



The Skeptic's Guide to Reincarnation

CHAPTER ONE

I wasn't thinking about Gabe the first time I saw Owen undressed. That didn't happen until the second time. Instead, I was thinking about the importance and difficulties of bringing clean water to remote African villages, and trying to think of another word for problem.

It was halfway through the spring term and I hadn't seen the weak Welsh sunshine for so long, I'd forgotten what it looked like. From my usual spot in a secluded corner of the library, a small study room with a privacy door, I gazed out into the late afternoon drizzle, wondering if it would ever stop. As I willed the right word to spring into my mind, I didn't realize that I was staring into the windows of the halls of residence a short distance across the faculty parking entrance, until my brain registered

a semi-naked body. In the second-to-last window on the third floor, a student wandered across his dorm room floor wrapped only in a ratty-looking towel that was probably once white, but was now an indefinable shade of grey. His dark blonde hair was wet and tousled and it was clear he'd just come in from the showers, as his pale skin was still slightly pink from the hot water. He had a nice body—not too muscular, but not flabby either—and he moved across the floor with neither a swagger nor an apologetic shuffle. Even from this distance he looked friendly. I was still staring when he walked towards the window and reached up to close the curtains. For a brief instant I took in the Jesus-like stance of his elongated torso and his outstretched arms, and my eyes ran down over his chest and across his extended abdomen. When I finally dragged my attention back up to his face, he was looking directly at me...and smiling.

I felt the color rush to my cheeks. Snapping closed my jaw (which I hadn't noticed had been hanging slack), I dropped my burning face into my hands and prayed the floor would open up and swallow me whole. What a pervert I was, sitting there, practically drooling at the free show. I imagined running into him on campus and being pointed out as the Peeping Thomasina who lurked in the library on the pretense of doing homework and instead scanned the dorms for half-naked men. Oh, the humiliation! But as I sat there envisioning the scene, I was startled by a dormant feeling that stirred inside me. Although I knew I'd never feel the same about anyone else as I had about Gabe, I was surprised by the familiarity of the tingling sensation in my belly that was now boarding a train to all points south.

When the floor refused to open up and offer me a humble escape, I persuaded myself that maybe he hadn't really noticed me watching him and that perhaps he was

just smiling to himself at the wonder of the day, grey and murky as it was. But when I looked up, Towel Boy was still standing in the window, only now he was grinning at me. As if to confirm the stupidity of my argument, he lifted one hand and waved. I closed my eyes, gathered my resolve, and gave him a timid wave back. Then he laughed and drew the curtains closed.

I tried to focus on my paper, but a million other thoughts were rushing through my head. Any ideas about desalination, irrigation, and sanitation were elbowed aside by embarrassment, irritation, and surprise. I was embarrassed that I'd been caught looking, irritated that I was embarrassed, and surprised at the feelings of lust that had stirred in a long-forgotten corner of my soul and made their way into my bloodstream. And what if the guy thought I was flirting with him? The very last thing I wanted, or needed, was any romantic wranglings. I had a future planned out for myself, thank you very much, and it didn't include any amorous silliness with a fellow student. I'd stumbled down that road in my first year, and my one night of idiocy had cost me three bags of humiliation and a bushel of regret.

I grabbed the longest lock of my cropped hair I could find, forced it behind my ear, and turned back to my laptop, trying to form a coherent sentence. "Even when environmentalists and engineers solve the logistical problems of providing potable water to remote Sub-Saharan African villages, they must still overcome issues of culture and tradition."

For at least ten minutes, I was lost in my work, clicking out sentence after focused sentence, but when the curtains of the next-to-last dorm room on the third floor flew open, my brain registered it instantly. Towel Boy was now Khakis-and-T-shirt Boy. His

hair had been dried so that it flopped casually over one eyebrow and he looked crisp, clean, and (mercifully) dressed. But he was looking directly at me. It would have been rude to ignore him, so I met his gaze and gave him a small apologetic smile.

“Hi!” he mouthed, and waved.

“Hello,” I mouthed back.

He held out his arms and pirouetted to display his outfit, then turned back and held up his thumbs in a question.

I smiled and gave him two thumbs up.

He mouthed again, pointing to himself. “I’m...” but I couldn’t make out what he was trying to say. I squinted and shrugged. He tried again. It looked as if he was trying to say that he was wet, but that made no sense. I shrugged again. He thought for a minute then raised his arms above his head, curving them until his fingertips met like a prima ballerina’s, and pursed his lips like a goldfish. I ran through the possibilities of what he was doing—dancing, kissing, making a circle—then realized he was trying to indicate a letter. “O,” I mouthed back as the light bulb went on for both of us. Buoyed by his success, he began strutting around in a circle, bobbing his head and flapping his tucked up arms like stumpy wings. It took several seconds of me flitting from his strange chicken dance to the word he was desperately trying to mouth, before I finally came up with hen. O. Hen. Owen. My name is Owen.

This was fun. I opened my notebook to a blank page, drew a big circle with two pointy ears and a fine set of whiskers, and held it up to the window. He looked, pantomimed cleaning imaginary whiskers, and mouthed the question, “Cat?” I nodded, flipped the page and drew a big letter K. “Kat,” I mouthed back.

Owen grinned. He looked at me for a moment, and then held up his hand in the “stay” position. I waited to see what he was going to do next. He hurried around his room gathering various items and putting on a jacket, and came back to the window. He pointed to himself, then to me, and then wiggled two fingers in a walking motion. He held his hand up again, then turned and left his room.

And that’s when I panicked.

What had started as an innocent attempt to cover my embarrassment at being caught staring, had turned into flirting. I couldn’t deny it, not to myself, nor to any jury; I had been flirting with Owen the Towel Boy, and now he was coming over to talk to me, in person. What was I going to do?

I sat, frozen in my seat for a moment, running through all my options. There weren’t many, considering I was cornered in this room. I did some quick calculations, made my decision, gathered up my belongings, and fled. Circling around the far wall of the library, I took the back stairs to avoid running into Owen. At the bottom, I poked my head through the emergency exit door, checked the coast was clear, and hurried out. I skirted around the bottom of the engineering building and past the Student Union to avoid the library’s main doors, and ten minutes later I was ensconced in my room, perspiring and out of breath from the brisk march home. Throwing myself down on the bed, I punched a hollow in my pillow and stared at the lumpy wall in front of me.

“Shit,” I said, but the wall didn’t respond.

The very last thing I needed was man trouble. So, I’d seen a good-looking bloke. Big deal. The world was full of them. That didn’t mean I should go all wobbly every time

someone with a twinkly smile was nice to me. “I just don’t need that kind of hassle in my life right now,” I told the wall.

But when would I be ready for that kind of hassle? How long was it supposed to take before I could flirt with someone across two panes of glass and a car park, and then stay in my seat when he came over to talk? How long until I could say, “Yes, I like you, I’m willing to take a chance on you.”? Was two years, nine months, and 27 days long enough?

Apparently not.

I climbed up onto the bed and reached into the top cupboard above my wardrobe, feeling around for the shoebox I knew would be just within reach. Lifting the lid, I pushed aside the postcards of California that my friend Maggie had sent when she moved there, and pulled out my favorite picture of Gabe and me.

It had been taken at my brother’s on the day we’d gathered for his partner (now spouse), Alex’s 30th birthday. It had been an unusually warm May day and the indoor party they’d planned had spilled out onto the back patio and into the garden. As the evening wore on, my mum and the other family members drifted home, leaving Jon and Alex to celebrate with their friends. Jon insisted that Gabe and I stay and it was the first time I realized my brother saw me as an adult, and not simply his teenage baby sister. As Gabe and I stood together in the thick of the festivities, the heels of my sandals sinking slightly into the lawn still soft from the spring rains, and Gabe’s fingers intertwined between mine, I remember thinking this is who I am; this is the person I’ve come to be, and I remember feeling a sense of peace that I was exactly where I was supposed to be and that my future would unfold in a perfect, pre-determined rhythm from this point. I

can't remember now who had taken the photograph—one of Jon and Alex's friends, I suppose—but whoever it was had captured Gabe and me in a moment that embodied everything we felt about one another.

I ran my fingertips over the photo, taking in the familiar features of Gabe's thick dark hair and impish smile. Gabe had been beautiful. It wasn't a word I had ever used for a boy before. Good-looking, gorgeous, even fit had been enough to describe most of the boys I'd come into contact with in the first 17 years of my life. But Gabe.... Gabe was as close to perfection as I could ever have imagined. There was a light that shone from somewhere within that lit up his eyes and made his skin glow. He had a cool gentleness about him that made me want to move just a little bit closer and tell him just a little bit more than I'd ever told anyone before. I would have trusted Gabe with my life. But when he'd trusted me with his, I'd let him down.

I rested the photo on my bedside table, leaning it against my lamp, and reached up to put the shoebox back into its safe place. As I pushed it in, I felt it squish up against something soft in the back corner. I reached in and pulled down a black plastic bag wrapped carefully around its soft, precious contents. For a moment, I considered pushing the bag back into the cupboard and closing the door, but instead I did something I hadn't done in a long time. I reached into the bag and pulled out the old navy blue sweatshirt. I rubbed my finger over the embroidered Sheffield Grinders logo—a circular stone with a football in the middle—and held the faded cotton up to my face, breathing in its once familiar scent.

There was a hint of Imperial Leather soap, a slight bite of sweaty dampness, and the unmistakable aroma of Aramis cologne. Gabe, just as I remembered him. But the

smell I had loved so much was starting to fade. For almost three years I'd kept my treasure carefully wrapped, desperately trying to keep this one memory alive—the scent of Gabe close to me. But three years was a long time and the effect was beginning to pale. I'd worked so hard to put all my memories behind me. I'd forged ahead, bent on the future, on moving on, on forgetting, on living again. But in doing so, I was letting the last essence of the man I had loved drift away into oblivion.

I got undressed and pulled Gabe's sweatshirt over my head. In the darkness of my room I buried my face into the soft familiar fabric and, for just one night, I let all the memories—the bliss and the grief—flood back in.



*I hope you enjoyed this sample of **The Skeptic's Guide to Reincarnation**. If you'd like to read more and get an audio of the first three chapters, please [sign up for my newsletter](#).*

Thanks for reading.

Lisa