

This isn't just a

SOUL WE NIR

KI HYUN PARK



THIS ISN'T A SOUVENIR.

THIS IS A STAND AGAINST

CORPORATE TYRANNY.



This Isn't Just a Souvenir

By Ki Hyun Park

Back in New Jersey

I was sent to spy on those neo-leftist terrorists by an agent who looked like Vincent van Gogh. He gave me a fake name, but to me he'll always be "Vincent."

These confessions are locked away in files ready for kindling; either that or the CIA just pretended to write all this down and there is no Hey Guevara or R.E.I.N. But most of it's true. I even met the Dalai Lama.

The spy camera is probably still in that dusty shop back in Cambodia, an anomaly among models of its kind, triggered by fingerprint and impossible to open otherwise. I sold the camera to help this sex worker who I randomly met and escorted to a clinic in Siem Reap. She got an AIDS test and came out clean. We hugged in the street on a French colonial bridge.

It's hard to explain how I ended up meeting Hey Guevara without sounding crazy. I guess it's a bit unusual for someone to travel to China in order to present themselves to a cultish self-proclaimed revolutionary who promises to track down their missing girlfriend, but you have to understand that when you're in love with someone, this kind of thought process makes a lot more sense in the moment.

Before being used as a pawn for Uncle Sam, I was finishing my second year as an English teacher at a prestigious private school in Manhattan. My Brooklyn address made me seem worldly without having to leave the east coast, and I'm unable to grow facial hair so no

one could accuse me of being a total hipster. My goal was simply to die outside of New Jersey. I was happy.

Life had me by the balls and I thrived among the chic and stylish herd. This is what I'd wanted all along—to be a poet in rolled-up shirt sleeves ranting about Hamlet's father sending his son to a promised doom.

Then summer vacation came along and at 27 years old I decided it was time for an exotic adventure in the South Seas. I met my True Love while island-hopping in Thailand and fell in love. It was raining on the beach and she was holding a palm leaf over her head like an umbrella as raindrops trickled down her body. Electric blue fish darted about in the dark as we held a flashlight scouring the soft night current.

She worked the organic bar during the day where I leaned over the countertop and expressed my affections through the ordering of much green curry.

During the day, I kept myself from professing my love for her by distracting myself with activities on the beach. On Day Three, I almost drifted out to sea on a kayak and spent hours on the waves staring up at the Milky Way swirling above me in the vaulted veil, wondering what lies on the other side of death's doorway.

The blinking of a distant light twinkled eventually and I saw my True Love running back and forth on the beach. I was dehydrated from the twelve or so hours I spent lost at sea. My True Love poured water on my lips, and I guess you could say that was our first drink together. After that it was a couple cans of Singha on the beach. I suppose I could've died at sea, but in the end it made asking her to dinner a lot easier.

Alas, the past is something no outrigger can ever take you back to. I left the island after a week of bliss and for months we emailed back and forth, Skyping on days when she was able

to get to the big island and use the PC room. This was in 2004, before the thought of video-chatting whenever and wherever you wanted was possible.

We made plans for her to come stay at my place for a while in Brooklyn to try things out and see where it went. I was already shopping for a diamond ring. I had my mind made up. I was going to marry her.

The last email I had from her told me that she had to evacuate the island. She was headed to Bangkok to stay with friends and family, and that was the only information I had left to go on when days of dreadful silence transformed my life into a tragic detective story. She was going to get on a boat and sail to the mainland, then get on a plane and fly to New York to meet me. In my happiness and relief I simply told her to tell me as soon as she got to safety.

The tsunami left the island in pieces, and I never heard from her again.

In those first days of silence, I moved through my days shellshocked, wondering when I'd hear from her, hoping that wherever she was, she was okay, and still on this "mortal coil." I was so broken that I convinced myself that maybe she was in Bangkok and in the end just didn't want to come to New York and couldn't find a way to tell me. Or maybe I was being tricked the whole time—fleeced even—and she decided to spare me, or decided that I wasn't worth it. Anything I could tell myself to believe she was, with or without me, doing just fine. Perhaps this was just the way it was; people she'd loved had been lost, and I was just some guy she met on the island, a little speck of nothing in her world, now covered in the debris of Thailand's tragedy. Who was I to think that I mattered at a time when thousands were missing, lost beneath the waves of an unforgiving sea?

One night I found myself screaming along the Hudson River, tearing my lungs out before speeding lorries. I looked out over the Brooklyn Bridge and knocked on death's door,

but then decided that this wasn't how it was going to be.

Not I.

Not we.

I'd find her again, even if I had to cross tundra and wild streams.

I went out, scouring the depths of the internet until I landed in something known then as the Dark Web, a place you didn't want to go without some destination, an idea of what you were looking for. Otherwise there were things you'd find that you didn't want to know existed. But it was here in this digital world of shadows that I, in blind hope and desperation, searched for the signs so that I wouldn't be trapped within the walls, wondering where she was, going crazy from all of the possibilities: the tsunami, her last email, a new lover or several at the same time; whatever else might be the truth.

I found a guy who called himself a shepherd of lost sheep. He was a finder of souls, his website claimed, and after a few clicks and messages, I gathered that he was able to dig up some information from files inaccessible to me with incredible speed. These were official reports and documents that I, speaking no Mandarin or Thai, would ever have been able to uncover, and I started to feel a sense of hope for the first time in months.

For a small fee the ships' manifests from that terrible day were handed over to me. Indeed, this finder of souls was even able to produce a missing person's list from the Thai government, but that was where things got strange. For more money, I begged him. But he refused, insisting that I come to meet him instead in some place I'd never heard of near the Laotian/Chinese border. He'd done some digging on me as well, he said, and there was something that could be arranged that didn't involve money.

I had no idea what any of this meant, and I discontinued our communication, looking

deeper into what I had: a ship's manifest, a list of names, dates, times, and news articles, but all of it was just black and white text. Nothing seemed to get me closer to my True Love's physical being or whereabouts. These were pieces of a picture, but logic told me that if she was still alive, she would've contacted me. Unless she was in a coma. Or maybe she'd gotten hit on the head in the chaos that ensued on the boat and now had amnesia.

What if anything was possible?

The point is that I was still in love with her. I would love her whether that meant I'd have to kneel beside a hospital bed for a year or hold her hand to the steady beeps of a respirator. If that sounds too romantic and unbelievable in this cynical age, then just accept this simple fact: I had to know what happened, or else I'd never be able to forgive myself for daring to turn my back on love.

Another summer vacation came and went. This one was spent no differently from the previous months deep in the recesses of the city library looking at records and reports from the 2004 tsunami. When I wasn't in the quiet halls of books and pages, I was sitting alone in my Brooklyn apartment wondering if I should continue to search for her, while at the same time selling my earthly possessions at random, as if my mind knew all along that I was leaving.

Writing in present tense creates the illusion that none of this has happened yet. Come along for the ride. I write to you from somewhere better than an asylum. My mom's house in New Jersey, getting rest, waiting for a sniper's bullet to enter my thoughts suddenly, like enlightenment after the dissolution of a Zen koan. I almost became one of the saffron-wearing monks, but like Saint, my brief guide into the underbelly of sleepy Laos, there were just some things I couldn't give up.

Yangshuo

The water is jade, the mountains are emerald, and as the sun reaches the midpoint of its descent, the scene is covered in a soft white shroud. The limestone formations carved by thousands of years of rain and wind roll like echoes across the landscape, reflecting the perfection of Taoist symmetry against the placid streams. It feels as if we've entered a time-warp into a secret grove that can only be found by riding off the beaten path into another classical Chinese painting with raft men silhouetted in the sunset and herons flying through the mist. I almost expect to look up in the upper-right-hand corner to see Chinese characters dripping down in faded black ink.

After a distance, Rice-hat Lady kills the engine on her Vespa and I roll up beside her, braking softly on the gravel. A dirt path leads to the water's reedy edge. Rice-hat Lady refuses to go any further, but encourages me with a chestnut-colored face and a gap-toothed smile.

The enclave is nestled by trees with rock formations playing music against the eternal rush of water. As I reach the bank, I spot a Nordic-looking man doing a dead man's float in the river. He's wearing a loincloth and coincidentally looks like a blonde version of Jesus, or at least the blue-eyed version that has been etched into our Western consciousness.

He notices me watching and slowly swims landward, rising up from the water like a baptist. He stares at me for a moment, then walks right past me as if I'm not there. I watch as he begins to towel off beside a sparkling black motorcycle.

I avert my gaze back towards the water's refractions as he gets dressed in jeans, an undershirt, and dusty leather sandals. He mounts his motorcycle and shakes his shoulder-

length hair, tying it up in a golden topknot. His eyes blaze at me with both intensity and peace, like a lion lying with a sheep. I'm expecting him to make the introduction, but instead, all he does is give me a little nod and puts a key into the ignition.

"Hey!" I cry after him.

He spins around in rage, looking suddenly like Thor.

"Are you crazy? Don't say my name!" he hisses in an accent that isn't American, but sounds close enough. "Follow me. I have a safe place where we can talk."

He speeds off down the dirt road faster than Rice-hat Lady or I can possibly keep up with, but Rice-hat Lady knows the way. I follow her red Vespa on my rented bicycle down the backroads and come to a small barn situated in a valley of golden fields.

The hideout is rustic and secluded, and almost tranquil with ducks waddling to nearby ponds and puppies sleeping softly in the grass. I see the shiny motorcycle parked by barn doors ajar. Three Chinese boys ranging from tween to teen laze around playing a game of cards. They bolt upright upon seeing me, but relax a bit as Rice-hat Lady calls out to them in Mandarin. The oldest one runs off and returns later with a pot of tea.

Blonde Jesus is nowhere in sight. I want to ask, but Rice-hat Lady urges me to slake my thirst before any further discussion. The afternoon is warm and pleasant, and after what feels like days of nonstop travel, I'm feeling a little sleepy.

Great, here we go. Time to say goodbye to my favorite kidney.

I drink the green tea down to the dregs and then I'm sent to the back of the barn where I see Blonde Jesus sitting on a bale of hay nursing a baby goat with a milk bottle, looking almost like the Lord with his little lambs.

“Hey!” I call out to get his attention.

He leaps to his feet and throws the goat to the side, causing it spring away bleating.

“Didn’t I tell you not to say my name? Are you trying to get me killed?” he demands in a rage. “Who are you? What are you doing here?”

“I’m Sam, the guy who’s looking for his girlfriend? You said you could help me,” I hear myself sputtering, balancing between incredulity, desperation, and exhaustion. “I just flew on a fourteen-hour flight to Beijing, sat on a southbound train for 20 hours to Guangzhou in a seat that had no recline mind you, hopped on multiple buses and motorbikes, rented a damn bicycle to get through these hills and woods. I mean, it’s beautiful here. Feels like I’m in an old kung-fu movie or something, but I just want to know what this is all about. Why couldn’t we just do this over email? Why am I here?”

Hey’s light mustache twitches into a smile. Apparently, I’ve asked his favorite question.

““Why am I here?”” he repeats, enjoying the philosophical depth of this query at my expense. “You’ve come a long way, Sam, but you’ve only just begun. The journey is long and hard, and narrow is the gate that leads to salvation. I’m Hey Guevara, leader of R.E.I.N. This is the name we use to refer to our cohort of brothers and sisters. It means “Revolution, Evolution, Infinite Nihilism.” It also means ‘pure’ in German. It’s clever, yes? But don’t let the German fool you. We belong to no one and nothing. We represent everyone and are represented by everyone. We are a coalition, a single body moving towards Point Omega.”

“Point Omega?”

“The final cycle in this Age of Kali which will bring forth our ultimate purpose.”

“Wasn’t that an arcade game from the 80’s?”

Hey squeezes his eyes tightly for a moment, then continues.

“Consider the frog,” he says, kneeling beside a greenish-brown frog sitting on a lily pad. “It knows not from where it received its legs, but at one time it was nothing more than another fish in the ocean. There was a revolution that happened, a terrible event in the eyes of those stuck in the prism of time. The frog was made different, outcasted, ostracized, and forced to seek shelter elsewhere. It was forced to live on its own in the mud, a strange and hostile new environment where many of its mutated brethren died. A terrible tragedy, eh? But we know the happy ending.”

As if on cue, the frog hops into the stream.

“Man is no different. Society is no different. We evolve through chaos. From chaos comes order, from order comes progress, from progress comes decadence, and from decadence comes revolution. Since the dawn of mankind, Man has sought the answer. He has wandered from continent to continent, mainland to archipelago following the stars across deserts of wind and sea. He has followed his heart with the pure hope that beyond the point on the next horizon, some answer to his question lies, the question that dwells deep in the heart of his darkest fears and wonders: ‘Why am I here?’ ‘Why am I alive?’ That’s why you’ve come to me, isn’t it? To seek this truth?”

“I’m looking for my girlfriend,” I repeat with a touch of sass. “Can we get to the part where you tell me what you know, and I give you the money or whatever?”

“We’re all just accidents,” Hey continues on, ignoring this request for brevity. “A collection of stardust and molecules, smashed together in a super collider we call the universe. But even accidents can be used for a higher purpose. Like a work of art consists of

so many misplaced strokes of the brush, or the greatest works of literature drafted from the scribbles of heavily edited manuscripts, so are we all just searching for meaning and shape out of our substance, protean and infinite, yet formless and weak. If we're nothing but the ceaseless calamities floating on the doomed future of a dead star, surely we must either embrace nothingness and death, or else live for a future that can be formed in love and in light against the darkness."

"To create life within a tomb and become the truth and resurrection?" I venture.

Hey looks more satisfied than I can describe. He looks infinitely pleased.

"I knew from our conversations that you were the one. I knew I wouldn't be disappointed, though I didn't think you were Asian."

"Does it matter?"

"No, in fact it could very well be to our advantage."

"Our advantage?"

"For the mission."

"I must've missed that chat," I say slowly.

Hey's face grows dark, his blue eyes somehow twinkling with a sorrowful glee.

"You're here to help us assassinate the Dalai Lama."

Against my own will, I picture the Dalai Lama's smiling face being popped by a bullet.

“What?” I splutter, almost laughing from shock. “The cheerful guy with the glasses and the robe who talks like Cookie Monster? That Dalai Lama?”

“Yes, we all love the Dalai Lama. Which is exactly why it must be done. The act contains within itself a message, a symbol that everyone in the world can understand. It’s the same reason why the towers in New York were destroyed. Not because of what was in the towers themselves, but for what they symbolized. This form of communication was shaped by a world of indifference and sensationalist depravity. This is the world we live in, shouting hopelessly to deaf ears, screaming our lungs out in the void. We beg the world to change and wake up, to come to its senses, and still we fail to communicate.”

“But the Dalai Lama is so...nice.”

“Your sentiment is shared by many, which is exactly why it’s so powerful.”

“For what though?” I ask, thoroughly freaked out, but intrigued.

“To free the slaves. To wake up the masses. To cause such a stir in the world that all who have eyes will see the truth. We live in a world that is full of double-speak, where language itself is a daily operation of mind-control. They call it ‘Freedom’ but what they mean is ‘Commerce.’ They call it ‘Hope’ when in fact it’s ‘Propaganda.’ Everywhere you look, the dream of Mao has become filled with corporate sweatshops where women and children manufacture jeans and Nikes for a world gorging itself to die a fashionable death.”

I’m wearing jeans and Nikes, but Hey doesn’t seem to notice.

“You said you could help me,” I press him, daring to stand between Hey and his imagined future, breaking off the waning bows of sunlight from his eyes. “Tell me what you know. Please, I’m begging you.”

Hey arches his eyebrow coldly, staring into a future only he can see.

“The time to act is now, before China constructs her new Silk Road, a monorail running from Beijing all the way to the tip of Spain. Can you imagine the amount of wealth such a project would amass? China would effectively rule the world. The only thing stopping China from continuing construction westward is Tibet. They’ve already prepared a puppet king to replace the one living in exile. After he’s gone, they’ll will proclaim a new Dalai Lama who will hand over Tibet by kowtowing to China’s demands. Whether or not you believe in the tenets of Tibetan Buddhism, reincarnation and so forth, is irrelevant. The fact is that the Dalai Lama isn’t a person, but a government and a tradition, which is what makes him impossible to kill. To ask whether or not he’ll live again is to question the value of money. The paper we hold in our pockets and the imaginary numbers in our accounts are valuable and real because we say they are. Nothing short of His Holiness’s assassination will make people pay attention to what is to come. Ironically, through his death we’ll be saving his life, by preserving his culture and preventing China’s plan to subjugate Tibet by installing a usurper.”

“You have connections,” I say in an attempt to change course. “The articles and the documents you sent me were really helpful. You’d be putting two people who love each other back together again. You’d be doing a good thing. I’ll give you any amount of money. It doesn’t matter anymore. If she’s still alive, I need to know.”

Hey appears to walk on water, but it’s only a puddle. We’ve left the stream by the rice paddies and have now returned to the barn. The sun is settling into its late afternoon position, pouring its tender rays over the long blades of grass, perfectly clothed and at ease in all of their splendor.

“There’s a movement for a return to purification within the Chinese ranks. To go back to the principles of Mao, before his successors made the compromises which has created this autocratic super-power you see today. Don’t be surprised by the events which transpire within these final days in China. The left hand know not what the right doeth. There’s a corruption within that must be flushed out. Religion is no longer the opiate of the masses. Selling opiates is the new religion—the opiates of ‘wealth,’ the opiates of ‘technology,’ the opiates of ‘entertainment,’ and of course, just plain old opiates. The Age of Decadence has come upon China once again, and you know what comes after decadence.”

We’ve come back to the barn now, and the sun is setting behind us. Hey pauses at the door. I feel like curling up in a ball and crying. I also feel like bashing his face in.

“There’s a Judas amongst us, Sam. I need you to find the members of R.E.I.N. and join their party. You’ll know them for the way they bring you into the fold. They’ll be complete strangers, yet seem to become your best friends. You’ll be able to see what I can’t. I need you to be my eyes, Sam.”

“Are you crazy? What’s wrong with you? You’re nuts,” I hiss derisively. “I’m reporting you to the authorities.”

“Oh really? Which ones?” Hey snickers.

I want to say the Americans, but I only know this will draw more scorn.

“I’m writing a blog about this,” I threaten instead. “Your plan for world peace or whatever by killing one of the kindest people in the world isn’t only wrong, it’s monstrous. It’s like you’re acting out that stupid question about whether it’d be a good idea to kill baby Hitler to save millions of people from dying. It’s not even close to right, and if we had the

ability to time travel, we still wouldn't be able to control the fate of the planet. It's insanity to think we ever could."

"You've come this far, Sam," Hey concedes, accepting my declination. "When I said I'd help you find your girlfriend, I wasn't lying. Whether you go to the border and meet the members of R.E.I.N., or choose to run away and try to forget everything that's been said here, I'm afraid it's already too late. The mere act of exchanging communication with me has already made you a target. You won't even make it onto your flight home before they take you in for questioning."

"Who?"

Hey whistles and wags his finger, admonishing me like I just said the Boogeyman. I try to steel myself against this dubious threat, but my skin bursts into a cold sweat. I look around us in paranoia, but all I see are lush fields and hills. Still, the fact that I'm here in China makes it feel like the threat of detention seem real enough. If it's their desire to take me down to the station, I probably won't have much choice but to go.

"Thanks a lot. You've been a great help," I snarl at him. "I'm out of here."

"Don't leave yet, Sam. Stay for dinner and I'll tell you what can be done. I don't know where your girlfriend is, but I know someone who can help you."

"Yeah, who? Enough with the suspense. I didn't come all this way to play mind games."

Hey smiles.

"The Dalai Lama."

I stand there, mouth open, feeling totally duped. I want to punch Blonde Jesus in the nose. But another part of me figures I have nothing to lose. I haven't eaten since yesterday, unless you count those Chinese mustard packets on the side of the road.

Hey picks up the cute little goat he had been milking earlier and hands it to me. The goat nuzzles my nose.

"If Nixon and Mao could have dinner together, why can't we?" Hey muses.

"What're we having?" I ask, giving in, feeling completely defeated.

Hey Guevara smiles.

"Frog legs."

Kunming

I travel like the wind past ghost cities in the green valleys, twisting and turning down a misty mountain beside a river like a silver snake. Another day passes as our bus climbs above the clouds and takes us back down toward the border of Laos where, according to Hey Guevara, his disciples are gathered.

Sleep doesn't come easy. Sleep doesn't come at all.

One thing doesn't make sense. Or maybe none of this makes sense. But one thing that I can't stop thinking about is whether anything Hey said is real. If he's here to overthrow the Chinese government, wouldn't they want him locked away or dead? How is he able to sit there in that little barn without a bunch of Chinese soldiers coming to get him? Or to put it another

way, why is he choosing to be on Chinese soil at all if that's his real mission? What if he's a double-agent, or a triple-agent, or a quadruple-agent? How many times can an agent cross over before they just disappear?

The only thing I know is that I know nothing. I always knew nothing, but now I know even less than nothing. As much as I hate to admit it, Hey Guevara has me right where he wants me. Despite my refusal to go along with his plan, the only thing that feels real besides the now dwindling hope of finding out what happened to my True Love is the dragon of the state looming over my shoulder. It starts with some officer asking to see your passport and ends with a bag being tied over your head. So I find myself following Hey's instructions as if he's the only one who can save me, and that's pretty much how I end up riding in a van with a group of migrant workers for lack of detection. That's how I end up at the border, taking a bus just to get the hell out of China as fast as I can. I don't know if Laos is much better than China, but I've heard enough stories about political prisoners disappearing in China to do exactly as Hey suggests and avoid beeping into the matrix at all costs.

This is what I get for using the Dark Web.

Before I get on the bus, I figure that if I'm fucked both ways, I can at least perform one noble act before I die. This might be the last bus ride I ever take.

I buy a postcard and hit up a PC room to use the internet, and despite my immense distrust of any technology this side of the Chinese border, I throw all cares to the dogs and look up the Dalai Lama's address. Apparently he lives in India. I already knew that, I think.

I write this message:

Oh Most Benevolent One,

This Isn't Just a Souvenir

What I am about to write may sound shocking. You may get death threats all the time, however, I feel a moral obligation to let you know that your life may be in danger. There is a plot to assassinate you for reasons which are too complex to explain here. However, it is important that you know there is a conspiracy that threatens Your Holiness's safety.

Yours,

Sam

I send the postcard with the outgoing mail at this dirty little business hotel next to the bus depot. I'm hoping they don't question the address, and when the realization that I probably shouldn't have signed my first name finally hits me, it's already too late. The lady closes the window for the day. I'm left standing there with the strange knowledge that I seem to be signing my own death sentence at every step.

Well, that's the price of love, isn't it?

There's only one bus and it doesn't arrive until the next morning. I decide to wander aimlessly in the streets until morning to avoid using my passport to book a room. Paranoia has fully gripped me to the point where I firmly believe the Chinese government is watching my every move and using super technology unavailable to ordinary civilians to track, monitor, and capture.

But there's no freedom in wandering aimlessly. There's only the flux of endless time. Chinese characters float in the rain. On the edge of a jungle in constant springtime, high up on a mountain, a silvery shot down towards the river to the border of Indochina, the opium

highways dotted with cheap neon and cheaper noodles for both jittery and numbed of brain. Trapped in a labyrinth of streets mapped on principles of commerce and repetition, a faith in outcome, a numbers game that gets tighter and tighter the more people there are at play.

I think about Hey's prophecies and wonder what they plan to do with all of us. Are we bound to live life as sewing machines, sex dolls, and seed beds for future slaves? The chances looking chipped up—call it luck—do whatever you can to win.

The machine moves forward. There's nothing stopping it now. The distant rumble breaks the center of the earth, smelting pools forming and congealing into every imaginable form. A new beginning, a history erased. Faded to memories of a lost tradition, an ancient poem, a faded sea of silk lining the steps in a pyramid of spirit stones rising onward to the peak of magnificence drawing the final line. The earthquake's jaws open the land and its fiery mouth, the dragon now emerging covered by the burning rot of the city, the polluted rivers of slime dripping over reptilian eyes, toxic spools of chemical smoke rising from the nostrils of a gargantuan demon unleashed upon the earth. Deeper in the earth lies the headless idol of Shiva, as many arms as the sins of men, in corporation to rule and destroy, this wheel of fire burning in sun and rain.

The Laotian Border

The bus dies as soon as it reaches the border. Here in Laos, the land of dreams, a state of half-waking, ready to reenter the slumber, the warm weather, light drifting through the

canopy, a dark beautiful green in her eyes, jungle and T-shirts rolled up to serve as a pillow on the windowpane of an old diesel clunker.

Where am I?

A gunshot wakes me. A graveyard filled with buses left to rust after drivers slosh bowl after bowl of water on overheated tires, a revival process that can take no predictable amount of time—Lao Time. The metal hands on your watch become twisted due to a mysterious force in the magnetic field. A dimension outside the fourth formed by a gateway of banana trees into a realm of eternal summer, a haven of endless red hills. I'm lost in thought, all intentions gone, and in the peace and summery breeze, I almost forget what the hell I'm doing here.

The bus driver announces that a second bus is coming while behind him his young trainees have resorted to their own personal drinking water to get the old hunk of junk to wake up. I pretend to peruse the roadside souvenirs, T-shirts and knickknacks before slipping off to an elevated vantage point.

The Laotian border looks to be as porous as a sponge. Guards are slack in posture with rifles slung lazily over their shoulders, their bare feet finding sticks to be scratched with, their smiles easy like the lope of stray dogs searching for dubious morsels buried in the sand.

At the border, I find a money exchange and find solace in the fact that my paper money has now gone from red to purple, as if this is a clear indication that the nightmare of apprehension by the Chinese government is far behind me. But the truth is, I'm not sure if a Laotian prison would be much better.

Something about Laotian money seems festive and worthless. The paper feels cheap somehow, like they couldn't spring for the extra ply. I convert the rest of my *yuan* into purple

kip, a currency worth nothing outside of this land of dreams. In this game, human life is the real currency, backed not by the acquisition of rare minerals, but by the ability to harvest the energy of a person with the exactitude of a machine. There, you're all equal now. You mean nothing.

I approach the shade where groups of travelers have already magnetized like ions released in space, sticking to each other by the sheer force of language. The Chinese sit at the big table; the Laotians organize by family ties; and on the outskirts sit assorted brown folk I can't confidently identify. I buy some spiky fruit, mostly for something to do, a way to be rid of this godforsaken *kip*.

Suddenly I see the flash of a wave.

"Hey, amigo! Over here!"

I look and see the biker chick's pompadour in the corner. I have no idea who she is, but she claims to have met me in Beijing at a farewell party. I go along with it, not knowing if she is lying on my behalf or actually thinks I'm someone she's met before. It doesn't matter. Her name is Paprika from Mexico City.

Sitting beside Paprika is her partner, a brown-skinned girl with big glasses who resembles a bespectacled teddy bear with frizzy black hair. She says she's from Los Angeles and sounds thoroughly Californian. I find myself relaxing due to the proximity of a fellow American, and before I know it, I'm seated at the table, feeling a sense of strength in numbers. Though this may be a false sense of security, I can't resist the momentary relief from the days of flight and terror I've just endured. I mention none of this to my new English-speaking pals, of course. It's all I can do to keep a full confession from pouring out

of my mouth like a busted pipe. I can only smile and hope that in the company of these travelers, I won't be the first one captured.

My eyes settle on a sporty-looking blonde with cheap white sunglasses of the kind you find at rest stops. She has the kind of chest that defies baggy clothing, a black and white striped string bikini beneath the loose white tank-top, droplets of sweat glistening into a trail of dew where for a second my eyes linger before returning to her hair the color of honey, tied up haphazardly and in the sunlight not unlike a bird's nest on fire.

The conversation is casual, all travel-related, and I don't get the sense of any cahoots to assassinate a world leader per se, but it doesn't take a genius to realize that these are the ones I have been sent to infiltrate, the members of R.E.I.N. The fact that they invite me over first as opposed to me sneakily absorbing myself among their ranks is only disarming for a moment. In some sense, I'm one of them, a part of the diaspora of the privileged and insane.

I introduce myself as Sam Iam. I'd thought up a few good aliases to deploy for this crucial moment, but in my gladness to finally converse in English with my own kind, I forget them all and use the worst one on my list.

"We partied back in Beijing," Paprika tells the others, making it sound like we knew each other. "This is my partner, Maya. We're on honeymoon traveling the world."

The teddy bear with the frizzy hair waves and smiles warmly. In her floral-printed muumuu, she appears to be the only one who isn't sweating from the morning heat.

"Sit down and join the club."

“Is it hot enough for you?” the Asian Clark Kent jokes. “This is nothing. You should come in summertime. Hot enough to make your bones melt. I’m Louis by the way. This is my girlfriend, Bee.”

Bee resembles a poodle you might want to copulate with. She wears a bright yellow top and a white tennis skirt. She seems uncomfortable with English and lets Louis do most of the talking.

I take a seat at the plastic table that leans if you lean, on the kind of chair that is likely to take off in a strong wind.

“Jacky,” the blonde with sunglasses says in an Australian accent.

After the introductions, there’s small talk about the ease of receiving visas at the Laotian border.

“Vietnam is the worst,” Maya says. “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 idiot friend (I love her, but she’s kind of naïve) 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 remarks in jest.

“That’s why I don’t trust anyone. I don’t even use my real name,” Jacky says.

“Is your real name ‘Jacky’?” I ask.

“One of many names,” she replies.

I watch as she removes her sunglasses and I meet her unshielded eyes. A corona of bluish-green light radiates from her pupils, reflecting the trees and sky.

"Is there anything to drink around here?" I ask, feeling parched.

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

"Sounds good," I agree.

"Make that two," Jacky adds.

Louis calls to the lady in Lao.

"So I'm guessing you're from here. If you don't mind me saying, your English is really good," I compliment.

"Thanks. I went to an international school. Plus, I'm a diplomat. It's my job," Louis replies nonchalantly to our drones of admiration.

"He always come home late. Smell like perfume. Tell me he out fighting crime," Bee complains.

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

"You really are a diplomat," we murmur in awe.

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

"You want to be our tour guide?" Paprika asks, half-joking.

"Sure. Just pay me in Beer Lao!" Louis chuckles.

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

Our beers arrive.

I clink bottles with Jacky and we drink. Jacky holds her 22-ounce bottle vertically over her head, displaying an impressive dive time. She lets a belch fly, and then covers her mouth, ladylike.

"God, I miss Thailand," she says.

I see her staring beyond the table as if somewhere through the trees, Thailand is there waiting. For a moment, everything seems to disappear for her, fading into some memory she is both avoiding and unable to release.

"I bet Thailand misses you, too."

"How long have you been out here?" she asks me.

"About a month."

"How long have you got?"

"Til Christmas break if I want to keep my job."

"Not that long then."

"We'll get to know each other," I say defensively. "Lay of the land. Some feels. That sort of thing. What about you? How long have you been traveling?"

She gives me a look of appraisal. "Ten," she finally mouths.

"Months?"

She puts her shades back on.

“Years?”

She smiles, looks the other way, and takes a sip of beer.

“What brings you to Laos, Sam? Just taking in the sights? Traveling?”

“Yeah, just seeing what I can see,” I reply innocently. “I’ve always wanted to visit Southeast Asia.”

“I love Southeast Asia,” Jacky says. “Where else can you just wake up, drink good coffee, eat fresh fruit, and do fuck all for the rest of the day? Swim, drink, eat, drink some more, and if you’ve got a boy...”

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

“I’ve heard a lot of good things about the night market at Luang Prabang,” I comment, almost blushing.

“That’s where we’re going. Then afterwards, it’s off to Vang Vieng,” Maya says.

“What’s Vang Vieng?”

“Just a place to party and drink. You can go tubing and swim in the river.”

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

“Candidate Dim,” Maya and Paprika say in unison and exchange glances.

“Who’s that?” I ask playing dumb.

“You don’t know? He’s only the worst scum to ever come out of a woman’s vagina,” Jacky says.

Paprika, Maya, and Jacky take turns illuminating me on all the things there are to hate about Candidate Dim: 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-white stretch-limousine appearing in the poorest villages during his campaign for office, handing out candy to little children as if that would substitute for their actual need of books and shoes, his disdain for the poor, his taunts against the LGBTQ community, his frequent use of the word “retarded,” his ridiculous toupee.

“His next campaign stop is going to be in Vang Vieng. Timed perfectly with the opening of another one of his godawful restaurants. Just another example of hyper-capitalism erasing the purity of the local culture. We’re going to join the protest there and let the people know we stand with them. Power in numbers! We’ll get there right in time for the Full Moon Party. That’s when the cosmic energies will be at their strongest. We’ll dance with our brothers and sisters in love and unity,” Maya says with her brown eyes glowing. “Every journey begins with serendipity. How about it, Sam? Do you want to join us in the fight against bigotry and injustice?”

“What’s in it for me?” I say half-jokingly.

“You’ll get to see the Dalai Lama,” Asian Clark Kent notes with a touch of bemusement, as my skin freezes in the tropical heat. “He’s going to speak out against Dim for trashing the Buddhist temple.”

“Nothing’s sacred to that bastard,” Paprika growls.

“What did he say about the Buddhists?” I inquire.

“That they’re a bunch of selfish hypocrites for shaving their heads in a world in dire need of hair,” Louis says. “He himself wears a toupee.”

“I see.”

“So what do you say, Sam?”

"I'm in."

"One more to join the Resistance," Maya nods, smiling with approval.

"Get your ass on the conga line!" Paprika cheers.

“What about you, Louis? Bee?”

“Sorry, we have 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 around.”

“I guess it’s just us then,” Maya says and then looks directly at me. “You’re coming with us.”

“Welcome to the party,” Jacky says.

I down my beer for courage.

Luang Prabang

We drive through green dappled light, passengers getting off every couple of hours at bus stops and banana trees. The bus is almost empty, careening on the edges of steep hill roads. We ride with every window open, boys pushing the bus out of mud holes, all of us

laughing as we bound off the bus to help. Jacky's eye catches mine over her shoulder at me as we push against the back of the bus like the one blue and green planet in the galaxy peeking over the lunar dust of a blood moon. The bus heaves and then frees itself, only to succumb to more Lao Time.

I use these various intermissions to try to find out more about Candidate Dim to unravel this conspiracy and find out how he ties into the Dalai Lama's scheduled demise, but to be honest it's hard to focus on geopolitical matters of the utmost weight and gravity when the girl you're probing has mesmerizing eyes and the kind of hair that tickles your nose with a tinge of citrus.

"How'd you get pulled in?" I ask Jacky, doing my best to remain focused. I keep my statements tactful and vague. "You guys meet at a rally or something?"

"God no," Jacky sneers and then leans into my ear and whispers, "We met at the border just before you came. I don't know give a flying whop about Candidate Dim. I'm just joining to get a room."

"Is it free?"

"It is if you act the part. Just say you hate Dim and they'll give you anything you want."

"Are they *political*?" I ask her quietly, as if this word carried within itself some innate danger.

"I don't know about all that. Just opinionated. Everyone's got one nowadays. Found each other online, I reckon. I don't ask too many questions. Don't want to give myself away."

"How'd you find out about them?"

“After you’ve been on the road as long as I have, you know how to pick up on things. Have to if you want to stay out of trouble. If you’re going to really travel, and I mean really, you’ve got to know how to live on the kindness of strangers.”

“I guess that makes sense. So you’re not really against Dim and him being elected and all?”

“Dim’s a lying sack, but who isn’t?”

I make a thoughtful noise, but say no more.

The bus is soon revived once more and we trundle into the twilight of red and green hills.

It seems that R.E.I.N. has a stronghold in Luang Prabang, and we end up at what I can only assume to be headquarters for their operations in Laos. Headquarters is nothing like I imagined. The triangular roof and white stone structure of the French colonial mansion is lost in vegetation. The lawn runs wild with an eclectic assortment of chairs below the open veranda where the colors of rugs and the music of windchimes flutter and blaze. There are way more beanbag chairs than I would have expected given the level of conspiracy their operatives are involved in, but it doesn’t take more than a couple hours before my sentences too began to end with high notes, indicating that no statement is empirically final, every thought is light and suggestive.

It doesn’t become clear until later that I’m being indoctrinated into the values of R.E.I.N. Maya lures me over to a bookshelf and we get into an interesting discussion about economic systems around the world. Next, my reeducation is solidified when a stranger

hands me a volume titled *Alternative Histories*, the orientation pamphlet (not written, but edited) by none other than Hey Guevara himself, who uses the pseudonym “Ernesto.” I’m tempted to ask my new friends what they know about Blonde Jesus and the Dalai Lama, but no one seems particularly concerned.

In fact, there’s no mention at all about the Tibetans, the Dalai Lama, or Point Omega. If anything, everyone seems focused on Candidate Dim. But even his name doesn’t get much attention at breakfast. Everyone’s way more into talking about their trips and travels to really care. I listen for code words or phrases that may be part of their operation, but unless the ascending levels of SPF secretly refer to their choice of assault weapons, none of the members seem to know a thing.

On a veranda softly buzzing with other early birds fluttering around, picking up toast and jam, butter, juice, fruit, and Lao coffee, I help myself and choose a sunny spot on the bamboo mat fielded with colorful cushions. My mind is at ease in these peaceful surroundings, and I forget that I’m surrounded by assassins and terrorists trying to spark the onset of a nuclear holocaust. I’m distracted by the sheer friendliness of everyone, their gentle eyes which seek out mine in a moment that is beautiful, strange, wondrous, and kind. Within a fraction of a second, there’s an understanding that we’re here to coexist harmoniously, thrust into these cheap beds as equals, with no more status, no more rules, as naked as the yoga pants and Beer Lao tank-tops that we’re draped in.

The smooth-faced ponytailed owner of the hostel, Pong, sits at a small front desk assisted by an ice-blond Danish girl who has stayed here throughout various seasons and now seems to work here, though not for anything so crude as money. She represents the wandering souls who come here and find this oasis, this state of mind, and make it a part of

their lives to spread the ideas of R.E.I.N. I quickly fall into place, and by the time breakfast is over, am convinced that there's no place like this on Earth.

Where else can you find people with this simple desire to escape the world as it exists and create another better version of civilization, albeit one that has no clear economic system and seems to be mostly supported in one way or another by some other taxpayer's money, parental or otherwise? A new life, a new existence, a shutting out of everything that's outside. I flutter from person to person gathering the nectar of knowledge they have for me. There are so many different walks of life, and yet they seem completely unified in their general stance against cruelty or division of any kind.

Take Claire, the wispy blonde English teacher from London. She's dressed in a sari, wears a satchel woven from elephant grass, and is currently working on a universal language that will erase the problem of language. "Language in itself is a system of oppression. Did you know that before an infant forms her first word, she is capable of speaking 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, it would 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 gush.

"You say, 'Wow!'" she laughs. "I didn't feel like we needed to change that one. Everyone says, 'Wow!' anyways."

Then there's Serena, a sturdy Dutch brunette who enjoys wrestling and 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 to do tricks for tourists. So we give them a new job that pays peanuts. We get human volunteers to act as animals in the circus! The elephants whip the humans and make them do tricks! We train them 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 of the human volunteers come from first-world countries. Most of them are French.”

“That’s fantastic.”

And of course, there’s Ben, the smug founder of Ben’s Shoes, who despite a rotund frame, is able to sit in a perfect lotus position on any rock and just loves telling people his story:

“So 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 have already heard the story once this morning, sits around him 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. So 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.”

“Wouldn't it be better to just give the kid some flip-flops?” I ask impulsively, and instantly feel a murmur of revolt in the audience.

Ben smiles wanly and says, “You know the old saying, ‘Give a man a fish, he eats for a day?’”

I bow my head in humility and slink to the back of the audience.

Despite the apparent disparities of employed versus not, the members of R.E.I.N. conduct themselves as equals and remain childlike at play. The games begin shortly after the Lao coffee has gone on infinity mode, and we've sipped and smoked and trembled with the restless excited chatter of summer camp. It isn't long before the coffee gets everyone nervous and in a state of hysteria. "What should we do? What should we do?" begins to ribbit out of our mouths. I know we're just being fed pots of coffee so Pong can get us all caffeinated and let us loose into the forest somewhere to wander around, scream, whoop, and pretend we're animals in the jungle again. We'll decide who gets to play the role of lion, and who gets to be the zebra, and who's the despised hyena and vulture. We'll run around and scream until we get sleepy, and then we we'll drift back to the vans in a daze, hours later, returning with wooden things someone had carved into the shape of a frog.

Listen: Ribbit. Ribbit.

By afternoon, word gets out that there are two vans going to a waterfall. In one van are our original four—Paprika, Maya, Jacky, and me—now also adding Jergen the Norwegian diver, Claire the English teacher, Serena the animal activist from Holland, and Ben from Ben's Shoes.

Pong lets us out of the van and leaves us in complete anarchy. This to be the final stage of R.E.I.N.'s indoctrination, to show you a world of absolute freedom with no rules, a

world to now survive in together as equals. We become teammates with the simple goal of making sure no one gets hurt. Besides that, we can swim in the water, jump in the pools, and admire our jade-green reflections surrounded by huge black rocks. There's a pathway leading higher towards the skyscraper of waterfall at the very top of the green hill, a silvery white sheet of rainbow cascading and pounding into the bottom of a flowing lagoon.

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

"Pong!"

Pong materializes like the Predator from the leaves. His handsome Thai face smiles as he twists the ends of his mustache teasingly.

"But where did you...?"

"Watch your step. It gets very slippery, especially at the top. See you there!" Pong cries, and vanishes back into the jungle. We watch as Paprika spreads the leaves to reveal Pong's hiding space only to startle a flurry of white butterflies rising from the flora instead.

"Some freaky shit in the jungle, man!" Paprika cries.

We each pair up. Paprika and Maya lead the way. Claire teams up with Jacky, and Serena with Ben; Jergen and I link together. The path winds around a hill, the narrow pathway bordered by a crudely built fence tied together with fibers, and at best, merely marking the edge. We walk up treacherous stairs carved into the hillside while sliding on moss and catching sprays of mist from the waterfall. I almost slip and immediately feel Jergen's hand on my wrist; his reach like a branch extending from a gangly trunk.

“Someone from above must’ve sent you to watch my back,” I say in gratitude, forgetting for a moment that in R.E.I.N. religious references were tolerated but somewhat awkward.

His eyes flash like ice, and I see a faint smile. He says nothing.

Our trail moves along a spiny ridge, the gnarly rainforest wet with an ever-present mist. I follow the back of Jergen’s head, a blonde untamed bush of half-dreaded, half-forgotten locks amidst a chaos of curls and swirls. He would often be stopped in airport security to spread those long arms and wait for the dance of a wand around his crotch. I feel my foot slip again, still donning a pair of Nikes which feel strange and stuffy here. His arm shoots out with the speed of a mantis shrimp.

“At least you’re not wearing Ben’s shoes, are you?” Jergen grins, making a crack at the tire guru.

“Standard sweatshop Nikes, I’m afraid.”

“You should be more careful. The jungle is a dangerous place.”

“Full of dangerous people,” I suggest, nodding to our group moving on ahead, my eyes settling for a moment on Jacky.

“The most dangerous game,” agrees Jergen. “Her skill level is 100. I doubt that’s even her real name.”

Skill level? Fake names?

I narrow my eyes and pretend to slap at a mosquito, which strangely, are nonexistent in this forest walk.

“So, who’re you with?” I venture casually.

“I’m traveling alone,” Jergen responds, “but I’m going to meet some of my friends in Vang Vieng.”

“Expecting to see some fireworks?”

“No, just a lot of screaming and yelling. There might be some police, but it usually doesn’t get anywhere near that. And that’s if he comes.”

“If?”

“Candidate Dim is unpredictable. It’s always a lot of commotion and a big opening, and he sometimes makes a speech, but these days he barely shows up unless the media is there to put it on the news. He wants to run for parliament. It scares the shit out of me.”

“What’s the big deal? Shouldn’t everyone get a shot at a lifetime of kickbacks?”

Jergen stops and looks at me. “You’re not a Dim supporter, are you?”

“Listen now. I don’t know anything about his policies,” I start bumbling defensively, my hands in front of my chest. “I just know he’s a horrible demagogue who’s as corrupt and ruthless as they come.”

“Well, you answered your own question then,” Jergen retorts, and he turns and continues up the path. “If he builds another one of his shitty restaurants in Vang Vieng, it will destroy the local culture. That’s the first reason.”

“The locals need culture,” I agree.

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

This Isn't Just a Souvenir

"Too many carbon footprints," I hum.

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

"Hate the player, hate the game," I sing.

"Finally, his burgers are disgusting and will probably decimate insect populations, which sounds like a good thing, but it's really not. It's really, really not."

"You ain't no good for me, you ain't no good for me," I chant like a backup soul singer.

"Do you know what he said yesterday during a visit with the king of Thailand? He said Theravada is the only pure form of Buddhism there is. Like, does he even know what Mahayana Buddhism is?" Jergen scoffs with disbelief.

The woods suddenly get quiet.

"So what do you think about Jacky?"

We pick up speed and catch up with the others as they stand in front of a rushing stream. Just as Paprika attempts to brave the first rocks, we hear a voice from above.

"Careful. One of you is definitely going to get your feet wet!"

"Pong!"

He's at the top of the next hill, looking down on us, encouraging us onward. The rapids must be crossed and then another hillside climbed helter-skelter through the trees and into the flowering vines. Somewhere over the rainbow is the waterfall.

"Just a little further, and then you can take a dive!" Pong cries, falling backwards, disappearing off the high precipice to somewhere beyond our sight.

"*Dios mio!*" Paprika utters in amazement.

We stand there paused, listening to the chittering of the birds and insects. Butterflies flutter past us in a smoke pattern through sparkling vapors fluttering across the frothing rocks and spray.

"You can do it, baby!" Maya calls out to Paprika, as one by one, she carefully jumps the rocks, nearly falls and recovers, and we all exhale in unison and cheer as she celebrates by pumping air guitar with a tree branch.

The rest follow.

Maya runs without a slip and Claire leaps like a lost Bollywood star in her sari. Serena and Ben, both in proper hikers, basically walk on water. Next, Jacky plays hopscotch on graceful toes in sandals, and Jergen joins them on the other side showing an almost faux-celebration, mocking the idea of ceremony itself, but I see a satisfied grin on his lips knowing that his feet are dry.

Finally, I step up to the rocks. I've purposely chosen to go last as to not raise the bar too high. I know I should focus on the path, but I smile at Jacky instead. I let our eyes meet and see myself crossing the entire way without breaking eye contact, leaping in slow motion like a ballerino, the pounding waterfalls of my desire churning beneath the zither and zephyr of longing, the sound almost silent. Suddenly I am blinded, spinning in cold current, hands stretched out, being flung like a rag-doll hard enough against the rocks so that there is an audible "Ooh!" that escapes the lips of my audience.

I get up and shrug, try to laugh it off, strike a haphazard nonchalance when the next rock betrays me, throws me back in the stream, and I'm just sloshing around now, not even trying to step on the rocks, just fording my way across, knowing that even as you fall, you feel every rock on the way down.

"That's never happened before," I say to Jacky, who does a very poor job of trying to contain her laughter.

We continue up the narrow ridge through flowering vines where orchids grow out of thin air. The aroma of nectar surrounds us. This is the hummingbird's paradise, the butterfly sanctuary. At the top of the waterfall, a solitary man poses on one leg, balancing on a stone in the middle of the stream that cuts the roaring flows before they break off and spill down into a white void.

"Pong!"

He turns and faces us with his arms spread to the sky.

"Congratulations for reaching the top," he says, smiling.

We whoop and cheer and give 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 points to the mountains and plateaus and foothills shining and darkening in a dance beneath the clouds. The green hills roll on for as far as the eye can 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.

“Long ago, before Westerners come, our countries always at war with each other. They fight and whoever wins gets the gold. They take the gold from their enemy and put it in their temples. Back and forth, over and over again. We always fighting with each other, so when the Europeans come, it easy for them to win. We didn't realize until it too late, but they not really fighting each other. They find an easy way to conquer us. You never know who your enemy until they try to become your friend. Sometimes your enemy seem like you need to kill them, destroy them, but for what? Because they did to you, you need to do to them. But worst enemy is enemy that pretend to be friend, then take everything from you. They give you to your enemy anyway. 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. There don't need to be friend or enemy. There is only people.”

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

"Only one way down," he says, smiling. "If you scared, don't jump. Just go down, cuz if you scared, you gonna get hurt. You believe you can jump, then just jump. Don't think about it. You think about it, it mean you don't believe."

And with that, Pong closes his eyes with pure bliss, stretches his arms straight above his head like a pencil, leaps off the precipice and flips into space, twirling sideways and upside-down in a tight ball, gracefully finishing with a perfect dive.

"Would anyone like to walk back?" Claire jokes.

We all laugh nervously. No one moves an inch.

Who of us will be the first to follow? Which of us truly believe?

Without a word, Jacky bursts into a sprint towards the edge. She whoops and hurtles into the water, screaming all the way down.

"Jacky!"

We run to the edge and look down. There she is in the aqua-colored pool, laughing, flipping back her hair and whooping with delight.

"Come on, you big baby! Let's see if you believe!" she hoots, taunting me to jump.

"All right guys, I'm going," I say to no one in particular and back up so I can get my running start.

At least that's what I saw in my head. But a minute later, I still haven't moved or said anything.

Suddenly Paprika goes leaping off the edge.

"Fuck you, Dim!" she screams and cannonballs it down with a big splash.

"Aiye!" Maya cries, following her partner, and a minute later resurfaces, her hair no longer frizzy.

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

"When in Laos, yes?" Serena says and jumps in as well.

"Yes We Can!" Ben cries fiercely, runs and jumps, screaming, "Obama!"

It's now down to me and Jergen. We stand there looking at each other smiling, but scared shitless. I don't dare move. I have no idea what will happen. I see myself being broken wide open like the metal fuselage of a plane crash.

"Are you going to jump?"

"If I jump or I 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 says spitefully, and then adds, "What a stupid way to die."

He closes his eyes, shakes his frazzled mane, and walks to the edge with absolute calm and conviction, and drops off as if searching for an invisible bridge.

The feeling of believing is to not even know you're going to act before you 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 hear the explosion in my ears as water erupts all around me. The feeling of inhaling all with one breath, falling and breaking through the surface, feeling nothing but refractions of light all around you like the dazzle of illuminated scar-tissue around the place where you were first broken. This is what you are. This is what you will be. The water is perfect and turquoise and clear. The streams meander one into another. We're all wet now and

happy knowing that we're braver than we think. We leave the water and follow each other into the trees.

Back at headquarters, I shower up and get ready for dinner. I'm standing by my bunk toweling off when I hear someone behind me say:

"Where are we going?"

I turn to look at the owner of this gruff voice and gasp in shock. All the lines blur and swirl into chaos. Standing before me is a man who looks like Vincent van Gogh standing in the room with a big sunflower in his breast pocket. He's wearing a tweed jacket and dark brown slacks. He looks completely out of place in this tropical clime. It's a wonder he isn't dripping with sweat. He seems totally at ease.

"Wh-what?" I stammer, unsure if I'm hallucinating or not.

"What are we? Where do we come from?" he adds gruffly.

Vincent lifts a tobacco pipe to his ashen ginger beard and takes a long pull, smiling at me from the corner of his eyes as he does so. His accent is untraceably European, the voice of a nomad. My mind races with questions I've always wanted to ask the man who shot himself in the heart and missed.

"A wheatfield with crows?" I suggest to the air between us as the smoke plumes in front of me. I'm holding a towel over my private parts. I'm afraid that if I turn around to put on my underwear he'll vanish. I'm also afraid of showing Vincent van Gogh my dick. I stand there frozen, unable to move.

"Are you...?"

“The gardener?” he replies with a smirk and blows a cloud in my face.

“Uh, no. I was going to ask...okay, are you the gardener?”

“I’ve been sent here to guide you to the best sunset,” Vincent says cryptically. “It rose in the east, but sets in the west. Now the sun is setting. The west will go into darkness, but not for the sun to rise again. That is a false hope of the Party. It only spells the end for all. The only thing to do is watch from the highest place. The Himalayas.”

“You mean Ti—”

The name is sniped on my lips in an instant with a glare. His watery eyes hold mine before his gaze goes to his wooden pipe.

“We don’t say that name here,” he murmurs softly, staring into the ashes. “Here or there or anywhere else. I was there a long time ago with a friend. We were in the mountains a week and had run out of jerky and water and were on the brink of death in the tundra. After many days, we came across a few mud huts on the rocky foothills. As we approached hungry and exhausted, a pack of giant dogs attacked us with hellish ferocity.”

“Mastiffs?” I guess, gripping my wet towel. “What happened?”

“One of us lived. Ha! You see, this one carried stones in his pockets. You must carry stones in your pockets to survive in the Himalayas.”

He finishes his pipe, and then speaks in absolute solemnity, “Always carry stones in your pockets.”

I notice a part of his left ear was missing, possibly eaten by dogs. He looks at me with consideration for a moment and says, “Here, take this.”

He pulls something out of his gardener's jacket and places a smooth heavy object in my hand. It's a camera.

I stare at him dumbfounded.

"Who are you?"

"I'm a friend," Vincent replies and fingers the petals on the golden sunflower, "of your uncle, Sam."

"You're here because of Hey Guevara and R.E.I.N.?"

"I'm here to tend the garden. I like to take pictures. Mostly of flowers. Do you like pictures?"

"I think the camera kind of ruined the medium," I attempt cautiously. "Of paint, that is."

"But you can always find inspiration in someone's face. A portrait, for example, can have within it so much truth and revelation."

"Let me guess, you want me to spy on R.E.I.N.?"

"I want you to take a picture," Vincent replies.

"You know what's going to happen, don't you?"

"No one knows that."

"The Dalai Lama's life is in danger," I say plainly, glancing around to make sure we're not being listened to.

Vincent taps his pipe against the bunk bed, letting his ashes drift down to the floor. He bends down and presses his thumb against the ashes so that none remains on the floor.

“His life is always in danger,” Vincent replies. “The Chinese want him dead. That’s no secret.”

“But I know of a very real and specific threat to his life. What’re we supposed to do?”

“The company uses email, believe it or not,” Vincent says vaguely. “The WiFi here is pretty good. Take good pictures, Sam. You can send them here.”

He hands me a plain white business card. Aside from an email address, it appears to be a total fake. *Vincent’s Flowers and Tea*, it says.

A moment of silence passes.

“I don’t know if I can do this.”

“You’ve never taken pictures before?”

“Not of people that I call my friends.”

“Ah, I understand. I should’ve come sooner. I was held up by Lao Time.”

“Yeah, I know. Everything’s super slow here. I kind of love it.”

Vincent nods appreciatively, as if carefully selecting his next words.

“Have you ever read *The Bhagavad Gita*?”

I shake my head.

“An ancient poem, from the Hindu texts. The story begins with a young prince named Arjuna. He must fight his family to unite the kingdom. Arjuna can't bring himself to war against his own family. It's in the chariot on the battlefield where Krishna appears.

“Krishna is a reincarnation of the god Vishnu, you see. He shows Arjuna that everyone has their own unique fate and destiny. The things we do in service of that destiny aren't evil. For everything has a purpose, and everyone must do as they were born to do. The only crime is to go against the destiny that has been laid out before you.”

Vincent starts to leave.

“Wait a second,” I cry, accidentally dropping the towel. I cover up with my hand as he pauses and turns just slightly to give me attention. “Do you know what happened to my girlfriend? You guys know everything, don't you? Is she alive?”

Vincent winks and then disappears into the bathroom, never to reemerge.

Later that night, I hang the camera around my neck and join the others for a visit to the night market. The mood is celebratory, which makes me feel like the lowest piece of scum on earth. I've been sent by Hey to find a Judas, and ironically after Vincent hands me the camera, I realize that if I want to find him, I only need to take a selfie. How does it get any worse?

An unspoken bond exists, which seems to have been formed as soon as we plunged into the water. I try to ignore the weight around my neck and move with the others through the night market as an unbreakable force, a new hope for the future, a rainbow of cultures and creeds representing freedom and equality unlike the world has ever seen. We shine our light

on the illuminated streets of Luang Prabang aglow with the colors of silk scarves, handmade tapestries, and stalls full of wonders. Here you can find 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.

This isn't just a souvenir. This is a stand against corporate tyranny.

We stroll past the avenues lined with architecture from those days of make believe when dusky-skinned servants quietly lived their inner lives behind white smiles, before Marxism brought a bloody end to colonialism. We pass tourists enjoying their evenings of romance inside the structures we've been taught to despise while begrudging to some level the purity of aesthetic value, and finally admitting that it does look rather nice inside.

Further on the edge of town, along a sleepy stretch of the Mekong, we find a strip of family-run seafood stalls with the catch of the day on big platters with big beers, all while looking out at the dark blue night upon the river.

"So, Vang Vieng? Who's in?" Maya asks after we order and each have a Beer Lao in hand. "I need a head count. We're going to start working on placards tonight. What do you guys think of 'Rim the Dim?'"

Laughter and murmurs of praise bubble around the table.

"You still going?" I ask, glancing over at Jergen.

"I must meet my friends first. I'll see you there," he promises with solemn eyes.

"I don't know what we might encounter," I whisper. "I might need backup."

"I'll be there," Jergen nods.

"I'd love to join you guys, and as much as I hate Candidate Dim and would like nothing more than to see him 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. Shell-toes."

"I hate to spoil the party, but I think I'll have to pass as well," Claire says, continuing to dampen the mood. "It's not quite my scene. For me, the best way to fight against Candidate Dim is to educate the children. I'm going to volunteer at the orphanage, 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 says heartily. "I promised to help my friend. She started an equal payer coffee plantation. Going to get my hands dirty."

Aren't we all? I resist saying. It seems like the members of R.E.I.N. either have their own individual missions or are just plain flaky.

At that moment, the waiter arrives with a multitude of dishes. We eat family-style: spicy noodle soup from the same bowl, minced meat salad from the same plate. It lets you try a little bit of everything. Some plates are better than others, but in keeping with the values of R.E.I.N., we try to eat more of the ignored dishes, leaving the more sumptuous mains shocked in their snubbing. Being together is what matters. If you want to know the world and experience the spectrum, share a meal. If you want to assassinate a world leader, pass the shrimp to your comrade.

"Here, try this lemongrass chicken with greens and chopped mint leaves. Sticky rice in woven bamboo bowls."

“Here, try this papaya salad!”

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

“All right, everyone take a pepper,” Maya announces. “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?”

“Wait a second,” I cry out. “Let's take a group photo.”

“Okay, but eat the pepper first. I want to see pain on your faces!” Maya cries.

“One...two...three!”

We each take a pepper, these fiery little yellow-green acid grenades, which taste good at first, with just that right amount of spice on your lips, but slowly they start to smoke. Everyone gathers for a group photo at the table, ready in various poses, doing their best to smile while the heat smolders inside their mouths. I prepare the flash.

Click.

“Ah, Fuck!”

Glug, glug, glug.

“AHHHH!”

“Garçon, six more Beer Lao! Hurry!”

By the time we finish eating, we're so stuffed from chicken, prawns, noodles, fish, sticky rice, and beer, we can hardly move. I excuse myself from the table and walk to the bank of the river with my comrades blurred behind me under a string of Christmas lights

drinking the third round. The river seems like a sea of bluish-black ink with a speckling of lights on the distant shore. I hit the bottle and feel the weight of the camera hanging from the strap around my neck like a stone.

“Care for a swim?” Jacky jokes, as if reading my mind. She sidles up beside me holding a cold one. We stare at the distant glow of lights across the Mekong River and clink bottles. *What do I say if she asks me to tag her on Facebook?*

“That’s the Thai border,” Jacky says, pointing at the 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.”

“How condescending, Sam! Guesthouses always have heaps of freebies on the shelves, didn’t you know? Take one with you and leave one behind. That’s the way.”

“What do you love the most about Thailand? I sense kickboxing.”

“Nah, I’m a beachie. Love to swim. And the food—God, I miss Thai curry. I can make it on my own, but it’s not the same. You need the beach behind you and a good book in front of you or it doesn’t taste right.”

“When are you going back?”

“There’s a beach town in Cambodia called Sihanoukville I’ve always wanted to check out. After that, I suppose it’s back to Thailand. If I didn’t have to renew my visa, I’d never leave. I almost married into it before everything fell apart. Talk about the mother-in-law from hell. We were perfect until he told his family that he was going to marry a foreign girl. It’s all for the best, I suppose. My name would’ve been Jacqueline Elizabeth Chanyatananon. Can you imagine the wrist-ache from signing all my forms?”

"Sorry to hear that. It's easy to fall in love in Thailand, I guess. Maybe it's the weather, or the constant fucking."

"What happened to yours?" Jacky asks, after swigging in agreement.

"I'm still trying to find out."

"Well, good luck with that. But wandering's the best cure for what ails you, I say. You can't expect to all be flowers and butterflies. It's all part of the journey. You just keep moving on, that's all. Just got to use your wits, rely on the kindness of strangers, give smiles as currency, stick out your thumb, and make sure you always have your passport. Also, get used to sleeping in odd places and skipping a few showers and wearing the same clothes for days, save every bit of food and don't throw anything away until you've reused it, and most important of all, don't go crying back to mum and dad. If you can manage all of that, you're as free as a bird."

"So what? You're running away from this bad breakup?"

"Nah, I was running long before that. He was the reason I almost clipped my wings. I would've done it too. I've always had a bit of wanderlust, I suppose," Jacky muses. "I grew up in a farm town. Church, footy games, school. The same people everywhere you go. I don't want to sound like I'm putting them down. They're all lovely people, but they'll never leave. All of my friends are still there, getting married and having babies. I don't want to end up like that. Maybe I will one day. Maybe it's my fate, who knows? For now I'm just living life, making sure I can die with no regrets."

"I guess everyone's running from something."

"What about you? What's hot on your heels?"

“The CIA.”

"Oh God, what're they on now, another secret war? They never get tired of spreading freedom, do they?"

“Hard to say. I’m not sure if I’m working against the Chinese or working for them.”

“China’s got everyone on payroll nowadays.”

“Yeah, what can we do? Dismantle the world economy so that the Tibetans can be free?” I ask ironically.

“Maybe it’s worth it,” Jacky muses. “Seems like they’re the only ones who know what it means to be happy.”

We both take sips of our beers and listen to the river as a deafening chorus of ribbiting rises and fills the air like monks chanting.

“What really brought you here?” asks Jacky after the croaking subsides.

"True Love."

“Giving it another go, eh? Why Laos?”

After a moment’s hesitation, I tell Jacky my story from the day I saw my True Love on the beach holding a palm leaf over her head in the rain to the night, to the last email she sent, the months that followed, and pretty much everything except for Hey Guevara, the Dalai Lama, and R.E.I.N. There’s just no delicate way to confess that I’m there to spy on Jacky and our new friends.

“Do you really think she’s out there?” Jacky asks softly, her tenor betraying the fact that she’s dealing with someone irrational and fragile and possibly crazy.

“I have to know for sure.”

Jacky pouts, and gives me a sympathetic look. She almost touches me, and then decides against it, taking a long swig instead.

“After my engagement fell apart, I headed south to Pattaya,” she confesses after finishing off the bottle. She lets it thud on the sand. “Have you ever been there? God, it’s awful. It’s terrible and incredible at the same time. You’ll just see things there you wish you hadn’t. Anyway I thought a good roll in the mud would drown my sorrows. Made some real blunders. Met this Italian boy who told me he loved me after a week of shacking up. Three days later I walked in on him shagging the maid.”

“We just can’t live without love.”

“One of the best things about traveling is you can tell strangers your life story. Not like you’ve got to see them again anyway,” Jacky snorts.

“I’m starting to feel a little drunk,” I admit.

“Are we going out?”

“Seems that way.”

“As friends?”

“Comrades.”

“Watch my back and I’ll watch yours,” she smiles and touches my nose with her wet fingertip. I feel confused as she sashays her way back to the table.

“We need order, structure. There has to be a nucleus to every cell or else it’ll all go haywire,” Ben is preaching to the table now cleared for after-dinner, which means ashtrays

and more beers. “We’re at a point of critical mass. The movement is strong, but how long can it last? It’s only a matter of time before we start splintering into factions and fight amongst ourselves.”

“Says our precious white knight CEO,” Maya retorts, a bit drunk now. “I suppose you’re proposing you become the leader. 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 have to establish order,” Ben says soothingly, trying to maintain composure. “No one’s going to do it for us. Together we stand, divided we fall.”

“What did I miss?” I ask Jergen as he looks on with a mixture of curiosity and disdain.

“Just a little after-dinner conversation before our tea and cake arrives,” he comments sarcastically. “Cheers.”

I take a long drink and try to catch up.

“The whole point of the movement is for everyone to be equal and free from elites,” Claire interjects. “Otherwise what’s our purpose? Isn’t structure just another form of hierarchy? And isn’t hierarchy just another form of oppression?”

Ben sits back, reflective and sage-like. His presence has begun to annoy everyone at the table.

“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 says, grinding her teeth.

"That's why we need total social uplift," Claire adds. "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 of all, they had chiefs. Second of all, 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 fires back.

"Okay, that's enough," Serena bellows. "My goodness, who's the enemy here? We're here to stop Candidate Dim. We have to stay united!"

An awkward moment ensues as everyone sips their beer and I look around for the dessert no one ordered.

"My apologies if I got a little too excited. I think I'm drunk," Ben mutters. "I should probably just head back to the hostel."

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

"What do we do now?" Claire asks.

"Let's go find some music and dancing," Paprika laughs.

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

"What should we toast to?"

"How about to Laos?" I suggest.

"To Laos!"

We leave the restaurant and apologize to the waitstaff for the noise. All is forgiven and by the time we find a strip of Tiki bars brightly lit along the river everyone is back in good spirits, minus Ben whose dissent he has taken with him back to headquarters.

The torches dance to the music, and our eyes glitter in the dark. A bonfire grows on the shore, and fire-jugglers take turns whirling the wheel of fire to the delight of childlike faces. People drift in from out of nowhere, travelers and Lao guys riding in on motorbikes. Bare feet touch on grass. Serena brings over a Lao guy holding my Nikes, worried I'll lose them. "They're yours, mate," I tell him, adopting an Australian accent in this climate, certain I'll never return to western civilization again. The Lao guy takes his sandals off, gives them to me, and we hug at the bonfire.

Midnight comes, and it's curfew. The whole city shuts down. Stores are closed, radios silenced, loiterers and pedestrians subject to harassment by authorities with black guns. There's no traffic of any kind. The only thing moving is us, flying now in a *tuk-tuk*, gripping the metal bars like a roller coaster, whooping and taunting the laws of the land, barely missing stray dogs, which rule the night.

Where the hell are we going? Did someone give this guy directions, or did we all just hop in and let him spirit us through the night?

The windowless vehicle leaving you naked in the arms of the jungle, which is evidently loud, filled with laughter, and moves in a cloud of booze.

We pull up in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by the threat of too many trees. There is the sense of the jungle still surrounding us, the exit onto the highway without lanes going back to town, now standing in front of this abandoned warehouse in the middle of the woods. Without lights of any kind, we follow the techno pounding through the nightclub, or whatever this place is, some industrial smell still lingering, a mixture of paint-thinner and ethanol, beer, and jungle juice splashed all over the concrete floor.

In the dark, the Lao guys lean about all relaxed, even in the nightclub, with curious stares and hair that looks on the verge of being styled with a dab of wax that never comes. Girls pull up as well with their own motorbikes, their long hair appearing to have never felt the touch of scissors, trailing behind them like silken waterfalls, a thousand times combed and spiced with coconut oils and adorned with tropical flowers.

Inside the frenzy of digital light, we're just ions dancing around in space. Whoops! I knock over a bottle. The boys don't seem to mind and invite Jergen and I to a drink. It's a mix of whisky, tequila, and rum, plus some Red Bull. I don't know what the hell this is. One of these guys is now yelling in my ear. I think it's English, but he might just be shouting noises. My mind is only able to hold focus on one thought at a time, this rhythmic sea of girls around us. Somewhere in there are our friends. I forget we even have friends. These girls just dance, smiling with black lustrous hair, moving in a way that's fun, almost innocent, beautiful, exotic, pure.

"Holy shit, it's him!" Maya cries grabbing us with wide startled eyes. I glance up at Jergen, who uses his long neck to periscope above the crowd.

“Who?”

“Candidate Dim,” Jergen confirms with a solemn nod. “He’s in the V.I.P. section having a very private party. It looks like one bodyguard, three girls, and a bucket of fried chicken.”

“He’s grabbing them by the pussy!” I gasp, and stare wide-eyed at Maya, who mirrors back at me with a mix of shock and displeasure at my phrasing.

“We have to stop him!” Maya cries, more frantic than resolute, and takes another shot at the bar. She heads off to search out Serena, Claire, Jacky, and Paprika, who were last spotted somewhere on the dance floor. We’d be able to spot them easily if the club wasn’t absolutely packed and a mockery of fire code. The building is small enough that if it were empty and Candidate Dim was on the V.I.P. couch, I could reasonably attempt to fling a record at him from the DJ booth at the other end and expect to hit his head maybe three times out of ten.

“Wait!” I shout at Maya, paused at the edge of a mass of gyrating bodies. “I’m going to do it.”

“Do what?” she yells back.

Jergen lowers his neck, both of them looking me in the eyes.

“I’m going to throw a drink in his face.”

“Are you crazy?” Maya shouts, her face a jumble of fear and confusion as I make my way towards the V.I.P. lounge.

I see Candidate Dim sitting in the back of the club, enjoying himself with a trio of young ladies, each of them in desperate need of chicken. They betray none of these feelings

as they smile and clink glasses from a bottle of champagne, a vintage he must've brought himself for such an occasion. The muscle beside him stands erect in the black suit, seeming to never move his shaved head, an oddity in this atmosphere of strobe and disco beat.

Just as I reach the edge of the dance floor, the music cuts off. The spotlight turns on. Bodies freeze and pause with anticipation, disappointment, confusion. A microphone crackles and squeaks, and the voice of an emcee attempts to do a big Vegas-style introduction, and then, when the microphone fails, resorts to hoarsely shouting to get everyone's attention. The crowd begins to form under his direction into something of a circle with an empty space carved out in the middle.

Jacky whirls me around from out of nowhere, and I see her eyes glittering with a craziness I haven't seen before. "It's a dance contest!" she cries and grabs me by the wrist so hard that it hurts and pulls me towards the circle where the emcee is announcing the prizes. The spotlight moves onto each prize as the rankings are 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's a real surge of excitement over the second, more attainable, prize. Who couldn't use a new fan?

"I want that bloody fan!" Jacky screams and jumps up and down, whooping her heart out. I'm afraid of what will happen next.

The DJ plays the music, and one girl is shoved into the circle by her girlfriends. She puts her hand over her mouth and trembles with classic girl-next-door modesty and makes a timid attempt to dance. The whole club cheers her on good-naturedly and watches as she tries another little move, something happening with her feet, a terrific disaster. She covers her face and edges back into the crowd.

Next, a tall dude with long hair and rocking a miniskirt marches into the fray like “let me show these bitches how to work it!” and out of nowhere, and without invitation, begins 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 pixie fingers at the shy girl still recovering from her moment of public humiliation.

Finally, Jacky decides that she’s had enough. “I’ll show these girls how to win a bloody dance contest!” she roars, and in she comes with a look of fire, body movements of a snake. She finds contact with the camera, wherever it is, staged in this cinematic moment of magic when time freezes and the bartender overfills the drink, the DJ nods with approval and puts on the perfect beat, and the whole club comes alive with the rapture of this heat, this moment like an out-of-body experience.

Soon all you see is hair flying and *kip* raining from the air, Jacky’s body now seemingly levitating us, crawling on a glass ceiling. The monsoon clouds burst and the rivers overflow. The levees break and Maya, goddess of wind, hurricanes in with Latin rhythm programmed into her hips, grabbing Paprika and the two of them take over, doing a salsa in a way these people have never seen before, or anyone for that matter, on this side of the hemisphere. Claire joins in grabbing hands with the shy girl, and Serena swings in with the guy in the miniskirt, and pretty soon the dance contest develops a conga line.

Clearly things have been turned up a notch, perhaps to a level of no return. They’ve seen too much; it’s too much to unsee. These westerners with their lack of shame and ample cleavage have just changed the game forever. An epidemic of girls stripping for oscillating heads will soon take over the country, shattering that old image still hanging from the wall of the bar on the Beer Lao calendar featuring a beautiful Lao girl who looks on from an idyllic

field dressed in something form-fitting, but traditional, ready to bring her man a cold one. The revolution starts suddenly before anyone can even ascertain where, how, and when the change began. The contest turns the disco into a strip club, girls taking their clothes off for electric fans, and pretty soon, political freedom. Finally, they'll call it performance art. Soldiers will raid the place and confiscate every electric fan from here to Vientiane. The captain will undoubtedly ride out on the shiny electric-blue motorbike.

The emcee concedes the victory to Jacky, looking like he just came in his pants. She takes her spoils with satisfaction holding the box in her arms, and in the spirit of sisterhood, hands the fan over to the shy girl, who covers her face, bows, and comes in for the hug.

"Damn it. He gave us the slip!" I cry, coming back to my senses. "Candidate Dim's gone!"

We look back at the V.I.P. area. There's nothing there except an empty champagne bottle and a greasy bucket surrounded by napkins.

"It's all right," Maya says, putting a hand on my shoulder. "We'll get him in Vang Vieng."

"Damn right, we will. Let's party!"

For the rest of the night, we're treated like legends. Every table wants to drink with us. I seem to be running on the power of my subconscious awareness and Red Bull, a sugar-rum autopilot. But my heart guides me through the noise and the fog and soon I see my True Love here at the club! *Isn't that her in the white capris? Or is that her in the pink?* That long black hair, those sensual lips, the curves of her body. Those eyes as dark and multifaceted as a Hindu goddess's. I can't seem to see straight.

We dance together for a song and a half with my hands on her hips, and I barely notice when she gently removes them and places a little more space between our bodies.

“You remind me of my True Love,” I tell her with a level of creepiness I have to admonish myself for.

Suddenly I feel two hands whirl me around and the Doppelganger escapes me like a squid. It's Jacky, completely wasted, going on wildly about some spanking contest.

“None of these boys can spank me hard enough!” she cries out. “Spank me, baby! Give me all you've got!”

Next I see my True Love's doppelganger heading for the exit, her white capris and long black hair flowing out the door. I chase her down and confess my love to her in the parking lot, her sitting on a motorbike with a pink helmet on, her chubby gay friend with the purple hair looking on from the back.

“Baby, look I'm going to save the world, but when I come back, can we have coffee?”

“I go home,” she says with fearful eyes.

“Home? Why go home? No, stay, stay,” I plead, touching her hand gently as she white-knuckles her handlebars.

“I must go,” she softly insists.

“I don't even know that girl! She's just a friend. Please stay with me. I love you.”

“Thank you,” she says and rides off with flashing lights and a small puff of exhaust into the night.

I kneel in the gravel to weep. Vomit spews out of my nostrils instead.

Vang Vieng

As soon as you arrive in Vang Vieng, you know you're there even without ever having been. There's no mystery about it as your van slows to a crawl and lightly honks girls in bikinis out of the way. Heaps of drunken Aussies roaming about in search of god knows what, phrases like "Get Fucked" and "I'm a Cunt" finger-painted in rainbow all over their bodies.

The protest against Candidate Dim breaks down fairly quickly once it's announced he's gone on to Vientiane. A few zealots claim they'll follow him there and put up road blocks for some reason, but the mob soon disperses and the morning gets started as the first bottles of the day crack open and plastic buckets are filled with liquid love.

"We'll protest against him anyway," we cry, hoisting our buckets, convinced we've somehow won this exchange. It's a happy day for R.E.I.N.

The sun is high; the air is warm. Jacky appears with another red plastic bucket sloshing about with four straws. We each take two and hit the bucket, sipping away like two honeybees on an overgrown blossom. The buckets are endless, a never-ending cocktail, a drinker's mansion wrapped in plastic, leading toward your final transformation as a beast. The idea is to get smashed immediately. Soon enough, I'll be dancing around in my swim trunks, and there's nothing I can do about it. It's only a matter of time before the juice hits me and makes me understand this.

"Stop looking around! You've got to feel it!" Jacky cries.

"I am feeling it!" I shout, and start chugging the bucket over the rim.

"If I don't have anyone to dance with, I need you to be my dancing partner!" she yells over the music, never missing a beat.

"I'll do my best!" I holler back, and do my best impression of whatever Paprika and Maya are doing next to us, laughing happily in matching sunglasses, tangoing up on a platform.

There beside the sparkling river is the lush grass and clear blue sky of a summer that never ends. Here and there I catch glimpses of that crazy vision: a place of music, sunshine, and peace welcoming all people, free from class or occupation, a communist paradise with each and all as one, here on the river Vang Vieng. Here comes the traveling man and the wandering woman, in perfect harmony, anarchy, as strangers, friends, bedfellows, soulmates who arrive with no invitation needed, no reason to live, and therefore none to die for either, which to the members of R.E.I.N. means to simply live without regret, in defiance of time, ignorant of death.

None of us will ever die here. Not us. We'll grab a bucket and pour it back endlessly as if trying to make ourselves spout out the truth in a confession somewhere down a long line of bars so far you can't even remember what time it is. Finally at the height of all the endless chatter, the noise of screaming conversations, laughing and yelling and being brought to the most basic words that still contain any meaning, the aping of primitive language only to gibber, "Hey! Let's procreate!"

The music is so loud that I can't even hear anything. I simply smile at Jacky dancing and acting to my surprise sort of reserved, self-aware, looking for someone. She smiles to herself and shakes her head back and forth, dancing without having to try to be sexy; she just

is. She puts her hands in the air and twists her hips, claps her hands, pumps her fist, and laughs as I grind up on her. *Where will we be when the sun dies?* They throw you in until finally you feel nothing, fly into the water, land in a tube, and float away to the next bar.

Soon we're adrift in the river of floating people; all of them, like me, holding their precious drinks, splashing along in tubes, gently paddling toward the ropes cast nearby, grabbing hold, and letting the bartenders pull them up. It's a strict catch and release system. You let yourself be caught, and when you're ready to move on, you release. There are several ways of doing this. The preferred methods are by zipline, trapeze, or rope swing. Not all recommended for beginners, of course. You can almost tell how long a guy has been traveling based on one extraordinary dive. Most people land badly, being unskilled, drunk, and overambitious. No one seems content with a simple cannonball into the water unless they're still sober. No one is sober. Once the punch has them, they go flying in at all angles and directions, and the splash, while appearing painful, is completely drowned out by the blasting music, making it even more surreal as people dance around with drunks awkwardly flying into the water behind them.

So much color and inspiration. What would Vincent have thought of this? Girls with tanned bodies laid out in the sun with flowers painted on their thighs and stomachs. A sea of absinthe. More finger-painted messages. "Jesus was a Jew" on a freckle-faced Irishman. "Paint is Gay" on another guy's back. What are these? Zen koans? I used to have the power to discern such messages. Now they only point me to my drink. *How many have I had?* I've lost Jacky. There she is, shouting the happy cries of, "Oh my god! What're you doing here?" Some guy she knows. Looks like an old flame. I decide to dive off the planks when I feel a hand clasp my shoulder.

"Jergen!"

I turn and see my fellow agent holding a beer, still dripping wet from the river. I almost hug him I'm so glad to see him. A group of singing Brits passes by.

"Where the hell have you been? Candidate Dim's on his way to Vientiane! We've gotta stop him!"

"Stop him? From doing what?" Jergen asks blissfully, drunk and possibly high on ecstasy.

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

"Candidate Dim?"

"The one who gave you the pill."

"I got it from Waldo."

"Waldo?"

"Yes, there he is. Over there."

I turn and look past the volleyball court and see him, that nefarious double agent handing out blue pills to make agents forget their mission. He's dressed from top to bottom like that ubiquitous beatnik, hiding amongst the crowd of half-naked bodies, that red and white striped shirt, glasses, and beanie. I hate the idea that I now have to take him out, but I decide to wait until he's done motorboating.

"What lies inside the mind of a person who packs their luggage with a Waldo disguise?" I ask Jergen as we watch Waldo pour shots from a bottle of vodka surrounded by Swedish swimsuit models, burying his face in their tits.

"A genius we cannot understand," Jergen says.

“It’s too late, isn’t it?” I ask him.

“It’s still early,” Jergen replies, glancing at a wristwatch that isn’t there, replaced by a tan line.

“I meant for us. This dream. Vang Vieng.”

“It’s happening already. Look.”

I follow his long point finger towards the river where already the evidence of Candidate Dim’s presence is found: a fast-food burger wrapper.

We walk over to the water and fish it out with a stick, ignoring the splashing bodies around us, the partiers dancing and trying to throw each other in.

“That’s one of his,” Jergen confirms, eyeing the specimen hanging from the end of the stick. “Tarantula Burger from the looks of it.”

“So it begins,” I reflect 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 already begun, long before we came here. Trust me. There’s nothing we could’ve done,” Jergen comments prophetically.

“What’re you talking about? Are you saying he’s—”

“I’m not talking about Candidate Dim. I’m talking about us. This revolution. We never had a chance. All we had was a moment in history. To unite and stand against someone, to fight for something. A way to reassure ourselves that there was good in this world, and that we could stand there and fight for it. But what is good? Are we good because we say so? What do you think guides us but our highest esteems, this worship of freedom?

Are we not slaves to our own desires? How can we know purpose when morality becomes an invention of our mind? We pick and choose at our own convenience. Our hunger becomes a reward. Candidate Dim and all the others like him have already won because they believe in something, as shallow and corrupt 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 on to the next coopted revolution, branded into the next commercial catchphrase. Don't give credit to their overwhelming strength. Instead weep over our crippling weakness. Nihilism is dead, and we have killed it."

We stand there by the shade tree watching the scene of afternoon delight pass by carefree while at our backs lies the hot intrusive breath of apocalypse.

"I thought you were supposed to be all carefree and happy on that stuff," I say finally.

"I'm Norwegian. This is me being happy."

A little later, Jergen disappears to get another drink and doesn't return. "I need some air," I mutter to myself.

I realize I'm outside.

A Lao guy hands me a rope, and without thinking, I swing. The sudden splash into the water snaps me out of my daze. I grab a stray tube and glide away in the flow of the current. I lie back and close my eyes, no longer sure what belongs to me. My soul, my body, my mind. I'm just another note in the music, written upon the radiant sheets, all these floating donuts playing melody, dotting a river of sheet music as we pass in a stream. I suddenly want to escape, find a sense of peace, become a monk, and receive enlightenment under a Buddha tree. Fishers of men lift me out of the waters. A cloud passes over and darkens the sun.

I feel her hands suddenly whirl me around, but as I'm already spinning, I dip into a windmill and almost break my neck. Jacky pulls me up onto my feet and shouts so I can hear.

"Having fun?"

I feel myself nodding, floating in the air. My smile stretches so wide it feels like my cheeks are about to tear. My teeth grind against each other in a ghastly fashion.

Did Waldo spike my drink?

I turn back and see him at the bar, his bespectacled face laughing at me.

Damn it. I've been compromised!

"Let's get you some water," Jacky shouts so I can hear.

"Okay," my voice seems to echo, but there's only this beat that drives the symphony, that drives the life, that drives the whole damned river.

I'm afraid to leave now, feeling as if I have found the source of all this life around us, so beautiful, so idyllic, so crazy, wild, and free.

Water's a good idea. Pretty sure I'm dying.

"I'm sorry," I say to Jacky as we sit down and I chug a bottle of water.

"Sorry for what?"

"Making you do this. You go on. Have fun. I'll see you in the morning."

"I knew I'd have to take care of you."

"It was Waldo. He's a double agent. He's working for the CIA!"

She touches my forehead, almost tenderly, but drunker.

"You're such a nice boy. Why doesn't anyone try to keep you?"

"Do you want to dance?"

"No, let's do something better," Jacky cries, eyes blazing. "Let's go mud-wrestle. Come on!"

She grabs my hand and off we go to the mud pits where a few friendly matches are already in play. Lao guys stand off to the side with buckets of water ready to make more mud. I squish onto the scene like a jellyfish. It feels like I have no legs. I resist the urge to rub the goop all over my body. My entire nervous system is alight with an addictive tingly sensation.

Jacky skips the warmup and approaches me, hands out in a convincing pose, daring me to make the first move. *What am I supposed to do? Tackle her?* I make a little mudball instead and toss it at her feet, expecting this to lead to some amorous grappling. She charges like a rhino, scoops me in a judo toss, and stands over my fallen body like Muhammad Ali.

"I dated an MMA fighter," she boasts.

"Well, I dated a nurse!" I shout for no reason and execute a takedown, which she blocks impressively, and pretty soon we're just rolling around in the mud. I feel her skin soft, cold, and wet, now growing warmer, that little space between our bodies which becomes no space, just her lying on top of me, that feeling as if the clay is baking, the fire raging in the kiln, and both of us know I'm not making a giraffe in there, but something seems to be taking form. She sits on top of me, dominating me, for what purpose, I still don't know. I see her

smiling less mischievously now. Her blue-green eyes capturing the sun, her dirty gold hair hanging down in my face.

Rising from the muck, we laugh as I chase her around from bar to bar and I stalk her as she weaves in and among the people, appearing like someone and then reappearing as someone else. Smiling, laughing at being caught, I almost have her cornered for a drink before she slips away again. The last bar I see her at she's wearing a flower in her hair. A plumeria, her favorite.

"Where'd you get that?" I ask her.

"Someone gave it to me," she says and lets me hold her hand. Suddenly my hand is cold and wet. The moment she allows you take hold, she jumps in. You have to go with her.

I know she's impossible to capture, impossible to hold, like that flower you find on dilapidated streets that somehow seems like a glimmering door. The moment you pluck it, it's already faded. No way to return. We're separated on the river, and I find myself headed down the rushing rapids while she sails on slowly, looking back at me and shouting, "Where you going?" But I have no idea.

Jostled along some bumps downriver, I eventually find myself far from the noise, away from the bars and the people and the music. The echo of bass quickly fades into the stirring buzz of insects and babbling stream. I float on my tube down a channel surrounded by grass and canopied by jungle trees. The hidden hollow seems to send drones to spy on me. Dragonflies helicopter around me, taking photos and sending them back to headquarters. Even in a paradise formed from the imagination and desires of the heart, to defeat the lonely darkness, the bird-calls that inspire music as we make love beneath the archetypal windows,

we still have this place of silence away and down the river where we belong. *How many of us disappear into the forest only to walk alone? Which of us will survive in the end?*

Surely they find someone to love and settle or simply leave and forever become a shadow on the wall. And then they grow up. Their seed becomes a legacy of lostness, and that desire to range across mountains and float down rivers stays deep in us still. *What makes us wander from the fire, from the beat of the drums? Who's here in the presence of the silence of the trees, and the infinite days when there is no one left?*

The universe keeps dividing itself in half, and yet the only world I live in is this one. To impregnate a planet, the full moon of a woman, this alien invasion sending all of a million and one ships in three bursts of blast-off. White sails gliding through the water, into the girl's arms, into an unraveling of culture, unwrapping myself from my own preconditioning. The last waning bows of sunshine stone me quietly that shimmering orange towards the horizon. Let me be like the sky that remembers this time pink and nostalgic while looking at something new.

I feel the jolt of my tube hitting and scraping the sloping side of the riverbank. I sit up, turn, and look around me and see a bamboo shack by the water, the limestone hills rolling in the distance, a dirt road that leads through the grasses back to Vang Vieng. A young woman tends the kitchen as her little boys play about in the front. A dog sits curled in the dirt, gnawing some bones, getting shooed by the broom on its backside as I approach the simple wooden table. I order spicy chicken salad, sticky rice, and beer. Bob Marley sings in the background and everything is calm. Everything seems still, the sun frozen there in the middle of the sky in its lazy descent behind the palm trees.

The next morning always hits you as a sort of surprise. You're somehow still alive. There are greenish-brown flakes all over your clothes and the bed. The room is dark. There's no view of anything from behind those curtains besides another guesthouse. I look and see Jacky's golden-brown hair fanned around a pillow wearing my t-shirt and boxers.

Flashbacks of the night before creep back into my head. I turn and see someone's half-dreaded tangle of hair in a bed across the room. The *dong*-joint, which we had attempted to roll out of Vietnamese currency for lack of rolling papers, lays there dead and badly singed. More weed remains crumbled around the dresser. Jergen comes out of bed in women's panties. I look under the blanket and gasp. None of us seem to be wearing proper underwear.

"Oh my God. Take off my knickers," Jacky screams. "Actually, keep them on, keep them on!"

"Can you stop yelling? My head feels like it's going to explode," Jergen mumbles.

"Where the hell are we? What country is this?" I cry.

I find myself drifting back to the Full Moon Party. Fire shows and fire dancing all around us. We decide we are weary of alcohol and agree to do mushroom shakes instead. We let Maya guide us into the trance, each of us taking a cup and downing it and noting that it tastes sort of like vanilla ice cream, only there's a grainy feeling at the end. "Get all that in; that's the psilocybin," Maya coaches. "That's where the spores are. Remember, stay positive. Align your chakras."

Things seem to be going well. Just another mysterious drink we have collectively decided to toss back like Kool-Aid at a Jonestown retreat, no big deal. Get in touch with your spiritual side, your other side, the parts that lurk in the night. The DJ senses our chemical

change and plays the same reggae song over and over again. Not only do we enjoy the endless repetition; we demand it. We sing the lyrics all wrong and are struck by how these words somehow describe the moment, the feeling we've been searching for all night.

I'm going to put on my iron shirt

And fly to outer space.

The singer's voice is a raspy Jamaican. We can't be sure what he means. There's a huge circle of dancers, and everyone just goes in the middle and acts like a fool. Some dance by jumping around on one foot to the other. Others move their arms in waves and twist their hands as if casting a spell. There's openness and safety in this place. There is a pregnant moon above us. Everyone is beautiful. Everyone is perfect just the way they are. I can see their souls in their eyes. I feel the fellowship of these gentle spirits, and I wonder how anything that has ever happened came to be, and then forget, because of this overpowering feeling of love. The love is so strong I grab a stranger's hand and kiss it for no reason at all.

I do this several times.

I've been doing nothing but drinking mysterious beverages for the last 24 hours. This thought comes sweeping past me as I suddenly feel my stomach a gurgling as though replaced by a cauldron filled with a bubbling brew. There's a breakout of cold sweat, a panic, and I quickly dive into the bushes down towards the water away from the party. I pray no one is making love nearby as I lower my shorts just a second too late and then grin and bear it as the evacuation process begins. The sound of the river mutes this sickening chorus of liquid

and mushrooms. Everything I have ever eaten, drank, thought about eating or drinking, has now fired out of the rocket ship and gone off into space. The river accepts my offering with her endless song, and I stand there alone and in the dark, feet wet, shorts around my ankles, which are from what I can guess, slightly shit-stained.

There are flashes of fire in the air. Flashbacks of LSD programs in the dark. I see fire, torches, and tortured faces like melting ice cream distorted in the hellfire of war and savagery. The night lights up with chemicals trailing comet tails and falling stars, flares above the trees. There are screams in the night. A shadow agency dosing soldiers strapping skulls to movie theater seats. I watch traumatic moments of another life over and over on repeat. I'm an animated deer. Hunters shoot my mother. I never even see who they are. I just feel myself running and feel her fall behind 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, shoot 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 out. I gnash my teeth and try to save her and find the back of my head smashed by rifle butt. I feel nothing. The film replays again.

My chakras feel nauseous and sick. The feeling passes and I find the resolve to come back to camp. Like an animal moving in the darkness, I simply act. I wash my ass with water, my feet, my ankles, and give my shorts as an offering to the river goddess, which takes them and sends them floating down current into the impenetrable darkness where these evil thoughts will stay. I stare into a fire. The all-consuming dance of a flame. *Why do they dance,*

the life of a fire, the life of a soul, dancing as they die? But only we know they're dying. Only they know how glorious it is to dance on fire and die.

"Oh my God, where have you been?! What're you wearing? Is that a...?" Jacky begins hooting with laughter, then suddenly stops and continues her plea. "He's here! What am I going to do?"

"Your fiancé?" I ask, my voice traveling some vast distance of space, mesmerized by the flame, somehow knowing who and what we are talking about and answering via radio waves.

"No, that fuck boy who shagged the maid. Oh, wake up. Snap out of it. I need you to walk with me. I can't let him see me alone. You said you would be my friend; now come on!"

Something tells me I may not be the best man for the job, but damn it, I'm all she's got. Searching for Maya, Paprika, or Jergen is out at this point. I have a terrible feeling that if I go in among the dancers, I may never return.

"What do we do?" I ask nervously, my fear growing in-sync with hers. I break my eyes away from the hypnotic flame and look at her. The wreath of flowers from a love-fest sits fresh in her hair that somehow she managed to escape.

"We've got to get back to the guesthouse. 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!"

“Which direction is it? Where are we? The mushrooms were poisoned. I can't see anything!”

We run blindly for what seems like a very long time, but mustn't have been that long because we bump straight into Jacky's old flame with his new bird, as Jacky would say, probably hoping for a bump-in just so he could display his sexual and emotional wellness to her.

“Antonio!”

He's a lot different from what I imagined. I sort of pictured him to be a strapping Sicilian with thick brown hair tied in a ponytail wearing white linen shirts to ripple over his muscles as he zips around on his Vespa. It certainly seemed that way when she had recounted her days in Rome. “Italians are lovely. Some of the most hospitable people in the world.”

“You mean waiters and guys who're trying to get you into bed? Those Italians?”

“You've got to go.”

He looks like he has a unibrow with a hooked nose and eyes filled with superiority. In another life, he would have been a conspiring Roman senator. All this I perceive through first impression, but the more I concentrate, the more he seems to look like an ostrich in a Hawaiian shirt with an Ethiopian supermodel beside him.

“Hello, Jacky. Where you running off to?” the ostrich opens its beak, smiling.

“Off with my boy,” Jacky says nonchalantly as I stand there and stare open-mouthed at the African girl's body wrap, which is decorated with tropical flowers in respiring bloom tendrils curling and uncurling over her breasts. She in turn, amusedly, and then disapprovingly, returns my stare.

“Hello *boy*,” Antonio says condescendingly. “Doesn’t speak English, does he? Must be nice to finally hear yourself talk.”

“He speaks. Go on, speak!” Jacky commands, elbowing me now.

“Squawk!”

“Very nice, Jacky.”

On a better day, he wouldn’t have caught me in a Vietnamese rice-hat and oversized novelty sunglasses. Worse still is the Beer Lao shirt that I’m now wearing like a diaper.

“Fuck off, Antonio,” Jacky says coolly and leads me away slowly, and then in a mad dash to escape.

“There’s the road. Oh God, we look crazy. Am I alright?” Jacky cries as we sprint blindly through the trees.

We stop beside the last torch, which separates us from the all-encompassing darkness and the menacing carnival of streetlights ahead. The blue-green planets of her eyes burst into flames.

“You’re fine,” I lie.

“I can’t believe I ran into that bastard. I come all the way out to bloody Laos and here he is waiting for me. Are you even listening? No, of course you’re not. You’re staring at the bloody wall!”

We’ve managed to reach the room somehow running through a delirium to the door. Pornographic visions of Gandhi and lost children and even more lost adults and dogs. Face-paint, neon colors, savage howling, laughter echoing eerily in the alleys.

“You’re better off without him,” I reply from an ethereal distance trying my best to be helpful, but finding it difficult to concentrate as vines and tendrils and lotus flowers grow like mystical spider webs along cracks in the plaster. “He’ll never understand what he’s lost until the flowers grow on the wall and civilization becomes lost in a jungle matrix of time and thought.”

“What on earth are you babbling about?”

“Sorry, that made more sense in my head. Just been thinking a lot.”

“I bet you have.”

“Ever since this evening, this whole place has turned to darkness, literally, figuratively. Every beautiful afternoon submits to the darkness and uncertainty of night. That’s our future, this whole experiment; our search for freedom is a wandering through the trees. We don’t know where we’re going or what it is we’re searching for. All of the hook-ups and one-nights that’ll occur in this place, and then we’re back on the road the next morning. Where can we go to find a home? We come in search of paradise, but if it only lasts for a moment, what are we really searching for? Here a guesthouse, another night of love forgotten. Just a memory, but all around the infinite of whatever this life is.”

Jacky listens and cocks her head, but doesn’t move, standing in front of the bed where I’m now sitting, the light above her head forming that halo not unlike an angel running away from home.

“We come to this place to find freedom, and how does that freedom express itself but pleasure and the reckless drowning of our souls in liquid and smoke? We celebrate ourselves and call it a new civilization among the tatters and remains of one that’s dying, a people for whom a loss for the cares of daily life is a privilege. We dance on the graves of an empire and

howl at the moon like the wolves sent to hunt among the remains of a culture. We've come to this place of the most afflicted, most impoverished, and wonder at their happiness despite having so little, their endless resourcefulness and tenacity fueled by the things that really matter, which is family and love. They have a history that can't be broken, an ancestry that stretches beyond time. Meanwhile we've come in search of the end of it, to make a new one, and have already divorced ourselves from all that we know, wandering on empty but full of hope in the illusion that we've been set free."

"Jesus, what on earth was in those shakes?"

"I'm sorry. Ignore me if I start to ramble."

"No, you're right. You can see it in the way they smile. They have something we don't. Maybe we're the problem."

"We're not all bad. I've met some of the most beautiful and amazing people on this journey. Do you remember when we went to the waterfalls?"

"Yesterday?"

"You were stretching and then you started walking off into the woods. There was this moment when the sun touched your hair, and these two white butterflies came out of nowhere and were fluttering around your head like you were a forest spirit or a goddess. Every time I see you, I think that you've been sent to teach me how to live, how to be free, how to not care about anything but the moment. That's what living is supposed to be."

"It doesn't last forever, but that's what makes traveling so addictive," Jacky nods, eyes flashing. "If only we could always be this honest in the real world. We're all just travelers in the end."

I stare at my hands and watch the splotches of blood dance like festive amoebas.

“I have to tell you something.”

“I reckon.”

I confess everything else I didn't tell her—from my meeting with Hey to my involvement with the spooks. I take out the camera and show her last night's group photo, all of us in various stages of hilarious pain.

Jacky paces the room, pausing to look at me, smirking, frowning, and then pacing again. She sits beside me on the bed and looks me in the eyes. Her eyes seem to mirror my own black holes.

“You've got some good ones there.”

“Do you want a copy before I delete them?”

“Obviously, and does this mean you've gone rogue?”

“I'm going to Cambodia to meet the Dalai Lama,” I hear myself saying as words come forth before I even think them. “I'll use my body as his shield if I have to, but I'm not giving them anything that'll get you guys in trouble. Everything I've seen here, experienced and witnessed, it's not perfect, but it's not evil. It's just the wild heart of the free, looking for change, fighting for the cause of the people. I don't know what the answer is.”

Jacky gives me a look, then sighs and rolls her eyes.

“Bloody hell. Maybe I should've drank my shake after all. If I had, I'd probably be like you and feel all, I don't know...”

“Transcendent?”

“Christ, I’m zonkers.”

“You’re not mad at me, are you?”

“I knew you were playing dumb from the moment I met you. I didn’t know you were working for the bloody CIA.”

“They still haven’t paid me. We never discussed compensation.”

“What’re you going to do?”

“I’m going to find my True Love.”

“How do you know if you’ll find her?”

“I suppose that’s what makes it romantic.”

Jacky smiles and touches my face and points my eyes up at hers. The ceiling is filled with shadows, the faint recollections of a night under starry reflection, the feebleness of a canoe, knowing you are out there in vast infinite space, a tiny thing so fragile and helpless, in the arms of a beautiful universe.

“I’m going to shower up. Are you coming?”

She walks to the doorway in her mud-stained bikini, preparing to undress, looking back at me.

“I suppose I should.”

“Come on then.”

I rise from the bed and follow her into the bathroom. The room is yellow and smells like jungle fungi and strawberry shampoo. I stand and watch as she starts the water, reaches

out and touches it, letting the water pour off her hand. She turns and takes off her bikini top, then, with the same nonchalance, removes her bottoms. She's shaved.

"Did you do that for me?" I ask, not sure how, but finding I'm now standing naked before her. My diaper has slipped magically away into the forest never to be seen again.

"Don't be absurd," she replies, and brings me into the water. We stand below the poorly working shower under a drizzle of naked and wet, standing face to face like animals meeting suddenly in the forest. Not threatened, but startled, curiosity warming with attraction, the water warm and cold at once drizzling slowly down one side, half her side and mine. She pulls me against her and kisses me with lips that softly taste, then take with passion my lips and tongue. The grit washes away from our bodies and smooths the layers of dirt and savagery that we are.

She gets on her knees and I don't know what she's doing or why except that somehow this is for my benefit and that she wants to make me happy. I find myself kissing her back in a weird place, as if there's something to find inside of her, an answer to this puzzle of life, the mystery of this moment that might unearth or unveil the greatest answer of all.

I stand up and she guides me as water drifts down my chest to my stomach and I become suddenly enveloped in warmth.

"I'm inside you," I gasp in bewilderment as I stare into Jacky's eyes.

Sex is puzzling on mushrooms, like a strange dance of souls looking both inside and outside of myself, now into this other person, through the link between the rods of spiraling color flashing reflecting sky and water, tree leaf and shade, deeper into the earth, the spirit of the world in hers, as she fades away and we both begin to disappear.

I lift her like a caveman and lay her dripping wet onto the bed. I'm flesh, spirit, and machine. I feel no sign to stop or slow, go signs keep the pace, faster and faster until she makes it apparent for the maid not to come in, as if there was one.

"Fuck, what did they put in that shake?" she asks me breathlessly.

I want to tell her mushrooms, but for a moment I ponder the measurements of milk and ice cream.

"Fuck me, baby. Fuck me like your island girl," Jacky moans as she rolls over and gets on top. My unbroken hand lies between her breasts as she kisses my fingers, my wrist is preoccupied with her heartbeat, matching mine beat for beat, and I have the strange sense of time-travel, as if we've reincarnated and she's become my True Love in a different form.

I brush my bandaged hand through her hair, finding it peculiar that there was evidence that this journey had scarred me. I'll never be the same, even in the next life, this pain, this cycle, this tragedy that I'll never escape until one day I discover the answer, that wisp in the light, the refractions in the water, that smell in the air that always just escapes you before you have it, and it's gone.

"I found you," I whisper and kiss her neck.

"I was here, waiting for you on the island. Come on, baby. Take me there."

I close my eyes and slowly count to ten.

I hear the sound of the motor from the rigger bouncing us up and down against the chop, the water clear and sparkling turquoise blue, a color that would always stay with you once you had seen it, swam in it, felt its warmth against your body, swimming out to the

distant buoy, resting against a blazing screen of sapphires. The lazy hot air and the cool Pacific winds.

I see her in the moonlight, in the hammock, staring out at the ocean. I hear the waves in the distance. Her silhouette glows in silver.

Jacky gets on the bed and arches her back, hands and knees, turning her face up to me, her eyes as turquoise as the ocean. I see the bungalow, the moonlight descending through the open window, and hear the sound of a crashing sea. I feel the past slipping away from me and see the present expand into infinite prisms as we transport onto the beach where I once searched for electric blue fish with my True Love. She's still there, vanishing into a past no outrigger can ever go to. We dig our knees into the sand. Snow begins falling from the skies, falling upon the beach, glittering the paradise shores with a crystal white, the moonlight turning everything silver, snowing harder and harder.

"I'm Sam I am...I'm Sam I am...I'm Sam...I...AM!"

There's a silhouette on the hammock, looking out at the open window at the sea bathed in moonlight, her face in shadow. We run through the sand glittering with crystal snow. She takes a handful of the stuff and marvels at it in awe, then with a cry of delight rubs a handful on my cheek. I feel nothing. I see nothing. I close my eyes and try to see her face. I see darkness. I see moonlight, her naked body on the bed..

"Zonkers," I say absentmindedly rolling the crumbs of weed on the dresser into another Vietnamese dollar, lighting it on fire, and watching it burn like old newspaper.

“Oh, here are my rolling papers. They were in my pocket the entire time,” Jergen laughs.

The fire looks like fire again. I turn and look at Jacky's form under the blankets as she gets dressed out of Jergen's sight.

The room smells like weed despite our attempts to blow it out the window. It does little for our hangover, and heightens the bizarre sense that everything that happened last night was a dream, but there's comfort in knowing that we can now go out and find fruit shakes and coffee. After we smoke, Jergen puts his hand on my shoulder and says, “I have to go back to my guesthouse. I'll see you later.”

“See you later. We'll be at the cafe.”

He gives me a wink and Jacky a nod, and fades into the sunlight. I can still see his tall loping figure disappear into the soft hum of the Vang Vieng morning, his blonde dreadlocks slowly fading into the distance, and then gone behind the passing of *tuk-tuks* and motorbikes. We never see Jergen again.

Paprika and Maya are nowhere to be found. We walk to the cafe, sit outside, drink Lao coffee, and wait for them until it's time to get on our bus to Vientiane. We had somehow envisioned this ending differently, perhaps with a goodbye hug at the bus stop, watching each other get on separate buses towards our own little destinations, shooting forever out there, not wondering if our paths would ever cross again, but welcoming it as much as it feels good to be welcomed.

How do any of us ever know where we're going, or when we'll get there? Who of us arrive on time? 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 try to see Jacky's face, but she hides from me, too hungover to tell me how she feels without throwing up, while I alone hum silently the fragments of my thoughts.

"She's gone," I say on the bus finally.

Jacky turns and looks at me, studies me for a moment with those blue-green eyes, and then touches my cheek with her fingers.

"Stay out of Thailand," she whispers and turns back towards the window to watch Vang Vieng disappear as we roll away.

Vientiane

Jacky and I arrive in Vientiane as the sun drips pink in its long descent. Purple shadows spread over the yellow butter and creamy French architecture, and the air smells of banana crepes. *Tuk-tuks* and slow traffic fill the streets, motorbikes piled with husband, wife, and at least three kids, one baby riding on daddy's lap and holding onto the handlebars, boxes in tightly bound stacks tied to the back. We arrive at the magic hour when the streets in Vientiane begin dying with the waning of light and the streets don't wake up again until sunrise. We're marked for easy traps and accosted by pimps of vacant rooms and empty restaurants, but only *tuk-tuk* drivers seem to wait.

We decide to split up in different directions and converge in an hour with any news. The hour passes as the sun sits still, and we meet in front of the banana crepe cart, both of us shaking our heads.

“Everything’s booked and the streets are still empty. That’s Laos for you,” Jacky gripes. “I didn’t know there even was a high season.”

“You know what they say: Dry season is high season.”

“I’m not sleeping outside,” she says. “We’d better find an internet cafe. There’s got to be something—”

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to interrupt, but I couldn’t help overhearing your situation.”

We turn around and notice him for the first time. It’s obvious he’d been lingering, eavesdropping, waiting for the opportunity to strike. An interloper, vaguely Middle Eastern, or Eastern European, his accent sounding Transylvanian, his entire attention directed at Jacky’s glistening cleavage.

“Hey, eyes up here!” I snap my fingers, answering for her, not liking the smell of Dracula’s mustard.

“I have a bed available in my room, if you’re willing to share with me and my friends,” the vampire continues, smiling a devious tea-stained grin.

“How many friends?” Jacky asks dubiously.

“Just three: Me, myself, and I,” he replies, but doesn’t laugh and gives no indication as to whether this is a joke or not.

“Should I take it?” Jacky asks, wrinkling her brow and looking at me searchingly. It’s clear she sees her options as thus: fighting off cockroaches, rats, and stray dogs, or just one altruistic vampire. The impact of leaving me behind is unclear. I see her leaning toward the room.

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

“You can always sleep on the streets,” Dracula reminds her. “Anyway, I think your boyfriend is getting mad at me, so I’ll leave...”

We watch as he pretends to leave, but doesn’t, finding a reason to search his fanny-pack instead. The moment stretches to the point of awkwardness, and just as he begins to zip back up, she agrees.

“All right, I guess I have to,” Jacky coos and smiles at me apologetically. “What about you, love?”

I see her throwing in that extra “love” just to soften the feeling of concrete I’d soon be lying on, but I appreciate it all the same. *What can I do?* A girl needs a bed.

“I’ll figure something out.”

“Sure?”

“Go ahead. We’ll have breakfast.”

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

“How’s eight?” I suggest, and we agree, both of us knowing we might never see each other again.

I’m wandering along the dilapidated street on the edge of the riverbank when I see him sitting at one of those shops that always keep moving, selling everything and nothing,

depending on who it is and where you are. He's a beardless blonde kid with his hair cut so short it almost has a silver sheen. He's college material, but not a student, tells me he's Parisian, but speaks fluent Lao and Thai, and he's not lying. He's dressed in expensive street fashion, even wears some gold chains; definitely not a backpacker.

"What's up, bro?" I hear him rasp as I slowly pass 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.

"Got a light?" I ask, and walk up to the storefront, where he sits drinking a beer, smoking a clove under the dim lights of the shop, the river and the street acting as dark and silent witnesses.

"Sure," he replies, looking at me with those discerning eyes. "You're an American."

"Yeah, I used to be a good one too," I say, holding the lighter in my hand.

"Need a smoke?" he offers, taking one out for himself after I gratefully pluck one from his silver case.

"I don't really smoke," I explain, lighting the clove, coughing on the fragrant embers and handing back the lighter.

"One of those nights, eh? Take a seat. I can order you something."

"Thanks," I say, and hit the chair like a sack of rice. "I wouldn't mind a beer. My name is Sam, by the way."

“Nice to meet you, Sam. You can call me Saint,” he replies, and then calls to someone in the back in what sounds like fluent Lao, which is almost the strangest thing I’ve seen today. He returns to me and smiles. “She’ll bring you a beer.”

A young serving girl brings two bottles of Beer Lao followed by whom I guess to be the shop’s matron. The 30-something-year-old Indian woman seems to see me with her red dot only as she sweeps the streets and nods at the serving girl to go back inside. Saint looks back at the woman and says something with a schoolboy smile in what sounds like textbook Hindi. She gives a tight grin and sweeps the streets once more before fiddling with some flowers on her way back in.

“She’s in charge here,” Saint whispers and pops the beer open for me with a wink. “So, what brings you to Vientiane?”

“I want to end the cycle,” I groan after taking a long cold draught from the bottle.

“Aha. We call that ‘samsara,’ the endless cycle of rebirth,” Saint replies. “You came to the right place.”

“You ever think you knew somebody, but it turns out you didn’t know them at all?”

“Trust me, I know perfectly what you mean.”

We clink bottles and drink beer like water, suddenly thirsty in this quiet evening of fraternal therapy. The supersized moths of the Mekong flutter and bang against the fluorescent lights and the awning as we wonder at the mysteries of the other sex, sharing our war stories like two soldiers wounded in the field of love. We finish our beers, which Saint says he’ll pay for, but doesn’t actually pay for, instead telling his ‘mom’, scary Hindu gangster lady, that he’ll see her later on; he’s taking his new pal out for drinks.

“I call her ‘Mom,’” Saint tells me as we walk toward some bar he knows. “She’s not my real mom. I have a lot of moms here. Better than a real mom, right? Mine kicked me out when I was 18. She got sick of me, I guess.”

“How long have you been in Vientiane?”

“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 conclude.

“Exactly.”

We arrive at our destination, an unassuming building on the corner of a dead street. The splash of luminescence comes from above on the second floor, where some jazzy blue neon glows in darkened windows that allow for a view into this dreary nothingness. I’m picturing plastic tables and floors where it’s okay to piss on. But as we enter I’m surprised to find the joint swanky, big enough to find a quiet corner for some hands down the pants in a leather booth; a semicircle of a black bar lined with hanging glasses and mirrors if you’re just here to watch the game. There seems to be a conflict of vision and reality. Maybe an investment made on the ghost of a promise that the tides of money would make Vientiane the next Kuala Lumpur, or Bangkok even, instead of a city with a midnight curfew where nothing happens.

Bottles glisten under the dimmed ambience; servers wear black shirts and black pants, and appear well-groomed. Yet despite the aim of cocktails and sparkling wine being serviced to stylish professionals, there are only bloated old men in soccer jerseys, clientele that don’t

even see the point in wearing proper pants. Swimming trunks and flip-flops, because fuck it, it's Laos. Pints line the bar with girls in miniskirts standing beside pink gorillas and mandrills who are apparently territorial, taking a moment to pause from shouting profanely at the soccer game on screen to stare us down with pure hostility, particularly me, for no reason that I can immediately perceive until I realize that the idea of an Asian who isn't serving them in some way is seen as a threat.

I want to leave, but in order not to offend, I decide to have one beer. One more beer with this young stranger who seems like a really nice guy, but is possibly affiliated with some kind of underworld network that I'm not sure I want to know about. There he is at the bar now, getting our drinks, not paying of course. We don't have to pay anywhere is what I'm guessing. *Perfect*. He talks with the bartender, a slick-haired mustached Laotian who looks exactly like the kind of guy who can slip you information without saying a word. If they exchange paper, I'm out of here. Saint comes back with our two pints, but not before briefly engaging with some of the guys at the bar, perhaps explaining my presence, or making some loose commitments to get them this or that. *Jeez, what am I doing here? Leave now!*

"Thanks for the beer," I say and clink pints with him, letting the amber hops massage my worried neck.

"Is everything okay? Not your kind of scene, huh? I'd take you to a disco, but we'd have to go out of town. Vientiane has this curfew. You can't be on the streets 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. Where are you staying?"

“Uh, not sure. I was thinking that I could just sleep somewhere on the street, near the river. Under the stars, that kind of thing.”

“Not a good idea,” Saint dissuades me, his eyes concerned. “If the police find you, you might get charged with vagrancy. The laws here are pretty strict. Don’t you have any friends here? You came by yourself?”

“That’s the thing. I was with this girl. We traveled to Vang Vieng together. Then she met this guy who said he had a room and she kind of, well, I guess she ditched me.”

Saint shakes his head, tut-tutting in sympathy.

“I mean, I might see her tomorrow. I just met her. I don’t know. I’m kind of confused.”

“Well, there are lots of girls here. Take your pick. You’re an American. You can have any one you want. Just don’t fall in love.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. But when you said you were going to take me to meet some girls, I was thinking of something else.”

“Not pretty enough?” he asks, raising his eyebrows, pegging me now for some whore connoisseur.

“No, no. They’re very pretty. Very sexy, but I don’t think I’m that kind of guy.”

“Oh,” Saint says catching on, and then laughs. “They’re not prostitutes. You don’t have to pay them. They’re here on their own. Well, some of them are prostitutes. Most of them just want to meet foreigners. You don’t have to go home with them. You can just buy them a drink and talk. Most of them can speak English. Some English. Enough English, I guess.”

I take a long look at the gorilla with his hairy arms around the shoulders of two girls at once, laughing coarsely in the dark, having good nights and happy endings. A skinny little thing in miniskirt bends over to take a shot at the billiards table; her partner, or opponent, playfully rubs the end of his cue up her ass. She seems to enjoy it, or at least doesn't let it break her concentration.

"I appreciate the sentiment, but I'm pretty sure this isn't the answer. Maybe one day after my second divorce, I'll come back here. Until then I think I'm going to pass."

"You shouldn't be so hard on them," he giggles all childlike. "Or the girls. Most of them just want to take care of their family. 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 count, 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 money. Lots of girls just want to have sex with foreign men," Saint pauses and almost blushes. "Maybe foreigners do it better."

Saint laughs charmingly.

"You should meet my roommate. He's a sex addict. He is, as you say, a bitter divorced guy. 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. Anyway, it’s been good talking with you, Saint. I think I’m going to hit the road. I have to find a place to sleep tonight.”

“Why don’t you stay at my mom’s house? She lives in one of those mansions from the old days, before the revolution. It’s pretty nice actually. She’s trying to make it into a hotel, but it kind of ended up as a museum. There’s always an extra room.”

“You think she’ll be okay with that?”

“Yes, of course! She’ll be happy to meet you. She likes handsome guys. She’s kind of an alcoholic.”

“This isn’t some kind of brothel, is it?”

“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! There’s just one place I need to stop by before we go home. It’ll just take a minute.”

“O-kay,” I hear my voice croak, picturing Saint handing me two bricks of Golden Triangle heroin wrapped in brown paper, asking me to hold them in my backpack. I envision my execution by firing squad.

Saint disappears to settle our bill, which he won’t pay for, and basically leaves me wondering if I should run out the door as fast as I can. Despite his reassurances, I can’t help but assume my lodgings will be in some kind of pseudo-museum/hotel/whorehouse with a crazed old man running around inside ranting about the government, greeting me at the door

with an angry stiffy, spraying spittle in my face as he demands to know who I am and who I'm working for. I fix my gaze upon the view from the rooftop, revealing dimly lit orange streets below and a dark blue night, occasionally a stray dog running down the street doing nothing to avoid getting hit by the scatter of passing motorbikes. I listen to the sound of a *tuk-tuk* passing and then back to the ruckus of the bar, the last calls being taken, one for the road as different men leave with different girls, off to the rodeo.

Saint returns and we meander from the riverside road toward downtown, where we see the white government buildings and international hotels. The avenue is wider here, the architecture impressive in its illuminated silence. Here and there, and kind of everywhere, we see beggars and panhandlers, street musicians—some of them just kids—missing arms, missing legs, missing body parts.

“Did I tell you I was training to become a Buddhist monk?” Saint recalls, dropping some money in a legless guitarist’s hat. We pause and listen to the guy strum chords by Bob Marley in his wheelchair. “That’s why I came here to Laos. 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 utter in shock. “What happened? Did she catch you at the Ping-Pong show?”

“She thought I was cheating on her,” Saint shrugs nonchalantly, all of this old news. “She was helping me sell drugs. Like I said, I was a promoter. She was a bar girl. We just got caught up. All of the backpackers who come to party in Thailand take ecstasy, smoke weed, smoke meth, whatever you want. I could get anything. I became that guy. Eventually I got addicted. I couldn’t get out of the cycle. When she called the cops on me, I felt so betrayed. I

felt so angry and lost. But now, when I think about it, all she did was force me to get my life together. I escaped to a Buddhist temple and almost became a monk.”

“What happened?”

Saint sighs and flicks his clove regretfully.

“I was able to quit coke, pills, weed, meth. I even quit sex! I don’t even think about girls anymore. 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, finishes *Redemption Song*. The two of us clap for him, and he smiles the brightest smile you could imagine a guy with no legs smiling.

“I still plan on becoming a monk later on,” Saint says faintly, and puts more money in the guitarist’s hat. They fold hands and exchange *khob chai*’s. “I just want to help people.”

We walk through a warren of alleys until we finally stop in front of what seems to be a KTV silently glowing. I follow Saint down a dark rabbit hole and enter an underground that twists and turns until suddenly we come to a heavy wooden door.

Saint knocks three times, no special pattern, but loud because of the jazz that muffles from a deeper source. A panel in the door slides open and two black eyes check us out. The door clicks and we enter 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 looks like something between a maître d' and a gangster greets us with a smooth formality that makes it questionable whether he and Saint have ever met before. No words are exchanged and no questions are asked as he ushers us to the other side of the antechamber, opens the golden door and bows despite the obvious fact that we are both wildly underdressed. One of us looks particularly unbathed and has those wild what-the-fuck-is-going-on eyes just staring at the wonderland on the other side of the wall.

Before us extending through the blue dark, I see a posh lounge with a beautiful singer on the far stage sparkling in her black cocktail dress singing *So Insensitive*, the bluesy band behind her playing soft keys, rhythm guitar, and stand-up bass, each band member dressed in velvet while servers patrol the darkened perimeters, responding quickly to any candle being raised, a signal from the spread of circular tables, where gangster politicians from various nations around the world sit with their mistresses, mouthing drink orders and requesting ice amid clouds of cigarette smoke and music-drowned laughter.

"Welcome to the ASEAN," Saint murmurs for my ears only, as I continue gawking at the scene. There's a dance floor in front of the stage, the room divided into four sections, each section containing lounge seating with about half of the tables empty. We choose a table with a safe view of the old tycoons, mob bosses, and moguls dancing slowly to the bossa nova with their dates for the evening. These guys are even older, and the girls are way more beautiful than the skanks we'd seen back at the mandrill bar. Each girl wears a glamorous evening gown that she definitely doesn't own, and it almost seems like each one somehow fell off the stage from a Miss Universe pageant, or perhaps this is one of the hoops you have to jump through to get in. They've clearly mastered the discipline. Their eyes are heavy-lidded in eyeshadow and their cheeks touched with rouge, their statuesque faces emotionless

as they slowly step and turn in the arms of the old codgers whose wrinkly old faces glow with ecstasy.

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

“That’s not *kip*; that’s dollars.”

“Shit-za!”

Before the song ends, Saint goes off to take care of some business, and I am now nursing an overpriced beer which I shouldn't have ordered, needing something to hold onto which would give me strength. I need a drink as soon as I see the bastard, spot him, nearly dropping my water glass in the process. That rich old buffoon, dancing as if he’s on top of the moon, his soul pickled with happiness. Just when you think it’s another night out, there he is, Candidate Dim, tonight sporting an ambitious and slightly delusional toupee. So that’s why he’s in Vientiane. Of course! There’s no finer hair in the world than a Laotian’s. He’s here for a new wig!

I still owe the future Prime Minister a drink. The old splash in the face. Security is tight. The dance floor reserved just for them, the patriarch gangsters of the East, their bodyguards, soldiers, lawyers, and right-hand men all sitting in the dark beside their own escorts, enjoying themselves, but keeping their libations respectfully subdued. I sip my \$20 beer slowly, thinking about how I can skip the bill, rip that toupee off his head without getting captured, and disappear conveniently into the mist before getting shot in the leg. If I was a real agent, I’d blow the horn on all these crooked candidates breaking bed together, watching each other commit unfaithful acts, secretly filming each other in their hotel rooms, bonded together by blackmail, blood money and lawsuits. Tonight I’ll let them wine and dine and then sign away pieces of their hell-driven souls for another slice of the world. I’m only

here for Candidate Dim. The girl being turned counterclockwise in his arms meets my eyes by chance across the darkness, asking me in that brief moment, "When is this going to end?"

"Where are you, Louis?" I whisper in the near-dark.

"Right here."

"Louis!"

I drop my beer in shock and watch mouth-opened as Louis, dressed in a server's uniform, catches the bottle before it hits the floor. He puts the bottle back on the table gently and leans forward, pretending to adjust the napkins on the table.

"It's never too late for a Beer Lao," he murmurs, echoing the commercial none of us knew, his voice low and serious.

"You work here?"

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

"Are you—"

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

"Do you see that door next to the statue? When I leave your table, I need you to get back there and wait for my signal. As soon I signal, the guard will leave his post. The door will be open. I need you to open it and help whoever's in there get outside the club to safety. Can you do that?"

"My friend, I mean, this guy I came here with—"

"He's waiting outside. Don't worry. Just get to that door and open it after my signal."

"What's the signal?"

"A lot of fucking noise."

As soon as Louis leaves, I begin chugging what's left of my beer, clutching the bottle in case I need a weapon. I watch as Louis the waiter makes his way toward the center of the room where a bunch of suited gangsters sit with their girls. Rising slowly, I inch my way along the perimeter edgewise toward the secret door where Candidate Dim's muscle stands guard. I see that thick shaved skull turn and spot me and approach like the Terminator as I clownishly duck behind a statue of Mara, the goddess of death.

Suddenly there's an explosion in the room. I feel myself being thrown in midair, instantly thrust into Lao Time, my eardrums popped, all hell breaking loose. Fragments of glass spiral in slow-motion, sparkling shards in the midst of short-lived gunfire and the twisting of the first thug's arm. I stare in amazement as Louis spins him into an arm lock and then uses the momentum to do a flying roundhouse kick in the face of another goon. The gangsters all rise up from their seats in Lao Time with looks of rage twisting their faces as they scramble to grab Louis or their weapons while their girls scream and flee from the shattering glass and flipping furniture.

The band abandons the stage in a panic, knocking the mic stands over as the look on Candidate Dim's face goes from shock to fury and he pulls out a derringer and holds it against his date's ribs as she flails and tries to escape. Candidate Dim's muscle forgets me and goes bounding toward the melee. Louis is now doing Jackie Chan moves with the chairs, confusing and flip-kicking the gangsters as they struggle to get ahold of him. Some conveniently placed chandeliers provide some dazzle as Louis swings around comically,

kicking every one of them in the face. I sprint toward the curtains where Candidate Dim is attempting an escape.

Just as he spots me, he points his derringer in my direction and I throw the beer bottle watching it explode in midair. I come through the burst of broken glass with my fist cocked and punch the old man right in the face. His false teeth fly out of his mouth and spin in slow-motion and hit a rim shot on the cymbals. I grab his toupee (which is glued on surprisingly tight) and hold back a karate chop, threatening to crush his windpipe.

"I was only planning to throw water in your face. I didn't know it was going to be a hostage situation," I tell Candidate Dim, enjoying seeing his panic-stricken mug convulse in search of words.

"Ah-American. Let me go. They get me, it's over. No more Candidate Dim!"

"That's the idea," I hiss, grinning all shitty. "I'm going to let you go, but first consider this a warning. Keep your hands off the Dalai Lama, you hear me? Tibet is an autonomous nation. I don't care what the Chinese say. America says so."

"What talking about, you idiot?" Candidate Dim sputters angrily. "I not Chinese. I'm Uncle Sam, stupid. I'm your side!"

"What the hell you talking about, Dim? And make it fast. This Lao Time isn't going to last forever!"

"I puppet leader for transition phase. Open door for American business. Understand? White House gonna be furious. Bomb everyone. Campaign over. Junta win. Communist win. What you are? CIA? Looks too dumb for spy."

“Where’s Hey?” I growl and clamp my hand over his mouth, inside knowing that I had peed earlier without washing my hands.

“You not supposed to say his name,” Candidate Dim splutters desperately after I unclamp his mouth.

“Thanks for nothing,” I mutter and slowly loosen my grip on Candidate Dim’s toupee. I smooth it out for him, and then yank it off completely. He lets out a horrible shriek.

“I’m going to let you go, Dim. But just remember one thing. America is more than a nation of paradoxes. Sure, we don’t mind bombing brown people off the face of the planet when it’s convenient, while at the same time hating the thought of little babies being mutilated in the womb. It doesn’t make sense. It’s not supposed to. But one thing that we hold dear is that our operatives, foreign or domestic, don’t make us look like assholes. This isn’t some beauty pageant you’re representing here. A little dignity, please!”

Candidate Dim cowers away, and then runs as fast as his fat little legs can take him into the darkness, covering his naked pate in shame.

I turn around and notice his former hostage, a gorgeous girl in a golden gown with a matching yellow orchid in her hair still standing where I left her, waiting for permission to flee.

“Go on, miss. You’re free to go.”

She babbles wildly, gesturing and pointing toward the door. The door! Together we run back into the lounge, where bullet holes make a tight trail right behind us. We open the door and there’s a large dressing room filled with Miss Universe hopefuls all huddled in fear, crying out, but perhaps a little used to this sort of thing. They’re the most beautiful prisoners

I've ever seen. The door is open. The girl with the flower in her hair cries out something in Lao like, "What the hell are you waiting for?" The girls all come sprinting in tow, and we barrel through the antechamber spinning the maître d' on his ass, his head getting trampled by 20 pairs of stilettos, and I kick the door open and we burst upstairs into the warm night filled with red and blue lights.

Outside the club, there's a swarm of police vehicles and soldiers in green and black, rushing in just as we bust out from the karaoke. The Miss Universe contestants dash into the arms of various policemen and agents. The girl with the flower in her hair grabs my hand and pulls me along the shadows, not wanting to be seen. We duck down the alley and run until we're just out of reach of the lights and the crackling of megaphone.

Down by the river, she stops and removes her stilettos, now a head shorter than me. She glances up and touches my arm, stands on tippy-toe and kisses me on the cheek. I look into her eyes and see all that her makeup hides; she's just a kid. She turns and spirits away into the black night. I let her go. She knows where she's going, I hope.

"And now the movie ends," I say to myself aloud, and stand there for a moment, expecting credits to roll across the inky blue night above the Mekong as I go walking off into the darkness alone. Then I remember Saint.

"Saint!"

I run back to the scene and arrive just in time to see him being placed in the back of a police car, handcuffed, looking through the backseat window with his sad blue eyes. I'm stopped by a rough-faced guard, who intercepts me and speaks rapidly, shaking his head.

"Whoa, slow down there," Louis calls, stepping in from out of nowhere.

"What the hell is going on? He's innocent, I tell ya! We went there by mistake!" I start to explain.

"Hold on. Take it easy. Come here for a second," Louis motions me over, taking me and guiding me a little ways off the scene before I end up in the back of a squad car.

"Louis, you have to get my friend out of there. I'm staying at his mom's house."

"Your friend is a well-known dealer in these parts. He won't be charged with anything tonight, but we'll have to ask him some questions, just for formality's sake. I'll make sure he gets home safe," Louis says.

"Dealer? What do you mean 'dealer?'" I scoff, acting dumb.

"Where'd you two meet?" Louis asks, turning the tables on me.

"I hardly know the guy, I tell ya! I don't even know his real name!"

"But you're staying at his mom's house?"

"It's a brothel or something," I stammer. "Just trying to get my rocks off in Vientiane!"

"So he was pimping," Louis concludes casually.

"No, it wasn't like that at all. He just lives in a brothel. He's a Buddhist. You have to give him some credit for that!"

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

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

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

"But you won't..." I trail off, silently pantomiming a firing squad.

"No, definitely not. After questioning, we'll send him home."

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

"There's no crime for being a bad son," Louis agrees. "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 points out all too wisely.

"If they offer it."

"Go ahead."

I walk up to the police car now, the guard being given the nod by Louis to give me a minute to have a final word with Saint.

"Are you okay?" Saint asks me as I lean into the window.

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

Saint smiles.

"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 says without remorse. "It's my karma."

"Karma knows best."

"Can you just tell my mom what happened? I don't want her to worry. Reach into my shirt pocket" he says, and I fish out the business card of some place called Sabaidee House.

"This is where she lives."

"Not what I was expecting," I murmur, examining the card.

"It was nice meeting you. Good luck on the rest of your journey."

"You too. Thanks for everything," I tell 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 smiles, looks down, and nods. When he looks up, I'm pretty sure I see a twinkle.

"I will," he promises.

I walk away and get approached once again by Louis.

"Another day in the life, huh?" I quip.

"Yeah, that's right. Tomorrow, it will be someone else's turn. But there will always be more. Can I give you a lift?"

"Sure. You know where this is?" I ask and show him the card.

"Oh yes. Famous place."

"You mean, 'infamous?'"

"Not like that. Old mansion. Historical building. Very nice."

"Sweet."

"Get in," Louis says, and opens the door to a squad car.

"Thanks for saving the day back there."

"Just doing my job."

"Remind me to buy you a beer."

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

We cruise past the downtown esplanades and arrive minutes later on a dark street filled with stray dogs and clouds of huge insects having a nocturnal fiesta by the dismal street lights. Before we part ways, Louis gives me a little background on the house where I'm staying, an establishment run by a noble family punished by the regime for their prosperity under French rule, that once upon a time of land and servants, French tutors and English governesses, before the revolution woke up the coolies and they burned it all to the ground.

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

"There it is. See the house with the veranda?" Louis points to a French colonial mansion, rain-beaten with moss and vines growing wildly around the white stone. "I have to get going. My girlfriend, you know how it is."

"Yeah," I chuckle along, knowing I don't.

Louis drives off, leaving me standing there for a moment, unsure of what to do. I was kind of hoping he'd make the introductions, knock on the door and say something like, "Ma'am, is this your son?"

It's after curfew. Should I just ring the doorbell? It feels way past visiting hours, but I have no choice. Soldiers roam the streets in search of cigarettes or bribes. Packs of stray dogs tear each other apart in the dark. I whisper my lines and walk through the rusty gate hanging halfway ajar, trying to configure the half-truths I'm about to tell.

The door is answered by a brawny kickboxer with a crew cut and a steely glint in his eyes. He sports soccer shorts revealing his brutal knees and wears his six pack like it's a shirt. His scowl tells me that I'm interrupting the game.

"No vacancy," he says, and begins to close the door.

"I'm a friend of Saint's! He sent me here to tell you something!" I call.

At the mention of Saint's name, I hear Ms. Alana, the lady of the house, order me to come in. Her son Ken (who I am introduced to later) scowls and lets me in. The foyer opens majestically with a massive sitting bronze Buddha growing green with tarnish, but this is quickly overlooked due to the meditation pond that trickles below. The walls are lined with oils, ancestral portraits of men in the evolution of dinner-wear from princely white and gold

to French royal blues, circular gold rims on patriarchal faces, each man sporting the kind of facial hair that once commanded armies.

There's a wooden screen with intricate carvings of lotus flowers and patterns metaphorically infinite in their repetition. Behind this screen sits 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 has a sultry beauty, smoky-voiced, seductive, alcoholic, and old enough to be my mother if I was her first-born son. She wears the traditional Lao *sinh*, a tube skirt in silky peacock blue that displays her voluptuous figure and 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 smiles with hungry 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 stammer, having felt more at home than when I thought it was a whorehouse. I sit up straight and keep my hands folded on my lap, suddenly unsure of my posture. "Saint said he was staying here. He wanted me to tell you some bad news, as you might be wondering why he's not coming home."

"First, we have a drink," Ms. Alana insists. "Then you tell me everything."

Without a change in her expression, her honey voice transforms into the barking command of a dictator. Two young serving girls bring out glasses and a fresh pitcher of water.

The girls place the pitcher and glasses on the table, and I watch as Ms. Alana holds them in her arms in a drunken matron's sudden outpouring of tenderness, then shooing them

away like flies. She pours me a glass of vodka. It tastes like nothing. Not like water, but like nothing. There's only a slight burn at the end.

"Saint's been arrested," I tell Ms. Alana, who reacts with a drama so immediate and complete it could only be Russian. I measure out the details as she wails and laments, not mentioning the where's or what's exactly, wondering how to steer the conversation towards the topic of an empty room.

"I have too many children, too many little birds. They fly away and I am happy, but then I wait for them to come back," Ms. Alana sighs afterwards. "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, a brave and respected leader. We had the most beautiful garden when I was a little girl. Now look. It grows wild with snakes. In America, people have big house, yes? But they work in their own garden. This I cannot understand."

"It's a beautiful home," I venture to say, faced with this open lament. Ms. Alana gives me a withering look and snorts, throws back her drink, and pours us both another triple shot from the bottle.

"Come. I show you my *beautiful* home," she says, mocking me, and laughs, either at me or herself, or both. We walk into the adjoining room and stand 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 is the portrait of a beautiful young woman with soft intelligent eyes and ringlets of hair in a classical Western

style, pearls in her ears and around her neck. There are others of her in traditional costume, heavily caked with makeup, and a wide shot of the whole clan standing for a wedding portrait, and others which I look at, but receive no explanation for, since technically visiting hours are over. I try not to ask too many questions, but let her tell it the way she wants, between jolting shouts and hard disparaging laughter, riddled with sudden tangents. She's quite drunk.

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

"Is that him with Ho Chi Minh?" I ask, spotting a black and white photo of important men who simply seem to be enjoying a cup of tea rather than negotiating the terms of defeat.

"That dog-faced coward. I keep on the wall only for historical purposes, 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 takes a pause and seems emotionally distraught. I almost put my hand on her shoulder before she laughs bitterly and takes a drink. She turns her attention to brighter times, better times, further back in the family history.

"In Russia, I had a sable coat. My husband buy me for 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 nod sympathetically, observing now that she is starting to spend more time staring into her empty glass than at the pictures on the wall. I decide this is as good a time as any to interject.

"So I guess Saint might need his personal belongings? 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 trust everybody. I knew one day he would be caught," Ms. Alana laments. Then just as suddenly, her voice sharpens as she barks orders at her son, who groans and responds with something to the effect of, "But the game's still on," to which she ignites, prompting him to get off the couch to get Saint's stuff.

"You go with Ken. Bring down his things. We bring them to the police station tomorrow."

"Sure, I can do that," I reply, glancing at Ken, who doesn't look one bit pleased that I'm making him miss the game. I hope he won't smash my nose with his knees when we get upstairs.

Ken motions me through a beaded curtain, and we walk 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 is a reclining Buddha, the slimmer and more meditative kind, as opposed to the fat, cheerful baldy. On either side of him are those French-style fainting

couches which aren't really meant for sitting unless you're desperately tired during the tour and are willing to sit on anything.

The paintings that line the upstairs hall are Laotian landscapes with princes in white uniform riding elephants leading colorful bands of emissaries and courtesans. A million elephants under a white parasol. A monk in saffron walking beneath a red sun. A gong that looks ancient and battered. The decor almost all Lao while architecturally European. The ceilings are high and the floors are made of stone tile, keeping the place relatively cool.

One day I might write an anonymous recommendation on a travel site noting 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 I didn't spot a few roaches here and there, or notice a mildewed smell that must come with seasons of rain that never end, slowly rotting away the mansion somewhere deep in its core, and later finding out, that of course, the plumbing doesn't work so well either.

Down the hall, rows of shutters on the side look out over the unkempt yard, and old French doors, some open, most closed with lodgers, occupying the spaces inside. As we pass by, Ken calls out to the guests he's on friendly terms with, not bothering to introduce me of course, but receiving his hellos in different European accents.

We reach the far end of the hall where we pause in front of a closed door and Ken gives me a look like an inside joke I don't know yet before knocking on the door twice.

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

"Fuck off!" is the reply which comes muffled from inside, but a few moments later, the doorknob turns and an elephantine Englishman with a remarkable sunburn covering the

whole of his face and what's exposed of his body beneath a poorly-tied bathrobe answers the door. He has squinty eyes, which indicates that he's not wearing his glasses, but the way he peers at me isn't from poor vision. He's not the type of man to welcome visitors, unless of course, they're 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 little twat."

"Saint gone. He get in trouble with police," Ken says simply, and looks 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 yer name is. Where's Saint? Speak up now. Don't stand there like a daft cunt."

"For Saint, it was just another night in Vientiane. For Sam, 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 ye? Ye just show up, Saint gets nicked, and ye just expect me to stand here and believe ye 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 stands there dead-eyeing me with a look of pure malice.

"Easy, Pat-ty. We just get Saint's things and go, yes?" Ken intervenes, prompting Pat, as I am later told to call him, to step aside and let us into his room.

"I don't just let anyone in me pad, Kenny. Ye know how I am."

"Only they has ass and teets," Ken jokes, and motions for me to come inside. I follow Ken through the doorway.

It's a bit repulsive entering the lair of a rumored sex addict, but it's the master suite and I'm curious to see what the accommodations are like. The room isn't as big as I expected, but the decor is surprisingly tasteful, executed with blends displaying an appreciation for the minimalist aspects of Asian design. On the other hand, the general clutter of papers and books occupying every free inch of space show the mark of a writer who has not been practicing Zen.

The mounted samurai sword and Ukiyo-e prints on the wall tell me he was fascinated with samurai as a young lad, while the various Buddha statues suggest he graduated to more sophisticated inquiry with an Eastern philosophy course in university, perhaps with serious thoughts of becoming a monk while simultaneously falling for a Japanese girl in his class. The chopsticks and lacquerware set on the small table confess a young and inspired love-drunk decision to pursue the girl.

The large Japanese folding screen painted with plum trees in flower tells me he's tragic. The wall-to-wall bookshelves overflowing with volumes tell me his greatest dreams. The piles of neatly stacked sheets of paper tell me he's obsessive. Arranged in mysterious formations, making sense only to their creator, like steps ascending higher and higher into nowhere, the never-ending drafts of a novel, a magnum opus which would eventually read as syphilitic madness.

“Inspired by the Japanese existentialists,” I begin to monologue, “he attempted the life of a struggling novelist, teaching English to businessmen for another year, and then finally returned to the U.K. to settle into traditional life. He spent his honeymoon in Bali (note the dark wood and white canopy), had kids and divorced, and after a lifetime of setting his literary aspirations aside to work at a well-paying job he despised, he came back to the Far East. Washed up and embittered by nonstop betrayals as his life went down the toilet, he searched for the life he had never lived, writing his novels on a Pacific island with women in endless carousel.”

Pat and Ken look at me in wonder.

"Back there, in the sick room," Pat grunts to Ken with a heavy nod toward a modified veranda where Saint meditated deeply enough to ignore the grunts of exertion.

Pat wields huge lobster claws that block me from going in or out, his eyes full of interrogation. He wants to know who I am, who I work for, just like the premonition I'd had before.

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

“Saint was a good friend to me. I only met him for a night, but he saved me from drowning. I would never do anything to harm Saint. There are some things that happened that I can't explain, but I'm one of the good guys.”

"Boy's a bit screwy, ain't he?" Pat remarks to Ken, who reappears with a small duffel bag filled with Saint's meager possessions. "I call bollocks. He's no James Bond, that's for sure.”

Ken shrugs indifferently, rather 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 is decided without my consent of course, but the kickboxer nods in the affirmative and leaves me wondering whether Pat's planning to tighten up that bathrobe anytime soon.

The door closes. Pat remains 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 ye here for, mate? Just come clean. What'd he tell ye about me? I'll lawyer up. I'd rather help a dog in the street than another soul after this one. Saint was a bit of a stray dog, wasn't he? There's irony in that."

"Saint had nothing but good things to say about you. Okay, that's not true. But he's not going to give you up, no matter what you did. So you don't need to worry about that."

"So yer not an agent?" Pat narrows his eyes, but seems to deflate a little.

"Not the kind you're thinking of. I left the business. I'm a free man."

"Ye are, are ye?"

Pat shakes his head and laughs like he has a glob of phlegm in his throat, probably from the onset of a heart attack.

"This is why I can't have no one over," he mutters 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 ask as he gingerly lowers himself into a rhino-skin chair which grumbles under his weight.

“Just one minute, laddie. I almost felt that one,” he laughs, sweating and looking a bit pale in the face. “Go on and fetch us some water. There in the pitcher.”

I look toward where he’s pointing by a bonsai tree and pour him a glass. His hand trembles as he takes a drink.

“Are you on the run or something?” I ask.

“I—I,” he stammers and looks at me, shaking his head like I’m 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.”

He nods over to the stacks of paper piled around the room.

“Memoir?” I ask.

“Confessions of philosophy, I suppose ye could say.”

I gaze around the room, wondering where it starts. *How much time do you wait before leaving the scene of a heart attack?*

“Ye think I’m just a bloated old man having a good wank on the page,” Pat says 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, yer supposed to laugh.”

“It sounds like you’ve nailed down your genre. That’s always tough to do.”

“Ay, and what about ye? Chasing the wind, holding onto illusion. Ye’ve left the badge, ye say. What’re ye going to do with yer newfound freedom?”

“I’m going to go toward the darkness instead of running from it.”

“Ye ain’t running from the darkness, laddie. Yer in it.”

I give Pat a cockeyed look, then say fuck it and spill the beans.

“I came to China to find this girl I used to know, but after this long conversation I had with this guy near Tibet, I ended up in Laos because I was supposed to do this job...but I couldn’t do it. They wanted me to rat. Now the group’s separated and things are all mixed up. The Dalai Lama’s life is in danger, my True Love’s missing, and now there’s this new girl Jacky, who I probably shouldn’t have slept with, making me all confused. I feel like I’m trapped in some weird mushroom hangover. It’s hard to explain.”

Pat nods slowly, his look of malice now replaced by the pensiveness of someone analyzing, probing, connecting the dots for you, trying to help.

“Ever read Dostoyevsky?” Pat says after a moment of contemplation. “He wrote that book over there, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Read it, and ye’ll find what yer looking for. In there’s all the answers to life’s questions, all in one book. Brilliant.”

I take a seat in a chair facing his, hands draped across my lap and lean back, wary of sex stains. Seeing he has an audience, Pat launches in.

“Three completely different upbringings. None of them has a mum, and dad don’t do fuck all but name them. Brothers reunite after as young men. The old bastard owns land. He’s got a wee bit of gold tucked away. He buries it soon as he sees them coming. HA! But two of the brothers ain’t interested in money. Only one of them’s in pieces over the inheritance, and

he ends up killing the old man and prying it out of his father's cold dead fingers. What's his bloody name? My brain's gone foggy—Dmitri! He's the eldest one.”

“Drunken argument?” I venture.

“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 just fucking unbearable. Goes on for days, even after the viewing. Ye 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. So do the brothers duel it out to see if God is real?”

“Ye'll have to read it for yerself to know. Which one of the brothers are ye? That's the question ye'll have to ask yerself in the end.”

“So you're saying I'm Dmitri, the drunken gambler, fighting against his father, or in my case, Destiny, to be with my True Love.”

“Yer a fool is what ye are,” he snorts merrily, cinching the knot on his sash. “What'd it take for her to let ye have a go? One or two buckets of rum? And now yer 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.”

“Yer true love was a one-night stand.”

“You don’t know her.”

“Ay, and neither do ye.”

I rise and walk around the chair, stare at a katana sword mounted and sheathed, then glance back and forth at the layers of text stacked at different heights like a lost city in the jungle.

“There was a tsunami. It destroyed the island. She told me was leaving. She told me she’d get in touch with me soon. Months passed and I never heard back from her. I tried to forget her, tried to tell myself to move on, but I couldn’t. I had to find her.”

“What yer looking for is a favor from the Almighty, and there ain’t nothing but silence. I’ll tell you why, laddie,” Pat declares and flaps his arms in the air to express the all and nothing. “No one’s listening.”

“Can there be true love if there’s no God? No greater sense of truth or destiny?”

“Ye think ye know true love? Ye think laying next to yer dream girl is the answer to the mysteries of the universe. PAH! Yer just a kid. Love is suffering, love is sacrifice, love takes everything from ye because that’s the only way ye knows it’s real. The point of life is to suffer. Ye can’t live without love so ye let her take what she wants and leave ye with nothing. Then you go somewhere and die quietly. There’s yer true love.”

“Whatever happens, happens. I came this far.”

“And ye’ve strayed off the path, haven’t ye? Talking to this old geezer about yer true love ain’t quite the same as holding her in yer arms now, is it? Ye thought she’d just come waltzing into yer lap if ye bought a plane ticket, didn’t ye?”

“What if she’s gone?”

“I’d say ye dodged a bullet. Or go, and find her. But will ye be able to leave life on the road once ye do, or will ye wake up and keep going and save yerself the trouble? Ye love her now because yer free and can love her as ye please. But once she has ye, freedom’s out the door.”

“I can’t give up on love. That’s like giving up on life. Even if it makes no sense, what else is there?”

“I say bollocks to true love. We’re just impulses, laddie, and everyone’s got a vice. Ye have one too, even if only ye know it in yer heart. Mine’s not so bad. I treat me girls right. I’m a lot gentler than some of the bastards out here. Mean bastards, the lot of them. Hard men, here for a good time. But make no mistake about it. The animals out here ain’t trained to sit and beg. Some of us ain’t so gentle, laddie. Some of the girls like it that way. Ye fuck and get fucked and say fuck it and yer done. That’s from them pages over there. I just gave ye the abridged version.”

“You don’t really believe that. If you did, you’d kill yourself. Fucking around in a country filled with beautiful women and eating mangoes till you pop sounds great, but I know it’d leave me empty, if that’s all it was. Maybe it’s already become like that for you, too.”

“I’m just waiting for that last sentence. After that, I’m putting a bullet in me head.”

“A grand finale.”

“The last line will be a real killer.”

As if on cue, we glance at his city of words.

“What’s the point of all this?” I ask and return to my seat, facing him in a mutual search for answers.

“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?”

It’s written on the wall,” Pat replies and points 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 smiles, sliding the bishop in for checkmate.

“Now why would Dostoyevsky do that?” he asks aloud, once again mocking me.

I ponder 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 makes the sign of the cross over me in a sanctimonious manner, yet I receive his blessing.

I nod solemnly and promise, and leave him sitting in his armchair to consider the remains of his life as I drift down the hall.

The lights are off, but I find the stairs and float downward in a haze towards a dim light at the bottom, which seems impossibly far.

I see Ms. Alana through the beaded curtain sitting alone at the table while her children sleep on floor mats in the other room. I hear her telling one of them to go back to bed, but when I reach the bottom of the stairs, she's already pouring me a drink.

"So you met the fat man?" she says with unveiled derision. "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?"

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

"This is a place of the dead," Ms. Alana says thick-tongued, too drunk to have any emotion or bitterness, a hollowness which seems 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 dances in reflection off the glass frames of portraits and photographs spanning the ages like fire in the cave.

"Drink!" Ms. Alana barks, and in one jerking movement, I take the vodka I don't really want to drink anymore and absorb it into my bloodstream. I should have 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. We're stuck somewhere in the middle waiting to be swallowed up by history."

"History is full of mistakes," Ms. Alana sighs and pours herself another drink. I see her face both young and old in the candle. I see her traveling as that young, stunning beauty with a diary wrapped in rosaries and going from the misty jungle mountains of Laos to the wintry empire of the U.S.S.R. She's a good student who maintains a low profile, but still has enough adventure to keep her skin glowing rosy in the Moscow nights. She wants to live in snow forever so her skin will become white. She speaks fluent Russian, Chinese, and English, among her studies of classics and mathematics. She's 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 trails distantly.

Suddenly I feel something tickling my thigh. For a moment I freeze, thinking it's some kind of tarantula that comes out to hunt birds at night. But the thing seems to move about clumsily, fumbling for my zipper. I look up to see Ms. Alana, eyes half-shaded, ready to show me some photos she doesn't keep on the wall, glamour shots on bedcovers in a one-piece teddy that hides her belly and stretch marks. She smiles and breathes so noisily I'm afraid she'll 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'm pretty sure I let out a squeak at that moment, accepting a final drink to lubricate the moment. We're both drenched in lubricant. Slogged, really. I take the shot as a means of courage, a foolhardy decision. The other vodka shots sit stagnant in my stomach, burning away my organs like battery acid. I feel a rumble and know there's about to be a spewing of semi-clear liquid.

I run into the spiraling maze-like darkness, using what little moonlight there is available to locate an acceptable place to puke.

I empty out my guts in a dark room and pray to the god of bed and breakfasts that it's 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 emerge from the bathroom and feel Ms. Alana looming behind me. I feel her grab me and nibble on my ear whispering, "I want to eat you," in a Russian accent, running her tongue over my earlobe, tasting me. She pats me on the ass and disappears in the darkness,

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and still all I feel is her tongue in my ear, that hot breath that feels more like the kiss of a lioness.

Or did I fall asleep with my head in the bidet?

In a land between waking and dreaming, I dream about Tibet.

I'm staring at a monastery at the top of a mountain. I'm standing at the gates greeted by a white yak. Beyond are two Tibetan angels. One angel holds a puppy. Another holds the leash to a giant dog. "Won't you take a picture, brother?" they call.

Something about the symmetry and the way they call me brother makes me not refuse. I know my True Love is in there.

I hold the leash and puppy and stand there smiling. It's the last photograph before I become reincarnated into my next form. Just a keepsake you receive later on in Nirvana when you finally become enlightened and rescued from the endless repetition of life, living and dying over and over again until finally you realize what really matters.

"Three...two...one!" And the shutter clicks and I'm handed an uncountable amount of Polaroids, all taken at the end of one juncture of incarnation to another. In this photo, I'm Chinese. In this photo, I'm American. In this photo, I'm an Israelite. In this photo, I'm African. In this photo, I'm a monkey. In this photo, I'm a frog.

I walk amongst the spirits of limbo in this beautiful border town of living and dying. Everywhere I look there are young monks, cheerful guides into the afterlife, walking about in burgundy robes and shaved heads, new sneakers, rosy cheeks and brown creases in white smiles. They fold their hands and bow their heads in greeting as I pass by. I do likewise.

I arrive at the main temple at the top of the hill. It's a grand old structure fortified by great white walls and dusted by blowing sands from the mountains surrounding. The expanse of the blue supernal seems endless and touches the very realm of the infinite itself. The endless plains of desolation between this life and the next stretch in eternal emptiness where wandering spirits fly about searching for a way to the next life.

Covered by a heavy brown curtain parted just in the middle, I enter a sanctuary full of older monks chanting meditations among the trees of burning incense. The great hall vibrates with a deep rumble from the chorus of Om. I hold a stick of incense and stare at the golden Buddha before us, unsure of what to say or how to pray, my stick smoldering with blue wisps of smoke rising in the gold-choked darkness.

I enter a sanctuary emblazoned with the stars of brightly colored tile moving in swirls both clockwise and counterclockwise, alternating with the spin of pinwheels in an ever-changing wind.

"Stop right there," a voice says from the darkness.

As I turn, a monk materializes from the shadows, his bald head gleaming and his eyes glittering, his robe drenched in burgundy blood.

"Where you going?" the monk asks me, eyeing me curiously. "It's not your time yet."

"I'm searching for my True Love."

The monk smiles knowingly.

"Ah, the highest mountain. Come, I show you."

He leads me through the door to a sunny courtyard beneath the bright blue sky. Sitting lotus-position on the ground surrounded by a pep squad is a monk pouring trails of sand between his fingertips, the sand of a million colors transforming the concrete into a mandala spinning, spinning a wheel of life and death. As sand flows freely from his knuckle, five peaks form on top of the clouds.

“She is with them on the five peaks of Meru,” the monk says, quietly touching me on the shoulder and looking me in the eye. “Home of the gods.”

As I continue to watch, the mandala is completed. The monks cheer excitedly and observe in wonder at the detail and perfection of the artist’s hand. The sand forms a chrysanthemum of colors, twirling like a kaleidoscope, wrapping me deeper into its web.

The artist bows his head and begins murmuring a prayer to which all of the monks calm themselves and fold their hands respectfully in prayer, and as if in answer, a wind comes from the east and begins scattering the colored sand in different directions.

“No!” I cry and move to recapture the lost grains, but the monk holds me back and shakes his head.

We watch as the mandala is slowly obliterated, the sand blowing in all directions, and the monks themselves begin to part.

It’s almost ten by the time I get to the donut shop. Jacky is nowhere in sight. "Have you seen a girl with blue-green eyes and golden brown hair like fields of wheat, and a big—" I cup my hands over my chest to illustrate, “mountainous region?”

"She here this morning," the guy behind the counter says. "Eight o'clock exactly."

"How do you know it was eight o'clock exactly?"

"Because she say, 'Look at the clock. It eight o'clock exactly.' She very angry."

"Zonkers," I sigh and slump over the counter.

I try to press the man behind the counter for more information, but all he gives me is Lao coffee. I sip and form some sort of strategy to get to Cambodia with the 50-odd dollars I have left in my pocket. I ponder my destiny as a failed secret agent soon to be monk, laying low in a monastery for about a decade or so. Will an oath to silence work for them?

Jacky's probably on a bus to Thailand by now, her visa renewed for another three years of beaches, cocktails, dancing, and good times. Would've been nice to say goodbye. Maybe I can find her Facebook. *What was her last name?*

I decide Laos is too hot, both temperature-wise and in the way that I'm now a target. I need to go somewhere hotter, more suitable for death. Cambodia seems like a good place to die. Pat had suggested Siem Reap, hadn't he? Angkor Wat? *What if they did me right there in the temples? At least I could go out Indiana Jones-style.* I wander into the first motorbike rental I see when suddenly...

"Jacky!"

She turns around. Her mouth drops as if she was just on the phone, calling me. Neither of us have pocket technology.

"Where have you been? I've been looking all over for you!"

She looks freshly showered and changed. I can't help but ask.

"Did they try to gangbang you?"

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"Who?"

"Him and his 'friends.'"

"No, you ass!" Jacky laughs and pinches my shoulder. "I told him not to do anything funny or I'd stick him with a knife."

"You're so Australian," I whisper admiringly.

"Did you end up bunking with some lucky Lao girl?" Jacky teases, batting her eyelashes.

Events from the previous night flow hyper-speed like I'm being plugged back into the matrix.

"I'm still shrooming."

"That bad, eh?"

"I was just about to rent a bike. Did you pick one already?"

"Sure did. Where ya headed, cowboy?" Jacky says and put on a helmet.

"Siem Reap."

"Forget Siem Reap! Come with me to the beach. We can rent a bungalow and sip cocktails by the water. I'm going to do a cleanse before I go back to Thailand. Just sit at the bottom of the world for a few weeks and watch the sun go down. Put your wallet away. You can ride with me. As long as you don't mind riding bitch—"

"What? Are you nuts? I can't ride on the back!"

“Why not? There’s nothing wrong with a boy riding bitch. It’s actually quite daring. 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," she says, and winks at me. "I just bought it."

One of the grease monkeys from the shop comes wheeling a brand-new motorbike, cherry red. He wipes it down and gives Jacky the key.

"You do know how to use the clutch, I presume," Jacky says as she straddles the bike.

"I'm a fast learner," I chirrup.

"Oh God. Don't tell me..."

"Come on, teach me. Give me ten minutes, and I'll have her at full speed!"

We go to the side street and start up the bike. Jacky flies up and down the street, ready to burn. The expectation will be to have it pushing red line from here to Stung Treng. We give me a practice a run and I almost drop it, my arms quivering like two strands of wet spaghetti.

"Get a scratch on my new bike and you're paying for it!"

I try to reconnect with the machine. There’s a brief moment when I enter the super conductor and all of my infinite parts and pieces seem to deconstruct and just hang there for a

moment in the air. Then there's a sudden shudder and the sound of grinding gears. Jacky is on the sidewalk yelling. She's not happy.

For the next few hours, I sit on the back of the cherry red motorbike and try to avoid the stares of nearly every single person we see—children and dogs included—as I daringly ride bitch—defying five thousand years of learned culture. I feel brave.

We weave in and out of traffic until we reach the outskirts of the city where the walls along the highway crumble into fringes of concrete which then diminish to pebbles and then finally rubble and the grassy nothingness of the road.

The plan is to ride until we reach the border without making too many stops, a trip that would normally take half a day, but with the way Jacky rides and expects me to ride, we should get there in no time.

My bandaged hand is one with the accelerator. A sort of numb vibrating pain comes from the hyper-pulse of the engine, electricity shooting down my arms and into my fingertips. Jacky's arms hold me tight. A feeling of numbing electricity shoots through me, tears trembling in the corners of my lids, full-speed into a perfect summer day, rays of blurry light, realms of zero gravity, screaming into a white light before the explosion disintegrating the world. A silent deafening roar, the sound of pure consciousness, the perfect awareness of this moment, speeding through the countryside toward the green hills with the trees standing perfectly still until you pass them and they break down into their simplest forms. Seeing the road in complete focus until it becomes a rainbow.

“If I walked into a bar and you saw me, would you buy me drink?”

“I'm joining the priesthood.”

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"I think that's wonderful, Sam."

"Mostly for cover."

The sun dips over the Mekong, painting the sky quicksilver with pink and vermillion stains sparkling on the water as silhouettes of fishing boats float in the distance.

"I wish our last meal was a bit more memorable," I say, using chopsticks to pick at a platter of fragrant greens, bamboo bowls of sticky rice, and lukewarm tripe.

"Trust me. I'll remember this every time I even think about touching animal parts again. I'm going back to being a vegetarian."

We stare out at the water in silence, listening to the deafening clatter of giant crickets in the grass.

"What do people usually say in these moments?" Jacky wonders.

"I love you? I think."

Jacky looks at me and bursts out laughing.

"Come with me. It'll be so boring without you. Wouldn't you rather lay low on a beach with me than sit in a temple and meditate all day?"

"I've got a lama to save."

"You don't have to. He's probably got plenty of bodyguards. You could just leave a message."

"Somehow this will make it right."

We order more beers. The sun fades into a spectacle of light and beauty, impossibly distant, distorted by dreams. Giant moths beat ripples upon the surface of the river; what changes may come.

“What’ll you do without me?”

“I was fine before I met you. I’ll be fine again. I might cry a little. But only a little.”

“You can still change your mind.”

I swallow a shot of beer.

“Nah. I made a promise.”

“Well, the bus leaves at six in the morning, so no dallying,” Jacky reminds me. “It’s not an actual bus; they just call it that. It’s more of a pickup. You’ll see the 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 think I’ll be a lot safer when you’re gone,” Jacky laughs. “Won’t be nearly as fun though.”

“I’ll follow you around the world in another life.”

“I knew you were a stalker. Lucky I’ve got good instincts.”

“Plus a really big knife.”

“Yeah,” she grins, knowing that she really does.

Against waning reflections of rosy glass, Jacky sits on my lap and stars fill the twilight skies. It's a rare gift to be able to know it's the last time. Blue-green in her eyes like a world spinning alone in the galaxy, coming in line with the sun and the moon.

"Do you think we could ever be something? Out there in the real world?"

Jacky shakes her head with a smile, "We'd just end up hating each other. I'd never cook anything, and you'd always forget to pay the bills on time."

"In the next life, I shall return as an accountant."

Jacky gives me a soft kiss goodbye.

"Come find me," she says, "if you decide to change your mind."

Jacky puts her hand on my cheek and mounts the bike. She disappears in less than eight seconds, but it feels longer, like watching a giant wave roll across the sea, growing and growing, until finally it crashes on the horizon on some distant moonlit beach.

Stung Treng

Getting into Cambodia proves more difficult than I imagined. I'd fantasized a Hollywood reception waving my navy blue passport and flashing my pearly whites as supplicants usher me in, picking up the coins I leave behind like a trail of slime, 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. All I have to do is call my friend..."

There's always a friend, isn't there? It's places like these that run on the buddy-buddy system. I'm chuckling with the guard, lighting his cigarette, and slipping a couple more into his shirt pocket as we laugh and carry on almost flirtatiously and he spouts the dirt in exchange for a few petty compliments.

"Boy, you sure do have good teeth," I tell him admiringly.

He looks down beaming, feeling pleased with himself.

"Do you know where I can get a ride into town?"

He points me over to a group of guys ranging from surly to lazy. Their aviators-sporting alpha spots me coming from a mile away. We make a quick arrangement, not going too far with the haggling, mostly because I have no options and would rather lose a president's face than my own.

I get on the back of Mr. Aviators' flashy little doowop-cycle and we go riding into the daylight. The scene feels almost triumphant, like the rising smoke at the end of a war film until a billboard on the side of the road makes the whole thing feel more tragic than anything.

WELCOME TO CAMBODIA! IF YOU SEE ANY SIGNS OF SEX TRAFFICKING, CHILD ABUSE, OR HAVE REASON TO SUSPECT A FOREIGNER, PLEASE CALL 1-05...

I miss the important part where I remember the number to call.

Mr. Aviators drives as far as a small street market in what I'm guessing to be an impression of a town. The vendors sell bootleg clothing in giant piles that look like they were airdropped from a UNICEF helicopter. A whole plastic array of riches and wonders you would likely find in a dollar store near the pits of hell. I'm so hungry I actually consider some barbecue in this ghost town until I watch a man cooking with dried leaves and stones just to have something to burn. There is no meat, only these sticks, which raise up a nice ambience for the warm beer and generic soda floating in coolers filled with dead insects and water.

There's a guesthouse near the town-square. There are some parts of town that seem as though they'd not long ago been in a gun fight, but it could also be the general slowness and ease and lack of hope or expectation which hung in the air, Year Zero, the spirit of liberation pouring out into the streets, the ultimate dream, as the universe unfolds itself from the meandering trails of gas and fire lighting stars to reach the dawn forever hanging just over the horizon, the sky milked in blood.

Before I wander back towards the street market for some distraction, I decide to sit at a wooden table in the shittier guesthouse next to mine just to feel like I'm doing something. The entire facade is missing, broken, eroded by time into a nice view of the river and the street. Around sunset, it's actually kind of pleasant despite the squalor. Men smoke and play their games. Children run freely in the streets. A motorbike passes slowly without aim. A dog licks the earth and passes on.

A menu is placed in front of you, and you remember that you originally came for something to eat. You don't want to eat anymore. You just want to sit and watch the people drift by in the quiet rhythm of their lives, and all they seem to be is scenery. Time keeps going. For some reason, you order roasted spiders. *Great, now I have to leave.*

As I wait for my arachnids to arrive, I let my eye catch that sign again, a smaller version on a message board this time, of a little girl in a gritty black and white photo with tears in her eyes. The proclamation for this fallen kingdom is grim; seeds taken from the arms of those who give their lives, what else but existence in a perpetual state of status quo, against the quicksand and the sharp edges of the crocodiles' mouths.

There's too much hope, too much beauty, too much chance, and the price of life is cheap. The flowers seem less planted than accidental, parasites wrapping their vines around the rusty barbed wire and announcing their fragrance next to trash heaps. A river runs from a desperate paradise with nothing left to offer the world but the rain on beaten back, the child slung by mother's breast, and taken into the back of the room, years later doors shut and there's a nothingness from the static, not seeing the thing hidden by curtains drawn, a new cycle, another black hole to hell.

Destiny is to become a tissue, used and discarded, thrown away among the heaps of rubbish. A strange man takes pictures in the dark. Incense lights the dusk as I sit before my plate of twisted spider legs unable to think or eat. An old woman prays to Buddha for protection, for her family, the offering of a few blossoms that fall on the side of the road.

I glance at a table on the other side of the room and see four middle-aged white men sitting by themselves, waiting for their food. I'd seen them earlier when I first sat down, but hardly paid attention. Now I see through their facade. Something inside me sounds the alarm. It's the pancakes that convince me. After they receive their food, I watch carefully, now holding up the "No Sex Trafficking" poster off the wall and moving silently towards them, watching as the bald one with glasses methodically slices and chews, drizzling the syrup in slow, perfect lines like a commercial, his knife pressing against the soft dough in perfect symmetrical triangles. Most pedophiles are neat-freaks. OCD, abusive childhood, beaten for

being messy as children. They hate filth; they hate it! Love giving children baths, the sick fucks.

I watch him eating his pancakes slowly, chewing robotically, his eyes focused on the flavor of the maple syrup, the sick bastard. The rest of them carry on casually, thinking nothing of the abhorrent crimes they've committed and will soon commit again. Coming to this land specifically because of its corrupt system, its destitution, and the beauty of its children. Watching him eat pancakes, hoeing and humming, I feel so enraged that I want to scream. I want to feel him choke on his pancakes as I press slowly with my sandal upon his windpipe! I feel my superpowers rising! I have to do something!

I AM—THE DEPUTY!

Unable to stand another minute, I walk up to the table, ready to sweep the cutlery off the table. I imagine smashing the plates and feeding them the shards. I find myself in no time standing before their table, breathing heavily, my eyes glistening with a dark sense of justice, an eruption of righteous violence soon to come.

“Enjoying your dinner, gents? What kind of a grown man orders a meal like that at this time of the evening? You'd better get with your pal here with the fish sticks, although that's still cutting it kind of close. You guys are just giving yourselves away, shouting for some violation to be done to you in prison. But you reap what you sow, as they say.”

I say all this while rounding the table, fingering their plates; dipping my fingers in the syrup, tasting it crudely in their faces.

“How are you guys enjoying your stay, hmm? Everything to your liking? These shitty bedrooms holding up for you?”

I deliberately land my palm onto the man's pancakes allowing the syrup to make a sick squelching noise, making their blood freeze with horror.

"Watch yourself touch any little boys or little girls in that mirror today? Not before dinner, hmm? How nice," I growl, my voice hitting a Batman-like register, my hands taking fistfuls of collar off their shoulders.

"I'll give you guys a five-second head start before I take your child-touching, evil little fingers, and shove them—"

Before I can finish my righteous ultimatum, four middle-aged women enter the guesthouse and look at me quizzically, probably thinking I'm just a handsy waiter.

Man down! Man down! The Deputy has been shot! I repeat, the Deputy has been shot!

"I recommend the soup! It's excellent!"

I vanish before my food arrives.

I can already hear the nightly news on Channel 5:

Vigilante crime-fighter turned diner and dasher? Looks like it's hard times for Cambodia's self-proclaimed superhero. Find out more on the news at 10.

At sunrise, orange lanes that reach out into fields of morning grass swaying endlessly into the flat horizon beyond. The bus passes a home set back in the fields and picks up this young guy standing at the wooden gate with a huge grin on his face and his whole family behind him, seeing him off as he takes that first step into a world apart from the basin. One

day he will return and they'll see a change in his eyes, a gaze like two mirrors reflecting distant suns on top of that old familiar smile, that look of innocence explaining 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 today, he only begins his journey. Who knows when he'll 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 where she knew he should never have gone in the first place? Rain-filled windows writing to baby sister and naked babies watch from the shade as the tangerine dream disperses the dust, and suddenly he's gone. There's a stillness from the birds and insects observing his passing, and then only vibrations remain.

The young guy finds his seat and tries to contain his excitement, not wanting to make it so obvious that he's nothing more than a country bumpkin who's never left his village. But that all changes now. 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 cocktail and cut to the front of a line.

He'll bring air-conditioning into their world as he feels it here in this electric fabric, the whole caboodle vibrating as if in ascension, never climaxing, just elevating. The theater seats keep everyone in deep immersion, fancy lighting along the aisles, a Thai pop karaoke video loud enough so that you can't tune it out without your own personal immersion equipment, of which I have none.

The song is 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, when suddenly there she was, her pretty white face visible through a space between the shelves, red lips softly reading while unaware of intense stares from 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, abandoning the books altogether. He caresses her cheek and 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 sable coat, 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. I see them walking 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.

It's late afternoon riding through fields of grass and pink skies streaming across the sky until it becomes a vision of eternal stillness, the shallow waters that glow with lily pads, purple-blue lotuses standing 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. Life is lived with pants high and feet open to leeches. The expanse of earth is without division or variation in slope or

altitude. Green stretches on in indica and sativa dreams and memories of rice trapped in the sky beneath the distance of holiness and a raindrop becomes a bud which spring forth in fruit of the grass, harvested as pearls, the steaming bamboo bowl and a face giving grace before his or her god. Beyond the palms leaning on the horizon, like thin blue poles, the sunlight besets upon our bus a silhouette with the luminescence of a grapefruit and the soft blue formation of shadows where one may hallucinate hills among the silhouettes of mirages, of mountains in the distance, whereupon sit temples that aren't there, a city that no longer is, but in the echoing infinite burning stars.

Siem Reap

I meet this driver named Mac. Tells me he'll do the job cheap as long as I don't blab to any of the drivers. We shake hands on it, and from there we go flying through Old Market. By this time I'm so enlightened that even a pile of dog shit, of which there are many, seems like a beautiful gesture of sacrifice. I'm already talking foolishly about coming back and adopting a bunch of kids. Every time you say "aww," they multiply. There's so much color, so much poverty, all in the same places together like they can never be apart. The street vendors and their carts, saffron-robed monks walking the street burning sticks of incense holding their bowls for alms, blessing little shops with a prayer each time they receive their daily rice. Stray dogs follow traffic at random, snapping at the tires which spit back clouds of dust as little children stare all liquid-eyed from behind their mothers' wrapped skirts; the older and bolder urchins sauntering freely, unafraid of the ubiquitous motorbike traffic.

Somewhere beyond the morning rush of burning cloves and motor oil, swallowed by the jungle, there lies a kingdom of peace and serenity, a place once forgotten by the eyes of man and woman, but everyone knows how easy it is to get distracted. One of the greatest structures ever built by mankind, lost until a Frenchman in khakis comes around taking pictures, exploring the woods with hoots of excitement while servants stand around exchanging glances. Trees splitting stone walls and flowers growing superfluous in the memories of a courtyard. The carved stone statues become roosts for birds and perches for monkeys. Saffron-robed monks sweep between the gnarled roots of the banyan tree which spreads its fingers through the soil around the crumbling city, eating 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 becomes 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.

Now I'm here in the back of a *tuk-tuk*, officially declaring myself renegade and forsaking the benefits of my navy-blue passport, flaunting the risk of being locked inside a military prison for the rest of my life without media privileges. I have a stamp on my hand and a couple of dollars in my pocket. *What other direction is there left but forward? Is this what they mean by faith, Alyosha?* Why does it have to always come so close to the edge? Perhaps this is the trigger-point that's needed before I unleash some mystical superpower, have lights shine out of my eyes and fire shoot out of my ass while great clouds of heaven and hell darken and illuminate the skies. Why else would the universe have taken me here if not to give me an ending? I thought you were giving me freedom, but I can see now that you've given me lawn duties instead. Let's say that I come with nothing then. Let's say that I join you. I just want you to know that I give you my heart. *What more do you want? Where's*

my special moment? The one where I find a tree growing from a stone wall and hear the sound of birds and gentle streams and finally shut up and just listen? I'm almost in it, this moment before death when I see the thing that I was finally meant to see right before I die, fall face-first into a lotus pond.

There's a bridge that stretches over a moat, which forms a flowing blue square around the temple. In front of me is an outer wall where behind and beyond rise a quincunx of towers reflected in the waters as a procession of monks in robes the color of kumquats make their way before a king. I stand 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.

There's an odd silence now that I've entered the inner chambers. The air is cool, and the people who share the hallways seem to be nothing more than faint echoes as they drift by. I trace 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 seeming 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 rides 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. Here in the battleground are 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 feel 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.

"And that's when I decided to pledge my life to preserving this place, for as long as I can, in what little capacity I have. When you give your heart and soul to something, it makes it all worth it to know that you're helping people come and feel what you felt, what I continue to feel each and every day."

"You been here only three hour," the woman with the sun hat says with a playful scowl. The other caretakers laugh as we rest beneath the shade of a tree, Angkor Wat standing majestically behind in the distance.

"Isn't it amazing how we all ended up here?" I sigh blissfully.

"You go see sunset?" Mac the driver asks.

"Is that a thing here?" I yawn and stretch. "Where's the best place to see it?"

"Sunset Temple," they all reply in unison.

"That makes sense."

We fly past the head with four faces at Bayon and take a shortcut past the Terrace of Elephants. We speed through Ta Prohm, where a giant tree sprouts from a doorway and the four elemental pools where people bathed clockwise to cure their infirmities. We find ourselves at the end of a procession so large it seems as if the whole world has come to see the sunset. People must have waited hours ahead of time, some even camped out at the very top of the temple from four o'clock onwards in the scorching heat with their smug sunburnt faces, ignoring the jeers by the masses as they cozy in for the sunset of their lives.

The closest star descends upon a 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 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* riots on as the sun threatens to dip another centigrade closer to the horizon. There's 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!"

Mac nods grimly and peels out of there, soon trapped and swallowed by more people. Meanwhile, I have my own problems. I'm currently caught in a massive Chinese collective in matching t-shirts gathered at least one hundred strong. Trapped in a purple amoeba spreading across the world. There's an elephant charioting a pair of Japanese newlyweds, the bride barely keeping it together as they lurch back and forth. The groom holds onto his top hat as the elephant driver curses and kicks his elephant's ears with a decided vigor. From every direction, masses across the nations pour in to sit at the top of the temple-mountain.

The temple is soon covered by fans and worshipers sitting on stone steps, on statues, on peaks and ledges. The sky is filled with electric awe, forest blurring line into night, temple silhouettes in the sunset like fires reaping the darkness, the spires pointed against the paling

bluish-gold gradation of the sky. The sun begins to pour down over like a hot, glowing liquid, seeping in with a glow, warming the expanse of jungle and distant temples. As I run about, convinced this is my moment, searching for the perfect place to secure its passing, a little raincloud drifts by. The crowd gets excited and starts firing off their cameras and one guy pre-ejaculates and emits a burst of excitement that quickly dies in the resumed quiet. Now the sun begins to align with the cloud, sensing our respect and urgency, spraying rays at an angle that electrifies the strata like a blowing curtain in the window, glowing with shame and ecstasy, the orgasm of time.

There's nowhere to sit, nowhere to find this final moment meant to marry me to this journey and its happy ending when I see my name written among the tree branches as a sign, to know that somehow I'm meant to be here. The gift of knowing that the journey was not all meaningless. But was—

“Care to sit down?”

“Your Holiness!”

The Dalai Lama sits on a ledge with a smile, shifting over to make room for me on a lower, less-populated tier of the temple with the sunset in a humbler view.

“Please, don't bow to me like that. No one knows I'm here,” the Dalai Lama says, looking over his shoulder, waving his hand for me to stop kowtowing.

“What're you doing here?” I gasp.

“I'm here to see the sunset. Are you going to sit or not?”

“Did you get my letter?” I ask him, sitting beside him now.

“Yes I did, Sam,” the Dalai Lama says. “Yes, I received your letter with great gratitude. It was quite recently, as I recall. To answer your question: No, I don’t get death threats every day, which made your particular death threat very memorable.”

The Dalai Lama gives me a Cheshire Cat grin, his eyes glinting with amusement beneath his gold frames.

“It’s my honor to have been able to help, sir.”

“Just because I am a monk who walks around in a robe all day,” the Dalai Lama grins, “does not mean I do not have spies of my own. My secret service was able to intercept this letter just days ago in Dharamshala.”

From his robe, he withdraws a postcard that says “Kunming: City of Eternal Spring.”

“As fate would have it, I was already here to promote my new cookbook. Here is a gift for the generosity of your kindness,” the Dalai Lama says and hands me a hardcover book with a rich portrait of himself with that golden smile standing in the pantry of what I assume is the monastery’s kitchen.

“*Tashe Delight: Rejuvenation, Reincarnation, and Rejoicing in the Kitchen*,” I read the title aloud, and look at him with tears in my eyes. “Thank you so much.”

“It’s a signed copy,” His Holiness points out as I flip open the cover and read his inscription. “Isn’t it curious that all of these events transpired, and that we would finally meet here in Cambodia, on my yearly pilgrimage to this very temple where we now sit. Is this a coincidence? Tell me, Sam. What have you learned from your experience?”

“I’m going to become a caretaker for Angkor Wat?”

“No, you dummy!” the Dalai Lama snaps, and resists hitting me on the head with the postcard. He clears his throat and says more gently, “No, Sam. That is not why you were brought here. Tell me why you were brought here.”

I walk in the dying light to the other side with the sunset behind me, and at a distance. The sun disappears over the jungle's smoldering horizon and glimmers over the temple ruins. A monk sits on the ledge in his robe, brightly colored against the onset of blue night. I want to take a picture of him without knowing why, staring at the sunset, the green mountains all blue and shadowy in the background. But I sold my camera for chicken-rice.

At night, there's a blackout. I find myself walking through the streets far away from Old Market, following the river into the night and the darkness, just to see where it takes me. There's no light from the moon. There are no stars or heavenly bodies as I feel my way blindly through dense, wet darkness, guided by the sounds of laughter and voices, kids shrieking happily, playing hide and seek in the forest. That evening at the chicken-rice spot, two little boys came to my table and asked me if I could buy them something to eat. It was the older one who asked me with that street kid rasp in his voice. It was my last two 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 two more 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, cherished in the setting of the sun. 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.

Where do we go from here? Walking in the dark, the pitch-black darkness, the color of her eyes. I found my way through the forest and found a road. There were flashes from motorbikes speeding past, disappearing into the night just as fast, as crickets reigned supreme over silence, the bewitching of frog-scum, the shadow-boxer nodding at me from the dancing flames of an oil drum, in dreams where you see fire and green.

“There’s so much good in the world. How can we not see it?” I ask, remembering the eyes of the father as he held his little girl in his lap, the two of them just sitting there on the side of the road on a motorbike, smiling and shaking my head no when he offered me a ride.

“And yet, there’s so much corruption. How do we fight it? How do we fight all this darkness?”

“You become light. You go where darkness is and watch as it runs away. Even one little bit of light can do that,” the Dalai Lama says in his halting, thoughtful manner, nodding his head. “Imagine what can happen when many lights come together and glow at the same time.”

I bow my head in silence and let his words flow over me. The moment passes.

“Your Holiness, if I could ask you one last thing. There was this girl I knew. I loved her, and now she’s gone. What do I do?”

“Let go, Sam. This is the true definition of freedom. Attachment only brings suffering. When you fall in love with someone, you will always feel pain because you don’t want to lose them. But this is not our choice to make whether they go or stay. We cannot control others, we can only control ourselves. We can empty our thoughts and live with a clear mind, and in that way we manage our feelings even in our the greatest moments of

suffering. That is all. What are you but a leaf in the wind? There is nothing you can do to control the wind's direction. But you can still enjoy the view."

He gives a hearty chuckle that makes me smile.

"Tell me where to go when we part," I whisper.

"You must go home, Sam. Go back and tell the others in your village, your city, your hometown. Tell about the wonders and the horrors you have seen."

"What if no one believes me? What if they say I'm crazy?"

"Whether they do or don't does not change your mission. You have a responsibility."

"But I can't leave. I don't have any money left."

"Plane ticket, eh? That must cost about—let's see, from here to New York City—" the Dalai Lama does some quick calculations in his head. "One thousand dollars, by my estimation."

The Dalai Lama pulls out a huge wad of cash clasped together with a golden money clip.

"Well, it is Christmas," my voice falters. "Tickets tend to be more expensive."

"One thousand two hundred dollars should do it," the Dalai Lama concludes, deftly licking his fingertips and counting out twelve crisp one hundred bills.

"Your Holiness, really I can't accept this," I say as he holds the money out for me to take.

This Isn't Just a Souvenir

“Please, Sam. Consider it my pleasure, and also, my duty. Just as you have your duty, I have mine: to freely share what is freely given,” the Dalai Lama rasps and winks. “People give me money all the time. I’m loaded!”

He throws his head back and laughs into the fading pink light.

The End