

Excerpt:

1. Quantum Meeting

Day 787. I sponge Mom's stringy arms and pronate her elbows. Suction saliva from her white gums, careful not to disturb the *psst-psst* of the breathing tube. I attach cotton-ball-size muscle-stimulation pads, all forty of them, to her biceps and triceps, her deltoids and extensors, her flexors and hamstrings. As the pads pulse against muscle atrophy, I crayon Chapstick on her lips, rub cream down her pointed nose and waxen cheek skin, brush her dark hair splayed over the starched pillow. I leave the waste bags for the nurses but check the connections out of habit — the tubes to the catheter and colostomy bag, the one to her nutrients. Then I sit, holding her hand, pretending to talk to her for the sake of passersby, even though I know she's not listening. Not even in the room.

Her body is an empty vessel. A coat on a hanger waiting for her arms to slip in. A mollusk on the beach, abandoned by its host. An empty carton of milk I'm here to make sure they don't throw out.

Because when I find her — and bring her back — she will need her container.

They've told me it's dangerous to think this way. Psychologically damaging, Aunt Margaret has claimed. A byproduct of grief, the therapists have said. Denial is a natural defense mechanism, Dr. Horn has counseled. "But we can't ignore the reality of what the scans tell us."

He means the X-rays of Mom's gray folded matter. The regions of her brain that still incite spontaneous reflexes — causing her arm to jerk here, her leg to twitch there. "All seemingly normal manifestations of brainstem function," he's told me repeatedly. "But should not be confused with actual brainstem function. Without which she has little chance of waking up."

I can't fault him for thinking this way. The guy's a neurologist — his business is brains.

But I know there has to be more to us than our bodies and brains.

Call it what you want — a consciousness, a soul, a spirit, a light being. It's the thing countless comatose patients swear gave them the ability to live whole other lives while on respirators. The thing that philosophers and spiritualists spent their lives writing about. The thing that makes us who we are. And maybe even *fuels* the brainstem.

And Mom's brainstem went missing two years ago the moment she crashed her car.

An accident, Aunt Margaret had said on the phone. Black ice. A telephone pole. Coming to pick up you up in five. . . .

I flew down the stairs of our apartment and rushed into intensive care, still in my red plaid pajama bottoms, dried toothpaste stuck to my cheek. Mom lay behind a wall of glass, and I

heard fragments: Her chest had banged into the steering wheel. Glass shards had lodged in her cheeks. *She's lucky to have made it out alive.*

But define "alive."

For a week, I watched machines automate her breathing, feed her, monitor her. I felt numbed, stunned, dazed. Most of all, empty. Like something in my chest cavity had gone missing, its hollowness threatening to suck my heart and lungs deeper inward.

I thought it was coming from me.

Then one night, following Dr. Horn's delivery of yet another brain spiel — this one replete with pictures of axon and dendrites that looked like tree branches — they let us through the glass wall.

I plunked into the pink pleather chair and held Mom's limp hand in mine; ran my thumb over her beige polish, chipped from washing beer glasses at Sharkie's Bar and Grill. The emptiness opened like a black hole, and I yearned for my best-friend sister-like Mom, just 17 years older than me. The woman who wore my jeans and tried on my life, from basketball tryouts to friendship blips. The woman who let me inhabit her dreams of traveling the world.

"How much tragedy can one family take?" Grandma Eloise was saying. "First, I lose one daughter, and now another?"

"I know, Mom, I know." Aunt Margaret sniffled.

They were speaking of Grandma Eloise's oldest daughter, who had died as a teenager — Mom's oldest sister. And I had sat there, unsure of what to say. Not only because there seemed to be some kind of dark cloud hanging over us, but because they barely noticed I was in the room.

So, when they decided to go to the cafeteria, I said, "I'll stay here, then."

Aunt Margaret turned, her yellow, roller-set waves bouncing like in a retro TV commercial. "Jett, I'm sorry. Did you want to come with us?"

"It's OK. I'm good," I said, because I knew they were just trying to salve their own pain, even though you couldn't have paid me a million dollars to eat a bite of food in that moment.

So off they went, leaving me and Mom and my emptiness, and because everything felt so empty, I climbed into bed with Mom, spooned to her side — admittedly feeling sorry for myself in this new orphaned state — and blubbered away into her bony shoulder.

Her respirator lulled me into a sleepy state, and my mind drifted, thinking about her running off as a teenager at 17 — just a year older than me now — to marry a guy outside the enclave of this small town. Then *that* got me thinking about my dad, the man I barely got to know, but whose hands for some reason I could see peeking out from his electrician's coveralls: coppery skin freckled like mine with wispy red hair, as he meticulously spliced the wire of a lamp cord.

Cut before the damage. Splice by twisting. See his hand twisting a lightbulb in, electricity zipping through its filament. *We can travel as fast as this . . . in our sleep. . . . We can meet in Hawaii, where the sand is black, and the rocks are as large as grapefruits.*

I must have drifted off then, Mom's empty container against mine, the respirator wheezing rhythmically, everything hazy and meshing and sucking me under.

Just think of where you want to go, my dad said, still coming to me in snapshots. His freckled hands on a tabletop. Suntanned face. Fiery hair. A woman beside him laid down cards splattered with ink. Palm trees swayed outside, and contentment purred in my chest like a vibration.

Deeper and deeper I drifted under, as darkness surrounded my eyelids and tunneled around me, churning into a black liquid — the way dreams work — until it ended in a circle of purple-blue light large enough to fit through.

I poked my head through and found the air was watery, indigo-colored, and pocked with millions of crystalline white stars. I wanted to climb through the hole and swim out into the starry space. But when I looked up, I saw rectangles hanging in the sky.

They were outlined in what looked like glitter — the kind I recognized from my childhood drawings, when I'd outlined geometric shapes with glue and glitter and blown the excess off. And inside were movielike images:

Palm trees in one.

The stairwell to Mom's and my old apartment in the other.

Where do you want to go? My father's voice sounded again, only this time my chest tightened and pulled, as though there was a rope attached to the center, and I suddenly got scared feeling . . . wondering . . . *knowing*. . . .

This wasn't a dream.

I was somewhere outside of myself.

Definitely not in my body.

And Mom . . . she wasn't in bed at the hospital. She was behind that rectangle . . . that *door*.

I could sense her, alert and awake, black hair not splayed on a pillow, but tucked behind her ears and parted down the middle, revealing a white line of scalp; cheeks not waxen and pale, but flushed from moving around the kitchen . . . pulling me to her.

But because it all felt so real, and because I didn't know what would happen if I did dive through that hole, I jerked my head back. And the next thing I knew, I was yanked backwards and my whole body stung as though I were a human rubber band snapping back.

Just in time to find Aunt Margaret back from the cafeteria, shaking my shoulders.

“Jett, Jett, wake up,” she called.

“Should I call someone?” Grandma Eloise asked.

My eyes popped open, and they gasped.

“You scared us, you were in such a deep sleep,” Aunt Margaret scolded. “You’re not supposed to be in bed with her.”

“I went to find her,” I tried to explain. “Mom isn’t here. . . .”

“What? Nonsense.” Aunt Margaret said. “You were having a bad dream.”

“Honey, we are all under tremendous stress,” Grandma Eloise said.

“But there are doorways up there,” I insisted. “We have to find her and bring her back. . . . Look, there’s no one inside.”

“Honey, we don’t know what you are saying,” Grandma Eloise said.

“Jett, this is hard enough on all of us.” Aunt Margaret’s tone steeled.

My mistake, I’ve come to realize, was continuing to insist, back at Aunt Margaret’s, and for months afterward, describing all I could remember, and lugging home research and stories from the library about people leaving their bodies: about the idea that a person could ostensibly be in two separate places at once.

“That is absolutely enough. I will not have that kind of nonsense talk in my house,” Aunt Margaret snapped finally, and the next thing I knew I was seeing Dr. Karr, a grief counselor, and being asked to review more charts from Dr. Horn. And when a year later, I still wouldn’t relent about the purple hole and the doorway to Mom, and the fact that anyone can *tell* she is simply not in this room, the grief counselor suggested medications, and eventually whispered to Aunt Margaret terms like “grief delusions” and “detached from reality.” This led me to understand two things:

Not only can I not convince people to open their minds, as a minor in the State of New Jersey, 10 minutes from the state’s largest psych ward, I need to watch it, or I might never find Mom.

Excerpt #2

Quantum Club Meeting. 2:30. Cafeteria.

“I didn’t know the school had a Quantum Club,” says a girl passing by. Popular. A junior, in black Lululemon leggings.

“What the hell’s ‘quantum’?” a familiar voice says. “Oh . . . that explains it.” I turn to see my cousin Meghan looking in my direction. Hair highlighted blond. Glossy pink lips. We are nearly the same age, and worlds apart.

“Don’t know and don’t care,” a beefy senior guy says. “Let’s go eat.”

“Oh, Matty, all you care about is food.” Meghan giggles as they continue walking.

Truthfully, I don’t know what quantum is either, but a quick Google search gives me the answer:

The study of physics that allows for particles to be in two states at the same time.

“That’s weird,” I say out loud to no one.

I head for the cafeteria, intrigued...

There are three people seated in the sea-foam-green cabbage-smelling room. No surprise Mickey Mizner and Brian Leonard are two of them.

“My problem is I’ve got everything prepped for ampage past 27MHz,” Mickey says, blowing dark bangs off square-framed glasses. “I just need to hit ionosphere at the right angle—” He taps a black box on the table, the size of a breadbox, with knobs and buttons. From here, I make out the words *Galaxy Torchlighter 825*.

“—Sweet, isn’t she?”

“Sweet and illegal to jack up,” Brian replies.

The new guy swigs from an Orangina and scribbles in his notebook, his white braided bracelets scratching against the Formica tabletop. He’s wearing an MIT sweatshirt, and peeking out from the neckline is a black rope necklace. At the ends of his hair, gold beads catch the fluorescent light.

“It’s not a bad start,” he says, looking up and taking a swig of orange soda. “But can you get someone on the other end of the world to receive the signal? The antipode must be, what, Australia?”

“That’s what I told you,” Brian says. He’s wearing a uniform from the ice cream store Sunset Scoops: a brown wavy smock made to resemble dripping hot fudge, and a maraschino cherry hat.

“Wait, the *what* is Australia?” Mickey asks.

“It means ‘opposite,’ ” I say, reaching the table. “Geographically, right?”

The new guy grins at me, his eyes twinkling with approval. And I’m not going to lie: I can’t help but grin back. I slide into the end seat.

“Farold,” he says.

“Jett.”

“Well, now that we got that out of the way,” Brian cuts in. “I’m thinking Electromagnetic Induction. The hypothesis is that a current can create a magnetic field.”

“Also not bad.” Farold scribbles again and glances up. “But you’d have to check if it’s already been done.” He has a singsong quality to his words. I like the way “realize” is “real’izze.”

Mickey shoulders Brian. “That’s what I told you.” He turns to Farold. “Anyway, if I find someone across the world, in an *antipode*” — he glances to me — “think it’s worth seeing if my radio’s skip is capable?”

Brian shoves back. “Mine may be done, but there’s nothing yet on what can and cannot escape the said magnetic field. . . .”

“They’re both solid starts.” Farold draws his fist to rest beneath his sculpted jaw line, looking suddenly like the art room’s knockoff sculpture of Michelangelo’s “The Thinker.” “But since this is going to be a competition for MIT, the best science institution in the country, we’ll have to shoot beyond the rudimentary. . . . Any other ideas?”

Three faces turn to me. One cute as hell. But I’m here to listen. Besides, I can’t take the rejection again.

“Every idea has merit,” Farold says.

“He’s dope, Jett,” Mickey says, which coming from him sounds anything but dope.

“If she doesn’t have any ideas . . .” Brian says.

“I don’t . . . I mean, I thought . . . I don’t know, maybe we were going to talk about quantum physics or whatever, not enter a competition.”

“You study quantum physics?” Farold asks.

“No . . . but it sounds interesting.”

“Which part?”

I could feel defensive, but there’s something about the way he asks, earnestly, and the way he looks at me, so open and curious. “I . . . guess . . . I liked what your flier said. It made me think. Wonder, really. Something I’ve been thinking about. The idea of things being in two separate places at the same time?”

He smiles again, right through me, sending a tingle along my neck. “I’m actually working on something that poses that exact question. But it’s hard to prove. I mean, so far, no one has . . . supported it.”

"I hear that."

"I had a feeling you might."

"How would you have a feeling about that?"

"Your hesitation." Our eyes affix. Is it my imagination or is there something palpable between us?

"Tell me your idea," he says.

"Tell me yours."

"You guys know we're in the room, right?" Brian says.

Farold turns to him. "Two particles in separate boxes."

"Following," Mickey says.

He waves his hand, drawing us all in. "It's proven they can communicate with one another and influence each other's physical spin. Well, I propose they relate to one another in a nonscientific way. In a way we can't really yet name. That they can speak to one another . . . by sensing one another."

His eyes meet mine, alight, full of possibility. "Your turn."

And like that, I find myself blurting the story I promised I'd stop telling people:

"There was an accident. . . . I could tell my mother wasn't there. . . . And then this thing happened at the hospital. . . . But I've tried everything and can't get back. . . ."

"What have you tried?" Farold asks.

"You name it. Re-creating the events. Dreaming and setting an alarm. I've tried something called the rope technique, and the ladder technique. Also, rolling out, driving out, rotating, and yo-yo'ing, which is basically trying to climb, drive, or shimmy out of my body. I've tried the point-shift method and the picture technique, in which I'm supposed to envision myself hovering at the ceiling, looking down at my bed. I've even sent away for this—"

I pluck the envelope from my bag and tear it open.

That's when Mickey and Brian call it a day.

"Next Thursday?" Mickey asks, gathering his CB radio.

"Yeah, I gotta split too," Brian adds. "You're awesome, man. . . . Uh, good luck, Jett." Brian tips his ice cream cone hat and exits the cafeteria, leaving me alone with Farold, my heart sinking at the sight of the DVD on the table between us.

It's not the cheesy clouds against sky on the circular sticker adhered to the DVD that rushes blood to my cheeks, but the airbrushed, ethereal angel flying through those clouds.

At \$39.99, this cost me more than four hours of librarian work. Why did I think this was a good idea to share — or buy?

Farold slides the disc into his laptop, turning the device for both of us to see. Even the digital quality is pathetic. Two women wearing flowing garb and seeming to float on a cloud discuss how they came to learn under the tutelage of the Dr. Reflexology guy, the art of soul travel by aligning their chakras — what they can help me do for the next hour. Though if I want to learn the nine secrets to launching myself, I will need to send away for the DVD package. For a mere \$69.99 more.

I want to crawl under the table.

"I didn't know it would be this—"

"—cheapjack."

"What's that?"

"It's what we say in Trinidad. Or in English, 'cringe-y.' "

And that's my cue.

I stand, slinging my backpack on, and extend my palm for the DVD, even knowing as pathetic as it is, I am going to watch it — a thought that makes my cheeks even hotter. Because that's how desperate I've become, and I hate myself for it. "Anyway . . . if you can just keep everything I said earlier to yourself."

He pops out the DVD and walks around the table to stand before me, a foot taller. "What happens in Quantum Club stays in Quantum Club." He edges close enough for me to smell a delicious vanilla scent wafting from his sweatshirt, to feel those tingles again, and to see in his pupils gold flecks that look like stars.

"Could be a multiverse, you know. That Indigo place?" His hand grazes my wrist as he places the plastic disc back in my palm. "Alternate realities are always taking place. The name for it in quantum mechanics is the Many Interacting Worlds."

Prickles down my neck. "Are you saying . . . you believe me?"

"There are no absolute proofs in quantum theory. It's about what we can measure, and to what precision." He seems to have an idea, darts back to his notebook, and scribbles.

"We're going to need to know what's been documented on the theory so far, and under what conditions." More scribbling. "Oh, and what laws govern these . . . phenomena. So . . . maybe that's not a total waste?" He nods to the DVD.

I place it on the table, suppressing tears, and take a seat.