

*This Isn't Just
a Souvenir*

by Ki Hyun Park

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For Grace Choe, who inspired me to travel

Chapter 1.

THE BUS DIED as soon as it reached the Laotian border. The weather was warm, and tropical light drifted through the canopy. The winter parka which had protected me in Tibet was now rolled up to serve as a pillow so that I could sleep against the windowpane. The drivers were sloshing bowl after bowl of water on overheated tires. Clearly, this was a revival process that could take hours. A gateway of banana trees opened into a haven of endless red hills.

The bus driver announced that a second bus was coming. Behind him, his young trainees had resorted to their own personal drinking water to get the old hunk of junk to wake up. All passengers got off the bus and idled around the checkpoint. There wasn't much to see or do, but we'd all be stuck here for several hours before that second bus arrived.

As I walked about and observed the scene at the border, I noticed a certain slack in posture by the military men with rifles slung lazily over their shoulders. This was a far cry from the Chinese side of the border where the soldiers were hyper alert and ready to shoot. A few guards at the border had bare feet and were using sticks to scratch themselves with. Their smiles were easy like the lope of stray dogs searching for dubious morsels buried in the sand.

These were the telltale signs of an economy doomed to stagnation. But maybe it was all just a calculated ruse to separate us from our precious foreign currency. I wandered over to the currency exchange kiosk and watched my red *yuan* turn into purplish Laotian *kip*, I couldn't say why. I was just bored and needed something to do. The currency exchange office was just sitting there, ready to send me into fiscal demise.

Lao money is worthless, but this it's only on the other side of the border that you find out that only dollars are desired. Even the paper feels cheap somehow, like they couldn't spring for the extra ply. Without knowing it, I'd entered a game where human life was the real currency, backed not by the acquisition of precious metals, but by the ability to harvest the energy of people with the exactitude of a machine. It was simple: We were all equal now. We all had nothing.

After my plunge into a money-pit of *kip* like Scrooge McDuck, I approached the shade where groups of travelers sat at separate tables wondering if they'd fallen into the same hole that I had. Language was the magnetizing force. The Chinese sat at one big table; the Laotians were organized by family ties. There were also gatherings of assorted brown folk I couldn't confidently identify. I eyed the tables, uncertain which group I'd fit in with. I bade my time, buying some odd spiky fruit, just to rid myself of some *kip*.

Suddenly, I saw the flash of a wave.

"Hey there, over here!"

A girl the frizzy hair waved and smiled warmly. Her wire spectacles kept sliding to the tip of her nose, perhaps due to the heat. She was a brown-skinned girl in a rainbow muumuu who resembled a bespectacled teddy bear with frizzy black hair.

"Sit down and join the club," she said in a familiar accent. "This is my partner, Paprika." Paprika smiled and gave me air guns. She had a buzz cut and wore a white T-shirt with cut-off sleeves like she was an extra off the musical *Grease*. The teddy bear introduced herself as Maya.

"A fellow American," I said in surprise. "Whereabouts?"

"Orange County, California," Maya informed me. "What about you?"

"The Garden State," I told her. "My name is Sam, Sam Iam, and I do not like green eggs and ham."

Maya laughed, but the joke went over half of the table's heads.

"Hey, your English is much better than mine," a guy who was sitting at the table observed. He looked like the Asian version of Clark Kent. "You're

an American, huh? I've never met an Asian American before. You seem Asian *and* American at the same time."

He was no Sherlock Holmes, but he had the kind of torso that polo shirts were made for. He introduced himself as Louis, and almost forgot his girlfriend, who he quickly added was named Bee. I assumed that her bright yellow tennis outfit was just a coincidence and smiled politely.

Beside them was a white girl who wore the kind of cheap white sunglasses you find at rest stops. She was dressed in a white tank-top, with droplets of sweat glistening along her collar. Her hair was the color of burnt honey, tied up haphazardly and in the sunlight not unlike a bird's nest on fire. "Jacky," the blonde with the white sunglasses said in an Australian accent, as if a speaking stick has been passed to her. I wouldn't go so far to describe her as "pretty" for the little smirk that she wore had something acidic about it. Not the kind that horribly scalds you, but like orange juice. Not exactly sweet, but close enough.

"Have you guys been to Vietnam? That was the worst for us. We were almost there for a whole day," Maya said, continuing some previous conversation about receiving visas at the border.

"Don't ever give a guy off the street your passport. This dude said he could expedite the process for like thirty bucks and my friend gave her his passport and never saw him again."

"Your friend no longer exists. She lives in Romania now and has a fair amount of credit card debt," Louis remarked with a laugh.

"That's why I don't trust anyone. I don't even use my real name," Jacky said.

"So, is your name not 'Jacky'?" I asked.

"Just one of many names," she replied and removed her sunglasses. I was suddenly confronted by her unshielded eyes. A corona of bluish-green light radiated from her irises, reflecting the trees and sky.

"Is there anything to drink around here?" I asked.

"It's never too early for a Beer Lao," quipped Louis, making his voice sound like a commercial none of us had heard before. "Want me to order for you?"

"Sounds good," I agreed.

"Make that two," Jacky added.

Louis called to the vendor in Lao.

"If you don't mind me saying, your English is also quite fluent," I said to Louis. "Did you study abroad?"

"Nope, we both went to international school in Vientiane. That's the capital," Louis explained, glancing at his girlfriend, Bee. "Now I'm training to be a diplomat, so I use English all the time."

"He always comes home late. Smells like perfume," complained Bee. "Tells me he's out fighting crime."

This was followed by titters of uncomfortable laughter.

"It's true. The job of a diplomat is serious business. Sometimes I deal with weapons dealers and drug cartels. These aren't the kind of people who have offices. You need to hit them where they work and play," insisted Louis.

"The job of a diplomat is a lot different in Laos than in America, I guess," I said helpfully, unsure if he was joking.

"If you're ever in trouble, you know who to call," Louis chirruped in mock superhero mode.

"Hey, you can be our tour guide," Paprika suggested.

"Sure, just pay me in Beer Lao!" Louis said with a chuckle.

I imagined us following this drunken diplomat turned super-bro, running around Laos, showing us plenty while explaining nothing.

Two bottles of Beer Lao arrived.

I clinked bottles with Jacky, and we drank. Jacky held the bottle to a near vertical angle over her head and gulped the beer down halfway. She let a belch fly, and then covered her mouth, suddenly ladylike.

"God, I miss Thailand," said Jacky, as if this stunt brought back memories. I watched her staring beyond the table as if somewhere through the trees, Thailand was there waiting.

"I bet Thailand misses you, too," I remarked, guessing at the trail of hearts she'd left behind.

"Where're you coming from?" asked Jacky.

“China,” I told her. “I did about a month there, traveling from Beijing to Tibet. What about you?”

“I’ve been in Southeast Asia for years,” Jacky confessed. “Where else can you wake up, eat fresh fruit, and do fuck all for the rest of the day? I’m just doing a visa run in Laos so I can go back to Thailand. It’s a pain in the ass, but unless I marry a Thai man...”

Her voice trailed off coquettishly producing some light laughter from the table.

“Well, the bus is headed to Luang Prabang,” Paprika said. “Are you guys staying for a few days?”

“After that, it’s off to Vang Vieng,” added Maya.

“You know who else is going to be there,” Jacky said knowingly.

“Candidate Dim,” Maya and Paprika said in unison and exchanged glances.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

Paprika, Maya, and Jacky were shocked that I’d never heard of the Laotian demagogue known as Candidate Dim. They took turns illuminating me on all the things there were to hate about him: his pug face, his fat body, his short little legs, his chain of fast food restaurants, his misogyny, his brood of nasty children from three different wives (all former contestants of Miss Universe pageants), his ivory limousine appearing in the poorest villages only during his campaigns for reelection, and worst of all were his taunts against the LGBTQ community and his ridiculous pompadour.

“His next campaign stop is going to be in Vang Vieng. Timed perfectly with the opening of another one of his restaurants,” Jacky said with a snort.

“Just another example of hyper-capitalism erasing the purity of the local culture,” Maya murmured sadly. Then, perking up with inspiration, she said, “We’re going to join the protest there and let the people know we stand with them. Power in numbers!”

“Right on time for the Full Moon Party,” Paprika added.

“That’s when the cosmic energies will be at their strongest. We’ll dance with our brothers and sisters in love and unity,” Maya said, her brown eyes

glowing behind her spectacles. “Every journey begins with serendipity. How about it, Sam? Do you want to join us in the fight against bigotry and injustice?”

“Um, sure?”

“One more to join the Resistance,” she said with a nod.

“Get your ass on the front lines!” Paprika cheered.

“What about you, Louis? Bee?”

“Sorry, we need to go back to Vientiane for some family stuff. But if you ever find yourself in the capital, feel free to contact me. I’ll show you guys around,” Louis said.

Perhaps Maya sensed that I was already thinking of a way out because she looked directly at me and without allowing me wiggle room declared, “You’re coming with us.”

“Welcome to the party,” Jacky said and chugged the rest of her Beer Lao. And like that, I was one of them: a diaspora of the privileged and insane. I downed my beer for courage.



The second bus arrived like a relief pitcher and rumbled us through dappled light. I switched my seat to sit next to Jacky while Paprika and Maya sat in front of us. Jacky shared one of her earbuds with me and we listened to her music until the batteries ran out. Her tunes were mostly pop, and I spent way too much time smelling her hair.

Local passengers got off every couple of hours at various bus stops or banana trees that they recognized as their own. We rode for hours with every window open, and at one point the bus got stuck in the muddy road. Everyone hopped off and worked together to push the bus from the back. I got behind Jacky to contribute to the effort. The bus rocked back and forth and was finally set free, only to die moments later.

We reached Luang Prabang in the middle of night. We said goodbye to Louis and Bee, then hailed a tuk-tuk to the nearest hostel, a place called

Cool Shade. Thankfully the journey was short. We were all dead tired. From outside, the hostel looked like a crumbling mansion. The most noticeable feature were the gargantuan moths that crashed into the few porch lights that were kept on. After the night manager signed us in, we wished each other good night. I went to the men's dorm while Paprika, Maya, and Jacky headed to the women's dorm. The men's dorm was dark and filled with snoring, and I was forced to feel around like a blind man for an empty bed. In no time, I fell into a deep sleep.

I woke up early the next morning, surprised by my new surroundings. For a moment, I thought I was still in China. The whole journey to Laos seemed like a strange dream. In my sleep, I remember looking out the window of the bus and seeing a night sky filled with distant fires. It had only been days before that I was in the Himalayas, hanging out with Tibetan monks. Now I was in shorts and a tank-top with the cool morning air luring me out of bed. I walked barefooted through the lobby and headed to the veranda which was wrapped around the hostel. Cool Shade was a former French colonial mansion converted into a backpacker's hostel. In the lobby, various brochures for temple stays and jungle trekking were in dogeared abundance. On the veranda, there was a breakfast station, lounge chairs, hanging tapestries, and lots of used books.

I lined up with the other early risers who seemed to have just finished their morning meditation. The atmosphere was peaceful, and voices were kept hushed as everyone picked up toast and jam, juice, fruit, and Lao coffee. I chose a sunny spot on the bamboo mat plush with colorful cushions and quietly ate breakfast as I looked out at the dilapidated street beyond the untamed yard.

The early morning atmosphere was quiet, peaceful, and respectful for those who preferred to start the day with reflection. As I checked out the other guests, occasionally I would meet their eyes and feel a sort of connection. Almost an acceptance or a confirmation that no matter who we were or where we'd come from, we were on the same level. I noticed how similar we all were, how *copacetic*. There was a sense of harmony and equality. I found

myself telling my own story to new friends as if we knew each other, about how I'd spent the last two years living in Tokyo, trying to teach Japanese businessmen to pronounce "hamburger", and having failed that, was .

They'd tell me their own stories and misadventures, and we'd end the conversation by drifting, not even caring that no social media tags were exchanged. It was like technology didn't even matter. Everything was analogue. The pulpy paper of a rain-beaten book was the texture we craved. The feeling of bare feet on wood. We'd all found each other in this exotic and secluded location, and were thrust into these cheap beds as equals, with no more status, no more rules, and as naked as the yoga pants and Beer Lao tank-tops that we were draped in. The only person who had any authority here was the smooth-faced, ponytailed owner of the hostel, a Thai man named Pong, and all he wanted was for us to have a good time.

After the third cup of Lao coffee, I was jumping from conversation to conversation. Everyone was so fascinating, reading books I'd never heard of, full of information about the world. They represented different walks of life, and yet there was something we all seemed to share, though I couldn't put my finger on it. There was a unified politic in our worldview, and this was something that I only understood much later.

Many of the travelers were seasoned backpackers, which meant that they'd been traveling for a year or longer. Some of them weren't even traveling in the traditional sense of hitting the sites and roaming until their savings dried up; they were living life out there, taking on jobs or working as entrepreneurs and digital nomads. Many of them had no plans to go home or return to "reality." Others had found their calling in these lands as volunteers or in some way involved in charity or some impressive ambition to change the world.

Take Claire, for example, the wispy blonde schoolteacher from Ireland. She was dressed in a sari, wore a satchel woven from elephant grass, and was currently working on a universal language that would erase the problem of language. "Language is a system of oppression. Did you know that before an infant forms her first word, she can speak every language in the world?"

What if we could take elements from every language and put them into one? Not only would it increase cross-cultural communication, but it would also eliminate the inherent tyranny of language itself. That's why I've been working on a new communication system I call 'One-glish.' Do you want to know how to say 'Hello' in One-glish? 'Konichi-bon-ola!'"

"How do you say 'amazing'?" I gushed.

"You say, 'Wow!'" she said with a charmed laugh. "I didn't feel like we needed to change that one. Everyone says, 'Wow!' anyways."

Then there was Serena, a sturdy Dutch brunette who enjoyed wrestling as much as she was passionate about fighting for animals' rights.

"I've created a circus that features Thai street elephants. They're rescue elephants, freed from a life of being beaten and abused into doing tricks for tourists. We give them a new job that literally pays peanuts. We even get human volunteers to act as animals in the circus. The elephants whip the humans and make them do tricks. We train the elephants to hold a whip in their trunks. It forces people to see how brutal the circus really is, and it's also therapeutic for the elephants. And in case you're wondering, all the human volunteers come from first-world countries. Most of them are French."

And of course, there was Ben, the smug founder of Ben's Shoes. Despite his rotund frame, he was able to sit in a perfect lotus position. When I first met him, he was seated on a rock telling a small group of admirers the story of how he got the idea for Ben's Shoes:

"There I am in Siem Reap. I'd just graduated college, and all I want to do is go see the world before I get into the rat race. I don't really know what I want to do; I just know that I want to help people and make a lot of money doing it, but I just can't think of any ideas."

A crowd of listeners, some of whom had already heard the story earlier that morning, sit around Ben as he goes on, legs folded like a guru.

"So, I'm at the temple doing my meditation when it hits me. A flip-flop! Some kid must've thrown it at me. At first, I got angry, but then I quickly realized this was the answer. This is the thing people need. That's how I started my own flip-flop company, all made with 100 percent recycled tires,

courtesy of the Siem Reap junkyards. It gives the kids an education. They learn a skill and can earn money for the rest of their lives. Plus, if you buy a flip-flop, I give a recycled tire to one homeless child in need.”

When I later asked him if it wouldn't it be better to just give the kids some flip-flops, he smiled wanly and said, “You know the old saying, ‘Give a man a fish, he eats for a day?’”

With the Lao coffee on infinity mode, we sipped and trembled with the restless chatter of summer camp. It was as if we were just being fed pots of coffee so Pong could get us all caffeinated and let us loose into the jungle to wander around, scream, whoop, and pretend we were animals. We'd run around and scream until we got sleepy, then we'd drift back to the vans in a daze, returning with wooden things someone had carved into the shape of a frog.

Listen: Ribbit. Ribbit.

By afternoon, word got out that there was going to be a trip to Kuang Si Waterfall. I hopped on the list and reunited with Paprika, Maya, and Jacky. Also in our van was Jergen the Norwegian diver, Claire the English teacher, Serena the animal activist from Holland, and Ben from Ben's Shoes.

We jumped out of the van and were given some basic directions. There would be a pathway leading higher towards the waterfall at the very top of the mountain. From there we would be able to see a view stretching all the way to Myanmar and Thailand.

“The way up is very narrow and slippery, so I advise you to pair up,” a voice said from the bushes.

“Pong!”

Pong materialized like the Predator from the leaves. His cheeky Thai face was aglow as he twisted the ends of his mustache teasingly.

“Watch your step. It gets very slippery, especially at the top. See you there!” Pong cried and vanished back into the jungle.

We each paired up, with Jergen and I linking together. The path winded around the mountain with a narrow pathway wide enough for one person to go at a time. The edge was bordered by a crude fence tied together with fiber. The fence would do nothing to prevent us from falling over the edge.

Our trail moved along the spiny ridge, the gnarly rainforest wet with an ever-present mist. I followed the back of Jergen's head, a blonde untamed bush of half-dreaded, half-forgotten locks amidst a chaos of curls and swirls. He was the type to be stopped in airport security. He was well-accustomed to spreading his long arms and waiting for the dance of a wand around his crotch.

Once, I nearly slipped off the edge, still wearing beat-up Nikes which were inappropriate for the terrain. Fortunately, Jergen had long arms that could shoot out with the speed of a mantis shrimp. I felt his hand grip my wrist as I regained my footing.

"You're not wearing Ben's shoes, are you?" Jergen said with a grin, making a crack at the tire guru.

"Standard sweatshop Nikes, I'm afraid."

"You should be more careful. The jungle is a dangerous place. Are you traveling alone?" he asked.

"I'm with those girls up there," I told him, waving toward Paprika, Maya, and Jacky up ahead. "We met at the border of China and Laos. What about you?"

"For now, I am solo," Jergen responded. "I'm going to meet some of my friends in Vang Vieng."

"That's where we're headed," I told him. "Do you know anything about Candidate Dim?"

"Yes, I know him," Jergen said, glancing over his shoulder at me sharply. "He is the founder of Bug Burgers. He is scum. I hate him."

"I think the plan is to join a protest against him," I told Jergen. "I'm not going to get beat up by riot police, am I?"

"No, there will just be a lot of screaming and yelling. That's only *if* he comes," Jergen replied. "These days he doesn't show up unless the media is there. He wants to run for parliament. The thought of him with power is terrifying."

"What's the big deal? Shouldn't everyone get a shot at a lifetime of kickbacks?" I snarked.

Jergen stopped abruptly and stared at me. “You’re not a Dim supporter, are you?”

“Whoa, hey now. I don’t know anything about his policies,” I said defensively. “I just know he’s a horrible demagogue who’s as corrupt and ruthless as they come. Allegedly.”

“Well, you answered your own question then,” Jergen retorted, and continued up the path. “If he builds another a Bug Burger restaurant in Vang Vieng, it will destroy the local culture. That’s the first reason.”

“The locals need culture,” I agreed.

“Second, it will add more traffic and development around the town.”

“Too many carbon footprints,” I hummed.

“Third, his existence is causing nothing but rifts within society and stirring up tribalism and hatred.”

“Love your brother, love your sister,” I crooned softly.

“Do you know what he said yesterday during a visit with the king of Thailand?” Jergen said and paused to look at me with incredulity in his eyes. “He said Theravada is the only pure form of Buddhism there is. Like, does he even know what Mahayana Buddhism is?”

The woods grew suddenly quiet.

“So, what do you think about Jacky?” I asked.

We picked up speed and caught up with the others as they stood in front of a rushing stream. The only way to the other side was to traverse steppingstones as the water churned and gushed around them. Just as Paprika was about to attempt the first rock, we heard a voice from above.

“Careful, or you will get your feet wet!”

“Pong!”

He was at the top of the next hill, looking down on us, encouraging us onward. He pointed to the path across the rapids. We followed the tip of his finger up the next hillside, helter-skelter through the trees, and into the flowering vines. Somewhere beyond was the waterfall.

“Just a little further, and then you can take a dive!” Pong cried, falling backwards, disappearing off the high precipice.

We stood there and listened to the chittering of the birds and insects. Butterflies fluttered past us in a smoke pattern through sparkling vapors fluttering across the frothing rocks and spray.

“You can do it, baby!” encouraged Maya to Paprika.

Paprika carefully jumped the rocks and celebrated on the other side. She picked up a fallen branch and played air guitar.

The rest of us followed. Maya picked up the hem of her muumuu and danced across without a slip. Claire leapt in the air like a Bollywood star in her sari. Serena and Ben, both wearing proper hikers—with Ben noticeably not wearing his own shoes—treaded across the rocks. Next, Jacky played hopscotch in sandals, and Jergen joined them on the other side walking across the rocks with ease on his stilted legs. He seemed to mock the idea of ceremony itself, but I saw a satisfied grin on his lips knowing that his feet were dry.

Finally, I stepped up to the rocks. I saw my comrades on the other side cheering me on, but specifically I noticed Jacky who was jumping up and down, bouncing. I let our eyes meet and imagined leaping in slow motion like a ballerino. I stepped out with confidence and found myself spinning in a cold current, hands stretched out, being flung like a ragdoll against the rocks.

I got up and shrugged, trying to laugh it off, but the next rock proved just as treacherous, and I was thrown back into the stream. At that point, I just started sloshing around, moving past the rocks and fording my way across, being spun this way and that by the current on my way to the other side.

“That’s never happened before,” I told Jacky, who did a very poor job of trying to contain her laughter.

We continued up the narrow ridge through flowering vines where orchids grew out of nectar-infused air. At the top of the waterfall, a solitary man posed on one leg, balancing on a stone in the middle of the stream that cut the roaring flows before they broke off and spilled down into a white void.

“Pong!”

He turned and faced us with his arms spread to the sky.

“Congratulations for reaching the top,” he said, smiling.

We whooped and cheered and gave each other high fives.

“From here, you can see all the surrounding countries. To the north, there is Myanmar, which used to be called Burma. To the west is Thailand. To the east is Vietnam. Behind us to the south is Cambodia.”

He pointed to the mountains and plateaus and foothills shining and darkening in a dance beneath the clouds. The green hills rolled on for as far as the eye could see.

“If you look hard enough, you can see a light on the horizon. That’s the top of a golden temple. This land used to be full of gold. No more gold now. All gone. Our countries always at war with each other. When the Europeans come, it easy for them to win because we always fighting each other. In this world, we make country, we make kingdom, we make war. That history for most people. But now, what is country? What is people? People are people. One day, there’s not going to be any countries or wars. But we going to have to learn to live together, and fight together, because someone in this world don’t want people to get along. Someone want them to be divided because it makes them have all the power.”

Pong turned and faced us, letting the seriousness of this monologue pass into the roar of endless water.

“Only one way down,” he said, smiling. “If you scared, don’t jump. Just go down, because if you scared, you’re going to get hurt. You believe you can jump, then just jump. Don’t think about it. You think about it, it means you don’t believe.”

And with that, Pong closed his eyes, stretched his arms straight above his head like a pencil, leapt off the precipice and flipped into space, twirling sideways and upside-down in a tight ball, finishing with a perfect dive.

As if on cue, we politely clapped. Then nervously, Claire joked, “Would anyone else like to walk back?”

I thought about how everything Pong said about belief tied in with my own philosophy of just going, not thinking, yet I didn’t make a move. I was too busy thinking about not thinking.

Without a word, Jacky burst into a sprint towards the edge. She whooped and hurtled into the water, screaming all the way down.

“Jacky!”

We ran to the edge and looked down. There she was in the aqua-colored pool, laughing, flipping back her hair, and whooping with delight.

“Come on, Sam. Let’s see if you believe!” she taunted.

“All right guys, I’m going,” I said to no one in particular, and backed up so I could get my running start. At least that’s what I saw in my head, but I still hadn’t moved.

Suddenly Paprika went leaping off the edge.

“Fuck you, Dim!” she screamed and cannonballed with a big splash.

“Aiye!” Maya cried, following her partner, and a minute later resurfaced, her hair no longer frizzy.

“Bloody hell,” Claire murmured to herself and looks at us. “See you in the next life, then! Ta!”

“When in Laos, yes?” Serena said and jumped in as well.

“America!” Ben cried fiercely, ran and jumped, making the biggest splash of all.

It was down to me and Jergen. We stood there looking at each other smiling, daring the other to go first.

“Do you want to do rock-scissors-paper?” I asked.

“If I jump or walk down, what does it matter? Will I feel like a coward and lose a part of myself because I did not jump? Will I care if some strangers think I’m too scared? No, I won’t care what they think about me. But I’ll know that inside I’m a coward and inside I’ll die every day that passes from this moment to that until I’m able to find another waterfall even higher than this one and perhaps risk my life in some stupid attempt to prove to myself that I’m not a coward. I have only to prove this to myself so that I won’t die inside,” Jergen said spitefully, and then adds, “What a stupid way to die.”

He closed his eyes, shook his frazzled mane, and walked to the edge with absolute calm and conviction, and dropped as if searching for an invisible bridge.

The feeling of believing is not even knowing that you're going to act. There's no consideration or hesitation. You simply assess the situation as it is happening, as you fall. You don't even feel your legs running or hear the water roaring as it spills over the edge. You only see the white foam, that little line drawn by the water across the green vista and all the hills rolling into the horizon, invisible behind each other and invisible to themselves.

I inhaled with one breath before I broke through the surface. I heard the explosion in my ears as water erupted all around me. Refractions of light all dazzled like illuminated scar-tissue around the place where I made impact.

The water was turquoise and clear. The streams meandered into another. We were all wet now, happy knowing that we were braver than we thought. We left the water and followed each other into the trees.



Later that night, we got ready to hit the town. The mood was celebratory, and an unspoken bond was strengthened as soon as we plunged into the water. We moved as an unbreakable force, a new hope for the future, a rainbow of cultures and creeds representing freedom and equality unlike the world had ever seen.

In the illuminated streets of Luang Prabang, the night market was aglow with the colors of silk scarves and handmade tapestries. We emptied our pockets in support of the local artists who build, paint, and innovate ingenious little trinkets made from bottles, cans, and any other materials they find washed up on their shores or populating their landfills. I picked up a picture frame made from Heineken beer cans.

"This isn't just a souvenir," I told Jacky. "This is a stand against corporate tyranny."

We strolled past the avenues lined with architecture from those days of the past when dusky servants quietly lived their inner lives behind white smiles, before Marxism brought a bloody end to imperialism. Older, more well-to-do tourists enjoyed their romantic dinners inside the structures we

collectively despised while begrudging to some level the aesthetic value of colonial architecture.

“Look at the piggies,” Maya said with uncharacteristic scorn.

Paprika nodded grimly in agreement, but we passed the French restaurants and the sight of sparkling wine glasses without too much fuss. We were in search of our own table, something within our range.

Along a sleepy stretch of the Mekong, we found a strip of family-run seafood stalls. The catch of the day was served on big platters with big beers. We chose a place where we could enjoy our meal while looking out at the dark blue river.

“So, Vang Vieng? Who’s in?” Maya asked after we ordered. Each of us had a Beer Lao in hand. “We’re going to start working on placards tonight. What do you guys think of ‘Rim the Dim?’”

Laughter and murmurs of praise bubbled around the table.

“You still going?” I asked, glancing over at Jergen.

“I must meet my friends first, but I’ll see you there,” he promised with solemn blue eyes.

“I’d love to join you guys, and as much as I would like nothing more than to see Candidate Dim roasted over a spit, I’ve got an important meeting in Hanoi tomorrow. A new line of Ben’s Shoes made from Vietcong Army helmets. Shelltoes, we’re calling them.”

“I hate to spoil the party, but I think I’ll have to pass as well,” Claire added, further dampening the mood. “It’s not quite my scene. For me, the best way to fight against Candidate Dim is to educate the children, and to be honest, I’d rather guard my rose-colored view of humanity by avoiding the pits of hell.”

“Serena?”

“Yeah, I am sorry, but I already booked a ticket for a boat,” Serena said heartily. “My friend started an equal payer coffee plantation. Going to get my hands dirty.”

It seemed that everyone was jumping ship. I considered doing the same but perhaps Vang Vieng was part of the plan.

At that moment, a waiter arrived with a multitude of dishes. We ate family-style: spicy noodle soup from the same bowl, minced meat salad from the same plate. Some plates were better than others, but in keeping with our shared values, we tried to eat more of the ignored dishes, leaving the more sumptuous mains shocked in their snubbing. Being together was what mattered. If you want to know the world and experience the spectrum, share a meal. If you want to overthrow a demagogue, pass the shrimp to your comrade.

“Try this lemongrass chicken with greens and chopped mint leaves. Sticky rice in woven bamboo bowls.”

“Try this papaya salad!”

“Oh my god, these prawns! This sauce is amazing!”

“All right, everyone take a pepper,” Maya announced. “On three, we eat. But you have to chew; you can’t just swallow. First person to drink their beer loses, or wins, depending on how you feel. Ready?”

“One. . .two. . .three!”

We each took a pepper, these fiery little yellow-green acid grenades, which tasted good at first, with just that right amount of spice on our lips. It wasn’t too bad at first, but slowly our mouths started to smoke.

“Ah, Fuck!”

Glug, glug, glug.

“AHHHH!”

“Garçon, six more Beer Lao! Hurry!”

By the time we finished eating, we were so stuffed from chicken, prawns, noodles, fish, sticky rice, and beer, we could hardly move. I excused myself from the table and walked to the bank of the river with my comrades blurred behind me under a string of Christmas lights drinking the third round. The river was like a sea of bluish-black ink with a speckling of lights on the distant shore.

“Care for a swim?” Jacky joked, joining me and handing me a cold one. We stared at the distant glow of lights across the Mekong River and clinked bottles.

"That's the Thai border," Jacky said, pointing at the distant glow. "The place you belong is the place that feels like home outside of where you were born. That's Thailand for me."

"Hemingway! I didn't picture you as much of a reader. No offense."

"I don't know much about him," Jacky admitted. "I like that quote though. I always felt like that growing up. I never wanted to stay home."

"You're from Australia, right? Sydney?" I guessed.

"Nah, I grew up on a farm," she said, looking out in the distance, seeing a childhood that only she could see. "It was okay, but I didn't belong there. Most of my friends are still there, getting married and having babies. They'll never leave. I didn't want to end up like that. What about you? What brings you to Laos?"

"The CIA."

"Oh God, what are they doing now, another bombing campaign?"

"The people of this country would feel a lot better if they got an official apology."

"Seriously though. Just messing about? Looking for a nice Lao girl to shack up with?" guessed Jacky.

"Is that how I come off?" I scoffed, almost offended until I remembered my past. "Well, I used to be that way, but I'm a one-woman kind of guy now. I'm headed to Thailand to find someone."

"How romantic. What's her name?" Jacky inquired, asking the very same question that I'd been asking myself for all that time.

"True Love," I told her.

Jacky shook her head. "Asians," she said dismissively. "No offense."

Maybe it was the endless stretch of darkness making love to the river, but I was feeling open. I felt like talking about it. I took a deep breath and told Jacky the whole thing:

"I met her at a bar in Tokyo, just before I left to backpack across China," I began. "It was a lowkey event with a couple of my buddies from the English academy I worked at. We had this LP bar we went to all the time where we'd order whisky sours and request our favorite records."

“If this is going to be a long story, just pause a moment so I can get another beer,” Jacky said.

“Okay, I’ll wait.”

“Oh my God, I’m joking. Go on. I’m listening.”

I took a deep breath and stared into the darkness. I felt myself disappearing into the river. I was there at the bar again:

She comes in. Her cheeks are glowing from the cold. She and her friend sit at a table not far from ours. They order citrus cocktails.

I can’t stop looking at her, but it doesn’t seem right to chase a girl at my own goodbye party, even if she is stunning. Then I watch as she hands the bartender a slip of paper. The next thing I know, I hear I Fall in Love Too Easily by Chet Baker come on the sound system. That’s it. I’m talking to her.

“Is this your song?” I ask, as she and her friend glance up to see me standing there like a waiter, suddenly at their table. Her black hair is styled in a fringe cut, and this nicely accentuates her eyes. Her hair is about shoulder-length, and her sweater is form-fitting and black. Her cheeks retain that rosy glow, as if she’s still cold, but it might be from the alcohol.

“You know Chet Baker?” she asks, seeming impressed. She has a slight accent, almost Australian but different.

“He’s especially good on nights like this. It’s usually not this cold this time of year. You came on a special night,” I tell her.

I invite her and her friend to join our table. They’re from Thailand and it’s their first-time visiting Japan. She’s wearing a new winter coat. She’d bought it specifically for this trip. She’s never been anywhere cold before.

I find out that she’s 30 and works at a resort on a secluded island, mostly frequented by Europeans looking to decompress. She’s one of the yoga instructors, plus she manages the juice bar.

We get closer as the night wears on, and even though it’s supposed to be my goodbye party, it turns out to be our own little date.

The funny thing is that no matter how many times she tells me her name, I keep forgetting it. It’s my first time meeting a Thai girl.

"Everyone has a nickname in Thailand," she tells me. She isn't offended. She understands that I'm tipsy, and her name is impossible to pronounce. "Thai names are very long. We like long names because it makes it seem like we're from royalty."

"What do I call you?" I ask her, reaching across the table, touching her hand.

"True Love," she says shyly.

"My True Love," I repeat with a drunken smile, and we stare into each other's eyes.

The hour is late, and the whisky bottle is done. Brief conferences are held, and her friend makes assurances that she can find her way back to their hotel, which is right around the corner. I give my coworkers the nod and they lift their glasses to me wishing me bon voyage.

My True Love and I leave the LP bar together and walk the streets of Shinjuku. Even though it's early November, the temperature drops to below freezing. We stumble around, laughing and looking for a love motel. At one point, we trip over each other's feet, and she falls into my arms, and I catch her against a car parked on the street. She's wearing her fur-lined hood, and when she looks up at me, I bend my head down into her hood, and kiss her on the lips.

We kiss for a long time until I feel something wet on my face.

It's snowing.

We look up and both let out a cheer. Who doesn't love to see the first snow, especially when it's nighttime and you're feeling good from the whisky?

But this isn't just any snow. This is magic.

As I stand there and watch, My True Love runs around trying to catch every snowflake in her hands. She opens her mouth and catches one flake on her tongue and lets it dissolve on my lips. The look on her face is radiant. She's never seen snow before.

It doesn't stick, but it's one of the most beautiful things that I've ever seen. Not just the snow, but her. How happy she is.

We find the love motel and kiss each other as if we're in love...

She lays in my arms and tells me that she's thankful.

"What do you mean?" I ask her.

"It's my birthday," she tells me and snuggles deeper into my arms.

"Oh. So, I guess you just turned 30 today?" I wonder, staring at our naked bodies tangled in the dark, reflected in the love motel's mirrored ceiling.

"Actually, I lied to you earlier," she says, and kisses my shoulder. "I'm 35. If I knew how much I liked you, I would've told you the truth from the beginning. Are you mad?"

"No," I assure her. "What's age but a number? I can't believe you saw your first snow."

I kiss her, but inside my head I start doing calculations. If she's ten years older than me, then by the time I was 40, she'll be 50. This isn't a nice thing to think about, but I suddenly seem to remember that I'm leaving for China in a few days. Did I even mention that to her? Oh well. What's the point?

"But is your nickname really 'True Love', or are you just putting me on?"

"You can call me whatever you want, baby," she says. It's meant to be cute, but suddenly it sounds like the kind of thing that...Am I judging her because she's...?"

"When are you going back to Thailand?" I ask, trying to change the subject, but failing to reverse the thoughts in my brain.

"Next week," she says. She's holding my hand. Holding it up and looking at my finger and her fingers, as if we're already a thing. "Have you ever been?"

"No, never," I reply quickly, wondering where this is all going. I'm leaving for a backpacking adventure the next day. That's what's really important.

"If you ever want to visit, you can come find me," she says. "It's a small island. I'll make you my special juice..."

We stop talking and make love again. We sleep in each other's arms. Truthfully, I want to take her with me. She's special. I really like her.

The next morning, I'm halfway out the door when she wakes up and asks me where I'm going.

"Going to get some breakfast," I say.

"Can I get some noodles?" she asks, in a voice that reveals a slight hangover.

"Yeah...sure...I'll be right back," I reply.

"But I never saw her again," I said, concluding a more paraphrased version to Jacky.

"And now you're going to Thailand to find her just so you can apologize?" Jacky scoffed. "You're in Southeast Asia, love. She's probably used to it. No offense."

"No, I can't do that. You see," I said, and paused, being unintentionally dramatic, "I think she might be the one."

Jacky snorted, but patted me on the arm, nonetheless.

"Personally, I think it'd be a lot easier to say that you're going to learn kickboxing. That's what all the other blokes say when they know they're just going to Thailand to fuck everything in sight."

"It's not like that."

"Sure."

"Well, you've been to Thailand. Don't you know any island resorts with yoga clinics, juice bars?"

"Yeah, about a million. Is that all you've got to go by?"

"I have a few other clues," I lied. "You think it's going to be hard?"

Jacky was quiet as she studied me in the dark.

"I suppose love is like finding a needle in a haystack," she said after a while. "Or in my case, minding your own business until you step on one."

"Not a fan of love?" I asked.

"You don't spend a few years in Thailand without making a few mistakes. Met this Italian boy who told me he loved me. Maybe it was because I was getting pissed every day, but he had me convinced. Anyway, we shacked up for a while. Then I walked in on him shagging the maid."

I listened for a moment to the voices back at the table, and the sound of the river lapping against the water's edge. Jacky made her heartbreak sound so casual it was hard to imagine she did anything more than simply leave. But somewhere underneath that ample cleavage was a heart, and that heart pumped alcohol, and that alcohol swam in blood, and perhaps

in that cocktail mix of her being was a deep longing for the quintessential happy ending, as we all presumably had in some vague way that we didn't really want to know about until it hit us in the head. We clinked bottles and finished our beers.

"Well, we're both going in the same direction," I suggested. "Should we just go together?"

Jacky looked at me, thinking, and then said, "Why not? You watch my back and I'll watch yours."

"Deal."

We walked back to the table expecting merriment, but things had taken a decidedly heated turn.

"We need order, structure. There needs to be a nucleus to every cell or the whole body goes haywire," Ben was preaching to the table, which was cleared for after-dinner, meaning ashtrays and more beers.

"Says our precious white knight CEO," Maya retorted, a bit drunk now. Her voice was high and mincing in a mocking tone. "Please organize us. Save us from ourselves. We're too ignorant to make our own decisions."

"Look, all I'm saying is we need to find a system that works for everyone. We need order," Ben said, trying to maintain composure.

"What did I miss?" I asked Jergen as he looked on with a mixture of curiosity and disdain.

"Just a little after-dinner conversation before our tea and cake arrives," he commented sarcastically. "Cheers."

I took a long drink and tried to catch up.

"I feel very wary of power words like 'structure,'" Claire interjected, to Maya and Paprika's agreement. "Isn't that just another term for 'hierarchy'? And isn't hierarchy just another form of oppression?"

Ben sat back, reflective and sage. After a few beers, his presence had seemingly begun to annoy everyone at the table. He did have a sort of know-it-all vibe from the start.

"Look I want freedom and equality as much as everyone else does. Why do you think Ben's Shoes practices conscious capitalism? We're teaching

people skills to create self-sustainable societies, but there needs to be organization. Do you know how hard it is to keep people from starving? Do you think farmers just toss seeds in the ground and watch them grow? Has everyone forgotten what happened in Zimbabwe? How long is it going to be before we start selling our own babies for bread?"

"I'm sure everything would've been perfect if they just kept the white man in power," Maya growled, grinding her teeth.

"That's why we need total social uplift," Claire added. "We need to go back to a hunter/gatherer civilization like the Native Americans. Imagine a world where we can live in harmony with the environment. Not to mention they were a matriarchal society. Homosexuality wasn't seen as a sin. That concept only formulated when the Europeans came and spread their plagues."

"If you quote Rousseau, I'm going to totally lose it. That narrative of the liberated native is completely false. First, they had chiefs. Second, they weren't peaceful by any means. They were trapped in cycles of revenge-killings and wars long before a white man ever stepped foot on their shores," Ben fired back.

"Okay, that's enough!" Serena bellowed. "My goodness, who's the enemy here? I thought everyone wanted to stop Candidate Dim. If we want to make a difference, we have to stay united."

An awkward moment ensued as everyone sipped their beers. I looked around for the dessert that no one had ordered.

"My apologies if I got a little too excited. I think I'm drunk," Ben muttered. "I should probably just head back to Cool Shade."

"That's all right, man. No worries," we murmured, but no one tried to change his mind.

"What do we do now?" Claire asked.

"Let's go find some music and dancing," Paprika suggested with a laugh.

"It's about bloody time," Jacky roared. "Let's make a toast!"

"What should we toast to?"

"How about to Laos?" I suggested.

“To Laos!”

We left the restaurant and apologized to the wait staff for all the noise. They smiled at us and assured us that they’d seen worse. By the time we found a strip of Tiki bars, everyone was back in good spirits. Everyone danced to the music, and our eyes glittered in the torchlight. A bonfire blazed on the shore, and fire-jugglers took turns whirling their wheels of fire to the delight of childlike faces. People drifted in from the road—travelers on foot and tuk-tuk, and Lao guys riding in on motorbikes. My bare feet danced on the grass. Serena brought over a Lao guy holding my Nikes, worried I’d lose them. “They’re yours, mate,” I told him, adopting an Australian accent in this climate, certain I’d never need shoes again. The Lao guy took his sandals off, gave them to me, and we hugged at the bonfire.

Midnight came, and apparently that meant curfew. The whole city shut down. Stores were closed, radios were silenced, loiterers and pedestrians were subject to harassment by authorities with long rifles. There was little traffic of any kind. The only thing moving was us, flying now in a tuk-tuk, gripping the metal bars like a roller coaster. We howled and taunted the laws of the land, barely avoiding the stray dogs which ruled the night.

“Where the hell are we going?” I screamed into Jacky’s ear. “Did someone give this guy directions, or are we just taking a joyride?”

The windowless vehicle flew into the heart of the jungle like a giggling cloud of booze. We pulled up on an unlit lane in front of what looked like a warehouse. There was only the faint glimmer of Luang Prabang somewhere beyond the Mekong. Without light of any kind, we followed the sound of techno pounding through the nightclub, or whatever this place was. There was some industrial smell still lingering, a mixture of paint-thinner and ethanol, beer, and jungle juice splashed all over the concrete floor.

Inside, we found Lao guys leaning about all relaxed, even in the nightclub, with curious stares and hair that looked like it was on the verge of being styled with a dab of wax that never came. Laotian girls sported hairstyles which seemed a thousand times combed and never felt the touch of scissors. Their hair trailed behind them like silken waterfalls.

There was a frenzy of lasers on the dance floor where all the girls were dancing. The dance style was cuter and more fun than provocative. Paprika, Maya, Jacky, Claire, and Serena wanted to dance and left Jergen and I on our own. The atmosphere of the club was somewhat divided by the sexes with the guys standing by their tables, gathering liquid courage from their bottles.

While wandering about in the neon-reddish gloom, I accidentally knocked over a bottle on one of the tables. The Lao guys didn't seem to mind and invited Jergen and I to a drink. It was a mix of whisky, tequila, and rum, plus some Red Bull. In other words, I had no idea what the hell it was, but it wasn't good. One of the guys started yelling friendly noises in my ear. I think it was some dialect of Claire's One-glish, but who knows?

The boys kept offering us shots, so Jergen and I decided to match them bottle for bottle. This got them all super excited, and I soon returned with a glow-in-the-dark bottle of "Jack Daniels." We took a few more rounds, and just as we were all getting clearly sauced beyond control, the music cut off. A spotlight turned on. Bodies froze and paused with anticipation. I might've been the only one booing and shouting for them to turn the music back on.

A microphone crackled and squeaked, and the voice of an emcee attempted to do a big Vegas-style introduction. Then, after some technical difficulty, he resorted to hoarsely shouting to get everyone's attention. He directed the crowd to form something of a circle with an empty space carved out in the middle.

Jacky whirled me around from out of nowhere, and I saw her eyes looking crazier than usual. "It's a dance contest!" she shouted and grabbed me by the wrist so hard that it hurt. She pulled me toward the stage where the emcee was announcing the prizes. The spotlight moved onto each prize as the rankings were announced:

Prize #1 is a shiny, new, electric blue motorbike!

(No one ever wins that prize.)

Prize #2 is a brand-new electric fan, complete with oscillating head!

There was a real surge of excitement over the second, more attainable prize. Who couldn't use a new fan?

“I want that bloody fan!” Jacky screamed and jumped up and down, whooping her heart out. I was starting to feel afraid.

Prize #3 is a bottle of liquor from the bar!

There was evidently less excitement over the third prize, and I almost threw up in my mouth thinking of that sickly sweet “whisky.”

The DJ played the music, and immediately one girl was shoved into the circle by the wolves. She put her hand over her mouth and trembled with classic Asian girl-next-door modesty. A timid attempt to dance was made as if a gun was being pointed at her head. The whole club cheered her on and watched as she buried her face in her hands. She tried to do something with her feet, but it was a complete disaster. She looked as if she wanted to disappear as she edged back into the crowd.

Next, a tall dude with long hair marched into the center. He was wearing a skirt, and though he might prefer to use a feminine pronoun, his decision to forego shaving his upper lip made it unclear and I didn’t want to assume. Undoubtedly, however, he was not afraid to show these bitches how to work it! He was showing off the goods, strutting back and forth around the circle, not so much dancing as taking advantage of this moment to display himself on parade, snapping his fingers and moving his neck, spinning, and wiggling his fingers at the shy girl who was still recovering from her moment of public humiliation.

Finally, Jacky decided that she’d had enough. “I’ll show these girls how to win a bloody dance contest!” she declared and marched into the center of the ring.

What happened next was pure Hollywood bullshit transpiring right before my eyes: Time froze, and every head turned to watch this dirty-blonde sashay her way into the center of the dance floor, waving the transgender with the mustache and skirt out of the way. The bartender lost focus and overfilled a drink, spilling that precious Molotov cocktail juice all over the bar; the DJ nodded with approval and put on the perfect beat; and the whole club came alive as *kip* rained down from the ceiling, mostly from me throwing my wad in the air. Jacky electrified the audience with moves too

graphic to describe in this telling, lest the details further ban this story from more conservative international markets. Let's just say, she fucked the air. She felt herself up. She squeezed her boobs together and gyrated. I'm pretty sure the emcee had an orgasm because just as the microphone kicked itself into gear, all you heard was a crackle of static and his voice go, "Ahhhh."

Maya, with Latin rhythm programmed into her hips, grabbed Paprika and the two of them took over, dancing salsa in a way these people had never seen before. Claire joined in grabbing hands with the shy girl, and Serena spun the transgender around in some aggressive waltz, and in no time the dance contest developed into a club-wide conga line.

Clearly things had been turned up a notch, perhaps to a level of no return. They'd seen too much—It was too much to unsee. I could only imagine what would happen after we left on this night, the legends that would be told about these westerners with their lack of shame and ample cleavage. We'd changed the game in Laos forever. Soon, there would be a nationwide epidemic of girls stripping for oscillating heads. Gone would be the days of Beer Lao calendars featuring some beautiful farm girl in an idyllic field, dressed in some form-fitting, but traditional costume, ready to bring her man a cold one. The sexual revolution in Laos would start before anyone could even ascertain where, how, or when the change began. Soon, women across the country would call it political freedom. Finally, they'd call it performance art. Soldiers would raid the clubs and confiscate every electric fan from here to Vientiane. The captain would undoubtedly ride out on a shiny electric-blue motorbike.

The emcee conceded the victory to Jacky, but his stooped posture made it appear as if he were presenting the trophy to her sweaty tits. Jacky took her spoils with satisfaction holding the box in her arms, an oscillating fan. She wasn't sober enough to demand to know why she wasn't being handed the keys to a new motorbike, but instead, in a spirit of sisterhood, she handed the fan over to the shy girl, who covered her face, bowed, and they hugged.

For the rest of the night, we were treated like legends. Every table wanted to drink with us. I didn't want any more of that horrid liquid, yet

I couldn't seem to say no. I was running on ethanol-induced fumes. Just then, who should I see through the lasers and the fog but My True Love, here at the club!

"What is she doing here?" I said to no one and left the table to catch her in the crowd of dancing bodies. Wait a second, was that her in the pink? No, there she was in the white capris. I knew that long black hair, those sensual lips, the curves of her body as if she were my future wife.

I approached her and we danced together for a half a song. I whimpered apologies to her as she continued to gently remove my hands from her hips and place more space between our bodies.

"I've traveled across the world to find you," I told her, slurring and drooling somewhat. "I'm so sorry for what I did to you. Will you forgive me?"

Two hands whirled me around and My True Love's doppelganger escaped me like a squid. It was Jacky, completely wasted, going on wildly about some spanking contest.

"None of these boys can spank me hard enough," she shouted. "Spank me, baby. Give me all you've got!"

Next, I saw My True Love's doppelganger heading for the exit, her white capris on the run with her long black hair flowing out the door. I chased down the doppelganger and confessed my love to her in the parking lot. She sat on her motorbike with her helmet strapped on, ready to take off. Her chubby friend looked on curiously from the back.

"Please, give me a second chance. I want to be with you," I confessed.

"I go home," she said with fearful eyes.

"Home? Why go home? No, stay, stay," I pled, touching her hand gently as she white-knuckled her handlebars.

"I must go," she softly insisted.

"I don't even know that girl!" I cried, pointing toward Jacky who was probably at that moment getting spanked. "She's just a friend. I love you."

"Thank you," she said and sped off with flashing lights and a small puff of exhaust into the night.

I knelt in the gravel to weep. Vomit spewed out of my nostrils instead.

Chapter 2.

THE YEAR IS 1965. *Two American soldiers named Doc and Marty have recently gone AWOL and have somehow made it to Laos, which is for the time-being neutral, but will soon be napalmed into oblivion by the United States.*

Presently, Doc and Marty take shelter from the pouring rain under a bamboo roof in a small village by the river. They're sitting in the mud, hallucinating on psychedelic mushrooms, playing their favorite game: Time Machine.

"The year is 1969, Marty, the Summer of Love. The war is over, and we've been cleared as American heroes! What're you going to do?"

"You know what, Doc? I think I'm gonna be right here."

Doc laughs hysterically.

"What? Marry some village girl and wear one of those rice-hats with your pants rolled up? Do you want to live like a peasant? You're a goddamn American, Marty. Act like one!"

"Oh, I am Doc. I have a vision. It's everything we've been talking about. It's gonna happen. Right here!"

"What in blazes are you talking about, Future Boy?"

"Remember what we were saying, Doc? The waterslides? The monkey servants? The rum cocktails with the crazy straws?"

"The coconut-bikini waitresses?"

"On roller-skates."

"Paradise," Doc intones wistfully. "That's what we called it."

"We can do it right here. After the war is over, I'm gonna be build the best damn club this world has ever seen!"

"Marty, I invented the Time Machine for scientific inquiry. The Time Machine must be used for world peace. Not as a vehicle for some get-rich-quick scheme!"

"Doc, don't you get it? The whole country will be free for the taking. Why can't we get a small piece of it for ourselves, make a country of our own? Make the dream real!"

"A world without strangers."

"A world without money."

"A world without bureaucracy and oppression."

"A world where we can just swim in the river and lie in the sun all day."

"Marty, I think you're onto something here."

"The only thing we need to figure out is how to make ketchup."

The two visionaries look in each other's eyes, knowing they would happily blast a gook for a packet of Heinz. For now, contented in the mud, sheltered from the tropical rain, they experience the primitive glimpses of what will become Vang Vieng, a magical place where travelers can gather and find a haven of music, nipples, and French fries.



Vang Vieng appeared serene and picturesque, until our van nearly bumped into our first dreadlocked Aussie and received a rude splash of bucket juice on the windshield.

We had arrived.

"I believe these are your people," I said to Jacky, as she grinned with a mix of shame and pride.

"Is this Vang Vieng?" Paprika asked the driver, and he answered in the affirmative.

There was no mystery about it as our van slowed to a crawl and honked girls in bikinis out of the way. Where else could we possibly be?

We headed to the river's edge on a bumpy and muddy lane, crawling for the last twenty minutes or so. There were tons of scantily clad backpackers walking about, apparently uninterested in our attempt to make passage. It reminded me of a music festival, with people going in all directions, quite aimlessly. Heaps of drunken Aussies roamed about with phrases like "Get

Fucked” and “I’m a Cunt” finger-painted in rainbow all over their bodies. Laotian guys set up tubes and boats and worked as bartenders. The scene was very congested, and very white. Laotians aside, I might’ve been the only Asian guy there.

After we got out of the van, we found a hostel to stay for the night. These were bungalows along the river or the market street. The market street had knick-knacks and souvenirs, shot glasses and Beer Lao merch, and the necessary replacement swimwear for when you shat yourself from overdrinking.

I changed into some cheap trunks that I’d picked up off a vendor’s table and threw on a Beer Lao tank top. Jacky came out of the bathroom dressed in a baggy white T-shirt, which went down to mid-thigh, and it was clear that she would only do the big reveal once we were next to water.

“I can always tell when a girl is about to show a lot of ass,” I commented as we locked the door to our bungalow.

“Don’t get cheeky,” she replied, to which I pointed out that she would soon be cheekier than I. Jacky didn’t care for puns.

We joined Paprika and Maya and each carried a placard illustrated with obscene caricatures of Candidate Dim and the catchline “Rim the Dim” as we headed straight to the river in search of the protest line.

When we arrived, we were told that the protest had broken down once it was announced Candidate Dim had gone on to the capital city, Vientiane. A few zealots claimed they would follow him there and set up roadblocks, but the mob had already dispersed once the afternoon swung into motion as plastic buckets were filled with liquid love.

“We’ll protest against him anyway,” we later cried falsely, hoisting our buckets, convinced that we’d somehow won this exchange.

The sun was high, and the temperature was perfect for swimming. Yet I felt unsettled as I noticed the dynamics of this backpacker’s dreamworld. All around me was a feeling of mirth as if we’d stumbled upon some utopia, but it was hard to ignore the irony that all these backpackers—for the most part white, young, and carefree—had gathered to this impoverished

paradise in search of “freedom” while the Laotians busied themselves with the task of serving libations, food, and entertainment. I couldn’t help but visualize myself on the other side of the party, despite the difference in the circumstances of my birth. And though it was a far cry from *Heart of Darkness*, I kept hearing Marlow whisper, “The horror! The horror!”

Not long after the first bucket of booze, I felt an urge to ditch the party and go off on my own to Thailand. We were on a wooden platform that extended all the way down the river for as far as the eye could see. A never-ending row of Tiki bars was the main feature on both sides of the river, with rickety platforms constructed from bamboo and other dubious planks of wood serving as places to perform high dives into the river or else zipline across to the other side.

It was like a child’s drawing of a coconut castle, or the ultimate tree fort, while keeping in mind that such a design would only be interesting to stoners and alcoholics. Each bar played its own music at full volume, so that as you moved down the row you would hear hip hop blasting at one bar, and then step into a realm of house music the next, and so on.

I didn’t want to swim, and I didn’t feel like dancing. I didn’t know what the hell I was doing there in the first place. I was about to make my escape when Jacky appeared with a red plastic bucket sloshing about with four straws. She had ditched the T-shirt somewhere and was wearing a Laotian flag bikini, with red and blue stripes going across her top and bottom, and a white circle emblazoned on her crotch.

I wasn’t sure if this was a respectful nod to our hosts, but the Laotian guys seemed to give their unanimous approval as well as the white guys, even though some of them had no clue what the Laotian flag looked like. The white disc, representing a full moon on the Mekong, was an appropriate touch, given the fact that we would see a full moon that night. It also seemed useful for locating Jacky’s crotch as a sign to search for in case I got lost.

Despite my misgivings, I took two straws into my mouth and hit the bucket, and we sipped away like two honeybees on an overgrown blossom.

The buckets were endless, a never-ending cocktail, a drinker's mansion wrapped in plastic, leading toward our final transformation as beasts.

"Stop looking around. You've got to feel the music!" Jacky cried.

"I am feeling it!" I shouted and started chugging the bucket over the rim. I cut to the chase and asked, "Do you want to go to Thailand?"

"If I don't have anyone to dance with, I need you to be my dancing partner!" she replied, missing what I'd said, due to the volume of the music.

I repeated the question by yelling in her ear.

"Yeah, we're going to go," she yelled back. "Don't worry, your girl will still be there!"

"I want to go now!" I hollered with my hand cupped to her ear.

"Right now?" Jacky cried, not missing a beat of the rhythm, still dancing while I stood stiff, serious, and contemplative. "You said you were going to watch my back!"

I started moving a little to the rhythm, if only to appease her. I felt guilty about trying to leave so unceremoniously. Maybe I would just hang out for an hour or two, or at least enjoy a dip in the river.

In the river were partiers floating along in tubes, holding their precious drinks, splashing gently down the stream. Laotian bartenders cast their ropes into the water and tubers grabbed hold, letting the bartenders pull them up to refill their buckets. Some people dove into the water headfirst while others preferred the trapeze or rope swing. Some landed badly, being unskilled and overambitious. Others performed extraordinary dives. No one seemed content with a simple cannonball into the water. No one was sober. They flew in at all angles and directions, and the splashes, while appearing painful, were completely drowned out by the music, making this sight even more surreal as people danced with drunks awkwardly diving into the water behind them.

Girls with tanned bodies laid out in the sun with flowers painted on their thighs and stomachs. There were more finger-painted messages as we traveled down the length of the bar crawl. "Jesus was a Jew" was written on a

freckle-faced Irishman. "Paint is Gay" was splashed on another. Were these Zen koans?

For a moment, I lost Jacky at the reggae bar and then saw her shouting the happy cries of, "Oh my God! What're you doing here?" There was some guy she knew. They looked like they knew each other well. I thought about diving into the water when I felt a hand clasp on my shoulder.

"Jergen!"

It was my tall dreadlocked friend holding a beer, still dripping wet from the river. He had a silly smile on his face. I almost hugged him. I was so glad to see him. A group of singing Brits passed by.

"Where the hell have you been? Candidate Dim's on his way to Vientiane," I shouted pointlessly. "We have to stop him!"

"Stop him? From doing what?" Jergen asked blissfully. He seemed drunk and possibly high on Molly.

"Damn it! You've been compromised. Don't even tell me. Where is he?"

"Candidate Dim?" Jergen wondered.

"The one who gave you the pill," I demanded to know.

"I got it from Waldo," answered Jergen nonchalantly.

"Waldo?"

"Yes, there he is. Over there."

I followed Jergen's long arm as he pointed me past the volleyball court. There he was, that ubiquitous beatnik, hiding amongst a crowd of half-naked women. He was wearing that red and white striped shirt, glasses, and beanie.

"What lies inside the mind of a person who packs their luggage with a Waldo disguise?" I asked Jergen as we watched Waldo pour shots from a bottle of vodka on various women, burying his face in their tits.

"A genius we cannot understand," Jergen replied.

"It's too late, isn't it?" I asked him cryptically.

"It's still early," Jergen replied, missing what I'd meant entirely. He glanced at a wristwatch that wasn't there, replaced by a tan line.

"I meant for us. This dream. Vang Vieng," I explained. "We came here to fight for justice, but now look at us. We're just getting drunk on a river, dancing in a place where the people still live in servitude to a colonial power. It's us."

"Yes, and guess what else? It's happening already," Jergen pointed out. "Look."

I followed my Norwegian friend's long finger as it pointed toward the river where there was evidence of Candidate Dim's presence: It was a fast-food burger wrapper.

We walked over to the water and fished it out with a stick, ignoring the splashing bodies around us.

"That's one of his," Jergen confirmed, eyeing the specimen hanging from the end of the stick. "Tarantula Burger from the looks of it."

"So it begins," I reflected solemnly, taking a moment to soak in the as-yet unspoiled beauty of the river, the painterly strokes of splashy sunlight sparkling against the mud.

"It had begun, long before we came here. Trust me. There's nothing we could've done," Jergen commented prophetically.

"What're you talking about? You said his restaurant wasn't—"

"I'm not talking about Candidate Dim. I'm talking about us. We say we are good, but are we not simply reassuring ourselves that there *was* good in this world? Are we good because we say so? How can 'goodness' change with each passing generation? We pick and choose what is 'good' at our own convenience. Candidate Dim and all the others like him have already won because they believe in something, as base as it is, while we deny any absolutes and embrace the transient. Our truth is just a feeling. Soon we will be buying Bug Burgers and moving onto the next revolution. We should've believed that nothing mattered, but we made ourselves gods and our collective vanity into a religion. Nihilism is dead, and we have killed it."

We stood there by the shade tree. Before us were the scenes of afternoon delight. At our backs was the hot intrusive breath of apocalypse.

“I thought you were supposed to be all carefree and happy on that stuff,” I said finally.

“I’m Norwegian,” Jergen said. “This is me being happy.”

We walked further down the riverbank until Jergen was lured by the sounds of trance music. I joined him at the rave bar, but I couldn’t get into the vibe without some drug to help me enjoy that awful scene. I was surrounded by Scandinavians awkwardly dancing, all of them clearly tripping on something or other.

“I need some air,” I muttered to myself and realized I was already outside.

A Lao guy handed me a rope, and without thinking, I swung. The sudden splash snapped me out of my daze. The water was warm and pleasant, and I grabbed a stray tube and climbed on, gliding away in the current with a herd of partiers on their own tubes. I was all alone now, yet I was one with the river and the scene. I felt like I was just another note in the music, written upon a radiant sheet music of water. I saw us from above as floating doughnuts playing some cosmic melody.

Did Waldo spike my drink?

I turned back as I floated away and saw him at the trance bar, his bespectacled face laughing at me.

Damn it. I’d been compromised!

Jostled along some whirlpools downriver, I found myself drifting away from the noise, past all the bars, the people, and the music. The echoes of bass eventually faded into a stirring buzz of insects and a babbling stream. My tube floated down a channel surrounded by grass and canopied by jungle trees. The hidden hollow seemed to send drones to spy on me. Dragonflies helicoptered around me, taking photos for the CIA.

How many of us disappear into the forest only to walk alone? Which of us will survive in the end? I contemplated the history of wanderers, those whose exploratory nature led them to death, and those who’d gone on to survive, escaping some tragedy or finding some river to save them from drought or famine. How many of these seeds became a legacy of lostness, with a tenaciousness to live through tragedy and tough times?

We are that progeny, which then grow up with that unexplainable desire to range across mountains and float down rivers. We are those who wander from the fire, from the beat of the drums, and who finally, within the stillness of the trees, close our eyes undivided, as the universe continues to expand.

I felt the jolt of my tube hitting and scraping the sloping side of the riverbank. I opened my eyes and sat up and saw a bamboo shack by the water. Behind it were limestone hills rolling in the distance, and a dirt road that led through the grasses back to Vang Vieng.

A young woman tended to a fire in her kitchen as her little boys played about in the front. A dog lay curled in the dirt, gnawing some bones, getting shooed by a broom on its backside as I approached the simple wooden table. I ordered a papaya salad, sticky rice, and beer. Bob Marley sang in the background, and everything was calm. Everything was still, with the sun frozen there in the middle of the sky in its lazy descent behind the palm trees.



Later that night was the Full Moon Party. There were fire shows and fire jugglers all around us. Paprika suggested that we drink mushroom shakes. Weary of alcohol, we all agreed. We let Maya guide us into the trance, each of us taking a cup and downing it and noting that it tasted sort of like vanilla ice cream, only there was a grainy feeling at the end. “Get all that in; that’s the psilocybin,” Maya coached. “That’s where the spores are. Remember, stay positive. Align your chakras.”

Things seemed to be going well. Just another mysterious drink we’d collectively decided to toss back like Kool-Aid at a Jonestown retreat, no big deal. The DJ sensed our chemical change and played the same reggae song on repeat. Not only did we enjoy the repetition—we demanded it. We sang the lyrics all wrong and were struck by how those words somehow described the feeling that we’d been searching for all night:

*I’m going to put on my iron shirt,
And fly to outer space.*

The singer's voice was raspy. His accent was Jamaican. We had no idea what he meant. There was a huge circle of dancers. The protocol was to go in the middle and act like a fool. Some danced by jumping around on one foot to the other. Others moved their arms in waves and twisted their hands as if casting a spell. There was openness and safety. There was warmth and unity and love.

I'd never tripped on mushrooms before, but I was pretty sure that everyone was tripping. I was certain that I wasn't even high. On the contrary, I believed that I was more sober and lucid than ever before. I had reached some spiritual plane, and this was my true self, my true identity, and my true reality. We would be there forever. We had already died.

There was a pregnant moon above us. Everyone was beautiful. Everyone was perfect just the way they were. I could see their souls in their eyes, and I loved them as brothers and sisters. I had never felt such fellowship even in my closest encounters with the spiritual, at church or at stadium-sized concerts. Nothing compared to this moment.

"How did anything ever come to be?" I found myself thinking. "How would anything ever be...again?"

Because of this overpowering feeling of love, I knew nothing could ever be the same. I kissed Jacky, I kissed Maya, I kissed Paprika, and I almost kissed Jergen but he was too tall so I only got a mouthful of hair. I rode that feeling of ecstasy for hours by the bonfire until something went terribly awry. It was as if a group of scientists deep inside my gut suddenly pressed a red alert building and scrambled for the exits.

It dawned on me that I'd been doing nothing but drinking mysterious beverages for the last 24 hours. My stomach gurgled as though it'd been replaced by a cauldron filled with a bubbling brew. There was a breakout of cold sweat, a panic, and I quickly dove into the bushes and instinctively headed toward water, away from the party. I prayed no one was making love nearby as I lowered my shorts just a second too late and then let the evacuation process commence.

Thankfully, the babble of the river muted the sound of liquid shooting out of my ass. The river accepted my offering with her endless song. My feet were muddy, and my swimming trunks hung around my ankles, now shit-stained.

I was naked and alone in the dark. There were booms of thunder in the air. I saw torches and tortured faces like melting ice cream distorted in the hellfire of war and savagery. The night lit up with chemtrails falling from the sky like comets, and green flares glowed ghostly above the trees. Screams followed me in the night as I began to run like some animated deer that soldiers watched on repeat with their heads strapped to theater seats.

Hunters shoot my mother. I never even see who they are. I feel myself running and hear her fall behind me onto the earth. Her body is wet. Rice paddies light up with napalm. An orange vapor creeps into the jungle like cancer and instantly decays all that it touches, the country a forest of death. The world becomes filled with ghosts. Howling zombies invade a village, burn it to the ground, shooting fathers and brothers and sons, all blindfolded with their hands behind their backs, bullets and then a hole, the screams of mothers, wives, and daughters as dicks harden in the open air and the procession begins. A little sister cries. I gnash my teeth and try to save her and find the back of my head smashed by a rifle butt.

“The horror! The horror!” whispered in my head again.

I felt nauseous and sick. I tried to retch in the bushes, but nothing came out. Where was that feeling of love and peace? It must’ve exited my heart through my anus. I had to find it again.

Slowly, I gathered my energy, remembering what Maya had said, “Align your chakras.”

What did that even mean?

Despite my perplexity, this mantra seemed to work. My chakras now centered, I rose from the depths as a newly formed, battle-tested, and victorious being. I could feel electricity shooting out of my eyes like night vision goggles. I washed my ass with water, rinsed my feet, my ankles, and

gave my shorts as an offering to the river goddess, which took them and sent them floating into an impenetrable darkness.

I stared into a fire. The all-consuming dance of a flame.

"The flame of a fire, like the human soul, dances until it dies."

I said this to no one, but I felt that the Universe had heard me and that was enough. That was everything.

"Oh my God, where have you been?" Jacky asked as I reappeared from the bushes. "What are you wearing? Is that a...?"

She began hooting with laughter, then suddenly stopped, and hissed, "He's here! What am I going to do?"

Like me, Jacky was a hot mess with twigs in her hair and splotches of mud on her face. That white disc on her crotch, however, seemed to glow with even more power with the brightness of the full moon above us.

"Who's here? Candidate Dim?" I asked, my voice traveling some vast distance of space.

"No, that fuck boy who shagged the maid. Oh, wake up. Snap out of it!" said Jacky, shaking me. "We've got to get back to the guesthouse," she said now, more to herself than to me. "We'll stay there and regroup. I can change and you can, well, you do whatever you want. Do you have the keys?"

"There are no keys."

"Oh, come on!"

We ran for what seemed like a long time but mustn't have been that long because we bumped right into Jacky's old flame. He was with his new bird, as Jacky would say. He was probably hoping for the chance encounter just so he could display his sexual and emotional wellness to her.

"Antonio!"

He was a lot different from what I'd imagined. I sort of pictured him to be a strapping Sicilian with thick brown hair tied in a ponytail and a white linen shirt to hang sheer over his muscles. I also imagined him permanently attached to a Vespa like some kind of Centaur.

He had a unibrow with a hooked nose and eyes filled with superiority. He looked like an ostrich in a Tommy Bahama shirt. In another life, he

would have been a conspiring Roman senator. His girlfriend was African, Ethiopian I guessed, judging by her high forehead. She wore glowing face-paint around her eyes, which in contrast to her dark skin, made her look like some celestial being in the moonlight.

"Hello, Jacky. Where are you running off to?" the ostrich spoke, opening its beak and smiling.

"Off with my boy," Jacky said nonchalantly as I stood there and stared open-mouthed at the Ethiopian girl's dress. Flowers were climbing all over her body like mutant ivy.

"Hello *boy*," Antonio said condescendingly. "Doesn't speak English, does he? Must be nice to finally hear yourself talk, Jacky."

"He speaks. Go on, speak!" Jacky commanded, elbowing me now.

On a better day, I wouldn't have been caught dead in a rice hat and oversized, novelty sunglasses. Worse still was the Beer Lao shirt I now wore like a diaper.

"I shit my pants," I explained.

"Very nice, Jacky," Antonio said.

"Fuck off, Antonio," Jacky said coolly and led me away in a pretense of confidence. Once we were a safe distance away, we made a mad dash to escape.

"Well, that couldn't have been any worse," Jacky said as we sprinted through what seemed like a carnival from hell. "Oh God, we look crazy. Am I alright?"

We stopped beside a Tiki torch to check our pupils. The blue-green planets of her eyes burst into flames.

"You're fine," I lied.

"I can't believe I ran into that bastard," she continued huffing as we hurried back to our room. "I come all the way out to bloody Laos and here he is waiting for me!"

I tried to think of something supportive to say, but I was lost in delirium. Pornographic visions of Gandhi leapt out at us from the shadows, along with lost children and even more lost adults and dogs. Face-paint and neon

colors glittered with menace. Savage howling and laughter echoed eerily in the alleys.

"You're better off without him," I replied, as Jacky fumbled with keys at the door. "He'll never understand what he had until he finally writes a book about you."

"What on earth are you babbling about?" she muttered as we entered the room and swiftly turned on the light as if that would make the monsters disappear. It didn't. Instead, they were right there in the mirror, waiting for us to check our hair.

Jacky let her hair down and began combing it with swift and purposeful strokes of her fingers, as if this was a solution to some equilibrium. Safe within these walls, I closed the blinds and sat on the bed.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking," I told Jacky, as she pulled at a wedgie caused by the Laotian flag.

"I bet you have," she replied, giving me a sarcastic smile over her shoulder.

Undeterred, I spoke in what felt like another voice from beyond.

"No one knows what they're looking for. Not really. When I first started this journey, I was hoping to find the story that would make me rich. Then I realized that to find it, I'd walked away from what might've been the love of my life. I came here to find that person again."

Jacky stopped fiddling with her hair and put her hands down. She turned and looked at me curiously, with sincerity in her eyes.

"All of the hook-ups and one-night stands that'll occur in this place will only lead back to the road in the morning. We came in search of paradise, but if it only lasts for a moment, then what're we looking for?"

Jacky approached the bed where I was now sitting. The florescent bulb which shone above her head formed a halo not unlike an angel running away from home. I continued my stream of consciousness:

"We celebrate ourselves among the remains of a civilization that's dying. The loss of daily life is a privilege. We dance on the graves of an empire and howl at the moon like wolves. We come to the most impoverished places on

earth and wonder at their happiness despite having so little. But what we don't realize is that their endless resourcefulness and tenacity is fueled by the things that we've left behind, which are family and love.

"There's a history that can't be broken, an ancestry that stretches beyond time. We've come in search of the end, to make a new one. We're a generation of divorced children, wandering on empty but full of hope. We don't know what we're looking for, because despite everything that's happened, all we see is a future made of potential and our imagination to make of it whatever we want to. We just need to remember that we can't do it alone. We're just notes in a symphony and raindrops in a storm."

"Jesus, what was in those shakes?" Jacky wondered quietly. "I must say, Sam, I do think you have a book in you yet."

"Maybe I do," I said and looked hopefully in her eyes. "Or maybe the real story isn't the one we write, but the one we live."

"Nobody will give you money unless you write it down," she joked lightly. "But we're just running away, bringing our troubles with us wherever we go. There's no cure for what ails us deep inside. We like to think that we're bringing the best of our culture and our civilized ways to these parts of the world, but in truth we're the problem, aren't we?"

"We're not bad. We're just lost. But we knew that from the get-go," I said gently.

"I've met some of the strangest and most wonderful people on the road," Jacky reminisced softly. She sat down beside me and stared at a moth fluttering around the fluorescent light on the ceiling. "It doesn't last forever, but that's what makes traveling so addictive. It's so hard to be honest in the real world. If only we could cut the bollocks and remember that we're all just travelers in the end."

"I'm glad I met you, Jacky," I told her and stared into her bluish-green eyes. "I'd travel across the world with you if I could. One day, you're going to find everything you've ever wanted, or maybe what you've wanted is what you have already, right now."

"I reckon I want more," she said with a sly smile.

“You know there was a moment when our bus was stuck in the mud, and I looked at you. You were doing yoga stretches or something, and the sunlight was coming down through the trees over your head. There were these two butterflies circling around you and you didn’t even know it.”

“I’m the spirit of the road,” Jacky said and laughed at herself. “Christ, I’m zonkers.”

“What’re we going to do now? Go back out there?” I asked.

“God, no. I’m going to shower up,” she said, rising from the bed.

“I should shower, too.”

“Come on then,” Jacky said and offered her hand. “There’s only one minute of warm water before you’re just bathing in the river.”

I took Jacky’s hand and followed her into the bathroom. The room was dim and smelled like mildew and strawberry shampoo. There was a sickly yellow tile that looked like it had never been scrubbed. She turned the spigot on the shower and a weak dribble began to fall from the showerhead, gathering strength into a trickling flow. I stood there motionless as Jacky reached behind her back and pulled the string on her mud-stained bikini. Her top fell to the ground. She turned to face me and bent down to strip her bottoms. I watched in silence as the sound of the water splashed on the tile. The white circle on her panties wrinkled and slid down her thighs and then rested at her feet. She was shaved.

We didn’t speak words anymore, but we made small noises. I pulled off my T-shirt diaper and left it next to her bikini bottoms. She walked backwards into the shower stall and beckoned me to come forward. My dick was hard, though I didn’t mean for it to be, but it knew better than I did that I was just full of words.

There was barely enough water to get us both wet, so we took turns, rubbing the dried mud off our bodies, helping each other with our meager share of water and liquid soap. She mostly ignored my erection, except for one flick of her fingers as if testing its bounce, and it sprung back up like a diving board. In truth, my dick had never been harder. I suspected it had something to do with the mushrooms.

The shower didn't feel sexual, but there was no denying that the more I soaped her breasts with my hands, the more blood seemed to pump through my body. We were slowly working through all that grime beneath the water, covered with wet suds, when our bodies pressed together, and I reached behind her, gathering her by her cheeks and felt her lips on mine.

It was less passionate than filled with wonder, our tongues communicating like ants do with their antennae. However, when she turned the shower off, a feeling remained. The mood had changed. I didn't question what was happening, nor did I understand what it meant as we moved to the bed without toweling off, and she lay on her back, and I felt myself enveloped in her warmth.

"I'm inside you," I whispered and stared into her eyes.

There was no sign to stop; her hips told me go; keep the pace, faster and faster until her fingernails were gripped on my back and her legs were wrapped around me. After some time, she finally broke our verbal silence and asked me—rhetorically perhaps—

"What the fuck did they put in those shakes?"

—and then kissed me as if to prevent me from revealing a secret recipe.

I wanted to tell her that the answer was shrooms, but then pondered the measurements of milk and vanilla ice cream.

We changed positions, and I closed my eyes. She got on her hands and knees as I entered her from behind. I imagined the sound of a motor from an outrigger. I felt the waves bouncing up and down against a chop. The water was clear and sparkling turquoise blue. I felt its warmth against my body. I swam out to a distant buoy and felt the breeze of Pacific winds. I could see My True Love in the moonlight, in a hammock, staring out at the ocean. I heard waves in the distance. Her silhouette glowed silver.

Jacky turned to look at me and her eyes were as turquoise as the ocean. I held onto her ass and pounded against her like a storm. I saw a bungalow with moonlight descending through an open window. But the past is a place that no outrigger can get to. Even as snow began to fall from the sky, glittering on the sands of the beach.

“I’m Sam Iam...I’m Sam Iam...I’m Sam...I...AM!”

I heard Jacky cry out and I felt her hand grip my arm as I squeezed my eyes shut. I almost saw the face of My True Love as we ran through the sand and crystal snow. She took a handful of the stuff and marveled at it, then with a cry of delight rubbed a handful on my cheek. I tried to see her face. I tried to tell her I was sorry. But when I opened my eyes there was Jacky in my arms. After we were finished, I wasn’t sure why I came at all.



“Zonkers,” I said absentmindedly, rolling the crumbs of weed on the dresser into a Laotian dollar, lighting the *kip*-joint on fire, and watching it burn like old newspaper.

Jergen had stumbled in earlier that morning. He didn’t seem surprised to find Jacky and I in the same bed. He had some weed and was looking for rolling papers. He still hadn’t slept and was looking for a way to ease the crash.

The fire looked like fire again. The room smelled like weed despite our inability to get any of that smoke into our lungs. It didn’t matter. It was a terrible idea and I suspected that the weed would’ve only heightened the bizarre feeling that last night was all a dream.

Jacky got up and gave me a touch on the cheek before going into the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. Jergen looked at me with bloodshot blue eyes and a head of hair that looked like he’d gotten into a fight with a tiger. He put his hand on my shoulder, and we decided to give up. “I have to go back to my guesthouse,” he said. “I’ll see you later.”

“We’ll be at the café,” I told him.

Jergen winked at me and walked out the door. I followed him outside just to get my bearings on reality. I watched as tall loping figure disappeared into the soft hum of a Vang Vieng morning, his blonde dreadlocks fading into the distance, and then gone behind the passing of tuk-tuks and motorbikes. I never saw Jergen again.

Paprika and Maya were nowhere to be found. After Jacky and I packed our bags, we walked to the café and drank Lao coffee, waiting to see one of our friends before getting on our bus to Vientiane.

We had somehow envisioned this ending differently, perhaps with a goodbye hug at the bus stop. We might watch each other get on separate buses towards our own little destinations, and not wonder if our paths would ever cross again, but we would welcome it as much as it feels good to be welcomed. This time, Lao Time. Time to fade into the light. The bouncing afternoon journey of the long red dirt road into the city, sitting silent, for now just another companion.

Such pretty eyes. I tried to look at Jacky's face on the bus, but she hid it from me, too hungover to tell me how she felt without throwing up. Our bus chugged to life and prepared to depart.

"I never knew her real name," I said on the bus finally.

Jacky studied me and once again touched my cheek with her fingers.

"Stay out of Thailand," she whispered and turned back to the window to watch Vang Vieng disappear as we rolled away.

Chapter 3.

JACKY AND I arrived in Vientiane as the sun dripped pink in its long descent. Purple shadows spread like jam over the buttercream of French architecture, and the air smelled like banana crepes. Palm trees and a manicured lushness worked in contrast to the dusty traffic filling the streets. Tuk-tuks and motorbikes flew around in a disorderly rush, ignoring any sense of a queue. The big city Laotians were also apparently colorblind, or else saw traffic signals as mere suggestions. Outside the window, I saw one motorbike impossibly piled with a husband, wife, three kids, and a baby riding on daddy's lap while holding onto the handlebars, and boxes tied to the back.

Jacky and I arrived at the magic hour when the streets in the capital begin dying with the waning of light and the streets don't wake up again until sunrise. We arrived an hour before curfew, due to several breakdowns from Vang Vieng to Vientiane. We were road-weary and expected some pimp to escort us to a guesthouse, but only the tuk-tuk drivers had any interest in us.

As we walked down the main drag, we saw No Vacancy signs at every hostel and guesthouse we passed. We decided to split up in different directions and converge in an hour with any news. The hour passed and we rendezvoused in front of the banana crepe cart, both of us shaking our heads.

"Everything's booked. It's not even sundown and the streets are dead," Jacky griped. "I didn't know there even *was* a high season in Laos."

"You know what they say: Dry season is high season," I replied, making this up on the spot like I was some travel agent.

"I'm not sleeping outside," Jacky obstinately declared. "We'd better find an internet café and do a deep dive. There's *got* to be something—"

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to interrupt," an oily voice said, "but I couldn't help overhearing your situation."

We turned and noticed him for the first time. It was obvious he'd been lingering, eavesdropping, and waiting for the opportunity to strike. He was vaguely Middle Eastern, or Eastern European, his accent sounding Transylvanian, his entire attention directed at Jacky.

"I have a bed available in my room, if you're willing to share with me and my friends," this interloper continued, smiling a devious tea-stained grin.

"How many friends?" Jacky asked hesitantly.

"Just three: Me, myself, and I," he replied, but didn't laugh.

Jacky and I exchanged meaningful looks and cringed.

"Should I take it?" Jacky asked, wrinkling her brow, searching for my approval. It was clear that the way she saw it, her options were staying with me and fighting off cockroaches, rats, and stray dogs, or she could take her chances with a schizophrenic vampire. I could see her leaning toward the room.

"This guy clearly has a mental disorder," I murmured to her in conference, but loud enough for him to hear.

"Unfortunately, there's only *one extra bed*," Dracula said, aiming this last part at me. "You can always sleep on the streets, but if the police find you, they'll probably arrest you for breaking curfew. It's your choice."

We watched as Dracula pretended to leave and didn't, finding a reason to rummage around his fanny-pack instead. Theis charade stretched to the point of awkwardness as he zipped his zippers back and forth like a DJ.

"All right, I guess I have to," Jacky said with a shrug and smiled at me apologetically. "What about you, love?"

I could see that she was throwing in that extra "love" just to soften the feeling of concrete I'd soon be lying on, but I appreciated it all the same. There was nothing I could do. A girl needs a bed.

"I'll figure something out," I said and adjusted the weight of my rucksack.

“Sure?”

“Go ahead. We’ll have breakfast.”

“Yes! Meet me at the Malaysian donut place near the travel agency tomorrow?” she suggested.

“How’s eight?” I replied, and we both agreed, knowing we might never see each other again.



I wandered for hours down the dilapidated streets on the edge of the Mekong. That’s where I saw him sitting at one of those corrugated metal shops that seem to sell everything and nothing, depending on what it is and who you are. He was a beardless blonde kid with his hair cut so short it almost had a silver sheen. He looked old enough to be a freshman in college, but something about his demeanor told me that studying was the last thing on his mind. He was dressed like a Soundcloud rapper, draped in Japanese streetwear. He told me he was Parisian, and that he could speak fluent Lao and Thai. He was definitely not a backpacker.

“What’s up, fam?” I heard him rasp as I slowly passed by, which when said by one foreigner to another in a third-world country usually means, “Who are you? Where are you from? Take a seat and rest. Tell me your story if you want to; I’m not going anywhere,” all in one breath.

“What’s up, bro?” I replied, which meant that I was willing to be his friend for a few minutes to see how things went, and if things got more interesting or took some beneficial turn, I would join him in front of the store. He was drinking a bottle of Beer Lao and smoking a clove under the florescent lights of the shop, the river and the street acting as dark and silent witnesses.

Immediately, he looked at me with those gray discerning eyes. “You’re an American.”

“Yeah, but don’t tell anybody,” I joked. “Americans used to be popular. Now we’re just scum.”

“Need a smoke?” he offered, and after a moment of hesitation, I plucked a black clove from his silver case.

“I don’t really smoke,” I explained and bent down as he lit the clove for me with a Zippo, “but something about that fragrance can’t be denied.”

I took a drag on the fragrant embers and coughed.

“Smoke it lightly. It’s rough on the throat,” he said.

“Mind if I pull up a seat?” I asked.

“Why not? It’s a free country,” the blonde kid said. “Well, not really.”

We both laughed, enjoying the pun.

“My name is Sam,” I introduced myself and held out my fist to bump, figuring this was more natural to him than a handshake.

“You can call me Saint,” he replied, bumping my fist. “Want a beer? It’s on me. You look like you need one.”

“Yeah man, thanks,” I said, and eased my rucksack down to the ground. I massaged my shoulders as my new friend called someone in the back of the store. I was no expert, but it sounded like fluent Lao.

A young Lao girl who probably should’ve been doing elementary school homework brought us two bottles of Beer Lao. She was followed by who I assumed was the shop’s matron. The 30-something-year-old Indian woman smiled at Saint and gave me a glance. Her bindi seemed to see much more than that. She swept the streets with her eyes and nodded at the little girl to go back inside. Saint said something to the scary Indian lady with a schoolboy smile in what sounded like more Lao. I felt like Saint was just showing off at that point, but I didn’t say anything. My spider senses told me that these were characters of an unsavory sort, so I didn’t want to offend. The lady gave a tight grin and fiddled with some flowers in the front before going back in.

“She’s in charge here,” Saint whispered and popped our beers open with a wink. “So, what brings you to Vientiane?” he asked and handed me the perspiring bottle.

“I don’t know. Just wandering,” I said and took a nice long drink. Seeing his raised eyebrow, I summarized my mission to travel China at random,

crashing in the Himalayas, and then coming to Southeast Asia to search for My True Love in Thailand.

“Wow, you’re a romantic, huh? I thought we French were the most romantic people in the world, but you might be the winner,” Saint said and clinked his bottle with mine.

“Yeah, except things got a little messy in Vang Vieng,” I said sheepishly.

“How so?” he asked.

I told Saint about waking up in bed with Jacky but kept it brief. “I guess I’ve lost my sense of direction,” I said falteringly. “Maybe I never had any in the first place. Maybe it was all just an illusion.”

“Aha. We call that ‘samsara,’” Saint replied. “In which case, you’ve come to the right place. Maybe it’s your destiny. Everyone I know here is like that. Wandering without direction. I’m the same.”

We clinked bottles again, finding kinship in that evening of fraternal therapy. The supersized moths of the Mekong fluttered and banged against the fluorescent lights and the awning. We continued the conversation into a third round of beers, sharing our war stories like two soldiers wounded in the field of love.

By the time we finished our fourth round, which Saint insisted he would pay for, he announced that he would take me on a tour of the nightlife of Vientiane.

When I pointed out that he’d forgotten the important step of exchanging money for our beers, he dismissed my concerns with a wave of his hand. “That’s my Mom’s shop,” he said, and we rose to get up. I picked up my rucksack and began to follow him, albeit nervously. He explained further down the road, “I call her my ‘Mom.’ I have a lot of moms here.”

“Are you sure?” I asked again. Truthfully, I feared the Hindu woman. I didn’t want to be cut into pieces by a machete over an unpaid beer tab.

“Yeah, it’s cool. Better than a real mom, right? Mine kicked me out when I was sixteen. She got sick of me, I guess,” Saint said a little sadly.

“How long have you been in Vientiane?” I asked.

“A couple of years. I was in Bangkok for a while working as a club promoter. Then I met this girl and we fell in love, and things were good for a while, but you know how it goes. Things got kind of crazy. I had to go on the run. Laos is like a Thailand for people who need to get away from Thailand. Do you know what I mean?”

“A quiet place to lay low?” I concluded.

“Exactly.”

We arrived at our destination, an unassuming building on the corner of nothing and less than nothing. A splash of luminescence poured into the otherwise dead street from above on the second floor. Jazzy blue neon glowed in the darkened windows.

As we walked up the grungy stairwell, I pictured the kind of bar where there were plastic tables and floors that were okay to piss on. But as we entered, I was surprised to find the joint to be rather swanky. It was just big enough if you needed to find a quiet corner for some hands-down-the-pants action in a private booth. There was a semicircular black bar lined with hanging wine glasses and flatscreens for patrons who wanted to watch the soccer game, but this centerpiece didn't match the vibe at all.

“There were some big Chinese investors who wanted to make Vientiane into the next Bangkok,” Saint explained, when I inquired about the bar. “But with a midnight curfew, it'll never happen.”

Despite the poor economic forecast, the vision for this bar at least was clear. Bottles glistened under the dimmed ambience. Servers wore black shirts and black pants and appeared groomed with an availability of hair products. Yet despite the aim of cocktails and wine service, there were only bloated men in soccer jerseys. This was the sort of clientele that didn't even see the point in wearing proper pants. Swimming trunks and flip-flops were favored, as if to say, “Fuck it, it's Laos.”

Pints sat lined on the bar in front of these grizzly patrons. Beside them were local girls in miniskirts ready to feed or eat a bag of nuts, depending on the hour and course of the evening.

As Saint and I entered, this odd collection of sunburned primates paused from shouting at the soccer game to stare us down with more hostility than welcome. They seemed particularly offended by my presence, as if I were there to whisk their girls away. The more time I spent with these pink gorillas, the more I figured out that they loved everything about Asia—the food, the beaches, the women, and even the culture—but what they didn't like were Asian men who were not there to serve them or assist them in getting their dicks sucked.

I wanted to tell Saint that this wasn't my scene, but I didn't want to get run off from a well-deserved fifth round of beer just because a patch of pasty old bastards gave me a sneering.

I sat in a booth as Saint went off to the bar to get our drinks, not paying, of course. I watched from a distance as he conferred with the bartender, a slick-haired mustached Laotian who looked exactly like the kind of guy who could hold information without saying a word. I decided that if they exchanged packages, I was out of there.

Laos is known for executing drug traffickers, and they don't even care if you're white. Seeing as how I now looked like some bedraggled local who belonged at the front of a tuk-tuk instead of in the back of one, I figured I didn't stand a chance.

Saint came back with our pints, but not before briefly engaging with some of the guys at the bar. I closely observed their expressions, wondering if perhaps I'd gotten it all wrong. Maybe these were friends, cronies, drinking pals. But the expression on Saint's face told me different. A polite distance was maintained. I was familiar with Saint's smile by now, and he gave these mandrills none as he nodded his head and made them some loose promises.

"Thanks for the beer," I said as Saint rejoined me at the booth. I took a long drink from the draft, letting the amber hops massage my worries away.

"Not your kind of scene, huh?" Saint accurately guessed. "I'd take you to a disco, but we'd have to go out of town. Vientiane has some decent clubs on the outskirts, but we can't be on the street past midnight."

“That’s all right. I wasn’t really looking for anything special. I think I’ll just have one beer and be on my way.”

“Really? It’s so early,” said Saint with disappointment. “Where are you staying?”

“Uh, not sure,” I mumbled, realizing that I had zero plan. I could pretend I was camping or something. “Maybe find an empty skiff on the Mekong?”

“Not a good idea,” Saint dissuaded me, his eyes growing with concern. “If the police find you, you might get charged with vagrancy. The laws here are strict. Don’t you have any friends here? What happened to that girl you were telling me about? Jacky?”

“Ah, she met this guy who said he had a room and she kind of, well, I guess she ditched me.”

Saint shook his head, tut-tutting in sympathy.

“I mean, I might see her tomorrow,” I stammered. “We’re supposed to meet at some Malaysian doughnut spot near the Victory Monument.”

“Well, if you want to just have fun tonight, there are lots of girls here. Take your pick,” Saint said and nodded toward the bar. “You’re an American. You can have any one you want. Just don’t fall in love.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. But I don’t think that’s going to help me get out of samsara, you know? Might keep me stuck there for longer than I’d like.”

“You’re right about that,” Saint agreed, and then laughed. “But they’re not prostitutes, if that’s what you’re thinking. You don’t have to pay them. They’re here on their own. Well, some of them are prostitutes, but most of them just want to meet foreigners.”

“Just a little drink and some conversation, eh?” I surmised, weighing the options. “Followed by a baby and a green card?”

“Well, yeah,” Saint admitted. “That’s their dream. But they’ll settle for a nice guy who’ll show them a good time. Most of them can speak English.”

I cocked my eyebrow at him.

“Some English,” he said, editing his claim, then more truthfully clarified, “Enough English, I guess.”

I surveyed the scene once more, seeing a few of the pink gorillas with their arms around the shoulders of the Lao girls. A few of them had two girls. One guy had three all to himself, laughing coarsely in the dark.

"Cheers to good nights and happy endings," I said sarcastically, and drank in celebration of nothing.

A skinny little thing in a miniskirt bent over to take a shot at the billiards table. Her partner, or opponent, playfully rubbed the end of his cue up her ass. She seemed to enjoy it, or at least kept her concentration as he used the end of his stick to tickle her anus.

"You think it's just money?" I asked Saint, point blank. "I mean, some of these guys are so *old*. They don't even look rich. Back home, these guys would be total losers. Can these girls be that desperate?"

"You shouldn't be so hard on them," Saint said, almost innocently. "When you marry a Lao girl or a Thai girl, you're not just marrying the girl. You have no idea how many people can be in one family."

"Brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents," I counted, ticking them off like bills to pay.

"Lots of divorces in Thailand happen that way. Guys who come here and don't know what they're getting into. But you can't say it's all about money. Lots of girls just want to have sex with foreign men," Saint said and almost blushed. "Maybe foreigners can do it better."

I knew what Saint was getting at, but he had the decency not to say it. Instead, he laughed charmingly like a schoolboy.

"You should meet my roommate. He's a sex addict," Saint informed me. "He's kind of a genius, but kind of an asshole as well. I think his dick doesn't work anymore. He makes me get stuff for him. He wants to die of a heart attack while fucking. This is what he tells me."

"I feel sorry for the girl who gets stuck under his carcass," I said, cringing at the thought. "Anyway, it's been good talking with you, Saint. I think I'm going to hit the road. I need to find a place to sleep tonight."

"Why don't you stay at my mom's house?" Saint offered, rising as I got up from the booth. "She lives in one of those mansions from the old

days, before the revolution. It's a nice place, if you don't mind her being an alcoholic. She tried to make it into a guesthouse, but it kind of ended up as a museum. There's always an extra room."

"You think she'll be okay with that?" I asked, incredulous that my luck had changed.

"Yes, of course! She'll be happy to meet you. She likes handsome guys," Saint said taking me by the arm now. Then repeated his warning, "She's kind of an alcoholic."

"This isn't some kind of brothel, is it?" I asked.

"No way. My roommate has girls come over, but they don't stay. Mom hates that. They fight about it a lot."

"Sounds cozy. Well then, shall we get going?"

"Sure," Saint replied, and we started to leave when he was interrupted by a ping from his iPhone. We lingered for a few seconds as his eyes scanned the message. He looked up at me and smiled in that charming way of his that should've made me get the hell out of there, but of course, I didn't.

"I just need to make a quick stop," he said. "It'll only take a minute."

"O-kay," I heard my voice croak.

As we left the bar, I kept picturing Saint handing me two bricks of white powder wrapped in brown paper, asking me to hold them in my backpack. I saw my execution by firing squad.

I once again noticed that our bill was comped, and we left without exchanging any money. As we walked down the street, Saint droned on innocently about his roommate, some crazy old bastard who he lived with in what I was slowly gathering to be some kind of pseudo-museum/whorehouse.

Stray dogs ruled the night and seemed unperturbed by the occasional zipping of motorbikes. We meandered from the riverside road and headed toward downtown, where we could see white government buildings and international hotels. The avenues were wide, and the architecture was impressive in its illuminated silence. Here and there—and everywhere

really—we saw beggars, panhandlers, and street musicians with missing arms or amputated legs. Some of them were just kids.

“It’s our fault, isn’t it?” I asked Saint, as we passed a little boy kicking a soccer ball with one of his nubs. “We did this to them.”

“The Americans?” Saint replied, having the social grace not to include me in my rightful category. “Yes, it seems that America has a habit of not cleaning up its messes. These are all from landmines. There are thousands, maybe millions, of mines still buried in the fields. Once a child steps on one, they must live the rest of their lives as beggars if they don’t die.”

“I’m sorry,” I apologized to no one, unable to look at these children in the eyes.

“Did I tell you I was training to become a monk?” Saint asked, and we paused and listened to a legless guy strum chords from Bob Marley’s *Redemption Song* as he sat in his wheelchair. “That’s why I came here to Laos,” continued Saint. “I did a temple stay in the mountains so I could get off drugs, after my ex called the cops on me and I went on the run.”

“She called the cops?” I responded, though perhaps without the obligatory tone of surprise. “What happened? Did she catch you at the Ping-Pong show?”

“She thought I was cheating on her,” Saint said and shrugged nonchalantly. “She was helping me sell drugs. Like I said, I was a club promoter. She was a bar girl. We just got caught up. Eventually I got addicted. When she called the cops on me, I felt so betrayed. But now, when I think about it, all she did was force me to get my life together.”

“What stopped you from becoming a monk?”

Saint sighed and flicked his clove regretfully.

“I was able to quit coke, pills, weed, and meth. I even quit sex! The only thing I can’t quit are these stupid cigarettes.”

“They wouldn’t kick you out of a monastery for that, would they?”

“Maybe I just wasn’t ready. Still, I think it saved my life. I don’t know where I’d be now if that didn’t happen. Probably dead.”

Our friend, the guitarist, finished the tune and we applauded quietly in the empty street. His smile was so bright that it broke my heart.

"I still plan on becoming a monk later on," Saint added faintly, and put some money in the guitarist's hat. They folded hands and exchanged blessings, each of them bowing and saying, *khob chai*.

"I just want to help people," Saint said as we walked away.

We entered a warren of alleys until we finally stopped in front of a KTV. I followed Saint down a dark rabbit hole and entered an underground of twists and turns until we came to a heavy wooden door.

Saint knocked three times, in no special pattern, but loudly because of the jazz that could be heard muffled from a deeper source. A panel in the door slid open and two black eyes checked us out. The door clicked and we entered a dimly lit, heavily gilded, rather gaudy antechamber filled with an eclectic array of colonial-era oil paintings, Buddha statues, and tantric carvings of naked goddesses being seduced by demons.

A man who looked like something between a maître d' and a gangster greeted us with a smooth formality that made it undetectable whether he and Saint had ever met before. No words were exchanged, and no questions were asked as he ushered us to the other side of the antechamber.

He opened the golden door and bowed despite the obvious fact that we were both underdressed. Saint looked like he was there to promote his new rap album, and I was still walking around with a rucksack, thong-sandals, shorts, and a wrinkled T-Shirt.

There was a stage that featured a four-piece blues band, led by a songstress in a black cocktail dress doing a bossa nova rendition of *So Insensitive*. They were all Laotians, looking as if they'd come from 1950-something, playing soft keys, rhythm guitar, and stand-up bass. Each band member appeared to be dressed in velvet while servers patrolled the darkened perimeters, responding quickly to any candle being raised, a signal for service held aloft by one of the righthand men. These men were younger than their bosses, but each member of this collective of cronies and rivals had their own mistresses. Gold gleamed from wrists and fingers and the aroma of cigars

was evident as drink orders were mouthed, and requests for ice were made amid clouds of smoke and music-drowned laughter.

“Welcome to the ASEAN,” Saint murmured for my ears only as he led us past the dance floor in front of the stage where a few of the men danced with their dates, who were on average half their age. We sat in a corner booth where we wouldn’t be noticed.

Each girl was dressed in a glamorous evening gown that she didn’t own. I could tell because of the way they were dragged around by the servers. These girls weren’t like the floozies we’d seen an hour earlier at the pink gorilla bar. These girls belonged to a Miss Universe pageant. Maybe this was one of the hoops they had to jump through to get in.

Whatever the case, they’d mastered the discipline. Their eyes were heavy-lidded in eyeshadow and their cheeks were touched with rouge; their statuesque faces emotionless as they slowly stepped and turned in the arms of the old tycoons.

“Should I even ask how much a drink is here?” I asked, picking up a drink menu. “What’s that, *kip*? That’s nothing!”

“That’s not *kip*,” Saint informed me. “That’s dollars.”

“Shit-za!”

Before the song ended, Saint went off to take care of his business and I decided to use the bathroom. I was intercepted in the dark by a diminutive server who seemed to anticipate my need without words. The young server led me along a dimly lit hallway that resembled a wing in a stately hotel, full of statues, brass light fixtures, and decadent art. I gave him some *kip* for escorting me and entered the dark stone-tiled latrine. Just as I was walking in, I bumped into a short old man, and out of reflex said, “Whoops, sorry.”

Had I not spoken, the old man probably would’ve kept on walking. However, upon hearing this American phrase, he paused and looked at me with keen interest, and right away I knew it was him.

In all the photographs Paprika and Maya had shown me back at Cool Shade hostel in Luang Prabang, he looked regal and charismatic, like a world leader in front of huge crowds. In person, he was short and cartoonish, with

arms and legs as stumpy as they'd said, and even with that ridiculous toupee whisked and volumized to defy gravity he only stood as tall as my forehead.

"You American?" he said, his face wrinkled with delight, looking at me like some kind of toy.

"Um, hi," I said nervously, having no idea what to say. "You're Candidate Dim, right? I've seen you in pictures."

"No picture," Candidate Dim said automatically, as if this was the usual request, and then changing his tone back to inquiry he asked, "Who bring you here? This no place for tourist."

"I'm here with a friend," I said. "We're not staying long."

"All America is my friend," said Candidate Dim. He smiled ingratiatingly, looking me up and down, perhaps trying to figure out how I'd managed to dodge the dress code. "Laos and American must work together. Tell your Laotian friend vote for Dim."

This brief exchange was the equivalent of kissing a baby, and he started to walk away without a further thought in his head. I knew I should've let him go, but how many times in my life am I going to meet a politician in the bathroom? I had to say something.

"Tell me why," I called after him, stopping him in his tracks. "Why should we vote for you?"

When he turned around, his smile had faded a little, and his face had taken on a stony edge beneath the spotlighting.

"Why?" Candidate Dim asked, squinting at me. "You smart, you vote Dim because Dim is democracy. You vote democracy, you vote Dim. You don't like me, I don't care. You vote for the junta, nothing change. That's why you vote Dim."

With that, Candidate Dim walked away, and I stood there stunned, wondering if he had earned my vote.

At the urinal, I did my business, all the while trying to figure out what kind of place Saint had brought me to. How the hell could a kid like Saint get access to a place where the future members of Parliament were having a private party? Where the hell did Saint go anyway?

I returned to an empty table and saw Candidate Dim on the dance floor, spinning a girl around who was probably sixteen, but looked eighteen with make-up on. He seemed to be having a great time. Despite those little legs of his, he was quite a dancer.

"Is this the only answer for democracy in Laos?" I asked aloud to nobody. "A pig with short legs who likes them young?"

I decided to order a beer despite the astronomical price tag. I needed something to hold onto to give me a sense of gravity. A few moments later, my beer came.

"It's never too early for Beer Lao," a voice murmured from the darkness and a bottle of beer was placed in front of me. I knew that voice. When I looked up, I couldn't believe my eyes.

Louis!

"You work here?" I cried, completely taken by surprise. It was him, alright. I recognized him by those curled forelocks that reminded me of an Asian Clark Kent.

"Only for tonight," Louis said, keeping his voice low. "Better drink up. The bar's about to close."

"Are you—"

He cut me off, nodding, his eyes communicating more than words.

"I saw you walk in. That kid you're with is in trouble."

Instinctively, I rose to warn Saint that the jig was up, but Louis put his hand on my shoulder and firmly sat me down. I knew that I should probably be more worried about myself.

"Don't worry, I've got you covered," Louis assured me. "Do you see that door next to the statue? When I leave your table, go there. You need to leave right away before you get caught up. The party is about to be over."

"My friend, I mean, the kid I came here with—"

"He's waiting outside. Don't worry. Just get to that door. Leave quietly, just like the way you came in. Otherwise, you might be asked a lot of questions."

After Louis left, I took a quick sip of the beer for courage and gathered up my rucksack. I slunk quietly over to the other side of the dance hall

where I noticed some muscle standing guard. I saw his thick shaved skull spot me and approach like the Terminator as I clownishly ducked behind a statue of Mara, the goddess of death.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the room. A group of armed men burst into the lounge and yelled in Lao, I guessed, for everyone to freeze. The security who approached me reacted instantly and ran to the door as everyone cleared the dance hall in a panic looking for the exits.

I watched in amazement as the servers withdrew pistols and barked orders like a scene from the movies. There was a sound of broken glass as the party was ended abruptly and the mic stand was knocked over as the band ditched their instruments and disappeared behind the curtain.

I snapped out of it and took that as my cue to vacate.

Outside the club, there was a swarm of police vehicles and soldiers in green and black fatigues. The Miss Universe contestants were scattered among them with several of them being questioned. I saw Saint in the back of a police car, handcuffed, looking through the backseat window with his sad eyes. As I approached him, I was stopped by a rough-faced guard, who intercepted me and spoke rapidly in a language I didn't have to understand to know that I should probably fuck off.

"Sam," Louis called, stepping in from out of nowhere.

"Louis, you have to get my friend out of there. I'm staying at his mom's house," I said and pointed at the squad car.

"Your friend is a dealer of rhino horn," Louis explained. "Pure extract. Used as an aphrodisiac. It's likely he was here to sell some to the parties gathered, so they could," Louis cleared his throat, briefly uncomfortable, "do boom-boom all night long."

"Does that stuff really work?" I asked curiously.

"Whether it does or doesn't, the sale of rhino horn is illegal. We'll probably have to deport him."

"You really are a diplomat," I said in awe. "But you won't..."

I trailed off, silently pantomiming a firing squad.

"No, definitely not. After questioning, we'll send him back to his home country."

"That's probably better for him," I concurred. "He needs to call his mom. She doesn't even know where he is."

"There's no crime for being a bad son," Louis agreed. "But there should be."

"Can I just talk to him for a minute? I should tell his Lao-mom what happened, or his roommate, or someone. They might be worried."

"Plus, you need that spare bed," Louis pointed out all too wisely.

"If they offer it."

"Go ahead."

Louis spoke in rapid-fire Lao and gave me clearance with the cop standing guard, and I was allowed to have a final word with Saint.

"Are you okay?" Saint asked me as I leaned toward the window.

"I'm not the one in handcuffs. Are you going to be all right?"

Saint smiled.

"See? Laos isn't as boring as everyone thinks. You just have to know where to look."

"They're going to ask you some questions, and probably send you home. Back to Paris, I think."

"Yeah, maybe it's that time," Saint said without remorse. "It's my karma."

"Karma knows best," I said.

"Can you just tell my mom what happened? I don't want her to worry," he said. "It's called Sabaidee House. That's where she lives."

I nodded in the affirmative.

"Thanks for everything," I told him, unsure which part of the night I should be thanking him for. "But just one thing."

"Yeah?"

"When you get home, make sure you call your mother. She misses you."

Saint smiled, looked down, and nodded.

"I will," he promised.

I walked away and was approached once again by Louis.

"Did you know Candidate Dim was in there?" I asked.

Louis said nothing but gave me a wink.

"There's no rest for the wicked. Tomorrow, it will be someone else's turn. Can I give you a lift?"

"Sure. You know where 'Sabaidee House' is?" I asked.

"Oh yes. Famous place. It's a historical building," said Louis and led the way to his car.

"Remind me to buy you a beer," I joked.

"It's never too early for a Beer Lao."

We cruised past the downtown esplanades and arrived minutes later on a dark street filled with stray dogs and clouds of huge insects having a nocturnal fiesta by the dismal streetlights. Before we parted ways, Louis gave me a little background on the house where I was staying.

"It was an establishment run by a noble family punished by the regime for their prosperity under French rule. A long time ago, they had land and servants, French tutors, and English governesses. They lived well. The current mistress's father was connected to the king. He was a military man if I'm not mistaken."

"And then the coolies got some Marxism in them and burned it all to the ground," I added, for color commentary.

"I hear she drinks quite heavily," Louis continued. "Who can blame her? At least the poor at some rice out of the revolution. People like her lost everything; generations of wealth gone with the stroke of a pen."

"It's one thing to be born poor, and another to be born rich and then become poor," I said helpfully.

Louis nodded. "She's still from a respected family. No one forgets that. But she's a widow. Be nice to her."

"Don't worry. Old ladies love me. I know how to talk to them," I assured him.

We slowed down on a poorly lit street in front of a French colonial mansion, rain-beaten with moss and vines growing wildly around the white stone.

"There it is," Louis said pointing to Sabaidee House. "I have to get going. My girlfriend. She always complains."

"Thanks for the ride," I said, then added, "and for keeping me out of Lao prison. I just have one question: Who do you work for? I mean, if Dim was being propped up by the Americans, then does that mean...?"

Louis chuckled and drove off, leaving me standing on the street, unsure of what to do or think. I knew better than to get involved with the politics of a third-world country, and worse still was I had no introduction to get into the house. I was hoping we would go up to the front door together and that Louis would say something like, "Ma'am, is this your son?"

It was after curfew. Should I just ring the doorbell? It was way past visiting hours, but I had no choice. Soldiers were roaming the streets in search of cigarettes or bribes. Packs of stray dogs tore each other apart in the dark.

I whispered my lines and walked through the rusty gate hanging halfway ajar, trying to configure the half-truths I was about to tell.

The door was answered by a brawny kickboxer with a crew cut and a steely glint in his eyes. He was sporting soccer shorts that revealed his brutal knees and he wore his six pack like a shirt. His scowl told me that I was interrupting the game.

"No vacancy," he said, and began to close the door.

"I'm a friend of Saint's. He sent me here to tell you something!" I cried before he could shut the door.

At the mention of Saint's name, I heard Ms. Alana, the lady of the house, order him to let me in. Her son, Ken (who I was introduced to later) scowled and welcomed me.

I entered a foyer that opened majestically with a massive sitting bronze Buddha growing green with tarnish with a meditation pond that trickled below. As I moved further into the home, I saw walls lined with the ancestral portraits of men in an evolution of dinner-wear from princely white and gold to royal blues. Some had circular gold rims on their patriarchal faces, with each man sporting the kind of facial hair that once commanded armies.

Separating the prospective guests from the rest of the home was a wooden screen with intricate carvings of lotus flowers and patterns metaphorically infinite in their repetition. Behind this screen sat the lady of the house, Ms. Alana, with her empty dinner plates and half-bottle of vodka, the other half hidden somewhere in her bloodstream. She was a sultry beauty, smoky-voiced, seductive, and old enough to be my mother. She wore the traditional Lao *sinh*, a tube skirt in silky peacock blue that displayed her voluptuous figure and constrained her tipsy sauntering walk, caused both by the tightness of the dress and the half-bottle of vodka.

“Welcome to Sabaidee House. Please sit down. It’s not every day we have such a handsome young man come to visit us,” Ms. Alana said in English with what sounded like a Russian accent. She smiled with glowing eyes. “I’ve just finished dinner, but I can have a few dishes put together. Shall I prepare something for you?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” I stammered, wondering how close Saint was with this Laotian mother figure. “Saint said he was staying here. I met him earlier this evening. I’m afraid I come with some bad news.”

“First, you eat,” she said motheringly. “Then we have a drink.”

Without a change in her expression, her honey voice transformed into the barking command of a dictator. As I set my rucksack down on the floor and got situated, two young serving girls brought out food and a fresh pitcher of water. The servants placed the pitcher and food on the table, and I watched as Ms. Alana gathered the little girls in her arms with a sudden outpour of tenderness, then shooed them away like flies.

I had no idea how they’d put a plate together so quickly, but I wasn’t one to deny free food. I figured that if things went badly, this could be my last chance to eat before breakfasting in a vagrant’s jailcell.

Ms. Alana poured me a glass of vodka next as an *apéritif*, or perhaps she was tired of drinking alone. I raised my glass with hers and took the shot. It almost tasted like water with just a slight burn at the end. Then I dug into my plate like an animal. The fare was *laab*, the minced seafood I already knew

I liked, which was like ceviche with all the citrus and tang of lemon grass, coupled with a crispy noodle salad, and sticky rice.

Ms. Alana watched me eat with a satisfied look on her face, but I had the feeling that *I* was her dessert. I didn't look up from my plate until I'd eaten every morsel. She poured us another shot from the bottle, and we clinked again, and now I was ready to talk.

"Saint's been arrested," I told Ms. Alana, decided to get right to it before she became further intoxicated. She reacted so immediately and with a drama so complete it could only be Russian. I meted out the details as she wailed and lamented, not mentioning the where's or what's exactly, wondering how to steer the conversation towards the topic of a vacant room.

"I have too many children, too many little birds. They fly away and I am happy, but then I'm always here, waiting for them to come back," Ms. Alana said with a sigh afterwards, and I could only suppose that she was referring to her failed attempts at running a guesthouse.

"My little girls in the kitchen, they come from the countryside, from poor, poor families. I take them in. Can I pay them? No, I have no money to pay them. All we have is the food on our table and the drink in our glasses. I was once from a wealthy family. My grandfather was a great scholar. He was part of the king's council, a doctor. There were no doctors in those days. And my father, a great man in the royal army, was a brave and respected leader. We had the most beautiful garden when I was a little girl. Now look. It grows wild with snakes."

"It looked okay," I told her, though in truth there probably were snakes bigger than my arms in there.

"In America, people have big house, yes?" Ms. Alana supposed. "But they work in their own garden. This I cannot understand."

"Americans do like to keep their grass at a certain, uniform length," I agreed, struck for the first time how odd this was. Then, realizing I was expected to throw in a complimentary word to the lady of the house, I added, "You have a beautiful home. Saint told me it was like a museum, but truly it's a work of art."

This was spreading it a little too thick, but I was desperate for a room.

Ms. Alana gave me a withering look and snorted, but I could see that she was pleased. She threw her drink back and poured us both a triple shot from the bottle.

"Come. I'll show you my *beautiful* home," she said, mocking me, and laughed, either at me or herself, or both. We walked into the adjoining room and stood before the family shrine, a photographic history mixed with colored prints and black and whites, framed and arranged neatly from generation to generation in a timeline.

Towards the center was a portrait of a beautiful young woman with soft intelligent eyes and ringlets of hair in a classical Western style. There were pearls in her ears and around her neck. There were others of her in traditional costumes, heavily caked with makeup, and a wide shot of the whole clan standing for a wedding portrait.

I tried not to ask too many questions but let Ms. Alana tell it the way she wanted, which was apparently between jolting shouts and hard disparaging laughter, riddled with sudden tangents of sorrow.

"I grew up in Moscow because of my father. He sheltered me there when the war tore our world apart. There is my husband in that photo. He is dead now. He was my father's favorite captain. My husband served my father in the royal army."

"Is that him with Ho Chi Minh?" I asked, spotting a black and white photo. I recognized the leader of the Vietnamese revolution from my history books. In this photo, it seemed that they were enjoying a cup of tea rather than negotiating truths and victory.

"That dog-faced coward. I keep on the wall for my museum. I spit on his picture every night!"

"Sorry."

"When I come back to Laos, the war was over. The communists take everything. They hated my family because we were wealthy. They call us all their foolish names. Aristocrat. Bourgeoisie. They steal everything from us like thieves. To them this was justice, to give everything we had to strangers so

that we could feed them like dogs. Now look at my land. We had fields of rice, bananas, spices, coffee. Now you see what it is. Nothing but snakes and weeds.”

She took a pause and appeared emotionally distraught. I almost put my hand on her shoulder before she laughed bitterly and downed the rest of her drink. She turned her attention to brighter times, better times, further back in the family history.

“In Russia, I had a sable coat. My husband bought one for my wedding present. I miss wearing that coat. I wish I never sold it. I felt like a czarina. You cannot wear a sable here. The rain ruins the fur.”

I nodded sympathetically, observing now that she was starting to spend more time staring into her empty glass than at the pictures on the wall. I decided this was as good a time as any to interject.

“So, I guess Saint might need his personal belongings?” I said coyly. “I don’t think he’s coming back. Maybe you’d like to have them sent?”

“Yes, that is a wonderful idea. My poor boy. He was a good boy. Sweet child. But young, and foolish. He trusted everybody. I knew one day he would be caught,” Ms. Alana lamented. Then just as suddenly, her voice sharpened like iron as she barked orders at her son, who groaned and responded with something to the effect of, “But the game’s still on.” This caused a verbal onslaught in Lao, prompting him to get off the couch to get Saint’s stuff.

“You go with Ken,” Ms. Alana said, her voice returning to honey. “Bring down his things. We bring them to the police station tomorrow.”

“Sure, I can do that,” I replied, glancing at Ken, who didn’t look one bit pleased that I was making him miss the game. I hoped he wouldn’t smash my nose with his knees when we got upstairs.

Ken motioned me through a beaded curtain, and we walked up a servant’s stairwell to the upstairs hall, dimly lit and decorated with more relics. Welcoming us at the top of the stairs on a low wooden table was a reclining Buddha, the slimmer and more meditative kind, as opposed to the cheerful fatso. On either side of him were those French-style fainting couches which weren’t really meant for sitting unless you were desperately tired during the tour and were willing to sit on anything.

The paintings that lined the upstairs hall were Laotian landscapes with princes in white uniform riding elephants leading colorful bands of emissaries and courtesans. A million elephants marched amid a white parasol. A monk in saffron walked beneath a red sun.

There was a gong that looks ancient and battered. The décor was almost all Lao while architecturally European. The ceilings were high, and the floors were made of stone tile, keeping the place relatively cool.

One day I might write an anonymous post on a travel site recommending Sabaidee House as a place of cultural interest, full of history and all the vodka you can drink. But I'd probably keep it down to four stars; I'm not going to pretend that I didn't spot a few roaches here and there, or find out that of course, the plumbing didn't work so well either.

Down the hall, rows of shuttered windows on the side looked out over the unkempt yard. Ken called out to the guests he was on friendly terms with, not bothering to introduce me of course, but receiving his hellos in different European accents.

We reached the far end of the hall where we paused in front of a closed door and Ken gave me a look as if to clue me in on an inside joke. He knocked on the door with a playful pattern.

"Pat-ty, it's Ken. Are you busy or lonely?" Ken called in a teasing manner and winked at me. "We need to come inside."

"Fuck off!" I heard in reply.

A few moments later, however, the doorknob turned and an elephantine Englishman with a remarkable sunburn covering the whole of his face and what was exposed of his body beneath a poorly tied bathrobe answered the door. He had squinty eyes, which indicated that he wasn't wearing his glasses. The way he peered at me wasn't from poor vision. He wasn't the type of man to welcome visitors, unless of course, they were there to give him a blowjob.

"Where the fuck is that little dodger with my ivory? I've been trying to stand straight for nearly an hour now and nothing's coming. I've had to send two girls home tonight because of that tardy twat."

“Saint gone. He get in trouble with police,” Ken said simply, and looked to me to fill in the details for this monstrous lobster in a bathrobe.

“Hi. I’m a friend of Saint’s. My name is—”

“I don’t give a fuck what your name is. Where’s Saint? Speak up now. Don’t stand there like a daft cunt.”

“Well, for Saint, it was just another night in Vientiane. For me, it was the adventure of a lifetime—”

“Just get to it!”

“I know a guy, a government official, I suppose you could say, who tells me Saint is fine and in good hands. He’ll make sure Saint gets home safely.”

“Who the fuck are you? You just show up, Saint gets nicked, and you just expect me to stand here and believe you ain’t had nothing to do with it? Boy, this fella’s got some bollocks, he has. Look at the apples on this one, Kenny. I ain’t never seen an agent show up at the door to give news unless he wanted more information.”

Pat stood there dead-eyeing me with a look of pure malice.

“Easy, Pat-ty. We just get Saint’s things and go, yes?” Ken intervened, prompting Pat, as I was later told to call him, to step aside and let us into his room.

“I don’t just let anyone in me pad, Kenny. You know how I am.”

“Only if they has ass and tits,” Ken joked, and motioned for me to come inside. I followed Ken through the doorway.

The room wasn’t as big as I expected, but the decor was surprisingly tasteful, executed with an appreciation for the minimalist aspects of Asian design. On the other hand, the clutter of papers and books occupying every free inch of space showed the mark of a writer who has not been practicing Zen.

The mounted samurai sword and Ukiyo-e prints on the wall told me he was fascinated with samurais as a young lad, while the various Buddha statuettes suggested that he eventually graduated to more sophisticated inquiry into Eastern philosophy. The chopsticks and lacquerware set on the small table confessed a delicate side.

The large Japanese folding screen painted with plum trees in flower told me he was tragic. The wall-to-wall bookshelves overflowing with volumes hinted at his megalomaniac dreams. The piles of neatly stacked sheets of paper confessed that he was obsessive.

Thousands of pages were arranged in mysterious formations, making sense only to their creator, like steps ascending higher and higher into nowhere, like the never-ending drafts of a novel, a magnum opus which would eventually read as syphilitic madness.

In short, he was me, the worst part of me, or what I might one day become.

"Inspired by the Japanese existentialists," I began to monologue, "he attempted the life of a struggling novelist, teaching English to businessmen for a year or two, before leaving the love of his life behind to chase down his literary aspirations. Washed up and embittered by nonstop betrayals as his life went down the toilet, he searched for the life he never lived, writing his novels in Southeast Asia with young women in endless carousel."

Pat and Ken looked at me in wonder.

"Back there, in the sick room," Pat muttered to Ken with a heavy nod toward a modified veranda. It seemed hardly a room, but I suppose Saint didn't need much, considering that he'd almost become a monk. It was just big enough for him to lay his head, and meditate deeply enough to ignore the nightly grunts of exertion.

As Ken went to get Saint's belongings, Pat wielded huge lobster claws that blocked me from going in or out, his eyes full of interrogation. He wanted to know who I was and who I worked for. This last request made him seem paranoid, for I was clearly unemployed.

"Fess up now. Who're you working for? You're police, ain't you? Out of nowhere you show up and Saint's in the can, ay? I never heard of you. Saint ain't never mentioned you before. I think you had him set up, mate."

"Saint was a good friend to me. I only met him for a night, but I would never do anything to harm Saint. I guess you could say we bonded as brothers in samsara. I had no idea he was going to get in trouble."

“Boy’s a bit screwy, ain’t he?” Pat remarks to Ken, who reappeared with a small duffel bag filled with Saint’s meager possessions. “I call bollocks.”

Ken shrugged indifferently, in a hurry to catch the rest of the game.

“I’m going to keep him for a minute, Kenny. Go on and bring that down to the lady. Me and him are going to stay for a little chat.”

This was decided without my consent of course, but the kickboxer nodded in the affirmative and left me wondering whether Pat was planning to tighten up that bathrobe anytime soon.

The door closed. Pat remained standing where he was, blocking the exit, lobster claws out, ever-expanding, his body filling up with some kind of gas.

“Alright, let’s have it. What’re you here for, mate? Just come clean. What’d he tell you about me? I warn you that I’ve got lawyers.”

“Saint had nothing but good things to say about you,” I said, having no idea what Pat’s problems were or how far back they went. “Okay, that’s not true. He said you were an asshole and a sex addict, but he would never rat on you. You don’t need to worry about that.”

“So, you’re not an agent?” Pat said, narrowing his eyes and deflating a little.

“Not the kind you’re thinking of. I’m just a vagabond looking for a bed.”

“You are, are you?”

Pat shook his head and laughed like he had a glob of phlegm in his throat. A thick one at that.

“This is why I can’t have no one over,” he muttered to himself. “I sit in here all day writing me confessions, now I’m babbling my brains out to anyone who asks me. I’ve finally gone round the bend, I have, I have.”

“Should I go?” I asked as Pat gingerly lowered himself into a rhino-skin chair which grumbled under his weight.

“Just one minute, lad. I almost felt that one,” said Pat with a nervous laugh. His face was bright and shiny, and he was sweating profusely. “Go on and fetch us some water. There in the pitcher.”

I looked toward the bonsai tree where he was pointing and poured him a glass. His hand trembled as he took a drink.

"Are you on the run or something?" I asked.

"I—I," he stammered and looked at me, shaking his head like I was too young to understand what a lifetime can make you do. "I've done terrible things. Saint knows. I've told him everything. Him and this bloody book."

Pat nodded over to the stacks of paper piled around the room.

"Memoir?" I asked.

"Confessions of philosophy, I suppose you could say."

I gazed around the room, trying to ascertain where chapter one might be buried. Simultaneously, I wondered how much time was appropriate to wait before leaving the scene of a heart attack. Five, ten minutes?

Five seemed reasonable.

"You think I'm just a bloated old man having a good wank on the page," Pat said in self-pity, the panting stage of his attack now passed. "Well, I do love me girls, and I do love that ivory. The doctor told me it was going to be the end of me. I told him that was the end I was waiting for. HA! Go on, you're supposed to laugh."

"It sounds like you've nailed down your genre," I said appreciatively. "That's always tough to do."

"Yeah, and what about you? Chasing the wind, holding onto illusion?" Pat said with derision.

"I'm going to go toward the darkness instead of running from it, I guess."

"You ain't running from the darkness, lad," Pat wheezed with his hands folded over his belly. "You're in it."

I gave Pat a cockeyed look, then said fuck it and spilled the beans. I told him everything from Beijing to Tibet, about searching for My True Love and ending up with Jacky. I explained to him how I ended up alone once more, which led to my meeting Saint, and then to him getting arrested, which caught us up to the present moment. I told Pat everything in great detail, and was surprisingly unashamed about it all, as if it were a dissertation I'd been working on for this very occasion. Here he was, Professor Lobster Hands and his angry stiffy, waiting to shit all over my story. But I didn't care. It felt good just to say it out loud.

A change seemed to come over Pat. He nodded slowly, his look of malice now replaced by the pensiveness of someone analyzing, probing, connecting the dots, trying to help.

“Ever read Dostoyevsky?” Pat spoke after a period of contemplation. “He wrote that book over there, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Read it, and you’ll find what you’re looking for. In there’s all the answers to life’s questions.”

I took a seat in a chair facing Pat. Seeing that had my attention, Pat launched in.

“Three completely different upbringings. None of them has a mum, and dad don’t do fuck all but name them. The brothers reunite as young men. Their father has got a wee bit of gold tucked away. He buries it as soon as he sees them coming. HA! But two of the brothers ain’t interested in money. Only one of them is in pieces over the inheritance, and he ends up killing the old man and prying it out of his father’s cold dead fingers. Dmitri. He’s the eldest one.”

“Drunken argument?” I ventured.

“Bungled burgling. Probably would’ve done the job anyway to keep little Grushenka out of the old bastard’s clutches. She’s the same bird Dmitri’s in over his head about.”

“Classy.”

“Ivan’s the second one, an atheist; Alyosha the youngest, a priest. Loves his brothers, forgives his father, but it’s his Holy Father that worries him. The stink from the old priest’s corpse is unbearable. Goes on for days, even after the viewing. You can imagine what Alyosha thinks about that. Everything he believes in, smelling like a great old pile of dog shit.”

“Maybe it was the herring and onions,” I suggested. “So, do the brothers duel it out to see if God is real?”

“You’ll have to read it for yourself to know. Which one of the brothers are you? That’s the question you’ll have to ask yourself in the end.”

“Okay, well I’m not an atheist or a communist, so Ivan’s out. I’m definitely no saint, so I’m not Alyosha. I guess that I’m Dmitri, the drunken gambler?” I wondered out loud, hoping for Pat to just give me an answer.

“Go on,” he encouraged me. “Explain.”

“Well, maybe I’m fighting against my father, except not my actual father, but God? Like, I’m just screaming at him to tell me where to go, and in the process, I’m defying him by just wandering around until he grabs me and brings me back home. But he doesn’t have anything to give me, at least not the thing that I want. But what do I want? Is it his fatherly love, or is it the woman of my desire? Maybe I’m just looking for a way to rip the gold out of his fingers so I can be with My True Love. So, yeah, maybe I’m Dmitri. I don’t want to believe in God unless he gives me what I want.”

“You’re a fool is what you are,” Pat said merrily, snorting, thoroughly enjoying the fact that he’d set me up. He cinched the knot on his sash and continued berating me with glee. “Be honest, how much did it take for her to give you a go? One bucket of rum? Two? And now you’re chasing her down like she hasn’t already been with the next lonely traveler searching for a warm bed.”

“What do you know? Your girlfriend’s probably a prostitute,” I shot back angrily.

“Your true love was a one-night stand,” Pat said all too accurately.

“You don’t know her,” I said defensively.

“Ay, and neither do you.”

I rose and walked around the room, stared at a katana sword mounted and sheathed, then glanced back and forth at the layers of text stacked at different heights like a lost city in the jungle.

“What you’re looking for is a favor from the Almighty, and there ain’t nothing but silence. I’ll tell you why, lad,” Pat declared and flapped his arms in the air to express the all and nothing. His eyes widened until they were red-rimmed. “No one’s listening.”

“If there’s no God, then there’s no such thing as love,” I said somberly. “And if that’s the case, then all our urges toward procreation are just in service to the continuation of a species. None of us love one another, humanity, or even life itself to deal with the cost of love just to keep death from its final say. Each of us would choose death and annihilation of our entire species if

we knew we were nothing more than hormones and impulses and chemicals in the brain. Is there no greater sense of truth or destiny?"

"You think lying next to your dream girl is the answer to life's mysteries," Pat mocked with a dismissive gesture. "PAH! You're just a kid. Love is suffering, love is sacrifice, love takes everything from you because that's the only way you know it's real. The point of life is to suffer. You can't live without love, so you let her take what she wants and leave you with nothing. Then you go somewhere and die quietly. There's your true love."

"As crazy as it sounds, I'm going to find her," I said, my conviction starting to break like sand.

"Why? Because you *believe*?" Pat sneered and laughed heartily at my expense. "You've strayed off the path, haven't you? Talking to this old geezer about your true love ain't quite the same as holding her in your arms now, is it? You thought she'd just come waltzing into your lap if you showed up, didn't you?"

"Okay, so what if I never find her?" I asked Pat, beseeching his wisdom, however rotten it might seem. I knew he was right. It was hopeless.

"What am I supposed to look for?" I continued. "What do I believe in? Nothing?"

"I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the important and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man, that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, for all the blood that they've shed, that it will make it not only possible to forgive, but to justify all that has happened."

"Did you memorize that?" I reacted in shock.

"It's written on the wall," Pat replied and pointed to the quote by Dostoyevsky scrawled on a sheet of large, yellowed paper taped to the wall.

"Which one of the brothers said that?"

"Ivan Karamazov."

"I thought he was an atheist."

Pat smiled, sliding the bishop in for checkmate.

"Now why would Dostoyevsky do that?" he asked aloud, once again mocking me.

I pondered a moment, staring at the long sprawling quote.

"It wasn't a mistake to come here. She led me to where I am, to where I stand now, talking about the deepest parts of my being with someone I hardly know. How does the person I detest become the same person to show me who I am? Or the words of truth, the words of hope, and ultimately, the words of faith, come from a person who claims to believe in nothing?"

"And so ye become Alyosha. Go and minister unto the world."

Pat made the sign of the cross over me in a sanctimonious manner, yet I received his blessing.

I nodded solemnly and promised and left him sitting in his armchair to consider the remains of his life as I drifted down the hall.

The lights were off, but I found the stairs and floated downward in a haze towards a dim light at the bottom, which seemed impossibly far.

I saw Ms. Alana through the beaded curtain sitting alone at the table while her children slept on floor mats in the other room. I heard her telling one of them to go back to bed, but when I reached the bottom of the stairs, she was already pouring me a drink.

"So, you met the fat man?" she said with unveiled scorn. "He is a disgusting pig, a permanent resident, a thing I must live with. I don't go upstairs anymore. I hate his stink."

"It takes the lost to lead you into the darkness. That's where you find what you're really looking for, isn't it?" I replied, still in a philosophical state.

Ms. Alana's face twisted into a smirk caught in candlelight as we took a drink. Her face looked both beautiful and decrepit at the same time.

"This is a place of the dead," Ms. Alana spoke thick-tongued, too drunk to have any emotion or bitterness, a hollowness which seemed to thud. "You never imagine the future when you're old and have lost everything. I live

with guests in my house and have become their servant, fulfilling their needs and desires and endless requests. We used to own land. We had servants.”

The candlelight danced in reflection off the glass frames of portraits and photographs spanning the ages like fire in a cave.

“Drink!” Ms. Alana barked, and in one jerking movement, I took the vodka that I didn’t want to drink and absorbed it into my bloodstream. I should’ve thrown it over my shoulder. She wouldn’t have noticed if I threw it past her head.

“I was once a beautiful young woman, with a proud husband, a loving son. You don’t imagine the future. You don’t think you’ll be the one with no one to help you. We live in a museum. Look at the photographs. Look how they smile. They don’t know what will happen to them. And now here we are looking at them. Are we not the same?”

“Maybe the beginning is eating the end, like that snake eating its own tail,” I said, fighting the burning in my stomach. “We’re stuck somewhere in the middle waiting to be swallowed up by history.”

“History is full of mistakes,” Ms. Alana said with a sigh and poured herself another drink. I saw her face both young and old in the candle. I could see her traveling as that young, stunning beauty going from the misty jungle mountains of Laos to the wintry empire of the U.S.S.R. She was a good student who maintained a low profile, but still had enough adventure to keep her skin glowing rosy in the Moscow nights. She wanted to live in snow forever so her skin would become white. She spoke fluent Russian, Chinese, and English, among her studies of classics and mathematics. She was arranged to marry her father’s favorite captain, back then so dashing and brave, and then broken by the war. He died of whisky.

“Life was beautiful back then,” Ms. Alana trailed distantly.

Suddenly I felt something tickling my thigh. For a moment I froze, thinking it was some kind of tarantula that came out to hunt birds at night. But the thing seemed to move about clumsily, fumbling for my zipper. I looked up to see Ms. Alana, eyes half-shaded, ready to show me some photos she didn’t keep on the wall—glamour shots on the bedcovers in a one-piece

teddy that hid her belly and stretch marks. She smiled and breathed so noisily I was afraid she'd wake up her kickboxing son, snoring audibly from a near distance. Is this what happens? Right after that romantic story about her childhood in Russia? Can someone make these beads a little thicker, or perhaps soundproof?

I might've let out a squeak at that moment, accepting a final drink to lubricate the moment. We were both drenched in lubricant. Slogged, really. I took the shot as a means of courage, a foolhardy decision. The other vodka shots sat stagnant in my stomach, burning away at my organs like battery acid. I felt a rumble and knew there was about to be a spewing of semi-clear liquid.

I dashed from the room and ran into the spiraling maze-like darkness, using what little moonlight there was available to locate an acceptable place to puke.

I emptied out my guts in a dark room and prayed to the god of bed and breakfasts that it was the bathroom. I wouldn't want them giving me a poor rating and writing disapproving notes on my behavior. "Guest left a mess in the prayer room. Did not clean, but instead fled the scene. DO NOT RECOMMEND!"

I emerged from the bathroom and felt Ms. Alana looming behind me. She grabbed me and nibbled on my ear whispering, "I want to eat you," in a Russian accent, running her tongue over my earlobe, tasting me. She patted me on the ass and disappeared into the darkness, and still all I felt was her tongue in my ear, that hot breath that felt like the kiss of a lioness.

I woke up with my head in the bidet.

Chapter 4.

IT WAS ALMOST ten in the morning by the time I got to the Malaysian doughnut shop. Jacky was nowhere in sight. “Have you seen a girl with blue-green eyes, hair the color of wheat, and a big—” I cupped my hands over my chest to illustrate—“mountainous region?”

“She here this morning,” the guy behind the counter said. “Eight o’clock exactly.”

“How do you know it was eight o’clock exactly?” I asked.

“Because she say, ‘Look at the clock. It eight o’clock exactly.’ She very angry.”

“Zonkers,” I said with a sigh and slumped over the counter.

I tried to press the man behind the counter for more information, but all he was interested in was Lao coffee. I sipped the condensed milk until I felt a sugar boost and tried to form a strategy to get to Thailand. As I sat at a table in the doughnut shop and took inventory of my pockets, I realized that I was running dangerously low on *kip*. I had some American dollars in my rucksack, but it wouldn’t be enough to buy a plane ticket to New York City when I finally decided to give up and leave. I pondered this fact and suddenly every drop of coffee became precious.

I knew that it was my last day in Laos, so I decided to see the Victory Gate, or what the locals call Patuxai. The monument was crowded with tourists trying to take advantage of the morning before the afternoon became insufferably hot. The ornate concrete monument was basically a Laotian version of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, which seemed ironic considering that it was built in honor of Laos’s liberation from French rule.

I mulled over this fact in my head and took a few snaps with my Canon, feeling annoyed and unamused. I decided I'd had enough. It was time to say goodbye to Laos.

Down the street, there were several motorbike shops with bikes and scooters out on the street for rent. As I made my way past, who should I see but...

"Jacky!"

She turned around. Her mouth dropped as if she was just on the phone, calling me. Neither of us carried pocket technology.

"Where have you been? I've been looking all over for you!" Jacky cried, scolding me as if I was a child. She was freshly showered and wearing a sky-blue top with tassels and denim cut-offs. She looked the very opposite of a vampire victim, but I couldn't help but ask.

"Did they try to gangbang you?" I demanded to know.

"Who?"

"Him and his 'friends.'" I said, making air quotes.

"No, you ass!" Jacky said with a laugh and pinched my shoulder. "I told him not to do anything funny or I'd stick him with a knife."

"You're so Australian," I whispered admiringly.

"Did you end up bunking with some lucky Lao girl?" Jacky teased, batting her eyelashes coquettishly.

The events from the previous night flowed back into my brain at hyper-speed. I had no idea where to even start.

"I met Candidate Dim," I said simply.

"Fuck off!"

"I'm serious," I insisted, and told her about how I'd bumped into Dim in the bathroom. I failed to sell the story, however, because the moment I started telling it out loud, I became aware of how ludicrous it all sounded. Jacky didn't believe a word. She thought I was still shrooming.

"You should've pulled that toupee off his head to see if it was real," she told me jokingly.

"You know, that did cross my mind," I said.

"I was just about to get my new bike. Are you coming?"

The sound of this invitation brought me back to our night in Vang Vieng when she beckoned me into the shower. I knew that I was there before she even asked.

“Where’re we headed?” I asked. “Straight to Thai border or are we taking the scenic route?”

“The scenic route, obviously. Let’s stop by Cambodia. There’s a beach town called Sihanoukville. We can rent a bungalow, sip cocktails in the water, and just sit at the bottom of the world for a few weeks while we watch the sun go down. It’s like Thailand, but cheaper. Well, there’s nowhere in the world like Thailand—put your wallet away—I’ve already paid for it. If you don’t mind riding bitch—”

“What? Are you nuts?” I hissed, making sure no one had overheard her. “I can’t ride on the back!”

“Why not? There’s nothing wrong with a boy riding bitch. It’s quite daring,” Jacky said and handed me a pink helmet. “You can show the world you’re not afraid of what they think.”

“Please stop calling it ‘riding bitch.’ That’s not helping.”

“Fine, we can take turns. You ride half and I’ll ride half. Deal?”

“What about once we get there? How are you planning to return your motorbike?”

“I’m not,” said Jacky with a wink. “I’ve just bought it.”

One of the grease monkeys from the shop came wheeling a brand-new motorbike, cherry red. He wiped it down and gave Jacky the key.

“You do know how to use the clutch, I presume,” said Jacky suspiciously as she straddled the bike.

“I’m a fast learner,” I chirped. “Give me ten minutes, and I’ll have her at full speed!”

We went to the side street and Jacky tested out the bike, flying up and down the alley, ready to burn. I gulped, knowing her expectation was to have it pushing red line from here to the Cambodian border. She gave me a practice trial and I almost dropped her new motorbike on the ground, my arms quivering like two strands of wet spaghetti.

“Get a scratch on my new bike and you’re paying for it!” she hollered from the sidelines.

I tried to mentally connect with the machine. There was a moment when I almost felt like I was one with the metal. Then there was a shudder and the sound of a grinding gear. Jacky was on the sidewalk yelling. She was not pleased.

For hours, I sat on the back of the cherry red motorbike and tried to avoid the stares of everyone we passed—children and dogs included—as I daringly rode bitch, defying five thousand years of learned culture. I felt brave.

We wove in and out of traffic until we reached the outskirts of the city where the walls crumbled into fringes of concrete which then diminished to pebbles and then finally rubble and the grassy nothingness of the road.

The ride from Vientiane to the Cambodian border takes over ten hours, but with the way Jacky rode we’d make it there in eight. But eventually there came a time when she couldn’t hold the throttle a second more. I got in the front as she climbed in the back and held on. I revved the engine and felt electricity shooting through my arms and fingertips. It was a lot easier to ride on the highway without the constant worry of crashing into a pedestrian, stray dog, or a tuk-tuk. We flew at full speed on that perfect December day, the date nearing somewhere closer to Christmas, while to my east coast sensibilities it felt more like July.

Rays of blurry light filled my vision, and a silent deafening roar whistled into my ears. Jacky’s arms were locked around me as I listened to the sound of pure consciousness, the perfect awareness of this moment, speeding through the countryside toward the green hills with the trees stood perfectly still until you passed them, at which point they broke down into their simplest forms. I saw the road in complete focus until it became a rainbow. I understood that this was what we were experiencing all the time, Time itself, and it was beautiful.

“If I walk into a bar and you see me, will you buy me drink?” Jacky asked me as we watched the sunset.

"I don't know. I'm thinking about becoming a monk," I replied with a smirk and a sip from my beer. "Siem Reap isn't too far from here."

"Don't be dramatic. I'll let you borrow some money. It's not a big deal," offered Jacky, looking at the side of my face as I stared into the river. "I'm not worried about you running off on me. You know I'd chase you down anyway."

The sun dipped further into the Mekong, painting the sky quicksilver with pink and vermillion stains sparkling on the water as silhouettes of fishing boats wavered in the distance.

"I'm serious though. I'm going to Angkor Wat. I know that it's breaking the rules, but now that I've given up on finding My True Love, there's nothing else out there for me. I just want to see it before I leave here."

"And then what?" Jacky asked. "Are you going back to America?"

"I have no idea."

We stared at the water in silence, listening to the deafening clatter of giant crickets in the grass.

"I wish our last meal was more memorable," I said, using chopsticks to pick at a platter of fragrant greens, sticky rice, and lukewarm tripe.

"Trust me. I'll remember this every time I think about touching animal parts again," Jacky said, wrinkling her face at the pale grayish innards. "I'm going back to being a vegetarian."

We ordered another round of beer. Somehow, I knew that this was the right answer. I was once again breaking the rules regarding randomness, and destiny—and despite what I wanted to believe about the Universe, and myself, I'd failed in the sense that I'd discovered the world but felt as if I'd learned nothing at all. If I went to Sihanoukville with Jacky, I would've grown even more intimate with her, and her with me, and while nothing could sound better than frolicking with Jacky on some third-world beach, I wasn't sure that that was the lesson I needed.

If our lives are shaped by choices, then what God is the algorithm that creates those distinct desires to lead half of our lives in refusal of our egos

and the other half in service to them? We chase a dream, hunt down a vision, make plans and look for signs. In the end, what are we really looking for but an ending? Our whole life is in service to this glorious death, when in reality no one knows when it'll come, or what we live for day to day in denial of its approach.

As for my book, if it didn't end with a fairytale kiss, what would it end with?

"What do people usually say in these moments?" Jacky wondered.

"I love you?" I suggested. "I think."

She looked at me and burst out laughing.

"Come to Sihanoukville. It'll be so boring without you," she said and shook me by the arm. "Just let yourself go, Sam, be free! Look at me, I've been vagabonding for years. When you go broke, you just need to work some shit job, save up and hit the road again."

"I love being on the road," I said sincerely. "This trip was the best thing I've ever done in my life. But I can't stay out here for years and years. I need to end this journey with a sense of clarity."

"You need to stop looking for a spiritual experience, Sam," Jacky said. "There's nothing wrong with being spiritual, but you don't need to go to a temple to feel that way. You can feel that way every day. You just need to let go of your expectations and give it room to happen."

"That's what I was going for," I said. "That's what this whole trip was supposed to be. But there's something that I can't let go of. Maybe I want to start over. I guess I'll find out in Siem Reap when I run out of money."

We looked at each other and laughed.

"God, you would look terrible with a bald head," Jacky said, envisioning a clean scalp in place of my messy hair.

The sun faded into a spectacle of light and beauty, impossibly distant, distorted by dreams. Giant moths beat ripples upon the surface of the river.

"Well, the bus leaves at six in the morning, so no dallying," Jacky reminded me. "It's not an actual bus; they just call it that. It's more of a pickup.

You'll see farmers waiting around for it. That'll take you to Stung Treng. From there, you can get a bus that'll take you straight to Siem Reap."

"You think you'll be alright without me?" I asked.

"I reckon I'll be a lot safer when you're gone," Jacky said and laughed. "Won't be nearly as fun though."

"Good thing you've got a big knife," I pointed out.

"Yeah," she said and grinned, knowing that she really did.

Against the reflections of a rising moon, Jacky climbed onto my lap and put her arms around my neck. Stars filled the twilight skies. The blue green in her eyes were like two worlds spinning in a galaxy, coming in line with the sun and the moon.

"Should we exchange Facebook accounts, Instagram, anything like that?" I wondered.

"God, no."

I smiled. I was glad to have known her.

"What if we meet one day," I asked her, "out in the real world?"

Jacky shook her head with a forgiving smile, "We'll just end up hating each other. I'll never cook anything, and you'll always forget to pay the bills on time."

"In the next life, I shall return as an accountant," I declared.

Jacky kissed me goodbye.

"Come find me," she said, "if you decide to change your mind."

She put her hand on my cheek and mounted the bike. Jacky disappeared in less than eight seconds, but it felt longer, like watching a giant wave roll across the sea, growing and growing, until finally it crashed on the horizon on some distant moonlit beach.

Chapter 5.

GETTING INTO CAMBODIA proved more difficult than I imagined. I'd fantasized a Hollywood reception with me waving my navy-blue passport and flashing my pearly whites as supplicants ushered me in, picking up the coins I left behind like a trail of slime. I wanted to be fawned upon like the heroine at the start of a sleazy romance or the captain at the end of an adventure in the South Seas, smiling in victory lap, however obscenely.

"Welcome, welcome! If there's anything you need, anything at all, please let me know. I can call my friend."

This was the line that everyone around here seemed to use. There's always a friend, isn't there? It's places like these that run on the buddy-buddy system. Soon, I was chuckling with the guard, lighting his cigarette, and slipping a couple more into his shirt pocket as we laughed and carried on almost flirtatiously.

"Boy, you sure do have good teeth," I told him admiringly.

He looked down beaming, feeling pleased with himself.

"Do you know where I can get a ride into town?"

He pointed me over to a group of guys ranging from surly to lazy. The alpha spotted me with his aviators coming from a mile away. We made a quick arrangement, and I held back from trying to haggle, mostly because I had no options and very little money to play with.

I got on the back of Mr. Aviators' flashy little doowop motorcycle and we went riding into the daylight. The scene felt almost triumphant, like the rising smoke at the end of a war film. The only thing spoiling this grand finale was a billboard on the side of the road made the whole country feel tragic.

*WELCOME TO CAMBODIA! IF YOU SEE ANY SIGNS OF
SEX TRAFFICKING, CHILD ABUSE, OR HAVE REASON TO
SUSPECT A FOREIGNER, PLEASE CALL 1-05. . .*

Of course, I missed the important part, which was the number to call.



Mr. Aviators drove me into Stung Treng where Jacky had informed me that I could get a bus to Siem Reap. He dropped me off in front of a row of barrels, where guys with cigarettes in their mouths refueled their motorcycles using hoses to guide the ethanol into their little gas tanks. Down the street was an outdoor market, but if I didn't know better it was like a UNICEF drop-off zone. I wasn't sure if the things on display were for sale or donation.

I walked past this dollar store from hell with my stomach screaming for food. I was so hungry that I thought of little else other than some roasted meat until I saw that the barbecue man was cooking with dried leaves and stones just to have something to burn. There was no protein, only these burning sticks, which served as a nice ambience for the warm beer and generic soda floating in coolers filled with dead insects and water.

I lodged at a guesthouse near the square. It was in a part of town that seemed as if it had recently been in a gun battle, but it could've just been the general lack of hope or expectation that hung in the air. The guesthouse had an entrance that opened into a sort-of lobby. There were a lot of books about Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge lining the bookshelves. There were also several computers which didn't work, and several tables with dusty homemade menus. By now, I'd learned to enter any guesthouse with a sense of resignation, like a deep breath saying, "Okay, how dirty is it going to be?"

When I entered my room, I saw a room with nothing inside it other than a dirty bed. The white bedding was clearly speckled with dried blood, possibly menstrual, with a mirror on the headboard in case I wanted to watch myself having sex with invisible hookers.

Why, thank you. How thoughtful!

I put my rucksack down and retreated immediately. I decided to sit at a wooden table in the shittier guesthouse next to mine just to feel like I was doing something. The entire façade was missing, broken, but through that gaping brick hole was a nice view of the river. The river itself was muddy, but it was better than watching some old man argue with his chicken, I guess.

A menu was eventually placed in front of me, as if it took that long to notice I was there. Or perhaps the kitchen had just opened. I didn't want to ask questions. The menu was written in English, Mandarin, and Khmer. I thought I should eat something, but I was more interested in watching people drift around the streets. I wanted to know what they hoped for, dreamed about, and what they struggled to overcome. I wanted to know if somehow our lives were the same. But in a place like this, what could they possibly hope for?

Somehow, this train of thought transitioned into me ordering roasted spiders. "Great," I thought. "Now I have to leave."

I rose from my seat, planning to ditch the bill and run when I saw a little girl in a gritty black and white photo with tears in her eyes. It was a public service announcement on the guesthouse's message board. Again, it was a warning against child traffickers and would-be pedophiles, letting them know that the Cambodian government was on the case and would not tolerate the thing that so many people came to Cambodia for, which was not only the opportunity to pay for sex with children, but to do it in a country with an extremely bribable police force. I supposed if there was a war going on, it was mostly being fought in the form of Photoshop.

"Why does God let this happen?" I thought. "Why in a land where the people are so beautiful is the price of a life so cheap?"

Incense scented dusk as I dodged my plate of twisted spider legs. In the street, an old woman prayed to Buddha for protection, for her family, with the offering of a few blossoms that fell to the side of the road.

On my way out, I spotted a table of middle-aged European men sitting by themselves, waiting for their food. I'd seen them earlier when I first sat

down but hadn't paid them any mind. Now I could see their perverted designs. They'd come as a group, under the guise of some fishing trip or golf excursion in Southeast Asia with the guys.

Yeah, right.

I felt like marching over to their table, holding up the "No Sex Trafficking" poster ripped clean off the wall. I wanted to grab the bald one with glasses especially as he methodically sliced and chewed his pancakes. What kind of a grown man orders pancakes for dinner?

A pedophile, that's who!

I couldn't take it anymore. I had to say something.

I approached their table as he drizzled syrup in slow, perfect lines like a commercial, his knife pressing against the soft dough in perfect symmetrical triangles. I couldn't believe how casual they were. How could they just sit there carrying on like it was nothing? Did they feel nothing about the horrors they'd committed against those innocent little children?

Finally, I stood in front of their table, ready to sweep the cutlery to the floor. I imagined smashing the plates and feeding them the shards.

"You guys make me sick," I spoke, my voice trembling with a combined sense of justice and hatred for the scum of mankind.

"You come here and take advantage of these people. You order whatever you want. Pancakes for dinner," I said, eyeing the bespectacled gentleman specifically as his fork hung frozen in the air. "Little children for dessert."

They began to protest, but I went on.

"It's not going to happen here. Not tonight," I said quietly and leaned forward looking each of them in the eye. Their faces grew red and indignant. "This is my guesthouse, and you're not welcome here."

Just then, four middle-aged white women approached and looked at me quizzically, probably thinking that I was a very intense waiter.

"Try the spider legs," I managed to choke out before fleeing. "They're excellent!"



At sunrise, orange lanes that reach out into fields of morning grass swayed endlessly into the flat horizon beyond. The bus to Siem Reap passed a home set back in the fields and picked up this young guy standing at the wooden gate with a huge grin on his face. His whole family stood waiting behind him. They were there to see him off as he took that first step into a world apart from the basin.

One day he'll return, and they'll see a change in his eyes, a gaze like two mirrors reflecting distant suns. There will still be that familiar smile, that look of innocence as he explains the misadventures of his journey, the mysteries which lay beyond the river, over the mountains, and deep in a glassy neon wilderness. If only he could find the words to make them understand how beautiful, terrible, and strange.

But that day was only the beginning of his journey to the big city. Who knows when he'd come back again? Will he remember this moment as she will, growing up without her big brother around? Will he still be the same? Will he talk about things no one understands and feel alien until he finally runs back into that glass-refracted oasis?

There's a stillness from the birds and insects observing his passing, and then only vibrations remain.

The young guy found his seat and tried to contain his excitement, not wanting to make it so obvious that he was nothing more than a country bumpkin who'd never left his village. But that would all change. He'll make mistakes in the beginning, show his wonder too easily before his eyes harden into steel and he becomes wary and suspicious of everything. He'll know how to order a meal at the restaurant. He'll fight to cut to the front of a line. He'll bring air-conditioning back to his parents' home as he feels it here now, enjoying this electric fabric, the whole caboodle vibrating as if in ascension. The theater seats keep everyone in deep immersion, fancy lighting along the aisles, a Thai-pop karaoke video loud enough so that you couldn't tune it out without your own personal immersion equipment, of which I had none.

The song was a ballad, a specialization in sudden bursts of reckless emotion, spiced with English tropes of “I love you,” “I need you,” and “Baby come back to me” on top of Thai lyrics.

Singing from his ivory piano in the middle of a windswept field, our hero, dressed in a long purple coat that flies in the wind, bangs away at the keys, and sees a gallery of images starting from the moment he first laid eyes on her. One night in the library as he studied an old leather-bound edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, dressed in a silken pirate shirt, suddenly there she is, her white face visible through a space between the shelves, red lips softly reading while unaware of his intense stare just inches away.

Her book falls to the ground and they both reach down to pick it up. Their hands touch. He doesn’t even have the decency to apologize for bumping into her before placing two fingers gently beneath her chin, lifting her head up as they both rise now in duet. They abandon her library books on the floor.

They transition into scenes of autumn walking hand in hand beneath the yellow, red, and orange leaves in scenes of short-lived bliss. Enter an all-white suit topped with a sable coat, and he’s playing an ice-piano in his snow-mansion of loneliness. All he wants is to feel cold, a desire to feel the wonder of another world at subzero.

They walk in autumn with leaves like stars drifting around their smiling faces, little puffs of breath indicating the low temp, the greatest of all jungle dreams. For people of colder climes, the quintessential vacation flex always features tan lines and a tropical beach. For the people of Southeast Asia, it’s a shopping day in a cold cosmopolitan city.

It was late afternoon riding through fields of grass and pink skies streaming across the sky. Everything was a vision of eternity, like shallow waters that glow with lily pads, and purple-blue lotuses that stand still in the breeze.

Where Laos is covered with twisting mountain roads, elevated vistas and dense vegetation, Cambodia sits on a flat basin where there is nowhere left to hide. The Mekong River flows forever and floods the plains.

Life is lived with pant legs high and feet open to leeches. The expanse of earth is without division or variation in slope or altitude. Green grass stretches on in indica and sativa dreams. Memories of rice are trapped in the sky beneath the distance of holiness and a raindrop becomes a bud which springs forth in ripened grass.

This food becomes harvested as pearls, the bamboo bowl steaming before a face giving grace before his or her god. Beyond the palms leaning on the horizon, like thin blue poles, the sun set upon our bus and turned it into a silhouette.

The sky glowed with the luminescence of a grapefruit and the soft blue formation of shadows where one might hallucinate hills among the silhouettes of mirages. Of these mountains in the distance, sit temples that aren't there, in a city that no longer is, but in the echoes of infinitely burning stars.



In Siem Reap, I met a driver named Mac who told me he'd do the job cheap if I didn't blab to the other drivers. We shook hands on it, and Mac wrapped a *krama* around my head, a thin scarf that shows you're one of them. My skin was burnt to a crisp and I had almost zero body fat. As soon as the *krama* touched my head, I fit right in.

From there, we went flying through Old Market. By this time, I was so enlightened that even a pile of dog shit, of which there were many, seemed like a beautiful gesture of sacrifice. There was so much color, so much poverty, and somehow these elements can never be apart. Saffron-robed monks walked the streets, burning long sticks of incense, praying before the bluish haze as they hold their bowls for their daily rice.

Rabid dogs followed traffic at random, snapping at the tires which spit back clouds of dust. The little children stared all liquid-eyed from behind their mothers' wrapped skirts; the bolder urchins sauntering freely, unafraid of the ubiquitous motorbike traffic.

Somewhere beyond the morning rush of incense and motor oil, swallowed by the jungle, there lies a kingdom of peace and serenity, a place once forgotten by human eyes, swallowed by the jungle and time.

One of the greatest structures ever built by mankind was lost until a Frenchman in khakis came around taking pictures, exploring the woods with hoots of excitement while servants stood around exchanging glances.

Trees splitting stone walls and flowers growing superfluously in the memories of a courtyard were the cause of no excitement to the native Khmer, who found the magic of television and ice cubes to be the last things they wanted to see before *they* died.

These carved stone statues were mere roosts for birds and perches for monkeys. Saffron-robed monks swept between the gnarled roots of the banyan tree which spread its fingers through the soil around the crumbling city. Nature ate away at what remains of a primordial energy, a granule of dust at a time.

The jungle eats us, as well as our gods and places of worship; the city itself became a metaphor of life and death. The flag of an empire and its descent into ruin. The rest of the world carries on, searching for progress, identity, industry. But when all else fails, run to the jungle. Forget the world. Sweep the leaves.

There was a bridge that stretches over a moat, which forms a flowing blue square around the temple. In front of me was an outer wall where behind and beyond rose a quincunx of towers reflected in the waters as a procession of monks in robes the color of kumquats made their way before the place where once reigned a king. I stood in a place where long ago even the beggar boy got a view of the royal sedan chair and water buffaloes stood idly on the banks, staring at the green-choked lily padded waters filled with lotus flowers. Angkor Wat, that great temple rising like Mount Meru, home of the gods, from a lost city swallowed by the jungle with stone walls gone limey, mossy, and moist, like dew or evaporated rain, an atmosphere that pervades everything and continues like the memory of a monsoon even in the dry season.

As I entered the inner chambers, I found the air surprisingly cool in contrast to the blistering heat outside. The people who shared these hallways with me seemed to be nothing more than faint echoes as they drifted by. I traced a finger around the intricate carvings, the endless symmetry impossible to believe. An empty space, a pond forever rippled. From peace and prosperity, the evil demons battle Krishna on every wall seemed to never end, every inch of surface carved with countless soldiers, elephants, horses, chariots, demons, slaves, courtesans, drummers, horn-players, flag-wavers, and in the center of it all, at the spearpoint of battle rode Prince Arjuna with Lord Krishna lounging at his side. Ride into the faceless night and capture as many demons within yourself as you can, enough to battle for the rest of your life. There in the battleground were not just soldiers, but every man and woman from the lowliest slave to god-king, riding out and meeting danger and evil at the head, engaging all their endless force in battle, because the darkness will destroy you and consume all that has been created out of nothingness and the void unless we meet it with the face of war. "Too far!" cry the archers, who felt their arms breaking. "Too high!" trumpet the elephants, whose stampeding feet have already begun to bleed. But the cries of the front echo all the way to the back, so we move forward with the certainty at this unperceivable distance that someone has sounded the cry; we march closer and closer towards a black hole, forgotten forever as we fly with swords drawn into the wind with bodies as numerous as blades of grass, wispy and curved and altogether shapeless, yet individually as sharp as a glowing knife.



"You know what, Mac? I can really see myself living out here," I said, as we lounged in the grass beneath a banyan tree. "Maybe that's the answer. When you give your heart and soul to something, it makes it all worth it to know that you're helping people. Maybe that's what keeps it feeling new, like falling in love again and again."

"You go see sunset?" Mac asked me.

"Is that a thing here?" I said with a yawn and stretched. "Where's the best place to see it?"

"Sunset Temple," he said.

"That makes sense."

We hopped on his tuk-tuk and drove past the head with four faces at Bayon and took a shortcut past the Terrace of Elephants. We sped through Ta Prohm, where a giant tree sprouts from a doorway. We skipped the four elemental pools where people used to bathe clockwise to cure their infirmities.

When we got to the temple, we found ourselves at the end of a procession so large it seemed as if the whole world had come to see the sunset. People must've waited hours ahead of time, some even camping out at the very top of the temple from four o'clock onwards in the scorching heat with their smug sunburnt faces, ignoring jeers by the masses as they cozied in for the sunset of their lives.

Our closest star descended upon this temple built for her, inspired by her, needing her touch, her grace, her beauty to make it real and take shape. This is what woman is to man, what love is to all of us. It's a tough ride to the top where everyone shoves each other out of the way to feel the love. The tuk-tuk rioted on as the sun threatened to dip another centigrade closer to the horizon. There was panic in the mob, the scene teeming with desperate tourists.

"Get out of here, Mac. I'll go ahead on foot. Go home to your wife and family!" I cried.

Mac nodded grimly and peeled out of there, soon swallowed by more people. Meanwhile, I had my own problems. I was currently caught in a massive Chinese collective in matching t-shirts gathered at least one hundred people strong. It felt like I was trapped in a purple amoeba spreading across the world. To make matters worse, there was an elephant charioting a pair of Japanese newlyweds, the bride barely keeping it together as they lurched forward. The groom held onto his top hat as the elephant driver cursed and kicked his elephant's ears with a decided vigor.

The temple was soon covered by fans and sun worshipers sitting on stone steps, on statutes, on peaks and ledges. The sky was filled with electric awe, the forest blurring into night, and the temple was silhouetted in the sunset like fires reaping the darkness, the spires pointed against the paling bluish-gold gradation of the sky.

As I ran about, looking for a spot to get the perfect shot, a little raincloud drifted by. The crowd got excited and started firing off their cameras. One guy pre-ejaculated and emitted a moan that quickly died in the resumed quiet.

The sun aligned with the cloud, sensing our respect and urgency, spraying rays at an angle that electrified the strata like a blowing curtain in the window, glowing with shame and ecstasy, the orgasm of time.

There was nowhere to sit, so I climbed up another tier and found there was only space on the opposite side of the temple, facing away from the sun. But there on a ledge, I saw a saffron-robed monk sitting in this humble and undisturbed place, quietly watching the temples and forest dim with the colors of bluish and gray twilight. I knew that he'd probably seen the sunset a thousand times. He could watch it any day of the year.

I took a seat not far from him and let my legs hang over the side of the temple wall. I resigned myself to missing the spectacle of another day's end, unwilling to fight for a picture I would just as easily forget.

That's when it hit me. As I looked at the greenish-blue haze of the jungle, and the distant roads that led away from the ancient city, I saw what that monk saw. I can't quite explain it. It's one of those things you can only see when no one else is looking.

I walked in a dying light with the sunset behind me. The sun disappeared over the jungle's horizon and glimmered over the temple ruins.

At night, there was a blackout. I walked through the streets away from Old Market, following the river into the pitch-black darkness, just to see where it would take me. There was no light from the moon. There were no stars or heavenly bodies as I floated toward the sounds of laughter and voices, kids shrieking happily, playing hide and seek in the forest.

I found my way through the forest and found a road. There were flashes from motorbikes speeding past, trailing behind them their neon lightshows. They disappeared just as fast, as crickets reigned supreme over the silence. I felt the bewitching of frog-scum and saw a shadow-boxer nodding at me from the dancing flames of an oil drum. A man riding with his little girl offered me a ride back to town. I smiled and said no.

Later that evening, as I dined in front of a chicken-rice street-cart, two little boys came to the plastic table and asked me if I could buy them something to eat. I was down to my last handful of dollars, but I couldn't say no. As they sat down, I told the chicken-rice lady to put on two more chicken-rice plates and to add two cokes. They couldn't hide their excitement at the cokes. It was a real treat for them.

Another boy came also, but I didn't have any more money. The two little boys shared with the scrawniest third, who looked like he didn't even have a home. The plates were cleaned. The food vanished in an instant. The cokes were sipped slowly and cherished.

Finally, the oldest asked me to buy formula milk in the pharmacy for his baby brother. "We have no money. Please buy milk for our brother. My brother only a baby," he said with his little dark eyes looking fiercely into mine.

"I'm sorry," I told him sadly. "I don't have any more money."

Which was true. I had no idea how I was going to get back to America outside of asking my parents to buy me a ticket home. The boys looked as if I'd failed them. I knew I had the luxury of having parents who could help me. Shouldn't I do the same for them?

"Alright, wait here," I told them. "I'll be back."

I walked over to a pawn shop I'd seen earlier, next to a "happy pizza" place that sold pizza slices that would supposedly make you trip balls.

I caught the shopkeeper just as he was preparing to lock up for the night.

"How much will you give me for this camera?" I asked and showed him my Canon.

He took it into his hands and peered at it. He weighed it in his hands and looked through the viewfinder.

"You have memory card?" he asked.

"Yeah, but how about just the camera?" I bargained. "All the pictures from my trip are saved on there."

He shook his head and handed me back the Canon.

"No memory card, I cannot sell."

"You've got to be kidding me," I said in exasperation. "Okay, with the memory card, how much? This baby needs milk fast!"

"Thirty-five dollars."

"Are you out of your—" I started and paused.

What did it really matter? Would I rather have these pictures, or would I rather make sure this kid had milk for another week? A chance to grow.

A part of my brain told me that maybe there was no baby brother. But I already knew that before I came to the pawnshop. What I understood deeply at that moment, however, was that the pictures on that memory card weren't real. None of this was real. Not to say that this was all just some hallucination or a work of fiction, but that it was an illusion in the sense that life is just a dream, filled with fantastic visions and wonderful strangers who guide you on a path and a journey of destiny, where all the things that you think you need to do, achieve, and have, are just figments in light of a greater truth, that there's this baby who needs milk, and everything that happened up until this point happened just so you could believe that he was real, and that he needed your help.

"Alright deal."

When I returned, the little boys were there, along with all their friends. It seemed like they'd multiplied. They'd heard that some crazy guy was buying everyone chicken-rice and cokes, and they had to make sure the rumor was true.



So, that's how I ended up teaching English in Cambodia. I was kind of trapped here without any more money, so it just made sense that I hang

around for a while. I thought about asking my parents to bail me out, but who needs New Jersey winters?

Plus, the kids are great. They're super fun and smart. The best thing about being a teacher is that you think you're teaching them, but they're teaching you so much more than you know.

Anyway, I could go on and on, but you heard the bell.

Class is about to start.

THE END

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