

# FALLING WITH PURPOSE

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*A Strategist's Pursuit of Love and Durchblick*

A MEMOIR

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*Andrea and Michael, Cambridge 1974*

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***For Andrea***

Tyler and Vanessa

Gisela, Hans, Silvia and Katharina

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## PREFACE

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IT TOOK FIFTY-TWO years to tell this story.

In June 2025, Andrea and I celebrated fifty years of marriage. For our anniversary, she asked again the question she had first asked in 1973, just after we met: “Tell me your story. Where do you come from? What makes you the person I want to see at breakfast?”

At the time, I answered as best I could. But I did not know my own story. I knew the episodes. I did not yet recognize the pattern.

This book tells two stories that became one.

The first is a love story, set in Cambridge, Dortmund, Paris, and Munich, the years in which Andrea and I found one another, tested the bond between us, and chose a shared future with enough intention to make the choice hold. It begins in a Harvard Square café and moves through courtship, marriage, and the first great test, when work, ambition, and love forced us to decide what kind of future we were choosing.

The second reaches backward into the Ruhr Valley, to my family, and the world that formed me—coal dust and factory floors, soccer fields and jazz cellars, road trips, first love, family tensions, and inherited expectations.

Somewhere in that world was the boy who once asked for Coca-Cola’s secret formula and began to suspect that happiness, like success, must have a hidden recipe, a secret pattern he would spend much of his life trying to find.

From my mother I learned ambition, taste, and the dangerous belief that love must be earned. From my father I acquired charm, appetite, invention, and the confidence to move toward the world as if it might open for me.

Both gifts. Both confusions.

The second story exists because without it, the first one makes no sense.

There is a German word I have never been able to translate exactly: *Durchblick*. It means more than insight and more than clarity. It is the ability to see through confusion—to recognize the pattern beneath events and know what must be done.

I spent much of my life cultivating that faculty in the outer world, where strategy is rewarded and problems are expected to yield to analysis.

It took considerably longer to understand that love requires a deeper version of *Durchblick*: not the skill that reads markets and moves accordingly, but the courage to turn inward, toward the truth of what you want and what you fear, and outward, toward the life another person needs in order to flourish.

This is not simply the story of a marriage beginning. The courtship is the visible plot. Beneath it lies the harder story of readiness: what had to be unlearned, faced, and risked before lasting love became possible.

She was reading *Siddhartha*, a story about the long search for the self. She had clear eyes, a quick mind, and no patience for cleverness used as camouflage. When she asked where I came from, she was not asking for geography. She was asking about the road that had formed me—and whether it had made me ready for her.

The two stories are woven together here because that is how life works. The man Andrea met at the Pewter Pot on a September afternoon was already carrying everything this book goes back to explain.

I do not believe lives unfold according to plan. But I have come to believe that chance is not entirely blind. It favors those whom longing, error, discipline, and disappointment have made alert enough to recognize a gift when it appears.

This book is my attempt to understand that preparation—the hidden work that, before I knew it, had made me capable of seeing what had just entered my life.

When your luck walks to the table next to you, you better be ready to grab it by the jacket.

# The Ferryman

*Fall 1973, Harvard Square*

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IT ALL BEGAN with long johns.

I was still learning how to survive Harvard Business School and its case studies. My roommate Gani, from Singapore, was focused on a more immediate threat.

“Boston winters are brutal,” he warned on a warm September afternoon in 1973. “No one survives without long johns.”

“It’s seventy-five degrees outside.”

“That’s short-term thinking.”

“I’d rather find a woman who keeps me warm.”

“That,” Gani said, “is a much riskier strategy.”

“Let’s venture out and maybe we both get lucky.”

Filene’s Basement was legendary: a chaos of markdowns, misfits, and minor miracles. We descended the grimy staircase beside the subway entrance and stepped into a sea of clanging hangers, shouted discoveries, and disoriented tourists. Women tried on clothes in the aisles, ducking around columns, indifferent to modesty. Gani found his woolens. I marveled at the mayhem.

Afterward, exhausted, we returned to Harvard Square and took refuge at the Pewter Pot café. The place beckoned with a portly pewter kettle. From its spout, a perpetual plume of steam unfurled. Inside, the colonial décor was charmingly contrived: waitresses in bonnets, Revolutionary-era wallpaper on every surface. It was cozy without being too kitschy.

Gani ordered chowder. I had tea and a cranberry walnut muffin. We talked about coursework.

And then she walked in.

A young woman entered, scanned the room in one unhurried sweep, and moved directly to the empty table beside ours as though she had reserved it. Red corduroy pants. A blue shirt, jean jacket. Dark curly hair pushed behind one ear.

“This could be my luck,” I whispered to Gani.

She approached and placed a white shopping bag on the table. When she turned to remove her jacket, inches from our table, I leaned over and took hold of the collar to help. Part good manners, part opening volley.

Her hands went to her pocketbook before I had finished the gesture.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

I held the collar, one beat too long.

“... helping off with jacket.”

She looked at me, long enough to see that I was more embarrassed than dangerous.

“Nice gesture. Next time, please ask.”

“I will.”

A look of bemusement crossed her face. She sat down, unbothered, opened a book to a page she had folded before, and began to read. Wordlessly we sat near each other. Gani and I resumed our conversation, but my mind was on her.

She was reading *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse, a popular book about a young Indian man who leaves a comfortable life to find his own path.

“A good place to read this book,” I said. “Right next to the big river.”

She turned to me, her expression puzzled, then quickly softening.

“Depends on which side of the river you are.”

“True. One side for the soul, the other for the wallet.”

“Have you decided which side is for you?” she asked, looking at me over the top of her book.

“You must have read this in the original language.”

Emboldened, I introduced myself and turned my chair toward her table.

Gani, perceptive and generous, stood to leave with a knowing glance.

“I’m taking my supplies home,” he said. “Good luck with yours.”

Then it was just the two of us.

“YOU went to the Basement?” she asked. “I love it there.”

“My friend wanted to prepare for the winter. Thermal underwear.”

“Winters are hard in Boston,” she said. “I can handle the cold. But I miss the light.”

When I asked her name, she said, “Andrea.”

She held up the shopping bag from The Lodge, a clothing shop on Brattle. “I work there.” Then, before I could ask the next thing: “And before you wonder, no, I’m not waiting for anyone.”

She had two hours before a folk concert at Club 47. Tom Rush. She’d seen him three times.

“Psychology. The doctorate program,” she said, when I asked about her work at the university.

“Studying it or practicing it?”

She gave me a look. “Both, depending on the conversation.”

“You seem young for this program.”

“I’m always early. I left home at sixteen. Finished college in three years.” She gave a small shrug that did not quite hide the seriousness underneath it. “When you arrive early, things happen.”

She looked at me, not flirtatious, just as if she had decided, for the moment, to take me seriously.

“Is it hard to study a new field in a foreign country?”

“Not if you know how to play the game,” I began. Then I saw her expression. She wasn’t waiting for credentials.

I was puzzled by her composure. She did not offer the usual signals of attraction—quick laughter, easy agreement, the small surrender that lets a man feel clever. She watched instead. There was discipline in her, as if she had made a private vow long before we met not to be swept away.

“In truth,” I heard myself continue, unexpectedly opening, “it’s really hard. I think I know more than most in my class, but it’s all the wrong kind.”

She wrapped both her hands around her cup and simply leaned in.

“I feel like I’m watching a foreign film,” I said. “One without subtitles. I am bad at math and balance sheets. When my classmates from the South start talking, I lose half of it. So, I watch the pictures, but I don’t always get the plot.”

The words kept coming. I had known her for less than an hour.

She didn’t look alarmed. Just attentive.

“Give it time,” she said quietly, tapping Siddhartha with one finger. “For this guy, business was easy. Finding himself took longer.”

She held my gaze for a beat longer than necessary.

In that fleeting moment, in the middle of the café's noise, I felt an unexpected stillness.

"Why do you like to go out alone?" I asked.

"I deal with people all day, their personal issues. Sometimes, I want quiet." She took a deliberate sip of tea. "Sometimes, I like folk music."

"Do you have to find answers to all their problems?"

"No, mostly I help them ask the right questions."

She was culturally Jewish, not observant. I told her I had believed in God strongly as a boy and wasn't sure I did anymore.

"What happened?"

"I stopped believing he was paying attention."

She thought for a moment, as though she were deciding whether to say the thing she was thinking.

"Maybe you were looking for the wrong kind of attention."

We had stopped noticing the café around us. I checked the clock. Her concert was approaching. She was about to leave.

"I bet we both like the same character in the book."

Her eyes lifted.

"You're like the ferryman. The way you listen. You take people to where they want to go."

"The ferryman takes them to where they need to be."

"Yes." I held her gaze. "That's what I meant."

Then I heard the sound I will never forget.

"Hmmm."

It was a breath more than a word. Like a single tone from a great musician, it carried more than sound. Something clicked, as if our minds had touched. I reached for her hand.

"Can I get you anything?" a voice interrupted.

The waitress was impatient.

Reluctantly, I pulled back my hands. We both ordered another tea.

ANDREA picked up the thread after the order arrived.

“You seem very sure of yourself. Why aren’t you Siddhartha, the hero of your story?”

“This guy gets everything he wants,” I said. “But he can’t hold on to it.”

“And you think you can?”

“I want the full package too. Love. Work that matters. Enough money to stop worrying.”

I paused.

“And to know when to stop.”

“He didn’t listen to the ferryman. Would you?”

“Maybe not to an old ferryman. But I might listen to a young ferrywoman.”

Andrea was about to answer when the waitress returned.

“One check or two?”

In the moment that followed, I felt the weight of the question.

Wordlessly, I offered to pick up her tab. Wordlessly, she slid her own money on the tray.

We were beginning as equals.

# The Turning of a Key

*Fall 1973, Boston*

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THEN I ALMOST messed it all up.

As we each paid our separate check, I made what felt like the safer decision. For an hour, I had debated whether to follow Andrea to the concert. I was afraid to ask, afraid of hearing no. We had a good connection, but I doubted my ability to keep it alive in a noisy club.

A safer move was obvious: get her number, plan a real date, hope for more. Citing my school obligation, I proposed we meet again. She took a pen, wrote her number on the Lodge bag and gave it to me. Together, we left. She turned right to go to the club; I turned left toward the business school.

Halfway across the river, the second thoughts came hard and fast. Why had I been afraid to act? Someone else might make a pass at her. Had I outsmarted myself?

I went into game mode, that state I'd learned to enter when the stakes were high, when everything irrelevant falls away and only the objective remains. I hurried to my dorm, dropped off the bag, put on a clean shirt and some aftershave, and hastened back to the Square.

Club 47 was mobbed. Rush was a big draw; the show was sold out. I pushed to the front of the line, explained I was urgently looking for someone, and somehow convinced them to let me slip in just as the concert began.

The room was packed, no glimpse of Andrea. After one of the songs, I searched row by row, squeezing through the aisles, no luck. In the dark, I stepped on a woman's foot and heard her hissing:

“What do you think you are doing?”

Wrong foot, wrong woman.

She wasn't there.

I had imagined her surprise: You did this for me?

Instead, I walked back, alone.

THE white shopping bag sat on my desk, daring me to dial the number scrawled on its side. I forced myself to wait forty-eight hours, a tactical delay to avoid the scent of desperation. When I finally called, my voice was steadier than my pulse.

“I am the guy you met at Pewter Pot.”

“Oh, I remember you.”

“I tried to find you at the concert. Were you there?”

“I couldn’t get a ticket. So, I went home.”

After a pause, “Did you really try to find me?”

She asked it lightly, but not casually. The answer seemed to matter more than she intended to show.

“Yes,” I said. “I used my Durchblick to get in but could not find you.”

“What’s Durchblick?” she asked.

The word seemed to hang between us.

“Clarity,” I answered. “To know what you want and how to get it.”

In the silence that followed, I wasn’t sure if I was winning her over or scaring her off. I moved on before the doubt could settle.

“I have two tickets for Saturday. Would you like to join me?”

“To Club 47?”

“No. A Danish dance company is performing at the Loeb.”

I could almost hear the gears of her mind shifting. A first date at the ballet? Really? It was a calculated risk. I was taking her onto European soil, hoping to offer her a glimpse into the world that made me.

She answered with sudden conviction.

“Let’s do it.”

WE met in the Square, both dressed casually, but clearly with care. On the way to the theater, while crossing a side street, I reached for her hand. She didn’t hesitate; her fingers laced through mine. The brief pull I’d felt at Pewter Pot was back, but steadier now. There was a rhythm to our stride, as if we had finally synchronized our pace.

The dancers delivered a graceful performance, and we watched in shared silence. During the intermission, we sought out the cool air of the courtyard and found a bench.

“The first piece was beautiful, but the pas de deux, that I loved,” she said.

“Because?”

“Because they trusted each other.”

“You can tell that just by watching?”

“Usually.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then you see the effort, not the dance.”

After the performance, we retreated to a nearby coffee shop for late-night hot chocolates. When we finally reached the subway entrance, I stopped.

“Can I take you home?”

Then I saw it for the first time—the Andrea Look. Her face tilted to the right and her eyes seemed to pierce through my carefully constructed persona. She wasn’t just looking at me; she was deciding something.

After a heartbeat that felt like an entire negotiation, she nodded and pulled me toward the subway. As we approached her apartment on Beacon Street, she glanced over at me with the beginning of a smile.

“You know,” she said, “you’re getting the steps out of sequence.”

“What steps?”

“In the book. Siddhartha had to become a successful businessman before Kamala lets him into her boudoir.”

“Hah. That is only in the American translation.”

“Oh really?”

“In the German original, she first helps with his business education.”

She shook her head.

“Bullenkacke.”

She said it with a small, satisfied smile, as if puncturing self-importance was one of her more dependable pleasures.

“Your German is improving already,” I said.

We descended the stairs to her apartment, a walk-down basement studio where the sidewalk was at eye level. Inside, the traffic sounds softened to a murmur.

“May I help you with the jacket?” I gently asked. This time, there was no jolt of alarm. Instead, a slow, deliberate nod of approval.

The room smelled of old books, candle wax, and herbal tea. A red shag rug. A black daybed. A wooden desk with a reading lamp tilted at a precise angle, as though someone had spent time getting it right. A shelf crowded with books and records, arranged by subject, not by size.

Andrea moved through it the way people move through spaces they have organized for themselves, not giving the tour, not explaining anything. She put on a record without asking what I wanted to hear. Cat Stevens. She disappeared briefly into the kitchen, and I heard water running. I took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

THE next morning, I prepared a fluffy omelet in the French style, eggs with minced vegetables found in her refrigerator. The kitchen was small, lit by the pale, low-angled light of a Boston basement. In her cabinets, I found only tea bags. I made coffee instead. The tea, I decided, I would bring next time. Proper loose leaves, the way it should be done. As I gently folded the eggs, I reflected on a night that had taken unexpected turns.

It started as I had hoped, with a first kiss, passionate, picking up steam. But when I reached for the buttons of her shirt, her hand covered mine.

“This is moving too fast,” she said, keeping her hand over mine. “I don’t feel ready. Can we wait?”

“A few minutes, or a few days?”

She didn’t smile. She simply put her hand flat on my chest for a moment, not pushing, just placing, and then withdrew it.

I wanted to keep going. She had invited me, after all. But her hand had already told me what she wanted. I went still. Not retreating, just letting go of the next move and paying attention to the moment. I trusted that the next one would come in its own time.

We undressed quietly. She turned her back to me with a modest grace and slipped on a T-shirt. We climbed into bed, a twin mattress on the floor of a room that had once been a closet. No window, just the darkness of the basement pressing close.

After a few words, she kissed me good night and fell asleep. It took me longer to calm down. But as my frustration ebbed, a feeling of respect, almost awe, flowed in. She was neither prude nor coy; she simply knew her own mind. I imagined being with her in another room, filled with sunlight, perhaps near the ocean. As sleep finally came, I made a private vow: Someday.

SUDDENLY I was awake. The clock hadn’t yet struck five. She had stirred, and I sensed the shift in the air. I turned toward her, settling into the curve of her body,

close enough to feel her warmth but careful not to touch. I let my arm rest lightly across her hip, an anchor rather than a claim. We lay there, suspended, the darkness pressing close.

She was quiet for a long moment, listening for something only she could hear. Her hand found my wrist.

Then, softly, I heard it.

“Hmmm.”

Barely audible, the sound carried invitation and resolve, like the quiet turning of a key in a lock. She shifted, her eyes finding mine in the dark.

“Come here.”

We moved gently, without hurry, and let the rest happen.

The omelet almost burned as I relived the night. Andrea, hair still wet from the shower, sat down in a kimono-style bathrobe, her skin catching errant beads of water. Before taking a bite, I held up my fork. She followed my lead without asking why. We tapped the silver together like a shared secret and chanted with mock solemnity:

“Gu-ten Ap-pe-tit.”

We ate ravenously. Then Andrea sat back, tucked a pillow behind her, and studied me. She set down her fork before she spoke, as if deciding that breakfast was no longer the point. The look was back, but deeper.

“Now, Michael,” she said, her voice steady and searching. “Tell me your story. Where do you come from? What makes you the person I want to see at breakfast?”

I looked at her and felt a profound ease, as if all the tension since I landed in this country was finally letting go. What was my story? I didn’t know. No one had ever asked.

I started to tell my story.

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*The story continues in **Falling With Purpose***

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