# Let the Sea Connect Us

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# A Few Notes From Emil

Apologies. When I wrote this, the only person I was thinking about was me. It was my therapy journal. I stuffed it into an envelope and left it lying in a dusty desk drawer for years. I didn't have the nerve to peek inside. It was too painful. I just wanted to forget it all.

When I finally dug it out again, I also thought of you. Maybe I could help someone else.

Once you start reading this, you'll find songs along the way. I'd ask you to listen to them as you go on. They'll bring emotional depth to the story. The lyrics are significant too.

Since this is a true story, some identifying details of people and places have been changed to protect their anonymity. Except... maybe this was all written by a certifiably crazy person? Maybe it was all just a really fucking strange day.

© Emil Hallina

A traditional publisher looks for the "right" kind of book to mold into a bestseller. I write to cut off the head of the dragon – the Devil. And let me tell you, neither of us will ever truly succeed.

But you gotta try. I'm finally taking Eminem's hand, going down a new road. Time to the curtains. I see the red fabric has formed a kind of pyramid shape...

© Emi Hallama

# Chapter 1: Back in LA

The palm trees outside the airport felt like balm for my soul. For the first time, I wasn't wondering when I'd have to leave them behind again. I was here to stay. Los Angeles would be my new home. I'd get my morning coffee from little cafés wearing nothing but shorts all year round. I'd find inner peace. Skate through life without a care in the world.

I felt the rays of the sun pricking my skin. The sun was the cure to my flexural rash. I had suffered from eczema ever since I was a kid. Stress brought it out in the worst way. The sun took care of it in a matter of hours.

I decided to save some money and took a shuttle instead of a cab. The tiny Mexican driver was holding a route map. I asked him if the shuttle would go down Wilshire Boulevard.

©FionaFelima

He nodded yes. "Twenty-two dollars, fifty cents, please."

I sat in the front. The sunset was a crimson red, a dreamy, kind of bleak scene unfolding out the window. Huge billboards with lingerie models posing on them. Small houses, high-rises, empty parks. The City of Angels is strange that way – the vibe totally changes every ten blocks. The only common denominator is that no one walks the streets. Apart from some homeless people.

There were a bunch of UCLA students on the shuttle. I felt ill watching them. Their laughter was genuine. They had spent their summers with their families. Now they were coming back to their everyday lives. The pain turned into envy by the third traffic light. The Toyota right next to us had a broken windshield. The Japanese driver was squinting ahead. I opened my phone, called Kian.

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

Kian told me to hurry up.

© Erin Hinna

"Let's hit the LA nightlife."

I made it to the lobby of a tall high-rise. It was on the corner of Wilshire and Stoner. Right across from a huge Ralphs supermarket. A tense-looking doorman called Kian down. We hugged. I could see from the dimple on Kian's face that he was genuinely happy to see me. I was wearing rocker-style jeans and a colorful t-shirt. In the elevator mirror, I took in the bags under my eyes. I hadn't slept a wink on the plane.

The living room of the large one-bedroom apartment had a 77-inch TV, a big couch, a designer glass table with accompanying chairs. A big bed, a black leather massage recliner and a desk in the bedroom. My suitcase was still at the airport in London. They'd deliver it in the next couple of days. I was prepared for something like this and had stashed a spare t-shirt in my laptop bag. This wasn't my first rodeo. Thanks, Finnair.

© Finn Reima

I had a cold shower, brushed my teeth. Walked back to the living room along the soft carpeted floor. Kian had turned on the Xbox. We liked to smoke pot and play video games before heading out. The big bong was stuffed full of cannabis as usual. I changed into jeans and a tight t-shirt. Kian noticed the shirt.

"I've made some new friends while you were in Finland. You wear that, everyone will think you're gay."

"All my clothes were in the fucking suitcase."

"At least wear that jacket on top."

I put on a green Von Dutch windbreaker.

I smoked several full bowls. I was two points behind. There were less than two minutes left in the game. I was never anxious while high. I told myself that if I won the video game, my entire life would sort itself out. High stakes. Kian hit a three-pointer. I used Karl Malone for an accidental half-court shot right after that. I lost. Dropped the controller.

© Emil Ramma

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We headed to the parking garage. I checked myself out in the mirror of the first car. My nose was clean. Kian was too high to remember where he'd parked his car. Finally we found his black Porsche in a corner of the garage. A gut feeling told me this would be an unforgettable night. That was entirely due to the wacky tobacky. We drove out into the night.

The Westwood high-rises got me daydreaming. A penthouse in a high-rise, a convertible to cruise along the beaches in Santa Monica. Kian changed CDs. "The new Linkin Park is a banger." I felt relaxed. The flashing lights, the living buildings, the people driving around me, they were all just window dressing. There were butterflies in my belly. The golden arrows of Cupid in my chest.

© Fini Hanna

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The nightclub was located in a run-down block in Hollywood. Warwick was the trendiest club in the city right now. Their regulars included people like Leonardo DiCaprio, Mark Wahlberg, Nicolas Cage... Kian pulled up at the front and handed the car keys to the Mexican valet. The club was run by Linda and Jessica. Linda was a diva in her fifties, with a face covered in scars. She never wore the same clothes twice. Jessica was about thirty, a tough-seeming chick from New York. She'd tried to hit on me in another bar. I'd blocked her advances and coldly brushed her off. It's the way I had operated since I was seventeen. It was a defense mechanism.

I remember when my first crush, Kirsi, asked to walk me to the bus stop. We were at a party in Haukilahti. She told me she liked me. Wait, I think my first crush was Julia in junior high. Julia called me Jug Ears. That crush ended

© Emi Rinima

in tears in the school hallway. I still remember the day I saw Julia in the city years later. Julia thought my jug ears had grown smaller. I thought Julia had grown unpleasant. But back to Kirsi. She'd asked her big brother Samuel whether she should tell me how she felt. I felt the same way about her. I found it hard not to stutter around her, I was so into her. But I chose to walk to the bus stop alone. I didn't change my mind when I saw the sadness in Kirsi's face.

On my way to the bus stop, I wiped away tears. How could I have explained my anxiety to her? I couldn't do it then and I can't do it now. Who knows what might have happened if I'd actually faced my fears with a nice girl when I was younger? Things might have been different. Still, hindsight is twenty-twenty.

It was the same with Jessica. Except I thought she was just another plastic Barbie with fake tits at first. I used to watch her in dark

© Erin Fanning

dive bars. Soon I realized I couldn't have been more wrong. She never drank alcohol. She blocked every guy's pick-up attempts. There was something vulnerable in her eyes. They drew me in more and more as time went on.

I got nervous when I saw Jessica. She was sitting on a stool in front of the wooden door. I noticed her outfit. She was wearing faded jeans and a white jacket. She looked like she was at work to pay her rent. Not to hang out with the party people. I tried to be cool. Took out a cigarette and fiddled with it. I'd never liked the smell of cigarettes. Or the taste. It was just a ploy to make these fractions of a second last slightly longer. Linda drew the red rope aside for us. Jessica noticed me. Then looked away with calculated coldness.

There were only a handful of people in the bar. It was only 10 p.m. Kian ordered a vodka cranberry and a Heineken for me. We leaned on the bar counter and looked around at the white

© FranHelena

booths. There were lanterns and champagne bottles on the tables.

Models from the billboards were starting to trickle in slowly. Then there were the girls with their expensive rubber tits and Louis Vuitton handbags on full display. They were there hoping that this Wednesday night would be the one to change their lives. The bar would soon be full of men with Ferraris waiting in the parking lot. These women wanted to sit in the front seat. For their whole lives, preferably. Watching the common folk from behind dark shades. Kian got chatty.

"I'm young, rich, good-looking, a lawyer, why would any of these chicks ever say no to me?"

I immediately guessed Kian had had more cocaine. He got kind of narcissistic after sticking his house keys up his nose. In reality, he was an insecure little boy in a thousand-dollar blazer.

© Erin Hamma

Kian showed me photos of beautiful women on his phone. I smiled, even though deep down I felt sorry for him. The girls in the photos were students, fresh in from Alabama. Kian showed them around the city, took them to expensive restaurants, opened doors for them. They adored him. Or more specifically, used him. Kian pulled out a small white baggie. Handed it to me under the bar counter.

"Just one line. This has to last 'til Friday."

There was a line to the restroom once again. The urinals were empty as ever. Everyone wanted to hit the stalls. I doubt it was for a good shit. A stall opened up. I sat on the toilet lid. Opened Kian's bag carefully. Sprinkled coke on my key. Inhaled one batch, then another, then a third. I felt like my heart might crash through my ribcage. In my three months in Finland, I had only smoked pot.

I yanked the stall door open. A ripped 6'7" guy stared back at me in the mirror. I splashed

© Emil Hallama

Dior aftershave around my neck. Gave a dollar tip to the restroom attendant. He was a black gentleman in his late sixties. He handed out napkins to the patrons, offered them perfumes and lollipops. Sometimes I felt bad for him. I checked my nostrils once more. They were clean. I walked out. My body started dancing along to Snoop Dogg. I handed the baggie to Kian.

"Did you do just the one?"

"Yeah. Fucking sweet."

"Don't lick your lips. Let's get a beer."

"Let's have a smoke."

I felt nervous. My mouth was spasming. My lips were totally numb. I'd taken too much.

"What was the name of that girl? The one you showed me."

"Emily?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Are you into her?"

"I only met her on Friday."

"Yeah. You believe in love at first sight?"

"Of course."

© Emi Fontana

"Me too."

I felt compelled to come up with this stupid shit. I wasn't in control of myself. I was scared of the silence.

"Dude, your mouth's fucking twitching! How many lines did you do? Like, for real?"

"One."

"No, you didn't."

"OK, two. You got any gum?"

"No. And stop licking your lips."

"Yeah, yeah."

"You look like a dog."

"Let's go for a smoke, c'mon."

I thought some pot might calm me down. We went to the patio. The outdoor area was decked out with palm trees and brown couches. Two fitness models working the bar. P. Diddy dancing under a palm tree. A woman blowing a kiss.

I look up at the black sky and see seven stars. Wait, there's more, at least twelve. I try to count the stars. I hear a police siren

©Fini Falima

somewhere. Kian digs out a glass bong from his breast pocket and lights it up. He had this habit of taking big bags of marijuana to nightclubs and making "friends" with strangers by offering them drugs. Usually his new friends were more interested in the herb than in Kian.

Two young blondes come over and ask for a drag. Kian fills his bong again. The blondes start coughing. I pick up the bong from one of them and inhale for as long as I can. My vision gets blurry and the revelers turn into hazy outlines. The bartender winks at me. I respond with a carefree smile. I feel like Alice in Wonderland again. Except I'm holding the sceptre that'll get me to the King's chair.

A snake leather belt, leather pants, two women holding hands. Marlon Wayans. A famous male model holding a motorcycle helmet, walking over for a drag. Tattooed hands, Vin Diesel in sweatpants, Hugh Hefner with his whores. A

© Erin Hanna

small guy in a New York baseball cap, Justin Timberlake. More Louis Vuitton handbags.

"Emil, wake up."

I turned my attention back to the conversation.

"Oooph, I'm pretty baked."

"Where are you from?" The second blonde.

"He's an actor working on an accent for a role."

"No, I'm not."

"Are you really?" The blonde.

"Oh yeah." Kian.

"There's no talking in the 'movie' I'm doing."

Kian shot me a sharp look. The "joke" went way over the blonde's head.

"I'm from Finland."

"Scandinavian." The blonde.

"Yeah."

"What are you doing here?"

"Working."

"Where?"

© Erin Hallana

The conversation was starting to get on my nerves. The girls always found a roundabout way of asking, how are you for money? Where do you live? What kind of car do you drive? On the other hand, there's no such thing as social security in the US. People's fear of ending up on the streets is real. Not that I was thinking that far ahead myself. I had maybe thirty dollars in my wallet. An empty bank account. My dad's authorized user Visa in my pocket.

"I work for a music video production company."

"What do you do over there?"

"I dunno."

The blonde looked fuckable. Gold-digging college dropout. Probably moved to California in search of a better life. But hey, so had I.

"I'm helping out a friend. It's an apprenticeship."

The blondes noticed five guys sitting at a table behind us. I got the impression they were Russian. There were multiple Ketel One vodka

© Erin Hanna

bottles on the table. The women went over to give them a hug. Then they sat down and stayed with the guys. I'd experienced similar situations before. Kian went to order another drink. I didn't have much money, so I walked over to the dance floor. Stared at the dancers for a while. Then I changed my mind. I'd come here to succeed. I could get another beer, why not?

I walked to the bar and ordered a beer. Stared at the Heineken label and let my mind wander.

Jessica had been on my mind a lot. After film school, I'd been aimlessly drifting in the City of Angels. I'd applied for jobs all over the place, but no one would hire me. I'd applied for assistant positions at multiple production companies. I used my credit card to pay a photographer who had spotted me at the gym. He convinced me I could get work as a model. I posed shirtless at the Grand Canyon. Felt

© Erin Hollana

vulnerable at every flash of the camera. He complimented my fat-free body, which made me feel even worse. After the photo shoot, I had just enough money to develop four large photos. Three were of me shirtless.

I hiked like the Duracell Bunny from one modeling agency to another. The photographer had set up the meetings for me. I was way too tall, too muscular, the birthmark on my shoulder was too big. Two agencies suggested I take new photos. Their own photographers would do it. I'd pay them, obviously. That would get me hired, they said. I didn't even have a work permit at the time.

I had lost touch with the boy I was, deep down. I wasn't strong enough to take a beat and think clearly. I'd done three years at a Los Angeles art school. Everything had gone to shit after that. As a student, I got good grades. I didn't touch alcohol or drugs. I was conscientious and enjoyed studying. All my student work

© Emil Hamina

explored my own fears. In a carefully roundabout way obviously. The teachers and students loved it.

After two months of loitering, my friend Niklas offered me an assistant gig. He had his own music video production company. I'd lied and told him I already had a job several times. I was too embarrassed to ask for help. Eventually I had no other choice. After a five-minute phone call, he promised to get me a work permit. Due to my studies, I had the right to work, as long as someone just hired me. I'd spent the summer at our family's summer cottage in Finland, waiting for my permit. Now I finally had the stamp on my passport that allowed me to work.

My eyes went back to the Heineken bottle. I searched the label carefully, as if that would fix the empty feeling inside me. It's hard to explain why I had such a deep need to succeed. To show the world I was more than what my bullies in elementary school said I was. To fix

© Erin Hanna

my broken self-image. Success would help me build defenses around myself. I wasn't able, or wise enough, to go under my own skin. What I wanted was thick skin. Thick enough that a Stanley knife blade would shatter on contact. Fame and glory would make me whole.

Was that a good explanation? I don't know. I'm not sure I understand it myself. But maybe you get what I'm trying to say. Today, Instagram dictates the frame for so many young people, adults even. What the fuck are we trying to do? Advertise, brand ourselves. For what? Ourselves? What would my Instagram account have looked like? I'm embarrassed to even imagine. Five hundred thousand people in Finland are on antidepressants. Do we not have the kind of skins we'd like? An armored iPhone case protects an expensive phone. Does our armor protect us? Or is the armor what destroys us?

I took a huge sip out of the bottle. Fuck, it was good. So relaxing.

© Emi Fontana

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I was trying to sleep on Kian's couch. There was a Toblerone and a bottle of Snapple on the table. I was finding it hard to doze off. I got up. Opened the white curtains. Looked at the huge supermarket across the street. Its bright lights shining. Ralphs was open all night long. Two large black SUVs pulled up. I could hear Kian snoring in the bedroom. I was sweating, so I took off my t-shirt.

Sometimes, when I was high, I'd reminisce about my childhood. It was happening less and less though, because the drugs took away the pain. But tonight the memories scratched my skin raw.

I had my first sexual encounter when I was eleven years old with another boy. I remember asking to play the man during the act. He played the girl. It hurt the other way around.

© Erin Reiana

He was six years older than me. He took advantage of my ignorance. He forced me to play along.

Matias lived on the same street as we did. I don't actually remember how we met. Maybe it's somewhere deep in my subconscious. In hindsight, I'm not even sure it helps to dig this stuff up. When you're driving a car, you rarely look in the rearview mirror, right? Obviously you need to know where you've come from and why. Do you wanna go back? The person in the back seat can't make that decision.

After Matias, I'd never enjoyed sex sober. Not with anyone. Not that I knew whether I would or not, since I'd never actually had sex sober. Apart from with Matias. My own inner voice had been taken away from me. It had been left back in Matias' grandma's apartment, screaming all alone. And I couldn't exactly walk down Valhallankatu to knock on the door.

© Emi Hamina

"Excuse me, but my soul is haunting this place. I thought I'd come by to pick it up. It's kinda hard to live without it."

I can feel my bones. There are no broken ones. You have to have something to break in the first place.

I didn't want to play with Matias anymore, but I was too scared to tell anyone why. Several months later, Matias broke my James Bond toy gun. My dad had brought it back as a souvenir from a business trip to Germany. That shattered toy gun saved me. I told my parents the truth, that Matias was bullying me. "He broke my toy on purpose." That's how I got rid of him. The broken gun is still in a box of toys at our family's summer cottage to this day.

The first time I did drugs, the memories flooded up and out from the recesses of my mind, like a movie only I could see. The second time I did drugs, I was convinced that I was

© Emi Hiltunen

finally seeing the world the same way as everyone else.

There was something similar about Jessica, something like me. Beneath the long beautiful black hair, there was a vulnerable girl, hiding, hoping for someone to hold her hand. Her whole family had died in a car accident. Or so I'd heard. Of course, that could have just been a rumor that had grown in the telling.

Selfishly, I thought that she could hold me, bandage my wounded body. What she saw in me were the ripped pecs, the torn True Legion jeans, the orange Converse sneakers. It was easy to hide behind trendy clothes. Nobody ever asks what your toes look like inside the shiny shoes. Then again, I can never know for sure what she actually saw.

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© Erin Hanna

I woke up on the couch, feeling fragile. Last night's reminiscing felt like someone had poured sea salt all over my wounds. I couldn't figure out why the memories had come back right now. I'd successfully erased them from the corners of my mind lately. Thank you, drugs.

Kian had left for work around seven in the morning. I have no idea how he managed to keep going on four hours' sleep multiple days in a row. Making important decisions at work. I knew he was a well-liked, hardworking lawyer at his office. He was analytical in everything except his leisure activities.

I rounded up all the marijuana I could find. I wanted to forget the nightmares. I failed.

Chester Bennington was an abuse victim. He couldn't vanquish his demons in the end. It's not that hard for me to guess what this song is about.

**Listen: Linkin Park – "Crawling"**

I lit the bong. Fuck this!

© Erin Hanna

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Eventually, I put on my busted white Adidas shower sandals. Took a pot of peach yoghurt and a cup of cold Starbucks coffee out of the fridge. Headed to the backyard. Dove head first into the pool.

I should have called Niklas first thing and told him I was back in town. Ask him about work. But I didn't. I wanted to feel the sun on my skin, close my eyes. Be at peace. Feel my breath.

***

I was strolling down Wilshire Boulevard. I'd just bought my first local cell phone. I had a work permit for eighteen months. You needed one to buy a phone. But I wanted a slightly better phone, so I committed to a twenty-four-

© Emi Hanano

month service plan. The monthly payments weren't that bad. Eighteen months to get an artist visa. Failure wasn't an option. It was either that or nothing.

First, I dialed Isaac's number. I'd met him at the gym. He was a black, sporty, kindly gentleman. Always so positive. He made a living as a realtor and fitness coach. His hobbies included photography and road cycling. I often hung out at Peter and Isaac's house in the Hollywood Hills. Their three-story house had an amazing view of the Valley. Straight out of a postcard. Peter's father had died of cancer. I'm not sure, but I believe he inherited his millions. Peter was a truly humble guy, treated everyone the same. On weekends we would have barbecues, watch movies, have deep conversations.

In this city, it was hard to find a friend you could talk to about anything other than work. I was grateful to have these two. After smoking

© Erin Fanning

pot, Isaac would show me his photo books. Usually they featured naked male models. Sometimes, I got the feeling that Isaac was more interested in the filming process than the pictures themselves. He was extremely warm and positive. I couldn't care less about his sexual orientation. He was my friend. And he never tried to hit on me. On the contrary, he kept trying to find me a girl. Someone who had something to offer besides good hair.

I often played with Peter's dogs while high. They didn't like it. They'd tell me:

"Dog's aren't clean. I washed them a week ago."

According to Isaac, dogs shouldn't get along with strangers too well, otherwise they'd learn to beg for food and jump on their designer couches. I took no notice of these rules. And Isaac didn't want to repeat himself.

Isaac was happy to hear my voice.

"Welcome home!"

© Emil Hamina

The greeting confused me a little. My family wasn't here, was it?

"Thanks."

Isaac asked me to come for dinner on Wednesday. He'd pick me up and drop me off at Kian's in Westwood. Peter had promised to serve authentic Kobe beef.

It was getting close to 6 p.m. and the sun was going down. I made a beeline for the gym. It was run by Kian's housing co-op. There was no one else there apart from one elderly lady. I never ran on the treadmill or rode the exercise bike. I only ever pumped iron. I put 240 pounds on the bench press. Lifted my sixth rep with animal fury. The lady jumped out of her skin at the fucking roar.

After lifting, I decided to do five hundred yards in the pool. There was a hot girl, maybe twenty-four, lounging on one of the sunbeds. I doubt I'd have hit the pool at all if it hadn't been for her.

© Erin Fanning

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Back at the apartment, I jerked off to porn on the computer. There was pretty much nothing else on my laptop apart from music and porn. The Ice Hockey World Championships were on TV. I watched Finland play. I didn't give a damn whether Finland won or not. I refilled the bong. Kian walked in.

"Are you smoking my pot?"

"Just a little."

"You're not gonna ask for permission?"

"Sorry."

"Pizzas are on you!"

I called Domino's on my cell and ordered two pepperoni pizzas. I've never liked American pizza, but when I was high, I'd have eaten anchovies straight out of a can. I took my laptop, went to Kian's bedroom and started browsing. Kian followed me.

© Emil Hallana

"You can't just go into my room without asking."

"I'm paying you 570 bucks in rent."

I couldn't wrap my head around it. In Finland, you'd never ask a friend to pay rent for a couple of weeks' stay. We'd agreed to look for a place together as soon as possible. It's just that Kian was looking at places way out of my price range. My budget was $860 a month.

"I have to check my email."

"You could ask for permission."

"Sorry. Let's play an NBA game in a bit."

"The loser pays for parking."

Kian loved to win money off me at video games. Losing three dollars made a visible dent in my wallet. But what made it worse was that Kian seemed to enjoy making me suffer. Soon I was ten dollars poorer once again. The herb made me forget my money troubles.

I still remember the first time I smoked pot. It was in Punavuori, Helsinki. I felt nervous and

© Emi Hanna

surreal. I immediately had too much. Panicked and thought everyone in the room had gone. Only their ghosts had stayed to haunt me. Martti handed me a chocolate bar. The sugar made me feel better. My breathing slowed down. My panic subsided bit by bit. I swore to myself I'd never touch the green tobacco again.

In America I tried again anyway. This time, I could feel the cage I had been trapped in as a child burning to ashes. I started smoking almost every day. Lots of people in California seemed to live the same way. My confidence grew with every toke. Sometimes my own voice almost scared me. It seemed to come out of me without echoing in my windpipe.

***

We were stopped at a traffic light at the corner of Santa Monica Boulevard and Doheny. It was a dark and windy night. I closed my eyes.

© Emi Hanna

I opened my eyes. I closed them again. Kian fished a small coke baggie out of his pocket. Took a quick sniff before the lights turned green. I didn't want one. Cocaine had a tendency to mess with my head if I'd smoked pot beforehand. I wanted to stay in a dreamlike state. Safely inside a barbed wire fence.

We pulled up at a gas station around Highland. Kian filled up the tank. I went inside to buy a Snickers ice cream bar and a small pack of cigarettes.

We arrived at Cabaret. It was Tuesday night. Jessica was on the door again. She let us in. She gave me a wink and wished us a fun night. I stared at her, frozen. My eyes red. I was too out of it to form a coherent sentence.

The club had a fireplace and a sky bar upstairs. We smoked more pot. Kian wanted to buy me a drink. A large vodka Red Bull. My guy was making sure I wouldn't fall asleep standing up.

© Erin Haima

The bar was slowly filling up. I was being checked out by multiple women. I was sitting on a window ledge upstairs, next to the fireplace. From there you could see out through a wooden lattice. I could see Jessica's perfect body, the narrow waist and fit ass looking superb in camo trousers and a black top. She was walking alongside the queue, handpicking her customers. Kian knew I had a thing for her, though I'd never admitted it to him. "Don't Stop Believin'" by Journey came on.

Two girls came up to me for a chat. I was short with them. I wanted to be left alone. I was listening to the lyrics of the familiar song. The woman I wanted to talk to was sixty yards away. I dreamed on. Kian poked me on my arm.

"This is Lisa."

"Hey."

"Oh, and this is Eva."

"Hiya."

"Where are you from?"

© Erin Hanna

"Finland."

"Europe?"

"Yeah."

"Do you live here?"

"Here in this bar?"

"Haha..."

Kian dug a minigrip bag out of his jeans pocket.

"You girls wanna party?"

"Of course."

The four of us headed to the downstairs restroom. We all knelt around the wooden toilet lid. Smashed a hardened lump with Kian's credit card. Poured coke along the edge of the card. Each of us snorted in turn. Women always got horny on coke. But I didn't have the patience for these skanks. I was feeling surprisingly calm. But not quite brave enough. I asked Kian for more cocaine. I'd psych myself up with more white powder. Kian closed the bag.

"Fuck no, you're already high."

© Erin Hanna

"Just a little."

"Look in the mirror, no one's gonna talk to you looking like that."

I stormed angrily out of the stall.

"Hey, don't open the door yet." One of the girls, mumbling.

I pretended not to hear. I walked straight upstairs and to the bar. Marco Jarec, a Clippers player, was sitting on the couch with two Playboy models. I checked out the women casually. Ordered a Heineken. Someone grabbed my ass. One of the girls had come up to me.

"What's your name?"

"Emil."

"I have a kid."

"Girl or boy?"

"Boy."

"Where's the father?"

"We just broke up. John's one of the best commercial directors in the city. He's shooting a

© Emil Hanna

Nike ad in Europe right now. Where do you live, handsome?"

She talked like a robot. I'm pretty sure she had her own secret baggie hidden in her Chanel purse.

"Westwood."

"Rent or own?"

"Rent."

"What are you doing here?"

"Drinking beer. I might even order another one."

"I meant LA?" Completely serious. The girl clearly had a great sense of humor.

"I studied directing. In film school. Now I'm doing an internship."

"Where?"

"At a music video company."

"What do you do over there?"

"Carry heavy things, probably. Try to figure out my next move. Assistant shit."

© Erin Haima

"I think my friends are waiting for me. Really nice meeting you."

I was left to hang out with my Corona bottle. She had realized I'd only pay for her next drink at best. I turned toward the dark, solid wooden bar. Stared at the bartender's breasts. She smiled and handed me a piece of paper. I inspected it. It was an invite to some party. I secretly counted my dollars under the bar, twice. Eleven bucks. I wanted a beer, but ordered bottled water. It cost three times less. The bartender wouldn't take my money. I thanked her politely.

***

I had been lounging at the pool for five days. Gone to the gym. Bought a rock 'n' roll style t-shirt on Melrose Avenue. I still hadn't called Niklas to tell him I was back in town. In a weird way, I was scared that the job wouldn't

© Emil Ramana

be there anymore. I decided to dodge responsibility for a couple more days before picking up the phone. Loitering in cafés let me keep on dreaming. Imagining what it would feel like to wake up carefree. Happy.

We sat in front of the TV later that night. Kian was showing off his new clothes and asking for my opinion. I witnessed at least five different blazers with ever more intricate designs on the back. Kian's after-work look included a pair of jeans, a hipster blazer from Melrose Avenue and a t-shirt. Zane was coming over. I had never met him before. Kian had only met him recently. He'd told me about Zane's successful real estate business. The doorbell rang. Kian turned on the intercom.

I sat on the couch wearing a pink Dolce & Gabbana t-shirt. My best t-shirt. Zane walked in. He was carrying a see-through plastic bag. I've never seen that much marijuana in my life.

©EmiRaimma

Loads of orange flowers in there. They give you the best hallucinations.

I listened to Kian and Zane talk. The words Escalade, Fargo, Miami real estate. The best way to get rich apparently. The stock market, that stuck with me too. I felt shy and stayed quiet. I was quickly starting to feel insignificant. I switched channels.

"Lakers-Denver, don't switch dude!" Zane roared. "It's the last period. I didn't know this was on. Hey look, it's tight, 93-93."

Zane had a long bin Laden beard and a rugged face full of scars. Somehow he came across as honest and genuine even so. I was kind of startled when he started talking to me.

"Europeans piss me off. Coming over here in Gucci shirts, thinking they're better than us."

Kian's face blushed. He watched how I'd react.

"I guess", I blurted out nervously.

I should have changed into a worn t-shirt. Kian had bought me dinner in a fancy Mexican

© Erin Hanna

restaurant two hours ago. That's why my best t-shirt was still on. I felt awkward.

"Sorry, you can't come along. I only have two people on the list for Pearl. Next time."

"That's OK. I'll just play PlayStation."

"Where do you work?"

"At my friend's company. I haven't started yet though."

"I do up apartments by the 405. Come work for me if you need extra dough?"

"He doesn't have a car", Kian chimed in. In a friendly way though.

"I can walk. Or take the bus."

I could feel in my bones how badly I needed the money.

"Call me on Monday."

"Thanks."

Zane threw me a humongous bag of pot.

"Get zoinked on that. I'll dock your pay for it."

© EmmRellama

I saved Zane's number into my new cell before the guys left me alone. I lay on the couch. Squinted. Goddamn, Jaws is a scary movie when you're high. Even though you don't even see the whole shark before the last scene. Or maybe because of that.

After three joints, I was craving chocolate. I put on my shower sandals and headed to the supermarket across the street. I strolled down the aisles slowly. Browsed the newspapers. After twenty minutes, I woke up and realized I was still in the supermarket. The young cashier was laughing at me.

"The candy aisle's that way."

Should I have worn shades? I remembered I didn't even own a pair. Noticed a selection of thirteen-dollar shades on the shelf. Picked out a pair of big yellow aviators. Checked myself out in the mirror to see if they were cool or fucking awful. I couldn't decide.

© Erin Hanna

There was Ben & Jerry's in the freezer. I put the chocolates and the bag of candy back on the shelf. There were too many flavors, white chocolate, peanut, strawberry, cheese. I bought my trusty old banana chocolate.

***

The apartment door opened. I woke up on the couch, still wearing my sandals. And the yellow shades. Kian walked in with two women. For a moment, I wondered if I was awake or still asleep. I perked up at the sight of two tiny leather skirts.

"Fuck, man. Didn't cross your mind to open a window? And what are these fucking glasses?"

Kian and the girls burst out laughing.

"I bought shades."

They laughed even more.

"Aren't they cool?"

"Yeah, really cool."

© Tini Hanna

One of the girls tried to fight back laughter but couldn't.

"I guess I bought fugly shades."

The laughter just wouldn't end.

"Should I go exchange these for a couple of tubs of ice cream? This Ben & Jerry's is pretty good."

"Yeah, do that."

Everybody else seemed to be having a great time.

"This is my friend Emil."

"Hi, sorry, I'm kinda high. But it's my first time."

"Really? We couldn't tell."

"So you have a pothead living in your house."

"Temporarily."

"I like it here. There's a bong, a PlayStation and a big TV."

"And Ben & Jerry's." The girl looked at me flirtatiously.

"Sorry, I already ate it all."

© Emil Hamina

"We're watching our figures anyway."

The girl lifted up her top. Kian poured cocaine onto the glass table. The credit card cut it into seven equal lines. I took the bong, stuffed it full of ganja. One inhale, second inhale, third inhale. The girls' faces got prettier at each one. One of them threw herself on the couch next to me. I rubbed her butt with my foot as if by accident. The girl gave me a sharp look. I laid my head on the checkered couch cushion.

The conversation turns into a haze. The laughter is ringing in my ears. It's the leather skirt's turn to kick me awake.

"You like giving head?"

I stare at her in confusion. Did I hear that right? What's everyone talking about? Kian pours me a Red Bull in a red disposable cup.

"Don't ruin the night, man."

The girl lifts up her skirt, shows off her bikini wax. I try to wake myself up into the present moment. My eyes lock onto the Snickers

©FinnRaina

bar in the kitchen, even though the girl's skirt is up around her ears. Kian disappears into the bedroom with the other girl. I don't know how exactly, but I find myself in the middle of a passionate make-out session. The couch cushions fly to the floor, next to the leather skirt.

***

I woke up feeling sick. The girls had gone in the morning. I vaguely remembered one of them being in a bad mood, complaining she was late for work. There was a note on the kitchen table with a name and phone number written on it. I had no idea which of the girls had left it. Lisa, which one was Lisa? I'd talked for hours after sex. But I guess I hadn't asked her name. Or had I? I couldn't remember.

I took a can of Coke out of the fridge. I had this habit of drinking Kian's drinks as if by accident. Smoking his pot. Snorting his cocaine.

© Emi Hanna

Sitting in his convertible. I had to pull myself together. I decided to call Niklas and ask about work. I took an ice cold shower, brewed three large cups of coffee. Looked for my phone all over the apartment. Eventually I found it between the couch cushions. Niklas' voice was warm.

"Emil Zátopek."

"I just got here."

"Fuck, if only you'd been back a week ago. I just shot a music video."

Niklas dropped the artist's name. One of the top twenty artists in the world. I won't share the name here, as there's only a handful of music video directors in the world.

Why had I been too chicken to call before? I mumbled to myself.

"Next time."

"Where are you staying?"

"Here in Westwood?"

"Dinner tomorrow?"

© Emil Ahlbäck

"Where?"

"Katana, 7 p.m."

***

I was always nervous around Niklas. We had similar, sporty backgrounds. I was younger than him. He was born in Sweden. Spoke Finnish with an accent. I'd sent him one of my student works. A short film about a paralyzed man who left his wife because he felt like a burden to her. Even though she loved him and begged him not to. The film had a sad ending. Two yearning, heartbroken lovers. Niklas had liked the idea.

I loved movies. I don't really know how or where it started. Escaping into stories felt safe. My work always depicted my fears. And I guess I naively believed that good stories could have a positive impact on people's lives. Stories, a crying actor, running around with a toy gun. Learning lines, expressing fake feelings in a

© Emi Hamina

made-up scene. Is that art? In a hospital people cry for real. That's where the real heroes are. Not that I thought about it that deeply back then. On the contrary, I admired everything Hollywood stood for.

***

I arrived at Katana. It's a trendy sushi spot on Sunset Boulevard. Right across from the Skybar. Lit candles gave the place a romantic atmosphere. I felt anxious walking up the stone stairs. The restaurant architecture seemed old. The waterfall in the middle caught my eye. I hadn't dared to smoke pot before meeting up. I was dressed cleaner than usual. Tidy shorts, a button-up shirt.

Our table had a great view of the streets below. Niklas was talking to someone from the William Morris Agency. I mainly just listened. The agent asked Niklas a question.

© Emil Hamna

"Would you have made 8 Mile if they'd offered?"

"Yeah. The story was good."

I thought about Eminem's performance in it. He'd been great. I had always liked his songs.

The agent turned to me politely.

"Emil. What are you here to do?"

"He's gonna work for me", Niklas said in a friendly tone.

"I could introduce you to another director as well, if you want? You might get more assistant gigs."

"We'll have to talk about that." Niklas picked up his vodka glass from the table.

I gathered my courage.

"If there are any jobs going, I'd be happy to make coffee runs, anything at all."

"That's the spirit. Where did you study?"

"LA Film School."

"Is that the place that advertises on Variety?"

© Erik Hellana

"Yeah."

"Was it any good?"

"Sure. It was mostly up to you if you did well over there. No one pushed you to do anything."

"That's the way it should be."

"We did have Brett Ratner as a lecturer."

"He has a bit of a reputation for being an asshole in this town." The agent.

We talked about movies all evening. I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten so well. I felt kind of ashamed for eating even after the others were full. The restaurant was a place for people who were content with their lives. A stress-free atmosphere. I didn't really fit in.

After several bottles of wine and shots of vodka, we headed to a rock bar. Played darts in the corner with AC/DC blasting in the background. I was so drunk I had to actually concentrate on not hitting the other customers. This one guy in a denim jacket was standing way too close and the dartboard was way too

© Erin Hanna

fucking far. "I gotta go to the restroom." Unsurprisingly, I lost the game.

Next, a strip club. Then, an after-party at the agent's home in Bel Air. We sat on the floor eating burgers and watching movies. I'd have preferred to sit on a couch, but there were only three big beds and a barbecue in the whole place. It was pretty funny, since the house was huge. A bachelor pad for three guys. I wondered if they had blown all their money on the house. Or maybe they had just moved in?

In the small hours of the morning, the coked-up agent started giving me shit. I went over the evening in my mind. Had I done something stupid? In the strip club I had opened the pack of cards on the table. Thrown one of them between the girl's legs on stage. It couldn't be that, could it? I just tried to play it cool.

The agent kept fucking with me. I guess it made him feel important, being able to mess with a student twenty-five years his junior.

© Erin Fanning

Niklas didn't stand up for me, just grinned in the background. How is it that drugs always bring out the best in people? I was afraid I'd burst into tears, make a complete fool out of myself.

© Emil Hallama

# Chapter 2: Living the Life

We were doing the rounds with Kian, looking for apartments. His parents were from Iran. It was important to them for their son to live in a safe area. I had met them several times. They lived in a small townhouse in Orange County. I had the feeling they didn't like me much. Maybe because I wasn't a lawyer and walked around wearing old t-shirts.

I'd brought them souvenirs from Finland. Two littala mugs and a candle. I was always polite around them. Thanks to my parents, I had good manners when I was sober.

Beverly Hills was too expensive for me, but we found a place there anyway. It had two bedrooms, a small study and a living room area. I suggested I take the smaller bedroom and pay

© Emil Hallina

eight hundred bucks for it. Kian could have the study and the larger bedroom for $990 a month. He refused.

"And anyway, I don't wanna live in the only ugly house in the neighborhood."

I thought the place was lovely. A light blue wooden house along a quiet cross street. Most apartments were close to $2,500. Kian's old schoolmate Ryan called him to say that a large two-bedroom apartment downstairs from him was becoming available. $1,600 a month, behind Urth Caffe, right by Melrose Avenue. A hipster location. Within walking distance from all the trendy little boutiques. It's just that the place was in pretty poor condition. Kian agreed to take it anyway.

My name didn't go on the rental agreement. The landlord only wanted Kian on it. I'm not sure if it was because of my Lynyrd Skynyrd shirt or my long keychain. Kian had insisted I wear a button-up shirt. I'd refused. I wanted to

© Erin Fellana

be good enough as myself. In hindsight, I guess Kian was right. The landlord said it was because I didn't have credit history in the US. Which was true, of course.

When we finally moved in, the place was covered in dust. The landlord hadn't bothered to hire a cleaner before his new tenants moved in. The apartment was in total disarray.

"I didn't know we were renting a storage unit."

There, I finally managed to wring a smile out of Kian's parents. They'd come over to help us clean. Later I complained about the place to a neighbor in the hallway. He laughed.

"That guy owns five apartments in this building. He's a cheap asshole. He won't fix anything until someone threatens to leave."

Ryan's place had a different owner. His apartment was done up to the nines.

***

© Fran Rhiana

Mom and I had talked about me buying her a car. She'd get it a year after I bought it. That's because cars are half the price in the US, thanks to Finland's insane car tax. I guess it's fine to poison the environment with old cars in Finland. Few people can afford a new one. Still, the taxation of electric cars has helped things move in the right direction. Mom wanted a big SUV so that she could transport stuff to our summer cottage. She'd send me the money once I found the car.

I had spent years sitting in the passenger seat trying not to feel nauseous. Usually I just wanted a ride from location A to location B. Now I was getting my own driver's seat. Still, the money was coming from my mom, so I continued to feel like a flea, burrowing under people's skin to suck their blood.

***

© Emi Hanna

The Ikea in Burbank had everything we needed. I'd bought a new shirt and sneakers earlier, so I lied to my mom and told her the bed cost $150 more than it did. I felt sick, tying my new shoelaces. I convinced myself I'd pay all my "debts" back with interest once I started working. Kian found us a couch. We agreed I'd pay him forty-five dollars a month until I'd covered my share of it. After shopping, we had Swedish meatballs. I asked Kian for his opinion.

"Should I call Zane and ask for a job?"

"I thought you were working for your friend?"

"It's quiet over there right now."

"Zane will yell at you if you don't do a good job. He's kinda crazy."

"I need to get the car first."

"My dad's friend owns a car dealership, maybe he could help."

"Do they have used cars?"

"I think so."

© Erin Fenima

"A used Jeep."

"I'll call him."

***

I was sitting in my room, barefoot. The mattress had gone bust within a week. The bottom sheet was lying forgotten in a plastic bag. I was paralyzed, imprisoned in the apartment. It was hard to move around in LA without a car. I walked one and a half miles to the gym every day. Apart from that, I sat in cafés, watching all the busy people. They had schedules and friends.

Depression was starting to creep in more and more every day. It wasn't my friend's fault he wasn't drowning in job offers. I was sending out multiple job applications a day with zero responses. Most people seemed to land their first industry jobs through their personal connections. There were more movie industry

© Erin Hanna

employees in LA than residents in the city of Espoo in Finland. Competition over jobs was ruthless and cruel. I didn't want to become a disillusioned quitter.

The Hollywood sign was glowing over the Hills. The sign is pretty ugly and unremarkable in real life, actually. To me it symbolized the meaning of life, glamor, money, fame and fortune. I think, in my subconscious, it meant stitches for my bleeding wounds.

***

I walked over to the gas station to buy a used-car magazine. There were dozens of used Jeeps in there. Where would I start? The first person I met was selling a red Jeep for $23,000. The black leather seats from the ad had turned into black canvas ones on the way over. I stared at the seller in confusion.

"Here's the car. It's great."

© Fran Hallama

The guy was in his sixties and wouldn't even let me test drive the car. I'm 98.7 percent sure he was a Donald Trump supporter. I rolled my eyes and told him I'd think about it on the way back home. How hard could it be to buy a car?

***

The next morning, I browsed my car magazine at Starbucks. I always got drip coffee because it was cheaper. It tasted amazing. I could see almost everyone else was drinking a specialty brew. To this day, I can't understand why people buy drinks that expensive. Drip coffee has more caffeine in it, too. An ad caught my eye. Limited edition, brown leather seats, last year's model. The car looked great in the photos. We agreed to meet near my place.

The Spanish man looked laid-back in broken Vans and an old t-shirt. His first sentence confused me.

© Erin Fanana

"My wife cheated on me."

"Sorry, what?"

"That's why I'm selling the car. My wife used to drive it. It reminds me of her."

He lit a cigarette, nervous.

"You smoke?"

"No."

He threw me the car keys. I caught them, but only just.

"Well, try it."

"Does this still have a warranty on it?"

"I think so. There's nothing wrong with the car."

I liked him immediately. There was something honest and fun about him, something I hadn't encountered in a long while. He told me he worked as a plumber. We had a long conversation about his ex. I told him I had a thing for a girl, but didn't know what to do about it. Or more to the point, didn't have the guts to do anything about it.

© Erin Hanna

"When a lady gives you her number, you don't call her for three days. You act like you're not into it."

"Yeah."

"They don't want a man who's easy. If you call them immediately, they think you're pathetic. What's your star sign?"

"Aquarius."

"So you'd do well with a..."

"How about a Gemini?"

I knew Jessica was a Gemini.

"Actually, a Gemini is your soulmate. How did you know?"

"She's a Gemini. Sometimes I feel like there's two people inside her head."

"That's the way Geminis are."

Was Jessica my soulmate after all?

I woke up to reality. I had forgotten I was here to buy a car. After an hour of talking, we'd discussed everything except the SUV. By the end, we were sitting on a park bench

© Erin Hanna

smoking pot. I promised to call him that same night and tell him my decision.

My mom was excited. The car was exactly what she wanted. It cost $22,000. I told her it was $23,000. I felt sick about lying to her, but I thought the extra thousand would cover next month's rent. I'd pay her back when I could. I don't know if I even believed myself. The job situation wasn't looking great. I had this strong feeling in the pit of my stomach that my troubles hadn't even begun. In the end, I even haggled the actual price down by 250 bucks.

"Don't rob me. My wife already took me to the cleaners." Laughing.

***

We drove to Venice Beach. Small quirky neighborhoods, single-story houses, romantic water canals. The area was going the same way as Kallio in Finland. Prices through the roof due

© Emi Pamina

to all the hipsters. Until the homeless people took over the beaches after Covid. So sad. Where were they supposed to go? They had nowhere else.

We'd reached an agreement on the car. The Spanish guy asked if he could smoke in the car. I said yes, aware that this couldn't be the first time. Strangely enough, the car didn't smell of cigarettes. Could the green Little Tree hanging from the mirror actually work? Sitting behind the wheel felt strange. I felt important as I turned on the blinker. I turned left down a narrow alleyway. I'd only driven in Los Angeles three times before now. We arrived at a small car dealership.

"I'm gonna jump off here."

"Buying a new car?"

"A used Range Rover."

"You want me to wait? In case you can't find anything?"

"I'll buy something, as long as it works."

© Erin Hanna

He was actually walking into a dealership to buy a car without any idea what they had in stock. I wished I had even a third of his carefree attitude. My eczema would be a distant memory.

"Gimme a call if you wanna have a drink sometime", he said.

"Sure."

His wife lost a real one in him. She was still messaging him. Apologizing. I watched him getting smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror. I was certain we would never meet again. I turned on the radio. Felt something undefinable in my stomach.

I parked in front of a small gray house on Ocean Drive. Searched my jeans for my bong. Inhaled deeply. In that moment, I felt like a part of something. Maybe it was the car, maybe it was Bob Marley's music. I spent the day listening to music and driving. Malibu, Santa Monica, the Hollywood Hills, West Hollywood.

© Erin Rhianna

Eventually I ran low on gas. I regretted my joyride in the morning. Not that gas was crazy expensive or anything.

***

I shaved my beard and my head. I'd been looking forward to tonight. I'd be driving my very own, freshly waxed car to the nightclub. Maybe Jessica would look at me differently. Kian was putting gel in his hair. He used to mold it into spikes. During the day, he wore a tie and glasses.

I could hardly contain myself. I'd picked out a HIM album for the drive. One steep climb up La Cienega Boulevard, and we'd be on Sunset Boulevard. The new nightclub was on the first floor of the W hotel.

We got out of the car. Walked to the short queue outside the restaurant. We had gotten there early to make sure we got in. Linda

© Erin Hanna

nodded, come on in boys. I glanced at Jessica. She gave us a cool hi.

We went over to the bar. The moment I had been waiting for felt empty. I decided to order a vodka shot. Kian made sure we didn't run out of drinks.

"Don't worry about the car, Samantha can drive it back."

I looked at the blonde girl standing next to us in confusion. So she was to be our designated driver.

"Drink up. Let's have fun."

The more I drank, the worse I felt. Shot glass in hand, I tried to figure out how to find a job as quickly as possible. I'd emailed an old teacher yesterday to ask for work. I was feeling down. He hadn't replied. We'd had lunches together, seen arthouse movies at the ArcLight together, maybe I shouldn't have asked for a job. I was ashamed of myself. Or maybe he hadn't even opened his inbox yet? I was lost in

© Erin Hanna

thought. The blonde girl's friend tapped me on the shoulder.

"So, you guys promised to take me to Santa Monica first."

"OK."

"I'm not coming to any after-parties. I'm a good girl."

"Right."

"And I don't even know your name."

"Emil."

"Nice name."

"Believe it or not, I didn't come up with it myself."

"Haha..."

So I drank iced water for the rest of the night. I was in a foul mood. I didn't even know if I had enough gas to drive to Santa Monica and back. Two hours later, the same girl insisted on filling my tank and paying for it. She wouldn't take no for an answer. She'd noticed the yellow fuel light. I tried to pretend

© Emil Hamma

I was stopping at a gas station to buy Coca-Cola. The plan was to fuel up when she wasn't looking. She had done it herself while I was inside picking a soda. She even thanked me for the ride politely. She was so sweet. Different from all the hoes I had met. Forgive the blunt choice of words.

Samantha looked deep into my eyes as she was getting out of the car. I think she expected me to ask for her number. I had a blunt conversation with myself inside my head. I have zero shot with this girl. I wanted to ask her out. But I didn't have the nerve.

She turned around right as she was stepping inside the small house. Spread her hands and smiled. For the life of me, I can't understand why I couldn't just get out of the car. It's been haunting me. It still stings as I write this now. If I ever see her again I'll open my mouth. It's never too late. Never. Right?

© Erin Hanna

Oh, you think sometimes the moment's just gone? And then it's too late? No. No, it's not! There will be another chance! Believe me. But you can't fuck that one up. You have to learn from your mistakes.

***

I'd spoken to Niklas on the phone. We were meeting up at Fantasy Island, a titty bar in West LA.

I walked in, looked for my friend, but he wasn't there. The clientele seemed kind of hillbilly. The place was a dump. Even the strippers were pretty unimpressive. I ordered a beer and sat at the bar. After two beers my friend arrived. He sat down next to me.

"Sorry I'm late."

"No worries."

"Whatcha been up to?"

© Erin Halama

"Shooting a student project thing." I felt bad about lying. "Like a mystery lottery win, family feud kind of thing."

I couldn't come up with a better story in the moment. I was just too embarrassed to admit how badly I needed a job. Before the second beer, all I'd been feeling was anxiety. I'd been looking for work every day, but there were thousands of applicants for every job out there. And I struggled to write in English because of my dyslexia. Who knows, maybe that was the reason I was never even called for an interview?

I know Kian would have helped me with the emails. People had been giving me shit about my dyslexia since elementary school. If you ask me, people who worry about one misplaced word in a sentence are small-minded snobs with nothing real to say.

"What did you shoot it on?"

"16 mil."

© Erin Rahima

"I'm probably doing an Elton John video in Vancouver in three weeks."

"Good song?"

"Eh."

Two young dancers came up to us. One of them started giving Niklas a hard time.

"You never called!"

"I lost my phone."

Niklas dug a phone out of his jeans pocket and took the girl's number down again. I tried to be cool and went for a private show with the other girl. When she took off her bra, I was thinking about the last of my dollars deep in my pocket. Why didn't I say no? This was a lot of lunches vanishing into thin air.

We rounded out the night with a party in Venice Beach. There were about fifty people in the house. I kissed a dark-skinned girl on the couch. Everything was turning into a haze again. I saw Niklas in the kitchen. He was pouring Finlandia vodka into a glass. I don't know how

© Erin Hanna

the bottle turned up at the party. We didn't bring it. I went in to fill my glass.

"I've never kissed anyone as dark as that before."

Niklas chuckled.

"That's funny, but kinda racist."

"I didn't mean it like that. You got me wrong!" I poured myself a big glass of vodka. "Did you hear me? You got me all wrong."

Even though I was three sheets to the wind, my friend's harmless dig about racism bothered me. I had always been of the opinion that racists were people who project their own misery by judging others. Real fucking losers.

"Have you ever seen a little kid who's racist? No, you haven't. Imbeciles are racist. Incels."

"Hey, Zátopek, just drink up and shut up for a second."

I took a swig straight from the vodka bottle. I guess I was so drunk that even my friend was tired of listening to me. I wanted to ask Niklas

© Finn Reinna

if he had any jobs I could get in on. The party was starting to get to me. I knew they couldn't very well fly me to Vancouver, but I wanted some kind of consolation anyway. I poured vodka and cranberry juice into my glass. Looked around at the party-goers. Whose party even was this?

I walked back to the couch. I had to sit down for a second. The room was spinning. I took a big gulp of water from a glass on the table. Spit it right back out. Some nutter had filled the glass with liquor. A fat man in a Lakers cap gave me a sip from his Coke bottle.

"No water in there, huh?"

"No. Right when I was hoping for just water."

"I didn't put it there. Drink this Coke."

"Thanks."

The fat guy started rolling two joints.

"You can have the smaller one."

I didn't have the heart to say no, even though I wanted to. He told me he produced and directed porn movies. Bragged about being the

© Erin Haina

biggest producer in town. He seemed like a fun dude after a short conversation. I told him I was looking for assistant work. He gave me his business card.

I was drunkenly admiring a Sitting Bull poster on the wall. The Indian had a rugged face. I was wondering about the strange dimple on his cheek. It made him look kind of friendly.

We had a brief philosophical conversation about all sorts of life stuff. I was surprised to realize I liked the guy. How had he gotten into the business? Maybe he had a hunch that the industry would soon be worth tens of billions of dollars? My eyes drifted shut. The cushion felt soft, and I slowly fell asleep. The porn director hit me on the shoulder.

"Wake up. Here's Jesse, she's one of my girls."

A blonde woman was looking at me doubtfully.

"This boy is from Finland. Finland, Nokia phone."

© Erin Holma

I had fallen asleep on the couch. The beautiful woman smiled at me as I opened my eyes.

"Go on, get something to eat from the kitchen."

The girl looked me in the eye.

"Don't be shy."

The director laughed. The girl and I went to get some chips from the kitchen. Then she led me to the bathtub. I don't know, maybe something had already happened and I'd missed it. But I jumped in the tub. You never get this lucky.

"Don't get water on my Hermès bag. It can't get wet!"

The girl filled the tub with soap bubbles. I thought the porn star liked me. But in reality, I guess I'd told the porn director about my life. I couldn't remember exactly what. I never spill my guts to strangers when I'm drunk. I don't even tell my friends about my problems. Way too

© Emi Hamana

much booze and drugs. But it was clear he wanted to cheer me up. He'd made some kind of deal with the girl.

Several hours later, I bumped into the director in the kitchen again. I was getting pizza and water. A couple more drinks and I'd have passed out. He asked me to join him on the balcony. He was admiring the ocean view from upstairs. I stared at the palm trees. They'd always fascinated me somehow. The director didn't ask about the porn star at all. He tapped me on my upper arm.

"You're a real one. Not many of those around."

I was starting to remember more of our previous conversation. I felt dizzy and ashamed. He quickly changed the subject to basketball. The pornstar found her way onto the balcony. She had a plateful of carrots and pretzel sticks. She cuddled up to me sweetly.

© Emil Hajjiana

"I don't know what you're so anxious about. You're wild."

The director made a hand gesture. Shut up. My gaze shifted down to the wooden floor of the balcony. The polish was very worn. The railings needed touching up.

"Have you ever been fucked properly?"

Who said that? I turned around, recognized the guy. A famous singer. The pornstar was offended. Turned her back to him. I couldn't wrap my head around how a man who sang such deep love songs could be such a jerk.

"Well, go fuck that tall guy then. He's handsome if I'm not good enough."

The producer smoothed things over with him.

***

I was sitting in a café on Sunset Boulevard again. My car was in The Coffee Bean parking lot. I didn't care about the car anymore. There

© Erin Hanna

were men playing chess at the next table. Two girls were comparing headshots behind me. I watched them in a daze. Then I gathered my courage and called Zane.

"I need a job. And I'm broke."

"Well shit, come to work in the morning."

He texted me the address. I promised to be there at 9 a.m. The drip coffee was starting to warm my throat. I felt relieved.

***

I was wearing old, torn sweatpants and a worn Mickey Mouse t-shirt. I knocked on the door nervously. The area looked nice. Lots of palm trees, small cozy houses. Zane's house was the exception to the rule. Straight out of a horror movie, an abandoned house with a basement to imprison people in. Zane opened the door in his boxers.

"Wait out here. I'll be right back."

© Erin Hallama

I sat down. The house was missing half its roof. The downstairs floor was partly gone. The building was an eyesore in the neighborhood. A lady across the street was trimming her hedges. Her yard could have been straight out of a gardening magazine. Zane reappeared about fifteen minutes later.

"These illegal Mexicans used to live here. I evicted the fuck out of them. It's gonna have three one-bedroom apartments with hot tubs and everything."

I struggled to understand how this run-down hovel had found its way into such a fancy neighborhood.

"How many guys do you have working for you?"

"There was this homeless guy. I paid him fifteen bucks an hour. That fucking asshole kept whining that the work was too hard. I'll never fucking help a homeless person again. They're just too lazy to work."

© Erni Hanna

"That's weird. You'd think they'd want the job."

"Let's go inside."

I looked around at the rusty pipes. The sand on the ground. The backyard looked like a landfill. The large green dumpsters were full of lumber

"Tear all these old pipes the fuck out. You like The Police?"

"The police?"

"Sting. The band?"

"Yeah."

"Good!"

Zane put on "Don't Stand So Close to Me" by The Police on full blast.

**Listen: The Police – "Don't Stand So Close to Me"**

I started tearing out the rusty pipes. They came off surprisingly easily. I actually enjoyed the work. It was hard. Sweating soothed my mind. I thought Zane was a stand-up guy. I

© Erin Hallama

could tell he was living in this ruin of a house. I don't even think there was running water. But I played dumb, pretended not to assume he was living in a run-down compost heap. There was a big Cadillac Escalade out in the yard, and a new SL 63 AMG convertible Mercedes. I didn't get it, but hey, it wasn't my business.

"OK, break time. Let's have a joint."

"Oh, already."

We'd been working for two hours. Zane lit up a joint. For the next two hours, we sat on the floor listening to music and smoking pot. I realized we wouldn't be doing any more building that day. But hey, I needed the "job". If someone was willing to pay me even a little, then that was good enough for me. Zane paid me at the end of the day, including for the three hours we spent smoking pot and shooting the shit. The sun had gone down hours ago.

"Let's pick this up tomorrow at 9:30."

©EmiRoana

I folded the notes into my wallet. It felt good, even though I wasn't sure whether I had actually helped Zane or unwittingly featured on an episode of Candid Camera.

***

We were having a barbecue on Isaac and Peter's rooftop terrace. Peter's sweater touched the grill.

"And I just showered, damn it."

I tried not to laugh. The steaks looked great. Isaac brought cold margaritas from the kitchen. We sat in the chairs on the terrace. I was in a quiet mood, listening to Peter and Isaac talk about some new supermodel reality show. They'd asked a good friend of Peter's to host it, but he'd refused. I felt incredibly relaxed, watching the steaks sizzle on the grill and the narrow, winding roads below.

© Erin Hanna

After sunset, we went inside and sat on the brown leather couches in the living room. We smoked pot and browsed through different TV channels. There was a huge painting of an angry King Kong on the wall. I'd always stare at it while high, wondering why that particular one had been chosen to hang in the biggest corner of the living room. I felt kind of awkward after chilling on the couches for several hours. I didn't want to go home, but I also didn't feel like I could spend the night. Eventually Isaac said he had an early start in the morning. I thanked them for a lovely day.

Once I got to the SUV, I realized I had no idea how to get home. The leaves on the palm trees looked sharp. You could cut your fingers on them. I stared at a red brick house. I had left the car in their yard with Peter's "permission". Peter and Isaac's neighbor was a famous B-list actor. His life looked perfect. Except Peter had told me about his partner

© Erin Hanna

crying, running to escape the violent actor on the weekends. Peter had gotten an extra parking space in their yard with the woman's permission. I guess it made her feel a little safer.

I tried to bring myself back to the present moment. Everything looked like a video game. If you get shot, just hit Enter and Start Over. I turned on the car. Drove slowly down the Hills.

***

I'd called dozens of places about a job again. Checked my emails every morning. All spam. Kian's old schoolmate Ryan and I had become close friends. He lived above us in the same building. We smoked a lot of pot and watched South Park. Ate junk food. Ryan was short and kind of stocky. He was four years older than me. Sometimes he complained about his job. Being a lawyer sucked, apparently. He smoked

© Fran Fraima

pot to forget about his job. I smoked to forget I didn't have one.

I felt good on Ryan's couch. Sometimes I slept on it, even though I lived downstairs. I was sure Ryan could tell I was depressed. We only ever argued a few times, and always over women. At after-parties, I just wanted a cozy spot to curl up and sleep. Ryan didn't like that. He wanted me to stay up and entertain the ladies all night.

Ryan was looking for his future wife in every girl. That surprised me, since none of his women ever seemed like the future mothers of any children to me. I mentioned it once or twice. He was offended, so I resolved to bite my tongue next time.

© Erin Hanna

***

Crunch was a gym in West Hollywood. I went there almost every day. You could see Sunset

Boulevard from the gym floor, fifty yards below. It was a lovely view, as if the sky was bowing down to touch the ground.

The gay clientele would often give me significant looks. Once every couple of weeks, someone would slip me a crumpled piece of paper with a phone number on it. I knew they were only interested in my looks. I did call one guy, an older man with his own production company. He'd produced several horror movies. I thought I'd be bold and ask him for a job. He started the call by asking about my ab workout. I told him I was naturally thin. I very quickly realized there was no point asking him about a job. He was trying to turn me gay with his money.

***

Work with Zane had been drying up lately. He'd taught me the basics of construction work.

© Erin Hanna

Sometimes I wondered if this was it. I had flown twelve hours on a plane to hammer nails into a wall. I was removing old parquet flooring with a claw hammer. Sweat was pouring down my face. I let my mind drift away. Zane interrupted my daydreaming.

"Let's have a break."

We walked inside. I sat on the worn leather couch. Zane sat on the floor. He was showing off his new computer.

"This cost me nearly two thousand bucks."

"Nice."

"You should see the image quality when you watch movies on it."

Zane dug out a huge sack of marijuana. Lately, we'd only been working while high. Everything we were doing seemed to be getting slower by the day. Zane was an even bigger pothead than me. I was impatiently waiting for him to roll our joints when he said the words I didn't want to hear:

© Erin Hollana

"I'mma have to pay you in pot. This bag's worth 200 bucks."

"OK."

I was pissed off but didn't dare argue. Zane took an orange t-shirt out of the closet. It was silk, apparently. He put it on and twirled. All I could think about was how to find someone to sell this huge bag of pot to.

Even though there was no light on the horizon, I guess I still believed in a miracle, a lottery win. Maybe the drugs made me lose touch with reality. Why didn't I just pack my bags and head for Helsinki Airport? Somehow, I was convinced a miracle would turn up. I'd get the chance to prove myself. Succeed. Show my bullies what's what. I wish I had known how to look inward. All my dreams of success were starting to poison my soul.

***

© Emi Hiltunen

I was stuck in a traffic jam on Wilshire Boulevard. I kept switching channels on the radio. Couldn't find the right song. I contemplated the other cars stopped at the traffic lights. Once I got to West Hollywood, I kept going toward the Hills. Driving soothed my mind.

All those fancy houses with mood lighting glowing through their windows. I imagined what it might feel like to own a key to one of them. To open the door to a house where someone might be waiting for me. Sunday morning, barbecue in the backyard.

My daydreaming was interrupted by a long-haired man in a wheelchair on Sunset Boulevard. He was holding a piece of cardboard that said: "Vietnam vet. Please help. I'm hungry."

***

© Erin Hanna

I walked into the kitchen in my boxers. The coffee was out. I took a cold Coke and an egg roll out of the fridge. I microwaved the roll for way too long. Then I opened my laptop on the glass table. I noticed the glass was covered in food stains and wiped it down with a damp rag. There was an email from Niklas' assistant. Niklas would be directing a music video. It was for one of my favorite female artists. This was a nice surprise. My presence would be required at 6:30 a.m. that Sunday. I took a deep breath. Finally, a gig.

I decided to get a large latte from The Coffee Bean. I texted my mom to tell her I'd gotten a job. Mom responded with a long message telling me how glad she was. The latte tasted great. I wrapped my fingers around the paper cup.

***

© Fran Rellana

I didn't get more than two hours of sleep the night before Sunday. I was afraid I'd accidentally oversleep, which kept me awake. I left the house at four in the morning. I didn't want to be even a minute late. I swigged coffee from a huge thermos while driving. I'd found a radio station that played old rock albums. There was something about Nirvana songs that always stopped me in my tracks. You could hear in the color of Kurt's voice that he was in Hell. The boy from under the bridge was singing "Come as You Are." He found his answer in a shotgun. The bullet went straight into his brain. No detour through his heart. I arrived downtown at 5:20 a.m. The freeways were empty in the morning.

The first crew members and their trucks got there at 5:30. The producer shook my hand and asked if I was the director's friend. I said yes. He wondered why I was there so early. The spotlights and tripods weighed more than I remembered. I carried them with a couple of

© Erin Fontana

guys who were a bit older than me. One of them was giving us directions. I knew I'd be paid about $250 for the day.

Around nine o'clock, Niklas and the rest of the production crew arrived. I exchanged a few quick words with Niklas. During the shoot, my job was to spray the asphalt with a large water hose. On the break, Niklas drank coffee.

"Is that why you went to film school?"

"What?"

"To spray water and clean up."

"Haha, no I did not."

I gave him a wink. I knew he was just giving me shit as a joke. Still, after all my setbacks in recent weeks, it didn't feel good. I'd planned to ask the producer if there was any more work available. But I didn't have the nerve. I just forced myself to laugh it off and act cheerful. I didn't mind carrying shit around. It was the condescending looks from the two cameramen

© Erik Fontana

that bothered me. Niklas came to get me at lunch.

"Come eat with me."

During lunch, we talked about everything except the production. At the end of the day, the producer came to shake my hand.

"Damn, you worked hard today."

"Thanks."

"You're friends with the director, I mean, you could have just sat around and collected the money."

My grin must have been visible from miles away.

"A great fucking attitude." He gave me a pat on the shoulder. "If you want..."

The female artist turned up before he could finish. She shook my hand politely, looked me in the eye, and said hi. Her manager yelled from a distance.

"We're gonna be late. The magazine photographer's waiting!"

© Emi Hanma

"Wait up, I'm coming!"

The producer left with her.

"See ya!"

The producer looked back at me, waved. I waved back. For the first time in a long time, I didn't roll a joint at the end of the day.

***

Ryan and I were walking down Hollywood Boulevard. The fairy lights wrapped around the palm trees looked amazing while high. Ryan had insisted on going for a beer. He'd knocked on my door an hour earlier. He had an early start in the morning, but he needed a cold beer right now.

The doorman wouldn't let Ryan in. He was OK with me, though, since I was a familiar face. We turned to go.

"You shoulda brought three girls with you."

© Emi Rhinna

"We're here to pick up girls. You don't come to a bar with them, do you?"

The doorman didn't find this funny. Ryan turned to me.

"You go, it's OK."

"Let's go somewhere else."

"I have an early start."

"You're the one who wanted to go."

"Nah, you go. Look at all these girls going in."

"I don't know..."

"I'll call you tomorrow. Go!"

Ryan walked back to his car. I went straight to the counter and ordered a Heineken. I loved the fact that you could smoke "freely" in LA bars. Sean Paul was playing in the background. The place was full of beautiful women. I took my bong out of my pocket and hit the dance floor. A girl with plastic titties was groping my ass. I turned around and grabbed her tight butt. I could feel the music vibrate inside me. Sean

©Erin Rahma

Paul, "Gimme the Light", palm trees, waterfall, red colors. A bridge that separated the dance floor from the bar. The scary black night.

"Why are you wearing a beanie?"

"I have a hole in my brain."

"I can see that..."

"What do you mean?"

She looked deep into my eyes. I took her into my arms. Gave her a cuddle.

"You like AC/DC?"

I looked at my t-shirt. I'd forgotten what it says.

"Nah, I'm just trying to be cool."

"Haha, I can see that."

I kissed her neck.

"You're crazy."

"According to recent studies, yeah..."

"Haha..."

She introduced me to her friend. I shook hands with a charismatic-looking guy in his

© Erin Rellana

fifties. I was hoping I wouldn't have to buy drinks for her. We headed to the bar.

"My friend says I should go home with you?"

"I agree."

"You're trouble."

"No I'm not. Let's get out of here."

"Is your car outside?"

"No."

"I have a two-seater."

"Let's ditch your guy."

"He's my best friend."

"Let's find him someone to fuck."

"He likes men."

Eight minutes later, the man was driving the girl's lilac Corvette. She was sitting in my lap. I barely fit in the car. I grabbed her tits in my arms.

"Sorry, I'm just so scared of car rides."

"You seriously have a screw loose. I knew it."

"You have a screwdriver?"

© Fran Hanna

"No, but we could find a doctor and get you one."

We arrived at a small house. I didn't know where we were exactly. Probably in Brentwood. I vaguely remembered seeing the sign. We had a beer while the man showed off album covers he'd designed. Justin Timberlake, Bon Jovi. I praised his pics, even though I'd forgotten every single one as soon as I saw them. He gave me a blanket. I walked to the red couch in the living room. Rolled a joint.

The girl came and sat in my lap. She took off my shirt. Started kissing my body. I took off her red bra. Explored her plump silicones. The man left the room politely.

"How are these so soft?"

"Saline solution."

"What?"

She took off my jeans. Slipped my cock into her mouth. I pulled her hair back. I wanted to see her beautiful face. Sex only felt good when

© Erin Rhiana

I was high. I held onto my cock, I didn't want to cum too early. She removed my hand despite my objections.

"Does your friend have a condom?"

"I can't ask him... I'm definitely not asking him."

"Yeah, he probably doesn't realize what we're up to."

I tried to take off her panties. She pushed my hand away. Crawled into my arms.

"Are you always that carefree?"

"I dunno."

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"No. Do you?"

"Hey, be serious for a second! Do you like LA?"

"I love how honest and straightforward people are."

"Haha... Are you happy?"

"Me?"

"Yeah."

© Erin Hellana

"I'm high. When I'm sober I wanna die." I flashed a stupid smile.

"That's what I thought."

My cock was still hard after an hour's conversation. The sun was coming up. I gave Angelina my phone number. I had already decided not to answer if she called, though. Out on the street, I realized I had no idea which direction to take. I was in Brentwood. That's right. My coke baggie had disappeared during the night. For a moment, I considered whether I might have actually used it all. I hadn't offered any to Angelina. There were a few flakes left in my pocket. I wet my lips with them. I had a headache.

I solved my direction problem by walking into the breakfast place across the street. I immediately walked out again after hearing the following sentence:

"We don't serve beer."

"Not even with food?"

©EmilHaima

"No, we don't have beer to go with pancakes. Believe it or not, you're the first person to ever even ask."

***

My old schoolmate Shinya worked at a sushi place in the evenings. During the day, he was an intern at an editing company. He was a shy boy from Tokyo. We were having coffee at the Beverly Center. Our friendship was unusual. We were total opposites. During our chats, I'd complain about the lack of jobs. He'd tell me he was looking for a wife. He complained that it was hard to find one in this city as a Japanese guy. If not impossible.

He had a little crush on a Japanese waitress he worked with. Shinya had broken up with his first girlfriend after being together for eight years. He didn't know how to be alone. I told him about Jessica.

© Erin Hanna

"Why don't you just ask her out for coffee?"

"What if she says no?"

"Well, then you know."

"Yeah. Maybe I should. No. I don't know how to do it sober."

"Well, you're not gonna ask her drunk, are you? I just don't get you."

I never told Shinya about the one-night stands, the cocaine. Though I do believe he had his suspicions. My phone would often ring when I was hanging out with him. I never answered. I knew I was Shinya's only friend. Our friendship meant a lot to him. Sometimes I told Shinya I wasn't doing well. I needed more stability in my life. Shinya needed more adventures.

Sometimes he'd bring me Japanese food from work. I felt weirdly humiliated by it. I couldn't just appreciate the sincerity of the gesture, even though I more than needed the food. I'm so ashamed of the idiot I used to be.

© Emi Honma

***

I sat in the living room watching South Park and smoking pot. I was feeling sad. I'd just found out that I didn't get a job I'd applied for the week before. At least they had gotten in touch and told me. Even that was progress. I didn't want Kian to see that I was depressed. He came home from work and asked me to come play basketball at the West LA gym.

"So your folks are coming over this Sunday?"

"Yeah."

"Can I put my new clothes in your wardrobe?"

"Of course."

Kian's family had lost a fortune in the gas station business. A bigger gas station turned up next to theirs and drove them into bankruptcy. He gave his father seven hundred dollars every month. I wondered whether I'd ever be able to do the same for my parents. I didn't want to think too hard about it, it made me feel ill.

© Fran Rallana

What had my parents given me? Visits to the psychologist when I was thirteen years old. Monopoly games with the therapist while my mom had coffee at Hakaniemi Market. No one knew why I was having night terrors. I found it impossible to concentrate at school. The other kids could sense I was weak. They started bullying me relentlessly, and not a single teacher intervened.

My parents had made it possible for me to study in the United States. How many Finns could do that without a scholarship? I always saw things the way it suited me to see them at any given moment.

Kian insisted on going to play basketball.

"I've never played basketball while high."

"It feels amazing."

Kian brought a white baggie out of his room.

"Let's do a quick line."

"That's not smart. It's bad for your heart right before exercise."

© Eini Rainio

"Just a little."

I had my threadbare Nike basketball shoes in my left hand. My house key in my right hand. I knew this was a very bad idea. I just couldn't bring myself to care. I guess I also thought I was immortal. The key was up my nose quicker than my thoughts were racing through my brain. And the next thought was about the next line, of course.

We listened to Kid Rock's "Lonely Road of Faith" in the car. I wanted to hear it again and again. I also loved Kid Rock's "Picture." I put it on despite Kian's objections. Kian didn't like to listen to it because it reminded him of an ex-girlfriend.

"Not that one."

"Well, it's on now."

"Did I tell you they asked Kathy to pose in Playboy but she turned them down?"

"Yeah, you did."

© Emi Ramona

I'd seen dozens of pictures of her. All the pictures were unflattering, apparently. "She's a thousand times more beautiful in real life." Maybe she was, I didn't care.

Going to play basketball was slowly starting to feel like a big deal. Men come home after work, change their clothes. Go and play sports. Bring home sushi for their girlfriends, maybe a blockbuster movie. A normal, stable life. It didn't quite occur to me that playing basketball while coked-up wasn't usually part of a normal, stable life. Or being driven by a friend who, well, let's just not even go there...

The basketball court at the gym was chaos. Nearly thirty people wanted to play in the first game. Half of them didn't even seem to know the basic rules. I was too fucked up to focus.

"I'mma go lift weights, pick me up when you're ready."

"C'mon, play a couple of games at least!"

©EmiHanna

The games looked like a mixture of floorball, basketball and soccer.

"Yeah, no."

I went to have a lie-down on the stretching mats. That's where Kian woke me up.

"I could do with a good burger... There's a nice spot near here."

"What time is it?"

"Dude's been sleeping!"

We went for a burger.

***

I'd been spending more and more time on Ryan's couch, watching cartoons. I'd never listened to Dave Matthews Band before. Not much Pearl Jam, either. You can often tell more about someone's personality and depth by their taste in music than a half-hour conversation. Ryan and I clicked on that level. South Park, Ben & Jerry's, frozen pizzas, smoking pot. Ryan

© Finn Hallama

would often warn me about the dangers of cocaine. Kian's habit was getting out of hand. I tried to downplay mine as much as I could.

"Kian won't be able to keep working for long. Always out partying somewhere."

"Yeah."

I didn't know what else to say. I was complicit in Kian's nightly adventures. Ryan went to the bathroom. I sat alone with the bong. There was a Lakers-Pacers game on in the background. Suddenly, a mass brawl broke out. I was too high to notice how the scuffle had started. I just suddenly saw players and spectators beating the crap out of each other.

"Come quick!"

"Did someone score?"

"Run!"

Ryan ran into the living room. Looked at the TV. Then at me. Took off his round glasses.

"What! I'm so stoned. What happened?"

© Erin Hiiana

Confused, Ryan kept looking at the TV, then at me, then back at the TV.

"I don't know. Look, he's hitting someone in the audience."

"This is sick!"

Ryan bit into a pizza and lit up the bong. We watched the fight on the edge of our seats, like a FIFA World Cup game that's gone to penalties. Entertainment at its best. Afterward, we moved to the balcony. We sat in the chairs in silence, watching the leaves on the palm trees. We were too stoned. Neither of us felt up to talking. We admired the neighbor's bright blue 1967 Mustang. Freshly waxed. My dream car. Ryan came to.

"Uh-oh, I have work in six hours. Being a lawyer sucks."

"I'm stressed out 'cause I don't have enough work."

"I have a feeling we'll be working together one day."

I looked at Ryan in amazement.

© Erin Fanana

"How's that possible?"

"I don't know, maybe I'll help you with contracts or something."

"Ryan, there's no need for lawyers in my line of work."

"Time will tell."

I looked Ryan in the eye. How high was he? His eyes were already closed.

***

It was a rainy, stormy night. I was sitting on a wooden toilet lid in a nightclub. The club was half empty. Women don't go out when it rains. It's about the only thing I'd learned in my last few months in this city. I had the biggest cocaine baggie I'd ever bought in my pocket. I'd planned my outfit carefully. Harley-Davidson t-shirt, hat, clean Adidas sneakers. I opened the door, washed my hands. My throat was dry. I took a quick sip from the dirty tap. Jessica was

© Emi Hanma

sitting in a booth. I walked right up to her, put my hand on her thigh. She looked at me cautiously.

"You always look so beautiful."

"Thanks."

"Let's finally have that beer?"

"No thanks." Jessica turned her back to me.

"Just the one. I'm not a serial killer."

"And I'm not just a good-looking chick."

"Well, this is harder than it needs to be."

"You know what, it's really not."

"Let's go to the bar, c'mon."

"I'm not drinking, and you shouldn't either. You look like you've been in a fight!"

I didn't get what she meant about the fight. I hadn't been in a fight with anyone since junior high. Even then, I was the one getting my ass kicked. I'd never hit anyone. Jessica walked sternly away.

I headed straight to the dance floor downstairs. I couldn't see Kian anywhere. I was

©Erin Fabiana

feeling frustrated and down, so I didn't stay to look for my friend. I picked up my car from the parking lot. Checked myself out in the rearview mirror. My nose was bleeding. The coke had irritated the lining of my nose. I wiped my face with a Starbucks tissue and stuck a Metallica album in the CD player. I stopped by In-N-Out Burger on the way. My heart was beating scary hard. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep. No point in going to bed. I switched from Metallica to the radio. "The Crying Game" by Boy George was on.

**Listen: Boy George – "The Crying Game"**

***

An old colleague of my dad's had given me a contact at a local ad agency. They'd be shooting a Heineken commercial that Sunday. We'd agreed that my first gig with them would be unpaid. It was the city's way of recycling students. Do the

© Emi Fellana

first gig for free, there won't be another one. It had happened to me eight times already in the last two months. Maybe this one would be the exception.

We were filming in an old theater downtown. I carried spotlights around, sweating myself silly. Between takes, the producer complained that his coffee didn't have enough milk. He'd asked me to bring it over two minutes earlier. I walked back downstairs to get more milk. When I got back up, he asked me to get a plastic lid for the cup. Apparently, there were lids downstairs. So I walked down the two flights of stairs for the third time to look for his fucking plastic lid. I wanted to spit in his coffee. But I didn't.

During lunch, I found a gossip rag lying on a theater seat. It had a two-page spread about Jessica. Interview with the hottest promoter in LA. I read the article. Her answers annoyed me enormously. She gave the wrong impression of

© Emi Rhiana

herself, a foolish one. She was on my mind for the rest of the shoot.

At the end of the day, I was praised for my contribution. Promised more work, paid this time. That never materialized. Surprise, surprise. Just another case of ruthless exploitation of young ex-students. My friend Shinya had actually edited two whole TV commercials for free. I couldn't see how that was even possible. He was sad occasionally, but never upset about it.

***

We were sitting on Sienna's balcony, smoking pot. I'd met Sienna while I was at school. We'd become good friends. She lived in a high-rise across the street from Tower Records in West Hollywood. I knew Sienna was very lonely. All her friends were in romantic relationships. Expecting babies. Her brown cat Tim was her emotional support animal. We'd never kissed.

© Erin Hallama

She did want to. But she was nice, a real friend, and I didn't want to ruin it.

Sienna was obsessed with becoming an actress. It kind of annoyed me. She did commercials. She was undeniably talented. Tony Kaye had asked her to be in his next project. I remember visiting her once while she was preparing for an audition. She'd be portraying a suicidal woman. I got scared when she acted the part for me. I didn't know who I was seeing in that moment. I asked her to stop reading the lines.

"I thought we were making Spanish omelettes."

I poured the contents of the grocery bag onto the table. Drew Sienna back into our world.

Her habit of reading Tarot annoyed me, too. I kept drawing a card that said "Hidden creativity". I didn't want it. Sienna explained that it was the card I was meant to draw.

"And I knew it anyway."

"What?"

© Erin Hellana

"That you're creative."

"I wanted a card that says everything's gonna be OK, you're getting a job!"

"Haha..."

I told Sienna all about my hoes, my drugs, my money troubles. I hoped it might dampen her crush on me. Unfortunately, it did the opposite. She wanted to save me. She knew I was extremely sweet and sensitive deep down. I didn't even realize myself that I was putting on a front all the time. Acting like the "tough guy". In hindsight it was pretty ridiculous, really. I just couldn't quite connect the dots.

I never told her about Jessica. I don't know why. Maybe I didn't want to hurt Sienna by letting her know I already had a crush on someone. Or whatever passes for a crush when you're constantly high, as opposed to genuinely caring about someone.

We decided to go get ice cream. A beautiful brunette was sitting in a convertible at a

© Emi Hanna

traffic light on Santa Monica Boulevard. She looked at us and smiled. I smiled back.

"That's the kind of woman you want. She's smiling at you."

"No, I don't."

I looked away. I immediately regretted what I'd said, as well as avoiding eye contact. We weren't a couple. A blonde, muscular guy with make-up on was walking his tiny dog next to us. Sienna and I shared an amused look. All these gay guys on the prowl on Santa Monica Boulevard, using their pets as bait. Then I gave Sienna a serious look.

"I don't know what to do. My friend doesn't have any work for me."

"So tell him straight."

"I kinda just don't wanna be one of those assholes begging for a job."

"But you need a job."

"Would your restaurant have anything?"

"I can ask."

© Erin Hanna

"Thanks. What about my English?"

"Not a problem."

"Yeah, and I can always speak Spanish."

Sienna gave me a shove.

"I want a milkshake."

"How about a movie?"

"Sure."

We rented Owen Wilson's latest comedy. We both wanted to smoke some wacky tobaccy and have a laugh together. But we never put on the Blu-ray. We just fell asleep on the plump couch in each other's arms. Sienna nudged me.

"Let's go to the bedroom."

We slept in the bedroom next to each other like a bored married couple. I should mention that Sienna was a very attractive, fit blonde woman. She never really understood how I could just sleep next to her. The following month she cut off all contact with me.

©Erin Fanning

I hope your life is going great, Sienna. Maybe it was the right Tarot card after all, huh? Hey, made you laugh. First time for everything!

© Emi Hallama

# Chapter 3: Reality Bites

Kian had met someone. Laticia was twenty-six years old and fresh out of a long relationship. I hadn't met her yet, but I suspected the worst. We'd been shooting the shit and smoking. Kian was on his way to meet Laticia at Koi.

I had no plans. After Kian left, I called my Mexican drug dealer. He was always late, but at least he always showed up. He pulled up at our entrance in a black Cadillac. I jumped in the car while he circled the block. I gave him $120. He gave me five small baggies. Kian had promised to go halfsies on them. I didn't want to go back home. I called a Beverly Hills cab. I have no idea why, but they were thirty percent cheaper than LA cabs, so I used them. I even negotiated

©FinnHanna

the price in advance so that they never put on the meter.

I headed to Hollywood Boulevard. A sign saying Deep on Wilcox Avenue caught my eye. I walked toward the purple light.

"Are you on the guestlist?"

"No. But it's just me."

The huge doorman let me in after a moment's hesitation.

"My friend's already in there."

I ordered a beer. The bar had multiple platforms with half-naked bikini babes dancing on them. I noticed that nearly all of them had huge silicone tits. What kind of sex party had I found myself in, exactly? The vibe was different from a normal nightclub. Seeing a Lakers star player piqued my interest. I walked over to him. I wanted to see how small I'd feel.

In the restroom, I realized my keys had broken the minigrip bag in my pocket. I scraped all the powder from the pocket onto my key.

© Erin Hanna

Rubbed the leftovers into my gums. Then I headed back to the bar. I was clutching my chest. I needed a vodka shot, and quickly. I was afraid I'd OD'd. I hadn't wanted to waste any of the pricey powder, and look where it had gotten me. I'd have a heart attack in a nightclub.

I knew liquor would balance me out. Anyone who's had too much cocaine more than once knows that particular trick. I elbowed people out of my way, barging through the dance floor. Marched anxiously toward the bar. Three women with silicone titties were sitting at the counter. I intentionally stood between them to order my drink. Downed a tequila shot in one go. One of them grabbed my hand.

"Aren't my tits beautiful?"

I was stunned.

"Yeah. Yeah."

"You wanna feel 'em?"

I squeezed her tits. The women pointed out that I seemed more interested in catching the

© Erin Riviera

bartender's eye than in her rack. I needed another shot, fast. My heart was still pounding. I downed the shot. "And a Heineken, please." The woman took my hand.

"They're brand new."

"Were they expensive?"

She burst out laughing. Never before had I squeezed a woman's tits at a bar counter. I looked around. Many others were doing the same thing. What the hell kind of party was this? This wasn't a normal nightclub. I got that much. The woman gave me her number. I went back to the dance floor. After three slow dances, I went looking for her but couldn't find her. Toward the end of the night, I walked out onto Hollywood Boulevard and called her.

"Where are you?"

"Home."

"Can I come to your place?"

She said yes. I handed my phone to the cab driver.

© Erin Hanna

"The drive won't be cheap. Forty-five bucks, give or take. You wanna go or not?"

"Do it for thirty-five?"

"Just this once."

I was fishing for any remaining flakes of cocaine in my pocket. Where the fuck was I going? Eventually we arrived in the middle of nowhere. Total suburbia. The woman opened the door. I blinked. We went straight into the bedroom.

"You smoke heroin?"

"I smoke anything."

I was too fucked up to realize what I was doing. She lit a match at the end of the pipe. The lighting in the house caught my attention. It was somehow darker than usual. I wondered why a beautiful woman like her would smoke heroin. But hey, not my problem.

"You go to Deep a lot?"

"No, I just saw the colorful lights and walked toward them. Shit, I'm so fucked up."

© Erin Halama

The room starts spinning. I feel like I'm watching my body from the ceiling. I start getting anxious. Something isn't right. This drug is not for me.

"Did you like the dancers?"

"It was like a strip club."

"I go there every Saturday. I've never seen you before?"

"My first time."

"You're kidding me."

"Who cares if it was?"

"Did you know the dancers are men?"

"Oh."

I try to see if there's anything left in the pipe. No luck. Just ash.

"You fucking with me?

"About what?"

"It's a trans club."

"What the fuck!"

"A trans club."

"Are you a man?"

© Fran Hanna

"Well, yeah. For now, anyway."

I look around. I feel like I've stepped into Hell. Can't even tell a man from a woman anymore. I'm overwhelmed with fear. But I don't want to offend the person next to me. I go totally quiet for a second. She's probably in the same Hell as I am. Desperate for approval, just for a different reason. Always felt different. Found solace in a heroin pipe. I need to pick my words carefully. I don't want her crying on my shoulder right now.

"Well, holy shit. You're a pretty man."

That's the best I got.

"Thanks. Deep's the only place that lets trans people in."

"How can they tell?"

"The IDs."

"Fuck. Look, there's been a huge misunderstanding."

I pour more heroin in the pipe. Flinch. Pour it out on the floor. I don't want any more...

© Emi Faima

I don't want anything. I start scanning the other rooms, overcome with terror. Is there someone hiding in the other room? I'll be robbed any second now. I'm starting to hallucinate. All I want is to get away.

"I really gotta go now."

"Can you come by again?"

"No. Could you lend me forty-five bucks? I'm out of cash."

"You come over here to fuck me and you wanna get paid?"

"I didn't come here to fuck you. But I don't have any money, for real. Lend me that bike on the porch maybe?"

"The bike!"

"I just really need to go."

I start staggering toward the door. I'm finding it hard to breathe.

"I need some air!"

"Hold on."

© Erin Flaim

The trans woman calls her friend, a cab driver. He'll drive me home for twenty bucks. But it'll take him thirty minutes to get here.

"I can't breathe, I need some air."

We go sit in the yard and wait for the cab driver. The trans woman starts spilling her guts.

"I'm saving up for my final surgery. It's just really expensive."

I look down at my white sneakers.

"I don't feel good."

She looks at me sadly.

"Is it 'cause of me?"

"No, I'm just too fucked up. Why am I this fucked up? Can I get another bottle of water?

Finally, an old Mercedes pulls up to the yard. Once inside, I accidentally blurt out, "Holy fucking shit." The cab driver turns to me.

"Didn't you know Lisa was a guy?"

"I didn't fuck her!"

"She's saving up for her last surgery. Fuck me, you really didn't know?"

©Erin Fariana

"No. Are you happy now?"

"You want a smoke?"

"Yeah."

The driver pulls up by the side of the road. We look at each other and start laughing. I ask him to turn off the radio. "Actually no, leave it on." Coldplay's "Amsterdam" is on.

I want to enjoy the moment. For the first time ever, I'm completely numb. An empty four-lane freeway next to me. Fog building up from the Valley. The driver opens his mouth.

"My life's not that easy either, you know."

"Huh?"

"My kid and my wife moved to the East Coast."

I'm too exhausted to answer.

"I can't afford to go to the East Coast."

For the rest of the way home, the cab driver kept talking about his life. I was falling into something between sleep and a coma. I kept alternating between feeling peaceful, then

© Emi Hanna

feeling convinced my life was about to end right there on the back seat of the cab. The cab driver must have walked me home. All I can remember is drifting to sleep in the back seat.

I realized something later on. You can totally enjoy good music without understanding the lyrics. For example, most people have probably never considered substituting the word "heroin" for "Hotel California" in the following song. Exactly. If you listen to the bit from 3 minutes 50 seconds to the end, maybe you'll also see what I never had before. Taking stuff too literally makes you miss the message.

**Listen: Eagles – "Hotel California"**

***

The morning after, I felt atrocious. I was almost suicidal. I checked out the score of yesterday's Lakers game in Kian's LA Times. The star player had done well. I wondered what

© Emi Raimo

else he had done that night. My laughter turned into pain. I had to roll a joint.

I couldn't bring myself to open the computer. Check for potential responses to my job applications. I wanted to watch a movie. It might help me escape the way I was feeling. I put on The Movie Channel. An oldie, Die Hard was on. That would have to do.

I woke up on the couch. Kian had come home. "What time is it?" I decided not to tell him about last night's adventure. I was still drowning in self-pity. Obviously, I knew that the next time I'd poison my body, I'd most likely spill my guts anyway. And that was probably only hours away, actually.

© Erin Fridina

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I was walking along the waterfront in Santa Monica by myself. The ocean view soothed my mind. I walked down 3rd Street Promenade to

the end of a long wooden pier. Watched the fishermen and the seagulls. Sat down on a wooden bench. Worked up my courage, called Niklas.

"Is it a bad time? Oh, you're in New York? Listen, I kinda need help with work stuff."

We agreed I'd call Niklas at 9 p.m. He'd be at his computer then. I called him that evening. He didn't answer. The situation was getting intolerable. I felt totally insignificant.

A friend from the gym had helped me. He got me an interview for The Jay Leno Show. The job was guiding people to their seats. That fell through because apparently my work visa wasn't meant for jobs like that. Like a dumbass, I'd told them how I'd gotten my visa. They were already in the process of hiring me. Thanks, Curt. You tried to help. He was a genuinely friendly, down-to-earth guy. He'd been to Finland on holiday. He liked my homeland.

© Emi Hiima

I went to the Finnish Consulate and asked what type of work my visa allowed me to do. They laughed at me.

"Listen, we can't tell you what to do. But no one cares about your job description. As long as it's a legal job, you have permission to work."

I believe that if I'd just explained things properly, they'd still have hired me. Curt's guy was the executive producer on the show. It was some middle-management asshole who decided that the usher's job wasn't a production job. But when the email arrived, I didn't have the nerve to call them back and argue. I guess I was feeling pretty defeated by then.

How could I have been so fucking stupid? My work permit was for movie productions. After the nonstop setbacks, I applied for a sales assistant role in a vintage t-shirt store on Melrose Avenue.

At long last, I was hired as a doorman at a teenage disco on Sunset Boulevard. They

© Erin Hanna

required a black suit. I used the Visa to buy one. A stylish, striped Hugo Boss suit. It would pay for itself in three nights. The rest of the pay would go toward groceries. Kian pointed out that I could have just bought a cheap suit from H&M.

"Who cares what you wear on the door?"

He was right once again. Imagine my disappointment when it turned out I was just covering for someone on sick leave. They had promised me a permanent position. The bartender told me the score.

The owner of the club was an unpleasant meathead. He turned up at the club in his black Ferrari around 2 a.m. Gave me $160 in cash.

"You did great, I'll call you next week. We'll figure out your next shifts."

The Hugo Boss suit sat in the closet as a constant reminder of my bad investment.

***

© Erin Hanna

In the evenings, tears poured down my cheeks. I knew a job wouldn't take away the pain for good. My dad called me once every two weeks. He'd tell me the latest finance news and what was going on with his company. Sometimes he complained about the credit card bill. I smoked cocaine after every call. I thought my dad was part of the reason I was in pain. The other reason was Matias.

The only one who cared about my well-being lately was my crack pipe. It stared at me with desire all the time. It wanted to give me love. It didn't ask me what I was planning to do with the rest of my life. The pipe made me feel loved. I needed that love more and more after every inhale.

Getting raped as a child must be one of the worst experiences a kid can have. After that, you don't enjoy sauna nights with your basketball mates. You don't enjoy hanging out

© Emil Raima

with friends, you don't enjoy women. You try to explain to your parents that the reason you cry every night is because of the nightmares. They tell you, "It's not natural for a twelve-year-old to sleep with his parents anymore." I believe that by the age of sixteen, I had concluded I was terminally damaged goods. The nightmares didn't hound me at night anymore. The pain started at sunrise. The scariest place of all was outside the front door.

That kite you flew as a child. I never saw it. I was too anxious to focus on it playing in the air. The way it bobbed up and down in the wind. All my thoughts were focused inward. All I could concentrate on was making sure you didn't see through me. I didn't have the strength to stop and look at the world with my own eyes.

***

© Erin Helena

I woke up in the morning, drenched in sweat. I'd had nightmares again. After washing up, I looked at myself in the mirror. I hated the face looking back at me. Day by day, I was losing what little connection I'd ever had to it. I just didn't care anymore. On second thought, I'm not even sure I realized I'd lost touch with my soul. Maybe if I had, I might have tried to change course. I don't know. Maybe I didn't even want to.

The obedient, sensitive film student who had orange juice and oatmeal for breakfast just wasn't there anymore. That boy was excited to go to school. His vice was Ben & Jerry's ice cream. He went on dates with several college girls. Lots of girls were into him because of his sweet nature. He just couldn't bring himself to believe it. He turned his back on every single one before they could do it to him. It was a defense mechanism.

©ErinHanna

The first time I used it was when I was nineteen. I already told you about Kirsi. The girl who asked to walk me to the bus stop after a party. We were in Espoo at Kirsi's parents' place. Kirsi was throwing the party. Her brother was out doing a Chippendales show. We liked each other. We'd been making out all night long. She asked me if we should start dating. I still remember saying: "Maybe it's better if we don't see each other again. Your brother's a friend of mine." I could see how sad she was. In reality, I was even sadder.

Later, Kirsi invited herself to my high school graduation party. Brave girl. But I still didn't want to believe she could care about me. I walked the other way. I listened to my demons, not my heart.

It's what I'd done my whole life. I was used to listening to the demons. I just never got used to living with them. I killed their voices with drugs. I just didn't understand that with

© FinnHallama

every inhale, I was inviting in more demons. It was the snowball effect from Hell.

***

That night I got a happy call from Niklas. They'd be shooting a rap music video soon. It was for one of the world's biggest rappers. Not Eminem, though, ha. They had a job for me. They'd email me with more info. The shoot would be on Friday.

My car's brake pads had worn through. The brakes of the heavy SUV were under constant strain on the hills of Los Angeles. The car was at the mechanic's and wouldn't be ready by Friday. I had picked the cheapest auto shop I could find. The car was currently waiting its turn in their parking lot. I called them and asked if I could pick up the car for three days and return it back to its original place in the queue. A friendly employee told me it'd be fine,

© Emil Hamma

but if the brake pads wore down to the metal, the repair would cost a lot more.

I started investigating other ways to get to the shoot. First the bus, then the metro, then the bus again. Kian said the neighborhood was the worst ghetto in Los Angeles. The location was probably chosen specifically for the video.

"You can't take public transport to get there. Preferably not even a car." Definitely not a convertible, apparently. "You can't walk around there on foot. Like, at all. Get it? They'll beat you up and rob you instantly."

But public transport was my only option. I kept that to myself. The cab fare would have eaten up half my pay.

***

On Friday, I left home at four in the morning to make sure I'd be there by seven. I was alarmed by what I saw outside the bus window. People lying in cardboard boxes, drug syringes. I

© Erin Rainha

asked the bus driver where to get off. He couldn't understand why I was there. Told me to go back home! I told him I was going to work, to a video shoot. He showed me the right bus stop. Warned me about walking on the street.

The shoot was in a dilapidated house four blocks away. The actual shoot went well. The vibe was great. I was part of the set design crew, styling all the different rooms. On our first break, a food truck turned up in the yard. Tacos and burgers. One of the older producers bought a knife. I was curious.

"Gonna cut your burrito with that?

He gave me a serious look.

"The shoot ends in the middle of the night. I'll have to walk to my car. This is gonna come in handy."

I noticed there was a guy watching the cars to prevent them from being vandalized. I was starting to worry about getting home at night.

© Fran Haina

"You know, my car's broken. You think someone could give me a ride?"

"Of course. You can't leave people behind in a place like this."

I breathed a sigh of relief. The directors and producers usually left right after the shoot. At the end of the day, we were still loading equipment back onto the truck. There were five of us in the set design team. A man with a gray beard spoke up.

"The upstairs still needs tidying. Clear away the cardboard."

I volunteered. I wanted to leave the upstairs in tip-top shape. It was important to give it my all at every gig.

After an hour of tidying, I came back downstairs. To my horror, I realized I had been left alone. In the middle of the night, in the middle of a slum. I dug out my phone and called three different people on the production crew. The ones whose numbers I had. No one picked

© Fran Hellana

up. Hard work definitely paid off in this town. I was getting scared.

I walked out onto the street. The scene was scary. Teenagers sitting on a stoop. Junkies walking down the street.

The teens give me angry looks. I try to walk as calmly as possible. Four kids walk toward me. They don't say anything. One hits me in the head with his fist. I lose my balance, my glasses fall to the ground. I start running like mad. One of them chases after me. I hear someone shouting, "Take his wallet!"

As if by magic, a bus turns up. I wave my hand. The female driver stops the bus, even though there's no bus stop anywhere to be seen. She waves me in. Closes the doors.

"Are you OK?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Sit in the front."

© Erin Hanna

I look back at the kids, laughing and waving at us. The bus driver drives past several stops even though some of them have people waiting.

"You trying to get yourself killed?"

I was too exhausted to do anything except stare emptily at the driver. The view from the bus window was simultaneously sad and terrifying. I hadn't realized what a slum truly meant in Los Angeles. It was a shocking sight. A scene that most of the city had closed its eyes to. If you can't see it, it doesn't exist? It's a wonder they haven't set up barbed wire around the area. No one cares for these people. What happens when they get sick? I never would have thought I'd see such a thing. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

***

A friend of my mom's had told me about a Finnish woman with her own cosmetics brand.

© Emi Honma

Her warehouse might have a job for me. I needed cash pronto, so I got in touch with them. I was hired on the spot for the rest of the week. The drive over was long. The warehouse was a forty-five-minute drive away. In the middle of cattle ranches. Cheap industrial buildings. Luckily, gas was cheap.

The first day was weird. There were five Mexicans working in the warehouse. Two mothers whose three kids worked long days alongside them. Ramon was the boss. He told us to put our cellphones away at work. That pissed me off. I felt oppressed. Our job was to pack lipsticks into big cardboard boxes.

At the end of the day, Ramon told me I'd done a good job. I'd be hired for three days a week. That cheered me up. It was a bullshit job, but I needed to start earning money for myself. I smoked two joints back in the car.

On the freeway, I sang along to "Unforgiven" by Metallica. That's how mad I was.

© Erin Hanna

**Listen: Metallica – "The Unforgiven"**

I was scared witless when a police car switched lanes ahead of me and turned on its sirens. I thought they might pull me over. Had they noticed I was stoned? In the US, they can't stop a car for no reason. The fancier your car, the more they let you get away with. Sad but true.

I threw my cocaine and pot out the window. A second later, the cops took the next exit off the freeway. It crossed my mind to stop the car. See where the drugs had fallen. Get them back. In the end I decided against it. There was a whole convoy of cars behind me.

***

The next morning, I asked Kian why the cops would drive with their lights on right in front of me.

© Emi Hamina

"They're traffic cops. They control traffic jams."

"I threw my fucking drugs out the window."

"You're kidding me."

Kian burst into nasty laughter.

"Idiot."

A moment later, Kian dropped a nuclear bomb. Laticia would move in with us for a while. I didn't have the heart to say no. Laticia had started wearing big Louis Vuitton bags and white-gold jewelry. It didn't take a genius to figure out where she'd gotten them from. I remembered Kian asking me to pay rent for staying in his old condo for three weeks.

"Laticia's gonna pay rent, right?"

"She's gonna live in my room."

"Yeah but I paid you."

"A hundred a month."

I couldn't be bothered to argue.

***

© Erin Fenna

Work at the warehouse usually started at 6:30 a.m. There were no breaks. An hour for lunch. I resented Ramon's instructions. No listening to the radio. Wash your hands before eating. Like I didn't know how to wash my hands.

But I needed the money more than ever. I decided to become a kiss-ass. I asked him what Mexico was like. During lunch, he showed me pictures of naked young women he'd fucked. That was his introduction to Mexico for me. I got nervous and withdrew a little.

"Don't be shy, look at this pussy."

It turned out Ramon was a gangster. His real business was elsewhere. He was only working at the warehouse to look legit. From that moment on, I knew my work routine would change.

On lunch breaks, we would go and play pool at strip clubs. Ramon beat me one-handed every time. We drank Mexican beer. You had to put salt and lemons in the beer can. Sometimes I

© Erin Fleming

wanted food more than oppressed women dancing on poles. But I didn't complain. Ramon told me he was married to an 82-year-old. He himself was 48. I was smart enough not to ask questions. I shrugged, like it was no big deal. Ramon loved my reaction. I had won his trust.

Ramon's Mexican pot was shit, but it was eight times cheaper than the stuff from my ex-USC student contacts. You had to pick twigs and other rubbish out of the Mexican stuff. Ryan was particular about his pot. I just poured everything into the bong, twigs and all, by the time I got to the Highland Avenue freeway exit.

Ramon offered me LSD after work. "Let's go to a strip club." I told him I was working somewhere else that night. I didn't want to try a mind-altering substance that caused hallucinations that might stick with me for the rest of my life. Ramon liked me so much that there were at least ten extra hours on my weekly paycheck every time.

©Erin Holmes

***

On Saturday morning, I woke up to my phone ringing like crazy. It was in my jeans pocket on the floor. Niklas told me there was a party at his friend's house. Mulholland Drive. Get there around seven.

"OK, see you then."

I rolled over onto my side. Eventually, I made it out of bed around ten. My depression made it hard for me to get up in the mornings. I went to the gym. Ate a microwave dinner. A cab picked me up around 6:30 p.m.

I arrived at a gated house. The host was Renny. I knew all his movies. I just didn't enjoy watching nothing but cars fly around for two straight hours. The evening started in the living room. We ate well. I felt nervous since I hadn't brought any drugs with me. This was a drug-free party. I twirled my fingers so no one would

© Erin Hanna

notice they were shaking. Later that night, Niklas and I had a swim in the pool with all our clothes on.

On the upstairs balcony, I told Niklas about my crush. Then I called an acquaintance of mine named Henry. He was close friends with Mark Wahlberg. He promised to ask around and get me Jessica's number in fifteen minutes. Thirty minutes later, I got a text. Jessica's number.

I was too drunk. I didn't have the nerve to call her, so I asked Niklas to do it. It seemed like a good idea at the time. And funny. Jessica hung up on him in two minutes. She was mad. I texted her.

"Go fuck your mother! Don't call me at night!"

She didn't realize I was just too shy. She thought this was a booty call.

"Hey, this city is full of chicks", Niklas consoled me.

"Yeah, but..."

© Emil Hallina

"No buts. You never get the chick you want the most."

I thought that was a strange thing to say. We replied to Jessica, told her we were on our way to fuck her mother at a Mexican whorehouse. After half a bottle of liquor, it seemed like a fitting "revenge".

Niklas and I were still talking at seven in the morning. He told me about his own troubles. That helped me in a strange way. I had never had anyone I could open the curtains for, the curtains I had drawn closed to protect myself. Even though he gave me shit sometimes, he was still a real friend.

I woke up on the couch around 1 p.m. Looked around. The house was a disaster zone. I tried to find a non-empty vodka bottle on the table, but in vain. A large dog wandered around the living room by itself.

I took two cold beers out of the fridge and called a cab. I didn't dare stay and sleep on the

© Emil Hamina

couch. I wasn't sure how many people had stayed the night. Renny seemed likeable, nice. Last night, he had cooked us incredible gourmet food. Early this morning, he had gone go-karting with his son. I remembered that. What would he think if he saw me sitting on the couch holding a beer? He could be back at any moment.

***

I had just gotten home. Laid my head on the pillow. My phone rang. Not picking up, I thought. And then I did. Niklas suggested we go to The Rainbow Bar in two hours. Get ahead of the hangover.

I sat down in the empty bar and ordered a beer. A woman in her fifties sat in my lap. She started making out with me. Niklas walked in wearing a white leather jacket. He sat down next to me.

"Hey, lady, this dude could be your son!"

© Emi Hanna

The woman gave him a piercing look.

"I've never been this insulted in my life!"

"Sorry."

"I'll forgive you just this once!"

"You just look really old."

"Fuck you..."

I tried to act like I couldn't hear them. She got up from my lap and walked away. I knew the night wasn't going to end well. We had a few drinks, then took a cab to a strip club, Fantasy Island.

I spent all my money on a lap dance. Niklas took a shine to a fat dancer for some reason. Bought her loads of drinks. Sat her on his lap.

"I want her to feel good."

"Why?"

"She's the ugliest woman here. She probably never gets any compliments."

"You're making yourself sound like Jesus."

Niklas' acquaintance Pierre turned up at the bar uninvited. He was a French real estate

© Emil Hallma

mogul. His stories were like from another planet. Niklas told me, "Let's try to ditch him." Apparently, he didn't have the best reputation in town. But he followed us around like a leech. Niklas and I agreed to hit the restroom and leave. We made a plan. Niklas would go in first, then me.

An hour later, I sat up and looked around. I had forgotten to go to the restroom. Pierre had made sure there was constant company at our table. I realized Niklas had gone. I walked back to Pierre's table. Later that night, I begged two women for their phone numbers. I promised to call them once we got to The Beverly Hilton. Pierre had announced there would be an after-party at the hotel.

***

© Fran Hanna

Pierre and I were doing lines in the hotel corridor. Once inside the room, I called the girls.

"If I don't pick up, please call again. Don't leave a message!"

After five calls, they promised to come over. Four hundred bucks per dance. I had maybe five dollars in my pocket.

We drew straws to decide which one of us would go buy condoms. I lost. I walked to the supermarket and bought candy and pizza slices. Back in the hotel lobby, I remembered the condoms. Luckily, I managed to bum some from the hotel barber. He was coming back from some kind of gay party. Apparently he had left his house keys in his office.

***

I was fucking the woman from behind against the toilet. The mirror shelf was full of cocaine.

© Erin Fanning

Occasionally I stopped to have a line. Then we kept going. After I came, we went back to the room. The women asked for their money.

"We didn't talk about any money."

And it was true, we hadn't agreed on paying for sex. The girls considered it self-evident. Maybe I was stupid enough to think we had charmed them by behaving "well".

"Emil, you're a pig!"

"I have five bucks."

"We have to pick up our kids from daycare soon."

The women were dead serious. They needed to pick up their kids. They needed the money. And this was the only way they could think of to get it.

"Here I am, falling in love, and you're talking about money."

I was acting like a dim-witted ass. Pierre produced a thousand euros from his wallet. Apparently he had just come back from Paris.

© Emil Hallana

"Go to the exchange in the hotel lobby."

The women slammed the door behind them. We slammed our heads onto the pillows.

***

It was midnight. A full moon. I was admiring it from the passenger seat. Ryan was driving his Porsche down Doheny Drive. We'd been smoking pot and drinking vodka Red Bulls. We were on our way back from a party on the USC campus. Ryan's old school. Ryan hit the gas, then the brakes, then the gas again.

"Chill!"

"Yeah, yeah."

The meter was showing a hundred miles per hour on the small lanes.

"Ryan, c'mon."

"Yeah, yeah."

Ryan was playing at being a race-car driver. We turn right. The car hits the high curb, spins

© Emil Ramona

out of control. Drifts into the oncoming lane. We miss the approaching car by inches. Hit the traffic island at full speed.

Ryan is holding his head. I'm holding my shoulder. We share a shocked look. The other car has taken off. Not that the driver had done anything wrong. Maybe they'd been drinking as well. Ryan's car is wrecked.

"You OK?"

"My arm's kinda sore."

Ryan's head looks like it's bleeding.

"How bad is it?"

"You have a little cut in the corner of your eye. And your lip. It's not too bad. Should we go see a doctor?"

Ryan somehow manages to start the car.

"I have alcohol in my blood, I'll get fired. Let's go home."

Ryan starts driving down even narrower lanes. Against all odds, we make it back without

© Erin Hallana

getting stopped on the two-mile drive home. I look at Ryan in the parking garage.

"Coulda been a lot worse."

"Who knows what mighta happened if we'd hit the other car."

"Wanna have a drink at your place?"

"No. Not now." Ryan gives me a sharp look.

***

I was walking down Sunset Boulevard on a Friday night, alone and wasted. I noticed a tattoo shop called Shamrock. I walked inside. The heavily tattooed employee took in my appearance.

"I can't tattoo you if you're high. You might start bleeding."

"I want a picture of an angel."

The man looked at me with kind eyes.

"Where do you want it?"

"On my arm."

© Erin Fiona

He handed me a bunch of big books with pictures of angels from the Bible. I browsed the religious imagery, kind of nervously. The guitarist from Guns N' Roses sat down next to me.

"My dog just died."

"Sorry for your loss."

"I'm getting a memorial tat."

I looked at the book. Closed it. Turned toward the employee.

"Could you design it?"

"How big you want it to be?"

I looked at his sketch. It looked amazing.

"That's it."

I sat down in the chair. I didn't feel any pain as he started working.

"Why an angel?"

"A guardian angel."

"Good!"

After the tattoo was done, the artist told me to go check it out in the restroom mirror. In my

© Emi Paloma

own time. I burst into tears. When I came out, he gave me a manly hug and knocked fifty bucks off the price. It felt like a tattooed sailor was giving me a warning. He had already put down his anchor. Arrived in port.

***

On Monday, I helped Ryan out. He was taking his car to the shop. Apparently you could still drive it, at least. People were giving us long looks. The car was totally wrecked.

I was driving behind Ryan. Then I gave him a ride to the office. The repair was covered by Ryan's insurance. As a lawyer, he knew how to answer all their questions. Ryan made sure I remembered the car starting to drift on the coast of Malibu. In case anyone ever happened to call me about it.

A couple of weeks later, the car looked as if the accident had never happened. The only scars

© Erin Hanna

were in Ryan's mind. He never drank and drove again.

I talked to him on the phone just last week, actually. I asked him, "Really? Trump again?" He said, "The sequel is always worse than the original."

***

There was a swap meet on the corner of Fairfax and Melrose Avenue every Sunday. Sienna was haggling over an old painting. It was Africa-themed. I don't remember the exact picture. I was wandering aimlessly up and down the place. My heart leaped. I saw Jessica walking her cat. Sienna and I had had cannabis cookies in the morning, so I was feeling chill. I walked up to Jessica.

"Sorry about the call the other night."

"It's fine."

She was acting cold, which made me panic.

© Erin Hanna

"Wanna get an ice cream?" I pointed at the ice cream stand. Tried to put on an unnatural smile.

"I'm OK, thank you."

"Have fun shopping."

"You too. You know, I..."

Jessica stopped midsentence. Picked up her little cat and moved on. Sienna found me.

"I wanna leave."

"But we just got here."

"I don't feel well. Maybe the cookies were off?"

I wanted to know what Jessica had been about to say. She didn't seem that angry. Sienna suggested we could make pizza at hers. That sounded relaxing.

***

Kian and I were fighting a lot lately. He complained that I didn't clean the kitchen

© FranHollana

enough. Kian spent most of his time with Laticia in his own room. I begged for attention from the living room couch. After one argument, I was so mad I threw some of Kian's clothes off the balcony. I hated feeling like the third wheel in my own apartment. I felt like Joey on Friends. Smoking pot and watching porn on the couch. The lovebirds making out in the bedroom.

Laticia and I often had our morning coffee together. We always kept to ourselves. Now and then we'd talk about the latest movies, maybe. I thought she was a gold-digging Barbie. I was trying to figure out whether she'd had silicone lip injections. My prying aggravated Kian.

***

I hadn't heard from Zane in a long while. I'd been working in the lipstick warehouse for three weeks. Then Zane texted me:

"Can u help me out today, please?"

© Emi Hanna

I didn't have the heart to say no. He'd helped me out, after all. I jumped behind the wheel.

The renovations on the house had gone nowhere. There were two hot tubs lying in the yard without any cover whatsoever. The house was still missing half its roof. Who was the lunatic buying hot tubs? Zane had probably lied to the owner and said the renovations were on schedule. And so they had delivered the hot tubs. I knocked on the door. Zane invited me in.

"Gimme a sec. I'll roll a couple of joints and tell you what's going on?"

"Is everything OK?"

"Fuck no."

We sat on the floor and had a smoke. I could see Zane had packed his clothes into suitcases.

"They want me out by 5 p.m."

"Why?"

As if it wasn't obvious...

"I wasn't fast enough, apparently."

"Where will you go?"

© Emil Ahlgren

"To my brother's place."

I knew Zane's brother lived in Boston.

"It was my dream to build a house."

Tears were streaming down Zane's cheeks. I never thought I'd see his sensitive side. I noticed Zane's new Mercedes was missing from the yard. The huge Escalade was still parked outside.

"I'll build a new fucking house!"

"Yeah, you will."

"Can I pay you forty bucks?"

"I don't want your money."

I helped Zane get his tools together, clean the yard. The yard was full of lumber and trash. Zane must have lied about his progress. No one in their right mind would order hot tubs before the bathroom was ready. Or before the floors were installed.

On the drive home, I thought about Zane. I just couldn't quite collect my thoughts. Bret Easton Ellis once wrote the magical line: "People

© Erin Haina

are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles." I thought I understood what that meant.

Zane called me after I got home.

"Could I stay with you guys for a few days?"

I promised to talk to Kian and get back to him. We both agreed that Zane would end up staying forever and never leave. Kian knew about his connections to LA gangs. It was best to say no. Zane got aggressive when I told him we already had a third wheel living with us.

"I fucking helped you when you needed a job! And now you won't help me?"

Zane hung up on me. After the call, I wondered if I had done the right thing.

***

I was getting more pissed off by the day. Ever since Laticia moved in with us. At first, it was only going to be a couple of weeks. Now it

© Erin Hanna

had been several months. I fucked with them by walking around in my underwear in the evenings. Kian used to do it in the mornings. This was my home too. Sometimes, I'd intentionally fall asleep on the living room couch.

Kian came home from work. I could see from his face that he had bad news. He sat down on the couch next to me.

"You know what?"

"What?"

"We have mold in the bathroom."

"Fuck."

I realized he was making it up.

"I'm gonna call the mold inspectors."

"When are they coming?"

"I'll call them in a bit. We could receive compensation if the landlord has known about it."

"That's good."

Kian threw a huge stack of paper on the off-white couch.

© Erin Hollana

"I need to write a summary of all that by tomorrow."

"Looks like an all-nighter for you."

"It won't take long."

Kian was a conscientious employee. Laticia had reined in his cocaine habit a little. Kian had taught Laticia to smoke pot in return.

"Let's go out for a pizza, just the two of us. When I'm done with work."

Kian tried to be fair. He felt bad about not being straight with me.

***

The job at the warehouse was starting to get to me. I had bad back pain. The workers were treated like slaves. I didn't want to go out with Ramon after work. He cut my hours in revenge.

The owner of the company politely asked me if I could come up with an online ad for them. I liked him. He seemed like an upstanding guy. He

© Rani Hallama

was married to the Finnish woman. They had two kids. I needed to script the video and come up with a budget. But I didn't do anything about anything. My depression had been getting slowly worse and had reached a point of zero motivation.

Isaac had been asking if everything was all right. Apparently, I had lost weight. All I could think about was the expiration of my work permit. I had only three months left in the country. I wanted to prove myself. I just didn't know how. A lipstick commercial wasn't gonna cut it.

***

A real estate catalogue had been left lying on the kitchen counter. I opened it, browsed the properties for sale. Kian walked into the kitchen. I was holding the catalogue. He told me he was thinking of buying a place.

© Emi Hanana

"Then you can pay me rent. You can have one of the rooms."

I knew that was never going to happen. Kian would move in with his girlfriend. I was sure of it. I asked if Kian had any cocaine. Did a line off a mirror for the first time. I didn't like it. Kian wanted to come out with me. I lied and said I was going on a date. I didn't want company.

***

I went to a bar by myself. Even I didn't know exactly where I was. In a place that served beer, anyway. I walked to the counter. A blonde walked up next to me. I turned to her.

"I'm starving. How about you?"

"Yeah."

"Wanna go to Mel's on Sunset?"

"Yeah, I like it there."

© Erin Hallama

I took her hand. We zigzagged through the nightclub and stepped into the dark night.

Several hours later, we were cuddling on the living room couch. I lit a candle. I wanted to have sex on the couch, just to piss Kian off. She took her clothes off, started riding me. After two thrusts I pushed her away. Turned to my side and started sleeping.

"What's up with you?"

"I'm tired."

"You didn't even come! Is there something wrong with me?"

"No, no."

I laid my head on the pillow again. In the small hours of the morning, we woke up in my room. She started giving me head, then sat on my cock. I pushed her away again.

"What's up with you?"

"I gotta go to work."

©Erin Hallana

There were many times I wanted to explain what was up with me. But this was anything but the right moment.

***

I'd met some new people lately. They all seemed to have one thing in common: they loved money and jewelry. I was spending a lot of time sitting in this or that café. My favorite new acquaintance was Jackie. He was a Black guy, a Valentino model, apparently. I didn't believe a word that came out of his mouth. Not that I really gave a shit.

He had beautiful female friends. One of them was kinda into me. But Jackie didn't like the idea. Maybe he had a little crush on me himself. I just sat and listened to him talk about real estate, traveling. When I got home I felt ill. And yet I did it again and again.

© Emi Hamma

Listening to all these people's stories made me feel deeply inferior. I was bored with my life. At least when I was high, I could tolerate myself. Escape to la-la land. Listen to other people talk shit.

No one ever asked me how I was doing. Not that I knew what to say if they had. I'd probably have lied. I felt like no one was being honest. Everyone lied to get by. Maybe I was starting to feel I was just like them? I still remember my dream, the one I never made come true.

© Emi Hallana

# Chapter 4: Norma's Place

Kian told me he'd made an offer on a place in Westwood.

"It's close to the schools for when I have kids."

"Yeah."

"I think we're gonna move there. You get it, right?"

"Yeah."

"You can always stay here. Find another roommate."

"In a moldy apartment? There's mold in here! And I don't even have any furniture."

There was no fucking mold. The inspectors had never even come by.

"That's not my problem."

"No, it isn't."

© EmmHallama

Who would even want to live with me? I blamed Kian. I couldn't take a look in the mirror. I wasn't exactly easy to live with. Kian used to tell me:

"You're not easy to walk all over."

It wasn't until years later that I realized he was giving me a compliment.

It felt like I was one step closer to drowning. There seemed to be no way out. Kian's offer was accepted. I needed to find a new place within two weeks. I had no strength left. I couldn't even get out of bed. I decided to solve my problems by turning off the lights and going to sleep.

***

The days were passing by. I only had three days to find a place. Kian had already moved out. I'd checked out a couple of rentals. My potential new roommates seemed even more

© Emi Raiana

fucked-up than me. Believe it or not, I occasionally enjoyed a bit of intelligent conversation. I could still have that with Kian and Ryan sometimes.

As it happened, Ryan was also buying a place. He was moving out in a week's time. He was letting me stay on his couch until then. There was nothing left in the apartment except a mattress and my clothes. We'd sold the couch. For some strange reason Kian didn't want it anymore...

That morning, I saw a notice on the wall of the gym: "Room to rent. Pleasant area close to The Grove." I called the number on the spot. We agreed on a viewing in two hours.

The neighborhood was lovely and peaceful. Ninety-five percent of the residents were Orthodox Jews. They walked around wearing black suits all day, with long beards down to their ribcages. Sometimes I felt bad seeing the little kids, all suited up in the heat from dawn

© Erin Hanna

to dusk. They never played baseball in the yard, no football. Not that I paid that much attention to their lives. I may well have been wrong. It's just what I thought at the time.

Norma's house was fancy, about 3,800 square feet. It was full of '60s furniture. Absolutely nothing had changed in several decades. Norma had three rooms for rent. One had a balcony and cost $980 a month. The other big room had a big couch and cost $850 a month. The third room, the small and modest one, was $480 a month.

I took the cheapest room. I'd run out of money a long time ago. The price was more than OK with me. Norma's interview was easy.

"Do you use drugs?"

"Of course not."

"You do look like a sporty guy."

I shoved my hands into my pockets. There were two baggies in there. My palms were sweating. I took a deep breath.

© Erin Hollaina

"Are you seeing anyone?"

"No."

"Are you moving in today or tomorrow?"

Norma had a great sense of humor. We clicked immediately.

The first morning, I woke up around nine. Shuffled downstairs. There was a note on the kitchen table: "So nice to have a man in the house. It's such a big place." Next to the note was a plate with a beautiful breakfast waiting for me. I turned on the TV. The morning news was on. There had been a gang shootout on the freeway. Then they covered the latest movie premieres. The breakfast tasted amazing. I could feel positive thoughts bubbling up for the first time in a long time.

In the evenings, Norma and I had deep conversations. She had advanced cancer and a heart condition. She loved bacon. She loved making me different drinks, especially since I got more talkative after a margarita or two.

© Erin Rainone

I told her about my crush on Jessica, and my anxiety about the impending expiration of my work permit. She gave me advice on how to win a woman's heart. She didn't understand my need to prove myself to the world at any cost. I believe she saw who I was deep down.

Norma's husband had died many years ago. Norma was afraid of death. Sometimes I wondered if she had done something she regretted. I didn't understand what there was to fear about death. It was a way out. An end to the pain.

***

Kian, John and Ryan were coming over to my place on Saturday morning. We were going to Las Vegas. Everybody else had sports cars, so we would go in my SUV. Norma had told a friend we were coming. The friend owned a restaurant in Las Vegas. We could have dinner

© Emil Hallana

there. It was all paid for, apparently. I knew there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell that we would actually go, but I was polite and took down the number anyway.

I was exhausted. I'd had sex with a girl the night before, so I hadn't slept much. I'd been visiting Ryan's new place. I bumped into her in the elevator on my way home. She was going to a party at some gay couple's place. She asked me to be her plus-one. Just when I'd planned to go to sleep early before Las Vegas. Instead, I ended up at an apartment with a wild party in full swing.

I filled up the tank in my car. We put on some Dave Matthews Band. I'd lost a bet, so I was the designated driver for the first leg of the journey. My eyes drifted shut and stayed shut for several fractions of a second. I didn't complain. Our first stop was Burger King. After an hour's drive, we smoked two big joints and kept going. Dave Matthews Band turned into Bob

© Erin Hanna

Marley. After the others fell asleep, I played "Last Kiss" by Pearl Jam on repeat.

John was Kian's old boss. A small guy, maybe 5'9". But he had incredible charisma. We'd booked a large suite. We'd all sleep in the same huge room. John had promised to pay for everything. His wife let him go out twice a year. Kian had warned us in advance: "John gets kinda crazy. He doesn't get to party much."

After half an hour in the room, it was hard to find a surface without some kind of drugs on it. After two hours of pregaming, we headed out, got a cab. We hit a strip club first. Ryan loved lap dances on ecstasy. The rest of us wanted to go to a bar where you didn't have to pay a woman twenty bucks to talk to you. Ryan kept saying no.

When we made it to the nightclub at the Hard Rock Hotel, the doorman told me no one would let me in anywhere wearing sneakers. We

© Erin Rhinna

agreed I'd go and change my shoes, then catch up with the guys.

Once I got back to the hotel room, I laid my head on a pillow. I was so wiped out I fell asleep on the couch.

I woke up to a huge racket. The boys had come back to get more cocaine.

"What the fuck, Emil? We didn't come to Vegas to sleep."

"I'm tired."

"Have this."

John handed me an ecstasy pill. I chased it down with a beer.

"Don't drink too much on that."

I'd never tried E before. But I was down with any chemical that might make me feel better.

I was still dancing at an after-hours club at six in the morning. Squeezing a young woman's latex leggings on the dance floor. My cock was rock hard. I'd never danced to techno before. Kian screamed with laughter when he saw me.

© Emil Hamma

He knew I hated EDM. All the stories about getting horny were true. The girl wouldn't come with me to the hotel room.

After an hour of begging, I went to look for girls in the hotel corridors. I wanted to have sex on ecstasy. I had the feeling that for the first time in my life, I might feel fully relaxed during the act. Women kept turning me down. I guess I was too high. Every conversation ended after about two sentences. I bumped into Ryan in the lobby.

"Let's find people to party with!!"

"I'm going to bed, it's ten in the morning."

"Hey, look at those chicks. C'mon, let's go."

"What the hell, Emil? They're going to breakfast with their parents. Come on!"

Ryan dragged me to the hotel room before I could make a complete fool of myself.

***

© Emil Hallama

I couldn't get out of bed in the morning. I told the guys I was staying in. "I don't feel well." John sat down on the bed next to me. Cut lines of coke on the nightstand. "Let's go." I hadn't even made it on my feet before inhaling the hotel keycard. There was no way I could have gotten out of bed without the cocaine.

We headed to the Hard Rock Hotel pool. The area was full of strippers. Kian, Ryan and John enjoyed the shade by the poker table. I entertained the girls at the pool bar. I was told off for jumping in the pool with my sweatpants on. The girls and I secretly smoked pot by the kiddie pool on the second floor. There were no kids to be seen. The age limit to the pool party was 21. It was the Fourth of July. The party resembled Finnish May Day celebrations, people were drunk as fuck.

In the evening, we went to another nightclub. I snuck back to the hotel around midnight. I didn't tell anyone. I was in such bad shape I

© Finn Hanna

almost felt sick. I tossed and turned in bed as wildly as the ceiling was spinning above my head. There was no hope of falling asleep. I looked at the landline next to me. I had the bright idea to call Jessica. Maybe she was in Vegas too.

"It's Emil. Come grab a coffee with me?"

"It's the middle of the night!"

"You coming?"

"Why are you always so wasted?"

"I'm in Vegas. Everyone here is wasted. Anyway, I have a water bottle. I took it out of the minibar."

Jessica hung up.

***

I woke up the next morning with zero recollection of what happened after. There were young college girls in the room. John fished a beer out of the minibar and handed it to me.

© Emi Hanna

"You're either the craziest person I've ever met or a total genius!"

"What now?"

"Don't you remember our conversation?"

"Uhhhh. No."

"It was deep, man."

There were three women in bed with Kian. Kian was wearing black jeans. Ryan was still asleep in the armchair. I looked at my phone. It was full of messages. Somebody had sent me loads of nudes. I couldn't remember who. It wasn't Jessica. Of that I was certain.

"The strippers."

I guess they wanted money. I had no idea what was going on. John wanted to hit the casino before leaving. I promised to go with him. John forced me to wear shades.

I have no idea how we managed to drive back to Los Angeles later that day. The whole trip was insane. After getting home on Sunday evening, we were all bedbound for three days. I

© Erin Hanna

was overwhelmed with extreme anxiety and depression. Even Ryan called in sick. John had forgotten half his stuff in my car. He lived in San Diego. He promised to come get it dozens of times, but he never did.

The next weekend, Ryan and I went to see a basketball game. Ryan got free tickets from work. We both had a touch of the flu and a mild fever. We made a solemn vow to each other that we were done partying for a while.

***

We were sitting in an opulent mansion above Sunset Boulevard. There was a fireplace by the pool. Huge sofa beds. A TV embedded inside the fireplace, which was on in the background.

Tom was Niklas' ex-boss. I hadn't done drugs in two days. I stayed quiet, listened to Niklas and Tom talk shop. Tom's girlfriend's friend was kind of alluring. She had a small dog in her lap.

©Erin Hallama

The dog's collar was the thickest gold chain I had ever seen. I didn't have the nerve to talk to her. My constant drug use had made me too anxious to open my mouth while sober. I had always been an introvert, but some people interpreted my silence as arrogance.

I fiddled with my beer bottle. The situation was getting awkward. I'd been completely silent for half an hour. Niklas and Tom started mocking me cruelly. It hurt. I tried to hide my tears.

"This guy can't cut it on his own. Dude carries my bags on set."

"Who was that guy at the party? The one with the white sweater."

I was wearing a white sweater. I picked lint off the sleeves.

"Oh, the one who went to the gym twice a day."

"Yeah, and never had a leg day."

"His ass is so flat."

© Finn Halma

"Dude drives around wearing shades all day long."

Their digs made me feel like shit. I'd been busting my ass at the warehouse lately. I was so close to my final breaking point, and had been for a long time. I'd have stayed home if I knew this was going to happen. The others had clearly partied before I got there. Tom kept licking his lips about once a minute.

Tom's girlfriend got upset at the way they were treating me. She got up. Asked me to join her in the kitchen to get something to eat. I was so paralyzed that I just said I'd eaten before I got there.

I wanted to get up and go home. But I wasn't brave enough. I was relieved to hear that some Italian guy was coming over. He'd have more cocaine. This was after an hour of them giving me shit.

The long-awaited guest arrived. Marco was a skinny, messy-looking guy with curly hair. He'd

© Erin Hanna

bought his cocaine from a Jewish businessman. It was pure. Marco dug out a five-hundred-euro bill. I don't know why he had euros in the States. I did multiple lines to hide my pain. Niklas told me not to have any more. Was he feeling guilty? Did he realize he had crossed the line with me? I don't know. I doubt they really thought about it. They were just having "fun" at the expense of another guy. Like the idiots in elementary school.

Niklas was usually a cognac-and-beer man. Maybe he didn't do drugs all that often. That was probably it. But his behavior was totally beyond the pale. I don't even want to write down everything he said, since it doesn't really matter in the context of the story. But you were an asshole that night!

I opened my mouth to talk to the dog's owner. She asked me to join her in the front yard. We went and sat down, just the two of us. The yard was at least as opulent as the

© Erin Hanna

pool area. I later found out who Tom's father was. Not that it matters to the story, either. Still, it explained why he had one of the fanciest houses in the city.

There was another fireplace in the front yard, surrounded by brown canvas chairs. I was so nervous I spilled my wine on the chair. Tried to frantically wipe it off with my sleeve. The woman laughed at me.

"Leave it..."

"It won't come off... Is Tom gonna be mad?"

"No. It's no big deal."

The tops of the palm trees made me think of tigers. Stalking their prey in the jungle, trying to rip my heart to pieces. I was getting paranoid. I had done too much coke again.

I kissed the top of the dog's head. Her dog had jumped into my lap a second earlier. I shot the shit with her, forgetting everything I said the minute I said it. I do remember telling her how shitty the guys in the backyard made me

©Erin Fiona

feel. Even if they did stop fucking with me after Marco came along. She seemed nice. Her name was Julia. Thick brown hair and a beautiful, symmetrical face.

I grabbed a pillow lying by the white fireplace and tucked it under my head. Fell asleep in the middle of our conversation. Woke up in the same chair in the small hours of the morning.

***

I tried to hide my tears when Norma wished me good morning in the kitchen. The digs from last night still hurt. Was I a man who carried other people's bags? Couldn't hack it on my own, or whatever they had said?

Tom had texted me. The text said: "We should do that again. It was nice to meet u. How r u?" Maybe he was feeling bad about yesterday. It didn't make me feel much better. I had felt like a loser long before last night. Now

© Erin Halama

it was official. It felt like other people didn't have to worry about everyday life. They also didn't carry secrets that nailed you to the bottom of the bed on a regular basis. Tom texted me again that evening. Maybe he was a nice guy after all?

I called Ramon and told him I couldn't make it to work today. I was "sick". I simply couldn't go and package lipsticks right now. Who knows what might happen if my self-esteem dropped even lower than this? I immediately stopped that train of thought. Went outside wearing a tank top. The rays of the sun cheered me up.

I walked to a gas station to get a Coke for my hangover. I couldn't believe my eyes. Jessica was watering plants in the yard. Just two blocks away from me. I ran past her house. Was this a sign? Everything would be all right after all. Her house was exactly like I imagined it. A small white wooden house under the shade of two large palm trees.

© Erin Hanna

I called Shinya. I told him I had seen Jessica's house. In my own neighborhood. Shinya wanted to grab a coffee with me after work. He confided he was tired of his job. But I didn't show him the same compassion that he felt for me. I told him about the guys making fun of me last night. He encouraged me to let it go. "Who cares what drunk people say?"

On the other hand, Isaac believed that drunk people say exactly what they mean. That's how they show their true nature. "They're all assholes. Jerks with small dicks and small minds." That's what Isaac said.

***

On my way back from the supermarket on Sunday, I saw Jessica was having a yard sale. In all honesty, I'd taken a slightly different route than usual. It's good to get in ten thousand steps a day, you know. It looked like Jessica

© Emi Fujima

was selling her clothes and old furniture. There were surprisingly many people around. They didn't notice me. I was on the other side of the street.

I called Shinya. He told me I should go.

"You're her neighbor, right?"

"To buy women's dresses?"

Shinya said he'd come with me.

"That sounds better. We'll buy you a dress."

In all seriousness, I just didn't have the guts. Shinya didn't get it. I didn't get it. I didn't even want to.

I didn't have time to dwell on it, though, as Niklas called me and asked me to go to the movies. I started driving toward the Arcade Theatre. We bought the tickets and had a drink before the movie. The drinks and the movie were on Niklas. He knew I didn't have a lot of money. In fact, he paid for me almost every time. I always tried to pay my own way, but he wouldn't take my money. Sometimes he was

© Fran Hollana

more than fair. Surprisingly enough, he apologized for his behavior last time.

"You're just not successful yet. All my other friends are."

His choice of words wasn't the best. But I could see in his eyes that he meant well, felt genuine remorse. Even so, he'd just poured even more salt in my wounds. I wanted another beer.

In the movie theater, my thoughts kept racing. I had no idea whether the movie was any good or not. I told Niklas I liked it, though. Only because he said:

"That was so fucking good. Mickey was amazing."

"Definitely. It's been a while."

Then we went for drinks in a small sailor-themed pub. We talked about our favorite movies. All I could think about was what kind of movie I would write myself.

***

© Emil Hellana

On Saturday, I smoked a joint after my morning coffee and looked inside my wallet. Ninety-five bucks. I headed to a florist's on Melrose Avenue, across the street from Fred Segal. I bought the most beautiful flowers I had ever seen. They cost $93. They came with a see-through plastic pot. I sent them to Jessica. On the card I wrote, "I'm not a bad boy :)"

It felt like a brilliant idea while I was high. I'd never have done it sober. Jessica and I had bumped into each other on the street multiple times. She had seen me washing my car in the yard on Tuesday.

After sunset, Norma cooked us Russian food. I couldn't quite figure out what was in it. Eggs, mixed in with the meat. It definitely beat my own efforts. Norma was an incredible cook. She had run her own culinary school when she was younger. She laughed at my cooking skills. "Emil, you're just boiling the pasta and pouring a pre-prepared sauce over it." Norma had taught me

© Emil Hamina

one pasta recipe. "You can make it for a special lady one day." The recipe was kind of unusual: salmon, caviar, a sauce based on a particular wine. It was undeniably delicious. We had several margaritas once again.

We were both drunk. Norma told me she'd been on a date with an old friend of hers, a gentleman so "stingy and cheap" that Norma couldn't stand him anymore. He didn't even tip the valet, even though he was extremely rich. Norma had felt ashamed on his behalf. Then she'd gotten her own wallet out. Our conversations were so much fun. I told her I'd sent ninety-three bucks' worth of flowers to a woman I didn't really even know. She thought I was sweet. Norma was a hundred percent sure Jessica would thank me for the flowers.

I myself was pretty sure Norma knew about my drug use. She was ill, not blind. But she didn't want to lecture me. She believed that

©EmiFiamma

everyone needed to make their own mistakes to learn and grow.

She'd been caring for me like a son lately. She set me up on a date with a stunning model. I canceled it. Without telling Norma of course. Norma had met the famous model at a charity event. She'd shown her my picture and sung my praises. I was feeling very inferior to everyone recently. What would we have talked about over dinner? What would I have said if she'd asked me about my week? I was so goddamn stupid. I didn't understand that honesty and a sense of humor are often worth more than shiny cars. But on the other hand, there's no bigger turn-off than doing drugs.

I kept obsessing over Jessica in the early hours of the morning. I couldn't sleep. I was starting to regret the flower delivery. I had made a fool of myself. Why did I keep doing this? I went out to the balcony and smoked

© Emi Hamma

cocaine. Back in la-la land. I texted Jessica, "No thanks for the flowers then?!"

I don't know what the fuck I was thinking. She probably didn't even have my number saved. And I hadn't put my number on the card. I realized my mistake in the early morning. If you do drugs for a long time, small things start looking bigger than they are. You lose your capacity for logical thinking. How fucking selfish of me to imagine someone else would save me...

**Listen: Oasis - "Wonderwall"**

***

The next day, I felt so ashamed of myself. I realized I had zero chance with Jessica. Or anyone else. This city made it more than clear: you had to be successful. Success was the measure of a man's worth here. It wasn't just my opinion. I was a broke warehouse worker. Even my friends insinuated I was a failure.

© Emil Hallana

Tears welled up in my eyes. There was only a month left on my work permit. I wanted to take Jessica out to dinner. Which didn't feel exactly possible anymore. I only had to look in the mirror to see why.

I wanted to find a permanent job as soon as possible. Then they might extend my work permit. But that didn't feel very realistic anymore, either. I wanted to feel something other than pain. Just for a moment.

***

I was walking along the oceanfront in Venice Beach. I had gone to film school. Studied writing, directing. Success was supposed to fix my self-image. I didn't see it that way at the time, but that's how it was. Dreams of fame and fortune had become an obsession.

I stared at the ocean, trying to figure out a solution to my "problem". The problem was that

© Erin Hallama

I didn't quite see what the problem was. How could I come up with a solution? I didn't even know what I was trying to solve.

***

Over the next couple of weeks, I picked up women in Jessica's general vicinity left and right. The morning after, I'd feel even worse than before. I wanted to show her I could get girls. Every night if necessary. It was my way of protecting myself. I acted like a kid in a candy store. Besides, I was embarrassed by my behavior before. So I got high and found a creative solution once again...

That led me to an even deeper chasm. One night, Jessica coolly said, "You're not welcome in my bars anymore."

She told not only me, but the rest of her staff. I walked away and headed to Crazy Girls, where I spent all my money on a Russian girl.

© Erin Hanna

She gave me her number. I promised to wait for her in the parking lot after her shift.

At 2:15 a.m., the doorman told me all the girls had gone home.

"One's coming. We have a date."

"The place is empty!"

I stayed and waited. Fifteen minutes later, a Mexican man came out with a broom. I realized I'd been had. I was furious. I'd stuffed my last dollar bills down her panties. I wanted to walk in front of the first car I saw.

***

Norma's brother had moved in with us. He was a retired fireman with a mean streak. He made fun of me all the time. Maybe he was annoyed by how much Norma liked me.

The week before, the other room had been taken by a man maybe fifteen years older than me. He had a kid. The kid never visited us. The

© Erni Hallama

man was editing the new trashy Van Damme movie. He was a nice, ordinary guy. Authentic.

Norma cried when she told me she needed more money. She kept asking me:

"You won't leave if I get more lodgers, will you? Money's tight for me."

"Of course not."

Why would I have left? A storage locker would have been more expensive to rent than my room.

© Emil Hallama

# Chapter 5: The Oldest Lie in the World

I was sitting in Santa Monica, staring wistfully at the ocean. Was this it? After all my studies? My internship?

Everything had gone to hell in a handbasket. I'd have to go back to Finland. I'd noticed a new Maserati outside Jessica's house this morning. I had nothing. A boy becomes a man when he has a steady job. My visa was expiring in three weeks. I had failed to prove myself.

The ocean was calm. Seagulls circled in the sky. I had a crazy idea. I'd write a love story. I'd been awarded best scriptwriter in school. Why hadn't I thought of this before? Why had I stopped writing? Maybe my depression had made it feel too hard. Not that the depression had gone away. It was time that was running out.

© Emi Halina

I'd sell my manuscript. I'd be rich, famous. I'd get a work permit. I'd sweep Jessica off her feet with my new car and my success. It was the solution to all my problems. I felt like I'd finally found the easy way out. I couldn't even remember the last time I saw a movie with a brilliant script. Ninety-six percent of movies pretty much suck.

I called Ramon, told him I wouldn't be coming to work anymore. Thanked him for his help. As for Niklas, I wanted nothing to do with him anymore. It was my turn to show him. Soon he'd be the one eating humble pie. He'd be begging me for attention for a change. Then I called Ryan and told him I was busy at work. Ryan had never said anything shitty about me. We'd never even had an argument. But I had to concentrate on my work. I wouldn't have time to see anyone in the next two weeks. I just had to figure out the details. What would I write about? It would have to be a love story either way.

© Erin Hanna

I closed my bedroom door, opened the windows. Smoked my pipe, marijuana mixed with cocaine. I looked for inspiration in music. Metallica, Led Zeppelin, Nirvana. Then I opened my laptop and started typing. It felt surprisingly good. My room was starting to look like Hemingway's childhood home. I'd make history here. The small, dreary room would turn into an apartment of my very own soon. I'd invite Ryan and Jessica over for a barbecue. Peter and Isaac would sit in my living room for a change. I'd serve beer and chicken breasts. We'd have hash brownies for dessert and smoke pot.

I got up late in the mornings. Made sure Norma wasn't in the kitchen. I didn't want to see her. I was getting more fucked up every day. My only human contact was with my drug dealer. I was completely broke. The dealer agreed to front me. I wanted heroin, cocaine and marijuana. Then I burrowed back into my room.

© Erin Fanning

This was my last chance to show everyone what I was made of. Sometimes memories of my elementary school days went through my head. The moment my beanie was dipped in the urinal and put back on my head. Or when they spat in my mouth. Hit my head against a hardened snowbank. Crying or yelling just made things worse. Why didn't the teachers help?

I banged on the keyboard with all my might. With every keystroke, I thought of names of people who had oppressed me. You're the ones forcing me into this room. Now I'm beating you assholes out of my system once and for all. I'll show you all. Every single one of you who took advantage of me. Used me for slave labor with the promise of a job. Led me on for a whole year. Did you ever consider how it felt for me? Working for free? Didn't even bother to reply to my email about more gigs. A fee of $270 for a shoot is nothing to your agency. For me it meant holding on to some human dignity. I was

© Erin Falana

just an invisible clown to you. Time to turn the tables. I can hardly wait. And the tables will turn, by force if necessary.

I picked up a pizza once a day. Sometimes, I dreamed of success. That was the important thing, after all. Still, I couldn't think too much about it. My manuscript wasn't ready yet. It had to be perfect. The paintings on the wall seemed to speak to me. They forced me back to my computer again and again. The house seemed to whisper secrets at me. I looked out of the small window in my room. The house across the street looked sharp. The sprinklers on the lawn rotated serenely. Fog was rising from the ground. The air felt humid. The universe was sending me signs from the future. I didn't need a fortune teller to see what was coming.

I hadn't shaved in a couple of days, though I had been to the gym the day before. I couldn't lift, though. I'd smoked two huge joints before going. I was getting paranoid. I felt something

© Erin Hanna

evil lurking in the house. Maybe it was Norma's brother. He wanted to tell me stories about his time as a fireman. They'd make a good movie, apparently. "Then you can buy me a cabin by the lake." I told him I was working on a manuscript of my own. He belittled me, taunted me. Some people feel so important when they're putting someone else down. What did Isaac call them again? Right, we all know at least one jerk with a small mind and a small...

But the writing felt easy and that was all that mattered. I wasn't sure how my story would end. A brilliant ending was the most important part of any manuscript. The audience should still be thinking about it on the way home. The beginning and the end were the only things that mattered. The middle could be weaker. You could fix almost anything with a magical ending.

The drug dealer arrived at our agreed location. A short walk from my place. The black car pulled up, I got in the front seat.

© Erin Hanna

"Is that chopper tailing you?"

There was a helicopter in the sky.

"No, there's been a traffic accident. You seen Kian lately?"

"No, why?"

"You don't look so good. How you doing?"

When a drug dealer tells you you don't look too good, you know something's not right. He happily took my money though.

"Stop twitching! You're making me paranoid, too."

"Are you sure it's not tailing you?"

The helicopter was flying toward us.

"Shit, I'm not sure about anything anymore. I'll drive you home."

"No, I'll walk."

I slammed the car door and ran away like a madman. I could hear the sound of the helicopter overhead. Once I got home, I hid the drugs in a shoe box. I was convinced the chopper was looking for my drug dealer. I went

© Erin Hanna

to the kitchen to grab myself a Snickers ice cream bar. Took a deep breath.

***

I had fallen in love with Led Zeppelin. Their music was magical. Like my manuscript. I didn't know what the connection was, but I felt it very strongly. Sometimes I sat on the bed and listened to "Stairway to Heaven" ten times in a row.

**Listen: Led Zeppelin – "Stairway to Heaven"**

I'd heard that Jimmy Page used to tell people he didn't know who wrote the song. He'd been sitting in front of the fireplace when he saw the shadow of a small woman. In the morning, the lyrics were scribbled into a small notebook. Bled onto the empty page from the veins of demons.

I never double-checked what I'd written the night before. I just kept writing, like a

© Erin Hanna

competitive golfer. He's just trying to get the ball in the hole. He's not thinking about the landscape the ball is flying over. All I needed to do was aim at the hole. Money and success. After that, love and life would be easy. All the pain and bitterness would come to an end.

Sometimes I felt like the painting on my bedroom wall was listening to me. It was painted in vivid colors. A sailboat in a storm. Every time I got anxious, I smoked a load of heroin. Then I felt safe again. I was the Hulk, crack was my vitamin. I was growing in strength with each passing day.

***

I was sitting in a park between The Grove and Garden Avenue, watching young girls in sweatpants walking their dogs. My Macbook in my lap. I liked the yellow condos on the corner of Third Street. Apparently they had a gated

© Emil Ramona

pool area and two-story apartments. That would be a nice place to live. I'd buy a one-bedroom apartment there.

In the evenings I prayed to God. This was his chance to prove his existence and help me. I promised I'd help others in return. He had seen my suffering. The prison walls would crumble into dust. I was certain God was on my side. I had suffered enough. More than enough. I'd absolutely help others, if only he would make my dream come true first.

**Listen: Metallica – "Welcome Home (Sanitarium)"**

***

I was done. My fingers stopped at 117 pages. There it was. My story. I felt relieved. All I had to do was sell it now. That would be the easy part. I wasn't totally sure what the story was about. There were so many layers. It was

© Emi Hamina

genius, that much I knew. The main plot was about a man who would die if he couldn't write. He hid behind the different stories. People thought he was a genius. The stories were his fortress. Everybody envied him, even though he was sad inside. Every failure in his life was a new bestseller for him. I wanted to read through my manuscript in peace. I'd been under the influence of drugs the whole time, after all.

I rolled a joint. Headed to the upstairs balcony to smoke it. Norma's station wagon was gone. The sun burned my skin. I was back in daylight and out of my dusky room.

I started reading the manuscript carefully. The writer had created a new Harry Potter-like phenomenon. His wife was more interested in the book's sales numbers than the inner landscape of her husband. This caused the writer to turn to drink. He himself didn't value his novels. He decided to get a divorce. Retire in peace to a villa in Spain. That's where he fell madly in

© Erin Hanna

love with a waitress and decided to write one more novel. His new book changed the world. It made him a legend. It was about a boy who had discovered the oldest lie in the world. I was the boy. The lie was that God had sent Jesus to Hell. We had nailed our Saviour violently to the cross. We were in Hell!

What had I come up with? I looked at the Led Zeppelin album cover. Did they know what I knew? They'd grown tired of making music, it was too heavy. I did a big line of cocaine. God had finally helped me. My prayers had been answered. I'd written something groundbreaking. I realized there were too many evil spirits in the house. They were trying to kill me. I had to save this ingenious manuscript. Had to tell the whole world what we'd done. We had created Hell. We had to save the world while we still could. I was in deep shock. How had I managed to write something that would change the way people thought all over the world?

© Emil Ramona

I packed everything I owned into my car. Records, clothes. Jumped behind the wheel. The evil spirits couldn't stop me. I was stronger. I went to an internet café. Sent a copy of the manuscript to Niklas. Asked him to sell it. I wanted a million dollars for it. I told him I'd escape the demons in the meantime. He was to call me when he had the money. He could direct the movie, all I wanted was the money.

I went to the Shamrock tattoo shop on Sunset Boulevard. A familiar place. I wanted a tattoo of a cross on my wrist. I could finally feel God's presence. He hadn't abandoned me when I was a child, after all. The pieces of the puzzle were finally falling into place. I was entering paradise. The Hollywood Hills, above everyone else. The tattoo artist refused to tattoo me. Said I was in a compromised state. Told me to come back tomorrow. I told him to fuck off. I didn't have time to wait until

© Emil Hollina

tomorrow. My head would explode, any fucking second now.

"Don't you see what I'm trying to solve here? It's not a fucking crossword, man!"

"Go away! Try the place next door!"

"You've made the biggest mistake of your life. You refused service to a very important person!

I slammed the car door. Drove back and forth down Sunset Boulevard. Sang along to the music. I didn't know where I was going. The car window popped down by itself. I couldn't get it back up, the button didn't work. It was a sign from God. Hang in there, just a little longer. Your friends will sort things out. At that moment, I felt a strange vibration in my body. I looked out of the window. The world looked like a beautiful movie. I was finally in heaven.

My phone rang, I didn't answer. I didn't want to talk to anybody. Tom was calling for the seventh time. I dug my cell out of the pocket of my green cargo shorts.

© Erin Hanna

"Emil! Where the fuck are you?"

"Santa Monica right now. I'm getting gas. And fixing the car window."

The gas station owner could tell I wasn't well. He used that to his advantage and billed me $376 for fixing the window. The original quote had been for $110.

"Wait right there! Do you hear me!"

"Yeah, but Tom, did you know we're in Hell?"

"Let's talk about it in a minute."

Tom pulled up to the gas station in a white Range Rover. I was trying to have a smoke next to the car. The gas station attendant threw a fit. Tom snatched the cigarette out of my hand.

"OK, Emil. We're gonna go to that diner across the street and eat something."

Tom ordered two burger meals and a large Coke. I didn't touch the food. Just a sip of the soda.

"You don't look too good. What's going on?"

"Nothing. You have the money?"

© Emil Palmina

"What money?"

"I gave you guys clear instructions. Did you read the book?"

"Emil, eat something."

"I haven't eaten for days."

"Why's all your stuff in the car?"

"I can move now. Look, the window exploded by itself!"

"Emil, do you have any money?"

"Twenty bucks maybe."

"Let's go to a hotel. It's on me."

Tom took two hundred dollars out of his wallet.

"Here's some money for food."

"I can't take that."

"Just take it. Emil, I'm sorry I gave you shit when you were over at my place."

"That's OK."

Tom picked out a small hotel in Santa Monica, close to the beach. First we went to the supermarket. Tom bought me chips,

© Erin Hanna

sandwiches, deodorant and juice. I wanted a six-pack of Mexican beer. Tom paid for it grudgingly. He told me he'd come by around eight in the morning. He said something about getting his father to find me a job. He also told me that the girl from his place had asked for my phone number several times. He was sorry he hadn't told me before.

"Tom, this is much bigger than that."

Tom didn't understand what I was talking about. I tried to show him my manuscript on my laptop. It was in Finnish. Tom couldn't understand a word of Finnish. Before he left, he wanted to make sure I was going to sleep.

"You'll feel better in the morning if you get some sleep."

Tom raided my backpack. Poured a couple of cocaine baggies down the toilet. I couldn't stop him.

"Are you sure you'll be fine until morning?"

"Of course."

© Emil Hannula

Tom wasn't sure what was going on with me. He was very anxious. He probably thought I had taken too many drugs way too quickly. He believed things would be better in the morning. He gave me a hug and tucked me in.

***

I woke up in the hotel bed in the middle of the night, feeling wide awake. I took a sip from an unopened whisky bottle. Tom hadn't taken that one out of the bag. Then I drank two beers. I found them under the bed. Tom had tried to hide them.

I got dressed. Walked toward the parking garage. Eventually I found my car. I drove the black Jeep all over the dark, narrow lanes of Santa Monica. I was too excited about the future. Tom came back to the hotel in the morning. I told him I'd gotten back to the room twenty minutes before.

© Erin Holmes

"Where were you?"

He saw the paper cup from The Coffee Bean.

"You got a coffee?"

"I drove around all night."

Tom looked at me in shock. Listened to me talk for a while. Then he said he was getting something from his car. A moment later he came back. He told me he was buying me a plane ticket to Finland. It was clear he had spoken to my parents. Not that I realized it at the time. Tom was genuinely concerned about me and didn't know what to do.

"Fuck off!"

"You're not well. You'll be back. I don't know how to help you. I'll get you to Finland."

Tom was texting on his phone. Speaking anxiously into my phone.

"Fuck it, I guess we're going to the hospital."

"What are you talking about? Let's concentrate on the book. Where is it?"

© Emi Hanna

"Niklas has it. I still don't speak any Finnish. And Niklas is in Sweden shooting an ad."

I didn't get Tom. I thought he was being stupid.

"This is Hell. Don't you get it? We're all in Hell."

Tom was breaking out in a cold sweat, walking in circles around the room. Then he took his cell out of his jacket pocket.

"I have to make some calls. I'll be right back. Will you promise to stay here?"

"Where the fuck am I gonna go?"

Tom took away my car keys.

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm low on gas."

"I'm just making sure."

After Tom was gone, I went to lie down on the bed. Opened a packet of chips. Mumbled to myself that Tom didn't have a clue. My mom called my cell.

"Kimmo from the Finnish embassy is coming over. Be nice."

© Emi Rinne

"Maybe he'll get it."

I wasn't in the mood to talk to my mom. The call lasted all of thirty seconds.

***

After several knocks, I opened the hotel room door. A man in his late fifties stepped in. He was wearing brown cowboy boots, jeans and a casual button-up shirt. Kimmo shook my hand politely. I told him how to fix the whole world. I had the antidote to every problem out there.

"Everything's fucked up, see? First, we're gonna get everyone a job."

Kimmo looked at me with concern. I was almost foaming at the mouth, my hand flailing up and down.

"It's been really hard, I feel like people aren't getting me. Nobody believed Jesus at first, either."

"Emil, we should go see a doctor."

© Emil Hamina

"Are they gonna believe *me* then?"

"I don't know. I'll come with you."

"Don't they believe *me*... Man, they still don't believe *me*."

We started walking toward the parking garage. Kimmo told *me* to get *my* passport from the back seat of *my* car.

"Are they trying to steal it? Don't they believe *me*? Are they gonna kill *me*? Isn't the world ready for the truth? And where's *my* manuscript? Where's *my* laptop?"

I was talking like a robot. I dug a wad of A4s out of the glove box. I'd printed out *my* book in the café earlier that morning. I showed it off to Kimmo proudly. Kimmo took a pen out of his jacket pocket and started crossing out paragraphs.

"Emil, this needs some changes. You're on the wrong side, you see?"

"What?"

© Emil Ahlma

"You're going in the wrong direction. But we can change that. We'll get through this together."

Years later, I realized that Kimmo could immediately see what was going on. He wanted to help. But let's get back to the moment.

I sat in the passenger seat of Kimmo's car. Watched the palm trees go by. For the first time, the leaves looked scary sharp. My heart slowed with fear. I was drenched in sweat. Kimmo looked at me with kind, calm eyes. He changed the subject to sports.

We arrived at the local hospital. I was shaking with terror. I looked around. There were demons everywhere. In the mirrors, in the paintings, in the carpeted floor. The nurse, the students had infiltrated the place to read my mind. They'd still be talking about the historical figure they'd seen here long after my death. They were witnessing a historical moment today. I was taken to see a doctor in a cramped room.

© Emi Hanna

"How are you feeling? What drugs have you taken?"

"All of them. There's no point in being sober here in Hell. What did you think of my book?"

"I'm focusing on you right now."

The doctor wasn't sure what to do.

"I was listening to Led Zeppelin... the demons came in through the music."

"Where's your ID?"

"Kimmo has my passport. And my book is on my laptop. People are trying to destroy it, we need to hide it. They don't understand that the world is ready for this."

"Listen to me. You don't have insurance. I have to send you to a public hospital first. Then we'll take things from there."

"Everything's all about money again. Fuck this place. I'm going out for a beer, and then I'll buy three hookers. That'll make me feel better."

The doctor was shaking his head, half amused, half serious. Two male nurses came in and

© Erin Hanna

escorted me into the corridor. Kimmo and Tom were in the lobby.

"Tom, where are they taking me? They're gonna kill me! People need to know."

"We don't know yet. It'll all be all right."

Tom leaned against Kimmo anxiously.

"I wanna go to your place. All I need is a glass of water."

I felt like a king. A minute later, I felt sick. The loop kept repeating over and over.

"We'll follow you to the hospital."

I refused to go with the nurses. They injected me with a sedative against my will. Strapped me to a gurney. I tried to fight it, to yell, but I didn't have the strength. Bit by bit, the rage turned into hysterical sobbing. Tom looked on in shock until he turned his head away. He couldn't watch for one more second. Kimmo took me by the hand.

"Everything's gonna be OK, Emil. Everything's gonna be OK."

© Emil Ahlama

***

I open my eyes. I'm lying in an ambulance. I try to tear at my straps, struggling in terror. They give me another shot. I beg them to let me go home.

"Please don't take me away. I'm not a bad person."

I'm crying and screaming in fear. The nurses' faces get blurrier and blurrier.

The next thing I remember is a room where a doctor is asking me about my drug use. I tell him I've used cocaine, heroin and marijuana. In the same breath, I ask him why they've brought me here.

"Is this part of the manuscript?"

The doctor offers me his white coat.

"Do you want to wear the cloak of God?"

"No, I'm gonna make do with my own t-shirt."

©Erin Hanna

***

I was escorted to a large room with about fifteen other patients. Everyone was sitting in a black armchair. In the evenings, the chairs were lowered into a reclining position. It meant you sat in the chair during the day and slept in it at night.

I noticed I was the only white patient in the room. As far as I knew, I was in South Central. The room was like a concrete bunker. Cold and bleak. A windowless rat trap. The scene was ten times worse than the Los Angeles slum. These people were too unstable for society to let them sleep under bridges. They would run in front of cars. They were likely to scratch more than just their own skin. That was probably the line you had to cross to get locked up here.

They gave us pills every three hours. I thought the doctors were trying to feed me poison. The world wasn't ready for the truth, so

© Fran Rhoma

they had to kill me. The doctors strapped me down and injected me with medication. I cried myself to sleep that night. I didn't understand why they wanted to examine me. Did they want to make sure I wasn't scamming people? Or did they still want to kill me? The demons on the walls didn't answer me, no matter how much I begged. I couldn't tell which scenario was the truth and which was the voice of the demons on the white walls.

In the morning, a nurse turned on the TV while the doctors measured out the pills. The TV showed long lines of cars. The news talked about huge traffic jams on the freeways. The real reason was probably Thanksgiving. People were going to see their families. But for me, everything was becoming clear. People had arrived from all corners of the land to see if the rumors were true. Jesus had risen from the dead to cast judgment on the Earth. They were holding him in a mental hospital to test him

© Erin Hanna

first. I needed to pass the tests. After that, I could tell everyone the good news. How had I been endowed with such a huge responsibility?

I always knew I had it in me to write something brilliant. It's just that I ended up creating something too good. The most revolutionary thing since the Bible. I hadn't asked for a crown as heavy as this. A higher power had chosen me for this task.

There's a line in Eminem's "Not Afraid". A lying king looking to be crowned, but instead gets something else right between the eyes... But the allegory was lost on me at the time.

***

Tom and Kimmo came to see me in the morning. We sat in the same room as all the other patients.

"Get me the fuck out of here!"

© Emi Rinima

I collapsed into hysterical tears. Tom put his arms around me.

"Once you get through this, you'll be stronger than any of us."

"What am I doing here? Where am I? Fuck you, Tom. I wouldn't be here without you."

"It's just your insurance. We'll transfer you to a private hospital, but it'll take a couple of days. You just have to be strong."

"Tom, did you read the manuscript yet? Do you get it now?"

"You have friends."

I burst into tears again.

"I'm not sick. You're all crazy."

I tried to explain to Kimmo that we had to talk quietly. People might be secretly listening. Not everybody was happy with my book. Kimmo told me about different cities I could visit. He'd brought along a picture book of the most exotic destinations in the world. Looking at the photos

© Emi Hallama

calmed me down a little. White sandy beaches, palm trees, a turquoise ocean.

"Emil, look how beautiful nature is."

***

I spent my days lying in my chair. We were allowed out for an hour every day. I used to ask the nurses for cigarettes, which I then secretly stubbed out on my palm. It made me feel alive. It's hard to explain, but every time a cigarette burned a hole into my skin, the pain made me aware of my surroundings. And that calmed me down.

The TV in the room was usually on. I watched the shows. All of them were still talking about me. The whole world was a conspiracy theory. No one wanted to hear the truth about what we had done to our planet. The only soul who had solved the puzzle had been committed to a mental hospital. Experts were offering their

© Emi Hanna

insights on talk shows. Had Jesus really come back? What would happen on the day they released him? I was furious. Crazy people were allowed to walk the streets and cause destruction. I prayed I wouldn't be crucified by mankind. That was a mistake they'd already made once before. The presidents and popes would soon congregate to discuss whether the world was still the same. Why did I have to be the one to save the whole planet?

The food in the hospital was awful. I was afraid it was poisoned. I'd try a spoonful here and there, then stop and realize the next potato might be the one to kill me. I was emaciated. My beard had grown long and frizzy. I was a shadow of what I used to be. In my mind, this was simply a phase I had to go through. I was on my way to becoming superman. No one would ever fuck with me again.

Tom told me my dad was coming to town tomorrow. That made me feel even worse. I told

© Erin Hanna

Tom I didn't want to see him until they arranged a mansion for me to live in. Tom was shocked by my condition. I think he was wondering whether this was it. Emil had disappeared. He had a concerned conversation with the nurses, then came back. I don't know what Tom saw when he looked me in the eye. It was like a scene from the worst horror movie ever made. And there was no end in sight.

"Is my dad worried about the credit card bill?"

"No, he's worried about you."

After a half-hour conversation, I started to believe my dad's arrival might be a good thing. I paced the hospital corridors. The pain was hideous. I can't even find the words. It was on a level with being fed to piranhas. The only difference was that they didn't eat me alive. They just left me floating in the water, bloody and in pain. The pain was inside my head. I wouldn't wish that kind of suffering on my worst enemy. I didn't dare focus my gaze on a single

© Emil Fraima

object because I believed they'd all been intentionally brought out to mess with me. I looked for secret codes in the toilet roll.

***

I was throwing up in the bathroom. Only water came out. I was on my knees in front of the toilet bowl. There was a doctor beside me. I grabbed his hand. He was a little startled. I begged him for relief, but none came. The doctor saw my angel tattoo. He told me he'd seen an angel once.

"What?"

"We'll talk about it later."

I didn't understand a word. This man was someone who got what I was trying to do. He believed I could break open the gates of Hell.

"You'll become a healer one day. I'm sure of it."

© Emi Hanna

I looked the doctor deep in the eyes. He looked back at me with empathy. I remember the moment like it was yesterday. The doctor seemed pleased with what he saw. My pain, lying on the floor. And I don't mean he got off on my suffering. He was a male doctor, close to retirement. He had seen things, experienced life. He knew how to put two and two together.

My dad stepped into the room with Tom. I took Tom's hand, even though my dad was right next to me. Dad's hand felt scary. He had never understood me. He tried to tell me everything would be all right. Even his gaze felt distant.

After a week of throwing up, crying, and burning my skin with cigarettes, I smelled like a rotten mushroom. The place had a single shower for all the patients, and no one was forced to use it. Tom, Kimmo and my dad managed to convince the doctors to send me to a private hospital.

© Emi Rahma

We took a cab straight to the Beverly Hills Hotel. Instant change of scenery, ha. A bleak mental hospital for a five-star hotel. Tom and my dad forced me to take a shower. Dressed me in a button-up shirt. I was too tired to talk on the way over. I avoided looking at the billboards on the side of the road. They were all erected for me, after all. And I didn't even understand half of them. At least the BMW ad was clear. Los Angeles was giving me a new car. So my book had at least been published in California. The city wanted to give me a small token of their appreciation. Coca-Cola wanted to be part of the book's production too.

***

Tom had booked a table at a luxurious, atmospheric restaurant. It was only a short walk from the hotel. Dad and Tom thought a chill night out might calm me down, since the public

© Emi Fränna

hospital had been so shocking. Maybe a nice steak, a Coke, a chat in a safe environment would bring me back to Earth for a while. The four of us had dinner. My dad and Tom were sweating. I suggested to Tom that we should smoke some pot to calm my dad, Kimmo and Tom down a little. Tom burst out laughing.

"At least you haven't lost your sense of humor."

"Tom, the chef's not trying to poison me, is he? The world isn't ready for the truth. There are all these cameras here."

I was starting to get scared and paranoid.

"Let's lower our voices. Why do I have to fight alone?"

Tom looked at my dad. "Let's take him now." We finished our steaks. Dad sent the dessert menu back to the kitchen. Tom ordered a long black private limo.

"Are we going to a party? Are they throwing me a party after all?"

© Erin Haima

The limo drove to **UCLA** Hospital as quickly as possible.

***

My dad was shocked to see me in this state. Would his son ever recover? Was this it? I had turned into a self-destructive addict, in too deep for anyone to reach me or understand me anymore. Dad squeezed my hand. Tears welled up in my eyes.

We were sitting in the hospital café. Behind closed doors. A thousand thoughts were running through my head. I couldn't make sense of anything. It was my turn to see the doctor. Dad took me by the hand again. I realized the party was turning into yet another hospital visit.

"Don't tell the doctors you've been taking drugs. For insurance reasons. This is one of the most expensive facilities around."

© Emil Hajima

My heart felt like it had been shot with rusty arrows.

***

Two kind-seeming Jewish doctors were interviewing me.

"How are you feeling?"

"Awful?"

"Have you taken any hormones?"

Apparently my muscles hadn't completely atrophied yet. I chuckled.

"Never. But a fuckload of drugs, yeah. Could you commit my dad? I feel like he needs it more than I do."

"I understand. You don't want to see him right now."

"What the fuck am I doing here? The book, what did you think of the book?"

The doctors looked at me with sympathy. They kept the conversation short. One of them

© Erin Reiana

went out to tell my dad that his son wanted to go into care alone. "Your son's not ready to return to Finland." At first, the doctors had considered I might fly to Finland with my dad. But I don't think anyone would have let me board a plane, even though they talked about it. I myself didn't want to go to Finland because my book project was still incomplete.

My dad booked a flight to Helsinki Airport. Before he left, he brought me the coolest Jordan tracksuit I had ever seen, a Livestrong bracelet, a blue UCLA college hoodie, a pile of boxers and a new book. But that night I looked for hidden codes inside the book. Maybe they had hidden something in there that I should know? It wasn't my dad's fault if they had. Dad promised to come back in two weeks.

***

© Emil Hamina

The quality of care at UCLA was better. I played pool with the nurses during the day. In the evenings, we watched the latest movies in the break room. I had multiple panic attacks. The narrow corridors separating our bedrooms from each other kept closing in on me. They medicated me every three to four hours.

One morning, I was locked in a padded cell. I'd resisted taking my meds. I looked at the black padding on the walls. Kneeled on the floor and prayed to God. Took off my glasses and broke them in half. Alone in the room, I yelled, "I wanna see the world like everybody else!" There was no response.

Sometimes I held a Bible in my lap as I lay on the couch. I don't even remember where I got it from. One of the patients, a beautiful young addict, told me to let go of the Bible. "Don't read that."

My pain was indescribable. I was inside a horror movie. The pen on the table was

© Erin Hanna

whispering secrets to me. Had it been brought over for contract negotiations? The nurses kept trying to interfere with my train of thought. No one understood me.

I still had an iPod in my backpack. I went and sat on the bed in my room. Put on "Wish You Were Here" by Pink Floyd. Finally someone who understood what I was going through.

**Listen: Pink Floyd – "Wish You Were Here"**

***

All my friends visited me, one after the other. Tom's wife baked me cookies. That made me tear up. Kian showed a whole new side of himself. He visited me every day, brought little gifts.

Ryan had come over straight from work. He was wearing a dark suit. I was in my sweatpants and a worn t-shirt, eating popcorn. I didn't know how to start the conversation. My gaze

© Fini Hallama

wandered over the other patients. I was comparing myself to them. I felt insignificant, admiring Ryan's dark blue suit.

"I'd like to be like you."

"What, a 5'11" fatso?"

"You're a good guy."

"So are you. And no one ever comes to talk to me when we're out. They always talk to you."

"I don't want them. Should I call Jessica?"

Ryan burst out laughing. "Fuck no. Not right now. Trust me."

For the first time in a long time, a dimple appeared on my cheek…

Every now and then, I made it back to Earth for brief moments. With my friends beside me. Of course in about two hours' time, I'd be convinced again that the world was one big fucking conspiracy. A higher power had chosen me for an important mission, even if it was starting to feel impossible. The Devil kept putting up obstacles.

© Fran Hanna

"You think I'm ever gonna get better?"

"Of course."

"Then we can have a joint and listen to Dave Matthews Band."

Ryan burst out laughing again. "Fuck me! I think I'm done with that stuff."

I think Ryan had had a bit of a scare. Something like this could actually happen?

We took out a chessboard. Focused on the game. Ryan kept eating my pawns on every move. After ten minutes, I flipped the board over.

"This is bullshit. I can't do this."

"Don't give up now. And I mean, please never give up."

Ryan picked the pawns up from the floor. I found it impossible to concentrate on the game. My head was full of chemicals. Occasionally, I had the thought that maybe the game was about something else entirely. Maybe they were filming and analyzing the game all over the world. The

© EmmRollana

only way to squash the thoughts was to flip the board. But I couldn't tell that to Ryan. We went back to the round tables. A nurse came over to complain that we were laughing too hard.

"You're bothering the other patients."

We laughed even harder.

"What, are we just supposed to cry in here? Cry and cry, all day long!"

"Emil, come on. But yeah, it's pretty messed up."

Ryan looked at his watch. Two hours had gone by fast.

I had fewer nightmares that night. Only woke up twice. Ryan's sense of humor, his dirty jokes, they calmed me down. He told me he always knew I was crazy. "Good crazy." And now it was official. Medically certified... I told Ryan I'd get him some tasty hospital cake if he brought me some pot.

***

© Emil Hellana

My mom called the hospital every day. Consoled me. Niklas told me that Vesa-Matti Loiri, Mika Waltari and many other Finnish legends had gone through similar things. He said he'd tried to find out for my mom just how many creative people had been in a mental hospital.

"These things make you stronger."

I found that hard to believe. I was wearing trousers that were five sizes too big for me. There was a wristband on my arm with my name and patient ID on it. Niklas still wasn't back in Los Angeles, so he couldn't come by to visit me. But he often called me at the hospital. The calls were under a minute long. That was the official advice.

***

© Erin Hanson

On weekday mornings, we had two hours of group therapy. There were tissues on the table. We sat in a circle. I always sat quietly, listening to the others' problems. Divorces, violent men, getting fired, the death of a loved one... On Wednesday morning, I opened my mouth. I told them I'd been raped when I was 11 years old.

"I've been dead ever since."

I took the pack of tissues and threw it furiously against the wall. I looked at the other patients' faces. I couldn't see their eyes. The walls of the room were caving in. The ceiling was closing in on me. I grabbed the table for support. A nurse took a hold of me. It was hard to breathe.

The nurse took me to a balcony protected by a thick metal grid. It was there so nobody could jump. He gave me a pink pill. I washed it down with water. Looked down at the street. The café's outdoor seating area was filling up. I

© Fini Hanna

dreamed about sitting down there. The psychiatrist came up to me.

"You were brave today."

"When?"

"Just now. I can sense when there's something special about a patient."

"What?"

"The good ones always make it."

"Why am I doomed?"

"You're not doomed. You've been knocked out, but it's only the second round."

"What do you think about love?"

"I have a wife and two kids. I love them."

"Do you believe in love?"

"Of course. What would be the point otherwise?"

"Maybe there is no point. No one can love me the way I am. Who's gonna want a man who has a complex about sex? How was the Lakers game, by the way?"

©EmiFilippa

I changed the subject on the fly. I didn't have a clue whether the Lakers had played or not. The moments when I was free of paranoia were getting longer and longer. But the real world wasn't the same after my confession. Partly it added to the pain, since the demons always had a way of bringing me back to la-la land. And the problem kind of grew because both worlds were now turning into one and the same Hell.

As I sat down on the side of the bed that evening, I noticed someone had taken the laces out of my red Converse. I didn't get why anyone would steal someone's shoelaces. Obviously, the doctors were worried I might try to kill myself. Not that I could see that at the time. I blamed my roommate.

***

I was crying and shaking in the corner of the couch across from the pool table. A male

© Erin Hanna

patient, a little older than me, embraced me. He told me his story. He had been a lawyer in Tokyo. Got addicted to drugs. Lost his job and his wife.

We got along well. He never burst into tears, but he had bad withdrawals and panic attacks. The doctors forced us both into a room with former alcoholics. They told us how much their lives had improved after they stopped drinking. They had loads of dark stories from their past.

"I don't have a drug problem. But will you read my book?"

They soon discovered it was pointless talking to me. I couldn't understand why I was being compared to an alcoholic. The lawyer next to me stared at the walls. He understood me better than the doctors. The whole thing was like a sitcom. The lawyer even suggested we all have a beer together. Take it easy.

"Maybe we could even understand each other?"

© Erin Hallana

The former alcoholics didn't find it funny. The lawyer added fuel to the fire.

"When was the last time you laughed? When you were drunk? How about that thing with your wife, which one of you cheated?"

The atmosphere in the room turned menacing in the space of a second.

The lawyer was the furthest thing from a mean guy. He always supported others in group therapy. He just didn't have a filter. Our lecturers got up.

"You can't help people who don't wanna be helped."

The two of us stayed behind in the room. The lawyer drew a pussy on the chalkboard.

"Well, this was fucked up."

We cracked up. Felt like we were tough guys for a second. After we left the room, they had our pills waiting for us.

"And lift your tongue."

© Emil Hamma

Two nurses made sure we took our medicine. The lawyer liked the pills, though. He asked for more every day. They didn't give him any. I tried to give mine to him. The doctors made sure I failed.

***

The evening snack was always the highlight of my day. They gave me popcorn and other goodies. That's when we also had to fill in our meal preferences for the next day. I never read through the options, I just ticked whatever box as quickly as I could. Sometimes I was surprised with twice as much food as I could eat. I gave away my extra pastries to the other patients. Afterward, I found out that my treatment cost twenty-nine thousand dollars. My insurance company would've been grateful if I'd had the sense to read the menu.

© Fini Raimo

***

Sometimes Tom's wife came to see me on her own. I didn't let myself cry around her. I explained to Katie that I believed the Earth was actually Hell.

"Then why would an innocent child be born into this world?"

"Maybe that's exactly why."

"Emil. There are many good things in this world. You'll see."

We usually talked about women, about love. Tom had told Katie about my childhood trauma. I think that was the reason she kept helping me. I told Katie she'd be a fool if she didn't marry Tom. She always laughed. I told Tom the same thing, obviously. Many years later, Tom and Katie got married. No thanks to me, probably.

After sunset, Tom suddenly made a confession. His mother had been raped as an

©Emil Hansma

adult. She had been in a mental hospital ever since. Despite multiple attempts, she had never fully recovered. This had happened years ago. She hadn't received the help she needed in time. She was unlikely to ever recover. Tom had seen a second chance in me. I didn't understand that. Tom genuinely wanted me to get well. He missed work meetings to visit me.

Afterward, I found out that Tom had taken my breakdown hard. It had brought up difficult memories for him. Tom helped me even though we weren't close. Niklas couldn't come see me in the hospital because he wasn't in the country at the time. I'm sure he'd have been there for me. He had a good heart beneath a tough exterior. He partly blamed himself for what happened to me.

***

© Emi Hamina

My delusions got the better of me again. I'd refused to take my meds in the morning. Told the other patients to do the same.

"These doctors are fucking crazy."

All the nurses got mad at me. I told an older male patient I was getting a house with a pool soon. He could come and live in my spare room. He stared at me with his glazed eyes and thanked me profusely. Tom came to the hospital straight from work. He was angry. He grabbed my arm and pulled me aside.

"Goddammit, Emil! If you don't take your meds, I won't come and see you ever again. And no one else will either."

I tried to explain.

"Don't you see? You have to read my book."

He was fuming.

"You could stay like that forever."

Tom didn't stay to listen to my explanations. He just left. I looked fearfully through the

© EmilHallina

glass door. My emotional support person's leather jacket disappeared around the corner.

I went up to the nearest nurse and asked for my medicine. Washed the pills down with orange juice.

I used the hospital phone to call Tom that evening. I told him I'd taken the pills. They'd confiscated my own phone a long time ago. I'd called 911 on my first day there and asked for emergency assistance. I hadn't seen my phone since. Tom promised to come visit me with Katie tomorrow.

***

Kimmo from the Finnish Embassy came to see me often. His wife baked me all sorts of goodies too. He had bought me a painting. It was a boat, floating on the streets. A flood had submerged the houses. I kept the painting on

© Emi Hallama

the windowsill of my room. I didn't understand its meaning yet.

Kimmo played the guitar. He brought it with him once. Sat down in the armchair in my room. Played it for me. In that moment, I understood the meaning of music for the first time. There was no need for lyrics. The guitar strings told me exactly what I needed to hear. My mind grew calm, and I focused only on the music. That moment was one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. In the middle of the worst pain imaginable, I could just focus on the music. I forgot everything around me. Closed my eyes and pictured myself sitting by the sea in Italy.

***

I had a long and heated argument with a nurse. I wanted to walk across the road, get a black coffee from Starbucks. Apparently, I

© Emi Raiona

couldn't. I was in a closed ward. I couldn't get my head around it.

"One fucking coffee."

There was a basketball court and park benches on the hospital grounds. My ward was on the thirteenth floor. I watched the cars in traffic through the metal grid. The café was across the street. It was my dream. I had to get there. I wanted to take my time deciding what kind of coffee I wanted to order. Sometimes I told the nurses to go fuck themselves. I was convinced a walk to the café would cure me. After a bad meltdown, they gave me a handful of multicolored pills instead of a coffee.

***

Rick was a slightly stocky nurse in his late forties. We would sit together in the dining room in the evenings, shooting the shit. He'd

© EmiFreimuth

brought me a safety razor from home. Rick was a good example of the kind of nurse some of them were. The ones who genuinely cared about a stranger in need of help. I shaved my beard in the bathroom. It took me ten minutes to mop up the hair.

We talked a lot about life and death that night. Rick told me artists were always fascinated by dark things. I explained that all I wanted was to sort out my life. We talked until midnight. Rick's next shift was on Wednesday. We'd continue our conversation then. Rick even considered taking me to Starbucks for coffee. He managed to convince me that drinking coffee at eight in the evening wasn't such a great idea.

In reality, the sleeping pills made sure I was passed out in ten minutes. The fact that Rick even considered going to Starbucks with me was enough. It made me feel less paranoid. The walls stopped caving in for a second. I actually

© Erin Fanning

believe Rick would have taken me to the coffee shop if it hadn't been so late.

The next morning, I was pulling on my socks when I noticed my Converse laces were back. I instantly walked to the kitchen and told the cook, who I also got along with. My shoelaces were back!

"See?"

He couldn't keep a straight face. Then he high-fived me. I think I laughed a little myself. That same night, Tom told me he'd come straight from a meeting with Fred Durst, the Limp Bizkit singer. Apparently his Converse were missing laces as well.

"You're just fashion forward."

I shot Tom a sharp look.

"I'll never be without shoelaces again."

After a chat with the doctors, I found out I was being sent to Finland. I wasn't well enough to go back to work. I explained there wasn't any work in this shithole anyway. Then I tried to

© FinnFamina

insist they give me back my computer so I could sell my manuscript.

***

They were sending over a Professor Ranan from Finland. I was looking forward to his arrival, as the hospital was getting to me more and more every day. Ranan would accompany me on my flight home. From the way my mom talked, I gathered I wasn't allowed to fly on my own. I don't even think I had enough capacity for a cab. The news about going home hit me hard. I couldn't see why I had to go. What would happen to my book?

It was Sunday. I was sitting on the side of my bed, crying alone. I was in extreme pain, but I still didn't like taking sedatives. Ranan would arrive on Tuesday. I'd have to fight against losing my mind for two more days. The demons were still inside my head. The nurses had taken

© Emi Rahma

my iPod away on Friday. They suspected Metallica was upsetting me even more.

***

Ranan stepped into the lounge area of the hospital. He was a tall gentleman in his seventies, wearing a checkered shirt and gray slacks. A hospital access pass around his neck. He sat down next to me. My pulse began to stabilize.

"No one gets me. I wrote a story and then everything went to shit. No one's ever understood me. I've tried so many times."

"Would you like a coffee?"

"The kitchen's in the other room."

"We'll have a walk and then sit on the patio and have a coffee."

"I'm not allowed to leave the hospital."

"You are now."

"For real?"

© Erin Hanna

I felt like a backpack full of rocks had been lifted from my shoulders. The nurses gave Ranan a doubtful look. Ranan noticed the nurses' attitude.

"Come on then. Where's this boy's coat? Bring it over, now."

A moment later, we were walking down the narrow streets of Westwood. I immediately felt safe next to Ranan. He had an indescribable charisma about him. Seeing palm trees and people made me feel peaceful. We walked past several nice-looking restaurants. Ranan wanted to pick our spot carefully. Eventually he chose a humble café run by two Mexicans.

Ranan bought me a coffee and a donut. He asked about my parents. He knew my dad was the CEO of a large hotel chain. Ranan cleverly probed into my childhood and life values without asking directly. I explained to him how fucked up everything was. Ranan said something I'll never forget.

© Eran Raimi

"I'm not comparing you to Mozart, but Mozart composed while deaf. People kept asking him what he saw when he looked at sheet music. Mozart said the notes flew on the streets. Your situation is somewhat similar. You've been composing while deaf."

I didn't understand a word.

"This is the best coffee I've ever tasted!"

My exclamation brought a kindly look to Ranan's face.

"You know, the worst of the pain is probably behind you by now."

That's where Ranan turned out to be wrong, unfortunately.

On the way back to the hospital, we passed by several fancy restaurants. Ranan pointed at each swanky place with his finger.

"That's where we should have gone. Or that one, that looks great."

"Where we went was OK too."

© Emi Hallana

"See, this may all turn into valuable insight later."

I didn't understand Ranan. Nor did I know how to ask him to elaborate. I doubt I'd have gotten a straight answer even if I had.

Next, we went to a big supermarket. Ranan promised to lend me money so I could buy deodorant, cologne and a new movie on DVD. I could take the DVD back to Finland with me. Ranan suggested Shakespeare in Love, but I picked the latest season of Entourage. When I picked out an Armani cologne, Ranan took it out of my hand and gave me a bottle of regular Old Spice instead. He told me it was just as good.

***

All my friends were around me. My plane would leave for Helsinki in six hours. I hugged them all, one by one. Explained that I'd be back in two weeks. Tom told me they might come and

© Emi Rahma

visit Helsinki as well. For the first time, I had a hunch that everything had gone to shit.

A nurse came up to Ranan and told him the hospital couldn't give out any free medication to tide me over on the way home. The meds for the trip would cost more than a thousand dollars. I suggested we call my dad. He could pay for them. Ranan's answer scared me.

"We won't need them."

"What if I go crazy again?"

"You're not crazy, Emil. It's complicated." Ranan turned to the nurses. "Do tell your president what a wonderful healthcare system you have."

The nurses were amused by the comment.

"We all feel the same way."

"What about the meds?" I was getting anxious and starting to sweat. But I felt so safe next to Ranan that I managed to avoid a panic attack.

"We'll eat well on the plane, Emil."

© Emil Ruusima

A male Jewish doctor came up to us. He talked to Ranan in a language I couldn't make heads or tails of. Neither could the nurses, honestly. The doctor treated Ranan with respect.

A bunch of the nurses came around to give me a hug and wish me a good journey home. I was welcome to visit the hospital anytime. I thought to myself, I'm never coming back here, not even if they paid me millions to do it. Even the nurse who'd locked me in a padded cell came to shake my hand. I was overwhelmed with terror at his approach. Ranan could tell something was up. He saw something in the nurse that he didn't like, either. He snapped, "Who are you!" The nurse was thrown off. He slithered away like a snake.

© Erin Hanna

# Chapter 6: Underground

We flew in first class. I watched the businessmen negotiating all around me. Their pinstripe suits looked very important. I was wearing the 5XL Jordan tracksuit my dad had given me. Ranan gave me permission to drink one beer.

"God, this tastes good."

Ranan laughed out loud.

"We'll keep it at the one, though."

The plane had been in the air for about three hours. We talked about religions for a while. I explained that the Earth was actually Hell. Ranan told me stories about how people used to spread Christianity by the sword. Cutting off people's heads. Fighting over the right way to draw a cross.

"See how crazy it all was?"

I kept quiet. I couldn't find the words.

© Erin Helena

"And it's still happening."

Ranan grew serious. I tried to explain that I didn't care what anyone believed in, as long as they didn't hurt other people.

"I believe that too, but you can't go around with a sword. Using swords is crazy."

After a brief conversation, we put on our headphones. We picked the new Batman movie to watch. After half an hour, Ranan tapped me on the shoulder.

"This seems like trash. It's ridiculous. But then almost all movies are."

I didn't know what to say. Ranan didn't appreciate the art of film whatsoever. That much was already clear from our previous conversations. Yet it turned out that Ranan loved art. He'd been awarded an artist's pension, even though he was a doctor, a professor, ex-military. I just couldn't understand what kind of art he might enjoy. He outright laughed at the movie industry.

© Emil Ahlbäck

***

My parents were waiting for me at Helsinki Airport. Mom's tears had messed up her make-up. She was worried because some of the doctors suspected I had developed schizophrenia. But Ranan had told her he was one hundred percent certain that this boy did not have schizophrenia. He'd told her, "I taught your son to paint sober."

My dad was smiling. I was bone tired.

"Which one am I staying with?"

"You're going to Lapinlahti Hospital at first."

I looked at Ranan, scared.

"No way?"

"Just for a while. It's part of the deal."

"What fucking deal?"

We all walked to the parking garage together. I saw Ranan's old car, a blue Volkswagen Golf. I

© Emi Rainma

was mad at him. Why was he lecturing me about life? He wasn't successful.

My mom was driving. I stayed silent for the whole drive. I wanted to sit in the back seat. Outside the hospital, my mom bent down to smell the beautiful flowers.

"Come and smell these."

"Don't care."

They escorted me to a small room. A young man was reading a book in there. I slammed my bag on the floor in a rage. The boy got up.

"Henkka, hi."

"Emil."

"We're gonna be roommates."

"I'm leaving in the morning. I'm not staying here."

"This hospital saved me. I had anorexia."

I inspected the boy. He did seem very thin. A male nurse wearing yellow Crocs walked in.

"Emil. Do you want some supper?"

"No. I wanna go home."

© Emi Hallama

I climbed into bed and slept like a log that night. All thanks to the multicolored pills, of course. How else? I was filled with rage. They'd taken away my cell phone again. I'd get it back in the morning, apparently. Otherwise, I'd have called my friend Jori to come pick me the fuck up. I could have done with a couple of beers in the company of my best friend, who I hadn't seen in years.

***

A sunbeam was shining through the window. I checked the clock in the corridor. It was 8 a.m. I packed my things in a hurry. There was no one in the corridor. I walked to the nurses' break room, where two female nurses were lost in their phones.

"I just came to tell you I'm going home."

"You can't leave just like that."

"I was told I'd only be here one night."

© Fran Rellama

"Have some breakfast first."

"I'm not hungry."

"Wait a second. I'll make a phone call. We'll fill out the paperwork so you can go home."

The woman pulled a cell phone from the pocket of her white coat. The minutes dragged by slowly. Two large, bald security guards came in. They took me by the arm.

"Let's go."

"What! What! I'm going home."

The men led me to the end of the corridor. Then down the stairs. We arrived at the closed ward.

"Fuck you! I'll sue! Fucking monkeys!"

"You can't just leave the hospital."

"Fuck that! I didn't know I was in prison!"

They showed me my new room. It was a dark, cramped rathole. The Head of the Department came by to introduce himself. A rugged face, a gray beard, thick brown glasses.

"Hi, I'm Risto."

©Erin Hanna

"What happened? Why am I suddenly here?"

"You were in an open ward, but you tried to leave before we'd had a chance to examine you. Until we know your full background, we have to keep you here by law."

"Oh. OK. Well, take me back to the open ward, I'll stay there."

"We can't do that anymore."

"What a fucking joke. It just never fucking ends, does it!"

I sat in the windowless room. My thoughts were racing from one image to another. I didn't even feel sad. My life had been a total rollercoaster. Now I was wearing yet another wristband with my name on it. And it wasn't to go to an amusement park.

© EmiFriima

***

At breakfast, I covered my toast in butter. A pregnant Somali woman and an emaciated girl

were sitting next to me. I felt bad for the pregnant woman. What was she here for? I tried to catch her eye. She looked down. They took my pulse and gave me new pills. They were a different color from the ones at UCLA Hospital. The newspaper rack had today's copy of Helsingin Sanomat on it. I didn't want to read the news, it felt too upsetting.

After breakfast, my mom came by. She brought me some Fazer chocolate. I took the chocolate and went back to my room. Mom stayed behind to talk to the doctor. I munched on the chocolate. A nurse opened the door, screamed:

"Emil has slit his wrists!"

The doctor and my mom ran into the room. I was startled awake. I had fallen asleep on top of the chocolates. The nurse thought the chocolate smears on the sheets were blood. Mom tore into her. I smugly asked the nurse to change the sheets. I asked her if she actually

© Emil Ahlroth

worked here or if she was just another patient. The nurse did not find it funny.

Later that evening, the same nurse let me have my phone back for a while. Apology accepted.

***

Over the following days, they ran loads of tests on me. They suspected a brain tumor or a mental illness of some kind. My family was called in on Wednesday to hear the results. My brother was sitting anxiously in the hospital meeting room. The doctor initiated the conversation.

"We have established that Emil displays manic depressive tendencies. In other words, he has bipolar disorder. It's characterized by intense mood volatility. The illness manifested as mania in the US. Drugs played their part in triggering

© Emil Ahlina

the illness. During a manic episode, the patient loses their grip on reality."

I listened intently. I was being declared certifiably insane. The doctor went on.

"Emil studied art. Bipolar disorder has a direct link to creativity. It's the illness of great artists, according to several studies."

Dad interjected solemnly, "I guess regular people can have it too, right?"

They handed me a pamphlet explaining what bipolar disorder was. How the patient's loved ones could support them. How the patient should accommodate the illness in their life. I threw the pamphlet into a trash can as soon as we got to the corridor. I wasn't going to take instructions on how to live my life like some halfwit. I was a person, not a robot that needed programming. I guess that was proof of what Kian had said: "You're not easy to walk all over."

© Emil Ahlina

I wanted to call Ranan and ask him, "What the fuck is bipolar disorder?" Maybe he could explain it to me. Then again, he never said anything about any diagnosis.

***

About a week later, they told me they were moving me to another room. My new roommate was a 52-year-old man. He was wearing a dark suit and fancy patent leather shoes. I wondered why the suit. We were in a madhouse. What the fuck did he need a suit for? Oh, right. We were in a madhouse... I felt like laughing for the first time in a long time. The man opened his mouth.

"My wife left me. She got half of everything I owned and custody of the kids. I had an expensive lawyer. It didn't help. What are you in for?"

"I dunno. I guess I'm sick. I don't wanna be here."

© Erin Rahana

I looked the guy deep in the eyes. They were warm, the eyes of an honest man. He looked like a model in a Dressmann commercial.

"So I've been thinking. I'm gonna rip out those bars and grab a beer at Molly Malone's. Wanna join? I'll buy you a beer."

I froze.

"I think that's probably a bad idea."

Two hours later, the man tried to rip the iron bars out of the window with his bare hands. He didn't really get anywhere with it. I promised to stand guard in case any nurses came in. After trying with his bare hands, he started searching the drawers in the room for a screwdriver. Surprise, surprise, nothing but dust bunnies anywhere.

I woke up around eight in the morning to my roommate putting on a tie and shining his shoes. Nothing surprised me anymore. I burrowed under the blankets until someone came to pick me up for breakfast.

© Erin Rollins

I spent my days sleeping. The meds drained all my strength. They also gave me fast food cravings. My mom brought me pizza and burgers every day. I ate them between hospital meals. They weighed me every week. The medication caused me to gain weight, increased my appetite. I'd never had issues with my weight before. I gained eleven pounds in one week. I was hungry all the time.

***

I was sitting in the hospital lobby, holding a newspaper from a few days ago. I felt up to reading it now. The worst of my delusions had gone. Of course they still surfaced occasionally. They'd been replaced by anxiety and an intense fear that often overwhelmed me. My best friend Jori was coming for a visit. I felt nervous about it. How would I explain everything? After ten

©Erin Hollama

long minutes of counting my drops of sweat, Jori arrived in the lobby.

"Holy shit, Emil! I'mma visit you every day. Did you see how hot that nurse was? Go for that ass!"

"I can't fucking do that. You know where I am, right?"

"I mean, they can't put you anywhere worse, can they?"

I cracked up. We were both in stitches.

"You're fucking crazy!"

"No one's crazy!"

Jori had an incredible ability to break the ice. This wasn't the first time. Or the last. He made me feel better in no time. We started talking about basketball and our friends' engagement news. I started feeling kind of nostalgic. Jori didn't ask any awkward questions. He'd talked to my parents already. He made me feel just a little bit more normal. I grabbed a magazine out

© Erin Fellama

of the rack. It was Alibi. Such a trashy true crime tabloid.

"What the fuck! Alibi! We're in a mental hospital and people read Alibi? Who's the crazy one here?"

Jori cracked up. "Fucking hell."

"This is exactly the kind of bullshit I've been dealing with."

A doctor came over and nervously took the magazine away.

"Was that yours?"

"It got mixed up in there by mistake."

"So it belongs to one of the doctors. Well, that explains everything."

My friend tried not to laugh and failed.

"This truly is a madhouse."

We talked about the summer coming up. All the things we could do. Several hours later, my friend had to go home. I had to go back to my doghouse. I couldn't find it in myself to be grateful. How amazing it was to have such a

© Erin Rooma

good friend. I was using up all the energy I had to keep myself from dissolving into dust. For the first time, I thought about what my other friends would say when they heard I was at Lapinlahti. I looked up at the ceiling in my room.

**Listen: Peter Gabriel – "Red Rain"**

***

After three long weeks and counting pills, I was finally told I could go home. I'd have to come back in for daily observation at first, though. I was packing my duffel bag. My roommate, whose name I had forgotten dozens of times, and can't remember now as I write this, gave me a CD. He had dozens of them. I was allowed to pick one. I was moved. I chose a Nickelback album solely based on the cover.

He wished me good luck. I felt sorry for him. He'd tried to bribe the nurses with a Patek

© Emi Reinona

Philippe watch to get out of here. They'd confiscated the watch. His father had given it to him. I often had to reassure him that the watch was safe. I never quite figured out what was wrong with him, but my instinct told me there wasn't an inch of violence in him. He definitely had anxiety to spare, though. Maybe he was suicidal.

I almost forgot to mention something important: he didn't speak Finnish. He was from the UK. That meant he was in the same situation as I had been in America. Not that you can really compare Lapinlahti and a "hospital" in an LA slum.

***

I was lying in my room at my mom's house. I couldn't watch movies because they made me feel ill. I was too tired to even listen to music, read newspapers. All I did was sleep. Sometimes

© Emi Rahma

I told mom my head was exploding. She held me in her arms for hours. Long enough for the panic attack to pass.

Mom told me she'd talked to all my friends. Mauritzio had said, "We always knew Emil was different. In a good way." Apparently, I'd always been kind of an outsider, lost in my own thoughts. Mom reminded me of all the good friends I had. Apparently, Niklas had told her what kind of movies I should watch. What books I should read. Jori was planning to take me to the gym. I myself couldn't see any light at the end of the tunnel.

Mom and I walked to Lapinlahti every day for my appointment. Mom waited in the lobby as I was being interviewed. My friend Juhis had brought me a wooden cross pendant from Brazil. I wore it over my t-shirt every day. The doctor asked me if I was religious. I explained that the cross reminded me that I had a friend who'd walked down narrow alleyways just to pick out

©Emil Hamina

this cross for me. It meant I had a friend who'd thought of me on the other side of the world. My answer brought a warm smile to the doctor's face.

In my heart, I felt bitter. I couldn't understand why I had to go through so much bullshit. God hadn't listened to me in America and he wasn't listening to me now. At least the cross looked good. But on some days, the pendant felt scary.

***

In the evenings, I visited my dad. My mom and brother always drove me even though it was only a couple of miles away. According to the doctors, I needed therapy. "But not quite yet." I was still too weak. My dad's dachshund understood me. She always came to sit in my lap. I gave her scritches for hours on end. She never pressured me one way or the other.

© Erin Hallama

Lying on my dad's couch, I think I finally realized that my book was no good. I found it hard to accept. Had I been totally talentless all along? After all of my teachers' efforts. I thought about looking for my older work on my computer. But I didn't. Maybe I knew I wouldn't have the energy to read it anyway in my medicated stupor.

***

Niklas and I were sitting at Café Esplanad. I could see the question in his eyes. How had Emil turned into a 265-pound fatso? No one ever mentioned my weight out loud. The meds made me look like I'd been on a year-long drunken binge, all day, every day.

We talked about Jessica. We came to the conclusion that all I ever saw in her was a way out. I'd been a lying asshole in every way. She had every right to hate me. She was never

© Emil Fahlma

going to grab that coffee with me, either. Niklas also told me that Tom had said Jessica was trashy. I told him I didn't believe that. According to Tom, Jessica liked hanging out with B-list celebrities. Shopping with Paris Hilton. I wasn't sure if this was Niklas' way of helping me, or the truth. Not that it really mattered in the end.

Niklas also gave me a long lecture about the selfishness of suicide. "Leaving everybody else behind to suffer." He read me like an open book. After an intense conversation, we went to Stockmann. At the department store, Niklas carefully picked out a pile of Blu-ray movies for me and paid for them. One of them was a classic, Smoke.

Before we went our separate ways, Niklas gave me a hug. I tried to ask him about my book. "Was it that bad?" He said it wasn't a project he'd be interested in. "Too bleak and oppressive."

© Emi Hamina

He was honest, which was a good thing even though it hurt. Niklas was intelligent. He tried to understand the world I'd ended up in. He'd felt anxious after reading my book. And even more anxious after seeing how I was. I didn't have an explanation for him, since I didn't understand either.

**Listen: Chris Rea – "The Road to Hell"**

***

My weight was starting to bother me. It added to my already low self-esteem. I started jogging on my own, though I took my phone with me just in case. I was afraid of a bad panic attack. I'd ballooned into a pig and my self-confidence was at zero. At first I ran down Valhallankatu to Restaurant Mestaritalli. All of 1,300 feet.

I couldn't shed the weight despite all my efforts, which depressed me even more. And I

© Fan Fiama

don't mean that a fat person would automatically be depressed or that there's anything wrong with being overweight. I believe that ninety percent of overweight people are happier than I was. I'd just always felt insecure about myself. My sporty appearance had been my knight's armor. Now I needed my armor more than ever, but it had disintegrated in battle.

***

Jori and I hung out at different cafés. He told me about his difficult childhood. Sometimes his family couldn't even afford decent food. He knew I came from a wealthy family. I'd never had problems like that. I couldn't relate to Jori. I didn't have the energy. I told Jori about the rape. He was at a loss for words. All he could say was "fucking hell".

Looking back, a bigger reason for how I was feeling was my mistakes in America. I just

© Erin Rhiana

couldn't see it at the time. I looked around at the customers in the café. Could anyone see how much pain I was in? There was only pain and a hundred question marks. Could anybody else tell? You could definitely see it in my glazed look. The meds took the spark out of my eyes.

***

I slept in my mom's back room. I'd turned into a 13-year-old child who only saw monsters in his own bedroom. Mom never asked any questions. Just tucked me in. I woke from a nightmare in the middle of the night. Jumped up.

"Mom, my head's gonna explode."

"Just breathe."

"I had a bad dream."

Mom grabbed benzos from the kitchen. I took two.

"I had a bad dream."

© Erin Hanna

"Tell me."

"I was on a boat. It sank and I fell into the sea. I could hear trumpets on the beach. There were mermaids at the bottom of the sea. Every time I touched one, they became paintings. I lay on the seabed on top of the paintings."

"Drowning means good luck."

Mom was trying to console me. I was scared to close my eyes again. The nightmares were so awful, and they came almost every night. We've all had nightmares at some point. These nightmares were like something from another world. If I'm honest, the way I see them in hindsight is... They came straight from Hell.

***

I was lying in my room. Niklas sent me a text. "Tom says hi. How r u?"

Tom and Niklas used to text me every week. It felt good. My friends cared. Tom and I had

© EmiHaima

talked on the phone, but I found it difficult to talk to him. It brought up too many memories. When Tom asked how I was, I couldn't tell him the truth.

**Listen: Pink Floyd – "Comfortably Numb"**

On Friday, Niklas announced that we were going out for dinner. Niklas' fiancée, Sari, and someone called Laura would be there. Laura was a nice girl, he said. That sounded scary.

"I can't and don't want to."

"No buts, let's go."

We were sitting at Strindberg's. I ordered meatballs and mashed potatoes. Niklas had the meat and potato hash. I didn't say a word for thirty minutes. I nearly fell asleep at the table. After Sari and Laura went off to the ladies' room, Niklas told me what was up.

"Sari and I have been thinking you and Laura would make a great couple."

I realized they felt sorry for me and wanted to help.

© Erin Hanna

"I've been quiet the whole time."

"Laura will give you space. Trust me."

"This makes no fucking sense."

"I mean, you're holding a pretty shit hand at the moment. You've just come out of a mental hospital. Maybe you need a little help."

We both cracked up. For ten seconds, everything felt good again.

***

On Sunday, I was sitting with Laura on a green bench at Esplanadi. I told her about my issues, though I didn't mention the reasons that had led to my total burnout. I knew Niklas had told her everything. This was a total set-up. And Laura was adorable. She just wanted to help. Laura was a make-up artist. She told me she felt insecure about powdering beautiful faces all day long. Even though I liked her, I sent Niklas a message saying Cupid's arrows had

© Emi Fiilima

missed this time. And could he please sort out the mess he had made. I didn't have the courage. And it's not like Laura was even slightly attracted to me.

Afterward, I went to a pub and had a couple of beers. Some doctors had warned me against drinking alcohol. But it's not like I could feel much worse than I already did. I'd reached rock bottom. Which was a bit of good news, I guess. On the other hand, the beer didn't make me feel any better, either. Who knows what might have happened if I had eleven pints? I doubt anything good.

***

At a party with our friends, Niklas took a dig at me in front of everybody.

"Emil went to Hollywood too. Didn't make it though."

© Emil Hamina

Again with this. He probably didn't mean it maliciously, but it hurt anyway. I wasn't exactly feeling great about myself at the moment.

***

I was anxious about my first therapy session. My mom drove me there and back. My therapist was Lila, a woman in her late fifties. We drank peppermint tea. She'd seen my medical records. We talked about drugs, and anger. She made me hit a punching bag. Told me to visualize my enemies and beat them up if I wanted to. I started pummeling.

Take that, Matias. "You're the reason I'm here!" I yelled.

All my elementary school friends got a taste of my fist. I was drenched in sweat. After five minutes of pounding it out, we started talking.

Going to therapy kept triggering my panic attacks. I was happy to reach for a bottle of

© Emi Hanna

pills for relief. I wondered why we never talked about the sexual abuse. We did talk about the bullying. Who knows, maybe it was too big to tackle in the very beginning. The therapist tried to explain that I had poor boundaries. That I didn't know how to set boundaries. She was probably right.

I'm not an expert on therapy. But my nightmares, the panic attacks. They were about something more than a lack of boundaries. Night terrors like you can't even imagine.

***

I was walking down Museokatu. I had forgotten my umbrella. My shoes were full of water. I decided to call the man who had flown to America to get me home. Maybe he could still help me. I had a feeling he could.

"Ranan. About these pills. There's so many of them. How long do patients usually take them?"

© Emil Hallama

Ranan said, "For as long as they're all right in the head."

He told me he was coming over next week to sell my dad a painting. Maybe we could see each other then. I had mixed feelings about this.

***

I saw the painting on Thursday. It was great. Ranan stood beside me as I was admiring it. Lots of different shapes and colors. I praised the fruit basket in the middle.

"Some people see a person there, but you can see a basket too", Ranan said in a kindly tone.

I tried squinting, but couldn't see a person no matter what. Ranan pulled me aside and into my dad's study.

"How have you been? I didn't want to ask in front of the others."

I was honest. "Pretty bad."

© Erin Hanna

He repeated what he'd told me on the plane. "Maybe this will all turn into valuable insight later." I found no comfort in that.

***

Queuing at the local convenience store. I started sweating. The queue wasn't moving as fast as I'd have liked. What would I say to the cashier? The candy shelf was caving in on me. A tabloid headline ripped right through me. I dropped my shopping. Took a pill from my wallet. Called my mom. "Will you come get me, quickly? I'm gonna faint. I'm at Töölö Market."

Once my mom arrived, I went into shock. "Mom, I can't do this anymore. I can't. Why can't I just fucking die?"

We drove straight to a private clinic to see a doctor. They said they could admit me to the hospital again. Mom refused. "I'm taking care of my own son." The doctor prescribed me some

© Emil Ramsay

sedatives to be taken every four hours. Quiet walks in nature.

"Will I ever be normal?"

"Do you mean healed?"

"Yeah."

"It's like a desk drawer, you know? There are all these papers mixed up with each other in there. Now it's time to sort the papers out. And they'll always be in there. They'll just be in order in the future."

The doctor impressed me. He would be my doctor from now on. Heikki had a rugged beard and a worn blazer. He gave me permission to have a beer now and then. There was something bohemian about him. He showed a polite interest in my art studies. Once he smiled and said, "Without bipolar it's probably pretty hard to write anything all that revolutionary..."

***

© Erin Hanna

I spent the next year lying on a couch. Beset by panic attacks. The fact that each panic attack was slightly less intense than the last brought me some consolation. Therapy with Lila was painful. We used cards with pictures on them as tools. I had to pick cards according to how I was feeling. I hated all the thought experiments. I wasn't really feeling better despite thousands of "cognitive" exercises.

I had lost the will to live. In the evenings, I often prayed to God. "Please take me away during the night. So many people die when they don't want to. I'm ready for angels to take me away." In the mornings, I was full of hate.

One evening, I poured a bottle of sleeping pills down my throat. I wasn't sure how many would be enough to make me fall asleep forever. Then I hesitated. Was I sure I was ready to go? Well, the pills were in already. When I woke up the next day, I thought about it like I'd popped

© Erin Hanna

a zit last night. My cheeks were just kind of red and my stomach was upset.

***

Jori and I went to the movies a lot. They took me someplace else for a while. I had a panic attack at a Mads Mikkelsen movie. We left immediately.

"Sorry about having to leave."

"The movie was so shit, I'd have left anyway."

My friend was my walking stick. I always leaned on Jori before I fell. My friends kept supporting me even though I wasn't getting much better. I must have been a heavy burden for them, but I believe Jori had a feeling I was going to be fine. I'm not sure he could have kept going otherwise. I gave nothing back. I never asked about Jori's own life once.

***

© Fran Hanna

I was lying on my mom's couch in a medicated stupor. I sent a text message to Jessica in the US. I apologized. "Things kinda went to shit, all my art stuff and everything else."

Surprisingly enough, she responded. She sent me a touchingly kind message and hoped I'd get better soon. So much for Niklas' analysis...

I guess I got even more depressed after that. This was my first honest message to her. How the fuck could I have been so stupid? The only thing that could fix this was a time machine, and that hasn't been invented yet.

***

My life was full of question marks. I'd been looking for a relationship. A 29-year-old without a single romantic relationship under my belt. But intimacy caused me anxiety. I'd never had sex sober. I had a backpack full of skeletons. I was

© Emil Fahlina

scared that if a woman saw that side of me during sex, she'd never look at me with desire again.

My star sign is Aquarius. If a woman ever moved in with me, I'd probably be laying bricks to separate our bedrooms within two weeks...

Jori wanted to do me a favor, so he picked me up from my mom's house and took me to a strip club. I think I actually managed a smile here and there, and my friend saw that.

A week later, he wanted to go to Tallinn with me. We had to book a cabin for the ferry ride over, since I might have a panic attack on the way. We drank beer in the cabin. At the harbor, a cab was waiting to take us to a brothel. We drove thirty miles to a place in the middle of the woods outside Tallinn. To several brothels, in fact. We acted like we were car shopping. Maybe you need to test drive more than just one car...

© Frau Fatima

I probably shouldn't say this out loud, but my friend turned out to be a pretty decent therapist. Without any training in the field. Definitely better than Lila. Obviously, it was shocking to see these people selling themselves. On their breaks, they did homework, studied. We did talk about all this with Jori on the way back. And at least we treated the girls with respect. But I'm not gonna defend all my choices here.

Jori watched my drinking as well. He kept a strict count of how many beers I could handle. I believe Jori had a hunch that if someone didn't do something, I'd string myself up. And he was right. My friend brought a smile to my face.

***

I was back in Lila's office again. Her office had moved from Kallio in Helsinki to Matinkylä in Espoo. I don't know why I was only sent a

© Erin Hanna

text message with the new address. The room felt dirty. There was a painting on the wall with an old lady hiding under an umbrella. The picture made me anxious. Lila told me she'd been thinking about a career counselor for me. She'd come with me to the employment agency.

I sat in silence with a burning rage simmering inside me. As if I couldn't figure out for myself what I wanted and didn't want. I knew I had to find a job, I just didn't care. I was suffering from hellish nightmares and panic attacks. I was way too sick to work. I was also getting sick of all the thought experiments. Anyone would get anxious if you viewed their whole life through the lens of their childhood. Dug up their past to analyze their behavior, then billed them for it once a month.

I'd been given an IQ test by another psychologist a week before. Lila had suggested it. Lila was taken aback by the results, even though she'd called me smart multiple times.

© Emi Ramona

The psychologist had deemed me highly intelligent. I don't know how a result like that was possible, since my head was full of chemicals.

I also don't know whether it was intelligence or sheer stupidity that made me text Lila that I was taking a break from therapy. In plain English, I was never going back to that office to talk about any more bullshit. There was no humor, joy, or laughter in that shit. And besides, my friend was a brilliant therapist. My conversations with him were at least as deep as my conversations with Lila. And his responses made me laugh. I believe the most important job of a therapist is to get the "patient" to realize they are important just as they are. Do you even need a therapist for that?

Nowadays there are sex therapists too... Just out of curiosity, who are they supposed to be for? People like me? Hell no. Your pathetic

© Elena Ferrante

superficial bullshit is exactly what puts pressure on people like me.

***

Because I refused to go back to Lila, my mom had heard of a traditional bodyworker who lived in the countryside. She drove me to Martta's place. Martta's small and humble cabin was close to Salo. Near our family's summer cottage.

Martta was an 88-year-old super granny. She was chopping wood with an ax when we got there. She led me to the bed inside the cabin. Her strong hands relieved my muscle spasms. She told me my back was full of knots. Afterward, I found out that she suspected I had cancer. But the knots gave in. She was shocked to hear I'd been hitting a punching bag in therapy.

"You heal people with love, not hate."

© Emi Hanna

I quickly realized Martta was some sort of spiritual healer. But she wasn't woo-woo in the slightest. She had her feet firmly on the ground. After a massage, she'd always offer me home-made pastries. To tell you the truth, Martta was a better masseuse than baker. She didn't use any sugar.

I visited Martta every two weeks. It sounds crazy, but she seemed to take and hold my pain in her own body during a massage. She felt ill after every session. A wise person once said, "Those who do not believe in magic will never find it."

I opened up to Martta during the sessions. She gave me the answer I'd wanted to hear from Lila.

"You're no different from anybody else. We all have our struggles. They come and go. But they help us grow."

©Erin Hanna

Lila would have marched me straight to the employment agency if she'd been the one saying those things.

***

My dad was constantly pressuring me to find a job. "Just try it. It'll take your mind off things." He meant well, really. Finnbody gym was advertising for B2B and membership sales reps in the newspaper. I was scared stiff, but I made the call.

The interview was at their Tikkurila gym on Saturday at noon. My mom promised to lend me her car. I had a tendency to have panic attacks on public transport. Driving allowed me to go at my own pace. If I felt an attack coming on, I could pull over, stop the car, roll down the windows. I don't actually know if I was even allowed to drive on the medication I was on. No

© Emi Hellana

doctor ever mentioned it. Which is pretty insane if you think about it.

I got to the gym fifteen minutes before the interview. I poured a couple of tranquilizers down my throat in the restroom. A trembling little boy stared back at me in the mirror. There were ten other applicants. We listened to an hour-long lecture about the company. I found it hard to concentrate. My palms were sweating. I was deathly afraid they would ask me a question. Everybody had to introduce themselves in turn. Explain to everyone why we were so into the sports industry specifically. I didn't give a fuck about the sports industry. I told them I'd played basketball, won two Finnish championships. I couldn't have looked less like an athlete with my glazed eyes.

I got the job. I'd be based in Pitäjänmäki. The gym there was in kind of bad shape. I took solace in the fact that bringing in badminton or floorball contracts meant extra bonuses.

© Emil Hamina

***

For the first few weeks, I was a nervous wreck. I sat in my own little cubicle making client calls. I was too scared to go into the break room, so I ate lunch in my cubicle. I took my anxiety pills three times a shift. Wore sweatpants and a Finnbody hoodie. My appearance bothered me. I'd ballooned to 270 pounds.

I had bouts of nausea in the mornings. My shift usually began at noon and ended at 8 p.m. Which suited me just fine. Working turned out to be the best therapy for me. Dad and Martta were right, it gave me something else to think about. I was slowly learning to deal with people sober. But my will to live had been extinguished.

Occasionally Jori would come to Pitäjänmäki to work out. He pushed me to work out, too.

©Erin Hanna

"You'll lose twenty pounds in a month. You used to be so fit. Let's just fucking do it together."

"Yeah, maybe we should."

But the truth was grim. I didn't lose any weight. You couldn't fight the meds. My strength had seeped out of me. I used to be able to bench 300 pounds, now I was lucky to push 165. Every month or so, my jeans grew tight at the thighs. I was starting to lose hope when it came to my looks. Many antidepressants cause weight gain and low libido. And what does that cause in turn?

***

My next step came when my brother moved to Germany. I moved out of my mom's place into my brother's studio on Töölö Market Square. Even though her place was huge, I needed my own space.

© Emi Hamina

On my first night in the studio, I felt the walls closing in on me. I was afraid of my own mind. It was in such fucking chaos. My night terrors made me scared to fall asleep. I was afraid I was developing schizophrenia. My mind was in control of me, I wasn't in control of my mind.

Evenings were hard. I watched trashy TV and munched on oat bread with cheese. I became a hermit. I went to work. Sometimes to cafés with Jori. Apart from that, I sat at home all the time. I didn't dare to hit the bars, the crowds scared me. And I couldn't talk to women. I was scared to touch alcohol. I was convinced I'd go crazy after a single pint.

Jori consoled me on the phone.

"After you're done with all this shit, we'll get drinks and go MMF some hooker."

I was amused by my friend's way of helping me. Sometimes I wondered if Jori ever saw my sensitive side. On the other hand, maybe he

© Emil Hamna

wanted me to bury my sensitive side. Life might just be easier. Who knows? But I also had no interest in sex thanks to my latest meds.

***

Sanna had been my friend for over a decade. She lived in Lauttasaari. On Sundays, I used to sit on her balcony eating chocolates. Sanna was a beautiful 32-year-old single woman. We'd never been more than friends. Sanna knew all about my skeletons. She was a career woman. It bothered me that she hadn't found a man. I never felt brave enough to ask if she wanted a family. I thought it might be a sore subject. She was dating a married man. She had a crush on him. I tried to explain to her:

"So, you have a crush on a married man who lies to his wife every night. Doesn't seem like a very stand-up dude. He should divorce her if shit's so hard. What a clown."

© Fran Hanna

Despite dozens of pills, I could still have a surprisingly coherent train of thought sometimes. Sanna didn't want to hear it. She knew I was right. She never asked how I was. I told her how I was feeling when I felt like it. My doctor had warned me against sharing everything with everyone. I might regret it later.

So, I should probably stop writing this book. The End. JK, let's keep going...

I don't think Sanna truly understood what I was going through. The radio was playing "Under the Bridge" by the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

***

A young female client was waiting for me in the gym lobby after lunch. My palms were sweating again. I shook her hand.

"I'm sorry, I just washed my hands."

My palms were kind of moist.

"Helena. It's OK."

© Emi Hamina

"Emil. I'll show you around the gym first."

"Cool."

We started the tour. I showed her the spinning room, the yoga room and the gym itself. Then we had a coffee at the high-top tables in the lobby. Helena thought sixty euros a month was kind of expensive. I noticed she was wearing a ring, so I gave her two free week-long passes to the gym. Hey, I still got paid.

"You can take your time and get to know the gym with your man or lady."

"Or lady?" Helena chuckled.

"Well, you never know."

"No, you don't. So does this come with the free personal fitness consultation?"

"Yes. Two of them. I can introduce you to the coaches if you want. We have female and male coaches."

"Don't you do any consultations?"

© Emil Romma

"I guess I could. I do have these love handles. I've noticed browsing Facebook doesn't help. Usually what I do at work is eat pie and browse Facebook."

"That's what everyone does."

"If I'm honest with you, there's not much else to do here. You can't really sell gym memberships like coffee."

"You need to find a more interesting job."

"I don't feel too good. I suffer from panic attacks."

"My sister is the same. She says it helps if you tell people."

"That's why I told you." Smiling.

She bought the membership. Being open about my shit seemed to help with her.

***

A get-together at my friends' place in Punavuori. Pizza, soda water, chips. A strong

© Emi Hanna

smell of pot wafted through the apartment. I was overcome with nausea.

"Wanna hit the balcony? We'll open a window, it'll get rid of the smell."

"It's not that."

I was looking for my hat.

"We want you to stay."

"I'll call you tomorrow. I'm tired."

Mauritzio called out after me.

"Dude, call me when you get home. Yeah?"

"Yup."

I left Pete's place and went straight out for a long walk. I was strolling down Fredrikinkatu. The shop window displays gave me anxiety. The people at Restaurant Kynsilaukka scared me. Would I ever be able to sit in a restaurant without worrying about what to say? Enjoy a good steak without overthinking how to hold the fork? Eat wearing a hat? Just because I fucking felt like it?

© Emi Rahema

A gay couple walked toward me. They were wearing matching green jackets. I wondered what they thought of me. How had I become such a fucking wuss? Would I seriously stay a zombie forever? Would there ever be a day when this fucking nightmare would simply be over? And how had it all begun?

***

There was an electric piano in my little brother's apartment that I played around on. In the evenings, I listened to Eric Clapton and Jeff Buckley. Sometimes, I wondered whether Jeff could have swum back to shore if he wanted to. I was ninety-nine percent sure he could have.

The magic of music was incredible. Different artists were talking to me through their music. The message was clear. Keep going. You'll find your way back home.

© Erin Hanna

I found solace in Eminem. But I wasn't ready to take in his message. He had the kind of courage that I lacked. I only listened to a few of his songs all the way through. I could tell he'd gone through things similar to mine. I could put two and two together from his lyrics. But he seemed to be thriving now. How the hell had he done it? I listened to his song "Deja Vu".

***

I was microwaving a meat pie for lunch at the gym. Ville, a coworker of mine, walked into the kitchen.

"Holy shit, some maniac is shooting up a school in Kauhajoki."

We turned on the radio. There were multiple fatalities. The killer was still on the loose inside the school, carrying a gun. I was instantly overcome with anxiety. The break room filled up with listeners. Everybody kept repeating: "How

© Emi Rahma

can anybody be that sick? He's going to Hell. He'll get what's coming to him."

I was starting to feel ill, though I didn't understand why. I swallowed several pills in the restroom. Waves were coursing through my body. I left work two hours before my shift ended.

I got home. Turned on the TV. Psychologists were analyzing the killer's state of mind on every channel. His childhood. The senseless violence. My mind was in turmoil. I managed to catch a thought. Got scared. I felt sympathy for the shooter. I felt sorry for him. He was a victim too. "What the fuck? Am I a bad person?" I kept asking myself. I had to turn off the TV.

I had to find a way to stop my thoughts. They were racing ahead like a steam train. And I wasn't even on board. I'd been left behind, running by the railway tracks. I tried to grab a handrail and failed. Fell over. A panic attack washed over me. I poured even more pills down my throat.

©Erin Hanna

That night, I didn't sleep for a minute. The killer had found his way inside my head. I found the world unbearable. I'd never wished ill on another person in my life. Well, I'd been jealous of people multiple times. I wasn't thinking about that, though. I believed I'd never done anything wrong. I just couldn't understand how I could feel sympathy for the killer, too. He'd probably been in Hell for a long time without any help from anyone. Not that it gives you a right to violence. So utterly senseless to destroy other people's families. Why couldn't he just shoot himself? Did he think about a big sister crying, asking why her little brother wasn't coming home from school? These were somebody's siblings. Such immense evil.

The following weeks were hard. Once again, nothing made sense whatsoever. I realized I was too sensitive, but still. I couldn't be this sensitive. I didn't dare share my thoughts with anyone, which hurt my heart. I wondered if Jori

© Erin Hanna

would understand me? But I couldn't take the risk, so I kept my mouth shut, which just added to the pain. Was the Earth one big Hell after all?

***

I got a sad phone call. My grandma had been taken to the hospital. It would be her last journey. She had always been there for me. She'd had her own struggles, even tried to kill herself when she was young. She loved telling the story of a cousin fixing the roof of Laitila Church. He'd fallen off the roof. Everybody kept asking, "How did you manage that?" The cousin had sternly answered, "It's a person's private business how they fall."

I arrived at Meilahti Tower Hospital. My mom was in the room with my grandma. Grandma was lying in bed, almost lifeless. Her eyes were closed. I stood at the door, frozen stiff. "Come

© Emi Hiltunen

sit with Grandma on the side of the bed." I couldn't speak. "Eeva and Esa will be here soon." Mom's sister and brother.

"Could I have a moment alone with Grandma?"

My mom said she'd go to the hospital café to buy a tabloid in the meantime. I stood beside my grandma, opened my mouth.

"I'm sorry I haven't been here for you in recent years. I've just been having a hard time. I'm sorry about that."

I remembered the many moments I'd spent lying on Grandma's couch, complaining about life. If only I could get those moments back. I couldn't even remember the last time we laughed together. Grandma always understood and encouraged me. What had I given her? Nothing. I felt like a miserable loser by her bedside. I couldn't change our last encounter even if I wanted to. Grandma always talked about how artistic I was. I just had a bad piano teacher. I should still continue to play. "But I

© Emi Rahma

don't know how." "Keep practicing, you're so musical." I wish I could go back in time.

I looked at my lifeless grandma.

"Grandma, I'm so sorry. I feel so bad now."

At that moment, Grandma grabbed me by the hand. Squeezed. Her eyes were closed. It was her way of saying: "Everything will be all right. Everything will be all right."

It was the last time I saw her. I was told she hadn't reacted to anything for days. I didn't find it necessary to tell the others she'd taken me by the hand with her last ounce of strength and squeezed it three times. It was between me and Grandma.

You saw the icon on my book's website. My grandma gave it to me when I was thirteen years old.

***

© Emil Ramma

A week after my grandma died, I let myself into her house with my own key. I'd been tasked with measuring the length of her piano. A home care worker had been coming by her place for the last year. I didn't stop to think. I smashed the plastic medicine container with a wrench. Threw the meds into my backpack and ran. I didn't even recognize every bottle. The pills tried to look at me with contempt.

Mom's sister nearly raised a stink with the home care people. I quickly admitted to taking "one" sedative.

***

I had started kickboxing lessons with Jori. I could go for free, and I gave Jori loads of weekly passes.

Jori had met an Iranian girl, Siru. Siru had come to Finland as a child refugee. She'd recently moved from Turku to Helsinki. Jori told

© Emi Hallama

me stories about how Siru's father didn't want to meet him at first. Siru should marry a Muslim, not a Finnish man. I found that odd. Hadn't Finland offered Siru's family safe harbor from war? Wasn't helping people what mattered most? But I liked Siru. She always thanked me politely for her free aerobics gift cards. It made me feel good. I felt useful for the first time in a long while.

My boss called me in for a reprimand. She felt I wasn't aggressive enough as a sales rep. I closed about thirty contracts a month, which I thought was good in the circumstances. People in Pitäjänmäki didn't have extra cash lying around. We were pricing ourselves out, though we still had nearly all of the local businesses as our clients. But apparently that wasn't enough. A competitor, SATS, was opening a branch close by. We needed to double our profits. I thought that was ridiculous. At the end of the meeting my boss said:

© Emi Honma

"Oh, and I'm moving you to a commission basis. You can make more money like that. We'll turn you into a top salesman."

"Well, fuck", I thought to myself. On Tuesday, I announced I was quitting. I had to fight for several months to get my outstanding commissions paid. Finnbody left a shit taste in my mouth, even if it had been my first step toward healing. I think the company went broke later on. I can see why. They could have at least cleaned the gym once a week. And fixed the broken equipment.

***

I was listening to Elton John and let my imagination run free. Out and away from my small studio. I wanted to buy a new record player, but I was broke. Being out of a job didn't help. I felt like a burden to everybody. I also felt bitter and envious of my friends. Their

© Emi Hanana

lives were so easy. Work, home. Cooking with the girlfriend. Sex, movies, planning vacations together.

Of course, they all had their own troubles that I often knew nothing about. The problem with anxious alcoholics is that they tend to be shitbags who think the universe revolves around them. Opening my eyes might have helped my anxiety. I just didn't have the strength to broaden my horizons.

I took out the Elton John LP. It was on its last legs. I wasn't sure whether the record player was broken and kept scratching the albums. I turned on the radio. "Behind Blue Eyes" by The Who was on.

**Listen: The Who – "Behind Blue Eyes"**

Doctors can talk all they want about brain chemistry and serotonin deficiencies, but this song explains "bipolar affective disorder" better than a thousand textbooks. But hey, sorry, we're

© Erin Hanna

not quite at the end yet. And I definitely hadn't gained any insight so far.

***

My conversations with Sanna were getting awkward. I didn't enjoy shopping with her. Sitting in cafés with her.

My future was shrouded in a haze, and I didn't have the courage to walk through the forest. How could I find my way home from the heart of a forest? There was no one listening to prayers. Why didn't someone else just hand me a map?

I thought about throwing myself off the balcony more and more often. It was just a thought experiment for now, though. I hadn't tried to kill myself since the pill overdose. And that wasn't really a serious attempt. I'm not sure what it was. Cowardly stupidity.

© Emil Hamina

***

I was at the movies with my dad. Then we went for a pizza. Dad suggested I could start studying at the Marketing Institute. It might go well with my film studies. He promised to pay for it. It was hard to find a job in the Finnish movie industry that paid more than being a cleaner. And an alcoholic pill addict isn't the hottest commodity on the job market either...

***

There were about twenty students in my class. Some younger than me, some older. Our subjects were creative writing, marketing and Finnish.

I had been diagnosed with severe dyslexia in high school. I think my final Finnish grade was the equivalent of a D. Barely a pass. Who knows what grade they would give this story?

© Finn Hallama

Let's hope my old teacher reads this. "Writing isn't your forte." Obviously, the English version has been edited and translated. Well, maybe it would still be a D. Just with a plus on it for good effort 🙂 And the teacher's comment would be, "No smiley faces in a serious text!"

I'll change it into a middle finger. Fuck you.

All of us can write. No one should ever be told "this isn't your forte". About anything.

***

Hey, I've only just noticed. I've been too focused on my writing. I'm in Töölö Library right now. It's as good a place as any to type up the full story. There's a beautiful woman sitting right in front of me. Her laptop is open. She's studying something. Let me try and see what it is.

Psychology. Haha! For real, I'm not even joking. Should I say something? Close my

© Emi Rellama

laptop? What would she think if she ever read my novel? Would saying hi be a lost cause after that?

Maybe I should try to write a thriller after all. Then Solar Films could adapt it into an even worse movie. Three hundred thousand Finns would go see it. I'd finally achieve something revolutionary. I could wear red glasses and look all cool. But I don't know how to write a thriller. Can I even write? I don't know. Why am I typing this at all?

If I'm honest, sometimes I'm overcome with profound insecurity. Am I full of shit? Can I do anything at all? I've made it this far and I still feel stupid. But I can't overthink it. I've already made it. That's what matters.

***

Where were we?

© Emil Ramma

Right, marketing studies. Let's keep going. Wait, no. You get that this story is written as it happened, right? I'm not confusing you or anything? Most of the sentences and opinions here reflect the way I saw things at the time. I'm ashamed to be typing some of them out today. I hope you see what I'm trying to say.

New attempt. Let's go. Marketing studies. I'll try not to intrude on your reading experience again.

Our first class was creative writing. We had to write short stories and commercials. Then we'd trade our pages with the other students so that everybody could read everybody else's work. We had an hour. I stared at the blank sheet of paper for fifty minutes. Then I wrote a poem about a man who wanted to die, but couldn't find bullets for his gun. He threw the empty gun off the balcony in a rage. The gun hit his brother in the head. The brother died in the street. The depressed man broke down even

© Erin Reinina

more. He moaned to the police, "Why couldn't I be satisfied when things were only partly fucked-up?"

I could feel the piercing stares of my classmates. "Who wrote this poem?"

I continued to write poems over the following weeks. Felt the teacher avoiding my eyes. I put all my rage into the poems. Every poem was about death. Now and then, the teacher did praise my creativity.

***

Our first group assignment was to create a mock ad campaign for Dove. We had to use disabled children in the ads. For equality. I told the teacher the idea was both contradictory and naive. He snapped at me:

"It's a playful Dove campaign. For a good cause."

© Fran Hallama

We were divided into groups during the break. Members of my group suggested photos of disabled children holding hands. It would say "Dove" on top. I don't know where I found the strength, but I told them I'd make my own campaign.

"I don't like your ideas."

"Well, what's your suggestion then?"

"Nothing. I couldn't care less, honestly."

I could see the unspoken question in my classmates' eyes. "What are you doing here?" I was wondering the same fucking thing.

I went home and called Niklas.

"I'm so fucking over everything."

"C'mon, dude."

My friend tried to lift my spirits with encouraging words.

***

© Erin Hanna

Monday evening at school, after many poster presentations. Legless kids, a blind kid, a kid with a developmental disability. Dove would bring them all together. Just buy the soap!

It was my turn. I was nervous. Terrified. My palms were sweating. I walked to the front of the class. Presented my drawing. It portrayed Times Square in New York. There were monkey cages at the bottom. In the cages were teenagers and mirrors. The kids were oiling themselves with fat. Taking Instagram pictures, weighing themselves, looking up at the billboards on the skyscrapers. Billboards with nude, fat-free models on them. Bikini models, thin as rails. In one cage, a young girl was busting open the lock with a wrench. In the next panel, she was getting on a bus. A slogan on the side of the bus said, "Be yourself!" The license plate said, "Dove".

All the students burst into laughter and applause. The teacher looked at me sternly:

© Emi Fujioka

"Where are the disabled kids?"

"There, up on the billboards."

The class cracked up again.

"Emil, what are you trying to advertise? This wasn't the assignment."

I had a panic attack. Went back to my spot. My classmates voted my work the best. I didn't know what to think of the teacher, who kept reminding us he had won several advertising industry awards at Cannes. He thought he was better than us. Two weeks later, I went home during recess and never went back. The whole thing had started to piss me off. The teacher often said that copywriters changed the world. What he meant was, copywriters sold people stuff they didn't even need.

I didn't see how this was any different from telemarketers. It's just that "copywriter" sounded like a more important title. Advertising industry parties, slick designer dress shirts. Something about it all did fascinate me. They

© Emil Ahlgren

were still sending monthly invoices to my dad. He thought I was still in school, learning how to make ads for supermarket casseroles.

Oh, and we had a Finnish teacher too. She kept emphasizing how important it was to structure your sentences correctly. How you should write and how you shouldn't write. What was proper Finnish and what wasn't. This whole grammar Nazi thing was the final nail in the coffin.

Of course, if somebody had offered me an actual job at an ad agency, I'd have jumped at it. And I actually ended up in that situation within a month's time.

***

My dad set up a meeting with an advertising agency for me. Hasan & Partners. "They might have a job for you."

© Emin Hajina

I was waiting for my dad's friend Ami in the conference room. An attractive woman brought in two slices of cake. The door closed. The room felt oppressive. Time slowed down. My palms were sweating. I couldn't think of any other way to calm myself except to take a big bite out of the cake. The strawberry tasted fresh. Ami stepped into the room.

"Oh, I see, you went for it already. I haven't even tasted it yet."

I was nervous. I didn't understand how rude I was being. Ami gave me a long lecture about the advertising industry. I'd brought my student short films and some pieces of writing with me. Ami looked through them leisurely.

"Emil, you're talented, but if I hire you, I'll kill you. I can't do it."

I could see how things looked from Ami's point of view. It was like a woman wearing stiletto heels was applying for a job at a construction site. I wasn't fit to work.

©Emil Ahlina

I looked at Ami with glazed eyes.

"I can write car commercials too."

We'd just been talking about car commercials. Ami gave me a serious look.

"You would never be happy here."

Ami could see my disappointment.

"Believe it or not, I'm doing you a favor and helping you by not hiring you."

"What do you mean?"

"My employees can't do what you do."

Despite everything, I believe Ami meant what he said. I walked home from Punavuori, disappointed. I was still scared of having panic attacks on public transport.

© Emi Hanna

# Chapter 7: A Long Way Out

My little brother moved back to Finland. He was furious, he thought I'd messed up his apartment. He's a pedant. The place was tidy enough. I think there was one painting I accidentally knocked off the wall.

I found myself a studio on Topeliuksenkatu. The place was a wreck, just like me. It had a small kitchenette and a balcony. But the location was great. My friends helped me move. One hour and my stuff was in. I bought a bed, a desk and a chest of drawers from Ikea. Spent half an hour trying to assemble the chest, then threw the fucker into the attic.

I scoured flea markets and art exhibitions but couldn't find a single interesting painting. I wanted something to look at on the walls. I did

© Emil Hollma

have an icon my grandparents had given me. It was striking, with real gold leaf on the frames. My christening gift, originally smuggled in from Russia. But it scared me a little. God had turned his back on me when I was a child after all. I remembered praying to God as a kid after my mom's cancer diagnosis. And she did get better. Whether it was thanks to the doctors or a higher power, who knows. That wasn't what kept me up at night. But after my stints in the hospital in LA, I was once and for all convinced that if a higher power did exist, it definitely hated me.

I decided to learn oil painting. My mom bought me the necessary paints and an easel. I don't think I finished a single painting.

***

My savings were running out. The recession had finally hit Finland too. This time it wasn't

© Erin Hanna

just the Nordic countries but the whole world. I did random moving gigs. Carried large, heavy couches up the stairs. All the sweating made me feel a bit better, I even lost eleven pounds. Though I still had more than forty pounds to shed. The work was easy. The less you thought about things, the faster the long days went.

I remember a job where we hauled a load from Vantaa all the way to Porvoo. I was terrified I wouldn't be able to make the trip. This shows you just how small my world had become. I was a scared 6'7" child.

Physical labour helped me pull myself together. Ridiculous but true. Today I understand that when you do your job well, smile, and treat people politely, you're a more interesting individual than any rude banker will ever be.

***

© Emi Rahma

I was sending job applications everywhere. For the first time in a long time, I was excited, as I'd been called for an interview at a new ad agency.

But just as I was about to walk through the glass doors of the agency, I had a huge panic attack. I turned around. Walked back home with my tail between my legs.

Eventually, I was hired as a substitute teacher at an elementary school in Punavuori. Don't ask how I ended up there... I picked up the phone one morning in a pill-infused haze. Called the school. I needed the money. How difficult could it be to teach 7-year-old kids? I could do addition and knew Sweden was Finland's neighbor. Armed with this knowledge, I was convinced I'd be the smartest person in class.

On my first day, I felt anxious. I quickly realized the school building scared me. The classrooms looked the same to me as they had when I was eleven years old. In the teachers'

© Fini Finland

lounge, I was a sheep among wolves. I tried hiding my face behind the newspaper. Twirled my coffee cup in my hand. The coffee was way too strong every fucking day. What maniac was brewing this every day? I decided it must be Ismo, the old history teacher just waiting for retirement. His eyes had lost their spark forty-seven years ago.

My great-uncle was ninety-nine years old and he still had a twinkle in his eye. He knew how to laugh at himself, which (in case you didn't know) is the secret to youthfulness. I was interested in what he had to say. I knew he was a Freemason, though I didn't know what that entailed. But I saw the way he treated other people. He was a good man. A gentleman of the old school. This new generation will go the way of the dinosaur sooner rather than later. Their cause of death won't be an asteroid though, it'll be text emojis. I could sense Ismo the teacher approaching me. A stupid person is easy enough

© Erin Hanna

to get along with, but someone without a sense of humor, impossible.

I liked hanging out with the kids. That was a new experience for me. I played soccer in the courtyard, skipped rope with the girls, folded diamonds out of little pieces of paper. You had to write words and numbers in the folds. Playing with the kids sometimes made me forget I was the teacher. When I was a kid at Töölö Elementary School, we used to play King of the Hill and I always got beaten up. During recess, I used to stare at the hands of the school clock. Count down the minutes.

Now, years later, I didn't pay any attention to the clock. I guess it was kind of weird to stand in front of a class with benzos in my pocket. But I enjoyed myself around the kids. I felt lighter for the first time in a long time. Before teaching, I had no idea hanging out with kids could be so much fun. Their sense of humor is the best. I didn't quite see it at the time, but

© Emil Hannila

it was the 7-year-olds who were taking care of me. The care relationship was backward.

***

Friday came surprisingly quickly. My friends and I decided to go out. We partied at the Apollo. I felt embarrassed about my appearance. I was wearing the loosest-fitting sweater I could find. I hadn't drunk more than a couple of beers. Jori and Juhis were on the dance floor. I was desperately trying to order a glass of water at the bar. Right on cue, a small man turned up next to me and asked me in English where he could get more cocaine. "More?" How had he picked me?

He told me he was from Spain. He'd be in Finland for one more week. There were two attractive young girls with him. The water I was ordering turned into whisky. I tried to talk some sense into myself. Getting wasted wouldn't be

© Emil Hellman

good for me. Then I thought, am I happy? The answer was obvious. I started downing drinks like there was no tomorrow.

I ended up at an after-party with this bunch. We were doing lines in a small apartment in Kallio. The Spanish guy's "cocaine" turned out to be speed. Awful cut shit. In the morning, I slipped out to the balcony with a young woman. My meds had a negative effect on my sexuality though. We tried to get it on, but it was never going to work. We were both too fucked up. Later that morning, we kept going and hit the Pataässä Karaoke Bar.

On Sunday night, I wondered whether I should call the elementary school. Would I be able to make it to my shift in the morning? Despite my fears, I decided to go anyway and miraculously made it through the day.

***

© Emil Ahlbäck

About three weeks later, on a Thursday, the principal called me into her office. Had I left my pills in the classroom? I'd be getting a reprimand. Had they noticed I was hungover at work? I'd never come in while drunk, though, of that I was almost certain. But I hadn't really climbed out of my bender either.

"Sit down, please."

I sat down on the green chair across from the principal. A cold sweat beading on my face.

Fuck it, there's always moving gigs.

The principal opened her mouth.

"I just wanted to tell you that the children ask when you're coming back every day. You're their favorite sub. You've been such a help to us. We rarely hear feedback this good from the children. Their parents are saying good things too. They've talked about you at home."

I stared ahead in confusion. So I wasn't being fired? It was pretty obvious that most teachers

© Erin Hanna

didn't bother to play with the kids. But I didn't feel I was a good teacher. I mean, I could do first-grade math. 5+6=10. Oh wait, 11.

I did intervene every time I saw bullying. A little girl thanked me once. My intervention had caused her bullies to stop completely. That felt better than a thousand benzos. For a moment, I got to feel I'd helped a tiny human being. It made me emotional on my way home.

***

A beautiful summer evening in Turku. Sanna and Siru were eating tuna salad, Jori and I had gone for ham and basil pizzas. The cold water made us sweat even more. The waitress was flirting with Jori. We found it funny. Siru blew a fuse.

"You always do that, Jori!"

"I haven't done anything."

© Emi Hallama

"Siru, c'mon. Jori was just checking out her awful baggy jeans."

"Yeah, right, Emil!" Siru turned to Jori. "Next you're probably gonna give her a big tip."

We'd agreed that Sanna and Siru would go for a girls' night out. Jori and I headed to Börs Night Club. The bar was filling up. We checked out the girls' beach butts. Jori kept bumping into people he knew. He'd played basketball in Turku before. I hadn't touched alcohol in over a month. I hadn't dared to lately, and I didn't really even want to. I was comfortably numb. Jori did multiple shots with his friends.

"Fuck it, I can't be too weak to have one beer."

"One's not gonna kill ya", Jori said the magic words.

I ordered a beer from the patio. Downed it in three gulps. Ordered another one. Then a vodka shot.

"Emil, take it easy."

©EmiRaima

"Yeah, yeah."

"That's four beers now. Stop. You know you're on meds."

I went to take a leak. Walked inside. Straight to the bar. Tequila shots. It felt good to get drunk. Not scary at all. I was in better shape than I thought. Soon I had a tall blonde woman in my arms. I don't remember how she got there, what we'd talked about. I wrapped my arms around her and we kissed. She wasn't quite as drunk as me. We went to sit on the couches. Jori came up to us and smiled. I told him I'd be taking her back to the hotel. "If Sanna asks any questions, tell her I'll be down for breakfast at the latest."

I lifted my head from my pillow. There was a naked woman sleeping next to me. A Snickers bar lying on the floor. I ate the bar. Saw a condom wrapper on the floor too. I sighed with relief. Somehow I didn't feel hungover, even though I'd been drinking like a fish. Pretty soon

© Emi Hanna

I realized I was still drunk as a skunk. At breakfast it was the others' turn to laugh at me. Everybody else seemed to find it very funny.

***

I was working out at Töölö Gym. They'd switched up my meds a little. Lowered the dose too. I'd made it clear I wanted to get rid of my excess flab. Heikki had moved to another workplace. The doctor sitting across from me snapped, "Your medication should never be discontinued." So, I'd be on pills for the rest of my life. "You can try other medications of course, we do have options."

The doctor told me about a patient who'd come off their meds and, two weeks later, had been running naked in the streets. Interesting. Apparently I'd have to have exactly the right balance of meds in my system at all times...

© Elin Hilma

Like Eminem in "Underground", though, I didn't really care what the fucking doctor said, I was gonna do what I was gonna do... Including relapse if I felt like it.

Switching meds helped, though. I started burning fat, and fast. I dropped 13 pounds in one week. It felt nice to attract looks from girls in the gym again. It had been years since I was happy with my looks. My friends noticed my weight loss.

"Emil, you're looking good."

"So you're saying I was fat a couple of months ago?"

"We all decided not to say anything. You couldn't help it, you know."

I was still kind of chubby. But at least I'd shed the worst of the bloat.

***

© Emil Hamna

I was unhappy with my life on every level. Teaching was making me anxious. I felt I was too sensitive to be a teacher. Hiding behind a newspaper in the teachers' lounge was getting more and more difficult over time. Questions about my favorite sports teams were getting more and more personal every day.

The day before was haunting me. There was a girl in my class, Marika. She was severely disabled. Always wore a Metallica shirt. Marika was only 3'3" tall. She didn't play with the other kids. We'd both been standing in line in the cafeteria. Marika looked at my t-shirt.

"What's your favorite Metallica song?"

"'Nothing Else Matters.'"

"Mine's 'One.'"

I was afraid Marika would see the tears in my eyes. I couldn't find the right words. I was overthinking what to say. The silence turned awkward. I kept munching on a piece of crispbread and couldn't think of anything other

© Erin Hanna

than what the silence must have felt like inside Marika's head. At least I knew who I'd be approaching during the next recess.

Being around the kids was slowly getting more difficult for me. I couldn't believe everything I saw. A first-grader being bullied because of a broken shoe. I'd been bullied because my mom dressed me up in clothes that were too fancy. Anyone can see which is worse.

***

I'd stopped taking some of the meds, though I was still on three different ones. Three pills every morning and every night. I didn't even know what they contained. Maybe they did stop me from walking down the street with my dick in my hand. From feeling sad, from feeling joy. How the fuck should I know? I just opened the bottle and washed the pills down my throat with water.

© Erin Hallama

I felt incapable of teaching. Alcohol had crept back into my life on weekends. If I had one beer, I had another, and didn't stop until my wallet was clear of everything except my supermarket loyalty card. Getting drunk didn't make the depression go away, it just interfered with my motor skills. I couldn't overthink every damn thing when I had to concentrate on walking in a straight line. On Sundays, I'd wake up in Herttoniemi, in Espoo, wherever. Never in Lapland, though, so I guess at least some things were under control.

I found a Facebook friend request waiting for me on Monday. It was one of the employees from my local video store. I rented movies every night. Forgot to return them on time. Sometimes my wallet was AWOL. But somehow I always managed to rent something. I was a good customer apparently. Had dozens of bonus stamps. The guy and I recommended movies to each other. Once he told me to watch some

© Erin Feliana

horror movie. Funny, right? I was even dumb enough to actually watch it while hungover.

***

Siru was cooking pasta in the kitchen. Jori and I were browsing video rental catalogues online. Jori lit some candles. The left corner of the couch was my spot. I was allowed to put my feet up on a chair. I felt good there. My friend still wanted me over for hangs. Still wanted to do things with me even though I hadn't been myself for years. The sign of a true friend.

Some of my old friends had turned their backs on me. I wasn't bitter. I knew I was depressing company. It's not fun to go out to dinner when one friend keeps having panic attacks in the restaurant. Always whines about anxiety and can't enjoy anything.

I believe Jori privately trusted he'd see the old me again one day. Will I ever be able to

© Erin Robina

repay my friend for his selfless support? The answer's easy. No. I don't think I'd be here, writing this, if it wasn't for him.

***

I was sitting on the side of the bed in my pyjama pants, barefoot. The bookshelf was covered in thick dust. Very in line with the dust bunnies on the floor. I hadn't even had the energy to read John Fante in ages. Reading was frustrating, I couldn't concentrate.

My phone beeped. A text from Tiina. We'd gone out for sushi twice. We'd met a couple of months ago in a restaurant. She kept checking her watch every half hour. She told me stories about her ex-boyfriend, a hockey player. "Jussi plays in the NHL." "Oh."

It was clear she didn't appreciate the fact that I was sacrificing three days' salary every time I took her to an expensive restaurant.

© Emi Honma

Sometimes she didn't even say thank you after a 150-euro dinner. Tiina was sexy, but she was becoming less sexy the longer I knew her. And she wasn't even into me. On the other hand, I kept knocking back whiskys with my fancy zander. So who was I to judge her? Who in their right mind would go out with me in the first place?

Last weekend, I'd left the bar early to go to Tiina's place. She was joining me later with a hot pizza. I opened a vodka bottle she'd been given as a gift. Drank a third of it and passed out on the couch. That was the last straw for her. "Sort yourself out." Tiina's text was brief and to the point.

I threw my phone at my armchair. It bounced and fell on the floor. I didn't really care. My cellphone can take anything. My grandma had given me the armchair as a gift. It was really fucking comfortable. It just needed

© Emil Hamina

reupholstering. I'd forgotten my coffee cup next to it way too many times.

***

There were candles burning on the windowsill. Our Christmas tree was decorated to perfection. Mom had done it alone this time. My brother was playing Christmas carols on the piano. I was lounging on the couch with a box of chocolates in my lap. We had just finished dinner.

I thought back to Christmases from my past. One time I was working as Santa Claus, with Jori driving my dad's car. We split the money between us. As a navigator, Jori was terrible. We got lost all over Espoo. The radio was playing Christmas carols. John Lennon's "Happy Xmas" was our favorite. I saw all kinds of ways to celebrate Christmas that year. Poor families as well as rich ones. The children were scared of Santa in every family. I visited a small

© Emi Hiltunen

apartment in a Pitäjänmäki high-rise with a father, mother and a 5-year-old kid. The place had a kind of wistful air to it. The family was sad even though Santa Claus was there. I had a feeling that both parents were unemployed. I wonder how that kid is doing now?

There was another Christmas I spent at a Las Vegas strip club. The saddest Christmas ever. Though fun in its own way. Maybe I'll leave that story untold. Las Vegas at Christmas. No snowflakes falling from the sky. You had to shovel your own snow out of a baggie.

It was always peaceful at Christmas. The world grew quiet for a moment. Our family always celebrated Christmas in a big way. Of course, things had changed a little after my parents got divorced.

Oh hey, my first Christmas present came from Kimmo at the Los Angeles embassy. He had giftwrapped several CDs for me. I looked over the albums. It was music made by Native

© Emi Hanna

Americans. There was also a handwritten card. It's hard to explain, but he was cheering me on in a way.

I remembered a time when we were eating out in Helsinki with Kimmo and my dad. I was staring into space with a glazed look. Distracted and dispirited. Kimmo said to my dad:

"Let's hope some of these boys become tough guys later. We haven't had tough guys in a long time. And I mean a long time."

I never understood what Kimmo wanted me to do. But he'd sent me gifts on several Christmases and birthdays. They always had a message for me, almost like a coach pushing a student forward. I don't know how to explain it, all the pieces have just fallen into place later.

***

The months went by at the elementary school. I felt nothing about anything. Holding my pills in

© Emi Hellinga

my hand always made me feel weak. And I saw zero reason to enjoy life just because I was alive. On the weekends, I drank to get wasted. Combining meds and beer was a non-issue for me. At least I didn't feel anxiety when I was numbed out. Not that I felt anything at all. My sadness didn't go away no matter how wasted I got, though.

Summer came, then fall. I didn't pay any attention to the seasons. I got so used to how I was feeling that I stopped dreaming about anything better. I did think about death, but...

***

Then a kind of turning point happened in my life. Completely out of the blue. As these things usually do. You never know when your positive turning point might come. So never give up.

© Emi Hamina

It was Saturday night. Sanna and I were leaving Restaurant Teatteri to go to Apollo. I had picked up my puffer coat from the cloakroom. Sanna was waiting for her leather jacket. A beautiful blonde woman was sitting alone in an armchair. I noticed her terrible pink shoes. They were way too flashy. Barbie shoes. I walked over to her. I was drunk as usual, so approaching her was easy.

"Hi, come with us to Apollo?"

She responded with a cheerful look.

"I'm waiting for my friends."

"Where are they?"

"I don't know."

"Well, c'mon. I'm not an axe murderer."

The blonde chuckled.

"Who are you, then?"

"Emil."

"Aada."

"Let's grab a drink."

"OK then."

© Emil Romma

How was this so easy? Aada's friends came downstairs. She told me she was going to another nightclub with them. But I managed to score her phone number. I sent her a text from Apollo later. She responded, saying she was going home to bed. "And alone!!"

The next day I sent Aada a hungover text: "Up for coffee?"

Aada sent me a long message where she basically detailed her entire schedule for the week, right down to the hour. She could potentially meet me somewhere between those hours. I was amused. I had pretty much nothing but free time. We agreed on a date at Tin Tin Tango for that same evening. When I got to Töölö Market Square, I nearly texted her and canceled. Cold feet once again. Why were we even meeting up?

Maybe I had this subconscious feeling that someone would save me. Absorb all my pain and

©Erin Rollins

make me whole. Even in all my chaos, I believe I'd been hoping to find that for years.

The hangover wasn't helping. A panic attack.

We sat down. Both of us had green tea and cheese sandwiches. When I paid for her snack, Aada thanked me politely. I got a good vibe from her immediately. Aada told me she was fresh out of a break-up. Just moved to a small apartment. She had never been to Tin Tin Tango before, even though her new place was right around the corner. "Hey, there's a washing machine! You can wash laundry here." Didn't she have a washing machine? I didn't want to ask her outright. Aada told me she was a flight attendant.

"I get to travel a lot."

"You like it?"

"You mean, do I like waitressing in cramped spaces? I also teach fitness classes. I find that very rewarding. I'm kind of looking for my place in life right now."

© Emi Fiona

"Going on adventures?"

"Yeah."

Aada's eyes were sparkling. They shone with light. I can't describe it any better than that. I panicked. Cussed myself out inside my head. The green tea didn't feel right for this. I should have been holding a glass of wine. We looked deep into each other's eyes. That alone brought on a blind panic. The little moments in life… Why couldn't I be like other people?

"What do you do?"

"I teach elementary school. But I don't know if it's really my thing. I studied art, but I haven't really been doing that lately. I do write, though."

"Write what?"

"A book."

I don't know why I lied. I hadn't touched my computer in a long time. I'd tried to write a movie script, but the meds killed off any creativity I had. They killed off my rational

©EmiRahma

thinking too. And what would I have written about? The way everything was gray and black and monochrome?

"I don't wanna say. It's too personal."

"Well, I'll just read it one day."

"If I ever finish it."

Our conversation turned to cities Aada had visited. Our favorite country was the same, Italy. Aada had seen a lot more of the world than me. I respected that. We had a long chat. Could she tell I was on medication? My reaction time wasn't normal.

I couldn't remember the last time I enjoyed a woman's company so much. In that moment, I wanted to be thirty pounds lighter, with a nine-to-five job. Why had I chosen art back in the day? A road to nowhere? This woman was funny and nice. Down-to-earth. We even went for a long walk around Töölö Bay. When had I last laughed and smiled like this? She did that for me. Occasionally I even felt normal. But

© Emi Hallana

ultimately I was overcome with shame. I knew no one would want me as long as I had these pills in my pocket.

The next day, for the first time in ages, I started thinking about ways to get out of this fucking hole. And not by solving a temporary problem with the permanent solution of suicide. If I'm honest though, I didn't believe for a second that my problems were temporary. And even if I could find a way out, what then? What would I have to give?

***

Aada sent me a text on Monday. "It was nice to see u. Have a nice day."

I looked around at the piles of clothing on the floor. I hadn't vacuumed in a week. I believe one of the most important things in a depressed person's life is to try and keep a tidy home.

© Emil Hallama

Chaos in your mind and in your environment is a combination that rarely leads to anything good.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to see Aada again because I was scared. I knew I couldn't act like an ass around her. She wouldn't tolerate that for a second. On the other hand, there was no way she'd want me as I was. I tried to solve the equation in my head. Then I remembered I had an unopened bottle of wine. The solution was only six feet away. I opened the bottle and washed away my insecurities. I listened to my favorite Juice Leskinen song, "Risainen elämä" ("Broken Life").

***

There were only two other customers in the Spanish tapas bar besides us. The tapas plate was tasty. I still enjoyed Aada's company. I liked her style. Her outfits were unpretentious. Totally different from what I'd imagined. I didn't

© Emi Hanana

know where the pink shoes had come from weeks before. Maybe she'd broken a heel on her own shoes. Borrowed a pair of heels from a friend. That must have been it. Aada was an unpretentious girl from Ostrobothnia in every way.

"People say exactly what they mean over there."

"The first time I saw you, I thought you were some dumb beauty queen."

"Haha! Maybe you like dumb beauty queens."

Witty, too. The wine relaxed me. I liked being around this little Aada. She was an atheist. Wouldn't believe anything unless she saw it with her own eyes. I thought that was hot. Except maybe atheist wasn't the right word. I take that back. She had a spiritual side. It was attractive to me, actually.

"You know, Emil, it's probably best to focus on your actions. No one's gonna pick anyone up from home."

© Emil Ahlbäck

I ordered us two more glasses of wine. The waiter told us the place was closing. It was almost midnight.

"Wow, time's just flown by. It was only six o'clock a minute ago."

We continued the night at Aada's place. She made it clear that nothing "untoward" would be happening. That was more than OK with me. I'm sure you get what I mean...

Maybe I was a true gentleman in her eyes for a moment. We talked in bed until sunrise, when Aada fell asleep in my arms. I looked at the time. It was six in the morning. I couldn't sleep without my fucking sleeping pills. I'd forgotten them at home. My sedatives alone didn't have enough of a kick to get me to sleep.

Lately I'd been taking three zopiclone at ten p.m, then another two during the night. Sometimes a third one at five in the morning. Four times the amount I was prescribed. I'd lost all sense of how long I had been doing that.

© Emil Hallina

I looked up at the white ceiling. It needed a fresh coat of paint. I thought to myself, had I ever been able to sleep next to a woman? Did passing out count? I couldn't think of a single time. Aada had several bottles of cold Corona in her fridge. She had made sure I didn't drink more than one. What if I tiptoed to the fridge? I couldn't keep staring at the ceiling thirsty, could I? I tried to get out of bed. Aada grabbed my hand.

"Sleepy time."

Easier said than done. I turned to look at Aada's hair. Her blonde highlights were more interesting to watch than a white ceiling. Had she dyed her hair herself? The highlights weren't even.

© Erin Halima

***

I was sitting in the teachers' lounge holding a cup of coffee, listening to the conversations

flowing around me. The gym teacher was constantly trying to initiate a conversation with me. It was starting to get to me. It didn't seem to bother him at all that I was holding a newspaper. I wasn't in the mood for a chat. I pulled out my phone and called Sanna. She invited me to the movies. I didn't particularly care for Sanna's taste in movies. I casually mentioned how cool Aada was. Sanna was sincerely happy for me.

It wasn't more than a few days before Jori, Siru and Juhis heard about Aada too. I started getting advice on what to do. Sanna's advice was not to date anyone else. Jori's advice was to fuck everything that moves as long as your heart is beating and your dick is hard.

"You should never put all your apples in one basket. Not before there's a ring on your finger."

Obviously my friends knew that my new relationship would go to shit sooner or later.

© Emi Reina

Maybe if I'd met another walking pharmacy, we could have made it work.

***

The ride up in the old wooden elevator seemed to last forever. There was a heart-shaped wreath on Aada's door. We sat down on the bed. The apartment was sparkling clean. We opened a bottle of wine. Aada sat on my lap. I looked at a poster on the wall. It depicted a New York traffic jam. You could see Brooklyn Bridge in the background.

"That pic would be cooler if the cars were black-and-white too."

"That's what they had at Ikea."

Aada clearly didn't like my comment. I looked around. All her furniture was from Ikea. I imagined Aada shopping at Ikea. Walking in and deciding she needed every piece of furniture all at once. She'd probably had her mom or sister

© Erin Hanna

with her. But her home was cozy compared to my own storage unit.

Aada had just come out of a three-year relationship. Apparently her boyfriend had just played poker every night. Aada had spent her nights drinking wine with her friends.

"I just didn't have the energy to go to every shindig everywhere. We're still best friends."

The furry rug was starting to burn beneath my feet. Many women would have loved Aada's situation. A friend of mine told me that Aada's ex was one of the most successful poker players in Finland. Aada didn't have any idea about the shitty hand I was holding. And I'd never exchanged cards with anyone else. I filled my glass to the brim. Aada carried the wine bottle out of my sight.

We talked until the early hours of the morning again. I think I even slept for two hours, because this time I had my pills in my pocket. I took three zopiclone at once just to

© Emil Hannila

be sure. I tried to take them as secretly as I could. I'm not sure whether the night would have gone further than cuddling if I'd been more active. Aada controlled my drinking all night. It annoyed me and felt really good all at the same time. A rollercoaster of feelings. Aada made it clear there would be no sex while drunk.

**Listen: *James Blunt* – "Give Me Some Love"**

***

My night terrors were getting even worse. Believe me, nightmares don't let you off easy when you're underground. It was my trauma being triggered. I had to up my sleeping pill dosage. What that actually meant was that I stopped keeping track. I poured myself a pile of pills every night. Woke up in the night, poured another pile. I lied to the doctor and said I'd lost my bottles. I got 120 pills from the pharmacy in one go. Which was insane.

©EmiRahma

Something was badly wrong. Dusty books on the floor. Paintings I hadn't hung on the walls. Mornings were difficult. I made oatmeal and brewed my coffee. Opened my computer and surfed the internet while I ate. I watched Dave Matthews Band concert clips on YouTube. Ryan had been there. A great show apparently.

Ryan and I were still in touch via email. Ryan couldn't stand Facebook. I'd been invited to his wedding. My parents would have lent me the money to fly over. But I was in such bad shape I was afraid to go. What if I had a panic attack in the middle of the wedding? What would my friend say when he saw me? I was a shadow of who I used to be. I felt sad about having to miss the wedding.

Ryan, I promise to be there the next time you get married... (JK) Miss you, my real friend.

I missed Ryan and Isaac. Would I ever see them again? A nostalgic feeling came over me. I wrote Eminem's name into the YouTube search

© Erin Hanna

bar. I watched his video "3 a.m." How the fuck had he found his way out? You can tell from the video he's gone through the same thing I did at the hospital. How does he look so healthy and happy now? How did you do that? Wish I could have you as my therapist.

**Listen: Eminem – "3 a.m."**

That evening, I told Aada on the phone about my morning nausea. The next morning she sent me a text: "It's eight o'clock, time for a run. Sincerely, your personal trainer, Aada."

I put on my worn running shoes. Aada was right, the demons left me alone during my runs. They drowned in Töölö Bay. They found their way back to my apartment during the night, though. In the mornings, I dumped them back into the sea again. Bit by bit, some of them stayed at the bottom of the sea. It's incredible how much exercise helped my mental health. I was sweating out my misery. Shedding a few pounds gave my self-esteem a boost as well.

© Emi Rinima

***

A rainy Friday night. Aada and I were doing a pub crawl of cozy little bars in Helsinki. Every time I held Aada on my lap, I got goosebumps. We were at a shabby but trendy place on Iso Roobertinkatu. We were discussing the paintings on the wall. They all depicted space. We decided that every piece of furniture in the bar must have been bought from a flea market.

"If you had to take one thing home from here, what would you take?"

I pointed out different chairs.

"How about that green leather armchair? Or that old wooden table?"

"I don't like either of them."

Aada's eyes wandered around the room. I held back laughter.

"Are we still talking about furniture?"

© Emi Hanna

I burst out laughing. The girl from Ostrobothnia was witty. I gave her a squeeze. Aada fiddled with her hoodie strings.

***

As soon as I got home, I typed Niklas' number in my phone. We hadn't talked for a month.

"Emil Zátopek, my man. What's up?"

"Still breathing. How's it going?

"Fuck. I just finished a movie. Had to fight over every frame. I was this close to ending up in a padded cell with you."

"There are worse places. They all probably have cable TV and PlayStations now."

"How's work?"

"I'm a subbing at an elementary school in Punavuori. It's not too bad. Or I dunno, maybe it fucking is. By the way, I met a chick. She's really cool."

© Emi Hamina

My friend instantly figured out the real reason for my call.

"OK, fire away."

"I'm kind of anxious about it."

"Just go for it. Don't fucking overthink everything again."

"I'm running out of banter, you know."

"I'm the same way. All sparkling wit and repartee when it's just some chick. Scared stiff when it's someone I actually like."

"Maybe I should just tell her, hi, I'm Emil, I was railed in the ass as a kid. The other kids washed my beanie in the urinals. I played bingo with a therapist from age 11. Heroin came later. Oh, and I tried to kill myself once. I'm also manic-depressive, but apparently that's genetic. Not 'cause of my childhood. Or that's what the doctor says. By the way, he looks like he jerks off between patients. Gets off on pawing at the next patient with cum on his hands."

© Emil Hamina

"Sounds healthy as fuck! Hey, I'm shooting a movie in London. It got postponed for a year. There's a job for you there if you wanna come? I might get Sean Penn."

"Nice."

"Let's grab a coffee next summer. Oh hey, I'm just driving past our den of sin."

"Which one?"

"Chateau Marmont."

"Haha! But..."

"Fuckssake. Just don't overthink it..."

***

I was buttoning up my black shirt. Looked for my favorite hat under a pile of clothes. Cracked open a beer. I needed Dutch courage. I was running late.

Aada was waiting for me at her place. I stepped into her small yet cozy home. Aada was wearing a green scarf, tied prettily around her

© Erni Hallama

neck. I realized she had put it on for me. There was fresh Finnish cheesecake on the table.

"Did you bake this yourself?"

"Of course! I made the base a bit differently this time."

All my demons knew Aada's street address immediately. Fucking fuck. After a glass of wine, we moved to the bed. I kissed Aada's neck. She started telling me something kind of odd.

"I was seeing this Swedish guy a while ago."

"So what went wrong?"

"I didn't wanna be just a hole."

I took Aada in my arms. My heart was pounding. The demons were knocking on the gates inside my head.

"And he kept bragging about all these beauty queens he'd slept with."

"Sounds like a gentleman. What's the worst thing anyone's ever said to you?"

"A cunt's a cunt, even a retarded one."

"I don't get it."

© Emi Rahma

"I don't either. How about to you?"

"In junior high, I was looking at this girl I had my heart set on. She shouted: 'What are you looking at, Mickey Mouse?' Her name was Julia. And I know my ears stick out a little. So it felt bad."

We cuddled for several minutes. Then we went to the movies as agreed. Aada got to pick the movie. It'd be my turn next time, she said. I felt incredibly weird about never having invited Aada to my place. I started organizing my bookshelf bit by bit. Hanging up paintings. Bought a new dining table.

***

That Christmas Aada sent me a postcard. It had a small girl and a boy on it. They were carrying a huge Christmas tree together. It was the best Christmas present I got. But I put it on my bookshelf, out of sight. I'm not sure why,

© Emi Rainha

but I think seeing the card scared me. I never stopped and listened to my fears. That's what pills were for. Maybe alcohol and drugs, too.

***

It was the first weekend after New Year's. We were in a red brick house on Runeberginkatu, on the top floor. I was kissing Aada's body below the neck. My body was tingling. There was an empty Corona bottle on the floor. Aada hadn't let me drink the wine bottles I'd brought over. She wanted me to be sober. I'd had four beers before coming to her place. She was ready to make love. The demons of Hell found a way in through my ears. I was licking her hairless pussy. I didn't want to stop. Finally I got up. We kissed. Aada wrapped herself in the duvet and got out of bed. The condoms were inside a dresser in the bathroom apparently.

"Haven't I seen you naked already?"

© Erin Rahima

"This is just more comfortable for me."

Aada handed me a condom. I turned into a little boy in three minutes. Overcome with anxiety. I didn't ask permission anymore, just opened a bottle of wine. The bottle was my Viagra. After that, everything would be smooth sailing. Aada could see something was wrong. She took the condom, blew it into a balloon. My shame was indescribable. She got dressed. She was furious with me for opening the wine bottle. I don't know, maybe she thought I didn't find her attractive sober. Guaranteed argument. And I was in no way ready to tell her what was up with me. Even if I was being kind of pressured.

I don't know. If I'd been able to have three bottles of wine in one go, would I have opened up to her? I believe I would. But I was interrupted on my way to the finish line. I put on my black puffer coat. Wiped my tears in the elevator. I kept walking and ended up in Pub Janoinen Lohi, where I poured a few whisky

© Emi Hamina

shots down my throat. I felt immense shame and rage. Once I got home I crawled into bed in my button-up shirt.

***

I ran into Aada one night in Helsinki. We hadn't talked for weeks, apart from a couple of text messages here and there. Who knows what might have happened if I'd been honest from the get-go? Probably at least half my demons would have died in one fell swoop. But I was a coward. Could she have been the first woman I was one hundred percent honest with? I don't think I was even honest with myself. How could I be honest with anyone else?

I froze. I saw her black leggings, her innocent eyes. I felt ashamed. She didn't want to hang out with me because I was acting like a bitter, sarcastic drunk. She made it clear she'd keep partying with her friends.

©Emi Hanna

My entire childhood played on a loop inside my head like a black-and-white film. The reel had been edited by hand, so you could see the splice marks between every frame. Aada had managed to turn on the old film. I myself wanted to destroy the reels for good. At least I had sense enough to leave the nightclub before I caused any more damage. I was putting on my coat in the cloakroom when I saw Aada looking at me out of the corner of my eye. I didn't even tell my friends I was going home. They'd have only tried to make me stay. On the way home I texted them: "I had to take off, you guys have fun."

***

My courage was being put to the test. The next day I was sitting at my friends' house, playing PlayStation with one hand and holding a pizza slice in the other. I didn't care about the

© Emi Rahima

others smoking pot anymore. I had to pull myself together. Preferably as soon as possible. I was ashamed of myself.

I didn't want to lose Aada as a friend. I was scared, but I found some strength by listening to "Fire and Rain" by James Taylor. I was singing along to James.

**Listen: James Taylor – "Fire and Rain"**

***

After I got home, I started organizing my drawers and the bookshelf. I found a pile of my old writings from my student days. I read through them carefully. It felt nostalgic. All that time I had invested in my work. Was it all for nothing? I gathered up old pages from my diary. Opened my computer. The keyboard scared me. There were greasy fingerprints on it. The last time I touched it, I ended up in the hospital. Where would it take me now?

© Emi Hanna

Fuck it, I thought. Things can't get any worse. I compiled sentences from the diary. I had a finished story after five evenings of work. It felt good to write things out.

I vomited all my anger, frustration and grievances onto the page. I thought this might be a good way, in fact probably the only way, for me to be brave enough. This was how I could tell Aada what was up with me. The next day I sent Aada a text: "My book's ready. Would u read it?" She replied quickly: "I'd love to."

I mean, Eric Clapton wrote "Layla" about a married woman he desired. So this wasn't that weird, was it? I tried to convince myself this was at least a decent idea. I didn't consider what it might feel like for the other person to read a creative person's outburst of emotion. I sent it to Aada's email. Anxiety flooded my body immediately. You couldn't cancel an email, no matter how much you wanted to.

© Emi Rellana

Conveniently enough, it happened to be Friday, so I went out for a beer. The bender went on all weekend. My phone and wallet vanished into dark rooms. I had opened Pandora's Box, the one you can't close again. The following week, I laid my story on my dad's office desk.

"Emil, writing isn't realistic."

"They're just thoughts of mine."

"It's impossible to make a living as an author. No one does."

"For fuck's sake, it's a short story. Seventy-seven pages."

"Of course I'll read it. I'm just thinking about what's best for you. Telling it like it is. Put it on the bookshelf."

I was excited. Maybe my dad would finally understand me. The text is probably still there under all the business newspapers. Probably better that way...

Aada sent me a long message. She praised my courage. "You had the guts to let it all out. It's

© Emil Hellana

the first step to healing." She wanted to meet me again. But I'd heard that Aada's sister was shocked. Aada had let her read my book on the plane. She thought Aada shouldn't stick her head in a hornet's nest again.

It was a relief to glue all my diary bits and pieces into a single book. But my demons didn't let me off the noose that easy. They crawled up out of the page and into my skin. I started drinking even more. I figured that if I could turn off my brain, everything would sort itself out somehow. Once again I solved my problems in my tried and tested way. Three benzos in one go. Three times a day. A couple of beers. What fucking problems?

***

We were at Aada's place. Her sister had come down from Kokkola. Tiina was twenty years old, but sharp as a razor. She told me what she

© Eeri Hiltunen

thought about my book. I'd have preferred to forget about it. She was trying to initiate a conversation about delicate subjects. After seeing my face, she changed course politely.

"It could help others. If you're able to show your face. It's just a bit short. It could be a lot longer, the story felt interesting."

"OK."

"You should show it to different publishers. It's not whoring yourself out", Aada said.

Her words stayed with me. Should I make one more attempt to show I was actually good for something? Try to prove I was worthy of another human being? But I knew the truth. I couldn't do anything right. I looked at the New York poster from Ikea. If only I could just disappear into the busy streets right there. New York was my favorite city. We drank wine and talked about Tiina's friend's relationship. The friend had called her, crying, earlier that

© Emi Hiima

evening. The girls soon realized I wasn't any good for relationship advice.

"Do as I say, not as I do."

What a cliché. Aada fell asleep in my lap. We kept talking with Tiina.

"Have a guess, when do you think I last felt good?"

"I don't know. Was it in the book?"

"No."

"How should I know?"

"Guess."

"OK. You were drunk."

Sarcastic but funny.

"No. Now."

"What?"

I pointed my finger at the sleeping Aada. Tiina gave me a wink. I wished the girls a good night and headed home.

***

© Emi Hanna

All my troubles were on the page. So what had changed? Nothing? I was still trapped inside the book. There was no way out. But my curiosity was piqued. I walked into a bookstore. Picked up one book after another. Why didn't anyone have anything to say? Why wasn't anyone screaming out loud? People were happy to set up OnlyFans accounts though...

"Murder mystery on an island." What the fuck? Guillaume Musso. I remembered a newspaper interview where he said he uses a formula for his novels. The art of building a plot. Yeah, right... You live a book, you don't write them wearing a cozy cardigan. Bukowski would have to be hammered out of his fucking mind to browse this book selection. On the other hand, I get it, life is hard for a lot of people. Escaping into a book takes your mind off things.

But hey, five years from now this will be the latest Italian restaurant à la Hans Välimäki. The menus will look like books. There will still be a

© Erin Hanna

couple of bookshelves and armchairs in the background for the atmosphere. And that's OK, things change. Is there anything better than good conversation and food? That's art for you.

**Listen: Eminem – "Sing for the Moment"**

I stepped out of the bookstore. A young girl in a Minnie Mouse hat was walking by with her mom. The girl was blind. I stopped to look at them. The girl was smiling to herself. She was happy. I wasn't sure what I was feeling. But I did feel stupid, seeing her. I started walking faster.

***

I was feeling frustrated lately. A thousand things weighing on my mind, and no way to organize my thoughts. I went to some shindig with Sanna. It was in a nightclub, so they served beer. Great party. Aada, shit, she's here. I hadn't expected this.

© Emi Hallaina

"You're hammered."

"No I'm not."

"Go away."

Her friend was giving me piercing looks. A dark-haired guy was trying to get Aada's attention. He came over to introduce himself to "protect" her. That pissed me off even more. Aada had a new man. I wasn't her man, after all. I wasn't even a man, I was a mouse. I went to the bar. My friend vodka Red Bull gave me wings. After my fifth shot, I strode decisively toward Aada. She was sitting at a table. I bumped into it. There were drinks everywhere.

***

I woke up to an insane headache. I remembered the night before, as much as I'd have loved to forget. I went for a long walk. I knew it was game over with Aada. I realized that the Valentine's cake I had baked for her

© Emi Ramona

was just a pathetic attempt to avoid talking about painful subjects. I didn't feel like a man. I was taking out my pain on other people. Aada had gotten me to open up to my friends about my past. She had taken the red Converse off my feet. I was learning to walk barefoot.

I knew the stones would rip my skin open, but I didn't want to put my air-cushioned Nikes back on. If I picked up a bottle again, I'd lose my battle for good. The line between being an extremely sensitive person and a callous asshole was pretty blurry. Every wall felt like it was caving in on me. Anxiety flooded my body. I didn't understand why I couldn't be the dark-haired man by Aada's side. A collected, sensible person. Maybe not as creative or fun. But stable. Who the fuck had dealt me this hand?

I closed my eyes. Daydreamed about a trip to Brazil with Aada. We would stay in separate hotel rooms. Drink freshly squeezed fruit juice on the beach. Walk through small street

© Emi Fiamma

markets. Get to know each other at our leisure. Dance on the streets. In the evenings I'd go and watch the sunset on my own. I'd heard that Brazilians were in good spirits every day, even if they were poor. Aada could design a tattoo for my shoulder. It'd be an Indian chief. He'd be holding a peace pipe. I'd find the meaning of life to the sound of drums playing in the dark night. The daydreams helped me make it through the day.

In the evening, I lifted my feet up on the bed. Opened a pack of Start! cereal. I knew I was too deep underground. There was no way out of here. Dreaming was easy. Execution was another thing entirely. More than a few tears streamed down my face. I didn't think I had what it took to sort my life out. I remembered doing well at basketball when I was nineteen, even though the coach didn't always believe in me. Those were good times. If only I could get that kind of courage back. One achievement on

© Erin Hanna

the basketball court led to another. I still remember the day I was called up to the national team camp like it was yesterday. I was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

I turned on the TV. Watched the evening news. They were discussing the reputation of the Catholic Church. Had it been damaged by the actions of pedophile priests? New cases had come to light again. The Pope was talking about the Church's reputation. How sorry he was. What about the kids? Did the Church hand these children the keys to the basements it had cast these innocents into? Nobody talked about the victims. It was all about the Church's reputation.

According to studies, more than three thousand people working for the Catholic Church had engaged in child abuse. And apparently that was a conservative estimate. I remembered the Boston Globe article on the subject. At the end of the article, there was a list of churches where abuse had taken place. The list was so

© Emi Hoima

long that if I included it here, it would take up an entire page. Some of the priests were still working in those churches. How the hell was this possible? I repeat, how the HELL is this possible!! You spit in the victims' faces after dropping them off at the gates of Hell! And a hymnal will guide them back toward daylight?!

I got chills. A shocking surge of rage. I was one of those children, technically grown-up but still in the basement. According to the news, there were hundreds more once again. I dug my pills out of the bathroom cabinet. The demons of Hell gorged on news like this. It was like food to them. I downed a bunch of pills faster than ever.

I thought about the Pope, the church. It made my head spin. I honestly didn't know what to think of the whole thing. If there was a higher power, I was deeply bitter and furious at it. Had God perhaps given all the keys to us humans? Maybe we just needed to exchange keys among

© Emi Ramona

ourselves. That way we could unlock everything. The Devil wants us to judge each other's religions. Not God. I couldn't make sense of my thoughts. Just as I thought I'd found some great insight, my bitterness came and muddled everything.

I was too anxious. What was the point of anything? I got up to get more pills from the kitchen. Had a fit of rage, threw my phone against the wall. Why had I been backed into a corner? Was nobody gonna help me? I didn't want to live in the basement anymore.

I knew one person would help me. He'd already offered his hand several times. I just hadn't been ready to take it before. My rage overflowed. I looked around. Was this the bed I wanted to lie in for the next ten years, alone, clutching my pills to feel safe? Feeling sorry for myself? "I can't fucking live like this!" I was a living dead man, day in and day out. I let Eminem take care of the rest. I slowly started

© Emi Rahma

piecing my diary pages together. Went through my medicine cabinet, bookshelf, wardrobe. There were bits and pieces everywhere. The song "Not Afraid" did the rest. The lyrics hit deep in my soul. So deep that...

**Listen: Eminem – "Not Afraid"**

Listen to the lyrics. Read them. I knew them by heart. They burned something into my subconscious, something I couldn't quite define. I guess the song is about more than just addiction. But you're gonna have to read and decipher the message yourself.

Of course, every song means different things to different people. And everybody's interpretation is equally important.

***

I bound the pages of my diary together. Put them into an envelope. My demons tried to open

© Erin Falligant

the envelope again, even though I'd carefully glued it shut.

I didn't really know what to do with the envelope. My anxiety grew. I made a decision. I would win this battle. There was no other choice anymore. A life as a human wreck, or just maybe, something else.

***

I was sitting in a downtown restaurant with Niklas. Two huge burgers with fries in front of us. I'd sent Niklas a copy of the text inside the envelope. I'd wanted to explain myself. I was nervous about his reaction. He went quiet. His eyes were shining. I didn't understand why just yet.

"They haven't sent me any good movies lately."

I looked at my friend in confusion. I knew what he meant and it definitely boosted my

© Erin Hanna

confidence. After eating, we strolled down Aleksanterinkatu. I was shivering without my pills, like a marionette. I was trying to wean myself off the drugs gradually. It was my secret. I didn't want to hear what anyone else thought about it. I was the one shivering all day, not my doctor. I ran my fingers over the anxiety meds in my pocket. It was enough to feel the bottle in my hands. If the anxiety got even slightly worse, I could always pour a bunch of pills down my throat. I was surprised by how much the bottle alone calmed me down. I touched it with my fingers and my heart started beating slower.

Niklas was asking me why I had to write this book.

"Why do you have this need to pluck the brightest star in the sky?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't get it. We all fucking know you can write by now, but how's your mental health?"

© Emi Rahma

"I was trying to explain my shit to that chick. Can't be bothered to talk all the time."

"So here we are in a capitalist society, but apparently we still get fucking lunatics who send their ear to you in an envelope…."

"Well, where was I gonna send it? To a Mercedes factory?"

Laughter.

"Well, no. I wanna see your student work again, all of it. I have a feeling I should watch and read them very carefully."

I broke down and vented to Niklas.

"Can't you see why I have to be the best of the best?"

"Fuck no!"

"Can't you read? What about the part where I had to have a drink even though I had a naked woman in bed with me?"

Niklas froze. "Let's go over there." Pointed at the closest pub. Ordered us beers. Stayed quiet. Pale as a ghost. Finally he opened his mouth.

© Emil Hellena

"Now I get the star thing. The human mind is so fucking weird."

Niklas was holding back tears.

"Fucking dumbass! How many guys would bake a girl a Valentine's cake? That's what women want, the cake. Not you plucking stars from the sky."

Silence.

"Goddammit, dude. Fucking hell."

My friend's X-ray vision pierced my soul. I was at a loss for words.

"The beer's nice."

"Just a shitty Lapin Kulta! When did you last talk to Tom?"

I couldn't remember. Niklas felt that we should call Tom right now.

"Eminem, huh?" Niklas chuckled. I guess he could read between the lines.

"You know what, it must be hard to find love when you're Eminem." Niklas went on. "We'll get

© Emi Rellana

Johnny Depp for this. My favorite actor. If only he was a little fucking younger."

It was a difficult situation for both of us. My friend saw a great piece of writing. It could have made a good movie. Maybe a movie that was, in a way, like a bride at the altar...

I was still trapped inside the book. I hadn't made it out. We were two boozy creative friends. Alcohol scrambled both our heads. This was the last time I went out with my good friend. We ended up falling out. My friend was the first one to know my worst fears. My friend was the first one to see my soul. I believe he saw it when he offered me a job. My friend invited me to his kid's birthday party. It was family members only. He also brought me to tears. And he brought me laughter and joy. He was the one who showed me that creativity can be a gift. It's a shame we fell out.

© Erin Hanna

If I called him today and told him I was stuck on an island and needed a boat... I believe he would bring me the boat.

If this message in a bottle finds him one day... Oh, right, you don't really know about the bottle yet. You'll find out soon enough. But he probably wouldn't send it on. It would require courage on his part too. Still, I believe he'd tear up. Then he'd chuckle.

"Fucking lunatic. Brave lunatic."

Of course, he already had a hunch years ago that this might happen. My friend is doing at least as well as I am today. Niklas, if and when this book ends up in your hands, I want to thank you. This is the way it had to go. Without us falling out, I'd never have found inner peace. But hey, I figured out where the star is. Read on and find out... And stop laughing! I'm trying to be an artist, haha. By the way, do you have any idea how complicated it is

© Erin Hanna

to bake a good cake? Mine usually get burnt sooner or later.

Niklas, I'm very aware that after this I might find it incredibly hard to find someone for me. It's my choice. I thought long and hard about it. You're not stupid, you know what I mean.

How can we even know who's right for us? The other day, I heard someone say, "Something ugly can still be beautiful." It definitely stopped me in my tracks for a while. But I'd already made the decision to throw this bottle into the sea by then. And I don't want to live a double life. So I looked her in the eye like a dumbass, and couldn't find the words. All the pages of this book flashed before my eyes. I think it was the second time in life that I froze completely while sober.

If the restaurant scene at the end of this book happens... I don't know, it's a roll of the dice. If I'm honest, I don't even know if I want to bake cakes anymore. Sad but true. You

© Erin Fanina

always think someone will come and save you. But when you save yourself... I don't know if I even want it anymore. And I don't need to know. I guess you feel it in your heart if it's right. And I don't even know what that feels like, since I've never let anyone close enough. So I don't know.

Even if this bottle runs aground, I guess the person I am today is what Hollywood is trying to be.

We'll be young forever. You'll never lose that spark in your eye. And I have mine back now! It gets me in trouble sometimes. I could tell you a few stories, but I won't share them here...

The next time I'm in LA, I'm going to learn how to surf. See where the waves take me. I'll spend two weeks near the beach. The Hollywood sign looks like a Target sign to me now. I doubt I'll cross Fairfax Avenue. I guess my dreams are elsewhere nowadays. They're on streets full of

© Emi Hanna

life. I'm no longer interested in running down dark alleys through movies.

Having said that, there are some good things that have come out of Hollywood. The Shawshank Redemption, for example. It's the third-best movie of all time even today.

Niklas, without you I'd never have broken out of the cage. If you hadn't given me a job (and with that, a visa), maybe my life in Finland would have been quiet. But I'd still have been inside the cage. It had to smash into the walls. Life had to tear me apart so I could find the strength to break the cage.

Obviously I'd like to make a few digs at you here. Even the score a little. But then I wouldn't be any better than my bullies. This is the part where I'm a man and not a gun-toting "badass" = a dumb Mickey Mouse.

It's not your fault you couldn't stop me from doing drugs. You were smart to stick with whisky and cognac. I say the next sentence from

© Finn Hanna

the bottom of my heart: people like us always wonder whether we're good people or shitty people. You're a good person. Always remember that. It's the sign of a good person to wonder about this stuff. Am I? I don't know. I do like myself more than I did years ago. That's a good start.

Maybe next summer I'll take a sailboat out by myself. Throw my phone literally into the sea. And think about all this stuff. Do I know how to sail? What do you fucking think... The worst that can happen is that the boat runs aground. Maybe I'll smash into a pier.

But I will tell you one thing. The next time you're directing a movie, remember that everyone who works on set is going through something real in their lives. Someone running in front of a movie camera holding a toy gun, while the director thinks they're making larger-than-life "art", is fucking ridiculous.

© Erin Hanna

People cry for real in the hospital, at funerals, at weddings.

No wonder artists often have mental health issues. Many authors have sat in bars with a glass of wine in hand, pondering how to make the world better with a poem. Then carelessly cut someone with the wine glass.

Then they lose their manuscript while drunk and think in their little heads that the whole world will come crashing down... And unfortunately I've been one of these morons.

In Finland the state funds these people's hobbies way too much. While nurses treat real people and get paid next to nothing. And they're the ones who can truly change someone's life.

Niklas, you've directed a few "movies"... What do you think Eminem feels about Hollywood? Why does it seem like there are no movie projects he's interested in... Pretty sure the Hollywood sign looks ridiculous to him, too.

© Emil Hämina

Then again, there are good comedians out there. Chris Rock, you're so fucking funny! My favorite.

And hey, a good movie + a pizza = a nice night. But that's all it is.

Finnish elementary schools and high schools give kids grades in sports, music, art. Then people wonder why kids won't exercise, won't sing, won't draw. They'd rather take an antidepressant than go skate in the park. If your teacher gives you a bad grade in sports when you're only ten years old, you're still going to hate sports as a grown-up. The same with music or art.

It's kind of funny that the same "cultured" people who advertise this and that literary award can't fix something like this. A lot of first-graders' artwork would hang in museums if you just wrote "Pablo Picasso's first sketch" at the bottom. We're killing children's creativity by judging them at such a young age. It's the same with music.

© Emi Hamina

Every one of us is creative in our own way. Fixing cars, cooking food. Almost everything requires creativity. Do we have to grade arts and sports at school? Or maybe we could prevent a few depressive episodes in the future by fixing just this one small thing?

Anyway, Niklas, maybe our paths will cross again. Maybe we'll laugh again over pizzas. It takes forgiveness from both sides. Oh hey, I guess I had to get a little dig in after all...

***

OK then, back to the story. After our boozy night, I headed home. The night was full of misunderstandings on both sides. I realized that no movie, no book, nothing would save me. You can't get rid of the pain by building a wall.

**Listen: Creed – "One Last Breath"**

Over the next few days, I got a handful of texts from my friend. But I don't really

© Erin Hallama

remember the full message exchange. I'm sorry, that was the first time I lied. I remember it clearly, but it doesn't matter. My apologies to my friend for dumping a truckload of sand in his lap. He had no idea where to put it.

© Emi Hallama

# Chapter 8: At the Crossroads

I was sitting at home holding my phone. A text had just come in. I threw the phone at my armchair again. Didn't respond to the text. It was Wednesday, about 6 or 7 p.m. I was sober. Obviously never far from a wine bottle, though.

Like a bolt out of the blue, my heart started pounding. It beat so hard I thought I would die. I've had thousands of panic attacks. This wasn't that. This was scary, but also peaceful. It felt like an energy coursing through my body that I couldn't explain. I can't explain it even now, so I won't even try. I'm no teacher, either. I don't want to be, and I can't be.

**Listen: Johnny Cash – "God's Gonna Cut You Down"**

© Erin Hollina

Tell that dragon that God's gonna cut you down... Tell that dragon.

I was lying on the floor. I couldn't reach my phone. Would I have called an ambulance? I don't know. I don't remember exactly how long this episode went on. I lay on the floor like a knocked-out punching bag. The experience was so personal. For the sake of this "book", I'm sharing only what I'm trying to understand. But I can never understand everything. I'm just a human being who has been wrong about some things.

If you didn't listen to the song just now... Please rewind and do.

The next morning, I flushed all my meds down the toilet. Yeah, that took some time...

If you're depressed and are on medication, don't get me wrong. I'm not telling you to do what I did. I believe you're the only one who knows when the time is right, if it ever is. And bear in mind that my social security card had the code 112, the one that entitles the user to

© Erin Hanna

a discount on hard drugs... I'm not a doctor. But I don't have that card anymore, and I never will again.

***

It felt like I wasn't fighting alone anymore. I spent the next two weeks climbing the walls of my apartment. Sometimes I thought I would die. Shock doesn't begin to cover it – the withdrawals took me to the gates of Hell and back. During the worst shakes, I'd text Aada. I blamed her. She didn't answer a single message, and I'm glad she didn't. I wondered about walking into a hospital. But if I walked there, I'd never be back. I was consoled by the thought that if they were busy, they'd take me in last. Maybe I should just be left in a ditch to die.

For two weeks, I couldn't go to work. Buying groceries was hard. Sometimes I left the store

© Fran Hanna

running, like I was suffocating inside. No one knew what I was going through.

**Listen: Johnny Cash – "(Ghost) Riders in the Sky"**

I watched the music video for Eminem's "The Way I Am". He gets heart palpitations at the end, just like the ones I'd had. (Watch the video.) I felt something indescribable. There's a story to the video that may not click with everybody. But I knew something of what it feels like to be inside that story. Eminem had found a way out from underground.

I wanted to add another sentence here. I thought long and hard before deleting it. I will share that sentence with someone in person one day, at the right time and place.

I kept listening to Eminem's song "Not Afraid" over and over. I knew now what my subconscious had felt the first time I heard the song. Cold chills ran through my body.

© Erin Hanna

Check out the lyrics. The fake king that lied through his teeth. Not getting crowned. Getting capped.

Pretty sure that the dude talking to you there is not exactly Jesus Christ. And sometimes I wanted to string myself up by the neck. But I still knew I was finally going in the right direction.

***

Ever so slowly, the withdrawal symptoms faded. I went for a walk in the park. Little kids were playing on the slide. My eyes welled up. How fucking dumb could I be? Traveling all the way across the world in search of treasure. Then poisoning the treasure for years on end with drugs and medication. And the psychologist called me intelligent. Fuck that, I was DUMB AS SHIT.

© Emi Fatima

At times, the sun shone on me through the fir trees. At other times, the tree branches cast a shadow over my head. Why had I never simply stopped to look around before?

**Listen: Nirvana – "All Apologies"**

***

I had been sober for a month. I walked to the ATM on Töölö Market Square and withdrew €150. Leather jacket, fresh cologne, and a tram toward Kallio. I'd decided to have sex sober for the first time. Romantic, right?

A young, beautiful woman opened the door and looked at me with suspicion.

"What are you doing here?"

She could sense my nervousness.

"Um, I thought I'd have sex sober for the first time in my life."

I was scared stiff.

© Emil Ramsay

She didn't believe me. She thought I had some fucking kink and my line was part of it... It made things easier, actually.

After sex, we cracked open two cans of Coca-Cola and talked. For the first time, I saw the person beside me. What had her path been like? At least as rocky as mine, I bet. I felt ashamed of my old antics. How many scars had I caused other people?

In the fresh air, I burst into tears. For the first time, I understood the hellish pile of shit I'd been trying to scramble through for years. I don't know the right keys to press to describe how I felt. After all the bullshit, this was probably my rock bottom after all.

I walked into a tattoo shop and got an eagle tattoo. I want to fly free and brave like an eagle. I know change has to start from the inside, not your skin. But the transformation had begun.

©FinnFinina

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Over the next month, I experienced every possible emotion. I truly can't describe what I went through. Taking a new path at a crossroads means having to repair the potholes in your old path, one by one. Sometimes it's harder to forgive yourself than another person.

***

I'd bought myself a new tracksuit. I nearly turned back on Aleksanterinkatu. But I couldn't do that anymore. I'd listened to "Walk the Line" by Johnny Cash in the morning. This was the only way. Otherwise, I couldn't solve the equation. Maybe you get what I'm trying to say. I'd already bought the chocolates and the cute t-shirt. I was scared like a little child. I was on my way to Aada's fitness class.

© Fran Hanna

My heart rate was 178 for the whole hour. And it wasn't because of the spinning bike. After class, I waited for the others to leave. Then I walked calmly up to Aada.

"I did pretty well, right?"

"Yeah, you've lost weight."

I gave her my gift. She turned her back. Why the pounding heart, if our paths won't join? I didn't get it. As Kid Rock sings, only God knows why...

She handed me a box of darkness. It took me months to realize that it was a gift.

And you probably won't read this book again...

**Listen: Gordon Lightfoot – "If You Could Read My Mind"**

But you still brought out the best in me. I guess you were a little angel in my life. Our paths will never cross again. I believe things are good on the path you're on.

***

© Erin Hanna

Summer came. Winter came. Winter always follows summer in case you didn't know. The puzzle was almost complete. I don't know, maybe I'd been looking at it from the wrong angle the whole time.

I trained as a fitness coach and sports massage therapist. Physical work, but pretty nice. I pushed myself to get back into top shape. When I'm on the leg press, I still sometimes think about the time I stubbed cigarettes out on my palm. And suddenly 500 pounds feels easy. I throw down with my demons every day at the gym. It's my way of defeating them. Someone else will have some other way.

I always listen to music when I'm giving a massage, by the way. I don't know, maybe that means my journey isn't finished yet. My soul, my hunger isn't sated.

**Listen: Elton John – "I Want Love"**

© Erin Hanna

I've heard someone say, "The people who have suffered the most make the best healers." I don't know about that. I do know how to relieve shoulder tension. It's not rocket science.

Nowadays, I see and consider every person to be valuable and perfect just as they are. It's probably the reason why I feel I'm good at my job. I have a lot of nice clients. Do they know my background? Some of them do. Some will have a heart attack after this book... Nah, I don't actually think they will.

Sometimes I get "reprimanded" at work because my clients' laughter echoes through the halls. I find strength in being able to help a client. That's how life works. It just took me a surprisingly long time to understand that. And I often get clients who say, "I don't normally talk during a massage. I don't know what came over me."

If this message in a bottle reaches one of them, will I be out of a job? Will someone say

©EmiHaima

something? I don't know. Have I thought about it? Many times. Massage therapy is a job where you're trying to help another person. Make them feel relaxed. Maybe release an emotional block. I once told a client, "Listen to your heart, not your friends." How can I help anyone else if I don't believe in my own thing?

I asked a friend of mine who sets up huge business mergers, "Will I lose my clients?" What's a businessman's perspective, you know.

"In my job I've learned to see at least three steps ahead. I think you'll find it's the other way around. You'll get more clients. As long as you don't end up back where the book started, you'll be just fine."

To tell you the truth, it helped me a lot that my friends didn't judge me. I've had several dinners where no one has judged me, in fact, they've sometimes even praised me. Thank you for that, friends.

© Erin Hanna

And this is what I want to say to you specifically. Having even one person who sees you and connects with you face-to-face is more important than five thousand hearts on Instagram. And remember, if you're being yourself and things don't work out between you and your crush, then maybe it wasn't meant to be. Someone else will come along and the chemistry will be there. But if you hide behind a mask, you'll never know if you would have hit it off. I can tell you from experience that that fucking sucks.

Huh, I just thought of something... Well, maybe it's not too late yet. At least the mask is off now...

You know that feeling when you're driving down a narrow dirt road on a motorcycle? And all you can think about is how fast this thing can accelerate? I've had that feeling for a long time. You have to shoot the butterflies out of your stomach and into the sky.

© Emi Rellana

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I called the man who took me home from LA. Ranan was delighted to hear from me.

"Such a gentleman, thanking me like that."

I suggested dinner at an artistic place somewhere. I was thinking Elite myself. It's close to where I live now. My one-bedroom apartment is clean and nice. The kitchen renovation was just finished according to my own specs. The kitchen counter is really damn high... A bedspread made by a real Indian tribe. All my stuff in order. But even now, Ranan didn't let me off easy.

"If you want somewhere artistic, let's go to the Kamppi Service Centre."

The place for pensioners and unemployed people. Fuck. I knew what Ranan meant immediately. He'd given me the rope to hang

© Emi Hamina

myself with. The butterflies wouldn't leave my stomach that easily.

Had he made similar mistakes to mine in his life? How did he always come up with this insights like this? I guess everyone will see these things differently.

Maybe I could help another human being? In a different way. Without touching their muscles.

Sometimes I watched the starry sky at night. I'd gained more insight into life. I knew I was just one person. I can't make an impact any other way except by being as good a person as I can. And I don't mean sucking up to people. That breaks you.

Johnny Cash said, "Sinners make the best saints." I can share my own view on that in fifty-three years.

Will there be days when I stray from this path of light? I can't promise you there won't be. The way I see it, the wonders of the world are right in front of us. We're just so focused

© Erin Hanna

on our own goals that we forget to live. Sometimes we forget that we can actually see the treasure in the mirror. Over eight billion treasures in this world. I'm sure you understand I mean people. Gold isn't treasure. Though of course everybody needs money to live. When you don't have any, you often end up using all your energy to get it.

But you can't buy a personality, manners, charisma. They're in your soul. You have to earn them. And you don't need money to get them. It just takes hard work, every single day. You can look up at the stars and wish for one. But what if the star is in your soul already? Just keep polishing that one, day in, day out. Others will see it shining in your eyes.

***

For people who suffer from anxiety. My advice is to take a beat. Look at the little kid in line

© FranFranina

at the supermarket, which ice cream did he pick? Why? Hold the door open for an old lady. Look at her smile when she says thank you. The walls won't cave in on you when you live in the moment. Open your eyes, look at the world. You're perfect just the way you are.

I'm not a particularly clever person, but I believe that spirituality is presence. It's looking another human being in the eye. Not looking over them into the sky. I've made that mistake once and paid a hell of a price for it. If you look at the state of the world, it's clear that many people "compose while deaf". Israel, Gaza, the situation is tragic. I know the history of the area is complicated. I just wish both sides had strong enough leaders to try leading with love.

That takes so much more strength and courage than hate. Everybody knows bullies don't exactly have high self-esteem. I'm convinced that those who live by the sword, die by the sword. You saw what happened to me when I

© Emil Ahlina

grabbed a sword. I'm the wrong person to judge anyone, that's how wrong I was. And sometimes, we may still wonder how dictators succeed and stay in power. But I'm a hundred percent sure that a man who lives by the sword can never be happy.

I could list seven famous artists here who have also composed while deaf. But that's not my job. If you've been listening to the songs here, you may already know five. I don't think Kanye West would hold it against me if I say "Can't Tell Me Nothing" and "Jesus Walks" are about the same thing that put me into the hospital. If you ever listen to "Jesus Walks", maybe now you'll understand something I didn't before. I won't comment on Kanye's well-being. I don't know anything about it. But when you come out of the darkness into the light, and suddenly you can't even grab a coffee in peace without having a hundred people filming you... It would probably take a lot less for a person to start

© Emi Hanona

wondering why the darkness won't go away, even though I've already stepped into the light.

In fact, Kanye looks like he's doing pretty well now. My heart goes out to you, Kanye. You have so many amazing songs. Thank you for those.

Rick Rubin seems like an extremely intelligent and good-natured person based on his interviews. I find it strange that people don't ask him where all his wisdom comes from. I don't believe anyone can come by that kind of insight without walking through the shadow of the valley of death. I could be wrong of course. In fact, something he said has been an important guideline for me: "The audience comes last."

You can't look for acceptance in other people. It's enough to give it to yourself. Maybe that's what Rick Rubin meant.

I believe in love. It means understanding that we're all equal regardless of religion, skin color, sexual orientation. It's accepting the other

© Emil Ahlina

person. Understanding that the reason people behave the way they do might be a consequence of their own rocky roads. You can't judge someone's religion based on the actions of a handful of angry, bitter people. What's crazier than driving a tank over treasures? All the while going on about peace and a better world. Does that require courage?

It's just as misleading as Andrew Tate's "alpha male" culture for incel men.

True courage is walking among the weapons holding a peace pipe. True courage is owning up to your mistakes and apologizing. True courage is forgiving, not retaliating with a sword.

Obviously, I understand that things are complicated. I myself would rather work in a pizza parlor than be the president of Finland. Aleksander Stubb is doing good work, though. And he's a HIFK Hockey fan, too...

All of us have feelings, regardless of skin color, religion, sexual orientation. What the fuck

© FinnFamina

happened to us? Showing our feelings is now considered a weakness? We'll even medicate ourselves to repress them. We talk about economic cycles on the news all day long. Then we wonder why the number of applications for disability pensions keeps rising. We don't know how to change our point of view. How privileged we are to be able to work. Where are the leaders who make sure that work can be fun, too? Life isn't just an endless performance review until you reach retirement. What's waiting for you at the finish line? Heart medication, a pension, a prosthetic hip and a wife whose sense of humor dried up thirty-five years ago. All of which you notice only after you can't get off your couch anymore.

***

© Erin Rahimi

I was crazy enough to book an appointment with the doctor who told me I needed to stay on medication for the rest of my life.

The doctor: "And how are you?"

Me: "I'm good. I threw away the pills you told me to take for the rest of my fucking life. And I battled my demons and won. Knocked them out, one by one. And on top of that, I think I'm taking Eminem's hand now, for real. So I don't give a fuck what you think anymore."

The doctor rolled his eyes. "Listen, after everything you've been through, it's OK to take pills."

"Listen, doctor. Shall we have a line of cocaine and book a flight to Ibiza? I promise we'll get you a diagnosis or two as well."

The doctor didn't take me up on my offer... And I wouldn't have, either. I'm not going back underground.

Who knows, we might have come back in a coffin.

© Emi Hanna

"By the way, which pharmaceutical companies do you invest in? Oh, right, the ones whose pills you prescribe." Sorry, I had to get one last dig in there.

***

Depression, mental breakdown, stupidity... If you ask me, my problem was the latter.

It's like a broken ankle. It'll get better. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Every crisis in life helps us grow. Turns us into deeper, more interesting people. Of course, I know nothing about being seriously ill. And you can't solve everything all at once. There will always be new challenges. And there will always be new sources of joy.

***

© Emi Fraimona

You know that feeling when you go out to eat with your friends? What makes a good night? Food, company, the smile of a waiter, the atmosphere. The whole shebang, right? What makes for a good book? The same thing, it takes collaboration. Of course, if the food really sucks, it's hard to have a good night. The same goes for this book. But I assume that if you've come this far, I still have a small chance of offering you a good reading experience.

Maybe you've already figured out that I'm going to ask something of you. But only if you believe it might help somebody else. And only if you can keep a promise. I know, you're confused. We're nearly at the finish line.

***

I'm starting to get nervous. What's this all gonna come to? Marshall. I'm trying to make it in my own shoes now. You found pretty big

© Erin Hanna

shoes to fill. Maybe for a reason, who knows? But I hope you keep rapping until you're ninety years old. The members of The Rolling Stones are cool, still out there touring. There's no difference between rock and rap if you ask me. Why couldn't an 80-year-old rapper stay cool on stage? A rolling stone gathers no moss.

I do wonder why I got my particular shoes. But it would feel wrong not to have the courage to put them on. They're my own shoes after all. It's just that these laces are pretty hard to tie. And I'm kind of scared of tripping over them. And I don't even understand why I'm still here to put them on at all.

**Listen: Eminem – "Beautiful"**

***

I was on a bike ride with my brother's kids and told them about this book. Should I publish it? The 6-year-old said, "Yeah, good idea, but

© Erin Hanna

watch the road, you're riding on the sidewalk." That was the clincher. That sentence had more insight than my whole book.

This kid taught me what love is, by the way. I'm grateful to have experienced it. It's when you love someone else more than yourself. You wish them well, even though they're not beside you. If I myself don't find love like that in this life, then I'm totally fine with that. It's the only kind of love I want.

Both my brother's kids taught me that. Believe it or not, these rug rats actually like me. They even laugh at my jokes. When they're twenty, I'll give them this book. And then we'll talk. I'm pretty sure they won't touch drugs after that.

© Erin Reinina

***

Is there a way to have both – crazy adventures and the white doves of peace? Do

they go together or destroy one another? She'd have to be completely nuts, in a way that makes me smile. Very neurotic. And I still wouldn't know how to be with her, and that would scare me. But if I wasn't with her, I'd be scared of losing my path. And I can't think of a single reason why she should trust a lunatic like me. But she would smell good, kind of like home.

I've never gone in for the Instagram/Tinder world. I sold a good-looking car once. The engine had all kinds of faults. I felt shitty for months afterward. If someone approaches me at a bar, though, well, that's not my fault. Grown-ups are responsible for their own choices...

© Erin Rhiana

# Chapter 9: The End…

# Or is it?

I'm walking down the streets of Töölö toward Café Regatta. I have the bottle with me. I've hidden this book inside a wine bottle. It even had room for a few extra pages. They're waiting for you inside.

Fuck, I could still turn around and go home. But I'll never be able to forgive myself if I give up now.

**Listen: Johnny Cash – "Personal Jesus"**

What if I printed a couple of copies and took them to a prison for the inmates to read? In my cocaine haze, I could have run someone over with my car. I'd still be sitting in a Los Angeles prison now. What if Tom hadn't turned up at the gas station? One or two more days and I'd have

© Emil Hamina

been dead. The world owes me nothing – it was here first.

A mosquito bit me. I almost didn't notice. If I met Matias today, he'd be like that mosquito. I'm no longer angry or bitter. But it's easy to see which one of us is the stronger man today. I'm still kind of angry with myself, and sometimes I grieve my bad choices. But when this bottle sails over the sea, I know my soul will slowly become whole. There's an old Indian proverb: "We all have a good wolf and a bad wolf inside us. The one you feed, wins."

No, wait. There's someone I'm still angry with. The dragon. You almost swallowed me whole. I can't kill you, the dragon, the Devil, on my own. But I'll stab you with a sharp sword straight in your black soul. I won't be able to kill you, no matter how much I want to. But I'm convinced that some other reader will stab you again in the future. And maybe one day we'll have your tail.

© Erin Hanna

***

It's probably obvious why I picked out a black leather jacket to wear this morning. For the first time in my life, I know where I stand. And I know what I stand for. Believe it or not, there's a lot of black in my closet… Bear with me, humor is the best medicine after all.

To tell you the truth, it's really fucking hard to stand here. Why did it take me so long to see… I don't believe you truly understand how hard it is to be here. And I'm not expecting any sympathy from you. But it's my scars, my bruises, all these tragic events that gave me the strength to stand here right now. Before we get a few final things straight, I am the man in black.

**Listen: Johnny Cash – "Man in Black"**

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© Erin Hanna

I've thrown the bottle out to sea. There's no getting it back anymore. I can see it drifting on the waves. Will it run aground? Will it sink? Will it stop? You, my reader, are the publisher of this book now. Your efforts count as much as mine. There's a job for you inside the bottle. I hope you can keep a promise. Let's try together. Let's not be naive enough to try and save the whole world. But let's try and help one person – that's a good start.

What do I dream of? Maybe one day I'll hear someone say, "You helped me." That will be the day the last piece of the puzzle falls into place. That will be the day I finally understand why this puzzle had to be assembled in the first place. That will be the day my pizza will have too many onions on it... That will be the day I can finally forgive myself.

I'm best friends with my dad now, by the way. He's created jobs for a lot of people. Helped

© Emil Ahlma

the economy. I'd lose my very last screw if my path was like his. But every path is equally valuable.

I never would have guessed. I showed him this book. With the worst parts obviously censored… He paid for the translation. He said, "It's definitely not made for the Finnish market." I guess the businessman understood "art" better than I expected after all.

***

A summer evening at the Olympic Stadium, a good concert with friends, a cold long drink in my hand. Guess which artist I'd love to see live… And yes, I do drink alcohol once in a while.

In fact, I might just have a glass of wine on my way home from Töölö Bay. Why? Because I feel like it. I'll stop at one though… Never in

© Emi Hollama

my life will I care what someone else thinks of me again. But I do try not to hurt others.

Because hope springs eternal. I know that there's always a microscopic chance that the following scenario might happen one day:

It's Saturday night. I'm sitting in a restaurant on Tehtaankatu. Basbas Kulma, at the bar counter. It's snowing outside. A freezing cold evening is turning into night. I'm lost in thought. Actually, I'm not thinking about anything much. I'm listening to the background noise. Wait, I know this song.

**Listen: England Dan & John Ford Coley – "I'd Really Love to See You Tonight"**

Sometimes I enjoy eating alone. I've left my AirPods at home. I'm not even sure where they are anymore. Maybe in the same drawer where I found this text.

I ask the waitress for another drink. A wine bottle hits me in the shoulder. I do a double take. It's the bottle I threw out to sea. There's

© Emi Hollanti

a woman standing next to me. I recognize her face. Dark brown hair, covered in snowflakes. I realize that you, my reader, have sent the bottle on. I swear I saw it drift toward Seurasaari Island. Who knows? Maybe you felt a twinge of sympathy for me despite everything. Maybe you're carrying out the task you found in the bottle. Thank you, reader. I owe you one.

I pick up a napkin from the bar. Wipe the corners of my eyes. In that moment, I realize that against all odds, you felt... I can't find the words. Many people told me: "Don't do it like that. Let's do this, and edit that, and it'll turn out great." But I only listened to my own heart. No one else. You, my reader, haven't just read this book. You're the publisher who saw something in me. But, dear reader, do you believe I can handle the situation you've gotten me into now?

You've probably figured out that the person standing in front of me might just be real. Not

© Emi Raimo

just a figment of my imagination. The following dialogue is obviously hypothetical, but maybe it'll become true one day. Sometimes life has to be a bit adventurous. How tedious to just wait for a Tinder match. Or not. I've heard Tinder dates are almost always boring. This is much more exciting... And there's always the chance the bottle will end up smashed over the back of my head in the end.

I look down at my feet. I'm wearing my own shoes. I look the woman in the eye. She looks serious.

"I told you I wanna hear how it ends."

I can't find the words. I look around for the waitress. Where's that wine? Chop chop, please.

"I told you I respect authors who..."

"Would you please sit down?"

She won't sit down, even though the stool next to me is free.

"Will you throw the bottle into the Atlantic?"

"I don't know."

© Erin Hallana

"I could help you with that. 175 euros per hour."

"Your rates are pretty high."

"I'm not cheap, am I?"

I can tell she means something else by that.

"I wasn't gonna come, but my half-crazy friend told me to."

"But we don't really know each other very well."

"No. But hey, at least I know you better than my Tinder date from last week."

She can be funny. But I knew that.

"Hey, that's not fair... And how do you know it's not just my wild imagination? Maybe I was watching Netflix while I wrote this. There's no way you can know. Anyway, maybe you should just go home."

She interrupts me.

"You wanna pay me? I'll help you. Let's see if this bottle really can cross the ocean."

"That's the reason you came?"

© Fani Fiona

I know it wasn't the reason she came. Her star sign is inquisitive. She needs constant mental stimulation. Well, careful what you wish for...

I take the bottle out of her hand and look at it. How is it still intact? It looks almost shiny. Nice one, reader. You didn't break the bottle. Now I'm losing my train of thought.

"I'm kinda tired. Trying to collect my thoughts."

"Should I smash the bottle against the counter right here?"

I look her in the eye. I don't answer. She continues.

"There's a third option. I'll sit down and order food."

"I don't know. The kitchen might be closed, it's 11 p.m."

The waitress comes over, smiling. "We'll let it slide just this once." She hands us a menu.

© Emil Hellana

"Hey, how about I fill that glass with wine. Red or white?

The woman takes off her coat. Works through mathematical equations in her head. I need to stay in control, see into the future. She knows that if she sits in that chair, there's no knowing where the wind might blow.

Crazy adventure, white doves.

She sits down. I take a sip of wine. If there's one thing I know, it's that this won't be a boring dinner. She didn't ask me about that one sentence. "Something ugly can still be beautiful." I wonder if she'll ask me later. How could she know I was talking about her specifically? It's just one sentence. It's not the hair that matters, it's what's underneath... Anyway, she guessed right. I open my mouth.

"I think the reason people always feed off your energy is because... Well, I won't do that right now. We're gonna focus on you."

She probably likes what she's hearing.

© Fran Hanna

So what happens now? Dear reader, I can't tell you, and don't even want to. And I'm not a fortune teller. Do I have the answers she might be looking for? How could I? Maybe we'll find them together one day. If I can make it through this "date", I promise that you can make it through yours. Just remember to be yourself. Of course, I have one thing going for me. If this woman gets up from her chair, she knows I won't ask her why she's going. I'll just wish her well. What do you think? Will she get up?

I can tell you one thing, though. If she does stay, she'll get impatient with me about thirteen minutes in.

"Can you be serious for one second?"

"Sorry, no, I cannot."

And with about 99.9 percent certainty, that'll be the answer she's looking for.

Of course, she knows that the easiest thing to do would be to hand me the wine bottle at

© Emil Ahlina

the end of the night. And walk home on her own.

***

These are the cards in my hand. They're my own cards. I'd have given anything to be dealt them in Los Angeles. And here I had them in my pocket the whole time. Now that I've organized them, I don't really know what to think of them.

Let's pretend that the scene I've just played out comes true. It's obvious that you gave me a few hearts from your own deck. I'd love to give you some of my own cards in return.

We're all missing a card or two. Maybe the secret is to show your hand to the other person openly. That way you can exchange cards. And if your cards are torn and kind of in a mess, believe me, those might be exactly the niche cards someone else is looking for.

© Emi Hajima

Either way, you have to be OK with yourself before you can love somebody else. And I will never again stake my own happiness on another person.

***

For the woman who said, "Something ugly can still be beautiful."

This wasn't how things were supposed to go. I would have thrown my whole laptop, this whole book, into the sea, for another chance. Now I can't do that anymore. I can't lose myself. Maybe it was fate. Fate didn't allow the laptop to sink into the waves. Maybe I'd have drowned with it.

If you ever find this bottle, I hope you're in a happy enough place to throw it back into the sea. But if you're not, you can bring it to me. I won't ask why. And I won't tell a soul.

© Erin Riviera

You were my catalyst. You helped me understand that fame and fortune won't bring happiness. Your attention meant more to me than Eminem's attention ever could.

Now my demons are getting KO'd for good.

***

Wait, could things actually work out in the right order? I'm just considering that now. I guess not, though. Or who knows? But no... Or could they?

Only one person knows in her soul if they can... Only she knows whether it's too late to listen to her heart.

Or is the path too twisty by now?

***

A bottle in the Atlantic Ocean. Me in Töölö, picking up a pizza at Zuhat's. Sopranos close to

© Fran Hallama

my brother's place is pretty good too. The reason I like their pizza is that they both have the nicest staff. Does the family-sized pizza still exist? I don't know. I've never ordered it.

Sometimes I still worry that no one will connect with this book. That the bottle will rot at the bottom of the ocean. And I honestly don't know which option would be better.

But I'd have never broken out of my cage without Eminem. Thanks to him, I knew someone else had been down the same road. So here's me trying to do the same for somebody else.

***

**Dear Eminem,**

I'm finally reaching for your hand for real. Believe me, after this shitstorm it's kiiiinda scary. I have a funny feeling this bottle might even end up in your hands...

© Emi Hanna

Maybe one day I'll get the chance to thank you personally. I'll buy you a case of Finlandia vodka to show my appreciation. Would love a "Not Afraid Vol 2" as well (wink).

I straight-up wouldn't make it through that meeting without tearing up...

I thought a lot about how to end this with you here. But I trust my intuition, my instinct. I don't have to say anything. I'm tearing up. Thank you.

I'm not afraid. Holla back!

***

**Dear reader,**

Thank you. You may not see how, but your investment in this book is as big as mine. This book is kind of our thing. And I made it through. Do I still have scars? Of course. We all do. I'm just not covering them up anymore. Maybe they were treasures this whole time.

© Rupi Kaur

In fact, even though I don't know you, I sometimes feel like I'm talking to you specifically. I don't know how to explain it.

You can find the rest of the bottle on Facebook. I'll tell you how in a minute. But I get that you might not be on there. One of the tasks hidden inside is this: try to see the value in every single person for the next eleven days. Even in the difficult moments. For the next eleven days, try to get through the difficult moments, the conflicts, with love instead of a sword. Maybe you could even forgive someone who's hurt you. Smile at the barista, see how it feels. Eleven days. You can do it. Don't bully anyone for eleven days. And after those eleven days, take a twenty-minute walk to reflect on how that made you feel.

And consider sticking with it for a few more days? Reach out. Touch faith. It's pretty simple at the end of the day.

© Erin Hanna

We just keep making things so complicated. I speak from experience... If your feet don't work and you can't walk, don't worry. What truly matters is between your ears. It's just the way it is.

Someone might say, "Well, obviously every human being is valuable." But I myself live in Töölö, Helsinki, and I don't have to walk that far at all to see that it's not a foregone conclusion for everybody.

So you see, we need to keep this bottle moving together. Let's both be part of a better tomorrow.

I thought long and hard before adding the sentence at the end of this paragraph. But ultimately I wanted it here. I didn't come up with it on my own. Every single one of us will lose someone we love one day. Some of us already have. I don't know any more about things than you do. All I know is that I was

© Emi Hamina

wrong about some things. And like Kid Rock, somehow I know there's more to life than this…

**Listen: The Police – "Message in a Bottle"**

***

Once again, remember, you're perfect just the way you are. If you listen to your heart, you can never go wrong in life. But if you scramble your head with drugs, alcohol… it's kinda hard to listen to your heart.

I'll have to walk a tightrope for the rest of my life. Just like everybody else. If the day comes when I cut people with my wine glass again, act like a jerk, this entire story will lose its worth. It'll have zero value. Which is why I believe that the day will never come. Because I have agency over that decision. I know that love for others only begets more love. But if I treat others poorly, it means I think I'm worth more than the other person. And that's a mistake I

© Erin Halma

don't ever want to make again. To look through a fellow human being rather than into their eyes is a sign of stupidity.

You don't change the world with words. You change it with actions.

In the (almost) words of Rocky Balboa... If I can change. You can change. The world can change.

I believe the secret to happiness is to be part of the change toward a better world. The smallest of actions can be the biggest of all.

***

And if you're dreaming of a Hollywood ending, the perfect love story, find another man. I'm not one to settle down, at least not today.

**Listen: Johnny Cash – "Hurt"**

***

© Emil Hallana

Find your way to the bottle here:

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