

## CHAPTER ONE: ON THE ROAD

We had barely broken in our uniforms for Dusty's Pizza. The five of us were the new recruits. It was as if each of us had been dropped by parachute on Atlanta with a mission. We were supposed to forget our past, learn everything we could about the city map, and calibrate our bodies to the delivery guarantee. "Thirty minute, or it's free." Some of the veterans were already way over the top. They had convinced themselves that they could make a hundred grand a year if they just drove fast enough and beat the other drivers out of as many deliveries as they could. For the time being their times were awesome. They'd be out there with forty pies to our ten. We weren't even in the game. Jimmy had convinced himself that he was going to graduate to the upper echelons as soon as possible.

"If this is all a bachelor's degree has to promise me, I'm going to get something for the experience." A couple of days later, he and I were racing at ninety miles an hour trying to get back to the store. We were crazy!

Brent thought that this life was a lot less than he had expected when he moved to the big city from Florida.

"I'm not going to be here long. I miss my girl."

"What happened?"

"It was over. So I moved up here."

"Tough break!"

I tried to seem sympathetic. It only added to our common sense of desperation. As we talked, a bus of yuppies drove by with revelers for the Buckhead bar scene.

"Get a real job!" one of the partygoers yelled at us.

"This is as real as it gets," Brent yelled back. He was ready to throw down then and there.

"I miss, Honey," he repeated to me a little later.

"I'm sure that you do."

"Do you want to see a picture of her?"

Oh what the hell! I was willing to oblige. He handed me her picture. It was lodged in his wallet. She was naked from the waste up. Her breasts stared at me.

"She has great tits!"

I was sure that she realized that he'd be showing this shot to his buddies for years. What was I supposed to say? I felt like some kind of creeper participating in a peep show. I was waiting for him to ask me for money.

"Wow!"

"I love breasts!"

I was hoping that a delivery call would break up our conversation. I was silent for a minute or so. I didn't want to let on my disapproval. Honey had bared a lot of her soul in posing for the picture. I couldn't very well insult her best intentions. At that moment, Brent just seemed a little sad. This was his main memory from years with the poor girl.

I wanted to ask if she had found a more suitable lover. But I could imagine her teasing the next sucker by posing for a similar picture.

"I've never done this kind of thing in my life."

"You can trust me. I'll never show it to anyone else. This is for those moments when we are apart."

True love knows no limits.

After I worked at Dusty's for a while, I wondered if I had been visited by some mythic curse because I had set my eyes on the Medusa Honey. This ill-fate had touched Brent from the moment that he had snapped the ill-timed picture. And the rest of us were equally damned for his actions. It didn't help that I was cradling a pie in my hands as I waited for one of the girls at a Roswell Road massage parlor to come out and pay me.

The bouncer looked down at me in shame.

"She'll be right out. What kind is it?"

I was distracted. His words brought me back to the real world.

"Pepperoni and mushrooms!"

"I'd love some of that."

I could see him downing the whole pie in a mouthful.

Tammy came out in heels and a negligee. I felt a little weird about making eye contact. "You should stop by for a visit sometime. It gets a little lonely here."

This was part of the great opportunity that Atlanta had to offer girls like Tammy. Just out of high school, they made a beeline along I-20 to hot spots like this. She gave me a nice tip.

"Remember what I said: stop on by!"

I wasn't sure if she wanted me to be a paying customer. Nick watched begrudgingly as I walked off. Maybe she wasn't going to share her pie with him.

As I hauled ass out the parking lot I noticed a sign in my rear view. I looked back to see what it said: "FORTUNES TO GO!" It seemed like the perfect complement to the pizza guy.

I started to think about Tammy. She couldn't be much older than nineteen. But she was becoming a year away from ninety years old. She had come to Atlanta from Alabama with dreams of an opportunity. Now she was performing every night. I couldn't imagine what kind of guy would waste his money on a perverse fantasy. I knew how she was good at making guys feel special. But it was only making her hard.

There was nothing that I could do to rescue her. She wasn't in for that. That was all part of her theater. Loads of men felt that they could give her what she wanted. And then there were the others who thought that they could beat the wickedness out of her.

I didn't want to believe that my writing was getting the best of me. Here I was setting up this scenario with Tammy. I was an elite customer for her final fantasy.

The fortune telling place did intrigue me. How could they ever do fortunes to go? I wondered if I could call ahead my order.

It took about a week before I followed up on my initial interest. When I entered the place, the subdued red light made me feel as if I was back at the massage parlor. To top it off, the attendant gave off all the mannerisms of a hospital admitting room. She had that same habitual cheer.

"How do you do this fortune-to-go?"

"First, you pay your fifty dollars."

"Do you take credit cards?"

She nodded, "You place your hand down on the screen. Then the computer scans your palm. And it prints out your fortune."

"That is pretty wild. Does it work?"

“They say that it is more accurate than any palm reader.”

“You’re telling me that this is scientific.”

I guess I wanted her reassurances.

“How much is it again?”

“There’s a fifty dollar charge for a reading.”

“Do the readings change?”

“The cosmos is in flux. You have to be aware of the radiation changes.”

“Sounds intriguing!”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to spend my cash for a reading. But I was curious.

“How about a pizza for a reading?”

Her eyes lit up, “Maybe we could make some kind of deal.”

When I got back to Dusty’s, there were a couple of pizzas that were ready for delivery. Brad needed to give me some added instructions.

“I want you to bring this pizza to Kate Longley. She’s upset as hell. Just broke up with her lover. She’s lonely. She wants a man. I’ve been on the phone with her for a half an hour. All while you were out delivering. You need to give her special attention. Special!”

She met me in a terry cloth robe. She was pathetic. She could barely talk above the whimpering. She was a lot worse than Brad let on.

“What can I do?”

“You can love me!”

“I need you to pay me for the pizza.”

“I don’t know where my wallet is.”

Her robe kept coming open. Her body was such an immediate distraction. She climbed into bed as her robe seemed to fall off her.

“Have you found my wallet?”

“It should be somewhere here.”

Her left breast was exposed. I covered it with the robe. I was trying to figure out what I was supposed to do. There was a mixture of heavy perfume and alcohol in the air. I felt a sense of total helplessness. She was licking my hand.

“I should go.”

“Stay and make me feel better.”

She started to pull down the covers.

“I should find that wallet.

I was on all fours looking under the bed.

“Do you like what you see?”

For a long while, I stayed down there not doing a thing.

“Do you like my body?”

“You have a lovely body.

“Don’t lie. He hated my body.”

“He sounds like a cruel man.”

“He was monstrous. But he left me. I wanted to leave him. But he left me.”

“Mam, what do you want me to do with the pizza.”

“Leave it in the kitchen.”

I took it out of the bag and put it in the kitchen.

“Do you like me?”

I wanted to tell her that I didn’t even know her, “You’re beautiful.”

She pulled down the covers more, “If we were together, you’d sleep with me.”

“Sure enough, man.”

“What about if you slept with me, would that mean that we were together.”

“I’m not sure.”

She pulled at my hands.

“Come to bed with me.”

Her robe fell completely. It seemed as if it would be so easy.

“I should go. I’ve got the money. I should go.”

I thought that Brad had given me permission to comfort her. He quizzed me when I got back.

“Was she upset?”

“Very upset. She pulled me over to her bed. She was naked. I could see her breasts.”

“Did you sleep with her?”

“Of course not. I had other deliveries, and I had to get back.”

“I am going over there later. I talked with her after you left her place.”

What kind of people were we? We were taking advantage of her. If not him, it would have been me.

After work, I was treating myself to a snack of apple juice and pistachios. As I sat by my desk, discarded shells accumulated on the surface and on the floor. I had my fill. I sat there and stared into space. I was supposed to get writing. I had nothing to say. I was full of a general sense of contentment. But I could hardly motivate myself to do a thing.

Another day, I might have passed out after a beer or two. This was different. Why had I stopped myself in my tracks? I surely had a story or two to tell.

Most of the nuts had been eaten. This was my story for the night. I couldn’t drag anyone else into my morass. It wasn’t as if I hated things. Not at all. But this was my life. It wasn’t as if I had got dumped. Or I had left some kind of criminal activity in Montana. Things were what they were for me and for so many others.

Some of us pretended. We’d spend time with someone that we met on a delivery or in a grocery store. But that hardly was enough to make a real difference. The next day, my car was still full of pizzas, and I was still making deliveries. This was no road to a secure life.

Tomorrow I would change my routine. I would go to work at five. I would go grocery shopping early in the day. But nothing would really change. I’d start the day with new hopes. I’d smile at the woman in the book store. But we had little in common. She liked most of the books in here. Self-help books and books about your cat. Books about some obscure legal point. Books about ways to get rid of a barking dog.

I could ask her to dinner. I’d tell her about my novel, and she’d make horrid little faces.

“Why would you do that to your characters?”

“Because they’re all psycho like me.”

She’d excuse herself, and I’d never see her again. She’d move to a small town. And I would again be alone.

“Were you the one who frightened away the girl from the bookstore?”

I’d answer in a proper tone, “That would be I.”

Of course I would. I had no character.

Why would I see a fortune teller? How could I really have a fortune? Nothing ever happened to me. I could get a pet. A cat would be nice. I’d love a luxurious Siamese. Who would look after the cat when I wasn’t here. This was too much to think about. Skip the cat for now.

I cleaned up the nut shells. That made me feel industrious. I was getting things done. I took the trash out. Everyone in the complex was already asleep.

I didn’t have a television. I knew that if I had a TV that I would spend my spare time watching it. I’d come home after work ready to write, and I would fall asleep with the TV on. I wasn’t like this in college. There was meaning to my life. Somehow I had become distracted.

I had planned for moments like this. This was a time of ideal introspection. It wasn’t as if I was frightened by myself. However, except the fact that I wanted to be a writer, there was little in my life. Give me someone to watch, and I would come alive. But left alone, I only felt hopeless. Other people like me would beg to extra work. There were afraid of those quiet times. And the world had a way of snapping back and knocking us down.

I thought about my encounter with Kate Longley. She had had a good life. A successful lover. Plans for a family. And now she was falling over some random pizza guy. And Brad was willing to play that part until the end. I was getting my bearings back. I had let my fatigue take over. I shook it off and got ready for bed. Things would look brighter in the morning.

The next evening, I had sort of got lost on one of my last runs before going back to the store for more. I rushed to the door. I thought the customer was going to be pissed. Instead, he had a great smile on his face.

“Chill dude. Come on in and rest a bit, How about a beer?”

I seemed a little frantic, “I’ve got goto to get back to the shop.”

“Call ‘em up and tell ‘em that you needed a tow.”

“I really shouldn’t.”

“You need to live!”

Brad asked if I had any more pies to deliver.

“I’m a go.”

“We’ll cover for you. I’ll just check you out early.”

“Thanks man, I’ll make it up to you.”

I guess that I had covered him with Kate. So he was getting me back.

“Have a piece of pizza, too. My name’s Phil”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

I settled back in an easy chair with a beer and a slice.

“Let me jack the tunes.”

“This is the life. What do you do Phil?”

“I’m in advertising. Just started.”

“Good stuff.”

“It’s a living.”

“How long have you been in Atlanta?”

“Just moved here from Philadelphia. I like the weather. Although it is really humid.”

“Sure is. It can never decide if it wants to rain.”

“Do you get a lot of deliveries in the rain?”

“Hell yeah! Noone wants to go out.”

I always figured that I was working for someone else. But I had made time happen on my own. It was totally my life.

“Did you lose a lot of money by not going back?”

“A little. I can make it up tomorrow. It was a pretty dead night. There wasn’t that much left. I got out of closing. That way I don’t have to clean up the shit hole. Then it takes forever to get out of there. Sometimes it’s just too damn late to go anywhere else. You have all that stress from the shitty day. And you just have to head on home.”

“I think that’s just too much for me to deal with.

“You ain’t the only one. So do you ever get caught like that.

“I got to be in pretty early. So when I get held up past six, that is a bitch. We’ve had some accounts where we had to work all night. I mean work all night, and then keep going to next morning.”

“That doesn’t seem worth it.”

“I have no choice. I’m new. Have another beer. Take another slice.”

“I don’t want to eat all your pizza. I get it all the time.”

“I ordered a large. My bud was supposed to show up. And his girl ended up making him do some godforsaken thing. So here I am with pizza and beer. You bailed me out.”

Phil had helped pull me out of a downhill routine. He reminded me of a world outside of Dusty’s Pizza. Even though I had enjoyed myself hanging out with him, I still had a weird sense of guilt. I was like the Girl Scout who had eaten all her cookies. Before my misdeed, I had been on the top of the world. Now, I would have to figure out what to do about my lost inventory.

The Renaissance master sat with his subject for hours. He didn’t even touch his charcoal. With his eyes, he worked to contour the intersection of the lines. He constantly revised his image. He was tracking the path to the soul.

I had no such luxury. I glanced over and there she was. I was in a well-lit grocery store. She was looking at Easter candy and smiling. I did what I could to attract her attention. But I did not want to disturb the moment. She wore a short yellow knit skirt to match the occasion.

There was a soft quality to her features. She was on to something, a way of seeing. There was a gentleness in her presence. Then she disappeared down one of the aisles. Soup. A minute later, we were again in proximity. This was my only path to the produce department. As I walked passed her, I was impressed by a nonchalance of her pose. This was not the runway patter. She took grace for granted. She was after something more deliberate.

As I looked back I noticed her tugging on her boots.

It was midday. There was nothing misplaced in her intention. She wasn’t hurried to make her purchase. She didn’t need to apologize about the events of the night previous. She hardly made mistakes of judgement. It was not because she was steadfast or extremely remarkable in her actions. She simply made things come to her.

There was nothing unpleasant in her demeanor. It wasn’t as if things always went her way. But she just didn’t like to make a fuss. She knew how to work around trouble. She wasn’t

averse to standing up for herself. But she could be accommodating if needed. She was not stubborn.

I feared the world might be ready to crush a tender soul. But she had no such worries. She could get by on her craft. Always industrious, she wasn't one to over-exert herself. But she would never yield to flattery.

Once I had my groceries in hand, I could hardly pull myself away.

"I'm sure that she would love an audience."

"Of course she would."

"But you couldn't watch her every move. That would be creepy."

I could hear David's words echoing in my mind. David was my editor. And we often discussed my writing.

"She sounds like a great subject for a story. That's fantastic in its own right. But you can't try to mix fact and fiction. You know where that got you before."

David was obviously questioning my judgement, not just my perspective as a writer.

"Are you telling me that I have a character flaw?"

"No more than any of us. It's just that you tend to dwell on your fantasies. You tend to cross that line."

"There's nothing wrong with forming a picture in my mind. I feel that it gives me special insight into her character."

He wanted to highlight his warning, "We all do that. But you get carried away. I'm sure that she wouldn't mind talking to you."

"I don't think I'll see her again, no matter how many times I go to that grocery store."

"That's the beauty of art. It gives us the ability to hold on to things that fly away. It gives a permanence to what is fleeting."

"Where's the problem?"

"If you followed her in the hopes of sharing your ideas with her."

"I never did that."

"She'd be weirded out if you walked up to her. She'd have to give you an opening. She doesn't want some freaky guy watching her every move."

I felt a little hurt by his implications. "We all see things. I just feel inspired to share my thoughts."

"It's okay to use other people as models for your characters. But it's not cool to show them your written sketches. It will only embarrass them more."

"She loves having an audience. She dresses to be complemented."

"Compliment her if you like. But don't think that you have some kind of special privilege because your vision is more vivid. That's the psychotic part."

I needed to find out what he thought was allowed. "Are you talking as my editor?"

"I'm telling you as a friend. If she's looking for an audience, she wants more than one person in her fan club. And she also knows the difference between admiration at a distance and real friendship. You're only making complications for yourself."

I wanted to clarify my fascination for David. But I had to admit I wanted more from her, I wanted more from Erin.

"David, what if I admit that she did mean a little more to me than the average person that

I see in the store. I'm not going to do anything crazy."

"Then why are you getting so obsessive about it."

"Because she is art come alive. If I go to a gallery and see an exhibit of contemporary photographs, it's not strange if I want to meet the photographer."

"No, that's normal. But if you go to all kind of bizarre lengths to make the photographer's acquaintance, that could be a little weird."

"That's not what I'm saying."

"If you naturally have the opportunity to talk to the artist, that would be great. But you can't take it to mean more than that."

I knew that David was a writer in his own right. So he had worked out all these issues for himself. But this was still at the heart of my quest. It wasn't enough for me to have this image in implanted on my brain. I had to know if there was something more to what I saw.

I hared my analysis of my subject with David. Erin didn't seem to be caught up in all the bull shit. Sure she loved to have a good time. And she had moments of despondency. But she never let things get out of hand.

"And you can know all that by looking?"

"I'm not sure what I know. But as a writer, I do have a knack for observing character."

"You can also be one of the worst judges of people. You adopt this image in your head. And you expect everybody to live up to it. I love your writing. But you don't let your characters breathe. They are always under your watchful eye."

Every time that I went into that same grocery store, I would continue to feel her presence. It was something that I had to make sense of.

"You have these opportunities. But you don't know how to live in the moment. You can't enjoy things that come you way.

"What things? I'm living in a little hovel. I'm working part time at as a pizza delivery man. And I can't even get my first novel done. Tell me when the magic comes my way."

"You have a dream. You have loads of opportunity. You have a great education. It will all work out. Just don't force it."

"Am I forcing it?"

"You are. You have to become a great writer. You can't simply assume that you are."

I was curious.

"How am I doing that?" I asked him.

"You are taking your opinions to mean so much more than simple opinions. As if you're a god bestowing his blessings on mere mortals. For a lot of people, you're just an interference."

"What people?"

"It's an expression. Don't take it personally."

"But you are making it personal."

"If you want to be a good writer, you have to live. You need to be vulnerable. You can't run back to your computer every time someone says something that freaks you out. Stick in there."

"I'm trying!"

"If it doesn't happen in the moment, walk away."

I questioned his advice. If I thought that way, there never would be a novel. Just these



loads of random experiences. I constantly felt my anonymity. But this was my world. And I wanted other people to know what I felt.

This took me back to Faith Arney, one of my college writing teachers. She strove to make the point that the writer needs to keep revising things over and over again until they could perfectly capture the described experience.

“Faith, I need you help. I’m hungry.”

“Sorry! You sound desperate. Go back and revise your pitch until you get it right!”

This was simply an excuse for Faith and her disciples to ignore the destitute. She was living in this cocoon of manufactured emotions. And her students toed the same line as her. That was why all their stories were full of maudlin tales of the desperate. It was simply a reflection of her own despair that she was so good at hiding. And her students preserved this legacy.

You throw yourself into the melee, and you really do lose your ability to compose articulate prose. That was part of the adventure. Faith and her associates were comfortably ensconced far from the sweat of life. David could accuse me of getting lost in my epic visions. But these writers had turned life into a series of elegant gestures. They had eliminated chance.

David was more pointed in his criticism, “If she feels that she can’t live up to the image that you have created of her, she will come to hate you. You don’t want that.”

“What if there was some way to make my point? What if there was a world where the light from the sun would be enough for her to come to the same realization that I did?”

“That sounds like mass psychosis.”

“Are you telling me that it is impossible?”

“I’m not just telling you. The whole world is. Don’t get delusional.”

“But there’s got to be some pattern behind all these coincidences. Something that holds it all together.”

“People go to the track with ideas like that. And they bet all their money on some runaway nag.”

“You’re telling me that I can’t be on to something.”

“Next, you’re going to be doing psychic readings.”

I felt as if I really was making a breakthrough.

“What is the appeal of the psychic for a lot of people? Don’t just laugh David.”

“People would have a better time if they read the newspaper. Or really studied the market. You can’t get lost in mumbo jumbo.”

I needed mull over his advice. I needed to get back to my writing. I was giving myself a pass.

“Let’s get a beer sometime. You need to loosen up.”

I wanted to take his counsel in stride. But he seemed to be getting the best of me. I’d figure it out. I had had a long day. I needed to get some sleep. I just dozed off.

A wave of running thunder made me jump up and take notice. I was sure that I was in the midst of a tornado. I had felt a crack in my existence as if I was on the verge of an alternative reality. My heart was racing. My sheets were wet with sweat.

More than a sense of disorder, I felt that I was in the midst of a visitation. All along I had this presentiment, a vague feeling that someone had been looking over my shoulder. I had tried

to remain one step ahead of my guardian. Now I was being overcome by the experience. I was in the midst of a nightmare unable to cry out. For the moment, I could feel that I was being dragged out of time. Everyone else that I knew seemed lost in the present. So this was entirely chaotic and frightening. But I was also in awe.

I sat up in my bed. If I didn't get some sleep, I would be terrible tomorrow. However, I was too restless to quiet down. I wanted to get to the bottom of the mystery. A very skeptical sort, I was not about to believe a phantom now inhabited my abode. I got up to get some water. I realized that I could still manage four hours sleep if I could just settle down.

I worked to distract myself from the interruption. All that I needed to do was to concentrate on a pleasing image. I had a partial inkling of the faces that I had met that day. I submerged in the swirling vision and fell asleep.

My encounter with the nether world had proved to be transient. I had no lingering after-effect of the phenomenon. Sleep had a way of disorienting the self. The urgent commands at the heart of a dream quickly dissipated in the morning light.

I was still restless as I got in my car. As I headed out for my lunchtime deliveries, I let myself trail off into deep thought. I hated lunches. It was always so hard to find parking. For a lot of the other drivers, they couldn't zone out in the same way that I did. Some would smoke and blast tunes as they drove along. The more daring would even light up a joint to sweeten their day. There was still something more immediate for all of them in the experience. At least, I could pretend that I was somewhere else. I was back in writing class. And Erin was ready to teach me a lesson.

"I'm not like you. I don't need books to make me happy. I have my life."

"Is that all you have to say for yourself?"

I was disappointed. Erin was not going to be my receptive reader.

"Sure, I'm flattered for the attention. But you're a fucking pizza guy. If I can get all that from a pizza guy, what is a lawyer going to give me. A house. A ring. A future."

"I thought that you had your own future in tow."

"I do. I'm messing with you. I have imagination too."

"So what do you think about?"

"Finally landing a better job. Not having to work in telecommunications industry."

"What do you do?" I asked her.

"I sell cell phones. She sells cell phone by the sea shore."

"It's a living."

"It beats living with my parents. If I stay out all night with a guy, I don't have someone giving me the third degree."

"Do you stay with guys all night a lot?"

"It was just a way of talking."

I wondered, "Is there a guy?"

She admonished me, "We're not here to talk about me. We're here to talk about your writing."

"I thought you were supposed to answer all my questions.."

What was poor Erin getting in the process. Here I was an obsessed writer. And I was hounding her about advice for my lovelife.

“Ask me a real question.”

“What’s a real question?”

“You’ll know if it’s real.”

“So you do read?”

“I thought about studying literature. I loved Blake and Wordsworth. But it didn’t seem practical. What am I saying? Out here I am selling cell phones. So what is practical.”

“Do you need career advice?”

“From a pizza deliverer?”

I looked hurt.

“I was kidding you.”

“So this is your fantasy not mine.”

“We could say that?”

“So you’re interested in me.”

She smiled a wide smile, “No silly. I want you to teach me about writing.”

“I guess my first word of advice is not to get distracted by attractive women in the supermarket.”

“I may appear attractive, but once you get to know me, you realize that I am one hellacious monster. Do you really have eyes to see?”

“I am trying to train myself. Aren’t we all? What do you see?”

She pretended to look all prim, “I know how to dress myself. That’s a beginning.”

We both laughed.