

Lobster Clouds  
and  
Pieces of People

words by  
Michael Watson

## ten

I've never been so happy.

"I'll teach you," I tell her.

She's running behind me as fast as she can.

"Don't be afraid, Maura," I yell over my shoulder. "Don't close your eyes, or anything, just take my hand."

She flinches for a second as she drops her hand into mine. I tell her to keep running—to keep running as fast as she can as the sidewalk starts crumbling away beneath us. If we can fly, we can't be hurt, I tell her.

The end of the world is here. It's epic, like nothing anyone's ever seen.

Her hand falls into mine, and she falls *up*.

As long as we believe we can fly, we will.

The grass is falling into the same black crevasse as the sidewalk. Streetlights bend and explode all around us in some sort of D-Day fireworks exercise. Sparks and halos of light everywhere, cutting through the night. Buildings collapse into blackness.

We're flying away as fast as we can, high over everything that's left for however long it's still there—however long the world can hold on—and I've never been so happy.

And all I want to do is fall.

In San Francisco, I waited for the doors to open and the people to flood in, looking for my signature on the flap of some book written by six different people who weren't me.

In San Francisco, Maura was talking to me again.

It was no coincidence that people showed up. Welcome to the plan in full-motion action.

For example, they pass out bumper stickers in heavily populated malls. You see them coming sometimes, because they're wearing the t-shirt, too. Flyers and more stickers get stuck under windshield wipers in parking lots. Free literature, more stickers. T-shirt freebie packages.

"Street teams", they're called.

It's guerilla marketing. With all of the major media markets covered, you get *total market saturation*. Usually, street teams are made of volunteers. Fans and stuff. When you're looking to create fans, though, it doesn't hurt to build a street team. Hired fan bases.

The street teams did their thing right up until San Francisco. Actually, they never really stopped. There's a reason they call it a marketing *machine*.

In San Francisco, I got ready for Los Angeles.

In Los Angeles, I was a best-seller.

So, the gun, yeah.

Guns are beautiful things. They're raw and perfect. They're designed for one thing, and

they do just that.

They don't take "me" days. They don't leave their wife and two children for another woman. They don't break promises, and they don't max out their credit cards on premium imported crap.

It's so much easier to kill someone with a gun, because it doesn't feel like a part of you doing the killing. With a knife or a pipe or something, you get dirty. You're actually doing something, not just watching from fifteen feet away as someone's face goes all bloody and splattery.

Sometimes, I just get ahead of myself, I guess. I wished I'd had a gun then, right there sitting behind the Designated Signing Table.

In San Francisco, the doors opened and the line of people crept in, like they'd camped out for some big-budget sci-fi movie. I fed them my scribbly ink marks, and they lapped it up like thirsty puppies.

Smile, yes I'm sure things will work out for you and your wife. I hope my book helps guide you, whatever.

Smile, big teeth, now.

I'll pray for your daughter, Ma'am, of course. Every little bit helps!

We're all in this world together!

Smile!

They stood in the hot sun outside for hours, for me. For the signature of some guy they'd only get to say three sentences to, and one of them would be, "I can't wait to read your book."

By Austin, it was how much my book had changed their lives.

Crowds and single-file lines of soccer moms and Gap-clad family men, the total opposite of the people who wrote the damn thing, they lined up for hours on end for the numbered limited edition of twenty-five thousand with the silver cover and the personal message to them from the author. They baked in summer heat just to put me on their shelves.

The smell of hairspray cooking in the mid-morning sun.

Sun visors and lawn chairs.

The smell of rotisserie perfume basting sauce.

Two-dollar bottles of water to cool it all down.

The smell of desperation is SPF thirty-five.

I expected an execution-themed hotel in Houston for some reason.

Couldn't imagine why.

Check-in is always after twelve, so it pays off not to be able to sleep.

And if you've seen one hotel, you've seen them all. After the sixth or seventh one, you don't even bother looking around at all the potted plants and gold-and-marble-trimmed lobby fountains. Like watercolor paints, they all run together in one big, sloppy puddle.

At one, you're still going over the briefing packet for the next day's signing event.

Cold and clammy eyelids.

Sweaty fingers and armpits.

In the hotel in Houston, Maura watched the hallway while I let a nicely chilled bottle of red wine go down the laundry chute.

"You know, they're just going to get washed anyway," she said.

We drew chalk outlines in the street at night in Topeka, and blocked off the area with caution tape.

"Don't make this seem like more than it is," Maura said.

“Shut up and keep still,” I told her. She kept squirming, and it was making it hard to get a good outline of her body on the road.

“I’m just saying, don’t make this into some sort of message or some bullshit. People die for a reason, you know.

“Even people who don’t exist,” she finished. I’m sure she meant the outlines.

“People don’t die for reasons,” I said. “Accept that and move on. Otherwise, you’re still only just pretending things don’t make any difference.”

She said,

She said to me, “You’re saying I don’t believe that? What are you saying?”

I ran my finger over her lips and showed it to her.

“Lipstick? What the fuck is this for? Does buying this and putting it on make you a better person?”

Never mind that she didn’t *buy* it.

I said, “I don’t know what you believe.”

She sat up right as I finished the last chalk outline.

“Every time I get where I really like you, you go and fuck it all up. You’re a real winner, you know that, David?” Maura stood up and walked off toward the side of the highway.

You have to either stop caring about things, or end up being fucked by them again and again, I told her. If you can’t accept the fact that the universe doesn’t give a shit about you, why are you still alive?

Accept that you’re doomed to fate.

Accept that the universe is slowly cooling down and will die alone.

Accept that the universe is not something you can control.

You cannot change fate. You do not have this power. You are, in a word, inconsequential.

It’s the tragedy and the silver lining.

All of this noise in my head and the conversation, I’ll never know how much of it actually came out of my mouth.

“Police these days don’t use chalk because it comes off too easily. They use masking tape because it doesn’t fade away with rain and foot traffic,” I said.

“We should do anything we want, anything that’s remotely interesting, because in the end, it’s all going to shit. There aren’t any reasons or points or big, giant plans. People don’t die for a reason, they die because it’s going to happen. You can only be but so important.”

“You’re such an asshole,” she said through her whimpers.

“Let go, Maura. It isn’t going to get better, because there’s no *good*, and there’s no *bad*.”

“But—”

Walls came down in Topeka.

“I keep hoping things will get better,” she cried. “I keep hoping it won’t hurt like this forever.”

Fuck subjectivity, I guess. Maura was a light switch, back and forth, off and on, yes and no, things matter, things don’t matter, blah blah blah. It got really annoying sometimes.

I stared her down and said, “If you let go, it won’t hurt anymore.”

Give up and be saved.

Because there’s no good or bad, just doomed and saved.

Hope, I said to her, hope is something you have to let go to make room for more important things.

Understanding.

Inner peace.

Love, yeah, if you're into that sort of thing.

Illumination.

Edification.

This is cosmic dissonance, and you're a part of it, I said. Nothing makes sense, nothing agrees, nothing lives forever.

We're both dying, just like our fake murder victims on the street died, just like train wreck passengers die.

Just like prisoners executed by the state die.

Here's your sense of inner peace.

Just like your mother died, I said.

Accept it and nothing, not even yourself, can hurt you.

You have to discard what you believe to make room for the truth.

Self-affirming karma.

Finely tuned chi.

Paint-by-the-numbers feng shui.

Affirmations of faith and devotion.

Garbage-disposal it all. Make room for the knowledge that it's not the insignificant things that don't matter, it's *everything* that doesn't matter.

"Are you saying you don't love me, David?" Sniffle.

No, I'm saying that if I didn't, it wouldn't matter. I told her to close her eyes.

"Go ahead, close them."

They shivered and shuddered, but Maura closed them.

I said, "Imagine everything you can see is the whole world, the entire universe. What does it look like?"

Well, nothing, of course.

"Good, that's all there is, then. I'm not real, the highway isn't real, maybe nothing's real," I told her.

If you can't see it, it may as well not exist.

The Sunday afternoon solipsism value pack.

"You can't even prove anything exists at all, because once you close your eyes, it's all gone. You look away, and it's not there anymore. Memories of your childhood, recollections of old lovers, there's no way to know what's real and what isn't, anymore." I talked like I could prove *she* existed.

Every time I stopped for punctuation, I clapped my hands together.

Accept.

Your.

Place.

In.

The.

Universe.

Sniffle.

Maura shook a little bit and said, "So where does that leave us?"

"Right here, in one single moment, with no before and no after," I said back. "The world ends when you do, Maura. I can't save you if you won't let me.

"I'm just trying to help."

I went back to tying the caution tape across the highway as Maura collapsed and sat limp on the grass.

In Salt Lake City, there was the surprise escape of several endangered cotton-top tamarins from the Hogle Zoo.

The biggest line yet was in Salt Lake. It was more like a roadblock of people rather than a line, really. A woman who showed up had me sign her interstate-mega-jackpot lottery ticket instead of her copy of my book.

“Bring me luck!” she said.

Lottery tickets. Hope, at a dollar a play.

But I guess that’s why I was there. Because of the hope, I mean.

Maura and I had come up with a new game by then. Well, not so much a *game*, as an experiment in instructional cacophony.

We played it in every city.

I’d be signing some first edition—by Albuquerque, we were in our second printing—for some woman, and suddenly I’d feel a tap on my knee.

“I won’t sign your book, Ma’am,” I’d say.

But she came all this way—

“I’m going to give you a better gift. I want you to take this book and give it away when you leave here. Each day, you’re going to wake up and give up one thing in your life that you can’t live without. It could be bridge with your friends, it could be your coffee table, it could be your split-level house. But you’re going to give it up.

“Don’t stop until you feel like you’re a better person. If you feel waves of joy and enlightenment, you haven’t given up enough,” I said.

I should be a motivational speaker.

Look at me, I’m inspirational!

I’m the answer to the question everyone’s asking.

A little enlightened magic eight-ball.

I’m anti-corporate dogma in a convenient leather carrying case.

I’m shrink-wrapped independent thoughts and ideals.

Look at me, I’m the answer to the world’s problems.

“You are not going to eat for a week. Starve yourself.” He just stared at me, expressionless, waiting for my next word. This was the guy in Fort Worth, with the five-gallon hat.

Cherry pulled Maura aside after she heard that.

“You’d better tell your boyfriend to stop this shit,” Cherry said. “Or there won’t be any more cities or bookstores to visit. I have every talk show on the planet on their knees and ready to swallow every sticky little drop of his, just to book him.

“But only if he doesn’t screw it up. If he fucks this up, I’ll make sure he’s fuckin’ beyond ruined. I’m talking Stonehenge, here. There won’t be anything left of him left standing when I get done with him. And the same goes for you, so at least think about saving *your ass*.” Cherry made no bones, ran around no bushes.

The world was simply waiting for her instruction.

“I don’t control him,” Maura said.

They looked back at me.

“At the end of this chosen week, you will be a better person. You will know what children in third-world countries go through every minute of every day. You will thank trade embar-

goes and greedy capitalist corporations for starving entire mud-hole countries to death, because you will have learned to appreciate the suffering of others.”

“Start. No more second chances,” Cherry sneered back.

“I can try,” he said to me in that Texan Judeo-Christian drawl.

“Trying isn’t good enough. Make it happen,” I replied.

You can do it. You have it inside you.

The light, I mean.

That changes the world.

I’m unfiltered clarity of sight.

That changes the world.

“You are going to feel better about your life if you do this right,” I said to him.

“Life,” as Maura would say, “is God waiting for you to redeem yourself.”

I’ve heard that somewhere before.

*Coping With The Shadow* was a support group for people afflicted with terminal brain cancer.

It was in Nashville.

The group closed without an announcement, just a flyer posted on a bulletin board in the basement of Saint Augustine’s.

It’s gone.

And no one remembered it.

The group had never been there. No one ever came to meet there, no one stopped showing up after their cancer cells metastasized and smothered their brain stem.

Maura and I closed it without it ever opening in the first place.

But people started remembering it, and lobbied for the church to sponsor it again, and they did, and it came back.

Makes you wonder what memories are true, if any at all.

*Learning To Live* met twice a week for ten years. Amputees met there to discuss their injuries and support each other in times of pain.

It never really existed, either. The people at Saint Matthias’ didn’t have a clue.

All in all, twenty support groups no one had ever heard of closed that week. Every single one of them came back from the dead. Clergy members apologized sincerely for the rash of sudden closures.

These people, they had nowhere to go, and suddenly needed to go somewhere.

Oklahoma City, Greensboro, Atlanta.

Washington, D.C.

Baltimore.

Groups closed in every city after Nashville, and all the cities just slurred together, like some stroke victim’s speech that’s been fucked up by a lack of blood to their frontal lobe.

Boston.

Hartford.

You visit a lot of cities when you’re being chased by a giant marketing ogre.

In any given major metropolitan city, there are any number of state-run hospitals. Most of the time, they’re overrun, crowded, and chaotic. Those are the ones you look for.

You visit a lot of cities, and you’ll eventually find the right one.

You look for the ones with overflowing ambulance bays. Med students running around with their heads up their asses.

You look for nursing stations that are piled high with charts and history folders.

Go on crowded nights—major holidays are the best times—and never leave through the same place you came in.

We're all invisible.

As long as you don't pass the same place over and over, you go pretty much unnoticed. A set of scrubs helps. Ditto any other accessories you can cop from a laundry room or doctor's lounge. Some larger E.R.s keep spare stethoscopes in trauma rooms or equipment closets.

You're from Radiology if no one recognizes you.

Or you're a med student from OB.

Let me tell you something about cycles.

The med lockers are always locked, sealed in glass. Anything that's worthwhile is inside.

Haldols. The tablet Tylenols with codeine in them.

A ten-dollar glass cutter gets through the thin glass without flinching. Some hospitals use that chickenwire glass stuff, where they sandwich wire between two thin panes of glass. Unless you're brave enough to carry wire cutters, just keep moving.

If you have the balls to throw the fire alarm—

Hello, Maura—

You can just take a pry bar with you under a lab coat and break the lock.

This is how I fed the monkey.

I mean, I got whatever I needed from Cherry's doctor, a nice man indeed, but the point of this was the rush. Dirty, sick, and wrong. Maura even followed me, usually.

It needed to feel bad to feel good.

If you can feel worse than you did before, feeling like you did before feels pretty good. If you can't get to zero, move the zero mark.

She'd stand outside and wait, ready to run as soon as the warden found out there was an escape and the search lights went up and the guards started firing from their towers.

In another lesson of the universe, nothing lasts forever.

In Baltimore, Maura tossed her cigarette on the ground and we left without anyone noticing.

"Since when did you smoke?" I asked.

"I thought I might want to try cancer for a change," she said.

Fair enough.

"And you think that'll get you somewhere?"

"Better than doing nothing," I heard back.

Fair enough.

"You know, sometimes, you really impress me," I said. Kiss.

"Whatever. I hope your pills make you happy, David," Maura replied.

A beat.

"I wish I could."

Could what?

"Make you happy."

But I just kissed you.

"A kiss isn't happiness. A kiss is just sex you can have in public, or at Christmas dinner with your family. A kiss is meaningless unless you love the person." Cavities in my back teeth.

So now, what, I need love, too?

I guess I did, yeah.

Fair enough.

