

# 1

Somebody died today... Nobody I know ... but nonetheless, somebody died.

I can't help but to think of these sorts of things on days like today. It's the kind of Midwest October day you'd expect to see in a photograph. Only, there are some things a photograph can't portray: like the taste of the air, rich with the aroma of burning firewood from distant fireplaces, or the feeling of that air as it blows through my hair in a gentle, cool breeze. Nor could it portray the motion of fallen leaves as they dance in perfect unison with that breeze, or the sound of those multicolored leaves as they skip across the ground to the creaking harmonies of the swaying trees.

On this perfect autumn day, the sun is whispering warmth from its position halfway between the peak of noon and twilight's horizon as it silently hangs in the clear blue sky. And it is under the comfort of its golden rays that I now find myself quietly gazing out upon my suburban neighborhood of medium-sized homes as I sit on the soft, green grass of my yard.

In addition to the dancing leaves and swaying trees, I am also captivated by the sight of some neighborhood children joyfully riding their bikes while their parents rake the dried, brittle leaves from their yards. However, too distant to be heard, they do so in silence—almost as if they are being displayed on Earth's canvas with a silent movie projector—while the only sound I do hear is the soft and confident verses of nature's song gently moving forward as it somehow manages to never repeat the same melody twice.

What are those faraway people thinking about right now? Are they thinking about where to ride their bikes to, or what to do after the afternoon tasks are done? Or are they thinking about something completely unrelated to the day instead? Could they in turn be thinking about the same things I am right now, or are they completely oblivious to the sweet, yet tragic events of this day? Somebody died today... Nobody I know ... but nonetheless, somebody died.

And just as I can't help but to think of these sorts of things on days like today, I also can't help but to consider what it will be like on the day I die. Will it be during my favorite season—autumn—or will it be during some other season instead? Will it be sunny and during the day? Or will it be raining and during the night? Wouldn't it be nice if we could choose? And if so, would we choose to die on our favorite day knowing we would be surrounded by its comfort and beauty as we took our last breath? Or would we choose a less enchanting day to die just so we wouldn't have to bear the pain of knowing we are about to leave such beauty behind? Do I want to die on a day like today? Could I even find the strength to let go among such peace and tranquility, or will the tranquility instead give me the courage to face death without fear or regret? It's difficult to say, because, while I do realize that I have little or no control over the circumstances of my death, my uncertainty on the matter comes from the belief that those very same circumstances will also most likely influence where I choose to be reborn next. So perhaps one of the reasons why I cannot seem to escape these questions is because I have some very definite ideas of where I want to go and what I wish to do after I leave this world, and it simply pains me to think I might sabotage those ideas if I get too wrapped up in the events that lead up to my death. In the end, I know that only time will tell, but nevertheless, I think about these things almost everyday.

That being said, I'm not really sure if I would choose to die on a beautiful or sad day, because, for quite a while now, I have thought of life as being both beautiful and sad at the same time. Beautifully-sad, I call it. Sad, because of all the pain and loneliness, and beautiful, because of all the reasons we find to hang on to life, despite all the pain.

In fact, it almost seems as though a dozen or so fond memories are enough to make a lifetime of pain worthwhile. I, like everyone else, have plenty of fond memories, but as I get older the pain only seems to slowly outweigh the fondness. This is true, not because the world has changed, but because I have. I'm not as simple as I used to be. I guess you could say that I believe there are two kinds of people in this world: those who look around and believe everything they see, and those who know that everything they see is a lie. I was once the former, but now I'm the latter. I have since opened my eyes, and because of this, I now see more beauty than I ever have before. Only, once a person takes that step towards truth, innocence is forever lost and the pain of existence becomes far worse than it used to be. It becomes a longing to go home ... where the pain doesn't exist.

The pain I speak of is the pain of separation—separation from nature, separation from other people, and separation from my true self. Separation has always been a part of this world, but for many people it is far too elusive to put their finger on. So, as a result, pain becomes something that seems to be caused by the outside world. However, once someone recognizes that the true source of all pain is separation, it instead becomes something that is caused from within. And when I eventually discovered this basic truth for myself about three years ago, I simply couldn't go back to the way I was before, and that is when life became beautifully-sad for me. Beautiful, because I can see clearer than I ever have before, and sad, because I can also see the boundaries that separate me from the rest of the world when I no longer wish to be separate from all of the beauty I now see.

I can't think of how many times I've wanted to say something kind to someone I hardly even know: like when I see the beauty in someone's eyes or the warmth of someone's smile. It's these simple pleasures that make life truly worth living. Only, my many years of life on this planet have ultimately taught me not to share these observations with the world at large. I've found that it makes people feel uncomfortable. In fact, it almost seems as though the pain and uncertainty of life has constructed an impenetrable wall around most people. Over the years, I imagine, most people learn to only let in the thoughts and emotions that are safe and neutral as though comfort is somehow more important than truth. Yet, the truth is, there's beauty in everyone's eyes and warmth in everyone's smile, but we hardly even notice anymore because we spend so much of our lives trying to hide or deny this simple fact. Maybe that is why we die: hiding from the truth is hard work. It takes serious effort to suppress what the spirit naturally sees, and perhaps every time we fail to see the beauty around us we die a little bit more. After all, without beauty what is there to live for?

Sometimes I wish I could go to a place where people don't hide from the truth—a place where it is all right to express all of your thoughts and emotions without having to worry about making someone feel uncomfortable, as well as a place where everyone can see the beauty in everyone else. I want to go to a place where I can truly connect with everyone and openly embrace whomever I want. But I know of no such place on this planet. Everywhere I look in this world, I see nothing but lies and separation. I see it when others seek safety and comfort, and I

see it every time someone holds back a kind word. But, perhaps most important, whenever I see pain and loneliness, I know deep down inside that life isn't meant to be this way. So, when I die I want to go to a place where there are no boundaries or lies ... just the beautiful truth instead. I want to go to a place far, far away from here—a place where I feel as though I truly belong.

But then ... there is the rain. To me, one of life's most endearing experiences is the rain. I simply cannot imagine a world without it. The rain is both pure and selfless—giving to all that wish to accept it—and knows nothing of separation or regret. It does not apologize for its sweet smell, simple rhythm, or soothing touch. Nor does it make mistakes or have any fear. It just simply *is*—nothing more and nothing less. Rain, it seems, teaches me the very best lessons in life. I have spent many nights just simply watching and listening to the rain. No other sound can whisper me to sleep as easily as the rain can and nothing else in my 28 years of life has stood by my side in quite the same way. Maybe this is because deep down inside I realize the rain represents all I hope to be, or perhaps all that I already am.

Sometimes I can hear a melody being tapped out by the raindrops, while other times, it just simply washes away the pain and loneliness I feel from time to time. I suppose I owe the rain a bit of gratitude, because the rain—along with my love for music—has sustained me through many years. So much so, that I eventually felt as though I should pay tribute to the rain in the best way I know how: in a song.

Music has meant so much to me for so long, that I had begun to write music of my own when I was 16 years old. For many years now I have written dozens upon dozens of songs about this beautifully-sad world. Somehow the songs let me deal with the sadness and celebrate the beauty in a way that makes the most amount of sense out of them. So, it's no surprise that over the years the rain has appeared in many of my songs. This was the case some time ago, during a particularly hard time in my life, when—on one lonely autumn night—I sat alone in a dark room with nothing but the sound of the rain to soothe me. It was on that lonesome night that I heard a melody being tapped out by the raindrops for the very first time, and it was also on that night that I finally paid my tribute to the rain.

## Melody-

Bow my head, please let me slip away  
Rather than torture myself one more day  
Broken dreams, the world is full of pain  
Knock me down and crush my heart again

Tonight the rain has come to wash away  
The sins and ugliness of this past day  
And through the breeze, I hear a melody  
Reminds me of just how sweet life can be  
It makes me want to hang on  
It makes me want to hang on

On my knees, I want to come home

Rather than keep on wasting my poor soul  
All alone the world despises me  
Turn away and show no mercy  
Tonight the rain has come to wash away  
The pain and loneliness of this past day  
And through the breeze, I hear a melody  
Reminds me of us all and our beauty  
It makes me want to hang on  
It makes me want to hang on ...

I used to think I wanted it to be raining on the day I die ... only, now I'm not so sure about that either, because, if it's raining, I might be tempted to come back just so I could experience it again. And as I have already explained, I do not wish to come back here ever again. So, when I do die, there's a good chance that I'll probably wish to move on and forget all about this world.

But then, there is the rain ... I will always remember the rain.

## 2

What is your fondest memory? I can think of no greater question to ask anyone. Everyone has a memory or two that stands out—memories that make life worth living—and days like today seem as though they were tailor-made for remembering those special times that have long since passed. Soon this day, like all others, will pass as well. It, too, will become a memory. For some people it will become a fond memory, while for others it will simply become a non-eventful one. But, regardless of how this day might be remembered years down the road, it was a beautiful one nonetheless. And it is with its beauty in mind that I now reminisce about similar days passed as I stand in my front window and gaze out upon the yard I had so comfortably sat down upon earlier today.

It's early evening now and the sun has just recently disappeared below the horizon. Its only trace can be seen upon the orange-colored clouds that now hang in the western sky as orange fades to purple and purple fades to night.

Am I the only one thinking about this day as twilight's spectacle brings it to a close? Perhaps the children I saw riding their bikes earlier today are also remembering what a beautiful day it was. Maybe years from now those same children will look back on this day and remember it fondly. And if so, perhaps they will look back on today and recall the smell of the air, the feel of the cool breeze, and the innocence of childhood as well.

I wonder ... could a memory be enough to make someone choose upon their death and subsequent rebirth to come back to the same place again? Of all the things to think about this past day, this is the question on my mind right now. And as I continue to gaze out upon my quiet neighborhood and observe the multitude of lit windows shining forth into the evening sky, I can't help but to wonder what the lives of all the people in those houses must be like. Each and every one of those windows is used by a person to look out upon the world and make memories. What have my neighbors seen out of their windows? Beauty? Sadness? Or have they seen a little bit of both? Everyone has a fond memory or two they hang on to. What is your fondest memory? I can think of no greater question to ask anyone.

And what about all the people that died today? What were their lives like? What were their fondest memories? Did they recall beautiful or sad memories as they slipped away? Will they take those memories with them to their next lives or choose to leave them behind? Do you suppose their memories were fond enough to convince them to come back here again? Or will they choose to move on instead? To me, that is the ultimate test by which we judge our memories and thus our lives: was our life beautiful enough to come back and do it again, or was it sad enough to make us move on, never to return? Today was such a beautiful day, and for some, it may be the last autumn day they will ever see on Earth.

Questions turn to contemplation and contemplation slowly gives way to remembering. It is said that the sense of smell is the one most closely tied to memory. And if this is indeed true, then I'm not surprised in the least with how the scent of burning firewood earlier today was instantly able to provoke images of me as a child walking home from elementary school in late October. But, like the essence of most memories, I was not able to recall what I was wearing or

thinking about all those years ago. Instead, I was only able to remember how much I truly enjoyed that fiery aroma as it accompanied the feel of the cool drizzle in the air.

With the evening sky now slowly falling into complete darkness, it is this same rich scent of this afternoon's burning firewood that still lingers in the atmosphere. However, in addition to the comforting smell of the brisk, smoke-tinted air, the all-familiar scent of a light rain can also be detected. I can easily recognize its sweet smell on the light breeze that pours in through my cracked-open window. Only, it's not the same sweet smell I have grown accustomed to during the spring and summer months. It's autumn now and rain smells differently in autumn. Autumn rain has an edgier feel and scent to it. And just as the smell of the burning firewood earlier this afternoon was instantly able to take me back in time, so too, does the unique aroma of the autumn rain now evoke memories of the night on which my fondest memory was made 10 long years ago. For it was on a rainy autumn night like tonight that I was to fall in love for the very first time.

Specifically, my fondest memory happened the October after I had graduated from high school when I was deeply infatuated with a girl named Jodi.

I had known Jodi from high school and I had even managed to talk to her on several occasions. But, because I was much too shy to approach her most other times, we didn't talk nearly as much as I would have liked to. On the rare chance that I did talk to her, it was usually just to crack a joke or tell some funny story, but never to express the real feelings I had for her. At that time I was much too afraid of telling her about all the reasons I was drawn to her. And there certainly were a lot of reasons, at that!

I remember I was drawn to both her happiness and the way that I could always seem to make her smile. I used to wonder if she had laughed at my jokes because they were really that funny, or if it was because she was just being nice. Yet, whatever the reason, she would laugh nonetheless and that was all it took for me to want to be around her. I simply loved being around her. But, perhaps most importantly, I simply loved who *I* was when I was around her. She seemed to bring out the best in me. In fact, I would have had a hard time believing I could be so charming if she hadn't seemed to be genuinely charmed by me. And if she hadn't responded to my hidden affection for her in an equally subtle manner, I would have had a hard time believing that I could be so gentle and caring. Ultimately though she made me feel like the person I thought I was—or at least the person I had always wanted to be—and because of that I was able to affirm my own beauty through her. Maybe that is the real reason people fall in love: love is an affirmation of beauty. And when we fall in love with someone, it's because they show us the beauty within ourselves and the world as a whole. Love is separation undone. Love is lies undone. And love, simply put, is the realization once and for all of beauty and truth. Love is all there is to live for and it's the only reason to be reborn again. It was love that had visited me on that rainy October night 10 years ago and it was love that has made my memory of that night so fond.

The particular October day that had led up to that magical night started out much like today. Only, it was a bit warmer than usual for this time of the year in the Midwest—Indian summer it is sometimes called. Yet, despite the warmth of Indian summer, the shorter days had taken their toll on the once green canopies of the trees. As you would expect for that time of the year, the leaves had already turned brown, yellow and orange with some managing to remain on

the trees, while many more rested in piles below. And if the autumn colors and half-bare trees weren't enough to feast my eyes on that day, a number of geese could be seen flying overhead on their way south as well. I also seem to recall that every so often a flock could be seen flying north instead. Perhaps the unusually mild air had fooled them. But not the squirrels—they were not as easily tricked by the temporary warmth. Several of them could be seen gathering food in their cheeks for the upcoming winter.

I remember I was two years into my love of song writing at that time and I couldn't help but to be inspired by the day. I had come up with a chord progression earlier that afternoon I liked and all that was needed were some words to go along with the melody I heard in my head. Up until then, I had never written a full song—music and words—all in one day before. It would usually take several days or weeks to complete a song and I remember I wanted the song I was working on that day to be the first one written in just 24 hours. Only, I was stuck and had no idea what the words were going to be about. I'll have to admit that I've always had a habit of putting more effort into songs I thought were really good from the start. And as it turns out, the song I was working on that day was the best one up until then, so naturally I wanted the words to be extra special. But, by the time three o'clock in the afternoon rolled around, I still had not begun to write any words.

Frustrated with my writer's block, I decided to go for a walk to try to find my muse.

At that time, I had lived on the outskirts of the same mid-sized city of 200,000 people as I do now. And because of my proximity to the edge of town, I needed only to walk a mile or so before finding myself in a quiet, rural setting. Back then, there was—and still is—a large park containing woods and hiking trails located between the end of town and the beginning of the farmland thereafter. It was that same park, only a short walk from where I had lived, that was to be my destination on that beautiful autumn day...

Upon arriving at the park, I immediately headed up a trail toward my favorite spot: an isolated clearing in the middle of the woods that sat on the side of a gently sloping green hill. The clearing I speak of is just large enough to hold a moderately sized coliseum and in the middle of the circular clearing sat one gigantic oak tree. However, on that particular day, in addition to the oak in the clearing, I was surprised to see there was a girl standing among the piles of fallen leaves at its base as well.

At first, the girl was much too far away to be able to tell who she was. From that distance, the only thing I was able to make out was her long, dark hair. "Who is this person standing in my favorite spot?" I thought to myself. In fact, so surprised was I at finding a stranger in my spot, that I even considered turning back. But, in the end, it only took a few more seconds for me to decide that I wasn't about to turn back and waste my trip out there just because someone was standing in my favorite spot! So, rather than leaving, I instead decided to casually walk by and see who it was. After all, maybe the girl—whoever she was—wouldn't mind if I sat down on the other side of the tree, I remember thinking.

Ever so curious, I set out towards the tree. And by the time I traveled only half the distance between the oak and me, I could already begin to make out some of the features of the

mystery girl. She looked to be about my age, maybe 5 1/2 feet tall and about 120 pounds. As a matter of fact, she looked a lot like Jodi! “Is it her?” I thought to myself as I continued to move closer.

Step after step I took, never once taking my eyes off the girl as 100 feet quickly turned into 10 feet and a question turned into an answer. It was Jodi!

Pleasantly surprised by her identity, I began thinking of something clever to say to her. “What’s your name?” I asked in a gentle voice, settling about a body’s length from her left side.

Jodi was standing with her back against the tree, staring lifelessly ahead with arms folded tightly across her chest as her shoulder-length hair danced softly in the breeze. But regardless of the emotionless look that was frozen on her face, I was still able to read her mood in her deep blue eyes. They were sad—almost as though they were tired of looking at the world, but not yet ready to wash away the grief with its tears.

Startled by the abrupt sound of my voice, she quickly turned with wide eyes to see who had just spoken to her. “Hi, Toby,” she smiled in a relief, seemingly pleased to see me. “Have you forgotten my name already?”

“No!” I replied, finding her smile so hypnotizing that I could have stood and stared at her forever. “Of course not.”

“So what brings you out here?” she asked as the breeze tickled her face with her hair and delivered the sweet scent of shampoo to my nose.

“I heard someone was standing in my spot,” I said after a slight pause, hoping she wouldn’t misinterpret the humor.

But as usual, she laughed. And with the sound of her laughter I was instantly reminded of what I had been missing during those few months that had passed between then and the final days of school. I had not seen her since June, but the sound of her laughter and the sight of her smile had made it seem as though no time had elapsed between that October day and graduation.

“You haven’t changed a bit,” she said to me, still grinning in a happy, yet sad manner.

“You say that as though it were a bad thing.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s not a bad thing, it’s a good thing... Now come over here and sit down with me... I need you to cheer me up.”

Not about to refuse such a delightful offer, I immediately did as she asked. And as I did so, I remember hoping that her invitation to sit with her was going to lead to some much wanted conversation. But, as we sat down beneath the tree, she instead went back to quietly staring straight ahead again while assuming an upright fetal position with her chin resting comfortably on her arms and knees.

I, on the other hand, sat comfortably with my legs crossed and my back resting against the giant oak as I anxiously waited to hear why she needed me to cheer her up. But, as seconds turned into minutes, Jodi remained silent. Only the sound of the wind stirring the leaves could be heard until I finally asked in a soft, concerned voice, “What’s wrong?”

“I’m boring! That’s what’s wrong!”

“What?” I asked with disbelief.

“I’m boring!” she repeated as a tear began to run down her cheek.

“Why do you say that?” I pressed.

“Because I am!” she exclaimed before burying her face in her arms and beginning to

weep.

“That can’t be true,” I assured.

A few seconds of silence passed once again before she sobbed, “Why?” with her face still buried in her arms.

“Because I don’t hang out with boring people... Boring people don’t laugh at my jokes the way you do,” I told her.

But her face remained too deep in her arms to tell how well I was doing at cheering her up.

“And boring people can’t light up the sky with a smile the way you can,” I quickly concluded, hoping to break her silence.

And with those last words from me, I could instantly hear her happiness radiating through her arms as her then slightly rosy-colored face emerged donning her unmistakable smile.

“So don’t tell me you’re boring, because it simply isn’t true,” I insisted with a grin.

Comforted by my kind words at last, Jodi gradually began to open up by telling me that she didn’t know what to do with her life because she wasn’t really sure what she was interested in. She also went on to explain that she didn’t enroll in college after high school and felt as though the uncertainty of her future was slowly starting to strangle her. Yet, as simple and brief as the explanation of her sadness was, I could tell by the look on her face and the sound of her voice that she had genuinely lost all hope.

Perhaps one of the reasons why I was able to recognize her delicate state so easily at the time was because, I too, had worn that same look of desperation on my face once or twice back then. I too, had little hope for the future at that time in my life. In fact, that age seems to be a desperate time in a lot of people’s lives. It’s when the innocence of childhood must be replaced with a new identity. And while some people make this transition from childhood to adulthood very easily, others like Jodi and I had struggled every day with the idea of who we were supposed to become and the role we were supposed to play in the world.

Quietly, we sat in the fading light of early evening and soon it began to rain. To my amazement though, we somehow managed to remain dry despite the fact that the oak tree we were sitting beneath had hardly any leaves left on it. Still, as good of a job as it had done sheltering us from the rain’s cool touch, it wasn’t, however, able to prevent the rain’s sweet aroma from saturating our noses. The air was thick with its taste. And it was at that very moment that I began to wonder how much longer Jodi was going to remain under the giant oak with me. Most people would have considered going home under similar circumstances. Yet, regardless of the rain and the fact that twilight was slowly beginning to fall upon us, Jodi had not given any hints of wanting to go home. As a matter of fact, she seemed that much more determined to stay once the rain had begun to fall.

Having realized that Jodi wasn’t going to be leaving any time soon, I attempted to continue our conversation by offering up some information about myself. “I want to be a songwriter,” I abruptly said, breaking the silence as I stared across the clearing at the woods that surrounded us. “Not because I want to be rich and famous, but because I want to do something truly beautiful with my life,” I told Jodi, briefly pausing to look over at her. “But do you want to know what scares me the most about my life?”

Intrigued by my statement, Jodi looked over at me with a soft and curious look on her

face before asking, “What?” in a gentle voice.

“I’m afraid that if I don’t succeed it’ll be because I’m not beautiful enough on the inside to create anything the world will appreciate... I’m living in this fantasy where I think I’m going to share something wonderful I’ve created with the world... I’ve based my whole life around it, and without my dream of being a beautiful songwriter, I’m nothing,” I explained in a bleak voice. “Sometimes, it seems easier to just slowly inch my way towards my dreams. That way, I can stretch the fantasy out for years, always thinking that success is just around the corner. At least that way I can feel like I’m beautiful on the inside, even if I’m not... So in my mind, endless fantasies that never come true are always better than harsh realities that do.”

Not entirely sure how to respond to my answer, Jodi gazed over at me for a moment with a compassionate, yet frustrated look on her face. “At least you have dreams!” she said in a harsh voice. “I have none!” she added, instantly going back to staring at the rapidly darkening woods straight ahead.

“Everyone has dreams,” I insisted. “I can’t believe you think you have none... In fact, I can tell you have lots of dreams.”

“How can you tell that?” she quickly responded with a negative chuckle, continuing to stare straight ahead.

“Because it’s in your eyes.”

“What?” she firmly questioned with a brief glance.

“Everything you need to know about a person is in their eyes... You have big, beautiful eyes that take in the world at every glance... They are soft and alive, which means they like what they see... The only problem is you don’t let your mind see what your eyes see. And when you finally let your mind see what your eyes have always been able to see, you will know what your dreams are... Your dreams will take you to where your soul can truly experience what your eyes have always been able to see.”

Jodi looked over at me. And in the dying twilight, I was just able to make out a faint nod of her head. I could tell by her reflective silence that she understood what I had said and I could also sense that she was quietly searching her mind for memories of all the things she has seen with her big, beautiful eyes.

That was when I felt as though I needed to express my affection for her by bravely reaching across and holding her hand for the very first time. That was also when I remember having wanted so badly to tell her how beautiful I thought she was. Only, perfectly content just to be holding her hand, I instead said nothing.

Jodi said nothing as well. Yet, I could also tell by the way she gently gripped my hand that she was just as content with the moment as I was.

By that time, the sun had completely set and the distant city lights reflecting off the bottoms of the clouds supplied the only light that could be seen. And with the sun no longer present to warm the autumn air, I quickly found that the rain was beginning to add a chill to the evening air.

“I’m getting cold,” Jodi told me as she slid close to me and cuddled up against my left side. “I think you should hold me.”

Happy to comply, I gladly put my arm around her, but nervously failed to find any words to express my overwhelming affection for her. After all, what could I have said at a moment like

that? Should I have told her how I felt about her at that moment, or should I have waited for a better time to reveal my feelings for her? Not sure exactly what to say, I simply said nothing. Besides, I was much too enchanted by the moment to try to think of something say. “Tomorrow, I’ll tell her,” I thought to myself. And that was that.

So, there we sat in each other’s arms for the remainder of the night. And as the night went on, we said amazingly little to each other—almost as if we had both just wanted to enjoy the beautiful moment we were having in the rain...

In the morning, the sun had risen just as gently as it had set the night before. It was also then that we had realized, to our amazement, we were still dry! Somehow, the rain that had fallen throughout the night had managed not to touch us in the least bit.

“Should I tell her how I feel now?” I remember thinking to myself, realizing time was short and that we should get back home to get some sleep. But my thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Jodi’s voice before I was even able to arrive at an answer.

“I going to visit my brother out east for a few weeks,” she indicated with a confused, torn look on her face. “And I’m supposed to leave in a couple of hours... Thank you,” she added after a brief pause, acting as though she didn’t want to leave but was forcing herself to anyway. “You’ve helped me out tremendously and I hope to see you when I get back,” she said, hugging me for a good 10 seconds and saying with affection in her eyes, “Goodbye, Toby.”

Hesitantly, she then turned and began to make her way back home, never once looking back as she went.

I remember I had watched her walk away as long as I could. However, it didn't take long before she disappeared into the surrounding trees. And it was only upon losing sight of her in the woods, that I then briefly stood beneath the oak tree for a few more minutes to relish everything that had taken place there before gradually beginning to slowly make my way back home as well.

Happy at the thought I was going to see her again in a few weeks, I was eager to get back and finish the song I had started the day before. I had just lived the inspiration I was looking for earlier and I had easily decided that the song should be about my night in the rain with Jodi...

When I got home I quickly grabbed some paper and a pencil, only to find that this time the words that had been so difficult to find the day before had instead flowed effortlessly from my hand. So effortlessly, that it had almost seemed as though my hand were on automatic! It took only 20 minutes to complete the song. And when finished with it, I was also pleased to see I had just made it in under the 24-hour time limit I had set for myself the day before.

Like many songs I have written, the song I wrote on that day was a romanticization of real events. Sometimes, I think in order to portray the right mood in a song, real events need to be embellished with fictitious ones. The result is a delicate balance between dreams and reality. That way, I can have the best of both worlds. And over the 20 minutes it took me to write the

words, I moved from the way things really happened to the way I would have liked them to have happened in a perfect world.

### Rain-

“I love the rain,” I said  
“It reminds me of the day I saw  
You by the tree,” I said  
And you were standing all alone  
I asked you, “What’s your name?”  
And you smiled at me, oh so shy  
And then we watched the rain  
All through the day and into the night  
And that’s why, and that’s why I love the rain  
It reminds me of you

“I love the rain,” I said  
“It reminds me of the day I first  
Held your hand,” I said  
And you were so beautiful  
I asked, “Will you be mine?”  
And you turned to me and you kissed my cheek  
And then we watched the rain  
All through the day and into the night  
And that’s why, and that’s why I love the rain  
It reminds me of you

“I love the rain,” I said  
“It reminds me of the day I fell  
In love with you,” I said  
You always made me feel so good  
I asked, “Is this forever?”  
And you threw your arms around my neck  
And then we watched the rain  
All through the day and into the night  
And that’s why, and that’s why I love the rain  
It reminds me of you ...

I never saw or spoke with Jodi again. She remained out east, never to return. My only indication of what had become of her was written in a brief postcard I received a few weeks after she left. It read: “I’ve finally found myself! I’m going to be starting college out here in the spring! You’ve helped me open my mind, and for that, you’ll always be a dear friend! Thank you... Love, Jodi.” There was no return address.

Now that I look back on it, my fondest memory didn't just end with the rising of the morning sun. It had lasted for the weeks I had spent waiting for her return as well. It seemed as though I had been living in a daydream for those few weeks. I felt so alive, and everything I saw was as if I was seeing it for the very first time. A peaceful calm had come over me and nothing at the time could have convinced me that life wasn't perfect just the way it was. I simply couldn't wait until the day she would be getting back so that I could finally have the opportunity to tell her how I felt. It was as though I had a secret that needed to be told to the whole world and if I didn't share it soon I would simply explode. And every day that went by brought me that much closer to the day I thought I was going to see her again!

Often, to help pass the time, I would revisit the giant oak tree. I had spent many evenings and countless hours just sitting in silence beneath the tree. I remember that I would look up at the stars and try to guess which ones Jodi might have been looking at that very same moment. Somehow, it helped ease the loneliness.

I realize that I'll never really know what was going through her head during those last torn moments of the morning I had fallen in love, and I also realize that I'll never know how she had really felt about me either. Yet, I can't help thinking that if she had fallen in love that morning as well, she would have come back. Still, regardless of the outcome, or how she might or might not have felt about me, I still look back on those autumn weeks fondly.

The 10 years that have passed since those memories have taught me many lessons. The most important one being that life is about loving and not being loved. It was loving that made my memories so fond because loving is something you can do with or without the other person's permission. That's what makes life so beautiful: you control your own memories and not anyone else.

So, if I were to die tonight, would the memory of that night in the rain with Jodi be enough to make me come back here and do it again? Probably not—that was 10 years ago, and as the years have passed, the pain of life has gradually begun to outweigh its fondness. No, I believe it will take a much stronger and more recent memory to entice me back to this world again. But, I guess I won't know for sure until the day I die.

### 3

Her name is Aurora and she is every bit as beautiful as the Northern Lights that share her name. Her wavy dark hair reminds me of ripples on a river and the way it falls over her shoulders is like a gentle waterfall. Her beautiful brown eyes evoke the sweetness of chocolate and their elegantly wide shape is like that of perfectly cut diamonds. They are the windows to her soul and in them I see reassurance of the pure radiance of being. And with delicately frowning lips on a face that is nothing short of angelic, a voice flows forth that is as beautiful as a symphony and as lucent as the sun. Even her very essence, it seems, has been handed straight down from the heavens. She is, quite simply, the perfect manifestation of the Goddess bringing into existence the intrinsic beauty of the universe.

Yet, beneath her beauty lies a look of uncertainty that even the most exquisite face can't hide: a look that I cannot entirely describe, but one that seems to portray a deep-seeded skepticism towards her own beauty and worthiness nonetheless. And if that is indeed the case, then she needs only to see herself through my eyes to know, now and forever, that she is already a part of all that is beautiful in this world.

Her name is Aurora and she is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen...

It seems that, in an effort to snap out of the somber mood that last night's reminiscing had brought on, I was inspired to visit my favorite bookstore earlier this morning.

The store I speak of is quite large and houses every subject a person could possibly want to read about. It has a high ceiling—giving it plenty of space—and the thin, crimson colored carpeting that lines the floor creates a nice warm atmosphere. The hosts of books that are contained under its roof are all neatly housed on a hundred or so golden-brown, wooden bookshelves that line both the walls and the floor, while dozens of small tables for people to sit and read at are scattered among the seven-foot-tall bookshelves that fill the store as well.

I was looking through a book of photographs about 10 feet away from her when I had first noticed her sitting all by herself at one of those tables as she paged through a book of paintings, and from the very first instant I saw her face I could not take my eyes off her. She was simply breathtaking. Everything about her seemed to demand my fullest attention. In fact, so struck by her heavenly presence was I, that I even found the way she was looking at the paintings in her book to be intriguing. Her gaze was an intensely curious one and I could tell that she was thoroughly absorbing everything she saw among the pages. One by one she studied the paintings in the book, looking at each of the paintings for only a second or two before shyly turning the page as if a second or two more would have been too much for her to handle. That was when I observed the look of uncertainty on her face for the very first time, and that was also when I recognized its beautifully-sad qualities. Beautiful, because of the pleasure the paintings must have surely been giving her. And sad, I think, because of the subtle way she had distanced herself from the beauty as if it were a painful reminder of something. Of all the things I could have

noticed about her, it was that beautifully-sad gaze of hers that had stood out the most.

However, despite these mixed emotions that the paintings had obviously brought about, she relentlessly continued to page through the book, never spending more than a few seconds on each painting before having to look away. And the longer I watched her, the more I wanted so desperately to tell her what I so easily sensed about her. I wanted to tell her she was not alone in her pain, but most of all, I wanted to tell her that I was truly touched by her beautifully-sad gaze. Only, how could I have had? We were complete strangers to each other and those aren't the sorts of things you say to someone you don't even know ... or at least not in this world, you don't. Besides, my initial impressions of her could have been wrong. So, rather than attempting to communicate my observations on the matter to her, I instead decided to quietly continue looking through my book of photographs while trying not to stare at her too much in the process.

But, only moments after having decided not to disturb her, it was I, and not her that was to be engaged in conversation when she suddenly asked in a curious voice, "Do you take pictures?"

Surprised that she had begun speaking to me, I instantly looked up from the pages of my book and made firm eye contact with her.

That was when I heard her voice for the very first time as she modestly looked away, and that was also when I noticed the odd juxtaposition of its delivery. So soft and shy was it, yet so confident as well. I couldn't help but to feel as though an angel had just spoken down to me from the clouds as my fascination with her grew larger by the second.

"No ... not really," I kindly responded as she gazed back at me again. "I just like to look at pictures of places I haven't been to before."

With that answer, she gently looked down at the pages of her book for a moment before returning her gaze back to me. "Pictures of where?"

By that point in the conversation, however, I'll have to admit that I was having a hard time concentrating on the subject matter. Instead, all I could fixate on were her piercing eyes. Whenever she looked at me, I couldn't help but to feel as though she was looking right through me. Eyes like hers see everything. Nothing is left unexamined and nothing goes unseen. They were wise eyes—like the kind of eyes that belonged to an old soul, and in them I saw everything that is beautiful about life.

"Out west," I replied in a receptive voice, having gotten enough of a genuine impression of interest in the conversation to timidly move towards her table and politely sit down across from her. "Have you ever been out west?" I sincerely inquired as I put the book of photographs down at a right-angle for both of us to see.

"No, I haven't," she replied in a friendly voice, seemingly eager to continue the conversation while studying the photographs on the pages of my book. "It's beautiful," she added moments later in a soft voice as she bashfully took her eyes off the page and focused them squarely on the table instead.

That was when my eyes became fixed on her delicately frowning lips, and that was also when I noticed how expressive they were. For, although they were making no sound at that moment, they spoke 1,000 words. Only several lifetimes of sadness could have shaped such a gentle mouth into an expression of that sort. "How else could they have taken that shape?" I thought to myself. I can't imagine her ever using that sweet voice of hers to mutter anything

other than pure harmony through such soft lips, so it can't be anything she has said. Maybe that is why they have taken the gloomy shape they have: so as to express the sadness that hadn't yet been put into words. Or, it could be entirely possible that she isn't even aware of what it is that brings her such sadness. But no matter, because whatever the cause may be, I was definitely interested in finding out more about her.

"Do you paint?" I curiously asked in an effort to gain some insight, imagining that someone who would be studying the paintings in a book with such intensity must paint as well.

"A little bit," she replied as she slowly rocked her head to the left. "But I'm not very good at it... I just do it to express myself," she finished, gazing briefly at me to monitor my reaction before looking away as though she was expecting me to not understand.

By that time, I had already gotten the feeling that there was a lot more to her than meets the eye, and by the way she had been cautiously conversing with me, I had also gotten the impression that she was not used to being understood by a lot of people. But I was not one of those people. And I think by that point in the conversation she had started to realize that.

Then, after a brief period of looking down at the table, she returned her gaze to me again. And again, although she had spoken no words, her eyes had told me she was intrigued by our conversation.

"Do you have any of your paintings with you?" I asked as I broke eye contact and gazed over at the book bag sitting next to her on the table.

Having verified that she was indeed a painter, I was intensely interested in seeing some of her work. For some reason or another it was easy for me to sense her pain and I was filled with a certain sense of compassion for her. I had instantly identified with her and I wanted so badly to ease her sadness. Naturally, I had thought that seeing some of her paintings would have given me some desperately needed insight into her soul.

"No," she said reluctantly, seemingly embarrassed that someone was asking her about her paintings as though they weren't even worth looking at or discussing.

"That's too bad," I said. "I would have liked to have seen some of them."

Surprised that someone had taken a genuine interest in her paintings, I was once again taken by her gentle demeanor as she smiled ever so slightly at the prospect. She had such a beautiful essence and I could only imagine the beauty that her paintings must surely hold. And that's when it had occurred to me: I had learned so much about this beautifully-sad girl, yet I didn't even know her name!

Anxious to discover her name, I paused to imagine what it could be before asking in a gentle, inquisitive voice, "What's your name?"

What name could ever do such a beautiful girl any justice?" I thought to myself as I awaited her answer. This is due in part to the fact that I've always believed people are a lot like the sound of their names. Gentle names usually belong to gentle people and bold names usually belong to bold people. But in the short amount of time that I had to guess, I could not think of one single name that could truly express the beauty she had encompassed. Not one.

"Aurora," she informed me, seemingly pleased that I had asked.

I was rendered completely speechless. "Of course!" I thought to myself. It made perfect sense! And while images of the Northern Lights danced in my head, all I could think of was how perfect the name "Aurora" was for her.

But, my infatuation with her name was only able to occupy my mind for a second or two before I realized how much time had passed while we were talking. I suddenly remembered there was somewhere I needed to be. There was a little boy that was anxiously awaiting my weekly visit and I wasn't about to let him down.

Realizing this, I then took a few seconds to think of what to say to Aurora. I was going to ask her if she would be returning to the bookstore any time soon, but something had already told me that indeed she was ... and soon. Therefore, I hadn't really thought much about it as I prepared to say my goodbyes. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I have to get going. There's someone I need to pay a visit to," I explained, detecting a hint of disappointment in her eyes as I did so. "It was very nice talking with you, Aurora, and maybe I'll see you in here again," I said as I stood up. "I'm in here every day it seems like," I added with a chuckle. "And if I do see you again, I hope that you'll have some of your paintings with you," I sincerely told her as I pushed in my chair. "I'd really like to see some of them."

With that farewell, Aurora paused for a moment as we made firm eye contact before confidently asking, "What's your name?"

"Toby," I replied with a warm smile and a nod of my head.

"Well it was nice talking with you, too, Toby," she assured me, still looking into my eyes.

"Well ... goodbye," I smiled in a gentle voice.

"Goodbye," she smiled backed in an equally soft voice.

Then, having felt confident I would see her again, I made my way out of the bookstore.