

ONE MORE THING

STORIES AND OTHER STORIES

B.J. NOVAK

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The Rematch

In the aftermath of an athletic humiliation on an unprecedented scale—a loss to a tortoise in a footrace so staggering that, his tormenters teased, it would not only live on in the record books, but would transcend sport itself, and be taught to children around the world in textbooks and bedtime stories for centuries; that hundreds of years from now, children who had never heard of a “tortoise” would learn that it was basically a fancy type of turtle from hearing about this very race—the hare retreated, understandably, into a substantial period of depression and self-doubt.

The hare gained weight, then lost weight; turned to religion, then another less specific religion. The hare got into yoga; shut himself indoors on a self-imposed program to read all the world’s great novels; then traveled the world; then did some volunteer work. Everything helped a little bit, at first; but nothing really helped. After a while, the hare realized what the simplest part of him had known from the beginning: he was going to have to rematch the tortoise.

“No,” came the word from the tortoise’s spokesperson. “The tortoise prefers to focus on the future, not relive the past. The tortoise is focused full-time on inspiring a new generation with the lessons of dedication and persistence through his popular speaking tours and his charitable work with the Slow and Steady Foundation.”

The smugness and sanctimony of the tortoise’s response infuriated the hare. “*The lessons of dedication and persistence*”? Had everyone forgotten that the hare had taken *six naps* throughout the race (!)—unequivocally guaranteeing victory to anyone—a horse, a dog, a worm, a *leaf*, depending on the wind—*anyone* lucky enough to be matched against the hare in this reckless, perspectiveless, and now-forever-lost peak phase of his career, an offensive period of his own life that he had obsessed about and tried in vain to forgive himself for ever since? How could anyone think the tortoise was relevant to any of this? A minor detail of the race, known to few but obsessives (of which there were still plenty), was that there had been a gnat clinging to the leg of the tortoise throughout the entire contest: was this gnat, too, worthy of being celebrated as a hero, full of counterlogical lessons and nonsensical insights like “Right place, right time takes down talent in its prime”? Or “Hang on to a tortoise’s leg, who knows where it will lead”?

No—the lesson of this story has nothing to do with the tortoise, thought the hare, and everything to do with the hare. How he had let himself become so intoxicated with the aspects of his talent that were rare that he had neglected the much more common aspects of his character that also, it so happened, were more important—things like always doing your best, and never taking success for granted, and keeping enough pride burning inside to fuel your success but not so much to burn it down. Now, the hare knew these things. Now. Now that it was too late.

Or was it? What was that lesson again? Slow and steady?

The hare started running again, every day, even though there was no race planned. He ran a mile every morning, then two, then ten.

Before long, he added an afternoon run to his training routine—a slower one, with a different goal in mind. On this run, he made a point to start a conversation with everyone he came across. “Boy, I sure would love to race that tortoise again someday. You think anyone would want to watch it, though?” Then he would shrug it off and jog along to the next stranger. “Hey, what do you think would happen if I raced that tortoise again? Ya think I win this time? Or do you think pride would get the better of me all over again?” Then he shrug and run off again, at a provocatively medium pace.

Slowly, steadily, anticipation built for a tortoise-hare rematch. After a while it became a topic that anyone could talk about, and eventually, the questions made their way to the tortoise.

“No,” said the tortoise, but this time his “no” just led to more questions. “No” now, or “no” ever? Would he *ever* rematch the hare? If so, when, and under what conditions? If not, why? Could he at least say “maybe”?

No, said the tortoise again; never. They kept asking, and he kept saying no, until eventually, everyone gave up and stopped asking. And that’s when the tortoise, sad and dizzy from all this attention given to him and then taken away, impulsively said, Yes, okay, but I can beat this hare again. Yes.

I’m undefeated against the hare, thought the tortoise. Actually, I’m 1-0—I’m undefeated in my entire racing career! How do you win a race? Slow and steady, that’s what they say, right? Well, I invented slow and steady. This is good. This will be good. One time could have been a fluke. Twice there’ll be no question.

The race was set in ten days’ time. The tortoise set out to replicate what seemed to have worked the first time, which was nothing in particular: simple diet, some walking around. A little of this, a little of that. He didn’t want to overthink it. He was going to mainly just focus on being slow and steady.

The hare trained like no one had ever trained for anything. He ran fifteen miles every morning and fifteen every afternoon. He watched tapes of his old races. He slept eight hours every night, which is practically unheard of for a hare, and he did it all under a wall tape full of the mean, vicious things everyone had said about him in all the years since the legendary race that had ruined his life.

On the day of the race, the tortoise and hare met for the first time in five years at the starting line, and shared a brief, private conversation as their whole world watched.

“Good luck, hare,” said the tortoise, as casual as ever. “Whoa! You know what’s funny—that again—huh, from this angle you look like a duck. Now you look like a hare again. Funny. Anyway, good luck, hare!”

“And good luck to you, tortoise,” whispered the hare, leaning in close. “And just so you know—nobody knows this, and if you tell anyone I said it, I’ll deny it—but I’m not really a hare. I’m a rabbit.”

This wasn’t true—the hare just said it to fuck with him.

“On your mark, get set, GO!”

There was a loud bang, and the tortoise and hare both took off from the starting line.

Never, in the history of competition—athletic or otherwise, human or otherwise, mythic or otherwise—has anyone ever kicked anyone’s ass by the order of magnitude that the hare kicked the ass of that goddamn fucking tortoise that afternoon.

Within seconds, the hare was in the lead by hundreds of yards. Within minutes, the hare

had taken the lead by more than a mile. The tortoise crawled on, slow and steady, but as he became anxious at having lost sight of his competitor and panicked over what he seemed to have done to his legacy, he started speeding up: less slow, less steady. But it hardly mattered. Before long—less than twenty minutes after the seven-mile race had begun—word worked its way back to the beginning of the race that the hare had not only won the contest, and had not only recorded a time that was a personal best, but had also set world records not only for all hares but also for leporids and indeed for all mammals under twenty pounds. When news reached the tortoise, still essentially under the banner of the starting line, he fainted. “Oh, now *he’s* napping?! Isn’t *that* rich,” heckled a nearby goat, drunk on radish wine.

Those who didn’t know the context—who hadn’t heard about the first race—never realized what was so important about this one. “A tortoise raced a hare, and the hare won? Okay. They didn’t understand the story, so they didn’t repeat it, and it never became known. But those who were there for both contests knew what was so special about what they had witnessed: slow and steady wins the race, till truth and talent claim their place.

Dark Matter

“And that’s the puzzling thing about dark matter,” said the scientist at the end of our planetarium tour. “It makes up over ninety percent of the universe, and yet nobody knows what it is!”

People on the tour chuckled politely, like *Wow, isn’t that a fun fact?*

But I looked closer at the scientist, and I could tell something from the smirky little smile on his fat smug face:

This motherfucker knew exactly what dark matter was.

“So as you look up at the skies tonight, I hope you have a little more perspective, knowing more about what we know—and *don’t* know—about our vast and magical ...” etcetera, etcetera.

Everyone clapped and the tour guide smiled that smug smile I mentioned before and waved goodbye without opening his fingers like the huge fat nerd that he was. Everyone else on the tour headed back to their cars, but I kind of sidled up to the scientist with quite a little fake smile of my own.

Two can play this game, fatso.

“Pretty interesting tour you gave there,” I said. “Lotta interesting facts.”

“I’m glad you had a good time!” he said with that smug smile again.

“Oh, I did, I did,” I lied. “In fact, I’d like to ask you something about Saturn.” I gestured to a dark corner of the hallway.

“Sure,” he said, still smiling at me and ignoring my pointing. “What would you like to know?”

“Over there, over there,” I said to the fat fuck, pointing to the dark corner. “Past by where the coats are. There’s a diorama of Saturn that I think is all fucked up. The rings and stuff. Come here. I want your *expert* opinion.”

“I can’t imagine they would have gotten the rings of Saturn wrong,” he said. “Oh, unless maybe you mean the mural at the entrance? The one for tots?”

“Yeah, that,” I said.

We walked toward the corner and when we got there I grabbed the string of the tour badge around his neck and twisted it and choked him hard.

“What is dark matter?” I said. “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” he coughed. “Nobody knows.”

I pulled the cord tighter.

“*We can measure its effects,*” he said. “*We only know what it isn’t.*”

“Well, work backwards, bitch! You know what it *isn’t*, so what *is* it?”

I pulled the cord tighter, and with my other hand I started pinching him in cutesy, creepy ways. Nothing that hurt, just things to scare him and make him think, Jesus, who *is* this guy? What else would he do?

“*All right,*” he whispered. “*All right. I know what it is.*”

That was more like it. I eased up on the cord a bit.

“If this is a trap, I swear to God, I will come back and *kill* you,” I said.

I was just bluffing. I didn't want to kill this guy and go to jail for the rest of my life. I was curious about this one thing, but not *that* curious. Plus, if I killed him I'd never get to know what dark matter was, and it was kind of driving me crazy. Ninety percent of the universe is dark matter and we have no idea what it is? How are we supposed to sleep at night? Actually, maybe *that* was that curious!

“Come to my office,” he said. “I have a little desk upstairs where I'm working it out for my Ph.D. I haven't told anyone yet because I don't want anyone to steal my work.”

I promised I wouldn't steal anything at all, and he walked over to a door with a little dust and a gold knob off the main hallway. “Follow me upstairs,” he said. I followed him, even though I wouldn't really call it upstairs—it was just a few stairs, like the number they put at the entrance to a library to make it look fancy. Maybe to this guy it felt like a full-size staircase.

At the top of the stairs was a small room with no windows and no decorations or anything, not even a poster of the moon: just a couple of desks with computers, some papers, empty coffee cups and crumpled wrappers. At first I was disappointed. But then I realized that's how you know it's a serious place—just for scientists, and guys like me.

“This one is my coworker's desk,” he said, pointing to the one at the other end of the room. “He's not coming in today, though. He's working on cosmic interference. He's on a dead end but doesn't know it yet, ha.”

The scientist closed the door behind us. I noticed he didn't look scared anymore. Now he seemed kind of happy, or something. His eyes darted around the room, and he started pacing in little back-and-forth steps, like halfway between pacing and just shifting his weight from foot to foot. It was actually kind of cute. I could imagine being his mom and loving him a lot if that makes sense.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay. We only know what dark matter is from the gravitational field around other objects, right? Okay. We know that certain galaxies have different weights with regard to the light they emit. And people have tried to measure the light with different ... Okay. Wait. Let me start another different way. We all know what black holes are, right? Actually, that's not the best ... Wait. Maybe ... Okay.”

The way he kept starting and stopping made it hard to know when I should pay very close attention and when I should just let him ramble on and rest up my brain for the important parts. And then, right in the middle of a part that did sound important, my phone started buzzing in my pocket.

“One second,” I said.

“Go ahead,” he said quickly.

“I'll just pick it up to put it on silent,” I said. “I won't even look at who it is.”

I went to turn the ringer off, but it's basically impossible to pick up your phone when it's buzzing and literally not even look at who it is, and also I knew if I didn't look, it would probably just distract me even more, since I'd be wondering who it was the whole time, and I needed to focus all my concentration on the scientist. So I looked.

Well, wouldn't you know it: all the friends I had asked earlier if they wanted to come to the planetarium with me—oh, *now* they're interested. “*You still going?*” “*Hey, man, just go up.*” “*Sounds fun, when?*” Lazy fucks! Too late, I've been here for over an hour! I really couldn't believe these guys. Didn't they realize how much interesting shit there was to see

and do in this world if you just woke up at a normal fucking time like a normal fucking person?

I put the phone back in my pocket.

“Sorry about that,” I said.

“No problem, no problem,” said the scientist. “So, okay. Do you know what a quasar is? We know that quasars are a paradox because they emit great amounts of energy despite being close enough to a black hole to be swallowed up by it. Right? Okay. So ...”

All of a sudden another thought jumped into my mind, and I couldn’t tell if I was just being paranoid or what—but it suddenly occurred to me that maybe it was possible that all my friends went to the same party the night before without telling me, and *that’s* why they all woke up so late and then all texted me at the same time.

“Uh-huh, wow, whoa, that’s crazy,” I said, while I thought about whether I should give them the benefit of the doubt and still make plans to meet up with them later, or whether I should hold off on making plans until I could find a way to prove definitively whether or not they had all fucked me over, in which case I would still meet up with them but only to tell them to go fuck themselves. I really hoped it wouldn’t come to that, though, because I had gotten pretty excited to see the looks on their faces when I told them about dark matter and about how nobody in the world knew what it was except the scientist and us.

Also, to be honest, it would be bad timing for me to lose all my friends today of all days because it was Sunday, and Sunday nights always made me a little lonely for some reason. Sunday always seemed to be windier on Sunday nights, too—maybe the scientist knew something about why that was. In any case, the point was that on Sundays especially, I really would prefer not to be alone, even though I knew deep down that it was probably better to be alone than to be with fake friends.

“Uh-huh, wow, whoa, that’s crazy,” I kept saying to the scientist on a loop as I tried to figure out if there was anything at all in the middle—for example, which friends might have convinced the other friends to leave me out and which friends might have just gone along with the peer pressure, and so which ones I might possibly be able to forgive, even if I had to tell the others to go fuck themselves for all time.

Just when I was finally close to a pretty good theory, I noticed that the scientist wasn’t saying anything anymore. He was just standing there, staring at me with that same smile from before, only not so smug anymore, like now it was really tender and scared, even though the weird part is that if I had to draw the smile, I would have drawn the exact same smile as the smug one—but I could somehow tell it was different even though it looked the same. And also, I noticed both his eyes had clogged up. “You’re the only other person in the world who knows,” he said. Then one tear fell down from one eye and then the other. “I can’t believe I’m not alone with this anymore.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him that nope, he was still alone, so I nodded and walked up to him and shook his hand—a really big handshake, like in a “congratulations” type of way—and when that didn’t feel like enough, I gave him a hug right around his fat, nice neck. The whole thing that felt like maybe borderline too much—the handshake and the hug combined—so I gave him one of those solid “and that’s *that*” nods and left.

I did end up seeing my so-called friends that night. Get this: they told me they *had* gone to a party without me, but they said they knew it was going to be bad and that I wouldn’t have

enjoyed it, which is why they didn't invite me. It was a little bit shady, but I was tired of thinking about this so I just decided to let it go. I told them about the planetarium tour and about how no one knows what dark matter is, not even the scientist, which they thought was interesting, and then I did an impression of the scientist giving the tour, which they thought was hysterical. I felt a little bad because in my impression I gave the scientist a lisp, which he didn't have in real life, but that was the part that made my friends laugh the hardest, so, who knows. One of my friends said, "You know, he actually sounds kind of sweet," which made me feel better because that was how I felt about him in my head while I was doing the impression! Even though I was making him sound like a dork, I still thought of him as kind of sweet. And also, he had lied about no one knowing what dark matter is, when he really did know, so he wasn't exactly an angel himself. And I knew he would never find out about my impression, so it wouldn't hurt him. And if he ever does find out about it, through some invention he makes or something, I hope he'll just forgive me, the same way I forgave my friends.

We ordered two pizzas, one of which the place messed up, so we gave the delivery guy hell, and the whole thing ended up being free. My friends are insane, but I love them—you wouldn't believe the stuff they did to this guy to convince him the pizzas should be free, but it was all in good fun, for us at least. Then we watched a movie on TV that was somehow listed in the "classics" category, but it was so bad that it was actually hilarious to make fun of it. It was about a sled.

I was sure I wouldn't be able to sleep that night not knowing what dark matter was, but turned out I could. I slept better than usual, in fact. I think it's better to not know certain things. It gives the world an extra bit of mystery, which is important to us as human beings.

No One Goes to Heaven to See Dan Fogelberg

Tim, nine years old, leaned next to his grandmother as she lay in her hospital bed. He gently kissed her face around the tubes in her nose.

“I love you, Nana,” said Tim. “I promise I’ll visit you in heaven.”

The next day, Tim’s grandmother died.

Sixty-six years after that, Tim died.

The first thing Tim did when he got to heaven was look for his wife.

He was so anxious and excited to find her that he couldn’t focus on anything else—not the fact that he had died, not the fact that he was in heaven, and certainly not his grandmother.

“Is Lynn here?” he asked everyone he met. “Yes,” they said, but he kept asking. “Is Lynn here?” “Yes,” they laughed, “you’ll see her in like two seconds!”

And there she was, standing beside a park bench in a spring dress, looking at the same time the way she looked when he had known her last, at the hour of her death just under a year ago, and the way she looked at her very most beautiful, the day he married her, when she was twenty-two and he was twenty-five.

It was a far deeper and sharper moment of first love than the *first* first moment of first love, because now, not only was he falling in love, but he was falling in love with someone he loved; and while the first time, he also believed he’d be with her forever, he was too young to consider what forever meant.

Now here he was, truly, on the first day of forever.

He kissed her for an eternity, which was fine, because heaven had eternities to burn. Then he kissed her for another.

“It wouldn’t have been heaven without you.”

He took her hand in his, and they strolled out of the park together.

“Oh, and you gotta remind me,” said Tim as they walked. “One of these days I have to visit my grandma. Remind me, okay?”

“Of course!” said Lynn. “I would love to meet her.”

But first, they looked up their friends, the ones they had shared for the main length of their life together. They brought to each house a bottle of wine that never emptied, and they visited everyone for hours, laughing late into the night, reminiscing and gossiping about who had died and who hadn’t. Then they’d wake up early the next morning, make coffee and French toast, and talk about the friends they had visited and whether or not heaven had changed them.

Next they went to see Tim’s parents, who were doing very well and were very happy to see both of them.

“Have you visited Nana yet?” asked his parents.

Not yet, said Tim, but soon.

Next, they visited Lynn's mother.

"You know your father's here," Lynn's mother told Lynn. Lynn was surprised to hear this. "It would be the right thing to visit him."

Tim had never met Lynn's father, but he had heard all about their relationship. Her father abandoned her family when she was thirteen and only saw her once more, when he showed up unannounced at her high school graduation and tried to reconcile, ruining the day for her. She had retaliated by rebuffing him publicly and rudely. She did not want to see him at all, but she could tell it was the right thing to do, and heaven was the kind of place that made you want to do the right thing.

"We'll go together," said Tim. "It'll be fine."

Lynn's father opened the door to his oversized condominium with a huge grin. Of course he would have a condominium in heaven.

"Remember at your high school graduation?" he said. "When you told me to go to hell?" He smiled like he had been looking forward to saying that line for a long time.

"What a jerk," she said after they left. "Why did they let him in?"

"He must have changed," said Tim.

"And then changed back?"

"Maybe," said Tim. "Who knows how things work here?"

"Well, maybe this is better, because I get to feel mercy, or something. Or close the chapter. Or whatever. I did it. You know?"

"That's a good attitude," said Tim. "And it was the right thing to do. Now you can enjoy heaven with a clear conscience."

The next day, Tim called Nana.

"Hello?"

"Nana?"

"Who's this?"

"Nana! It's Tim!"

"Tim who?"

"Tim Donahue!"

"Eliza's husband? Oh." She sounded unhappy. "Hi."

"No, Tim *Junior*. Eliza's son. Timmy! Your grandson!"

"*Timmy!* Oh, goodness—Timmy, you died? You're just a little boy!"

"No, Nana, I'm all grown up! I'm in my seventies now. Was."

"Oh, thank goodness. I still pictured you as a little boy! How did everything wind up?"

"Well ... there's a lot to cover, Nana! We want to come visit you. I have a wife now—want you to meet her!"

"Oh, that's wonderful! Wonderful. It will be so wonderful to see you both!"

"When's good?" said Tim.

"When? Oh. Hm." Nana paused. "I have a bunch of stuff next week. I'm seeing some friends, and there's a couple concerts I want to see ... How about next weekend? The

weekend after this coming weekend, I mean.”

“We would love that. How about Sunday, for dinner? Like old times?”

“Huh?”

“Like the Sunday dinners you used to make us, when we were kids.”

“Oh. Sure, we could do that. Or we could order in. Lot of options. Let’s decide closer then, okay?”

“Okay, Nana. I love you. I’m so happy I’m going to get to see you!”

“Me, too. I love you, too. See you next Sunday. But not this one—the next one. Bye now.”

“Nana sounded odd,” Tim said after he hung up. “Or something.”

“Maybe she’s upset that you didn’t get in touch with her before?”

“I don’t know,” said Tim. “It’s hard to tell that stuff over the phone. And also, there’s a lot to do here, you know? I hadn’t seen you, I hadn’t explored heaven—it’s not like anyone going anywhere ...”

“It’ll all be better on Sunday,” said Lynn. “When we see her.”

“You’re right,” Tim agreed.

On Sunday, Tim called to confirm.

“Nana! It’s Tim. Just confirming we’ll see you tonight? I’m bringing my wife, Lynn.”

“Who?”

“Lynn, my wife. You’re going to love her.”

“Who’s *this*?”

“Tim, your grandson. Timmy.”

“Timmy! Oh, Tim, gosh, tonight? I’m so sorry, tonight won’t work. Can we do next weekend?”

“Sure,” said Tim. “I guess.”

“Let me look here There’s something I have to be at on Saturday. And then I’m actually checking out some shows next week—actually, is two weeks okay? A week from next Friday. Can you pencil that in?”

“Sure,” said Tim.

“Perfect. I’ll see you next Friday! A week from, I mean.”

“Okay, Nana. I love you.”

“I love you, too!”

A week from Friday, Tim and Lynn showed up at the door of Nana’s house. On the door there was a note:

Tim: Tried to call you last minute but no one picked up. So sorry but there’s a concert I just had to see with some friends. Won’t be back till very late. So sorry. Must reschedule. Talk soon. I love you! Nana

Tim turned to Lynn.

“Am I crazy to take this a little personally, at this point?”

“This is weird,” Lynn agreed.

“A concert? Again?”

“Weren’t you two close?”

“I thought so. Maybe you’re right—maybe she’s mad that I didn’t contact her before.”

“But then why wouldn’t she just say it?”

“I don’t know. I guess she would have.”

“Well, what should we do tonight?” asked Lynn, trying on a smile and finding it perfectly. “We’re all dressed up, it’s a Friday night in heaven ...”

“Yeah. We can go out ourselves, can’t we?”

“Want to check out one of those concerts?”

“Sure!” said Tim. “Why should Nana have all the fun?”

Tim and Lynn walked through the streets of heaven at sunset. A breeze blew through the pink-and-purple air. Dogs barked, birds sang. Children with old souls finally laughed lightly. Horses, bicycles, and vintage convertible cars shared the wide streets.

As Tim and Lynn got closer to the center of town, they started walking past posters:

TONIGHT! BO DIDDLEY! FREE!

TONIGHT! BING CROSBY! FREE!

TONIGHT! NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV! FREE!

“Look at this!” said Lynn. “No wonder your nana’s out at concerts every night.”

“Ritchie Valens!”

“The Big Bopper!”

“Curtis Mayfield!”

“Sid Vicious?!”

“Debussy!”

“Is this all really free?” asked Lynn.

“Roy Orbison!” Tim pointed to a sign. “Want to check this one out?”

It was transcendent: a private concert and an arena show at the same time. None of the things that had kept them away from live-music events before had made it into heaven. No sweat or aggression in their row. No songs from the new album that the musician was overly sincere about now but would be embarrassed by in a few years. No confusion or pressure as to whether they should sit or stand or dance or put their hands in the air. The sound was impeccable. So was the stage design. They could eat, drink, smoke, make out. They had front row seats. There were no crowds. They were literally the only people there.

After a few hits, but still at the height of the show, Tim turned to Lynn with an indulgent idea.

“Wanna just check out the next one?”

“Why not?”

They went to the stadium next door. It was also a private concert in a giant arena. Just as they walked in, John Denver launched into a blasting rendition of “Take Me Home, Country Roads.” When he finished, Tim and Lynn gave a standing ovation.

“Hello, Heaven!”

“This is amazing,” remarked Tim.

“I know! It’s almost even too perfect,” said Lynn. “Like, in a way, I would like it if there were a few people here, a little energy, you know?”

“That could be the motto for heaven,” said Tim. “ ‘Almost too perfect.’ ”

They snuck out to see the next show.

As they kept walking toward the center of the music and arts district, the streets became more and more crowded. Tim and Lynn started seeing more of all types of people, occasionally even celebrities. For example, Ricardo Montalban. He was an actor they both recognized from the television show *Fantasy Island*, but he wasn’t being mobbed at all. He almost looked like he wished he would be, or that at least someone would approach him to ask him a question or to pose for a picture. Tim wondered why no one was going up to talk to him and then, to try to figure it out, asked himself the same question—why wasn’t he approaching Ricardo Montalban?

Probably because there were more interesting things in heaven than Ricardo Montalban.

It must be hard being Ricardo Montalban in heaven, thought Tim.

As they got within a half mile of the center of the district, Tim and Lynn finally realized why the concerts had been so empty before.

“Look,” whispered Lynn. “Look.”

ELVIS PRESLEY! LIVE! FREE!

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART! LIVE! FREE!

L. V. BEETHOVEN! LIVE! FREE!

Tim and Lynn stared in awe as people poured by the millions into stadiums bigger than they could have imagined to see the greatest artists not only of their generation but of the entire generation’s consciousness.

Hundreds of thousands of people lined up to see Miles Davis; millions to see Tupac Shakur; billions to see Michael Jackson.

“We can see anyone,” remarked Tim to Lynn. “We can see anyone, of all time.”

It was almost too much to comprehend. It was a good thing they were already used to love or they might have fainted from the size of the feeling.

They decided on Frank Sinatra, a favorite of both of theirs, and headed into his concert.

It couldn’t have been any more of a thrill. Sinatra was at the top of his game. He opened with “The Best Is Yet to Come,” and a crowd of seven hundred million chanted along. Then a song they had never heard before—“a new one,” Sinatra warned, making everyone nervous—but it was as good as one of the classics, and they had heard it first. Then “My Way.” Then “Fly Me to the Moon.” Then “New York, New York.” Then “One for My Baby.”

“Now, here are a few songs whose artists haven’t made their way to heaven yet,” intoned Sinatra in the same soothing, ever-knowing voice he’d had in life, made even more poignant here, as he stroked the quaintly unnecessary cord of his microphone. “I hope they won’t mind me giving you a little preview, keeping the songs warm for them.” And then Tim and Lynn

took in the soul-expanding sight of Frank Sinatra covering the hits of Bruce Springsteen, Radiohead, Coldplay, and Beyoncé. Heaven cared not for the limits of era.

After five hours and nineteen encores full of more of his own hits, the concert finally drew to a close. Tim kissed Lynn, and she kissed him back. They felt like they were in heaven. They were, of course; but they felt like it, too.

Still, even after all that, they didn't want the show to end, and when they looked down, they realized what was hanging around their necks: backstage passes, all access, VIP.

"Of course," said Lynn. "Of course we have these."

They went backstage. They showed the badges tentatively to the first person they saw in uniform, who nodded respectfully and walked them to a wide, clean corridor under the stadium. It was a billion-seat stadium, so the hallway was long, but along the way, not a single person second-guessed their right to be there. Tim and Lynn were escorted along the hallway until they were finally left by themselves outside a single, unmarked door.

Tim and Lynn looked at each other.

"Could it be this easy?" asked Lynn.

"It's heaven," Tim said. "No need to guard the door."

Tim knocked, but heard nothing.

He knocked again, harder, and heard nothing.

He tried the knob of the door and found it was unlocked—of course—and swung open easily. And there, leaning casually against a closet door with his eyes half-closed, was Frank Sinatra. And there, on the floor on her knees, was Nana, blowing Frank Sinatra.

"You got to understand something, Timmy," said Nana, glowing and gorgeous and angry and mysterious as she closed her robe with one hand and the door to Sinatra's dressing room behind her with the other. "And it's lovely to meet you ...?"

"Lynn."

"Lynn. Tim, Lynn, I'm so happy for you both. And I love you, Timmy, so much. But you have to understand. When I met you, everybody was dead. My husband; two of my kids; my parents, of course; my sister; all of my friends—not everybody, but, yeah, kind of everybody you know? And I was part dead from it. I didn't know I was at the time. And believe me—I was so happy and grateful for the love I did have in my life, in the form of you and your little sister, whose name escapes me at the moment. Danielle! That was her name, wasn't it? My, what a beauty." Nana smiled at the memory. "She was my ... I loved you all equally, and so much. That love was real. And it still is. And Lynn, welcome to the family." She hugged Tim again and kissed Lynn on the cheek. "Oh, isn't it exciting? Everyone's here. There's so much going on!"

Nana took a drag from the live half of a cigarette, which she had neatly hidden between her fingers by the doorknob.

"It's funny, isn't it?" said Nana. "You have infinite time here, and there are infinite things to do, but you still don't end up doing much of it. You do what you love most, over and over."

She took another breath of smoke, which couldn't kill her now. "There's something I think about sometimes, when I'm walking through the town, looking at the different concerts. So many of them were so big in their time, and people loved them, but maybe it's just 'cause

that was all they had, you know? There's this guy, Dan Fogelberg. I recognize the name, think your mom liked him, he did this song and that song. I'm not saying he wasn't great or big deal or worth seeing. I'm sure he was great. But no one goes to heaven to see Dan Fogelberg. You know what I mean?"

Yes, said Tim.

Yes, said Lynn.

"I love you, Timmy. It's just ... I only knew you for nine years. And I'm young here. You know? I have other things to do besides dinner-at-Grandma's."

He got it. And he got her, too, more than ever, and maybe for the first time.

"I love you, Nana," said Tim.

"I love you, too," said Nana. "Gotta go."

Romance, Chapter One

“The cute one?”

“No, the other cute one.”

“Oh, she’s cute too.”

Julie and the Warlord

“Okay,” she laughed after three complicated cocktails. “Now, you, sir ...”

“Yes.”

“You, sir ... Now ... I am ... Okay. I feel like we’ve only talked about me. But I don’t know anything about you. Other than that you’re very, um, charming and, well, very cute, of course. Ha, don’t let that go to your head! Shouldn’t have said that.”

“Thank you.”

“But I feel—okay, if this is my—well. Okay: what do you do?”

“What do I do? You mean what is my job?”

“Sorry, I hate that question, too. It’s like, is this a date or an interview, right?”

He finished his bite of sauce-soaked broccolini and answered, but she didn’t hear him clearly.

“HMMMMMMMMMMMM? All I heard was ‘lord.’ ”

“Yes.”

“Ooh! Okay, this is fun. Are you a ... landlord? Because I do not have the best history getting along with landlords. My first apartment—”

“I’m not a landlord.”

“Are you ... a ... drug lord?” Julie said, stroke-poking the side of his face with her finger. “’Cause that could be a problem.”

“No.”

“You’re not ... *the* Lord, are you? Because I haven’t gone to temple since my Bat Mitzvah. Ha, don’t tell my grandma!”

He laughed politely. She could tell he was laughing just to be nice—and she liked that more than if he had laughed from finding her funny. A nice guy: now that would be a real change of pace for her.

“Then what kind of lord *are* you, anyways, eh?” she asked with an old-timey “what’s the big idea” accent. God, she was a bit tipsy, wasn’t she?

“I’m a warlord.”

“In-ter-est-ing! Now, I don’t know exactly what this is. But I want to learn. So: what exactly ... is ... a warlord?” Julie asked, her chin now resting playfully on a V of two upturned palms. “Educate meeeee.”

“Okay. Can you picture where the Congo is on a map?”

“Kinda,” she exaggerated.

“This is Africa,” he said, pointing to an imaginary map in the air between them. “*This* is the Indian Ocean. *This* is the Democratic Republic of the Congo. *This* is just regular Congo.”

“What? Hold up—”

“I know—that’s just how it is. I didn’t name them,” the warlord laughed. “Anyway. *This*. All *this*, here? This is what I control.”

“So you’re like ... the governor of it?”

“No. There are areas of the world where it will show up on your map as a certain country.”

But in reality, no government is in control of that region, in any real way. They cannot collect taxes. They cannot enforce laws. Do you follow?"

Yes, nodded Julie.

"The people that *are* in charge are the warlords. They—we—bribe, kidnap, indoctrinate, torture, and ... what am I forgetting? What's the fifth one? Oh, kill—ha, that's weird that I forgot that one—the population of any region that falls above a certain threshold of natural resources but below a certain threshold of government protection. It's not *exactly* that simple, Julie, but, basically, that determines where I'm based. Once those conditions reach that level, me and my team, we show up and terrorize that area until the entire population is either dead, subdued, or, ideally, one of our soldiers. *Ideally* ideally, dream scenario? A child soldier."

"That does *not* sound legal," said Julie, trying to stall for time so that she could object properly and intelligently, which was going to take a second, because she had had a couple of drinks already and had not anticipated having to debate a hot-button topic like this at the top of her intelligence—especially not with someone who did it for a living.

"No, it isn't legal at all—have you been listening?" Julie blushed and rotated her fork on her napkin in a four-point turn so she would have something to focus on besides her embarrassment. "This is a show of force *outside* the ability of any government to enforce its laws."

He went on and on. The words "rape" and "limbs" came up more than on any other date she could remember.

"What about, like, the international community?" asked Julie, hoping this was a smart question. Usually this was something she was good at on dates, but tonight she was having more trouble. "Don't they ever pressure you to stop? Or," she added, thinking there might be something else there, "or something?"

"Yes," said the warlord. "Sure! For example, there was this thing about me on Twitter while ago—are you on Twitter?" She said she was but didn't check it often. "Same here!" he laughed. "I have an account, but I can never figure out if it's a thing I do or not. Anyway, it was 'trending.' You know what that is?" She did. "I'll be honest, it weirded me out. I got into this pattern where I was checking my name every two seconds, and there were like forty-five new mentions of me. All negative!"

"You can't let yourself fall into that," said Julie.

"Exactly. Anyway, it passed," said the warlord. "You know Twitter—before long everyone's on to the next thing."

"What about," asked Julie, downing the last sip of her cocktail as she felt a premature ripple of seriousness returning, "the ethics of it? How do you feel about that? Doesn't that trouble you?"

The warlord gestured to Julie with his fork. "That top you're wearing. Anthropologie?"

"H&M," said Julie, "but thank you."

"Even better," said the warlord. "Do you know the conditions in the factories that make that top that you're wearing? Do you ever think about that?"

"Yeah, okay, no. That's not—nice try. Just because ... No. And yes, I know, this *phone* right here, that I use every day—but, no. No! You can't ... It doesn't help anything to equate ... Look," said Julie. "There's no excuse. But that also does *not* mean—"

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