

Our bus had gotten stuck in the traffic of Friday evening commuters fleeing Manhattan. Now we'd be lucky to make dinner.

Recorded flute music played overhead, to soothe us I supposed as we waited in line to check in, but I was distracted by my empty stomach. An effete bearded man wearing a loose smock and chocolate brown sandals confiscated our iPhones, and in return offered flimsy paper cups of lukewarm herbal tea that tasted like wheat. To clear our toxins, he said. Stuff like mercury, cell phone radiation, BPA's, the usual suspects.

I asked, but he didn't have any snacks.

After a sip of tea, the petite woman ahead of me in line frowned and gave her cup back to the bearded man. "No, it's not what I expected."

"Good for you," I whispered. "I was too nervous to say something."

"Well, why not?" she said in a loud voice. "I paid a thousand bucks to unplug for a weekend and connect with my inner child, not to drink shitty tea."

Her name was Marie and she too was a first-timer at the Tao Center for Yoga and Health. When I said my name was Adam, she called me Alan. I didn't correct her. I liked the idea of being someone else for a while.

"I don't usually do things like this," said Marie. "You know, New Agey. I told my friends I was doing a spa weekend."

"Do people still have friends anymore?" I said.

She didn't get my sense of humor. "I meant on Facebook," she said, hugging her oversized purse. "I didn't know how to explain it. Is this a vacation? Are we tourists?"

"How about Tao-rists?" I offered.

"Naah," she said. "Sounds like terrorists."

Marie and I had the same milky complexion, the mark of people who spent too long indoors. And we both wore all black, the mark of people who'd lived too long in Manhattan. Without phones or a coffee to hold, our fingers felt restless, trigger-happy.

"I need a change in my life," she said. "What are you looking for, Alan?"

Adam, I thought, correcting her in my head. "Well," I said. "Something real."

Lately, I'd been overdosing on change. I'd quit my five-year stint as an assistant to Kim Crawford, *the* Kim Crawford, a one-hit wonder '90s pop star and *Top Chef* runner-up who on Saturday mornings showed Cooking Network audiences how to make small portions of rich desserts. Guiltless Pleasures, she called them, and she'd produced two actual books under this theme, despite her lack of cooking talent. Sure, Kim often tweeted about the pleasure of baking bread, but in fact, I wrote her tweets and baked her bread—not to eat, but to pack into baskets to send fellow chefs, publicists, bookstore managers, anyone useful. During her rare kitchen appearances, she'd use dry measures for wet ingredients and wet for dry,

or confuse baking powder and baking soda. She'd claim she'd done it on purpose, to mimic what her audience would do at home.

As Marie finished checking in, I stepped up to the desk, where I was greeted by a middle-aged woman who'd tucked a gray feather into her hair. Behind her, a large light box pulsed red and orange, like a sunset. The woman's face was toasty brown and free of make-up, which startled me after years of TV work. She explained the rules of Tao (no refined sugars or caffeine, any attempts at communication via electronic means were grounds for a polite yet firm expulsion from Eden), then asked whether I was here for Weekend Environmental Warriors, Tennis without Tension, or Love is a Choice: A Workshop with Anna Paloma.

"The last thing you said," I said, drumming my fingers on the counter.

She handed me an iPad, to "take care" of my remaining balance, a daunting figure, but I was so hungry, I'd have signed my life away for a granola bar.

The woman tilted her head slightly. "Is this your first time at Tao?" she said in a soft voice, as if we were in a library. "We bid you welcome. I know you'll enjoy it."

At first I thought she was looking right at me, but actually she was staring at a point just above my head.

A white boy with dreads down to his hips had thrown my duffel bag onto his eco-friendly golf cart. He promised that I'd find it at my door later that evening.

"No one will steal it?" I asked. The boy gave me the kind of indulgent smile I might have offered a particularly slow intern struggling to dice an onion.

My footsteps crunched across a woodchip path to a wide lawn where several Tao-rists held hands in a circle. Off to the side, a gray-haired woman with dried skin sat

in a rocking chair. She was swaddled tight in a thick, scratchy Navajo blanket. Her eyes were closed and her lips were pulled in a taut, blissful smile.

Was that my future, living for weekends at a New Age farm, my new guiltless pleasure?

The lawn expired at the veranda of a long white house, where a tired garland of Tibetan flags sagged indifferently above the entrance. A doe-eyed teenager on a stool ignored the paper ID badge I'd been told to carry with me everywhere. I tried to catch his eye, to see if he'd notice, but he just rocked back and forth on his stool.

Inside, I took a scoop of everything on the buffet, then sat alone at a table for eight and inhaled my food. Even when it was all gone, I was still hungry, maybe because the food was so fragile. The kale chips melted on my tongue. The vegan sugar-free brownie crumbled to brown dust in my fingers. I spread a puddle of almond butter on my slice of spelt bread, and it ripped in half.

Kim would have sent me scrambling to find the closest James Beard-nominated restaurant and return with three courses in take-out tins. Comped of course.

To be fair, Kim wasn't all bad. She mostly left me alone on weekends, and as she often reminded me, she paid a decent salary in comparison to other chefs. She claimed to like me personally, though I suspected she was one of those power women who thought of gay men as pets, a suspicion confirmed by her reaction when I quit: "You're a nice guy, Adam, but you never were a good fit for this job. You and I, we're too alike."

Her and I, alike? Where was I a fit? What had I been put on this earth to do?

After dinner, I wandered through a garden of weedy flowers and shaggy-leaved vegetables. The air here at Tao smelled clean and damp, refreshing after the endless

bus ride from Port Authority. A pair of heavysset women stood beside a rain barrel with their arms around each other and their eyes closed. I wondered what my ex-boyfriend was doing that weekend and I had to take several deep breaths to stop myself from crying.

The buildings at Tao were packed close together, so you couldn't get lost—not unless you were Kim, who'd call me at least once a week from Denver, London, some Greek island, or across the street from her apartment building. "Can you believe I'm lost again? These gosh-darned phones are so hard to work. I used to have such a good sense of direction. I can't understand what the heck happened to me." There was something charming in the performance, in the way she did everything, and she knew it.

The Anna Paloma workshop was held in the Barn, a large hall painted butter yellow. A flyer by the door announced that tomorrow was movie night, featuring a documentary on rain forests. An older man in a white cowboy hat leaned on the porch railing and explained to a small crowd about neuroplasticity.

Entering the Barn, I stumbled over several pairs of discarded shoes. It reminded me of the *Sex and the City* episode when Carrie lost her Manolos at a party. Mine weren't Manolos, but they weren't cheap either, and I couldn't afford to replace them.

Shoes on, I moved toward the stage, set out with a pair of padded armchairs, and a backdrop of beaded curtains and paisley printed tapestries. Several audience members had already occupied the cushions on the floor, up front. I scored a pair of seats several rows back, and when I waved to Marie, she offered a pained smile before sitting next to me. She'd taken off her shoes, showing off her pedicured and painted toes.

After complaining about the food and the expensive

massage she'd booked, Marie asked if I'd mind if she moved to the cushions, to sit closer to the stage.

"Not at all!" I said, wondering what I'd done to put her off me so quickly.

"Thanks for understanding, Alan," she said, and I thought I recognized that same fake-sincere voice Kim liked to use whenever she deigned to offer me a compliment.

Understanding. Wasn't that what I'd come here for?

"The name is Adam," I said, after she'd gone.

Anna Paloma, or simply "Anna," arrived late. She had a shiny face with a lavender-pink complexion, framed by a mass of shimmering silver silk scarves and a pixie haircut so blond it looked white. From the edge of the stage, she beamed at us for a solid minute that felt more like five, though my sense of time had been warped by TV work, where every fifteen seconds had dollar-values attached. "What a glorious moment," she said at last with a fetching Southern drawl that suggested she knew the secret to fluffy angel biscuits. "And now it's over."

Tao assistants in white cotton blouses handed out recycled brown folders with Anna's face on them, and a Choosing to Love "worksheet," on which we were invited to write our judgments about someone we blamed for something. Then we were supposed to ask "Is it true?" (I guessed the answer was no.) Finally, we had to rewrite our original judgment as its direct opposite. I listened to the noise of pens scratching paper.

"Thank you, sweethearts. Any questions so far?" Anna asked.

Before she'd finished her sentence, several hands shot up, fingers wriggling. Anna chose a bald, barefoot man in the front row whose wife had left him a month ago.

"And you're not glad about it yet?" Anna sang out in

her folksy twang. “Come into my parlor, sweetheart.” She meant for him to step up on stage, where they sat in the padded chairs. “So your wife up and left you. Is that true?”

“Yes.”

Anna tucked her legs under her thighs and smiled patiently. The ends of her scarves billowed in the breeze of an overhead fan. I was still stuck on what she meant by the “glad” part of it. It was almost a year since my boyfriend left me, and I held out hope for reconciliation or at least some good break-up sex. But he remained inflexibly and politely cheerful around me, continually expressed an eagerness to meet for chaste Sunday afternoon coffee rather than a sexy late Saturday night drink.

“Well, she’s gone,” the man said, as if it were obvious. “So it’s true.”

“I was just wondering,” Anna said, smiling patiently, “who would you be, without that thought, she left me? Same situation, she’s gone. Only . . .” she held up her right hand, “that thought, she left me, doesn’t exist. Poof. Outright disappeared.”

As the man furrowed his brow, Anna turned to us in the audience. “Maybe you too were left by someone, maybe someone who passed, maybe someone who did you wrong. How might you be better off, or they be better off because they left you?”

“I don’t get it. How would I be better off?” said the man.

But Anna was ready for him. “I have a thought. Care to hear it?” She leaned forward and said in a stage whisper: “You might be free.”

On the day I freed myself of Kim Crawford, we were prepping a shoot for a “Summer Sensations” Cooking Network special, which featured a smattering of top net-

work stars, so Kim felt it was a coup that she’d been included. Our contribution was a recipe I’d created for mini chocolate pudding pies, but when I showed up to the set, I found Kim frantically tapping on her iPad, cheeks flushed, hair tied up in a frizzy bun.

“It’s worse than Jell-O!” she said. “So fake, so chalky. So white trash.”

To Kim, the world’s worst insult was “white trash,” perhaps because she feared that’s what other people called her behind her back. Once a week, she met with a vocal coach to erase the remaining traces of her Louisiana accent. She nearly fired me when I claimed on her official bio that she’d grown up on a farm instead of a “rural estate.”

“You liked the recipe yesterday,” I said cautiously. “I liked it. Everyone liked it.”

Kim gave me a pitying look. “Adam, honey, when you’ve been in this biz longer, you’ll develop a more sensitive palate. No, this pie is against all I stand for.”

She stood for things?

In my initial interviews with Kim, I’d gushed about innovation, creativity, my passion for testing new methods and ingredient combos, and she nodded anxiously in approval, said that innovation was the hallmark of her brand. I did not mention that someday I too hoped to have a “brand,” even host a cooking show of my own. I toyed with hokey titles like “Adam’s Apples” or “Play with Your Food.”

I’d heard about the job through one of the dozens of recreational cooking classes I took, sometimes three nights a week, to distract myself from the misery of my paralegal work, the taste of failure it left at the back of my throat. This wasn’t why I’d gone to Oberlin. I had classmates who’d written novels, released albums, been featured in Biennials.

“No restaurant experience, no formal training,” Kim said, glancing through my resume. “I like it! I need someone different, a fresh, creative perspective.”

Later, I found out that her reputation had made it impossible for her to recruit anyone with industry experience. Apparently, she used to go through assistants the way I went through parchment liners for my baking sheets at home.

Creativity was the last thing Kim needed more of. Her mind flitted from one Big Idea to the next, with frequent pit stops for vacation plans, restaurant visits, or accessory shopping. My job was to trail in her wake while guarding her dream life from the real world with its nasty deadlines, bills, and account ledgers. As Kim recounted her latest grand scheme or failed relationship, I learned to master the art of simultaneously making reassuring noises and sorting through a mess of receipts for reimbursement, or booking and unbooking “research trips” to Marrakech, Kenya, and Nepal, or helping her play hide and seek with the kosher salt (once I found the box behind her toilet), her favorite offset spatula (stuck in a spider plant), and her keys (which she’d left at her gym a dozen times).

When Kim first directed me to “borrow” a recipe, altering an ingredient or two, I used to tell myself I was too busy settling into my new job to invent new dishes from scratch, just as I was too busy to see friends or pay much attention to my increasingly resentful boyfriend. The trouble was, I never did settle in. It took me years of struggling to satisfy Kim’s constantly shifting demands to realize that my life as her assistant was not so different from the one I’d led as a paralegal, except that my friends, if I still had any, would have been more impressed by my job with Kim.

So when this chocolate cream pie came up, shortly

after my boyfriend quit on our relationship, I decided to make a change. I spent a hundred and some dollars of my own cash and hours of my own time testing recipes. I interviewed chefs, food studies professors, mothers, and children. I went to the fucking New York Public Library and researched the history of pudding. I forced slices on every intern, security guard, and maid between Kim’s building and the Cooking Network offices. And I used my research as an excuse to drop in on my ex-boyfriend’s new apartment.

“Delicious,” he said in a sad voice, “but everything you make is delicious.”

“You’re just saying that because you feel sorry for me,” I said.

“I’m not,” he said. “We’re past all that now.” I didn’t know what he meant. Lately, he’d been getting into yoga, meditation, all that, and out of the blue he’d just drop some line from Marianne Williamson into the conversation, apropos of nothing. I supposed he wanted to make me feel dumb and small for not being as spiritual as he was.

Anyway, the result of my efforts was a silky smooth pie, a cloud of chocolate cream punctuated by shards of delicate cookie crust. A paragon of pie. A poem of pie.

All this apparently failed to satisfy Kim, who tapped frantically at her iPad, the little veins in her pretty temples throbbing and her elegant swan’s neck flushing orange. “There,” she said, clicking on a *Barefoot Contessa* recipe for a peach tart. “We’ll press the dough into mini tart pans, and then swap out peaches for nectarines. Nectarines are much classier than peaches, right?” She glanced up from her tablet with a look of terror, as if my approval were all that stood between her and the abyss. Because I’d grown up in a tony New York suburb, she believed I had an instinctive feel for what was classy.

Soon afterward, I was pulling ingredients from the kitchens downstairs, furiously leveling cups of flour with my chef's knife, punch-packing brown sugar, hacking blocks of butter into pats and guillotining nectarines into slender moons. Why did I care? Even if Kim had done the recipe I'd written, I wouldn't have gotten credit for it. As if I wanted credit for a silly chocolate pie that would rot kids' teeth into vampire points.

Later in the studio, a Manhattan set designed to resemble a sun-splashed suburban kitchen, Kim blithely spun some yarn about picking nectarines with her dear granny, who always kept a box of gingersnap cookies in the house for her grandkids (in case they came to visit the rural estate). Apparently this memory had inspired Kim to concoct these chic, delectable, easy-to-make mini tarts with a gingersnap crust, filled with nutritious fruit. Wearing her gingham apron, her hair tied in actual pig-tails and held in place with darling little plastic butterflies, Kim sounded so convincing, so slyly seductive, that even I couldn't recall which parts of her story were and weren't true. And this terrified me.

That evening I informed her that I was moving on.

Kim looked confused. "Because of this recipe thing? There are only so many ways to make a tart. There's no copyright on sugar and butter. Even if I did call Ina, she'd say borrow away. She's probably grateful I didn't bother her by asking."

"Maybe so," I said. "But I won't see you tomorrow."

Kim's cheery expression melted. The tomato-red spots in her cheeks now glowed like blood. "I guess I'm not surprised," she said. "Adam, sweetheart, you really were never a good fit for this job. You and I, we're just too much alike."

The students in Anna's workshop fished around in tiny

Chinese silk bags for pens made of recycled toilet paper rolls and attacked their worksheets. They carried self-help books whose authors I didn't know and talked about wounds and forgiveness. They wore thick wool socks and fleece pullovers, as if constantly on the verge of going hiking.

When our session ended, a crowd of wet-eyed women rushed the stage and delivered their payloads of grief to Anna. I stood at the edge of their crowd, chewing the inside of my cheek, dreaming of retreating to my room to devour the Snickers bar hidden in my luggage. Gradually, the crowds thinned and I drew close enough to see a few wrinkles in Anna's face and scarves. I smelled her perfume, like a field of lavender.

Before it was my turn, an assistant ushered her out of the room.

Outside, I ran into Marie, stepping into her black ballet slippers. In the faint light, I almost mistook her for Kim.

"I don't know if I buy all this," Marie said, checking her slender silver watch. "It feels like a sales pitch. Turn your life around, buy my book."

"Well, she has to make a living," I said, not sure why I was defending Anna. "Maybe I don't buy all of it either, but I could rent it for a little while."

Marie shook her head. "If you were a woman, you'd see right through her." I wanted to invite her for an herbal tea so she could explain what I was missing, but she said quickly, "Hey, I should get to bed. I booked a massage before breakfast. It was nice talking with you."

Maybe she thought I wanted to hit on her. Maybe she didn't like my face, my gender, or my age, too old to be interesting, too young to merit the kindness extended out of pity to men and women who will shortly die.

* * *

Safely back in my single “dorm room,” furnished in particle board and industrial carpeting, and lacking in air conditioning as well as ambience, I opened the windows. It was so quiet outside that with the windows open or closed I didn’t notice any difference in the noise. Funny how in the city, you felt just by living there that you were accomplishing something. Here, with all this quiet, no past or future, I felt lazy, downright dissolute. Time crawled as slow as molasses.

I took a bite of my candy bar, then put it down. For a change, I wasn’t hungry.

Bathrooms were down the hall, but clean. After washing my face and brushing my teeth, I returned to my room and lay down on the stiff starchy sheets.

Kim would have never shared a bathroom. See? We were nothing alike.

I’d come to Tao on the recommendation of my ex-boyfriend, who after my first year of working for Kim, announced he was tired of dating both me and my boss. “I liked you better as a miserable paralegal who tinkered in the kitchen.” When I left Kim, I’d called him, half-hoping he might feel sorry enough for me to suggest that we get back together.

“Go see Anna,” he told me. “She’ll change your life. That’s how I got over you.”

I was surprised to hear that I was someone to get over.

In the middle of the night, I ran to the toilet and shit my brains out until dawn, cursing kale, spelt, and quinoa. I’d heard of “cleansing” diets—so maybe this was mine.

When I finally got off the toilet, just after sunrise, a bell rang at the Buddhist shrine atop a nearby hill, as if in honor of the occasion. I was indeed an empty rice bowl.

Marie arrived late to the morning workshop from her massage and was careful to choose a seat far from mine.

I listened as members of the audience stood to recite their litany of hurts. Their children used drugs. Their husbands abused them. Their dads had died of cancer or their moms had reinforced their negative body image. Through it all, Anna listened with the same patient smile, asking, “Is it true?”

I looked to the wings of the stage to see if her assistant was there to keep time, refill the water pitcher, flash a list of “throwaway lines,” like the ones I used to feed Kim off-camera about the virtues of Dutch-processed cocoa powder or the meaning of “tiramisu” in English. She’d recite those lines for the camera as if she’d just thought of them, in the same poisonous yet honeyed tone she’d use to remind me to empty her dishwasher, or find out how many miles her dad had in his frequent flyer account, or order her tickets—“good tickets”—to a show recommended by the *Times*, which she might or might not attend. “Adam, honey, do you want them?” she’d ask airily, as if unloading an extra helping of green beans and not a pair of five-hundred-dollar seats to some Broadway megahit that I’d called seven people to procure.

Of course I always said yes, like a dog grateful for scraps thrown under the table.

My daydream was interrupted by Anna Paloma, saying, “I don’t ever *expect* anyone to understand me. Even if they do, what do I have?”

I followed the wooden signs down to the lake with my new purchase from the Tao bookshop: *The Self-Compassion Guide to Your Dream Job*. However, I’d grown unused to paper, and after a few pages I gave up reading and used the book as a seat cushion on the sand, which I dug anxiously with my fingers.

“You always know when Anna’s giving a workshop,” said a middle-aged lady to my right, sprawled out on a

beach towel printed with a spiraling tie-dye rainbow. “Because everyone goes around asking, ‘Is it true? Are you sure it’s true?’”

On my other side, a man who looked about my age sat alone with one of Anna’s brown folders. The light breeze off the lake mussed his wispy blond hair and toyed with the collar of his blue button-down shirt, in desperate need of ironing. He caught me staring, and instead of calling me a faggot, he waved and said his name was Timothy. Would I care to do one of Anna’s Choosing to Love worksheets with him? As I shifted closer to him on the sand, I noticed his wedding ring.

He pulled out his page, flooded in cherry red ink. “My dad shouldn’t have died.”

I nodded calmly. At Tao, we’d quickly grown accustomed to tragedies like death, rape, and violence. The fact that I was here only because I’d lost my job was starting to give me an inferiority complex. “Your dad shouldn’t have died. Is that true?”

He tugged a lock of hair across his forehead. “No.”

“So turn it around. Your dad . . . should have died?”

He stopped me. “Wait, the next question is how do you react. . . .”

Somehow I felt the correction defeated the spirit of the whole exercise, but I said, “Oh, that’s right. Sorry. How do you feel. . . .”

“It says, ‘How do you react,’ not ‘How do you feel.’”

It was a good thing this Timothy was cute, because he struck me as kind of a stickler. “How do you react when you believe your dad shouldn’t have died?” I asked.

“I feel frozen, tired, upset. Very cold.” He seemed to actually shiver as he said it. I wished I had a spare towel to offer him, or maybe one of those Navajo blankets.

I looked beyond his blond head at the sand, the lake, the trees. Yesterday, Anna had talked about trees, how

they filled your lungs with oxygen and you did nothing back for them, and how grateful we should all be for trees and light and air. At the time, my reaction had been to wonder if it was too late to leave and still get a partial refund. But out here, with the light, the easy breeze, the freshly cut grass, and wet earth, and maybe Timothy too, her words took on more meaning. “The present moment,” Anna had said, “is always full of grace.”

And then, in a voice that sounded much gentler than mine, I said to Timothy, “Try it a different way. Try, ‘I should not have died.’”

“I should not have died?” he repeated. “But I’m alive.”

“Yes, but are you really, fully alive?”

He paused. “I guess since his death, a part of me has been sort of dead inside.”

“Anna would say, drop the ‘sort of.’”

“She would do that.” Timothy smiled slyly. He had a funny way of smiling, very thin-lipped and sleepy. His mouth was begging to be kissed. “I’ll do you now,” he said.

Really? But we’d just met. I didn’t even know if he was a top or a bottom.

Of course I knew what he meant. Why did I always make everything into a joke?

I read from my worksheet: “I should not have quit my job. I don’t know what the fuck to do with my life. I’m all alone. I’m forty years old. Kim was unfair. . . .”

He touched my wrist. His fingers were cold yet firm. “Slow down,” he said.

We turned everything around. The job with Kim had grown stale, so even if I’d stayed, I wouldn’t have done it well. I knew what to do with my life: be happy. I wasn’t alone; we could hear children splashing and mosquitoes buzzing on the beach. I wasn’t forty because I didn’t have to define myself by the sum of my years in existence

on the planet. Kim had been very fair with me. In fact she had given me two weeks severance pay and offered to write me a glowing recommendation. The last time we'd spoken, she'd even made a joke about how I might resume my former duties someday—and maybe it wasn't a joke. I'd conveniently forgotten all that.

"But . . ." I said, and then a strange thing happened. Timothy put his hand in front of my lips, missing them by a mere millimeter.

"Don't," he said. "Just imagine what it would be like to land there, before the 'but.' And just stay there for a little while. Without the but."

I opened my mouth to explain. There was so much more he needed to know, to fully understand my situation. He put up his hand again. This time he was actually covering my mouth. I could have kissed his fingers.

"Okay," I said when he removed his hand, and then I closed my eyes. The air got still. My big toe tingled. A fly buzzed past my face, and I heard my heart beat in my ears.

"Thanks," I said, and I meant it. "It's kind of strange here. But in a good way."

"Sometimes I think I could stay forever," he said. "But my wife wouldn't like it."

Just my luck.

In the Barn, Timothy took off his shoes, and in sympathy, I also took off mine.

It felt cozy hiding together in the back of the room that afternoon as we listened to a new catalog of grief: a mother whose baby had been diagnosed with a terminal disease. A rape victim who struggled to keep her inner spirit bright and shiny. Anna listened, nodded, turned statements around until a young woman with deep purple hair, the color of a ripe plum, reported that

her husband had committed suicide.

"How can you say he should have committed suicide?" the woman cried out, her lips grazing the mike. "How can you deny the real pain I experienced?"

"Oh, no, dear heart," said Anna. "I don't minimize one iota of that pain. Not at all. I'm just saying I can only accept what is true because if I don't, then I'm not free."

"So I'm just supposed to be glad that my husband killed himself?"

By now I'd come to expect Anna's pithy comebacks, her clever and insightful one-liners. She was so good on the fly, she could have had her own TV show. I wondered if she'd ever thought of it. Maybe this could be my triumphant return to television. . . .

So I was all the more disappointed when Anna's comeback never came.

"I don't know what anyone is supposed to do," she said. "I can't speak for you."

"I don't understand."

"That's because at this moment you don't need to understand."

"I've had enough of this bullshit." The woman stomped off.

"I wish you peace," Anna said to her back. "Who else has a question?"

I told Timothy I needed to rest before dinner, but really I went back to my room to think about him and jerk off. It was the first time in many months I'd done it out of urge rather than boredom or habit.

When I was finished, I opened my window and enjoyed the symphony of electric golf carts whizzing luggage back and forth, or guests coming and going to their rooms. Someone played a harmonica out of tune. I felt desperately unhappy at the thought of collecting my

phone tomorrow on my way to the bus. Maybe I could stay here and work in the kitchens. No one would miss me back home.

I slipped back into bed to close my eyes and when I opened them again, it was nighttime, well past dinner. Timothy was probably wondering where I was. I ate a Snickers bar, then put on my shoes and wandered outside to look for him.

The night air felt cool and clammy. I heard wind chimes ringing outside the gift shop. Timothy wasn't inside. I paused by a barrel of organic popcorn, then moved on.

I found him on the sand. A light fog had descended on the gray-purple lake, and Timothy looked moody and lovely with his hair falling into his eyes.

"While I'm here, I'm okay," he said, "but out there . . . I still can't support myself."

I put my hands on his shoulders, as if to steady him. "You seem okay to me, my friend," I said. He was my friend, wasn't he? My first male friend in I didn't know how long. "No danger of toppling over."

He smiled, then put one of his hands on mine. "Your hands are warm," he said. I leaned in and kissed him, on the mouth. His lips felt soft and alive against my lips. They met mine for only a few seconds, but their touch lingered.

"That was nice," I said, gasping for air. "I'm sorry, I thought I sensed something in you, that might be open to it."

"You weren't wrong," he said, then stood up. "But we shouldn't do that here."

I thought he meant we should go back to his room, but then he said, "I came to Tao to take care of myself. I just . . . I see it as a remove from the rest of my life."

I reached for his hand. "Please," I said. "I need some-

one next to me."

Timothy shook his head. "I can't be that person for you. I wish I could, but I'm married. I have a child."

He had his own life. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I still wanted what wasn't good for me.

The next morning was our final session with Anna. I pretended not to look for Timothy, and anyway I didn't find him, so I sat alone. Each day, the room grew less crowded, and smelled more heavily of dirty feet.

In the middle of a sentence, Anna paused, said, "Can we have the music?" The overhead lights went off, and a recording of a harp came on. "Let's try a meditation."

She directed us to close our eyes and imagine a ball of golden light between our eyebrows. At first I pictured a radiant golf ball bobbing at the top of the bridge of my nose, which reminded me of a hair I'd noticed growing out of my left eyebrow—I'd forgotten to bring a pair of scissors with me and I was dying to cut it off. I imagined Marie and Timothy staring at it and thinking, doesn't he know how to trim his eyebrows?

"Now I invite you to turn your attention inward," Anna continued in her soft, suggestive purr. "We focus our energies into that tiny pinpoint between our eyes, and we rest lightly upon a bank of soft white clouds, floating in a gentle blue sky."

For so long my mind had been buzzing so busily, I hadn't seriously considered the idea of rest. I took a deep breath, let my shoulders droop, felt the tension at the back of my neck go slack. I sank back into my chair as if it were a soft cloud, pillowing around my arms and legs, supporting my weight on all sides. Then, like a whisper, I heard Anna's drawl, "and now we drop right through."

I imagined myself sinking through a cloud, wind whistling past my ears, cold air painting my skin, nothing be-

low to catch me. Shortly, my body would crash into earth.

“. . . until we come to rest on another cloud,” said Anna, “a cloud of stillness and quiet comfort.” This one was not white, but pale gold. The sky had changed color from blue to a shimmering pearly gray. I gripped the edge of my chair.

“And now once again, we fall.”

Six more times, we landed, then fell through clouds in skies of varying hues. And when at last we landed softly back on earth, Anna had us repeat after her, silently, “Who I was, I shall not be any longer. What I felt, I shall not feel. Here and now, I claim joy. We all have the right to be happy, whoever we are. That’s our birthright.”

I felt the weight and warmth of a rough hand on mine. I opened my eyes. The hand belonged to Timothy. “What are you doing?” I whispered.

“I don’t know,” he whispered back and squeezed

my hand.

I didn’t know either. Were we holding hands as friends or lovers? Would I really stay here or go home after lunch? Where would I find another job? What would the rest of my life look like? So many questions demanding to be answered. But now, in the warmth of Timothy’s hand holding mine, all these questions about how to end my suffering were themselves the only suffering I was experiencing.

My hand relaxed in Timothy’s. My fingers stroked the hairs on his skin. I inhaled deeply, took the tired smell of that stuffy room into my lungs. Anna’s voice tickled my ear like a faint echo, reminding me of my sole responsibility at that moment: to inhale, and then exhale. Inhale, then exhale.

Breath rose and fell, and then rose and fell again, as if for all eternity. 