

Anak Sastra, Issue 6

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Clifton Bates has spent a good amount of time in Thailand and Hong Kong. For the past 35 years, he has lived in Alaska involved with Alaska Native education as a teacher, administrator, and university professor. Over the years he has published a variety of plays, poetry, fiction, journal articles on education, and one book entitled *Conflicting Landscapes: American Schooling/Alaska Natives*.

M. Reza Purbhai is a professor and author in the field of South Asian history. He was born in Pakistan and lived in various parts of Asia, Europe, and North America before coming to rest in Louisiana (USA).

Ling Tan (nee Tan Lai Ling) was born and raised in a Hainanese coffee-shop in the Little India part of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. At the age of 21, she left on a scholarship to the East-West Center in Hawai'i and eventually found her niche in the Lake Atitlan region of Guatemala, where she has been a permanent resident for the last few decades and raised two children. A demographer turned public relations consultant turned restaurateur, Ling moonlights as a teacher, brews fruit wine, plays the dulcimer, writes, and is invested in community-building. She is a founding parent of Panajachel Colegio Internacional and is on the founding Board of Directors of Oxlajuj B'atz' (Thirteen Threads), an NGO with the mission to empower indigenous women through change.

G.B. Miller is a lecturer of composition currently teaching at Qatar University in Doha, Qatar. His most recent publications include "Motionless Movement" in *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal* (November, 2011, Vol. 15) and "Istanbul" in *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* (October, 2011, Vol. 10 No. 4).

Abidin Zainal blogs at [A Fake Guitarist in a Genuine Keyboardist Who Writes](#).

San Francisco-based poet **Michael Shorb**'s work reflects an abiding interest in environmental issues, history, and the lyrical form. His poems have appeared in over 100 magazines and anthologies, including the *Nation*, *Sun*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Queen's Quarterly*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Commonweal*, *Rattle*, *Urthona*, *Underground Voices*, *Great American Poetry Show*, and *European Judaism*. His collection, *Whale Walkers Morning*, will be published in the winter of 2013 by Shabda Press.

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January 2013 featured author interview with Clifton Bates

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

I started working labor-type jobs when I was fourteen. I continued with such jobs (carpenter's apprentice, warehouseman, lineman's assistant, truck driver, etc.) in order to support myself and cover my college tuition. Took me a long time to get through school, sometimes working two jobs while still attending classes. At this time I read a lot of Erskine Caldwell, Steinbeck and others that seemed to have an affinity with the working world. I encountered lots of characters and witnessed many amusing, interesting, absurd situations that were in stark contrast to life at the university. I began to take notes and thought of putting some stories together to try and portray all this. That was my original motivation.

Now, non-fiction-wise, I just want to continue addressing my specific social concern, which is Alaska Native education. My other writing is an attempt to create scenes, feelings, instances, or ideas that capture a certain essence of a place, people, or an incident, be it in Southeast Asia or Alaska. I'm not delusional about my writing: some people like to go bowling, others collect stamps, and some are into archery. I fiddle with writing and appreciate it when something is published. It's like catching a fish.

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

With computers coming on the scene, of course, my writing process changed greatly. Now I write on the computer and get the piece as close to being finished as I can. Then I start printing it off and working on the hard copy. I make changes on the hard copy and then correct the computer draft. I usually wait a while before printing it off and then doing the same thing again and again. Depending upon the length and complexity of the work, I can end up doing this a ridiculous number of times, resulting in using lots of paper and printer ink. There comes a time when I believe I'm done with this process, and I tell myself I'm finished. Seems, though, there is always an error that I don't discover until it's off to be published. The amended printed drafts are tossed under my desk in a big pile. When the snow goes away in May, I take them out and get a big blaze going in my burn barrel.

Q. You have been involved with Alaska Native education for 35 years. Despite the extreme temperature differences, do you see any similarities between rural Alaskan village culture and rural village culture around Southeast Asia?

Villages in Northeast Thailand and Western Alaskan, from my experience, share many similarities that I suspect may be present in villages anywhere. Elders are respected. There is a strong sense of community. Extended families and neighbors support each other, watch

out for everyone else, and keep traditions alive and strong. Aunties, uncles, and cousins are everywhere, tending and caring for any child no matter whose it is. Rituals and ceremonies maintain the ties between the people as they work together to subsist and battle any adversities. Everyone in such places shares tragedies. And, of course, the power structure can sometimes be quite mysterious; it may not be evident to any outsider where the authority truly lies.

The main difference that separates the remote villages in rural Alaska from many other small communities is, due to the remoteness, extremes in weather, and the few economic incentives present there, the indigenous, aboriginal people remained isolated for a very long time. Western influences have come relatively recently. Many villages went from the Stone Age to the Space Age in a very short time period: just in a person's lifetime. Subsistence was a full-time activity and the people faced extreme hardships. With the onslaught of outsiders arriving, diseases ensued as well as the difficulties that arose handling such drastic changes so quickly. The outsiders, the non-natives, were there "to help and do what was best" for the people; be they missionaries, schoolteachers, medical personnel, or the law. So the Native people took on a very subservient relationship with their visitors. This possibly has happened to some extent in various other places, but it occurred to the extreme here.

Q. You seem to have published everything from plays to academic journal articles. What do you find appealing about writing short fiction?

I was always greatly impressed by Hemingway's short fiction because it is more than just the evident narrative. There is something else, a substance, which you can't identify, put your finger on, or grab a-hold of. I believe he called it the fourth dimension. It is a very difficult thing to do. I don't try to write like him, but I am interested in trying to create a successful, accurate portrayal of events. And, of course, they are almost always based on true occurrences. Short fiction provides the opportunity to focus on an instant in life and present it without having to provide all kinds of exposition. It is satisfying to avoid, as much as possible, explaining this and explaining that.

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

One memorable experience is a part of "The Bear, the Coconut Shell, and the Buddhist Doctor." I was fortunate to actually witness this amazing doctor's healing of a severely asthmatic young girl.

Other than that, all my time in Northeast Thailand I treasure. The most unforgettable, but the saddest experience of all, was the funeral for my wife at a temple outside Khon Kaen. She was from that region.

I was also fortunate to have lived in Hong Kong for about four months. There I experienced a fascinating, mini-James Bond kind of life. That was certainly memorable.

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“The Bear, the Coconut Shell, and the Buddhist Doctor”

“Who are you going to believe, me or your own eyes?” Groucho Marx

Initially it was quite dark in this eerie, silent, dead marketplace, but over time I witnessed it all come to life as the dawn slowly emerged. Whoever was in control of the lighting sure had a nice touch with the rheostat. It grew almost imperceptibly but steadily and, always, when I wasn't looking. All of a sudden new shapes and objects came into view, and the variety of colors gradually brightened and became more vivid. The sounds of voices and clatter intensified as my surroundings came more into focus.

Goods and produce were brought to wooden stalls on women's backs, by wheelbarrows, wagons, carts, and bicycles. Colors and outlines continued to sharpen with the developing sunlight. Next to me a woman unloaded her handcart filled with dozens of pairs of sandal-thongs that she proceeded to carefully arrange on the table as if they were bouquets of flowers. It felt like the post in the wall behind me was solid enough to lean against. I needed it: I was exhausted. After the long drive riding in a cramped, un-air-conditioned car through the night to this town on the Gulf of Siam, we searched for this particular marketplace in the smothering, groggy-inducing heat and humidity. This in combination with my odd diet and abnormal sleep as of late; I required something dependable to prop me up.

The last few months I'd been staying in Hong Kong. My host there had been extraordinarily generous and helpful. I quickly agreed to his request for a favor. I was headed to Thailand on business for a few weeks, and he asked if his eleven-year old daughter could accompany me for a portion of the time.

She had been suffering from acute asthma since she was a little girl. They had taken her to specialists in Seattle, Chicago, Los Angeles, Singapore, and Hong Kong: all to no avail. Her parents had learned of an extraordinary Thai Buddhist doctor with unique practices and unbelievable abilities. They thought it was worth a try.

This would in no way interfere with my business plans, and it sounded like an intriguing venture. I was happy to help. Their poor daughter was pale, thin, frail, and she wheezed and struggled all night for breath. She had never been able to run, jump, skip and play like the other kids. A flight of stairs was something for her to conquer.

My host was not able to leave Hong Kong at the time, so plans were made for his daughter and me to meet some friends in Bangkok, a Thai couple, who would drive us down to the coast town on the Gulf where the doctor was located.

We arrived early in the darkness in hopes of ensuring a meeting with the doctor at some time during the day. His residence was a fenced white structure right in the middle of this busy market place.

There was no queue. As dawn became more evident, the nurse stepped out from the house, into the yard and handed out wooden chits with numbers painted on them from one to thirty-three. She distributed these randomly to the crowd of hands reaching across the white picket fence. Those lucky enough to obtain a chit were to be the doctor's patients for that day. She went back inside.

It wasn't long before the amah re-emerged from the house and called out "*nueng!*" A person handed her the little piece of wood with the number one on it and followed her through the door. The patient who received the lucky number nine felt fortunate and hopeful.

We were unfortunate and none of our outreaching hands acquired a chit. We waited nearby in the marketplace in hopes that Boon, the Thai husband in our party, could attract the amah's attention and plead our case.

I returned to my leaning post where a deaf and dumb boy with the look of a total madman caught my eye. A questionably secure six-foot square cage of spaced bamboo bars contained a dusty heap of a very forlorn black bear. As the market came to life the boy believed he was entertaining me by slipping his arm under the bars and onto the floor of the cage. His hand held a half of a coconut shell. With this he would continually clap on the wood flooring, seemingly, irritating the creature to no end. The boy's mouth would contort in futile efforts to make a sound. I couldn't imagine the sounds he would be making if he were able. The bear would grunt and occasionally and half-heartedly take a swipe at the skinny, filthy arm. Any action from the bear caused the boy to turn his head and look at me for approval with this insane silent laughter at which time a glop of drool that had formed in his mouth would pour out, land in the dry dirt next to the cage, and cause a puff of dust. I certainly didn't want to encourage him by any means. It looked like the bear had enough to deal with without this lunatic tormenting him.

There were patches of missing fur on his hindquarters revealing cracked, calloused skin. Dried, yellow mucus was caked around its nostrils. I expected to see in the bear's eyes a resemblance to the crazed look of the boy. But I was startled to find quite the opposite. The bear possessed a gaze that was deep, tranquil, most benign, patient and composed despite its conditions and the constant clop, clop, clop made by the harebrained boy and his coconut shell.

They were the most distinct, disturbing set of eyes I had ever encountered; disturbing because they were so profound, steady, calm, and independent of the reality they inhabited.

Just then Boon nudged me and told me in his limited English to beware of this suspicious character nearby that was likely on some drug or was maybe sniffing glue. He sat off to the side of us by a stall. He was nervous; eyes darted with a wild, dangerous look on his sweaty

face. Perched on the railing he looked like a bird on a wire ready to fly off at any second; or I considered him quite capable of quickly attacking someone like me with the makeshift dagger I imagined he had concealed in his rags.

While keeping my eye on this fellow, I was taken aback by what appeared to be a seventy-some-year-old tiny woman walking by with a sixteen-foot-long plank on her back. She was bent at the waist, had it balanced, and her head was cocked under the board so she could see where she was going. People made way for her. I was startled by her appearance and disbelieving of her strength and ability.

Right then a well dressed, slick, middle-aged modern Thai male strutted by, and he pointed with his chin at the old lady. With a glib smile he said to me, "Wimmin lib".

When the amah returned to the porch to call out "*sarm*", for the third patient, Boon got her attention and explained that I had come all the way from the United States with my daughter to see the doctor. We hadn't got a chit, and he asked if there was any possible way the doctor could fit us in to his day's schedule. She told him to wait, and she would find out.

It wasn't long before she came out to the fence to tell Boon that the doctor would see us after lunch at 1:00. Thanks to Boon altering the facts a bit and making our case more appealing, we felt lucky and excited. So we had about six hours to occupy before our doctor's appointment.

"We go see special, village temple. One-two hour drive," Boon told me.

Ahhh, we would soon be relieved of the sound of clop, clop, clop, of that half coconut shell. It wasn't giving rise to any benign gaze in my eyes. I noticed the boy had found a new victim to be his audience, and I suspected this activity just might continue incessantly throughout the day.

We drove northwest away from the Gulf, buildings, people, and traffic congestion. It wasn't long before dusty, red dirt was blowing up from behind our car as we traveled on an unpaved narrow road past rice fields and through the occasional small village. In due course we pulled over by a house with an array of things for sale set up to make a store. There were some benches, coolers of soda and various items on display. Boon and his wife and the girl walked on to the temple to see if the monk was able to receive visitors while I rested a bit. I sat on a bench drinking cold juice from a young coconut through a bent straw.

I relaxed and surveyed the surroundings. It was very quiet and things were in slow motion in the heat. After drinking the cold juice from two young coconuts I decided to walk on to the temple.

Three Thai women came by and walked in the same direction I was headed. Balance poles on their shoulders held loads dangling from each end that gracefully bounced to their cadence. Their bodies were wrapped in colorful cotton, and they wore the traditional Thai

lampshade hats. They swayed to the beat of the hot sun, and I found myself naturally falling into their rhythm in the heat as I followed them along the path that soon divided. They went to the left, and I remained on the main trail.

But I shared their listless sleepy pace as we made way on parallel paths that headed toward the temple. Their course eventually veered off, and I continued toward the spire. As I approached, the temple and its grounds appeared as a shimmering oasis. The scene was tranquility personified: no wind, no sound, just stillness and silence with an intense golden and green metallic sheen. The air was soaked with mysticism and spiritualism. There was an absolutely still green pond; palm trees stood with nary a frond in movement, and quiet bungalows were tucked amongst thick green foliage.

Boon was just coming out to get me, and I met him on the trail. He handed me a small brochure printed in Thai and oddly translated English that told about the temple and the old monk. I read that he was orphaned as a very young boy and lived in the streets of Bangkok on his own until he was about twelve. At this time monks at a temple somewhat adopted him. He soon decided to become a monk and has remained so for the last eighty-some years. He was well known and highly respected throughout the country for his “extraordinary meditations, his fasting as well as his ability to listen and provide people and other monks with succinct, prudent responses”.

He had lived alone as a forest monk in the north for many years. He devoted decades to study, became an expert on Pali and could translate the original Buddhist texts. Boon explained, “Now his body is very sick; he is in lots of pain, but his mind is clear and his thinking alert.” He and his wife had finished their meeting with him.

I entered the temple and found him sitting on a platform amongst some cushions near the huge statue of Buddha. I could see that he was crippled and unable to walk. His crossed legs were skin-covered bone. I knelt, bowed, brought my hands together and *wied* as politely and as properly as I knew how, then looked into the face of this most distinguished, impressive, aged monk.

I was staggered when I met his eyes. It was not my imagination or any exaggeration. They eerily had a remarkable resemblance to the eyes of the bear in the market place. It was more than haunting. They possessed the same detachment from his physical being: the same patient, tranquil, steady gaze. They were even the same shade of brown with the same deep black pupils, and they were intensely alive.

This certainly provided me some things to ponder. Seemed I had nothing I wanted to say to anyone: no desire to explain or relate anything to another soul. I juggled thoughts concerning strength of will, poise, detachment, inner peace and suffering. With the reality before my eyes, it didn't seem at all like a phony, contrived, banal thing to do. The combination of the mystical temple grounds, the beauty of the Buddha and the quiet, gold room, and my considerations of the eyes of the frail, imposing, aged monk and the eyes of the tormented bear caused me pause and has remained within me ever since.

Lunchtime was nearly over when we returned to the market place, and I was still recovering from my encounter and my personal revelation and thoughts. The heat of the day approached, water dripped from the plastic blue awnings shading many of the stalls, and people went about their business: a daily occurrence for them, fascinating for me.

As we neared the doctor's home I cringed as I disappointingly detected the clop, clop, clop sound amongst the din of the market place. I could well-understand the behavior of Poe's character in *The Tell Tale Heart*. I was about ready to confess something to anybody just to make that clop, clop, clop stop!

While Boon stood by the doctor's white fence to let the amah know we were there and ready, I once again found my leaning post vacant there waiting for me. I returned to my special place and enjoyed observing the life of the market. I was reluctant to look into the eyes of the bear and see the eyes of that monk then plunge into my new dark cave and get myself all rattled before going in to see the doctor. A voice caught my ear from across the way and saved me.

"*Krueng kilo, jet baht leow!*" the lovely Thai woman announced from the stool she was perched on behind her table and baskets of goods. This lilt continued steadily, interrupted only by a question or a purchase from a customer. So, for seven baht you could get a half of a kilo of whatever fruit or vegetable she was selling; but you'd better hurry she sang.

She fanned her gold-tinted face as she chanted this catchy phrase while smiling the most beautiful of smiles. I had the fleeting, fanciful desire to request her hand in marriage then and there, be her fifty-fifty partner in her enterprise, and live nearby in one of the wooden houses on stilts with glassless windows where we would enjoy frugal and healthy meals together as we peacefully aged.

My warm dream was interrupted by Boon calling my name. The girl and I followed the amah through the gate, up the stairs and into the dwelling. The entry had floor to ceiling shelves filled with thousands of statues of Buddha of all sizes and of various materials. There were hundreds of lit candles, clusters of burning incense, and colorful silk pillows with embroidered birds and fish posed neatly about. We walked through this large room, down a hallway lined with Buddha statues to a darkened area.

The robed doctor sat on a stool behind a partition. My "daughter" sat on a stool facing him. She could see and speak with him through an open window in the dividing wall. As instructed, with two hands, she set on the counter in front of the doctor a piece of paper with an explanation written in Thai of her illness.

He closed his eyes. Amidst his muttering and chanting, he suddenly raised his arm. Then he brought it down and quickly scribbled the information he received from somewhere. Three graceful women behind him squatted on the teak floor in bare feet. They mixed, counted and sorted medicines that were spread out all before them. Colorful tablets; reds, yellows, pinks and baby blues; white and lavender capsules were softly shuffled like muffled marimbas creating background rhythms to the doctor's quiet chanting.

He held the girl's arms at the wrists for a minute and then he released her. His eyes rolled back in his head. He sat quiet and still before resuming his chanting.

A few moments passed then he turned to the women on the floor behind him. He instructed them what to do, and they searched through some drawers in a cabinet and gathered some pills and herbs that they placed in a small rattan basket. It was actually a beautiful little model of the fish traps used in the waters nearby. He set this container of medicine on the ledge for his patient along with a piece of paper listing things in Thai that she should and should not eat.

We were dismissed. Just like that. Before I knew it we were in the sunlight walking through the market. It happened so fast. It was a perplexing experience. The sound of clop, clop, clop, echoed in my ears but thankfully grew faint and finally disappeared as we made our way to the car.

It was an uncomfortable long ride back to Bangkok, but I had some things to think about. When we arrived I left this little group of friends, found a hotel, and set myself in motion to take care of my business dealings.

Two and a half weeks later, back in Hong Kong, my host picked me up at the airport late one night. When we got inside his flat he motioned for me to come and look. He opened his daughter's bedroom door and pointed at her in bed sleeping like a babe in arms, breathing steady and clear and all cozy.

The next day he brought me out onto his balcony. I looked down at the parking area and there his daughter was with some friends. Two of them turned a long rope while she skipped as they sang a rhyme. After a bit they started running around kicking a soccer ball on the asphalt. She appeared to have gained a few pounds, there was color in her face, and she was aglow with healthiness and energy.

Her mother and father were relieved, so thankful and very happy parents. They were astounded at her transformation. A miracle had occurred. On the sidelines, I had experienced private inner adjustments as well during my sojourn with her and the Thai family. But it wasn't me in the spotlight, their daughter certainly was, and I celebrated her fortune.

I bore witness to this doctor's healing of a seriously asthmatic young girl who could not be cured by a multitude of conventional doctors in various cities around the world. It is difficult to deny something witnessed by one's own eyes. I saw what happened, and I was certainly impressed and filled with incredulity. What other inconceivable deeds and cures could this man conjure?

Undoubtedly this doctor was aware of the bear and the pitiable, mad young boy in the marketplace. I'm sure he knew the waif was beyond hope and healing. There was nothing

he could do for this lad to bring him closer to any kind of normalcy. No magic, no trance, no potion could help.

There was something I sure wished he would do though. I would be most pleased and most satisfied to learn that this mysterious doctor used his wisdom, power and influence to, at least, arrange for that coconut shell to be forever taken away from the little lunatic for the sake of that poor, dusty bear no matter how detached that animal's eyes were from his circumstances.

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“Children of Privilege”

“Hi, new guy...”

Of course, I’d heard it before. The child of a diplomat knows no permanence.

But, this story is not mine; already at fifteen, the brooding sort who’d rather scribble in a sketch pad than socialize. This is the saga of two Americans at the American School, Manila, and their journey home. It must be about them. This was their school and their country, even if they didn’t realize their forefather’s had won it for them long ago. I, the son of a recently appointed Pakistani ambassador, was the interloper.

“Hi, new guy...”

Katherine...Kate...K reached out in chemistry class—my first on my first day at a new school. I don’t think we exchanged more than smiles and names before class commenced. I thought she was pretty, sandy-brown hair to her shoulders, grey-green eyes. Her tan fit the tropical setting and she smiled like the sun at dawn—any schoolboy’s dream. So I almost choked on my sandwich under an awning by the football field later that monsoonal day when she appeared beside me again, essentially to ask how I’d come to be in Manila. The question was tough. Answering it would not be easy. It would require a conversation that lasted six years.

“I was born in Nebraska,” she opened her account by the sodden field. “But I lived in Brazil and Mexico before coming here four years ago.” Later campus banter would reveal she spoke Spanish and Portuguese as fluently as English and was the only one among all I met in the meantime who could address the locals in Tagalog. Her father was a scientist at IRRI, an agricultural research institute on the outskirts of Manila.

Getting to know Kate, it soon became obvious that her smile was not her sole fortune. Her most distinguishing treasure was her demeanor, because there was nothing girly-girl about it. She wore no make-up, unlike the other girls from all corners of the earth already emulating their housebound mothers. She was not coquettish about showing me up in chemistry when I was busy melting ballpoints in the Bunsen burner. She was more athletic than me too. I remember her laughing wildly as I inhaled a cigarette under the bleachers after trying out for track and field. She’d just watched me run two circuits of the field then turn straight into the washroom to vomit. Yet, she showed up for every game when I began organizing cricket matches instead.

From the way I looked at her and the ease with which she sought my company, teachers and peers alike suspected more than a budding friendship from that first chemistry class. They conjectured that we were just too bashful to admit it to others. I, at least, had only been too reserved to speak my feelings to her. I didn't take that formal step required in American courtship—I didn't ask her out on a date. But just before she left for the summer, we were pretending to study at the library when I instinctively took her hand for the first time. She didn't look up from her book, but smiled faintly as our fingers played. Every moment was chemistry. The experiment only concluded when a classmate turned the corner and snickered.

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The distance a summer can create when you're approaching sixteen is as large as your inexperience.

While Kate was away, I turned to the other tonics within the allowance of a privileged adolescent in Manila. Right around the corner from school in Makati—the new commercial hub of the city—beer and rum, marijuana, and more was available for little to nothing. In fact, they were most widely purveyed in the narrow alleys and numerous bars outside the campus' every guarded gate. I walked past them, or was approached by shady guys in sunglasses—"Hey, G.I. Joe! You want weed, coke, heroin?"—everyday on my way in and out of school. Having either just escaped or hurtling back towards parents tied up in their gripes with each other and the world, such propositions were a temptation too alluring to pass by, doubly so when the friends I'd just begun to make (to replace the ones I'd just abruptly lost) had abandoned the city to rediscover where they came from, and I had nowhere else to go.

When Kate returned, we had both changed a little. I was interested in exploring more of Manila, while she had reached out over the summer to another guy. She knew Alexander...Alex...Al from school, though I'd not met him. They were also neighbors at the IRRI compound in Los Banos, riding the institute shuttle back and forth to the city. It was a surreal place to live. Not only was it a little bit of America on another's land, like our school. The IRRI compound was in the middle of the jungle under a volcano. The resident scientists were from every niche of the globe, but they generally socialized within their respective communities—Indians with Pakistanis, Brits with Aussies, and Americans with Canadians—echoing the patterns of their children at school. No surprise, then, during the summer that Kate and Alex's parents had hooked up in the U.S., and their kids had followed. I suppose Alex asked her out on a date.

My father, on the other hand, had bought me a driver's license and an old jalopy that summer, presumably to make up for not going anywhere. Though looking forward to sharing this new mobility with Kate, distracted by Manila's many intoxicants, I didn't notice at first that she came back avoiding me. Belatedly, I resolved to ask her out on that date, only to learn of Alex. She told me, "You'll really like him. You guys are so much alike." Anyone who knew us would attest that she was right.

In Alex I discovered a kindred spirit. His looks were the opposite of mine—blonde hair, blue eyes, skin as pale as a ghost. His parents, excommunicated Mormons from Salt Lake City, had brought him into this world in India, a child of the Peace Corps. They had raised him in Vietnam and Thailand while serving at the U.S. Embassy, moving to Manila a year earlier as administrators at IRRI. None of his stops matched the points on my life's map. But that was of little consequence. Impermanence was our bond. Any distance that existed was bridged when I first joked that his father was probably with the CIA, and he retorted that mine was no doubt an agent of the ISI.

At first, the three of us only spent time goofing off together at school, talking about the places we'd lived, the people we'd left behind, and the books and music we'd picked up along the way. They told me about their summer in the U.S., and I relayed my exploits, which would have been well beyond my years anywhere but in Manila. Eventually, Alex skipped the shuttle back to IRRI to learn if all I'd been describing was true. We ended up at Manang's, a hole-in-the-wall place around the corner from campus where beer, dope, and mystery-meat on a stick could be had nightly for a few *pesos* and a place to sit on the grimy sidewalk was always yours for the taking.

While I envied him for the stories he told that night—of midnight rendezvous with Kate by their compound pool, trips to the enchanted beach at Boracay together with their families, or just the time spent dining together at home—I suppose he saw a little green when on a guided hop from bar to bar in throbbing Makati. In the midst of it all, we also determined why it was that he was buried in Kate's embrace and I in the seediest alleys of one of the seediest cities I know. We shared a deep desire, growing with every passing minute, to escape our unstable homes. His parents had their share of gripes with each other too.

By the time summer rolled around again, Alex had opted for my route of escape entirely, spending most of his time in Makati, staying at our house as the year flew by. I didn't mind. I enjoyed his company. I was preparing for the loss of a girl I had met at one of those Makati clubs: the British Ambassador's daughter, to whom I'd grown attached over the last couple of months. Our last fling would be her senior prom, before she headed back to London. Toasting summer vacation at Manang's, Alex and I were so caught up in our lives that we barely noticed the dirt in which we'd sat all year, or the fact that people were sleeping in it behind us. This was normal, and we looked past it as we ate, drank, and talked, like every other student at the American School.

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The first I heard of the break up was not from Alex. I heard from Kate. On the first day of the new school year, after a summer I'd spent much the same as the previous one, I encountered a side of her I hadn't seen before. All the energy she usually expended on effervescence, she now spilled into anguish. She wouldn't share what was wrong when our paths crossed on the way to separate classes. She just stood there, sobbing. To save her some embarrassment—though she seemed oblivious to the other kids hurrying to and fro in the hallway—I convinced her not to take the early shuttle back home but to stay in town and confide in me after school. "We can meet at Tia's"—a Mexican restaurant by the side gate.

While *mariachis* strummed to lush candlelight, she wept on inconsolably, stammering out the words Alex had more bluntly conveyed when they'd returned to Manila from summer vacation. "He said he didn't love me."

I said I'd talk to him, calming her, when it slipped out that even if he didn't change his mind, "I'll always love you."

She took my hand and said she knew. "I love you, too."

Love, love, love... As if any of us had the slightest inkling of its meaning. So, chalk it up to youth, but she had a smile in her eyes when I walked her to the late shuttle and waved her off, glad to head back to Tia's for more sangria before heading home myself.

On the first of Alex and my nocturnal jaunts that year—I recall it began at an open-air *balot* and beer joint near Green Belt Cinema—I made good on my promise to Kate. The place was new and brightly lit, surrounded by the souped-up Japanese compacts we could avoid at Manang's, so we were downing our beers to find a less invasive spot. Before escaping the glare, he confessed. "This past summer, I realized that Kate sees picket fences in our future." He did not. He wanted his own future. He wanted my present. There was no turning back. What could I say to that? We would drink together whenever he wanted. As for Kate...

She felt excluded. If not ensnared by the memory of midnight rendezvous, Kate lived in the days when the three of us would stalk the school's hallways together, Alex and I usually skipping classes to hang out during her free periods. She had pushed aside the fact that much of that time, she had worked hard not to fawn over Alex in my company. I'd felt sick at the thought of how they behaved when alone, and he'd begun to wish she wasn't around at all. Such togetherness had obviously been unsustainable. Its loss, nevertheless, sent her reeling; her only consolation, she said, was my steadfast friendship.

*

When the IRRI compound became Kate's personal concentration camp, Alex stayed in Manila and we explored the city further. We drank at a bar-b-que place in Quezon City, chomping on chickens' feet. We smoked a joint or two, leaning back in our chairs at a cliff-side ginebra stall overlooking Valle Verde. We talked. Every outing taught us more about each other and ourselves, though we didn't know what we were learning at the time. In Manila, we were both G.I. Joe to the hookers and fishball vendors on every street corner. We may have raced the souped-up Japanese compacts on EDSA Boulevard, but we weren't one with the racers. We enjoyed being immersed in dark streets far from those into which we were born, and though we'd eat the fishballs and smoke the weed, we'd only flirt with the harder drugs and prostitutes, nothing more. We were just bidding our time before racing to other places. We'd have to graduate on a fast track and travel beyond all we knew. We were too scared to go alone and too young for spouses, so we found friendship in the prospect of exploring the world together. University in the U.S. would serve as our excuse.

I should have known even then that despite the pandering voices of fishball vendors and drug dealers, Alex and I were not G.I. Joes. As I told Alex one night, I wasn't even sure I'd be following him to the U.S. My father had recently quit his post. "I can't represent the General, anymore," he announced one night over the buzz of Johnny Walker. "We'll make our lives here until the Americans tire of him. It will happen as soon as the Soviets leave Afghanistan, wait and see. Then, we'll go home." All he added, before returning to Johnny's lullaby, was that we would be leaving the official residence in Makati for a suburb further down Edsa, where mostly Philippino professionals resided. Even they couldn't afford to send their children to the American School, and without any source of income, it would cost my father a big chunk of his savings to allow my sister and I to graduate. When I raised the subject of paying for university, my father just sipped his whiskey and shrugged, saying I would be packing as planned. "God will provide." Driven by the desperate want to follow the path of every other child at school, I accepted him at his word as readily as I believed that I too was G.I. Joe.

We also talked about how badly Kate had taken their break up. Alex thought, "She's not who she pretends to be." That self-assured, capable voice I heard by day, quivered in the dark with him. "Her mom is pretty hard on her." I guessed something more than losing Alex accounted for the severity of her despair of late, but Alex's insight still came as a surprise. I imagined that Kate lived the peachy, Midwestern life of sitcoms, albeit under the shadow of a volcano. After all, even the manhole covers of the IRRI compound were 'Made in the U.S.A.' Still, I figured Alex knew better. I'd barely met Kate's family. He'd practically lived with them. And once alerted by Alex, Kate's behavior, too, did nothing to dispel the idea that she was not the person she fought so hard to project; that the troubled individual Alex tried to put behind him, was in fact the same person he had first asked out on a date. And Kate's mother would do one thing, of which I'm personally aware and will refer in good time, to suggest that she was somehow involved.

*

Kate's response to my conversations with Alex clashed with our plans in ways we had not expected. Time dulled none of her anguish, but every passing minute fortified her resolve to reconstruct the past she longed for. She would graduate early, too. She would stalk the streets through the night. She would travel with us. Alex and I squirmed, though each for our own reasons, and Kate was perceptive enough to know it. She would feel ganged up on when he and I were swilling vodka and professing our atheism, our socialism, in some elitist club, while she sipped cola and defended Jesus. She stood apart to scold us when we'd pass some racist slur about the native masses around us, some juvenile thing we'd found funny when she hadn't been around. She felt isolated when we'd break our promises to attend some play she was in, or some function to which she was invited, because we'd spent the night toking in the paddy fields by Lake Laguna. It all came to a head when she got her greatest wish.

In her good old days, Kate, Alex, and his parents had taken a scuba course and diving expeditions around the Philippine archipelago ranked high on her list of fondest memories. One had been arranged before their break up and was on the agenda now: a weekend on

Bonito Island, diving the reefs and rock faces that surrounded it. My parents had not the expendable income to fund scuba lessons, let alone diving expeditions, but Alex said there'd be an extra hammock in his *nipa* hut, he'd give me some diving tips and we could snorkel, too. I wasn't fooled: he wanted me to run interference with Kate. I only agreed because of the ferocity of his dread and the intensity of my never-ending quest for destinations other than my own troubled home.

Why did Kate want me along? She slept with her head on my shoulder the entire way from Los Banos to Batangas on the bus. She clung to my arm on the choppy *banka* ride over to Bonito. She sat close to me when we feasted by the fireside on fish and prawns pulled from the turquoise waters around us. We even shared a regulator in a school of yellow angel fish twenty feet below the surface of the sea. I was taken aback. We had never been this intimate. I think I even looked to Alex for an explanation our first night on the island. A silent grin reached across his face in response to my dropped jaw. We were all on the beach when Kate used my thigh as her pillow. I didn't think she was trying to make Alex jealous. Perhaps that was naïve, but I'm still not convinced that was her intent. I believe she was simply casting me in his role the way she'd scripted this excursion long ago. Of course, it didn't work. By the end of our final day, she broke. All the anguish of that afternoon at Tia's erupted with the ferocity of Mount Pinatubo. I told Alex there was nothing I could do. He had to face her. So, he spent the night in her *nipa* hut, trying to dampen her sobs with pats on her back, while I writhed under a mosquito net within earshot, trying to escape more than insects and the guttural calls of the geckos in their pursuit.

I found myself unable to toss and turn for another minute, just before dawn. Restless, I decided to find a spot from which to watch the sunrise. The bamboo patio of my hut was not ideal; it faced west. But, Bonito is a small, rocky island and I figured it wasn't a long hike through the swaying palms to the unexplored eastern shore. To my surprise, it was uphill all the way – difficult going by the light of a torch – and I winced at every crackle in the underbrush, imagining that creatures more fierce than geckos lay in wait. I was certainly relieved when I finally found myself peering through the dense foliage and over a crest at the last flicker of the moon on the sea. There was a bench on the cliff at the end of the path, but what I hadn't anticipated was the silhouette of Kate seated on it.

Struck dead in my tracks, I turned off my torch, thinking myself hidden in the palms. Deciding I should turn back, I was about to go when she swiveled in her seat and smiled serenely, gesturing for me join her with a raised eyebrow just visible in the moonlight. I approached gingerly, unsure of what to say and not exactly thrilled at the prospect of dealing with her woes when sleep deprived. Once seated awkwardly beside her, I settled on simply asking if she was alright. "I am," she nodded, wrapping an arm around me, drawing close. While she stroked my hair, gazing out to sea—I, still and heavy as the boulders around us—we watched the rising sun peel back the starry horizon. She only let me go when a blue, starless sky stretched over our heads and the rustling of palm fronds behind us announced that others were up. She leaped to her feet with a smile as they approached, less vivacious than affected.

In the coming months, Alex avoided Kate as much as possible. I'd only see him if he was staying the night in Manila, and that was no longer too often. No more Bonitos were planned. He told me later he was hanging out with Danielle...Dannie...D-famous among the guys for her killer body, infamous among the girls for her willingness to use it. D allowed no more time than was necessary for Alex and I to finalize the details of a trip to Europe on our way to university in the U.S.

Meanwhile, Kate and I spent more time together alone. She'd take the late shuttle to IRRI, and we'd go to Green Belt Cinema to watch movies, or just head home to listen to music in my room. She was lonely and down. After that weekend on Bonito, we'd hardly held hands, but we'd grown closer than we had ever been before. No longer hiding in her books or buried in some extra-curricular activity, she also seemed to have no time for any of the countless friendships she'd courted before. No longer asking me to sit in on her dance recitals, she'd model for me in the art studio and share every random thought that entered her mind, from the particular hue of Nebraska's endless cornfields to her love affair with Mickey-D's quarter-pounders. Using the poses she'd strike, I'd sketch grotesque portraits of myself, hangmen for ear-rings, appendages contorted. I knew she'd always been attracted to these sides of me, but through such lengthy exchanges, she began to penetrate the unstable home that contorted her poses. I think, in some ways, reading those motley drawings led her to look up to me a little. I had been able to ground her during the worst tornado to blow through her fields of corn, despite the cyclones already raging in my back yard. Perhaps, it was not so much that she looked up to me, but that she felt small. I cannot say. All I know is that she accepted warmly when I asked her to be my date at our senior prom. It would be an interesting night, part of a larger journal of curious anecdotes surrounding graduation and our last days together in Manila.

A trident of points to mention, beside a crown of thorns...

One: throughout the period of graduation, after final exams were written, Kate stayed at our house. Two: my mother, more than her own, spent time shopping with Kate in preparation for the event. Three: Kate's parents' adored Alex, their blue-eyed boy.

Granted, the first two points can be explained by the fact that Kate's parents lived in Los Banos, but the third suggests the prom would have been different if Alex had been her date. There was also the fact, which she'd confided in the time we'd spent alone, that Alex was right to think something of her melancholy had to do with a growing distance between her and her mother. Even in my presence, that woman only harped on the virtues of her eldest daughter, married and baking babies in Nebraska, and her youngest, Rebecca...Becky...B, dating the captain of the swim team, another blue-eyed boy named Jackson...Jake...J. Kate, on the other hand, poetic and curious about the world around her, received little praise or encouragement. When in Alex's arms, she had had the feeling the distance was less. I saw myself how openly she and Alex cavorted in her mother's company. With me, there were no invitations to dinner, and there is the matter of points one to three, mentioned above. I only saw her parents at the front door when dropping Kate home from Manila. I'll never know if

Kate or her mother was behind this last circumstance, but either way, it speaks of distance between them.

Now, the crown of thorns tearing at her brow...

When Alex and I had finalized our plans to tour Europe, Kate had expressed a desire to accompany us. Alex was, quite expectedly, unenthusiastic, but by graduation I wouldn't have minded. Nevertheless, so as to avoid any repeat of Bonito, I told her it would be better if she didn't come. Besides, we could see each other in the U.S., even though she was going to California, Alex to Utah, and I to Massachusetts. I know Alex told her the same. She eventually acquiesced, but at least I was oblivious to the depth of the cuts being delivered. We made her feel like a middle child, first excluded from her mother's affections, then overlooked by her siblings; all of this on top of the spike of Alex's unwavering resolve to remain separated. Kate obviously held all this in her heart the night of our senior prom, but it was also clear that she wasn't going to let it spoil the occasion she had planned to spend with Alex.

It would be nothing like my previous experience at the prom. Then, I'd waved to a radiant Kate and an already uncomfortable Alex, when my date, the British Ambassador's daughter, dragged us out before the first dance was called. We had driven through Manila, radio blaring, then parked, steaming up the windows until dawn, as we had most nights together before she left for London.

On our night, Kate had never appeared more beautiful—except, perhaps, on that moonlit bench at Bonito. We chatted at home while she applied her make-up, a rare sight, until Mum came along and ushered me out. Kate made her grand entrance down the stairs to my applause and Dad's flashing camera, a white lacy dress falling from her shoulders with Mum still pinning a hem behind her. A corsage was duly attached. We attended the formal and danced the slow dances, before heading out with B and J, who had invited us on a cruise of Manila Bay. After the cruise, we stopped for a drink and listened to some live jazz at a hotel on the waterfront, then made our way to a party where the booze must have arrived in trucks and the weed in gunny sacks. I declined every offer, seeing Kate's discomfort, before we headed home early.

Sooner than expected, we found ourselves on the couch in the den by the flickering light of the TV, back in the usual garb of shorts and t-shirts. We had been in touch all evening—fingers entwined, bodies close—and I hadn't seen Kate so much at ease in ages. Even the sight of Alex at the prom with D had not fazed her. And then, the highlight of the occasion: we kissed and the rest of the night passed in each other's embrace, both for the first time. I suspected that it was the Bonito syndrome all over again, but it was better than truck loads of booze and gunny sacks of weed, so I savored every moment without hesitation.

An emotional, but mannered parting awaited Kate and I a few days later, when I dropped her at her parent's door in Los Banos for the last time. The piercing trident and crown of thorns, as much as our last few nights together, had taken their collective toll. I, of course, only thought of her lips on mine, her hair in my face, her waist in my arms, and wondered if

I would ever feel them again. Having nothing else to give, I took the Allah pendant from the chain around my neck—placed there by my parents—and put it in her hand. I told her it would protect her while we were apart, as they had told me. Without a word, Kate strung it on her chain to dangle along with her Cross.

*

Alex and I parted company at New York's JFK Airport after months of crawling through Europe. We felt we'd seen it all and enjoyed seeing it together, but were ready for some time apart. The only low Alex had to deal with came over a baguette and some wine in Paris, across from Notre Dame on the Left Bank, when he was shocked to see his parents waving at us from a tourist boat on the Seine. But that was on the last leg of our trip. Otherwise, he had only worried—whether walking toward the Prado in Madrid, riding a train through the Alps, or on a ferry to a Greek isle—that Kate had chosen a university in California because it was driving distance from Utah. If *Fatal Attraction* had been out by our travels, I'm sure he would have likened Kate to a crazed Glenn Close.

We also stopped in London, where we saw my British Ambassador's daughter, now unemployed and living with her sister in a tiny flat. To be honest, I only contacted her because we needed a place to stay, trying to avoid the cost of hotels wherever we happened to be. She seemed a little dazed both days we spent together. Alex had no idea I had hurled some rubbish at her about the wound she'd inflicted by not writing to me in Manila, rather than more honestly declining the place in bed she offered that first night in her hometown. As far as she and Alex were concerned, I was myself. I was not. I missed Kate and was guilty every day, whether on the Acropolis or at a cinema in Zurich, wondering if she had rediscovered her vivacity after being excluded from this trip. I was also haunted by the daily certainty that my father did not have the money to pay for all this. It had been an extraordinarily long summer, and I had had no contact with Kate or my family at all. I called her the moment I checked into a motel in Boston.

I needn't have worried, at least, regarding Kate. The roommate who informed me that Kate was attending an orientation session already knew who I was. Kate returned my call soon after...elated, effervescent. She was already talking of visiting for Christmas. "I love Boston," she announced, still giddy. "I've never known winter. We'll discover it together."

There is a sense of hope among college freshman, quite distinct from the dread of kids entering high school. A new chapter is being written and the pen, the collegiate believes, is in his or her hand for the first time. My saga could be no different. So, I read it as a sign of things to come when on my eighteenth birthday – my first away from family – I received a grand parcel of thoughtful notes, home-baked cookies and other little trinkets from Kate. This was another first for me. No woman, other than my mother, had reached out in such ways before. It was the first inkling I had of the love between a man and a woman who weren't related. And the smack of growth, like the rustling confetti in her birthday box, made Christmas seem an eternity away. Why walk the slushy streets of Boston? I resolved. Why not spend Thanksgiving in Kate's warmer surroundings? I washed dishes in the cafeteria to make it happen.

Warmer than Massachusetts in November, yes, but along the stretch of Californian coast from Santa Barbara to Long Beach that Thanksgiving, it was only a matter of a few degrees. It rained and an icy gale blew off the Pacific the entire duration of my stay. It should have been a portent of doom the moment I stepped off the plane, but I was sheltered by Kate's welcoming smile.

That evening, however, diving out of the wind and rain into a Mexican restaurant Kate had chosen because it reminded her of Tia's, she confirmed that the storm outside would penetrate my bones, after all. Alex, she said in a whisper, averting her eyes, had descended from the frosty blue heights of Utah a couple of weeks earlier, unannounced. He'd asked to be reconciled. That surprised me, but I didn't need to ask how she had responded. "I didn't know what to tell you," she explained without prompting, "You'd already bought your ticket." That said it all.

I wanted to leave, but didn't. We were still friends.

Love, like life itself, is as laden with twists of fate that cannot be predicted, as it is replete with omens fulfilled. By the time we stood on Santa Barbara pier on my last day, a week later, snuggling for warmth as we scanned the churning seas, she looked up at me through the drizzle and asked, "Is it possible to love two people at once?" It seems she was also acquiring an inkling of the vast, indefinable meaning of that small and easily bandied word. But, taken by the moment, I answered with an abrupt no. My head was crammed with the barely dry images of being bundled together in a bus, wondering why anyone would name a town Oxnard; huddled together under a stranger's stoop on Long Beach, the rain pelting down, the Queen Mary across the gray waters in front of us; snuggled together watching cartoons on a coin-operated TV at LA's bus station; throwing popcorn at the movie screen when Rocky beat the Russian guy. Together with that last day on the pier, they were all moments when she'd grabbed me from distraction to kiss.

I don't recall the times I grabbed her. There must have been one or two, but I suspect not more. Flying east over the continent, only the occasions on which she'd reached out to me remained. Her touch had felt nothing like Bonito or the prom. It hadn't made me feel like a substitute or second fiddle. Every sensation had been chemistry. She had laughed with me, seeing what I was seeing, like on those long, sweltering afternoons in the art studio. I had heard her every word, tuned into every frequency of her voice, just as in the many phone calls to have passed between us since I'd arrived in Boston. So, I couldn't understand why, despite the desire in her kisses, I had not been elevated from a stand in to a contender in the larger scheme of things. Why was I still flying solo?

The passengers around me landed safely at Logan Airport; I alone crashed.

*

The plot thickens...

More than an emptiness that devours you from the inside out lurked in Massachusetts. My university was not Ivy League, I'd heard it said, because one of its football players had died on the field, leading its program to be scrapped. Even without a football team, however, tuition fees for foreign students in particular were smothered in ivy. I don't know what my father expected from me. Did he think I'd land a scholarship within months of arriving, or better yet, a job that could cover the exorbitant tuition fees, room, and board? I suppose so. Before Thanksgiving, that's all I'd been pressed to achieve in every letter and phone call from home. After Thanksgiving, second semester fees being due, those cries for action were turning to screams of disappointment. I was failing him, somehow. And, although I'd not spent a penny from home on California-dirty dishes had even purchased my books and other school supplies-I was riddled with guilt. I was also distraught. The prospect of throwing in the towel after only a few months in the US, to return to a grimace in Manila, was not something I relished. Neither God nor my father had provided, but I was supposed to? I broke down and called Alex. We hadn't spoken since JFK.

Obviously, my turning to Alex was not helped by the Kate situation. She may have told him of my feelings for her before I visited California, but I never had and wasn't going to start now that all was in the open. Yet, I had to call Alex, because his grandfather was on the board of directors at Utah State University, where Alex was pretending to study while he skied. The fees there were considerably less than Ivy League and a speedy transfer of credits could insure against visa hassles. Perhaps, Kate had even suggested, I speak with Alex at some point; I can't recall. Anyway, when Alex said that he'd do everything he could, I didn't feel the offer was insincere. I think he was feeling quite isolated himself, up in his frosty blue mountains, surrounded by the Mormons who had excommunicated his parents. And I had no choice but to believe that he'd be happy to see me. My visa did not allow me to work off campus, and if I dropped out, I had no right to remain in the country. So, I resigned myself to make the move to Logan, Utah.

One more thing...

While awaiting the call from Alex's grandfather to confirm the paperwork was done, the phone rang one night after everyone else had left the dorm for Christmas break. I hoped it was Kate. It wasn't. Out of the blue and as remote as the Rocky Mountain peaks around Logan, it was the British Ambassador's daughter. She spoke casually, laughing over the ruckus around her, saying she was in New York for a small reunion with some of our former classmates. She was wondering if I'd like to join them. I said no. I was broke. She said it was good to hear my voice anyway, before hanging up with a thud.

A few hours later, the phone rang again. Not Kate. It was another voice from the past - the Indian girlfriend with whom the British Ambassador's daughter was staying in Scarsdale. She said our mutual friend was beside herself. She said that when we'd met in London over the summer, I'd convinced her how deep my feelings for her ran. She'd only crossed the Atlantic to see me. I had to make the short journey from Boston to New York. She'd give me the money if I was broke.

I went to New York on my father's coin, albeit hesitantly. I told myself the girl who greeted me so warmly at Scarsdale Station did so for the same reason she had offered me a place in her bed in London. She'd had a difficult time adjusting to life in England. It couldn't have been easy after spending her childhood in all the places England had once owned. I understood that much, at least. So when she offered me a place in her bed in New York, I didn't squirm out of it. This time, I crumbled into it.

I know I shouldn't have done it. I know I should have told her about Kate, instead of repeating the line I had delivered in London, that my anguish was a sign of her earlier rejection. I know I lied because I sought solace in her arms, just as she did in mine. By our second kiss, I even set aside the nagging suspicion that this was how Kate had felt with me in California.

Bidding her farewell under the magnificent ceiling at Grand Central a couple of days later, she overcome with grief and I with renewed guilt, I took the chain from around my neck—the same one from which I'd given the Allah pendant to Kate—binding it around her wrist, to remember me by, I said. I felt ashamed. She knew I'd be disappearing into the frosty blue of Utah soon after, but had no clue that keeping in touch was not high on my list of priorities. Self preservation alone was on my mind, not least because I was following in the footsteps of Brigham Young without the protection of any God.

*

Alex, snow ten feet high and a racial slur I had never heard before—'grit'—awaited me that January in Utah. I had encountered other colorful epithets in Boston, of course—Paki, Rag-Head, Spic, Nigger—but not even Alex knew what this one meant when some red-necks threw it at me from their passing truck on Logan's main street. We conjectured that it referenced the dirty, brown grit strewn on the roads for de-icing, or the dish known as grits on the menu of soul food restaurants. But this wasn't my most pressing problem. In my desperation not to return home, I hadn't considered how awkward I'd feel when Kate called Alex, or if I wanted to talk with her for any reason. I hadn't imagined how alienating that would be. It must have been the same for Alex, because we spent those months in Utah binging on weed and cheap gallons of wine, rather than talking about anything.

In Massachusetts, I'd actually attended classes and studied. I'd worked at the cafeteria. I'd reserved alcohol and marijuana for weekends and avoided buying much myself. But two weeks high in the Rockies, it was like sea level in Manila. Only, it evoked none of the thrill it once had. We were just up all night, sleeping after breakfast and making sure that no one else on our dormitory floor slept at all. Classes, be damned. There was something mean about us; something bitter. Perhaps it was just my third wheel driving Alex. Perhaps I was simply crushed by the inevitability of my departure. But I don't think so. As I mentioned, Alex's home was as unstable as mine and we were never at university to study. I think seeing each other again only pushed us toward the realization that the lives we'd lived in the tropical splendor of the Philippines, the lives we'd run from, were in fact the lives we'd imagined lay in our futures. We now knew, because such lives were nowhere to be found knee-deep in rednecks and over our heads in snow, that those had been lives of privilege,

lost. This realization scared us as much as our previous imaginings had thrilled. I understood why he called Kate. I'd call her too, separately, when I could.

So it was that one night in March, stowed away in the basement of our dormitory, far from our floor, Kate and I fell into a conversation prompted by the overdue acceptance that it was time to drop out of university altogether and head back to Manila. Nothing else would ease the financial crisis at home. I didn't know what I'd do there, I tried to explain, but at least I'd be cheaper to maintain. Kate first responded with a pregnant silence. Not until I wondered if we'd been cut off, did she speak. "That's probably best," she finally blurted in a voice I had not heard from her before. This was not the voice that usually greeted people with *Ola*. This was not the person who'd been wearing her Allah pendant in Santa Barbara. This was a new voice, at least to me. This was her mother's voice. She asked, "What would Christmas be like, anyway," me with her blue-eyed family? How would they react to my "praying to a different God," if I pray at all? "We're from different worlds."

All my life, I had been told the world is one, whatever the color of one's eyes. I had been raised to believe there is only one God, if any. And even if I had been blinded by my upbringing, it was only because I had been led to think (by American School after American School) that Americans, more than anyone else on earth, espoused the same values as me. I was stunned to learn otherwise from Kate, of all people. All I could do was agree without argument. For the first time, I understood why I was not a contender. Only in the Philippines could I be confused for G.I. Joe. She had reduced California to Bonito and the prom, after all. I couldn't stay.

Alex and I drove to Santa Barbara a few days later, picked up Kate and moved on to LA, checking into a motel for the night before my morning flight. I bought a bottle of something, but not even Alex was in the mood. I poured myself glass after glass anyway—it was expected of me and it provided an excuse to pass out. In fact, I fell asleep from sheer exhaustion, feeding a potted plant most of my drink when no one was looking. The next morning, we set off for LAX with Kate sandwiched between Alex and me on the bench seat, looking uncomfortable. She cried while Alex took a walk to give us some time to bid farewell at the airport. She told me she'd be writing me a letter every week, and that she loved me. I told myself I shouldn't care, that I was an idiot ... a shameful idiot.

*

A people's uprising had shaken the Philippines while I'd been watching my life explode like the space-shuttle on take-off. Marcos—Manila's long-ruling general—was now in Hawai'i under U.S. protection. Everyone in the diplomatic community knew a suitable replacement would soon arise from the abandoned piles of Imelda's shoes, but without diplomatic immunity of his own, the uprising had left my father feeling vulnerable. He wasn't sure how to proceed. Was it time for a rapprochement with his general? Should he wait for the inevitable fall, as planned? And what's more, my dropping out of school had not settled his nerves, as I'd hoped. In fact it only added the burden of explaining my premature return to his friends.

Obviously, my return to the Philippines was marked by none of McCarthy's triumphant bravado. I returned in the shape that McCarthy had left: in tatters, self-esteem trampled. Worse yet, unlike the cheers that restored McCarthy's sense of self upon his promised return, my parents only added to my sense of worthlessness. My father, unemployed but still riding on the fumes of his former privileges, described me to his poker buddies—all fathers of classmates not yet back for the summer—as a good-for-nothing who had bankrupted him in America, chasing girls. My mother, glad to have her baby boy back home, told the wives at the table not to listen to her husband, that I was a sensitive boy, I'd been hopelessly homesick, I'd missed my mother. And finally, when no one else was around to impress, they bickered over which of my weaknesses had carried me prematurely home.

Nothing, however, robbed me of an illustrious return more thoroughly than Kate's letters, which arrived like clockwork every month. She wrote pages and pages, but managed to say nothing at all. She told me her parents had moved back to the US, her father taking up a position at the University of Nebraska, and that she had left California to live and study under their wing. She recounted her routine in excruciating detail, even describing the bicycle route from her house to campus and every person with whom she worked at an ice cream parlor. I learned more about micro-biology—her field of study—than I ever cared to know. And I endured directions to all the best spots for Mexican food in her new town, the latest developments in the lives of second-cousins twice removed, and miscellaneous odds and ends gathered on excursions across the U.S. and Europe.

It was as if Kate had accomplished what nature itself had eschewed. Every month's letter was menstruation. Most of the month I'd maintain an even keel, but as the time for a letter approached, I'd begin feeling queasy, weepy, ill at ease. I'd stop eating properly. I'd snap at people. Then the letter would arrive and I'd bleed. My only relief was the crew of Philippino neighbors my sister had gathered around herself during my absence. In their company, I remained G.I. Joe.

Nevertheless, I was glad to leave Manila when my father finally decided to take his chances in Pakistan. No matter the manner in which I may have been perceived, I knew I was not an American action hero. What's more, time with my *Pinoy* neighbors reconfirmed that I was also not one of the locals racing souped-up Japanese compacts on Edsa Boulevard. Besides which, I was tired of avoiding the former classmates who had returned for the summer and, breaking with the routine of previous moves, I made no pretense of keeping in touch with anyone.

Kate's letters, however, pursued me to Karachi—that's why I bled on the shores of the Arabian Sea as profusely as on the pavement outside our house in Manila. I duly dispatched a postcard from time to time, but Karachi provided one counter to cramps that had not been available in Manila. This was the realization that, if I kept my mouth shut, I could blend right in with the kids racing souped-up Japanese compacts on Sharea Faisal. I capitalized by taking up a job as a front-desk clerk at one of Karachi's five-star hotels—valued for my English skills. This paid for weekends at the beach and travels from the deserts beyond the city, northward with the twists and turns of the Indus into the shadow of the roof of the world. Looking past the multitudes sleeping in the grime, I discovered

ruined cities as ancient as Egypt's pyramids; castles, palaces, and tombs drawn with the same pen as the Taj Mahal; music played in ecstasy and despair; and poetry and lore as complex as the fabric of time itself. But most importantly, unearthed from under the sands, dredged from the bottom of that mighty river and imbibed from the sun reflected off Himalayan peaks, I discovered that, if my accent did not betray me, I could claim all of this as mine.

The same process of rediscovery that made me want to stay, led my father to question his return almost as soon as we arrived. His contacts in government had evaporated with the constant shuffles taking place. People who once flocked to his side, now avoided him. Money was running out. He couldn't secure his pension, let alone a new posting, so long as the general remained in power. And worst of all, the general's promise to his American superiors was threatening to wipe out the very heritage and culture which I was busy claiming. In the charge of the general and his friends from the CIA, Pakistan was fast joining the ranks of places and people that did not believe in one God for all. I cannot blame my father for flying to Islamabad to begin the process of immigration to Canada less than two months after we arrived in Karachi.

*

A year later, we stepped off a plane and into a hotel in Toronto. A letter from Kate was waiting for me when we arrived. She said I was missed, valued, and that she was glad that we shared a continent, again. "When will we get together?" she asked. Anytime, I replied immediately. But she would have to make the journey north. I was trying desperately to find my feet in my fourth country in two years. I was broke. All true, except for one sin of omission: once bitten, twice shy. It was late summer now and she responded within days; school was about to start, but she'd be with me for Christmas. As it happened, in the coming months, she wrote of many other excursions, but the one in my direction was finally aborted on account of family obligations. I didn't wait for the next bout of cramps. The bloodletting had to end. I picked up a pen and instructed her to stop writing. Again, a response arrived in days. She refused my request, saying she would continue writing even if I burned her letters, that she loved me, that she could explain everything, that my image of her had become warped...

Kate's final letter, though not my final period, was posted from Nebraska in time to drop in the mailbox on my twenty-first birthday, my second in Toronto. In it and the letters leading up to it, a new voice had issued from Kate, one that bore no traces of the one on the phone in Utah or the letters written before I asked her not to write. It was an older voice, a more mature voice, a voice I had heard before, back in Manila at the art studio and on the pier in Santa Barbara. It spoke of more than lab experiments, the idiocy of cousins, or the texture of sauerkraut encountered on some trip to Germany. It expressed some sadness and evinced some of the understanding that had crept up on her without her knowing. She said that it pained her not to know how I was. She'd undergone an operation lately and it had made her think, that it had switched things around in her head, as she put it. She had been planning trips to surprise me, but they kept falling through. She had picked up the phone many times, but could not bring herself to dial my number, fearing that all on my end had

been instructed to tell her I wasn't home. She knew she had no credibility, but she had experienced a sense of loss that she had only just come to realize. She would not write to me again, as I requested, but urged me to speak with her. I didn't.

Alex was not such a prolific writer, and those were not the days of email. Apart from the odd postcard passing between us in that time of motion, I knew little more of his comings and goings than that he too had dropped out after freshman year and moved from Utah to D.C., where his mother, now divorced from his father, had set up house. So I was taken aback when he showed up at my doorstep in Toronto, soon after Kate's last letter had fallen from my hands. Over the next few days, mostly spent at my favorite watering hole on Queen Street, Alex was uncharacteristically subdued, listening to me reminisce about our travels or babble on about being tired of handing out movies at a video store. My father drove a taxi. My mother worked in a boutique at the Eaton Centre. Home was unstable as ever, but divorce remained out of the question. My menial job helped pay the rent, but I couldn't live with my parents anymore, so I was planning on going back to school, funding my newfound interest in history with student loans. I knew nobody ... I was seeing no one ...

He waited until our last night together, but Alex finally interrupted my immigrant's tale with the stunning news that his father had recently passed away. I was dumbfounded. It was deemed a hunting accident, he explained. "Of course," he added, circumspect, "I think that's a bunch of bullshit. He knew how to handle a rifle. And what's more, I was left to clear out his place.... He'd been living in El Paso, supposedly working for an organization that supported Latino immigrants ..." He paused to shake his head. "Guess what I found in the back of his closet? A box full of documents, transcripts of interrogations he'd conducted going all the way back to Vietnam. Remember how we used to joke that he was CIA and your father was ISI? Well, it seems we were half right." He sipped his beer and shrugged, looking bemused. "My whole life has been a lie, man."

I didn't know what to say, other than offer my condolences, but Alex didn't seem interested. "In D.C.," he said, the floodgates now open, "I spent my time drifting from dead end job to job. It made my folks think I was trying. But now, after having finally met my Dad, I say fuck it. I'm going to live as I want. I'm on my way to Egypt. It's going to be great. I've landed a gig as a scuba instructor in Sinai. Then, I'm heading back to Utah to hit the slopes. I hope this hot Israeli girl I met in D.C. can be coaxed along for the ride." He smiled.

Kate had not entered our conversation, but now I had to ask. What had happened after I left the U.S.? Were they still in touch? He was surprised to hear that I was not in touch with her. He said that they'd spoken here and there over the last couple of years, but things really hadn't worked out after I left. They'd driven to San Francisco after dropping me off at LAX. It had been a miserable time. She'd cried a lot, as she had on every occasion they'd met since. I thanked him for trying to spare my feelings.

"I especially made myself scarce after her 'troubles'," he added off-handedly. What troubles, I asked. "Oh, man. It's classic. Sometime back she finally let go and went to some frat party, got smashed and slept with some guy. Wouldn't you know it, a month later she figured out

she was pregnant and spent the next few weeks arranging an abortion without her Jesus-freak parents finding out. She told me about it after it was all over, but she insisted that I don't mention anything to you, so you didn't hear any of this from me."

I don't know why Kate didn't tell me. I could speculate, but I won't. All I can say is that I bled for Kate and called her one last time after Alex picked up his back-pack and dove into the Red Sea, never to be heard from again. Kate's mother answered when I called. She said that Kate had moved to Baltimore, where she was beginning graduate work in some scientific field. She didn't offer me her daughter's address or phone number, and I didn't ask. I merely requested that she inform Kate that I called and that I hoped she was well. When I didn't hear from Kate, I wasn't surprised. Maybe it is to shield my heart, but I like to think that her mother never passed on my message. I didn't have the strength or the courage to track Kate down and find out for myself. I was afraid she'd chosen Baltimore because it was close to D.C. Besides, Kate and Alex were home now. Manila was a receding memory. Only I was still a scribbler, still an interloper just enrolled in another American School.

* * * * *

“Thy Word Is a Lamp unto My Feet ... (Me and the Methodists)”

My son attends Wesleyan University, CT.

The name is not unfamiliar to me.

When I was a girl growing up in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, I attended the Methodist Girls' School, first Junior, then Senior. Our brother school was the Methodist Boys' School on Petaling Hill up hundreds of steps above Chinatown. Past the school and higher up is the Wesley Methodist Church.

It is to John Wesley that I owe it all. That I am who I am: a renegade Chinese-Malaysian living in Guatemala. If not for the Methodists, I wouldn't have learnt English, which opened the door to many new doors. I was the heathen soul, you might say, that is the vessel for Manifest Destiny.

How to explain the totally uncharacteristic change of mind on the part of my father, the Chinese coffee-shopkeeper? My birth certificate has three stamps in the space marked “School.” The first stamp is that of “St. Teresa Chinese Convent,” but this has been crossed out with the endorsement of the Ministry of Education. The last of the trilogy is the Junior Methodist Girls' School. Ama used to complain how she was the one to have to do it all, trudging the miles with her paper supplicating everybody for help. “Because I am uneducated, I never went to school... so now my daughter must.” All Abah has to do is to say the word. Thus is my schooling, spirited away from the Chinese-speaking Catholics to be given to the English-instructing Methodists.

“MGS.” Those are the red letters of the school monogram over our hearts, this patch of curly capitals sewn into the left-breast pocket of our white uniforms.

“MGS.... Monkey Girls' School,” taunt the people, on sight of our uniforms. At the base of the monogram is a genie lamp with the slogan, “*Thy word is a lamp unto my feet*”. I am not sure what the words mean, but they sound quite magical. In my mind's eye, I see a lamp underfoot: not very much of a perch, and with a dizzying view.

Fridays is Chapel in the Hall when the red hymnals are handed out. Singing exalts my heart, swelling it. Singing starts and ends the service, with a preacher in the middle. I like to sit in the last two rows and play the monkey.

“*Our Father who Art in Heaven,..*” In his long, white robe, God strides the skies with his paintbrush.

"*Thy Will be done...*" 'Will be done' is a verb, I know. So this is a Being so potent he gets his very own possessive, Thy, which works like a noun. "Thy will be done..." Thy is almost the same as Tai, big. Thy is a scary one: what kind of a father sends his son to die for the sins of countless strangers, people who aren't part of the family? At the same time, He is puny and pathetic. What kind of god cannot change, with a wave of His wand, the nature of sin by wiping it away?

To Jesus, on my knees I pray, promising to accept him as my Savior if I get an A+ for Arithmetic. When it works, I am infinitely disappointed in this Son of a God who can't see through my ploy. Jesus is not Chinese; I can tell from the pictures. How can his Father — Son and Holy Ghost though he be, which just doesn't add up — be the God of my people? Even so, when I am alone, the only one I can turn to is Jesus.

Abah has kicked Tai-jieh, Big Sister, out of the house because of her big belly. In front of Abah, we are forbidden ever to say "Tai-jieh" or bring her up in any way. Sundays, when it's Hainanese Chicken Rice one week and Boiled Pork the next, Ama packs me a tiffin to take to Tai-jieh. With instructions to go and come quickly, before my absence is felt. For Sundays are insanely busy. Sunday, with its throngs of people wanting a cup of tea or coffee, or to place bets, or to reward themselves with breakfast after Mass at the nearby Church of the Holy Rosary. Sundays are crazy with much crossover.

Having escaped, I linger. Delinquency is the more delicious when expressly forbade. The longer I stay away, the more reluctant I am to face the fire. At long last, caught out and chased home by Tai-jieh, I sneak up the stairs only to have the bad luck to run into Abah at the very top. Whence I am dragged by the ear, squealing painfully every step of the way. Into the kitchen with its stacks of firewood. Enraged, Abah barely pauses as he selects a log slender enough to be used on my legs without breaking bone. Along comes a gambler on his way to the bathroom whose open-mouthed curiosity we must endure. Salt is rubbed on the wound minutes later when the gambler emerges from the bathroom and, finding Abah gone, subjects me to his snickers. So why am I being beaten, what did I get caught for, could it be for gambling?

Afterwards, squeezed into my space between the bed and the armoire, it is into my patchwork blanket that I sob, "*What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and grief to bear...*"

Monkey King, with his full bag of magic tricks — leaping mountains in one bound at the same time changing form— is more playful. But MGS is the territory of Jesus' Father. Drafted into P.O.L. (Pupil's Own Language) class, I land by default in Mandarin class. For Chinese automatically means Mandarin even though it is Cantonese, really, that is my mother tongue. When I get a "D", the solitary red mark in a sea of A's and B's, I feel both abandoned and diminished by our slant-eyed gods. Ours are the idols.

If Jesus isn't Chinese, that's good, so then he can't judge me. Not by Chinese standards, for sure.

To Jesus' cheek do I turn, after many a caning. The Greek gods are the ones for having fun but they have ceded themselves to the Roman Empire, which has in turn converted to Christianity. Like Paul, once Saul. In this race of the gods, Jesus is the long-standing winner. *"This is my Father's world,"* brag we schoolgirls, driven by the music of the spheres to tough out just exactly whose father's world it is. *"Onward Christian soldier, marching as to War..."* with its military beat is a good one to counter the stupor of a hot, humid Friday noon. But the Top Two are *"Nearer my God to Thee"* and *"Rock of Ages"*. Dirges, as Mrs. P.S. Wong, who plays the piano and leads the service with room for requests, never fails to remind us.

"O, Come All Ye Faithful" "Joy to the World" "...For unto us this day is born in the city of Bethlehem a savior, and he is Christ the Lord..." Christmas pageant, Standard Six, is Miss Alves at rehearsal screaming at us as she pounds the planks of the platform under her piano. By a miracle, I am the only one of the cast to be impeccable in my timing — Albeit in a minor role: the anonymous double of the actor playing Everychild— thus earning the praise of Miss Alves and skipping her fire. Eurasian Miss Alves who says her name like "Elvis." Throughout most of Standard One, until I saw her name in print in our school magazine, *The Beacon*, I thought our music teacher was Miss Elvis, the sister of the king.

*"He Lives! He Lives!
Salvation to rejoice;
You ask me how I know He lives
He Lives...
Within my Heart."*

One year with Easter approaching, I pass myself off to the Christian Youth Fellowship in order to sing in their choir. Caught goofing off during rehearsal, I am punished with a solo. *"Let there be Light, God said, and there was Light. And God saw the Light, that it was good..."* I am a prefect: lighting the flame of my candle from that of a retiring prefect.

When it is my turn to be the prefect on afternoon duty, I am led by morbid curiosity to ferret my way through the ceiling into the next room, to land myself in the Storeroom next to the Art Room. Dazzled by the gilt and wealth of framed reproductions — mostly Impressionist — I find there, I cannot resist becoming a kleptomaniac.

Another day, I steal a hymnal to take home. Alone again naturally, I sing the songs, but I can't get no satisfaction.

Brightly gleams the Lamp at school, overshadowing the Chinese household. I flee to books, leading a double life. Weekends are when our coffee-shop is the front for the numbers racket run by Abah for the syndicate. This is the business that gives us our daily bread: this is the business we must serve; its slaves are we.

A few years after Big Sister's departure, it is Second Sister's turn to leave, for higher studies this time. This puts me at the mercy of the two boys, especially Second Brother. One day, he touches me in a thrilling way. It happens about the time Ama opens up our rooms above the

coffee-shop to indulge the gambling habits of men: bus and lorry drivers cursing through in a steady stream, days at a stretch, to play mahjongg, dominoes, fan tan, poker, Russian poker, or gin rummy. There is more attention of the inappropriate kind.

"In the beginning was the Word,..."

I bury myself in a pile of books from many places. Without meaning to, I see *The Sound of Music* six times. Enchanted, I vow to grow up and run away someplace with streets of people bursting into song. Some place far away, the opposite of a Chinese place.

At the age of twenty-one, crossing oceans, I land myself in Hawaii on a scholarship. Finishing, I go to Mexico, southward drifting to Guatemala, where an unfortunate combination of visa exigencies leaves me stranded for two months. Losing myself, I find myself. I go away, seven years later to return.

In time, I bear two children. Together, we grow. The bond of life is our devotion. These days of course, we've all gone secular but Wesley is to Methodist as MGS is to Wesleyan.

*"Let the lower lights be burning;
Send a gleam across the shore;
Some poor struggling, drowning seaman
You may rescue, you may save."*

* * * * *

“Manila”

Heat, rain, breakfast free with the room, air conditioning, double bed, private bath, no visible roaches. In Manila living like the king of Ermita, but with bars on the window, makes the picture seem distant; she's not unlike the city. Seen through cages, heat is made by man in the box, brother runs the shade racket, twins of paradox rule souls of the archipelago. Never felt such contrast between light and darkness, cats jaunt by — sleek, thin, muscular, eyes, ears, tails, alert, relaxed — cruise down alley. People pollute streets, a home for others. Stroll lazily through park of martyr, 1897 or '96, can't recall. Sun pours upon crowd, dense, taste sweat from nape of his neck, constant, sway, mass, eight rifles, one bullet, aimed doctor, dioceses step away, clean conscious, God's work, Spanish guns, ring gunfire, smell powder, intoxicate throng, Conquistador dead. Born to defeat, to over throw, to triumph, for purpose, appropriation, annexation, invasion, occupation, subjection, lit *cou* of feathers a fire, dying within silver shell, monarch's screams, confirmation of fate, destination.

White, tan, patched cat brings me back to present. Mind is uneasy. Dirt fills every space not occupied by something else; noise from all things fills senses with confusion; air carries smell of oil, urine, human sweat; car horns scream through every hour; and round-eyed, brown-skinned natives pass with second look. Everywhere there is swindle, look of millionaire; “taxi, taxi, where going, cheapest taxi.” Nature turns evil, veil is discarded, fraud, “fifty,” rickshaw, Intermuras. Reality: thirty pesos and a stoning, leaves, look of rabid dog, eyes fire.

Bus, Batanges, port, southern shore, North Island, “last boat just left, my boat, eight hundred pesos.” Harpoon, fleshly back, whale, very tanned, shorts, stomach fell, love of pork. Walking, warm, calm, night, jungles, walls stone, vacant-eyed boys, sell, steal, angle. ‘Chica’, light smoke, walk, pension house, desk, call airline, beer. Room, watch, she cleans, dusts, tan, smooth, figure. Black shadow, hazier edges, longing, turn away, yet.

Morning, dock, coffee, bread, nineteen pesos, maggots, flies are free. Ship, Philippines, into paradise. Clouds dancing, rich, lush, tropical hills, water, gray-brown, pure, green-blue, phosphorescent streaks, a sign, this is the way — came, on her, past passed, vomited breath, freedom, imprisonment, nothing.

Raining, showered, dressed, city cleansed, street shone, reflected, deflected, refracted absorbed lights, Manila.

* * * * *

“Lost and Found”

The rat’s dilemma

A cafe stood in the middle of Brinchang City in Cameron Highlands. Fakhrul, a part time waiter, is anxiously and carefully bringing the ordered food and heading towards the respective, hungry customers. It was a very busy day. The staff was running around, taking and sending orders, while maintaining a good disposition to keep away from the manager’s rage.

Suddenly, a plate collapsed and crashed, spreading pieces everywhere. Fakhrul is shocked for a moment and saw the culprit running away with a small piece of cheese. The whole cafe is stunned; everyone is distracted! Then, the atmosphere turned to panic when a female customer hysterically and continuously shouted:

“Rats! Rats! Rats! Rats! Rats! Rats!”

Fakhrul cursed blindly and silently to the rat as if communicating with it mentally. He brushed through the cafe from the store, now with a broom, not waiting a single moment to attack the rat. One hit to the right, but the rat was already on the left. Its short legs are meant to run fast. Another hit to the left, but he hit a customer’s foot instead.

“Ouch! Watch it waiter! My leg doesn’t look like a rat!”

“Sorry sir!”

Looking around, Fakhrul noticed that the chaotic environment led the customers to flee from the cafe. He became increasingly frustrated as the cafe had only recently started operations and would need more time rebuilding its reputation because of a tiny little rat. And this was only his part-time job!

But with less people, there are more spaces to launch more broom attacks. After a few minutes, the vengeance-driven broom thumping was still going on. The rat maneuvered skillfully to avoid being swatted. Fakhrul picked up a pepper shaker, took off the cap, and splashed it in the direction of the rat, which stumbled for a moment and sneezed repeatedly.

Each time the rat tried to run away, it would sneeze and jump backward, making its effort worthless. Fakhrul figured out the pattern, waited for the perfect moment, and struck the rat while it was sneezing. But the rat was not under the broom, but rather, sitting on top of it. The surprised Fakhrul swung the broom toward the opened door and outside it went.

The rat landed into the drain and stopped sneezing. It got brighter and noisier as vehicles were passing by. Perhaps dazed by its new environment, the rat rested in a sheltered place beside a lamp post. Just in his vision, however, was a portion of cheese on the ground outside the cafe. Hungrily, the rat ran for it.

Fakhrul, now standing outside the cafe, saw the running rat and swiftly kicked it flying into the rear of a lorry. Fakhrul hoped that the pepper had affected the rat's sense of smell, meaning it would never be able to smell its way home. The lorry would bring the rat to a new home. Perhaps a temporary home.

The rabbit goes on a journey

An aroma spread in the air. The tea was ready while the grandma filtered excess oil from the banana fritters. She extended the sleeve of her blouse to sponge sweat off her forehead. The evening would be filled up by taking care of her only grandchild while the parents would be gone for a few days on a business trip. It was going to be a lovely day entertaining her with good food and drinks.

She glanced outside to the garden behind the house; a rabbit was hopping around playfully. A bag of carrots lie over on the table; she rolled up her sleeves, took out four of them, and scattered them around the garden. Without fail, the rabbit would find every carrot in the garden, which was mainly carpeted with boring green grass.

Never once did she fail to feed the rabbit, but she grew physically tired of its companionship after the long hours spent on her work. All she wanted was a long break. She planned to give the rabbit away. While looking at the clock, she stretched her arms after the long hours of cleaning. The child would arrive soon and the house would be less lonely.

In front of the house, a car zoomed up and stopped. The rabbit stood up, startled each time the car's doors were shut. The garden was not connected to the outside world. But the child loved this area the most. Back at home, she needed to comply with strict rules and regulations, but here, it was freedom for her. Finally, the car zoomed again, disappearing.

The grandma had the food and drink ready by the table and encouraged the child to enjoy herself. The crispy banana fritters were delicious and eaten with warm tea. But the child was anxious to play with the rabbit. It was a sticking point for the grandma to give away the rabbit because this would disappoint the child.

Both the rabbit and the child were well-fed by the grateful yet tired grandma. While the child provoked the rabbit and chased it, the grandma sat down by the garden and watched. Her old age had led her to a painful and passive life, so the rabbit took over responsibilities in entertaining the child while her aging body rested. The grandma eventually fell asleep.

The child carried the rabbit gently, resting it on her arms, and walked into the house while combing its soft, mix of black and white hair. She saw the leftovers on the table and decided to finish it on her own. The child set the rabbit down and went to the table. The rabbit wandered around the house confusingly but found the bright lights through the loosely-closed front door.

-half an hour later-

When the grandma woke up, both the rabbit and the child were missing. She jolted her body up hard and quick, and entered the house to look around. The child was asleep calmly on the sofa. In the kitchen, the dining table had bits of banana fritters all over it. But the house was silent and the door slightly ajar. She knew. Her dilemma was solved. But when she looked at the innocent sleeping child with yellow bits around her mouth, she wondered whether she should buy another rabbit?

The lost and unlucky uninvited guest

In broad daylight on the strawberry farm appeared 2 uninvited creatures. One with a limbless, elongated body, while the other with hind legs, a large head, short body, but missing a tail. The former was still confused, adapting to the new surroundings, while the latter had just extended its tongue trapping fruit flies back into its mouth. It was well fed.

The former contracted and relaxed its muscles as it moved in a serpentine movement. It was poisonous. It smelt something ... it smelt food! So it followed the smell. It followed slowly, slithering through the grass, neglecting the soft soil as it went.

The lost python was agitated, flickering its forked tongue while the unsuspecting frog remained motionless, well-fed. It was about to become a meal. Though lost, the python felt fortunate to make use of its role in the hierarchy of animals, as a predator. As the frog sung its ugly song, the python moved forward.

The sun stood directly above as the day became hotter. The plump frog vocalized heavily as more air was pumped into its larynx. The strawberry farm's automated watering system suddenly started, and the grateful frog, which required moisture, jumped a few meters away to better enjoy the water.

Between the frog and the python, the strawberries danced to the falling water droplets released from the machine-operated tap. Slowly and carefully, the python controlled its excitement as it continued toward the frog. Neither the frog nor the snake realized, however, that a worker came nearby to check a malfunctioning water pipe.

The dampened soil has become a comfortable bed for the frog. Being showered by the water and with a full stomach, this was paradise for the frog. The shower came to an abrupt stop. The frog looked but saw the tap working. Its voice halted like a musician dropping his

tuba while playing. The frog finally noticed the python! Without a sound, the python struck! And it became dark!

“Gotcha!”

Noticing this movement from afar, the worker got an empty sack and a long stick. With the watering sound limiting the snake’s sensory abilities, the worker successfully pulled the python with the stick into the empty sack!

The frog escaped peacefully while hurriedly singing with its ugly voice. And the rain continued.

One day in a strawberry farm in the Cameron Highlands

The owner came rushing out of her house after being informed of the situation, worried that something had happened to one of her workers and horrified to think that a snake had taken residency on her late husband’s farm. She crossed the vast strawberry farm and went straight into the farm’s store.

She had read George McMillan Darrow’s book *Strawberry: History, Breeding, and Physiology* and recalled that strawberry farms attracted common predators like birds and insects but rarely snakes and frogs. Her beloved, late husband tried many friendly methods to discourage the predators, particularly the birds. He creatively used the picture of an eye to psychologically shoo away the birds, as though a warning to the birds that they were being watched. Amazingly, the birds never came back!

Passing the door, she checked the labor schedule, noticing that it was Fakhrul’s turn for inspecting the farm. Ah, he was the one who captured the snake! She suddenly remembered that a lorry would be coming to deliver the ordered farming utensils. While she waited, she decided to reassure herself that the snake would no longer be a problem.

Fakhrul gave the owner a brief explanation and informed her that the fire brigade would send a team to pick up the snake. The owner was relieved and proud to have such a brave and reliable employee. She was considering upgrade his part-time contract to a full-time position since he had lost his job at the cafe in Brinchang City earlier that morning.

She looked at the snake-filled sack on the table by the door and hoped it would be sent somewhere else soon. The gushing water from the sprinkler system was disturbed by the roaring lorry, which came to a stop near the store.

The owner and Fakhrul both went to greet the delivery men, but made a mistake in knocking over the sack and not shutting the door completely. With a glimmer of light, the python poked its head out and slowly crawled out. Outside the sack and still hungry, the silent predator made its way towards the open door. The python escaped!

The owner ordered Fakhrul to take a look at the newly-arrived utensils. He obediently dealt with the lorry drivers, making sure the invoice matched the items sent. Despite the rat tragedy earlier, he felt that his day was turning out well. In fact, he blamed the dirty conditions in Brinchang City as the reason why pests like rats could find homes, just like the one he saw resting on the row of hoes in the lorry. The rat sneezed!

Surprised and raging with anger, Fakhrul grabbed a hoe and hammered his target repeatedly, but all of the hits failed and the rat managed to find its way out into the strawberry farm straight through the open store door. The lorry drivers and the owner confusedly watched the scene, wondering how a man could be so enraged by a tiny, innocent rat.

A fast runner, the rat saw a head coming out of the door with its mouth wide open boasting its forked tongue but could do nothing to stop at its accelerated speed. The rat realized that there was nowhere to go. In front of it was the python, while the human was coming from behind. Finally, it crashed into the mouth, lunch for the winning predator, the python.

But the rat's ordeal has not ended; it sneezed again! The python was startled and strengthened its grip, allowing no room for escape. But the rat sneezed again and again. The python was losing its grip and eventually, with another big sneeze, the rat flew away from both predators.

The rat rubbed its nose, and its sense of smell came back! It breathed in deeply, sensing home's scent! Lucky rat! Just a few minutes earlier, it was on the verge of being eaten. But within a matter of seconds, the rat's destiny had twisted yet again, granting him continued life and maybe even cheese.

Fakhrul, who came to his senses, forgot about the rat and focused on the python. Predator versus predator, only one would remain. From afar, the owner took a new sack from the lorry and threw it to Fakhrul, who skillfully swept the python in with a hoe.

The owner sighed with relief when she heard the siren of the fire brigade. Fakhrul handed over the sack to the authorities and cursed the rat silently. The owner reminded Fakhrul about the utensils, and he hurried to finish his job.

Passing through the farm, the owner realized that there were pieces of eaten strawberry alongside one of the rows. She wondered, doubtfully, whether the python had become an omnivore. Or if not, what other predator could be eating the strawberries. She followed the trail of the pieces and found the culprit, gnawing strawberries with its teeth, munching like it had never eaten such delicious fruit before.

The owner recognized its soft white and black fur pattern. It was definitely her rabbit! What an extraordinary and unbelievable adventure it must have had to get this far away. She held it up and looked into its eyes, thinking that they were pleading to her as though it missed her so much. The thought of her grandchild came to mind and on her lips

articulated a meaningful smile, knowing her future had taken another twist. She felt less lonely already.

* * * * *

“On the Mekong”

Everyone grew quiet and fixed on their thoughts as the helicopter gunship, with its droning rotors, rumbled through the dark sky like a giant dragonfly.

Besides, they knew the routine. They knew the location of the sheltered beach on the river. They knew the trail to the village where they were meeting their contact. They knew the VC general they were to capture. And they knew what time they were supposed to meet their ride back to the base. Night along with the pervasive green and black shapes and sounds of the jungle surrounded them.

The team leader was “Don’t-call-me-Captain-just-do what-I-fuckin’-say” Doyle Collins. He had the stocky frame of a Celtic warrior, close-cropped shock of reddish hair, emerald fire lurking in intense eyes set off by an incongruous scattering of freckles spanning his blunt nose, and prominent cheekbones. Big Jerome, taciturn and downcast, coiled in concentration, no sign of his usual deadpan banter. Blank-faced Larry and Bama. Sharkey, the wise cracker from Philadelphia, who had many personae, such as the fixer and the demolition specialist. His favorite line was that he was in training to become a mob hit man when he got back to The World.

On reaching the Mekong, the helicopter veered sharply and plowed north along the river delta. The nearly invisible glints of approaching sunrise cast shadows of grayish liquid light. They tracked briefly across an endless span of jungle on the Cambodian side.

Larry squinted to make out the vague outline of some ancient ruined temple looming amid the jungle trees. Ruins all over this country, he thought, as though . . . as though what? From a temple in Siam to something overgrown by wild vines. The people return to village life and survival mode. Could be right, too. Build something up, you just attract armies of jack-booted raiders who want to loot you. Better to live on rice and fish and be left alone in jungle river gloom.

Dawn was approaching as they neared the part of the beach where the Apache could hover long enough for them to lower themselves down on rope ladders. At a signal from the pilot they scrambled into action, each passing through the door into the opaque furnace of river air. They assembled on the tiny beach and watched for a minute as the helicopter took off.

“Welcome to Cambodia, gentlemen,” announced Doyle Collins. “We’re not really here anyway so let’s do it and get the fuck out of where we’re not. Got that?”

They each managed their own version of a tension-breaking grin or smirk or smile. Good old Doyle. Not your typical officer, for damn sure. Larry and Jerome gave him a thumbs-up sign.

“Get a rope, over here,” signaled Sharkey. As quickly as possible, they scrambled up the overhanging cliff on ropes that had been placed there by their anti-commie Cambodian village elder contact named Quoc Tran. According to ARVN sources, his eldest son was tortured and killed because he was excessively lucky at playing cards with some VC officers. The old man was leading them to Tran Do’s hideout to get even. He was going to show them the location of a VC supply depot as proof of his good intentions. Well, it sounded plausible. Maybe even a little too neat. They were either in the jaws of the trap or the bait for the trap; it was strictly by Cambodian rules.

“Fuck is that?” demanded Sharkey as he stepped gingerly around a brownish-green pile of fecal material swarming with red ants in the center of the tiny footpath.

“That’s old Tran Do right there,” observed Bama with a sardonic grin. “Looks like he’s sicker than we thought.”

“This place is the asshole of Asia,” observed Jerome emphatically as they made their way along, constantly pulling vines and branches from their faces and simultaneously watching the ground for snakes and trip wires.

“I give it a thumbs-up,” Sharkey pursed his mouth wryly, “like to build a little vacation pad right on that beach, you fucking bet I would.”

“Water’s greasy,” noted Bama with a quick wrinkle of his nose, “greasier ‘n shit.”

“That’s why there’s no graveyards around here,” Larry chipped in, “anything’s dead, they either eat it or throw it into the river. How far to this village, chief?”

Doyle stood still at the head of the column, peering at a small diagram drawn on a torn cereal boxtop. “Hard to say from this. Trail goes right along the river, then cuts inland two, three clicks.”

“Then where’s this VC vacation spa?” whispered Sharkey.

“Back up there on the river, where it starts to turn north. Not far.”

They walked the rest of the way to the village without speaking, the sound of their bootsteps drowned out by the rising cacophony of bird calls and insect drones that filled the early morning. Two small black-clad figures awaited them at the village outskirts. They bowed repeatedly, greeting the strangers with an urgent obsequiousness.

The older man, Quoc Tran, eyes shadowed under the wide straw brim of his conical hat, introduced his remaining son, Lon.

“Only son left,” the man repeated angrily several times as they set out in the direction of the river. “First I show you VC storehouse. Then we go find old Tran Do, yes?”

“They got plenty stuff, the VC,” said Lon, “get stuff from you guys, USA, you’ll see.”

After a short time, they came to a place where the path vanished into a tangle of vines, mangrove trees, and rough underbrush. Quoc Tran held up his hand and the column stopped. He signaled an area to his left, and led them through the trackless terrain with practiced ease. Emerging, they found themselves in a small clearing before what remained of the delicately-carved towers of a ruined temple.

“Son of a bitch,” whistled Bama, wiping his sweating brow.

“This is the one I saw coming in,” added Larry, “bigger than it seemed.”

“You see, you see, plenty stuff,” urged the two villagers in unison, leading them into the interior of the skeletal, vine-covered building.

“Jesus Fucking Christ,” exclaimed Jerome, “look at all this shit.”

Removing a patchwork covering of straw mats and camouflage tarps, they uncovered a small treasure of wooden supply boxes, most of them stamped with the familiar USA logo, some with Chinese lettering and a few with the Cyrillic stamp of the Russian language. Squinting in the shaded gloom, they could make out M-16s and Kalishnikovs, ammo, grenades, mines, MRS’s, meals ready to shit, as many soldiers called the latest generation of K rations. A crate bearing the familiar sailing ship symbol and the name Cutty Sark Scotch Whisky.

“Mother fucker,” whistled Sharkey appreciatively, “these guys got everything but my ‘Dear John’ letter from home.”

“That’s packed in the whisky box,” Jerome chuckled. “Shit, this beats breaking into warehouses back in the Bronx. Less dangerous neighborhood, too.”

“You want dangerous, come to Philly,” Sharkey quipped. “I’ll show you dangerous.”

“How they get this shit, anyway?” asked Bama.

“That’s easy,” replied Doyle Collins, prying the lid from the top of the crate of Cutty. “Half the longshoremen are VC agents. Between them and the fucking crooked ARVN guys, we’re lucky to get half of our own supplies. Well, you do your thing, Sharkey, and let’s get moving. Don’t like the smell of this place.”

Lon said something to his father in a furtive voice.

“What’s he saying?” asked Larry suspiciously.

Doyle exchanged a few phrases in the local dialect and nodded.

“Sure, sure. He wanted to keep back the crate of whiskey to sell on the black market. Wanted to know if it was all right.”

“That seems kinda strange,” Sharkey’s brow furrowed, “that he didn’t just scam it before now. I mean why ask us?”

A few more words were exchanged. Doyle nodded, seemingly satisfied.

“Says they were afraid to come here without us along. Get caught by the VC and they’d get their heads cut off. Guess that’d do it.”

“How we gonna work this?” asked Sharkey.

“Best thing’s gonna be to swing back,” Doyle said after pondering a moment. “You get it set up and we’ll make the hit, come by here and blow it on a timer. Give us time to get back to the beach.”

“Don’t wanna tell every gook within a hundred miles that we’re here,” Jerome nodded ponderously.

A moment later, Sharkey joined the column.

“Ready to rock and roll,” he announced.

They hacked their way back to the main trail and eventually worked their way into a position on high ground just north of the riverside village. The only sign of life observable in the bright mid-morning light was a pair of pajama-clad men who were repairing fishing nets near some small boats close to the shore. A warm breeze stirred the fronds on the roof of the main hut.

“Looks like it’s deserted,” said Doyle suspiciously. “Where the fuck is everyone?”

Quoc Tron crawled to the Irishman’s side and gestured toward the main hut. “Village men out fishing. See two boats missing there? Gone out already. Women and children, they send to other place when general come. See there, in main hut? Gotta trap door there. Tunnel goes to little VC hospital. That’s where the old man is. Tran Do. You see. I not lie.”

“Not lie. No way,” Lon bolstered his father’s assurances.

Doyle looked at his men. “OK,” he said decisively, “makes sense that they got an underground facility, not gonna be lounging on the beach getting a tan now, is he?”

“Not that wily old bastard,” nodded Sharkey.

“OK. Listen up. Jerome, Sharkey, you work your way down there ,and when I give the signal, ace those fuckers at the nets and come up toward the hut. Me and Bama and these two birds go down and bust into the hut. You know where this trap door is?” he barked softly at the two Cambodians.

“Yes, Sir, middle of floor, right middle of floor.”

“Right, you go inside the hut first and show us. Larry, you stay up here and cover us from this high ground.”

Larry’s palms began to sweat as the men moved slowly into position. He strained to hear any unusual noises beyond the usual sporting of monkeys and shrieking of birds. Nothing. The warm breeze picked up. When would the fishermen return? That could screw up everything. He saw Doyle looking back at him, gave him a thumbs-up sign and saw Jerome and Sharkey emerge from their cover on the south side of the village. He tightened his grip on the grenade launcher in his hand.

In seeming slow motion, a keening sound like a whistle swept across the yellow mud and the two men at the nets hurled grenades at Jerome and Sharkey as they were in the act of raising the barrels of their Uzis to fire. Two jagged red explosions shocked the heavy river air. As if on cue, two pairs of men emerged from the two huts between the now obviously empty main hut and the river, machine guns blazing.

“Shit!”The curse seemed to float above his head and drift away like a blue balloon. Jerome and Sharkey were already gone, nothing visible in the sector they had occupied except a drifting black smoke and two mashed-up red and green objects. At the explosions, the two alleged guides had bolted for the treeline like rabbits, the younger one taking a split second to flip a grenade behind him, as much to cover their escape as to kill Doyle and Bama.

As if by miracle, the grenade caught the tip of the bamboo and palm frond roofline and spent most of its force blasting apart the main hut. By this point, Larry’s finger found the trigger of his weapon, and he launched a perfect shot over his diving companions, squarely eliminated the two VC closest to Doyle and Bama, who returned enough fire from their vulnerable positions in the yellow clay to force the farther pair of attackers back behind their hut.

“Mother Fucker!” the voice was Bama’s in belated recognition of the sudden death of their two companions. The voice was so choked with rage and shame and grief that the words seemed to be lobbed forward so that they fell into the flames that consumed the main hut with lapping intensity.

“Back out, I’ll cover you!” he shouted down to the two Rangers as he squeezed off a second grenade from the launcher. It wasn’t a perfect hit like the first, bouncing erratically up and over the frail wooden boats the initial attackers crouched behind and exploding in mid-air

so that the man with the lowest position was able to escape the blast that tore off the head of his companion and hurled it smoking into the river.

With the man at the boats momentarily stunned and Larry raking the far hut with machine gun fire, Doyle and Bama were able to make their way back to the high ground position. All three realized simultaneously that Bama had taken a bullet in the stomach and lost a chunk of his charred right thigh to the grenade blast from the traitorous guides. They looked at each other, but said nothing. Larry motioned them ahead and fit his second-to-last grenade into its socket and, seeing the two VC flashing toward the cover of the trees, lobbed another shot in the direction of the already burning and splintered boats. A tangible death cry mingled with the blast and Larry noted with a dull satisfaction that red chunks of the attacker mingled with charred straws of splintered bamboo surging into the air, leaving the village in a violent silence broken only by the crackling of flames.

Rushing to join his companions, he helped Doyle push and pull Bama, enabling them to reach a point on the trail where a large squat banyan tree provided a natural shoulder-high shelter.

The three men looked at each other in the rapid calculation of combat. Behind them on the trail, a rustling noise could be heard as their pursuers approached.

"I'll circle around," offered Doyle. "Come in from behind."

"Fuck it," says Bama, "you guys get those two double-crossing gook mother fuckers and split. I got some left. Those two shits ain't gonna get by me no matter what. This is for Jerome, man. What the hell we be thinkin' to trust a pair of gooks? You go get them two for me. Do it."

Larry and Doyle exchanged a look.

"Ain't no time, man," growled Bama.

"OK," says Doyle. Abruptly, he leaned down and kissed the wounded black man on lips, "you're a warrior, man, a fuckin' warrior. Meet you at the edge of the village," he murmured to Larry then turned and bounded down the trail.

The two friends regarded one another awkwardly. The noise of their pursuers intensified.

"Fuck, Bama, fuck."

"Don't you be kissing me too, dude," Bama grimaced at Larry, holding up his arm as if to ward off an unwelcome advance. "I don't take to white boys kissing me. Go on now," he tried to avoid the intense look Larry gave him, then reached out a trembling hand to exchange a brotherly grip, "All right, you take care. Been a hell of a brother. Man, we seen some shit on this ride. Fuck. I wonder if that gook pimp put a fucking hex on my ass? Go on, now."

Larry lumbered off. A moment later, as the two pursuing VC hustled up the jungle path, Bama swung from his concealment behind the oversized mangrove root and raked them with close range machine gun fire, sending one of them staggering into the bushes with his insides oozing from stunned and awkward fingers, the other one clawing at the blood-spattered air as though looking for his suddenly missing face and brains before slumping to a frozen stop against the tree trunk. Bama hunkered down with a smile of bitter satisfaction.

"I got you mother fuckers good." Then, wincing at the increasingly violent pounding of the pain invading his chest and stomach, he slumped forward, managing to crawl to where the enemy leaned in death. With a trembling hand, Bama reached out and grabbed the dead man's frayed sleeve and shook his arm.

"Dude, mother fucker, who are you? Who the fuck are you, man? That's all I got done in my fuckin' life was wastin' you." A death rattle formed in his throat and his last query was a plea. "Who in the fuck are you?"

Half a mile away, Larry crashed along the jungle trail, backtracking his way to the village. A low abrupt whistle alerted him to Doyle's presence. Stuffed into a clearing between two red-flowered bushes is the body of Lon, the younger of their betrayers, his throat hanging at an awkward angle due to the massive slash across it. Heavy flies with bodies like blue marbles hanging in the air in front of his dead face, buzzing.

"Got this one," Doyle nodded at the corpse, other one's probably back at the village by now. You circle north and I'll come up by the low road entrance."

"Right."

Larry tracked through jungle more quietly now, crouching down as he approached the rear of the small village. He loaded his last grenade into the launcher and peered in, taking inventory: six hutches in a semi-circle, a few scraggly clucking blue and red and yellow chickens. A movement in a blanketed doorway made him freeze. It was the old man, hurrying to get away, a pack strapped to his back, he spoke quickly over his shoulder as he scuttled across the clearing and turned the bend in the trail that entered the village from the south.

OK, thought Larry, holding his fire and peering more intensely across the shining damp fly-speckled mid-morning sunlight, Doyle'll be there to take care of old Judas. Let's see who's left. The flap in the doorway opened and a small Cambodian woman carrying a bundled infant emerged, issuing low urgent instructions to the two small children who emerged after here. She kicked one of the chickens out of the way as she turned a second time, motioning the two children, a boy about six and a girl perhaps half that age, forward.

Larry never really thought about the next thing. It wasn't the thought of Bama crumpled across the jungle river trail, already drawing a voracious line of red ant scavengers who

marched the length of his charred leg, pausing at a spot where green camouflage cotton turned swampy with blood and a white bone poked upwards through black skin.

Or the thought of Jerome and Sharkey back at the river village, reduced in a few insane seconds of action to smoking puddles of scorched protoplasm. It was just the curse, emerging from clenched teeth, and then a routine operation, practiced a hundred times, a swinging around of his body to brace the grenade launcher squarely against his tensed stomach muscles as he broke through the green cover at the edge of the village.

Less than a second elapsed, a second that seemed to stretch out into slow motion minutes as the woman looked up at him and looked back at the two children who were just in the initial puckering stages of beginning to cry, the tiny edges of their lips quivering, and the woman looking back at the large white man with the blackened face and fierce expression bolting in rage, predatory from the jungle.

“You fucking bitch, Fuck you, all of you!” growled a strange choking voice in the streaming sun of the clearing.

And then his right forefinger squeezed the trigger almost secretly, and a second of roaring gave way to a blasting pounding red and yellow clap that dug clay and chicken bones from the crowded ancient ground and mixed them instantly with the molten torn disemboweled and digitized bodies of the woman caught in the act of shielding and the infant and the two small enemies of the moment, who spurted into nothingness as their fractured matter fountained skyward. Larry pasted himself against the bark and moss of a sheltering tree and closed his eyes with a fierce and ecstatic energy. Damn, got ‘em all.

The thought clawed its way into his sweating forehead. Women and kids. Animal, fucking animal, is this really me? His heart thumped inside his chest and thundered in the canals of his ears as he leaned against the trunk of a tree and vomited, first in small dribbling amounts accompanied by racking throat noises, and then in a brown and yellow flash that exploded from his wide-open mouth and struck the wood of the tree like a bucket of paint.

Recovering enough to move he ran, veering both feet and eyes around the flaring fat-fed gore in the center of the village. He nearly collided with Doyle Collins, who was standing astride the pathway wiping his knife with a torn piece of the old man’s black pajamas.

“Got ‘em both,” he announced, “unlucky day for those two Judas goats. You blast the guy’s hut too?”

“The woman and her kids,” the words nearly strangled Larry as they emerged from his throat, “I hit ‘em.”

There was the briefest of pauses, then Doyle Collins sheathed his combat knife. “Well, there it is then. Better to clean out the whole village than leave witnesses around.”

Larry gaped at him, struggling to keep his face from betraying the wave of disgust that undulated from his crotch to the pit of his stomach, nearly making him vomit a second time.

Collins saw the struggle on Larry's face and gave him a reassuring look.

"I know, it ain't a fucking picnic, but that's the way it is, isn't it?" He reached across to give Larry's tense forearm a squeeze.

"Yeah," shrugged Larry woodenly. "Hell with it. War is all we know, right?"

"That's all that need be said." Collins glanced at his watch. "Long way to go to make the pickup," he observed, urgency returning to his voice. "Have to forget about blowing the stash and concentrate on getting out of this hole alive. Now that's something serious. We don't make that pickup, we're fucked. Forget it, forget those gooks."

They didn't say a single word the rest of the afternoon, communicating by hand signals as they made their way back to the cliff overlooking the Mekong River. After about twenty minutes, they heard the welcome scudding and thud of the rotor blades of the Apache that came to pick up an enemy general only to find two bloody and taciturn survivors. Once in flight, Larry was stunned by the seemingly incongruous, late afternoon splendor of the Mekong River and the hell from which they had just escaped.