

Hello, Agnieszka!

**BETWEEN TWO WORLDS SERIES,
BOOK 2**

EJOURNEY

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*Some of us think holding on makes us strong; but
sometimes it is letting go.*

—*HERMANN HESSE*

*Music is the divine way to tell beautiful, poetic things to
the heart.*

—*PABLO CASALS*

I. Secrets

Elise Halverson-Thorpe sat, perusing a client's testimony at her desk in mid-afternoon, green highlighter in hand. She still had a half-inch thick of testimony transcripts to go through before she could stop for the day. She might have to bring some work home again.

She lifted the highlighter to mark a phrase in the transcript, but the cellphone in her shirt pocket vibrated and interrupted her movement for an instant. She groped for the phone while she dragged the clear green ink across the phrase.

She knew it couldn't be Greg, who usually called sometime around noon. Before she swiped it, she glanced at the screen.

"Dad," she muttered to herself, surprised to see her father's face.

He rarely called her at work, aware that she might be arguing a case at court or taking testimony or deposition from a witness. What could he want from her at two in the afternoon?

"Dad. What's up?"

"We're at the hospital, but don't be alarmed. Everything's okay now. It's Peter."

Her father's voice was low and calm, but she detected an edge to it. He was struggling to sound normal and in control.

“Peter?”

She put the green highlighter down, next to a red one, and closed the two-inch thick transcriptions of testimony taken from the woman she was currently defending on a murder charge. Her third such case in as many years of working with the Public Defender.

She leaned against the back of her chair and gripped the telephone tighter. Her father was taking a while to answer, and she grew apprehensive with every second he remained silent.

“Yes. He swallowed a bottle of pills. Mom found him unconscious in the tub. But he’s okay now.”

“What? What are you saying? He tried to ... kill himself? Peter?”

“Yes.”

She thought, gasping, refusing to believe that loaded one-word answer: No, not possible. Not you, Peter. No. I don’t understand. Her mind went blank for some seconds at the weight of it. She began to breathe a little faster as she struggled against what it meant until she could no longer resist the full force of it. A tangle of thoughts and emotions closed in on her: Why? What’s going on with you? Why choose death over life? No! How could you? How could anyone?

“Elise, are you all right? Are you still there?” Her father’s anxious voice broke through her turmoil.

She swallowed hard to clear her throat. “He did it in your tub?”

“Yes, he came last weekend, said he missed us so much he wanted to stay a week. That was unusual, but we never wondered why. We were just so happy to have

him with us for a while. He travels so much in his work, we hardly ever see him.”

“The pills, how ...?”

“He must have had them. We don’t have any in the house.”

Still refusing or unable to believe what her father just told her, Elise was silent again. She could hear her father breathing, echoing her own labored one.

She forced herself to speak again. “But ... he’s okay now?”

“Yes. Yes. And he’s been seen by a psychologist. How were we to know that he was going to do it? Nothing was different about him.”

“That’s apparently not unusual,” she said weakly, her father’s news still weighing on her like a huge unsolvable puzzle. Peter tried to kill himself. But why?

Her father said, “How can anyone know then?”

That was, at least, a question to which she might have some answer.

She said, “People serious about suicide don’t often say a thing, according to our psychiatric experts. We have defendants who attempt suicide and if they have no history of similar attempts, psychiatrists can’t always diagnose them early enough to put them on suicide watch.” She had to control the quiver in her voice and she hoped she sounded authoritative enough.

“He was in a good mood.”

“We’ve seen that, too.”

“I can’t help thinking we went wrong somewhere.”

“I don’t think it’s anything you did.”

“He made dinner for us twice this week.”

“I didn’t think he could cook.”

“I don’t know why we didn’t see it coming.”

“None of us might have.”

“I thought I knew my children very well.”

“I thought I knew Peter well.”

“I’ve never seen Peter so hopeless.”

“Neither have I. Nor so desperate that he’d try to end his life.”

“He’s kind of intense.”

“But people say that about me, too.” Her voice was finally as calm as she wanted it to sound.

Her father let out a long sigh. “We have so many things we must work out. I still have to call Justin. Mom wants you both to come for dinner tomorrow. Greg, too, of course, and Goyo. Can you make it at three?”

“Yes, of course. How is she?”

“Worse than me, I’m afraid. As if she wants to take the whole burden of guilt on herself. Anyway, talk to her tomorrow.”

Greg reached out to put his arm around Elise, but she was not there. He jerked his groggy head up toward the clock on his side table—an hour after midnight. He looked around the dark bedroom. After three years of marriage, groping at that space in the middle of the night could still give him a start and a now-familiar sinking sensation in his gut. To his relief, it was only for an instant.

Five years ago, he had awakened to find Elise gone, leaving him alone on their first wonderful night together. He was left with feelings of misery and desolation he hadn’t been able to forget. Two painful

years followed when he had to face some hard lessons about himself. Those were behind them now.

He saw her standing against the large window, bathed in the greyish yellow light of a partial moon streaming into the room. His gaze traced her silhouetted figure—from her profile crowned in a luxurious halo of golden hair, along the sinuous line of the throat that sloped gently toward her nipples and curved around her breast, then slid down to her belly, slowly swelling from the life she was nurturing in her womb.

His wife had grown more beautiful in his eyes, as the years went by. Maybe, that was what love did to people.

Elise was sipping water from a bottle, and even in the dark, she looked pensive. She crossed her arms in front of her stomach and bowed her head, strands of hair falling on her cheeks. He didn't see much of her face anymore, but he could imagine her anxiety. She was worried; he knew that. That phone call from her father, shortly before she left the Public Defender's office that afternoon, distressed her deeply.

She had phoned him right after to tell him about Peter. She could not continue her work and decided to take the rest of the afternoon off. He hadn't seen her that upset in the three years they'd been married. He decided to come home early. She needed him.

He'd been shocked at the news. The Halversons seemed to be a well-adjusted, but earnest lot with a few quirks to occasionally surprise those who didn't know them very well.

He watched Elise raise the bottle to her lips and drain it of its contents. She tossed the empty bottle in a

trashcan, walked toward the bed, and crawled in. As she lay down, Greg lifted the bed sheet and wrapped it around her. She snuggled into his warm embrace, shivering a little.

“Did I wake you up?”

“No, not really. You were quiet. But I can always sense when you’re not in bed with me. That’s what wakes me up.”

“I do have to get up sometimes, you know. And it gets worse as my stomach gets bigger.”

“I can’t help it.”

Her skin felt cold against his and he rubbed her arms and back gently with his palms.

“You’re cold all over. Your arms are almost icy.”

“Yes, it was probably stupid to get up without my robe on, but I was hot.”

“How long have you been standing there?”

“Not too long. I was burning and my mouth was so dry. I had to get me some water.”

He lifted her right hand to his lips and blew on it; he gave the left the same treatment. He tucked both hands inside the sheets, next to his warm chest.

“Aren’t you glad we have a little refrigerator in the study?”

“You think of everything.”

She planted a quick kiss on his chin.

“I can’t remember being that thirsty when I was pregnant with Goyo.”

“It’s not because you’re pregnant. You moan, you know, the whole time, with your mouth slightly open.”

He grinned, his eyes twinkling in the near darkness.

“Speak for yourself. I watch you, too. You’re worse.”

She slapped his bare buttocks playfully. Greg laughed softly and gathered her closer.

“Okay, okay, back to sleep. You’ll have a long day tomorrow. When are you going to Mom and Dad’s?”

It took him more than a year to feel comfortable calling Elise’s father “Dad,” who had always been “Charles” to him although he was at least twenty years older. They’d been good friends before they became family.

“Shortly after lunch. She wants us there by three, but I’d like to talk to her before Justin and Dad get there. What time do you think you’ll come with Goyo? You don’t have to, you know.”

“Don’t I? But I have to. Peter and I aren’t that close, unlike Justin and me, but he’s family. Besides, this sounds serious and you may need me. Are you very worried?”

“Not about any danger to Peter right now. He’s getting help. But I can’t shake this feeling some scary thing is going to happen. Like an emotional tsunami we can’t escape.”

“That is scary, but you may still be in shock. Give yourself time. Tomorrow night, you’ll wonder why you were so worried.”

“I hope so.” Elise didn’t sound convinced.

“You sure you don’t want Bob to pick you up at your office and take you? It’ll be quicker and he likes driving you around. It’s been a while since you’ve been on that train.”

“I rode that train from the East Bay all the time. I don’t think anything much has changed.”

“You’re carrying another precious life in here,” he said, caressing her belly.

“Goyo went through the same experience. He survived. Don’t be such a worrywart.”

She pulled his face down and kissed him.

Elise caught glimpses of modern glass and concrete façades, as her train whizzed by office high-rises in the East Bay, on her way to the peninsula from her office. Three years had not altered that landscape, but to her, it seemed fresh again. Maybe, she was merely seeing it with different eyes.

The last trip she took on that train to her parents’ home was shortly before she and Greg got together again. That time, three years ago, she had left Goyo with her mother during a hectic week at the Public Defender’s Office, and was taking him back to her apartment on the East Bay. She and Greg now lived with their son a quick ten minutes from her parents so she took a different train. Many times, Bob, Greg’s friend and right-hand man, drove her to and from her office.

Two years before that last trip, she had taken the same train. Alone, sad, and hopeless, she had given up on seeing Greg, ever again. She’d been pregnant then, as well, and she was going to tell her parents she had decided to have a child out of wedlock. They had been upset, worried that her career would be derailed. Still, they professed faith in her, and offered her help so she could get her degree.

Elise closed her eyes and settled comfortably on her seat. This afternoon, she could pass for a housewife. Granted, she admitted with an amused smile, a housewife in a dark blue suit, getting tight around the stomach. She would have to buy a few maternity suits.

Little Gregory was four now, a frisky little boy who worshipped Bob and Alicia's oldest son, about ten years older than him. Andres, "Andy," who was patient and always indulged the little boy's whims, was the one who christened him "Goyo," a Spanish diminutive for Gregorio. It had stuck because little Gregory could say it and Bob's two boys used it with obvious affection.

At the train station, Elise was surprised to find her mother hovering in the lobby. In the past, she used to wait in her car at the short-term lot for people picking up or dropping off passengers. Her pacing in the lobby could only mean one thing. She was too restless to sit alone in her car.

Her mother smiled at her, but Elise saw deep anxiety in her eyes. Close up, she noted dark shadows that emphasized tiny lines on the corners of her eyes. Furrows on her brow seemed longer and deeper.

What a contrast from the last time she had seen her less than a month ago, at her mother's last dinner party. That time, her sea blue eyes shone, her delicate, sweet face glowed, and nothing but harsh light could reveal shallow lines on her forehead or a slight sagging on her cheeks.

Elise embraced her mother tight.

"How are you, Mom?"

Mrs. Halverson held Elise close and didn't answer.

"You okay?"

She merely nodded her head and, with a hand on her daughter's elbow, led her toward the car.

"Let's go to Peet's. I can't go home yet. We've got more than an hour before your brother and your dad get here. Is Greg coming?"

"Yes, he'll be here with Goyo, maybe sometime after five."

"You're not showing yet."

"No? But I'm going on four months. I can't button my jacket anymore."

"I'm glad you decided to have another kid. I thought you were going to stop at one. You're warm and loving, Elise, a good mother."

Elise was touched at the unexpected compliment. She smiled and kissed her mother's cheek.

"Greg's already talking about a third. He says he knows how lonely it is to be an only child. After that, he'll go for a vasectomy. So, maybe, we'll follow this one with another in two years."

The coffee shop was nearly full but relatively quiet. As usual, most customers sat alone, pounding on computers or squinting at books or hand-held tablets, oblivious to what was going on around them. Elise and Mrs. Halverson made their way toward a small empty table.

"Wait here for me, Mom. I'll get me a latte. Café mocha for you, as usual?"

Her mother nodded. "Remember the whipped cream."

Elise returned, holding one paper cup of coffee in each hand. She handed her mother a cup and sat across the table from her.

The barely two feet of space between them acted like a barrier as they sipped their coffee in silence. Elise regarded the tension and misery on her mother's face, and blinked away the moisture that began to gather in her eyes.

Her mother seemed lost in an inner world that no one could penetrate. Elise wondered how one began to talk about a loved one's attempted suicide, particularly of a brother one adored, and to a mother who had built a wall around her to protect herself from the pain of it.

How could she possibly add to her suffering by talking about Peter now? What her mother needed was some respite. Elise averted her eyes down to the dark brew in her hand.

Peter was not garrulous, like Justin. He was often quiet, but in such a serene, reassuring way that she and Justin felt they could safely share their secrets with him. He was also active and athletic, but was most earnest about basketball, usually beating Justin at it, although he was shorter than Justin by five inches. As serene as he was, he radiated life, and never betrayed any signs he was depressed.

Minutes later, Elise swallowed the last drop of coffee and glanced at her wristwatch.

"It's a quarter of, Mom. Time to go. I'll drive."

She drove in silence for some time before her mother spoke again.

"There was something more than depression in Peter's suicide attempt."

"I don't understand."

"Oh Elise, your brother is sick, seriously sick."

“Depression can be a sickness. But we all feel down sometimes. Peter tried to commit suicide; so something deeper is going on with him.”

“No, I mean, he’s really sick. Not just in his mind.” Her mother covered her face and burst into tears.

Elise was dumbfounded. Had she not heard the worst yet? She freed one hand from the steering wheel and stroked her mother’s back. That was all she could do, for now. They should soon be at her parents’ house.

She let out a long breath when she spotted the stuccoed California bungalow where she grew up. She slowed down, steered onto the driveway, and parked next to her father’s car.

“Mom, we’re here. Dad’s already home.”

Mrs. Halverson pulled some tissues from a box in the glove compartment. She wiped the tearstains off her face and inspected it in the rear view mirror. She composed herself, opened the car door, and wearily eased her body out of the car.

Dr. Halverson had opened the door by the time she reached it. Elise walked a few paces behind her mother.

Mrs. Halverson gave her husband a slight nod and was about to walk past him, but he caught her hand and squeezed it before she could go in. The gesture was quick and unobtrusive, but Elise sensed the implicit support it conveyed.

“Dad.” Elise hugged her father.

He nodded and touched cold lips to her cheek. He put an arm around her shoulders, and led her into the house.

Her mother had gone straight to the kitchen. Elise followed her there. She had already filled a kettle with

water, placed it on the burner, and was spooning herbal tealeaves into an infuser. A plate of finger sandwiches covered with plastic rested on the table. She had obviously prepared it earlier that day.

Food and cooking were her mother's way of coping with anxieties. To soothe nerves, she swore by the powers of tisane and prepared it as if it was a ritual. Before her husband came home from his work as economics professor at the university, she would sit sipping tisane in a meditative mood, in front of her butcher-block table.

“Mom, let me help you.”

“No, sit down. I need to be busy. Better yet, go talk to your father.”

Elise hesitated and stayed where she was. She watched her mother's movements for some minutes. They were efficient, as usual, but she saw a certain desperation in them. Was she merely imagining it because she knew the chaotic emotions her mother was going through?

She envied her mother her rituals. She, herself, didn't have anything like them. Yet, now, she wondered if they were enough to sustain someone who never had to deal with disasters worse than burnt roasts, or an emotional crisis like the one she suffered after she left Greg on their first night together.

Her mother flashed her another glance.

“Go! I'm almost done here.”

With one last worried look, Elise left to search for her father. She found him in the living room, his legs crossed, and an arm across his stomach supporting the other arm. His fingers covered his mouth and he had

that faraway look and inscrutable darkness in his eyes whenever he mulled over serious problems.

She sat across from him, but he ignored her presence and continued to stare into space. How could she violate that obvious need to be alone? Her father didn't have the busy rituals her mother fell back on in times of tension and turmoil. He was like her. He brooded long hours over whatever troubled him.

She retreated into her own thoughts, summoning pleasant memories of growing up with Peter, and hoping for such happy times again. But her hopes didn't ring true, dashed by the gravity of her mother's grief and the remoteness her father assumed in the face of a tragedy none of them ever expected.

She heard the front door being unlocked, and bounded from her chair. That had to be Justin, she thought with some relief. Her brother had a knack for brightening up the atmosphere, a gift they could use at the moment.

By the time Elise reached the vestibule, Justin was closing the door, his back to her. He smiled when he saw her and approached with open arms to hug and kiss her. But Elise noted something different about him. His smile was forced and she missed the mischievous glitter in his eyes.

Ten minutes later, the family was in the living room having tea. Justin had hugged and kissed his parents and, then, lapsed into silence. Elise thought it was so unlike him and it made her uneasy; but how else was he supposed to act, considering recent events? She and her dad took refuge in silence, so why couldn't he?

Mrs. Halverson sat on the sofa next to her husband, across from their children. They all avoided each other's gaze as they sipped tea. No one, not even Justin who gobbled up everything their mother prepared, touched the finger sandwiches.

Evasiveness, Elise thought, had been rare among the Halversons. Frankness was valued, although never at the expense of someone's misery. Discomfort was endured, if that brought problems or disagreement out in the open. Theirs had been a lively family who hashed out their differences through talking, often until they were hoarse in their efforts to reach resolution. But that was before Peter's attempted suicide.

Silence, she was now finding out, was a safe though uneasy haven at times like these—when great pain was so new, you couldn't contain it; or some fateful truth hidden for so long had to be disclosed; or your reaction was so personal, you couldn't sympathize with another. All those were now true for them.

Elise was certain her mother held in her heart and her mind some secrets that weighed on her. She couldn't even guess what those were, but her mother needed to tell them soon for her own peace of mind. She peered expectantly at her father, hoping to get some help from him.

He met her gaze, with the ghost of a hesitant, helpless smile, but he turned toward his wife, who seemed determined not to look at him. Forehead creased with worry, he watched her for some time while she continued to sip her tea as if it was critical for her to do so.

Elise realized, then, that her father was leaving it to her mother to explain the distressing events of the past week. She could sense his discomfort. He knows what Mom is about to disclose. Of course, he does, she told herself. This family has no secrets.

For an instant, she glared in annoyance at her father. Why can't he help ease Mom's misery by taking the burden away from her? He, himself, can tell me and Justin what's going on. She was about to insist that her father do the explaining when Justin spoke.

"Would you like me to stay for a few days? Help along? Peter and I used to share secrets, tell each other our fears when we were kids. Maybe, he'll want to talk, and I could be there to listen to him."

They were the first words he uttered that afternoon. His voice was steady enough when he began, but he seemed to lose control of it with his last words. He clamped his mouth shut.

Neither parent answered and long minutes went by before Mrs. Halverson raised her face. She had a resolute expression in her eyes and pursed lips.

"Peter is sick. But as I told Elise earlier today, it's not so much in his mind. He has this terrible disease."

Her mother's voice trembled and Elise held her breath. The next instant, she heard her shaky voice splinter into words that seemed to break her heart.

"Peter ... has ... Huntington's disease."

Elise and Justin exchanged bewildered glances, searching their minds for something to help those words make sense. Neither knew exactly what the disease was nor how bad it could get, but they both guessed that it was inherited and quite serious.

At first, Elise resisted the idea of Peter's sickness. The threat of it made her stomach turn and she took comfort in thinking that it was also vague, even surreal. But disbelief could not last. Lifelong habits confronting problems head on prevailed.

As reality sank in, Elise shivered at the cold coursing down her spine. Her first thought was for her son and the child in her womb.

"Are my children at risk? Do we need to be tested?" Her voice was unsteady and her eyes dark with anxiety.

"That's inherited. Who ...?" Justin said, shuddering.

"No, you're both safe," Dr. Halverson hastened to answer.

"But how can you say that, if we haven't been tested?" Elise's voice was shrill as she struggled with emotions she still could not contain.

"Because your father and I were and we don't have the disease. It's directly transmitted," her mother said.

"Then, how ... ?" Justin said, staring at his parents, then at his sister.

Elise knew he was searching for resemblances. She owed her mother her coloring and the shape of her face and mouth but, like Justin, she had inherited her father's large eyes, giving the three of them that wide-eyed look of eternal curiosity. Peter had dark, deep-set eyes under bushy brows.

"Peter is not Dad's." Quietly, Elise completed the thought she sensed Justin was reluctant to give voice to.

Mrs. Halverson peered into her children's eyes. She was pleading, Elise thought. But for what? For understanding? Forgiveness? Possibly even relief from

despair and ... guilt? Elise felt even more unsettled. Was there guilt in her mother's eyes?

"Peter is my son, but not" She glanced sideways at her husband and bowed her head. She clasped her hands tight on her lap, her body rigid with tension.

Wordless moments passed as Elise and Justin, both coping with confusing emotions, regarded their mother with concern.

Elise could hear her heart thumping and, before long, she was sure that if she kept listening to it, she would get even more anxious. The silence became too much for her to bear. She and her brother needed more answers.

"Does Peter know that the disease didn't come from either of you?"

"No, not before the doctor told us the test results. The first symptoms are sometimes in the mind ... the attempted suicide." Her mother's words trailed off into trembling silence.

"The doctor at the hospital noticed some physical symptoms, so he ordered tests," she added, after a long pause.

Justin said, "Was there a prognosis?"

"Nothing specific. What we should expect. Peter's father died from the disease more than ten years ago."

She bowed her head again and lapsed into another long painful pause.

After a while, she said, "There's no cure and it keeps getting worse. My son"

This time, she turned toward her husband and buried her face on his shoulder to muffle her tears. They were profuse tears. To Elise, they seemed full of anger—

probably at fate for what it had dealt Peter and even at herself for being helpless against fate. She and Justin could do nothing but watch and wait for her to calm down.

The allusion to another man neither Justin nor Elise knew—a father to a brother they both adored—caught them by surprise. Never in a hundred years, Elise thought, would she have suspected that Peter had a different father. She was neither angry nor resentful that it was kept secret. But why the need to keep it hidden? Her parents knew she and Justin would have accepted Peter, no matter what.

“Did Peter know about his father?” Elise asked after her mother stopped crying and had been silent for some minutes.

“Not before he was diagnosed. We never told anyone. Peter was born, knowing your dad as his father.”

“True, Dad and Peter are like peas from the same pod. Nearly the same color hair, similar lean physiques, although Peter’s some inches shorter.”

“And they have the same mannerisms,” her mother added. “But people have remarked that Peter didn’t have blue eyes like the rest of us.”

“Genetic variations. That’s natural.”

“That’s what your Dad always said. Anyway, to him, Peter has always been his son.”

She grasped her husband’s hand and tried to smile at him. She rose from the sofa and before anyone could protest, she snatched the teapot from the table.

“I should get us more tea.”

Elise swiped at the tears welling in her eyes as she gazed at her mother's back until she disappeared into the kitchen. Even in anguish, her mother always thought about their welfare first. More than once, Elise had wondered if such selflessness took something out of her. How often has she suppressed her own needs, her own desires for her family's sake?

Elise realized she didn't know this woman as well as she should, beyond her exceptional piano playing and her traditional role as mother—certainly as caring and comforting as her children could hope for. She winced with a twinge of guilt as she admitted to herself that she found her dull, maybe because she limited her interests to her family.

She now understood why her father left it to his wife to disclose the truth. That truth was buried in her mother's past, and had really not been kept secret. Her parents merely allowed it to languish because it hadn't mattered to them. They had assumed nothing bad could happen to anyone in the family. Were it not for Peter's attempted suicide and his threatening disease, they might never have supposed they had "secrets" they needed to share with their children.

Elise understood why her mother seemed reluctant to recount her past. She had been complacent in the tranquil, ordered world her husband offered her. He exuded the same calm reassurance Peter did. But the last tragic week turned her world inside out, and she had to reveal the truth. Though the worst disclosure was probably over, she dreaded having to bare her soul to her children.