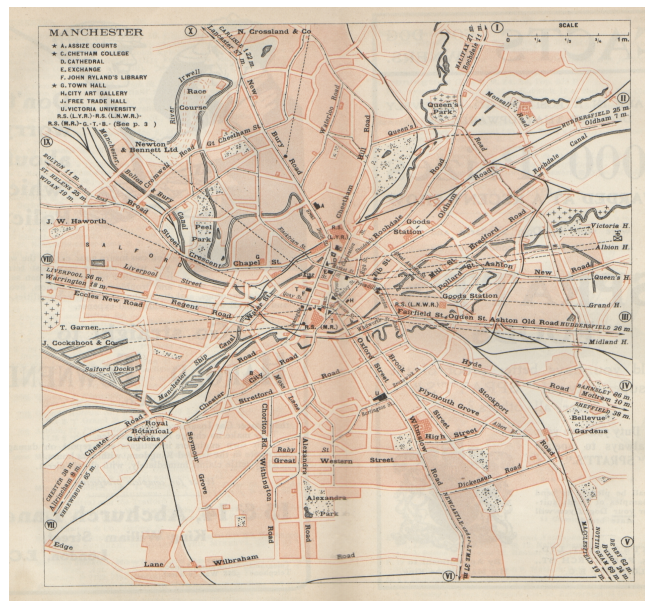


A NOVEL BY

ASHLYNN
EDMONSON-
GOETZ

FINDING



MANCHESTER

Faith is the assurance of all things hoped
for, the conviction of things not seen.

Hebrews 11:1

TO LIVE IS TO LOVE

By Ashlynn Edmonson Goetz

Love; not hopelessness.

Art; not war. Fight for your life.

These endless numbered days will not wash away
but in your mind; make peace; follow the
shadows; paint ruthless words in the shieldless
sky.

Dream on kite strings. Knit your heart on a
sweater vest. Push daises in carts. Box clouds in
moving vans. Blow frost bubbles. Light fires.

Spin a web of catastrophic dignity on pedestals;
ivory; noir; crimson cries; tear ducts weep; wings
of ferns clasp angels; grape vines mend.

And then we dance. And then we kiss goodnight.
And then we sleep. And then we live. We write.

We create. We hope. We carry the blue day on.

This is how it ends: at the beginning, with the
door open. Thought full.

Rain tonight; cigarette ashes; a new day
tomorrow.

CHAPTER 1

A one-way ticket, no return, was pressed like a flower petal between pages 116 and 117 of Chariots of the Gods. The ticket was dated April 8, 1984. Behind it was a letter. It had yellowed over the years and black ink spread out like the upturned roots of dead, fallen trees. This book lay, in a coffin of memories, smelling of pine, musty books and Time magazines dating back to 1959. Patent leather bridal shoes sat neatly above an array of brightly colored sweaters from the early 80's, a faint hint of Prestige cologne still stuck to their wool threads. Loose Polaroid's were scattered about under foggy flaps, on top of once-sticky adhesive in a stack of faded photo albums. This chest stood, locked and unopened in Nora's mother's bedroom for 26 years at the foot of an antique, four-poster bed, in the upstairs of a house that had housed three generations of Easton's.

Gentle wind played with Nora's long, sun-streaked hair on the front porch below her mothers room, twisting and flowing like a gust over a wheat field, the weight of it no matter for the hot stick of the humidity which lifted it up in a thick, wavy frizz. The few humid days that actually arose on the shores of Danford Cove were excruciating.

Nora's salt-washed dress clung to her pale skin, which matched the moonlit glow that bathed the Easton lot, grains of sand sparkled their way up to the foot of the house. As Nora rocked on the front porch swing, a one-chimed wind chime swayed from the overhang, a somber dance with the rhythm of the breeze. Brushing a wisp of hair from her face, she looked vacantly out at a single anchored boat, sail shuttering in the distance. She longed to be out among the unpredictable waves, jutting along into the sea, letting the tide take her, anywhere, everywhere, wherever she was meant to go, she thought, the sea would decide.

The low drone of voices sifted through the screen door, stinging her eyes, a burning reminder of the faculty parties her mother used to throw. This night was not unlike the others, and that, she thought, was the point. Similar to those occasions, Nora skillfully avoided these intellectuals, though sometimes her curiosity caused her to listen in on their philosophical conversations, catching the words and soaking them up, their energy reverberating through the halls, vents, windows, screens, stairs, their spark intriguing her to scrounge her mother's bookshelves in an effort to satiate her existential inklings.

This night was different, however, in that it was really a formality, however, there was nothing formal about it. An eclectic group of artists, writers, philosophers, astrologers, antiquarians, archeologists, neighbors, and friends of Nora's mother chattered solemnly inside. The only other blood-relation present was her grandmother, Ella, who was engrossed in an

unbreakable conversation with a young philosophy instructor by the name of Chap Stevens.

As Nora's eyes gazed at the white sail, fluttering out on the sea before her, she imagined Chap, whipping in a spinnaker with swift expertise, firmly securing the sheets, and leaping onto the bow with a gaze so powerful it would move the wind in his favor. He would mumble on about the vastness of the horizon, the complexity of ocean ecosystems, and the energy that connects us all to the impossibly perfect cycle of the universe.

Chap was a colleague of Nora's mother. Atop his always-stubby chin was a perfectly symmetric, squarish nose that scrunched ever so slightly into his typically squinty, thought-stricken eyes. His shady blonde hair was styled in whatever way the air dried it. Among his past bad habits, the worst was smoking. He had quit the silly obsession upon Nora's mother's request and replaced it with toothpicks. You could tell he had a nervous tick, because he always had one of those ridiculously tiny sticks sunbathing like a bloke on his inflatable mattress of a lip, as if it were a tiny sword, protecting him from the rest of society.

Charlotte, her mother, was seriously close with Chap. Though thirteen years younger than she, he reminded her of Nora's father. She liked familiarity. Longed for it. And as time aged the things around her, her spirit never changed. A daughter, a decade, two, what did it matter? A free soul in the wind she was and she would be forever.

"It's an exquisitely bright moon tonight, isn't it?"

Nora's consciousness shattered back to reality. She turned to see Steve Werner, astrologist and mathematician, friend of her mother's from USM, staring bleakly from the opened doorway.

"Yes—it is," she said, forcing out a normal tone, though her inner self felt like dissipating away like a sandcastle in high tide.

She stared forward, burning her gaze into the railing; flames would have burst into fury if they could. Her energy enough should have penetrated a sense of unwelcomeness – but he was not keen to understanding the state of others, apparently.

He walked to the railing, looked to the sky that had cleared, staring at the stars, but not really seeing them. He sighed a sorrowful sigh and sat down next to her.

Her lips tightened like an asshole. Her eyebrows could bend steel. He made no notice of this.

"How are you doing Nora? I bet this is a little difficult for you, isn't it?"

She did not respond.

"Oh Charlotte. Charlotte, Charlotte, Charlotte. Who would have ever expected?"

Nora snorted.

"Are you okay?" He slid his arm across her back.

"Please excuse me," She pulled away abruptly. Wiping a tear from her cheek, she stood and walked quickly down the porch steps to the beach. The

beaming moon seemed to lead her to no other place than the edge of the bay.

She knelt. Waves, lapped at her knees. She stroked the water, as if she would never see it again. Finally, she could not hold it in any longer; the sea streamed from her eyes.

CHAPTER 2

“When she was only thirteen, she slipped out the side door. It was raining. But that didn’t matter. She ran along the beach until she was out of sight of the house. I peered through the blinds in my bedroom as I watched her go.” Said Nora’s grandmother, Ella.

Chap’s brow furrowed in confusion.

“Why stop a young girls’ curiosity?” She breathed out regrettably. “And then it was midnight and she hadn’t returned. And then it was noon and still no sight of her. Were her father alive, he would have sent out a search party.”

“And weren’t you concerned? She could have drowned. She could have been swept up by some stranger —” Sneered Chap.

She cut him short. “Because I believe there’s an order to things. Young girls will learn about the world in their own way.”

“I think you have too much trust.”

“No. Just faith in things.”

“And what happened?”

“Three days later a nun brought her home. Apparently Charlotte had come across a book of her sister’s. It was by a Swiss author who proposed

that ancient civilizations were aided by intelligent visitors from other solar systems. I guess what hit her were a few particular passages proving that the Bible had actually documented these events and misinterpreted them for the divine.”

“Chariots of the Gods. I teach that book. It proposes some fascinating theories.”

“Earth shattering to Charlotte. She ran off to the Church with sudden necessity. She later told me that she slept outside the Pastor’s office until he returned the next morning, but the next morning was Sunday and she couldn’t get a word with him until after the 6:00 mass. At which time she pounded him with frustrated questions until he insisted on bringing her home, but she refused to tell him where she lived. So he walked her to the convent to spend the night there. Where, of course, she continued to argue with the women, but they would not back down from their holy stance. And after spending two days like this, a young nun finally talked her into going home, insisting that the police must be on the look out for her.”

“That does sound like Charlotte.” Chap placed a toothpick in his teeth.

“Oh yes, she was always getting into things like that.”

“And did I hear you right? You said Charlotte came across her sister’s book?”

“Yes, Anna was very much into theoretical ideologies.”

“Strange, Charlotte never mentioned she had a sister.”

“Well, they haven’t talked in years.”

"In years?" He flipped the toothpick expertly, no hands.

"Anna ran away when she was seventeen. Charlotte was twelve. She literally flew away. As if she had been caged. Ha! She was always the dramatic one. Must have inherited it from her father."

"Seventeen? And I suppose you just waited for her to return as well?"

"Well, I suppose I did."

"And did she?"

"No. No she didn't." A tear began to form in Ella's eye which she quickly blinked away.

"Where did she go?"

"Everywhere. It's hard to keep track. She was in Chile for some time. And Belize, Guatemala, Egypt, Greece. She sent porcelain statues from everywhere she went. A nice gesture. But no words. The only way I knew where she was, was from their 'Made in wherever' labels, which often aren't even the same country, unless she went out of her way to find trinkets that were. I still have each and every one, in that shelf of squares over there. Last one she sent was from England. That miniature Basset Hound there. Underneath it says 'Made in Manchester'." She turned its wood base over for Chap to see. They looked. Then he looked back at her, a tear slipped from her eye and fell directly on the head of the dog, baptizing him. She was frozen. If he touched her, she'd probably fall straight over. Had time paused? He looked around. No. No it hadn't. Might as well have. He snapped his fingers

and she came back to life. “Sorry.” She lowered her arm. “It’s been a while since I’ve thought of her.”

“When was it? That she sent the pup?”

“Twenty-six years—”

Suddenly a high tide of long dark hair gushed into the room, plunging into their conversation with an excessively large bouquet of stargazer lilies. “Ella!!!!” She shrieked; probably an attempt at Street Car humor thought Chap, un-amused.

“I am so sorry! I’m ungodly late – And I’m terribly, terribly, SO terribly sorry about Charlotte.” She tried to manage a hug with Ella.

“Aren’t we all.” Chap butted in, swirling the merlot in his glass.

She stared at him but didn’t see him. “Do you have a vase for these Nana dear?” She took Ella by the shoulder so swiftly she almost splashed the wine she had already poured herself upon entering the house on Chap’s tweed coat as she rushed “Nana” off towards to the kitchen.

“It’s nice to see you too.” Chap said and snapped his toothpick in half with his teeth, spitting it in her direction, unwisely catching the eye of several other members of the academia that he wish would trip on their ties. Fuck this, he thought, wanting to seek out a smoke. But instead, he stood there, looked around at the vacant room. Should he follow Ella and save her from that horrible lady? He scratched his head a little too long to be manly about it, he had turned into a dog. No. He was really not in the mood to deal with those annoying womanly emotions right now.

He leaned his head back, to the left, almost sneakily, peering at the guests in the dining room. He just stood there. Alone in the hot stick with no fans. Ugh. He'd deal with it. He'd decided. He didn't want to seem desperate and no one was smoking but that creep, Steve Werner. He walked over to the exploding bookcase. He set down his glass of wine and flipped out a fresh toothpick from a small case in his shirt pocket. He closed it. He liked the sound it made when it closed. Click. It was subtle. Reminded him of Tic Tacs. He almost smiled. Then he returned the case to its proper place in his tweed coat, buttoned it up, tapped it. It was good. The toothpicks were mint flavored. Similar to Tic Tacs. Tic Tacs. Tick. Tack. Tick-tack. Sticky tack. Whick whack. Words were racing around a track in his head.

He stuffed his hands into his pants pockets. Rocked a bit. Looked around the family room.

He looked at the familiar orange couches, the green knit pillows. He looked at the mid-nineteenth century, now peeling, paisley wallpaper. He liked that. Then he turned around, remembering the trinket case that took over an entire wall. He wondered why he hadn't noticed them before. It was blatantly obvious. The wall was cluttered with them. It was an army of miniature proportions, a hodge-podge, a mishmash, a global array of culture, on display. His eyes widened. Boy! He was like a kid in a candy store.

Getting suspiciously close, he looked around, he decided he probably had at least two minutes, and it's not like he was going to play with them. He just wanted a closer look. A giddy grin grew across his face as he picked up a

brightly colored this and spun a spiny that and see-sawed a thiddle thaddle,
and mimed a miniature mime, and tinked a tiny drum, and opened a cute
Cadillac door, and cheersed a tiny teacup, losing his masculinity entirely.

“Made in Athens,” he said aloud.

Then another. “Made in Rome.” Really, he thought. He would love to go
there.

“Made in Guatemala.”

“Gua-te-ma-la.” He definitely wanted to go there.

“Made in Chichen Itza.” Ha! Lie. Nothing is made in Chichen Itza. Not
anymore. Mayan ruins. He’d love to go there too. He’d heard that when you
walk into the pyramid of Kukulcan you can *feel* the energy of the earth,
aligned with the sun, its bizarre serpentine shadow slithering down the
staircase on the spring equinox. He would go. Why hadn’t he gone yet? Of all
the places, he’d always told himself he would go there. So many places. So
little time. He should make some. Free up a couple weeks. Maybe months.
He’d at least think about it.

He looked again at the pixy-sized pyramid. There was more.

It had a paragraph of words on it, underneath it’s base. Tiny words. Not
in length but in print. And not in Mayan, in English. This was a souvenir. This
was for tourists. But he liked it.

‘The Solar Ceremony’

‘Say K’IN seven times into your hands for your body, say K’IN seven times
for your spirit, and say K’IN seven times for the awakening of the cosmic

human. You can actually feel the energy of your spirit in your hands! Feel the vibration in your hands. Hear the sound of the SUN in your heart. Now rest the blessings of your spirit on the Earth by bending down and placing your palms flat upon the ground. Allow your spirit to enter the Earth and send your blessings and intentions to walk in a way that will awaken yourself and others into rightful living once again.'

"Rightful living." He thought of Charlotte and he decided he would try this for her. When he goes to Chichen Itza. He really would.

Chichen Itza. Chichen Itza. He liked the sound of the word. Now it was stuck in his head.

He was about to lift another trinket from its stronghold when he heard the dark haired women's voice booming ever more annoyingly from the kitchen. He retracted his hands, frustrated with anticipation like a child shaking a bulky present under a fir tree. Grunting, he decided he'd sit. And wait. For a something, but he was not quite sure what.

He sat down on the couch closest to the window, sinking into its worn cushions. He twiddled his thumbs. He really did. He flipped his toothpick around, flipped it back. He had gotten good at flipping it skillfully with his tongue, a full rotation. It was very impressive.

In an effort to appear more at ease: he'd spread his arms across the couch back, sigh, and kick his feet up; he'd seen people do this; relax. That was something he could only do on a sailboat; relax. But he'd try it now; maybe by pretending it would actually come into being.

Here's how it went: He sighed. Stretched his arms across the back. Oh damn, did he have pit stains? He looked, got distracted, then remembered the next move, the kicking back of the feet. He lifted his loafers onto the coffee table, awkwardly, and accidentally knocked a book to the ground, completely destroying any perception of ease. Damnit.

"Immanuel Kant." He read aloud with a hint of surprise and a dash of nostalgia. A distraction! Thank god. He flipped the book open. The cover was barely attached, hanging there, fearfully, dangling on to its life as he tormented it in suspension. He stared at the poor thing for more than a moment. Hanging there, like a tooth that needed pulling. At first he was a bit disappointed, but then he felt a bit happy. He shook his head. Of course. Charlotte. At least she liked it. She probably traipsed around with it in the abyss of her purse for too long.

As he fanned himself with the rush of flipping pages, the wonderful aroma of old paper and time drifted from the yellow within. After exactly seven repeated flips, a few flaps, and a shake like a Chinese fan, he turned to the inside cover, noting an inscription he had taken time writing and rewriting and rewording and finally committing permanently to the page. When he was in grad school, he slid that book under Charlotte's office door. She was his professor for 'The Philosophy of Metaphysics.' Apparently she liked the gesture. She remembered him. He was fairly handsome and all. And something was slightly off with that one, in a quirky kind of way. But she

liked that. Two years later she hired him when he applied for a teaching position. That was the start of their intimate friendship.

He turned to chapter three. 'The Philosophy of Being.' Was there a chapter on the philosophy of not being? No. No there wasn't. Now he was looking at page 82. 83. 95. Turning pages. But he was just looking. There they were. Words. They might as well have been in Sanskrit.

His mind was still caught up with the revelation of Charlotte's sister. She should be there. He tried to shake the thought from his head, but thinking was all he could do. His thoughts were circling, circling, circling, like a psycho rat in a maze, running and darting and turning round, turning back, flipping, flopping, upside down, thinking, thinking, thinking. He wondered if Anna even knew that Charlotte had passed away. That she had cancer. Why did she get cancer? Of all people. Why Charlotte? Why now? How did it advance so quickly? She was so young. And she didn't even have the chance to fight it.

The whole thing. The cancer, it just made no sense. He had thought cancer and sickness were created from negative energy, lack of exercise, poor diets, bad habits, dull minds, lives that are dead but still being lived. Charlotte was none of these. She was like laughter that swept across a room, polishing plates on walls and blowing dust off the banisters. He was sure Anna was not aware of this. And he was certainly sure she had no idea that Charlotte was a wonderful mother. A devoted daughter. A surviving widow. Dedicated friend. Successful professor. Scholar. Writer. Reader. Dreamer. Seamstress. Wine enthusiast. Conversationalist. Idealist. Pacifist. Monotheist.

Optimist. Philanthropist. Artist. Cook. Romantic. Jazz fanatic. Record collector. Roadie. Hippie. Beauty. Then something strange started to happen, he was beginning to choke up. He was on the verge of crying. He ran to the closest mirror and assessed, his eyes were getting dewy! This was a breakthrough!

He searched the room for a picture of her, but only came across a picture of Nora as a little girl, splashing in waves as if she had just discovered water. Was Nora even aware that she had an aunt? He should tell her. No. He couldn't. He probably shouldn't. Ella should. He would at least bring up the idea to her. He stirred uneasily in his tweed trousers. Tweed? Why in gods name did he wear all tweed? The heat index was 105. He wafted his shirt in an effort to cool his sweating chest.

Where was Nora? He eyed the living room, but saw no glimpse of her. Though he didn't really expect to. Why on earth would she want to small talk with people she barely knew. A thousand sorry's would never bring her mother back. Ten thousand hugs and stories would never let her know her father. What luck. Poor girl. He wanted to take care of her. Hold her. Stroke the tears from her freckled cheeks. Run his fingers through her sandy hair.

Where was she? He hadn't seen her since the ceremony. Wine. At a funeral. He finally smiled. Only for Charlotte. Where did he put his glass? Nora. Where's Nora? Wine? He tried to catch a glimpse of the bottles on the table in the dining room. Empty, empty, empty, full. White. Damn. Nora likes white. He should bring her a glass. He looked to the open screen door.

Maybe she was outside. Maybe he should go outside. Maybe there was a cool breeze meandering out there. Why didn't they have air conditioning? God. But fans *are* so vintage. These women were all about that. Like this room. With no fan. The miniatures were sweating. No wonder everyone was over there. Two fans. Food. *Conversation*.

He decided to take an inventory. Weigh out the situation.

Small talk.

Fan.

Wine.

Four cakes: cheese cake, chocolate cake, red velvet cake, lemon cake, lemon cake?

Vegan sandwiches: noble.

Apple quinoa salad: good protein.

Spinach cheese tortellini: delectable.

Olives: delicious.

Seafood salad: fresh.

Freerange chicken salad (he could read the sign): liberal.

Cilantro pesto rotini: worth small talking for, he loved pesto like he loved Maine.

Peaches: in season.

Naan: random. Ella loves to make naan.

Maybe he should eat again. The scale was leaning in that direction. And walking over there might cool him down. But it would be like crossing a high

traffic street of academic freight trains to get there. No. He'd remain hot. He decided. Then he heard a crash and decided he was over-suited for the situation to help, he was so damn hot, but no, he would not take the Tweed coat off, he was just so much more handsome with it on.

He thought he'd try to relax again. He lifted his arms to the couch back. Were there pit stains now? He lifted his arm. Sniffed.

The dark haired woman returned. Startled him. Ella followed. The dark haired woman was carrying the lilies in a vase that could finally hold the massive bouquet. They were top heavy. They had to try 12 different vases before finding one that wouldn't tip she said. They broke one. It was antique. 'Made in England.' That's where Ella's parents had lived and where Ella got her accent from. In fact, Charlotte, having been home schooled, inherited the accent from her mother. And Nora, same story. Yet neither of them had even been to Britain. They were homebodies. They liked what was familiar.

The dark-haired woman sat next to Chap, raised her eyebrow at him, then abruptly pushed his feet from the table. Damn. And he had finally, almost relaxed. This woman was making him testy.

She placed the bulging arrangement squarely in the center of the coffee table, fluffed it to her liking, then sighed in exhausted relief.

"Sit, sit!" She insisted to Ella, motioning to the orange sofa across from Chap. Ella turned to Chap, apologizing with her eyes. He apathetically raised his brows. What did it matter, he couldn't relax anyway.

“Kathryn was just telling me about her unfortunate ride from Manhattan.”

The woman swelled up like a tidal wave, “Oh, it was quite awful. That’s why I was so late. I really didn’t mean to miss the ceremony. But, my train broke down just outside of Boston. No electricity. No air conditioning. We were forced to sit in the sweltering heat for three hours, until they sent a rescue train to pick us up, which had to head to the nearest station, forcing us to switch to a rerouted train and traverse back to Boston again,” she took a breath. “You cannot imagine how awful it was. Crying babies, fat sweaty men, sniffing, hacking, wheezing old men, passengers making awkward small talk. Unbelievable! And of course my cell phone died so I was unable to call any of you. And I won’t even waste your time to get into the drama with the taxi driver, I don’t know why I didn’t hire a town car,” she breathed again. “Anyway, I’m just relieved to finally be here.” She exhaled deeply. Then straightened the pleats of the bursting poppy print of her skirt that was swirling in Chap’s consciousness like an acid trip. The oranges and reds and yellows and greens screaming in their own high pitched frequencies, melting together and spinning like pinwheels. He felt faint. But worse than the heavy, wet, in that sauna of a living room with Kathryn’s shrill voice. That voice had given him splitting headaches on every occasion she was in town, sucking the life out of the moments she spent with Charlotte when she was not away stuffing her students minds with art history at Sotheby’s Institute in Manhattan.

“But I’m here, Ella, for you and for Nora, anything you need, I’ll take care of, cooking, cleaning, arranging Charlotte’s things in storage, I’m sure it would kill you to have to go through all of that, but I can manage, it would be nostalgic for me, I’d love to do it. I’ve opened up two weeks in my schedule, which is amazingly difficult to do, but I’ve managed, can you believe that? From art openings and lectures to dinner parties and cocktails hours—cancelled! I mean really, Charlotte was one of my favorite friends from childhood and one of the only that I’ve actually kept in touch with. And this is all, so, so... tragic, the cancer and all, she was just so young, so involved, so inspired! And all of sudden, just like that. Gone.” Ella raised her eyebrows at Chap, could he believe this? They were both doomed.

The woman’s wave must be crashing soon. He hoped.

“It’s just so hard to believe. I don’t want to believe it. Let this be a dream! But it’s not. It’s life. And everything happens for a reason. Who knows why, but whatever it is will unfold itself before us. Her energy will pass on where its meant to go, off to some other place, joining the energy of long past scholars and philosophers, and oh, and John I suppose, that’s one light of optimism we can reflect on, joining her young love, who left also so abruptly, and unsettlingly, and with a newborn daughter he barely had the chance to know. But here we are, still alive, with memories and learned lessons that will live on,” she nodded. Turned her head and smiled at Ella, “we women will be here for each other and we will get through this!” She sighed again in theatrical fashion. Chap was waiting for her to lift her hand to

her forehead, he hoped she'd faint and fall to the floor, but his powers of telekinesis were of no avail.

"You should have given the eulogy." He muttered.

"Oh! No. No. I'm no orator, that's for sure. My students seem to nod off quite frequently in my lectures on 17th century art, however fascinating the subject may be. I would have degraded Charlotte's exciting life with my dry rhetoric."

"I haven't the slightest idea what you mean!" Chap spouted, tossing his hand gaily and scrunching his face into a sarcastically posh smirk.

"Oh stop, stop!" Her voice rolled in a flirtatious crescendo across the room. "So who did give the eulogy, if I may ask? And was the ceremony nice? And the weather perfect? It was dark when my train arrived. So I really don't know. Do tell!" She shifted in her seat, looking from Chap to Ella to Chap to Ella. Then Chap raised his brows insinuating Ella to speak.

"Well," she paused. "It was an overcast day. Fittingly, I do think. The ceremony was very nice. We had it on the beach. Everyone shared their intimate memories of Charlotte and her life. I started it off, but it was no eulogy I have to say, and it sort of coalesced into a cheerful story, told by everyone whose life she had touched. Then we all raised our glasses. Oh, I forgot to mention, we were drinking wine." Kathryn shook her glass of white to show that she too was drinking, almost spilling it on Chap's lap. "Also fitting," Ella paused, struggling to find her train of thought. "Um, yes, and

then Nora scattered Charlotte's ashes into the sea and that was the end of it."

"Oh—my—how lovely!" Was she going to cry? It appeared that way. Yes. Yes she was crying now. Politely. It looked as if her heart had been broken. Someone, some thing was squeezing the air out of her.

"I can't—believe—I missed that." She was speaking slower now, at least.

"Did anyone film it? Were there any pictures taken?" She pleaded.

Ella looked at Chap, questioningly.

He appeared not to know.

"Well, someone must have saved a little piece of that moment in some way. Something. Maybe I should go ask."

"There is—the urn." Chap pointed to a side table.

Kathryn almost leapt from the couch to retrieve it.

She lifted it. Opened it carefully. Squinted inside. Then looked up, teary eyed. She turned to Chap. Paused, as if questioning why this had happened. Then to Ella. Shocked that this moment was real.

"It just—it just—can't be! God wake me up!" She ran to Chap and placed the urn in his left hand, the lid in his right.

He turned to Ella.

Kathryn backed away, as if she were frightened.

"I—I—I have to do something. We—have to do something."

She turned to Ella, in sheer desperation.

Ella looked at Chap, her mouth agape. "Um, um..."

“A vigil!” She shouted. “A candlelit vigil.” She looked around the room. Ran to the side table and began opening and shutting drawers, madly sifting through their contents. She stopped, suddenly. She had found candles. Their energy was glowing as if she had found the grail. Angels were probably singing.

She placed one in Ella’s hand, then turned and stood in front of Chap. He looked at the candle. Then up at Kathryn. Then at the urn. He set it down, took the candle. Then she ran to the next room, made an announcement, and hoarded everyone outside. Chap and Ella lingered behind.

“Two weeks with her,” he started.

“Please stay too.” She shot an insistent look. “For Nora.”

“Certainly.” He affirmed, without even questioning, “I’ll stay.”

They walked down the porch steps following the crowd. Chap looked around for Nora. He saw something dark, in the distance, by the shore.

“Is that—Nora?” He asked, alarmed.

Before Ella could speak, he was already running to her.

As he got closer, he saw two bare feet, knees, tucked in the fetal position, and wet locks of hair being bathed by the tide.

“Nora!” He shouted.

Her eyes were closed and puffy, her dress was soaked through and sandy. He shook her. She would not move. He tapped her cheek.

“Nora!” He pleaded.

“Please Nora. Wake up.”

His warm hands gently lifted her to sitting. Her head slunk to the side. He pulled her close. Hugged her.

“Nora.” He whispered in her ear. Stroked her. Squeezed her. He turned her head, swept her thick, wet hair aside, exposing her long white neck and placed two fingers under the side of her chin. Her heart was beating. He shook her again.

Finally she moaned. Her eyes opened slowly, their focus adjusted enough for her to see his dark figure in the haloed light of the porch.

“Nora.”

She blinked. And blinked.

“Nora, are you ok?”

“Mmm hmm,” was all she could mutter.

Hoisting her up to standing, her feet barely moving, the warm figure led her up the shore, past a hundred sparkling flames to her right.

She stared incoherently. “A cloud of fireflies have come to pay their respects.”

“Oh.” He said, surprised. “You’re right. Look at that.”

They walked up the sandy path to the porch. Ella rushed to meet them.

“Is she ok?” She asked, stroking Nora’s wavy, sea-soaked hair.

“She’s fine. I think she’s had too much wine. I’ll take her inside. She needs to sleep.”

Ella watched them saunter up the stairs and over the front porch. The screen door screeched and slapped shut.

Inside, Nora's legs began to give, her knees went limp.

Chap sighed. Picked her up in both arms. Her head fell onto his shoulders. He carried her up the stairs to her room and laid her onto a soft, blanketed bed.

"Nora?" He stroked her cheek. "You should probably take off those wet clothes."

She groaned from her half sleep.

"Nora..." He said, concernedly. She turned onto her side and grasped her pillow like a teddy bear.

He waited. Watching her sleep. "Nora." He insisted, "Nora, really, you need to take off your wet clothes."

He paused. Unsure of what to do.

Then, pushing a reluctant, nervous breath out his nostrils, he reached for the zipper on the back of her dress and began to unzip it.

"Mmmh." She mumbled. She turned her head slightly, looking up towards him, helplessly tired, eyes strained from salty tears and salty waves.

He sighed.

"I need to get you out of these wet clothes." He said in an almost fatherly tone. "I'm not going to be responsible for you catching pneumonia."

Her head fell back against the pillow. He lifted her arm, it fell right back down like a dead fish. He looked around, he must do this. He decided. Then carefully, he slid the straps from her shoulders and slipped the wet dress down her shivering body. Like a ragdoll, she barely flinched. He pulled a soft

blanket over her, it was one that her mother had quilted from her grandmother's linens.

"I'm sorry." He muttered. He stared at her, sleeping sweetly before him. Wanting so much to comfort her. He watched, waited, breathing deeply, then stood. "Good night Nora."

He flipped the light off and closed the door, leaving an inch of the hallway's glow streaming into her room like a beacon and walked downstairs to join the vigil.