

The Soulmate Place

written by Guest Contributor | March 28, 2018



Five years ago, my best friend C died. She was twenty. She was a poet. She once told me that everyone has not only a Soul Mate Person, but also a Soul Mate Place. She would have something poetic to say about this love triangle between New York and the Northwest I've found myself in. She'd have something to say about all of this.

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Third day of freshman year at Sarah Lawrence College:

C plopped across from me on lush grass in a circle of strangers, her pale legs kicked to the side like a thrift store princess. Her hair was bottle-black, her nose was red, and her posture was awkward. She sat silent for twenty minutes, listening to everybody debate Marxism.

"Oh my *god*," she suddenly exclaimed, pointing to my corduroy messenger bag. "Your White Stripes pin. I love it."

"Thanks," I said. "Jack White was my hero when I was sixteen."

"Your hero when you're sixteen is your hero for life."

Eagerness seeped her voice, and I knew then C was a Girl Like Me: a rule-following outsider who had survived her suburban adolescence by reading down stacks of books and dreaming of New York City. The recognition was a relief. Most people on our Liberal Arts campus had turned out to be the unsmiling children of rock stars or entertainment lawyers, too edgy to relate to. A 70/30 female to male student ratio didn't help. The cool freshman girls had already en masse affected Jane Birkin's style, were always laughing urgently at the hipster dudes' pretentious jokes, and, most of all, were incessantly eyeing everybody with competitive suspicion. The vibe wasn't much different from the bitchy Midwestern private school I'd recently graduated from.

"Who's your hero?" I asked.

"Well." C's cheeks flushed. "I have a lot."

I'd soon learn that she'd grown up on a small island in Washington State and had made it East thanks to perfect grades and bank loans. New York City, she'd always known, was her Soul Place.

We called them our "Great Conversations." We talked about heroes like Virginia Woolf and Bob Dylan and The Riot Grrls every day, I, gazing down from my bed at C, who sat sloppily on my dorm room floor. "I came here to be part of something bigger than myself," she said. "But it isn't the 1960's anymore. We might need to make the revolution ourselves."

We weren't even sure what we meant by *Revolution*. We only knew we wanted to honor the excitement we felt about being eighteen and in New York. We decided to ride the MetroNorth to Manhattan gripping printouts of our favorite poems and lyrics and tape them all over trees and lampposts and subway walls. The idea was that we were literary guerrillas. But then we fretted about the legal aspects.

"Does the city *own* The Washington Square Arch? Is it a crime to tape things to government property?"

"Let's not risk it."

C was shy. Except at night. She hadn't rebelled in high school, so it fascinated her to realize that when she drank, she transformed. On good nights she'd crash campus parties and banter with strangers. On worse nights she'd argue with campus security or sob about not belonging to the popular group at school. "How don't you get that you're so much cooler than them?" I'd ask. But by then she was usually too out of it to listen and I was just chasing after her, seldom drunk because I sucked at taking shots, writing her moonlight wildness off as a symptom of genius.

Eventually C starting fucking coveted boys at the parties she crashed, and the cool girls began to bully her. They left comments on C's Facebook wall like: *you think you're really deep, dont you, Valerie Solanas?* C started drinking even more, and harder, often winding up in the ER.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," she said one night when she awoke in a hospital bed, a needle in her arm. I was in the chair at her side.

"Never drugs, though, right?"

"Course not. I hate how drugs make people act. So dead and cynical."

"Exactly." My hands were twitching, anxious to control our story. "We're good girls at heart. We're good girls, not drug girls."

"Yeah," she nodded. "We're not drug girls."

My phrasing was intentional. C loved self-definition. We're the Kind of Girls Who're Introverted and Extroverted at the Same Time! C is Allen Ginsberg, I'm Jack Kerouac! She's a Gemini, I'm Aquarian!

Then she was kicked out of school for so many ambulances. Then she met an

older man in the city and started using heroin. She ignored my pleas for her to stop. She cut me out of her life. Then I cut her out of mine. Then she died.

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A year following C's death, I entered an MFA program and became obsessed with writing a book about her. I longed to alert the world to her stunning, unseen poems, and, even more, to avenge her to those who'd been cruel. But my writing was shit. Caring professors would pull me after class and murmur, "Listen, it's not working, you're still too close to it, just try a different topic." I refused. I couldn't bear to stop.

My first relationship was failing too.

It's not working, the girl gchatted me.

But there are so many signs we're meant to be together

It's not working

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Though New York can be a wonderful place to mourn – if you cry on the subway surrounded by thirty people, not one of them will bother you – I needed a break from the city. But where would I go? All my friends lived here, having succumbed, too, to faith in its ability to gift them lives that could read like books.

Except for Toni. Facebook said my high school BFF, Toni, had ended up in Coastal Oregon. She'd been an outsider as well: the feared Scholarship Kid with a Cuban last name who always challenged our shitty classmates for being republicans and rolled her eyes anytime she overheard gossip about herself. Reading our tarot, taking my midnight calls, incessantly insisting that life was magical – freckle-nosed, dark-eyed Toni had been a natural predecessor to C.

My old friend picked me up in a freshly-repaired car at the sleek Portland airport. We laughed the two-hour drive to the coast as though five years had only been five days. Her three sisters, too, had settled in Manzanita, and they joked that they were a coven. The coven cooked me meals with vegetables picked from their backyards and led me on hikes up moist Neakhanie. "It's haunted, you know," they said, of the mountain. "Neakhanie means 'place of the gods.'"

"I don't know if I believe in things like that anymore," I confessed later, as Toni and I sat on gargantuan roots. She'd next taken me to the Magic Tree, an ancient Sitka spruce near the cabin she'd built with her boyfriend. "C is gone before we could do any of our plans. I expected to at least feel her with me or see her, just once. Instead I'm a failed writer and a dumped loser. And she's nowhere."

Toni smiled as though I hadn't seen anything yet. First, she took me to

Wanda's Café for Huevos Rancheros; above our table was a sign made of neon lights that said YOU ARE HERE. Then we ran into a friend who gave us a gripping ride on the back of his pickup. Toni seemed to constantly run into friends in town. Girls with waist-length hair and bare faces, who gave long hugs. Unanimously bearded men who were clad in hip-looking overalls not for Instagram, but because they spent their days stepping through goat shit. I could think of nothing more comforting.

He'd dropped us at bleached-white Manzanita Beach, where we picked bruise-colored rocks from the shore as Toni explained the science of tides to me. "It's actually the moon's power that pushes the water." I could think of nothing more beautiful.

Finally, at the Sunset Surf Motel, I Skyped with my mom.

"Who is that behind you?" She asked.

"What? I'm alone in here."

She swore she saw a girl with dark hair standing near the back of the room. I turned and saw nobody.

"It's probably a glitch on the phone."

But I couldn't deny that I'd experienced no place more mystical than Manzanita, which, in spite of its miniscule population, translated from Spanish to *The Little Apple*, a detail C would have loved. *You've got a Little Apple to run to when you can't stand the Big one!* I could hear her saying. I started taking the six-hour flight every six months.

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Of New York, C once wrote: *Everyone else has people, relationships, friends to count on. I have New York City. My favorite sight: when I walk to the subway from the NY Public Library and see Grand Central and the Chrysler building, one after the other. Angels on Grand Central, all its trains underneath. Everyone's alone here. These trains feel like Hell, and to remind us of the big what else? are the angels on top of that building.*

My favorite sight in Manzanita lies at the end of its central road. Walking down Laneda Avenue, I'll pass San Dune Pub, where bartenders shout the name of whoever walks through the door. Bread and Ocean Café, inventors of the only egg sandwiches I can stomach. Then some scuffed grey motels and a coffee shop locals understand is priced for summer tourists. It's not long before the scent of damp salt begins to thicken with each step, and I find myself on the chilly shore of an infinite ocean. The Pacific. White sand, white water, white sky. To the right of the water sits bulky Neakhanie covered in evergreens, emanating slow mist: the place of the Gods.

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I met Angel a year later, at The Fairy Tale Lounge on 46th street. She slouched in a cigarette-scented denim jacket that made her seem like a Bad

Girl – but she had pupils the size of a cartoon kitten's. Angel's beauty was poetic, but she was adamantly not a poet; she believed in justice, and was planning on applying to law school. She just needed "the push." I knew I could be that push.

It was the kind of Soul Mate romance C and I always dreamed of but had concluded was not intended for Girls Like Us, the Kind of Girls Who Are Never Loved Back. Yet Angel and I were living together in no time; she became skilled at decoding my gibberish whenever I got too stoned, held me strong whenever I cried about C, cracked hilarious comments while we did the dishes. I wondered if she ever got exhausted being so perfect.

The first time Angel's eyes went black and the warmth in her voice drained, we'd been together three months. We were at a concert in Brooklyn. It took four beers. The werewolf-like nature of the transformation reminded me of C. But C was never mean. Angel grabbed me by the elbow and leaned close to my face and said something terrible.

The incidents became monthly and solved, for me, some mystery of C and Angel and any others in the world who radiate unbelievable purity: the purer a heart seems, the more desperate it probably is for relief.

I refused to leave Angel. In fact, recalling C's heart bound me even more to her. The truth was C had tried reaching out to me through Facebook messages toward the end, telling me she missed me, that she'd been in love with me all along. I'd responded: *Leave Me Alone*. Then C died.

By day, Angel's perfection never faltered; it was only after sunset that we suffered. Years passed, and I refused to fail her the way I'd failed C. Instead took our love as a simple lesson:

Yes, everyone has their Person, and everybody has their Place – but only your Place can't break your heart.

*

This summer, Mom, curious about the Pacific Northwest, planned a Seattle weekend with her boyfriend. They were packing for it around the same time Angel hit bottom.

"You guys are having problems?" mom said on the phone. She loved Angel almost as much as I did. "We accidentally double booked hotels. You could use our other suite."

Angel swore she wanted to get sober, so where better than my Place to kick off a new beginning? We'd explore Seattle, then get on the Coastal Starlight to wander Portland, and wind up in Manzanita. We'd forget the door she'd broken, and the texts to that other girl I'd found. We'd move on from the nasty things I said out of hurt. We'd heal.

Angel packed a suitcase. I ordered our cab to JFK.

Then, as she was stepping in, she froze.

“Going away right now will do us in. I want us to make it.”

I knew what it meant. She'd forgotten my experience with that lying, startled glint in the eye particular to addicts. It meant she wanted to stay home and drink.

*

“We don't need lovers,” C told me, 8 months before she died. We were on chilly deck of the Staten Island ferry, watching pink sun fall behind Manhattan's cluttered skyline. “New York City is our soulmate. We're going to write and be best friends and go back to Sarah Lawrence and teach. All we need is each other, our work, and this city. We're writers, after all – and here, we live among stories.”

Touring Seattle with my mom, I was torn. Seattle was refined and lovely, with really good ice cream and a super-hip local newspaper. It also possessed the same lush trees and grey sky I loved of Manzanita.

“Don't you want to live here?” Mom asked, as we rose up the Space Needle. “Be near your place, free of New York?”

She had never believed New York was very healthy for me.

“I'm not finished with the city yet,” I told her. “Manzanita will be there waiting for me when it's time.”

That night, during dinner, I felt torn again and recounted my West Coast fairy tale to mom and her boyfriend. “White sand, white sky, white water!” The weed chocolate from Herban Legend started to kick in. The restaurant slanted, my plate of fish grew vivid, voices around me garbled.

“I'd encourage you to move to the Northwest if you love it so much,” I heard her boyfriend say, “but it won't exist soon anyway.”

“What?”

“Oh *right*, the tsunami,” said mom. “How did I forget? I saw that on sixty minutes.”

“Wait – won't exist?”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “It's not an urban legend. Actually a scientific guarantee. The coast will be destroyed within fifty years.”

“Then why haven't my friends told me about it?” Suddenly I felt too stoned.

“Maybe they're in denial,” somebody said.

*

I've been crying on the Coastal Starlight for four stops because I noticed something on Instagram I didn't want to see and had texted Angel immediately.

You've been talking to her every night I've been gone, haven't you. The former fling Angel sometimes contacted when she was blacking out.

I barely remember doing it, she typed. It's another kind of problem.

I called her. "It's not working."

We both knew what I meant. Through static, we whimpered.

When I was younger, I'd possessed another belief that bonded C and me:

nothing can come to an end if you love it enough.

I halt my tears to Google what mom's boyfriend talked about at dinner: *Cascadia Tsunami*. A *New Yorker* article appears first: *The Really Big One*, by Kathryn Schulz.

"It's true," writes Schulz. "The Pacific Northwest sits squarely in the Ring of Fire." The Big One, a massive tsunami, is long overdue and coming for the coast within fifty years. "Certain disasters stem from many small problems conspiring to cause one very large problem." Schulz describes ghost forests and an earthquake that occurred in 1700 and confusing tectonic science, but the point is I now accept that my reliable little town, the only part of the world I have loved like a person, will be annihilated in my lifetime.

*

Before I boarded the Coastal Starlight, Mom and I wandered University of Washington, a university in the most classic sense. Palatial Gothic buildings, miles-long pathways lined with cherry blossom trees, and Mt. Olympia in the distance. The antithesis of Sarah Lawrence. C had adored our little school's offbeat, gaudy library, which resembled *The Brady Bunch* living room with its greenish carpet and dowdy desks.

So I was surprised when I stepped into epic Suzzolo Library and felt C with me. Sun bellowed through massive stained glass and the great walls echoed as I passed lobby sculptures of Darwin, Dante, and Plato. At the top of stony stairs was a reading room with bookshelves packed colorful and tight. Ceilings soared and doorways arched; renaissance chandeliers hanged every few feet.

And there it was. C's loopy gait was at my side. She felt like heat near my shoulder and an instant smile on my face. *It's you*. I thought I'd felt her once in Powell's, the famous Portland bookstore, but I hadn't been sure. Here, a guttural certainty had surfaced within me. I took in all the summer students at the desks, bowing to their books.

Why here? *What does it mean?*

My pocket vibrated. Mom.

We want to check out a ferry, gotta leave now.

The stained glass sun seemed to dim. I was scared to stay anyway, and rushed out. Then, as I thudded down the marble stairs, it bolted:

Of course she's here; she's been here before!

Gritty C, of Washington State. She'd almost certainly visited this campus when she was looking at colleges. Everyone from her small high school probably had, just as I'd taken an obligatory tour of my own local university.

□And, like me, she chose artificial lights and constant company instead, leading us to one another.

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Tomorrow, I head to Manzanita, where I'll interrogate my friends about The Big One, why they never mentioned it before. They'll tell me they do not even think about it; all preparations have been made; there are crisis kits in front closets and they've planned which hills they'll run for. They'll explain that they're too happy to leave; of course the beauty is worth the risk.

I am afraid, for their lives and mine. Still, when they explain, I'll believe them. Haven't I reason to? I'm counting on my my place, where hopelessness washes from me by the water like a baptism. I will choose it for good, loving it so much my young self may even appear on the shore or at the mountain or near the trees, resurrecting our dead myth that if you love something enough, it can't be destroyed.



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