

falling, endlessly

by Jeffery Klaehn

Z. felt herself falling, then for a brief whisper of an instant there was only darkness.

All the pain suddenly vanished as if it had never really existed in the first place.

A sense of weightlessness washed over her.

Then just as suddenly she was surrounded by light.

So it's this easy, she thinks to herself.

Z. lives alone. She's 94 years old. By any measure she's led a very full life.

She felt herself moving toward the light, quite apart from any conscious effort on her part to do so mind you.

It just felt right, really, going to the light.

Memories, faces, places, sensations, all came flooding back as she moved closer to the brilliant white light.

Clouds quickly appeared, in a perfect peach sky. Big, puffy clouds, moving together, formed the shape of a heart.

Z. smiled inwardly. The glow of the white light felt welcoming. It seemed to be reaching out as if wanting to embrace her. She touched the clouds, could feel herself touching them.

Knock, knock.

Z. was vaguely aware of the sound. It seemed so far away though. Part of another reality she no longer existed within.

Knock, knock. Again, and sounding a touch more impatient now at that.

Z. was spiraling away from the light. Then she could feel herself coughing and raising herself up on her hand. She felt a numb sort of pain on the back of her head and knew that she hadn't died.

"Yoo-hoo, Z.," said an extremely pleasant-sounding voice, an extremely pleasant-sounding female voice, from outside the front door.

Using her coffee table for leverage, Z. pushed herself up and struggled to make her way to the door.

It was the type of door that was very old and very sturdy. It had a big window at the top. Z. peeked around the polka-dotted drapes on the left-hand side of the window. Outside, standing there on the front porch, impatiently tapping one of her feet, was the most beautiful woman Z. had ever seen.

The beautiful woman had lustrous long blonde hair and seemed to be glowing. While she appeared to be in her late twenties, her age seemed somehow difficult to define. She was dressed in a simple white blouse, shorts and flip-flops.

She turned, looked precisely at the sliver through which Z. was peeking out and waved at Z. animatedly, smiling brightly and looking somehow even more refulgent now that she was smiling. "Well, are you going to let me in?" she asked. "I've brought you some blue lotus flowers!" She held the flowers up so Z. could see them, and they too were extraordinarily beautiful.

Z. opened the door. "Do I know you?" she asked. In truth, she felt somewhat disoriented. She was consciously aware of the fact that just moments ago she had been dying. Or at least she thought she had been dying.

It seemed rather strange to her that she was able to be standing here, now, at this moment, opening the door to her house like this.

A flicker of a thought came instantly to mind.

So much of life is perception.

"Of course you do," the beautiful woman replied. "We should really put these in water," she added, as if to herself. "May I come in?"

"Please do," Z. found herself inviting. "Would you like some green tea?"

"Hmm, well, I have my water," the beautiful woman held up a sleek-looking refillable water container. "But yes, I think I rather would enjoy some tea, actually."

And suddenly they were sitting together on the two wooden chairs Z. kept under the ivy, very deep in her backyard garden.

On the table between them, in a clear glass vase, were the blue lotus flowers, along with two of her finest tea cups and a pot of tea on a teak wood tray.

And a very old and expensive-looking silver cigarette case with the letter "A" engraved in the lower left-hand corner.

Z. didn't smoke.

"You don't mind if I smoke, do you?" the beautiful woman asked. She didn't wait for a reply.

And with this the most beautiful woman Z. had ever seen laughed softly. *What a lovely laugh*, Z. thought. So light and carefree. Z. had no memory of the elapsed time from when she had opened the door until now. Strangely though, she felt suddenly alert. The disorientation had vanished. She actually felt more alive than she had in many years.

"I want you to listen carefully to what I'm about to say, okay Z.?" The beautiful woman paused to take a sip of her tea and then took a long, hard drag of her cigarette. "The truth be told, as it should always be, you're 94 years old and you just almost died a very natural death, which would have perhaps been a nice enough way to move on into, hmm, what lay beyond, depending how you look upon such things. However, there is a slight complication, and that's really why I'm here."

Z. simply listened. She couldn't help staring in admiration at the blue lotus flowers. They were exquisite.

"Not a complication, really," the beautiful woman continued on. "But I'll explain, and I'll explain in very easy to understand terms and in brief detail, but please bear in mind that I'm quite aware in advance that there's a great likelihood that your perception of what I'm about to tell you will leave you doubting everything I'm about to say. As I'm saying it, I mean. Not after." And she laughed again with this. She seemed to be enjoying herself. "By the way, this garden of yours, it's undeniably spectacular! I quite like it here. Very serenity-inducing, I think." She motioned, with a wave of her hand, to the ivy and roses, then back to Z., and she smiled.

Z. was about to say "thank you," but the beautiful woman began talking again before she could move from the thought to the words.

"You're welcome," the beautiful woman said, and this too seemed strange to Z., but somehow natural.

Again Z. noticed how it appeared as if the woman was glowing. A soft warm glow, subtle but undeniable, she was giving off her own light, somehow.

"Who exactly am I? And what am I doing here? And, ultimately, why you? You know what, Z.? I'd probably be wondering these exact same things if I were in your place right now. Hold those questions for just a moment and let me tell you a story," said the beautiful woman. "Are you okay with this?"

For some unknown reason, which she didn't fully understand, Z. felt herself completely at ease with this woman. "We've known one another for quite some time, haven't we?"

"Yes we have," the beautiful woman replied quickly. "Your entire life, in fact."

"You look so . . . young," Z. said. "How old are you?"

"Very," the stunningly lovely woman replied. "But we'll come back to this and I'll answer all your questions afterward," she promised. "If you still have any then . . ."

Z. took a sip of her tea. It tasted so good. "Tell me your story," she said. "I want to hear it."

The beautiful woman smiled. This was why she had come ...

"A very long time ago a very handsome young man saw a young woman with whom he fell instantly in love. He was out at a nightclub and he saw her across a large, crowded room. But he could only see the beauty of her face because there were so many people moving about between them. That fleeting glance alone, however, was enough to capture him, and his heart, utterly and completely. He was madly in love with this mysterious and beautiful young woman, instantly.

"He felt as if he'd been searching for her his entire life, and when he saw her, well, she took his breath away.

"He stared in wonder at her dark skin, her beautiful eyes and her long black hair. He was instantly in awe of her and he saw in her a thousand stars, the entire universe beautiful and alight. He fell, ever so deeply, in love with her. And he searched, trying to find her all throughout that night.

"And the young man left that evening, wishing and hoping that he might someday be lucky enough to see this amazingly beautiful young woman again. He had a vivid dream about her that night, a vision really, and when he awoke the next morning, he sensed that they would meet again one day.

"Over a year passed before, as if purely by chance, that day finally came. It wasn't by chance. They were meant to meet again. The young man was walking his usual path to the hills when he noticed this same young woman walking along another path, nearby. It was just like his vision, his dream of meeting her again, and finally that moment was here.

"Summoning up all his courage, he approached her and introduced himself, although in truth he found her so beautiful that he was barely even aware of what he was saying as they spoke.

"Hearing her voice, at last, was like heaven for him. Standing so close to her was like heaven for him, wonderment.

"Finally being able to look into her eyes, this woman who had captured his heart at a glance over a year before, left him breathless.

"She extended her hand and introduced herself to him, and as he took her hand in his he felt his heart beating very hard inside his chest. To touch her hand, his fingers on hers, the sensation of godhead, divinity.

"Seeing her there, standing so close to him, in that moment, he felt simultaneously overwhelmed, mesmerized and euphoric. She was, impossibly, even more beautiful than the memory of her he'd been treasuring for so many months.

"The sound of her voice, the way she spoke, made her ever more attractive to him with each word she said. He felt elated simply to be talking with her. But he managed to tell her about how he had seen

her that evening over a year before, how he had never forgotten her. He admitted to her that he felt it was serendipity that they'd run into each other again. He didn't tell her about his vision though, because he didn't want her to think he was strange, out of the ordinary.

"The young woman just looked at his face as they talked, and she was smiling throughout the entire conversation, which made him think all was going wonderfully, even though he felt absolutely in awe of her and was almost too nervous to even talk.

"We'll see each other again."

"The young woman said this to him twice, in the middle of the conversation, which made his heart cry out for her, and again at the very end of their conversation, which filled his heart with hope.

"And, in truth, the young man so very badly wanted to ask her right then and there if she would walk with him up to the hills and down to the water. But he was also too afraid, nervous that she might say no to him, and he didn't want to pressure her in any way either, so he felt that perhaps it might be best if he simply said goodbye to her for now and allow fate to bring their paths together again, if she was his destiny.

"So, at the end of the conversation, he simply waved goodbye and smiled at her as he stepped back onto his path and she onto hers.

"At last he'd spoken to this beautiful young woman who had stepped straight out of his dreams like a vision of beauty and love.

"And he felt happy too because he felt in his heart that their conversation had gone so well. He also felt extraordinarily lucky to have run into her again. But mostly he felt as if he were flying.

"After talking with her, he felt as if he were filled with light. He went to the first bench he could find, and he quickly sat down, because after talking to this remarkable, enchanting young woman he also felt faint, out of breath and light-headed. He still couldn't believe they'd actually met, couldn't believe they'd talked, at last.

"As he looked up at the sky, he realized that it had never before looked so blue, as it did just then in that moment. He was cognizant of the fact that he couldn't remember ever feeling quite so happy.

"The smile on his face would remain there for the rest of that evening and into the next day. He was quite unable to stop smiling as he thought about her and about the possibility of meeting her again, now that they had at last met each other.

"That feeling of awe, lightness, remained with him the next several days.

"She was a dream of beauty, and of love, a dream he felt he had been searching for his entire life. Do you remember that day, Z.?"

Z. did remember, vaguely. It was her, she knew. She was the beautiful young woman in the story. She'd been on her way to pray that day, when their paths had crossed.

"What happened to him?" Z. asked. She had never met him again after that day.

"He continued hoping and wishing and never truly forgot about you. After a time, he moved away, to another country across the world, and remained there for the rest of his life, living in a quite lovely cottage-style two story house on a secluded beach. He'd always wanted to live by the ocean. And at night, every night from that point in his life on, he wrote heart-wrenching poetry and painted, and you were there in his poems and paintings even as the many years and decades passed. Just as you were in his heart after only that briefest of glances the very first time he laid eyes on you."

A pair of mourning doves flew down to the right of where Z. and the beautiful woman were sitting.

Z. poured herself another cup of tea and pointed to the cigarette case. "There used to be a notion that knowing someone's name gave one some type of power, but I know that's silly. And while I feel I know you, I know I don't know your name and I want to. Will you please tell me? What's the 'A' stand for?"

The beautiful woman smiled. "Aphrodite," she said.

Shakti, Parvati, Hathor, Ishtar, Milda, Venus, Mami Wata, Rati, Oshun, Albina, Turan, Saule, Freyja, Astarte.

She was known by many different names across different places, different times.

And Z. knew instantly who she was. "The Goddess of Love," Z. whispered softly. "But I don't believe in you . . ."

Aphrodite laughed. "You don't need to believe in me for me to *be*. You believe in love. That's enough."

Z. almost felt as if she were having a surreal waking dream of some sort. This seemed too unreal, yet she somehow knew for certain that it was real.

"This isn't a manifestation of your consciousness," Aphrodite offered, somehow hearing her thoughts. "It's passionately real, as is his love for you."

Is? "So he just left?" Z. asked. "Why would he have done that?"

Aphrodite was smiling at the mourning doves. "He'd hoped to meet you again. Then he wished. And he even prayed to meet you again. But he never did," was all she said. "All he had was the memory of those perfect moments, talking with you, looking into your eyes. He felt that was a perfect day, and he never forgot those moments, all his life. You were like a dream for him, a perfect dream."

"I remember talking with him. He'd been a scholar, though, and a writer," said Z. She was remembering fragments of their conversation that day. "He simply left that life behind?"

"It didn't really matter to him, by that point, I don't think. That day when he approached you, I'm not entirely certain, even with my great powers, what your perceptions of him were, but I know that he'd always been a hopeless romantic and that he always knew that love is ultimately all that matters in life, all that gives meaning, and all that one should ever truly wish to have and to hold."

"Did he continue writing?" Z. asked.

Aphrodite explained, "After that day he met with you he waited for a long while, hoping for something divine to happen, hoping for his dreams to materialize. He couldn't bear to continue living as he had been when his life suddenly seemed very unremarkable in the shadows of his memory of you and the promise of what life with your love could have been. He hoped to understand what it was about you that had such a powerful impact on him."

"He saw his past and future in new lights, vastly changed from his previous frames of reference. He didn't believe in miracles before he met you, Z. His changing perceptions led him to what he initially thought to be an existential crisis. This was his awakening to the sacred and sublime, transcendent love. He began writing more than he ever had before. Inspiration, carried by surrender, enveloped him."

"Because he met me," Z. whispered.

"He never forgot you and he always held the memory of you in his heart. He would always remember your words. *We'll see each other again.* And I also know that he tried to find you every night, in his dreams, for the whole rest of his life."

Was he dead now? Z. felt so sad for him. And, in truth, she also felt sad for herself now, knowing all of this, her perceptions crystallizing.

But Aphrodite had said that his love for her *is* real.

That was present tense.

She sensed that love didn't stop with death, it somehow continued on. She had so many questions. "Is that why you took notice of him, and of me?" Z. asked. "Was it because he loved me as, well, as you say he loved me?"

"Not entirely, at least not in the way you mean. Do you really want me to answer that question?"

Z. set her teacup down on the saucer and looked up the stars coloring the evening sky. It felt so good to be alive. She sensed that Aphrodite could read her thoughts and wanted to savor this. "I'm 94 years old, in my garden, here, now, under the ivy, having tea with Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love," she said, thinking aloud. They'd only talked for a short while. How could he possibly have fallen so deeply in love with her?

"Yes," Z. said at last. "I think I would."

Aphrodite took a deep breath. "You're not going to believe me. Or then again, maybe you will. You seem to be taking it all relatively well so far. So here goes, then. Z. You've lived this life and you've known what it is to dream and to love. But there's something more

you don't know about the young man you talked to that day. He'd loved you before he even met you. He'd been so deeply in love with you, with the promise of you. For years before he was lucky enough to see you for the first time that night, he'd loved you. And when he saw you, he just knew, and he loved you so dearly, so innocently, sweetly and truly, that I cried when you two waved goodbye to each other that day on the path."

"Why didn't you intervene?" asked Z.

"Because I can't, or at least I'm not supposed to."

Z. didn't ask how it could be that bringing her back from her apparent death could possibly be construed as non-intervention. She remembered her own "vision," particularly the heart-shaped cloud. She'd begun returning as soon as she'd touched it.

"Sometimes doing what we're technically not supposed to is the right thing to do," Aphrodite added.

"Hmm," Z. said simply, by way of reply.

"But what you really need to know," continued Aphrodite, "is that there are other realities, other timelines, and that particular man has loved you in every reality, in every distinct timeline, from the beginning of time onward into infinity. I can show you, if you like?"

Aphrodite was smiling, positively beaming now, and light began glowing, cascading, all around her. Soft amethyst, Maya blue, warm shades of orange, hues of alizarin crimson, yellows, playful raspberry, flirtatious and energetic pinks, jade green, and sensuous shades of purple, in torrents of misty light.

Z. didn't know what to say or do. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Just touch me," Aphrodite offered, holding out her hand.

Z. hesitated, for a second. Then she set her fingers in Aphrodite's outstretched palm.

"I live for moments like this," Aphrodite said. But Z. was already gone.

The images came quickly, flashing, like a film in fast-forward, in full color and with sound.

She saw in an instant what life with him would have been like, would be like, not just in this reality, but in every possible alternate

reality. There's so much love, everywhere. It overpowers her senses, the sheer force of it.

They hold one another tightly, her perfect body pressing against him as their lips adventurously explore.

And each time she kisses him she can feel it, in his kiss, wanting, always so desperately wanting. Passion and the promise of so much more.

Two, together. In his eyes, such innocence. She feels free and wants to stay lost in each moment.

He's tickling her, smiling, bringing her coffee, reading her love poems very late at night. They're walking together along a river. She's driving, listening to something he's saying and singing along to a song that's playing on the car radio at the same time. They're eating from a popcorn bucket she's holding as they sit side by side in a movie theater and they're the only two souls there.

Swimming together in the ocean, they're looking up at the stars lighting the night sky.

Destiny, fate ...

They're traveling together, sitting in hotels looking out new windows at new cities, and at the lights and people and cars moving around them.

Exploring hidden out of the way forests and trails, she's walking beside him.

On the warm, wet, sensuous sands of a faraway hidden beach, gentle waves make a peaceful lulling sound that's no longer registering for them because they're far too preoccupied.

Lost in endless sensation. Rapture. Love.

She is all that is. All that matters.

All he wants, needs and dreams.

Forever and always, he is hers.

She finds it exciting that she can seduce him with zero effort, whenever she likes. When she does make an effort, she finds limitless joy in his reactions. She sometimes thinks of him as a butterfly, or a bird, in her hands, and she thinks this metaphor is probably quite accurate. A beautiful butterfly, or a beautiful bird,

that makes her feel alive. She can see through his eyes, feel his desire, when their souls are one. Seduction is unnecessary, but she finds it so much fun.

He's always writing her letters, even though she's always right there with him, and every now and again she writes him a love letter too.

It's snowing and they're kissing in a doorway. A young couple in the second story apartment across the street are watching them. And he wants to propose to her.

Each moment, forever. Love and wonderment. Theirs, to have and to hold.

All he wants is to hold her.

All he wants is to make her happy.

All he wants is to love her forever.

She's catching him as he falls into her arms.

Smiling at his expression when he first sees her in her new emerald-green gown, she laughs and tells him he's completely hopeless.

He's crying as he tries to tell her how much he feels for her, how he loves her, and he can barely manage the words, and it doesn't matter.

Euphoria, déesse de l'amour. Cognizance of the grace, staggering beauty of life, overwhelms her as she loses herself in his eyes, and she kisses him tenderly then, and after a moment her kisses become increasingly more passionate, and she feels him gently taking her hand in his, and it feels like it's just them, as if their lives and the world no longer matter or even exist. There's only this, eager and all-consuming passion, and their love for one another.

The music and dark night envelop them as they dance, sway and hold tightly to one another.

Shivering, she opens her eyes to the morning light and moves to take him in her arms before closing her eyes once again and falling back to sleep.

"I love you," she whispers, holding him tightly. "So much ..."

A thousand million similar scenarios flash through her mind's eye with each passing moment.

She is always kissing him. So many kisses, hugs, days and nights filled with laughter and deep conversations, a kaleidoscope of passion and endless desire, worship. Falling, endlessly.

He's buying her flowers and she can somehow hear his thoughts, and all he's thinking is that he can't wait to see her expression when she sees the flowers, after he gives them to her.

She's always smiling, feeling so alive and in love with him.

Then, discord, and Z. found herself back in her garden.

The mourning doves were still there and they appeared quite contented.

Aphrodite raised an eyebrow and smiled.

"I've never known such passion, such romance," Z. said. She was barely able to speak. "It's like a fantasy . . ."

"He's always loved you Z., and he will always love you. Everywhere, always, forever, his love for you is a universal constant."

"Can you?" Z. began.

"Take you back to that moment when you met on the path? Is that what you're going to ask me?"

Z. nodded, overwhelmed with emotion.

Aphrodite smiled as she lit another cigarette. "You'll keep your memories of this reality, but only vaguely. Have you ever had a sense of déjà vu? A strange but palpable sense of familiarity or remembrance? Recognition, whatever you might want to call it? It will be like that. Are you okay with this?"

"Oh yeah," Z. said. Her perception was now quite fully informed.

It's a miraculous thing, how perception works.

Our state of consciousness can frame and re-frame everything.

"You don't much sound like a 94-year-old, you realize?" Aphrodite blew a smoke ring, and Z. noticed it was shaped like a heart.

"Tell me something, honestly," Z. said. "Am I dreaming this? Did I die? Is this real? This can't be real."

"It's as real as it ever gets, Z.," said Aphrodite. "Love knows no limitations. Time doesn't exist within love's frame of reference. Trust me. I know of what I'm speaking. Are you ready?"

Z. nodded. *Oh yeah* -

In the next instant she was standing on the path as she remembered it from so many decades before. She felt young again. She was young again.

Fabulously so alive.

Aphrodite was here too, although she was dressed differently and appeared slightly older now. A light pastel green summer suit. Late forties, early fifties, or thereabouts. Still young, and still the most beautiful woman Z. had ever seen. Was she holding a refillable water container too?

"Are you ready?" Aphrodite asked.

Hadn't she just heard this same exact phrase a moment ago?

"You look absolutely beautiful, by the way!" Aphrodite added.

"Here he comes!"

Z. felt panic overtaking her. This was happening so fast. She turned toward Aphrodite. "What should I say to him? What should I do? What should I say?"

"Say hello, smile, say anything," Aphrodite laughed. "You'll be fine. It won't matter to him what you say. He loves you passionately. Just standing next to you will be like heaven for him. Trust me, I know. Remember that he's in absolute awe of *you* and that he desires you intensely."

Then Aphrodite paused, as if thinking of something specific, an important detail. "No, actually," she began again, "I know! You should hug him as soon as you see him and tell him that you're so happy to see him again!" Then that same soft, gentle laugh again, the same sweet, beautiful laugh that Z. remembered from another place, somewhere, a lifetime ago. "That will make him happy and send him over the edge at the same time! He deserves that, really!" Aphrodite patted Z. on the back and nodded, as if agreeing with herself, which Z. even in her anxious, fidgety state found amusing and quite endearingly attractive. "And whatever you do, don't let

him walk away without making some sort of definitive plans for coffee or something. This is hugely important. Don't let the moment slip away again."

Z. sighed heavily, overwhelmed. "I'm ready! A whole different life. Is this a parallel reality? How can I ever thank you?" She didn't notice she'd begun to cry.

"Oh and by the way, I've left the blue lotus flowers at your place for you, here. You won't remember me after a few moments and you might wonder how the flowers have simply appeared in a new glass vase on that table over by your window, but you won't ponder on it for more than a moment or two and you'll really love them. All is well. You'll both exist for love! I must go now ... perhaps I'll come back and visit someday. I think I might." She gave Z. a quick kiss on the cheek before saying one final thing: "The love that awaits you is precious and very rare, Z. Embrace it."

"Excuse me, I'm not sure if you'll remember me but I saw you over a year ago and never forgot you . . ."

He wanted to tell her he'd fallen in love with her, instantly, at a glance, and that he'd burned, ached for her, so desperately, but of course he knew he couldn't.

The sound of his voice, Z. had yearned to hear it again ever since the visions, longed with every cell of her perfect being, and suddenly here it was.

His love for you is a universal constant.

She turned about and felt butterflies and warmth flowing through her entire body as her eyes met his.

"Oh," she whispered, smiling as she reached out and grabbed him and pressed herself against him, clutching him tightly in her arms. "It's so good to see you again! Thank you, Goddess! Thank you so much!" Her eyes filled with tears of joy as bliss, elation and ecstasy overwhelmed her senses.

And she wanted nothing more than to never let go.

The sky hasn't ever looked so blue . . .

Aphrodite winked before fully disappearing, smiling brightly as she faded to nothing, as if she'd never been there at all.

"Oh!" he thought, feeling her hugging him, and words began racing to his mind, whole sentences, like a wild river. "Rain to the sand all along the beach. Darkness, falling to the light. The last day of summer. I'm not even looking at the edge as I leap. Dreaming, aching, wishing, begging, pleading. Beauty and love at first sight. Purring. Again and again. This seemingly endless desire. Over and over you leave me wanting. Murmuring. You, strange, wonderful, so sublimely beautiful. I'm so nervous. You're a dream and I'm yours. Now, forever. A smitten kitten. Your mere presence makes me yearn to worship. I want only to surrender completely, to this, and to you. I'm so in love with you. Like swimming in a fantasy. Endlessly falling in love, time after time. Always so desperately wanting."

Melting, he couldn't manage to speak, so he simply wrapped his arms around her, finding everything that is beautiful.

Everywhere, always, forever . . .

Z. felt herself falling, then for a brief whisper of an instant there was only darkness.

When she opened her eyes she noticed the pair of mourning doves just off the path and how, curiously, they seemed to be watching them embrace. And only then did she remember to breathe.

