

SALUTING THE SUN

ONE

When Nevaeh Thera woke up that Sunday in her tree-house ten feet up in an aging oak on Farmer Jones' back forty, she peeled back the clear plastic door, looked down, and saw that her boyfriend, Tray Ashley, was gone. The previous night, after one too many tequila sunrises, he'd tarzanned off the tree-house's rope ladder and crashed in a heap next to their outdoor shower. She couldn't wake him, so she'd tossed a sleeping bag over him and left him, a curiosity for the raccoons and other night critters. Now, assuming he was down at the creek answering nature's call, she yodeled his name, "Oh, Tray-ay," and it carried so far in the open Iowa fields that it didn't come back to her.

She turned back inside and spotted a note next to Tara, her pet white rat, who was asleep in a wicker dog basket. A twenty dollar bill was clipped to a page torn from a college-ruled spiral notebook, and in Tray's large and confident scrawl, it read, "'Honor Thy Father.' Going to I-City." It was dated August 23, 5:45 a.m. At the end of the note, he'd drawn a little diagram, and added that if she continued to live at *Chez Nay Tray*, she should anchor the rope ladder at the bottom.

"P.S." he wrote, "Have a good life." He was going to law school.

She finished reading, ripped the twenty in half, and tossed it out of the tree-house. Then, she started throwing their furniture to the ground: two plastic lawn chairs that had been on sale for six dollars each and which Tray had managed to finagle the salesgirl into selling him for the price of one; a small round white plastic outdoor table with a crack in it that someone had

condemned to the trash; and a six-by-nine orange shag rug, same source. She wanted nothing to do with anything he had anything to do with.

How dare he leave her a note! They'd been together all through their last two years of college and a year of grad school and another on the road before landing in Prairie du Chien. At the least, he should've talked to her sober and in person; she was sure she could've talked him out of it, like the first time he'd deferred his admission.

Despite the early hour, she poured herself two shots of cheap tequila and downed them in one gulp. Then she grabbed the bottle and lifted it directly to her lips—to hell with shots, glasses, and false measures—but as the liquid spilled onto her chin, she saw Tara's glassine eyes fixed on hers.

"You don't know," she said to the rat and tipped the tequila back. It burned her throat and rumbled in her empty stomach. Tara stood her ground. "Okay," Nevaeh said. "Okay." She had responsibilities and she was a responsible person. For the sake of her rat, she set the bottle aside.

Carefully, she lowered herself down the rope ladder, gathered up the two pieces of the twenty, and retrieved her things, item by item, with the pulley system Tray had devised to get them up to the house. It took the rest of the morning and much of the afternoon. Then she made herself some tea, taped the twenty back together, and put it in her soft, vinyl-covered Bible, at Luke, 12:22. Alone on her double-wide air mattress, she fell asleep even before the lightning bugs filled the field.

That very Sunday night she started to dream again. Whenever she didn't have a man in her life, she had busy, colorful dreams, which she liked to think of as direct instructions from the Divine Spirit of the Universe, DS for short. Monday morning, after a fitful and unfamiliar night without Tray, she woke up with only one word in mind, a word she'd actually seen written in an

elaborate script in her dream, and had heard repeated over and over: “Pulchritude.” She didn’t know the word, which seemed an especially cruel joke, and so, dream in hand, but unsolved, she started that first day of the rest of her life like any other day. She saluted the sun, poured two handfuls of dry cereal into an oversized coffee mug and ate while sitting in the lotus position, facing east. Then she showered with Lemon Joy dish-washing liquid under a plastic camp shower she’d filled from Farmer Jones’ garden hose, humming a show tune for its parodic value, and tried, unsuccessfully, to wash Tray Ashley right out of her hair. Determined to resume her normal life, she put Tara in her pocket and walked as usual the two and a half miles to The Bluffs, the family resort overlooking the Mississippi where she worked as a housekeeper.

As she changed sheets and scrubbed tubs and toilets, she pondered her dream, and the possible meanings of “pulchritude,” and, since she couldn’t help herself, how long it would take Tray to come to his senses and come home to her. How could he give up his tree-house—built with their own hands—and Prairie du Chien and all the years of their relationship, for something as spiritually confining as law school? He’d taken the law boards to strike a bargain with his dad, a man he claimed he had no desire to emulate. He’d deferred his admission last year when she’d reminded him that his father, a wealthy corporate lawyer, was so bored by the routine of his practice it took three extra-dry martinis, every night, just to crank up enough enthusiasm to greet the next day.

She finished her twenty-four rooms at The Bluffs by shortly after three, and headed for Prairie du Chien’s two-room public library to look up her dream word. While she was there, she figured she’d apply for a library card, to help pass the time without Tray.

"Your address?" librarian Judith Scott asked, friendly enough at first.

“Tree-house, Third Oak Up from the Second Downstream Bend in Farmer Jones' Creek, Prairie du Chien,” she said proudly.

Judith eyed her up and down the way she would've inspected a potential boarder, as if waiting for her to say she was just joking. Enduring the woman's inspection, Nevaeh stood very still. She was wearing her good blue-jean skirt, which she'd fashioned out of oversized overalls and filled out with bright triangles of flowered fabric remnants pilfered from the old-fashioned dime store in the town square. Her white tube socks were clean, and her tennis shoes relatively new, from the Goodwill over in Muenster. Even though Tara was asleep at the back of her neck, under her long and kinky brown hair, she was feeling highly presentable. Sometimes, if Tara peeked out while Nevaeh was waiting her turn, like in line at the grocery, it could be humiliating: the cash-register girl would scream and the manager would kick the two of them out before she could buy her food. So, even though it was more expensive, she usually shopped at the single convenience store in town, connected to the “On The Run” Mobil gas station, where Herb and Grace knew both her and Tara, and sometimes gave them a free day-old donut or a bruised apple. Although Grace didn't know it, in exchange Nevaeh would sneak Herb a couple of her hand-rolled cigarettes.

“How old are you?” the librarian asked.

“Old enough to read,” Nevaeh wanted to say, but there was a thick growth of dark hair on the woman's upper lip and, out of sympathy, Nevaeh was struck civil. The librarian probably lived in a real house—but alone, and obviously, she'd never looked in a mirror. “Twenty-five,” Nevaeh lied. She was really twenty-three.

“How long have you been at this—.” The woman worked her lips. “This address?”

“A few months,” she said, and felt Tara shift her position.

“What about the winter?” the librarian asked, leaning forward over her desk, her voice more concerned than stern.

“I don't know. Last year, we went to Mexico.” Nevaeh hoped she sounded casual. In truth, they hadn't thought that far ahead, although Tray probably had had his eye on some free insulation lying around a construction site, or maybe even had formed a plan for heading south. But then again maybe not; he'd rarely had a plan—application to law school being his father's price for the year of film school—and besides, the idea had been to settle in Prairie du Chien. She hoped Tray would come back.

The librarian straightened. “Oh,” she said.

Nevaeh knew what she was thinking: how could someone who lived in a tree-house afford a Mexican vacation? Though surrounded by thousands of volumes describing the entire world and every sort of adventure one could have in it, the woman probably had ventured out of Prairie du Chien only long enough to get her library degree over in Champaign. Most likely, she'd never hitch-hiked anywhere, never conned anyone out of bus-fare, never begged at a church's food pantry, never played blues harp on a corner or camped on a beach for a week until the *policia* asked her to move on. It was surprising, really, how wonderful people had always been to Nevaeh; it was the very foundation of her “sunny” disposition and of her belief in the goodness of the universe. She found her heaven here on earth. It was her birthright and her name: “Heaven” spelled backwards.

The librarian typed up a library card with a little metal strip on it. In bigger cities—Nevaeh had stayed a few months in San Francisco—the libraries used bar-coded systems. Like the town itself, the Prairie du Chien Public Library was old-fashioned. It still charged five cents a day for over-dues.

While she waited, Nevaeh made her way to the big dictionary sitting on an oak stand with a little brass plaque stating that it was given in memory of the Travis and Violet Johnson family. She turned to the P's, found "pulchritude" spelled exactly as in her dream, and was profoundly disappointed at how little guidance this word offered on her future. *Beauty*. Why did the English language need "pulchritude"? Could anyone use it in a sentence with a straight face? What good was a word even the college-educated had to look up? What was the DS trying to tell her?

The librarian handed her her card and her first two books. "Don't let them get wet," the librarian said, but, since it was bright outside and not a single cloud in the royal blue sky, Nevaeh didn't quite get her meaning. "If it rains," the librarian said. "What do you do when it rains?"

"Oh," Nevaeh said brightly, "we—I—have a roof, and walls—like a regular house! But I'll put them in my pack. It's waterproof." She felt Tara wiggle and resisted the urge to sit down and tell the woman, whose imagination so clearly needed a jump-start, that the tree house was built with old barn wood Tray had scavenged on Farmer Jones' property, had glassless windows that she draped with clear shower curtains with Donald Duck borders from the Goodwill, and was crammed with furniture: People threw out some of the best, most useful stuff for no reason other than boredom. Her own mother had been motivated—if that was the word for it—only by the *ennui* that often plagues the well-to-do and causes them to want to spice it up, add a little drama—or, in her mother's case, a *lot* of drama—to their ordinary, well-to-do-lives.

Nevaeh hadn't spoken to her mother in two years, since the day she ruined her college graduation by getting stumbling drunk at the English Department's post-ceremony reception and making a pass at the chairman. When the chairman's wife tried to guide him away, Mrs. Thera shoved her, and the wife had, remarkably, shoved back. Tray intervened, and they'd dragged Nevaeh's mother across campus, people watching and shaking their heads, and dumped her on

the bed in her hotel room, leaving an angry note from Nevaeh not to call her or contact her again. Even before Nevaeh had given up her cell phone (for financial reasons), her mother, isolated on the snooty North Shore of suburban Chicago, had honored her wishes.

After grad school, Nevaeh (creative writing) and Tray (film) moved to San Francisco together, taking all summer to coax his twenty-year old Ford 150 across the country. They both were privileged enough to have escaped the university with respectable grades and almost no debt, and they each had a little stash of graduation money from aunts and uncles and a few extra dollars saved from jobs around campus. They were going to look for jobs, but they weren't in any hurry. Neither of them had ever been fully and solely responsible for themselves, for generating all the cash it would take to feed the truck, pay camp fees, and buy their daily bread and wine. In state and national parks where they'd stay for a week or so at a time, men and women, usually wistful people in their forties, would invite them to their family campsites for dinner, enchanted by the romance of being on the road for a summer without three kids and a mortgage or the need to be clear-headed in the morning.

Tray, with his patrician features—straight nose, chiseled jaw line, perfect white teeth—immediately earned the trust these families would normally have withheld from someone in raggedy jeans, a long-sleeved cotton shirt open nearly to his waist and an auburn pony tail half-way down his back. He opened his mouth and lyrics came out: funny words, kind words, college words. Just the right words at the right time. He was like a hypnotist, and Nevaeh was in heart-stopping love. Tray was pulchritudinous. He also happened to be a pretty skillful pickpocket.

In San Francisco neither of them found work. Nevaeh wanted to be an editor, Tray a television producer. Liberal Arts degrees from the Midwest, no connections to the San Fran aristocracy: no go. In the winter they headed south, but they found LA too big, too expensive,

and too glitzy, so they headed south to Tijuana. Tray made friends with the locals, they smoked a lot of dope and drank a lot of wine. The old pick-up didn't move for six, maybe eight weeks. Then Tray got to feeling tied down, and in the middle of the night on a Tuesday in late February, they fired her up and left. Nevaeh had looked over her shoulder for the first hundred miles, worried that Tray had picked the wrong pocket.

She ducked when he said to, too frightened to scream when the gatekeeper at the trailer park, where they'd crashed for their last week in Tijuana, leaned out of the window of his Isuzu Trooper and aimed his rifle at them as if they were a couple of prairie dogs. When he removed his hand from the wheel to take the shot, the Isuzu hit a bump, slipped onto the gravel of the right shoulder and skidded into a three-sixty in the middle of the interstate. A semi swerved around the crazed Mexican and jack-knifed in the middle of the southern California highway, fending off the swearing rifle-man and saving Tray's and Nevaeh's young lives.

After the Tijuana terrors, they'd spent a few months searching along the river for just the right town: at Baton Rouge they'd turned north, up through Natchez and Tallulah, and broke down in Barkeyville, Arkansas, where, as the one hundred and sixty-first and one hundred and sixty-second residents, they were as welcome as silt. They left as soon as they could start their truck, that is, as soon as Tray could score a new battery.

When they crossed the border over into Missouri, Tray beamed as if Nevaeh had just won five hundred dollars as Miss Mark Twain Days, and told Nevaeh, "This, my love, is the heart of America. This is the homeland." It was May, it was humid, and Nevaeh said this land was definitely not home. She pointed north, and Tray obeyed. He wasn't fussy about where they lived, although he said he wanted a town where the police would know him, and not harass him because of his ponytail. He said he wanted to volunteer with the Lions Club, and the image of his

passing out used eyeglasses to the blind and semi-blind warmed Nevaeh's wannabe-hippie heart. She, too, began to yearn for that kind of connection to a community. Tray said he'd learned his lesson in Mexico and swore he'd never again prey on his neighbors, and when they simultaneously noticed the billboard for The Bluffs, a family resort in Prairie du Chien, Nevaeh saw the possibility of employment, and Tray saw a necessary port in a storm. City folk would come to The Bluffs, overlooking the river, and, weak with *bucolia*, would let down their guard, leaving their wallets in their rear pockets. (Nevaeh never questioned Tray directly about his money matters, but she'd made him promise to use his extensive hand-eye skills, which he said he'd learned in high school during his "magic phase," only in emergencies, and only on the rich.) Because of The Bluffs, Tray could keep at least half his promise.

Almost immediately, Nevaeh found her housekeeping job at the resort, and developed a sideline of her own. She never lifted more than five dollars, usually in ones, from any given room, and never from anyone with more than two kids. She didn't approve of Tray's shenanigans, but she didn't consider what she did to be in the same category. Most people failed to leave a tip in the room, even though the etiquette books suggested it, and she was sure it was because in their last minute muddle to get out by 11 a.m., they simply forgot, not because they didn't want to. She didn't give them a chance to forget.

At any rate, she saved up some money she didn't tell Tray about, because, generous to the point of insolvency, he always spent whatever they had. At Cruise On Inn, on the south side of the town square, he would buy a couple pitchers or spring for a garbage pizza, even when he didn't have a dime in his pocket at the time of ordering, and he never passed a children's lemonade stand without buying one and tipping the owner as well. He never stole from kids, but he always knew which parents "owed" him.

That's the short story of how they'd ended up in Prairie du Chien, and how she'd come to get her library card from Judith Scott.

Back at the tree house with her two books—*Best American Short Stories, 2000* and the other, *Making Your Own Music*—Nevaeh put Tara in the wicker dog basket and sat on the curved plastic chair. She reached in her backpack for her Bible, opened it to Luke, 12, and counted out her money, three-hundred-eighty-seven dollars, including a twenty dollar bill, freshly taped together in the middle. It was remarkable how long that much money could last, if one didn't have to pay rent and car installments and taxes, and if you didn't smoke store-bought cigarettes or drink fancy liquor. She felt like a veritable lily of the field. If she ever needed to change identities, she thought she'd go by the name of “Lily.”

She took a can of Five Aces Blend down from its shelf above her bed. A package of Zig Zags lay on top of the tobacco. She held the can to her face like an airplane mask and sucked in the sweet raw smell, like shredded coconut, good enough to eat. She rolled one, lit it and took a long drag, holding the smoke in her lungs like dope. She lay back on the double air mattress and, for the first time in the thirty hours since Tray had left, cried. She let herself cry for seven minutes, exactly, and then stubbornly wiped the tears from her eyes and flicked her ashes in a Chock Full O'Nuts coffee can that was chock full of butts.

Then, she poured herself a glass of wine, and opened her music book, a teacher's guide to instruments that could be made out of old fashioned cigar boxes and rubber bands, tin cans and beans, glass bottles, washboards, washtubs, and other relics once but no longer commonly found around ordinary households. Idly, she ran her finger around the rim of the glass, and was just noticing the sweet sound of a middle C (she had nearly perfect pitch) when she turned the page to “Musical Glasses.”

She'd been fascinated with the sound of musical glasses ever since she'd heard a bearded, ageless man playing an extensive collection of stemmed wine glasses on Jackson Square in New Orleans. He'd had a wooden cart with three rows of glasses, each filled with water to a different level. He ran his wet index fingers around the rims of the glasses, producing natural, almost haunted tones.

The sun had been hot but not yet too hot in the French Quarter and the man had played *Amazing Grace* and told the story of the instrument in a voice as soothing as the glassware's eerie, wind-like music. He called himself a glass harmonicist, and said the music went back as far as 1492, the date of an Italian wood cut that showed a musician striking glass bells with a stick. She and Tray had been in love and headed out west and at every diner along the way, they remembered New Orleans and played two-note duets with their water glasses while they waited for their food.

Nevaeh put the book down, dipped her finger in her wine, and ran it around the rim of the goblet. Nothing happened. She drank a little and wet her finger and tried it again. Still nothing. She consulted the book, irritated that the magic had stopped working for her. The book said to make sure her finger was clean, which she knew it was, and to apply pressure until the glass produced a sound. She pressed down, at first concerned that she might break the glass and cut her finger, but she was rewarded with a high, sweet note. She filled the glass to the top and got a lower pitch. She only had five stemmed glasses. None of them matched. She filled them from the round red insulated jug in which she stored her drinking water, and started sipping. *Do re mi fa so*. She played "Do, a deer, a female deer, re, a drop of golden sun, me, a name I call myself," and ran out of notes. She dipped both her index fingers in glasses and played a two-note chord, one note clock-wise, one counter-clockwise. It felt as if she were patting her head and tickling

her stomach at the same time, but she liked the sound. It blended seamlessly with the open air of the tree house.

Nevaeh adjusted the water in her fifth glass and wet the little finger of her right hand to see if she could play three notes at once, a C-major chord, *do, mi, so*. She played until her fingers tingled, and then she slept. She woke up Tuesday morning, closed her eyes to try to fish her dream from the great pool of the DS's instructions, and remembered only the image of a book that had two glossy pages, without words, but with brightly colored shapes, including a square circle constructed out of many straight lines, to make whatever an octagon would be called if it had eight times the number of sides. She hadn't a clue to its meaning. But, she had a job, she had five-eighths of a beautiful octave for her new musical hobby, and—because, perhaps of “pulchritude”—she had hope that Tray would come back. Still, she had to live as if he were lost to law school, and to act as if she were in charge of the rest of her life. Not knowing what else to do, she saluted the sun.