

Endorsements

Sealed and Delivered is much more than a mere novel; it's a captivating delivery vehicle for ancient wisdom applied to contemporary life. In so many ways, only Rosalind Ziccardi could have written this book. Her three-plus decades as a military spouse equip her to divulge the ravages of war from the front row. Her training as a theologian and hands-on experience as a minister converge to tell the story as only one who has "heard it all" could do. And her skill as a maestro of metaphor makes it all but impossible to put down. Readers will have no choice but to be gripped by its central theme: "Life is the chisel God uses to release our true self." Read this book, and let the chisel do its work.

—**Chaplain, Major General, Dondi E. Costin**
U. S. Air Force

. . . a profound—and ultimately breathtaking—series of letters by a woman as she find her way from lostness to becoming found. A relentless, and serially insightful description of life as the wandering of frail creatures bent on self-destruction, but bound for glory. Here are philosophy, theology, love, logic, tears and resurrection. The conclusion will leave you trembling.

—**Rev. Dr. David A. Baer**
Overseas Council, President and CEO

In the face of choices, tragedies, anguish, and distractions, so common in our search for love and acceptance, Rosalind Ziccardi weaves a story of unconditional love through the medium of letters that unites our everyday life to our relationships with others towards the Divine. A triumph of the human will and living within the tensions of this earthly life.

—**Bishop F. Richard Spencer, DD**
The Archdiocese for Military Services, USA

Sealed and Delivered is a powerful story of Annah's learning what real love is. When Rey, Annah's husband, returns from war his physical appearance is altered but his soul is very alive. Annah makes a decision to leave the man she loves. She shares her inmost thoughts, struggles, desires, and brokenness in poignant love letters. Rey's unselfish love and wisdom helps her deepen in her understanding of God and human relationships. Rey becomes an "agent" of God's peace to her.

—**Sr. Lucy Wynkoop**, Order of Saint Benedict
St. Placid Priory, Spirituality Center

This is a riveting story which leads the reader in the mystery of unconditional love in the face of betrayal, sin, transformation, and ultimately, redemption. I was reminded of two sayings of Julian of Norwich: "The good God does not want us to despair of our sins since he can use our sinfulness for our good, and finally, "All will be well. All manner of things will be well."

—**Sr. Josephine Aparo, MPF**
Morning Star House of Prayer
Religious Teachers Filippini

I highly recommend Sealed and Delivered as a way to plumb the depths of relationships and isolation, faith and doubt, suffering and healing, forgiveness and love – both human and divine. Few books I have read explore these themes with such depth and honesty. The story pulls you into the heart of existence and the ending is not to be missed.

—**Rev. Dr. Fitz Neal**

Lead pastor, Columbia Presbyterian Church

Sealed

and

Delivered

A NOVEL

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ROSALIND B. ZICCARDI



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Dedication



For my husband, Gary John, my sons, Andrew and Benjamin, and my mother, Mary Gwen, and in memory of my father, Gerald Brummitt. God uses you most to forge me into the woman I still hope to become. I am eternally grateful.

Contents



Preface	xiii
Acknowledgments	xv
Prologue	1
<i>Saturday, June 15th</i>	
Part I: Shattered	3
<i>Monday, April 21st—Eleven Years Before</i>	
Part II: Doubt	23
<i>Thursday, November 13th—The Early Years</i>	
Part III: Miracle	79
<i>Saturday, July 1st—Four Years On</i>	
Part IV: Glimpse	187
<i>Thursday, January 3rd—Six Years More</i>	
Part V: Peace	257
<i>Thursday, September 20th—Saturday, May 4th</i>	
Epilogue	273
<i>Wednesday, June 12th</i>	

Preface



*S*ealed and Delivered has always been God's project. Glory to God whose steadfast love called me, caught me, and will never let me go. I'm grateful to know I have a date with God in the palm of God's hand. I pray you discover you do too.

Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
And have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget, I will not forget you!
See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.
(Isaiah 49:15-16 NIV)

Despite the details, Annah's story is our story.
Rosalind Ziccardi

To read more about Rosalind Ziccardi see www.sacredsparks.net.

Acknowledgments



Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

(2 Cor. 9:15 NRSV)

Many thanks, first and foremost, to my wonderful husband whose support has never flagged. I give God heartfelt thanks for you in my life. As we greet our respective finales, publishing this book concurrent with your sterling and fulfilling chaplain career, I look forward to seeing what God has next for us . . . and meeting you on the tee box!

Particular thanks to those who have provided invaluable encouragement and support:

Sr. Jo Aparo, MPF; Rev. Dr. Dave Baer; Beth Brummitt; Mary Gwen Brummitt; Chaplain, Major General Dondi Costin, USAF; Nick and Wendy Giancola; Elaine Johnson; Inger Logelin; Mary Pat Marshall; Rev. Dr. Fitz Neal; Laura Petersen; Bishop Richard Spencer, DD; Kathy Walker; and Sr. Lucy Wynkoop, OSB.

Prologue



Saturday, June 15th

Dear Paul,

One good turn deserves another. Your letter, along with the one you found from Annah, inspired me.

I saved all her letters, years' worth. I offer them to you. I doubt you will find much here that you don't know generally, but I think they are worth reading. They reflect a woman's honest, probing search. I expect you will appreciate them as much as I have. Some letters delve into tough topics, though you shouldn't have trouble with the context as you read them.

May you find blessing here.

Sincerely,

Rey Bridges
c/o H. Singer, Assistant



Shattered



Monday, April 21st

Rey, my dear, precious, broken Rey,

What am I to do now? Waiting is torment. My heart and soul feel severed from reality. You lie, covered in bandages, and your uncertain future has landed me in a nightmare; a floating, ghostly dream world that feels real, but mustn't be. I can't afford it to be. You haven't awakened and I can't sleep.

Tears are locked deeper than I can tap. Writing might keep me from losing my mind.

I got the news of your injury last Friday. I was late to work, having over-slept my alarm. That was odd because I finally got my teeth into a new project and I was giddy at the thought of your homecoming. Determined to make up time, I was absorbed at my computer when Marcy called sometime around 3 p.m. to say I had visitors. "They look official," she said.

There were two men and a woman, standing straight, tall, and spit-shined in uniforms that shouted "strong, brave, and superior." The looks on their faces belied a different mission.

The commander took the lead, “Mrs. Bridges, may we go into your office? If you would like, your assistant can join us.”

The blood drained from my face, I was light-headed and sick to my stomach, my knees wobbled. The chaplain took my arm and walked me to the chair in my office, followed by the sergeant and Marcy.

It wasn't like in the movies, the announcement. They didn't stand ramrod erect, stare straight ahead, or say disembodied words like a team of robotic doomsayers completing an unpleasant task. Tenderness bathed their tone. Respect.

Their compassion seemed as necessary for them as for me, since the brutal fact couldn't be sidestepped. “Ma'am, we're here to inform you that your husband, Captain Rey Bridges, stepped on an improvised explosive device while on patrol. He's being evacuated to Landstuhl Army Medical Center where he will get emergency treatment. As soon as he is deemed viable, he will be brought to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.”

He's alive? All this to say you're alive? Your last patrol outside the wire, one last mission two days before you were to board the rotator for the grueling, multi-leg cattle-car flights home, and you stepped on an IED? I wanted to hug the chaplain. I thought the news would have been final, given the entourage, but hit, hurt, getting a plane home for the best medical treatment an advanced nation can provide its brave warriors felt like good news, considering what I'd braced for.

The questions tumbled over themselves. Which hospital? Landstuhl Regional Medical Center. That's in Germany? How long will he be there? What's the damage? He's alive, so he's all right, right? What the hell was he doing outside the wire? (I actually apologized for saying that. The chaplain waved it off.)

He's been outside the wire countless times, why now? He was hit earlier today—Friday? Did you say about 4 a.m. local time?

He'd spotted someone writhing in pain from a blown explosive? It was an insurgent? Was it an accident or a ruse to lure our troops into a newly placed cluster of IEDs? Of all things.

What were you thinking, Rey?

The commander realized I wasn't waiting for answers. If he'd tried to answer, I wasn't listening. Maybe it is a predictable response they are trained to recognize—the manic phase that comes with distressing news.

Then I got strangely calm, very focused. Now I wanted answers; I was in territory I thought I knew. I'm a manager—I manage things all the time. I could manage this too. Is he at Landstuhl now? Not yet, still en route. Then he'll transfer to Walter Reed? In D.C.? How will he arrive there? Can I go to Germany or do I have to wait until he gets to D.C.?

Eventually, I ran out of questions that had answers. I needed to get to you, see you. That meant checking out with my boss, conveying all the scattered work details to Marcy, getting home to pack for who knew what kind of spring weather in Germany, catching a flight out of Charleston to BWI. I remember being grateful I knew where to find my passport and that it hadn't expired.

Unable to sleep, I stood at a galley window looking down over either Greenland or Iceland when I realized I missed Easter. It would be Monday morning when I landed.

Getting luggage and going through customs was a blur. Miraculously, Petty Officer Alvarez found me as I came into the main airport. I must have dozed off on the ride to base; I don't remember anything past a massive, ultra-modern silver building that looked like a tethered zeppelin as we left the airport.

We were climbing a steep hill when I woke up. It was green everywhere. Petty Officer Alvarez told me that you were being processed, but wouldn't be in an ICU bed for a few more hours. He recommended I get settled at the Fisher House. He helped me check in, get my bags to the room, and showed me how to call him when I was ready. I didn't feel like sleeping, but, taking his advice, I stretched out. I was comatose for about forty-five minutes. I panicked when I came to, worried that I'd missed your arrival. When I called him, Alvarez said you were still en route, so I took a quick shower. I needed to be ready for whatever was coming.

Thank God for Fisher House.

I walked across to the hospital where, up an elevator, down a hall with large landscape photographs, I numbly made my way to the dimly-lit room to await your arrival. Was I there two hours or six? However long, my insides felt like a helium balloon thumping the ceiling, with nobody to pull me down by the dangling string. When I was notified that you had arrived, I must have stared like a bird dazed after flying into a window. I realized I had no inkling what was coming.

Rey, when they let me see you, it was as though *you* weren't there—just some mass of bandages, tubes, and humming machines. Thankfully, you were unconscious when I first saw you. There was no disguising my shock. Your body is destroyed. Both legs and your left arm are gone. Bones in your right arm, clavicle, and pelvis are broken. Your face is shattered, and one eye is permanently damaged. How did you survive?

Sitting here in the ICU waiting room, I tell myself bones heal. We will get through this, I chant silently in my head. Will we?



Tuesday, April 22nd

It's a new day. Gray. I slept a few hours in the chair by your bed.

I called our parents and your brother, James, who promised to call your other brother and sisters. I'm drained. It is seeping into my consciousness how different life will be now. It's daunting how one instant can change everything.

I never thought much about that before, but it has always been true; not just when an IED explodes. It was true when we stood at the altar seven years ago, looked into each other's eyes and said, "I do." It must be true when, in one moment, after hours of excruciating labor, a miraculous cry and relief announce the arrival of a new baby. Forevermore life is different. Changed. In the blink beyond recovery, what *was* is replaced by what *is*. A fighter pilot must have a sickening realization when a missile hits his plane. It's what happens in that instant the bike rams the unseen rock, launching the child over the bars onto her head, never again to walk normally or gain adult reasoning. It's nothing but a flash. Whether embedded in natural consequences or in a war zone, most often without awareness, all the preceding moments lead to that *one*. The future forever altered.

The hospital chaplain is here.



Wednesday, April 23rd

Writing letters still helps me, Rey.

Early in our relationship, before we married, I wrote to make sense of my feelings for you. One day, in an unguarded

moment, I sent what I wrote. You said you loved me for writing and insisted I stay honest, saying the truth was what we could work with. My letters weren't always love's tender feelings, yet you encouraged this habit. Back then I wrote with pen on paper, but even on the computer there is something concrete in the exercise. And today, rambling or not, writing helps keep my feet on the ground and my mind tethered to reality.

The remarkable fact is that the prayers of the chaplain and the legions of people called upon to seek a miracle have been honored. The doctors say you are one—a miracle. You came back to us. I am grateful I was there when you came to, woozy as you were.

I waited, plastered to that faux leather chair by your bed. At first I couldn't sleep, and then I didn't want to in case you roused. Trying not to nap, I jerked myself awake every few minutes, worried my eyes would be closed when yours opened for the first time. I *had* to be fully there when you woke up.

I want to be strong, give you strength to fight on. I doubt you need my strength. You're back from the dead, literally, having died in the war-zone surgery. The report was that, after the paddles and flurry, the doctor was taking off his gloves when something kicked back into gear and the flat line got a pulse. Your survival instinct is astounding.

My strength feels like draining bathwater.



Thursday, April 24th

Your mother is here.

Waiting is our first task. You are barely out of the woods. The doctors won't commit to any picture of what the future might

hold, yet Eileen's suggestions fly like bats from a cave. She wants you near her, arguing Charleston's such an unknown. She says the burden of care would be better shared, that you'd be happier with more familiar faces around. That's easy for her to say, with your stepfather there, an established cadre of friends, and your brothers and sisters who can drop by when they visit home.

Even if she's right, what am I to do? I have a job and need to work.

It's wrong of me to blame you. I don't at my logical best, but I'm unnerved. I need you and it feels like you have been taken from me, sheared of your legs, arm, and eye. With your mother sitting next to me, offering her unending ideas, I want to scream at you for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, regardless of your high-minded intent.

Maybe if I scream long enough and loud enough, there will be some comprehension of what is forever gone and how lost I feel. Why can't my screams upset the cosmic balance enough to reverse this tragic truth and give back the past we'd built our future on? I need *that* truth.

Enough. Self-pity won't give back our life—whole, vital, and mutual—as much as I ache for it. I need calm assurance, a quiet acceptance in the face of our crushed dreams. Obviously, I'm not alone in carrying the emotional weight of our loss, Rey, so I need to be strong.



Tuesday, April 29th

We're heading back to the States today. You'll fly on what amounts to an ICU with wings, what the Air Force calls a C-17

Globemaster. Eileen and I will trail you to Walter Reed. They promised we won't arrive much after you, but who knows what "much" means to admin weenies.

I hate this.



Thursday, May 3rd

Your commanding officer is one head's-up guy. He forwarded this letter I sent a few weeks ago, after I got your bouquet marking our anniversary. My letter arrived at the Forward Operating Base the day after your injury.

He handwrote a note to me, extolling your many virtues, not least, your constant faith. He wrote,

Rey's calm in chaos is a profound example to everyone around him. If anyone will pull through this calamity, it's Rey. His love for you, Annah, is solid. You can count on it. These are turbulent waters, but you have the prayers of grateful Marines holding you.

"One team, one fight."

Col Hayden Singer

Enclosure

Tuesday, April 13th

What great news came with a spectacular anniversary bouquet, Rey!

You'll be home in ten days! I wish the Marine Corps wasn't keeping you an extra four days. The mandatory reentry detox to remind you that Americans have rules of the road

feels heavy after these grinding fifteen months. Never mind! I can almost believe you're on your way.

I wish I could meet you in Germany and whisk you to a romantic hideout, just the two of us. Powered by the thought, I found the perfect vacation package to Italy for my first ten-day hint of freedom next spring. It cost you, but it serves you right for missing our celebration day. Besides, seven years seems poetic for an extravagant anniversary trip. I bought the package, nonrefundable, but we can still decide if we'll start in the south and work our way north or the other way around. Amalfi first, or Venice? What a sweet dilemma!

This is my last letter for the foreseeable future, since your next known address will be right here in Charleston! Be safe in the meantime.

I can't wait to wrap my arms around you!

It is jarring to read the jubilant words now. God knows I wanted to rip the note to shreds, but I sent it to you and it was forwarded to you—it's yours.

Oh, Rey. We were so close to the finish line of that deployment . . .



Sunday, May 6th

My love,

With hours stretched before us—and undoubtedly prompted by the forwarded “hurry home” letter—I found myself sharing memories with Eileen. It may be the first time I've felt sense of closeness with *her*, not just through you.

She wanted to know about my cross-country trip. I don't remember her asking anything personal or showing any awareness of my life as a military spouse. She was especially sad at my recounting Bianca's disappearance outside of Waco. After I finished sharing that awful memory, she said, "Crazy cat." After a long pause, "You must have been devastated. I can only imagine how Rey took the news."

To her credit, she kept digging. She wanted to know what it was like for me to pull up to the house we bought "sight unseen" (she can't believe we did that!) and how the neighbors greeted me. "Is it true the people in the South are friendlier?" she asked. "You can't get more South than Charleston."

There I was, in a sterile hospital waiting room, telling her about the Saturday I pulled into the driveway of our new house. She didn't seem surprised that, by Sunday, several of the neighbors had made their way over to invite me to the neighborhood get-together the following Friday. She laughed at my faux drawl repeating their invitation, "Good timing; it's our first one this year."

What an evening! It was hardly warm enough, though the warmth of the company tempered the evening chill. There's a reason southern hospitality and barbecue are famous.

Sipping beer, wine, or sweet tea (believe me, they mean *sweet*), we settled into lawn chairs and the grilling began—and it wasn't just the chicken on the barby. Don't get me wrong, they are terrifically friendly; it's that we have master interviewers for neighbors. They already know what you look like, what you do, where you were deployed, and how we met.

It was completely natural telling them how we met at that classic California beach party nearly nine years ago. They laughed

at all the right places, but I got nostalgic remembering you then, twenty-six, tall and golden with your tanned face and sandy hair. I told my version of how you bulldozed me while diving for the volleyball, kicking a truckload of sand into my face. Don't worry—I gave you full credit for being solicitous when I fell to my knees in agony. Beachcombers themselves, I expect they knew I omitted cursing my vanity for wearing contacts to the beach.

Recounting the story reminded me that the pain made me want to tear out my eyeballs. Thinking back, I realize I hadn't duly appreciated your sexy, chiseled arms wrapped over my shoulders as you helped me to the sidelines. You didn't exactly hover, but you checked on me after every point until I decided to head home. As I was gathering my things to leave, you tried to make it up to me, offering to take me out for dinner that evening. I declined, since I thought there was potential with the man I was dating. You seemed like a complication.

You persisted. You weren't pushy, just affable. You let me know that you wanted to be with me without the sad puppy dog, I'll-make-you-feel-guilty-if-you-say-no face that Joe would've adopted. A month later you stopped by to say hi. It tipped the balance. You never invented excuses for coming over, never pretended a false reason. I liked that. It finally broke through to me that you genuinely wanted to be friends, and made yourself available, though I was as good as gone with Joe. (At 22, I was so full of myself. I shudder to think!)

I told the neighbors that the rest was history and that you'd tell your side of the story as soon as you decide to come live with me again. (Sarcasm works there—these are people of good humor. They're also patriots and believers—their words. Hearing your deployment was almost up, they promised to pray for your safe return. They are devastated by this news.)

Wrapping up our humble beginnings, I did some grilling of my own. One couple was transplanted with two high-schoolers, the rest are locals with children and grandchildren scattered within a forty-minute radius. If our new neighbors are at all representative, the stereotype for colorful language and storytelling is true.

“It was a delightful barbecue,” I said as I finished recounting the evening.

I remember writing some version of it to you, but I realize now that my mom only got an abbreviated account of my first neighborhood get-together. It pained me to share it with Eileen, yet there was some comfort too. If nothing else, it drew a new bond between us.

I wonder where that will take us, your mom and me.



Thursday, May 16th

Rey,

Watching your tearful goodbyes as your mom heads back to Santa Barbara makes me doubt the decision to stay in Charleston. I know you wanted it left to me, being the one most directly affected, but is any decision the right one?

As crazy as she makes me, watching Eileen walk away set off a panic attack. We're on our own again.

You have to get stronger before getting the skin grafts and face reconstruction, but it is a blow that you're not a candidate for prostheses. Having been self-sufficient for so long, the idea of perpetual care must be daunting for you.

Eileen praised the light and beautiful grounds of Evergreen Care Facility in Charleston; let's hope the attendants are as competent as the brochure pledges.

My boss said Barnes, Meade, and Sawyer has approved the extra time before I have to be back to work. We're on track. We'll be a little longer here in Maryland. I just feel so alone, Rey.



Sunday, July 6th

At least they gave us the Fourth together. They've been more than generous in their understanding, but it feels wrong leaving you here at Walter Reed while I go back to Charleston. I go back tomorrow and it feels like I'm starting from scratch.

Leaving is hard because the doctors won't commit to a release date. Obviously, I'll be back every weekend until you are transferred, but I hope that won't be too long.

The gut-punches don't let up, do they?



Sunday, August 17th

It's been six weeks, and tomorrow finally marks the new beginning. You're coming home.

Granted, home is a relative term, but the approvals are signed, the medical flight is arranged, and Evergreen is ready to receive you, promising uncompromising care and devotion. Having returned to work, the strain of crisis has downgraded to something more routine. It has been a long road. I wish I could say I've caught my breath, but hopefully living in the same city

will help. Seeing your damaged body still saddens me. I miss our bodies together. Your mind is keen while mine spins like a twister when I consider the dreams I used to have. It makes me wobble to think about it.

I want to say “baby steps,” but every reference to walking makes me cringe. Ida Mae, a neighbor you’ll meet soon, says we’ll find ways to laugh about it someday. She insists that I find a support group, saying it was her saving grace after her husband’s stroke. Maybe she has a magic lamp complete with a genie who grants wishes for more time in a day.

Sorry, that was snide. Can I blame my dark mood on unsettling comments from co-workers? To think, these are people I consider friends.

We’ll talk later. Let’s get you home first.



Saturday, September 6th

Carving out time to write has gotten harder, but it feels important. We are finding a rhythm, which helps, but my week is framed by exhaustion, and weekends are nonstop. It’s exactly opposite for you. How have you transitioned from hyper-busy to full-stop without apparent effect?

Your ability to stay positive and keep the attention on others is remarkable. The attendants are laughing every time I see them leave your room. What joke book did you memorize while I wasn’t looking? Maybe when I’m not so strung out I will appreciate your efforts more.

You’re making your way and I’ll get there. Things could be worse. I got word that my cousin is dying.

I never knew Jill that well. Her family moved into a house around the block from ours when we were about ten years old. I remember being overjoyed that she would be living nearby. She was only months older, and, being family, I naively thought we would be best friends. I'd never had a best friend.

We all knew her daddy was rich because of the house they lived in. Even at ten, that was an automatic arrow in her arsenal. But her real advantage was beauty. Why do we give beautiful people power? Maybe I should have pitied more than envied her, because rich and beautiful or not, she was mean.

Her caustic wit displayed intelligence, but, like beauty, brains didn't bring happiness. Happy people don't delight in cutting people down. Unattractive—or just ordinary people at awkward moments—glittered for her like illicit diamonds. We were reliable targets for cleverly acerbic comments. Over time, I came to avoid her. It dawned on me that it was never cool to be the butt of every barb.

As she's dying, I realize that I didn't know her enough to determine if she was sad and insecure or if she really saw the world as beneath her. I only know that I resented her changeable rules, her on-again, off-again attention, which, when it was on, was inevitably cruel.

Now, through adult eyes, I wonder if we are all just trying to make sense of life, riddled with the internal pressure of thinking we're supposed to have everything figured out. We're like actors without a script, ever auditioning for the role of our lives, performing in a play we don't understand. It is hard to know the lines or the right response to others when there's only a vague sense of where the plot is headed. We're all in this play of life, but we don't know if we have a bit part or a leading role.

With so much riding on the moment, it is hard not to be brittle, nervously anticipating the line, the mood, the expression. Was Jill really mean-spirited, or merely uncertain of her part and how to play it?

But now she is dying and that changes everything. Whatever my past fear and frustration, I don't feel like I'm allowed to leave her on a safe shelf of disinterest. I can't remember the last time I saw her. Were we adults? What would she be like now? Does her scathing spirit still rule, or has it softened with time? Considering how much I have changed, surely she has too.

I'm truly sad to realize I don't know her, sad I never took the time to get to know her. She never stopped being my cousin. Sure, I can rationalize our lives took radically different turns long ago, that she never sought me out either. But she is dying and, like it or not, blood is thicker than water.

What does that make us, Rey? Are we blood, or still water after seven years married? Am I this sad over my cousin's impending death for what I've missed with her, or am I raw over the death of what we were meant to be?

Jill is dying in a hospital bed as you lie in yours, never to rise out of it. Both scenes stick in my mind like wet fingers on ice.

You ask me to keep going with these letters. You seem convinced it will help me work through our loss; maybe you hope I'll find a way to rewrite our script. I don't know where to start on that project. While I wonder if writing is such a good idea, I am able to express things on paper that I can't say aloud. You seem to think the honesty will yield a breakthrough. Your uncompromising truthfulness keeps you centered and peaceful; mine renders panic.

I have to work harder to find a happy place.

Maybe tomorrow.



Tuesday, September 30th

Rey, the pressure is mounting. I'm tired—obviously the root of the strain—but there is no end to the assault. I try to keep a perspective, see through your eyes, but work is relentless. Going from my office to see you at Evergreen and then to crash, only to get up and do it again tomorrow, wears thin.

I try to keep a stiff upper lip, fend off people who harbor some opinion about what I should do. Yesterday, Marsha in PR felt compelled to say, “Honey, this may sound harsh, but that man of yours sounds like he'll make it just fine, and you have your whole life ahead of you! You look so tired all the time—and you *know* it isn't gonna get better. Really, you ought to walk away now. I'd have been gone months ago.” Others haven't been quite so crass, but people make suggestions and I hear them whisper.

They're wrong I know, but all we had set out to do and be together has been lost like a star sucked into a black hole. The IED that severed you somehow dissected a vital link between us, too.

It's a trick, trying to forget what we had, yet remember the mystical union that tied our souls together. Surely, that wouldn't be spoiled by a physical impairment of lost limbs and being bedridden. I try to imagine how cheap and shallow and selfish I would feel if I failed you.

Love is what's called for, yet I'm tripping over the gap between the ideal and the real.

The impurity of my love is unavoidable. Mine was always a love that demanded something in return. Mine has always been

a selfish, cheap love, that flourished and thrived while the skies were clear and the edges smooth.

By contrast, your love never seems to waver. Is it love that keeps you from feeling sorry for yourself (or for me, for that matter)? Your response to the accident has seemed mildly apologetic that our original path took an unexpected bend. Something deeper seems to hold you together. How can I live up to such pure love? Like a frost in early spring destroys a tender crop, my romantic, I'll-love-you-forever-no-matter-what-happens promise is being frozen by harsh reality.

Can I hold up my end of the bargain? My best efforts seem crude.

I set out to be strong for you, yet I need your generous, selfless love to hold up for both of us.



Friday, October 17th

The bird has flown. The gate is barred. The storm rages and hope has evaporated like a whisper in a hurricane, like spit on hot coals.

You lie broken, but I'm the one drowning in guilt, longing, rage, and sorrow. I ask myself, if I'm the one ripping your heart out, why am I shredded like a tangle of ribbons on the floor? The years of our rich and happy life together were supposed to offer better protection.

Catastrophes befall others; how did this one catch you? What crushed you gutted me. I rehearse our story like an incessant, looping nightmare. Rage circles to despondence as I think of all we had, all we lost, all you were, and what I was when we were

whole together. I think of our wonderful plans for the future—to travel, open an after-school program for disadvantaged kids, have children of our own. Seeing you look at me with one eye, always having to come to your left side so you can take my hand, watching you eat with your disfigured mouth, going home to an empty bed every night . . . Everything has been wrenched from us. I'm back to rage.

I can't go on like this. I have to change something. Since I can't change you, it means that I have to change me—somehow.

Leaving seems the only way.

I've been trying to tell you for weeks, waiting for the right time, a moment uninterrupted by a visitor or phone call. You are never alone. It helps to know people here flock to you, love you, and are committed to caring for you.

I can't conjure the courage to make this new life work. The thought of life entirely without you is intolerable, but I can't linger with this future before us.

Please understand that only a crisis this monstrous could force me out. I know how selfish I am being; the word is a neon sign flashing in my mind. I want to believe that my leaving doesn't mean I love you less. You are worth every grain of love and more, but my threshing floor is empty. You are the one cut down, but I am the chaff scattered to the wind.

Leaving is easier to think about than do. The hardest part is not telling you goodbye in person. But the squeeze in my chest, the burning lump in my throat, and the tears brimming with every blink make a face-to-face farewell impossible. This letter is the best I can do, though the shame sucks air from my lungs.

I can't ask you to understand. Had I been the one crushed, you would remain steadfast to the end. You have always been the

beautifully-constructed hospital dedicated to healing, while I'm the peeling paint on the storage closet wall. Whatever you saw in me was a mirage. I'm an unhitched soul and weak of character.

Bye, Rey. I love you more than I knew possible. It's not enough. You taught me all I know about love, but I'm a shallow learner. I can't contain your ocean of love in my pitiful drop.

I'm sorry. I wish things had worked out the way we'd planned.

