

An aerial photograph of a surfer riding a wave. The water is a mix of deep teal and purple, with white foam from the wave on the right side. The surfer is a small figure in the center-left, wearing a blue and orange wetsuit.

KRISTINA
MONINGER

ONE
SECOND
To Love

ENGLISH
EDITION
by Forever

A NOVEL

BREAKING WAVES

Forever

Kristina Moninger
One Second to Love: English Edition

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For Teresa and Ben

**There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in**

LEONARD COHEN

Prologue



Ten years earlier

The sand beneath my feet was soft, and I dug my toes in deep until they finally felt cool. It was a pleasant contrast to the summer heat that made the festival grounds boil like a cauldron, further heating up the bodies around me. Although the sun had begun to set over the ocean, promising relief, it was still unbearably hot. Salty, sandy strands of hair were stuck to my forehead, pulling on my scalp. A blend of sea breeze, sweat, and the sweet smell of weed lingered in the air, like a thick cloud of perfume.

Isa danced beside me with her eyes closed, her long blonde hair blowing around her pale shoulders. The flower necklace that came with the ticket swung from her neck as she turned to me, and I smiled timidly. She smiled back, the corners of her mouth twitching slightly.

Odina's deeply tanned arms wrapped around Isa from behind, which looked a little odd since she was smaller and curvier. Although everything was noisy and people were screaming, Odina's rich, heavy voice reached me. She was singing out of tune, but the charm of her Italian accent made up for her lack of musical talent.

The band on stage wasn't bad, but the guitarist was useless. I

shouted to the girls, “The riffs are weak. The slides in the higher notes aren’t clean and don’t have enough punch.”

“Oh, Ave, shut up,” Lee laughed and gave me a shove that was rougher than usual. She had a beer in her right hand and threw her left up in the air, bopping to the music.

Lee was wearing her usual short cut-off jeans and one of the two T-shirts she owned. Her hair, shaved on one side, fell long and straggly over the opposite shoulder. She was the only one of the five of us without a flower necklace—she didn’t have an actual pass for Harbour Gras, but she knew how to get in anywhere without a ticket.

“Someday, Avery will be on stage, and we’ll cheer her on,” she claimed, taking a deep swig from her cup. “Avery Winter, rock star. The only question is ... with or without Jake,” she added, her laughter fading away at the same time as the song.

“That’s nonsense,” I said, too loudly in the sudden silence. Instinctively, I craned my neck to look toward the beach bar. As if Jake would be there. But he had probably left the island long ago, and all I saw was heat shimmering and distorting the air like a milky mirror.

I tugged at the sticky hair on my forehead, wiping it out of my face. If only I could get rid of my thoughts of Jake the same way. Just wipe him away. But he was firmly in my heart.

“This is our last summer together, girls,” Isa called out when the band announced they were taking a break. “I’m going to college, Odina is breaking free from the Catholic regiment, and Josie can go to hell. If Avery doesn’t pursue her music career, her parents might have to sell their vacation home, and Lee, well, Lee, I don’t see you moping around Harbour Bridge either. The world is our oyster.”

The words rolled off her tongue so easily. But to me, it didn’t

sound like freedom. It sounded like too much responsibility. I didn't want the world, I just wanted this little piece of earth. Harbour Bridge. Summer. Isabella, Lee, Odina—Jake.

And Josie. Damn it, Josie.

I wanted to pretend I could be young and carefree forever. I had no idea how soon it would all end, or that I would be the first and only one of us to travel the world, not stay on Harbour Bridge.

"We should go to the Washout tomorrow morning and surf one last time before we leave," I said, thinking wistfully of the weeks that were already behind us. Of the endless beach, of Isa on her board next to me. Of how we peeled ourselves out of our wetsuits after surfing, feeling both relief and a sense of loss. It was the same feeling I got when I left the island and the sea behind. I already missed Odina's spaghetti skewers and the strong smell of Lee's hand-rolled cigarettes.

I suppressed thoughts of Josie; I didn't want to feel everything swirling beneath the anger.

"Everything comes to an end eventually," Isa said, smiling strangely. "Someday we might not know each other anymore."

Years later, I'd often wonder if I had imagined the relief in her voice.

I started to disagree when a cool breeze brushed my neck, making the fine hairs stand on end. I looked toward the bar once more, searching for Josie's green hair where it had last caught my eye, the strands an unnatural splash of color among the festivalgoers.

"Where's Josie, anyway?" I asked, unsure why I was the only one asking about her. Nobody responded. I repeated the question: "Where is she?"

Isa shrugged, and the expression she seemed unable to hide played around her mouth again, a half-smile that could have just

as easily been a threat. All summer, she had reserved that look exclusively for Josie. And I couldn't figure out why.

"Grabbing drinks still?" Odina suggested, uninterested. She wiped her sweaty hands on her dark dress, and they left damp patches on the thin fabric.

"Strange that you suddenly want Josie's company," Lee remarked, analyzing me with her sharp blue eyes.

I flinched and felt my cheeks begin to heat. "What are you trying to say?" I couldn't make my voice sound as calm as I had intended. How long had Lee been listening to the rest of us earlier? My face was burning, but I wouldn't let myself feel ashamed or remorseful. It was hard enough to bear the pain as it was.

People have limits, and mine had been exceeded.

"She'll show up soon. Weeds don't die," I heard Isa say as I scanned the crowd one more time. No Jake. No Josie. The cool breeze that had been pleasant just a few minutes ago now made me shiver.

And I knew, instinctively, that things had changed. That nothing and no one could turn back time, undo what had been done, and right a wrong.

When the first loud burst of fireworks went off, we all jumped. I hadn't even noticed the band had left the stage. Lee went to look for Josie, but the rest of us were frozen in place, unable to take our eyes off the pyrotechnics dancing in the sky. We glanced around but didn't move, and the noise drowned out my racing pulse for a few blissful minutes.

In that moment, I could still pretend everything was fine.

But Josie didn't reappear. Not that afternoon, not that evening. Not ever again. The island had swallowed her whole.

And what remained were four friends and great guilt.

1



Only a single bridge links the island to the mainland. When crossing it, you inevitably arrive directly at the Seasons, Harbour Bridge's only hotel. It stands like a decrepit but proud queen at the end of Center Street and, from its rooms, offers a spectacular, unobstructed view of the sea. the Seasons is elegant in a rather unassuming way: light sandstone and simple architecture round out an imposing building.

And yet, next to the swaying palm trees, it seems like the center of the island. Whether you want it to be or not.

It feels simultaneously right and wrong to be here.

As soon as I pass over the bridge, I feel that deep connection I've missed like hell in the past months. It's probably just sensory overload and all the stress I've been under lately, but for a moment, I allow myself to simply enjoy it. I drive past an Exxon gas station, the Subway with the green roof, and a small orange church before passing the Seasons and turning onto East Atlantic Avenue. A girl is standing in the parking lot of the laundromat, her right thumb out, looking for a ride.

The sight of her makes me flinch violently. I can't see her in the rearview mirror anymore, and my heart is pounding. It only slows

down when I take my foot off the gas and reassure myself that she was just some girl.

Not a ghost from the past.

I'm driving at barely ten miles an hour now, delaying my arrival and the moment I had always imagined would be so magical. It was why I wanted to arrive alone. No band members. No ... Jake. Not on the tour bus, which is probably already at the festival site. Just a few minutes that belong to me.

Maybe they're still here, a voice whispers inside me. *Maybe they're all still here*. Isabella, Odina, Lee, Josie.

But the voice is lying.

One of them is no longer here. One of them is gone.

I try to shrug it off and focus on the road. Everything still looks how it did back then. Those long weeks across many summers have burned every street, every turn, every sight of this island into my memory. The trash cans waiting for pickup on the side of the road. The sprawling power lines full of birds. The brown lawns in the front yards, blending into the sandy ground. On the street, children are riding bikes that are too big for them, and an elderly woman is taking laundry off the clothesline in her garden. She's in a rush, like it's going to start raining any minute.

And then I can't put it off any longer; I turn onto Beach Side Road and pull into the parking lot, the red barrier tape flutters in the wind. With trembling knees, I get out and slam the rental car's door behind me.

It's been such a long time.

I heave the guitar case out of the back seat and throw my bag over my shoulder. Underneath, my pounding heart is about to set a new personal record. If there's anything that can hide that, it's my leather jacket. It's like a shield. An old, well-oiled suit of armor

that I found in Dad and Marge's attic when I was sixteen, alongside a dusty tie-dye shirt and greasy motorcycle boots.

"Here we are," I say to myself and pull the fabric tighter. The wind is chilly, but the air itself is warm. My hair is blowing around my head, mimicking my racing thoughts. My steps are not as steady as I would like, even though I knew being here again would do something to me. I just didn't know what. Or how much.

Earlier, before I saw the wide, sun-faded sign announcing the few miles left to Harbour Bridge, I had the strange feeling that magical forces were drawing me towards the island.

"Harbour Bridge? Is that a good idea?" I hear my stepmother, Marge say. There was a quiet, hidden desperation in her tone. But now it's as if the wind is carrying her words away, as if she's growing quieter with every gust.

Other voices echo softly in my mind. The ones that yell at me, the ones that stay silent. Jake's.

I'd almost forgotten that Harbour Bridge marks the end of our tour. That I won't be seeing Jake every day anymore. Because, despite everything, it bothers me when he's away from me. When he's with Emily, his wife. Or with some other woman. At the counter of a rundown bar after too much alcohol. Too many places, too much money, and too many possibilities. For him, life never stands still. And when it does, he can't handle it.

But Jake's silence is louder and more brutal than Mortimer's yelling. "It's time you wrote something again, girl. No new songs in three years!"

I think of the compassion in my brother's eyes.

The disappointment in my father's eyes.

Jake's eyes.

Josie's eyes, which I only know from photos but which nevertheless drew me back here. For a long time now, Josie has also

been in my head. Shocking how easy it is to suppress a voice if you shout loud enough to drown it out. Maybe that's the reason I became a musician.

In front of me is the beach, artificially widened and flattened for the concert. For a moment, it feels as if the clock hasn't moved at all, as if we've all been standing still. And only Josie has disappeared into quicksand.

I turn toward the small wooden house. The facade was once blue, not white. Perhaps the color of the walls is insignificant, but the wrong shade feels like a betrayal of my memory.

My gaze shifts to the waves breaking behind the levee instead. They have their own melody. Every place has a sound, its own unique scale that echoes within me. Harbour Bridge is a D minor chord, accompanied by the sea's low bass notes. The wind is its singer, the gentle call of a siren. And even though its notes have a calming effect, I suddenly feel like I'm waking up.

I pull my jacket tighter and walk toward the stage, waving to the familiar faces carrying crates of drinks, unrolling cables, setting up steel scaffolding, and unloading speakers from the back of a pickup truck. I spot Lindsay, part of the tech crew, and the bald roadie who has been with us since Warsaw struggling with the stage's wiring. They're loudly complaining about the miserable power supply: "It'll blow up during the first solo, if not before. Boom, and then lights out. You'll see!"

I smile weakly. I know the lights won't go out. Lindsay is reliable.

I put my guitar case on stage, throw my bag up as well, and then grab the railing to pull myself up. "You have to admit, this is the best view we've ever had," I say, pointing to the sea.

Lindsay mumbles something incomprehensible.

I look around, waiting for something to happen. For the sur-

roundings to suck me in and spit me out again. This is where it all began and where it all ended. Harbour Bridge is the lifeline in my palm. A clear cut. Old life, new life, and not so much in between.

“Where’s Jake?” I ask the group on stage.

Lindsay shrugs. Sammy, the bassist, clears his throat and shakes his head, short blond hair bouncing. And Rodriguez, our drummer, grumbles, “He wasn’t on the bus.”

“What do you mean, he wasn’t on the bus?”

Sammy looks at Rodriguez as if to say, “Don’t you know what happened in Berlin?” And I don’t say anything, hoping that maybe not everyone in the band knows what really happened in Berlin yet.

“He made a detour to Cannon Falls,” Rodriguez replies.

As always, when Jake’s homebase is mentioned, everything inside me tightens up. My fingers are trembling, but I try to hide it.

Cannon Falls. Jake, Emily. And a period after that, excluding me. No chance of a comma. After Emily, there is always a final punctuation mark. It’s the same after Berlin.

I sigh. Then I take “Blondie” out of her guitar case. There she lies, as if she were some standard, cheap guitar and not a Fender Stratocaster, with all its details and historical significance. I love and hate this guitar. Jake gave it to me for my birthday three years ago, beaming with joy as he placed the Strat in my hands like a newborn baby in a tiny dressing room in Wisconsin. If he hadn’t, I’d probably still be playing “Bluey.” And I’d love to. But now I own an instrument that, according to Jake, is the original from Mary Kaye. He spent a fortune on this guitar simply because he could. Just to give it to me.

I love and hate Jake as much as I love and hate the Strat. It’s the perfect symbol of our complicated relationship.

“Shall we get started?” Lindsay asks, eyeing me thoughtfully.

I nod. "Let's do it. Jake will show up eventually."

"Line check already done," Sammy mumbles, fiddling with his electric bass.

As always during soundcheck, I'm wearing my lucky pants—baggy jeans with a frayed hem and a faded light blue color. My stage outfit was washed and ironed this morning and has been waiting for me in the tour bus.

I know I could have arrived yesterday and made myself comfortable at my parents' vacation home. Instead, I got a hotel room at the Seasons, just like the others. I was supposed to spend these days here with Dad and Marge. We don't get to spend enough time together, and we've only seen each other briefly since I returned from Europe. But so many things are keeping me away, like my stepmother's at times overwhelming love, which I can only repay with guilt and an endless longing for the old days.

My recurring melancholy is too heavy to shake off, too persistent to give in to. I know it's a driving force for my music. And yet sometimes I wish for more lightness.

"Avery, are you ready?" Sammy calls, playing the opening melody of "A Summer Gone By."

Rodriguez, our drummer, hits the snare.

With a sigh, I do a shoulder stretch. I try to let my thoughts go and focus entirely on the music. I slip out of my leather jacket and lay it carefully on one of the speakers. Lindsay immediately rushes over, adjusts my microphone, and gives me an encouraging wink.

"Nice haircut," she says, tugging at the long blonde braid hanging down my back. While in New York waiting for my connecting flight to Charleston, I got bangs, really short ones. Jake hasn't seen them yet.

"It's weird to be here," I say quietly.

"It's the jet lag and the excitement," Lindsay reassures me. For