it and still find some nuggets to get stoned off of. This garbage bag was making my alternative arts lifestyle attainable, but I was also aware of the low-class nature of this existence.

“Hey, should I bring some weed to this thing, or do you think they'll be enough?” I asked Roxy over the phone.

“Weed? No, it's a music festival! There should be a bunch. I wouldn't stress about bringing any,” she answered. “There's also going to be food vendors. We'll get vouchers since we're playing. I'm not even planning to bring all that much.”

We showed up poorly prepared. There was only an Indian food vendor. It was great food, but that's all we ate for three days. I also couldn't track down any weed. I might have if I weren't such a crabby introvert around large groups of unknown people. So I mainly listened to the music from the distance of Liam's car, as Roxy came and went with her friends and occasionally brought me simple offerings like a warm beer or a rescued half of a joint.

“It sure does look pretty like this,” Roxy said from the deep space outside the bonfire. “I love that all the shadows stretch as they come near us.

“Yeah, we're bred to like fire. I think it's in our DNA or something,” I imagined aloud.

“It will go fine tomorrow. I'm not worried about it. It will go fine,” Roxy pep talked to herself.

“You're just going to sing about Jesus to a bunch of hungover hippies. They'll love it,” I reassured her.

“Yeah, it will go fine tomorrow,” Roxy said for the last time.

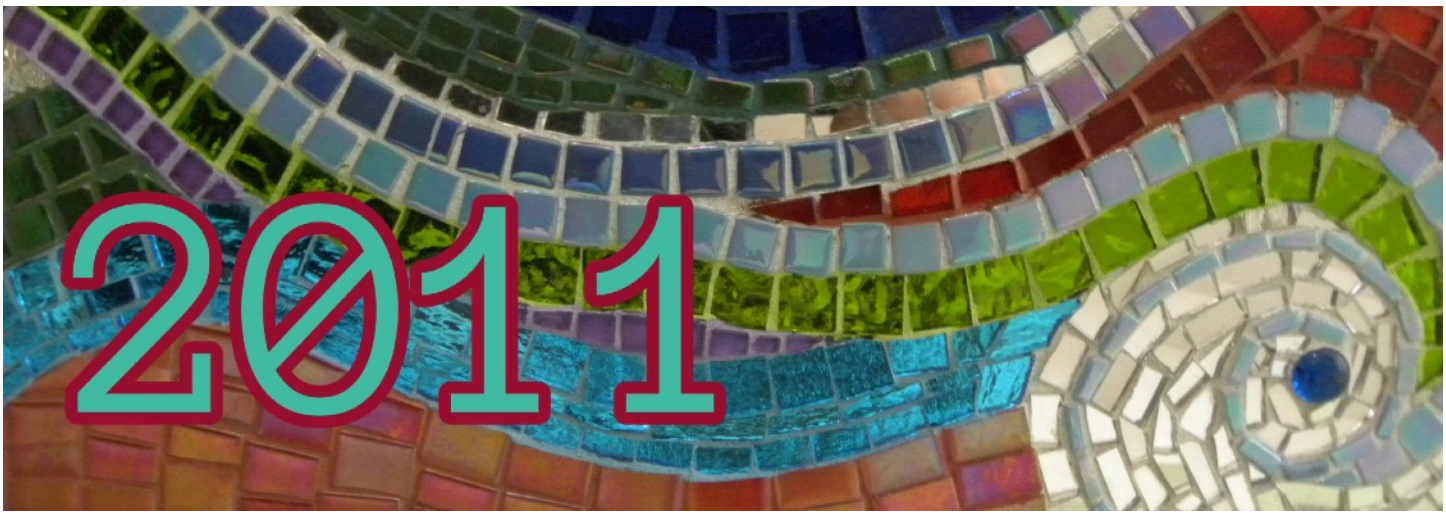
As we watched the festivities from the distance of Liam's car, I leaned up against the back hatch and Roxy against me. Our fingers interlaced as I held her tight. As we waited for nothing but the morning, a DJ interrupted our stillness by playing Pure Silver's most popular song over the P.A. system and people all over the campground started to cheer loudly.

“Look! They're already excited. Everybody's going to love it in the morning,” I told Roxy as I kissed her in the bright blue light of the moon and the faint orange glow of the bonfire.

“Sea, it's been a wild ride getting this far in my life. All I know is I'm happy being with you. I thought I'd forgotten what that felt like. But music isn't for me anymore. I don't know where I'm trying to get to, but I'm just excited to keep looking and find it together.”



Chapter Three
Drugged. Willingly and not so much.



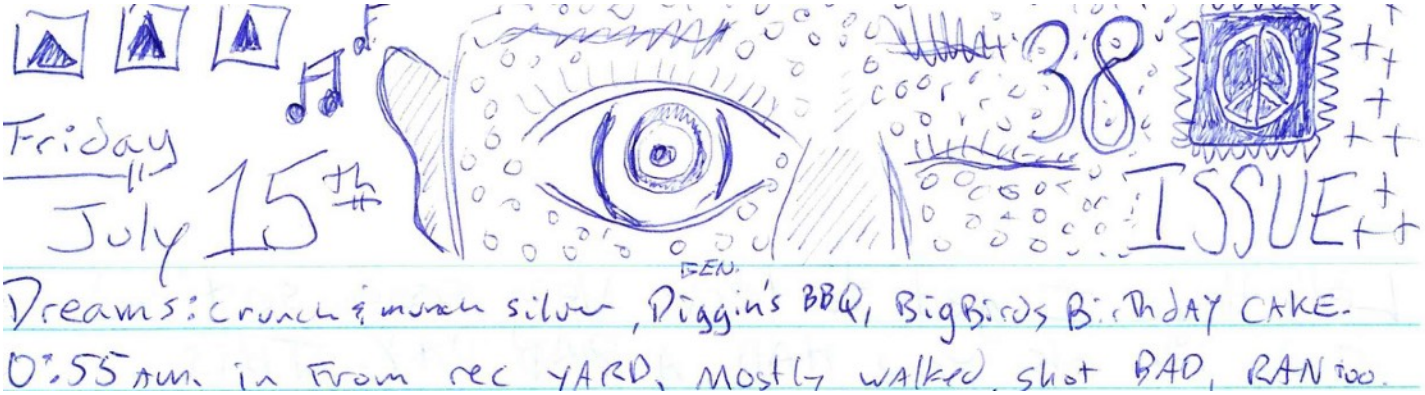
(2011) Late August. County Jail

I was more worried about what the psychotropic medication would do to my mind than I was the eventual outcome of my temporarily suspended court case. My lawyer Lilly told me to take whatever they prescribed me once I got to the State Hospital in Napa. The judge's order made my decision simple, either I took them by choice, or the hospital had the authority to strap me to a bed and hit me with syringes full of whatever medications they deemed appropriate. With everything I had recently been through, the path of least resistance seemed like an acceptable concession. I was aware that this was all happening due to my own actions and it didn't matter if I liked it or not. But I still prayed every night that God would spare me and just do the Wikileaks stuff instead.

I had the court's order to begin my treatment, but Napa State Hospital was overwhelmed with like-minded Schizophrenics, so I had to wait a few months.

In that time, I worked at understanding my illness. I started a daily

journal. As it took shape I found new ways to capture the negative emotions I was feeling. I would draw three empty boxes in the top left corner and fill them in with tears when things got too heavy for me. I thought of them as my atomic bombs from an old school video game and I only used them if I really needed to blow away a painful feeling. On many occasions, I have to fight through tears to find the atomic bomb box to try and save myself some intense emotional discomfort. It might surprise you, but it helped.



On a board dayroom afternoon, I made a thorough search of the book cart. On the back top row was a book called “A Beautiful Mind.” I recalled the film with Russel Crowe. It had been a while since I’d seen it, but I figured it was better than a Danielle Steel romance novel or another Louis L’Amour reread.

As I stretched my arm out to grab it, the touch on my finger against its spine flashed scenes from the movie in my mind. It was the montage where John Nash realizes his memories of working for the CIA weren’t necessarily true. I quickly pulled my hand away.

“Wait!” I said in my mind. “If it's not true for him, is it not true for me too?”

I carefully backed away from the book cart.

A month later. “A Beautiful Mind” was back on the rotating book cart and I took it back to my cell. With a new found bravery I read it pretty quickly. Through the descriptions of John Nash's struggle with his mental illness, I was able to see mine clearer and gain some needed insight.

As I waited to leave, I spent my days in the duality of working for Wikileaks and reminding myself that being mentally ill was a possibility. Like the guy from “The Beautiful Mind” book.

It’s also important to mention that my Dad and sisters attended our local NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) meetings to share in the strength of other families. Where they learned about mental illness so they could be a better support network for me in my adversity.



When the day for my departure finally came at the end of August, most of the time I was pretty sure I was mentally ill and that the meds the hospital would soon prescribe might help me put my life back together.

I woke up in the transport van on a sharp twist in the road and was immediately reminded that I really needed to pee. All I could see out of the back window I faced was more traffic and I knew asking the guards where we were would change nothing, so I quietly ignored my discomfort. Soon the guards started to talk about what they wanted to go for lunch as out the back window the scenery had changed from commuter cars to old white institutional buildings surrounded by bright green trees and freshly mowed grass. We quickly arrived at a gate and drove inside to reveal a small courtyard, a brick building and a small waterfall. As the guards unlocked my door, two women approached with a question.

“Are you willing to be a peaceful participant in our administrative process?” One asked?



After changing from my orange jail clothes to a khaki-colored outfit in a small bathroom, I signed all kinds of information release forms and had a quick interview with a doctor. I was then given a sack lunch and told to wait in a Dayroom. I peeked into the brown bag. I wasn't even hungry, just curious. I set it aside and looked out the windows to get a better view of the place. From behind me, I heard a new person had

entered the room. It was another guy dressed the same as me.

I'd get to know Jake pretty well. He said wow a lot, but never casually. When he said wow, he said it slowly. Like he was deeply contemplating the information. He was Korean. He wore thick-framed black glasses. And like most everyone else, enjoyed eating the ramen soups off the weekly canteen list.

“I guess this is where I'm supposed to eat my lunch?” Jake said as he sat down.

“Yeah, they sent me to eat here too,” I said before sitting back down next to my lunch.

“I'm Jake, you ever been here before?” He asked.

“No,” I replied then introduced myself.

“This place is nice, I wasn't expecting it to be nice. I've been to prison, but it wasn't nice like this,” Jake told me as he quickly devoured his cottage cheese.

“Yeah, I wonder where they're going to put us?” I said as I looked back out the window.

“Is this your lunch? Aren't you hungry? He asked.

“No, you want it?” I offered.

“Yeah!” Jake replied as he grabbed the brown bag off my seat.

Not long after that, a hospital guard opened a nearby door.

“You must be the new guys!” He said as he started organizing his handcuffs. “Since he's still eating, I'll start with you,” he said as he held up his restraints. “Don't worry, it's a short trip.”

Once we were in the van, the guard drove us three short blocks, and then I heard a groan from Jake as we rounded the last corner.

“This is more like what I was expecting,” Jake said as he saw the razor-lined fence when we pulled up to the sally port.

Whatever waited inside was undoubtedly less friendly than the cleanly manicured facade of the admissions center. Jake and I remained quiet, ready to see more from the consequences of our actions.

“I've got two here for X-4,” said our driver to the guard at the gate.

I couldn't make out a word of their small talk, I just anxiously waited to face the fear that had been treading water in my mind ever since the judge made his disappointing ruling. Once we passed through the event horizon of the razor-lined gate, I felt trapped and my only logical escape was to accept defeat and give in.

“It's been really hard for me, living in that jail cell and every day wondering if I’m really working for Wikileaks? So if you're trying to kill me, then just do it. But if it turns out that I am crazy, I'm ready to try your pills,” I passionately told the treatment team assigned to my case.

The team all had thoughtful concerned faces on for me, but nothing I told them was anything out of the norm. I would imagine if I could have seen into their inner minds during my plea of an unjust diagnosis, I would have only discovered the more basic desires of our human natures on display. Time, food, coffee, or a trip to the restroom. The whole meeting was a big show of force for the psychiatrist to reveal his decision.

“Let's try Risperdal. 2mg, twice a day.”

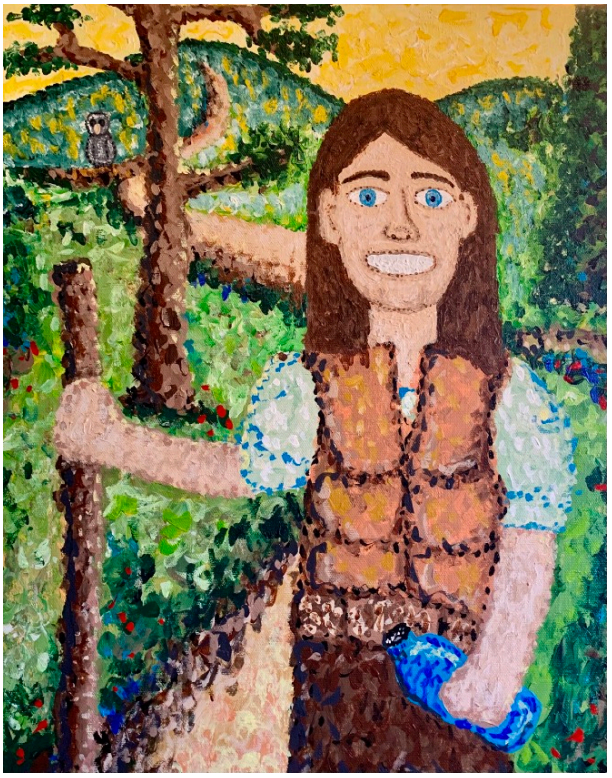
And with that, the meeting was over.



(2010) Early July, The Boat Party

“Well, that's the way it seemed to have happened. One day we're going to play our first show for everyone in town for the boat party, the next Tommy won't even return my call and leaves me a message saying that he's got too much stuff to do to get ready. What I'm I supposed to think?” I said to Starla in a quiet but aggressive tone as we sat at the bonfire.

“I don't know, so why don't you just come out and say it,” she answered.



“That you’re jealous and trying to go behind my back and pull the strings of Metalujah. I don't even know what your trip is, ever since I asked Sandy to be involved it's like all I get is a cold shoulder from you about the whole thing. But it's happening, we’re making a record. Sandy's singing and playing a drum, Tommy's playing bass on a keyboard. Eli's doing whatever. It's this whole thing I've got in my head and I don't have the time for everyone to give me the green light on everything. I’ve got to make it all happen

now," I told her.

"Can you even hear yourself? You're not the one calling all the shots in your life. You're getting by exclusively off the generosity of others and you act like you're doing them a favor for it. I'm not pulling any strings, I'm just sitting here wishing you'd be a little nicer on your imagined rise to stardom. All I hear from you is the hype of it all, but if you're really as good as you say you are, I think it's time you impress me!" Starla hit back.

"Hey, hey, hey! This doesn't sound like Boat Party talk. What's the problem with you two?" Cole asked as he came to Starla's rescue.

"He's drunk and getting out of line," Starla told him.

"Cobra! Get up and sit over here, talk to Drew! Drew, could you try to get him to mellow out a bit? Starla I'm going to find Tommy, come on you guys! This is the Boat Party," Cole directed a cease-fire.

The Monday night after the party was over, Tommy stopped by my house with a twelve-pack of beer, and we tried to work it all out as we drank on my deck. But I was just as unreasonable with him as I was with Starla. He wanted to get off the roller coaster I'd allowed Metalujah to become. I was kind of shocked, but Roxy convinced me to be fine with it. The summer progressed.



Now that I didn't have band practice to get to, I would just smoke pot, listen to our unfinished demo, and tinker in the garage on my music video set. I was also learning to mess around with photoshop on my borrowed computer. I was experimenting with pictures of my paintings and got in the habit of adding the tag of Cobra Industrey's onto them. I found it to be a fitting new name for the different direction my art was going as a stoner.

By the end of August, I had run out of willing piggy banks to borrow from and Roxy was about to be free from her house sitting obligation. Out at the ranch where I was growing my weed was a vacant trailer. I asked nicely for permission from the ranch owner to stay with Roxy till the harvest was over. I hadn't talked with Starla since our fight at the boat party, but I somehow knew she'd be interested in taking over my bedroom. She agreed with little discussion and I had a week to get my possessions in order.

My most pressing issue was the garage. It was completely occupied as the set for the music video I'd been working on and it would definitely have to go. A music video director had put this idea into motion, and now I needed his help to capture what it had become. Unfortunately, his interest had waned by more pressing projects, and just getting something shot was really stressing me out. As I waited, I was able to get a photographer to come by and get some more pictures. That was fun. More images to mess with. The night before Starla moved in, the director came by with his nice work camera. I explained my vision, but he thought it was a bit underwhelming and instead wanted me to be on screen interacting with the things that I'd created. This was also fun. Too bad I didn't have any finished music to put to it.



Once I had packed up all my things and got the place ready for Starla, all I had to do was meet Roxy in Berkeley to see Faith and Liam play the last show on their tour.

I don't know why, but I was surprised to see Roxy talking to a handsome man when I returned from the concert hall's bathroom. Liam had all the charms that a successful musician should have. Long shoulder-length blonde hair with a touch of gray, fitted jeans neatly pressed and a glass button western shirt. We shook hands as all musicians want to, lightly as to not upset the delicate balances of our hands. He greeted me with his foreign accent.

After the music ended, Roxy and I waited for a moment with Faith. She'd put on quite a show. She had long black hair, thick lips, and eyes that seemed fitting for a character out of an anime. I was a little disappointed to see her in today's fashion. She wore the 90's well.

“Oh my gosh, you’re so tall!” Faith said to me as I towered over her backstage.

“It must be the heels on my boots,” I told her.

“So you’re the guy Roxy’s running off with. You better be good to her! We’re quite taken with her you know,” Faith kindly warned.

“I'm quite taken with her as well, I'll definitely do my best!” I said with all honesty.

“Will you two stop, I'm a grown woman and the real adult in the relationship. Faith, you should be encouraging me to take good care of him!” Roxy said, as we all laughed at my expense.

“So you'll be going back to the house tonight?” Faith asked Roxy.

“Yeah, we’ll be leaving early tomorrow morning so we can get settled at the horse ranch,” Roxy told her.

“Well if you change your mind, we've got a bunch of rooms right down the street and if I don't see you before you leave, I'll be emailing

you about the party when we pick a date and a suitable location," Faith said before sending off Roxy with a hug.

We were living in a unique microclimate, hot and dry. The owner's main concern for us staying in the small trailer was the propane water heater was almost out of fuel and nobody had the cash to refill it. This mattered very little. A couple quick cold showers were the only thing keeping us from totally melting out there. Food was our bigger problem and Starla was right, I was living off the generosity of others. Now that I was bringing my also broke, beloved girlfriend into the mix, we were both feeling the stress. Good thing I had the scraps from last year's weed trimming to keep me distracted. Roxy called it my medicine. She didn't believe in pharmaceuticals.



"Now Sea, your dad was nice enough to give us this hundred dollars and to let us borrow his car. I want to make sure we get the things we need and when we can, to get organic food," Roxy told me in the parking lot of a grocery store.

"Yeah, I'll try to keep out of your way," I said.

But things didn't go well for us once we were inside.

“I'm a complete failure! All I want is to do is eat organic food! Is that too much to ask?” Roxy pleaded after falling apart once we were back in the car with our meager little bags.

“I thought we did pretty good, we can live off this,” I told her optimistically.

“No, I wanted the organic chickpeas, and we didn't get any of the organic apples. The regular ones were too gross. I can't be expected to eat that crap. I have to draw a line somewhere,” she yelled as she also showed signs that the emotional outburst would soon be over.

“I don't know what to tell you? Being broke sucks.” I said.

“I've just worked so hard in my life. I've got a college degree and I've toured the world. You would think someone like that could afford to eat healthy food,” she said as she fell apart again.

“Look at me! We’re going to get there! You do deserve to eat organic, it's just this world that's got things messed up. Plus the plants are starting to get bigger and I think we're going to be something special out of them. Just stay with me. Keep the faith!” I told Roxy in my best effort to put out the fire.

My thirtieth birthday came and went with only a small celebration to honor it. I was trying to keep my pot-growing off the radar but I don't think I fooled anyone who bothered to pay attention. Some of the plants were getting big and needed support, but I wasn't able to see past my optimism that the numbers wouldn't be as big as I hoped. But being with Roxy made every day amazing and she would always find a blessing in our scarcity. We still laughed a lot and were in no way sick of each other's touch. She was proving to be as wonderful as a partner as I thought she'd be at the beginning of our courtship. As for my side of the relationship, I was trying.

The first week of October seemed like a good time to harvest the

crop. I was able to get a handful of my friends to come help out. As the plants were drying, Roxy got an email from Faith. She was throwing a big "thank you" weekend for the people involved in the tour. She rented a couple of swanky large cabins in Nevada City. I wasn't excited about going. Roxy reiterated many times that I needed to be on my best behavior and not get too drunk. It felt like I might as well be going in an itchy sweater that didn't fit right. I was able to borrow my dad's car and we showed up as late as we could get away with.

"You guys want to smoke some weed?" I asked as I opened my weed tin to a bunch of out-of-town musicians. I kindly handed it to Liam and he put it to his nose.

"I think that sounds like a pretty good idea, what do you guys say?" Liam asked the rest of the band.

Faith had asked Roxy to help her get dinner on the table and was unaware that I was getting everyone heavily stoned.

"Why is everyone being so quiet?" Faith asked at the dinner table as everyone intensely feasted on her delicious meal.

"Hey man, what was your name again? Do you think I could buy a pound of that?" A DJ friend asked who had come along on the trip.

I did a mediocre job of not embarrassing myself that weekend. I was also paid two grand for a pound of the weed I was selling the DJ. The only catch was I would have to drive it to him in San Francisco once it was dry. But now we had some cash for our last few days together which eased a lot of lingering tensions. Roxy would soon be headed to Mendocino to trim marijuana for a big grower. She did pretty well at this the year before and had high hopes that she would do so again. I'd be staying at my dad's to finish trimming my own product and making sure I had a buyer lined up.

Now that the waiting game was over and people were seeing how green a dollar bill was, there was an added urgency and extra layer of stress to everything we did. It also didn't help that I had pounds of fresh weed around to cloud my thinking. As much as I loved our little summer ranch trailer and the life we developed out there, the leaves were changing and I was excited to drop off Roxy so I could get a break.



(2011) Late August. Napa.

There was a knock on my door, followed immediately by a sickly-looking man with a message.

“Are you Stoltzner?” He asked.
“Yeah.” “I replied.
“Medication,” He said as he quickly disappeared.

I already knew where to get my med, I just didn't want to. There were two guys ahead of me in line and I thought I'd need that much time to get my head together. As I waited, I contemplated the obvious theme of the unit. Lots of white, and lots of light. White walls, white ceiling panels, and white vinyl floors. With all the white around, the khaki colors the patients wore must have really stood out to the nurses

in the central station. The way the overhead fluorescent lights reflected off the floor hurt my eyes. It was quickly exhausting being out of my room.

I enjoyed the creative freedom of my thoughts till I was suddenly in front of the med nurse with a confused look in my eyes. I tried to swallow my parched mouth. I'd only been on the unit a few hours and I didn't even know where to get a cup of water yet. It was all happening so fast.

“Who do we have here?” The med nurse asked.

“Stoltzner, I'm new today,” I told her.

“Yep, I got it right here. Have you ever taken this med before?”

“No,” I replied.

“It's nothing to worry about, I'll even give you a cup of juice. Do you want green or orange?” She said as she pointed to rows of filled cups.

“I guess orange,” I said.

I looked into the small med cup she handed me. It was such a small pill for all the headache it had been causing.

“Thank you,” I told her. As I had previously decided this would be my new ritual for this unwelcome habit.

I swallowed the pill quickly then followed it with the cup of orange flavored juice and started to walk away.

“Not so fast,” the nurse told me. “Let me see your tongue.”

I wasn't sure what she was getting at, so I stuck it out.

“I want to see under it too,” she demanded.

I opened my mouth wide and wiggled my tongue around to prove that I had swallowed it.

“That's good, just checking.” she said as she returned to her med chart to see who was next.

Now that my evening had been freed up from the only thing that the judge cared about, I went back to my bedroom, lied down on my bunk, and waited to not be crazy. But this would take a little more time.

“What I'm I holding?” Asked the bland professionally dressed unit psychologist to the court competency group.

“A piece of paper,” someone answered.

“Yes you’re right, it is a piece of paper. But what's on it?” She asked again to a long pause.

“The California State seal,” I answered.

“Yes! You're right. It is the state seal. I want us all to look at what's on it. So what do you all see?” She asked the group.

“Some kind of lady with a weird hat,” another guy answered.

“Yes, she does have a weird hat on. Does anyone know who she is?”

“Yeah, I think that's Athena. The wisdom one,” I said.

“You're right again, that's her Greek name, but does anyone know her Roman name?” She asked a tougher question.

“Look lady, I'm not here for history class, get to your point and tell us why her hat’s so funny?” One of the guys blurted out.

“My point is, look hard at this seal. Try and tell me if you see any hidden occult symbolism. Lots of guys get worked up about how there are black magic emblems in the courtroom and how witches are trying to steal their souls and keep them in jail so they can't fight back. Does

anyone feel like that?" She probed.

"I didn't before, but you're making a pretty good case for it now," someone joked.

"Come on you guys, work with me here," she pleaded.

"I don't know if there are any witches involved, but my public pretender does a pretty good job of keeping me in jail. If I could have paid for my own lawyer, I would have never ended up in this place," another guy said as the whole room agreed.

"Thank you for that. Moving on…," The frustrated unit psychologist said as she gave up on her point.

On my first weekend, I got a visit from my family. At Napa State hospital there were no booths or inmate numbers to worry about, just a large hall filled with tables, people's home cooked meals, and excited friends and families. But I still wasn't sure that they weren't secretly recording us somehow. So I kept my side of the conversation light and avoided talking about Roxy or Wikileaks. We were watching other families around the room show affection, so by the end of the visit I got a bunch of needed hugs. It had been over six months since I had one. They felt foreign by now, but I knew that they were needed if I was ever going to feel normal again.

It was a quick and smooth transition back to sanity. Just a couple of weeks for the medication to balance things out. Most of the work I did in jail stuck as soon as I was chemically grounded back into the common baseline reality most people reside in. This experience was uncommon. Most people have to try a few different medications before finding relief. I was glad that this part of my journey went easy. I still had a long way yet to go.

But now I had to deal with a side effect that wasn't listed on the bottle. Without Wikileaks as a scapegoat, reality was very depressing. On my first day at the hospital, the treatment team recommended I keep

the nature of my offense to myself. I did. It was hard walking around under the dark cloud I was facing and not able to share the reasons why with my newfound friends. But another patient that had been a school teacher took notice.

He went by Sal. He had short buzzed black hair and often talked about his young son. So far his son's mother was still standing by him. Sal talked about quitting teaching and getting into construction to better support them. Once he got better. Once they figured out what set him off.

“Do you think it'll be something good today?” Sal asked me as the group was being moved to the dining room for breakfast.”

“I think it's just eggs and oatmeal. I looked at the menu last night,” I told him.

“Yeah, that's what I saw too,” Sal said as we kept walking.

“I was wondering if you were doing alright? As a teacher, I was taught to look for signs of depression and you might be fooling the treatment team, but it looks obvious to me,” he said as we approached a bottleneck to get into the dining hall.

“Yeah, it's been kind of heavy for me recently,” I told him.

“Well then snap out of it! You've got to work to pull yourself up out of these dark places. Take it from me! Or you can do nothing and take more of their pills. The choice is yours,” Sal said as he walked into the dining room, ending our conversation.

It took me a few days to figure out how to combat it, but I knew Sal was right. I thought about how my offense was too big of a problem for me to focus on and I'd have plenty of time to worry about it once I was back in jail. For now, I need to treat this place for what it really was. A vacation from everything awaiting me back home. During our courtyard breaks, a bunch of guys would play horse at the basketball

hoop. It could get pretty rowdy with jokes from all the weird stuff said in groups.

Ken acted as the host of our comedy hour. My first impression of him was of a Will Ferrell character come to life. Tall with curly black hair. He was very upbeat and positive. He treated everyone on the unit like an equal, no matter how weird. He was the first person to start laughing and the last one to stop. At the basketball court one day, I had a request to run by him.

“You know I used to do stand-up comedy.” I told him.

“Theres no way! You're not funny,” he said with complete disregard.

“No, I did. Before rock shows in my town, some nights I'd dress up like a mime and tell stupid jokes and do really bad impressions,” I replied as I stood my ground.

“Alright, then. Let's hear what you've got,” Ken said.

“I'll tell you one, but even if it's not funny. I need you to ask me for more and to try to get me out of my shell. This place is getting to me. I want to try and have a good time like the rest of you guys,” I informed Ken of my simple plan.

“Listen up everyone,” Ken said loudly to the court. “It appears that we've got a comedian in our midst. Let's hear it for Sea!”

Everyone blankly looked my way. I proceeded with the first of my old jokes that came to mind.

“If I'm ever on a sailboat and the captain tells me to ‘go starboard’, I'm going to pretend like I misheard him and say ‘go Star Wars?’ “Look man, we're in trouble! We can talk about Chewbacca later,” I told the group with little reaction.

Now that I was back living in reality and fighting for optimism. I started to pay attention to the mental health system I was immersed in. Jake had a bunch of useful information. They had roomed us together and we'd get to talking about the legal side of things.



“Sea, your case is easy, you're just here for Competency. Once the doctors think the pills are working, they'll just send you back to court. Since you're only here on a vandalism charge, you'll probably get time served,” Jake said to calm my nerves. He couldn't understand why I worried so much about my case. I didn't have the heart to tell him either.

“My case is different. The courts found me Not Guilty By Reason Of Insanity. I have to stay here until the doctors think it's safe to return me to the community. I was talking to one of the old-timers. He had to put in ten years before they gave him a chance! And then he blew it with a beer on the outpatient program,” Jake continued.

“Yeah, I heard a couple of guys talking about Outpatient. How does that work?” I asked.

“After six months, you're eligible for outpatient treatment, but it never goes that fast. There's a bunch of levels. You can get a job or a girlfriend. You can basically do whatever as long as you don't mind them running your whole life,” he loosely explained.

“That doesn't sound so bad, I mean if you have to do it,” I told him.

“But you can't drink or get high, they test you all the time. If you fail, they send you back. Also, if you have weird new symptoms, they can send you back too. It can be a revolving door. But you don't need to



worry, I'm telling you the judge is going to say time served. You'll be free and I'll be here for years dealing with their games," Jake admitted his defeat.

One evening I was pacing the halls and someone told me I had a phone call.

"Cobra! How are they treating you in there?" Cole asked warmly.

"Pretty good, I guess, I might be leaving soon. I'm supposed to take a competency test and if I pass they'll ship me back to jail." I explained.

"Do you think you're ready to come back so quickly? You've only been there a few months? What do the doctors think?" Cole inquired.

"They called me Schizoaffective and said that's why I did what I did, I'm hoping to win my trial and come back or maybe even go free," I said confidently.

"Cobra, think about the fact that a man lost his life; that there is a heartbroken family somewhere out there and that people are confused and scared about what you've done. I know what you want, but if you were in charge, what do you think should happen?" Cole challenged me.

"I don't know, it's hard. I'm the one who's sick," I paused as Cole allowed the silence. "I have to think about it," I told him.

"Well hang in there. We're all rooting for you," Cole said.

"Well, this might sound trite and trivial but it's a big deal for me," I teased.

"What?" Cole asked.

"I cut off my hair."

At a heavy cost of time, money, and effort, my family still visited

me often. One of our last visits before I left stands out.

“And then he starts jumping up and down as he's running out of the Dayroom. He's jumping so high that he hits his head on the top of the doorway. Now he's bleeding all over the place and the staff starts freaking out and pulls the alarm. Yeah, you never know what's going to go on around here. Last night was really crazy,” I told Starla and Sandy for some reason.

“That's horrible! What a poor man,” Starla says.

“Yeah, then they kicked us all out of the Dayroom so they could clean up all the blood and we ended up missing the rest of our show,” I explained coldly.

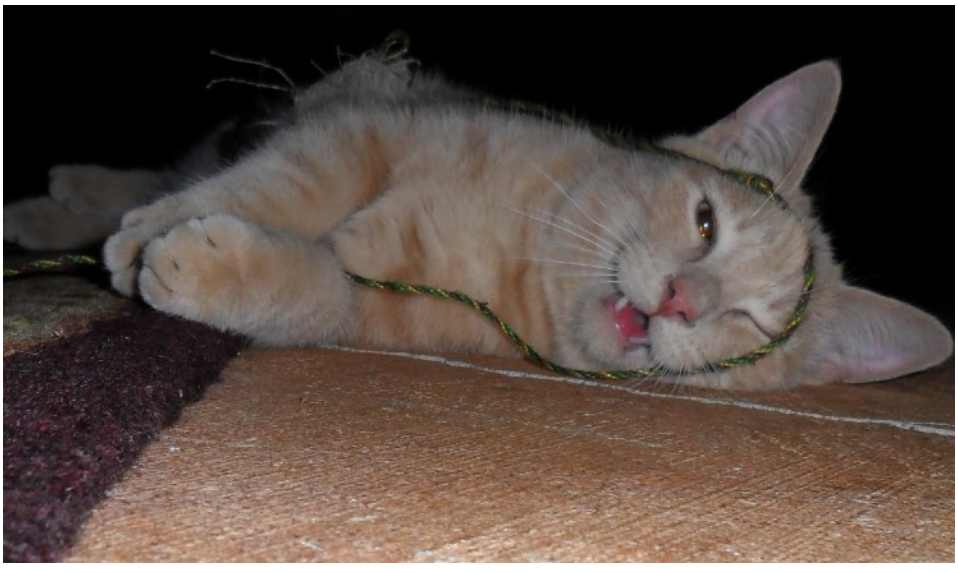
“You know if that's your biggest concern, I think you're missing the bigger picture here. Was the man OK at least?” Starla asked.

“Yeah, fine enough. One of the guys that knows him told me this sort of thing happens with him all the time. Part of me is glad that I'm leaving. I can handle being in a cell by myself. Fewer wildcards to keep track of,” I told them as I looked around the room.

“Speaking of being in a cell by yourself, I found King Cat hiding in the wall again. He must like confined spaces too,” Sandy told me.

“It's not that I like the isolation. I don't like any of this. I'm just ready for a change,” I admitted nervously

“Yeah, we know,” Sandy said.



“I've got that picture of him grabbing that whip toy on my locker. That's a good shot. I like that one,” I said.


POP
POP
POP
POP

Sandy whispers something over to Starla and she popped up in her chair and reaches into her bag.

“We saw this at the store and had to have you try it. Since we probably won't get to do this for Christmas,” Starla told me as she presented me with a small chocolate cake with a decorative plastic candy cane stuck in it. She also handed me a white plastic fork.

I took off the plastic candy cane and set it down on a napkin and adjusted the cake to get the angle I wanted lined up to cut into.

“Aaahhh, there's stuff inside!” I yelled to my surprise.

“It's alright, it's a hot lava cake. You'll like it. It's not a problem,” Starla explained as she grabbed my hand.

“I think I'm not doing as well as I'm letting on.” I said.

“You're doing as well as you need to do. You're getting through it!” Sandy told me.

“It's just all this court stuff, I don't know how to...” I started.

“I think it's too much to think about. Maybe worry more about the little things. Like what to do if there's hot lava in your cake. Chocolate lava problems. Can you do that for me?” Starla asked.

“Yeah, we'll deal with the big stuff only when we have to,” answered Sandy.

“Okay, I'll try,” I said as I took a bite.

As I ate, Starla and Sandy talked about their three-hour drive home. The lava cake was good. Way better than anything I'd get in the dining room or off the weekly canteen so I savored every bite. Knowing now that the visit was drawing to an end and that I might not see them aside from behind glass, I had to ask them again with the 3 months of medication built up in my system.

“So you're telling me that nobody's talked to Roxy since she went back to work in Mendocino?”



(2010) October. Dad's couch.

Having an unreliable phone was a double-edged sword. Out at the ranch, it had allowed Roxy and me some freedom from the constant distraction of the music scene. But now that I was back at my dad's with little to do, I didn't like that people had stopped trying to reach me on it. Also, Roxy didn't get cell service at the trim house where she was working. She'd have to go on a decent hike and then climb up a big hill to get a few bars. So I wasn't hearing much from her.

My silent partners were more than ready to get paid, but none of them had any idea on what to do with the product. I had one. It was a front through a friend of a friend. They were Bikers. Whatever I'd dropped off at his apartment, he could work with. I'd just have to be patient. He quoted me a high estimate of return. The market was flooded with other eager sellers, so I was lucky to have him to work with. We started off with five pounds.

I'd start my day on the couch in the living room. My dad was an early riser and after a few hours of his commotion, I'd just get up. The

coffee would still be warm and I'd get busy with a joint, then a cigarette. I still had a couple large bins of weed to trim but I was losing my enthusiasm for it. It bothered me that while I was doing all the work, my partners felt free to complain about it all. So I just stopped. I figured I'd wait to see how the money on the first five pounds turned out. I'd spent the rest of the day at my dad's waiting on the elusive call to come pick up some cash, and then I'd give up around five with my first beer. My intake of the fresh weed remained constant.



“Sea, I can't believe you'd ask me that,” Sandy replied with her mouth still dropped open as we drank beers in the kitchen. “I mean, aren't you two going to get married? Isn't that the plan?”

“Loosely. Come on! I can't be that backed in here. Don't I get a little grace period before I'm totally committed?” I said as I tried to convince her. “I mean one date. I can't even go on one date?”

“No, you can't. That's called cheating,” Sandy informed me as she opened us up two more beers.

“It's not cheating if it's just dinner and talking,” I protested as I took an aggressive swig.

“Well then, what's the point of going?” Sandy dug deeper.

“I don't know,” I paused and then sheepishly told her. “To see if I like her. To see if I'm making a mistake.”

“Wow, Sea! That's somehow even worse than if you were going to cheat. You can't do that. Everybody second guesses themselves. But you've got to see your relationships through. Who is this woman anyway?” Sandy asked.

“Her name's Charlotte. I met her at a show. I really liked her. I thought it could be something,” I disclosed my desire. “But she never got back to me.”

“All the more reason to move on. If this is really what you want, I'd try running it by Roxy first,” Sandy aggressively suggested. “See how that goes.”

“I can't do that,” I quickly dismissed her idea.

“Yeah, because she'd freak out on you,” Sandy agreed. “I'm sorry, but you've landed yourself a good woman, and you're stuck with her. You men, you always want more.” She added.

“I know, I know. I love Roxy and things have been great, but there's just so much unnecessary baggage. I hate that so many of our issues revolve around some band she quit that I wasn’t into. I love her, but I've got my own art and music to make. Things are too convoluted together. Charlotte on the other hand is into books. I couldn't care less about books. No conflict there. And as well as things have been going with Roxy, I can't shake the feeling that Charlotte inspires,” I explained.

“But she never got back to you,” Sandy reminded me.

“Nope,” I admitted. “I guess it's all red lights.”

The weed stayed consistent. Meaning I smoked a lot of it all day, but my beer intake varied. One night as Sandy and I drank, we joked around about an Easter egg sticker my dad put on the top left corner of the sliding glass door to tell if it was open or shut. I suggested that stickers are attached to memory due to a loose association I had with scratch and sniff stickers; since scent is attached to memory. I had recently been buying a bunch of stickers. It started as a stoned impulse buy from a big box store. Now by my encouragement, Sandy and I had a big laugh putting skull and crossbones stickers all over the house. We even put a couple on my dad as he slept. But it wasn't funny the next morning when we had to peel them off everything. It was also difficult to give a good reason why we had done it.

When Roxy would call, she couldn't help but tell me how much money she was making from day to day. I was getting tired of bringing nothing but the empty promises of a drug dealer to the table and we arranged for me to leave my troubles and work with her. I had minor difficulties on my three-hour drive, mostly by locking myself out of my Dad's SUV with it still running on the side of the road when I got out to pee. After a quick freak out, I was able to pry open the back hatch and climbed in, but it wouldn't properly latch anymore.

“Forget it,” I said to myself. “I’ll fix it later.”

I was quickly becoming less impressive. While I tended to my meager hand me down, poor man's 30 plant garden, the “Man” Roxy was working for did it all and more. He managed six, 30 plant large gardens and also built the three-story, off grid, remote trim house that everyone was staying in. I couldn't wrap my head around an accomplishment of this size. That's why the “Man” made the big bucks and I counted nickels to hopefully buy a beer at the end of the day.

The “Man” wasn't done showing off either. He brought me to a large barn that systematically dried his weed, from floor to ceiling. Every inch was taken up by large hanging buds. Good thing the “Man” was spoken for. Because if Roxy wanted to search for something more, she would quickly see I was nothing more than empty promises.

We were glad to see each other but I noticed Roxy's eyes had changed from brown to green. So I tried to stay out of her way and let her work. I think due to the stress of getting paid on my fronted weed, I got sick after arriving at the trim house and I figured it would take a few days to get into work mode. But I never really kicked it into gear and this concerned Roxy.

“Listen, Sea, I know you've got a lot going on in your head, but this is our time to put away some acorns for the rest of the year. I'm working hard you know, but I'm not seeing the same from you and that worries me. If that's the way you want to play it, go ahead, but I'll be sitting back all spring while you're out digging ditches,” Roxy gently reminded me.

“I'm sorry. I'll try harder, I’ve got this new song and I can't work it out. I tried to work it in the car with that funky acoustic guitar, but it was too cold with all the snow around. I brought it inside, but I couldn't hear what I was doing with all the noise of music and talking.”

“Yeah, that noise you were hearing was called working. That's what you need to do. We'll figure out your song when the work is all over,” she firmly suggested.

I did better from then on, but still kind of straddled the line between acceptable and disappointment. My intake of the fresh weed still remained constant. My daily hope would be my walk to the top of that big hill to check my voicemail.

“Cobra, it's Cole. We're playing a big holiday show in San Jose in a few weeks. You'll like the lineup. I've got two backstage passes for you. Bring Roxy, we'd love to see her.”

“Cobra, when are you coming back to town? I think I'm about to have something for you,” said the message from the guy handling my weed.

“This isn't good timing, Sea. I really need these last few weeks out here to create a bigger cushion. There's always a big rock show to go to, but we've got to keep making money,” Roxy told me.

“I know, but that big producer will be there. I'll probably get to meet him too.” I told her.

“I've met lots of big producers. It never did anything for us. We just made our own records. I thought that's why you were doing all of this?” She harshly pointed out.

“I think my cash is about ready too.” I added.

“About. What does “about” mean?” She prodded.

“That's what the message said. It's about ready,” I told her.

“My hair is a mess. I don't want to be seen like this,” she said to end the discussion.

“I'm sure Sandy could make time to fix it up?” I suggested.

“Sea, I'm not looking for a solution.” Roxy concluded.

I decided to go without her. The morning I left, a news talk channel was on the radio in the trim room. The big story was about Wikileaks releasing a bunch of diplomatic cables. I didn't know much about Wikileaks. All I'd heard before this, was some guy was wanted on sex crime after he leaked an Iraq report. I didn't think much of it. I was more concerned to see how I was leaving things with Roxy. Would it be a friendly kiss or a disengaged hug? It turned out to straddle the line between both.

I came back to Grass Valley a few days before the big rock show and called about the money as soon as I got service.

“Soon, soon. Any day now,” I was told.

On the rest of my drive home, I listened to stories about Wikileaks and with nothing going on once I got back, I started to investigate on my dad's computer. Smoking weed remained constant.

“Sandy, get in here! Look at this!” I yelled from the office.

“What?” She'd yell back as she cooked in the kitchen.

“This part wasn't like this yesterday!” I continued to yell.

“I have no idea what you're talking about!” She continued to yell as well.

I got up from my dad's desk and walked into the kitchen.

“The Wikipedia page on Julian Assange is different from yesterday. Like wildly different!” I explained.

“That's the website where people can change the information, right?” She asked me.

“Yeah, but it shouldn't change this much from day to day. I think the government had something to do with it.” I suggested.

From there my interest in the story grew.

“It's so crazy! He released a secret file last summer with a 365 digit password. If he's killed, imprisoned, or taken offline, it's released!” I told my dad as we smoked cigarettes on the deck during his work break.

“What's inside it?” He asked.

“That I don't know, but I'm really hoping it's aliens.”



I was obsessively interested in Wikileaks, as a topic but had no desire to read through a quarter-million diplomatic cables. I basically just wanted to read about the global intrigue of it all, but this went too far.


You Know the Password
Time Travel

One night, I took a break from searching and walked out onto my dad's deck to have a cigarette. It was dark and I didn't want to lose my pack of smokes, so I held onto them. We had new neighbors, or new to me at least. They had a bunch of weird lights all over the back of their house. I acknowledged their strangeness as I enjoyed looking at them. Then as I turned my head, I heard my voice.

"You know the password!"

I didn't say it, but I heard myself say it. I didn't know any password. "Is this the Wikileaks password we're talking about? I wouldn't mind knowing that one. Is this a time travel thing? Like I'll know it in the future so I know it now? It must be something like that," I thought in the darkness.

Even though I never thought too far ahead with it, researching this global public event was not without its dangers.



"Dad, I'm so sorry!" I told him in a quiet panic.

"What!" He blankly answered as he watched TV.

"It might not be as bad as it looks, I don't know." I told him.

"What is it?" He said in a frustrated tone.

"I think I crashed your computer," I said shyly.

"What!!!" He got up and ran to the office. Hitting the power switch right away. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me!!!"

“Yeah, I tried all of that,” I said as he kept flipping the toggle switch.

“No! No! No! I was almost done with a report! Sea! You've screwed me again! What were you doing on it?” He demanded.

“I was looking up this Wikileaks credit card thing on social media and the screen went all weird and then black,” I told him.

“I knew it was that damn Wikileaks! OK mister, you're done with that stuff on my computer!” He ordered.

He continued to yell, rant, and rave for the next fifteen minutes till Sandy came home. I met her in the driveway.

“Hey, how's it going?” She asked as she got out of her car.

“Dad's not in a good mood. Something's wrong with his computer. I went on social media to look up this thing and I might have crashed it. You wouldn't mind checking your phone, would you? I just want to see if any of your friends are posting about it.” I asked.

“Sure, I'll check real quick,” she said.

Sandy tried to log on to her account, but it froze up on her and got glitchy.

“Sea! What did you do to my phone!!!” She yelled.

“This isn't good! I think they're dropping the grid tonight to try and contain this!” I said as I began to freak.

“Contain what? What have you gotten us in too?” She aggressively asked.

“I don't know! It was just a thing about credit cards. Look, I've got some cash. Let’s go to town and see if your credit card still works and then buy some cans of food!

We did, and long story short, the grid remained intact. The next

day when my dad brought his computer in to get fixed, the repair guy told him it looked as though the computer was hit by a wave of viruses. He was able to fix it, but my dad was still pissed. I had a few more days of waiting for the show. Around this time I had another perceptual difficulty.

Those neighboring lights! They were giving me problems again. I was up late drinking and they had changed from friendly decorations to an alien UFO pod thing. I just stared out the kitchen window in complete shock! Then I saw a fleshly being walking around their back yard and I very quietly freaked out. I locked the doors and hid on the couch till I fell asleep. But when I woke up the next morning, I wasn't really all that concerned. I just figured I needed more to do with my free time.



Sandy jumped at the chance to go with me to the big rock show in

San Jose. She drove and we got there with little trouble. We picked up our passes and called Cole.

“Meet me in the arena.”

We saw him walk in from the other side and met him halfway.

“I played him your demo, he wants to meet you!” Cole opened with.

We walked backstage, then through double door with the band's name printed on it. As Cole opened it the famed producer was standing right on the other side. We were introduced and gently shook hands.

“So, you're the Cobra. I've heard about you. They played me a few of your songs. They were alright!” He said with an upbeat tone.

“Thanks, it's great to meet you too! I've been a fan of your’s for a while.” I told him.

“I've got to go do a radio thing, but catch me later. You'll be hanging around tonight, right?”

After watching a few bands, I got bored of just standing around and being intimidated by the successful musicians. So I went out to the car and grabbed a sack of my recent harvest. I can't remember who else I got stoned but I sure was feeling the effects of it. That's when I heard the singer of the band Cole played for mention that his publicist told him to pay attention to Wikileaks. So I had to butt in on the conversion.

“They call it a dead man's switch, it only gets triggered if everything goes horribly wrong. That's what opens up the file. I think we're about to find out that we're not alone in the universe!” I said as I told him everything I knew all at once.

“Hey man, cool,” he said. “The headliner just started, let's go watch!”



(2003) Choose your adventure

It was around eleven when I walked on to the private airport near my parent's house in Alta Sierra. I heard faint chatter and saw the flicker of a lighter. Being in a good mood, I walked over.

Ted was an old family friend a few years younger than me. We played music together a few times. He had long brown hair and an easy smile.

“Hey, who do we got here?” I asked.
“Is that Sea? It's Ted from down the street,” he answered.
“Oh, hey Ted. It's been a while. What's been up?” I asked.
“Oh nothing man, we're just sitting here smoking a little weed. You smoke too, right?” he inquired.
“Nope, I never have,” I replied.
“Is it because you don't want to or you've never been asked kindly enough?” A mysterious woman's voice interrupted.

As I walked back home half an hour later, my senses were

heightened. But it wasn't until I put on some headphones and whatever album I was currently digesting that I noticed the full effect. The weed definitely made the music clearer. More like I was actually in the room with the musicians. It was a mild first experience.

Not long after, I smoked pot for the second time with Sandy and got intensely too high. We were watching the movie Tombstone and as my sense of time slowed. I thought that the whole black and white intro scene was the whole movie and I kept asking.

“I thought Val Kilmer was in this movie.”

With nothing else better to do, I was hooked. For the next six weeks, I smoked in the evenings after my parents went to bed. It was completely a stereotypical stoner's experience. TV, video games, sweet and salty snacks, and lofty dreams of what I should be doing with my life. Soon I became daring and started smoking earlier when my parents were still awake. One night my mom and I had an impactful interaction.

“We had a great meeting tonight. I like these mid-week church sessions where we don't have to focus on a sermon and can really find out what's going on with each other,” my mom told me in the kitchen.

“Yeah, what did people say that was so interesting?” I asked.

“Tonight we talked about a bunch of spiritual prophecies for the area. How God's going to pour out his spirit in a great movement and how people need to prepare their hearts for it,” she told me.

She kept talking, but the rest of her words weren't necessary. I'd heard everything I needed to hear and I interpreted her.

“Mom, for the last six weeks I've been smoking pot every night and I think I'd like to quit,” I said as I broke into tears.

I'd been pulling it off better than I thought, she was completely surprised to hear this confession. She prayed for me and then we threw the rest of my stash out in the yard. I was able to stop for a few weeks, then during a sleepless night I had a vivid vision of a series of events leading to the great spiritual movement my mom talked to me about. It ended with God touching me on the forehead and a message.

“This is what you need to do.”

My vision was mainly groups of people getting together and I tried to orchestrate the right interactions but the things I saw never happened. Out of frustration, I would still smoke weed occasionally and one night while high, a friend and I had the idea.

“Yeah, I remember those choose your own adventure books, the kind where you flip to certain pages to continue the story. Those were cool,” he said.

“It'd be cool to make an album like that,” I answered.

“You mean where you'd switch between tracks on a CD to follow the story?” He asked.

“Yeah!” I said as we both reached the conclusion at the same time.



My brain somehow tricked my heart into believing that this CD was the new agenda for my vision and I put everything I had into it, including finally quitting pot. Fittingly, the story I went with was a fiction about a man deciding to either quit or keep smoking

marijuana. As the story branched out, I found more ways to incorporate my successes and failures into the directions. Including an obscured vision from God.

Now that I was a welcomed addition to the fringes of the music scene, I was able to get people to join in on my musical madness. I bought a digital eight-track recorder and I'd bring it wherever needed to get the right musical additions from my friends. After a year of work, I had all thirty-eight songs finished and put two grand on my credit card to get a thousand pressed.

But once I had one in my hands, it was hard to admit the truth that marijuana and I didn't work well together and I was now facing an embarrassing explanation with this new CD. But fortuitously, no one paid it that much attention and it was just as quickly forgotten.



(2010) Mid December. Home and Away.

The next morning after the San Jose show, I was tired for my upcoming meeting with the Bikers. But the promise of money finally in hands overshadowed me not getting to sleep in. Soon I was in an unfamiliar garage, in an unfamiliar town talking about making money off of drugs which I was unfamiliar with. My meeting was briefly interrupted by a more pressing meth deal, but I figured with all the

handguns lying around I wouldn't ask to speak to the manager. When it was my turn again, I was told that a couple of the five pounds I'd fronted had been lost in the mail and anything more that I could bring in would be split between me and two other people. Then I was handed a brown lunch bag filled with cash and then quickly back in my car and on the highway.

When I got home, I closed the door to my dad's office and started counting. I was very upset. Four grand for five pounds, and I had other 3 people to pay with it. My decision turned out to be easy. I'd just split it four ways then have three unpleasant interactions and explanations. Afterward, I went to town to make the soundest decision I could with my share. A new set of tires for my dad's SUV that I still needed to borrow. Early the next morning I was back on the road and made it to the trim house by lunch.

"It's getting weird out there in the world! I tell you this Wikileaks stuff, it's not what you hear on the news talk channels. There's this whole secret under layer happening online. I crashed my dad's computer and my sister's phone while looking into it. I don't know what comes next," I told the room filled with isolated pot trimmers as soon as I walked in.

"That sounds wild, Sea. How was the show?" Roxy asked.

"The guys played great. Their producer heard my demo and told me he liked it. So I guess that was worth the trip," I told her.

"Listen, this place is shutting down in a week. Why don't you change your clothes, sit down and then tell me all about it as we finish off these bags. We also need to start talking about where we go from here," Roxy instructed.

She was burnt out. She'd spent two months working in that trim room and when she told me to drive to the small quaint coastal town of Mendocino, I was on board. It took a day to shake off a few other

trimmers that had nothing better to do but tag along, but once we were finally alone all the good feelings came back. I was still consuming a lot of weed, cigarettes, beer and coffee whenever I could.

I found them at the register of a souvenir store as Roxy checked out what they had in the back. White sunglasses with a gold snakeskin print. I had to have them. After paying, I put them on and went to surprise Roxy.

“Look at this trippy, hippy car!” She exclaimed before looking up at me.

It was a white VW bug toy car with two hippies inside. I tried to act as though I was enthused by it.

“Oh, those sunglasses are great! You should get them,” Roxy told me after looking up.

“I already did. Are you hungry yet? I think our table’s about ready.”



Nice meals, hot coffee and browsing the local mom and pop stores with Christmas right around the corner. All along the gorgeous pacific ocean, which we found time to explore. Nothing more to say, just a perfect couple of days with the woman I loved.

From there we spent a night at a hot spring and took a treacherous back road drive to civilization to mail Roxy's family some Christmas presents. Afterward, the mood took a turn in the parking lot of the packaging center.

“I can't live like this! I don't have a home. I just drive around live out of my suitcases. It's too much!” She cried.

“I don't know what to tell you, you just can't change your whole life in a day. We're working on it.” I countered.

“I just don't know how to be in a relationship, I can't do it! I don't know how. When you're not around I get everything done I need to. I'm sick of getting bogged down in all your drama–and it's not your fault. You're a beautiful creature on your own, I just don't know how to keep making it work. I don't know how!” She cried out.

“But you do know how, you're doing it right now. Your talking about it is an important thing and we're going to get there. We're good together, you and me. All of this is worth the headache. I love you too much to not keep trying. You're the best thing in my life! You have to keep trying too,” I pleaded.

Once Roxy composed herself, we decided the best thing to do was save some money by driving south to Jon's house to regroup.

It must have been a nice vacation home when it was built back in the sixties. But it had fallen into disrepair. Jon did his best to keep it up. I was instantly drawn in by the backyard's steep dramatic cliffs. To a visitor, the condition of the house mattered little against this backdrop.

Jon was happy to oblige us. It was his first time seeing us together as a couple. It was quite a novelty for him. Jon was going up to Canada in January and needed someone to look after things for the whole month. Roxy jumped at the chance to postpone her developmental life

goals and I was just as happy to have a place and time to try and get back some of those happy summer trailer vibes. But first, the three of us had to go back to Nevada City for Christmas.

I'd be negligent to not address the comment I made as Jon pointed out Napa State Hospital on the drive back to Nevada City.

“I hope I don't end up there,” I said as we all laughed at what was starting to be an actual concern.

Roxy didn't want to be a bother to anyone so she rented us a motel room. We had a lot we wanted to do and Roxy had a lot she wanted to spend her new grip of cash on. Shoes, clothes, an iPhone. I tried to stay out of her way.

Another thing that needed dealing with was the rest of the Marijuana I grew. I'd been getting voicemails about what to do with the other five pounds. There was an offer of five hundred a pound, but it was a complete disaster for me. I'd get less than a grand and I couldn't live and make a record off that. I wanted to give the Bikers another try. We were getting about double that if we waited on them to do their thing. The bottom line was everyone involved didn't like the presented options.

On Christmas Eve, Roxy cooked my family a big organic fried chicken dinner. That was a big hit. Afterward, as I lay on the couch in the living room smoking weed, I asked Roxy about the rest of the evening.

“Hey Roxy, you're coming out with us tonight, right?” I asked.

“I don't know, I'm not feeling all that social. I bet it will be packed at the bars,” she answered.

“Definitely, but you should still come out. You'll probably see

people you haven't seen in a while." I explained.

"Yeah, that's what I'm afraid of," she said under her breath, but still loud enough for me to hear her.

"Anyone in particular?" I asked

"You know the score here. I love you to death, but I also have to live with the social aftermath of your little moods. Some people in this town love you. Great, I get it. But there's a larger world out there and isn't privy to the secret genius of Sea Stoltzner. To everyone on the outside, you can come across as a bit of a jerk, sometimes," Roxy told me.

"Well, I appreciate the addition of 'sometimes'. That sure did soften the blow." I said as my mood rose above the strength of the marijuana.



My sisters had a large breakfast waiting the next morning. Sandy surprised me with a joint of "white widow" and I got really stoned. I had to hold my hand over my heart to keep my tight t-shirt from touching my chest. So I just stayed out on the deck as everyone ate as the intensity passed. We exchanged some gifts. My dad got me a black western guitar shirt. It went well with the black leather gloves I bought for myself. My dad also got Roxy a felt hat and a shawl. She loved it which really helped out our situation because she couldn't find any shoes or clothes she liked when we went shopping. From there the day progressed to dinner at my grandmas, then back to the motel to decompress and make a new plan.

“How about one more day? I need to figure out what to do with the rest of these five pounds I've got trimmed up,” I told her.

“Five hundred a pound, I mean that's nothing! Nobody will make anything of that,” Roxy agreed.

“I know, that's what I told them. I think I should just drop the rest off with the Bikers. It was those couple of pounds that got lost in the mail that really hurt us the last time. Maybe we’ll fare better if we try again,” I said as I made my decision.

Roxy agreed to one more day and I thought I'd do the best thing for all parties involved and make this tough decision on my own. So I got up early and dropped off the rest of the weed.

Over the next week, Roxy and I spent a few days in San Rafael getting new pairs of glasses and some new age books we'd been looking for. Then a few days with Roxy's Big Sur musical festival friends in San Francisco for the New Year. My hangover didn't really hit me till we crossed the Golden Gate bridges and started in on the winding hills of Highway One. The drive seemed like it went on forever, but soon enough we were back at Jon as he gave us the direction of how to look after things while he was away.



“This plant will do fine, you'll probably only need to water it once or twice. The cats don't mind this dry food I feed them, it's nothing fancy. Their big treat is catching mouse or something. Don't worry, they don't make a mess with it,” he told us.

“And Cobra, feel free to use my recording setup. It's all through this computer. You know how to use one, right?” He asked.

“Well sort of, I guess,” I said to not embarrass myself. “Do you think you could give me a recap?”

Jon fired up the computer and opened a new file and recorded a track of us talking about how to use the program.

“Look, it's simple. Very intuitive. Very user-friendly,” he told me.

“Yeah, it's similar to other programs I've used,” I lied to move us on from the foreign subject.

“Great! I can't wait to hear what you've been cooking up. Roxy told me you've been busy.” He said.

Roxy and I were both sad to see Jon leave. He was a good distraction from our need to re-spark our relationship. Roxy made her plans clear after I played her the new song I'd been working on since summer.

“And now I go to sleep, ashes will blanket me. And that's the rest you'll see,” I softly sang the closing line of my new song.

“Sea, I've heard a lot of half-baked musical ideas, and I'm sorry to say this still needs a lot of work. It's kind of all over the place,” she told me after leaning back in her chair. “I didn't know what to say.”

“I think I can play it better if you'll let me try it again. I'm still working a few things out.” I explained.

“OK, listen. Here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to stay out of your way so you can get your stuff figured out. Whatever that needs to be for you. If you want to be a musician, great. If you want to get into woodworking, that's great too. But whatever it is, you need to commit yourself to the higher capability I know you've got in you. That's what I truly want to see out of a partner. Okay? I'll see you for dinner,” she said as she got up from her chair and left the room.

I wasn't ready to change my occupation over the demo, but Roxy was right. I needed to work it like a job. I needed my telecaster from back home. I called Sandy and left a voicemail.

“Hey Sandy, I was thinking you should come on out here for a few days. I need my guitar and I'm just about out of weed. I've also got a few vocal ideas for you, let's try them out. Call me back,”

Over the next two hours, the trip was negotiated to include my dad and Starla, who I'd barely talked to since our fight at the boat party. Roxy wasn't amused by this at first but once they arrived and everyone started drinking, her mood lightened.

“Dad, why don't you pick out a record from Jon's collection,” I asked

“Sea, I don't know who these bands are, don't ask me.” He started looking. “Hey Roxy, what was your band called again?”

“Pure Silver. Jon has it. You still haven't heard them, right? I'll help you,” I told him.

After a few minutes of looking, we put on their first record.

“Hey, they've got a flute. I know what a flute sounds like... The song just kind of just sits there, on the edge of almost getting going, doesn't it?” My dad reviewed.

“I guess so, but that's what we were going for,” Roxy told him.

“Yeah, for when you're too drunk to get out of your chair, but you can still tap your feet,” he told her.

After my family left, there always seemed to be a new distraction. We needed firewood. Roxy wanted to check out a heritage seed bank. We'd needed to make an hour's drive to the nearest town to fill up five-

gallon jugs of water. We got invited to go rock climbing with the woman who was renting us free videos at the gas station. My aunt invited us to her vacation home for dinner. All were welcome distractions for Roxy, who had nothing going on for herself. It was just hard for me to get in the zone and start impressing her again, like I did at the beginning. Plus my constant need for weed didn't help my cause.

Even though Roxy would stay out of my way during the day, in the evenings we'd still relax together. She had her new book that we got in San Rafael, The Matrix Energetics. It was a self-help book by a fifth dimension faith healer based on the idea of connecting two points and observing the change between them. She would read it aloud to me, and we'd discuss.



"Wow! He got Superman to save that little girl! Isn't that amazing, Sea?" Roxy asked.

"It's the weirdest thing. Years ago my mom bought two old Superman cartoons on DVD. I think I've seen the episode he's talking about," I told Roxy, completely surprised.

"What? Maybe this book is more for you than me," she concluded.

Cooking brought Roxy a lot of joy and now that she had cash, we were eating well. She'd make me elaborate breakfasts. It would often be a fried egg in a nest of ringed onions on a quesadilla, with salsa, beans, and rice. Sausage on the side and avocado garnished all over the top. After she'd clean up I'd make us a juice out of about ten fruits and

vegetables. I had brought along the Champion Juicer my mom bought when she tried to fight cancer through nutrition. I don't think I cared about my own health at this moment with Roxy. It was just a way to feel close to my mom again. With all the fuel in my system, I couldn't use hunger as an excuse for anything.

But as the weeks went by, I started to pay more attention to the obvious signs that things would be changing again soon.

“So it's just going to be the two of you for a while, if you want to stay here that is. My mom was fine with sharing me for Christmas, but she's been hounding me ever since, wanting to know when I was coming back home,” Roxy told me.

“Are you sure you don't want me to come with?” I asked.

“Frankly Sea, it's a part of the country you wouldn't fit in, and you didn't want to work hard at the trim house. I'm in no mood to pay your way on this one. Just stay here with Jon. You've got a lot to work out,”

One afternoon Roxy walked into the living room, looking for something, and found me lightly strumming my guitar with a joint in my mouth. She had reached limit in asking me nicely, so she said it again very simply.



“Your current trajectory is something that I'm not interested in for a partner. And I'm very curious to see what you do with your time while I'm away,” she told me and left the room.



I was distraught. Captured by the deep down feeling that I didn't have the extra efforts to be anything more than I already was. I felt like I'd been punched in the gut, so I staggered down the worn path that led to Jon's cliff overlooking the waves. I felt dizzy, so I laid in a shallow cut out in the cliff bed. The longer I stayed there, the less I wanted to get up. Was Roxy right? Had I blown my chance with her? Had the novelty worn off? I was who I was and probably unable to change that, now what? How do I change everything in an instant with the one I truly love at stake. It felt impossible and I had no hope. I knew I was a lost cause.

After an hour, no hope came to me. I just shuttered in a ball thinking I should cut off my sideburns and get some kind of normal job. But at my core, I didn't like that. In the next hour, I saw an image of a golden doorway over the pacific ocean. But that was nothing of a plan or approach for dealing with this enormous problem. But my body started to loosen as I accepted the winter's cold. I kept thinking. By my third hour, I really had to pee so I got up and walked back to the house with the foundation of the best plan that I'd have to go with. Roxy was seated when I walked in and I went over and kissed her."

"You're right. I've not been carrying my weight and in the process been dragging you down. I want to do better, I just haven't been able to see how," I lovingly told Roxy.

"Thank you, Sea," She said softly. "I really don't want to lose this. You're capable of so much. I know it," she said.

"Do you remember that news story we heard on the radio about apps?" I asked.

"Kind of, like the ones on your phone?" Roxy inquired.

"Exactly. They were saying that in the next ten years everything will be an app," I reminded her.

"Let me guess, you're telling me this because you want to make an app," she said. "For what?"

“The album. It's going to be an app. I'll make a bunch of art to go along with it. We'll do some videos too. It will be a whole new type of interactive record. I think we'll be first into the market and can use it as a template for others. There might really be some cash in this,” I explained.

“Okay, yeah. I kind of get it I think, but how does it work?” Roxy asked?

“I don't know yet. But I think this is something I can do. It's like the Choose Your Adventure CD. I didn't know how that was going to work, but I figured it out as I went,” I told her.

“Well, if anybody can, it’s you. But let me just first ask, how are you going to pull this off when you can't even get Jon's computer to turn on?” Roxy asked with a chuckle in her throat.

“I think I know the right people to talk to.” I said with confidence.

With a good solid answer to what I was going to do with my life, the next day returned us to more cohabited bliss. I even figured out a general blueprint for the App. It would be based on an outdoor survival book I'd been carrying around. We'd write songs and make videos about the topics of the chapters. Making fire, building shelter, filtering water, stuff like that. But it would all have a Do It Yourself art vibe weaved through. I figured if Wikileaks was so close to releasing the biggest secret of all time, maybe there was a chance we'd all need to hide out somewhere. From what? I didn't know. I wanted to make the topic of survivalism fun and colorful. Roxy was supportive.

Things took a turn the day before she left. Jon didn't have a washing machine and our laundry had piled up. We had to drive two towns over for the nearest laundromat, which was very busy. While Roxy got her clothes ready, she noticed that she'd forgotten her nice natural detergent. She was not happy and I knew enough to stay out of her way for a bit. There was a grand lookout with an inviting bench. I

lost track of time as I smoked a couple of cigarettes waiting for the situation to cool down. On my walk back I saw a weird little car pod thing. It reminded me of the UFO pod I'd seen. Funny, I hadn't thought of that since. I saw that Roxy was back in the car, so I got in too. By now her clothes were in the dryer.

“Was it a good smoke? It must have been if you've been gone this long,” Roxy inferred.

“Yeah it was fine, there was a nice view I liked,” I answered.

“Oh, it must have been a great view then, the only view I've had here is of my underpants spinning round and round. But it's okay, I didn't need your help. It would have been nice to have not had to lug these things in myself, but I didn't really need your help. I’ve got it, it's fine,” she told me.

“I'm sorry,” I said.

“For what? Doing whatever you want? That surprises me! I don't know why you'd pick now to be sorry for that,” Roxy exploded.

“Look, I'm not wanting to get into any of this,” I answered her in the hope to put it to an end.

“Well, that would have been something great to think about when you should have been lugging my laundry.”

I quickly grabbed the door handle and got back out. Walking a few feet away, then turning back and turning back again. After a moment of standing in the parking lot with no real thought of what I was doing. I turned around one more time but instead got in the back seat.

“Your back! You must have come up with something really creative to say out there. I'm kind of excited to hear it. Alright, Sea! Lay it on me,” Roxy goaded.

“I don't really have anything. I just really don't want to fight with you right now,” I said with my head in my hands.

“Fine,” she relented.



After a minute Roxy started rummaging through her purse, I could hear her pausing on random things until she found a bag of Peruvian holy wood she carried around. She lit a piece and then waved it around the car and then in my face a few times.

“What? You don't like it?” She asked.

“Not really, not in my face I don't.” I told her.

“I thought you didn't want to fight? Maybe this sacred wood smoke will inspire a real apology out of you,” Roxy continued to goad.

“I don't think it works, you're still being a B!+$#,” I told her gently after losing my inner battle not to.

Roxy had nothing to say in response and I saw no need to push her any further. I just got up and climbed into the back of the SUV to give us more space. Once her clothes were done and we were halfway home, we started talking again. As for the fight, I would say we had a quiet understanding that if Roxy didn't leave me after her trip, we'd finish it another time.

Later that evening, Roxy read more from her Matrix Energetics book. The book was intriguing enough, but I loved to hear her talk more when she was lighthearted, with a chuckle in her throat.

“Well, that ends that chapter. We've got a few more to go when I get back. It says here the next one is on time travel,” She said.



I woke up first and looked over at Roxy's peaceful face still locked in slumber. I checked the clock on the nightstand. I wasn't sure when we were needing to be on the road, but it was late enough in the morning for me, in my oblivion, to know we were going to be late.

“Roxy, are you awake?” I asked in a low tone.

“Hey,” I lightly shook her. “What time are we supposed to be there?” I asked.

“One O'clock,” She said with no movement other than her lips.

“Girl, we’ve got to get going. It's 10:30 right now,” I told her.

“What? Didn't my alarm go off?” She yelled at me.

“If it did, I didn't hear it,” I said.

What happened next, to an outsider, must have looked like the most poorly planned fire drill of all time. Roxy ran around from room to room, grabbing things, setting them haphazardly down somewhere, then stopping and backtracking to where she just put something else.

“Should I make a quick pot of coffee?” I asked her as she stormed into the living room.

“No, we don't have time. We're going to be late!” She harshly answered.

“It'll be fine, we're just meeting them at the beach. I think it will be fine,” I told her.

“Are you packed? I don't have time to wait for you!” Roxy barked.

“Yeah, my bags in the car. Don't worry about me.”

The coffee would have been more than ready by now and I would have been sipping on a cup as I smoked in the driveway waiting for her.

“So I guess I have to drive,” She asked as she carried out her last bag.

“You know the way,” I said.

“It's Highway One, everybody knows the way. It follows the coastline,” she told me as if I were a complete idiot.

“I can drive.” I said.

“I thought you didn't like driving stoned,” Roxy prodded.

“I'm not that stoned,” I told her.

“No, no. I'll drive, get in,” Roxy ordered.

The couple we stayed with in San Francisco for New Year was going to put us up for the night. But they were staying at the hotel with another couple in the very small coastal town of Bolinas. Roxy was excited to be seeing her friends for a change and we'd be getting a key to their apartment. So this was a stop that had to happen. Highway One

is beautiful but can be pretty slow going when you're trying to get somewhere in a hurry. We stopped off for a couple quick cups of coffee, which settled us down some as we continued with the drive. Once we pulled into Bolinas, Roxy wanted to stop at a health food store for snacks to take to the beach.



“We have a big problem!” I yelled as Roxy when she came out of the store and into the parking lot.

“What?” She asked with a bag of goods in hand.

“I was messing with a latch on the back door and now the door won't shut,” I said in extreme frustration.

“Why were you doing that? Did you try to put it back?” She asked me as she tried to understand what I was saying.

“Yeah, I tried. It's broken. I don't know why I did it, it just kind of happened,” I tried to explain.

“It just kind of happened! What do you mean it just kind of happened? So now I’ve got to worry about you breaking the car just for fun!” She exploded.

“It's not like that,” I said

“No Sea. It's exactly like that. Now, what do we do? Can we deal with it later? We're late to meet them,” She said harshly.

“No. The door won't shut at all, it just flops open. I think we need to find a mechanic,” I told her from the former experience I had in creating this problem as a child.

We started driving around the small town as I held the door shut from inside. Roxy rolled down the window and asked a guy walking

down the street. Turns out he was a mechanic and after getting the right tool was able to pop it back in place for beer money. We were blessed to find someone so easily, but all and all it set us back another hour. Now we were really late.

Once we got to the beach and parked, we gathered our things and walked down to where the beach sign directed us to go. Her friends were not in sight. Did we miss them? Now we had to walk up and down both sides of the beach looking. This definitely didn't put me in the mood to socialize when we found them after another twenty minutes.

Later, when we were driving to the apartment in San Francisco Roxy tried to pick back up from the fight at the laundromat the day before. I guess getting up in the middle of dinner to go wait out in the car was frowned upon in Bolinas, but I will concede that she had good reason to wish I made a better effort with her friends. I wasn't mean, just indifferent. All I could say in my defense was I was wanting to make things ‘manifest’, but I wasn't sure what that meant.

Jon's plane from Canada had come in a few hours earlier and he was waiting for us to pick him up. He was all amped up from his trip, so we stopped to buy a few drinks to try and calm everyone's nerves before Roxy's early morning



departure. As I smoked out on the porch I could hear Roxy and Jon talking about me.

“Now Jon, I need you to be a bit gentle with Sea. I don't know what's going on in that head, but he seems to be unstable and I'm trying my best. But after what I've been through, I can't watch another artist lose it. I sure know how to pick em, don't I?” Roxy confided.

“I'll be on it. We'll try to get a routine going. That works for me when I get out of it,” Jon said to ease her concerns.

“He might need more than that. I can't say when, but there's been a change,” Roxy told him.

“I've known Cobra for a while now, he can get like this but he always bounces back.” Jon told her.

The next morning as Jon unloaded Roxy's bags on the curb of the airport departures lane, I got a kiss and a hug, and the elusive feeling that this would be the last time for both. But I ignored it and decided to finally stake my claim to my art, music, and Roxy as a partner for the rest of my life.

“By the time she gets back, it will all be underway,” I thought as I looked in the rearview mirror seeing her walk through the automatic double airport doors.

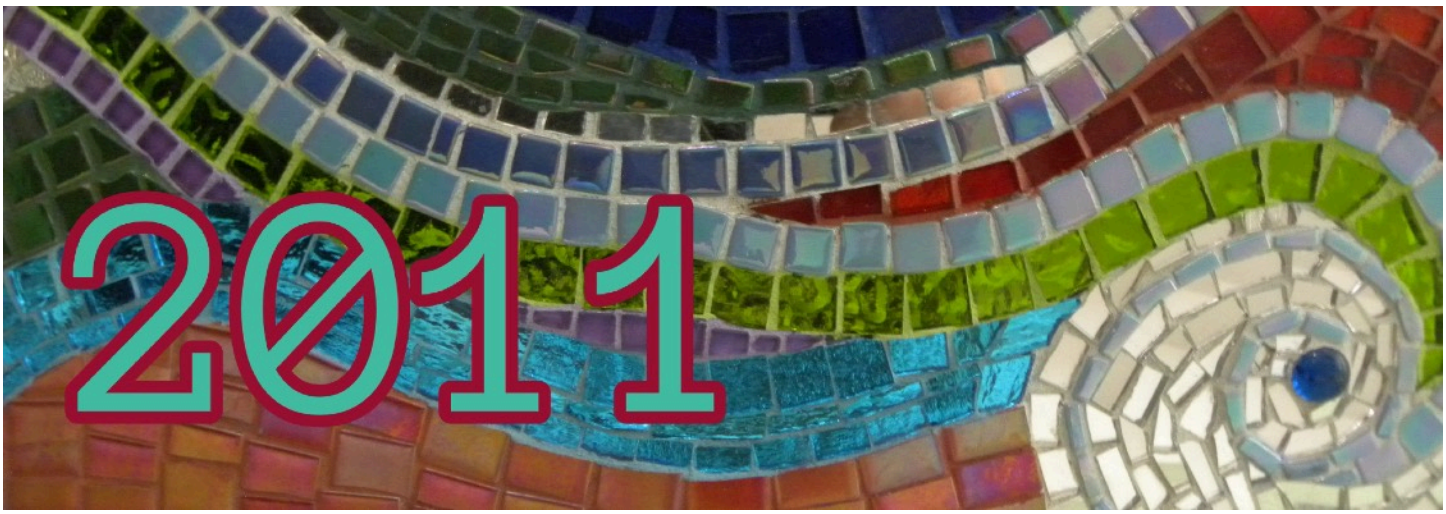
“Okay, Jon. Now what?” I asked as I followed the signs back towards San Francisco.

Jon cracked the window and lit a rolled cigarette.

“I don't know, but I know of a good place to stop for coffee.”



Chapter Four
It's just something that I need to do



(2011) Early December, County Jail.

"I don't know why he does it that way! It drives me crazy. I mean, just leave it on the hook where anyone can find it!" A female guard's low voice echoed into my tiny cell.

"Yeah, I think that's Dave's fault. He's trained him wrong from day one and now we've all got to live with it," a male guard's nasal voice said back.

"Why is this tray still here?" A female guard asked. "Did someone not get their food?"

"I'll check," the male guard walked past the four small cells.

"I think we missed Stoltzner." He said.



A second later the male guard opened my cell door, handed me dinner and finally revealed his face. As I waited in booking over the preceding hours, I tried imagining what

these loud and brutish guards looked like and if I'd seen them here before. I wasn't sure, so instead I prepared to try and get an ounce of pleasure out of the meal.

“Sorry it's cooled off, but it eats all the same. And don't worry, we’ll have you out of here soon. They're working on a place to put you now,” he told me as I held back my complaint that I didn't deserve to spend all day in booking.

After going to Napa, the jail had a boom of sex offenders to deal with. The classification officer had to spend all day shuffling them around to get me an open cell. Meaning for the moment, I'd have to live in a block of all sex offenders until something more appropriate opened up. I wouldn't have to interact with them though and I'd have Dayroom to myself. But according to prison politics, it was bad for me to be housed anywhere near them. The jail knew this, but they couldn't leave me in booking all night.

My lawyer Lilly came to see me pretty quickly after I got back.



“Wow Sea, you weren't down there long at all,” Lilly congratulated. “The question is, are you ready for a fight?”

“Yes. I'm ready to get this over with.” I said in exhaustion.

“Well hold on, we're nowhere near an end. First, we need to reinstate your trial. I haven't even opened up your file since the order to send you to Napa. Once everything is up and running with the court, we'll need to do a review to see if you meet the criteria for the Not Guilty By Reason Of Insanity plea. If you

don't, there's not much I'm going to be able to help you with. But if all the boxes get checked, then we'll start bringing in the forensic psychiatrist to see what they think," Lily explained.

"How long will all that take?" I asked.

"Honestly, months. We should get you a few magazine subscriptions. You're going to be here for a while." She reality checked me with.

The light in my cell was going dim. I loved it. I quickly put together a decent routine for my 23 hour day of extreme confinement. Reading, writing in my journal, exercising with a little bit of Yoga sprinkled in, and attempts at art with my colored pencils. I also spent a decent amount of time thinking back on the positive parts of my life before Roxy. I didn't have the heart to think about her anymore. I was pressing forward. After a couple of weeks in the sex offender pod, I was called out to talk to a guard.

"We've got to get you out of here. You can't enjoy being in there with all those sickos." He told me.

"I like that it's quiet." I said resigned to the fact that I had no power in the situation.

"A cell just opened up in another pod, it's a better fit. I insist that we move you," he instructed.



My sisters sent me a bunch of pictures of Christmases from our childhoods. I even waited till Christmas morning to open it. They also sent a holiday gift package that the canteen offered. They wanted to make sure I had plenty of love. The new cell was working out alright, it was quiet too. There

was a guy in the next cell that was fine to talk to through our doors. He'd been to prison and thought it was important to educate me on what he could.

“I don't know anything about the insanity plea. I've known a couple of guys that have tried, but no one that’s ever gotten very far. Maybe it will work out for you, but if it doesn't you're headed to the big house. And not just any stay either, you'll be on a high wall,” he told me as I tried to act like I understood what he was talking about.

“Levels son, prison works on a level system and due to the nature of your crime and the extent of your sentence, you'll have a high level. But don't worry, after a few years it will come down and you can do normal stuff in the yard. But at first, you'll be stuck in a cell block where its no hands, only knives. And it will be you and your brothers versus the Mexicans and the Blacks. Trust me Sea, it can get rough! And there's usually not enough white boys to make it a fair fight,” he explained to my horror.

Now that I'd been back a few months and was getting prison pep talks daily, I was starting to lose the tranquility I put together at Napa. When I'd get upset about something, my only escape or distraction was to pace my cell. I get seven small steps, having to turn sharply on the last one. These industrial architects make the jail cells as small as possible. Mine was about 10 X 6, minus a diagonal cut-out for the plumbing, sink, and toilet. And I'd pace every inch of it as fast as I could, as long as I felt bad and until my knees throbbed and ached. Then I’d lie down on my bunk for a max of 60 seconds before getting back up and having to move again. On repeat. All day long.

It was around this time that I turned my attention to God.... and how much I hated him. It became the fuel by which I did everything. I couldn't understand how all this had happened. It almost seemed like a cruel joke or a vicious game. Let's raise a man, have him struggle his

whole developmental life then give him a taste of everything he'd ever wanted and take it all away by making him the town monster. I'd pace harder and harder the more I thought about how wronged I'd been by God. When my knee pains became too much to bear, I'd try to cry to somehow release any amount of the hurt I felt. But as soon as I'd fail at this, I would be back up at pacing again.



After months and a few pointless procedural court dates, Lilly was back to see me.

"Good news Sea! The public defender's office is going to pay for you to meet with a forensic psychiatrist. I've picked out one I like. He's extremely busy but he says that he can meet with you sometime in the

next few months," Lilly told me with a big smile on her face.

"The next few months! I'm barely hanging in there today," I explained out of pure frustration.

"I know you don't like it, but this is the process. Remember, you killed a man. I'm doing the best job I can with what I have to work with. This is good news, Sea! I think we can win this," she told me gleefully.

The meds were still working as far as I could tell. One day I got so dizzy I couldn't lie down without wanting to vomit, one of the side effects I was told. This went away, but I was constantly worried it would come back. At least the former hallucinations and delusions weren't holding me back from moving forward.

All the guards knew me well by now. I'd worked hard at earning their respect by always giving some in advance. Because of this, I was taken off administrative segregation and started sharing the Dayroom with a couple other guys in similarly difficult situations. A blessing and a curse. We'd all have more time out in the Dayroom, but you'd have to navigate around how others wanted to spend their time. Mostly, who was controlling the TV. I quickly found that there were no shows worth arguing for, so I just avoided complaining and got along the best I could. But it was frustrating.

Now that I was off of Administrative Segregation, the guards started giving me cellmates. Another blessing and a curse. I didn't get along with the first guy. He was on his way to prison with nothing to lose. He was jealous that I had snacks and wanted me to get my sisters to look in on his wife. When I told him no it almost came to blows, but he turned out to be all bark and ended up leaving for prison soon after. The guy after that turned out to be a pretty good conversationalist. He heard me out on why I hated God and didn't discount my feelings but had other thoughts about it.

“I think we alone are responsible for the things we do, good or bad. God didn't make you kill that man. Everyone goes through difficulties and I think God is there to comfort us, not to break us down to teach us harsh lessons.” He explained.

As I worked on my issue of hating God, I couldn't argue that I had blessings in my life. My family had divided up the week's visits so I'd be able to see someone different each day and on occasion, a friend would stop by. Another blessing was Starla kept money on my books and having those little extra luxuries each week made a big difference in the long run. Starla also put money on my inmate phone account so we could talk on the non-visit days, where she'd often read me inspirational quotes or do meditation and breathing exercises. As far as my wants and needs were concerned, I had it better than most.

Since starting meds, I was having a hard time getting back into art. I tried, but mostly ripped up my efforts. I decided instead to try and write a poem every day. As an experiment it started out fine, but it took a dark turn rather quickly and I had to stop. It seemed as though my subconscious was not happy with the mundane routine and the repression of the meds on my emotions. I'd read something off the book cart occasionally, but I’d prefer to lie around and daydream. Whenever I could get a magazine, I’d give it my undivided attention.

By summer I had run out of tricks to keep motivated and really needed something to happen. After months of waiting, it was time for Lilly's forensic psychiatrist to start visiting me. Now that I was finally getting attention, all I knew was to answer his questions as honestly as possible. We spent hours going over all the details that I vividly remembered. He also had me do a bunch of standard psych evaluations. I still remember one of the weirder questions being “Do you have sexual feelings on elevators?” As he left our last session he reassured me that his report would be helpful. That made me feel a little better.

Soon after that, a contagious Hand, Foot, and Mouth virus spread throughout the jail and I was the last to catch it. Good thing I waited, now there was plenty of room in the medical wing to house me.



(2011) Late January, back home at dad's.

"Sea my boy, you're back! How's the car running?" My dad said as I walked up to the house.

"Fine enough. Is there any coffee?" I asked.

"A little, I think. Enough for a cup," he offered what he had.

"Thanks, I don't think I'll ever get used to that drive," I told him as I poured from the coffee pot in the kitchen, next to the sliding glass door.

"What's the plan? I know you've been cooking something up," he lit up a cigarette.

"Jon and I decided we both needed a break, he wanted to decompress from his trip and I needed to figure out some stuff to keep Roxy from leaving me. So I'm back doing that," I said as I lit up my own cigarette.

"Sounds good to me. What's the big plan then?" He sat back expecting a show.



“To keep Roxy from leaving me? It's kind of complex. I'm not sure I'm ready to explain it,” I told him.

“Humor me then.” Dad demanded.

“Okay, here it goes. We're going to turn my new art and music into an App for cell phones.” I told him with little fanfare.

“What's an App?” He asked dumbfounded.

“Exactly,” I told him. “It's a hard plan to explain.”

“An album for cell phones? I don't get it.” He said lost.

“I'm not sure I get it either. I’m just hoping to act confidently with this idea until I find and inspire someone who does,” I admitted.



I called my sisters. We all decided to meet up at Starla's house. I put my dirty laundry in the wash and cleaned myself up. Once I was ready to go, I stepped outside on the deck for a quick smoke and I heard it again.

“Tomorrow you will go to the Animal Save thrift store. There you will find King Cat, you will name him Cowboy. You will spend one hundred dollars.”

It was my voice from the future again. I had forgotten all about it.

My dad's cat had recently run off. He was more of the neighborhood's cat but after showing up on dad's birthday, he made himself comfortable. It had been weeks since anyone had seen him and Sandy was concerned.

“We need a new pet,” I thought as I drove to town. “I'll have to meet this King Cat.”

“So Sea? How are things going with Roxy? Starla asked me early on in the evening.

“Good, she's been stressed and on my case a bit. But I think it's going well enough to get mom's engagement ring fixed up,” I told my sisters casually as we ate some chips, ignoring all of Roxy's recent red lights. “She even told Jon what her ring size was over X-mas.”

“Sea, that's a huge step! Are you ready?” Sandy inquired.

“Well, I think I've proved that I can't do any better, and if she's willing to go along for the ride I think I am too. I wish we would have run off to Reno and done it right away. We’ll probably have to do a whole ceremony and everything,” I told them as the reality of marriage was now hitting me.

“Sea, I'm glad to see that you have someone you care so much about. I hope it works out for you,” Starla told me.

“Thanks,” I said.

“I'm going to the bathroom, then let's go already! I don't want to spend the whole night just sitting here and grazing,” Sandy said as she left the room.

“Hey, I had an idea earlier. How about the three of us go to Animal Save in the morning and get Sandy a new cat?” I suggested. “But let's keep it a surprise.”

The next morning, I walked up the stairs to the back room where they housed the adoptable cats. They only had a few. An old gnarly gray one. Two black sibling kittens and a golden yellow striped kitten.

“Can I pick him up?” I asked the volunteer behind the counter.

“Oh, he's very friendly. Go ahead,” she told me.

“Hello, King Cat,” I whispered in his ear as I held him to my chest. Sandy and Starla had gotten distracted by the black siblings by the door, so I brought him over.

“Sandy, I'd like to introduce you to Cowboy.” I told her as I handed him over.

Starla got to work filling out the application as Sandy and I played with the cute little guy. When we were approved, the adoption fee was eighty-five dollars. But the voice had told me to spend one hundred. So I told the volunteer to keep the change from a hundred-dollar bill. Now everyone was happy. My sisters, the volunteer, and my voice from the future.

After the acquisition of King Cat, Roxy called me and asked me to stop by a recording studio to hear the new songs Mary's been working on. There were a handful of my other friends there too. I invited everybody over for dinner. My dad was making the only meal he knew how, chicken enchiladas. I made a few more calls and invited a few more people. Now I had to get home quickly and try to put some sort of presentation together about the App.

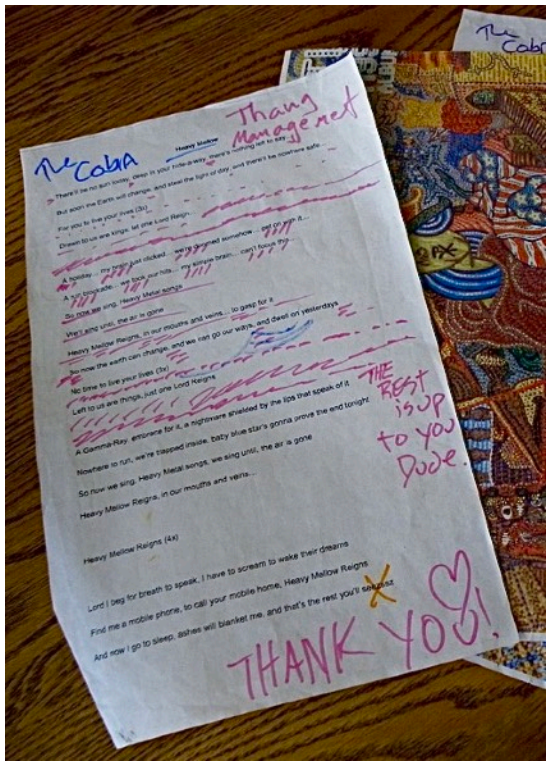
“Starla, could you help me with something?” I asked as she played with Cowboy.

“Probably, what do you need?”

“Could you sit at dad's computer and type up some lyrics as I read

them? He still doesn't want me using it after I crashed it."

"Sure Sea," she told me as she got up off the floor.



"...And now I go to sleep, ashes will blanket me. And that's the rest you'll see," I said as I finished reading through the lyrics that I had scrawled across the many pages of my pink zebra print notebook.

"That's it, that's the end." She asked.

"Yes! I'm going to relish the moment this song gets recorded and Roxy gets to hear its full potential." I told Starla with the same passion as a marathon runner breaking through the finish line tape.

"Cool Sea. Do you want me to print this?" She asked.

"Yes, print it on the backside of these. I need like seven of them," I said as I handed her a bunch of old show fliers.

As surrounded by talent that the Nevada City art and music scene seemed to be, Jill brought an array of technical and organizational abilities to the table. She was short, with brown curly hair and a genuine smile. She was my first and last hope of pulling off this App. She showed up later in the evening and after most people left to beat the rain, and soon, Jill and I got to talking.

"He's a cute cat! Sandy looks really happy with him," she told me. "Okay, let's hear it, what'd you bring me out here for?"

I explained the basic idea. The Metalujah, Heavy Mellow Survival App. I gave Jill a copy of the lyrics that I decorated with stickers. She

took a second to collect her thoughts.

"It's a good idea, I just don't know how practical it is. Like how much data are you going to require? I don't think anyone's doing anything like this," she thought aloud.

"That's why we've got to jump. We'll be the first ones in the pool." I added.

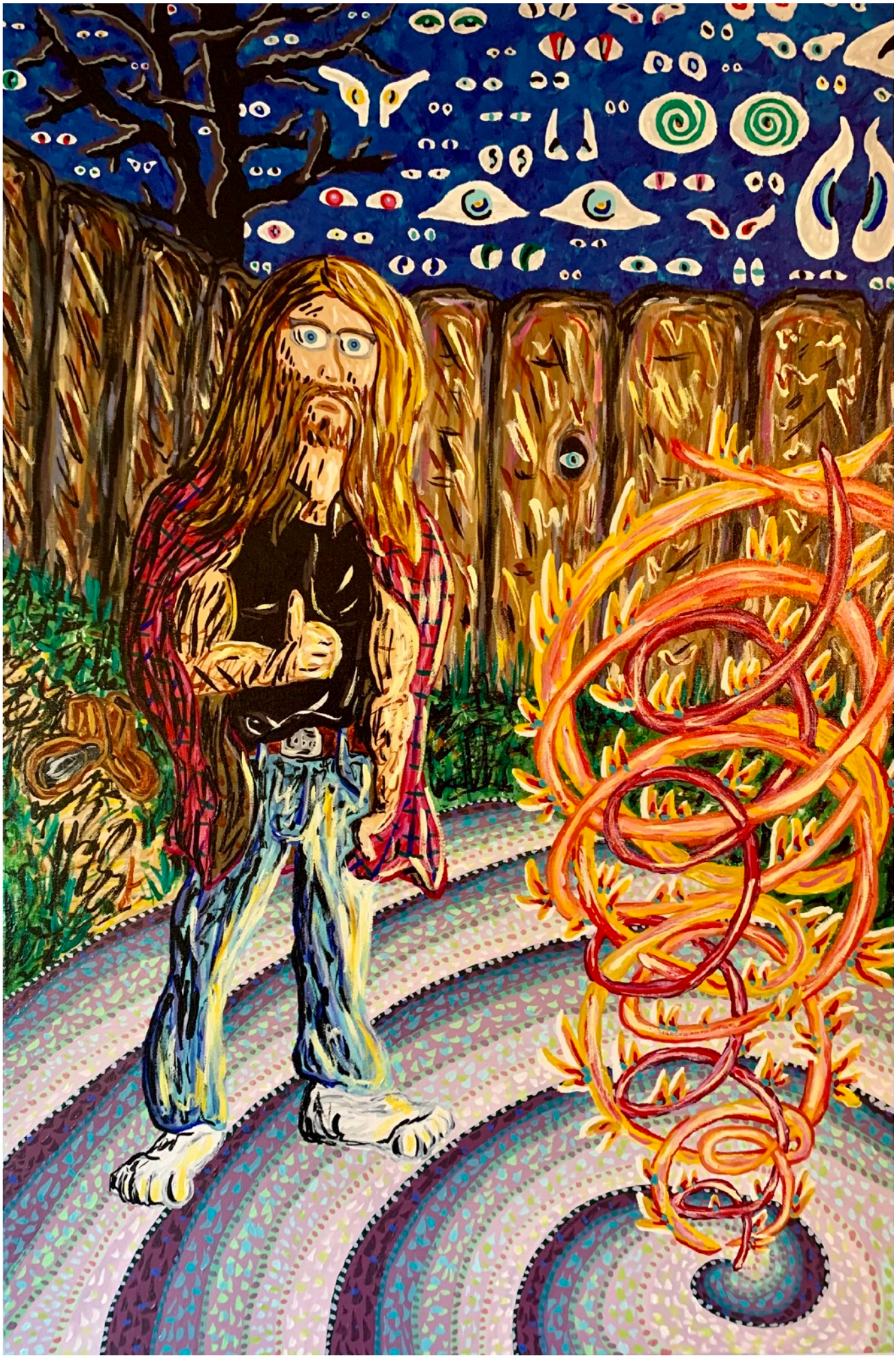
"Even after you get all the art and music made, you're going to need a decent-sized team working on the tech side of all this. And I'm guessing you don't have much money, do you?" She asked, already knowing the answer.

"I don't, and I'm not even sure what I need. But this is a chance to build something new. We'll find the cash somewhere. I just want to get the right people on board before I go chasing the money," I explained.

"Can you come by the Coat of Arms tomorrow? It's the new gallery I'm operating. It will give me some more time to think about this. I'm definitely interested. Who else have you got on your list?" She asked me.



By the time the rain started, everyone was gone and I was too drunk and too stoned for anything else. I kept drinking and contemplating ways to talk about the App, or at least talk about the way to talk about it.



In anticipation of this storm, earlier in the day, my dad burned a pile of leaves near the deck. Once I heard a break in the rain, I went outside to have a cigarette.

As I looked out into the darkness, there was little to catch my eye. No weird lights from the neighbors. No stars in the sky. But then I noticed a dying ember down in the burn pile. It grew as I stared at it. I was shocked! How could there still be life to this fire after all this rain? I had to investigate.

As I approached the fire, it exploded into a four-foot-tall fire tornado. I instantly knew I had to take off my boots, that this was now Holy Ground. I walked closer. I was scared but the fire seemed to be inviting me to take a better look. I felt eyes all around me, from every angle and every side. For a second I could see myself from the perspective of the fire. But once I was back in my own perspective, I gave the fire a thumbs up and started stepping backward. Somehow knowing I had seen all there was to see. Then the flames died back down as I put back on my boots and went back into the house.

“How's April? Do you think you could get a show ready by then? But do the survival stuff. So we have the option to use it for the App if that comes together,” Jill asked the next afternoon at the Coat of Arms gallery.

“I'll get right on it. I have some ideas that I'm ready to move on. I've been wanting to do something with a golden doorway,” I told her.

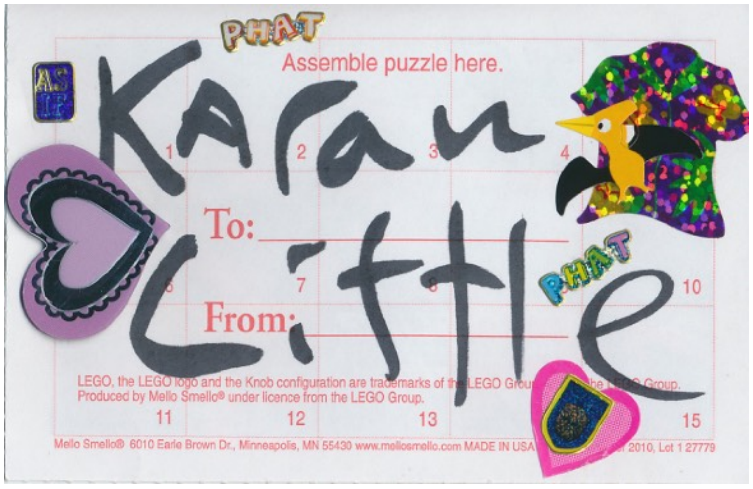
“I talked to a programmer friend. He's got some ideas and is interested too. If you really want to be the first one to pull this off, check to see if the next person on your list is interested.”

Jill wasn't my only App related appointment. I knew I needed the right person to lead the art department and Vince was an obvious choice.



Vince was my earliest cheerleader. He'd already had successes in the art world, so his support meant a lot. You could always pick him out at a show. Few stood taller. He worked his art harder than anyone else. His sense of humor came across in everything he did. The Nevada City scene greatly benefited from his presence. He lived with Claire

Claire made it all work. She kept things organized and well presented. Sewing was one of her gifts and she always was working on something amazing. She had short brown hair and embodied all of the charms of a desirable woman. It took me a while to be comfortable around her. She was too strong of a woman to put up with adolescent male behavior. She was a good motivation to act my age.



"If you're looking for a yes so you can tell people I'm on board, then it's got to be a no. But if you want me to be a part of it in some way, I promised Drew I'd make him a music video soon. Maybe you could work something out with him to include it. Feel free to credit my work to the name Karen Little," Vince told me coldly.

"So what are you looking for out of this art department? How can people help out?" Claire asked from the couch.

"Well, I want little tutorials on how to make useful objects. Like

matching tribal head wraps or ways to bundle fire kits. But with a kind of style you don't see with most survival stuff. Make it fun and expressive," I explained to Claire.

"I think it all sounds great! She said. "I think there's a lot of talent to tap into with this."

I had one more night in town before returning to the coast. Sandy was hungry so we drove to a grocery store for some tasty things to cook up. As we loaded our cart with frozen potstickers, onion rings, and ice cream, I noticed a display of various children's valentines day cards. So I grabbed a pack of the Lego ones. We had a fun night pigging out on snacks, watching movies, and taking our minds off our problems. I helped myself to the large bag of untrimmed fresh weed that I stashed in the mess of my old bedroom.

Before I left the next morning, I kindly asked my dad to let me quickly check my social media account. He agreed but still reminded me not to crash anything. On my account was a post from Claire. She linked an article about people getting rich off of new forms of media. It was encouraging to see that she saw the potential too. Lastly, I gave Cowboy a pat on the head and got back on the road for my trip back to Jon's.



(2012) July, County Jail.

The hand, foot, and mouth virus hit me hard at a bad time. Most people just experienced a rash of red contagious bumps, but what I got came with a cold. For the first few days in the medical wing, all I did was sleep. I'd wake up at random times to find a cold tray of food on my small metal desk. After a couple of miserable days, I improved enough to read a book Starla sent me months earlier and I was able to use the phone to check in with my family. Starla told me Cole was in town and tried to see me but couldn't due to my quarantine. This really bummed me out.

The stress had finally become too much as I paced this new windowless cell. The lights were way too bright. Even if they only had half of the incandescent light bulbs it would have still been too bright, and the thought of going back to a regular cell after this didn't help. I was stuck. Anyway you factored it, I was stuck. As I thought about everything, my stomach turned sicker and sicker ‘till I freaked out and grabbed a drawing a friend sent me and ripped it to pieces. I threw its remains onto the floor, breaking through the emotional walls the med contained me in and cried hard on my unmade bed.



A few days later I was free and clear from the virus and one of the classification officers came to talk with me.

“Stoltzner, we've all been watching you. With the seriousness of your case and all, I just wanted to say that the way you've carried yourself under all this weight–-well, you've earned my respect.” He said.

“Thanks, it isn't easy,” I admitted.

“I can't imagine it is,” he paused. “Look, I've got a problem and I was hoping for your help with it.”

“Okay, what is it?” I asked.

“I've got nowhere to put you. The pod you came from is filled with guys worse off than you. I can't send you back there. I was wondering what you thought about going to general population?” He proposed his easiest solution.

“I kind of don't feel good about it. You guys housed me with the sex offenders for that month and I know some knucklehead is going to make a big deal about it. I'm just trying to get through this without any friction.” I told him sternly.

“Yeah, that's what I thought too. That should have never happened,” he paused again. “I have one other place I can put you, but you’ll have to promise that you'll be on your best behavior,” he paused again. “I just opened an overflow male dorm in minimum security. I think you'd do just fine there.”

“Do you play Gin Rummy?” I was asked five minutes after picking my bunk and setting down my things.

“I have, you'll have to remind me,” I told the table.

“There's only three of us that play, it works better with four. Whenever you’re ready, grab a chair.” One of the guys from the table said.

“I'm ready now,” I sat down.

“You sure got a lot of stuff, where'd you come from?” Someone else asked.

“Medical, I picked up that hand-foot thing that was going around. But don't worry, I'm better now.” I told them to ease concerns.

“Where did you come from before medical?” The third guy chimed in.

“Ad-Seg.” I told them with the fleeting hope of keeping myself under the radar.



“What were you doing there?” The first guy asked.

“It's kind of a long story,” I said as I tried to deflect the inevitable conclusion of this line of questioning.

“Well, it's your lucky day. We just so happen to have nothing but time,” the second guy replied.

“It's a kind of involved story, I'm not sure I feel up to telling it,” I said.

“Alright guys, cut it out. He's that Stoltzner guy, the one in for murder. How did you ever pull off getting sent down to minimum security?” The third guy joked, which led to everyone having a big laugh.

I played so many cards that first week, I'd almost have to be reminded that I was still in jail and still under the same difficult circumstances. The guards wanted to keep this dorm flexible. Able to be shut down instantly if needed. So they kept it as small as possible, which worked out great for us. Everyone got a bottom bunk, it remained relatively quiet and stayed pretty clean. The whole dorm got to share two hours out in a large Dayroom with a TV, Ping Pong table,

and outdoor rec yard area. We were also very blessed to have a payphone in the dorm with us. But it could get awkward to have personal calls in front of everyone you cohabited with.

“Well Sea, the psychiatrist I sent didn't let you down. He just turned in an 80-page report. The bottom line is he says that due to the symptoms of your mental illness, you weren't able to tell right from wrong and therefore are unable to be held responsible for your actions. This is great! We're getting close!” Lilly told me.

“That's awesome news, what comes next?” I asked.

“Now the court is going to have to hire their own independent forensic psychologist. I have a pretty good guess who they'll use. He's more available than the guy I hired, but all in all it will probably still take a couple more months. Hang in there, we're almost done!” Lilly chose encouraging words before parting.

I was getting used to dorm life, there was lots of turnover. It didn't take long for the card players to move on and be replaced. Also, the dorm was where they sent the weekenders. These guys served their time for lesser offenses on Friday and Saturday nights. They were generally a bunch of grumpy alcoholics but if you left them alone, they'd do the same.



I still paced some; right down the long row of bunks. I had about a twenty-five-foot runway. But now it wasn't about hating God, it was more of a stress reducer and a thought provoker. I took a lot of naps. It's incredible how much

sleep you can get in jail. It wouldn't be out of the norm to get sixteen hours. But it was never a deep sleep, it was more of a light-headed, half-conscious, uncomfortable restless sleep. But you got a lot of it.

One of my new habits bothered me. I had the constant urge to rearrange the plastic chairs and tables whenever people weren't sitting at them. When everyone in the dorm would mellow out and take a nap. I'd fight it for a while, but I couldn't help myself. I get up and spend two minutes shifting it all around, then go back to sleep. It bothered me because I knew it was pointless, but my higher control freak self couldn't let it go.



"You caught me on pizza day again. Wow, that always seems to happen," I said to Sandy in the visiting booth.

"Oh shoot, did I get you during lunch again?" She asked.

"Nope, great timing. I just finished," "How's old Cowboy doing?"

"He's loving the new house. He's out and about most of the day and when he finally comes home he's covered in sticks and burrs. He's a really funny cat." She told me.

"How does Starla enjoy being a new homeowner? Is it everything she hoped and dreamed it would be?" I asked.

"It's a longer drive into work, she doesn't love that. Dad keeps stepping in and making homeowner-styled decisions. He's been cutting down some trees to improve the view. It's annoying." Sandy explained the new dynamic.

"I still can't believe dad lost his house to the bank. I wish I would have been more aware of what was really going on and not just chasing

this stupid App and messing around with Wikileaks," I confessed.

"Don't be so hard on yourself. Not now when you're so close to getting back to Napa," She said to encourage me.

"When I do get back, I want a real pizza. Maybe I can get back for my birthday?" I wondered.

"Well, we'd love to bring you one. Have you heard from Lilly recently?" Sandy asked.

I had a couple of visits with the court-ordered Forensic Psychologist. He was friendly enough and our last sessions seemed to be productive. I spent the next few weeks waiting to see which way it was going to go. Finally, I got called out to see Lilly.

"He agreed. He also concluded that you were out of your mind and couldn't tell right from wrong. This is fabulous! The D.A. is going to have a hard time fighting these reports. We've got a court date next week, we'll wait to see what they want to do." Lilly directed.

With this latest news, for the first time, it felt like it was okay to be excited for the rest of my life. Within the weeks, Lilly presented me with a plea deal from the D.A.



"If you plead no contest to a charge of Murder Two, the D.A. will accept the duel plea of Not Guilty By Reason Of Insanity." She explained.

"Murder Two? I don't see how they have the evidence to support this? It should be some sort of manslaughter. I don't want to let them get me on something more than I did. This is ridiculous!" I emphatically told her.

“I completely agree, but the charge you take makes no difference once you get back to Napa. You'll have to run the same program either way. You'll still have to go on outpatient, and after six months you’ll still be eligible for that. But if you choose to fight this for a lower charge, there's still a chance you could still lose and be sent to prison. If you take it, it's all done. You'll be on your way out of here. I'm going on vacation next week. So you can take some time to talk to your family about it,” Lilly instructed.

“Take it, Sea! You couldn't handle going through a trial. It would take too long and if it's all the same once you get back to Napa, I don't see the point!” Starla shared her reaction to hearing about the deal. I needed no more convincing.

Soon I had the plea deal document in front of me. Lilly was there to make sure I signed it correctly. I only had one question after I finished.

“So, when do I leave?”

Some time in September there was a hearing to formally accept my plea. The local newspaper reported that I'd taken responsibility for my actions and I'd be headed back to Napa. But this would take time. New agencies would need to make new reports and then those needed time to be filed. All while I was waiting in the dark about it all. Wondering each day what the hold-up was. By January I was fed up with waiting, but I knew my day had to be close. Then without a reason given, I was moved out of the dorm and back to Ad-Seg.

“You know, the night before someone leaves the guards close out your books. They've got to get a check ready for them to take,” my new cellmate told me as I stood by the cell door, waiting for our nine o'clock

Dayroom time.

“Yeah, I should check. I thought when they moved me out of the dorm three weeks ago it meant something was about to happen, now I don't know what to think.” I said in frustration.

“Dayroom,” the pod officer announced.

I put in my pin on the small computer kiosk attached to the wall. It showed that I had a balance of $0.00.

“Nothing's there! I'm on my way tomorrow!” I yelled to everyone in the pod.

“Well, don't forget about us all when you're rich and famous. I'll probably still be locked up somewhere,” my cellmate told me lightheartedly.

The next morning after breakfast, the pod officer was surprised when I immediately told her I was ready to go once she told me to roll it up. So she popped my door and I carried my green plastic mat to the storage room. Then I came back to get my box of property. Now I was off to booking and more importantly off to the next leg of my journey.

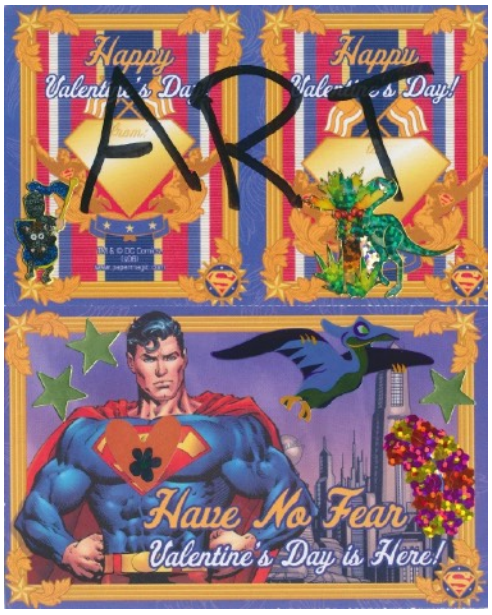


(2011) February. Back to the coast.

I had enough self-control to drive back to Jon's without smoking any weed. My sober mind had milder, more realistic thoughts about what I needed to do with the next two weeks. I thought about the Lego children's valentines day cards I bought at the grocery store.

“That could be something.” I told myself to the noise of the road.

On my next stop, I called up Jill.



“Hey, what do you think about doing a Valentine's day party at the Coat of Arms? I think it would be fun for everyone to buy cheap children's card packs, decorate them with stickers and hand them out to each other. We could somehow use this idea in the App, I don't know how yet. I’m just thinking about this now.”

“We should have cupcakes too. People love decorating cupcakes,” she couldn't hide the excitement in her voice.

“Yes! I'm all about cupcakes as well. I'll be calling when I get to Jon's, I can't remember the number right now. Take care,” I said as I got back on the road.

Next, I needed to address the art department. One of the reoccurring anecdotes in the App pitch I was using was this:

“We have friends with highly developed skill sets and they all have hobbies that they wish they’d be doing. How about this, if people are going to be working on this project for no immediate pay, let's rearrange the opportunities to get people set up with the jobs they'd rather be

doing.”

If this was going to be my approach, I couldn't fault Vince for beating me to the punch. If he wants to make me a music video for the song Drew was offering, great! I'd rather have people motivated by their passions. Things might even get done that way. Not like all the bro deals I've tried in the past. So my next question had to be how do I utilize Claire's excitement for this project?

It was already dark when I pulled into Jon's driveway right off of highway one. I unload my clothes, art supplies, and the wooden garden poles I'd soon be getting much use out of. I went inside and gave Jon a burrito I picked up along the way. I told him about the trip.

“So until I make my sweat lodge every morning, I'm going to be observing a vow of silence,” I told him as he ate.

“Whatever you say, Cobra,” he told me between bites.

The next morning, I slept in late. Now that Jon was home, I was staying out in the pump house. It wasn't all that big, but it served its purpose. As soon as I stepped out the door I saw a pair of fighter jets fly overhead. Then I immediately noticed that my Dad's SUV was gone. As I smoked my first cigarette and got stoned, I tried to run the math on the situation.

“Did the apocalypse start without me? Are those fighter jets en route for world war three? Was Jon in such a hurry to save himself that he couldn't come and wake me up?” I thought as I then moved on to my morning weed.

There was a pot of hot coffee. I tried the radio and everything appeared to be normal. I grabbed a tortilla, put a cold hunk of cheese

into the middle, and took a labored bite. I missed Roxy now more than ever.

Here was a piece of the grand plan, one of the chapters in the survival book was on shelter. I had brought back with me a bunch of the wooden poles that I used to tie up my marijuana plants over the preceding summer and I now wanted to use them as the structure of a sweat lodge for a music video. The next step was coming up with a design. Then to learn how to build it quickly while blindfolded. I also needed to prepare a canvas covering that a couple energetic band members could put over the top to end the video.

I had taken everything I needed out of the SUV the night before, so I got to work. I discovered if I tied three poles together at the top and made a three-sided pyramid, that would hold pretty well. Then if I made another pyramid next to it, all I needed to do was lie a pole across the tops of both pyramids and it was a proper structure. Or one good enough for a three-minute video. As I was finishing up Jon drove down the driveway in my dad's SUV.

“Hey, is this the sweat lodge?” He asked with excitement.

“Yep, it's pretty good for a start, I can already see how to do it better tomorrow. Could you get a picture for me?” I asked.

“Yeah, let's document the process,” he got out his new iPhone and snapped a shot.

“I hope you don't mind me taking your car. I have a friend up the street who lets me use their washing machine. I'm not used to being without my truck. I’ve got to start looking for a new one,” Jon explained, as his former ride grew rust somewhere in a local scrapyard.

“Do you want to do a town run?” I asked.

“Not today, we got some sausages left. I'll go with you tomorrow though. We'll get a bunch of things, then lay low for a while. Roxy sure made it clear to me that you've got to get something going for yourself.”

He reiterated the nagging.

“Yeah, it's easy for her to say. She has no ambition of her own, she just picks on me,” I said candidly to Jon.

“Sea, that's not a fair assessment of her, she...” Jon began to tell me but I interrupted him.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know. She just quit her band after ten years of a high-intensity lifestyle. I get it. We've got a complicated dynamic going on. But in practicality, she gets to do nothing but nitpick me on the way I do things,” I exploded in frustration.

“Hey man, it's cool. I'm just saying this App sounds like it could be something and I'm here to help out if it can. Two weeks is a while. I bet by the time she gets back, you can get a big bite out of it,” he told me.

As Jon and I finished off the pot of coffee, we brainstormed our immediate future together.

“I think I have an idea for that table you busted,” Jon told me as he looked out at the ocean.

“It fell apart. It had been sitting outside too long, it fell apart when I moved it,” I tried to explain to him.

“I think the centerpiece would make a nice table for my recording laptop. I think I'd like to get back into recording music,” Jon realized.

“That sounds good. We should jam later,” I added.

“Yeah, let me get this set up first, so it's all ready to go,” he said as I handed him a cigarette from my pack.

“The universe is a strange place. I've been thinking a lot about black holes recently. How objects speed up the closer they get to the event horizon. I was thinking maybe when objects reach the other side, time gets so slow it starts to reverse. And that's what the universe really is. A giant cassette tape running forwards and backward. I'd believe that, it makes the most sense to me,” Jon pondered as he kept his gaze on the pacific ocean.

I waited for a second to see if he had more to say on the subject then lost my focus.

“I think I found a way to save Julian Assange,” I blurted out.

“How?” Jon asked.

“We're going to get him a Valentine.” I said casually.



My statement broke Jon's concentration on the ocean and he paused before saying what was really on his mind.

“I drank too much coffee. I need to eat something. Could you get those sausages cooked while I start on the recording station?” He asked

After we ate, Jon told me that Roxy had called while I was cooking. I phoned her back.

“How'd it turn out? You never cooked me dinner, I'm a little bit jealous,” she taunted me.

“Don't get too excited. It was merely edible. I left a metal spoon in the frying pan and burnt my finger pretty badly, testing to see if it was hot. So on that safety scale, I don't think I did such a good job.” I reported.

“It will heal, you'll be fine,” Roxy said as she dismissed my pain.

“I don't know, I've already got a big blister on it. . . whatever,” I said out of frustration.

“Put some ointment on it,” she directed. “How'd everything go in Nevada City? I barely talked to you.”



“Good enough. I think people are interested in the App. Drew’s doing a song,” I casually told her.

“Why’s Drew doing a song? I thought this was your thing?” Roxy interrupted.

“It is my thing, but Drew's a good guest to add. Vince even said he'd make a music video for it.” I tried to defend my decision making process.

“So Vince is onboard then,” she assumed.

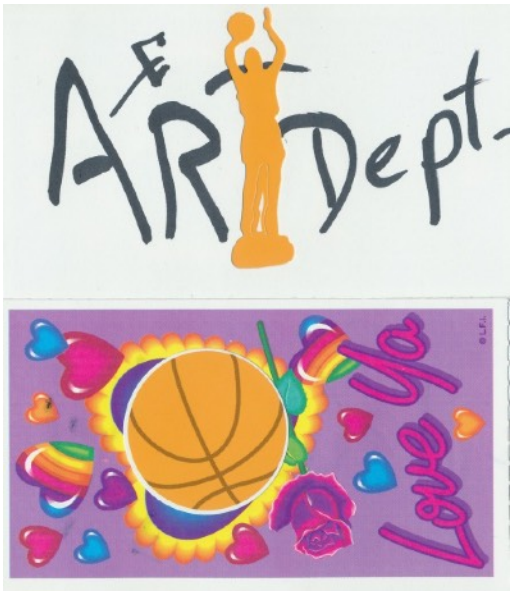
“Kind of. He just wants to make Drew’s video. I'm going to need to find someone else to run the art department,” I told her.

“Well, that's a disappointment. Do you have someone else in mind?” She dug at me.

“I do. When I was over at Vince's, Claire sat in on my pitch and seemed pretty interested. I think she'd have a good temperament for the work and would bring a nice home-spun vibe. What do you think?” I asked Roxy

“I think you'd be lucky to have her,” Roxy quickly said back.

“Yep. I do too. Let me call you back in a second.” I hit the red button that looked like a phone.



I dialed Claire's number.

“Hey, Sea, What's up?” Claire asked after answering.

“I've been thinking. The other night when I made Vince my pitch for the App, I now know I asked the right question, but to the wrong person. So, I was hoping you'd consider leading the art department for me? But I don't want an

answer tonight, I don't think I could handle another no. I've got a lot on my plate right now trying to get my own ideas together, but I'll be back for Valentine's Day and we're doing a whole thing at the Coat of Arms. Just think about it till then." I said as I made my offer.



(2004) St. Joseph's Cultural Center

I parked on the street outside of St. Joseph's Cultural Center. I was late. I could hear that Eli had already started his set. As I investigated the building, all the obvious doors were locked, so I gave up, rolled down the windows in my car, and listened the best I could.

St. Joseph's takes up the whole block. It used to be the local catholic church but had been willed to the city at some point. The large wooden hall dates back to the 1800's. There's a large rose garden out front that was popular for weddings, graduations, and other festive events. Attached to the hall is a large three-story building that's home to a local museum, a dance rehearsal space, Taiko drumming den, a practice spot for us local musicians, thirteen art studios, and an apartment.

On this night, Eli was playing in the large art studio and without having the proper knowledge of the center, I can see now why I couldn't find it. Even though I was late for the show, I was right on time for St. Joe's to become the home base for the local art and music scene.

“I don't want to use blue on this one, I'm going to avoid it altogether. I'm even going to avoid green and purple. Just red, yellow, black and white,” Eli told Jen and me as he started at his new painting in her studio.

“No! Say it ain't so, don't hold blue hostage! What about Picasso? He'd freak!” Jen exclaimed.

“Why's that?” I asked.

“Picasso's blue period! He spent years painting only in blues and greens. It made him famous.” Jen told me.

“And now it's all about red and yellow, heat! It's summer out. We’ll save blue for later.” Eli went on.

The scene was picking up steam. Recent Nevada County college graduates were finding out for themselves that back home was a great place to bring their new degrees. Soon, it wasn't hard to get a like-minded audience to check out the variety of local musicians and artists. It was a fun summer.

“You're that Choose Your Adventure guy. I'm Cole. I got your CD from the record shop. It must have taken you a lot of work,” Cole made his introduction as we walked in a large group to a house party.

“Yeah. I don't know what I was thinking with that, but thanks. I've seen your band play around town, you guys are great! Do you got any shows coming up?” I asked.

“Naw, that band’s over. I'm working on something new.” Cole announced to me.

With the sudden boom in new talent and after my recent failure with the Choose Your Adventure CD, I wasn't in a rush to showcase my lack of musical direction. But with the need to reimagine it, I found a couple of good open mics around town. It helped that none of my new

friends ever showed up, so I felt free to try out new material and practice in front of a small, lifeless audience. And after I was done, I'd drop by St. Joseph's, to see who was out.

"Sea, can you drive us to the gas station? We need some beer and I've already walked down there twice tonight?" Drew asked as I climbed up the stairs.

"Like now or in a few minutes?" I replied.

"It can wait a few minutes. Whenever you're ready, I guess." Drew told me as he backed down.

I walked over and sat on a chair next to the always-occupied brown velvet couch. Jen was digging in the ashtray.



"Somebody stole it," she said under her breath. "Sea, will you bum me a smoke?"

"Yeah, here," I handed her a blue American spirit and she immediately ripped off the filter.

"Do you know why the moon is the same size as the sun?" She asked.

"It's not, the sun is much bigger," I reminded her.

"I mean why does the moon appear as big as the sun? They fit on top of each other perfectly. You've seen a lunar eclipse, right?" She kept asking.

"Maybe. I don't know, you tell me," I said to move it along.

"It's a reminder that no matter your cosmic weight, we're all equal. Every one of us. Big or small. To the observer on the ground, they can't tell the difference," Jen explained.

"Except, for the fire part," I argued.

“Yeah, I guess. Whatever,” she said as she became distracted by Drew pantomiming driving a car behind me. “Are you getting us more beer?”



I wouldn't say I was learning anything practical on the third floor; but in my sobriety, I was allowed to witness a handful of different artists in all of their glory and despair persevere and produce real magic. I didn't know why or how, but I thought of them as the teachers I needed, if I was ever going to be more than the stupid Choose Your Adventure guy.

“Sea, besides all the car rides, I think people like you because you're not trying to be more than you are,” Cole said after a long night partying as I drove him back to Nevada City.

“Then tell me, what am I???” I asked him, hoping to finally know myself.

“Well, I don't know. But when you're ready, I'm sure we’ll all be amazed to find out.”



(2011) February, The Coast.

“Morning Cobra, I was thinking we should play some music before we head into town,” Jon said in an attempt to start a small conversation. But I held my pointer finger up to my lips. “Oh yeah, the vow. I'll come back in a minute.”

On my second day of working on the sweat lodge, I made a couple small tweaks and added some rituals. Now, before I did anything, I'd need to find west on my grandpa's old army compass. Then once I was finished, to show that I was happy with my work, I'd set down a dinosaur I'd painted black and named “salad buddy”.

“That was easy. Tomorrow I'm going to up the ante and put on the blindfold,” I told Jon as I walked into the house. “Are you ready to play?”

“Sure, Roxy called,” he told me.

“OK, I'll get to her in a minute. But first, let's make some proper noise.” I said as I grabbed my guitar.

“I want more than a slice, how much is a whole pizza? I mean we’ll eat it,” I asked Jon as we drove along the coast to town.

“I don't know, but it can't cost too much. I don't really care what's on it. Maybe no pepperoni.” Jon said as there was a break in the conversation. “What'd Roxy have to say?”

“She's bored, just checking in on me. I guess talking to me is a fun distraction.” I said.



“Do you know what you're getting at the store?” Do you have a list?' He asked.

“No, but I'll know what I need when I see it. Vegetables for juicing. Foodstuff. Art supplies. Valentines,” I rattled off.

“Valentines? So you're really doing this?” he asked.

“I guess I have to. Don't worry it will be fun. I'm going to make it a whole thing. I vaguely explained.

Jon guarded the warm Pizza as I made a few quick stops around town. Once I loaded the last of my goods in the back seat, Jon asked if it was cool if he drove home.

“Sure, I don't love driving,” I told him.

“Did you get everything you needed?” He said.

“Yep, they had Superman, Wizard of Oz, and High School Musical valentines. I also found a couple sets of gold leaf Dinosaur stickers.” I explained as if I'd won a small jackpot.

“There's got to be more than that in those three bags,” he pressed me.

“There is. You know me, I picked up a couple of surprises.” I teased.

By the time we got home, I was glad Jon wanted to drive because I was able to finish my half of the pizza while it was still warm. Now I got to work cleaning and preparing the fruits and vegetables to be easily ready to juice for the next few days. I decided there was no better time than now, so I made Jon and I a big pitcher and brought it into the living room.

“And now for a surprise.” I pulled out a large bottle of Jack Daniel's whiskey and poured about half of it into the fresh juice.

“I don't know what you're going to do, but as for myself, I'm going

to sit here on the floor, drink this spiked juice and mess with these valentines," I told him.

Jon sat on the other side of the room and fiddled with his recording set up as I quietly laughed to myself and came up with nick names for people.



"Hey Jon, do you think the nickname "Punk Rock Kenny G" is offensive?" I shouted, not knowing if he could hear me over his headphones.

"Yes," he answered, being a little annoyed at my constant need for attention.

"But I didn't tell you who it was for?" I protested.

"Cobra, let me ask you. If you showed up to a valentine's day cupcake party and someone addressed you as Punk Rock Kenny G, would you be in the mood for it?" He asked as he lowered his headphones.

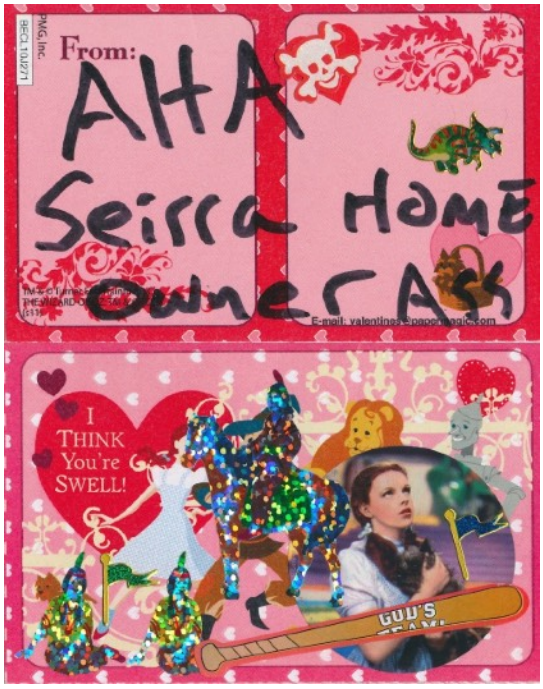
"Me? Nobody would do that. And if they did, it would just be confusing. There's too many other good candidates for a name like that," I told him.

"Well you asked for my opinion and I gave it. It's a little mean and disrespectful," he told me as he put back on his headphones.

"I'm still using it," I muttered to myself as I got up and walked out on the porch to have a smoke.

"I wonder if Roxy is still up, I've been getting a lot done tonight. I wonder if it's a good idea to keep her updated on my progress," I

thought as I took a hit of weed.



"No, don't. Keep all of this a surprise. Don't tell her anything. It's not good to be talking about all this Wikileaks stuff over the phone," I countered myself as I took another hit.

"I need my stickers out of the pump house to know where I'm going with this. But I left my flashlight out there. And I hate that it's so close to the road. Someone could miss that corner and drive into me," I thought as I took one more hit.

"Are those boat lights out there? Why aren't they in a dock somewhere? I don't really know how all that works. But if aliens want to hang out over the water, I guess it's better than being around me." I tried one more hit, but just sucked down some ash.

I got up out of the wooden chair and stood in front of the stairs as I lit up a smoke.

"I really need my flashlight. And my stickers. But I'll probably break my ankle on some rocks getting over there," I continued.

"But Jon has a flashlight and I'll just do the stickers tomorrow. What I need to do is tell Roxy I'm getting this App figured out,"

"Just don't talk about which valentine is for Julian Assange. That should be a secret."

"Or maybe make a bunch for him and give those out too."

"No, that one's a UFO... or a plane. I can't tell where the horizon is.

"I've got to quit smoking."

"Punk Rock Kenny G is great! People will love it. Jon's just jealous."



“I think it's time for all of this to manifest.”

“I wish I would have had a shot with Charlotte,” I thought as I realized my mouth was parched from the weed.

“I need a little more juice, if there's any left.” I thought as I put out my butt and went back into the house.

As I finished making up code names for my friends, Jon moved to the couch and picked up my dad's acoustic guitar.

“It's not bad with the juice. Kind of different. It still gets you drunk,” I said of the night's beverage.

“It's okay, I don’t want to do it again. Too sweet and vegetablely. Are you about done?” He asked.

“Almost, I’ve got one more surprise.” I pulled the brown grocery bag close. “Did I ever tell you I took a forensic class?”

“No.” Jon told me.

“I did right after high school. It was interesting. For the final exam, we had to process a mock crime scene.” I took out a disposable camera from the bag.

“What's this?” Jon asked.

“Something I learned from this class. I don't know, maybe someday people will wonder about these valentines and now I'll have proof of tonight and all the work I did.” I started to whine the camera taking random pictures of the two hundred valentines all over the floor.

“I don't see the point,” Jon said.

“I don't really either. It's just something that I need to do,” I told

him.

“It's late, I think I'm going to turn in,” Jon said as he put away the guitar.

“Before you go, one more thing? I asked.

“Yeah?” Jon answered me hesitantly and with a little energy.

“Can I borrow a flashlight?”



Chapter Five
The glamor of hope



(2013) February, Napa X-14

When the Napa transport guard drove me back through the razor wire-lined gate of the secured treatment area, I felt like I was due the same fanfare as a returning soldier from some battle in the ancient world. Jail had been hard on me, but now I was ready to use the resources at hand to try and put my life back together.

“So, have you been here before?” The guard asked.

“Yeah, a little over a year ago,” I told him.

“Then you saw it in its heyday. Things have changed since then. What unit did they have you on?” he questioned.

“X-4. Is that where you're taking me now?” I asked him, expecting a yes.

“Looks like we're taking you over to X-14. It's an alright unit. You'll do fine there.” I was told.

Once we arrived, the guard rang the doorbell and waited for a short nurse to open the door and let us in.

“Welcome Mr. Stoltzner,” she said as the guard removed my shackles. “Do you want a quick tour?”

“Sure, that sounds great! I'm excited to be here,” I told her as the guard let himself out.

“Over here we've got the big dayroom, and across the hall is the smaller dayroom. We've got a small computer room. Payphones are in the hallways. We do a couple long courtyard breaks. We'll be doing one just as soon as I'm done with you. There are bathrooms down these halls. The rest you'll figure out. Just ask your roommates. They'll tell you. Let me show you to your room,” she said as she opened the door to a 4 man room.

“Mr. Stevens, this is Mr. Stoltzner. He's moving in. Please show him around.” she insisted.

“I'd be much obliged to tell him of it,” he said as the nurse quickly left. “Well, what do we have here? New meat! They've got to keep the butchers fed.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Which bed is mine?” I asked.

“Well, you could say every bed is yours if you owned the world? Tell me that?” He told me as I tried to figure out if it was a question or a statement.

“I guess,” I answered after giving up. “But which bed is nobody using?”

“That one's been free since Mark left. I didn't like him. He had no tolerance for decorum,” Mr. Stevens told me.

“Alright, everyone. Time for a courtyard break. Come and get some courtyard,” the short nurse that I just met said over the loudspeaker system.

“Okay, cool. So I'll take this bed. The one that’s free. Nice meeting you, I'm going to go and check out this courtyard,” I said as I tried to casually walk out the door.

“There are moles. I never go near them. I stay inside where it's safe,” he said as I closed the door.

Being out in the courtyard gave me plenty of reason to smile. I wasn't built to be trapped in the cinder block walls of my county jail and I decided to spend every minute I could outside. There was a small garden plot. A bunch of the guys would stand around it and watch the blind moles stick their weird little noses out, hoping that we'd all be inside so they could come and take a bite of something. The peacocks would stand right outside the gate and show off their feathers to the hens. The grounds were overwhelmed with peacocks. It was a problem. But to my fresh eyes, I thought the display was awesome.

Lunch was up next and I was in for a surprise when I got to the dining room. Years earlier, one of the psych techs painted all four walls to make a 360 Star Wars dining experience. It was a lot of fun to walk in on. I loved it. I'd only been back at the hospital for an hour and I was having a blast.



“Man, you're going to hate it here!” One of the guys told me.

“Why? It seems pretty nice. Way better than jail,” I disagreed.

“If you want to get to the next level, they say you have to go to groups,” he explained.

“Are there a lot of them? Like how many do they expect you to attend?” I asked.

“Well, Thursday mornings there's the W.R.A.P. group and we do a unit meeting on Tuesdays.” I was told quickly, expecting a longer list.

“That doesn't sound bad,” I responded.

“Looks like you already play their games

then. I've got better things to do. My lawyer said I've only got to do six months. I can wait them out," he told me.

"Yeah, that's what mine told me too." I agreed.

I'd learned that X-14 was established as an admissions unit. Meant to transition guys from jail to hospital life. Any therapy that actually happened was considered to be a bonus. I showed up early to the W.R.A.P. group having no idea what it stood for. It was my first question.

"Wellness Recovery Action Plan. We're going to look at our lives, uncover our triggers and early warning signs, and then discover healthy coping strategies to deal with them. When you are eventually driven out of the gate to the rest of your life, you'll be carrying a document you can follow to keep you safe out in the community. And don't worry, we don't have to get it all done at once. I'm just glad you showed up. Nobody else seems to. With this kind of attitude, I'm sure it won't be long until you're off to the next step of progress," the unit psychologist told me.

I wasn't able to get that pizza for my birthday, but my family was happy to come and visit me soon after I arrived.

"So, how much better is this Round Table pizza compared to what you got in jail?" Sandy asked with a huge smile on her face.

"I mean I love pizza, and the jail pizza was the food highlight every so often. But now that I'm eating this, I can't believe it's legal to call them the same thing," I told her as everyone laughed.

"Your father made a good joke in the lobby today. The guard opened up our deck of cards to inspect and he said "They're all there, all 52 of them," Starla said to another laugh.

"Yeah, I got to keep them honest," dad continued the joke.

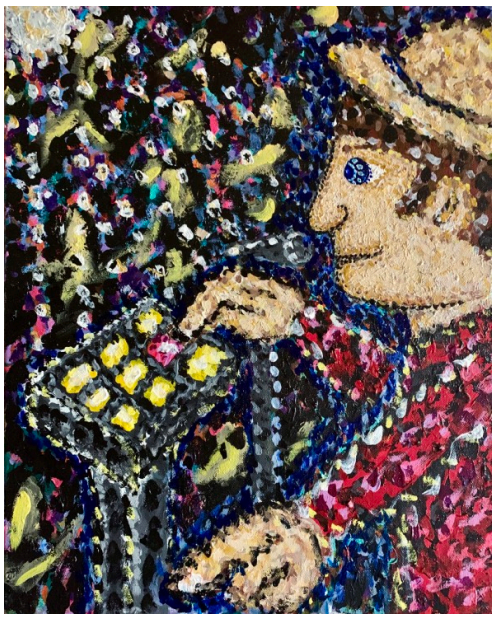
Back on the unit, I was still basking in all the new freedoms and perks of returning to the hospital. Every Saturday morning they showed a movie on a big screen and I had to go and check that out. I wanted to see what the larger community I'd been dropped into looked like. They'd removed coffee from the county jail in the middle of my stay, but now I was served a cup at breakfast and lunch. I had Starla order me a small personal radio, which was a huge addition to my life. Starla also posted the numbers of the two-unit payphones and I quickly got a couple of calls from old friends.



"How are they treating you there, Cobra?" Eli asked.

"Pretty good. It's a dramatic difference from jail. I've been listening to music again. I can't believe it's been two years since I've heard anything good. Just boring country music videos off the T.V. in the dayroom," I told him

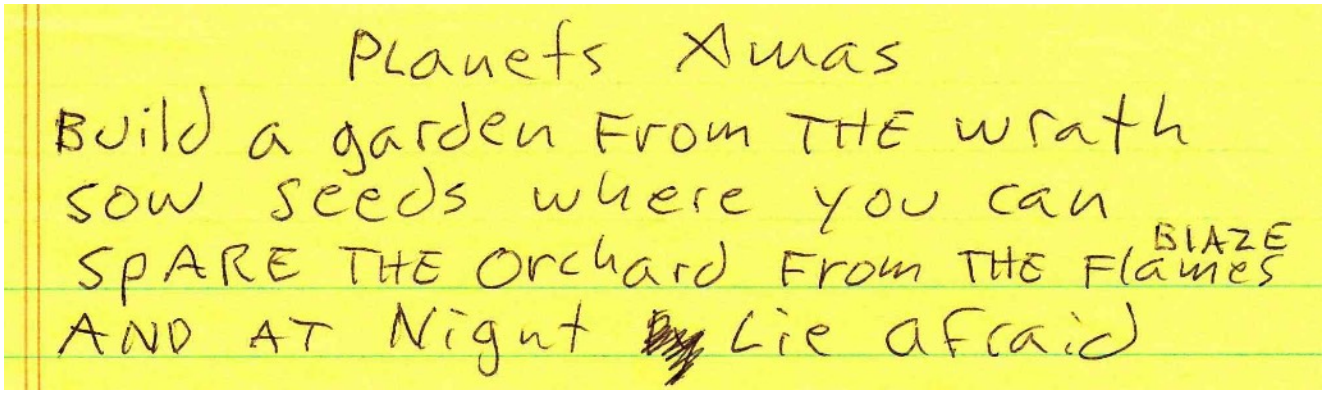
"What else they got you doing?" He inquired.



"The unit I'm on has a guitar. I've been playing that. I finished a song I started out at the coast with Roxy. It's called, "Planet's Xmas." At the time I even got her to play it on Jon's piano while I made up the lyrics. That was one of the few times we played my music together. I can still hear it," I explained to Eli as my mind wandered to brighter moments.

"Well that all sounds good. I just wanted to check in on you. Keep working on your music. I can't wait to hear it," Eli told me as we parted ways.

The unit staff decided to put on a talent show. I entered and played "Planet's Xmas," it went over very well. I won a bunch of coffee and some other goodies. After two months on the unit, I'd worked hard to earn a good reputation. All the staff knew my name and encouraged me often. I had some friends and followed a productive routine. I was very grateful for this change in my life. But one morning after breakfast, the unit psychologist had something he needed to talk to me about.



"You've been doing a great job here and I wanted to personally let you know your efforts are not going unnoticed. That's why I'm excited to tell you to pack, you're headed off to X-12 for the next stage of your journey."

"Bring on these groups. I'm ready to get out of here," I said to myself as I quickly packed my things and said goodbye to Mr. Stevens as he hid in the 4 man room from the blind little moles out in the courtyard garden.



(2011) February. The Coast.

“Hi, Sea! How's your sweet little morning on the Pacific Ocean going? You're so glad you're not stuck out here with me. I guess being broke really helped you dodge a bullet on that one,” Roxy exclaimed when I got her on the phone.

“Yeah, I guess so. I'm fine. Just working on the App stuff,” I told her.

“Well, that sounds good. How's all of that coming?” She asked.

“I've mainly been working on this sweat lodge music video and making valentines for the party. I've got it all worked out in my head. I think I'm on track to pull it all off, but I've still got a lot of work to do.” I elaborated.

“Well I hate to admit it, but I miss you. Keep working on your projects, Sea! I'm the kind of woman that has to stand by the lines she draws,” Roxy explained. “I couldn't respect myself otherwise. But just know I love you and I'm rooting for you”.

“With an incalculable amount of things to do to finish the App, I slowly got myself into gear. I went to the kitchen, but the only food I saw stood on the other side of a high wall of preparation. So I just cut off another hunk of cold cheese and put it in another tortilla. As I ate, I made a juice for Jon and me. He was on the phone in the living room, so I left the pitcher after pouring myself a glass and headed to the porch to get stoned.

“When is Roxy actually coming back?” I wondered as I packed the pipe with a fresh bud from my outdoor harvest.

“Will my mom's engagement ring be ready for Roxy by Valentine's Day? If she's back by then,” I continued to wonder as I prepared my morning ritual.

“I mean, what am I waiting for?” I took my first hit.

“What I'm I doing? How does a stupid little sweat lodge get me anywhere in the music industry? Why am I out here? It's like I'm just avoiding the scene back home, while I'm talking about bringing it all together on some wild goose chase,” I took another hit.

“And why am I making an App when they'll just bring that down too? Like my dad's computer. I need to get prepared. I mean when that password gets out, it’s going to be nothing but chaos. I'm not ready,” I hit the pipe again as I continued to think about it all.

“I need to help save my dad’s house.” I remembered the larger calamity bearing down on the family.

“I need to hide my thoughts better. They're on to me. I've been too sloppy out here.”

“Create or disappear”. The phrase hit me hard and out of nowhere, and I knew it to instantly be the truth.

“But how? How do I hide the secret from these Psy-op's guys?” I thought as I lit up a cigarette.

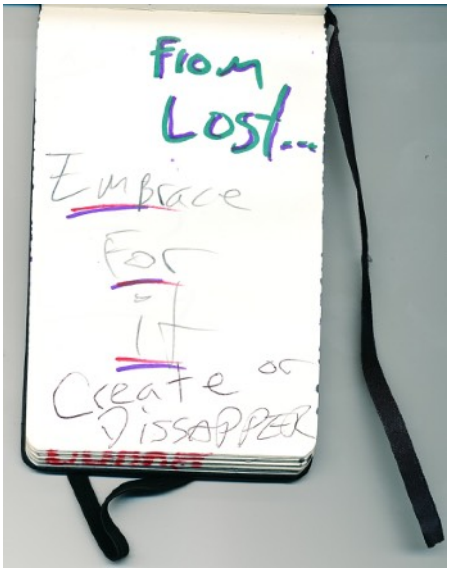
“With what I have. By making more art. Hidden intentions wrapped in a bow.”

“But whose side was that alien on from the backyard? I don't really want to mess with him in all of this.”

“And we’ll need a backup plan for when I'm killed. A package for the afterlife. I'll need something to eat in it.”

“I know the valentine’s are weird, but are they too weird? Like, am I going to get away with it, weird?”

“Create or disappear. I'm on it.” I put out my smoke as I went back to the pump house to get to work.



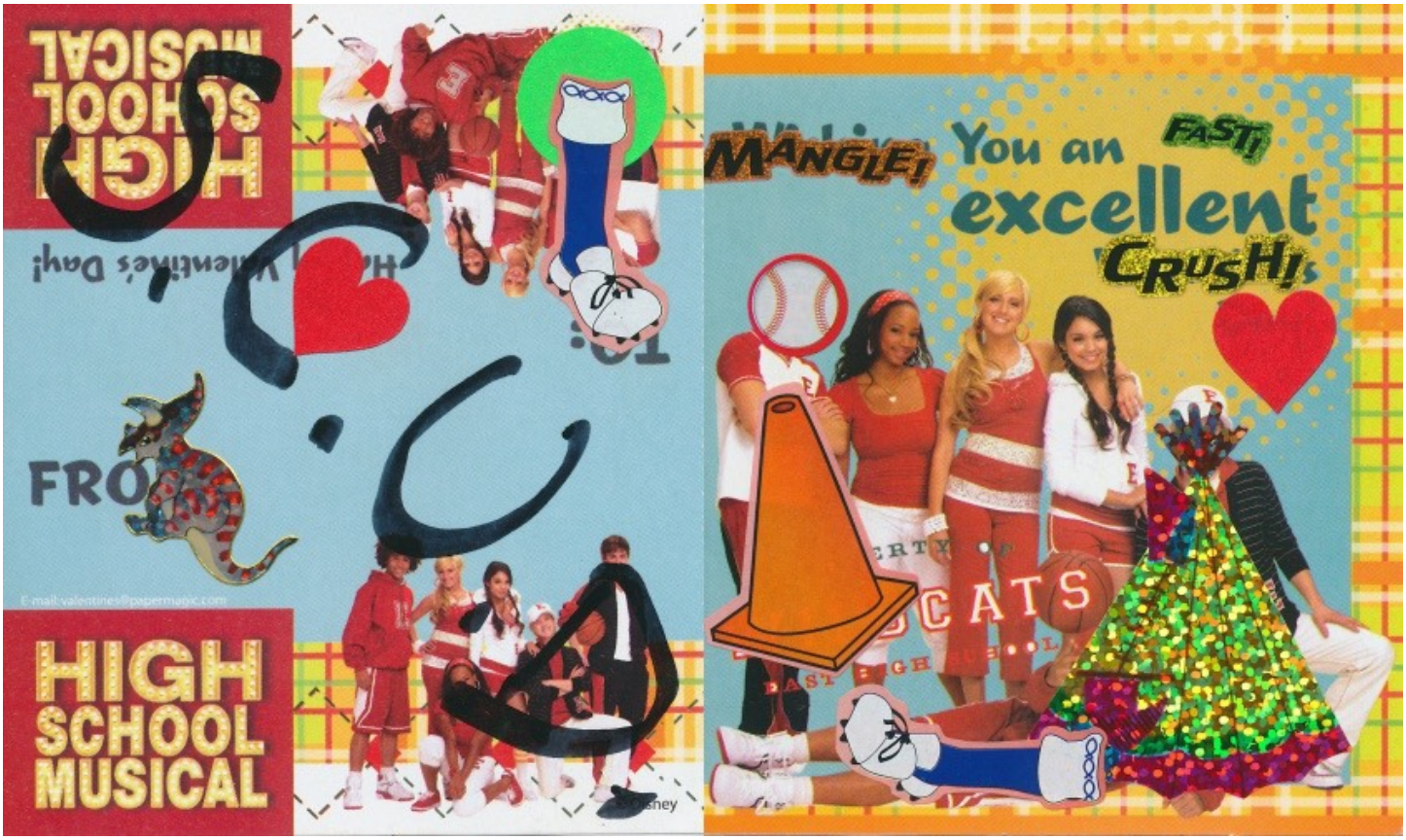
With the rest of the day before me, I got busy. I brought the canvas strips that I'd used as the background of the Cobra Industrey’s lego music video shoot with me. I wrapped tools and

other debris in the strips and put them all in a five-gallon bucket. I poured fabric dye over it and figured that would be all the work I needed to do to get them ready to be the skin to the sweat lodge.

I still took time to smoke and stare out at the ocean. Even though I had a lot on my mind, I wasn't able to observe any one thought for more than the time it took to think it. The ocean is a fitting metaphor for my time with Jon. Thoughts rolled in and broke with the resistance of the natural world. I was trying to change into what Roxy required of me, but I was now in crisis. Even if nobody saw the full extent of why.

“I had a productive day too,” Jon told me as we reconvened after a day of our own artistic pursuits. “I worked up a new song. But I need to get the drum part figured out before I can go any further with it. I need to work on that tonight. So it might be loud in here.” he said.

“That's cool. I'm just going to be decorating my valentines with stickers. The drums won't bother me,” I told him.



I had about twenty blank valentines leftover. I spread out last night's work to see if there was anyone important I'd missed. I guess I was pretty drunk by the end of my card-making. I'd even designated valentines for the local police departments, the Sheriff, and even the newspaper. I tried to be more surgical with the ones I had left. I filled out another ten for people that could help out with the App, then I remembered the whole point of the project in the first place, to get one to Julian Assange in his recent confinement. I thought that this might take a few attempts so I used all of the valentines I had left on him.

By now Jon was starting to work on the drums and he was right, it was loud so I went to the deck to smoke.

"There's got to be a right way to do this," I thought as I took a hit of weed.

"But I still don't know the password. When am I going to understand how all of that works?" I took another hit as I stared into the darkness where I knew the sounds of the waves were coming from.

"But he's in jail, that's not supposed to have happened! Is he waiting on me to deliver that password? But I don't know how. It's not the future yet. I don't know it," I hit the pipe again.

"And what was that story Roxy was telling me the other day about her mom's neighbor? It sounded like she was trying to tell me that Obama is on our side with this. That I don't need to be afraid," I lit up a smoke.

"I don't like it out here at night. Too many eyes. I need more protection. I'm too vulnerable out here."

"Create or disappear! I'm trying, but am I doing enough?"

"The sweat lodge. I should make it right now. It doesn't matter that it's dark out. I can already do it blindfolded. I should practice while Jon's doing his drum thing.

There was a break in the drumming and I opened the sliding glass door and poked my head inside.

“Hey, Jon! I'm going to go practice my sweat lodge. Could you time me on your phone?” I quickly asked him.



I'd been using a cleared-off landing by the cliff to work on the sweat lodge and everything was where I'd left it. It was a dark night but with the aid of a flashlight, I found west on my compass and felt orientated to my place in the universe. I turned off my light and began. The trick was to leave the poles at the same place on the ground every time. You'd still have to fish around to find them, but knowing about where they should be made the whole thing possible.

As I picked the poles up one by one I noticed a weird side effect. The stars would shine brighter when the end of a pole pointed in their direction. This didn't slow me down any, but I marveled at the display. I kept at it, feeling like this was my most important attempt at this project. The stars kept pulsating and lighting up as I worked. And by the time I put the last pole on top I knew what had happened. I'd just received the Wikileaks password from Julian Assange through a fifth-dimensional portal. I was so excited that I ran up the hill and burst open the sliding glass door. Jon was in the middle of recording his drum idea, but I had to know.

"How long was that?" I yelled with the door still open behind me.

"What? That was a good one! Why didn't you wait for me to finish?"

"The sweat lodge! How long did it take me?" I asked him again.

"I don't know. I forgot to set a timer. Could you give me another twenty minutes? I've almost got it," he pleaded.

I cooked up the rest of the sausages while he finished recording. I was cautious this time, I didn't need another badly burnt finger. Jon and I ate as we talked about boundaries. He wanted to keep working on his song for the rest of the night. That was fine with me, I could keep quiet.

I dare not say I ever had a plan or even cared about making one. But I now knew that the Wikileaks password was stored deep in my

brain. And it was now my job to spread it to like minded free radicals. But how?

Stickers. I had a plastic grocery bag filled with the many packs I'd bought while Roxy and I made our way around northern California. I'd discovered that souvenir shops often had different packs of dinosaur ones. We also stopped in on a lot of thrift stores and it would be common to find some random pack there. As I decorated my Valentines, I used these stickers to create an array of narratives that I hoped would manifest in the real world. Let me elaborate.

Dinosaurs. I already had used a bunch of the good ones to make a visual prophecy about Roxy and my life, but with the ones I had leftover, I thought it was a fitting calling card of my efforts. Plus I had just picked up two large packs that had nice gold edges on them.

I had two packs of God's Teams sports stickers. These would represent the upcoming revival that my mother would talk about. I had a lot of them and I used them liberally.

Small medieval knights, wizards, and maidens. There were a lot of these in the pack. Obviously, I was the knight, Roxy was the maiden and all of my friends were the wizards working to help us build our new life together. But there was a dark night. Who was that? I didn't know, but that's who I was protecting us from.



There was a wild animal pack. These worked as a fifth-dimensional portal tied through the moleskine notebook I carried around because I'd put the same pack of animal stickers strategically through those pages.

I had a pack of Native American stickers I used because my dad was losing his house to the bank.

I had also found a couple of pages of Wizard of Oz stickers at a thrift store and those worked great on the matching Wizard of Oz valentines. It gave them extra magic.

Besides those, I can also remember that I had musical instruments, Hawaiian shirts, monster trucks, skulls and crossbones, and classic red hearts.

As I systematically added the different varieties of stickers. It really wore on the index finger I'd burnt cooking the sausage a few days earlier. The stickers were constantly getting caught on the burned area and I assumed it was where the fifth-dimensional magic was really coming from. As I worked, I truly believed in the power and importance of all the different stickers. But I knew my dinosaur stickers had somehow been encrypted with the Wikileaks password too. And that this was the real mission I was doing all this work for.

As I worked that night, I took a lot of breaks out on the porch where I got lost in the frail reality of what I was doing. But by the end of my best line of reasoning, I kept at it. Later in the night Jon was tired of recording and sat on the couch to look in on what I was doing.

“I'm probably going to stay here for the party, but I'd like to see the looks on people's faces when you start handing these out,” Jon said as he strummed my dad's acoustic guitar.

“Yeah, they're weird. It will be fine, it's still art. I'll get a lot of leeway with that,” I told him as I ripped off the last sticker of the night. “Do you have any tape?”

“Tape? What kind?” He asked.

“Like a duct tape or something,” I explained.

Jon got up and walked over to a wicker basket I hadn't seen before and started digging.

“I've got this black tape. It's kind of like duct tape,” he said, holding up the roll.

“Perfect. That will do perfectly,” I told him as I caught it over my head.

I had bought a bag of fun-size Snickers the day before and it was already empty. So I grabbed the bag off the coffee table and then turned to get my moleskine notebook off the chair behind me. I put my notebook in the Snickers bag and folded the extra bag around it nicely and tapped it up completely.

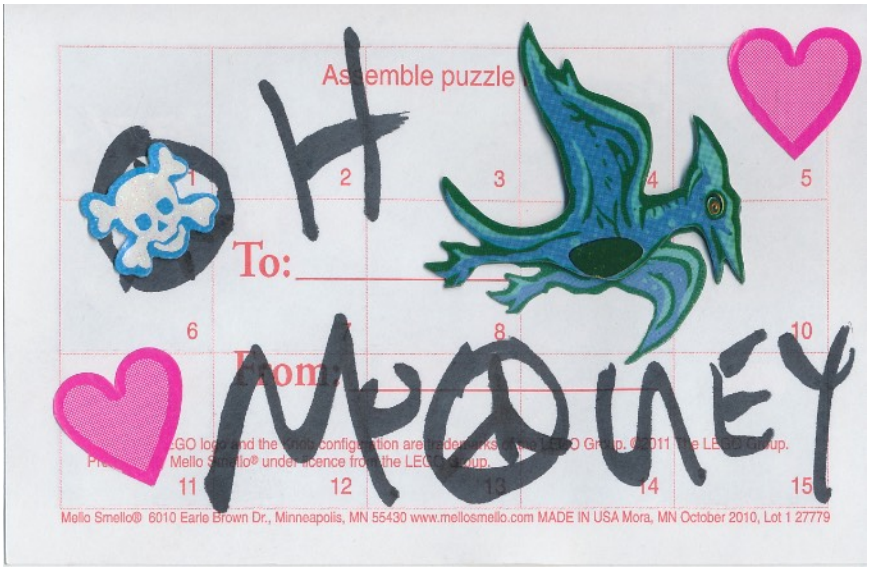
“I'm going to ignore how wasteful this is and just ask why?” Jon said without missing a beat.

“Well I mean, come on. First I have to decorate it,” I told him.

I took out my gold and silver pens and wrote ‘Oh Mooney’ as I drew a crescent moon. I dug deep in my bag of stickers and pulled out a pack of fake mustaches and put one across the bottom. Then below that, I wrote ‘Fail Safe’ with big gold letters. I also drew a light switch on the back and wrote ‘Clue One’. Feeling a sense of accomplishment, I tossed it over to Jon where he gave it a quick inspection.

“I hate to ask, but who's this for?” He said.

“I'm surprised you don't know. Think about it. It just screams Jen.”





(2005) St. Joseph's

"Fine. I'll shave off my beard, but I'm going to leave a mustache," I compromised to be cast in a short film for the upcoming local film festival.

After the shoot was over, we all stopped by a rock show happening in downtown Nevada City. Everyone loved my new mustache, I was starting to like it as well. It was fun and I saw no reason to get rid of it immediately.

Jen had recently quit a band that used 'mustache' in its title. A few weeks after my mustache had been established, Jen and I were joking around on the porch at St. Joe's with whoever else was around that night.



"It's so pointy! How do you get it so pointy?" Jen asked me with a chuckle in her voice.

"It's called mustache wax. I found it at the drug store. It's funny, if I don't wash it out before bed, I wake up the next morning with the whole thing looking like a blown up firecracker." I told everyone to a laugh.

“How long are you going to keep this ridiculous thing? I mean you want to have a girlfriend someday, don't you?” Jen exclaimed to more laughter.

“Well, I figured I'd keep it till I got invited to replace your old bandmate and become the new mustache in your life,” I said to more boisterous communal response.

“Yeah! We’ll call it Madame and the Mustache,” Jen joyfully proclaimed.

A few days later, I showed up at Jen's art studio with my guitar. She was working on a painting of some Goddess with peacocks standing around.

“We're not really doing this, are we? It was a good joke the other night, but I don't know how funny it's really going to be,” Jen told me as she tried to back out.

“Yeah, I know. I might shave this thing off any day now. But let's write one song and post it online. At least to bug your old music partner.” I told her.

We made progress quickly. We decided to use leftover song ideas we both had and musically stitch those together. This created a fun, back and forth, singer-songwriter duet. Our lyrical styles and topics fit together well enough to not seem as haphazardly assembled as they really were. We were having fun and pretty quickly had a couple songs. We played our first show in town opening up for Eli. Jen dressed in a corset and other Victorian garb and I did my best to also look from that era.

“You two were a hit! Everybody tries to be so serious with their performances. It's so refreshing to see you two just get up there and have fun. The music was great too. I hope you both keep working this up, this could really be something,” Eli told us after the show.



Now that we had good reason to continue the project, Jen thought it was best to set some ground rules for us to keep working together.

“I've had problems in the past, and I don't want to again. So you're not allowed to fall in love with me, that's my only rule,” she explained as she worked on the Peacock Goddess painting.

“That's fine. I can assure you I won't. But I have one condition as well,” I told her.

“And what's that?” She asked.

“I don't feel comfortable with all the Tarot cards and Astrology chart stuff. I'd prefer it if I didn't have pressure from you to read my life in that way. That it remains off-limits,” I said.

“Okay, I can back off with that. I guess we're going to need more songs if Eli's already asking us when we can play again,” Jen told me as she put away her painting and got out her small guitar.

Quickly, Madame and the Mustache were playing around town regularly and starting to get gigs in Sacramento. We had a lot of fun playing as a duo and enjoyed that the music came together so effortlessly.

Sam courted visual attention. He often wore from his large collection of '90s, day-glow hammer pants unless busy working on one of his cars. He liked to talk eccentric gibberish. He looked good in his black mid-length wizard's beard. He showed discipline at the bar and parties. He was a fun addition to the scene when he was around.

Sam had just returned home after being on tour for the better part of the year. He was one of the bigger musical success stories the town had produced and Jen and I were both happy to see him in the crowd at one of our shows. A few weeks after that, he invited us over to his house to talk.

“I'm really busy right now finishing up this tour, but after it wraps I'd like to start work on a record with you two. I can already hear the approach I'd like to take with the drums and bass, I'd like to do both and be generally responsible for the overall production. But with all of your energy and character, if we capture that, I don't think we can lose.”

Jen and I knew the project would be blessed by having Sam on board and we casually continued to work and perform until he was ready. But waiting around to work on some half-baked, leftover musical ideas I had years earlier, didn't really scratch any artistic itch. So I kept writing on my own. I knew with Jen, Madame and the Mustache had a limited life span. It was just impossible to tell what that was going to be.



(2013) April, Napa X-12



“Wow, a guy with glasses. You look too smart to be here,” a jolly gnome-like patient told me as I waited in the dayroom.

“Yeah, I guess. What's this unit like?” I asked.

“Pretty good, it's pretty good mostly. It's supposed to be group time right now, but it doesn't look like anyone showed up again,” he explained.

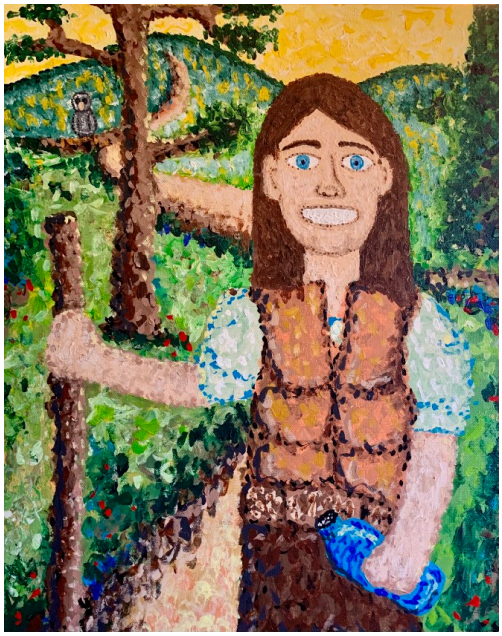
“Again? I thought this unit offered a higher level of treatment,” I began to argue.

“I don't know anything about that. If you want to go to a bunch of groups, you're going to have to wait till they put you on a unit that goes to the mall. We don't. We just do a couple of groups in this dayroom. But keep wearing those glasses, I bet they'll move you along quickly when they see you in them.” He told me.

Seeing the relaxed group requirements was disappointing but I still retained my optimism for the overall six-month hospital stay that Lilly teased was possible. After I got settled, I quickly realized that the other patients were bad barometers for realistic information on how the hospital actually worked. Fortunately, word of my recent talent show victory reached the music therapist on the unit.

Her name was Cara, she sang and played piano. She wore a big bright smile unless the situation called against it. Everybody liked her. She quickly broke down the hospital system for me.

“For you, it's about how long we've witnessed your stability. Everyone knows your meds work. Everyone knows you function at a higher level. But due to the seriousness of your crime, we've got to put you under the same scrutiny that we do everyone else. Just show up to whatever groups we’re running and wait it out. The discharge unit is always looking for new people. But just understand that you've got to put in your time here like everyone else here.”



“Hey, Starla. I'm glad I got a hold of you. This new unit is weird about the phones,” I immediately explained.

“Hi, Sea! Yeah, we've been wondering when you were going to call. How's it over there? She asked.

“Challenging. Definitely not what I was expecting. There's only one phone for all the guys,” I started to tell her but she interrupted me.

“Wait! What? Does that mean there are women in the unit too?” She asked.

“Yeah, one of the wings is for the women, but men aren't allowed down there. The women have one of the phones and two wings of male patients have to share the other one. We all get issued a phone time. Twenty-minute windows where we get to make and receive calls, I'm pissed about it. I don't know how we're going to manage this?” I said in extreme frustration.

“It's okay, Sea, relax. We've been through worse,” Starla tried to console me from ninety miles away.

“I know, but I was just starting to get calls from my old friends. I don't know how to be available for that when we've going to be so closely tied to this new phone system. It completely takes away the hope of a random call, I hate it.” I said as I began to flash.

“It's going to be just fine, don't worry about it. How's the rest of the unit? Is there anything you like about it?” She inquired.

“No,” I flat out told her.

“Come on, how about a little positivity? There's got to be something?” She asked again.

“We have a music therapist on the unit. She seems nice. She has a lot of guitars and she said I can play them whenever,” I gave Starla a small silver lining.

“There you go, see it's not all bad. Now about that phone time. I'm guessing it's now. Let's figure this out,” Starla told me as we made plans to revolve our lives around it.

Living on X-12 was always doable, but I found it to be constantly unpleasant. I was living in a five-man room and my bed was right up by the door. All night it opened to the bright light of the hallway and then slammed shut onto the industrial door hardware. This was exhausting until I discovered a classical music station to drown it out with. Now I only had to get used to sleeping with loud earbuds in.

Without making the list of all the general downgrades, the more elusive problem was the pervasive vibe of the clientele. This was a dead-end unit. A place where they put people to forget about them. I knew that I'd be an exception in the long run, but whenever I'd look around the dayhall at a Saturday night's Bingo game, it felt demoralizing to think of them as my peers. My only way to cope was to put up walls and not get involved in the lives of such sad people.

Now that I was getting to check out a guitar regularly, Cara got me an audition for the hospital band, “The Goblet of Rock.” It didn't go all that well, I had forgotten too many chords in the years that I languished in jail. But I picked up a bass for a while and did fine locking down the low end. They invited me back and soon I was performing around the hospital. Even though it just felt like something to do, once I'd be back

on the unit it also felt like the highlight of my hopeless weeks. Everything felt complicated. It was all hard to process.

I kept showing up to the groups. I got a weekly taste of the treatment mall. An afternoon workgroup for my W.R.A.P. Plan. It was in the computer lab. I spent most of my time trying to figure out how to use the W.R.A.P. plan template. As I struggled, I'd often wonder how I figured out so much Wikileaks stuff and crashed my dad's computer, all while I was generally so incompetent with technology. The unit also had a substance recovery group. I knew it wouldn't look good in the long run for me to skip it, so I went and tried to say little.

“I think it's a good question. Will it ever be safe to use drugs again? Let's talk about it,” Cara asked the group with fifteen minutes left.

“I say no because I have a mental illness and it could make it worse,” one of the female patients added.

“Wow, good answer! I can really see you thought it out. Alright, who's next,” Cara continued around the room.

“I don't want to use anymore, because drugs killed my mom and I want better for my kids,” another female patient responded.

“Yes! Our children are positive reasons to want to change and do better. I think that's a great answer,” Cara told the woman. “Sea, how about you? Do you think it will ever be safe for you to use drugs again?”

“Well, I'm willing to follow the rules and guidelines of the outpatient program, but as for the rest of my life, I can't really say,” I explained to the group.

“Do you think you could someday smoke weed again?” Cara asked.

“Maybe?” I told her.

After the group, Cara pulled me aside.

“There's nothing wrong with you giving an honest answer, but if you really want to make some progress. It would be best to start thinking about your sobriety and how it affects the nature of your mental illness.”

With nothing else better to do but lie on my bunk, I thought about Cara’s advice. Until now, I assumed that my mental illness was responsible for all my problems. I mean I only smoked pot heavily for a year and a half. I couldn’t be an addict for that? I thought deeper about the possibility that marijuana was a huge problem for me. The more I did, I found internal evidence to support Cara’s guideful nudge. But this conclusion still took time.

I was given a couple of days' notice. The outpatient program from Sacramento was making its annual rounds and I had my first interview. My six months of treatment that was legally required was just about up and I was getting my chance to prove I was ready for another chance out in the community.

“Everything looks great Mr. Stoltzner. Your verbal account matches what I read in your file. You know your stuff. I would like to see more work on your substance abuse issues, but I believe you'll be the right fit for our program when the time comes,” the friendly outpatient therapist told me.

“When the time comes? No, I'm ready now. My six months are up and I'm ready for your program now,” I calmly pleaded, with the shock of confusion from what I’d just heard.

“I'm sorry Mr. Stoltzner. It never works out that fast. With a case like yours, I could see you joining our program sometime in the next four years.” I was kindly told.

A week later, I was still trying to process this defeat when I was presented with some good news.

“Hey! You must be Sea. I'm the unit supervisor over at X-17. The staff here tells me you've been working hard to get to the discharge unit and I'm here to tell you that the discharge unit has got an opening for you. How does that sound? Are you ready for a change?” A tall bald man gently said with a smile on his face.

“Yes!” I told him without hesitation,“I can be ready to leave whenever.”



(2011) February. The coast.

“Jon called me this morning, he’s kind of worried about you. He says that you've been acting weird,” Roxy said half concerned and half annoyed.

“That's funny. It's funny he would say that,” I took a hit off the weed pipe. “I think he's the one that's been acting weird. I think something happened on that trip because he's not the same, from what I can see,” I explained to Roxy who was fully aware that I was getting stoned, but said nothing of it.

“Listen Sea, if that's the case I'm not going to call you anymore. I want you to start calling me and if things get too weird, you don't have to stay. You can always go back to your dad's.” She suggested.

“I mean for the most part it's fine. I'm getting a lot done,” I took another hit. “It must be hard for him, with everything he's going through.”

Jon and I were both feeling a little bit stir crazy so we made ready for town and hit the road. We stopped at the grocery store with the pizzeria. We didn't get far with our slices as they were quickly devoured in the parking lot. Afterward, I went inside and got another pack of Hot Wheels Valentines and four boxes of “forget me not” candy hearts. From there we crossed the street so Jon could fill up some five-gallon water jugs outside another grocery store. I went in to grab a pouch of rolling tobacco.

I immediately got in line behind one other customer. Since I was only buying tobacco, which they kept behind the register, I didn't have anything set down and partitioned off on the conveyor belt. As I waited, an older woman got behind me in line. She was only buying a bottle of wine and a plastic purple wine opener. Once the customer ahead of me was finished, my sense of time slowed down and warped the edges of my vision. As I tried to understand what was happening, the cashier tried to grab the bottle of wine which was next in line on the conveyor belt.

“You're not going to get this! You're not going to get this!” The woman joked with me over the cashier's mistake of who was buying the bottle of wine. “You're not going to get this!”

She was still laughing about it as I pulled myself together to ask for the tobacco. Then I looked over at the purple wine opener. It was just like one Roxy and I took from a motel we stayed at in Mendocino a

few months earlier. But what I was noticing now was a big bar code sticker on it, staring me right in the face.



“You're not going to get this! You're not going to get this!” It was a warning from Julian Assange! A fifth-dimensional alarm that trouble was on the way. The bar code. It represented the Psy-Op's team that was watching me with the Valentines and now Roxy was the target. “You're not going to get this!” It echoed in my head as I left the store and walked out to Jon waiting in the car.

“I need some change,” I told him.

“How much?” He asked.

“Like 50 cents,” I answered.

“I've got it here,” he reached his hand over and dropped the change into mine. “What for?”

“I've got to make a quick call.” I said as I turned to walk over to the payphone.

Roxy had recently gotten a new cell phone number, I luckily remembered it and got her voice mail. I had to warn her but I couldn't make it that obvious either. I heard the beep. Here goes nothing.

“Clark Kent! Clark Kent! Clark Kent!” I exclaimed and hung up the payphone.

I got back in the car. Jon was now driving and looked a bit curious.

“What was that all about?” He asked as he looked to see if a car was coming.

“That? Nothing. I just saw something funny in the store and had to tell Roxy,” I answered.

“It couldn't have waited till we got home? You had to waste my change on it?” He said with a bit of frustration.

“I’m sorry. I'll get you back.” I replied.

Funny, Roxy didn’t even bring up my message when I talked to her an hour later. She had concerns of her own.



“I just don't like their dynamic, it's not respectful. I don't ever want to turn out like that, Sea. Sometimes I can't believe that I'm related to these people!” Roxy told me of her day with her family.

“Yeah, family can be rough,” I took an unabashed hit off the weed pipe. “It's amazing how some people can be so oblivious.”

“Sea, are you messing with me?” She countered my statement.

“Me? No, what do you mean? What are you talking about?” I asked in complete honesty.

“I don't know, but it's like you're always straddling these two diverging wavelengths,” she said.

“Try three or four. It's like the wild west in my mind these days, it should make for an interesting App.” I explained.

“It's like behind your humor hides the sad sense of the actual reality you live with. It's like you get what I'm thinking but have no conscious way of letting me know. Does that reach you?” She posed me with the toughest question of the night.”

“Yes?” I answered as I took another hit.

“Yes? Yes, how? So you're telling me you are aware of the complex nature of your jokes? That you're not just trapped in your mind, mocking the efforts of everyone around you working hard to make something special out of their lives. You're telling me you're completely aware of this?” Roxy elaborated.

“Oh, I was saying yes to that? Put me down for a no then. I'm not even sure what we're talking about,” I told her as I turned that last darkened piece of weed into ash.

“It's late, I should let you go. You've got important sticker work ahead of you,” she started her goodbye.

My index finger had taken all the abuse it could and I felt a sense of completion. I knew I properly clear-cut the former forest that was my sticker collection, so I grabbed a small dinosaur lunch box that Sandy had given me and carefully filled it with my wares. Starting with ‘Doc’ and ending with ‘The Mole’. I wrapped a white skull bandanna around the outside and tied it as tightly as I could. Now that I was done with the first stage of my Wikileaks assignment, I set it down on a chair next to Jen's ‘Fail Safe’ book.



Jon had recently moved a big pile of sticks into the garage to keep dry from the rain. He asked me if I could break them into kindling.

“No problem,” I told him.

I had a rough start. They weren't breaking over my knee easily and my only reward for my efforts was pain. Then I stopped and just

listened to the music on the radio for a second. The beat, I was missing the beat! I tried again with another stick. “Crack!” Right in half. I picked up another. “Crack.” It broke with the beat too. After a couple more victories, I got distracted by thinking about the sweat lodge. I realized its success would revolve around the mechanical movements I made. So I started pantomiming the process. Then the music! It was them!

It was time for me to know that the aliens were real. They changed my reality to the lyrics of some random pop song. Like a cosmic translator. I started to cry a bit. I didn't feel as alone now that I knew about them. Then the voices started.

“Cobra! It's time you know!” Cole told me

“We're all telepathic. It's time you know about it,” Tommy said.

“You're supposed to know about me too,” Sandy added.

“Don't forget about me!” Eli interjected.

“Cobra's getting it!” Said the rapper Lil Wayne.

“Hold on everybody, this is all too much! I would think I was going crazy if I didn't know this was all so real. You're telling me everybody is telepathic?” I asked the invisible voices.

“Yep,” the growing chorus answered.

“Oh, I see. Then it all finally makes sense. Are you all working for Wikileaks too?” I asked everyone.

“The ones who are pure at heart do, sweet cakes!” Roxy told me.

“Okay, what do I do now?” I wondered aloud.”

“You still need to make your package for the underworld, but be careful. It's not what you think,” my mom told me.

“And you still need to create or disappear. But don't make a mess,” Jon's voice added.

“Now that you know about us all, it will all be simple. When you need us, just call. It's as easy as flicking on a light switch,” Cole said.

“I have just one thing to add,” a new voice told me.


WHAT A World
WOW
I'M RICKY
Good Job Cobra
Super Cool
AVERY IS HERE
Cobra's getting It
BE CAREFUL
Now you know About us ALL

“What's that Oprah?” I asked.

“Good job Cobra.” she said.

“I'm sorry that I'm crying. But this is all a bit much. Is it possible to be left alone for a while?” I asked everyone.

“It's cool, Cobra. I got this,” Sandy said. “Alright, everybody. Let's all say goodnight to Cobra!”

“GOOD NIGHT COBRA!” All the voices yelled to me like an episode of the Muppet show.

“Good night everyone! Thanks,” I answered.

Abruptly, the voices disappeared and after a few minutes of composing myself I returned to Jon in the living room.

“How'd it go with the sticks?” Jon asked.

“Alright, I guess. It's funny, even when you're all by yourself, people can still find a way to bother you,” I told him with a chuckle in my voice.

“Yeah, like the echo of people's expectations and criticisms?” Jon asked.

“Um, kind of. More like you just know what people are thinking. Like some weird form of telepathy,” I explained.

“Right, I think I know what you mean,” Jon told me. “Hey Cobra, are you doing alright?”

“I think so. I guess the stress from this App is getting to me. I have a lot more to do tonight, but I think making some more art will take my mind off it. But don't worry, I won't make a mess.”

Jon had a bunch of colorful candles. I melted a few of them onto my Cobra belt buckle to seal shut an envelope of small drawings I made for Claire to use on the App. Then I wrapped the still wax-covered belt buckle up in a nineties video



game advertisement for my old girlfriend Kim, who had given it to me in the first place. After this Jon and I watched a stupid movie and by the time we were done, it was really late. I knew the normal human being thing to do was get some sleep, so I gave in and made my way out to the pump house. I brushed my teeth, spit the toothpaste water into the bushes, went inside, and drifted off asleep.



(2006) Spring, more St. Joe's

“I've got my laptop and some microphones out in the truck, what do you say we sneak into the hall and get some of these new songs of yours recorded?” Francis suggested.

“Okay, they're all pretty new to me, but I think I'm ready to try.” I told him.

“Yeah, I propped the upstairs door open, so we can get in whenever. I've got a couple I’d like to record too. I love the sound of the natural reverb in there,” Drew said as he cracked a beer.

By proxy of hanging around with Jen, I got a chance to sublet one of the other art studios and as soon as I moved in I was struck by lightning. Three of the best songs I've ever written came to me in the span of a week. That's when Francis heard them. He insisted that I record a demo immediately. It was a good session.

About a month later, I was ordering a beer at the National hotel bar when someone unknown to me introduced themselves.

“Hey, your Cobra right?” He asked as I noticed his face looked more familiar than the average face in the crowd.

“Yeah.” I said casually.

“You're the guy that made that demo in the Catholic hall, Francis played it for me. I loved it!” He told me with a lot of energy.

“Thanks, I was happy with how that turned out.” I replied.

“Yeah, you should do some more. Sorry, my name is Tommy. I grew up here in town and went to school with all these guys. I just moved back with my girlfriend,” he started to explain.

“Oh cool. Are you another one from that famous guitar class?” I asked.



“Yeah, how'd you know? Those were fun days. I was wondering about your plans. I just graduated with a degree in audio engineering and I'm eager to get to work on something more serious. There is so much good music happening around here right now, it's hard to know where to start. But we should do something. I like the sound of that hall. We should maybe try to do a real record in there,” Tommy proposed.

After talking to Francis and Cole about the offer, it seemed like the right overall fit. I kept busy writing more songs in the new musical style I'd stumbled onto, which mostly revolved around alternate guitar tuning. As my art studio sublet came to an end, I talked with the man who ran the cultural center and booked the hall over Labor Day weekend for the price of five hundred dollars.

It wasn't hard to find friends to play on the new album, just hard to get them to show up to band practice. Francis said he'd be fine with Tommy hijacking the project if he could play bass. Tommy also wanted to play lead guitar and also stay with the project beyond the recording phase. As we all talked optimistically about the upcoming session, the months were flying by and I alone was practicing the music.

The week before we started recording, Tommy told me he was too busy at the moment and he'd have to figure out his guitar parts after the session. I was fine with that, then Francis bowed out under the pressure of too many other commitments. Right after his abandonment, I got a call from Eli.

"Hey Cobra, what's up with you tonight?" He asked with his pleasant and upbeat manner.

"Hey, I'm just trying to put a practice together for next week's recording session. Do you want to play bass? Are you going to be free?" I asked.

"Sure. I can be by in fifteen minutes," Eli said.

Once we had the hall, we were plagued by technical problems. Tommy really wanted to capture something huge with the drums and that took us two days to get set up properly. To be fair, Tommy was also working his normal day job. On the third day, we got the main four songs I'd worked up with the small combo. On the fourth day, we recorded my mom on the grand piano and a couple solo performances of mine. I begged the man in charge for a fifth day. He agreed as long as we'd be out by seven in the morning for a Tai Chi class. On that fifth day, besides recording more of me, I invited a cellist someone recommended. He added a bunch of layers to a song called "Wanda and Me," which was our best attempt at anything complete over that long weekend.

As we packed up in a hurry at six in the morning, Tommy and I talked about a band on the cover of a recent music magazine he had been reading and had lying around the back seat of his car.

“This is who we're up against, bands like this. The ones riding the trending tides to peak attention. Promise me Cobra, that we’ll never have to be anything as weird as them to make it,” Tommy said as he picked up the magazine and tossed it out of the way.

“Pure Silver? Everyone knows their nothing serious. I haven't even bothered to listen to them,” I told Tommy as I set down my box of gear.

“Well, you might be the only one who hasn't, and whatever voodoo they're doing with all those pigeon feathers, it seems to be working. I'm just saying that we're going to have to try harder to break through all the current noise. We've got to just make the best music we can,” Tommy sincerely begged of me.

“I wouldn't worry about it,” I told him. “I bet we won't ever hear of Pure Silver again.”



(2013) September. Napa X-17

“I've got two beds open,” the shift lead told me as I waited by watching “The Price is Right” on the TV in the dayhall. “You can have whichever you want.”

“I guess I'm more concerned about what kind of guys I'll be living with. Based on general temperament, which room do you think is mellower?” I asked.

“I'd probably recommend the three-man room. It's a weird shape, but the guys in it are pretty low-key,” he told me.

“Sounds great! I'll take it,” I happily exclaimed.

Moments later, the halls filled with people returning from their morning groups at the treatment mall. I saw many familiar faces from the previous units I'd been on and I was warmly welcomed. The first thing out of everyone's mouths were all the new privileges I'd be getting on the discharge unit. Among the many things I was excited about was getting to use a regular size pen again. I asked around about how to get one.

“Ask Polly, she's got a bunch of them,” someone suggested.



Back on X-12, Cara told me that Polly would be helpful. She was another music therapist and a member of the treatment team on X-17. She was energetic, wore mid-length straight blonde hair and glasses. Cara told me that she'd put in a good word.

“Are you Polly?” I asked a woman who was aggressively unpacking bags of groceries in one of the dayhalls.

“Why, is it about the groceries?” You know I'm not responsible for them. I'm just helping out. If you didn't get something, take it up with whomever usually runs this. I'm just filling in today,” Polly explained as she didn't even look up from her unpacking.

“No, sorry. I didn't order anything, I'm new here. I was wondering if I could get a regular size pen?” I asked her.

“A pen? Yeah, I've got some. Let me finish up with this. What's your name?” She asked.

“Sea Stoltzner.” I told her.

“Oh, you're the musician Cara told me about, the songwriter. Sure, come by my office and I'll get you a pen,” she said as she tried to figure out who all the food belonged to.

As I wandered the halls I noticed an open door to the courtyard. A nice green open space. Some trees, a basketball hoop, a worn path around the perimeter to walk, and a swinging bench overlooking it all. Another privilege. The staff leave the door open till dark. I sat on the bench and as quickly as I caught my balance, I was called to.

“You want that pen now?” Polly yelled out the unit door.

“Thanks, you don't know how much this means to me. I hate writing lyrics with those short safety pens. It's hard to get a grip on them,” I told her as we walked to her office.

“You're the new guy in ‘The Goblet of Rock’. I saw you play for the Positive Recognition event. That sounded pretty good.” She said as she picked up a pile of stuff off the chair in her office. “Have a seat.”

“Well, here’s where you keep the good stuff. Guitars, art supplies, and industrial size boxes of popcorn,” I made a shortlist.

“Are you sick of it yet? The popcorn. We only do it twice a month here, but back on X-12, I think they do it every week, right?” She asked.

“Yeah, I just don't want to bust a tooth on something I barely enjoy eating. But you know how it goes around here,” I explained.

“Yeah, I know,” she picked up a stack of folders. “I checked, you're on my caseload.”

“Oh, cool. I still don't know how this place works and what that means.” I confessed.

“Yeah, on those stabilization units, it's pretty much the same for everyone. Now we're going to be talking about your individualized treatment plan, a lot more goes into these team meetings. I think we're going to have one for you next week.” Polly informed me.

“Okay, cool. Anything else I need to know?” I asked.

“Tomorrow you're going to need to get a group schedule at the mall. Don't worry what they put you in, we’ll fix it after the team meeting. Just relax and get settled in in the meantime.” She told me.

“Alright, I was also wondering when I could play the guitar?” I said,

“Good question. I'll bring it up at the meeting. I'll try to leave one in the supply closet for the nurses to check out to you. If you want, can you play me something now?” She offered me her ear.

“Oh, wow. I guess I could. We had a talent show on X-14 when I got here. I could play you the song I played for that. I wrote it with my old girlfriend. Or, I mean she played it with me, once. She was a musician too. Nevermind, I'll just play it. It's called Planet's Xmas.”

My new room was mostly peaceful, but there were short bursts of exceptional snoring from one of my new roommates. I did my best to look past it.

Polly was right, I did have my first treatment team meeting the next week. At this meeting the unit Psychologist, Dr. Wells was the most vocal.

Dr. Wells started out in the Army. She was very direct and obviously enjoyed speaking harshly to the patients she managed. Her wavy platinum blonde hair looked like it took a lot of effort every morning, so did her make-up. She was an unavoidable presence.



“Well, I'll admit you do look good on paper, but we need to get down to the dirty nitty-gritty with you Mr. Stoltzner. What happened is probably not as simple as it sounds, it never is. And don't get me even started on the substance abuse side of all of this. I'm going to want you in my recovery group for that. We'll be talking a lot about it. But on paper, you've got a good head start on things,” Dr. Wells told me and the rest of the team.

“So what do you think? How much longer am I going to have to be here?” I asked Dr. Wells.

“To be frank Mr. Stoltzner, in a loss of life case like yours, I can't support someone who hasn't put in at least five years of treatment,” she answered coldly.

Five years was a lot to process. At least with the occasional snoring from my roommate I had hope for a quicker resolution to the problem.

Carl's eccentric nature fit in nice at the hospital, meaning it hardly needed addressing in comparison to everyone else. He studied the history of the Nazi party, with the hopes of proving their clinical insanity. He worked hard at improving his songwriting. He was short, with a thick black beard.

“Hey Carl, do you snore?” I asked the occasional member of “The Goblet of Rock.”

“Me? No, why? Are you thinking of taking me up on my offer to move in? It's a sweet room! I've got a TV! I'll even do my best to not

drive you nuts with my guitar playing," he said with an elevated level of excitement.

"Yeah, let's do it. When your roommate leaves next week, I'll take his spot." I told him.



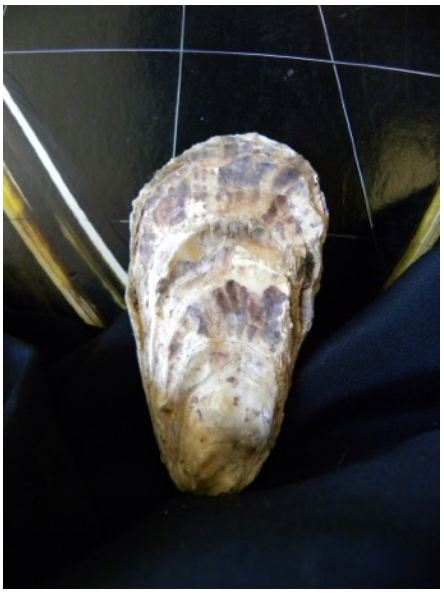
(2011) February. The coast.

As the sound of Jon backing out of the driveway echoed in the pump house, I was suddenly concerned over a book Roxy left on the corner of the desk. "The Great Pyramid" by Tom Valentine. I felt a great evil omitting from it. As soon as I picked it up, I knew I shouldn't have. So I stormed out of the pump house with the book in hand and made my way down the hill to the fire pit on the cliff.

I held the book open on the last page and flipped through it backward. I assumed I'd unlearn all the evil I'd absorbed in picking it up. Then I ripped the book in half, and then those halves in half. From there I started ripping up any sections I could get my hands on. As the pieces scattered to the ground, I gathered them up in the center of the fire pit and used my lighter to burn it all away. It went up effortlessly and for a second I watched and felt safe.

When the flames burned back to blackened ash, I saw a small section of an undamaged page and with a reckless curiosity picked it up. The only bit of writing that made any sense said "Christ took

control.” I took this to be a powerful message so I used my fingernails to trim the edges. I scanned the fire pit for more meaning and saw some burnt wire and nails. I grabbed those, a lighter, and fashioned them into a monument with this new important message tightly grasped in the center.







I saw a pile of oyster shells off to the side of the pit and stacked them all around the monument till it was completely covered. When I got to the top, I offered my seal of protection with a simple word. “Lock!” As I surveyed the scene, I saw that buried at the bottom of the pile of shells was an empty shrimp flavored ramen packet. I thought it was significant so I took it with me, back up the hill and into the pump house.

I had a lot of trash around. I grabbed handfuls of it and wrapped up the tiny shrimp packet and a lighter. Then I stuffed it all in an old forty-ounce Klean Kanteen bottle and then packed that with as much trash as would fit. Once I heard Jon pull into the driveway, I tightened up the lid and I went in the driveway to meet him.

“I'm going to make fish tacos, are you hungry?” He shouted as I walked up.

“I could eat,” I told him.

“I got a movie called “District 9.” It looks entertaining enough. I've been wanting to see it.” he said.

“Yeah, that sounds cool,” I agreed.

“So, I'll get started with food and we’ll watch it. Give me thirty minutes. I also got you a beer. He said to entice me.

The sun was about to set. So I rolled a joint, then a cigarette, and walked back down to the bench next to the shells I piled earlier.

“Okay, what's the plan here?” I thought as I lit up the joint. “Oh yeah, the light switch covers I bought. Those all need God's team stickers,” I inhaled the smoke meditatively.



“But I need to also work on the box for the afterlife. Food, smokes, clothes. I'm going to need a lot of things,” I took another hit. “That stuffed toy mouse from when I was a baby! I'm glad I brought it. That should go in too,” I exhaled again, but more intensely.

“But they're on to me. I'm not even sure my thoughts are safe anymore. I need to spend as much time working on nonsense as I do the important Wikileaks stuff,” I took another hit. “I think I could do something with my calendar. Pop on a couple of stickers, add some paint. That will trick the Psy-op's team.”

“I also need to decorate that disposable camera. It should be a part of the App too.”

“It might be time to call in my protectors Batman and The Ninja Turtles. Keep those guys around to watch the base,” I indulged in another long drag off the joint, burning the tips of my fingers.

“I forgot to call Roxy again. I don't know what's so important that I keep missing calling her. As soon as I go in, I'll remember this time,” I snuffed out the joint and lit the cigarette.

“I've got to get some art ideas ready for Claire. I should just give her my old sketches of the graphic novel. Maybe she can do something with them,” I thought.

“Maybe I can save the house! I think the password has some extra power for that too.”

“Wait, is my heart beating too fast? I think I smoked too much of that joint.”

“I'm giving them too much access. I just need to work, not think. Go back in there and just make things. Create or disappear.”

“But wait! I was going to do something when I got inside. Shoot, I think it was important. I'll remember later.”

“Just get up and start walking. You can finish the smoke on the way,” I rose to my feet and directed them up the hill towards the house.

“And Batman, if you're down here, please protect me,” I said aloud.

I rummaged around the pump house for well over an hour adding stickers, paint, pens, ribbons, trash, and rubber bands to complete more packages. Some being fifth-dimensional wormholes in the aid of

Wikileaks, others being decoys. I was burning myself out, so I walked over to the kitchen to see how dinner was coming. No activity. Jon was in the living room, so I sat down on the couch with him to rest for a second.

“No, it's alright. I need to make dinner anyway. I'll call you back in an hour. Bye,” Jon pressed the off button on the cordless phone. “Sorry about that. I got distracted. Dinner, I'm on it.” he said.

“Does that thing still have a charge?” I asked as Jon set the phone down on the coffee table.

“Yeah, enough,” he replied.

“Good, I need to call Roxy,” I told him.

“Isn't it a little bit late out there?” He asked.

“Yeah, probably. I don't know. I'm going to do it anyway,” I decided.

Her phone rang 4 times and just when I thought I’d have to quickly think up another voicemail to leave her, she answered.

“Hey, I was wondering about you. What's going on out there? I haven't heard from you in a while,” Roxy said in a very soft tone.

“We're okay. It's been kind of weird. Am I calling too late? I don't get the time difference thing. Is it alright that I'm calling you right now?” I asked.

“We can talk. Everyone is in bed and I've just got to keep it down. I was just lying here hoping you would call. Why is it so weird out there?” she asked.

“I don't know, I just don't feel safe. Jon's still acting strangely, at least some of the time. I don't know how to talk about it all,” I told her.

“Well, if you don't feel safe you can always go back to your dad's house,” She suggested again.

“Yeah, I know. I'm almost out of art supplies anyway. I think I'm mostly done what I set out to do with my prep for the App. I just don't



want to leave Jon all high and dry. I mean he doesn't even have a car right now," I explained. "When are you coming back?"

"Sea, a couple days after Valentine's day. I think the seventeenth," she reminded me.

"Can you come back earlier? I want you to see what I've put together for the Valentine's day party," I begged. "Please, I need you out here. I think you'll be surprised with what I've put together."

"Sea, you know I can't do that. My Mom only gets so much time with me and she'd freak out if I left before ending this visit proper. I can't do that, but it's sweet of you to ask," Roxy admitted. "Just relax out there if you need a break. Or get creative. Make something new out of what you've got left. You're going to need a lot more art to pull off this App.

"Okay, I'll keep at it then," I conceded. "I love you so much. I just don't know what to do with myself sometimes," I told her.

"I love you too. I am glad to hear you persevering." Roxy said. "I'll be back there soon. Bye Sea."

"Sorry Cobra, I know I said I'd have this done hours ago," Jon told me as he stood in front of the stoves checking the fish sticks. "They're almost done, I've just got to chop up the cabbage. We'll be eating in no time."

"It's cool," I said as I looked around the cluttered room. "Hey, do you want this box?" I asked.

"Which one?" Jon turned around to look. "Oh, the ones my new boot came in. Go ahead and take it. It's yours."

I could make the case that I was planning on this moment. The moment I put together my package for the afterlife. Everything I needed



to build it, I'd previously set down in the kitchen. The mask, my grandfather's Mexican poncho, my childhood stuffed mouse in a protective case, and last summer's garden shoes. At that moment, these all seemed like the obvious things I'd need to battle back the dark forces and reclaim my earthly life. Or they were just physical manifestations of my scattered mind and within my reach at a time of psychotic inspiration. But it was a start. Once Jon declared dinner was finished, I put the box aside and we both went into the living room with our plates to watch the movie.

I cracked my beer, ate my tacos, and happily watched the film. In Jon selection, District 9, the characters used the term *Prawns* as a slang term for the alien refugees. I saw the connection to the shrimp-flavored ramen packet I found by the fire pit. I didn't know what it meant. Just more fifth-dimensional coincidences. It was late after the movie ended so out of habit, I went back to the pump house to get some rest.

But sleep eluded me. All I could hear were the strong winds blowing up from the cliff. I was worried that the small piece of paper, in the center of my monument, buried underneath those shells, wouldn't survive the night. I started crying. I felt helpless. Then I imagined the atoms of the lighter fusing to the atoms of the paper. I tried to imagine how that felt from the inanimate object's point of view. Once satisfied, I got up, got dressed, and grabbed my flashlight.

The moon was full enough for me to roll a smoke, and after lighting it up I walked back down to the cliff to see how the shells were fairing.

"I hope this works. I hope it's about more than just aliens. I hope we discover that Christ is real too and the aliens are just a part of the larger universe we're about to be inducted into," I thought as I looked out at the moon over the water.

"All of this has to mean something. I know it does."



(2007) February, Even More from St. Joe's

After the big labor day recording session in St. Joseph's hall, I was left to wonder what we'd achieved for the next few months while Tommy was otherwise occupied. As a weird twist of fate would have it, a room opened up in the big house Tommy and Sam both lived at. I

took it without any hesitation and found myself living with both of the record producers I was currently working with.



“Hey,” I said to Tommy who was sitting on the couch after I got up around noon. “Do you need coffee? I'm thinking of going down the street to get some.”

“Nope,” Tommy held up the large white paper cup to prove he'd already been. “But have fun though.”

I sat down on the other end of the couch.

“I really don't want to walk, but my car is parked down the opposite street. I've got to get it eventually,” I opened my pack of blue American Spirit cigarettes to see how many I had left.

“You got one of those for me?” Tommy asked.

“I have one. I guess you can have it, but that means I've got to drive to a gas station to get more on my way for coffee,” I complained.

“Yeah, but don't you have to do that anyways?” He countered.

“I guess I do. Here, take it,” I said as I gave into his logic. “What are you doing?”

“Me? Writing this guy an email. He's selling something we need for the record. A larger patch bay. It will make things go a lot faster,” Tommy explained.

“Oh, but that can't fix the last session we did in the basement?” I asked.

“Short answer, no. It just doesn't sound right mixing stuff we did in the big grand hall next to stuff we recorded in our muted basement. I think we've got to get back into the hall if we're going to do this right,” Tommy concluded.

“Yep, I'm broke again. I've spent all the money I made trimming weed last fall on rent. I can't keep living here,” I told him.

“What are you going to do?” Tommy asked.

“Move back in with my parents. I've also been offered one of the studios at St. Joe's,” I told him.

“Me too. Who's? I'm taking over Jim's” Tommy said.

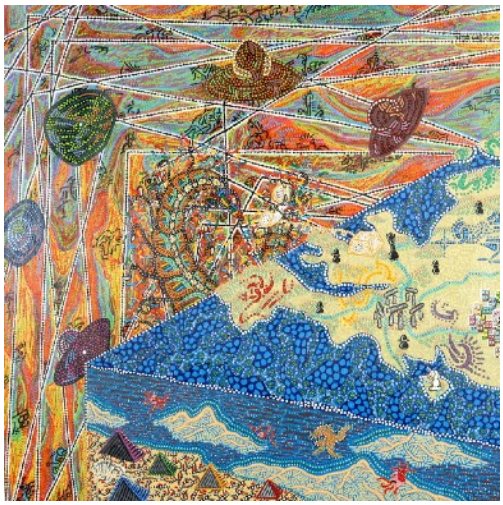
“Oh cool, I'll be across the hall in Brian’s. I want to start working on the record cover. You've seen the idea from that science book I have,” I reminded him.

“Oh yeah, you'll have to show me again,” Tommy gently shut his laptop, giving me his full and undivided attention. “You know what we could do.”

“What?” I asked

“Once I'm set up in Jim's studio, we could run an XLR audio snake out my door, across the hall, through your new studio, out your window, and around the back deck. We'd just have to remember to unlatch the upstairs door to the hall, and we could sneak back in at night and finish recording that way.” Tommy said with a smile on his face. “We could probably make it all work with only two hundred feet of cable. I've seen them sell used ones for as cheap as two hundred bucks, do you think you could swing that?” He said.

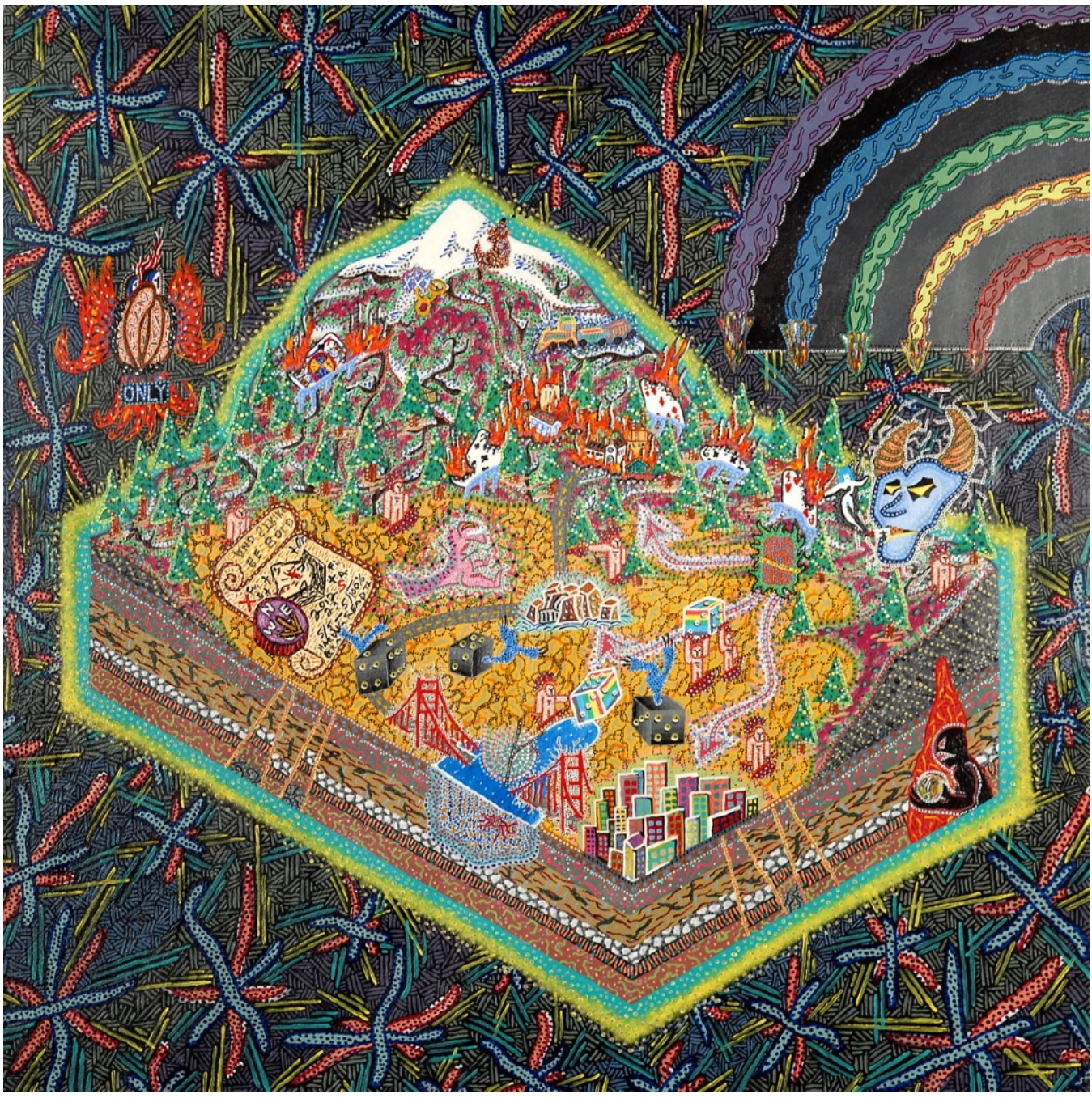
“If that's what it'll take to get this done, I can,” I got up from the couch and checked my pockets for my keys. “Yeah, I think that could work.”





Now that I had my own art studio, painting the album's cover was the easy part. But motivating Tommy to actually work on the music was hit or miss. Some days he'd be excited to record, but other days he wouldn't. We made slow progress.

After four months of work on a psychedelic, geographic, semi-pointillist, land cut out of northern California for the record cover, I thought I should keep going with the general idea and make more art for the album. The new paintings continued to take little effort and I made progress rapidly.



One evening in early spring, I heard an unfamiliar sound as I painted in my studio. I got up from my generic metal folding chair and walked down the hall towards the door. It was unusually locked and someone was on the outside ringing the doorbell. I opened it.

“Hey Sea, how are you? These are my friends from college, April and Gwen. They wanted to check out Nevada City and I thought no trip is complete without a stop at St. Joe's,” an old friend greeted me with a lot of information. “Why’s the door locked? What's going on here tonight?”

“I don't know about the door, Drew's down in the city tonight. I haven't seen Jen around either. I'm just painting in here,” I told them.

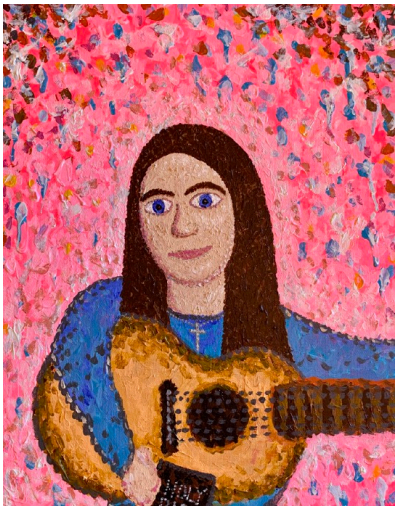
“Can we see?” Gwen asked.

Gwen studied art at the closest university. She instantly loved my paintings, my facial hair was a close second. She had jet black hair, and liked to wear dresses. We started dating pretty quickly. She was the first to discover that the trick to a successful relationship with me was to pursue me harder than I tried to pull away. I liked her. She was very encouraging with my art, and I knew to keep her around I'd need to keep making more.

As I started to get comfortable with having my first girlfriend, there was trouble brewing at home in Alta Sierra.

“Sea, I think it's from the mold in my bathroom. I don't think those guys that tested it knew what they were talking about,” my mom said with a bloody tissue held up to her nose.

“Mom, they said it was just a common bathroom mold and they're the ones who should know. Maybe we should bring you in to see a doctor if it's turning out to be this much of a problem?” I told her.



“A doctor? Sea, I've been playing the harp in the healing room for a couple of years now. We're trying to establish a new way of thinking about disease. If that's your only solution, then we're just going to have to pray harder. That's the whole point, to give God the glory in healing us, not some doctor,” she said, strongly disagreeing with my idea.

“Fine mom, just tilt your head back till the blood stops.” I compromised.

As my Mother suffered quietly at home, I had a great life going for me in town. I kept coming up with interesting new paintings, including one for Eli's big new album. Tommy's progress was starting to add up on the hall recordings too. And Sam was back from tour, giving the Madame and the Mustache’s album its needed attention. Gwen enjoyed playing her part in my life's magic and I did my best to be a reasonable boyfriend. But my delayed development as a partner was obvious and I spent most of our time together marveling at the novelty of having a girlfriend.

As the summer was coming to an end, I was at a local basement show when I got a call from my dad. I was already sitting down on the curb outside when he broke the news.

“Sea, it's some kind of Cancer. I can't remember the name of it now, but it's in her sinus area,” my dad said without the usual humor in his voice. “I don't know Sea, it's all too much.”

After a minute of silence as I tried to unscramble the static in my head, I then proceeded with the call.

“Dad, did you tell Starla and Sandy yet?” I asked.

“No, can you? I was barely able to make this call,” he told me with much-repressed emotion in his throat.

“Yeah, I'll go and find them. Dad, try to relax. I'll be home soon.



(2011) February, The rest of my time on the coast

“Just tell me where you want me to stand,” Jon said.

“How about over there, but get low. Film the pile of shells more than me,” I explained.

“Okay, here we go,” I moved into position. “Unlock!” I removed the shells one by one, throwing them off to the side.

Things got confusing once I got to the lighter, the wire, nails, and the burnt message I saved from the book. I had remembered that it read, “Christ took control.” But now after the night on the cliff, the message read “Christ took reign.” I was shocked! I couldn't believe it at first.

“He changed word!” I said over and over again.

I thought this was proof that God was a living element in all of Wikileak's plans, so I lit the small piece of paper on fire.

“He changed a word, it's a message!” I told Jon.

It took a few minutes to regain my composure, but I was more than encouraged by this seeming miracle or by a mix-up in the word I'd remembered reading the day before. I had even forgotten that Jon was filming it all.

“Nice!” Jon hit stop on his iPhone. “Now what?”

“I don't know? Are we going to check out some of that game later?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah, the Super Bowl. I'd be down for a little bit of that. Let's head over to the hotel and get some burgers.” He said.

“Yeah! Can you bring your laptop? I'd love to check my accounts,” I replied as I remembered that the internet existed at most places.

With hours till kick-off, the mantra “create or disappear” was strong. So I continued to make packages. While I was deep in my creative process, Jon knocked on the door to the pump house.



“Whoa, you've got quite the mess going here,” he said in sort of a stunned chuckle. “You're not getting that paint everywhere, are you?”

“Nope, you might not remember but I'm the cleanest painter in town.” I boasted.

“Well if that's true, try picking this place up a bit for me,” he kept looking around. “Are you ready? The game's starting.”



“I don't even know who's playing? And I bet when you tell me, I'll probably never have heard of them,” Jon said as we sat at the bar.

“Well, I can't bet against the inner workings of another man's mind. But it's the Packers versus the Steelers. I'm going for the Packers. My mom was from those parts.” I told him.

“What can I get you two?” The bartender asked.

“A couple of burgers and fries,” Jon told him.

“Anything to drink?” He asked.

“I'm fine with water, Cobra?" Jon said.

“I'll take a cola,” I told the bartender as I didn't break my glare at the TV.

“Coming right up. Enjoy the game,” he said as he fixed our simple drinks.

After a few minutes of leisurely watching the game, and in the empty silence that it brought. I was bored out of my mind. So I asked Jon to use his laptop.

“I think that ought to do it!” I told Jon who was busy eating his burger. “What I'd like now is for you to write “Salad buddy” on my post.”

“I'm not going to do that,” Jon said after a second of chewing. “I don't want to get mixed up in whatever you think it is you're doing.”

“You're no fun,” I picked up my burger and took my first bite.”

“What did you say?” He asked.

“You're no fun,” I repeated myself.

“No, I heard that. I mean what did you write in your post?” He asked again.

“Oh, I just said a few things about the App. And how I could use people's help putting it together. But in like a fun way. Like it's a fun community art project,” I explained.

“But how do you need people's help? I know you need computer programmers. But how are you going to get the community involved? And what good is it for me to say “Salad buddy?” Jon asked in frustration.

“Jon, I don't know. . . I just do. I'll figure that part out later. I could just use a little bit of positivity right now, so I asked. I put it out there. I'm trying,” I took another bite. “Hey, look, a touchdown.”

“You guys didn't even stay for the whole game. What's so important to rush back for?” Roxy asked over the phone back at Jon's.

“I don't know, I think we’re burnt out with each other. When are you coming back? It feels like you've been gone forever,” I asked as I took a drag off a cigarette.

“Like ten more days. Can you handle that?” She questioned me.

“Yeah, I guess. I just don't know if Wikileaks can,” I told her.

“Wikileaks? What do they have to do with anything?” She questioned further.

“I don't know, I just get bits and pieces out here. I'm sure it will be fine. So what were you saying about tattoos?” I changed the topic.

“I just said I liked that all the football players had them. But don't change the subject on me, and be honest. How much weed are you smoking these days?” Roxy dug deeper.



“Weed? I haven’t been smoking too much. I'm almost out of the stuff Sandy brought me from home. I smoked most of that when you were still here. But since I got started on the App, the weed just makes things confusing. And if I'm being totally honest, it's all confusing enough without it.” I told her with our guard.

“Okay, thanks for opening up. Is Jon around? I'd like to say hi if he is.” Roxy said.

“Sure, let me find him.” I told her as I stood.

Jon was close by, smoking into the wood stove by the sliding glass door. I didn't even have to put out my cigarette to find him. After I closed the sliding glass door, I knew they were talking about me but I was too worn out to care. As I finished my cigarette, I felt an urgent warning to leave. No tricks this time, no veiled messages to figure out. I just knew the Psy-Ops team was on their way. That I'd been given a

heads up to leave. So as Roxy and Jon questioned my sanity, I was busy loading up my Dad's SUV with everything I brought out to Jon's, and half of what Roxy had left behind in the pump house.



“Cobra, me and Roxy are worried about you. You need to try and snap out of whatever head trip got you so twisted up. We think the best thing for you to do is take a break from all this App stuff and just relax for a few days. I'm also worried enough that I'm going to have to hold on to the car keys until this passes,” Jon explained as he grabbed the keys off the coffee table.

“I get why you both would think that, and I'm not upset. I just don't want to be inside right now. I'm going out for a smoke,” I told him.

Now with real opposition to me leaving, I was more convinced that I needed to leave than before. Jon was trying his best, but he didn't know about the spare set of keys I kept in the glove box. And with extra urgency, I quietly packed up the rest of my stuff. Now it was time, I went back into the house and gave Roxy a quick call back.

“Hey, I just wanted to tell you that I know you're worried, but I'm okay and I'm going to finally take care of myself,” I told her in all sincerity.

“Thanks, Sea. I know you're going to be alright. It's just too hard for me to tell what's going on from all the way out here,” Roxy said.

“Okay, I know it's late so I'm going to go. I'll talk to you in the morning.”

Jon quietly finger-picked my Dad's guitar on the couch as I said goodnight to Roxy. Once I hung up the phone I had a message for him too.

“Take good care of that guitar, it’s my dad's,” I said as Jon looked at me weirdly like there was a chance he wouldn't.

“Okay?” He said under his breath as I walked out onto the porch.

Once I slammed the car door, I knew there was no turning back. So turned the spare key, threw it into reverse, then accelerated up the driveway, and was soon driving down Highway One. I knew I still had a pretty good head start on the Psy-Ops team, so I drove responsibly until I reached the Russian River. I was somewhat familiar with the area and thought a less direct route home would be the safest. So I took a long, panicked, semi-backtracking, 4 hour drive back to my dad's house in Alta Sierra.



It was very late when I stood on top of my dad's driveway performing an intuitive magic spell out of imagined pure light. I had done it. The valentines had been moved closer to their intended location. Now, all I had to do was wait around to see what comes next.

Chapter Six
The impacts on my mind and the fractures thereafter.



(2007) Fall. An emergency room in Sacramento

"Man, I'm telling you. This guy needs a belt! Look at him, Sea. He has to hold his pants up just to get a drink from that fountain. What happened to his belt?" My dad said aloud to mom and me as we all sat in the large waiting room of the ER.

"Dad! I already told you twice! Shut up about the homeless man over there. Yes, he needs a belt. There! Are you happy? I said it! Let's try to focus on what's important. Your wife is sick and in the hospital," I said to my dad a few seats away from my mom who was holding her hand up to her eye. "If this is the best you can do then just stay over there, we don't want to hear it."

"Sea?" My mom called to me. "What did the nurse at the counter say?" My mother asked softly.

"Same thing they told Starla an hour ago, it's a busy place and they're working on getting you a room," I told her as gently as I could, under the stressful conditions. "Hey, they're back."

"There's a health food store down the street, we just grabbed some prepackaged stuff. It seemed pretty good. Does anything look

appetizing, mom?" Starla offered her the first pick of what would be our dinner.

"I'll try the salad, thank you, Starla! I'm so hungry," mom sheepishly replied.

"Sea, you've got a belt, go and give it to that homeless guy over there, he really needs one," my dad persisted.

"Dad, Starla got food. Come and eat," I said as I took a bite of a chicken wrap.

It was all happening so fast. Her primary doctor was concerned that she was leaking spinal fluid and wanted her to get checked out at a higher level of care. Once she got past the receptionist, the ER doctors thought her best chance at recovery was immediate surgery. Which would undoubtedly leave her blind and needing rounds of chemo. She was quickly assessed to have stage four cancer, and not a type that doctors have much success with either. As they were preparing her for the surgery, they let each of us family members in to say our peace.

"These guys seem to know what they're talking about mom, you'll be fine in their hands," I said as I looked down at her in the hospital bed.

"Sea, I'll be fine. Remember to love Jesus with all your heart," she said as her strength was waning.

"Okay, mom. I'm going to let you rest now. I'll be back in the morning to see you. God bless." I told her as I quietly left.

For the sake of everyone, this is how it should have ended. A battle lost as soon as it started. A quick goodbye. But as soon as a supervising doctor got involved, the whole thing was put on ice and they directed her to a follow-up visit to seek a second opinion.

From this point on, the doctors were more interested in talking about how bad the cancer was than moving forward with a plan. The

more tests they ran, the more risks they had to account for in any treatment. All while she had to learn to live with the tumor rapidly expanding in her head. Now, her normal resting position would be her right hand over her left eye. She was in a lot of pain.

“Lord, we want to lift up your child. She needs you tonight. We know it's not in your nature to see her in distress. To see her in disease. We ask that you break these bonds that Satan has a hold of and release your abundant river of life, peace, and healing in her. In the name of Jesus, we ask that her healing be a message to the dark one. That he can't have her. That he can't have any of us. We pray that you heal this mother as a sign to her children that you are faithful and true. We ask all of these things tonight in your name, bless her, bless her, bless her. Amen.”



Most nights someone brought us a meal and prayed with mom for a half hour or so. A couple times a week they'd bring the healing rooms to us. Music, prayer groups, even dancers with flags to show God the collective gratitude for her eventual healing. There was a lot of passion in her circle of believers. There were lots of people who believed God would save her. My sisters and I would sit quietly and be supportive, but it was all a lot to take in.

Someone gave my mom an old videotape of a guy that beat his case of cancer through nutrition. He talked about how the food we eat, was in itself, God's own natural remedy. This was the best news yet anyone had given her and she took it. The Church bought mom an expensive new juicer and she was no longer concerned with what the doctors said.

"You're going to cheat on me, I already know it!" Gwen exclaimed out of nowhere.

"What?" I said sitting up in bed. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I just know your type," she accused me.

"What type? The type of guy that waits till he's twenty-six to get his first girlfriend?" I countered with.

"The type that has options. The type that looks around," she started crying. "And when you do, I know you'll quickly see that I'm not good enough for you. And that's when you'll inevitably find someone better and leave me," Gwen explained through her tears.

"I can't believe we're having this conversation. I was just telling you about what my mom was dealing with in her cancer treatment and you go and spring this trap. No! I won't do it. I won't get dragged down by this. I've got enough on my plate without having to constantly prune your insecurities."

"Then go ahead and do it! Get it over with! Prune me to the roots!

Put me out of my misery," she pleaded.

"Fine, it's over. I'm ending it, but it's on you. This shouldn't be more stressful than what my mom's dealing with back at home." I said as I gave my reasons.

Once the family got in the habit of mom's new juicing routine, her spirits rose. She quickly changed to a vegan raw food diet. She also found hope at a Christian healing conference in Redding, California where she met a woman who worked with lasers and crystals. The woman was hesitant at first but took my mom on as a patient. We found a one-bedroom apartment across the street from the women's practice and mom was soon living on her own, pursuing her health.

I was glad she found a solution that suited her beliefs, but I was selfishly thrilled that I wouldn't have to deal with the flag dancers around the house anymore. I got back to painting. I got back to bugging Tommy about the record. Now my only obligation was to give mom a call and make sure she was doing alright.

"Hello? Who's this?" My mom frailly answered.

"Mom, it's Sea. How are you?" I said.

"Oh Sea, I'm so glad it's you. I can't read the words on the phone anymore. I couldn't remember your number either," she said in a panic.

"It's alright mom. What's wrong? What did you want to tell me?" I asked.

"I heard a bump on the wall, I couldn't tell if it was real or if I made it up. I saw some kids outside the other day. It might have been them, but it was too dark out for kids. Sea? Am I going to be okay?" She asked me with real concern and worry in her voice.

"Yeah, you're fine there. It's a safe neighborhood. It could have also been a branch off a tree or even a raccoon. But I'll check it out when we come up this weekend. Remember? We're coming up with Eli and his mom? We're all going to church with you," I did my best to

calm and distract her.

“Oh yes, church. You're going to love the pastor, Sea. He is such a Godly man, and smart too. They've been seeing so much healing up here, I know any day now it will be my turn.”



(2011) February. Dad's House.

“What are you doing back? I thought the party wasn't until next week,” my dad asked in a full volume voice at six in the morning.

“Jon was acting weird, so I left,” I told him as I used my hand to block the kitchen light.

“How was he acting weird?” He continued his line of questioning.

“I don't know dad, he just did weird stuff. Like ask too many weird questions,” I said in a fit of anger as I rolled over on the couch.

“Am I being weird? I'm also asking a lot of questions,”

“No, you're just being annoying. The bottom line is I'm sleeping back on your couch,” I told him humbly.

“Sea, why don't you get up and sleep in my bed. I don't want the light to bother you and I'm not going to walk around in the dark.”

Once Sandy woke up, she invited me to lunch with Starla.

“We already ordered for you. Sandy and I both have to get back to work soon, so we got you a pastrami sandwich. Starla told me as I sat down in the deli.

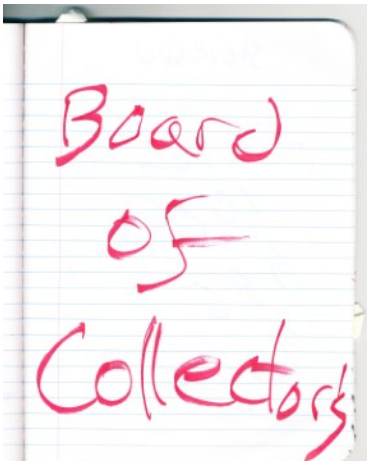
“Okay, that sounds good. Is this it here?” She nodded so I took a bite. “Wow, they make the best sandwiches.

“So what's been going on out at the coast? We haven't heard much from you in a while,” Starla asked me as I took a second bite.

“Between us? It's all happening. Everything mom fought for. It started out there,” I said in a low tone.

“What does that even mean?” Sandy asked.

“You know, God and the devil. I saw how it all plays out. We win! There are just a few loose ends to tie up. That's what the Valentines are for. I've got a lot of packages to deliver. It's time to assemble the Board of Collectors.” I directed.



“Alright, Sea. We're trying, but we don't know what the Board of Collectors is,” Starla said.

“I know this one. It's the imaginary Board of Cobra Industrey’s. He calls it that,” Sandy told Starla. As she took a bite out of her sandwich.

“That's right, but it's not imaginary. It's a real thing. We've got to get them together so I can hand out my packages,” I explained.

“Well,Vince and Claire are doing a craft night tomorrow. I could ask if it's OK to do your thing over there?”

“That would be great. And if I can’t make it, I want Starla to open the light,” I told her.

“What's the light?” Why wouldn't you make it?” Starla asked.

“And if Starla can't make it, I want Sandy to open the light,” I said.

“Okay Sea, now you're starting to creep me out,” Sandy said as she pushed the rest of her lunch aside.

“Yeah, me too! What are you talking about?” Starla asked me concernedly.

“You'll find out. Just talk to Claire about tomorrow night. It should be a wild time.

My dad woke me up on the couch at six the next morning.

“Now that you're back in town, can I talk you into doing a little bit of running around when you get up?” He asked as the kitchen light shined directly in my eyes. “There's fifty bucks in it for you.”

“Yeah, what do you need?” I asked half asleep.

“A couple photos. I need a part from the hardware store, something for dinner and then I need you to pick up the handle to the oven door at Tim's warehouse.” My dad listed his demands.

“Okay,” I said as I pulled the blanket up over my eyes.

“Why don't you take my bed again. This isn't working for me.” He insisted.

Once I got up around ten. I convinced Sandy to watch me for two minutes as I built the sweat lodge down in the yard.

“Cool, Sea,” she said halfheartedly. “And this supposed to be what now?”

“What? This is the big project I've been working on out at the coast! A music video to go on the App!”

“Oh, okay. I bet it makes more sense with the music,” she yelled back.

My dad was all ready for me to leave, just as soon as I could get my act together. He had his camera, a clipboard of maps and addresses, a list of things to pick up from a couple of stores, and that fifty-dollar bill for my trouble. I intuitively knew I'd have a secondary agenda once I was in town, so I packed a few things of my own, and once I was all

set, I jumped in his car and lit up a smoke as I drove off.

My folks had been friends with Tim and his wife since they moved to Grass Valley in the '70s. He was a collector. All types of metals. Safes too. He wore white undershirts and a visor hat. He often had a smoke in hand. He was always kind and in the mood for a quick laugh, between business and favors. He was a good Christian man.

After a quick stop for coffee, I went to Tim's warehouse. For some reason, I'd brought along a basketball-sized rubber ball with dinosaurs on it that I bought with Roxy. I grabbed it along with my new black leather gloves and went inside.

“Hey Tim, how's things?” I asked him in his office, not noticing that I was interrupting another conversation.

“Sea! Your dad said I'd be seeing you today. Great! I'm doing really well,” Tim said warmly. “What's with the ball?”

“You'll need to put these on first,” I tossed him the leather gloves. He put them on without hesitation. Then I tossed him the rubber ball. He caught it and looked up at me.

“Now what happens?” He asked with a surprised look on his face.

“I don't know, you tell me?” I asked.

“Pray over the ball until it's time to pass it on to another?” He quickly replied.

“Yep,” I said, projecting that this was the right answer all along but having put no thought into it.



I stopped by a thrift store in Nevada City. I found a small ceramic owl. Starla was a big owl collector so I bought it. Then I drove over to her house. Nobody was home so I grabbed the owl and took it with me into the garage and set it on a storage

bin among her other boxes.

At the hardware store, I found more than I was looking for. I got the parts for my dad, and for myself, two rolls of duct tape, and a blank key with musical notes printed on it.

I didn't know if he'd be in, but I stopped by the grocery store where Eli worked just in case. I found him right where I expected and took a number.

"Cobra, your back! What can I do you for?" Eli asked with a smile.

"How about a pound and a half of the chicken fajita mix," I told him.

"Fajitas, nice. What's your plan? We should get together soon," he said as he put on the food-grade plastic gloves.

"I'm still working on this App stuff, I've got a good start on it. How about we get coffee. My whole week is free," I replied.

"Ok, I'm free Thursday morning," he said as he weighed up the Fajita mix.

"Then it's set," I told Eli as he handed me dinner. "And don't worry about your family, they're protected!" I said as I held up a bottle of "Mr. Bubble."

Soon after the grocery store, I was back at my dad's.

"How'd it go with Tim?" My dad asked when I handed him his fixed oven door handle.

"Fine, I only saw him for a second," I explained.

"The pictures all look fine. Did you have any trouble?" He said as he looked at them over the viewer.

"The pictures? No, but there were a lot of guys burning leaves, it was kind of creepy, like some kind of satanic ritual," I said in honesty of what I thought I'd encountered. "I need a shoebox. Do we have any?" I changed the subject. "Like, I must have a shoebox. Like, I'll have to

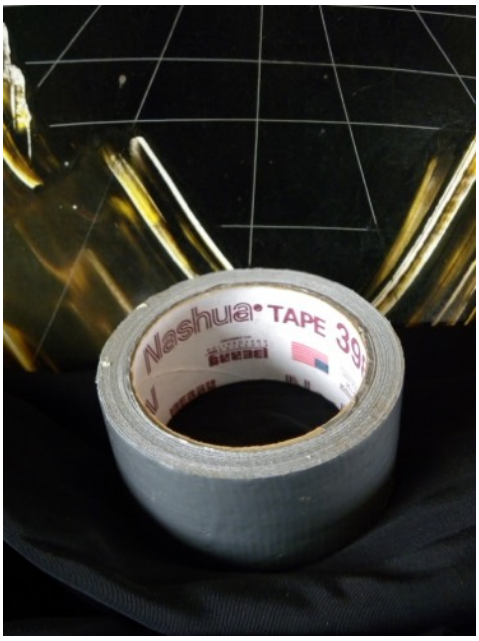
go back to town and buy a pair of shoes, I need a shoebox so bad."

"Come on Sea, I'm working. I don't have time for this," he told me.

"Man, I need a shoebox. I don't know what to tell you," I said with a blank stare.

"I think there's one of your mom's in the closet," he replied after thinking for a second.

"Great! Now I have everything I need." I announced to the room.



I grabbed those two matching boot boxes I'd packed out at the coast. The one with the stuff for the afterlife and the other with the valentines and other packages for my friends. With them I'd been keeping the Kleen Kanteen bottle of trash, lighter, and the shrimp flavored packet. I sacredly put the bottle in the shoebox that belonged to my mother. Now it was time for the two rolls of duct tape. I carefully wrapped all three of the packages in them. Once I was done, they were all ready to be delivered at the craft night party later on in the evening.



"We're going to need to bring these, for safety," I handed Sandy a couple of knock off transforming dinosaurs. "Let's put them in the glove box, they'll work best from there."

I made her take the back road from Alta Sierra to Nevada City. I sat in the passenger seat and directed our camouflage by adjusting the transforming dinosaurs.

"Your car is a red 70's Buick!" I yelled,

expecting the government Psy-Ops team to be seeing us in this type of car. “Now we're in a yellow Ford truck,” I yelled to continue to stay one step ahead of this mischievous team.

I also had my hand crank flashlight with me that I pointed at the oncoming traffic as I screamed out the window to chase away evil spirits. Sandy had no idea what was going on. Once we got into town, I quickly pulled myself together as we were soon parking out on the street outside Vince and Claire's.

I knocked on the door.

“Come in,” someone answered.

I entered with the three duct-taped boxes in my arms. The living room was filled with my friends. Around twenty of them. I went right into my presentation.

“Tonight, I've got a magic trick,” I picked up the smaller box. The one with the shrimp packet in the Klean Kanteen. “This is *The Light*,” I set it down on the ground in front of me. Then I grabbed one of the matching boot boxes. I put it to my ear and shook it, hearing nothing. It was the afterlife box. “This is *The Dark*”. I set it down in front of me with *The Light.* Then I picked up the last box, held it to my ear, and shook it a little. I heard a few coins I'd put in banging around. “This one is *The Middle*”. I can always tell them apart. Go ahead, feel free to take a look for yourselves.”

A few people showed a little interest. Then Vince asked me to step back outside, so I did.

“You can come back inside now,” Vince shouted through the door.

Now there was just one of the larger boxes in front of me.

“Which one is this?” Vince asked me in front of everyone.

I picked it up, held it back up to my ear, and shook it again. I heard the coins rattle.



“This is *The Middle*, let's open it up,” I said as I looked for the end of the tape.

“Alright, I think we've just about got it,” I said as I reached the end of the strip of tape. I opened the box and went right for it. “Here it is, F-14. My Valentines.”

Nobody had anything to say.

“What else do I have? Jen, this one's for you,” I handed her my black tape-wrapped notebook.

“Thanks, Cobra. This sure is an interesting presentation,” she commented.

“I got one for Claire too,” I handed her my wax-sealed envelope.

“Oh, cool? Thanks,” Claire said to me as I looked over at Jen trying to open her gift.

“No! You can't open it yet! That one gets opened last. After all, hope is lost,” I exclaimed.

“What about mine?” Claire asked.

“That one gets opened before Jen's, when there still is time to do something about it,” I directed.

“Sea, what are you doing here? I just want to open it,” Jen said in

frustration.

“You just can't. I will ruin the magic,” I told her.

It was a big deal for my friend Sage that night. He's a photographer and he'd just received a bunch of copies of his newly published book in the mail. I gave him the disposable camera I used to take the crime scene photos of all the Valentines and he gave it little thought.

“Did you guys know I can read Sage's new book by simply touching it? Ask me what pages a specific word appears on. I'll tell you metaphysically,” I boasted to the room.

“Okay Cobra, let me see here,” Sage flipped through a few pages. Okay, what page does the word ‘Resource’ appear on? Sage said as he handed me his book.

“Alright, let me focus for a second,” I closed my eyes. “Sixty-seven, it's got to be page 67,” I said emphatically.



“I'm sorry Cobra, it's on page 22,” Sage said kindly, so as not to not embarrass me.

“Can I see it again? There must be something significant on page 67,” he hands me back the book. I opened it up to the page and found something to laugh at.

“What is it Cobra?” Sage asked.

“Nothing. You wouldn't get it.” I said.



I still had a lot of weird little packages left. Mostly empty promotional metal cigarette cases that I'd filled with trash and wrapped with rubber bands. So I gave those out to people sitting around the living room. They showed little interest. I had an explanation of what the whole point of them was.

“To undo what I've done, was to learn these lessons with me. But to break seals or rubber bands was to lock the secrets in my brain forever.”

As I was losing people's attention, I sat down next to Claire.

“I have a folder for the art department, is it cool if I leave that with you?” I asked her as she nodded.

“Hey, Cobra! I took apart this thing you gave me. At the center, I found a match. What do I do with it?” Someone asked.
“You light it. It's a signal,” I told him.

I had a few things for my sisters. I gave Starla a can of silver spray paint and told her to make sure all the light switch covers get a coat of it, and I gave Sandy F-14 to look after. Starla looked concerned and shared her thoughts.

“Sea, I think you're starting to weird people out. I think it's about time for us to go,” she said quietly in the kitchen.
“Atomic!” I shouted at her. “You'll know what that means later. After you remove the baseball glove.”
“Sea!” Starla vocalized her concern loudly now.



“Alright! Five minutes. Let me go out for a quick smoke,” I demanded.

Out on the patio, Jen was smoking with a few others.

“I think I'm leaving,” I said as I walked up.

“The party? Craft night?” Jen asked.

“Yeah, Starla's on my case. But I mean I’m leaving town. I need to get somewhere safe. I wonder how all that works. I think I'm about ready to open some doors,” I told them.

“Cool Sea,” Jen said. “I think after tonight people are going to say you've turned out crazier than me.”

Everybody laughed.

“But in all seriousness, I have to. The remote at my dad's house is acting strangely if you catch my drift,” I said as I tried to vaguely explain myself.

I looked down at the concrete and saw an old-fashioned key. As I put out my cigarette, I grabbed it and put it in my pocket.

“Alright, everyone. I think my work here is done. Thanks for humoring me,” I shouted as I reached for the doorknob with *The Light* and *The Dark* in my arms.

“What? What about the magic trick?” One of the women shouted back.

“Oh yeah, sorry. We're going to have to finish this another time,” and with that, I was out the door.

After the party, Starla asked Sandy if she'd drop her off at her home.

“Sea? I’ve got work in the morning and this is all too exhausting,” Starla protested in her driveway

“But this is your ‘Return to Oz’ moment. Come on, I’ve coded a message onto something. Let's go check out the garage for a second. If you can find it, I can explain,” I pleaded.

Starla realized the path of least resistance would only take a few minute so the three of us got out of the car and went inside. She made her way through the rows of boxes and bins and she found the owl I set there earlier in the afternoon.

“I've never seen this one before. What does it mean?” She asked.

“Two things. First, that you have a great eye for detail, and second,

you shouldn't have seen it because I put it there earlier today," I explained.

"Well, I can't be too upset by that, it is a cute one," Starla told me as we exited the garage.

I had one last thing for Starla out in the car.

"Here, one is the prophecy and the other is the notes. But I can't tell you which is which," I said as I gave her two of my notebooks painted together. "I don't know what good they'll do you, I'm just supposed to give them up for safekeeping."

"Thank you, Sea. Have a good rest of your night. And take care of yourself. I'll be in touch," Starla said

Sandy fired up her car and drove us up the steep driveway back to our dad's house in Alta Sierra where I was free to drink beer and smoke some weed.





(2013-2017) A general day at Napa State Hospital.



X-17 didn't have a loudspeaker system. Instead, it had a four-note xylophone to announce meals that a passerby would be asked to bang on it for a minute. This was my notice for breakfast. I'd jump out of bed, get dressed, and make a quick stop at the bathroom before the whole unit walked together to the dining room. The staff didn't care where people sat. But it was the unspoken rule of the unit to sit at whatever table that random chance had assigned you upon arriving, only getting to move when a seat became briefly available the day someone moved out.

As the slow eater's trays got called first, I'd make small talk with Franswa. He was a wild one. Tall, loud, and never without a mustache. He told me his

stories enough times for me to remember the plots and his turns of phrase. So for fun, I'd beat him to the punch. This would get him all worked up and even louder, as he tried to catch up. This would break the morning's tranquility for the people seated at nearby tables and we'd often be asked to keep it down by staff. But this usually wouldn't stop until one of us got our trey called.

Breakfast had the least variety. Something different each day, and always along the lines of healthy dry cereals, oatmeal, fruit, eggs, turkey sausages, waffles, or pancakes; that kind of stuff. But always at a level of quality where you hated yourself for making the mistake in your life that led you to now have to eat it. I didn't need this as extra motivation. I was already trying to move on.

After walking down the chow line and grabbing something edible, I'd quickly devour it and use the rest of the meal time to quietly drink my hot cup of coffee. I only needed a splash out of my small carton of milk to cool it down and I had a friend at a neighboring table that was more than happy to drink the rest.

"I just remembered that we've got Dr. Wells to deal with today," I told Franswa as I sipped my coffee.

"Yeah man, she's a smart lady, but I don't see why she's keeping me here," he exclaimed.

"It's not just her, it's all of them. They're all keeping us here. Nobody's helping to move people along. I don't know what else to do but speak up in group and keep to myself. But it's not seeming to get me anywhere," I said as I gulped the rest of my now tepid coffee. "And don't call her smart. I see how she's earned that, she just knows how to use big words," I got up and bussed my tray.

Once everyone got back to the unit, there was an hour of free time until the whole unit got moved to the treatment mall. For me it was a quick shower, a moment with my toothbrush and then back to my room

to make my bed. Then I'd lie back down on top of my covers as I hid under my nylon jacket.

"Did you get your meds yet?" Carl asked as he came into the room with an acoustic guitar in hand.

"No, I'm going to wait it out. I'll probably just lie here for the next half an hour and then get up and check," I said as I looked at the time on the second cheapest watch offered from the mail-in prison catalog.

"I just got kicked out of the big dayhall. I guess the sound of dominos hitting the hard table is less offensive than my new song. Do you mind if I work on it here? I'll keep it down as much as I can. It's all I can think about," Carl asked me as he turned on the overhead light.

"Fine, I'll put my earplugs in. Just let me know when the line gets low and you get your meds.

After the med line dwindled down and I was able to quickly achieve this simple mandated task, I went back to my room for a blissful ten minutes of solitude. By now Carl had to return the guitar and we both lay on our beds in the darkness, dreading the next obligation.

Knock! Knock! "Locking up!" A nurse yelled as she locked the door from the outside. Now once we exited, we'd be locked out till after groups.

Out of Carl's and my window, you could see everyone lining up for their badges and leaving out the courtyard gate. With fifty-five people to process, I had another ten minutes before they'd start to look for me. Which was never a pleasant way to start the day. As I walked over to the treatment mall I'd often find someone to strike up a conversation with.

“Is your new song ready for practice? I can't remember what you called it,” Polly asked me as we walked.

“Golden Seeds, I wrote up a couple chord charts last night. I think the band will be able to put it together pretty quickly. I'm hoping to do it for the Earth Day Festival,” I told her as we reached the bottleneck of people waiting to get scanned by the metal detectors.

“I'm excited to hear it. I brought some more CDs over from the music room. Stop by my office later and check them out. I haven't heard of half of the bands. Mostly nineties stuff,” Polly said as she got to skip security.

After the wave of a metal detector, I'd be directed into a very large courtyard with a track in the center and doors to different treatment centers and worksites along all sides. I'd have another ten minutes to wait by another door unless I saw a friend from a different unit and wanted to make small talk.



“You have to remember that it's a sickness. That you're sick people. Sometimes life can be too hard for you to think straight, and that's before the symptoms kick in. Once they start, you're done. You have a slim window of time to tell outpatient that you're having problems before you're too far gone,” Dr. Wells said as she casually opened up her symptom management group. “Where were we last week? Who's turn was it to explain their psychotic episode?”

“I think it was Dave's turn,” I

replied.

“Dave, where is Dave?” Dr. Wells asked in a fury. “Could someone get a nurse and have them track down Dave.”

“I think he got moved to basketball,” a woman told the group.

“Basketball? I'll have you all know that basketball isn't going to keep you safe out in the community. Basketball won't give you a clue when you're losing grasp on your frail sanity. That's why I'm here, to do the hard work. Dave can go and play all the basketball he likes, but when he's ready to finally get out of here, he's still got to put in the work and develop his insight,” Dr. Wells told the group of mostly low-functioning schizophrenics.

After this fifty-minute verbal beat down, there was a ten-minute passing period before the next session started. Dr. Wells' groups were known to take extra effort, and the Mall Coordinators like to strike a balance between education, exercise, activities, and potential employment. With a minimum of two groups, five days a week, there was lots of opportunity for an hour in the computer lab or the weight room. Often, when there would be no suitable group, you'd be left to walk the track for an hour.

Austin loved two things. Analytic philosophy and technical death metal. He was always happy to talk about either. He kept a short haircut and wore glasses. He was good to talk to.

“Hey, Sea. Are you walking fast today?” Austin asked as he caught up.

“I don't have to,” I said as I pulled out my earbuds. “I was just listening to a song I recorded last week.”

“What's this one about?” He asked as he pulled out his earbuds too.

“You know when I wrote it, I thought it was just gibberish. Like a bunch of random ideas and phrases. But now I think I've tapped into a

darker vein of my subconscious. I think it's about my ex-girlfriend Roxy."

"That's cool. I mean dark songs are always better than happy ones. But this is coming from a guy that only listens to the darkest stuff he can find," Austin said with a chuckle. "What's it called?"

"Golden Seeds." I told him.

"That doesn't sound too metal," he responded.

"I just want to feed her, feed her in a cage, feed her golden seeds," I said.

"Is that one of the lines?" He asked.

"Yeah, I think it means, I would have only been good to her if she would have given in to me completely. But I don't know, I could be reading into nothing," I told him

After the second group period, people would stand around by the gate for another ten minutes until they started letting people with grounds cards and the escorted groups back to their units. We'd all be waived by a metal detector again and then be free to mill about the unit.

"I'm not going to go to lunch today. It's starting to add up. I lost two pounds last month," I told Carl as he walked into our room.

"What are you going to do for coffee?" He asked.

"I've still got some from the last store run. I've been cutting back so it will last longer," I explained my freeze-dried coffee plan.

"I can never make it past a week," he reminded me.

"I know, that's why I don't mention it. My system only works when you keep it to yourself. But it makes it easier when the nurses only let you get out one shot at a time."

"Well you better get on it then, they've got the canteen room open right now and if you don't hurry you're going to miss your chance," Carl replied.

I'd add two inches of water to my shot of coffee, then bring it back to my room to hide it in my locker for later. As I drifted to sleep, I'd hear the xylophone announce lunch. Then I'd sleep for the forty-five minutes it took to complete the meal. Once I heard the commotion of the unit returning, I'd climb out from beneath my jacket and wait for the last nurse to walk back down the hallway from lunch.

“Let me guess. You want the guitar,” she asked.

“You don't have to guess. I would have told you,” I said as she got out her keys to open up the activity closet.

Carl was good at giving me space after lunch. He had other hobbies. I'd take the unit's acoustic guitar back to my room and I'd sit with it on my bed while I'd try to write something new. An artist muscle I flexed often. Regardless of my inspiration or mood, I'd give it an hour. Always needing something new to record on Thursdays when it was my afternoon to use the new eight-track digital recorder. Once I was done, I'd take the guitar to the nurse's station to get put away so I could be on time for my next group.





(2007) Mom came home for the holidays.

“I hate you,” Starla woke me up in a quiet voice as she sat on the edge of my bed. Once awake I quickly noticed the source of the conflict.

“What's their problem?” I asked as I wished I was still asleep.

“What's their problem?!! Your father is being a jerk and your mother is trying to stand up for herself, but she was too sick and too confused. You know, I'd be surprised if either of them actually knew what they were fighting over,” she explained with intensity.

“So you want me to break it up for you,” I asked.

“No Sea, there's plenty of things I want. I can just as easily get up and put an end to this myself. I just wanted you to hear the chaos that exists in the absence of caring adults. What I really want is a little help in not letting this whole family fall apart. I'm sick of doing it all on my own, and as you can see it's not really holding.”

It was easy to tell that her vegan, raw food diet was doing something because when she came back home for Christmas, she was as thin as a rail. But the tumor was still growing. Now her eyes were bulging out of her skull and the rest of her face was starting to deform around it. Just looking at her turned my stomach, but we all had to be positive. We all had to keep the faith that God would soon heal her.

All of the years of fighting and dysfunction had added up. My parents proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that they were ill-suited for their marriage and my mom finally wanted out. But getting around to this would be her fantasy. . . Once God healed her she'd say. But in the meantime, we all struggled to keep things financially afloat. It would have helped if I got a job. But my art was starting to take off and my sideburns were getting too long for a traditional employer. I just coped by ignoring the majority of my daily problems and put dinner on my credit card.

After a week of having her home, Starla asked me to take mom back to Redding once the New Years' festivities had wrapped up and to spend a few days with her.

“Are you hungry? We have more carrot juice in the cooler,” I asked mom as I drove.

“Carrot juice, yuck! How about a hamburger?” She said with a noticeable bit of joy.

“Mom, come on. We can't,” I said cold-heartedly.

“I don't know, Sea. You could get one and I could have a couple of your fries. They're just potatoes, Sea,” She suggested with unashamed optimism. “Come on, I've got to eat something real.”

We returned to the familiar quiet of a road trip for a few miles, till panic struck her face and she had to sneeze.

“Ah, ah, achoo!!!!”

When I averted my eyes from the road, I looked over to see her hands bloodied, as she picked chunks of tumor from her nose.

“What do I do?!!” She said gruesomely.

I reached into the glove box and pulled out a stack of old fast food napkins from certainly a better time. Probably a night when I had Drew, Cole, and Francis in the car after closing down The National. They loved those tacos. But now I weighed the decision to pull over to help or speed up and find some kind of medical assistance.

“Mom! All I'm asking is that you stop picking at it,” I begged as I tried to do both.

“I think the blood is letting up, I think it's ending,” she told me.

I pulled over at the next gas station and lowered the passenger's seat, as I watched her try to stop the bleeding by pinching her tumor-stuffed nose. Once the new napkins I gave her started to come back clean, I loaded up a grocery bag of the bloodied napkins and found a trash can.

“Okay mom, I guess we’ll just keep driving and tell your laser woman about what happened,” I said as I started up the car and put it into gear.

“Sea?” My mom asked me in the saddest voice ever. “Can we get some french fries?”

By mid-February, she could no longer take care of herself and we had no choice but to bring her back home for good. The whole family would often talk about bringing her back to finish her treatment as soon as she felt a little better. She'd be comforted by this. I just wished we could have all been honest with what we were facing; that we were going to lose her. I would have liked to have had that kind of closure in our conversations.



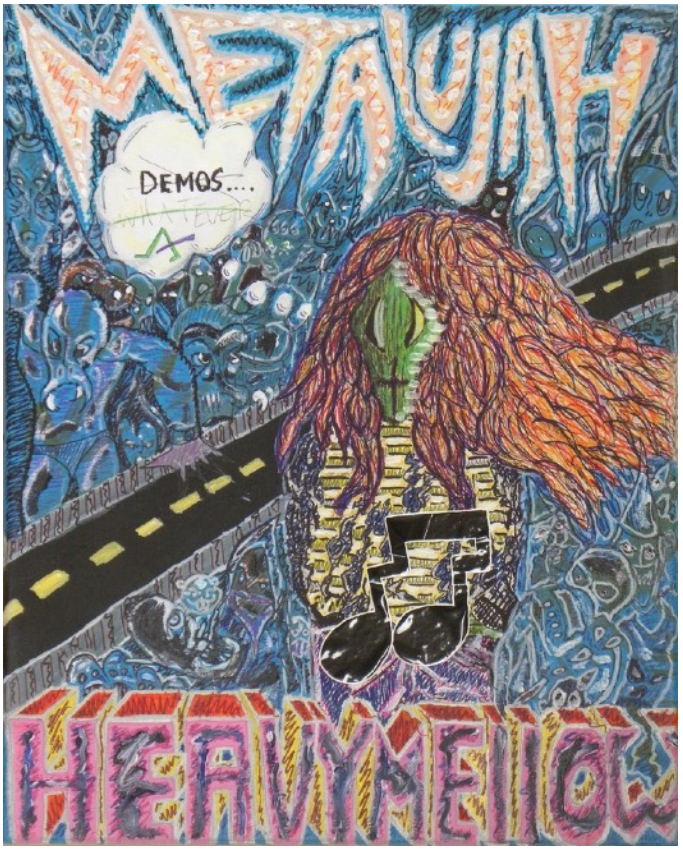
(2011) February. A day around the house.

“Who are those guys?” I asked Sandy aggressively as I looked out the kitchen window.

“Sea, I don't know. They look like work guys from the power company or something,” she answered me tiredly.

“They shouldn't be there. I'm going to go talk to them.”

“No, they're fine! They're just workers. Sea, I don't want you leaving the house today. I've got to get to work, so while I'm gone just stay inside,” she told me sternly.



Now I was really lost. I'd given out my packages and didn't know what came next. I dug deep in storage and found an old box of burnt CDs I brought back from the ranch with Roxy. I went through them for a bit. I didn't recall why or when, but Roxy had given me a pair of heavy-duty goggles that I must have added to the box. I set those aside on the kitchen table and thought I should ask her about them.



“Hey,” she said softly as she answered the phone.

“Is this a good time?” I asked.

“As good as any. How are you? I'm worried.” she told me.

“Why? Who have you been talking to?” I questioned.

“Nobody, I just don't know what's going on. I've only talked to Jon and that was a couple days ago. Why? What's been happening since you've been back?” She questioned me.

“I don't know, it was kind of a whole big thing over at Vince and Claire's. I dropped off a bunch of my new art for people, it was kind of weird. Kind of a performance art piece,” I explained.

“Oh, well that doesn't sound that bad. You can get away with something like that.”

“Hey, listen since you won't be back for the holiday and because I'm going to be the big Valentine guy around town. I need to tell you about a problem I'm having.” I confessed.

“What problem?” She asked.

“The problem with your gift. I found a place online that sells organic flowers in your area, and I put in an order but they're not going to be able to fill the order in time for the holiday. I'm sorry. I wish I would have found them sooner so I didn't miss it. I just didn't want you to think I forgot about you,” I told her in complete sincerity, but completely untruly.

“Oh, Sea! You're so good to me. I can wait to get them! I hope they get here before I leave. It will brighten up the place for my mother and spread your good vibes all throughout the house,” she said with a

chuckle in her voice that reminded me of when we first met.

“I'm glad you're not upset. Just know I did my best,” I told her.

The next morning I just got stoned on the deck as I mentally prepared for another day. An old Volkswagen beetle drove through the neighborhood. I was suspicious. I quickly performed an intuitive magic spell with a paperclip and a detached power outlet to keep me safe. I needed to be on my way to meet Eli, and there were obvious dangers around.

I paid for my coffee with a two-dollar bill I found in the bottom of Roxy's old purse, then I sat at one of the tables as I waited for Eli. He walked in with authority shortly after. He wasn't thirsty.

“What's the plan? I want to hear from you. What's going on?” He asked me right off the bat.

“Come with me. I'll drive,” I told him.

I talked fast as I drove to my sister's house in Nevada City. Eli sat quietly and listened. Once I parked in my sister's empty driveway, I handed him his package. My old Darth Vader action figure I drew all over and wrapped up in canvas. He knew how much I loved this toy. He knew I kept it in my guitar case. He just stared at it as I got out of the car and called to him.

“Come on Eli, it's your Return to Oz moment!” I said with excitement.

“Wait? Is anyone home? Are we supposed to be here? He asked with reasonable concern.

“It's my sister's house, it's fine. There's something I want to show you in the garage,” I replied as we walked to the unlocked door. “Come on! I told you it's fine.”

“Okay, but let's be quick about it,” he said shyly. “What did you want to show me?”

“This is your chance. Pick something from this room, I'll explain it.”

Eli took more time than I expected walking around the room and finally settling on the boombox I'd set up the last summer.

“Cool! Now we have to go,” I told him as I opened the door to the daylight.

I drove back calmly. We talked casually. Once I parked back at the roasters, Eli asked for my explanation of the Boombox. I noticed a cassette tape adapter on the floor, the kind that has a long cord to plug into an MP3 or CD player. I grabbed it and threw it over both of our legs.

“We're connected. What I know, now you can know too,” I told him.

Eli smiled and got out of the car.

“What's next?” He asked.

“I think it's time for me to go. I can't say here. It's not safe for me here anymore,” I vaguely explained.

“Take care of yourself. You'll be fine, I know it.” Eli told me.

As I made my way back through Grass Valley, due to habit I checked my rearview mirror right behind me. There they were. A cartoon man and a cartoon woman waving to me from their white old cartoon VW beetle. I wasn't concerned, just kind of surprised by them. They looked friendly enough. It would take me years to remember them

from a toy Roxy's showed me at a novelty store, out on the coast in Mendocino. But at this moment, I just kept to my destination as I glanced back at them. After a few blocks they were gone, and quickly forgotten about.



“Oh man, what happened? What did you do?” My dad yelled at me in his driveway with a coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

“Yeah, sorry. I hit a trash can. It wasn't really my fault. It was halfway in the street as I rounded a turn,” which was a lie. I'd hit it on purpose, and for no real reason.

“Sea! You've got to be more careful if you're going to be borrowing my car. Look! The headlight is busted, so is the passenger's mirror! Sea!” He yelled as he lost his cool.

“I know, but it's like I told you. It was in the street. I could have been killed!” I continued to fabricate the situation. In truth, I'd been busy blowing my mom's school safety whistle to keep evil spirits away on the ride home. Except when I stopped at the market for smokes, I saw a creepy guy that I knew was working for the Psy-Op's team. He was driving a new red VW Beetle. I found this to be very concerning.

“Damn it, Sea!” Dad took a long drag of his smoke. “Roxy's been calling for you. I told her I'd have you call when you got in.”

“Ugh. I'm not really in the mood for her right now. I'm kind of rattled by it all,” I said as I watched a car drive through the neighborhood, taking a hit of the leftover ash in my weed pipe. “Is there any coffee left?”

From inside the kitchen, the house phone rang.

“That's probably her again, I'll get it for you,” my dad told me as he answered it. “Hey Roxy, yeah, he just got here. I'm walking him over the phone right now. Sea, here.”

“Hello?” I said generically, but knowing it was her.

“Hey, listen. I was just calling to see if you found that thing? You know, that thing I was looking for.” She asked confusingly. My first thought was the Wikileaks password I'd been protecting. Was she asking me for it?

“No sorry. I can't help you,” I told her coldly.

“Can't help me? Sea, I need it for my trip. It's in that leather bag you took from Jon's. I asked him to look for it and he said it was gone. You have my bag right?” She asked again.

“You're a liar! I know about you! Roxy's dead, and you're her clone!” I growled aggressively to end the call.

After I put the phone back on the receiver and fixed myself a cup of coffee.

“What was that all about?” My dad asked.

“I don't know, probably nothing. Wrong number,” I told him.

“How could it have been the wrong number? I talked to her,” he argued.

“Did she sound the same to you? I thought she sounded different. One of their tricks. I haven't begun to figure it all out yet, just parts. So let's just drop it, okay?” I said dismissively.

“Fine,” he sat down. “Now what? What's your grand plan to get out of this mess? And when are you going to have more than two nickels to your name and be able to fix my car?”

“Soon I guess,” I said through the open door to the kitchen as I added some milk to my coffee. “It will all come together. Like Samson in the Bible.”

“Samson? What does he have to do with anything?” He asked as he took a sip of his coffee.

“I don't know, I was just thinking about him earlier. He was able to hold it all up. To keep it together until the time was right to let go and have the whole thing fall around him,” I said as I lit up a cigarette. “I've got respect for a guy like that. A real world strong man.”

“Sea, you're being weird. What does that even mean?” My Dad said as he put out his cigarette.

“I don't know but we both have long hair. We are both strong and we're both doing our best. That's all I'm saying,” I crouched down as I took another drag. “Maybe that's why I was thinking about him”.

My dad's office phone rang and he went to answer it. I got up and moved to one of the corners of the deck and hung my head in my hands. For a moment I tried to erase the reality of my phone call with Roxy. But I couldn't, she was dead and I would soon be next.

That's when I heard it again, my voice from the future.

“They're coming to get you now!”

With the added weight of this warning, I freaked out.





(2013-2017) A general day at Napa State Hospital continued.

“Alright you guys! Let's use our musicianship and try to listen to each other. Sea brought us a new song, let's give him our attention!” Polly yelled over the roar of the drums and instruments.

“Here, I've got chord charts for everyone. I'm just going to play it once through. Feel free to jump in if you think you see where it's going. It's not too complicated, you'll see,” I told the small group as I went into my new song ‘Golden Seeds’.



After the music group, I'd be free till dinner. Now that cup of coffee I had tucked away in my locker would be the perfect addition to my MP3 player as I sat on the swing bench in the courtyard and watched the hummingbirds.

“I like this new Arcade Fire song, but I just want to hear the bridge. It's just too hard to hold down the little arrow button to find it. I'll just enjoy the anticipation of it I guess,” I thought to myself as I took a sip of coffee.

“I should try my dad before it's too late. I haven't talked to him in a few days,” I continued to think as the bright blue iridescent bird showed up to drink from the unit's feeder.

“I wonder when I'm going to get some movement on my treatment? I haven't heard any news about my progress in months. I'm tired of just treading water around here,” I took another sip as a red-headed hummingbird showed up to the feeder and chased off the blue one.

I heard the noise of the gate opening. Polly was returning to the unit after the music group.

“I thought it went great for a start! Everybody really got into ‘Golden Seeds’,” Polly told me as she sat down on the other side of the swinging bench.

“Yeah, that will easily come together in time for the Earth Day Festival,” I replied as I removed my earbuds.

“You're still going to do the medication song? I keep forgetting the name of it. People really get into that one.”

“Oh, you mean the ‘Thorazine Shuffle Up and Deal’? Yeah, I'll play that one too. There's always a couple of people who ask for it.”

“It looks like it's about time to refill the hummingbird feeder. They really go through it,” she said.



“Yeah, they're worth it. They keep good company,” I told her as I took another drink of my coffee.

“Everything alright?” She asked.

“I guess, things seem fine enough. I've got the band. I've been making tons of recordings. I'm symptom-free and clear-headed. I make plenty of money helping out with the music groups. It's just I miss the life I thought I was

going to have, with Roxy. Even though it was stressful as all hell and driving me crazy. I just don't understand these struggles in my life. I mean I'm just here, waiting on an endless series of paperwork to go through. It's hard to be proactive when there's nothing to do about it," I admitted to Polly.

"Listen. I've been working here a while and my advice is simple. Just keep at it. You'll get there. You'll get out of here. One of these days you'll be playing 'Golden Seeds' somewhere out in the community and you'll look back on the time you wrote it as a faint dream. You'll hardly believe it's true and you lived it," Polly told me with a big smile on her face. "Did you want to check out those CDs? It's no rush, they'll just be sitting in my office."

"Sure. I could use something new to listen to," I told her as I got up from the bench, took one last big gulp of coffee and tossed the remains of my ice onto the grass beneath the hummingbird feeder.

"Beef Stroganoff again? I don't know how they can expect us to eat this crap!" Franswa yelled as he saw one of the slow eaters walk by with their meal.

"Yeah, I'm just as happy about it as you. Are you coming to the meeting tonight?" I asked Franswa to change the subject.

"I don't know man, I've been going to twelve-step meetings for years, but they never let me go so I'm over it," he shouted from three feet away.

"Well, yeah. It's not some path to get you out of here quicker. We all go because we had drug problems out in the community and they don't just go away because we're in here. It's our own self-regulated treatment. I mean, what else do you have going on that's so important?" I asked.

"Franswa! Franswa!" A nurse called his tray.

“I'll think about it,” he said as he got up to be served.

After dinner I would often attend a twelve-step meeting. I had volunteered to be the secretary of our large AA meeting. It wasn’t surprising that most of the unit had substance issues, because most of the hospital did too. I found it was easy to support people who used their free time to support others. I no longer the shamed of my Marijuana and alcohol problems and came to the understanding that sobriety was the best thing for me moving forward. It was one of the few factors in my life I had seeming control over.

My nightly meds were my last obligation. I used the time before the line shortened in one of three ways, I either watched sitcom reruns in the dayroom, mostly ‘The Big Bang Theory’ and 'Modern Family’. or I'd write up different sections of the story of my psychotic episode, or lie under my jacket on my bed. I’d have to fight my nature of being a body at rest to get up and wait in another line to ask the treatment nurse for some dental floss, then go to the bathroom and use it, then wait back in that same line so the nurse could watch me throw it away, to the sum total of twenty minutes. By now the medication line would be acceptably low and I'd wait my turn.

“Any big plans for the evening Mr. Stoltzner?” A nurse asked.

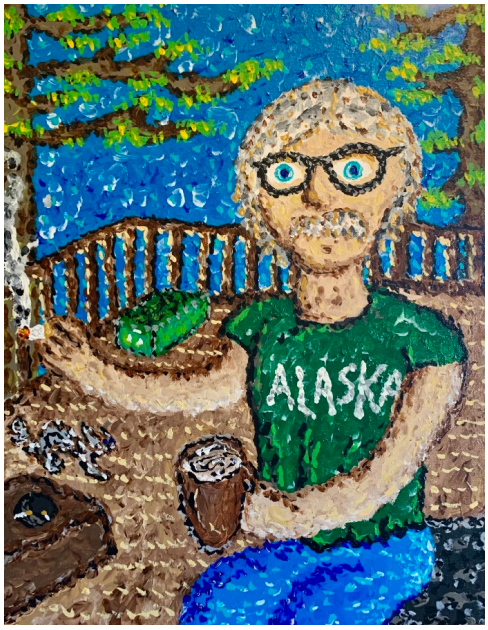
“Maybe, I was going to try calling my dad. But it might be too late for him by the time a phone free’s,” I told her.

“Here you go. I wish everyone's meds were as easy as yours.”

“Thank you,” I always remembered to say.

After meds, most of the unit went to sleep right away. This would be the best time to get on the payphone. As you can imagine with a unit of fifty-five people and only two payphones, it can get tricky to check in with the people that care about you. I'd call the house collect, let it

ring twice, and then see if anyone wanted to call back.



“Sea, how's my boy doing?” Dad asked once I picked up the ringing receiver after waiting a minute.

“I'm okay, just winding down after another busy day,” I said.

“Yeah, you always say that, but I can never remember what that means,” he wondered obliviously.

“I just had some groups. I just ran the routine. They keep us going from one thing to the next,” I explained.

“You know Sea, it sounds like you've got it better in there than we've got it out here. You wouldn't believe the amount of energy it takes to keep our lives running. Besides Sandy fixing me a sandwich earlier, I don't think I really ate anything today.”

“Dad, you need to eat,” I said.

“I know. I just open the fridge and nothing jumps out, so I have a bowl of cereal,” he explained as I switched hands on the dirty payphone.

“How's Cowboy?” I asked.

“The cat? I saw him earlier, he's fine. He's getting thin from eating lizards,” he replied.

“Okay. I don't have much to tell you tonight, I just wanted to check-in.”

“That's fine, we're all okay here. We've still got that room for you when you get all better. So keep at it and we’ll talk to you soon,” he said to conclude our call.

I immediately headed to the bathroom to wash my hands after using the public phone. I was used to washing them often. I was also in

the habit of using the lower left side of my button-up khaki shirts to open every door. After years on the unit, I started to see that the added friction wore them unevenly and left it comically threadbare.

I rarely found amusement in any of the nightly television dramas, but would have to bug my friend Will who needed them as a distraction.

Will was a deep introvert. The fifty-three other patients and the staff were often too much for him. I only saw him late at night when things had calmed down or late in the afternoon hiding out in the corner of the courtyard. We were both bothered by the same stuff. It gave us plenty to talk about.

"I saw you on the phone, is there anything interesting going on in the world?" Will asked as I walked into the dayhall.

"If there is, my dad would be the last to know about it," I said as I sat down next to him. "What's going on in here tonight?"

"Don't give me that, you know exactly what's going on. I'm watching 'Bones' and looking through this quilting catalog."

"Nice, it will probably give you some good ideas for when you make my quilt out of old Thin Lizzy T-shirts," I told him jokingly.

"Yeah! I'll get right on that," Will said with a laugh.



"How's the book coming?" I inquired into our project.

"It's getting good. I just read the part where you called Roxy a "B!+$#". But I can't really put that in there you know. I mean it's obvious that you're the real piece of work in this situation," he said gleefully.

"Let's keep it in. I think it's

an important detail to explore. Like one day she's the love of my life and the next I'm comfortable calling her that? Geez. Things were failing apart from all sides. And I see no reason to hide it." I explained.

"Ok, as long as you're fine being a," Will paused. "Let's say layered character."

"I guess I'll have to be. I really appreciate you typing this up for me. I'm not great with computers," I told him.

"No problem, I need things to keep me occupied. There are only so many episodes of 'Bones' to watch."

We sat in the glow of the old T.V. until the next commercial.

"Well, I'm burnt," I said.

"Are you calling it so soon?" Will replied.

"Yeah, maybe. I think I'll go lay down until I'm tired enough to go to bed," I explained.

"Your system baffles me. If you're tired, then just go to bed!" He argued.

"But I'm not that tired yet. I protested.

"Then hang out," he suggested.

"No, I'm way too tired for that." I said.

"Alright, then. Whatever. You're the least weird person here, but don't forget that you're still a weird-o," he reminded me.

Once I made the effort to brush my teeth and climb under the covers, I engaged my new mantra as I drifted off to sleep. I wanted to do everything I could to know I'd be safe when I returned to the community and I only wanted to use positive words. Here's what I came up with.

"I want everyone around me to remain safe. I want to remain safe too."

I'd cycle this through my mind as I tried to engage in some real sleep. Sometimes quickly, but more often taking up to an hour. As my mind would drift, I'd do my best to catch it and return to the mantra before I finally achieved slumber.

“I want everyone around me to remain safe. I want to remain safe too.”

I was putting in the work before me, but there never seemed to be any large resolution in the process groups I went to. I wanted one of those magical moments that you see in movies where all the therapy comes together and fixes a person. But that wasn’t happening to anyone.

The topic of remorse came up often. I wanted to feel some sort of relief from all the pain I caused, but I didn’t know how that worked. I just felt trapped in the walls of the facility, the halls of justice and in the emotional caverns of my mind. I was completely boxed in from all sides. But all I knew to do was keep showing up to my many groups and to keep trying.









(2008) Mom returns to her real home.

We reached an impasse. Tommy wouldn't make time to work on the album and I wouldn't stop bugging him about it, which didn't make him want to be around me. I was handling the stress poorly. I finished my last piece of album art, a black and white land cut out of Gwen. I knew it was right to end things, but I got hung up on this decision for a while. Now as my life was in seeming disarray, I didn’t know what muse to follow.



“Cobra, listen,” Vince told me as we stood in my small art studio looking at my new Gwen inspired painting. “ I've been thinking, most artists need to grow into their shoes, like kids. They always need a few sizes bigger. Artists need to keep getting bigger opportunities based on their prior successes. It helps people learn and grow”.

“Yeah, I guess that's true.” I agreed.

“But with you, I think we should skip it altogether, I think you're ready now. I've got a respectable show coming up in the city in six months. It's a big gallery and I don't think I'll be able to fill it all in time. I was hoping we could do it together,” Vince offered.

“Oh, okay.” I told him.

“Yeah, you don’t get it, do you? Ask Jen, she'll set you straight.” Vince suggested.

“Oh my God! My little Sea's going to be an art star!” Jen told me with her jaw dropped open. “You son of a gun.”

“So it's that big a deal?” I asked.

“Showing with Vince in San Francisco? For a nobody like you? Yeah, it's a big deal. I guess pretty soon I'll have to bow when you walk in the room,” Jen goaded.

“I'm thinking of doing a big painting of the city, but completely dotted this time,” I said as I thought aloud.

“Well, you've got to do something new. If you buckle down you'll have plenty of time.” She encouraged.

I went out and charged everything I needed for the show. A six by four foot canvas for a city skyline and four small canvases to do a quick series of dogs playing internet poker. I got to work right away and for about a week had a nice new spring in my step. One night as I was working I got a knock on the door.

“Hey Vince, come in check it out! I've got a pretty good start on the big one for the show. It should come together soon enough,” I said.

“Cool Sea, it looks great,” Vince turned away from the painting and looked me in the eyes. “They told me no. The gallery won't show you. They told me they have criteria for the artists they show and you didn't come near in meeting them. I almost backed out myself in protest, but that doesn't do anybody any good,” he let me down somberly.



“Oh okay,” I told him.

“But keep painting, I'll find you something,” he quickly tried to change the subject. “How's your mom doing?”

It was hard to tell a difference from week to week, but from month to month it was noticeable. She was dying. But the ‘when’ part was turning out to be a constant guessing game. How deformed can a mothers face get before it's unfamiliar? What will it feel like when it finally happens? Will she be awake waiting for me? These were the thoughts that would trouble me on my twenty-minute drive home from St. Joe's at four in the morning.

“Sea, I'm so glad you’re home!” She said from the couch as I walked in the front door. “I heard a noise, but I couldn't tell where it was coming from.”

“Mom, I think you're fine. It was probably one of those new cats running around,” I said as I hung up my keys.

“You think so?” She asked with a look of horror on her face”.

“Yeah, it's just nighttime and nighttime can be scary,” I explained to her as I emptied my pockets on the counter.

“Can I tell you my dream?” My mom asked with a noticeable joy in her voice. “You've got to hear it tonight. They played me more of the story, it's really getting good.”

“Is this the King Cat dream?” I said, wanting a cigarette.

“Yes, Sea! You remembered, the King Cat dream!” She told me with much excitement.

“Alright. Do you want to sit at the table?” I asked.

“Sea, you wouldn't believe the bunkers. King Cat built rows of them so the government couldn't find us, but we were so hungry and we had nothing to eat. So King Cat and his cat subjects would hunt us mice. They would just bop them on the head and feed them to us. They were so good Sea, I mean we were so hungry,” mom told me as she held her left eye with her right hand.

“Gross mom,” I told her as I thought about my upcoming cigarette.

“And Nicholas Cage was there. Oh, Sea, he was so smart! He took care of everything for King Cat and so did a West Point grad and one of Starla's roommates,” she explained.

“Oh,” I commented.

“Sea! I think the dream means we're going to be okay. That it's all going to work out!” She told me emphatically. “What do you think about the dream? What do you think about King Cat?”

“Well I hope you're right. And you should know, you're the closest to God,” I said as I stood up from my chair. “Are you getting tired? Do you need to lie down? I am. Maybe we could both use some sleep”.



I remember hearing that the tumor had broken through into her brain. I just can't remember from who, but there was definitely so much deformity in her face, this wasn't surprising. Now she was angry. The tumor was apparently affecting a part of her brain that regulated aggression, turning her from a loving mother to a ferocious ninety-pound monster.

“Where's your father? I can't stand him! He was supposed to bring me my juice ten minutes ago. How am I supposed to get better if he can't be bothered to bring me my juice?!” She screamed.

“It's okay mom, I'll grab your juice,” I told her.

“He's probably out in his shed smoking! What a loser! I can't believe I'm still married to him. When I get better, he's out on his ass,” she gestured to the opposite side of the room that I was in.

“Mom, I'll get you your juice,” I handed her the plastic cup. “Are you in pain? When was your last pill?” I asked, forgetting that she'd have no clue.

“Pain! Of course I'm in pain! What, are you as stupid as your father? What, you need new glasses but are too broke to get some? Shut up, Sea! Yes, I'm in pain!” She screamed some more.

“Okay, let me find out what I can give you. Just sit here for a second,” I told her as I quickly found the best exit from the living room.

“You're all horrible ungrateful brats. I swear they're going to find me covered in blood playing with your murdered bodies,” she yelled with enjoyment.

As the weeks progressed, the pain pills weren't enough and it would take two people to hold her down and another to squeeze an eyedropper of liquid morphine into her mouth. All while she fought as hard as she could to stop us.

At night, she would often wander the house blindly. On a couple of occasions, we'd be awoken to screams from her falling or knocking

stuff over. One night I woke up on the couch to her sitting on the other end by my feet, patting them.

“Mom, what are you doing?” I asked half asleep.

“Don't worry Sea, I'm just blessing them for the road ahead,” she gently whispered.

She was starting to fall more. She was collecting a bunch of bruises. One of the Hospice nurses told us that she still had a strong heart. That as sick as she was, she was still too healthy to say goodbye. But whenever I looked at her, I couldn't believe that she'd make it another day.

Her church friends were all losing hope and turning on each other. One of them came by and told my mom to renounce her pastor's false teachings and that this was the only way for her to get healing. This pastor was calling my dad often, asking for the chance to try to raise her from the dead once she passed. It was beyond chaos. Just dealing with mom and the rest of the family was hard enough and trying to accommodate all of her friends and supporters was too much of an added burden, although we tried.

One morning, I sat with mom on the deck as she dug into a dry flower box with a flat piece of a stick. We had a nice conversation as we sat in the sunshine.

“So I'm going soon, aren't I?” She asked with the sincerity of a child.

“Yeah,” I said as I watched her dig. “We've done everything we can.”

“Do you think I'll like it in heaven?” She asked as she looked up at me.

“Like it? Who wouldn't? You'll be much happier there for sure,” I told her as I looked past the tumor obscuring her eyes and made a real connection.

“But I'll miss all of you. I can't remember who else is up there,” she wondered.

“I'm sure you'll be surrounded by good people. People that love you,” I told her.

“Like my Aunt Alice?” She questioned.

“For sure mom. You know she'll be the first to greet you,” I said with excitement for her.

“And my dad?” She wondered.

“Yeah, I bet he's there too.” I replied.

“And Gary! Do we get to play music again?” She asked with growing excitement.

“Yeah, of course. Everybody knows they've got the best music in heaven. They'll be getting the better end of the deal by having you two play.” I added.

“Okay Sea, thank you! I'm not afraid now,” she said as she continued to break up the small patch of earth. “Now what do I do? I think I've had enough sun.”

“Do you want to go back inside?” I asked.

“Okay, let's go!” She exclaimed as she stuck the stick into the dry dirt.

Later that night, she fell for the last time. She was in even more pain and needed more sedation. She quickly fell into a coma. Every day felt like the instant before hitting a brick wall. Was this the day? How will it feel? We all navigated the house as softly as possible.

After about a week in the coma, it started. The death rattle. Her lungs were filling with fluid, an obvious sign to Hospice that she didn't have much more time. After getting this explanation, I mustered up the

courage to do what I should have been doing all along. I grabbed her harp and carried it into her room, sat down, and played for half an hour.

One of the reasons she got the harp was to learn to play for sick and dying people. So this was my gift to her. I only knew the basics, but I was able to put together something pleasing. As I played, I could hear her moan, like she was trying to reach out to me. Once the experience had seemed to peak, I went over, kissed her forehead, and made my promise to her.



“Don't worry about the girls, I'll look after them,” I told her as I fought back tears. “Mom, I love you. It's alright to go. You've got people waiting.”

I spent the rest of the evening babysitting people at the bar. I couldn't drink myself. I couldn't break the sober reality I'd been living under the whole time she'd been sick. I also couldn't talk about what was happening at home. I just sat on the patio smoking cigarettes, trying to keep a light mood as I ignored the fact that I'd soon be back home hitting that brick wall I'd feared.

A local musician was back from tour and joined the table. As he made his rounds, his attention turned to me. I did my best to hide my pain.

“Cobra, how's that album you and Tommy have been working on? I can't wait to hear it,” he said.

“I don't know, I've had a lot going on. We're hoping to get it done this summer,” I told him.

“What? It's still not done? I thought you'd be releasing it by now? What’s been the hold-up?” He asked dumbfounded.

“I don't know. I don't really want to talk about it,” I admitted as I slunk down in my chair and put out my cigarette.

After I dropped off whoever needed a ride, Tommy and I ended up over at St. Joe's and thought about making some aggressive noise in our basement practice space. As we walked down the long hall at two in the morning, I got a call from Starla.

“She's passed. Are you going to be home soon?”

Everyone was waiting for my hug when I got back home, but then quickly went to bed. Now in the stillness of the other side of that brick wall, I sat on the deck, smoked a cigarette, and wondered how I was really feeling about it all. I may have been numbed by the experience, but what I felt was the joy that she was gone and no longer in pain.

The next morning, before she was taken away. I took a long look at her lying lifelessly in her bed. Now it was clear, my mother was gone. And quickly that joy of her being released from her pain became more complex when I looked around and saw the mess that the family had become.

Later as I smoked on the deck, I saw the stick she stuck into the dry dirt of the planter box. The moment she realized that heaven was going to be a wonderful place. I reached down and pulled it out of the parched soil, as if I were trying to release some sort of that freedom in myself. But she was gone and all I felt was empty.





(2011) February 10th, The Alta Sierra airport.

“They're coming to get you now!” My voice from the future told me.

From inside the kitchen, the house phone rang again. In the time it took for me to get up off the corner of the deck, my dad was next to me with the receiver.

“Yeah,” I said quietly.

“What was that? I knew I should have listened to Jon when he told me you've lost it, but I guess I was holding out too much hope. Sea, I love you! What's going on?” Roxy pleaded with me.

“It's too late for these games. I can see what's going on now. The real Roxy is dead! You guys killed Her. And your job is to keep me calm until they arrive. Don't bother! I'm on to you!” I barked softly and hung up the phone again.

I was back in the kitchen. On the table were those dark goggles Roxy gave me out at the ranch. So I put them on. I walked back out onto the deck and looked around under the new darkened perspective but it was finally happening! They were coming to get me. So I grabbed

my grandfather's hammer I had lying around and started smashing things on the deck.

"What the hell, Sea?! Put that down!" My dad yelled.



I dropped the hammer and walked over to his green SUV in the driveway. The one I'd just hit the trash can in. I opened the passenger door and started bending CDs in half until they shattered all over the place. After a few minutes of doing this, while my dad was still yelling at me, I opened the hatchback and grabbed a bamboo pole we used to prop it open. Now armed with another weapon, I walked over to the front door and smashed the living room window.

"Sea, you're out of line! You need to calm down! What's wrong with you?" He pleaded.

"I'm not safe here. I'm going for a walk," I told him with little emotion.

"Good. Go and cool down," he said. "We'll deal with all this when you get back and can start acting normally."



As I started down the hill from my dad's property, I became present in whatever distraction this walk would become. In a way, I was seeing the neighborhood from a new perspective.

One where I'd soon be dead. The dangers had been closing in for weeks. I knew my guardian angel was near, and to me, he'd be represented as a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle. So I kept an eye open for him.

As I rounded the corner, it didn't take long before I was in front of the neighbor's house that lived behind us. The one with the strange lights. I'd never met him. He was tall with a thick head of white hair and he was working on a car in his garage, so I addressed him. This felt like a normal thing to do and I was calm about it at first.

“Hello!” I said loudly with a wave. “I'm your neighbor, from the house right behind you.”

“Well hello back!” He said as he walked towards me. “I heard a ruckus up there a bit ago, that must have been you? Man! Those sure are some wild sunglasses!”

“These? I just found them. They’re from my girlfriend. I like your glasses too. I'm really into the utilitarianism of a good pair of glasses,” I explained.

“These old things?” He said as he took them off and held them up to the light. That's when I saw a perfectly illuminated fingerprint on the lens. “They're nothing special.” He told me.

Now due to seeing the fingerprint, my tone and beliefs about this man completely changed from a harmless neighbor to a part of the plot against me.

“You know, when I was a kid there was a pond here. We used to catch polliwogs and raise them into frogs on our deck. But since you moved in, I don't see the frogs on the trees anymore,” I started to get really intense.

“What?” He asked as he realized my tone was changing.

“You've killed all the frogs! And I know about you! I've seen your

lights change in the backyard!" I accused him.

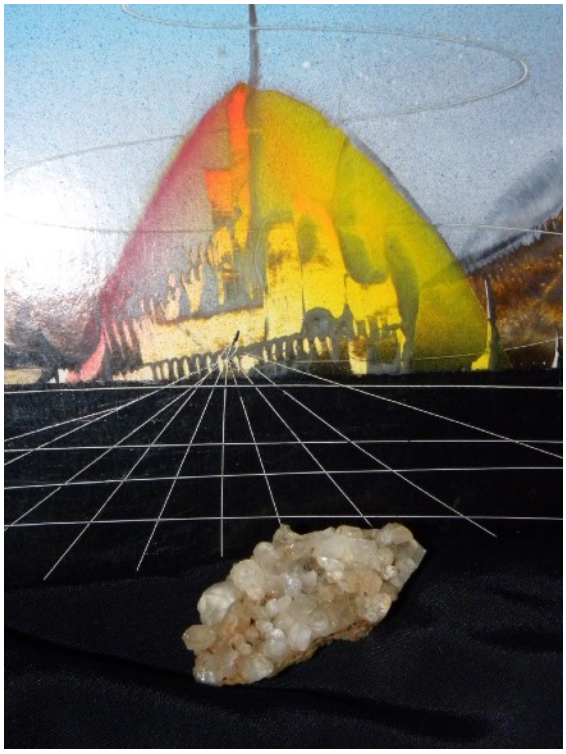
"The lights? Those are just decorative lights my wife put up," he said in defense.

"No they're not. They're here to hide the UFO! I've seen it change, I know what you're up to over here!" I yelled.

"Get out of here! Get off my property!" He yelled back.

"Operation Tree Frog!!! I shouted as I smashed his streetlight with my bamboo stick and retreated to the street.

"Go, and don't come back! I'm calling the cops!" He yelled as I ignored him and made my way to the private airstrip.



As kids, a friend and I found an outcropping of quartz crystals on a hill that overlooks the runway. I hadn't been back there in a long time and for whatever reason, I decided now would be a good time to see if there were any crystals left. As I walked around the locked vehicle gate and up the driveway, I became enraged by all of the 'Keep Out' and 'No Trespassing' signs. So I ripped a few out of the ground and threw them off to the side. I kept walking till the driveway ended in the center of the runway. The crystals were just a bit further to the north, so I kept to my destination.

Along the way, I noticed something new. A member of the Airport Association had recently died and they put up a plaque in his honor on the side of the rock face. I stared at the plaque as I tried to engage my long-held ability to read. That's when I saw a curious reflection in it. I dropped the bamboo stick. A fraction of my split mind could tell what it was, an orb of energized light was in the air about fifteen feet above me. I turned to look at it. It was there, but it also wasn't. I guess its only real

purpose was to alert me to the man walking from the other end of the runway. But I wasn't afraid, so I walked towards him.



I waved well enough in advance to get his attention before we met south of the halfway mark. I could tell he was old enough to be retired. He had a kept head of gray hair and stood around my height. The cardboard case in his hand interested me. I somehow got it in my head to expect a package from Wikileaks. I pulled myself together for the upcoming conversation.

“Hey, you don't know me. I'm your neighbor from across the block. I'm out working on an art project to get to know my neighbors. My name is Sea,” I opened up with.

“An artist, you look like an artist. I'm Paul, what's this project about?” He asked.

“It's kind of involved. I'm waiting on a package from a friend, but I don't know who's going to deliver it?” I told him.

“Well, all I've got is this empty box. My friend Bob is working on a computer for me, it's for my daughter. That's where I'm coming from. He lives down at the other end of the runway.” Paul informed me.

“Bob? I know Bob. I went to school with his son,” I told him honestly.

“I didn't know Bob had a son,” Paul explained as I instantly found his remark to be wrong.

“He didn't know Bob,” I thought as I recoiled in detest of this lie.

“So, that box isn't for me?” I asked directly.

“This? Here,” he said as he stretched his arm out, holding the box from the side and giving me a proper angle to grab the case by the handle.

As I looked at the box coming my way, I saw a holographic sticker flicker in the sunlight, but I still took the handle when the apex of his



action reached me.

Once I firmly had the package in hand, he grabbed my arm at the wrist. Now I felt a burning pain! I felt my life's essence and the Wikileaks password leaving my body. This man was stealing it metaphysically! As soon as I could break his mental hold over me, he gave me a horrified look like he knew what was coming. I punched him in the face with my free, left hand. He fell to the ground easily. In shock, I looked down at him with the box in my hand and turned to walk away.

“It's too late. You're as good as dead, we've got you now,” is my best reenactment of what I thought he said in my psychotic state that day at the airport.

With all the confusion about the death of Roxy and the imminent swarm of government agents, I knew they were about to capture and kill me. I kicked this harmless man in the ribs, tripping myself and then falling into a pile of logs at the side of the runway. I grabbed one as I got back up, and again looked down at him.

“But I'm a seventy-five-year-old man!” He pleaded with me alertly.
“No, you're not!” I said coldly as I threw it, hitting him in the head.

Not knowing what else to do, I screamed and ran a short aimless distance. It felt like I was in hell, and hell was an empty, lonely place. Where all transgressions are met with silence and the harsh sunlight of mid-day, giving you no place to hide from the truth of your horrid sins.

I didn't know what to do, so I grabbed the cardboard case and started to run home. In the dirt, along the driveway was a decent sized boulder. I thought my only hope to protect myself from the Psy-Op's

team that was coming to get me was buried underneath. Somehow I flipped it over and tried to dig at the dry ground with my fingertips and nails. There was no golden knife nor a golden sword, just a last-ditch effort to save my sad existence. Once I admitted it was futile, I just wanted to go home. So I picked back up the cardboard box and brought it with me through the gate. I saw a bunch of mailboxes. So I ran into those with the box to cushion the blow.

“You get out of here! I've already called the cops! They're on their way!” My neighbor with the UFO yelled as I walked past.

“You'll be dead in an hour!” I threatened him as I tried to choke him as Darth Vader would.

“Sea, what did you do? All I heard was yelling?” My dad asked as he met me at the bottom of his property.

“You can't see!” I said as I grabbed his glasses off his face and bent them in half and handed them to him.

“What?! Sea! You're out of control!” He shouted at me.

I ran into his house and straight into the bathroom. I lit a candle and started to shave parts of my facial hair. Sandy had a jar of gold makeup dust that I threw over myself. I got in the shower with the water on, all while my dad yelled at me through the door about the cops and about how much trouble I was in. Their arrival was announced by the sounds of their beeping radios. I prayed that the bathroom door would only open to a safe place. Away from the Psy-Op's team that just killed Roxy.

But as soon as the officers knocked on the door, they found it wasn't locked. As they entered I felt the need to tell them what this would all be about.

“I killed Tom Valentine at the airport!”

Chapter Seven
An event, on the horizon





(2016) Napa, Spring.

One afternoon between groups, there was a knock on my door.

“Stoltzner, telephone in the pool room,” the voice announced.

“Hello?” I said into the receiver.

“Sea? It's Lilly,” my lawyer answered.

“Hey Lilly, it's good to hear from you!” I happily told her.

“Yes you too, Mr. Stoltzner. From what the court reports say you've been doing quite well in Napa,” she complimented. “The court received your writ for a placement in a less restrictive environment. From everything I read, you meet the criteria. But whomever is in charge must be dragging their feet because according to the law, you don't need to be there any longer”.

“That's the work of Dr. Wells. Everyday she's fighting hard to keep people trapped here,” I explained.

“Yeah, I've seen her name on some reports. Whatever she's doing, it looks clean on our end,” Lilly told me.

“Well, it's been over a year since anyone's left this unit for an outpatient program. The morale is pretty low. The good news is since I filed the writ, the hospital has started me on the injectable medication. In a couple of months, I will have completed everything they've asked and I should get the big interview for their outpatient recommendation”. I said.

“Good. That recommendation will help, but it's not completely necessary. I think we can win without it. Keep doing what you're doing. In the meantime, let's not pull this writ. It will motivate the treatment team to move things along and hopefully keep them honest,” Lilly advised.

“OK, Lilly. Thanks. I'll stay at it here,” I told her.

“I know you will,” she reassured me. “I'll be in touch, Mr. Stoltzner. Goodbye.”

As the months passed, I'd get calls updating me on the writs progress. At one point, the rumor was the D.A. wasn't even going to fight it. A cruel tease of excitement. On X-17, I was one of fifteen people that were ready for discharge, there were also another ten from the other specialized units that were waiting on their turn to get an outpatient interview. The big problem was only one person gave this interview and at max and she was only able to conduct two a week.

From the hospital's perspective, they loved it when a patient filed a writ for the court to make the decision if somebody is ready to return to the community. It takes the accountability off them and lets them use their resources elsewhere. But from the court's perspective, that's why there is a state hospital system. To rehabilitate people and to have them make recommendations based on that treatment. In my case, both sides

were staring each other down. Everybody knew what the answer ought to be, they just wanted the other side to make it, so I waited as court dates came and got postponed.

“Hey,” I said to Polly in her office. “I just heard that one of my old favorite bands released a new song and video. I know the internet group isn't till tomorrow, but I can't wait! Can we watch it now?”

“Sure, sit down,” she grabbed a pile of stuff off her chair. “Do I know this band?”

“Animal Collective. Once infallible, but they've been letting me down for years. I think I'm ready to give them another shot.” I told her.

“I see it here, pressing play now,” she said as the video started.

“Cool enough. I hate giving my opinion on new music. It's not like it matters to anyone, but thanks, Polly. This will definitely be the highlight of my day.” I said.

“Oh, I wouldn't be too sure about that. I heard you guys are having baked potatoes in the chow hall tonight,” she said with a chuckle. “And your musical opinions do matter. They lead to the music you write and I can name a lot of your peers that love the songs you've been coming up with.”

“Yeah, I guess. I better get a move on if I'm going to be able to emotionally prepare for this soggy potato,” I said in half jest and half disgust as to my looming dinner.

“What's one more potato when you're so close? You can handle it, it'll be more proof that you're ready for the stressors of the community,” she suggested with a clinical edge.

“Well it sure seems like a long way off. I know things are in the works even if I just can't see them, but it's still frustrating,” I got up from her chair. “Thanks for the video.”

“What?” Franswa yelled at the dinner table. “They postponed your

court date again?"

"Yeah, the judge gave the hospital another month to make their recommendation. Again," I said as I took a bite out of my baked potato. "I don't even know what to make of all of it."

"Well, it's the judge! They've got to do it this time!" Franswa yelled.

"They didn't last month, the hospital does what it wants," I argued the reality of it.

"Man! This place is a dead end. If they're holding you this hard, I'll never get out again," he capitulated.

"No, you will. I will too. It's just all playing out weirdly for me, I'm sure you'll have a better go at it when your turn is up." I reassured him.

My birthday in the hospital always brought up complicated feelings. But Cole always called to check in and see how I was doing.

"That all sounds like a complicated mess," Cole told me over the phone. "Are you handling it all okay?"

"I guess I am, what else can I do? At least the struggle is over when I get out. I can name a lot of people in here that would love to have my problems." I told him.

"I bet. I got your latest CD in the mail. I haven't been able to hear it yet. You send them so often that I'm always behind. I don't have a CD player in my car and it's hard to find the time at home to just sit and listen," Cole reminded me.

"I'm sorry, I don't know who else to send them to. It just sucks having all this new music with no outlet," I admitted.

"No, keep at it. Keep sending them," Cole told me. "We've got to document this the best we can. I should get going, but I just wanted to call you and wish you a happy birthday. You're still loved and on people's minds today," Cole said as we made our goodbyes.



As the social aftermath of my offense within my community, the stresses of my looming court case, and the small daily struggles of living on the unit all occupied my mind, I had a lot to think about as I sat on the swing bench with my MP3 player and iced coffee. But after years of dealing with similarly difficult circumstances, I found my own equilibrium in which to process them.

Time. I'd been under these difficult circumstances for a while now, and in my interactions with my peers, I found that we had this in common. Once we recovered and were properly medicated, we were all just normal people. You would have to be told that any one of us was responsible for such horrible crimes.

But the two different reactions I saw were the same as the undulating feelings I dealt with out on that swing bench. To give in to the nihilistic feelings that your crime and subsequent pain constantly presents you with, or to try and have some kind of productive way of approaching the opportunities currently before you.

When I thought about it all under those two extreme reactions, I found that my skills and training as an artist/musician molded me into a person that sought self-improvement as a means of exercise and necessity. I realized that the hardest parts of my life were spent idle, and without muse. But just as often at night, when I retreated to my room and hid under my jacket, I'd fight to ignore the simplicity of my life and current experience. I'd think that there was something important I was missing out on. That incarceration was keeping me from my full potential and wasting the gifts I'd been given.

As the years went by on X-17, I painfully learned that there wasn't anything more important than my current experience and only I was in control of my reaction to it. Knowing that, my family back home, the outcome of my court case or the annoyance that someone didn't properly mark down their name on the laundry list, became less daunting and always manageable. I'd just sit on that swing bench as the

hummingbirds came and went, acknowledging the perceptions that made up my life and found a stillness that had all the hallmarks of happiness.

“It's the weirdest thing, everything smells like cleaning products,” I told the nurse as she did my monthly vitals.

“Really? How long has this been going on?” She asked.

“A couple of days. On and off. I'm worried I have a brain tumor.”

My concern was reported to the treatment team. They had theories.



“You're symptomatic! I've already talked to the D.A. We've got to get you healthy before we can send you out there. It's for your own safety too!” Dr. Wells told me aggressively in a small team meeting.

“What? Just like that, it's all over? My shot at getting out? But I did the right thing! I openly told staff what was going on with me. And now it’s over? Was that even a real symptom? And what about a brain tumor! I'm still worried about that! Come on, you've guy’s got to work with me!” I told them with the most emotion they'd seen. But the response I got didn't change.

“You're symptomatic!” Dr. Wells reiterated.

“There's not much I can do with this situation. Dr. Wells told me she's prepared to testify against you. Plus, they never gave you that

outpatient interview, so you don't have the hospital's full recommendation. My hands are pretty much tied here, Sea. My best advice is wait them out. In six months this will all have blown over and you'll be eligible for outpatient treatment again, I'm sorry," Lilly told me over the phone in the hallway by the nurse's station.

This was the kind of news I had to keep to myself. Mainly because I couldn't vocalize the first few words in the string of sentences I'd need to, to even begin to explain this. I just hid under my jacket and fought dark thoughts.

"Sea, my boy, how's it going?" My dad asked me over the phone. "Any word on when they're letting you go?"

"No, dad. It might be a while, we'll see," I said as I hoped the topic would change.

"What? What do you mean? I thought it was all happening any day now?" He asked for clarification.

"I don't know dad, look. Can we talk about something else?" I pleaded.

A few miserable days later, from underneath my nylon khaki jacket, I heard a knock on my door.

"Hey Sea, the unit social worker wants to see you," another X-17 patient told me.

She was a cheery lady named Patty. She had short blonde wavy hair and a lot of personality. The type of lady that called everyone 'Hun'.

"Good news, you're all set for Tuesday!" She said with a large smile on her face.

“For what?” I asked.

“Your outpatient interview. Ten O'clock, Tuesday morning, it's all set!” She continued behind that big smile.

“I'm sorry, but you must be mistaken. Dr. Wells says I've been having symptoms and now I have to wait another six months,” I said as I won the battle inside my head to not believe the good news Patty offered me.

“Oh, they must not have told you. A senior psychiatrist changed the report from an olfactory hallucination to a very mild seizure. His conclusion was if you were really having breakthrough symptoms, they would have first manifested in a more traditional ways. Hearing voices, seeing shadows, stuff like that. Smelling stuff that isn't there is possible, but you don't have a history of it. He felt like a mild, sudden seizure made the most sense,” she explained.

“What?” I told her after a second of trying to process it.

“Yep. Your interview is back on. Or would you like me to postpone it?” She jested.

“No, no. I'll do it, I'm free on Tuesday. I can do it!” I exclaimed.

“Good! Then it's all happy news Hun. You have the questions, right? They're not a secret. Go over them with a friend. It will help you to not get nervous.”



(2011) February 10th, A bathroom in Alta Sierra

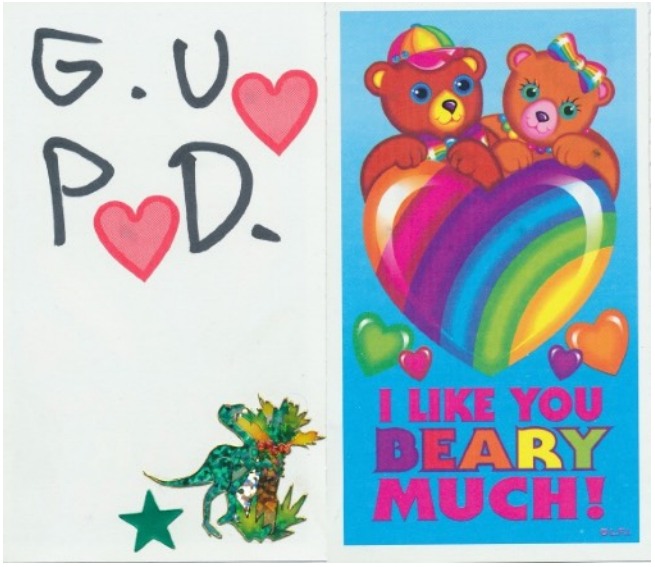


“Okay, let's get him up. Towel. Hand me that towel,” One cop said to another. “Does he have any clothes nearby?”

“Yeah, in his room, let me grab some,” my dad answered. “Here, it was the first thing I could find.”

“Great! Can you put these on?” The cop asked me after I'd been moved to the couch in the living room.

“Okay, please just don't hurt me,” I said with real fear in my voice as I pulled up my pants. Then as I put on the bleach stenciled T-shirt from the lego music video shoot, I looked over at the house phone. Roxy. So much had just



happened since I learned of her death. And then just as quickly as an exhaled breath, the fear left me. Now in this new moment, everything was okay because I knew that I'd see her soon, on the other side of the abyss.



“Okay Sea, we have to put these on you. It's as much for your safety as it is for ours. Can you just relax and give us your wrists?” One of the cops said before he tightened down the handcuffs.

After they confined me to the backseat of a patrol car, I had to wait a while. But for what? I didn't know. There was a dispatch radio to keep me company, some chatter was about me, but the rest was mostly codes that I didn’t understand. There were also computer screens visible on the dash. And on it, I was able to read a list of the last few stops I had just made in town.

“So they were following me,” I said silently to myself as the two cops talked to each other outside the vehicle. With this news, my anxiety returned.

“I hope it doesn't hurt, I hope they just shoot me when I'm not ready for it,” I thought.

As I continued to wait, I also noticed a blinking light on the dash. I didn't consciously know Morse Code, but as I sat in the back seat of that cop car the message came through loud and clear.

“Don't worry Sea, this is all a part of the plan,” Julian Assange reassured me cryptically by way of the fifth dimension.

“Alright, Mr. Stoltzner, am I getting that correct? Are you doing

okay back there?" He asked as he looked over his shoulder to see if it was safe to enter the street.

"Me? I guess, it's been a weird one," I said coldly as I stared out the window.

"Well, don't worry. We're going to take good care of you. We've just got to make a quick stop by the emergency room." I was told.

I can't remember the officer's name, but I can't forget that it started with a J. I could see he was right all along. This must be all a part of the plan. Now that I had a surrogate for Julian Assange, I felt more chatty as we toured my former school bus route on the way to the hospital.

"It's just like my song 'Escape From Alta Sierra'", I said to J.

"Song, what song?" J. answered.

"It's one that I've been kicking around for a few years now. It's about growing up on these streets here in this little community. The chorus goes, 'Escape from Alta Sierra and live your dream... Escape from Alta Sierra and do something'. Maybe that means now?" I pontificated. "Maybe this is it, me finally doing something?"

I was getting the royal treatment. There was a gurney waiting for me when we pulled up to the emergency room, this was a whirlwind. Nurses taking all kinds of vitals, all of which were extremely elevated. One of the nurses knew of me. I went to school with his son and we shared a birthday. September 11th. I found comfort in this and it seemed fitting. I guess with all the commotion I was yelling a bit. I'd been holding it together better in the cop car, but the energy of the hospital didn't suit me.

Once I'd been assessed, they brought me to a small room for observation. J. was still with me. Now the handcuff was attached from my left wrist to the handle of the bed. I'd been repeating a disturbing message to everyone since I'd arrived.



“My right hand creates and my left hand devastates.”

J.'s shift had come to an end and a new cop was brought in to replace him. I don't remember his name either, I know it didn't start with J.

“I bet you feel better now that you've eaten. The food here ain't bad, I've had it plenty of times,” my new guard told me.

“It’s alright, just a ham and cheese sandwich but I think I'm over meat,” I said as I threw the crust to the side of the tray. “Are you allowed to call my family?”

“I can. Nothing I tell them will be private. What did you want me to say?” He asked.

“Could you tell my sister Starla that one clue is in the baseball glove in dad's car,” I told the officer.

“Anything else?” He asked as he afforded me the opportunity for needed communication.

“Yeah, tell them I'm fine and after this I'm going to be a vegetarian,”

Hours earlier my clothes had been taken, bagged up, and had been set outside the door of my hospital room. As an old woman walked by, she brought this to my attention.

“What are they doing to these clothes?” An old woman asked.

“I don't know Gladis, they're just the police. Leave them alone,” the accompanying nurse told her.

“Yeah, what are you doing to my clothes?” I asked the guard.

“Just relax Mr. Stoltzner. You've been doing such a good job of staying calm, let's try not get worked up again.”

As I waited, reality warped around me. One minute I was sure I was about to be killed, the next minute I'd just be confused by it all. I don't recall what motivated me, but I can still see the cop gag as I systematically ripped them out by the root. My glorious foot and a half-long sideburns with my ‘Devastating’ restrained left hand. Now they were nothing more than the top layer in the small trash can at the corner of the room. I was getting sick of waiting.

“Mr. Stoltzner, I'm Detective Jones. I was hoping you'd be willing to talk about your afternoon out at the Alta Sierra airport,” a new unfriendly face asked me.

“Maybe, you know they won't let me smoke in here. Can you do something about that?” I probed.

“Well Mr. Stoltzner, if you'd like a cigarette I can make that happen, but it's got to be down at our station. You'd be willing to talk after a cigarette, right?”



(2008) Summer. Coping with disappointment.

The back patio was an odd choice for such a serious conversation. It must have been because it was the only place to pin down my dad. He'd been used the tool shed to smoke weed in when mom was still alive, but now that she was gone he continued to out of habit.

"Sounds good to me. If it's half as nice as you say, I don't even need to see it," I said of the ranch offered to host the memorial.

"Good, that's settled. Now the tough question, who do we want to MC it?" Starla said as carefully as someone pulling the pin on their first grenade. "Rick or Dale?"

"Rick for sure, your mother liked him and he was a good pastor. Dale? No way, the last time he called he was parked down the street begging for the chance to raise her from the dead. I don't even feel comfortable with him showing up!" My dad empathically made his decision known.

"Yeah, but Rick moved away years ago. I know he's coming, but this is mom's service. Shouldn't it represent her today? If we go with Rick it's like a giant 'F U' to half of her friends still coming. I don't think we can win this either way," I argued with myself.

"I'm with dad, Dale's out. I don't care who does it as long as it's not him," Sandy voted.

"I agree with Sea, whoever we pick, it should represent her better. Any other ideas?" Starla asked the now smaller family.

"I can do it. I don't want to, but I can. That's a good compromise. Let's make it less churchy and more of a celebration of her life," I suggested.

"Yeah, let's do that," Sandy approved.

"Works for me," my dad agreed.

"Okay, but what are you going to say? Please plan something, Sea. It'll stress me out too much if you just wing it," Starla pleaded.

Once we changed the notice from a memorial to a celebration of

her life, the planning took care of itself and all I had to do was think of stuff to say. But things escalated quickly. It went from one keg of beer to three and the idea of wine, to needing some of Starla's friends showing up early to uncork a table full of it. It was going to be our celebration of her life, and my mom's church friends were going to have to deal with it.

“Thank you all for coming. It's so great to see so many people from my mother's life. But today I'm going to be doing something my mother always hated, show up totally unprepared and still do a great job,” I joked with the gathered crowd.

After an hour of different people from my mom's life speaking their peace, we ended the service by honoring mom's only request. Starla, Sandy, and I all got up and sang the Beatles song, ‘In my Life’. Afterward, as people left or settled in to drink, I stacked the chairs, folded up the tables, and loaded up my dad's SUV with the black trash bags that contained the remnants of a wonderful potluck. I'm told, I couldn't eat much. As I completed the tasks Starla assigned me, I found my dad at the bonfire and crouched down low by his ear so he could understand me.

“Dad, listen to me, here are your keys! Don't lose them. When you wake up here in the morning, you’re going to need to go to the dump. All of the trash is in your car already. Do you understand?” I said loudly into his ear.

“Okay, Sea. I will,” he drunkenly replied.

“You guys seem set on booze, so I'm taking one of the half-empty kegs,” I explained.

“Okay, Sea. I will,” he drunkenly repeated himself as he tried to get back to the party.

“Fine, just go to the dump!” I said as I stood up.

“Okay, Sea. I will.”

With that half keg of beer in the back seat, I met a handful of my friends over at one of their houses as they joined me in my first drink since my mother had gotten sick.

“You did real good today, I think your mother would have approved,” Eli told me as we smoked cigarettes and refilled our glasses out on the porch.

“Yeah, I'm just glad that it's all over,” I said as I took a big drink. “Now I can get back to music and figuring out something to do with my paintings”.

“That's a good plan. Work it all out with your art.”





(2016) Napa, Fall.

“Okay, yes. Let's now talk about the offense,” Dr. Teal from the forensic department asked me as she diligently moved our discussion past pleasantries. She seemed nice enough but on an important task. I remember her having short brown hair, but not much else.

“Sure... How in-depth do you want me to go?” I replied from my side of the uncomfortable metal patio table out in X-17's courtyard.

“Well I already know what happened, but I'd like to hear your version.” She said,

I paused for a second, more to create the proper frame in which to tell my story than the unknowing of where to start. For me, the beginning was always clear.

“After my mother’s battle with cancer, I gave into marijuana to cope. This led to a daily habit. Months later, I was growing it, which caused more stress than it did solutions. My girlfriend and I tried to ignore our problems, but I started falling apart. She left to visit her family and I totally lost it. I started making weird art that I thought would be used by Wikileaks to uncover the truth about aliens. Then,

once I started concerning my family and friends, I quickly became more and more paranoid that government Psy-Op teams were trying to stop me. I thought they killed my girlfriend, I confronted a neighbor about this. He grabbed my arm, which hurt and burned badly. I thought he was stealing the Wikileaks password I was protecting metaphysically. I punched him, kicked him while he was down, and then hit him in the head with a log. I was arrested a short while later," I told her shamefully as I looked down at the picnic table "I can elaborate on any part of this if need be."

"That's not necessary. You covered all the parts I need to hear. It sounds like you have done a lot of work to process this." Dr. Teal replied.

"Yeah, I think so," I answered, not knowing if it was a question.

"From what I've read, it sounds like Marijuana was a big part of the problem. Can you talk about that?" She replied.

"Sure," I said as I took a deep breath. " Unfortunately, my girlfriend thought it was good medicine for me. That's not to put all the blame on her, but it didn't help. Yeah, it was a problem."

"What have you done about it?" She asked.

"Time has helped. Being clear-headed helps. I go to the Marijuana Anonymous meeting on the unit. I've been going for years now. Mostly we just read the stories about others that were addicted, messed up their lives, and turned it all around due to the program. It's encouraging. I'd like to get to the point where my story is encouraging to others too. But for now, I'm just focusing on staying sober out in the community. It's funny, when I think about the actuality of getting stoned again it scares me. Not about what I'd do, just the idea of thinking about all the troubles I've caused stoned sounds really intense. I definitely don't want to do that." I told her in all honesty.

"And your meds? What do they do for you?" She continued.

"I think they're basically the whole game. Since I started them in 2011, I can tell a big difference in my life. No overwhelming magical

thinking, no fantastic delusions, just normal conclusions. I've been blessed to find something that works for me. So I figure I'll just keep going down this road. Whenever I think I don't want to get poked with a needle, I remember that I did kill a man. And whatever side effects the med's have on me, I can't complain."

"And of your victim. How do you feel about what happened?" She asked as she reached the rock bottom of painful questions.

"Well, I mean I did it. I'm guilty." I said as I ignored eye contact. "I'm responsible for more pain than I'm able to understand. I know there's a family out there completely devastated by my actions. I know that they probably hate me, or they should at least. But I hope for their sake they found a way to forgive me. I know negative feelings can be toxic, but I hate myself for it too," I looked up to reestablish eye contact. "I see the pain in my family. I've put them through way too much and yet they still support me. I'd like to be a blessing to them someday. I used to have a lot of great friends, but all of this has changed that. I have so many apologies to make."



After the interview, I sat on the swing bench till the rest of the unit returned from the treatment mall.

“How'd it go?” Austin asked with his arms full of analytic philosophy books.

“Good. I'm supposed to find out later today.” I told him.

After a well-deserved lunch of the alternative to the menu, peanut butter and jelly, I returned to my room with the unit guitar and began to work on a new song to record that week. After a short while, there was a knock on my door.

“Stoltzner, Patty wants to see you,”

“Mr. Stoltzner! I just got off the phone with the forensic department. They’re making the recommendation! You passed your interview!” She told me with a giant smile on her face. “You know I love to give good news, Hun. In my line of work, you've got to relish the good news, it can be hard to come by sometimes.

Now with nothing but green lights, I called home and shared the news. Everyone was thrilled. It was a needed acknowledgment of my hard work and my family's commitment to me. Now the D.A. would have nothing to argue. Lilly had everything she needed. By the end of April, I had a minute order from the court for outpatient treatment in Sacramento.





(2011) February 10th, The interrogation.

They were so happy to get me to talk that they asked me for my brand. The promise of one more blue American Spirit cigarette was too much to pass up. I was unaware that the Sheriff's Office operated out of the large county building that Starla also worked in. Over the years, whenever I'd meet her after work, I'd wait at a side entrance.

And now here I was, shackled and smoking in the center of a ring of deputies in front of that very same door. The deputies made small talk, I didn't mind. I thought I was lucky to be getting one last smoke in before they killed me.

“So, why'd you do it?” The lead detective asked me from the other side of a generic folding table in the interrogation room.

I paused for a second. Then I pressed down both of my restrained hand's index fingers on the table, about a foot apart in front of the detectives as I responded.

“Because of the fifth dimension,” I told him.

We went back and forth for about forty-five minutes. They asked a lot of questions. I had few reasonable answers. Whenever they'd just let me talk, I tried to explain everything that had taken place since I met

Roxy. Who was still alive and apparently worried about me. As the interrogation progressed, the detective seemed more and more frustrated that there was nothing new to learn. It was obvious that I did it. I openly admitted to it and every word would be used for my insanity plea.

As they shuffled me back outside to be moved to the jail, I was shown some mercy.

“Let's give him one more, I mean we bought the pack. It will be his last cigarette for a long time,” the detective told the deputies.

As I stood barefoot on the cold asphalt and leaned over for the deputy to light my smoke, I was given a brief moment of silence in which to collect my thoughts.

“I know they must be lying. She's dead, I know it,” I thought as I blew a drag of smoke out the side of my mouth, trying not to disturb the difficult-to-reach cigarette.

“I hope they do it soon and get it over with. I don't want to live like this. Having to jump through hoops to just have a smoke, it's not human,” I thought as I exhaled again.

“I mean, how could God let me down here? I met him. That night with the fire tornado. It's proof,” my mind wondered as the ash built up at the end of my out-of-reach last cigarette.

“I'm tired and hungry. If they're not going to kill me, I hope they just give me something to eat and leave me alone,” I thought as my unintended wish was about to come true.

“Come on you guys, it's late, it's cold. Is he done yet?” The second detective shouted from the patrol car.

“Come on Stoltzner, let's wrap it up,” a deputy told me.

With the stillness broken, I made the painful reach and grabbed the cigarette out of my mouth. Taking one last long drag before I flicked the remaining ash out of habit. Needing no more favors, I dropped it on the asphalt and snuffed out the cherry with my barefoot.

“Alright guys, thanks. I'm ready,” I said in ambivalence to my impending death.

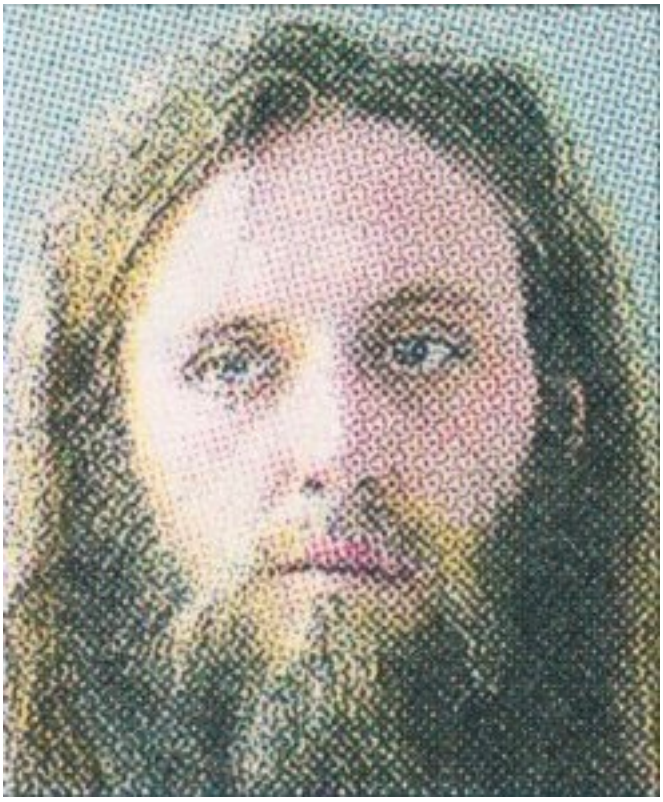
The county jail was a very short trip. It shared the same parking lot. Once inside the walls of the sallyport, I was released from the shackles and surrounded by a team of correctional officers. They brought me to a small room where they took blood while an officer filmed with a video camera. Once the blood work was done and the officer started putting away the camera, I thought.

“Here it comes!”

But that was it. Nobody laid a finger on me. They peacefully brought me to booking where they sat me down in front of a T.V. for an hour as they did paperwork. And then came the mug shot, ID wristband, physical inspection, and a change of clothes. Then I was handed a large cardboard box. I was told everything I needed was inside. A couple officers escorted me down to administrative segregation and just like that, I was on my own in a shrinking cell.

I opened the box. There were a couple of blankets and sheets on top of a small bag of toiletries. It wasn't hard to figure out. I had a fitted sheet to cover the green plastic mat, and a slim sheet to separate me and the wool blanket. Now all I needed was something to eat. I looked around the cell, I saw a button on the wall. I pressed it.

“Yeah,” a voice responded shortly.



“I'm sorry. I don't know how any of this works, but I'm very hungry,” I asked helplessly.

“Breakfast is at five-thirty,” the voice replied.

As I climbed into bed and quickly drifted off to sleep, There were no thoughts about tomorrow, There was no concern for the aftermath this horrible day would bring me. I just slept till breakfast.



(2017) Spring. Napa.

I was sitting out on the swing bench when Polly found me with a message.

“Oh hey, there you are. I just got an email about you! The outpatient program from Sacramento is picking you up on May 25th. They're sending a guy named Ron, he'll be your new therapist. Isn't that exciting!”



That night I got on the phone with Sandy. Now I had an urgent request.

“I don't know? What do people wear these days?” I asked.

“Well, people wear all kinds of things. You see a lot of staff, what do they wear?” Sandy answered.

“I don't know? Maybe we should just try to keep it simple. How about some Levi's, a pair of Converse and I'll need a shirt. Like those glass button western ones, can you look for something like that?” I wondered allowed.

“I can look. We should also get you a pack of t-shirts, socks and some underwear. Wow, you're going to need everything. You're totally starting over! Okay, let me get a pen, I need your size’s,” she told me with real excitement that I hadn't heard out of her in a while.

As the weeks counted down, I couldn't hide the smile on my face. I was able to organize one last show with the band. It was warmly received. I had a lot of songs to choose from. I had written roughly two hundred since I got to Napa. I was also able to make a recording for each. I had kept busy and was now quietly planning my musical comeback, once I settled back into the community.

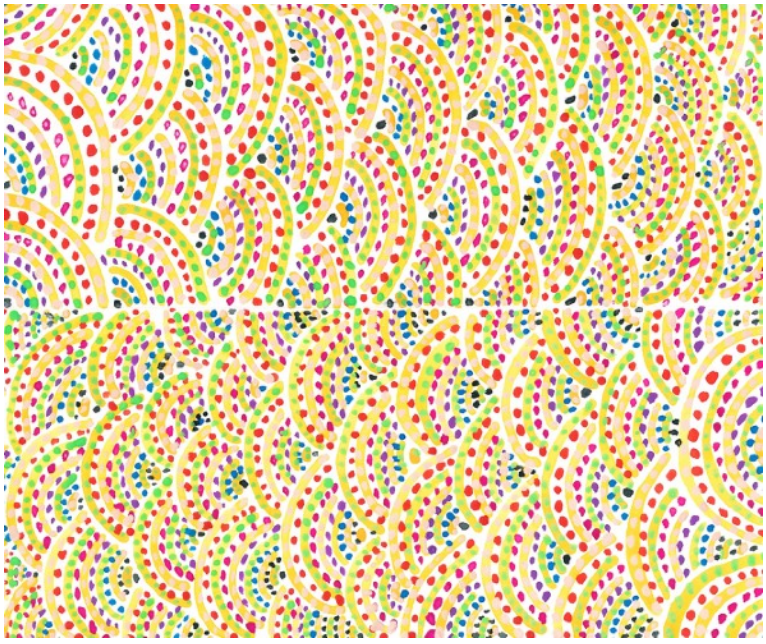


The Friday afternoon before I left, I walked back to the treatment mall with the beginning band. Polly announced to the group that I was leaving. Along with the other farewells, I was given a thoughtful goodbye from another patient whose mental illness was more severe than mine.

“Go and be successful with your life. Because if you can't, how am I going to be?”

As I selfishly navigated the clinical riggers of the State Hospital system, I put little thought into how I was positively affecting the others around me. At the time, playing music was just a thing I did for myself, but with all these goodbyes I was reminded that there were many more present for my musical experiences. And even larger still, my success over my illness, my treatment, and the legal system reminded the other patient that it's possible. And that their day can too come.

Due to factors out of my control, I got a poor last night's sleep at Napa State Hospital. That was fine, even under perfect conditions I think I would have tossed and turned in anticipation of the upcoming momentous event. I got out of bed before the morning breakfast bell, took a shower, and finished cleaning out my locker. I'm a pretty good Tetras player but I had more stuff tucked away in my locker than I remembered putting in. I collected a big pile of khaki state clothes I'd been wearing that I now no longer needed. With my arms full, I carried them to the bathroom to put in the laundry basket, I even paused before I did.



“Is this all really happening?” I thought to myself.

As I sipped my morning coffee in the dining room, the whole unit applauded my departure. It's important for everyone to see a person's journey at the hospital come to a positive end. I've never been a big fan of applause, but in this case, I was happy to be the center of this communal ritual. After all the commotion, when everyone had returned to mentally preparing for another day of hospital life. I looked around the room to see all of the faces I'd soon be leaving. Is it okay to say, I was a bit sad, to be leaving all of these sad people in their sadness? I guess it is. Every time someone else had left before me, I was all the sadder for it too. It was all so complicated.

“I think I'll be over this place the minute I'm out the gate,” I thought.” “But these melancholic faces are sure killing my buzz.”

As I waited for my pickup, I went out to the courtyard to say a few more goodbyes as everyone gathered to leave for the treatment mall.

“You've got my stories, right? On your flash drive. They're good stories, you should read them!” Fransaw loudly told me.

“Alright Fransaw, I will,” I conceded.

“Okay, be good out there! Don't be like me, don't mess it up!” He said as we shook hands goodbye.

Now that everyone was gone, I easily heard the doorbell.

“Come on Mr. Stoltzner. It's time to go.” The short nurse said as I grabbed my things and followed.

“This him? Stoltzner?” The transport guard asked the nurse. “Well come on! You can put your stuff in the back, then we've got to put these

handcuffs on you, but don't worry, it's a short trip."

As vividly as I remembered coming through the gate on my first day, I wanted to remember going out. So I sat quietly as my papers were presented to the guard that manned the station. No problems, just a little small talk, and we were on our way. Through the event horizon of the razor-lined gate and back to the admissions building where I was placed in a newly built, large cage.

"Is this all you've got?" A man asked me from the free side.
"Me? I think they left a box of my stuff outside," I said.
"I already got that. I'm Ron, are you ready to get out of here?"







Chapter Eight
The necessary links of the chain.



(2017) Late May. A cage.

"My sister sent me clothes, but they told me there not in my property. I was expecting to walk out in them," I said from my side of the cage, in frustration of my freedom plan falling apart.

"I don't know about any clothes, but later today I can send an email and try to track them down for you," Ron offered a reasonable solution.

"Okay, then I'm ready. Let's go," I said as I stood up in the already too small sweatsuit.

"Excuse me," Ron stopped a woman walking by. "Who do I talk to about getting this cage opened?"

As Ron drove, he asked all the standard introductory questions. What I was excited about? Some plans for my future, and a summary of that day at the Alta Sierra airport six and a half years earlier. I answered as I quickly forgot that I was anxious about riding in a car again. Less than an hour later, we arrived in Sacramento. Our first stop would be simple.

“I'm going to know all your personal data very well by the end of working with you,” Ron joked as he filled out forms in the MediCal lobby. “How exciting is this? Paperwork. Lots and lots of paperwork.”

While answering Ron's questions, there was a serious decision occupying the back of my mind. Cigarettes. I hadn’t had one since after my interrogation. I smelled one out in the parking lot as we walked in and I liked it. I knew all the reasons not to, but I wasn't sure if I could abstain now that I'd been tempted. It felt like smoking again would be an inevitable failure. That instead, I should just have one to celebrate this larger accomplishment. But again, I knew all the reasons not to.

“That should get the process started,” Ron told me as we walked back down the stairs to his car. “It's important to get the ball rolling right away, I mean we are responsible for your health care.”

Next, Ron drove me to an unassuming housing track on the outskirts of downtown. The house had a fancy, but cheap appeal. All the furniture and fixtures looked nice till you got up close and realized it was nothing more than a low-grade foreign product. The door to my new home was unlocked, and nobody was around.

“First rule Sea, lock the door when you go out. It seems like every time I stop by, it's left open,” Ron told me in frustration.

“Okay, that's not hard,” I agreed.

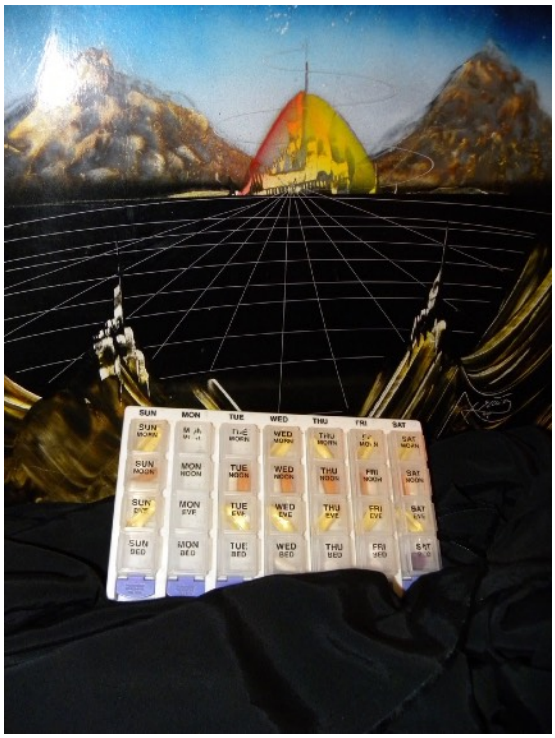
“I need to do a quick inventory of your stuff in case something goes missing,” he said.

“That's fine, I don't have much.” I told him.

I was shown to my new room, it was a mess. The last occupant had been sent back to the Hospital and all of his stuff was where he left it.

There were two beds.

“As you can see, there's clutter. But this half of the room's not too bad. If you like, you can organize a bit. If you don't want to, that's fine but I doubt his therapist can come by till some time next week,” Ron told me as we went through my stuff.



“Sure, I can be helpful,” I said.

“Well, just as I thought, nothing to worry about with you,” Ron stepped back from my boxes of hospital belongings. “OK, here's all you need to know. You're on blackout for a month. No phone, no internet, no coming and going. You're just here unless you're in a group over at the office. I'll talk to someone about escorting you there. You know the rules, you signed the contract. Just hang out here. Eat whatever you want out of the fridge. There will be someone by tonight to help you with your meds and run an evening group. That's about it. I'll be back in a couple hours, I need to show you where the office is and have you meet the rest of the team. After that, we've got more paperwork.”

“Alright, that all sounds simple,” I replied confidently.

“Did you used to smoke?” He asked on his way out the door.

“Yeah.” I said.

“Are you going to again?” He continued.

“I don't want to,” I rightfully confessed.

“Good. Don't. It causes a lot of unnecessary drama. And you don't need it anyway. Stay strong. I'll see you in a few hours,” Ron told me as he locked the door behind him.

Now that he was gone, I went right to work organizing my new

room. I didn't get far, my stillness was interrupted by Tabitha's raspy voice.

She'd been homeless before her minor offense. I don't think it was even a felony. She was just happy to get off the streets for a bit. But as I said earlier, no one does the minimum stay at Napa State Hospital. She'd been out a few months longer than me and was already finding resistance in the boundaries of the program. She had an unpleasant look and demeanor, but she showed me kindness on my first day with a pair of men's shorts that were too small for her.

"Who locked the door?" Tabitha yelled in the house.

"Oh hey, I know you. We were in one of Dr. Wells's groups together, but I forgot your name," I said as I walked into the living room.

"Yeah, I'm Tabitha. You're Sea," she reminded me. "Around here we don't lock the door. I didn't even have my key on me. I had to use the one we hide under a rock."

"Oh, Sorry, Ron locked it," I shifted the blame.

"Oh, you've got Ron as your therapist, he's good. I wish he was mine. I keep getting in trouble with the woman they stuck me with," she admitted to me. "I'm going to have some ice cream. You want some?"

As we ate, Tabitha explained the rules of the house and gave me a run-down on the program. When we finished our bowls, another housemate came home. I'd describe her as a more pleasant version of Tabitha, once you got to know her.

"Tabitha! I'm out of tobacco, do you have any?" She barked.

"Yeah, let's go outback. Sea, do you smoke?" Tabitha asked.

"I don't know yet, but I'll come and check out the backyard."

Watching them was the best anti-smoking ad I could have ever seen. All they did was cough, spit, and complain about the stagnation of their mundane lives. I didn't want to be anything like them. Plus, all they could afford was the cheapest rolling tobacco. It wasn't like what I smelled outside of the MediCal office. As I sat there I decided if I ever smoked again, it would be on my terms and not like this.

After my trip to the office and the nightly meeting, I went to bed eager to start another day out in the community. If I only learned one thing on this first day, it was that I had so many things to be excited for. And even though the new bed was soft and the mood peaceful, my mind still wandered on all the possibilities of my life, until I eventually let go and drifted off to sleep.

“Payday Sea!” Ron handed me a check at the end of our therapy session a few weeks later.

I looked down at it as he kept talking. Fifteen dollars, just like I'd been told to expect from my housemates.

“Now, I know you don't have an I.D. yet. But there's a grocery store near your house that will honor this check. They only take a couple bucks for their trouble. I've got you an escort all lined up.”

“Cool,” I told him. “I'm saving up as much as I can right now, but is it ok if I buy a soda at the gas station on my way home?”

“Sure, I see no reason why not,” Ron told me.

During my first year on X-17, I successfully avoided the vending machines. Then there was a change in the payphone protocol. Due to misuse, the phone company updated its operating system to no longer allow collect calls. Now it took cold hard change to get Starla's house phone to ring. After letting it ring twice, I'd hang up to get my quarters

back and then wait for my family to call me. It was a simple solution, but often the quarters I needed to dial home would get diverted by the warming glow of the Pepsi machine. An occasional treat that I enjoyed.

The following year, the hospital went on a health kick and the vending machines were gone. Now, the weekly canteen was the most reliable way to get something special, but they didn't leave many exciting options.

I avoided it as long as I could, but I eventually gave in to the only soda the hospital allowed. Diet 7up. I'd have to eat a bag of fruit snacks with it to make it halfway palatable. I missed the real thing. I missed the vending machine's rows of backlit buttons promising different kinds of bubbly joy. Drinking my weekly 7up felt completely empty, like another chore saved to muscle memory. An occasional habit that seemed fitting, as hospital life drug on.

As I exited the grocery store with twelve dollars in my hand, I knew that a soft drink would cost me around two, but would be a well-earned reward. The full breadth of my new freedom hit me as I stood in front of the long wall of chilled beverages at that corner gas station. It had been an era since I was allowed to make such an unimportant decision. One where the only accountability was to me and my taste buds. I stood in awe. Torn between the drinks I used to get, Snapple Mango Madness, and the new things I saw on the shelves. “What's a LaCroix?” After what felt like too long in deciding, I brought the Snapple to the register, paid, and walked home sweetly satisfied.

Out of all of Dr. Well’s inaccurate accusations at the hospital, I was concerned with one. Flat affect. On a number of occasions she pointed out my diminished emotional expressions, often seen with schizophrenia and the meds used to treat it. I didn’t care about this at the hospital. I just ignored this problem and chalked it up to my vibe of trying to get by in the hospital with an even keeled attitude.

But now that I was riding the bus and light rail, for the first time since junior high I felt the need to fit it. I felt a new awareness of my situation and had an idea.

My new room had full mirrored doors to the closet and a couple times a day I'd stand in front of them and I'd have imagined conversations as I made big reactions with my face. Happy faces, sad faces, confused faces. Surprise faces too! I'd remind myself of what my eyebrows were doing, was I nodding too much or not nodding at all. This awareness quickly spread to the conversations I was having with providers at the outpatient office. It took work, but it helped me build confidence in my return to the community.

As the blackout period was coming to an end, the outpatient program allowed me a family picnic at a local park. I had an aunt in town from out of state and she'd be leaving before the blackout period officially ended. My dad, sisters, grandpa, two aunts, uncle, and I all gathered for a well-deserved celebration of my freedom. Ron sat off to the side and did paperwork.



"So, what's the routine like?" An aunt asked.

"It's pretty simple. Just about every morning I come into the office for a group. Different kinds of topics. Symptom management, W.R.A.P. Plan, Substance Recovery. On Friday's we just get to play cards and watch videos and I meet with Ron once a week. There's a lot to do to get me reestablished. Besides that, I just hang out at the house. Not too much going on there, out of boredom I cleaned the kitchen floor to ceiling. The woman who runs the house sure did like that," I told

everyone to a laugh.

"Are they going to get you working again?" Asked my uncle.

"I think so. Right now the goal is to get me set up with Social Security Disability Insurance. The outpatient program keeps a ledger of what I'm costing them. Once I get approved for Social Security I'll need all the back pay to break even," I explained.

"What's been the best part so far?" My other aunt asked.

"This. Definitely this. Sandy brought her scissors. She's going to clean me up today. I've really been looking forward to that. I got a lot of questionable haircuts at the Hospital and now I'm ready to look good."

"Sea, just keep doing what they asked of you and I know you'll do fine," my grandpa told me.

"Oh Sea, I almost forgot! Your friend Francis called me. I guess he's living in Sacramento too. He wants to get back in touch when you can," Starla said with a sandwich in her hand.

Blackout soon came to a swift end. Now I could go two miles, for two hours. I was required to go to one twelve-step meeting a week and I could use the phone and internet. The first thing I did was run a search on my name. A bunch of newspaper articles were right on top, but I'd been expecting that. But not much else. I called Francis later on that night.

"Yeah, I'm getting married once she finishes up her degree. I've had a tough go of it with some medical stuff, but I'm getting better all the time. I'm still making music. Now that I'm living in Sacramento I don't see much of the old crew," Francis told me over the phone. "We should get together soon. Where are they keeping you?"

It turned out that Francis lived a light rail stop away from the office. Ron and Francis met, then I was approved to hang out and work on music at his apartment. The Outpatient program ran on a system of

levels and around this time I moved up another one. Now I could go anywhere in the county for five hours. I also got moved to another room and board across town. It was fine and it offered more independence. By now the summer was coming to an end and I got what I really wanted, my first trip home.

Back in 2012, Starla got a first-time home buyer's government loan. That and the stability of her county job was enough to buy her first home. My dad, Sandy and Cowboy were welcome to move in too. The house had a great view of the Sierra Nevada's with Alta Sierra right in the foreground. Even from this distance, you could see small airplanes fly behind the hill that was our old neighborhood and assume that they came to a safe landing at the old airport. It was a big house, which had been added on to a few times over the years. It was a home with as much character as my family.

“That's the famous tour! I give it pretty good by now,” my dad said as we returned to the kitchen. “Not bad for an old guy like me. At least I didn't fall through the attic ceiling like I did with your cousin.”

“Yeah, she had to pull him up!” Sandy replied in laughter as everyone joined her.

“I liked the attic. I could live up there, if they'd let me.” I told the family all gathered around. “I saw a bunch of my old stuff in boxes. I’d kind of like to dig around a bit later, just for a few minutes.”

“Take your time. We're not in a rush for anything,” Starla asserted.

“Well now, hold on,” my dad backtracked the conversation. “There's that car show going on at the fairground today. I'd like to check that out with everyone. I'll even pay for the admissions.”

“I don't know, I'm only here for a night and I really wanted to go to the river,” I explained my priorities.

“Let go in the morning, when it's cooler, Sea. As for the car show, it's up to you,” Starla told me.

“Yeah, let's do it. It kinda sounds like fun!” I concluded.

The next morning, when I jumped into the pool of rushing river water. I couldn't help but imagine this moment as a joyous baptism of my re-enchanted being. My visit home was everything I needed. I'd be back often.

Last I heard, Brian was living back in Sacramento. Years earlier, Brian had sublet his art studio to me at St. Joseph’s. He didn't like all the eyes around the place. To him, his art was private. He'd seen too much of the art world. Then he developed an interest in online gaming. He spoke with a low voice. He often wore the shirts of his friend's bands and no matter how deep into the drink count, he always knew what was going on. Now that I was in his town, I got his number and called him up.

He was glad to hear from me and we quickly met for coffee. We had a great conversation about art, music, and my time away. He was open to hearing my side of what had happened. After our conversation, I walked away feeling like less of a monster and instead someone with a valid but complicated story. Now I had two friends to hang out with in Sacramento. It was around this time that Francis and I were working on uploading some of my hospital music to the internet.

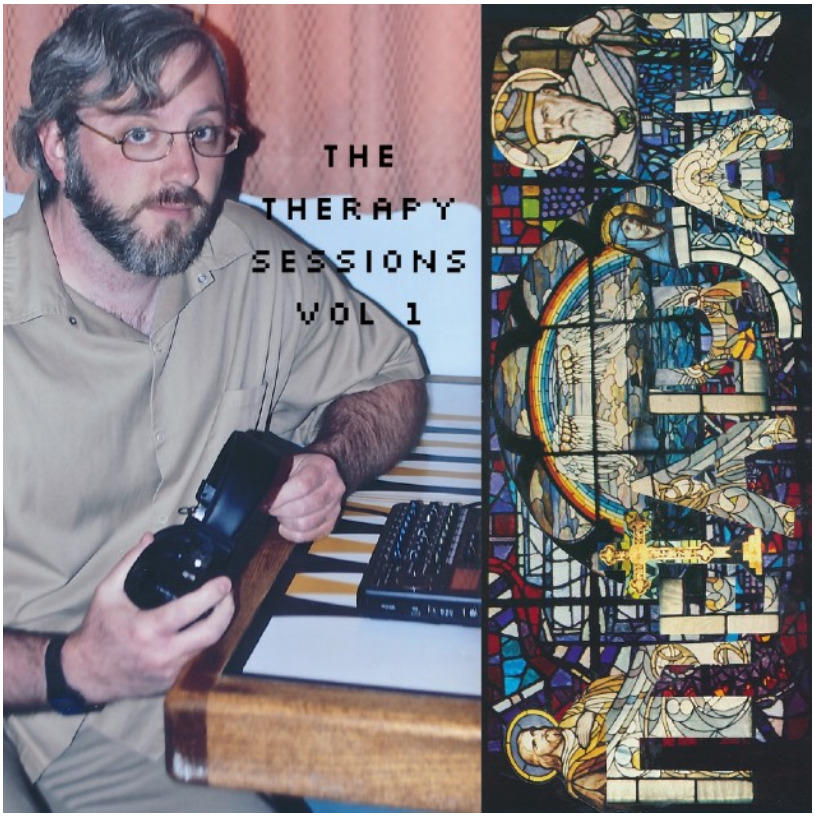
“It'd be nice to clean them up a bit. Maybe add a little extra reverb. But there's not much more else we can do with them. I already did my best to master them on the original machine,” I told Francis about the collection.

“Well they are what they are, but I think we can do a little better. I've got a couple of programs we can try. When do you want to post these?” Francis asked.

“Soon, whenever. I already got permission from the program. I've

been sitting on these songs for years now. I'm pretty excited to release them into the world."

November brought a few developments. On the same day, I posted my first Metalujah album, 'The Therapy Sessions Vol. 1'. I got to stay out past curfew to attend my first Marijuana Anonymous meeting. I didn't know what to say about myself. It's all such a long complicated story. But the people were nice, so I made the meeting a part of my weekly routine. By the end of the month, I had climbed another level. Now I didn't have to do the nightly house meetings and had one less group at the office. Progress was coming quickly for me in Sacramento.



The outpatient program approved a five-day home visit for Christmas. I'd been reconnecting with Jon via email and we decided to meet up for a walk while he too was back in town for the holiday.

"So it sounds like you just hung out and played music for a few years," Jon said to lighten the mood as I explained my life at the hospital.

"Yeah, kinda. I also had to go to a bunch of process groups, but I just talked about music in them too," I joked, but then unintentionally got serious."The hospital was a great blessing, considering all the pain I've caused."



We kept walking to the sound of the gravel beneath our feet. Then Jon must have read my mind because he did me the favor of bringing Her up.

“I talked with her,” he said.

“Who?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“Roxy. I told her we were getting together for this walk,” he explained.

“What'd she say?” I calmly pleaded.

“Not much. I think her exact words were, ‘Good luck with that’,” he told me gently, knowing how bad it was going to hurt.

“That sounds about right,” I said as I hung my head. “Whatever happened to her?”

“After your incident, she found a life to retreat into. She got married. I think she does stuff with crystals, I don't know. I don't talk to her much. I was surprised she even got back to me when I called,” Jon told me with a smaller fraction of the same disappointment I had, that all of our lives had moved on.

“Well, I wish her the best. She's one of the good ones,” I replied to another moment of silence, and then a complete change of topic thereafter.



(2018) January. A coffee house in Sacramento.



“I thought it went really well, Sea! I could tell you've really been practicing. You came off like a real pro!” Starla told me as we walked back to her boyfriend's car.

“Yeah, I'm happy with it for the most part. It was nice to have a few people from the program and Brian there. We'll see what happens. The owner said he'd call me the next time he has an opening to fill,” I said as I climbed into the back seat with my acoustic guitar.

“You played for, like what, an hour?”

“Yep. That's what the owner asked for and I only messed up once when that cute woman walked in and smiled at me.”

As pumped as I was for my return to music, I quickly deflated when presented with the reality of my currently restricted situation. In my prior experiences, gradual success in a local music scene was as much about embedding yourself into the local nightlife, as it was the nuts and bolts of technical musicianship. As well as I was doing in the outpatient program, I was struggling to meet people and the few people I was meeting, I was nowhere near being able to explain my troubled history. It all seemed like a good reason to give up the dream of the musical comeback I'd thought so much about as I hid under my nylon jacket at Napa. It was cold, it was winter and I needed that call back for the owner of the coffee shop to book me again.

"That's what I liked about it, it was just music. You weren't trying to fit in and do what everyone else is doing. You just played your songs," Brian told me over coffee in the weeks that followed.

"Yeah, thanks," I replied to Brian. "It's weird, I let the show build up in my head too much and now that it's over, I don't know what to do."

"The music scene down here is all over the place, I wouldn't chase it. You've got too many other talents. Have you been painting?" Brian asked.

"A little. Mainly flowers I take pictures of on the street. They're okay, but I don't have much cash for supplies," I answered.

"Good, you don't need them. Work with what you've got," Brian preached.

"I've been wanting to finish writing my story, but I don't get the point of it. What's the moral of my story? What good can come from me telling it?"

"No, it's very important! Stories are the best teachers. They show us who we are as a people," Brian explained strongly. "I don't know what the moral of your story is either. Do you remember the old fairy

tales they told us as children? They were just a simple story for a simpler time. Now our lives are more complex, so we need a more complex story to match. You should tell your story and let the rest work itself out."

With little to do at the room and board, I'd plug in an old laptop Francis sold me and reread the rough hundred pages I wrote at the hospital.

"This could be something," I thought.

As much as I captured in Napa, it still felt far from complete. I knew I needed to tell the other half of my story. If my insanity was worth a hundred pages, then my recovery should be worth a similar effort. But I couldn't get the juices flowing. So out of frustration, I put away my computer and just watched T.V.

"I've got an idea for you, Sea," Ron told me in our monthly session. "Maybe it would help with your feelings of guilt and remorse if you made some art about it? We could make a special box to store all of your artistic feelings in and when you're done, we can bury it, burn it or throw it away?"

As I thought about Ron's idea on my long bus ride home, I saw it from my mind's artistic eye. My symptoms, by my hands, in vivid color and motion. I could also add them to my story. I knew right there on the bus that this was what I needed to do. Whenever I'd got the space to set up an easel that is.

"How's looking for your own place going?" Ron asked at our next monthly meeting.

"I'm on the waiting list at a couple disabled complexes. Besides

that, I can't find anything in my price range. Social Security is a blessing, but apartments are expensive," I explained the results of my limited search.

"I know of a couple other people on the program that are looking, why don't you team up with them?" Ron suggested. "We can't have you living in a room and board forever."

My potential roommates and I all found a place we liked quickly, it was near the office and within everybody's budget. We each put down fifty dollars for a background check. They both passed just fine, even though I knew they had similarly serious criminal records. I did not. Now what?

"It's very unfortunate. County courts file things differently. That's the best way I can understand it. It just so happens that your court is very competent so we've just got to work around it," Ron told me during our session. "I talked with the treatment team, and I think we need to go with the next best alternative."

"What?" I said disappointingly.

"We think it would be best for you to move in with your family back in Grass Valley."

I didn't have to be told twice. I was excited! Starla agreed right away. The program required a year in Sacramento before I could move, so I got the most out of the thrift stores that I frequented and bided my time till Sandy picked me up to take me back home.

"So what's the plan with these? Please tell me you have some sort of idea of where you're going with them," Starla asked me as I painted at my new easel in the living room.

"I do. Dr. Wells had us make a timelines of all our symptoms, so I'm using that. I figured that'd be a good place to start," I explained as I

took a step back.

“Cool. Looks like I don't need to say it, but have fun,” Starla patted me on the shoulder as she walked away.



Being home with my family was great. I started up with community mental health services. I got my driver's license back. My dad still had that green SUV I borrowed with Roxy, but it was old now and had limitations. I still had to go to the outpatient program in Sacramento twice a month. To do this, I'd have to be at the bus station in Grass Valley at six in the morning, take three different buses and the light rail to make it on time for my group, three and a half hours later. Then I'd meet with Ron, do a drug test and turn around for the three-and-a-half-hour trip back home. A small sacrifice.

“So how's it going now that you're back home?” Ron asked in a session.

“Great. I'm keeping busy. Art, music and I love having my old guitar back in my life,” I told him without much thought.

“That all sounds fitting,” Ron said to a pause. “But Sea, can I ask how it feels? Being back. It must bring up all sorts of feelings.”

“You sound just like Starla,” I laughed. “I don't know, complicated. It feels complicated.”

“How so?” He dug deeper.

“I guess I don't know yet. Things feel best when I just keep busy. When I lie around I just feel like garbage. So it's easier to get up and paint, I don't know,” I took a pause to collect my thoughts. “I'm aware that I need to be aware of feelings.”

Starla was keeping tabs on the dark clouds over me. I'd be fine for a week, then laid out on my bed for two or three days, and then back to painting. After watching the cycle for a few months, she came to me with a suggestion.

“Don't bother trying to understand your feelings, don't try to fix your feelings either, just feel your feelings. That's what they're there for.”

Not long after this advice, the source of the distress was uncovered. After years in jail, the hospital, and even the room and boards, I finally felt safe now that I was back home. Safe enough to let down my guard and start to feel everything. My offense, the pain I caused my friends and family, the confusion of being trapped in that jail cell, losing Roxy, and the spiraling fractals thereafter. It all amounted to an unbearable weight. A monster with a face and a dragon with a name. But I couldn't find any clever way to bring myself to battle.

“Sea,” Starla said from the hallway outside my bedroom door.
“Yeah.” I somberly answered her from my bed.
“I just got a text, look!” She said as she held up her phone.

I got up and walked over.

“Oh, cute!” I said immediately.
“Do you want her?” Starla asked.
“Really? Yes!” I told Starla emphatically.
“Okay, it's done,” Starla said as she texted back her friend. “Now all I need from you is her name.”

We were early, waiting in a dentist's parking lot. Starla's friend was

running late for her appointment. There was a noticeable excitement.

“We can just go home once we get her, right? We don't need anything?” I asked.

“I think we're good. We've have food and litter,” Starla answered. “I see her car now. Come on, say hi real quick.”

After a friendly greeting, I was handed the pet carrier. I set it down gently in the back seat and then got in from the other side. I looked in. I saw nothing but a mess of blankets.

“How is she?” Starla asked from the driver's seat.

“I don't know? Fine I think, I haven't seen her yet,” I replied.

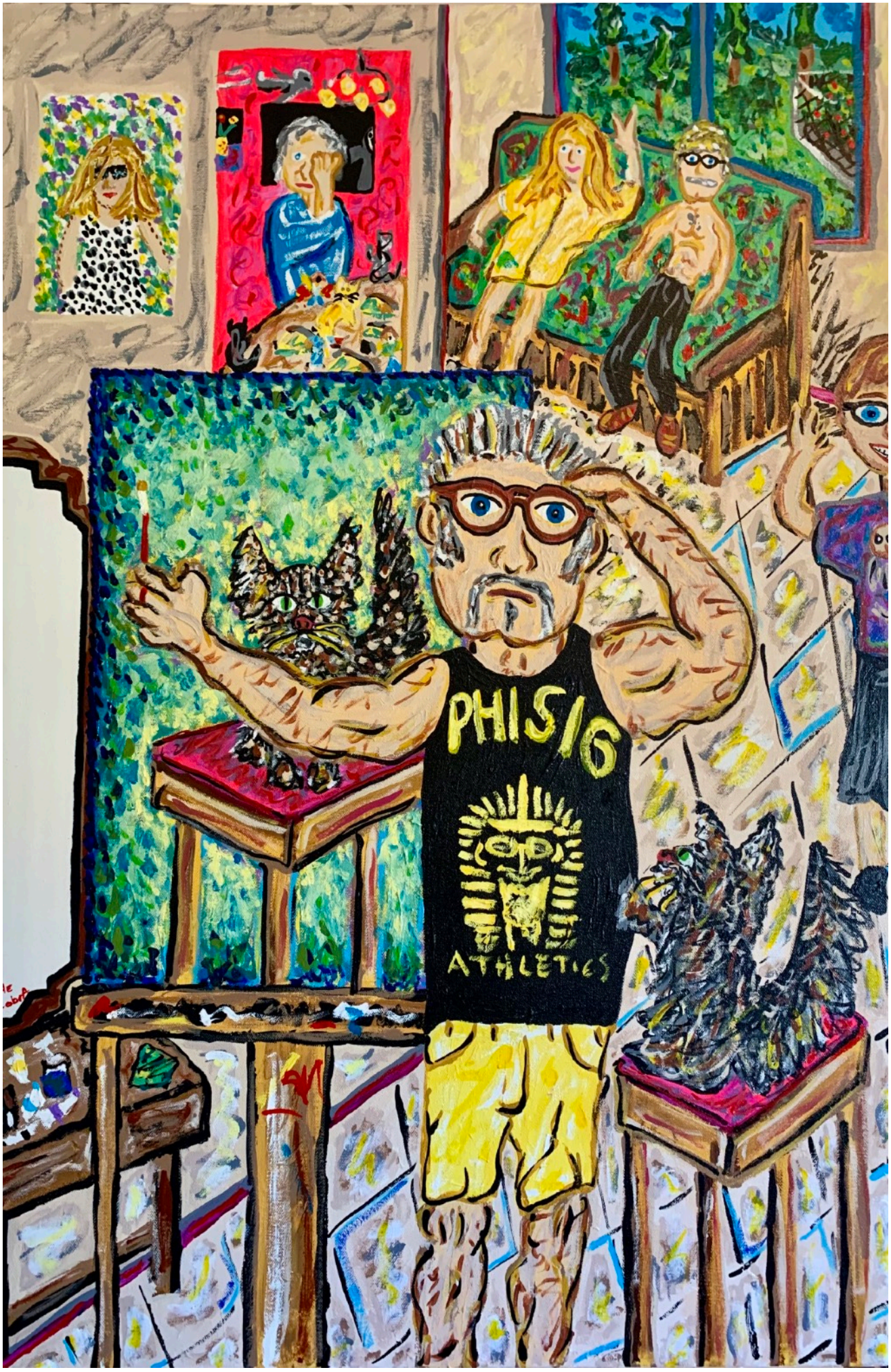
“Well if she's sleeping, let's let her.” Starla turned the ignition.

As we made our twenty-minute drive home, I kept bending down to look into the crate. Still nothing. As we rounded a big corner, I felt a slight disturbance with my pant leg. I looked down to see a small black and gray striped arm with a small set of claws grabbing onto me.

“Hello, Whisper! Nice to finally meet you. I'm Sea,” I proclaimed softly.

Whisper was a small kitten. Definitely the runt of her litter, but she walked around like she was ten feet tall. She never second-guessed herself. She always knew what she wanted, and she quickly learned how to get her messages across to me. She liked to fight and chew on fingers. She would often launch herself into the air and spin around like a thrown toy, landing back on her feet. She was found in an evacuated neighborhood after a wildfire. She was mostly gray, with lots of black stripes on her face and arms. She was quick to purr.




PHISIO
ATHLETICS

Now I had a roommate. Whisper was too little to be left alone in Starla's big house and I was happy to have company. We bonded quickly. Starla called me her cat mom. Now that I had something to care for, I didn't feel the weight of my garbage as often, and when I did, it wasn't as heavy.



With a companion at my side, I got to work writing about my recovery and in a couple of months, I had another hundred pages. I continued to make more and more art based on my symptoms and story. It was a lot of work, but it was the kind of work that felt necessary to process everything I'd been through. Aside from an occasional coffee with Tommy or a chance encounter with Cole, I sought counsel in Francis, who too had moved back from Sacramento.

“I guess the scene has moved on. I'd like to start playing music again, but there doesn't seem to be all that much happening,” I complained to Francis as he played a video game. “It's like everyone agreed to only have one show a month. I know it's not a grand

conspiracy, it just feels like everyone's given up."

"Or we've all gotten old," Francis said in a low tone with little energy.

"Yep, and kids. People have kids now." I said.

"What are you getting at? This isn't new information," Francis said without looking up from the TV.

"Nothing. It just eats at me, that's all. Before I couldn't get my music projects anywhere near finished, and that somehow just built me a bigger buzz. But now I've written and recorded two hundred songs at the hospital and when I post the greatest hits from it all, nobody can be bothered to check it out," I took my last gulp of warm coffee. "Or maybe my new music isn't any good, maybe that's the reason."

"No, we're all just old and the higher achievers have kids. No need to second guess the music, Sea. We've just got to keep trying to break through all the noise, that's all," Francis pontificated between levels on his game.

As I dreamed of more. More waited in a new form.

"You're all so expressive today! I love what everybody's coming up with," said Martha, the energetic woman that ran the community mental health art group. "All the colors look so great!"

I continued to silently glue feathers to my clothespin.

"Oh, yeah, I'm supposed to ask if anyone's interested in joining the peer support training, it's starting at the end of the month," Martha added.

I began to layer my glued feathers, half aware of the table talk.

"Sea? Is this a group that interests you?" Martha asked.

“Peer support?” I set down my arts and crafts creation gently as I tried to hide my indifference to the question. “I don't know, I've got plenty going on right now. What is it?”

“It's training to be a peer support specialist. It's a position that's in high demand. You basically use your learned empathy to help empower people,” Martha explained.

“Oh, maybe. I'll think about it,” I told her.

I brought up the idea to Ron.

“Sea, the team thinks this peer support training is a great idea. You don't have all that much else going on. We insist you pursue it,” Ron told me over the phone, giving me plenty of time to enroll.

I didn't take to the instruction immediately. One of the key directives is to never give advice. I didn't like that. I considered myself to be a wealth of good advice by this point. I’d succeeded at the highest level of mental health treatment and I thought this should earn me some respect. I tried to quit, Ron strongly suggested I keep at it. So I did.



(2019) Putting out effort, wondering why.



As I continued to edit my book and wrap up the accompanying paintings, I was often confronted with the social aspects of doing so.

“I don't know, it was good seeing Cole. But it got weird when I showed him some of the new paintings. I probably shouldn't have. I mean they never look that good on my phone,” I explained to Starla in the kitchen after getting home early.

“What did he say about them? Did you see Eli? How'd he play tonight?” Starla asked as she boiled water for tea.

“Well, it's not what Cole said, he just didn't seem to be that into the idea. I don't know, it was a quick interaction. Maybe I'm reading too much into it. I only talked to him for a sec. Eli sounded okay, but I didn't like it. I don't like hearing all the old songs again. It kinda brings

up too much," I told her. "It was a big letdown for an evening out."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Those guys have always been there for you. I'm sorry it feels like such a disappointment," Starla said as she poured the boiling water. "Do you want peppermint?"

"Yeah," I grabbed my cup off the shelf. "Whatever it was, it wasn't relaxing or fun. If it's this hard just going to a show, how am I supposed to ever do something of my own?"

"Well, Sea," she replied. "It looks like anything you're going to do is going to be hard. So in the future, let's not dance around that." Starla concluded.

The peer support group was progressing as I was starting to appreciate the idea of helping to empower people, but I was dreading what came next. Each person in the class got assigned a day to share their life story, in as much or as little detail as necessary. I was bold and volunteered to go first, but chickened out a few days beforehand. Now I had to wait. As I did, I oscillated between telling the group about my crime, or not. Once the day came, I figured if I was going to tell them of the harsh reality of what I'd done. I better do it to my full capability. So I brought some of my new paintings to better explain things. With a lot of emotion from the group, it was warmly received.

"I'm a little bit underwhelmed with my current ability to do anything with my new paintings. When I used to show my art before, it all just kind of came together naturally. But nothing like that happens for me anymore," I replied to Martha in the art group, when she asked how I was doing.

"If you'd like to bring some in, we could show them here. We'd love to see what you've been working on," Martha proposed a good idea.

"I don't know, they're all kind of weird. They're about my former symptoms," I tried to put out the fire before others could add kindling.

“Perfect! We'd love to see your therapy in action!” Martha exclaimed.

“I don't know, I'll think about it,” I said sheepishly.

A week after hanging a couple paintings, the staff asked me to do a full showing of the series. I explained that it works best as a story. So on a Thursday afternoon. People brought hors d'oeuvres and mingled until I gathered them for my presentation. I hadn't thought about it, but almost none of the staff had any idea about my offense. The presentation totally took everyone by surprise, it was also very emotional and just as warmly received as it was by the peer group.



(2020) Mid February. Starla's house.

“Didn't Sandy do such a good job as my assistant? I love looking over at her changing the paintings as I'm explaining things. This week was huge for me. I did a presentation at the peer center on Monday and one for that psych nurse class on Thursday. Too bad things are getting so weird with this virus. If it weren't around there’s no telling where I'd be doing a presentation next,” I told Starla with mixed emotions as I flicked the cat tamer at Whisper.



“Yeah, it was a big week. We'll just have to see where this situation is going,” Starla acknowledged.

As life restricted, I ran our household errands and got busy with new paintings. I figured since I put so much effort into highly charged emotional reenactments, I should just have fun for a while. Do whatever comes to mind. Plus a song title from a mixtape I once made. That should be enough inspiration to keep busy. Until all this weirdness is over.

“Sea, I've got great news!” Ron told me over the phone at the end of March. “The treatment team met today and everyone agreed that you're ready to move on from our program! I'm so proud of you!”

“Oh wow! Thanks, Ron!” I replied.

“Don't thank me, you did all the work,” he said.

“Maybe, it feels more like a giant team effort. You, me, my family, Francis, the folks over at community mental health,” I started to ramble, unsure of how to mark the occasion. “And Whisper, let's not forget about her.”

“Sure, Whisper's been a huge support. But you're the one who put in the work. You should be proud of that,” Ron stated.

“Now what?” I asked after a second to collect my thoughts.

“I'm got to put a letter together for the court, but don't stress over it. The courts rarely go against our recommendations,” he reassured me.

“The D.A. sure did their homework with this one Mr. Stoltzner,” Lilly began to explain from behind her mask at the end of April. I

already knew things weren't moving smoothly but didn't expect the news to be this bad. “Buried deep in the case law is the right for the D.A. to have this matter settled by a jury. And they're taking it.”

“What?” I said dumbfound



“Yes, I'm sorry. The judge already agreed. But let's remember, you have the outpatient recommendation. That will mean a lot. We might also need you to speak about your recovery. I don't know, I'm just thinking out loud,” Lilly continued. “It might not even matter how much support we put on the stand. This will all come down to the jury and nobody knows what a jury is going to do, especially in a case like this.”

During my time away, Lilly had been promoted at the public defender's office. She suggested another attorney to handle the trial, one with more time to dedicate. His name was Mike. He was roughly my age and familiar with the music scene. He was tall, thin with a short, dark beard. He wore cool ties as if to say “If I have to, they'll be of my own unique choosing.” I got along with him right away.

“Things are coming together quickly with your case. But the problem is with the courts. Due to the virus, California's attorney general has put all jury trials on hold. I don't know what more I can do but advocate against this jury trial. Maybe we're rounding the corner on this virus, maybe not. But right now we're all just going to have to wait and see,” Mike explained to me over the phone.

Francis had occasional work for me remodeling a garage into an additional dwelling unit. I didn't have any experience but learned fast enough to not slow things down. I was grateful to make a little extra money and to have a reason to leave the house. Sometimes I'd bring my

guitar. We were both antsy to get a new music project going, but found that our lives had many roadblocks.

“I like the idea, it just doesn't feel natural on my hand. Can I do it the other way?” I asked Francis in his small music room.

“The part worked fine last week?” he recalled.

“I guess. But I forgot it already. I need a recording,” I argued.

“I sent you the file,” Francis reminded me.

“It didn't work on my phone. My phone is garbage,” I reminded him.

“Why don't you get a new one?” He asked.

“I don't know how that works, besides nobody ever calls me on it. Can't you just burn me a CD?” I asked.

“No, my computer doesn't have a CD drive. None of the new ones do,” he said as he hung his head low. “My stomach hurts.”

“Yeah, let's take a break.” I said.



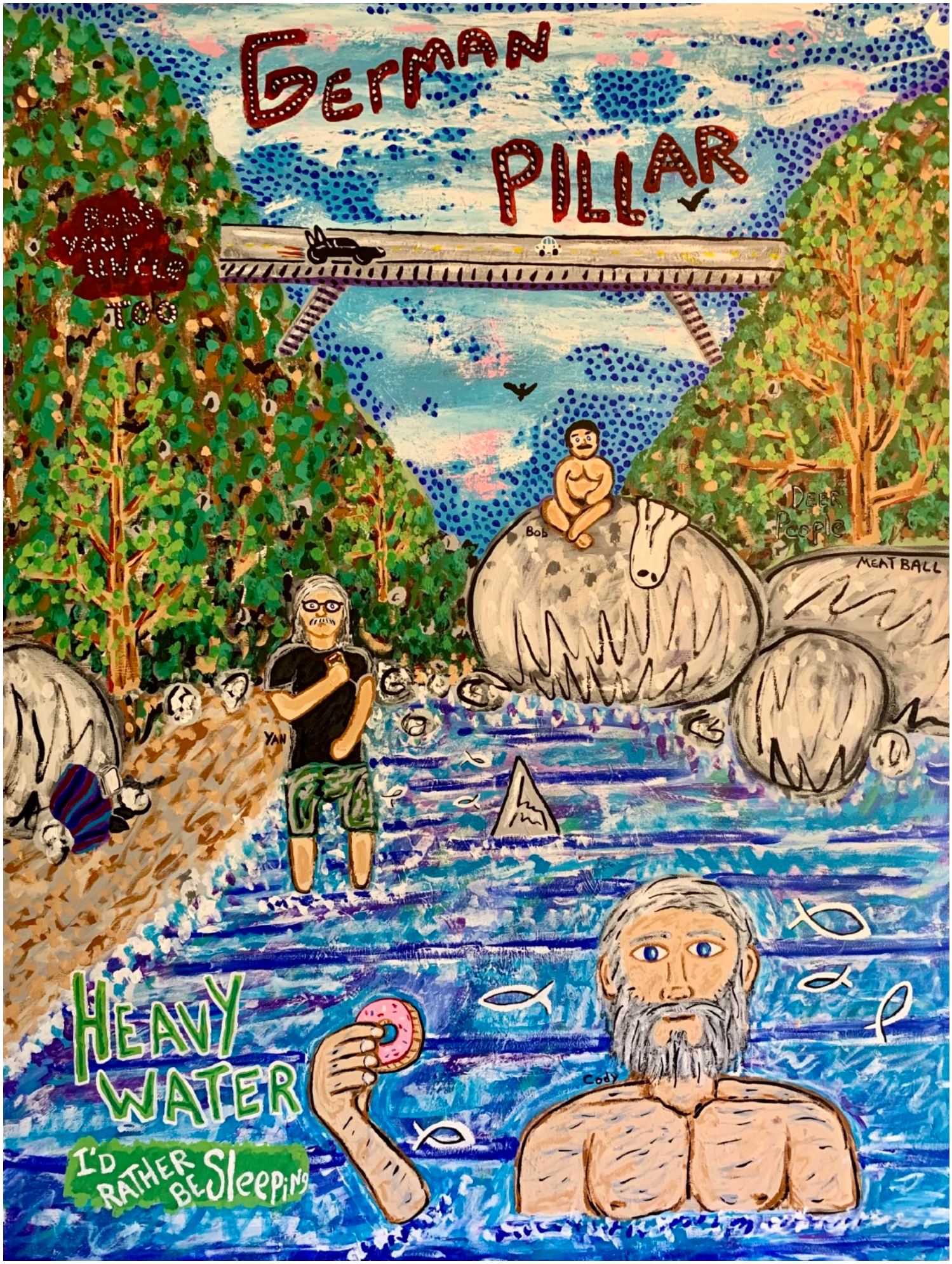
The former owners of Starla's house left a bunch of scrap metal around. Old wheelbarrows, an old horse trough, a washtub, a bunch of T posts, and random lengths of fencing. All things I found useful to reclaim for a container vegetable garden.

I successfully grew lots of zucchinis, tomatoes, lettuce, basil, and cucumbers. I had mixed luck with broccoli, potatoes, carrots, and



onion. There were a few complete failures. I had a few robust pots of mint that I'd use to make tea, then chill, and enjoy throughout the day. The garden became my favorite place to bring my morning coffee and soak up the stillness of nature. Whisper would often be at the window looking out at me. On occasion, I'd be visited by hummingbirds, which always reminded me of the swing bench back at Napa.

As the summer progressed, my new lawyer Mike would check in about my case. Lots of false starts about when court may actually happen. The idea for a knockdown, drag-out, jury trial sounded awful. I'd worked so hard to put together my calm little world. The stress ate at me as I waited for his news to wait some more.


GERMAN PILLAR
Bob's your uncle too
Bob
DEER People
MEAT BALL
YAN
HEAVY WATER
I'D RATHER BE Sleeping
Cody

Once a week, my dad and I would get up early, grab donuts and head out to the Yuba River. A fair trade of factors. Plenty of close parking and few other people, but it was not as refreshing as jumping in during the heat of the day. We still had fun. I enjoyed the peacefulness as I submerged myself in the cool waters. The donuts were a distant second place.

“You know what I like about Whisper?” I asked Starla as she prepared her morning tea.

“Oh no, here it comes,” Starla answered. “What?”

“She's PooPaw and proud, and prepared to Pooka”! I told her with excitement.

“What does that even mean?” Sandy asked from the kitchen table.

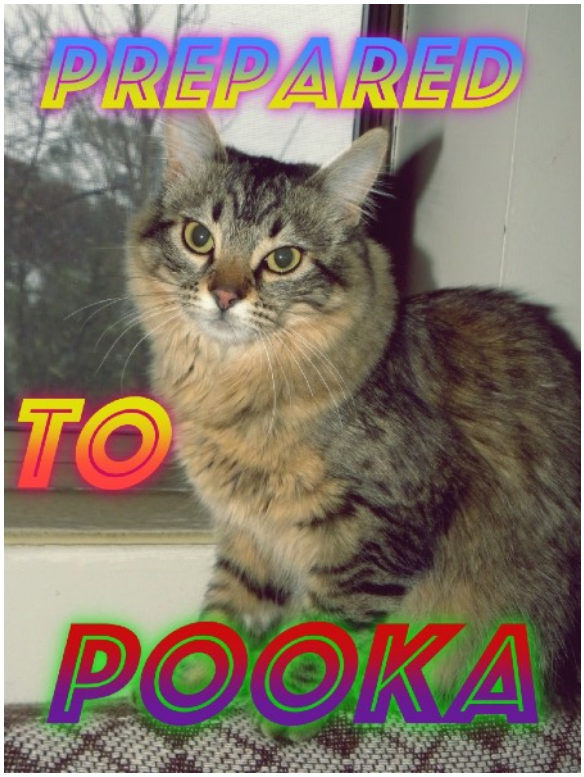
“Look at her go!” I exclaimed as Whisper ran through the room.

“She's going for a new record this morning,” Starla said with a laugh.

“Get out the laser pointer,” Sandy suggested.

“Are you crazy? There'll be nothing left of the house!” I joked.





Even under all the stress of the virus and the suspended court case, I still had a lot of support. I'd get coffee and talk with my local case manager. This was always very casual and reminded me that I was more than just my illness. I'd help out with yard and garden work over at Francis's parent's house. They'd often have me over for dinner where we'd celebrate special occasions. I also made a good friend from the peer support class that I stayed in touch with. Even though I felt like my old friends didn't see my value, I was reminded that many of the people I currently encountered did.

As fall approached, my fortieth birthday was soon upon me. Even though my circle of support was small, I was heartened to see how much my dad and sisters cared about me. We've all been through a lot. I hope that our mother up in heaven is proud of how we've handled our adversities. It's taken much from us, but never more than we had to give to each other.

I finished up the book I started at Napa. ‘F-14, by The Cobra’. It is a much more extensive account of what happened, but something didn't feel right about it.



It took a few months to pinpoint the problem. But once I did, the solution was simple but daunting. I wrote pages about things that should have been summed up in sentences and sentences about things that should have taken up pages. I had ignored the emotional story of my life and just focused on the needless details. I quickly brainstormed this better format, but with the stress of the jury trial looming, I didn't have the needed effort to begin.



(2021) Mid April. My Aunt and Uncle's house on the Coast.

“If it's alright, I think I'm just gonna sit on the deck and work on something for a bit,” I told my aunt, uncle, and dad who were putting on a movie.

“Come on Sea, they've got MASH the Movie! I don't know if I've ever seen that one,” my dad said with real excitement.

“What are we working on now?” My aunt questioned me, aware of my unrelenting artistic drive.

“A book about my story. I needed to blueprint the chapters. Your house is so nice, I kind of just want to sit here under these Redwoods and let it all come back to me,” I told her.

“After that hike today, I'm happy to just relax,” my dad said. “When are you making your famous pizza?”

“In about an hour. The dough is proofing now,” I told him.

“Have fun, Sea,” my aunt instructed.



It was such an important conclusion that I remember the date. April 27th, 2021, I was driving home after working on Francis's house. Many years earlier, Eli had given me a Terry Riley CD that I ignored and stashed in my collection. I found it again buried at the bottom of a box of CDs. I had it on as I drove home and however thoughts are born, it came to me.

Two questions had persisted among the many mental health professionals I've worked with. How can I come to terms with the guilt and remorse of my actions, and why have I been such a success, when so many others who struggle with their mental illness aren't?

I believe the answer to both of those questions are the same. From a young age, my Christian upbringing taught and reinforced in me the idea of forgiveness. Early on in jail, in a moment where I grasped the full weight and reality of what I'd done. I prayed to be forgiven of my horrid sin and as I drove home that day I realized that I was and had been for many years. My real difficulties were the pain I'd caused many living people that I'd affected, but I no longer carried the moral burden of the life I'd taken. That's the reason so many others in similar situations become stagnate, is the idea of their own forgiveness is something that they can't comprehend and thus are forced to struggle under the perpetual weight.



“Hey Sea, did I catch you at a good time?” My lawyer Mike asked me over the phone.

“Good enough. I'm just sitting at my computer. What's up?” I replied.

“It looks like jury trials are about to start back up. Are you ready to put up a fight?”

After a series of quick court proceedings, my trial was set at the beginning of August. The stress ate at me. I kept busy. There were a bunch of irrigation pipes that needed to be replaced under the back deck of Starla's house. It took a week to dig them all up. Once I did, there was a situation.

“Hey!” I shouted to Sandy, as to be heard over her earbuds. “I thought I talked to you about walking the other way around the house. I put up these barriers to keep people out, mainly dad. You know his memory's not great. He almost tripped into one of these trenches the other day. When he sees you walking around them, he thinks it's fine for him to walk around them too. Can you please go the other way?”

Even with my valid point, the stress overwhelmed my ability to be nice about it. The next day I called up my community mental health program and asked to start seeing one of their therapists until after my trial. I quickly had my first session.

“I think the irrigation pipes and the jury trial are the obvious triggers. I know I carry things well enough most of the time, but there's so much to this story. How am I ever supposed to process that first stretch of jail when I was still psychotic and scared of every possible future? What are those emotional scars? I lost everything back then. Did I ever really process losing Roxy? Or did I just add her memory to the complete and total devastation I abandoned when I started taking pills? I don't want to be too melodramatic about it all, but how should a healthy person feel about something this dark and complex?” I asked my new therapist.

As Mike and I prepared the case, I continued my self-care. More paintings, tending to my garden, playing with Whisper, working when I could, my weekly therapy session, and writing at least a page of this book a day.

On the Friday afternoon, the weekend before the start of the jury trial, Mike called me with a last-minute offer from the D.A.

“If you'll agree to meet with a court-appointed forensic psychologist for their assessment of your case, the D.A. will waive their right for the jury trial,” he told me, half relieved and half disappointed. “I think we should take it, even though we have the stronger case for a jury trial. Nobody knows how a jury's ever going to react.”

“Okay, let's do it,” I told him, completely relieved of the unknown circus that could have developed around it.

“Good, that's what I thought you’d say. Unfortunately, the doctor they've suggested isn’t available till mid September. But if it's a matter of waiting a bit to have a better case later, I think there's no reason to not be really optimistic.”



(2022) Early February. My bedroom at Starla's house, watching a “how-to” video.



“Dad, it's not funny!” I yelled to him while laughing in the hall. “I've got to figure this out, I can't believe you forgot how!”

“I can't believe you never learned,” he said between boisterous laughs.

“Yeah, whose job is it to teach their kid how to tie a tie?” I told him as I gave in to a chuckle.

“I'm sorry,” dad said, still laughing. “You'll get it soon, just relax.”

I was meeting Mike for lunch. Court was scheduled for 1:30. With all the virus backlog, everyone was accommodating to get my hearing underway. Even if it would take a handful of nonconsecutive

afternoons. Ron was first up and I was excited to see him. It had been a while. He had been promoted to another outpatient program and either way it turned out, this would be the end of us working together. Over the years we'd often talk about our cats. I made him a painting of his and brought it to him. Over lunch, Mike updated me on the details.

“Ron's been exposed to the virus so he's going to have to video call in. It's too bad, but with the judge, his information will weigh the same.”

Over two and a half hours of direct and cross-examination, Ron's testimony was simple. I met all of the outpatient standards to be released from their supervision. Another date to proceed with my next witness was set for two weeks later.

Next was the program director and therapist from the community mental health program I'd been on for the last four years. Over two and a half hours of direct and cross-examination, her testimony was simple too. I performed very well on their program which gave her no reason to believe that I'd stop taking my medication. Another date to proceed with my next witness was set for two weeks later.

Now it was time to talk with the court-appointed forensic psychologist. Due to technical difficulties during his video call, he took two afternoons, two weeks apart. Over the many hours of direct and cross-examination, his testimony was easy enough to understand. I got low results on all of his tests for dangerousness and he didn't believe that I'd be a danger to the community. Another date was set for the D.A. and Mike to agree on what was submittable evidence from his report.

“Your honor, at this time we'd like to rest our case,” Mike told the Judge after the doctor's report was agreed upon.

“We’re not going to hear from Mr. Stoltzner?” Asked the Judge.

Mike and I decided it wasn't necessary for me to speak on my own behalf for a few reasons. I'm not a medical professional, and anything I said would be taken as an emotional testimony. Which would have been fine, but it may have attracted the newspaper to do a big emotional story. Besides, my dad and sisters were on edge from their experience of dealing with life after my offense. Those seemed to be good reasons to move things along and turn it over to the D.A.

“The people have no witnesses. We rest as well.”

Another date was set for closing arguments two weeks later.

“I think this is about as much as I can handle,” I said to Starla over breakfast as Whisper ran around the kitchen. I’d received an unwelcome letter. “I wasn't expecting for their review to say I was no longer disabled and thus ineligible for Social Security. I don't know what I'm going to do?”

“Well, you'll figure out something. You have to. You haven't come this far in your recovery to give up now because you can't easily find a job due to your criminal record. What do other people on outpatient do?” Starla questioned.

“I don't know, I just hope this peer support job comes together soon. I've already been waiting on it for months. I know it's still in the works and there are people pulling for me. If this doesn’t work out, I don't know what else to hope for.” I vented about my situation.



Many stress-filled weeks later, after finishing up a morning of shoveling goat manure over at a friend's farm, I sat down in my car to drive home but noticed that I had a voicemail to check.

“Hey Sea. I am calling from community mental health to offer you our new Peer Support position. We think you'd be a valued addition to our program. Please call us when you're able. I look forward to working with you.”

Over the next two weeks, as I turned in all the needed paperwork, I half expected to be rejected due to the serious nature of my offense. But late on that second Friday afternoon, I was told everything was in order and to be by the office by 9:00am Monday morning to start my orientation. I watched training videos all week, Mike called about another court postponement. I was used to them by now.

In my second week, I got to start meeting with a few of the people that would become my caseload. It was surreal. Going from relying on Ron's help after leaving the hospital, to now being a support to people who had struggles of their own. It gave me good reason to get out of bed at 6:00 in the morning.

Weeks later Mike finally gave his spirited closing argument to my case. He warmly brought up the unique and inspiring qualities of my recovery. The D.A. couldn't argue otherwise but only suggest that someday it's possible that I'll go off my meds and for that reason should remain under supervision. The Judge wanted to wait and do a written verdict. I also wanted to read a statement, but couldn't until after the verdict was rendered. So another date was set, three and a half weeks later for the big day.



(2022) May 17th, 1:30pm. The Nevada County Courthouse

“Mr. Stoltzner. How are you? Did you talk to Mike?” Asked Kelly, a warm and friendly Lawyer from the Public Defender Office.

“No, why? Is the verdict out already?” I nervously said, after previously witnessing the D.A. give off a few dance moves from across the lobby.

“No, I don't think so,” she told me gently. “Mike is out with a fever. He's pretty sick. He'll have to conference call in today. I'll be with you too in case there's an unforeseen problem.”



“I'm sorry, I knew all that. I talked to Mike yesterday. I thought there was newer news,” I said as Kelly took a seat next to me on the bench. “I'm happy to have the extra support.”

“It should be a simple proceeding. The Judge will read his verdict and I'm told you have a statement you'd like to get on the record.”

“Yeah, I've got it right here. Do you want to have a look?”

After all the years of anticipation for this moment, I quickly realized I was ill-prepared to sit and listen to the judge recount the overwhelming evidence. I just wanted to instantly know the outcome. It was too much to try and recalculate the expert's opinions in real-time. But the case the Judge was building became stronger and stronger and by the end of his written ruling, I was more than ready to hear it.

“Mr. Stoltzner, the court finds that you are restored to sanity.”

The room reacted very little, but I knew Starla, my dad, and Francis seated behind me would soon make up for this.

“Mr. Stoltzner, I believe you have a statement you'd like to read?” Asked the Judge.

“Now? Is this the time?” I said I was overwhelmed by the moment.

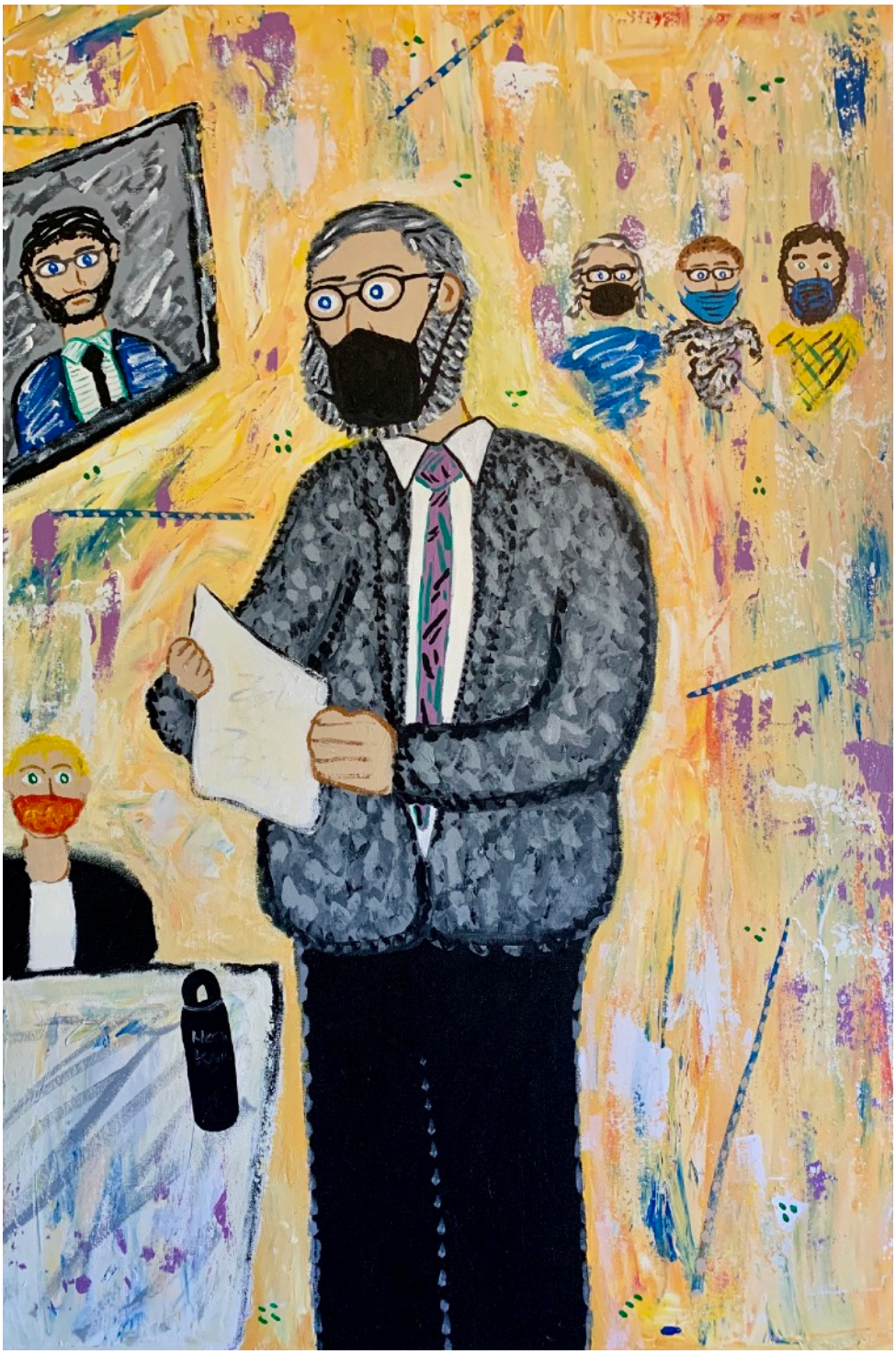
“Yes, when you're ready,” the Judge told me.

I stood up and immediately reached for my insulated Klean Kanteen. It was full. I had added the rest of my ice cubes from my morning iced coffee. But all the ice inhibited my ability to get a good swig of its cool water. I got just enough to moisten my mouth, then I pulled back my mask and started reading.

“After waking up in jail, it took me months to figure out what the term mental illness meant. It took even longer to apply that definition

with my life," I began slowly as the first wave of emotion hit me.

"Films, television, and other media often present mental illness simply, doing a disservice to the many ways it manifests in people's lives. But now, after years of mental health treatment, I understand how my illness works and I have found effective ways to counteract it," I said as I did my best to fight through the complex feelings.



"Unfortunately, this understanding came too late. My undiagnosed illness ultimately brought me to a place of extreme fear and a loss of reality. I took a man's life. I am responsible for that. My insanity at the time likely brings little comfort to my victim's family and friends," I was openly in tears but still reading.

"Since I can not make direct amends with my Victim, I instead seek that forgiveness from our Creator, in nature, solitude, and the stillness around me. But there are many more people that I've negatively affected that I've yet to address," I paused, not understanding

how I'd made it this far already.

“To my Victim's family and friends: I'm deeply sorry for causing so much pain in your lives. There is no way for me to rectify this. I don't deserve your forgiveness. But when I pray, I ask for peace between us and happy memories when you think of your loved one,” I said with relief.

“To the people of Nevada County: My offense has disturbed our peaceful community. I've demanded too much of our shared resources in my rehabilitation. Forgive me.”

“To all of the professionals I've worked with in the jail, the courts, the hospital, and on outpatient treatment: Thank you for treating me fairly and as a human being, even when I didn't feel like one.”

“I'd like to recognize the blessings of my family, who in the instantly chaotic aftermath of my offense, decided to keep loving me anyways. I'd also like to acknowledge my cat Whisper, for seeing in me the loving man I really am,” I read as I gestured to Starla, my dad, and Francis.

“And meaning much less in comparison to everything I've stated before this, I would like to acknowledge that I also lost the woman I loved,” I took a brief second to remember Roxy before moving on.

“I'm still building the road to my future. I'm in great shape today because I focus on healthy habits, surround myself with positive people, and I address issues when they present themselves. I accept that I have a mental illness that needs medication and I continue with 12-step support. This is what a successful rehabilitation looks like.”

“I'm aware that no accomplishment can ever blot out the stain of my offense, but I hope I can use my experience to raise awareness that people with mental illness can live fulfilling lives. As I do, I'll keep driving forward in awe of the growth I see in my life and knowing that this road I'm building is taking me somewhere I want to be. Thank you.”

After I sat down and composed myself, I realized what had just happened. With the accomplishment of earning back my freedom, I also gained the next level of release and understanding of what remorse is and feels like. This has been the spiritual gift of this journey and maybe its truest reward. The Judge gave me some encouraging words and reiterated my need for continued medication. I nodded and took this all to heart.

Just as quickly the doors opened for the afternoon's other cases and we were all rushed out and on the courthouse steps to begin celebrating this huge accomplishment and all the promise of the rest of my life.



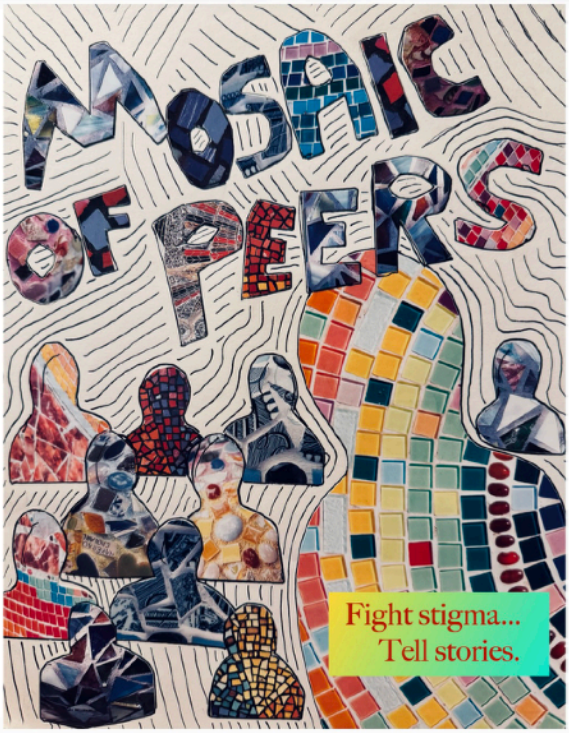
And what will that be? The story of the rest of my life? We shall see. I enjoy working in mental health. I've got some ideas from my time at Napa to keep trying. I'd like to move on from Roxy by finding (and keeping) a mature relationship. I'm committed to a stable home for Whisper and I. Of course, I'll keep on painting and working on music. I'm interested in making videos about mental health-related topics, but haven't found my voice yet. I'll keep trying.

I've never intended to profit off of telling this story. What you're hearing now is the second edition of this book. With the first version, I offered this content as a free download on my website. This didn't go well, from a technical standpoint. People who engage with ebooks are used to common methods of distribution and trying to go my own way to avoid getting money involved sputtered things out.

During this time I mainly pursued mental health opportunities to gain a base of support. This was also misguided. It didn't take long

before I reached the desired audiences, but I found I was either preaching to the choir or bothering people with vested interests against the kind of story I tell.

I intend to always make this story free on my website, but with this second edition and Audiobook, I'm now accepting payment for this material on other commonly used sites to feed my NonProfit (Mosaic of Peers). Whose mission statement is simple.



Fight stigma… tell stories.

I'd like to bring you back to the moment in jail when I picked up the book "A Beautiful Mind," This book made my recovery possible. It was my teacher and roadmap of the many ways mental illness can manifest in people's lives. As great as this story is, the movie is almost 25 years old by now. We need newer stories. That's why I keep coming back to share my truth. It does good. I never please everyone with the way I go about it. But I can't help but believe there's a purpose to my experience and the ways I've found to process it.

Now that this story is finished, please indulge me with one last vignette. One that only lives in my mind. A place I've visited often as I hid under my Khaki nylon jacket at Napa. In a world of possibilities, our struggles are the proof of what could have been under slightly different motivations.



(2011) Late January. An alternate reality, On California's Pacific ocean.

Roxy woke up first and looked over at my peaceful face still locked in slumber. She checked the clock on the nightstand. She wasn't sure when we were needing to be on the road, but it was late enough in the morning for Her, in Her oblivion, to know we were going to be late.



“Sea, are you awake?” She asked in a low tone.

“Hey,” Roxy lightly shook me. “I think we slept in,” She said louder.

“What? Where are we going?” I replied with no movement other than my lips.

“Sea, we've got to meet my friends in Bolinas, pick up the keys to their apartment and find Jon after he lands from his trip,” Roxy explained. “Sea, you must be pretty sleepy, or are you forgetting that tomorrow I'm getting on a plane to visit my family.”

A sheer rush of terror hit me, as every nerve in my body misfired at Roxy's ever so casual statement of our day's agenda. I sat up in bed. I reached for my Klean Kanteen and took a quick drink of its water-cooled by the winter's coastal air and the drafty weather stripping.

“Come on, we've got to get moving,” Roxy said as she locked my

eyes. “Hey, are you okay?”

I fought to be strong. To be like a man that's capable of wielding the kind of power that I am. But instead, I broke down.

“I can't do it. I can't let you leave. I don't think I'll make it this time,” I pleaded as I grabbed her hand with my left's calloused guitar fingers and covered my sobbing eyes with my right hand. “I'm not hiding it well enough. Maybe I am from you, but not from strangers I pass on the street or at the grocery stores. It's not safe for me anywhere. I don't feel safe. And I don't know what that actually means. It's all too weird, please help me!”

“Sea, It's okay. You'll be fine. I'm only going to be gone for a couple of weeks. You'll make it just fine. You probably won't even notice I'm gone that much.” Roxy pulled my arms into hers as She worked to reassure me of my safety. “You'll have your guitar, your weed, and your stickers. What could go wrong?”

“I'm sorry, but you need to hear me. This is as close to the edge as I want to get. You can bring me back. We can have a beautiful life together. I know your mom will be disappointed if you cancel but it's all on the line. Everything we've dreamt up,” I wiped away my most recent tears. “I'm sick. I know it. And I don't really even know what that really means. But I need help and right now you're the only person in my corner. Don't leave me out here all alone. Don't leave me out here with Jon. You're my only chance to beat whatever this is that got a hold over me. Don't let me go because you've made other plans.”

As I laid my head down on Her chest to finish crying, Roxy ran Her fingers through my long and tangled hair. Out of discomfort, She readjusted Her position and looked up at the dream catcher over the headboard. It waved gently from whatever cool breeze had chilled my

canteen. Roxy thought about it all. She weighed our good times against our struggles and multiplied that by the number of opportunities before us. But was it enough? Was fully committing to the problems of this broken-down man, two thousand miles from a home cooked meal worth it in the grand scheme of things? She thought not. She retreated to a previously held belief that life held obvious rewards. The kind that didn't upset Her mother.

As my stream of tears came to an end, I was hesitant to vacate Roxy's chest. I knew the way Her fingers ran through my hair could just as easily be confused by the way my mother would when I was ill as a child.

"Thank you, Roxy," I said almost silently. "For getting me this far."

This was enough for Roxy to ignore all the reasons not to and make a loving move.

"Okay, Sea. I need my other arm now. I need to find the phone," Roxy said softly.

"The phone?" I said as I sat up. "Who do you need to call?"

"Home, I need to let them know that something important has come up. My Mother will understand," Roxy told me with a quiet confidence. "I'm going to go and get us breakfast going. How about you lay off the weed today. And the cigarettes. I'm sick of all the smoking. I mean do you really need all of those cigarettes?"

"No, I don't think I do," I said as I began to regain my natural voice. "Roxy?"

"Yeah," She answered as she put on a sweater.

"When you get back, I have a weird dream to tell you about".



The Epilogue cabin

(2023) New people



“Do you mind? I’m a hugger.” Anna asked as she made her way from her car.

“Not at all.” I said well enough in advance for us to figure out how our arms would wrap around each other.

“This is great! I haven’t left Sacramento since I started this job. I love all the tree’s. This is a great park!” she said.

“Yeah, I like this one OK, too bad the park in Nevada City is being overrun by a music festival. I like it better over there.” I told Anna, in an attempt to put a higher value on a different grove of trees.

“You won’t see me complaining. Should we have a seat?”

Not long after starting my peer support job for the county, I filled out a survey from Peertalk, one of California's longest running peer organizations. It was quickly followed by a request to apply to become my region's representative on a peer advocacy council. I didn’t know anything about any of this, but my boss told me to fill it out anyways. So I did. Immediately forgetting all about it.

A month later I got an email that burst with colored confetti at the word Congratulations. I didn’t know what to expect, I just knew it would involve more learning.

“I’m glad you agreed to meet me. I'm sorry it’s taken so long for me to get back to you.” Anna started to say as we settled into a park bench.

“Oh, it’s fine. I’m not sure what I’m trying to get out of this book” I said as I started to prepare for whatever the upcoming review may be.

“I don’t mince words, but I loved it! I almost read it in one sitting. I had 30 pages left and it was 3:00 in the morning when I put it down. But I finished it over breakfast.” Anna said very directly.

“Really?” I asked.

“Yes. It’s quite an achievement. To survive all of that and now be on the other side working with consumers. Making all this art and crafting a narrative that is compelling and as complex as the situation really is. Well there’s nothing else like it.” Anna confidently told me.

“That’s so nice to hear. It’s not the reality I live in. But it's nice to hear.” I countered.

“Really? What was your take on it?” she asked.

“People just want me to move on. I don’t see any support. I don’t know what to even hope for. It just seems like it’s all been an exercise of snuffing out the dying embers of my artistic ego. I just feel tired.” I explained.

“No, no, no. It’s not like that. Maybe it is here in Nevada County, but not in the rest of the world. Not even in Sacramento 50 miles away. Yours is a story of hope. People need that right now.”

My year as a Peertalk advocate ended with a conference at their office in Sacramento. As their Policy Director, Anna opened up the meeting with an inspiring speech about the work that needed to be done statewide. The next 7 hours were a pressure cooker of passionate ideas, and advocates brainstorming their issues furiously. To me, it was just as chaotic as being back in the National Hotel bar in Nevada City on Christmas Eve.

As the event drew to a close, the moderator noticed that I’d been silent the whole time and gave me the floor. I told the group if we can connect the public to our stories, we’d have the chance to convert them to our causes much faster than facts and details can. I mentioned that I had a series of paintings on my phone that tell my story, and if anyone was interested afterwards I’d be happy to share. I mentioned I had a book too.

“I have to ask, Can I get a copy of your book?” Anna said with a wry smile on her face after showing her my paintings. “I’ve never heard anyone tell this story.”

The crack of a softball bat nearby brought me back to the present moment in the park with Anna. After her short review of Mosaic of Planes, she dug in her purse as I sat with the idea that it was good. People always say nice things to your face. I’ve seen too much to blindly accept praise, but it must be good if she drove all the way up

here to say so. Anna stopped rummaging and pulled out a blue container.

"I'm trying to quit. But this job is so stressful." Anna took a small bite out of a nicotine tablet. "What I really want to know is what was the State hospital like?"

"You didn't like how I described it in the book?" I asked.

"No!" Anna flat out told me.

"What was wrong with it?"

"Listen, I work in politics. I can tell your book carefully dances around sensitive issues. You've done a good job with that. You've had too. I just want to hear it from you. Between us. What was the hospital really like. I know you've got stories." She probed.

Seeing that Anna drove an hour for this conversation, I opened up about the depth of pain in the state hospital. Anna was trying to learn as much as she could about the different situations California mental health consumers can find themselves in.

"So the book wraps up with you leaving the courthouse. When was that?" She asked.

"Let's see, May of 2022." I told her.

"What's happened to you since then?" Anna inquired.

"It's kind of a bummer story. Do you really want to hear it?" I said.

"Your whole story is full of bummers. I can handle it." Anna told me as she took another bite of her tablet.

"Well, the day after I was restored to sanity, I tested positive with Covid for the first time. Then so did my Dad and then Sandy. My Dad got hit really hard. We'd been noticing the onset of dementia for a couple of years, but after having covid, his mind was gone. La la land.

We spent a rough week with him at home, thinking after he got better from Covid his mind would come back too, but each day got worse."

"He was trying to climb the furniture in his bedroom. So we took it all out and put his mattress on the floor. He wouldn't sleep, he wouldn't eat. He would just talk gibberish. Once we took him to the hospital, they told us he had pneumonia. He was quickly on death's door. I braced myself to lose him. But his body bounced back. His mind stayed elsewhere."

"They sent him to an assisted living center in Sacramento. My sisters and I would visit often with something good to eat. We could tell he remembered us, but he made little sense and was frustrated. He escaped the facility a number of times. We'd get a call, " You're dad found his way out again. We'll let you know when he turns up." It was horrible thinking of him wandering around Sacramento without his wits and senses. He was at the assisted living house for about a year before he died."



"I didn't know Covid could do that?" Anna said after a pause for me to collect myself.

“I didn’t either.” I replied. “Ok. That’s enough of that story”

I raised my arms in a stretch as Anna checked her phone. After updating herself on who’d been texting, Anna followed with the next question.

“Can we get some food? Are we anywhere near civilization or is this town just tree’s”?

Anna and I hit it off right away. Our first month together was great. But things fell apart quickly there after. As we evaluated parting ways Anna made it clear that I needed to process my experience deeper.

With this as the last productive word between us, our time together ended.

Enter Charles



When I got my county peer support job, I had to change all of my mental health providers due to a conflict of interests. My previous therapist was now my boss and she said Charles was the only person she’d trust me with.

Charles was quickly pleasant and personable, and I could tell he’d seen about everything there was to see as a therapist and I wondered if he’d worked with anyone in my situation.

Charles had been one of the clinical supervisors at Behavioral

Health before I got hired on. He was very knowledgeable about the world I was navigating and we spent a decent amount of time talking about that. He was in high demand as a therapist. That was fine with me. I wasn't excited about starting over with someone new. We met once a month for the first year and slowly circled the drain of the black hole that was my guilt, shame and remorse.

But after the break up with Anna, I decided to take her advice and go deeper.

"Who does that really?" I said again in frustration.

"What? Break up in a text? She does apparently. But the good news is you've learned that about her and you don't have to do this again." Charles replied in a session.

"I've been thinking about the angst I bring to everything. Her words not mine. I've just assumed that I'm in the best shape that I can be after everything that's happened. But I get all this pressure to be a nice new shiny happy person. Like that's what the hospital is supposed to churn out. It's too unrealistic." I rambled.

"No, you can be more. I wasn't sure if you were ready to be. I can work with you on this. It won't be fun. We'll have to go to some dark places." Charles calmly explained.

"I didn't know that was an option? What? Do we need to set up another appointment for this kind of work? I asked.

"No, we can start right now. If you really want to?" Charles offered.

"Ok, but I'm doing this for me, and not for her. I really want to be in a better place the next time I meet someone." I explained without seeing the contradiction.

"Great. OK Sea. Sit back in your chair and take a deep breath… relax… try not to think about anything but this moment… Not what you

have to do after our session… not what you're going to have for lunch… just sit there and exist for a minute…

So I did.

"Now Sea, let's set out our intentions… What are we trying to accomplish…" Charles directed.

"I'd like to process deeper levels of my guilt, shame and remorse." I exclaimed.

"Ok. Now that we are relaxed and not attached to the outcome of our normal day. What comes to mind?" Charles lightly knocked over the first domino.

"My friend's daughter. She's older now. He's told me she's started to play music." I answered.

"Ok. We acknowledge that. What comes next?" Charles asked.

"I told a joke to Starla a few weeks ago, she didn't think it was funny. I shouldn't have said that." I told him.

"Ok. We acknowledge that too. After a second tell me what comes to you next?" Charles asked again.

"I see my reflection. I've got a rash all over my eyes. I remember this. I'm back in the jail cell. I look so different. I look like I'm on the verge of tears and could rip the sink out of the wall at the same time." I told Charles, attentively listening comfortably from his seat.

"Yes. This is who we've come for. This version of you in all of this pain. Tell me, can you feel what he's feeling?" Charles asked.

"Kind of, I mean I know I don't want to. He scares me. I know he feels hopeless. I don't want to feel that way again." I said.

"That's alright, I don't want you to do anything you're not ready to do. But you did bring him here. Give him a chance to express why he came. Can you do that?" Charles asked kindly.

"I can… wow… I feel the tension in my shoulders. I feel the need to brush away these flaky scabs on my eyelid, I feel the painful

pink raw skin beneath. I just want to scream. I just want my hour in the dayroom so I can microwave a hot cup of coffee and take a hot shower. I know the water will burn my eyelids, but I'm tired of being cold in my cell. I hate it! The sweatshirt they gave me doesn't fit! It's better to just use it as a pillow and cower under that itchy wool blanket than be stuffed into that tight sweatshirt! It makes me feel like my heart is going to burst!"

"What else are you feeling as you look at him?" Charles probed.

"He's angry. He's confused. He won't pray after that man died. He wants to destroy things. He wants the red button for all the nukes in the world so he can push it with glee that there won't be anyone around left to remember him and what he's done. He's so tired. I can tell he's in extra pain just seeing me in his eye. He knows that a life like mine will never be possible." I explained.

"Ok. Sea. Since we're here, how can we help him? If you can imagine a doorway for him, where does he want to go?" Charles offered a solution.

"A cabin. In the woods. With trees… and birds… maybe a view of a snow covered mountain?" I answered.

"Great, Can you grab his hand? Can you lead him through the door into this cabin?" He asked.

"I can… ok… he's in." I said

"What is he doing now?" Charles wondered after the intensity of my breathing paused.

"He laid down on the couch in front of the fire. He's asleep already… He doesn't look angry anymore." I painted Charles the vision in my mind.

"Great! Sea? Is there a blanket you can put over him? We're going to leave him now and we want to make sure he's warm and taken care of." Charles told me to end the experience.



Over the next handful of sessions, Charles and I found many versions of myself still in pain and trapped by guilt, shame and remorse. They were all helped out of their situations and brought to the cabin as well. Once collected, Charles asked a new question.

"Can you think of an element of nature to help these guys get rid of all the pain inside?"

"Yes, water. Let's take them to the Ocean!" I replied.

After this decree, I vividly watched all the versions of myself I'd collected rush out the cabin onto a beach and into the waves of the Pacific Ocean. As the waves crashed over them, I saw the dark roots of the sludge inside start to wash away.

(2024) Vague details.

At that moment I felt freed. Anna and I reconciled. She could tell I was different. But after a few more months other issues arose and we parted ways again.

Starla was done looking out at the Sierra Nevada mountains. She needed a change and after months of processing our Mom and Dads belongings, and then a seemingly endless supply of boxes from our childhood, my sisters' and my life was reduced to its essentials and the house was put on the market. A buyer was soon interested and Whisper and I were lucky to find a cabin in Nevada City to start our next chapter.

(2025) It surprises me that I never mentioned where my art comes from till now.



The time seemed right to release this book. I gave it a solid effort, but I knew with my current resources it was going to take a while to see what could come from it. The managers at work became aware and interested in my presentation. They recommended me to an agency that certifies peer support and other California state mandated behavioral health issues to present for their staff retreat in Monterey. This led to another presentation in front of 90 behavioral health leaders from across the state. As I was being introduced, I got "the Flash!"

Charles had been annoying me. He kept bringing it up.

"So what I don't understand is, why haven't you painted the offense?" Charles asked in a session.

"I did! It's the blue one where he grabs my arm." I told him in protest.

"No, that's a small detail of it. Come on, you've painted 25 paintings about this topic and you stop right before the most important part." Charles argued.

"I don't think people can handle it." I defended myself.

"No, I don't think *you* could handle it. People watch violent movies and video games everyday. People can handle what you've done. I think there's a part of you that still wants to hide this." Charles said this much kinder than written words suggest.



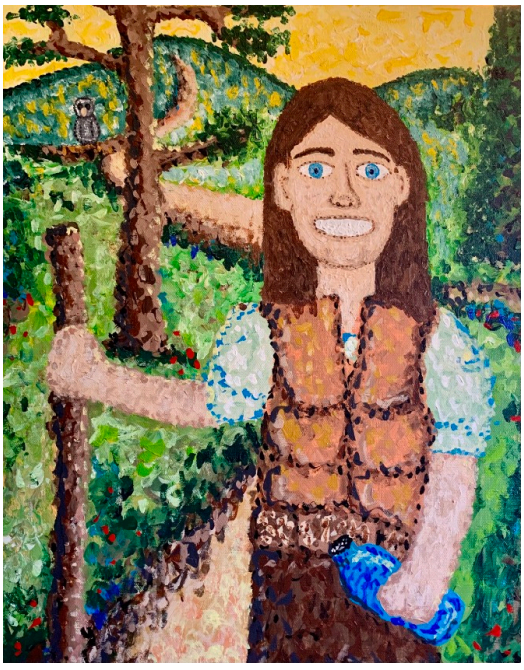
"You've got a point. But I haven't seen "the Flash." All of my paintings start out with a quick flash in my mind. My paintings never turn out good if there's no flash." I explained.

"Well, how do you get "the Flash?"

Charles asked with curiosity.

"I don't know? It's the mystical part of my life as an artist. The part I don't get to control, the part I don't fight. But I'll do it if I ever get "the flash" of the offense, I'll paint whatever I see." I said to Charles to move things along.

A week had passed since I saw "the Flash" before my last presentation. On Monday morning I woke up in a mood. When I got home from work I went straight to my bed. Tuesday was worse. Somehow I made it through the motions at work before retreating to my bed after filling Whispers food bowl and filling my belly. On Wednesday, I had an online meeting at work and I couldn't hide what I was feeling anymore. One of the managers interrupted the call to stop and ask if I was doing alright? But I wasn't. I had no idea what was going wrong. I just knew at that moment, I didn't care if I lived or died.



"This sounds rough, Sea. Have you eaten today? Let's start with that." Starla said from her new home 35 miles away.

"Not really. I was going to pick up some Indian food but ended up back in bed after work." I explained.

"What? If anything caused this?" Starla started the investigation.

"The best way I can explain it is the First Law of Thermodynamics." I said lifelessly.

"I'm sorry, I've forgotten that one." Starla answered.

"Energy can not be destroyed, it can only be converted. My presentation stirs up all kinds of energy in me. I don't know why? But it's trying to make me feel this right now. If this is going to be the outcome of doing the presentations. I'm not sure if I should be pursuing

them further. I hope there's some good coming from them, but right now they're really costing me." I barked at Starla, forgetting that she was graciously helping me.

"I just need to know you're going to be safe tonight." Starla pleaded.

"I am. It's more of an ambivalence to death than a call to action." I reassured her.

"Ok. Go get some food! That's an order soldier."

The next morning I woke up with my alarm and immediately understood what was going on. I had seen "the Flash" two weeks earlier and had forgotten all about it. Now was the time to capture what the guilt, shame and remorse looked like.

I got my easel out of storage and bought a 40" by 30" canvas after work. Now I was all set up when I got home Friday with my favorite burrito in hand. I ate peacefully as I stared at the blank canvas wondering what the experience had in store for me. The hardest part was finding a pencil to start the sketch and restarting side A of the "Sigur Ros" album "( )" every 20 minutes. Once I divided up the sections and crafted the subject's form, my tubes of acrylic paints emerged. Three and a half hours later, it was complete. I sat in awe of this painting, the experience in discovering it and the full journey to arrive at this point of my life. The idea of what comes next didn't matter. I found a new peace.





Copyright 2026 Sea Stoltzner

I hope you find these three additional stories helpful. It takes a lot of time and work to find healing, but I've found it's always worth the effort and investment. If in reading my story, you feel sorry for me that I've had to experience so much pain to arrive at what might seem to be a return to something normal, I apologize and have missed the mark that I've aimed for. My lesson has been simple: I am blessed to have a life on this Earth. In the depths of my suffering I've found a better understanding of myself and the things in my life that matter most. Maybe this is best summed up in lyric to a song I wrote at Napa State Hospital called "All of all."

Here's what I think of the fire that tests me…
I would have chosen other ways… but life sure got my attention.

I haven't come this far with my art and story to just walk away without giving you the opportunity to see this artistic resolution. I'm putting a great new picture of Whisper on the next page. She's such a joy to me. You can leave on that note and I wouldn't fault you anything if you did. On the last page will simply be my reenactment of the worst moment of my life. Charles thinks you can handle it. But the kinship I feel with you, a reader that's made it this far, is to allow you to just walk away with this darling shot of Whisper and leave the memory of what happened on the Alta Sierra airport alone with me.





Whisper is such a joy to me

Please skip the last picture

