

ordinary was never an option. As I fluctuated between the storm in my mind's eye and the menace in the calm before the storm of reality, I was beginning to understand that insight can only come when luck and faith are clicked together like a pair of ruby slippers at the precise instant of the great escape from doubt.

A room at a mediocre hotel was completely out of my budget. The vision of holing up in a two-bit, cinder-block hostel full of scruffy youths was about as appealing as pinching off a hasty loaf before algebra class with nothing more than bathroom stall graffiti for reading material. Postponing the trip until I could better afford it had crossed my mind, but time's portentous reprimand would never cease its tsk-tsk-tsking away in the meantime of my procrastination. Time is a mean thing indeed. I had no patience for it and it didn't wait for anyone either. Facing the clock in a staring contest, I was caught in breathless restraint against my own passivity and apprehension. One blink and I would never make it out of L.A.

With persistence and some good fortune, I came across an internet listing for the short-term sublet of a fully furnished, air-conditioned studio in Chelsea. The girl who lived there had plans to travel abroad for two weeks and wanted to rent her place for five hundred bucks during the time she was away. I sent her an email conveying my interest in the room. She responded with her phone number and asked me to call her for details. We established a chummy rapport right off the bat. I asked the girl to send me an email with photos of her place. If everything looked hunky-dory, I would send her a check, and she would mail the keys in return.

Most people would have found the arrangement a risk not worth taking. Skating on the edge as much as I had, nothing was too far fetched to consider anymore. Fundamentally, I was an optimist. I trusted people until it were blatantly obvious they were two-faced degenerates with no soul. Living in a world guarded by paranoia and pessimism wasn't the answer. We get what we give. Extending to people the benefit of the doubt—more often than not—prompted them to live up to my belief in them. The keys to the studio arrived in a week's time. Whether or not

they would unlock the door to the address I was given would remain a question mark until I arrived in New York. If they didn't, I would deal with it when the time came. It was pointless to stress about something that hadn't happened yet or was out of my hands.

The final task was to set up as many interviews as possible. Over the next two weeks, I blanketed Manhattan with my résumé and contacted dozens of headhunters, staffing agencies, and companies hiring direct. Joan and Zelda were impressed. My plane ticket was booked, I had a place to stay, and recruiters were calling me for interviews. With each successive train of thought and beat of my heart, New York was coming to fruition.

A week before I was to leave, Tom had attended the arraignment of the Bulldog, the Mexican, and the Iron Cross. I called him on my lunch break to see how everything went. No answer. A few hours later, Tom returned my call. He said he was in the hospital.

Sitting up in my chair, "What happened?" I asked.

"I was in the courtroom with the lawyers when I started getting these chest pains like I was having a heart attack. Then I passed out, someone called for an ambulance, and I was taken to the emergency room."

"What hospital are you at? Do you need anything? I can come over after..."

"No hon, that's all right. My mom's here. Everything's fine now. They're running some tests and then I'll be out of here soon. I'll call you later. I have to go."

Tom was acting entirely out of character, and I was at a complete loss. There was no way I was going to tell him about my leaving for New York. The news would freak him out. I didn't want to rock the boat while he was in an unstable condition. An honest face-to-face *basta la vista* would have only led to a fitful argument in which he would convince me to second guess myself or blame me for abandoning him. I saw him having a "panic attack" on me. Then, instead of rushing to catch my plane, I