Anak Sastra, Issue 10

Table of Contents

Jim Henry works as a lecturer in composition and creative writing at the American University in Dubai. He has published a collection of short stories, *Thank You for Being Concerned and Sensitive*, which won the 1997 Iowa Short Fiction Award. He has published several short stories in various journals, including *Hobart*.

Loren Sundlee has published stories in a variety of literary journals and magazines, one of which was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2011. In 2012 his poetry chapbook *Looking Both Ways* was published.

Yolanda Christian was born in Liverpool and moved to London where she was a professional artist for more than 20 years. Her literary fiction novel-in-progress, *Eye of an Artist*, is about a young but ingenuous painter who goes to Portuguese Macau in search of her roots. It is based on her own experiences as a part of the Portuguese colonial Diaspora and as a professional artist.

Elaine Bardard's stories have won awards and been published in several literary journals, including *Pearl*, *Southword*, *Apple Valley Review*, *Writers' Forum*, and *Timber Creek Review*. In 2010 she was a finalist for a Best of the Net Award. She holds an MFA from the University of California at Irvine.

Raymund P. Reyes works as an English teacher in the Middle East. He has published his stories and poetry in various magazines, journals, and anthologies in his native Philippines. He maintains a blog about his life as a migrant worker in Saudi Arabia.

* * * * *

January 2013 featured author interview with Jim Henry

Q. Why do you write? And what are some of your motivations?

I used to write out of the love of it. I always enjoyed it, and it helped me make sense of the world. This was when I was young. Now, writing has become something of a chore. I can enjoy it, at times, but I used to almost always love it. I write now for what are maybe not the most inspiring of reasons: mainly because I don't really have any idea what else to do with myself. I travel a lot, take tons and tons of photos, but still, there is this nagging sense that I somehow "am" a writer. This idea of "being" a "writer" used to fulfil me. Now, it brings with it a sense of dread, because I don't really know what it means.

Q. What is your writing process like? Do have any quirky writing habits?

I have nothing but quirky habits. In fact, I probably suffer from a mild form of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. I write in the mornings, listening to jazz, after two very large cappuccinos drunk while watching Al Jazeera. There are maybe 3 hours a day in which I can write. If I miss those hours, it's over for the day, and I have to wait until tomorrow.

Q. You have traveled extensively around Asia and the Middle East since 2002. How do your travels and experience living overseas factor into your writing?

My travel has changed me quite drastically, in ways I try to get at in the story "La Vida No Esta Bien." As an American, when I first travelled to South East Asia in 2002, I became almost disoriented, to choose a strange word. I began that trip in Singapore, which is arguably a first world city, and an extremely multicultural one. Even coming from the U.S., which is multicultural as well, and having lived most of my adult life in New York City and Chicago, two very multicultural cities, the vibrancy of Singapore delighted and surprised me.

After that, I went to Kuala Lumpur, also a developed world city, but not quite as rich as Singapore. It also thrilled me. After that Vietnam and Lao were thrilling and fascinating and disturbing and inspiring. Seeing the non-Western and somewhat less developed places in the world shook me. I loved being there and continue to travel in Asia every year for at least a month or two. But I believe seeing the world as I have has changed me and made me less certain about things. I've seen that what I thought I "knew" in my comfortable bubble of Western middle class existence is sort of a sanitized lie. I struggle putting into words what I feel I've learned in my travels because it is something deep inside me and I don't think I fully understand it myself. Not a very satisfying answer, I'm sure.

Q. You work in Dubai as a composition and creative writing instructor. Does teaching others writing techniques and styles help you grow as a writer? Is there any overlap between your personal writing and your career?

Teaching creative writing is nice because it keeps me focused on writing. At my university, we work very hard, and it's easy to forget about your non-academic work and let time just slide by.

Q. What is your most memorable experience about having lived or traveled in Southeast Asia?

I've had so many wonderful experiences in Southeast Asia. In my first trip to Ha Noi, I became friends with a local woman who worked at my hotel, and she took me around the city and showed me where she lived. It was a tiny box of a room with no windows and one light bulb hanging from the ceiling, yet she showed it to me with such pride and had a radiant smile and warm personality. It was overwhelmingly moving for me to see people who had so little and yet had so much, when we in the West have so much and yet have so little. This sort of thing happens to me all the time in my travels and is probably the main reason I continue, other than taking photos and my fascination with Eastern religions. I find Asian culture to be so rich and so complex and even as often as I've visited, I don't feel I know even a tiny

fraction of it. I'll always be an outsider, but what I see I treasure. So my most memorable Asian experiences almost all revolve around meeting a person: a monk in Mandalay, a shop keeper in Colombo, my motorbike guide in Hue, the hotel manager in Vientiane.

* * * * *

"La Vida No Esta Bien"

Most people I'd spoken to in the States told me that Vientiane, Laos, was really not much worth hanging around for very long. It was viewed mainly as a stopping-off point, a place one was forced to go to catch a domestic flight or bus to the interesting parts of the country's interior. But I'd never really been one for the interesting parts of a country's interior, preferring instead to sit in coffee shops in old colonial capitals and watch traffic patterns, the scavenging of street mutts, and the daily routines of the local people -- going to market, tending to their children, sweeping the streets in front of their shops, and doing the chore that seemed to occupy most of their time, emptying buckets of water into the street. And so that is pretty much what I did in Vientiane for 10 days or so. I also visited temples, Buddha Park, and bought a Chinese mountain bike at the morning market for forty dollars and rode it through villages no-handed videotaping rural Lao life, falling only once (and scraping my elbow pretty badly).

I spent my ten days in Vientiane at the Saysouly Guest House, which was managed by an exhausted young Lao woman from the countryside named Noi. We'd had a bad first encounter, over confusion, on my part, over how many baht and kip there were in a dollar. But, over time I came to like and admire Noi. She was only about 23 and worked there sometimes around the clock for days and days on end, sleeping on the couch in the lobby to check in backpackers who'd arrive in the middle of the night. She was always friendly and had a very warm smile and over time we began to talk. She was hesitant at first, fearing that, like so many *falang*, I was in Southeast Asia looking for a bar girl or for a wife. Noi had, I would learn, a seething contempt for her countrywomen who allowed themselves to be so treated by *falang*. But she slowly came to trust me and nearly every day we would have at least a half hour conversation on the patio in front of the guest house, sitting on the stone benches around a badly-weathered picnic table. During these conversations, Noi told me about her life. She lived about 15 kilometers from the guest house with her mother and father and seven brothers and sisters, all of whom depended on the 25 dollars a month she made at the guest house. I asked her why none of her siblings worked, and she said they only wanted to watch television. I asked why she didn't just move out and let them fend for themselves, and she peered at me as if I'd gone mad. "They are my family," she said.

"We just don't think that way in America."

"This is Lao."

I also learned that she'd recently been in a bad motorbike accident and had almost died from the head injuries she'd suffered (In 19 days in Laos, I did not see one Lao wearing a helmet). At first, she was treated in Vientiane where they stopped the bleeding and stitched up, very poorly, the gash that ran completely across her face, from left of her chin, across her cheek and nose, all the way to her right ear. But after being released she continued to have severe headaches and finally persuaded her boss to allow her to travel to Bangkok to see Thai doctors. They found several fragments of glass still embedded in her face, though I was never quite clear how deeply or exactly where. Sometimes it seemed she was telling me glass had been removed from her brain.

Noi asked about my life in the States, and I told her it was rather dull but that I was very comfortable by her standards, though not very well off by American standards. I told her I was a very unsuccessful writer of features for a bunch of the new crop of men's magazines that were sweeping the country, but that I made most of my money as an HTML coder. She surprised me by

knowing what that meant. She even said she knew a little HTML herself. “P tags, yes? Tables and . . . the other: Java?”

“P tags, yes. P tags.”

After ten days in Vientiane I’d booked a flight up to Luang Prabang, the old royal capital of the legendary Lan Xang Empire that ruled much of present day Laos from the 14th to the 17th centuries. I’d gotten a very bad dose of pagoda-fatigue by my second week in Vietnam and swore I would never again visit a tourist site of any kind, but for some reason, probably its name, I felt I had to see Luang Prabang. Noi was sad to see me go and on our last night she told me that I had a “good heart” and that knowing me would, she felt certain, bring her “power-heart and good luck.”

“You stay Room 24 again,” Noi said, “when you come back Vientiane.” She was standing out in front of the guest house as I tossed my huge bag into the back of a *tuk-tuk* with three Australian girls with about 15 tattoos -- and not a bra among them.

“I’m counting on it,” I shouted back.

“Did you go trekking?” one of the Aussie’s asked me after about a mile or two, lighting up a Gitanes.

“Do you mean *hiking*?” I asked.

They stared at me dully, hanging onto the bars above our heads as we bounced down the road.

“No. No *hiking* for me. I’m not much for the countryside. I’m a city-boy.”

“A Yank?” One of the others asked. This one had nipples the circumference of a Kennedy silver dollar.

“*Yank*? Yank what?” I asked, looking up at the ceiling of the *tuk-tuk*, searching in vain for a lever to yank.

They all looked at each other and rolled their eyes. In the three weeks I’d been there, I’d discovered little to do in Southeast Asia remotely as gratifying as mocking backpackers -- particularly Aussie backpackers.

The girls and I wished each other well at the airport. They were flying to Bangkok, while I was psyching myself up to take my flight on Lao Aviation, the national carrier; one that every Western government in the world advised its nationals to avoid. There was some confusion as to exactly why this was, however. A German couple I’d met at the Scandinavian Bakery in Vientiane told me it was because there were frequent, unreported crashes. An American stationed at the embassy who claimed, in a quite indiscreet tone of voice it seemed to me, to work for the DEA, told me it was because they didn’t have radar at any of the airports and that they in fact flew by sight. But, he assured me before reinvolving himself with the *Bangkok Post* in a cinematic flurry of snapping newsprint, “Flying by sight is nowhere near as dangerous or exotic as it sounds. It works just fine, provided there’s visibility,” he added with an expat wink.

My alternatives for getting to the Luang Prabang were few, and one of them involved a two-day river ride in a large canoe filled with filthy backpackers, who, I imagined, would pass the time spinning each other’s dirty blonde hair into corn rows and gleefully exchanging stories about the foul Asian toilets they’d endured, their endless bus rides with chickens and goats, and all the cheap opium they’d managed to ship home.

Death in a plane crash was, it can be easily seen, preferable.

As it turned out, however, the flight was perfectly fine. Lao Aviation was on a par with Vietnam Airways, which was itself maybe half a step below Malaysian Air. The plane was small and cramped and there were no peanuts, but it was constructed of the same sorts of metal and rivets I’d noticed back on our side of the globe, and it attained lift by way of the same roaring jet cylinders I’d seen power craft in and out of O’Hare for most of my life. And, anyway, the flight to Luang Prabang was only about 50 minutes long and the sun was out, so the pilots would have no trouble, presumably, spotting and then accurately hitting the airstrip.

In Luang Prabang, I stayed at a mid-priced backpackers place run by a very old man who grew elegant orchids around an old stone fountain in a courtyard between the guest rooms and the main

house. My room was large, well decorated, air conditioned, and came with a nice writing desk. The city itself was as rural a place as any I'd been in Asia: about 18,000 people if one is to believe *Lonely Planet*, (and one should never, ever believe anything in *Lonely Planet;* particularly anything preceded by the words "A must see . . ."). Add to this the backpackers and the population probably doubled.

#

When I got back to Vientiane, Noi's pleasure at seeing me reminded me of all the reasons I'd come to love Laos and the Lao.

"You came back?" she asked, genuinely surprised I'd kept my word.

"I told you I would. Have you saved Room 24 for me?"

She said she'd have to check and went behind the desk to look at some ledgers. She looked up and said, "Tomorrow. How long stay Vientiane?"

I told her six days, but then I had to get to Hanoi to start my trip back to Chicago.

"Tonight Room 25, just as big but no balcony. Then Room 24 until you leave."

The next day I returned to my regular Vientiane routine: a morning jog across the Thanon Fa Ngum, along the Mekong, to the Thanon Lan Xang all the way up to the Pha That Luang (the Great Stupa) and back, past the Patuxai, my favorite piece of Lao architecture. Built to resemble, and probably rival the Arc de Triomphe -- national symbol of their still hated colonial overlords -- it stands right in the middle of the Lan Xang, between the embassy district and the Great Stupa. After my jog, I'd get coffee with steamed milk and an egg sandwich on a croissant at the Scandinavian Bakery in the city's center, right by the fountain the nation of Laos is prosperous enough to pump water through approximately once a week for an hour or so. In the afternoons, I'd get on my Chinese mountain bike, which Noi had kept safe for me, and go for rides through the villages feeling like a lousy voyeur, the in-country representative of the Empire of Limitless Dreams. In the evenings, I'd check my email, eat a 90-cent dinner, and then I'd return to my room (at first Room 25, but then back to the luxurious Room 24, with its expansive verandah) and listen to the BBC until I fell asleep.

As the day of my departure from Laos approached, I began to sense a sadness in Noi, a sadness I deeply shared. We'd become about as close as culture, the rigid morals of Vientiane society, and Noi's intense fear of gossip would allow. We'd talk for at least an hour every day. Her spoken English was pretty good, better than almost any Vietnamese I'd met and better by a long-shot than any Lao.

The day before I left, as I returned from my run, I found Noi sitting in the front courtyard with a bottle of water for me. I told her I'd have to give her the 12,000 kip later since I didn't carry any cash with me when I ran.

"It is my present to you," she said.

It is very hot in Vientiane -- even at 8 in the morning and even in March -- so I drank nearly the whole bottle at one gulp.

"Are strong man. Run every day in Lao heat."

I told her many people in American ran like I did; it was not anything remarkable.

"In Lao, we work every day."

"We are very lucky in America," I told her, even though I knew it was not anything remotely like luck that made us rich and kept her poor.

Noi then suddenly got up and went back into the guest house as she often did. There seemed to be few greeting and departure rituals in Laos. People just got up and left when they needed to go somewhere and would just sit down and join you, no matter what you were doing, if they for whatever reason wanted to. I finished my water and was about to head up to Room 24 to take a shower when Noi came back out with more water.

"Sweaty man," she said, and handed it to me.

I sipped this bottle. Backpackers walked up and down the street, dogs, chickens, half-naked Lao children, luxury SUVs, old Citroens, *tuk-tuks* full of *falang* driven by weathered, nearly toothless Lao men.

"You stay in Vientiane," she said, as a sort of command.

"I have to get home. And I have a ticket for Hanoi for tomorrow."

"Tickets can change. You stay Vientiane."

"I'm sorry, Noi. I'm running out of money. This trip cost me almost everything I have. I have to get back to Chicago and try to earn some money."

She didn't say anything for a while, and then said that that night she would take me to eat real Lao food. "You like? Not what *falang* eat."

Having the stomach of a *falang* I was a little worried about this but was so touched at the offer I told her I would love for her to take me to have some real Lao food.

"I have to work. You go riding in the villages today?"

I nodded. She shook her head in dismay. It was sort of a joke between us. She couldn't understand why anyone would find a Lao village worth spending hours in the tropical sun riding a bicycle through to videotape. The joke started one day when I came down from my room in the morning on my way out for a jog, and she was wearing a shirt from the Chicago Blues Fest. When I saw her shirt, I said, very excitedly. "Chicago! That's where I'm from."

She nodded (I guess I'd already told her this) and then she pointed at my shirt. I hadn't even realized it but I was wearing a Lao P.D.R. (People's Democratic Republic) shirt. "And Lao my home!" I told her she was a very lucky woman to live in such a beautiful place, and she shook her head at this ludicrous notion and went back to her work. "You are not good in head maybe."

I spent the day in a village I found about six miles down the Fa Ngum along the Mekong, basking in the adoration of the children who ran out to see the crazy *falang* with the video camera. I'd film them, turning the viewing screen to face them, and they'd jump and wave in pure joy. I knew, from reading *The Nation* and from the post-colonial literary criticism I'd read in graduate school, that there was something vaguely -- or, more accurately, *overtly* -- sinister in my behavior, something voyeuristic, hegemonic, expropriating -- who could keep track of the pejoratives? But, even knowing I was the invader, the cultural thief, the imperialist scum, I enjoyed my days in the Lao villages, entertaining the children with my gadgetry about as much as I enjoyed anything in Southeast Asia, including making fun of Australian backpackers.

When it was time for dinner I came down from Room 24 and found Noi cleaning the lobby. I asked her about dinner and she said half an hour. I went and wandered the boutiques, picking up a silk shirt I have yet to wear and a couple of bootleg CDs: Cat Stevens and the Beatles. Cat for me and the Beatles for Noi. She'd told me a couple of days before that she'd never even heard of the Liverpudlians. When I got back to the guest house she pointed to the courtyard and told me to wait. I took out my notepad and my Lao phrase book and practiced the script, something I knew I'd never perfect but which amused me nonetheless. When Noi came out she giggled at the amateurishness of my attempts. I'd been trying to write, "Which way to Vientiane?", "How many kilometers to Vientiane?" and "I'm a vegetarian." Noi scribbled them out in the seconds, continuing to giggle. When she got to the vegetarian, message she looked a little concerned.

"You don't eat meat?"

"No."

"Lao food is meat."

I told her I could eat fish in a pinch, if it was caught in the river and not raised in cage.

"No," she said, "no."

I assumed this meant they were not raised in a cage (it did not; it meant they were not caught in the river).

"We go to river first. Please walk behind me."

I followed about 60 yards behind her down past the Fa Ngum into the dry river bed. The Mekong's width varies by about 60 percent depending on the season, and it was the dry season so there was about three football fields of dry, rocky riverbed, absolutely littered with garbage, between the Fa Ngum and the water. Noi was sitting on the edge of the river by the time I got there. She smiled up at me. "The other guest house girls think I am a bar girl if we walk together. The police will come."

"The police?" This seemed incredible to me. I knew Laos was a police state, but I didn't think they bothered with things like *falang* mingling with Lao.

"Yes, last year, the guest house across the street? They had bar girls. I called the police and they came and now it is closed. I do not want Lao to become Thai. No bar girls in Lao."

I told her this was good, a good thing for her to feel so passionately about. As I was routinely doing, it seemed, I apologized for the Western sex tourists that were destroying their countries.

"You are a good man." She said. "You have good heart."

"The Westerners ruin everything."

"I don't think so," Noi said. "Many *falang* are having good hearts."

"Well," I said. "Maybe. Except for the Australians."

Dry sarcasm does not translate well. There was some silence after my Australians remark. It was starting to cool off. Noi asked me to tell her about my life in America. I thought for a minute of lying, telling her it was something different than it was, but I knew she watched MTV and American broadcast network television shows like "Friends" and "Everybody Loves Raymond."

"We are very fortunate in America," I told her. "I grew up in a nice house in a nice suburb of a little city called Cleveland. I've lived in New York and Chicago. I spent nearly a decade just going to school. Sometimes I worked freelance (a word she needed explained to her) and so didn't really have to *go* to work anywhere. I worked at my house, writing."

"Switzerland man here once was writer too. He wanted to write about my life. I said, 'That good for your career, but how it help me?'"

"Well, I'm not much of a writer. Mostly I make my money with my web work. The Internet." I'd published a short-story collection with a tiny press that was completely ignored and had published a dozen or so stories in literary journals of widely varying renown.

"What does your house cost?"

"I live in an apartment, not a house. It's small, very small. The apartments in the big cities are small. But mine costs 900 dollars a month."

I thought she might scream or faint, but she just nodded.

"At the guest house, I make 20 dollars US in one month."

"I make that in about 20 minutes."

This was maybe not a good thing to say; there was more silence.

"What is the story you write?"

Her use of the singular made me laugh because the one newspaper that bothered to review my collection had written, "It's sufficient to read only one of the stories in this first collection, for they are all, at their essence, the same story."

"You laugh at Noi?"

"No, dear God, no." I touched her shoulder but she pulled away. There was not a person within 500 yards of us.

"It's just something I was thinking, about what you said about my stories. My stories are usually simple stories about people who have too much education and are unhappy."

"Like you?"

"Very much so. Very much like me."

"You are not happy?"

"Not particularly. Not really. No, no, I'm not happy. In fact, I'm probably going to kill myself in the next couple of years." This was my plan, though I hadn't told many people other than therapists and

a few close friends. Life was nice, but it was, in all honesty -- and I'd even gotten one therapist to concede this point to me -- it was, by a factor of three or four, more tiresome and frustrating than it was rewarding or interesting -- on any level. I'd given it forty years, and would probably give it another decade or so, but that was plenty. As a writer, I'd come to believe that the story was over when *I said* the story was over. It was my call and nobody else's.

A small child suddenly appeared a few dozen yards down the bank of the Mekong, running toward us. He looked about 5 years old and was by himself, wearing only a pair of red shorts. His head was completely shaved and his eyes were so wide he looked to me deranged, though I'm sure he was not.

"The little boy," Noi said, pointing to him.

"What's he doing?

"Bathing. Maybe bathing."

Then, sure enough, the little boy stopped about 20 yards from us and slid down the steep sandy bank into the river, took off his shorts and began splashing frantically.

"You tell me a story and then we get dinner. One of your stories."

I told her I didn't know any of my stories well enough to recite one.

"Recite?"

"Say it from memory."

"Tell new one. Then we get Lao food."

"Okay." I thought of a story I could tell her. God knows after seven weeks in Vietnam and Laos I should have plenty of stories to tell. "Well, I can tell you a story about Luang Prabang?"

Noi nodded. "Then Lao food."

#

Well, it was a beautiful city high in the mountains and was full of pagodas and temples and there are many stories I could tell, but I'll tell you about my first full day there. I took a river ride out to some cave where thousands of Buddha statues were hidden, and as I was engaging a boatman, a lanky Dutchman

"Lanky . . ."

A skinny man from Holland trotted up and asked if he could join me, and then without even waiting for an answer, tossed his little pack into the boat. We asked each other where we each lived and then we talked of Laos and a bit about Vietnam. He wasn't terribly pleased with either and was on his way to a beach resort in Thailand.

"Thai?"

Thai.

I pointed across the river.

Yes, to Thai. In time, it was revealed that he'd gone to school in Austin, Texas, a famous school in America, where he'd earned an MBA -- You know what that means?

"No matter. I just listen now. I like your voice."

So he'd earned an MBA from the University of Texas at Austin and had then gone to work for Deutschebank, one of the richest companies on the planet. And, because of these events, he'd come to believe that the best cure for what anyone would agree is a terribly, terribly sick stricken world was the benevolent hand of free market capitalism.

I looked at Noi. She was cleaning the dirt from her filthy toenails and seemed to be barely listening, sort of like my reading public back in the States.

Capital must simply be deregulated, he told me, as if it were divinely revealed fact. It really was that simple. The power of enlightened self-interest, a modicum of Europeanized greed, and the universal desire to better one's lot in life, if allowed to just flourish unfettered would bring about, certainly not a Utopia, but a much better life for all of us here in the new global marketplace . "But the government," he said, shaking his head. "Taxes. Do you know what we pay in Holland?"

I mentioned trivialities like the Clean Water Act and laws governing worker rights. He polished his glasses, squinted into the sun. This went on for some time.

"But the evidence is everywhere you look," he said at one point, making a sweeping gesture, meaning to indicate, I understood, the entirety of creation, all that had been made right and good by the free flow of goods and services. But really what he ended up pointing out were some naked toddlers swimming along the muddy banks of the Mekong -- like our little boy over there -- (I pointed, but he was gone.)

"Oh!" Noi got very worried and stood up, dusting off her skirt and looking all around the expanse of dried riverbed. The she spotted him further out into the river, where the water must have been well above his head. This made me quite nervous.

"He can swim?"

Noi nodded. "The story."

All he really pointed to were some naked kids cooling their bodies from the heat and, at the same time, generously offering their bodies as hosts for any number of the hundred thousand varieties of famished parasites sharing the Mekong with them.

Global economics had come up about halfway through our journey when I'd had the temerity to suggest we give our boatman twice his asking price, considering he had three children and a wife to support and what he was charging us (12 dollars, split between us, for six hours of work) would not even buy us something as idiotic and useless as a Rolling Stones CD back home in paradise.

The flaws in my logic, the weakness in my heart, were so repellent, he could barely respond. "We must not disrupt the price system." There was a very real danger, he warned, that if we gave this poor man and his starving family an extra ten or fifteen dollars, he might come to expect such irrational exuberance from the thousands of Westerners gliding in and out of their sacred temples and quaint village markets, Westerners who were, after all, traveling on a budget.

"The skinny man is talking these things?"

Yes, the lanky Dutchman.

"Lang-key Dutch-man. Skinny and from Holland, yes?"

Exactly.

Noi giggled.

We both sort of hated each other right away, so obviously on different sides of the fence. It was visceral at times.

So we went to the Buddha cave, which was very badly lit, and then the boatman took us to a village to eat. There were many villagers with a market set up to sell little bags and hats and shorts that they thought tourists might like. I thought they were all pretty ugly, but I bought a lot because I wanted to give them some money. This caused me and the lanky Dutchman to argue yet some more when he saw me laden with junky trinkets back on the boat. He said, "What will you do with all that?" I told him I'd probably give it some Lao children to resell to other tourists or use it as gifts for people back home." He just shook his head like I was a madman. Like I was crazy.

"They need the money. Lao are very poor."

So then after the village shopping and some lunch, the boatman took us back Luang Prabang. I went to my hotel and took a nap.

"Was the guest house nice?"

Not as nice as the Saysouly. And nobody as nice as you in all of Luang Prabang.

She barely reacted. Flirting, like sarcasm, evidently doesn't translate well.

So I went back to my hotel and took a nap and then went out for dinner later to an Indian restaurant on one of the main streets -- I forget their names. It's all falang *in Luang Prabang. Ten* falang *for every Lao, or at least that is how it seemed. Anyway, I was reading a book I'd got in Hanoi about the American War, written by a female soldier for the Viet Cong and then the lang-key Dutch-man*

"No make fun of grammar."

"Sorry, your grammar is excellent. The lanky Dutchman appeared at my table and asked if he could join me. I was shocked because it seemed to me that we'd gotten along terribly, but I said, "Sure, sit down."

He knocked a few things aside with his big bony Dutch knees and asked me what I was getting. He suggested we split an entree but I told him I wanted my own, that I was very hungry. This seemed odd to him. It must be against either the Dutch way or the backpacker ethic, which, after seven weeks, is still more mysterious to me than even Vietnamese Buddhism. But so we made some stupid conversation about EU enlargement, which he is against, unsurprisingly, and I made a sarcastic comment about, yeah, why spread the wealth?

Well, this made him drop his fork and stare at me very angrily. This is what he said to me, as well as I can remember. "Look, I know what you think of me, that I'm some kind of ruthlessly self-interested Thatcherite, or, since you are an American maybe you've not heard of the Iron Lady, so I should probably say 'Reaganite.' But it's not that simple. Before getting my MBA I studied what an American would probably call 'comparative literature' and philosophy at Oxford. Capitalism does more than lift all boats. Capitalist societies force people to think in increasingly abstract and complex ways as they adapt to new strategies for survival. In agricultural societies, like your beloved Laos, people feed themselves in simple ways. The grow food, catch it in the Mekong, whatever. But when capitalism comes, they have to learn to value goods in relation to pieces of metal or paper. This is a new kind of thinking. Things are assigned values and a person is forced to make considered judgments about what value to associate with what need. The means to feed oneself change and soon they have nothing to do with the production of food. One can do nothing but pound metal for a living or rent motorbikes or hotel rooms.

"Or stitch Nike swishes onto running shoes."

"That too. But the point, to avoid liberal clichés, is that as capital distances people further and further from the production of safety and warmth, they become free to develop in all sorts of other ways. Capitalism allows the two of us to sit here eating this food, surrounded by other Westerners, and someday capitalism will allow the Lao to come to Chicago or Frankfurt and eat our foods and buy our trinkets.

"It is very difficult for Lao to leave the country," Noi said, still cleaning the dirt from her toenails.

I wasn't buying it either.

"Skinny man don't know Lao. Much paperwork and we have to have a sponsor in another country. Very hard to leave Lao."

I shrugged.

This is what he said to me. Then our somosas came and we ate without really saying anything else. The next day I flew back here, to Vientiane.

#

Noi was done cleaning her toenails and now was drawing circles in the dirt. "I don't understand the story, but we go eat Lao food now. The lanky Dutchman should have given the boatman 12 dollars. Lao are very poor." She got up. "Please walk behind me."

She got up, straightened her Lao skirt and walked back across the dried riverbed to the Fa Ngum. I watched her the entire way. Back at the guest house, I washed my feet in the hose by the door and went up to my room to change for dinner. I was rather sandy from our time in the dry riverbed of the Mekong. Around 7 p.m., Noi came and knocked on my door and said it was time to go eat Lao food and she led me through Vientiane, in a direction I hadn't gone before, past all the boutiques and tourist restaurants. She took me to what is probably best described as a garage where a dozen or so Lao were seated on small plastic chair around low stone tables. I wasn't quite sure why, but it was now okay to walk relatively close to each other and even to be seen going into this restaurant together. We took a seat very near the rear of the restaurant, and Noi told me she would order everything for us and then warned me yet again that this was "real Lao food, not *falang* food."

A waitress came over and she and Noi spoke to each other in Lao as though they were close friends, pointing to me periodically and smiling. While we waited for our food, Noi asked me again about my family. Did I live with them? How many brothers and sisters did I have? I did my best to explain all the complicated dynamics of the Western family structure, particular the American family, which is usually spread out over many states, hundreds, if not thousands, of miles apart. I told her I saw my family a couple of times a year, usually on the holidays.

"Christmas," she said, smiling.

"You know a lot of surprising English words," I told her.

"Many *falang* come guest house teach me. Some languages other than English. Spain-man here while you were in Luang Prabang taught me to say . . ." she trailed off and tried to remember, but then shook her head. "Oh!" Then she looked in cheap plastic purse she carried around her neck. On it was scribbled a Spanish phrase which she read to me as best she could, but I couldn't understand what she was saying. I held my hand out to ask for the paper and read it. The Spaniard had written, "La vida no esta bien."

"It says, 'La vida no esta bien'"

"La vida . . ."

"No esta."

"No ess-ta."

"Bee-en"

Bee-en."

"Exactly," I said. "Now repeat the whole thing."

She was about to when our food arrived. The Lao food was a pile of unwashed, decidedly unexotic vegetables and a freshly fried fish, complete with skin, fins, head, and tail.

Noi showed me how to eat the food, by taking a leaf of lettuce, putting some of the sliced, unwashed vegetables in it, and then picking at the fish, with her fingers, to also add to the concoction. She handed the first one she made to me and I took a bite, and although it tasted horrible, and I was horrified to be eating this poor dead creature, I smiled as best I could.

"This is what Lao eat every day," she said proudly.

The waitress brought us some water and we drank and ate in relative silence, since, although her English was quite good, it was difficult for her. I also got the impression that she did not want us to appear too intimate in public. After finishing the dinner, the waitress brought us some tea and Noi asked me how I liked traditional Lao food. I said it was okay, but she didn't believe me.

"I can tell you did not like. And the fish made you sad."

I told her it was true, and she said we would go get a baguette, the sustenance of the backpacker in Vientiane, which are sold all over town. Noi paid, despite my pleadings that I had plenty of money and she should not have to pay for an American to eat dinner. But she just completely ignored me and paid the bill. Out on the now darkened street, we could actually walk side by side. In an alley leading to a bakery where we could pick up a couple baguettes with butter, she asked me what the words the Spain-man taught her meant.

"Well," I said. "'La vida' means 'life', 'to live'. 'No esta' means 'is not' and 'bien' means 'good.'"

"To live is not good?"

"Yes," I said. "To live is not good. More accurately, 'Life is no good.'"

She was bewildered. "Life is no good? Spain-man rich, travel all over world and he say 'Life is no good?'"

The rumbling of a *tuk-tuk* came up behind us, and I touched Noi's shoulder and gently led her off the street, a needless maneuver considering she'd been making her way through these streets (which as far as I could tell in my weeks there had absolutely no traffic rules) all her life. The *tuk-tuk* passed us, its rear filled with weary looking backpackers, probably fresh from the late flight from Bangkok. When the noise was passed and we emerged on the main road, Noi repeated her

astonishment at the Spain-man. “Lao can go nowhere. We have nothing. Spain-man say ‘Life is no good’?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “People in the West are not happy. They may have money, but many of them are not happy.” I’d told her this dozens of times but knew each time that she had no idea what I was talking about. It was beyond her how these *falang* that came and went from her guest house, spending weeks just lying around, drinking Lao beer, taking long tours of her country, looking so young and healthy and undamaged from motorbike accidents, how any of these people could be unhappy.

At the bakery, I got two baguettes, thinking Noi would want one too, but she refused. Back at the guest house she said she must get back to work now and I took my baguettes up to my room. I went out onto the balcony which looked out over a side street. Across the way was a local house. Three young children were playing in the front yard, their mother sitting behind them on a plastic chair, fanning herself with a plastic fan. A man came out and sat next to her, handing her a cup of tea. They sat and stared at their children as I opened up a Beer Lao, tuned my shortwave to the BBC, and ate my sandwich.

* * * * *

"Palawan"

The taxi turned into the Cebu City Northern Bus Terminal where buses sat angle-parked and attendants called their buses' destinations and solicited travelers to fill their empty seats. "Where you are going?" asked the driver.

"Bantayan," answered the man in the back seat. The driver slowed and peered at the signs on the buses.

"I can drive you Bantayan," said the driver. "Get there faster. Not have to ride crowded bus."

"Bus is OK," he said. The woman in the back seat frowned. The driver turned back to the buses. "There."

As the driver unloaded their bags, a teenager from the bus ran to them. "You go to Bantayan?," he asked the man, who could see that the bus was nearly full of passengers.

"Do you have a front seat available?," the man asked. The boy glanced back at the bus and shook his head. "Only back," he said. "Back is very good. Not so crowded."

The man reached into his pocket and pulled out some bills, offered a couple to the boy and said, "Find us seats up front, and we ride your bus." The boy looked at the money. Then he seemed to notice the girl for the first time and spoke to her in Tagalog. She translated for the man. "He says the front is very crowded, the music will be loud, and the film. Middle is better."

"VIP's up front, no doubt," the man said and handed the bills to the boy. "Middle," he said.

The boy took the bills back to an older man who would be the driver. The man nodded and climbed onto the bus. Soon they saw two passengers -- a woman and a young girl -- pick up their belongings and move to the back of the bus. The man began to say something but checked himself and motioned for the girl to climb aboard.

The bus seats sagged with the impressions of thousands of rumps, of women whose laps seated infants or children too large for laps, of men in short-sleeved, collared shirts, khaki pants and sandals, of girls in clean and pressed polo shirts, their black, glistening hair held back by berets, their eyes flashing or furtive. The laps without children seated boxes or bags of clothes or produce, whatever would not fit overhead or in the aisle. Or if their laps held none of these, they held the clasped hands of the passenger heavy with patience or prayers. For these, the icons at the front of the bus above the windshield served -- the beatific painting of the Virgin and Child, and the Bible verse, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

Behind and above the driver was mounted a television set and a VCR. Every few kilometers the bus would stop for new passengers, some traveling light, others with large bags or boxes. Couples squeezed together to make room for a third in the seat, but when a

woman sidled down the aisle to where the man and girl sat, she glanced at them, at the man's long legs in the aisle and pushed on toward the back.

The man's name was Saltness. He bought furniture for a shop he owned with a partner in Portland. Having finished his buying early, he had a few days to kill before flying home for Easter. On his one previous trip to the Philippines in August, he had met an Australian at his hotel who had talked about girls for hire. They called them vacation partners. Saltness had doubted many of the garrulous Aussie's details, but in the months that followed his own imagination had painted him a paradise. Less than a full day into the arrangement, he was still optimistic, though he was beginning to regret not hiring a private taxi for their trip to Bantayan.

Finding the girl had been the easy part. The signs of poverty were everywhere, and families lucky enough to have a pretty daughter could survive on her income better than by their other miserable means. He had seen where these girls came from -- the rows of shacks that lined railroad tracks and highways, the country people driven to the cities by the drought, and finding no work in the cities, driven to desperation. He had no problem seeing the economic benevolence in his deal. He was paying the girl well by Philippine standards, and he would treat her well.

Saltness had almost backed out on the plan after talking to the woman on the phone. It struck him as slumming. He associated it with underworld corruption and vice. With relief he found the place clean and bright, outwardly as well or better appointed than many business offices he had seen. A middle-aged woman with glasses sat at a desk with a stack of papers, a telephone, and a fax.

The woman took him to an adjoining room with a small couch and a couple of cushioned chairs at one end. The other side of the room was bare of furnishings and had a door at the left side. The woman told him to sit down, walked to the door, and said, "Come in, ladies." Ladies they certainly were in that professional sense, but for some the term "girls" seemed more appropriate. He judged them to be at most twenty-two, while one could hardly have been sixteen -- though the woman had assured him that all were of "legal age." All wore heels, short skirts and blouses, earrings, and mostly long hair. The uniformity told Saltness what the sporting man -- native or foreigner -- preferred. They were five, and though none was unattractive, he felt disappointed at his choices. The woman handed him a note pad and a pen. "You may write down the name of your choice, sir," she said. Then she asked them to tell him their names. Not wanting to offend, he wrote down each name. "Would you like to ask them questions, sir?," the woman asked. He was stunned. What could he ask? Was this a job interview? Should he ask for previous experience? For special skills or talents? What did he expect of a woman whom he would pay to spend several days and nights with him? What could they say that would enhance their chances of getting this job? Something told him they did want this job -- the way they stood, one foot in front of the other as in a swim suit competition, shoulders back, chests forward, smiling when everything in the room harangued that there was nothing to smile about. Only the one second from the right seemed natural. Her hair was shorter than the others, and her face, though smiling too, did not flash her white teeth in exaggerated joy but as if all of this was a joke not wasted on her. Saltness checked his notes. "May," he said. "Do you like to swim?"

The older woman took him to the front office, where he paid his fee. In a chair by the front door sat a large man who glowered at Saltness, the muscles of his arms and thighs bulging against the fabric of his clothes. The woman asked Saltness where he and the girl

were going, when they would return, told him the extra charges for additional days. In a few minutes, May came from the inner room carrying a travel bag. The woman said something to the girl that Saltness didn't understand and then said goodbye in English. When they were out on the sidewalk, Saltness asked the girl, "Who's the muscles?" and nodded toward the office. "Oh, that just Johan. He helps Marie out. He's an idiot."

The film on the bus was about an ex-marine who takes a job substituting in an inner-city school where his teacher brother had been killed. He almost single-handedly takes on a gang of young blacks, presumably his brother's killers. His sidekick becomes a janitor (also black, also an ex-GI) who happens to keep a small arsenal in the basement of the school. Of course, the two use their fighting skills and superior weapons to gain a reckoning over the hoods. Power prevails.

When the film finished, the bus pulled into a parking lot. At the back of the lot stood a bakery/concession stand with miniature loaves of bread and buns of various sizes and packages of Blue Skies cream crackers. High above the counter ran strings with cup-sized packets of Nescafe and Ovaltine. Bottles of San Miguel beer, Seven Crowns whiskey, and bottles of Pepsi-Cola lined the shelves behind the two girls working the counter. A cooler at one end of the counter kept cold sodas, which the girls served with straws. The girls gabbed and laughed with the customers and each other in the easy way Saltness had found typical of the Filipinos. While waiting for May, he took his small short-wave radio from his shoulder bag and scanned the frequencies he had memorized for the BBC and Voice of America. He concentrated, listening for the faint messages but got no clear signal.

Much depended on the stock market. Eight years earlier his maiden aunt had died and left him a large inheritance. A stockbroker friend of his business partner had got him into some mutual funds, and they had done well. Very well. He had it figured that he could sell out his share of the business and live simply in the Philippines for a long time. The only concern was for a big, sudden sell-off on Wall Street before he could unload his shares. His broker had convinced him that all was well and that all Saltness needed to do was give him a call, and he would sell should things get shaky.

He looked up to see May striding toward him, slim and strong with the confidence of someone who likes where she is going. She smiled at him, and for a moment he forgot that this was business. They moved toward the bus and passed a circle of passengers talking animatedly. May hesitated and leaned to listen. "What is it?" he asked.

"They say a ferry has sunk near Bantayan. A big ferry with many people." She gestured toward the bus. "You go. I will ask more." Saltness boarded and watched through the window as May spoke with the driver. He had wondered how the natives would treat May, seeing her with a foreigner -- if they would scorn or belittle her in this very Catholic country. But he saw no sign of it. She seemed to be treated like anyone else, and if the men's eyes appeared to linger over her longer than the other girls, he could hardly blame them.

"He says our ferry may be delayed -- that they are using it for the surviving passengers. The big ferry was going from Cebu City to Iloilo, filled with holiday passengers. Sometimes they take too many passengers."

"What can we do then? Are there other ways to get to the island?"

"I don't think so," she said. Then she smiled. "Don't worry. It will be all right." Something in that remark failed to console him. She had likely seen much worse circumstances and survived, but he was not here to survive. This was his paradise.

The bus stopped a short distance from the ferry dock. A crowd already milled there, and Saltness could see trouble. A gate blocked their way to the dock, and a man there charged them a couple of pesos tax to use the dock. The road was lined with concession stands selling snacks, drinks, fruit, and an assortment of simple rice dishes. To their right a large tent bustled with women and children getting out of the sun and dozens of crates of chicks piled one atop the other apparently also waiting for the ferry. May asked when the next ferry would come and was told it was due in a couple of hours.

Saltness took out his radio and held it to his ear as he turned the dial. May mingled with the other passengers, so he wandered to a far end of the dock area away from the noise. A man and a woman had a sandal and played keep-away from a young girl who was laughing and running from one to the other trying to intercept. He found a station and listened for several minutes. The broadcaster from the BBC briefly noted that a ferry had sunk off the Philippine island of Bantayan and that the authorities were unsure of the exact number of casualties. Then, in the same tone, he said that the American stock markets had dropped dramatically in heavy trading. The second day in a row.

Saltness peered out to sea. He couldn't tell if what he saw on the skyline was an island or just clouds, but he knew that in that direction was Bantayan and beyond that the large islands of Negros and Panay. They held no real interest for him. It was beyond those that he looked, to Palawan, the long slip of green stretching two hundred miles along the western edge of The Philippines. Less developed than other islands, it shone in luscious innocence, white beaches surrounding jungle and beads of small villages and towns strung along one main road. More than anywhere else, that place had captivated his imagination, his conception of paradise. There he could start over, live simply, fully, ingratiate himself to these good people, think and live their way in return for their acceptance.

Commotion rose on the dock. People stood on tiptoes looking out to sea where a ferry approached then scurried to pick up their bags and surge toward the end of the dock. A uniformed employee of the ferry company shouted for their attention and delivered a message. May had been talking with passengers but now came over to him with a translation. "These are survivors of the ferry to Iloilo. They will go back to Cebu." The buses lined up outside the terminal gate.

The ferry docked and Filipino soldiers led the passengers down the wooden ramp to the dock, clearing the way through the silent, staring counterparts hoping to ride the other way. The survivors looked as if they had pulled from the water a few hours ago, their clothes wrinkled, and their hair dried stiff with salt water. All wore life vests. Some smiled or laughed, seeming perfectly healthy. Others appeared exhausted or perhaps in shock. One woman was on crutches and grimaced as two others helped her along. Saltness wondered how many life vests the huge ferry had carried. If it had been overloaded with passengers, as the news reports hinted, the fate of those without vests was obvious. Like in musical chairs, the slowest to take a seat was left standing. Floating, in this case. Sinking. May mumbled something he didn't understand. The last survivor had barely passed when the crowd surged forward eager to get a place on the return trip to Bantayan. Saltness and May were carried forward with them before he had quite recovered from the scene. Suddenly furious and feeling the hopelessness of resisting, Saltness hefted their bags above his head and waded through the smaller natives, May following in his wake, until they were near the ramp and the white-uniformed ferryman mechanically taking tickets.

A deck with a bamboo post rail ran along the front of the hut where Saltness sat in a wooden chair, his bare feet resting on the rail. Between the resort restaurant and a copse of coconut palms that began another line of huts he could see a patch of the beach and the horizon, like a window through which you watch from the far side of your room. You can see without being seen, but your range is limited, the angle of your vision cut down. People walked down the beach, boats passed in the water, and he had to watch closely, intently to see what he could of them in the few seconds.

It was their second day on Bantayan. The first night they had arrived late and weary, showered, and dropped into bed. It was May's cool nipples against his chest that chased the fatigue and reminded him of his few emerald days and nights on this still moon of an island. On the first night, in Lapu Lapu, May had been a willing lover, as Saltness had expected -- this being her main duty in her occupation. (He wondered what kind of report card the woman in Cebu would keep from her customers' comments.) Here she had been equally attentive, but it seemed natural for him to want more, more than an encore of the night before. Her stroking and nuzzling seemed too familiar, and when she tried to pull him on top of her he resisted. He would get his money's worth.

He rolled onto his back and placed his hands on her neck. They fit perfectly between her collarbone and jaw and for a few moments rested there firm and adoring. Then he pulled her slowly downward, giving her time to kiss his shoulder, his ribs, his navel. She giggled -- the one thing that most reminded him of her age -- and said, "O, Mr. Salty. You are a very bad man." She giggled again before continuing the route of his hands.

They walked down the street into the village and came to a shop bearing a hand-painted sign that read "Shells." As Saltness and May entered, he could see that the place had survived previous incarnations and had been originally built for grander purposes. On shelves by the entry large conch shells had been rigged with light bulbs for lamps. An assortment of smaller shells sat under glass in the front counter while behind, against the front wall, lay others -- delicate, opalescent, bizarre. A halfway open door in the back led to a kitchen where a young woman stirred something while saddling a baby on her hip.

A woman rose from her chair behind the counter as they entered. Her hair had turned to pewter; her eyes appraised the new customers in turn. Then she spoke in English. "Good morning. All of my shells are from the waters off Bantayan. Some are very rare." She paused and let Saltness scan the room. A few he recognized -- scallops and common cowries. Others were strange and exotic in their architecture. May glanced casually at the collection. After one look, the woman seemed to ignore her completely. Saltness stopped at a copper-colored spiral that wound to a perfect point at one end while the other tapered to a sleek rat's tail.

"*Tibia Fusus Linne,*" she said. "Years ago my husband (she crossed herself) dove down sixty feet to find one. Today only scuba divers and trawlers get them. The common name is Spindle Tibia. They are rare now." Saltness grinned as if to say *of course they are*.

"Looks like an ice cream cornet," he said of a small tan cone with a white and brown mottled cap.

"*Conus Mustelinus,"* she said. Looks harmless, doesn't it. They have a stinger that can be very painful, even fatal."

"I bet it's rare, too -- and a good thing," Saltness teased.

Unfazed, she replied, "This one is uncommon because of the two rows of brown spots round the middle. Looks good enough to eat, doesn't it. But alive it could kill you. Sometimes that is the way with beautiful things." She placed the cone on the counter next to the spindle.

Saltness pointed out shells he found particularly strange or beautiful, and the woman explained each one, giving its common and Latin names. "How did you learn so much about shells?," he asked.

"When I was a young girl, I dove for them to sell and help feed my family. That is how I met my husband. He could dive deeper, but I could stay down longer. We did that for many years, even after the children came."

"You must have seen wonderful things."

"Once while we were down, a whale shark passed over us and blotted out the light like a huge cloud. I screamed under water and lost all my air. My husband saw and put his mouth to mine, giving me some of his air. We both nearly drowned." She laughed.

Soon the counter was littered with shells. Saltness noticed two white scallops with long spines. Though only a few inches in diameter, they looked ferocious, like predator sea urchins.

"*Spondylus crosse,"* she said. "Chrysanthemum oyster." She reached under the counter for them.

"Just one," he said, but she set both on the counter. Then he could see why. They were joined together.

"Apart they are common," the woman said. "Connected together they are very uncommon."

Saltness scanned the room. "The lamp shells," he said. "We call them conchs."

"*Charonia Tritonis,"* she said. "Pacific Triton. I have heard that in Japan the Shinto priests blow these to call people to prayer. The sound is very haunting, very beautiful."

She found a box and wrapped each fragile calcification in newspaper. When they were all wrapped and paid for, Saltness walked out with a box lighter than a pair of shoes.

Finding the resort beach too rocky and unpredictable, they learned of a community swimming pool a mile away and hired two boys on motorbikes with sidecars to drive them. Maybe thirty yards from the rocky beach cliff, the pool paralleled the water and gleamed in its unreal purity and opacity. A few couples -- mostly tourists like themselves and also native families -- played in the water or lounged under umbrellas on the grassy perimeter. On the opposite side from the beach, a stone path led to a cavern. Steps cut in the stone descended to a large rock from which they could see two fresh water pools with dim lights placed at the far ends. Older kids and some of the young couples eased down and slipped into the dark waters, May among them. "Come in. It's cool," she beckoned. She spoke to another Filipino girl and both laughed. She waved him in, and he was about to descend when a middle-aged Filipino man beside him spoke.

"Why not swim? Magellan probably did." He scanned the interior. "He and his men had to find clean, fresh water. This is one of the few easily accessible pools among all the islands. They probably loaded their barrels here before setting off again."

"Was it before or after Lapu Lapu?" Saltness asked. He knew the story of the native warrior, had seen his romantic statue in dingy downtown Cebu.

"Well, if Magellan was here, it had to be before, didn't it?," the man replied. He introduced himself as a professor of history at the university in Cebu. "Of course, they had to have help from the natives to find this place. Nothing of it was visible from the sea. So some helped and some hurt, and one way or another, we acquired the Spanish language and Catholic religion."

"Maybe that was Magellan's revenge."

"Ah, his revenge is everywhere." The professor smiled.

May played in the grotto pool with other Filipinos, her white teeth and glistening black hair as stunning and perpetually youthful as it must have seemed to Magellan's men almost five hundred years ago. A paradise for the taking. Those forests were the bamboo, palm, and rattan. And they were the *luaun*, the Philippine mahogany that made Saltness's furniture.

"She is a very pretty girl," the professor said. "And you are a lucky man." He said goodbye and rejoined his party by the pool.

Saltness stood at the end of the pier, the placid, turquoise sea stretching away like an extension of himself, diffusing westward toward Palawan. In his hand, the Sony portable short-wave radio scratched and squeaked as he searched for a band with a clear signal. He tried one after the other, checking his watch for the hour when Voice of America would sign on.

The resort woke slowly. Someone hummed the old Eagles tune "Lyin' Eyes" in the kitchen. On the beach a boy in dark shorts and a white t-shirt used a palm frond to sweep up the night's flotsam. Any other day, Saltness might have made this peace last the whole day, used it to reconcile all mayhem and corruption. But this morning he listened to the "Yankee Doodle" theme and braced himself for what his bones felt was coming. And it came. The American markets sank drastically for the third day in a row, this time even worse than yesterday. He turned and strode back to the shore, across the loose sand and up the path toward their hut where May had finished her shower and was drying her hair with a towel.

"When does the post office open?," he asked.

The two boys with cycles were at the gate as if they expected them. This time Saltness paid for one bike and squeezed both he and May into the sidecar. The engine snarled under their weight as they weaved around the puddles from last night's rain. It was only about a mile and a half, but Saltness could see well enough what was happening to the town. Trees had been cut back for developments. Here and there a building stood in a field of red mud -- some finished, others partially done and apparently abandoned. They passed a yard of junked cars behind a high fence with a padlocked gate, testimony to the value of used parts and of the machines that growled on for decades on cannibalized organs.

The new post office sat back from the road. Cars and cycles scrambled in a small lot. That chaos stopped at a set of pillars and a gravel path to the building. Inside, one bench lined a wall where they waited their turn to see the postmistress, a middle-aged woman who contributed to the majesty of her domain and position with her elaborate deliberations. Forty minutes later they approached the window.

"He would like to call the United States," May said.

Saltness breathed deeply. "A number in the state of Oregon.

"Do you have the number?," May asked. He handed it to the woman who moved to another window and dialed the phone. In a few seconds she hung up the phone and spoke to May. "She says she can't get through now."

"Then when?," he asked. May asked and said the woman would try again in a few minutes.

The heat was up and the puddles in the road had dried on their edges as Saltness and May rode back to the resort past family-run kiosks -- makeshift huts in front of houses selling soft drinks, cigarettes, and mystery snacks in glass jars. A woman sold shells. Little boys played a game throwing their rubber flip flops. The noise of the motorbike and smell of gas and oil nauseated Saltness. They arrived just in time. He paid without tipping and shuffled toward their hut.

The day stretched out before him like a vast ocean in which he found himself as in a nightmare. He should have known better than to pick a place like this -- remote, subject to the whims of backward communications. The other side of the world was turning into night, and even if he could get a call through now he would only get recorded messages, machines that only spoke to other machines, to touch-tone phones. He could just as well have been on the other side of the solar system.

They caught a bus into the main town across the island. It occurred to him that under slightly different circumstances he would enjoy the lazy ambling through streets and shops, watching the locals, buying things for May. Her youth and beauty would vitalize him, and he would urge the day to pass so he could take her back to their hut. They ate lunch at a small, cheap café. He drank a second then a third San Miguel while May sat bored.

After an hour a couple with a baby came in and sat down. He was an American, she a Filipino. They ordered food and he produced a bottle of Seven Crowns whiskey. He ordered a Coke and settled in. She tended the baby while he drank. Saltness wasn't sure how he knew the guy was ex-military. Maybe the haircut, the cigarettes, the tattoo, the way he cozied around the whiskey and Coke. The woman was younger than him, pretty though haggard as most mothers are who travel with babies. Abruptly, Saltness stood up, paid for the food and beers and said, "Let's go."

On the ride back, May tried to humor him with commentary on the people, the island. "Bantayan is famous for its chickens," she said. "They raise many chickens and sell them and their eggs all over Cebu."

From their dinner table on the beach, they gazed out to sea, occasionally spotting a far distant light -- maybe a fishing boat or some speck of an island invisible by day. "That must be the loneliest light in the world," he said. "Do you get lonely, May?"

She laughed. "Today, I was a little lonely because you seemed so far away."

She has learned what to say, he thought. She has picked up the charms of her trade and no doubt has repeat customers. He almost asked her about it. Some spite in him nearly spoke. But a waiter came and asked if they wanted more to drink. By now, he was unsteady enough to say many things, yet he did not. They rose and in a subtle, affectionate way she put an arm around his waist and guided him toward the hut. She was tall as Filipino girls go, her head above his shoulders. For just a second she reminded him of Rosie, his daughter. For years he and Rosie had been good pals, but in recent years she had grown moody and sarcastic, preferring the company of her friends or sometimes her mother. Saltness and Carmen had married young, outgrown poverty together only after she had found a good job. She liked her work. Her friends were there, and she seemed to

manage well during his biannual business trips. The sleepy Portland of his childhood had grown crowded and raucous. The forests and mountains woke a little farther from him each morning, and now in his mid-thirties, he needed some place that refused to change.

They were at the end of the pier. The rising sun started to kick some heat into the humidity. Saltness dialed through the bands on his short-wave radio. He stood facing the sea as if at the end of the world listening for a signal from beyond. May waited behind him wearing a long, loose dress. She shielded her sleepy eyes from the sun with one hand as if trying to see what he might hear. Then she eased down to sit with her feet hanging over the edge. Before long the incoming tide would climb to kiss her toes. Her dress spread fan-like about her on the weathered boards.

Saltness checked his watch and then refocused on the radio dial. Voices came and went in a chain of languages. Then it caught the brassy theme of "Yankee Doodle" and his gaze drifted away toward the western horizon, skipping over lesser islands to Palawan. The announcer wasted no time. "The financial markets continued their steep decline, the major indicators showing some of the largest single-day losses in history." Saltness had prepared himself for it. Most of the night he had laid awake striving for reconciliation. But now he realized that it wasn't reconciliation at all but a kind of advanced penance, suffering he must undergo so that the morning and its news would bring absolution. And now there was no absolution, no atonement.

The announcer babbled on with details, but Saltness lost interest. He turned off the radio and set it on the pier. Beyond that simple act he didn't know what to do -- just stood and glanced about as if for directions. May watched him. Then something out at sea caught her attention. Her eyes widened, she pointed and said, "Look!" She jumped up for a better view, and the radio he had set on her dress flipped, teetered on the lip of the pier and fell. Before the ripples could clear it was gone. Now his hands found a purpose. They seized her neck, his knees bent, his legs coiled remembering the high school shot put, his eyes and brain remembered nothing, feeling only the need to launch something. And then just as quickly, before May could scream, his hands remembered the softness of that throat, the girlish giggle, the charitable acquiescence. His hands loosened. The anger drained from his eyes, and as if life itself had slipped away, he leaned and fell sideways into the sea.

Then his life took over again. Hand over hand he stroked toward the shore. Above him, May was calling, "The radio. I can dive. I can find it." She was hiking up her dress to her knees as if ready to take it off and dive in. "No," he barked. "I don't want it."

Saltness slouched in the wooden chair on the porch of the hut. Salt water drizzled from his clothes and hair. Light glanced through the gaps between the slatted boards of the deck. Below, a colony of ants scuttled, their tripartite forms charged with purpose, thousands of them relentless and undeterred. He peered out at the water and recalled a dream he'd had. Was it last night? The night before? He was adrift on the ocean with no land in sight, trying to swim but having no idea of which way to go. Then boats passed. First a cruise ship, then a ferry, then a sailboat. Passengers and crew stood on the decks and gazed in his direction. He waved and yelled, but no one appeared to see him, and all sailed indifferently on. At last he understood: he was invisible. The sky darkened and the swells rose ever higher until he woke. May lay curled beside him like a kitten. When he touched her back she flinched and rolled away.

Now May sat on the steps to his right. For a long time they were silent. Tourists followed the gravel paths leading to the restaurant. The slap of their flip-flops kept a rhythm for their talk that sounded like a distant drone. Then May said, "I'm sorry about your radio ... and your money." She spoke so softly he could hardly tell it was her voice and not something he imagined. She watched the tourists. "They pay more for one dinner than my father earns in a week." More silence. Through the vista of the palm trees he could see a banka boat out beyond the pier. Three men were absorbed with something in the water on the far side. They struggled with it and finally hauled it into the boat. Saltness and May watched in silence as the boat circled back to its dock with its grim cargo.

After a few minutes, May said, "I think I know how you feel -- about losing your money. I think that is the way my father feels when I go -- to work."

The streets of Cebu City widened, the noise deafened, and on every block groups of men, young and old, gathered having nothing but time. Before long the taxi crossed the bridge onto the island of Lapu Lapu, named after the warrior who slew Magellan in hand-to-hand combat. The driver turned onto the causeway leading to the airport, passing large motels and fancy, fenced resorts. At the airport Saltness paid the driver. Then taking May aside he gave her the rest, bills and coins. "For you and your father," he said. He walked her to the taxi, picked up his bags, turned and entered the terminal without looking back.

He checked in and as he was about to find his concourse realized that he had no money for the airport tax. Distracted, he must have sent his credit cards in his checked luggage. The irony of it might have amused him except that now nothing in the world seemed as important to him as getting on that flight. He wandered about the area hopeful of recognizing one familiar face, someone who would loan him the pesos. It occurred to him that he might try to sell some shells to earn the tax. But they were Carmen's shells. Looking down the row of shops, he read a sign for one of the airport bars, and as he turned the corner his hopes rose at the sight of a form he recognized. Sitting at the bar with one hand on a bottle of San Miguel and the other on the arm of the man next to her was May. The man was Johan.

Saltness walked over to them and got May's attention. "I forgot to save money for the airport tax," he said. She looked confused. "I need pesos for the airport tax, or I won't be able to get to my flight. I gave you everything." May looked at him, then at Johan.

"That's my money," she said.

Johan stood. He wasn't as tall as Saltness, under six feet, but he balanced himself on the balls of his feet, ready to explode.

"I gave her all my money and forgot to save enough for the airport tax," Saltness said as if talking to people who didn't speak his language. May said, "That's my money." Then she turned away. Saltness started to follow her, but Johan stepped between them.

Saltness tried to go around him. He wanted to make May tell him to his face that it was her earned money. It wasn't much of a push. More of a straight-arm to the shoulder, but it caught Saltness mid-step and off balance. His feet slipped out from under him, and he fell hard onto his back, his head bouncing off the carpeted floor.

When he woke the barman was kneeling over him, waiting for his eyes to clear. "We want no trouble," he said. "You get up, get out. No trouble here." He picked up the box of shells and shoved them toward Saltness.

Saltness looked around and saw no sign of May or Johan. Slowly he rose to one knee and then to his feet. His head throbbed and his legs were rubbery, but he made it outside the bar.

There he stopped and stared across the bazaar of faces coming and going to or from their concourses, but the face he saw was May's in the ignominious line-up in Cebu City, her grin too confident. He had imagined that she might take him to Palawan. But she had taken him for more than that. He remembered her talk of being educated by nuns in a village school, her coquetry in bed, her artful act as the desperate Madonna, the final stroke about her guilt-ridden father who allows his daughter to sell herself for their survival. And he had swallowed it all and wrung his little sanctimonious heart dry by paying her off -- the grand gesture all the grander for the fact of his own evaporated fortune.

He shuffled back toward the check-in desk, the box of shells under his arm. In the noisy airport, he had to hold the box close to his ear with two hands as he gently shook it and heard within the unmistakable rattling.

* * * * *

"Cheeki Dos Remedios & the City of Angels"

Eighty-nine-year-old Great Aunty Cheeki is a cheeky lady who was born in Macau in 1902 and moved to California after the Second World War, as many Macanese people did. Cheeki holds the key to my *heung ha*, and if I'd never met her, my quest to understand my roots would have been that much harder.

The day finally came when she wangled an invitation from the Franciscan nuns at her retirement home to let me stay for free. I, in return, refused to worry about the cost of a plane ticket from London. I opened up my studio -- which is what I do when I need to raise funds -- plied friends and neighbors with wine, and sold three paintings.

I'm now in the City of Angels, staying in her room.

I unzipped my sleeping bag and pulled an arm out. Sunshine was streaming through the window. The bathroom door was open, and Cheeki was sitting on the toilet, legs apart, stockings dangling around her ankles like bracelets, pushing out yesterday's sustenance. Now, you might find that shocking. But I would say that you've led a sheltered life -- you poor soul. These are the events that make life endearing -- make it real.

Shit represents so many things: a love token trapped in a knight's silver locket, a gift from a Chinese relative presented with a bow, essential organic 'nightsoil' manure for farmers in countries such as China, Japan, India, Tanzania, or enlightened western communities.

Cheeki emerged from her ablutions dressed in a blue polyester dressing gown and said: "Jolly, blueberry muffin for breakfast?"

I sighed with pleasure. "Any chance of wholemeal toast with jam and a cup of coffee, Aunty?"

"Wah, *wholemeal*? What is this *wholemeal*, Jolly?"

"I need it to start my day Aunty Cheeks. After all, you did say I was hefty."

"Oh Jolly, I say wrong thing each time. I told your cousin Lena she had big hips, and she didn't look happy about that."

Her eyes were a watery blue and her jowls wobbled as she shook her head with excitement. She knew I was keen to hear about Kowloon, Macau, and Hong Kong. Well, just about anything to be honest.

"Why didn't your mother tell you about the past?," she asked, obviously perturbed.

I shrugged. I didn't think it was a great idea to tell her that Mother was a tyrant, who had ruled the house with violence, hammering holes into my sister's legs with a Stiletto.

"OK Jolly. You say tell me about Macau. OK. Our name belongs to the greatest number of Macanese in Hong Kong and Shanghai and comes from devotion to Our Lady of Remedies. But we always regarded Macau as the place of our roots, because Portuguese seafarers colonized it from year 1557."

"We lived in a house called *Alvege* in Ho Man Tin, Jolly. The name was derived from the

first initial of each sister: Alda, Lina, Valda, Ermima [that's me!], Griselda, and Enaida, the eldest." She spelt out, "A - L - V - E - G - E. See? In Portuguese, means 'evergreen' Jolly."

She waded over to a kitchen cupboard and pulled a photograph out. "Look Jolly, names on back, and everyone is standing in doorway of *Alvege*."

I held the black and white photo in my hands. It showed eleven siblings, five boys and six girls, standing in ascending order of age or size on steps, flanked by parents. The mother had a kind face, maybe Portuguese or Indian, or both. The father looked hard and more Chinese. Cheeki was a little girl with billowing hair and a white, lace collar.

"What happened to *Alvege*?," I asked. The family looked complete, successful. I needed to know more.

"During the Japanese invasion, the Chinese looted *Alvege*. They would steal anything in those days to survive the ravages of war. Then all hell broke out. Whatever was left, the brothers drank or gambled away. Each sister received a diamond necklace."

"Bah," she slapped the air angrily. "We have left all of that behind. Anyway, after the war it became a school."

This time I said: “Mum never told us anything. I don't know why. I don't know anything about my father either. Well, he left when I was about three. That's it." I held my hands up to show exasperation. "That's why I went to China in search of my roots. I should have come to talk to you instead."

"I went to Beijing you know -- where I ended up in a police cell (I'll tell you about that one later) -- travelled northeast to Chengde to see the Great Wall, flew to Xian in a Russian plane to see the terracotta warriors, travelled to Hangzhou where children waded in the River Qiantang in straw hats shouting 'Hallo, Hallo. You buy!' Cormorants fished for their keepers from the edges of boats, huge butterflies flitted through sweet-smelling Camphor trees, and the limestone peaks of Guilin disappeared into misty clouds. Everyone laughed at us foreign devils in Kunming market. Finally, I reached Hong Kong and Macau! When you get off the plane, Aunty, the heat and humidity just hits you like a wet towel!”

"Wah! I can't believe you can do all that Jolly. You are intrepid."

We drank our coffee and got dressed. As I got ready, she said she'd love to go to the local shops, but she wasn't strong enough. Indeed, the Catholic premises of rest home, chapel, and restaurant, with a palm tree drive-in, led straight into a vast dual carriageway roaring with traffic and searing sunshine. Even I, a fit woman of thirty-two, had to sprint to make it across before the lights turned red. I made a mental note to check out mobility scooters when I got back to London.

"You know, Jolly, I give you mementoes. I give you wineglasses over one hundred years old."

She opened a side cabinet, pulled open a drawer, and handed me four antique wine glasses about five inches in height with no chips or cracks. The bowl section and stems were set in an octagon shape, which I'd never seen before.

"These are wonderful. Thank you very much. I can see they're old -- the glass is dense and uneven. They're unusual you know."

"You appreciate these things, Jolly. I gave plates to Cora. Ah, waste of time. Should have been you."

"I've never seen hollow stems before. We could fill them up later with red wine Aunty."

"Oh, nuns like that one, Jolly! Anyway, I'm going out to have a fag. The nuns will go crazy if they catch me, hee, hee."

We went outside and sat on the porch.

In a way, the feelings this simple event invoked in me were indescribable. You might call it corny, but she made me feel relevant, and as a consequence, years of childhood neglect got washed away.

We said Grace and ate lunch in the restaurant. Other residents and a Sister stopped by to say hello, which was nice. The food was excellent, but three courses twice a day? Wow, I'd soon blow up like a balloon.

Cheeki said she liked to fight with one of the wheelchair-bound residents.

I said she was feisty.

I told her I was going to visit Venice Beach and Watts Tower.

In the evening we ate a simple dinner in her room and watched TV. I made a mental note to investigate the best tin opener for severely arthritic hands.

Daylight was fading. Cheeki shocked me by pulling up her nightdress to show off a circle of shingles around her midriff.

She slipped into bed, onto what appeared to be an egg-crate-shaped foam mattress, said 'goodnight', turned onto her side, and pulled a quilt over her. I got into my sleeping bag on the floor. Outside, it seemed to me that the stars twinkled in the blue-black sky of the City of Angels, holding me, telling me that everything would work out.

September arrived. My sole mission was to honor Cheeki's grave. I'd poured plaster into a mould in my studio in Leytonstone, let it partly dry out, carved it with flowers, words and loving care, and intended to bury it beside my Great Aunty Cheeki.

I reached the Franciscan nuns' rest home on Manning Avenue, Los Angeles. Everything looked the same. I walked past the palm trees, stepped into a tranquil vestibule with a holy water font, and enquired about Sister Teresa. She appeared straightaway and invited me in with a quizzical "come in dear..." as if to say: 'Why on earth is she here?'

"I wrote to you recently, then phoned you yesterday about my Great Aunty Cheeki -- Ermima Dos Remèdios. You said you'd be happy to disclose where she was buried, and that maybe we could talk about her last moments. As you know, I've flown in from London, and I was very, very fond of her. I stayed here one summer several years ago and you were all very hospitable to me."

This seemed to reassure Sister Teresa who said, "of course my dear. I'd be happy to tell you anything you want to know."

"Please can you tell me where Cheeki is buried?" For some reason, no one in England knew where she was buried.

Sister Teresa meandered into the history of her Order and how the place was financed and about the various sacrifices of the Sisters. I began to lose track of names and events.

"Please can you tell me where Cheeki is buried?"

I wanted to cry. How could she keep dragging this out? I needed to know.

"Of course my dear, let me write down the details for you on a piece of paper." She handed the slip to me. I sighed with relief.

"You said on the phone that you were with my Great Aunt when she passed away. Can you tell me if she ever mentioned my name to you? Did she leave any message for me? Was she all right before she died? Was she in pain or afraid?"

Sister Teresa considered my questions carefully, and then gave me her answer: "Young lady, no, she never mentioned you. I do not recollect the name 'Jolly' or 'Jolenta' at all.

Sweet Mother of Joseph, no, she never mentioned you. There was no message. Be sure she died peacefully though, and I was with her to the end."

* * * * *

"The Hairdresser"

I was in my room behind the shoe shop, where the electric wire is fastened to the telephone pole, when the call came. "Hurry Phuoc," the Sofitel's receptionist screeched. "It's an American."

I'd never seen an American at the Sofitel. Few Americans visited Hanoi since the big war many years ago, before my birth even. I had learned something about it in school, how Americans bombed our women and children. How, for that reason, we should hate Americans. Indeed, many of us still do. But as I see so few of them, it's difficult to hate what isn't there. Besides, Americans are known for their money. Money is something we desperately need in Hanoi. Northern Vietnam is not like the South, like Saigon, which prospers with American handouts. I hear they have huge department stores there with glitzy windows and elegant jewelry for sale, French perfume and American appliances.

I wish I could transfer my trade south. But what trade? There is none. I sit at the Sofitel waiting for a real customer, someone who is not Vietnamese, whose hair is not black, who does not wish a black dye job for their graying temples, someone who resembles the women in *ELLE*, the blondes and redheads, pale brunettes, or silver whites.

Yes, I have become depressed of late, wondering why I ever took up such an unstable occupation. All I had to do was look around, and I could see what my future would be. But I did not look around. I looked inward instead, burying myself in the dream world of fashion magazines, in my sleep cutting and coloring the beautiful models in their pages, only to encounter the next morning another coarse head of black hair that needed shaping. But now, with this call, perhaps my life is changing. Perhaps I will run to the Sofitel and lines of Americans will wait, their silky tresses longing for the touch of my coconut shampoo, my freshly sharpened scissors, my color brush and comb. I will mold their heads into the latest fashion, long and straight hair like the anchors on American TV or short and wild like some of the stars in Hollywood magazines. My name will be linked with theirs. "Hair designs by Phuoc," they will read. My assistants will be many. I will choose them carefully from those who are waiting to audition, exhibiting their skills on mannequins before I deign to hire them. They will call me Monsieur with a Parisian accent, tremble slightly as they cut and color to my specifications….

The morning now is overcast. A hint of rain silvers the palms as I run past Truc Bach Lake, dodging the vendors, hopscotching the banana leaf mats set with red plastic cups and chopsticks in hope of customers. On another day I might stop for a French baguette, sweet pineapple, and green tea but not this morning. A putrid smell rises from the lake, which is often used as a toilet by the itinerant homeless. I try not to breathe deeply, to take short puffs of air so I do not infect my lungs. Much of our population has the lung disease that comes from the stench, the foul pollution.

I run on passing the Indian restaurant. An aroma of curry spices the brooding air. The French café is grinding fresh beans for morning café au lait, and the tattoo parlor has just repainted their sign in brilliant reds and purples. In a distant temple, the monks are busy with morning incantations as they kneel before the golden Buddha and his frightening protectors, wielding knives and swords should anyone dare to challenge their god's sanctity. Wafted by the breeze, their voices soothe my anxiety. I am afraid the American will have left by the time I arrive.

I puff my way up the hill, passing fruit carts of overripe durian that smell like French cheese kept too long in the cupboard. I dodge the incessant stream of motorcycles and autos that honk me dead. Clouds gather overhead as if to warn me. And then the rain, light at first, comes down in torrents. People rush by with newspapers over their heads. Vendors cover their carts with plastic bags from the market and hide beneath. But there is no place to hide as the rain pelts me, destroying my freshly ironed shirt, my shined shoes, and pomaded hair. I resemble a sewer rat, and suddenly wish I could join them down below the gutter. Why did I ever choose this unrewarding career? Why didn't I sense my disappointment years ago when, at the age of eight, I dressed paper dolls and wore my mother's skirts for dressup, sneaking her makeup when she wasn't looking. But she thought I was a doll and never warned me about the possibility of a disastrous future in a trade dominated by females.

Finally, I reach the hilltop and see the Sofitel in all its pretentious elegance. The doorman has disappeared. Behind the glass, clerks don sweaters as if the rain were inside instead of out, hoping it will dissipate by lunch time so they can buy fried peanuts and bananas from their favorite vendors.

I slip on the puddle outside the revolving door, splashing mud on the edge of my blue jeans. But I am beyond caring. I shake myself off inside the door, resembling the shaggy animals on the street. Peering in the window of the hair salon, I take a deep breath before I enter. In a soft bamboo chair sits an elderly woman. She sips a white ceramic cup of coffee. In her lap is the latest issue of *ELLE.* Her feet are encased in gold stilettos beneath a leather skirt, much too short for a woman of her age, and a pink silk blouse from which her breasts protrude like mounds of marshmallows. White hair bushes from her head in strange tufts as if she's teased it into this bizarre coiffure. *What will I do with her*? *What in the name of Buddha will I do*?

Grabbing a hairdryer, I hide behind a screen and blast it at my jeans, which cling to my hips in a rather provocative fashion. Well, maybe that isn't all that bad. Stepping from behind the screen, I approach her, smiling. "I apologize for keeping you waiting, Madam. The rain you see…and I point outside to the torrent splattering the windows.

"No problem," she replies, "I'm staying at this hotel."

"You're staying here?" Foreigners usually book the Sheraton or one of the fancy hotels near the embassies.

"Yes, everything else was taken."

"I hope you enjoy your visit. If Obama is elected, relations between our countries will surely improve."

She smiles in agreement.

"I would like to visit the U.S one day," I say. "I would like also to see Canada too. How much flying time between California and Vancouver? Is it like maybe the same as between Hanoi and Saigon?"

She looks puzzled. Perhaps my Viet accent has kept her from understanding, so I change the subject to something more immediate. "What can I do for you?" Lifting a lock of her hair, I display my scissors.

She shakes her head in a negative fashion.

"Color?" I ask, hoping she'll say yes, as that's an expensive process.

"Weave," she says.

I bring her a color chart. She points to the color she wants woven through her white: a dark brown, similar to a zebra's. I think she would be better off with a full coloring, a gorgeous red or platinum blonde so I could display my expertise. Weaving is difficult; each lock separated from the others, then rolled in foil, followed by a tedious heat process.

I smile. "Of course," I say, but tremble inside. I've never done a weave. Such a thing is not popular with Vietnamese. In fact, it is almost unknown. You occasionally see a teenager with a shock of purple, red, or gold but a full weave, never. Maybe I can talk her out of it. Maybe I can show her models with white hair dyed red or blonde. Politely, I show her some photos. "Would you prefer..." I offer.

She shakes her head impatiently. It's obvious she wants me to get on with the job. I dare not delay any longer. She could easily escape; visit a foreign salon where they are used to Americans, perform weaves day in, day out. If I am successful she will recommend me. I might have a chance at stardom after all.

"Come." I place a fresh gown over her clothing, carefully snapping it in place. Then I slip in a CD of some soft Vietnamese love ballads to soothe her as I get my color pot ready, mixing the zebra brown that she requested. Gently, I part her hair, painting some strands in zebra stripes, leaving others white. Rolling the stripes in foil, I set her under the dryer with her copy of *ELLE* and her coffee. "Voila," I say, and imitate the little twirl I'd seen in hot French movies.

She looks pleased as she begins to doze beneath the warmth of the dryer. Nervously, I hover about her, wondering how my zebra will look with her new coiffure. When the timer rings I remove the dryer, unroll her hair, and lead her to the basin. Gently bending her head back as if she were one of the dolls I played with as a child, I shampoo her hair, adjusting and readjusting the water temperature until she smiles. The brown dye washes into the basin. I'm soon afraid no color will be left. Lifting her head, I tie a towel around it and lead her back to my station. Removing the towel I am aghast. The dark stripes bled into the white so there is no definition. She resembles a zebra confused in the womb of its mother. I am ready to apologize only I don't know what to say so I stand there smiling as I run the blow dryer over her head.

She smiles back. "Just what I wanted," she whispers, admiring herself in the mirror. "Nothing too defined, a bit abstract, like a Rothko maybe."

I don't know this Rothko so I say nothing, only smile brighter when she slips a big tip into my sweating hand.

* * * * *

"Three Deaths in Miss Encarnado's Class"

I saw Miss Encarnado being interviewed by Korina Sanchez on TV this afternoon. She was getting married to a wealthy Malaysian businessman. After five years of working for the rich man's household as a domestic helper, Miss Encarnado was going to join his harem and become the fourth wife.

On television, she looked like she hadn't aged for the past fifteen years. She actually looked more beautiful. No wrinkles marred her face. She kept her hair long. She was slimmer, and her eyes were a hazel color, most probably from contact lenses. She wore thick glasses when she was my teacher. I also couldn't help but notice all the gold that seemed to cover her: large hoop earrings, a butterfly hair clip, a rose brooch, a thick necklace, and bangles around her wrists. All shone under the klieg lights. The camera even caught a toe ring when it briefly focused on her gold-colored sandals.

I could not forget Miss Encarnado. She was my fourth grade teacher. I am sure all my classmates then would remember her, too. Those who knew her, the old students and teachers of Aguinaldo Elementary School, would remember her for what happened during her last year in the school, the same year that I was her student.

II

Myra was the chubby girl in the front row that always raised her hand to recite. Miss Encarnado would also ask her to write things on the blackboard that we would copy into our notebooks. She also sometimes asked Myra to stay behind after classes and help her check papers.

Myra was everyone's friend. We called her Miss Piggy, but it didn't bother her. In fact, she had Miss Piggy everything—bag, tumbler, lunch box, notebooks, and pencil case. Early in the school year, we already knew there was no contest as to who was going to get the First Honors ribbon. Myra had always been the First Honor student from kindergarten. She was the smartest in our fourth-grade class. That was until in August, when Myra just stopped coming to class. Miss Encarnado announced that Myra's father had called the principal who, in turn, asked her to relay the news that Myra had the flu. Probably from the rainy weather, the teacher added. But after two weeks and Myra still had not returned, her seatmate, Christina, asked Miss Encarnado when she would get well. We missed Myra. She could answer all of Miss Encarnado's questions so we didn't have to worry about getting called on when our teacher asked difficult questions and nobody raised a hand to volunteer the answer. Miss Encarnado, however, said she had no idea when Myra would be back as the young girl's parents had not called the principal again. Weeks later, my mother would tell me that Myra had died. She learned it from another parent during a General PTA meeting. Myra, it turned out, did not recover from the flu. Her condition perplexed the doctors because after a week of tests and medications in the hospital, they couldn't bring

down her temperature. She simply died in her sleep one night and only then did her burning subside. Mama said after Myra's death, her parents did not see the need to inform the school principal anymore.

The last week of September, Miss Encarnado lit a red candle and placed it on the small table beside her desk. Around the candle, she piled leaves and pods from the tamarind tree in the garden behind our classroom. Some of the tiny leaves scattered on the floor around her desk. When we filed inside the classroom, the candle was already lit, the perfumed wax emitting smells of green apple inside the room.

What is the candle for, Miss? Claudia asked her.

It's for Myra. I prayed for her this morning, Miss Encarnado answered.

It's a pretty candle and smells pretty too. Is Myra in heaven, Miss? Do you think?

The entire class looked at Miss Encarnado. Everyone must have heard from their own parents about what happened to Myra.

Of course, Miss Encarnado reassured Claudia with a smile and turned to the front of the classroom to start class.

III

It was January, three days after we had come back from Christmas break. We just finished cleaning the classroom. Our class was grouped into five and each day one group -- about five to seven students -- would stay behind to sweep the classroom floor and scrub it with coconut husks, replace the flowers in the vases, wipe the desks, and clean the blackboard. Miss Encarnado would usually be in the garden outside, under the shade of the tamarind tree, writing lessons plans. She had a stool, and she opened a small folding table there with her. Once in a while, she would look through the doorway into the classroom to check on us.

That afternoon, however, Miss Encarnado said she was going to leave us because she was going to pay her electric bill in the supermarket a block away, but that she would be back in a few minutes. When we were left on our own, we decided to have a little fun. Lito emptied the broom cabinet, a rectangular box that stood in the corner. He laid it on the floor, and climbed inside. Then he asked Jonas, the biggest kid in class, to close the cabinet door and lift one end while Bernard and I raised the other end.

We're going to pretend that I am dead and you are carrying me to the cemetery in a procession, Lito said.

Claudia, who just came in from the garden carrying a bunch of *santan* flowers to replace the wilted ones in the vase on Miss Encarnado's desk, placed her small bouquet on top of the cabinet. She picked a broom, raised it before her, and told everyone that she was the acolyte holding a giant cross and she would stand at the head of the procession. Two other classmates, Lerma and Cathy, joined in the game and stood at the end of the line pretending to wail with grief, although the tears they shed were more from laughter than feigned sorrow.

Miss Encarnado arrived just as our little procession was rounding one corner of the room. She stood aghast at what she saw.

Why did you climb inside the broom cabinet? She asked Lito.

I just wanted to feel how it is like to be dead, Miss, Lito replied.

Really? Well, you should know that it is not funny to make a game out of something like that. And you shouldn't have played along, she pointed at each one of us. You were

supposed to clean the room, not play. She scolded us for a full five minutes more after that before telling us that we could go home.

While we were about to get our bags, Miss Encarnado asked Lito to stay.

I want to talk to you about something. It will not take long, she said.

Miss Encarnado pulled a chair beside her desk and told Lito to sit as she followed the rest of us to the door.

That was the last that I saw of Lito.

The next day, after the flag ceremony, Claudia was telling the class about how Lito got run over by a *jeepney* that morning while he was crossing the street. A hit and run.

Surprisingly, Miss Encarnado didn't want to talk about it. When Claudia tried to tell her about Lito's accident, Miss Encarnado shushed her.

Let us not talk about it, yet, she said. Maybe later after class. Better yet, let us wait for Lito's parents to call. It was a frightening and bad accident. Let this be a caution to everyone. Always be careful in crossing the street, all of you, she added.

A week after Lito's death, Miss Encarnado had lit a blue candle. She also took out the red one she lit before for Myra and placed the two candlesticks beside each other. The familiar pile of tamarind leaves and pods surrounded the base of the candles. It reminded me of the holiday wreath that the priest lights in church during Advent. The room did not smell of Christmas, however. It was thick with the mingled scent of green apple and *sampaguita* coming from the burning candles.

Is it the same red candle you lit for Myra before, Miss? Cathy asked Miss Encarnado.

Yes, and the blue one is for Lito. I prayed for both of them.

Do you feel sad for Lito, Miss? Jonas asked

Yes, I do, Miss Encarnado answered. Now, take out your Building English Skills Reading books and open them to page 29. We are going to finish the story we started yesterday. Nobody talked about Lito in class after that.

IV

Alex was our neighbor. He lived with his grandmother ten houses away from ours. His father was an American soldier who died during the Gulf War. His mother met his father in an Internet chatroom while he was stationed in Iraq. They married after six months. They met each other for the first time a week before their wedding day. He died shortly after returning to duty. Alex's mother married again a year after her husband died and left Alex under the care of his grandmother.

I remember that afternoon when I waited for Alex to finish so we could go home together. He was part of the cleaning group so he had to remain after class.

However, after everyone had done his chores, Miss Encarnado asked Alex to stay behind. When she saw me loitering by the doorway, she asked me to get going.

Anything I can do for you, Peter? She asked me.

No, Miss Encarnado, I answered.

Ah, yes… you and Alex go home together, she smiled. All right, you can wait, but you have to stay outside. I only need to talk to Alex here for a short while. She went to the door and motioned me outside. She wanted to close the door.

Can't I stay inside and wait, Miss? I asked

No, there is something private that I want to talk to Alex about. You stay outside or you can go to the playground and play a while. There was a bench for visitors outside the

classroom but I chose to sit on the floor. I decided to pass the time by playing with my rubber bands. I took out a packet from my pocket, bunched the rubber bands together, then tried to loosen them one by one by flicking at them with my thumb and forefinger.

As I was crouched on my knees, I happened to notice a small crack between the wooden boards of the classroom walls. I peeped inside, curious to see what Miss Encarnado and Alex were doing.

I saw Miss Encarnado motioning for Alex to sit in front of her desk, now covered in green felt cloth. In the middle she lit a green candle. The sun was setting so the classroom was cast in dancing shadows brought about by the flickering candlelight. It was almost dark inside with the windows closed and the lights turned off.

Then, Miss Encarnado took a little bottle from the desk drawer and asked Alex to smell it. After he did so, his head slumped upon his chest, unconscious.

I could not understand what was happening but I felt scared. I wanted to run then and ask for help but I was rooted to my spot. My curiosity won over my fear.

Miss Encarnado carefully laid Alex's head on the table. She took out a plastic bag containing tamarind leaves and started scattering them around Alex. All this time, her lips were moving; she was mumbling like she was in prayer, but I could not hear the words from where I was. Next, she pulled out another vial from the drawer and poured its contents on Alex's head. Then, the room grew dark. I did not know if it was because I blinked hard or whether a shadow passed and covered my peephole. I was only certain that the room went completely dark for a few seconds.

When the light from the candle flickered back, I saw Miss Encarnado shaking Alex's shoulders for him to awaken. They stood up and our teacher led my classmate to the door. I peeled off my eyes from the crack and sat on my haunches, my back against the wall, pretending that all this time, I had been waiting patiently.

When Miss Encarnado opened the door, she was smiling, her arms around Alex's shoulders. He looked dazed.

Take care, boys, she bid us. I'll see you tomorrow.

While we were walking home, I asked Alex what happened inside. He said he could not remember because he felt himself drifting to sleep after Miss Encarnado asked him to sniff a bottle of perfume.

Was it perfume? I asked.

Miss Encarnado said it was. She said, Alex I want you to smell this new perfume I bought and tell me if you like it. So I did.

What did the perfume smelled like? I asked him.

It didn't smell like perfume at all. It was like my grandmother's oil, the one she puts on her arms when they feel painful, he answered.

I told him about what I saw. Alex said he doesn't know because when he closed his eyes he just fell asleep. Although, he remembered the teacher talking to him before she asked him to smell the perfume, telling him she would pray for him, something to help him with his grades.

Can I smell your head? I asked. But it was not wet nor did it smell of a strange odor. What are you going to tell Inay Belen?

That Miss Encarnado talked to me after class ... that she is going to pray for me so I would get better grades, Alex replied.

The next Friday, exactly a week after that incident, Alex died from dengue. He was the second kid to die from the fatal mosquito bite in our street.

The day he died was also the last day of school.

V

When we came back after summer vacation, we were too busy with the beginning of another school year that no one remembered about the tragedies of the preceding year until somebody -- I think it was Claudia -- asked Mr. Baoy, our Grade 5 teacher, where Miss Encarnado was. He said she was not teaching at Aguinaldo Elementary School anymore. When we asked why, Mr. Baoy said he did not know.

Where did she go? I pressed.

We don't know, Mr. Baoy answered. The last time we heard, she went back to her hometown in Northern Samar.

At dinner I told my mother about Miss Encarnado. The past summer I told her about what I saw that afternoon in the classroom with Alex and Miss Encarnado, but she did not believe me. She said with my imagination, I could become a writer when I grew up. However, that night, Mama told me she thought she might believe the story I told her after all. She said that earlier that day she learned why Miss Encarnado was not teaching at Aguinaldo Elementary School anymore. At the school canteen, when she was looking for Mr. Baoy to pay him her contribution to the homeroom PTA, she recalled that some teachers were talking about Miss Encarnado. She said that she eavesdropped on them until she got the whole story. The teacher was asked to file a leave of absence by the school principal after some teachers reported seeing strange behavior from her. Mama said Mr. Llamanzares, the Math teacher, saw Miss Encarnado laughing by herself when he visited her in her classroom. When he asked her what she was laughing about, she just shrugged her shoulders and pretended as if nothing was amiss. Another teacher claimed that, while passing by outside the garden gate, she saw Miss Encarnado pointing and talking to the tamarind tree by herself one afternoon. Even a Grade 6 student reported having seen something unusual in Miss Encarnado's classroom. The story went that when this student stopped by to pick up her sister's report card from Miss Encarnado last May, she saw the teacher writing in her desk but the room was dark with the windows closed, the lights turned off, and only a stream of daylight came in from the opened doors. Her hair was disheveled, and she was not wearing eyeglasses. She said a thick perfume like burning incense choked the air inside the classroom. Upon entering the classroom, a cold chill went through her spine, and she stepped out as fast as she could and did not bother to get her sister's report card.