

Chapter 1

Frieda Kahlo

Spring 2010

Life overflows with death, and death gifts us with flowers. A strange thought for this morning. I have a daily routine. It begins with a strange thought, and then continues on to more important matters, followed in turn by more mundane matters. Today is handing me a whisper of unease that prickles my hair. As usual, I walk into her room for my morning greeting, forgotten dreams evaporating into the new day. I love it when the windows are open all night and the air flows through the house like a taste of fresh mint. This day, in its infancy, smells of promises and anxieties. I sit on her bed and I look upon her sleeping face. This is my favorite time to look at her. That face, absent of its usual stretches and contortions, trading them in for still serenity. She has such a large fleshy face. Cheeks like little pillows to rest my head on. I think she put new pillowcases over her cheeks, because they don't look the right color. I should touch them, her cheeks. That is not quite how they should feel. Not so soft as I recall. And cold. I don't believe she is in there. No, she has definitely taken

leave of that body. I should look around and find her. Well, she *should* be in her body, where else could she be hiding?

Dammit, I'm hungry. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. It is so much more important for me to fill my belly than to fill my heart. Maybe she will be back after I eat. I make my way to the kitchen. Still no food. I have always found that ceaselessly pacing and voicing my irritation will inevitably result in food. Back to the bedroom. "I'm hungry. I'm hungry. I'm hungry." Nothing. She's still not here.

The sun is coming through the window at a sideways angle throwing a long square of yellow on the floor. I go back to the kitchen, still no food. I go to the living room. There it is again, the sun square, this time on the couch. I lay myself down on the cushion and allow the sun to warm my body. I can lie here and stare into the day until she returns. I think she is called "Pat." Anytime someone comes to visit, they always greet her with the sound "Hello Pat." Maybe she goes by "Hello Pat." I am not the greatest linguist, but I have noticed the "Hello" part of the name is only used on first encounters. For that matter, I too have been called "Hello." "Hello, Pat's Cat," they might say. Only, my name has been spoken in a higher tone, as if I were only attuned to frequencies of kittens, mice and small birds. Such a complex language.

Still no sign of Hello Pat.

Chapter 2

Marieta

Spring 2010

There's that cat again. I have seen you, Miss Calico Cat, creeping through the edges of my garden. Sliding through this world like a collector of souls, watching us all as we grow old and dissolve away into darkness. I see you keeping an eye on this old woman, waiting for her spirit to follow you to wherever it is you take spirits. Mama told me, when I was a girl, that when a person is close to death, they will be visited by a *comfort cat*. I think that is right, a comfort cat. That cat will lead their spirit to a beautiful place and the cat will sit on the spirit person's lap and purr and rub her head on them and make sure that they are happy. Mama said that you cannot help but to feel happy with a soft kitten on your lap. And when you see a cat, you should always treat it with kindness, and in turn, it will always be kind with you. Mama might have made that story up. She did that a lot, to teach us lessons. All the same, I like to believe it is true.

I noticed, Cat, that you are not yet willing to jump up on my lap for a scratching. Perhaps I have a way to go before you are ready to take me away. But then, I have already come so far. So

many fond memories. So many sorrows. I have seen eighty-six years fly before me. When I was young, my mother would walk me through this garden and hand me old lady dandelions with their old lady white hair and I would blow their seeds off into the winds. By the time those seeds finally landed, I found that I too had become an old lady with white hair. I'll tell you a secret, Miss Calico Cat: I feel the same now as I did then. I didn't know time could be so liquid. My mind is slipping, I guess I am not a child anymore. And now I have my own children. And now, life goes on.

We all have our stories, our voices, and they are all intertwined in strange ways. And these stories that we all tell, they have no concern for time. The years jump back and forth in a dizzying tumble of events, like the pages of a manuscript blown about - dandelion seeds on the breath of a young girl. And now they no longer have much of a chronological order. New stories, old stories, they all come together, and we call it life. Even you, Cat, must have stories.

Now where did that cat go to? Have I been talking to myself? I wonder if she belongs to my neighbor, Pat. I should give Pat a call and see how she's doing. Well, it's too cold to sit out here any longer. I should go inside and have a snack.

Chapter 3

Irini

Summer 1920

Early this morning, as the sun tosses around the idea of coming up over the horizon, and the sea does calmly lay in wait for the new day's winds to toss its façade into a rhythmic frenzy, I sit one last time, relaxing in my favorite café overlooking the street, soaking in the scenes of my final day in Greece. I have sat in this café – the only café in my village – so often that I know every rock in the wall, every crack in the floor, and every patron who ever walked through the door.

Since I was a young girl, hiding behind my mother as she sat in this café with the other women of the village, in a spare moment stolen from life's endless chores, I loved to watch the village come to life in those first waking hours of the day. My memories are filled with the warmth of the old wooden tables and chairs that became our favorite perches. Each table bearing the stories of countless patrons as they ate their way through life. Each chair worn smooth by an endless line of bottoms sliding in and out of their temporary resting spots. I can still see the old women, adorned with headscarves, aprons, full skirts and billowing

blouses cinched around their waists with beautiful bands of fabric to accentuate the last vestiges of their womanly figures as they transformed into the thickened bodies of maturing matrons. I basked in their scents of lavender and iris applied heavily in desperate acts of vanity to transcend themselves into the ethereal goddesses they once were. I watched, mesmerized, as the aged hands moved expressively and gracefully, spilling out the day's gossip and the night's secrets. I was to become these women one day. I too would be sitting with the other girls grown old, content in my preordained station in life while the world goes on as it always has. But even as a small girl I felt there was something else awaiting me. And with that secret knowledge I would run off from the old woman gathering and skip around the corner out into the street.

Free of the burdens and the reservations of an adult, I watched wide-eyed as life in the streets unfolded before me. I recall seeing the fishermen, who trolled the waters throughout the night, rolling their early morning catch, trailed by the scent of the sea, down the old roadway to see what they might get at market price. I watched the man who ran the café with fascination, dressed in his handsome black vest and his merchant's apron tied around his waist, covered in the morning's food stains, as he stood outside the café door hoping to drum up business. I followed stray cats down the side streets as they slid through secret places in their mysterious lives. I ran to find my friend Martha and together, as always, we ran to the water's edge and threw stones at the sea. And sometimes I looked out at the Aegean and watched in wonder as the monstrous ships passed by on their way to the Americas. That, the sightings of the ships, more than anything, took that young girl, who was the beginnings of this young woman, to the start of this new adventure.

I savor my sweet bread with apricot preserve and I close my eyes as I sip my strong coffee which tastes to me of the earth – deep, rich, and bitter. I wonder sometimes if coffee is a metaphor for life. My childhood life seemed rich, but now I am not sure if it truly was. It might be that a deep and rich life is what lies in wait for me, if it please God, on one of those ships bound for distant lands. As for the bitterness, at this moment, sitting in this café, the only bitterness I can foresee is that which lies in the bottom of my cup. These are thoughts of a woman, no longer a child, I tell myself. Fitting, as today, more than any other day, will mark the uncontested official day of my adult life. I reach into my handbag and hold my ticket reassuringly in my hand. Yes, I am a grown woman. I look up and my thoughts are interrupted, and my childhood memories dissolve as I find my forever friend, Martha, looking down at me.

Martha, my love, my life. I have no brothers, no sisters, but Martha has taken up the part of both, and so much more. We always confided our secrets in one another, and we created a hidden world of friendship that made my childhood and adolescence complete. Secrets – from the innocent crime of taking licorice from her parent’s kitchen, to the sinister act of sneaking wine from my mother’s pantry and taking it down to the shore, hiding amongst the rocks, and learning the thrill of the adult world of inebriation. And then there were those sins of which we never spoke, that bound us together.

I wish she had not come to see me off. I am glad she did come to see me off. She sits down across the table from me and offers me a warm smile that comes from her heart. She does not want me to go. She admires me. She would hold me tight if she thought it could stop my escape. She thinks she will be lost without me nearby. I will write to you and tell you of America, I tell her.

You can come and see me, I assure her. Martha gives me a look of understanding as she absently caresses her pregnant belly. Her beautiful pregnant belly. She married Nikolas, a mason's apprentice who came from Athens with his family when he was thirteen. An arrangement was made for their wedding. A perfect match, they all said, and I believe it was. Still, she would miss me terribly, and I her. We sit together staring at each other, speaking of nothing but saying everything.

Chapter 4

Herman

Spring 2010

My name is Herman Kageorge. Actually, Kageorge was my mother's maiden name given her by her parents – Irini and William Kageorge, but through bureaucratic mistakes it was printed on my birth certificate as my last name, and it was not noticed until I was enrolled in kindergarten. At that time, my parents, unsure of how to proceed, simply left Kageorge as my official last name. It is an awkward name, Herman Kageorge. No flow. Wholly unattractive. I was ridiculed as a child. "Spermin' Herman," they called me. That was second grade. I didn't know what it meant, but I knew it was offered on a school lunch tray filled with malice. I asked my mom why I had such a stupid name. She replied that it was good enough for my father, so it is good enough for me. It was not actually my father's name. All the same, I went forward and tried my best to carry the name with pride.

I have always taken what has come my way and graciously accepted it for all it offered, or I allowed it to run off me like a light rain on my back – "Quack." I am an optimist. That is what I wrote on my online dating profile. I have never been good at

meeting girls, but now, in this glorious age of technology, and the anonymity that comes with it, I go on a new date every week. "How has that been going?" you might ask. I in turn would have to ask you, "Are you an optimist or a pessimist?" It has been going very well, thank you. And thanks to this new dating hobby of mine, I now have much more appreciation for those evenings spent alone binge-watching old HBO series. In fact, I might even say my evenings spent in my own company have become refreshing, filled with sweet stress-free silence.

I like to sit with my best and maybe only real friend, Sherman, and share anecdotes of our dating lives. I know, I know, you are saying to yourself right now, "Herman and Sherman, what are the odds?" I know. The odds are about one hundred percent, as it turns out. I don't like to call him Sherman, it's just too rhymey. People make fun of us, or they just think it's cute, like kittens are cute. So, sometimes I call him Cindy. You know, like Cindy Sherman, the famous photographer. Being an artist, I have always had a thing for creative, artsy women. So, Cindy Sherman has long been the unknowing recipient of my secret romantic adoration. I remember the first time I saw one of her self-portrait photographs. It was called Untitled #96, 1981. Cindy Sherman was seen lying on a bed dressed in the fashion of an early 1960s girl. She looked as if she were a pensive and emotionally troubled teen. She was so beautiful. I love how Cindy Sherman could take on an entirely new persona in every one of her self-portraits. She is a genius. If she were to answer my online profile, I would die. Sometimes I think that she has a profile of her own, but no one knows it's her, due to the fact that she looks like a different person in every one of her portraits. She is smart and talented that way. My friend Sherman looked at a book I have containing some of her work, and he said to me that she is probably a lesbian feminist and that

my little-boy-crush is being wasted on her. Well, I don't know if she is a lesbian or not, let's just say we will cross that bridge if we ever find it. I guess Sherman knows a little about these things, being a gay man himself. I know he is gay because he always tells me about his sexual encounters with other men. I find it very interesting, even though I am not gay. One day Sherman asked me if I was sure that I wasn't just a little bit gay, and I told him that I was sure because I was in love with Cindy Sherman.

I have not always been lost in a hapless world of shameless dates and unrequited love. There was Monique. Uniquely Moniquely. My God, I loved that girl. Or the idea of that girl. Eyes of brown and green – changing with the weather. Hair of gold, red, and browns, changing with the light. A smile that I did not deserve. She was filled with such sweetness that, I swear, I drooled every time I was near her. I was totally in love with her. My family (that is, my brother Richard and my mom) was totally in love with her. She called my mother by her first name, Marieta. She called Richard Ricky, which he normally hated, but coming from Monique, it gave him a blush of pleasure. He called her Nikki, and just like that, Ricky and Nikki had a happy connection. Monique and I were together for about seven years. Everyone knew we would get married. Everyone but me.

I could not open myself up. I could not expose my full heart to her. She often told me that I felt like a closed book. I was afraid to be truly seen by anyone. She asked what it was I was hiding. She was concerned I would become like my mother: emotionless. Gifted with a sense of humor, but at the cost of hidden emotions and a loss of the ability to share myself. This critique brought tears to my eyes. Maybe because I knew there was some truth to it. Maybe because I didn't want to be what I saw in my equally closed brother. In the end I let her go. I held her on a pedestal

and I saw myself as little more than the dust that gathered on the floor beneath her. Cliché and overly dramatic, I know. The last time I saw her I literally watched her ship sail. She was working as a marine biologist on the Lake Erie islands, and she stood on back of the ferry as it left the shore. I told her goodbye. The final goodbye. I should have told her much more. I should have poured my heart out to her. I had so much inside me. But she was right – I was closed. The image of Monique floating away from the pier nearly destroyed me for ages after. After a while I came to realize it was not Monique that I wanted: it was the closeness I thought we shared. And so I moved on. My mother told me that it was okay, some people never marry. I took this as my mother's acquiescing to my inability to hold on to any lasting relationship.

Chapter 5

Marieta

Fall 1930

Mama has been sick for a while. She cannot get out of bed and it is hard to hear what she is saying. She sleeps most of the time. When she is not sleeping, she is crying. Papa says not to worry, but I think he is always worried. He doesn't talk much, and I never know what he is thinking. I think he is thinking that it is my fault that Mama is sick. I think it might be, because I don't always eat my dinner when she asks me to. I told Petie this and he just looked at with me with a face made of spaghetti. He does that when he doesn't know what to say, a squirmy noodle face. His eyes are meatballs, but I don't want to eat them even though I like Mama's spaghetti and meatballs. Everything is sad now. Michael is three and he doesn't know what to do. He cries sometimes. Mama tells me to take care of him because I am her *megalo koritsi*, her big girl. I try to play with Michael and I help him at dinner time. I wish Mama wasn't sick. I wish the house was nice again.

I like to sit in the garden when I am sad. Mama says the garden is the place to heal the sickness of your heart. Her heart must be real sick, because when she first got sick, she sat in the back

corner of the garden all day for three days, until she was not able to stay outside any longer. Now that Mama has to stay in bed, I have taken over her job as the garden sitter. I watch the beans grow and the beetles land on the squash flowers. Pretty soon me and Mama will be out here with my basket picking the beans for dinner. Sometimes she puts them in jars for the winter, but I don't help with that. Once I found a big green caterpillar in the garden. I named her Bee-Bee. Mama said we had to kill her because she would eat our tomatoes. I hid her in the little pocket Mama sewed into my dress so she wouldn't have to be killed. Later that day, I reached into my pocket to play with Bee-Bee, but she was squished. I buried her in the garden when Mama wasn't looking. I put some tomato plant leaves in her grave with her in case she woke up and was hungry. I said a little poem to her after I covered her with dirt and pretty stones.

Mama reads me poems at night before I go to bed. My favorite is about a bird that lives in a plum tree and sings to the plums to make them grow. Only, sometimes she sings too much and the plums get too ripe and fall off the tree and land on the ground. Mama said that was a good thing because the plum seed was like a baby. "Like Michael?" I asked. "Yes," she said, "like Michael." And I knew the baby plum would grow into another plum tree and me and Petie could climb it like we climb the mama plum tree that lives in our yard. "Is Michael going to grow into a plum tree?" I asked, and Mama laughed.

Chapter 6

Annie

Spring 2010

Thank God, this winter is finally easing up. Winter time in Akron, Ohio, is torture. Five frigid months, trapped in a house, a self-imposed lockdown unit for this crazy woman. The walls close up on me, take away my air, take away my spirit. Only my writing and my dancing keep me alive. There is no sunlight to warm my humanity. No soulmate to take my thoughts, gently cuddle them, and let them fly again. I have been told I need someone, a man, a woman, anyone, to fill me. *Get yourself out there*, they said. *Try internet dating, everyone does it*. Well, I tried it once. I was writing to some goofy guy called Herman. Probably not his real name. Probably not even an adult. I mean, he wrote with the wide-eyed wonder of a six-year-old. Probably sleeps with his stuffed giraffe. Anyways, I couldn't see it – "Herman and Annie." I ended up chickening out and standing him up. I hope he didn't wait too long for me in his little diner. And of course, I have my therapist, Dr. Kate. But she wouldn't really count as a warm friend, would she?

I see Dr. Kate every week or two to ground myself. She tells me I hold a lot of anger. That's a nice way of calling me an *ice bitch*. Seems like a good investment for my money, to have someone professionally insult me. She tells me to use the *gentle lioness* inside me to help me deal with this anger of mine. I'm sure she maintains her own inner *gentle lioness* when she gets off work and goes home. I like to write, I tell her. *Write*, she says. *Write your poetry, your prose, fill journals, but be true to your writings*. I like that. Each visit, I bring in my poetry and we talk about it.

I think of Dr. Kate as my socially acceptable form of therapy. But my real therapeutic release is my dancing. I volunteer to put in time at the studio, sweeping up, opening up for assorted dance workshops, sending out emails to members, and such. In return, I have a set of keys and use of the studio space whenever I like. I can crank the music and let my body go until my stresses have vanished. The vast wooden floor, the pulsing rhythms, and my wanting body interact in a private manic performance. If Dr. Kate saw me dancing, I don't know if she would give me a smile of approval or if she would have me locked away.

On this unexpected day of spring's early arrival, I again resume my ritual of sidewalk cafes, aromatic coffees, and writing in the open air. Like a small yappy dog that cannot contain its wiggling excited body as it holds the leash in its mouth, my pen trembles on my tabletop, proceeds to tap dance on the rim of my Americano, and leaps into my hand to bleed words and phrases onto the virgin pages of my journal. My poetry is neither brilliant nor structured in any formal manner. These words which spill across my pages are meant for me alone.

*Springtime brings new stories
To my sidewalk café*

*Bulky hooded sweatshirt
Hides my emotions away
Five long months of winter winds
Have left my heart in cold dismay
Now these warming days do coax
New poems that reach and say
Open tender blossom
There is a better way
Look for new beginnings
Your spirit they may sway
I rarely write in rhymes
Though they find my words today*

On a day like this, when the masses crowd the streets to partake in the wonderment of this new season, I devour the distractions they create. I imagine what each individual must do to busy themselves. Those who walk solo down the sidewalk, are they alone or are they lonely? Dare I speak out and invite one to join me for coffee? And if I were to be so bold, would it be a violation of their space, or mine? That woman there, with the quick choppy steps, she keeps her light spring jacket nestled closely to her body with her crossed arms. She looks to be in her own unhappy world. What if I were to grab her jacket and sit her down across from me at this street-side table? What if I were to press my pen into her hand and implore her to write her thoughts into my journal? What would she write? A brilliant idea, Annie. A journal filled with pages of lonely strangers' immediate thoughts. Tomorrow I'll pick up a new journal with empty pages awaiting inspiration. *The People Journal*, I will call it. Kate says I don't have empathy toward others. This might appease her little PhD mind.

Chapter 7

Herman

Spring 2010

An internet date this evening. Another first date. Another woman who won't stand up to my worn, and probably inaccurate, memories of Monique. Another diner. I prefer a diner over a Starbucks or a bar. Maybe I'm not cool enough for the hipster scene. Or it may be that I favor the romantic nostalgia of the mom-and-pop diner that is lacking in a corporate chain or a loud brewery. I want to fall in love with the seasoned waitress who calls me "Honey." I want a grumbly old manager who bitches about the waitress from the morning shift because she didn't refill the tableside ketchup bottles. I like to see the regulars come in and get greeted by name. I like the thirty-year-old diner plates complete with chips and stains and the undersized coffee cups that need to be refilled a half dozen times to satisfy my caffeine habit. The bathrooms are okay on a scale of disgusting to pristine. The silverware spotless and the floor mopped twice a day. Though it is not a requirement, I prefer the booths with the slippery worn benches covered in vinyl of teal blue, swamp green, or '70s-orange with black duct tape patches over the old tears and rips. I want my menu to be

little more than a single back-and-front sheet of paper stuck into a scratched and discolored once-upon-a-time clear plastic sleeve. But I won't even look at the menu, because it is always the same for me: two eggs over medium, home fries, and rye toast. To drink: a large glass of orange juice and a bottomless cup of coffee, please. I want to see the old couple who has been coming here since just after the war and has run out of words to offer each other but are always quick with a "beautiful morning" and a wink for the waitress. I like to see the young lovers sitting down for a Saturday morning cure to a hangover from the previous night's crazy-time. I prefer the low murmur of the patrons, the tinks of forks on plates and the clanks of dishes from the kitchen over blaring music or a television mindlessly playing in the corner.

This evening I suggest we meet at the Elbow Grill, one of my favorites, but she counter-suggests we meet at *her* favorite, Dairy Queen. I immediately hate her. Dairy Queen would have been great when I was in high school. Oh shit, she's not a tenth grader is she? If her mom drops her off, I am running. Immediately I draw a portrait of the woman in my head. She still dresses like she is living in the '80s, she carries a cute little purse with gold trim, laughs too loudly, wears two pounds of make-up, and outweighs her photograph by thirty pounds (really, twenty-eight pounds, because two of those pounds are make-up). Before leaving, I meant to look at her photo and read through her profile one more time to search for clues pertaining to her personality, but I was running late.

I park my car in the side lot away from the street, subconsciously, or barely subconsciously, hiding it from anyone who might recognize it. I walk through the large glass door and into the blaring fluorescent lighting of the DQ. An awkward seventeen-year-old boy tracks me from behind the counter.

"A large black coffee, please."

"Would you like a sundae?"

"No, just a coffee, thanks."

"Would you like a burger? fries?"

"Coffee."

"Would you like..."

"Just. A fucking. Coffee."

I take my coffee and I look around at the brightly lit plastic tables for a possible high school girl with big hair. To my relief, I see a forty-something woman in a sterile booth by the window. She is giving me a half-smile with a slight reserved wave of one who is not sure if I am her date or if she wants me to be her date. She clutches her small golden purse in her left hand. I knew it. I walk to the table with the slightest detectable hint of hesitancy.

"Herman?"

And then it hits me... I don't remember her name. A blank. My mind runs through a list of possibilities. It must be a common name. Most common name for her age range – Katie, Jennifer, Amy? Do I take a stab at one or do I fake my way through this? All I can think is "Joanie," because she reminds me of Joanie Cunningham on *Happy Days*. I offer her a smile and before I can even say anything, she immediately begins a monologue about her love affair with the DQ Blizzard. I sit across from her in the booth. I sit and I listen to her mundane showering of words and I think to myself, *what is this woman's name?* Think, Herman. I go through the alphabet – Amanda, Brianna, Christine, Dora... Right Herm, like her name is going to be Dora.

Ten minutes go by and I cease to hear her words. Is she really still talking? I look at her and she is a cartoon figure with her mouth stuck open, a giant "O." A big rainbow sprinkle donut inviting me to throw tiny objects into the middle. Words and