

Maxwell
and
Maxwell

Montana Kane

-----Chapter One-----

Celia Natalie Maxwell of 730 W. Pine Street, Chicago Illinois was in a pleasant mood. Everything was just right with the particular moment in space and time she occupied:
-she had just purchased a fresh bundle of Frankincense incense
-the autumn air was crisp and soft, the sky blushing nicely under the first brush of evening
-the weekend sidewalks were crowded and lively
-she was walking briskly through the lively crowds
-life was good.

Her mind was on everything and nothing, she was vaguely pondering what she would make for dinner, what new wonder of ethnic cuisine she would inadvertently invent by happily mixing spices from her shelf with random ingredients in the fridge. The other day she had accidentally discovered the secret to a beautifully creamy Thai curry, thanks to a can of coconut milk that had not been the right kind for a piña colada, and five basil leaves left over from a caprese salad.

So Celia Maxwell walked, content, at peace with the universe and her place in the world. But then it happened. Just as she was marching past a trendy, hip little cafe, she had the unfortunate impulse to look in. The place was filled with attractive young people having a fabulous time, laughing while throwing their heads back, holding delicate martini glasses between their fingers, placing hands on shoulders in shameless displays of intimacy, exchanging warm nurturing looks, whispering confidences, enjoying anecdotes, smiling sweetly. The jazz that poured out of the trendy cafe was perfectly tangy, loud but not too loud, the kind of loud that says Everybody In Here Is Having A Fabulous Time.

Had Celia been engaged in conversation at the time, she would have been stunned into silence. Instead, she tripped and nearly fell. Although perfectly aware of the fact that she tripped because the brown suede boots she had acquired a week ago were a half size too big, she did as any urban tripper does in such a situation:

- a) she cursed loudly
- b) she adopted an annoyed expression while
- c) she bent down to examine the sidewalk, pretending to look for any imperfection that could be directly blamed on City Hall.

Then Celia kept walking, and her thoughts returned to the horror of what she had just beheld. Who the hell were those people? How come they had so many friends? What did they do for a living? Where did they meet, in a TV commercial? A montage of clichés immediately and effortlessly unfolded onto the private screening room of her mind: she watched the attractive young people skiing together in the winter, gathering for barbecues on large wooden decks in the summer, piling into brightly colored jeeps with an assortment of fashionable sporting gear, driving to cabins in autumn woods. Why the hell wasn't *she* going to barbecues and fancy cafes? How come *she* never got to go skiing or driving around in handsome all-terrain vehicles?

At the same precise moment that these mortifying thoughts were blasting through Celia's mind at the speed of light, two slightly worse ones came crashing into her skull:

a) if she had an accident and died right then and there, it would take weeks for anyone she knew to find out.

b) if she needed emergency surgery right this second, she wouldn't have anyone to call for a ride to the hospital.

The rest of Celia's walk was not pleasant. Once home, she threw herself on her futon and stared at the ceiling for forty-seven minutes. She concentrated on making her mind a perfect blank and tried to erase any image notion idea that threatened to enter it. She wanted to avoid the uneasy feeling that had come over her and that was now hovering on the edge of her thoughts like a clinging cloying intruder, like the annoying uninvited guest that ruins the party. She was not yet prepared to confront the abstraction, not ready to give it birth through thought and words. She was nervous at the thought of seriously thinking about what seeing those happy-sunny people in the trendy cafe made her feel.

But nagging intruders of the mind invariably turned into full-fledged tumors on the psyche, and, fully aware of that useful fact for having chosen denial in many an earlier fork in her road to self-awareness, Celia eventually rose from her futon and did what she had to do. She walked over to her desk, sat down, grabbed her notebook, moistened her right thumb and index finger with a lick of saliva, turned to a virgin page, took her favorite blue marker from the yellow Café du Monde coffee can used to store writing utensils of various shapes sorts sizes, and wrote: "For the first time in my life, I am admitting it. I am lonely."

She stopped and tried to analyze how that made her feel. Kind of sad, she decided. Not pathetic, as she would have suspected, not desperate, just kind of sad. Terribly sad actually. The words came pouring out.

"Lonely in every sense of the term. Lonely as a person, because I have no more friends left. Lonely as a woman, because there is no man. Lonely as a thinker, because there is no intellectual exchange. Lonely as an artist, because there is no creative nourishment. Lonely, alone, isolated, alienated, disconnected, out of it. Left behind. Like there is life out there and I'm not part of it. There are people out there who are having dinners and evenings out, and I'm not. There are people out there who are starting families, who have IRA accounts, who have dental plans and life insurance, mortgages and car payments, and all that other normal stuff, and I don't."

Celia stopped there. That sounded sentimental and she knew it. She knew full well that she didn't wish to start a family, that she had no desire for a mortgage and that she thought most people were idiots. Still, there had to be a way of not feeling so disconnected without buying into all that nonsense. She burned a stick of incense and resolved to think about it the next day.

When she awoke the next morning, it occurred to Celia that, all things considered, the situation wasn't necessarily all that tragic, it just needed to be thought about. Thought would sort it out, make her see things from all the right angles. She had been feeling vaguely disconnected in recent days weeks, and for some time now, an unidentified, unlabeled feeling had been steadily creeping up on her, which she had done her best to dismiss and had refused to name. Now that it had been named however, she understood it would have to be confronted, in the best way she knew. She would analyze reflect ponder, make lists, send messages to the universe, examine conclude. She would visualize rationalize objectivize, euphemize minimize maximize

and come out on top. It would once again become crystal clear to her that she was a great and amazing person and that she had a great and amazing life.

Celia made herself a gargantuan pot of coffee, took out a cigarette and sat in front of her notebook. She tried to examine her life from a detached disinterested kind of perspective. She needed to make an objective assessment of her situation, then dig in deeper for the more subjective analysis. In bold letters, she wrote at the top of the page: "Celia Fact Sheet." That was a good start. She began with vital statistics, then moved on to more personal matters:

-Health: good, should quit the smokes but otherwise good. Walk a lot, work out occasionally. Generally pretty fit.

-Finances: fine. No investments or retirement schemes, but fine for the time being.

-Family: all fine. Not here but fine. No illnesses, no deaths. Would be nice to see them more.

-Work: fine. Not thrilling but fine.

-Social life: zero. Cocktails once in a while with one or two friends I don't find all that riveting anymore, but nothing else.

-Love life: zero, zilch, nada, nothing, the big "O," zippo.

-Sex life: see above (do sex and love necessarily have to be synonymous? Is this because I'm a woman? Think about that later).

-Artistic life: not so good. Apart from work-related projects, have not picked up the camera much lately. No motivation, no inspiration. Ready to think the whole thing over.

-Intellectual life: could be better. Need to read more and watch less TV. Need to rent foreign and independent films more, not succumb to Hollywood trash because tempted by thoughtless entertainment. Need to do all those things I used to do so much more (what happened??).

Celia was now getting slightly depressed reviewing her chart. She needed to start putting a positive spin on things and quickly move on to the more optimistic, empowering list: "Things I am proud of, things I've accomplished."

-Travels: have traveled more than anyone I know. Except for the last few years, have traveled on a regular basis. Europe, Asia, northern Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Alaska, the western coast of Mexico, most of the States. I am more grateful for this than anything else. Has given me worlds of experience, introduced me to fascinating people.

-Education: because of traveling, did not do grad school until much later. Took me a while to figure out what I wanted to do, but managed to get an MFA, proud of that. Very proud of that.

-Work: being a photographer is a good thing. People think it's cool. If I'm not happy with it, it's probably my fault. Think about that more later.

-Friendships: have been blessed with dozens of rich, stimulating, interesting friendships. Most of them have been with people overseas or with people passing through Chicago, or with fellow MFA students who are no longer around. This accounts for solitude now, but am grateful for these friendships nevertheless. Interesting people from all walks of life -- lots of artists, lots of intellectuals, lots of travelers. I can't complain. It was good while it lasted.

-Artistic life: am in limbo now, but have done a fair amount over the years. Have had good ideas and have pursued them. Have tried to get my work out there. Not so much recently, but nonetheless. Just need to find my muse again. I know she's out there somewhere.

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-Relationships: have met my share of men, had my share of relationships. None of them lasted very long, but that was either because the men were not right for me, or they were but weren't around for very long. I am not afraid of relationships, I am open to them.

-General overview of current situation: not so good, but has the potential of being improved. Past is interesting but present needs to be worked on. Past is filled with fabulous experiences and people, present is lacking in both. Need to make the present more consistent with the past.

Celia took a drag of her cigarette and pensively blew out the smoke. Her eyes studied the fossilized remains of a smashed bug on the wall as she reflected that perhaps probably possibly, compared to the most average of the average mainstream American, she could be considered a tiny bit strange. A young single woman living in the margins, just slightly on the fringes, with little interaction with the world at large, not one hundred percent in step with the rest of society. She didn't travel in packs like many females her age did, did not gossip with colleagues over after-work drinks, did not even possess that single most indispensable accessory for the unattached urban woman: the gay best friend. She was alone. Completely alone. Ninety percent of her life consisted of activities spent in the sole presence of her own company. Presumably that was a bad thing, if you were to believe the songs books research findings, but Celia, allowing her thoughts free reign now, releasing them from the restriction of pen and paper, was suddenly thinking, right then and there, with her coffee and her cigarette, that it was possible she was less bothered by her solitude than by the thought that she wasn't sure whether or not it bothered her to be alone.

In one brush of her mental eraser, Celia dismissed the sad thoughts that had overcome her the day before, understanding instinctively that due to their point of origin, they didn't fully qualify in this particular context and could not be utilized in an honest exploration of her state of mind. The glossy snapshot of the beautiful cafe people had prompted those negative feelings of loneliness, yes, most undoubtedly, but now, some twenty hours later, Celia was in better control of her emotions. She knew that feeling disconnected at the sight of those people was the equivalent of feeling bloated when holding up the magazine cover of a sultry fourteen year-old supermodel in beachwear. The mind was momentarily neutralized as it was assailed by battalions of insecure thoughts, feelings of self-doubt, waves of self-loathing. It was only normal, and otherwise emotionally healthy adults generally recovered quickly from these traumatizing experiences.

Celia blew an incomplete smoke ring. Clearly, those people in the cafe were the exception, not the rule. In the grand scheme of things, taking into consideration every human being on the planet, taking into consideration war, crime, poverty, disease, unemployment, domestic abuse, human rights, you could definitely contend that most people were not living in the same rose-tinted universe as those yuppies with their martinis. Most people had pretty shitty lives. This hardly constituted a big news flash, and yet she had let it affect her. She had let those idiots in the cafe cast a shadow of doubt on her life. Celia was usually impervious to such complexes, her opinion of herself was not in the slightest bit swayed by the trends and tastes of popular culture. She usually managed to retain an overall sense of perspective. Yet here she was, at ten thirty-three on a clear autumn morning, in the middle of a self-imposed exercise meant to validate her existence on the planet. And why she wondered, why. All things considered, she had a good life, she had done some interesting things. She had a tiny reputation in the art world which she was working semi-hard at expanding. She had her dreams and her passions, which was more than many people had. And without

falling into clichés, or rather, to completely fall into them, it was arguably kind of romantic to be a tortured lonely artistic type.

The coffee mug was lifted towards her lips, then the cigarette.

But *was* she tortured? And if not, *should* she be she wondered, should she be. Her mind now drifted towards some of her favorite figures in history and fiction --the mad painters, the alcoholic writers, the strung out musicians, the lone cowboys, hallucinating princes, brooding cops, soul-searching superheroes. Alone. All of them alone. At times, Celia suspected she confused her own life with the movies and the books, clinging to a mostly subconscious belief that interesting and important things only happened to people who were alone. Yet at her most sentimental, usually after several glasses of Pinot Grigio and a black and white evening on a DVD, she did know, and with feverish conviction, that holding out for true connections, searching for kindred souls and refusing to settle for trivial relationships or meaningless friendships was the only way to truly experience human interaction (except that she wasn't really searching --*something to think about later*).

Celia flipped through the pages of her very thick notebook, each one covered top to bottom with blue ink, personal experiences, lengthy analysis and other astute observations on life in general. She did not feel brave enough to process them, she was beginning to grow tired of herself, she required a break from her thoughts. But one of the thoughts persisted, nagging her, trying to be heard above the others, refusing to be dismissed to a later time. *I can't remember the last time I really felt anything. I can't remember the last time anything made a strong impression on me, made me want to shout out loud in the street or high five a total stranger. I can't even remember the last time anything really surprised me.*

That one stung. Like a slap in the face. That one was not good. Complacency and apathy were not good attributes to possess, she knew that. They led to death of the spirit, to a life of sleepwalking. It terrified her to consider that she could be that damaged, that she had crossed the line into the non-salvageable. This thought would definitely have to be confronted at some point, it would have to be subjected to thorough probing, possibly another useful list.

But first Celia needed to get some work done. She took a couple of rolls of film from the fridge, grabbed her camera bag and walked out the door. Six minutes later, she walked right back in (it was raining). Not sure how to proceed with her day, now that Plan A had been neutralized and a contingency plan had not yet been dreamed up, Celia went over to her favorite armchair, sat down, lit up a cigarette, directed her attention to a crack in the wall in front of her, and waited for something to happen.

-----Chapter Two-----

What happened was a ring at the doorbell one hour and twenty-two minutes later.

"Who is it?" she asked the intercom.

"Fedex."

Fedex? What in the world could that be, she wondered as she buzzed the guy up. She signed for the package without really looking at the label. It wasn't until she ripped it open it that she realized she wasn't the intended recipient. Inside, there was a manuscript (a novel, it looked like, at first glance) and a letter.

"Dear Mr. Maxwell,

We regret to inform you that we will not be considering your novel for representation. Although we receive a great many submissions and are not usually able or inclined to respond with individual input, my reaction to your work was so violently negative that I feel it is my personal duty to offer you my most candid feedback."

Celia paused. Poor guy. These people could be ruthless. She knew what that was like. She also knew that what she was doing was totally and hugely wrong, not only a violation of privacy, but of the most sacred kind. As a photographer, she had gradually grown more comfortable showing people her work, but she knew that writers, generally speaking, were paranoid, arrogant weirdoes riddled with insecurities and self-doubt. They didn't feel they had the *right* to write. They weren't validated, the way other artists were, by technical training, fancy equipment, complicated tools, group rehearsals, advanced degrees, impressive industry jargon. Their medium was the pen and the paper or the keys on the keyboard. Something everyone had access to, something everyone knew how to do, technically speaking. All of this fed their insecurities. Musicians, painters, sculptors, photographers, actors, dancers were always cheerfully and loudly announcing to their friends, family and anyone who would pay attention: come and hear me play! Come and check out my show! Come and see what *I* did! It's great, you're gonna love it! Writers, on the other hand, stayed in their caves and generally had to be begged or tortured to death before showing their work to anyone close to them. Celia herself had dabbled in poetry essays short stories, even an aborted novel once, without ever showing a single word to a single soul. So what should she do about the manuscript?

She decided to take the ethical highroad and stop reading the letter right then and there. Instead she would try to figure out how in the world this thing had landed on her kitchen table. It was not customary for Fedex to screw up, she had used them for years to send her own work all over the place. True, not so much recently, much to her shame, but nonetheless.

She picked up the airbill and carefully examined it. It had been sent from New York, by a P. Jones Literary Agency. It was obvious that the writer had submitted the manuscript to the agency and had included a return airbill pre-marked "bill to sender." That was standard procedure in the business, you could spend a fortune sending your work back and forth to gallery owners, curators, agents, publishers, producers. So the writer had sent the manuscript, the agency had hated it and had returned it, along with the scathing review, using the enclosed return label. You could clearly see that the

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address of the sender had been neatly typed in by some receptionist with literary aspirations, whereas the novelist had already filled in his home address in long hand. And this was the source of the problem: his penmanship was virtually illegible.

C. Maxwell

730 W. Pine St., Apt. 9

Chicago, IL 60657

Well, that was Celia, all right. So what was the problem? Upon closer inspection, she decided that the "3" in "730" could also possibly be a "5." A fairly common mistake. There was probably some C. Maxwell who lived at 750 W. Pine, Apt. 9. A coincidence most definitely, but not inconceivable.

Was there a phone number? No, the idiot had not left one. Well, she would just have to be a little more enterprising, a little more involved. She grabbed the Chicago white pages. When she reached the Maxwells, Celia was appalled to realize what a common last name she had. Not only were there five columns of them, but there was almost one whole half column of C. Maxwells alone! However, even though she nearly went blind poring over each one, there was no listing for a C. Maxwell at 750 W. Pine.

She decided she would wait until the next day and then stop by her namesake's apartment on the way to her shoot (if it wasn't raining). Exhausted by her investigative work Celia elected to take a nap. She dreamed a wonderfully weird dream, as she often did whenever she passed out in the middle of the day. Something about a bungalow-type house on the beach, which was strange but not unfamiliar, and a wild trip down a raging river in an exotic jungle-ish kind of place. Celia loved having dreams like that, it always made her feel as if something wonderful and adventurous were about to happen to her, as if she were about to embark on some intoxicating new quest, some deliciously wild new journey.

When she woke she spent nineteen minutes staring at the ceiling and feeling good about the dream. She loved that. She loved few things better, in fact, than lying in bed remembering good dreams. The thought of the dream swept over her whole body, warming it nurturing it, reaching all the way to her extremities in a soft electric tingle. She sometimes wrote the dreams down, but only when she sensed they were developing into a pattern, or when they were so intense and outrageous she felt they needed to be analyzed. This one was a good one, exciting certainly but not uncommon.

After that, it suddenly dawned on Celia that she was starving and that she had not eaten anything all day. She grabbed the phone.

"Hi, I'd like to order a delivery please."

After painstakingly spelling out her name and address thirty thousand times to the Minority-American at the other end of the line, she placed her order: "I'd like one order of steamed dumplings, one order of chicken pad-see-eiw, and one iced coffee."

Then she hung up the phone, went to the bathroom, washed her hands, spent one full minute in the mirror examining a blemish on her chin and debating whether to manipulate it or let nature run its course, then decided to watch a little television. She took a twenty-dollar bill out of her wallet so that she would be ready for the delivery guy when he showed up, and walked into the living room. Just then the buzzer rang.

"Who is it?"

"Deliwewy!"

Gee those guys were fast. Service at the actual restaurant could not possibly be any faster. Three and a half minutes later, her wonderful dinner in front of her, Celia sat

on the couch zapping the remote. Nothing. Nothing even remotely interesting or stimulating on any of the five channels she could access! She instantly remembered that it was Saturday night, and that she was probably the only loser sitting at home while everybody else in town was out having a fabulous time. It was obvious that the suits at CBS NBC ABC and all the other channels Celia did or didn't get weren't about to program quality television just for her. There was Saturday Night Live, of course, which was threatening to become humorous again, but that was still hours away.

Now what she wondered, what now. The night was young, she had food cigarettes coffee, and an emergency Guinness in the refrigerator. What the hell was a young, healthy, good looking single woman supposed to do on a Saturday night? Of course she could make a quick dash to the video store to rent a foreign or independent film, but the food would get cold in the meantime, which would seriously diminish the pleasure of being entertained in the dark *while* eating.

Out of her peripheral vision, Celia spotted the Fedex package (which was difficult to do, because it was in the other room). She nearly tripped over herself in her rush to grab the mysterious manuscript.

"Let's see what you're made of, C. Maxwell, and whether the agent is a moron or you are."

Celia made herself comfortable in her oversized cushiony armchair, pulled the coffee table near so the food drink ashtray would be easily accessible, opened the manuscript, flipped to the first page, took a taste of tasty dumpling and nearly choked.

"Who the fuck are these people? They gather at night in trendy looking jazz places, they throw their heads back and laugh wholesomely, they barbecue in the summer and ski in the winter. Who are they? How did they meet? Why do they have so many friends? What the hell do they do?"

Those were the first words of the novel. Celia sat in a state of utter consternation, a half-chewed dumpling dangling dangerously from her fork. She stared stupidly at the page, eyes wide with disbelief, mouth wider. It took her a full twenty-eight seconds to fully assimilate the fact that these words she had just mentally pronounced, this specific collection of vowels and consonants, had been selected and assembled in such a way that they translated, nearly verbatim, into the thoughts that had blasted through her own mind the day before. She read on.

"Is this normal? Are they normal? And by implication, if they are normal, am I *abnormal*? Is this the way it's supposed to be? And if so, says who? Is it normal to feel like shit when I see these people? Am I missing out? Whose illusion or delusion is it? Are they kidding themselves into thinking they are happy, or am I kidding myself by thinking they are unhappy? Who's happy? Is anyone happy?"

Celia nibbled on her dumpling pensively. C. Maxwell certainly did appear to resent those people. But he did kind of make a point, even if it was only a variation on the tired old grass-is-always-greener theme. The thing is, some people did have pretty green grass, you had to admit. Celia suspected C. Maxwell's intention was to find out who and why. She read on.

"And what does it really mean to be happy? I have my health, I have a roof over my head. I have a strong mind, a strong body, intellectual curiosity and an appetite for discovery. I have a few scattered friends, a lot of books, sex when I need it and reliable wheels. What does that add up to? Am I happy or unhappy? If I am unhappy, is it because I've been conditioned to think I should have more? Is it because I'm lonely? Are the people in marriages less lonely than I am? Are the people who gather for Sunday brunch at mom's less lonely? Vonnegut says that the solution to the world is the

extended family. No doubt about it, the family has been shattered here. The community has been shattered. Young urban types live out their lives, for all practical purposes, alone. Kids leave the nest, go to college, don't return to the nest. They carve out their future alone. They land a job in the big city, make friends, move in with roommates. A little later, they move in alone. They have a social life, they date, they go to bars and attend sporting events. Then, and here's the clincher, little by little, they marry, they start families. And those who don't are left behind. The millions who don't are suddenly alone. The circle of friends that had been their extended family is suddenly not available anymore. Occasionally, certainly, for planned gatherings once in a while, when the babysitter's been confirmed, when there's a big game on TV, a fourth of July picnic in a city park. But not for spontaneous treks to the corner bar, not for midnight telephone calls that stave off despair, not for last minute parties that last until dawn. Something has changed. Something has been taken away, and if it is not replaced, loneliness and desperation take root.

But what can replace it? Historically speaking, families, churches and communities were the center of fellowship, of relationship with other. Now families are far away, God is dead and who anymore, in young white urban middle class America, belongs to any kind of community?"

Celia paused, reached for the spoon and sampled the pad-see-eiw (not bad, just the way she liked it, lots of gravy easy on the broccoli). Two things became quite clear to her. One, this guy sounded like he had some interesting things to say, he had an interesting way of thinking. But two, no publisher in the world would buy this kind of work. Straight self-involved rambling with no plot no story. She flipped through the heavy manuscript. Scarcely any dialogue at all, mostly dense pages of Inner Thought. No characters to speak of, a fictionalized essay on loneliness in the postmodern world. C. Maxwell's mistake was to present his work as a novel. He should have gone the extra mile, conducted a sociological study, interviewed people, given some context to his thoughts, supported his declarations and then come up with his conclusion and solution, if indeed there was a solution.

Celia smiled at the thought of dropping this off for him the next day. She would ring the doorbell, a grumpy but handsome writer would materialize, they would sit down and have a cup of coffee over scintillating conversation. When he read the rejection letter, she would be presented with the golden opportunity of practicing her nurturing skills, which people were constantly telling her she lacked.

It was now quite late and Celia was tired. She finished her meal, enjoyed one cigarette with the chilly sweetness of the Thai coffee and went to bed, happy at the thought that there was something to get up for the next day.

-----Chapter Three-----

When she awoke the next morning, Celia stared at the ceiling for less than three minutes. She was motivated. While the coffee brewed, she jumped in the shower jumped back out, changed clothes a few times before settling on a casually artsy looking black dress (she definitely did not want to come across as one of the happy sunny people he hated and she slipped on some exotic jewelry from one of her travels that would be sure to emphasize the common spirit she shared with him, C. Maxwell) then sat down at the table. Coffee cigarette in hand, she rehearsed her lines.

C. Maxwell? (who wants to know?) You don't know me but I have something that's for you. (what is it?) It looks like a manuscript. (huh?) Are you a writer? (yeah. . .) Well, your manuscript was sent to me by mistake. (BUZZ)

Celia glanced at her watch. It was ten o'clock, which, even on artist time, was a perfectly decent hour to pay a visit to a neighbor. She grabbed the Fedex envelope, checked her appearance in the mirror and walked out.

Minutes later she had found C. Maxwell's building (it was four doors down from her!). She took a deep breath and studied the buzzer. There were two names next to apartment number nine: C. Maxwell (attached with a piece of paper and some tape) and M. Krane. Great Celia thought, he probably lives with someone. Won't *that* be embarrassing.

She rang. The answer came almost immediately:

-Hello? (a man's voice)

-Hi, I'm looking for C. Maxwell.

-He's not here (so the Krane was a man --was C. Maxwell gay?).

-Oh, well do you know when he'll be back?

-Not for a few weeks. Who are you?

-I'm a neighbor. Listen, could I come up for a minute? I have something for him.

-Yeah, all right.

BUUUUUZZZZZZ. Celia walked up two flights of stairs. A friendly looking, handsome, early-fortyish man stood in a blue bathrobe on the landing of the second floor.

-Hi, he said.

-Hi, I'm Celia.

-Matthew. Matt. Come on in.

She followed him in. He apologized for the bathrobe.

-You caught me on my way to the shower, actually.

-Late night?

-I'm a musician, I had a late gig.

-Oh that's great, what do you play?

-Piano. Jazz.

-Wow, that's great. Oh my gosh, are you the one I hear once in a while when I'm walking up Pine?

-Probably.

-Wow, well you're very good.

-Thank you.

There was a bit of a pause. Then Celia produced the Fedex package.

-This was delivered to me by mistake. I believe it's for your roommate.

-For Chris? Who's it from, a publisher?

-An agent. I'm afraid I opened it inadvertently.

-Did you read any of it?

-I'm ashamed to admit that I did, but just a few pages.

-Don't worry about it. Chris wouldn't mind.

-Anyway, I just came to drop it off.

-Well, I'll give it to him when he gets back, but that won't be for a while. He's in Mexico.

-That sounds nice.

-Yeah, he'll probably be gone for weeks, maybe months. Until the money runs out, most likely. But don't worry, he'll get it eventually.

-Okay. Well, I guess my work here is done. Sorry I bothered you.

-No problem, Celia. Thanks for doing your civic duty.

-I guess I kind of wish I knew how the novel ends.

-Everyone dies and there's no hope.

Celia laughed.

-Bye, she said.

-Bye, Celia.

Then:

-Come and check us out at the Greenmill one of these days. We play every Thursday.

-Maybe I will. What's the band's name?

-Originally enough, it's called the Matthew Krane Trio.

Celia neatly tucked the information in a part of her brain where it could be easily retrieved, then walked back home. She felt both off center and elated at the same time. She wished she had someone to call, someone to regale with her urban adventure. These kinds of conversations, though, were only appropriate for people involved in her daily life. These were best friend conversations, tell me about your day conversations. These were not hey haven't heard from you in ages conversations. She missed that. She missed it quite a bit, now that she thought about it. The sad thing was, she reflected with a twinge of pain, there was no one left like that. Geography and other circumstances had removed many friends from that short list. Friends who used to be talk-about-your-day friends were now long-distance friends, and though the complicity could still be felt in the telephone wires or the e-mail messages, it wasn't the same. All that was left to do, she thought sorrowfully in a burst of self-pity, was to put it all down in her notebook, the truest and most reliable friend she had ever had.

After jotting down her Thoughts, Celia flipped through the glossy pages of a women's magazine she had purchased for the sole reason that it featured a nice eight-page spread of photos from Annie Liebovitz's highly acclaimed series of women's portraits years ago. All the good ideas were taken, Celia mused bitterly. If she had started collecting all the stuff she wrote, all the photographic portraits she had taken over the years and never done anything with, all the miscellaneous items in her life, she could easily have become Annette Messenger or Sophie Calle or any other world famous artist who incorporated her daily life into her artwork. That second self-pitying thought led to a third one: just when you think there's nothing new under the sun, some idiot comes up with a brilliant idea you had ten years ago, or that you've been *doing* for ten years, dares to publish produce exhibit it, and suddenly, it's Art.

To wit: the exhibit she saw the last time she was in New York, where an artist had taped a bunch of little notes and memos to the museum wall. Notes? Notes?? She was the crowned queen of notes! She had been writing notes since she was ten! On refrigerators, on walls, on doors tables mirrors desks, to friends parents roommates boyfriends, colleagues bosses herself. Witty creative clever little notes, that brought humor good cheer and a hearty chuckle to their recipients. Why the hell couldn't *she* have come up with the idea of slapping them onto a museum wall?

To wit: *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Celia had been writing a *journal* (she much preferred that term to the word "diary," which conjured up images of a pimply plump schoolgirl confessing her crush on the star jock in a pink notebook fastened with a pink bow and a delicate golden lock) for years, often times in a much more clever, witty and humorous way than *whatsherface*. But *whatsherface* did something with it, and was now a multi-millionaire.

When would *she* become a *whatsherface*? As she had countless times before, Celia filled with utter panic at the realization that she had better come up with something and come up with it fast, before some moron somewhere shot out from obscurity and into the limelight with another idea that she, Celia, had mulled over in her head for years and never acted on.

She walked over to her desk drawer and grabbed a file entitled *Misc. Ideas*. She flipped through the mess of *notes* (see!), consisting largely of short cryptic messages hastily scribbled down on restaurant napkins, matchbooks, post-its, telephone bills electric bills gas bills, book covers, torn out corners of the *Chicago Tribune Chicago Reader New York Times*, business cards and small actual pages ripped out of small actual notebooks.

Idea for humorous collection of words and images: shoot a series of scenes, objects and situations that are always described in a specific arrangement of words. For example:

- strictly forbidden*
- conscious effort*
- remote possibility*
- vivid imagination*
- brutally honest*
- hardened criminal*
- humble opinion*
- bitter disappointment*
- reckless abandon*
- painfully obvious*
- heated argument*
- driving force*
- hopeless effort*
- biting satire*
- popular belief*
- etc.*

That *was* kind of a clever idea. Not very profound, but an interesting reflection on words and their tendency to be composed in highly unoriginal ways by their composers, without a second thought. If someone is trying, it is always desperately; if someone is apologizing, it is always profusely; if someone is murdered, it is always brutally; if someone fails, it is always miserably. There could even be a whole series on

restaurant menus: soups are always hearty, fries are always golden, omelets always fluffy.

Next: three whole pages of notebook paper with ideas descriptions sketches for two inventions: an elegant piece of home furniture “specially designed” to enhance lovemaking; and funky, colorful waterproof wristbands that could hold a key, an ID and a few dollar bills, perfect for runners rollerbladers surfers. Provided these ideas weren’t already out there, they definitely seemed to have potential. But how to proceed? Inventions required what, lawyers, start up money, patents, manufacturers? It sounded a little involved.

Next: a book about a conversation. The book is one long conversation between two people. Just dialogue. Or, even better: instead of fiction, an authentic, real as they come, straight from the guts, e-mail correspondence between two artists. About art love life sex, loneliness depression, everything. With no editing, all typos included, funny painful vulgar real.

Maybe. But the second scenario required another artist, preferably another woman, to better achieve the intimacy of riveting unbridled girl-talk, and preferably one of her friends overseas, to allow for cross cultural topics. Who could she ask? Definitely something to think about, to mull over some more. She reached for a black magic marker and wrote THINK ABOUT IT on the piece of paper, along with the date, which she added parenthetically. Then she underlined the whole thing twice in two swift strokes. This would enable her to establish quick visual hierarchy in her notes the next time she riffled through them.

Next: a visual art piece that is about the artistic process, including the rejection process. Collect and save anything and everything about the process of creating a piece of art, from its very conception to its finish: record date time place, number of minutes hours spent thinking about it and working on it; keep any rough drafts, any little notes taken down hurriedly on a bus or in a cab; keep all scrap paper, keep all receipts --from ink cartridges, film, camera batteries, Fedex shipments, etc. Keep all submission letters, all portfolios, all rejection letters, all phone records, all e-mails. Keep everything even remotely associated with the process involved. Have one-woman show that could document the work like this: the creation of this piece took x amount of ink and paper, x number of rejection letters, x number of hours in the dark room, x tubes of paint, x number of all-nighters, etc.

NOT BAD. A little self-indulgent but not bad. But it was hard to break into a new career with a one-woman show, just like that. She grabbed the marker and wrote: “consider group show.”

Next: produce a series of portraits of people consisting of collages made from pieces of their lives. For example, select for display things they have chosen to keep in their lives, which is a reflection of who they are. Example: a corny movie stub from a first date, a note left by a roommate, pictures, etc., all of which are assembled artistically in a multimedia collage. Every portrait will be drastically different, as the artist is allowed free reign in the subject’s house and is given permission to take objects and use them for the portrait. What we keep, what we value, becomes the portrait of who we are.

N-O-T B-A-D.

Next: an exhibition of text and images consisting of a day in the life. An account of one day in a woman’s life in real time, that logs every single minute of each of the twenty-four hours. She gets up, she spends fifteen minutes in the shower, twenty minutes dressing, forty-five minutes on the bus, thinking about this and looking at that,

etc. The photos provide a visual record of the activities, while the accompanying text breaks the day into time units and provides intimate information such as the content of the woman's thoughts. OR: perhaps better as a video installation. Think about it.

Not bad either. Let's face it, it was clear that Celia Natalie Maxwell could become a highly successful multi-disciplinary artist if she would just put her mind to it once and for all.

The order she had just given herself had the immediate effect of making Celia want to take a nap. Which she did.

When she awoke one hour and thirty-three minutes later, the butterfly in Japan had mysteriously caused her *Misc. Ideas* file to fall off the desk. Celia knelt down and began to clean up the mess of scattered paper. Reaching under a chair, she found a note she had missed the first time around. On the back of a crumpled cocktail napkin stained with red wine, and with some difficulty, she read:

"take a long trip and record everything via photographs and writing. Promote it as a sort of travel essay book. Don't mess with the historical and geographical information, which has already been done better than you could ever hope to do, but make it an internal voyage. Don't make it a corny quest, either, simply a journey of (hopefully) self-discovery. What happens to a person when taken out of familiar setting and faced with time, solitude, etc.

Definitely dangerous to let *that* thought linger. Once thought was allowed to settle in the mind, it could lead to things. Thoughts needed to be controlled or they could get out of hand and make the thinker do things. And the knowledge of where this one particular thought could lead was frightening. Celia knew herself well enough to be sure of one thing: if this thought stayed, she would have no choice but to obey it.

She pushed the ERASE button in her mind, grabbed some film from the fridge and walked out the door.

