

A tragic death sends Michelle on a journey to self-discovery.

Emblems

by Laura Beatrice Thomas

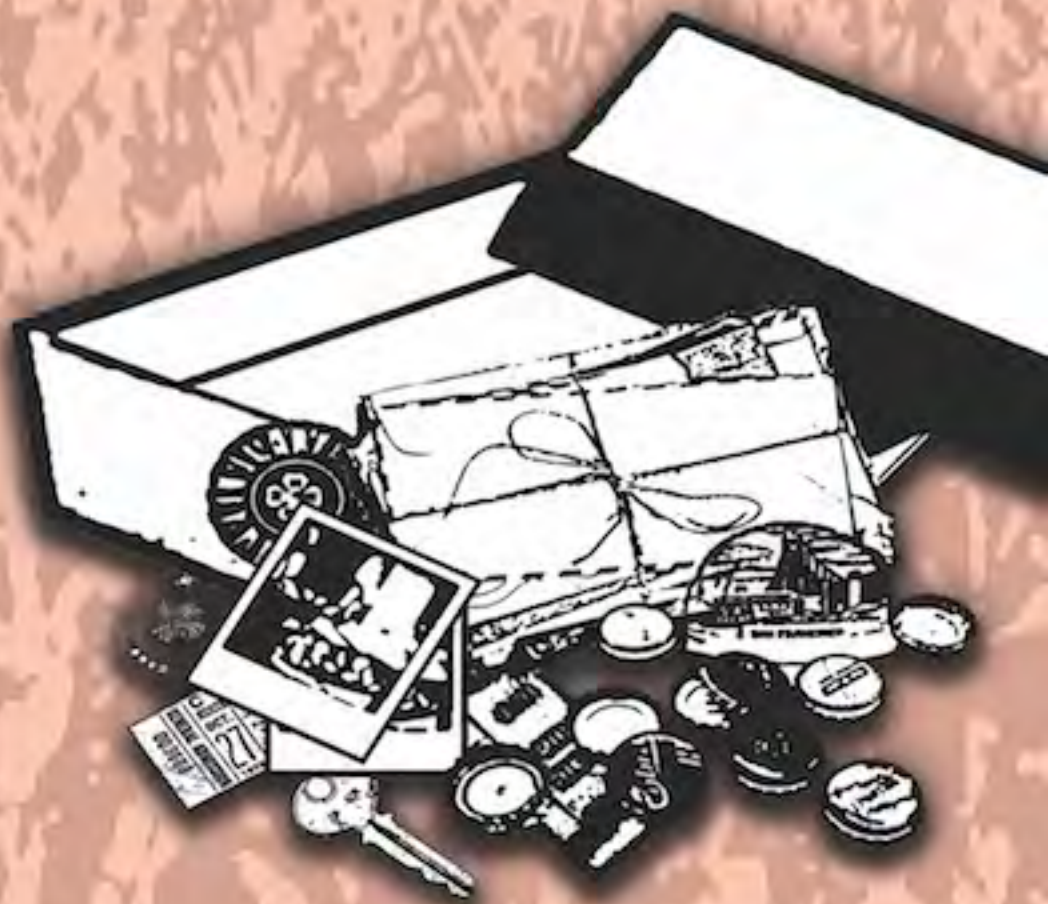
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First Edition

This book is dedicated to my husband Daniel

Acknowledgments

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CHAPTER ONE

It was the sound of a fire alarm that caused Michelle Palominos to spring up in bed, her heart racing. She slipped out from under the covers, reached for the jacket and sweatpants that hung on the knob of her dresser, and wobbled a little as she put her leg through the pant leg. And then she remembered.

“Damn kids”, she muttered, exasperated.

It was the third or perhaps fourth time this month that the alarm had awakened the residents of the Plaza Towne apartments in the middle of the night. Michelle had lost count. Each time had been more annoying than the last, and each time the noise had first become part of a dream and then had jarred Michelle from a sound sleep.

Michelle moved more slowly now, and waited to hear that it was a false alarm once again. Her head felt heavy. She reached over for her eyeglasses in order to see the time on her cell phone. It was 12:28 a.m.

She slid her feet into her slippers, then changed her mind and slipped on her sandals instead. She always kept those by the bed, upside down, in case of an earthquake. She had learned to do that in the emergency preparedness class at her law firm. The instructor had told them this would keep any broken glass out of the shoes.

She put her phone and her apartment key in the pocket of her jacket, lifted the hood and zipped up her jacket as far as it would go. She found it a bit disturbing that she had almost gotten this down to a routine.

The only sticking point in her methodical evacuation was Baht, her cat. He refused to come to her. It was apparent that he had had enough of the pranks himself, so he refused to budge, and met her calls with a defiant stare from the top of his cat tree.

“I understand how you feel Baht, but it could be the real thing this time,” Michelle said soothingly. She reached up and encircled the cat’s body with her arms. He did not resist and relaxed against her chest. “You never know what could happen in this crazy place.”

Michelle wondered herself exactly what was going on, because on the previous occasions the alarm had gone off, she had heard voices in the hallway letting the tenants know that it was a false alarm. She heard no such announcements this time.

She placed the palm of her hand against her front door – the door was not hot. As she opened the door, she was relieved to see there was no smoke in the hallway. A few of her neighbors had already begun to trudge reluctantly toward the stairwell, among them her next-door neighbor, Mrs. Zywiecki. She wore a bathrobe, and had her hair tied up in a neat bun on the top of her head. Michelle knew her neighbor's name only because the mail carrier would often place Mrs. Zywiecki's mail in Michelle's mailbox by mistake.

A woman in the group barked what sounded like orders in Chinese to her young son, who carried a small toy in his hand as he walked a few paces ahead of his mother. Michelle joined the procession that headed into the stairwell. The person in front of her let the door to the stairwell close behind him. Michelle pushed it back, and came face to face with another neighbor coming down from the floor above. Michelle managed to utter a faint "good morning", and the neighbor responded with, "yeah right".

When she arrived at the bottom floor of the building and opened the door to the street, Michelle realized immediately that it was not a false alarm this time. Firefighters were rushing from the pumper, pulling the hose over to the side of the building. A woman in a uniform quickly ushered Michelle over to an assembly area where other tenants of her building were now standing and waiting.

"Apartment number?" the woman asked. Michelle was not sure if the woman was from the police or fire department.

"104", Michelle replied, and the woman went on to question the next person.

Michelle turned to a neighbor who wore what looked like a long scarf wrapped around her body. "Do you know what happened?"

The woman stared at her blankly, not seeming to have heard her. Michelle repeated her question more loudly.

"I don't think she speaks English," a young man replied. He was dressed in street clothes and seemed wide awake, unlike the rest of the group. "From what I heard, the fire started in Apartment 301," he continued. "Some guy fell asleep with his cigarette."

"Which apartment was it?" another person asked him.

"Apartment 301," the man repeated. "At least I think that's what I heard one of the firefighters say."

"Does anyone know who lives in 301?" someone asked.

A few people shrugged in response. The Chinese woman continued to admonish her son who repeatedly dropped his toy onto the ground, and then

picked it up in response to her reprimands. Several people had their cell phones in video mode and were recording the events.

A woman was speaking to someone on her cell phone. “Just letting you know I’m okay, in case you hear something on the news. Some dude had a cigarette and fell asleep. Trying to burn down the frickin’ building I guess.”

“I don’t know,” a man was saying into his cell phone, “I don’t think anyone has seen him.” He moved his phone away from his ear and asked the group, “Hey do you know if the guy is okay?”

His question was met with a few more shrugs and a “dunno” here and there, but for the most part the group ignored him.

Michelle looked out on the scene. The lights were blinding. Baht seemed unfazed by the activity and rested comfortably in her arms. He was beginning to feel a little heavy, but she was grateful for his warmth. She pretended not to notice that the man standing to her right was regarding her with a suspicious expression.

“I thought pets weren’t allowed in the building,” he said finally, his eyes fixed on Baht.

She sighed. She held back from saying what her first reply would have been, that it was after midnight, they were standing in the freezing wind, and under those circumstances only a jerk would be making an issue out of the fact she had a pet. Instead she answered in the calmest voice she could muster, “I was grandfathered in. I’ve lived in this building since before the current management.”

“Oh,” he answered. “Well lucky you then. I wanted to bring my Chihuahua Max, but they told me no. Had to turn him in to the Pound.”

Michelle shook her head with genuine sympathy. “I’m sorry, that is really sad.”

“Yes, it really sucked,” the man agreed.

“I do have to pay extra rent for him,” Michelle added. She hoped that fact would offer some consolation.

Michelle’s cell phone rang. She shifted Baht slightly in her arms in an attempt to retrieve the phone from the pocket of her sweatshirt. “Would you mind terribly holding my cat so I can get this?” she asked the man. “He won’t bite or anything. He’s very friendly.”

“I’m allergic to cats,” the man replied without apology. He didn’t look at Michelle, but instead focused his gaze on the firefighters who were working the fire.

“Maybe...then...could you just take the phone out of my pocket, so I can at least see who is calling?”

The man turned to look at her. “Darling, anyone calling you at this hour is either reporting trouble, or Trouble Himself,” he said. “You’re better off letting it go to voicemail.”

Michelle nodded her head. “You know, you’re right,” she agreed. She knew who was likely to be calling anyway.

It was after five o’clock in the morning before the authorities had cleared the residents to return to their apartments. Michelle’s legs and arms were trembling by then, between holding Baht and standing in the cold. San Francisco wind was merciless if one had to stand in it for extended periods of time.

She took a hot shower, then left a message for her boss that she would be late and would explain it all later. She could not remember the last time she had been late to work. She guessed that she probably never had been.

Later in the morning, on her way out the door to catch the bus to work, Michelle noticed the missed call message on her cell phone. As she had suspected, the call was from Lucas. He had left a voicemail. She laughed to herself. The neighbor with the Chihuahua had been right. The caller had in fact turned out to be “Trouble Himself” - or Michelle’s version of it anyway. Lucas with perhaps a drunken plea to get back together, or his latest middle-of-the-night idea for a new enterprise.

There were two things that bothered Michelle about the situation. One, that Lucas clearly had thought it okay to call her at all hours of the day and night, despite her having told him many times not to do so. And two, that she couldn’t shake the nagging feeling his call was about something important this time. She always worried if she didn’t take his call, she would regret it later, that it might turn out to be a call for help or a message letting her know that he was in the hospital. It was the hold he still had over her.

She put the phone on speaker as she retrieved the voicemail, so she could continue to gather up her things for work – a file she had brought home, her briefcase, and her packed lunch. She was four hours late going in, but her boss had been understanding. Michelle was grateful for that, that she worked for one of the most reasonable attorneys in town.

On the voicemail, Lucas’ voice sounded deep, with his words only slightly slurred. “Hello Michelle? This is Lucas.” He paused, either to gather his composure or for a belch, she wasn’t sure which. “Sorry, I’ve been drinking a little. Wait ‘til you hear what happened to me. Remember Matt Neumann? The guy I lived with when I was an exchange student? Janna

Fox's boyfriend? I saw him tonight. He had just gotten back from Janna's funeral. Can you believe it? She died a couple of weeks ago. It's unfrickinbelievable Michelle. Call me."

Michelle picked up her phone and watched the voicemail line fade. Janna Fox. Just hearing the name made Michelle catapult into the past – back to college and the dorm room they had decorated with newspaper clippings affixed with rubber cement. Laughter, silliness. Gentle sweet Janna. It could not be so.

She sat down on the couch, and listened to the voicemail again. Then she called Lucas. She didn't even hear the call go through before he answered.

"Hello?" Lucas' voice sounded like it always did after a night of too much drinking, tired and raspy. He never bothered to take note of who was calling before he answered.

"Lucas, it's Michelle."

"Michelle, hey yeah hi, what a trip about Janna huh, can you believe it?"

"No I can't. I mean, wow. No. I just can't process it."

"Yeah, and weird about running into Matt."

"Matt Neumann! Where did you see him?"

"At Monty's Bar. I never would have recognized him in a million years, but he recognized me. Said he knew my voice right away."

"The Brazilian accent gave you away no doubt. Not to mention being the loudest one in the room I'm sure," she said and laughed. She knew Lucas always made himself the center of attention wherever he went.

Lucas didn't laugh, and Michelle guessed it was too early in the morning for him to be amused. He was not a morning person. "Yeah well whatever. Anyway, the dude comes up to me and says 'Lucas'? I turn around and I'm like, who is this guy, but I said 'hey how ya doing' just in case."

Michelle couldn't help but smirk at the way Lucas told stories. She still enjoyed the sound of his accent, even after so many years.

"And he says, 'you don't recognize me do you', and I admitted I didn't, and he says 'I'm Matt Neumann'. He had put on a lot of weight. Looked a lot older."

"Don't we all," Michelle replied, as she glanced at the clock. She had only a few more minutes before she needed to head out the door. "Did he tell you how Janna died? Was she sick? That is just so sad."

"No, we didn't have much time. He was on the way out the door with his...looked like a date or his wife, I don't know, he didn't introduce me." Lucas coughed and then continued. "But yeah, he told me about Janna dying

and I said wow I'm sorry man, I loved Janna, she was the best. And he asked if you and I were still together." Lucas paused. "Of course, I wished I could have told him we were."

"Did you tell him we had twenty years, that's a pretty long time," Michelle replied with some irritation.

Lucas went on. He seemed not to have heard her. "I was trying to figure out how long it's been since I saw the guy. I lived with his family... what was it, sophomore year? That would have been 1986?"

"Yep. You and I met at Matt's party, right before Janna left for UCLA."

"That's right."

"You were 'the cute exchange student from Brazil'. Little did we know."

Lucas let out a small chuckle, then stopped abruptly, presumably as the previous night's imbibing rattled his head.

"Anyway," Lucas continued, "Matt gave me an attorney's name, and said if I am still talking to you, which I told him I was, he said to ask you to call this attorney."

"An attorney? Really? Why?" Michelle stood up.

"I always knew Matt had the hots for you," Lucas said, without responding to her question. That was a habit he had, answering questions minutes after they were asked. It could make conversation with him difficult, for people who weren't accustomed to it. Michelle had learned to ignore it.

"Seriously Lucas, did Matt mention why I needed to call the attorney?"

Lucas sighed, something he always did when he sensed Michelle was getting upset, which she did easily. "No, he said it was important, that's all. He was like, blown away that he and I had run into each other, because he said a bunch of people had been trying to find you. He said it has something to do with Janna."

"Find me? Why?" Michelle exclaimed. "That's really weird. I haven't spoken to Janna since forever."

"Hey maybe she died a millionaire and left you a fortune," Lucas offered.

"I doubt it. Money really wasn't her thing," Michelle said. But then, perhaps it had become her thing, Michelle thought. "So, I guess Matt and Janna were still in touch?"

"Yeah I guess so. Maybe they were married at some point I don't know, he didn't say. We didn't talk that long. Hey but I did give the bastard a hard time for not making it to our wedding. Remember? Both he and Janna were a no-show."

Emblems

“I can’t believe you brought that up after all these years, especially under the circumstances Lucas,” Michelle said, but she knew Lucas wasn’t one to forget anything, good or bad, that anyone did to or for him.

Lucas went on as he typically did, and he ignored her comments. “I did take a selfie of Matt and me. A little blurry but... I’ll send it to you later. I told him we gotta get together soon. Maybe you should join us. Wouldn’t that be a trip?”

“Yeah it would,” Michelle said wistfully. “It would be sad without Janna though.” The four of them had shared some fun times, all those years ago. Janna’s singing along to Matt’s French horn. The memory of it made Michelle chuckle.

“What is it?” Lucas asked her.

“Oh, I’m just remembering stuff,” Michelle replied, still smiling.

“Yeah I did the same thing myself after I saw Matt. You think you forget about something, but then there it is - back in your brain again.”

Michelle glanced at the time on the clock. “Okay, I got to head out, I’m late to work as it is. My apartment building was on fire last night.”

“Whaa...seriously? Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I’ll tell you about it later. Do you have the attorney’s number?”

“Hold on,” Lucas said. She heard him shuffling through papers in the background before he returned to the phone. “Okay I guess I don’t have a number, but he did give me the attorney’s name. Paul Story in Casper Iowa.”

“Say again?” Sometimes, even after all these years, she still had trouble understanding Lucas’ accent.

“Paul Story – S-T-O-R-Y, in Casper Iowa. Do you need me to spell the name of the town?”

“No I got it. ‘Casper’ like the ghost. Iowa? Huh. This just gets weirder and weirder. Well thanks, Lucas.”

“Hey no problem. Sorry to call with bad news. Then again, maybe it’s not bad news. Hey you won’t forget me if Janna made you a millionaire, will you?”

“Of course, I won’t. I’ll be sure to send you a postcard from Tahiti.”

Lucas laughed.

“Okay, I’ve gotta go,” Michelle said, as she lifted her purse and briefcase from the sofa table.

“No problem. Talk to you later,” Lucas said, and then he added his trademark, “Ciao”.

On most days, Michelle was the first person to come into the office in the morning. Each day she would unlock the front office door, pick up the Wall Street Journal that lay on the carpet in the outside hallway, and attach a routing slip to the newspaper. The newspaper went first to the Managing Partner, then to each of the other attorneys in the law firm. Michelle herself would read it after her boss had tossed it in the recycle bin, provided it wasn't too dog-eared and coffee-stained by then. She had considered writing her own name on the routing slip, since she doubted anyone would have minded, but Michelle attributed her success in her job to the fact that she always operated within the hierarchy of the law firm. The attorneys took care of the law and the high-level client relationships, and she was in charge of most everything else.

Michelle's boss' name - Beni Rothberg - was last on the routing list as she had been most recently hired. Michelle had worked for all of the attorneys in the firm, having been transferred from the more experienced to the less experienced, so she could "show them the ropes" of life in the firm. Michelle herself had started as a Receptionist at the firm, and she had been grateful for the job during the years Lucas had struggled to make a success of his restaurant. After a few years, Michelle was promoted to Office Manager and Legal Assistant, and that is where she remained. It was not where she had hoped to be at the age of fifty. Her dream had been to become an attorney herself. But she hadn't clung very tightly to that dream, and it had slipped from her grasp.

Lucas' first restaurant, Samba, had not been the success either he or Michelle had hoped it would be. Her job at the law firm had provided the salary that kept them afloat through that and all the other years of restaurant debacles. Michelle had heard it said that the law is a jealous mistress, but the restaurant business had been just as all-consuming.

On an average day as part of the regular morning office ritual, Michelle would open the drapes and peer out to the thermometer on the building across from the Embarcadero. It was on the shady side of a busy Financial District street, and it almost always read 57 degrees, which was typical for a summer day in San Francisco.

It was in fact the last week of July, what should have been the height of summer, and yet the rooms in the office seemed dark to Michelle. She noticed immediately the drapes had not been opened. She quickly drew the drapes, and the hazy sunshine brightened the room.

Word about the fire in Michelle's apartment complex had already circulated the office, due to the fact that the local news station had carried an

early morning “Special Report”. Several of her coworkers had more details than Michelle herself had learned. From what they told her, the man with the cigarette had passed away. His cigarette had caused the fire, but he hadn’t died from smoke inhalation. Earliest reports surmised that he had suffered a heart attack, and had died before the fire even started. Michelle’s co-workers asked her if she had known the man. Their question made her realize that she did not really know anyone who lived in her building.

It had been both strange and uncomfortable for Michelle to walk into the office when the pace of work had already begun. She felt almost like an intruder instead of the person who conducted the morning. As Office Manager and habitually the first person to arrive, it was normally she who tapped the baton on the music stand and summoned the workday orchestrations to begin.

When she made her way to the break room, she saw that the coffee pot was already half empty, with assorted mugs left in the sink to be washed. Washing the mugs was a job left to the receptionist, Juanita. Michelle noted with pride the tasks that she could now delegate or leave behind altogether. Several years at the law firm had given her that right.

Michelle still didn’t have an office of her own, even after so many years at the firm, but her desk was large and it had an extension. She enjoyed a modicum of privacy, due to the cubicle wall that separated her from the others. It allowed her to spread out her files, papers and assorted memorabilia that clients had left at her desk over the years, small tokens of appreciation for whatever support she had provided them. At times, it was Michelle who spoke most often to the clients. She offered them assurances when they called with concern, and answered questions with just enough information to keep them satisfied until her boss could call them back. Nonetheless, assurances from a Legal Assistant had a very short shelf life. By the second call, if the client had not heard from the attorney, Michelle found there was little she could do to make the person feel better.

This morning, as was often the case, Doug, one of the attorneys, was sitting on Michelle’s desk. He held a stack of documents and spoke animatedly to Beni, who stood next to him. Beni held what Michelle guessed was already her third cup of coffee that morning.

“This dude insists on sending me hard copies even though I’ve asked him more than once if he could just send me electronic,” Doug said, as he waved the documents in the air.

“Good morning,” Michelle greeted them both. Doug slid off her desk and made a deep bow. He always joked at all times of the workday.

“Well not so good for you apparently,” Beni said, the furrowed lines on her forehead showing her concern. “Is everything okay with your apartment?”

“Yeah, no damage. Apparently, some residents are complaining that they can still smell smoke, but I guess I’m far enough away not to notice anything.” She had overheard a comment to that effect in her apartment lobby when she had left for work. Repeating it made it sound like she had actually spoken to one of her neighbors.

“Well that’s good,” Beni said brightly.

“I’ll stay late tonight to make up my time,” Michelle offered.

“Don’t worry about it,” Beni replied. “It’s looking like Westwick is going to trial after all, so these next few weeks will be busy ones, and I’ll need you to work late then.”

“Wow, so they didn’t accept the settlement offer?” Michelle asked.

“Nope,” Beni answered. “The guy is convinced he’s got a better case than he has, so there’s not much we can do about that.”

Michelle settled into the remaining routine of the workday and appreciated its predictability. The news about Janna had been unsettling, and she didn’t know what to make of it all. It was easier for her to put it all in the background, and to concentrate on the pile of mail on her desk instead. Michelle had always been grateful that work had provided her a refuge during the ups and downs of her life.

By mid-afternoon Michelle’s eyes began to feel dry from her lack of sleep. She yawned once, then tried to stifle a second one, but Beni spotted her.

“Hey you look like you could use a nap,” Beni suggested. “Go home lady, and get some rest!”

Michelle smiled through her watery eyes. “You caught me,” she said. “You don’t mind? I am starting to drag.”

“Really you’re no use to anyone half awake. It’s Friday. Go home, catch up on sleep, and I’ll see you bright and early on Monday morning,” Beni said, and she waved her hand as if to hurry Michelle out the door.

Michelle looked up from the couch. She had dozed off. Her apartment was cast in a colorful glow that first appeared lilac, then peach, and then settled into a deep shade of pink. She walked over to the window and moved the blinds aside in order to look out.

It took some time for her eyes to focus on the sky beyond the building. She opened the door to her patio, flipped on the light, and at once was stunned by the noise of traffic. Inside her studio apartment, it was easy to forget that she lived in the middle of a metropolis.

Her little garden patio was small, but it served as a miniature oasis. It made up for the lack of interior living space, and had been what had drawn her to the apartment the first time she saw it. She watched Baht, who lay next to one of the potted geraniums and slept soundly. He was oblivious to the traffic noise as he was to most anything else, except the turning of the key when she first came home at night, and the sound of the refrigerator door opening, which portended some delicious morsel making its way to his food dish. He was calm against the frenetic activity, and a good companion to her always, but especially this evening.

“Hey Baht,” she whispered. He raised an eyelid in response, and then closed it again.

She was heartened to see her geraniums were faring well. The recent rain which had been unusual for San Francisco in summer, had resulted in two new buds on the stems. She lifted the pot and could see the roots protruding from the small holes in the base. It was long past the time to transplant them.

“Okay, I’ll do this now,” Michelle said to herself, as if someone were urging her. She searched for the newspaper from the day before and spread it out across the patio floor. Baht, suddenly interested, sauntered over and lay across one side of the paper. Michelle reached behind the chaise lounge for the bag of potting soil, along with the large pot she had bought some weeks before, when she had first written this task on her to-do list. She turned over the potted geranium and pushed on the soil through the bottom holes, shaking the pot slightly as she did, and the plant slid from the pot. It was even more root-bound than she had thought it would be, and she felt a slight twinge of guilt that she had procrastinated so long in doing this simple task.

It felt good, this sense of liberating the plant and placing it into the larger pot, with fresh cool soil, and ample room to spread its roots. It felt like unleashed potential. She filled the new pot halfway with the fresh soil, then placed the uprooted plant in, surrounded it with soil, and watered it thoroughly. Through the entire process, Baht did not move, with the exception of his tail, which snapped around a few times as though he contemplated chasing something, but then reconsidered.

Michelle pulled her knees up to her chest and sat quietly on the patio. She tuned out the roar in the background and felt the calmness of the

moment. There was nothing lovelier than evening in the city, she thought to herself, the comfort and warmth as the lights began to go on, the feeling of solitude in the midst of thousands of other people.

“Come on Baht”, she said, as she stood up, and brushed from her hands the remaining soil. “Time for dinner.”

The two of them went back inside the apartment as Michelle pulled the sliding door shut, which silenced the siren that blared from the street behind.

Several times during the night, Michelle woke up from fragmented dreams. When the blankets were on her, she kicked them off and then woke up shivering. By 4:00 a.m., she had given up the battle to stay asleep. She kept seeing Janna’s face, and replaying the memory of that day when Michelle had come back to the dormitory early, after a canceled class. She had found Janna lying in bed, the covers pulled up to just below her lips, tears falling down her cheeks. “My father died,” Janna was saying, and Michelle had stood there, unable to find any words with which to console her.

She remembered Janna’s words to her had been, “Life will never be the same.” There had been nothing that Michelle could say to that at the time, and even now she could not dispute that. Life was never the same from one day to the next. It offered so little upon which one could rely.

She remembered she had urged Janna to get out of bed, and that the two of them had taken a bus ride across town. Arm-in-arm, the two of them had climbed up Lombard Boulevard to Telegraph Hill Boulevard and then to Coit Tower. It had always been the place where Michelle would go when she needed the perspective that was only possible so high above the city.

She remembered the sight of Janna, standing in the wind and staring out at the Bay, her wavy hair blowing in all directions. She had told Michelle that up there she felt closer to her father, as though he were still by her side.

Baht had heard Michelle’s middle-of-the-night stirrings and jumped onto her bed. Normally she would have shooed him off, as it was the one indulgence he was not allowed in her tiny apartment. But she welcomed his comforting presence.

“A sad day Baht, hearing news of a friend dying,” Michelle said. The cat’s back rose up as she moved her hand along his smooth coat. “I really hope this doesn’t mean we are getting old.”



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