

## MAERE TUNGOL

*“If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast.”*

Ernest Hemingway  
To a friend, 1950

### I

“Serra, Serra Madison – is that you?” he asked, lightly tapping the woman walking away from him on the back of her shoulder. The woman stopped and turned slowly to face him; she was beautiful.

“No, that’s not my name,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“My mistake,” he said.

He had arrived at Grand Central Station earlier that evening to catch the 7:37 train to Westport, where he planned to have dinner with friends around nine. For the most part, Zachary Spencer had never been early for anything in his life, including love – so tonight’s weather delay presented him with a rare opportunity.

His train would not depart for another twenty-five minutes, and that left room for a cocktail at the open-air bar located on the upper level of the station. There he could catch his breath and from his corner seat, watch thousands of commuters scramble to find their rides from the city to their homes in the suburbs. It was Friday and snowing outside.

“Wild Turkey neat,” he said to the bartender.

Zachary finished the whiskey and had made his way about halfway down the marble steps that led to main floor when he thought he saw her. He noticed the reddish brown hair first, then the manner of her dress and finally, her stride; there she was again after

more than fifteen years. His heart pounded violently inside of his chest, and his palms began to sweat. Things had not ended sweetly between them, and he did not know how she would react if he went up to her, much less what he would say.

For an instant, he simply watched as she began to distance herself from him. He looked at his watch – time to board. But he had to speak with her, even if it was to say hello and ask how she was doing; more than anything he wanted to look into her eyes again.

“Serra, Serra Madison – is that you?” he asked.

## II

Zachary Spencer and Serra Madison met nearly twenty years ago in New York City – at the Greenwich School of Music in the West Village, where one evening writers Charles Kuralt and John Irving read their favorite passages by Jack London. Each had come to the reading alone and strictly by accident, ended up seated beside one another. As usual, Zachary arrived at the last minute and grabbed the first seat available near the back of the room. They spoke briefly at the intermission and afterward he invited her for coffee at a small café nearby. She ordered a hot popover with strawberry butter and some hot chocolate; he had a double espresso, and the conversation ran non-stop until almost midnight. Later, he escorted her back to Grand Central Station for her train-ride home. It happened that quickly - on a November day in the city - and they both knew it.

At the time, Serra was a senior at Smith College and Zachary was completing graduate school at Harvard. She had traveled home that weekend to visit her folks in Southport, Connecticut, a small and elegant village on the coast about sixty miles from New York. He had taken an early train down from Boston that Friday morning to

interview for life after school, and planned to return on Sunday. The ten-year difference in age never mattered to them; Zachary told friends later on, “to be honest – between the two of us, she is the wiser.”

Following the initial flurry, Zachary and Serra settled back into their individual lives. There were a couple of letters and several polite phone calls, nothing more. But they got an inkling of things to come about six weeks later when Serra traveled to Boston as part of an exchange program between Smith College and the Fine Arts Museum.

“I’ll be in Boston for five days,” she said, telling him about the program that included workshops in her fields of bookbinding and watercolors in addition to a behind the scenes look at the museum operation itself. “Our schedules are pretty tight, but do you think you might have time for a cup of coffee, lunch, or something?” she asked.

“I believe I can manage,” he said.

They saw one another every day that week and on Saturday drove north of Boston to explore the towns of Gloucester and Rockport, and watch the Atlantic pound the rocks at Cape Ann Point. They ate fresh lobster on a roll for lunch; it rained all day. On Sunday the skies cleared and the pair ventured south onto Cape Cod, where they walked on the beach, held hands for the first time, and began a lasting friendship.

“She sent chills up my spine that sparkled and cracked, ones that were unfamiliar and without explanation,” he said, afterward.

The train rocked slowly along the tracks as it left the terminal at Grand Central bound for Connecticut. His thoughts drifted aimlessly before they finally narrowed onto one particular fact: that for more than fifteen years he had not dealt with Serra Madison’s presence or absence in any sort of unflinching way. Now, as selective as they might be, he

sketched memories in his head and listened for the sound of her voice; a voice he admired, one too that spoke from the heart and seldom flinched from anything.

“There is a consensus of opinion among my friends that believes one must purge themselves of the person they had planned to spend the rest of their life with and now were not,” she said, in one of their last conversations.

“But how do you do eliminate someone that is so engraved into your brain you can think of nothing else; where everything you look at is filled with them?” she asked.

“Those are painful steps.”

“Tickets, tickets please,” the conductor said. Every seat on the train was taken, but Zachary barely noticed.

### III

Serra returned to Northampton after completing her work with the museum and a few days later a package arrived at his door. Inside the box, Zachary found a hardbound copy of *A Moveable Feast* by Ernest Hemingway. A hand painted bookmark lay flat inside.

The inscription on the first page read:

*To a friend,*

*There were reasons you stood out like a star hovering  
over the beach on Cape Cod – one is that you had this piece of Paris sticking  
out of your back pocket. I hope your every stop in this wild and  
wonderful world is as equally salubrious.*

“Hello,” she said, answering the phone on the second ring.

“Serra, it’s Zachary.”

“Oh, hi,” she said.

“Thank you for the package - and the kind words. What are you up to?”

“I’m here singing my heart out for you silly; *I Only Have Eyes for You, Here There and Everywhere, Take Me Out to the Ballgame* – things like that,” she said, followed by a soft laugh. “What about you?”

“Its ten degrees in Boston and the boiler in our row house is broken – what would you say if I came to Northampton for a few days?” he asked.

“Great,” she said. “My room has an extra bed and a fireplace – surely we can figure out some way to keep you warm.”

“I’ll take the Peter Pan bus out in the morning,” he said.

“I have a couple of things to do, but I’ll meet you at the bus station, it’s within walking distance. Bring your ice skates, okay?”

Zachary and Serra spent three of their best days together. They skated on Paradise Pond, visited her bookbinding and art studio, walked the campus and the sidewalks of Northampton, and danced and talked beside the fire. Zachary made his special chili for Serra and her friend Erin, who lived next door.

“More gruel sir,” Erin said, coming back for a second helping. While doing so she whispered softly, “You take care of that beautiful treasure.”

“I promise,” Zachary said.

The note card that followed him home became one of many during their time together.

*January  
Kings Library*

*Here is a winter village where two cross-country skiers that just so happen to be cross-eyed in love can find the solitude serious sweethearts desire. This library is a place where I come to study on dreary days because the windows are Gothic and fit my mood.*

*Maybe we can visit this village one day – or maybe we will just dream together. Either way I will be happy. I'm smiling ear to ear.*

*Thanks for the wonderful visit. It was good to have my best friend near.*

*Love,  
Serra*

Following graduation, Serra and Zachary returned to the Pioneer Valley in western Massachusetts on several occasions. Among other things – they shared the glory of autumn colors and the outdoor concerts of the Boston Philharmonic and Widespread Depression Orchestra on a summer evening.

#### IV

Serra Madison cherished the water and all things related to it. Being near it granted her peace, joy, and comfort. She loved the beach at dawn or sunset; at mid-day or in the dark of night; during a summer thunderstorm or in the dead of winter. She liked the salt, the freshness, the sounds and the smells. She respected its power and potential fury, and she was a good swimmer and a fine sailor. It did not matter to her whether it was the ocean, sea, sound, bay or harbor; she was simply drawn to the water and the life beside it.

“One particular time when I was alone and walking along the ocean in Newport, I found a stopping place to sit, look out and dream,” she told him. “The water was so beautiful – magnificent and strong - that it completely overwhelmed me with thoughts about the flow of life and how everything in the universe must somehow be connected.

“The water soothes my soul,” she said, later.

She introduced Zachary to the water. They walked, dug for clams when the tide went out, and dared to dream there. The years passed there; as did several birthdays, holidays,

and special occasions. Later, when they were both living and working in New York, they became engaged there. It was beside the water that Zachary first heard the words, Maere Tungol.

Their engagement was unusual on two fronts – one it was never announced and secondly, it came in the form of a silver stickpin shaped like a donkey, complete with a small diamond in its nose. Zachary had packed the surprise in a small quilted pouch he found at a shop in Chinatown, and presented it to her one summer evening.

*20 July  
Southport*

*My Dear Beachcomber, Dune Lover, Big Dipper and Maere Tungol,*

*This seems to be a way to say things to you when you least expect it, and I hope finding this from me in your mailbox today, telling you how crazy I am about you, does just that.*

*I mean you really send my bonnet off to the side and make my stockings sag. I'm looking forward to the weekend. Can we sit upon the lifeguard chair one night and count the ships going out to sea? And if there aren't any, can we kiss instead?*

*Can I build you castles on the beaches or in the air, down in the subways or up in Maine for the rest of my life? Do you think your voice will ever grow tired of reading aloud to me or will your arms ever grow weary around me as I nestle close? Can we continue to share cones and phones, books and nooks, sand and land, and so much more?*

*The pin is another step for us and will hold a special place in my heart forever. I know what it means between us and what lies ahead. There is a comfort in its ancient traditions of family and life, unique to the land of China. I know we share those values and I look forward to telling our daughter about our visit to the ocean.*

*I love you tungol, you diamond-studded democrat, even with sand between your toes.*

*Forever yours,  
Serra*

“The water soothes my soul,” she had said.

She must still go to a place by the sea, he thought.

## V

Lane and Abby Carson picked him up at the Westport train station about an hour later than expected. They were old friends and classmates; those rare companions in life with whom secrets are allowed to breathe freely, the truth lives, and few judgments are cast. At dinner, Zachary told them about the incident at Grand Central and how it had dredged up vivid memories of Serra Madison.

“Not long ago I spoke to a friend of mine,” Abby said, after a brief silence. “She has been divorced from a man for a few years now and he has remarried and had children. He has also fallen ill recently. My friend heard that all his relatives were upset because he could not content himself and was not only making the illness more complicated than necessary, but also alienating everyone that was offering to help him through it.”

“What’s your point?” Lane asked

Abby said, “Well, this woman - my friend - sent him a box of his favorite books, and his new wife was so grateful. It turns out they made the man happier and more peaceful than he had been in months.”

“Why don’t you stay the weekend with us,” Lane said. “The weather is horrible and tomorrow we can take a run or go cross country skiing, maybe drive over to West Point. Go back to the city on Sunday with the New York Times.”

“Thanks guys,” he said, “but I think I’ll get back tonight.”

## VII

Zachary stood on the platform and waited for the 11:55, the last train back into the city that evening. Out of the darkness, he saw the lights and watched as the silver carriages rounded the curve and came to a stop in front of him. The doors opened and he stepped in, taking a seat next to a window. The compartment was nearly empty and he stared out into the night.

While living in New York, Zachary and Serra shared dinners, concerts, museums, politics, work and so many other things together; it was an exciting time and place. Serra had landed a job with the Whitney Museum and traveled extensively, mainly to Europe and the West Coast, and Zachary worked for a newspaper. The couple also began to have their share of disagreements.

“I don’t think I ever cried more than this weekend during *Casablanca*,” she said one evening on her telephone message from San Francisco. “I think it is a combination of things, because surely there is something in the film to laugh about.

“But You Must Remember This,” she said. “I miss you and seeing their love captured our own; it was powerful and he was so gallant. We found Paris in Cambridge, Northampton, and Southport, don’t you think?”

“I visited Ghirardelli Square today – as you know I’m hooked on their chocolate shakes and you, but not in that order. I left my heart in New York.

“Good night.”

A birthday card from Los Angeles arrived a few days later. On the front, a lady wearing an enormous hat, and a stylish black and white polka dot dress, complete with black buttons was having tea alone.

*Los Angeles  
From a reading chair  
Thoughts on your birthday*

*Hi darling,*

*Like my new look. Actually Los Angeles is a bit too kitschy for me – I'm a New Yorker to the end (and she was too, her mother and father were born and raised in Brooklyn).*

*You are there, and I am here,  
So one of us is obviously in the wrong place.*

*Please think good things of me while I am away and forgive my craziness. I will be thinking of you tungol. May all your hopes come true - now blow out those candles on your carrot cake.*

*Always and forever,  
Serra*

A few weeks later Zachary and Serra decided to call a halt to things, but could not bear it. They patched matters up and tried again; each understood the stakes.

*TWA Flight 731  
New York to London*

*I am watching On Golden Pond on the plane, from God only knows, how many feet up in the air. It is such a beautiful film – so full of love, understanding and I think most of all, effort.*

*My thoughts have been filled with you as a result of our emotional last few weeks, and the depth of my feelings have only increased after reaching such a sad, empty state during our separation.*

*Our ability to talk and comprehend these matters of the heart makes me realize the strength of our bond, and the faith needed to allow love to flourish. It is a frightening ledge to be on some days.*

*Maybe our relationship required changes. I know I can be overly romantic, but that same romantic spirit in you draws me closer and to my ongoing surprise, I am content simply thinking of you. How great is that?*

*Openness to the other's ideas and concerns makes the physical distance bearable. I know you are there for me if I should ever need you – just like that night I felt so alone in the*

*world. I hope you know too, that I will be there if you call. So many wonderful events lie ahead.*

*My eyes and heart fill to capacity when I think about the patience and gentleness you have shown me. The world makes more sense to me now. From me, I offer you all that I have to give and hope it adds to your life. Thank you for understanding my wishes to remain celibate until marriage. It is difficult to play the role of resistor when I love you so much.*

*How did I come to be the one for you? I often think about that. I smile a lot because you would think the odds of us finding one another were slim at best. I mean I never aspired to be a cheerleader and you did not hang out at nursery school.*

*There is no explanation – I like that part.*

*You can kiss me as much as you want – I'm not fattening. Sigh. I believe some of our problems are created because we care too much. You can, you know? Can we go to the Carnegie Hall cinema when I return home next week? I'd really like to go there.*

*Love,  
Serra*

## VIII

“Sometimes I sing songs without words,” she said, in her telephone message.

“Perhaps it is because I often feel things that cannot be articulated. Maybe it is these things that stir deep emotions inside of me at different times, for better or worse. I sense you have erected a permanent barrier between us and that makes me sad. Why have you pulled back? If you know, please call me.

“Sometimes I wonder if you love me as much as I love you. I never intended to question your love, because I know in my heart what I mean to you. I guess when I act that way, I just want you to hold me and tell me that you love me.”

## IX

The last time they saw one another was more than fifteen years ago at the home of her parents in Southport. It was late one Thanksgiving afternoon and they sat on a

wooden bench in the back yard, near her herb garden. The sky was clear and the sun warmed their faces.

“I wish you could have been here with us today,” she said. “My brother ran in the Pequot Thanksgiving Day race and came in third. I thought you would have loved doing it – the course ran through all of Southport, even along the beach and harbor.

“I’ve finally accepted what you have known for a long time and I am sure it has been painful for you to see me hang on. I love you, but I was unable to express it in a way that would keep us together. Perhaps when the harshness passes you will be able to see our relationship in the context I always will.

“This weekend was the turning point for me. I realized that for some reason we are not the right people for one another. I know your feelings for me will never be as strong as they once were. But I am grateful for the time that they were because it was more than I ever expected in life, and I will never settle for anything less as a result.”

Zachary was silent; she knew he had given up on her. He left Serra alone on the bench and spoke with her mother and father before he left.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Thank you for everything, I wish things could have turned out differently.”

“You either love someone or you don’t,” her father said, leaving the room. Her mother walked him to the door.

The following week a small package arrived. He would soon learn that he had become accustomed to her gifts, and would dearly miss their presence. Zachary opened the card first. “I am not sure about the Great Pumpkin anymore, but I believe in you,” Charlie Brown said inside.

The pouch from Chinatown fell onto the floor. Zachary unsnapped it and placed the donkey-shaped pin on its side in the palm of his hand. Then he read her final words written to him, aloud:

*1 December  
Southport*

*Tungol,*

*This does not belong with me anymore; it ought to be with you now. I know that it had many emotions attached to it when you gave it to me and I'm sure it always will.*

*Je t'amie bien, cherie/J'esperer que tu sais qu'il  
Est pour toujours  
Mille baise  
(Translation: I love you darling,  
I hope you know it is forever.  
A Thousand kisses)*

*I'm sorry for addressing this as tungol, but I'll probably never have the chance to do it again and it is one of my favorite words. Take care of yourself and your family. Please know I wish you happiness.*

*Always,  
Serra*

X

For the longest time he looked for her – in train stations, bookstores, anywhere, everywhere, nowhere. A few years later, Zachary heard through others Serra Madison had married and was the mother of two daughters. He was thrilled she found that person in life that fit her, but he hoped her husband would understand if one day he sent her a copy of her favorite book.

Inside he would write, “You are the precious star, not me.”

“Grand Central next stop,” the conductor said.

