

Gravity and Need

Killer Year

by Marcus Sakey, ...

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Here's how Pamela introduced herself to me: „Candle wax washes out of sheets. Did you know that?”

People talk about love at first sight, but what they really mean is recognition. You look in someone's eyes, could be anyone, a childhood friend or a stranger waiting for the bus, and in an instant, things are different. Like they've pulled aside a curtain and let you look deeper than flesh.

What you see depends on who you are. Maybe it's peace and plenty. Maybe it's grandchildren bobbling on your knee.

In Pamela's eyes, what I saw was a reflection. And more than that, I saw her seeing her reflection in my eyes, the look bouncing back and forth like an endless loop of mirrors. Then she smiled, those lips turning up at only one corner, a hint of teeth, and the next thing I knew we were going at it under the humming fluorescents of the stockroom, her legs wrapped around my back, her ass up on the packing crate of a forty-inch plasma screen.

In retrospect, everything that followed seems obvious.

It hadn't been easy getting the wheelchair up the hill and onto the embankment above the river.

Late sun spilled through the trees and set the steel tracks on fire. A hum of crickets rose loud and steady. The railroad bridge was lonely in the same way as the back side of a strip mall. It's a part of civilization you aren't supposed to see: there's graffiti but no people.

„What are we doing here?“ I watched the light rouge her cheeks, highlight her black hair. She looked away, and I thought of the day we met.

The guy was ideal. Late twenties, outfit by Banana Republic, cheap shoes, and a good haircut. Two years ago he probably had a goatee, and two years hence he'd have a BMW. Ideal.

„I need a new stereo,“ he'd said.

I shook my head. „You don't.“

„Huh?“

„You don't need a new stereo. You need water. You need food and clothes and shelter.“ I held up my hands and smiled like we were buddies. „I'm not going all grammar Nazi. I'm just saying the things you need, they aren't any fun. They're just things you need. What's fun is the things you want. Right?“

He snorted. „Sure.“

„Okay. So what kind of stereo do you want?“

The guy walked in thinking about a boombox. He walked out with a 5.1 surround-sound system, a hundred-watt-per-channel receiver, and a progressive scan DVD. Understand—I didn't con him, and I didn't pressure him. Hell, I didn't even sell him. I just told him that it was okay to want something.

Everybody wants. Without that, what are you? Just an animal taking care of needs.

But I didn't waste a lot of time pondering it, because all the time I was talking to him, I saw this beautiful girl staring at me, one side of her lips raised in a secret smile.

After you have sex with a total stranger on top of a three-thousand-dollar television, what you're supposed to do is zip up, exchange fake numbers, and never see each other again.

We went for Thai.

You know that moment on a first date when the conversation hits a lull? You'd been scoring points with the classics—the story about an old roommate's dog, the day you tried to quit your job but were fired first, one about your wacky-but-beloved sister—when suddenly the rhythm is lost. You laugh a second longer than

her joke is worth, and fiddle with the chopsticks while the silence beats against your temples. It's unavoidable; after all, you don't know each other. The trick, though, is what comes next. Usually it's banal, a question about her job or yours, a reflection on the décor or the food.

What Pamela said was, „Do you think you could kill everybody in this restaurant if you needed to?”

I narrowed my eyes. Leaned back, looked around the room.

Her words spilled fast. „I'm not a psycho. I'm a writer. It's my job to think about things like that.” She paused, brushed a lock of hair behind her ear, then looked down and bit the corner of her lip. After a moment, still staring at the table, she said, „Did I just blow it?”

A waiter came by and splashed water into our glasses, then sulked away.

„Well, it's like this.” I scooped gomaе, chewed slowly. The peanut sauce was delicious. „I think if I surprised the big guy at the end table with a chopstick in the ear, I could handle the rest of them with a chair. It'd be messy, though.”

When she looked up, it was with that smile, and I felt something squeeze my chest.

Pamela's smile.

I used to babysit my little cousin when he was four or five. A good kid, but he got into stuff. One time, I found him in his parents' room. He'd gotten hold of my aunt's lighter, and was holding the lace curtains in one hand and the Bic in the other, the pale flame just inches away. He had a look of intense concentration, like he was doing math problems in his head.

I shouted, and he dropped the lighter and looked up, caught between the joy of his private world and the panic of the real one. He explained, without a hint of guilt, that he was trying to make more lace—he thought the intricate holes must be made by fire, and he wanted to poke some more.

Pamela's smile is like that. Like she sees a secret the rest of us don't, a dangerous, wondrous secret. And every time she smiles, you think this time it might break free.

Only it never does.

The dying sun made the river sparkle like blood, warmed the metal of the wheelchair.

„Our place.” Pamela turned to look at me. „Do you remember?”

Do I remember.

After the gomaе, after the pad khee mao and the red curry, after the bottle of wine and the sweet Thai coffee, Pamela wanted ice cream.

„I know this shop,” she said. „They have gelato, the real stuff like you get in Italy.”

I raised my eyebrows and the collar of my jacket. „It's fifteen degrees out.”

„Have you ever had real gelato?”

The place was out on Division, a twenty-minute ride. I kept glancing at her just in time to catch her glancing at me. The third time it happened, we both broke into

laughter, and then she reached over and took my hand, our fingers interlacing as though we'd done it a hundred times.

Gelato is smoother than ice cream, and comes in more flavors. I had a scoop of white chocolate and one of pistachio. Pamela ordered espresso, sour cherry, and pumpkin.

„You're kidding, right?”

„Why?”

„That's the weirdest mix I ever heard.”

„I want them all. Why choose?” She worked her cone like a project, licking in small, steady strokes to maintain the shape, rolling it around her lips.

It was a little distracting, yes.

Afterward, we went for a walk. A walk, in the middle of January, the streets buried in dirty sludge, the concrete icy, the wind cutting. We went for a walk and I put my arm around her and she fit her body into mine and neither of us shivered. She told me about her writing, how she'd sold one book, a mystery novel, and had a second almost finished. Told me about childhood, her parents splitting up when she was young. How that had never made sense to her, the idea that they changed their minds. If she ever got married, that was it, all or nothing, till death parted. She told me that she danced ballet when she was a teenager, and that her favorite color was avocado, and that her first kiss was with a ten-year-old girlfriend, and I held her and could have listened all night.

But it would have been better if I didn't.

My apartment was too small and hers was too far from my job, so we found a new place, a bungalow pulled back from the street, large and private, the ceilings at Wonderland angles. Pamela turned the second bedroom into a writing den, hanging photographs of crime scenes and a dry-erase board that traced the unhappy fates of her protagonists.

We played house. On the weekends, we built a nation of two and ruled it from the king-size bed. Dirty breakfast plates piled on the floor beside paperback thrillers and the New York Times. We'd watch the Spanish channel and make up our own stories. Once we spent all day pretending I was a pilot down behind enemy lines, and she was the naughty interrogator trying to make me talk. She giggled while we shopped for shiny boots and leather gloves, but didn't break character after she put them on.

It was spring when we found the bridge, and by then, Pamela was all I wanted.

We were taking a walk. Funny, a lot of the milestones in our relationship involved walking. Sometimes irony is so neat you just want to shoot yourself.

The park was one of those pleasantly fake spots where the paths wander but the trees are well disciplined. We must have been through it a hundred times. But that morning was the first we spotted the trail. Pamela took one look at it, smiled, and then bet me I couldn't catch her.

It was a thin dirt track that wound under branches and around bushes, the kind with something always snapping out to catch your face. She ran like a little girl, a doe, light on her feet and quick, and it was all I could do to keep her in sight, much less catch her. But every time I heard her laugh, I pushed a little faster through the tangle of woods.

Then, suddenly, sunlight. I slowed as I stepped from the line of trees. A ridge of gravel ballast crested in front of me, dull steel railroad tracks running along it. I shaded my eyes against the sudden brilliance.

Pamela stood on the very edge of the bridge, arms out, chest forward, blue horizon behind, nothing but the breeze and my prayers between her and a thirty-foot plummet to the brown river below.

Like she were cut from the sky.

“Of course I remember.” My voice sounded harsher than I meant for it to. But lots of things don’t turn out how we intend.

Pamela acted like she hadn’t heard, her eyes locked on the river below. She squatted, then sat on the edge of the bridge, her legs dangling. „It was a beautiful day. Spring.”

„I know.” My hands shook, and I wasn’t sure if it was due to effort or memory.

„It was like something from a myth.” She reached in her pocket and took out her cigarettes. The smoking was new. I hated it, but under the circumstances, I couldn’t begrudge her. With her right hand, she snapped a lighter, held it to her cupped palms. Took a deep drag and then blew a stream of smoke. „We burst out of the forest to this place, and it was like nothing else existed. Just you and me at the end of the world.” She shook her head, took another inhale. „You came up behind and put your arms around me and pulled me away from the edge. We made love”—she looked around, pointed—„there, right on the tracks. Waiting to feel a train coming. You had gravel burns on your back for a week. And when we were done, you asked me to marry you. You remember what I said?”

I choked back battery acid. Looked down at my hands, folded in my lap, atop my ruined body. „I remember.”

We’d been married for almost a year. The morning it happened, we had been screaming at each other. We didn’t fight often, but when we did, you could have sold tickets.

It made sense. All we wanted was everything all the time.

I slammed the door as I left for work, but the battle kept raging in my head. I marshaled arguments to defend myself, launched the imaginary salvos I thought most devastating. I was right in the middle of saying how tired I was of her divorce issues when the number seventy-two bus sheared off the back half of the Chrysler.

It’s not like TV, with attractive doctors and snappy banter. In truth, I don’t remember much. The rotting-flower stink of antiseptics. A bright light and a sense of motion around me, like a rock in the midst of rapids. Opening my eyes to see Pamela in a cracked orange chair at the foot of the bed. Her fingers squeezing my toes, eyes a million miles away. And then noticing that I couldn’t feel her touch.

Funny thing is, I don’t remember what we’d been fighting about.

I could still have a fulfilling life, the doctor told me. True, I would be in the wheelchair. I’d lost my spleen and one kidney, but my lungs, my heart, they were in fine shape. My dick didn’t work and my legs never would. But I had the use of my arms, my mind. There were people worse off.

I said, Aren't there always? Is there one poor, crippled, disease-ridden bastard out there that suffers worse than everybody and is allowed to be pissed about it?

The doctor's lips went tight as he said that bitterness was a natural part of the healing process. Then he checked his watch, wished me luck, and held the door for Pamela to wheel me out.

„We can make it, baby,” she whispered. But I swore I could hear a question mark at the end of her sentence.

This is the bad part.

Before the accident, our world had a population of two. You know those disgusting couples that just draw into one another, that don't seem to even realize other people exist? We were them. And I'm not talking about the early flush of the first months. I'm talking about two solid years. More.

Funny thing about words. You always think you know what they mean, until life kicks the context out from underneath you. Same way every pop song turns into poetry when you're in the middle of a breakup—you see all that pain that you never connected to before.

Take the phrase, „I need you.” There was a time those words might kick off a romp that could get us arrested in some states. We said „need” when we meant „want.” Same as the kid looking for a new stereo.

It was only after the accident that I learned what “I need you” really means.

I need you to tie my shoes.

I need you to drive me to work.

No. Please no.

I need you to help me off the toilet.

Here's an ugly little home movie I'd rather not remember.

Establishing shot: A man sits in a wheelchair. His fingers clench nervously.

A door opens. A woman in a parody of a nurse's uniform struts in. A preposterously short white skirt reveals pale lace stockings. She closes the door with a theatrical flourish. „Good morning, Mr. Johnson.”

His expression twists with desire.

She sways over and puts a hand against his forehead. Zoom in on her blouse, barely buttoned, breasts straining against the fabric. „Oh, Mr. Johnson. You're burning up!” Makeup exaggerates her pout. „I need to cool you down immediately.”

Red fingernails unbutton his shirt. He touches her neck, traces the curves of her chest. Hoists himself up enough for her to tug off his pants.

„I should give you a sponge bath.” Close-up of her nibbling on the tip of a finger. “But I forgot my sponge. Whatever will I do?” She begins kissing her way down his torso. He can feel the light pressure of her lips, the warmth of her breath. So sweetly familiar. It's all he wants. He can feel it at his collarbone. At the hollow in his chest. At his navel.

And then he can't.

To her credit, she spends a long minute trying anyway.

When she looks up, he realizes he's not the only one crying. There's a terrible moment when they stare at each other, and then she covers her mouth with her hand, jerks to her feet, and rushes for the door.

The camera pulls out slow on the man alone in his chair.

The bloodred in the sunset had given way to the pastel colors of those candy hearts you see around Valentine's Day.

„You said that if we were married, it was all or nothing.” I took a deep breath. Afraid of what was coming. „That you didn't want to go the same way your parents had.”

She nodded, still not looking at me. With a flick of her forefinger she sent the cigarette spinning bright into the shadows below.

The muscles of my chest tightened. All I'd wanted, and I'd had it for so short a time. „Has that changed?” I bit my lip, took a breath thick with fecund river smells. “Do you want a... a...” I couldn't say it. That word, it's like a home invader, a ski-masked freak in your living room. Once the possibility has been acknowledged, it never goes away. It becomes part of your reality, and you wake up sweating at night sounds forever.

She spun. Her eyes flashed, and I could see beads of sweat on her upper lip. „No. I don't want a divorce. You know better than that.”

I let myself breathe. Our relationship had been forged of desire, a fantasy kingdom of want. But since the accident, we'd lived in a world of one-sided need. Selfish or not, there it was. „Look. This place... it hits a little too close to home.”

She shook her head as if to clear it, and moved behind me to take the handles of the chair. „Maybe it'd be better if I did want a divorce. Easier on both of us. But I'm”—her voice caught—„I'm just not wired that way.”

Me either.” Was I telling the truth? Would I stick with her if our roles were reversed? I really don't know. I just know I was relieved.

„Do you love me?”

„Of course.” I struggled to turn around and touch her hands. The easiest way to see someone pushing your wheelchair is to tilt your head backward, but there's no dignity in it. You're always staring up their nostrils. „Of course I do.”

„I love you too, baby.” Pamela smiled at me, that secret laced with darkness, the secret she never shared. Then she took a deep breath and shoved the chair toward the edge of the bridge.

On our wedding night, the bed rocked and shuddered halfway across the room.

When we were done, Pamela flopped on top of me, her dark hair draping my chest. I lay motionless, still inside her, feeling her every breath like it was me drawing air. Our skin pressed tight, our sweat ran together, our bodies connected, and I literally couldn't tell where I ended and she began.

Gravel popped as my chair lurched forward. „Stop!”

The front edges of the wheels hung in open air. Vertigo squeezed my stomach. Thirty feet below, the concrete base of the bridge struts loomed. Even if I missed

them, the water was deep. I couldn't keep myself afloat, not with half my body waterlogged and useless.

Behind me, I heard her sob as she bent forward, braced herself, and pushed.

The chair jumped four inches before my flailing hands found the tires. Hardened rubber burned my palms. Gravel slid over the side, hung in silence, and then clattered against the concrete below.

„Stop!” My fingers locked like steel clamps. „Jesus!” The breeze seemed to tug at my dangling feet. My arms were strong from months of maneuvering the chair, and I forced the wheels to reverse, but they skidded ineffectually in the loose ballast.

Fuck dignity. I looked backward, staring at her upside down, trying to understand what was happening, hoping for some answer in her eyes, some hint that this was a joke.

People talk about love at first sight, but what they really mean is recognition. You look in someone's eyes, could be anyone, a childhood friend or a stranger waiting for the bus, and in an instant, things are different. Like they've pulled aside a curtain and let you look deeper than flesh.

What you see depends on who—and where—you are.

When I saw what was in her eyes, I let go of the wheels.

In the sudden absence of resistance, we leapt forward, the chair cresting over the rim of the bridge and starting to fall, the river rushing upward. Just as it went over, I thought, Forgive me, baby, and then I twisted my torso as hard as I could and flopped sideways out of the wheelchair, my body slapping against the bridge edge like meat.

Pamela's momentum propelled her. She let out a startled cry and, still clutching the handles of the wheelchair, hurtled off the bridge.

I scabbled and fell, clawing at gravel that tore up in handfuls. My dead legs swung free. As my body slipped over the side, I made a desperate grab and caught the corrugated edge with both hands. The metal bit cruelly, and my heart slammed against my ribs. I clenched my teeth and heaved, wriggling forward, rocks jamming into my ribs. When I finally felt the tug of gravity ease, I gasped for breath, muscles on fire, as I spun and wormed back to look over the edge.

She lay splayed on the concrete. Apart from the disconcerting angle of her pelvis, she looked almost relaxed, as if she were lounging in the shallows to battle the heat. Her left foot and arm bobbed with the current. Something sparkled just below the waterline. Her ring. Sometimes irony is so neat you just want to shoot yourself.

Pamela's eyes were open, and locked on mine. An eternal moment passed. Then she coughed, and said, „I think I need you.”

And through the blood, I finally shared the secret behind her smile.

It's a funny thing, needing someone. If it goes one way, it's a burden. If it goes both ways, it's a bond.

Our breakfast table is higher now, and there are rails fastened beside the bed. Maybe we don't laugh as much as we used to, and everything comes a little harder. After all, not all secrets are pretty. But Saturdays are still our favorite. And though there are now two wheelchairs parked beside our bed, the man and woman in it are committed—all or nothing.

