

Chapter 2

Somehow I knew the train would come to a shrieking halt. Call it willpower, premonition, luck, call it a mere stroke of serendipity, yet however a label would get anointed to the breakdown that occurred, the result was imminent, or at least I believed so in my mind. Maybe silent prayers that escaped from reticent jaws did the trick, or perhaps the telepathy I attempted on blurring trees and totem-like telephone poles to uproot and spill in a flurry of wood and leaves and cables upon the steel tracks. I knew the conductor would probably pick up the intercom and go through a rehearsed diatribe about how the locomotive was experiencing technical difficulties and they were trying to get to the bottom of the problem as soon as possible. Soon after we would hear an apology for the postponement followed by a hope that all the passengers could bear with them during the delay. The engineers and doormen would sort through switches and wiring, computer screens and instrument panels searching for a cause that hindered the eight car, mode of transportation. They would dig into the memory banks of problem solving, possibly the brake line, a blown fuse, a loss of power to the main frame, but my doubts loomed about the crew ever finding a mechanical glitch. Cosmic forces felt diligently at work and the apparent signs screamed as distinct as the hooting of an oncoming train whistle.

I should have never boarded in the first place. I felt it beforehand, but could not avoid the overwhelming pulses surging through a body unfamiliar with acting upon radical compulsions. All needed to be done in proper order, sorted and drawn out, cautiously laying down directional tile towards the next logical step. The proper etiquette had to commence, piece by piece, line by line, and then, only then could the next decision proceed. It stood as a delicate balance on the jagged fence of ambivalence. Careful and fastidious continued a tessellated pattern of mundane cowardice I could no longer tolerate.

A frenzied artillery of cell phones flipped open and sent an attack of invisible signals out through the walls of the debilitated train car. Next lap-tops opened up and the striking of keys began to propel e-mails through cyberspace. Who knew how many waves of technology impaled all of our bodies as they danced around us on invisible pathways. I thought to call for a second and inform my employers of the predicament,

but reluctant fingers refused to strike the eleven digits on a cracked and faded, silver cell phone. I turned instead to the window and watched the rain pour down flooded with thoughts about why I was at the mercy of public transportation, but the answer came quick in knowing that Southern Californians could not drive in the rain. It became an undisputed fact every time the roads got wet. Morning traffic reports became inundated with countless accounts of crash sites and stories about spun-out vehicles banking into center dividers whenever it began to fall. Better to stay off of the road during a rainstorm in our section of the country.

Honey drops of moisture came into view ten feet from the window; they paused for a second with a flutter of wind and crashed into a damp piece of tinted glass. It was a brief life, created in the belly of a dark nimbostratus cloud, formed into droplets, and released shortly thereafter like a parachute jumper freefalling to the earth below, only to end its existence in an abrupt splat against the cool of oval glass and metal train. Sad to think the same fate awaited many motorists as they woke from their encumbered homes and were released upon the wild streets at a rushed pace only to collide with another pile of glass and metal. Cosmo's words haunted inert bones and led me to question why I sat on the paisley, fabric seat at all.

It was raining harder than two hours prior when my truck came to a halt at a stop sign back in Oceanside. The ocean peeked out in between two large houses where the cross street of Oceanside Boulevard ended at a slight graveled hill. A caramel hue overtook the blue-green radiance of the sea as local run-offs and the San Luis Rey River merged with the murky waters. It brought to mind the coffee I consumed earlier that morning, diluted and filled with cream and sugar poured from the heavens.

I continued to drive towards the harbor. Garret, the morning DeeJay on the local 94.9 radio station was on his soapbox about the real independence and freedom to play good music. He stressed the importance of not playing a song just to sound edgy and hip, but to actually enjoy and respect the tracks he spun on the radio, as well as his blessing for the opportunity Halloran and himself had been given to mold a station to where it really was about the music. He then proceeded to tell the early rising audience that **Rage Against The Machine**, a band they frequently played, probably would have never existed if **Public Enemy** did not come first. Before I could decipher if he really said

Public Enemy, the base hit and Chuck D's commanding voice exploded out of the speakers. A smile emerged and my head bobbed as I cruised along the coast.

The harbor looked tattered and too dirty to enter. Dark clouds congregated on the horizon, accompanied by a sharp breeze which carried sand on its wings and disseminated speckled granules across the asphalt. Cosmo's steel-gray, Toyota pickup truck rested in a middle spot facing the ocean at the north jetty parking lot. How many mornings we met there just after the first rays of sunshine for an early morning session I could not count, or put into lucid perspective. His truck parked in a similar position with the stereo blaring and as always was there well before me.

As I pulled up next to him I lowered the volume on the radio to a whisper as Garret introduced "Bank Robber" from the **Clash**. No booming sound reverberated out of Cosmo's truck, nor did bursting laughter or excited hoots, just a reiterated drone of raindrops drummed morose tunes on the hoods of our vehicles. He rolled down his passenger window while I emulated the motion and put down my driver side window as well. A chill bit my cheeks and overpowered the hot air blowing out of the ducts in the truck. We exchanged nods, but no words exuded as the drumming mollified.

"Hey," Cosmo finally said.

"Hey."

"You ready for this."

"Are you still planning on going through with it?" He did not respond, but his left eyebrow rose and his head tilted up, which extended a slightly dimpled chin to accentuate his intent. A few of his sun-bleached locks spilled out of a black beanie. I knew the answer would be yes before I asked and I wished I could have taken it back the moment it escaped my lips.

"Don't feel forced to go man; it's totally fine. You know I can pull this off by myself." Cosmo did not change expression at all while he spoke, which meant he really would not have blamed me for not wanting to paddle out. Never one for small talk or to say things out of pity, Cosmo more than anyone I ever knew said what he meant. I knew he would have absolved me and not held a grudge if I decided to stay in the warmth of my truck. Erratic dashes of rain landed on the back of my left hand and dove towards my bones. The cool impalement brought about a shiver at the thought of entering the water.

Even though the underlying tones that swam in my guts and desired to stay glued to the cloth seat and remain sheltered underneath the bower of the steel fortress that protected goose pimpled skin from the cold, I would not let him go alone. I would have never forgiven myself.

“I was just checking with you because of the storm. I am ready for whatever you need.”

“I’m glad. The words refuse to form on this inept tongue of mine, and thank you comes out overly cliché, but I appreciate it more than you know.”

“No worries. You don’t have to thank me. I am....,” but Cosmo cut me off before I finished by putting out his hand and manufacturing a crooked, half smile indicating nothing more needed to be said. The act of speaking did feel unnecessary amidst the frigid air and our pending adventure as words dissipated faster than the steam from our breath. I decided to get out of the truck and keep my mouth shut until Cosmo requested conversation.

Two icy hands recalled the process of turning a damp wetsuit right side in without thought. A pattern repeated and etched into memory as familiar as the loop, swoop, and pull method of tying a pair of shoes. The ocean screamed alive displaying many facets of a never ending repertoire. White caps and large surf created an ominous seascape and teemed with ferocity and vigor. Mother Ocean appeared upset and disheartened and expelled her grievances in arrays of crashing foam.

The beach was empty. A few months down the road when summer reined the spot would overflow with bodies and tents. Kites would take to the air, lifeguards would stand posts upon mint green towers, scraps of trash would drift from blankets and scatter about as people from two minutes to two thousand miles away congregated and plopped themselves upon the sand. Young boys would transform in seconds as they became infatuated with watching girls move about in bikinis. A busy circus would commence of noise, varied characters, and tomato pasted sun burns, but on a chilly morning in late February the crowd consisted of five: Cosmo, myself, and three huddling seagulls nestled close in the sand.

“Are you all packed?” Cosmo shouted through his window. I was interrupted from my gaze upon the beach to notice him still in his truck as rain dripped from my hair.

“Packed for what?”

“To go.”

“Go where? I thought we were going surfing.”

“We are, but not here. Not now. Not in this.”

“Then where? Remember I need to be out of the water by seven-thirty to make it to work on time.”

“You mean you didn’t call in?” Cosmo asked with a slight crack in his voice. Instantly I knew that I missed something and became plagued with an overwhelming feeling that I let him down somehow. He liked for people to think, not to make them uncomfortable or beneath his wisdom, but to search for answers that were right in front of them if one could stop and put the pieces together. I put nothing together, no problem solving, just stood like an idiot in the rain.

“So where did you have in mind?” I sputtered out.

“I just can’t do it here. He loved this town, his friends, the community, but he had plans to be free of the rat race this place had become. He felt truly alive at his favorite place down the coast. That’s where he really wanted to be, isolated, on the cusp of the ocean with nothing but wide open space to fill his eyes.” Cosmo stared towards the sea, sailing with scraps of driftwood and marshmallow waves unaware that I hovered in the wet weather. I knew I should have returned to my truck, but I lingered and waited for an answer. Shivering from the cold, the piercing wind, the thought of coming up with an excuse for not showing up to work and struggling with the myriad of possible plans swimming around Cosmo’s brain, I stayed put. His expression, the direction of his words were leading to one possible destination, and as my mind actually began putting something together it became apparent that I would need to request more than one day off from work. How could I have missed it? Three days prior at the funeral, what were his words? “Tuesday morning meet me at North Jetty, we need to send J.P. off right.” How one dimensional of me, something Cosmo always pushed to get out of my system and the reason why I began doing crossword puzzles, to think it was as simple as showing up and paddling out. My mistake for not accounting for the fact that nothing with Cosmo ever followed a path of solitary dimensions. I should have known better.

Cosmo watched my mind at work, a gift he used since the day we met, and eased back into the seat of his truck. His shoulders relaxed and a smile came to his face. "I want to get on the road by three. I still have a few things to button up and should be done with them around one or two. I'll wait until four o'clock, if I have not heard from you by then, well then, that is just the way it is going to be, I guess." His tone impaled my chattering body and reached into a cavernous valley of emptiness.

"I'll do my best, but it's not going to be easy. I mean how many days are we talking here? Two? Five?"

"Not sure. As many as it takes."

"And I am just supposed to walk up to my boss and say I need to leave now. And, oh, by the way I'm not sure how long I'll be gone, but it will probably be around, oh, as long as it takes. Then I'll have to call Karana next and explain to her that I'm going to disappear for a while with Cosmo, which ought to really freak her out. She might assume that I might never come back."

"I already called her."

"What? When?"

"Two days ago. Figured I better tell her of my intentions. I even invited her along because of how much uncle J.P. thought of her, but she declined."

I looked like someone slapped me in the face. Red and stunned I landed on the door of my truck. "Well what did she say?"

"She said you need to go as much as I do. Actually that you need this escape more than you know."

"Even if I loose my job?"

"Better than losing you to a job that your heart is not really into,' she said."

Slapped harder and my head rang. The rain threw punches, the wind snapped bone, and I faced an incursion of which I possessed no defenses. Cosmo's smile turned into a chuckle and it agitated me.

"What is so amusing to you about all of this?"

"You are. Get out of the rain; you look like a fucking drowned cat. I'll see you at three." He laughed and put his Toyota into reverse. He drove off and I could not move, petrified by everything that his purposed journey entailed. The request for time off

would not go over well, especially on such short notice, plus Karana and I were in the middle of a paltry spat and I did not want to leave without appeasing the situation at least a little bit. I could not believe she actually told Cosmo that I needed to go, that she basically told me to go. I finally climbed back into my truck and noticed a text message form her on my phone. I did not feel in the mood to read it and drove home to get ready for work as **Modest Mouse** climbed out of the speakers.

Two hours later I sat stranded in the rain. My tentative plan consisted loosely of getting to work, I was hoping on time, some definite ass kissing, maybe a lie or two about how long I would be gone and then hopefully back on a train to get home and pack. But that seemed crazy. Cosmo could be so crazy. Why the hell could he not wait for a weekend or tell me straight out at the funeral instead of hiding it in some coded message? At least then I would have had a head start on trying to eke out a few days off of work. We were busy and it was the end of the month, always the craziest time. I wanted to blow it off, forget it, walk into work and finish up the month.

Conversations continued on an assortment of phones. They opened a door for smokers to step outside and have a quick puff underneath an umbrella. Men and women discussed imminent big deals, what to ship out before DHL arrived, losing money because the conductor could not keep a train going straight on a delegated track. The ties were so ironed and prim. Black jackets, business dresses, business suits, gelled hair; the talk was all the same. I looked down at my shoes; the right one unlaced, and realized I was no different. That was my life. The existence I somehow had drifted into. I was someone I thought I would never be. My only solace came from knowing I did not carry a briefcase. The train car spun into a tornado and a sense of vertigo panged my stomach. Clutching my cell phone I opened it up and decided to read Karana's message.

“You know who you are
And you have been missing
Go and find yourself
I love you”

The pain that stabbed at my insides when Cosmo told me he had spoken to Karana returned to my bones and a whirlwind proceeded in my mind. I wanted to

question everything; my clothes, my thwarted complacency, my station in life, but I knew it would not solve anything? The moment was much simpler than all of that. Cosmo needed me to go. And I knew Karana was right, I needed it as well. Plus, why had the train malfunctioned in the first place? It was not just a momentary pause to let another train pass by, no, the train broke down just as every stirring molecule in my blood knew it would. You hear that signs are everywhere, pointing, directing if we could open our eyes to see them. Was it a sign? Was it fate giving me one more chance to escape my penitence towards incessantly following within the lines? Call it mystic, call it arcane, call it mere coincidence, but I could no longer deny the alluring obviousness of the moment. I pushed out of my seat and headed towards the smokers. An attractive woman with streaky, most likely dyed-blond hair asked me for a cigarette as I approached the door. I gruffly got out that I did not smoke and parted the huddle of umbrellas and tobacco clouds and charged into the rain

I heard an Amtrak employee yell at me, something about having to re-board the train, but I was gone. My mouth opened and swallowed nature's life droplets as I cleared the tracks. The voice disappeared, the train vanished, and I stopped, dropped my head back and extended my arms. I stood outstretched underneath a cathartic baptism of flowing showers. What was to come? What adventures were ahead? Everything was possible in that moment. My jacket hood finally came up to cover my drenched hair. Mud splattered steps guided towards civilization as the phone came to my ear.

“Hey baby.....

“I love you.....

“Yes I am going to Mexico.”