

# Chapter One

Flags swell in crisp breezes. The warmth of the sun seems to affirm the auspiciousness of the day. Families are still arriving after the lobby doors open. Long lines, expectant and giddy, weave around the auditorium parking lot. Teachers loiter in the holding area backstage where they complain about how bad the coffee always is and wonder aloud *why administration can't just shell out a little more damn money to hold this graduation at a college with better facilities, oh, and did you hear? That girl who had to take a leave of absence for "medical reasons" sophomore year was elected as this year's class speaker. Go figure, right? You remember that football player who spoke last year? Jesus, don't remind me.* They laugh and drink more shitty coffee.

Graduates carry their parents' expectations alongside their own conflicted feelings; not conflicted enough, of course, to prevent them from floating ecstatically into the auditorium. A second-generation American, representing the modest aspirations of her family both here and abroad, pushes her smartly dressed grandfather's wheelchair through the lobby. A tall boy who set a state record in the hundred-meter butterfly walks arm in arm with his mother, a psychologist, and his Father, a Civil War scholar, the same boy who's been complaining to his friends for the last four months how difficult it is to choose between Brown, Yale, Princeton, and Harvard. A morbidly ironic girl trails him...ironically. She barely tried these past four years. She caught the bus here because her mom was tied up working a second job at Best Buy today. She only came because, *like, how else could I make fun of the rest of these idiots before they head off*

*to their fancy colleges?* There are the absences too, names never called, tassels never turned, absences which, depending on the community, might speak louder than the applause.

My high school graduation might have been all these things; maybe it was none of them.

I will never know.

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Mom called two days before graduation.

“So have you given any more thought to our road trip?”

“Not really. Not much to think about though.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s do it.”

I could feel her smiling over the phone.

“Where’d you say you wanted to go again?”

“Albuquerque. After that, we’ll see how adventurous we’re feeling. I got something else up my sleeves...it’s a surprise, for now at least.”

“So when do we leave?”

As it turns out, I answered my own question by the end of our conversation. We would leave the morning of my graduation. There was no brooding or pre-meditation involved. At that moment, it just seemed like the right thing to do. I was not naïve enough to think my absence would create much of a stir, and sure enough, no one noticed; not a single phone call or email in the days that followed, no teachers or friends wondering where I was. All of which confirmed

that the impression I was leaving behind could be classed in one of two ways: faint as the afterglow of a snuffed candle or a memory others wanted to leave behind before beginning the next chapter of their life. Sure, senior year I was becoming someone else, someone old friends and enemies alike did not recognize, but the change was slow and subterranean. It had not yet reshaped, in a noticeable way, the nature of my influence on others. Instead of putting myself in situations in which I knew I would be at cross-purposes with myself, I chose to fade into the background. My absence at graduation was, in a sense, the final sleight of hand in this disappearing act.

On the morning of our departure, I tossed and turned the apartment I shared with my dad, frantically packing until the moment Mom arrived to pick me up. I stuffed my duffle bag with a carton of cigarettes, more than enough clothes, and a bag of cassettes that she and I would both enjoy. Deciding which books to bring caused me the most trouble. I already sensed that whatever I read on the road would help shape the contours of our trip. The problem was that whenever I picked up a book and tried to decide whether or not it should earn a spot in my backpack, I ended up wasting valuable time flipping through and reading sections at random.

Books, though lacking the tranquilizing power of television, had always figured significantly in Mom's efforts to raise me. She usually read to me from books that she herself enjoyed reading, not just Humpty Dumpty or Benny the Golden Goose or whatever kids my age grew up on during the 1980s. The fact that I had no idea what these books were about didn't matter to me; that they were *hers* was enough.

I remember clearly during this period of time when I was first introduced to the world of books that my parents' collection comprised the two bottom shelves of a large white bookcase that towered over everything else in our living room. The remaining shelves, beyond my reach,

were filled with framed Maxell Parish prints and a trio of ochre blown-glass vases. Most of the books filling the lower shelves within my reach were about Buddhism or art, subjects I appreciated but had little interest in reading about back then. There were also several volumes of poetry, including an old yellowing copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* that smelled like the Virginia Beach pier and a hardback second edition of Langston Hughes' first novel *Not Without Laughter*. I spent many hours of childhood running my fingers along the rough spines of these books, pleasantly dazed like a neophyte given the key to the ancient library of Alexandria.

"Did you know that when you finish elementary school at Hunters Woods you'll go to Langston Hughes Middle School? It's named after the man who wrote that book you're always looking at," Mom told me once when I was sitting at the foot of the bookshelf leafing through her books.

"Who's that?"

"Langston Hughes is the name of the middle school down the street. I think it's pretty cool that your middle school is named after one of America's greatest poets, don't you? When I was growing up, all the schools I went to were named after politicians or generals. Yup, I'd say you're pretty lucky Mr. Nathan."

I looked up for a moment from those brittle pages to consider what she'd said.

"Mom?"

"What monkey?"

"Who's your *favorite* poet?"

"That's easy: Daisaku Ikeda."

"*You mean Sensei?*"

As far back as I can remember Mom had always referred to Dr. Ikeda as *Sensei*.

I put the book down, eager for her to tell me more.

“My favorite poem of his – it’s actually a song, but it’s poetic, so I guess I can call it a poem – it’s called “Atsuta Village.” I sang this song for Sensei when you were still in my tummy.”

“Really?”

She nodded with a huge smile on her face.

“What’s it about Mom?”

“Just listen and you might have a better idea for yourself. One day, when you’re older, I’ll tell you why it’s my favorite song.”

She cleared her throat and began singing in a clear and sonorous voice.

*Atsuta Village by the cold northern sea  
amid endless snowstorms  
that silver house by the seaside,  
poor as it was,  
that was your ancient castle of glory  
Atsuta River with the poetry of spring  
and summer,  
herring-filled waves of the Japan Sea,  
the region opened up by the lords  
of Matsumae,  
sheer cliffs, fishing-village gardens*

The phone rang in the kitchen before she could reach the midpoint of the song. Although she did not have a chance to finish singing it to me that day, and despite the fact that many years would pass before I’d understand why this song meant so much to her, watching her sing that first

stanza made a lasting impression on me.

There I went again: my tendency to drift into a state of remembrance was going to delay our departure. I looked at the clock on the wall and started packing double-time, and in the end, I only brought two books with me. The first was *Discussions on Youth*, a dialogue between Daisaku Ikeda – the Buddhist leader, peace builder, educator, and writer that I’d grown up calling *Sensei* – and a panel of young people. Although my daily practice of Buddhism had enabled me to scrap my way through senior year and graduate on time, my intense hatred for school never quite disappeared; what had changed, to my great surprise, was that I fell in love with reading again. With Mom less than ten minutes away from our apartment complex, I flipped to a section entitled “Discovering Great Literature.” One passage, in particular, drew me in.

Literature is the study of humanity. It is the study of oneself and of the infinite realm of the human heart. Without an understanding of people’s hearts, one cannot gain a profound understanding of any other sphere of learning or endeavor. Human culture is the product of the human heart and mind.

I looked up from the book several minutes later, a smile slowly forming as I savored that moment when someone articulates something you knew all along without even knowing you knew it. It struck the nerve of a question I’d been puzzled with for more than a year: why, after unconditionally hating reading for so long, had I begun to actually enjoy literature after beginning my Buddhist practice? The change had been sudden and absolute, as if a vast network of secret floodgates opened at once. After reading this passage, it began to make sense, for if literature is the study of humanity, the study of oneself, one’s heart and mind, of what interest could it be to a person who wants to look away from what he is becoming?

Reading this passage from *Discussions on Youth* directly influenced my final selection

for the road trip book of the month club, though I didn't really know what I was getting myself into when I packed *The Divine Comedy* next to a bag of cassette tapes. Full disclosure: I would not make it all the way through Dante's full descent into hell before the end of our trip; one, for lack of trying, and two, because I enjoyed skipping around and rereading certain stanzas, imagining them as the epigraph to my life at a particular moment in time.

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Later that night, by the time we hit the Louisville, Kentucky city limits, I was in a mild state of hypnosis watching the white highway lines flash beneath us. We'd been on the road for more than ten hours and had less than thirty minutes of daylight remaining when Mom suggested we stop off at a KOA campsite.

I pushed the red call button beside the entrance gate to the complex.

"Yea?" a girl's voice crackled over the intercom.

"Campers here," I said, making Mom laugh.

Enormous pines lined the gravel inlet. I took the bend in the road a bit too hard, smoke still in the air when I stopped in front of the wide trailer anchoring the grounds. Mom and I headed inside hopeful a two-bed cabin could be had on our meager budget.

"Ya'll came at a good time. Grounds were only half-full like half an hour ago," the girl at the desk said. "Sun goes down and people start pulling off the road."

Five minutes later, she handed me our room keys and a computer printout showing where our cabin was located. We made our way to cabin four, a small A-frame structure that reminded

you of those gumdrop graham cracker houses covering cooking magazines during the holiday season. Inside, we found a spare wooden desk and two bunk beds bolted to the wall. There was a seat belt dangling from the upper bunk, not a bad idea considering the fact that it was suspended six feet in the air.

“All yours!” Mom said as I looked up at the seatbelt in disbelief. “What? You think I can even get up there? You must be crazy.”

Mom rarely used her illness to elicit sympathy. On the rare occasion she did pull the health card, I always folded without protest. Tonight would be no different. When I returned from the bathroom, she was sprawled across the lower bunk. I could almost make out the dark-colored waves of pain rising off her body, but she said nothing aloud to confirm she was hurting. She rose from bed with a look of distress in her face and spent the next fifteen minutes searching through her bags. I asked several times if she needed help looking for something, but she didn’t respond.

“Mom.”

“What?”

“What’s in Albuquerque?”

“You mean like stuff to do, things to see?”

“No, I mean why are we going there?”

“I owe an old friend a favor.”

“What kind of favor?”

“Not now Nathan. I can’t find my Vicodin bottle...speaking of which, can you go out to the car and look and see if it fell under the seat or in the back somewhere?”

By the time I came back to the cabin to tell her I could not find her Vicodin, she was

passed out on her bunk fully clothed, snoring through a deep, dreamless sleep. I wasn't tired, however, and decided now would be as good a time as any to move the ball forward a few yards on one of the books I'd brought along for the trip. I opened my copy of *The Divine Comedy* and read the following stanza:

*“Are you then Virgil, are you then that fount  
from which pours forth so rich a stream of words?”  
I said to him, bowing my head modestly.*

Captivating as those first lines were, it didn't take long for restlessness to strike. I needed air, movement, company...something. What I found outside was a riot of smells: beer, RV exhaust, coffee, sewage, corned beef, and the damp Kentucky sky harboring thunder in the distance. A gentle wind was blowing through the trees, all those scents comingling until you could not stand any of them. Orange light – was it morning already? – flitted among the branches of Sycamore trees flanking our cabin. I blinked my eyes twice and realized an enormous heat lightning storm was playing on the horizon, a silent telegraph trying to reach this forgotten KOA. I cut through the parking lot and hopped a short brick wall edging the back of the campgrounds, following a dirt trail for three or four minutes before stopping to sit on a large stone jutting out of the grass.

A tiny blue flame wavered in the cool air as I tried to light the blunt I'd rolled in my bunk after Mom fell asleep. The smells in the air; the Norman Rockwell characters crowding gas stations, rest stops, and this KOA; the endless rows of clouds reaching past the horizon; all of it

made me long for something indefinable. As I sat trying to light the blunt in the wind, a familiar tune began playing ...*You don't need this shit to relax. You drove more than ten hours today, stupid. You'll just feel stupider than you already are if you smoke this shit. Put it away. Enjoy the night.*

Reasonable as this all sounded, there was another voice inside me – more like a band actually... a trio? A quintet? – who loved drowning reason in their odes to self-destruction. Songs like, “This will be the last time I smoke on a Monday,” or “This will be the last time I smoke before work,” or “This will be the last time I smoke by myself,” or, my personal favorite, “This will be the last time I smoke.” Yes ladies and gentlemen, all the greatest hits. Ever since I began practicing Buddhism, however, I was getting sick and tired of hearing these same sorry-ass tunes. The time was coming when they would have to start looking for new venues. I had explained this to them many times, in fact, but damn did them boys love to play.

I eventually gave in and smoked the blunt down to ash. As was always the case when I got high, the past came rushing in, memories I'd hoped to leave behind for good on this trip. In the darker corners of my mind, I could hear that muffled pass of feet from five years earlier. Beyond the locked door, telephones rang. My middle school principal's words ricocheted through me: “If Bobby's parents press charges you will likely spend the next five years of your life in jail, until you turn eighteen. Even if that does not happen, I can assure you that you will never set foot inside of my school again.”

Later that morning, the principal returned with a manila folder tucked under his arm. He asked me if I knew what was inside.

“Test scores?” I had the nerve to say, though my stomach was clenched with fear.