

**b**ECAUSE

**JACK A. LANGEDIJK**

because

JACK A. LANGEDIJK

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## DEDICATION

To all those who may feel alone in their struggles.  
And to each and every person who takes the time  
to show them that they are not alone.

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Asking questions is what makes us who we are.





## 1. 16 WEEKS AGO – SEEMA’S OFFICE

“I’m not supposed to be here!” Robert Sanchez spoke the moment Seema Pourshadi walked into the room.

“Seriously, this is wrong! I’m not supposed to be here. Really, I don’t know why I’m here. I never requested this.”

Without a word, Seema went and sat behind the desk facing Robert.

“No offence to you and what you do, but I’m not supposed to be here.”

Seema simply smiled and nodded. Her reaction surprised him.

“Oh—Okay then. So me being here—this *is* a mistake?”

Seema kept smiling as Robert rambled on. “You see, when Benny said I had an appointment with you after my session, I thought you were a new specialist I had to see—you know, going to talk about the new—Argh! Anyway, it doesn’t matter, it’s pretty obvious you are a...a...you know—Anyway, I’m sorry. Benny must have made the mistake. I’m not supposed to be here, right?”

“Okay. But Mr. Sanchez, do you know where it is you’re supposed to be?”

The question stopped Robert cold. He knew it was not meant to be anything more than just asking him what room he was supposed to be in but the innocent question forced a dawning realization that other than the multitude of doctors’ appointments and physio sessions, he really didn’t have any other place that he was supposed to be. The purpose of his days had changed. He had now become the one seeking help from other people.

Seema waited for Robert to answer her question. It soon became obvious that he was lost for words, so she spoke. “Benny didn’t make a

mistake, Mr. Sanchez. He was the one who told me I needed to see you.”

“No, Benny would *not* have done that! He knows! I told him. We talked about it. He knows.”

“Knows what, Mr. Sanchez?”

“Can you please stop with the ‘Mr. Sanchez?’ I’m not here for a job interview!”

“All right, ‘Roberto,’ is it?”

“Just call me Robert.”

“Oh, Robert, that’s such a great name! All right, Robert, you were saying Benny knows something. So what does he know?”

Robert squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. Other than his parents, very few people ever called him Roberto. The name had suited him more when he was in his twenties when his dark brown hair was all slicked back and he sported a very stylish Clarke Gable moustache. But now at forty-eight, a clean-shaven Robert with a receding hairline was a much closer match to Alan Alda during his last days in *MASH*.

“Look, he just knows, okay?” Robert held his hand up as if to signal he wanted this conversation to be over.

Seema just nodded in agreement.

“Don’t do that, okay?” Robert looked at Seema who just stared back at him.

“Okay—look, please just don’t do that!”

“I’m sorry, do what?”

“That...that...nodding your head all the time, like you know something I don’t. I’ve worked with a lot of people, you know, and I know what *this* is. And I’m sorry if Benny asked you. That just makes him another...Damn him! Great! Another person I can’t trust around here!”

“I don’t think he meant you any harm, Robert. Please don’t think Benny was being untrustworthy. I wouldn’t want to—”

“—But he knew! I told him. We talked about it so many times.”

“About what, Robert?” Seema asked calmly in her pleasant Middle Eastern accent.

“About this! About seeing any kind of shrink, therapist, mind doctor. I don’t know, whatever the hell you call yourself. ‘Cause he knew! He damn well knew that *I don’t want to be here!*”

“Well, if he knew that you didn’t want to be here, do you think Benny knows where you want to be, Robert?”

“No! No! And what the hell kind of question is that? Just stop it, all right?”

“I’m sorry, Robert, stop what?”

“All these damn questions! Look, I don’t think anybody knows

where I want to be, all right? For God's sake, I don't even know where I want to be anymore!"

Seema watched Robert squeeze his eyes closed again, lower his head, and then rock slightly in his chair. After a few moments, he lifted his head and scanned the room, purposely avoiding her eyes.

The room was a small office space with one window that overlooked a schoolyard. Seema sat in a red cushioned chair behind a plain, dark brown desk. On the wall hung a single, framed picture of a majestic black horse flying through the clouds. Among some obvious therapy-titled books, the few bookshelves behind the desk contained a strikingly diverse selection of novels. It looked as if the complete *Twilight* series, *Hardy Boys* and *James Bond* were there. *Miss Marple*, *Jane Eyre* and many of John Grisham's books were scattered over three different shelves. Another shelf seemed completely dedicated to the works of Dr. Seuss. The desk was virtually empty except for two unopened white envelopes and a mug filled with pens and pencils. Dr. Seuss's book entitled *Happy Birthday to You!* laid open and face up.

Robert looked up at Seema. Her short dark hair reflected a red glow from the scarf that was loosely draped over her head and around her neck.

"I'm sorry, all right?" Robert spoke unapologetically. "I'm sorry I got upset, but please understand, that ever since this happened, it seems that I have no choice anymore...about anything. Everyone always tells me to be here or there, see this doctor or that specialist. And I made it very clear to everyone—no offence to you, Doctor, but I've made it *very* clear that I don't want to be in any, you know—this! Therapy! That's why I said I'm not supposed to be here. Is that clear?"

Seema's face was hard to read. She possessed vaguely masculine features, and although the deep-set eyes and square jaw did not make her outwardly attractive, her blue eyes seemed to soften all the features of her face when she smiled.

"Well, Robert, first let me tell you that my name is Seema. I am the rehabilitation centre's assessment consultant. If I don't give your insurance provider an assessment they will stop paying for your treatment. And second, concerning choices, I am also here to consult with you and help you with all the choices you have now and after you leave this rehab—"

"—Choices? What the *hell* does that mean?"

Seema's smile disappeared from her face. "Well, Robert. Even right now, you have a choice. When you came into this room you had the choice of whether to say, 'hello,' or to just keep rudely interrupting me."

*Rudely interrupting her?* Robert's jaw dropped and his eyes widened. He was no longer accustomed to anyone being so blunt towards him. Ever

since that day, no one had ever spoken to him like this no matter how irritable or nasty he became. Regardless of his behaviour, everyone always seemed to become more understanding and show more kindness towards him, whether he deserved it or not.

“And maybe to help with your choice making,” Seema continued, without any hint of playfulness, “I should also tell you that today is my birthday.”

Lately, hearing the word “birthday” or even the slightest mention of anything to do with celebration would cause Robert to react with extreme irritability verging on anger. He had developed some kind of resentment to all things celebratory. But he definitely didn’t want Seema diagnosing anything more about him so he masked his reaction with a forced smile and gestured to the opened Dr. Seuss book on her desk.

“Oh. So that’s why you have that book on your desk?”

“Before I answer your question, Robert, I would like to know what choice you have made.”

Robert gave her a puzzling look. “What the—”

“—The choice to say, ‘hello,’ or interrupt.” She smiled.

Robert rolled his eyes as he responded, “Oh God, you’re kidding me! Really? Choice? Yeah, okay then, sure...” He forced another smile. “Hello.”

Seema waited for a moment for his greeting to register, nodded her head and smiled, “Hello, Robert.” She then picked up the book. “And *yes*, to answer your question, that is why this book is on my desk; it’s a gift from my son and daughter. Mr. Seuss was quite a profound writer, don’t you think?”

“Dr. Seuss.” He corrected her.

She simply smiled again and flipped to a page. “Listen to this: ‘Today you are You, that is truer than true. There is no one alive who is Youer than You.’”

Seema turned the book around for Robert to see the picture inside. It was a bright orange, furry creature happily blowing out the rainbow of candles on his colourful cake.

“I’ve gotta get the hell out of here,” Robert said as he abruptly turned towards the door.

## 2. PRESENT DAY – DRIVING TO THE HOTEL

*I took my love...  
Climbed a mountain...  
Turned around...*

The song played. Not a sad song. Not really a happy song either. But it was *their* song. Monique turned up the volume and smiled a hopeful smile while looking at her husband, Robert, in the rear-view mirror. They always played this song while driving to the airport to drop off Robert for one of his mountain climbing adventures.

Robert had always half-joked that the song was bad luck because of its title, but Monique would always say, “No, it has nothing to do with luck; the song’s title is just a metaphor. You know, Bobby...to me the song is about some kind of cleansing.”

“Oh, of course,” Robert once joked. “How did I not see it? It’s a song to inspire janitors!” Yet, his funny responses only encouraged Monique to dig even deeper.

“It’s like...really touching honesty or maybe finally realizing what one’s true love is.”

“Ah! So, in the end it’s just another silly love song?” Robert always tried to get his wife to finally commit to one meaning, but Monique loved the challenge of coming up with different meanings throughout the years.

“Okay, maybe it’s finally facing the truth of one’s self—No, wait. Wait, I have it! You know how a snake sheds its skin?” She would get so excited. “Oh wait, I know...maybe a mountain has to shed things too and maybe it’s saying that we are mountains...and, just like mountains, we all have to shed our masks at some point in our lives as well.”

Although Robert's mind was often preoccupied on those drives to the airport, this song never failed to connect them. It didn't matter what was said; it was more about what was felt and these conversations always left Monique with the closeness she so desperately needed before seeing him off. A protection against the fear that this might be the last moment they would ever share together.

Monique and Robert had a pact to never speak about this fear. The two of them avoided any conversation mentioning the dangers of those climbs and the reality of death on those mountains. Yet, the thought that something terrible might happen was always alive inside her the whole time he was gone. She never really got used to it. So, no matter how tired or sleepy they both might be, she always made sure to somehow make this drive to the airport count.

The conversation today sadly ended up becoming a monologue as Robert sat in a stony silence in the back seat. His empty eyes just stared straight ahead, not once catching any of Monique's smiles or her playful winks in the mirror. So she tried the only other way she knew to connect with him. She started to sing along with the song and with each verse, sang a little bit louder. This had always provoked Robert to sing along, mostly to keep her in key or to get her to sing the right words.

Monique had a unique gift for rhyming and changing the lyrics to any song. It was her way of communicating a message. There was the time when her daughter needed to clean her room, and she used the song "When You Wish Upon a Star" but changed the lyrics to "*If you do not clean your room, you'll be waking to your doom...*" And after her rhyming couplet, like a performer in a Vaudeville show, Monique would stop and hold her hand out, to encourage her audience to finish her thought and sing back to her. So that day her daughter completed the song by singing, "*Yes I know, that dirty socks just...do...not...bloom...*"

Monique leaned forward in anticipation, turned up the volume and looked in the mirror. But just as she did, she caught Robert impatiently sighing and rolling his eyes. *Wham!* Another door slammed shut and the hope of any clever rhymes quickly escaped her.

"Oh sorry, Robert, I guess that was too loud. Sorry!"

She tried to hide her hurt as she turned the sound down and for the next minute she just sang quietly along with Stevie Nicks.

When it came to the part where Stevie stopped singing and spoke, "I don't know" to the question about "being able to handle the seasons of one's life," Monique also stopped and made another attempt to reach out. "I love those lines. It's so true, isn't it, Bobby, that the older we get, the more it seems we don't know?"

Robert finally broke his silence. "Really, Monique? Of all the songs,

you have to pick this one? *This* one? Do you even know what that song is called?”

“Yes, it’s called...” Monique’s face went pale instantly. *Oh my God! Landslide...The song is called...* “Landslide,” she whispered slowly to herself.

“I’m sorry, Bobby...I’m so sorry, I wasn’t thinking—It’s just that I thought since you are talking today about—Oh, I’m sorry, Bobby—you’re right, I *wasn’t* thinking!” She turned off the CD player and looked in the mirror, smiling apologetically, but Robert just looked straight through her with the same emotionless stare that had masked his face for the past six months.

During those months, as Robert was drifting farther and farther away from her, Monique had desperately tried everything she could to reach out to her husband and pull him back to her. Now it seemed that even their song, the old failsafe—the trusty emergency lifeline that had rescued them many times before—had failed to conjure up even the tiniest bit of a connection between them.

*Keep smiling*, she said to herself. *I know today will help him. I know it will! I know it will!*

She gave Robert one last look in the mirror, trying to hold on to her smiling disguise despite the stabbing pain of losing one more thing that they had always shared.

Monique drove on as the silence deepened, listening only to the rhythm of the windshield wipers beating against the snowy wet rain and, from the rear-view mirror, she watched her husband drift even farther away.

### 3. 15 WEEKS AGO – SEEMA’S OFFICE

“Look, I came to see you because my wife got a call from our insurance company and they said they hadn’t received an assessment from you yet.”

Seema stood up from behind her desk to greet Robert. “Hello, Robert.”

Robert ignored her. “So, it seems that I have to do this.”

“Hello, Robert!”

“So, let’s do it. What do you need to assess?”

Seema raised her hand like a young girl in classroom wanting to ask a question. Robert’s hands opened up.

“*What?*”

“Robert? Hello!”

Robert snorted impatiently, “Oh, God! Yeah, whatever—Hello! Is that what you are assessing...if I say hello or not?”

“Well, not really, Robert. It’s just...No, actually—I’m sorry about that. I changed my mind. Yes, it *is* part of the assessment.”

“So the insurance will stop paying if I don’t say hello?”

“Let me ask you a question, Robert. It’s a fairly straightforward question. Before you came here, before this happened, did you usually say ‘hello,’ to people when you met them?”

Robert rubbed his face and exhaled with a low, exasperated sound. “Yeah, probably—I always said ‘hello.’ So?”

“And now you choose not to say, ‘hello?’”

“Look, lady! Do you have any idea what I’ve been through, or what it’s like for me now?”

“No, Robert, I don’t. I absolutely have no idea. And that’s why you’re here, so I can find out. So I can assess how much time, resources

and care you will need.”

Robert arched his head back and ran his hands through his hair. He looked up at the ceiling and muttered, “Okay, okay, okay! Please! Can we just get this done so I can get out of here?”

Robert stared at the ceiling, his hands supporting his head and waited for her questions, but Seema stayed silent. Then he heard her open a drawer, pull out a piece of paper and start to write. He lowered his hands and looked at Seema, who was now intently focused on what she was writing.

Robert waited for her to stop, thinking that she was going to ask him the assessment questions, but Seema just kept on writing. Robert lifted his head slightly to look, but he was too far away to make out what she was writing. Seema stopped for a second, put the pen to her lips, thought for a moment, then went back to her paper and wrote something more.

Robert started to feel a little anxious about what she could be putting down about him, so he finally blurted out, “All right already! What are you writing?”

Without looking up, Seema gave him a wait-a-second signal with her hand and kept on writing. He waited a couple of beats, watching her pen furiously scratch down word after word. Robert couldn't take it any longer and he slammed his hands down on the arms of his chair.

“What the hell are you saying about me there? What...just ‘cause I didn't say hello?”

Seema wrote for a few seconds more, then stopped. She looked up at Robert and smiled slightly. “I'm so sorry Robert. I didn't mean for you to get upset. It's just...well, I had to write that down before I forgot it. Otherwise it would bother me all day.”

“*What?* That I didn't say, ‘hello’? Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt or bother you.”

“Oh no, Robert. No, you didn't hurt me, not at all! But I must confess that it did bother me, you *choosing* not to say hello...but we'll speak of that later. No, I was writing about something I heard last night. I saw that film *Les Misérables*. Have you seen it?”

Robert shook his head.

“It is just this one line that got me wondering. It's near the end and all the characters are singing together and they sing—”

Seema stopped and raised her hand. “Oh, please don't worry, I won't sing it. But it goes something like ‘to love another person is to see the face of God.’ It's a curious line, isn't it? I mean, at face value, its literal meaning seems obvious, but is it?”

Robert looked annoyed and said nothing as Seema continued, “Anyway, I just needed to jot down some ideas I had about that line

because, in one way, I'm wondering, is it when we love someone that we...that we can see the face of God? So, if we love many different ways and many different people, does that mean God's face also changes? Or is it saying that only when we love do we get closer to actually facing God and then realize all that God means to us?"

Seema saw Robert look away. "Oh, don't worry, Robert, I'm not expecting you to answer, it's just that it really made me think. Because it could even be this: when we stop loving someone, does God's face then suddenly vanish from us? It's quite interesting, don't you think? One simple line and *so* many questions! Don't worry; I'm not a religious fanatic, but don't you just find it incredible when one thing can have so many meanings? Anyway, forgive me, but if I didn't write that thought down, I just know my focus would have been off. So, thank you for giving me time, Mr. Sanchez."

Robert squinted and felt a bit uneasy. "That's good—Ah, whatever. Good, you got that down. So, um...can we just start this assessment you have to do?"

Seema's blue eyes smiled. "Thanks for being so understanding, Robert."

She opened the drawer, pulled out a file and put it on the desk. "Well, Robert, I already have quite a bit of an assessment from Benny and your doctors. But one of the things I need is your assessment of yourself."

"Well, that's not too hard. Look at me!" Robert held his hands up to display himself. "There's my assessment. I can't do anything I used to do."

Seema looked at Robert and smiled. Today she was wearing a blue patterned scarf that somehow made her look much younger than her forty years. "Yes, Robert, let's talk about that: what you used to do."

Robert started to nervously tug at his eyebrows and shift in his chair as Seema spoke. "So I see here that you are self-employed. What is it you do?"

"Used to do," Robert quickly corrected her.

Seema waited for Robert to continue, but it seemed he had said all he was going to say on the matter. He found it difficult to look at her, so he turned his head to look out the window. Robert could see kids running and playing in the schoolyard behind the centre. Seema turned and looked out the window.

"I can't tell you how refreshing it is to have that school outside my office," she said.

"Yeah, well, if you want to know...that's one of the things I used to do. I worked in schools." Robert turned away from the window and looked at the floor.

Seema looked back in the file and read aloud, "Leadership and safe school programs?"

"Yeah."

"It says here you are—I mean, *were* a speaker as well?"

"Yeah."

"And you spoke about what?"

"Different things."

"And it says you led leadership adventure treks?"

Still staring at the floor and playing with his eyebrows, Robert nodded.

"And where did you do these leadership adventure treks?"

Robert sighed. "Mountains."

Seema tried not to comment on anything he said in hopes of encouraging him to continue speaking.

"And you would lead students on these treks?"

Robert whispered, "Yeah."

"And it says here—it was on one of these student treks that the accident happened?"

Robert's head jumped up. "Accident? Is that what you call it?"

"No, Robert, I'm just reading what is written here."

Robert raised his voice. "Well, an accident is usually something you can avoid or you caused. This wasn't any goddamn accident. No, wait, I take that back...it was exactly that! It's exactly like that...that thing you were talking about..."

Seema's whole body perked up as she felt him opening up. In a soothing voice to encourage more, she asked, "What thing was I talking about, Robert?"

"Seeing the face of God. What happened to us *wasn't* an accident...it was God showing His face to us that day and believe me, when we saw the face of God it sure as hell didn't have anything to do with love."

Robert looked directly at Seema now. Though she could feel the violence of his stare, she didn't look away for fear it might defuse the energy he now displayed.

"Okay, so what did it have to do with then?"

"Those kids...Those poor kids, they had already gone through so much in their lives. Why the hell did I take them there?"

"And this was on Mount Ever—"

"Don't! Don't dare say it. Okay? Just...look...Just don't say it!"

Robert then remained quiet.

Seema silently cursed herself. She knew not to say anything. *Just let the volcano erupt! Just let it explode if you want to see what's inside.*

She watched him stare out at the kids in the schoolyard. She stood

up and took a step towards the window.

“Would you like me to open the window so you can hear them?”

Robert ignored her question but then it came—the very volcano Seema had anticipated slowly erupted with a forceful quiet intensity. “The school board had organized this whole trek. I was taking three, what they called ‘at risk kids’...teenagers—the ones most think are beyond saving. We weren’t going to climb all the way up, just getting to base camp is quite a feat in itself. Every day, we filmed our journey and we put it on this...this website for all these kids in schools back home to watch—kids around the same age as those kids outside there...‘*The Living School Project*’ they called it. It was supposed to be...it was supposed to be...”

Robert paused.

“It was our last day. We were supposed to leave late that morning. Yeah...right after um, we visited the Khumbu Icefall we were supposed to pack up and go home. The four of us went with three Sherpas. Phi...”

He paused again and started rubbing his knuckles as he continued, “Every day they were filming to show all the kids back home so they could, you know...follow our story. But that day was different ‘cause—That day we were...what they call a ‘live feed.’ You know—It was amazing...we were up there in the middle of nowhere, eighteen thousand feet up in the air and we had all these little kids in gyms and classrooms actually all watching us live that day.”

Like a switch inside him had suddenly turned off, Robert stopped. His whole body just froze and he stared off into space. Seema waited for a few moments, walked back and sat down, but Robert still didn’t move. She picked up a pen and opened the file and just as she put the pen to paper, Robert spoke again.

“How many floors are there in this building?” he asked.

Seema cocked her head in reaction to the unusual question. “Five, I think. No—wait. There are six if you count the basement.”

Robert looked at the only framed picture Seema had on her wall. He pointed at the horse that was flying through the clouds. “Imagine this building—and this whole building is up there—up on one of those clouds,” Robert then looked towards the schoolyard, “and that cloud is right above that schoolyard out there. And then out of nowhere, suddenly that building—this six-storey building—just fell off that cloud and came crashing down on top of that schoolyard.”

Seema’s eyes opened wide in fearful wonder, unsure of what Robert was getting at. He then looked directly at her as he pointed out the window. “And imagine all those kids out there—every single one of them—they are all watching it. They’re all watching this huge, white, six-storey building fall off that cloud. It’s coming so fast...it’s crashing down on

them so fast that they don't have a chance to move.”

“What do you mean by saying all those kids are watching a building coming down off a cloud?” Seema asked.

Robert looked at her and shook his head. “Did you not listen? We were filming it and all these students back home—hundreds and hundreds of kids were watching us. For six weeks they had been following us online. They were getting to know who we were. My three leader students spoke to them daily. It was almost like we were talking to our families back home...and these kids who were really getting to know us, care for us, and then in one second—in one split second, they saw that goddamn avalanche come crashing down on us.”

Seema waited for him to continue, but Robert was silent.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I...I guess I didn't understand.” Seema paused, hoping Robert might add something more, but he just looked back out the window. A school bell could be heard faintly in the distance and the kids were now forming lines to go back into the school.

“So all those young kids watching the live feed saw this happen to you?” she asked. Robert barely nodded his head.

“That must have been quite devastating for them.” She looked at Robert, but he was still staring out the window, watching the children file into the school.

“And your three leadership stud—”

Robert quickly cut her off. “—Can we please get this damn assessment over with?”

## 4. PRESENT DAY – JENNY’S RESIDENCE

Three hundred kilometres away, Robert and Monique’s daughter, Jenny, was in her kitchen, warming up her voice for an audition she had that afternoon. A cover band called Simply Yours was looking for a lead singer.

Dressed in a comfy purple housecoat, Jenny had just finished pouring her coffee and, after blowing the steam away, she took a sip. With her head bouncing from side to side, she loudly belted out a song about exploding like fireworks and showing off what you’re worth.

Jenny loved to sing. Her dad said it was her passion, the same way mountain climbing was his. Jenny, although two inches taller than her mother’s five-foot-two, was a carbon copy of her mother. She had a full, dark wavy mane of hair and beautiful round pouting lips that could blossom into a crazy happy smile that her father simply adored. He always told her that it was that same crazy happy smile that made him fall in love with her mother.

Jenny left home at twenty-one. A couple of years earlier, she’d sung in a band called *Out on a Ledge*. Two months after the band was formed, they had landed on one of those TV talent shows that was searching for the country’s newest talent. Although *Out on a Ledge* came in second, they quickly became an overnight sensation. Being on a national television program had helped them line up gigs for the entire upcoming year, but it all came to a sudden end two weeks after the TV show finished.

Jade Sinclair, lead guitarist and the composer of all of the band’s songs, along with Bud Light, the band’s drummer, had driven their car off the road after a drunken celebration at a friend’s house. The car went through a fence and both men fell two hundred metres to their death. The media was cruelly creative in using “Out on a Ledge” and its members’

deaths in their headlines.

The band was formed during Jenny's last year of high school and most of the band members had grown up and gone to school together. Bud Light, whose real name was Brian Light, lived two doors from the Sanchez family. Although Bud's late night drumming had caused much neighbourhood grief and frequent calls to the local police station, he had also endeared himself to the community by raising twenty-three thousand dollars playing his drums for nineteen hours straight on a makeshift stage in the front of his house. It was difficult this time for Bud's neighbours to have the heart to stop him or call the police, since everyone knew that Bud was trying to raise money to help his sixteen-year-old little brother, Gary, who had just been diagnosed with leukemia. Jenny and some of Bud's friends used their home phones as a call centre. It was never mentioned in the papers, nor spoken about in the neighbourhood, that the majority of the money was raised between two a.m. and three a.m. but among friends, they joked that Bud's neighbours had paid him to stop. In reality, the whole street was quite proud of what Bud did and some believed the massive media coverage of Bud's efforts probably raised the real estate value of houses on Ellington Court. After all, who wouldn't want to live on that famous street where the drummer kid played to save his little brother, Gary?

Jenny was supposed to have been in the car the night of the accident, but had decided to leave early and walk home. Though her life was spared, she was devastated by her friends' deaths. She stopped singing completely and abandoned the idea of pursuing a singing career. Instead, she got a job as a store clerk at a game and puzzle store.

In many ways, Monique was secretly happy to have her daughter home, out of the limelight and not a part of the 'dark' world of bars and bands anymore. She made sure not to tempt Jenny back into the song world—no longer singing any of those song rhymes in the house and always found reasons not to have any music playing at home. Robert and Monique quietly fought about this.

“Mon, you can't hide her passion from her. Jen was born to sing.”

Monique would respond with a protective instinct, saying, “And sometimes people change, and their passions change.”

Robert knew his wife's hidden message was more pointed towards him, for as much as she loved him and tried to show her support of his mountain climbing passion, she hated wondering if he would come home alive. So, secretly, she wished his passion would change as well.

“Don't you miss her singing, Mon?”

“Of course, I do, Bobby, but at what cost?”

“Cost? Look at her...she's hiding from the world. We need to do

something to help her get back out there.”

“Give her time. Don’t you like having your daughter home?”

“Truthfully? Not like this, Monique.”

“Like what then, Bobby? You want her running around in those dark smoky bars, singing to all those drunk—” Monique stopped herself from saying what she always said about the accident: “If those kids weren’t around all that alcohol...all the time, those boys would still be alive.”

“Monique, you think this is Jen’s big ambition, selling puzzles?”

“Well, she seems happy doing that.”

“Happy? Happy, Mon?” Robert’s voice almost cracked as he questioned his wife.

“For God’s sake, Robert, it’s safer than where she was headed. You know...you know, Robert, she was supposed to be in that car that night.”

“But she *wasn’t*. Monique, she wasn’t! Come on, love, we can never know what unexpected accidents await us when we walk out that door each day.”

“But it’s a lot safer going to that store everyday than having her coming home in the middle of the night from some bar.”

“Safer for who? Jenny or you?”

Monique’s eyes opened wide in shock. “Is that what you want, to have your daughter drunk and driving off some cliff?”

“Mon, come here, love...Please come here.” Robert opened his arms and Monique hesitantly moved to her husband. “We didn’t raise her to do something stupid like that.” Robert cupped his hands around his wife’s face. “Love, if Jenny had known how much her friends were drinking that night, do you really think she would have let them drive?”

Monique’s eyes looked down and she whispered. “No, I know she wouldn’t. She would have thrown those keys in some sewer before she’d let that happen, but Bobby...”

“Shhh...shhh...” Robert smiled and gently kissed his wife’s forehead. “She has to start living again.”

“I know, I know but...Oh, Bobby, it scares me.”

“I know, love, it scares me too, but it scares me more to think she might never do what she truly loves.”

Monique hugged her husband tight. “Please...Bobby, just give her time, she’ll find her way. She’ll find it, Bobby. She will.”

Yet after eight months living in the quiet Sanchez household, Jenny seemed to wander deeper into depression. She came home right after work, sat in front of the TV and always found excuses not to return calls from friends. Robert knew he had to do something to help tear his daughter from this silent cocoon of grieving she seemed lost in. So, one Thursday night, Robert announced that it was time to have a father and daughter night at

the gym like they had often had during Jenny's teenage years.

Throughout the years, Robert would take his daughter out to rock climbing gyms, but after a couple of months, Monique told Robert she didn't think it was a good idea. Jenny was always coming back with some minor scrapes or bruises and her mother said that maybe it was too dangerous. Monique asked Robert if he could find something else for them to do on these nights. Robert knew it wasn't the minor aches or bruises Monique was worried about. In truth, she feared these climbing adventures might lead Jenny to follow her father onto one of his mountains.

Jenny cried and begged her father not to stop when Robert told his daughter they needed to do something else. So together, they came up with a little deceptive plan to ease Monique's worry by telling her they were going to a movie. They always planned their alibi by reading a review of the film on the way to the gym so that they could tell Monique the plotline when she asked them about the film. Some nights they had more fun creating the stories they thought could be in the film than they did climbing. They would laugh and sometimes almost tear up as they told imaginary tales about some funny or touching moment that could have been in the film.

So, that night at the supper table, Robert tried to ignite the memory of their past glories and asked Jenny if she wanted to see a film with him.

"Come on, a father and daughter night again!"

"No," Jenny replied instantly.

"Jenny, it will be good," her mom pleaded. "Jen, remember all those movies you and your dad saw together. Oh, the two of you would come banging through that door all excited and full of life, telling me in so much detail I thought I'd seen the movie!"

Robert winked at Jenny. "Yeah, come on, Little Rock, let's find a good one to tell your mom tonight!"

Jenny shook her head.

"Come on, there's that new Tom-Cruise-saves-the-world-on-a-motorcycle movie. You know your mom won't see it because of all the fighting. Please, Little Rock, it'll be fun to tell mom all about it."

Robert winked again. "Please!"

Jenny paused, looked at her father and then realized what he was up to. She gave in to him with a little smile. "Okay, but I'm picking the movie."

Jenny giggled when she got in the car, opening her bag and showing her father the climbing shoes hidden inside. But just as they had fooled Monique for all those nights, this time Robert was planning to fool his daughter. He was about to try something that he prayed would pull his daughter out of her self-imposed, depressing silence. They drove for about ten minutes and entered a familiar parking lot where he had dropped her

off and picked her up countless times before.

Jenny was just about to step out the car when she suddenly realized where they were.

“Daddy, what are we doing here?”

“I thought we’d—”

Jenny cut him off, “—No, Dad. I’m not going in there—And I thought you wanted to go climbi—Argh!” she screamed, startled by the sound of two hands hitting the passenger side window.

“Jenny? Jenny Sanchez?”

Jenny looked out the window. She could not make out the face as the lights from the lampposts cast a dark shadow over the hooded figure. The figure quickly pulled down his hoodie, revealing a young teenage boy.

“It’s great that you came!”

Jenny, still startled by the sudden slam of the hands on the window, looked to her dad. Like a dog that freezes and jerks its head the moment it hears a noise in the distance, Jenny did a double take to look at the dark figure outside the car.

“Gary? Oh my God! Dad, it’s Gary Light!”

Jenny opened the door, jumped out and spread her arms wide.

“Gary...Gary, it’s so great to see you!”

Gary moved towards Jenny and hugged her in an awkward teenage embrace.

“What are you doing here?” Jenny asked.

“You kiddin’, Jen?” Gary smiled. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

Jenny looked at her dad with a puzzled, almost angry stare. And at that moment she noticed the illuminated sign of Maggie’s Pub directly behind him: *Playing tonight—Precipice*.

A loud sound came from the pub. Screams, yelps and a crazy cheer filled the air.

“Damn—I gotta get in there. Hurry up, Jen, everyone’s waiting!” Gary said as he sprinted across the parking lot to the door.

“You get in there, Gary. We’ll be in soon,” Robert called out.

“Sure thing, Mr. S. See you, Jen.” Robert and Jenny watched Gary as he flung the door opened and yelled, “Hey Jen, you gotta sing a tune with us tonight, okay?” then quickly disappeared into Maggie’s.

Jenny was familiar with *Precipice* because two members from her old band were playing in it. What she didn’t know was that Gary took over as a drummer for his deceased brother, Bud Light.

Robert looked at his daughter and extended his hand towards her. “It’s time, Jenny; you have to get back to your life.”

Jenny didn’t budge. She just stared at the billboard.

“Baby, you have to get back to living your passion, Little Rock.”

Jenny turned around and opened the car door. “No, Dad, no! I don't want—and if mom knew I was here...”

“Mom just wants to keep you safe, Jen. Look, she means well. She just doesn't want you to get hurt again. She's always trying to do the same to me. Do you know how many articles and things on YouTube she shows me to warn me before I go up a mountain? I look at them and I thank her for caring about me, but she never stops trying to warn me how dangerous it is. I guess, in that way, I know she never stops caring. And Jen, can you imagine what she's showing me before I go to Everest next month? Every dead body she can find a picture of and let me tell you, there's a lot of them!”

“But Daddy, I'm scared too. I don't really want you to go up there either!” Jenny climbed back into the car.

“Hey, wait, this isn't about me. You know I take every precaution, Jen. I know I have to do it. Don't ask me why; it's one of my reasons for living, *just* like singing is yours. We have to follow those reasons, Jen, or we just end up living with this question—a question that will just gnaw at you forever. Constantly asking you why you never tried.”

Jenny closed the car door and put her head down. Robert walked to her side window and pressed his face against the glass, distorting his face in a funny way, and said in a humorous voice, “You *can't* hide in there forever!”

Robert had done this many times throughout their lives whenever Jenny was nervous about something she was about to do. The first time was on Jenny's first day in kindergarten. She absolutely refused to come out of the car to join her class and Robert had tried everything to coax her out. At last, he got out of the car and closed his door, leaving her alone in the car. He then crawled around on his knees to her side of the window and popped up. “You *can't* hide in there forever!” Even though she knew it was her father, it scared Jenny so much that she screamed for her daddy to help her.

Robert yelled to her, “But you have to open the door, Jenny!” Little Jenny struggled to open the door and jumped into her daddy's arms. And as Robert held his young daughter and carried her into what he called the ‘safety of the school’, Jenny triumphantly cheered, “We did it! We did it, Daddy! We showed him, Daddy, didn't we? We're not scared of that crazy guy in the window!”

And later that day when he picked her up from school, she asked her father to repeat the episode and victorious triumph over the weird goblin-faced guy in the window. And so, throughout their lives, father and daughter played the fear-facing game together at Jenny's piano exams, swimming tests and even on her graduation night when Jenny had to deliver

her valedictorian speech about facing the fears of life after high school, but had refused to get out of the car because she had spilled ketchup all over the front of her beautiful white gown.

“You *can't* hide in there forever!” her father cried out in a silly cartoon voice.

But tonight the crazy-faced goblin was ignored and Jenny kept her head down.

“Come on, Little Rock, please? Come on, let's go in. Just watch your friends play and listen to them sing again and then, even after just a couple of songs, if you tell me that you don't want to ever sing...*ever* sing again, I promise you, Jen, I'll never say another word. Promise!” Robert pleaded softly.

Jenny looked upward, closed her eyes and whispered something. Robert looked up as well, right up into the street lamp that was shining a circle of light around the car. Into the night, he whispered a hopeful prayer that his daughter would come back, back into the wonderful passionate adventure of life she had been living before the accident. Robert smiled as he looked back into the car at his daughter. He held his smile so that, when Jenny opened her eyes, a smile would be the first thing she would see.

Jenny's lips stopped moving. She opened her eyes and saw her father staring at her, smiling. She grimaced and shook her head as if she knew this was a mistake, but opened the car door anyway.

“Okay, you go, Daddy. I'll follow you.”

“Are you sure?” Robert held his smile.

“Yes, but please you go first.”

She watched her father walk towards the building and then she called out to him, “And Daddy, stop smiling like that—you'll freak everybody out.”

Robert let out a laugh and walked about twenty steps. Just when he was about to open the door, he turned around and saw Jenny still hadn't moved. And then, this father who had taken his daughter on many rock-climbing trips, swung his hands over his head as if he had an imaginary rope and threw it over to his daughter. “Catch and tie on. I won't let you fall.” Jenny kind of laughed, caught the imaginary rope and made a gesture as if she was securing it around her.

Jenny followed her father step for step, staying a good eight feet behind him. But with each step, the sounds of “*Ordinary Day*” grew louder. Robert stopped at the door and turned around. It was as if he was watching his daughter take her first steps. He held his arms open and she walked into them.

“I'm going to open the door now, okay?” he said and Jenny nodded.

Jenny placed her hand on the bar door, feeling the beat of the drums vibrating through the thick wooden door. Robert slowly opened the door to the pub. "Ready?"

She nodded with the beat, "Lead on."

Jenny stood behind her father and closed her eyes. Robert could feel her hand on his back so he stopped and slowly looked over his shoulder. It was like she was meditating. Robert reached for her hand and started to turn around, when suddenly Jenny burst into joyful tears and wrapped her arms around her father, holding him as tight as she had as a little girl before her first day at school, and said, "Thank you, Daddy, thank you!"

Jenny let go of her father. And there she was, where she had been so many times before, belting out in full voice with everyone else in the room and with the guy who sounded so like Alan Doyle of the *Great Big Sea*. Jenny sang with every fibre of her being, "*It's all right, it's all right, it's all right...*"

When they got home that night, Monique was sure Robert had taken Jenny rock climbing and accused him of it but Jenny sprang to his defence and said, "No, you're wrong, Mom. It was better! He took me singing!" And just before her mother could say anything, Jenny sang to her mom, "*It's all right, it's all right, it's all right...*" and she suddenly stopped, kissed her mom and said, "I am sorry, I know I've been—"

"—Don't, honey. You don't need to say anything. I've missed that sound so much...so much." With Jenny tucked tightly in her mother's arms, Monique looked at her husband and mouthed, "Thank you. Thank you. I love you."

Four weeks later, Jenny still worked at the games and puzzle store but was also working four nights a week as a backup singer for two bands. And in only half a year, Jenny moved three hundred kilometres away when she found work teaching at an arts school that her high school music instructor had started. Jenny was teaching her joy and her passion full time and still sang whenever she could find work, always in search of another band.

This morning, while Jenny was warming up, singing Katy Perry's "*Firework*," she thought of her father and remembered when he first heard the song. He had actually pulled his car off the road to call her. "Hey, Little Rock, I found a song written just for you!"

What Jenny and her father had was unique. They had the closest thing to a friendship a daughter could ever have with her father. She was the only one he ever confided in about his concerns and even fears about climbing and it was on this day, in the middle of her warm up, that she found out just how much her father needed to talk.

As Jenny sang, the doorbell rang. It rang a few times before she heard it. She opened the door. There stood a UPS driver with a small brown package. Right away she saw her parents' return address. She was sure that it was a book from her mom. Monique loved sending her daughter a book she had read, "so that we always have something in common, something to talk about."

Jenny opened it right away. There was an envelope and a worn hardcover red book. Jenny recognized it immediately. Her mouth fell open and she couldn't move. Suddenly, she almost felt like she would faint. *What?* she thought. This was her dad's mountain journal. *Why did he send it?* Her father had always told her that this journal would be her inheritance after he died.

As she sat there, the song she was singing to played on, echoing the words: reasons...doors...searching...open one...

## 5. PRESENT DAY – ARRIVING AT THE HOTEL

Monique looked back at Robert, who had his eyes closed. She had not let his loud sigh discourage her. She couldn't, not today. In the last fifteen silent minutes of the drive, Monique kept trying to convince herself that this was what Robert had to do. For the last six months, she had tried so many things to shake her husband back into the world of the living. She clung to the hope of what this day might bring, despite her close friends' comments, saying things like "she was now living with a corpse" and there was probably no way she could "save her marriage." Even some specialists had warned her of how even some of the strongest and healthiest relationships couldn't withstand the changes they were about to face in their lives. Yet Monique kept telling herself, *"I don't care and I'm willing to lose the marriage...If I can just...If I can at least bring my best friend back to life..."*

Lost in that thought, Monique suddenly realized she was about to pass the hotel entrance so she slammed on the brakes. The abrupt motion jolted them both from their shared silence.

"What the hell are you doing, Mo?" Robert shouted.

"Sorry, Bobby," she apologized. "I almost missed the hotel."

Monique backed up the minivan twenty feet or so until she was in front of the hotel's main entrance. She looked at her watch—nine fifteen. This gave her forty-five minutes to set up. The hotel doorman, a very tall young man with a deep African accent came to the side window and asked if she needed help.

She pressed a button on the door and pointed to the back of the van. "Yes, please help my husband."

The back door of the vehicle opened upwards. Distinctive sounds of mechanical movements filled the air as a platform raised up, protruded

out and finally lowered down. The doorman waited at the side of the car. He smiled at Robert who was sitting in a sturdy, non-mechanical wheelchair.

“Hello sir, welcome to the—”

Robert cut the doorman off. “—Thanks, but I can see where we are.”

The doorman laughed. “Of course, sir. Sorry, but it is my job to greet everyone like that. It does seem quite silly though, since the sign is so large and you are standing right in front of it.”

“I’m not standing in front of anything,” Robert said gruffly.

“Of course, sir. I’m sorry.”

Monique interrupted the two of them with a nervous laugh. “Yes, the sign is right in front. Oh, it is truly crazy, isn’t it? The redundant things our employers have us do. Anyway, thank you for helping him.”

The doorman smiled. “Yes, and I am sorry, sir. I should have said the sign is standing in front of you. It was not a very good choice of words. I am sorry.”

Monique quickly interjected as she handed the keys to the doorman. “Here are the keys to the car. Where do I pick it up later?”

“I will show you, but please wait here for a moment. In order for you to get your car back, I need to get you a ticket first.” The doorman took the keys and walked away.

As the doorman passed in front of them, Monique saw Robert look up and then close his eyes as the cold wet flakes hit his face.

“Why are we doing this, Monique?”

## 6. PRESENT DAY – JENNY’S RESIDENCE

The old, beat-up red journal lay on the table in front of Jenny. She dared not touch it for fear of what it meant. She held her hands motionless, inches from the journal, as if an invisible force field was preventing her from touching it. As she stared at the journal, so many questions and thoughts exploded in her head. *Daddy would never let me have this unless he was...* She shut her eyes tight before she could complete the thought.

When she opened her eyes, she saw a white envelope neatly tucked under the elastic that bound the journal. Jenny slowly slid it out from under the elastic with great trepidation, as if she was defusing a ticking time bomb. Once released from the elastic, she slowly brought the envelope to her face and sniffed it as if she could smell whether it contained heartbreaking news or not. With a steady intake of breath, she detected nothing, but then suddenly tossed it upon the table as if the envelope had given her an electric shock. She was not ready to read it.

Jenny then became aware of the song that was playing. A ballad she was to sing today at the audition—“*The Look of Love*.” It was right at the point when Diana Krall was about to go on her jazzy piano solo riff and repeat, “*Don’t ever go, I love you so.*” Just as the trumpets came in, Jenny whispered a defiant little “no!” and then snatched up the envelope and ripped it open. Immediately, she recognized her father’s very poor handwriting.

*Hi Little Rock,*

*I hope this day finds you with reasons to sing out loud! I’m sorry we haven’t talked in a while...Sorry...Ever since this all happened, I haven’t really felt like talking to*

*anybody...Anyway, here is my journal...doesn't seem to be any reason for hanging on to it any longer. Sorry about some of the pages being taped up...I got upset...Sorry...Your mom saved it and taped it up...and she told me that I had always promised you, that someday it was going to be yours...So sorry for the shape...but here it is!*

*Open arms of all that is...*

*Daddy*

All Jenny could focus on was how many times her dad wrote the word “sorry”. *Five times!* Before the accident, her father had a way of always spinning a positive out of every situation. Words like, “I’m sorry,” and “I don’t know,” were foreign to her father. He had always taught Jenny that repeating such words was just another way of saying you won’t or can’t do something. People mainly used these terms to disguise the fact that they refused to do something or were unable to change something, or maybe had given up, he always said.

Over the last six months, her father had become a different man. And after his last surgery, her father avoided almost anything that remotely resembled a conversation. Whenever she called home with any news, he would always say, “Tell your mother, she’ll tell me later.” Now, with all these apologizing words, she wondered if he had maybe simply given up.

Suddenly, she jumped. “Oh my God!” she said aloud. She had just remembered her mother calling her late the previous week, complaining that her father had bought a gun. “Why a gun?” she had asked her mom, almost laughing as she thought it was just her mom’s way of making a point.

“No, Jenny, a gun, he bought a *real* gun!” her mom said as serious as she had ever heard her. “Daddy says we need it because he can’t protect us now.”

“Really, Mom? I can’t believe it! A gun?”

“Yeah, I asked him if he was so worried about protecting us, why did he leave us alone so many times to climb those...those mountains?”

For the past ten years, Jenny had heard her mother complain numerous times of how her father left them alone for almost two months out of every year. And as Jenny grew older, she witnessed a great tension between her parents each time her father came home from a climb. It took her mother weeks before she could connect and feel warm and loving to her father again.

“Mom, you shouldn’t have said that.”

“I know Jen, but it’s almost like he’s—oh, I don’t know, honey...I just don’t know anymore with Daddy. Look, Jenny, please come home for a

visit soon. We need to see you. He needs to see you. Please, baby?"

Jenny hadn't been home for months; it was so busy at school and she was singing five nights a week. Also, she had just started a relationship with a fellow piano teacher named Kyle Le, a young man whose parents had emigrated from Vietnam in the late seventies. Jenny had always shared everything with her parents but now, because of her father's depressive behaviour, she tended to downplay all her good news. She hadn't even told her mother about Kyle and how happy and deeply in love she was with him.

"Yes, Mom, as soon as I can, but I'd—"

Her mother, who had called from work, had to take another call and so they said a quick goodbye. "Sorry, honey, we'll talk later. I have to go. Love you. Bye!"

Jenny sat there trying to piece together if there was any more to that conversation with her mom that she might have missed. She soon started feeling a little short of breath. *Why did Dad send this journal today—the day of his big talk? Why give me this journal: he wouldn't even let me read it, always saying that this journal would be my inheritance?* Each time they spoke, her mom would tell Jenny how much he was changing. But now it seemed he wasn't changing anymore—he had changed! And, today, the words "sorry" in the letter, the gun he bought...Her breathing was getting quicker with each thought. Jenny put her hands on her chest and tried to take in a big breath. She dropped the letter to the floor and picked up her phone.

## 7. 14 WEEKS AGO – SEEMA’S OFFICE

“My wife and my daughter came to Kathmandu two days after it happened.”

Seema looked at Robert waiting for him to continue.

“Well, isn’t that what you wanted to know? That’s when they first saw what happened to me.”

Seema waited a moment and looked back into the file. She searched for some information then looked up at Robert. “I was actually asking about the surgery. The surgery was not done in Kathmandu, was it?”

Robert shook his head in annoyance. “No, and it was ‘surgeries’. Eight, I think it was. And I thought you wanted to know when they first saw me after it happened.”

Seema looked back into the file. “Mr. Sanchez, I have only five surgeries and—”

Robert snapped, “—Eight, five, does it matter? They had enough tries at it, didn’t they? And look what happened?” Robert pointed at his legs. His right leg was amputated above the knee and the left leg was in a large white cast with metal bars protruding from it. Seema looked at Robert’s legs and nodded her head sympathetically.

“And how did that make you feel?”

“Make me feel?” Robert stared at Seema with an intense, burning anger.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean the question to sound trite or uncaring, Robert. I was just wondering how it made you feel facing so many medical decisions. Did you trust that these decisions were still yours to make?”

“Mine to make? Do you know how many doctors have—No. Stop

it! Why are we talking about this anyway? Who cares who decides?"

"Well, it is important that you feel you're still in control of—"

Robert jumped in. "—Control? What control? I've never had any decisions to make at all. I was just given what they call 'options.' And even then, each option they said I had—well, it didn't matter, because as soon as I was given these options...they just all started to disappear. Then some doctor is sitting like you behind some desk and telling me, 'I'm sorry, Mr. Sanchez, but you have no options left and this is what we *must do*.' So no, Miss Pourshadi, I don't think I ever had a decision that was actually mine to make!"

Seema pursed her lips and jotted something down. Robert sighed and shook his head in disgust.

Seema looked up, "Okay, well, tell me about when your wife and daughter first saw you in Kathmandu."

"What do you want to know about it?" Robert sighed.

"Well, how did you feel seeing them?"

Robert turned his head and looked out the window. It was a Saturday afternoon and the schoolyard was quiet. He could see a father and son flying a big yellow kite. Robert spoke as he watched the yellow kite gliding through the air.

"I was so..."

Robert paused. Seema looked at him intently and smiled slightly, hoping that Robert would let out his feelings.

"I don't know how I felt. I mean, my wife and daughter, they thought I was already dead for almost a full day. They had already called my parents and well, everyone thought I was dead. So I guess it didn't matter how bad I looked when they saw me. They didn't even notice...I guess they were happy just seeing me...seeing me lying there alive. Even though I probably smelled like a piece of rotting meat because of the gangrene. But they said they didn't smell anything—I don't know, I guess they were just so happy to see me alive."

Robert was still staring at the yellow kite twirling in the air. Seema looked out the window and saw the kite Robert was watching. "Everyone thought you were dead for a whole day? That must have been—"

Robert cut her off. "—You see that kite, Miss Pourshadi?"

"Yes?" she answered.

"The way that wind is blowing, do you know what would happen to that kite if someone just cut the string?"

"It would blow away?" she answered him with a question, hoping whatever she said he would continue on.

"Yeah, it would blow away. And I bet it would go pretty far. And then that kid would be feeling all upset and start to cry, probably one of

those big huge cries. So then the father, feeling how upset his kid is, he does everything he can to find the kite. But even if he did find it—with all those trees and wires—I'll bet that kite would probably be completely bent and busted up. More than likely, completely wrecked, right? But the father, he'll still try to fix it. Do you know why? It's completely destroyed. So why does he try to fix it?"

Robert stopped and looked at Seema with a harsh vacant stare. He could see in her face that she was searching for the right words to say. Robert snorted. "Don't you get it? All that time that's spent crying over a wrecked kite that's beyond repair and all the effort that dad spends trying to make it better...it's just a waste of time. It's the same as you asking me how I feel—because when something is too broken up to ever fix, it doesn't matter how anyone feels. I don't know why we can't face it. That some things can never be fixed."

Seema watched the yellow kite swirling in the open blue sky. She smiled sadly as Robert's words echoed loudly inside her: *Some things can never be fixed!*

She turned to Robert and asked him, "So, you think that if that kite fell and was completely broken—the father shouldn't even try to fix it?"

Robert was staring at the floor as if he had not even heard the question, but he answered her firmly. "Yes."

Seema waited, thinking Robert had more to say, but nothing came. So she asked him another question.

"Do you believe some things are just not meant to be fixed?" He didn't answer, so she asked again. "You think once something's broken we should just go out and replace it?"

Robert spoke without raising his head. "It doesn't matter what I think or believe. But sometimes, we just have to face the fact that *some things just cannot be fixed.*"

"Okay, Robert, then who makes the decision of whether something can be fixed or not?"

Robert rubbed his face roughly and let out a tiny pained breath. "It's not anyone's decision, it just is. If it can't be fixed then it can't be fixed. It's a fact."

"What's a fact?"

"That it's broken!" Robert said, looking up at Seema.

"Yes, I understand that, but who decides when something is too broken to be fixed?"

Robert said nothing and looked back at the floor.

"Who makes the decision about whether something is too broken and not worthy of being fixed?"

"That's the problem." Robert raised his voice but kept looking

down. "That's the problem! Too many bloody people think it's their decision to make when it's not. It's not their decision to decide."

"So then, who is the one that makes the decision about the kite?"

Robert looked up with a confused look and mumbled, "What?"

"The *kite*, Robert, remember we were talking about the kite? Who makes that decision? Is it the son or the father? Who makes the decision about whether the kite is too broken to be fixed?"

Robert let out another sound of annoyance and then spoke insolently. "Look, Miss Pourshadi, all I'm saying is they see the kite—they can see it, right? They look at it, see it's smashed, right? They see it's all fucked up...so walk away. Just walk away! Don't let the kid feel...you know, get all worked up about it. Why get him crying? And why get that kid all hopeful...hoping to fix something that is just plain unfixable?"

Robert sharply turned his chair to face the window. The yellow kite was still happily flying. Seema looked at it as well and now couldn't help wondering about the fate of that little yellow kite. She knew she had to ask Robert the obvious question. But she almost winced before it came out of her, fearing his reaction would be loud and angry.

"Is that how you feel, Robert? That you are unfixable?"

Robert's reaction surprised Seema. He didn't get angry, raise his voice or get defensive.

"Is that how you feel, Miss Pourshadi, that all people are fixable?"

Seema's eyes opened wide. She was surprised how the question unnerved her completely. She wished her answer to be an immediate "yes, of course, everyone is fixable" But after spending three years working in one of the country's largest maximum security prisons, she discovered something she would never readily admit. In there, she assisted a doctor who was responsible for the psychological assessments on some of the most depraved prisoners—child rapists, abusers, wife beaters and even a serial killer who tortured his victims over prolonged periods and then would release them into a forest only so he could hunt them down and murder them.

She had seen firsthand that every single one of these prisoners had been broken in some way or other. And it became obvious to her that it was the broken part of them that led them to their sinister and cruel behaviours. She knew some of these broken inmates could be rehabilitated and she even saw that some were. They could be fixed. But some, she came to realize, were broken, beyond the chance of living a normal life—the broken part of them could never be fixed.

Seema's education was based on psychological causes and effects: *Find the cause and you can help alter and change the effect.* The thought that a person could actually be unfixable terrified her. That was the sole reason

she came to work at the rehabilitation centre. Here, she felt, was a place where she could provide true hope for the people who had been broken. Here, she felt confident she could help fix them.

Robert looked up. Her pained face didn't stop him from asking again, "So, Miss Pourshadi, do you think all people are fixable?"

Seema quickly turned her head towards the window. Her hands played with her scarf. Roberto Sanchez was not a heinous criminal, nor had he done anything more than find himself in the wrong place at the wrong time. *Is Roberto Sanchez fixable? Are all people fixable?* Seema honestly didn't know.

A knock at the door saved her.

"Sorry to interrupt," Robert's physiotherapist, Benny Tucci said.

"Your wife is here, Mr. Sanchez. She says you have a doctor's appointment today?"

Robert turned his chair around to face Benny and said dully, "Yeah."

He then turned back to Seema. "You know what they are going to decide for me today, Miss Pourshadi?"

Seema nodded her head grimly.

"Yep, they're going to help *fix* me!" Robert said sarcastically. "Let's go, Benny. Don't want to miss a minute of someone telling me how they may have to cut my other leg off, do we?"

## 8. PRESENT DAY – AT THE HOTEL

Monique avoided Robert's question of, "Why are we doing this." The aching pain in her heart just wanted to scream out, "We? When was the last time you and I were a 'we' Robert?"

Yet, as soon as she thought that screaming question, she was struck by the happy fact that Robert did say "we", not "I" or "you". She couldn't remember the last time he had referred to her or Jenny as an "us" or even a family. Although Monique Sanchez was a very practical, matter of fact woman, she also had the uncanny ability to find hope in the most hopeless of situations.

And lately, hope would be difficult for anyone to find at the Sanchez residence. Every day since the accident, Robert had sunken deeper into depression. He refused to go back to work and had almost completely retreated from the world. What hurt Monique most was how he found new ways to hide from his own family. The distance between them grew every day. In many ways, Monique wished Robert was off on one of his climbing expeditions, for at least then he wrote letters, called or sent faxes. Now it was hard to connect with him in even the simplest of ways; even merely asking him what he would like to eat for dinner had become daunting and emotionally taxing.

Robert and the doorman watched as Monique reached into the passenger door and pulled out a fairly large green duffel bag. She handed it to the doorman. "No, leave that there. I don't need it," Robert snapped.

"But Robert, don't you think—"

He threw his arms in the air. "—Okay. I don't care! Take it, leave it—This is your crazy idea, Neek, not mine!"

*Neek! He called me Neek. So there has to be some hope,* she thought.

Robert had called Monique many pet names over the years—Little M, Moanie, Mo—but Neek was a name Robert rarely used. And although she was embarrassed by Robert’s behaviour in front of the doorman, she managed to turn her head away from Robert and smile a hope-filled smile.

“Sorry,” she said to the doorman. “Could you put that green bag back in the car, please? Thanks.” She then reached for a small backpack on the front seat.

Feeling the awkwardness of the moment, the doorman quickly offered to carry the backpack, but Monique just flung it over her shoulders and said, “It’s okay. I got it!” She then reached back in to grab a black computer bag, which she slung over her other shoulder.

“I can take that for you.” The doorman extended both his arms. Monique was just about to hand it to him, but quickly changed her mind when she saw his hand. “No, no, that’s fine. I’m used to it.”

Robert jumped in, “Just close the door and let’s get this over with.”

Monique gave the doorman an embarrassed smile as he closed the car door. “I’m sorry,” she whispered to him.

The doorman smiled back. “You don’t have to say that. I truly understand. I do. Come. Please, let’s go inside.”

They entered the hotel lobby. It was alive and buzzing with people gathering, coming and going. Monique walked beside Robert as he tightly gripped the wheels of his wheelchair and pushed it forward. The wheelchair’s shiny silver leg and foot holders glistened as they reflected the light from the impressive lobby chandeliers.

Robert was dressed in a black T-shirt and dark navy pants that were folded and pinned closed at the knees. Earlier, Monique had tried to get him to dress up, but Robert defiantly refused. “You say they want me, then they will have me the way I am!” he had said.

In contrast, Monique was radiant. She was dressed in a deep red V-neck sweater, an attractive tailored navy jacket and a knee-high flowing black skirt. With her long dark hair pulled back loosely with a large, beautiful African-designed silver clip, she looked ten years younger than her forty-four years.

“Monique, Monique!” A short, sturdy, and impeccably groomed Chinese man in his thirties came to greet them. “You look great in that backpack, Monique!” He spoke with absolutely no detectible accent whatsoever.

“Ah, Robert, wonderful to see you again!”

“Yeah,” replied Robert sourly.

Monique quickly jumped in. “Robert, you remember Greg Wong, the president of Elevation?”

Greg held his hand out to Robert, who lifted his right hand from

the push ring of his wheelchair and said, “I don’t think you want to shake this grubby paw.”

*Oh my God!* Monique thought. Robert had opened his mouth only twice and still could not muster a single pleasantry.

Yet, Greg surprised her when he took Robert’s hand and said with a laughing voice, “Well, we’ll be even then, because you don’t know where my hand has been either. Great to see you again, Robert!”

Greg’s comeback stunned Robert too. He let Greg quickly shake his hand while Monique laughed an ah-he-got-you kind of laugh. Monique was used to Robert always being the one who could find ways to ease any tense situation. She smiled at her husband, hoping he would appreciate what Greg had just done, but Robert just lowered his head and put his hands quickly back onto the wheels of his chair.

“Sorry, Monique, but I must get back in there. And, Robert, we all are looking forward to hearing you.” Greg looked at his watch. “I’m meeting with the team for fifteen minutes, but you can go into the room and set up. There is a technician in the room although, Monique, I’m sure you won’t be needing one. So please, do what you need to do, and oh, we are in the Leaning Tower of *Pizza* room.”

As Greg walked off, a pleasant yet distinct smell of cologne trailed after him. Robert waved his hand as if to clear the air.

“If they all smell as much as him, I may die of asphyxiation in that room.”

Monique ignored Robert and turned to the doorman. “Leaning Tower of *Pizza*?”

The doorman laughed. “Pisa not Pizza! The rooms are all named after and themed around the Wonders of the World. The tower is a great room, but the Taj Mahal is my personal favourite. Really, do try to take a peek at it if you can before you leave. I’m sure they put you in the Leaning Tower of Pisa because it has the best acoustics for presentations. Come on, follow me.”

The hotel was a large circular building and the lobby hallway circled around all the conference and meeting rooms. The Leaning Tower of Pisa was halfway around. They passed the rooms called Stonehenge, Great Wall of China, Colosseum, and Niagara Falls and as just they passed the Taj Mahal, the doorman stopped.

“I wish you could see it now.” He pointed to the door. “Please make sure you see it before you leave today. You won’t be disappointed!”

They stopped at the Leaning Tower of Pisa room. As the doorman opened the door, they were hit with the rousing sound of Steppenwolf’s “Born to be Wild.”

“Oh, looks like they are checking the sound.” The doorman raised

his voice over the loud music. He then took the computer bag from Monique and placed it on a table near the door and, just before he exited, he turned around and bowed slightly, saying, "I pray your day is successful and may you have a wonderful experience today!"

"Thank you so much!" Monique touched the doorman's shoulder as he was leaving.

"Great! The Leaning Tower of Pisa," said Robert as the doorman left the room. "They put your company in a room that's named after something that looks like it's about to fall down."

Standing by the door, Monique tried to muster a smile as she watched Robert push that mysterious brown leather bag deeper between his left leg and the chair. The same leather bag that he forbade her to touch and yanked from her when she was about to put it in the backpack earlier. The music seemed harsh for the early morning. She couldn't make out the exact lyrics, only the hurting words of: making something happen...firing a gun...and exploding into oblivion...

It hurt her even more as Robert stopped his chair and chirped with a swagger, "Yep, Steppenwolf's got the right idea."

## 9. PRESENT DAY – JENNY’S RESIDENCE

“Hey, Mom...Just calling to say hi...wondering...Oh my God, of course you’re probably gone already...but—Hey, Daddy, if you’re still there, pick up...Mom? Dad, you there? Pick up! Okay, I’ll try Mom at her work number...Bye, love ya!”

Jenny called her parents’ house and left a rambling message. She felt a sudden panic come over her and started bouncing from side to side, saying out loud, “Daddy, where the hell are you?” Then, in a lightning second, she took her hand and hit herself a little too hard on the head. “Oh my God, you idiot—You *freaking* idiot! Today’s Friday. Dad’s talk—they are at the hotel by now—” She then tried to take a deep breath to calm herself. “Stop panicking! Daddy’s not going to kill himself!”

Jenny quickly covered her mouth in a gasp. She couldn’t believe those words actually fell out of her. *Kill himself!* She couldn’t believe she had that thought about her father. “Daddy would never do that!”

But the image of her father from her last visit home told a different story. When she hugged her mother goodbye at the door, her father was sitting in his wheelchair with his back to her and he didn’t even turn around when she said, “Bye, Daddy, love ya!” He just waved his hand.

Her father was always big on “hellos” and “goodbyes.” He had always taught her, “Eye contact, Little Rock. Please don’t just walk into the house and go straight into your room without us seeing each other and saying ‘hi.’” He was constantly reminding her that when someone came home, you drop everything to welcome them and when someone leaves, you go to the door to say goodbye and wave until you can no longer see them.

*Why? Why didn’t I just go back into the living room, look in his eyes and hug*

*him or maybe even chastise him like he would have done to me if I didn't come to the door to say goodbye?*

Jenny's eyes spied the letter on the floor. She picked it up and looked at her father's last line. "Open arms of all that is..." *What did he mean 'all that is'? Is what?* she wondered. Seeing the red journal on the table, a panic seized her again. It was the echo of the last conversation they had at suppertime together, when her mother spoke about her father's talk for her company's event.

Jenny had looked to her father and saw his blank expression, so she smiled and said, "That's great, Daddy!" Robert just nodded his head and replied with a sarcastic sigh, "Yeah, it's great!" and then wheeled himself from the dinner table to the living room.

Jenny leaned over and whispered to her mother, "Really, Mom? I mean, do you think he's ready?"

Monique quickly put her hand to her lips. "Shhh!" She then quickly changed the subject by directing her daughter into the back bedroom with the intention of showing her a new dress she had just bought for the company's big event.

The moment they walked into the bedroom, her mother closed the door and leaned her back against it.

"Jen, I don't want to scare you but I'm starting to get worried about Daddy. He told me not to tell you tonight, but he just found out that he may lose his left leg too if it doesn't show any signs of improvement in the next two weeks."

"Oh, my God, Mom, I didn't know! Oh, what an idiot I am! There I was asking Daddy when will he get the cast off and get that new leg so we could start running again."

"It's okay, honey, you couldn't have known."

"Mom, do you think Daddy is ready to do this thing—this talk about...you know?"

"Honey, your father needs something...something else to focus on, other than—Look, he needs something, Jen. Every day he seems to—I don't know, become more and more...lost."

"But Mom, does he want to do it?"

"I don't know, Jen, he doesn't really talk to me. But this presentation for my company was planned months before the accident. And your father has cancelled everything—all his workshops, any meetings. He never returns anyone's calls...But this...this talk, even though he acts as if he doesn't want to do it, he hasn't said no. He still sees me planning and talking about it and he never really stops me."

Monique rubbed her eyes hard and then sat down on the bed beside her daughter.

“He has so much to share. Your father is an amazing man, Jen. He needs to know that and feel that again. And maybe if he could talk about his climbing, maybe that will instill some new passion in him. Lots of people make their living speaking about that mountain stuff, you know...”

Jenny stared at her mom with curious wonder and shook her head ever so slightly.

“Jenny, why are you looking at me like that?”

“You know, Mom, I’ve never heard you use that word ‘passion’ before. It was what Daddy always called his climbing.”

“Just because I don’t use it, doesn’t mean I don’t understand it.”

Monique leaned over and touched her daughter’s leg, “Oh baby...I...I really regret the way I acted with your father whenever he came back from his climbs. I was happy he was back, but I was kind of resentful he had left.”

“I know, Mom. It wasn’t hard to see.”

“I was wrong in so many ways, Jen. I feel so ashamed of myself now. Don’t get me wrong, it was really hard when your father was gone on those mountains...and I know I was difficult to be around when he came back. It always took me weeks before I could forgive him for leaving us...But now, Jen, I think those mountains might be the only thing that will help him.”

“It’s okay, Mom.” Jenny patted her mother’s hand.

“But now I need your help,” Monique said as she put a hand on her daughter’s cheek and gently pushed a lock of Jenny’s hair behind her ear. “Look, Jenny, I need you to go back in there and try to encourage your father about doing this. He listens to you. He needs to hear it from you.”

Jenny stood up and then smiled a huge I’ve-got-an-idea smile. Jenny had lots of experience of getting through to her father and convincing him to agree with something she wanted him to do. Like that time when she was fourteen and had to ask her dad to help convince her mother to let her go for a week with her best friend’s family to Disney World.

“I’ll try, Mom.”

Monique reached out and held her daughter as tight as her arms had strength to.

“Daddy’s so lucky to have you, Mom.”

Monique needed to hear those words from her daughter. For the last few months, she had been the absolute pillar of hope. From that very first moment of seeing her husband lying in a bed in a Kathmandu clinic, she never wavered. Even the first time the sheets were removed and she saw the sickly sight of her husband’s completely shattered-beyond-recognition legs, she stayed positive. And even today, living and sharing a

home with the hurtful monster that possessed the caring loving husband she had once known, Monique still had never spoken a hopeless word or let herself feel defeated.

But in her daughter's arms, Monique's hopeful armour finally cracked and the warrior wife and mother cried for the first time.

Jenny held her mom and kept repeating, "I love you, Mom. I love you."

After a few minutes, Monique sat back down on the bed, completely spent from the emotions she had just released. Jenny faced her mother with a smile—that crazy happy smile that could win over anyone.

"Don't worry, Mom," she said. "Daddy's going to be all right."

Her mom's whole body smiled back at her daughter. "Okay, baby." Pointing at Jenny's smile, she said, "Now, you go give some of that to your daddy."

Jenny left the bedroom and gave her mom a little wave as she closed the door. She could see her dad from the hallway. She took a long, deep breath and then walked with a focused purpose into the living room. She tried to look as playful as possible, swaying her arms and, with a carefree bounce, she threw herself onto the couch.

She leaned over to the iPod dock on the side table, picked up her purse from the floor and pulled out her iPod. Scrolling through her playlists, she stopped when she found one labelled 'Daddy's Garden.' She had this for the many car trips they shared over the years. 'Daddy's Garden' was a list of songs Robert had found and sent to Jenny. Every time he found a song he thought his daughter would like he would say, "That is definitely one for the garden, Little Rock. Let it bloom!"

Her father had once explained that, "Anytime you hear a song that makes you feel something, it will then create a memory inside of you. The more you feel, the longer it stays inside of you. The feeling of some songs can last your whole life...It's just like something saved to the hard drive on your computer, Jen. You may not see it on your desktop, you may have forgotten you downloaded it, but it is always there, ready to be accessed—this emotional recording. And I call it a garden because once a song makes you feel something, that song is now planted inside you and like anything that is planted, well, it starts to grow inside of you...To me, Jen, every great song I love is like some beautiful flower, and every time I hear the song again, it's like this little flower inside of me starts to bloom and opens up the memory of that feeling again. And so, the more songs I have, the bigger my garden of feelings is."

*Oh man*, she thought, *which song?* Her little fingers spun the long list up and down and wow, there it was "Lost" by Michael Bublé. *It's perfect!* That was a song from the CD her dad sent her when she had lost her two

band mates a couple years ago.

As she put the iPod in the dock, she glanced back at her father. It was strange to see him sit there in his wheelchair under the lamp where his big comfy La-Z-Boy chair once was. They used to call that chair 'The Head Quarters.' It was her father's mission control centre whenever he was planning his mountain climbs. He always had books, maps, letters and sometimes a crampon or rope he was fixing. 'The Head Quarters' had been moved into the garage as Robert felt there was no use for it anymore.

Her plan was set.

Jenny started the song softly, barely audible, as if to show she was not about to disturb her dad's reading. She was secretly hoping her father would ask for her to play it louder so he could hear, but he had not even looked up when she came into the room. So, she lay down on her stomach with her legs kicking up on the big green sofa and pretended to read a magazine about health products.

She felt her father look up towards her, but she acted as if she was engrossed in her reading, making sounds like "Oh," "Wow" and "Hmmm, didn't know that." Jenny always knew how to get her dad's attention.

She then slowly turned the music louder and started singing along. She also knew how to get into her dad's heart. Halfway through the song, Jenny felt the moment was right and she turned up the volume and Mr. Bubl  and Jenny sang together words about life just tearing you down, and yet something stays the same...

And as the music built, Jenny got up from the couch and started moving directly towards her father, who had not budged from his book. Jenny reached down and took her father's hand. Oh, how many times since Jenny was a little girl had they held hands just like this? It would always lead to the magical moment of a daddy and his little girl twirling together. Sometimes, Monique would jokingly pout and jest, "I'm jealous, Jenny, you always get the man."

Jenny swayed and took her father's hands in hers. She started to pull his wheelchair into the centre of the living room. "Come on, Dad, let's get lost together."

"Jenny." Her father broke the mood. "*Please.* I have a headache. Can you turn that music off?"

It was like a dagger piercing her heart! Her father was always the one to ask her to sing louder and after Jenny moved out, he would almost beg her to sing just one more song before she left to go home.

Jenny froze for a moment but regrouped quickly. "Sorry, Daddy, but I'm just so excited that you're going to tell your stories at mom's company event. I wish I could be there! Those people are so lucky. It will be like you're taking them climbing with—"

Robert snapped and cut his daughter off. “—*And* what? And talk about the last goddamn time I ever climbed? Talk about something I can never do again?”

Yes, Jenny remembered that night: of hiding her own tears after experiencing her father’s reaction, his harsh words, “the last goddamn time I ever climbed.” She painfully recalled feeling her mom cry in her arms and then she realized there was yet another thing she had lost: she would never stand in his arms again and feel that father’s hug—the place Jenny had always felt was the safest place on the planet! As she looked down at the red journal, she had to rub her eyes to keep them from bursting into tears.

Why had she not listened better when her dad said, “talk about something I can never do again?” *He sounded so final! “Talk about something I can never do again?” Why didn’t I talk to him about it? Why didn’t I listen? I just ran out the door and now this...sending me his journal?*

Jenny rushed to the phone, started to press some numbers, but stopped then said out loud, “Why can’t I ever remember mom’s cell number?” as she grabbed her purse.

## **10. PRESENT DAY – AT THE HOTEL**

The Leaning Tower of Pisa had lived through many exciting corporate events and had happily celebrated hundreds of Italian weddings. The floor was covered in a tasteful, stone-patterned carpet. There was a hardwood stage on one end with a huge mural of the Leaning Tower of Pisa as its backdrop. Walking into the room felt like walking into the Pisa's grand cathedral square. The walls were colourfully decorated with Italian street scenes. The ceiling was a deep sky blue, sparkling with clusters of gold coloured stars. Yes, there was the feeling that this room had celebrated many times before!

Without saying a word, Monique picked up the computer bag and walked towards the technician who was working on the soundboard up on the stage. She left Robert on the ground level, hoping to avoid hearing whatever negative comment he might share with the next person he met. This was brand new territory for Monique. She was not an outgoing person; in fact, she was quite shy. Robert was the one who always took the initiative to ensure his wife felt comfortable whenever they found themselves in a new situation or adventure. But in a strange way, Robert's physical and personality changes had created a new and welcome independence in Monique, giving her the confidence to take control of certain situations that she never would have in the past.

Robert wheeled his chair to sit facing the stage. Directly above the stage was a big banner hanging from the ceiling displaying the company's name and logo. *Do they really need it that big? It must be as big as a movie screen*, he thought.

It was a tasteful banner with a bright aqua-coloured background. The company's name, ELEVATION, was printed in dark purple lettering

and above that were jagged lines, much like the lines on a stock market chart. The three lines formed into three separate peaks. At the bottom of the banner was the slogan, “Always Elevating Software above and beyond SEE Level.”

Robert smirked to himself at the lame word play of “SEA” to “SEE.”

Greg came in behind Robert and asked, “Do you like our banner?” “What are those lines?” Robert asked.

Robert waved his hand noticeably in front of his face, anticipating the strong odour of cologne that surrounded Greg, but Greg didn’t see him. The startling sound of drums boomed throughout the room. Greg and Robert both looked up at the stage at the same time.

“Sorry about that!” Monique called down.

She went back to connecting her computer to a projector as the technician continued playing with the sound levels. The startling drums soon transitioned into a quiet mournful song; the singer’s voice had a definite sounding ache. It was the unmistakable voice of Bruce Springsteen, who was singing something about being bruised and battered, and seeing a reflection and didn’t know his own face...

“Do you like it Robert? Although it wasn’t intentional, those lines actually represent mountains,” answered Greg. “You see, when we came up with the company name ‘Elevation,’ we wanted to find a logo that depicted something on the rise. So we hoped the logo would stand for the stock fluctuations, and indicate that our stocks are always going up. Do you know what they were before the mountains?” he asked with a laugh.

Robert barely heard what Greg said. His brain only had room for the song and its words. Robert knew the feeling of this song—the memory of this song—it was in his ‘garden of songs’ but it was now flowering like a thorny weed, piercing him with shame. It was as if the song was exposing him: look at the cripple about to speak about climbing Mt. Everest, something he can never do now. *Yes*, he thought, *I am truly unrecognizable to myself!*

Lost in his depressed thoughts, he hadn’t noticed that Greg was waiting for a response. Despite not hearing what Greg said, Robert quickly composed himself and blurted, “Oh, good...it works!”

“I’m sorry...” Greg said. “What works?”

Robert was flustered. Why didn’t he just ask Greg to repeat what he had said? But at the same time, he just wanted to end this conversation, so he said, “It all does—Good work—Looks good.”

“Well, thanks to your wife. You see, with our recent merger, we needed to strengthen and firm up our image but we wanted to do it without really changing our logo, and it was Monique’s idea to change those way

graph lines into mountains. The three peaks represent the three companies we are now composed of. Yes, you have a very intelligent and creative wife, Robert!”

A drop of sweat trickled down Robert’s forehead, visible enough that Greg quickly snatched up a napkin off a nearby table and offered it to him.

“Yeah, thanks.” Robert took the napkin and wiped his forehead. He felt uneasy and almost short of breath.

“Yes, of course. Go prepare. Sorry to take up your time. Oh...but, Robert, please know how grateful I am that you are here, because we really need a talk like yours today. You see, Elevation has always prided itself on teamwork, but now with three separate companies trying to forge into one—well, it’s not an easy task. Ever since the announcement of the merger, I have been fearing we might become fractured or split. Like that Chinese saying: ‘we are like a bucket of sand.’”

“Sand?” Robert stammered.

“It’s like we are all in the bucket together, but, like sand, nothing sticks together—and I fear the changes going on within the company might prove to too much for us to handle and we won’t be able to stick together. We really need this event and someone to inspire and help bring us together, make us feel we all are on the same team. So thank you, Robert, for helping us today.” Greg put his hands together and repeated, “Thank you,” with a reverent bow.

Robert just nodded and then swiftly turned the wheelchair with a strong-handed jerk down on one wheel in the opposite direction of Greg. *Inspire? Help you? Well, you’ve got yourself the wrong man, Mister Wong!*

With his sudden move, the napkin flew off his lap and landed on the floor and just as Robert was about to turn back, Greg smiled. “No, no, don’t worry. I have it.”

“Great—Yeah, you have it,” Robert said, trying his best to muster a smile. And as he pushed himself towards the stage, still holding that forced fake smile, he thought, *Yeah, everyone’s always super helpful to the cripple!*

Monique had been keeping an eye on Robert and fearing the worst as she saw him talking to Greg. So, she was happy to see them part at least with what looked like smiles. She greeted her husband at the bottom of the stairs to the stage.

“Oh, no!” *There were six steps and no ramp!* she thought.

The technician working on the stage noticed this right away. Amir Satchu was a scrawny little man from Guyana. His weathered face made him look much older than his forty years.

“Ah, Miss Monique,” Amir said, his wide-open smile sparkling with three gold-plated teeth. “Does your friend here need assistance?”

“Well, what is the best way to do this?” Monique asked.

“Ah, there is always a way—and I know the perfect one!”

Amir arrived at the top of the stairs and then called out to Robert.

“Okay, sir. Jump and I’ll catch you!”

*Oh my God!* Monique closed her eyes preparing for Robert’s worst response.

“How high?” was Robert’s reply. “Think you can catch all this weight?”

Monique was relieved and shocked that Robert didn’t get insulted and chew poor Amir’s head off.

“Stop! Wait!” Amir playfully yelled. “I just remembered, I forgot to eat my Wheaties this morning. Jumping and catching might be bad for your health, sir. We must think of something else.”

“What’s your name, strong man?” asked Robert.

“Amir, sir. And, as I’m sure you can see by my towering physique, many call me ‘Amir the Giant Satchu’. At your service, sir.”

Monique let out a small laugh, thinking she could probably catch and carry the small-sized Amir herself. *What a relief it was to laugh out loud!* Monique thought. *What was it about Amir that had Robert displaying glimpses of his former self?* she wondered.

“I’ll tell you what, Amir the Giant. Come behind me,” Robert instructed. Amir quickly hopped down to the floor level. “Now, let’s go backwards up the stairs.”

Amir, who could not have been much taller than Monique, latched onto the handles at the back of Robert’s chair.

“Okay, lean me back. Just balance me, don’t take all the weight, I’ll turn the wheels and we’ll go up one step at a time. Remember, I’m the motor, right? Okay, you ready, Giant?”

*Robert, co-operating with someone he just met...and calling him endearing names?* It seemed like a miracle to Monique!

Step by step, Robert encouraged Amir and after each step Robert asked, “How’s the Giant doing? Ready for the next?”

*Could it be it’s because he was climbing?* Monique mused.

Amir then stopped on the fourth step and joked, “Okay, sir, it looks like time to switch places. It’s my turn to sit in the chair.”

Monique held her breath, shrinking back from what might come out of Robert’s mouth, but he just laughed and said, “There’s only one Giant Amir and that’s not me!”

Finally at the top and just as Amir was setting the wheelchair level, it almost tipped forward, threatening to throw Robert to the floor. Monique leaped up the stairs just in time to put her hands on Robert’s chest to steady him while Amir quickly put his arms around Robert’s shoulders to keep him

in the chair. Just as Robert was upright, the mysterious brown leather bag that Robert had been holding fell out. *Wham!* The weighted impact sounded as if it would surely make a good-sized dent on the hardwood stage.

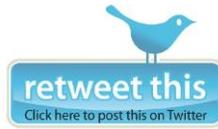
Monique went to pick it up.

“No!” Robert yelled a little too loud. “Don’t anybody touch it!” He swirled the wheelchair to its side and reached down to pick the bag up.

Right at that moment, Monique’s cell phone went off. She reached into her purse for the phone and said, in a joking way to lighten the moment, “Good thing that went off now and not in the middle of your talk, Robert.” Without checking the incoming number, she switched it off and put it back into her bag.

Robert totally ignored her, turned to Amir and snapped, “All right, what do you want me do?”

Monique’s heart sank hearing the return of Robert’s harsh tone. The climb was over and they had summited the stage, only to find *the little giant miracle* had not made it to the top with them.



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