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INCONSTANT ENDEAVORS:
THE ELUSIVENESS OF THE ANTI-HEROINE

A
DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty
of the University of Alaska Fairbanks

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By
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Fairbanks, Alaska

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Abstract

The anti-heroine is a difficult woman to define. The intent of this project was to find the markers and signifiers for the character of the anti-heroine. Only recently, with modernism and then post-modernism, has the equation of beauty = woman started to change. What has occurred is the opposite, the grotesque. How are female artists using the grotesque to open up the possibilities for how women are allowed to act?

Although women are now being allowed, in film, to DO what men do, i.e. kill people, they are still coming across in stereotypically female ways. The women are still beautiful, they use violence, they have to be more manly than men.

How has second and third wave feminist theory opened up the realm of writing about the bitch? In the past decade literally thousands of books have been written with “bitch” in the title. Is the “bitch” the same thing as the anti-heroine?

In the creative part of the dissertation, I have attempted to write a multi-faceted anti-heroine who isn't necessarily a bitch, doesn't participate in violence, has a sense of humor, and is writing about both female and feminist subjects. The critical essay looks at literary influences on my writing and my own definition of the anti-heroine.

My research has shown that the anti-heroine is an extremely elusive character and is quite different from the male anti-hero. What we can say is that she defies stereotyping, is a complex creation, may or may not be beautiful, and acts rather than reacts.

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INCONSTANT ENDEAVORS

A Novel

INTRODUCTION

This is a story about me. After I finished writing this book, I decided to change a few things around, re-organize some names, try to make the guilty appear not quite so—well--guilty. At the top of that guilty list would be me. For many reasons, most of them connected to the fact that I'm female, I felt true anxiety, if not disgust, at times, with myself, regarding some of my behavior as put forth in the following narrative. Well, that's not entirely true either. I felt like I SHOULD feel true anxiety, if not disgust, because anyone reading the book who might know it was me doing all this stuff might presume to judge my behavior by some sort of societal standard. And by that standard, the societal one, I was sure to feel guilty. It wasn't intrinsic guilt, but rather guilt by association with myself. So, because of this, I tried to create, or recreate, or re-term this piece of writing as non-fiction, or fictional memoir, a mock-u-memoir, or whatever term is being used nowadays for that which is not cold, hard, fact. I attempted to distance myself from myself and place myself within a fictional framework so as not to recognize my true self, and more importantly, my actual actions. And then I said to myself, "Well, fuck that!" First of all, fuck that part of myself that actually thinks about the marketing ploys of fiction versus non-fiction versus complete bullshit versus whatever is selling this month. And fuck all those judgmental eyes and impossible standards of conduct that I'm always supposed to have followed, and mostly did, but for the most part of that—mostly-

-felt resentment about. I did do all this stuff. Mind you, nothing in the following pages is earth shattering or even stunningly original. I didn't maim or kill anyone. I didn't shit a twelve-foot turd. I didn't violate the sanctity of the mother/child relationship. The only difference between this book and a pulp romance novel is that I did have stupid, unprotected sex. I did travel into the world of crazy men and try to figure them out. I'm not just a character with a heaving bodice waiting for a man with a sword to save me, I'm a three-dimensional, flesh and blood woman who has not only loved men, but also suffered because of them.

I have to admit my fascination with men is deep and broad. They smell and they simmer and sometimes I wish I had their courage to place myself in the broader world and NOT, not even for a half of a second, feel any of this girlish, if not womanish, anxiety and guilt for just doing and being in the world at large. I mean, really, I'm pissed off about this. Why? I mean, I don't want to spend all my time second guessing myself, wondering, pondering, angsting, analyzing, projecting, nauseating myself to the point of obsession about what I do, what I might do, what I should do, what I'm not allowed to do, who I might do it with, the reasons, the explanations, the rationalizations, the minutiae of almost doing, but never quite getting there. These men, no, they don't go through all that crap. They do it, they act like heathens at times, they might feel a twinge, if not twinges of self-doubt, but they'll never let you see them sweat it. They might even go so far as putting a gun to their head -- blowing their brains out. I would never behave that stupidly. But there is something to that concept of just doing. I wanted to be able to do, create, not re-create under a different moniker in order to distance myself from that

self that I am, in action. I wanted to get rid of the schizophrenia that followed me day in and day out regarding the possibilities between being and doing. I had attached myself to Simone de Beauvoir's concept of not being "born" a woman, but "becoming" a woman. How does one do this in a culture that is post-feminist and also retro-50's -- both at the same time? Mommy Wars, reality dating shows, find the man, get the man, fight another woman over a man! I had to learn it, learn to do it from men, because the women I know and love ain't got that part happening. They're as split in their personalities as I am. There's the punch that gets pulled. We want to tell it like it is, like we see it, like we want it to be, our ideal version of something, anything, that we take an interest in. Then we think better of it, think twice, reconsider, wonder what the repercussions will be. If we really say that, what will happen? Will they still like me? Will I still be lovable? Could I get fired? Will they think I'm a slut, an inconsiderate person, a bad mother? And what about the daughter part? Could I ever let my mother actually read these meanderings? Hell NO! That's when I knew I was onto something good, some part of myself that was saying YES. If my mother wasn't allowed into this world I was living and writing about, then I knew I had passed through some sort of threshold of "supposed to"-ness. Boy, mom never gets a break, does she? We define ourselves entirely according to what she will or won't approve of, even if that approval is removed and placed within a paradigm of our childhood remembrances. My mother really has no idea who I am. Reading this book may give her insight, but I'd be afraid of offending her. Why would she have raised a daughter who talks about blow jobs and getting shit-faced drunk and who ponders the many meanings of shit and hangs out with men who can't

throw away a used cough drop? She wouldn't. She didn't. But I am, I did, she did. It's a part of me, anyway. I'm also a mother, but that's not all that I am. I did do everything I wrote about. I also drive my three-year-old daughter to pre-school three times a week and make Halloween cookies from scratch. There it is again, my split personality. I admit I used people to further my experience of the world. Sometimes I subjectified their words and made them my own. I stole from them. I used men to become more of a woman. I wanted to be around men because I love them for their difference. I wanted to suck their strength from them whatever way I could. And I do mean that in a good way. I'm not a vampire in the Strindbergian sense because mostly what happened is that I also gave them some of my strength. They also stole from me, and I let them take what I had--freely. I let myself be used sexually and I used others for their sexuality. Is it all about sex with me? No, but women's bodies are, my body is, a powerful tool that has to be reckoned with. The body is the first line of offense for women. We have to get over it, beyond it, in order to be free of its tyranny.

No, I'm not a bad person. I'm actually very nice, for the most part, although some who only know me peripherally might feel inclined to call me a bitch. That's just one part of myself that I put out there, the public part, the part that wants to protect that other half, the vulnerable, Cinderella part that I despise.

I admit to embellishing a bit, but only a bit. This is a story, after all, not a report to the government. I left most everyone's name as is, unless I felt it was really bad judgment or bad taste on my part, then I changed or deleted those sections. It's a difficult task to live up to yourself, look in the mirror, realize you have crossed a line or two. I

really am a nice person. Oh, did I say that already? Or, you can call me a bitch. Either is fine by me.

PART ONE: Montana

ONE

I moved to Butte, Montana, on Halloween. An appropriate introduction to my new town, to my history as it's unfolding before me in this urban frontier cemetery. Before we arrived here (and the "we" is my now ex-boyfriend, Bradley), we'd heard the typical stories. Butte had been a metropolis of sorts around the turn of the 20th century. Wealthy and industrious men from the East Coast arrived and bought up the land, turned the earth upside down, uncovered vast amounts of copper, the necessary ingredient of the era to electrify the country. Butte was the second city in America to have electricity. Even prior to N.Y.C. The Copper Kings, as they were called, battled it out for dominion over the earth, the Irish immigrant laborers, the citizenry and the direction Butte would take.

With all the wealth pouring in, beautiful buildings were built: mansions, Arts and Crafts style bungalows, eight-and-ten-story structures with intricate facades, a Masonic temple, churches of all varieties. Then, on the other side of town, tiny dwellings for the miners, flop houses for the bachelors, whorehouses, opium dens, speakeasy bars during Prohibition, and prior to Prohibition and after, bar after saloon after pub after drinking establishment. In 1900, Butte had 156 bars. I know this because the ex and I bought one of them. Attached to the front of our building is a plaque put there by the National Historic Registry. The Silver Dollar Saloon, corner of Main Street and Mercury, was built in 1894. It went through a variety of incarnations. Basic saloon, initially named The Silver Dollar sometime in the 1930's or 40's, the black jazz club during the 50's,

closed for a few years during the 60's, re-established as The Silver Dollar in the 70's. Music venue for the past thirty years. Gay bar just prior to our buying it, due to the fact that the previous owner happened to be gay.

I've discovered, since being in Butte, that I'm experiencing something like a low-grade depression. Maybe it's absorption of dead energy. Living here is living in multi-dimensions. I'm present in my body now, my brain is cognizant of what's happening around me at this moment, and then there's everything else. The shadows I see out of my peripheral vision. The cold air I walk through on my way upstairs, sending chills up my spine. Teary responses to objects. There's a green metal frame bed sitting inside one of the rooms of the building. I've moved the bed twice, from room to room, trying to decide if the room is haunted or if it's the bed. It's definitely the bed. Something happened in it. It reeks of violence, fear, destruction. Yet it remains in my living space.

Let me backtrack a bit, for the sake of clarity. The Silver Dollar inhabits the first floor of a three-story building. Each floor is approximately 4,000 sq. ft. The second and third floors, since the building's construction, were a boarding house (read whorehouse) called The Lucky 7. The building sits at the crossroads of the whorehouses and the opium dens. Chinatown was directly to the west, and there are still tunnels beneath many of the buildings in town that were used for travel in and out of the dens. Across the street, to the east, was Venus Alley. There's a coffee house there now called Venus Rising, hailing the entry-way to the alley where the hookers would market themselves to the lonely, horny, sleep-deprived and drunken miners. All of this humanity makes sense to me. Butte is a town where karma gets accelerated. It's hard to avoid yourself here.

The distractions are few, the alcohol is cheap and history is everywhere. The Butte motto is, "I left the circus to join Butte."

#

The psychic had come to town.

"I heard she's good," said my friend Marcy.

"Does she do tea leaves, tarot or hypnosis?" asked my other friend, Elaine, who was somewhat of a connoisseur when it came to accessing other dimensions.

"Tarot" was Marcy's terse reply. She was already plotting out her list of questions.

"Do you think we can get an appointment?" questioned Elaine.

"Don't worry. Already done. I have an in with her booking agent."

Marcy turned towards me. "Don't worry. I made one for you, too. Noon, on Monday. Don't be late."

Marcy put a ten on the bar, gathered up her notebook, and headed for the door.

"A little presumptuous, don't you think, Marcy?"

I was sort of half-joking. More than that, I was nervous.

She looked at me with a grin and said, "Woman, if anyone needs a psychic, it's you."

"What do you mean?"

"Hello! You hate Bradley, are screwing like the most psycho-erotic guy in town, and besides that your aura is like turning this really bizarre color. I'm worried about you!"

“My aura? You believe that crap?”

Elaine interjected at this point, “Marcy’s right. Your aura is just this really intense color right now. Not right, not cool at all.”

I looked at both of them and laughed. They both stared grimly back at me.

“Okay, okay. I’ll go and see her.”

#

It was one of those Butte days where the sun was shining intensely but it was still only 25 degrees outside. Butte sits right on the Continental Divide and is one of the coldest places in Montana. On the day I saw the psychic, the weather perfectly mirrored my inner state, sunny disposition on the outside, but a cold, cold heart.

She was doing her readings at the local Holiday Inn, which I thought was peculiar, but I still wasn’t used to the strangeness that is Butte. It seemed there could be a million places in Butte for a psychic to get psychic. The place is practically overrun with ghosts. She chose the Holiday Inn. She must have been getting a discount on a room or something.

I checked in with reception to find out which way she was. They directed me to an austere sitting room adjacent to an ordinary-looking conference room. The doors of the conference room were shut. I nervously sat there, waiting, picking at my nose and wondering what the hell I was going to say to her, or better yet, what she would say to me. At that moment, a woman opened the door and walked past me. She held a Kleenex in her hand and dabbed at her tears as she left. Shit!

Thinking about her now, I can't remember the psychic's name, but her look was distinctive. She weighed well over 300 pounds. Her hair was stringy bleached blonde, and her teeth were rimmed with black, pointy on the ends. The blinds were pulled and the room was dark. It was extremely hot and I felt claustrophobic. There she sat, at a card table, overflowing on her fold-out chair. There was another chair directly across from her, for the next customer. Me. I sat down and looked at her tools: a deck of well-used tarot cards, a dish of polished stones, a large box of Kleenex.

"I've had this gift since I was a young girl," she says, by way of introduction. "I can tell your immediate past and immediate future, only about six months or so. If you have any specific questions, please ask them. But don't ask generalities. How long will you live? Will you be rich? Will you get married? I see best what's happening now."

I nod my acknowledgement. She takes both my hands in hers, closes her eyes, and takes a deep breath. I watch the fat on her cheeks jiggle like Jell-O as she inhales, slow waves of flesh undulating with her breath. I'm mesmerized and can't look away. I'm staring at her as she opens her eyes and releases my hands. I quickly try to avert my gaze but know I've been caught. She ignores my bad manners, picks up the tarot cards, and expertly shuffles them.

"Cut the deck," she says. "The cards need your energy on them."

"Cut them more than once?" I ask.

"Whatever you want. You just need to make contact."

Contrary to what Marcy and Elaine think, this isn't my first time to a psychic. In many ways I could out-connoisseur Elaine in the psychic department. Starting about ten

years ago, when I'd bought my own deck of Tarot cards, every time I travelled somewhere I'd be sure to find a Tarot reader. I learned to read the cards from the experts. I cut the deck into four piles, playing along with the agreed-upon game of energy transference. I actually spent a few moments analyzing the pattern on the back of the cards. Some did seem to vibrate at a different level, stand out. I'd decided, after many an afternoon reading mine and other friends' cards, that it's harmless if you don't actually believe it. For the moment, I put my experiential skepticism aside and mentally step deeply into the ritual. My choices are in front of me, and I say a slightly hysterical prayer that she'll tell me something I can use. She puts my choices back together in random order, then starts pulling cards out, placing them in a quasi-cross configuration.

"There are two men in your life."

"Correct," I say. I tell her, "There's the ex-boyfriend, Bradley, and then the new one, Freddie, the hot-headed Italian I'm having an affair with."

She doesn't seem disconcerted by my indiscretions, but continues, "You're playing the role of mother with one of them. The other has a spiritual side. He's also very dark."

"Bingo!" I say out loud. This one is actually good, getting me somewhere! I concentrate intently.

She continues. She pulls the Three of Swords. It's a distinctive card, a large red heart floating in space, with three long swords sticking through it, piercing the flesh. It's hard to make a positive reading out of that card.

"Wait a minute. There's a third man." She looks at me expectantly.

"Yes." At this point I'm hesitant to give away information. Especially of this sort. Damn, she's got me figured out and suddenly it's the last thing I want, to be exposed.

"Something tragic happened with him. Something you still haven't recovered from. You're stretching yourself thin. Giving away too much energy with the other two. You can't make it work with anyone until you get over this event. You might even get sick. Be careful."

My heart starts to beat wildly. I want to throttle her Jell-O neck for being so--so psychic. I grab for a Kleenex and then stop myself. I'm not going to cry. I'd already shed enough tears on that particular man, but what she said got to me.

"He died," I say.

"I see." She looks at me. I stare back, stony faced. I want to scream at her, "He blew his brains out, OKAY! Is that good enough for you?!" But I don't. I sit there, stoically, in my Scandinavian way, and wait for her to continue.

She turns over the next card, then asks, "What job do you have?"

"I own a saloon, in the historic district."

"You have a ghost in the building."

She says it nonchalantly, like it's an everyday occurrence. The strange thing is it doesn't seem strange at all.

"Man or woman?" I ask.

She thinks for a moment. "Man."

"Hmmm. I always thought it was a woman."

We both laugh.

"The ghost is friendly towards you. He's going to help you out with the business. He's happy with what you're doing."

I say, "That ghost is damn lucky to have me as his new landlord."

She counters, "He doesn't like the color red."

I look at her, jilted to my core.

"But that's my favorite color. I was going to do an entire wall of red up there."

She says, "I wouldn't advise that."

I shake my head in acknowledgement. Picky damn ghost! If he's so sensitive, maybe he could have helped out with the clean-up! The second and third floors of the building had been abandoned for fifty years. Nothing but piles of plaster, pigeon shit and detritus from the former owners, who used the rooms for storage of every piece of crapola imaginable. I'd spent two months cleaning it out, installing new plumbing and electricity, gutting the water-soaked walls, removing layers of peeling wallpaper.

I ask, "Does the ghost realize that the second floor was supposed to be the love nest for the boyfriend and me?"

She stares at me for a moment, and then her stare turns into a glassy-eyed trance.

She starts to rattle off the following: "Bradley's living with a new woman." She pauses, as if trying to find a description for the woman, whom I already know about. I let her ramble, "She's an emergency room nurse, two ex-husbands, a daughter."

I add my two cents, "She's a gold-digger."

Bradley comes from a finely pedigreed, blue-blood background, but all of the family money is long gone, squandered on booze.

The expectations of him were so low or non-existent that no one noticed he was still living at his step-father's home, sleeping on the living room couch, until the ripe age of 42. Oh yeah, and they live in a former Chinese Embassy in a quadrant of Washington, D.C., with some of the most expensive real estate in America.

My pissed-off reverie on Bradley and his family is interrupted by the psychic.

She asks, "Did you get rid of the raccoons?"

I look at her in astonishment.

"You know about the raccoons?"

How was this possible? Someone must have paid this woman off. There's no way in hell she could possibly know about the family of raccoons living in the rafters of the fourth floor of Bradley's house.

I say, "Yes, we finally flushed them out with peanut butter and hot dogs."

"It's better to use potato chips. Pringles. They love the shiny inside of the cans."

"Uh-huh. I'll keep that in mind."

I wondered if she also knew that in the house none of the toilets flushed, that the once formal dining room is now filled, floor to ceiling, with 70's-era computers that will someday be given to poor children in Liberia, not competing with one of the rooms on the second floor that you can't even walk into because that one is stacked floor to ceiling with magazines, newspapers, paper products of all varieties, raccoon scat and

disintegrating plaster from the walls and ceiling that are slowly caving in all over the house.

I finally ask her, “What else do you know about Bradley?”

She thinks for a moment. “I know that you loved him.”

I feel deflated. I had loved him. But I don’t now. What had I been doing with this eccentric loser?

She finishes, “Bradley is on his own path. It’s not yours.”

“No duh, sister!” I feel like shouting at her.

I say, “I always pick the wrong guy.”

I am met with silence. The session is over. She sticks out her pudgy hand to me and I hand her a twenty dollar bill.

#

As I walk back to my car, I start knocking myself in the head with the palm of my hand, as if to say to myself, “MORON! You’re a moron, a stupid woman who believes in that hideous word—hope!” The demise of all relationships can be traced to that one word and then the disintegration of belief in that word. That knowledge doesn’t really help, though, when I see him nowadays. It’s impossible to ignore or avoid anyone in Butte. The place is like Sartre’s prison you can never escape from. He can barely look at me when he speaks: his eyes are full of betrayal and hurt. The pain pierces for a moment, then I remember my own betrayal and hurt. Or should I call it outrage?

The conversation went something like this:

Me: "If you bring one more piece of shit into this house I swear to God I'll burn the fucking place down."

Bradley: "You just don't understand."

Me: "You're damn straight I don't understand. You're a crazy motherfucker."

Bradley: "You sound just like my mother!"

Me: "Your mother used to call you a motherfucker?"

Bradley: "She used to tell me I was crazy."

Me: "Well, you are."

Bradley: "You can't say anything to me that you want!"

Me: "Apparently, I can."

Bradley: "So what do you want me to do?"

Me: "See a therapist and get rid of your shit. Get a real fucking job. Stop pretending you're an old Black man. If I have to throw one more frozen soda can away, I might kill you!"

An aside here. Bradley used to put cans of soda pop into the freezer with the intent of getting them a bit colder. Inevitably, he never took them out and the soda would explode all over everything. It happened more than a few times. It was sort of the straw that broke the camel's back.

Bradley: "You're such a drama queen."

Me: "Try me."

Bradley: "I'll be back in a few hours! Give you some time to settle down."

Me: "Don't you dare drag another piece of broken furniture into this house.
Don't you do it!"

Then Bradley left, letting the door slam behind him.

The next day, I found the bar in Butte on the Internet, as if by divine intervention. Someone, somewhere, wanted to give Bradley and me another try. It took some convincing, but he finally went for it.

So, here I sit, alone, in this loft space on the second floor of the building. Looking out over the city-scape of friendly and not so friendly ghosts. Wondering exactly how I got here. The facts exist, the chronology of events is already done, and yet I wonder about choices, the random phone call I made to Bradley, out of the blue. Almost two years ago now. The phone call that ended up getting us back together. Why? I hadn't thought about him for ages. We'd had a brief dalliance years before, but I'd broken up with him after I let him borrow my car while I was out of town on a job and when I got back I discovered he'd eaten an entire bag of shelled peanuts in my car and had neglected to clean up the shells and other shell-y crap, those little red flimsy things that encapsulate the raw peanut. Totally irritating, they stick to your fingers, clothes, everything. It was finished!

When I called him this time around and we finally hooked up, he was on the verge of getting married to someone else! They were thinking about having a baby together. She was a lawyer for some big government consulting firm, made mega bucks and had way better tits than I do.

Why did I and why did he? Contrary to what the psychic had said, it's not like we fell madly in love. Sometimes I could barely look at him, he irritated me so much. The way he chewed his food. The roll of fat around his waist that was especially unattractive when he wore tighty-whities. The way he wouldn't (compulsively) throw away anything, to include bottle caps, used match books, the little plastic band you pull off to open a jug of milk, Chapstick lids, egg-roll wrappers, two-decades-old newspapers and socks with so many holes the toe no longer existed.

Oh, well. Disappointment doesn't go away in a day. Speaking of which, I wonder if Mr. Dark and Spiritual and I will ever work it out. Mentally pondering my rehabilitation level with the one who died. Hoping Bradley, despite everything, doesn't truly hate my guts for dragging him out to this destiny, and all the while blaming the entire saga on Calamity Jane, Wild Woman of the West, whore and mother who completely usurped my life, turned it upside down and brought me back to Montana, via India, via Alaska. I had to return to Montana to unravel my karma.

And here the unraveling begins. In Butte.

TWO: Five Years Earlier

“I lost your manuscript,” she says to me, over the phone. It’s 6 A.M. Montana time and I’m still asleep. A pounding headache from doing shots of tequila the night before hits me as I try to comprehend that someone is talking to me via the telephone that somehow I have managed to answer.

“What? Who is this?”

“Wake up! It’s me, Jessica.”

Jessica is my quasi-editor in New York City. She works for a major publishing house and is unofficially helping me get my most recent novel properly edited in order to make the rounds of all the agents she knows. She’s the ex-girlfriend of an ex-boyfriend of mine from Baltimore. Something convoluted like that. At some point it seems everyone I know has screwed everybody else I know.

“Jessica. It’s 6 A.M. Why are you calling me? Did someone buy the book?”

“I lost it. I lost the Calamity Jane book.”

I finally sit up in bed. “Lost it? How can you lose something like that? You mean *Montana Rhapsody*?”

“Yes. It was sitting right there on my desk. I’ve been meaning to get to it and edit it, and then I came in this morning, and it was gone.”

“So maybe one of the other editors took it?” I offer, as a helpful suggestion.

“Nope. Nobody touches another’s manuscript. It’s verboten. It’s gone.”

“You mean like in the slush pile? Or in the paper shredder? How gone is it?”

“I mean, it’s disappeared.”

“Do you want me to send you another copy? I can print you off another one.”

“Actually...” she hesitated.

“What?”

“The thing was really creeping me out.”

“The story?”

“After you told me what happened to the two characters in the book, just like the two guys you knew, it freaked me out.”

“Sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have told you.”

In a nutshell, two of the cowboy characters I wrote about in the book died in the same way as my two cowboy friends who I was modeling the cowboy characters on. The twist is I wrote the book first and then the actual people died – like I’d been writing their fates into the storyline.

Jessica continued, sounding distraught, “I swear, I mean, you know me. I’m the most responsible person there is.”

She was right. She’s one of those left-brain people who never miss a deadline, and, if anything, are always early with their editing notes.

She sounded like she was coming to her confession, “I just couldn’t read it. It had a bad vibe or something. I kept telling you that I’d do it, and then I never did. The manuscript sat on my desk for weeks, and now it’s gone. It’s like my mind decided I wasn’t going to do it, and now it’s gone.”

There was a long pause between us while I took it all in. Then I just said what I was thinking, “Weird.”

#

The reason I came to Montana in the first place wasn't about Calamity Jane. It was really about a cowboy I'd met over the Internet. His screen name was Montana_Cowboy. I could say that I was already writing the Calamity Jane book and was using him for information about horses: he was my horse guy. In truth, it happened in reverse. I found him in the Yahoo personals and as a result of "meeting" him got re-interested in horses and then started thinking about Calamity.

My Montana Cowboy sparked some part of my imagination that wanted only that—a cerebral playdoll. A flesh and blood man would have been too much. Any writer knows that all strains of life flow through the subconscious and frequently end up coming out the fingertips onto the keyboard, attaching to the page and becoming the nut of fictional reality.

The Montana_Cowboy incident sticks out as the turning point in my foray into the schizophrenic land of imagination and creation versus the no-fly zone of concrete here and now reality. If you're the one living it, there's no schizophrenia involved. It's all real. I did have to wonder how it sounded coming out of my mouth.

"Well, he doesn't want to meet me because he has cancer."

"Yes, he's a millionaire rancher in Montana."

"Nope, couldn't find his name or address in a phone book. But he said that he's a private person and doesn't want to be listed."

"Of course he's for real. He knows everything about horses."

“He said he’d tried calling before, but I wasn’t there and he didn’t want to leave a message.”

“I think we met in a former life or something. There are so many things I feel connected to him about. Like he thinks in one former life he was a woman living in rural Ireland. He has visions of himself as herself collecting seaweed on the Irish coastline and I’m pretty sure that I was a Viking invader. I may have even raped him.”

“I don’t care if he’s not who he says he is or even if he’s a she. Someone’s on the other end of that message, and whoever it is, sure as hell is more interesting than any person I’ve met in recent history!”

“Go to hell! I don’t need a life. I need you to believe in me! Believe in him!”

#

When I first started thinking about cowboys, somewhere around my prepubescent teens and the *Bonanza* years, I thought about two things; horses and hats. As I hit puberty, there was number three; sex. (I knew I was going to get married to Little Joe Cartwright.) As I became more decadent, number four appeared; alcohol. And as my fetishes hit full force, there was a number five; boots.

Additionally, there was something symbolic about the open sky, the freedom, the perceived individuality that I responded to. These ideals corresponded to my experiences of growing up in Utah. Some of my most vivid memories were of the intense sun reflecting against the eerie orange sandstone of Southern Utah. Our family did yearly trips to somewhere outside: Southern Utah, the Uintah Mountains, Flaming Gorge, fishing, camping, hiking, open fires, marshmallows, kick the can, and card games.

I think all those years of growing up outside left a mark. It felt like the man I'd eventually end up with would be one of 'em, an outside guy. And no one knows outside like a cowboy.

My Montana_Cowboy was a poet. First and foremost, that's what I admired about him. Cowboy poetry is specific. In the midst of the tragedy and the pain is the humor. Always the humor. It rarely, if ever, flows into intellectual analysis, but stays the course to failure. Failure on its own terms is a good thing. The analysis afterwards can only mean doom and gloom. This is where the sophisticate gets into trouble. For the cowboy, the main point is the action taken. The attempt. That's what the rodeo is made of, getting on that bucking bronc and giving it your best shot. Almost inevitably, the bronc will win. Failure as an elixir.

His story was that he came from a long line of farmers in Missouri. His mother was born Irish. His father had died years ago of a heart attack, and it was left to the boys in the family to make a go of the farm he'd grown up on. He left that job to his older brother and went off to Kansas to do rodeo, build fences and make his fortune. He liked to play the stock market and was good at it. If the particulars of the year weren't known, his story could have been one that started well over a hundred years ago. Missouri as the jumping-off point to the potential fortunes of the Wild West. Nothing to stop ya but a few thousand Indians and fear of the unknown.

My Montana_Cowboy batted his way around the West, working as a ranch hand, saving his pennies, eventually saving enough and making enough off his stock investments to buy his own parcel of land (he told me 10,000 acres) by the ripe old age of

33. His only downfall was his temper. He was impatient, a perfectionist and a loner. His horse had been his best companion, and when he was forced to come face to face with other men, especially after a few drinks, fights ensued. According to his telling of the story, he shot someone. It had been an accident but had happened anyway. He'd shot someone who was drunk and harassing a woman. He had come to her rescue, like any good cowboy would. The other man died.

He spent the night in jail, but, due to the circumstances and lots of witnesses, he was released. Then guilt started gnawing at him. He considered himself a religious man and had been taught that taking a life was the ultimate sin. Even if it wasn't exactly his fault. Then whose fault was it? He'd fired the gun. His pride and stubbornness had led him to pull the gun in the first place. The woman wasn't really in that much danger, was she? It'd been mostly for show. Mostly. The bullet had exited the barrel after his finger pulled the trigger, and it had hit the man in the chest. No matter how many angles he looked at it from, he'd caused the man's death. Every time and every night when he shut his eyes to try to sleep, he saw that pool of blood. It had happened so quickly.

He got sick. He came down with what he thought was a flu that wouldn't go away. Then he started losing weight. He couldn't afford that. He wasn't that big to start with. Sure, he was tall and muscular, but there wasn't much fat on his long bones. He was tired all the time. Riding a horse, which had been similar to breathing, became more than he could fathom. He was being punished by God. He had Hodgkins Disease.

Now, when someone tells you they have cancer, the last thing you do, even if it's over the Internet, is ask them to prove it. This was how I met Montana_Cowboy. He

was in the middle of his treatment and was looking for some Internet pen pals. Doing anything face-to-face, for a man with his ego, was out of the question. The safety and distance of the computer was about all he could handle at this particular point. He told me the specifics about his chemo, all of his hair falling out, how he looked forward to the day when he could get an erection again, drink beer, live a normal life. And he was writing his poetry. The lines were filled with stories of wayward men and their heroic horses. Unattainable women and the quest to attain them. Drinking parties and all-night poker games. The possibility of finding true love. I was mesmerized.

He became my prototype cowboy. He inspired me to start work on the Calamity book. I didn't tell him this. What I told him was that I needed horse advice. I needed the cowboy point of view on how and why things happen with horses. The different colors, breeds, temperaments.

Our love affair of words was the correct result of two people incapable of handling more direct contact. I needed a heroic cowboy to lead me through the twists and turns of Calamity Jane's obsessive world, and he needed a female persona to project his incapacitated wet dreams onto. We were a perfect match, at least for a while, until I couldn't take the lack of sex, the lack of physical intimacy, the lack of seeing someone's face.

About six months into my computerized romance with Montana_Cowboy, I decided it was high time to take the virtual into the real, and I set my goal toward latching onto a flesh and blood actual cowboy. Apparently, it wasn't meant to be anyway, because right about that time Montana_Cowboy died. He didn't die from Hodgkins

Disease, but a better way. On a beautiful spring day he decided to go riding again. The horse bucked him, he fell off, broke his neck and died. Enter cowboy number two.

THREE

It was an incredibly hot August day, August 11, to be exact. I was sitting in my house on a wooden chair, directly across from the green couch where, the night before, Danny had blown his brains out. The Carbon County Sheriff was sitting in another chair, to my right. I remember it was to my right because it was early afternoon and the heavy midday sun was reflecting off the Sheriff's badge, nearly blinding me.

I said to him, "I can't see anything."

He looked at me and my swollen eyes. "I'm sorry, Ma'am. Do you need a tissue?"

It was a good guess on his part, since it was fairly obvious I'd been crying.

"No. It's the sun. On your badge. It's blinding me."

I'd put my hand up to shield my eyes. He looked towards the window and finally got a clue.

"Sorry about that." He scooted his chair closer to me, angling it away from the sun as he came towards me.

"So why am I here, exactly?"

I'd gotten a call from the Sheriff's department early that morning, telling me that I needed to meet them at my house. Danny's father had identified the body, so at least I didn't have to do that. I was unsure of what they wanted from me.

"I really hate that you have to see the mess, but I needed to clear up a few things."

I said, "I'm surprised there isn't a bigger pool of blood."

"It was a pretty small caliber gun that he used."

“I don’t know anything about guns. I was just expecting more blood.”

I looked him directly in the face. He looked away.

“So why am I here, again?”

I was beginning to get suspicious and started feeling like I was taking part in some bad, made-for-television Friday-night B movie where a woman gets unjustly accused of killing her idiot boyfriend.

“Since you were the last person to see the victim alive, I’m obligated to ask you a few questions.”

I said, “Legally obligated, or just curiosity obligated?”

He ignored my needling, “We have his suicide note. We found it on the table there.”

He pulled the piece of paper out from a black binder and held it up for me to see. It was the same piece of paper that Danny had scribbled on the day before. At the time he’d done it, I hadn’t considered that it would be a suicide note, but hindsight holds more clues than foresight.

“Yeah, he wrote that. He wrote it outside then put it under the door. I’m the one who put it on the table.”

“So, when you left, he was where?”

“He was standing right in the front yard, by the barn, stumbling fucking drunk.”

I was starting to get angry, and I was also starting to cry again. That goddamned motherfucking motherfucker!

I started sobbing, "I didn't do it -- okay? He fucking stood right there and told me he was going to do it, and I didn't believe him. Well, he did it!"

I got up from my chair and half-stumbled outside. As I hit the full heat of the afternoon, I doubled over with nausea. I was practically drooling all over myself and my nose needed to be wiped. I closed my eyes and leaned against the door. Then I screamed at the top of my lungs, "I fucking hate you, Danny! I fucking hate you."

#

The Sheriff finally left and, thankfully, he and a deputy took the couch with them. I was sitting on a rock under a tree near my house as they prepared to leave.

After putting the couch in the back of his truck, the Sheriff came back and stood in front of me. He cast a long shadow over my face and, when I looked up towards him, he was completely in silhouette, like a ghost in reverse.

"I'm really sorry you had to go through that. Are you okay to stay here by yourself? I can't say I think it's a good idea. Where's the other two fellows who live here?"

He was talking about Yancey and Grazier, my roommates, sort of. I lived in one house on the property and they lived in the other, bigger farmhouse. Yancey owned both of them; he was my landlord.

"They're at Seeley Lake. Won't be back for a few more days."

"Don't you have any friends you can stay with?"

“I’m not going to let him kick me out of my own house. I won’t let him.” I was shaking my head back and forth, in a continuous motion, convincing myself, most of all, that I could actually do it, go back in there and pretend like nothing had happened.

He stared at me for a few seconds and then accepted my stubborn behavior.

“Alright, then, you take care of yourself.”

He tipped his hat at me and walked away.

I said, “Thanks.”

#

I sat there, legs crossed underneath me, chin on my knees, for what seemed like hours. Occasionally, I’d start crying again. I didn’t care that I could barely see anymore and that my entire face was covered with snot. I just didn’t care. From my perch, I could see into my house, and I was staring through the front door into the space where the couch had been. The small pool of blood was still there. Somebody would need to clean it up. Somebody.

The sound of a pick-up truck jarred me from my hideous nightmare, except this nightmare was real. With my two hands open, I simultaneously wiped my eyes and cleared away the snot. I slapped myself a few times to see if it registered. It did. Who the fuck had shown up, anyways?

I heard, “Howdy there.”

The drawl was un-mistakable. Brock, the neighborhood Southern Baptist, born-again, Bible-thumping transplant from South Carolina.

What the hell could he possibly want except to gloat and piss me off?

I could hear him walking towards me and then I felt his shadow.

“I heard what happened.”

I said, “Yep.”

He said, “You know that God punishes those who commit murder on themselves.”

I said, “Yep.”

And then Brock knelt down in front of me and put his face right up to mine.

“Danny was walking with the devil when he did it. Don’t you forget that. Walking with the devil.”

I said, “Brock, would you please leave me alone.”

He said, “God will heal your wounds.”

I said, “I don’t believe in God.”

FOUR

The first time I had a full conversation with Danny was on Easter. I'd seen him once before in a pick-up truck, driving past me at 75 m.p.h. Tonight would be our initial contact. It was a slow night at the bar where I was working. I was newly arrived in Montana and had decided to go deep undercover to absorb the rhythm of the local population. No 9-5 routine, no suits, stockings, high-heel shoes, cell phones, palm pilots or brief cases. No rants on feminism, Marxism, new experiments for birth control, she-males, or forays into lesbian land. No white trash or hill-billy jabs. No Freeman or Unibomber jokes. I'd learn to like Bud Light and rail tequila. I'd deny the number of degrees I had, the price I'd paid for my last bottle of wine, and how much time I'd spent reading obscure novels by even more obscure Scandinavian writers. I was going to learn to fit in and what better place to learn the ropes than at the local watering hole? Everyone would be so drunk they wouldn't realize my faux pas.

That's how I'd ended up back West in the first place. Research. After living on the East Coast for almost 15 years and absorbing the romantic cynicism and relationship-challenged lessons from my friends there, I'd decided on a different path. I'd decided that perhaps there was hope. Hope for happiness, hope for self-revelation via another person, hope for reconciliation with my past by living in the present and looking toward the future. I know it sounds like something out of a Hallmark card, and in many ways I'm loathe even to admit that relationships matter, but I also knew that pretending that I was exempt was a sure-fire way to have a nervous breakdown.

There was a schizophrenia about my view of the man/woman thing. In many ways, I'd always wished I was a lesbian. The woman/woman equation seemed normal, easy, obvious. The man/woman thing was so loaded with power plays, gender crap, and the learning of "how to be a woman" from my Mormon upbringing, that every time I'd tried to start something with a man I found myself reverting to one of two types: either an aloof and bitchy slut or a simpering and dependent fool.

I was determined to break the impasse and thought, perhaps foolishly, that the best way to do it was by leaving my comfort zone behind (comfort zone here being cynicism and detachment) and jumping directly into the unknown of self-exposure. I'd found the easiest way to self-expose was to live it and then write it. And so, like any writer willful or lazy enough to think that life can become fiction, or possibly vice versa, I knew that either way I needed to do my homework. *Montana_Cowboy* had given me the excuse to start. Now I needed to find out all sorts of things on a variety of levels, generally about Calamity, but mostly about myself. Could I fall in love? What *was* it about cowboys that I found so mesmerizing? What narrative had I fallen into and how could I get out, or did I even want to get out? In the dark recesses of my denial there was me, as a little woman at home holding the plump baby on my left hip as I stood frying sliced-up red potatoes in a cast iron skillet. In another pan, I was frying liver and onions. His favorite. Or, was I just being a selfish writer, using other people's lives and stories to further and fuel my technique?

Or, or, even more of a possibility was, as previously stated, that I was living out the pre-programmed requirements of having grown up in Utah. After years of living on

the East Coast, trying to re-educate myself to the ways of culture and couture, I'd somehow missed my mark with the urban crowd and had ended up bartending in a divey saloon in Silesia, Montana, for god's sake. Population about 30, give or take a few transients. Even though I'd thought I was finished with my propagandized Mormon-girls-get-married-and-have-a-gaggle-of-kids-phase, somehow I'd ended up back at the beginning of my story of denial and dismissal.

Enter Danny, as if on cue. I don't think there was another person at the bar that night. I was agitated and surly, wiping down sticky liquor bottles, trying to clean red lipstick off the beer glasses, listening to classic Johnny Cash, wondering how much longer I was going to have to toe the line. Just prior to wiping down the bottles, I'd been swabbing the bathroom floors. There was a sewage leak, and the overflow water was soaking through the carpets outside the bathrooms. The owners knew about the leak but didn't care too much. How much could they care when they also served wine on tap? Nonetheless, the place smelled like fermenting stink on a hot summer afternoon. How angry could I get after a few hours in this joint?

Danny walks in and I'm saved from myself. He has a look about him, as many cowboys do. He's tall and muscular, has on a worn, plaid shirt with a wool vest, a pair of work gloves tucked into the back of his pants and a silk, royal blue scarf wrapped tight around his neck. Silk doesn't chafe, as other material does in the frigid weather. His hat is black, beaver skin, not felt, no adornments. He wears a leather belt with a rodeo buckle that looks like it'd lost its shine years ago. Wranglers, of course. No self-respecting cowboy would be caught dead in Levis, except Robert Redford in his movies.

Something about the low cut at the waistline; they ride up when you're on a horse.

There's a thin layer of mud at the hem-line of his pants. He's been working the range, probably moving cows. He has deep creases around his eyes that come from squinting at the sun and in answer to the never-ending wind. He has the start of a handle-bar moustache, a wad of chew in his cheek. His teeth, regardless of the chew, are even and white, and his smile is crooked and constant. Finally, his boots. They're worn, not too pointy, crusted with mud: my boot fetish caught in the headlights. I don't know when or where I fell into that particular freak zone, but cowboy boots make me shiver inside. You can tell from a man's boots how active he is, if he's been around, so to speak.

Additionally, the gait of a man in cowboy boots is sultry. His hips jut out and sway as he walks. Boots tell you how good he'll be in bed.

"Budweiser."

"Bottle or draft?"

"Bottle."

He doesn't look at me as he orders. Interesting.

Danny leans into the bar and drinks down his beer in three passes. Puts the bottle back down on the bar.

"Andy around?"

"Nope." Andy is the owner of the bar.

"Huh. Tell him I stopped in, will ya? I'm back in town. Tell him that."

"Sure will. Who are you?"

He chuckles to himself and tips his hat towards me. “Danny. Andy and I are friends from way back. Nice to meet ya, ma’am.”

“No ma’ams around here.”

“Don’t know ya well enough to call ya anything else is all. You have a good evening, ma’am.”

I smile, “I’ll try.”

Danny puts a five on the bar and leaves before I can give him his change. I watch his butt as he walks away from me, and I inhale deeply. Damn, those cowboys are sexy.

#

Easter Sunday, we have a band playing at the bar called “Nadine the Outlaw Queen.” For almost 40 years, Nadine had been married to the cussin’est, hardest-drinkin’, bronc-ridin’ rodeo man in Montana. He was a legend of Big Sky proportions, and Nadine attained mythical status, too, after shooting him one night when she found him shacked up with another cowgirl at the local Motel 6. He recovered with only a slight limp as evidence of his indiscretion, and Nadine’s reputation went through the roof. Her shows were packed after that stunt.

Nadine was crooning away on a Patsy Cline cover when Danny walked into the bar. My heart skipped a beat and even sped up when I saw him. I think I caught him taking a sly look in my direction as he took a seat at the far end of the bar. I slid a Budweiser down the bar to Danny and he caught it in his palm like in a scene straight out of a commercial. He smiled at me and I grinned back at him like a pre-pubescent twelve-year-old-girl. I felt myself turn red, too. What was going on here? I turned my back to

Danny and poured myself a shot of tequila. I jerked my head back, like I was fending off a wayward fly, and downed it. If I was going to participate in this seduction, I definitely had to be a little drunk. I'm no good sober when it comes to sex.

I felt his eyes on me as I continued to pass out the booze. I felt myself sucking in my stomach, sticking my breasts out a little farther, flicking at the hair in my eyes, licking my lips in a sultry manner, even though they didn't need licking, taking a tad longer to bend over to find that extra bottle of whiskey in the cupboard beneath the bar.

Nadine finally took a break and the band members scooted over to the bar for their complimentary shots of whatever they wanted. The fiddle player took up residence next to Danny. His name was "The Fiddler" -- very original -- and the man had breath that could kill. He was like Pig-Pen, his odor hovering over his head. I was mentally begging him to drink heavily, if only to take the edge off the stench.

The Fiddler felt obliged to start up a conversation with me. For once I was grateful since it gave me an excuse to pay closer attention to that end of the bar. To Danny. The Fiddler had met me at least three or four times before when they'd played there. For some reason, he could never quite remember my name or when or where we'd met.

"What's your name again, honey?" asked Fiddler.

I gave him my most withering half smirk.

"We met before?" he continued, lost in the fact that he was becoming his own joke.

I rolled my eyes at him. "You jokin', Fiddler? You'd better be."

I saw Danny grin. I could tell he didn't want me to know he was listening in, so he turned his head toward the wall and laughed into his shirt.

"You need another drink, Fiddler." I said it as a statement, not a question. I walked back to the rail and found his brand of cheap whiskey, picked up a tumbler off the bar back, and filled it to the brim. I put it down in front of him, spilling a few drops. The Fiddler automatically put his palm down on the bar, wiped up the liquid with it, then proceeded to lick his hand clean, like a dog licking a wound. I gulped back my disgust.

"What's this for?"

Trying to stanch my rising nausea, I said, "For all your great playin'. Drink it, Fiddler. On the house."

The Fiddler grinned at me and I could see the layer of scum on his teeth. It was slimy and yellow and gooey. I wanted to retch. Instead, I turned my gaze to Danny.

"You want one too?" In my book it was time to start the downward slide into oblivion.

Danny hesitated a minute, unsure I was speaking to him. It finally registered just right. He answered with equal parts doubt and enthusiasm, "Well sure, but I didn't do anything to deserve it."

I gave him my best seductive eyes, flitted my tongue across my lower lip, acting like a teen in heat, and said, "You sure about that, hon? You showed up, didn't you? I think that deserves a drink right there."

I grabbed two shot glasses and poured one for both of us. I caught my hand shaking, ever so slightly, for a hot minute. I hoped Danny hadn't seen. It was strange for

me to be acting the slut. I was close to uncomfortable but forced my chest to heave for effect. I held my glass up and Danny and Fiddler joined me in a toast.

“Here’s to the Easter Bunny.” We clinked, then drank.

Fiddler wasn’t to be outdone.

“Here’s to young lovers.”

I gave him a screwy look, and Danny turned red. I didn’t know if I should acknowledge what Fiddler had said or not. We all clinked again, then drank again.

Danny and I avoided each other’s eyes.

“You gonna’ dance with me this evening?” Fiddler asked.

“If I dance with you then who’s gonna’ play the fiddle?”

That one caught him off guard. “Oh...yeah....”

Fiddler turned to Danny. “You know how to two-step, young man?”

Danny, “Sure do.”

“Nothing better than a two-step. Ya know, I had to learn how to do that one for my wedding reception. Ah, what a joyous day that was.”

“You were married?” I said it a little too loudly. It was a shock.

It seemed inconceivable to me that any woman, no matter how sturdy a Montana stock she was from, would be able to deal with the breath.

“Of course I was married. For 38 beautiful years. Three kids.”

“Holy hell!” It was the only response I could think of.

It was a turning-point moment for me. If Fiddler could manage a relationship, with all his obvious defects, surely I could at least try. And here was the perfect

experiment sitting right in front of me. Danny must have been reading my mind. He looked me straight in the eyes, and I could feel the heat coming off his stare. “You and me. Once Fiddler starts up again, we’ll dance. That okay with you?”

“Sure. Yeah. That’d be great!”

I was woozy inside. Not only did I NOT know how to do the two-step, but I’d never done any of that partner-dancing. I’d have to let him lead. Fuck!

Nadine was back at the microphone, publicly humiliating Fiddler. “Fiddler. Get your ass over here. We’re ready. Do NOT take another drink of that whiskey or you’ll be sorry.”

The Fiddler turned and gave Nadine a fuck you glare, then bent his neck back to the ceiling and downed the whiskey. He did a tongue swirl on the bottom of the glass. I could see the disgust in her face. They’d been through a lot together. It takes years and years of personal knowledge to have that much contempt for another human being.

Fiddler leaned over the bar and gave me a boozy, breathy, stinky and somewhat gooey kiss on the cheek.

“Thanks, love. Whiskey was just what I needed. See you on the dance floor.”

All I could say was, “Yep.”

FIVE

It's been three days since Danny killed himself. His father calls to tell me he's coming over to the house to collect Danny's horses. We meet each other outside, by the corral.

I'm hesitant to let his father inside. Not only do I not want to remind him of the actual place where his son met his demise, I also don't want more male energy in the house. I'm having enough problems as it is dealing with the dead zone left behind by Danny.

His father keeps himself busy gathering together the horse gear. He is purposely not looking at me. I decide to break the spell.

I say, "I'm really sorry this happened."

He continues to work.

"You know, my brother killed himself about 15 years ago. Hanged himself. It's no one's fault. Sometimes people just think they have to do it."

Still no response.

"I can't really imagine what it must be like to lose a child. I didn't really know Danny that well. I had no idea he'd do something like this."

He turns on me and looks like he might strangle me. He takes a few steps towards me and I see murderous anger on his face.

"You did this to him!"

I back up a few paces and my heart starts to beat wildly. This is just too much.

"What are you talking about? How could I have done this?"

“He loved you. He wouldn’t have done this if he hadn’t met you. You drove him to it.”

I choke up with tears. “You don’t really believe that.”

He takes a few steps towards me, his face softening, “I don’t believe it. I don’t know what to believe.”

I start crying. “I’m sorry. Really, I had no idea he was going to do it.”

This wasn’t entirely true. I did know. He’d told me so. The difference was between the saying and the doing. Danny had actually followed through -- the asshole.

His father looks directly at me. “I have to warn you about something.”

“What?” What the fuck now? How stupid is this going to get?

“You might be in danger.”

“What are you talking about?”

“His friends do think it’s your fault. I don’t, but they do. They might hurt you.”

I was incredulous, beyond incredulous, stupefied. I was frozen in amazement at what I was hearing.

He finishes, “His funeral is next week, but you’d better not show up. Something might happen.”

I half-scream at him, “You’re joking. Why would they think that? Why would they think I could force Danny to do ANYTHING? He was a huge guy. He weighs like 100 pounds more than I do. How could I force someone to put a gun in his mouth and pull the trigger?”

“He loved you! Don’t you get it? You’d become his only hope! He couldn’t get a job doing what he loved. Real cowboys don’t exist anymore. He was real.”

And, I add, “Now he doesn’t exist.”

SIX

On our first official date outside of the bar, Danny and I go riding horses. It's an embarrassment for me to try to be riding with an actual cowboy. I feel clumsy, awkward, idiotic, scared, childish and turned on, all at the same time. I can't say exactly why I feel turned on, but I figure it must have something to do with letting the man be in charge. I've always been something of a femi-Nazi, but at the moment Danny helps me mount the horse I almost faint into an old-time movie swoon, back of my hand against my forehead and everything. Fortunately, Danny is oblivious.

He's picked out an old sway-back for me. Her name is Lily. She's about 100 years old and couldn't buck me off if her life depended on it. I don't know that, though, because I'm a greenhorn rider and scared as hell of this massive beast. Danny senses this.

"If they know you're scared, they'll push it."

"Huh?"

"Horses can sense if someone's afraid of 'em. If they know, then they'll do things just to mess with ya."

"No way."

"Way, little darlin'."

"Even this one? She has it in for me?"

Danny laughs a deep, barrel laugh. "I'm saying in general. This horse couldn't and wouldn't hurt a tick on a turkey and that's why I chose her. Hell, if she makes it

back to the stable tonight I'll be surprised. She's practically ready to collapse into a pile of dust and bones."

"Great! So now she's gonna' die right on top of me? What if I get squished?"

I know I sound ridiculous, but I'm not in the mood to joust with a horse, no matter how old and decrepit Danny claimed her to be. It occurs to me that his version of near death's door and mine might be miles apart. To him, a horse that can't run the barrels in record time is ready for the slaughterhouse, whereas, for me, anything that is this big and breathing is the enemy.

"Just come on and give her a rub on the nose. Get close to her. Smell her."

Danny grabs me by the arm and almost wrestles me up to the horse. Her long nose bobs around me. Her cavernous nostrils take in my scent. She nudges my shoulder, and, I swear, winks at me with one eye, her left. I finally relent and give her a good rub on the side of her long neck. She nudges deeper into my shoulder and nibbles on my hair, licks my ear. I screech with automatic laughter, equal parts disgust and delight. I haven't had a wet willy like that since I was a kid.

Danny looks on with amusement. I must seem like an idiot to him. I make myself feel better by mentally telling myself that at least I have a college degree. The snob factor gets me nowhere with the horse, but for a moment my ego feels assuaged. I hate learning new things in front of someone else. It's a pain in the ass and hard to keep my vanity at bay. I need a good dose of sarcasm. I try to think of something, quick, but nothing happens. I'm caught in someone else's home movie. Shit!

I slowly tune back in to Danny's channel. He's saying something. "Now, with your hands on her, walk clear around. Give her a nice rub-down with your hands."

"You've got to be joking," I say, sarcasm finally finding my tongue and oozing out like toothpaste from an overripe tube.

"They love it when ya scratch their flank. Helps 'em fight the flies."

"I see. Flank. Fly swatter."

I tentatively take a step towards her side, a few steps short of her so-called flank. She turns her long neck to gaze at me as I rub down the length of her body. "She won't kick me?"

Danny lets go something like a chortle. "She's got arthritis so bad she can barely walk, let alone kick."

"Should I be riding her, then?"

"Sure, it'll give her a taste of what it used to be like. She was a great horse in her day. Now she only gets saddled up for kids, and you."

I laugh, "Gee, I'm a little embarrassed."

"Don't be. Ya got to start somewheres. After ya get used to the feel of a horse again, we'll switch ya up to something a little more challenging. For now, ya have to remember how to steer and stop and all that. Ready?"

"Ready."

"First thing is ya have to get up on her. Ya know how to do that?"

"Of course!" I say, overly sure of myself. All my years of watching *Bonanza* come back to me in a supreme moment of clarity. Little Joe Cartwright hoisting himself

up onto his trusty horse like it's a little bit of nothin'. I grab onto the horn of the saddle, like I seem to remember Little Joe doing it, and with my left leg in the correct stirrup, try to pull myself up. I abruptly pull the saddle halfway off the horse.

Danny runs to my aid. "Oh, shit! Forgot to tighten her cinch."

I look at him sideways. "You trying to kill me or something?"

He laughs. "I swear, didn't want to tighten her up yet 'cause she's just so damn old. Afraid she might croak."

"Well, that makes me feel better."

Danny tightens the cinch beneath her belly and looks at me with a grin. "Just got distracted is all."

I know I'm his distraction. I grin back, "Oh, yeah? How'd that happen?"

"I dunno. Some darn fool smart girl out here is messin' with me. Got distracted."

I laugh.

Danny finishes with the saddle then says, "Try her again. This time it's fair play."

I never was good at making a fool of myself, so instead of trying again with the potential of not getting on the saddle again, I turn to Danny and say, "Okay, Mr. Cowboy. You want to let me in on your secret?"

Danny tips his hat down at me, approaches the horse, grabs the saddle horn, puts his leg in the stirrup and, within a single, swift movement is sitting on the saddle.

"How'd you do that?" I ask with wonder.

Danny grins at me. "The magic of television."

I say, "But, it's the same thing I did. How come you made it look so easy?"

Danny, "I dunno. Probably 'cause I've done it about five million times. Don't worry. Before I'm through with ya, you'll be jumpin' on just like a regular cowgirl."

I say, "Not in your lifetime."

We both laugh and Danny jumps down from the horse and hands me the reins. I take a deep breath and try again, clumsily making it up to the saddle on my stomach. My ass is staring Danny in the face.

"Swing that right leg around; you've almost got it."

"Shut the hell up!" I yell at him from my perch. I'm laughing and pissed at the same time. "Don't look at me. Turn around or I won't be able to do it."

Danny does as he's told and turns so his back's toward me. "I'm turned."

"Good!" I grunt and moan a few times and finally swing my leg over the saddle. I realize I'm in horribly bad shape. I make a mental note to work on it. After catching my breath, I settle my ass in the saddle, grab at Lily's reins, which I've managed to lose control of, readjust my baseball cap and look down at Danny.

"Ready," I say.

Danny turns and looks at me. "Well, look at you. Just like I said, ya look like a regular cowgirl."

"Fuck you!" I say, laughing. "Let's get this show on the road before I change my mind. My ass is already sore."

"Yes, Ma'am." He tips his hat at me and literally jumps onto his horse. He turns his horse toward the dirt road and I follow close behind.

To say we worked up a sweat because of speed would be nothing but a tall story. The horses maintained a good pace of somewhere between 3-5 m.p.h. Danny kept looking back at me to make sure I hadn't been trampled on or suddenly fallen out of the saddle. It was a hot day, and the sun was beating down fiercely on our foursome. I could see the heat gathering on Lily's long neck, even though we were barely walking. The flies were constant, and I could feel my face turning beet red. For some reason, I don't sweat, only overheat.

I was grateful when Danny finally steered his horse to a small trail that led down to the Yellowstone River. He dismounted and left his horse to stroll to the river for a long drink. I tried to emulate what I'd seen him do and was somewhat proud of myself for at least dismounting without feeling too much like a buffoon. Lily seemed to know what she wanted and headed straight for the water. Danny had a padded, long, tube-like contraption strapped around his shoulder. He looked at me, unzipped the bottom of it, and out slumped two cans of Coors Light. He held one in my direction and I smiled.

"You're just like a Boy Scout. Always prepared."

"Can't ride without some liquid refreshment."

I popped the top and took a long drink. My head started to spin as the cold beer made contact with my fried nerve endings.

"Damn, that's good!" I say.

"Champagne of the cowboy."

"That's what I've heard."

There was an uncomfortable lull after we both took a swig. I wasn't quite sure yet if I wanted to make the leap into sex-land. It was the typical conundrum for all bookish women everywhere: the body says yes, the brain screams ARE YOU JOKING?!

It wasn't that I wasn't attracted to him, it wasn't that I couldn't see myself butt naked with my legs wrapped around his manly physique, it was that he constantly used double negatives, spit tobacco which often landed on his boots, treated all food as finger food, and then the other thing, the vibe. What would I be setting myself up for? Something, somewhere told me to watch out. My antennae weren't registering the full extent of what I needed to watch out for; I had no idea if he was a bizarro stalker, or if he had violent tendencies when he got drunk, or if it was that he just got drunk a little too often. It was the grey area of unknowing that was poking at my intuition.

My mind processed these thoughts in a flash. I'd come to my decision and, as with all ridiculous and overly sexually adventurous women everywhere, my body won the day.

I gave Danny a side-long glance. "So, you wanna' come over for dinner tonight?"

Danny gave the broadest grin I'd ever seen. It almost looked like his teeth might fall right out of his mouth. "Missy, I'd love to come over. What time?"

"I dunno. I'd say around 7."

"Now, don't you worry about a thing. I'll bring the meat."

"The meat? Great! You bring the meat."

And, with that, we set the circumstances for our sex rendezvous.

#

Danny showed up exactly on time. Strangely for me, I didn't go through any tumultuous second thoughts or self-doubts. I just accepted the fact that I'd made a sex date with Danny and he was the bringer of the meat. I wondered if this referred back to some primitive part of himself, the hunter thing, preying on his unconscious mind. He blurted it out so quickly, it was as natural to him as peeing outside.

I could see the dust from Danny's truck as he made his way to my house. Out where I lived, on Yancey's ranch, there was little or no traffic. When one of us saw a cloud of dust, we usually knew who it was. When the dust cloud was an unknown, we'd all watch until the vehicle passed, then label the vehicle as to where its final destination might be.

Yancey might say, "That's young Taylor's rig. Must be going over to see the old man."

Grazier might add, "Ain't he the young guy who knocked up old Gustav's daughter?"

Yancey: "Nope, that's the other young Taylor. This was the one who got locked up for dealin' marijuana."

Grazier: "Oh, yeah. He grew some good pot. Too bad the law dogs cut it all down. I could use some of that right now."

Yancey: "God-damn law dogs show up here I'll shoot 'em in the ass like they deserve. God-damn fascists!"

Fortunately, at this very moment, both Yancey and Grazier were over in Missoula visiting one of their hippie friends. Most likely, they were all drunk and high and hitting

on native girls at the divey bars they frequented. I was glad they weren't here. Now I wouldn't have to explain anything. It's not that they were overly inquisitive; in fact, they never asked a direct question, but there was a tacit understanding between us that if I was getting sex, they wanted the details. It'd been a while for both of them, and indirect sex was better than none at all.

Danny pulled into the gravel driveway and I could hear Shania Twain belting out one of her solid gold tunes at top volume. Danny turned off the engine and sang along with Shania until the song ended, then there was silence, the sound of a door closing and boots on gravel. When I heard him walking to my door, I got nervous. It was a momentary, butterflies-in-the-stomach sensation born from libidinous expectation. The precursor to full-blown orgasmic delight, or at least a quickie. The body always has higher expectations than what really happens. That's why vibrators were invented.

When I opened the door, Danny looked newly scrubbed. He'd obviously showered and shaved prior to the date. He had the smell of aftershave lotion with a secondary aroma of Irish Spring soap. Under one arm he held a bag of cheap beer; in the other he held the meat. He offered it to me and I took it, quite solemnly, wondering what it was under the plastic covering.

"Whatever it is, it sure smells great!" I said, a bit too loudly.

"Barbeque spare ribs," he responded. "Got 'em at the grocery story. Ya know those ones they cook up and got all the right sauces on 'em? I love these things. Ya don't have to cook or nothin'. Just take off the lid and start munchin'."

"Cool!" I said.

As if to demonstrate, he came over to where I still held the meat, took off the plastic in a whirl of a movement, plucked out the juiciest rib he could finagle and stuck it in his mouth before I knew what'd happened. In a whiz of a flash, he made a little sucking noise then pulled the newly stripped rib from his sticky lips. A big glob of sauce stuck to his chin like sap from a maple tree, about to drip. And then it did, right onto the front of his pristine shirt. I knew I had some frozen smile on my face as I watched this unfold, and then the smile went into an even deeper freeze as Danny looked down at his shirt, wiped the sauce off with his forefinger and licked that dry, too.

"Shit! Can't take me anywheres," said Danny, with an apologetic tone to his voice.

"Ah, don't worry, I'm sure it'll wash out. Clean shirts are overrated anyways."

"Hell, this is NEW! Had to go shopping before I showed up to buy me a shirt that didn't have tears and holes in it. Found this for \$9.95 at the Dollar Store."

"I thought the Dollar Store could only sell stuff for a dollar?"

"Maybe."

Big, uncomfortable pause.

"So, how about a glass of wine or something? What can I get you to drink?"

"Brought my own," Danny said, motioning to the sack under his arm.

"Then let's have a party!"

We proceeded to get sloshed. I drank at least half a magnum bottle of cabernet; Danny drank all of his beer. It was some brand I'd never heard of. Cheap was the operative word. Before I could grab even one piece of the meat, it was gone. Danny

swallowed the ribs up before I had a chance to say Jack Sprat. I nibbled on a piece of cheese and some crackers. At a certain point of the drunk, food seemed irrelevant. I knew I had wine rings around the inside of my mouth. I could feel them, slightly chappy with a hint of residual wine. My tongue felt fuzzy and huge. Danny walked sideways on his boots.

He said, "Let's build a fire."

We did. At my house the only source of heat was a wood-burning stove. I'd arranged all of my furniture around the stove so I could pretend it was a fireplace, even though the only glimpse of the fire was through a one-foot-square glass panel. Danny built the fire and I created the mood. I plugged in all of my Christmas lights, chili pepper lights popular in the '90s and various and sundry other twinkle lights I'd picked up along the way at Pier One or WalMart. I'm a sucker for twinkle lights. In all of my moving, I've given lots of stuff away, including antique furniture, special-edition books and expensive linens. Even so, I always kept the twinkle lights.

The first-floor room was warm and the twinkle lights were blazing. I had an overstuffed, art-deco-style sofa with green plush fabric, almost like velvet, that we both sank into. We sat side by side, arms touching, looking at the flames pressed up against the glass. We sat in a woozy silence, each waiting for the other to make the first move. Then I had a flash of inspiration.

"How about some music?"

"Sounds great!" said Danny. "Got any Shania?"

“Um, I was thinking more like Nina Simone or Billie Holiday. I’ve got some old-school Charlie Mingus.”

“Charlie Pride?”

“Nope. Mingus.”

“Oh. No Shania, then?”

“Nope. Sorry.”

“Ya know I met her once? A friend of mine from the Marine Corps was one of her roadies. He got me back stage at a concert down in Phoenix. She signed a poster for me. Man! She was the sexiest woman I’ve ever seen.”

“I bet.”

Big, long, drunken silence.

Danny then took off his cowboy boots and socks. I looked at his feet, white and bony with overgrown toenails. It was disconcerting to see them. Cowboys are supposed to have on boots. They’re not allowed to wear swimming trunks, sport a bow tie or have white, bony feet with yellowing toenails. Simply unacceptable. The room was spinning and there were his feet, mocking me with their very existence. Danny had spread himself out on the couch, with one leg spread on the top cushion, the other spread out in the other direction. A scissor position, ready to cut me in half.

“Take a load off, darlin’. Come and sit a while.”

I knew what he had in mind. He wanted me to sit and allow him to wrap his legs around me. To swaddle me with his feet. It was too much. I needed more wine.

“How about another drink?”

“Beer’s all gone.”

“Wine, then?”

“Why the hell not? Never liked the taste, but better than nothin’.”

“Right.”

I headed off to the kitchen and took a long swig from the bottle. I was living my own private hell. At this point, it was only his feet. What would my reaction be when he took off all his clothes? His translucent, jellyfish skin glaring at me like a nuclear sun? Not to mention his hat head. I’d completely forgotten about that as soon as I saw his feet. I could only stall for so long. At some point he’d come looking for me. I decided to take the offensive and ignore all of his ghastly faults.

I returned to the living room and purposely put on Charlie Mingus. I handed Danny a glass of wine then sat down on the end of the couch he’d reserved for me. I took a long sip of the wine and stared stoically into the fire. This romantic thing wasn’t quite turning out the way I’d planned. Danny was a human being after all. Shit! As the realization occurred, sure enough his legs wrapped around my shoulders.

“Come on, sweetheart. Relax a little.”

I looked in his direction and gave him a weak smile.

“I guess the wine’s making me a little tired,” I stalled.

Danny gave me a sympathetic look and said, “Lay on back there against the other side and I’ll show you a cowboy trick for relaxin’.”

I was warming to his effect. “Okay! I can do that.”

I purposely took my shoes off and leaned back against the opposite side of the sofa. We were somewhat face to face with each other, crotches inches apart. Thoughts of him giving me a foot massage, or a calf massage, fled through my brain. My toenails were newly cut and polished. My feet weren't too bony, either. What is it about feet, anyway? They're pretty gruesome-looking entities when you really take a good look at 'em.

Danny interrupted my reverie. "Ya ready?"

"Sure."

"So lay back there, close your eyes."

I did as I was told.

"Okay."

And then it happened. Danny's feet all over my face. His bony, scrawny, white, yellow-toe-nailed feet ALL OVER MY FACE!

My eyes flew open and I saw Danny laughing so hard he looked like he'd pee his pants.

"What the hell are you doing?!" I screamed at him.

"Doesn't that feel nice? I'm givin' ya a facial with my feet!"

He had my face pinned between his feet and was rubbing the soles up and down on my skin like I was a pumice stone.

My next words were garbled and incoherent due to my face being squished like an overripe pumpkin.

"Danny, stop it!"

He obviously didn't or couldn't understand what I'd said. The beastly massage continued. So I did the only thing I could think of. I grabbed his penis—hard! I grabbed his entire ball sack in my hand and squeezed with all my might. It was tough going through the seam of his Wrangler's, but his reaction assured me it'd done the trick. His feet jerked off my face and his legs flailed, almost hitting me with the spasm.

“What the hell!” he screeched.

“Get your fucking feet off my face!”

The evening was a bust. Danny was crouched over his private parts, moaning like a newly cut calf. I was standing, facing him, my eyes wild with bewilderment at this unfathomable dating ritual.

“What the hell was that about?” I blurted out, rage on the edge of my voice.

“I thought you'd like it!”

His lack of defensiveness blew the wind out of my superiority complex and then I felt terrible.

“I'm sorry, Danny. I didn't mean to hurt you. I just needed to get your attention.”

“You got my attention all right!”

There was a rise to his voice but nothing unjustified. I sat back down on the couch next to him, deflated.

“I don't like feet,” I said, by way of partial explanation.

“I'll try to remember that.” Danny sat up and grinned at me. “You got a wicked grip! I'll remember not to mess with you. You can be my back up any day of the week.”

“Sorry!”

“No harm done.” Danny struggled to his feet. “Damn, I forgot how much that hurts. Haven’t been stunned like that since the last time a horse kicked me in the head.”

I couldn’t help myself; I started to laugh. “We’re quite a pair, huh?”

“Yep. I guess I’ll be headin’ home. This has worn me out!”

He sat down on the couch and put his socks and boots back on. As he re-transformed himself back into the cowboy, my attraction peaked. I walked him to the door and he put his arm around my shoulder and hugged me close.

“Ya mind if I get a little kiss before I head out?”

“I don’t mind at all.”

SEVEN

The week before I left for Alaska, I got a call from a literary agent. I'd almost forgotten about my manuscript and the fact that, months earlier, I'd sent it out to a few agents. Ever since Jessica had confessed that she'd lost it, I'd decided not to pursue trying to get it published. It seemed clear to me that the bad mojo from using both Montana_Cowboy and Danny for their life experiences, rather than their personal selves, had created a dark cloud of doom and destruction over my psyche. I was paying for my hubris via feelings of guilt and was participating in self-destructive behavior like drinking excessively, screwing any guy in sight, and discontinuing my writing. Since Danny died, I hadn't written a thing. I knew if I wasn't writing I'd have to leave. I can sit still to write, but can't do the same to just wither up and die, which is what I felt like doing. So I'd decided to leave. Leave Montana, leave the past, leave myself behind. Alaska seemed far enough away to accomplish the task.

The phone call caught me by surprise.

"This is Mary Roberts, from Cranston Literary. You sent me your manuscript. I really like the book."

When I picked up the phone, I was decked out in my flannel pajamas, slouching on my new couch in front of the fireplace. Some fuzzy TV show was on with the sound muted, and I was listening to Nina Simone.

I was halfway through my first glass of wine. It was 10 A.M.

I was confused: "You liked the book? Really?"

Mary: "You sound surprised. Didn't you send me the manuscript?"

I sat up straight, trying to fathom that something good might be happening to me.

“Yeah, I did send it to you. It was just a while ago. I’d sort of forgotten.”

Mary: “Yes, I’m sorry about that. Sometimes it takes a while to get to projects. Just part of the business.”

“Well sure, I understand that. So you liked it?”

“I did. I do.”

“It’s just that...”

I don’t know why I started in on the story. I don’t know why. Maybe I just hadn’t talked to an objective, smart stranger for a while, or an objective, smart anyone, and I was yearning for a sympathetic ear, or a clever ear, or an ear that wasn’t attached to someone in Montana. I don’t know why, but I started telling her what had happened.

“Just that what?”

I tried to recover, “Oh, never mind.”

Mary: “Why don’t you tell me what’s on your mind.”

“Well, you know the cowboys in the story? The ones who die?”

Mary: “They all die.”

“Right, they all die. That was Calamity’s tragedy, that Wild Bill, her true love, died.”

Mary: “And then the curse gets passed down to her daughter and granddaughter, etc. I loved it.”

“So the thing is, that two of the cowboys that died in the book also died in the very same way in real life.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It goes like this. Cowboy number one in the book died from falling off a horse and breaking his neck. I have an actual friend, who is also a cowboy, who also died by falling off a horse and breaking his neck.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your friend. But authors do that all the time, use personal experience in their stories.”

“Of course, but then cowboy number four in the book dies by shooting himself in the head. I have another friend who killed himself in the same way.”

There was a slight pause, “My goodness.”

“The kicker is the two real cowboys died AFTER I wrote the book. Their real lives mirrored what I’d already written.”

There was a silent pause. I tried to fill the gap before Mary hung up the phone, thinking I was crazy.

“Weird, isn’t it?”

She said, “It’s very weird, and very sad. Are you okay?”

I almost started crying. Who was this woman? In recent months, my own mother hadn’t even bothered to ask me if I was doing okay. Most of my friends were close to long gone because I’d turned into such a maudlin date. They couldn’t take it that nine months after the fact I was still feeling the effects. Excuse fucking me!

It was almost a whisper. “I’m almost okay. It’s been a rough ride.”

Mary: “I’ll say. What an incredible story. Maybe you should write about that.”

“I don’t think I can write anymore. I don’t have it in me. I’m too freaked out.”

“All I know is that it’s always best to turn a negative into a positive. Write a meta-story about the story. Tell the story of telling the story, how it all happened, just what you’ve told me.”

I laughed, “And be sure not to kill anyone this time?”

She laughed back, “Exactly. But you have all this material. Make use of it.”

I thought for a minute. “That’s a good idea.”

Mary: “So I assume you’re not really interested in marketing this novel?”

“I don’t think I can. I can’t even read it again, to do re-writes or anything. It’s tainted.”

Mary said, “Well, think about the other idea. It wasn’t your fault. It was just a bizarre set of coincidences. But don’t give up. You’re a great writer. If you ever do write the other story, send it to me. I’d love to read it.”

“Thanks, Mary, I will.”

“You have a lovely day. And take care of yourself.”

“I’ll try.”

Then she hung up.

PART TWO: Trying To Forget

ONE

The genesis of India sprouted in Homer, Alaska. Also known as the Homer Spit. The town has one of those scenic vistas that, if you didn't know better, you'd think was in the fjord region of Norway; massive mountains jutting straight towards heaven and glacier blue water. The town is about 220 miles south of Anchorage on the Kachemak Bay. It's a fishing town with processing plants and, in the summer, smells overwhelmingly of fermenting fish guts. There's a famous bar called The Sawlty Dawg and lots of California transplants.

My third or fourth time there I meet one of those transplants. His name isn't important since naming someone indicates a close relationship. This would not be the case. Rather, he would become a one-night stand, but nonetheless would also have a significant impact on my travelling trajectory.

I was on Cuba Libre number three when he sat down next to me at the bar.

"Rum and Coke?"

"Nope, the fancy version, rum and Coke with lime. Cuba Libre," I corrected him.

He asked, "Can I buy you another one?"

Never being one to turn down alcohol I responded, "Sure. The problem with these things is they go down too easy. Hard to taste the rum sometimes. I think I'm getting drunk."

He was drinking fancy scotch. Something with a strange name I couldn't pronounce. I took a good look at him and saw that my new conversation partner was

something of a cross between Kris Kristoffersen and Richard Gere, a good combo for an older guy.

I asked, "So where you from? You don't look like an Alaska guy."

He turned towards me, "What do Alaska guys look like?"

I said, "Look around the room. Lots of flannel, lots of bad haircuts, lots of dirty fingernails. You look too pretty to be an Alaska guy."

He laughed, "No one's ever called me pretty before."

"You know, a pretty boy. Like Rob Lowe. You have that same look. Coiffed."

It turned out he was a retired stockbroker from San Francisco, my hometown. He has a summerhouse in Homer and was writing a novel based on his experiences in Vietnam training the Matagnards.

"The Matan-who's?" I asked.

"Matagnards. It's French. They're the aborigines of Vietnam and are a pygmy, matriarchal tribe."

"I've never heard of such people. Are they sort of like the trolls in Norway? You hear about them in fairytales but they don't really exist?"

"Believe me, they exist. They're fierce fighters, great mercenaries." In short, they hated all sides of the Vietnamese governmental structure because they'd been abused by all sides.

"So what are you doing in Homer? Running from the law?" He was trying to make a joke, but it didn't sound very funny considering my somewhat recent interlude with the Sheriff.

“Nah, just up here looking for a husband.”

He laughed. “You wanna become the wife of an Alaska guy huh?”

“Nah. But you might do.”

“Don’t even think about it! I have three ex’s already.”

“Then what’s another wife, you already know the drill.”

“Yeah, the divorce drill. Too expensive. I’ll never get married again.”

“A man after my own heart – economics in lieu of love. Sounds like a good title for a book.”

“You’ll have to write that one.”

“I just might. And when will your book be finished? The one about the midgets who kill?”

He laughed, “Not funny. They’re vicious. I’m telling you. I dunno, should be done with a first draft by the end of the summer. But I’m getting bored with writing, I want to do something a little more adventurous.”

“Get married. That’s always an adventure.”

“No, something mentally challenging, not mentally taxing. I was thinking about becoming a bounty hunter.”

“A what? Why not join the French Foreign Legion? At least that way you can kill people. If you’re a bounty hunter you just chase after ‘em. Doesn’t seem like as much fun.”

“Maybe I’ll just join the Peace Corps.”

I said, “Man, that is totally fucked up. Bounty hunter on one side, Peace Corps on the other.”

“They’re sort of the same thing. Helping people out.”

I looked at him to see if he was joking, because I wasn’t getting it.

He saw my look of confusion, “Well, if I find the bad guys that’s helping people out, getting them out of society.”

“And getting paid for it, and paid for carrying a big-ass gun. I don’t think the Peace Corps allows the use of firearms by their volunteers.”

“You’re right, maybe the CIA then. At least then I can legally carry, as you say, a ‘big-ass’ gun.”

I laughed. He was an interesting combination because he looked so straight, but had obviously done his share of fucked up stuff in Vietnam. I leaned into him on the barstool and told him, “I normally would never sleep with someone who would potentially join the CIA. But for you, I’ll make an exception.”

“I’m honored.”

I was attracted to him but there was also something about him that made me a little nervous. A definite was that for all his lived experience and bravado, there was ultimately something flat about him. It wasn’t something I found out that first night when we went back to his house and had sex all night. Not a single flat, limp or linear thing happened that wasn’t consensual and in good fun. It was something that took time to see. At least twelve hours. Let’s admit it, you don’t see the flatness when you’re drunk, the libido is engaged and the stories sound outlandish but plausible. Alcohol

makes all things possible, and in that state you don't see much of anything except the haze of seduction wrapped around you like a gauzy cocoon. You feel the flatness the next morning when you're eating breakfast together and you ask him to pass the cream cheese, noticing that he's not quite there.

I spent the day with him and the longer I hung around him, the stranger he seemed. He invited me out to dinner that night and I accepted. I told him I'd be spending the night in my own hotel since I hadn't gotten much sleep the night before, and I had a long drive back to Anchorage.

We went to a little Mexican place that was jam-packed with people. As soon as we were seated he ordered three margaritas -- two for him, one for me.

"Going on a bender?"

"I always start with two, then I feel calmer. I normally smoke pot, but don't have any right now. Alcohol keeps my nerves intact."

It was the most he'd admitted to in the past 24 hours. So I decided to push it.

"Have you ever really freaked out or anything? Totally lost it? I mean, with everything you've gone through, it wouldn't be uncommon."

"You mean, are those ex-wives really dead wives?"

"Something like that."

He half-laughed, and I couldn't tell if he was thinking this line of conversation was funny or offensive.

I interjected before he could answer, "For example, I recently went through some pretty nasty stuff, and I can definitely say I have suffered mentally as a result. I figured if I hadn't suffered, then I'm not actually human."

"So feeling pain reminds us of our humanity."

"Yes."

He said, "The real question is: how do you, or how does anyone act out on that pain?"

I looked at him with new admiration, "That is exactly the question. What form does the pain take? Can it ever be productive?"

"Well, I think at some point in everyone's life they have to go through something. Everyone has to live with the idea of death, either your own or a loved one. I watched my father go through excruciating pain while my mother died of cancer. I don't know who was suffering more, him or her."

"And he eventually got over her death?"

"Not really. Two months after she died, he killed himself."

Just as I was about to say, "Well, now THAT is fucked up," our food arrived. The things we'd talked about lingered. They got me to thinking about my own ways of handling pain, of being human. I wanted to beat tracks out of Alaska. Fairbanks in the winter was hell. It was mid-May and the water tank at my house in Fairbanks still hadn't thawed out from the winter before. Frozen water; never enough heat; tomatoes that cost two bucks; too much alcohol; no daylight; huge, bird-like mosquitoes; moose in the front

yard; dead batteries; tail pipes that break off from sheer cold; and, last but not least, weird men. As the saying goes, “Alaska, where the odds are good but the goods are odd.”

What was I doing with myself? I was in a quasi mid-life crisis and had to get real. The best way I know to get real is to leave. It’s always possible to go back to things worth going back to. For me the returnings were getting fewer and farther between. I was also running out of states to move to. Now I’d have to cross Alaska off my list. I needed something farther away, some place where no one knew my name. I was close to reaching that visceral point of no return when something’s gotta’ give and you’d better come up with a plan fast or destruction is on the other side of the rainbow.

This was the secret I’d been hiding from everyone else, and even from myself. I was not okay. I was about to lose it. I was on the verge of a major depression due to the role I’d played in Danny’s demise and going to Alaska was a physical way of leaving the space I’d shared with him. The problem was that psychically I was in the shit. At this juncture, I knew Fairbanks hadn’t been my best option. The last place you want to be when you have patterns of guilt and anxiety running around in your head is Alaska. Perhaps I needed some place even farther away, more disorienting, hotter. Maybe that was it. The heat. I needed to cleanse myself, like Native Americans oftentimes do, with a sweat lodge, rid my mind of these meanderings and get back on track.

On my return to Fairbanks, I went online. There it was, the mother-lode of web sites for jobs calling to drifters, depressives and commitment-phobes everywhere. All of them overseas, far enough away that identity was more conjecture and passport photo than actual form. I wouldn’t have to explain anything to anyone. I’d be a blank slate. I

tried to call Homer guy a few times to let him know I'd finagled a trip to Tamil Nadu and was leaving Alaska for India via Montana. The voice-messaging system on his cell phone picked up and I tried to sound friendly. I wished him luck and said that I'd look for his book on *The New York Times* bestseller list. I never heard from him.

TWO

I've just driven 2300 miles over the past four days. Starting point, Fairbanks, Alaska. End destination, Boyd, Montana. I've just stopped in Shelby, Montana, to get gas. It's a typical small Montana town, population 2700, 30 miles south of the Canadian border. From Shelby I have 300 miles yet to go. Prior to Shelby I've stopped in an even smaller Montana town called Sunburst, to get gas.

As I pump gas in Sunburst, I can't help but notice the pool of liquid spreading under the engine block area. Even the most neophyte of mechanical idiots would realize it's not good. Fuck! My cat is escaping out the window. My dog is going nuts running back and forth between the two front seats, barking at me, pressing her drippy black nose against the windshield, having been trapped in the front seat during the entire 2300-mile ride. She'd trounce me if she had it in her. But she doesn't. She's a 100-pound Old English Sheepdog. Of the Disney *Shaggy DA* variety. A cartoon dog. Her name is Bex. Short for Beatrix. My cat remains Kitty.

I kneel down. Touch the liquid. I put my finger to my lips, taste at it, like they do in the movies when the good guys find the drug stash and are trying to figure out if it's cocaine or just powdered sugar. This action leads me to believe that all will be revealed. I'm pretty sure it's not oil. Not dark or slimy enough. Not transmission fluid either, not yellowish-green enough. I do know that much. I crouch down and look up to see a gash of water still pouring out from some interior thingamabob. Fuck again! I lasso my wayward cat, throw her in the front seat on top of my dog's back. She hisses and bats at the dog and then at me, claws open. I roll my eyes. At this point we're contemptuous of

each other. I have equal parts hate and sympathy for her. She has quite literally lost her meow. When she opens her mouth now it's only a squeak. She's meowed away her voice, pleading with me to let her out of this rancid hell hole of a '95 Jeep Cherokee, 218,000 miles on the odometer and hopefully at least 300 more to go. Right now the rancid hell hole isn't going anywhere. At least not far. I jump in and drive two blocks to the bar in search of help.

Every town in Montana, no matter how decrepit or long gone off the beaten track, will have two bars. They will be the Mint Bar and the Stockman's Bar, symbolizing the only two necessities on the open range: money and cows. The third spoke on that wheel is alcohol. The harder the wind blows, the more people drink. It's a fact. And Montana is a windy state.

I find the Mint. There are three old coots bellied up to the bar. One woman. An overweight, crinkly skinned bartender with half-dyed reddish, fading hair. Female. All five smoking cigarettes in unison. Not a one of the men resembles the horse-riding, clean-shaven Marlboro Man. The women don't look a bit like Miss Kitty from *Gunsmoke*. They look more like a group of mayonnaise-eating, hard-drinking, pork-rind-and-beef-jerky-chewing sonofaguns. It's a symphony of inhaling and exhaling, extinguishing butts in the plentiful, plastic ashtrays. I'm guessing they smoke red packs. A couple of kids playing pool in the dark back corner, probably smoking too. The air is thick.

I ask, "Any of you know anything about trucks?"

It's a stupid and obvious question, but I have to get the ball rolling somehow.

#1 says, "What ya need, ma'am?"

They're all looking at me with expectation. I've become an event. I decide not to disappoint them. I say the next line with just the right amount of drama. My eyes widen as I say it.

"It's a leak. Not oil."

#1, "Smell like anything? Anti-freeze maybe?"

"Maybe. Could be. I dunno."

#1, "Let's take a look."

The three men slowly stand from their stools. Bones creaking and knees screeching in pain. I can see it on their faces, the grimaces. Years spent inside that bubble of agony with no way to escape, buying into the stoic necessity of upholding the sacred cowboy way of never complaining about nothing. 'Cause there's not much that a can of Bud, shot of Canadian Club, and a handful of aspirin can't cure anyways. Especially if taken simultaneously.

They walk like they've ridden horses for a million years. They can't help their bow-leggedness. The procession proceeds to my Jeep. Belts get adjusted and shirt-tails tucked in as they walk. Hats previously askew are straightened. They mean business.

The cat has her paws straddling the half-open window. She looks desperate. I've already released my dog to check out the smells of Sunburst and its local dog population. I can see her half-way up the one and only street. She never strays far. She's a dilettante of a dog when it comes to preservation. She won't kill a bug, let alone dinner.

#2, "Nice-lookin' cat." He says it with a smirk.

I look at him sideways. "Thanks."

#2, "Male?"

"Nope. Female. Fixed, though. You a cat person?"

#2 looks offended. "Hell NO! I hate those damn things. One of 'em tripped me up years ago. Goddamn kitten crawled half way up my leg before I could get him loose. Tripped and broke my arm."

"I'll try to keep mine outta' your way."

#2 smiles. "Don't get me wrong, honey. All God's creatures are good for something, even if it's target practice."

I do a snort laugh. "Damn!"

#2 looks back at the others. "Yep."

I decide to drop the subject. I've learned after living in Montana for almost four years that the easiest way to start a conversation is to talk about either trucks or animals and not to be surprised if the animal in question is something they've killed at least twice. Either way, dead or alive, inevitably they, a man, want the animal to be male. Balls intact. The weather comes in a close third. Alcohol, relatives, the waywardness of the law, former spouses, government conspiracy theories, religion, the problems with the Indian population, alcohol again, god-damned foreigners coming in and buying up the land, beef prices, and anything to do with a tractor encompasses the rest of the chatter. Most questions and answers barely amount to half a dozen syllables. At least in the beginning. The locals are quick to size up an outsider. If they decide from the looks of you, your demeanor, or your license plate that you're really NOT one of those nasty

Californians newly arrived to go after all their stuff (read land), you're spit fire passed through the old-timer threshold. Then it takes about four seconds for the language to flow like Coors from the tap. Flowery bouquet, rich and quenching. Coors is the champagne of the cowboy.

The youngest of the three (#3) gets down on his back, peering into the guts of the machine, or outfit as it's rightly called. Any and all driving machines are outfits. You can have yourself a new one, an old one, a good one, or an ornery one. Or like right now, a non-working one.

#3, "Definitely the water pump."

#2, "Looks like the water pump?"

#3, "The water pump."

#1, "Yep."

#2, "No doubt."

Pause.

#3, "Hold on there now."

#1, "What is it? What ya see?"

The excitement is palpable.

#3, "Maybe just a clamp."

#2, "Clamp?"

#3, "Yep."

#1, "Huh. I got me a clamp in my truck."

As we stand waiting for #1 to return with the clamp, the bartender from the other bar, just a stone's throw away, saunters out. His belly jiggles as he walks. He tries to balance on his cowboy boots but seems on the verge of tipping over. I sense a mood of disdain. In a town like Sunburst there have to be obvious reasons why the town folk would prefer one bar over the other. Here comes the competition, who didn't get it quite right. I'm sure if I pressed for reasons I'd hear something along the lines of fornication with a distant cousin, paying back a \$5 loan, or that time he took the last cigarette outta the pack and didn't replace it. Small towns are inevitably a tough crowd. Little forgiveness and long memories.

Bartender, "Anything I can help with?"

#3, "Not unless you got a water pump in there." There's a tinge of surliness to his voice.

Bartender, "Nope."

Another truck pulls up to the bartender's bar. Two twenty-somethings. Man and woman. The man strolls over and looks down at #3's Wrangler-clad legs, sticking out from under the Jeep.

Man, "Need any help?"

#3, "You a mechanic?" The surliness intensifies. That's all he needs is some youngster second guessing him. The direct line of questioning heads him off at the pass.

Man, "Nope."

#3, "Didn't think so. Never mind then."

Man, "What's the problem?"

#1 returns with a clamp and hands it down to #3.

#3, "Hell if I know." What he's really saying is, "Mind your own god-damned business." I try not to laugh. There's some sort of power play going on here, and I'm the damsel in distress who can only hope the most innovative party wins.

The man takes his cue and sullenly returns to the woman, muttering something under his breath about something. I can't quite hear. I'm too caught up in the spectacle to pay attention to specifics. I look at each pair of hands. Works of art. Gnarled, rough and able to do just about anything. From under the hood, expletives are being said by #3. "Bastard this, sonofabitch that." Those sorts of expletives. While the swearing continues, I strike up a conversation with #2.

"What goes on around here?"

#2, twinkle in his eyes, "Now don't go makin' fun, missy."

I laugh. "I'm not makin' fun."

#2, "Where you goin', anyways? Where's 10 from?"

All the license plates in Montana have a number as the starting prefix. For instance, my license plate number is 10-A6522. The 10 tells which county I'm from. The county I'm in right now is prefix 21. I don't know the name of the county, but I'm pretty sure from this time on I'll remember the 21 as Sunburst.

"10 is Carbon County. Red Lodge."

#2, "God's country down there. Nice mountains, those Beartooths. Too many foreigners, though, for my liking."

I grin at him and refuse to take his bait about the god-damned deluge of rich retirees who've bought up the good real estate, drive around in way too big SUV's and demand coffee drive thrus on every corner. I give him a wink, shake my head and say, "Yep."

The tension is rising towards climax.

#3, "God-damned clamp. It's tighter in there than a virgin's...."

He doesn't finish. Instead, he scoots out from under the truck and tells me it is indeed the water pump.

#2, "You owe us \$100 each, missy." He has a grin on his face.

#1, "We'll fill the radiator up, then you need to drive down to Shelby. We ain't got no mechanics here. Not even a motel."

"Can I make it that far? To Shelby? It won't hurt anything? The engine?" I know I don't have a choice, but I want to be armed with information in case something goes awry. I'm cautious but optimistic. I trust these three implicitly.

#3, "I hope you can make it. Just drive fast."

They all shake their heads at me in joint affirmation of driving fast. As #1 goes into the bar in search of a container to fill with water to then fill my radiator, I also go in and give the crinkly skinned bartender a twenty-dollar bill.

"What's this for?" she asks.

"Buy 'em all a round."

"This is too much, honey. A round of what they're drinkin' is \$5.25."

"How about a ten, then? That okay? Buy one for yourself too."

“That’ll do. Thanks.”

I take my twenty off the counter and hand her over a ten. She smiles at me. I leave, load up the cat again, and high-tail it for Shelby, waving back at my saviors from the rear view mirror.

#

This is where I initiate my concrete musings toward India. In Shelby. Crashed out on a queen-sized bed at the O’Haire Manor Motel, a true classic of a motor lodge replete with shag carpet, swag lamps and swivel chairs. Everything a modest tone of tan/brown. No Bible in the drawer. Strange.

I’m mostly naked, watching cable, trying to get the crinks out of my back from the 2300 miles. This is the first time I’ve been able to stretch out on a comfy bed since leaving Alaska. My first night on the road, I do the sleeping in the car routine. It isn’t a money issue as much as timing. I’d left Fairbanks on the 4th of July right around 2 P.M. It’s a situation where I meant to leave earlier but at the last moment my cat pitched a fit at the idea of being in the Jeep and disappeared on me, running quick fire into the dense spruce trees. I hear her claws attach to bark and know I’m in for a long-haul search and seizure. It takes almost two hours to coax her back towards the house with an open can of Albacore. At that moment it’s leave now or don’t do it ever.

Because of the lack of nighttime that far north, my body won’t adjust to the never-ending sun and I end up driving then driving some more finally stopping at 4 A.M. the next day, or night. Fourteen hours of driving. By that time, 4 A.M., all the motels are closed down for the night and it seems silly to spend the money for a few hours’ sleep. I

find a scraggly looking campground and spread out my costly Navajo rug on a bed of pine needles. I pile all the soft objects I possess on top of me for blanket warmth and nuzzle my face into my right arm. I just shut my eyes when it starts to rain. First a drizzle. No big deal, I can live with that. Then heavy drops. Bullets of rain in a torrent. I curse, load up my makeshift bed, grab the cat again (who's managed to escape while I've been re-packing) and start driving until I find a parking lot.

I'm thinking that all of that happened three days ago. The Alcan, or Alaska Highway seems to go on forever. All the majestic scenery becomes monotonous, and the fourth time I saw a bear I didn't even slow-down to take a better look. Driving becomes about driving. Therefore, I'm loving every moment on my Serta sleeper at the O'Haire. My cat jumps on the bed and rubs herself against me. We're friends again. The dog has found her corner and her face is nuzzled deep into her front paws. All is well.

#

It takes two days to get the water pump fixed. Shelby is the closest full-service town to Glacier National Park and the two mechanics are overloaded with the strange mishaps of the traveling. The guy who fixed my Jeep told me about the poor man from Indiana who'd just bought a brand spankin' new Chevy, only to have the engine explode right there in Shelby. He was staying at the O'Haire too. We were the band of stranded drifters. I finally make it back to Boyd in one piece.

As I pull into my driveway I eye the house that I'd left only two months before. I turn off the engine and sit in my Jeep, absorbing the silence. It's disconcerting to be back in the same place that I'd been frantically trying to leave. My dog finally nudges me out

of my musings as she climbs on my lap, trying to get to the door. She probably has to pee.

I let her out and walk slowly to the door. I open it and peer in. Nothing has changed since I left. I take one step in and say, "Okay Danny, I'm back. And I don't feel like putting up with any of your nonsense."

There's no response.

After Danny died I spent many a night talking to his newly departed spirit, or whatever you want to call it. Mostly, I ended up apologizing and then screaming at him, schizophrenically trying to break the spell of my profound guilt.

"What you doing here little missy?"

I jump a mile in the air as I turn around and see Yancey.

"Jesus Christ Yancey, you scared the shit out of me."

"Talking to ghosts again?" he laughs.

"Course."

"Welcome home."

"It's good to be back." Strangely, I mean it. Now that I have my goal of India in mind, I can release some of the tension that being back in Montana has caused. I always feel better about being in a place when I know I'll soon be leaving it.

Yancey asks, "Ready to hit the Belfry?"

I say, "I don't mind if I do."

#

The Belfry Bar is in Belfry, Montana, population, 100, and is just a hop, skip and 75-mile-an-hour jump to the Wyoming border. It happens to be a Thursday night and every Thursday night at the Belfry Bar means a jam session, free chili and a pool tournament.

This won't be our first time at the Belfry. Yancey and I have our routine down. We arrive early to get a good stool at the bar halfway between the band and the door. Down two shots of tequila, one after the other, then settle in for a show. The show could be the band, a new member who can't quite hit the high notes, or a suburbanite who shows up and wants to try her hand at two-stepping, or on the cowboys trying to get sex.

A few hours into the music, two out-of-towners show up. One has on a jersey, knit shirt and embroidered onto his left pocket it says, "American Embassy, Thailand." He looks conservative. Docker-style chinos. A swirly, comb-over hair-do. Square 70's glasses. A full-on dork. I strike up a conversation with him based on his shirt. He tells me he works for military CID. I'm remembering that means "Criminal Investigation Division." He's spent time in 56 countries. I ask him if he's ever been to India. Southern India, specifically. He looks at me through his thick lenses and says, "I have, and it's the armpit of the world. You'll hate it!"

The dork leaves and I turn to Yancey and tell him what the dork said. Yancey has a different version. He says that India is the spiritual heart of the planet and that what I take to India, metaphysically speaking, will be what I get back. Later, at the house, I look at my map of the world. I find India. I notice that the country resembles a human heart.

THREE

I realize that I'm going to India to forget about myself. To become someone else. A new, different person. Not necessarily better. Different. Better is in the back of my mind, but I'm not sure who or what I would become if I were better or different or new, for that matter. The trick is to find out one or the other or all three. Maybe it's more about the forgetting part.

I'm starting this excursion in the state of Tamil Nadu. They're not called provinces, but states. There are 28 states in India, 14 officially recognized languages, or 18, depending on whom you talk to. Tamil Nadu is the southeastern tip of a state in this vast country I know almost nothing about, with the exception of the usual curry dishes at the local Indian restaurant.

I'm going to be teaching English at a theatre school in Kanchipuram, one of the seven holy cities of India. The style of theatre is called Kattaikutu and is a relative of the narrative style of the Mahabarahta. I know nothing of Kattaikutu and can barely spell, let alone say, the word.

An Indian information web site tells me that Tamil Nadu is the size of Massachusetts and has 55 million people. I look at that number, thinking one of the commas must be off. After all, for the past four years I've been living in Montana (4th largest state, population under one million) and Alaska (largest state, 600 thousand people).

My friend Anuvab, who, strangely enough, I met in Alaska, is originally from Delhi and jokes with me.

He says, "Whatever you are thinking, it will be worse. It is dirtier than any place you can imagine."

I say, "And what about the men?"

Anuvab shakes his index finger at me, smiling, and predicts, "You'll meet a dark and very handsome man. Love at first sight. He will be selling coconuts."

I say, "I hate coconuts."

He says, "You will learn to love coconuts because you love this man. You'll have many, many children that will be given the names of Hindu gods."

I laugh again, "I hate children too."

He says, "You will love your children because they will remind you of the weakness that you have in yourself."

I ask, "Weakness?"

He says, "Loving is your weakness. You will go to India to learn about love."

I roll my eyes at him, "Love has caused me nothing but trouble."

Anuvab smiles, "Love is not sex. Sex you know about, love you do not."

I glare at him, "How do you know?"

He says, "Anuvab knows. I can read it on you."

I ask, "Read it how?"

And then he looks at me quite seriously and says, "I'm not sure you're ready for this. I don't think you should go."

"Ready for what?"

“India. You will confront all those things that you are trying to forget about. It’s like the Ganges River, reincarnation, yoga. Whatever you throw out comes back to you. The psychic wheel.”

I say it but don’t really believe it, “Don’t worry Anuvab, I’m ready.”

And then, under my breath, say to myself, “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

#

I’m doing my research. In the back of my mind I remember reading in a newspaper about “Tamil rebel fighters.” The Tamil Tigers. The women are as fierce as the men. Squadrons of nouveau exotic, almond-eyed Amazons. I see myself being taken hostage. Blindfolded. Sold into white slavery. Shackled to a dank-smelling wall. I become the concubine of a notorious opium dealer, possibly female? I am an obvious choice. A tall blonde in a sea of black hair and dark skin. I know I’ll stand out based on that alone. The travel books tell me not to worry when people stare or want to touch my skin or hair. It’s only curiosity. Can I touch them back?

I’m trying to configure a reading list for my pre-India research. Memoirs by women? I dunno. I should, but do I really want to? It’s a “supposed to” thing. There’s the usuals, Isak Dinesen’s *Out of Africa*. I’ve never actually read it, only saw the movie. Beryl Markham’s *West With the Night*. Read that one years ago. Both classics, although I’m not sure how much I should try to identify with upper-class women who had no compunction about being the great white hope. It was a different time. They were adventurers.

The best books are the ones that find you in the middle of some other routine. So I tempt the fate of another routine and end up on a completely different avenue. *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Great title, has possibilities. *The Tiger Ladies: A Memoir of Kashmir*. Figure I need to know the Kashmir equation since that's potentially nuclear ground zero. Not that I'll be anywhere near the north, but I guess the fallout doesn't care about geography. It is nice to know about a place before it ceases to exist. I'm going to read a Christopher Hitchens book, *Why Orwell Matters*. I hadn't realized George had spent time in that part of the world.

Of course, I'm also including some general reading. History of India, compilation of Gandhi's writings, a bio on Indira. There's one maverick book in the lot. I'm almost finished with it, Anthony Swofford's *Jarhead*. Swofford was an unwilling Marine during the first Gulf War. A sniper. I'm stunned by this tale of testosterone. Stunned and fascinated. I wonder if there's a parallel realm of action and anti-heroism women can inhabit? It grates on me that death, destruction, crudeness and violence are all so seductive. I long to be the real female action hero. Schwarznegger in drag. A combination of She-Ra, Wonder Woman and Cat Woman with a dose of Tank Girl and G.I. Jane to round it out. Female-ness seems pale and unadventurous in comparison to Swofford's world. Even the grrrrl power movement, all shades of feminism, Bridget Jones, Mata Hari, Margaret Thatcher, Amelia Earhart, Courtney Love, Playboy Bunnies and the suicide of Marilyn don't measure up to death by way of killing. Even if it means killing yourself.

I was on a train once. Christmas Eve. I believe it was '94 or '95. West coast of Sweden. It was a 1st class compartment. I had one of those passes, the over 26 version of Eurail. The 2nd class was full of Finns. Drunk, festive, singing one decibel too loud, approaching scariness. Lines and the smell of vomit at the toilets. My compartment mate was a very attractive, older woman. Late 60's, early 70's. I was on my way back to Hamburg, Germany, from Oslo, where I'd been immersed in the land of Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*. The woman spies my copy of Hamsun. He's still a controversial figure over there. He probably would have been shot after WWII for his Nazi sympathies if it weren't for his literary accomplishment. He made the mistake of shaking Hitler's hand in public. But he was old and, some wanted to believe, senile. He was a hard case because, until the end of his long life, he insisted on his clarity.

She begins to talk to me. Her English is impeccable. I'm reminded at that moment of how linguistically lazy we Americans are. Her husband is a painter. Apparently, somewhat famous. She has worked with Ingmar Bergman in the theatre in Stockholm. She asks me pointed questions. Why do I want to write? What will I accomplish? Why Hamsun? Why the north? Do I have children? Don't I want them? I respond as best I can, grappling with complicated possibilities, the lies I've told myself and the persona I'm trying to reveal, the one she's obviously not buying into. She has a daughter about my age, married, children. I'm a conundrum to her, possibly a mirror of choices thought about but not made. The more questions she asks, the more nervous I become. In my mind, I'm screaming, "Who is this woman and why is she picking on me?"

I'm saved. A drunken Finn comes and sits across from me. She wants to practice her English. I happily comply. She slurs and giggles and wobbles on the seat. The older woman looks on with no judgment. She's seen it before. Those crazy Finns. This one lasts until she passes out, her head landing very close to the older woman's lap. The older one kindly brushes the hair from her face. Strokes her cheek a few times, then pronounces her verdict: "A woman cannot be a genius."

I try to make a direct correlation between all we've talked about and what she's proclaimed. There isn't one. The non-sequitur takes the day and stays with me even now.

The woman leaves the train, but before she does she gives me a copy of a book titled *Aniara*, written by a Swede named Harry Martinson. The book won the Nobel Prize for literature sometime in the 50's. I'd never heard of it. I thank her and tell her I'll think about everything she's said. I'm the only one in the compartment now. The drunken Finn has stumbled her way back to her group. They accept her, no questions asked. They're still swilling cheap vodka. I watch her take another gulp. I stare out the window at the snow, the hazy, distant, winter sun.

#

People often ask me where my home is. I ask them to define home. I have flashes of memory. I don't recall when or where things happened. I relax and fall into the conversations in my head. Words and images weave themselves into concrete placement. What's the accent? Irish? American? French? Is there a cowboy hat involved? How drunk was I? Which man? Did it rain? I've come to an elastic

understanding of my post-20-something years. It's a continuum. My body is the only constant.

#

I started learning Tamil yesterday. I've found this great web site that specializes in teaching Tamil. There's an animated alphabet section that shows how to write each letter. It's sensual. I like the challenge of it but making a sentence seems impossible. Let alone a word.

India is now everywhere. Everyone I meet has a story. Grazier, who lives with Yancey, has an old girlfriend who was in the Peace Corps in India. She was there to teach women about birth control. They gave each woman a necklace with two different colors of beads. Each day the women were supposed to move one of the beads, representing their fertility cycles. One color meant SEX. The other color meant NO SEX because of fertility. Apparently, they misunderstood. They thought that as long as they were wearing the necklace they wouldn't get pregnant.

That is what the Indian women didn't learn.

On the flip side, the one thing that Grazier's friend did learn was how to wipe her arse with her finger. Huh!

Another person got cholera.

One was seduced by Hinduism and didn't want to leave. I'm assuming that the Kama Sutra was somehow connected with this. I've had my own copy of the Kama Sutra for some time now. Two different versions actually. Anuvab tells me the illustrated Kama Sutras are a hot item in Delhi.

There are two things I'm wondering. I'm wondering if I'll get sick and I'm wondering how many days it will take before I want to leave. Yancey would be ashamed of me for these wonderings.

FOUR

Upon my return to Boyd, I quickly re-establish myself back into the drunken clique of my pre-Alaska sojourn and end up spending many a topsy-turvy day and/or night at the Blue Ribbon Bar, Main Street, Red Lodge, MT.

My new partner in crime is Johnnie. Johnnie is a perpetual pot-smoker and Budweiser drinker. He's had two heart-attacks, chain smokes (of course), plays fiddle, and has two ex-wives who still talk to him (I wonder if the number of heart attacks and number of wives is a coincidence?), three full grown kids, and a long list of young women he buys drinks for at the Blue Ribbon Bar, myself included.

It's Friday early evening and hot, even by July standards. I've gone into Red Lodge to mail off my visa application for India. I know that if I can get one small task accomplished each day, eventually it'll all get finished.

I stop in at the Blue Ribbon Bar to see if Johnnie's around. He is. Tracey, another one of his sycophants, is sitting to his right. Tits out and ablaze. I sit down, tits nicely groomed behind a white cotton button-down I'm wearing. I ask for a glass of wine. Johnnie does the same. He drinks slowly and then begins nodding towards the bar. This time it's not from alcohol, but rather pure exhaustion. It's been well over 100 degrees almost every day this week. He's been building a rock wall for some rich Red Lodge transplant.

I get him to agree to go home if I promise I'll buy a couple bottles of wine to drink at his apartment. He consents. I notice when we arrive that someone has made up his twin-sized bed. It now has sheets, pillowcases, blankets, whereas before there was a

dingy sheet strewn across the bed and a blanket balled up on one end. Turns out the lady across the street had hooked him up. There are a lot of people out there (women) who see Johnnie as a project. He exudes it. I'm no exception.

I head off for the wine run and end up spending \$100 on food and various other necessities. At least half of this is on wine and beer. Even with the paltry amount of actual food I've bought it'll be the best-stocked fridge Johnnie's had in years. Maybe today he'll actually eat something.

He falls asleep around 8 P.M. After a few glasses of wine, I doze off on the tiny twin with him. I should have moved over to the couch when I had the chance because just as I'm sound asleep there's Tracey banging on the window, "Open the fucking door, Johnnie. You said you wouldn't lock me out. Open the god-damned door!"

I look at my watch, almost 1 A.M. Johnnie slumps out of bed and shuffles to the door. Tracey barrels past him and pouts, "You said you wouldn't lock me out Johnnie. Why did you do it? How could you?"

I cover my eyes and know the night is lost to me.

2 A.M. Johnnie's back asleep, snoring in my ear. Tracey is conked out. She's straddling the couch and looks like she's trying to give it a hump job. I relegate myself to the floor and watch Lee Marvin and Ernest Borgnine partner up for *The Dirty Dozen*. Not the first one, the second, where the mission is to kill the German general who has it out for Hitler so that the war can continue. It's a great movie and not a single moment of those two hours is wasted.

4 A.M. I still can't sleep.

At 5, Johnnie wakes up, almost stepping on me as he makes his way to the refrigerator. He reaches for a Budweiser, pops the tab, and says to the air, "Now what could that sound be?" He laughs and I wonder what's going on in that head of his. He was stone sober for 14 years, the "ultimatum" years of his marriage. Now he's reverted back to a basic Montana alcoholic.

I ask him what he's like when he's sober.

He says, "I'm like me, but better."

I get access to the bed for a few hours while Johnnie drinks and smokes his Marlboros.

7 A.M. Johnnie's still smoking and I still can't sleep. Tracey is still making love to the couch. It feels claustrophobic in Johnnie's 12 x 8 living room/bedroom.

By 8 A.M., Johnnie and I are sitting at his kitchen table. I ask him if he wants breakfast. I'm willing to cook if he'll eat. He shakes his head an emphatic NO and instead grabs a glass, a bottle of open wine, and pours.

High Noon. It's been a constant stream of visitors. Tim arrives first. The two of them are supposed to be pouring concrete for somebody. He gives Johnnie a 45-minute window of opportunity. Tim says he'll wait for Johnnie at the Blue. Tim says he'll have a couple of Bloody Mary's while he waits. He says if Johnnie doesn't show up in 45 minutes, he'll be back to get him. Johnnie never gets to the Blue and Tim never shows back up.

Eddie is next. He's the landlord. He and his elderly mother own this establishment. They live on the main floor, next to Johnnie. They fight like cats and dogs.

Mother: "Phone, Eddie."

Eddie: "Who the fuck is it?! You know I don't talk to anyone when I'm hung over."

Mother: "I don't know, Eddie. You'd better take it. It might be important."

Eddie, under his breath, says to no one in particular, "Fuck, I hate that old woman."

Before Eddie can get to the phone, the caller hangs up. He returns with a wild look in his eyes. He's shirtless and his beer belly jiggles as he walks. His ass crack is showing from behind.

Clive, or The Duke, arrives next. He's the upstairs tenant. Somewhere down the line, he says, his family is related to the "Dukes" of Duke University. You know you're a somebody when it's an "of" sort of thing, i.e., the McDonalds of Ronald McDonald's. The Busch of Annheuser Busch. Clive, The Duke, shows up with Suzanne, his occasional girlfriend from Colorado. They haven't seen each other in two years. Clive has a humongous bloodied piece of cotton with a Band-Aid strapped across his chin.

Eddie, "Fuck, Clive! Why you got that tampon on your chin?"

Clive says, "Cut myself shaving. It won't stop." Clive's hands are shaking.

Johnnie, "What's wrong, Clive? You need a drink or something?"

Clive, "Fuck, that woman makes me nervous. She never lets up."

Suzanne is sitting there as Clive says this. She's so distracted she doesn't hear him. They could be living on separate planets. We'd met Suzanne previously. Yesterday they'd shown up, just prior to Johnnie going off to sleep. Suzanne had just arrived in town. Hugs and kisses for Johnnie. I kept my space on the other side of the room.

Suzanne: "Hello, Johnnie....I've heard soooooo much about you....what Clive? You know he got a DWI and I have to drive. I have Adult Attention Deficit Disorder. Yes. What? Oh, my ex-husband is a famous art critic from Temple University....Clive told me that....now Clive just has to leave me alone or I'm afraid, well I just couldn't, nope, I only got two hours, no, I didn't sleep at all and I had to change my airline ticket, it cost almost \$700....from Denver! Can you imagine that? Yes, I'm famished....Clive. We have to eat now. We need to go, Clive. Now, Clive."

Suzanne grabs Clive by the arm and they're gone.

I say, "Holy hell!"

Johnnie says, "I like her!"

I say, "She is pretty. But Jesus!"

Johnny, "Clive says she used to be a model."

Skip back now to Eddie sitting at the table. Prior to Clive and Suzanne arriving for the second time. After Eddie's gotten his non-phone call. We're gossiping.

Eddie, "Model, my ass! What does she model? Depends?"

I say, "Well, she probably *used* to be a model. Once a model, always a model."

Eddie, "Not in this century. That woman has a screw loose."

Now the couple is with us again. Johnnie and I have consumed a magnum bottle of cheap red wine. I have no idea of the time. All I know is that Suzanne is with us. Somehow, Tracey is too. The table is like this. Me. To my right, Tracey, then Suzanne, Johnnie, Eddie, Clive. Full circle that means Clive is to my left. He's still bleeding.

Suzanne stands and Johnnie pulls up her dress so that her entire ass and most of her stomach are exposed.

I say, "Slap him, Suzanne. He's acting like a prick."

"Oh, honey, I don't mind at all."

There are electrodes attached to her thighs, with wires dangling down between her legs. Eddie and I look at each other, bewildered. Johnnie presses on.

"Give me a kiss, darlin'," he says.

She kisses him.

"Come here and sit on my lap."

"I used to be a Speedo model. I'd break your lap now."

"I don't give a shit. Just sit down here. Tracey, take a picture."

Tracey takes a picture with her throwaway Kodak. Suzanne tells her, "Hold on there. If we're going to do this we got to set it up. No model just gets a snapshot taken."

Suzanne hastily arranges herself on Johnnie's lap. His grin grows more lascivious as she torques and twists on his groin.

"There now, Tracey, go ahead and take another one," says Suzanne.

Their faces are inches apart. I see Johnnie flick out his tongue at the last minute. The flash goes off. A true Kodak moment.

Suzanne goes back to her chair.

“You know, I haven’t had a good fucking in years. I fucked Clive’s brains out last night. He’s great in bed. Has such a nice little ass.”

There’s a moment of silence, then everyone cracks up. Including Clive. He can’t laugh too hard or his chin will bleed again.

“He’s a monster, eh?” I ask.

“Oh honey. You have no idea. Has he been fucking around? Is he fucking around on me? If I get a disease, so help me.”

Johnnie finally asks the obvious. “What the hell are those things on your thighs. Stand up, I wanna take another look.”

Johnnie pulls her to her feet, lifts up her dress again, pulls down her panties on one side and starts licking her butt cheek.

“If you like that ass, honey, you’ve got something wrong with you. That’s an old woman’s ass if ever there was one,” says Suzanne.

Johnnie stops licking and presses his finger against an electrode.

“That hurt?”

“I got in a car wreck a couple years ago. Hit my head and crushed my hips. These electrodes make it so I can walk.”

Johnnie says, “Sure are sexy.”

Pause.

“You sing, don’t ya?”

Suzanne: “Sure do. Grew up singing in Nashville.”

Johnnie: "Well, let's play us a song."

I get his fiddle out of the closet behind me and hand it to him.

The two bicker back and forth about what to play and what key it should be in.

The fighting ends when Johnnie says, "Well, you're just a bitch, aren't ya." That means

Suzanne has won. They sing and play together. Some tunes are better than others.

Johnnie's almost too drunk to fiddle. He's standing, and with an occasional working of his bow it looks as if he might tip over.

Suzanne stops mid-song, "You know I used to fuck Kris Kristoffersen. I was just a kid."

I ask, "He any good? He sure is sexy."

Johnnie interrupts, "Let's sing another one."

Three hours later. I wake up, with a start, at the table. Johnnie's younger brother Pat is now sitting next to Tracey. She starts picking at Johnnie's back with a fork. He has some sort of disgusting, festering pimple on it. My tolerance is growing rail thin. Johnnie appears to enjoy it.

While Tracey digs away, Pat launches into his story. "Anybody see that little waitress at the Blue? What's her name again?"

There's a variety of responses as to her name. I'm out of the loop. My tenure at the Blue is short-lived compared with the rest of them.

"Yea, Sarah. You see her in there today? She was sucking face with that fucking nigger! You see that, Johnnie? She was sucking face with a nigger?! That nigger. What the fuck is that nigger's name?"

I'm cringing. Everyone else is laughing.

I look over at Johnnie. He sees the look on my face and says, "Yea, those god-damned niggers. Who'd wanna kiss 'em anyways?"

I pointedly ignore Johnnie egging me on then finally say, "Ya know, Pat. There's really no need to use that word anymore. It is 2003."

"Oh, whatever. Afro-American then. Black guy. He's a nigger. And she was sucking face with that fucking nigger. How could anybody do that?"

I take a deep breath and stand up. I point my finger in his face and say, "Shut the fuck up, Pat. You shut the fuck up. Don't ever say that word around me again. I happened to be married to one of those people you're talking about. I not only sucked face with him, but I fucked him, too. And he went to Harvard fucking University. What do you think about that?"

I put on my shoes, grab my bag and storm past all of them. Nobody tries to stop me. In fact, they're still laughing. On the drive home I keep repeating to myself, "Violence is never the answer. Violence is never the answer."

FIVE

I'm reading another history of India. There are visuals and facts that jump out from every page. The most extreme piece of data so far is that in the major cities of India -- Calcutta, Delhi, Bombay, Madras -- the population/land ratio is 1000 people for every square mile. The average in Montana, according to the 2000 Census, is 6.2 people for every square mile. I've started having nightmares about people. Not individuals. Numbers.

#

There are too many Hindu gods to remember all of them. Or perhaps a better approach is to decide which gods you want to remember and then pay attention. By some counts there's over 330 million! The one that does stick out is Ganesh; he's the elephant-headed one. A few years ago when I was in my multiple necklace wearing phase I bought a Ganesh necklace, knowing nothing about who exactly he was or where exactly he came from. According to my Stanley Wolpert book titled *India*, Ganesh is "...worshiped throughout India as the patron god of scholars, authors, and thieves." So I was somewhat on track, although the thieving part has never held particular attraction for me. I think I did steal a candy bar once, when I was about 6 or 7 years old.

Each of these gods has what's called a "vahana" or "mount" and literally it's what they're doing. Meaning they're somehow riding or mounted on this secondary creature. Ganesh's vahana is a rat. Other vahana creatures are bulls, a golden goose-like bird, a lion, and a peacock. This is all from Wolpert's book, again. He rattles the names off like

a shopping list. It's a mind-blowing experience to try to absorb all of the labels. I was never good with taxonomy of any kind. To me it just exists.

One additional god/goddess equation. The basic mama and papa of the Southeast Asia pantheon is Shiva and Parvati. They're the Zeus and Gaia of the Hindu School for Gods. Ganesh is one of their offspring, the Hindu version of Apollo or Dionysus. The visual that sticks is that most of these gods have multiple arms and legs. Theoretically, it's because they're being asked for so many favors from their multitudes of devotees that they need extra help to get it all done. Everything has an explanation. Multiple arms equals an extreme case of multi-tasking.

SIX

Johnnie calls the afternoon of the night that we're going to have a BBQ for my birthday. I haven't talked to him in over a week, since I high-tailed it out of his kitchen. I know in these parts my East Coast rhetoric is empty as a bucket with a hole. I know that trying to explain my problem with the word "nigger" is lost on the likes of Pat and Tracey. Johnnie's another story. He knows better. It's the instigator in him that is most likely precipitated by boredom. People in Montana choose the simple over the complex because the complex isn't necessary. Cycles of crops. Seasons. Everything in good measure and in its time. Death, re-birth, winter snows, scorching sun. Elemental details, light and dark, soil, pungent earth. Raw, basic and tactile.

It's good to hear his voice. I drive the 30 miles to pick him up in Red Lodge. He's clean shaven. Shirt tucked in. Ready for a party. The look on his face tells me he's ready to behave like a gentleman. He tips his hat at me and smiles.

"Happy birthday, sweetheart."

All rancor is forgotten. We drive back to the barn for a BBQ with Yancey and Grazier. We eat ice cream and cake and sing silly songs. We start a bonfire and stare at it with sugar-hazed faces. It's 4 A.M. before anyone realizes it's time to go to bed.

Next morning, really afternoon, Johnnie decides we should call Yancey and see if he wants to have brunch. Johnnie and Yancey have taken a liking to each other. This is good for me since it's always nice when your friends like your lovers. This case is interesting since they're both much closer in age than I am to either one of them. They're contemporaries in the old hippie category. Brunch turns into Bloody Marys, shots and

then Johnnie telling our 19-year-old waitress that he's in love with her. I bet him my bank account that he won't be able to seduce her to the point of penetration. The wager is made.

Johnnie turns and says to me, "This is why I don't get seriously involved with anyone anymore. They can't take it when I do this."

I smile and say, "Well, ya know, Johnnie, it is a two-way street. You want me to start on this route? Say the word and I will."

He looks at me, grins and says, "I think we should get married."

Yancey chimes in, "If you two get the certificate I'll perform the ceremony. I am a minister."

Johnnie says, "It's about the most radical thing I could do at this point. Get married again."

I say, "It's Montana tradition for everyone to be married at least three times. Let's do it!"

We toast our audacity with another round of shots and then proceed to forget about it.

Yancey says to me, "You gotta' drive the Lincoln back. I get stopped once more I'm going to prison."

I protest, then finally say yes. I don't really have a choice. It's either that or hitchhike. The paved roads seem like slick rock. We stop for one last drink on the way back and then we all hit our limit. Yancey looks white, like he might pass out. He hasn't spoken much in the last few hours. He's been on a bender for almost three weeks. I feel

queasy and dehydrated. Johnnie is Johnnie. It's impossible to tell the difference if he's drunk or sober. We somehow make it back to the barn and fall into alcohol-induced slumber. In the midst of fitful sleep, I realize Johnnie is on top of me, screwing me with the biggest erection he's ever managed. I have two vaginal orgasms. I've just celebrated my 38th birthday.

SEVEN

I leave for Utah on Wednesday, three days after my birthday. I know that if I don't go and see my parents before I leave for India I'll regret it. Not so much for them not knowing where I am or what I'm doing, but because in order for the India adventure to be an effective tonic for my insanity I have to go to the source of that said insanity -- Utah. Halfway through Wyoming, I get a flat tire. It's the same tire that had been going flat my entire drive through Alaska. This is not good. One too many times of flatness and it finally goes out. I don't want my tires turning to mush when I'm driving 75 m.p.h. on a desolate highway. I stop in Riverton, Wyoming, at the nearest tire place. Somehow, my one bad tire turns into four and, before I know it, I have \$400 worth of new tires on my Jeep. I probably should have done that before Alaska. Better late than never.

I drive down Parley's Canyon, past Park City, where the Sundance Film Festival is. When I was a kid it was a dusty ski town. Now it's condo-mania. I see the ski jump that had been built for the 2002 Olympics. I wonder what in the hell they'll ever use that for again. Family reunions? Birthday parties? Wedding anniversaries?

I come out of the canyon and drive along the shelf of the mountain. It's built up with mansions. I wonder where people get their money. My dad tells me later that Utah has the highest bankruptcy rate per capita of any state. The three factors are too many kids, too high a debt ratio and keeping up with the Joneses. Mormons are famous for that. The only way to get into the celestial kingdom is to shove your way in with the biggest house on the block.

I get lost. I don't remember that Las Vegas is to the south and Ogden is to the north from where my parents live. I'm all turned around. I manage to escape from the Interstate and find an exit that sounds familiar. I drive through the small town I grew up in. It's not small anymore. I'd label it more sprawl. Mostly inhabited by Mexicans. Immigrants. There are other brown people here: Laotians, Hmong, Thais. This coloring had been happening since before I left. Now the transformation is complete. I like it. It adds spice to the mayonnaise of Mormon blandness.

I drive by the first restaurant where I ate Chinese food. My old dentist's office. The library where I spent my summers. Strange flashes of memory. The Kentucky Fried Chicken where I tried to get my first job. The pharmacy owned by a neighbor whose wife was addicted to something. The pavement on the roads is cracked. One too many repairs. The turn-off into my old neighborhood is crowded with used car lots. I almost don't find it. The streets seem narrow, small. The houses tidy and neat. The grasses green. Utah is hyper clean. Almost sterile, like a Monopoly board, no deviation or personal idiosyncrasies. The houses are lined up. Each quadrant has a church with a steeple. Everyone has at least one spiffed-up automobile or truck. American flags flying. I'm in red, religious America and swearing is not allowed. Fuck!

The policy with my parents is don't ask, don't tell. We talk about surface things. About India. I sometimes throw in references to boyfriends, on principle. I find myself watching everything I say. I don't want any "fucks" or "god damns" seeping out. I know the rules and it's the only way to keep the peace. If I'm going to be myself, then I can only last for about 24 hours. But I'm here for almost a week, the 24-hour threshold is

moot. All I can finagle is to act like somebody else. That elusive somebody who used to be me when I grew up here. I don't swear. I don't drink. I think I'm also a virgin again. I drink herbal tea in the mornings because my parents don't have coffee. Mormons don't do caffeine. I smile and say perky things.

It is nice to have air conditioning. It's nice to have satellite television. It's nice to be able to sit in the basement and write on the computer without wondering when the next dust storm will show up and millions of particles will get into the hard drive. It's nice to have a toilet that flushes. It's even nice to not go out every night and get totally shit-faced drunk with Johnnie or Yancey.

For some bizarre reason, I'm compelled to go to the mall. I spent many an hour there as a teenager, roaming, looking for boys, wanting to get my ears pierced, wishing I could fit into clothes at the "Size 5, 7, 9 Shop." I realize that I've definitely been living in hickville when I see that even the mall in Midvale, Utah, has hipper shoes and clothes than anywhere I've been in Montana.

I'm pleasantly surprised to see a coffee bar. I get an iced coffee and savor the caffeine. Who knows when I'll get back again for another one. I watch the young girls on search and destroy missions. I used to be like them. They are beautiful specimens. That's the thing about Utah. Nobody drinks, smokes, eats bad food. The young people, men and women, are healthy looking and gorgeous. They're also on the fast track to getting married. The competition is fierce. The quicker you get married, the quicker you have babies and the more set up you are to reap the afterlife rewards of Mormonism. It dawns on me that's the real reason why I had to leave. Every moment of my teen years

was actually a beauty contest. I was never one for contests unless I decided the terms. (I did win my 5th grade spelling bee, though! Then lost my title in 6th grade and was crushed to the point of crying myself off the stage.)

I ask my mother what she thought I'd be when I grew up. She says, "Something literary. You always were into books."

My father also responds, even though I hadn't really asked him. He says, "I thought you'd grow up to be a nice young lady."

The eye roll happens automatically. I can't prevent it.

#

My twenty-year high school reunion is Friday night. This is another hidden reason for coming to Utah. I can't admit it out loud to myself or anyone else, but it's true. My curiosity about how and why I've turned out the way I have is punctuated by how everyone else turned out. My mother warns me to show up early since most people will bring their kids, make an appearance and then leave. I'm the first one there. I can't do it. No way in hell will I be the first one there. It cries out sheer desperation. I need a drink. I'm no good in these situations anymore without alcohol. I only learned how to make small talk after I found wine.

I drive around. I've never been to a bar in Utah. I find one that looks sleazy. I can't go in. I decide on something known, an Applebees. It's not a place I'd ever go anywhere else, but here it seems un-intimidating and I know they'll have margaritas. I order a jumbo-size one. I suck it down in a flash, then return to the reunion. There's a handful of cars. I pull my sunglasses down over my eyes and make the long walk to the

reception table. I'm the only person there not married and with no children. We all introduce ourselves. I say, "No husband, no kids, living in Montana, on my way to India, a dog and a cat and that's the way I like it." Everyone laughs. I wonder if they believe me? I wonder if I believe me.

I go out after the reunion with my old friend Flynn. Our parents are best friends. My father and Flynn's mother grew up near each other. Flynn's mother's father was my father's Boy Scout leader. It's all very village-ish and related and incestuous. Flynn was a skinny, gawky, freckled kid in high school. Now he's filled out. He's found his style. He works as a mutual fund investor. He makes a lot of money. I heard from my dad via his dad that Flynn is "a yuppie." He's married to a non-Mormon! Flynn and I find a bar and go in. It's one of those Utah things that you have to be a member in order to drink anywhere. Membership is \$5 for three weeks.

I ask Flynn how he saw himself in high school. He says, "Well, I was a commoner. Most everybody there tonight was a commoner."

I shrink at the term. I wonder if I was a commoner, too, and I was too stupid to realize it. Is my ego totally out of whack? Would I know if it was? Isn't that what your ego prevents you from doing? Knowing if you were a commoner when in fact in your head you thought you were sorta' cool? If not a little too much of an egghead. I take the leap and ask Flynn, "Was I a commoner, too?"

"Nah, you always had this bigger view of things. Like the world was big and you wanted to find out about it. I knew you wouldn't stay around too long."

Relief.

I tell Flynn that I've never had sex in Utah. It freaks me out to think of intercourse in Mormon land. Only being here do I realize how deep the indoctrination is. I spent my entire twenties deconstructing it. Then I've spent my thirties figuring out how to live in my own world. The Mormon strand runs deep.

#

Last night the gang from the neighborhood I grew up in had dinner. It wasn't quite *The Big Chill*, more like *The Un-Chill*, *The Lukewarm Shiver*. There was no angst, even though one of my childhood friend's mothers' is in the hospital with lung cancer, prognosis not very good. There's no hysteria. It's all about God. Accepting what we cannot know. Submitting to the totally screwed up. Praying. Faith. It drives me nuts. I'm not sure if I'm more tweaked by the fact that there's no anger apparent whatsoever or that they really do seem happy.

#

It's Sunday. I'm still in Utah. My parents have gone to their three hours of church. My father asks me to join them. I beg off. He seems disappointed. He tells me he'll say a prayer for me.

I say, "Whatever."

My friend Carol calls me on my cell phone. She lives in Washington, D.C. She talks a mile a minute.

"What are you doing for the next two months? Wanna' work?" The phrase comes out in a single breath. It catches me off guard.

"Well...."

“Can you be here beginning of next week? Maybe middle of this one?”

“You serious?”

“Four hundred a day. Big, massive, horrible Hollywood thing. You in?”

“But....,” I stammer, “India....” The ending gets lost in the flurry.

“Okay,” she says. “I’ll call you later with details. Gotta’ go.”

I hang up. The dollar signs appear. Four hundred a day for two months. I can pay off my credit cards. My car. Not worry about money for the next year. But the business. I hate that business. I’d avoided the Hollywood stuff from the beginning. I figured if this was for real, then I’d have to do it. If not, I was nothing short of a moron. I’d give Carol a couple of days to make it so.

Monday. Nothing. Typical.

Tuesday. Nothing. I’m getting antsy.

Wednesday. Still nothing. I look over my checking account. I let the fantasy of the pay checks lull me into a sullen kick in my own ass. I should have known better.

Thursday. Nothing. Until almost noon. A frantic call.

“Okay, here’s the deal. You have to be here 8 A.M. Monday morning. Ready to work. This is huge and we have to be on top of it. Can you do it? Can you get here?”

There’s barely a pause between her words and mine.

“Sure.”

“Call me Sunday night.”

What this means is driving back to Montana immediately. Finding a flight to Baltimore/D.C. or driving. I have three days to figure it all out and get there. First things first. Back to Montana.

Five hundred miles seems like almost nothing out here. I leave Utah at 2 P.M. and make it back to Montana and the Belfry bar by 9. Only seven hours.

Yancey is there, at the Belfry. I figure why not stop for a beer. Too much driving. He sees me and it doesn't seem strange to him that I'm there.

"I flashed on it that you might show up."

I laugh and marvel at his prescience. Eerie but practical. I'm dreading the East Coast. I've gotten used to this life style. But not. It's me. But not. I can't spend my life in a bar. I mean, I can. Don't get me wrong. Somewhere in my gradually pickling soul there's still a small amount of drive left, ambition. If I stay in Montana, my nebulous goal of self-fulfillment will get hazy with booze. I'll end up puffy faced, fat in the belly with three ex-husbands. I'll ponder on all that later. For now I have a beer and a shot and then another beer. I give Yancey a punch in the arm and then head back to the house.

I find a flight for Sunday morning. It's way overpriced, but I don't have a choice. I find Johnnie at his "office," the Blue. He's happy to see me. I tell him I'm leaving town. He says, "Well, then we'd better get married -- quick."

I say, "Okay."

Barry, the bartender at the Blue, performs the ceremony. We both say, "I do." Johnnie introduces me to everyone as his new wife. By and large everyone believes us. They also buy us a round. I see the glint in Johnnie's eye. He's no dummy when it

comes to rounds. We spend the evening and the next day being congratulated and drinking for free.

At some point, Johnnie and I return to his apartment. Probably for a nap. He tells me he's washed all his jeans. Finally. Well over 30 pairs. Up until now he buys a new pair rather than washing. I ask if he's taken them to the laundromat? He says, no, he's done it himself. In the bathtub. They're all folded and sitting in the middle of the floor. I go in and check out his bathtub. It's filled with soggy socks. Apparently, they're next on his washing list.

I ask, "What do you do when you need to take a shower?"

He responds, "Well, those socks need agitatin' once in a while. They don't mind."

I laugh.

He says, "Ya know, I could start whining and complaining here. Tellin' ya I want you to stay. And don't get me wrong. I do wish you'd stay. I'm going to miss you. But I think what you're doing is great, exciting. I admire you."

"How would you feel about watching my cat while I'm gone? She loves you to death and it'd be good for you. Something to take care of. What do you think?"

He ponders on it a moment, "I'll do it. Ya may not ever get her back, though. Cats love me."

I say, "Thanks Johnnie, you're a sweetheart," then I kiss him and leave.

EIGHT

I'm in D.C. with Carol and it's like I'm scrapple in a room full of prosciutto. I'm just not cool enough to be connected to big-time Hollywood. My ego isn't big enough. I agonize for two weeks then quit. I get a job making pornographic props for a John Waters film being shot in Baltimore. Baby mobiles made of gigantic colored dildos, stuff like that. In the meantime, my wallet gets stolen out of my rental car. I don't miss that part of living in a city. Crime. Something was totally fucked up that night. The guy parked next to me found a six-year-old Black kid sleeping in the back seat of his car. He swore up and down the car had been locked. I guess he didn't ask if the kid had my wallet.

#

I've reconnected with my old boyfriend Bradley. He's a native Washingtonian; junk collector, hoarder and Blues musician. He's really an old Black man trapped in an upper-class white boy's body.

I say, "Why did we break up again?"

He says, "Because of those peanut shells."

I say, "Oh yeah, I remember now. I went to San Francisco on a job, let you use my car and you left a bunch of peanut shells in it, that red part that sticks to your fingers and everything. I was pissed."

He says, laughing, "Something like that."

I say, "Are you sure it wasn't because we didn't have sex?"

He says, "That could also have something to do with it."

I say, "You don't like sex?"

He says, "I'd just started AA. I wasn't supposed to be getting involved with anyone."

I say, "What about now?"

He says, "What about now -- what?"

I say, "Sex."

He says, "I have a girlfriend."

I say, "And?"

#

About a week after that I moved into his house. We told each other it was temporary and I really didn't have anywhere else to go anyways. One night Bradley and I were lying in bed, half-way drifting off to sleep, when I heard something fall in the room next door.

I say, "What the hell was that?"

Then we both heard a scratching noise and some high-pitched screeching.

I say, "Jesus Christ!"

Bradley looks at me nonchalantly, "I bet one of those raccoons fell out of the ceiling."

I say, "Raccoons?"

We both get out of bed and literally stumble into the next room. Bradley's house is filled with crap everywhere. I mean everywhere. I mean every inch of space with the

exception of a small foot trail that leads from room to room. Bradley turns on the hallway light and we push open the door to the room.

There it is, a baby raccoon, staring straight at us.

Bradley says, "Ain't he cute?"

I say, "Yeah, until he bites you and you get rabies!"

Then we look up and what do we see? A momma raccoon and at least three more babies. They're peering at us with their cartoonish eyes. It's obvious the mother is distressed by her charge's fall.

I ask, "What should we do?"

Bradley says, "Just leave 'em alone. It'll figure out how to get back up there."

I say, "So you don't mind that there's a family of raccoons living upstairs? What if they get out? Start eating everything, bite us or something?"

Bradley looks almost exasperated, "You afraid of raccoons?"

I say, "No."

He says, "Alright then, let's go back to sleep."

I give him a skeptical look then go back into our bedroom. About fifteen minutes later, just as we are about to have sex, sure enough, there it is, the screeching, scratching and clawing of the raccoon family, right above our heads. A cacophony of bestial noises.

I start laughing as Bradley's erection goes south, "You afraid of a little raccoon?"

He says, "Fuck they're noisy."

I say, "Sounds like they might come through this ceiling too. Don't you guys ever fix anything around here?"

I was referring to the point that all the ceilings in the house had suffered major water damage from one source or another. The raccoon in the other room had fallen through because the ceiling was barely intact.

Bradley responds, "We don't believe in fixing things. We believe nature will take its course."

I say, "You guys are looney."

He says, "I can't argue with that."

#

I believe it was a Saturday. I was pretending to be domesticated and had actually cooked pancakes for Bradley and his step-father. We were all sitting down to breakfast when there was a loud pounding on the front door and then a woman's voice.

The voice says, "You get out here now Bradley. I wanna talk to you!"

Bradley looks at me. I look back, somewhat alarmed. "Is that who I think it is?"

He says, "Shit."

I say, "Well, why not just get it over with?"

His step-father says, "Who is it? What's going on?"

Bradley's step-father is almost 85 years old and is mostly mentally alert, but can barely see anything.

I say, "It's Bradley's girlfriend."

Step-father says, "That's great. Invite her in."

Bradley says, "You don't get it pop."

Step-father, "Get what?"

I say, "Me. She doesn't know about me."

Step-father, "Oh. I see."

Bradley, "Yeah."

I say, "You have to do something."

This is not entirely the case with these two. Their M.O. is mostly to do exactly the opposite of something, which is nothing. The raccoons still living in the rafters being a case in point.

I say again, "Go! Get out there and deal with it."

Bradley slowly gets up from his steaming pancakes and sullenly walks to the door, looking like he is on his way to his executioner. I almost start laughing and throwing up, both at the same time. On the one hand, I'm happy that Bradley will finally have to deal with his two-timing. On the other, if he chooses to be with me, then that would mean I am more than peripherally (meaning sexually) involved with him. I'm not sure I'm up to the task. I also stand up from my breakfast and tip-toe behind Bradley to watch the confrontation at the door.

As soon as Bradley opens it, he ducks. A 78 record whizzes past his head and smashes into the wall behind him.

Bradley, "What the hell are you doing?"

The girlfriend, "Returning all your shit that you've been storing at my house."

Another record goes flying. "Put those down. You're destroying my Slim Pickins Watkins collection." [Or insert any other name of some old time Blues guy you've never heard of.]

The girlfriend, "Go fuck yourself. Better yet, go fuck your new girlfriend."

As she says this she goes walking to her SUV (a Mitsubishi Montero thing) and tears the back doors open. She starts throwing speakers, musical instruments, records, clothes, shoes, hats, whatever, out of the back of her car and into the street.

Bradley runs into the street, frantically clawing at his stuff, trying to carry it back into the house before it gets damaged. Another record whizzes past the door and into the house.

Bradley to girlfriend, "Would you just settle down for a second?"

Girlfriend to Bradley, "Could you just tell me the truth? Are you sleeping with someone else?"

Hearing this I walk out the door and into broad daylight.

She looks at me, "Her? You're sleeping with her?"

The tone in her voice makes me feel like I'm a leper with green peeling skin or something.

Bradley looks at both of us. Back and forth, back and forth, like a tennis match. Back and forth. I'm standing on his front porch with my arms folded in front of me and a smirk on my face. The girlfriend sneers at Bradley then gets into her SUV and backs up, crushing all of his stuff in the purposeful process.

Bradley, "You bitch!"

She drives away and I go inside, slamming the door behind me.

#

The day before I leave for India, the stand-off occurs. Somehow or another Bradley has convinced the girlfriend that I'm not a threat. I don't know that he's done this for a fact until I hear the answering machine going off and the girlfriend leaving a message.

"Hi honey. So don't forget to be here at 7. We'll have a quick bite then head down to the Alma for the show. See you soon. I love you."

As with most things, I'm torn. He loves me, he loves me not. I love him? I love him not? I'm leaving town the next day and have no real ties I can hold over Bradley. Nonetheless, the message gets to me. I also realize that the volume on the machine has been turned up to its max. An accident? Are there any accidents?

I feel almost guilty to be violating the female sisterhood thing because of a guy. At the same time, I'm not going to lie about it, my ego kicks into high gear. I'm not good at being female #2. I'm conflicted and take it out on Bradley as soon as he gets home.

I fish for information I already know, "So where are you off to tonight?"

Bradley, "Why?"

Me, "Just wondering. I mean, it's our last night together. Don't you think it would be great to go out somewhere?"

Bradley, "You said you wanted to pack."

Me, "I finished early."

There's a pause while Bradley figures out his strategy.

Me, "Oh yeah, there's a message for you."

Bradley, "I'll listen to it later.

Me, "No, I think you should listen to it right now."

Bradley knows he's been caught.

Me, "Why don't you just marry the cunt. You're a fucking asshole."

Bradley, "Which cunt are you referring to? You, or her?"

Me, "Go fuck yourself. You're a lame-ass and you know it. Don't you know how to be fucking honest with anyone?"

Bradley, "In case you've forgotten, you're leaving for India tomorrow. You've never one time said that we were involved. You wanted sex, you got sex. She forgave me because she loves me. She really loves me. Can you say the same thing?"

He had me on that one. I had nothing to say. All I knew at that moment was that men have caused me a lot of trouble.

I held my ground, in silence.

Bradley, "Okay then. I'll see you later."

And then he left.

#

The next morning I walked to a nearby restaurant and started drinking margaritas. I left Bradley a note telling him where I was. I'd heard him return late. I'd barely slept. Eventually, he showed up. We both sat in stony silence.

I finally said, "I want you to tell me something to make me feel better."

Bradley said, "Let's get out of here. I don't want this to be public."

We left the restaurant and drove over to a nearby soccer field where kids were playing, all the parents watching. It was a gorgeous October day. I felt sick. I was done with crying, though. I couldn't do any more of it. I was numb to the emotional whiplash of relationships.

Bradley, "Do you mind if I hold your hand?"

"Yeah, it's okay."

He took my fingers in his hand and held on tight. He looked out at the field. "I don't know if there's any point in saying any of this. But I think I fell in love with you. I mean, the only other feeling I can equate with this is mourning. When someone's died I've felt like this before. The other part of it," he paused.

I didn't say anything. I knew it had happened. And now what? I was leaving.

He continued, "I haven't felt like this before. Well, maybe a long time ago. Nope, this is different. There's no way I can stay in my relationship now. Not after this. I know what's missing. I'm in hell. Does that make you feel better? I'm in hell."

There it was. The truth. I believed him. I sat there holding his hand and thinking, deciding how to react. There was no long, passionate kiss. No immediate reconciliation. No movie ending. No me deciding at that moment that I wouldn't go to India. I'd stay with him, work it out, we'd live happily ever after. Instead, I stayed rational. I couldn't stand any more emotion.

"Bradley, we've known each other a long time. We already have a relationship. We've always been good friends. Always. What's going on with your girlfriend is

something you have to deal with independently of me. I don't know what's going to happen in India. I don't even know how long I'll be there. Nothing. I will say that everything that's happened has felt real to me. It's all been good. But I don't want to be thinking about all this. Wondering what you're doing. How you're handling it. It's too much."

We both stared out the window. I was miserable. At that moment I wasn't sure why I was going. At that moment, going to India seemed pathological. A last-ditch effort to free myself from something. What, though? People? Relationships? America? The past? Myself? All of the above? Or something else? Something I couldn't see, couldn't even feel. I was writing my history and had no idea of any of the rules I'd made for myself. It seemed counter-intuitive to be leaving a man who was telling me he'd fallen in love with me, but something was pushing me onto that airplane. I had to go.

#

I'm sitting in the airport waiting to board the plane. My cell phone rings and its Yancey. Johnnie has died of a massive heart attack. He was 58.

#

The rare instance when economics can be ignored is in the pursuit of an artistic endeavor. The potentiality itself may possibly come first. This is an inconstant endeavor.

PART THREE: India**ONE**

I'm immediately struck by the heat. The clothes I've worn are inappropriate; baggy pants made out of a synthetic knit material, a large, heavy cotton cargo jacket with lots of pockets, and steel-toed biker boots. As we fly into the airport in Madras, it's raining. I look down at the fast-approaching ground and see lush, green hills. We're flying into the south of the city, so I won't see the teeming masses for an hour or so.

After exiting the plane, my fellow travelers and I walk down a long, concrete hallway, no visuals except a gigantic statue of Shiva at the end. She's adorned with fresh garlands and other offerings. It looks like the walls are sweating. The humidity has escaped into the building, and the release of the water makes patterns against the whitewash. My clothes are already sticking to me. I can feel my face turning five shades of red. And then I step into the baggage claim.

I'm not prepared for the smell of the place. It's aromatic on both ends of the spectrum. Incense mixed with human excrement, sweaty bodies, curry, and all of it intensified because of the heat. I feel as if I might pass out. I can't even remove my jacket since I haven't worn a proper undergarment. As I'm waiting for my bags, I take a moment to size up my fellow passengers. Most of them are Indian. There's very little interaction between the men and the women, like they don't know each other. I don't see a lot of smiling or other signs of acknowledgement. There's a pragmatic intensity to their expression that fascinates me. Something similar to the Buddah's laugh, indicating a life

mystery I don't have access to. Of course, everyone in that terminal is at least middle class.

My bags finally show and I discover that I'm too late to grab a baggage trolley, they've all been long taken, so I drag my luggage behind me the best I can. I'm supposed to be looking for someone named Mani. He's the accountant at the school where I'll be teaching, speaks English, and has agreed to meet me at the airport with a taxi. As I step outside, there it is--barricades holding back hundreds of brown people. Many of them are half dressed in rags or loosely fitting cotton clothes. It's raining, hard. Bullets of rain so large each droplet is like a water balloon.

As I step out into the crowd, I'm immediately surrounded by at least twenty young boys wanting to carry my bags for me. They've practically taken them from my hands before I can get my bearings. Within seconds I'm drenched. I notice groups of people pointing and staring at me. The crazy white woman with four times too many layers, drenched to the bone. It's comical, but I don't feel like laughing. It's too hot to laugh. I feel like I want to throw up and pass out at the same time.

And then I'm rescued. Mani appears at my side and grabs my bags from the rascallions who are well on their way to taking my bags home with them.

He says in clipped English, "Are you the teacher?"

I smile weakly, "Mani?"

"Yes, so nice to meet you. Follow."

I follow him to a waiting taxi and manage to get even more wet. I'm dripping water everywhere as I slide into the back seat. We pull away quickly and almost collide

with two other taxis and a gaggle of people with baggage. The two rules of the road in India are: get out of the way and the most aggressive driver wins.

The water is rushing down the streets and taking debris with it. It looks like a mini flood in the making. People are crouched under pieces of cardboard or standing in the streets just taking in the weather. Rail-thin figures cross back and forth on the road, barely missing death by inches numbers of times.

I ask, "Is this the rainy season?"

Mani replies, "Oh, no. That was many months ago. This is nothing."

We come to a train crossing and the guard rails are down, so we have to wait. As we do so, people approach the taxi, looking in at me, tapping on the window.

Mani says, "They think you have money. Don't give them any."

Just at that moment the train passes and the cars look like that old game, "Barrel full of Monkeys," where you try to see how many monkeys you can balance on the side of the barrel. They're hanging on by arms, toenails, teeth, anything. At any moment it seems they'll all come tumbling down and land under the tracks. It's a sight straight from *National Geographic Magazine* that I never thought was possible.

We finally make it to the countryside and simultaneously the rain stops. I can see rice fields and, in the distance, ugly, concrete buildings. Then every once and a while, up on a hill, a geometric temple soars up to the sky.

Mani notices my gaze and tells me, "Kanchipuram is one of the seven sacred cities in India. Many temples there."

I say, "Uh huh."

The landscape reminds me of the wetlands in southern Maryland and Virginia. For more than a moment, I wish I were there. I know that I'm jet-lagged, wet and in a state of culture shock, but the rationalization still leaves me feeling homesick. I need sleep.

I'm greeted by Hanne and Rajagopal, the couple who run the school where I'll be teaching. Hanne is tall and wide and Dutch looking. Rajagopal has a wonderful expression on his round, dark face. His eyes dance with laughter and his lips look like they're half smiling, constantly. Rajagopal, or Raj, clasps both my hands in his and does a slight bow, "Welcome. Let me show you to your room."

The house is more like a compound. Hanne and Raj live in the main house, a two-story structure with an attached guesthouse, where I'll be staying. Beneath the guesthouse is a huge patio where the kids do arts and crafts or other projects related to the theatre. Down the street a few yards is an outdoor theatre, designed in the local style of thatch and bamboo. Then across the way is the building, or hostel, where the 30 kids live and take their lessons. Beyond that is a house for the instructors. I'll be moving over there in a day or so, when the woman I'm replacing leaves. For now I'm at the guesthouse.

Raj takes me up the stairs and shows me my temporary room. It's sparsely furnished. A bed, a chair, a small bookcase with novels by Iris Murdoch and other books in Tamil. The walls are plastered, and two large windows face out onto a garden. There's an attached bathroom with a flushing toilet. I have to admit I'm relieved. Raj

tells me how to take a shower.

“Fill bucket with water. Put the coil in. When it’s hot, use it for washing.”

I smile at him and pretend I know what he’s talking about, “Okay.”

Raj does another slight bow and leaves.

I automatically lock the door behind him and take off all my clothes. I immediately feel 100 times better. I look at the pile on the floor and shake my head at my stupidity. And then the urge hits me. I’m dying to watch TV. I know it’s not what you’re supposed to think about when you get to some new, exotic and foreign place. I’m supposed to be curious and enamored with the culture, fascinated with my new friends, blah blah blah. I want to watch my old *Friends* on television and drink a nice glass of chilled white wine. A good Pinot Grigio. Instead, I stare at the ceiling fan whirling overtop the bed and watch a gecko climb the wall. I look at my watch. It seems like an eternity has passed since I arrived at the house. It’s been twenty minutes.

TWO

The first night I'm in India I have a dream. At first I'm standing in a Turkish steam bath. Water is running everywhere and there are three Indian women dressed in colorful saris. They beckon me towards the water. Then, suddenly, I'm on a jumbo jet plane. I am the only person. The jet is flying way too low, almost clipping the buildings in a chaotically busy street. I can see people on the ground running, the shadow of the jet menacing them from above. I go to the cockpit to see why we're flying so low. There sits Danny and Johnnie. As Danny looks at me he steers the jet down towards the ground. An instant before the plane explodes I wake up.

#

There is very little conversation between me and anyone. The reason is simple: I don't speak Tamil, and they don't speak English. The one exception is my roommate Anna, from Holland. Our relationship doesn't start out on a good foot.

My second morning living with her she says, "Let me give you some advice."

I say, "Anna, advice is a very strong word for someone who's twenty years younger than I am."

She looks at me confused. I continue, "Advice, in English, is a strong word. It's condescending. Usually only much older people say it to younger people. Advice is only good when it's asked for, not given."

Her face skews up, wondering what I'm talking about.

I finally say, "I don't need any advice."

She says, "But..."

I know I'm acting like a rude bitch but I don't care. It's 120 degrees outside and the last thing I need is someone giving me "advice."

I finally turn to look at her and she has her face hidden deep within the daily English version of the newspaper.

I ask, "Okay Anna, sorry. What advice would you like to give me?"

She says, "It's nothing, never mind."

"I really do apologize. I'm not used to this heat yet. It's frying my brain."

She says, "I was just going to mention that you shouldn't leave your shoes outside. The neighborhood dogs will take them."

I go to look at the gated door and sure enough my favorite boots are missing. The dogs have eaten them.

#

One of the things nobody ever tells you is that if you're a woman, and you travel across 16 time zones, your period will start that many days sooner. For instance, my period had finished just prior to me leaving for India. I was expecting it to start again in approximately 21 days. However, because I had travelled across 16 time zones to get to India from Washington D.C., my period was now going to start 5 days after it had ended. This meant my period would be starting day 3 in India.

But, like I said, nobody tells you this information. You find out about it yourself. I was horrified to find myself bleeding profusely as I walked back to my house from the post office. I was equally horrified to discover I hadn't brought any super plus size tampons with me. Men never have to think about such things.

THREE

A typical day at the school started at sunrise. From outside my bedroom window, I could hear the local Imam calling the Moslem faithful to prayers. It actually wasn't really the Imam, but a recording, blasting its way into the hearts, souls, minds and spinal cords of everyone within a ten-mile radius. After the Imam's personal concert was over, I usually spent a few minutes in my bed staring at the creatures roaming the walls and ceiling. Easily a dozen geckos had made my room their home. One day, to my great, almost heart-attack-level surprise, I found a mini-alligator lurking in my clothes drawer. I know it wasn't a mini-alligator, although that's what it looked like. A big-ass lizard that looked like a mini-alligator. I screamed so loud when I touched it that one of the house parents from the hostel came running over to see if I was okay. The lizard was long gone by the time he got there, but from that day forward, opening my clothes drawer became a ritual to make sure there was nothing slimy, hairy or crawly inside.

At least I had better luck than Anna, who woke up one morning to discover her mosquito netting was covered with mice. There were at least 200 mice in her room. They'd recently mowed the wheat field behind our house and the mice living in that field had found shelter in her room. I heard her screaming and ran down the hallway to find out what had happened. She had a couple of mice caught in her long hair and was trying to fling them away. At the same time, there were half a dozen of the critters scurrying around her feet, climbing up her legs. I almost threw up. It was a sight straight out of a horror movie, or an image from a nightmare. I went into action-heroine mode and got the broom, opened her back door and started swooshing great piles of mice out the back

door. I couldn't do anything about the ones tangled up in her hair. She was on her own with that and somehow they eventually were extricated. After we got them out of her room, off the mosquito netting, curtains, and out of her luggage, drawers and bathroom, we both sat down at the breakfast table, shaky but laughing. I made us both some tea and offered her a couple of biscuits. She took them with an unsteady hand, had a nibble, then went into the bathroom and started crying. I knew how she felt. There was no use trying to comfort her. We had to come to terms with our own reactions to this place where we were living. Tears were a reasonable response.

#

After waking up in the morning, one way or the other, with one creature or another, the rest of the rituals involved boiling water. We boiled water to make tea, take a shower, or brush our teeth. Breakfast was always tea and biscuits, and we'd sometimes add a banana or another kind of fruit with a peel/skin. A peel was better, thicker. Things like grapes, with only a thin skin, were iffy. Better not to take a risk and come down with two weeks or two months of diarrhea and vomiting. I only got sick once while I was there, and that was after a visit out of town to a fancy, 4-star hotel in Pondicherry. I stupidly let my guard down and ordered a vegetable salad. The cucumbers, carrots and beets tasted wonderful! Who was to know the little micro-organisms of human excrement attached to my salad would put me in bed for almost a week? After that, I was more careful. Anything not made by the cook at the school was off limits. Anything not boiled first was off limits. Anything without a million preservatives was off limits. It made for slim pickings at breakfast, lunch and dinner. On the positive side, I did lose 15

lbs while I was there but abruptly gained it back once I returned to the food-obsessed United States.

Following breakfast in the morning, I took a shower/bath, put on the least amount of clothes I could get away with, and begrudgingly slipped my feet into my sandals and walked over to the hostel for the morning round of classes. As soon as I got to the school, I had to take my sandals off and leave them at the front gate – inside – having learned my lesson once before about the village dogs absconding with footwear.

One of the highlights of my stay in India was adopting one of the mangy dogs in the neighborhood. She was a short-haired white mutt that looked sort of like a Jack Russell. She followed me everywhere I went and would spend the night on the front porch, waiting for me in the mornings so she could accompany me to the school. As soon as we arrived, though, she was greeted with jeers and whistles from the children. A few of them threw rocks at her, and one of them actually went so far as to give her a good kicking. I tried to explain to them: be nice to the dog. Don't hit her. It didn't sink in. All of the village dogs were at risk of an ugly demise. They were unwanted and a nuisance because they went through the trash searching for food and made lots of noise.

The dogs were a symbol of why I felt so uncomfortable in India. The kids were from one of the lowest castes and the only things lower than them, and accessible, were these village mutts. To the kids, they were one of the only targets they could take their aggression out on. True, the caste system is now illegal in India. True, in the front of every government-sanctioned school textbook is a motto, to be repeated before every class, about how everyone is equal and the caste system is illegal. True, occasionally a

person here or there (men) will find a way to take a leap from the lowest class to perhaps the middle class, usually by way of education. All true in philosophy, but not in reality. Reality is worse because caste doesn't matter so much anymore. Pure economics matters. Does it matter what caste you're in if you're living in a house made of cardboard? Does it matter what caste you're in if you're on the brink of starvation? Does it matter what caste you're in if you're repeatedly raped or set on fire if you're a woman? Does it matter what caste you're in if you happen to contract polio, malaria, AIDS or some other debilitating and deadly disease? The dog became the way I made up for what I couldn't do. What I had no control over. At least I could make sure, on a daily basis, that the dog had food. I could try to keep her out of harm's way. I could keep the bigger, meaner dogs away from her when they tried to take her food. I could keep her safe until she gave birth to the litter of pups she was expecting. I could make her life a tiny bit easier until I left. And then once that happened? Well, better not to think about that.

#

My first class in the morning was with the youngest kids. I enjoyed this class the most since the littlest ones were always the most receptive. They hadn't learned yet how to be sullen or stubborn. They were only 6 or 7 years old and I was something of a surrogate mother. I tried to teach them the alphabet and a few words here and there, but they were mostly interested in giving me hugs, combing my hair, and drawing pictures. None of them had been in school before and had no idea what classroom protocol was. They had no interest in sitting down, didn't respond to a raised voice (mine, on many,

many occasions) and didn't understand the concept of taking turns. My Tamil was negligible, and after a week of trying to get them to conform to my idea of a classroom, I finally conformed to theirs. I had them draw pictures of animals and objects and that became our daily lesson. Strangely, their English skills improved faster than those of the kids in the other two levels.

My second class was with the oldest kids. They were the leaders of the group and weren't about to let on that English held any interest for them. Two of them had studied English previously, so I concentrated on building skills for them and attempting to get the other ones to try just a little. The thing that always worked the best was to have the two who did want to learn do something outstanding and then the rest would want to learn that particular thing, if only to compete against them. I did have them all reading by the end of my stay, and they had learned how to raise their hands and speak one at a time.

Following the second class was a tea break, and then class number three. This was my biggest challenge. These kids were smart and loud. They were hungry for knowledge and could barely contain themselves when I got into the room. They all talked at once, and each wanted to outdo the others. Every class was a race to see which one would be the best. They had a daily spelling test, and it became the measure of success. By the end of this class, my voice was raw from trying to talk louder than the group, and my brain was fried. It was time for a siesta.

Following my 30-minute nap was lunch, then another nap, then, starting at 2 p.m., the kids had three hours of theatre practice. I'd usually go down to the theatre and watch them rehearse. Some days I'd stay at the house and read a book on the roof and watch

the old ladies hang laundry across the way. I took up smoking while I was there to break up the monotony of those long, hot, afternoons. By 5 p.m., when classes were over for the day, the sun was starting to lose its edge and it was possible to move again. I'd either go to the market, read more, or go over and visit Hanne and Raj. Raj had discovered, my first week there, that I liked to drink alcohol. In that part of India it's taboo for a woman to buy alcohol, so Raj became my pimp. He'd ride into town on his motorized bicycle and buy me my weekly bottle of Indian whiskey. Drinking Indian whiskey is like drinking rubbing alcohol. Raj told me the only way to do it was one part whiskey, three parts water, and the juice of at least two fresh limes. Raj and I spent many an evening swilling cocktails in their apartment. I'm pretty sure Hanne didn't like it, but she went along with the niceties for the sake of being a good hostess. By around 8 p.m., it was finally dark and cool enough to think. I graded papers, figured out the lessons for the following day, wrote a few letters home, felt bored, took another shower/bath, gave the dog her evening slice of bread, read some more, looked at my watch a lot, folded my clothes for the millionth time, looked at myself naked in the mirror from all angles, cut my hair, looked at my watch again, and by 9 p.m. was in bed.

FOUR

I hate wearing sandals. I prefer wearing boots. The bigger, the clunkier, the better. I think it comes from when I was a kid and my mom bought me my first pair of heavily treaded shoes. The noise I could make in those things! Clomping down the hallways of our house, pretending to be Frankenstein or some other TV monster.

Boots don't work in India, sandals do. Also, since my favorite boots had been torn to shreds, I sort of didn't have a choice. It was either that or going barefoot, which is how the kids make their way around. It's that feet thing again. It was one of the hardest things for me to get used to while I was in India, taking my shoes off before passing over the threshold of every building. Of course, I hadn't brought a pair of sandals with me, since I'd never worn sandals a day in my life. Even growing up, during the summer time, I'd wear some form of boots. It became my trademark as I got older. Biker boots and cut-off shorts. Steel-toed boots and mini-skirts. Cowgirl boots and a slinky, black dress. The possibilities were endless.

A week into my stay I realized I was going to have to buy a pair of sandals, which meant I was going to have to go to the market, which meant either walking the two miles downtown, taking a bus and risking my life, riding a bike and definitely risking my life, or finding a rickshaw to drive me into town. The rickshaw is now electrified and is the local version of a taxi. The only problem with rickshaws is they don't stand up well to regular taxi cabs, buses and loaded-down trucks barreling through the tiny streets at 100 miles per hour. In my opinion, getting on any road in India, via any transportation form, is risking your life. For this reason, I walked a lot.

This would be my first time to the market. I was given directions by one of Raj's daughters. She pointed her finger this way, then told me that at the big church I should turn the other way and there I would find the market. I nodded my head and started on my adventure. Two hours later, I found the market. It was a route that, after figuring out the shortcuts, should have taken 30 minutes. By the time I found my first pair of potential sandals, I felt like I was truly going to faint. There were too many people. Too many hands, eyes, bodies. Too many tiny, skinny kids following me around begging for money. Begging doesn't elicit feelings of compassion and empathy. Rather, it makes you want to grab the heathens by their necks and throw them in the river. You don't believe me? You try having your clothes practically taken off you while four or five ragamuffins follow you around, pulling at your backpack, grabbing at your earrings or necklaces. It's like a public rape. At one point a young guy came storming out of one of the market stalls and started screaming at them to leave me alone. He practically had to drag them off me. Within minutes they were back. The rational assumption is to give in. Give them what they want, a few pennies, a bauble, anything. Give them what they want and they'll go away. The problem is the opposite. Give them what they want and you own them. They are your new project, family and conscience rolled into one. So, the problem remains. Don't give them anything and hope they'll get tired and eventually leave you alone.

It was exhausting dealing with them and added another layer onto the exhaustion already seeping through my body as a result of the heat. At one point, I escaped into a rather largish building, hoping there would be some form of air conditioning, a ceiling

fan, anything. What I found inside was a wall of mirrors and what I saw was a frantic-looking woman staring back at me. I didn't recognize myself. My face was almost purple and my hair was stuck to my head, cheeks and neck. I looked bloated and fat, ready to pop. From inside, I could see the kids hovering around the doorway, waiting for me to leave so they could start up their begging again. I thought about what it must be like to be them. They barely had any clothes on, their faces were smeared with dirt, dried snot, remains of food. They were deathly thin. The divide between us was unbreachable. It turned out the building I'd stumbled into sold t-shirts by the millions. Rows and rows and rows of various-colored shirts. I bought a handful of the cheapest and smallest ones I could find and went outside. The kids started grabbing at them. Eventually they all had one. While they were trying them on, I escaped. Buying sandals would have to wait for another day.

#

It's a strange sensation to live entirely in your own brain, asking and then answering the same question, over and over. My question, the entire time that I was in India, was: What the hell am I doing here?

They say there are three phases to adapting to a new environment: phase one is complete fascination and adoration. The new place is the best on earth and you want to sell everything you have and move immediately. Phase two is just the opposite. The negatives start to show and you can't wait to leave. Phase three is acceptance. You've become one of them and you're at peace with where you are. I've heard this logic

applied to everything from relationships to cultural geography. It's pragmatic and easy to understand. With Kanchipuram I never got to phase one or three.

From the moment I was there, I wanted to leave. It may have been I was too uncomfortable with the quantity of have-nots. From an egalitarian, American point of view, I couldn't understand why the lower castes hadn't risen up in all their numbers and absolutely whipped the hell out of the upper castes. I wanted them to be more ambitious, aggressive, American, or at least somewhat Marxist. It was hard to understand the seemingly passive acceptance of their lot in life. Yeah, yeah, reincarnation and all that for the Buddhists in the bunch. But I didn't want to be the lone white girl in the midst of the sea of brown. It made me extremely uncomfortable, especially when they made a big deal of it.

A month into my stay, I realized my liver had grown. How does one acquire this information? Quite by accident. I was waking up one morning and noticed that underneath my right rib was a bump. I reached down to discover that my liver was jutting up against my ribs, like the alien bursting to get out of the guy's belly. Huh! This being India, I was a bit concerned. In my mind's eye I saw big worms growing in there, or curlicue creatures with a million legs and antennae. Later that day, I found the local hospital and walked in to the reception area. A woman told me the doctor would arrive in approximately 30 minutes.

I took a seat with the 20 or so other people waiting. It was an open-air clinic and a pack of dogs and other animals wandered through, using the hospital as a passageway to some other destination. Chairs lined the perimeter of the wall and then more chairs in

rows stood in the center of the room. I took a seat on one of the perimeter chairs and watched. I noticed that no one was sitting by me. More people were showing up every moment and the locals were crowding around each other, but no one would sit in the chairs on either side of me. Then the doctor arrived, a woman, and suddenly my name was called. I told the nurse that it surely wasn't my turn. I'd only just arrived and here were all these other people waiting. She wanted to hear nothing of my protests. She just kept shaking her head and motioning for me to come into the room. I finally assented and was given a liver tonic to take twice daily.

The problem wasn't that I felt uncomfortable being put first in line, the truth was I was beginning to enjoy it and beginning to understand why the invading white forces left the caste system alone. Why change something that left whitey at the top of the heap?

FIVE

In the midst of my boredom last weekend, I decided to write down all the men I've had sex with. It's one of those silly things you think about once in a while. Trying to decide on the number. At first I did the number of men where intercourse was involved. Then, I wondered if that also meant men where intercourse was intended, but for some reason or other they couldn't get it up. So, I decided that instead of being a hard ass about it, I'd just list the men where it was more than a kiss and some other body parts were involved. The number wasn't too surprising. It's at 88 right now. I know there are a few names lurking out there that just would not come to mind, no matter how hard I tried to remember. Honestly, how did I feel after finding out I'd screwed 88 men? Or at least been "involved?" Fine. I wondered if I was supposed to feel sluttish. I circled all the names that were a one-night stand, roughly 1/3 of them. Sluttish yet? Not really. I think it's more men who judge on the numbers. It was actually fun to remember all of it. Admittedly, my sex prospects here are not good. And the imagination is a fine thing to rely on in times of drought.

#

The first time I was propositioned for sex in India, I was in Mahabalipuram. It's a beach town about 40 miles due east of Kanchipuram. Mahabs, as it's called, didn't do well in the tsunami. However, the tsunami is more than a year away when I'm there. Hanne has told me there's a huge flesh trade in India and there are a number of European operators working out of Mahabs. I figure she's pulling my leg, although the Dutch

aren't really known for their sense of humor. It still feels impossible for these things to be real.

On the beachfront of Mahabs is an ancient temple. It's perched on a bed of disintegrating rocks so the local government has fenced off a portion of it, leaving only a walking trail for tourists to look at the exterior. Early one morning I decide to do the walking tour. In this part of India, it's a good idea to do everything first thing in the morning. By 11 A.M. it's too hot to even think. At first, it looks like I'm the only person out at that time. Then, just up ahead of me, I see a young man, about 16 or 17. He turns around a few times and looks at me. I ignore him. He's skinny, skinny and I know if anything physical happens I've got him by at least 25 pounds. Up ahead there's an abrupt turn in the path to the left. As I turn the corner, there he is, penis in hand, masturbating. His eyes are locked onto mine and he stares at me with all the intensity of any masturbating male. I stop dead in my tracks and just watch. I mean, what the hell?! I do a classic double-take, look into his face, down at his penis, into the face, down at the penis. Then I get a clue and turn around and start briskly walking back from whence I came.

The second time was in a town called Pondicherry. Pondicherry was originally settled by the French and there are some magnificent French-style houses in the historic area. It's another ocean-front town and is known for its fine and varied cuisine. As soon as I get off the bus and check into my hotel room, I take a walk along the boardwalk. The locals have done an impeccable job of creating a carnival-like, yet tranquil, path along the ocean. I stroll like everyone else, frequently going off the path and down to the rocks to

feel the ocean spray as it smashes against the sea-wall, rock barricade. As I'm standing on a rock, staring off into the wild blue yonder, a very beautiful young man approaches and stands about five feet away. He stands very still and only after a few moments am I aware of his presence. I look over at him with a question on my face.

"I love you," he says.

I look at him, "What?"

"I love you." He puts his hand on his crotch and looks at me more directly. "I love you."

I finally get it and say, "If you don't leave, I'm calling for the police."

He stares at me blankly.

I repeat myself. More succinctly. "Police! Police! Get out of here."

He continues the stand-off. His stare has turned slightly sneerish. He's done this before and has had willing customers. It makes me wonder why he's approached me. I guess because I'm alone, am white. Do I have some sort of pervert vibe about me? I wonder.

Once again I say it, "Police! I'm calling the Police if you don't leave me alone."

He finally turns and runs.

SIX

Thanksgiving in Kanchipuram was an especially hard day for me. That's the one holiday I get really homesick, especially if I'm traveling alone or have had a rough few days. I don't recall anything specific happening, unless it was almost getting hit by a bus the first time I tried to ride a bike into town, or when the troop of monkeys practically raped me as I walked home with a bag of bananas in my hand, or when the old guy walking in front of me did a squat and shit and then merrily went on his way. None of these events were singular enough to be called rough, only a part of the vagaries of traveling in far-off places where the smells, habits and hygiene were quite different.

Whatever the case, I felt less than myself and certainly homesick. I called Bradley. I called him for all sorts of reasons: I wanted to hear a friendly voice, I wanted to hear about his schedule for the day, I wanted to be able to imagine myself there with him, in a friendly environment, with someone I thought I could possibly love. I had to know if he was going to be spending the holidays with the girlfriend. He wasn't. Or, at least if he was, he wasn't telling me about it. He was doing the turkey thing and the pumpkin pie thing and the fall asleep thing that all Americans know only too well, each group having a specific ritual that marks the years from November to November. That was the problem. November. My memories of November are cool if not cold, crisp air and sky, possibly even snow. November here was too freakin' hot. I missed the change of seasons and the wool sweaters and the fact that I could gain a few pounds and hide myself under another few layers of clothing. In India, everything is exposed. The smells, the habits, the hygiene. Exposed in all its acuity and strangeness. I was exposed too. I

couldn't hide behind my language manipulation skills, clothes or even my skin color. On all fronts I was the elephant in the room.

When I talked to Bradley that Thanksgiving, he told me that on Friday he'd be playing one of his Blues gigs at one of his regular haunts. I felt more than a pang of jealousy. I wanted to be there. I wanted to be there with the overpriced drinks, the all-white yuppies, if there still are yuppies, moving in horrible rhythm to the music Bradley and the rest of the band of white boys were playing. I wanted to fake it like the audience was faking it and pretend that I liked talking to strangers in smoke-filled rooms. I would have killed to be able to do that. At least at that particular moment.

Initially, I was a fan of Bradley's forays into the world of poor, Southern black men who eventually became the heroes of The Blues. I enjoyed going to clubs and listening to the scratchy-throated lyrics of the hard-living and hard-luck-loving anti-hero men and their wayward women. I was a fan. Until the "stuff" happened. The hoarding factor broke down all levels of like and eventually love between Bradley and me. Whatever he liked, I grew to dislike with a passion. Whatever he had to hold onto, I was intent on throwing away. Whatever he thought was valuable, I labeled a piece of detritus. This was about six months into our new relationship after I'd returned from India. It took a while for what was happening to seep in. Seep in meaning that it took me a while to notice that he was intent on holding onto bottle caps, used-up matchbooks, the caps to dried-out Chapstick tubes, the tubes themselves, newspapers from the last three decades, mismatched socks with holes so big it looked like a rat invasion, cords to absolutely no

piece of electronic gear, basically anything and everything he could find in the alleys of Washington D.C.

He had a particular ritual to it, as most OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) people do. He trolled through the alleys, piling every imaginable piece of crap he could find into one of his illegal vehicles (illegal because he never bothered to get them registered and at one point there was a chase scene between him and the D.C. parking authority regarding one particular station wagon that had pushed the boundaries of illegal station wagon behavior.) After the vehicle was loaded up with his newly found crapola, he'd then drive over to the warehouse he was squatting in, a 5000 square-foot vacant warehouse with no windows and a floor made of rusted-out corrugated metal, he'd back the vehicle up to the warehouse door and then literally throw the items into the warehouse. He'd do this until the door could no longer open, then he'd throw the stuff a couple more yards to make room for more of his alley-trolling junk.

All this I could have possibly justified as some anti-establishment, counter-cultural personality quirk until he started in with the sandwiches. Every fucking day we had to eat some high-cholesterol fried fish sandwich from some divey black joint in some shitty neighborhood that Bradley knew about. We'd drive to the other side of town and hunt down the catfish delight of the day. I was eating one fried fish sandwich a day, along with the proper amount of french fries and non-diet soda, and I was gaining weight. Above and beyond that it was the catsup packets. I mean, truly, I do know that some people collect catsup packets and actually use them. However, my gut instinct is that people who keep those packets are the same ones who keep soy sauce packets when they

get Chinese food delivered and are the very same ones who pull out perfume samples from magazines and never throw them away and also have a collection of mini product samples from every fucking product ever invented in America that shows up in some piece of plastic on the doorstep.

We all know some idiosyncratic person out there in the world who does this, possibly even you? If so, they, and you are hoarders. Theoretically, according to me, if you have more than three packets of catsup in a drawer or the refrigerator that you're holding onto for some special purpose, step out of your denial and admit it, you're a hoarder. Bradley had and has a problem. He kept every unused catsup packet, toothpick and plastic utensil in an overstuffed drawer of the family house in D.C. Also in that drawer were Scotch tape dispensers with no tape, dried-up magic markers, paperclips galore, salt and pepper packets, towelettes, lipstick holders with no lipstick, lots and lots of ballpoint pens with no ink, string of all shapes and sizes, one of every kind of rubber band ever manufactured, corks from champagne bottles, the metal thingie on the champagne bottle, wine corks, napkins from every fast food restaurant in D.C., straws, a pair of those red edible lips that you wear on Halloween still in a very worn package, a couple of ping pong balls, you get the picture. The point being I know for a fact none of those packets ever got used. It got to the point where I'd purposely just eat the packets of catsup so Bradley couldn't take them home with us.

That was when the realization hit me, as I spewed the fourth catsup packet into my mouth. Bradley had a problem and I had one too. I'd become one of those co-dependent girlfriends who let the behaviors of the boyfriend drive the girlfriend to drink,

and drink heavily. Maybe that's not the AA definition of co-dependent and maybe I didn't care. Maybe I was seething with unabated anger at Bradley's rituals and the only way I could remain with him was to drink. Maybe I actually wanted to use the stove in the kitchen without having to remove Styrofoam cups and containers from the inside, Styrofoam that was being saved so it could be taken to a Styrofoam recycling plant somewhere in Virginia (Yeah, right! Like that would ever happen, it hadn't happened in the last five years, so why would it suddenly happen now?). Maybe I just wanted to be able to flush the toilet instead of filling up a bucket of water to pour down the bowl every time I took a poop. Maybe I just wanted to be able to open a drawer, any drawer in the entire house, and not have the contents spring out at me like some nightmarish jack in the box. And maybe, just maybe, I wanted to get a towel from the linen closet, wipe down my newly showered body with it and not have my entire body turn blue from an ink pen that somehow had gotten into the linen closet and burst onto all the towels and then have Bradley hand me the towel while I was in the shower and not noticing the towel was covered in blue ink because my eyes were closed because I still had a little bit of soap in my eyes (not to mention that Bradley didn't notice the ink either even though supposedly he had his eyes open when he handed the fucking thing to me) take the towel and proceed to wipe myself down and then discover that I was covered in blue ink. So right about this moment, the blue ink moment, I decided to drink with decisiveness and also to hate the Blues. I have never regretted nor retracted either decision.

SEVEN

Everyone has limits, and I found mine while I was in India. The number one thing was the heat – my genetic background just isn't engineered for equatorial weather. I was like the Wicked Witch of the East and constantly felt as though I was melting and about to disappear. It was hard to think.

Also, the men. I wasn't allowed to interact with them. There were two main hindrances: language and culture. The language aspect was the easiest to overcome since it's always easy to seduce someone while simultaneously trying to communicate; the batting of the eyes while asking if you're saying something correctly; the mispronounced words and attempts to overcome the impasse of garbled messages. Culture, though, was the Kilimanjaro of my distress. Unless I somehow managed to get myself involved in an arranged marriage, my prospects of seeing an Indian man naked were pretty far-fetched. That's when I hit upon the idea of putting a personal ad in the regional English speaking newspaper.

Anna and I were sitting at our small dining room table one afternoon and I was reading through the personals.

I said, listen to this one, “Brahma Engineer with Oxford education seeking woman of equal status to marry.’ Geez, they just put it out there.”

Anna said, “And they're into the astrology.”

I scanned the columns and then saw, “Beautiful Bengali woman born on the cusp of the new moon at 12:47 A.M. looking for professional English speaking man to share

my life with. Send all pictures and astrological information to the listed address.' Do you think people actually do this stuff? Have you ever done a personals ad?"

Anna replied, "No, I've had the same boyfriend since I was 14."

I said, "You're joking."

Anna looked at me, indignantly, "He was my neighbor. We practically grew up together."

"Are you two going to get married?"

"Probably some day. We're in no hurry. While I'm in India he's in Australia. We'll meet back in Holland when the next school semester starts."

"And it doesn't freak you out that you've only had sex with one guy? For your entire life?"

Anna replied, "I think it's nice. He's my best friend too."

I said, "Wow. I didn't think there were people like you still around."

Anna looked wounded. I backtracked, "I didn't mean it like that. I just mean, it's nice that some people can actually be in a relationship without being cynical and pissed off."

"Why would you be in a relationship if you feel that way?"

"That, my young friend, is the question. What's the point if it brings nothing but bad feelings? Maybe the Indians have a point with the arranged marriages. Then you don't really need to think about it. It's just like getting accepted to the university or finding a job. Instead, you're just finding a husband." I paused for a minute, "At least it's worth a try."

Anna looked suspicious, "What are you going to do?"

I got out my notebook and started to write, "Educated American woman looking for wealthy Indian man. Marriage possible and living in the United States likely. All Visa requirements met in exchange for rural land to start a vineyard. Astrology not important. Looks and compatibility are."

Anna said, "You wouldn't do it."

I said, "Wouldn't I?"

"I thought you had a boyfriend waiting for you?"

"Well, it's a maybe boyfriend. The status isn't quite set."

Anna asked, "Do you love him?"

I said, "It's not that easy."

She said, "You either do or you don't."

I said, "If you put it that way, then I do, sort of."

"What part is sort of?"

"He's a bit nuts. His family is definitely nuts."

"What does 'nuts' mean?"

"They're crazy. They live in this huge house that's falling down around their heads. They're all a bunch of former alcoholics. They don't have toilets that flush. They're crazy."

"Well, maybe you can change him."

I said, "Now I can tell your age Anna, there's no such thing as changing people. A leopard will always have his spots."

She said, "I think love can transform people. It happened to my mother. My father died when I was quite young and my mother was depressed all the time. And then she met her current husband and it's like she's a different person. She's happy and smiles all the time. It can work."

"Maybe it's just me then."

She said, "You want to think that you're an exception, but you're the same as everyone else."

I let her point sink in. I was going to fire back something pithy and then thought better of it. She was right. I finally said, "If I'm the same as everyone else then why are relationships so hard for me?"

She said, "You expect too much. You must accept people for who they are. Love them for it."

I said, "When did you get to be so smart?"

She laughed, "You remind me of my mother."

"Geez thanks."

"Actually, I think you're the same age as she is."

"Could be."

"Since I was young I saw her struggle with her pain. She tried to hide it, drink it away. Run away from it. It never worked."

"Yeah, that's sort of what this India thing was supposed to be. A place to run away from all of it."

She asked, "Is it working?"

I laughed, “Hardly. I hate it here.”

“Then why don’t you leave?”

I said, “And leave behind my new, wealthy husband?”

Anna laughed, then said, “Maybe the place you need to be is the place where the person you love is.”

I looked at her intently, “Maybe.”

EIGHT

I've never in my life been so involved with such different kinds of shit, as when I was in India. The first jolt came one morning as I was walking from my house over to the hostel where I taught the kids. It's only about 150 feet away and there's a dirt path running between the two structures. However, on that path there is also a grouping of tall bushes, slightly spread out with plenty of room for the emaciated locals to hide out and also shit. As I walked past the bushes that particular morning, I was somewhat surprised to see a fairly elderly gentleman squatting and doing his morning business. Great strands of excrement were coming from his asshole. I was told later those bushes are the local, outside toilet.

The second event at least involved animals. The walkway up to the house I was living in is sort of a zigzag affair, like a ramp you'd see at a house in the States if the owner was in a wheelchair or something. Everyone knows that cows are considered off-limits (sacred) in India, and so they roam the neighborhoods eating trash and whatever they can find to feed themselves.

I remember it being after lunchtime and I returned to the house to find three cows stuck on the ramp. They'd wandered up and couldn't get off. They were stuck on my porch and shitting up a storm. Cow patties six inches thick spread out like so many gopher holes on the prairie. In Montana, everybody knows cows WILL NOT walk backwards. You have to get them into or out of the feeding corral by moving them forwards. This presented a problem for me and my cows. How to get them off the bloody porch? They were backed up on each other and were, as they say, nose to ass.

The only good thing about a cow is that it's incredibly stupid. I knew if I could get one to turn around on the porch the others would blindly follow. That first one was the problem. I inched myself around the small ledge of the porch, (the porch was enclosed with an iron railing, which was the real problem in getting the cows to move. If it had been an unhindered ramp system, I do believe the cows could have easily stepped off the porch. The railing was preventing the movement.) I stood in front of the first cow and she looked at me with huge, watery eyes. I pushed on her neck to try to get her to move. She didn't budge. I tried again. She jerked her neck up to brush off my advances. By this time the children were gathered around the scene, chattering at me in Tamil a million miles a minute. They were giggling and pointing and a few of them look concerned after I'd pushed on the cow's neck. I hoped they weren't putting some sort of Hindu spell on me for violating their cow god.

In the end, I left the cows to finagle a dismounting of their own, which they somehow managed to do. I don't know the details of their movement, I only remember that the next time I came out of my door there were no cow behinds to observe, only huge cow patties fermenting on the porch.

The third round of shit was metaphorical, not literal. During my tenure as an instructor at the school, all of us ate lunch together in one of the rooms at the hostel. "All of us" means me and the Dutch girl who shared the house with me. She was the health person for the kids, making sure the lice were under control, that the kids brushed their teeth, cleaned up in the toilets, etc. Then there were the actors from the school. All men. There were four or five of them who showed up for lunch. One afternoon we were all

sitting on the floor, eating lunch with our hands (except me--I never got used to that method and always insisted on a spoon) with the blare of the local soap opera booming in the background. It was fairly quiet except for the TV. Suddenly, one of the house husbands came booming into the room, grabbed his wife, the cook, by the neck and pushed her up against the refrigerator. He was screaming at her in Tamil and I noticed none of the men looked. They just ignored the scene. And then it continued. The wife had her hands up around her face as the husband hit at her head. Another one of the maids, a woman so thin she looked like a gust of wind might blow her over, came to the wife's rescue. She stood between the couple and said absolutely nothing. The husband continued to try and hit his wife, while I, being the American that I am, was astounded. I just stared. As I watched it unfold over the 5-10 minutes that seemed to last hours, my brain kept switching back and forth between thinking I should do something to knowing I mustn't get involved. These weren't my battles to get involved with, but at the same time I had a very hard time doing nothing. It went against my belief system.

It was a turning point moment for me. Not only because of the actual event but also because afterwards I told Hanne, the director of the school, about it. I explained it in a very objective way, trying to get her take on how she handles these things. She had no opinion or comment on it whatsoever. That was when I knew I wanted to leave.

PART FOUR: Butte**ONE: The Present**

Freddie, the Dark and Spiritual Italian, says, “You’re used to getting what you want.” It feels like a slap in the face, the tone of his voice.

He continues, “You’re a spoiled cunt. A god-damned sorority girl cunt.”

I’ve been listening to him rant at me for well over twenty minutes. He calls me on my cell phone, wakes me up to tell me the shopping list of what I’ve done wrong. To my mind, the only mistake I’ve made so far is to almost fall in love with him.

He doesn’t want that. Under any circumstance.

I laugh as I listen to his description of me. It’s dead-on accurate except for the extra helping of male ego under duress, manifesting itself as meanness. It’s easy to tell when you’ve gotten to a man. He becomes a snake bite.

“Why shouldn’t I do what I want?” I ask. “Why should I do things your way, when mine is so much better?”

“Are you being sarcastic?” he questions.

“Not even.”

He hangs up the phone on me.

A week ago, exactly, his brother, Tony, tried to choke me. He reached across the kitchen table where we were all sitting and started to throttle my neck. My chair got pushed against the wall and I fell over, banging my head and shoulder blade.

Freddie calls me back again to tell me that now that story has been re-written. He's teaching me a lesson. "If somebody asked me, I'd tell them a really drunk girl just fell off her chair. I didn't see anybody choking you."

I shake my head at him over my cell phone in silent disgust. It's pure treachery and he's doing it on purpose. He's doing it so I know without a doubt which side he's on. Certainly not mine.

It all starts to unravel the first night that I stay over and sleep next to him in his bed.

He says, against my bare shoulder, "I love you. Tonight." I wince because I'm pretty sure it's true.

The next morning he tells me, "Women mess me UP!" For him I'm nine kinds of dangerous.

He goes to Thailand twice a year for months at a time and fucks hookers and gets coffee enemas. He has a collection of women in town he also occasionally fucks and/or treats as pet projects. More than likely he's fucked the pet projects at some point too. They're down and outers, women with ex-husbands who shoot out their car windows. Triplicate sisters who've all spent time in jail, the mother and father also, a family affair. The projects have big hair and bad skin and bastard children and use double negatives and pick at their teeth with forks. I call him the grand puppet master.

We didn't meet by accident. Quite the contrary. It was a set-up of sorts, bourgeois in its own way. A dinner party at his house. He sets out a daily meal for his

menagerie of misfits: steamed asparagus, string beans with salt and olive oil, marinated elk, brown trout.

In the beginning, I am the honored guest. The new girl on the block making the rounds, kissing the ring of the local consigliere. As I approach him, I give him my brightest smile, not sure if I find him attractive or not. He's tall and barrel-chested, walks with a shuffle, wears baggy clothes and lots of jewelry: bracelets, rings, clunky gold necklaces. His Italian-ness is obvious in the color of his skin, the texture of his hair. His eyes are dark brown and sparkle with mischief. I watch him sideways as he prepares dinner. He knows his kitchen impeccably. He blindly pulls out knives, cuts vegetables. He turns the broiler on the oven and kneels down to get just the right crustiness on our frittata. A perfectionist. He pours wine for everyone and talks all the while about his recent trip. The crazy nightclubs in Bangkok, the preponderance of he/shes, the girls shooting ping pong balls out of their vaginas. He's an excellent storyteller and likes to belly laugh at his own adventures.

I feel intimidated by his loquaciousness. My Scandinavian tongue feels heavy and flat. All I can do is drink, to make myself feel more interesting, untie the vowels.

The night wears on and gradually, one by one, the other guests leave. It's just the two of us. He walks to a closet and pulls out a bag of silk scarves he's brought back with him from Bangkok. They look like fluorescent caterpillars piled one atop the other, waiting to blossom into butterflies around the neck.

"Pick one," he tells me. "It has to match what you're wearing, though. Color coordination!"

I laugh. He picks out a hot pink one for me, wraps it around my neck. His breath against my cheek makes me blush. I don't have a stitch of hot pink anywhere on my clothing.

“Silk between your fingers is better than pussy.” I feel him sizing me up to see how I'll handle the pussy factor. He's opened the doorway to sex and I decide to step through.

“Really?! But you've never had MY pussy,” I counter, realizing that the wine is doing its job and I've become a loose lipped hussy who can now say “pussy” without blushing ten shades of red. It's probably the first time I've even said the word out loud, at least in this context.

“Never say never.” He pauses. Looks me square in the eyes. “Ya know I have a hot tub in the backyard?”

“How California of you,” I laugh. “Is it the sort of hot tub where ya have to get naked?” I ask, innocently enough.

“Is there any other kind of hot tub?”

“Guess not. So where is it?”

“Right down the stairs, hang a left, you'll see a silk black robe hanging on the door. Go ahead and use it.”

“Silk again.”

“Yep, like I said.” He raises his eyebrows twice at me in an overt, lascivious manner.

I get up from the table and head downstairs while he clears away the dishes and glasses.

He has a rule for everything. There's the rule about bringing your own case of wine to his house. You can only drink your wine while you're at his house. There are scattered cases throughout the basement, guests who come and go but leave the trail of vineyards and labels behind with them.

There's also the rule about surprise house calls. No just coming around or spur of the moment visits. At first that might sound obvious, common sense wise. But in this town, no one locks the door, except him. It makes sense once you realize he's the local marijuana distributor. He's not the dealer on the street selling dime bags, but the middle-man who gets the shipment from wherever and makes sure the peddlers get their quota. He justifies breaking the law by telling me that if someone isn't making sure there's pot here, the population would be at each other's throats. I have to agree. This town is full of unemployed and underemployed blue-collar lunch pail types. Men who hit their women for the fun of it and women who swing back.

Once you've gotten past the threshold there's an energy inside that beckons you back. The smell of pot is thick in his house, second only to the scent of multiple sticks of incense burning at his altar to Ganesh, the elephant god. I give him one of my Ganesh necklaces that I'd gotten in India. It's a hand-painted one that I'd stupidly worn into the shower. Ganesh is now smeary and more lumpy than usual. He takes my offering, places it gently on the altar, closes his eyes, says a silent prayer and bows.

Rule number three is that it's worse to make someone else lose face than it is to lose face yourself. It seems only to apply to men though, since on more than one occasion he has taken great pleasure in putting me in my place while his male compatriots looked on. There's a crew of them. There's Henrich, the Ukranian from upstate New York. He made his way here via heroin addiction in Illinois, fucking whores in Amsterdam and art school at some ritzy place I'd never heard of. He was a psychologist at the state prison and has the look of a ferret about to pounce. He's obsessed with Internet porn.

He says, "My dick is only two inches long."

I say, "So what?"

He says, "Still wanna fuck me?"

I say, "I never wanted to fuck you."

He says, "See. I told you."

I say, "What the hell are you talking about."

He says, "As soon as I tell women that my dick is only two inches long, then they ask me to fuck them up the ass. It's what you want, I can tell."

I say, "You're a lunatic."

He says, "Fuck you. You women are all the same."

I say, "Yeah, whatever."

Then there's Wayne. Wayne is sort of a miniature Grizzly Adams, not quite so big but bearded and cuddly looking. He's the driver on the pot deals and spends lots of time on the road. Wayne's the least well-traveled of the three and, to my knowledge, has had no experience with hookers. In this crowd that's not a hall pass.

I am here at Freddie's house, specifically, Butte, generally, because of the aforementioned ex-boyfriend, Bradley. At this point he's not an ex.

Freddie has a misconception about me. He thinks I'm from money because of where I went to university.

He says, "We don't want to hear your resume."

I say, "What resume?"

He says, "You think you're so fucking smart, so educated. Who gives a shit? The only thing that really matters is how well you give a blow-job."

He describes to me how to give him blow jobs without my hands. He says he won't eat my pussy because it's dirty. Asian girls are nice and clean. No hair, either.

Then he says, "I'd like you a lot better if you lost 40 pounds."

I say, "Why should I do that?"

He says, "Because I asked you to."

I say, "Why don't you ask me something else. I like my butt at it is."

He says, "You've got a fat ass."

I say, "Did you hear me disagree with you? What's your point?"

He says, "You think you're so sure of yourself."

I say, "I am."

He says, "Do you think I'm fat?"

I say, "What do you care what I think?"

He says, "You're obsessed with me, I can tell. You show up here whenever you want. You think you have control over me."

I say, "I barely have control over myself. Why should I bother with you?"

He says, "You want to change me."

I say, "Fine. Stop calling me. Stop inviting me over here, then maybe I'll stop showing up."

He calls.

A few days after our initial meeting, I discover he has been looking up our astrology signs. He does both western and eastern versions. I find out that north is my direction for health, I'm a metal person and that pigs are lucky for me. He is a pig. We have empathic intuition, to the point where we can gauge each other's temperaments so well that it could lead to violence. I know exactly what he means.

He makes marijuana cookies.

I say, "I'm allergic to marijuana."

He says, "That's bullshit. No one is allergic to it. You're trying to make yourself sound more interesting."

I say, "No, really. My eyes swell shut and then I throw up."

He says, "Just try it. I'm famous for these cookies."

I say, "You're an egomaniac."

He says, "Come on, just a nibble."

I finally relent. The taste is sweet and a little acrid. He says, "Whatever you do, don't eat a whole cookie.

Believe me, you'll be sorry."

When he's not looking, I eat an entire cookie, on principle. The minutes seem like hours, the myriad of paintings in his house dance in front of my eyes, making me woozy. I have to lie down for a moment. And there we are again, on his long, brown leather couch that will come to be known as fellatio alley. He fucks me so long and so hard that I feel like I might pass out.

TWO

Being in India made me realize I am a traveler who doesn't like to travel. Being in Butte made me realize I am a relationship person who doesn't know how to be in a relationship. The beginning of my abject disgust with Bradley started on a car trip we took together to Maine.

It was just after the 4th of July and we had been together about six months. At this point we had weathered the errant raccoons, his "girlfriend's" temper tantrum on the front lawn, his infernal gathering of junk and his unrelenting inability to throw anything away. We were going to Maine to stay at his family's property which is on an island off the coast of Portland. I'd been there before with him, many years before, and remembered it as trashed but quaint, sitting directly on the water at the end of a dead-end road.

We were almost to Boston when my period started. Normally I have a pretty good indication of when it will start, but recently my cycle had been out of whack. I didn't know if it was a result of my travels, pre-menopause, stress at being in an actual relationship, or some other thing, but it started, and with a bang. I was bleeding all over the seat.

I said, "Bradley, we need to get off the road. I need to buy some tampons, it looks like I'm dying here."

Bradley looked over at me. I'd taken off my pants and had grabbed a towel from the back seat and shoved it into my vagina. I pulled it away for him to see and there were big clots of blood.

"Jesus Christ," he said.

“I know, I’m telling ya I need to get a tampon.”

Bradley looked up and down the highway, as did I.

I said, “Look, there’s a Dunkin’ Donuts at the next exit. Just stop there. I think I have some tampons in my bag in the trunk. At least it’s close.”

Bradley said, “No way I’m stopping at Dunkin’ Donuts. Let’s find a truck stop.”

I said, “What the hell is wrong with Dunkin’ Donuts?”

He said, “They use Styrofoam cups.”

I said, “And what does that have to do with me putting a tampon in?”

He said, “Sorry, I’m not stopping. Styrofoam is one of the most toxic substances there is. I can’t support Dunkin’ Donuts.”

I almost strangled him, “I don’t give a flying fuck if you support Dunkin’ Donuts. I’m bleeding all over the place and you’re going to fucking pull the car off the road this minute or I’ll fucking kill you.”

As he signaled to get into the exit lane he said, “I’m sure we can find another place at the next exit.”

I said, “Bradley, what is wrong with you? This is not about toxic landfill, this is about me putting in a tampon. Can’t you separate the two?”

He said, “I just can’t do it.”

At that moment I took a hold of the steering wheel and jerked the car towards the guard rail.

He started screaming, “What are you doing? You almost killed us!”

I yelled back, "If I don't insert a tampon into my vagina in the next five minutes I will drive this car the wrong way into traffic and we will both die. Do you understand me?"

He finally relented. As I went into the Dunkin' Donuts to clean myself up and get a grip I saw Bradley drive to the other side of the street to wait for me.

When we finally got to the house it turned out his sister-in-law and niece were also there. At the front of the house, there used to be a wooden porch with railings. All the railings had long since rotted away and the wood on the porch was uneven and rickety. As I cautiously made my way up the front steps and across this porch I felt a something give under my foot. I looked down to see that I was slowly sinking into what was left of a section of wood.

I said, "Bradley, don't you guys have any wood to fix this thing? I almost fell through."

He said, looking at my precarious position, "Nah, you just have to learn where not to step. If you go to the right a little the wood is still fine."

I did as I was told and finally made my way inside. I put my bags down on the floor.

I said, "I want you to fix that porch. It's dangerous."

He said, "Sorry, can't do it. My brother needs to fix the foundation before we put a new porch on. Otherwise it'll be uneven."

I said, “And what about your step-father? Doesn’t he come out here all the time? What if he fell through? He could really hurt himself.”

Just at that moment I heard a horrible screaming noise. Bradley and I rushed outside to see his niece up to her armpits in the porch. She’d fallen through.

It was a constant fight to throw things away. Every Monday was a continual worst day of my life since every Monday Bradley would troll the neighborhood looking for milk jugs that people had neglected to recycle. We’d be on our way to the grocery store and Bradley would turn down an alley-way, spot a dumpster and dive in, throwing all the milk jugs out onto the side of the road. He’d get back in the car, leaving them there, and drive away.

I’d say, “And you’re not even going to put them in the recycling bin? What’s the point?”

He’d say, “The point is, you’re not supposed to throw plastic away.”

I’d pick up a bottle cap or straw off the ground and throw it in our kitchen garbage. Ten minutes later Bradley would be going through that very same garbage looking for anything that could go into the recycle bin. Inevitably, he’d find the bottle cap and straw. I got to be more subtle about it. I’d carry around a plastic grocery bag with me in my backpack and would put trash in there. Then I’d wait until I was in a public place, like a restaurant or grocery store, to throw the plastic bag away.

By the time Bradley and I got to Butte I could barely stand the sight of him. One night, after eating hash cookies with Freddie, I arrived back at our house at approximately

3 A.M. Bradley was still awake, watching TV. As I walked through the door he gave me a sorrowful look.

He approached me, grabbed me by the waist and said, "I'll try harder. I promise I will."

He tried to nuzzle his face into my neck. I jerked my head away and looked at him with scorn, "You don't know how Bradley. You don't know how to do it."

He got down on his knees at that point, and actually started crying, "Just please don't leave me. Don't leave me. I promise I'll change."

I extricated his hands from my waist and said, "I'm going to bed."

He said, "You'll be leaving me in my darkest hour. I've left my family and friends – all because of you."

I said, "Then go back to where you came from. I'm staying here."

The next time Freddie went to Thailand I hooked up with some cowboy oil worker who was passing through on his way to South America. We spent two nights in a hotel together. Bradley didn't bother to ask me where I'd been. But after that, I knew Bradley and I were finished. Now it was just about the details of getting there.

THREE

There's nothing worse in this country than having to go on welfare. There's no underground honor to it, like in some countries. In Ireland, if you go on the dole, it's a badge of rebellion and an indicator of being a dedicated artist. Not so in good old, anxiety-producing, do-it-yourself America. It feels like reaching the lowest of the low and you can definitely count on the case workers to re-enforce that notion.

I was a little over three months pregnant. No, it wasn't Freddie's. No, it wasn't Bradley's. It was either the crazy cowboy oil worker's baby, or the crazy South African's. At this point, I wasn't quite sure. In my gut, I knew it was the South African's, but technology had played a cruel trick on me. (We'll get to that later.) It's not always our friend, you know.

One night, late, I was in my bed paging through the female version of a little black book. I'd had it for at least five years and it wasn't very organized. I had business cards Scotch-taped onto certain pages. Names and addresses with phone numbers crossed out then re-written on the next page with little arrows directing me to the new number. It was chaotic.

To me it read like a diary of sorts. I'd started in the front and then chronologically worked towards the back as I met people. But that's not entirely true. When I first bought the book, I made a real effort to go through all my other address books and synthesize them into this new one. For about a month my new black book was the paragon of organization. I could find anyone by first letter of the last name. And then I started putting stickers on it: one of a devil girl in a stripper outfit and then on the

back a Russian icon of Christ on the cross. I'd find various stickers and cut them up to make different messages out of the original. The covers were starting to look hectic and the aesthetic seemed to creep into the interior.

By the time I was using the book in this particular narrative, I was making a trip down memory lane. It took me well over an hour to go through all the pages, wondering where each person was, re-living the circumstances upon which their name had been entered. And then I came to his name, the South African's. He was near the end of the book and was part of my original organizational effort. This meant he was one of the original core of the book. This made me feel better, for some reason. It meant we had a certain amount of history. That he wasn't a fly-by-night business card I'd picked up from some dude at a dance club. I could tell my handwriting was careful when I'd penciled in his name. There were no arrows or cross-outs. He had a teenage daughter, so he'd stayed put for the years since I'd known him.

I'd always liked him. He's a big bear of a man, wild sun-bleached hair, sparkling blue eyes, beautiful white teeth, a limp from a motorcycle wreck years earlier. As I saw his name, I pondered our past.

It was a strange hook-up. It was my first landing in Montana. Pre-Danny and even pre-Montana Cowboy. I ended up working as a bartender in one of the fanciest restaurants in Billings. My friend Greer, who was also a friend of the South African's, was the manager of the restaurant and asked me if I wanted to work there. I told her I'd never bartended before but that I'd had plenty of experience drinking. She said that was fine.

About a month into my new job, my skin looked like I'd developed leprosy or some other evil skin-peeling-off disease. The insides of my forearms were chapped and raw and oftentimes bleeding. My hands were so dry one of my fingernails almost fell off. It was washing the bar glasses that was precipitating this particular problem. The detergent had some weird chemical in it, probably highly toxic, and my skin was in revolt. Greer had the solution.

Greer: "Here, call this guy. He knows a bunch about lotion."

Me: "Excuse me?"

Greer: "For your skin. Call him up. Tell him about the problem and he'll tell you which lotion to buy."

Me: "Are you joking?"

Greer: "Not even."

So, being the gullible person that I am, I dialed the number and heard someone with a very thick accent and a very manly voice answer the phone. He sounded like a mix between Arnold Schwarzenegger and Dudley Moore, sort of German/British, sort of. It was difficult to place and, even though I already knew he was from South Africa, I wasn't expecting that particular accent.

Me: "Hello?"

Him: "Yees?"

He extended his vowels out and it sounded like he was either mocking me or making fun, I wasn't sure which.

Me: Stammering, saying nothing.

Him: "Can I help you with something?"

Me: "Um, Greer told me to call you."

Him: "I seeeeeeee."

Me: "Um, she said you know a lot about lotion."

Him: Laughing uproariously, "She did?"

Me: "Yeah."

Him: "What would you like to know about lotion?"

Me: "I have this rash, you see?"

Him: "Rash?"

Me: "Yeah, it's really painful. She said you had some secret lotion or something."

Him: "Where is this rash?"

His question sounded somewhat sexual to me, for some odd reason, and I found myself trying to visualize what he looked like. The origin of the voice and the accent. I got a certain chill and then a bit of a tingle down under.

Me: "Well, it's actually on my arms. My hands, too."

Him: "Let me think for a moment."

Long, not very awkward, pause.

I couldn't think of anything to say to him to fill the gap of waiting. So I remained silent while all of the information ticked away in his head. Finally, the answer.

Him: "Bag balm."

Me: "Excuse me?"

Him: "They put it on cow udders. Bag balm. When their teets get chapped."

Me: "Teets, huh?"

Him: "Yes, their teets. It's very painful for them. I put bag balm on their teets."

Me: "Do you sell this stuff?"

He laughed loud and long.

Him: "No! No, you buy it at the ranch supply store. Just tell them you're looking for bag balm."

Me: "Okay."

This is all I remember now. I went to the local ranch supply store, bought some bag balm, and it cleared up my rash. And then, somehow, we also ended up at a Christmas Eve party together. I don't know who called whom, it seems like a long time ago. But I do remember coming out of the bathroom and he was waiting for me and he bent down and gave me a sexy kiss. Then the next morning, Christmas Day, we drank steaming hot coffee together, naked, in his hot tub and then jumped on the snow-covered trampoline, also naked. He liked to be naked. We had lots of sex and at one point I was thinking that he could almost be my brother, or at least related. We looked like each other, in that Nordic sort of way. He looked like a Viking from days past, replete with long, shaggy hair, shaggy beard, lots of earrings and a hairy back, and me, with my blonde hair, braided in parts, lots of earrings, a hell of a lot of necklaces and biker boots.

We hung out for a good bit of time, maybe six or seven weeks, and then he left the States for South Africa. I'd made friends with his daughter, and I told him to call me when he got back. That was that.

I'd see him at random times. I saw him with his girlfriend the night Danny killed himself. Which reminds me. I must write this somewhere, so why not here? Immediately after I found out that Danny had killed himself, I, of course, was hysterical. I ran out onto the streets of Billings, gasping for air, sick to my stomach, crying uncontrollably, looking for my girlfriends whom I'd hooked up with earlier in the evening. I finally found them at another bar, told them the news, and we all went back to my friend Sonya's house. They all knew Danny and it was a shock for everyone. In the midst of this the boyfriend of one of my other friends, who shall remain nameless, showed up at Sonya's house. His name, for the sake of the story, is Peter. At one point during the night, I stood up from the table and went to use the bathroom. I needed to douse my face with some cold water, and I needed to be away from everyone's stare. They wanted me to explain how it'd all happened. I couldn't do it because I didn't know. I walked past Peter, who was standing in the hallway to the bathroom. He approached me and said, "I'm really sorry to hear about Danny."

I probably just nodded something to him in response. Then Peter grabbed me around the shoulders, as if to give me a hug, but the only thing I could feel was a huge erection. He pressed his crotch up against my leg and just kept pushing. I was mortified. I was also speechless. I finally pulled away and locked myself in the bathroom. This new event, at least for the moment, had replaced my shock from the other event. I went back into the kitchen, where everyone was still sitting, and said: "I'd like everyone to know Peter just gave me a hug and when he did he had a huge erection! If he doesn't leave the house right now, I'm going to kill him."

He left.

Now, where were we? Yes, the Italian was in Thailand and I was rummaging around my little black book for someone to call. I called the South African. I caught him at home that night, very late, and said: "I'm coming to town next week. Wanna have a drink or something?"

He said, "Of course."

Who would have known that little "something" would happen to be two orgasms, a lot of moaning, and nine months later, more or less, a baby girl?

FOUR

“Your karma gets accelerated here,” Freddie says. “I’m hoping that’s true, then you’ll hate me faster.”

“Don’t worry. I pretty much hate you right now,” I reply.

“Excellent!” He says it like Mr. Burns from *The Simpsons*. “You hate me for the same reasons you love me. I’m untamable and you’re never really sure if I love you or not.”

“Yes.”

There’s a reggae band at the bar. They get invited over to Freddie’s house to smoke weed. Heinrich is there that night. I give the two of them a case of beer to further along the party. Freddie says to me, “The band and their women are invited. That’s it. No other hangers on. I don’t want them at my house.” I follow his instructions.

Hours pass. Everyone there is drinking, smoking. Freddie pulls out one of his guitars and hands it to the lead singer from the band, who starts playing tunes, belting out songs around the table. The band and their groupies leave around 4 A.M. Just Heinrich and I are left, and of course, Freddie. He’s pulled out his accordion and is playing tunes to himself, lost in the buttons and nuances of notes dancing in his head.

I say to the air, “Those guys were nice.”

Heinrich says, “You’re just a nigger lover.”

“What’s wrong with you? You’re not some red neck. What’s the point of saying that word? My ex-husband was black. Stop it.”

“Ah, you’re a nigger fucker, too, then.”

I feel like slapping him. He has a look on his face that defies description: smug, defiant and insecure, all at once.

“You’re just lame. If you can’t have more sophisticated views of people, your art will always be shit.”

“Tell me something I don’t know. I have no interest in winning this argument with you.”

“It doesn’t matter that you’re a racist?!”

“I’m not a racist. I hate everyone. Including big-mouthed bitches like you.”

The insults escalate. At one point, Heinrich and I are standing up, across from each other, pointing our fingers at each others’ clavicles. Freddie ignores the unfolding scene and instead serenades us with his accordion, silent and sphinxlike. The music pulls Heinrich and me back and forth, in and out of our lunacy.

I scream, “You’re id gone awry.”

Heinrich screams back, “You’re saying to me what you really want to say to him.”

At that I sit down, defeated. I close my eyes and listen to Freddie play. Heinrich leaves and the music follows him out the door.

#

Freddie says to me one day, “You get back what you put out. Unless you get involved with some Todd sort of character. Then you get back mad, lunatic-style forever love.”

I look at him like he's a lunatic. A question mark on my face. "What the hell is a Todd?"

He continues, "You know, the guy who falls in love with prostitutes on a routine basis. He also falls in love with strippers who he pays to do a lap dance for him. He falls in love with any and all women who give him any sort of attention. The check-out girl at the grocery store, the woman who does his laundry, the stewardess, the Kentucky Fried Chicken girl who sells him his lunch. Todd doesn't discriminate. His dick does all the thinking for him, and he has no clue to the fact that he's a hopeless dork! But he's always in love. Let a Todd be your boyfriend. Your lover. Your partner. Your man. That'll make you happy. Right?"

I say, "Right." Then I tell him, "You're the Kinsey report, run amok."

"How so?"

"Kinsey was blind to one thing."

"Which was?"

"Emotion. Attachment. Responsibility. Obligation. The social order that developed in order for life to carry on. Family structure. Babies don't raise themselves."

"How did babies get involved in this? In my life, I want no baby. So if I remove the baby, then what?"

"I dunno. That's what I'm wondering. You tell me."

"Perversion."

I say, "Cynicism."

He counters, "Perversion."

I continue, "Disappointment."

More hopeful, "Perversion?"

I take a stab, "The void!"

He says, "I maintain, perversion!"

I laugh, "Anger!"

He laughs, "Perversion!?"

I laugh, "Okay, okay! You win. We're both perverts! Is that what you're trying to say?"

Freddie says, "All I know is that we're not 19 years old. We're not young lovers running off together to upset our families. We're not Romeo and Juliet. We're old! Jaded!"

I say, "So the marriage game?"

Freddie says, "Passé."

I say, "Family?"

Freddie says, "The old structures are obsolete."

"Children?" I ask.

He says, "I'd only ever call myself a sperm donor. Never a father."

I say, "Togetherness? With another?"

Freddie answers, "Loneliness suits the wanderer better. It's more pure."

I try, "Happily ever after?"

He laughs, "There is no happily ever after. There's only what happens."

I says, "Sounds like a lot of Buddhist B.S. to me. What about attachment? There's nothing you miss?"

He says, "Everyone's replaceable."

With sarcasm, I add, "That's right. We're all snowflakes. Every single one is different, but they all melt away into nothingness. Nothing is permanent."

He says, "Bingo. The only thing that's interesting to me anymore is what's uncalculated and unconscious."

"And hookers are that? They're about as calculating as you can get."

Freddie looks at me, "Why are you making this all about sex and hookers? When I go to Thailand, what I'm learning is how to let myself go. My self go. I already know the mechanics of sex. Hell, I'm 46 years old! I know about the world, about how to control my corner of it. How to get things done. Now it's how to let it wash over me. Life. Cleansing. Experiencing things deeply without analysis. Richness. I'm learning depth and fullness and the embrace of the universe."

I say, "Well, maybe I'm too much of a Freudian then. Because my one experience with embracing the universe was with a boy/man named Frances and it was definitely about sex."

Freddie laughs, "Do tell!"

I say, "Are you sure? Sex is involved."

"I'm easy."

I say, Picture this, the Aran Islands. Off the West Coast of Ireland. I was out there working on a documentary. They were having this competition. The currack races.

The currack is a boat, made of wood. Some old tradition that reminded me of Vikings. The men rowing, muscles rippling. I'm getting light-headed just thinking about it."

Freddie laughs.

I continue, "So there are all these beautiful, brawny Irish lads competing. I thought I was in heaven. Very old school: the fog, the rough waters, the ancient fences made of stone lining the dirt roads, thatched roofs on the houses. And last but not least, of course, lots of Guinness."

Freddie says, "Nothing more Irish than a Guinness."

"Unless that would be Frances. There's a particular breed of Irishman who's somewhat virginal. Like a monk in the making. They're angelic almost. They've given themselves over to the Catholic teachings and look like they could walk on water. That was Frances to a T."

Freddie says, "Sounds horrifying."

I say, "Far from it. More like a complete turn on. It was his conflict that was the most seductive. His body was telling him one thing, his upbringing, his soul, even, telling him something else."

Freddie says, "Get to the sex part. I'm getting a hard on just listening to your tone of voice."

I laugh, "Okay, okay. So the races are finished for the day and everyone has moved to the pubs. There's a dance contest. They've pulled a wooden cart out into the middle of the road and the rules are three minutes to strut your stuff. Two musicians, a fiddler and a guitar player. They accompany the dancers. It's insanely fun. This old, old

man, who needs help getting up to the cart, starts. He can barely move. But as soon as the music starts, he's transported. His feet flying like lightning, arms gyrating to the rhythm. He looked not a day over 25. It was magical. Everyone stopped whatever they were doing to watch him. Soon after this, Frances comes up behind me. He's carrying two pints of Guinness and asks me if I want one. 'Of course,' I say. Within a flash, we're making out. Kissing like there's no tomorrow. I don't even know how it happened, it just did. He's a big kid. As big as you are. The Guinness are forgotten and then we're leaning against one of those stone walls. He has me pinned. I can feel this huge erection pressing on me. I fumble with his belt, undo the top button, and put my hand on his penis. Man oh man!"

Freddie, "What? What happened?"

"Well, Frances starts to cry. The words are jumbling out. He's weeping. 'I can't.' Then, 'Please.' I'm caught. Frozen by his desire. Mesmerized by his denial. It's painful being there. I finally ask him, 'Frances, do you want to do this?' Long, long silence. He's still crying. 'Yes! I've never done it before. I want to.' The realization chills me. He's a virgin. I look to my right and there's this skeleton of a church. Right there on the coastline. Unbelievable. The moon is shining. Fog has receded into the far distance. I grab Frances by the hand and lead him over to an interior wall of the church. The ground is soft, mossy, sweet smelling. I push Frances against the wall then take a few steps back. I undress in front of him. Put my clothes down on the ground then approach him. He's literally trembling. I undo his pants completely and push them down to his upper thighs, lead him over to my clothes and pull him down on top of me."

Freddie says, "Wow!"

I say, "No kidding. Wow times ten."

"How did old Frances do?"

I end, "Let's just say he was a quick study, and I trained him well."

FIVE

As every woman who's been there knows, pregnancy is a strange bit of non-fiction. I'll say it right now, I'm not one of those women who especially liked being pregnant. I refused to have my protruding belly photographed; I didn't want naked photos of me standing in all my pregnant glory for my unborn child to see years later. I didn't keep some intricate diary of the first kick or have the first sonogram framed for posterity. In fact, the first one practically gave me a heart attack.

At my three-month check-up I was told I'd be having a routine sonogram to make sure the fetus was developing properly, etc. I was an older mom, I'd be 40 when she was born, and so was given the full spectrum of tests. A sonogram is an interesting procedure and one of my favorites since it isn't painful at all. In the back of every pregnant woman's mind is the knowledge that somewhere down this road, this now living thing also has to make its way out of your body, and *that* is a recipe for excruciating pain. Therefore, any procedure on that pathway that didn't leave me wanting to rip my eyeballs out, wrap myself in cotton, and set myself on fire was welcome.

The technician was a middle-aged woman with three children. She told me everything she was doing as she was doing it: "Now I'm measuring the length and width of the blob to make sure it's growing properly."

I know she didn't say "blob," but that's what it looked like: A big blob of shadowy looking blobiness. I nodded my head and made appropriate assenting grunts as I stared at the screen, trying with all my might to imagine what this blob was going to

turn out to be, and coming to terms with the fact that I was responsible for this blob, no matter what.

All of this heavy existential shit was running through my brain as she then told me the conception date. The first time around, I didn't hear her. But in fact she'd said, "According to my calculations, the blob was conceived on March 23rd."

I said, "Uh huh."

Then I said, "What did you say?"

She said, "According to my calculations..."

I said, "No, what was the conception date?"

She said, "March 23rd."

I said, "Are you sure?"

She said, "Yes, this is a very accurate dating system. When the blob gets bigger, it's much more difficult to date conception, but this early on, all blobs follow a very particular growth pattern and so it's almost 100% accurate."

I said, "Shit."

She said, "Is anything wrong?"

I said, "I need to look at a calendar."

Any woman with half a brain knows the precise day she conceived. It may not be some overly cognizant form of knowledge, but somewhere in the recesses of her maternal growth pattern cycle, she knows the date. I thought I knew. I thought I knew without a shadow of a doubt that this blob was the South African's. After I'd found out I was pregnant, I went over my menstrual cycle at least 200 times trying to figure out why I

hadn't realized I might be ovulating the night the South African decided to ejaculate inside of me. In fact, my menstrual cycle calendar was now emblazoned on my brain, so when she said March 23rd, for the third time, everything I thought I knew got scrambled.

I thought I knew that my period had started March 14th, I'd had sex with the crazy cowboy on March 18th (not ovulating then) and then had sex with the crazy South African on March 28th (definitely ovulating, according to every Internet ovulating calendar predictor I could find.) But if my conception date was now scientifically sealed at March 23rd, who was the father? It would completely rule out the South African, and it would mean that the crazy cowboy's sperm lived a whopping five days! Fuckity fuck fuck fuck!

There was only one solution to the problem. During my next appointment, I'd have to confess my slutiness to my obstetrician and ask him for a ruling. I started the conversation this way: "Um, please don't judge me on my moral character, but I have a bit of a question about my conception date."

Obstetrician: "Yes?"

As with most doctors, he showed no sign of real interest or emotion. It irked me continuously with this guy, and I'd make sarcastic comments at times to see if I could get him to show a little bit of humor or even disagreement. He stayed on the straight and narrow path of the professional.

Me: "Well, I don't really know how to say this."

I explained my chronological dilemma. Was it possible for sperm to live that long? How accurate was this test? If he had to take a guess, who would the lucky guy be?

He gave nothing away. Sperm could live that long, but it was unlikely. The test had a margin of error of 2-3 days (which still didn't get me to a March 28th conception date with the South African), and he refused to guess. In the most neutral tone he could muster, he told me that the only way I'd know for sure was a paternity test following the pregnancy. Both she and I would have to wait six long months to find out who she'd be calling "daddy."

Unfortunately, I'd already told the South African I was pregnant and that it was definitely his. I had somewhat neglected to tell him about my earlier foray with the crazy cowboy. I had some explaining to do.

SIX

One night at the dinner table, Freddie says, "Why are you screwing me anyway? Bradley's a nice guy. He's probably the best musician in the state. You're a bitch."

I say, "So which part of that do you want me to respond to?"

He says, "All of it."

I say, "Bradley is a nice guy, but I'm sick of him. I'm sick of his shit everywhere, I'm sick of the fact that he can't throw anything away, I'm sick of listening to his excuses. The only way I could ever stay with him is to screw someone else – you."

Freddie laughs, "So I'm a temporary diversion?"

I say, "What else would you be? You've made it pretty clear you only like to get involved with Asian girls who look like boys."

Freddie glares at me, "Fuck you. You're just jealous."

"Why would I be jealous of hookers? I feel sorry for them."

"They like what they do. They have a great life."

I say, "You can't really mean that. Do you think if they knew better, if they had a choice, they'd be hanging out with a bunch of guys who just like them because they can give blow-jobs without their hands? How stupid are you?"

Freddie says, "I treat my women right."

I say, "Your women. My point. You own them because you pay for them. It's not freely given."

Freddie says, "There's nothing wrong with it. In fact, it's more honest. There are no hidden agendas, it's a simple matter of supply and demand. Men want sex with no

hassles, the women are there to give it to them, and are taken care of along the way.

Everybody wins.”

I say, “You know it’s twisted but will also never admit to it. This is a dead end argument.”

He says, “You’re a cunt.”

I say, “You’ve said that before. Be a little more original, would you?”

He says, “No wonder you can’t keep a boyfriend.”

I say, “Well, as far as I know I’m the only one screwing around.”

Then he says, “And that’s why I like you.”

#

I hear things about him around town. The description that remains most singularly is when someone at the bar, sitting in front of me while I’m bartending, describes him as “the devil.” I call him on the phone and tell him. Within moments he is at the bar, yanking the guy from his stool. He personally has related incidents involving his 9mm gun, getting beaten up at bars, having money stolen, criminality and thuggery. It makes me laugh.

His brother, Tony, comes to visit from Sydney. The first thing anyone notices about him is his size. He’s about 6’4” and weighs around 300 lbs. It’s not all muscle. There are signs of cellulite on his thighs, easy living. He used to be a Green Beret in the Army. Parachuted into Afghanistan, has bullet wounds on his back, a large scar angling from ear to chin. He smokes miniature cigarettes with tips a multiple of pastel colors, or he’s smoking a pipe. His accent switches back and forth between Aussie and pure

California beach bum dude. Our first meeting is congenial. He's brought a bottle of high-octane rum for Freddie. We all get drunk on shots and then I drive the three of us to the nearby truck stop diner at 4 A.M. for greasy food and dessert.

The night the choking happens starts like any other night. I always wonder about precognition, preterconscious knowledge of the future. Like the day we die, is there something in our bones, our energy, that lets us know the end is near? Or is it all just random cause and effect, consequence run amok, trying to adhere itself to something or someone? If you become the random object that the equally random act of violence gets attached to, well that's just too fucking bad, isn't it. Better luck next karmic cycle. Not that the night of the choking was a near death experience. But it was an experience that will stay with me until the day I die. Mostly because it came so unexpectedly. All I know is that dinner had happened hours ago. There was Wayne, Heinrich, Tony, Freddie, and me.

"What the hell is she still doing here?" Tony asks as he limps into the room for dinner.

It was a frigid January night and Tony had slipped on the ice that afternoon, wrenching his knee. It looked bulbous and red-slowly-turning-into-purple. He was wearing shorts that showed off the cellulite on his thighs.

Wayne and Heinrich stand as the brother comes into the kitchen, at attention for the grand entrance. The three of them are practically the same age. I wonder at this deferential male nonsense. Why rise for the occasion? Because he's bigger? Because he has scars across his chin? Because he could kill them, all of us, with his bare hands, he

deserves special treatment? I remain sitting and glare at him. I don't know or want to know the rules of this particular game. I find it ridiculous and juvenile. I think I probably smirked to myself.

Dinner proceeds. We drink wine. Bottle after bottle gets lined up on the counter, the floor, at least a case and a half among five of us. Tony limps upstairs. Wayne goes to the third floor to go to sleep. Heinrich leaves at some point. It's the two of us, Freddie and me, jabbering away with drunken nonsense about this, that, and everything else. Tony shows up again, hours or possibly minutes later. Time is of no consequence and has ceased to exist. The time warp associated with mental incapacity due to too much alcohol.

"Any decent woman would have left hours ago," Tony says, like I'm supposed to immediately get up and go because he's willed it. I don't respond. I continue talking gibberish. I do remember snippets. I remember Tony sits down and starts up a conversation about art. The usual topics are explored.

Tony says, "There's no such thing as original art. Everything has already been done."

I counterpoint, "Anytime new technology is developed, form gets re-invented, which then affects content."

Tony says, "Freddie's right, you are a cunt."

I say, "You guys call me that when you think you've lost an argument. I don't really know what I'm talking about, I'm just talking."

Tony says, "Well, maybe you should shut the fuck up then, and leave."

I laugh.

Tony looks at Freddie, "What are you doing with her anyway?"

Freddie looks at me, "I like her because she killed her boyfriend."

I look at Freddie, "What do you mean by that?"

Freddie looks at Tony, "He put a gun to his head and blew his brains out."

Tony looks at me and says, "You're a fucking witch." Then to Freddie, "Get away from her, she's dangerous for you. I can tell."

"That's right," I say, "Stay away from me or you could be next."

Freddie is laughing, "You putting a spell on me?"

I say, "I never told you about the other two?"

Freddie, "What other two?"

I say, "Well, remember I told you that Danny died the same way as the one character in the book?"

Freddie, "Yeah?"

"Well there were two more. The Montana_Cowboy guy died after falling off a horse. Then this other guy Johnnie, who I was screwing for a while, had a heart attack and died. So three of 'em died in the same way as what I'd written."

There was a long silence.

Freddie says, "Are you shittin' me?"

I say, "What? It's not like I killed 'em."

Freddie, "And how many were there total?"

Tony interrupts, "What the hell is she talking about?"

Freddie replies, "She wrote a novel where all these guys die, then the real guys die later."

Tony, "She *is* a witch."

I say, "You guys are nuts. I didn't do anything. I wrote a book."

Tony, "Then how many died, in the book?"

"Let's see. The first one falls off the horse, the second one has a heart attack, the third one gets accidentally shot, and the fourth one kills himself. So four."

Tony, "And three of the four have happened?"

I say, "Isn't that weird?"

He starts screaming at his brother, "Get away from her. She's bad luck! What are you doing with this woman? Men die around her."

I start laughing. It's the most ludicrous thing I've ever heard. Isn't it? Then Tony is grabbing onto my chin, screaming into my face. "Look at me, you fucking cunt. Look at me!"

I refuse.

I manage to say, "Fuck you," before he jerks my chin toward him.

"You'd better look at me before I twist your neck off your head."

I'm not believing this reaction and I think I say something like, "Go to hell!" I don't remember because as I say it I watch as his giant frame leaps at me from the short distance between us. His hands are out in front of me, fleshy palms waiting to grab at my throat. He does. He grabs me by the throat and pushes me, in my chair, against the wall. He pushes my spine against the chair and wall and I can feel myself not breathing. The

force pushes the legs of the chair away from their planted position and I'm now sliding down the wall in an overturned chair. His injury prevents him from continuing the hold. He lets go for a moment and in that span of time Freddie's finally come to his senses.

"Get OFF of her!" Freddie pulls his brother away from me and I lie on the ground sobbing, half choking. I'm stunned and still drunk and not comprehending what's happened. I continue to cry until I can't breathe. I'm gasping and hyper-ventilating. The brother has left the kitchen. Freddie lies down on the kitchen floor and tells me to come and lay with him. I do. I stay there with him, his arms around me, for minutes, possibly an hour. Then I go home and fall asleep, dreaming of blackness and nothing.

SEVEN

Here I am, in Butte, on welfare, with a brand new baby whose paternalistic DNA is unknown. The South African and I are in the process of having our collective DNA tested, but right now, while I'm at Wally World, the outcome is a question mark.

I've decided to use my food stamp card for the first time at WalMart since I'm hoping, because of the gargantuan size of the place, I won't see anyone I recognize. Specifically, I'm hoping I won't know any of the women who are working at the checkout stands. It's embarrassing. I'd always thought of myself as capable, mostly responsible (at least in my professional life), independent, and, last but not least, creative. Anytime I got myself into a jam, either with a man or with travel or with whatever, I figured out a way to extricate myself. This single mom thing, for the first time in my life, had me stumped.

How in the world is anyone, any woman in this country, supposed to be able to work full time and be a new mother? Forget about the physical side of it. Forget about not being able to sit down like a regular person for three months after having that part of your anatomy stretched beyond its limits. Forget about the not sleeping and the continuous bleeding and the trying to breast feed and the stomach that won't deflate and the post-partum depression and all of the other physical side effects of giving birth, none of which is pretty or interesting, unless you look at yourself as a guinea pig and as a participant in a science experiment. Fine. I'll accept all of that. My body has become a science experiment and is no longer my own. Perfect.

The impossibility of it resides in the financial factor. Daycare, even if I wanted to put my six-week-old into it for 40 hours a week, is incredibly expensive. I'd have to work 60 hours a week just to afford being able to put her into daycare for 40 hours a week. The numbers don't add up and, this country of ours, which can indiscriminately spend billions of dollars on war, sure as shit has no interest in actually helping out mothers.

The reason I'm embarrassed about being on welfare isn't because I'm actually on welfare. I made a choice that I didn't want to put my six-week-old into daycare because I couldn't afford it and mostly because she was just too little to spend that much time with strangers. I made a choice not to keep working at The Silver Dollar because I didn't want to bring a six-week-old into a smoke-filled bar. Even though I was an owner of the bar, I wasn't making any money off it. It was barely staying open. I'd made my money from bartending, but it's pretty hard to bartend with a newborn. Because of these choices, I had almost no money, and so I turned to the government for help. To welfare. You'd think that'd be fine and dandy. But in the United States it isn't fine and dandy. If you go on welfare, something must be wrong with you. You must be lazy and insufficient and stupid and uneducated and overweight and stupid. Did I say that already? Stupid? Because I've never felt stupid a day in my life until I sat across from that welfare social worker and answered the questions she asked me. The tone of voice. The judgment. The tone of voice again. At one point, I said to her, "You know, I have a Master's degree. I have a Master's degree from a very good school and until I moved to this god-forsaken place called Butte, I always thought it mattered a little bit. I thought I'd be able

to get jobs that paid well and had health insurance and if and when I had a kid I wouldn't have to go on welfare because I'd be able to make it work. That I'd be able to spend time with my kid and also make money. But there are no jobs that help out single moms. There is no such thing as that. I'm living in a fantasy world if I might think the United States could provide free and flexible daycare for kids so their parents can provide for them. But, no, that would be too progressive. Too forward thinking. Not ass backwards enough for the fucking idiots who run this country. And, by the way, this welfare thing sucks. I just want you to know that."

She said, "Just sign the forms."

#

So here I am, in aisle three, with the baby in her infant seat riding atop the shopping cart. I'm here with all the other welfare moms in Butte. We're shopping together for diapers and formula and nipples and baby butt wipes and all that other crapola you buy when you have a newborn. Oh, but I forgot, when you're on welfare you can't buy any of that stuff with food stamps. You can't buy diapers or butt wipes. No paper products allowed. Only food. So, I decided to buy the best stuff I could find: the gourmet cheeses, the fresh halibut I could usually never afford, the organic fruits and vegetables versus the toxic, plastic ones that somehow pass for edible in most supermarkets. I bought exotic olives, crab cakes, top-of-the-line fancy mustard, hamburger with only 4% fat. If I was going to be labeled a lazy, insufficient, stupid welfare mom, then I was at least going to eat well. It would be my secret revenge. I

wouldn't spend my food stamps on marshmallow dip, Cheetos, and frozen pizza, like they were expecting me to do. I'd show them. Gourmet all the way.

My shopping cart was full of my rebellious food. The problem was I hadn't paid for it yet and I didn't know the procedure for the food stamp game. My heart was pounding as I un-piled my stack of foodstuffs onto the conveyor belt. I'd singled out a mutant-looking checkout lady who was probably around 70 years old. I figured she could barely see anyway, so she wouldn't be able to identify me anywhere else as the lazy, insufficient, stupid welfare mom I was. I prayed that a chubby guy would be the customer behind me and that he would also have some sort of visual impairment. Sure enough, a chubby cowboy with an eye patch took up his position, natural as could be, in the line behind me. I took a deep breath.

The mutant checkout lady started scanning my gourmet stuff and proceeded to put one item into each bag. Why is it that every time I've ever gone to WalMart, if I buy six things, somehow I end up with six bags? Of course, the plastic they use on those bags has the strength capacity of a gnat, maybe that's why. Has anyone heard of the environment? Has anyone ever seen the tree-ornament plastic bags that are perpetuated by this sort of nonsense? I usually say something about trying to fit everything into two bags, but this time around I was silent. I didn't want to give away any identifying characteristics, such as environmental awareness, during my plebian food-stamp adventure.

About three hours later, the mutant checkout lady was finally done. If she could have moved any slower, my daughter would have been in college by the end of it. Once

again, I didn't complain or say a single word. I just watched in pained silence as she slowly looked for each bar code from every side of every box, and then dragged the bar code over the sensor two or three or twenty times before it caught, then lifted the object from the sensor to her bag turnstile, and each and every time she tried to put that object into a bag, sure as hell the bag wouldn't open. She'd have to press her fingers into the goopy stuff and try to get the fucking bag open. I almost started piling the food into the bags myself. But then I stopped myself, my lazy, insufficient mothering stupidity took a hold of me and I waited with a dumbfounded look on my face that no one around me could see because they were all fucking blind!

Finally, the total came up on the register! \$124.53. I stuck my food stamp card into the credit card reader (you know, the ATM thing at checkout stands) and waited to see what would happen. It asked me what type of card I was using. I looked at my choices: debit or credit card? I pushed debit. Then it asked me for my PIN. I complied. The gizmo started to whiz and whirl and do its business and sure enough: request denied. Oh SHIT! Not only was I an insufficient mother, I was so stupid that I couldn't even figure out how to use my food stamp card!

I said to the mutant check out lady, "I know there's money on this card. I just got it."

Mutant checkout lady: "What kind of card is it?"

Me: "Excuse me?" There was no way I was going to say the words out loud. Wild horses couldn't have dragged the words "food stamps" out of my mouth at that juncture. No way in hell.

Her again: "What kind of card is it? Debit or credit?"

Me: "Debit, I think."

Her: "Let me take a look at that thing."

I handed her my card and she held it up to her eyes, about an inch away. The card was so close she should have been cross-eyed. She squinted at it with all her might then said, as loud as could be, should have been a loudspeaker all over WalMart, "This ain't a debit card, this is food stamps. You got to push a different button for that."

I stood there. Mortified. Mortified beyond belief. The chubby cowboy took another gander at me and I could feel the thoughts flickering through his head. "Wow," he was thinking, "That woman must be a lazy, insufficient mother and incredibly stupid." I know, know, know that's what he was thinking.

I grabbed my card out of her hand and asked, slightly hysterically, "Which button is it, then? It only says debit or credit on this thing!"

"There's another button there, ma'am. It says 'other.' Push that one."

I re-inserted my card with a shaking hand and pressed "other." Up came another menu of lists, one of which said "food stamps." I entered my PIN, said yes to all the other questions, ripped the receipt out of the mutant checkout lady's hand, refusing even to look back at the chubby cowboy, who, I knew, was mocking me with his glare. I raced out of the place, barely taking any satisfaction from the fact that I was going to be eating gourmet tonight. At that point, it didn't seem to matter. They'd won.

EIGHT

Patrick is another one of the gang. Tomorrow night he's on his way to Bangkok. He shows up at Freddie's kitchen for a farewell drink. I've told myself I'll only stay until Tony arrives. Since the choking I've been avoiding him, for obvious reasons. I'm not sure if I'd bitch him out or start crying, and I decide I don't really want to find out. I have enough on my plate these days trying to make sure Bradley doesn't find out that I've been screwing Freddie almost every night. I resent Bradley for his stupidity.

The usual ritual occurs. Food, lots of wine, inane and not so inane conversation. I fetch the wine. Bottle after bottle of it. I am still the newest member of the band of misfits and am in my initiation phase; therefore, I am given tasks to accomplish by the task master. I like being told what to do. I'm not sure if a woman has ever been allowed this long at the table and I feel privileged.

It's intoxicating and surreal. I'm mesmerized by the tales of drug deals gone awry, pictures of Freddie with a Pinocchio mask on, fucking a Thai girl with his paper mache nose. Beautiful and exotic transsexuals at karaoke bars, tits fulgent and about to burst. With Patrick here to egg Freddie on, the stories become ludicrous.

Patrick, "Have you ever been to the bar where they shoot the ping pong balls out of their vaginas?"

I say, "That sounds like an urban myth. Why would anyone do that?"

Freddie says, "Why would I fuck a hooker with a Coke bottle? Because I can, that's why."

I look at him sideways, “You didn’t do that. You’re just repeating a scene you read from *The Painted Bird*.”

He says, “Never heard of it. I have pictures to prove it. Wanna see?”

I say, “Never heard of Jerzy Kosinski? What kind of person are you?”

He says, “Shut up you fucking sorority girl cunt. I told you, I don’t wanna hear of any of your resume shit. Do you want to see the pictures or not?”

I laugh, “Bring it on.”

He seems a bit discomfited that I am not that faint of heart. The more he shows me, the more I want to see. There is no Coke bottle, but rather him fist-fucking a hooker.

I say, “Where’s the Coke bottle? I’m waiting.”

He says, “Do you wonder who’s taking the pictures?”

I say, “Probably another hooker. She’s pretty good, nice angle there.”

He gives me a “fuck you” glare.

I’m waiting for the line to be crossed and it doesn’t happen. It seems natural as can be.

Patrick says, “How about a game of poker? I need to lose some money before I leave.”

Freddie, “You’re on ass face.”

I hate playing cards but need to participate. I’m in the middle of a strange passion play and must go to the next level. Not doing so would be a hindrance to my education. Like being executed by the firing squad with a mask on. I’d rather face my demise than cower at the moment of truth.

Poker is not a sport with these guys. Money is taken seriously and everyone must produce the required amount.

I say, "Freddie, can you loan me \$100?"

He looks at Patrick, who looks down at the stack of cards that's about to be cut.

Freddie says, somewhat sheepishly, "Sure, why not."

Patrick deals the cards and just before any of us pick them up Tony shows up in the kitchen.

Tony says, "Deal me in."

Patrick deals out five cards. Tony picks up his deal and sorts them out, looking over the tops towards me.

Tony says, "What's she doing here?"

Freddie says, "Just play poker."

Some things come easier if you don't know the rules. That's me and poker. I win. I win more than Tony does. The clock shifts hands from 1 A.M. to 3:30 A.M. Tony is out and I'm still winning. I've made enough to pay back the \$100, plus keep some for myself. Then the fight starts. I think I kicked it into high gear but for the life of me I can't remember the specifics. I think I made some drunken statement like, "Men are like babies, but with big egos."

Freddie starts screaming at me, "Get out of the fucking house. Who asked you to stay here anyways? You've been here eight fucking hours! Any decent woman would have left hours ago. Get the fuck out NOW!"

I see Tony grinning like a malignant Cheshire cat. I've been brought down a few pegs (probably because I won at poker), and he's enjoying my demise.

I leave through a torrent of wine-induced tears, screaming every epithet I can think of as I pass them. I walk up the alley away from Freddie's house to my tiny apartment that he also happens to own.

I call Freddie on my cell phone and say, "You asshole. You get over here right now and apologize."

He says, "I'll be right over."

Five minutes later, he walks through the door. Only it's not him, it's Tony.

I look at him, more than a little suspicious, "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Just came over for a little chat. You have an ashtray?" He's smoking some nasty smelling cigar and purposely puffs it in my direction.

I say, "I have no interest in talking to you."

Tony says, "I thought we could clear the air."

I say, "What, you're going to apologize?"

He says, "Before I do anything, what about that ashtray? It's either an ashtray or these ashes end up on your nice rug. What'll it be?"

"Fine," I say. I leave him in my living room and go into the kitchen. I rifle through my cupboards, looking for that orange 50's ashtray I'd bought at the thrift store the other day. I'm not a smoker so it's not in plain sight. During my absence, Tony makes himself at home, stretches his large frame out on my couch. As I re-enter the room and look over at him I notice there's also a handgun sitting on the coffee table.

Suddenly, this stupid game is becoming real. My heart starts to beat faster. My bravado dissipates into fear.

“Let me ask you something,” Tony draws.

“What’s that?” I say, barely getting the words out. I keep staring at the gun.

“What game are you playing over there? You’re an intellectual, those guys are thugs. You don’t belong there.”

I say, “That’s what you came over to tell me? What are you doing with that gun?”

“Never mind the gun. It’s a prop.”

I say, “Get it out of here then. I hate guns.”

Tony says it again. “What game are you playing? I’m interested in knowing.”

I finally get fed up, if I’m going to die, whatever. “It’s none of your fucking business what game I’m playing.”

“I’m trying to help you out here. Be your friend. Come sit next to me on the couch.”

I say, “Fuck you Tony. You’re nothing but a thug yourself.”

With that he gets up and pushes me onto the couch. He sits back down, swinging his legs down on top of my lap. I feel pinned and paranoid.

He says directly into my face, “These guys kill people. They’re outright criminals. Why do you think I live in Australia? Huh? Once you’re involved in it you can’t get out. Even if you’re not doing it yourself. You really want to be a moll?”

I look at him blankly.

“You know what a moll is? A gangster’s girlfriend. And you know what else? They’re always the first ones to die. Is that who you wanna be?”

Then he picks up the gun. He holds it in his hands and looks at it, from all sides.

He asks, “Is this the type of gun he used? Your boyfriend?”

I almost can’t talk, “Stop it.”

Then he says, “So did he put it in his mouth? Or put it to the side of his head?”

As he says it, he does it. He puts the gun in his mouth, then to the side of his head.

“Which one?”

I start crying, “Stop it!”

He says, “You know, I don’t think you appreciate the fact that I’m over here doing you a favor. Get out while you can. Don’t go back there. Be with someone else, someone who’s nice to you. Huh? Come here, let me give you a hug. Let me be nice to you.”

He puts the gun back down on the table and grabs at my shoulders.

I try to push him away, still crying, “Leave me alone, get out of here.”

He leans in a little closer, and says in my ear, “Let’s have a screw. What do you say? I’m really good in bed.”

Then he starts laughing. He takes his legs off me and lets me up. He says, “You’re free to go now.”

I push myself up from the couch and turn on him. “You’re fucking out of your mind! Get the fuck out of this house right now. Did he send you over here? Did he?”

I'm screaming now. I walk towards the bathroom and Tony goes for my legs, tripping me to the ground. He's on top of me with my arms pinned to the floor.

"Come on now. Don't be like this. It's easier if you just let it happen."

For one moment I'm thinking that I'm about to be raped. But then something else kicks in. It feels like a set-up, theatrical almost. The gun is part of it. Planned.

"Get the fuck off me right now motherfucker and get the fuck out of here!
NOW!"

He lets me up and gives me a twisted grin as I straighten myself out. It looks like he has no intention of leaving. I walk two steps to the bathroom door and slam it shut. Sit down on the toilet. Then the door is wide open and he has a digital camera, taking a picture of me.

I pull up my pants and get off the toilet. I open the bathroom door and he's nowhere in sight. I turn the corner to where my bed is and see him naked, halfway under the covers. I grab the gun off the table, then get my coat and hat and leave. I race up the alley back to Freddie's house, fly through the front door and up to his bedroom. He's passed out cold, snoring. I try to shake him awake, to no avail. Freddie doesn't wake up. I throw the gun down on his bed then go to the third floor of the house and lay down on the couch. I find a blanket and try to go to sleep. Minutes later I hear the jingle of the front door opening again. Tony has returned. I give it thirty minutes then sneak out the front. Go back to my apartment and go to sleep.

The next day I say nothing. I realize Tony has rifled through my desk and stolen \$70 cash I had in one of my drawers. I don't want to give the story away. Don't want to be seen as the victimized female.

Freddie calls me on my cell and says, "You're a writer, we wanted to give you something to write about."

I say, "Next time I don't want the contingent. I want you. And by the way, you're an asshole."

"I'm glad you've finally figured that out. Just so you know, the battery on the camera was dead, and there were no bullets in the gun."

"I knew it! Fuck you," I say.

"That's exactly what I told Tony. That you needed to get fucked just to shut you up and I wasn't gonna be the one to do it. I just didn't know if Tony would be victim number four."

"What are you talking about?"

"We thought you might try to shoot him, just so your book could become reality. Tony said if you tried he might kill you."

Before I can comprehend what he's said, he hangs up the phone, laughing.

PART FIVE: ENDINGS

ONE

Danny and I had been dating for about three months. Our dates consisted mostly of drinking and riding horses and/or doing both at once. I was becoming quite the cowgirl and had even learned to saddle my own horse. Through Danny, I was finally living out my Little Joe fantasy from girlhood, and I was either becoming more myself than ever before, or had completely lost perspective on everything I held dear. I couldn't tell which, probably because I was trashed most of the time.

One of our most memorable forays into the world of *Bonanza* was going to The Bucking Horse Sale, in Miles City, Montana. It's called the Mardi Gras of Montana and takes place mid-May. They close down Main Street for two days so that everyone can drink and walk at the same time, or try to. There are stages set up with bands playing country around the clock, but the main attraction is bar hopping, or wandering.

I was standing in the center of Main Street, slightly buzzed, when the Caledonian players (bagpipes) came marching up the street. I'd lost Danny somewhere or another. The last thing I remember, he'd gone across the street for a slice of pizza. He never reappeared. It didn't matter since I'd bonded with the bagpipers. At the end of the session, me and my new friends ended up in one of the bars, I have no idea which one, and who did I see but Danny, at the bar, kissing some woman with red hair. Next to the woman was another cowboy laughing his ass off. I approached the threesome and the red-haired girl started kissing me. I'm no lesbian, it just isn't me, but that woman could kiss! My lips were tingling for more when she finished.

After the kiss ended, I had to lean against the bar to regain my composure. Danny handed me a shot of something and I downed it. The red-haired woman was glaring at me, half looking like she wanted to whip my ass, half looking like she wanted to do some carpet munching. She was scary.

Danny, "Darlin, this here is Ginger. An old friend."

I say, "Hey," looking at her under my slightly bugged-out eyes.

Ginger's voice sounded scratchy from cigarettes. "Danny was the best man at our wedding."

I say, "Excuse me?"

Ginger turned to the other cowboy and pulled him by his silk necktie to her burgeoning, never-ending lips. She kissed him too. This woman was a kissing maniac if I'd ever seen one.

Danny to me, "His name is Paco. He's a Mexican. We were hands together a few years back."

"Hands?" I ask.

"Ranch hands."

I say, "Oh yeah. They're married?" I had a screwy look on my face.

Ginger stopped kissing Paco and says, "Three beautiful years, honey."

Then Paco approaches me and also gives me a whopper of a kiss. What the fuck? Paco was an even better kisser than Ginger. What do they do all day? Sit around having kissing contests?

Paco says to me, in perfect, non-Mexican, English, “Wanna go into the bathroom?”

I look at Danny for clarification. There’s nothing even remotely close to clarification on his face. He’s laughing. I’m totally confused.

Danny pulls me away from Paco and bends down close to my ear. “Ginger used to be a hooker. She worked out of her trailer. Paco wants to know if ya want to have a screw in the bathroom.”

I look at Danny, “Cause you want to screw Ginger. That’s what’s happening here?”

Danny gives me a shrug that could have meant 100 different things. It was the look on his face that gave him away.

I say, “That’s a yes?”

Danny shrugs again. I guess no man ever wants to be that direct. For a minute my heart was beating fast, wondering what bizarro world of swingers I’d literally wandered into. My heart was pounding, mostly because of Ginger. She’d been a hooker, huh? Which meant she’d done it all, many times over. Her ex-hooker status also meant there’d be no moral judgment on her part, or anyone else’s. The perfect scenario for multi-orgasms. It seemed, though, I’d have to go through Paco to get back to Ginger’s lascivious lips, and Danny wanted her first.

I finally say, “Well, I’m not gonna stop you.”

That was all Danny needed. He took Ginger by the hand and was gone faster than I could say, “Use a condom.”

As I watched the back of Danny's hat disappear out of the bar, I turned back to Paco, who was looking at me with a grin.

I say, "So your wife's a hooker? How's that workin' for ya?"

There was no response.

I say, "Habras English?"

Still no response. He looks at me with his heavily-lidded eyes and starts up his kissing machine. "These people are nymphos!" is what I'm thinking as he sticks his tongue into my mouth. He and Ginger obviously have sex every second of the day because they could turn a nun. I fall into him and let the kissing continue. Why not? Yes, there was an angel on my shoulder saying to me, "Once a Mormon girl, always a Mormon girl! What the hell are you doing?"

Then he sticks his finger down the front of my pants and instantly finds my engorged clit, and the devil wins. I'm not going to go into sex mode writing here and try to make it sound romantic. It wasn't romantic, but it was incredibly erotic. I practically had an orgasm as soon as he touched me. It was the combination of alcohol, illicit sex and a very good partner that had my legs shaking. I was an animal in heat and, suddenly, going to the bathroom seemed like the best idea I'd ever heard of. Paco removed his hand from my pants and pulled me by the arm towards the bathroom area. I was limp, a pile of flesh being tugged towards an inferno, and my rational brain was completely turned off. Until it happened.

As we worked our way through the crowded bar, some skinny cowboy turned and abruptly threw up all over me. It was the smell of it that killed any sensuality I was

feeling. The smell of rancid bile, combined with barely ingested alcohol. He missed everything but my boots. My cool biker boots that I'd purposely worn as a counterpoint to the preponderance of cowboy boots at Miles City. Once it started, I was frozen in place. Yards and yards of vomit erupting from his mouth. The Mount Vesuvius of vomit spilling out from every orifice of his skinny cowboy body. Paco immediately let go of my arm and stepped out of the vomiting arena. I started to wretch, dry-heaving from the smell of it and in reaction to the skinny cowboy's sounds and actions. I pushed my way through the nonchalant masses and barely made it outside, where I abruptly bent over with my hand to my stomach, taking deep breaths of air. I sat down on the curb and put my head between my knees. And then tears were in my eyes. I don't know why. Just the extremes of everything. The kissing, the puke, my bodily reaction. I was on overload. I sat there for a few minutes, my head resting on my folded arms. I let the tears stream down my face and I wiped them away when they got to the point of falling to the ground. Ugh!

Then I felt something cold on my body. Danny was sitting next to me and had a handful of ice that he was rubbing on my neck.

"You okay?" he asked. There was true concern in his voice.

I refused to look at him. I didn't want him to see I'd been crying. "Yeah. I just need a minute to get that smell out of my nostrils. It's disgusting." I'm talking out from under my arms and it must have sounded garbled.

"What's that, darlin'?" he asks.

I don't answer. I just sit there. Wondering what the hell I'm doing. I finally wipe my face on my arms and feel inside my jacket pocket for my sunglasses, which I put on before I look up at him.

I say, "How was Ginger?"

Danny looks at me sheepishly. He'd definitely done the deed. "Ah, ya know."

I do know.

I finally say, "Let's get outta here. Okay?"

He says, "Okay."

We find a shaded area near the river and lie down on the ground. The cool earth against my body makes me feel a little less shaky. I look up to heaven and watch the fluffy clouds make animal figures in the never-ending Montana sky. It reminds me of when I was young, that feeling of letting go of your senses and merging with the natural order of things. I glance over at Danny and he's staring at me. He has an inscrutable look on his face, strange for him since he mostly wears everything on his sleeve.

"What's up?" I ask. Immediately, I wonder if he's feeling a pang of guilt because of Ginger. I honestly don't care. There's not much that surprises me these days. I'd decided when I started this thing that if I was going to get on the ride I had to abide by the rules of behavior, meaning anything goes.

"I want to tell ya something."

The gravity of his voice concerned me. I hoped to hell he wasn't going to say something hideous like he loved me. Anything but that. At this moment, I couldn't take any emotional revelations. I'd definitely vomit if he said that.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm just afraid you're going to judge me."

I tried to make light of the scenario. "You mean judge you on your taste in women?" I gave him the best fake grin I could muster, but his demeanor didn't change. I felt exhausted. I'd been leaning on my elbows to look at him, but I fell back down to the ground and started staring at the clouds again. I didn't want to hear anything he had to say. Rule number one of the Danny affair was that it wouldn't get serious. There was no way it could get serious because in my brain I knew it would never work. Deep in my soul I knew I might be guilty of conducting a social experiment on both of us. My fear was that I was the only one aware of it. Danny was taking this all to heart. His heart.

He finally responded, "I've never read a book."

I knew I hadn't heard my ears correctly. I got back up on my elbows. "What did you say?"

"I've never read a book. Not clear the way through."

My first response was mixed. On the one hand, I was relieved that he hadn't gotten emotional. I was also astonished that he'd tell me something so damaging. Exposing himself to me like that wasn't a good sign, almost worse than if he'd told me he loved me. My final judgment, though, after even seconds of mulling over what he'd said, was something close to disgust, but I'm not sure if it was disgust with him or with

myself. This was getting way too twisted. Suddenly, the future was laid out before me and Danny and I were not in it together.

Danny was staring a hole into the ground, playing with a blade of grass. I felt sorry for him.

“Do you know how to read?” I asked. I didn’t know if I sounded patronizing and I really didn’t care. I was concerned about him in the way you’re concerned about a dog that’s recently been hit by a car. You want to get him to a vet ASAP and get him fixed up. Danny needed help, but I knew I wasn’t the one to give it to him.

“Yeah, I can read. I guess I can. Never do it, though. It’s just laziness. Never had the discipline to pick up a book and read it clear through.”

“How did you graduate from high school?”

“I was an athlete. Did rodeo and wrestling. They didn’t care what kinda grades I got or what I did, as long as I won.”

“And you don’t read the newspaper? Anything like that?”

“Nope.”

Big, hideous, horrible, every adjective there is that means hideous and horrible, pause. I was speechless. What was I supposed to do with this information? It went against everything I cared about. In my view, experience only went so far as the words you could use to describe it with. Reading and writing were the holy grails of my existence. That’s why I did most of the things I did, so I could write about them later. Danny was out of those loops and not because of lack, but because of laziness.

I finally said it, “I don’t know what to say, Danny.”

He said, "I know. That's why I told ya."

There was no way to bring brevity to the situation. It's like he'd dropped the A-bomb, and it had hit its intended target, dead on.

He stood up and put his hand down toward me, to give me a pull up. I took his hand and raised myself to my feet. I couldn't look at him and he wouldn't look at me.

He says, "Shall we head on back then? Home?"

I say, "Yeah, sure."

#

Two weeks later I was on a plane headed for Baltimore. I couldn't look at Danny anymore. Something was happening with him and it felt wrong. It was an impossible sensation to describe. It was like I was watching him slowly disappear, bit by bit, cell by cell. Danny was going down into an abyss that neither I nor anyone else could get him out of.

A few days after the Bucking Horse sale, he went to a job interview at a guest ranch outside of West Yellowstone. I drove him over there since his truck was broken; one of the gears had gone bad, whatever. We barely spoke on the ride. He'd packed all his stuff into a duffle bag and brought it with him with the intention that they might offer him the job on the spot and he'd stay. He was getting desperate for work. He was too old to be a ranch hand anymore. He couldn't ride for more than an hour due to his swollen joints. During his rodeo days, he'd broken almost every bone in his body, including his neck. There were mornings, when he stayed at my house that he could barely get out of bed. He never complained, just started chewing on aspirin, downing it

with can after can of Budweiser. I never said a word, just observed in my usual, writerly way.

The guest ranch was shabby by any standards. It was small and unimpressive, nothing like what you see in the tourist brochures advertising the romantic dude ranches. The manager was overweight and inarticulate. Danny asked him lots of questions about the horses and corrals and the manager gave him snarly responses. I was depressed for Danny. Again, I felt sorry for him. His world and lifestyle were crumbling in front of him and he had no marketable skills by which to live any sort of post-cowboy existence. Of course, he never said any of this. It was in the air and my antennae were screeching warning signals. But I had my own sanity to worry about, so I was leaving town and in that gesture leaving Danny to his own devices.

Before I left, Danny asked me if I could show him how to use the Internet. He'd never used a computer before and, although he knew the concept of e-mail, he'd never done it. He told me he wanted to send me an e-mail while I was gone. He had no phone, so that would be our only way to communicate. As we sat in the barn, at my computer, I finally realized I had to say something.

I said, "Danny. I don't think this is working that great. Do you?"

He looked down at his boots and I could see a flash of awareness cross over his face, or maybe it was pain, or anger. Something.

He finally looked at me. "Nah, I always knew you were too good for me."

It sounded manipulative and I took the bait. "Come on. That's not true. It has nothing to do with that. It's just that all we do is sit around and drink. I need to do other

stuff with my life. I need to start writing again. Something. I'm turning into a total alcoholic. I can't do it anymore."

"Yeah."

"Look," I say, "how about this: I'm gonna be gone for a couple of weeks. Let's take some time to regroup. Figure stuff out. We'll leave it alone until I get back. Okay?"

For some reason, I couldn't tell him I never wanted to see him again, because that wasn't really true. I did want to see him again; I just didn't want to be involved with him anymore. I liked Danny. He was a sweetheart in so many ways, but the experiment was done and Little Joe needed to go back to *Bonanza* and I needed to dry out and extricate myself from TV land.

He stood up from the computer and said, "Okay. Have a good trip." And with that, he walked out the door, got in his truck and drove away, the sound of Shania blasting through his open windows.

#

I got back from Baltimore the day before my birthday. I was at the barn, unpacking, when I saw a swarm of dust on the gravel road. I looked out the window and saw Danny's truck driving toward my house. It must have been osmosis, or rather the Montana telegraph system (meaning gossip) that clued him in to the fact that I'd returned. We hadn't talked in two weeks since I'd gotten around to teaching him how to use e-mail. I'd missed him. He'd turned up in many conversations with my old group of friends. They were intrigued at my new find and wanted to know how it would end. I

didn't want to disappoint them with a premature, unhappy ending, so I talked myself into giving the relationship a second chance. I went out the side door to greet him as he drove into my makeshift driveway. I was glad to see him. He looked good.

He got out of the truck and was in front of me with two strides of his long legs. He gave me a bear hug, "It's great to see ya, darlin'. How about a birthday drink?"

We drove to our local hangout bar, not the one I worked in, and drank shot after shot of tequila. We chit-chatted about this and that and nothing in particular. We somehow got ourselves back to the barn and made love on my balcony. It was a hot August evening, and we stayed outside until the mosquitoes forced us in. We held hands on my bed, and I started to wonder if maybe I could figure this out. My time on the East Coast had reminded me that metrosexuals just ain't my cuppa tea. Too pasty, don't know how to use a screwdriver, and none of 'em wear cowboy boots. These thoughts were wandering through my mind as I drifted off to sleep, Danny by my side.

#

When he got up the next morning, he dressed quickly, gave me a cursory kiss on the cheek and said, "I probably won't see ya for a couple a days. I got two jobs goin' at once. Cuttin' hay for old Kenamore during the day and delivering parts for my cousin at night." He seemed happy to be telling me this, and I smiled up at him.

"Well, okay then. Guess I'll see you when I see you. Thanks for the early birthday party. I'm gonna have to spend today recovering." Now that I was almost awake, I could feel a hangover settling into the front of my skull. My head was pounding.

He tipped his hat down at me before he put it on his head, gave me another kiss, then left.

#

Four days later he showed up at around 10 P.M. I was upstairs in my bedroom watching a re-run of *Cheers* through the static on my TV. As far out as I lived, the reception sucked. In order to have a good picture I'd need satellite, which I definitely couldn't afford. I knew it was him from the sound of the truck and the Shania. It had to be him; Yancey and Grazier were off on some road trip. I didn't bother getting out of bed because I knew he'd eventually come through the door and upstairs. We'd crossed the threshold of announcing ourselves early on, besides the fact that my doors didn't lock.

The first thing I noticed was that he'd turned the engine off. It was Shania all the way. Then Shania went silent. Then nothing. I turned the sound on my TV to mute. There was something about this silence that was eerie, freaking me out. It was so abrupt, what the hell was he doing out there? Then I heard a gun going off. It's a distinctive sound. Pop. Pop. Nothing. My heart was in my throat. What the HELL?! I swung my legs off the bed and sat on the edge, wondering what I should do. Why was he shooting off his gun? At this time of night? In all the time I'd known Danny, which admittedly wasn't that long or that well, I'd never considered him to be dangerous. I did know he'd been in the Marine Corps, something he'd never talked about himself. I found out one night when he was doing shots with a long-lost buddy and the buddy told me they'd been in the Marines together. Huh.

The silence was driving me crazy. I had to do something. I couldn't just sit there all night and wait—could I? I was alone out there, with Danny, who'd just been shooting off a gun. I finally decided to go and find out if he'd shot himself, or something along those lines. I didn't want to know if he had, but if he had, I'd rather find out sooner than later. I crept down the stairs and walked slowly over to the side door, where the truck was parked. I don't know why I was doing everything in slow motion, and maybe I wasn't, but that's how it felt. I cracked open the door and could see the profile of Danny still sitting in the truck. He was staring straight ahead, and from this angle he looked like he was still alive. I waited for my eyes to adjust to the outside world and looked again. Yep, he was breathing. He was smoking a cigarette, which he rarely did.

“Danny? What the hell's going on?”

He didn't respond. He didn't even look in my direction to acknowledge that he'd heard me. He just sat there, exhaling long strands of filmy smoke.

“Danny, what's going on? Why were you shooting your gun?”

Still nothing. He finally turned to look at me and the expression on his face turned me cold. There was nothing there. Nothing. His face was vacant, his eyes were glazed over, with no sparkle behind them. It was like I was looking at a walking dead person. I choked out the word, “Danny?”

He got out of the truck, and for a minute I thought he was coming after me. He stalked, not walked, straight past me toward the corral. I could tell from the way he was moving that he was drunk, almost fall-on-your-ass drunk. This was not good. In hindsight, right at that moment, I should have gone inside and called the police. I should

have, but I didn't. Instead, I watched him. I watched him get his saddle out of the barn and drag it over to his ever-waiting horse. I watched as he tried to saddle his horse in his drunken state. The horse just stood there, doing her duty as the loyal cowboy appendage that she was, and let Danny try to get that saddle straight. This was something Danny had done a million times before. Tonight was like watching an infant. He struggled and fought with the thing, finally getting it settled on the horse's back. Then I watched him try to mount her. He was so inebriated that as soon as he lifted up his left foot to put it in the stirrup, he abruptly fell over. At any other point and time, this would have been funny. Tonight it felt sinister. After watching him fall over once, stand up, try it again, fall over twice, I finally thought I had to do something, or at least say something. I approached him and said, "Come on, Danny. Leave the horse alone. Just come inside. You're drunk."

He wouldn't look at me and he didn't respond, he just tried for the third time and managed to pull himself into the saddle. As soon as he was sitting somewhat upright, I saw him gouge the horse with both his spurs. He kicked into the horse's side so hard I felt nauseous. And he just kept kicking. The horse finally took off at full throttle and I saw Danny fall to the ground. I ran over to him as he was lying face down in the dirt. I started screaming at him, "Danny, what the hell's going on here? What the fuck are you doing?!"

He turned his face up to me. "Leave me alone," he slurred.

I said, "What are you trying to do? Kill yourself?"

He slurred, "That's the general idea."

I sat down on the ground next to him. "Danny."

No response.

"Danny. Get up. Come on, I'll help you. Get up and come inside. Tell me what's going on."

That's what I said, but it's not what I meant. I wanted him to leave. Get as far away from me as possible. I felt nervous, which wasn't typical. I felt queasy at the scene he'd just created, and for once I wasn't in control of the situation. It had taken on a life of its own and I was only a spectator.

His horse had come back to check out the damage. She leaned down to Danny and nudged him with her nose. Danny grabbed onto the reins and pulled himself up. I could tell he was going to get on again. That was it. I'd reached my limit.

"Danny, if you get on that horse, don't bother ever talking to me again. Ya hear me? If you start spurring her again, I'll never speak to you, let alone look at you. It's over. Okay? You hear me? You understand?"

He had heard me and he probably did understand. He just didn't care. My threats meant nothing to him at this point, and he got back on the horse and spurred her even harder than last time. She took off again and he fell off again. This time I just looked at his figure, lying in the middle of the gravel road, and I went inside. I pushed my heavy, art deco couch in front of the side door and another wing chair against the other door. Then I went back up to my bed and tried to forget about what I'd just witnessed. I knew there was no way I was going to get any sleep that night. I could only take lying there for so long. I got up and went to the balcony to see if I could figure out the next piece of the

puzzle. Danny wasn't where I'd left him, and there was no sign of either him or his horse. I went back to bed. About ten minutes later, I heard him pushing on the side door. After he realized he couldn't easily get in, he started to bang on the door.

Still slurring, "Darlin', let me in. I'm sorry, darlin'. I need to tell you everything. Everything. Someone needs to hear it."

I yelled back, "Go to sleep, Danny. Get in your truck and go to sleep. I'm not letting you in here. No way in hell."

He stared pounding again, "Please."

"No, Danny. Go to sleep." I sat up in bed, listening to his next move. I heard the latch on his truck door, then heard it close, then silence.

#

The next morning, at dawn, I heard the engine turn over and him back out of the gravel driveway. Thank god that nightmare was over. I had no interest in knowing why last night had happened. It was done. For good. Adventure is one thing, a near death experience (his or mine), quite another. The experiment had reached its end point. Self-mutilation is one thing, abusing an animal goes beyond the limits. When he showed up again I'd tell him to take his saddles and horses and get the hell out. It was finished.

He did show up again, at high noon. It was at least 100 degrees outside. I had both my doors open, some breeze was better than none. As soon as I heard his truck, I went outside to head him off at the pass. I hoped he was rational and we could end this in a civilized manner. He was neither rational nor wanted to be civilized. He was drunk as

a skunk and had a bottle of Jim Beam in his hand. As he talked to me, rather tried to talk, he took big gulps in between.

"You hate me, don't you?!"

I looked at him for a long moment and then told him the ugly truth. "Yes."

He shook his head a couple of times, like he was swatting off an invisible fly.

"I'm going to do it, kill myself."

There was a part of me that knew he was telling the truth. Then there was the other part that couldn't calculate the implications of the action. No one talks about death so directly. Suicide, at that moment, seemed like a lofty but surreal goal. No doubt about it. I should have believed him. I should have gone inside and called a suicide hotline, called the police, called someone. I didn't, I called his bluff.

I tried to be as matter of fact as possible. "If you do, don't do it around here. You have thousands of acres, get in your fucking truck and drive somewhere isolated." I was getting angry that he was forcing me to be so blunt, to admit how detached I could become towards someone I'd actually had strong feelings for. I was watching myself implicate myself in his demise, yet I did nothing to prevent it from happening.

"So you want me to do it?"

I said, "I don't want to be a part of this."

There was a long silence and Danny just looked at me. I stared back at him, willing him to call my bluff of his bluff. I finally stammered, "You're acting ridiculous. I'm leaving, and if you're still here when I get back tonight, I'll call the police."

Mentioning the police is heresy. It's a breach of our initial unsaid agreement of accepting whatever happens. The law dogs are the arbiters of behavior. Danny felt outside of those rules and it was a slap in the face. "Don't call 'em. Promise you won't."

I looked at him, "I'm going to get your dad, then. Danny, you can't stay here. You need to leave. I won't call the police if you'll just leave."

His blank face stared at me. He sat down against his truck and kept drinking the Jim Beam.

I went back into the house and blocked the doors again. I started to change my clothes. If he wouldn't leave, then I would. I'll take the dog and the cat and leave. Let his parents deal with him. Then I'll move out of the barn to somewhere far away where he'll never be able to find me. I hear him by the front door; his drunkenness is making him sloppy and wobbly. He pushes a piece of paper through the side of the door, just above the doorknob. I go get the paper and try to read his scrawl, it says, "the sky is blue and so am I. blue, blue, blue."

When I leave, he's still leaning against the truck drinking. He doesn't try to stop me and says nothing as I pass him with my dog and cat in tow.

TWO

The week before I left India, the kids from the school were doing their first all-night performance in a nearby village. I was invited to attend. Most of the Kattaikuttu plays last anywhere from six to nine hours. I was constantly astounded that these kids, six year olds and up, had the ability to memorize hours worth of theatrical dialogue, yet when confronted with the word “cat” couldn’t remember how to spell it. It just goes to show that kids will learn what they’re interested in.

Actors in India are from one of the lowest castes. The thirty students at the Kattaikuttu School took this opportunity to learn seriously. They were apprentices to this particular theatre tradition and if they worked hard enough would be able to make a living doing theatre. It would be a break for them. The days leading up to the first performance were filled with nervousness and excitement.

First they had to memorize the play. Second, they had to learn how to put on the make-up, and third, they had to get fitted for their costumes and headdresses. A written description doesn’t do any of the above justice. Which makes sense. This is an oral tradition that’s been passed down for generations. Only recently have the plays been written down for the students to learn from a paper text.

The best description I can give of their make-up and costuming is that it’s a cross between what Americans would say looks Aztec (the tall headdresses) and Balinese. The colors are vibrant reds, purples and gold. The make-up is designed to make them look fierce. The kids were aflutter.

The play would start at 11 P.M. and finish around 7 A.M. We showed up at the village in a motorized rickshaw. The play was being done in honor of one of the village elders who had recently died. As Anna and I walked into the performance area, the villagers were already gathered around, preparing their areas for the eight-hour show. Everyone was there. The very old, the very young, and the very dead. Front and center was a fold-out chair with a portrait of the dead elder perched on the chair. It had been turned into a shrine. The portrait, in its frame, was draped with garlands and other objects were laid around the picture. There was incense burning, and at one point, what I distinctly recall is that one of the villagers came up to the portrait and turned it, ever so slightly, so the dead village elder would be looking straight at the performers.

I wanted to be enchanted by the program. I spent every afternoon at the rehearsals with the kids and watched them go through the motions of conjoining the verbal with the physical. Although their brains were impeccable at memorizing the text, their bodies still had some growing to do when it came to the movement. It was delightful to watch the little ones attempt to contort their bodies into some of the geometric shapes required of them. Sometimes they'd fall down, giggling as they went. Or, one of them would tip over after trying to stand on one foot with his arms extended overhead. I didn't understand anything of what they said but in transcendent theatre, the language shouldn't matter. The best rendering of *Hamlet* I've ever seen was done by a Russian theatre company. I verbally understood nothing, but the performance was impeccable.

So, perhaps it was the heat, or the time of night, or the fact that I didn't really jive with India, or that in my TV-addled and addicted brain, eight hours is a hell of a long time to pay attention to anything. Whatever the reason, the entire performance I felt distracted and antsy. I can definitely say this was my own deficiency. As I looked around at the village audience, they were mesmerized. All faces looked directly at the stage, with no wandering eyes, yawns, or slumping shoulders. Even the smallest children were bright-eyed and alert throughout the eight hours. Even the dead guy found joy where I could find none. It was time for me to leave.

THREE

I wrote a good-bye letter to Freddie just before I moved out of Butte. At about the six-month mark of my pregnancy, we stopped talking to each other. Up until that point, he'd turned into the concerned Italian mother type and brought me sandwiches and lemonade on a daily basis. He made sure I was getting exercise and that I wasn't drinking any alcohol. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought that he cared a little.

Then one day, at that six-month mark, when it was completely obvious I was pregnant and hadn't just gained a bunch of weight, he called me up for no reason and said, "What do you think you're doing? Having a baby? You're a stupid cunt."

I hung up the phone and never talked to him again. I sent him a letter to let him know that our adventures together had been real. A week before I actually moved, after the baby was born, I got a letter in return. It was the baby's Chinese horoscope.

#

Bradley and I still own the bar. He runs it and I check up on him from time to time via our business checking account. He's still with the co-dependent nurse and apparently they're happy together, probably married by this point. I heard from a friend that Bradley has started his hoarding again. He's filled up the third floor of The Silver Dollar building with his usual crapola, the value of which only he could justify. Every once in a while I have the urge to call the fire department and report his crapola as a fire hazard. I still might do it, just to mess with him. Probably not. I keep hoping the crapola will bite him in the ass at some point. It's unfair if he can continue with his obsessions and actually get away with them.

I should have better things to think about and do with my time, but sometimes my own obsessions get in the way.

CONCLUSION

I just spent the last ten days renovating my bathroom. It's taken me almost a year to refer to it as "my bathroom" rather than "his bathroom." When the baby was six months old, the South African and I made a joint decision that we should live together and be co-parents at the least, romantic partners at the most. We're still working out the logistics of it, but for the most part it's functional. Except for this bathroom.

This was no ordinary renovation. The room had been torn apart approximately eight years ago. After the South African bought the house, his first priority had been the bathroom. He'd pulled up the stinky, weird carpeting, yanked all the seventies ceramic tiling off the walls and shower stall. And then, he left it. By trade, he's a carpenter and builder. It's inevitable, then, that his (I mean our) house would stay torn apart while his clients' houses were beautifully renovated in a timely fashion.

There were two layers of plywood, as sub-floor, that were so badly water damaged I could see the basement beneath. The shower stall had a slimy ooze of mold on it, giving it a shimmering sheen, with large swaths of black, icky crap on it that looked like a membrane, or a big blob of black snot dripping down the wall.

I put up with it for ten months, meaning I didn't start bitching about it until that point. I realized that unless I wanted to become a complete nature girl, I was going to have to do my "morning ablutions," "business" or "number one and two" in that room. If it had just been me, okay, I could somewhat deal with it, but the bambina had to take her evening baths in the slime. It was pretty disgusting. So one day, for no other reason

other than I decided to do it, I drove to the nearest Home Depot and found a nice woman salesperson and started asking questions.

I'm not a complete idiot or anything when it comes to screwdrivers, and I can deal with the different kinds of paint and brushes. But the tiling required for bathrooms had always scared me away. I think it was because of the tools. A screwdriver is universal. When I was growing up, I remember seeing numbers of adults with a screwdriver in hand. How hard were they to use? You put the long-handled thing into the slit on the screw, either the straight slit or the star-looking slit (why is that screwdriver called a Phillips?) and then you turn. Done deal.

With tiling, the tools look scary. The main one is a scraper thing with teeth on two sides and a straight, smooth edge on two sides. I still don't know what this tool is officially called. Even after a week of using it, correctly I'm hoping, I don't know its name. That shows how deep the denial is.

I decided to create a mosaic within the shower stall insert: A seat-of-your-pants, do-it-as-you-go design mosaic. All I needed was some good adhesive, a lot of broken glass and other mosaic-style objects, the scraper tool thing, and some grout.

What I discovered is that building a mosaic is a very strange process. It releases some pent-up part of the brain where all the memories from way back are stored. The cognitive part of your brain is involved in designing the mosaic and actually placing the pieces on the wall. But then there's this other part of your brain that dredges up names, faces, events that you thought were done and buried. While I was working on the piece, I

thought about people I'd completely forgotten about. My dreams at night were vivid and prolonged.

#

After Danny's suicide, I wanted to feel pain. I knew that on some level I was responsible for his death, and, being the good Mormon girl I was brought up to be, I felt guilty. Is there a poetic way for guilt to be expurgated? Are there creative excuses to be made for actions taken, things I should or shouldn't have done? Therapy I should have sought out, but didn't? What I did was collect more stories to replace the narrative of Danny. New pieces of the mosaic that would eventually add up to a piece of art. My guilt would be the glue holding it together. The experiences were the pieces of material forming the patterns. The cement was my soul. At times it felt like the entire project would crumble, that I would melt into particles of tiny dust and disintegrate.

I was fighting with the South African the entire time I was working on the mosaic. He'd become my enemy, the male totem in the space I was creating. Every object I glued into the design was another implication of my life with him. I rationally knew how obvious this was. The symbolism was almost simplistic. The elegance was in the reality that I was placing these objects into place of my own volition. I was picking each item out of a bowl, deciding on its position, then gluing it in place as part of a yet-to-be fathomed design.

The mosaic is done. My fingers were rubbed raw by the sand in the grout. My fingernails chipped away until I finally cut them off. There were moments during the process when I felt physically ill, like there were too many toxins in the ingredients and

my system couldn't handle them. I worked my way through the difficulties because I knew I had to finish. Not just for practical reasons. The practicality of it had worn off hours into the project. I had to finish for my sanity. The slime and the mold and the disintegrating wood were the least of my worries.

Now that it's finished, the South African and I aren't fighting any more. We've reached a *détente*. We do the normal things that couples do. We eat out in restaurants, watch TV shows, have sex maybe once a week, play with the baby and watch her do the silly things that toddlers have a special capacity for. Sometimes I look at her and wonder at the paths I took and how my life could have ended up a thousand different ways. I marvel at the random acts and aftermath that led to this moment of me watching her. I smile to myself, somewhat warily, and realize she has become the constant, where formerly there were only inconstant endeavors.

APPENDIX: Writing the Anti-Heroine

In 1890 the Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun's first novel, *Hunger*, was published. The book is the story of an unnamed, slightly hysterical protagonist who walks the streets of Kristiania (Oslo) in search of food and enlightenment. He uses the ruse of hunger as a way to come to terms with the gnawing awareness of his psyche. He is a man confronting himself in all of his dark and somewhat humorous manifestations.

That same year, 1890, Henrik Ibsen wrote *Hedda Gabler*. Hedda was a woman bent on reinterpreting Norwegian society's strict rules regarding gender roles in order to discover a new way for women to live. It cost her everything.

Ten years later, the Swedish playwright August Strindberg published *Dance of Death*. The play is excruciating to watch since the main characters, a husband and wife who've been married for 25 years and know each other down to the last detail, hating each and every detail, spend the entirety of the play excoriating each other. The "dance" is like a 90 M.P.H. car wreck that's just occurred on the Interstate directly in front of you. The bloody bodies are strewn all over the road and the smashed-up cars resemble nothing more than an abstract steel sculpture. It's a horrifying scene, yet you must look. Strindberg was a notorious misogynist who felt that women were nothing short of whores and users (Lagercrantz 308). They held great power over him, and perhaps this is why in his theatre the women are his most memorable characters, *Miss Julie* being a case in point.

These three male Scandinavian writers affected me heavily. Initially, my allegiance went to Ibsen. Hedda seemed to be the prototypical "wild" woman, un-

tamable and misunderstood. She dared to go where other women wouldn't. She dared to say NO and mean it. She dared to kill herself. It wasn't that I was mesmerized by her self-destruction, but more that I'd found a female character who didn't put up with anybody else's agenda. She stayed her own course and found her relief in death.

My fascination with Ibsen ended the day I read *Miss Julie*. Strindberg was vicious and confrontational and the language his characters used was visceral, if not downright cruel. The cruelty masked an underlying insecurity about the characters' place in the world. *Miss Julie* was written at a time when the strict rules governing Scandinavian society were opening up and long-held belief systems were crumbling. In a sense, *Miss Julie* was the first modern female protagonist. She took responsibility for her actions and had the power to choose which way her life would go.

The first time I saw *Dance of Death* at Washington D.C.'s Arena Stage, I couldn't stop laughing. Strindberg's prose held a bitter edge that was overt, mean, soul-wrenching. There was something about the way he used language and situations to look at the dark side of human nature that felt both familiar and horrifying at the same time. He could turn a banal conversation between marriage partners into a verbal joust between sworn enemies.

And then I read *Hunger*. I didn't just read it once, I read it numbers of times. I bought copies and gave them to friends. I told them they absolutely must read this book. I became obsessed with Hamsun. I discovered that he and I had the same birthday, August 4th. He became something of a metaphysical mentor figure for me. I read all of his books. I watched the obscure Norwegian films that were made from *Hunger* and also

Mysteries. I started doing research on him and discovered the complex figure that he was. He was someone who was almost executed for treason by his native Norway for meeting with Hitler during WWII (Ferguson 374). The government decided against this punishment because he was an internationally recognized author, and at the time he met with Hitler he was in his 80's. I even went so far as travelling to Norway, by train, and trying to immerse myself in the psychological landscape that *Hunger's* protagonist was feeling. I sat on park benches, for hours, watching the "civilized" people walk past me with expressionless faces and hunched backs. I forewent communication with other people to see how long I could stay in my own consciousness, with no distraction from others who wanted to divert me from my task at hand. I went as deep as I could into my own awareness and tried not to blink.

On the train back to Germany from Oslo, I ended up sitting next to an older woman who noticed my copy of *Hunger* that I was busily underlining and exclaiming. She started asking me questions: Why Hamsun? Why do you want to be a writer? What about a family? Children? Her husband was a painter in Sweden and apparently somewhat famous. She had a career in theatre and had worked with Ingmar Bergman in Stockholm. She had wariness in her look when she told me that "A woman cannot be a genius."

I look back on that moment as a defining one. I hadn't even thought about entering myself into any category of genius. But why were these men -- Hamsun, Bergman, Ibsen and Strindberg -- allowed the title, while I wasn't? To make it worse, I was being told this by a woman who seemed to know what she was talking about. She'd

justified her statement by telling me about how men and women spend their time. Men spend their time working on their art, going to the pub, discussing large issues of the world with other men, making money. Women spend their time raising children and looking after the house. They are only allowed their freedom once family responsibilities are finished. There was something about what she said that really got to me.

I became even more upset when I realized that there were women writers from Scandinavia, from this same period, who were writing radical pieces of fiction that no one (outside of their own countries) had ever heard of. Amalie Skram, from Norway, wrote a number of novels in the late 1800's, examining the lives of women and how they were forced into servitude to their families. Her 1895 novel *At St. Jorgen* is like the Norwegian version of Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*. And then there's Sigrid Undset, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1928 for her historic trilogy titled *Kristin Lavransdatter*. These women were all geniuses, yet were not allowed the title simply because of their gender. Prior to going to Norway to walk in Hamsun's footsteps, my intentions about being a writer were abstract, if not metaphysical. When I got home from Norway, and after realizing how invisible women writers really are, I concretely decided I wanted to be a writer.

Writing

Writing is no easy task. Exposing myself on paper, or in any other format, for that matter, wasn't something I was looking forward to since I had skeletons to dust off and great pains to reconcile with my family. I knew that only surface renderings of my growing-up years wouldn't produce the authenticity I was looking for. I had to expose

my illusions and idealism for what they were: utter bullshit. I'd grown up in the gauzy, yet stoic existence of Mormonism and experienced directly its effects on womanhood. According to my parents and friends, I was supposed to graduate from high school, make a sorry attempt at getting a college degree, then settle for an M.R.S. degree while happily bearing my first of many children. Give me a fucking break! You don't know how long it's taken me to say that phrase and mean it. How much anguish and over-the-top rebellion I've had to go through to exorcise the demons of my upbringing. My foray into the world of my imagination was the first step towards reconciliation on all fronts: with my family, my behavior, and myself.

My first exercise with putting pen to paper was titled, aptly enough, *Living in the Shadow of Bergman*. There were times when I was writing this story, about an Irish film director who had dissed me, that I was literally overwhelmed by the psychological trauma of creating something. I felt like I was having a nervous breakdown. I'd write a few pages then start crying for no apparent reason. I added some vodka to the mix and that settled me down, at least for a while, until the alcohol also had a depressive effect. I was going crazy. I couldn't look at people when I went to the grocery store to buy Ramen noodles. I'd talk to myself while I was driving my car and imagine that people on the street were laughing at the storyline I was working out in my head. I started going to a Unitarian church, as Hamsun had done when he'd lived in the United States. I was looking for signs of his ghostly presence and figured it also couldn't do my social life any harm. My friend Susan, also a writer, went to the Unitarian church with me one Sunday

and after the service we were standing around in the meeting hall sipping Kool-Aid and eating chocolate chip cookies. I started crying.

Susan looked at me sideways and said, "Having a rough day, Lulu?"

Something like that. She's not one to get sentimental and neither am I. She knew better than to give me a hug or spin out some hideous platitude like "Why not try a smile?" I actually think I would have killed her if she'd said anything like that. I told her I'd been writing.

She broke into a big grin and said, "It's hell, isn't it?"

Needless to say, that first story was a disaster. It probably wasn't as bad as I thought except I was pretty sure that no one, not even a therapist, would want to read through all the high drama and excruciating neuroses of the female protagonist – ME. I was using myself as subject matter because I wasn't comfortable writing about things or people I didn't know. I was afraid that if I let my imagination go, it might veer into territory impossible to escape from. I, as the subject, could at least produce a voice that hadn't been overdone and, better yet, I had control over the story-line. It is said that only amateur writers use themselves as subject matter. I don't know if I was suffering from extreme solipsism or just an acute case of navel gazing, but I knew I hadn't read a lot of stories similar to what I'd actually lived through. And besides, you have to start somewhere. Also, I, like everyone else, was born with certain strengths and weaknesses. I'm not sure which category the following falls into, but I had a perverse knack for getting myself into strange predicaments. Or better yet, of falling in with the most freakish of bedfellows, and I mean that in a literal context -- sex. My sex partners were,

on the surface, intelligent, creative, kind sorts of men. By the time I'd finished with them, they'd turned into simpering stalkers, incomprehensible nitwits or rude rascallions. The Irish film director was of the third variety. We'd had a brief dalliance while he was shooting a documentary in the States. After finishing the project in New York, he was supposed to take the train down to Baltimore and spend the weekend with me. Not only did he never show up, but also I never heard from him again. Then, one day, three years later, I was sitting in the International Bar in Dublin, Ireland, and there he was, sitting three barstools down from me.

The Irish director was one of many men that I used, sexually speaking, to rid myself of the Mormon expectations that were constantly dancing about in my head. Unlike Strindberg, I didn't hate the opposite sex. I didn't want to use these men, either themselves, or re-cast as characters in a play or novel, as receptacles for my own fear, disdain, or sexual anxiety. At the same time, I was intrigued with how they participated in the world. They seemed braver than I was, more willing to take risks than I was. Somehow I had to inculcate that male braveness into my female characters, not in a straightforward manner, but illogically, in a nonsensical way that would allow for distance between the reader or audience member and this female conundrum.

Fortunately for me, right around this time, I'd started my first graduate program at Johns Hopkins University in Drama Studies. I found in one of my professors, Joe, the perfect real-life mentor. He was better than Hamsun because he could argue a point. He was a specialist in Scandinavian literature and drama and was also an expert in the theatre of the absurd. Through this program I became immersed in Artaud and Grotowski. On

the one hand there was Artaud, who claimed that only through cruelty could humanity come to terms with the world. Grotowski, on the other hand, was something of a mystic who believed that beauty was the path that would reveal the truest aspects of life. For about a second, I was conflicted about whether it would be cruelty or beauty that won me over to its way of thinking. Artaud and the absurdists won.

Ionesco and Beckett were the finishing influences on my impoverished Scandinavian darkness. The absurdists could take that darkness and make it palatable through burlesque or language or other shock value. I'd found my combination: the anguish of the Scandinavians combined with the movement and absurdity of the Artaudians. This meant that on the surface all could seem well, beautiful even, but underneath, a gloominess lurked that would pull the reader/audience into the abyss.

Of course, when I wrote my first play, *Pythagorean Theorem*, all of this awareness was underground. I was writing and combining things I had no idea about. Meaning, I was making it up and creating some hybrid form that only my subconscious could follow. The plot line of the play ran something like this: white girl meets black boy, they fall in love, sort of, or is the white girl just using the black boy to make her parents angry? Is the black boy using the white girl as a way to cull power in a white-dominated society? White girl's parents (the mother is played by a male in drag) are racist and make no bones about it. They are all sexually over-the-top and at one point the mother (in drag) ends up humping one of the props. The white girl sings Doris Day's "Que Sera Sera" in a nightmarish way and Ionesco-like disjointed language punctuates each and every scene.

Surprisingly, the play was a smash hit, at least to the two audiences that watched it. It was a strange mix of a nightmarish yet playful style layered with ironic language that poked fun at just about everything that anyone could hold holy. Among those cultural paradigms that were skewered in this grotesque mirror were; marriage, race relations, sexual adventurousness, politically correct language, and, most of all, that utter horror of horrors -- decency. No one in the play had a moment of human decency. Each character was skewering their counterparts to justify their own cruelty and ignorance. I was writing about things that happen on a daily basis all over the planet.

Lest you begin to think that everyone became a Lulu fan -- that was definitely not the case. I had a friend named Mike Fields, who was a colleague in the drama program. I did a number of readings of the play at his house before it got cast. Right around the third reading, Mike's wife, Carolyn, decided she wanted to sit in on that night's performance. At the end of the reading, there was a heavy silence. I looked around at the faces of my performers, and they looked their usual selves. I glanced at Mike, who was fretfully trying not to look at his wife. So, I did him at favor and I looked at Carolyn. Her face was beet red. Her first words were, "You call yourself a feminist?"

I looked around the room to see whom she was talking to. Then I realized her venom was directed straight at me.

"Excuse me?" I said, trying to sound polite, since I was dying for one of those double-chocolate brownies I saw sitting on the dining room table directly behind us. At that point, I really didn't understand what she was referring to. Also, I barely knew Carolyn. My only knowledge of her was that she was involved with professional theatre

and was some sort of casting agent for the regional Renaissance Festival. To my mind, then, she knew something about jesters and ladies of the court, but probably didn't know much about Artaud and Strindberg. I tried to be polite without sounding condescending or defensive. Also, since I'm generally not known to be good at holding my temper, I was a little hesitant to start in on this line of discussion. Unfortunately, she wasn't going to let me off the hook.

"I've never heard such offensive language. It's despicable. Everyone in the play is despicable. I hate all of them. Why should I care what happens to any of them? And you -- how could you write those things about women?"

My response was immediate. "Women should be allowed to be as bad as men. Otherwise, there's no such thing as equality. Everyone is a target."

She was flabbergasted. "You don't really believe that!"

I did believe it. I believed it to my core. I knew, in both experiential and narrative terms, that if women were never allowed to do stupid things, act ridiculous, make mistakes, hate people, fail miserably, and/or make a fool of ourselves, then we would always be stunted in our development.

I turned to Jeanine, the woman who was playing the role of the main character, the racist white woman and said, "Jeanine, what do you think?"

She looked at me, with a smile on her face, and said, "I love being nasty. This is my favorite part I've ever had."

I then turned back to Carolyn: “I get what you’re saying, but I just don’t agree with it. It’s time women were taken down off the pedestal and it’s also time we turned them over to see their dark underbelly. I don’t care what men think. You got it?”

Carolyn was angry, “I don’t want any of you in my house again. *You* got it?”

I turned to Mike, saying, “I think it’s time for me to go.” And I left.

The next week at class, Mike told me that he and his wife had vehemently argued that night about the play and that he ended up sleeping on the couch the entire weekend. Mike had valiantly defended my right as an artist to create characters that were offensive and complex. Carolyn had argued that, as a woman, my responsibility was not to give men more ammunition with which to bring women down. If I created unlikable female characters, it was just grist for the mill that women were second-class citizens and didn’t know how to behave. I was reinforcing the worst stereotypes and making them seem “normalized.”

It was my first real experience with anyone not liking me and, by extension, not liking something I did. I was brought up in the school of “be nice” and “don’t speak unless spoken to.” I was also self-conscious about what I thought of as my success ratio and the concept of perfection. I was a doer and a goal setter and was singly disconcerted by the possibility that I was offending someone. I certainly wasn’t writing theatre to force any of these issues – or was I? Theatre was a safe space to work out and to write out my dissatisfaction with what I viewed as monstrous hypocrisy. I didn’t really want to take the hit, or become the target of someone else’s chagrin -- did I? My rebellion was displaced into the characters, and they became the puppets and I the puppet master to

show how I viewed the world. The only thing was, I was astonished at how much joy I was feeling from the very fact that I could bring such discomfort to people, especially women.

Was I a sadist or was I tapping into something culturally buried within the hearts and minds of contemporary women? It was okay if a man vivisected a woman, but let a woman try and she too would be vivisected along with her character/victim. I was intrigued by the incongruity of it all and vowed to find out what I'd latched onto and why it had caused such an outraged response.

The Problem of the Anti-Heroine

Recently, Eliot Spitzer, the Governor of New York State, resigned in disgrace over a dalliance he'd had with a high-priced hooker named "Kristen." There was a flurry of articles on the Internet and in the national newspapers about why his wife, Silda, stood by him during his media appearances. To say that she looked unhappy would be an understatement of profound proportions. Just a few hours after the scandal was announced, the American public learned the actual name and additional information about "Kristen." According to the *New York Times* (March 13, 2008), she was a 22-year-old wanna be musician, originally from New Jersey, whose name was Ashley Alexandra Dupre. In a statement to the *New York Times*, in the above-mentioned article, she said, "I just don't want to be thought of as a monster."

On the surface, this scenario may seem obvious, banal even: the man who flies too close to the sun and gets burned, the long-suffering wife who stands by her man no matter what, the harlot who uses her body to bring the man down. This is Greek tragedy,

right in the making. The roles of the characters are perfectly assigned as to gender. The man is the tragic hero who is undone by his hubris; his character flaw is biologically based – sex, a woman. The wife is in the shadows, not speaking and certainly not reacting with the anger she must be feeling. She is self-censored and culturally censored. The third character in the triangle is the harlot, a 22-year-old who fled her supposedly abusive home on the shores of New Jersey to make it big as a singer in New York. She, a victim in her own right, now considers herself the abuser. The women in this scenario are either good and long-suffering -- the wife -- or bad and abusive -- the hooker. I am not advocating the point that “Kristen” or Ashley is abusive, but her comment about being seen as “the monster” tells us that she believes that she caused the scandal. If it hadn’t been her, it would have been some other pitiful girl. The spotlight is on the man because he is the one with the power. He is the one who acted and took the initiative to create his own downfall. If he is a victim, it is of his own making.

As media consumers, we eat this stuff up. It plays into every preconceived notion we have about how men act and how women behave. Notice the difference between the two. Men do things, while women construct a response and behave in one way or another, depending on what the man did.

It is this construction of power in the public sphere that allows a clear-cut perspective on when and how men go outside of this construction. It gives us a perfectly demarcated view as to when and where Eliot Spitzer went wrong. He went outside the parameters of acceptable action and got caught. He broke ethical laws connected to public trust and perhaps also broke criminal laws. He acted, he got caught, he resigned.

Sex and politics seem to go hand in hand, at least for men. It is an easy way for men to go off kilter. It's so easy it's almost ridiculous. The most pathetic thing that Eliot Spitzer did was to resort to such a common cliché. At least if he was going to do something "bad," he could have made it a little more interesting, a little more creative. But no, he had to do the old sex two-step and ruin his career. He really is an idiot and he is now in company with a bunch of other male idiots: Bill Clinton, Larry Craig, Gary Hart and Jim McGreevey, the former Governor of New Jersey. The list is a long one, but notice there are no females in sight. Women in public office don't do this sort of thing. That's not necessarily true. Women probably also do things of this nature, but if so, they are either more discreet or are less well known. I can't recall any female politician, on a national level, who has been caught with her pants down, so to speak. Imagine if Barbara Boxer, the attractive female Senator from California, linked up with a male hooker. This reverse scenario seems almost ludicrous. What if Hillary were caught giving one of her aides a blow job, or better yet, getting oral sex herself from that male aide? Ludicrous again. The only real power discrepancy relationship I can think of was when Madonna got impregnated by her trainer. She had the child and who knows what happened to him? Women who have political power, or any other type of cultural cachet, are under a lot more scrutiny than the men are and have probably had to work twice as hard to get to where they've gotten. So is this about essentialism and testosterone versus estrogen, or are there cultural factors at work that disallow women from behaving as badly as men do?

In order to answer the question, let's look back at historical figures who participated in the realm of absolute power. These would have been women who were royalty. The two women who are most remembered in history are Catherine the Great, of Russia, and Elizabeth I, of England. I chose these two women because most people have heard of them and know a little about their stories (notwithstanding the myth of Catherine the Great being killed by a horse when she attempted to mount it/have sex with it.) In other words, they are part of our popular culture. What is common knowledge is that Catherine the Great was known for her numbers of lovers and for possibly having her husband killed so that she could take the throne. Anyone who's watched the films *Shakespeare in Love*, *Elizabeth*, or *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* knows that Elizabeth I was known for her temper, her virginity and for Shakespeare. However, Elizabeth has an untainted record compared with her father, Henry VIII, who had six wives total, two of whom were beheaded. This is a small example, but to my mind what it tells us is that for every woman in power who behaves somewhat badly, there are at least one hundred men in power who behave a lot worse. The history of the world has been written about men with a lot of blood on their hands. Which brings us full circle: are men naturally more evil than women? And if so, why? Is it testosterone or is it the basics of the power structure? Those who have power will inevitably abuse it. Men have traditionally held power; therefore, it follows that they are also the abusers of it. What we can say, generally, is that since men have had more access to power across the board, they have also had to resort to violence to defend that power. Violence is the domain of men because power is also their domain. Crime statistics bear this out. According to the

Justice Department, in December 2007 the number of men in prison was 1,483,896, compared to 114,420 women. That's a ratio of around 12/1. But that's still 114,000 women who behaved badly. It is indeed a myth that women aren't violent and don't commit crimes. They just do so less than men.

The point of all this is that it's easy to see how men behave badly. It's much more difficult to delineate this with women. It's a counter-intuitive construction since in our imaginations we can easily rattle off a hundred evil women. The majority of Disney's animated films have at least one villainess. Shakespeare's plays are dotted with miscreants and misfits of the female variety. Can't we just say, definitively, that the anti-heroine is a woman who personifies evil? Well, no. It's a lot more complicated than that. The beauty of the anti-hero is that he is complex, defiant, rebellious, all at once. He isn't one-dimensional. Defining the anti-hero is easy because there is a long lineage of men/characters that fit into this category. Paul Newman's numerous incarnations as the anti-hero in films like *The Sting* or *Cool Hand Luke* reveal the layers of his personality and the numerous reasons he is acting the way he is. Another obvious anti-hero character would be Michael Corleone from *The Godfather* films. He kills people or has them killed by others in order for his empire to remain intact. But he is more than pure evil. During the course of the films he is also shown as a family man, a gentle lover, a thoughtful thug. There is no female cinematic counterpart to this. There is no female version of *The Godfather*. We must reconcile serial violence with patriarchal culture.

The feminist writer bell hooks states in her book *Feminism is for Everybody* that, when women commit acts of violence, they are participating in a patriarchal structure.

Violence is the domain of men, so when women commit violence they are just adhering to rules of patriarchy that are so embedded in their psyche that they can do nothing else.

Then, is the anti-heroine just the female version of the anti-hero, or is this character specific to women? If we can say that the defined traits of the anti-hero, such as violence, are specific to men, then what is specific to women? Sex? Perhaps. And of course, not all anti-heroes are defined by violence nor are all anti-heroines defined by sex. But it's a good place to start.

The Femme Fatale

The femme fatale is a woman who uses her sexual prowess to destroy a man. It isn't necessarily a conscious decision on her part, but rather an aspect of her overly-sexualized female-ness that promotes this behavior. She is a woman who is out of control. The innocent dupe-of-a-man who stumbles into her deceitful plan ultimately gives in to her sexuality because of her possible redemption at his hands. Until very recently (the last 20 years or so), this woman got her due (for being the sexual monster that she is) by being killed at the end of the film, play, or piece of literature. Skip ahead to 2008, and our Ashley Alexandra Dupre now has seven-figure offers from porn industry magazines like *Hustler* and *Penthouse* to pose for the drooling masses. Due to the lascivious nature of our media consumer culture, bad behavior is now a hot marketing item. Ashley may still be getting her punishment by exposing herself to horny young boys and lascivious men, but at least she'll be well paid for her exploits. It would be disputable, though, as to whether being a prostitute really qualifies one for entry into the world of the femme fatale. Because of the monetary exchange one would suppose that

men know what they're getting into as compared to the good girl who turns bad after she doesn't get what she wants – her man.

There is an evolutionary aspect to the femme fatale. Whereas Barbara Stanwyck's character, Phyllis Dietrichson, in *Double Indemnity*, had to die in the course of the film, more recent incarnations of the femme fatale, such as Kathleen Turner's character, Matty Walker, in *Body Heat*, (1981) and Linda Fiorentino's Bridget, in *The Last Seduction*, (1994) get away with their actions and leave the man to suffer the consequences of their combined behavior. This reversal indicates a complication to and development of the anti-heroine character. She gets away with it. This is progress. But lest we think things have gotten too progressive, we must remember that *Fatal Attraction* came out half-way between these two films, in 1987, and in that film the seductress, Alex, played by Glenn Close, definitely gets her due in line with the femme fatales of an earlier era. It's a typical case of one step forward and two steps back.

One interesting addition to the expanding repertoire of the femme fatale character is the recent film *The Other Boleyn Girl*. The story is of two sisters, Anne and Mary Boleyn, both of whom became involved with King Henry VIII. As the film opens, Katherine of Aragon, Henry's current wife, has just given birth to a stillborn child. The couple already has a daughter, Mary, but it's thought by the royal court that the House of Tudor won't be secure until a male heir is born. Then the machinations begin. Henry has a wandering eye. Which woman will he take to his royal bed? Any woman who becomes his lover will be guaranteed riches and status.

The main force behind what happens is the Duke of Norfolk, who also happens to be Anne and Mary's uncle. The Duke travels to the countryside to meet with Thomas Boleyn, his sister's husband. The two men decide that Anne would be an appropriate diversion for the King and a time is arranged for the King and his court to visit the Boleyn household. In the meantime, Mary, the younger of the two, gets married. The King arrives and is quite taken with Anne, until she leads him over a cliff, literally, during a fox hunt. The King suffers cuts, and more importantly, a bruised ego, and the more reticent and less rebellious Mary is summoned to wait on the King during his recovery. The ever-lusty King is smitten once again, this time with the demure Mary. Mary and her new husband are summoned to Court, whereupon she becomes the King's lover. Anne throws a fit and, in an act of defiance, seduces and marries an already betrothed Marquis. When her uncle finds out what Anne has done, she's banished to the French court. Apparently, only the King can approve a marriage at that level of royalty, and if he finds out that the couple have defied him, the Boleyns will lose favor and be cast out of court. Of course, during Henry's reign, much worse could also happen. The entire family could be beheaded.

Meanwhile, Mary and Henry are continuing their liaisons and Mary becomes pregnant. However, she is required to lay-in during her entire pregnancy, meaning the King can no longer use her for sex. Once again, the King's libido needs to be controlled/manipulated. Anne is brought back from France to amuse the King while her sister waits to give birth. She is explicitly told that she is not to sleep with him, only to distract him. Anne, being the anti-heroine that she is, and taking counsel from no one,

does more than distract the King -- she seduces him with her celibacy. She also uses his relationship with her sister as a manipulating point. Why would Anne bed a King who threw her away for her sister? By the time Mary actually gives birth, and to a boy, the possibility of sex with Anne has driven the King crazy. At Mary's birthing bed, the King promises never to speak to Mary again if only Anne will give him hope that they will be together. This is the decisive moment for Anne, and she sells her sister out in order to further her political and sexual agendas. Anne agrees to the King's request, thereby bestowing *persona non grata* status on her sister. This is just the beginning of Anne's scheming.

Susan Bordo, who is writing a book about Anne Boleyn, recently published an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* talking about how Boleyn has caught the eye of feminist scholars because her behavior, as re-interpreted through our current time frame, is a cultural test for how we are viewing women:

Nowadays, loosened up by 'postfeminist' scorn for political correctness, we're once again going for the temptress/bitch image of Anne's own time, when she was roundly blamed for luring Henry away from the popular Katherine. Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl* goes so far as to present the most sordid charge laid against Anne (incest) as true -- despite the fact that scholars generally believe that the trial was trumped up (Retrieved from the Web March 17, 2009).

Therefore, our new, post-modern Anne, in *The Other Boleyn Girl*, as played by Natalie Portman, engages in a much larger role that ultimately leads to her downfall. As previously stated, the first thing she does to further her own interests is to force Henry to

deny her sister. Certainly, Henry's power still dominates this construction. Yet it is Anne's maneuvering and manipulation that forces him to act against Mary. This is especially difficult for him since Mary has borne him a son. Anne uses her sexuality to get what she wants. The next thing she does is to coax Henry, via not-so-subtle cajoling, into breaking with Rome and the Catholic Church. This will allow Henry to divorce Catherine of Aragon and marry her. Catherine has given him no male heirs, and Anne promises that she will do this. She gambles, once again, against her own sexuality in order to force Henry to do her bidding. In a sense, Anne is objectifying Henry to get what she wants – power. It's more than clear over the course of the film that Anne isn't prone to duly obey. It is also clear that Anne doesn't love Henry, but is using him for her own purposes. This was always the question I had with the Monica Lewinsky debacle. Who was using whom? To say that Monica wasn't using Bill to further her own career is sexist. Sure, Bill had the power, which Monica was aware of. She was giving Bill, not Al Gore, the blowjob. If you're going to go for the sex thing, you may as well go for the Commander in Chief, not the underling. If you're going to cause a scandal, doesn't it just make sense to get as much out of it as you can? To say that Bill abused his authority disempowers Monica. Which position has truth on its side? It all depends on whether we assume women can only be a victim, not a perpetrator. The reality is probably somewhere between the two cultural assumptions: women are victims and men abuse their power.

But back to Anne. Henry follows all of Anne's directions. He cuts off Mary, divorces Catherine, and establishes the Church of England, which forces a political split

between those who still follow the Catholic Church and consider the Pope the final arbiter in all things of this world, and those who are loyal to Henry and his newly established Church of England. The split is creating a socio-political climate conducive to civil war, which Henry is not pleased about. However, the couple finally marries and then the pressure is on Anne to produce a male heir. Her first child is a daughter, Elizabeth. Henry is clearly displeased. He begins to sexually sniff around Jane Seymour, whom he will become engaged to one day after Anne's eventual beheading. The more Anne tries to reignite the King's passion, the more disinterested he becomes. How can Anne possibly produce another child, a son, if the King wants nothing to do with her? Then Anne has an idea, to seduce her brother, have sex with him, which will hopefully produce the male heir Henry is looking for. Anne tells her brother that she has created problems for herself and loved ones that she must overcome. If she doesn't find a solution, she'll face charges of treason, which will mean her death.

Anne realizes she has taken actions that will potentially lead to her downfall. These actions are not honorable. Her actions have hurt other people, and she did this with her own selfish interests at heart. Anne, in this regard, is more than a femme fatale. She is the protagonist of the film; Henry and Mary are secondary. In the femme fatale films like *Double Indemnity*, the protagonist is the male character. Barbara Stanwyck's character is a projection of Fred MacMurray's desire. Barbara Stanwyck is a receptacle. To reiterate, Anne is a femme fatale, but she is also more. She is a prototypical anti-heroine in that we also know what is going on inside her head. We understand her motivation and we know the risks. It is her story, not Henry's. Anne tells her siblings

that her actions will have serious consequences for herself and her daughter. She has taken a risk and will lose her life if she doesn't figure out a resolution. The resolution is incest with her brother, in order to become pregnant again. Anne isn't crazy, but she has pushed the boundaries, due to her own desires, and knows what the risks are.

Through a series of machinations, Anne is caught trying to seduce her brother and both are sentenced to die. In this regard, Anne's character is typical of the transgressive woman who is always punished. The interesting thing about Anne Boleyn is that she didn't use violence, but rather her intelligence, to attain her position. That she was also beautiful doesn't seem to matter in this particular instance. It may be that the idea of woman is so embedded with the representation of the body, or beauty, that when she additionally uses her intelligence, her physical appearance takes the back seat.

Juno: An Unlikely Anti-Heroine

One of the ingredients sorely missing from the story of Anne Boleyn, in fact from the story of most transgressive women, is humor. Most women who take it upon themselves to venture into the world of men and male power don't have an easy go of it. Their travails are dangerous, murderous even. Many of them end up dead. Funny they aren't. Then, like the proverbial goddess of rejuvenation, we are given Juno, who is the main character in the 2007 film by the same name and who requires us to reconsider what an anti-heroine can be.

Unlike her anti-heroic cinematic sisters, Juno isn't an ambitious or manipulative woman lusting after power, nor is she particularly interested in venturing into the world of men and dragging them down to their ultimate demise. Juno is a new breed of anti-

heroine. She is not a bitch. She is wholly an individual. She isn't mean, nasty or contemptible. Also, she doesn't use violence. Then what is her secret? How did she find her way into the social club of transgressive women? Well, Juno does transgress societal expectations and she does this by walking a very thin line between cultural ideals that could be labeled conservative, on the one hand, and liberal, on the other. She becomes a poster child for herself, bowing to neither the demands of the left nor the right. She does it Juno's way, and this is the strength of her character.

When the film opens, we see Juno, played by Ellen Page, racing somewhere, a bottle of Sunny Delight in hand, gulping it down like it's the last liquid she'll ever drink. She enters a drug store and buys an EPT test, goes into the bathroom, sits on the toilet, and urinates onto the stick. This is all done in a very informal, casual manner, as if peeing on a stick to see if you're pregnant is just part of a daily routine. The truth is that while potential pregnancy isn't an everyday occurrence, peeing certainly is. This very banal, human action sets the stage for the first of many grotesque happenings that will continue throughout the film. It's relevant that the director chose to start the film this way, with Juno being exposed in all of her humanity. In most films or TV shows, we never see our protagonist urinating or using the toilet in an actual way. If a woman believes she's pregnant, we see her at the store buying an EPT test, then cut to the look on her face when she receives the news. The most relevant example that comes to mind is during the *Friends* episode when Rachel discovers she's pregnant. Phoebe and Monica are waiting for her in the restroom while Rachel supposedly pees on the stick behind a closed stall door. Another recent pregnancy was on *Sex & the City* when Miranda also

discovers she's pregnant. There was no toilet scene in that one either, although there is reference to the fact that she'd taken a number of home pregnancy tests prior to telling Carrie the news.

This small incident sets up a framework for the female aspect of the grotesque that follows Juno through the entirety of the film. As Bakhtin (26) explicitly states in his discussion of the grotesque, bodily fluids and pregnancy are on a very short list of human conditions that qualify as universally grotesque. The paradox of the grotesque is that these are the most concrete aspects of what makes us human and also the activities that remain the most hidden. It is when these aspects are revealed that people get uncomfortable. Juno's character is a case-study in making people feel uncomfortable.

The second aspect of the film that undermines a stereotype is that Juno is shown as the one who initiates sex with her best friend/boyfriend Paulie Bleeker, played by Michael Cera. We see it visually during the course of the film, and it is also confirmed by her parents after she tells them that she's pregnant.

Her father asks, "Who's the father?"

She responds, "Paulie Bleeker."

After Juno leaves, the father says to the step-mother, "I didn't know he had it in him."

The step-mother says something along the lines of, "We both know Juno was the one who initiated it."

The father agrees.

Although there have been plenty of films showing high-school-aged characters with out-of-control hormones, what is unique about *Juno* is that she isn't shown as a victim. There are countless films with adolescent characters who find themselves on the brink of engaging in sex. Most of these films have male protagonists, and almost always the girl only gets to the moment of intercourse by being extremely drunk. A case in point is the recent film *Superbad*, also starring Michael Cera. His character in *Superbad* is similar to the one he plays in *Juno*. He's a bit of a nerd, seems very sweet, is the silent type, and plays the straight guy. In *Superbad*, the entire film is about buying alcohol in order to get girls drunk in order to get them into bed. The twist in this one is that Cera does finally get into bed with the girl he's been romantically pursuing (if only in his head), but nothing happens because the girl is so drunk she actually vomits all over him. In this case, Cera, not the drunk young woman, is the main character, but this set-up illuminates the scenarios in which girls/women can participate in sex -- only when they're intoxicated. It's like saying, "Well, yes, she did screw him, but it didn't mean anything because she was so drunk." Women are only allowed to confront sex when their defenses are down.

We see this again in the film *Ten Things I Hate About You*. This film has more of an ensemble cast and it's difficult to say who the main character is. The film was based on Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew*, and our post-modern cast is comprised of Heath Ledger as Patrick Verona, whose task it is to "tame" the unlikable and boy-hating Kat Stratford, played by Julia Stiles. The two are high school students in Seattle and it is again within this pre-adult world that the unlikely couple's dynamic plays out.

The turning point occurs during a party. Kat has been downing shots of tequila and Patrick goes after her as she leaves the party in an obviously drunken state. Just as the two are about to kiss, Kat throws up. Once again, sexual desire on the part of the female is spewed out as vomit.

It is with a sense of relief and recognition of the possibility of progress to find that Juno could actually have sex in a film without resorting to alcohol-induced shenanigans. How does this development play with audiences? The target audience of tweens, teens and 20-somethings probably saw it as realistic. On the other hand, parents of those tweens and teens probably felt a bit queasy. Was it really possible that their daughters were sexual beings? Is it better for a female teen-ager to have sex drunk or stone cold sober AND as the aggressor? My guess is the answer would be: it would be better for them to be celibate. At least if she's drunk she's not aware of what she's doing. It's the alcohol making her do it. On all fronts of this equation, Juno is different.

A Brief Digression

When looking at the concept of mass media/popular culture, there are always two sides of the machinery. There are the producers and the consumers. For quite a while, these two sides of the equation were separated by access to capital and access to audiences. Now, with immediate access to the Internet, i.e., YouTube, blogs and web sites, those who were formerly only consumers could also be producers. This merging of the two components has created a hyper-awareness of what works and what doesn't. An example of this would be YouTube. Once a video is posted on the site, it can become clear pretty quickly whether the video is a hit or a dud. The number of people who have

watched it becomes an immediate indicator of its commercial success. If it's a hit, then repeat the formula with a few minor changes. If it's a dud, try something else. Nothing lost and everything gained.

In a December 10, 2008, *New York Times* article, "YouTube Videos Pull In Real Money," this very topic was discussed. A little over a year ago, YouTube started a partnership program with their members which would allow advertisers to sell advertising during the videos. Some YouTube producers are now making six-figure salaries. Hunter Walk, head of product management for YouTube, termed these producers "unintentional media companies." A hobby can now make you somewhat rich and almost famous. Not by Hollywood standards, but this progression from hobbyist to professional tells us that anyone, literally, with a limited amount of technology and a good idea can "make it" in today's media market. This has created a new sense of media analysis by consumers/producers. In previous decades, it required Nielsen ratings to discover whether or not a media artifact was popular. We now have immediate access to numbers of eyeballs in the seats, and with that information we also have an inkling of what the consumer wants. We are now the consumer and the producer, both at the same time.

With an eye towards this new sense of a hybrid consumer/producer, it becomes more important as an artist to write what you personally like. This may seem like an obvious point that needs no discussion. After all, haven't artists, from ancient times forward, created what they personally liked? Why create something if you don't have a vested interest in it? On the other hand, did Michelangelo really like cherubs that much?

Or were his skills as a painter and his appointment from the Vatican the culminating forces that created the paintings at the Sistine Chapel? The artist was an executor of content rather than a producer of content. Yes, it came from his brush, but he was limited by religious parameters.

This ultimately becomes a question of the author and her time. At this point in media history, it seems to me the author has the ability to supersede boundaries of NOW because we are living in a continuous present of content supply. This is in sharp contrast to what Gertrude Stein talked about, over 70 years ago, when she wrote her essay “How Writing Is Written.” In this essay, she discusses the concept of “contemporariness” and how this applied to her own life and writing. Her thesis was that there is a time-lag between when an artist writes something and when that something gets, not just consumed, but accepted into the category of “art.” Since everyone lives their lives contemporaneously to each other, including artists or producers of culture, there is approximately, according to Stein, a 40-year gap between when something is produced and when something is accepted. She states, “And that is the real explanation of why the artist or painter is not recognized by his contemporaries. He is expressing the time-sense of his contemporaries, but nobody is really interested” (488).

Juno is a prime example of an artifact that fits into the world of popular culture via the producer/consumer paradigm. This mostly has to do with the fact that the screenplay for the film was written by a 30-something woman named Diablo Cody. That’s not really her name, but her pseudonym by which she won an Academy Award in 2007 for “Best Writing, Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen.” Cody has stated in

several interviews that although she personally is not the template for *Juno*, she used her life experiences and connections to create this character. She also stated in an interview with SuicideGirls.com, an online magazine, that, "I did not want to write a movie about teen pregnancy that was melodramatic in any way, you know? We've all seen the after-school specials. We've all been fed the party line that women who have sex are going to descend into madness or tragedy. And I say screw that. I'm going to write a positive, uplifting movie about a girl."

Within this quote we see the producer/consumer paradigm at work. Growing up, Cody, like any other woman of her generation, would have been subjected to those messages meant to keep girls in line. As a consumer of her cultural values, she experienced a split between what was projected onto the screen (literally and figuratively) and her real-life experience. She experienced the values as a consumer and lived out different values as a producer. By extension, as a producer within the context of mass media (film), Diablo Cody took her production talents to a much wider audience and a higher level of artistic endeavor. She personifies this paradigm shift: that it is possible for anyone/everyone to be a producer/consumer. All that is needed is an interaction with media in a critical way. Now it is the discrepancy between what is consumed and what is produced by any individual that regulates the field of artistic endeavor and quality. Stein's assertion of contemporaneousness is upset by this new model in that ONLY through interacting with contemporary issues will anyone want to listen to you. Respect has been lost for the voices of elders and patriarchs. After all, if someone doesn't know how to text message, what good are they in today's technology-saturated culture?

This is why *Juno* caught on. She was real. Although she was labeled as a quirky outsider type by the press, she came across as real. There was no melodrama. The boy who got her pregnant didn't abandon her and run off with the cuter, richer, other girl who was so much better than the one he had. If anything, *Juno* provides a reversal of this situation. Paulie still longs for Juno, but she can't quite figure out how to bring him into her life and this new situation, especially since she's decided to give the baby up for adoption. In the end, they figure out a way to be together. He supports her after she gives birth and the final scene is a sweet one, but not overly predictable. It isn't unrealistic and full of saccharine-coated bullshit. Juno learned some hard lessons about love and Happily Ever After. The film's producers didn't go for the Palin family version of a happy ending, which, according to Tina Fey's impersonation of Sarah Palin, means "Happily Ever After is two teenagers being forced to get married against their will." But she discovered that love isn't always enough. That people can't always depend on each other.

Diablo Cody also avoided the cynical way out that would lead to Juno having an abortion. And she definitely avoided turning Juno into a victim. The reason she gives us for her decision not to abort isn't fraught with overtones of morality. Instead, Juno decides against the abortion after she's told that the baby has fingernails. The fingernails get to her sense of absurdity and that, along with the smell of the waiting room at the clinic, and the conversation she has with the receptionist about edible underwear, makes her realize that abortion and, specifically, this clinic, aren't for her.

Writing, Part II

The first scraps of the writing that eventually became *Inconstant Endeavors* were in a journal that I kept when I went to India to work at a theatre school. As soon as I found out I was going, I started the journal, recording all the minutiae of getting shots, getting people's reactions to my trip, and trying to figure out my own reasons for wanting to go. At the point when I found the job, I was in the middle of a personal crisis, but not one that was readily obvious as a crisis. For the sake of clarity, let me start at the beginning of the crisis, or the beginning of what would lead to the crisis, or better yet, the choices I would make that would allow the crisis to take place. Or, ultimately, how the crisis occurred because of the general randomness of life.

How far back should I start? Where does my story begin? Should I start with the story about being put up for adoption by a hippie girl in San Francisco in 1965? Or, does the story really begin when a Mormon family adopts me and takes me off to Utah with my two brothers, one of whom was born without legs? I could begin the tale the day I realized that religion is nothing but a hoax. Or, would it be a better narrative if the beginning was the first time I had sex, at the ripe age of 20, under my grandmother's dining room table? And then there's the part where I join the Army at the age of 17 and become an Arabic translator, get married to a former Black Muslim, and my parents stop speaking to me. Following the marriage, there's the matter of the divorce, four years later. A good metaphorical rendering could occur by way of my trip through Europe when I refused to speak English and only used broken Arabic and French while travelling through Germany. I did it mostly to irritate the train personnel, who were so German

and persnickety. There are numbers of boyfriends I could use as examples of types of men not to get involved with. On the other hand, there's the story of my true-love, Jacob, who really wanted to have almost nothing to do with me. Where does a story truly begin? The answer might seem obvious. A story begins wherever you start it. The first sentence of a novel, by definition, is the beginning. But there are layers and layers of experience that come out, either in a straightforward manner or completely sideways, that could equally ALL be the starting point.

This question of when does something start led me to write *Inconstant Endeavors* in an episodic way. For me, and I think for most people, very rarely does something happen in a linear, straightforward manner. Certainly, things build on each other. One can't speak of being in India without actually getting there. The trip is as important as the destination. Sometimes more so. *Inconstant Endeavors* is a road trip novel, except the road isn't literal, but metaphysical. It's not about being in India that matters, it's the HOW and the WHY that became the questions that needed to be unraveled.

For the sake of a real beginning, India became the focus. It was a new, exotic destination and a place where I wouldn't be able to hide behind cultural norms. The eating habits, hygiene protocol (or lack of it), religion, climate, clothes, language(s), gender relations, skin color biases, were all foreign to me. I figured it was a good place to confront myself, or better yet, a place to escape and run away.

"Run away from what?" you might be asking. This question brings us to Montana, which takes its cue from the East Coast, which had an antecedent in Alaska, and a post-script signed in New York City, along with several changes of address in

Maryland, Washington D.C., and Vermont. How can I talk about when something starts when there are so many beginnings to think about? Hence, the episodic nature of the book. Back and forth, round-a-bout, one experience zinging off an a causal remark somewhere else. Randomness tied up with concrete there-ness. I really did do all these things, travelled all these miles. But, what of it?

Again, India was a jumping-off point into reconciliation between the random and the there. Things I had control over and things that just seemed to happen. On either side of the India experience, there is a three-year margin. Meaning, if I took a line and plotted India in the middle of it, all of the other events and places in the book would veer either three years before or three years after India. India would be the mid-way starting and stopping point, the farthest point of departure and the farthest point of return. Therefore, not only was it the appropriate place to start, but the only one that made sense.

The idea of India held a fascination for me. However, my only experience with the sub-continent had come from films like *Passage to India*, *Gandhi*, and *Salaam Bombay*. It seemed that India would sort of be like Africa, as interpreted through Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*, the film, not the book. I would take on the persona of Meryl Streep, walk around with a rifle and meet handsome but elusive men like Robert Redford. In other words, I was wholly unprepared for the reality of India: the stench, the pollution, the poverty. These were the things I would discover immediately upon landing in Madras. To my credit, one thing I did realize going into it was that it would be an adventure. Adventure isn't always fun, unless one defines fun in peculiar ways, such as never knowing what will happen next, or by not having a place to stay for the night,

having money and luggage stolen, being sexually accosted by young Indian boys trying to make some money. Adventure can be dangerous and make you a little crazy, if not paranoid. That was okay by me because I knew that the one thing I wanted most was to replace the tangled threads of memory in my head, the memories that were playing over and over again, as if on auto-pilot, with new sensory and memory perceptions. I knew without a doubt that India would at least provide me with that.

The strange thing was, as soon as I decided I was going, everyone I knew had an India story. People who I thought had never stepped foot out of the United States or even knew where India was, had an India story. People who I met at bars and restaurants had India stories. It's that idea of the antennae. When you put your consciousness out into the abyss of the invisible energy field of thought, and really concentrate on an idea, manifestations of that idea surface around you like wildflowers growing in spring.

Although India became the cornerstone of *Inconstant Endeavors*, narratively speaking, the novel doesn't start in India. It begins in Butte, Montana. The idea of India started in India while I was writing the journal. I couldn't get to the truth of India, the reason I was there, until I also examined the other threads that were woven into this complicated fabric. Montana became the toughest thread of all, the triple-woven, multi-colored, unbreakable thread that formed the edges and intricate designs of the story. And anyone who's spent any amount of time in Montana knows that Butte is the toughest place of the places. It seemed appropriate to begin in Butte since it's the last place on earth I'd ever return to. It was like being in Dante's ninth circle of hell. Unfortunately, since I'm not Catholic, it was impossible for me to appreciate, on any higher level than a

literal one, the strangeness that is Butte. For Irish Catholics, Socialists and other nefarious deviants, Butte is a safe haven. For me, it was just hell.

I'm sure my dislike for the place had nothing to do with the fact that I was in the process of breaking up with Brian, my boyfriend at the time. Brian and I had bought a historic saloon in Butte and had recently moved there from Washington, D.C. Brian is a lot like Butte. On the surface, he's a very likable guy. He's witty and knows everything there is to know about Blues music. Underneath that surface there lurks darkness. Brian's darkness takes the forms of OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) and hoarding. Now there are some people who call themselves hoarders. They collect things like catsup and soy sauce packets, perfume samples from magazines, or fortune cookie fortunes. They have not a tinge of neurosis compared to Brian's hoarding. They are neophytes to his professional level of stuff insecurity.

Before Brian and I moved to Butte, we'd been friends. We'd known each other for over a decade before we got romantically involved. I knew that Brian had "issues" with his stuff. He came from an interesting, if not downright freakish, family, rooted in the history of America itself. His relatives were some of the first settlers of Maine. His step-father taught at MIT, and his biological father was almost Attorney General of Florida. They had the bluest kind of blood you can have. They were also irreversibly fucked up. They were the sort of family that had been about to bottom out, not just for decades, but for centuries. They were like the decay of the aristocracy in Europe. Their solipsistic tendencies and appetites eventually got the better of them. The Coyles (of which Brian was a relative) had given in to their thirst for liquor, and almost all of them

were alcoholics or were in treatment for alcoholism. This tendency to drink, along with their intellectual pursuits, didn't give them the mental acumen to actually deal with anything practical.

When I first met Brian, he was living with his step-father in the former Chinese Embassy in Washington, D.C. The house, at one point, had been beautiful, aristocratic looking, elegant. Now it was crumbling all around them. The attic was inhabited by a family of raccoons (I kid you not) and none of the three toilets flushed. There were buckets of water at hand inside each of the bathrooms so that after you were done with your business you could "flush" by throwing the bucket of water into the commode. They were eccentrics and their neighbors had a consistent love/hate relationship with them. Everyone respected the step-father for his accomplishments, but why the hell did he also have to have the menagerie of broken-down automobiles (all old Saabs) parked in the yard and on the street? Brian learned his shenanigans of keeping old stuff around from his old man. But the keeping-of-old-stuff-around-for-the sake-of-sentimentality quickly descended into the not-being-able-to-throw-anything-away category due to some major neurotic tendencies. Brian was thoroughly incapable of throwing away a piece of used dental floss. The first time you see the reality of it, the situation seems quirkily cute. The second and third times, that's when you start shaking your head in dejected wonder and amazement.

Right about the time I realized what a whack job I'd gotten involved with, I also started suffering from major depression as a result of Darin, the cowboy's, suicide. This was the cornerstone of my crisis. Darin had been one of my Montana boyfriends. One of

the subjects I came into too close contact with. He and I couldn't have been more incompatible if we'd been born on different planets and of different species, and I'm not talking Venus and Mars here. I'm talking deep-seated cultural values and differences that made him seem irresistibly foreign and somewhat taboo. He wasn't John Travolta to my Olivia Newton John. Nor were we the dysfunctional couple of John Wayne and Katherine Hepburn in the film *Rooster Cogburn*. No, it was more like he was Yosemite Sam, a cartoon character, and I was Amelia Earhart, former real-life adventurer. We were from different factions of reality. We inhabited different genres or categories of existence. It's not like I thought my existence was superior, but that we were at cross purposes. My purpose was to have sex and absorb his differences in order to incorporate these aspects into my literary characters. His purpose was to fall in love.

Unfortunately for him, his cowboy existence and way of life was also on its way out. He was having a hard time finding work and an equally difficult time creating a new concept of himself that would allow him to be something other than the cowboy that he was. Finally, the stress of not being able to evolve in the "New West," mixed with a heavy dose of alcohol, pushed him over the edge and he killed himself. My end of this crisis was to feel complicit in his death. You see, he'd told me he was going to do it. I ignored him, refused to take it seriously, didn't get him any sort of help, and paid the price because he shot himself in the head on my couch in my living room.

Darin's suicide happened a year previous to my going back to Washington, D.C., and linking up with Brian, two years before I went to India, and one year after I'd been in Montana. Now you can see why I question the concept of beginnings in stories. The

delayed reaction of my response to Darin's death, combined with my disgust with Brian's habits, forced me into therapy. It was there that I discovered how boring these problems really were. I'm definitely not saying my problems weren't real, but while I was sitting through my therapy sessions, I became bored with the fact that I had to go through this process, real time. I just wanted to feel like myself again, wanted to extricate these experiences from myself and put them into a more palatable form. Exorcise my demons by putting them to work for me, instead of against me. Hence, *Inconstant Endeavors*.

And Then There's the Female Body -- Always

The other part of the writing of these stories came from Cixous' exhortation to write as a female. In the past, I have been wary of this type of compartmentalization. If anything, my inclination has been towards the opposite end of this spectrum, for my reader/audience to be unable to identify my gender. The turning point for me came while watching pornography. What? I can feel the eyebrows on your face rising ever so slightly. A friend of mine, who shall remain nameless, but who also was a lover, made a habit of recording his former wife and himself while they were having sex. He said that in the beginning it was just an erotic ploy that played into their scopophilic narcissism. After having sex, they liked going back and critiquing their lovemaking skills. This foray into porn became something that eventually crept into my friend's artistic endeavors.

He was an artist by trade but had never wandered into the world of video installation. His work was innovative, but not radical. His pieces were more likely to show up in the board room of a Fortune 500 company than in an Avant-Garde-happening-cum-art show in Williamsburg. And then he got into porn. His level of love

for his phallic status became ludicrously lascivious. It's like he'd re-discovered his penis anew, after 40 years, and couldn't stop showing the world, via his porn, what a great lover he was. The final year he was with his wife (they got divorced after he found her with another man -- his best friend -- how cliché is that, for god's sake?) they pulled out all the stops and just fucked their brains out, on camera, in every possible position there was. They were like candidates of poster porn for *The Kama Sutra* or something. Well, about the time I met him, he'd been divorced for three years and had edited down a hefty amount of the videotape into a 10-minute piece that centered on him and his penis. He showed me the tape one afternoon, after we'd just eaten our spaghetti lunch, and I was mesmerized. How could he dare to expose himself in that way? Had he no shame? Could he really pull this off in the name of art? I was flabbergasted.

I asked him, "You'd really show this at an art opening? With all your friends watching? Is your ego really that big, or are you just crazy and delusional? What if your mother sees you? What would she say?"

He looked at me, brazenly, and said, "Grow up!"

It's not like I was a prude or anything. Just a few years prior to this incident, I had been sitting in the office of the Development Director for The Playboy Channel, discussing the various rules relating to hard-core porn versus soft porn. For instance, in soft porn you never actually see penetration. In hard porn, that's about all you see. In soft porn, you never get to see the lips of the woman's vagina. In hard porn, it's just the opposite. There was also some sort of rule regulating male orgasm -- to see sperm or not

to see sperm. It would follow that in soft porn you don't see the sperm, but in hard porn it can explode in any which direction, usually on the woman's face.

I'd come to porn as many women do – with ambivalence. I couldn't sit entirely on the fence of the feminist factions who believed porn was nothing but misogyny with pictures. I understood that condoning porn as something positive for women was opening a huge can of cultural worms, but Dworkin's exhortation that "The woman who wants sex wants force" did nothing for me. If I had to choose a camp, then I was definitely pro-porn. I'd spent many an afternoon thumbing through porn mags (that my brother had hidden in a cupboard of my playhouse) and reading *Penthouse* "Forum," in search of my sexual identity, when I was a youngster. Who were these women to tell me I couldn't enjoy my own sexuality, either through pictures or words? As Ellen Willis states, "...the last thing women need is more sexual shame, guilt and hypocrisy – this time served up as feminism" (462).

And so, I created a possible series for The Playboy Channel called "Who Wants to Fuck a Porn Star?" The premise was similar to the myriad of reality TV shows that had recently hit the airwaves. I was modeling this one specifically as a cross between "Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?" and the old-time show from the 1970's, "The Dating Game." In my pilot, we'd have three horny college frat boys and one porn star. The porn star would ask these horny boys ludicrous questions, and I supposed they would answer with equal absurdity. At the end of the final round of questioning, the porn star would choose the lucky boy and immediately the set would open up to expose a king-sized bed; whereupon, the boy would have to strip and deliver his own porn performance.

His prize was to fuck the porn star. It seemed that this would play into every man's fantasy regarding porn. The numbers would be huge. I'd be rolling in dough.

There were two things that prevented me from actually stepping into that world:

1) I knew that if my mother found out, she'd never speak to me again and; 2) Did I really want to be a part of that aspect of cultural production? Well, there was also a third thing. The Playboy Channel decided the show would be too risky to produce because of things like HIV status. How would they be able to assure the porn star that her choice in horny boys was HIV free? So, I was given an out without actually having to choose it for myself.

What this incident revealed to me was that I do have a line over which I won't step. I do have a modicum of scruples. I won't do just anything for money. When I was confronted with the home-made porn my friend had made, it was porn, but different. He wasn't just producing something that was extraneous from himself, but rather was exposing himself directly to an audience. He was unafraid to do it. I danced around exposing myself, taking a cavalier attitude about it and hiding behind intellectual constructs and cultural stereotypes. I didn't have to reveal my inner slut to myself because I was safely cocooned by the dominant ideology telling me what to do and who to be. I was unsure, though, if the person I was putting out there for public consumption was actually the person I really was. I was split. Was I really the Mormon girl I'd been brought up to be? Or, was I the producer of porn who could also give great head and handle more than a few one-night stands without guilt? The ultimate question was, how

badly would I automatically behave if allowed to do so with no cultural judgment attached?

It was also more than behaving. It was feeling. After Darin killed himself, I did feel guilty. I also felt angry. That mother-fucker! Why did he do it? To fuck with me, that's why. Because he could! That's why. Because he was miserable and full of shit! That's why. Because he was an alcoholic! That's why.

And after I had my daughter and I moved in with her dad on the premise that we would be co-parents and that never materialized -- that pissed me off too! This whole woman-raising-the-kids-and-men-not-helping-out-because-they're-so-good-at-playing-stupid. What the fuck?! They're not really stupid, but they pretend they are so they can get out of it. It's called Ray Romano syndrome, from the sit-com *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Women let them get away with it because we've also been programmed from day one to believe that we are better care-givers than they are. The entire paradigm pisses me off!

And after actually giving birth, I had to come to terms with the fact that my body was made for childbirth. I have a woman's body. I am a mother. That sort of pissed me off too! I thought I'd been exempt from this womanly body construct and especially exempt from the mother thing. As a mother, I didn't want to hold back my daughter's development by trying to re-invent dominant ideology. If she eventually wants to turn into a slut and use her sexuality in whichever way she sees fit, who am I to stop her? Then, of course, I realized that even more than wanting her possibly to be a slut or a bitch or a cunt or whatever she chooses to be, more than that, what I really want for her is to be

safe. For no harm to come to her as a result of the testosterone-driven, violent, woman-hating culture that she is being raised in. That really pisses me off!

Women and girls aren't safe in our culture, either emotionally or physically. So what is a woman to do? What is a mother to do except to feel completely schizophrenic? And that's what REALLY pisses me off!

Being schizophrenic disallows you from making choices. Since it's a constant balancing act, following the rules/breaking the rules, what occurs is stasis, an inability to act because of potential consequences. What this eventually leads to is status quo. And what ULTIMATELY pisses me off is that's not good enough! Status quo sucks!

Inconstant Endeavors was a way for me to explicate all of these complex and contradictory impulses in one place. I'm sure I didn't do as good a job as I wanted. I don't know if Heilbrun would acknowledge that I was angry enough since I hid a lot of my anger in dark humor. I doubt that I even made a dent in the dominant ideology, but by just giving myself permission to "go there," wherever that is for each woman writer, I at least dealt with my own preconceived notions and acculturated presumptions that I'd been forced to consume from my early girlhood. I agree with Felski's premise that woman writers aren't necessarily subversive; rather, when they put their energy to the task of toppling their own biases, that alone feels subversive.

Conclusion

After starting on the quest of coming to understand the nature of the anti-heroine, I realized I had a preconceived notion about how she might behave. I thought of her as someone who was difficult, did things her own way, took all types of risk, wasn't

immune to making a catty remark, and could definitely be a bitch. The question I must ask, after doing all of this research and writing, is whether or not the bitch is the end of the line? Is the anti-heroine something even beyond the bitch or are they like side-by-side circles of behavior that overlap each other?

Before I answer that question, it's relevant to talk about another thing I found distressing about my research. I really didn't want to be confronted with the reality that women's lives still revolve around the private sphere. Strindberg and Ibsen were revolutionary in their time because they made the issues women were having within the private sphere, public. Hedda Gabler's and Nora's (from *A Doll's House*,) journeys were within the context of private sphere dilemmas. The plays examined the stultifying existence of middle-class women within the confines of home and hearth. It's disconcerting to think that in 100 years, since those plays were written, we have barely progressed beyond that point? Certainly, women are in the work force and contribute and make money and do all the things that men do at work. But so much of the writing I came across was about women, usually as mothers, at home or involved with relationships of some sort. It seems that this binary division of private or public isn't enough. What sphere does Steinbeck's *Travels with Charlie* take place in? What sphere does Kerouac's *On the Road* take place in? Even Hamsun's *Hunger* inhabits a realm that is between the private and public. There needs to be an additional sphere that encompasses adventure, being out in the world, without necessarily meaning being in business. I'm looking for something like a poetic realm that addresses the adventures of the spirit and participation in the world that is connected to doing.

What I have discovered, and I hate to say it out loud, is that women are sort of boring; maybe overly cautious is a better way to say it. I say this not as someone who despises my female-ness, nor as someone who wishes I were male. I say this as someone who has gone on lots of adventures, usually by myself, and has thankfully lived to tell about them. But I have done nothing quite as stupid as what Christopher McCandless did when he went to Alaska and decided to live in a bus. Jon Krakauer's book *Into the Wild* tells his story and how he died of starvation. What about Timothy Treadwell, the idiot who got eaten by a bear, also in Alaska? Yes, his girlfriend, Amie Huguenard, got eaten, too, but it was the hair-brained idea of the male that led them both to their deaths. I see nothing within any female-centered fiction, that equates to the stories of men who set off on adventures and it ends badly, or even women who set off on adventures and it doesn't end badly. I take that back. There is a sub-genre of women's stories, such as *Under the Tuscan Sun*, about middle-aged women who re-invent themselves after their lives fall apart, once again, due to domestic situations. The story ends nicely, the author with a new potential boyfriend, and everything back on track. Where are the female adventurer fuck ups? Where are their stories? And if there aren't any new Beryl Markhams out there (she wrote *West with the Night*), why not? Is it a marketing problem? Or a larger cultural paradigm that will be shattered only when the Junos of this world reach maturity?

I don't believe the truth about the bitch or the anti-heroine is out there in some textbook or academic journal. An anti-heroine can be a bitch, but that doesn't mean a bitch is necessarily an anti-heroine. The anti-heroine is a larger construct, dimensionally speaking, than bitch. I still consider Hedda Gabler to be a prototypical anti-heroine

because even though, as previously mentioned, she dwells only in the realm of the private but her suicide brings her into the public sphere. This is also true with Juno. Although Juno's dilemma is presented as a result of pregnancy, which would be considered private, her decision to put the baby up for adoption brings her actions into a larger, public realm. The anti-heroine's actions must be seen as a catalyst for further growth of the character herself, (even if that growth means suicide), and a conversation starter for audience members regarding her actions. This is in contrast to the bitch, who, it seems, everyone knows how to identify. The bitch is one-dimensional because it is selfishness that drives her. The anti-heroine is three-dimensional because she is caught up in a narrative that forces a complex response. The anti-heroine still creates ambivalence, either by her words or her actions. She is angry and/or refuses to follow the rules. She cannot be stereotyped, and she is heard. Her own subjectivity drives her forward, and she exists beyond the realm of relationship and mother.

The bitch is a large step towards the anti-heroine because it gives women a way to find their voices and allows them to say no. The bitch and the anti-heroine, as I've written about them, are the new heroines. The heroine is no longer just there, waiting for the man to return; the heroine is out living her own life. She may behave badly. She may have her own agenda. She definitely doesn't do everything right. She might be into finding a boyfriend or having a one-night stand with a total stranger. She might be a lesbian or straight. She could be highly outraged at the state of affairs in the world, or just mildly pissed off. She doesn't care if others are ambivalent about her behavior. She is who she is first, and everything else, and everyone else, comes second. The big plus

for all of my sisters out there in the worlds of reality, fictional or virtual, would be that they're also just a little bit funny.

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