

CHAPTER ONE

A man is the choices that he makes. The rest is window dressing and accidents of chance. He does not get to decide if he is destined for greatness. At best, he may have the opportunity to decide his degree of happiness. But how does one know if he has made a right choice without experiencing what the alternative would have brought? No comparison can be made without a dual existence. A man cannot follow both paths when the road presents a fork. He can only choose which life he is going to lead and which one he will abandon. In so doing he defines himself, allowing others to say 'here is the man who went this way when he might have gone another'.

With his mind's eye a man may on occasion visit his unlived life. Such moments of introspection and imagination will be undetectable time traveling. It will not be to the future that he ventures, or to the past, but to an alternate concurrent reality that never came to be. A man is what he chooses to hold on to, and what he lets slip away.

James looked upon his wife and child, both of them sound asleep and seemingly without a care. These were his choices. The two of them were his mirror. They were the decision he made to go left instead of right. Was this happiness? If so, they were its cause. Was it regret? If so, then regret was what he embraced with the totality of his being, and maybe even accepted.

He was unable to recall the exact moment he first fell in love with his wife, for he had not been sufficiently observant. Examining emotions closely creates distance

from them. Standing apart from the experience would have been required, coming at the expense of immersion. We recognize in hindsight that a miracle has transpired. As it occurs we are swept away by a preponderance of miniscule details too fleeting for analysis. This is how it had been the first time.

The second time he fell in love with her the event was not gradual, but a big bang that was impossible to miss. It was then that he made the choice giving him all he had, and banishing all that was lost.

His gaze zeroed in on their son. Loving him was inescapable. The boy was a mirror for different reasons than choices made and bridges burned and allegiances established. There was nothing complicated about the feeling. But that did not mean arrival at the present had been a simple matter. Secrets and lies first needed to be buried alive, and on that foundation, this life was established. As he watched his family in slumber, he marveled at the tranquility and fragility of the moment they inhabited. It would take little more than the ringing of a phone or knock at the door to shatter what he possessed. Or it might be weakness on his part that brought about its ruin. Rather than worrying him, this made him cherish his allotment of fortune even more. This was love, although love is also what had been lost.

Others were quick to tell James that he led a charmed life. His days had the grace of a butterfly in flight. Did a butterfly consider itself to be blessed? Was it ever wistful? If not for its earliest days as a caterpillar than perhaps for the time in between when cocooned from peril, when all was comfort and peace and security? No, a butterfly was probably smart enough to know that even if the cocoon was preferable to a less predictable world beyond, there was no

way to return. It could not fit again into what had been cast aside. Reflecting on those days would diminish the sweetness of nectar and add weight to wings that required lightness for flight. It was best to flutter into the future.

Humans, because they are subject to the whims of love, sometimes failed to grasp what butterflies understood instinctively. Not that love by its nature was especially complex. In essence it operated according to garden variety physics. Gravity dictated that falling, whether in or out of it, was the easy part. It is the consequences of love that can get tricky.

Perhaps all love stories no matter how varied were essentially the same. Accidents of fate. We search for the person put here specifically for us and play guessing games with whoever comes along. One of them will be the one that was waited for. In the midst of uncertainties this inarguable truth sustains us, even if it is not true.

How far shall we backtrack to begin this particular love story? Many places could be described as the starting line. If James was to pick a catalyst for what took place, perhaps it would be the arbitrary act of his gym closing, which led to recommendation of a new one, which in an incremental series of steps brought about what came to be.

As for its end, that was not yet written. If he remained statue still while watching the chests of his wife and son rise and fall with the breaths they took, perhaps the calm of this moment would stop the hands of clocks. But for better and for worse, time never halted. And so they were inevitably headed towards an unknown that for wondrous now lay just beyond reach.