

## FOREVER'S A LONG TIME

By Glen Lamont

'So what was so important that I had to see you this very minute Gillian?'  
'Jesus Greg, can I at least catch my breath?'

They were meeting at the same place they always met. A small bar/bistro called Crazy One-eyed Ted's. Or Crazy's for short. As usual Gillian made it sound like a major emergency that she see him as soon as. It was always like that with her, she was always so fucking dramatic about everything. Greg wondered what it was this time; she had a major breakthrough in therapy, or maybe she had another one of her weird dreams that she thought had some deep hidden meaning, or maybe it was just that some guy actually said hello to her and now she was in love again. What ever it was, it was a good excuse to go for a beer on a sunny day.

'Did you order for me or what?'

'How the hell am I supposed to know what you want to drink on any given day. It's different every time Gil.'

'Didn't you get my text?'

Just then his message alert went on his phone. 'That new Yugoslavian cab sav. Couldn't you just have said a glass of red wine?'

'No no. The guy in the Times said it was, and I quote, "the best little cabernet to come out of the European Union since the wall fell", end quote.'

'Wow.'

'What did you get? A boring old bottle of Lone Star I'll bet. No wait. Dos Equi or some shit that would make you appear more interesting than you really are Am I right?'

The waitress appeared with his bottle of San Miguel.

'See, you were wrong.'

'And what can I get for your friend?' The waitress was young and beautiful with a great tan.

'I will have a glass of that new Yugoslavian Cabernet that you just got in.'

'Sorry, you can only get it by the bottle.'

'Then bring me a bottle Barbie.'

The waitress glared at Gillian wrote down the order then smiled at Greg and wiggled her ass back to the bar inside.

'Why do you have to be so fucking rude to other women? For that matter other people in general?'

'Because she was being rude to me, that's how. I mean she was totally looking at you when I was speaking, it was like I didn't even exist. Little bitch. Whatever, do you want to hear my news or what?'

'Do I have a choice?'

'No. Guess who has a date this Saturday night? I'll put you out of your misery. Me! How cool is that?'

'Does this one know how crazy you are?'

'Excuse me but he happens to think I'm pretty amazing.'

'Wait, it's not that Polish guy who collects glasses down at the Freemont?'

'What if it is?'

'Jesus Gil, the guy can't speak a word of English. You think you're going on a date and he thinks he's getting married so he can stay in the country. Fuck me.'

'Wrong again asshole. It so happens that my friend Agatha, who's parents are from Poland, speaks the language and he told her that he thought I was very interesting and that he wanted to get to know me better. Does that sound like a marriage proposal to you?'

'Maybe they don't have a word in Polish for neurotic? But hey, I hope it works out for you.'

'Really? Do you mean that Greg?'

'Yes. I do actually care whether you're happy you know.'

I know, it just that you've got a funny way of showing it sometimes. And what about you, are you still searching for the unattainable? Still waiting for the perfect woman to come along? Have you met the one that ticks all the boxes? You know if you don't lower your standards you're going to end up a lonely old man.'

'Well I'm already lonely, and I'm not getting any younger.'

'You're only lonely because you allow yourself to be. I can name at least ten women that you've been with that could have made you perfectly happy but you wouldn't let them. You won't let anyone get close to you. That's why you're alone.'

'I'm telling you that the right one just hasn't come along yet.'

'Or maybe you're comparing every woman you meet to Sam. Sam's gone and you're the one that sent her away. She's not coming back Greg it's just that simple. She got a little too close and you couldn't handle it so you sabotaged the relationship so that she really had no choice but to leave. Then you sat and moped around for a year and a half and let everyone feel sorry for you. And you revelled in it. How am I doing so far baby?'

'Damn Gillian, where'd all that come from?'

'Sorry but it needed to be said. This whole dark brooding, broken hearted writer thing is just getting so old.' She reached across the table and took his hand, 'You have so much to offer and I know that underneath that hard granite exterior of yours beats the heart of a true romantic. Let people see that side of you and you'll never have to worry about being lonely again.'

'You really know how to cheer a guy up. I'll take everything you've said under advisement, I promise. In the meantime let's get drunk and make fun of everyone around us.'

'Okay.'

They spent the remainder of the afternoon and most of the evening in Crazy's and after much heated debate ended up at the Eldorado to catch Harp Dog Browns last set. They took a taxi back to Gillian's.

'Are you coming in or what?'

'My Ma told me never to go home with drunken crazy women.'

'Fuck off; your Ma was a drunken crazy woman.'

'All the more reason to listen to her.'

'Suit yourself but we coulda had best pals sex.'  
'Thanks anyways gorgeous but I think I'm gonna walk home.'  
'Phone me when you get home so I don't worry.'  
He gave her a big hug, 'I will. Goodnight Gill, I love you.'  
'I love you too. Call me.'  
'I will.'

Greg decided to take the long way back, cutting through Blood Alley and through the park. It was a clear night for a change and a half moon was just hiding behind the only small cloud visible. He startled a homeless young person lying in their sleeping bag as he rounded the corner and wondered why that person had to sleep on the street. At the entrance to the park he passed a couple holding hands and wished he was them. He hated being on his own. It was the same thing night after night, nothing but an empty bed waiting for him at home. He was never alone but always lonely. Even getting drunk didn't seem to help much these days. Why can't I be like that couple back there, holding hands and nothing in the world matters but each other, he thought. What the fuck was wrong with me? Even Gillian has a better love life than me and that's saying a lot. I feel like a little kid with his face pressed up against the windowpane of the candy shop. I can meet a woman and after speaking to her for fifteen minutes; I've already thought about what side of the bed she prefers, whether or not my friends would like her and what her parents would think of me. I'm constantly rehearsing my next heart ache. I just want to know what that intangible is that everyone can grasp but me.

Greg stopped at the gazebo and reached inside his jacket for his hip flask. He took a long pull and lit a Marlboro. Just then he caught movement out of the corner of his eye and looked down to see a field mouse scavenging for crumbs. It was so tiny and the world was such a big place and yet it went about its business ignoring Greg altogether. He sat mesmerised by this tiny creature who in spite of its size ventured boldly out into the world completely and utterly fearless. And here was he terrified of being alone and at the same time incapable of letting anyone get close enough to rescue him. Just then the mouse stopped what it was doing and then like a shot it sped off to a dark corner of the gazebo. Greg heard a high pitched squeak and moments later a black and white tabby emerged from the dark with the mouse between its teeth still struggling. The cat paused a moment to look at him and then proudly stalked away. The image of that small furry face covered in its own blood would stay with him for weeks to come. He recalled a poem by D.H. Lawrence;

"I never saw a wild thing  
Sorry for itself  
A small bird will drop frozen dead from a bough  
Without ever having felt sorry for itself."

Why do all my perfect moments have to end in pain and carnage, he pondered as he took another sip from the flask. The bourbon slid down his throat and warmed his insides and his eyes grew heavy. He drifted into sleep and dreamt of a woman he'd never seen before. She had the sweetest kindest face he'd ever seen. He'd known her his entire life and yet he'd never met her.

She was the one. His angel, his soul-mate his one true love. Her kiss was like velvet and tasted like cotton candy. She smelled of lilacs. He lay with her face nestled in his shoulder experiencing love and comfort like he'd never known in his entire life. She spoke only to tell him how much she loved and adored him. Here he wanted to stay for ever. She looked up at him with the most beautiful softest green eyes he'd ever seen and softly whispered; 'forever's a very long time my baby.'

The sharp pain in his ribs made him sit up with a start and open his eyes. A policeman stood over him. It was beginning to get light. He gave Greg another poke in the ribs with his baton.

'Hey buddy, wake up. Ya can't sleep here now move it along.'

'Sorry officer. I guess I dozed off.'

'Ya got somewhere to go?'

'Yes. I uh, I just stay a few blocks from here.'

'Well ya better go home and sleep it off.'

'Right, thanks, I'm on my way.'

He rose unsteadily to his feet and fished in his coat pocket for his cigarettes.

He lit a Marlboro and shuffled off.

'Hey you!'

He turned and saw the cop waving him back. Oh fuck. Now what have I done?

'You forgot your hip flask.'

'Oh shit, thanks.'

He prayed that their might be a swallow left in it as his head was pounding like a tympani. He waited till he was out of sight of the long arm of the law and took out the flask. He shook it and heard the comforting swish of liquid. Thank you God.

After he got back to the flat and had a long hot shower he felt better but still he had the image of the phantom dream woman in his head. This was the most life-like dream he'd ever experienced. Could Greg's over active imagination have conjured her or did she really exist? The only person who could answer that was God and he wasn't too sure whether he or she existed. More importantly, his weekly column was due and he only had about six hours before his deadline and his editor phoned him to go apeshit. After about an hour of writing he reached for a cigarette and realized he was out and decided to head to the shop.

He went to the Greek shop and bought two packs of Marlboros and a paper. On his way back home he decided to stop for a coffee at Maxine's on fourth. He ordered a tall cappuccino and took a seat. He couldn't waste too much time as he had to get back and finish his column and he couldn't concentrate on his paper because of the couple at the next table arguing in some foreign language. Why do people feel the need to do that shit in public? He tried his best to ignore them but couldn't help glancing in their direction. They guy with her did not look pleased.

'What the fuck are you looking at?' he said in heavily accented English.

Greg stuck his head back in his newspaper. The woman was crying and got up from the table and started for the door. The man followed her and grabbed her roughly by the arm. She said something to him in their language and he

slapped her across the face. Greg looked around the room hoping someone would say or do something. No one moved. He picked up his paper and tried to get by the couple so he could leave. The man looked right at him.

'You have a fucking problem maybe?'

'Yeah dickheads who hit women.'

'Maybe you mind your own fucking business. Yes?'

'Look pal, she obviously doesn't want anything to do with,' he never got to finish his sentence as the next thing he knew he felt an incredibly sharp pain in his right eye and saw a flash of colours as he hit the ground. He opened his eyes to see the woman he was trying to protect kneeling over him. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen in his life.

'Are you okay?'

He looked into the most amazing green eyes and forced a smile.

'Yeah, I'm fine. A lucky punch, that's all.'

'Oh my God, I am so sorry. Please I help you.'

I'm fine really. I have that effect on angry foreign guys. I've actually been banned from the U.N. building.'

'Thank you for trying to help but there is no talking to him when he get like that.'

'Is he always that pissed off?'

'I make him very angry. Please I can do something for you?'

'No it's okay. Well wait now, yeah actually; you can have a drink with me.'

'I can do this.'

Greg was still trying to focus his right eye on the beautiful young woman seated across from him. Nothing else in the world mattered to him right now. He was utterly and completely engrossed in this moment. Her name was Aneska and she was stunning. His gaze was fixed on her very soft looking hands and neatly filed and painted nails as she played with the straw in her gin and tonic.

'I thought everybody in Poland drank Vodka.'

'Many people yes, but I am not many people.'

'Believe me, I knew that right away. I can only assume that your boyfriend or whoever he was is insane.'

'What is this word, in-sane?'

'Crazy, nuts, not playing with a full deck.' He made a circle motion with his finger at his temple.

'I make him angry, that is all. Maybe I am how you say, nuts.'

'I could live with that. What the hell is someone as nice and kind as you doing with a guy like that anyways?'

'I don't want to talk about him. Please tell me about you.'

'Not much to tell really. I'm a writer, I like classic cars, I once got drunk with Glenn Ford and I have an incredibly annoying habit of telling people how a film is going to end even if I haven't seen it. Oh and right now I'm having a drink with who I'm sure will turn out to be the most beautiful woman I've ever met. How am I doing so far?'

'Glenn Ford, Tea House of the August Moon, that same person?'

'You know the film?'

'Yes, I see this back home in Poland when I was a girl. I like this film so much and Marlon Brando play a Japanese man. Yes. Glenn Ford is your friend?'

'No. It was a one off. We just happened to be in the same bar and started talking about horses, then he bought me a drink and I bought him a drink and so on and so forth. I have a picture of us in my

apartment.'

'Then I am sitting with a famous writer, yes?'

'No. I'm not famous. I write a weekly column and I'm trying to finish a novel.'

He quickly glanced at his watch. 'Oh shit. My column! Listen, I have to go, I'm sorry I just completely lost track of time. Uh, when can I see you again?'

She stared down at her drink. 'I don't think that is good idea Greg.'

'Please tell me I can see you again. If you don't say yes I will get naked, stand on top of this table and sing I've got a lovely pair of coconuts. I'm very serious Aneska.'

She was laughing now. 'Now I think maybe you are how you say, in-sane.'

'No maybe about it. Please?'

'Yes then.'

'Thank you. You've made a crazy man very happy.' He reached into his wallet and took out a business card. 'This is my number and my cell phone. When can I see you?'

'Tomorrow. Here at two o'clock.'

'I can't wait.' Greg reached across the table and took her hand and gently kissed it. 'Until tomorrow then.'

And that is how, through a chance encounter and a black eye that Greg met the woman of his dreams. He could hear the phone ringing as he unlocked the door to his apartment. It's probably John having a fucking aneurism because he hadn't turned in his column yet. He let the answering machine pick it up.

'Greg, are you there, pick up if you're there dickhead. Okay so you're not there, listen I'm just calling to remind you to bring that c.d. you made for me, don't forget. Also Allison got busted for drunk driving the other night. Can you believe that? She hasn't even told her husband, I guess I can't blame her though. He is so straight he'll totally freak. Anyways, see you tonight.'

Gillian. He completely forgot about meeting her tonight. As a matter of fact at this particular moment in time he couldn't concentrate on much of anything except seeing Aneska the next day. She is amazing. Greg always knew in his heart of hearts that when the right one came along he would know in an instant and with her he knew. She was the one. He turned things over in his mind just to be sure. Had he ever felt this way before? I mean how many times had he gone off half cocked only to discover that the woman of his dreams was actually the woman of his nightmares. How many times had he mistaken lust for passion and infatuation for love? Too many. He had to find out what was different this time. What was it about this woman that he'd only known for three hours that captivated him like never before? Perhaps the fact that she was absolutely stunning had a lot to do with it. He'd made that mistake enough times in the past. That was one of his biggest character flaws; not being able to see past a pretty face or a great pair of legs. It was different this time; of that much he was sure. Sam used to tell him things like that. He remembered her saying one time that what she gave she gave freely and with

no expectations other than to be loved in return. She knew how to love unconditionally and he did not. What made him think that he was capable of that now? This last thought made him feel uncomfortable and so he sat down at his desk and finished his column. That was the one place that he was in complete control and answered to no one. He scrapped the piece he was working on and banged off a scathing but brilliantly funny commentary on Paris Hilton's prison diary. He e-mailed it to the paper and opened a nice bottle of Shiraz Merlot and put on a Billy Holiday c.d. Life was good. Screw all my ridiculous insecurities about my commitment issues, he thought to himself. I've been given a second chance and I'm not going to screw it up. He conjured up her image in his mind. The first thing that struck him was her eyes. They were a colour of green that he'd only seen once in his life. He was on Maui and he'd taken a boat to an underwater game reserve to do some snorkelling. He'd come across a tidal pool teeming with all kinds of fish, plants and crustaceans. But it wasn't the marine life that captured his attention; it was the colour of the water. It was a shade of aqua green that he'd never seen before in his life. He even tried to match the colour when he got home so he could paint his room in it because it was just that soothing and peaceful but to no avail. He'd never seen anything like it again until now. Also, she did this thing with her eyeliner. She curved it up at the corners of her eyes like Elizabeth Taylor did in that film where she played Cleopatra. It gave her eyes a very oriental look to them. She had a moon face, yet with very high cheek bones. Her nose was perfect. Her mouth, well that could only be described as full and inviting with lips that cried out to be caressed, not just kissed. She had shoulder length chestnut hair with a fringe. Her complexion was a caramel colour that revealed her eastern European roots and her skin was flawless. There was no doubt in Greg's mind that she was the woman in his dream. The phone rang and his heart skipped a beat.

'Hello?'

'Where the hell have you been?'

'Hey Gillian, I didn't forget I just needed some peace and quiet to finish my column. Listen I'm just gonna get cleaned up and I'll be there in half an hour or so okay?'

'Okay babe, oh hey Greg....'

'I know I won't forget your c.d.'

'Kay, see you soon.'

Forty minutes later he was sitting across from Gillian in a booth at Crazy's.

'What the fuck happened to your eye?'

'It's a long story.'

'And what's with that silly ass smirk on your face?'

'I was saving a damsel in distress.'

'Are you sure she wanted saving? Jesus, that's a beauty.'

'Her psycho boyfriend did this to me.'

'Well that's what you get for hitting on his girlfriend honey.'

'I wasn't hitting on anyone.'

'Funny, I think that was Bill Clintons defence when they were questioning him about the whole Monica blowjob thing.'

'It was nothing like that. I was just grabbing a cup of coffee and reading the paper when this couple started arguing. Then he started to get physical with her and when I tried to get by them he decided that I looked at him the wrong way and the rest, as they say is history.'

'Was she worth it?'

'Gill, she's beautiful. She's the most beautiful creature I've ever seen in my life.'

'What's the future Mrs. Greg's name?'

'Aneska.'

'That's an odd sounding name.'

'She's Polish.'

'Ha!! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha. Gee Greg, ya think maybe she's just trying to get her green card? Wow. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black.'

'Gill, I'm telling you I wouldn't care if she was using me to overthrow the government or start a people smuggling ring.'

'Sounds like you've got it bad Romeo. What about the crazy boyfriend?'

'I really don't care about him either. I'm meeting her tomorrow at two.'

'Honey you're going a hundred miles an hour here. Slow down. I mean, what do you really know about this girl?'

'I know everything I need to know, right here in my heart.'

'Okay, I don't know about you but I need another drink. This is way too much to take in all at once. I kinda liked you better when you were all dark and depressed guy.'

'Aren't you happy for me?'

'Yes of course. It's just gonna take some getting used to that's all. And I'm going to have to meet her, you know see if she's good enough for you and all that.'

'She's very likeable, she's just one of those people that you can't help but like.'

'I'll be the judge of that.'

'All right then Mom. So, are you looking forward to your big date?'

'Not really.'

'Why not?'

'We all know what's going to happen. We'll go out, he'll fall madly, passionately in love with me, and I'll get bored with the constant adoration and then have to dump him. The usual babe.'

'Tell me, what form of currency do they use on your home world? Is the sky a different colour from ours?'

'Being a sex goddess is not easy. It's a curse really.'

'Self delusion, eight hundred and seventy five, Gillian, zero.'

'If you'll excuse me I have to visit the little girl's room.'

'Listen; on your way back to earth from the upper stratosphere, could you bring me another beer?'

'Rodger that Houston.'

Greg was happy that he could tell Gillian about this girl. He was grateful that she was a part of his life and he was going to tell her just that when she got back. His phone vibrated in the front pocket of his jeans. He checked the caller I.D. and didn't recognize the number.

'Hello, hello, is anyone there? Slow down I can barely understand you. Aneska, is that you? What? Calm down. Where are you? Take a deep breath, now I want you to look around you and tell me what you see. Uh huh, yes, okay I know where you are. Don't move I'll be right there.'

Gillian returned to the booth with a Greg's beer and a vodka Collins.

'So I was thinking of getting my nipple pierced what do you think?'

'Gill, I have to go.'

'Look if it's gonna upset you that much I won't.'

'It's Aneska, she's in trouble. I've got to go. Sorry.'

He tossed some money on the table and left.

'Hey if she's mixed up with the Polish mafia or some shit, don't expect me to come down and identify your corpse. Did you hear me? Fine I'll just have a drink by myself. I'm quite comfortable with my own company you know. Hey what the hell are you looking at?'

He found her sitting on a bench outside the bus station. She'd been crying and her lip was cut and she had a suitcase next to her.

'Oh my God baby, are you okay?'

'I'm sorry. I don't know anyone else to call.'

'It's okay, I'm here now.'

'He call me a whore and throw me into street, like some sort of dog.' She broke down and sobbed uncontrollably.

'Come on Aneska, I'll take you home.'

And with that Greg took off his coat and wrapped her in it and picked up her suitcase. With one arm around her shoulder and the other carrying her meagre possessions they set off in search of a taxi.

When they arrived back at Greg's apartment he drew a hot bath for her and managed to find some clean towels and sheets. While she soaked he changed the bed linen and when he was done he made a pot of tea and poured two large snifters of brandy.

'Hey are you okay in there or what?'

She emerged from the bathroom wearing his robe and drying her hair with a towel. He thought at that moment that he'd never seen a more beautiful sight in his life. With that simple act, it was like she was saying I'm home now and I am safe.

'I feel better now, thank you.'

'Here, drink this.' He proffered out the snifter.

'What is this Greg?'

'It's cognac; it'll grow hair on your chest.'

'I don't think I want hair there.' She laughed.

'What I mean is it will make you feel better.'

She took a sip of cognac and winced as the alcohol stung her cut lip. 'Oww, that is sore.'

He took the snifter from her hands and set it down and taking her face in both his hands he gently kissed her cut lip. A single tear rolled down his face.

'I will never let anyone hurt you ever again.'

He took her in his arms and she cradled her head in his shoulder and there they sat and held each other without exchanging any words for what seemed like an eternity. Eventually Greg realized that her soft rhythmic breathing signalled that sleep had overtaken her. Without disturbing her he gently picked her up from the sofa and carried her into his bedroom. There he tucked her into bed, kissed her on the cheek and turned off the light and closed the door. As he lay on the sofa and stared at the ceiling he pondered the precious gift he'd been given and with the image of her face in his mind, drifted off to sleep.

He awoke to the smell of bacon and eggs and strong coffee. He sat up and grabbed his cigarettes and lighter off the coffee table. Aneska came through from the kitchen still wearing his robe and set a steaming cup of freshly brewed French coffee down in front of him.

'Good morning Greg, your breakfast is almost ready.'

'I must still be dreaming. You made me breakfast? Uh, thank you but you didn't have to do that.'

'It's okay I want to do this. I hope you are hungry, breakfast is the most important meal of the day you know.'

'What are you, like the Polish Martha Stewart? Hey, you're not gonna unzip your head and turn out to be some sort of giant alien lizard thing are you.'

'I do not understand.'

'Never mind. Wow that does smell good.'

'Come, you eat.'

'Okay I eat.'

And so began what was to be his one big love. If ever there was "the one," she was it. Aneska was to be the most defining relationship Greg would ever have in his life. Through her he would discover his true worth as a human being. Through her he would come to know unconditional love for the second time in his life. And through her he would discover his true heart. For better or worse.

'Pass the pepper please.' Gillian was attacking her jumbo Caesar salad with gusto while at the same time trying to catch Greg up on the last four weeks of her life. Since Greg and Aneska had moved in together they rarely saw each other. Today happened to be one of his rare free afternoons. At the prompting of his new found love Greg had submitted a rough draft of his novel to his agent who was currently in negotiations with a major publisher. So between his job at the paper, his relationship and the book deal, his time was precious these days.

'Anyways', she said through a mouth full of croutons, 'Lydia thinks I should go for it, what do you think?'

'I think that I can't remember what the hell you asked me in the first place.'

'Gawd! I swear you don't listen to word I say. The job, should I take the job?'

'Sorry Gill, I thought we were talking about your holiday. Yes, the job sounds great. I think you should take it.'

'Yeah, I'm not gonna take it.'

'Then why did you ask me what I think? If you'd already make up your mind what was the point of asking me?'

'I just wanted to see if you were listening, which you obviously weren't, because if you had been listening you would have heard me say that although it's a great opportunity they couldn't match my salary.'

'Money is like sex, if you don't have it, it's all you think about. But if you have it, you find other things to think about.'

'Gawd! Another fucking quote. Who said that?'

'James Baldwin.'

'Well he was an asshole. Honestly babe, I like you much better when you were all morose and cynical. Now you're like, like this successful author with a gorgeous, not to mention, nice, girlfriend who's fucking happy all the time.'

'Yeah that was pretty selfish of me, getting my life together like that. Sorry.'

'Oh Greg, I'm glad you're happy. I'm just jealous is all. It's like my best pal moved away or some shit.'

'I haven't gone anywhere.' He reached across the table and took her hand.

'You will always be my bestest friend in the whole world. You'll still be the one I run to when things go tits up for me and I need to get shitfaced and cry on someone's shoulder. I promise Gill. Best friends forever.'

'Really? Thanks sweetie, except this time around things don't show any sign of going wrong for you. I think you finally got it sussed babe. By the way, where is Princess Annabelle today? Did you have her surgically removed from your hip so you could have lunch with me?'

'No, she had some things to do.'

'Things, what things?'

'I dunno, Polish things. I never really asked.'

'I don't believe it. You're like the most insecure guy I know when it comes to women and you're not even concerned what she's up to?'

'I trust her that's all.'

'Wow. Don't tell me our Greg is all grown up?'

'Fuck off. How's that for all grown up? She just said she had some stuff to do downtown.'

'Well it must be love then. Any other time you would have been going insane wondering what she was getting up to.'

'Well I wasn't until you started going on about it. Thanks Gill.'

'What I mean is you must be getting better. This is a good thing Greg.'

'Yeah I know. It's pretty cool isn't it? Who knows? Maybe I've actually achieved a certain level of maturity.'

'Let's not get carried away. I've seen your Donald Duck night light.'

'Hey, that's a collectable.'

They drank red wine and chatted the rest of the afternoon away. When Greg left the restaurant he felt good. Really good. As a matter of fact better than he had felt in a long time. For once things were going well and he didn't have an impending sense of doom or foreboding about it. Maybe he had changed. Maybe he was growing up. Whatever the case he wanted things to stay exactly as they were for the rest of his life. His love life was more than he could ever have dreamed of and his career was taking off at the same time. He thought back to when he was a young boy. The school librarian, Mr. Geisel

had given him a copy of *The Red Pony* by Steinbeck to read. Mr. Geisel was to become a major influence on him in his formative years as a writer. He had introduced Greg to some of the greatest writers of our time. In the novel the main character, a young boy, had been given a new saddle for his pony. The boy cherished it and would continually go out to the barn to admire it and oil it. He had a dream one night that when he went out to the barn to check on his most prized possession to his horror rats had gotten to it. It had been chewed to pieces. Destroyed. Greg had instant identification with this part of the story as this was to become a recurring theme in his life. When things went well for him he had that same dream. When he was six he had that same nightmare about a shiny new red fire engine he'd received as a birthday present. It was to continue throughout his adult life. Especially when it came to women. Yet this time there was no dream.

Today he was a man in love. He stopped to light a cigarette and decided to call Aneska to find out what time she'd be back. Her cell rang out. No matter. He stopped for the paper and a cappuccino and was making his way along Twelfth Avenue when he saw her. He was passing the Calabria Bistro when he happened to glance in the window. His heart sank. There was Aneska at a corner table with a man he'd never seen before. A handsome man. They were holding hands across the table and looking very much a couple in love. Greg was paralysed with fear. He wanted to burst in and confront them. He wanted to run a hundred miles. Instead he just stood and stared in disbelief. He could see their lips moving but couldn't make out what they were saying. How could he have been so blind? Why? What had he done to deserve this? He felt as if a stake had been driven through his heart. He lowered his head and turned away. As he pushed his way through the throng of office workers making their way home he honestly thought he might collapse. It was the saddle and the fire engine all over again. He didn't realize that as he stumbled through the crowds that tears were streaming down his face. He fumbled for his door keys as he reached his apartment and dropping them several times managed to make his way in and collapsed on the couch. There he sat head in hands sobbing uncontrollably, unable to take in what had just happened. His stomach was one big ball of fear. How could she betray him like this? If this was one of his nightmares why couldn't he wake up? Please God don't let this be. His head was filled with searing white hot pain. He couldn't think. He knew he was fast losing touch with reality and had to do something. The bile in his stomach began to rise and he ran to the toilet to be sick. He fell to his knees and retched but nothing came up. He broke out in a cold feverish sweat. He stumbled back to the front room and collapsed in his armchair. When he came to he had no idea how much time had passed.

When she finally came home she found him sitting in the front room with the lights out listening to Lucinda Williams and half way through a bottle of Jack Daniels.

'Greg? Greg? Why you sit here in the dark?' She switched on the light.

'Did you have a nice day?'

'Are you drunk? You look terrible. What is wrong? Tell me.'

He stared vacantly out the window. 'I saw you today.'

'You see me?'

'With him. I saw you with him, Aneska.'

'You are scaring me now.'

'I saw the two of you holding hands across the table. I saw the way you looked at each other.' He turned and stared at her with hurt and anger in his eyes. 'How could you do this to me?'

She crossed the room and kneeling down at his feet she gently took his face in her hands. 'This is what I come to tell you baby. The man you see me with today? His name is Martin. He is my brother.'

'Your who now? Did you say brother? Like a sister only male? That kind of brother?'

'Yes. He just arrives from Poland yesterday. I have not seen him since I left home. I could never do anything to hurt you. Never. I love you and I always be yours. You believe us?'

'Oh my God. What's the Polish word for dickhead?'

'I not understand this word.'

'It's what I am for thinking that you would ever do anything to hurt me. I'm so sorry. Can you ever forgive me?'

'You are crazy person Greg Leary. Do you know that? You come and rescue me, you save me. How you think I could repay you like this? I love you forever.'

'I love you too baby. Forever.'

'Now you have to get up and take a shower and shave your face because my brother is coming to meet the man I tell him I love so much and you look like shit. I make some coffee.'

'Yeah, first impressions have always been my strong point. I'm gonna hit the showers coach.'

'What?'

'Never mind. You just make some very strong coffee.'

Her brother turned out to be a very nice guy and he and Greg got along well. He even liked Jack Daniels and Jackson Browne. Although Greg did not escape without the obligatory, if you hurt my sister I will hunt you down and kill you, speech. As to be expected. Martin had been accepted at M.I.T. and was only in town for a few days to see his sister before he left to begin his studies. Once again Greg's worst fears had turned out to be a spectre. Slowly but surely he was coming to accept the fact that it was okay to be happy. That not every relationship he touched would turn to shit in the end. Despite his best efforts this particular one seemed to be indestructible. And yet, deep down inside he still harboured a nagging suspicion that it just couldn't possibly be this simple. There had to be a catch. This bothered him more than he cared to admit. He decided to do something that he hadn't done since his mother was alive and he was a teenager. He decided to go talk to the priest. It wasn't so much that he had given up on God as he believed God had given up on him. He had ceased to be a practicing Catholic many years ago. Not long after his Mother had died and his alcoholic father had disappeared. Odd that he would think of going back to the church after all this time but it seemed like the right thing to do.

He sat in Father Docherty's office staring at the huge painting of Our Lady who seemed to be staring accusingly back as if to say you have been a very, very bad boy, Gregory James Leary what do you intend to do about it. Father

Docherty had been the family priest when he was growing up. He'd been everybody's family priest as far back as he could remember. He was old when Greg was a kid so he must be about a hundred by now. He was thinking about what he was going to say when the priest walked in and sat down. He'd aged remarkably well.

'Greg Leary, what a nice surprise it was when you phoned me. I hardly recognize you without your altar cassock.'

'I can't believe you remember that.'

'How could I forget the altar boy who set me on fire?'

'You're not still sore about that are you Father?'

'I still tell that story at speaking engagements actually.'

'Oh perfect. Anyways thanks for seeing me on such short notice.'

'Greg I have all the time in the world for you. It's what your Mother would have wanted. She was a wonderful woman with amazing faith and a great spirit.'

'When you phoned I was absolutely delighted. So what can I do for you?'

'Uh, actually I'm not too sure. I need advice.'

'Go on.'

'Well I've met someone and I love her very much but how do you know if she's the one?'

'So its advice on matters of the heart you want. So you came to the only celibate person you know. Makes perfect sense.'

'I see your point. Let's face it Father, Protestants and Jews see shrinks and Irish Catholics see the priest.'

'And you remembered that I also have a degree in psychology.'

'Really? You guys can do that? To tell you the truth I had no idea. That's pretty cool.'

'Yes well people come to talk to us but who do we talk to?'

'Priests have shrinks. Who'd have thunk?'

'I'll let you in on another secret.' The old priest motioned him closer. 'I smoke, drink, swear and have even seen the odd r-rated film.'

'And apparently quite sarcastic as well.'

'Right, let's get back to your original question. How do you know if she's the one? It's quite simple. You don't.'

'Excuse me?'

'It's okay son. That's a good thing. One should always think long and hard when planning to make a serious commitment. The amount of couples I've married who've sworn up and down that they were marrying the loves of their lives and ended up two years later ready to kill each other is astounding. So yes, you should question it. Two people should spend as much time as it takes getting to know each other. Make sure that the person you love is also the person you like. I presume you're abstaining from sexual relations and not living in sin?'

'Pardon me?'

'Relax I'm kidding. If you could've seen the look on your face. Damn, I never get tired of doing that.'

'Great. I've got the only smartass priest in the city.'

'Ya gotta admit it was pretty funny.'

'Whatever. Anyways Father. I'm ninety nine per cent certain but my track record with women isn't exactly the greatest.'

'First of all we are all Gods' children and he loves us all dearly. He wants us to love ourselves and others as he loves us. Let's have a look at the Popes first encyclical letter; Deus Caritas Est or God is Love. There are three Greek words for love. Eros, philia and agape. Let's look at the latter two. Philia refers to the love of friendship. It is used in St. John's Gospel in order to express the relationship

between Jesus and his disciples. Agape is used to describe the biblical notion of love. A love which involves a real discovery of the other, moving beyond the selfish character. No longer is it self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness; instead it seeks the good of the beloved; it becomes renunciation and it is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice. Am I losing you yet son?'

'I'm with you so far Father. I think.'

'Well smoke 'em if ya got 'em, because there's more.' He said sliding an ashtray across his desk.

'You don't mind?'

'As long as you brought enough for everyone.'

'Absolutely.'

'Now give us a light and we'll continue. The first word we looked at was Eros. The Greeks used this word to describe the love between man and woman which is neither planned nor willed, but somehow imposes itself upon human beings. The Greeks- not unlike other cultures- considered eros principally as a kind of intoxication, the overpowering of reason by a divine madness which tears man away from his finite existence and enables him, in the very process of being overwhelmed by divine power, to experience supreme happiness. This form of love can only be experienced by the physical and spiritual coming together of a man and a woman. "Omnia vincit amor"- love conquers all. "Et nos cedamus amori"- let us too yield to love. But not only is eros simply the coming together of man and woman or husband and wife, it is also fellowship with the divine. It's not to be experienced as a fleeting pleasure or purely a physical and sexual pursuit; but as a foretaste of the pinnacle of our existence, of that beatitude for which our whole being yearns.

Man is truly himself when his body and soul are intimately united; the challenge of eros can be said to be truly overcome when this unification is achieved. Should he aspire to be pure spirit and reject the flesh as pertaining to his animal nature alone, then spirit and body would both lose their dignity. On the other hand, should he deny the spirit and consider matter, the body, as the only reality, he would likewise lose his greatness. Yet it is neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves: it is man, the person, a unified creature composed of body and soul, who loves. Only when both dimensions are truly united, does man attain his full stature. Only thus is love- eros- able to mature and attain its authentic grandeur. Now did any of that make sense to you, young Mr. Leary?'

'May I just say Father; wow.'

'I know, you ask me for a frog and I hand you a shotgun. Let me try and sum it up a little more simply for you.'

'Please do.'

'Now the young lady in question, let's suppose her life was put in mortal danger. Now let's suppose that you could trade places with her so she could live but you would die. Would you do it without hesitation? If you can answer yes to that question, then my dear boy you are capable of true love.'

‘Well, I uh, ...’

‘I don’t need to hear your answer Greg. The only two people who need to know the answer to that question are you and God.’

The next few months passed without a hiccup. Greg was busy with his novel and Aneska was attending college studying English as a second language. They had dinner together every night, whether at home or dining out. They went for long walks in the park and spent romantic weekends in the country at quaint bed and breakfasts. Greg was so convinced of his new found maturity that they even got a dog. His biggest commitment to date. They fought and had incredible make-up sex, just like normal couples. Occasionally he sat by himself after she had gone to bed and wondered in awe at how he managed to get so lucky, how God or karma or luck had given him a second chance. He remembered all the couples he used to see out walking and holding hands and how he used to tear himself apart inside trying to figure out what they had that he didn’t. What was broken about him that made him ineligible for membership in that exclusive club? And now he was one of those couples that others envied. Somehow through divine providence, or maybe just an angelic mistake in Gods accounting department, he’d been sent this angel who gave him the one thing he’d always yearned for; unconditional love. There was only one problem. Deep down inside there was still a nagging doubt that he didn’t really deserve it. That she was all too real and he was an impostor. That this whole thing was just one big cosmic mind-fuck designed to bring about his ultimate demise.

Whenever he entertained these thoughts he was overcome with a sense of fear and foreboding like he’d never known before. It terrified and paralysed him rooting him to the spot. Upon releasing himself from its grip he would run to the bedroom to check that she was still there, and if she was that she was still breathing. When he’d satisfied himself that she was indeed a real thing he would crawl in beside her and embrace her as a child would covet its favourite stuffed toy. Having done so he would cry himself to sleep. The next morning in the cold light of day he would convince himself that there was nothing to worry about after all and that he was just being insecure the way any normal person gets from time to time. Today was the first time in ages that they had the whole day to spend together. She had no classes and Greg had just sent his first draft to his editor. It was a crisp clear autumn day and they were out walking in the park.

‘Greg, you are keeping something from me?’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘Because you are very quiet but you have sparkle in your eye like little boy with big secret.’

‘Let’s stop and sit a while.’

‘Okay.’

They stopped and sat at a bench with a clear view of the city skyline.

‘Baby, are you happy?’

‘I am happiest I have ever been. Is something wrong? Are you not happy?’

‘I’m very happy. I’m happier than I’ve ever been in my entire life, and that’s why I don’t ever want it to end.’

‘It does not have to end.’

‘That’s what I think too. Aneska, I need to ask you something.’

‘Ask me anything baby.’

Greg stood up and fished in his coat pocket and produced a small purple velvet box. He then knelt in front of her on one knee and opened the box to reveal an elegant yet plain diamond solitaire ring. She drew breath in sharply and her eyes were wide with excitement.

‘Aneska, I never thought the day would come when I’d be contented.

I’m too easily distracted. I get bored quickly and I’ve never really stuck with any one thing or person for very long. But with you I never grow bored and I never grow restless. There was always something missing in my life, some intangible that I could never quite put my finger on. I’ve always had a good career, good friends and enough money to be comfortable, but it was never enough. Until now. You are that missing thing that I could never identify. You are that intangible, the missing piece of the puzzle. With you I’m a whole person. The person I was always meant to be. I never want that to change. Aneska?’

‘Yes Greg?’ Her bottom lip was now trembling and the corners of her eyes were beginning to fill up.

‘Make me the happiest man on this planet and say you’ll marry me.’

The tears were now streaming down her face. ‘I wait so long for you to ask this. Yes, this is all I want. Yes I will marry you Greg Leary.’

He gently placed the ring on her finger. ‘Thank you for making my life complete baby.’

‘Oh Greg, I’m so happy. I have to go home and phone my family right now.’

‘Can we go shopping for dinner first?’

‘How can you think about food at a time like this?’

‘Hey I’m hungry, that’s a good sign. If I’d asked you to marry you and then woofed my cookies all over the place then you should worry.’

‘Okay we shop. But then straight home, I have much to do.’

‘I’ve just lost complete input in this whole wedding process haven’t I?’

They stopped on the way home at the Korean grocer on Twelfth. They were about to enter the store when Greg’s cell phone rang. He checked the caller I.D.

‘It’s Gillian, I’d better take this. I’ll meet you inside.’

‘Okay husband to be.’ She kissed him on the cheek and disappeared inside.

‘Hello? Hey guess what? What? How could you possibly already know? When did she text you, I’ve been with her the whole time? Whatever. So how cool is that? Yeah I know, me, the guy that couldn’t even commit to a house plant. No Gill, I’m pretty sure you can’t have a woman as your best man.’

As he carried on his phone conversation two men stepped out of the darkness of the alley and into the street in front of the shop. One wore an army surplus jacket and the other a long overcoat. Underneath them both wore hooded sweat tops. They both had on gloves. One was short and the other tall but they both carried the fear and paranoia of crank-heads in their eyes. They shuffled to and fro nervously. Greg made eye contact with one of them and in that instant he recognised all his deepest fears. He quickly turned away. His stomach was twisted into a knot and his heart began to beat faster. The two men pulled up their hoods and entered the shop. Greg had stopped listening to Gillian and stared in through the window. What happened next was all in

slow motion. The short one produced a handgun from inside his coat and pointed it at the clerk. The tall one was waving a pistol grip shot gun at the patrons and screaming for them to lie down on the floor. Greg stood paralysed and rooted to the spot. He could not move, nor could he breathe. He wanted to cry out but was rendered mute.

His world was crumbling round about him and he was powerless to do anything but watch. The short one was now becoming very agitated with the amount of time it was taking the clerk to empty the cash register. He began waving his gun and shouting. Before the clerk could hand over the money there was a loud pop and the clerks head snapped back and was instantly unrecognisable. Greg continued to watch the macabre film reel through the store window. The customers were all lying prone on the floor weeping and crying out but not daring to move. Among the hostages on the floor was an off-duty policeman. He had managed to remove his weapon from its holster undetected and was now committed to an act of heroism. From his prone position he took aim at the tall one.

'Police, drop your weapon!!'

At that precise moment Aneska who had been at the other end of the store stepped from around the end of the aisle directly in front of the gunman. He fired his shotgun a fraction of a second before the policeman fired his 9 mm. The gunman collapsed to the floor. He rolled over and loosed a second round at the short man at the counter who spun and fell wounded into a display of canned goods. When it was over the two gunmen lay bleeding on the ground and some twenty five feet away the future Mrs. Greg Leary lay unconscious.

Greg was holding her hand as the paramedics were loading her into the ambulance. He could not see for the tears in his eyes and he was unaware of anything around him other than her lifeless form strapped to the gurney.

'I'm afraid you can't ride along with her sir.'

'I'm her fiancé', he pleaded.

'Please let us do our job. We're taking her to St. Paul's you'll have to meet us there. Please sir.'

He watched the ambulance door closed as the lights and the siren came on as they sped away. When he got to the hospital Gillian was already waiting for him. She ran to him and threw her arms around him and cradled his head to her breast. He was sobbing uncontrollably.

'Oh God Gill, why? Why did this have to happen? What the fuck have I done?'

'Shhhsssh, don't talk crazy. None of this was your fault.'

'You don't understand. I couldn't move. I just fucking stood there!'

'Honey, honey, calm down. We don't even know how serious it is yet. Let's wait and see what the doctor has to say. Okay?'

'If anything happens to her I'll never forgive myself.'

They sat in silence for what seemed like an eternity before the surgeon came out of the O.R. He removed his cap and took a seat next to Greg and Gillian.

'Mr. Leary?'

Greg took his head from his hands and stared at the doctor through bloodshot eyes. 'How is she Doc?' he croaked.

'She's going to pull through. Her vitals are stable and she out of the danger zone.'

'Oh sweet Jesus, thank you Doctor. Oh thank God she's gonna be alright. Gill, did you hear that? The Doc says my baby's gonna be okay.' He was almost smiling. 'Is she awake? Can I see her?'

'I'm afraid she's still under sedation. Tell me, what's your relationship to Aneska?'

'She's my fiancée. Why?'

'Does she have any other family members or relatives in this country?'

'Uh, yeah. She has a brother at M.I.T.'

'He'll need to be notified of her condition as well.'

'What are you talking about? What condition? I thought you said she was fine.'

'What I said was she's going to pull through. Unfortunately there are complications.'

Greg buried his face in his hands. Gillian put her arms around his shoulders and tried to comfort him. The Doctor continued.

'We managed to remove the bullet from her brain; however it caused a unilateral lesion of the lateral lobe of the cerebellum. It's a condition called Anisothenia. Basically due to a loss of muscle tone it's caused her limbs to remain limp. I'm afraid her speech has also been affected. She has what's known as Broca's Aphasia. It's characterised by effortful and halting speech, reduced phrase length and awkward articulation. Now her auditory comprehension is still intact which means she can understand everything that's being said; she's just unable to respond properly.'

Greg looked up. 'So what; you're saying my future wife is a fucking prisoner in her own body? Is she gonna die? Is that what you're telling me?'

'Her life span will be as long as anyone else's. I'm trying to prepare you for the fact that she will need full time care. You'll need to make arrangements. She's resting so I suggest you come back in the morning when she's awake. She'll want to see you. She'll need all the support you can give her Mr. Leary.'

Gillian drove him home from the hospital and back to the apartment. She poured him a large Jack Daniels and gave him a valium. He sat on the couch staring straight ahead.

'Baby you guys can get through this thing together. The two of you are so much in love that I know you'll be able to overcome this thing. You'll see.'

'This is God punishing me for all the bad shit I've done Gill. This is what happens when you spend your whole life being a selfish bastard. This is my fault.'

'Oh my gawd!! Greg this isn't anyone's fault. It just happened. There was absolutely nothing anyone could have done.'

'You weren't there Gill. You don't know.'

'Look; you're tired and you've been through a helluva shock. When you see Annie in the morning things will be different. Greg she's alive. No one's taken her from you. Now that valium I gave you should start to work soon so I'm gonna put you to bed. You need your rest. Gillian took Greg into his bedroom and tucked him in.

'You get some rest and if you need anything I'll be right through there in the front room, okay?'

'Gill?'

'Yeah babe?'

'I tried to move but I couldn't. I wanted to you know. Honest to God, I wanted to.'

'You my dear boy are talking a load of crap. The drink and the drugs are starting to kick in, now go to sleep.'

With that she gently kissed him on the forehead and turned out the light. He slept fitfully plagued by nightmares of the very worst kind. One particular dream was from his childhood. It was something he hadn't thought about in years. His Mother had taken him to Ireland to visit relatives. He couldn't have been more than five or six years old. But in the dream he seemed to shift back and forth from boy to man. He was visiting his great Uncle and his mother's cousin. His uncle was very old and suffered from a chest condition. They were outside and the old man was sitting on a bench in the front of the house when he took a bad fit of coughing. His aunt ran into the house to fetch a glass of water but in her hurry tripped over their sheep dog. She banged her head on a stone and was bleeding. His uncle was coughing uncontrollably and his aunt lay on the ground.

A farmer and his wife happened to pass by on their way back from the village. They saw the uncle coughing uncontrollably and the aunt who lay on the ground bleeding and Greg who stood wide eyed and motionless. The farmer yelled at Greg to fetch a glass of water. He didn't move. 'Run boy run', the farmer cried again. He was paralysed with fear. He tried to cry out but there was no sound. He tried to move his legs but they felt like they were made of granite. The farmer continued to berate him and ran over and grabbed him roughly by the shoulders and shook him until he found his voice and began to cry. 'You're a stupid, stupid boy! And you're a little coward as well. Do you hear me boy?'

Greg woke up in a cold sweat and his face was wet with tears. He reached for the glass of bourbon on the nightstand and took a long swallow. His heart was palpitating and his breath was short and shallow. He wandered through to the front room to get his cigarettes. Gillian was asleep on the couch. He poured himself another bourbon and lit a Marlboro. He thought about the dream. He'd entirely forgotten about that incident at his uncle's house. When his mother found out she went straight to the farmer and gave him his character and then some. His mother held him and told him that it wasn't his fault and that he'd just gotten a fright. All Greg could do was cry and tell his mother he was sorry. From that day forward that frightened little boy would always be a part of him. When Greg stood outside the grocers and watched Aneska being gunned down that little boy was standing right next to him.

The next morning Greg and Gillian were seated in the waiting area outside Aneska's room. The doctor came around the corner and took a seat next to him.

'Did you get some sleep Mr. Leary?'

'A little. How is she?'

'She's awake now and you can see her in just a minute but there are a couple of things we should go over. As I told you her speech has been affected so she won't be able to answer you but she understands everything perfectly. She also lost some of her motor skills. This will be a bit of shock the first time

you see her but it's very important that you don't show any outward signs of any kind. What she needs right now is positive reinforcement. Do you understand?'

'Yes, absolutely.'

'You can go in now.'

'Come on Gill.'

'Why don't I give you a few minutes alone with her? I'll be in a little bit.'

'Okay.'

Greg stood up and realised that his legs were like rubber. He felt sick to his stomach. When he walked into the room she was lying in the bed with her head propped up with pillows. There were tubes sticking out of her arms and she had a large bandage around her head. What he noticed first were her eyes. Those same beautiful green eyes that smiled and welcomed him. He sat down gently on the edge of the bed and took her face in his hands and softly kissed her. He was crying.

'Thank God you're alive baby. I'm here now everything's gonna be alright now.'

She looked at him with tears streaming down her face. She opened her mouth and tried to speak but all that came out was unintelligible sounds.

'Don't' try and say anything. Just know that I love you with all my heart and soul and that once you get out of here and get better we'll get married just like we said. Okay? Nothing's changed. I really thought I'd lost you. Do you still love me?'

Aneska nodded her head but it turned into more of spasm than a nod. For a brief second he realised how different she'd become. Except for her eyes, her whole face had changed. One side of her mouth drooped down. Gone were the beautiful pouting lips and mischievous smile. Her head seemed to loll to one side as if her neck could no longer support its weight. And in that brief instant he saw in her eyes that she could see his expression had changed as well.

'Hey, hey, don't be sad. I'm gonna take care of you and never let anything happen to you ever again. I'll keep you safe from now on. I promise babe. Now I'm gonna go and speak to the doctor and see how soon we can get you home and Gillian's waiting outside to see you as well.'

Her eyes smiled at the mention of Gillian. Greg stood up and took her limp hand in his and kissed it.

'Everything's gonna be okay. You'll see.'

As she watched him walk away she looked longingly at him and her eyes betrayed the deep sadness that lay beneath. She tried to smile as the drool ran down her chin.

They were in the car and Gillian was talking a mile a minute.

'Now I've got the name of a great private nurse who comes highly recommended by my boss. He used her when his wife was undergoing chemo. I think you should look into getting one of those adjustable beds as well. You know the ones they advertise on the television? Oh, and you'd better check with your H.M.O. to see what kind of coverage you have for this sort of thing. Have you thought about moving to a bigger place? Hey pal, are you still with me?'

'Sorry Gill. I was a million miles away.'

'I know. It's a lot to take in all at once. I'm just trying to keep you positive that's all.'

'And I appreciate that. I'll be fine once she's out of that hospital and home where she belongs. Listen, would you mind pulling over here and letting me out?'

'What here at the park?'

'Yeah, I feel like going for a walk. I need to get some air and clear my head.'

'Do you want me to come with?'

'No I'll be fine. I just need a little time alone.'

She pulled off to the side of the road to let him out.

'Call me when you get home okay?'

'I will. Thanks for everything. I couldn't ask for a better friend.'

With that he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

'It's gonna be okay you know?'

'I know. I'll see you later.'

He got out of the car and made his way into the park. The same park that they used to walk in almost everyday. The same park where he proposed to her. He turned up his collar to the wind and began to walk. The place was almost empty at this time of the day. He picked up the pace and soon broke in to a slow jog. Before long he was running. From what he had know idea. He had no destination in mind, just a need to keep moving as fast as his legs would carry him. He ran past policemen on horseback. Past a woman pushing a baby carriage. Faster now, his breathing becoming laboured. Inside his head was nothing but noise. No one clear thought, just chaos. Somehow he thought that by running he could quiet the voices in his head that were now rising to a fever pitch. Whatever he was running from was gaining on him. He could feel it's hot breath on his neck. Faster and faster he ran. His lungs were on fire. The ball of fear in his stomach was growing with each stride he took. There was no escaping the spectre that pursued him. The world was spinning all around him.

Terror engulfed him. Then as suddenly as he had started he stopped. His legs no longer able to carry him he fell to his knees. He began to beat the ground violently 'with his fists. He looked up to the heavens and cried out.

'What gives you the right?! Why didn't you just take her instead of leaving her the way she is? Who the fuck are you to decide who lives and who dies?! Is this how you treat your so called children? She doesn't deserve this. Why didn't you come for me instead? If anybody deserves to be left a cripple it's me Goddamnit!! Bastard! You are an unfit parent. Do you hear me?!'

His energy spent he collapsed in a heap and cried himself to sleep. When he awoke he had no idea how much time had passed but it was beginning to get dark. He found his way out of the park and realised he was miles from his house. When he finally did get home Gillian was waiting for him.

'Where did you get to? I tried phoning you but you left your cell here. Are you okay?'

'I'm fine now. I'd just like to take a hot bath and get some rest. I didn't mean to worry you.'

'You look like you could use a drink.'

'Yeah. Pour us a couple while I go run a bath.'

After a hot bath he felt better but very tired. They sat on the couch together and sipped their drinks.

'Gill? Have you ever had to face your demons?'

'Face 'em. Hell I date 'em.'

'I mean have you ever taken a long hard look at yourself and not like what looked back at you? I coulda tried to help her ya know, but I was too shit scared.'

'I'm not going to sit here and listen to you run yourself down. There was nothing you or anyone else could've done. The important thing is that you can be there for her now. And I'll help you any way I can. She needs you Greg. Like she's never needed anyone or anything in her life. You're all she has left. Just be the man that I know you're capable of being.'

'Yeah okay Gill. I'm tired. I think I'm gonna hit the hay.'

'Okay babe. I'm gonna stay over again just in case.'

'Thanks. I'll see you in the morning. I love you.'

'I love you too.'

One month later Aneska was back home. He had made the apartment as comfortable as he could for her including buying her an adjustable bed. The nurse came by three or four times a week to do physiotherapy with her. Before long they were getting into a routine. He had to rely on her eyes to let him know how she was feeling. The range of emotion in a person's eyes is truly amazing. He knew when she was happy or sad, pissed off and even when she was teasing him. He doted on her and catered to her every need. Her initial feelings of insecurity had begun to leave her and life was as normal as it could be for the two of them under the circumstances. Greg was looking into getting her a computer that she could operate by blowing into a straw. She could then type what she wanted to communicate onto the screen. Things were fine. He would help her into bed at night and watch her fall asleep. In spite of the damage the bullet had done to her she still had the most beautiful face he'd ever seen. And when she was sleeping she almost looked like she did before the shooting. For all intents and purposes he was handling his new found responsibility rather well. And during this whole time she loved him even more deeply than she had before.

Aneska had been working extra hard on her physiotherapy with the nurse and had managed to gain a fraction of mobility in her left hand. She did her exercises daily and was keeping it a secret from Greg. Now it wasn't much. It was a very small movement that she could perform but it filled her with hope and today she planned to share it with him. She wheeled from room to room looking for him and found him in the bedroom. Greg was standing at the end of the bed and zipping up a suitcase. He turned to face her when he heard the hum of her electric wheelchair. He opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. She was staring at the suitcase on the bed.

'Listen, this isn't how it looks.' He sat down on the edge of the bed and she came across the room and stopped in front of him.

'I'm going away for a bit. It's uh, to do research for my new book. It's nothing to panic about. It's just that with everything that's been going on around here I haven't done much writing. I won't be gone long.'

She stared at him looking into his eyes and not wanting to believe what she was seeing.

'I just need a little break that's all. I've made arrangements with the nurse to come by everyday. I'm going to tell Gillian to come by as well.'

She didn't break her gaze.

'Baby, please don't look at me like that. I can't do this anymore. I thought I could, but I can't. I love you. I'll always love you, but it will never be as much as you love me. I'm sorry I'm so weak. I wish I could be the man that you deserve but I'm not. I thought I could change. I thought you could change me. Hell, I don't know what I thought.' He wiped at his tears. 'If I could change things I would. If I could turn back the clock to how it used to be before this horrible thing happened to us I would. But I can't. No one can.'

Her heart was breaking with every word.

'I prayed that you would come to see the man I really am long before it ever came to this. I thought one day you'd wake up and see right through me. But you were blinded by unconditional love. I began to resent you for having the ability to love so freely and completely. I tried so fucking hard to be strong. When I left you that first day in the hospital I knew then that I could never be strong enough for the both of us. You fell in love with a coward Aneska and I'm sorry for that. Please forgive me.'

The tears were streaming down his face. She continued to stare at him and then with some effort she moved the little finger of her left hand an inch or so. He failed to notice.

'If you hate me it's all for the better.' 'He stood up and put on his coat and picked up his suitcase. 'The measure of a man is not how much he has, but how much he's willing to give up. I'm going to go now. I love you.' And with that he walked out and left the woman of his dreams sitting in her wheelchair with a single tear rolling down her cheek. She knew that the man she loved so deeply was walking out of her life forever. And that she would be an invalid for the rest of her life. She closed her eyes and wept and waited for her life to be over.