

Southwest on I-40

By Bernhard L. Kirstein

CHAPTER 1: Up In A Balloon

When I walk into a room for the first time, I want to run up the walls and ceilings to experience the entire space, like Fred Astaire. I want to devour the room with every sense, absorbing past traces and actions of all the persons that have moved through the volume before me, with their traces flowing in time, like a burning stick swirled in the night. But I lose this feeling with the slightest distraction - a noise, a light, a reminder of why I entered the room. I also lose focus if performing redundant, robotic work. I need creative, open-ended tasks, or my mind wanders, plunging into joyful flights of blinding transcendent moments of clarity. I'm actively, tightly, focused on keeping the geysers within me from erupting. Because of this tight control, I'm often seen as being distracted or shy. I'm not. As a release, I carry a small black notebook with me to record fleeting observations and thoughts that I sometimes compile into essays and short stories. I've generally succeeded in staying in control, except on a few regrettable occasions.

Growing up in the spalling concrete of Chicago, I've bounced off the walls and people of my neighborhood, calloused, bruised, and scarred. In my youth, I filled out and grew tall rapidly, growing 6 inches in one year when I was twelve, to 6'2". In high school I poured my excessive energies into playing tennis and writing a lightly veiled subversive daily column for the school paper.

Physically, my initial good looks had lost sharpness from a series of broken noses in mean street brawls of survival. Until I became more disciplined, I took too many risks for too little gain. Few people would drive with me. I drove too fast, taking too many

chances, loudly upending three cars in my first three years of driving, despite having qualified for a good student insurance discount.

There is a genetic component to my restless energy. My parents both died of heart attacks in their early 60's, burning brightly but briefly, inspiring sparks of awe as they illuminated lives around them with their intelligence, empathy and good works. Their hopes for me were simple, get a college degree and stay out of jail. I did, except for a six-hour stint for a drunk and disorderly 3AM brawl between bouncers and friends, charges dismissed.

I was a restless student. I changed my undergraduate majors three times, beginning with engineering, which I left after two years to pursue a more open-ended creativity, journalism. I initially loved writing for a newspaper, but soon realized that being a spectator in life, rather than a participant wasn't for me, so I again changed majors after one semester. I continued to write, but other than winning one magazine writing contest, I remained unpublished.

My last major was in psychology, where I became very interesting in neurochemistry, how the brain physically works and in the psychology of aesthetics, why we have positive and negative reactions to our environment. Before I knew it, I had graduated and was yearning to spring out of my mother's apartment, (my parents were separated for 15 years but saw each other on weekends, being too fiercely independent to stay together for more than a few hours). My psychology degree was surprisingly not the ticket to a creative and rewarding career, resulting in few job offers, other than one as an assistant manager of a loan company, which I declined. After floundering as a machinist, I decided to go back to graduate school, in architecture. I saw this as a highly creative

field where I could put to use the engineering education I'd accumulated. It was a field where one was forced to look at the almost infinite variables that result from each design decision, where locating a structure on a lot determined how it functioned, how it related to prevailing winds, the sun, the neighborhood, the views from within and on and on.

I was accepted by three schools in a special graduate school program in architecture, for non-architecture graduates. I chose the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, in the warm Southwest primarily to escape the Chicago Gulag winters and to make a completely new start in life, of which my parents would be proud.

Driving into New Mexico for the first time was like landing on another planet. To my amazement, I found an environment in which I could feel comfortable. Trading hemmed-in Chicago, for open vistas of towering red mountains and lunar landscapes. I felt freedom to roam. Taking a short drive outside of Albuquerque, I would find myself inside a 100 mile circle of sandy desert without a trace of human existence. The Southwest seemed to be both prehistoric yet ripe with an endless future, the perfect setting for my restless spirit. My father didn't see my move as a wise decision, having emigrated from Germany after WWII. "Nothing grows there. What are you going to do when a war comes?"

I threw myself into my schoolwork with new focus and dedication, and did well. However, having grown up poor, a troubling question remained, how would I earn a living once I graduated? I had taken internships at architecture firms that shattered my romantic illusions of the profession, paying minimum wage during a four year internship I would have to endure. Initially the work would be grindingly repetitive rather than creative, until I learned enough to create value for my employer. I could spend years

slowly perfecting a senior designer's cryptic sketches into construction drawings, while endlessly deciphering and complying with Byzantine building codes. I was wary about my capacity for the dedication and sacrifice needed to claw my way up an enormous learning curve with a t-square.

If not architecture, then what? The rich cultural heritage of being a Navajo sheep herder had some appeal, but albeit the difficulty of not being a Navajo, this probably would have ended badly. I could envision, after a battle with the elders over the need for college boy modernized production methods, surprised sacred sheep being shorn assembly-line fashion on spinning barbecue spits, their wool being woven into Code-talker endorsed sweaters, as the sheep were off-loaded, naked and vindictively braying.

I did take a number of internships in architecture after I had finished my studies, mainly because I enjoyed the company of highly intelligent and creative creatures. My father helped subsidize me by giving me the down payment for a house, whose low mortgage I paid in lieu of rent. His and my mother's plan was to eventually retire in Chicago and come live in my house in Albuquerque.

My lack of purpose and mission changed when I met Melissa, a bright tall blond beauty who became a calming influence, directing me into productive channels, at least for a while.

I met her on a balloon ride, during a week when Eric, a childhood friend from Chicago, came to visit from Los Angeles. He had been the first of my friends to escape the windy city, giving me confidence to do the same. He had moved to the Coast after finding himself helplessly trapped in the spell of a sexually voracious Rubenesque woman with four children, who routinely cheated on him with her ex-husband. Sadly,

Eric had dropped out of college to work as a roofer to feed this unfaithful rutting bovine of a woman and her herd. Eric's moment of clarity and motivation came with the shock of entering his apartment to loud moans, and to find his girlfriend and her ex-husband disrobed and engaged on a toilet seat. In an instant it had become easy to ignore protests from her ex-husband that he'd only come by to see the children and nothing more. Her frantic efforts to support his lie became laughable. She tried to stop him as he packed a duffle bag, threw it into his Chevy van and smoked the tires down the street. With no plan in mind he drove west down Interstate 40, the old Route 66, determined to reach the ocean and fall asleep on a beach listening to its waves.

After driving four hundred miles he softened and thought about turning back, fighting the humiliating, degrading, feverish longing for this woman. He stopped to call her and she begged him to return. He told her he'd think about it. Starving, he stopped at a diner to think. A genuine cheery hello from a young pony-tailed waitress again jolted him into clarity. Her innocence and playful unpretentious exchange with him was so in contrast with the dark manipulation of his former girlfriend, it strengthened his resolve to continue his journey.

Now, after two years, Eric and I had gotten together. He had done well for himself, becoming a union electrician and contractor. Knowing he was coming I had arranged for a surprise, an early morning hot air balloon ride across the Rio Grande. By fate, Melissa had arranged the same surprise for her mother. The four of us were thrown together for the first time when we met in the parking lot of the "World Balloon Company" at 5a.m. shortly before sunrise.

The chill of that morning sharpened the pain of my hangover from our previous

night out with Eric, that had ended just three hours before. Towards the end of that evening I had lost Eric in the parking lot of a rock club. I had gone to get my car, while he waited with two unsteady female parole officers. We had danced with them until the club closed. I had suggested we get breakfast at a 24 hour diner. When I drove by the front of the club, they were gone. I was dismayed that Eric had left without me. I circled the lot looking for them without success, then in resignation drove home and went to sleep. Three hours later I was awakened by Eric, who had been dropped off by the women from the back of a pick-up truck.

Eric explained He had gone inside the club when the women needed to use the restroom and had missed me. He couldn't go home with them as they explained they both had husbands waiting for them. We laughed at the sad turn of events as we poured an eye-opening shot of Jameson's whiskey before we headed off to the lot of the balloon ride company just down the street from my house.

Bleary eyed, I met Melissa and her mother, Dorothy. They were both beaming and giddy for a great adventure, but too formally dressed for the occasion where every landing is a crash landing. Dorothy, in her late fifties had classic high cheekbones, her hair up in a bun, and wore heavy make-up with fire engine red lips. Melissa had the same features, but they were obscured by even heavier makeup, that made her look years older. She told me she was an intensive care nurse, working in a "vegetable garden," for which her mother playfully swatted her shoulder in reproach. Melissa's mother no longer worked, but volunteered at a hospital with other grand gentlewomen.

Melissa was as tall as I was, at 6'2". As I spoke to her, she emphasized each statement by patting my hand, even holding it, then suddenly pulling it away when she

realized how forward she might be appearing. My first impression of her as being standoffish waned quickly.

As we waited for the crew to load the basket and balloon into a truck, we were given coffees by the staff. Melissa said she wished she could have an Irish coffee. I laughed and looked at her mother, who rolled her eyes. Later I would learn that Melissa hadn't been joking. We exchanged polite banter as our guide, a leathery energetic old man, drove the Balloon World bus towing the balloon trailer to a large undeveloped lot at the foot of the Sandia mountains, followed by the rest of the "chase crew" in a pick-up truck.

We got out and watched as a four story long nylon balloon resembling the Earth was unfurled and its nylon tethers attached to rings on the gondola. The crew pulled the balloon to its full flat length in the sand, then pull-started a gasoline-powered fan aimed into the open bottom. The old man got into the gondola, which the crew tilted sideways. He lit the pilot lights on the propane jets on top of the gondola basket, reached that was now also pointed into the bottom of the balloon. When he pulled a chain, propane flames exploded in a roar like something out of a medieval foundry, causing the 100 foot globe to rise and pull the gondola upright.

"All aboard !" he yelled over the jets.

Eric and I climbed in first, meaning to help the women afterwards. I reached over the basket and clasped Melissa's mother's outstretched arm to lift her up as she extended one white-stockinged leg in, then the other, before catching her heel and collapsing on top of me. Melissa laughed and helped her mother off of me, who was now blushing as red as her lipstick.

The pilot pulled a chain at the balloon burner, opening the propane valve, and the flames roared as the balloon rose and took shape into a tight sphere. The ground tethers snapped taut and the crew released them at a signal from the pilot. We rose into the air at approximately the speed of an elevator. As we hung tightly to the sides of the wicker basket. Melissa and I glanced over the side, then at each other with eyes wide with surprise, as we were already hundreds of feet in the air, and city blocks looked like monopoly boards.

The thrill of the ascension gave way to silence when the burners went off. We were traveling at the same speed as the wind, so we didn't feel or hear the wind, only the random sounds below – a dog barking at us as we sailed by, a young couple arguing in their back yard without ever looking up, high pitched sounds of passion coming from a third-floor apartment bedroom window. Eric was engaging Melissa's mother in conversation about the desert topography unfolding around us. We floated over cottonwoods at the river's edge, then over the Rio Grande's lazy brown current. The ride was calming, without the adrenaline rich excitement I had expected, until I looked up and saw dark clouds and even lightning beyond the river.

“What do we do when it rains?” I asked the pilot who had been listening to something through his ear phones.”

He held up his finger to give him a minute and continued listening intently.

“You go down as fast as you can, like we will shortly,” he replied curtly, as if I had touched a nerve.

“Hang on to these ropes!” he yelled, which were looped around the perimeter of the basket. His, “old coot” manner had evaporated to a steely seriousness. The brown

water below was beginning to raise whitecaps, and we were descending.

Eric looked at me with a raised eyebrow. Melissa took her mother's hand, intertwining their fingers. I held onto a rope woven in loops around the basket, and reached for Melissa's wrist, which she didn't pull away. Reflexively, she looked at me with the professional calming manner of a nurse.

We continued to descend quickly and it looked like we would certainly clear the river, but the strand of cottonwoods at the banks ahead were another issue. The pilot was oblivious to us as he held onto the chain of the burner with white knuckles, forcing a continuous roar of the propane. Rain and small pellets of hail started bouncing around the bottom of the basket. I looked up into the hole of the balloon and saw the effect of the wind flattening the roundness of the side of the balloon. Melissa now grabbed my hand and her mother's and pulled closer. Our descent stopped and we started to rise. We were moving much faster forward now, but we were still below the tops of the trees.

"Throw out those water cans!" the pilot yelled, to no one in particular, as he desperately yanked the burner chain. I released Melissa's hand, and Eric and I grabbed a ten-gallon can that looked like it held gasoline. We shrugged and heaved it over along with two others, hearing them splash like depth charges below.

We were rising, but the wind and hail was heading us into the top of a tree.

"There's a golf course right behind those trees." the pilot yelled,
"Hang on!"

A tree limb shot into the gondola and broke off, showering us in wet leaves and broken branches. With a crack the gondola hit another large limb and we tipped sideways, then swung forward with the momentum of a descending roller coaster, then

rocked back and forth like a pendulum.

With a free hand I gripped Melissa's arm, by which she was also holding her mother, wide-eyed, her lips a silent O." The rocking slowed, but hail pelted the balloon and stung our hands.

I could see the smooth green of the golf course ahead. The flag on the putting green looked like a spear. A groundskeeper in a kart heard us scraping the tree and looked up. He looked surprised, then irate, as we were descending towards the course. Hail was whitening the greens.

The pilot let go of the propane chain and pulled a yellow cord that went up into the hole of the balloon. It opened a flap at the top that quickly released the built-up hot air and quickened our fall. We were now at the height of a two-story house.

"Eric bend your knees and hang on!"

The balloon was collapsing above us. Eric was bracing himself against me. The pilot killed the burners. Melissa's mother's arm was rigid with fear. Melissa looked up at me and squeezed my hand tightly. Whether it was out of need or reassurance, I couldn't tell, but I felt a barrier drop between us.

Our basket lurched backwards as it hit and bounced, the collapsing balloon becoming a parachute, slowing us but tipping us, as we hung on speechless. The basket tore through the putting green like a knife through mint jelly. Melissa's mother screamed, and we hit again with a stomach-belting thud and landed sideways, all of us spilling together in a tangle of arms and legs. We struggled to untangle as we were being pelted by stinging hail.

"You sons of bitches!" came a cry as I withdrew my arm from underneath

Melissa's mother's dress.

"Look at my putting green!" We all stared at the green which was now a huge crater with crests, that covered in hail, looked like white caps.

"It takes about a hundred dollars a square foot and years to make a putting green! You can't just lay carpet over this," the man yelled, oblivious to our plight.

Melissa and I looked at each other incredulously and laughed. We were just glad to be alive.

The pilot had gotten to his feet and pulled a bottle of champagne from a compartment, while we ran to the collapsed balloon to hold it over our heads.

"Relax and have some champagne with us," he offered the groundskeeper. Champagne was the traditional peace offering given to the person on whose property the balloon landed. The groundskeeper shook his head in derision. We watched this scene unfold from under the balloon with amusement.

I looked at Melissa next to me and she leaned towards me as if expecting a kiss, but was stopped by her mother's stare. Eric put his arm around Melissa's mother, who smiled at him.

A pick-up truck, the chase vehicle, honked from an adjacent kart path and drove over towards us, stopping between the pilot and the groundskeeper. The driver gave the groundskeeper a card and told him to contact that number with his damages, which he reluctantly accepted.

Eric and I helped disconnect and load the basket into the pickup and fold and stow the balloon as the hail turned to rain.

Melissa and her mother waited in the back seat of the truck. I joined them. Eric

sat up front with the pilot and driver. I looked behind us as we drove off. The groundskeeper was throwing his rake into the crater in disgust. Melissa and her mother had fallen asleep while waiting. Melissa's head leaned against my shoulder as we drove.

Eric began snoring up front. We had both been running on adrenaline and without sleep. No longer afraid of falling out of the sky, our energy was depleted. I became very comfortable with the warmth of Melissa's body and the whirring of the truck tires. I too dozed off.

"Hang on for impact!" yelled our pilot, jarring me awake, as he laughed raucously. "Time to go home!" I jumped up and saw that Melissa and her mother had already left. I looked around and saw their car just leaving the parking lot.

"Let's follow them." Eric exhorted. "I know you want to." I did.

We ran through the rain to my car. I felt a sense of urgency, even destiny. I slid onto the seat, and took off, spitting gravel across the parking lot. But I suddenly had misgivings about catching up to them, especially at appearing like a lunatic in front of Melissa's mother. Maybe I'd even misread Melissa.

"They're turning left at the light! Step on it," yelled Eric, caught up in the chase.

"This is really about you and Melissa's mother, isn't it?" I riled Eric.

"Well, if I were in my 60's, he admitted, I don't think I'd mind rolling around with her."

I drove through a business district, never getting closer than a half dozen cars behind them. Melissa drove like an ambulance driver. Was she trying to get away? I turned too fast at a corner, sliding the rear tires, and nearly hitting a parked car. They

turned onto on a quiet residential street. Old cottonwood trees lined long sedate lawns of moss and ivy-covered mansions. My squealing tires echoed through the neighborhood as I continued to try to catch them. Melissa's car, halfway up the block ahead of me, pulled into a driveway of a stately but modest adobe ranch house. I followed, pulling into their driveway, just as they were getting out of the car. They turned around quickly, startled.

This was wrong. Not only would they think I was a lunatic, but a dangerous one at that. Melissa peered at our car, looked at me, recognized me and laughed.

"Did we forget something?" she joked.

I was frozen inside the car.

"Go!" Eric elbowed me, enjoying my little drama.

I dove out of the car like a procrastinating high diver. I felt the fear of falling.

"Melissa, can I call you sometime?" I croaked, my throat dry.

She laughed. "Sure, since you already know where I live. Mother do you have a pen?"

Her mother came over to the car after digging into her purse. She found a pen and settled for an envelope to write on. She waved to Eric still in the car, who waved back enthusiastically. Melissa wrote down her number and gave it to me, her eyes locked into mine.

"I'll call you." I blurted. She nodded, and smiled confidently as she flipped her pony tail back, and headed into the house behind her mother.

I caught a glimpse of antiques through the door as they went inside. As we pulled out of the driveway, the curtains moved. I felt a warm buzz of electricity go through me as I thought about Melissa watching me.

Eric elbowed me again grinning approvingly, thinking he had made a positive

change in my life.

I called Melissa the next day. The number she had given me was from the nurses' station at the hospital where she worked. I had to hold while they got her. I worried about pulling her away from a medical emergency. The nurse however hadn't seemed annoyed, which put me at ease. Maybe she thought I was a doctor checking on a patient. Melissa seemed happy to hear from me. I apologized if I had called at a bad time.

"No, things are slow today. You're not interrupting anything. Pick me up at 6:30? You remember the way?"

Melissa's mother greeted me at the door and offered me a seat on her long antique coach. Melissa was still getting ready. She continued looking me up and down while smiling, and offered me a soda.

"Call me Dotty," she ordered.

She told me a silly hospital joke while I waited.

When Melissa entered, I could only stare speechlessly for a few seconds. Her long blond hair framed her high-cheeked Nordic features and blue eyes. She was wearing a short white sundress, that showed a hint of cleavage and accentuated her long tan legs.

Melissa turned slowly modeling for me. "You like it?"

"Very much," I said, trying not to appear rabid.

Her mother beamed proudly and waved goodbye from doorway as we left.

I took Melissa to a quiet restaurant downtown overlooking the city. Once we were alone, I felt relaxed with her. I reached for her hand, and I was relieved that she didn't withdraw it. Over drinks, snifters of B & B as she had suggested, we talked about her stressful job and her mother. She offered that she especially enjoyed helping people

that were scared and needed her. I told her I liked to create beautiful things out of nothing. The ice was broken. She became more playful, more physical, her knees touching mine. When I took her home, the shades were drawn, but a light was on in the living room. She hugged me at her door. I wanted to stay but thought of her mother, probably propped up in a chair waiting for her on the other side of the door. As I turned to leave, she boldly asked if I wanted to go out and shoot pool the next night. I whispered yes, my throat dry, as she kissed me on the cheek and hurried in.

I spent the next morning up high on a roof nailing down decking, on a design-build project my architecture firm was doing. I was in a dangerous trance, thinking only of Melissa. I rushed to shower at the end of the day, and drove recklessly down the now familiar streets to her house. Melissa's mother met me at the door. Melissa again wasn't yet ready. I mindlessly exchanged forced pleasantries with her. She never stopped staring at me and smiling.

Melissa appeared, tugging down a white knit sweater over a tight pair of jeans. She kissed me lightly on the cheek, then did the same to her mother and we stepped out to a cedar smoke scented night.

We drove my car to a sports bar with a large poolroom. She was a better pool player than I was, and she laughed as she beat me. I didn't care. I was stealing fleeting glances down her sweater, watching her breasts gently swaying as she carefully took her shots. I felt a little guilty over this small stolen pleasure.

We drank several beers and flirted openly with each other. After our fifth game I invited her over to my house for coffee. I never drank coffee, but I thought the offer sounded like an innocent enough invitation, like an invitation to dance. I kept some

instant ‘Maxwell House’ on top of the refrigerator just in case. When Melissa accepted, my temples began to throb. We drove to my house through the cool night, holding hands. She stopped to assess my suburban brick ranch house. I pulled her playfully up my walk, and, once through the wrought iron patio gate and oak door, offered her a tour of the house. We went out on the back patio, where the moon shown through the branches of a cottonwood tree. She looked up, taking in the night sky, then turned to me and said,

“I want to make love to you.”

I couldn't believe what I'd heard, but I instinctively pulled her close, and inhaled her natural vanilla scent. We did make love, and for weeks thereafter, we were inseparable, not bearing to lose physical contact even for a minute if we could, spending every night together.

CHAPTER 2: We Marry

A month after we met, we went hiking up into the Sandia Mountains above the city. I loved being alone with her in such a majestic natural setting, where time slowed and reality sharpened to a crystal-like poignancy. We took a trail that ran through a sagebrush meadow at the foot hills, then followed a creek into Ponderosa pines at higher elevations. The water rushed louder as the trail grew steeper. Melissa's swinging ponytail set my pace like a metronome. Ahead, I could see the path rise into a billowy green mist under a grove of high Aspens.

Melissa sprinted into the mist and disappeared. When I caught up, she was waiting for me, at the base of a cascading waterfall. Behind the wall of water, ferns grew up the side of the gray granite walls of a bluff. Alongside was a clearing and a flat

boulder overlooking the falls. A shaft of light cut through the tall pines.

Melissa stopped and sat in a curve of the boulder. I dropped my backpack on the rock and then helped Melissa out of hers. We laid back on the stone like lizards and absorbed its warmth. Melissa rolled over and rested her head on my chest, her blond hair wet from the spray of the falls. Exhausted, we feel asleep.

I awoke to a view of clouds floating out of sight over rocky cliffs and Melissa kneeling over me. She took my calloused hand and kissed the palm softly, then leaned forward and kissed me hard on my lips. I was unable to move and had stopped thinking. I watched breathlessly as she undid the buttons of my shirt and kissed my chest. She closed her eyes and listened as blood pounded through my heart. I reached over, and helped her off with her clothes. Her jeans came down over her long athletic legs and she smiled slyly. She arched back over the boulder to catch the spray of the waterfall as I held her. She closed her eyes and opened her mouth but I couldn't hear her over the thunder of the falls.

We held onto each other for a long while, listening to the falls and the sounds of birds. We finally got up to dress. Melissa's hair sprayed wildly over her shoulders. I was dazed but happy. When she turned and just stared at me, I felt like I was finally, totally alive and time had lost its meaning, it's urgency.

We cleared out and continued on, climbing down a shelf on the side of the bluff where the trail dipped into a crevasse. It led to a slit between steep rock walls that narrowed so tightly we had to squeeze through sideways. We slid along the granite towards a bright green light beyond. We came out of the slit into a wide sunny meadow. We were in a hidden bowl of a valley surrounded by steep forested hills.

There was something safe, and magical here for the two of us. I looked at her flushed

fresh face and smiled. She looked back assuredly, knowingly. We were safe with each other, I thought.

Three months later we married. We pooled our money and bought a home at the foothill of the mountain. We both worked in town. she as a nurse and me as an architectural intern and unpublished author. I spent my days at work daydreaming of being home with Melissa. The late afternoon's ride home from the town, through a winding wooded road fueled the excitement of the each night's pending adventure.

At home, we took turns cooking. I loved making pasta and Italian sauces that simmered all day in a slow cooker. I was also proud of my pizza, which I made fresh, sliding flattened kneaded dough onto a crisping stone with a cornmeal sprinkled pizza paddle. I topped the dough with olive oil, and Italian plum tomatoes layered with real Italian mozzarella, sausage and oregano.

Her recipes were more sophisticated. She tried to recreate aromatic memories of cooking with her Italian grandmother. She cooked like Vivaldi wrote music, combining flavors like notes in harmonious emotional compositions that transcended individual ingredients. Her Cornish hens with crusty honey-garlic skin were extraordinary.

In the summer we dined on a deck overlooking the pine valley below. Afterwards, we would move over to a double swing suspended from overhead rafters and discuss the events of the day, or read until the sun set over the mountain ridges. Other times we lay back in Adirondack chairs I had built. She would read as I worked on a science fiction novel, about a lone stranger exploring a utopian world.

In the winter, with the wind and snow howling up the valley outside, we would huddle under a blanket with huge pillows in front of the fireplace, talking about our pasts, our goals, our weltanschauung. Sometimes we reached over in mid sentence to kiss, igniting ferocious lovemaking.

We demanded little of each other in those days. We took time away from

each other to bring home surprises and delights to share. I brought tickets to see Tina Turner, whom Melissa idolized as a strong independent woman. She knitted me a scarf for days when I worked outside. I painted a two tone portrait of her from a photograph. In that time, having each other was enough. Just looking over at Melissa reading, her hair glowing a reddish blond in the light of the fire, her high forehead tense in concentration, gave me a rush of warm emotion. An emotion I thought would last forever. I wondered what we'd be like in 20 years, 50 years, maybe by some miracle, 200 years into the future.

Chapter 3: The Ice Age

Over time however, our passion cooled, not because of major revelations learned about each other, but through many small acclimations, slights and disappointments. Gradually, the urgency to go rushing home at the end of the day lessened, we didn't now always hold hands while going on an evening walk, she more often than not fell asleep while I wanted to make love.

The fire didn't go out entirely, but was replaced first by a comfortable glow. The times we spent together became less epochal but more relaxed, pleasant and comfortable. Times we spent apart however, brought to the surface the sharp longing we still had for each other, like heroin addicts whose habit no longer thrills, but when coming close to doing without, triggers raw pain.

Melissa , in her efforts to recapture the deep emotions we once shared, began to look elsewhere. She changed her job from that of surgical recovery nurse, to emergency room nurse, for greater adrenalin rushes and client adulations. She now worked every weekend, administering to 'sucking chest wounds', 'shotgun minced limbs'

and near decapitations. She regularly flew on a rescue helicopter, which raced death above city lights to the hospital roof. As we now shared little time together, I focused on work and soon moved up from intern to project manager. We now had only four days a month to spend together.

On weekends, I kept the house quiet so Melissa could sleep and I could write. But my mind would wander, always to Melissa. The person who could make time stand still was just a shout away, but might as well be on the moon, sealed in the vacuum of space.

Occasionally I would just slowly open the bedroom door and watch her sleep, scanning for any signs of life. The butterfly flicker of her long lashes telegraphing a dream. The soft rise and fall of her chest pressing against the silk sheets. At times like these I wanted her to wake up, and see her smile in wistful recognition as her mischievous blue eyes adjusted to the light. I wanted her to reach up, take my hands and pull me down into bed.

Once she did awake, her eyes springing open like a trap, staring at me as though I were a stranger,

"What are you doing here?" she barked.

She later apologized for this, telling me that she was under stress that I could never imagine. I felt even more excluded.