

Ch 1 ONCE THERE WAS A BOY

Wrapped inside a cocoon, the boy inhales his own stale breath, trapped within all that is himself and what could be. The bud awaiting its bloom, adrift in an embryonic journey from what was to what could be; the adolescent awaiting the man. A dichotomic weigh station. Unconscious, he hovers between two planes.

As the bed's magnetic force strengthens its hold, Matt curls within himself, unable to surface from the soft cotton layers. They own him, pull him inside their folds, accept him. The world outside falls away, the world with all its eyes, expectations. He is a bird, in an egg, in a nest. Incubating. Waiting. The crumpled sheets, flat polyester pillow he's laid his head upon since age 11, and the short boy mattress all draw him back into slumber. Not sleep exactly but a land of heaviness. This innocuous world, fortified by the gentle stir of his mother, he dozes in and out of cognition, in and out of a world where he is 11, 16 ... 11, 16 ... 11. He can't choose.

At once, the worlds of sleep and consciousness blur, and he's not sure which one's holding him. He turns over to check his alarm clock - 7:08. The numbers tell no lie.

"Matt!" Lee shouts from the shower behind a closed bathroom door. "Matt! You up?"

The muffled cry slithers down the hall, around the corner and inside the sixteen-year-old's blanket-encased sleepy right ear. "Up, up, I'm up," he mumbles, audible only to himself. He knows she's not expecting a response, just needs to convince herself that she's accomplished her motherly duty. It's Tuesday, the first day of finals, the final three days before summer, the summer before senior year, the year before Matt leaves, maybe, starts his own journey away from home, away from Lee. Maybe.

Lee appears in the doorway. "Up, up." Wrapped in a thinning white terry robe, her dull blonde hair dripping slightly, she moves across the room lifting scattered dirty socks, gingerly tossing them into a white wicker basket. Matt rolls up to the edge of his bed, sits Indian style, sheets bunched between his legs' meditative pool.

"Do you want eggs," she asks as she sits down beside him. "Do you have time?" "Oh, I wasn't going to make them, just asking, because I think there are

two left on the door.

"I gotta dash." Lee runs her fingers through her son's blond hair feeling its Nordic thinness and noticing the tiny streaks of red forcing their way to the surface with a determined - a knowing - sense of density. "You're getting Grandpa's hair, you know."

"Yeah, I noticed that. Hope I don't turn into a complete redhead. Think by the time more red starts to come in I'll be going gray, so it won't matter?"

"I hope not. I loved your grandpa's red hair." She pauses, lets her fingers slide down his cheek. "You know, these are the years now that I never had with my folks. You get them with me. You get to see me go through menopause and get hot and sweaty and cranky. Aren't you lucky?"

Never lost, filled only with passion, covered with a film of regret. A description of Matt West? Possibly. Certainly words found within the encyclopedic narrative of his mom. Yet Lee West has never truly been lost, though she easily could have been. The West family might seem your typical white working class types of a late twentieth century

California suburb. European descent. One adult gainfully employed. One adult absent, incarcerated, or dead. Minor children in school, playing sports, obedient. Adult children in college, backpacking in Europe, working in a fast food restaurant, incarcerated, or dead. By these accounts, yes, the Wests are typical. Single working mom, father could be dead or incarcerated, but is decidedly absent, minor child in school, once played left field for the Santa Niña Indians, adult child does not exist. Matt, the only child of this young mom, endures every drop of her undying love and too much of her doting attention.

To fully understand the West lineage, one needs to move further back than just one generation. Back one more to Matt's Swedish grandfather, a professor, and still further back to his great grandfather who changed the family name from Vest before he reached America. Jan Vest, a mechanical engineer, a genius, a Tesla-could-have-been, a vodka enthusiast, who began the elbow-bending tradition of West men. Hoping for change, for a change to dry out his habits, Jan Vest made the move to America just after the turn of the century, a time when huddled masses could still huddle about Ellis Island, were still greeted no matter how tired, how wretched, how poor.

Understanding that if this move would work, would at once drain his veins, reestablish a proper blood-alcohol ratio, he must begin anew. That might mean dramatic changes. Including his name. He didn't want people envisioning a disposable piece of accessory clothing when they looked at him. West sounded more forward thinking. After all, he was journeying to the West for a better life.

Lee's father, Johannes West, was born in the early 1930s, just in time for the Great Depression's onslaught, just in time for the party to truly begin, commencing a life of utter hardship, never knowing the meaning of calm, of abundance, of hope. With such a start, the chance of alcohol playing a minor role in this offspring seemed futile. It appeared that the West DNA had no chance of righting itself, of veering safely onto any path of truth and goodness. Hope lay in the arrival of the second American-born West generation, Lee and Janie, but their parents soon killed that (though neither girl has ever taken to the alcohol, both have found other avenues to avoid success and happiness – but this is not their story).

Hence, a final hope lay now in the third West generation born on this American soil, born in the vibrant 70s, an era of jiving hips, boogying behinds, and synthetic ensembles. A decade sitting on the revelatory heels of free-love and women's rights, laying ground for a time of Cold War and consumer orgies. A framework ripe for idealistic clashes and religious righteousness.

Change must emerge through chaos.

For Matt, the West genius has survived on a crutch, now moving through him like a crippled savant, only pausing to catch its breath upon a possible creative opportunity. If Matt is the generation to shift the destructive course of this family, he must seize his future with both hands, step inside the safety of himself, spread his wings and fly.

This boy does surely contain the potential of sheer brilliance, but due to his grandfather's obsessive desire for intoxication, he must work that much harder to unveil this Einstein-like ability to awe the world. He must work that much harder to dig out his convictions and step to the edge of the platform, fearless, ready to take flight.

Fortunately, much of his path is laid out, for Matt West has been gifted with smart, gifted with a knack for numbers, a drive for perfection. There is no doubt that he will ace his AP English exam and enter a prestigious college. However,

he might never change the world like a Bill Gates or Walt Disney. He might not simply because he lacks one essential ingredient of that county fair winning recipe of DNA.

Confidence.

This boy must write his own equation if he's to change the world. He must find the right formula to reveal his own declaration; with arms open wide, Matt West must be the one to set the world aright with love, the kind of arms-open-wide love that accepts without judgment, without shame.

Lee's parents didn't make it past her 15th birthday. Heavy drinkers both and professors at the state college, they developed a habit of coming home late most Friday evenings. Late and very drunk. On those nights, Lee would lie awake in her bed, not able to sleep until she heard the slight humming of that old brown Toyota as it pulled into their gravel driveway. This she loved - the sound of the rubber tires' crunching across the rocky spread. In the end, that sound evolved into a comforting expectancy, and after the accident whenever she'd hear someone pull into the drive, she'd run to the window thinking it was them, hoping. Of course, it wasn't, couldn't ever be, but she still ran, fooling herself time and time again. Hoping.

Hope. The one thing we fool ourselves with, she'd think. Something we use to drag ourselves through a life unfulfilled, a life that offers up possibility then tears it away. Hope. The one thing that keeps us running to the window, clinging desperately to that single buoyant chance that perhaps everything you *knew* to be true really isn't. Perhaps everything you *hoped* to be true really is. Once she heard the engine turn off, she'd instantly fall asleep.

Lee's sister, Janie, three years older, found it easier to doze off on those expectant evenings. Janie seemed to possess an elusive patient quality unfamiliar to Lee. Both girls understood that the only time their parents moved patiently through the house occurred when they were too drunk to move their bodies quickly. It wasn't really patience but lack of muscle coordination that caused such slow, methodical movements. It was these careful, detailed, slow-motion actions that convinced Lee her parents could safely steer a car through the solitary suburban streets of Santa Niña and arrive in that gravel driveway, crunching rubber along millions of tiny pebbles.

For the most part, for seven years, approximately 350 Friday evenings, Johannes

and Nancy West drove their faded brown two-door Toyota Corolla through the simple streets of Santa Niña and into the straight, 15-foot gravel-covered driveway of their three-bedroom single-story home as their two daughters lay in their single beds – one asleep, one not - listening to the engine hum then idle then shut off. As Lee allowed herself to drift off to sleep – starting from the age of eight when Janie had turned 11 and regarded old enough to babysit (this deemed so by her parents' selfish alcoholic logic) – she imagined her parents exiting the car, walking over to the backdoor, fumbling for their house-key, unlocking and opening it and stumbling into the kitchen, shutting and locking the wooden door behind them. It was only at this point – usually around 1AM, never much later as they didn't like to stay until closing and be labeled drunks like the others – that Janie would awaken and listen as her parents moved down the hall, passing the girls' rooms and closed doors, then as an afterthought or due to miscalculated opportunistic timing, turning to pause at each one, listening and gently opening each door one at a time to peer in on them, those two sleeping angels, their quiet, docile, hopeful angels.

At this point, Lee would be asleep, never bearing witness to these tender moments, missing out on seven years, 350 Friday nights of quiet visits by these two people who loved her so much but not enough to in time stop something that would eventually kill them.

Janie, however, embraced these moments, and later as an adult replayed them over and over in her mind, seeing her parents, side by side, silhouetted by the dull hall light within the crack of the opening of her bedroom door peering in on her lovingly, gently, patiently. Their inebriation, however, impeding control, not allowing them to actually speak and say the words Janie knew they thought, *Good night, Sweetheart, we love you.* So she'd say them to herself then return in silence, *Good night, Mom. Good Night, Dad. I love you, too.*

They'd close the door gently, lovingly, patiently, continue down the hall, stumbling occasionally but never falling.

Saturday mornings, Lee and Janie would rise, clean the house – mop, dust, wash the dishes, take out the trash – and cook up scrambled eggs, toast, bacon and brewed coffee. By 11, Johannes and Nancy would find their way into the kitchen, kiss both girls on the head, thank them for cleaning and cooking, and sit down for a family breakfast. No one talked much at these Saturday morning meals.

Lee remembers them as ritualistic, kind of like a Sunday morning prayer service. Or maybe this was Lee's fabrication because in her mind that's where she believed they all needed to be those mornings, in a sacred place, praying, praying for hope because hope was not something that came naturally to Lee. She believed she needed to pray for it.

That's what she did each Saturday morning as her parents sipped their bitter coffee, nibbled on their overcooked eggs, stared out the curtained window and read the newsless weekend paper; Lee prayed over her bacon that God would grant her just one slice of hope.

Lee never remembered that last Saturday morning ritual. She would spend the next five years trying to pull out a memory of something her dad might have said that morning or something her mom might have gazed upon in her characteristically thoughtful manner, but she recalled only generic moments.

So on the following Friday night when her clock ticked past 1, past 1:15 and past 1:30, 15-year-old Lee started to search in her mind for the last Saturday morning because this was the night she'd been expecting. Seven years, 350 Friday nights later, this was the one she knew would come.

Then the knock and soon the doorbell and her sister's footsteps, a door opening, a strange man's voice, and Janie's gasps and gagging sobs. Lee knew this was it. Her parents weren't coming home. She would never again sit across the table from her father as he sipped his bitter coffee while the Saturday morning sun played quietly off the red strands of his thinning hair and his wife pushed around the cold yellow rubbery eggs on her butterfly-covered china plate and their older daughter wiped the creamy melamine countertop and Lee sat praying over her bacon for hope.

A little more than nine months later, Lee would bring home her own bundle of hope, wrapped in a tiny yellow flannel blanket with a lime green cap and a pair of eyes that stared out in wonder of this new world and the part he would play, and who he would love. And who would love him back.