



An Online/Offline Story

by

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<BODY>

She was running late. It was 12:43pm by her watch when she stepped out into the mid-day sun. She was beginning to know the city better, and transitioned perfectly from subway to 42<sup>nd</sup> Street in a heartbeat. No asking for directions, no looking dangerously like a tourist in a brown Armani fall ensemble. She smoked slowly, and walked with long, even strides towards 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

Naomi was already by the entrance of the Mid-Manhattan branch when she got there a full twenty minutes later.

“I’m sorry. We had a crisis at work and I couldn’t leave.” She said, and removed her sunglasses so that her friend could see she was sincere. “God, it’s been a hell of a week, am really so sorry. Have you been waiting long?”

“Nope, just got here.” Naomi grinned.

“I knew I could count on you to be late too. Let’s go in.”

Once inside, they headed for the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor; with Katy towards the Literature section, and Naomi the Business Management shelves opposite.

The Literature section was overwhelming to most first-time visitors. She began by aimlessly walking the aisles with her head tilted, although not actually taking in any of the titles she quietly read out to herself. They were meaningless sounds accompanied by more meaningless lettering. This was a surviving habit from her childhood in Singapore, where she trawled second-hand bookstores all over the island from the buy-and-swaps on the edges of Orchard Road to the grimy lending shops (predominantly comics) of New Town neighborhood projects with names like Ang Mo Kio and Hougang – how far away those places seemed now – although, back then she never knew what she was looking for until she settled on its spine. In the Chinese language sections, however, one could conveniently scan shelves without any tilting of the head, which was always nice. Today she had come for the last remaining copy of “Summer of Our Parts” in the New York Public Library system. The website didn’t even have any details when she had checked. “Sum-of-our-Par.”, was all it said, next to “1 / 2”, in bold. An obscure 1979 novel by the even more obscure writer, Warner Gettenberg, “Summer of Our Parts” had been in Katy’s sights ever since a professor whispered its name to her in the course of lovemaking

once during their short-lived affair, in her freshman year. The reasons for their relationship had been complex; the lies she had told herself to justify it, implausible. It was an episode she longed to put behind her, and the book was all that stood in the way of closure now.

And then the names on the spines started making sense on their own. An Anderson here and a Browning there, and soon she was on Malcolm Gladwell. She had a brief staring contest with his book, “The Tipping Point”, which she had always wanted to read - and won. It would have to wait till another day, when her new job as copywriter for the biggest advertising conglomerate in the known universe (excluding the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) stopped making ridiculous demands on her reading schedule. She remembered apropos of this analogy that a meeting had been scheduled for the coming Sunday. She would need to find a way out, maybe call in sick or something. And suddenly, there it was. Warner Gettenberg. The name was printed in ornate hand-lettering, but the title was Futura Medium Condensed. Katy was a type fetishist. She felt the same way about typefaces and printing that one of her ex-boyfriends had felt about collectable anime figurines. She had been too hard on him, in retrospect.

“The Sum of Our Parts”, it read. She blinked, twice, reading it again to be sure. Could *he* have made a mistake? Or was it just another one of her professor’s bad sexual innuendoes? She groaned quietly as some choice examples came to mind. She pulled the book from the shelf, and started running through its pages, inspecting their color and type patterns. She contemplated sniffing them, if no one was looking.

“You’re going to read the last page first, aren’t you?” Naomi was coming up to her on the right, arms swinging, and humming some low tune.

“Do you really know me so well? How embarrassing.” She slowly lowered the book (from her nose). “I must seem like a pretentious fictional character to you, that’s exactly what Mariel Hemingway did in ‘Manhattan’. Well, she wasn’t the pretentious one there, that was... Diane Keaton’s character?”

Naomi flashed her the usual look that said ‘I look like I’m thinking about what you just said, but really I’m just hoping you won’t notice that I have NO IDEA.’ But she recovered quickly, that was her talent. “Don’t you mean like Julia Roberts’ character in

‘Notting Hill’? She was the one who flipped to the end of books to see if they were worth reading before buying them.”

“I have no idea, can hardly remember it.” Katy paused for a second before continuing, “Thinking about it now, that must be one of the most overused character traits. I seem to recall a dozen movies now where someone does that.” She resumed her thumbing.

“Yeah, lots of movies. Not too many books though.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll have a character like that in my book... whenever I write it.” A puzzled look came over Katy’s face briefly, and with furrowed brows, she flipped back and forth through the last few pages, as if looking for something.

“What’s wrong?” Naomi asked.

“It’s missing.”

“What’s missing?”

“The last page. Someone’s torn it out!”

“How positively karmic. And that’s the book you wanted? The only copy?”

“Yeah, but I think I’ll take it out anyway. Uh, it could be fun to read a book with no ending, I guess.” She looked over at her friend to see if the casual lie had been detected.

Naomi only shrugged and headed towards the exit and checkout desk. Katy followed, noticing that her friend was wearing a pair of mismatched socks under her pair of four-hundred dollar jeans, and wondered what the matter was.

Such was the degree of perfection that four years of close sorority companionship had led her to expect of Naomi Franklin. She was one of those deplorable girls who always looked put together to the point of unintentional snobbery. The sight of those socks, breaking the cardinal rule that one should never wear more than three colors at any one time (the left sock, pink, made for four), seemed out of character. Perhaps her friend was beginning to loosen up a little.

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I settled into my favorite reading spot, an armchair by the French windows that led out to the balcony. I paused before flicking on the short lamp that stood behind me, and looked out onto the neglected 3 by 5 space, the same as it ever was. Hadn't I planned on a little garden at some point? But I knew nothing about gardening. I didn't even know where people got seeds, let alone found the time. At that moment, it should have occurred to me that I had stumbled upon a cute analogy for this modern life. But the sad city of skyscrapers beyond my apartment windows didn't look enough like the seed-holding pods of my imagination, growing out of the land and pregnant with people, and so the vision escaped without fanfare, and I settled down to read "Summer of Our Parts".

*Summer of Our Parts*

*Chapter 1*

Stella and I stepped out of the car in unison and stared at the mass on the horizon, in complete silence. It was a while before she spoke. A tiny sound, like a cross between a gasp and a sigh of relief. I looked over to see her parted lips closing, and a hint of swallow in her white neck. Her gaze remained steadily fixed ahead.

"I thought I would be afraid, but this feels nothing like fear."

"Darling...", I started, but lost the words, transfixed by her profile. How long had it been since I last felt this way for her? I walked over to her side of the road and took her hand. It was warm, and slightly moist.

"Let's go to it." She said, looking into my eyes for the first time.

"I love you."

She smiled sweetly and kissed me. Then she started removing her clothes, article by article, all the while walking towards the empty beach, and the waiting water.

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Four days before, such a scene would have been unimaginable. We had just fallen out in a major way over a minor disagreement. ‘Fallen out’ being a civil way of saying ‘nearly killed each other’, of course. The phrase also has connotations of nuclear winter, which I think are appropriate. I entertained thoughts of leaving her, of starting again while I still had my hair. Well, if not a divorce then at least an affair.

And the hair was certainly going. I had gone from never having to worry about it (I had always had too much, if anything), to being a conscious buyer of hair tonics and scalp-strengthening lotions in the course of that summer. My hairdresser, discoverer of the faltering follicles, took it upon herself to proclaim the root cause of the condition.

“Stress,” she said, stressing the word in ways it had not been designed to withstand. “You’ve worked too many late nights, and you’re probably neglecting your family too.” Her diagnosis was direct, and unbearably accurate.

“How long have I got, doctor?” I asked with Oh, just a little sarcasm, looking up at her in the mirror. “Isn’t there something I can do?”

“Learn to style your hair, for one. The way you do it now just attracts attention to the bald spot, like a weather balloon in the Nevada desert.”

“Pardon my language, Debbie, but what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You know, a flashing light in the night sky, like what the Army said was at that Area 69.” Debbie was no expert on UFO phenomenon, I should note.

“You mean Area 51. I won’t go into what happens at Area 69, suffice to say that’s one time hair *isn’t* welcome. Anyway, no one can see it. You forget how tall I am when I’m not sitting down here.”

“But what happens when someone sees the top of your head while you’re on the toilet?”

“That rarely happens at my workplace, I’m afraid.”

“Well I wouldn’t know what goes on in fancy office buildings, with all your *headhunters*, and upper management types worrying about *recessions*.”

“Toupee, Debbie. You win.” I easily conceded her superiority at word games, which she played with every customer. But she was also right, standing all the time was not an acceptable solution, and I was worried. No amount of punning was going to cover my anxiety. I was, as young people said in the 1950s, “wiggling out” over the news. That night when I got home and climbed into bed, I dreamt of non-sustainable deforestation in South America, sleek Scandinavian models named Heidi, the Santorini Caldera, Indians scalping their victims in 18<sup>th</sup> century Massachusetts, and our new Sears Craftman lawnmower on the lunar surface.

I decided to stop reading at that point, and went to bed. It wasn’t that I thought it completely bad, but the sudden shift in tone, just half a page in, had thrown me. I was not a lover of genre-spanning at the time, and from all appearances this was the 400-page bastard child of postmodern tragical-comical-historical pastoral narratives that considered the wisecrack to be a destabilizing literary device. I wondered why Rebecca had recommended it as ‘the most moving book’ she had ever read. In any case, fate decided to keep me wondering and broke the two of us up a few days later, over a minor dispute involving a Leonard Cohen lyric (she had heard “like a drunken midnight choir” when it was really “a drunk in a midnight choir”, a mistake I called “ridiculous” and a number of other choice adjectives, in the presence of her two best friends, with such force that they promptly advised her to drop me, and I stupidly agreed to the arrangement in lieu of having to make an apology. Rebecca, in all fairness, agreed because she hated to be wrong). And then soon after, I had quit my job and moved to New York to get a fresh start.

I neglected to return her book in the confusion, and had no occasion to pick it up again from where it lay completely forgotten about in some packing box, until one day, years later, a new copywriter named Kei Nakamura waltzed, in 3/4 time no less, back into our shared office an hour late from lunch with a book entitled *The Sum of Our Parts* in her hand.

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“What’s that you’re reading?” Alex said, looking up as Katy shut off her iPod. He did not feel like bringing up her tardiness today, being more interested in the brown volume she held close to her chest.

She handed it over with a smile, and sat down to look busy at the computer. In essence she closed and opened the word processor a few times. Now reader, at this point it will be easy for you to jump to the conclusion that Katy was just one more of those vapid, undertalented and pathologically irresponsible young girls we all meet in high-school or college, who go on to hold perfectly good jobs by drawing attention away from their more obvious deficiencies by overplaying their more obvious gifts; or maybe it has not occurred to you yet – in any case, that was what Alex had thought of his new partner when she was first introduced to him five months ago. Nevermind that she looked like she was worth forgiving. “Oh God,” his inner misogynist might have complained, “Another vapid, undertalented and pathologically irresponsible copywench. Someone up there must want an excuse to fire me.” But since then, he had had ample opportunity to observe her work at a level worthy of a daughter of two Ivy League college professors, albeit divorced ones, calmly up-ending boardroom tables and entire meetings with fresh-faced vigor and fresher insight, shaking up things with the old guard and all that jazz. You can imagine the film montage, if there was one. Plus they had recently won a pitch for a large Korean consumer electronics firm because of her contributions, and if the predictions were accurate, it was due to surpass the Sony account in worth within two fiscal years. All this was in large part due to the fact that she was an incurable geek, with a decidedly masculine sense of curiosity towards the unconquered that translated into tireless passion. And so, Alex had withdrawn his premature judgment and now considered her to be quite all right.

But to blindly believe this second-hand account would be foolish. Let him tell you so himself this minute.

Alex: [*at stage left*] Yeah, she's cool.

Right. Back to where we were then. Alex flipped through the pages, absent-mindedly inspecting its type patterns as art directors are sometimes known to do. It is no secret that type fetishism runs rampant in the creative departments of advertising agencies everywhere. Somewhere in his mind, synapses flared and white matter shook off dusty years of sleep. A vague image of a woman came to the fore, and he became aware of a sickening feeling not unlike dread, coupled with the taste of clam. How bizarre, he thought, before the focus sharpened. Oh damn it, it was Rebecca. On Pier 39.

“Uh. I know this book.”

“You what?” Katy turned from the monitor slowly. “Really?”

“A friend of mine recommended it a long time ago. At least I think it's the same one.” He turned it over and opened it up to the first page. “Yeah, this definitely rings a bell.”

“No way, I've been looking for this book for ages! It's out of print and almost nobody's heard of it! Do you have a copy?” She unconsciously raised her voice a few dozen decibels towards the end of her sentence, prompting a gruff bark to come over the partition from the neighboring team.

Alex barked back at his colleague with practiced mimicry. Katy put her hands above her bowed head, as if in prayer, in a comically exaggerated Japanese gesture of apology. They both stifled little laughs, and then Alex turned back to Katy and resumed in a lower voice, “Do I have a copy of this book, *The Sum of Our Parts*? I... must have it, somewhere. Although I don't think I got very far with it. Are you just starting to read this now? Maybe I should join you.”

“Fantastic!” she whispered, sunbeaming. “This one is missing the last page, could you bring yours in tomorrow so I could make a photocopy? Oh thank you so much!”

“Welcome.” Alex swiveled his chair back to face his terminal. “An offline 404 error. Funny stuff.” He mumbled to himself, just loud enough for her ears, and started

work on a print ad for an internet service provider. This left the remaining half of the team to her own devices and smiling absentmindedly at an open word processor and some MSN chat windows.

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<KEIsatsu> what's up, sis?

<aKIRA> not a whole lot. how's your cute partner doing?

<KEIsatsu> he's here beside me, shut up!

<aKIRA> ok.

<aKIRA> i'm trying to write a short story, but i'm boring myself.

<KEIsatsu> what's the problem?

<aKIRA> I need to start constructing characters who are not 1) male 2) a version of myself or 3) a combination of 1 and 2.

<KEIsatsu> hang on...

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Looking around the office, her eyes rested on a current issue of TIME which had a woman in a lab coat on the cover: "THE MATH MYTH – The real truth about WOMEN'S BRAINS and the gender gap in SCIENCE." She recognized the stock photo from Getty's image banks.

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<KEIsatsu> i've got one for you.

<KEIsatsu> write about a female doctor

<aKIRA> uh huh

<KEIsatsu> she's a chain smoker even though everyone in her family has died from cancer

<KEIsatsu> even her dog

<KEIsatsu> who was, i stress, not even related by blood

<aKIRA> so it's the story of her epic struggle against irony and nicotine

<aKIRA> that's still pretty much my life in a nutshell.

<KEIsatsu> no no, there's a twist!

<KEIsatsu> she's genetically predisposed to suicide!

<KEIsatsu> she just doesn't know it yet!

<aKIRA> I think you can have this story.

<aKIRA> I gotta run now, brian's here, we're going to get measured.

<aKIRA> talk to you later!

<aKIRA> this wedding is going to make ME suicidal.

<KEIsatsu> okay cya

**\*aKIRA(165.21.13.37) has disconnected\***

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Katy looked over at Alex who was creating a picture of a lizard sitting at a table in an expensive-looking restaurant. It was his trademark image. Whenever a client proposed an abstract brief deemed impossible to visualize, he would serve them a lizard at a dining table, and they would be won over.

Content that he was not planning to spy on her anytime soon, she opened up her browser and went to her private (yet ironically public) journal at [katyn.blogspot.com](http://katyn.blogspot.com) to type up a summary of the day's events as she was beginning to get into the habit of doing. She started with a glowing appraisal of Alex's taste in literature.

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Back at home, I sliced opened the topmost box with an Exacto knife, then decided it would be easier if I just moved all the boxes out of the cramped storeroom first. That bought me some time. I was really in no mood to go through those effects from another life. They were a stranger's clothes, CDs, and outdated issues of Details and Esquire. But it had to be done in any case. In a sense, finding and reading the book would close that chapter of my life for good. The deeper I dug into the pile, the more I was reminded of little details and moments that we had shared in our eighteen months together. They were intense, and sharper than most memories I had made in the last year. I visually recalled entire days and hours of conversation in images so complete, that I found myself looking

around inside of them, like one might scan the width of a cinema screen, looking for clues in the deep focus. Everything I thought was another man's life was slowly becoming my own. I felt like an amnesiac suddenly gaining total recall. Too much, too fast. I held up old t-shirts against my chest and incredulously noted that I hadn't changed very much at all. The eyes in the hallway mirror were tired but could not hide their embarrassment.

I needed a drink.

Back from the kitchen with a large glass of vodka (in a little orange juice, for flavor), I started on a new box, and it was lying right under the lid. Decidedly different from Kei's copy, it was larger, bound in woven fabric, and had the title type embossed in gold. I sat down by the coffee table and began to read.

The alcohol had its way with me after an hour or so, and I dozed off with the book on my stomach. I probably slept for an hour, and was woken by an argument on the street below. It was after 11pm, and I knew better than to stick my head out in the middle of a heated cab-drivers' turf war, so I stretched myself into a less comfortable position and continued with the reading.

### *Summer of Our Parts*

#### *Chapter 11*

We took turns driving through the night, Stella and I. The scenery was implausibly bleak. If it wasn't a cactus on the left followed by one on the right, it was wide-open dirt and rocks, streaked with white sandy lines as far as the eye could see. We had been doing this for eight days now. We slept in motor lodges and ate at truck stops. We shopped in little towns and bought Indian trinkets for pennies. Then there were oddities we never expected to encounter along the way. The only thing on our minds was reaching the sea we had never seen, and when we would finally get to it. Instead we met an old man with a dog who communicated with him telepathically. They had a little show by the side of a road in Kinnuet (where we passed through), and visitors could show any picture or sign to the labrador, such as a number of fingers held out behind their backs, and

the old man would know what it was that it saw with no apparent trickery. Even after ten years of marriage, Stella remarked, we were nowhere close to knowing what the other was feeling at any given time. That evening, we returned to see the man when the crowds had dispersed.

He was friendly, but not very talkative at first. His companion regarded us with a wary eye as we made polite conversation. Finally we asked if his powers extended beyond the ability to see through the eyes of others. The absurdity of the question broke the ice. He laughed and corrected us with a gesture towards Leper.

“It’s not that I see anything I want to see, or have any powers like that. No, no. *He* shows me what he wants me to see. *He* chose me for this life, this work.”

“What do you mean? This dog has chosen to communicate with you? How did this begin?” I started. “Why in the world did...”

“We were both hungry and homeless,” he broke in. “He came to me one day and I knew immediately that I understood him perfectly. He looked straight at me, and I said ‘Ok buddy.’ And we’ve been living off each other ever since. Sure we could both survive without each other, but when you’ve something so good going on, even though neither of us understand it, why ruin a good thing? It’s a strange marriage, of sorts.” He laughed, and then led us into a coffeeshop where we bought them dinner. But not before he put on dark glasses and let himself be led in by the curious hound.

That night we had trouble finding a vacancy, and at last we were forced to take a room with two single beds, instead of the double we were becoming accustomed to on this trip; for the first time since her affair, we were sleeping together, in each others’ arms. To my surprise, she climbed into my bed when the lights went out on the two of us, and we lay there talking on that single mattress, uncomfortable, but happy.

“So, Wendell. How’s our campaign to save the marriage coming along?”

“Pretty good on my end, but of course the votes haven’t been counted yet.” I made out the shape of her face in the dark. It was smiling.

“On my end too!” she whispered. “You know we really did make things unnecessarily complicated for each other.”

“You for me, especially.”

“Shush, don’t interrupt.” She said, leaning forward and kissing me. There was, as a hack romance novelist might say, a stirring in my loins. “As I was saying,” she continued, after minutes of groping had passed, “I’ve been thinking ever since we met that funny man and his dog...”

“Hmm?” I struggled to pay attention to what she was saying.

“He was right in some ways, about what we want out of life, and how sometimes... do you remember what he said while we were eating, that sometimes we wander around searching for something, but if someone asked what it was that we were looking for, we wouldn’t be able to say? I know that feeling. For the longest time I was only living for myself, even after we got married, Wendell. I was only living for myself. I knew I wasn’t being fair to you, but I think I’m beginning to understand that I’ve had the missing piece in my hands for ten years now. Tell me I’m not crazy Wendell. Is this normal?”

“You’re not crazy. You’re just... it doesn’t matter. I’ve always known what I’ve known, and I knew that you would come to me when you were ready... I’ve always known what I’ve known, and I knew you would come... Maybe we were just ahead of ourselves.” I managed to be coherent despite her holding the... despite her holding the missing piece in her hands.

“You always know what I want to hear, even this has been you always know what I... yes I know djhkwz ten years, mfd le jr I managed to be coherent despite ... you’re not crazy. You’re just what I think you are always what you’ve known... always what I want to hear, yeskljd..... He was right in some ways about..if someone ehak aj asked? .skldjzz.....if someone.....only knew.....

Vodka always was a poor late night reading companion. I woke up the next morning an hour late for work, with the empty highball glass lying on its side by the couch, and the closed book on the carpet beside it. Cursing my stupidity, I ran to the shower, literally tossing the volume into my open briefcase on the way.

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It was Katy's turn to wait now, Naomi being a full fifteen minutes late for their breakfast appointment. She glanced at her watch and planned an alternative route of entry to her desk when she would inevitably be late. Perhaps she could leave her bag in a restroom downstairs, and saunter in like she had been at work earlier and had just gone out on an errand? She decided to head in first and order a bagel.

"There you are, I was afraid you'd run off without me!" Naomi said, tapping the shoulder of the taller woman as she waited in line, weighing the nutritional benefits of cheese over sour cream.

"Never! How could you even think that? Wait, do you want one coffee or two?"

"Why, two, of course." came the reply.

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"So what's on your mind?" Katy enquired as casually as she could manage, once they had found seats. "You seem a little off-balance this week."

"Do I? Oh." She turned her cup around on the saucer. She picked at a scar on the wooden table. Katy had seen this slow and deliberate fidgeting before, and she waited patiently for her friend to put the words together.

"Well, you know how my parents have always wanted me to be like them, right? Putting work before everything else, well, putting money before everything else, I mean."

"Uh huuuhh." Katy listened intently. Was the Franklin daughter about to abdicate and flee the position that awaited her? Surely she wouldn't. There was nothing else she knew how to do, or would have liked to do.

"Yeah, so... I've been... Thinking."

“Uh huuuh...”

“And I don’t wanna be like that you know? There are a lot of other things I’d like to spend my life on many other things I want to be able to say I’ve done and it’s not enough to go lots of places and say I’ve seen this and that and oh I’m better for it I’d much rather actually do something different and not have it be a temporary change in my life but a permanent one you know I want to do something that isn’t expected of me because then maybe I could be someone they don’t expect me to be and someone I didn’t expect myself to be either and I know you might think this sounds like me being that spoilt brat again oh of course she wants to do this and that but she never sees the consequences and what would she know growing up with everything she wanted and needed she has no idea how a normal person lives their life there are consequences that follow rash actions BUT!!

“What!?”

“I know all of that! And I want to take a chance now because if I don’t, it’ll never be the right time! Do you know what I mean?”

“First of all, I never thought of you as a spoilt brat in such a patronizing way, and you should know that better than anyone.”

“Okay, I know.” Naomi had calmed down, and sat back in her chair, drinking slowly with an outstretched pinkie.

“And secondly,” Katy wondered to herself how best to overlook the lack of irony in her friend’s emotionally overwrought ejaculation that called to memory a dozen afternoon women’s films on the Hallmark channel. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with what you want. It’s perfectly normal for you to feel the way you do. In fact, I would be worried if you didn’t have any doubts! But what is it you want to do?”

Naomi blushed scarlet for the first time in five years.

“Umm, I’ve been thinking for awhile that I might like to try and do some photography. You know, like fashion stuff. Remember how I used to help Lauren with her..... photos always turned out...” But Katy had stopped listening from the first words. She nodded with eyes fixed onto the crown of her friend’s prettily animated blond head as she kept talking, but all she could think of was Naomi’s revelation. It continued to shock her, how little she knew about the people around her. It was the same when her

parents had announced their divorce, and her sister had taken it calmly while she clutched at her chest; the same when Dr. Sterling had met, and clumsily declared his feelings for, her on that cold night by the dormitory courtyard, all she expected was a word of encouragement, for she had done well that term and committed to his advanced module the following semester – Oh God, how naïve she once was – still was! But still more naïve was Naomi to her eyes. Did she not know how difficult it was to change directions in life, in these times? There were things she was sure to be unaware of. Contacts she did not have. The backdoors of the industry. Technicalities and techniques. She considered how she might break it gently, but her friend had never looked so genuinely happy. Maybe all she needed was to believe in the strength of others. After all, when was the last time she had felt so good about anything?

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“It’s different.”

“Kei. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.” Alex sighed, leaning back in his chair as Katy examined the two books on the collaboration desk that ran between them.

“You don’t think some of the content is different too, do you? Have you read yours to the end?”

“Yeah I finished it two days ago, when you were ill.”

“I really was ill, you don’t have to smirk like that.”

“Hey, didn’t say a thing.”

“Even their dates of first publication are different. ‘78 and ‘79. It’s like they’re two different books, but that’s not possible, is it?”

“Hmm. Check the ISBN on the back.”

“Check the what?” Katy cocked an eyebrow. “Oh, I-S-B-N. Good thinking.”

Alex sighed some more, feigning annoyance.

“Cheer up, I’m told I grow on people.” Katy’s laugh rang out around the empty lunch-hour office. “Okay, they’re different. What does that mean?”

“Some English student *you* must have been! It means that yours isn’t a reprint, it’s a whole different edition, and obviously registered under a different title.”

“Can they do that? Put the same book out twice under different titles?”

“I’m pretty sure they shouldn’t be able to. There must have been revisions, but I don’t know anything about the process.”

“Right,” Katy climbed up to sit on her desk, legs crossed. “So this book of ours was put out twice, once in a handsome special edition like yours...”

“Ex-girlfriend’s, actually.”

“Okay, and then again in a normal library and store-bound version like mine. But they’re not quite the same, and no one knows why. Hmm. Well, someone must know why, I suppose.

“Someone always does!” He mimicked William Shatner, for effect.

“What about this ex-girlfriend of yours. Did she have a particular interest in it? Could we ask her?”

“We may most certainly not ask her. I don’t even know where she is at the moment.” He put a finger to his lips and sat in silence for more than a few moments. Katy watched him, not knowing if she could interrupt.

“Alex?”

“Hmm?”

“What did you think of the ending? Did you think the suicides were in character? I don’t know if it was poorly written or what, but it didn’t make a lot of sense to me. Especially not after the way they made love in that motel flashback, or flash-forward, near the beginning. They weren’t so nihilistic, these were people on the cusp of a new start in life. It just seems...”

“Wait, what in the world are you talking about? They didn’t commit suicide as far as I can tell. It ends a little ambiguously, I’ll give you that, but standing in water does not indicate an intention to self-destruct. Now, an electrician might tell you otherwise but ignore that. And I certainly don’t remember them making love in the hotel. They just went to sleep after some messing around.”

“No, they did commit suicide. It’s right at the beginning! The ending just provides an idealized reimagining of the scene where the moment lasts for an eternity.” She handed him the volumes as if to say he was better off not checking, because she was right. He took them anyway.

“There is no mention of suicide, what are you talking about?” He handed her the book, open to the second page. She scanned it and looked up at him with her lips slightly parted, but silent. She paused like that, looking past his right ear, long enough for him to start getting worried. He picked up the library copy on the table at the same moment her hand reached for it, and started reading.

*The Sum of Our Parts (1979) – On loan to Kei Nakamura*

*Chapter 1*

Stella and I stepped out of the car in unison and stared in complete silence at the dark mass on the horizon. It was a while before she spoke. A tiny sound, a cross between a gasp and a sigh of relief. I looked over just in time to see her lips closing, and a hint of swallow form in her white neck. Her gaze remained fixed steadily ahead.

“I thought I would be afraid, but this feels nothing like fear.”

“Darling...”, I started, but lost the words, transfixed by her profile. I wondered how long it had been since I last felt that way for her, and lost count. I walked over to her side of the road and took her hand. It was warm, and slightly moist.

“Let’s go to it,” she said, turning to face me.

“I love you.”

She mouthed the reply, squeezing my hand as she leaned forward to kiss me. Then she started removing her clothes, article by article, all the while walking towards the empty beach, and the waiting water.

At the golden edge, not yet browned by the tide, we stood and listened to the gentle whispering of the waves. They coaxed shells out of the sand, brought gifts to the shore, and made promises to our toes; I failed to notice that the ground beneath us was shifting, eroding. Like a seasoned lover, the salt waters ensnared our virgin hearts, and we took our first wary steps towards her.

Wading further out, the sea took us into her embrace. Our steps were as much hers as they were our own; I felt her arms around me, lifting me, pulling me to one side, and laying me on my back. And Stella was right there beside me, smiling that same sweet smile I had first seen at eighteen, the one she wore to our prom; her hands felt the same as they had when we had danced then, and now as we floated out her eyes took mine into their confidence and told me something I had always known, but had at times chosen to forget, or obfuscate with bitterness, like the blanket waves now, breaking on our faces like spider-webs, washing over and then pulling away; always my eyes were opened wide - I saw the layers come and go, I saw visions of our lives together, they were all true, I saw the past as a lie to be forgiven - and always, always I saw her face, and those brown eyes, until I could see no more.

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Four days before, such a scene would have been unimaginable. We had just fallen out in a major way over a minor disagreement [...]

“I wonder what else is different.” Alex mused, setting the book down again. “I quite liked that joke about the sea being a *seasoned* lover. It’s a pun to match the ones that follow in the next part.”

“I think the comedy was tacked on to keep the reader’s interest. One of my lecturers used to say that a good joke would ensure the next page got read.”

“Yeah I didn’t care for it in the beginning, but it made Wendell more likeable in the second half. I felt like he was a shorter, bald version of myself.” This got a laugh out of Katy. Sterling had said the same thing, only he really was short and balding. “It looks like your version is a little more polished, while mine reads like a first draft. But why was it published then?”

“Perhaps the publisher rushed it out the door before it was ready?” she offered.

“Plausible. Go on.”

“But the author wouldn’t have been happy, so naturally he’d have wanted to keep working on it, and get the final version out.”

“Right, but the changes would mandate treating it as a separate entity. Thus the different title, and ISBN.”

“I honestly can’t think of any other published work that’s been altered significantly after going to press. There’s always the desire to preserve writing like a valuable historic document. They may add a foreword, some commentary, but they never change the meaning of the text. Except to restore it to the way it was meant to be.”

“Tell that to Walt Whitman and the Church,” Alex laughed.

“But Alex, this goes beyond tightening up the prose. This looks like a thorough rethinking of the novel’s significance. The goal posts have moved.”

“It looks that way, sure. But the only way to know is to swap and reread this mother over the weekend.” He caught himself at the end of the sentence, cursing his enthusiasm. He had hoped for a homework-free weekend, the first in ages.

“Okay, I don’t mind! We will then.” Katy said, smiling. “Say Alex, are you seeing anyone?” She wore the same silly grin on her face until she realized what she was saying. “Oh! I’m not asking for myself. It’s just that I’m looking to set up a friend of mine. I think you might balance each other out nicely.”

“No, I’m not. But I object to being used as ballast.”

“Don’t be so negative. Really, I can see it now.” She looked around the office. “The two of you have similar tastes in interior decoration, food. You’re a decent, well-adjusted guy, she’s straight-edged with a decadent spending streak a mile wide. You’re independent, she needs someone. She’s got a huge place with spare rooms too.”

“Katy,” he said, putting her book in his messenger bag. “It’s a little early to be talking cohabitation when I haven’t even met her. Call me negative all you want, but I’m a realist when it comes to imaginary relationships.” He smiled at his own joke.

She might have laughed more if she hadn’t noticed his addressing her as Katy for the first time, and the nervous twitching of her nose in response.

\*\*\*\*

**Hi...**

*Hi, Becky? Uh*

**Hello?**

*Hey, can you hear me? It's*

**Hello???**

*Becky? It's Alex No, do you remem*

***Just kidding, leave your message at the beep!***

**\*beep\***

*Jesus Christ, Becky. Funny message you've got there. Ah... this is Alex, if you remember. Alex No? Listen, I know it's been a long time, but er... I needed to talk to you about something. I have something that belongs to you, and I wanted to give it back. This isn't one of those things you'd rather I just kept instead of having to see me again, it's your first edition copy of 'Summer of Our Parts'. Please call me, this is my mobile number, I'm in New York. Thanks, and I umm... hope everything's going great with you. Bye now.*

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Katy was late as usual that Monday morning, sneaking into the boardroom at 9.30, right in the middle of the WIP meeting. I turned slightly to watch her out of the corner of my eye as she took one of the plastic folding chairs, catching herself in the ankle with it in the process.

“Fuck!” I believe was the word that escaped her lips, just a little above the level of the suit who was speaking. What followed was a tense moment, as the MD looked her up and down, seemingly as if for the first time, and then motioned for the speaker to continue with his assessment. For the next hour, Katy sat very still, paying a remorseful and exaggerated amount of attention to the proceedings. She took notes where others yawned and sat back to daydream. I couldn't help but smile at how *cute* she looked in her red turtleshell glasses, deadly earnest.

As we were filing out of the room, I went up beside her and put my arm around her shoulder.

“Hey kid, don’t feel so bad.” I said with a smile, by way of cheering her up. If I succeeded, I didn’t find out. She merely sighed and suggested we go out for some coffee.

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I went to the back of the line and asked her what she wanted.

“Two cinnamon lattes, I’ll find us a table.” She handed me a ten dollar bill.

I put my hand on hers to gently push it away in rejection of her offer. How did she know what I wanted anyway? I decided to ask. Perhaps it weighed too heavily on my breath after lunch.

“What do you mean?” she asked, puzzled. I explained that the politically incorrect five-dollar Crazy Mulatto Cinnamon Latte was also my drink of choice at the Kofipolitik.

“Really? I wasn’t aware.” She rubbed her earlobe absentmindedly, looking around. “Oh! You meant... no, I meant two cinnamon lattes, for me. I always have two.” She put the money away in her bag. “Thanks.” I shot her my best feigned look of regret, but she had already turned away.

“Is this where you disappear to every other morning when we’re all hard at work?” I asked jokingly, when we had sat down by the windowed storefront.

“I don’t disappear, I just come in late.” she laughed. “Yeah this is probably my favorite place to be.”

“You’re kidding, so you really do come here often? I get coffee here almost every day, how is it we’ve never run into each other?” I took out a bundle of sketchbooks and papers from my bag. Then I found her copy of *The Sum of Our Parts* and took that out too.

“That’s odd. I’m here every other morning, just like you said.” She reached into her oversize sling bag and removed my copy, putting it on the table between us.

“Oh, I come in around the end of my lunch hour, which means, under this new staggered Active Response break plan we’re on, that I would have missed you anyway.”

“Yeah it’s a really stupid idea, and no good for team synergy.” She said the last two words with the gesture for inverted commas. “So I usually have lunch with my girlfriend Naomi. She’s the one I wanted to fix you up with.”

“Sure, I remember,” was my reply, although I didn’t. “But now I have some news for you.” I said, placing my hand emphatically upon the pile of books between us.

“I have some news for you too. I ran into Jack after the meeting, while you were getting your things.” I withdrew my hand.

“What did he say?”

“I couldn’t stop apologizing! I told him I didn’t mean to swear so loudly, and I showed him my sad face. See?” She demonstrated it. It was rather impressive. “Then he told me to calm down and said he wasn’t my mother, only my boss. ‘As your boss, I command you to stop worrying!’ He was really funny about it, putting on a German voice and all. So I think everything’s okay. He said he was happy with our work, and knows we put in a lot of late nights last December. So he can overlook a few late mornings.”

“He never says anything like that to me! What the hell.” Women got all the breaks under Jack’s management. I fumed quietly.

“Okay what is it? What’s your good news?”

I left her waiting as I swirled my cup slowly, inhaled, and took a long full sip, all the while watching her eyes over the rim. I smiled, but could tell she was growing impatient by the narrowing eyes and the book she raised above my head. So I explained. I told her everything that had happened in the past week. About contacting Rebecca. About how she was in Chicago, and that we had arranged to meet the following weekend. She laughed when I told her how Rebecca had been more interested in the condition of her long-lost book than in the details of my life. But I was exaggerating for her benefit. The truth is that Rebecca had fought to keep in control of her emotions. She was angry, she was frustrated, and sad. Sad enough that it had affected me, and those seemingly forgotten memories had washed up on shore again. They had really been beneath the sand all these years, and her tears had sought them out.

She had called me a week after we separated. She had wanted to say she was sorry; had wanted to hear me say I was sorry. It was probably the day I left, and the only apology

she got was from the phone company. We had too much of a good thing going for her to give up on, but people sometimes give away their better fortunes out of a queer sense of excess. It is a kind of guilt that afflicts those who are satisfied. I had throughout my life known people who discovered Buddhism or some other fashionable form of comfort, and then suddenly consummated their newfound faiths by discarding all valuable and worldly possessions. I was always proud of my possessions. I had books, art, and lovingly polished discs of vinyl, all earned through hard work, that no Eastern philosophy was going to wipe clean from the slate of my hunter-gatherer instincts. But I was guilty just like the rest.

My weakness was one of the heart, and I feared the loss of loved ones so much that I sometimes cut them off, willingly. Better to lose them by my own hand, on my own terms, than to have them taken by some random factor at a time when I needed them most. I could afford to do so because there would always be others, I told myself, and that was how those years were passed. But we don't stay young forever, and the mistakes of the young cannot be made forever. If only I had known that much when I left her abruptly, without even a note or number where I could be reached.

And so Rebecca had looked for me in all the old familiar places. But I was not to be found in that small café, the park across the way, nor the children's carousel, the chestnut tree, or the wishing well. Songs lied to us all throughout our relationship, and finally one of them had played Judas, and given me the chance to deny myself in front of three people. Meeting up with Rebecca wasn't really about the book, or finding the answer to Gettenberg's mystery. I wanted to find out if I had stopped living in a selfish future, and so I had to make amends with the past. She was a precious stone I had tossed aside because it was the wrong color, but like diamonds, no two gems are alike, and I was the poorer for it.

"I told her I might be bringing a friend. How do you feel about a weekend vacation? I thought we might drive up, it's not nearly far enough to justify a flight."

"Well," she said, cocking her head to the right, "that sounds like fun. Are we going on a fact-finding mission, or a diplomatic one?"

"Just the facts, ma'am. And she does have them. She wrote a research paper on one of Gettenberg's peers when she was at USC. She seems to know everything about him. This first edition was a gift from one of her professors."

“Nice gift,” Katy said dryly, before drifting off into some thought I could not see.

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“How was the drive up?” Rebecca asked, once Katy had been introduced to her. She immediately reminded the younger woman of her sister, Kira. There was her height, and shorter, more sophisticated way of wearing her hair. There were the horn-rimmed glasses, and the manner of looking at people as if they were artifacts to be studied, from which no harm could possibly come. She felt herself being studied and reduced to a series of scores she would never see. She tried to smile as amicably as possible, and shook her hand. Her sister was always satisfied by a firm handshake. People like them, she suspected, tallied up totals, burnt photographs, and moved on.

“It was very nice. We took turns at the wheel and stopped over in Toledo last night. Alex is a lot more fun in close quarters than he’d like to think.” She guessed correctly that the two would want a moment to catch up in private, and excused herself to go to the bathroom. But she was wrong about Rebecca, who had red eyes when she returned. Alex’s photographs were never burnt.

“I’m glad you brought this back to me.” She said when the book was placed in her hands. She brushed its fabric cover with reverence and care. Her eyes fell to Katy’s copy. “Oh you have the regular edition as well.” She said, in a voice that made Alex wince imperceptibly. “Some people believe that one to be the perfected work, but I personally have more love for the original. It’s much more... optimistic, don’t you think?”

“That’s what we wanted to talk to you about, Rebecca, if you don’t mind that is.” Rebecca eyed Katy as the latter spoke, and then turned to look briefly into Alex, who checked his watch.

“Sure. What do you want to know?”

“Everything! Why are there two? Why are they different?”

“Right. Have you ever been to Corsica? No? It’s a bit of a tourist hotspot these days, but it was back in the 70s too, when Gettenberg was there. He went up there alone when he was having some domestic issues with his wife. He said he was going away to

write in peace, but it's widely accepted that he was going away to forget her. He spent nearly a year in the southern town of Bonifacio, by the sea. Which is where he met his mistress. I don't know her name. You know all that talk about stairways in the book? That's probably a reference to this picturesque little spot called the Stairway of King Aragon, which leads down to the sea. He probably met her there. Not enough is known of this, only what some interviewers got out of his widow. I met her once actually, but she refused to talk about her husband. All in the past, she said. Anyway, this was two years before the first book was published. Eventually, Gettenberg was called back home to settle the divorce. As you may imagine, he left quite unwillingly, but he never returned to Corsica after that."

"Why was that?" It was Alex who spoke this time, intrigued by the lack of resolution.

"I'm getting to that. Gettenberg didn't head straight home. He landed in Florida and took a three week road trip, driving back home to his wife. He didn't tell anyone where he was going, and we don't know except for what we can infer from the journey in the book. I suppose he was sorting out things in his head. Whatever it was, he covered a great deal of American road, and probably passed through many small communities, like the ones Stella and Wendell encounter. He returned home a changed man. He cancelled the divorce proceedings, and spent the remainder of the year wooing back his wife. The following year, the first book was published."

"The more optimistic of the two," Katy noted. "But did something go wrong afterwards? To make him write the second one?"

"Funnily enough, no. The first book was based off the notes he started writing in Corsica. I say started, because we don't think he got much done that year. It's a pity the sordid details will never come to light, unless we find this mystery woman. As a romantic, I imagine she must have been a classical Mediterranean beauty, with olive skin and raven dark hair."

"He doesn't look like much on the dust cover." Alex noted.

"That's just like you to be superficial." She sighed, rolling her eyes. Katy giggled and would in later weeks imitate the complaint towards Alex *ad nauseam*. "Have you seen his wife? She was quite stunning, herself."

“The first and only man named Warner to achieve such a feat, I’m sure.”

“As I was saying... Gettenberg always meant to publish two books. The first one, “Summer of Our Parts”, was based on notes he wrote while in Corsica. As is probably obvious from the title, he meant it as a celebration of his love affair there. Which is what leads us to believe that it was, well, to put it crudely, sexually motivated. He was searching for something different, and found it. Going home, he probably realized the error of his ways, rediscovered the sanctity of the marriage vows he’d forgotten, and tried to mend the damage. But you don’t ever forget a lover, do you Alex? Gettenberg didn’t, anyway. The first five hundred copies of the book were published as ‘Summer of Our Parts’, a kind of love letter to his other woman.”

“Hah. *The other woman finds time to manicure her nails, the other woman is perfect where her rival fails.*” Alex recited, in his best Nina Simone impersonation.

“Exactly. Here’s the interesting part. Gettenberg always intended for there to be two books. Love letters to each of his women. He spent the next year madly and completely in love with his wife, and editing ‘The Sum of Our Parts’ for her. He considered it to be the superior book. That dark, fatalistic streak that runs through it? That’s his vision of true love. The love that dies together.”

“So the Other Woman just becomes a footnote in history. Five hundred copies, to disappear into the hands of private collectors of kitschy junk.” said Alex, seemingly disappointed, as if the failure of the long-dead man to properly remember a former lover was his own.

“*But the other woman will always cry herself to sleep, the other woman will never have his love to keep, and as the years go by the other woman, will spend her life alone.*” Katy half-sang the closing verse to herself, to Alex’s satisfaction, and Rebecca’s apparent displeasure (she crooked the left side of her mouth).

“Not quite.” The scholar said, holding up both books with their covers facing her audience. “Earlier, you asked why they had different titles. Obviously to keep them separate, but if you look at the difference between ‘Summer of Our Parts’ and ‘The Sum of Our Parts’, it may become clearer. Keep in mind that Gettenberg lived a landlocked life, just like Stella and Wendell, in both novels. What were they searching for?”

“The sea,” replied Katy immediately, without thinking. “It was the one thing unresolved about their marriage, because their honeymoon was cancelled. Thus the sort of pilgrimage-cum-roadtrip to rediscover each other. Right?”

“The word ‘The’... and also the morpheme ‘Mer’. Those are the two differences in the titles. And... ‘Mer’ is the French name for ‘Sea’. So, ‘The Sea’?... is what separates both his women? He hid the book’s true name across two editions?”

Rebecca nodded.

“Yes, you may go to the head of the class. It’s a little cute, but the sea was indeed what separated both his women. It led him to one, and it saved his marriage to the other. The story in the book was more fact than fiction, you know. During that second year, he took Emily, that’s his wife, on the route he traveled back home on. For some sort of closure, I suppose, down to Florida. Where they did *not* kill themselves, I should note. He died five years later from a heart attack.”

“That’s pretty clever, I suppose. But it still doesn’t do a very good job of preserving the memory of the other woman, does it? I mean since you need both books, one of which was rarer, to realize his attachment to his tropical mistress.” Katy mused aloud.

“Corsica isn’t tropical,” Rebecca corrected her. “And he actually kept his wife in the dark about the first book. She only found out when some royalty enquiries came after his death, which explains her current unwillingness to discuss him. Quite unfortunate, really. He did love her.” Rebecca removed her glasses. “He’s something of a writer’s writer. Or an academic’s writer. His name hasn’t been forgotten. I’ve been saying ‘we’ and ‘us’ a lot, and I mean my colleagues at the university. Alex tells me you were studying in Australia when you discovered this book, so that just goes to show how he, and Her, continue to be remembered by a passionate few. Anyhow, if you release a book in a limited edition of five hundred numbered copies, there are always bound to be ‘private collectors of kitschy junk’ who will covet and preserve them, just as you say, Alex.” She laughed, appearing relaxed for the first time.

Alex smiled, looking into her eyes, and maybe he even laughed with her.

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Closing the door behind her, Katy looked up at the darkening sky, reaching into her bag for a cigarette. Looking back, she noticed Rebecca staring after her, and then turning back to Alex as she was caught. She would leave them to talk it out. It didn't matter in the least.

She caught a raindrop on her nose, and then another on her outstretched tongue. The week was not yet old, and there was still so much on her mind, so much to do. But not for now. For now there were only these raindrops on her face, brought by a strong westbound wind. And, she imagined, the sound of Alex coming up from behind to take her arm, to ask if he could send her home, wherever that was.

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