

SEVENTEEN

by

Shan Serafin

SEVENTEEN

by

Shan Serafin



Baltimore, Maryland

Copyright 2004, 2005 by Shan Serafin
All rights reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by electronic means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote passages in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events, people, or institutions is purely coincidental.

Published by Bancroft Press (“Books that Enlighten”)
P.O. Box 65360, Baltimore, MD 21209
800-637-7377
410-764-1967 (fax)
bruceb@bancroftpress.com
www.bancroftpress.com

Cover and interior design by Tammy S. Grimes, Crescent Communications, www.tsgcrescent.com
Author photo by Bridge Mihalik

ISBN 1-890862-40-1
Library of Congress Control Number: 2004114264
Printed in the United States of America
First Edition



To my unborn daughter
And anyone else listening

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An echoing thank you to Bruce, Shauna, and Elly; to the preliminary readership—Kim, Gayane, Gisselle, Sibyl, Jessica, Terri, and Tatiana—whose encouragement was essential; to the exemplars, Vicki, Jackie, Ashley, Michelle, and Nichole; to my mentor in life, Daisaku Ikeda; and, inexorably, to my mom and dad, *sine qua non*.



CHAPTER ONE

 I WOULD LIKE TO BECOME good friends with a seagull.

There are other things, but that's the first that comes to mind. The conversations would be fun. Of course, there'd be tips on flight and a colossal crossing of culture lines.

But, again, that's just pine-scented nauseating garbage.

I've composed quite a bit of garbage in the past few years, all of which was confusing, none of which effective and yet, now, closer than ever to reality, my garbage is at its all-time most pined and nauseating. *A seagull? Friends with one?* What could be more pointless? Not only do they crap all over the place, but any particular seagull I'd get close to would certainly end up biting the hell out of me because, let's face it, all animals hate a loser.

What would I do with only one week to live? The question doesn't make any sense. If I only had a week, I would live a certain way. That's that. So, for some frigid English teacher to tell me, tell *us*, the whole class, that whatever it is we come up with (like seagulls, or seeing the aurora thing in Alaska, or saying hi to every third idiot we pass in the street) should be the way we live each day—that's nothing more than a toilet full of lies. "The purpose of the exercise, young lady, the purpose is to say to yourself, 'Why don't I live this way anyway?'"

Why don't I? It's called the future, and anyone normal expects there to be one. I live for my future. I think of plans and college and marriage to an occasionally humorous, forever efficient, tall, subsidizing husband with all the requisite qualities you're supposed to mandate. If I only had seven days left, yes, I admit I'd live differently, do zippier, more televisable stuff, but that's if I had seven days, a very big if.

If *not*, if, yay, I'm alive year after incessant year, then obviously I stay in school, learn, read, trudge through my worthless youth—the torture of being non-gorgeous, non-best, non-smart—put together a college career, graduate, marry, give birth, and fatten.

It's 9:04. If the line's short and this is done in five minutes, let's say eight max, I'll then have three minutes to race to class to avoid being fifteen minutes late with a third tardy in two weeks.

SEVENTEEN

The problem is I'm not normal. So it's doubtful any pharmacist is going to reveal to abnormal me the divine secrets of mortal relief. Whoever stands behind the pharmacy counter—some old prune or some acne-prone oaf—will take but one glance at the desperation in my face and tell me it's against the law to answer my question. I know it. No matter how delightful I try to sound, no matter how normal, sane, solid, how non-me, they'll see through the veil.

You absolutely cannot let the world perceive how different you are. You have to appear as if you're going to make it.

I need lip balm. This is the sixty-eighth time I'm reaching into my bag for lip balm, completely forgetting it's not my bag since Shauna switched bags with me last night—I'm sure of it—just to get a hold of the letter buried deep in the inner pocket. From JP. She knows I didn't want her to see it, but now that it's in her clutches, she's going to confirm that it states what it states—that JP has feelings for me, that he thinks I'm very cool, that he'd like to be more than just friends.

It's obvious she can't stand even the possibility of her socially inadequate brother having the nerve to like a member of her elite circle. All she sees is that he's awkward, shy, and disposable, which, OK, I used to see too, but not anymore.

I don't know why all this is coming up now. When you think about it, the three of us have hung out since elementary school, meeting in the same place every day, every week: Shauna and I in her room reading magazines or crank-calling the world, JP across the hall in his bed doing positively nothing. All the while he'd be weird and self-destructing and we hated him for it. Yet, even though to this day he still fails to fit in and Shauna still wishes he'd finish himself off, I don't mind him anymore. He's now the only person who listens to me. Actually, he's always listened, even when I had nothing to say, even during the humiliation last spring, when the three of us were still together on the swim team before I quit and went to diving, which seemed like it would be less work because for swimming you have to drown yourself stroke after grueling stroke, whereas for diving (one would think) all you have to do is fall off a plank.

No. Even gravity hates my life.

I ruin every good opportunity I get. All gold I touch turns to sewage. I am the anti-Midas.

The drugstore is up ahead past the fountain, past the main entrance. I should take the long route behind the administration building. It's the only way

to make Shauna think I'm actually going to the registrar's office to drop a class and not the drugstore, which is way too suspicious. Even though there are lots of good ol' American reasons why a girl would see a pharmacist, mine isn't good ol' or American or the reason of a girl. I can't afford to have Shauna probing around an issue like this one. Not this one.

I pass by the School of Architecture department with its mirrored walls that show me my unattractive reflection heading in a parallel course for nowhere. I hate college. I'm not coming here next year. Sappy Shauna's mom—I should've shot her idea down the instant it left her tongue. *A New York experience. Comma. Grin.*

I hate being in New York. About the only thing I hate more than being alive is being in New York. It's crowded. It's gray. It's an oven. And the sun beats open your face and gives you cracked lips. So then you lick your lips for moisture, but they bake up in, like, two seconds and get even cracklier. And I would reach into my bag and get my balm so I can smear two pounds of it onto my mouth, but this isn't my bag. It's Shauna's. And she's so slutty she doesn't carry balm because she only wears spread-eagle lipstick, which she wipes on way too wide, which she thinks is sexy and bolstered and gives her that bee-stung-lip look like what's-her-name from what's-that-film, but in truth does not in the slightest bit improve the quality of her face, because, seriously, and I'm not saying this to be mean, even though I have every right to be (the bag thing), nothing could improve the quality of that face. She has a wide mouth and way too much jaw width and, yeah, she has liquid moons of turquoise for eyes or whatever, but I don't believe in all that laminated lore on accenting and accentuating, and her hair is boring straight like mine. And yet, regardless of all this documentation, she cakes on the gloss layer after layer and just because she's D-cup at seventeen (tramp) and super tall (freak), she thinks she's tomorrow's cover-girl-of-the-month, which she's not.

She's my best friend.

I shouldn't have to keep reminding myself.

I enter the drugstore and queue up in a line leading to the prescription window. I have seven minutes to do this. Most of us here are students, I guess, because the store is right across the street from campus. The kid I end up standing behind is a weird computer type who looks like his name is Murton.

I'm in the mood to name people.

Murton doesn't glare at me as if I'm a consummate reject, which is a good

SEVENTEEN

sign. I think he's been checking me out, though, which is gross. Not that I'm all snooty about the status of guys, but when you're desperate and the cute ones don't look at you (I mean not ever, not even when you wave a flag that says "please, for the love of God, look at me" or "free car if we flirt") you end up praying that the toads, the ugly guys, don't look at you either. Because when the toads do and the good ones don't, it subtly verifies your low position on the spectrum of attractiveness. If, hopefully, the toads don't look at you either, then you can accept all sorts of encouraging rationales for the overall lack of attention like: Well, this is the type of place where guys just aren't interested in girls, or this particular population is gay, or this is a library, a morgue, Antarctica, and so forth.

But it's none of those. It's a public store. And Murton, toad, wants me. There's a good-looking guy at the front of the line—wide shoulders, total Matthew. He didn't seem to check me out. But then he didn't look up when I first merged into line, so even if I were a much prettier girl coming in, he wouldn't have looked at her either, right? Right?

Could I be any more twelve?

Murton wears a backpack with a bunch of buttons on it. I hate buttons. They're for people who think buttons are social and cute. Buttons are neither. He has, like, eighty of them on his bag. He also has a big zit on the nape of his neck. *That* he should cover with a button.

A voice from the window says, "Next," and Matt goes up. Wow. Matt. He has *the* most attractive walk. It is the confident stride of someone effortlessly taking care of business, casually refilling, perhaps, a bottle of antiseptic for some sporting wound, probably playing water polo later or meeting his sorority girlfriend, who is waiting for him in a café for lite lunch, who is at least a sophomore, slim, slightly tan from a Grecian summer, and apt to receive a kiss from him on her flawless cheek when he surprises her from behind.

Two more clerks open simultaneously with disunited invocations of "next." Murton and his zit go one way while I and my fear of pharmaceutical scrutiny go the other. An old man waits on me behind the counter. He doesn't smile.

The goal is to get information. There's nothing to be nervous about. Just use the story you came up with. I clear my throat and begin: "Hi, I have a friend, my roommate. She's a sophomore. And um. Well, anyway, she's a little uh . . . She's like . . . well, we're not sure about her . . . y'know, like, really not sure . . . and to be safe I was wondering if you could tell me what . . ." (Look happy.



Remember to look happy.) “What, uh . . . Do you know which drugs can be . . . overdosed?”

I try to laugh. Happy people laugh.

“You wanna know what can kill you?” he asks.

“Um . . .” (Jeez, he’s being direct.) “Yeah, for the most part.”

“We can’t give out that information.” He looks up at the next person in line, ready to dismiss my existence.

This can’t be over this quickly.

“I understand that,” I immediately say. “I’m just . . . like, I mean, sleeping pills. If she has those, right? That’ll do it?”

“What kind?”

“What *kind*?”

“Of sleeping pills,” he specifies. “Barbiturates? Benzodiazepines? Doxylamine?”

“. . . Yeah, I think it . . .” (What in the world did he just say?) “Those are prescription, right?”

“They can be.”

“So they would work . . . if . . . my friend wanted to . . . y’know . . . ?”

“I can’t answer that.”

“You can’t?”

“Not if you’re not asking about a specific drug.”

“Well, what if she has dol . . . yxdamanine? Should we worry?”

“*Doxylamine*. You find that in over-the-counter antihistamines, but you’d need far too much doxylamine for it to be fatal. There’s a fifty-fifty chance you’ll just vomit it up.”

“Fifty-fifty?”

“You can’t guarantee your death with a sleep inducer. It’s more likely you’ll just wake up with brain damage or slip into unconsciousness.”

“So we don’t have to worry . . . about her? I mean, is there anything we would have to worry about?”

“I can’t answer that.”

I look at him. He looks at me. We look at each other. It’s a brief bout of mutual judgment because, infinitely short on time, he summons the next customer. I’m moved aside.

Fine.

That lasted, what, four-point-one seconds? As quickly as it starts, it goes.

SEVENTEEN

Gone. I leave. I walk outside into the bleakness of Manhattan. I knew they wouldn't talk to me. It's my face, dead giveaway.

So all I've got is information on odds: fifty-fifty.

Which is terrible.

Fifty-fifty isn't worth the risk or even the effort. Fifty-fifty isn't even worth inking out the suicide note.

Not that I ever would.

I think suicide notes are redundant. Besides, most of the ones I come up with plummet from the start: "I'd've liked to have been friends with a seagull" or something equally useless. I never actually write the stuff down. I just compose while walking from place to place, mostly out of a hatred for walking rather than any real intention to quit.

