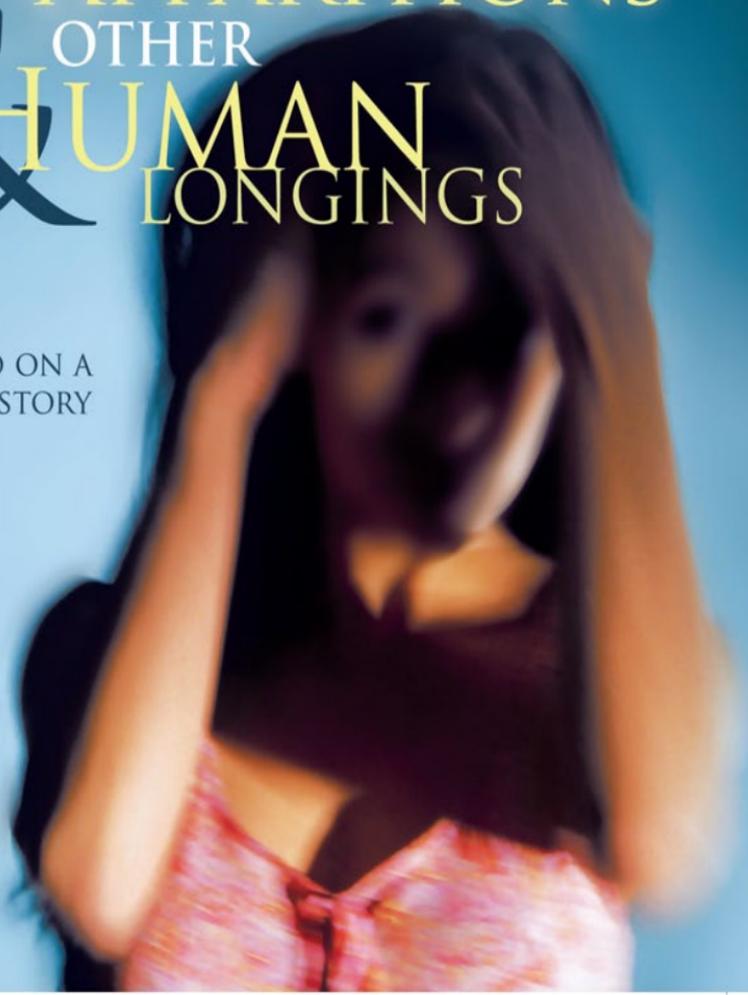


LISA  
FURTADO

HER  
APPARITIONS  
OTHER  
& HUMAN  
LONGINGS

BASED ON A  
TRUE STORY



# **HER APPARITIONS & OTHER HUMAN LONGINGS**

Based on a true story

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## PADDED CAGES

### St. Grace's Mental Hospital, Saigon, Vietnam 1982

While walking hesitantly past the iron bars, Laurence glanced inside the crib-like cage and saw the body of a young American woman. He quickly recognized her and winced at the sight of her large, protruding bruises. Her fragile legs and arms twisted in awkward contortions and her eyes were like black marbles. Laurence had finally found who he was looking for. He'd arrived that morning and hadn't wasted any time finding her in the hospital.

Laurence was a photographer, working in Thailand. Although he was raised in Midwest America, his European roots had given his skin a rich olive hue; his strong nose was wide and flat, his thick, heavy dark hair capped a neatly trimmed, lustrous, bristling beard.

While Laurence was forty-two years in age, his strong, youthful body was as powerful physically as his nature was passionate and kind. Today, freshly bathed in a crisp white shirt and tailored linen khaki suit, his eyes glistened brightly as he held on to his fedora hat.

He looked closer through the iron bars of the hospital bed. The woman's eyes were glaring up at him with no recognition, but he felt that even when they had been apart, he was beside her night and day. He watched her every expression and movement in the adult-sized crib, amazed by the human soul, especially now, that she was really there. Those wild and hungry eyes haunted him, seeming to carry the essence of the world's unhappiness. He couldn't think of a single action he could do to help her, except that *he had to carry her through this*.

The sick woman's hair was entangled and matted, like her mind. Her glance darted from left to right quickly, without really focusing on anything, so that she resembled a terminally wounded

animal. She was unaware that her parents and Laurence were even there to help her. Instead, trembling with fear, she had been caught off-guard and then quickly subdued. She felt all messed up, perhaps as anyone would, just after they had been hog-tied and placed in an iron-barred crib.

Every detail captured in this scene was horrific. The apathetic Vietnamese nurse, with two very white, rodent-looking front teeth, was small and coarse-featured, almost tribal in appearance, and contemptuous of Americans. She always wore latex gloves when she tended to the young woman. The institutionalized concrete walls were dirty, the same dingy hue as the sick woman, who emanated long years of accumulated internal filth. To her visitors, being there was like witnessing an exorcism, but an emancipation that was years overdue.

“This will help the crazy talk to go away,” the nurse said, as she injected the sick woman with a syringe of morphine. Her mother gasped as though a jagged blade had been wrenched inside her own gut, moving upward and piercing her very heart. Her face buried in her hands, she whispered to Laurence, “I can’t believe that’s my daughter. I can’t deal with this. Why us?”

“These things are life. No one is free from them,” Laurence replied. “I just can’t believe that we found her.”

Her father stood still and silent, without expression.

As the patient became calm she begged for a cigarette. The nurse helped her out of the crib and supported her as she walked to the exit. Her parents and Laurence were left to themselves, alone along the row of cribs in the ward.

The sick woman leaned on the arm of the nurse, floating through the concrete halls into the chill air under an outdoor awning. *A cigarette, ahh, a bit of salvation...*

The gray, cloudy sky had just welcomed a light rain, yet did not cool the oven-hot air that still agitated her skin. She struck the match a couple of times before it lit and took a long, deep drag on the cigarette. She poked the nurse’s arm and with a sudden,

haggard urgency implored, “Hey, don’t tell anyone my name . . . Now that you finally caught me, you’re going to tell them, aren’t you?” She reached out her arms toward Mahatma Gandhi as he appeared in the room to give her a kiss on the forehead, and he stayed by her side, only visible to her.

“I assure you, nobody knows what you know. Your secret is safe. I won’t tell nobody,” said the nurse with a closed-lipped smile, stepping back to avoid the smoke.

The young woman’s gaze became focused on a white concrete fountain in the garden with a statue of a woman in it, which appeared to her like a supernatural being. Entranced, she stared at the endless stream of clear water pouring through the hands of the goddess into the tiny, ornate pool. That statue resonated its own mood. Apart from a tranquil solitude, it was weary of all the witnessing and filtering of infinite and varying degrees of insanity it had witnessed each day, through time, since The Garden of Eden. Now, everything had changed and the evil along with the good cohabitated and remain locked, confusing even the meekest of souls for eternity.

“The Revolutionaries orchestrated my admittance to this mental institution. I must run away from here,” the sick woman realized now. The Revolutionaries from the desert wanted her for the powerful, secret knowledge she possessed, as the one person in the world with this great wisdom. She could read their thoughts, and although they could read hers as well, they knew she was invaluable. They wanted her for her ability to transmit information to everyone that the frontline of her country had a secret plan that was the embodiment of evil. It was not the kind of evil that one knows for certain, but a shrouded kind of evil, that only mildly revealed itself by watching things like news reports.

She remembered a man in a news report who once gave certain clues before he killed seven children and others, with absolutely no remorse. *Ah, I remember that damn one. I hate myself for that one. I knew he was gonna do it and that man couldn’t hear my*

*thoughts clearly enough to stop. I must try harder.*

And she did try harder, if only in her thoughts, disjointed thoughts, which would likely trouble most other people if they had them.

The sick woman got her own room and bed the next day. Her medical chart recorded only minor details of her overall bedraggled appearance, her waif-like 94 pounds – give or take the small amount of carbohydrates she ate during the day – the fact she was 5’6, with short, curly, dyed black hair, and light-yellow eyes. Those eyes – her French-American father and Portuguese mother didn’t even know where she got them. They changed color depending on her mood and what she wore. And now, she didn’t look like either one of them, with deep cuts and bruises all over her face, chest and neck, her body covered in silver sulfadiazine and loosely wrapped with bandages. It was a medicine normally used for severe burns, but the doctor had said it would help her deep wounds heal faster.

The woman sat on the hospital bed, barrenness surrounding her except for a few specks of blood on the floor from this morning, when the nurse had refused to give her a good pen and customary stacks of writing paper. So she had purposely chewed off too much of her toenail, enjoying the pain of making herself bleed, which numbed her and gave her something to do.

*Could it be possible to die from this unending hopelessness?* She wondered. But she couldn’t really believe in suicide, because of her touch-and-go faith in a God, who tried so hard to make everything good and purposeful. Things like smoking cigarettes helped to ease the pain and guilt felt so deeply in her heart for so many years. It also helped to distract her from bad thoughts to think about her old friend Fatima.

Today she wanted to write about Fatima, whom she remembered was such a special person, different from everyone else. Nibbling on the pen cap for a long while, she thought about how Fatima often inspired her and made her heart glow with an appreciation

for life. That girl she once knew had been so optimistic and gregarious, living life for spontaneity, preferably with an exciting hint of danger. Fatima had been such a pretty girl, with long, curly red hair and green eyes. She remembered that to be with Fatima felt like walking around with some kind of magical unicorn. Everyone stared at Fatima when she walked by, not just guys, but girls, too. And at parties, she would be dancing and doing her thing – go and put on a new record, pull from a joint or fix a drink for a lover, at the same time always smiling, swaying her body up and down and just flowing with the music, moving in her own enchanted world. She would dance all night with girls or guys, kissing them all over or rubbing them up to make them feel good, on occasional flashing her breasts, daring, not caring what anyone thought. Fatima had been just so damn confident. *“What in Christ’s name would Fatima do in a place like this?”* The sick woman mused. *“Or if I were Fatima, how would I escape from here?”*

The sick woman loved Fatima in an almost odd way, something like an ordinary person’s idolization of the rich and famous. *“Fatima was like a puppy angel, just floating around, making other people feel happy,”* she thought Like everyone, Fatima had a purpose in life, the sick woman believed, yet sometimes she wasn’t so sure about that. At the thought that her friend could be more like a stray puppy and not an angel puppy at all, she almost ripped up her notes about Fatima. *What was true meaning and purpose, anyway?* This question confused her a lot. Like that woman in the hospital, Fatima had also fervently wanted to know all of life’s mysteries and truths.

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*Ask not what your country can do for you.  
Ask what you can do for your country.*

*John F. Kennedy*

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One hundred years ago, there would be no place for such a mentally ill woman in that hospital. Once upon a time, people would have just accepted her, the way she was. The community would have thought that she was different and had strange views of the world, she would be known as the eccentric of the town. But they would have loved her as she was. It would seem fate had brought that girl to the hospital. Or perhaps it was a series of accidents that had brought her there.

Laurence gave her a pen and a small notebook to write in. With the single thought of Fatima's grandfather in mind, the sick woman attached a vague historical timeline and began to write about the details of his life, as if Fatima's grandfather's memoir were an extended part of herself. From her bedside, she wrote:

*I will tell it to you exactly the way I heard it was about Fatima's grandfather ... And by the way, Fatima's parents would kill me if they knew that I was talking about him. Her grandfather was born into a wealthy family in a city somewhere in Europe. He immigrated to America when he was eighteen years old, and attended an Ivy League university where he earned his degree in engineering, with honors.*

*When he completed his degree he was invited to join the Royal Air Force right at the start of World War II, sometime between Hitler's successful annexation of Czechoslovakia, Austria and Denmark. Or when Hitler took over Poland. Or was it when Stalin made that deal and divided Russia? Nevertheless, very soon her grandfather started flying those planes on a daily basis.*

*In next to no time, he became a distinguished member of the Royal Air Force, quickly moving up the ranks. The West had earlier warnings of a madman in Germany, but they waited, and after six months of building up weapons and strengthening frontlines, Britain and France declared war on Germany, two days after Hitler invaded Poland. War started, full throttle. The German blitzkrieg overwhelmed England with forty days of bombing. The Brits thought Germany would come up through France. However,*

*they were wrong; they came up through Holland. With ease, Germany secured Belgium, Holland and France. Meanwhile, a mass murder of Jewish people at Auschwitz began.*

*We read all about that history stuff in junior high school. "Why didn't anybody do anything to stop Hitler sooner?" This was the question that was asked at least once when we had a World War II history lesson. The teachers could never give us straight answers. We couldn't relate the disparity in our minds to the reality of what is. During history lessons, I kept quiet. I knew that Fatima's grandfather had been there and that his help came too late.*

*What drive and duty to his country Fatima's grandfather must have had, to become an air marshal and oversee where those planes flew and where those bombs would be dropped. I've always wondered how he did it. There is no other explanation for a life like that, except for it being forced onto him; or rather, a life he inherited from his ancestors. Maybe he was born to fight and his life was marked even before he was born. Her father was also born to fight- like me. I have an obligation to serve- somehow, I guess.*

The sick woman continued writing throughout the afternoon, without a pause.

*Here, my life is already imprinted with my uniform and nametag. The Sun rising into Cancer and Moon in Libra says it is so. Perhaps being naïve is better than being alive and conscious of every screw-up in this world. Growing up is unbearable and feels like Chinese water torture to me. I don't know and I bet you a million bucks no one else knows either, but we could all agree that it's ingeniously torturous and possibly boring. The redundancy is monotonous, to do what we are told and to remain fearful.*

*It's been all played out before in history, current events and in nature. Like being interconnected to the cyclical nature of the planets, Sun and Moon. Kind of like how a volcanic eruption in Asia could cause massive flooding in the American Midwest. But don't mind my nutty ideas, because I don't know what I'm talking*

*about. Besides, I'm just a kid trying to figure things out.*

Now back to Fatima's grandfather's time, exactly the way it was.

*Sometime during those years of war, in a lush forest shelter of trees, were moist, low-lying ferns and people-high bushes, and succulent pine trees surrounded by hop, basil and fig marigold. The hawthorn bore abundant, rose-like blossoms that lent a fragrance of tangerines. That sweet smell could cure any disease. It was a flawless blend, what an angel's bouquet of flowers would smell like.*

*There was a hidden path in the forest that was littered with life. Several yellow-scaled snakes with long black lines down their backs would wrestle in the bushes, barely holding up their tiny heads as their red-wild eyes wobbled from side to side. They spoke with their tongues, which were long, rubbery and slinky, patiently waiting in the long grass to pounce and feast on the giant, pouched rats in the area.*

*Past the long grass, the path opened up to a community of newly fabricated tin sheds in a large, perfect circle protected by barbed-wire fences. Each tin shed was identical; they didn't have windows and all had a projecting metal bracket projecting from the roof, which was used as some sort of pulley wheel. It was in this hidden forest that Fatima's grandfather had witnessed the creation of the first nuclear atomic bomb. Then he took orders for the plane to take flight and drop the bomb over Hiroshima, and a few days later in Nagasaki.*

*These are the credits that could deem a man's life successful. He had talked about this to Fatima and her older brother Azel in an objective manner, showing no emotion or remorse. Azel was like Fatima, ashamed of their inherited past. By contrast, her grandfather had held a great amour propre and pride that carried him throughout his life, up until his death at a hundred and one.*

*Fatima's father, too, carried on with this family tradition of military men. Her father was in the American Marines, working*

*offshore from the yellow desert. Creating a better life for the locals was the notion. However, pride was not at all what Fatima felt about her family's past. Instead, the remorse and guilt sickened her throughout her personal life and daily routine.*

*Today, it was no different from how it was during the time of Fatima's grandfather, except now there were more venues for sharing information. Now, everything is all rubbed deeply into our faces, leaving almost nothing for the imagination. Today, we cannot help but view the enemy as **the other**. It is set up this way. Or, others may say we are wired psychologically to view other cultures and nationalities as different from us. The news reports write about and discuss the revolutionaries as a Chinese person might write about the Ivory Coast or East Timor, with detachment and lack of sentiment that I suppose is meant to be impartial.*

Exhausted, she put the pen and notebook under the mattress and crawled into bed to sleep, thinking about four years earlier, in Fatima's hometown in Indiana.

*Every other night, Banda's soul haunts me. She is invisible to outsiders and her name came to me from outside myself. She is a dark-skinned, cherub-like girl who floats in the air when she speaks to me, while I lie awake in bed. She is twelve years old, the age she was when my father killed her in the desert. Above my head Banda whispers, "Fatima, every month thousands of us are left for dead. I greet many of them here, waiting for the light to begin. My brothers and sisters have all died as a result of the occupation. Independence is not the result, only abductions, militias, sectarian violence, revenge killings, assassinations, car bombs, American military strikes, death squads by extremists, armed robberies, executions, secret prisons, torture, rape and mysterious weapons. He doesn't see that you and me are one and the same. Just like you, they have their families and significant others they adore."*

*She says to me in a faint, scratchy whisper: "Make your father see what you see, or he will remain, along with your grandfather.*

*Your grandfather is a part which makes up the Other; thunderous, unfathomable evil."*

*Banda has ordered me to stop the occupation. I want to, but I know that even the thought of that possibility is crazy. I wish I could run deep into a forest somewhere, anywhere, with all my might, and end it by sacrificing myself. Or sometimes I wonder if it would be best to leave everything behind, like the hundreds of thousands of refugees who have left their country since the occupation. I wonder how many will actually return. Where will they go? What will they do with themselves? The locals must be so angered by us, and at God.*

Fatima's road to self-loathing began here, alone in Indiana, with her little life.

*I'm tired of hearing all about the lies and corruption. I want to live my life for me; free in my own mind, with tastes of my own, a style of my own, my definitions, with peace in my heart and without people tinkering with my brain cells without my knowing. Is it time for me to leave my home and go somewhere far away? To a place that only allows room for me to think of other things, big things or even menial things, like, "What cocktail should I have by the astir aqua sea today?" My own apathy makes my stomach turn, and I feel like a good-for-nothing human being.*

*As each day passes, I grow more and more indifferent towards life. Apathy is my newly acquired survival skill. They say I should feel grateful - very grateful - for what I have. But it is not enough. I cannot stop the guilt dripping from me, oozing through my pores. If I say to myself I am not an orphaned and deformed child; therefore, I was born lucky, and you were born lucky, too... Lucky ... Now you and I can just sit back and enjoy the ride, do nothing, say nothing and just write in our gratitude journals. Our help is needed, but it is already too late.*

Fatima had tested out the other way to live as well: giving to everyone that needed help and loving each person she met unconditionally, making eye contact with strangers and smiling at

everyone. She believed that was the best way to live. She helped countless people who lived in her town - friends, family and strangers, spending her time with those who lived on the margins of society, who desperately needed the help. She volunteered with the homeless and women and children who escaped violent homes, and organized mentor programs and small non-profit community programs in a vain attempt to feel good. Volunteer work always made her feel okay about her family secrets. Knowing that all kinds of people suffered from deep emotional pain much worse than hers made her feel better.

She had sent applications with impressive reference letters to different UN joint programs abroad just in case she did not get accepted to Columbia University, which she applied to in the spring after graduation. A colorful poster at her high school had enticed her. An orphanage needed English teachers and caretakers. So she mailed her application to the orphanage the next day, because she wanted to help the orphaned children of Cambodia.

Every year, Fatima won major awards for her humanitarian efforts at her high school and within the community. These awards proved to her that there was something really special and rare in a human being who helps others less fortunate.

But lately, she felt her efforts didn't matter. In truth, her heart didn't think it was making a difference.

"We live in a muffled bog of tears," she said to her invisible visitor, Banda.

"We can try hard and dream, but life is heartbreaking, cruel and violent. I can't do anything to change the world. I can't stop the Revolutionists or my daddy's mission. So why even bother trying?" With a half smile, the ghost disappeared.

While walking home from school one day, Fatima thought about her situation. She had applied to the best university in the country, and hadn't even bothered with scholarships because she felt that was for the students with no money, not her. Besides,

her mother promised to pay for everything when she finally got accepted. Yet she felt trapped, too attached to too many organizations, the administrators, teachers, friends and family. If she didn't get accepted to Columbia, she wanted to escape from there, move to Cambodia and help orphans. But it was a very bad time to leave this country now, she recognized, no matter how she looked at it and how badly she felt about everything.

Her mother felt so far away at that time. She could not get through to her, no matter how hard she tried, and was getting much worse. She was high on most days, and seemed to care more about her pills than her and her brother Azel. They did feel bad at first, when mother got into that terrible car accident and had to be operated on. She couldn't walk for six months and had to shut down her home-based cleaning business. Now, she could finally walk but couldn't do her job, and still used the painkillers. She didn't recognize her mother anymore. She had a hard time keeping up with errands, daily household responsibilities, and hadn't left the house in weeks. She didn't even answer the phone anymore. She begged Fatima to do it and never to say that she was home.

The telephone would ring once a day at exactly 8:30am.

"Oh, those are my darling friends calling me again," mother would lie.

"That is the bank, mother, they are not your friends. They are going to ruin you if you don't talk to them. And for Christ's sake, you have to stop taking those pills. You don't need them anymore. You can do it if you try harder!" She wanted to scream at her.

"Ya, I know, Fat. But it's really not a big deal," mother said, grabbing her shoulders and pushing her down on the couch. "And don't you dare tell me what to do. You don't know what I have to put up with."

"You have to get on the phone with those people," Fatima yelled.

"It's not a problem. Everyone is in financial trouble. The

country is in a recession,” mother reasoned, while pouring herself a rum and coke. Then she would pass out on the couch in front of the television, in her underwear and T-shirt.

Mother became obsessed about security. Once mother asked her to go out and buy two door locks. She didn't give Fatima enough money for the kind of doorknob that has a key lock inside, so she bought two padlocks instead. Mother installed one lock on the outside of her bedroom door and one on the inside. The power drill made some pretty ugly holes in the walls, but mother did not seem to care. She would often lose the keys and gave her children much grief about helping her look for them. Once she locked herself inside her bedroom, and of course, she misplaced the key in her room. The torment she must have gone through in there, trying to get out. Then Fatima found her passed out below her window in the snow, in just a T-shirt. She had a concussion and had to spend a night in the hospital.

Azel once said to her, “We have done it all to try and save her, but now we have to hope that something horrific happens so it can shake her bones anew.” Azel was older than her so she took comfort in those words.

*God disappeared; I can't find him anywhere. It's as though he never existed. Yes, I once believed it was a miracle when you helped us, when mother almost died. But lately, I have come to the realization that we made it through without you.*

Fatima would lie awake in bed, wishing in the darkness: *I hope daddy returns home soon, so that we can finally live a normal life. Please come back to help us take care of mother. I can't handle her on my own any longer. Daddy is oblivious to the seriousness of the whole situation at home. I know he loves his country, even more than us. For my daddy, loyalty, sacrifice and duty for the country come first, before anything else. Daddy thinks he's in the desert to relieve the locals from their oppressors, but I fear for the other side as well, the ethnic cleansing in progress. People are being killed according to their ID card. The ethnic cleansing has*

*happened all over again. There is so much that is weighing on my shoulders. Perhaps if I try harder I can do something.*

Time passed so slowly, as she waited for her future to unfold in front of her. Where were all her acceptance letters to the Ivy League? *All those perfect kids from perfect, filthy, wealthy families got accepted early, she thought. All are in study mode and at the starting line to become lawyers or some other highly regarded profession. Let's protect the pedophiles. Let's pardon the serial killers. Hurray! Crap. Our world is over. I am over. I'm scared my days of caring are over in just a few weeks, when I get my answer from Columbia. I'm so close to letting it slip between my disgusting fingers. But I've given myself to do the right thing and I will not give up.*

*Virgin Mary, do you hear me? I want to be a great humanitarian one day. Please answer my prayers and help me get accepted to Columbia, so I can learn how to be just like Mahatma Gandhi. I was a good Catholic, or so I thought... God, you fool! How dare you let me go? I always did the right thing and tried so hard to help mother, and I have failed.*

To make matters worse, Banda would not stop terrorizing her. Once, she awoke after Banda crept into her bed, weeping, and showed her what looked like a movie. She showed Fatima images of corpses of desert children, lifeless and grotesquely twisted, what was left of their faces frozen in expressions of agonizing pain and shock.

Banda yelled at her, “ I didn't know I could still feel that kind of sorrow, even after living a life that has become a daily reality for so many. This is civilians under lethal attack. It's a country fighting an occupation. In your news, you may hear about the situation there in your country, and the civil war breaking out here due to your occupation. But in the city, on the streets, in the little houses and at our kitchen tables, Fatima, it is a completely different reality from what you hear.”

This time shaking Fatima while she spoke, she continued,

“God forbid, your father is taking part in the rapes that I recently heard about. You don’t hear about it Fatima, but an occupying army always rapes the people as well. After all, you raped the country, why not the people? The naiveté of Westerners who can’t believe their heroes are committing such atrocities is ridiculous. My country is being pillaged. Most of the accused are men, the stupid lesser sex.” Fatima sat up like a shot, there in her bed with her pink fleece pajamas, the ones with silly white farm animals, and cried and cried.

She was scared that she might lose her mind if she chose to be apathetic. She resolved, *“I refuse to live a dull, sad life. I want adventure and love. Thus, I will choose to give more of my love away, especially giving around pleasure to the men in my town. It will make me feel so good, and loved back, too. This will be my own intended purpose for now, since I wasn’t given a clear task. I will give myself my own reason to be here. I am a woman, and that is something which is absolutely concrete. From this point on, I will focus all of my love by helping the men of my small town, offering myself until I am invisible.”*

## MY FRIEND STINKY

At night, the sick woman would occupy the time in the Vietnamese hospital by reading Fatima's old diary to Laurence from her bed. She didn't remember how she got the diary. Sometimes she would carefully write in her own little notes and add her own reflections and ideas, as if the diary were partly hers.

*Fatima's hometown in Indiana, three years ago:*

I made a special dinner for Chris and he didn't show up. Chris was supposed to have dinner here, then walk up to the pier, drop acid and admire the night sky with me. My mother went to the cottage for the weekend. Chris went to a party instead, with his best friend Steve. I have read Mahatma Gandhi's biography while waiting for him. I read every sentence intently. I was looking for the answer to my question: how could I be more like him?

I have been dating Chris for almost two years. He is sixteen, better-looking than most of the boys at my Catholic school, and one year younger than I am. Chris has shaggy blond hair, baby blue eyes, he's a bit taller than me and quite muscular. He's a very pale boy, with cute little freckles all over his face. He was a virgin when I first met him, and he adores basketball, Led Zeppelin and getting high. We like taking acid together. It's such fun. Our thoughts come alive and start living a life of their own.

He can get quite caught up with trivial things, like wondering what flowers I like best: roses or orchids? I tell him orchids, but honestly, I really don't care about flowers. He believes that I lost my virginity to him. He gets average grades yet his parents treat him like he's a prodigy or something. His parents are very loving, hard-working, decent and live in a happy home.

I am very careful to present myself in a certain manner in front of his family. I am a perfectionist in my ability to neatly tie up my gross, curly-red hair in a tight ponytail so that my hair is barely seen. I play my role well. I've only shown them my humanity awards and straight A's. His family seems enamored with me

and treat me like their very own. They love me so much that it's frightening. Their home life seems so foreign to me, but I feel good there when I visit them. I wish I could have what they have.

Throughout the year, Chris and I have had many wonderful mornings before our first class. Most mornings I go to his house while his parents are at work. He'd still be sleeping. His parents usually keep the back door unlocked. I walk through their log cabin-styled living room and look up at the plastic framed photograph of Angkor Wat temple in Cambodia hanging on the wall. Chris' parents took that picture when they were there last year. That photo gives me the feeling that I've been there before. Chris wants to go there with me, but I don't know.

Being in that house is always refreshing. In the mornings, I walk into his bedroom and slowly climb into his bed, sometimes only wearing stilettos. They were part of a Halloween costume that I bought one year. I often hide my stilettos in my backpack and surprise whomever when the perfect time comes. They make me look really sexy, especially when I'm not wearing any clothes. Chris would whisper, "Fatima, you sexy devil." *I make him happy, he adores me*, I felt giddy thinking.

Then we would walk to school together hand in hand, very happy and satisfied. After school we walked back to his house and hopped into bed again. Sometimes I wore black lace stockings and a garter belt with my stilettos. Most times we were together I would give him two orgasms. A couple of times we went to The Dock for an early dinner, where I usually had a medium-well steak, baked potato and Caesar salad. After dinner we would walk around town and check out stuff, sort of exploring I guess, but we knew those four blocks of our town like a routine or something, stepping into the shopping mall and roaming around, avoiding the mall maggots who claimed it as their turf.

Then we would take the bus back to Chris' house. It was fricking killer when we got some doobie action. A couple of times we hot-boxed the toolshed in the backyard while his parents

were at work. That was okay. I laughed a fair bit though. My impersonations of the kids at school were stellar as usual. I would always get so fried, and come up with a new joke like this: "I'm going to miss Fatima's bum, it is very warm," said Stinky, my imaginary friend (the fart)." Chris didn't really laugh, just kind of politely. It's kind of sad how people "just sort of" laugh at your jokes, I'd tease him.

Friday was the best day ever. It was our two-year anniversary. I met him at his house in the morning. We could not stop fooling around and talking to each other in baby talk. He put his hands all over me, especially up my blouse and gave me all kinds of nice compliments on my tight ass. It made me feel so good to know that he loved me. Then I gave Chris a present: black silk boxers and a vampire novel. I didn't have much time to look for something perfect, so I settled with that.

Chris gave me a beautiful gold Irish claddagh ring. He wrote on the card, "I want you so bad it hurts." He is so sweet. I want him so badly, too.

Two weeks later: Well, I thought my relationship with Chris was great because I gave everything of myself to him, but everything has changed. He was at my house for a mere two hours, after I hadn't seen him for a while. To me, this is living proof that I am in a 40/60 relationship. I worked hard to give Chris three orgasms today. I am so sore, how dare he leave me! Two hours later, he is off to buy a gym membership. He is already muscular and toned. He rides around everywhere on his stupid bicycle. I despise his confidence and independence. I am more into him than he is of me, and it pisses me off royally. He went to the gym with his best friend Steve.

Well I'm gonna burn Steve at the next bush party, that is for sure. I'm gonna make Steve touch me (too easy). Then I'll tell Chris that his friend is a backstabber. Chris will believe me, and not Steve. I'll ruin their friendship and have Chris all for myself, that's what I'll do. I hate Steve right now more than ever. I've

been shafted. Never mind, I'll take care of this on Friday night. I'll go to the bar with my friend Heidi, or any boy that I can find to get drunk with and party with. I'm going to pick up massive boys and use and abuse any boy that shows a little interest. I keep this all to myself; no one I know has these kinds of ideas. Fatima wrote in her diary while Chris was at the gym:

*The dead of night*

*Where strangers roam*

*The streets in search of anyone*

*Who'll take them home*

*I lie alone*

*With rocks and springs*

*And anyone who wanted to go and contact me*

*The dead of night to grateful day*

*Endless doubts and questions keep me awake*

*It's much too late.*

*Where've you been? Who'd you see?*

*You didn't phone when you said you would. Do you lie?*

*Do you try? To keep in touch with me?*

*And you know you can't even begin to see my point of view.*

*You could not hear or see me.*

November: the planets aligned in my favor. Now I like Trong Tri from school. I know in the way that we kissed today, it was so innocent, I loved it. I imagined that he would not be a good kisser, but he is not too shabby. He is tall, waif-thin, academic and inexperienced at life. He's a Vietnamese boy from my math class. His parents work at the sock and nylons factory. His parents are never around when I come over to his house. I think he has never kissed a girl before and that's why I am so strongly attracted to him; I want to rape him and make him a man. All I want to do is control and use him. This gives me much power and pride. I know in time that our kiss will lead to more. Yes, I can't lie that sex is very important. But I have learned that I am responsible for my own orgasms and that any man in bed cannot be fully satisfying.

In a forest behind our school, Trong Tri massaged my skull and hidden neck, the most wonderful feeling in the world. He told me that he has all kinds of romantic ideas of things to do with his girlfriend. He talks a lot and I love it, a chatterbox to keep me from listening to myself, so I can forget for a while.

I can't believe that I am Trong Tri's first crush and that he's never been laid before. I can't imagine what Chris will do if he ever finds out. It's Chris' fault that I went for Trong Tri, he should have treated me better. If Chris does not treat me like a queen, I don't know what I'll do. I'm scared though. I am not ready to give up on Chris until something better comes around. I definitely want to keep Trong Tri, the chatterbox. Or should I walk away from these two agonizing years with Chris with my head held high. The dream with Chris and me died ages ago.

This month flew by. It's so amazing, Trong Tri called me tonight and we talked for five hours. I like him a lot and we get along great. Then Chris called me.

I liked it in the beginning and then all those negative feelings came flooding back. I don't feel good anymore. Chris asked me to go out for dinner and talk, but I didn't want to. Chris is into taking it easy, he's a procrastinator and he's lazy. He would make a terrible husband. Trong Tri is into saving his money and getting straight A's. He has a goal to be a rich cop one day, you know, he wants to catch all the bad guys. Chris has no such goals of being rich. Trong Tri does. I don't like Chris as much anymore. I don't know what has happened. Chris said the lamest thing to me on the phone today. "I felt like I should call you. I haven't talked to anyone for a while, there is no one else to call, so I called you." Aaaargh! If only he knew what has happened between Trong Tri and me, then he would not even think about calling me. Yes, Fatima, you are slowly getting over Chris, he doesn't have the same effect. Yes, Fatima you are wicked awesome. I must keep faith that my dream guy will eventually come along.

The bush party in Wuntz Falls two months later was really fun.

I went with Trong Tri, Heidi and my brother Azel. Chris went to the cottage with his family. Azel has been very nice to me lately, such a wonderful brother to me. He has stopped his criticisms and gives his money freely to me, ever since I busted him with his pretty bitchen pot plant operation growing in his room, so he's petrified I might tell mother. He has a good business and regular customers now, selling pot to all his friends and their friends.

Sneaking out of the house one night, I got locked out. I knew his window lock was broken and hadn't been replaced yet, so I crept in through his window when he was out for the night. I couldn't believe my eyes when I stumbled on all of his lush pot plants and measurement scales. Gazing in amazement at them I yelled, "Oh my God, you plants are gorgeous, God you're gorgeous! Oh, the fun times we'll have together." My view of my brother being the overly protective, dickweed sibling changed overnight. Now I'm relieved that he'll stop tormenting me and am full of wonderment for him now.

It was a magical night under the stars. Trong Tri is breathtaking. This is so pitiful; I'm in love. Yes there, I said it. It's not going to be like last time though. I have to except what I'm feeling, even though I'm scared shitless. I've wanted to say it for a while: I love you Trong Tri, I do, but I'm afraid that I'll get hurt again. I can't be scared, my psychic said so. She said, "Fatima, you must break down that protective wall and feel love, and accept what others give to you. She also said that I only give my love away but I take nothing back in return. "How can you even begin to love when you desperately need to be loved and helped first?" she asked me. Well, my dear psychic, you are right. Trong Tri sure has been giving. I have to dive right in, be free and cut loose from my cover. It's okay, it is safe to come out, spread my love all over the place. I have so much love to give. I would like to surprise Trong Tri, so I found an adorable card for him at the mall and am going to write on the card, "I love you Trong Tri." I'm going to deliver it with a long-stemmed red rose at his front door. It will be such

a nice surprise for him when he returns home from school, make him so happy.

March: Ah, yes, life just keeps on getting better and better. The hell with Trong Tri – he couldn't keep up with my qualifications. Yesterday during math class he said, "I think we should be just friends." Today I was at my locker at school and I saw Trong Tri embracing another girl down the hall. "Your exotic soft skin and bulging manhood are useless against my superior desire for satisfaction. You don't do it for me," I laughed a little to myself. Band club practice had ended and kids holding their instruments stared at me as they walked through the hall, past my locker and me. "I have three kings waiting at my doorstep for me, and in three nights of passion I shall utterly destroy your pinkie dick." *Bwaa ha ha ha hah!* What a lame world this has become. Bite me A-hole! Why her? Olivia from school; she's such a space cadet and butt ugly. Well, I say, good girl Fatima. You have a fine way of influencing people into doing phenomenal things. And the hell with Chris too, Chris and I are just keeping it together for the daily sex, we have nothing else. I can't talk with him, grow or learn anything from him. What a Barney! A total dweeb – dork, man!

I told Trong Tri that he can take Olivia and shove her up his tight little cornhole. I don't want him anymore, he isn't what I want.... Sure, there is a lot of emotional attachment and memories involved, but he talked about marriage quite a bit, too much for my liking. That is UGH, so lame. Sorry, not interested. I want someone already successful, powerful, and a witty conversationalist. Maybe I'll go for Rangit now. He's totally boss, super-cool.... and ambitious.

Now today was the best day ever. I got a new part-time job at the downtown shopping mall. My friend Heidi told me about the position at the shoe store she works at, so we'll be working together now. I get to dress up every day after school and on weekends, too. I want to change my ugly red hair, but the stylist

said that she couldn't color over the red without bleaching it, or straighten the curls without damaging it. Tomorrow I'm getting that tanning membership at Sun Sport. I'm gonna look gorgeous, all the guys at school will adore me. This time I won't overdo it though. The last time, I had to wear the same red sweater for three days in an attempt to camouflage my third-degree burns.

I don't know when I'm going to have enough time to get all my stuff sold. I need to sell all the things that Chris gave me. I need the extra cash so I can get some clothes for the new season. That stuff he gave me doesn't matter to me anymore. I'm selling that gold bracelet, the stereo, that silver necklace and the Irish claddagh ring. Or better yet, I'll burn it all. Thinking about Chris makes me so angry. He's hurt me so much, I don't ever want him to get close to me emotionally again.

April: I did a lot of self-evaluating. I feel like I lost a great part of myself four years ago. I blame my parents for all the senseless things I did. They didn't raise me correctly, I think, or they didn't know how to deal with me.

I lost my virginity four years ago because I was pissed off at mother for not letting me go out to dinner with Adrian. Mother said that he came from a bad family and that his parents were first cousins. I met him at church, so he cannot be a bad person. Adrian was a plump blonde boy.

So late one night, I invited Adrian into my room through my window. He got his bootleg to buy a 2-liter bottle of wine cooler. That night we agreed that Tropical Watermelon tasted like Jolly Ranchers. We eventually ended up in bed naked together, just staring at each other. It felt so overwhelming when he took my hand down there... and he was huge! I didn't know what to do with it. The whole fooling around thing felt familiar yet scary. At first, I tried petting it like a cat and he said, "Don't be scared to hurt it. You can grab it and gently yank on it if you want." Then he tried to kiss me between my legs. "Ew yuck, gag me, don't do that," I said. "Why? I love it." he said. When Adrian grabbed it

and put it in between my legs, the pain was excruciating.

“Fatima, you’re bleeding,” Adrian said, “and you’re very tight. I can’t go in all the way.”

“Oh, it’s just that it has been a long while since the last time,” I said nervously, “it feels good though, keep on going.” I felt so embarrassed that I was still a virgin. As we kissed he kept on touching my hair. I wanted him to stop touching it, and took his hands away. I asked him to stop making love to me but he ignored what I had said. He was too aroused to stop. I decided to go through with it anyway, no matter how badly it hurt and how much I wanted him to stop doing it.

But in truth, I couldn’t wait to be a woman anyway, to be finally free. And so I went along with it. Mother had stopped me that night from leaving the house, but I’d shown I was fully in charge of what I could do with my body. A small part of it was thrilling though, to have a boy in my room while Mother and Azel were sleeping upstairs. The next day I bragged to all my friends about it and was in pure ecstasy during all of my classes. Even though technically he didn’t go in all the way, it felt as though I had become a different person. Life was good then, for sure!

I never thought I would regret it, until now. I never thought that thirteen was too young for sex until today. Rangit was pretty blown away when I told him that I lost my virginity when I was thirteen years old. Rangit is such a cool guy. He’s the lead singer of a rock band. I met him at the bar when his band was performing. I got into the bar using my cousin’s old ID card because I look exactly like her. He has a lot of groupies, but he noticed me, big time! He lost his virginity when he was eighteen, then had another lay three months ago. Wow... that is so, like, limited man. I have such a record, it’s sort of screwy. Another thing he told me is that he prefers blondes... I have red hair, and felt very ashamed. Then he said he was joking about the blonde thing, but I don’t believe him. Yet, I did get the most euphoric feeling today when he visited me at the store. My heart jumped so high that I thought

I would puke. My stomach was full of butterflies. This is a tell-tale sign that I'm falling for him.

Valerie, the district manager of the store, came in today. I caught her glancing at her reflection in the mirror. She nodded in approval as she pulled down her smart new blazer suit and fixed the collar of her white blouse. I can tell that she straightens her hair with a flat iron and uses a lot of serum to make it look that way. I wish my hair could do that. She was wearing gold chandelier earrings and hot pink nail polish. She intimidates me. Valerie pops in from time to time very early in the morning, changes the clocks, making them five minutes slow so we must work an extra five minutes a day for free. The day after her visits when we close the till there's always an extra twenty bucks in there. We suspect that Valerie put the money in there to test Heidi and me, to see if we would steal it.

The first time I met Valerie I told her about the great deal I got on a tanning membership. I felt pretty comfortable talking to her, until I heard all these stories from Heidi. And why is Valerie always at work when I am hung over or totally juiced? Heidi offered me some Demerol once to calm me down. It's like Valerie knows I suck as an employee. A couple of times I had to go straight to work from a party. I know I must have stunk like booze and cigarettes.

Valerie walked past me and asked if I smoked and I said "sort of". I should have just said, "Yes, I'm a smoker, and are you one, too?" I hate it when I can't be honest. Everyone knows that I am a good person on the inside, especially Chris' family, with my awards and honors. I have to be honest from now on by telling the truth, and screw the world. Mostly I've lied just because I want to make other people feel okay about everything, but I wasn't happy because I wasn't being myself. If I was myself, everyone would think I was crazy. I have tried to be the person I thought everyone wanted me to be.

All this talk about the district manager got to my inner self, and

I allowed it to stress me out. I felt angry that I couldn't be myself, because of what Valerie might think of me if I said something wrong. Now I was not sure how I was supposed to act around my manager. I'm okay around Heidi, she's my home girl.

Heidi's a bit older than me and I only confide in her and Azel. She's very mature for her age and the things I tell her don't shock her. I despise when people get shocked by the things I tell them. Heidi was short, curvy and very cute. Her father is African-American and worked for the American military. Her mother is Korean and worked at home. They met in the late sixties in Washington State. Heidi failed a grade in elementary school so she knew most of the older kids. Something she used on her skin had given a shine to her black skin and she stood with a slight awkwardness of posture. She wore colors that were sometimes very colorful and sometimes very dreary that seemed to merge into the blackness of her skin.

Tomorrow was teacher's professional day so the kids got a day off from school. So tonight, Thursday, I went over to Heidi's two-bedroom apartment for a party. Her parents moved away for a job in the desert and left her here, to her own defenses. She is secretly my idol, so grown up, and handles her freedom so well. It was a big get-together, about forty or so people were there. I met these guys from another high school, they were really hot. I couldn't stop staring and smiling at them sitting there on the laundry room floor, all of them sprawled out on the linoleum floor, with their hot rods, was all I could think about. "Hi." "Hey, what's your name?" "Fatima." "Sit down." I sat down. The cute guy with spiky, platinum blonde hair held out some foil for me and I smiled and he struck the match.

"Yuummm," he said as we watched the white powder turn to a little blob of brown. The smoke oozed out my nostrils slowly.

"Holy fuck," I yelled, jumping back up and staggering against the wall, trying to keep my balance. I lunged at the toilet, and started to puke everywhere.

“Whoa, are you okay?”

“Uh, huh...” I splashed some water on my face and wiped it with my arm. I sat down and suddenly felt calm. Everything about anything just floated up and away from me. Ah, it felt so good, floating away far, far away to a fairytale landscape where I felt better than anyone, even better than Gandhi did when he won independence for India against the biggest Empire in the world...

The next morning I felt like crap and had a splitting headache.

“Mother, do you have any aspirin or anything?”

“Yup, they’re in the glove compartment of my car,” which is where she kept them to prevent me from using them without her permission. These pills were for extra pain relief.

I had this bad feeling, a premonition for days and I knew something was not good. At first I thought something was wrong with my brother Azel, but he was fine.

I got the official letter in the mail today – Columbia University accepted me as a full-time student! I was so excited I couldn’t think straight, and started jumping up and down, kissing and squeezing the letter.

Then everything around me became very dark and came to a halt when mother informed me that she and daddy were BROKE, deeply in debt with credit cards, bank loans and lines of credit, and could no longer keep up with their mortgage payments.

I wasn’t really shocked, but extremely angry at her. I knew something like this was coming, her *friends* from the collection agency had warned her about this.

“We will have to sell our house and move into an apartment in a month,” mom said. “I am terribly sorry, Fatima, we cannot afford tuition for your school in the fall. Perhaps it’s best that you work for a year after graduation, save your money and settle for the college in our town,” said mother.

“How dare you do this to me?” I shouted. “It’s you guys, you’re the bad ones. It’s your fault the world is in ruins,” I said. I ran into my room sobbing and gasping for air. I lay there quietly and later

I let mother come in my bedroom and she gave me a couple of her pills. I still had a terrible headache. I took two of the pills in one gulp and slept for twenty-two hours.

The next day, mother had prepared hotdogs and home fries for breakfast when we sat together at the table to eat.

“I want to stick with my plan,” I told her. “I’m going to enroll in part-time studies so I can afford my courses at Columbia. I need to get on the phone and check which courses I can get into. If the waiting lists are too long I’ll take some correspondence courses or something. I’ll go to work, ask for some more hours and pick up my paycheck. And I need to lose weight; I’ve gained so much weight. I’m so fat,” I said.

“No, you don’t need to lose weight, you’re crazy,” she’d say.

“Thanks. I need to put some more money in my savings account,” I said.

“Daddy is scared that you will live in poverty,” mother said.

“But come September, I want to be a student in the big city, and get out of here as soon as possible. I have to at least try,” I said.

“I think that’s not being smart,” she said. “That’s not going to work. It is not that easy living on your own; the city is very expensive.”

“Yes, it *will* work because I’ll try my best and work very hard.”

“Fine, Fatima, but you are going to be on your own. After you leave this house, your daddy and I won’t help you anymore. Because you know what? You’re being really selfish, Fatima. You have always been that way since you were a little girl, never caring about anyone but yourself, she said as she got up and flung her arms around me, smelling of alcohol and cigarettes. “Don’t you dare leave me alone in this house. I need you here!”

I pushed the chair back, away from mother and said, “I’m going for a run.” After changing into my T-shirt and shorts and putting on some sneakers, I quickly walked out the front door.

*“I have so much that I need to do before moving to the city,”*

Fatima thought while racing down the street, starting to make a mental list: save as much money as possible, don't buy clothes, eat less, bring food to work every day, sell all the jewelry and stuff Chris gave her, phone the university and try to enroll in at least two courses; phone Joe – a nice Spanish man, a friend of her uncle's...

Her uncle once told her that Joe's father was in the mafia. Joe lived in the city and could help her start looking for cheap apartments. She'd slept with Joe last summer when her family was there for a visit. She hoped he remembered her so he could help her out.

Her mind went into overdrive: she needed to find out what stores she could work at in the city, to play the lottery once a week, even though she had bad luck all the time. *But, every blue moon or so I get some good luck too sometimes*, she rationalized; *I have to at least go for it*. She wanted to go to that school because it was the best in the country, and even if she had to risk it all, she would do whatever it took.

Fatima wrote in her diary the next day:

*Hey, hey, hey, what's crackalackin' girl? I'm doing pretty wicked now, I guess. A little stressed out though. That's where the Jack Daniels on the rocks for lunch comes in handy. I'm really excited about moving to the city, my next destination, my new life. I'm not scared at all. I get really excited when I think about the good times I will have there. I'm really stoked! Everything will go my way fer sure. I'll meet good people, get a high paying job, go to all the coolest gigs and coffee shops. My life will be good, really good. I'll audition for acting parts and they'll pick me. I'll be on TV and I'll look damn good. I'll have all the money I need, more than enough. I'll do movie extra parts and get small acting gigs. I'll be in major movies, working with big stars and they will pay me big bucks for just standing around. Aaaaah...that would be so like "yar" – way cool! It's too easy. As long as I try hard enough, I will make it happen.*

*Finally, there will be no adults in the way of anything. So many good experiences will happen to me. Joe and me will be best friends. I'm sure nothing has changed since I just saw him last summer. We will have a perfect relationship. My mother will give me her espresso machine for my going away gift. My uncle will give me his old dining set. Someone will teach me how to ride a motorcycle and help me find an excellent deal. The motorcycle will only cost five hundred dollars. I tell you, pure bliss! I'll settle in quickly, and have fun, fun, fun. Chris is a bloody prick from hell. I almost hate him. Me moving away and being happy will be the best revenge, in getting back at him. Thank you, dearest diary for keeping all of this to yourself. You are my dearest friend.*

She stopped writing and smiled when she remembered that Chris would get her letter today. She had written a goodbye letter to him and mailed it two days ago. That evening Chris would receive the letter from Fatima. He'd go into his bedroom, lock the door and read the letter quietly, alone:

*Dearest Chris,*

*I will be moving away very soon. We will not be seeing each other anymore. Two years of you were more than enough for me. Since my acceptance to Columbia University I have decided that I will be more honest in my dealings with others and myself, starting today with you. I compiled this catalogue for you. It is quite exceptional, if I do say so myself. I hope you enjoy the stimulating read. I call it:*

*You're not the only guy who made me cum loser!*

*Friends that I slept with before I met YOU: Darcy, Johnny, Freddie and Adrian*

*Friends I slept with while I was dating YOU: Trong Tri, Joe, Rangit and Matthew.*

*Random sex friends while we took a break: Mr. Chen, Ricardo, Meadow, Wilbur, Richard, Julian, and Sky.*

*My newest addition of sex friends: Bob1, Bob2, Christopher, Noah and Leigh.*

*All for freedom and I'll always be on your mind now.*

*PS) This is your entire fault, you brought this on yourself.*

*Best Regards!*

*Fatima*

Chris was devastated by the letter and sobbed while gasping for air in between his pillows and the comforter of his bed. He felt physically sick from hurt, tricked and betrayed by the constant thoughts, obsessive thoughts that played over and over in his head that night. He dealt with the positives and the negatives, coming to the conclusion that the outcome was bad. He replayed it in his mind, getting different spins on it, positive spins, and negative spins. Nobody had ever hurt him like that. Then he realized that the relationship was over and wondered what he should do next.

## ARRIVAL OF ENIGMA: 1

Four months later, almost everything did go as smoothly as she had hoped for. Fatima moved into her own apartment in the big city. Everything in the apartment – the colors, the concrete, the furniture, the smells – was new to her. She could think of the seventies when she entered the living room and smelled the curtains. Everything in the bathroom was new and interesting to her – all the worn-out fixtures and the old furnace for heat. Strangers had designed that apartment, installed those fixtures, chosen those white wall tiles. Some of them were cracked now, the crack-lines and caulking all black with mould or dirt, and the walls themselves were a little bumpy. Other people had become familiar with all those things, had considered them part of the comfort of the house. *This place is empty*, she thought, *four white walls free of familiarity or family*. Yet, a sense of angst and grim memories began resurfacing here, long-buried thoughts which she had worked hard to forget. In that apartment especially, she felt very alone.

From Fatima's diary, several days after moving into her new apartment:

*It is Saturday night in my tiny two-room apartment in the big city. I handed out a lot of resumes last week. The most amazing thing happened. I had an interview for a job at a high-end men's clothing store and they said I was incredible. They offered me part-time hours and said that later a full-time position might be open. I still can't believe it. I've come this far. I can't believe when those words first came out of my mouth at work to Heidi. I said proudly, "I'm moving to the big city." I can't believe it. Finally, one of my dreams came true. Now I am a firm believer of the possibilities of being an optimist, and trying your best. I sure have come a long way from depression to euphoria. The two years I was with Chris was a rollercoaster ride. As Azel said, "You were an emotional basketcase." I was crying all the time, being very*

*hard on myself and life was harsh. But everything has changed now, and seems as though it took overnight.*

The sick woman read Fatima's words in her hospital bed, and concluded that Fatima is, was and must be an optimist for life. *As an optimist and an overachiever one must be constantly setting new goals and achieving all of them in order to be happy*, she thought to herself.

Fatima stopped writing, closed her diary and fixed herself a Jack Daniels on the rocks. *"But in truth, I'm not truly satisfied where I'm living right now,"* she thought. *"As far as the quality of this apartment, it is close to perfection. Yet the rules – I cannot live with.* Her landlords, who lived downstairs, were an older, Catholic, Portuguese couple. When she moved in they established some rules: she was not allowed to have any overnight visitors in their house, daytime visitors allowed only on weekends. *I'm paying five hundred dollars a month to live with fatherly and motherly figures*, she sighed. *That's okay, I will change this circumstance easily. I refuse to live under these arrangements.*

Lost in thought, she sipped from the glass. *I have already paid my landlords two months' rent. At the end of the two months I will move into a new place near the city center for the same amount. From now until then, I will have one thousand dollars saved to move into my new place. I'm really happy I got a good job at the clothing store. My paychecks are quite impressive. They will be the same amount I was making during prime Christmas week at the mall back home. I have enough to save for my university savings account fund, and the rest will be for spending. I can do it all, I just need to stick with this budget. If I try hard, I can save two thousand dollars for university, no problem. Then I will need to find a roommate. My world would be blissful if my brother Azel could share a place with me while I go to school.*

But no chance there, as he had moved to Western Canada for art school.

*During these first three months, I also want to save some*

money for a new wardrobe and hairstyle. I'm thinking mini-skirts, tight, pencil-thin trousers, maybe a blue pair; no, black is more flattering. And three pairs of designer shoes, preferably very high heeled. From what I've seen already, oh my God, there are some hot little numbers. In that Italian fashion magazine I circled five must-have pieces of clothing for Fall/Winter that I must get. Maybe a pair of faded jeans, sexy low-cut black lace tops, new makeup and accessories. I'm sure the city will have a good stylist who can color over my disgusting, flaming red hair. Last season I didn't get much of a chance to look the way I wanted. But this time I'm going to look killer.

Soon I will be prancing around at work with firm legs and tight mini-skirts. It will make me feel so good. Note to self: buy some cellulite cream. I'd love to get a French manicure, too. So many things to get, and of course I need some hot club wear. Life will be perfect when I get those things. I want to go for a certain Latina look. Those Latina girls always look confident and seem so passionate about life even if they are usually 10 pounds overweight. I love that, they don't care what other people think. Those girls always look so pretty in the mall. I'm perfect for that Latina look. That's how I will look, exactly like them.

I spent twenty dollars on groceries today, so I can't afford to go shopping again for another month. I really need to make my food last for a while. I am also going to get my tanning membership. I have to look gorgeous for the boys at the mall. Let's see what I need to work on. I think I can lose 10 pounds by next month.

I am 110 pounds now, but 94 pounds would be perfect for my frame. More water, vitamins and fewer carbohydrates, that is usually what I crave. Next month when I go grocery shopping I won't buy cheese, meat or milk. I will skip the bread and get ricecakes instead. They are so much better for you but just as tasty. Eat only one meal a day and do at least 3 hours of cardiovascular a day. I'll write in my food diary every day and only drink water. So Fatima keep your eyes open in the shops for what clothing

*looks good and what those Latina girls are wearing. Maybe I'll pick up one of those Latino boys along the way, too, hang out at cool VIP clubs with valet parking and find a husband with a Ferrari. Do it all, knock the socks off every guy that walks by me and make them desire me...*

As far as men go, she was dating Joe in secret, her uncle's friend the Spaniard. He was okay, thirty-three years old. She didn't think her uncle knew what he was talking about when he said his father was in the mafia, because he didn't have a car or much money. But he did offer her what she needed right now, friendship and companionship. She also met this Italian guy from the mall named Nick. Now on the outside Nick didn't look like her type of guy, too preppy and kind of a momma's boy. Yet, he was a witty conversationalist, which she loved. Maybe something would blossom, possibly sex, friendship and a romantic relationship. Who the hell knew?

Another gorgeous man whom she noticed first came into the store and asked her out. They went for lunch and it was such a high. The next day a boy from the baguette cafe asked her out to a movie; she hadn't been to a movie in months. He paid for everything, it was very flattering.

Joe her boyfriend was coming over tonight. Hopefully they would have delicious sex together tonight at her apartment. She knew it would be great. The first time they did it she was on her period and he made her come twice. So the guy knew what he was doing in bed. Not so cool was the fact that Joe had a low libido. They did it about every couple of days. With Chris, their doinking average was six times a week.

*Every time you meet somebody new, they say you find a new piece of yourself that you never knew you had, she thought. I have met a new part of myself with my boyfriend Joe. To other people and myself I say we are only dating. But when it comes to my heart and soul I know that we are an item.*

She felt close to him in that he understood her life right

now. He had been through hard times himself, living in poverty and depending on social security payments. He immigrated to America when he was eighteen and worked hard to make things work, but lately he'd had some bad luck, or perhaps he had to try a bit harder.

He made her feel stronger as a person, encouraging but not forcing her to stand up for herself with her protective landlords. He allowed her to feel comfortable with whatever choice she'd made. She thought she was strong enough on her own, but not even close.

*There is a part of me that can be made invincible to struggles and conflicts. I think he can teach me what I need to learn to survive. Joe is, well, an average Joe-looking guy. "That friend, e feio," my landlady said to me when I was doing my laundry. "Feio?" I asked, while giving her the evil eye. "Not pretty, in Portuguese," she replied. I kind of agreed with her, but I didn't want to admit it.*

She did not think she would marry Joe. But he was perfect for her right now, in her life. *For now he is all that I need. He is everything I could have asked for. He doesn't have a job, but that's okay, he can give me more attention this way. Before, I thought Joe was immature, but there is so much maturity in him. Joe gives me the permission and encouragement to be my old and now strong self. He does not say "that is not right" and "that is not lady-like," or proper. He just understands me for some strange reason. Some people don't, but he does. He understands where I come from, and he is not scared. He, too, is a strong spirit like me. He seems to like me and care for me as I am.*

July: *Dear Diary,*

*Christ, I'm so bloody stressed. There is so much on my mind that I think my head is going to blow up. First my landlords are a bloody pain in the ass. This is too bad because my apartment is so gorgeous. I am in love with it. I just wish that this house belonged to a wicked couple. I hate my landlords with a passion. I met this*

*waiter, an East Indian guy at the restaurant of the mall. I invited him over to my apartment for drinks. I think Joe knows something is up, so I have to remain cool. What a mess my life is right now.*

*I'm looking for a new place to live, and have to try harder this time. I thought my landlord's rule about no overnight guests wouldn't be a problem, since I didn't know anyone in the city except for Joe. But everything has changed. The East Indian man wants to go out with me again. I don't even know his name still, it's too hard to pronounce. He and I also made plans for Saturday night. But I have plans with Jessie from another town. We met each other at the mall when he was visiting the city. Jessie called me tonight at work and said that he wants to come down to visit me and do something with me this weekend. What am I going to do? And Nick, the best-looking guy, he and I made plans, too.*

*I can't even explain it properly, it's so complicated. I'm supposed to call Jessie tonight, but how the hell can I do that when I am not allowed to use the downstairs telephone because of my nut bar landlords? The landlords have not installed a phone jack in my part of the house yet. Money is a huge problem in my life, and I am so close to going on a huge shopping spree using my university savings account fund. I have to get hammered tonight. I have just enough money to go out with the girls from the store. I know that they are at that new dance club. I'll just show up. No, I can't do that. No I can't, because I wasn't directly invited to go out with them.*

Later, she called her brother Azel and asked him to accept the charges to Jessie, who lived in the next city. She called Jessie on a payphone, then broke up with Joe. Now she just needed to call the East Indian man and tell him the truth, that she wasn't interested. She called Nick and told him that she wanted to go out with him tomorrow afternoon, instead of the original plan. *Saturday I'll look for apartments*, she thought, hanging up. *On Monday I'll go to Columbia and make an appointment with an advisor so I can find out what prerequisites I need for my upcoming courses.*

*Dear Diary,*

*Today I got up at 6am to look fabulous for Nick. I spent 2 hours trying to straighten my disgusting hair and one hour on make-up. This is part of my usual routine now. Nick expects me to look good and of course my customers at the store do as well. Before I have lunch with Nick I have an advisory appointment with a university counselor. I also need to give them mother's check for my prerequisites.*

*Mother finally sent me some money, thank you sweet Jesus. Today is a big day, possibly the most important day of my life. I always say this every day. But it is the truth, every single day of life is important. I give everything to make that day full and significant. But I feel so tired of trying so hard. I don't feel that drive that lies at the bottom of my gut as much anymore. Fatima, wake up. Don't talk like that!*

*Every day I must do the most impossible things that everyone said were impossible. I will make the impossible very possible. I have proved this to myself many times over. It is now or never girl, now go! Go get them and get them good! Eat 'em up! And swallow it whole like never before. You have a lot of things and people to prove them to, now go give it the best shot you have. Fatima, you know you have it in you. Now just give it. It's not hard. You've accomplished harder things in your lifetime.*

*I hope today is the day Nick and I make love. He sometimes makes me feel insecure because I don't know whether or not he wants me. He's had a chance to have sex with me but he didn't take it, saying he had to drive his poor mother somewhere. His father is in Italy and she doesn't have a driver's license. Oh brother! He called me in the morning and asked me if I would be interested in going for a drive to the country in his car. He was very excited because he had spent all of his credit from his visa to upgrade his sound system.*

*It was such a wonderful day, a welcome diversion from routine. We walked along the cool, shaded lake and pastures of*

young grass seedlings. Along the lake we found a charming little English-style manor house transformed into a restaurant, with the sun illuminating every corner of the patio. We had the most scrumptious meal of fresh bread, goat cheese, homemade gnocchi, and I savored every delicious sip of our Chilean red wine...

"How's your meal, sexy?" Nick asked.

"It's the best meal I've ever had. This is really too much. I don't have any money to cover a meal like this," she said.

"It's my pleasure to pay. I want to get to spend more time with you. Before I met you, nothing seemed to excite me. I was bitter and angry with my sad life. You see, I am just a car mechanic. My mother dreamed that I would be a famous character on a soap opera one day. I know I've let her down. But with you I am free, a freedom that I can't explain. It's a mystery how another person can allow you that kind of freedom. It's somewhat of a freedom of expression, a mutual exchange of wants, fears, silliness... and for that fleeting moment, one is not alone and miserable. You make me want you, Fatima. You are beautiful, and I desire you so much. You are like that daffodil on an unattainable mountain peak that wants to be desired too."

"Come on, you're full of shit," I said.

"No, I am dead serious. Do you know what loneliness is?" he said.

"I do," I replied. I smiled and took a big bite of gnocchi, and lingered over it. "Oh my God, I love this. This is so good."

He'd smiled, while he focused on the lake and felt very guilty. She hoped that she seemed clean to him and couldn't read her thoughts, because she couldn't help thinking about what had happened to her last night.

Her landlords had called the police on her and the East Indian man. She had him over for just one drink. *I should have called the police first*, she thought in hindsight. As soon as her landlords' thirty-year-old son took off his belt and threatened to strike her face with it, she should have run for the phone to call 911. He

called her a *puta*, a slut in Portuguese. When the police arrived, she explained everything objectively to them. Of course the police took her side but it didn't accomplish anything, except that the parties had to stay away from each other by five hundred meters. When she looked at her landlords' face and they looked so distressed – *good!* She thought. *This was peanuts for me. I've gone through much worse. Yet why do I feel so stressed out? I'm too old for this crap. I need to get my act together. I wish these men would have sex with me, then go their separate ways. I don't think any of them are hot, only Nick. Oh my God that dress in the shop was gorgeous. I put it on earlier today and it was just incredible. I must be losing weight. But I'm not complaining. Nick said that I looked gorgeous. It made me feel so happy. I think I will leave all the others and just have Nick. He is not perfect and he is not the man I will marry. But if I focus on him he will make my life easier, and he makes me feel special for now.*

From Fatima's diary, after her afternoon date with Nick in the country:

*Where are you? The man who will fall in love with me? The one who will treat me like rare jewels? I know you're out there. I'm sick of searching for happily ever after. I want to be loved. Take me away from this deep well. All my relationships have been rocky ones and I need you to take me away forever. Love is pain and suffering. The one who will save me from this sunken grave will prove me wrong. I know you need me as much as I need you. Who is this soul who will save me? I'm dying day by day and I don't know what I need or how much of this I can take. Save me infinitely and even beyond death. If you fill this part I'd simply dedicate my life to you because you are the one that I've been waiting for; searching for; hoping for. You are the one and I'll love you forever. I know you are there waiting, for me to get well.*

*All for love.*

*Fatima*

From the hospital in Saigon, Vietnam:

*As the sun came up the next morning she walked out of her apartment and locked the door. She jumped on her bicycle and peddled along the light brown dirt paths behind her building along the creek. She rubbed her eyes; she had got some dirt in them...*

When the sick woman read this diary entry, it brought back memories of a vibrant orange, bumpy countryside road where she and Laurence once traveled together several months before. She thought of Cambodia's dirty roads, green rolling pastures, a blessed scenery that stretched out for eternity. All around them was beauty, entrancing their eyes, alongside misshapen bodies from third world poverty and minefields. This was the only safe road to the famous Angkor Wat temples, where Lawrence and the sick woman traveled to by bicycle. Laurence always took the lead. Both of them were engulfed by the endless emerald ricefields, the wind on their faces and hot sun arousing them even more than they were.

They rode their bikes for eleven kilometers before deciding to rest under a large oak tree, their bodies shaded by its overhang. An abundance of red and violet blossomed cherry trees were scattered around them. Laurence set down a purple silk sarong on the grass for them to sit on. They rested in silence. As she spoke, he mentally took a picture of her demure smile. He didn't want to forget this flash moment for his entire life. He knew that in a lifetime, happy moments were few and fleeting. He hoped that she didn't catch his unspoken exasperation with her, because he believed she was created in heaven just for him. Laurence looked into her eyes, trying to find a hint that she loved him, too.

"This scenery is something out of a dream, isn't it? She said. "It's a country of miraculous transformation, from genocide to hope."

"Hope for a better world," he said.

"I'm going to miss everything about this country."

Laurence laughed and said, "Of course you are, this country is

mind-altering. It's labeled „governed,’ yet in reality you can do anything here within partial human ethical reasoning.”

“Yes, but anything is better than living under a dictatorship. Now tyranny has been replaced by anarchy.”

Laurence laughed and replied, “A little anarchy here and there, I guess. Cambodia leaves you with this feeling of instability and yet makes you feel completely and disgustingly alive. I'll miss Cambodia, too. Extreme beauty and extreme ugliness, living side by side in unity. I have visibly witnessed God here for the first time and felt that hope came to show itself for once.”

She nodded and put her arm around his shoulders with her head leaning on his neck. She was tired of everything. A terrible weariness overcame her when she said, “Laurence, when you go home, you must forget all about me.”

“I know,” he said.

“I'm going to do the same with you. When I go home, I'm going to put this all away and never go back. You're not mine, it is best that I stop this. Your wife is waiting for you in Indiana.”

Clumsily Fatima got up, shook the dirt off her clothes and got back on her bicycle. She didn't want to be led by him anymore. She wanted to be the first one to finish the last leg to the honored Angkor Wat temples. Laurence got up and yelled...

Suddenly, a loudspeaker at the hospital interrupted the sick woman's reverie. It was dinnertime for all of the patients at St. Grace's hospital.

## IT'S ALWAYS DARKEST BEFORE DAWN

Fatima turned her head to the little garden where her landlords were working, tossed her mane of red hair and looked away into the distance. She sensed a change in the weather. There was a gust of wind and a chill in the air. The tall maple trees swayed and curled like ocean waves. She passed from the sunlight into the chilly air of the unlit street, where along a wall, in looping black spray paint, she read JESSIE RULES. Fatima stopped and placed her feet on the ground on either side of her bicycle to put the hood of her lime green sweatshirt over her head. She flicked her cigarette into the air and walked her bike uphill towards her apartment, released the latch of the wooden gate and felt the first drops of rain on her face. She put her bicycle in the small purple shed. She did not look at her landlords as she passed them. She quickly climbed the stairs, collected her mail and entered the house. She did not pause, but ran up the stairs, which were in darkness, and continued down the small hall into her bedroom. She excitedly opened an envelope as she sprang upon her bed, stomach down and read the letter from Columbia University:

*Dear Fatima,*

*Your registration in our program is now void due to non-sufficient funds (NSF check enclosed). Please call our administrative office to rectify the issue.*

*Sincerely,*

*Lizzy Wang*

Shocked still, she looked out of her window looking for Nick as if the information she read hadn't meant anything to her. She saw his car and ran out of the house to meet him across the street.

"Hi Fatima, how are you?" Nick said.

"I'm fricking spectacular. Never been better!" she said bitterly, as she fumbled with her bags, sat down in the car, grabbed a cigarette and lit it. "I can't believe this crap, I'm in deep shit. I could have stayed at home, but all I could think about was that

I wouldn't be able to get the exact courses I wanted there, you know the good ones, from the best university in the country." Tears started flowing.

"Now I have nothing. The academic advisors from my high school are amateurs. They don't know how to deal with this kind of thing in my hometown. In my hometown, they knew nothing about it. I wouldn't be able to make it for registration and counseling and all that crap they do during the summer. They didn't tell me anything. You know all that stuff." She was choking on her own breath while talking. "That check mother mailed the university bounced, and I'm not going to... I'm not going to... I'm not going to give up. Those administrative bitches are bitches from hell. They didn't give me the correct information. Now I won't be able to get any of the courses because it is too late. I am a good person, don't they know? I can't come up with the money. I don't even have the money for toilet paper. "

Nick reached in the glove compartment and handed her some tissues. "Fatima, don't worry, it will work out. My mom and I will help you."

Three months later, she and Nick were still together, and he was officially her boyfriend. Every day he would pick her up in the morning and drive her to work, they had breakfast together, did errands together and every other day she would spend the night with him at his mom's house. They would meet several times a day. He was the only man she was seeing and sleeping with. He was the only person she talked to, too. It was okay, it seemed.

One Sunday morning, Fatima and Nick were having an early breakfast at Nick's house. She slid her hands through his black, silk-like, wavy hair, moved forward to kiss his neck, then put her mouth on his earlobe. The gold hoop in his ear was fun to play with in her mouth. The pungent smell of his cheap cologne lingered.

He pushed her away and said, "Hey, I want you to come to the

Italian Day picnic with us today. It's a big family tradition that happens once a year. You don't need anything, just you. We'll go after I drop you off to change. You look like a whore in that outfit."

"Fine!" She did not have a choice. He wasn't taking no for an answer.

Throughout the day at the picnic she got plenty of kisses, hugs, snuggles, and overwhelming cheek squeezes from Nick's family, twelve hours of family time. It was a three-hour drive into the countryside, with a few cottages on several acres of land, sheep, and fruit trees. Delicate aromas of barbecued meats and pasta sauces wafted through the air. They were surrounded by hundreds of people and tons of self-assured, middle-aged fat women in tight-fitting, leopard-skin patterned clothing and matching heels, busily preparing dishes and rounding up children and men for the big meal.

Fatima did not fit in with his younger, skinny, and big-haired cousins. They seemed so concerned over trivial things, like what jeans look better with boots, fitted jeans or boot cut jeans? All the cousins grew up together like brothers and sisters, and always talked about the family history, gossiping about others who were not there. Nick's family was very religious, very Catholic and very conservative. Everyone knew everyone's business. She was very overwhelmed. She hadn't known any family like this one.

The main uncle, Amerigo, was the center of the family. Amerigo was fifty-something, lanky, with gray hair and a small beard. There were also gray hairs in his nose and ears. Pock marks on his face stood out while he smoked, which were probably from terrible acne as a teen. He had crystal-blue eyes, like a wolf's. His hands were big, rough and wrinkly. Amerigo would shout things like, "Hey, Nicky, when y- you, you gonna come over to my place and fix Zia's car?" He stuttered when he talked.

"Whenever you want, Zio, I'm there," said Nick.

"You're a good boy, Nicky. Who's this lady friend?"

“Yes –” she cut into the conversation. “Hi, my name’s Fatima.” She tried to offer him a cheek to kiss like she gave all of Nick’s other family members, but instead he reached out a hand for her to kiss. She kissed it quickly. Amerigo wore loose, dark jeans with a gold-studded belt, patriotic Italian T-shirt, and white hightop running shoes. He carried a large hoop of keys, hundreds of them, on one side of his belt loop, and a pager clipped to the other side.

Amerigo’s side of the family were from the North of Italy and his ancestors first arrived in America in the early 1900s to escape from starvation and pellagra, a disease often resulting in the insanity and death of two million Italians every year. So Amerigo had actualized what his family desired, the American dream, and everyone in the family made a big deal about him, going out of their way to pay their respects and kissing his hand at family gatherings. They would remember to call him on his birthday and gave him Christmas presents every year, too.

One year, uncle Amerigo bought the entire family airline tickets to Milan, all forty-plus people. Then the family returned to America sporting matching patriotic T-shirts with pride. Seemed nice, but then again this American Dream was about to be crushed by the IRS and could happen any day now.

She’d met them before but still couldn’t get all of their names straight. She and Nick wrote a song beforehand so that she could remember all of their names; that helped immensely. His family was boisterous but warm, yet she sensed jealousy, anger, resentment, betrayal, even violence, blended with compassion. It was a family saturated in secrets and lies, shrouded in toothy smiles and very loud small talk.

She was half-Italian, but did not grow up like this, far from it, not even close to this large a family. She didn’t have any extended family; it was always just mother, daddy, Azel and her. Her family life was very unusual and not the best environment for a kid to grow up in – essentially she didn’t have parents, and grew up all by herself, along with Azel. Mother was either too stoned, drunk

or busy shopping, and daddy was abroad, directing fighters.

Nick's family gave her such inspiration though, to try harder to improve herself. Most of his cousins and Italian friends were already married, with mortgages and babies. Several of them asked Nick and when they would get married, and indulged in stories of their children. She wanted that too, maybe.

But most of these people were locked into something, committed, with house payments, car payments, TV payments. They seemed busy keeping up with the Jones' and not really living, only judging everyone and stating why they were better than everybody else. Fathers bragged about some kitchen renovation or some piece of property that was bought or sold. They were living for plastic things, steel things, and frivolous things that don't give you any sort of inner fulfillment or love.

She was feeling much more optimistic these days, but she felt belittled in a very subtle way around his family. *I am the outcast. This family makes me believe that in this world it hardly matters who I am inside; it's how financially stable you are that matters the most. I just want money now for basic things, then I can move forward to things that are major, like love and adventure. Nick's family says, "Oh he's such a good person!" when that man owns a million-dollar mansion and acres of land. And they said, "That woman has style," because she's sporting a 24-karat gold band with a massive diamond and jade pendant that only a king could afford, and even though she acquired those things through her drug-dealing husband. Everyone knows but denies all about everything to save face for the family. His family said, "He is in construction." Everyone in this family is "in construction" or owns a small business of some sort but cannot say what exactly. It's money that matters most in life for this family.*

Nick's aunts sure did complain a lot, as if they wanted to show how much they had sacrificed and suffered through in their lives. And they were always whining about one medical ailment or another, complaining about their back pain, neck pain

or their chronic fatigue syndromes. She doubted these men in “construction” or whatever else they did found any real personal fulfillment or passion there. She thought they just gave up their sweat and tears for the fulfillment of their family; sacrificial love, sort of like Jesus Christ.

*Dear Diary,*

*Right now, especially not having anything to my name, living below the poverty line is pretty sad. But I feel that things will change for me very soon once I get a better paying job. Through one of Nick’s cousins I overheard something about a job in the hospital that sounds good, radiation therapy. I’m going to look into that. She told me that she gets paid \$32,000 a year and she only took six months to finish her program.*

*I don’t want to be disgustingly rich like Amerigo, I just want all the things I’ve dreamed about. I’d like a house on the beachfront, to live in a warm climate, to own a nice car. That’s all, not much. So many people have achieved it in so many creative and difficult ways. I’ll be finally happy if I get some of those things because my life will be easier. I swear this to myself and to all the screwed-up yuppie folk who have spat in my face and deteriorated my self-confidence. At the same time, all this ambition and optimism with nothing in my hands makes me bloody thirsty. When I get home I’m making a stiff drink of rye on the rocks and gingerale and going to bed.*

She got home to find no magic. She had prayed to the Virgin Maand envisioned it so hard with all her might that uncle Amerigo would give her a gift of water and electricity, but nope. Her water was still cut off and the electricity had been down for about two weeks now. She came up with a new plan. She registered at a technical college to be a medical radiation therapist so that she could afford an Ivy League Education. She barely had enough money to call Mother on the payphone, so she made a collect call.

“Mother, I need three hundred dollars so I can secure some courses at the technical college. Can you please help me? I want

to get into some technical courses to be able to support myself when I finally get into the Ivy League.”

“Fatima,” her mother wheezed, “I told you I don’t really think it’s working for you. You left on your own will, I can’t help you. We don’t have any money. I feel very sorry for you but I think you could have made it at home,” she said.

“Living at home I know how much a dollar is, living on my own I value a dollar a lot more,” she said, quickly saying goodbye and hanging up angrily. *I can only trust myself*, she vowed. *Thanks mother, for teaching me that one. No one has ever come through for me, except maybe Azel. I now know that people solely help others for selfish reasons, never wholehearted, selfless reasons or anything. I have nothing to offer anyone, so therefore no one cares about me. I can’t depend on anyone except myself from now on, there have been too many expectations, too many letdowns. I never thought life could be so very challenging. It’s so very challenging...*

She just had to try harder. She came up with a plan to get the three hundred dollars for technical college. Actually she didn’t technically need the money to secure a spot in the program. She gathered her high school transcripts, humanity awards, income tax statement, and letters from her landlords pleading for rent money, which was a month and a half late, and bank statements of her overdrawn account. She was determined to prove to the director of the technical program that she didn’t have any money and that she deserved a free education. She wanted that perfect high-paying job so that she wouldn’t have to live in poverty in the city any longer. It would only take six months to become a medical radiation therapist, plus some time for the internship. She promised herself that. She thought she deserved to make enough money to survive every paycheck.

*Dear Diary,*

*I’m so close I can’t believe it. It’s so awesome, so perfect. I cannot wait six months from now when I can make some real*

money and be something very respected. It's perfect! In only six months I will become a radiation therapist. I just have to figure out a way to get the money. No more sorry and pitiful comments coming from Nick's family. "Oh she's a retail salesperson. How do you afford your rent in the city?" I know I can get a good job. I can obtain the skills. I will be able to get a well-paid job in a hospital or whatever.

Nick where are you? At 5pm you told me that you were coming over. You are such a bloody liar. Don't make promises you can't keep with me, ok? Remember that, A-hole!

The last point that I want to make is that I am doing darn well for what I have been through. My survival skills are strong right now. I'm living in a ground-level, downtown bachelor apartment in a big city. When I am tucked into my bed I can hear people leaving the bar late at night and their conversations. I have no phone, no real friends; my boyfriend didn't show up tonight. When I write in my diary at night it's by candlelight and I shower at the public pool five blocks down the street. I've never felt such loneliness but I'm keeping my cool. I'm not crying, why? I'm not crying. I'm poorer than a homeless dog. And I'm keeping my sanity. This is a very good thing. I definitely need my sanity right now. I'm proud of myself, very proud!

Well I'm working, spending my days around my new bachelor apartment. No TV yet, I have a battery-run twenty buck stereo that ruins all of my cassettes by eating them. At night I feel so paranoid that someone will break in and attack me, the sort of paranoia I would get from those nightmares as a kid that the men in camouflage with a tiny red satin star on their caps would get me and Azel. I'm on the ground level and anyone could get into my apartment by cutting through the window screen with craft scissors.

The other night I had a nightmare that was so vivid that I think it really happened. First I was fully awake in my bed yet unable to move. I was so terrified. In my sleep I tried so hard to come out of it. I tried to move but my whole body was paralyzed. I tried so

*hard to scream but couldn't make my mouth move. Then my spirit sprang out of my body above me and I was flying around aimlessly to each corner of the room. I could look down on my body from the ceiling. While I was floating around uncontrollably, a nine-foot steel being was in my room and a purple laser beam shot out from his head. The being sort of looked like a very narrow robot. Out of control, I zoomed right out of my apartment window into the night sky and into other countries where it was day. I looked back at my apartment and saw ten wolves perched over my windowsill, growling at my body lying on the bed. I don't remember what happened next. But it was the most terrifying moment of my life. It was very hard for me to sleep alone after that experience.*

Nick finally showed up at her apartment. He walked straight into the kitchen and said, "Fatima, there is nothing to eat. Why don't you ever buy bread, cheese or meat? I'm starving."

"There is a cup of noodles in the bottom cupboard you can eat."

"No, I can't handle this crap anymore, I'm taking you to a church food bank to get some proper food in this place. I'm very worried about you. You're not eating enough; you're a walking corpse."

That day Nick borrowed his mom's car, and drove her to the food bank. When they arrived at the door, the church lady asked her to fill out some forms. Then she said, "You can take a full cardboard box of food for five dollars... if you can afford to pay." Fatima shook her head. The lady waved her hand to come inside and gave her a big cardboard box.

The food bank was a small makeshift grocery store set up in a concrete two-park garage, and stank like old rags – second-hand clothing that hadn't been washed in months. Holding her breath at 20-second intervals helped her get through that smell. She was interested in the cake mixes and one-minute rice packages, so she browsed around the shelves and took a couple of pre-packaged items. She walked past the antique fridge and browsed through

the juices and yogurts. Sticking her head in a separate yogurt bin to take some apple juice boxes out, she suddenly caught a waft of moldy cheese and curdled milk, a rancid mixture of wet dog, urine and sweaty armpits of old men. She started gagging, glimpsed a sink at the back of the store, ran towards it while holding her mouth and puked all over the sink. She tried hard to think of something else to prevent herself from puking again. She thought of Azel. She quickly washed out the sink while tears engulfed her eyes.

At that moment she decided she'd had enough. She quickly picked up her cardboard box, gesturing to Nick that she was leaving. She didn't want anyone to see her. Nick threw in some more things into his box and walked out the door with her. Ashamed, she threw the box in the back of his car, opened the front door and sat down and lit a cigarette in silence. She thought about Azel and what he would think.

*Dear Diary,*

*The next morning I woke up at 8am. Nick had a court case at nine in the morning and he wanted me to go and support him. He got one assault charge dropped and only had to pay three hundred dollars for having no insurance on the car. I had my counselor's meeting at the technical college for the radiation therapy course at one in the afternoon. I've decided it's for certain I'm going to be a radiation therapist. They administer radiation therapy to people who are afflicted with cancer and tumors.*

*I met with a pudgy old man named George. He sort of resembled Santa Claus but not as cute. George wasn't full of shits and giggles. I explained my financial situation to him and he was very understanding, like he had experienced something similar. George was playing with his white beard when he said, "Fatima, you qualify for a twenty-five percent discount, and you don't have to pay any money up front to secure a spot in our program. You could apply for social welfare and just have a part-time job while you're studying at our school full time." I said, "How do I do*

*this?" George said, "I will call the social welfare office now."*

He set up an appointment for her that day. He made a list of forms that she needed to photocopy and bring in. *This is a perfect,*" she thought. *"I think my sexy low-cut blouse and mini-skirt brought me good luck today. I have to repay the favor somehow."*

She was so happy she could have kissed George right then and there. They would allow her to attend the six-month course without paying, a blessing. She'd be going to school full-time to be a radiation therapist assistant by next summer.

She never thought she would be this financially unstable, but she figured this must happen to a lot of people.

She thanked George and caught the bus home to get the essential papers and applied for social assistance without a hitch.

*Dear Diary,*

*Hi there, little one. So it's nine o'clock on a Saturday night and I'm in my coke bottle glasses and Laura Ingalls nightgown. I did something that I thought I'd never do. I answered two "just friends" advertisements in the local newspaper and put my own advertisement in the newspaper. I hope to meet some new friends soon.*

*My advertisement read: White female, twenty-two years old, seeks other female party animals. Hurry up girls, summer is almost up. Into clubs, patio and coffee. Write me at this PO box 1122.*

*I really hope I get like ten responses, that would be so great. I can't wait to get a telephone line. My social life really needs an explosion now. That's ok; I know what it feels like to have no friends. Let me say that this is something I never want to feel ever again. My life will get better, I know. It's just another problem. I have to crush it. If it has the balls to come back again, I'll crush it again harder.*

A girl named Shelly sent a letter in response to her advertisement in the newspaper a few days later. Fatima called her the same day on a payphone.

“Is Shelly there?” she asked.

“Yes, this is Shelly, who’s this?”

“My name is Fatima. You wrote me a letter. You got my address from the local newspaper.”

She asked, “Oh.... are you into girls?”

“Yes.”

She said, “So you are... a lesbian?”

Fatima said, “Oh no, no I’m not. Does it matter?”

*Astonishingly, she hung up the phone on me and that was the end of the conversation with that Shelly girl. Nick you dumbass if you don’t show up here after the club I’m going to personally rip off your balls A- hole. Oh, that felt good. But it’s true, that jerk has let me down so many times, when I needed him the most. I don’t like him anymore. If he doesn’t show up here tonight I’ll just dump him tomorrow morning. I need to keep pushing my boundaries to keep me stimulated and to stop myself from depression and killing myself. Whatever, I don’t know what I’m talking about... I think I might need my head examined...*

She got her monthly check from social welfare that day and thought she deserved a treat, so she had her tarot cards read by a famous psychic.

The psychic said, “This year is very hard. The next 3-5 years are good. You will meet your soulmate very soon at some family gathering. He has dark hair and medium-colored skin. He’s one in the same as you. There is something foreign about him. Nick is not your soulmate.”

She asked, “Is Nick keeping faithful to me?”

The psychic replied, “There are many things going on in his life and that’s why the two of you will break up. October is good career-wise. A new career choice is offered to you. You’ll be working with foreign people in the public in a very different place than where you’re at. You’ll be happy doing it. It is something you will enjoy. Keep your private life private. Don’t tell people too much. Your twin flame or soulmate is waiting and looking

for you. He is waiting for you because you have life-changing lessons to learn yet. He is a natural psychic and he will know where you are, and he'll find you and save you from yourself."

Fatima asked, "When will I meet my soulmate?"

"You'll meet him in the next couple of weeks, or even in the next couple of days."

The first tarot card Fatima chose had to do with dealing and getting through problems. Some death cards came up and she was quickly reassured that it didn't necessarily mean someone will die. She was calm. She wasn't scared because she knew that it had to deal with an end to her financial problems and poverty-stricken summer.

*Dear Diary,*

*What a bogus boyfriend I have. I hate him, bloody bastard. I'm so angry, last night he went to a dance club with Marion, Rob, and those skanky sluts from that wedding party. I was not invited. I will call him this morning and if the bloody guy is not home I'm really going to end it.*

*Once Nick said to me, "We all have to make sacrifices."*

*Screw him really...Is that why you go to other girls' houses, to screw them asshole? I know Katherine, that girl he used to bang was there. I don't want him anymore. Screw it, I'm angry, you jerk from hell. You promised me a whole day at Niagara Falls for a romantic date. If he's not there when I call at 11:30am he's never sleeping with me again. If he's home I'm telling him I have no money for Niagara Falls, sorry I cannot go. Too bad cornhole, it's over for sure. I'm very glad it's turning out this way. Everything that happens is meant to be.*

She went for a walk, then it started to pour down with rain. That was funny, because people started to push each other around, out of their way.

*I can't wait for things to get better. It's been so hard for me. As long as I don't give in to the fight it will be okay. I think quitting anything is the dumbest thing one can do. I've thought about*

*packing up and heading back to Indiana but that was not the solution. I'm glad I've had this year to learn to support myself. It has made me stronger inside. If I was that spoiled military brat in mother and daddy's house I would have failed. "Oh no, they are not giving me what I asked for." (Insert temper tantrum here) I can handle success and failure maturely. I'm a human with hopes and goals, and I see the hard work and perseverance it's going to take.*

*This morning I got a second response to "Just Friends" from a girl named Laura and she sounds cool. But for some reason I think she's an airhead. That's really horrible of me to say, since I don't even know her, but that's what I thought. So why should I even bother reaching her?*

*At first I felt happy today when I was with Nick, very happy. But I'm feeling a bit sluggish now. I have to write back to Laura and don't even feel like it. Isn't that weird? I want to get my telephone line next week, but then I will be broke until my next check.*

*November: Last week has been very tough for me. I am emotionally burned out. I had an emotional breakdown at my school. I couldn't understand the chemistry problem on the board. Everyone got it except me, and the teacher was putting me on the spot. All I could think of was my rent being late, and other more important things.*

*I was pressured to pay my rent so I applied for a checking account with check bouncing safety but they declined my application because the computer said I had a record of overdrawn funds. The banks are not happy with me at all. I wonder how my other account is.*

*Nick and I were totally fighting and pretty much broke up. I tried to break up with him and he refused. He said, "No one will care for you the way I do." Then he called me a whore, and threatened to kill me if I left him.*

## BLOOD ON LITTLE DAISIES

Fatima unwillingly woke up to the 7:30am rush hour traffic on the main street of her city, in a daze. The pounding pain, coming from her bruised thigh, annoyed her. Suddenly she began to feel horror and humiliation as she played back in her mind what had happened last night. It all felt like a bad dream, or an exaggerated story told by a drama queen.

*“How could I have let this happen to me?”* She asked herself over and over in her head, as she psyched herself to get out of bed to begin, as she believed, another useless day. Grimly, she looked around her tiny, one-room apartment and at her ripped shirt split in two pieces lying on the floor, stained with blotches of dried blood. Her favorite yellow blouse with little daisies on it could never be worn again. Hesitantly, Fatima looked over from her bed at the floor under the second-hand wooden night table to see if her baby-blue porcelain angel was safe. It was very special to Fatima because her daddy had given it to her at her first communion. Fatima stared at the shattered pieces, her yellow-green eyes overflowing with tears. She turned toward her boyfriend, Nick, and cussed him out under her breath while he slept under the sheets beside her.

Today was a crucial day for Fatima for many reasons. She had a job interview for a part-time retail position at an internationally known clothing store. She knew this job would help her with achieving all the plans and goals that she had set for herself. This was her first job interview in three months: she was eager to start working, wanted to start meeting new people, and was fed up with receiving social assistance every month.

Slowly, she put her sore legs down on the cold cement floor, then stood up and limped towards the bathroom. The bruise on her left thigh was now the size of a small pumpkin but she easily concealed it with a pair of baggy, black and white pin-striped pants. She worried about what blouse to wear and wondered if the

manager would notice her limp. She chose a loose cotton button-up shirt, the one with ruffles from the neck down to her navel. The shirt reminded her of Mozart and children's formal piano recitals, which somehow made her feel a whole lot better.

Fatima was finally ready for her interview when Nick woke up and offered her a ride. She preferred to walk on her own as it was only two blocks away, but her leg was very sore and he wouldn't take no for an answer. Fatima reluctantly accepted the offer, and quietly waited for him at the kitchen table while he got ready.

Before Nick dropped her off at the side entrance of the store he whispered,

"I'm very sorry Fatima. I promise it will never happen again."

Fatima nodded and proceeded towards the store. Last night's incident felt so far away now, as a whirlwind of butterflies danced in her stomach. She was excited but feeling very self-conscious as the manager approached her.

"Hello, are you Fatima?"

"Yes, I am," she said.

"I'm Mary. It is very nice to finally meet you. Shall we sit down?"

Fatima smiled and was feeling even more self-conscious by Mary's dashing demeanor. The interview felt a little strange to Fatima, because she knew that she was not at her best, but Mary didn't seem to notice. When a flash of Nick kicking her in the gut last night entered her mind, she focused hard on Mary's face and tried to appear "normal". Mary complimented Fatima's eagerness to work, her politeness and her maturity.

When it was time to leave they both stood up and walked slowly towards the door, past the crisply folded T-shirts and pristine fitting rooms. Fatima prayed that Mary liked her, and prayed she would get the job. Mary reached out to Fatima to give her a handshake and said, "I will call you next week to let you know if you are the successful applicant."

Fatima thanked her for the opportunity with a nervous smile.

“Oh Fatima, before you go... Can I ask you why you are limping?”

Fatima grew uncomfortable and had difficulties blurting out the words, so she lied and said, “I was playing soccer without any shinpads on.”

Mary chuckled and replied, “Oh, well, I guess you know better for your next game to protect yourself.” Fatima laughed nervously and quickly walked out the door.

Fatima never got a phone call from Mary.

She soon got used to walking on her bad leg; it didn't feel so excruciating anymore. While she limped home, she wondered if her boyfriend would be waiting for her at home. He didn't live there, he just popped by without a moment's notice.

From time to time he would check up on her, making sure she was staying faithful to him. Her leg was in immense pain from trying to walk on it normally when she was around Mary. But she felt at peace. She normally felt that way when her boyfriend wasn't around.

This was her chance to call Joe for help in leaving her boyfriend. She was absolutely positive he would help her through this incredible misfortune. All her friends and immediate family lived in another city, and certainly they couldn't help her now.

She had to make sure her boyfriend wasn't around, so she looked down the street to her apartment to see if Nick's black Honda civic was there; it wasn't.

The phone booth reeked of urine, repulsing her as she called Nick's house. Suddenly, that evil voice answered the phone. She hung up immediately. Nick's voice made her physically ill, she hated its raspiness. Fatima just wanted to make sure that he was not in her neighborhood, because he hated her using the phone when he wasn't around.

She called 911 first, and they told her to get pictures taken of her injuries and go to the police, but she didn't own a camera. Then she decided to call her ex-boyfriend Joe, to ask for his help.

Fatima picked up the receiver, inserted a quarter and prayed he would be home.

“Hello?” Fatima was so relieved.

Fatima spoke quickly: “Joe, something terrible has happened; I can’t believe this, it’s so awful. Last night as I was breaking up with Nick, he was yelling and swearing at me, and then he started trashing my apartment. I tried to call the police, but he ripped the telephone cord out of the jack. So I ran out of the apartment to the payphone to dial 911, but it was too late.”

Joe was silent.

Fatima continued, “He started punching me and kicking me; he wouldn’t stop. I was left lying there, in the middle of a busy sidewalk, with many people passing by me, but no one stopped to help... Joe, what should I do?”

In a sly tone Joe asked, “What did you do this time to provoke him? I mean, I hate men that beat up their girlfriends, and I’m very sorry to say this... but you probably deserved it...!”

Hysterical, Fatima shouted, “Joe he’s psycho! He might kill me!”

Before Joe hung up the phone he yelled, “I’m sorry Fatima, but I can’t help you. You’re not my friend any longer!”

Fatima was completely shocked that he could turn his back on her. She just could not understand it. Was she so alone in this world? Quickly, she regained her composure before calling her Uncle, eager to speak to him. Pulling her last quarter out of her pocket, she quickly pushed it through the slot. She dialed his number quickly, as she knew it well. She had called her Uncle for many things in the past: to borrow a cot when her best friend came to stay with her from back West, for advice on family recipes, and various other things.

Her thoughts were interrupted by her Uncle’s thick Italian accent. “Hello?”

“Hi Uncle, it’s Fatima. Did I catch you at a bad time?” Fatima asked.

“Oh, Fatima, no, it is great timing. How are you, lovely lady?”

“Well, I’m not doing well right now, something awful has happened to me. Last night Nick and I got into a bad fight, and he started punching me, and kicking me...”

Abruptly he said, “Fatima, what on earth did you do to provoke that kind of thing from him?”

Her heart dropped at this, and she had no more will to speak. She had been so certain her uncle would help her out -- but he couldn’t help if he couldn’t understand. She continued the discussion but soon rang off in disappointment, and slowly limped back home, tears running down her face.

While walking home Fatima whispered aloud, “I am in deep trouble. I don’t know what to do. I am in trouble...”

She was determined to leave Nick but it seemed it would not happen without a struggle. She knew she had to come up with a well-crafted plan. Fate had not welcomed her attempt at escape. She was determined that she would get out of this relationship one day soon, but certainly not today.

When she got back to her bachelor apartment Nick was already there. He could not meet her eyes as she entered the room. He looked upset and said,

“Fatima I talked to your mother today. She left a message with my mom. I’m so very sorry Fatima... Your brother Azel died this morning.”

There was a long pause, as it took a long moment for the words to sink in. Then shaking violently, she slapped him in the face with all of her entire being and screamed, “What did you say? Don’t you... don’t you fuck with me!”

“I’m sorry Fatima, it’s true,” Nick said, grimly looking at the wall.

Letting go of him she collapsed on the floor and cried while she held her bruised leg, the leg that Nick had viciously kicked the night before. A ball of rage seemed to form in the pit of her stomach, and hit her like the jolt of an earthquake. First, it was a

small tremor, then the fury erupted like a red-hot super volcano, red-hot, molten rage, and grief flowed from her gut throughout her body.

“How could this happen to me?” she cried. Nick bent down with her and wrapped his arm around her tightly, as she wept and wept on the cold floor, without a sound.

*Never for even one minute ever think, “It could never happen to me.” Because it can and it will,* thought the sick woman, chewing the end of her pencil, deep in thought.

## **ENIGMA OF ARRIVAL: 2**

Uncle Amerigo paid for their air tickets back home to make it to Azel's funeral. She didn't want Nick to go home with her but she didn't have a choice. So Fatima felt anxious and exhausted at the same time, a horrible state to be in. It was a long flight from the big city to her hometown in Indiana. When she arrived, she felt so lost being at home and being there for her brother's funeral.

This anxiety about feeling lost led her to take a walk to her childhood home, several kilometers away. As she finally approached her old neighborhood, she was ambushed by childhood memories. There was the same dirt pathway shortcut from the tiny corner store, still owned by the original Chinese family, the very store she once stole from when she was five years old. She'd wanted that heart-shaped pink eraser so much! So she took it. Her mother reprimanded her by spanking her on the walk back home. It turned all the neighbors' heads.

Mother threatened to force her to give it back and apologize to the owner but she never made her go through with it. The little girl was terrified at the thought of having to confront the owner. Would mother or she have to go to jail? Mother was scared, too. She did not want to face a fear that she had denied; she was a bad mother.

A series of childhood feelings flooded her mind. When she was little, she felt controlled and over-managed by her parents. There was school on weekdays from eight-thirty to three o'clock, then she had to take care of Azel and finish all the chores before mother got home at seven. It was overwhelming trying to finish everything while being chased and tormented by her brother at the same time.

He was a naughty kid. He liked playing with matches, and once she caught him in the downstairs bathroom making a fire on the floor with a towel. Nothing really happened, they just dumped water on it and tossed the towel over the fence. For years she

expected the neighbors to ask about it, but they never did.

Azel and Fatima hid things like that from their Mother, all the while worried that camouflage-clad men with rifles would come barging through the doors at any moment to kill them both. Every strange noise they heard would make them hide in her closet until they felt safe to come out.

When mother came home, Azel and Fatima had to tiptoe around the house on eggshells to avoid outbursts of anger and guilt trips for the house not being clean enough. Then Wednesday night they had church choir, Thursday night Portuguese class, Saturday morning piano class, and bible class on Sunday mornings before mass. And if they received less than 100 percent on any of their tests or competitions they would get whacked in the face. Her mother thought 100 percent was a fair score, but 99 percent was horrible and unacceptable. If they didn't get perfect scores they went to bed without dinner. She always accused them of not trying hard enough. Fatima always felt depressed as a child because she felt that she would never be free of all these pressures. Throughout her childhood she felt unloved and ignored, and could never recall being hugged or told she was a good girl. Her entire childhood was made up of pain and suffering.

Unexpectedly, Fatima in this millisecond in time, felt suddenly free. Nick had gone with her mother to the hardware store to buy something for Azel's funeral. She reveled in her freedom without Nick by her side, although she wished her brother were still alive. Now she was alive and free, but alone. She missed Azel so much...

She turned right on her old street, where she used to walk with Azel and kindred friend, Jacob, who also lived on their street. She now thought she had taken that friend for granted. He had been her confidante, he just hadn't known how much. Maybe never in public at school, but just in private, on those walks home. She felt regretful and stupid for not realizing this earlier. Her life at that time had been so full of worry, fear and sadness. He was the one she turned to when she was most scared. Once, when she was

alone and heard a loud noise coming from the back porch, she'd even gone so far as to call him up. As a child, the thing she feared the most were her daddy's enemies; she feared they would find them, break down the door and kidnap her and her brother.

Her friend Jacob never told a soul about her deepest, darkest secrets. It never occurred to her how much he meant to her back then, when she was only seven years old.

Now, as Fatima took that stroll she wished she could go back in time and thank him. She wanted to hug him so tightly for being her only true friend. He wasn't the kind of boy she used to dream about; Jacob was chubby in all places, including his head, and had unusually large pointed ears. He wasn't the cute, button-nosed, blue-eyed, blond boy Matthew, who was her first crush and who kissed her innocently when the teacher wasn't looking. Jacob wasn't particularly cute in that way.

Fatima made her way past the old English-style mansion, with six high, stained-glass windows. They were shipped in from England and showed a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, with white, flowing gowns, a harp and Juliet expiring on a bed of roses and Romeo on bended knee holding the cup of poison to his lips. Ivy and hydrangeas were strewn over one side of the house and a large droopy monkey tree grew on the front lawn.

Slowing down, she looked around to find Jacob's house. She thought about how sad Jacob would have been to know that Azel had been killed. She knew that Jacob would have remembered the times he pulled Azel out of the road in traffic and kept a close watch over him. Azel was an active and spontaneous kid, who was too much for just one caretaker. She stared up at Jacob's old steps and door in shock and dismay when it dawned on her she had never once climbed up those stairs. She didn't even know what the inside of his house looked like. Then she glanced up at the other neighbor's house, the family on social welfare. They were a bad family, according to her mother. The house still looked unkempt after all these years. The front yard was still overgrown

with wild blackberry bushes and weeds, and the whole house hadn't been repainted in years.

She finally came to her parents' house and its long, concrete driveway. Here a waist-tall, Mediterranean-style rock wall and black rod iron gates were kept closed, except for the time she and Azel had let the chickens out for fun. She remembered her brother pulling back on the chickens' wings and spinning them around and around until he fell to the ground, let the chicken loose and watched it stagger dizzily, then laughing uncontrollably when they would take a big poop afterwards. He did it with little chicks, too, the poor things would get so disoriented. He laughed even harder when she cried for him to stop; she didn't think it was funny.

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and pictured the never-ending variety of flowers that would appear in spring, and what it felt like to count each one for the annual spring flower counts at her primary school. Fatima was so proud when her teachers would praise her for counting the most flowers in her class. Those original flowers were still there; the tulips, daffodils, and bluebells.

The enormous front window of her brother's room hadn't changed. Azel must have looked out from it often, trying to catch sight of his friend from Ghana who lived across the street. They were best friends, and he probably saved Azel's life a couple of times as well. There were no phone calls made, only casual meets on the street when Azel yelled to him from his window. They played capture the flag with other neighbors, and street hockey.

Fatima stopped to touch the thick bush of ivy, and one by one, with her open palm, she briefly touched the iron rods of the gate, the concrete driveway, the grass, and admired that rock wall that was built by a Dutch neighbor. That rock wall was her make-believe balance beam, where she used to tiptoe across, and do cartwheels off, and dream about winning the next gold medal at the Olympics. That driveway was where she taught herself how to ride a bicycle and rollerskate, too. She remembered how liberating

it had felt to her. She bent down and grabbed some dirt from the flowerbed that she'd walked on as a child, rubbed the dirt on her hands, then wiped them on her pants.

A lump in her throat formed as she stared back at the side of the house and the tiny window on the side where once was her bedroom. That tiny ground-floor window was her ticket to freedom at night when mother was asleep, or during the day. She developed a habit of running away from home, which used to drive her mother to insanity.

She ran the whole way back to the Chinese convenience store to use the public telephone booth, after vaguely remembering an acquaintance telling her that Jacob still lived in her hometown. She grabbed the telephone book and searched for his name, the boy who had saved her life without her knowing it, until now. It only took a minute to find his number and reach him.

"Hello," he answered.

"Is that Jacob?" she said. She could hear children shouting in the background.

"Yes, who's this," he said flatly.

"Jacob, I know you remember Fatima from elementary school. Remember me? You would walk home from school with Azel and me every day. Azel has died," she said while breaking down into tears.

"Ummm..." He coughed and covered the phone while he shouted at the kids in the room. "Sorry...who is this again?" he asked.

"Fatima, from Richmond Elementary School," she said.

"I'm sorry... I'm not sure," he said.

"That's okay, bye-bye," she said.

In anger she slammed the phone down. She felt numb and hurt, even more than she was already. She felt stupid that he had not remembered her exactly the way she had remembered him.

It was late. She had to get back home quickly as she was far from her mother's house. She took the bus back to get ready for Azel's funeral.

## MY BELOVED BROTHER AZEL

The sick woman was sitting on a scarlet velvet armchair in St. Grace's mental hospital in Saigon, Vietnam. She pulled her long black-and-white-striped stockings up to her knees, adoring the way they looked with her black Mary Jane shoes. She was still wearing the pink cotton hospital smock which she was forced to wear.

She skipped ahead a few pages in Fatima's diary and continued reading it to Laurence. Then she coughed and cleared her throat and began rambling off of the top of her head, as teenagers do.

"Lawrence, would you think I was full of shit if I told you that some people go through their life so easily, with so little discomfort? They are fulfilled with their family, friends and life. They speak well, they look great, and they play their part beautifully. And when they die it's in their sleep at age 102. These people have a flawless passing. A life well-lived.

My brother Azel is not one of those people, he doesn't even come close. He contested the institution and social „norms' all of his life, and he was punished for it. My brother was a borderline atheist, and this angered the bejesus out of my Catholic parents. They never really wanted him in the first place to begin with, you know. Our mother had her appearances to keep up, and drinks to pour. Daddy had his military life and posts to keep. From up close, it didn't look like they loved him or even liked my brother very much at all.

He would steal money from me often, you know, five dollars here, ten dollars there. I forgave him easily. Usually I never said boo. I had to forgive him, because there were only the two of us, on our island of „not normal,' waiting for rescue and everybody else in the world of normal.

Life was never easy for my brother. My brother lost hope and hung Jesus up on the wall like the others, in the Hall of Fame. Jesus left him at the wayside for a long time. He hoped for a

sign. One time when he was stoned he said, „Fatima I need to witness an apparition of the Virgin Mary or something, so that I can believe again. I wait for the day where she will part the clouds and make us look up at the silver dish in the sky once more. I long to know why we are here. I mean, is it all random or is there a purpose?’

You know, Lawrence, in 1917, there was an apparition of Virgin Mary in Fatima, Portugal. And the sun danced in a zig-zag motion and witnesses said that it spun rapidly, releasing indigo, yellow and white flashes. Then it came dashing toward the crowd, and just as suddenly, it shot back into space. It cured all of the witnesses’ illnesses, probably to prove to us that something bigger than us exists.

When my family went to Fatima, Portugal for a family trip, Azel said that he didn’t feel anything special towards her shrine. I felt something so strong that I burst out crying when I sat in the pew, looking up at the holy shrine. Mary was alive in that church, and I could hear her voice so clearly. Mary told me that my purpose would come to me very soon, never to give up hope and that my purpose would be bigger than anything I had ever imagined. She also told me to be kinder to strangers. But the miracle lay in the overwhelming feeling of unconditional love that showered over my head and throughout my body. She really gave me that feeling, that tons of people love me here and beyond, and that a higher force protects me always. The divine was shown to me and I am a believer for my whole life now.

But I think my brother was too far gone, and that even if he were shown an apparition he wouldn’t know it. Or excuse it for something else; he’d think it was extraterrestrials or something.”

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### **Indiana, America**

She and Nick arrived at the church for the funeral on time. They walked past all of the punks, her brother’s social group, who were hanging on to the 70’s punk scene with a vengeance. They

wore plaid pegleg pants with buckles and straps, ripped, black faded jeans, preferably not washed in ages, and generally walked around with a pissed-off appearance.

She took a deep breath before opening the church door. They entered the foyer, catching a faint glimpse of the shrine made for Azel. The shrine had a framed photo montage of her brother, and a few favorite poems that he wrote. The poems they chose were nice but the plastic picture frame looked cheap, she noted. As they entered, a woman named Maggie appeared out of nowhere, and gave them her condolences. While talking to Nick, Fatima thought she behaved like it was a party or something. The manner in which she chatted with him seemed like they were at a bar, save for the beer and peanuts.

An attractive, familiar-looking older man approached her slowly. Transfixed by his green eyes, time stopped and everything was spinning around her but still within her as that man walked towards her with a warm smile.

“Fatima?”

“Yes, I’m Fatima.”

“I’m Laurence. Your brother was my student at my art studio several years ago. I feel like I know you already. He talked about you all the time. I just refused to believe it. I am so sorry for your loss. We were more like friends than student or teacher. I loved your brother like a brother.”

Then, without anyone seeing the gesture, he slowly moved his arm around her waist and clasped on to her two fingers, and squeezed her fingers tight. His gaze was glued to Fatima’s eyes, light green-yellow, which he felt he had known for years. He was crying inside, too, holding back the tears, and in his green eyes she could see a familiar, pure soul. In that flash of time, she endured what seemed like forever, a metamorphosis that was completely unexpected. It was a certainty of body, mind, and spirit, a freedom like she had never known. She felt an unshakable faith in him, in herself, in life, and in purpose.

On the other hand, she was annoyed by Laurence's girlfriend, Maggie, who was smiling and chatting with strangers like it was just another day. This was a time to grieve, she thought bitterly, not a time to put on an act that life is all fucking neat or something. All people should embrace the mourning period; she certainly did, weeping throughout Azel's memorial.

She was in love with the moment of letting go, after being so depressed recently. *It's the only time when people are finally allowed to lose control, feel nuts, feel sad and express themselves publicly*, she thought. *Let us feel our disgusting emotions.* She was in a constant state of shock and disbelief, numb and withdrawn, where nothing was as important as Azel's passing. *Let us get lost in our shock, by running it through our heads over and over again, in order to make sense out of it.* She felt a lot of guilt, too, because of a demented twinge of happiness for him, too, with the sense of closure, just the fact that he was in a better place. Azel died at thirty-three and lived less than half a life. She was told that his death was an accident and the details were never cleared up, but it didn't matter exactly how he died; it would always remain nonsensical to her.

Her mother, Nick and Fatima all took their seats together. She stared blankly at the wooden casket and the Christmas tree decorated with polyester angels at the front of the church. Azel's cherry-red electric guitar and an NHL hockey jersey were placed at the front of the altar, barely representing who her brother had been in this life, it seemed to her. The hockey jersey was her father's idea. The jersey was more like a symbol, what her father *thought* Azel should have represented in this life. *Daddy didn't make it to the funeral; duty to the country and fighting revolutionaries were more important than family or Azel's funeral.* The picture of Azel at the front was one she'd taken three weeks before, when Azel came to visit for one night in the big city...it was the last time she saw him alive.

That picture would haunt her forever, the two street lamps

above him and the way he cocked his head, seemingly looking up at them, and not looking at her through the lens. She'd tried so badly to ignore the subtle burn mark around his mouth; it was a cold sore, he'd said. After the picture was taken, he said he was nervous about moving away and starting again, but that he was hopeful. He'd told Fatima that he thought everything was finally going to be okay this time.

The service of remembrance and healing began with the usual prelude. Then the priest read word-for-word, not looking up from his book, some cliché opening remarks and a special prayer that everyone had heard a zillion times before. They sang the #499 song from the hymnbook, published by a Fortune 500 Press company. Then the priest said, "I invite Fatima, Azel's sister to the podium to give a tribute to her brother."

She barely made it to the podium, even though it was five feet away, feeling awkward in her high-heeled, black stripper boots. They were half-on because they couldn't zip up over her calf; bloated, her period had begun that day. Serious mistake number one: she'd worn them anyway.

What happened after reaching the podium became a bit of a blur.

"Um, hello everyone. Thank you so much for being here, it means the world to our family to have your support. Please bear with me, this is really hard. Azel and I had a love/hate brother sister relationship. He was so frustrating and a hard person to love. Yet, he was my hero. He was a one-of-a-kind artist, always striving for the perfect painting, the perfect painting that would explain the purpose of life.

I often asked Azel what his paintings meant. I always thought he was a genius. You know I absolutely knew for certain there were universal truths lying behind each piece of work. But he refused to tell anyone. He wanted the meaning to be expressed through his paintings, never up for interpretation; crystal clear.

He was shy, antisocial and did things that may seem against

the normal person's reasoning. He had a strange sense of what's smart.

He was usually on the move, looking forward to his next adventures, smoke in hand. Several times he moved to Western Canada, then he lived in Midwest America, then back and forth, and back and forth. To many people he appeared to lead a pretty meaningless life. Nevertheless, he probably lived more closely to spirit than any of you will in this lifetime. His imagination was his gift from God, and his paintings, poems and songs were expressing what God told him to express. I will miss my beloved brother Azel.

Azel the priest, lived like a hermit -- lonely and isolated from society. His death may seem senseless at such a young age. But there is always hope of his resurrection through his paintings, his 196 poems, 30 short stories, 68 original songs that he wrote, sang and belted out on his keyboard."

At this point she stood behind the podium silently while one of her brother's punk rock songs played, called: *Jesus knows, I'll catch his eye*. Azel's voice was haunting to all the people in the church, sounding eerie even to the old, pasty-white postman who peered into the window and walked away quickly to make a quick dropoff at the side office.

When Azel's song finished she continued to speak while the tears flowed, "His art will continue to inspire thousands of people and countless generations. And now that he is gone, I hope he doesn't become famous. It would piss him off to reaffirm that only great artists are dead. Now he is at one with the air, at his own memorial service, looking down at us, laughing. Or rather, in disgust, since he probably pictured his service would be outside by the sea and not in a man-made church. He will remain in our hearts and memories forever. It was hard for him to find a place for himself, like trying to fit a circle peg into a square hole. Some may have called him a „lost soul'. But „lost souls' are really people who no longer have the possibility of a reunion with the divine.

Yet Azel was in constant union within the divine spirit. He was side by side with ascension.” She glanced at Nick and mother and they were looking away, without emotion.

She sighed deeply and said, “Azel fought against the „normal’ system, kind of like a monk. He had no what you people might call „material stuff.’ I know that he had no „stuff’ because when they asked me to get his „stuff’ it was all stuffed in a small black backpack. Having no stuff wasn’t important to him. God would also tell you that he doesn’t run on our „normal’ system, really. Life is just the test.

Azel didn’t live by the contemporary views of success. He had his own definition of these measures. As for my brother Azel, his purpose came after his life. Today the church is packed full of people, all uplifted and inspired to be just like Azel. We all want to be closer to spirit. A relationship to God can be closer through writing, art, music and prayer.”

She’d finished reading her notes but felt there was so much more to say. Confidently looking up at the church full of people she said,

“Boy oh boy, has he definitely taught me some lessons about love. The kind of love we gave to him was what we thought he needed, but it wasn’t true love. He taught me what true love is. Sadly, people only become truly revered and loved after they die. I want to kill myself when I think how I love my brother more now, than when he was alive.

When my brother was alive, no one gave a rat’s ass about him. Our family cared immensely, and we showed love, the way we thought love was. At that time, we loved him through yelling at him to stop drinking so much. We loved him by avoiding his phone calls and not returning his letters. We loved him by blaming him for his messed up life. We loved him when we gave him money for his rent and we loved him when we gave him guilt trips for the money he never paid back. Azel would respond by rolling his eyes or he would remain silent, never retaliating because he had

accepted that we would never understand him.

Seven days ago, I learned a deep lesson about true love. Next time, when I love and if I ever truly love someone – did I just say that? – I will love everything about that person to death, especially their imperfections. Society contains anti-social people who don't fit in. Outsiders are used as sacrificial lambs..."

Quietly the priest walked towards her, grabbed her arm to pull her away and said, "Thank you Fatima, that was lovely..."

She nudged the priest away, grabbed the microphone walked away from the podium, looked out to the audience and said, "With Azel, he wasn't paid well, had no money usually, and pawned all of his belongings to survive. He didn't even have money for bus fare. Perhaps Azel was appeasing the Gods." She laughed while saying this, thinking how some Gods are said to be happy whenever human blood is shed.

"His blood was shed that night when the driver of a car hit Azel in a little garden meridian in front of St Vincent De Paul's Cathedral. This was his punishment and he was sacrificed for us."

She ended her speech by screaming and yelling as loud as she could, "God... Azel... why did you have to die now? Why in God's name did you take him away from me? How dare you do this to us!"

Then, acting without thinking, she pounced at his casket and wrapped her arms around it, crying. She tried to stop crying because it stole her breath, and she gagged while trying to contain herself. She wanted to hold on to that casket forever; it felt *soooo* good, a long-awaited release. Then she opened his casket and climbed inside it, hearing loud gasps coming from the crowd as she carefully lay down next to him. Azel felt like a squishy doll. *He was dead, her brother was dead!* Mother and Nick walked up and helped her out from Azel's casket, and as they walked her out to the back room she noticed the embarrassment in their faces. She looked at them and screamed, "What's wrong with you people? Show me for once some bloody emotion you stupid drones!"

She sat down in the back room and mother gave her a glass of water and fed her a horse pill. She soon became unresponsive. That pill was her deliverance. She remained very still and quiet for the whole day and throughout the afternoon reception of biscuits and tea later at mother and daddy's house.

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Like everyone at that reception now, she was zombie-like. Laurence was there along with his lady-girlfriend Maggie. Each time Fatima looked at him he would catch her, and they were not afraid to lock their glances for awhile, reading each other's souls. Laurence and Maggie walked toward her and Nick and sat down beside them on the couch. They made small talk. His girlfriend couldn't stop commenting about the deviled eggs and how delicious they were.

Laurence looked at Fatima and said, "I have a painting that your brother gave me in exchange for a favor I did for him. It's quite a large piece. It's not fair that I keep it any longer. I want to give it to you. Are you staying at your parents' house?"

"Yes," she said. Nick cut into the conversation and said that they were leaving for the big city in a day and a half and that she would have to get the piece some other time.

Laurence said, "Oh, I see. That's too bad. We'll do it another time then. No worries."

She developed a well-crafted plan. She asked Mother to talk to Nick to tell him that she needed her at home. Mother convinced him to fly back to the big city without her. She drove her mother's car to drop Nick off at the airport.

Nick said, "I'll call you when I get home."

She said evenly, "Oh right... my parents' new place. You don't have the number yet, do you? It's 598-2111." She lied through her teeth and got away with it.

Nick said, "I love you, Fatima."

She said, "I love you too, Nick."

She watched the wart-covered monster hand his ticket to

an angelic flight attendant and made sure he got on board. She surveyed the airplane like a hidden mouse spotting a cat and didn't look away until it took off into the open sky.

She was in bliss. That was the very last time she would ever have to see or talk to Nick, or associate herself to anything that belonged to the big city ever again. Oh, dear God...*Oh, meu deus sagrado*...she was finally free!

## LAURENCE

### St Grace's Hospital, Saigon, Vietnam

Laurence was alone, watching TV in the common area of the hospital. He was flipping through the channels and couldn't find anything to watch. There were just a few channels and all were in Vietnamese. The nurse had left to take the sick woman to a psychiatrist's appointment. A diary lay forgotten on the scarlet velvet armchair.

He quietly flipped through Fatima's diary and noticed an envelope with his name on it; it had a Christmas card inside which he had never seen before. Fatima had written this poem in gold ink along the left-hand margin of the card:

*For Laurence, the one I will never forget*

*What is it inside?*

*Ay, your divine spark*

*taken over me*

*Voice that was made for me*

*Once antique warrior prince,*

*Now sensual, sexuality*

*I want to succumb to thee*

*What is it that retaining?*

*Chosen and enclosed*

*You are not from this plane*

*But ethereal moons away*

*Take me,*

*with your arms of hope*

*I need to go deeper*

*Taken into your world again*

*Molded into a piece of rapture*

*You've taken over my body*

*Yet still yearning*

*Once in ultimate peaks of*

*purity and transcendence  
 Take me to your unveiled realm  
 hot crevasses, valleys and volcanic spills  
 Moist lips, warm touch, soulful eyes  
 So close, yet not enough to become  
 I had you once  
 But a slice of your treasure  
 So familiar and yet so exhilarating  
 Angelic feathery voices I hear  
 Be free, be like me  
 Celestial, me  
 I'd like to keep up this dance  
 I want to see you quiver again  
 Your unearthly voice avail me to freedom  
 You are no longer there  
 You found me out, I know I am a flake  
 And I am no longer needed*

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### **One year ago, in Indiana, America**

“Fatima, the phone is for you,” says Mother.

“Hello.”

“Hi Fatima, it’s Laurence. How are you?”

“Fine.”

“What are you doing today?”

“Nothing much.”

“I want to pick you up for you to get your brother’s painting. It’s at my studio.”

“Sure, okay,” she says.

“How about if I pick you up in an hour?” She panics, still in her pajamas, then decides that is enough time to get ready.

“Alright, see you then.”

When Laurence arrives at her mother’s house they give each other a long embrace at the door. Then he drives her to his studio. A Bob Dylan cassette is playing in the car and they don’t speak

much the whole way there.

“Well here we are,” he says.

They take the elevator to the fourteenth floor. He fumbles with the keys, dropping them on the floor twice as he tries to open the door. He finally succeeds, and they take off their shoes. Fatima isn't wearing any socks, and is grateful she'd painted her toes a pretty blue color with sparkles.

The studio is large and very bright. The setting sun is bright and illuminates every corner of the studio. Her cheeks are flushed and she feels good to be there with him. They are alone. To the left of the door there is a small shrine shared by Buddha, and one for Jesus. A bright red lamp is glowing. Some large incense sticks and candles are displayed on a small table. There are some Tibetan beads thoughtfully placed, along with some rosary beads. The paintings of Buddha and Jesus are very realist, exactly how she would have pictured them looking if they were alive today.

It was a two-level apartment with a grand staircase to the left and large bay window in the corner of the main room. The walls and furniture were white and photographs of scenes of Asia dominated the walls. Off to the right there was an enormous balcony with a view of the harbor.

Laurence said, “Sit down, I want to show you my portfolio of photos of Asia.” He showed her photographs of daily life; a man riding a bicycle in the rain holding an umbrella, an old woman at her foodstand of Khmer delicacies – dried grasshoppers, squid and chicken embryos. He showed her a painting he'd done of a ship at sea.

“For the past couple of years I have been taking photos of Asia; this part of the world fascinates me. I've been to China, Taiwan and Japan. Very soon I'll be traveling across Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam for a new project.”

She let her eyes roam around to see if anyone else was there. They were alone. Then she inspected the photos.

“These photographs are totally amazing, you've captured the

feeling that everything has a beautiful side. If I took the picture of that foodstand with the dried grasshoppers it would probably turn out pretty grotesque, but you've captured it from a peculiar angle."

His body turned towards her so the side of her leg was touching his. She moved slightly away from him.

"Hey, what's up with your girlfriend Maggie?"

"Oh, she's my wife." Fatima felt ill and cleared her throat and said, "She's pretty, what does she do?"

"Lots of things singing, acting; mostly she models."

"Where did you meet her?"

"I met her while I was working for Fashion Week in New York... I'll be right back."

"Okay."

Laurence came back holding an enormous painting of Jesus carrying the crucifix up a baby-blue cobblestone pathway. The painting was meticulously painted in bright pink and blue pastels.

"This is your brother's."

"Oh my God. It's absolutely gorgeous. I can't believe how generous he was. This isn't the first time I have heard of him giving away his best pieces."

He pressed the painting against her body; she turned it around, propped it up on the floor and stepped back to admire it for a while.

"May I use the washroom?"

"Sure, it's just to the right of that door."

Later as she came out he walked towards her, and she didn't look away. There was a long pause.

"Well, I should get busy here, I have to prepare something for my project. Do you want a lift back home?"

"Okay," she said, a little sadly. They rode back to her house in silence, a blissful silence.

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**Three days later**

*Dear Diary,*

*It's funny how you can wake up thinking nothing, thinking this is going to be another normal day. I'm going to the library, go home and get ready to go out, like I usually do on most Friday nights in my hometown. I still have a few friends here at home.*

*Yesterday was far from normal. I remember walking back to my house taking the usual path from the library, thinking about my motto, "Have a remembering day". I haven't felt like saying that for a while. I thought my day was going to be the same as most days, and nothing unique was going to come of it. I have been back home for a month now and have had this funny feeling that I was not safe and being watched. The last time I talked to mother something drastically changed. It got me thinking...*

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Heidi drove her to a friend's apartment where they were having a party. Fatima said, "I've been feeling kind of depressed. I'm really not up for a party."

"Why not?"

"My mother is an addict. I don't know how to deal with it anymore. I don't want to see her anymore. Once she clung on to me so tight and wrapped her arms around me and started to cry. „I love you Fatima, I love you,‘ she said while moaning and she was so drunk she fell on the floor... Then, daddy really lost his mind. He started grabbing things, a crystal vase, some family pictures and smashed them on the floor. He came after the both of us. I thought he was going to kill her. But he went after me! He hit me, across the face and I went flying. Then he started kicking and punching me, over and over. I'll never find out why he went after me."

"That's awful. You seem okay though. I mean on the outside. I have an ugly past too, doesn't everybody? But we have to remember that it all seems to pass, once the worst is over. Come on, you have got to come to the party, just for one drink. It will be a good break for you," Heidi said.

“You’re right, let’s go in. I feel like I could use a few cold ones,” I said.

That night after the house party she went with her friends to a dance club. By chance, Laurence was there. They were side by side, having a great time the whole night. She barely saw her friends.

It seemed destined that she met Laurence there, that night during a storm. The rain was pouring through the ceiling; it had been raining non-stop for three days. She enjoyed standing against the wall, right by the white lights near the bathroom, staring out at the dance floor, mesmerized. There were leaks pouring through the roof and several big trashcans were strategically placed around the bar to contain the leaks. It was amusing how people were purposely dancing around the trashcans.

Laurence was wearing a mint green shirt that made his eyes twinkle. She could see a familiar aura surrounding him. He was very excited to talk to her – she liked that a lot. Laurence told her that he once met his half-brother and said it was like looking into the mirror, but not knowing who that person was. Very bizarre. They also had a lively discussion about Asia and their desire to go there; her, Cambodia, him Vietnam. Laurence was going to go through Thailand first, then on to Vietnam. At one point he walked away to get her a whiskey gingerale on the rocks, and when he came back she asked, “Why do you want to go to Thailand?”

“In Thailand I’m working on my portfolio.”

“Why do you want to go to Vietnam?” He looked at her sheepishly before responding.

“I have a contract in Saigon. I’ll be visiting people who were exposed to Agent Orange and other chemicals that affected the people of Vietnam during the war. My photographs will be used for the American War Remnants museum in Saigon, Vietnam. The country is still being affected and some areas I’m going to are still contaminated. Do you think I am crazy?”

She replied, “No, not at all. Ah... actually... if I could, I would

love to go to Cambodia and see for myself how that country is littered in landmines.”

Laurence grabbed her hand and led her to the dance floor for a slower, New Wave song. They danced very close, the smell of his cologne drowning her. She hoped this wasn't the last time she would be this close to his strong body. She was attracted to him.

Later that night Laurence explained to her how he'd once suffered a lot of abuse at the hands of his mother's boyfriend, who was a drunk, and once did something unspeakable. Laurence said she was the first person he'd ever told. Eventually he ran away when he was twelve years old, and his great aunt who was a nun in a mountain monastery raised him. A few years before his mother had died from a heart attack, and he didn't know what had happened to the boyfriend.

As the night progressed, the two danced like old friends, unable to leave each other's side. Her friends had said goodbye for the night a long while ago. She felt she'd met a fast friend in spirit. They talked the whole night; he was a humanitarian, left-wing politically, and desired travel to sacred power sites like the Angkor Wat temples.

The new friends returned home by cab through a horrible storm. On the way, the power went out across the city, while rain overpowered them from below and above, overwhelming with electrical sheets of lighting that sounded like a biblical war was on; devils versus angels.

At home, she settled into bed, getting comfortable with her sacred candles lit. The gas fireplace was on and made the room feel cozy and warm. Just as she settled into bed, about to write in her diary, the phone rang; it was Laurence. It was a very spiritual, magical kind of thing happening. When the candle was lit, the telephone rang at exactly 4:22am. She picked up the telephone.

“Fatima, I really like you. I just wanted to say that I had a really fun time with you. I want to say goodnight and sweet dreams.”

“Thank you, goodnight.” And she hung up the phone. But

she had trouble falling asleep, and couldn't stop thinking about Laurence.

A little while later as she was about to fall asleep, there was a light tap on the window. She got up and let him in through the window. No words were spoken. He entered through the bedroom window and started to undress her forcefully, pushing her down onto the rug. He grabbed both her arms over her head and pushed his body on top of hers. In silence they faced each other in an embrace.

*I'm locked in his eyes, eyes that I have known throughout lifetimes together. His eyes are mirrors reflecting only my true self back to me...*

Fingertips traced warm lips and tongues ever so purposely. He caressed her softly and whispered words of love.

She allowed him to curl his naked body around hers. There were heavy breaths on neck and ears, his hands on her breasts, and heart beating into her back, igniting her heart with something that she could not recall, an echo of the last time, ancient love rekindled.

*I have dreamt my whole life of this moment. Caressed you gently in a meeting of passion. You drive me wild in exhilarating pleasure. Kiss me until I gently reveal my passion, too.*

*My begging response and my hunger for his love pleases him.*

*I taste your essence and you, mine. You're wrapped outside and inside my heart. Our love merges, twin flames begin. Like skin I wear you. I know that I finally belong.*

*I lower my body to kiss your penis but you stop me. I've only just begun.*

*His whole body shoots into convulsions when he has his orgasm; he comes quite a bit for someone who is drunk.*

*He holds me so tight and repeats, "I'm in shock... I'm in shock." Then he pulls me up to his lips to kiss and hold me tight, saying "I don't ever want this feeling to end."*

*It was a slow, deep, intense, relaxed, frenzied, tranquil night,*

*a night of loving gasps of endless pleasure, she wrote later in her diary. Finally, our transcendence arrived on a stormy, full moon night.*

Very early the next morning they said goodbye; he was leaving for Bangkok that afternoon. As he left out the window, she could hear mother's footsteps upstairs. In a flash he was gone, and she was once again in the house, alone with mother.

## MY CAMBODIA - MY EXOTICA

A few months later, after many telephone inquiries, I received a letter from the orphanage in Cambodia. I was accepted to a United Nations joint orphanage program on the coastline of Cambodia in Kompong Som. I would be paid to direct non-profit programs for orphans and teach English. I did not give much thought to my decision to go. The program would pay for my air ticket and my accommodation. I left exactly one week later after my acceptance to the program. I had to find Laurence in Asia.

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Fatima arrived at the airport early and checked in for her flight to Cambodia without any problems, bringing only one small backpack and her purse with her. Most of her belongings were left in Indiana. She only brought what the guidebook suggested: two pairs of pants, one pair of shorts and a several T-shirts. She was wearing the only shoes she had brought, some dark leather sandals, and left all of her fancy clothes, makeup and styling products at home.

While she sat waiting at the gate she re-read her Cambodian travel guide. It was from a second-hand bookstore in Indiana, and the information in it was limited and dated. She'd already read it several times over, highlighting important details and adding little notes of her own while smoking or biting her nails.

She also bought a tin of cookies and a carton of Marlboro lights at a duty free shop, not knowing whether they were readily available throughout Cambodia. There was nobody around to talk to or ask questions about the journey she was embarking on. She felt alone, the only white woman at the gate; everyone else was Asian. She felt out of place, panicky and nervous, and she chain-smoked until her flight was announced. Not only was she nervous about leaving America on her own for the first time but she also had a fear of flying, because in her mind planes were more often falling out of the sky than in flight. She wanted to be sure she

would sleep throughout most of it so she searched her purse for some gravel and popped them into her mouth without water.

The plane had a shaky take-off. With her seatbelt fastened tightly, she closed her eyes and clutched the armrest.

A young Asian attendant hovers, asking, "Excuse me madam, would you like something to drink?" He had a deep, comforting voice and looked elegant in his uniform.

"Yes, I'll have a double scotch on the rocks. Thank you."

"Here you go, love. Enjoy your flight." She sat there gripping and gulping the drink, allowing thoughts of Laurence to comfort her. *On that full moon night bent over like animals, he grabbed my neck so I had been unable to breathe... Oh God, I could die at the thought that Laurence won't be happy to see me. When I eventually find him I hope that he welcomes me with outstretched arms, tight hugs and a wide smile. I hope he is willing to share his half-invented world of Asia with me...*

It was very dark, and as the flight became more bumpy her thoughts were interrupted by an announcement.

"Excuse me ladies and gentleman this is your captain speaking we are experiencing some turbulence so please keep your seatbelts fastened until the seatbelt sign goes off. It shouldn't last too much longer."

She closed her eyes and prayed to the Virgin Mary for guidance and reassurance on my trip. She really focused hard and asked the Virgin Mary and her angels to guide them safely into Cambodia.

She lay an arm on the armrest and immediately felt a large, comforting spirit draped over her back and arms, cupping her hands. She felt two very large wings over her, belonging to a familiar presence that felt a part of her. It was Azel. He lightly rubbed her shoulders and neck, whispering and repeating, "*All for love...all for love...*"

Another invisible being was embracing her from the front. But the most intense sensation was the unconditional love that surrounded her body, from inside and outside herself, a

strong supportive network of energy; a lot of people loved her. Unconditional love showered down and around her from the top of her head. She cried and cried, and the tears wouldn't stop rolling from her eyes.

This feeling of love was very intense, even stronger than her love for Laurence and she grew happy and fully reassured about the trip, life and mostly about love. The love she felt was identical to the love experienced in the little church with Azel in Fatima, Portugal when she was a little girl.

She felt so grateful but did not understand: how could she feel the exact intense feeling of love from out of nowhere, and from two different places? It had to be... an empathic apparition from divinity.

She believed that she was finally on the right path. At that moment, she felt a detachment from everything, abandoned all of desire for possessions, and began living life without fear, just like Azel. *"I'm just going to follow my hunches..."* she thought, *"and not force things. This is my chance to be finally free and clean. In that, I have no choice."*

As she put the chair into a reclining position she hardly had time to think of what she had just experienced, and fell quickly into a deep sleep.

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### **St. Grace's Mental Hospital, Saigon, Vietnam**

After the doctor's appointment, the sick woman was accompanied by her nurse back into the common area and found Laurence fast asleep on the armchair. She picked up the diary in his hands and slapped him on the back of the head with it, giggling at his reaction. She glimpsed at the diary and said,

*"Do you want to know what happened to her? Fatima's chance to escape from her family misery came with the opportunity to enter the recently free but worn-torn Cambodia. She went to a failed Cambodia, a country that reached independence but fell into worse patterns of ugliness and decay... It failed to make*

democracy and the free market work.

Even though she had such a hard life as a little girl, she was a believer,” she continued with conviction. “Fatima never felt safe or particularly happy with her parents,” she said wistfully. “Laurence, I have a nice doctor,” she went on, without missing a beat. Laurence was listening intently. “Today I talked to the doctor and he helped me sort some stuff out.”

“How did he help?” Laurence asked, watching her every movement.

“Growing up she felt ignored, mistreated, neglected and unloved and spent a lonely adolescence covered in a mask that hid her cleverness and unhappiness. This strong sense of personal tragedy, of being a victim of bad luck, remained with her all of her life. Added to it in later years was the grief of a woman who was always left behind by her men. Ah, and after her brother died... that was the hardest part. I felt such anguish for her and her family. Fatima never got the facts straight. It was just Wham! Off to the coastline of Cambodia, trying to displace herself with anything and everything reminding her of her past.”

The sick woman sighed, opened the diary and read, “*Cambodia gave me comfort because it was a place where all of my eccentricities would not be judged.*”

As Laurence put his hand on her leg and kissed her forehead she imagined him wandering around and half-inventing himself and Asia.

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The plane landed in Kompong Som, Cambodia and Fatima looked out of her tiny window, enchanted by the vibrant, bluest-blue sky that stretched out for miles, sprinkled with clumps of white clouds like blobs of marshmallows floating about without intent; just for show. They’d occasionally peak through the jagged palm trees to look down on the blazing orange clay roads. The palm trees grew so tall they curved, and when the wind blew they swayed and tossed about their fronds like ocean waves.

Something that broke up the thick army of sparse palm trees was a miniature tractor, orange in color with black trim. The big black tires and tiny cocked-up seat seemed abandoned but must serve some purpose. Solid Mediterranean white stone walls jutted out of the sand and looked out of place against the endless emerald-green rice paddies. A lonely, isolated two-level house sat empty and the paint sun-bleached and eroded. Odd triple-caged grids enclosed all the tiny squared windows of the house, with bushy, immature shrubs randomly peopling the front garden. There were many Western European-style houses, some abandoned and most severely burned and bombed out. Fatima didn't much notice the destruction that laid waste to some of the houses. On the horizon, she saw a small grove of palm trees that were separated by more grassy pastures.

*"Good, they have houses here,"* Fatima thought, having envisioned the possibility of living in a grass hut with no electricity or running water. *This place looks quite charming. I'm going to love it here,* she decided.

As Fatima walked toward the airport terminal to pick up her bags a scraggly Cambodian boy came running towards her, looking about twelve years of age. He was dark-skinned with dyed orange hair and diamond-blue eyes that sparkled when he laughed. Both his ears were pierced with white plastic earrings in the shape of stars.

"Hello!... Hello!... Are you Fatima?" he said breathlessly.

"Yes, I am."

"Ah, How was your flight Ma'am?"

"Ah, very nice," She returned and was surprised with a big hug from the boy. He said, "Welcome to Cambodia, Ma'am. Cambodia is your home now. My name is Thom; I'm your driver and host for now until you meet DA, the director of Lotus Orphanage. DA would like me to take you to a night market to meet her. Later we'll take you to the orphanage."

Thom handed her the flyer about the orphanage and she felt

a sense of relief that he was the person supposed to meet her. They grabbed her bag, jumped on his motorcycle and rode for about twenty minutes to an area with a large market, with dozens of food stalls and wares displayed on tables. Mangy dogs busily feasted on chicken and pork bones that people had tossed aside from their dinner.

A small woman with dark black skin was approaching them. She had a flat nose and wide, dark brown eyes, between them a bridge piercing, a steel metal bar the size of a tiny nail.

“It’s DA,” said Thom. DA had a skinny body, skinny arms, and was missing a hand. Her shoulders and arms were about the same circumference as her pencil-thin wrists. When the two hugged, her hair touched Fatima’s cheek and it was coarse, and rough to the touch.

Fatima was both fascinated and repelled by DA. Her black hair just grazed her shoulders; it was messy with little movement. Her hair was pinned on each side by two blue plastic bobby pins. She was wearing a baby blue tank top with pastel pink trim, fitted to her delicate frame. She wore a short denim skirt and transparent, light blue flip-flops on her rough black feet.

“Come now, let’s go. We must look for the perfect chicken for you,” DA said, taking Fatima’s hand to lead her toward the market. “Thom is a resident at the orphanage and he’ll take us to Lotus on his motorcycle later. But first, let’s go shopping for the best chicken in all of Cambodia.”

“Oh. Are we going to have dinner here?” Fatima asked. DA laughed up at her and said, “No Ma’am. We need to find a good chicken for you to offer the gods at the temple, an offering for good luck. It is for your own good. You had a good flight, yes?” DA spoke quickly with few pauses in between. “The kids will be so excited to meet you, they have been talking about you for weeks, and they have been very busy picking out flowers in the garden for you. You’ll meet them today. Oh, but don’t worry, you’ll get lots of time for rest tonight. We’ll make sure you are comfortable

and well rested. You start your first teaching lesson the day after tomorrow: *How to help Cambodia be a better country.*”

“I’m not sure... about that topic.”

“You’ll be great, it doesn’t matter what you know about our country,” DA laughed.

“Do I have books to use?”

“No, you don’t need any.”

“How many kids are there?”

“Eighty in total, but most of your classes have twelve students.”

“I have never taught an English class before,” Fatima said, a bit apprehensively.

“It doesn’t matter,” DA replied. “Like most things, you learn through experience and everyone has to start somewhere. So just fake it until you make it. Isn’t that what you Americans say?” Fatima nodded, and they both laughed.

Later DA spent a lot of time asking at different foodstands on the road if they carried whole chickens. It wasn’t easy to find one. Eventually one man said he had a live one; DA said that was the best kind. DA broke the neck of the young hen right in front of the young American while DA laughed at her grossed-out expressions.

Then they took the motorcycle to another store for incense and candles, and attended a ceremony that began by drinking a slightly hallucinogenic kind of tea for worship.

Fatima was disappointed when they got to the temple – it was the size of a walk-in closet, very dark and on the meridian of a road. DA gave Fatima the chicken and advised her where to place it on the altar. She was instructed how to hold three lit incense sticks and bow three times. Entranced by the moment, Fatima watched the smoke slowly circling into the air and prayed together with DA.

“I like your piercing,” Fatima whispered, head still bowed as they were finished.

“I got it at that stall over there. Let’s get yours, too. It’s for

good luck,” DA led her toward the street.

“I just want to look...”

“Okay, no problem for you, no problem for me.”

Across the street was the tattoo and piercing shop. The tea started to take effect and she couldn’t hold back any longer in getting the bridge of her nose pierced. She liked the way the piercing looked, between her eyes, and was very proud and not ashamed of it. DA said that it represented the third eye, symbolized being able to see the past and future, the ability to talk to spirits and to see the spirit realm in everything more clearly.

DA was an informative and colorful friend and quasi-tourguide. She took Fatima to temples for hope. DA taught Fatima how to make sacrifices to appease the gods and make them happy, and about all the superstitions. Fatima was profoundly touched by this woman, and when she went inward to search for light and God and to meditate, she easily met her ancient shamans and invoked spiritual animals to play with her.

Cambodia had given Fatima an invisible third eye.

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Finally, DA, Thom and Fatima made their way back by motorcycle to Lotus Orphanage. Fatima looked out into the distance and asked, “Is Thailand far from here?” She was thinking about how she could visit Laurence in Bangkok.

“Yes, very far. Thailand is an awful place, you don’t want to go there. You want to see the Cambodian villages, jungles and majestic temples of Angkor Wat.” So for a time at least, Fatima surrendered to the majestic scenery of the coastline of Cambodia.

Thom came up the Orphanage’s long dirt driveway and a crowd of children spilled out from the large building, all sprinting towards them. Fatima made a clumsy jump down from the motorcycle. The children were already jumping up and down and hugging her from all sides. She felt such joy within her heart to see them.

“I love you,” said one. “I wish you could be my mother,” said

another. Fatima pulled out the tin of cookies from her backpack and started to hand them out. Hurriedly, they munched down the cookies until they only had large crumbs left on their faces, then all reached out their hands for another. They made a circle around her and started to sing a Khmer song for her: *Welcome home, welcome back home.*

Then all the children said goodnight, with big hugs and kisses. Everyone at the orphanage, including the nocturnal rodents, was going to have sweet dreams that night.

The next day Fatima wanted to get a head start on preparations for her classes, which would begin in the next few days. She started rummaging through the supply cupboard in the main office. A broad-built older Khmer man appeared before her and said in a carefully neutral tone,

“What are you doing in here?”

“Oh, I’m getting materials for my class. We are making a scrapbook, and our topic is: *How can we help Cambodia?* I want them to use some sparkles, fabric, paints ... you know.”

“Those materials are saved for special occasions. The children only need what’s in their classroom. Next time get permission before you come in here.”

“I’m very sorry. I checked the classroom... we only have white paper and a few pastels.”

“That’s all you need Ma’am.”

“Fine, I’ll walk down to the art store to see what I can find there,” Fatima said, rolling her eyes at the sight of his desk: kitchen staff had brought into the office earlier a tray for him a steak with eggs, French bread and espresso.

She thought, *“Last night the children had only rice for dinner, this morning a small bowl of congee. They told me the orphanage had a limited budget... this doesn’t feel right...”*

He practically slammed the door on her bottom as she walked out and left the orphanage in search of art supplies. After walking for nearly an hour she realized that there weren’t any art stores.

She only saw one cafe, a tiny grocery store and a few pharmacies. The sun was setting and she wanted to get back before dark, so she decided to collect things that she found on the road along the way. Quickly she rolled up her sleeves and started to wander around collecting flowers, leaves, pieces of silver cardboard and a couple of red bottle caps that she found lying in the dirt. When she felt satisfied with what she had found, she put everything in her purse, swiftly walked back to the orphanage and placed all of the supplies in the classroom. She heard light footsteps coming closer.

“Hey, Fatima, you feel like getting a tour of the nightlife in the village?” asked DA.

“Sure, sounds great!”

“Are you ready?”

“Yup.”

“You can jump on the back of my scooter. No problem for you, no problem for me.” And off they went to explore the village of Kompong Som.

They arrived at the Red Sun bar and met DA’s boyfriend Jim there, a kind Canadian man with glasses who worked at the orphanage, too. The Red Sun’s special was free shots and two-for-one highballs.

Jim brought over some rice wine shots for the two ladies, and they all moved outside to the street patio to order a late snack. Fatima counted a total of twelve beggars that asked for American dollars as they ate their meal.

The bar was like a bad acid trip – very loud, ear-blasting Chinese pop music and fluorescent lighting that made everyone look like ghosts. They were the only customers in the bar.

“So what’s life in Cambodia like?” Fatima asked.

Jim said, “Cambodia is a country of extreme contrasts. Extreme love and extreme hate.”

DA said, “Hate and jealousy for Thailand, the country that has been free of occupation and a country that desires to take away

Angkor Wat temple from us, the only thing that Cambodia thrives off. Extreme poverty... kids running around naked, like six years old and younger with no parents in sight. A country where the king keeps money from all of the tolls of the road for himself; meanwhile, kids can't go to high school because tuition costs four hundred US dollars a year, and that's a lot of money for a Cambodian. An average family makes twenty US a month, and they have about five kids."

DA explained, "The Pol Pot regime was horrific; the genocide killed millions of people. You were killed and tortured because you are \_\_\_\_\_... fill in the previous blank with anything you choose. Imagine being killed because you *are*..."

"The idea of being killed because *I am* makes me feel like I did when I heard about that man who killed twenty people and cut them up and tossed their body parts into the forest.," said Fatima. "My God, why do you let this go on? This is third-world poverty with a stupendously brutal history. Cambodian history makes our worst problem in the U.S. look like a day at the dentist, bearable but still painful."

"Cambodia is different, with different factors," said Jim. "A madman who wanted all educated free thinkers killed, even people with glasses dead or tortured to death until they said what they knew – Pol Pot thought everyone was a spy, which is insane because how many civilians do you know who are spies? Or working against the government and organizing a coup?"

It shocked her how they lived daily life there. The more they talked about it, Cambodia felt like what society would look like if there were anarchy – guns owned by civilians, being shot at if you talk to the wrong pretty girl, drugs being sold by the nice Khmer man who owns a fantastic cafe down the road...

The head of police, it turned out, "Papa" was the biggest local dealer for acid, heroin, and weed... for forty years now. Everyone knew yet they still loved him.

"It's corrupt," added DA, "The king's wife couldn't stand the

affection he was giving a movie star, so she had Thai mobsters kill his mistress. And everyone knows, but she doesn't seem to get punished..."

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*Dear Diary,*

*Such poverty here, the kids... so many kids running around everywhere. I gave a five-year-old my coke today. He wouldn't stop pleading and begging on his knees for it. Coming home from the bar another kid asked Jim for his bucket of gingerale and whiskey as we were walking around. Thank God he didn't give in to his begging...*

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The next day, Fatima brought in some stickers for her class and all the kids started screaming and shouting; everyone was super-excited. She felt an immense joy in the pit of her stomach. There were twelve children but some kids really stuck out for her.

DA asked her to help give them new English names. Fatima suggested Laurence and Azel, for the boys and Heidi for a girl. DA laughed at her and said she thought the children should be named after kinds of fruit, because fruit is pure. Fatima went along with it.

A little five-year-old boy was named Apple. He was extremely intelligent and a daydreamer, darting his eyes around and using his fingers to trace imaginary objects or friends in the air. She asked him once, "What do you see?" He giggled and said of his imaginary friend, "She's doing cartwheels now over the desks." Apple drew pictures of long, winding paths that look like noodles or brains, all connected to one point.

A little six-year-old girl named Cherry reminded her of a lost magical elf, giggling constantly or releasing high-pitched screams of glee, always running, jumping or spinning around until she fell flat on her bottom on the floor. She had so much love in her, so much joy and forgiveness, and reacted quickly to any injustice she perceived in the classroom. If anyone were to chuck his or

her eraser across the classroom, Cherry would lose it, angry that someone might get hurt. She had a short, pixie-like hairstyle, pointed ears and she was very small and intelligent. She had the power to change Fatima's emotions.

Once she walked into the class in a horrible mood. Cherry began to tease her, and while hanging off her leg she said, "Teacher why are you so sad?" "Teacher! Teacher!"

*That day she drove me crazy. I got very angry with her and shouted, "Sit down now!" She sat down and stared at me while smiling. And instantly I felt elation pouring through me ... and started to laugh and giggle along with her...*

The child that stood out to her the most was the boy DA named Passion Fruit. Fatima said "Let's name him Passion instead," and the boy really liked the name, so it stuck. Passion had a habit of yelling at kids who gave the best answers in class. While interrupting their responses he'd shout at them, "Shut up, go jump into a volcano," or, "Go jump out the window!" He would say this in the silliest tone and the whole class would roar with laughter, so she could never get angry at him. He explained once that he really meant the opposite of what he said.

DA came into the classroom and offered to translate the children's work for the class project. As Fatima walked around the room, she read each child's answers about how they would change Cambodia if they were each given one thousand dollars. Cherry said, "I will buy three hundred hospitals for Cambodia. I will let some people build a school for the poor children in Africa or a tall mountain. Then I will buy an island for building a hotel, and let the rich people live there and take some money for giving to the poor people. I will go to Egypt and the pyramid and take mummies and treasures out and help Cambodia to be a rich country."

A girl named Guava said, "I would plant many trees and flowers. I will build many schools to teach Cambodia's children. I will buy many butterflies, bees, insects, and animals. I will buy

a lot of seeds. When the seeds grow up, Cambodia can then have more trees and make tree seeds.”

Passion said, “I would make a machine that could make rice and water. This machine can also build hospitals for all the injured soldiers. I will buy countless robots that can fight, so no more people can die. This robot will bring back my mother, father and little sister. If we have another war everything and this robot will die but it’s ok because we can start a New World again. I want to take scientists from America and Japan to clean the water so we can drink from the tap. And I want all the children without parents to find families to live with and no more bad kings.”

A boy named Mango said, “I would give the money to people with no money and for poor children to afford to go to school. Make rules that no one can cut trees, grass or flowers. Buy a lot of water to drink. If I can I will make a house for all of the children on the streets. I will also buy a large kennel to put all the homeless dogs and cats. I will give one thousand dollars to other orphanages that are very poor. I will also tell people to choose me to be king and I will tell them that they are only allowed to ride bikes and use the wind, ocean and sun for energy. I will also buy a spaceship so I can go to the moon and other stars to hide if another battle comes...”

The bell interrupted Mango’s answer. School was over for the day.

DA asked her, “Hey Fatima, you interested in going to Red Sun with me for a beer?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll grab my scooter for us.”

Fatima was happy to have some time off to chill out with DA. They arrived at the Red Sun and ordered beers.

DA said, “When you go back to America, call a man you hate a *k’daw* – ‘penis’ in Khmer. Then when he asks you what does that mean, you say it means you are so pretty.” Then she fell off her chair from laughing so hard.

Fatima was laughing too, but didn't quite get why it was so damn funny to DA. Why she would call a man "pretty" was beyond her.

DA would say silly things like this all the time, usually at inappropriate moments. She enjoyed teasing her boyfriend Jim. It was hilarious to her when she would call her boyfriend a "bald, fat movie star," then she might hurt him by squeezing him too hard by her strong hugs, and then slapping him in the face. She kind of didn't trust him because she thought he would associate himself sometimes with the Thais. He'd been a teacher in Thailand for six years before moving to Cambodia. DA was very uncomfortable with his past, and extremely jealous of his ex-Thai girlfriend in Phuket. DA said, "All Thais are crazy. I hate the Thai people, to try to take our Angkor Wat."

*I wonder what she must think of me for bombing Cambodia during the Vietnam War. The US army... me... „same, same' in her mind, I'm sure...*

Fatima met a single Khmer mother at the Red Sun and told a story about her neighbor's uncle who lived in Siam Reap near Angkor Wat, a vivid story that in Fatima's mind became her own...

In 1971, Uncle was a hard-working sixty-year-old rice farmer. Pol Pot the madman ruled Cambodia at the time and wanted to start from ground zero.

Pol Pot said, "Let's start again... build a wonderful country of peasants and laborers who will always listen to me and do only things that I say."

So Pol Pot killed all the great intellectuals. You know... the smart, nice people, the skilled doctors, and lawyers, children and women or those who are associated with any of these people. Was anyone safe? No one was, during those cannibalistic and isolated times.

Uncle was taken to S-Z prison, which was formally a high school, and he watched people being beaten, tortured and starved,

and watched thousands of others treated in the same way.

But Uncle survived because he had an amazing talent for painting, and Pol Pot had demented ideas on recordkeeping. Pol Pot forced Uncle to paint what he witnessed at the S-Z torture prison.

Uncle painted the story of opposites, like love and hate, or reminders that everything in the world is counterpoised and ordered. And it would kill him to know that he was wrong, that it was all random and meaningless. What was the point to anything that he had ever painted, and how would it have changed things if he knew for sure? He stroked on his canvas contrasting scenes of beauty and ugliness, extreme vulnerability and extreme wealth and power. He searched for answers along the way. Where would God fit into this picture?

Uncle painted while searching for happiness and meaning. He painted the trees and the buildings in the S-Z prison. Uncle's paintings asked the question what is good according to "the plan"? And to some people, those paintings of the torture endured were evidence that an omnipotent being does not exist.

For some, the divine creator existed only in the aftermath of Cambodia's hell – now a peaceful and enchanting country.

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*Dear Diary,*

*DA seems very open and her English isn't bad. I try very hard to be as friendly and open as I can, but still I feel like she is an alien from another planet and not human at all. We are not connecting, alone in explanations, descriptions and reciprocated cultural faux pas. I keep pissing off other people along the way, too, especially by confronting them when they are telling me lies. I always cringe when I say, "I'm from America," when the locals ask. I cringe even more when they respond in a toothy grin, "Wow! America (giving the thumbs up)... Very good country!" I'd be like, you creep, don't give me that fucking crap, I know you're lying... saving face Asian bullshit. It's the lubricant of social relations*

*...really... lies... all lies to smooth over the tension. A couple of times, I've lied and said I was Canadian, like it would ease the already tense situation of dealing with the locals. But soon I learned that any country in North America is America, even Europe, Australia and Canada. These countries to the Khmer are interchangeable; same, same... no distinction. DA insists that the Cambodians don't tell lies, she gave me some shoddy explanation that they are selfless and just want to make others feel happy.*

*I keep on staring at DA's smooth skin, at her ivory pearl teeth and her brown sandpaper-feel hair. She is so skinny, like a ten-year-old boy and the most exotic creature I've ever met. And the best part was she is so entertaining I could just listen to her for hours. I don't need TV, radio or books when she is around. I envy DA too, because she is truly happy in her life, in this blink of time. I want to be like her. For the time being, she has found a decent foreign boyfriend who seems to love her and would never let her work in the brothels ever again. DA is full of hope and optimism for the future.*

*Cambodia is free of Pol Pot dictatorship. Most importantly, the world-famous Angkor Wat temples are still owned by Cambodia to cherish and share with the world...*

## OVERSIZED BACKPACKS AND IMAGINED CATASTROPHES

I was happy living in Kompong Som and especially enjoyed teaching the intermediate reading class. The class had twelve students and these kids were the best. They clearly expressed their views. They spoke in broken English, but nevertheless, I understood them and had an immediate rapport. I find it's often when you don't have rapport with people, they don't get on with you. They were like my little buddies. They were much more prepared for life than me, and had a demented kind of survival humor with regard to the world around them, making lots of jokes about the dead and casual references to the torture mechanisms Pol Pot used. I would often look at them in amazement and worry, worry for them because they would be alive for the next eighty years or so ... I would often wonder what it's like to be a kid nowadays. I had many fears as a child. A constant worry of mine was growing up and getting my damn period. It's true. I did not want to grow up. I would stare at the lightbulb to try and make myself blind to avoid seeing the blood on my panties when that day arrived. My students have so much more to worry about. "Teacher I won't be alive very long," said a girl as she laughed while playing the game paper, scissors, and stone with me.

The class was reading a magazine article about Australia, and they asked me what does the "land from down under" mean? I explained that it's because Australia is at the bottom half of the earth. I pointed at the globe and I showed them where Cambodia was in comparison to Australia. One student said, "I'm so happy I'm not at the top because if something happens to the earth where the earth spins around suddenly, Cambodia will not fall off the earth. I'm happy that Cambodia is in the middle so we have time to think."

Another student yelled, "Teacher! In eighty years our country will be covered in water. We will sink down into the sea. There will be so much water that we will have nowhere to go."

“No, that’s crazy, that’s just a myth,” I said. I felt really bad for them. It was the first time that they were expressing their fears to me, and for once I couldn’t do anything, when I was so used to solving problems for them all the time.

Once, when a student asked me, “Teacher I don’t understand countable and uncountable nouns,” I explained to him in a very clear way what they were. But this was different; I saw the concern in their eyes. In haste I said, “Don’t worry guys, by that time they will fix the problem.”

The class leader said, “Teacher, it’s too late!”

“Perhaps you could take a plane to America,” I said in desperation.

He said, “That’s no good, because America will be covered in ice very soon.” Then he ran to the globe, violently shook it, turned it upside down and said, “This is what will happen very soon, and then America will be covered in ice, then no more America for long... long... time.”

At this point everyone was talking at once, and I couldn’t keep track of the numerous theories about the end of the world. This is a child’s life – they asked me too many questions, I could not understand. They wished that I could give them some concrete answers; I could not. In fact, I felt ashamed that I was their teacher. I was their hero no longer and the respect they had for me was tarnished. Before, they thought I had all the answers; I clearly didn’t. I walked around the room to observe their work, looked down and noticed a girl’s drawing. It was a self-portrait of her wearing a shirt that read, “I don’t know everything”.

*I know that feeling very well, when you’re a kid and you find out that even your teachers don’t have all the answers. They are as lost as you are and it feels as if someone has ripped the floor from beneath you and the world suddenly becomes the wicked place that fairy tales warned us about. Grown-ups lied and said it’s just a fairy tale. At that very moment when you find that out, it seems as if the world has one hand holding a gun to your head,*

*with the other gripped around your neck, and you are never able to breathe freely again...*

I cleared my throat and said, “Class... Everyone, calm down! All we can do is live this life the best that we can, be full of light and love in our hearts, and have faith that God has worked everything out... and everything will turn out as it should be.” I saw that most of the students in the class were nodding their heads in agreement.

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Overall, as the months went on I was happy at Lotus Orphanage. Teaching children was something that I enjoyed immensely and learned how to do quickly. In a foreign country you really have no idea if you’re offending people’s sensibilities though (even if you think you know). In Cambodia, I created a half-invented world; I couldn’t understand the locals and they couldn’t understand me. But in my mind, I made Cambodia into something safe and beautiful.

I overheard a student talking to DA one day and they mentioned Camilla’s name, a Canadian teacher whose job I had filled, taking over for her class. The student said, “Camilla was sweeter but Fatima tries to teach better.” I felt content with that. Or at least that’s what I think my student said. Then DA stuffed some more books into the student’s backpack and she was on her way to public Khmer school.

The next day was cloudy but warm on the coast of Cambodia. It was my day off. Jim, DA’s boyfriend, asked me to go on a road trip to the Kbal Chhay waterfalls. It was a spontaneous thing; DA was on a field trip with a class.

Our guidebook said it was 30km from where we were. We took Route 4 north but missed taking the turn at mile marker 217, and turned left at the Quen Yen restaurant instead. We got lost but found it eventually, in the thick of the forest. We paid a dollar to get in, although it was free for the locals. A friendly Khmer woman pointed out the route, and we passed many other locals

along the way. As we walked past each local, they gave us warm smiles and hoped we would buy something from their foodstands.

A middle-aged Khmer woman offered to guide us to the waterfalls. We accepted her offer. She was wearing tattered beige, plastic flip-flops with a piece broken off at one side that dragged along the dirt. Her pants were made from yellow and pink plaid wool. She wore a blue and red wool plaid jacket, thick white gloves and straw pointed rice hat to protect her skin from the sun.

She took us all the way to the first waterfall. The scenery overwhelmed us, but it was commonplace for her family and its many generations; this rural setting was their home. There were three waterfalls in total. When we finally arrived at the first one, the three of us just sat there on a sharp, white boulder at the edge of a cliff that was barely big enough to accommodate the three of us. Jim and I wanted to smoke a joint but felt it would be rude and disrespectful to do this in front of a local. So I whipped out my pink and brown diamond-studded change purse, handed her a crisp American dollar and hoped that she would scam. She accepted it and smiled, and we all sat there in silence together.

To avoid this uncomfortable situation, Jim went for a swim and left me alone with her. He was only in the water for five minutes, and when he climbed back onto the boulder he approached the woman, gave her a toothy grin and said, "You can go now." She left us in a fake, smiling kind of way and hiked back to her juice stand at the bottom of the dirt path to relieve other adventuresome tourists of their thirst. We were relieved she had left, and immediately sparked up our phattie, had a beer and swam in the cool, pristine pools.

In a quiet moment, Jim let his gaze roam around the water and said, "You keep moving from city to city. What are you running from?"

"I'm running from myself," I said.

"Me too, I'm running... and hiding.... from my corporate life back in Ottawa... and the divorce. Eventually, you will find it,

Fatima. As I think the disciple Paul once said, we are like jars of clay – fragile, chipped, imperfect – exactly as God designed us to be. In this way, others see the „all-surpassing power’ of God through our weakened frames. We are monuments of God’s grace, with an inscription written in God’s own hand: Within this earthen container, the one true God is at work.”

At that time, a family came hiking through the area. Jim gave them a cursory glance and said, “Now, it’s just a longing for something bigger. It’s almost like believing that voodoo works. It’s a belief that one day something will happen, a higher purpose will finally come and you will be swept away, with neat and perfectly sanded stepping-stones on water to show you which way to go. That day never comes, exactly... one always wants the other thing. Life is this; people should know, we’ve been around long enough to know that we’re constantly looking for something else, something we have always longed for but can never grasp.”

Then he dove into the water, shot through the surface and said, “It’s like it comes from that unconscious yearning to go back to heaven, sorta you know.... to go back home... but that dream is impossible to attain here.”

*How dare he say that*, she thought and mentally backed away from him.

He continued talking from the water and said, “Don’t ever give up hope, though...there is always hope. Take this country for example, it is not perfect, but look around you at all this peace and magnificence in Cambodia. It’s hard to believe that just ten years ago this was a country of genocide and deep suffering. Cambodia is evidence that there is divinity, beauty; that’s all, and it’s all around us everywhere. It is in every breath from the Khmer’s lips to every wrinkly groove on the roots of this tree.”

They were swimming under the overhang of an enormous strangler fig tree. It could have been five hundred years old, with its large, bumpy roots growing outside of its trunk, emerging upwards from the soil. Its roots overlapped each other, intertwined,

squeezed and eventually smothered old roots in its place. Fatima lay her hand on the new roots. Never before had she been so acutely aware of the feeling and texture of a tree's roots, of the breathing life within itself, past and future. She felt joyfulness in the touch of those roots. It was her in that tree, the happiness of that tree, being alive.

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On the way back from the waterfalls they stopped at a restaurant in a hostel and had some dinner. A very frail white man in his early sixties approached them.

"Hi, I haven't seen you here before." A hand was extended right in her face and spilled her beer all over her chin. Abruptly he said, "My name is Constantine."

She said, "Hello, are you a missionary?"

He started laughing hysterically and said, "Fuck no, I'm an ex-Vietnam helicopter mechanic from Russia," and walked away. The waitress said he had been living in Cambodia since the Vietnam War, living from hostel to hostel and sometimes camping in the mountains for months at a time. Fatima was attracted to his heavy accent when he was Constantine the man speaking in his second language, English.

Then Constantine returned to their table, this time handing her a note that read: *Stay with me one night in my bed you will not regret it. I have air-conditioning.* Then he walked away.

Jim clenched his jaw and said, "That guy comes on strong with all the pretty foreign girls. He never lets up. How old is that old fart, anyway...like a hundred?"

Constantine returned to their table once again, gave her some cherry blossoms and said, "They were picked for your cascading scarlet hair... I love you."

Fatima exclaimed, "I just met you! That's really living life in the moment now, isn't it? As if this life is it."

Constantine said, "It is the only life we have!" She replied, "Ah, I see... just as the atheists do, in this lifetime."

“That’s right, nothing exists after you die,” said Constantine.

“I don’t believe that,” she replied.

Jim left the table in discomfort. I argued with Constantine and offered my examples, such as when I saw the divine light, felt unconditional and overwhelming love, and talked to the Virgin Mary.

He retorted, “It’s just a part of our brain that shuts down and gives us those hallucinations.”

When she stopped replying to his comments he got up rudely and went to the outhouse. He came back and started shooting popguns at the TV because some of the guests changed the channel from his favorite Vietnamese soap opera. Annoyed guests started leaving and going back to their rooms. At a distance from a barstool, he aimed the popgun directly at Fatima’s face. Then he chuckled out loud when he noticed how terrified she looked. He was lucky though, she would have simply killed him right there if he shot at her.

Later that night, an enthusiastic eight-year-old boy named Johnson introduced himself at the young Americans’ table and challenged them to a game of Jenga. Being teachers they of course loved children, and accepted. The Jenga blocks he brought out had messages written on them: “masturbate,” “threesomes are great,” and “free blowjobs”... She thought it was totally inappropriate for an eight-year-old to read that stuff, but they ignored the messages and so did Johnson.

“You win, you don’t buy postcard. I win, you buy postcard,” said Johnson. This kid was a natural salesman and they bought the pitch. She wanted more than just a game from this exchange; she wanted to do some anthropological fieldwork.

“Where is your mother?” she probed. This was a reasonable question considering it was almost one o’clock in the morning.

“Working,” said Johnson.

“Why don’t you go home and sleep?” she said. Jim gave her a horrible dirty look that said *leave the kid alone*.

“Too much money to go to sleep, and I have no money to pay for sleep,” said Johnson. Good grief...the kid was lying to her.

*He saw the color of my skin, knows that I'm American and immediately thinks I'm stupid. I'm sure of it, this kid thinks I'm stupid.* She gave him the last sip of her whiskey rye on the rocks as Jim looked away.. She felt strange giving a kid alcohol but he begged for some; plus her mother use to offer her that part of the drink when she was a kid. Only bits of ice remained, there was hardly any whiskey in it, anyway...

Eventually Johnson won the game and she bargained down the price on his postcards and lied to him, saying she only had two dollars on her. He was asking four dollars for dated postcards! He also tried to say her 5000 Cambodian coin was only 2000 – she looked at it, shook an index finger right in his face and said, “Don’t lie to your customers, you no do that, you bad!”

“Fatima stop it!” yelled Jim.

She did not care what Jim thought, the kid deserved a lesson, so she pushed Jim out of the way and slapped Johnson across the face. The kid didn’t flinch, just grabbed the money off the table which she owed him, ran towards the four Germans at the pool table and challenged *them* to a game of pool.

As he walked toward them Johnson said, “I win you buy postcard, you win you don’t buy postcard.” His mother was counting on his sales to support the family. But then again, child slaves at work were scattered everywhere throughout Cambodia. Human rights groups should go into convulsions over this, she thought.

She and Jim joked about kidnapping Johnson to be the maid for the orphanage, play Jenga with, and have him do all of her dirty traveling laundry. But she was the only one she trusted with her clothes.

That night, she also met Papa, the head of police for the area, who had been selling drugs for forty years. He was short, round, quite an unattractive man.

*I hated Papa when he sold people drugs. It was hypocritical, him being a cop and all. Papa disappeared, then showed up later, next to me, smiling. I heard him talking to me without words. I knew he could see the utmost disgust on my face.*

*Where does Papa think he will go after he dies? Or does he believe he is helping humanity ease the pain of this sick, disgusting corrupt world of evil men and silent women and children who are immobilized and numbed by it? People like them just can't see past the evil. If there is a God why is there evil, they say?*

“Don’t hate me,” he said, “I’m a person, not a monster. I have to feed my wife and five kids. I want them to go to school. It costs four hundred dollars to put them through one year of school. If I didn’t push drugs, I’d make twenty dollars a month... now how can I be alive, living like that?”

As she got up to go to the outhouse, Papa followed her there, and asked, “Ma’am, want some big H?”

“How much?” she asked, without hesitation.

“Five dollars,” said Papa. Without thinking, she handed him the money and he gave her a rock and a piece of foil. She smoked a hit, squatting there in the dirt behind the runoff from the outhouse. Eventually her compassion erased her hatred. Understanding this man took the place of ignorance. She was in awe. Papa was her very best friend in the whole wide world, like a shaman/doctor of sorts, because he helped her, and others like her, escape and ease the pain from the hurt of this disgusting no-good place called Mother Earth.

*And with big H, you could be sitting in the runoff from an outhouse all day and be sooooo happy, and feel sooo good. It could make you feel better than anyone in the whole wide world, even better than the king of Cambodia...*

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At the dusk before dawn, she found myself on the back of Jim’s motorcycle and back at the orphanage. She jumped off the back, and saw DA at the top of the driveway running towards

them. DA flung her backpack at Fatima's feet and shouted, "You fucking American pig slut! You stay away from my man."

Jim tried to explain, saying, "DA, we went out for one drink, that's all. Nothing happened."

Slowly, Fatima started to walk up to the front door. DA grabbed her hair and punched her in the gut with her good hand. She yelled, "Get out of here, you whore, you no good cunt. Don't you EVER touch him."

While gasping for air, Fatima grabbed her pack and started to stagger towards the street, away from the orphanage.

## THE DOLPHIN SHACK

Fatima was petrified that DA would come after her, so she stayed away for three full days and went into hiding in the forest. Later, she found a safe place and checked herself into a hostel.

Fatima wrote a note to Laurence: *DA threatened to kill me. I tried to calm her down and was held by gunpoint. She belittled me the whole time I was at Lotus Orphanage. Now she's threatening to tell the revolutionaries where I am hiding and I was actually once struck, a blow in the gut, though to this circumstance I have never made an official complaint to the orphanage, as I wished to keep everything about myself out of target range.*

Fatima had heard about a hostel/bar called the Dolphin Shack, that offered free accommodation and free pot. It was located on Cambodia's pristine aqua-blue beach coastline of Kompong Som, it was comfortable, had a relaxed vibe and she ended up staying for six months.

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You know when you're traveling though a foreign land and something uninvited wakes you up from a deep sleep? And it's too early to get up to go outside of your safe, four walls? You stay wide awake but choose to remain in bed. You lie there awake on the flimsy mattress or wobbly cot, but decide to lie there for a while because you have nothing worthwhile to get up for. Or, the brilliant sun just rose but you know nothing convenient is open. You're haggard by the foreignness of everything, and the hot oven heat has sapped all of your energy and will, and some days may pass before you finally decide to get up. It's this unexplainable thing that prevents you from searching for the only open stall or café to sell you that first, and very required, strong cup of coffee.

You tuck the synthetic black elastic around your ears and place the filthy face mask over your eyes to help block out the gracious sun, but something else keeps you from falling back to sleep: the blaring, no-good television, which some rancid fruitbowl is

watching.

The oddly versed newscast could be partially blamed, but the television was on so loudly that when you cover your ears you could still feel the voices vibrate over all your extremities and crawl through your innards. You have that sort of feeling like the television is *inside* of you, like the whole damn box has been inserted into your little cornhole.

The loudness everywhere today speaks volumes, of a bomb being detonated in your brain.

And what's worse, she couldn't stop it.

She also blamed everything on Murray, the once idealistic, dreamy and full of hope young man who decided it was a great idea to quit working for the Peace Corps and be at the Dolphin Shack instead. He had spent a whole year on the Cambodia-Thailand border helping refugees with food and shelter, which is very noble and great. But one day he changed his mind and did not want to do it anymore; he quit.

*He let the revolutionaries win and chose Kompong Som village to roam and think for a while. How dare he be that pretentious? There were just too many of them who gave up on it already.*

She hated him for being here and contaminating her space. Everything he touched was left abhorrent and revolting. She wished that idiot never woke up to turn on the television. She could have simply strangled him, easily killed him. But instead, she left her annoyingly sunny but dank crapbox to hear the words from the television more closely.

*"Breaking news...a Spanish priest named Juan Hernandez tried to stab Pope John Paul the second with a bayonet during the latter's pilgrimage to the Fatima, Portugal shrine..."*

He'd left eerie but familiar suicide letters and videotapes of what he wanted to do. It left her with the feeling that she had seen this all before and she sort of felt for the guy. Several professionals were being interviewed.

*"He was a shy and anti-social boy as a child. Everyone was*

*afraid to talk to him at school...*”

He'd tossed delicate motifs all around him as he carried on with his life, little nudges here and there that suggested that he wanted to kill others and himself, make the ultimate sacrifice. He was terrified that he wouldn't be victorious in his task...

*“He was clearly a textbook social psychopath,”* explained one official expert. *“He didn't know right from wrong, and if he knew, he didn't care.”*

Then the official president of the American Charter of Rights and Freedoms said, *“You have the right to be free, according to the charter of rights. We are just doing our jobs. You have the right to be psychotic and the right not to take medication if you don't want to.”*

Murray raised his eyebrows and said, “That sounds a bit odd, coming from the officials and all, but this is the law.”

Now, I felt even angrier than before. Loud vibrating voices woke me up. I turned to Murray and screamed, “How in God's name could you contaminate our paradise, you nutbar hippie. How could you listen to that fabricated crap, we don't have to hear all about this, you know?”

*I said all of this sort of just jokingly but to myself; in my own head. I hated Murray; I hated people like us. Yet, I understood. You know the pot-smoking hippies that lived, to the point of not being... in a place like this... it is so easy to remain blasé.*

I sort of toned it down a bit in my own head by lighting up a mini-joint for myself and rolling a fatty special just for him. I rolled it exactly how Azel taught me when he was alive. At the Dolphin Shack, besides free accommodation was the free smoke, and their supply was infinite. “Azel would have been very happy here,” she thought, in her mind seeing the image of that one big black garbage bag full of pot being delivered through the kitchen doors every other morning. To the lodgers' delight, the management sprinkled it on everything. Free pot was in the Dolphin Shack's cigarettes, milkshakes, hamburgers and pizzas.

It was part of the ambience. Pot could be found on just about everything, including but not limited to their tables, chairs, grassy mats and itchy hammocks. The only place she hadn't seen any pot was in the outhouses, perhaps.

Once, she'd watched two gorgeous Swiss men showering together in the forest outside those outhouses. Nicely drunk and stoned, she'd just acted cool as she walked past them, catching a glimpse of their huge cocks, thinking she would have taken both of them on, if the moment presented itself. But she acted as if the situation was all normal or something. It was very hard not to stare or make a move, but she kept on thinking about Laurence.

Murray accepted it, the pot from her that morning that is, but kept silent and remained transfixed by the television, looking severely disappointed. He'd walked 10 kilometers to buy an English newspaper that morning. And that had further motivated him to ask the neighbor bar worker to help him hook up the cable cord to the old TV set from the bar next door in that paradise.

Murray had a lot invested in this. He spent four dreamy years at Harvard law and had to get the details straight, as soon as possible. Like him, she hadn't watched TV or read any newspapers in almost a year. For the time being, she sort of preferred her life like this; uninformed. But when something or someone was trying to reach you, you eventually have to listen....

The newscast was still playing in her head and one professional said, "...you're an adult and they can't make you do anything." Murray butted into her thinking and said, "I think there should be a law where the people that witnessed psychotic behavior and don't do anything should be arrested. Throw in some educational doodad campaign to make them know the signs."

*Oooh, Murray was on to something here...throw away the key when the grandmother gets locked up for not saying anything about her nutty grandson and have the grandson get away.... to be psychotically free...Loo, laa, lee, yippy!*

The newscast continued and a man in a camouflage uniform

said, *“Some are even scholarship or honor students, CEOs, dictators or come from military backgrounds. Some give up fruitful careers and live in a cottage with no electricity high up in the mountains. Some have a fancy grill for making roadkill on a stick. They are usually depressed and are full of hate and rage. Some are kicked out of the army for drinking too heavily because they need to medicate themselves to drown out the voices. Some end up living far away from civilization in faraway lands, drinking Maitai’s all day, frequenting brothels and getting hooked on being serviced by underage hookers. A few of these go to the extreme when undetected for too long, and family members are playing a role in the full-on conspiracy to have them committed into a loony bin.”*

Fatima had heard all that she could take. At that moment she said goodbye to the once-bombed building, ruins that were the Dolphin Shack, and the overgrown blossoms and abundant vines that flourished in between, so that there was no difference between the greenery and the buildings. Pol Pot’s dictatorship had destroyed the entire village, turning the walls and roofs into rubble. But nature had endured, taken its course to fill in the holes, replacing nothingness with new life everywhere...

Soon, that afternoon, she’d grabbed all of her things from her hut in Kompong Som and left without saying a word to anyone. She hitched a ride on the back of a truck with several Khmer rice farmers and arrived in Nha Trang Beach in Vietnam two days later. This was her desperate attempt to escape. Laurence was her only hope and she had to find him as soon as possible...

## VIETNAM INSECTS EVERYWHERE

Now, she could see, the revolutionaries were all around her, everywhere that she went. She saw them in the French cafes, in bus stations, and they followed her into bookstores. She bought some black hair dye to disguise herself. She had a bite to eat in a local bar in Nha Trang; sitting next to her were Vietnam and navy soldiers from Denmark, having some beers before they set sail for the desert. A Dutch destroyer was waiting in the harbor of Nha Trang. They were laughing merrily and flirting with the waitress.

She whispered aloud, *“How dare they appear so happy drinking their beers? They are potential killers of innocent people, the sweet children... You’re screwing up my paradise, assholes...”*

She’d left America to escape the memory of war and military men. She turned up the volume full blast on her walkman and the music pumped into her eardrums, blocking out the parasites. *“How can I ever escape this,”* she thought. *“Their presence is all around me regardless, like the cockroaches.”*

Fatima paid her bill using the remaining pocket change she had on her and was relieved she still had ten dollars left in her purse. Money was never an issue, as she’d traveled for a year now without checking her bank finances. But now she was scared to find out how much money she had left. The orphanage had paid her in cash each month and she always had more than enough to get her through until the next paycheck.

She lived freely, without a budget, and always had more than enough money at hand without using her savings. She enjoyed eating at local foodstands and staying at the cheapest hostels, and found backpacking to be a richer experience than staying at 5-star resorts where her family used to stay, when she was a child. Money had never been a problem... until now.

Fatima hadn’t slept for a couple of nights; she was excited thinking about how she could invest the US dollars that remained in her university account fund in America. She thought about

buying a mansion in Kompong Som, about calling her friend Heidi and asking her if she wanted to be her partner in running an educational /artistic learning center in Cambodia for orphans, and naming it after her brother.

She thought she had about five thousand dollars in her bank account. Nervously, she made a collect call to her bank and was horrified when the clerk stated there was only fifty dollars left. *“A one-way bus ticket to Indiana would cost that much. Perhaps I’ll stay in Asia for good,”* she thought. *“I’ll buy a run-down building on the beach and I’ll start a wellness center and get all of my friends to invest as well.”* A wire transfer was organized.

Dumbfounded, Fatima jumped on her fifty-cylinder rental scooter and drove to her hostel to buy three packs of cigarettes, gingerale and a forty-pound bottle of rum on credit. She drank all night in her hostel, went to a bar and passed out on the beach.

Fatima felt an incredible hangover the next day. But it was perfect beach weather and she saw that the beach brought in excellent swells. *“I’m going surfing today,”* she thought. Soon she forgot all about her problems, but still felt a lingering tinge of anger. *“Why did mother bring me into this world? Mother, you didn’t prepare me for anything like this. I sort of love you mother and miss you, but kind of hate you, too, for bringing me into this world without preparation...”*

*Anyway, for my hangover I’ll just trade something for some strong painkillers that I can get on the street. Then I’ll head back to the beach to go surfing.”*

On the way down to the beach, she browsed some street tables that sold local crafts, clothing and towels. She loved the idea of having only ten dollars on her, and looking at all of the trinkets for sale on the street; everything was very cheap by Western standards.

*The merchants look at me like I’m the millionaire. I feel so much power with this ten dollars in my purse. I feel good. I feel rich. I feel immortal, like a god,* she thought. So Fatima bought

a hot pink T-shirt of the Hindu god Vishnu; the preserver of the cosmic order, redeemer of humanity, and a friendly god who takes human form. Vishnu had reincarnated nine times on Earth. He was the preserver and the sustainer.

She felt she needed Vishnu's presence around her while traveling. *Plus it looks damn sexy on me, not bad for only two bucks. Two bucks to be a radical-looking traveler and a two-buck reminder that there are higher forms in the universe looking over human dumbasses like me.*

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In her tiny hostel in Vietnam she was counting: four huge cockroaches were bunched up together in the bathroom floor drain. She stomped one with a sandal and killed the largest one. She killed it in one smack and it landed, legs up, oozing a milky, squishy juice. She picked it up with her bare hand and looked at it up close for a while. Then she placed the little guy on a square pink tissue and laid him on an old wooden chest near her bed.

Next, she glanced at the fluorescent lamp above the small metal table and counted fourteen massive flying ants on the wall. They were the size of prairie grasshoppers. Exactly ten of them were on the floor that had died in mid-air.

She killed them personally, by drowning each one of them with Deet bug spray. She picked up ten ants from the floor and put them on the tissue with their buddy, the dead cockroach. She watched the rest of them, crippled, barely walking on the ground. Loads of them were balancing on their wings on the table. It gave her satisfaction to watch them wiggle their legs into the air.

She went into her pack and grabbed some crackers. She was really hungry and gobbled them right up. Then she found eighteen more ants flying around. She took the bottle of bug spray – strong stuff but not strong enough for her liking – and drenched all of her clothes in it, sprayed it into her hair, and rubbed it onto her skin, very well. She sprayed it on the bedsheets, the pillows, chairs, desk and every inch of air. She soaked everything in bug spray.

Then she walked to her pack and finished all ten crackers that were left, while watching flying ants die in flight. She went back to the area underneath the fluorescent lamp and counted fourteen bugs on the napkin, took them out to the balcony and lit them on fire with a lighter.

She knew, without a doubt, the hotel receptionist had put an ant's nest in between the cracks of her windowsill, on purpose. She knew the woman hated her because of the color of her skin, and she was scared of her third eye. She hated Americans. Fatima was American. She was pretty sure a camera had been planted in her room somewhere, too, or in the flying ants. And she knew that the revolutionaries needed her more than ever now. They had all eyes on her because of who she was. She must be on alert; she was constantly under surveillance and the Thais were relying on her for inside information. The Thai militias were trying to contact her and they wanted to take the Angkor Wat temples away from Cambodia. The receptionist knew this.

*I'm leaving this hotel now – I don't give a shit what time it is.*

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She didn't know where she was but she was running in a red-rock desert with lemon-yellow sand dunes in the distance. There was a cartoon lake in the heart of it, with animated pink lily transformers as its focal point. Little bush trees whispered, she smoked her ganja, and listened to fine quality bamboo didgeridoos played by an Australian Aboriginal, just for her, in the desert. Horn. Drums. Banjo, Snake hissing, crickets. *I'm terrified.* She stole a goat from a farm and pierced it with a knife; an Aboriginal boy helped drain its blood into a tin cup. She took the knife, cut her hair and sprinkled it around, decorating the altar. The goat's head was the prize offering to the gods. She started to make little cuts on her face, then inspected and smelled each grain of sand for impurities. She constructed a sign that read: *All sects e.g. Atheists, Christians, Muslims...etc will be welcomed to this shrine provided they are morally and physically pure and clean. Persons suffering*

*from infectious or contagious diseases will not be admitted.*

She looked up and saw an East Indian man wearing a white sari walking towards her. He called her name and smiled, he must have heard her cries for help.

## BOMBAY, BOLLYWOOD

Laurence received a letter from Fatima at his four-star hotel in Thailand. The address and postal stamps were from Vietnam. He read:

*Dear Laurence,*

*In Nha Trang Beach in Vietnam I met an ambitious young East Indian man named Agni, he is taking care of me. He is an agent for big Bollywood films and scouts new talent. He has convinced me to work in Bollywood. We arrived in the port of Bombay by boat on a twenty-six day journey. Gandhi is about eighteen years old and he has left to study law in Britain. It's so terrible here now the Revolutionists are destroying India. They have killed the priests, intellectuals, the artists and the gypsies. The Revolutionary's mission is to bring the world population down and to control the world under one system. I feel they will kill me soon too because of who I am, so I have to remain out of their radar and wear a disguise. Yet, I am excited that I will get all kinds of marvelous spiritual insights being in India and all. I think my answers will come to me here.*

*Alcohol is prohibited in India. So I brought what I could. The whole trip I was paranoid that the officials at the port would find my bottles. Agni warned me that I would never get away with it. I had two bottles of Vietnamese rum with me but the officials at the port terminal confiscated them. They were conspicuous in their olive uniforms and peaked caps with a tiny satin red star. They wore big black boots and carried large rifles and held them to my back.*

*By British rule I had to undergo a complete medical check at the port. On the boat Agni gave me a saffron sari and headscarf to wear. My bridge piercing was infected so I took it out. I still have a marking over my eyes but I think it will grow over soon. I look so beautiful and confident now in my sari. I am a shiny star and I have all the riches of India at my disposal. Laurence you*

*would be so proud of me. I am more famous than God is. I miss you terribly. I know that we won't see each other for a while. India needs me.*

*I am God,*

*Fatima*

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Fatima and Agni were released from the medical service room from the port. The road outside the Bombay port waiting area was nutty to her, with a lot of forceful shouting and excitement; everyone was in everybody else's way. She went to use the washroom and had lost Agni when she came out. She glanced out at a sea of faces, headscarves, shaggy-haired kids, elderly people, mangy dogs, and dirt, and finally Agni the young, handsome, dark, shaggy bearded man stood out to her, waving and smiling.

"Fatima, come quickly, our driver's here. Leave your bags there. Our assistants will grab them for us," said Agni with an ear-to-ear grin. She looked in the direction he was pointing. A black Rolls Royce was parked in front of the arrival gate and a Punjabi man wearing a white tuxedo and white turban rolled down the window; he had a warm smile and waved hello.

Instantly, two very well-dressed Shudra caste Indians walked towards them from the car. The man wore a tuxedo with gloves and the woman a white Ralph Lauren blazer and trousers with large fedora hat. The tuxedo man grabbed Agni's bags and the fedora woman grabbed Fatima's and put them into the trunk of the car. "That woman is your personal assistant, and that man is mine. Her name is Tiki. She is all yours and will answer to all of your commands. Whatever you need to be comfortable, whatever you want to eat, whatever your wish is.... it doesn't matter, she will provide it for you," he said.

"I see," said Fatima in a whisper. She found it difficult to keep her mouth closed at this point. They all jumped into the Rolls Royce and made themselves comfortable. The car had a large projector screen and an unedited Bollywood film was playing.

The music seduced Fatima and she was enamored, filled with joy to be in India.

Agni's assistant enthusiastically jotted down notes. Agni had given him a checklist of things to watch for and notice in the film. He scribbled notes about things like how many times the lead actor had twisted his arm in the air while performing his dance routine, or how many times he'd looked into the air while singing. He made particularly careful notes if and when any slip-ups were made. There was a small table holding alcoholic drinks, although alcohol was prohibited in India.

Tiki said, "Fatima, we can't shoot the film with your forehead like that." Fatima looked puzzled, thinking no one would notice where her bridge piercing was. "It will be easy to schedule a laser treatment for you and have it smoothed over tomorrow morning. Production will pay for everything and you will stay in a private hospital with room service. At eight o'clock tomorrow morning I will pick you up."

"I don't think I want to do that," said Fatima.

Agni looked at her and said, "The whole procedure will take ten minutes and you won't feel a thing. While they are at it, they could also laser the blemishes off your face. You'll look younger and your face will glow."

Fatima felt her piercing holes above her eyes with her index finger and thought that it wouldn't be so bad getting a facial treatment.

"All of the other women in the film have had their laser treatment already," Agni explained.

"Fine... eight o'clock is fine," said Fatima. Tiki scheduled the appointment by making a mental transfer on her palm computer.

"I'll be at your room at seven in the morning to help you get dressed and bring you breakfast. The driver will be at the hotel eight a.m. sharp." Fatima nodded and looked outside her window.

Pedal tricycles, scooter rickshaws, and taxis competed for space with horse-drawn or mule-drawn carriages that tilted

dangerously downwards at the back, with careless drivers ready to throw out their heavy load of women and children. Flies swarmed everywhere and fed on everything. She noticed that the Indian flies seemed more skillful than people were.

India gave Fatima a new terminology of things: hotels, railway station, lavatory, and restaurants. She acquired new practices, such as only eating with her right hand, eating only cooked food, avoiding water and soft fruit, and squatting in outhouses. Iodium and hand sanitizers were her new best friends. She would use them each time her eyes blinked twice in a row.

“Fatima, before we drop you off at the hotel we are going to stop at our boss’ estate. His name is Sanjay and he wants to meet with you immediately, and to sign your contract today,” Agni said.

“Do you know what is in my contract?” questioned Fatima.

“No, not exactly. But I know that you’ll be very satisfied. Sanjay will make all your dreams come true. But you’ll have to wait and see what Sanjay says. In return, you’ll be expected to play the lead in Sanjay’s film which is scheduled to be released in one month. We have already begun the promotional campaign. You’ll also be paid to entertain his clients at parties and be present for informal business meetings. This is gonna blow up, Fatima. You’re going to be famous. You’re already on your way there. Look there, Fatima! We’re just coming up past your face on that chrome high-rise. That’s you up there, advertising for the film “Rang De Sonaa” on the large screen, flashing in the city center, you see that? You’re going to be more famous than God is. It’s your time,” said Agni.

Only thirty minutes had passed.

“We’re at Sanjay’s,” said Tiki, slightly arranging her fedora. The car rolled into an enormous driveway made from gray and white imported marble. The driver spoke into the intercom at the gate and placed his palm onto a computerized panel. She could see a large white limestone pond inside, with a statue resembling Venus, the goddess of love. She was ethereally beautiful, but

the expression in her eyes appeared dim, weary and far away. A gentle stream of water was flowing out of her tiny, cupped hands and splashing down onto her feet. However, it was not a clear-as-crystal stream; this was a muddy, mucky stream, giving off a putrid stench of moldy cheese and human excrement. The house was blindingly white and built from new money, with an air of British colonial influence. The white marble front steps were semi-circular, and on this rainy morning, slippery with the rain and blossoms fallen from an old tree.

They didn't enter that way, from the imported marble steps; they went through one of the four garage doors. Walking past the ten Rolls Royces and Ferrari collection shocked Fatima. A middle-aged, handsome man walked into the garage and greeted them, Sanjay the big Bollywood producer. He was tall and slender, very dark with a striking magnetism, and was wearing a black, double-breasted suit that emphasized his slenderness. His crinkled hair was combed back flat above a long, narrow face with a huge, hawk-like nose.

Both Agni and Sanjay were from the Shudra Caste and now embraced Muhammad. They adopted this new way of life to free themselves from the oppressive caste system and to lubricate business relations with their loan brokers.

However, since Sanjay still had Hindi society in his blood, he would only hire Vaishya caste (the merchants) and occasionally Shudra Caste (the peasants). Sanjay spread his arms wide, making his body into a cross and hugged Agni, kissing him gently on his left cheek.

Then he turned to Fatima and said, "You must be the one. Oh Allah, Allah, Allah, you are a vision." Fatima raised her hand to shake his.

"Yes, it's me. I'm so happy to be here. I have waited for this moment all my life. I am so overjoyed that I feel I might explode," she said while laughing. The others were laughing, too.

"This is marvelous...marvelous.... Your laser procedure

tomorrow morning is confirmed. Yes? You must get those ugly holes removed from your forehead as soon as possible. What is that anyway?" asked Sanjay. Fatima looked at him with awe and said, "When I lived in Cambodia I saw the world differently, in a kind of spiritual way. I don't have the words for it. It was as if God opened up a purposeful world and something bigger than myself allowed me to see things more clearly. I got the piercing to represent this change. But I took it out on the boat because it didn't seem fitting anymore."

Sanjay burst out laughing, and replied, "You were right to do that. God does not exist in India! Come now. Let's go in." They all walked through a large, high-ceilinged foyer and into a plush living room painted in pale pink with gold trim.

Sanjay tugged on Agni's shirt and said, "Come with me." Agni and Sanjay walked into the office, closed the door and sat down. Agni whispered, "I found her! She is that American woman and I am certain her father is fighting against our revolution. He is one of their top men. Did you secure the money?"

"Yes," said Sanjay "the money from underground, the revolutionaries. But I have to return the money as soon as possible or they will have our heads; the interest is at fifty percent. Agni, you've got to be certain that we can use this girl, that she is the one," said Sanjay.

"Yes, it's going to be better than ever before. The film will be huge, don't worry. This is going to work," said Agni. And he left the room with Sanjay and met the others in the plush living room waiting area.

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### **Bangkok, Thailand**

Laurence entered the hotel restaurant and had breakfast while he read the newspaper. The first article he read jolted him right out of his chair. He read again:

*The New York Times, May 15th, 1982*

*A coroner's inquest has returned a verdict of accidental death*

*in yesterday's Indiana, America fatality. Mrs. Maggie Kellaway Diefendorf died suddenly due to heart complications. Possible cocaine overdose is in question. She was a well-known model within the fashion and entertainment industry. She was found dead in a hotel room. She was married to Laurence Diefendorf, an international award-winning photographer.*

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Sanjay and Fatima walked down the hall and entered a very dark office to the left. She sat down on a large wooden chair; he sat opposite her at a teak wood desk. She began to chew on the left side of the inside of her mouth, nervous.

“Let’s get down to business,” said Sanjay, opening a tiny drawer of the desk and grabbing a golden folder that contained a seven-page contract of her employment. She and Sanjay had immediate rapport and respect. He seemed like a kind man to her, explaining each important point briefly.

The contract read:

*The employment period will be exactly one year. Hours of work shall normally be no less than eighteen hours but no more than 55 hours per week, depending on the number of promotional clients, advert shoots, and filming. Absences: If Party B (Fatima) cannot come in to work for some reason she must put work as priority and resume to work regardless of the situation. Party B’s assistant will take care of the situation whatever it is. Premature termination of contract obligations: If party B wishes to terminate the contract before the expiration of the contract this will result in heavy financial loss of Party A*

*(Sanjay’s Production Company). Party B shall pay 2 months of their salary income (\$500,000US). This penalty clause shall be enforceable through Bombay District court that may order exit/entry restrictions on Party B’s passport. Party A will issue legal papers to the legal authorities governing Party B’s home address.*

Sanjay focused on Fatima’s eyes and said, “I have people who are with Laurence in Thailand. If you make a selfish move

against this contract there will be an even bigger attack by the Revolutionaries directly on your boyfriend and many more of the ill-fated ones.” Fatima sat there, paralyzed with fear. She had no choice but to adhere.

*If the Revolutionaries have found Laurence, she thought, they must know what my father has done and all of their lives are in danger.* She felt trapped. Sanjay caressed her neck with his hand and said, “Don’t look so serious.”

Then he continued with the terms of the contract:

*Party B’s salary shall be paid \$250,000US cash per month tax-free. Party B shall be paid on the 10th day of every month during the period of employment.*

*Certification of Deposit, cost of training against early termination. \$1.5 million US will be withheld from the first or in increments over the first several pay dates and put into an interest-bearing account for one year. Should party B complete the full year contract, the full amount of the CD account including interest shall be returned to party B on or before the final day of the contract period.*

*Benefits: Party A shall sponsor Party B for purpose of a work permit and resident certificate for the duration of this contract.*

*Insurance: Party A will cover all medical expenses including but not limited to laser surgeries, cosmetic surgeries, optical and dental, etc.*

*Allowance: Party A will cover all expenses during the period of contract. Including but not limited to all accommodations: five star penthouse suit, personal care, designer clothes, one Rolls Royce car, with driver, one personal assistant, all travel expenses e.g.) private jet, Punjabi bodyguards.*

*End of successful contract bonus: Following successful contract bonus and following satisfactory completion of this contract the company will provide a travel bonus stipend of three million US cash whether or not the employee actually travels.*

Sanjay asked, “Any questions, Fatima?”

“What about time off?”

He replied, “With this contract, you will have Saturday or Sundays occasionally off. But you’ll be on call 24 hours a day.”

Fatima was terrified yet excited that Sanjay was going to guarantee her fame and a large income. While nodding her head she said, “...You covered everything.”

Sanjay replied, “Could you sign here... and here... and here. And then we’re all done. We need to keep your passport on file for this.” She felt nervous about giving him her passport but felt she had no choice. When the underworld finds you, you have no choice but to give yourself up without obstruction, unless you’re ready to get yourself killed...

She stood up and was about to shake his hand when he pulled her closer to him, gently kissed her on the cheek and asked, “Will you be prepared to work after your procedure tomorrow?”

“Yes, Tiki told me that I’ll feel fine, like nothing ever happened. So I think I’ll be okay.”

“Good. We are shooting some of your scenes tomorrow. Tiki will make sure you’re ready to get picked up by Sij. You’ll be on set from one in the afternoon until one in the morning, sometimes we’ll stay later, until six in the morning or so.” She nodded again.

As she walked away, Sanjay put the contract in the drawer and said, “Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday will be shooting days. Tuesdays are for TV, radio and endorsements. Saturday and Sundays are travel days and /or client promotional days. On your days off, Tiki will take you shopping around Bombay or take the jet out to Goa for the day. Your bodyguard will escort you.”

“Thank you Sanjay.” She quickly left the room.

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The next day the laser procedure turned into the worst nightmare coming true. She woke up in the middle of the procedure. *They lied to me.* The doctors put her under and were also performing surgery on her face and on breasts. A thick transparent tube was in her stomach, slurping out the fat from her mid-section.

*Those around me thought I was under, but I could feel everything. The pain was excruciating and I was not able to speak. The doctors thought I was asleep but I awoke paralyzed and I couldn't scream or do anything, but I felt every prick, pull and incision. With my entire being and all of my strength, I tried to open my mouth to talk but the words would not come out. It was the most terrifying thing in the world that I have ever experienced. I was aware of every feeling and I wanted to die more than anything in the world...*

After the procedure she lay in the bed of a private room, and woke up unable to open her eyes, they felt so heavy. An exhaustion overpowered her, as if a house had landed on top of her and she had spent days trying to escape. She felt her hair hang over her breasts and it felt coarse, not like hers, and it was jet black now, also not like hers.

The reflection in the window gave her a fright – her breasts were much bigger and rounder, and her nose looked chiseled and hawk-like. Her eyes were bigger and now black, and her skin had the appearance and fineness of porcelain; the bridge piercing had disappeared. She looked gaunt and twenty pounds lighter; her waist now seemed the width of a teacup. Her teeth shone like a fluorescent lamp, and her jaw had been reset and chin repositioned to perfect symmetry.

Her body felt foreign and her reflection repulsed her, it was so unlike her. Her assistant and the doctor kept on reassuring her that she looked sumptuous, like an Indian goddess. Fatima thought she just looked weird. The transformation hit her like a volcano, and she cried and screamed, “This is horrific. I am misshapen and not a natural being anymore. I look like a freak! How am I supposed to live like this?”

Languidly, she grabbed the pillow that was behind her head and smothered it over her face, terrified about what Laurence would think, that she'd lost her chance of ever being with him and he wouldn't want to touch her again.

The doctors explained that she didn't need time to heal, that it was a futuristic procedure from which she could walk away pain-free. She didn't have a single scar, yet the recuperation *was* painful. She could feel every cut on her body and every nerve stung. Thankfully, the nurse gave her morphine and needles to inject herself with whenever she needed it.

After much deliberation, Tiki, Agni and Fatima arrived on the film set. All of the women dancers looked identical, and all looked like Fatima. They had the same noses, lips, cheekbones, and hair color, and were all wearing the same sort of warm, beige-toned saris and headscarves as hers.

One of the studio executives sidled up to one of the women, touched her elbow, and said, "Time to go, honey." When she turned to look at him, they both saw his error. He apologized, and moved past the three women to his real girlfriend. A newspaper was in the man's hand, and it caught Fatima's eye. It read:

*The Bombay police rescued twenty-seven minor girls who were employed as dancers in a brothel. Saudi sponsorship of white slavery – the kidnapping of young Americans (women and children) and their enrollment in forced prostitution in Bombay...*

"Lady, come here now! Stand here," the director told Fatima forcefully. As she moved closer to him, the stench of rancid body odor and dog urine being cooked in raging heat sickened her.

The director shouted, "You, hurry up!" He forced her arm straight out and up into the air and said, "Now twist the wrist back and forth into the air. Twist it. The wrist, back and forth, back and forth." She did as she was told. "No, not like that, you stupid girl. Like this!" He grabbed her arm and yanked it hard into the air.

He pushed her arm up higher and grabbed her wrist, tighter this time and twisted it back and forth.

She copied what he did to her arm, and became very focused in making that perfect wrist twist in the air.

"Now, look up at the wrist, switch arms and look to the wrist, and twist it back and forth, back and forth quickly. Just like that,

stay still now.”

He screamed “Action!” On the stage a blazing floodlamp shone on her, which made her eyes squint, and melodic Indian Bhangra music blared.

The East Indian women who looked like her danced and shuffled up behind her in a rigid line. They moved in unison behind her, twisting their wrists back and forth, back and forth just as the rancid-smelling director had told them to do.

Yet another woman who looked and dressed like her entered the scene. She held a package of instant rice with a forced smile and began twisting the package into the air, and looking up at it. She danced closer to Fatima and passed the package into Fatima’s hand.

Then Fatima started twisting it back and forth, and back and forth, looking up at the rice package, into the air...

“And cut...walk away everyone, leave now,” the rancid director said. They were done filming for the day. Fatima walked away with the others, clueless as to what had just happened, and headed back to her plastic trailer, where Tiki and Agni were waiting for her.

Agni said, “Fatima, that was incredible, you were amazing! That was the best performance I have ever seen in my life!”

Fatima replied, “I thought I was filming for Sanjay’s film today?”

“You were,” Agni said. “That last scene was for an advertisement for instant packaged fried rice.

“Oh,” she said.

“Isn’t it amazing, instant fried rice...! It’s going to change India, so futuristic, it’s brilliant!” said Agni.

The next morning Fatima awoke to screams of excitement at her hotel door. Agni walked in the door.

“Wake up Fatima, wake up! You’re on the front page of eight newspapers.

“Oh my god, those shots of the instant rice, I look disgusting!

Like a plastic drone,” said Fatima.

Agni shook the newspapers in her face and said, “No. India says you are a goddess. The previews are already coming in and the movie will be a guaranteed hit.”

Tiki walked into the hotel room with a rolling hanger heavy with designer clothing. She opened the window to show how the commercial was being played on a large digital screen on a tall, silver building.

Agni pulled the curtain back and said proudly, “You’re a star!”  
“Right... who cares.”

“No, you are,” said Agni. “You have captured the hearts of all of India, and of the world. Today is a crucial day. You are scheduled to do more promotions later. Tiki brought you all of these gorgeous outfits to try on. You need to find something that fits you well for your meeting with the Valmiki and Rama brothers. This is very important, they own India’s Star Media. They’re bringing their TV crew in here from ten different stations, and five newspaper reporters. Then they will be interviewing you.”

“They will take care of catering here for us,” Agni continued, while checking a PDA. “You don’t even have to leave your hotel room. They understand how tired you are from twenty-four hours squeezed into sixteen. Rest well, and I’ll see you later.” Agni left the door and locked it from the outside. Tiki stayed with her in the hotel room.

Fatima was in her bathrobe, now looking apathetically through the outfits Tiki had brought in for her. The clothing was mostly Chanel and Ralph Lauren, including shoes, hats, handbags and jewelry. Fatima didn’t really care about the clothing; she was less materialistic now.

“Agni wants you to wear this,” Tiki said. “Let’s see if it fits.” Tiki dressed her in a fitted white Chanel blazer and knee-length pencil skirt. Tiki carefully put on her on a thick, braided gold bracelet, necklace, and matching ring, then placed a wide-brimmed white hat on Fatima’s head. In the mirror, Fatima looked sharp.

“Do you need anything else? Are you hungry?” Tiki asked.

“No, I’m fine.”

“Fine then, I’ll come back in an hour to help you get ready, then the media crew will come in shortly afterwards to set up.”

Tiki left the room, again the door was locked from the outside. At last Fatima was alone. She got undressed and changed into her cozy flannel pajamas. Her ears were ringing and she felt disoriented.

She climbed into bed, bolted the door, pulled down all the blinds, trying to shut out the howls of the dogs, potential intruders, insects and all those staring faces, skeletal bodies and naked children in the road. She required stillness to sleep but first wrote a letter to Laurence:

*Dear Laurence,*

*You would not believe my life. A life of ease, and free of hassles. Picture this: limos purring at the front door, helicopters ready to go at a moment’s notice (this is how Agni left to go to Pakistan from Bombay last week), private planes waiting on the tarmac. Restaurant owners and managers rub their hands in delight and anticipation, and maitre D’s hover by the door. A lot of effort goes into creating the illusion of a trouble-free life. Many assistants, helpers, servers, me too; I am one of them. Once I read Agni’s notes when he was taking a call in the other room and it read:*

*Daily Necessities:*

*-Two private planes, one for Sanjay and one private plane for Fatima.*

*-Order little black card weighing an ounce, lets billionaires do just about anything and everything (Must be careful because London might hack the information from us to check where transfers are being done.)*

*We need: Top bodyguards/all Punjabis*

*Electronic data and phone conversions secure with thumbprint. (But be careful the government uses these too and can crack the code if needed)*

*Install video cameras on every floor of every building used.*

*Warning: Very low budgets, hurried shooting, privileged star power and profit over artistic integrity....*

She'd write more for Laurence later. She was tired now, needed to sleep...

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It seemed like half a second from when her head hit the pillow. Suddenly all of the TV and media crew were in her hotel room, ready to start the live interview. Commotion and confusion thickened the air.

*Three... Two... One...*

Star media: "Now that you are famous, so you have a lot of celebrity friends?"

Fatima: "No, but do you know some decent ones? Actually, ignore that last answer. I enjoy being alone best."

Star media: "How did you get discovered?"

Fatima: "I think God believed in me first, and it went on from there."

Star media: "So you believe in God then?"

Fatima: "Yes, but if I was shown an apparition and a reason, I'll believe in him more."

Bursts of laughter in the room...

Star media: "That must have been so difficult to hear that your brother Azel committed suicide..."

Fatima cut into the question and replied, "My brother absolutely did not commit suicide. He sacrificed himself for all of our evildoers. You know the people who kill, the greedy, the corrupted...Azel will always be a hero in my eyes."

Star media: "Do you think the Revolutionaries can be stopped, or will they win?"

Fatima: "The Revolutionaries can never be stopped. One is delusional to think otherwise. No one wins in war..."

A female reporter interrupted her answer and said, "You mean so long as all people have choices and choose well, there is always

some reason of hope that evil will be overcome?”

Fatima: “Yes, I sort of meant to say something like that. If we don’t have choices and freedom... then it’s all over. It is not given freely, you have to fight for freedom!”

Suddenly all the lights came back on. The Valmiki and Rama brothers started shooing people away. They were both converted Muslims, Rama was tiny and Valmiki was skinny and tall.

Rama said, “That’s enough for today. Thank you everyone for being here tonight... you can go now.”

Everyone left the hotel room and Rama and Valmiki stayed and chatted with Fatima for a while about nothing. They ordered more room service. They ordered chocolate truffles, strawberry cheesecakes, and the very best champagne. Rama poured three glasses of the bubbly, turned off all but one of the lamps, and lit candles.

From outside came the sound of thunder; a terrible storm was looming.

Fatima was drinking quickly, thinking about how she could escape, and about these powerful men who fascinated and frightened her. Rama took a small bag out of his suitcase and placed it on the coffee table. He opened the bag in a hurry and she briefly saw a gun. He took out a ball gag and put it in her mouth. Fatima didn’t flinch and let him strap it in her mouth.

Valmiki said, “Down on your knees!”

Fatima kept her head down, and heard that both men were breathing hard. Valmiki went into the other room.

Rama violently forced her legs apart, tied one leg to the corner of the sofa and the other to the leg of an endtable.

Fatima heard a jingling sound of a belt being unfastened. Mustering her courage, she reached towards the lamp on the table and with all of her might whacked the side of Rama’s head.

She quickly loosened the ropes and got up to run. Valmiki came in from the other room and ran after her. She grabbed the gun. Valmiki clung to his brother, but gently let him go. Then he

went in front of Fatima, knelt down without saying a word, and his head was blown off with one shot.

Rama slightly moved his head and got up on his knees... and Fatima pulled back the trigger and shot him in the back. Rama fell to the ground, on top of his brother.

Fatima ran out of the hotel room into the corridor and found Agni.

“What –what happened, Agni?” Fatima asked.

“This is bad, Fatima,” said Agni. “Why did you kill them?” Fatima looked at the brothers’ dead bodies, then at the gun in her hand.

“Me? Did I kill them?” Her face went white, and the gun fell from her hand.

“It’s the champagne, Agni! I never meant...Oh, why did I drink all that champagne tonight? I don’t remember anything...”

Without letting her finish her thought, Agni pushed a gun into Fatima’s mouth and said, “You didn’t do your job...you have disobeyed.”

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The apparition appeared to Fatima at the dawn of an ethereal light. An angel gave a loud sigh. All of the beings on Earth heard her heavy breath, the cattle, the bees and nocturnal rodents. The angel cried, “Whoa, whoa, whoa...” A colossal red, hot fireball like the sun zig-zagged down towards the earth at astonishing speed, then spiraled across the horizon, along gray-ribbon tones and honey-colored hues across the sky. The ball shimmered in vibrant purples, then flashes of hot pinks.

A ball of enormous power came dashing before Fatima, then suddenly elongated back into space, as when a child pulls back on a slingshot. Then it quickly disappeared into the atmosphere, leaving behind only parted oceans and parted earth in between. The angel grabbed Fatima at just the last moment before it made itself known.

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That night in Bangkok, Laurence called Fatima's mother in Indiana.

"Hello, I am terribly sorry to bother you. I have some terrible news about your daughter. Fatima is in a lot of trouble."

"Oh, for Pete's sake! What has she done now?" said Fatima's mother.

"A kind woman from the US embassy contacted me at my hotel, and informed me that Fatima is in a mental hospital in Vietnam. She was found on a cliff in Nha Trang beach, unconscious, with self-inflicted wounds all over her body..." Laurence paused, waiting for the stream of exclamations from Fatima's mother to end. "I'm sorry to tell you this, but she is in critical condition. She needed specialists and was flown to a hospital in Saigon by helicopter. The doctors fear that she is very sick and may not make it. I'm flying to Vietnam today to see her... What happened? Last week I received a strange letter from her that Agni, her agent, had accompanied her to India to work in Bollywood. At first I believed it, but now I know this was all in her head. She is very sick," said Laurence.

"I don't know if I can make it," Fatima's mother was saying. "If I leave the country they'll cut my benefits. I can't afford it, and uh... But you know, whatever it is, it's probably her own fault. This is going to be a lot of trouble for her father and I. What a selfish daughter I have! How dare she put us through this! She must be faking it. It's probably another one of her stupid little attempts for attention. But I guess I'll try and contact her father about this. If I can't... can you get her back for us? I mean, I'm not really up for this."

Laurence answered, annoyance in his voice, "She needs all of our support now. The doctors said that she may end up staying in the hospital for up to a year if she survives. She is very sick physically and mentally. I guarantee you that she is not faking it. This is genuine."

"I'll leave you any messages at the US embassy if I need to

get in touch with you,” said Laurence, trying to wrap it up. “She is staying at St. Grace’s mental hospital in Saigon. I hope to meet you there,” said Laurence.

“I’ll try,” said her mother and hung up.

## FLIGHT

### Three months later in St. Grace's Mental Hospital, Saigon

Fatima was kneeling on her bed, gesticulating wildly while shouting at the nurse, "Do you know who I am? Because I didn't have sex with those brothers, Valmiki and Rama, the film bombed. Agni tried to kill me, but something rescued me. Sanjay freaked out because the movie didn't generate enough money to pay them back. I know he will be killed, because of the threatening phone calls that he gets. Then he panicked and called the authorities in London. They will come after me next!"

The nurse screamed, "Fatima, Agni and Bollywood only existed in your head!"

Fatima ignored the words, and rambled on, "London froze the brothers' 2.5 billion, which was kept in a country outside of the yellow desert. London soldiers also tracked the top revolutionaries and they were killed on the spot, resisting arrest..."

"But this knowledge just came to me, I'm not sure, you know..." her words came more slowly as she became more uncertain of the truth. "I don't know anything or everything. But they're also wanted for previous bombings in Southeast Asia and brainwashing Hindus in India to convert to Islam. The Muslim militia broke down and insiders got scared and leaked the information to me. I am still trapped. I can't call anyone, because the phones are tapped. I especially can't call my family. Everything is being recorded. My every step is documented."

The nurse replied, "Your mother, father, and Laurence are coming to visit you again today."

Fatima said, "I don't want to see my father or my mother today. They are a part of this conspiracy and they were against me all along. I will go to the top officials of the United Nations and sue them for putting me in here. No one can force me to be here against my will. I am an adult and have rights and freedoms. I will

not become part of the New World that they are planning, they will inevitably bring the world population down, but they won't get me. I'm a wolf and not a sheep with my eyes wide shut..." she trailed off.

Fatima asked, "Did Agni survive?"

The nurse sighed and replied, "Oh yes, Agni...Agni, your agent right?"

"Yes, my agent."

"I have told you this many times before. You were found unconscious on a cliff in Nha Trang beach in Vietnam and were lucky to survive. You were so far away when you hurt yourself. You just missed the ocean. You could have easily been carried off to sea if no one found you."

Fatima asked, "How long have I been here?"

"I must have told you a hundred times already. It has been three months since the accident. Remember, Dr. Nguyen told you to keep calm and rest so that the medications will be more effective? You're here to treat your illness. The doctors and your family are very concerned about you." Fatima silently climbed into the bed and gazed up at the nurse.

"The doctor said that you are manic but that you would be fine. It's a manageable illness, you can still have a life. So many have gone through this, some worse than you and have become better," explained the nurse.

Fatima laughed nervously and asked, "I went mad?"

The nurse smiled, shrugged her shoulders, and said, "Don't worry, Ma'am, you're not that far gone from the rest of us." Then she walked out of the room and left Fatima alone.

Fatima picked up a small notebook from the side table. She accepted now that it was her own diary; she looked at the diary and knew now that she was its creator. She looked closely at her hands, and knew the creator of the spark inside herself but didn't know for certain who had created her body.

Later that day, Laurence came into the room quietly and sat

beside her on the bed. He gently squeezed her hand and said, “You find love with that one person, but to that one person you are their world... a very meaningful life, don’t you think? Dear, I’ll get you some food. You haven’t eaten yet, have you?” She shook her head.

Laurence walked out of her room to arrange her food tray.

She lay unresponsive, transfixed to the world outside her window, but she relished the warmth of the sunshine on her body. Placidly, she was beginning to acknowledge what the nurse had told her, that Agni and Bollywood did not exist. And she felt a flicker from within herself, like a miniature pilot light, growing bigger in her gut.

A voice from outside herself said, “Fatima, it’s me, Banda. It might look like you have nothing now, but you’re at the best place to be. You have gone through the very worst. You can only rise above this and be better because of it. Your brother Azel is here, too. He and I love you, and we are so happy here because we finally made it home...”

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### **One year later...**

*Dear Diary,*

*Since it was my last week at the hospital I got soaked. It happens to everyone who leaves this place. They poured this stuff called simple syrup all over me. It’s made out of sugar and water. After that they poured water and strawberries on me, too. I laughed and was a good sport about it. Banda, Azel and Laurence were on the sidelines, smiling, waiting and ready to welcome my new changes, and my new life.*

*I think I screwed up along the way somewhere.... Now I have no choice but to start over again with nothing. Ok, so I get it, I’ve been put into a mental institution. I’m a goose egg of sorts that was placed in a padded cage. At least I avoided Indiana. Perhaps that is enough of an achievement. Are there any people out there who are neither locked up nor standing guard at the gate? Animals*

*that foam at the mouth are put into a cage. There are cages for the imbeciles of society found living under city bridges. And let us not forget about the cages for people who leave their papers at home. Children are enslaved by institutions when parents are not there.*

*Perhaps we are all enslaved by something bigger than ourselves. I'm even enslaved by my thoughts, feelings and emotions. I'm enslaved by my own mind at work, on what I believe is Earth. I don't think an all-knowing God would want this for his children. Perhaps something beneath God created our bodies as some kind of sick experiment. Is this really the planet that I am living on? No one knows.*

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Fatima wanted to go back to Lotus Orphanage, and carefully thought about her choice of words to apologize to DA. She missed the children so much, and wanted to see them as soon as possible. Fatima felt so tired but at peace.

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Later, Laurence came back with her food tray. He was there to comfort her and watch her fall asleep. Soon, she fell into a deep sleep and crystallized dreams of warm red desert sands, stillborn aqua seas, and a world anew... without cockroaches.