

A Novel By  
Virginie Glaenzer

# Through The Eyes Only

Book One

An adventure story and guide to self-discovery, this novel offers readers a simple and joyful, way to live.

A Novel by Virginie Glaenger

# THROUGH THE EYES ONLY

The book of Alex

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“Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. ...live in the question.”

— **Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet**

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# Author's Words

“Is this story real?” I’ve been asked many times.

I always respond: How can any stories be real?

Whoever wins in the end gets to frame the story. Beware of stories told and written, I am cautioning you, dear reader.

This work mixes fiction with non-fiction. Unless otherwise indicated, all the names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents in this book are either the product of my imagination ....or real. Therefore, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is not purely coincidental.

In fact, you might find yourself in the story.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot said “*History is a story of power built on silences. Your job as sense makers is to deconstruct these silences.*”

Our sense of freedom is dependent upon our ability to dream and to imagine beyond our history and individual stories.

Freedom is imagination.

When we look at the world, through our perception, the crystalline of our eyes works in a similar way to a camera. When you look at an object, light reflected from the object enters the eyes through the pupil and is focused through the optical components within the eye. The front of the eye, made of the cornea, iris, pupil and lens, focuses the image onto the retina. The image is constructed from the inside out. What you believe to be takes shape within before it appears in eyesight.

Injury and feelings of jeopardy are just a way to heighten the sense that something is at stake.

Mortality is just a cosmic parlor game.

Nothing and no story really lives or dies.

Welcome to *Through The Eyes Only*.

Yours truly,

Virginie Glaenzer

# Prologue

## A Moment of Clarity

*San Francisco, August, 1st 1999, 3:15am waiting to fall back asleep.*

At the early hours of the day, the night was still pitch black. I heard the continuous, flowing sound of the wind outside, whipping through the trees and bending the branches over. It was a stormy night. While listening to the wind and rain lashing against the window, I stared at the ceiling, watching the dancing shades morph into moving structures and beautiful shapes.

I started thinking.

I always wanted to be an architect.

But the truth was that my parents had other plans, and they decided otherwise. They wanted me to be successful and work in a bank, following my grand-father and father's footsteps. In their eyes, the financial industry was a safe career that provided a comfortable life, and a nice

retirement plan. My parents were good people and I always knew they meant well.

However, in the last few years, I often felt increasingly distressed and restless. Something deep inside was not satisfied. Are we meant to just get a job, get married, have kids, a dog and then die? Is that it? Is that all there is?

Deep down, I couldn't shake the feeling that I had been sold the wrong reality.

As a child, I remember playing for hours on end and enjoying life when things were simple. Now as an adult, I felt frustration and above all a sense of disappointment with my life. Yet, I had everything I was supposed to have to be happy and feel successful. I had followed the established path and achieved all the "dreams" I had in college, only to feel dissatisfied and burnt out.

Was I realizing that those "dreams" weren't truly mine?

Like many people, I had what you would consider a good career with shining moments of social recognition, as well as some harsh experiences from which I grew and learned.

Don't get me wrong. Overall, I could say that I was lucky: I was healthy, in a good relationship, and I supported my

young adult daughter from my previous marriage, which gave me direction and what I thought was a purpose. However, underneath this story, when I stopped and stayed with my distress and restless feelings, something else was showing up. Accumulated lies and piled up frustrations caused me devious anger and the potential for rage. The lies were everyone's individual truths imposed on me since I was a child. The frustrations were the limited options I had based on my gender and the role I was summoned to play. In a way, a growing part of me felt that I was living everyone's choices. I wonder if others felt the same thing that I did: a thirst for a different reality, one made of a story that, perhaps, I would write.

Back in my bed on that stormy night, my body felt a numbness with a tingling sensation. I let go of my thoughts and fell into a soothing darkness.

The next two weeks while traveling to a conference in Miami, would bring an unexpected turn of events.

# Chapter One

## A Serendipitous Encounter

*August, 14th 1999, Doral Country Club, Miami, which later became the Trump National Doral Hotel.*

*The night before the conference.*

The night was young. I was looking forward to getting back to my room after a long day of traveling from San Francisco to Miami, Florida. I decided to sit at the bar for a quick solo dinner. Having recently embarked on a vegetarian journey triggered by my high cholesterol, I decided to order a salad.

She sat down next to me. I could feel her eyes looking at me.

“Are you traveling too?” I asked her without raising my gaze.

“Yes. How is your salad?” She responded.

I looked at her briefly. She was beautiful and had a large smile on her face. Her eyes were light brown like her long hair.

“Very good,” I responded, smiling back at her.

“So why do you think you are here?” she asked.

“I’m here for the Leadership conference. I’m giving a presentation on consumer purchase behaviors and market trends analytics.”

It seems we skipped the usual informal small talk to dive right into topics about consciousness.

“Right,” she responded. “That is what you are doing *here*, but why are you here?” She insisted.

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean.” I said, a bit confused.

“It’s funny to think about how humans go through their day with certainty about where they are going, thinking they have figured it all out,” she said. Then she paused and averted her gaze. “If only they knew. You’ve never asked yourself why you are alive?”

It was such a simple question and yet, there I was, puzzled by my inability to answer. She was looking at me with the honesty of a child and the maturity of an elder.

“I guess I haven’t. I mean, what is there to think? I’m here because my parents met, had sex and I was lucky to have an education and found my way to a good paying job.”

“I see,” she said smiling. “Is that story good enough for you?”

I looked at her baffled by the truthfulness of her incisive questions. How do you react when someone throws you out of your comfortable and habitual way of thinking?

I remembered a professor of philosophy my junior college year who used to throw chalk at us.

“Alex, catch!” he would suddenly yell. “You need to wake up!”

My professor was a short man who always dressed neatly but without any sense of style or imagination for that matter: ironed collared shirt, usually in white or in some shade of blue. The only time I saw him wear a colored

shirt, still irreproachably ironed, was when he was chosen to address our school during a parent conference. The previous night must have been agonizing for him because he had dark marks under his eyes. He didn't like the attention of his peers and largely preferred to address the flock of students he was patiently trying to wake up to truly living.

He was always punctual starting class, and his passion for intellectual life and the wonder of the human mind was refreshing. He felt a great deal of responsibility to share his knowledge and indulged himself in creative ways to “wake us up” as he used to say. You knew that he was holding on to the last string of hope for the next generation, which had the future of humankind on their shoulders.

She asked “Is it?”

“I'm sorry, what?” I said, feeling like a chalk was just thrown at me.

“Is the story you just told me about why you're here good enough for you?” She asked again patiently.

“Well,” I responded, “I believe life is what you make of it and I did pretty good.”

“Be careful,” she whispered. “Beliefs are what hold us back. They close all possibilities and shut down all potentialities.”

I felt uneasy. I moved my head and something cracked in my neck. I heard myself say:

“Honestly,” I added, “I wouldn’t know which story is the right one.”

“Don’t worry,” she said smiling and in a reassuring tone. “We’ll have time to figure it out. The act of questioning is often half the answer. I’ll see you tomorrow at the conference,” she said as she walked out the bar.

That night, sitting at this hotel bar, deep inside I knew that those questions woke something inside me.

It was during this serendipitous encounter that I later realized my life was a love story between Reason and Faith, Control and Letting Go, Knowing and Not Knowing, and as you’ll discover, this love story would later unravel.

We left the dinner with a couple of unanswered questions. What story are we living and telling ourselves? And how do we find our personal truth?

I walked back to my room thinking about the mysterious woman's question: Is that story good enough for you?

Sometimes you hear or read words that you keep in your mind your entire life.

It reminded me of how my professor of Philosophy had this powerful effect on me.

I vividly remember ten years earlier, on that day in 1989 when a surfing trip was interrupted by a reminder for my term paper.

In Northern California, the early days of spring bring mild and sunny weather, with generally fog-free days on the coast until May. In the morning, I went to the beach early to hit some waves and the sky was clear blue. Pacific Grove was just an hour from my house and I found Asilomar State Beach to be cranking. The beach is a narrow, one-mile strip of sandy beach and rocky coves. The air smelled like salt and seashells.

My Palm Pilot buzzed. Yeah, I was a tech-surf nerd. At Christmas, my parents offered me the Compaq ProSignia Desktop 330. With the money my grandparents gave me, I bought myself a Palm Pilot. The small screen displayed a reminder: Philosophy paper due today. Deconstruct and argue the following statement: “*No man can step in the same river twice.*” I thought, yep that’s right, you can’t kiss a person the same way twice.

There was something about that quote that was intriguing and mesmerizing to me. My childhood and early teenage years had been like a repeating pattern without any noticeable and interesting events.

It’s like the quote was denying my own experience and I kept these words in my head for years before I finally discovered their meaning while traveling to Miami for a Conference.

# Chapter Two

## On The Golf Course

*August, 15th 1999, Doral Country Club, Miami.*

*The morning of the conference.*

When you land in Miami, you are immediately taken by a sensation of vacation and Latin culture. In the South, I always get the feeling of a slower, laid-back pace of life, but not in Miami. Between the swanky clubs in South Beach and the Art Deco architecture, you are welcomed into a mix of Cuban, Mexican, Central American and South American cultures. Miami is the best place in the country to find authentic Cuban food; Ropa vieja, Mariquitas, congri and platanos maduros are some of my favorites.

The first morning of the conference, I woke up early and went for a jog. The air was moist. Surrounded by palm trees, the hotel's green golf course contrasted with the crisp blue sky. At the edge of the hotel's property, a large

display invited guests to a Cuban dinner and surfing lessons.

Running along the seashore felt like traveling into a Miami Vice episode, one of my favorite 1980s TV shows that became known for its integration of contemporary pop and rock music and stylish visuals.

On my run back to the hotel, a few dark clouds had appeared. Further away, I recognized her from behind. She was sitting on the green turf in the middle of the 7-hole in a yoga position and for some unknown reason, a part of me was not surprised. As I walked closer, I saw her gently lay down on the grass and open her arms and legs like an angel. She looked like she was being sucked into the grass.

Slowly and quietly, I moved towards her. Her eyes were closed.

Without even opening her eyes, she asked, “How did you sleep?”

“How did you know it was me?” I asked, surprised.

“Lucky guess,” she replied. “Did you sleep well?”

I had barely slept but I didn't want to admit it to her. I didn't want her to feel that she had shaken and possibly cracked open some of my deepest beliefs.

I had woken up several times during the night incapable of wrapping my head around the question she had asked me the night before. I was only certain of one thing: I didn't know why I was here.

And perhaps more importantly, I didn't know what was more upsetting: Not knowing the answer or not having asked myself this essential question before.

I grew up in a family with a mission. Creating a good life was not something we would talk about but it was the driving force of all our conscious behaviors, and most likely, our unconscious choices. My great-grandfather arrived from Germany to the U.S. in the early 1800s with one suitcase and a head full of dreams. It was through hard work and focused dedication that he pulled himself up from precarity. At least that's the story I was told. My father had inherited his hard work values and eventually,

the required long hours working in a bank to provide for his family.

“I never sleep well when I travel,” I heard myself say.

“Interesting,” she replied while she stood up. Her eyes were shining, almost piercing, and her face was glowing. There was something indescribable about her. The way she looked at you, like she knew you and everything else about you.

“It’s OK to not have all the answers,” she said. “No one has them, if that’s of any consolation.”

I felt relieved. Even though I didn’t need her approval, it felt good to hear those words.

I went through life asking very few questions about myself and others. I learned at a young age that asking questions was a form of rebellion against the status quo. As a result, curiosity was never my forte and to make matters worse, it was not encouraged by either my parents or my teachers. I ended up believing that not knowing was a sign of weakness and that asking questions meant that I didn’t

know. Nevertheless, I was recently feeling a growing force inside urging me to question my life.

“Let’s take a stroll back to the hotel, shall we?” she suggested.

“Sure. I’m Alex by the way.” I formally introduced myself.

“Gene,” she replied, putting her hand gently on her heart.

“What a glorious morning, isn't it?” she said looking around at the variety of wildlife, birds, and plants. Abundant in high trees, home to a constant buzz of wildlife or the tranquility of the coastline vistas — this course was mesmerizing. It blended in beautifully with its surrounding landscape of rocks, natural ponds, and evergreen Mediterranean vegetation.

I felt inspired to share my thoughts.

“Yesterday evening when you asked me if I knew what I was doing here, ...on earth ...and in this lifetime, I realized that I have never asked myself this question before,” I said.

“I was raised in a family where members never asked

questions but rather followed a path: the most secure one, preferably and likely established by my family.”

She looked at me gently and smiled.

“Most people go through life without truly living,” she said softly. “Their inherited fear has conditioned them to follow the most traveled path chosen by previous generations.”

“How does one find his or her own path?” I asked.

Her eyes opened wide.

“Now that is such a beautiful question, isn't it? It feels like we're opening a new door.”

“I don't even know who I really am,” I added painfully.

“When I think of myself, all I can think about are my skills, my experiences and the person who I was told to be, and really, anything that is on my resume.”

“Then, stop thinking and instead focus on what you feel,” she said, putting her hand on my arm.

She looked right through me.

“I’m so glad you are curious. Did you know that the word Curiosity means ‘hunger to know’ or ‘a strange object?’ But the Latin root means ‘to care,’ so curiosity is carefully listening and following the natural desire of your inquiry. Practicing curiosity allows you to gain more awareness. It’s a daily practice that invites you to become a playful apprentice. By exploring and reflecting, your curiosity will grow and will develop the way a rose grows, not because you make it, but because it is organic, alive, and a force of nature. All you need to do is care for it.”

I was enjoying this morning walk tremendously and I was also glad to spend more time with her. She stopped walking and turned to me.

“Are you up for an experiment?” She asked.

“Sure, why not,” I replied.

“Fantastic! Now, relax, close your eyes and take a deep breath. Let’s start inward. Take a moment and ask yourself: What have you been recently curious about or what are you often curious about?”

She paused and then added:

“Notice how the answers that emerge might be memories, emotions, body sensations, smell... See if you can experience them before putting words to them. Let’s give ourselves a few seconds.”

I felt a slight breeze.

“Can you give me an example of the last time you remember being curious or you decided to do something new or explore something unfamiliar?”

“Honestly,” I said, opening my eyes, “It’s been a while since I’ve done anything new, but recently I’ve found myself wondering what would have happened if I had taken that trip to Europe like I was supposed to right after college instead of accepting my first job.”

As I heard my own words I was brought back right back to my twenties.

The door of Professor Holloway, professor of Philosophy was always open, even outside of his office hours. Once, I found myself in his office accompanying a friend and I remembered seeing a quote displayed in a crafted wooden

frame on his wall.

*Philosophy is like trying to open a safe with a combination lock: each little adjustment of the dials seems to achieve nothing, only when everything is in place does the door open.*

--Ludwig Wittgenstein

I was graduating in a week and for some unknown reasons, the last part of the quote came back to me when I unexpectedly decided to stop by his office to ask a question. It was a Wednesday and I went late after class so I wouldn't run into other students. I only had taken the Philosophy class during my first year of college so I could take economics, business, history and math classes. Studying the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and our existence was not considered useful or a worthy discipline by my parents. But on this particular day, with a job offer letter from the local bank in my backpack, questioning my life had suddenly become an entryway.

"Professor Holloway?" I asked, piercing my head through the door. "May I come in?"

"Of course. Absolutely! Please come on in," he said in a

joyful tone.

“My name is Alex. I took your class in my first year.”

“Hi Alex. It’s nice to see you again. How can I help you?”

He showed me a chair. His clear blue eyes and round face inspired trust. He had short white hair and a five-o'clock shadow, the white beard giving him a relaxed and casual appearance.

“Well, I was wondering if I could ask you a question.”

“Well, of course,” he said. “I’m all ears.”

“I’m graduating in a week and I just received a job offer to work at a bank.”

“Congratulations! You must be excited!”

“Yes! Yes, of course, I’m really happy,” I admitted.

“So what seems to be the question challenging this exciting time?” he asked.

“My friends and I made plans to take 6 months off to go to Europe.”

He understood the question and the dilemma that was keeping me up at night. He stood up and started walking

towards the windows.

“In Western cultures, we often say we like to have choice. To a certain extent that's true - we enjoy freedom, and choice makes us feel that we are in control of our decisions. But, it is also overwhelming.”

“Yes, yes, it is quite overwhelming,” I replied.

“Freedom of choice,” he continued, “describes an individual's opportunity and autonomy to perform an action selected from at least two available options, unconstrained by external parties.”

“Well, that's the problem,” I responded. “There are external parties that don't look at my plan to go to Europe as a valid one.”

He was leaning against the windows and looking at me.

“In contemporary philosophy, arguments for ‘fatalism’ are arguments for the conclusion that no human actions are free. I would argue that there are three types of freedom. The first kind of freedom is “freedom from,” a freedom from the constraints of society. The second is “freedom to,” a freedom to do what we want to do. The last is

“freedom to be,” a freedom, not just to do what we want, but a freedom to be who we were meant to be.”

That night I went back to my room and broke the news to my friends. Years later, every time I reflected on that moment of freedom of choice, I also remembered that I had met the love of my life while working at that bank a few months later.

“Alex,” she said, smiling at me.

Her voice brought me back to my current reality on the golf course.

“Asking ourselves what might have happened is not being curious. It's part of a grieving process,” she said.

“Let’s continue looking outwards, shall we?” “Now, start observing the environment. First, assess your experience of it. Identify the reactions you have to it. What do you notice about your surroundings? Let’s take 30 seconds.”

She looked around at the golf course and then looked at me inquisitively.

“It’s a beautiful golf course,” I said. “The turf is

impeccable, the holes are well designed and it actually has quite good architecture.”

“Now this time,” she continued, “I’m going to ask you to explore again, but this time notice the sounds, smells, light, the textures both human and natural. What grabs your attention?”

I looked around, my gaze reached a little farther away and for what seemed to me a brief moment, which later I would learn was more than 15 minutes, I lost my focus. My eyes became soft and vague. I took a deep breath. I smelled the grass’s green leaf volatiles, the pungent, slightly acetous scent of new-mowed lawns. Suddenly, my pupils opened wide, my brown iris abdicated its control on the amount of light passing through, and an abundant light reached my retina.

And it all happened: I saw the wind making ripples in the grass, a little bit like it would make on water. The emerald green became a trembling virescent light and nature revealed a 4-dimension effect with layers of colors similar to the colored emanation or aura described by Buddhists.

The leaves on the green raised up a few inches from the ground and each of the individual grass spurs had the different colors of the rainbow. The trees danced in a vibrant 4D shape like they were talking with each other, made of pure energy and vibrations.

I was mesmerized by what I was seeing and incapable of moving. I felt immersed in a feeling of love and a deep physical and emotional sensation of contentment in every part of my being and in every cell. I was it. I, my body and perception of myself was a part of this magical world and at the same time, I was the whole. I was the creator, without any judgment or thought of ownership. My complete attention was captured as if by magic. I felt completely magnetized.

“And finally,” she asked, “Ask yourself: what is your relationship with this environment now? How do I feel about this place now? Consider what changed and what stayed the same.”

I could hear her voice while I was indulging myself in this surreal experience. Nothing mattered. I was one with my

surrendering. I felt free and at the same time, bound to the boundary-free world. It wasn't about me anymore. I had become meaningless because meaning had no place to be. What was just was. Time was suspended. I was breathing deeply, one breath at a time. I was aware of it all, seeing the scripts, the stories, the narratives, and the heroes, all without any judgment, just seeing the beauty of their beings. It felt like being in a projection movie room looking at the two wheels and the light projecting life's movie on a large screen. A complete sense of wonder and a deep feeling of surrender overwhelmed my body, mind and heart all at once.

“Would you like to share your experience?” I heard.

“I... I...I don't know what to say,” I stammered, under the spell of this consciousness experience.

Thirty years ago, when Professor Holloway said those words, “A freedom to be who we were meant to be, ” a part of me chose to comply with others' perception of my social identity.

Today, on that golf course with a complete stranger, I had discovered who I was for the very first time and it was light years away from my original and limited comprehension.

“I need to sit down,” I heard myself say.

“Welcome back,” she responded, with a very happy face.

“Let self be self. When you let your inner-self lead consciously at work and in the world, you radiate. When you let your outer-self lead your thoughts and your choices, you absorb and block your natural creative energy.”

“I had the most profound experience,” I said, baffled. “It’s hard to describe. I saw it!”

“What did you see?” she asked.

“It’s... the...the real reality.”

All of a sudden, we felt droplets. The rain was coming in, hard and fast. We rushed inside.

# Chapter Three

## Leaving Miami

*August 15th, 1999, Doral Country Club, Miami.*

*Late afternoon after the conference, day of the departure.*

I've always felt uneasy when traveling in the South. As a child, I watched Dorothy and the Wizard of Oz many times, and the tornado made a big impression on me. I remember during the summer of 1992, when Hurricane Andrew, a very powerful and destructive Category 5 Atlantic hurricane struck the Bahamas, Florida, and Louisiana. The center of the eye of Hurricane Andrew made landfall near Florida City, 25 miles south of downtown Miami. That narrow path of devastation carved by Andrew was tremendous and deadly with 65 deaths attributed to the storm, while around 150,000 to 250,000 people in South Florida were left homeless.

On this day it was now pouring cats and dogs with high winds and I would have to make the best of it.

I had given my presentation early in the afternoon in the main conference room and all went well. The audience was captive and asked several questions on the points I raised. As I often felt a bit tense during public speaking, I tried a few tricks: the new over-the-counter saliva substitute I had purchased worked like magic. As someone who dreamed of being an actor as a child, I've always enjoyed giving public presentations. However, when a presentation was longer than thirty minutes, my mouth would become dry and uncomfortable.

I was sitting in the lobby with my suitcase waiting for a taxi. I saw her getting off the elevator and I waved my hand to her.

She saw me and with a big smile, she came right to me. She looked radiant.

“Well, hello again! How was your presentation?” she asked.

“Hi Gene! It's great to see you again. It went very well. Thanks for asking.”

“Another plane to catch?” she asked, looking at my suitcase.

“Yes, I’m going back to San Francisco. I wanted to ask you about this morning, which was quite extraordinary for me.”

She smiled at me, slightly tilting her head which I took as an invitation to share.

“I’m still unsure what really happened on that golf course. I felt so different, so at peace. It was quite surreal. The colors were so bright and the trees were popping up in 4D. I’m not sure if I was wearing special effect glasses or if I was on drugs,” I added laughing.

“Often, curiosity is the door to changing the experience of our reality,” she said.

“Have you had this experience before, too?” I asked curiously.

“What if my ‘real reality’ was what you just described? Everything we see and feel is based on our beliefs. Identify your beliefs and you’ll have the description of your reality. Change your beliefs and your reality changes.”

“How do you do that? How do you change your beliefs?” I asked eagerly.

“It’s quite simple: look at any aspect of your life: you won’t find one that is not limited by a belief, ” she added. “A belief is a sentence, a string of words that we repeat like a mantra. Catching our thoughts is the first step to changing our mantra.”

“Fascinating!” I exclaimed. “I have so many other questions for you! Can we exchange our email addresses to continue this conversation?”

“Of course! But be careful,” she said softly. “Some answers are an ending, a death of sorts; it’s the questions that keep us growing and some questions are not meant to be answered. Look at life itself: the real beauty of life is its ever-changing nature. However, if you are determined to engage in the act of questioning, then first you need to forget to remember. *“If faut oublier pour se souvenir,”* she concluded in a perfect French accent. “You need to forget to remember”.

Sitting in the taxi, I felt a heaviness in my chest. For some unknown reasons, it was painful to leave her behind. I had never felt this fathomless connection before with a stranger and I felt as if one of my internal organs was being removed.

The storm had passed and the sky was clear. Yet, I was feeling under the weather emotionally. In the past year, I had started to experience insomnia and progressively lost interest in things or activities I once looked forward to. They now filled me with dread. On several occasions, as I looked at everything that I had achieved in my life, I felt hopeless and without purpose, asking myself “what’s the point?” With those thoughts, a feeling of guilt came rushing in.

I remember my dad saying to me, “How can you be so ungrateful! People would kill for such a good job offer right after college. Do you know how hard it was for me and your grandfather?”

My Palm Pilot buzzed. “Saved by the bell” as I immediately felt relieved to avoid reliving this painful memory.

“Did you go to the game?” my colleague, Martin, was asking via email. We shared a love for sports and often discussed the latest games. The 1999 Miami Hurricanes football team represented the University of Miami during the 1999 NCAA Division I-A football season. It was the Hurricanes' 74th season of football and ninth as a member of the Big East Conference. The Hurricanes were led by fifth-year head coach Butch Davis and played their home games at the Orange Bowl. They finished the season 9–4 overall and 6–1 in the Big East to finish in second place. They were invited to the Gator Bowl where they defeated Georgia Tech, 28-13.

I replied to Martin that the conference consumed my entire energy and, as a result, I didn't attend any game.

On the way to the airport, we drove by a large display announcing the Ultra Music Festival. Back at the office, Martin had been raving about this new annual outdoor electronic music festival that takes place during March in

Miami. The festival was founded by Russell Faibisch and Alex Omes and named after the 1997 Depeche Mode album, *Ultra*, one of my all-time favorite disks.

“Thank you for the stimulating conversation. I’m looking forward to continuing our exploration of life,” I wrote to Gene in the airport right before my plan took off.

# Chapter Four

## **Back to Silicon Valley**

*Palo Alto, September 5th, 1999*

Most people take the 101 from San Francisco airport to the valley, but I always enjoyed going home taking the 280 interstate instead. The I-280 from Los Altos nearly all the way to Daly City remains one of the most magnificent stretches of urban highway in the U.S., or anywhere, for that matter, so I am told by all visitors.

It has been called the "World's Most Beautiful Freeway" and drivers along this portion of Interstate 280 are treated to scenic views of the Santa Cruz Mountains to the west and, at a few points, San Francisco Bay to the east, and are isolated by hills from the cities to the east. Through much of this segment, the freeway is actually running just inside the eastern rim of the rift valley of the San Andreas Fault. To top it off, in my mind, the Flintstone House just adds

to the beauty of this road. This unique house is a colorful free-form, single-family residence in Hillsborough, based on the movie the Flintstone.

Back at the office, everything was the same. People were reluctant to adapt to the constant market changes that we had to face, and I had to push and pull everyone to make any progress. I was under great pressure and I was trying hard to control the outcome of my work.

After a few email exchanges, Gene suggested that we chatted on ICQ. As an AOL instant messenger user, I didn't mind. ICQ chat messaging service was bought by AOL last year mid 1998 and it was a chance to test this new service.

“When we last exchanged about your career and your past vision-collisions with your colleagues, you asked me what I saw,” she wrote. “Well, it seems to me that your story is about control. You have a strong desire to control your future, and you have a problem when anything or anyone gets in the way or slows that process down, in your mind.

What you need to realize is that no one is in control. It's life's biggest illusion.”

“Thank you for that insightful feedback. However, I have been taught to be and stay in control, to evaluate risk and have back-up plans. How can I not desire to be in control?” I asked back, perplexed.

“Desire? What is your true desire?” She wrote. “In our society and in our culture of instant gratifications, desire is a word often misused and more importantly, widely misunderstood. In fact, desire comes from the Latin and its original sense means, "await what the stars will bring" from Sidus, "heavenly body, star, constellation" and De, “Down from.” We often think that if we want something, it means that we desire it. This couldn't be further away from the truth.“

“Really? Can you share more?” I wrote, doubtful.

“Sure," she explained, “You can't *will* a desire and you definitely cannot control it. It's either there or it's not. The strongest desires are the ones for which you cannot find a reason. You don't know *why* you want to do it, but you can

*feel* how much you want to do it. In fact, often when we think we desire something and we are not getting any closer to obtaining it, there is a high chance that we don't truly want it for a number of reasons, such as conflicting desires or fear of the unknown."

"How do we find our true desire then?" I responded, anxiously.

"It's easy," she wrote. "A true desire comes from within and is not pushed by your need to please others or to feed the self-concerned story we have in our mind about who we think we are. I invite you to write down what you think you desire and then ask yourself: *why* do I desire it? Is it to please others or is it coming from a deep and true part of my creativity and uniqueness? That distinction is very important as we often set up goals with the wrong desires and that leads to failure. So free yourself from others' desires and focus on the ones that truly improve your life and, by extension, the lives of other living beings."

Up until this point, I had spent most of my life in Silicon Valley, and being on the high tech stage I was playing a

really exciting game. I had recently joined an early stage company called WebVan as their Chief Customer Experience Officer. We were headquartered in Foster City, and my commute from Palo Alto was under thirty minutes. I enjoyed working with the founder Mark Borders as I agreed with his vision of a world where people would save time ordering groceries online. Started a few years ago, the company had built a robust system to deliver products to customers' homes within a thirty minute window of their choosing. We were expanding fast in many cities and were all excited by an IPO opportunity at the end of the year.

I've always loved my job, whether I was on a team or was an individual contributor. Working was for me a way to express my strength and assertiveness. I enjoyed the startup world that exacted every pound of sweat, passion, energy, and strength from every person, who, with their nose against the grindstone, often handled the workload of three or more people every day. Yet, in this high-intensity lifestyle, many often ended up experiencing burnout. Curiously, my burnout happened when I couldn't escape

from the feeling that I was weak and vulnerable. Unfortunately, I no longer felt my job was working for me.

“I want to talk about what happened on the golf course,” I wrote to her. “Can we talk on the phone?”

“Hi Alex, It’s good to hear your voice.” She said.

“Thanks for taking my call. How are you doing?” I responded.

“Fantastic! You?” She asked.

“Well,” I continued, “I’m not the same since I had this experience on the golf course. It was just a few minutes but it has led me to profoundly question the way I see life now.”

“A few minutes?” she exclaimed. “Not at all! You were standing still for a good fifteen minutes at least until you came back.”

“Really? Wow, I didn’t know that. I saw the real reality, the truth. I saw that we are made of vibrations and of energy and that we are all connected and come from the same source. Separation doesn’t exist. It’s an illusion. The idea of

individuality, and of human power over the world is completely made up.”

“You might have had a glimpse of oneness,” she said softly. “We are the expression of life no matter what we do. We can relax and trust. Life happens ‘through’ us, which might be a better description than ‘to’ us. Unfortunately, we were taught that life happens ‘against’ us, which is why we think we need to control it. So we feel pressured to control and protect ourselves against aging, against others, against nature. This has become our conditioning.”

“I see it so clearly now,” I said, hopeful.

“The biggest secret of all,” she continued, “is that life has our back. Life manifests through all living beings and humans are just one form.”

“Yes, I know. I felt it: so much love and more than a feeling of peace, contentment and pure acceptance of it all. Why is it so hard to let go of our control in this current world? Why are we so afraid and constantly on the lookout for bad things that might happen?”

“It’s simple. Our interpretation is an invention of the mind,” she responded, “Since there are always multiple perspectives and no one can predict how various circumstances will play out in life, we shut down ourselves to become warriors.”

“It reminds me of this Taoist story: an old farmer worked his crops for many years but one day his horse ran away.

Upon hearing the news, his neighbors came to visit.

"Such bad luck," they said sympathetically.

"Maybe," the farmer replied.

The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses.

"How wonderful," the neighbors exclaimed.

"Maybe," replied the old man.

The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbors again came to offer their sympathy for his misfortune.

"Maybe," answered the farmer.

The day after, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by.

The neighbors congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out.

"Maybe," said the farmer.

Silence settled and I breathed deeper.

I reflected on all those years I was nurturing my anxiety about the choices I made and cultivating constant fears that were running my life: fear of messing up, fear of failing, fear of being judged, and most importantly, fear of truly being me. I had been taught to play a role: I was a character with a resume and others directed how I should act and talk. The few times I tried to interject my own ideas and change my character's personality or my script, I was pushed back, which in turn gave my fear of failing even more power. Now I was certain that my desires were not my own.

My life was fading as I headed from home to work and from work to home. Every day I got further away from

who I was. I had achieved all the dreams I had when I finished college and often I felt dissatisfied. The dreams that I had fulfilled were not mine, but rather the ones that society had set for me.

There was that lingering feeling that despite all my efforts to fit in and be the one others wanted me to be, it was all in vain. I was killing my true self.

It was time to ask myself: What do I really want? What is my passion? And do I even have any passion?

I had been traveling extensively in the past decade.

Traveling is a quest. A search for landscapes, cultures, experiences and people. Yet, what we are really looking for is ourselves. And the more you progress, the poorer you are in time, in friends, in connecting with yourself and in life. I had lived a lifetime following the established path, a race towards an unattainable concept of success that always lives in the future.

If I wanted to play the social game with passion, I had to reconnect with my own true desire. I had to step outside

the social conditioning spell I'd been living under. My newly found desire was loud and clear.

“My inner voice is the voice of freedom and I will set her free,” I heard myself say.

I heard her smile on the phone.

“Good,” she said.

# Chapter Five

## Traveling to New York City

*Chelsea, NYC, November 1999*

I remember vividly the very first time I came to New York City. It was during the month of December and I was in my late 30s. I had won a three day trip from a radio game and I was not going to pass. During the last ten years in California, I had become accustomed to mild winters with temperatures in the 50's. The winter in New York city felt like I had arrived at the North Pole, with temperatures in the upper 30s. As soon as I walked outside I experienced the subzero wind chill and gusty winds engulfing the streets. The extreme cold took my breath away and breathing became a fight for my life.

Now in my 50's and having spent many weeks in New York City, I knew what to expect. I was dressed like I was going on a ski trip and was excited about the idea of seeing

snow. They predicted a snow storm might hit the Northern states while I was coming for a phenomenal business event that my company Webvan was going to be a part of: a public offering.

The month preceding, the team worked around the clock to deliver a unique roadshow that told our beautiful story. Launched only two years prior in 1997, we had become the golden child in a snap of a finger. The roadshow was an intense week of sharing our company presentation to investors in one-on-ones and in large and small group meetings. The feedback I heard from the roadshow was that there were many good questions and our team was feeling good about investors deciding to invest in our company. Everything would happen in a mythical location: the New York Stock Exchange. The building in the Financial District is one of the most iconic buildings in NYC. Located at 11 Wall Street, the New York Stock Exchange was completed in 1903 and designed by George B. Post, a prolific architect at the turn of the 20th century. I saw from afar its giant portico, colonnades, and sculpture

which imparted a sense of austerity and massiveness coupled with security.

We all came around eight in the morning for a private tour of some of the standout items found inside the building; the largest Fabergé piece in the world, a Led Zeppelin guitar, Andy Warhol art, a clock from 1867 and the Buttonwood Agreement, one of the oldest historical documents in the United States found outside Washington, D.C. We passed in front of the autograph wall signed by bell-ringers that's hidden inside a hallway, and a room just full of maps. At 9:25 am, we were inside the opening bell balcony surrounded by TV screens and cameras and at 9:30 a.m. sharp, our CEO proudly rang the bell to Mark the start of the day's trading. We clapped and waved at the cameras, making this instant history and a story we would tell our grandchildren.

On this day in November 1999, we raised \$375 million with shares traded at around \$30. Our company was now valued at \$1.2 billion.

My stock as one of the first employees was substantial and overnight I had become a multi-millionaire. My great-grandfather, grandfather and father would have been proud of me. I was honoring the family legacy through my sudden wealth.

Interestingly, a week prior I had felt a sense of abundance. It was quite phantomatic and I didn't pay attention at the time as I just felt free and content for a few minutes while walking in my neighborhood. But today, I was overcome by many deep feelings at the same time: First, a feeling of responsibility. What will I do with all this money? How will it change my life? And how can I help others?

I also felt a sense of relief, a weight lifted off my shoulders. The constant paycheck-to-paycheck struggle was finally over. I always had been diligent, money aside as a security nest, but I was also always trying to live below my means, which meant keeping constant track of my day-to-day spending.

The last overwhelming feeling was a sense of freedom and the excitement in light of the possibilities that were now

offered to me. What could I create? What new projects could I start? What skills could I choose to learn?

I could now understand the idea behind the basic minimum income and why it would empower millions of people to give life to their own creative ideas.

Later that day, our CEO gathered us all around him and said a few words about how the IPO is just the next chapter on an exciting new journey for our business. We all felt an extraordinary feeling which we knew wouldn't last long and would eventually give way to business as usual. Yet, our team felt energized and excited as a new era began. We went out on Times Square and grouped for a picture to immortalize this experience.

While some of our team members went to do some press interviews to take advantage of the opportunity to raise our brand awareness, later that day, I had to share my over-excitement with Gene.

“I feel so proud!” I said glossing.

“I can imagine! Congratulations to you and to your team,” she responded. “But be careful. Don't get too attached to

the one who feels proud and remember that you are playing a game.”

“Why wouldn’t I? It feels so good.” I said.

“Yes, it does,” she responded. “And that’s also why the downfall feels so bad. If you are attached to your character, you will feel both the ups and the downs.”

“My character?? I’m not a character.” I questioned.

“So who do you think you are?” She simply asked.

“Me. I’m me” I said

“Who is the voice talking in your mind?” She asked.

“The voice?”

“Yes. Try this,” she invited me. “Concentrate for a minute, take a deep breath and then say the word ‘Hello’ in your head. Do you hear an echo?”

“Yes, I heard it! Oh, my God. I’ve never noticed it before.” I said, baffled. “Let me try again.”

“Wow! Oh, my God!” I exclaimed, “There is a voice inside my head that goes on and says things before I think of them. This is so strange.”

“Yes, that’s it. It’s your hero story.” she said.

“My hero story?? What do you mean?”

“It’s simple.” She explained, “Who you think you are is based on what others told you about yourself. As a child you took everything said and done to you as the truth. As a result, you had experiences that confirmed to you this persona of yours from which became your fixed set of beliefs.

If you pay attention and get quiet, you will eventually hear two voices in your head. One loud and strong, the voice of your ego, your ‘reasoning mind’ as I call it. It tells you what to do and how to react based on the idea of who you are. This voice has been nurtured by our society to always stay in control of our life and to make sure you fit-in. It only wants to protect your social identity and is very fearful, yet sometimes over-confident.

The other voice is the quiet one, the ‘heart voice’ is the name I gave her. This voice is your creative energy that comes from your true self that wants to get out to create and share.”

“How do I recognize one from the other?” I asked.

“First you have to listen to your thoughts without reacting,” she replied. “Just listen. Then the answer lies within your intention. Living is about constantly choosing. The difference between your ego and your true self is in your intention. When you make a decision or choose to react, ask yourself, what are my intentions? This will tell you who is leading your life: your ego or your true self.”

“I see,” I said, thinking.

And just like that, Gene opened a new door of understanding for me, into the illusion of our social identity. Who we think we are is a made-up construction, like a scaffolding made up of beliefs that hide our true self. I had to figure out what those beliefs were and I was determined to break them down no matter how much time it took. The oneness reality that I experienced on the golf course had become my compass, keeping me headed in the right direction. Discovering who I truly was had become my only intention, and I knew that the answer would come

from the quiet inner voice, the voice that longed to bring my true self to life.

Five months after meeting Gene, we were having weekly calls and our friendship was becoming deeper. I felt an unexpected attachment to her and every Wednesday, I waited impatiently for our phone call. Spending time with her made me feel alive and something in me was slowly breaking down.

I didn't have many friends and was more a lone wolf than anything else. Growing up with one much older sibling, I always felt like a lonely child and later was said to be an introvert. As an avid reader, books provided just enough entertainment, movement, and drama in my life. Yet, the truth was, I was terrified of deep human connection. I felt that my independence, whether financial or emotional, prevented me from becoming a slave to others' desires and excessive demands. Both my father and mother were quiet people and never shared how they felt or demonstrated their emotions. They did what they were supposed to do without complaining. Their life of hard labor was chosen with devotion. "A life well lived is a life well planned," my

father used to say. Perhaps his work in the banking and life insurance industry had made him into a man of stability and consistency.

I had sometimes imagined another life for myself, a life of travel and writing, but the terror of not being in control would soon take over. After spending twenty years in the banking industry, I jumped two years ago onto this early stage start-up without telling my parents anything, as I knew they would be against it. I had no one depending on me anymore since my daughter graduated a few years back and I had enough savings put aside to keep me afloat should this job become sour. I met with the CEO, Louis Border when he came to open a bank account for Webvan, and I was immediately drawn in by his charismatic personality. I knew I had to join his team. I first joined the company to manage data and customer insights. I was the expert of predictability, the voice of certainty. Over the years, my role had evolved as Chief Customer Experience and I was still considered as the market whisperer who could predict trends and behaviors.

Interestingly, since I met Gene, I was brought into a world of the unknown and I was becoming like an addict who had found uncertainty as his own personal brand of heroin.

Six months after our IPO, I received an usual text from Louis asking me to join him in Paris for the next board meeting. Since our company became public, our CEO had been spending a surprising amount of time in France, which I noticed after he missed a few executive team meetings.

# Chapter Six

## Visiting Paris

*Rue des Pyramides, 1st Arrondissement, May 2000*

The 1st Arrondissement in Paris is less than seventy square miles and hosts the Louvre Museum, home to the "Mona Lisa." This prestigious neighborhood is a lively district that features Hausmann-era boulevards and parks such as the Tuileries and the 17th-century Palais Royal. Fashionistas troop to the designer boutiques and luxury jewelers along chic Rue Saint Honoré and Place Vendôme. Les Halles shopping district has international fashion chains along Rue de Rivoli and in a vast underground mall. I was renting a small apartment close to our offices located on Rue de Rivoli so I could attend a week of meetings called by Louis, our CEO, on behalf of our investors. My apartment was 3 Rue des Pyramides next to the Place des Pyramides.

My flight arrived early on Saturday morning and I was looking forward to a Sunday of visits.

I was sitting at the terrace of the Cafe Carrousel and enjoying a late lunch of a Cote de boeuf, some Frites and a creme brulee, one of my favorite French desserts that never quite tastes authentic when consumed in the US and which I was very much looking forward to. I could see the beautiful Roue in the Jardin des Tuileries, Tuileries Garden, the highlight of the Fête Forraine, a small amusement park opened during the summer. The Tuileries Garden is a beautiful public garden located between the Louvre and the Place de la Concorde which was created by Catherine de' Medici as the garden of the Tuileries Palace in 1564. It was eventually opened to the public in 1667 and became a public park after the French Revolution.

As I sat down, I was immediately taken by the beautiful surrounding buildings. Inspired by the Italian Renaissance, the proper Parisian architectural style began when

singularity and elegance were added to the uniformity and proportion of both Ancient and Renaissance styles.

I particularly marveled at facades, the most important element of the Haussmann style built in stone. I later learned that in Haussmann style, aesthetic gradation of buildings is parallel to social gradation. Each building consists of 7 floors:

A high-ceilinged ground floor that can accommodate shops with a first floor – called “mezzanine” – for storage or housing. These two stages are often horizontally striped.

A “Noble” second floor, with balconies and rich window frames. Why is the second stage the “noble” one? Because at that time, elevators did not yet exist. Therefore, the second floor helped rich people avoid the exhausting task of climbing stairs.

The third and fourth floors are more conventional, with poorer window frames. Individual balconies appeared at the end of the Haussmann period following new regulations.

The fifth floor has a running balcony. This floor is not “noble,” but has a balcony for the sake of balance in the aesthetics of the façade.

The last floor is attic rooms, which nowadays has become the ‘chambre de bonnes’, nanny’s room or rented as students' studio.

I had chosen a terrasse chair and faced the Place des Pyramides for a perfect view of the statue of Joan of Arc, a 1874 French gilded bronze equestrian sculpture by Emmanuel Frémiet.

The equestrian statue of Joan of Arc is one of the most famous in Paris. A statue that since its creation in the 19th century has always been a political symbol, but whose history is unknown. Secretly replaced ten years after its creation, the statue we see today is not the original.

In 1870, after the defeat of the country in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War, the Third Republic wanted to restore pride and hope, and commissioned a statue of Joan of Arc, national heroine.

The decision was made to raise an equestrian statue a few meters from the place where she was wounded in 1429.

The statue was inaugurated in 1874.

But very quickly, the realization was criticized. The sculptor, Emmanuel Frémiet, who was working on the second version he had to deliver to the city of Nancy, decided to modify the horse for this other statue. And, secretly, he made a new equestrian statue for the place des Pyramides. But how did he replace it without being seen?

In 1898, during the construction of the metro, the statue had to be removed. This posed a unique opportunity for Frémiet who, without saying anything to anyone, replaced the old sculpture with the new one. And covered it with a golden patina to hide the substitution.

Why did he choose to not be seen and why did he keep it a secret? I wondered.

I was overwhelmed by the statue's beauty. She was majestic, sublime and showed great strength. I wished for a moment in which I could be like her and go after my own demon,

my self-conscious, criticizing mind that regularly wins battles.

I had a war going on in my mind. *Being truly alive* or *fitting-in* were the two opposite camps and deep down, I knew the outcome: I would either live while dying or truly live.

This gilded bronze equestrian sculpture is the statue that you can see today, yet it is not the same one that was originally placed in the center of the square. Those who could remember the earliest version are long gone and therefore it has become a memory in a story.

I was reminded of a conversation with Gene about how unreliable our memories are and why they damage our lives. “Beware of your memory,” she told me. “We never remember the truth or what really happened, because what we remember is filtered through our colored view of the world. We remember segments of events that string together a make-up story that fits with our own perspective of ourselves, our own narratives. The more we let go of the

past, the more we are changing the present, which seeds the future.”

“What do you mean? I asked.

“Our brain works on autopilot based on conditioned responses from childhood and from trans-generational emotions,” she explains. “It is in a black box and is being sent sense data from inside and outside the body. It makes predictions for what happens next based on past experiences of equivalence or similarity by looking at the categories or beliefs. For example, our brain thinks the last time I was in *this situation*, this is *what it was like*, *i.e* threatening, so it constructs a set of responses. In short, our memory holds us back and keeps us captive of our past and conditioned behaviors. We think it keeps us safe when in reality this comfort blinds us from what we truly need to be alive.”

I knew in my gut that she was right.

Just look at nature, I thought. Life is perpetual movement, constant change. It reorganizes itself at each season and each passing year. It doesn't mourn the death of a leaf

falling but rather makes her dance until she reaches the ground and then embraces her like one of her children, to become rich soil and birth a new spur.

How can we not change, evolve and adjust our own direction at every instant? It's the movement that radiates and rejuvenates life. Movement and flow feed life's natural desire to be alive which expresses itself in the creation of all her children, her co-creative living beings.

“So beware of your memories,” she concluded. “I try to not waste my time in the past, indulging myself into made-up stories. Instead, I hold all my beliefs as assumptions on how the world works.”

“My mind is a bad neighborhood. I try not to go there alone.” I said laughing.

I felt her warm smile in my heart and I felt hopeful.

“You know, you can rewrite your story by changing your memory,” she responded. “Can you think of a bad memory you'd like to release?”

“Well...Wow! That's not an easy answer.” I said uncomfortably.

“What is the first childhood memory that comes to mind that doesn’t feel good?” she inquired, trying to help me cross the bridge.

“Ok, I can think of one. I was sitting on my bed. I must have been 5 or 6 years old and I heard my brother having one of his tantrums. My father rushed into his room and beat him up. That crushed me. I felt powerless and terribly sad. To this day, a part of me wished I could have helped, calm him down, or talk to my father to bring some peace. But I covered my ears to not hear my brother scream as he was being beaten. Anger was not accepted in our family and as a result, I always try to cheer up everyone around me to avoid any unpleasant situation.”

I felt a tear running on my cheek. My throat was tied and my eyes blurred. Here I was, a fifty-year old adult being all emotional from a memory that I hadn’t thought in ages.

How does she do it? I wondered. Gene had a way of reading through me and bringing me back to my authentic self.

“Good,” she said, “Let’s use this painful memory. First, let’s start by moving our body slightly from right to left, like a pendulum and close your eyes. Let’s take a few deep breaths. Now, put your right hand on your forehead. You remember those water pressed tattoos we used to have as children? Well, imagine that like a tattoo, as you are pressing slightly on your forehead, your memory gets imprinted in the palm of your hand. Imagine the scene that you just described to me: you are a five or six-year-old sitting on your bed and hearing your brother having a tantrum and being disciplined by your father. Imagining this image being imprinted on your hand from your forehead. Now, slowly bring your hand in front of your eyes and look at your hand. See the scene like a drone would record it. Then, use your thumb as the talking character using a helium voice. You know, the voice we have when we breathe from a helium balloon? Make your thumb talk to you, you as the child in the scene, like this: *“Alex, what is happening? You look so sad and you can’t make it stop,”* she said in a high pitched voice.

Then, close your fist and bring it slowly closer to your face, blow on your hand and watch the memory go to the ceiling.”

“This is the first step to disassociate yourself from a painful memory. Try it and see how it makes you feel.” she concluded.

I had read several books on memory and on introspection. When you create a space in a past memory, it changes your perspective of the memory and by practicing some of the techniques that includes using words, gestures, and breathing, it reduces its grasp and allows new behaviors to emerge. I felt a release, like some weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

On Sunday morning, I woke up energized. The sky was clear. Even the clouds were beautiful in Paris. Their shapes were round and crystal white. “How was it possible,” I wondered, “that everything is so beautiful in Paris?”

Before I left California, Martin, my colleague had mentioned the Catacombs as one of the worthwhile visits in Paris and I thought I would let my curious mind wander

and visit this unusual site. I took the subway from Pyramides, changed at Chatelet and arrived at Denver-Roucheau.

The Catacombs are located at 1 Av. du Colonel Henri Rol-Tanguy in the 14th arrondissements and their history starts in the late eighteenth century, when major public health problems tied to the city's cemeteries led to a decision to transfer their contents to an underground site. Paris authorities chose an easily accessible site that was, at the time, located outside the capital: the former Tombe-Issoire quarries under the plain of Montrouge. In operation since at least the fifteenth century and then abandoned, these quarries were a small part of the labyrinth that extended under the city over approximately 800 hectares. Preparation of the site and the organization of bone transfers were entrusted to Charles Axel Guillaumot, an inspector at the Department of General Quarry Inspection. The mission of this department, which had been founded on April 4, 1777, by Louis XVI, was to consolidate the abandoned quarries following major

collapses of the ground under Paris in the mid-eighteenth century.

The first evacuations were made from 1785 to 1787 and concerned the largest cemetery in Paris, the Saints-Innocents cemetery, which had been closed in 1780 after consecutive use for nearly ten centuries. The tombs, common graves and charnel house were emptied of their bones, which were transported at night to avoid hostile reactions from the Parisian population and the Church. Transfers continued after the French Revolution until 1814, with the suppression of parochial cemeteries, such as Saint-Eustache, Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs and the Bernardins Convent, in the center of Paris. They were begun again in 1840, during urban renovation by Louis-Philippe and the Haussmannian reconfiguration of the city from 1859 to 1860. The site was consecrated as the “Paris Municipal Ossuary” on April 7, 1786, and, from that time forward, took on the mythical name of “Catacombs”, in reference to the Roman catacombs, which had fascinated the public since their discovery.

“Votre ticket.”

I took the ticket handed to me by the agent and followed the arrows. I went down a long stair and felt some dizziness. I reached ground level with a white room filled with images and text to learn about the history of the site. Then I saw a long narrow and dark corridor with shallow lights every few meters. The audio guide would stop me on several occasions to tell me about the construction of the stone quarry made of clay and how the bones were dumped into two quarry wells and then distributed and piled into the galleries by the quarry workers.

After a good 10-minute walk, I finally arrived at the entry in a round room with a large frame above the entryway with these words:

*“Arrête! C’est ici l’empire de la mort”.*

*“Stop! Here is the empire of death”*

This was the part where all the bodies were buried. Millions of bones, primarily femurs and humerus were orderly displayed on each side. The quarry workers were

creative, it seems; skulls formed various shapes from a heart to patterned lines.

As I walked slowly, here and there, on large stones I read philosophers' quotes.

*“Souviens-toi, homme,*

*Que tu es poussière et que*

*Tu reviendras poussière. Genesis”*

*“Remember, man,*

*That you are dust and that*

*You will come back dust. Genesis”*

Having worked for a French company for several years, it has given me the opportunity to improve my French reading and writing skills.

*“Pensez le matin que vous n'irez pas jusqu'au soir et le soir que vous n'irez pas jusqu'au matin. Alphonse Rabbe”*

*“Think in the morning you won't go until the evening and in the evening you won't go until the morning. Alphonse Rabbe”*

The ceiling became lower and I had to bend my head to avoid hitting it. I felt oppressed and gradually anxious. All

those bones, skulls and dead people were the reminder of what was next for me, for all of us. How can we go on in life without realizing that this is what we have to expect?

At that moment, I remembered Gene's words.

“When you are at peace with death, only then can you truly live.”

She was right. I was desperately afraid of dying, the pain, the unknown of the after-life, so I knew that I wasn't truly living. I was trying to protect myself, to stay safe and more importantly to fit in. I was afraid of truly being myself, scared to be rejected or finding I was unfit for my tribe. I was scared to live because I was afraid to die.

Gene once asked me: “Do you know these words? Memento Mori.”

She added, “I often take time to reflect on those words. And if you do it too, you might find an exit door to a renewed sense of living.”

Memento Mori is Latin and translates, “*Remember that you have to die,*” which is an artistic or symbolic reminder of the inevitability of death.

For a brief instant that would linger as a deep sense of awareness in my life, as I was walking through the tunnels surrendered by millions of bones and skulls, I felt deeply insignificant. I knew that I would become one of them. I didn’t really matter in the grand scheme of things and I was a nobody. I felt overwhelmingly uncomfortable and I knew my ego was fighting this meaningless status.

As I noticed my heart beating faster, I looked around and found myself alone. All of a sudden, a few lamps crackled and turned off, bringing me into more darkness. This sudden change of light made me stumble and by reflex my hand reached out to the wall for balance and touched the bones. I removed my hand quickly and knelt to the ground to avoid falling down.

My vision blurred and I was gasping for air. I knew that I was going to die. Every cell of my body felt it and every

breath was a step towards my end. Soon, I will be those bones stocked against each other, stripped of all identity and meaning. I searched for my phone to create some light but as I reached into my pocket, the phone fell on the floor. I panicked.

“No!” I heard myself say.

I was on my knees touching the floor, desperately searching for my phone, when the lights went back on. As I raised my head, right in front of me was this scripture from Lamartine, a French author and poet:

*“Ainsi tout change, ainsi tout passe.*

*Ainsi, nous-même nous passons,*

*Helas! Sans laisser plus de traces*

*Que cette barque où nous glissons*

*Sur cette mer où tout s’efface.”*

*“So everything changes, so everything passes.*

*So we ourselves pass,*

*Alas! Without leaving more traces*

*That this boat where we slide*

*On this sea where everything is fading away. "*

My heart was pounding, I felt light headed but I could feel a slight joy, a subtle excitement, a spurr of hope. Through the light that made these words appear, I was being brought back to life. I realized, in that very instant, that the only true freedom one has comes from accepting that we will die, that our time is limited and that we are insignificant, which relieves us from the illusion of being in a pack. I felt alive and free in the kingdom of death. I finally remembered that I have to die to truly live. I had nothing to lose anymore because being alive was the greatest gift of all. I had nothing to prove to anyone. I didn't need anything from anyone anymore, but only to experience this human condition.

A few signs indicated the exit. I was almost at the end of the visit when I stopped by a large stone with those written words:

*"Non tanget justos tormentum mortis" Sap. 3.1.*

*Les justes sont à l'abri des angoisses de la mort."*

*"The righteous are sheltered from the anguish of death."*

Who are those righteous? Are those the “Righteous Among the Nations,” an honorific used by the State of Israel to describe non-Jews who risked their lives during the Holocaust to save Jews from extermination by the Nazis for altruistic reasons?

From that moment on, I decided to lead my life with compassion and in service of others. These two unsettling truths, the inevitability of death and our limited time alive, were profoundly changing my life.

I was now realizing that there might be a third element necessary to achieving true lasting freedom: accepting the randomness of the world and of our existence.

# Chapter Seven

## Board Meetings in Paris

*Rue des Rivoli, 1st Arrondissement, May 2000*

After a weekend filled with high emotions and a life-changing experience, I felt a renewed interest in my job and the people I was working with.

On Monday morning, I walked through the office door with excitement. Our office was a typical French apartment converted into a business space. The high molded ceilings made you feel sophisticated and you couldn't help but notice the beautiful and elegant carved-wood detailing of the leaf and flowers pattern. Seemingly indescribable in many of the flats in Paris built by the early 1900s, molded ceilings featured ornate architectural accents such as crown molding and trim. The office mastered the art of blending traditional Parisian style with purist contemporary design. The desks and natural color palette offered a minimalist

experience as you were welcomed by a sculptural copper pendant light in the main entrance.

I clearly remembered my first day working in Paris coming right from sunny California. I was wearing my regular polo shirt and khaki pants causing some looks. I quickly traded the outfit for a classic suit, as I wanted to blend in. In the first few days, I always had a thin sweater with me in case the air conditioning was put on high, typical of American culture. However, there was no air conditioning anywhere and the morning fresh air was sufficient for the thick stone walls to keep a cool temperature throughout the day. I later understood why so many Europeans visiting the U.S. complain about the "freezing cold" temperatures inside offices, buses or hotels.

Staying with cultural differences, I had to get used to being served during the long daily lunches of a glass of tap water without ice. On several occasions, I was lectured by my French colleagues about one of the main reasons to avoid drinking chilled water: it has a serious implication on your

digestion; chilled water as well as some cold beverages contract the blood vessels and also restrict digestion. The natural process of absorbing nutrients during digestion is hindered when you consume chilled water. French people like the taste and aromas of their drinks. Cooling drinks deadens all taste by reducing evaporation which is important for taste. They seldom put ice in spirits; preferring their spirits to give off the aromas. Needless to say, ice doesn't go in the glasses of wine.

On that morning, after the usual hand-shaking practice with every single person in the office, I was puzzled to see Martin standing by the espresso machine.

“Hi Martin! I didn’t know you were coming! What is happening?” I said anxiously and in a low voice.

“Hi Alex, I’m not sure myself,” he responded, “I was summoned here without any details and I was even asked to keep it confidential. Now that I know you are here, I’m thinking it’s either a big promotion for both of us or the end.” My head was racing with assumptions and a few theories. I had a bad gut feeling about this situation. Martin

had an over positive personality and, in my view, he often lived in Lalaland. If it was a promotion, we both wouldn't have been asked to come without explanation.

“We're having our board meetings in Paris this year,” said Louis, the CEO a week prior, “and I'd like you to join us.”

My work was impeccable, the department and team well managed, I wasn't aware of any pending issues.

Over the course of the week, the meetings went surprisingly well. They were productive, yet challenging as we were made aware by some of our board members of our unsteady financial growth situation. Our investors shared their concerns about how our customer base and our margins might not be large enough to support all of our planned expansions.

Since we went public last November, we had pursued an aggressive expansion to many cities without proving our business model in our first market. Yet, our investors were the ones pressuring us to grow very fast in order to obtain a first-mover advantage and on several occasions I shared my concerns about the risk of such rapid growth. My

vision and recommendation was to make the customer experience exceptional, so that people spread the word to their friends and family. Every experience detail had to be well-thought out and created to perfection. From the on brand colored plastic shipping tubs to the drivers who for a short moment transformed themselves into a personal shoppers, building relationships through conversation while they organized the food in the kitchen cupboards. I strongly believed that it was this unique and surprisingly exceptional customer experience that would make us succeed. We were training our drivers in the art of conversation which, for them, was converting into higher tips. Often, customers asked for a particular driver, demonstrating their appreciation of the delivery experience. This model was never heard of and we were experimenting with breaking old cliches and reprogramming behaviors from inside and outside the organization.

My days at the bank, crunching numbers in my first job were long gone. I had found behavioral analysis often managed by the market research department a lot more

fascinating. You couldn't change the data but only craft a different story. On the other hand, with new systems and clever processes, you could change people's behaviors and that was fascinating to me. I was always passionate about why people do what they do. There was something intriguing about influencing others' behaviors which I always connected to my own desire to help others in order to avoid conflicts.

But it was also about changing my own behavior. I was aware of having a repeated unpleasant pattern in my professional life: after giving everything I had, excelling in my work and showing exceptional results, I found myself leaving; the company was either bought out, shut down, or I was being asked to leave without clear reasons, looking back at a bunch of lions fighting for the meat.

I felt I needed Gene's wise words and unique worldview to lower my anxiety.

"I'm getting really nervous about being called to Paris without any agenda given ahead of time," I shared.

“I can imagine. Yet, remember that most thoughts are re-run of past thoughts. They are usually mostly one-sided and not true.” she responded.

“Easy for you to say!” I snapped back.

“We look for enemies to hide from our own pain,” she replied.

I paused.

“What pain would I be hiding? I’m curious,” I asked.

“You’re the one who knows,” she said, “But I can tell you this: The cause and effect are stories that create pain: I did this: *guilt*. You did this: *blame*. I did this and expected this: *anxiety*. These are just stories. You said, “I’m getting really nervous.” I AM is self-preservation.”

“You’re right.” I responded, “I do feel threatened and scared to see that pattern happening again.”

“You know, your trauma is held in the body which can be released through mindfulness.” She added.

“Mindfulness? Can you share more? I asked.

“Sure. Mindfulness is about bringing more presence, without any agenda, to the people or the circumstances

around us. Any negative thoughts are resistance to mindfulness. Be curious about your own resistance. Where is resistance held in my body? When there is suffering in the body, we try to fix it instead of just paying attention to it.”

“I see. When I start to think too much, I often feel stomach aches, I know that. How do I go about this?” I asked.

“I’m happy to share my own practice of Buddhist Mindfulness. I use a four-step process: First, I recognize my feelings and I accept that the feelings are true. Only then, do I look more deeply and investigate how it feels in my body, what story it tells, what it is asking of me. We need to ask ourselves if the story is true, really true. Finally, the last step is to not identify with the story because it is not who we are. In a way, we are carrying our parent’s fears and limitations. Yet, their history doesn't define us. Behind our craving for social recognition and self-protection is our longing for love. So the goal, should there be one, is not to

perfect ourselves but to perfect our love. Love is longing for love. This. Is. It.”

I felt invigorated by Gene’s words and a sudden release of my anxiety through letting go, at least temporarily, of the story that was running in my mind.

Over the week, I presented a few key ideas to the board which were applauded and as a result, I became an overnight sensation, like a prodigy child. My ideas were “unheard of” and had “so much potential for greatness”.

I pitched a new idea on community building for our customer base. What if we gave our customers a place to share recipes and meet one another at local events? From food delivery to food community!

I was aware that only five online communities existed but in the first part of 1999: I noticed the explosion of new online communities like BlackPlanet, KiwiBox and LiveJournal. Having spent countless hours in online gaming worlds like Doom and classmate.com since their launch in 1995, I knew how communities created loyal relationships that went far beyond loyal customers. When

you were in a community, you felt a sense of ownership and responsibility to participate and help others.

I saw the Internet as a virtual ‘third place’, different from home and work, that allowed people to hang out and engage in activities with others, such as hobby groups, gaming communities, and sports leagues. Only Apple was an innovator when they launched eWorld, their online service which ran between 1994 and 1996. The services included email, called eMail Center which I had for a while, news, software installs and a bulletin board system called Community Center). Users of eWorld were often referred to as "ePeople". I remember how eWorld was considered innovative for its time, even though it was expensive compared to other services and not well marketed, which is why eventually it failed to attract a high number of subscribers.

I strongly believed that we had to innovate constantly if we wanted to stay in the lead, otherwise our main competitor HomeGrocer.com was going to surpass us—that is, unless Kroger and Safeway bought them out.

Two nights before my flight back, I woke up in the middle of the night in pain. It was about 1 am when I started to feel a terrible stomach cramp. My first thought was that the dish I had enjoyed for dinner, the Moules-Frite, might be the cause.

Considered the national dish of Belgium, moules à la marinière are mussels cooked in a simple broth of dry white wine with a base of garlic and shallots fried in butter. It's one of my favorite dinners for two reasons, first it's perfect for two or three people to dive into together and second, it's messy. You're going to have white wine sauce spiked with chorizo dripping down your chin as you chow down tender mussels.

Unfortunately, it was not a success for my stomach.

By three am, I was in a state of pain so vivid that I dialed the French emergency number because I didn't want to die alone in the apartment.

“Room 24,” said the nurse. Martin ran up the stairs and peeked his head through the door.

“Can I come in?” he asked.

“Sure. Your friend hasn’t woken up but, please take a seat.”  
the nurse said.

I opened my eyes and found myself in a hospital bed.

“Oh, hi, you’re awake! How are you doing?” Martin asked.

“I’m ok. What are you doing here? I asked in a broken  
voice.

“I got a call in the middle of night and was told that you  
had called the emergency and passed out in your  
apartment. Good reflex!”

A doctor comes in.

“Bonjour, Je suis le Docteur Gervais,” shaking hands with  
Martin.

“Bonjour Doctor,” said Martin in a strong American  
accent.

The Doctor turned to me and said with a strong French  
accent, “So, how are you feeling this morning?”

“I’m good. What happened to me, Doctor?” I asked.

“You had kidney stones. You’ve been lucky, they passed out of your system rather quickly. So you are good to go.”

I remembered my conversation with Gene from just a few days ago about trauma being held in our body.

“When there is suffering in the body, we try to fix it instead of just paying attention to it,” she said to me.

At the time, I wondered what that meant. I would later find out from her that according to mind-body connection knowledge, kidney stones represent lumps of undissolved anger. Gene had urged me several times to face my anger so I could dissolve all past problems with ease.

“The difficulties and pain you experience are not yours but the ones of being human. Same with joy and happiness. They belong to humanity and they connect all of us,” she said to me.

I wasn't quite sure what she meant at the time, but months later on a beach in Maui, I would find out the truth of this profound statement.

# Chapter Eight

## Being Fired in Foster City

*September 2000*

I was told that it was not about me. What a bunch of bullshit! Other people were staying and not everyone was being let go. How can it not be about me??

I gave everything I had, countless hours of work and I went beyond what was expected. I had delivered something exceptional that top media outlets showcased on multiple occasions, providing us with incredible brand awareness. I felt diminished, and more than unappreciated, I was denied in my core of being who I was. I felt powerless and miserable. How could you do that to me!?

Louis told me, “Our company's customer base and margins aren't large enough to support all of the planned expansions. We need to make adjustments. It's not about you. Please, don't take it personally.”

I looked at him intensely for thirty seconds at least, or what seemed to be an eternity, and then I walked out of the office in silence. My silence was louder than any words I could have said. My silence carried the revolt of millions of good workers fired for the sake of money. In just an instant, I had become a supply chain piece dismissed without any thoughts, thrown out because it is convenient. My departure brought the executive team more time with the board, and my "At Will" employment contract was the key to their salvation. Most businesses turn to episodic restructuring and routine layoffs, but in the long term, both damage employee engagement and company profitability. Companies that shed workers lose the time invested in training them as well as their networks of relationships and knowledge about how to get work done. Not to mention that a low morale weakens engagement. Layoffs cause employees to feel they've lost control: The fate of their peers sends a message that hard work and good performance do not guarantee their jobs.

I used to have many discussions with my French colleagues about our American concept of "At Will" employment

which France, like most European countries, does not recognize. Instead, there is a presumption of and desire for indefinite term employment relationships. There is less freedom for employers to end the employment relationship. Practically speaking, this means that terminations in France are often quite costly for employers. But this desire for a long-term is what seeds trusted relationships, something that we are deeply lacking in Silicon Valley.

My fate was sealed and there was nothing I could do to change it. That damn unconscious pattern was alive and stronger than ever. In a desperate attempt to breathe, I reached out to the phone to hear Gene's voice.

"We have two scripts running at all times: away from or towards." She said to me, after listening to my sobbing.

"Which do you play?"

I was always confused by Gene's questions. She would question my behavior, my thoughts and my instinct in a subtle and gentle way that was enticing and addicting. She knew very well that I wanted to push further my own

understanding of the game of life. As for me, I knew very well that I was indefinitely hooked by her. By summer 2000, we were writing to each other daily and sometimes we had two phone conversations a week. But I missed seeing her face. While I was hoping to take a vacation in Hawaii where she resided, I didn't know much about her and her life. I knew she was a photographer and a painter, always on the move and "traveling freely" as she put it, but she rarely spoke about herself, or perhaps I was so focused on my own life and problems that I didn't pay attention to her challenges. I recall a conversation about her lifestyle.

"So you travel all the time? You don't have a fixed address?" I asked, curious.

"What is the un-lived life? She asked rhetorically, "To me, it's a life driven by objectives based on material possessions and social status and by goals based on others' approval. So, yes I move around, I meet new people and more importantly, I move past my fears so I arrive at the truth."

"What is the truth?" I asked.

She laughed. Her laugh was one like a child's, innocent and pure. It was easy to imagine the little girl in her, laughing joyfully. Her laugh made me smile, and for an instant, I forgot the weight I thought I was carrying on my shoulders.

“The truth?” she said, “The Truth is the freedom to create.” “So which is it?” she asked again, patiently.

Which script was I playing? Was I running away from something or towards it?

This question was hitting a nerve, a deep belief ingrained in me since I was a child. I always lived my life moving towards my object of desires. I pursued everything I wanted. I was a go-getter and a proud independent individual who never expected others to give me what I wanted on a golden platter. If I wanted something, I had to get it myself. I knew that my life was mine and I was free to live it as I pleased: free will was a deep belief. I was a proud American living in the land of opportunity.

Born and raised in Chicago, I went to Silicon valley at the first opportunity I was given. Like miners would flee and

leave town for the gold mines during the California gold rush, I packed my bags and left when I was let go from one of my jobs. Similarly to the thousands of would-be gold miners, known as '49ers', traveling overland across the mountains or by sea, sailing to Panama or even around Cape Horn, the southernmost point of South America, who rushed to California with visions of gilded promise to discover a harsh reality, I had some disappointments of my own.

Silicon Valley was a male-driven, competitive, elitist, and racist place to live and work in. Just a few years into living in Silicon Valley, my mental health took a hit. There, it was cool to work sixty+ hour weeks, and be fanatically dedicated to your team and your job. It was also strangely permissible to exhibit some of the darker eccentricities of celebrities like Steve Jobs, such as lashing out at people, because such practices are supposedly a prerequisite for being a genius or maven in business. I had my fair share of bad bosses and even lost a job standing up for one of my colleagues who was badly treated.

Silicon Valley also had serious, systemic problems with elitism. Age was a problem no one talked about. Young people who work in well-regarded companies like Facebook or Google were generally treated differently than their counterparts in older, less sexy companies like Oracle or Intel. The Job role was also a place where elitism shined. QA, known as Quality Assurance, generally gets treated like the “bottom of the food chain,” and QA engineers are sometimes considered socially inferior to developers or product managers- especially in large company cultures. Being “technical” in general was seen as a desirable trait, to the point that people in other business roles such as HR or Research were sometimes portrayed as “less valuable” to a company’s success. My job in customer research was never valued as what it should have been: the epicenter of insights and competitive intelligence.

Finally, while Silicon Valley prides itself on being a benevolent meritocracy, there is an image culture in the Valley, and especially in San Francisco, that is on par with what you see in places like Hollywood. “Wantrepreneurship,” as they called it, the “fake it till you

make it” culture, wasn’t just bizarre; it was socially unhealthy. It promoted an incredulous culture in tech that made it hard to meet and trust people. Similarly, it misrepresented the brutal difficulty of actually being an entrepreneur. We all recognized that startup success is very rare, yet there was a frantic culture of people, especially young people in their early thirties or twenties who pretended to be successful entrepreneurs just to “fit in.”

Should I leave out the most destructive behaviors of all? Systemic sexism exists across all parts of high tech and the industries that directly serve it, as well as racism. African Americans, Latinos, and other minorities who are also historically underrepresented in STEM or in universities that fuel Silicon Valley’s engineering-focused culture were underrepresented and frequently stigmatized. Just as the image culture of Silicon Valley has produced its systemic issues of elitism, sexism, and racism, it has similarly created an environment where simply thinking differently than the Silicon Valley norm is undesirable. The groupthink was something I was never able to get used to and having traveled a lot for work, I was infuriated more than once

when I noticed so much blind following that went on in Silicon Valley.

I responded to Gene's question.

"I always thought I was running toward what I wanted in life thinking it was a good thing, but now I'm not sure," I heard myself say out loud. I feel that perhaps what I'm really doing is running away from who I really am."

"That's good," she said. "What you are experiencing is the dissolution of your story. Remember... A story needs a hero, goals and problems. When you lose your identity, the hero in your story fades away, and with her goes her goals. That's frightening, because you have based your purpose and meaning of life on the future fulfillment of those goals: wealth, fame, career status, etc.

So now, you feel like the child who is told that Santa Claus doesn't exist! What are you supposed to look forward to in the future? Or the once religious person who no longer believes in heaven. So why be good or do good? Why even continue to live? All is meaningless."

“What a rip off!” I exclaimed. “Living feels like being in a cardboard box for the one role that most of us failed to play well. And those who succeed end up losing themselves and being stripped of their true essence, their childlike mind as you call it.”

“Yes. The real work,” she continued. “The deep work of becoming our true self is an inside job! It has nothing to do with others. So many have written about the topic of being our worst enemies. All the struggles that I’ve experienced happened in my own head, between my two ears.”

I was astonished; I had lived fifty years by following the established path, only did I feel dissatisfied and burnt out. Something had to happen before it was too late. I had to truly live before I died. I decided to stop postponing my desire to meet with Gene and give myself a much needed break. I headed to Hawaii for a few days to get away from the humdrum of everyday life, and to recharge myself.

# Chapter Nine

## Meeting Gene at The Fairmont Kea Lani Hotel

*Lahei, Maui, Hawaii January 2001*

After the holidays, I booked a flight on January 1st, which is when the post-Christmas blues are officially over. I was excited to get a fresh start with the new year.

I remembered how the first time I traveled to Hawaii for a business trip, I was surprised to see so many familiar business chains. All the typical California brands were there: Costco, Safeway, Trader's Joe. Being on an Island, for some reasons I was expecting something more islander.

When I arrived, I took a taxi to the Fairmont Kea Lani hotel which was located right in front of the beach. It was mid-afternoon already and, as we drove, the roads shimmered in the heat of the midday sun. I opened the windows and closed my eyes so the sun could bathe my

face in its warm light. The driver apologized for unexpectedly running low on gas and, a few minutes later, stopped at a gas station. While he filled up his tank, I quickly sent a SMS to Gene. “I just arrived. See you later at the beach!” We had planned to meet by the beach in front of the hotel at six o’clock. I raised my gaze and a bright and colorful camper van caught my attention. Parked on the side road, the blue van was decorated with a few yellow and green flowers on its side and red curtains on its back windows for the sleeping area. I always pictured happy hippies owning these types of vans living a life of free spirit outside the norms and the daily grind of life.

Suddenly, I had a weird feeling. I wondered if this could be Gene’s freedom. She never specified how she was moving around so often and I had assumed that she was staying in hotels or short-term rentals. She had mentioned how much she enjoyed driving. “The world is so beautiful and life is not just about people. The landscape, nature, sightseeing, every place has its uniqueness. How can someone live their entire life in the same place? I don’t understand it! It’s

cutting ourselves from the true exploration of what life is! Don't you think so?" she shared with excitement.

"I guess. How often do you move from one place to another?" I asked.

"It depends, there are no rules. Sometimes, I find myself spending a couple of nights in a new town and feeling that I should keep going farther. Other times, I stay six months and I stay longer in the community by building closer relationships. I remember my time in Denver, Colorado. I had met Marc, who's now a very good friend. He is a custom shoe maker and he taught me how to work with leather. I really enjoyed it."

"A custom shoe maker? Does that still exist in today's world?" I said, surprised and influenced by my narrow modern worldview.

"Sure!" She added, "Lots of people know the importance of the right footwear and it's not that expensive if you take good care of your shoes. You can keep them for a very long time."

“I should probably check him out.” I added, “I often have foot and ankle pain. I have a bunion that bothers me. So I have to wear a wide shoe size.”

“Our feet are so interesting. Did you know that they represent our understanding of ourselves, of life, and of others. Often, foot problems signal a fear of the future and of not stepping forward in life.”

“Interesting. I’ll have to think about that. I also have what’s called Plantar Fasciitis.” I added.

“Are you the ‘shock absorber’ for your family and friends?” She asked.

“I guess, in a way, yes. I always make sure that everyone is safe, that’s true.” I responded.

“Then, you know what to do to remove your pain.,” she said.

“What do you mean?” I asked eagerly.

“Taking on the role of the shock absorber can hide underneath a craving for control, which can come from a lack of trust in others, and thus in oneself,” she adds.

“Competence is a full body experience, you know. Our

body has a language to help us overcome all our fears. This is the whole secret of existence.”

“What is?” I asked, confused.

“The whole secret of existence is to have no fear at all,” she continued. “You see, it is so simple. Your brain makes decisions by curating the past and because context drives prediction in your brain, you need to change your context. Traveling, meeting new people, doing new things. The skill of enlightenment is to domesticate our mind: teach our mind manners and to be quiet unless called upon.”

I was far from being in the state of enlightenment. My mind had a mind of its own.

The taxi driver got back in the car and thanked me for waiting. As we drove away, from behind I noticed a woman with long brown hair similar to what I could remember of Gene. Was it her? I wondered.

We arrived at the hotel and I checked-in quickly. I entered my room and went by the window. Tiny specks of dust seemed to dance in the shaft of evening sunlight that slanted through the window. I opened my suitcase and

organized my clothes in the closet. It was five fifty and time to meet Gene at the beach. My room was located on the front side of the hotel and I had to go through the lobby to go to the front beach. As I walked past the lobby, I spotted the hippy blue van again parked in the front guest parking. Was it a random coincidence or was it hers?

My heart was racing and I felt nervous. I walked outside towards the sea. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows on the ground. The slanting rays of the setting sun gave a warm orange tinge to the sky. From afar, I recognized her immediately. She was laying on the sand. She had her arms and legs apart like an angel. I walked silently closer to her. Her eyes were closed and she was smiling peacefully and breathing slowly. I raised my hand to create a shadow over her face. With her eyes closed, Gene recited:

“On the green of the hill,  
We will drink our fill  
Of golden sunshine,  
Till our brains intertwine”

She opened her eyes and with a big smile, she exclaimed, “Alex!”

“Wow! If it’s not on the golf green, it’s on a beach! I always find you laying on the ground. Was that “Hamlet”?”

“Close to nature so I can truly feel it,” she said while standing up, “No, It’s John Keats. One of my favorite English poets.”

She embraced me in her arms in a big cuddle. I felt her warmth and strength as she held me tightly. She smelled so delicious, a mixture of refreshing sea breeze and passion fruits. I stopped thinking for an instant and let her take me in her loving arms. I felt a sudden release of tension, my shoulders relaxed and I breathed deeper. Her energy was invigorating and intensely refreshing. She pulled back and with her two hands on my upper arms, she looked at me profoundly and she said, “It’s so good to see you. How are you feeling today?”

“Oh, you know. Now that I am jobless, I guess I’m free,” I replied with sadness and resentment.

“All we have is now, ” she said. “There. Is. Only. Now.”

She then continued in a recital voice: “I give the fight up: Let there be an end, a privacy, an obscure nook for me. I want to be forgotten even by God.”

As she gathered her things, a small notebook that she put in her bamboo-like bag and wore it cross-body, she added: “This is just an extract of a long poem that Robert Browning wrote in 1835. It took him six months to write it for us to enjoy today. Come, let’s walk on the beach and enjoy this magnificent moment together,” she said, taking my hand. We walked on the soft sand, the gold disc of the sun already touching the surface of the ocean. It seemed to disappear quickly, slipping behind a spaceship that spread its last rays. We decided to have dinner at a nearby Italian restaurant on the beach. The evening sky was aglow with bright city lights and the pale crescent moon shone like a silvery claw in the night sky. We sat down.

“I can’t stop thinking about my job. It’s been a few months now, but I’m still so angry.” I said, as I expressed my full resentment.

She looked at me with a smile. “Memories are like parfums. Better in small doses.”

“I know, but I just can’t forgive them.” I said clenching my jaw.

“Let’s pretend for a second that I am a fairy, shall we?” she said as she took one of the breadsticks from the table and waved it like a magic wand.

“Ok,” I said laughing.

“My name is Freedom, I am the fairy of Release. I know very well that humans are sensitive to others’ intentions, but they are in complete darkness when it comes to letting go. We cannot control what others do, feel, think, or believe, but let there be an end to the controversy. As Fairy of Release, I shall grant you the gift of the release. I erase those people from your life so you can move forward, forgetting their very existence. If your paths shall cross in the future, they are no more than strangers to you and will be treated as such.”

“You’re right! I’m so self-centered!” I said. “Yes, Thank you Fairy. I shall be granted your gift.”

I often felt that I didn't deserve her. She was always so giving and she felt other people's needs deeply.

"So tell me about you. In your travels, have you been outside the US?" I asked.

"I have. The world is so big. One of my favorite places was Switzerland. I spent a year studying people and their culture. That's where I discovered why humans are rational according to their beliefs, not through logic."

We talked for hours until the waiter told us that they were closing shop. We walked back to the hotel and when we arrived at the parking lot in front of the lobby, Gene stopped by the blue hippy van and said: "Here we are. That's me."

# Chapter Ten

## **The Largest Banyan Tree in Maui**

*Lahaina, Maui, Hawaii January 2001*

The next day, Gene invited me to visit Lahaina, a seaside town and one of the four major towns in Maui that is visited by two million people, or approximately 80 percent of all Maui tourists, per year. Known for its long history, Lahaina was once the capital of the Hawaiian Kingdom and turned into a major whaling village in the mid-1800's. After cruising through the Front Street shopping district, passing oceanfront restaurants and stunning mountain scenery, we sat down in the Lahaina Banyan Court Park which is where visitors come to admire the largest Banyan Tree in Hawaii. This unbelievable tree isn't just the largest in Hawaii, it's one of the largest in all of the United States. This park is a popular gathering place for people, as well as birds — you'll hear them squawking at dusk as they settle

in to roost for the night under the magnificent banyan's leafy green canopy.

We were sitting on a bench taking in the energy of the place when I noticed a wiggly line on the inside of her forearm.

“You have a tattoo?” I asked Gene, looking at the inside of her wrist.

“Yes! I do.” she replied, and as she showed me her wrist closer. “What does it represent to you?” she asked.

“A wave?” I ventured.

“Exactly! Recently, someone looked at it and tried to remove it thinking a string was stuck on my arm. I laughed so hard. Poor guy. He was so embarrassed!” She added.

We both laugh.

“Is there a special meaning?” I asked, curiously.

“Of course! If you hang around people with tattoos you'll hear their entire life story through their tattoos. It's fascinating. My story is a simple reminder of how I want to live my life. I want to flow like water. When water

encounters a rock or debris, it doesn't freeze. It simply adjusts and goes around. It flows naturally."

"That's a good analogy. I wished I was like the water," I said, sadly. "I would have reacted differently in many of my past experiences."

"It's easy to say that afterwards. The past is a series of moments," she said. "Each one is perfect, complete, but we string them together to make a story that fits with our hero's story. That is a waste of time, and time is the only thing we truly have."

A man approached us with a big smile. He had overhanging eyebrows, thickish lips and was brown-skinned with wavy black hair. His smile made him seem gentle and kind.

"Aloha Gene! You're coming tonight, right?"

"Hi Kaimana. Of course! I'll bring a dessert, my own homemade chocolate mousse!" Gene said proudly.

"Yum," he said, licking his lips.

He looked at me and said: "She is the real deal. She gives true advice."

“It's difficult to know oneself. It's easy to give advice,”  
Gene interjected.

“She is Ali'i,” he said to me in a serious tone.

I looked at him with big curious eyes.

“It means chiefess,” he added and putting his hand on one  
of my shoulders he said, “I'm Kaimana. It's wonderful to  
meet you.”

“Good to meet you too, Kaimana.” I replied.

He went on to tell us his family's history. As Hawaiians,  
they were the descendants of Polynesians who migrated to  
Hawaii from Tahiti in the 9th or 10th century. He waved  
his hand at us. “We'll see you both tonight!” and he walked  
away.

“How do you know him?” I asked Gene.

“Kaimana is such a sweet person. I met him yesterday  
actually. He was fishing nearby. We got to talking and he  
invited me to a traditional dance held on the beach once a  
month. It's also a potluck so I'm bringing a dessert. Want  
to come?”

Later that night, I was waiting in the hotel lobby when Gene's hippy blue van pulled in front. I smiled and opened the passenger door.

"I still can't believe this is yours!" I said.

"Well, believe it, because that's how we'll get to the party! So hop in!" She invited me.

We arrived at a secluded beach.

"I think it's here," said Gene. "Let's see if we can find them."

We parked in an open space and walked through a narrow path to the beach. From afar, we could see torches and tents, people gathering around a fire and others dancing.

"Aloha. Hello!" said a woman dressed in a traditional Hawaiian costume.

"Mahalo for inviting us," Gene responded.

"A' ole palikir," the women responded.

"It means, "you're welcome," Gene whispered to me.

We walked on the beach and found Kaimana wearing the Hawaiian traditional costume too.

“Aloha! You came with your Malahini. Welcome to our gathering. Come with me and enjoy the food and music.”

“Malahini means newcomer,” Gene said to me.

“You speak Hawaiian?” I asked.

“No, not really. I just know a few words.”

Kaimana brought us to a huge table with food. Gene found a place for her dessert.

“Thank you. This is *ono grinds*,” said Kaimana, turning to me, “Delicious food,” he translated.

He handed me a small cup. “Here, take this drink, it will help you see the truth.”

“Oh, thank you. What is it?” I asked.

“A sort of shamanic tea,” Gene responded.

We stayed there, absorbing the music and the beautiful atmosphere. A group was dancing the Hula, the sensuous mimetic Hawaiian dance. Some were performing sitting, others standing with undulating gestures to instruments while chanting. Originally, the hula was a religious dance performed by trained dancers before the king or ordinary people to promote fecundity, to honor the gods, or to

praise the chiefs. The music stopped and people started gathering around Kaimana next to the pit fire.

“Welcome everyone. Thank you for coming tonight. We have someone very special with us tonight. She comes from far away. Her name is Gene but we will call her Keoki which means ‘alive.’ Please, Keoki,” inviting Gene to join him. Gene came next to him. He put one arm around her. She was standing there, simply beautiful with sparkles in her eyes. She looked like a happy little girl. With her palms together, she smiled and said: “I feel so much love here amongst you all. There is something special and unique about you, Kaimana, and about each of you. I’d like to share a poem that I wrote when I first met Alex. Is that ok?”

Kaimana made a gesture to invite her to continue.

“What if I was a bird

What if I was unborn

Would I feel any differences

With all my senses?

For some it is real,

For others it is just a dream.

What if it was a stream

Of pure awareness

That we call consciousness?”

They all chanted as a way to thank her. She walked back next to me.

Kaimana stepped back into the center. He had a sense of mystery about him.

“Tonight, we’re going to let go and wash away our painful emotions. We’re going to give them back to the dead ones to keep them where they belong, in the past. We know that most of our negative emotions are inherited from the trauma of past generations,” he said, “As we go about our lives, our brains construct emotions based on our past experiences. Instead of using our emotions to create unpleasant habits that become addictions, we should see them for what they really are: a personal compass. Emotions can help us navigate our mind, which is protected by a scaffolding of beliefs. Before we start our

Haka, I want to invite each of you to choose a painful story that you want to let go of.”

He raised his arms in the air and summoned: “Spirits and souls of the past, come take our stories that keep us stuck. Kāne, God of war, choose the one that we don’t vent about; Lono, God of peace, choose the one that we don’t hide from. Kānaloa, God of the ocean, choose the one that we can release today. Clear that story and that pain from our heart and our mind.”

While I was preparing my trip to Hawai‘i, I had learned that the Haka is a type of ceremonial Māori dance or challenge. Haka are usually performed in a group and typically represent a display of a tribe’s pride, strength and unity. Dance actions include foot-stamping, tongue protrusions and rhythmic body slapping to accompany a loud chant.

As I felt some excitement in anticipation for this show that I was about to witness, I suddenly remembered and felt some clarity about what Gene meant when she said to me a few months back: “The difficulties and pain you experience are not yours but the ones of being human.

Same with joy and happiness. They belong to humanity and they connect all of us.”

The atmosphere was deepening. I could feel a tension in the air that was palpable. A group of men in Hawaiian costumes were lining up behind Kaimana. They were warriors—warriors of greater consciousness. As he looked at them with pride, Kaimana invited the crowd: “Follow their gestures, follow their words, do what they do and let go of what hurts you, as it is no longer yours to carry.” The men started chanting together as one voice. They made faces, sticking their tongues out, gesturing, stamping their feet with such strength that the ground shook. They were strong and determined. Gene and others in the audience started mimicking them. It was beautiful music to my ears.

A quiet sense of reverence enveloped me. I felt like I was embarking upon reaches through time and space, to unite my human experience all the way back to antiquity. I was humbled. I forgot who I was and transcended my ego as I crossed a portal to the spirit world. Suddenly, I heard a loving voice in my head: “Remember the power of intention. What is your intention?” My vulnerability was

my shame. “Help me with my shame,” I mumbled. All my life I carried the facade of my strength, being strong in a deadly competitive world and as a result, I became a lone wolf. I took care of my family as an imposed duty and had lost myself in the role.

All of a sudden, I was experiencing the presence of infinite love in a new way showing me that there was nothing to escape from or to protect myself from. As I allowed myself to experience the emotional pain of my vulnerability, I didn’t need to seek oblivion in the temporary release that addiction grant us—whether to drugs or to any self-harming habit, be it compulsive working, internet surfing, or shopping. This unnecessary attempt to escape pain and to shed the unbearable unease with the self. As I touched the core of love, I saw that there was nothing to run away from anymore. There never was, had I but known that. In that very moment, I was “rewiring” and freeing my brain from rigidly established connected patterns. I don’t recall how long it was, but after a while I found tears flowing from my eyes: tears of joy, tears of love, tears of gratitude. Was I experiencing spiritual

enlightenment? I didn't know, but abruptly, I felt a sharp pain in my stomach that triggered intense vomiting.

As I slowly started to emerge from the haze of sleep, I thought I must have snoozed a couple times, because my mind was a foggy mix of thoughts and memories. Distant voices were waking me.

“A hui hou – Until we meet again” Said Kaimana.

“A hui hou,” responded Gene.

I was very tired and drowsiness began to overcome me.

# Chapter Eleven

## **On The Beach in Maui, Hawaii**

*Lahaina, Maui, Hawaii January 2001*

I heard the sound of screeching gulls flying over my head. I opened my eyes as I saw the tide foaming up on the shell laden beach and waves pounding endlessly on an old, worn jetty with a calm rhythm. There was a beautiful contrast between the blueness of the water and the whiteness of the sand. A cool breeze blew gently, which added to the serenity of an early morning at the beach. “Why don’t I always wake up early like this when I’m on vacation?” I thought. The sunrise over the ocean is truly one of the most beautiful wonders of nature. The beach was very quiet, there was no sound of men, but the seagulls peacefully chirped as they soared overhead, singing and searching for food. Gene was sitting next to me with her eyes opened, looking at the sky and seeming serene and

peaceful. We were comfortably laying down with pillows and blankets.

“What happened,” I asked? “I sort of blanked. I don’t even remember falling asleep on the beach.”

“We had such a beautiful night,” She said, smiling. “We danced, we let go of a lot of stuff and we saw the truth.”

“Oh, I remember. I threw up. The drink. The shamanic tea? What was that?”

“It’s a plant-based drink that helps the mind bring to our consciousness our unresolved trauma. Some people say it’s a light version of the ayahuasca medicine, a compound that changes brainwaves to a vivid 'waking-dream' state.” She continued, “Our trauma lives in the limbic system; that region of the brain responsible for memory, emotion, reward, pleasure and drive. In this ceremony, I’ve seen some people transform their lives. Many walk away and are no longer addicted, or no longer ill. Even more are no longer content to be other than who they are. I have witnessed healing from suicidal depression and from autoimmune disease.”

“I’m not surprised,” I added. “I had a deep experience last night and I feel lighter. I think I have let go of one of my stories.”

“Good! I’m so happy for you.”

“I finally realize that I can only see what I believe,” I said to Gene. “And honestly, this is so limiting and frustrating to me. If I understand correctly, my beliefs only allow me to see a small part of reality. You have no idea how much I want this scaffolding of beliefs to crumble so I can be free to experience the real reality. Do you see?”

“I do. Let me ask you. Who is talking right now in your head?” she asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“When we add a space between our emotions and our thoughts, we notice a slight release of our attachments to our beliefs. Our sense of identity is directly related to those voices. Questioning who is talking in our head is a way to create a space for something else to be revealed. Then you’ll be able to find what stories the voices in your head tell you. A voice can be many things: labels, judgments, our

history, and our perceptions and assumptions. And yes, you are correct in that our stories limit us and create blind spots. They cause conflicts and project inauthenticity. Our stories set up traps in our daily lives and they affect our relationships.”

And just like that, after a night of dancing, chanting and vomiting, I was reminded of the greatest truth and yet well-kept secret of life, a secret hidden from us underneath our education, knowledge and civility: we are life. We are the flow of energy, like water flowing out from an unlimited pure source. When we liberate ourselves from ingrained, habitual, constrictive patterns and we question our beliefs, something magical happens. We ordinarily believe that we think we know who we are, what we are going to do, what life is about, and even what will happen next. But inquiry means challenging all these things. Do we really know anything? I was taking major steps forward on my path toward authenticity and found significant liberation from my stultifying, limiting mind patterns and behaviors. Gene was instrumental in bringing them to life in a way that I was finally able to see them. In turn,

understanding these patterns, which originated as coping mechanisms in response to my early childhood emotional suffering, offered me a chance to rewrite my story and perhaps even more powerfully, to kill my story once and for all. After a week of hiking, meeting interesting people, and deepening my understanding of my true self, it was time to get back to my life with a new understanding of what it meant to be truly alive.

# Chapter Twelve

## **The Internet Bubble, Silicon Valley**

*Redwood City, October 2001*

When I visited my family twice a year in Chicago, I would appreciate the cultural differences and the immense technology gap between the two worlds I was living in. In my parents' house in Chicago, I had to use a modem to get on the internet and the buzzing hard drive noise made me feel unsafe. I had become completely dependent on the world wide web, and relied on it for almost everything. Back at home in Redwood City, I used a high speed DSL and was online 24 hours a day. No need to connect. As a result, Mapquest.com was my travel map, Yahoo.com my news, webvan.com my food delivery, Napster my music and movie database, epinions.com my best friend to spot unreliable services or products, and e-card.com my invitations to parties.

I couldn't understand why my family wasn't seeing this revolution happening. Similar to the automobile, telephone, and television that profoundly changed our world, the Internet was the next evolution. The Internet opened a completely new territory, breaking boundaries and raising integrity and legitimacy questions. Napster was a good example. Should we forbid the sharing of musical files? I had a fascinating discussion with Gene that made me challenge some of my core beliefs around our business practices.

“What is economics? How would you define it?” she asked.

“Well, going back to my college classes, I would say that economics is the social science that studies how individuals, businesses, governments, and nations make choices about how to allocate resources.”

“Is that what economics is? Social science? What about making choices on allocating resources? What do you think of those allocations? Do you personally feel you have a say

on how it is being allocated?”

“Not really. But why think about definition? It doesn’t change what is, does it?” I replied.

“On the contrary. It is important to start from what we believe because when we change filters through which we see, our understanding also changes. So let me ask you this: Is economics a social science per its definition or is it the creation of scarcity?”

“Scarcity is a reality, that’s how the world is made unfortunately.” I said.

“Is it really?” She asked, “Let me tell you the story of money. The standard story of money by economists like Adam Smith tells us that we have evolved from gift to barter, to coins to debt. But interestingly, there is another story about money. One that is hidden and even controversial. Anthropologist David Graeber says that Adam Smith's story has it all backwards. The story should be told with debt to coin to barter.”

“Why does this matter?” I asked.

“Simply because if the first story of money which is in our

history books is inaccurate, what other stories have we been told that are also inaccurate?” She replied.

She continued: “When we look at all the economic models created under the ideologies of capitalism, Socialism or communism, these models have three things in common: they focus on scarce resources, their currency is the medium of exchange, and wealth is accumulation. As a result, today businesses thrive through competition and extraction.”

“Yes, I would agree with your description,” I said.

“Good. Now there is one thing that we all experience,” she said, “and that is pain. Value happens when someone experiences less pain.”

“Yes” I added, “That’s what businesses do today, they solve customers' pain.”

“Not quite,” she replied, “Businesses only solve what people are willing to pay for. Businesses focus on visible pain that can be monetized. Also, they are really just reducing the symptoms but never addressing the root cause, because getting rid of the root cause would get rid

of the solution that they sell.”

“Ok, I agree with you. Then the real question is this: how we could use technology to reduce pain rather than seeking simply to make money and accumulate power?”

“That’s a great question! Here is my take on it,” she responded. “Our predator focus makes us prone to narrow-minded behavior. To expand our understanding, we have to relax our grasp on the world. Therefore, unlearning is ignoring on purpose our taught focus. So to go back to our initial start on the economy of scarcity, what if we are unable to see a different reality because of our conditioning?”

“I don’t see how we can change our understanding of what is,” I said, doubtful.

“You might be right. Yet, I see a new world emerging, a world of abundance where people can communicate freely and co-create in a new way. The ones who will make the invisible value visible will be leading this transformation.”

I liked discussing with Gene because when we disagreed, she respected my view and only shared hers.

My career and the high tech stage that I was performing on were about to take a new turn. When I moved to Silicon Valley fifteen years prior, I had, like my grandfather, a head full of dreams. By 2000, it seemed like everyone I knew in their 20s and 30s was working for a dot-com. New college grads and experienced business and technology professionals were migrating here from all over the country and world in the years leading up to the crash. Commentators famously compared it to Florence during the Renaissance. The housing market was beyond ridiculous at the peak. People were resorting to paying six months or a year's rent in cash in advance in order to get a decent apartment. Traffic often jumped high and those days, it took up to one hour to go from SFO airport to Redwood City, when it used to take less than 20 minutes. Up and down Highway 101, every billboard advertised some kind of Internet business with a silly name. Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati in Palo Alto, the Valley's largest law firm, was the running like a mad house for venture capitalists, handling Initial Public Offerings (IPOs) simultaneously, at various stages of SEC filing and review,

on top of all the usual Venture Capital financings, Mergers and Acquisitions. The IPO market has never been anywhere near that active in the decade since that time.

However, in retrospect, I could see why the castle of cards fell pretty quickly. A few major dot-coms started going under. Space Available signs began popping up everywhere. With a few other jobless tech geniuses friends, we would go to recently empty space and find amazing equipment and office furniture. Equipment makers, infrastructure providers and landlords started getting hammered as failed startups liquidated everything. Many of my friends working in large corporations, those who didn't want to take any risk, were experiencing downsize. It became a real blood bath.

The end of Webvan was in July of 2001. By the time the company announced it would close up shop, Webvan's stock fell to just 6 cents a share. Webvan laid off 2,000 employees when it failed. In 2001, less than a year after Webvan briefly had bought HomeGrocer in an effort to stave off financial disaster, both shuttered. For Venture

Capitalists grocery had become like a swear word.

“Reality is not quite the fantasy that we create in our heads, is it?” Gene said, laughing as I described to her what was happening in Silicon Valley as the Dot-com began to crumble.

“No, it sure is not.” I replied, laughing.

“Stay true to your inner voice.” She implored, “What beautiful things would you want to do if you had all the money? Listen to your answers and do it anyway, despite the money. In a new world of abundance, energy flows in various forms: it could be meeting with someone who knows an investor, or connecting ideas which will provide you with the needed resources.”

I felt inspired and free. Sholom Aleichem wrote, “*Life is a dream for the wise, a game for the fool, a comedy for the rich, a tragedy for the poor.*”

In that instant, my inner voice whispered in my ear and I knew deep down what I wanted to do. I waited patiently for a remarkable event to happen that would carry me on this new wave. During the following couple of years, I

worked as a consultant for technology companies and occasionally wrote articles and posts about the highlights of my career.

# Chapter Thirteen

## A Random Encounter

*Palo Alto, March 2004*

In the early spring of 2004, I found myself sitting at buck's, a mythical restaurant in Woodside, famous as a meeting place for venture capitalists and tech entrepreneurs. This is where venture capitalist Bill Draper pitched a company called Yahoo! Coupa Cafe was also a favored meeting spot for entrepreneurs just off University Ave. near Stanford University in Palo Alto. But I preferred Bucks' knickknack-festooned decor that landed a whimsical vibe and its comfort-food menu, especially the vegan burger.

I had met Jean-Louis Gasee, a big shot executive from Apple a few years back in the rear section of the restaurant. At the time, I had just arrived in Silicon Valley and found myself doing some research on tech companies. I was helping a journalist friend who valued my network and

research abilities. Interestingly, despite having been raised without a great sense of curiosity, I was very good at asking executives questions. I was having a late lunch and planned on ordering a Caesar salad without chicken and an extra side of croutons. Over the years my vegetarian diet had morphed into the Keto diet which was doing me a lot of good.

“Hey, Alex! How are you doing?” I heard.

“Oh my God!” I replied, “Marty, how are you? It’s so good to see you. I thought you went back to Germany?”

Marty Müller, originally from Germany, was working in an incubator when we met during my time at Webvan and he was extremely well connected.

“Well, we ended up staying. My wife found a great job last year.”

“That’s wonderful! So you’re still involved with entrepreneurs and working at the Sunnyvale Plug and Play incubator?”

“Yes, I am. How about you? What are you doing these days?”

“Well, since I left Webvan 4 years ago now, I’ve been doing some consulting and writing.”

“I remember the painful ending. Wow! But at least you were there for the IPO, right?”

“Yes, I got lucky.”

“Are you writing the Webvan story?”

“Nop. It's a non-fiction book.” I replied, “Hey, I just started my lunch. You want to join me?”

“Sure! I was going to grab some take-out but I’d love to. It’s so nice to catch up.”

We started talking about Silicon Valley trends, emerging technologies and who’s who. I shared in depth my time at Webvan and all the tribulations I had gone through. This success story always interested people.

The next morning I received an email from Marty asking me for my resume. He knew a company hiring and he thought I could be a great fit. They were based in Switzerland, but the team was planning to come to the Bay area soon. After that random encounter, I noticed a pattern of negative thoughts that really bothered me. For some time, I had practiced listening to my thoughts and

creating a space before reacting to them. I now was able to witness my emotions passing by like clouds in the sky. As a result, I slowly learned to lower my loud voice, the ‘reasoning voice’ as Gene called it, that was controlling my quiet inner voice.

Gene and I continued our calls, which were now spreading to once a month or sometimes every few months. We often talked about how our beliefs create our reality.

“Beliefs are the scaffolding of our constructed identity and stories are the steel tubes,” she said. “A structure is only as good as the space it has. So your negative thought patterns are like space that is perpetually self-corrected. Your ability to thrive is only as good as your ability to change.”

“Why can’t I just wake up in the morning and just be, without this heavy suitcase of past experiences that colors what I see and scaffolding that blocks my view?” I complained.

“Perhaps you’re still holding on to finding your meaning and purpose in life?”

“You think?” I asked.

“You tell me. My definition of meaning and purpose is simple. Meaning is the story we tell ourselves. Purpose is how we make that story fit into society and into our life.”

“Why are we humans always making meaning about everything?” I asked, “We see patterns in everything and we love to connect the dots, which are just random facts to which we give meaning. As a behavioral researcher, trust me when I say I know we are storytellers. But why is that?”

“You know, pattern recognition is what the brain does at a very basic level,” she responded. “It’s essentially the fundamental job of most neurons. As a result, whenever we recognize a pattern, the brain rewards us with a tiny squirt of dopamine. There’s a feedback loop here: we get dopamine when we first detect a link between two ideas, like a pattern, and the dopamine that we get helps us detect even more links and more pattern recognition. If you’ve ever done a crossword puzzle or played Sudoku, the little rush of pleasure you get when you fill in a correct answer—that’s dopamine. The reason we tend to fill in multiple answers in a row? That’s dopamine tweaking the signal-to-noise ratio and helping us detect even more

patterns. This is why creative ideas tend to spiral and why one good idea often leads to the next and the next and the next. Memory enhancement is another key role played by neurochemicals: they tag experiences as ‘Important, save for later’.”

I knew that my conditioned mind and loud voice was still trying to protect me from what I was doing since I didn’t understand what I was doing in the first place. Being in the unknown went directly against what I had been taught.

“I’ve been OK with noticing these negative thoughts and feeling uncomfortable. It usually goes away.” I shared.

“Wake-up and roar!” she shouted at me. “You’ve always thought you were a donkey, when you’re actually a lion. That’s as simple as it gets! Let your curiosity out, offer your compassion, and feel your creativity. And enjoy doing it. Play for God’s sake!”

“Fine!” I responded.

Lately, Gene seemed to be running out of patience with me.

“Well, guess what.” I added. “I’m creating my own reality. I’m talking with a new start-up.”

“Do you really? Haven’t you yet understood the randomness of life?” she asked in a scolding voice.

“What do you mean?” I was confused by seeing her upset.

“There is never one reason for something to happen. Emergence or something new arises, is a result of synergy, and it’s driven by the attraction of forces. That’s the property of the universe. How and where you play in this is irrelevant. Do you understand? Just play for the love of God!”

This didn’t feel like Gene. She has always been so gentle and kind. This directedness was unlike her. I resisted asking her why she seemed upset as I feared her response. I heard my own voice say, “Never fear what you become.”

# Chapter Fourteen

## Switzerland

*April 2004*

A few weeks later, I was invited to meet with the executive team of an early stage startup, Wikimedia Foundation, at their headquarters and I was going to Switzerland!

In preparation for my trip, I talked with the team several times over the phone and on Skype. I was thrilled to travel and discover the city of Geneva, but more importantly, I was excited that Gene was coming with me.

“My good friend Anna lives in Geneva,” said Gene, “We were on the phone recently and she kept inviting me, so I told her that I would come. You can stay with us. She is a host on Couchsurfing, which is how I met her.”

“Couchsurfing? What is that?” I asked.

“It’s a new type of accommodation. It was originally a small passion project started in 2004 by two students from

New Hampshire who, after finding a cheap flight from Boston to Iceland, could not find lodging. So they hacked into a database of the University of Iceland and randomly emailed 1,500 students, asking for a homestay. Couchsurfing began, and today people like my friend Anna, called Couchsurfers, share their lives with the people they encounter, fostering cultural exchange and mutual respect.”

“You know her well, right?”

“Yes, I do. Don’t worry. It’s all good and you’ll see, Anna is a lovely person.”

Geneva lies at the southern tip of expansive Lac Léman, also called Lake Geneva, and is surrounded by the Alps and Jura mountains with a dramatic view of the Mont Blanc. Headquarters of Europe’s United Nations and the Red Cross, the city is a global hub for diplomacy and banking. French influence is widespread, from the language and gastronomy, to bohemian districts like Carouge. We walked through the city, crossed the shopping area and arrived at the water fountain in the middle of

Lake Lemman. The 'Jet d'eau' reaches 460 feet and is one of the city's most famous landmarks. It spits out 500 liters of water per second at a speed of 200 km per hour. It was quite impressive and mesmerizing. As we came closer to the hub spitting out water, we could hear the flow burbling and as rain fell back down, it drew ripples on the lake. We stayed a moment, admiring the city view from that spot and sharing our travel experiences until it was time to meet our host.

Gene's friend, Anna, lived in the Old Town near the city hall, just a few streets from St Peter Cathedral. The cobblestone streets were narrow and a testament to the past. We walked up a semi-secret snake-hipped path called the Passage Degres-des-poules. Far behind us, a group of children were counting the steps in Italian, when suddenly, we heard the church bells ring marking seven o'clock.

When we arrived at the top of the stairs, the sky was the crescendo of the day with splashes of red weaved in, like a horizontal ribbon. We arrived at a massive wooden door with two panels circled with large metal nails. On top, two

flags welcomed you proudly, displaying the Switzerland cross and the lion, key symbols of the canton of Geneva.

The door knobs were lion heads that held large rings in their jaws. Gene knocked loudly and a few minutes later, the door opened.

“Anna!” said Gene as she wrapped her arms around her friend. Anna was a middle-aged woman with blond hair, a round face, and blue eyes. After warm introductions, Anna led us to a narrow, dimly lit staircase. Five stairs later, we arrived in a cozy apartment with large windows that boasted a beautiful city view. Later in the evening, we sat around a nice dinner on Anna’s patio, drinking wine and looking at the city lights.

“So, Anna, how did you become a Couchsurfer host?” I asked.

“I originally met the mother of one of the founders on a flight from London to DC. I thought it was a brilliant idea and since then, I’ve hosted many people who have become lifetime friends, like Gene.”

“How many tourists do you host on a monthly basis?”

“Not tourists.” She responded, “Travelers. The difference between a tourist and a traveler is the tourist seeks comfort while the traveler seeks adventure and takes more risk.”

“I see,” I responded.

“I don’t really keep track, but a few people come by every month. Maybe, I don’t know, three or four, I would say.”

“I have to say, to me as a traveler, the concept of couch surfing is certainly a little suspicious. A world traveler knows nothing about potential hosts aside from what they write in their profiles.”

“Well, what can I say?” she responded with a big smile.

“Couchsurfers are unfazed by the apparent risks.”

Gene interjected, “The world is an abundance of possibilities, and the limits are those we self-impose.”

I turned to her and replied: “I remember our conversation on the economy of scarcity a few years ago.”

“You do?” She asked.

“Yeah, and I think you were onto something. If I look around today, there are some amazing new technologies that will put power into the hands of individuals rather than governments and corporations. Hal Finney, a friend

of mine who is a video gamer designer, recently introduced reusable PoW. It's mechanism for receiving a non-exchangeable, or non-fungible as he calls it, sort of token in return for an RSA-signed token. Anyway, this could be big, and not to bore you to death, but it means that the computer can be used as a tool to liberate and protect people, rather than to control them.”

Anna gave me an incredulous look. “I wished that people would focus on the password problem. Soon, in addition to asking that our passwords contain an uppercase letter and a number, they will ask for a hieroglyph, a gang sign and the blood of a virgin.”

We all started laughing.

The next day, I met with the Wikimedia team and we discussed how we could improve their customer experience. “So how do you create unique customer experiences?” I was asked during the meeting.

“Well, we all know how people don't make rational choices—they make emotional decisions. It might sound counterintuitive, but I believe that there is another way to look at behaviors. To me, humans are rational according to

their beliefs, not through logic. Therefore, we should analyze them through their dominant narratives.”

The team was looking at me with a strong interest.

“With this approach, we can craft unique and highly relevant customer experiences.”

In the evening, Anna shared a conversation she had with another Couchsurfer host named Gabriel earlier in the day.

“I had the most fascinating discussion with a friend of mine, Gabriel. We met last year at a gathering on shamanism and he told me he was developing a new methodology to re-imprint our memories.”

“Wow! How interesting. Tell me more!” Gene asked eagerly.

“I knew it! I thought of you immediately. I remember how passionate you are on that topic,” Anna added.

“What topic?” I asked.

“Gene has her own theory about memory being in our body,” explained Anna. “According to her theory, we inherit memories from past generations into our DNA and they are stored in our body. For example, someone who had a grandparent who survived the Holocaust will pass on

emotional genes of anxiety and depression to their offspring. To remove these negative and unconscious memories, we have to move our body to get rid of them. ”

Gene added: “That’s why I always say: Memories are like perfumes. Better in small doses.”

“Actually, if you’re up for it, Gabriel would love to host you and demonstrate his new technique to you,” said Anna.

“I would love to! Where does he live?”

“He is in Lausanne. It’s a thirty minute train ride from here.”

“Brilliant! Let’s do that!”

“Hold on,” I said, “You know that our flight is tomorrow afternoon.”

“We’ll reschedule and we’ll stay a couple of more days,” said Gene. Gabriel seems like a fascinating teacher! Don’t you think so?”

“Well, it was not part of the plan. Maybe Gabriel is busy and he can’t host us.” I replied.

“Oh, he can! He has a big place. And he is always improvising.” Anna added with a smile.

“Improvising?” I asked, “What do you mean?”

“He gives classes on improvisation to help birth unscripted ideas. The game is simple: you say *Yes, and*. It gives participants permission to free themselves and others from the burden of saying ‘no’. In a way, the game challenges you to say ‘yes’ and embrace the risk of losing control.”

“At its core, every conversation is an improvisation, which means we’re all improv artists in a way.” added Gene.

Gene and Anna started laughing.

“Do you know why you are here, Alex?” asked Gene, playful.

I smiled and said, “Is that one of your trick questions?”

Anna interjected, “The little that I know Gene, I’m sure it’s a trick question on some deeper level! Be careful.”

“Okay. Let me think. Yes, I know why we are here and I’m open to taking any directions that the universe wants me to take. Ha! What do you think of that? I hope you’ve noticed how I ‘improvised.’ Right?”

Anna was looking at me with so much love, I could feel it. It was like she was looking at herself through me. I was both her creation and a separate individual with my own

beautiful strengths and weaknesses.

“So?” I eagerly asked her.

“You’re perfect just the way you are.”

Anna rejoiced and high fived me.

Anna and Gene were connected by a unique worldview: they were experimenting with something larger than the world inside their own heads. And for that very reason, I decided to become like the water, flow with the energy of life and continue my journey to Lausanne.

# Chapter Fifteen

## Reprinting Memory in Lausanne

*April 2004*

We arrived by train to Lausanne, a city on Lake Geneva, in the French-speaking region of Vaud, Switzerland. It's home to the International Olympic Committee headquarters, as well as the Olympic Museum and lakeshore Olympic Park. Away from the lake, the hilly old city has medieval, shop-lined streets, a 12th-century Gothic cathedral with an ornate facade and a 19th-century Palais de Rumine, which houses fine art and science museums.

The Swiss train was clean and punctual, a pleasant experience that fit with my appreciation of excellent time management. It was early morning and a light foggy rain accentuated my feeling of sadness as we left Geneva. This new kind of life, with all the unfamiliar experiences and unknown people, was opening a door for me. What I had found beyond that door was nothing like what I had

imagined. The world turned out to be far more interesting than I would have guessed it could be. I couldn't help imagining how it must have felt for my college friends, back then, to go on their European journey. Who would I have become if I went with them, I wondered, if I hadn't let fear prevent me from stepping into the unknown at that time? "Freedom to be who we were meant to be," as my college professor of philosophy pointed out. This freedom had been my unresolved burden to carry. What would it take for me to overcome limitations, to fully live and express my true self? Life, as it seemed, was listening to me.

The train was contouring the lake Lemman, surrounded by a few large stone mansions and wineries. We passed a few industrial zones and living areas with buildings that looked like they were built in the 1960's, with a simple yet slightly depressing modernist architectural style. Forty minutes later, we took the subway to Bessieres and walked towards the Cathedral Notre-Dame. Arriving in front of The Petit Theatre, at 10 rue Louis-August

Curtat, we walked up to the second floor and rang the bell.

“Good morning, are you Gabriel?”

“Indeed, I am.”

“Hi, I’m Gene. Anna’s friend.”

“Well, Good morning Gene. It’s such an honor to meet you! Anna speaks so highly of you.”

“This is Alex, my friend.”

“I was told you are an improv artist!” I greeted him.

“What a great compliment! Someone must like me a lot!”

He laughed, “Welcome Alex! I’m so pleased to meet you. Come on in! Vous êtes ici chez vous. This is your home.”

We entered a modern house which reminded me of the Eichler homes. These homes, known as “California Modern”, typically featured glass walls, post-and-beam construction, and open floor plans. Joseph Eichler was the developer who, inspired by modernist architects as Richard Neutra and Frank Lloyd Wright, brought quality but affordable architecture to post-WWII American families during the entire mid-century period. I always loved this open architecture and to me, Eichler homes were more

than just homes, they represented a way of living closer to nature. Gabriel's home was graced by an abundance of exposed wood and open spaces that emphasized a connection to the outdoors. In the middle, the covered atrium featured a crape myrtle tree and a duo of Japanese maples that were visible through floor-to-ceiling windows and sliders. On the left, a large living room was surrounded by lush ferns and palm trees, creating a soothing and seamless transition to the indoors. This spacious area had a wood burning brick fireplace. Gabriel turned to us.

"You are arriving right on time. I'm starting a session with Cecile to help her re-imprint some of her memories."

"We don't want to intrude. Is your guest comfortable with us being here?" asked Gene.

"Yes. Cecile is happy to share her experience with you. However, we ask you that you both sign this confidentiality agreement to respect Cecile's memory and personal experience."

"Of course."

Gabriel handed us a sheet of paper with a short paragraph on the confidential nature of the reimprinting experience.

We both signed and handed the paper back to Gabriel. A young woman came to greet us. After the introductions were made, we sat down on a sofa. Gabriel and Cecile sat on two chairs facing one another.

“Are you comfortably sitting, Cecile?” asked Gabriel in a soft voice. Cecile nodded.

“What would you like to resolve today?”

“I’m afraid of snakes. I’ve been afraid for many years and today I can’t even look at a picture of a snake without feeling my throat seizing up and wanting to run away.”

“Do you have a specific memory you’d like to change?”

“Yes, I was around thirteen years old when a group of boys threw a snake at me.”

“Ok. Close your eyes. And relax into your chair. Put your hand on your heart and focus your attention into that area. Breathe deeply but normally and feel as if your breath is coming in and out of your heart. Breathe for a count of six seconds into your heart space and six seconds out of your heart space. Focus on your heart and feel the relaxation.”

The air of the room was deepening and a change in the ambient energy was palpable.

“On a scale of one to ten, how relaxed are you?”

“I’m a nine. I feel very relaxed,” she responded.

“Good. Now let’s go back to that time when you were 13. See in your minds’ eyes the memory that you wish to work on. Can you see yourself?”

“Yes.”

“In a moment, we are going to step into that picture after the incident and talk to your thirteen-year-old self. What is your younger self wearing?”

“She has a blue dress and white shoes.”

“Now introduce yourself to her and let her know that you are here to help her. Go to her and ask her how she feels.”

Cecile started to cry.

“She feels terrified.”

“What does she feel in her body? What does it look like?”

“She feels afraid. It’s like a yellow ball of fear in her stomach.”

“Ok, now take her hand and let’s tap together. Repeat after me: This yellow ball of fear in my heart. All this fear. You’ve done nothing wrong. I love you very much. You are safe.”

Gabriel was using two fingers and gently tapping on his own face. At every sentence, he was following a pattern: eye brows, under the eyes, under the nose, collar bones and wrist. On our way to Lausanne, Gene had described this new technique, called EFT, known as emotional freedom technique and also called Tapping invented by Gary Craig. This emotional freedom technique was a form of counseling intervention that drew on various theories of alternative medicine— including acupuncture, neuro-linguistic programming, energy medicine, and Thought Field Therapy. Similar to acupuncture, EFT focuses on the meridian points, or energy hot spots, to restore balance to your body's energy. It's believed that restoring this energy balance can relieve symptoms a negative experience or emotion may have caused. Based on Chinese medicine, meridian points are thought of as areas of the body energy flows through. These pathways help balance energy flow to maintain our health and remove any imbalance that can influence disease or sickness. Acupuncture uses needles to apply pressure to these energy points while EFT uses fingertip tapping to apply

pressure. Gene seemed to be very excited about the new possibilities to relieve emotional trauma and negative patterns. Gabriel kept repeating the tapping pattern and slowly removing the stored feeling of anxiety that Cecile had experienced as a thirteen-year-old.

“How is she feeling now?” he asked.

“Much better.” Cecile responded.

“On a scale from one to ten how is she feeling?”

“She is an eight or maybe nine.”

“Ok. We’re going to create a harmonious situation for your younger self. Ask her what she wants to do now.”

“She says she wants to go to the zoo to see the animals.”

“Do you remember one time when she went to the zoo?”

“Yes, she went with her mother. It was a beautiful day.”

“Ok. Let's bring that picture into your mind. Make this picture as vivid as possible. Turn up all the colors, emotions and brightness. Then move that beautiful picture down into your body. Bring that picture towards you and pull it down into your head, into every cell, every interconnection. Imagine all the cells are now attuning to this lovely feeling of being relaxed and surrounded by all

sorts of animals. Lions, zebras, snakes, monkeys and birds are all together. ”

It was as if I was transported in Cecile’s imagination. As I looked at her face with great attention, I could see her two selves at different ages. The thirteen-year-old was morphing into an adult as she was called upon.

“When you are ready, open your eyes. Welcome back,” Gabriel said.

“Thank you, Gabriel. I feel a new space has opened inside me.”

“Would you like to test your new memory? I have a National Geographic animal book,” he offered with a smile.

“Yes, I’m ready.”

I was astonished by the radiance that Cecile’s face was now displaying. She looked like a weight had been removed from her shoulders. At that moment, I knew that I wanted to engage in this work for myself. I would finally put an end to my repeating patterns of not feeling good enough and remove the fear that I had been a burden throughout my life. My first marriage had failed because I was boxed

into a role I wasn't brave enough to say no to. Everyday felt like a rope was tied around my neck and I couldn't breathe. I couldn't deal with my failures, so I pushed them down and acted like a winner. I was always proud of how hard I worked, rather than being proud of achieving my goals. Letting go was so difficult, because my reasoning mind was addicted to stories and craved justification. She was protecting the scaffolding around my identity: she cared about who I was in the eyes of others. Today, however, I was able to witness first-hand how the scaffolding that made up my beliefs is in fact protecting a mirage, a made-up story. I was not who I was told to be, and Cecile was a living example of how to remove the scaffolding through memory reimprinting.

Gabriel went to get his book. He sat down and handed it to Cecile. She opened it carefully and started to look at the images one by one. For a second, I thought I was looking at her younger thirteen-year-old self as she discovered an animal book. She then raised her gaze, smiled at us and turned the book towards us.

“The python is the longest in the world and can reach six meters in length, which makes it longer than a giraffe is tall.” The picture displayed a colorful snake in its habitat.

It was a revealing experience that I would later find to be a salvation from my own barriers.

While at dinner, I asked Gabriel to share his experience on improvisation and on the purpose of his classes.

“Are you teaching improv to actors?”

“Not anymore. I did some improv classes in a theater a few years ago, but I’m now going into organizations and I teach employees, from executives to assistants. You see, improvisation encourages the development of unscripted ideas using the simple principle that we must say *YES*, and also add ourselves and our unique perspective with *AND*.”

Gabriel explained, “By remaining open and receptive to input from others and letting go of our own insecurities and preconceived notions, we create a culture of creative risk-taking and a shared sense of purpose. Improvisation offers practical rules to create real, honest conversations using *Yes, and*. There’s the element of willingly sharing power and giving people agency.”

“It’s fascinating. I’ve been challenging myself to lead others in my work and I like this new approach to learning how to be an effective, inspiring leader.”

The day of our departure, Gabriel looked at me deeply into my eyes and said rhetorically:

“Ask yourself: what makes me happy? And then, when you get your answer, do more of whatever it is.”

# Chapter Sixteen

## **The Revolution is in the Voice of Women**

*September 2008*

I moved to New York City during the summer of 2006. Living in this big city was quite a unique experience. It was nothing compared to the northern area of Chicago or the San Francisco Bay area. New Yorkers are a strange species that will stop on their busy commute to assist another but are also very protective of their individual freedom and way of thinking. There was a closeness when riding the subway every morning as our shoulders touched, a sign of trust during our communal ritual of passage.

I had been working for two years now at Wikimedia Foundation which was located on 300 Park Ave, in New York, a three minute walk from the St. Patrick's Cathedral. Directly across from Rockefeller Center and designed by

James Renwick Jr., the cathedral was constructed in 1858 and is the largest Gothic Revival Catholic cathedral in North America. Raised as a Catholic and having been an altar child, I left religion when I realized that this story was more destructive to humankind than the compassionate teaching I had received during Bible classes. Yet, I was able to appreciate the beauty and the grace of St. Patrick architecture. The cathedral was clad in marble and displayed several dozen stained glass windows. The bronze doors that form the cathedral's main entrance on Fifth Avenue were flanked by towers with spires rising 329.5 feet (100 m). The northern tower contained nineteen bells, and the interior had two pipe organs. It was a New York City designated landmark that I was taking great pleasure in admiring every day on my way to the office.

For the last six months, I was in charge of a project called *“Tell the missing stories of women on Wikipedia and beyond.”*

For as long as written history, women have far too often been left out of the record. And in a world that tells us to stay quiet, telling women’s stories is a radical act. We were encouraging journalists, academics, thought leaders, and

individuals and organizations in the information landscape to increase their coverage of women. I knew on a deeper level that the revolution was in the voice of women and I wanted to be a part of this societal shift. I felt that I was now ready to embrace a larger role than that of my smaller self. As a result, I had to rethink my role as a manager to expand the creativity of my team. I had come to realize that over the last century, leadership models have been closely tied to our industry needs, thus, reflecting the mindset of leaders and the assumptions they made at the time. According to Prof. Julian Birkinshaw from the London Business School, we have witnessed how “*the sources of competitive advantage are changing, from the industrial era to the knowledge era to the post-knowledge era,*” which he describes as the Hand, the Head, and the Heart. During the industrial revolution, manual labor was a priority and managers just needed bodies to get the work done. This Hand phase saw managers leading with an iron fist and micromanagement was commonplace during this era. The information revolution, known as the Head phase, was the data and knowledge phase. During this time, the more

knowledge a person had, the more valuable they became. Companies wanted intelligence because information was capital. Today, the business world is moving towards the Heart phase, where leaders are asked to be emotionally intelligent and adapt and navigate complex situations. I truly wanted to go beyond my understanding of this new reality and embrace a different form of leadership by becoming a Sherpa, a sort of guide. "*Sherpa*" originally meant "*people from the East*" and is pronounced "shar-wa" by the Sherpa themselves. Before mountain climbing became a popular pastime in the Himalayas, the word Sherpa simply denoted a group of people who migrated to Nepal from Eastern Tibet. Many Sherpas are highly regarded as elite mountaineers and experts in their local area. Today, the term is often used by foreigners to refer to almost any guide or climbing supporter hired for mountaineering expeditions in the Himalayas, regardless of their ethnicity. For me, a Sherpa lives in pure creation without compulsion, without will, without a direction even, or motive. Sherpa is gifting their lives to helping others on their own journeys. As a researcher for many years, I was

passionate about human behaviors, and I had finally removed the curtain on why people behaved the way they do and how our mind worked. It was quite simple and revealing. When we encounter bodily or external stimuli, in a fraction of a second our past experiences are brought up and added to our feelings and thoughts. This creates an emotional perception of the stimuli. From there, we choose how we want to behave, which leads to taking action. In a simplified format, the equation becomes something like this:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Stimuli} &\rightarrow \text{Past experience} + \text{feelings} + \text{thoughts} \\ &\rightarrow \text{Emotions} \rightarrow \text{Action} \end{aligned}$$

At the Wikimedia organization, I was working on a similar equation: brand values create processes that lead to behaviors. Some of my ideas were in complete opposition to those held by a few people recognized as experts within the sphere of psychology. These people were also extremely active on Twitter. As an avid early adopter, I had enjoyed connecting with people. One morning, I found seven hundred replies to one of my tweets from the night before. For those who have less than one thousand

followers, this never ever happens. Eighty percent of the responses were negative, threatening or just mean. I felt attacked and I panicked. I was afraid someone would post negative reviews on my employer. I remember how much my heart was pounding and how sweaty my hands felt, the same physical symptoms I had before going on stage. That is, until I remembered that I didn't know any of those people. I could clearly see that there were a lot of bots and trolls commenting. It wasn't until the afternoon that I finally realized that this was the illusion of our social game. I rushed to Gene for help and wisdom.

“Let’s celebrate our negative thoughts, our painful emotions, our discomfort and our soreness from expanding our synapses!” She exclaimed. “What is interesting is that sometimes, a negative emotion can be a form of resistance, which really means a synapsis expansion happening in our brain. Muscle soreness or feeling uncomfortable is a good thing because it means that we are going into uncertainty. When that happens, you need to remember that there is an opening, a liminal space. No decision needs to be made. Just sitting with these

emotions and letting them pass is enough. So congratulate yourself for this valuable experience.”

“Yes, and I did.” I replied. “I was shaking in the morning and now five hours later, I feel much better. My emotions have passed and I’m just witnessing it all.”

“That’s so wonderful! You are getting it and you might be living it!”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, confused.

“The key to enlightenment is quieting the mind. You’re familiar with the three states of consciousness, right? Being awake, being asleep, and dreaming. There is a fourth state, called transcendence. In this state, the conscious mind is quiet while the subconscious mind maintains awareness.

Transcendence while awake is being fully aware of flowing energy. This state of consciousness is quietude. Contemplating in this tranquil state is a level of consciousness called enlightenment.

Her words always worked like magic on me and after almost ten years of friendship, I had arrived at a profound understanding of our human experience. I was getting close to being enlightened. For most people, during their

youth, they get lost in being the hero of their story. As we age, some people are able to realize that they are actually sitting in a movie theater watching themselves on the big screen. However, few people will eventually get up, go into the projector room and smile as they witness what is without any judgement.

“I think you are ready now?” Gene said to me.

“Ready for what?”

"You're ready to fly on your own. The reason you needed a guru was that the lessons of correct teachings are at times counterintuitive. You finally understand that the observer is the past, memory, knowledge, experience. All the observers are the past. This recording is a divisive process. The divisive process is the self, the 'me' and the 'not me' which is creating havoc in the world.”

“I'm still learning and I have my moments of profound doubts, you know.”

“Living is learning. You are correct. Let me ask you a question. What is the one thing that brings you home? The key to being comfortable with change and uncertainty, and

with not knowing? What can you tell yourself that makes it ok?"

I paused for a second and replied: "I'm not sure."

"Well, you'll need to figure it out and find out your compass that brings you home."

I asked her eagerly, "Do you have a compass yourself that you can share?"

"Sure. The key that brings me home is to remember that I will die. It's also to remember that the social game is an illusion of my made-up self." She shared, "When I remind myself that life is an illusion, the part of me that wants control surrenders."

I paused. She continued:

"People don't know any words written by David Foster Wallace. Thus his suicide has become the story, a cautionary tale. Ask yourself why. Guy Debord the author of *The Society of the Spectacle* wrote, 'We watch a worldview that has been materialized for us'. As a facilitator, change expert and newly self-appointed Sherpa, you have become a guide for others' journeys. It is no longer about your role or your success. You have to accept

the idea of becoming a supportive character in other people's stories.”

It is the story of separation that I was finally breaking down. The scaffolding had crumbled. We tell stories because we want to put together the fragments of our life story. I was finally understanding how the unexpressed fragments of ourselves are the origin of self-defeating behaviors.

# Chapter Seventeen

## Gene

*September 9th, 2008*

“You are on your own now,” said Gene.

I felt a brief exhilarating moment of freedom. The journey of ridding ourselves of attachments in order to feel more free is a long one.

“What do you mean I’m on my own. Are you breaking up with me? I don’t understand. Do you know how long we have been friends?”

“Time is relative, Alex. It’s a relative reality,” Gene implored. “You have to let me go. You need space to grow.”

“But I need you and I’ll get lost without you.”

“Of course not,” she comforted me. “I will always be here for you and you already know it: I’m right here in your

head. We both now see you fully, your darkness and your light. All the answers are within you now.”

My heart was aching. There is no such thing as a happy ending, I realized. If I had told Gene this thought, she would have responded: “Without sadness, you can’t taste the sweetness of life.” I had become her. The past doesn’t haunt us. It’s us who haunt the past. We haunt it so we can look again and see the people we miss and the things we missed about them. It seemed to me that often our feelings of powerlessness come from our attachments to things and to others. What did I truly desire in this new life?

Between education that teaches us to stay in line and society constantly selling us the idea of happiness comes through material acquisition and social status, it’s easy to end up living a life of conformity. What’s more, living based on other people’s beliefs and desires can create a feeling of victimization.

To free myself from others’ desires once and for all, I needed to focus on the desires that truly improved my life and, by extension, the lives of other living beings. Most

importantly, it was time to bypass any permissions I was waiting for, because I was on my own!

I remembered Gene's words when we discussed how to tell the difference between desires that come from our true self and those that come from our limited identity.

"The truth lies in the answer to a question: Is the desire coming from a need to please others or is it coming from a deep and true part of your creativity and uniqueness? Making that distinction is very important, as we often set goals with the wrong desires in mind, and that leads to failure."

I discovered that in our culture of instant gratification, desire is a word misused and more importantly, widely misunderstood. In Latin, its original sense means "*await what the stars will bring*," from *Sidus* "heavenly body, star, constellation" and *De*, "Down from". I often thought that if I *want* something, it means that I *desire* it. It couldn't be further away from the truth. We can't "will" a desire and we definitely cannot control it. It's either there or it's not. Gene said, "Often, the strongest desires are the ones for

which you can't find a reason. You don't know *why* you want to do it, but you can *feel* how much you want to do it.”

When I think I desire something and I'm not getting closer to obtaining it, I realized, there is a high likelihood that I don't truly want it. This can be due to a number of reasons, including my conflicting desires or fear of the unknown. My true desire comes from within and is not pushed by my need to please others or to feed the self-concerned story I have in my mind about who I think I am. I finally understood: while a part of me thought my story was real, on a deeper level I knew that it was just a series of assumptions.

“I will miss you so much,” I said.

“On the contrary,” she replied. “Love is longing for love.

In our search, we are just longing for love. This. Is. It.”

I felt inside the certainty that I was now well equipped to live my life with curiosity and compassion for others and for myself. I was going to lead my life by following my

inner self, my true self, and from now on. I would let her make choices and call the shots.

# Chapter Eighteen

## When a Story Ends

*New York City, 17th February 2009*

The Post office in the upper east side was still open. Lenox Hill Station located at 217 East 70th Street between Second and Third Avenues is a brick building constructed in 1935. It was designed by Eric Kebbon in the Colonial Revival style, and is considered one of the finest post offices in that style in New York State. It was even listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1989, along with many other post offices in the state.

Jessica White, the store manager, started her career as a postman when she turned eighteen, the minimum age required to apply for a position at the post office.

She remembers clearly, like it was yesterday, the moment she decided that she wanted to become a mail carrier.

She was nine years old and had just learned in class that on July 26, 1775, the U.S. postal system was established by the Second Continental Congress, with Benjamin Franklin as its first postmaster general.

She loved imagining how during the 1600s, American colonists needed to send their correspondence most likely in Britain. Mail deliveries from across the Atlantic were sporadic and could take many months to arrive. There were no post offices in the colonies, so mail was typically left at inns and taverns.

Being athletic, she liked long hours walking and delivering mail in her neighborhood. When she started working, she enjoyed waking up early and starting her job at 5:30 am. She would sort her mail first, according to the exact order in which the streets are arranged, so that later she wouldn't have to search for a particular letter or parcel. With her customary cup of coffee, she would start her delivery round. Most carriers finished by 2.30pm, but she often didn't finish until four, as she wanted to make sure every last parcel had been delivered.

She really liked meeting people, and after a while, seeing lots of familiar faces. People smiled at her when she saw her coming with their mail.

Over time, her dedication, patience and social skills were recognized and she was offered a position close to her apartment as a clerk. With experience, her career progressed into management and people enjoyed working under her. On weekdays, Jessica would usually start closing at 4:45PM but on this Friday evening, she was running a bit late. It was already 5:05PM and she hadn't locked the front door yet. The two clerks on her team had just left when she heard a customer come in.

“Are you still open?” they said.

“You'll be my last customer. Come on in. I'll be right with you.”

Jessica went to the front door, turned off the light of the open sign and closed the door. Back behind her desk, she said: “You're lucky. We're usually closed at five but I'm running a little late tonight.”

“Yes, I'm lucky. Thank you so much for taking that extra time with me,” said the man. He was in his fifties with just

a few grey hairs on the temples. He was very good looking and had a large smile on his face. He looked at her with the honesty of a child and the maturity of an elder.

“What can I do for you?” asked Jessica with a smile. She felt a sudden ease being with him.

“I’d like to send this book to my mother. She lives in Chicago.”

The man put a book on the counter. The title read “*Through the Eyes only. The Book of Alex*”.

Jessica handed him a small green form. “Of course. Please, fill in your mother’s name and her address here.”

While the man was filling out the form, Jessica weighed the book.

The man handed the form back.

“What’s your name and address, please?”

“Alex Gene Smith. 520 East 90th street.”

“Gene is your middle name?”

“Yes,” he said laughing, “I know it’s quite unusual. It’s the other side of me.”

“The other side?”

“Yes, you know. The side who wants to create and play like a child.”

There was something indescribable about him. The way he looked at you, like he knew you and everything else about you. Jessica looked at Alex and for a brief moment, and she wondered the last time she played.

“Is that a good book?” she asked.

“I hope so. It is to me.”

“What is it about?”

“It’s the story about the two voices in our head.”

Alex thought, “People are going to think that you’re crazy.”

Gene replied, “Let them. You know it’s not about me anyway. Is it?”

“Yes, good point. I will never know what others think of me and perhaps for that only reason, it doesn’t really matter.”

“Exactly.” thought Gene, “It doesn’t matter to me either. For once we agree.”

“Why do you say that? We often agree. I’m just more realistic and I’m here to protect both of us.”

“Yes, and I’m here to remind you to dream of a world where we don't need protection. You are always safe with me because life has our back.”

“Yes, you told me.,” thought Alex. “We are life.”

As I heard the two voices in my head, my life was looking at me and the universe was listening.

# Chapter Nineteen

## A New Story Begins

*Lenox Hill Post Office Station, New York City, 17th February  
2009*

Jessica went to the front door, turned off the light of the open sign and closed the door. Back behind her desk, she said: “You’re lucky. We’re usually closed at 5 but I’m running a little late tonight.”

“Yes, I’m lucky. Thank you so much for taking that extra time with me,” said the woman. She was in her fifties with just a few long grey bands of hairs. She was very good looking and had a large smile on her face. She was looking at her with the honesty of a child and the maturity of an elder.

“What can I do for you?” asked Jessica with a smile. She felt a sudden ease being with her.

“I’d like to send this book to my mother. She lives in Chicago.”

The woman put a book on the counter. The title read “*Through the Eyes only. The Book of Alex*”.

Jessica handed a small green form. “Of course. Please, fill in your mothers’ name and her address here.”

While the woman was filling out the form, Jessica weighed the book.

The woman handed the form back.

“What’s your name and address, please?”

“Gene Alex Smith. 520 East 90th street.”

“Alex is your middle name?”

“Yes,” she said laughing, “I know it’s quite unusual. It’s the other side of me.”

“The other side?”

“Yes, you know. The side who wants to protect and keep me safe.”

There was something indescribable about her. The way she looked at you, like she knew you and everything else about you. Jessica looked at Gene and for a brief moment, and

she realized that staying safe was the only loud voice she was hearing in her head.

“Is that a good book?” she asked.

“It is to me.”

“What is it about?”

“It’s the story about the two voices in our head” Gene Said. “You are so kind to ask”.

“I’ve been asking myself some questions lately,” shared Jessica, mumbling out loud, “and when I shared it with my mom, she said it doesn’t sound like me.”

She laughed with a genuine laugh.

“Why do you think you are here?” Gene whispered.

Jessica’ eyes widened and sparkled. Life was looking at her and the universe was listening as she spoke.

# Chapter Twenty

## Epilogue

### *The Two Voices Inside Our Head.*

“One evening, a Cherokee elder told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside of people.

He said, “My son, the battle between two wolves is inside us all. One wolf is evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.

The other wolf is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked, “Grandpa, which wolf wins?”

The old man simply replied, “The one that you feed.”

When someone says they hear voices in their head, they are often thought to be mentally ill. Yet this couldn't be further away from the true nature of being human and awakened. As Charles Fernyhough argues in *The Voices Within*, "such voices are better understood as one of the chief hallmarks of human thought."

Our inner voices can be self-assured, funny, profound, hesitant, or mean; they can appear in different accents and even in sign language. We all hear them and we needn't fear them. Indeed, we cannot live without them: we need them, whether to make decisions or to bring a book's characters to life as we read.

Studying our voices can enrich our understanding of ourselves, and our understanding of the world around us. The brain works like a dream machine, according to philosophers. Working to understand our voices can help us understand the experiences of visionary saints, who might otherwise be dismissed as schizophrenics; to alleviate the suffering of those who do have mental health

problems; and to understand why the person next to us on the subway just burst out laughing for no apparent reason. So listen to the voices inside your head, but don't confuse them, as they have power: one can make you thrive and one can make you struggle.

And when you choose to lead your life with your quiet inner voice, you will be truly living.

A Novel by Virginie Glaezer

End of Book One.

**To engage with Gene or Alex**  
**go to [www.trulyliving.app](http://www.trulyliving.app)**

Upcoming Book Two  
“Through The Vibes Only”  
The Book of Gene

“As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality.”

— **Albert Einstein**