

Vagabond Zoo

By Nick Mistretta

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Chapter 1

Presumably Drugged

The mad rush of vehicles and people finally thinned to a slow trickle, a dripping faucet of faces and sounds. The pulsating waves of humanity, the madness, the chaos, the fucking insanity all went home to sleep for the night. The air was still thick, putrid, suffocating the lungs and inflaming the throat. Only the strongest of stars fought through the midnight cancer.

Milky orange shadows angled along dusty roads dotted with battered pavement. Laundry hung off balconies, while down below an anorexic cow wandered under a streetlamp. Beasts screaming, barking, moaning in pitch black shadows, trying to survive another moonless night. The *brum rum rum* of cars in the distance, the faint sounds of horns, bells and whistles, the lawnmower twang of a single auto rickshaw as it screamed down the road. A woman coughed. Generators boomed, shut down, then boomed again. The concrete jungle was catching its breath for another sunrise filled with seething madness. I climbed to the roof of my hotel and smoked an unfiltered Indian cigarette.

It was the spring of 2001 and George W. had just stolen the presidency from an almost-lifelike Al Gore then began following the Republican handbook verbatim. There was talk of drilling for oil in Alaska and instituting a domestic tax plan that would rob from the poor and reward the rich. The two-year anniversary of Columbine was nearing in the wake of other school shootings, and our teenagers were becoming more stupid according to national test scores. There was turmoil in the Middle East, but there's always turmoil in the Middle East, and to no one's surprise it would soon get much worse. The world was suffering through many problems, but they mostly went unnoticed *here*. No way could real problems on the dark side of the globe affect us – the fortress nation. God's favorite!

As for me, I felt little connection to the everyday Americans flittering around me. Always on the go go go, gotta be somewhere, gotta meet somebody. Always someone to blow, always so properly displayed. Ladders to climb and people to grease and all to get ahead, you see. But I couldn't play that game. The rules are too rigid. The prizes ... what are the damn prizes? So I did the opposite. I was as unmotivated as a person could be. A fantastic flounderer. Nothing meant more to me than getting high and drunk and laid. And this I did quite well. But something changes inside a person when they spend their 30th birthday delivering pizzas. So in 1998 I returned to college, my fifth one, in fact. I majored in business for absolutely no reason but then switched it to journalism because an English professor wrote a comment on a research paper that I should be a writer. That one seemingly innocuous comment planted in me a seed that

would eventually grow to include world travel, teaching abroad and writing books of my adventures. Without that comment I'd probably be married with children, dying in the suburbs, sitting in a constipated office all day and slowly, methodically, and eventually, *anxiously* losing the will to live. Yes, indeed. Suicidal as a midget in a room full of giraffes. So basically everything in this book, including the book itself, would not *be* without a simple 10 cent comment on a ridiculous research paper by a woman whose name I have long forgotten. And the title of this life-changing paper? "Aliens: Taste Great or Less Filling?"

I was a good student. But being good at college wasn't helping me decide what to do *after* college. Most of my fellow journalism students had career goals, a planned path with timelines and dates. Many had jobs lined up well before graduation. And many had job experience to go with that fresh new degree. And they all knew what they wanted. Or at least acted like they knew. But not me. I had none of that. Furthermore, I had no desire for a career. So as graduation neared, the question emerged that taunted me relentlessly: What now?

Then came along the first presidential election I gave any damn about – the Bush vs. Gore debacle. And the results of it sent me reeling. That was it for me. Whatever faint intentions I had of settling down and settling in quickly disappeared. I couldn't smile and pretend I didn't smell the stench. It was too awful to ignore. But when I looked around, everyone else seemed unaffected, unaware that they had been violated. And that's what really sent me off my nut. Surely the rest of the world isn't as fucked up, I thought, its people as mindless. So I packed some clothes, along with my disgust and shame, and went looking for *something*. *Anything!* All my negative feelings were morphing into one single entity – indifference. Which isn't a feeling at all. Like saying you're favorite color is clear. Nothing made sense, this much I was sure of.

I left the States with a few questions that needed answering. My life had no direction. And I just couldn't be that person that I was expected to become. Career? Marriage? Kids? I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do with my life, but I sure as hell knew what I *didn't* want to do. And rather than do something impulsively sensible, I went to India.

I arrived at the New Delhi airport around 1am to find a little man with a big mustache holding up a sign that read, "Mr. Miscrella." "Close enough," I said. He grinned and nodded his approval and off we went. The streets were still crowded, but no one seemed to be going anywhere or doing anything. Just a lot of standing around. We drove quickly, crossing recklessly from lane to lane, around people and cars, carts and animals, motor scooters ... you name it and we ran it off the road. The city smelled of stale feet and fresh shit. My eyes burned as dirty air rushed through the open window. At a stoplight a beggar struggled over to the car, dragging a horribly twisted leg. He had a long gone expression on his face I had never seen before. The driver yelled and threw up his hands. I struggled between hysteria and shock, trying to find the right balance. But shock won in a knockout, and it wouldn't be until morning that I came to fully realize where I was. What I had done.

While checking-in, a man at my hotel gave me a cup of coffee in broken English. I drank it fast and handed back the empty cup. Does he work for the hotel, I remember thinking? I followed another man into an antique elevator and up to my room. A few minutes later my room began to dance. A wave of red and blue jigsaw diamonds

bounced off the walls as a sea of carpet stains swirled around my toes. I had trouble with my footing and splashed back and forth looking for my cigarettes. "Surely I was drugged," I mumbled. I grabbed my smokes and tripped up the stairs toward the roof. (Later I would discover that this feeling is common after long flights.)

So that's how I found myself on top of Hotel Third World at 3am. Presumably drugged, wearing a lost gaze and mumbling softly. Just another washout that didn't make the cut back home. Another freak with more curiosity than common sense. India was as far away as I could get.

Chapter 2

Stupid Gay Bike

I awoke the next morning in a dark, windowless room. For a brief moment I had forgotten where I was. In the darkness I could have been anywhere. But outside my door lay India, and it was begging to be noticed.

I dressed slowly, hesitant and nervous but excited, too. This was the beginning of something, I felt. Something big perhaps. But I wasn't sure of myself. And certainly not myself in that place. And what do backpackers do, I wondered? And with so much time. My nerves and excitement were growing. I left the room, then the hotel and onto the streets of Delhi, as innocent as a new-born retard.

Apparently I still had that terrified, where-the-fuck-am-I look on my face from the previous night. Fresh meat! The animals can smell it for miles. My vulnerability was quickly spotted by two young boys competing for attention. They played tug-a-war with my wallet, and eventually I picked one over the other for no reason and toured many shops selling the exact same useless items. I looked too clean, an easy hustle, "a lamb in the lion's den," the Thumpers might say. Every con job and store owner in the third world was lining up to take his best shot. I bought an overpriced Indian shirt that hung to my knees. I bought a men's dress, really. And even though my legs look fantastic in a dress, I knew before paying that I would never wear it. But sometimes "no" is the hardest word to muster.

"You do not want to stand out."

"Yes, of course," I managed to say. "Now we are practically brothers."

No amount of planning can prepare you for India, its hassles and endless bothers. The poverty! Back home I would have turned to those boys and said, "Get the fuck off me." But in India I felt unusually timid. My voice got higher, my balls even shrunk. And the whole country caught a whiff of that. Smells like green ink. Currency.

Across the street a dark little girl in a tattered red dress shot a water pistol at vehicles rounding her corner. Her face revealed no happiness or even sadness, just dull resignation. She looked empty, like a person who'd given up. Certainly not the kind of expression you'd expect from a child. I reluctantly turned away and started walking toward Old Delhi.

The crowd thickened and became a little unnerving. The suspicious glares unsettling. I thought of going back to the hotel but talked myself out of it. The sun disappeared and the sky became dark. I could feel the pollution on my skin, I could taste it. And then a scene I shall never forget. People of all sizes bathing, eating, shitting, *dying* in the street. Steaming piles of dung covered with flies, filth-stained children playing in the muck, the catastrophic number of clamoring rickshaws, people and livestock dancing in the dirt. Hazy gray sunshine, brown water and beige skies.

The dejected stares of old tea men hunkered down in tight alley shadows. Everyone waiting their turn to die. *Hope is just a four-letter word, don't you know?*

A boy of maybe 11 or 12 rescued me from an intersection where vehicles zoomed past from every which way, spinning me round like a top, discombobulating any sense of direction I once had. I was grateful to be off my feet, to be in the hands of someone who could help me escape that nightmare. But once on the back of his cycle rickshaw, I felt something horrible. Beyond shame. Deeper than sorrow. A feeling that cannot be appreciated or understood by assigning a word to it in any language. The boy huffed and puffed on an empty stomach yet somehow he managed to churn his bony legs. I quickly lost sight of where I was going or who I was. The whole of life became a heap of dread and suffering. I withdrew to a place deep inside myself. So far inward that I could barely see.

The next day I bought a ticket on an overnight bus out of town. A wonderful man working for the hotel reluctantly drove me to the bus stop and assisted with the bike that I had brought thousands of miles only to go unused because of a pulled muscle in my back. The self medication I had imposed on myself had failed miserably. I gave him the secret handshake and muttered something about gratitude. He seemed to understand but looked disgusted nonetheless. I was their poster boy, the Ugly American.

The bus looked on the verge of collapse, and the air was so thick you could chew on it. But at least there was no one sitting next to me. And after a three-hour wait in a field of idling buses, choking on exhaust fumes, we pulled out of Delhi and pointed ourselves north toward Shimla, our early-morning destination. Within an hour the bus stopped on the side of the highway. A fat louse of a drunk climbed on board and stumbled down the aisle, looking for a place to sit. Fuck that, I thought. I tried to look bigger, puffing out on the bench like a blowfish. *No room here! Maybe in the back.* But he dropped himself down beside me anyway then spent the next eight hours passing out on my shoulder, his sticky skull gently pressed against my t-shirt. Every so often he convulsed and woke up slobbering, lifting his head briefly to show off a fresh trail of saliva running down his chin, the tail of it still attached to me. Then he'd look at me like we had met somewhere before and now he just couldn't place me. *Maybe it was that cocktail party at the governor's mansion. Yes, now I remember! The night that schizophrenic transvestite climbed into the punch bowl and sang a duet.* But again he would pass out, his head drifting in a predictable arc down to my shoulder. I wanted to roll his fat ass right off the bus. Create a diversion and shove him out the window. I remember thinking, it can't get much worse.

And soon a busload of people from different backgrounds melded into a single horrified entity flying down the highway. We gasped in unison as the 16-year-old bus driver gunned it and blindly passed everything on the road. Well, this is it, I thought. Time to meet God. My eyes were glued to the road. When death stares you in the face you feel obligated to look back. At one point we passed another bus that had driven off the road, crashing headlong into some trees. Heads swiveled to find the wreckage in the mist. The French woman sitting in front of me sounded loudly with something resembling an orgasm. *FOR FUCK SAKE!* Was that in my head? Could the others hear my cries? I couldn't speak for the rest of the screaming passengers, but I didn't mind arriving a little late. Who do I lodge my complaint with, I wondered. And thank

God for that soothing, loud-as-hell Hindi pop music. It nearly drowned out the sound of my bike sliding around on the roof, waiting for just the right moment to flip off and come shooting past my window. Everyone was speaking in excited tones, possibly praying. Others had their hands clasped in prayer, some had them over their eyes. I was frozen with fear. I couldn't shut my eyes or turn my attention from the road. Couldn't even blink. My fingers were bending the bench in front of me, but my posture was perfect. Fear is good for the spine, I remember thinking ...

In the morning the bus was ambushed upon arrival. Screaming men jumping as it rolled to a stop, grabbing through windows with toothless enthusiasm. They saw us coming and ran like wild animals alongside the bus the last quarter mile. Their long flowing garments flapping in the breeze like devil wings.

"Jesus Christ! That wasn't in the guidebook," I said to anyone listening as I reached for my bag. Four men attached themselves to me, all of them grappling for my handlebars as I maneuvered the bike and gear down steps and up the steepest of inclines and back and forth, everywhere really, searching for a cheap room. But all were either booked or too expensive. I was beyond frustration, a tired feeling of despair that ran so deep I could not summon the strength to yell or cry or kick at the air. They sensed this. My near-death energy manifesting in the nastiest of ways. And it frightened them. This wild look on my face, a mixture of sleep deprivation and extreme disbelief.

I should have been at home playing cards and drinking beer with family and friends. Or playing with my dog at the park. But no, I was in India pushing a bike and 50 pounds worth of gear up and down and all around. Besides, man's best friend had to be put down just days before I left for India. And this, more than anything India could throw at me, put me in a dark place.

Her name was Hendrix, a huge black and white bundle of fluff and energy. She was diagnosed with cancer at age 5 and given a grim prognosis of less than a year to live, with the cancer having already spread throughout her body. Nothing could be done, I was told. Every sniffle, every slight fever sent me into a state of despair. I have never cried as much as I did for her, and this I did regularly. But somehow she lived happily and healthily for six more years. And then she got sick, the cancer finally claiming her. Just days before coming to India we were walking in a park. She all glee and me in tears, knowing that this would be the last walk we would have together. For 11 years she was my best friend. But now I was left with only memories and struggling with the idea that I would never see her again.

But now I was in India, full of remorse and sadness, torturing those poor mutts. Haggling over the equivalent of a dollar or two. Coming out of my brief stupor I looked up to notice that just one man remained. Well, it was obvious. He won, I had to admit it. I was emotionally unwell, physically challenged, astrologically confused. I apologized for my behavior, gave him a big hug, kissed his ear a little, and he helped me find a room at the top of a winding series of alleys and stairs, for which I paid him 40 rupees.

Shimla was a great relief. A cool, calm oasis with fresh air and paved roads, wonderful mountain scenery and all the town's buildings hanging precariously on the edges. Hoping Mother Nature's fury would overlook their extreme vulnerability. But it

made for great views, and I was thrilled with the place. And then I got food poisoning and wanted to die.

It's one of those sicknesses that defy logic, making a person both hot and cold at the same time. It steals all your strength, rips apart your insides, and if you're truly lucky, entertains in a way only a bad LSD trip can match. By the end you feel like you've been consumed by something large, taken that long, dark journey through its insides and come out the other side covered in shit.

A few days later I was well enough to eat. After a couple more I was well enough to travel. But I was going onward by bike. And in no way did I have the strength for that.

My map was pitiful, but eventually I found the right road after some backtracking and half an hour's push up a steep hill and one minute's ride back down, then pedaled cautiously through an endless tunnel with no lights. Invisible men dug holes in the earth, their voices like beacons, while I navigated around oncoming vehicles that surely couldn't see me. A shaded, twisting road greeted me on the other side. It was 8am and cool and the breeze felt soft against my face as I leaned into turns and alternated between pedaling and coasting. Several miles later the road began a descent of 6000 feet spread over 10 or 15 miles. By this time I had become comfortable with the bike and the added weight. I shifted down low and strengthened my grip on the handlebars, often riding within a loose-dirt foot of certain death. I rode by shepherds and flocks of goats and sheep, uniformed children making the long walk to school and women scaling cliffs for shrubbery. Terraced fields too spectacular to be real, like giant green steps leading up the mountain. Old men squatting on rocks just inches from the edge of the world, smoking cigarettes and squinting into the morning sun. I zoomed past a group of people along the side of the road, and as I passed them in a flash they raised their arms and stood and jumped and yelled fantastic cheers of encouragement. I hummed the Indiana Jones theme and smiled broadly at the madness of the moment.

The road conditions quickly grew worse, turning from pavement to gravel and in some places dirt, loose rocks and long stretches where rockslides had obscured parts of the road, which wasn't wide to begin with and just barely able to accommodate two vehicles under normal circumstances. But the road was empty and I thought nothing of oncoming traffic, as I sped around rocks and potholes and other obstacles. Hooting and hollering as I flew confidently along. Until an out of control bus came screaming around a corner. I swerved and squeezed the brakes tight as my perception slowed. My eyes were fixed on the bike's front tire and the dwindling distance between it and the cliff. And for the tiniest of seconds I actually thought I was going over. I came within inches of bouncing down the mountain then fell to the ground with my adrenaline spiked and my heart racing. Never in my life had death been so close. Never had I felt so alive.

I rolled into the tiny village of Tattapani around 4pm, exhilarated and hungry. I rented an awful room, even by Indian standards and ordered a plate of fried rice and a large water. A few other travelers arrived later in the evening, and they were surprised to find a silly American pedaling through the mountains. We traded stories, and I smoked my first bit of hashish then spent the rest of the night flopping around on my bed trying to fall asleep.

Inevitably, one of the first things a fellow traveler will ask you is, how long have you been out. I remember well that feeling, in the very beginning, of being a novice. More than a novice, though, like a fetus. Like a non person who was just starting a new life, surrounded by those in the know. I knew nothing and it showed. I've been traveling two weeks or three weeks, I would say. But all those I met seemed to have been backpacking for many months and some for many years. They had what I wanted, that experience, and I was envious of them. But you never feel as deeply as you do in the beginning. Every single experience, good or bad, was new to me. And this made everything feel like more than it was. Life was like a rollercoaster then. It was all so magnificent and overwhelming, but it was *this* that made every single moment special. Nothing went unnoticed, unfelt. I would later learn that this feeling, the brute strength of it, would eventually fade away. And for this reason, I am quite certain that my fellow travelers were envious of *me*.

I was growing up fast in this new life of mine, but I still had so much to learn, such as navigating through my first squat toilet experience. I awoke at 6am after maybe an hour of sleep. My eyes drooped, my body ached and sagged. My room had no bathroom, so I went to the communal one outside. I opened the door and saw a sight I would see so many times but never really come to understand. There was a hole in the floor, and built around the hole was a porcelain structure about half a foot high with what looked like foot pedals where a person was supposed to stand. It looked dangerous, at the very least awkward. Why go to the trouble of building anything if all there is to do is squat over a hole? And why, if building something over the hole, not fashion it into a seat? This perplexed me then and still does. But I was tired and excited to get back on the bike, so I did my best and did it quickly and awkwardly and tried hard as I could, successfully too, to not shit on myself or slip and crack open my head. Of course, there was no toilet paper. Only a pail of brown water to clean myself with. Essentially the ass juice of those that came before me. *Isn't travel romantic?*

The sun was just rising and the whole scene draped in a soft aqua morning tint that made me hopeful for another great day on the bike. But by 7am I was out of water, dripping with sweat and huffing and puffing the bike up a mountain. I could see the winding road laid out before me, stretching to the clouds like a super snake coiled from valley to peak. I could see it was going to be a rough day. Around 10am I came to the first of several small villages. I desperately needed water but found only Coca-Cola. I drank one down and ordered another, becoming more dehydrated as a result of the caffeine.

By noon my legs were moving on will alone, and the nerves above my shoulder blades screamed with pain from the hunchback pushing posture I had assumed. I had long given up pedaling, and the thrill of the previous day was lost in a cloud of mental and physical anguish. The sun became inescapable. My mouth was dry, my tongue like sandpaper. It was about 3pm when I came to another tiny village, which also had no bottled water. There was an antique water pump in the center of the village and I walked over to investigate. After a few pumps on the handle, I knelt down and watched helplessly as the brown water filled my plastic bottle. I casually tossed in two purifying tablets, then two more and took a big sniff. Then I stood up and noticed that a few townspeople had taken an interest in me. They looked truly horrified, worried perhaps, mumbling to themselves and shaking their heads. Wondering what to do with my big stiff corpse should I drink the brown water. Can we bury him behind that boulder, they

wonder? I quickly poured it out then decided to throw away the bottle, too. I walked to the nearest shopkeeper and ordered two citrus sodas, three oranges and some cookies, then sat down completely deflated. I was still a long way from my destination, which was also the next town on my map. After slicing through an orange, I looked up to find what looked like the entire village approaching in a big circle with zombie urgency and glazed donut eyes. Some were close enough to touch me, others were fingering the bike. The old woman who sold me the oranges pinched my Swiss army knife and began cutting tomatoes. It's a strange thing to have a village of people staring at you for 20 minutes with no change in expression or any words spoken. Like they were watching television outdoors. Waiting for me to perform for them, sing a little ditty, shake my ass to some Kool & The Gang. I got up, retrieved my knife and thanked them all for freaking me out.

I would have sworn it impossible but the road conditions grew worse and the incline steeper. Each time I approached a bend I anticipated the road reaching its peak and winding back down the other side. I prayed out loud for this, pleading with God to toss me a freaking bone. And yet with each corner rounded, the path continued to reach skyward. My body was shutting down, and my mind had begun to tip off its axis. I was reduced to a blubbing idiot talking to God with weepy desperation. Making promises I knew I couldn't keep. I quit pushing the bike and dropped to the ground. I couldn't go more than 10 minutes without having to take a break, and it was really slowing me down. I was lying on my back, thinking about the sweet release of death when ...

"Walk ... walk ... walk"

I noticed several large birds flying circles overhead, inspiring me to keep moving. Or perhaps arguing amongst themselves over the tastiest body parts. Their barking sounded like they were saying "walk" and it was starting to make me itch. They were really pushing my buttons, these birds. I love animals, even the ones that aren't delicious, and would never think to harm one. But I must say that for a not-so-brief moment, what I wanted more than anything else in the world was a big god damn gun. And a bullet vest. Rambo goes to India. Bird hunting! *Bing. Bang. Blotto!* I was about to crack or had already, it being difficult to tell. The mad ones never know, do they?

"Walk ... walk ... walk"

"ROT IN HELL YOU STUPID BIRDS!"

While working on my journalism degree, I began reading authors like Jack Kerouac, Hunter S. Thompson and Henry Miller. They awoke in me a passion for reading, a passion for words and eventually a passion for writing. And they had amazing adventures. They loathed the work-a-daily life and all the nuisances and responsibilities that come with it. Life is meant to be lived, man, and they knew this. They took dreary old life and flipped it upside down and covered it with sprinkles then pissed all over and set it ablaze. They did whatever they wanted. They were free. Miller bummed food and francs for years from his little gang of misfits, anything to avoid work. Kerouac bounced around with a knapsack full of unpublished books and didn't give a god damn that they were unpublished. Thompson wanted to swallow society whole, and nearly did swallow Aspen. There was no rule or law big enough to control him. These guys lived on the fringe, that place I was now being drawn to. They were the grand starving artist heroes of the past. And this provoked in me a romantic

delusion for writing so strong it would eventually take me over. They were also one of the reasons I was now in India. I never knew anyone who took off to a foreign country to live and work or backpack around for months and months with no plans. Where I grew up, this was unheard of. But then Kerouac went to Mexico and Thompson went to Puerto Rico and Miller went to Paris. Finally, there were people in my life that I could look to and say, yes, that's the way. *That's* how it's done. Spend a year or two traveling, I thought, and then write a book. Easy breezy! Like connect the dots. I never accounted for any turmoil or hardship. Never accounted for a situation where I could get eaten alive by birds. That would be silly.

“Walk ... walk”

“FUCK OOOOFFFFF!”

What in the hell am I doing here, I wondered? No really, India? Where'd I get that from? More importantly, what am I doing pushing a bike loaded with everything I own in the world through the Himalayas. *This* was the question that I could not shake, nor could I answer it. I have this wonderful family that feels no reluctance in telling me when I'm doing something stupid or about to. A necessity, I admit. Yet there I was, pushing, sobbing, wondering how this, my most insane idea to date, had escaped everyone's ridicule. I guess I wanted to be that person, you know. The one that cycles around the world, intimately exploring places untouched by tour buses, getting toned and tan. A billboard image of myself manufactured by National Geographic and Nike. *Just do it!* I thought, hey, if others can do it, so can I. *That's right, man, just do it.* I had never done any long distance cycling before, and now I was challenging the greatest mountain range on the planet. *No biggie!* No biggie, I thought. *That's right!* This is the kind of thinking I've come to expect from myself. Romantic delusions always trumping practicality. But what about my family, my friends? Surely they thought I was nuts. So why no words of wisdom or condemnation from those accustomed to questioning my endless string of bad decisions? It's a damn conspiracy, I told myself as I mopped the tears from my eyes. Then I cursed them for their silence.

“Walk”

“SHUT UUUUUUUPPP!”

OK, the truth is India forces you to change, and if you don't accept these mental alterations, well then, you will go mad. You get used to the dogs that bark throughout the night, you get used to the anorexic cows eating plastic bags of garbage until eventually their stomachs explode, you get used to the five or ten power failures each and every night that leave you faltering through the maze like a lab rat in search of that little piece of street that leads you somewhere in the blackout night on those so-called streets, for these are simple trails of dirt mounds and big holes that lay unfilled for months and broken to pieces, pieces of pavement that try without success to hold together the order and the people from slipping through the cracks and the mobs of people and animals and rickshaws and taxis and buses and motorcycles and deformed beggars, these all add to the destruction of the uneven, narrow, polluted, cluttered, shit-stanked streets, you get used to those deformed beggars, too, cradling future deformed beggars yelling, “Sir, oh sir, please sir ... sir,” no fingers, stumps for legs, mangled and broken beyond repair – *Does intentional mutilation for the purpose of increased earnings continue in this our 21st century?* You get used to asking yourself questions of unquestionable bad taste but realize that in this world those are questions that are

relevant, those are questions that should be asked. Those are questions that you DO NOT want the answers to.

“Walk”

“LEAVE ME ALONE ... I’M NOT AS DELICIOUS AS I LOOK!”

“Walk”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!”

And that’s what happens when, after many years of bowing to fate and settling on the fact that someday I would be worm food, I suddenly realized in my last conscious moments that those damn birds were going to pick me apart before I was dead. Bird food! Getting eaten by birds was a form of dying I had never even considered. Ever. And on the subject of manly, that’s-the-way-I-wanna-go deaths ... I mean, what kind of asshole would let himself get eaten by birds? Ah, but wait. Several weeks later someone would say to me that everything always works out in India. “Yah,” I responded, “but it treats you like Job in the process.” So on day two of the bike experiment, I, Job, the Ugly American, was saved. I found my miracle and it even came with a hot shower. But first ...

Around 5pm I walked off the road into some trees, looking for a comfortable place to die. I had gone without water for 11 hours. I had quit sweating long ago, and my face was covered in a thick salty residue. I was physically wiped out, unable to walk another step. Better to spend the night outdoors, I decided. The sun was still a couple hours from setting but already the mountain air was growing chilly. I put on a lightweight hoodie, the only piece of warm clothing I had, then lay down on a reasonably flat piece of ground, happy to be off my feet.

An hour later it began to get cold, and I wondered if I could survive the night. At the very least it would be a long and uncomfortable experience. I picked myself up, absent mindedly reloaded the bike and continued down the road. Inside of 15 minutes I came around a corner and there before me was the most spectacular sight I had ever seen. What looked to be a cozy new hotel twinkled in the dusky night, partially hidden by a small grouping of pine trees. The winding driveway was steep and long, and I briefly wondered if I could make the climb up to see if the place was open. It had to be too good to be true. I thought of the old movies I watched as a child where a mirage would appear in the desert. A beautiful image of that one thing you longed for most. For me, it was that hotel. All new and shiny and all alone in the middle of my nightmare.

I decided to investigate, but when I went for my wallet I discovered it was in my duffle. But my duffle was locked, and the key was inside. The Swiss army knife was also inside the bag, so I picked up a sharp rock and tried attacking the bag, but it wouldn’t rip. I looked up again at the hotel and blinked several times, then set my bike on the road. I mumbled as I walked slowly up the drive, ready for it to disappear at any moment. But it was real! I went inside and began poking around what appeared to be an office when a man greeted me from the other room. Surprised me really.

“Can I help you?”

Slippery little nutter, I thought. My left eye wasn’t working properly, so I was inadvertently winking at him while I spoke. I was in no condition to explain.

“Hey there. Howyadoin? I’d like one very sharp knife please (wink wink) ... yes, and a bottle of water.” But I say it so slow and so loud that the guy actually takes a step

back from me. *Sweet Jesus! Don't scare the poor man. Quick, say something normal.* "Uh ... you see, my wallet's indisposed as is my money, so I need to stab ... (*STAB? ARE YOU KIDDING ME?*) ... no, not stab ... definitely no stabbing ... what I mean ... *whew*, what a day. I'm lucky to be alive. True story." And I proceeded to tell him about the whole miserable ordeal, finishing one bottle of water in the process. He waited a while before giving me a knife.

The room was \$10, but it was worth double that for the bathroom alone. It was huge and clean, like I was the first person to use it. *Look, the toilet has a seat!* I performed a little dance for the lavatory gods then phoned the kitchen and ordered chicken curry, French fries and four hard-boiled eggs to be delivered to my room. After eating I sprawled out on the king size bed and let out a little half groan, half whimper. Traveling is no vacation, I thought. My body felt weighted and my mind almost drugged. And soon I was slipping ever so gently away, teetering on the sublime edge of consciousness. Where for a brief moment our dreams and our reality are mysteriously allowed to mingle.

The next morning came quickly and I wasn't sure where I was or what was real. My body was sore, though, and this gave my memory a jolt. So did sitting up and seeing the dirty mountain bike propped in the corner.

"Stupid gay bike," I grumbled, as I slowly walked to the bathroom. I arranged for a taxi the next morning then spent the day eating and staring at the ceiling above my bed. Later that evening an Indian man came to my door.

"Hello," he said. I think. Then he walked past me into the room. I turned slowly and staggered with some kind of greeting, my eyes closely following him as he toured my belongings. He didn't seem to know any English and struggled to communicate, often trying to speak, followed by silence and a few uncomfortable smiles. This went on for some time. Then he looked directly at me and said, "Bong!"

"No. No bong here," I said, now very confused. Then a knock at the door, and he answered it. Yes, I thought, why not, make yourself at home. It was one of his friends, and he invited the man in. Now the three of us were standing in a triangle, the two of them speaking Hindi, I presume, and me leaning against a wall with what I can only imagine was a pretty dumb look on my face. Finally the new guy turned to me for the first time, extended his hand and said, "Hello." This is when I realized they were both loaded. I smelled turpentine on his breath. Indian whiskey. Then, same as the first man, he browsed through my stuff spread across the room. My camera caught his eye. He picked it up, looked my way and asked, "Expensive?"

"Yah ... yah, I spose," I answered meekly.

"How much?"

"About nine hundred dollars," I said, but also tried to explain that I was a journalist, sort of, and that my camera and laptop were the only two things of value I owned and that all my belongings could fit into my pack.

"You have computer?" he asked. This guy was obviously paying attention.

"Yah."

"How much for that?"

"About nine hundred, same as the camera. Cheapest laptop I could buy, really."

"How much rupees?"

“Uh ... forty-four times nine hundred ... it’s a lot, I can tell ya that much. About forty thousand rupees, I think.”

“Forty thousand rupees?” he said slowly.

The amount had stunned him. His response had me feeling the same. I felt vulnerable now, a little intimidated. Everyone in India saw me as a big dollar sign, and this feeling gave birth to the general assumption that everyone I met wanted to club me on the head, beat me till I was a bloody stump and take all my things. And they could do this and no one would know. I’m in the middle of nowhere, I thought! What’s to stop these two degenerates from carving me up right now?

“We go now, thank you.”

They left and I continued to wrestle with my dark thoughts. But first I bolted the door. This all-natural paranoia was having a square dance in my head. In the morning I felt stupid and vowed to quit acting like a scared little bitch. But is it that simple?

The taxi arrived early. A member of the hotel staff came along for reasons unclear, squeezing into the back seat and around the bike’s front tire. I was done with the bike, I knew this. It hurt to even look at it. I was sitting up front with my arm resting half out the open window, all giddy over a fresh day of traveling on, in comfort even. But India is always so up close, in your face – the people, the awful conditions and especially the prospect of death, that before long I had become wary of the day’s journey. When I looked out my side window I saw no road, only a drop that would allow me time to suffer in flight before crashing and burning. The newspapers in India are filled with road deaths. Incidents involving flying buses and falling taxis are common.

And that’s when it happened. I became so preoccupied with death and dying that my mind began to morbidly wander. I started thinking about near death experiences, specifically all the stories the nearly departed come back with of bright white lights. I was determined to figure this out. One of my theories went something like this: The white light we see when we die is just our light as it extinguishes, in the same way a light bulb will sometimes flash quickly and brilliantly when it burns out. We’ve all probably had some experience turning on a light that pops and dies in this manner. Flick the switch and *ZAP*, it’s out, that quick. That light, in our final moment before expiration, is the last thing we will ever see. It’s not some doorway to a greater state of being. There is no floating through tunnels into the warm inviting glow of eternal life. There’s dirt and there’s worms, and life continues on without us. And the reason nobody ever comes back from the brink and tells this story is because it isn’t possible. Once your light goes out, that’s it. There can be no return. So now there’s no heaven, no afterlife, no ...

“GOD ... DAMN!” I really let loose on it, too.

“AAAAHHHHHHH!” From all of us.

bus screech gravel slide

The blind-corner bus came within a foot of pushing us off the mountain. The three of us pissed our pants in the same language then looked at each other and let out a wild roar. We were glad to be alive. A couple hours later we approached a typical bend in the road where two cows were standing, staring around the corner in the direction we were headed. The driver slowed and gave a warning honk, thinking the cows were looking at an oncoming bus or truck. But there was nothing ahead but open road. He spoke to the man in the back seat and gestured as if to say, I thought there was a vehicle

coming because the cows were looking that way. I watched him speak and thought, me too.

There was a slight problem over payment when we reached the town of Mandi. I had very little Indian currency and the banks weren't open. It was Sunday. But after talking with several people we found someone whose brother's barber's second cousin's wife's sister could exchange my American currency for Indian rupees and make a nice little profit in the process. This took three hours.

One of the aspects of backpacking that takes some getting used to is the waiting. Backpackers are experts at waiting, tolerant and patient at the prospect of spending hours in a train station. They think nothing of spending the night on a wooden bench in an airport. They learn that timetables are a best guess approach, as they wait on that next bus or train that's already four hours late. A good backpacker can sit with a mediocre book in sweltering heat with a dodgy stomach and not utter a single complaint and even find the joy in it. A *good* backpacker can do this. But as I was a poor backpacker, not even a backpacker yet, I reacted with typical American indignation and intolerance. Until I met Manu. He recommended a great guesthouse and promised to come by later that night with some hashish.

I got a room at the Raj Mahal, which used to be a British Fort. The room was exotic to be sure and could easily have passed for a torture chamber under the right circumstances. It wasn't really the main room that gave me pause but the bathroom. It was attached to the bedroom by way of a long, narrow hallway with a low ceiling and exposed plumbing dripping with condensation. With the right kind of imagination a person's thoughts could run wild. But however medieval the room turned out to be, the hotel itself was pleasantly sophisticated. There was a peaceful courtyard singing with birds and buzzing with uniformed waiters. A fence of tall bushes perfectly obscured the crowded, dusty streets on the other side. It was an oasis of calm. I ate macaroni and cheese and washed it down with an ice-cold Coca-Cola. The moment felt like one I could have experienced anywhere in the States, and that feeling was just what I needed. A warm, gentle breeze blew in and rattled leaves overhead. I thought about a long-ago spring day in Colorado.

Manu came by at dusk. I was in the courtyard eating again. We went to my room and I watched as he emptied the tobacco from a cigarette into his hand, broke up a little piece of hashish and mixed it in then loaded everything back into the cigarette casing. He spoke excellent English, and we discussed many things. We talked about the convenience of rolling machines, sports and then music. I told him that the early 1990s Seattle grunge sound may have been the most important trend in the history of music.

"It killed the ballad rockers. The big hair bands." I played Radiohead's *The Bends* for him and he told me how to make good hashish.

"The women make best hash. Need much patience, and you must slowly roll in hands, working it. Like this, do you see? Men do not make good hash. No patience."

"Is it expensive?"

"No, the old women are easy to get from cheap. You can bargain better with them."

"It's good to be high."

"Yes. I know."

And then he was gone. Back to his wife and kids. And I was left with the good feelings that come from sharing a good smoke with a good person. It was my first real

exchange with an Indian who didn't want anything from me except conversation. And I was all smiles. I grabbed my toothbrush, ducked down low and made the long Dungeness walk to the bathroom. Trying to keep my hashish-fueled imagination from running amok.

Early the next morning I hopped on a bus headed to McLeod Ganj. The town caught my attention while reading through the Lonely Planet India guidebook, and I had planned on an extended stay. The Tibetan government is located there, and the Dalai Lama, too. It looked to be a place of magic and spirituality and really diverse, small and rural surrounded by snow-capped peaks and clean green valleys, where the rivers carve out a path of least resistance all the way to the sea. I had great plans for my time in McLeod. Yoga and meditation courses and even classes on Buddhist philosophy. Yes, big plans indeed. I was in town approximately 10 minutes when I came upon a large, healthy stick of hashish. Upon my first smoke I thought I felt a slight change inside of me, like perhaps the momentum had begun to shift. Would I follow my plan and create a learning experience for myself, I wondered? Or would I smoke myself into fear and loathing, embrace the madness as if it were my own ignorant child? Open myself up to the weird and wonderful of the world and happily wade in its lunacy? "Yes," I said out loud, "it is good to be high."

Chapter 3

Purposes and Porpoises and Tortoises and Turtles

My room had a balcony that hung over a dirt road that was too narrow and had too many holes for vehicle traffic. Young boys dug into the earth in pairs. One in the hole manning the shovel and the other up on the road pulling on a rope tied to the shovel. Other young men huddled around the holes, watching with great interest. I could see at least five holes, and each one attracted a crowd of onlookers. Across the road stood a small temple enclosed on all sides by colorful prayer wheels that rang twisted sounds of *rururum rarhrahrrar* as the walking faithful gave them a little pat.

The townspeople in McLeod are mostly Tibetan and mostly happy. But after their struggles just to get to India why shouldn't they be? They deserve happiness. They've *earned* it. The atmosphere is chaotic yet strangely serene, a balancing act of deeply rooted Buddhist beliefs with typical third world problems. Monks in flowing red garments glide through the streets past beggars who putter and stumble, dying for some spare change. Besides the Tibetans, the town's demographic makeup consists of Hindus, Kashmiris and backpackers, each having a near even piece of the human pie.

To simply live and live simply, this had become my mission. Conscious or otherwise. Detachment from a previous existence my goal. Or maybe I was just content to be lazy. My days existed only to eat, refill water bottles, drink tea, smoke hashish, read, watch and listen, inhaling all of India in properly. Building memories for a day when the experiences of India would become a lost dream that escapes through my fingers like running water. I felt an uneasy lack of urgency, a gross contradiction to my lessons learned growing up in the *go go go* society. Sit up straight! Are you paying attention? I just don't know what we're going to do with you! Talk of money, choosing a career, getting married, having kids. Then I'll understand, I'm told. But I simply didn't give a shit about those things. They floated around me like phantom clouds, but I had no desire to pluck one as my own. *Shoo clouds!* I couldn't explain why. Who'd have understood if I had tried?

While eating lunch at a café one day, I found a copy of *Human Rights Update*, a local publication that reports on the plight of the Tibetan people in China. Flipping through the pages I read horrible stories of death and torture. One such story was of a 28-year-old nun who died after 10 years in prison. The article said she went to jail for taking part in a peaceful demonstration. After her death her family was denied access to her body. They were never made aware that she had been sick and the circumstances surrounding her death were suspicious. But apparently this is common. The entire paper was filled with story after story of similar atrocities. As reported in the paper, 72 Tibetan prisoners had died directly as a result of torture since China ratified the

Convention Against Torture in 1988. This was *after* they agreed to quit torturing people.

India was having a profound impact on me. What kind of land is this, I wondered, where starving people and starving cows live side by side each not wanting to eat the other? Having been there almost a month I feared that soon I would be unable to distinguish normal from weird. But in a world so diverse, a word such as “normal” loses all meaning. And certainly in a land such as India, where spiritualism greatly outweighs common sense. The townspeople dump their garbage down the hills or onto the street then spend two hours asking Buddha to come pick up the trash. Not once did I see him do this. There is no order here. That left with the Brits in 1947. Buying a train ticket? Mind numbing. Mailing a postcard? Life threatening. I reminded myself often that “normal” is just a word. A byproduct of a society. One man’s sacred cow is another man’s Double Whopper with cheese, so to speak. There was also the susceptibility to illness. Again I was sick. I was in a bad way, physically and emotionally, far from the traveler that I wanted to be.

I had just come back from a traveler’s meal of whatever it was I pointed to on the menu, to find several people lurching around my hotel room door, only back a ways and staring up at the ceiling. So naturally I look up, and this hideous creature comes swirling down upon me, trying to claw out my retinas. “Bats,” I yell, putting on my best Hunter S. Thompson voice without realizing it. And then, “EEEEEEEEEE, what the hell is that thing?” I scream to no one in particular. Some woman, “A bird.” And me again, “Jesus, I thought I was being attacked by bats.” Then in one swift motion I open the door just enough to squeeze through, slamming it quickly behind me and leaving those people and that bird to sort it out amongst themselves.

Outside ... God is speaking in thunderous vowels. The only light in town is the one coming from the heavens, from bitch black to light as day to pitch black in less than a second. The wind screams and throws itself against the windows, hail *dings* and *dangs* off the tin roofs below. Mother Nature is tugging at the building as I wonder about construction codes. A loud crash of glass breaking, causing me to rise off my seat, spilling tobacco onto the floor. Dogs bark fearfully, and I myself am ready to howl. At the very least cower under the bed. Inside ... the candles are lit and flickering violently, casting distorted shadows against the walls. Smoke from the Tibetan incense dances through the room, keeping step with the wind whistling through a crack in the balcony door. While the melancholy mind alterations of The Doors float hesitantly from yonder laptop speakers.

I break up a little hashish and mix it with some tobacco then load it into my new pipe that I purchased off the street for a dollar. I huff and puff and think and blink. Many whys and what fors and what have yous bouncing around my mind. *Purposes and porpoises and tortoises and turtles*. A writer can write anywhere, I say to myself. So what’s really driving this Indian adventure? But I knew the answer, and knowing the answer made me more anxious. I wanted to find my purpose. I wanted to understand how I fit in, where I fit in. “Why must I try and make sense of life,” I cry out. And why look in *India*?

Never in my openest mind do I think of myself as a forever wanderer, a discontented soul incapable of finding my place, finding inner peace, so I roam and I search, for there must be a place, I tell myself. Perhaps just beyond the horizon. Always

just a step out of reach. These myths, the demons of paradise, the false hope that a place exists so perfect and without fault. But it's a fairy tale, a child's dream. Even the great Land of Oz was run by a short man wearing a curtain. It is conceivable that I will never find my place, I tell myself. And the voice responds, *Silly American, don't you know there's nothing more to life than the living of it?*

Chapter 4

Fuckin' Drugs

I awoke around 9am and went outside to look for food. I found a small gathering of people lining the main road so I went over to have a closer look. Someone said to me that “His Holiness” would be coming by soon. But since I don’t speak code, I had no idea what that meant, and it took me a few more minutes to discover that it was the Dalai Lama. It seemed an odd setting for a guy I always saw on TV with world leaders. From dining with presidents to the dust and disease of rural India is quite a leap. And my mind had trouble connecting the dots. How a person could live in both worlds simultaneously. How a person of that stature can just come rolling down this narrow dirt road with no security. No Tibetan secret service agents disguised as grocery clerks. No sharp shooters squatting on rooftops with eyeballs resting on automatic weapons. Or maybe there were. I took a good, long look around, trying to determine who might have been on the payroll. That’s when it really hit me. The Dalai Lama? I had always considered him a sort of mythical creature. Like unicorns. Or midgets. Certainly not someone I’d see in person. It felt like one of those moments when you’re not sure if you’re awake or still asleep and dreaming. For all I knew I had been asleep for weeks. Nothing ever seemed like it was happening to *me*. Except for moments of pain. Those were all too real.

Within a few minutes the vehicles slowly began to pass, a caravan of six Range Rovers. Followers bowed extravagantly but only half prostrations for lack of space. I had a good view, particularly with everyone bowing, and in the fourth car sat His Holiness in the passenger seat, window up but vigorously waving at the small crowd with a huge genuine grin and huger signature glasses. He didn’t think himself better than anyone else, no air of arrogance we normally associate with world leaders. Just a guy taking a ride in his car, waving at his neighbors. Our eyes met for just a second but it played in my head for much longer. And then he was gone, leaving behind a plume of dust and many happy people who just happened to be walking by at the right time.

I went for breakfast at the Shambala Café and had a couple of egg, tomato and cheese sandwiches on Tibetan round bread then back to my room to wash some boxers in the sink. I was still thinking more than living, and meeting other travelers was proving more difficult than I had imagined. Yes, they were everywhere. Thick like rednecks at a county fair. But how do you go from, “hi, where you from, how long you been here,” to “can I hang out with you cause if I’m alone and stoned much longer I’m gonna shave my head and buy a dress and join a cult?” Segues are difficult. Don’t get me wrong. People like me. Hell, I’m as sociable as an albino retard hopped up on jelly donuts. But meeting people, that’s trickier. My thoughts need constant monitoring. The think-before-you-speak mechanism is missing. It’s one thing to say, “Sure midgets

taste like chicken, but they're not nearly as personable," to someone you've known a while. But to lead with that? That could cause confusion and panic.

The following day I met a fellow journalism graduate named Josh from Canada who shared my cynicism and fervor for bashing the media. Which was nice after suffering through classes with people who fervently believed objectivity to be alive and well. Some were self righteous twits. Others just stupid. Most shared a common sense of inflated self worth. As if what they did mattered. The ambition, I understood. It's only natural to want to succeed, and success is measured in status and dollars. But to actually believe in fairy tales at that age? It's not only sad, it's irresponsible. We need people in the media who can recognize the bullshit when their standing in it. Even if their contributing it. Journalists are supposed to be the watch dogs of society. But how can they keep others honest if they themselves have been corrupted? Or if they're too ignorant to see what's happening. Objectivity can be compromised with one word. It's compromised by what stories you choose to print, where stories appear. Every human decision makes the news more subjective. And that's if we're actually *trying* to be objective. Just give the people the facts and let them come to their own conclusions. But news stations haven't operated like that since the black and white days of television. Now the news is cult-like or too sensationalistic to be taken seriously. I mean, Fox News? Is that journalism? Because it comes across a helluva lot more like a fanatical religious program than news. The media isn't feeding information anymore. We're giving people their opinions. The news has become theatre and propaganda, it's about forwarding an agenda. It has become unapologetically political and obviously so to anyone who dares to take notice. So please don't talk to me about how objective it all is. That's like a doctor telling a man with no head that he'll be just fine.

Josh was traveling with an English girl named Ellie. She was a real cutie, with freckles on her cheeks and big brown eyes, and of course that accent is enough to drive a Yank mental. After a couple of days of playing cards and walking into the woods to get high, we adopted Adam from Canada, age 18 and a devout Buddhist. Though he no longer smoked, he taught me the proper way to roll a joint.

"You can pinch or tuck. I prefer to tuck, but you can pinch. Might be easier."

"I'm just happy if it doesn't fall apart while I'm smoking it."

I called him Little Buddha. His head was nearly shaved and he spoke in great detail about his faith and Buddhism with enthusiastic calm. Though much of it sounded like ingredients for a fairy tale.

It was Josh's 23rd birthday. The four of us ran to a Japanese restaurant in the rain. I ordered soup, they ordered real food. My stomach was permanently shaky, despite my neglect. With my Udon soup I was given chopsticks, which I had never used before and to start with a bowl of soup seemed most absurd. It felt like a rigged carnival game. The odds were against me from the beginning. After a few unsuccessful minutes I asked the waitress for a fork.

"A fork?" I asked, now in disbelief over my request. "This is still soup, right?" They confirmed that it was.

"I like to eat my soup with a spoon," Adam said slowly, then spread a big, serene Buddha grin that reached around past his ears.

In the end I abandoned my soup then drank heavily on an empty stomach. The town's power went out as we were leaving the restaurant, and the rain continued to fall hard. The dirt roads were now small streams, and we were heading uphill. We carefully hopped around numerous holes and bricks and boards and every other damn thing that could be in the road. Jumping from rocks to wooden planks over those large holes all the way upstream. Our shoes were soaked through, our clothes just soaked. All of us had fallen at least once, splattered with mud, reaching for barbed wire while trying to maintain our balance. What started out as a stream was now quickly becoming a torrent. It would have been easy to fall into a hole and crack open a skull or lose footing and be completely washed away. We were the only idiots on the road/river, and we thought of this inconvenience as something fun, just one more story to tell when we get back home. We were invincible. And we knew it.

We managed it with no injuries and decided to reward ourselves with a little drink. The only real bar in town is McLlos, situated perfectly in the center of town across from the taxi stand. They serve food but everyone comes for the beer with strange chemicals and names like Godfather and Turbo XXX. None of the brands taste good but they do the job and usually keep doing it into the next day. The place is darkly decorated with Christmas lights and twinkle paper stars draped over hanging bulbs and plenty of candles and kerosene lamps for when the power goes. The music generally ranges from pink Floyd to Madonna and plenty of Bob Marley, don't you know. It's set up like a beer hall with long wooden tables running into other long wooden tables. It's cozy or crowded depending on your mood, but always close and hot.

We ordered four Godfathers, but little Buddha wasn't drinking, so we sent one back. Ellie had bought a birthday cake earlier in the day and brought it to McLlos. A few minutes into our beers the cake was brought out with everyone singing "Happy Birthday." Three guys who we didn't know sitting two tables over began showering us with joints. One of them stuck in the cake. Birthday presents, we figured. Ellie licked off the vanilla icing and sparked it up, while the rest of us nodded our appreciation.

All three were Brits. Jamie came off as the leader of the group, and in fact he was the one rolling and flying the spliffs. He talks in riddles and resembles a lanky, con-man Muppet with a golden fro. He's different, I'd say, a good guy all around. Mario's a character, a wild performer but chilled, too. He's a Greek Londoner with an extra-large nose that reminds me of my father. Rob is the guy you notice last, young and quiet with a perfectly shaved head, one of the nicest people you could meet. I assumed they had been friends since childhood, they got along so well. But they had just met a week earlier in Delhi.

McLlos closed and everyone left. I crawled back to my room and threw up. I brushed my teeth, rinsed out the sink then rolled a crooked little joint and sat cross-legged on the balcony feeling good. From anticipating death to celebrating life, there was optimism in the air. Stars stars everywhere stars. Blinking secrets in Morse code. A gentle *shusssh* of the wind gave life to prayer flags hanging from rooftops in the distance. Jagged white peaks suspended by moonbeams towered over soft green hills, while the children of God and Buddha and Allah slept peacefully around the world.

Josh left a couple of days later. He was upset about leaving, about parting with Ellie. There are no guarantees with travelers, no certain tomorrows with a person you've come to know intimately. And rarely are old friends reunited. In all likelihood

this was goodbye forever. Josh knew this. The three of us went back to my room, drank a little wine, even Adam, and Ellie and I smoked a few spliffs. Though it was strange at first without Josh there, we fell into a groove and soon all began to seem normal, for lack of a dumber word.

The next day Ellie and I did something impulsive, ambitious even, and it felt great after slothing around for so long. There was an ad in the local newsletter for the Yong Ling School, they were looking for volunteer English teachers. I remember very clearly the ad saying “come and watch.” No pressure in that, we thought, so we went. But they were short on teachers and threw us in unprepared.

There were about 50 eager faces staring at me, young and old, big smiles all around. Their common bond being that they were all newly-arrived Tibetan refugees. Very new. Most of the classes were taught outside on a huge concrete patio hanging onto the side of a mountain. You could see forever into the valley below. There was nothing to sit on but the ground, and my only teaching materials were a tiny chalkboard and a half inch piece of chalk.

“Hi, my name’s Nick. I’ve never done this before.” Then I spent the next hour and a half teaching them the alphabet. Ellie’s group was more advanced, and they sang songs 5 feet away from us. Afterward we both felt like we had just saved the world from a giant meteor. We were high on humanity and vigorously patting each other on the back. Naturally, we went to McLlos to celebrate.

“God, that was amazing,” Ellie said. “What were you talking about with that monk after class?”

“He wanted to know where he could find a hooker.”

“WHAT?”

“His name’s Tenzin. I’m gonna tutor him in computer skills three days a week.”

“So no hookers?”

“Not yet. But with my tutelage, who knows?”

“You want a Godfather?”

“NO! No Godfather. I think I’ll try that Turbo one.”

Soon everyone poured in. The boys from the other night – Jamie, Mario and Rob, and Bill and John – the Irish guys I had met the day before. Mark and Emma from England, and a couple of maniacs named Ian and Richard, also from England.

“Did ya hear what happened last night?” Richard asked me. “We had to save this fuckin’ guy from choking to death. I’m still upset. I wanted a good night’s sleep and this fucker brings home some belligerent drunk he just met.” He nodded at Ian.

“He actually stopped breathing,” Ian said. “Do you know what I mean?”

“‘Chuck ‘em out or I’ll do it myself,’ that’s what I told him. The guy was sitting on my bed exposing his butt crack to the world. Not passed out, just sitting there. I just wanted to smoke a spliff and get some sleep. And then he went into the loo, and we didn’t see him for about an hour.”

“But I had to take a shit,” Ian interrupted, “So I went in there and he’s just sitting there staring into space. I started yelling at him, ‘Can you please get off my toilet? Please pull up your trousers, get off the toilet and find somewhere else to sit.’ Then he went and lay down on the floor.”

“‘It’s gonna happen soon,’ I told him” Richard said, nodding at Ian. “‘And when it does you’re gonna be the one digging vomit out of his mouth, not me. You brought him home, he’s your responsibility.’”

“So I just finish saying, ‘Oh, I know it’s gonna happen,’ when we both start to hear gurgling and choking noises and I yell, ‘Oh fuck all,’ then jump on the floor and put my hand into his mouth, scooping out any bits of solids I can find until he’s breathing again. And then in the morning he gets up and says, ‘I’m OK now,’ and walks off.

“If it were up to me, I would’ve let the fucker choke to death. You know, I slept with my Swiss army knife under my pillow. Big blade open.”

Everyone was paired off in conversation, while Bob Marley sang, “*I know a place where we can carry on.*” Mario and I were discussing the best mobster movies when the table gave birth to Bill. Too squeezed in on his side, his only escape was underneath. The bar was chock full of backpackers, renegade Tibetans, Kashmiris, everyone singing and dancing and yelling over the music. In the middle of all the noise and chaos, just when the night was hitting its peak, a drunk Ellie sat on my lap and asked if I would be her brother.

Brother?

I returned to my room around 2am to find my things scattered all over the floor. Immediately I looked for the laptop and camera, which I quickly spotted. The balcony door was wide open, the moon providing the only light till I could find a candle. I lit a couple then noticed a trail of condoms winding onto the balcony, most open and thrown about.

“What ... the ... fuck?” I whispered to myself. I walked over to my table, sat down and rolled a miserable little joint. And then I smoked that miserable little joint, the whole time scanning the room for clues. At one point I actually said to myself, “What would Scooby Doo do?” Eventually I came to the conclusion that it must have been the monkeys. What else was I to think? The open condoms presented my mind with different scenarios, but I was in no condition to follow those trails. I was already debating whether to pick up the condoms or just kick them off the balcony. Then I noticed my bananas were gone and felt confident in my monkey theft theory.

I continued to float from a wonderful night, with the exception of the Ellie situation. I wanted to get inside of her, but only in that hormonal way that I want them all. My mind always tangled in thought, I ran to the balcony, leaned against the rail and yelled, “I WANNA DO EVERYTHING AND NOTHING AT ALL!”

Adam left the next day, and Ellie and I were back at the bus stop waving goodbye. I just couldn’t get used to that. But it’s an inevitability that lingers with every, “Hello, my name is ...” then in three days or two weeks or four months we’d be saying our goodbyes. All backpacking relationships are entered into with the knowledge that they will be temporary. But that doesn’t make it any easier.

“You take care of yourself, Little Buddha.” I never knew what to say. Hugs all around then back to McLlos to gather with good people and adequate drink and of course many joints and much merriment, while Adam tried to catch a few winks on that down-the-mountain road.

Every night was a party. If nothing specific then we’d all wind up at McLlos. Jamie rented a cabin near the village of Dharamkot, and after drinking a few Turbos he talked a few of us into making the mile-long hike up to his place in the dark. But first we stopped by a little shop on the edge of town and bought a couple bottles of apple wine. The cabin wasn’t near anything, except pine trees, and there were a lot of those. And it

was rustic, built into the side of a hill. Jamie's roommate was a furry brown spider the size of a softball. It was always in the same corner, and I always checked to make sure. It was me, Ellie, Jamie and Rob sitting on the ground, campfire in front of us, passing around glasses to be filled. Jamie was building two joints at once. There was a slight chill in the air.

"If I don't chop wood in the morning," Jamie said, "I don't eat at night."

We played 20 questions. I thought of Bugs Bunny and nobody figured it out. Then we moved on to the word association game.

"OK, I'll start. Tree."

"branch"

"7 - Eleven"

"soda"

"can"

"ass"

"hole"

"pie"

"math"

"Jesus"

"strange"

"eternity"

"light"

"make-believe"

"Peter Pan"

"dish soap"

"window"

"glass"

"beer"

"goggles"

"ugly"

"tree"

"You can't repeat a word, Rob," Jamie said disgustedly. "Tree was already said."

"When?"

"Earlier, I don't know. Are you gonna take this seriously?"

"I am! I didn't know it was said. I don't see what the big deal is."

"The big deal ..."

"Jamie, calm down!" Ellie jumped in, "it's just a game."

"What? Just a game? What does that mean? Nick, what do you think?"

"Fuckin' drugs."

"Fuckin' drugs! Yah. I love it!" Jamie sprang to his feet and held his hands palms up toward me. "Look here at the wise old owl. Watch him sit quietly, listening to all of us squabble. What he is thinking we never know, then BAM, fuckin' drugs."

"I do what I can."

"FUCKIN' DRUGS!" Jamie yelled down the mountain. "Our wise old owl."

Chapter 5

Hey, Drunk Girl

There was this place in town called The Green Shop where I went to refill my water bottles every morning. They also recycled bottles and sold a few organic products – candles and handmade journals constructed from recycled paper. I was an avid recycler in the States and thought that the tides of neglect could be reversed and all the world saved, but then I lay down one night and thought of all the plastic suffocating the earth, and where does this stuff go exactly, accumulating until what, when, how long can this go on? And now we've got the entire developing world using plastic. But still, I felt it was my duty to do what I could, so I went to the offices of the Tibetan government (The Green Shop was their program) and asked if I could build a website for The Green Shop. Nothing fancy, no pay or anything, I told them. Just doing it because I care, and perhaps to atone for all the slothfulness. But somehow during that brief visit I agreed to build a site for the entire Tibetan government. Oh, I was definitely in over my head. A volunteer named Kerin, from South Africa, volunteered to help with the content and asked when we could get started. Why rush? I wasn't going anywhere.

The sun was ducking behind a mountain. I ordered a *chai* then sat down. The Sunrise Café was the center of our universe. Everyone knew where it was, and most in our group took to gathering there around sunset. To say it doesn't look like much is an understatement, but it's cozy, which means that it's small. One wooden table sits inside the broken-down shack with three uncomfortable wrap-around benches that form a horseshoe. Books, games, lanterns and a few trinkets share table space with well-traveled elbows, while photos and homemade artwork hang from the dank wooden walls. There are several books on the table that travelers can draw in or write something for future backpackers to ponder.

The *chai* guy bobs and leans to the left of the slim entrance with two rickety stools. He stands behind a gigantic windowless opening, sparking nostalgic minds to float across oceans, back to the local Dairy Delight in small town America or rural Anywhere. Hunched over three large stainless steel pots, he strains his tea into dirty little glasses as the Indians have done for centuries.

Across the narrow dirt road from the Sunrise Café several dilapidated benches of wood and metal prop themselves against a cluttered notice board. Space is at a premium on the inside, but the real excitement takes place outdoors, where forever friendships are forged on those splintered seats. Travelers squat in heated discussion or sing and dance to the homemade music or just sit quietly, soaking it all in. Watching India pass by under the glow of a full moon while sipping a *chai*. This is the backpacker experience in its purest form.

The greatest thing I can say about the Sunrise Café is that it felt like home. And that feeling of belonging to something, somewhere, when you're half a globe away from everything familiar, that feeling is what goose bumps are made of.

Two English guys I recognized from McLlos joined me on the bench. John, 22, is tall and pompous looking, a button-up, short sleeved kind of a guy who loves to smoke pot. Dan, also 22, is clever and funny and he knows this. He's also pasty and has bitch tits, but he did invent his own religion called Poonism, which celebrates the female form. He was explaining a complicated theory while I eaves-dropped, completely unrelated to Poonism.

"I was lying in bed last night but I couldn't sleep, so I began counting sheep. But then I started to wonder why sheep's legs are so short. You see, when it rains the sheep become waterlogged, they're gigantic sponges, and if they had longer legs they'd no doubt buckle under the added weight. Whaddaya think?"

I introduced myself and said something like, "Yes, but with those short legs they're the perfect height for fucking." Then I passed them a horribly rolled joint and we began talking politics. I told them Bill Clinton should have remained the president until he died or ran out of interns.

"Fuckin' hell," Dan said, "he's a wonderful Poonist."

"That election made you guys look pretty stupid," John added.

I nodded and smiled. What else was I going to do? It did make us look stupid. An election for the position of most powerful person in the world wound up looking like bad reality TV. It was a nasty affair, a long, bitter example of what's wrong with the political machinery. What began with passion and intrigue ended in a last gasp hope of restoring a hint of dignity to our election process. A sprint became a marathon, and eventually it became an embarrassment.

Ian and Richard had left, but others got stuck in. There was Nicola from Germany who I named Circus Girl because she was a dedicated freak. And then Sara and her boyfriend, Joe. Sara was a TV star in Canada. Matt from Seattle, and Heidi and Alicia from Canada, and soon I would meet a big ape named Seamus from Brooklyn.

It was Mario's last night in McLeod. He was moving on to Thailand. It was like losing a spoke in a wheel each time another friend boarded the bus, and I began to wonder when the wheel would cave from the pressure. We went to McLlos early and worked ourselves into a frenzy. Drinks flowing, joints smoking, Indians dancing. Bill and Mario jumped up and performed an impromptu routine to "Walk this Way" that inspired Crazy Rafik to get up and get down. He was the Tasmanian Muslim, spinning and gyrating out of control.

"Someone could get hurt," I heard myself say. Bill was mimicking Michael Jackson perfectly while Mario did some kind of mad Run – D.M.C. thing. Crazy Rafik lost control and ran between the two like a junkie in need of a fix. Everyone up and clapping. It lasted only a few minutes, but it was the kind of moment that gets trapped in your head. The joint was packed, roaring hot. Bill staggered over, completely worn and vigorously sweating. Mario, too. But Rafik was just getting warmed up.

"Nick," Ellie called over, "did I tell you my monk bought me a chicken?"

"Uh ... what?"

She went on to say that the monk she tutored took her for lunch. They bought a live chicken then brought it somewhere where it was killed, stripped of its feathers and cooked.

“That’s great. Your monk buys you a chicken, and my monk pisses on my toilet seat. How is this fair?”

“He pisses on your toilet seat?”

“Yep. One day after our lesson he used my bathroom, and later I realized that rather than lift the seat up, he pissed all over it. And now he goes after every lesson. Three days a week I forget to lift the damn thing and three days a week he pisses all over it. Even on the floor. Maybe it’s a medical condition, a faulty valve. *Maybe* my monk is broken.

“It was good chicken,” Ellie said, playfully goading me.

“There’s right and there’s wrong, Ellie, and you know this. My monk owes me a chicken. Or at the very least an apology. I mean, that’s why the seat has hinges.”

An older woman sat across from me with floating arms and face in trance, starry eyes and glossy concentration. I stared at her for an inordinate amount of time. I couldn’t help myself. She never noticed me, never acknowledged any of us. She was in the grips of something good. Dan leaned over the table and talked excitedly with one hand in the air. Ellie had a few split ends in her mouth listening. Mario was laughing with Liz, Irish John’s sister who had just finished a two-week meditation course. Mark and Emma were rolling cigarettes, while Jamie methodically swayed his head with eyes closed and a big serenity grin. I was discussing religion with Circus Girl.

“What’s the name of that one dude in the bible who got eaten by a whale?” I asked.

“You mean Moby Dick?”

We left McLlos and wandered back to the Sunrise Café. A pack of wild dogs ran past and the 11 fingered tea maker screamed over a swirling wind, then set up four more fresh ones on the wooden ledge. The road was wet, mud puddles glimmering like magical pools from some faraway children’s tale. Bill grabbed his guitar and everyone began to sing. Then Mario raised his glass and spoke about friendship and addressed each of us individually in a way only Mario could. He was our Godfather. We sang and danced like happy hobos in a mad land, outlasting the night and welcoming the morning.

We were an odd gang, from many countries and many walks of life. Our common bond was being drawn together in that little town at a specific point in time. We shared something electric in those wild hills of Northern India, never to be outdone or recreated. Impossible to forget.

The next day an ancient bus loaded with backpacks departed with Mario on board, and another with fresh, hopeful faces arrived. In the same manner as revolving plastic horses on a carnival carousel.

“It’s all about keeping the balance,” Jamie assured us as the bus pulled away. “Life teeters on the edges.” We went to McLlos and left one chair open at the head of the table, then got splendidly drunk.

But there was something strange that happened on Mario’s last night, and it happened only to me. I was sitting alone on one of the benches, waiting for my *chai*, when a big drunk American charged over brimming with attitude and sat down full of anger.

“You see that guy, that faggot in the white shirt? I’m gonna kill him. I’m gonna jump up and bust him in his head.” This was my first meeting with Seamus. He went

on about killing, and I had to look away and make sure I was still in India. Just out of reach was most of my gang. Bill on guitar and everyone singing.

“I don’t go for this faggot hippy shit either,” Seamus said, pointing at my friends. Then he jumped up and put his arm around the faggot in the white shirt and dragged him down the road.

I ran into Seamus two nights later at the Sunrise Café. He was talking with Dan. I had seen him around town twice since our first meeting and purposely avoided him. I walked over and said hey to Dan and apprehensively talked with Seamus, who seemed much different despite the strength of my first impression.

“That guy was bad mouthin’ New York all damn night, and I kept tellin’ him if he didn’t shut the hell up I was gonna have to knock him out. Oh my gentle Jesus, he’s from fuckin’ California, too, to make it worse.”

“So what happened,” I asked, “after you walked off with him?”

“I brought him to my hash connection, and the two of us ripped him off good.”

“Jesus, I was certain you were gonna chuck him off a cliff.”

Seamus was smart for a dumb, overgrown 19 year old who looked as though he was going on 30. I was 33 and everyone thought he was the older of the two of us. He said things repeatedly like, “Well it is and it isn’t,” or “I have this friend whose half Nazi.” And he always had a trivial fact about some obscure thing that usually left us speechless and amused. We began hanging out a lot, myself, Dan and John, Seamus and Brandon. Brandon came to India with Seamus, they were lifelong friends. But he snorted too much Ketamine and lost his mind. He drifted in and out of conversations, consciousness. We saw him often but he contributed nothing and sat coma-like and still for hours. He was purely decorative. Helpless as a newborn and tranquil as a cucumber. And then he’d say something not only coherent but also intelligent. This is when Seamus would tell us how smart Brandon used to be, before India. Before the Ketamine.

Raj was my hash supplier. He also owned a shop selling Kashmiri handicrafts. I met him my first day in town, and we quickly became friends. He was a skinny little guy with big lust for the ladies. He owned pick-up lines in five languages, usually delivered from the roadside next to his shop as the women walked past. He was bursting with confidence.

“Do not run away my love. Come back to me. Raj is lonely.”

When he was not panting in the dusty road, he was entertaining in his tiny shop. Seated behind a miniature desk, he became The Man, passing out hashish, talking confidently in multiple languages, cigarette in hand, elbow on the desk, waving at Arif to get some *chai*.

Arif was Raj’s best friend and roommate. About a year previous, Arif’s wife left him and somehow he ended up broke and lost in McLeod Ganj. So Raj took him in and gave him a job, too. Now they were inseparable. Arif was 27, a few years older than Raj, and also from Kashmir. And he was the nicest guy. He spent 10 hours one day braiding my hair, only to have me take them out three days later. I often went to their apartment for lunch. Cross-legged on the floor, eating dhal and rice with our hands. I also spent a good bit of each day sitting on the roadside with them, laughing at Raj’s advances on the

parading Western women. Blushing, too, at times. But it was good fun, harmless, and any girl with a sliver of a sense of humor usually laughed.

“Nick, I am very horny,” Raj said to me one fine day. “There are many new flowers in town. Tonight we must go to McLlos and get fuckadup. I need a little import export.”

“Import export,” Arif laughed.

“It was light it was dark, it was light it was dark,” I added, as I thrust my hips back and forth. They fell all over themselves mimicking me.

At McLlos, a drunken Raj began to disrobe to Tina Turner asking, “*What’s love got to do with it.*”

“Do you feel something from the beer?” Raj asked a girl at our table.

“What?”

I translated.

“He wants to know if you’re getting drunk.”

Raj’s family lived on a houseboat in Srinagar, Kashmir, and we talked often of the two of us going up there and even made vague plans to do so in the future.

One late, drunk night while searching for some snacks, Dan, Seamus and I stumbled upon a little place that sold food and the cheapest of booze. They had snooker tables and a big TV with cable, and they were open 24 hours each and every day. And they didn’t so much as blink at us for rolling and smoking our sweet hashish.

The owner was a hospitable Indian guy about 35 years old, married to an attractive Chinese woman, and a few other family members helped out. There were three snooker tables, a TV area usually playing a movie or MTV, scatterings of white plastic patio furniture and a long counter from which to order your rum. For 30 rupees, about 75 cents, someone poured half a glass of rum which amounted to about four or five shots, and it was shockingly good. They also served whiskey, but it tasted like death. Their food menu was slightly larger and very basic. We usually rolled in around midnight and stayed till the sun came up. Sunrise Café, McLlos, and then the 24 Hour Place, as we called it. It was becoming routine.

It was around blackout time and everyone moved on instinct. When we first found the place there were no Westerners, just Tibetans playing snooker and occasionally passing out under a table. But now the 24 Hour Place was getting famous. Dan and I played Jamie and Bill at snooker and lost quickly, then tried to pull two Canadian birds and lost even faster, and now we had just watched helplessly as Bill and Ellie cuddled and groped each other in front of everyone. This was unexpected. Ellie was the only single female in our group most of the time, and everyone wanted her. But Bill got her, and Dan and I were stunned, beaten and drunk. It was clearly a sign to go pass out.

Next to the 24 Hour Place, a shirtless little man baked Tibetan round bread all night in a closet-sized cave. He rolled out the dough then slapped the circular pieces against the stone walls, where they baked to perfection under a wood fire. We bought two small loaves and ate while we walked. A pack of wild dogs ran up and challenged us in the still dark morning. We grabbed a handful of rocks and carefully navigated around them. This was common and we hardly gave it a thought. Except for the dogs, the streets were empty.

“How the hell did Bill pull Ellie?” Dan finally asked. “He’s a nice guy, don’t get me wrong, but he looks like Kermit the Frog.”

“You think you’re better looking than Bill?”

“Hell yes!”

I couldn’t say, or didn’t want to, but Dan did have a point. He did closely resemble Kermit. And of all the guys moving through our group, he was the least likely to hook up with our sweet little Ellie. So we thought. Dan stayed in the village of Dharamkot, so once we reached the taxi stand he jumped into a rickshaw for the uphill ride. I walked the rest of the way home then smoked one last joint on my balcony as the sun began to rise. These brief early morning moments of solitude, these near meditative escapes, were often the finest part of my day. Watching the town come alive to a rising sun. The satisfaction of a well spent night among friends, the hope of another wonderful day with absolutely no responsibilities. And the knowledge that I could sleep just as long as I wanted.

But Jamie came by around 8am, dropped down on my bed and started rolling a couple of joints. I rubbed my eyes and groaned.

“What time is it?”

“A little after eight.”

“Dude, I just passed out an hour ago.”

“Here, spark this up. You’ll feel better.”

We smoked a couple of joints and Circus Girl came by, then the three of us went to a rooftop restaurant for breakfast. We ate and laughed and always smoked, if Jamie was close by. But why not? We had freedom, and I was beginning to realize how crucial this was for me. I looked up and nearly lost myself in the vastness of the sky. Mother Nature reminding me how insignificant I am.

After breakfast, Circus Girl went to her Buddhist philosophy course, and Jamie and I wandered off into the woods. Sitting on a cliff, we watched an ant carry a spider across the ground between us. It came upon a crevice about 6 inches wide and stopped for a moment.

“That’s inconvenient,” I said. But rather than walk around, the ant jumped over the divide with the spider on its back.

“IT’S THE MATRIX ANT!” Jamie yelled.

This is why it was so hard to explain to folks back home what I did with all those hours not working or going to school. We didn’t *DO* anything. Nothing you can properly sum up in a quick email, anyway. “Yes, and today I got stoned and watched an ant jump over a hole in the ground.” Who’s going to make sense of that? We had no agenda, no responsibility. We could do whatever we wanted but felt no pressure to do *anything*. No guilt in doing *nothing*.

I had an appointment with Tenzin, my monk, so we went back to my room to find him waiting by the door. I went in first, then immediately to the bathroom and lifted up the toilet seat. Tenzin was nearly finished typing his story on the computer. It was a four-month ordeal of his near-death escape from China, crossing the Himalayas into Nepal and finally to India. He left Tibet with a friend when he was 15, his buddy 16. They couldn’t tell their families they were leaving because it might have put them in danger, so they snuck away in the middle of the night. They had just a little money and few supplies, and Tenzin got sick often and nearly died of malnutrition and exhaustion. They were just kids but they made it. Tenzin told me once that he hadn’t talked to his

family in his 10 years since escaping, and the last letter he received was a year and a half old. He had no idea if they were well, or even alive.

He had just one paragraph to type. Jamie continued to roll and we continued to smoke. Jamie asked him questions about sex and masturbation, and Tenzin blushed often but happily answered and even stayed an hour longer than usual. Jamie wasn't trying to be funny, he was genuinely interested and sincere, and Tenzin could sense this. I watched silently from across the room as this unlikely duo shared their thoughts on many things.

I was reading "Around the World in 80 Days" on the balcony when the boys came by and announced that they were going to Thailand and so was I.

"When?" I asked.

"In a couple days," Dan replied.

"I can't do it. I just bought a pound of hashish."

I figured it was about time to buy in bulk, considering how much we'd been smoking. So Raj gave me a great deal on two large pieces that looked like Hershey candy bars, only thicker.

"We'll smoke it," Dan said.

I tilted my head like a dog who didn't understand the command. Then held up the two gigantic slabs to make my point.

"I know a guy who'll probably buy it from you," Seamus said.

"So who all's going to Thailand, anyway?"

"You, me, Dan and John."

"What about Brandon?"

"He's not going but he's not sure why. By now he's probably forgotten all about it."

"I don't know. I can't just take off to Thailand."

"Why not?"

"Well, for one, I promised the Tibetan government that I'd build them a website, and it isn't finished yet. In fact, I just started working on it. I can't just blow 'em off."

"Piss off!" Dan said. "They got more important things to worry about than a website. They have no *country*."

"OK ... OK. Fuck it, I'll go. So when we leavin'?"

"Two, maybe three days," Dan said. "John's really sick, so we're waiting for him to get better or die."

It took John five days to get better, and we impatiently waited by bathing ourselves in rum each night and smoking as much hashish as time and tired lungs would allow. We sold as much of it as we could, and I gave away several generous pieces to friends. During the day when time moved the slowest, we usually played cards in McLlos. Or we took in a movie, which in no way should be thought of as a typical movie viewing experience. Take your granddad's falling down shed and furnish it with a rough pawnshop TV and eight of the most uncomfortable, forward-leaning benches you can find. Now find the lowest quality pirated movies where shadows with small bladders get up several times and babies cry and others cough and sneeze, and the cameraman sneezes, too, then drops the video camera into his tub of popcorn, which looks like a landslide on the TV. The lights in the shed came on several times during each movie so

a little Indian man could crawl over and kick the machine chewing on the disk. I do believe this was his only responsibility, his job description you might say. Two hour movies became three and you still missed the most important 20 or 30 minutes because of some malfunction. By the end your body is wrecked. Your ass is asleep, your back is screaming and your feet feel like two swollen fish. But it was something to do and we rather enjoyed it.

At least we were using this time wisely. Seamus, Brandon and I tried to rent a rickshaw for a day but communication problems were too great, and we and the drivers parted ways frustrated, upset and confused. I made a sign for a teenage beggar boy we had come to befriend. It read, "Will beg for money!" I told him it would triple his take, people would laugh. But he usually held it upside down, if he held it at all. Seamus and I stumbled upon a travel agency built into the fuselage of an airplane. It was on the second floor, which made it look like it flew into the buildings around it. Inside was a photo of Pierce Brosnan sitting in the very same travel agency with one girl on each side of him. I looked up and sitting there were the same two girls. In the same clothes even. I ran and got my camera then had Seamus take a photo of me sitting with the two of them, while I held the photo of Brosnan in my lap. Later I wondered how many idiots before me had done the same. A few days before we left I gave my mountain bike to Raj and Arif, but Raj had just left on the bus to Kashmir, and I never got a chance to say goodbye. Arif gave me a necklace with an Om (or *Aum*), which means "everything," and I attached it to my backpack and brought it with me everywhere.

Finally, when John was well, we caught the 6pm downhill bus. I thought of a Green Day song and sang to myself, "*I hope you had the time of your life.*" And I had, all of us had. But the anticipation of Bangkok and Thailand was too great and we felt better than people should be allowed to feel. I felt oddly sad for the town, for those left behind. So many leaving in such a quick few days left McLeod Ganj looking different, like a stranger. Mark and Emma were leaving shortly after us, and Bill and Ruth, too. Jamie was still in the hills, but Circus Girl had recently left, as had Sara and Joe and Matt and even Ellie and Rob. The once strong group was coming undone. Sure, we would all move on and meet other people in other places. But only once do the stars align just so and the moon smiles down upon a group of strangers that would come to form a bond so strong in a place so perfect. Our time together seemed as though it would never end. Like it *could* never end. For many of us, the weeks and months we spent in McLeod Ganj would be the highlight of our travels. For me, it was the beginning of a new life.

We sat in the very back of the bus. Dan to my right, Seamus to my left and John next to Seamus. We bought some Valium for the ride, but Seamus took too many and kept sliding off the seat like a cartoon accordion. Dan was trying to fall asleep, and John was out. I was exhausted and just wanted to pass out but couldn't get comfortable. The seats in the back row didn't recline, and this made me squirm. There was a drunk girl and her friend sitting in the middle of the bus and Dan and I noticed them. It wasn't too difficult with the drunk one screaming and jumping around in the aisle.

"Hey, Drunk Girl!" I yelled. "You wanna switch seats?" Surprisingly, she did. Dan seemed a little displeased. I gathered this from the way he grabbed my arm and cried out, "No no no no no no, don't do this to me." Finally free after a brief struggle, I walked up to the middle of the bus, past Drunk Girl, and sat down next to her friend

who blinked once then passed out. I reclined the seat and was out in minutes. But in the morning I heard from the fellas how during the night Drunk Girl pulled on Dan's dick then ran to the front of the bus and punched the driver in the back of the head, and he hit her back, several times, in fact. Apparently the bus was swerving during the altercation. All while I slept. She was passed out in the aisle when I woke up. I stepped over her and returned to my original seat.

"So ... pretty entertaining evening," I said to Dan. "Sorry I missed it."

"That girl's psychotic." Then he raised his eyebrows and fashioned a little grin. "But I did get a hand job."

The plan for Delhi was this: hop a train to Varanasi, spend a couple of days there, then another train to Calcutta for a couple more days then fly to Bangkok. Ah, plans. What is it John Lennon said? Something about life happening while we're busy making plans, I think. Well, our plans got scrambled because the people working at the train station were morons, or maybe not, but we got upset regardless and decided to fly straight to Bangkok where we could get a burger with some cow in it. By 8pm, 12 hours after arriving back in Delhi, we had four tickets leaving in a few hours and two large pizzas, then loafed down the highway out to the airport, all four of us squeezed into a rickshaw with dangling limbs. John was on my lap, Dan on Seamus. We were taxing the hell out of the engine. It sounded a little sick, like it was about to cough up a hair ball. Everything on the road was flying past us, dangerously close at times, and I'm quite certain our driver's stress gauge was in the red. Judging by the yelling and hand gestures. The sobbing. But we didn't care about none of that. We sang and laughed at everything. The next time we'd see the sun it would be from Bangkok, and the excitement was too much.

"ALL I WANT," John yelled over the noise, "IS A REALLY GOOD SHAVE."

"YAH?" Dan said. "WELL, ALL I WANT IS A REALLY GOOD BLOW JOB."

At the airport we ate our pizzas and washed it down with some beers then took a walk into a clearing with one large pine tree. I still had a piece of hash, and we decided to make one last effort to finish it. But before I could fish it out of my little gear sack, two chicken-curry cops started yelling at us in Hindi, and I threw the entire sack into that huge tree that kept us all out of jail. One two four, quickly in the door.

"Whaddaya want?" Seamus asked. "Just give me some money, and I'll go get something." I gave him 10 bucks and within minutes he was back holding a plastic grocery store bag full of Valium and codeine. There were 30 strips and each one contained 10 pills. We passed around a bottle of water just before boarding, with each of us swallowing a small handful.

Seamus passed out before he sat down and John shortly after takeoff. On my wrist in black marker was a dotted line with the words "cut here" from some vague night previous. Dan and I sat together on one side of the aisle and leaned over it to play tic tac toe on Seamus' right leg. We tied twice, then ordered baby vodkas four at a time. My laptop was out and I was writing in my journal when Dan began to whine like a spoiled child. So we decided to pass the laptop back and forth with each of us writing something off the cuff that in some shallow way pertained to what the other had just written. Feeding off each other in our shared delirium. We tired of this exercise after several rounds, and just before passing out Dan saved it as "Peanuts, Planes, Vodka and Valium."

Chapter 6

Peanuts, Planes, Vodka and Valium

It didn't take long for the flight attendant to fire a disapproving glance at Shameless. Perhaps it was the tic tac toe in red marker on his leg or the drug induced dribble trickling from his chin to his shirt downward as far as gravity ...

Or at least his French fried gut would permit. The tone was set for another drug inspired, frequent high-flyer knocked out by the frying pan and into the fire that is Bangkok ...

The trip of the trippy, tripping over our tangled addictions and twisted premonitions of a million ton passenger bird falling with the sky and our leader, the magic marked ugly duckling, clutching his Hindi newspaper already three days old ...

You could tell by the way he scanned the Sanskrit with the callous disregard only a man conceived in sin could, that it has always been 'just so'. As it happened, a Ford Transit, two bottles of bourbon, a lustful whim and a midget Puerto Rican prostitute named Izzi Pitchins and his philanthropic father are the sum parts of our hero ...

And then there's Ginger, the ex-circus freak turned stewardess. She's sullen and dumb but can walk down the aisle on her hands and shoot honey roasted peanuts out of her ass with the kind of precision that would have made William Tell mad with envy ...

They weren't friends, they didn't even know each other and yet they had to sleep together. The little monster on the wing had decreed it ...

"Which way is Mecca?" screamed the nervous bible thumper. "For fuck sake, I must face Mecca." "I believe it's toward the front where those two teenage girls are playing strip Yatzee and barking in German," I slur with swollen teeth ...

As my wallet knows too its cost, Yatzee is a game that both delights and fascinates even the keenest of minds ...

Chapter 7

Now That's Talent

I remember little from my first 10 days in Thailand. It would seem that I was on a bender the entire 240 hours. When I finally came around I was sitting on a bamboo deck staring into the bay of some postcard island paradise. The beauty of the scene had brought me back to reality. I had many questions bouncing around in my head. But I was finally becoming *aware*. My tongue was furry. My body felt old and beat down. My eyes burned from lack of sleep. I had a few memories but most had drowned in beer and cheap whiskey. If only memories could swim, I remember thinking. And then I said something like, "Where the hell are we?"

I emailed Mario before leaving India so he was expecting us, and he recommended a guesthouse in Bangkok. We got to the Tavee around 5am and slept for many hours. In the afternoon we found Mario and drank a few beers then ate dinner at a little outdoor restaurant around the corner from our guesthouse. A bottle of booze on the counter had a dead cobra coiled up inside of it with its head just below the neck of the bottle, its eyes bulging and tongue out. Looking very alive. We each had a shot, but it was awful so we had another. After dinner we went to mad places with strange names and drank like the end of the world was upon us. I got separated from the fellas talking with some random woman who ran up and grabbed my arm.

"Excuse me," she smiled up at me. "Will you help me find my husband?"

"Huh? No, I need to catch up to my friends." I pointed ahead to the guys, their vague outlines growing smaller. When I looked back down at her, she was taking off her wedding ring. She pushed it into her tight jeans pocket with one small finger then turned her face upward and smiled again.

"Well then, will *you* be my husband for tonight?"

She was small and Thai, around 30 years old, and had a room in a nice hotel. I grabbed a beer out of the mini fridge while she drew me a bath. Then she bathed me while I drank. I remember smiling a lot.

We ended up in Patpong late one night. The place is a high voltage, drug induced caricature of what Las Vegas could have been if we had let the mob continue to run things. Everyone screaming and falling all over themselves with drunken excitement. Ladyboys lounging around like bored house cats. Thai prostitutes with juicy propositions, other girls grabbing at us for free. Seamus disappeared and when he came back he was carrying a huge burnt fish that he cooked in a ladyboy's apartment somewhere. Dan stood in a corner apprehensively signing autographs for nearly an hour, because John and I announced over a microphone that he was the lead singer of a popular boy band.

Later I was sitting by myself, absolutely stranded in a dream-like trance, watching the parade of hot females and all the horny Western men who were crazed and foaming at the mouth for a little taste of young, Thai pussy. To my left, bar girls gyrating in fat German laps pretending to enjoy, delicately massaging ego and wallet simultaneously. Stubby sausage fingers plucking at ripe brown skin. Hot heavy breath sweats and ecclesiastical lust. Across from the Germans a blurry eyed American businessman threw money at every piece of tail that walked by. While his family, mortgage and mulching lawnmower waited patiently for him in Texas. He hee'd and haw'd and played the role of fool to perfection. And soon the Germans were pantless and spreading liverwurst carefully around each other's genitals. The girls crawled over emotionless and began lapping it up. The American had been jump yelling nonsense like, "OH BAY BEE. DADEE LIKEE. MY COCK WANTS TO SAY HOW DEE, BAY BEE," and eventually he went hoarse from all the heeing and hawing and plain old buffoonery. A girl with a faceful of liverwurst and spunk went over and began humping his leg. By this time the Germans had grown tired of the girls and were now fucking each other. I ordered another beer and ran off to find my boys.

For reasons unknown – *must there always be a reason?* – John and I ate bugs at a street-side stall early one evening. Completely sober. There were seven flavors of bugs and we ate one of each: locust, cockroach, beetle, grasshopper, maggot, silkworm and a huge water bug that took two bites and one loud crunch to get down.

Dan dragged Mario and me to Siam square one afternoon to watch the movie "Faust." But it might have been the worst movie ever made, so Mario and I left Dan in the theater and smoked a pack of cigarettes in the bathroom waiting for it to end.

Mario introduced us to Wade. He's a crazy character from New Zealand who speaks painfully slow, but his stories are pure genius. With him much of the time was a 15-year-old Thai prostitute that he was playing daddy for. Somehow I got set up with her older sister and found myself in her apartment around sunrise one morning. And after giving her a nice poke, I went to the bathroom to dispose of the condom. But the door was locked. She came over and tried it twice then kicked at it a few times. I motioned to her, asking if she wanted me to boot down the door William Shatner style. She spoke no English, but she shook her head yes. I hopped up and down, putting on one of my shoes, now the only thing I was wearing other than the loaded condom. Then I began kicking the door, braking and splintering wood, fucking it up good and proper from the sounds it was making in protest. But it was strong and wouldn't give completely. So the girl ran out of the room and quickly returned with a key and unlocked the door easy as can be, while I stood dumbly watching. Inside the bathroom, broken pieces of door were scattered everywhere.

Our last night before leaving for the island, Mario, John and I rode the sky train into the suburbs and drank a few beers in a reputable place then went bowling in a neon disco and drank much more beer, which is the rule when bowling. But like most nights, we blinked and found ourselves inside a go-go bar in Patpong. We sat behind a long table loaded with drinks and cigarettes, Mario and I bug eyed and slobbering like dogs at the females on stage. John turned to us with a serious look and said he would give up free sex with every girl in the joint for just one kiss from his girlfriend. That struck a chord in us, and I could see on Mario's face what I was also feeling. Then John got double-teamed, aggressively hit on by two gay Thai men, while Mario and I pretended not to notice his cries for help.

Hardly 10 days' worth of memories, and now I'm sitting on our deck on some tropical island putting the pieces back together. With me are Seamus and John. Swaying green palms in front of us rustle lazily in the wind, making those sleepy sea breeze sounds. The blue waters of the bay and perfect sand beaches beyond the palms. John's rolling a joint and I'm up and bouncing on my toes, trying to clear my mind. Dan is still sleeping and Mario is supposed to meet us in a day or two, I've been told. I'm absolutely fried, tender from the sun and salty from the sea. Ziggy Marley and The Melody Makers boom that island vibe, while Seamus sits eerily still like a disinterested ape in a zoo. Perhaps also wondering where the last 10 days have gone.

"We're on the island of Ko Pha Ngan," John says, seemingly out of the blue.

"Where did that come from?" I say.

"You just asked where we were."

"I did? Are you sure?"

"You're exact words were, 'Where the hell are we?'"

"Oh my gentle Jesus," Seamus sighs loudly. "We gonna smoke that thing today?"

"You Americans, always rushing everything."

"Seamus, my brother," I say, "are you familiar with the mighty power of the wake and bake?"

"No. I'll be fine."

John and I look at each other amusingly. Seamus tells us that the first and last pages of the Bible are the same type of paper as rolling papers, and the reason for this is in case you're stranded in a motel in Idaho with no skins.

"Yah, I'm sure that's what the Gideons had in mind," I say.

"Seamus, you're a twit," John laughs. "Are you aware of this?"

Seamus nods his head. He is. We smoke and John starts building another.

"Who is responsible for this postcard view?" I mumble. It was spectacular and I felt great. Each day was a gift, even if I had trouble remembering some of them. I had no idea what the next day would bring, and I didn't need to know. And this alone was reason to be excited. John put a rush job on the second spliff, and soon we are puffing again. Dan wakes up and comes out onto the deck, and we force our devastation upon him, as the Counting Crows sing, *"I'm not ready for this sort of thing."*

"Listen," I say to Dan, trying to be philosophical, "someday these wonderfully wasted days of being wasted will be long forgotten and all you'll be left with is an enlarged prostate, an old hag of a wife and a trained chimp, and you'll be so old that you'll confuse the two with regularity, but then your wife will leave you 'cause she found you in bed with the chimp ... and ... uh ... did I have a point?"

"My God! You guys are all trashed. Trained chimps? And Seamus! Jesus, can you see outta them things?"

His eyes are closed tight but his mouth wide open. No sound though, just accumulating pearls of drool. His own mouth too stoned to function. He looks half a squint away from a stroke. And then John goes for his skins in slow motion and begins to build another joint.

"Ahhhh," I say helplessly. "Seamus is toast. He can't handle another joint. Look at him."

"Om naa ean stone yea."

“What’s that Seamus?” John snaps. “Just shut up and sit back. We’ll help ya kill them brain cells. Leave it all to us, buddy.”

Seamus makes it halfway through the third joint then sits there crying uncontrollably into his hands in laughter, while the three of us stand over him shouting obscenities. Just then an old woman comes around the corner and snips her large garden clippers at us twice then cackles maniacally and cartwheels away.

“That was odd,” Dan says. “Let’s go eat.”

“Seamus, you comin’? Guess not.” It was around noon. Seamus passed out, and we didn’t see him awake again until the following morning.

We spent our days smoking on the deck or playing in the surf, splashing each other like kids and tossing tennis balls near floating females. An ignorant attempt to strike up conversation. And yet it works. At night our bodies moved down to the beachfront restaurants and bars that lined Hat Rin Bay, but after so many faded nights in Bangkok, we were a little partied out and usually retired to the deck before midnight for a few puffs and much laughter.

The very first day we arrived on the island Seamus was jabbering away non-stop and we all cried out for him to shut the hell up. In the end we bet him a few baht that he couldn’t be quiet for the rest of the day. No words, no sounds, we made this clear. He had been wearing the same hideous pair of orange and black basketball shorts since I had met him. He wore them every minute of every day and never washed them, and for this he seemed quite proud. The rest of us, however, were not. He was also wearing a thin blue nylon shirt. We were all soaked from rain and sweat.

To his credit, Seamus said nothing for the last fifteen minutes during the ride to Hat Rin beach. We had hurt his feelings. So when the pickup carrying us stopped and let us off, he wandered alone toward the water, leaving us behind. We watched him as he walked off, all of us feeling a twinge of remorse. Then Seamus ripped off his damp shirt revealing a Smurf-blue back. A *hairy* Smurf-blue back.

Mario eventually found us, and we initiated him into our lethargy and even ate a few rounds of space cakes for good measure. Dan, Seamus and I decided to get an apartment for a month when we returned to Bangkok. Mario was going to another island, and John was undecided. A few days later we finally worked up enough ambition to leave.

The ferry was leaving in a couple of hours. I had just finished packing, when I noticed my Mickey Mouse beach towel hanging in the bathroom. Mickey’s big fat head staring at me with a dirty grin. Like he had just fucked my sister and now he wanted to talk about it. I was singing on the deck and brought it inside with me.

“*Summer lovin’ happened so fast.*” What I didn’t know was that Dan was on the shitter.

“*Summer lovin’ had me a blast,*” Dan sings back. “Hey Nick, I’ll be John Travolta and you be Olivia ...”

“Lalalalalalalalala, I can’t hear you,” I say with my hands over my ears. “Hey buddy, how ‘bout shutting the door when you’re taking a dump? Unless you’re laying golden eggs, I don’t need to see it.”

“No hurry, no worry, no chicken curry,” he replied.

The ferry ride was steaming, all of us drenched in sweat and deflated by the heat. We still had a 12-hour bus ride ahead of us, but at least we could recline comfortably with cold air blowing in our faces and even movies to watch on board. The bus was still boarding, the four of us minus Mario seated in the last row, when we persuaded Seamus to go outside and ask about the movie. He quickly returned.

“When I asked them what movie was playing they told me to get back on the fuckin' bus. That's just not good business. If this was New York ... well, this could never be New York, but if it was ...”

Seamus sat down next to me, still talking, while Dan and John took two seats across the aisle. I was fumbling through my pack for pen and paper.

“I don't know what they do in Norway,” Seamus was saying. “I guess they fish for whales.”

“What in the hell are you talkin' about?”

“It's the differences that make life interesting.”

“Have you been popping pills?” He smiled. “You know those aren't M&Ms, right?” He nodded.

“You know what?” Seamus said. “I christened the bathroom before we left the island.”

“What?”

“I popped one off in the shower.”

Dan overheard this.

“You asshole,” Dan said, “I showered immediately after you.”

“Don't worry, Dan, it all went down the drain.”

“How the hell do you know? Did you watch it? I've probably got your spunk stuck to my feet right now.”

“Boys, boys,” I said calmly, “no one on the bus wants to hear about Seamus' spunk. Though if you do have his junk stuck to your feet, that is pretty fucked up.”

“You listen to me, *Shameless*,” Dan said, taking off his socks. “If I find any dried spunk on my feet I'm gonna feed it to you after you pass out.”

A little man working for the bus company ushered a couple of girls into the seats in front of us. They had heard the end of our spunk conversation, and their faces expressed concern.

“Excuse me,” Dan asked the little bus man. “We get movie later? Yah, soft porn? ‘Twin Cheeks’?”

“Porn doesn't do it for me,” Seamus said proudly. “I could rub one off right now. I'm in a reclined position. All I need is a wet nap. I remember this one time ... hey, did you know ...”

He was still mumbling when he passed out. John, Dan and I passed around the Valium, but may have been a little loud. Many on the bus heard that we were doping up for the ride. The occupant sheet started in the back, and with Seamus already out, John filled out his portion before it crossed the aisle to me. Under name, passport and nationality he wrote, 'Loud, Ass, American.'

From the Bangkok bus station we took a taxi to the Tavee. I had just withdrawn \$100 from an ATM before boarding the bus, but when I went into my wallet to pay the driver it was empty. Dan and John were missing nothing, but Seamus had a credit card and his passport stolen. All of our belongings were stowed behind our seats, but we were too passed out to defend them.

Dan and I looked for an apartment, while Seamus worked on getting a new credit card and a replacement passport. For two days we wandered the streets, on and off sky trains and buses and in and out of endless taxis, fumbling around a sprawling city of 8 million in 95 degree heat, and the humidity used to play ball and always gives 110 percent. And of course there's the language barrier. "Do you have an apartment available? APARTMENT! A-P-A ... oh fuck all!" In the end we found a furnished one bedroom with air conditioning inside a secure building with lovely little Thai receptionists, and all for the low price of 6000 baht for one month. Like any apartment we might have found, we got this one purely on accident.

Our first night we cabbled it to a local department store for supplies, but only the basics – one spoon each, one bowl each, one glass each. No forks, that's what fingers are for. This was also when we bought bedding and discussed the sleeping arrangements.

"You two homos can have the bed," Seamus said quickly. "I'll sleep on the floor."

Dan and I went half on sheets and pillows, and Seamus bought a foam sleeping mat that looked like a dog bed and very well might have been. John didn't know what he was doing so he decided to couch it with us while he figured it out. Back at the flat, Dan, John and I watched "Iron Eagle II" while Seamus floundered noisily on the bedroom floor, trying to get his massive body onto his little bed. We were dog tired and trying to drink our way to excitement, but that plan never got off the ground. Sipping our drinks we sat zombified, stupefied, staring into the TV. Our first television in months, and the damn thing had us in a trance.

"What was so great about 'Iron Eagle I'?" Dan asked. "Besides the black guy from that Richard Gere movie."

"Hey Dan," I yelled from the kitchen. "Can I mix booze and codeine?"

"Yah! If you wanna meet Jimi Hendrix."

John came out of the bathroom and asked, "Did Seamus christen the loo yet?"

"Well, he did take a shower while you and Dan went for booze. A *long* shower."

"I'm gonna kill that monkey," Dan said in mid push-up.

He would get up at the oddest times and drop down for 10 or 20 push-ups.

"Jesus Dan," I said. "Are your knees touching the ground? I know you got tits, but come on. At least *act* like a man."

But then those old familiar feelings began to bubble up to the surface. The ones that said, hey man, what the fuck you doing? Are your purposes purposely purposeful? And where in thee hell are you going with that chainsaw? Nothing but the same old questions, you see. So on night one in our new apartment I was all confusion and torment because I expected great, cool vibrations on this eve, not bad TV and a hemorrhaging conscience. It was being spun upside inside wrongside down and I was losing the joy, and in its deathly tracks sprang forth a sudden and desperate bout of self loathing. It came over me like a wave, fast and with tremendous force. But why? Where did it come from?

The next night we were soberly determined to avoid any areas of the city that could get us into trouble. In our effort to keep it local and cheap we wandered down the main road that intersected the small street we lived on. There were no foreigners in that part of Bangkok. No *farang*. There were a few strange looking places with twinkling

lights and tinfoil windows that looked inviting. Three or four bar girls always mingling out front. What's not to like? We walked into one and took a seat facing a stage. We bought a couple pitchers of beer then watched as one girl after another got up on stage and sang. The place had the cheap feel of a barnyard auction. Seamus was fidgeting and squirming in his seat. He didn't let loose like the rest of us and seemed to prefer his hand to the real thing. John had a girlfriend back in England and was naturally more reserved anyhow. But Dan and I felt right at home. I looked his way and motioned toward the stage as he got up. There was a shy little thing bouncing around up there mostly hidden behind a wall. She was trying to sing, but it wasn't working out. And she was wearing a number, like she was about to run a marathon. Actually, all the girls had numbers. Dan came back from the bathroom while I was ordering two more pitchers of beer.

"I just got molested in the toilet. Some guy comes up behind me as I'm taking a leak and begins giving me a massage. He's rubbing my back and shoulders ..."

"Good God man," I said. "What did you do?"

"I pissed on my leg, nearly chopped off my dick zipping up and got the fuck outta there. Whaddaya think I did?"

"You mean you didn't give him a massage back?" John asked. "That's kinda rude if you ask me."

Then two girls in white cotton bathrobes sat down at our table. They appeared to be naked underneath. We were in a booth, and the girls dropped down next to Seamus and John. Dan and I let out a little laugh, but really we were envious. Dan leaned over the table and whispered to me.

"We have to nonchalantly switch seats with 'em."

"And how exactly are we supposed to do that ... nonchalantly?"

Then one of the girls grabbed John's hand and shoved it under her robe, between her legs, right to the sweet spot. Well, I thought, no point beating around the bush. He grinned himself fire-apple red then jumped up suddenly and walked out. Seamus right on his heels. The beer wasn't gone, so Dan and I stayed behind, but the damage was already done. The girls scared off.

After finishing the beer we walked the streets looking for anything to avoid going back to the apartment. We were night creatures for sure, Dan and I. We were of the belief that if there was something fun happening that we should be a part of it. It would be downright foolish not to be. But we found nothing and walked back to the apartment in a heavy downpour.

The following night Dan and I drank Red Bull, rum and coke for several hours underneath the air conditioner before leaving the apartment and swore that under no circumstances would we go to Patpong. But suddenly we were there, inside some go-go bar. A lovely girl came onto the stage and casually shoved a marker up her cunt then squatted down over a piece of poster board. She waddled around like she was performing yoga or laying an egg, but in the end her pussy drew an amazing picture that my hands never could.

"Now that's talent," I heard someone say.

We were smoking cigars and always had several drinks on the table in front of us. The joint was packed with naked girls, and every one of them gave me the best look I ever had. And I was high on it. I felt like I had been there for a year or maybe just a few

minutes, and I couldn't honestly say which was closer to the truth. A girl came over and handed me a balloon. I popped it with a lit cigarette. And then sometime later Dan said, "Nick, you better duck. NICK! ... Jesus, that dart nearly stuck in your head." As told to me by Dan, a naked girl on stage was shooting darts into the crowd. She had both feet firmly planted then bent backwards and placed both hands on the floor behind her feet and began firing darts into the crowd like she was a human cannon. Presumably aiming at the balloons she had just passed out. A man holding a balloon sat directly behind me, but somehow I missed it all, and the dart missed me. And how drunk does one have to be to not notice a naked girl alone on a stage shooting darts out of her trap door? Dan said he wanted to crawl inside of her and find the hidden mechanism capable of shooting those things at such a high speed.

"So that's what the balloon was for," I heard myself say. I looked around slowly, coaxing my mind into recreating what I had just missed. Dan shook my arm to get my attention, causing me to spill a vodka tonic into my lap. Some girls were bringing a carousel onto the stage. Four horses that revolved like a miniature carnival ride. Then eight naked women paired up, four with dildos and four without, and proceeded to fuck each other senseless on smiling plastic horses.

"Nothing crazy about that," said I.

"Just harmless fun," Dan added.

We returned to the apartment to find that Mario had once again returned, this time from the island of Ko Phi Phi. Seamus was still awake, but John was crashed on the couch. The four of us sat on the bed until dawn, passing around a bottle of wine and smoking cigarettes. Laughing and making fun in that way that guys do.

Chapter 8

Manufacturing a Penis Mummy

I needed a nap. The partying and the heat were sucking me dry. Dan was watching TV in the living room, and I was in the bedroom pulling the window shut so I could switch on the air conditioner.

“Oh, uh ... EEEEEEEEEEGGAAAA!” *SMASH!* “Uh, Dan, can you come in here a minute?” When I reached for the window it jumped off the track and fell to the ground. Dan came in and we leaned outside and looked two floors down at a maintenance man standing on glass shards staring back up at us. The phone rang.

“Hello.”

It was one of the girls in the office.

“You have accident?”

With the nap no longer an option – I’d drown in my own sweat – Dan and I took a taxi to Khao San Road, the horrible and famous traveler’s street, and shopped for used books. The whole sad scene is full of freshies, plus a colorful assortment of lechers to prey on the freshies. The place is about as exotic as a French fry, and I cannot imagine how anyone can spend more than an hour there without losing the will to live. We made sure to time ourselves. I bought an old favorite, “On the Road” and also “Soul on Ice” by Eldridge Cleaver. Dan bought a Harry Potter book then spent exactly three and one half minutes defending his choice even though I had said nothing about it.

The next night Wade, Mario and I went to a shopping mall near the apartment and ate dinner in a Chicago style hot dog place. We got some dogs and fries and one pitcher of Coke and three glasses. We talked about stealing the glasses, then decided against it. If we were going to steal anything it would be the pitcher. Each of us except for Wade had his own glass at the apartment. We had finished eating and were watching the locals eat hot dogs with chopsticks, when Mario popped up unannounced and with the subtlety of a swift kick to the face shoved the empty pitcher under his shirt, turned and walked toward the counter. Wade a few steps behind and me several more paces behind him. The situation had me confused. Neither Wade nor I knew of Mario’s intentions. This was not discussed. The people working the counter should have seen him, but no one was there as he passed. But there was an employee standing just outside the door and to the right, and Mario was heading right for him. The jig was just about up, I figured. He would turn right exposing himself, and we’d all have a good laugh. But he quickly turned left instead, and the only view the guy working the door had of Mario was his back.

It was Saturday and the mall was packed with good, hard working Thai folks. Some carrying little kids, old couples strolling happily along. Groups of uniformed

school children running around on cell phones. Every one of them much more presentable than the three of us. Every one of them walking directly at us. We were in the same staggered formation, only I was falling farther back. I could see clearly the delayed expressions on all the stunned faces and I was doubled over with laughter. In fact, I was laughing so violently, I began to fear for my safety. Perhaps my spleen might dislodge itself, I thought, and come shooting out my nose like when I was in the third grade and I laughed so hard chili came out. And that burned. But a spleen? Could it really happen?

Let's face it, those poor confused Thai people had never seen a *farang* walk through a mall with a chest growth in the shape of a soda pitcher before. That sort of thing doesn't happen in Thailand. People go to jail for less than that. Mario walked the length of four stores then slipped into a corner, took out the pitcher and resumed walking with it in his hand. The humor was fading now, and I was beginning to freak out. I ran and caught up with them.

"We gotta ditch that thing. There'll be no explaining this to the police, and I'm too pretty for prison. I mean, what's going on here? Are we retarded?" The thought of going to prison in Thailand over a big plastic cup had me a bit on edge.

"Nobody's going to Thai prison," Wade said slowly. He was my age and had been in Thailand a long time. It was practically his home. "Listen you've already ... got ... the pitcher so why don't you just keep it as a souvenir." Mario and I pleaded with him to be quick with his words and squirmed like little kids while he spoke.

Wade went into a shoe store and asked for a bag then returned to our little corner. I picked up the pitcher while Mario held the bag and in it went. We were very careful to be out of view of other shoppers. The last thing we wanted was to draw more attention to ourselves. We turned around and resumed walking and discovered several shoe store employees watching us through the huge store window. Watching the whole miserable thing. Their noses practically pressed against the glass. Their expressions told us they were on to us, and this had me feeling a bit hysterical. Our pace began to quicken and paranoia was the cause. Now all of us had it. We hit the front entrance in a slow, innocent jog and didn't stop for three blocks. When we got back to the flat, Wade took half an hour telling the story to the rest of the guys while Mario and I laughed all over again. And when the story had ended, Wade stood up and paused. Then casually pulled a drinking glass out of his pants and set it on the table without saying a word.

We had some mad nights in Bangkok and continued to have fun still, but I was tiring of the sleaze. Tired of watching drunk, soulless men spanking young Thai ass as the carousel of pussy failed to miss a beat. Supply and demand fucking each other for fun or profit. What kind of choices are these, I wondered, where 15-year-old girls become prostitutes because *this* is their best option? Perhaps their only option. And who are these men that come to take advantage of this, and what kind of soap do they use to get clean? But the real question, the nut of it, was this: Aren't I behaving in the same way as these men that I despise?

Now that we were staying in on most nights, we entered a phase known as The Apartment Drag. We watched bad movies simply because, "Dude, we got guns here." "Well, Danny, in America we got more guns than we need, and how many guns are really

pills and a bottle of water. When I finally came out of the bathroom, hobbling and wincing, holding my shorts away from my body, the guys' expressions of horror were startling. They felt my pain.

I cautiously lurched over to the bed and lay down spread eagle, giving my man parts some room to breathe. Wade rolled me a joint, a big fat beast. *God bless you!* I smoked a good long while and still couldn't finish it. The pills began kicking in and I could feel myself on the tipsy turvy edge of unconsciousness, but the pain remained steady and strong. Dan came home several hours later and woke me up.

"So, I heard you boiled your meat and two veg." He was limping badly.

"What the hell happened to you?" I asked. Everyone was coming into the bedroom now.

"He won't tell us," Seamus said. "He's too embarrassed. Dan, it's OK. We already know you're a dumb ass."

Dan was bright red now. This had to be good. He said nothing of his injury in front of the others but later told me that it happened dancing. He ran across the dance floor and dropped to his knees in a John Travolta slide, but he tripped or something and landed hard on one knee. Gracefully though, he said.

"So you're injured, then what, where'd you go?"

"Well, one of the girls I was dancing with felt sorry for me and took me home. I can't even walk, but I'm still thinking, 'pussy pussy pussy'."

"Oh no," I cried out, "what if I can't fuck no more? I hadn't thought of that till just now. You with your dancing injury and 'pussy pussy pussy'."

"Don't worry, I'll tackle your share."

"Oh Lord, what if I need a prosthetic cock? Do you think there is such a thing?"

"Yah, they're called dildos. Remember the horse carousel in Patpong?"

"Not as well as I would like."

I eased myself out of bed and rummaged through my first aid kit.

"You got burn cream?" Dan asked.

"Nope."

"SEAMUS! GET IN HERE. Go to the pharmacy and get some burn cream."

"And more Valium and codeine," I added.

"Why do I have to do it?"

"'Cause you're the only one who can walk, you monkey," I said, moving nervously toward the bathroom.

Under an ice cold shower and completely doped up, I looked down in horror. It was worse than I had imagined. I cringed and covered my eyes and let out a big, sorrowful sigh. Actually it was more like a scream, and a girlie one at that. There was a huge blister on the tip of my cock and the entire thing looked like a hotdog that had been left on the grill too long. I toweled off oh so carefully and gently applied burn cream then wrapped my charred appendage up in gauze, manufacturing a penis mummy. My shaft and upper thighs were freckled with smaller blisters, but my balls were spared. I thought hard about going to the hospital but decided to manage it on my own out of sheer laziness. But the male genitalia is nothing to play around with, so to speak. So I took good care of my burnt pecker and watched it closely.

There was a long ago summer day when I was 17, sitting on the back porch with my father and one of his friends, and I was bitching and moaning about how things

couldn't possibly get any worse. I was having some stupid teenage problems and looked to them for reassurance. But they laughed at me and told me I was a dumb kid. I was, there was no denying it. Of course things did get worse, and I learned then that things can always get worse.

Just 20 hours after boiling my cock, I woke up with one eye glued shut. Pinkeye! I walked my one good eye over to the window and looked outside to see if the sky was falling. Or maybe I'd find a plague of monster locusts nibbling on the skyline of Bangkok. But nothing. I went to the mirror and pulled my bad eye open then yanked the goo out in pieces. I could hardly walk. Dan too, so ...

"SEAMUS!"

Everyone should have a purpose in life, and Dan and I sat Seamus down and carefully explained this to him. He fetched our meals and smokes and snacks, and he went back to the pharmacy to buy some eye drops. He returned an hour later with a bottle that read on the side that it was for eyes *and ears*.

"Are you sure this is right?"

"Are you serious? Of course I don't know if it's right. No one understands English around here. I pointed at my eye and she gave me this shit."

The big blister popped one night while I slept. The pus that came out served as an adhesive, joining the tip of my dick to my boxers. And I mean to say, that was one strong bond. It took me half an hour to delicately disengage myself from my clothing. There was, of course, pain. Dan and I were cripples and all of us stoned day and night. In a permanent fog we watched bad movies in fistfuls. My eye wasn't getting better so I increased the dosage.

"I think our asses are starting to leave grooves in this couch," Dan said, smiling and rolling a cheek.

"I can't move," Seamus said, laughing with watery eyes. "This weed is really good."

"What the fuck is going on here?" I pleaded. "I mean, it's the middle of the day, in fact the beginning of *our* day, and already we're starting to pass out."

"Hey, Nick," Dan said, poking his head around Seamus. "Why you talk so much?"

"This weed is really good," Seamus added. Again.

My mind was mush. No original thought, just stale, recycled air. The three of us lounged about the apartment, drugged to the gills and silly with ourselves. Unrepentant loafers with no ambition. Doing absolutely nothing and doing it proudly.

"Nick, Seamus is in the bathroom. He's been in there a while ... SEAMUS, SHOW US YOUR HANDS." The bathroom door opened and out popped two dripping wet hands.

"Dan, can't you feel yourself wasting away?"

"Of course I can. But need I remind you that we got this apartment for a month so we could just hang out and chill and do nothing. And we are."

"Yah," I conceded, "You're probably right."

"Of course I am. Arguing about Gandhi does not a good travel experience make."

"What?"

"You know what I mean."

But I had no idea what he meant. And then Robert Deniro said, "Paradise is salvation," as I replaced Seamus in the bathroom. Salvation from what, I wondered?

No matter. Roll another joint, I thought. *And a handful of pills. Some whiskey, perhaps.* Maybe then everything will become clear. Yes, of course. Clarity through drugs.

But then I realized what the problem was, sitting there on that toilet. It was my incessant need to be doing something *worthy*, even though I've spent most of my life doing the opposite. A need I can't fulfill or don't care to. Where does this come from exactly? This awful feeling of guilt and shame, a pestering conscience nagging and judging, always so critical. All because I'm not *contributing*. I must learn to let go, I thought. Perhaps time *can* be spent well amid catastrophic laziness. Doing nothing is good for the soul, I remember reading once. No pursuit can be a worthwhile pursuit, and is this not what the Buddha teaches? If only I can let go, I thought.

We met several girls one fine day who worked in a beauty salon down the street from our apartment. Actually, Seamus found them and they asked him if he had any friends as good looking as himself.

"Oh, we're in," Dan said, rolling off the couch.

"You know I haven't had morning wood since I burnt myself?"

"And your point?"

"My brain knows not to raise the roof, if ya know what I mean. But it can't fight the power of these tiny Thai girls and that sweet kung fu. I'll bust outta my bandages like the Incredible Hulk after you steal his Chunky Soup, and the pain'll be too much to bear."

"The Incredible Hulk?" Dan asked. "Someone's got a big ego."

"God must really hate me. Why else would he burn my pecker in the midst of all this sweet ass?"

"Come on, you gotta go over there with me." And of course I did.

I was walking better, but Dan still hobbled badly. My eye was getting worse, though, and I continued to shove more drops into it. Lynn owned the beauty shop, she was around 40. Then there was Mod, second in charge and 28 years old. Also there were Tong and Leh. Tong was 27, lived in the same building as us and very fine. Leh, also 27, was visiting from Canada but fine as well. They passed around some Heineken bottles and we happily drank. Half blind, I lit the wrong end of a cigarette, but Dan covered it up quickly before any of them noticed.

All of them spoke English well enough. That is to say we understood each other most of the time. Understanding on the most basic level, though, and only if concentrating properly.

"Do you want go birthday party with us?" Lynn asked, passing us two more beers.

"Sure," we said in stereo.

"What's wrong your leg?" Lynn asked Dan, as we got up to leave.

"War injury."

We limp-hopped back to the apartment with our beers and talked Seamus and John into going then passed around some deodorant and walked back to the salon. While we were walking, Seamus told us that he used the deodorant on his ass, too. It didn't matter *why*, we had given up asking him that question. But the deodorant was mine. And up Seamus' ass was the last place I wanted anything of mine.

The eight of us shared two taxis and soon we were at another beauty salon, this one decorated with food and booze and birthday presents. There were no other guys present, unless you counted the birthday girl. And I might never have noticed if someone hadn't told me.

Trying to get laid in Bangkok sometimes felt like a TV game show. *Dick or no Dick?* Where horny foreign men looking for pussy try to make certain it's pussy they get. But just how is this achieved, you ask? Well, you cannot ask your girl, for this would be cheating. Or at least wildly inappropriate. I mean, even if she got no cock, you've probably screwed it up by asking, don't you think? So how do you know? Ah, the rub. You don't, well not completely, not until ... *ahem*. But before letting things go that far, you can always look for clues, such as an Adam's apple. Though many have those removed now. A full beard is a nice giveaway. Some of them are built like Bruce Lee and what guy wants to fuck Bruce Lee? Some sound like Kathleen Turner, with a voice so husky you'd swear it came from a seven foot tall logger with a jaw like a radiator. There's big feet. Man hands. A too-short skirt, no panties and dangling participle, otherwise known as a Dead Giveaway. But many are passable all the way to the point of contact. That *ahem* moment when you suddenly decide to become religious. As if God wants any part of your sordid affairs. You're pretty sure it's a girl, but you won't know for sure until you get in there and have a look around. Which is why you're always so relieved when you pull off your girl's pantaloons and don't find an itty bitsy teeny weenie staring back at you.

After the salon party a group of us went to a disco, but the girls working the door made me buy black socks since I wasn't wearing any with my sandals, go figure. I sat down right there in the entrance, with people squeezing around me, and stretched my new black socks *over* the sandals to make a point or maybe just an ass of myself. My eye was giving me fits and I was in a bad mood, so I took off after a few drinks.

The cabbies in Bangkok can be so wonderful. But they can also be thieving, venomous assholes. They're supposed to use the meter but often tell you they won't, in the form of a hand wave or shake of the head. I was tired, injured and drunk and just wanted to get home. The first taxi I flagged down was a bust, the driver refused to use his meter and quoted me a price quadruple the norm. Same with the second and the third. I was boiling mad. When the fourth driver told me the same, I unloaded on him.

"Do you know what the word 'fuck' means? Do you? Huh? Answer me, do you know what the word 'FUCK' means? Yah? You do? You sure? Well ... FUCK YOU!"

It was an ugly scene, my composure hijacked by Murphy's Law and oodles of booze. Here I was, out with some real girls, not bar girls, and they were nice and attractive, but I could only see out of one eye. And my third eye was so badly mangled I wouldn't be able to use it for at least another month. And I hate dance clubs. As much as I do excuses.

Dan and I began hanging out a lot with Tong and Leh. These girls had money, and Dan was not shy about spending it. I felt slightly worse, until I got a few drinks in me. One evening they took us out for dinner and a movie. We watched "Shrek" and laughed our asses off. Well, Dan and I did. The Thais seemed confused by it. Another night they took us to a traditional Thai music venue beer garden bamboo sort of place. An air conditioning vent was blowing into my face, causing the lid over my bad eye to turn spastic. I had no control over it. It was up it was down, back and forth, and then it

quit working altogether and remained closed the rest of the evening. Just before I was foiled by the air conditioning, Leh told me that she had a fiancé back in Canada where she went to school. *A what?*

“Ooooooooookkkaaaaayyyy,” I said, stunned by her announcement. I liked her, and she liked me. So this was rather unexpected. She reached into her purse and pulled out a little photo of him.

“Jesus,” I blurted. “He’s really old ... and really bald.” Naturally, she got upset. But I didn’t care, I had more pressing concerns. My eye needed to see a doctor.

Mario came to my rescue and helped me to the hospital the following day. Dragged me, really. The doctor stuck a machine in my eye and grumbled about “drops no good” and “you go blind.” The eye doc gave me new drops, and I told him I’d give them exactly three days to start working, then I was taking out my eye with a Swiss army knife. He laughed, then got serious and said, “Maybe.”

After the hospital Mario and I ate lunch at a proper Irish pub owned by a genuine Irishman, and we had big steaming bowls of stew with enormous chunks of beef and carrots and potato rolling around in a smooth brown sauce. The kind of food young boys grow strong on. My eye watered nonstop, but the rest of me was satisfied. We promised the owner we’d return, then went home and wasted away the night smoking and playing cards, making several trips to the corner for ice cream. Again it was Mario’s last night. He was leaving in the morning for Vietnam.

“Yah yah, you’ll be back” I said. “You can’t live without us. We all share the same brain.”

“Just one?” Dan asked.

“If we’re lucky.”

Mario left, and John, too, the very next day for Indonesia. Our month in the apartment was more than half over, and for the first time, Seamus, Dan and I had the place to ourselves. It wasn’t a big apartment and often felt crowded with the five of us plus Wade and his girl. But that was also part of the fun. Dan and I continued to see Tong and Leh, despite the fiancé announcement, and we continued to drink out of their wallets. But I drank a little too much one night and turned into Satan during the cab ride home. I was in front, Dan and the girls in the back. Tong was telling us a story about how she had to sell both of her hair salons to pay for an operation due to a near fatal car accident when I said, “blah blah blah.” What’s worse, ironic even, is that I had just taught her the meaning of that saying the day before. Nice and fresh in her mind it was.

“No really,” she said, remaining very calm. She held up her arms so I could see her scars.

“Whatever,” I sighed. I didn’t hear a word of what was being said. I was stewing over Leh’s old bald boyfriend or maybe it was the obnoxious cab driver or my injuries. Or maybe I’m just an asshole. When Dan told me the next day, I tried desperately to apologize to the girls.

“That was one of the rudest things I ever heard,” Dan said, just after my apology was rebuffed. He was laughing, though.

“I know. I feel horrible. I don’t even remember doing it. Oh, and they definitely hate me now. All of us, in fact.”

Seamus was on the couch, where else would he be? He never left the apartment anymore. He didn't have Thai girl fever.

"Ya know, I've watched 'Runaway Bride' 23 times since we've been living here," Seamus said, matter of factly. "And I hate that movie. Isn't that funny? Nick, chop chop, time for a joint.

"At least you're using your time wisely," I said, reaching for the gear. "Keeping count is a nice touch."

The apartment was trashed. Every afternoon upon waking we cleaned it and every night it was a mess again. Wade came by to drop off a sack and tempt us to go out, but we were all tiring of the Bangkok scene. Dan still couldn't walk properly, but my burn was improving and my eye, too, though slowly. We played cards all night till Dan whined himself into a fit because he never won. "Mickey Blue Eyes" came on TV and we rejoiced and ordered pizza. We had become inconsolably pathetic.

Mario returned the following day, just three days after leaving for Vietnam, and the two of us took Dan and Seamus to the Irish pub for a hard night of drinking. It felt strange drinking in a real bar loaded with Westerners. Not a cosmic room in India or a go-go bar, but a proper pub. I wondered if normal was becoming abnormal. Then Dan whipped out his prick and waved it around the table like Robin Hood at a car show. He followed that up by pouring a beer into his trousers then spent the entire taxi ride home trying to convince us that everyone in England does it. Mario laughed and shook his head, no.

Back at the flat, Mario pushed the couch into the bedroom then sat quietly smoking a Marlboro Light. Dan was reading "The Godfather." I was sitting next to him on the bed typing away in my journal. And Seamus was passed out on the floor, curled up on his dog bed. And so rolled our happy gang through the early morning majesty.

Our month in the apartment was nearly over, and we made plans to go to Laos right after. Wade had recently gone up there to make a visa run, but before leaving he gave us instructions on getting there and how to buy a visa at the border without getting ripped off. And he gave us the name of the guesthouse he'd be at in Vientiane. We had a few days before leaving, and Dan absolutely needed to see a doctor. He had his knee drained and reacted as though he had just given birth to an RV. But at least he was walking better. And once again we found ourselves with too much to smoke and too little time to smoke it. Don't get me wrong, it's a fantastic problem to have. Like suddenly discovering that your dog can shit gold.

I spent a good portion of that time reading on the rooftop patio 20 stories up with amazing 360-degree views of Bangkok. I was reading one of my newly purchased books, "Soul on Ice," written by Eldridge Cleaver. Eldridge Cleaver was a founding member of the Black Panthers, but he wrote his book before all that. He was young, angry and in prison. He wasn't famous yet, just a disgruntled black man who had the time and ambition to lash out. While reading the book I wavered between moments of respect and others of contempt, but what I felt most was a connection. Eldridge Cleaver was supremely critical of America, its people and the government, just as I had recently become.

I had trouble buying into the land of the free, home of the brave, yada yada yada, after sitting through countless hours of history classes and learning by what means we

became so damn free. America is a country built on hypocrisy and the twisted ideals of manifest destiny. Blindly butchering Native Americans and laying claim to stolen land in the name of God. We killed women and children to please God. *I wonder if he was.* We were the Nazis before there were Nazis. With the Native Americans wiped out or pushed onto barren land, again and again, the fathers of our great Notion cultivated the American Dream with the blood of slave labor. Thomas Jefferson may have *written* that all men are created equal, but then he returned home to Monticello to beat and fuck his niggers. The Chinese broke their backs and traded their lives to build our railroads, and we used them like they were cheap, expendable tools. *Weren't they?* Ask the Japanese Americans, actual *citizens* of this free land, how they felt when they were imprisoned during WWII. Jailed not because they broke the law but because they just happened to have the right degree of slant in their eyes. It matched those living in strange, far off places like Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And tell me this, brothers and sisters, what brand of freedom comes with a complimentary jail cell? And many of those imprisoned Japs ran off to fight *for* America *against* Japan. Once they were let out of their shackles, of course. Even as late as the early 1900s, the governor of California paid bounty hunters to run off into the wild and kill Indians just minding their own business. *So much for the fantasy of Thanksgiving.* Why don't we teach the little kiddies what really happened at Plymouth Rock? The Indians saved our asses one cold winter and we thanked them by trying to kill them once the frost broke.

I was working myself into a mood. Best to stop reading, I thought. The shadows were retreating from the roof and the wind began to blow strong. Lou Reed sang out my laptop, "*Just a perfect day, sangria in the park, and maybe later when it gets dark, we'll go home.*" Eldridge Cleaver wrote, "You must continue to change or die." I collected my book and computer and hopped up. It was time to move on.

Chapter 9

The Hot Dog King of Bangkok

Dan, Seamus and I showed up for the 10pm train at 9:45 then looked around for Mario. He was supposed to meet us to say farewell again. He arrived a few minutes later, and we talked him into coming with us. Mario was leaving for Australia in a few days, and with all of us in Laos it didn't make sense for him to hang out in Bangkok alone. He agreed and made it onto the train with a minute to spare after running for a ticket. Without having so much as a change of boxers or a toothbrush.

I was happily stuck in my Jack Kerouac book. Mario slept one seat up, and across the aisle Seamus and Dan both read quietly. I bought my first copy of "On the Road" in San Francisco at the famous City Lights Bookshop in 1999. I dug into it immediately and finished it on the road to Denver. It was like reading my own thoughts. Kerouac perfectly expressed my meandering spirit and my search for truth and always so many questions to think on. Always on the run, thumb out, knapsack over his shoulder, hopping a boxcar with wine and cheese and yo-yo optimism. Cruising in an American-made shark down Mexico way, looking for nothing or anything but always bursting with enthusiasm for *all* things. Even the sad ones. I wanted to jump and scream, "So this is what inspiration is?" The sky opened up outside of Elko, Nevada, and I sat inside my VW van finishing "On the Road" at a rest stop while a deafening storm pounded everything around me. I read the last paragraph five times and smiled so hard I nearly dropped a tear. Now every time I pick up that book I have to read the last paragraph.

So on the night train to Laos, I turned to the last page and read a passage I had read hundreds of times. And I smiled so hard I *did* drop a tear. I was living a dream and reading a book that embodies freedom and everything wild and pure, *chuggaluggin* through the jungle night and feeling the rush of being so far from home. Grinning at the randomness of all life's decisions that led me to that train.

It was 3am. Waking up the previous morning in Bangkok seemed no closer than a week away. We smoked all day and drank some beers then hopped a train with some Valium and had a few more beers, and still I was awake. I walked between the cars and opened a side door then sat on the floor with a Coke and a smile and a cigarette dangling from my lips, watching the Thai night zip past in a dizzying spray of earth and trees. A big moon dodged and bounced over treetops and jungle rivers and between jungle hills, always keeping a watchful eye.

In the morning we got off the train and made our way across the border into Laos and on to Vientiane, the capital. It's a small, sleepy town molded by the might of the slow moving Mekong River. We found Wade and checked into the hostel, with all five of us in one room. There's a lot of good food in Vientiane, particularly the baked goods, and we can thank the French for this. We bought huge sandwiches with tuna, loads of

strange vegetables and mystery condiments. They were massive and nearly impossible to eat at one sitting and cost barely a dollar. We checked some email then back to our room where Wade rolled us each our own joint. We played cards until sunset.

A mug of beer was 25 cents and we found a nice little place with a huge bamboo bar and tables surrounded by tropical plants and fountains. It was a typical hot and steamy summer night, the perfect climate for an ice-cold Beer Lao, the national brew, and we kept the waitress hopping till they closed.

The next morning when I woke up, Wade was gone and the others still asleep. He returned a few minutes later with a brown sack and that devious Kiwi grin. He said he had been to the morning market then reached into his bag and pulled out three enormous sacks of pot ... it was 12 hours later when I said, "I've been awake for 12 hours and I haven't left this room yet."

"I like this room," Mario said. He hadn't been out either. "It has character."

"That's because it hasn't been cleaned in 15 years," Dan said.

I finally left the room later in the evening. It was just Wade and I, on a food run. He took me to a different market from where he had gotten our smoke, and it was a strange affair. Faded yellow lights intermingled with grill smoke, while 10 old ladies all in a row with fantastic storied faces sold the exact same chicken legs. I wondered about the details of their lives. The temperature rose considerably around the grills and I was gushing with sweat. Nearly all of the food was unrecognizable. A lot of strange looking fruit, meat on sticks that didn't look familiar and big tubs of God knows what. It was crowded and the grill smoke irritated my eyes. Though chaotic, it was gentle and restrained. Like being lovingly smothered to death with a soft, plush pillow. Just then a few sporadic gusts of wind ripped through the market and I nearly lost my hat. Dust kicked up off the dirt road, the whole scene becoming shadowy and dreamlike. The only thing we recognized for meat was the chicken legs, so we went back and bought as many as we could carry. They were huge, and I couldn't help but wonder what kind of super chickens they produce in Laos. Back at the room ...

"Nick, my brother, I don't mean to criticize," Mario was saying, "but could you please tell me what the fuck kind of animal *these* came from, mate?"

"Those are chicken legs," said I. "They're big, huh?"

"Do you reckon maybe they're a little too big?" Dan asked.

Wade and I assured them they were being stupid, but after several bites we set the mystery meat aside. No way was that chicken. And whatever it was, it didn't taste like chicken.

The following night I lusted after a cute little Laotian girl with a great smile and a perfect, tight little body. She was sitting at the bar with some goofy old dude, but every time she turned and found me looking her way she winked provocatively. I blushed and winked back. But suddenly the cute little Laotian girl got up and left.

We were drinking at a good pace. After two days of lying around we were getting impatient for some fun, some female companionship, for the parade of the weird and insane to once again sweep us up. Seamus and Mario were tired and left for the room, but just moments after they walked off we met four girls who were headed to a disco and yes, we answered, we would like a ride. Dan danced next to the most beautiful girl in the joint, but when he came back to the table he told me she was a man. The pumping

thumping bright light sounds of the dance club spun my mind like a top, then the room shook violently and flipped upside down. I held on tight to my stool. A strange man kept buying Dan and me whiskey and refilling my glass with beer. What would I be expected to do for that, I wondered? Sometime later I found myself sitting at the bar alone, having lost Dan and Wade, when I found the Cute Little Laotian Girl that winked at me earlier in the evening. She didn't know a word of English, so we smiled back and forth ... and then I was running down the street with her on my back, bouncing merrily along, and all events in between were lost like a mad dog in the fog. I was also singing.

"Flintstones, meet the Flintstones, they're a happy stoner family. From the town of Barstow, they're as easy as your ABCs."

She was light, but I had been running a while. Long enough to butcher a number of television theme songs. I had no money, no idea where I was or where my guesthouse was. Didn't even know the name of it. But I was excited. I felt like Dustin Hoffman in "The Graduate," at the end when he impulsively breaks up the wedding and steals the bride. But after their getaway his expression changes when he comes to terms with the reality of the situation, once the adrenaline rush of spontaneity ran dry. I was getting that same look on my face when a woman on a motorbike drove by with a pasty Englishman on the back.

"DAN," I yelled as loud as I could. He heard me and had his woman turn around the bike. And what a woman she was. Leathery and old. Manly! I briefly wondered if she had won Dan in a poker game. He couldn't explain why he was with her or where he was going, only that he wasn't wearing a helmet but had asked for one several times. And suddenly I was happy again, jumping around full of joy. I bent down to pick up my Cute Little Laotian Girl and throw her over my shoulder. But I lost my balance and threw her on the ground instead. *Whoops!* I looked down at her, and the expression on her face told me to fuck off. She was wearing all white. The ground was all mud. I bent down to pick her up. Dan was helping.

"Bloody hell! What did you do that for?"

"I ... I ... was gonna put her over my shoulder but I tripped or something."

"Why?"

She was filthy, her hand scraped and bleeding and her arm, too. Then I heard myself say, "Oh, that's not so bad." Translation: We can still fuck, right? But there was no way to explain that I was just trying to be playful. From her perspective it probably looked like an assault. And a crazy one at that. I wanted to disappear. Or just pick a direction and run fast. But I said something to piss Dan off, so he disappeared instead.

"Let us go, darling," Dan said to his scag, while he awkwardly hoisted a leg over the seat.

"Dan, don't leave ... DAAAAAANN!"

I turned to my Cute Little Laotian Girl and shrugged my shoulders. She snarled. The two of us stood in the deserted road and stared at each other with grim, confused looks. The night got all twisted around somehow, and I was beginning to sober up just enough to realize what a shit show it had turned into. The cutest littlest Laotianest girl I ever did see, and I screwed it up very well indeed. But then Dan came back. He decided I was worth saving. After a few minutes, and with the help of Dan's scag, we were able to figure out how to get back to our guesthouse. The Cute Little Laotian Girl and I rode in a *tuk tuk* following behind Dan and his old lady on the scooter. It was a chilly ride, and for a moment I was tempted to beat myself unconscious. I tried again to apologize

when we got to the guesthouse, but there would be no understanding. I kicked at the ground and swore up and down, while Dan and I climbed the stairs to our room.

“Dan ... I wanted her.”

“I know you did.”

“Dan ... how did you find me?”

“No idea. I thought we were following Wade and some bird on another motorbike, and then I heard someone yelling my name.”

“You know you’re to blame for this. I never would have picked her up if it weren’t to show you how small she was.”

“Yes, but you never would have made it back here either.”

The fellas were awake when we rolled in, and Seamus began to yell immediately.

“You guys gotta hear this story.”

It turns out that when we lost Wade he went off with some hooker. They were both in towels when an argument broke out over price. She quoted Wade a normal low price, around \$10, but later in the room said that she wanted 100, as in U.S. dollars, and Wade freaked out.

“I was telling her what a bitch she was while I got dressed, right,” Wade said, trying to smile but still a little shaken. “And then she goes to get something out of her bag. I’m thinking she’s got a knife or gun, you know, so I grab it out of her hands and empty it out all over the bed. I looked up, right, and she was standing in the corner of the room, ringing someone on the mobile phone. By now I’ve really worked myself up, right. I figured it was the police or her pimp, so I grabbed the phone out of her hand and accidentally ripped out an earring. I emptied the batteries onto the floor and threw the phone back at her then told her to give me five-hundred baht for the room. I’m screaming at this poor girl for five-hundred baht, while she’s on all fours looking for her earring.”

“That’s fucked up,” Dan said.

I tried to lean against the wall but fell over, then sat cross-legged on the floor.

“Yah, well. I had a Cute Little Laotian Girl. But I threw her on the ground. So that was that.”

The next day the five of us ate lunch together at a little café. Then Dan, Seamus and I said goodbye to Mario and Wade and caught a local bus three hours north to the tiny village of Vang Vien. This was the fifth and last time I said goodbye to Mario. Wade would be waiting for us when we returned to Bangkok.

The local bus was hot and crowded and full of locals, go figure. Women carrying ancient-looking, forlorn bundles and a sullen, old man near the front holding on tight to a small wooden box with a chicken inside. It doesn’t make a sound. The man either. We passed naked children jumping in the rain, lazy bulls resting on the road and a small man in a big hat knee deep in mud. Hunchbacked and mechanical, he planted his rice in total silence. Vang Vien looked ominous as the bus rolled into town. Everywhere spooky spires of green earth peeking through dense fog. It felt more foreign than any place else that came before it. This was jungleland, with caves and steep rock formations with dense, tropical overgrowth and a fat methodical river flowing into fatter and lazier rivers. And we had arrived in the middle of the rainy season. Everywhere

brilliant shades of green crawling up steep cliff walls that plunged into fat, low-lying clouds. We walked down the main dirt road and found a room for a dollar fifty.

Across the street from our guesthouse sat a bar made of bamboo with outside tables and umbrellas and cheap beer. We ate hamburgers and drank mugs of cold Beer Lao and made vague plans to drive to South America from the States and to push this travel thing all the way until it completely runs out of gas. After dinner we walked around town and found a bar that showed nightly videos, and “Apocalypse Now” was just beginning. The rain came steady and hard with occasional bursts of thunder and flashes of lightning, which perfectly illuminated the eerie scenery all around us. The bar had no walls. Rain fell in buckets next to our table and trickled through the bamboo roof and into our pitcher of beer. I could have walked one mile in any direction and been lost in a thick mess of ripe vegetation. A flash of lightning revealed a tall green monster rising in the distance. I looked back at the TV, and Martin Sheen stood surrounded by the same jungle.

The following day we rented inner tubes. A local man drove us upriver several miles in the back of a pickup, then we walked down a gravel road that became a dirt path, carrying our tubes, looking for the river. We came prepared. That is to say we rolled three huge joints and stuffed the beautiful babies safely into Dan’s waterproof pouch. After jumping into the river and making our way into the slow moving current on our tubes, we passed them around and smoked in a light drizzle. Floating down the lazy river we passed tiny bamboo houses hastily constructed and ancient longboats, naked kids running in circles on an orange sandbar. We were surrounded on all sides by high reaching jungle walls teeming with life. And, of course, those ominous skies. The river was high and we had to duck under hanging vines and trees. A snake shot across the water, and I screamed at Dan and scared him. Farther downriver a boatful of Laotians capsized and startled Seamus who was close by. By the time Dan and I noticed, the boat was tipped and several wide-brim straw hats were floating on the water’s surface. But no people. One by one the family of Laotians emerged and collected their hats. They regrouped in the water and swam across to the other side, pulling their boat behind them. Seamus could only laugh and squint and hold up his arms.

“I can’t believe Seamus didn’t go in after ‘em,” Dan said, floating a couple feet next to me.

“Really though, what’s the protocol for a situation like that? Besides, he’s in no condition. Look at him, he’s crying.”

“Yah, he probably would have accidentally killed one or two, trying to *help them*.”

The Laotians were now on the river bank, safe but soaked. All laughs and carefree. Poor but happy. The modern world hadn’t suffocated them yet. But it wouldn’t be long before quiet, little Vang Vien became a sort of Khao San road in the jungle. A hideous backpacker Disney World. It wouldn’t be long before it lost that thing that made it special. The crowds would see to that. But in the summer of 2001 it was still relatively undiscovered. It was still a small slice of perfection.

The next day I awoke early and knew from experience that the boys would sleep for several more hours. I usually enjoyed this time by myself reading or wandering around, maybe getting breakfast. But I felt an odd surge of energy and curiosity and took flight into the jungle to find me a cave. I got my hands on a poor hand drawn map and bought a bottle of water on the way out of town. According to the map I would

come to a bridge on the river and then walk straight for what appeared to be two or three more miles. Easy enough, I thought.

But there was no bridge. A primitive taxi service of wooden longboats operated along the river, though, and for 10 cents a nice man took me across in his long, thin boat. He was smiling broadly into a light breeze. Yes, I thought, look at him. He gets it. He *understands*. My feet were soaked from getting into the boat like a city boy. After hopping out I waved at the boat captain then followed a deserted dirt path into the jungle. The air was thick and stifling, perspiration ran freely down my face. I came upon several farmhands crouching in a small rice paddy, every one of them stuck in the muck. Behind them, rising out of the ground, stood a granite wall of popping green life, its top predictably lost in a cloud. All around me jungle hills and jungle sounds, birds singing, the squawks of a few faraway monkeys and other strange noises for which I would never know the source. The trail came to a T in reality but not on the map. I guessed left, which was wrong, then turned around and went right. The path ran through a nearly-dry riverbed with scattered pools of water with strange little things swimming around. A winged creature flew overhead, and I heard an enormous buzz but saw only its shadow which was large and distorted in the morning sun. My shoes sloshed and squished and slipped on the rocky surface. Then the rocks gave way to sand which caked itself to my wet shoes, increasing the weight of each foot by two pounds. I entered an area that looked like the entrance to a cave, but it turned out to be tremendous overgrowth in the shape of a tunnel. The sun disappeared. Hanging foliage and vines, fallen trees crossing the path and endless boulders and slick rocks to crawl over, under and around. For the second time on my journey I felt like Indian Jones. For a while I doubted that I was going the right way but then stumbled upon the cave and something unexpected. I hadn't seen another person for over an hour, and standing before me in the middle of nowhere was a shirtless old man charging admission. Capitalism, deep in the Laos jungle.

I entered the cave by climbing down into the darkness on a rickety old ladder made of bamboo twigs, my disgruntled headlamp blinking like a spastic strobe light. It was black inside. Everything I saw came in random flashes. I crawled over and under strips of earth then randomly glanced down just before stepping into a hole that had no bottom as far as I could tell. There was a board stretched across it, but barely long enough to reach both sides and thin, so I jumped over the hole instead. But then the bats began to squeal and flutter, and I twirled in a circle and began squealing myself until my headlamp in mid-spin illuminated a super-sized golden statue of Shiva hiding in a corner. Naturally, I thought it was a monster.

“AAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!”

The bats continued their rebellion, buzzing and barking all around me. I breathed deep then tried to regain my composure and sense of direction. I was clearly lost now. I crawled into a small hole which I hoped would lead me somewhere else, but it was the size of a crawl space. I had a sense that I wasn't alone, and with my headlamp panning around, and blinking, I discovered that I had disturbed the biggest baddest spider I had ever seen. Less than a foot from the tip of my sweaty, shaking nose. One-two one-two and out I scrambled backward on scraped knees and squishy toes, stumbling blindly into Shiva once for good measure which startled the bats who viciously screamed which made me spin and run ... *THE HOLE* ... which I saw at the last minute and barely cleared, sending a shoe full of rocks over the side. With the bats still

singing, I climbed up the bamboo ladder and swung on a vine to the other side to hug a tree and ride the mud slick on my ass to the little old man waiting to collect my lamp.

“No time for love, Doctor Jones,” said I, handing back the still-blinking headlamp in mid jog. I got back to the room a muddy, sweaty, grinning fool, to find my monkeys still asleep.

In the afternoon we went tubing again. In fact, we went every day we were there, then at night back to the familiar bar for hamburgers and beer. Seamus left early to do some laundry, and Dan and I attached ourselves to a group of three girls – two Americans and one German, who I was absolutely goofy for. We talked and smoked for hours on their balcony, but Dan got bored and decided to run off, and I followed behind him rambling on about love and lust and lost chances.

“She’s not even attractive,” he said.

“Well, that may be. But she looked good to me.”

“Because you’re drunk!”

We went to an outdoor restaurant and shared three breakfast plates at three in the morning, then back to the room to kick Seamus awake. We smoked a couple of spliffs and a bit of opium given to us earlier in the day by two departing Irish guys. Sufficiently cooked, we created an animated TV show about a king cobra with a Ricky Ricardo complex, a white, African-American militant rabbit and a gay English prawn. The three of them solved crimes or maybe critiqued movies, we weren’t decided. The next day we continued to argue about the attractiveness of the German girl.

We loved the slow pace of Vang Vien and even talked of going tubing more than once each day. But Dan had to get back to Bangkok. He had a friend from England flying out to meet him. The day we left, a wedding procession of several pickups and *tuk tuks* loaded with people drove through the town, a colorful display of drums and umbrellas and singing. We found an unrelated passenger pickup, known as a *sawngthaew*, heading south to Vientiane and climbed aboard. From there we’d cross the border and hop the night train back to Bangkok.

“I get laid a lot in the States, ya know?” Seamus said, out of the blue.

Dan and I looked at each other amusingly but said nothing. All along Seamus had been reluctant about having sex during his travels, and Dan and I could not understand why. Seamus didn’t even understand. We could see it on his face when he tried to explain himself.

“I got this ex-girlfriend I’m gonna marry. She already knows, it’s practically prearranged, even though we haven’t seen each other for over a year. I got it all planned out. We’ll have two kids, one boy, one girl. The girl’s a bitch. She hates me and plays soccer. We even have a minivan with one of them soccer mom bumper stickers. Oh yah, and my wife cheats on me, but I don’t give a shit ‘cause I’m ballin’ my secretary. It’s the American dream.”

“I, too, have a dream,” I said. “I wanna be the hot dog king of Bangkok. I’ll have a hundred hot dog carts around the city, Chicago style dogs, and I’ll lease out the carts to little old Thai folk who’ll run ‘em and I’ll just come round once a month to pick up some baht.” I had been thinking about the hot dog idea since getting high with Wade one night on the roof of his guesthouse.

“Yah!” Seamus said. “Thai people love pushing shit. I mean in New York that would be embarrassing. But in Bangkok everyone just pushes shit around. They push fish, hell they even use bikes.”

Then he swung the conversation around to something completely unrelated.

“Can you tell me why the fuck Canadians have a patch of their flag on their backpacks? Are they so fuckin' dumb they can't remember where they're from?”

“Well,” I said, “they probably don't want anyone thinking they're American. Can't blame 'em really. You know, I once told someone in India I was from Canada.”

“Get outta here! You fuckin' pussy!”

“Hey,” I said, “I got tired of them Indians giving me that look like I had just eaten their children.”

“Yah yah,” Seamus said. “Hey, what about the Mexican flag?”

“What about it?”

“Well, the Canadian flag has that stupid maple leaf, right? So does the Mexican flag have anything on it?”

“Fuck if I know. A taco?”

“Either of you know what day it is?” Dan moaned. He was hung over.

“Who cares?” I asked.

“Just curious.”

“Well, let's call it Sunday. They all *feel* like Sunday.”

“Oh my gentle Jesus,” Seamus said quietly. “Look at this, I have a few nugs in my passport.” He did, enough for a small spliff.

“Jesus,” I said. “I wonder what would have happened if someone found that pot at the border. I mean besides the guards shooting you in the head and Dan crying hysterically for his dead, gay lover.”

“Hey, if I was gay, I could sure do better than Dan. Really? Dan? Come on.”

“I'm gonna miss tubing,” Dan said, ignoring Seamus.

“Yah,” I said. “Me, too.”

“Do you guys think we'll ever see Mario again?” Seamus asked.

Dan and I shrugged. How could we know?

Chapter 10

Stroking the Ice Dildo

Our favorite hangout in Bangkok was the Bamboo bar. It was our starting position on most nights. The place was owned by a rough-looking cockney from London, and we were fortunate enough to be there on his birthday for the free drinks, before leaving for Laos. The place is huge, with a stage and several pool tables and sitting areas and a DJ booth comfortably spread out with a large square bar in the center of the room. And inside that square bar were some of the most beautiful and uninhibited girls, dancing with each other suggestively or shaking those tight asses on top of the bar. On every pool table a sexy Thai sharpshooter teaching a horny *farang* a luscious lesson. A baby elephant the size of a jeep showed up nightly to get his feed on. For 20 baht you bought a handful of shrubbery that the elephant took from you using his trunk, before rolling it into his mouth and giving it a good chew. The little kids usually came in after the elephant, selling roses or lighters or hunting knives. And several times throughout the night a dirty, little man made his rounds, selling nuts and dried this and that from the sea. Last call always came with a shot of tequila and a beer. Then the lights came on and everyone paired up to go fuck. It was the same glorious thing every night. And managing this mess was Apple, a wonderful Thai woman in her early 30s.

We were regulars, but after 10 days in Laos the girls at the Bamboo had begun to wonder if we'd ever return. So on our first night back we paid for nothing. Everything was comped like we were Hollywood royalty. We drank and ate and filled ourselves up to full and then some. The boys ran off to play pool with a couple of girls. Seamus was starting to get that deep-from-the-loins ache. The switch had been flipped. There was no going back. Dan, of course, was always in the mood for that sweet kung fu. Another addict who couldn't get enough. And like most addicts it's not a question of right or wrong. No wasted time lumbering over ridiculous thoughts of morals and responsibilities ... religion. *What would Jesus fuck?* Only, how fast can I drive the beast? How *high* can I get? I know this because I also had the disease.

I sat at the bar talking with Apple who fed me shots of tequila like grapes off a vine. She liked me, I knew this. But we played the game anyway. The one where she gets me drunk to take advantage of me and I let her. You must understand, Thai bar girls will usually play the aggressor, and I for one enjoyed the relaxed ease of it all. Our white faces were like catnip. To them we all looked like Brad Pitt. When the final bell rang Dan and Seamus were long gone and forgotten. The joint was deserted. I sat on a bar stool, balancing myself carefully, while Apple locked up. I caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror. I was unrecognizable. The person in the mirror stared back and I

felt complete detachment from him. I was trying to make sense of it when Apple returned.

“Come, we go now,” she said, grabbing my hand as I slid off the stool. Arm in arm we strolled out the door and walked down an alley behind the bar, turning right once, turning left once and coming to an apartment complex after a few blocks. We walked up to a building and then up two flights of stairs and stood motionless before a door. And after an uncomfortable silence ...

“Well, do you have a key?” I slurred.

“No. Why would I have key?”

“Because this is your apartment.”

“This no my apartment. I think you stay here.”

“No. Not me. How the hell did we get here?”

“I follow you.”

“But I was following you,” I said slowly, my mind backpedaling the impossibilities that led us to that door. But what now, I thought? There’s still the small matter of sex. Isn’t there?

Apple took control of the situation, while I stood there with a constipated look raked across my face ... and soon we were climbing out of the back seat of a cab at the Playboy Motel – the famous no-tell motel in the Nana area. The taxi pulls into a carport as a man working for the motel runs over and quickly pulls a curtain around the car so you can hop out unseen. You pay the man, then discreetly into your room you go, where you can spend three hours or all night. It’s quite an event. We stayed all night. And were very discreet.

The next morning Seamus and I said goodbye to Dan and rode the train to Malaysia. The tentative plan was for Dan and his friend Tim to meet Seamus and me somewhere in Indonesia. Sometime. Maybe. We had never been in the sleeper cars of a train before. There were two bench seats facing each other on each side of the aisle and only one person per seat. Lots of elbow room. And leg room, too, if you prop your smelly feet up on the seat facing you, which I always did. A man in a uniform handed me a menu and asked what time I would like my dinner served. After dinner I had a cocktail and a cigarette at my favorite spot with my feet dangling off the train, breathing in the skyrocket night. Around 9pm several uniformed men came down the aisle and changed the seats into bunks. We ate some pills, then I took the top bunk and lay down chilly under a warm blanket with cool air blowing right above me. This was the greatest gift in the always sweltering pain of S.E. Asia.

At 6 the next morning the nice uniformed men turned ugly and woke us viciously to cross the border into Malaysia and dance through immigration, but people were pushing and barking nonsense in a senseless language and asking reasonable questions at an unreasonable hour. The morning crusties still fresh in my eyes. During moments like these it’s best to be half asleep, like being drugged for surgery. But being dragged down by large doses of Valium is a whole other monster, and we looked and felt like we had just come back from the dead.

Back on the train, we swayed and bounced through the humid jungle morning. Life passed before me, lives of people I would never know. Different people with different dreams, smaller dreams and grander dreams. To live is to dream, and this is one thing we all have in common. Their world rushed in my open window and for just a

moment I was a part of it. Then the train rolled to a stop, and the locals came aboard to pedal fish heads and strange treats. A girl sat quietly kitty corner from me reading a book and looking very sweetly, and my cold heart skipped a beat, but only one as I went unnoticed. The train rushed past small towns and smaller villages, and I sat back and dreamt on. I dreamt for all those too frightened to dream. I dreamt for all those for whom dreaming is a luxury they cannot afford.

We came to a port town on the western peninsula early in the afternoon, then boarded an empty ferry for the short ride to the island of Penang and its capital city of Georgetown. We ran into H, an English guy who we met at the Tavee in Bangkok weeks earlier, and he guided us to a nice hostel.

The night that was to follow could be described as unbelievable, stupid certainly, shocking to be sure. But even in a world of so many words, none seem to adequately capture the spirit of the chain of absurdity that we found ourselves entangled in. We blamed it on the 8 percent beer at the reggae place.

We leave the reggae place late and drunk, determined to be a nuisance in a country that would have none of it. They hang people in Malaysia for the little bit of pot Seamus found in his passport in Laos and for God knows what else. A brightly lit hotel in the distance catches our attention, so we stumble in and fumble around, shooting fire extinguishers at each other in some men's locker room. Seamus steals a couple of shirts from a locker that are much too small for him, then we walk to a large outside patio and discuss scaling the 45 degree windows or shimmying down a drain pipe but settle on living. Seamus pulls a fire alarm then we run spirals down a parking garage ramp and up the street to hide in a tree.

We climb out of the tree when the coast is clear, as they say. I have absolutely no idea where our guesthouse is. But Seamus assures me he knows which way to go. He leads us down the darkest of alleys while I sing a John Denver song I heard once when I was five, and now the suppressed memory has come back to say hello ... and soon we're back at the reggae place, which is still open, so naturally we have another beer. A cute drunk Western girl tells me that I'm quite rugged looking (she is *really* drunk) and that she's never kissed a man with a goatee before. Then without warning she sticks her tongue into my mouth and leaves just as suddenly. I breathe deep and lick my lips. It was a good kiss and I feel like a starving man who has been given a bite of filet mignon. But only one. We finish our beers and wander off again, this time down a silky lit alley, the effects of that kiss still lingering. I want a second and a third, perhaps some over the bra action. A cute Indian girl sitting on her porch watches us as we pass. She yells after us and soon catches up. She says "Hello" or "How do you do?" or "Who's your daddy?" Quite difficult to tell really. Then without hesitation she reaches out and grabs Seamus by the balls with one hand and me with the other. Seamus freaks out, mumbles something and runs off. And now she has me unzipped and everything out, stroking my cock in the middle of the street. A curious cat wanders by.

"Uuuhhhh," I say, everything happening much too quickly. She whips her tiny body around and drops her pants and says something I can't understand. I begin to wonder about condoms and where Seamus is, and who the hell is this girl, anyway? It's clear that I have lost all control of this situation. *TIME OUT!* I can't fuck this girl in the street like a filthy animal. Can I? She's bent over hugging her ankles, her ass shining in the moonlight. Then she says something else I can't hear.

“What?” I finally ask, my mind juggling my options.

“I have dick but you can

“Aaaahhhh, what?” *Oh, I heard, brothers and sisters.* Dick? Is that what she said? She? I was a little thrown by this most unexpected turn. I pull my pants off the ground and zip up quickly and say something like, “Sorry, but I’m strictly a vegetarian below the waist,” then run off to find Seamus.

“She’s a man,” I say, after finding the big ape around the corner muttering to himself.

“WHAT?”

“*IT* ... has a dick.”

“What? How? How do you know?”

“*IT* told me.”

“Oh my gentle Jesus.”

I leave out the details. No need to promote this messy source of future paranoia. It’s late now, and the last episode has me feeling a bit queer. Not the gay kind, you moron. Odd, perplexed, out of sorts. Clearly my brain’s on the lamb. It escaped after processing the word “dick.” That’s the only way to explain what happens next.

On the way back to the hostel we come to a swanky new hotel with several large flags waving at us in the dark. I wave back then regress to my juvenile delinquent years and before I know it I’m underneath the Malaysian flag quickly navigating my way through the knots that bind it, then *zzzzzzzzzzzz* the flag falls into my arms. It’s massive, much larger than I had thought. I casually tie it around my neck as a cape then jog down the street after Seamus who ran off as the flag zipped noisily down the pole.

“They’re gonna hang us for this,” Seamus says. “You know that, don’t you?”

Shit, he’s right. They will hang us for this. And everyone will gather to watch. Proud parents will bring the little ones to see their first public execution. And oh, what a day that will be. Everyone dressed in the finest of rags, carrying tins of dried squid and expensive digital cameras. For just one Malaysian dollar anyone can flog the hell out of us with a live eel before a large, bearded woman and a hairless, hermaphrodite midget nail us upside down to a large wooden cross. And then things start to get weird. Children will run up to us and set our hair on fire. Once that burns out, the large bearded woman will spin the cross around leaving us upright, so the town’s virgins can work over our testicles like Muhammad Ali on the speed bag. And through it all, the Malaysian Boys Fundamentally Flawed Choir will sing a nice selection of Public Enemy songs. *You gotta fight the power; fight the power that be ...* But then Seamus interrupts my thoughts. Always talking shit while I’m trying to think.

“Maybe you shouldn’t wear THEIR FLAG as a cape while walking down the middle of the street.”

I untie it from my neck and wrap it around my waist like it’s a sarong.

“How’s this,” I ask, twirling around like a silly queer. Yes, the gay kind. I can see that Seamus is about to go mental on me when a Chinese guy in a big American car drives by real slow, sneaky like. DRIVE BY! No wait ... where am I? And then I notice the driver. He’s hissing and giving us eyes, then up pops a giant dildo, maybe two feet long. He blows us a kiss and speeds off, and we treat the situation like it was a hallucination. I’m silenced. I cannot find any words. Seamus, too, from the looks of it. A few minutes pass and the Crazy Gay Chinaman returns. He slows again and sticks the giant rubber cock out the window. Waving it around like he’s leading a parade. This

goes on for several minutes, while Seamus and I pretend not to notice. And this is a hard thing to ignore. The streets are empty now except for the three of us and that glistening rubber dick. We come to the hostel and he stops the car across the street, then sticks the dildo into his mouth and begins bobbing on it extravagantly. His eyeballs about to burst. He's sweating furiously, and now lets out a savage moan, which temporarily drowns out the car's engine. Then he chokes and gags and removes the dildo and smiles at us big and bold with lunatic fury. All teeth and spit and slobber. What now, I think? Do we clap? How does this end? I look down and see what I'm wearing. I had forgotten about the flag wrapped around my waist like a skirt. Might this have given the Crazy Gay Chinaman the wrong idea? I turn to Seamus who is still as can be, his mouth hanging open.

"I'd love to stay and see the end, but I should go upstairs and take off this flag."

"I'm gonna go have a talk with this fucker."

"You need a condom?"

"Asshole!"

"So, that's a no?"

I run upstairs and take off the flag and fold it neatly and tuck it away safe. Out of sight of the few Malaysians staying in our dorm room, and of course the Malaysian staff and owners. This flag business is now starting to register as a bad idea. I'm trying to hurry but I have to stop and pee, and by the time I get back outside several minutes have elapsed. I figure to find a dead Crazy Gay Chinaman and Seamus standing over him with a bloody, two-foot dildo. But when I get outside Seamus is walking back from the car, and the Crazy Gay Chinaman is driving away. From the look of things, he's unharmed.

"What happened? He's still breathing, I see."

"I gave him a tip on how to pick up gay guys."

"WHAT?"

Seamus' big tip was this: "Don't drive around sucking on a giant dildo." Now there's a sentence you never imagine having to say. We go upstairs and pass out without talking, too much has happened. When I wake up in the morning I'm using the Malaysian flag as a blanket.

The next night we drank more 8 percent beer at the reggae place. We met an Australian military guy stationed on the island, and he bought us each a meal at an outdoor stall. Seamus picked through it like it was contaminated. He mostly ate French fries and drank Coca-Cola. But I loved the street food – the curries and meat on sticks, grilled chicken and noodles, everything fresh and healthy. And it seemed the farther south we went, the better it got. With a full belly, I passed out quick and slept hard. In the morning Kurtz jabbed me in the ribs several times to wake me. We were dangerously close to missing our boat.

Kurtz is a beatific character straight out of a Kerouac book. A nomad of the highest order. He's English, bald and stout, about 50 years old. We didn't know his real name, so we called him Kurtz. He looked exactly like Marlon Brando in "Apocalypse Now." We met him at the Tavee in Bangkok. The dorm there served as his home base. No matter where he ran off, he always had a place to come back to. We knew he had left for Malaysia but didn't anticipate running into him. He was also staying in our hostel, and it's a good thing for us he was.

Five minutes later we were packed, checked out and running down the street toward the harbor. Forget about taking a leak or brushing your teeth or dusting the crust from your eyes. We barely made it then spent six hours sprawled out on the upper deck as the fast boat to Indonesia cut through a glassy sea. I fell asleep staring into the sun.

The scene at the Indo harbor in northern Sumatra took us by surprise. We hadn't seen chaos like that since India. We crouched impatiently on the boat for over an hour and watched as thousands of locals boarded a huge ship, while an angry, uniformed man screamed at them through a megaphone, viciously waving a big stick.

Off the boat the same angry man turned sweet and even spoke good English and treated us like honored guests. We boarded a bus to Medan then another to the small village of Bukit Luang. We had no plans beyond getting to Indonesia, no guidebook either, so we followed a friendly tout.

It was evening when we pulled into Bukit Luang. Entering the town, we nearly ran over a lazy snake trying to cross the road. The village was tiny and very dark. The only lights coming from the building we pulled up to. Our guesthouse was the center of a great celebration with native costumes and strange dances and a huge buffet table with heaping piles of glorious food. The restaurant was in the shape of a large octagon, with only a thin bamboo roof and no walls. We sat with two guys and a girl, all from England. One of them introduced us to their jungle guide who also happened to be their drug source, and soon we were all smoking around the table. Telling our stories. Laughing like carefree children. Then after a good meal and a couple of slugs of some homebrew moonshine, Seamus and I went to our room, and I passed out hard after a suspicious frog sitting in the corner stared me to sleep.

The following day Seamus and I decided to take a little excursion. Do not go into the jungle alone, everyone told us. You will get lost and die. *Yah yah yah*. Well, of course, we did get lost. And while we were trying to get found, we stumbled upon a little old man who was fishing. He had a battery strapped to his back and attached to the battery was a metal rod, like a golf club, for example. And whenever he saw a fish, he poked his golf club into the water and turned a dial and *zap*, up popped a dead fish. Electrocutated. He smiled at us and demonstrated his invention. We smiled back and quickly hopped out of the water. We crossed rivers waist deep and watched as monkeys jumped from sky-tower treetops. We backtracked several times looking for the trail ... or maybe not. Funny thing about the jungle: IT ALL LOOKS THE SAME!

One of the attractions around Bukit Luang is the Bat Cave, which is not related to or endorsed by Batman. We came upon it by accident on our way back into town. After finally finding the trail. I tried telling Seamus that I'd already seen enough bats in Laos to last a lifetime but followed him in anyway. Of course, the bats were sleeping, hundreds of them silently hanging upside down till we shined our lights on them. That pissed them off real good and they let us know about it. Coming out of the cave there's a small gully that must be navigated down, through and back up the other side. Or someone with more balls than brains could try and swing across the 30-foot deep crevice riding a thin vine. I was not that someone but tried anyway. Waiting for me on the other side were more vines and a tree or two, but my vine didn't reach and I returned on the back swing shoulder first into a tree. *THWAP!*

"Damn," I said. "That kinda hurt. But at least the vine didn't break."

“Not yet!”

I got a running start on my next attempt, but still the closest tree was out of my reach. The pain from the last smash sent me into a spastic wiggle, and I spun completely around, crashing nose first into the tree. It was badly sunburned and now spitting blood.

“GOD DAMN!” I yelled, wiping my eyes. “That fuckin' hurt.” That was the end of our little trek. It was time to take the trail back into town.

A slow rumbling river pushes through the jungle with miniature bamboo houses on each side. Kids jump from buildings into the river, all of them laughing and splashing, while upriver a woman washes her laundry and others are scattered about doing the same. Down the river a man takes a bath wearing only his briefs. Repeatedly he lathers up then dives down for an underwater rinse, and all this I watch from my pleasant little patio. The jungle is pushed up against the back of our room, and the loud prowlers are waking for the night. A young woman across the river dressed in a towel sits on a rock after a fresh bath. She's a symbol of hope, I think. Our eyes meet, perhaps. Difficult to see now in the dusky faded light. She walks like an angel up to her perfect jungle house. For a brief moment I feel something for her – the idea of her, the perfect *her* in my mind. I suppose it's easier to love women I don't know. More convenient to deal briefly in fantasies than struggle through the often flawed realities of love. The highs are shallow. But the lows don't leave me crippled.

Seamus and I had dinner with the Brits from the night before. I bought another little sack and rolled a joint after we ate. I struck a match to the side of the box and one quick *ffiiissszzz* ignited an explosion. The whole pack burst into a fireball and was now burning bright in the palm of my hand. I shrieked like a little girl and quickly threw the box over the wooden railing and into the river. I looked down at my hand, and it had a burnt patch on it nearly two inches in diameter. Half completely white and half charcoal black, crispy even. Seamus ran for some ice, he knew the drill. The Brits were all pre-med students, but so fresh as to be useless. I tried to remain cool, but the pain was excruciating, like hundreds of tiny knives stabbing the palm of my hand. Seamus returned to the table minutes later with the oddest piece of ice, and I gave him my you've-got-to-be-kidding face. It was over a foot long and tubular, thick. An ice dildo, really. So for the next hour I rolled the ice in my hand, stroking the ice dildo for everyone to see. But ya gotta do what ya gotta do, and I rubbed that dildo till it was an ice cube, the whole time feeling the deep burning through the numbness. Back at the room the pain soared as my palm thawed out. I popped some pills and Seamus emptied out a cigarette and packed it with the good stuff. Then again, and again. All at once the pain went away and so did everything else. In the morning I had a blister the size of a ping-pong ball in the middle of my palm. It would be a while before I stroked anything with that hand again.

I apply some burn cream and wrap my hand while Seamus builds a joint. We smoke like zombies then crawl out onto the porch, yawning intensely from the crippling effects of the wake and bake. Rubbing our eyes in slow motion circles. An Indonesian guy wanders over uninvited and sits down next to Seamus who looks at me for help. *Talk to him, you fool!* I type in my journal with one hand and try to ignore him. Then

the intruder reaches over the divider separating the porches and grabs some random kid then sits back down and calmly, casually mentions that this is his boy. Getting pretty comfy, I think, while Seamus gets that constipated look on his face – what the hell am I supposed to say to this guy? The Intruder just sits there holding that butt-ugly kid and Seamus gets nervous from the silence and feels he must initiate conversation by saying things like: “So, uh ... where are you from? Oh right, Indonesia, always wanted to go there.” While I sit and happily write the experience as it happens. Then Seamus becomes silent and strikes the usual pose, his mouth swings open and his eyes morph into tiny slits. And then, of course, the drool. He can only stare now, occasionally turning his head like a mechanical figurine. He’s forgotten how to speak. A burnt out Buddha lost in a vague reality. And what happens when our reality doesn’t seem real? Will we all strike the Seamus pose? Will future artists chisel resin statues of half-wit monkeys too terrified to speak? Too stoned to function? Hmmmm, I look around me now and wonder, how did we get sucked into this humid jungle morning? Is Seamus responsible for our presence in this backwater village? THIS IS NOT REALITY! Or is it? We’ve been pushing it now for so long, so hard, that I’m not sure what the hell reality is any longer. If it even exists. Bouncing around Asia high, drunk and medicated has made my brain goopy and very unsure if all this is real. Am I really in a Sumatran jungle village? How can *that* possibly be real? I turn back toward Seamus, who is completely lost. He looks to me like an upside down piñata. Someone should beat the fucker, I think. Maybe candy will spill out. I briefly entertain thoughts of bashing him in the head with a stick, when a beautiful girl walks over. The Intruder’s daughter, I think, and I am very attracted to her. *Keep typing, don’t look too closely.* Oh no! I can feel the early rumblings of morning wood creeping. It comes unannounced and quick, too, pushing against the laptop, trying to break free. But wait ... what’s this? *More* people? And now I feel Seamus’ uneasiness growing stronger because everyone, I mean the whole freaking family, is standing around us. Eight, maybe nine people. Just staring! What *are* these strange creatures, they wonder. “Daddy, can we take one home with us?” “Oh no, dear. They’re much too dirty and probably diseased. Don’t get too close.” Jesus, he’s right. We are dirty. We are probably diseased. We belong in a zoo, behind glass. Away from the *good* people. The little ones are climbing on the divider and peeking over it. I always say that Seamus is a monkey, but now so am I. I’m not comfortable being on display this way. I don’t want to be a monkey any longer. I close the laptop, let out a little snort and go inside. Leaving Seamus and his buzz with an extended family of Indonesians to entertain.

The next day we rode five hours in a minivan to the town of Berastagi, high in the volcanic hills of Sumatra. The pre-med Brits came with us. We drank some beer, ate some Valium and passed out early. The next morning Seamus took a local bus three hours to Medan. He had to drain money from his American Express card, and it was the only city in all of Sumatra where this could be done. I ate breakfast and watched from my guesthouse patio as some kid pelted a dog with rocks then beat it several times with a stick. I desperately wanted to go over and flog the little bastard but forced myself to my room. My face was a spider web, dark red blotches of burnt flesh and peeling skin, the end of my nose one giant scab. I hadn’t had a shower in days, my hair was tangled and matted, and the dog incident had brought back bad feelings. My hand throbbed and

the blister continued to grow, the skin around it stretched to the max like the outer ring of a trampoline. It felt as though my skin were slowly being pulled off.

I saw the pre-med Brits and asked about my injury. They told me in no uncertain terms *not* to cut into it. Infections or something, they warned. I immediately went back to the room and grabbed a razor blade from my first aid kit. The first few passes of the blade weren't hard enough. My burnt flesh was like tough, overcooked chicken. It's not an easy thing to forcefully push a razor blade into your own hand. It goes against all of your instincts. But finally on the fifth try my hand split open. Bright yellow pus shot everywhere. I grabbed the garbage can from the bathroom and held my hand over it for nearly an hour draining the fluid. Then I cleaned off the wall and the floor. At night it would fill again, and I could actually feel the fluid accumulating. And every morning I cut into it and drained it. This went on for weeks. After the burn on my prick I felt comfortable with the nasty business of first aid. But this burn was like nothing I had ever experienced before.

Time slowed down and the day dragged ass. I lay on the bed thinking of the future, the present too sour and tired. Seamus was still in Medan and I felt alone. Something about illness or injury that sparks these feelings, I guess. Not lonely, I don't have it in me. Just alone.

Chapter 11

The Lake Toba Experiment: Dan Watch Journal Entries

Dan Watch Day 1 – We arrived via Mr. Friendly’s express ferry that sent us drifting aimlessly for 30 minutes in a dark lake after an all day ride in the breakdown minivan through the dense jungle. We passed soldiers who dropped their weapons and began waving vigorously. The ride was a high-octane affair, and one girl in our vehicle had fright in her eyes. I sat calmly, grinning like a seasoned goon. She didn’t know what to be more afraid of, oncoming traffic or the madman sitting next to her. Smiling at every near miss.

Dan Watch Day 2 – We made the long walk across the Tuk Tuk peninsula to the Reggae Guesthouse for stoned cheap rooms with surreal views of the lake and thick, machete green hills and ocean blue skies that look to turn ugly. We got a room and negotiated a good price for a brown bag of bungalow special herb. A 15 year-old French girl stays in the room next to us, her mother left yesterday for several weeks in southern Sumatra. Only we don’t know at first that she’s 15 'cause we’re all smoking and she’s rolling like a pro and who the hell leaves their 15 year-old daughter alone in Indonesia?

Dan Watch Day 3 – There are two Indo kids inside our room preparing to smoke crack and Seamus is freaking out, saying “Ya gotta do whatcha gotta do and you guys smoke right, not us?” There is a glass Fanta bottle full of water and two straws sticking out, then another bottle with a bill inside and a lighter on top that has been converted into some kind of a torch. The crack is sprinkled into a tinfoil gutter and placed over the lighter suspended by Thai currency. Real MacGyver shit. When the smoke rises out of the tinfoil it’s caught by the straw, sent through the bottle with the water and up through the second straw and inhaled. Seamus looks at me and says, “I just don’t know what they’re doing, that’s not a hot enough flame to cook crack.” Hell, maybe he’s right, but who cares? Two hits for Evan and now Indra's turn. Indra's banging the little 15 year old French girl. He’s 18, but looks much younger and works for the guesthouse. He blows out a huge cloud and offers us some but we pass. They tell us they need it to stay up all night and party and we think maybe it’s speed instead. The kids are getting jittery, time for another joint.

Dan Watch Day 4 – Indra made us a bamboo bong and it works, too. Seamus is tripping and acting like a silly twit. I asked to see Indra’s ID card to check the spelling of his name, and he reacted with much paranoia. “You not take me to the police?” Seamus erupted into laughter 'cause the poor kid had serious dribbling down his chin.

Seamus is gone now, tweaked out and babbling. Indra paces nervously on the balcony, and I sit inside making a mental list of supplies I need – notebook, postcard, string, water, scrub brush ...

Indra leaves and returns with a bag of fruit. “Can I just bite into it?” Seamus asks. “No,” Indra says. “You have to peel it.” “So I can just bite into it?” “No, you have to peel it.” So what does Seamus do? He bites into it. And I sit here stunned ‘cause it’s obvious what the kid has just said, in perfect English even. Frame of reference: just minutes before this Seamus declared, “I feel like a Smurf.” Now he’s chugging down a mango. Radiohead plays on and we sit in our new *Batak* style house. Waiting for the storm to overtake the lake so we can climb outside and watch from our balcony, which sits directly on top of the water. We switched rooms and our new one is much larger, unique too, but still part of the guesthouse. The door to the balcony is tiny. It measures about two feet by two feet, so we gotta crawl in and out like dumb little kids. There is another smaller balcony/loft that looks too dangerous to enter, so I reckon it goes unused. In the doorway waves an enormous Malaysian flag, tied to the beam above the door that we propped open. The breeze comes off the lake and into our hut via the balcony midget door and exits by wildly blowing the Malaysian flag on its way up the mountain. The room has a few half pillars that serve no purpose other than masquerading as tiny shelves, a place to drop your keys or put your mosquito repellent. There are several hooks on the bathroom wall and a laundry line on the balcony. The toilet is missing a seat. The shower can only drip. And we have an infestation of ants, and whatever else feels like crawling into our room while we sleep. Indra and Seamus sit cross-legged on the floor quietly eating mangoes.

Dan Watch Day 5 – Seamus and I met a mad magic mushroom maker this morning. He leaps out of the jungle wearing a maniac grin and half naked. He holds up a bag of mushrooms as if he were showing off a fresh grizzly he’d just wrestled in the woods and says, “You like magic mushroom?” Then he giggles like a loon, beams a near toothless little grin and bounces off. We are still not sure if that was real. I sit now trying to decide if I should shower ...

Seamus got an email from Brandon today, it read – Subject: “can I live on three dollars a day?” Message – “how cheap are the buses?” That was the entire email. He thinks we’re in Thailand.

Dan Watch Day 6 – Seamus had French fries for breakfast. I had an omelet. A few minutes later I go down to do some laundry and I look up and there’s Seamus eating an omelet, special mushroom of course, and I’m just scrubbing away at my laundry the old school Indo way – waist deep in the lake with scrub brush, bar of detergent, and flat rocks to scrub on. After I finish and come up to the room, Ramses (another kid working at the Reggae) comes in with a bag of mushrooms he just picked from his magic garden and Seamus starts to drool. Remember now, that it has only been one hour since our hero’s last magic omelet, and now he’s bargaining for a new bag and ... SOLD! He and Ramses run off to the kitchen.

Dan Watch Day 7 – Ooohh, Seamus is back. “Well, that was an adventure.” He bought peanuts, lots of them. Now we sit on the balcony cracking and eating and

throwing. My shells into the garbage can, his into the lake. “It’s probably good for the lake in some weird way.”

Dan Watch Day 8 – Got up at 8:30, computer didn’t work, piece of shit. Scribbling journal by hand from here forward. We go out onto our balcony as we always do upon waking, so the little Indo man living on the other side of the bay can see us. As soon as he does, he gets into his boat with all his goodies stowed in a dirty, brown paper bag and paddles over, roughly a 30 minute trip. He pulls right up to our balcony. The mushrooms are \$1 per bag and I buy one, Seamus more than one. We usually get some smoke if we’re running low, but today still have plenty. Then the little man paddles back to his shack on the water’s edge, while Seamus and I run our mushrooms up to the guesthouse kitchen. He’s about halfway across the bay now, and I can see him smiling. Or maybe wincing into the sun. And I’ve just now realized how normal this morning ritual seems to me now. How normal all of it seems. The unexpected becoming expected. Madness becoming routine. And like a drug addict I’m realizing how eventually I’ll need more to sustain me. More madness. More of the unexpected. But really, who has time for such thoughts when the mushroom man is 20 feet away from the balcony and gleefully waving a brown sack over his head? It’s time for breakfast.

Dan Watch Day 9 – Just for the record, I love midgets. I think everyone should own one.

Dan Watch Day 10 – Still no Dan. His email said he and Tim were coming. But when? Seamus is unconscious and it’s not even 9pm, so I shall empty tobacco out of my cig and reload it with the good stuff. No skins, you see. As for Seamus and his mushroom ladder to redemption – he ate three bags today. He is still alive but passed out and mumbling ferociously. Yelling occasionally, too, but only words like “fuck” or “shit” or “kill.” Just the basics.

Dan Watch Day 11 – “Weird moment,” Seamus says to me. “You can cut it with a knife.” “The moment?” I inquire. “No, the tension you asshole.”

Dan Watch Day 12 – When you mix *four* bags of mushrooms with eggs and try to make an omelet, it looks very un-omelet like. In fact, it looks like a hamburger pancake. But I assure you it’s not as good as it sounds. Seamus choked down most of it, and nearly threw up after every bite. Now that’s dedication.

Dan Watch Day 13 – A tall man wearing a cape and waving a beach umbrella, eyes like ripe avocados, runs up to a woman and screams with savage intensity, “YOUR BEARD, MADAM. IT NEEDS A TRIM.” The woman burps up a large toad which swallows the man in one gulp then hops into a red convertible and speeds away.

Dan Watch Day 14 – Again, no Dan. I’m beginning to question if Dan really exists or if Seamus and I just made him up on shrooms one fine day. Hmmm. Gobbly gook I go with the hitch-n-giggle swaggle, the huff and puff magic carpet ride. Pissed and squashed some ants with my left toilet foot firmly planted. I love washing dead ants off my feet before climbing into bed.

Dan Watch Dan 15 – “I need a personal assistant, that’s what it’s come down to,” Seamus says in the middle of our argument over who’s going for snacks. A two minute walk ...

“As soon as Dan gets here, we leave and trek across this damn island. You got me Chunky? Otherwise, if I don’t DO SOMETHING SOON I’m gonna go Jeffrey Dahmer on your ass.” “Yah yah,” Seamus sighs, nearly passed out. “No one would even know. I’d make sure your body could never be found. I get ideas ya know, late at night ... while I watch you sleep.” “WHAT?” “What?” That’ll teach him to ‘yah yah’ me.

Dan Watch Day 16 – No Dan, what a shock. But we got bats, brave little stealth bombers who get too close and freak us out with their random, quick maneuvering and occasional near miss. It’s not every day you have psychotic bats flying full speed at your head, which is bloated with poisonous fungi and cheap jungle herb. But it is for us as soon as the sun falls. This is not good for the fucked-up mind.

Dan Watch Day 17 – And so, “Oh my Buddha,” on Dan Watch Day 17, let it be known and properly catalogued that Dan has doth arrived at 9:30am. Seamus and I sitting on the balcony waiting for our mushroom man as Pasty Boy and buddy Tim float by. “Is that Dan? DAN!” Woo hoo! Big celebrations all around. “You speak English?” some kid asks Dan. “I *am* English.” He’s priceless. Dan tells us that Malaysia is the happy face of Islam. Yah, until you boost their national flag ...

Getting packed for the trek tomorrow, just me and Seamus. Dan and Tim too road weary. Supplies: two large bottles of water, three bags of peanuts and three bags of Oreos. Just the basics. This should be good for us, though we have no map and no idea where we’re going, how far we’re going, where to stay. Ah, those questions will be answered eventually. They always are.

Chapter 12

Let's Kill 'em and Eat 'em

Seamus decided to wear flip-flops on the trek, and we were thus doomed from the start. It looked to be a 20-mile hike up and over the island, but our map was hand drawn in crayon, so we had little faith in it. The over was no problem, it was the *up* that nearly killed us. According to the map the trail began next to the side of a church in a small village three miles down the coastal road, and sure enough it was there. Too bad we couldn't stick to it.

Off the trail we were afflicted with Guys Disease, that strange illness that prevents men from turning around even though we know we should. We knew where we had lost our way, finding the trail would have been easy. Guys Disease is also responsible for men not asking directions. It's a horrible affliction. Seamus was in front of me. Above me, actually. His sandals kept slipping off and hitting me in the face. I grabbed hold of some roots, and the whole bunch came out of the ground. I was carrying all our gear and climbing straight up the side of a cliff with a left hand that wasn't ready for this level of physical abuse. I looked down and wondered how my lifeless corpse would look mashed against the rocks below. Church bells in the distance began to ring.

The fall would have sent us tumbling at least a couple hundred feet. My mind was strenuously focused on footing and grabbing things that looked sturdy. Moving quickly to the side if Seamus fell. The pack pulled me backwards, and I hugged the cliff, climbing through sideways-growing bushes with razor-sharp thorns chewing on my sunburned skin. I looked down again and could barely make out the once close rocks. Seamus encountered some footwear problems and stopped. I climbed past him. Finally on top, with both feet firmly planted on flat ground, I could see the entire northeastern coast of the island. We had climbed higher than I thought. I turned to my left for another view and saw something strange in the sky. Like little speckles of dirt, but flying dirt. Thousands of tiny things moving as one dark patch against a baby blue sky. It looked like a huge net come to sweep me up. Then I heard a strange buzzing. They were getting closer now and it became impossible to ignore. BEES! I was feeling a bit crazed now. Absolutely bursting with disbelief. Not as in, oh, that must be a flashback. No. This was more like, you've got to be fucking kidding me. Because I, a person with a strong height phobia, had just survived climbing straight up a cliff some three hundred feet with one hand and many obstacles. Not even safe and sound 10 god damn seconds. And now I was about to be mauled by bees.

But the bees harmlessly passed a few feet above my head and couldn't have cared less about me. I leaned over the cliff to look for Seamus but couldn't see him anywhere. I yelled and got no response. I hadn't heard any screams, though with the wind blowing

loudly and those damn bees ... but then he answered my second call and was soon up where I was.

“Oh my gentle Jesus,” he huffed.

“I know,” I said. “We’re lucky to be alive. We’re city boys, basketball freaks, not fuckin’ mountain climbers. I am genuinely amazed one of us didn’t die.”

“It’s these damn sandals.”

“I will admit they add a degree of difficulty.”

“I don’t know why I wore these.”

“Yep, I wondered the same thing myself.”

“That climb fuckin’ killed me. I feel like I just came shooting out the birth canal.”

“I always think of birth as more like a water slide. Albeit, one with a bit of a bottle neck.” He gave me a strange look, perhaps the same one I was giving myself.

“Uh, anyway ... I’m gonna go look for the trail, so get some rest. If you see a swarm of bees, no worries. Their friendlies.”

The trail was close by, easy to spot and steep in parts. We still had a long way to go, this I realized as soon as I got off the cliff and looked up. Seamus saw it, too, and from the look on his face it had discouraged him. I came back and we tumbled off, happy to be walking rather than climbing. My pace was faster than his and it got to the point where I would stop for a rest and wait 15 minutes or so for Seamus, who eventually stopped catching up to me. I went on without him. I was pretty certain he was still behind me. Where else would he be? After a couple of hours moving up the trail I came upon three hikers coming down. The only people I saw on the trail all day.

“How much farther before I come to a town or guesthouse?” I asked.

“Keep goin’ straight, and Jenny’s guesthouse is about ... oh ... about another hour from here. We looked at another place first, but when we decided to stay at Jenny’s, people from the first place came over with machetes. Some kind of long running feud.”

Jesus, I thought. That’s a hell of a thing to tell me just before I walk into town.

“Say, if you see a big, hairy goon coming up the trail can you tell him you just saw an enormous grizzly that chased you down and tried to eat you? He loves animals.”

Seamus was like my little brother. So fucking with him in this way was absolutely necessary. Hell, it was critical. And it was *his* fault we almost died. Trekking across the island in flip-flops ... what kind of a moron ... “Ooohhh. Hey there.” A suspicious herd of water buffalo crashed out of the brush and began to cross the trail about 20 feet in front of me. There were baby buffalos, too, which made me extremely nervous. I thought about my fake grizzly story and the irony was too much. “No threat here,” I said to them. “Just your average terrified loser.” I wondered if they could understand me. Maybe I shouldn’t be talking to them, I thought. What if their adrenal glands are voice activated? The big mama buffalo stared me down as she was the last to cross by. I stood still as can be. Smiling like a retarded infant who had just shit himself and couldn’t be more pleased about it. And after a brief staring contest, the big buffalo followed the others back into the forest. I continued up the trail. Wondering, what next?

The map showed a town about midway across the island, after reaching the top of the plateau. But once I found it, the word “town” seemed much too generous. There were only six houses and no electricity, no plumbing ... nothing. The villagers walk over a mile for water. They grow their own food, raise a few animals, cook over a fire, and the children play in the dirt. Chickens and goats and cows and dogs, everything underfed. Jenny’s guesthouse is one of these six and looks just like the others. Jenny is a nice old

woman, but it's not really a guesthouse. Just some lady who rents out rooms in her home. And after I walked a mile back down the trail to retrieve Seamus, we rented two from her. We never met the mad machete people.

We ate lunch, but now what? It was only mid afternoon, and the entertainment options were sorely lacking. Nonexistent, really. I walked to the edge of the village and watched four wild horses playing in a clearing a few hundred yards away. I squatted on a dirt mound and smoked a Marlboro Light and dug into the slow, unhurried pace of the plateau. Dogs were chasing children who were chasing chickens that yelled in protest at all the commotion and the dust storm that chased them all. Villagers wandered around carrying water jugs, some had kindling on their heads. Seamus came over, his head completely empty.

"I was just sitting on the porch watching live coverage of the Indonesian food chain."

We walked down to the clearing, the horses gone now, and built a huge campfire for when it got dark. It took us over two hours, but we had nothing else to do, and it was fun. It felt like we were kids on a camping trip, climbing around in trees, foraging for firewood. After dinner Jenny gave us some pot, enough for a nice spliff. Seamus and I enthusiastically thanked her. Marijuana was everywhere on the island, and we saw cannabis farms of all sizes. The developing world is dependent upon a cash-crop economy, and drugs are a vital part of its success. It's a matter of survival. And we were more than happy to do our part.

I rolled a large joint, and we waited for it to get dark. Just before we left for the clearing, a herd of water buffalo wandered into the village. They were quickly chased away by dogs and villagers waving long sticks, and from the look of things they were headed toward our campfire.

"Hell, we survived that mountain," I said. "We're invincible."

Sure enough, the buffalo were gone, but we couldn't get the fire started so it mattered little. We climbed back up to Jenny's in the black night and smoked the joint on the porch. We ate French-fried potatoes by candlelight and drank Coca-Cola. Purely American but definitely not America.

In the morning I had another cigarette on the dirt mound, watching the sun creep over a distant mountain. It was only 6 o'clock and no one else was up and about. I always enjoyed those precious moments when it seemed as though I had the whole world to myself. The simple joy of being left alone with the clouds and the sky. Just me and the vast emptiness of the plateau. It was a moment of absolute peace and calm.

Finishing my cigarette I stood up and turned toward the town. It was time for my morning crap. The only bathroom is on the edge of the village. It's a small structure built on stilts, mostly enclosed, with a big hole in the center of the floor. This is the toilet. I used it. Seamus did not.

We left early, around 7 o'clock, and the walking was flat and easy. We passed two young boys riding on a water buffalo, and suddenly the big creatures didn't seem so ferocious. After a couple of hours we improvised and made our own trail again, a shortcut. Seamus was lagging. His lungs burnt out, his feet sore ... his bowels full! We made it to the other side of the island after a few hours and were only half a kilometer from a real town where we could find a decent room and a meal and most importantly a shower. But then, out of the blue ...

“I think I’m gonna catch a bus back to Tuk Tuk.”

“What? Why?”

“My feet hurt. And I gotta take a shit.”

“You moron, it’ll take us at least an hour to get back to the Reggae. We’re ten minutes from the next town, and a toilet, and you wanna go back. That makes no sense. Why didn’t you go to the bathroom at Jenny’s?”

Great, I thought. Now I sound like my parents.

“That was nasty!”

“Seamus, you never cease to amaze me. I could have sworn I met you in India where *every* toilet is a hole in the ground.”

We flagged down a bus and endured a 45-minute ride with uniformed school children giving us evil looks. The bus got no closer than 3 miles from Tuk Tuk, so we had to walk that stretch. After we got back to our room, Seamus spent an hour on the toilet. And from the smell of things, it wasn’t going well.

We were happy to be back drinking and smoking with Dan and getting to know Tim. That was more our speed. However, Dan and Tim didn’t care for Tuk Tuk and could not be convinced of the lake’s magical powers. They referred to this as a jail break. They were here to rescue us, they said. Seamus needed rescuing, and I was ready for it. Two days off the mushrooms, the fog was beginning to lift.

The next morning we rode the ferry to Parapat and jumped a minivan to Medan. Never in my life did I imagine the possibility of meeting people and traveling around the world with them. Even with the lulls and lack of privacy and personality quirks, I loved traveling with those guys. Every day began with a hint of anticipation, a freak-out good time always nearby.

Seamus and I found a coupon in Tuk Tuk and read it often and smiled when we did. I folded it up and stashed it away safely in my wallet. It was the source of pleasant dreams for both of us. The coupon was for the Semarak International Hotel in Medan. The Executive Suite was on special for 210,000 rupiah per night. And even though that sounds like a hideous amount of money, it was only about \$20, and we’d be splitting that four ways. To this point my daily budget in Indonesia was running about \$5, and that included all meals, drinks, lodging, snacks and all the drugs I could inhale or swallow. So \$5 just for the room seemed quite high. And yet I had to have that room. Seamus, too. He had also invested a lot into the dream: trading in our ant hole for the Executive Suite. Jesus, just to say the words, “Executive Suite.” And not in a, “Sir, may I carry your bags to the Executive Suite?” kind of way, but as the actual *occupants* of such a room. All of us were so delighted by this that we laughed the entire way to Medan.

The room was huge and we nearly pissed ourselves upon seeing it. I went right for the mini fridge then grabbed a room service menu. Tim ran out to the pool, just outside our sliding glass door, and Dan and Seamus changed into complimentary bathrobes and parked their asses on the bed for some MTV. I had a blanket on the floor with beer and soda and cold candy bars and nuts. The air conditioner blew ice cold. Dan rolled a huge joint and we all got high then went swimming and wasted the afternoon wasted by the pool.

“You know it’s the Third World when *we* can afford the executive suite,” Dan said, popping his blond head out of the water. “It’s amazing how a little genocide can stretch a traveler’s budget.”

The plan had been for one night in Medan, because, quite frankly, the city sucks. Maybe the worst in the world. A city of two million people, and we poor bastards could afford the best room in town. We also had to get tickets for the Pelni ship to Singapore, and that was a hot and long walking around clueless day. We bought tickets for the next sailing, but that was still five days away. Tim wanted to go up north to Bukit Luang, but Seamus and I had already done that, and I had a big round scar on my hand to prove it. Dan was tired and lazy, and Seamus and I convinced him to stay in Medan with us. Tim went on to Bukit Luang alone.

We decided to leave the hotel and find a much cheaper place to stay. We even packed and checked out, but at the last minute we settled on a smaller, cheaper room. We still had pool access and room service, and best of all, the bar. Dan and Seamus lived in those white robes, and we spent many hours poolside soaking up the ghetto-fabulous lifestyle. The air was thick, the temperature flirting with 100 degrees every day. But our room had air con and we cranked it up as high as it would go. Walking to the movie theatre or grocery store nearly drowned us, though. Of course, the people hated us and mocked us at every opportunity. We volleyed their insults back at them with the occasional “fuck you” or “eat shit.” Said lovingly, though, with a big smile. Medan is the Bronx of Indonesia, and the people aren’t shy. Even the well-groomed respectables working in our fancy hotel didn’t like us, always suspicious that we’d roll up a gruesome tab and sneak out in the middle of the night. And we talked about doing just that.

Down at the bar one night, after Dan had left, the cute Indonesian girl that was bartending began flirting with me. The bar happened to feature karaoke, and she sang four songs to me in a row ... staring into my eyes ... freaking me out. While everyone else in the bar watched. Most of me was drunk and flattered, horny as hell. But her desperation and that silly, maniac grin of hers sent my mind back to a time when I had an actual stalker. I never thought I could be scared of a broad. But then this woman began rummaging through my trash, following my every move, petting my door and tonguing my keyhole. She was my editing professor during my last year of college. I accidentally fucked her one night. And then she wouldn’t leave me alone. She would spend hours outside my apartment talking to my door, while my dog barked at the crazy woman on the other side. Sometimes I’d come home and find her this way. Sometimes I’d be inside my apartment hiding.

What to do if your stalker is noisily molesting your apartment door at 2am: Well, you have to confront her, at least for the neighbors’ sake. Especially if your overprotective, 50 pound dog is barking. But immediately, as soon as you open the door, you see the long-gone grin of a woman who has lost herself to the madness. A crazed-stupid addict and you are the drug. So now you wish you hadn’t just opened the door, but it’s too damn late, because you’re already on the other side of it. And then you wonder, why is her hand in her purse that way? Holy Jews on parade, does she have a gun? *Yes, but is she prepared to use it?* Maybe you can push her down the stairs, you think, before she can aim and fire. By this point you’re so juiced up that you’ve got adrenaline dripping off your front fangs. I mean, you are tweaking. Things inside you

are pumping at speeds never before experienced. You try to stay cool, but your mind just switched to survival mode and it feels intensely unstable. The rush is speed-like, your senses acute and tuned in to every detail. Her hand moves half an inch, and you prepare to pick her up and bounce her down the stairs on her head when you think, what the fuck is going on here? When did I lose control of this situation? The cute girl bartender finished singing and jolted my mind back to the present. Then she leaned over the bar at me with dreamy, psychotic eyes, while an Indonesian man in a pink Polo shirt sang something from the Celine Dion collection.

Dan and I agreed that karaoke was the lowest form of entertainment, but then two girls asked us to sing one night, so we sang “My Way” by Frank Sinatra. We got such a charge that we sang it every night till we left. We were always the only Westerners in the bar, and the crowd loved us. “*Encore ... encore,*” they yelled. Only it was in Indonesian, so it could have been, “Let’s kill ‘em and eat ‘em!” One night Dan convinced me to sing “Hotel California,” but we butchered it badly just like I told him we would. I set down my microphone halfway through the song then sang the rest of it to myself in the restroom leaning over a urinal. I could still hear Dan missing every note.

Seamus never came to the bar, except to pop in and tell us what movie was coming on soon. But Dan and I cared little about that. We were back to hard drinking and ill communication with the ladies. One afternoon Dan and I met two local girls at the pool, and that night the four of us went to a strange disco. The club had a tribute to Bollywood performance that made Dan and I blush and giggle. The girl that liked me earlier now liked Dan, so we switched seats. My new girl talked my ear off in fractured English and would not shut up. While Dan’s girl, my girl just minutes before, never said a word. Back at the hotel and out of patience, I said goodnight abruptly and ran for the room. Dan came in a few minutes later and said the girls wanted to spend the night.

“Where? There’s no room,” I said. “Besides, if that freak show butchers one more English word, I’m gonna lose my shit.”

“Yah,” Seamus said. “Go tell ‘em this ain’t no shelter. A couple of crazy bitches is the last thing we need.”

Listening to broken English and constantly trying to decipher what is being said is tiring work. You’re always straining to understand, and this can get old in a hurry. Minutes later he came back to the room alone. We ordered room service and watched MTV. Seamus was fasting, and we weren’t sure why. Robbie Williams came on, and I let out a big belch of disgust.

“Who the fuck is this pretty boy?”

“He’s a bit Bon Jovi,” Dan said, “but you should see some of the birds this prick has pulled.” He sat up with a half serious look. “I’ve always wondered ... is a home girl a prepubescent housewife?”

Tim was arranging his own transportation to Singapore, and we were supposed to meet him there at a hostel. We packed up our things and paid our too-huge tab. It’s completely irresponsible to let Dan and I drink for five straight days when all we have to do is sign a piece of paper each night when the bar kicks us out. The bill sent us into shock. I had never seen a number that big before. No wonder the hotel people were nervous.

We took a taxi to the port, where our driver openly bribed a police officer who did little to conceal it. We found Tim in the parking lot among a thousand Indonesians then

went to our waiting area. Tim bought a ticket in the lowest class, we we're just above him. The difference was negligible. The sitting area was unbelievably hot and crowded. Outside it was 100 degrees and very humid, and inside it was much hotter with no air flow. A stifling, debilitating heat. The kind of heat that can turn your internal organs into jelly. I continued to slowly read "On the Road," my sweaty hands warping the cover. Dan also was reading, but Seamus just sat with his mouth open and stared off toward an imaginary object. I couldn't blame him, it was too hot even for reading. The prayer room was hopping, though. There was a line of Muslims all the way to the bathroom.

The ship hadn't arrived yet. We waited for three hours, maybe the longest three hours of my life. I had come down with a terrible cold our last day in Medan. And now my eyes were watering nonstop. My sinuses pulsed like exploding tambourines, and my head felt like it was about to erupt and cover everyone in mucous and resin. The humidity and the lack of air stole everything I had.

There were no other foreigners in our class. Just locals carrying all their possessions to start over someplace new or maybe just leaving their tiny piece of the world for the first and only time on a well-deserved holiday. A wedding, maybe, a funeral, perhaps. All of them brought their own food and were happily munching away. This was a big event for them and they were obviously excited. The horrid swelter of the room did little to discourage them. The idea of traveling for fun is so absurd to nearly everyone in the developing world. For many, every day is a struggle just to get enough to eat. For us, traveling had become a hassle at times, and this was one of them. If only I could see life through their eyes for a day. How much more would I appreciate my own? That thought comforted me for exactly two seconds. Then I sneezed into my book.

The ship finally arrived, and it was enormous. There were eight levels, several cafeterias, or nice restaurants with lounges if you had a better ticket. It had a movie theatre showing old Hollywood releases, and there was a bar on the upper deck. We got a meal with our fifth-class ticket, some kind of slop over rice. After dinner we found Tim and went to the upper deck. The four of us sat on the railing and watched the sun as it slowly sank out of sight. The smell of the sea, the lapping of the breeze against hot skin, the peace and serenity that comes from staring into a landless stretch of sea as a multi-colored sky dances above. And even though I was physically beaten, I couldn't stop myself from smiling. I was on a passenger ship steaming through the starry night for Singapore, and this gave me goose bumps. I rubbed my arms and leaned into the wind. Freedom is a good thing. Perhaps the best of things. And I was drunk on it. Giddy and wild and loving every drop.

Chapter 13

My New Fake Tits

Sick and broke and on a boat, E I E I O. Dan and Seamus and most everyone else were sleeping soundly, while I was up all night brushing the cockroaches off my legs. I ran to the bathroom to blow my nose and pound my head against a wall. The floor had two inches of standing, murky water. Turds floating around me like little brown submarines. And me with sandals on. *Aaahh chuu!* My eyes constantly teary like I had been repeatedly punched in the nose. My head pounding. It was as bright on our level as a 5pm country Wal Mart. Only it was 3am, and the lights were beginning to burn out my retinas. I could read only half a page before I felt something crawling on my skin. The bunks were thin and practically stacked on top of one another, everyone snoring and coughing and spitting and wheezing. It felt like Old Delhi. It felt like death.

Midmorning the ship docked and we disembarked on the island of Batam then waited an hour for the express ferry to Singapore. In Singapore we found t-shirts that listed criminal offenses and the punishment for each. Fifteen grams of pot equals death. This is NOT my kind of place. It's expensive compared to the rest of South Asia. And the women ignored us, we were invisible. We had become accustomed to being the center of attention and our egos were severely bloated. But the city is well-organized, the people friendly. Singapore is clean and shiny and obscenely orderly, but it has no soul. We couldn't leave fast enough. Tim stayed behind. His girlfriend was meeting him there, then they were flying to Jakarta.

On the train as Mother Earth and Uncle Jungle are blanketed by early-morning fog. The sunrise express pushes through the Malaysian landscape, past ramshackle wooden huts and a lonely woman carrying water on her back. The greenest of greens, everything pops and whizzes and zooms fantastic. Broken roads and lazy rivers and spastic bridges. A small boy in dirty clothes waves from a far-out train depot. I rub my eyes, throw back a deep, throaty yawn and force myself awake. Dan sleeps several seats up. Seamus sits across the aisle undecided, his head rocking and throwing splintered shadows throughout the carriage, which is empty but for we three rogues. My neck aches, my shirt smells. Cows and chickens and fields of gray water pass by my window. The rough and tumble sounds of a speeding locomotive, carving our way through the jungle so dense. The jungle opens quickly, revealing odd shapes and wild morning colors, its every-form inhabitants. Cotton candy clouds drift merrily along the jigsaw horizon. Peek-a-boo sun and misty mountain tops. Then it tightens up and closes just as quickly – smothered again in a sea of green. Like a bullet through flesh and vital organs we fly.

The train stopped a little short of the Thai border around noon, and it had been a long, hard seat night with little sleep. We spent an hour and a half confused and hot and miserable, then boarded a local bus full of school children. Dan and Seamus sat up front, their constant jabbering was getting on my nerves. I lurched to the back like a lost bum and sat among the shy schoolboys, all of us silently staring out the windows. After about an hour-long start and stop ride, we came to the border and filled out necessary forms and dug proper documents from our disorganized packs then waited in line where the pens didn't work until some guy who couldn't help us sent us to another line. All finished and safely across into Thailand, we walked a mile to the nearest train station and bought three third-class tickets to Bangkok on another all-night train that was set to leave in a few minutes. Ferries and minivans and taxis and ships and trains and buses and *tuk tuks* and all in the last three days. It was wearing us down. And upon arriving in Bangkok, we had planned to hop the very next train to Chiang Mai, another all-night sleepless extravaganza. But we got drunk and changed the plan.

The train was a late starter. No engine. So we waited and waited some more, while the oven-hot Thai breeze pushed through our open window and stole what little energy I had. I could hardly sit up. Keeping my eyes open and focused was too great a task. New places, odd faces, a glance, a growl, murmurs in the wind. People crawled on board to peddle sweets and treats and strange meats, even providers of the almighty hooch. Everyone struggling for my attention.

Third class is awful, but we made the best of it by drinking heavily. I checked my bank balance at an ATM at the station and discovered that my student loan check had been deposited, so I bought several rounds of beers while we played cards in our laps. And then we were joined by a well-off Thai woman in her mid-thirties, attractive but worn. On a business trip, she told us. She owned a brothel of sorts and was off to buy girls for her bar. Just a little trip to purchase some *people*.

"Inside I'm rotten," she said out of the blue, "but the beer helps."

Dan, Seamus and I looked around at one another and then back at her. This broad was different. A self-proclaimed Lucifer who knew the score. And why shouldn't the Devil be a woman? Then she began buying us drinks, so naturally our opinions of her improved. People were stacked in the cars like dishes. At every stop more people got on but fewer got off. How long can this continue, I wondered? The cars were bulging like in a cartoon. Metal bending and arcing about to explode. Pulsating, breathing. The three of us shared one bench seat about four feet wide, puddles of sweat accumulating between pressed-together legs. I couldn't pick my nose or scratch a ball without elbowing one of my boys in the kidneys ...

And later we were drinking whiskey from a bottle, and I couldn't say when, where or how we got it or how much time had elapsed since playing cards with the devil woman now almost forgotten. Somehow, Seamus lost his sandals off the train then I threw my socks out a window because they were soaked with toilet water. We hung off the train like baboons, and I was certain one of us would lose a head or an arm. To pass time we played a game. I pretended to be Dan, Dan pretended to be Seamus and Seamus was me. I grabbed two pairs of dirty boxers from my pack and shoved them under my shirt to make a nice, healthy pair of man breasts, while Dan said, "Did you know that 7 out of 10 people in Poland eat cabbage with every meal? Isn't that so weird?"

Seamus leaned against a wall with his arms crossed, shaking his head and looking at us disapprovingly. “You two monkeys give me a fuckin' headache.”

“BLOODY HELL!” I yelled, massaging my new fake tits. I dropped to the ground and began doing pushups. My knees resting on the ground.

“Oh my gentle Jesus,” Dan snapped. “You do pushups like a little girl. Hey, that reminds me of this one time.” Then we laughed that psychotic drunk kind of laughter that comes along slowly but peaks with a flurry of coughing and gasping for air. The bottle now empty.

Two girls sitting in front of us lured us from our game and finally surrendered to our advances. They told us they were getting off the train soon to catch a ferry to an island. Well hell, it was unanimous. Naturally we'd go along, which surprised them since they hadn't asked. We got off the train and onto a *sawngthaew* that drove us through the groggy midnight hour to an unknown port. We knew we were in Thailand, but that's all we knew. Our ferry departed at 1am, and we got there with just a few minutes to spare, the last to board. There were no seats on the boat, just two levels with sleeping mattresses and pillows. I couldn't even stand upright without smashing my head on the ceiling.

Seamus passed out immediately, and Dan rolled onto his side and began chatting up some random girl. We had already forgotten about the two girls who were responsible for our diversion, which no doubt pleased them immensely. I walked outside for some fresh air, then laid down on a slim, low-lying deck with one arm and one leg hanging into the sea. I was beat tired and drunk but happily alone and comfortable, content as hell. Maybe the most content I've ever been. I looked forward to getting a good meal, taking a nice cold shower and sliding a soft pillow under my weary head. I gazed into the deep black sky with complete satisfaction and the thrill of anticipation only a wanderer can know. We didn't know where we were going. We didn't care. Wrinkled neon glistened along the shore and stars flickered above, and I had a feeling that magic awaited me on the island that I nearly missed.

Chapter 14

Walking Into a Thai Prison with a Boner

The sun was just coming up. Dan and Seamus inside the *sawngthaew* among other cramped travelers, and me standing on the back bumper hanging onto the roof rails. My face catching the only cool breeze in S.E. Asia. Turns out we were on the island of Ko Samui, heading to Chaweng beach. Only 6am when we arrived, but ladyboys still on the prowl and drunken morons staggering on sidewalks, puking in alleys, fondling fake tits and soon in for a much bigger surprise.

We finally found a bungalow along the beach after an hour-long search. Seamus ran to check email, and Dan and I went to a little shack for a quick breakfast – spicy peppers, fresh basil and ground pork over white rice, with an optional fried egg to top it off. My cold was fading but now my stomach began to gurgle ... and soon I was in a full sprint for the room. But it was too far away, so I had to run into a restaurant and use their bathroom. Only I let loose with such a shit storm that I clogged up the toilet. So after I flushed, all my recent work came spilling out of the bowl and onto the floor. I tip toed out, sheepishly thanked the staff then resumed my sprint for the room.

Seamus came back to the room an hour later and announced that he was leaving immediately for Bangkok on the train that we had just jumped from several hours earlier. I was on the very edge of consciousness. A sleep I desperately needed.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I have to go to Bangkok and meet Brandon. I just got another email from him.”

“Fuckin' hell,” Dan said. “He’s still alive, is he?”

“Yah! And get this. He met some village girl in Nepal while trekking out in butt-fuck who knows where, and now he’s marrying her.”

“Well, that sounds about right,” I sighed. Dan had his pillow over his face and was laughing hysterically into it. “Has Brandon gone mental?” I couldn’t hold it any longer.

“Whaddaya mean?”

“Ahhhh ... well, he’s been missing for two months, we think he’s dead except for one insane and brief email, and out of the fuckin' deep blue sea he announces that he’s getting married to some Nepalese bamboo that he found in a remote village. Doesn’t this sound a little ... oh, I don’t know ... crazy?”

“Yah, I suppose. But his email said that her family was the best in the village, and she can even say a few words in English.”

“Jesus, Seamus, so can Arnold Schwarzenegger.”

“Look, I gotta go if I wanna catch the next ferry. I’ll see you guys back in Bangkok.”

Seamus left and Dan continued to laugh into his pillow, his eyes big and watery.

Chaweng beach is so nasty it even has a McDonalds. Not exactly a tropical island paradise. It’s developed to the gills. Families strolling all damn day and idiots stumbling all damn night. No relief. But neither of us felt well enough to move. Dan now had the bubbly, same as me. We spent the afternoon taking turns on the toilet and lounging around the room.

“I’m fuckin’ *goooooooooooooooood!*” Dan said, leering over at me. “Occasionally I can be the shit.”

He was reading through his journal and really admiring his work.

“It’s much quieter without Seamus,” I said.

“It’s a good break, he can be a bit much. Don’t get me wrong, I love the big ape. But you and I can talk about writing and ideas we have. It’s difficult to bounce ideas off three people. Especially if one of them doesn’t wanna have ideas.”

Dan had a point. Seamus was not one for fresh thoughts. Regurgitated knowledge was his game. And he was good at it.

In the evening we bought some herb at a little restaurant up a dirt road from our bungalow. It was barely visible through all the plants and palm trees. We ate shark steak with potatoes and vegetables and rice and all for \$2. Then we went back to our room and smoked a couple of joints. Dan was in the bathroom yelling for a roll of toilet paper, so I dug one out of my pack and whipped it over to him. (For some reason the bathroom wall didn’t go up to the ceiling.) But then he began screaming like a little girl because the toilet paper landed in the toilet. The toilet that he should have been sitting on. But for some reason he got up before wiping his ass. He was in there a while and making strange noises.

“What the hell you doin’ in there?” I finally asked.

“Putting on lotion, why?”

“It sounds like you’re folding up a bean bag chair.” Then out of the blue I scream, “BEEF CURTAIN!”

“MADAM, SHOW ME YOUR BEARD,” Dan yells over the wall, and we both have a good laugh.

Dan ran out of the bathroom and jumped onto his bed, then jumped off and raced back in. The worst of my stomach affliction had passed, but his was in full force. The whole room smelled rancid. When he came back out we made stupid home videos with my digital camera. He sang “The Gambler” by Kenny Rogers, butchering the lyrics badly, and I filmed it in sepia to match the feel of the Wild West. We created a cartoon character named Rocky Road who had a 30-second slot on the news to speak his politically incorrect mind. He had a great catch phrase, too, that we’d yet to discover. Then Dan interviewed me, asking me questions like I had just written a top novel. I slipped into the part with ease and delight. We were high for the first time in a week and always easily entertained.

The next day we began feeling better so we rented a couple of scooters. I spent a long-ago summer getting drunk and speeding around Ft. Collins, Colorado on a big

Yamaha cruiser. Dan didn't like to ride on the back of a moped. Which is why I took off straight away and pushed it as hard as a person could push a scooter. I stopped to wait for Dan to catch up, and he had the most serious look of fright on his face.

Somehow we got turned around and came speeding back into Chaweng beach. We had been riding about half an hour, and Dan was starting to get more comfortable. To this point, every time the traffic backed up, I just leaned to my right and blew by anything going slower and to hell with oncoming vehicles because I had a big road and a small bike. "LOTS OF ROOM," I yelled. Then in the middle of the most developed stretch of road, I leaned to pass a stand-still line of cars and motorbikes but saw a big truck bearing down at the last second and had to stop. But the bike rocketed out from under me, leaving me on my stunned feet. *Oh shit!* It narrowly missed hitting a girl's arm, then slammed into the corner of a pickup and crashed hard to the pavement. The tail light from the pickup lay in shattered pieces on the road next to the bike. I turned slowly to face an audience of at least 50 people and growing. Dan finally came over, his mouth hanging open and his hands in the air.

"What the hell were you tryin' to do?"

He was behind me and saw the whole miserable incident. I explained that I had tried to stop but somehow hit the gas instead of the brake. The guy driving the pickup came over and told me the truck was his brother's. He called him on a cell phone then told me the tail light would cost \$35, but no police. He drove me to the bungalow to fetch some cash, while Dan watched the bikes. By the time I returned the commotion was over and everything back to normal.

The scooter was in sad shape. The handlebars slightly mangled, a big dent in the body, scratches everywhere. But it started, so we took off like nothing had ever happened. We rode to another part of the island and stopped to see the big Buddha. It was one of the most awful sights I had ever seen. This gigantic golden Buddha staring out to sea and all around it little shops selling little golden Buddhas. It was so bad, in fact, that we had to stop and investigate. We parked the bikes and drank a couple of Cokes on a deck looking down the coast. Then sat for a while in front of the giant Buddha, laughing at some Korean tourists who were weeping and kissing the golden monstrosity.

Back on the bikes and on the road, my scooter began to spit and gurgle and finally the engine gave up and died. Several people stopped by to offer assistance, but all who stopped agreed this one could not be easily fixed. Well, I thought, there's only one thing I can do.

Dan helped me push the dead scooter into the bushes, then I jumped on the back of his and closed my eyes tight. He was wobbly and I thought we were going to die for sure. But he didn't want me speeding around like a lunatic scaring the hell out of him. I would have, too. He dropped me off at our bungalow, and I quickly packed while he returned his bike. I met him on the street with both packs, and we jumped into a *sawngthaew* and told the driver to just go man, go, and we'd figure it out on the run. We should have gone straight off the island but we didn't have the strength or ambition. We ended up on a beach on the other side, very quiet and scenic, a great hideout. We got a nice bungalow facing the sea then went for a swim. Later that night, after dinner, we were drinking ice-cold Carlsberg bottles in the sand, listening to the waves and rustling palms, when Dan asked ...

"Hey, Nick. Didn't you leave your *passport* at the scooter rental place?"

THAT had somehow slipped my mind.

My passport had been collateral for the two scooters. It's standard procedure. Crashing and running away, however, is not. Dan and I reckoned that if I went back to take responsibility it would cost around \$1000 to replace the scooter. We called this Plan A. But responsibility came with too high of a price tag, so we quickly began working on Plan B. I'd have to lie, and this was my story: My passport was stolen on the train. Simple enough, as long as the scooter guys didn't call the police. A good portion of Plan B was based on the belief that my American passport was worth more than the bike, and that the guys working at the rental place would know of some questionable types who would give them good money for it. This was a big assumption.

For the next three days we did very little. We slept a lot and read on the beach, went swimming often and drank the best fruit smoothies ever made. We ate fresh seafood and slowed down the clock. We met two girls on a motorbike one night that stopped to talk, but they quickly left for something better. I searched far and wide one evening for the sweet ganj. I asked every tiny Thai man around, asked dogs and cats, even asked myself if I had hid some away for desperate moments. I hadn't. Our beach at its busiest usually included a couple of dogs playing in the surf, a handful of people stretched across 300 meters of perfect white sand and a cute girl or two laying around topless. I loved being a fugitive. That is to say I enjoyed playing the part. Like cowboys and Indians when you're young. But I wasn't young. And this wasn't pretend. There existed a very real possibility that a fleet of Thai policemen with sharp sticks and machine guns would be waiting for me at the port when we left.

But there were no troubles at the port, no police either. And after a three-hour ferry ride to the mainland, we boarded a luxurious night bus to Bangkok. I had mixed feelings. Bangkok had become the closest thing I had to a home, but one that I was not always proud of. I wished for a great rain to come and wash away all the sleaze, the unfortunate girls selling their bodies and their souls, those trading in their morals as I had done and would do again. I despise the city for it, just as I despise that side of myself. But we can't all be perfect, and I wasn't about to waste good time trying. Besides, being bad is always more fun than being good. And what else is there besides instant gratification? Living in the present, the fiendish Zen way.

The bus had two levels and Dan and I sat in the smaller, more intimate lower section with two luscious Scandinavian girls with milky-white thighs driving me to the edge of insanity. The ceiling and walls were carpeted, and why wouldn't they be? But not just any carpet. No. This was carpet straight from the old Dunes casino and hotel in Las Vegas. It was an explosion of psychedelic swirls in lollipop colors with stains that glowed in the dark. This bus was perfect. If only I had drugs coursing through my blood stream. If only I *hadn't* just lost my passport. All night I thought about the task ahead. I would have to visit a Bangkok police station and lie about my passport, put it into writing and sign it, too. Even though it specifically says that if I'm lying, I'm in deep yogurt. From here I would go to the U.S. Embassy, the largest and most suspicious of all the American embassies around the world, and lie and once again commit some form of fraud despite the warning of certain and long, uncomfortable imprisonment. If the scooter guys called the police, I was cooked. It was that simple.

Back in Bangkok and back at the Tavee, Dan and I found Seamus, Wade and Brandon, who backed off the story that he was getting married. His head was still oatmeal. It was nice to see the Tavee girls again – Noi, Yen and Dodo, which was really the dog's name and not hers, but she thought I didn't know that. In the evening Dan and I split a bottle of whiskey at the guesthouse, while a French girl of 17 or 18 danced between us in skimpy clothing, revving us up good and high. She was the physical representation of ecstasy in human form. Her hulking father sat across the table, carefully scanning us for lustful intentions. His muscles like concrete pumpkins. But this didn't stop us from wishing and wanting and looking. Our glances growing longer and bolder with every sip of whiskey. Until father took mother and near naked daughter and left, with Dan and I panting and feverish. Then all of us minus Brandon went to the Bamboo bar.

And soon we were back among familiar faces. Seamus was getting worked over on a pool table by a sharp-shooting Thai girl in a short skirt. Of course Dan was instantly bamboozled and telling his story to some girl at our table, a friend of Wade's new sugar mama. We didn't know the details behind Wade's new woman. But we chalked it up to Bangkok. The city is like a magnet attracting the weird and wonderful, the clinically insane ... the morally ambiguous. A girl at the next table was throwing me looks, and there was no denying it, so I went over. But her ambition in life was to kill my buzz, so I had to ditch her.

Turned out Wade's sugar mama had a husband, English and dumb and out of town, and a kid with a mouthful of gold teeth who we affectionately named Goldie. But she also had a lot of money and little morals and enjoyed buying us food and booze. The bottle of Black Label was hers, and Dan and I drank the hell out of it. He and Seamus disappeared then returned 30 minutes later.

"Where'd you two go?"

"There was a croissant incident," Seamus said casually.

Later on the street, Dan and Seamus had a tense moment and Seamus wandered off angrily. Dan and I rode a quiet taxi back to the Tavee and passed out.

Wade had court the next morning and according to him it was no big deal. He got pinched a week earlier with some gear on Khao San Road. A couple of ounces worth. But it *was* a big deal, and he was sentenced to two months in prison. By that time the bribe had climbed much too high, something like \$5000. There were too many people involved, and all would require compensation. Had he known how serious this was, he could have gotten off cheap and easy by greasing the cops who tagged him. But instead he was spending his first night in a Thai prison.

We were drinking at the Tavee early that evening when Rin, Wade's new sugar mama, and a few of her friends came by to tell us the news. It really didn't surprise us. Something like that was bound to happen to one of us eventually. We decided to go to the Bamboo to console Rin. And get stinking drunk on her tab.

Seamus instantly began slobbering over a tall, gorgeous, Thai bird. And she seemed interested in him, too. Dan patted him on the back and said it was about time.

"Welcome to the dark side," I said casually, raising my whiskey glass. Her name was Tao and she was our waitress. Rin purchased her from the bar for 500 baht to work only our table. Our glasses were never empty. Dan leaned over to Seamus.

"There's no guarantee of tomorrow. If you can fuck her, fuck her now."

“Dan,” I said, “such a romantic.” I turned to Seamus. “Remember though, you have to get a room somewhere. You can’t bring her to the Tavee, it’s against the rules.”

“That’s a good rule, too,” Seamus said. “We certainly don’t want ‘em runnin’ around unsupervised.”

Somehow at the end of the evening I ended up with Rin. There was an awkward moment in the street with sexual advances and an open cab door. A lot of confusion and smiling. Then she paid for a nice hotel room and we fucked like sea otters. In the morning I had my very own sugar mama.

The following day I walked to the tourist police near Khao San Road and filled out a report for a stolen passport then took a taxi to the U.S. Embassy with fingers crossed and story straight. We passed a sullen and dispirited demonstration. Hundreds of motionless heads silently staring as one man shouted at the sad faces through a bullhorn in the bright sun. Inside the embassy two American guys were talking loudly. It seems one had a watch that was also a black and white digital camera capable of holding 100 images and zooming in on unsuspecting subjects, although the picture quality sucks, he said. MORONS, I wanted to yell. Get a life! I spent three hours at the embassy, occasionally running down the road for photos or copies or something, but everything went off without incident. I was in the clear. All I had to do now was go to Thai immigration and get a new visa stamp.

Back into a cab, I sat in the back seat with papers strewn about, my new replacement passport next to me on the seat. I was all smiles. I got out at Thai immigration and knew exactly where to go, having gotten a visa stamp there before. But when I got to the counter I couldn’t find my passport. I checked every pocket many times, and though it seemed nearly impossible that I could lose it immediately after just getting the damn thing, it was definitely gone. No doubt left in the taxi that I had just climbed out of. I felt beaten and could have dropped to the floor right there. I went outside and walked in circles around the parking lot mumbling to myself. Thinking. I couldn’t go back to the embassy and tell them I had lost it again. No one would believe a person could be so careless. And yet, I was.

I took a long, sad taxi ride back to the Tavee. While I was telling my story to Dan and Seamus, a man from the U.S. Embassy called to say that a woman from Thai Immigration had called him and said that a cab driver had dropped off an American passport. He got the Tavee’s phone number off the police report that I had brought in earlier. An hour later I had my replacement passport back and a new visa for Thailand, and the whole, ugly scooter saga was behind me.

Early that evening, Dan, Seamus and I were lounging in our room. They were trying to talk me into going out. They wanted to drink for free and they wanted me to call Rin and ask her to spend more money on us. And they knew that deep down I couldn’t resist. So I phoned Rin, and we all met up at the Bamboo. Rin bought Tao again from the bar, this time so she and Seamus could be together. Essentially she went from serving drinks and food to getting drunk and flirting. This was so normal that we didn’t think twice about it. Rin also bought a waitress named Nune to pour our drinks. With Rin it was always about appearance and excess. The night zipped by, as they sometimes tend to do, and around 4am Rin, Seamus, Tao and I cabbied it to the Playboy Motel and got a couple of rooms next to each other. On Rin, of course. I was drunk and running between the rooms at top speed when a low beam leveled me and sent me to the

floor. It was only a few hours later when Seamus, Rin and I took a taxi to the Correctional Institution for Drug Addicts to visit Wade.

“I got morning wood,” Seamus whispered to me, both of us in the back seat of a taxi. “I’m walking into a Thai prison with a boner.” That’s wonderful, I thought. Adding your cock to this confusion should send me right over the edge. Every bit of me was dripping with sweat. I was about as bedraggled and hung over as is humanly possible. The sun poked a hole in my brain through my eye, and I just wanted to be somewhere else. I wanted a cold shower and then a long shit, followed by another cold shower and eight good hours of sleep. But at least I wasn’t Wade. At least I wasn’t in prison. And I *was* fucking his sugar mama, so I owed him at least a visit.

The three of us sat down in a large outdoor waiting area and baked in the sun for what seemed like days. A mystery voice called out the names of those incarcerated, and after hearing Wade’s name, we walked down a long, fenced corridor to where he was. He was in a cage. Bug eyed sober and climbing the walls like a nervous monkey with an army regulation buzz cut and freaked-out half grin. Wade told us there were 65 guys in his cell. He had to buy his own food and bedding, and guys kept trying to steal his trousers while he showered. At night, when everyone lay down to sleep, there was no room to move. Everyone was head to toe and shoulder to shoulder.

“Do you have any questions for me?” Wade asked, like he had just finished giving a business presentation. What do you say in that situation? I had never visited someone in prison before. This was new for me. The bell rang, and we got up to leave.

“I wanna be on that side,” Wade said, his smile slipping away.

“Wade, you take care of yourself,” I said.

“Yah, and I’ll try to keep hold of my trousers, too.”

Then he was gone, back to his steel and concrete cage. The next day Dan and I hopped the night bus to Chiang Mai in the north.

Chapter 15

Looking for a Nice Place to Pee

Seamus stayed behind with Brandon, and Dan was leaving in a week for sunny, old England. The group was thinning out, but we didn't look that far ahead. The only thing in our sights was an all-night bus ride into the unknown north. We had talked often about making it up to Chiang Mai but never did. I was soundly asleep on the bus and dreaming even. I dreamt that Dan and Seamus and I were at the Tavee, in our room and crashed about like sloths. It was the middle of the afternoon and Dan and I were waiting to get on the night bus to Chiang Mai. I was beat and on the brink of unconsciousness. Then it occurred to me that if I slept in the room I would never get to sleep on the bus. So I forced myself awake ... and found myself on the bus.

“Oh my God!” I cried out.

Dan was next to me reading, and I told him about the evil dream that woke me up. Then a couple minutes later I forgot all about it and had to ask Dan what I had just told him. When I heard the story repeated back to me, it was fresh. I had no recollection of any of it. But this sort of thing has been known to happen with me, you understand. It was not unusual for me to wake up in the middle of the night and discover that not only was I naked and standing in my front yard, I was also waving two table lamps over my head. For me yelling at the top of my lungs about giant rodents or lizards or bucktoothed hillbillies at 4am was just as normal as brushing my teeth or watering my dog. I'd occasionally wake up under my desk staring out the window at the moon, or sitting outside in the snow, listening to music in my car, eating a sandwich in the kitchen ... anything was possible. I was like an unpredictable volcano that could erupt at anytime, anywhere. When I fell asleep, I never knew what to expect. And neither did my poor friends/roommates. They often complained of strange noises coming from my room late at night. Arguing, screaming, bewildering echoes of the mentally unfit. I really felt for them. I couldn't imagine having to live down the hall from something like that. Who's to say I wouldn't grab a meat cleaver in my sleep and go bananas? Hack all my roommates into little cubes and make soup of them.

In Chiang Mai we wandered around the night bazaar – the one reason everyone goes there, but really the only reason not to go. It was mostly mass-produced junk. The kind of crap people buy on vacation and never use. “Look, these chopsticks came from Thailand!” “Then why do they say ‘made in China’ on the side?” Salesmen hassles and

loads of tourists walking into each other, no one watching where they stepped, and me sitting on the street curb smoking a cigarette, admiring the chaos from a safe distance. Dan was buying some presents for his family, and I went along to watch.

We found a hidden courtyard area dressed in Christmas lights with many small bars circling it, and in the center a giant boxing ring. We sat down at a table and ordered two large *Singhas*. The ring was dark and empty. All the bars were barren, just a sprinkling of partiers, but it was still early. Three girls sat down at the table next to us. They were Western girls, and one in particular was very cute. I was trying hard not to stare at her when she turned to us abruptly and asked a question. And soon they were at our table. The three of them were from England, and Kamilya was the cute one. She had the most perfect little body and the sexiest cockney accent. She was 22, a skateboarder, confident and beautiful and every other adjective I would use to describe perfection in a perfect and sexy little package. They were leaving in the morning for Laos and asked us to go, but Dan had time constraints.

The boxing ring was taken apart and pushed off to the side. And then there was music. And lights. A pack of ladyboys rushed onto the empty patio, jumping and prancing around, singing and dancing in flashy and feathery showgirl costumes. After each performance they crawled through the audience with tin cans, twisting arms for a few baht. Kamilya was jealous of the ladyboys' figures, all the girls were. I blushed and told her she looked great. I smiled big and listened hard to every word she said. It was one of those evenings that you want to last forever. She was a girl I wanted to know better. In the end we hugged and said goodbye and good travels.

In the morning I ate a Thai omelet then began the lengthy process of typing my handwritten journal entries. My computer had recently been fixed in Bangkok after six weeks of collecting dust. I had nothing but time and happily typed. I had several notebooks and stuffed into these notebooks were loose pieces of paper with my nearly illegible hand writing snaking around the corners. Receipts, napkins, coasters, even my hand. I wrote on whatever I could find, when I didn't have a notebook handy. The romanticized ideas of being a writer and a world traveler had me high and happy and bursting with enthusiasm. I would stop whatever I was doing to write down a thought, whether I was half passed out or working my way inside a sweet Thai girl. For the first time in my life I knew exactly what I wanted to do. And oh what a feeling that is. But the odds were not in my favor, and I knew this. Becoming a published writer of books is not something you sail into easily. Still, it was my dream. I had no choice but to pursue it.

Dan was hung over and noisily rolling around on the bed in pain while I typed. He finally left the room late in the afternoon to look for socks or something and returned with a surprise.

"Get ready to be happy. I just ran into this I'merican who owns a bar. He's from Chicago and says they serve great sandwiches. I told him you were from Chicago and said we'd be back later to eat.

"Sandwiches? What kind of sandwiches, did you see a menu?"

"One was a Philly ..."

"A Philly cheese steak?"

"Yah."

We showered up quickly and walked over. The bar was the Chiang Mai Saloon, and Harry was the owner, a nice guy about 45 years old. I had a juicy French dip with thick steak fries and didn't say a word while I ate. Dan, too, was silently devouring his sandwich. Harry talked about the cities he'd called home and all three were places I was familiar with. His partner was an Austrian named Walter who also owned property in Costa Rica and Florida. He said he owned a house next to Woody Harrison's on the beach in Costa Rica and told me stories about him and Woody playing chess and drinking lemonade. He talked in great detail about the specifics of opening up a guesthouse in the developing world, and I enthusiastically listened.

In the evening we went back to the dark boxing ring area and picked up a couple of Thai girls at one of the bars. They weren't very attractive, but they spoke excellent English. We left the first place for a second place and bought two pints of whiskey and stayed all night till we finished them both. We smoked joint after joint and suddenly the sun appeared. I remember looking across the table and hearing Dan say, "But I *already* kissed you," and me thinking, nice save. I was loaded and still his girl was pit-bull ugly. But her body was predictably small and tight. My girl was oddly large for a Thai but had a pretty face. Then Dan and his butchy ran off, and I took my girl back to our room. It was 7am and I was out of condoms, so I ran barefoot through the streets for 30 minutes looking for an open store. It had been nearly two months since the soup burn, and I hadn't had any female companionship in that time. I was excited and oddly nervous. But when I finally returned, the girl was asleep. I showered and passed out on the other bed.

I awoke two hours later, and the girl was gone. My body and soul felt old and bruised. Distorted impressions and flashes of the previous night danced in my brain like pieces of a puzzle that I couldn't put together. I ordered a Thai omelet and checked my head.

Dan returned around noon, he too was in bad shape.

"I wish she was more attractive," he said. "Cause I'd like to bang her again tonight. I'm thinking of banging her anyway."

I talked him out of it.

The next day we were back at the Chiang Mai Saloon, enjoying our last meal before getting on the night train back to Bangkok. Dan played pool with the bartender, a helluva nice Thai kid and the brother of Harry's girlfriend. I sat at the nearest table to the wide-open entrance and absentmindedly stared across the street. A Thai child was playing with cardboard boxes, slowly climbing in and out of them like an antique cat, while his father lovingly watched. And I thought, things really are the same everywhere. I went to the internet café next door and checked my email. Seamus sent one for Dan and I that read: EVERY FUCKIN THING HERE GOT SO FUCKIN WEIRD I COULD NOT TELL YOU BUT BASICALLY NEVER CALL RIN AGAIN AND I AM NEVER GOING TO SEE ANY OF THEM AGAIN WE CAN TALK ABOUT THIS WHEN YOU GET BACK I MAY SEE TAO ONCE OR TWICE BEFORE I GO FUCK SHE IS HOT OK SEE YA. All capitals and no punctuation, but it was the message that had me stunned. Everything was fine when we left. I printed the email and brought it to the saloon for Dan to read.

"Leave it to Seamus to fuck up a good thing."

"I really didn't wanna see Rin again anyway."

“But what about the free booze?”

“Tell you what, Sparky. How ‘bout you fuck her and I’ll come along and drink for free.” We argued about it over our sandwiches and almost missed the train.

I fell in love with the sleeper trains and convinced Dan to spend a little more and assured him he would not be disappointed. A girl sat across from him picking at a loaf of brown bread. An older Thai man in a suit sat across from me. The girl’s name was Bez, a college student from California. I wrote a story about the soup incident, and she read it and laughed. I showed the Thai guy a picture of my deformed hand when the burn looked its worst. But he was too crushed by the burden of being an adult to give a damn.

After dinner Dan and I stepped between the cars and opened the doors. He on one side leaning out and me on the other, sharing drags off a cigarette. We talked about him returning home, and how he didn’t want to go, and I told him I was thinking about hitting the road myself and going someplace new. When we got back to our seats, they had been converted into bunks, so we climbed in, each of us on the top separated by the aisle. Dan was reading my copy of “On the Road” while I typed in my journal on limited battery power. And soon I was staring at the ceiling, wishing I hadn’t given my only book away, even though I had just finished it for a third time.

I heard something in the aisle and pulled back my curtain. A woman two seats up brought a poodle on board, and now the dog was free from its leash and looking for a nice place to pee.

“Dan.” I whispered. He pulled back his curtain and I pointed down. The dog was sniffing around some luggage then raised a leg and watered the hell out of a lovely little suitcase, while Dan and I both chuckled like mimes and bounced with the train.

“How’s the book?” I asked.

“Nothing ever happens.”

“Yah,” I smiled, “I know.”

He gave it back to me for the night, and I read the last paragraph then fell asleep with it on my chest.

Our first night back in Bangkok we went to a snobby lounge where all the drinks glowed fluorescent. Rin and her wallet and the friends that came with it. Dan and his new girl, Nune – a bar girl from the Bamboo. And me. We never did figure out what Seamus was going on about in his email. Everything seemed about as normal as could be expected. The one exception to this being that I was drinking slower than usual. The sugar mama thing had played itself out. I couldn’t take even one more night of it. Something about Rin’s voice that blistered the hollows of my inner ears. I plotted my escape sitting in front of a Day-Glo aquamarine gin and tonic with the *thump thump thump* stuck in my head and sufficiently nauseated by all things Rin. I dropped down an excuse and left abruptly, but there would be no easy getaway. She was right behind me nipping at my heels. The stumbled, stammered slow-motion walk to the door then the lengthy nod and sigh exchange on the curb, while she rambled on about her mountain of problems. I listened reluctantly for nearly an hour and barley squeezed in a handful of words and grunts. Only about 20 percent of what she said came out coherent and in reasonable English. The rest sounded like a wounded animal screaming for mercy.

Finally I just turned and walked away. She had filled me up with her gibberish. There was no room for more.

Once free it was a quiet cab ride, two 7-Eleven hot dogs, a cold shower and some hang-out time with Yen. Yen worked the graveyard shift at the Tavee. She was a dark-skin beauty with a playful personality, a mocha dream with golden hair. But forbidden fruit. To get involved with her would have compromised her job. And jobs are not easy to come by in Thailand for girls who don't give back-alley blow jobs. Everyone working at the Tavee knew I liked her, it was obvious. And she seemed just as interested in me, always sitting next to me, stealing my hat or hand feeding me whatever she happened to be eating. Usually potato chips. But she also saw me bounce in around sunrise every morning, wrecked and reeking of booze and cheap pussy. I knew she would never let herself become entangled with a tramp like me. She was hesitant and for good reason. I had just whored myself out so my friends and I could drink for free, and this seemed, and still does seem, like a completely reasonable thing to do. Bangkok can be a dangerous city for someone like myself. Always looking for the dark fun. Because everything else seems too subdued.

The following morning I got up early and walked to a travel agency across the street. I purchased a one-way ticket to Cape Town, South Africa, leaving in a few days. I went back to the Tavee and ordered a number 15, my usual. A mighty omelet with cheese and potato, toast and fresh sliced pineapple. I was really going to miss the Tavee. The girls working there had become like family. So had the other travelers, many of whom were regulars like us. Usually I don't appreciate people or places until I've moved on. Only looking back do I recognize what I had. But the Tavee was different, special, and I knew before leaving how important the place had become to me. No matter where we went in SE Asia, we always came back to Bangkok and the Tavee. It was my home. I felt it upon every return. Colorado was a wonderful stretch of land where I had friends and family, but the Tavee felt more like home.

Maybe there was too much pressure for a last night, or perhaps we had all just run dry. The three of us went to the Bamboo, of course. Dan was leaning on the bar drooling on Nune, while I sat at a table with silent Seamus drinking a Carlsberg. Seamus was upset about Tao, because she had three boyfriends, besides him or maybe including him, he wasn't certain. He had just found out and was trying to pretend that it didn't bother him. I told him no bar girl in Bangkok had just one guy, but he was dumb and refused to listen. Dan ran over to our table a couple of times then ran out. Rin ran over and jabbed me in the ribs with her pool cue. She was holding a grudge because I blew her off, even though she had since replaced me. But on this night she was with her fat-ass husband, who groped and pooltabled all the available bamboo right in front of her. Apple knew I was leaving soon and poured her heart into my vodka tonic, on the house of course. A tall and slender new girl behind the bar made me smile, but she was too innocent to be there, and the changes she would go through made me sad. I had seen it with other girls at the bar. It's evolution. Country girl to Bangkok whore. I tried to drink but lost interest. Seamus remained silent and sober and waited like a Christmas Eve child for Tao, who was running about three hours late.

Dan never came back, so I left and made it back to the Tavee much earlier than usual. Everything was falling apart, and it surprised me how tragic it felt. We went through the motions of a Last Night, but none of us wanted to accept it, or even

acknowledge it, and it made us squirm and act funny. We knew it would someday end, but the longer it went on, the harder it became to walk away. We had grown into a family during the many months we had been together. Seamus, Dan, Mario, Wade and John – these guys were my brothers. They will always be my brothers.

Dan left the following night. Seamus and I walked down the alley with him one last time and out onto the street where a cab was conveniently parked. We hugged our Pasty Boy and shouted a couple of parting insults, then sadly watched as his taxi drove away. What is it that forces us to watch so intensely as someone leaves us, reluctant to turn away too soon as their existence is reduced to a receding speck in the dreary night?

“That’s crazy,” Seamus turned to me. “We might not ever see him again.”

I went up to the room to write in my journal. I found a note on my bed.

“I’ve never been one for ‘little notes’. I feel the same way about them as I do group emails. But they serve their purpose. That is to feign affection without really trying. With this in mind, I bid you both farewell. I have no doubt I’ll see you both again where we’ll pick up where we left off – bad cards, cheap thrills and poonah. Dan.”

I put on some Bob Dylan and he sang, “*Times they are a changin’.*” They certainly are, I thought. I was leaving in 40 hours for Cape Town, and Seamus was staying in Bangkok. Brandon was leaving just hours before me for the States, and then there was Mario in Melbourne singing for a raucous crowd and John pouring a beer in dreary England with a smirk on his face. Wade was curled up on a hard prison floor trying to get some sleep, while Dan sat alone in the Bangkok airport, and all the other faces from so many other places were getting on with life, and Bob sang, “*Don’t think twice, it’s all right.*” Yes, I thought, the times they are a changin’.

Chapter 16

September 12, 2001, Kathmandu Time

Shit happens, they say, and who better to know? Perhaps that explains how I found myself at the Kathmandu airport with no visa, no passport photos, no paper money to buy a visa. No clue. And Cape Town? Well, in the final hours I was led to believe that South Africa was more expensive than I had realized. So I decided to go to Nepal instead.

The flight was delayed for an hour with everyone on board. Apparently there was a midget stuck in the turbo prop. But, of course, the announcement was in Nepalese. So it might have been something more logical, since the plane had no propellers. Something like, "Excuse me, I have an announcement. The flight will be delayed about an hour. The pilot is having a beer drinking contest and is quite close to winning. But since he's been drinking so much he'll obviously need to shower. We can't have our pilot smelling bad, now can we? So just as soon as that drunk fucker stumbles in smelling sweet as freshly killed roses, then we'll be flying just as high as he is. Until then we're not on the clock. So please piss off." Then the flight attendant puffed out her chest and disappeared.

The plane was full and hot. My t-shirt was covered in sweat puddles, and everyone talked loudly and unnecessarily raised the temperature further because they just had to share their opinions on some restaurant or movie or cabbage like it was end-of-the-world important. All their pestering voices bouncing around the cabin, unable to escape, nearing a volume level that was sure to induce orbital leakage and Pentecostal hysteria. Their noises burrowed into my brain like a freshly sharpened porcupine. Oh, how I wanted to get off that plane. In back of me sat an Israeli punter kicking my seat. In front of me a stoned Arab loudmouth laughing like a high-pitched little girl. And between them I sat like Switzerland, wishing and hoping on the plane that couldn't fly.

Finally at the Kathmandu airport with everyone standing in one customs line, I sat down and wondered if I would have to spend the night there, what would become of my backpack sitting alone at baggage claim. But I didn't care. If everything always works out in India, I reasoned, certainly that would also apply to Nepal. I was the last up to the window. All the other travelers came prepared, and I watched from a wooden bench and silently wondered how this would play out. But lo and behold, the good

customs people let me into their country on a promise that I would return the following day with money to purchase a visa. They held my passport hostage as collateral. I jumped into a taxi, and the driver was a masochist, jamming his way at top speed through the twisting-alley city with no regard for my safety or his own. Cows sunbathed on the battered and sometimes paved roads, and I sat in the back and smiled.

I got a room in a decent guesthouse then threw a few rupees at a kid to go fetch me a pack of smokes. I hung off the balcony breathing deep, thinking about how crazy life is. How quickly change comes. I could see vague outlines of trees and small clay houses, a few twinkling lights in the distance. It was around 8pm, and I hadn't eaten all day so I went for some food and a nice walk.

I wandered through the narrow streets of people and cars, brick and concrete. I shuffled between bicycles and taxis, steered clear of oncoming hawkers and dodged madmen on motorcycles. I peered upward at all the buildings and all the signs on all the buildings and felt dizzy, intoxicated on the moment. My nose absorbed every odor. Strange spices, exhaust fumes, the smell of rain. My ears rang with the sounds of bells and horns, of foreign chatter and industrious sales pitches, of engines revving and people laughing.

With each corner turned I discovered new distractions and greater obstacles. To my right stood the Carpet Man, hissing and pointing into his wall-to-wall shop. Coming from straight ahead was a toothless dwarf wearing a peculiar grin and fidgeting with a small wooden chess set, "No? Maybe backgammon?" And on my heels a young boy, dirty as his shine box, "Sir, I can fix shoes for you, can shine for you. Sir? Please, sir."

Jagged intersections inside the maze require cat-like reflexes and unwavering faith. The people don't notice the vehicles and the vehicles respond by trying to drive through the people. "Sidewalks," I wished aloud. Mad hatters on 1950s bicycles rang their bells triumphantly while pedaling through the shifting masses of humanity. The jerk and wiggle movements of a taxi, an ambitious driver searching for a fare, an evening dupe. "Hello friend. Taxi? I take you. Come." Speeding horns screamed from hidden corners and people jumped away with slow-motion urgency. Those madmen on motorcycles narrowly missing side mirrors and elbows. "Going too fast for conditions," my old Driver's Ed. Teacher might say.

Thousands of neon signs clung to buildings and peered out of alleyways, jockeying for an advantageous position. A plentiful display of unpretentious illumination, like a sky full of stars on a moonless rural night. "Hotel Pacifist." "Yeti Airlines: Experience the Shangri La." "Massage 3rd Floor." A fresh rain had just fallen upon the mystical city, sparkling brown puddles surfaced everywhere. Music poured from doorways and hidden-alley hangouts. People drifted back into the streets, grouped together and sang into the cool night. A herd of wet tourists exploded with laughter.

Congestion thickened as the central artery of the city became overwhelmed with night prowlers. I walked past Western searchers in local dress and locals in conservative Western wear, beyond all the strange faces of the world looking past, at or through me. A cartoon-like scene of stray-missile headlights, soaring-decibel motorcycles and street-savvy concierges, "Rug? Shawl? ... Hashish?"

"Hmmm. *Hashish*, you say?"

The next morning I ate a greasy omelet on the rooftop restaurant of my hotel, then jumped into a taxi for the airport to purchase a visa and retrieve my passport. But

there was a problem, and I was told to return in a couple of hours. Down the road from the airport sits a sprawling temple complex, and I walked over to have a look. There were more tour guides than tourists, kids offering their 16 years of knowledge for \$10 a pop. But this is just the first price, and the fun comes in trying to out-walk them while you haggle for something you don't want or need. More of them approach, calling themselves "friends," and I have to finally say, "Look, you're not getting my money, so piss off." Then someone tells me to say, "*cha day na*," which means, "get the fuck away from me" or something equally vulgar but appropriate.

A river flows through the temple and cremations take place on its concrete banks. A body was nearly done burning. I watched as people pushed the still-smoldering pile into the river. Fifty feet away another family was quietly preparing a body for cremation. They were piling sticks and brush on top of the wrapped corpse, which sat high atop a foundation of firewood. A kid came over, "just friend" he assured me and began talking about hashish and telling me how his teacher, his *sadhu*, could lift a rock with his penis. So naturally I followed him.

We went into a tiny mud hut near the main entrance and sat down on a rickety cot. A feeble, half-naked old man crawled over and curled up at my feet like a cat. He poked at my shoes and legs and whatever else fascinated him. Inside it was dark, just a few blades of light jetting through the cracks in the doorway. The old man was nearly invisible in the darkness, but I could feel him breathing on me. Then he reached up and gingerly swiped my hat. The kid finished rolling a joint and handed it to me. We smoked and traded smiles for several minutes, and I thought about having to go into that crazy woodshed airport carrying a head full of hashish. I'd begin mumbling with glossy eyes, and they'd drag me off and fleece me, toss me into a hole with leeches and expired dairy products. The kid interrupted my thoughts and told me that the old man gets paid to lift the rock. But I laughed and told them that wasn't going to happen. They wanted money for the hash I smoked, and I lied and told them I had none. They wanted my hat, my shirt, anything they could get their meaty little fingers on. And I told them, "*Cha day na*."

Back at the airport I was running through security, setting off alarms, which is not acceptable behavior in an airport. But thankfully no one seemed to care or notice. I paid \$30 for my visa, collected my passport, caught a taxi back into town and smoked a cigarette on my balcony. The air was thankfully cool compared to SE Asia, and I felt more alive because of it. It was once again a pleasure to be outside.

Birds played chase the leader over and around ancient buildings weathered by the centuries into several shades of earth. A dog yelped in high, excited tones at the falling sun, as an old woman casually tossed a bucketful of water into the alley below. Across the road two young boys were putting the finishing touches on a metal railing they had been painting all day. Multicolored prayer flags ruffled in the breeze while the mighty Himalayan range stood tall and stoic in the background. I bought some sandwiches at a deli then went back to my room and ate. I shaved my face clean for the first time in months and showered for the first time in days then put on "Dark Side of the Moon" and began reading "The Dice Man" while puffing on a joint.

The following morning I awoke early to look for a cheaper place to stay. Four dollars a night was about twice what I wanted to spend. When I came down to the lobby, George W. Bush was on TV addressing the nation. America, not Nepal. I

immediately said, “Oh, what’s this moron talking about now?” A young boy sitting on the floor was smiling and pointing at the television, urging me to keep watching. The president finished up within seconds, then a reporter for the BBC recapped the events that took place while I slept. It was the morning of September 12, 2001, Kathmandu time. I watched in disbelief as the tape rolled and the planes crashed into the World Trade Center and then the towers fell, which totally caught me by surprise. Everything in unreal time, way too much to process all at once. It looked like a bad action movie, and my mind nervously struggled with the reality of it. Back in the States it was the evening of the 11th and everyone was trying to put together the pieces. I went upstairs and packed.

Out on the street I felt like a shadow. It was a wonderful Kathmandu morning, the sun shining, the temperature a refreshing 65 degrees. The smell of fresh bread wafting out an open bakery door. But my body and mind were on autopilot and I noticed little. I found an adequate room with a balcony for a little over a dollar then smoked a huge joint and sat on the edge of my bed biting my fingernails for what seemed like hours.

I was angry, confused. I felt absolutely helpless, and that’s what bothered me most. There was nothing I could do. And no one to talk to about it. I thought about all those people at work in the towers when the planes hit and of the firemen sprinting into the burning buildings when every working brainwave is screaming to turn around and run the other way. Not only avoiding the usual hazards but also falling people who were jumping and exploding on impact. One minute you’re eating your morning bagel and the next you have to decide how you’re going to die. Fire or fall? I was really getting inside their heads. The combination of the attack and hashish and a vivid imagination was affecting me strangely and deeply. My feelings had a red-hot intensity, but I couldn’t make sense of them. I certainly couldn’t control them.

The portents of a traveling madman: on the table sits some bread, a jar of peanut butter, a Swiss army knife atop the jar with the long blade open and smeared with peanut butter, a travel alarm clock, toiletries, half a roll of toilet paper, an empty water bottle, my wallet, room key, some odd nasal drug from Thailand, four unread and recently purchased books, a plastic bag of batteries, electrical converters, condoms, some spare plastic bags for garbage and a bundle of Tibetan incense. On the floor next to the table is a plastic bag half full of trash, burning incense, four bottles of water each with different water levels, an empty backpack, a pair of sandals, a pile of dirty clothes and a pair of Nikes. On my bed lay my semi-clean clothes, two pieces of rain-soaked clothing trying desperately to dry, my modest collection of CDs, four postcards, two pens, a map of Kathmandu, “The Dice Man,” a magazine holding loose tobacco, a lighter, one empty pack of cigarettes, one full pack, rolling papers and a big bar of hashish. Everything I needed.

Eric Clapton played guitar. I listened to Eric Clapton play guitar. My mind wasn’t right, I knew this. I hid in my room, going out only when absolutely necessary. Pacing a groove into the floor, babbling random thoughts out loud like, “Why do we assume enemies to be men?” and, “Nothing ever goes as planned,” and so on and so forth. I had so little to do and so much time to do it, but plenty of time for *thinking*. I rubbed my furry head like a nervous gorilla. My thoughts came at me like daggers,

random and full of fury. But I couldn't hang on to a single one. I was dumb with doubt, walking the streets completely mad, staring into dark faces and wondering how *they* feel about it. Do they *cheer* behind that smile? Do they *SEE* me?

My sanity had been replaced by nostalgia. A remember-when-I-had-brain-function feeling, just barely noticeable in my current condition. With dead eyes I snarled down the lunatic trail draped in desperation, tripping over every idealistic thought I ever gave birth to. Shaking them off my leg like a yapping poodle you just want to kick in the face. "I GIVE UP," I screamed. "YOU WIN!" But who or what was I screaming at? "This world is no place for an idealist," I say to my backpack, which is eagerly listening. "It will sniff you out and carve you up into bite-size pieces." "Not just yet," the backpack replies, "there's still hope. It's only Round Two."

Ding ding!

Idealism comes out of the corner fast, with purpose, jabbing and moving side to side, methodically working over his opponent. But here comes Cynicism with a flurry of punches his own self. Cynicism is strong, with a natural aggression Idealism can't compete with. In fact, Idealism looks petrified, like he already knows how it ends. And soon Cynicism has gained total control and is pounding away without mercy. Turning a man into hamburger in front of the slovenly crowd that barks and burps with pleasure. Idealism should have fallen, but Cynicism is propping him up with one hand. Taking him apart with the other. His victim now limp as a used pickle. He wants to get his point across. He does. He finally lets go, and Idealism falls to the mat like a side of beef, his dark red blood slowly meandering across the surface like a river looking for the sea. A sad, nearly silent "ooooohhhh" resonates throughout the crowd. They know the significance. The conscience counts to ten then declares Cynicism the winner by knockout. Idealism isn't moving. He's dead. The death of hope, scream the news whores, while they objectively weep. An innocent victim, the newspapers will say. The garbage men are summoned and rush over to get the piece of meat rotting in the ring. They're frothing at the mouth and furiously sniffing at the corpse. Addicted to the smell of death, they are. Into the back of the truck he goes. *Chomp chomp chomp*. The garbage men lick their lips and wring their hands, deliriously glee stricken by the sounds of crackling bones and snapping tendons. Oh yes, dead as dog food. The ambulance team looks on bored, wishing Idealism was only maimed so they'd have some say in it. But he's gone now, and maybe he never *was* to begin with.

I come out of my coma long enough to roll another joint, while the Red Hot Chili Peppers ask, "*How long will I slide?*" The head leaves the body to continue on alone, but how? A half cackle, half growl comes loudly through my balcony door, and I become frightened and think, was that *real*? How did I get here? *SLOW DOWN YOUR MIND!* Who said that? Two weeks passed me by. I remember Jimi Hendrix in a fog singing, "*There must be some way outta here.*"

Chapter 17

Multicolored Bug Juice

I was glad to be back in Bangkok with friends, but I immediately fell into an old routine. My first night back at the Bamboo with Seamus, we somehow split up drunk and stupid, and I stumbled to the Playboy with a forgotten girl. Seamus and I went to Nana Plaza one night to play with the go-go girls. Naked bamboo everywhere, swinging on poles, pouring drinks. All of them fit and fine and mine for the plucking. I turned to Seamus and said something like, "This is what God must feel like." I got up to take a leak, which involved leaving the bar, but then got lost. Three floors of girlie bars and all of them identical when you're slow roasted. Some girls pulled me into another bar, and I forgot all about Seamus. After closing down the bar, two of the girls took me to a local spot to eat then back to their apartment. In the morning I awoke sandwiched between them. All of us naked.

Seamus and I played basketball on the hard court across the road from the Tavee with poor little local kids wearing new Nikes. But he had a critical shoe malfunction and no socks, so I gave him my only pair, which resulted in numerous blisters for me. I was back three days when I thought of leaving again. Bangkok was doing nothing to fix my head. Just more lost nights getting wrecked.

At the Bamboo one odd night, I met Wan, a cute girl who told me in very bad English that she was leaving but would be there the following night. In case I wanted to see her. I did. Seamus and I went to Thai prison to see Wade again. He looked better, a little more calm. "Three more weeks to go." "Hang in there, buddy." Leaving the prison, a girl on the back of a scooter yelled at me with a huge smile and waved excitedly. "You can find girls anywhere here," Seamus said. "Even at prison." The next day I bought a ticket for Chicago, leaving in a week.

I promised Seamus that if I left for the States I'd rent a car before leaving and the two of us would drive that bastard all over Thailand for five days and get weird with it. Traffic flows on the left side of the road in Thailand. The steering wheel was on the right side, but the five-speed gear shifter was to my left. The gears were in their old familiar places, but now I was on the other side of them. First gear was away from body rather than toward it. Everything backwards. And traffic in Bangkok can in no way be compared to anything in the States, not even L.A., not by a long shot. I was driving and Seamus was scanning the LP Thailand guidebook for a useable map that could lead us

out of that clamoring city of 8 million people and 5 million scooters. On my right I had two feet of lane, on the left about one foot of the *other* lane.

“Look out, Nick! ... SCOOTER! Oh my gentle Jesus. You almost ran that guy over.” Seamus was yelling and getting spooked. I was also yelling.

“Get me the FUCK OUTTA HERE. Am I in the right lane? Do you know what you’re doing?”

“Yah, I think so ... RED LIGHT. (tires squealing) Jesus. OK, when the light turns green, try to get in the far left lane. Well not all the way over but ... ya know, I’m not really sure which lane we need to be in, so just be prepared. But the road we’re looking for is ... Butchencari ... or something like that. I can spell it for you.”

“Oh my God,” I said painfully. I wanted to cover my eyes, it was too awful to watch. There would be many deaths in five days. Vegas odds had me at 3 to 1 that I’d kill at least 10 and main another two dozen.

I was getting better at staying in one lane but still had trouble shifting with my left hand. It reminded me of a carnival game where I could win a stuffed iguana with a little concentration and luck. But this was no time for luck. No time for *beginners*. Lives were on the line. The Thais would be expecting me to *NOT* run them over. Would I disappoint them? But the real problem was moving the car sideways in the dense chaos. First, there were too many lanes. And to jump from one to another you had to aggressively wedge yourself sideways into small openings, gimping spasmodically from lane to lane like a junkie crab. Stuck between lanes and between vehicles you hope a scooter doesn’t hit the car and launch an entire family of Thais like they were shot from a cannon. That would be bad. And these scooters will come at you from everywhere, and your head just might fall off trying to keep up with them all. And you won’t either. It’s not possible. Everything about driving in Bangkok is so random and unexpected, and I was just getting a sense of how fucking freaking fudging felatioing unprepared I was for it. Yes, many deaths, I thought.

Seamus helped me pick my spots and we scraped a few bike tires getting over. And judging by the screams, we did scare several people. The left side mirror brushed a telephone pole a half second after Seamus yanked his arm in the car.

“WOW!” I yelled. “That was close.”

We continued to scare the hell out of families on motorbikes, and Seamus screamed a couple of times, too. But eventually I straightened her out, and soon we were on the highway speeding to Kanchanaburi, just a short two-hour drive northwest of Bangkok.

“What are the chances,” I was saying, “of us actually surviving the next five days?” I sped up to about twice the posted speed limit. The road was four lanes and wide now, like any old cross-country highway. “How about the chances of us returning this here car with no cuts or bruises or missing doors?”

“Well, judging by that shit back there, I’d say it doesn’t look good for us or the car,” Seamus said, poking around the dashboard in front of him. “I wonder if this thing has a passenger side airbag.”

I laughed.

“We’re lucky this thing has tires.” The car was old and sickly. A splendid piece of shit.

A few guys at the Tavee told us about a guesthouse in Kanchanaburi where they would be staying, but we couldn’t find it. And asking directions for a guesthouse whose

name you cannot remember in a foreign country ... let's just say it took us some time. We finally found it, and it was located right on top of the river. The bamboo walkway leading to the cabanas bobbed up and down in the water. We got a room facing the famous bridge over the river Kwai. The town is surrounded by rolling jungle hills, extremely laid back, friendly, the kind of place a person could get stuck in. H had purchased a café across the street and was busy remodeling it. Kurtz was helping him, and a few other guys were there just hanging out. We bought some smoke, but no one had papers, so Kurtz built a bong using an empty Coca-Cola bottle, one toothpick and a fresh papaya stem.

A floating bar spent the night moving up and down the river past our porch. Every half hour or so the party barge with blinking lights and awful music swam by. It was a hairy, stinking wart on an otherwise perfect face. I wanted a bazooka so I could blow it to smithereens. Send it back to hell. It was intruding on my calm. But things like this would soon become common and everywhere you go more modern every day. More Western, too, though often their own strange interpretation. Asia is dying. All the reasons that backpackers came in the 1960s are nearly gone. These days if you want a genuine Asian experience, you'll need to build a time machine.

It was around 3am when I looked up and saw something evil making waves in the swampy mess on the water's edge. I remembered earlier when H had said, "Just the other day I saw a lizard about three feet long going into that shrubbery." He pointed to the bushes just a few feet from me. "On the road out here, oh, about a week ago, I saw a snake, huge, at least 10 feet long and thick. There's all kinds of things around here. This is the jungle."

It was Seamus, Kurtz and I doing our best to finish the sack, everyone else had crashed. I continued to watch the water and thought my mind was playing tricks, but then Kurtz said something about the mystery animal, and then Seamus saw it, too. We couldn't actually see it so much as hear it. Under a lame moon we could only see dark patches of rippling water. This thing was either very large, or there were many of them. Something kept breaking through the surface of the still water and in different places at odd intervals. But there were never several breaks in the water at one time, which led us to believe that we were dealing with something large and quick. We thought about it a good long while, smoking and scaring each other for fun, and eventually came to the conclusion that it had to be a giant snake. Like a man-eating anaconda. The scene was perfect for it: dark as death, goopy clouds, black water and quiet as a dead hooker. It was the point in the movie when everyone in the theatre is screaming at you to run. Would we run, or would we be eaten? We came to our decision quickly. We were much too stoned to be eaten by an imaginary anaconda. So we did the sensible thing and ran for our lives.

In the morning I ate a quiet breakfast and read the Bangkok Post. The town was just coming to life, and slowly. Still early, but already the heat and humidity created a thick layer of sweat dripping down my forearms. Streaming down my face. My clothing quickly becoming spotted with sweat puddles. My salty wet hands leaving perspiration patches on the newspaper. Ink stains on damp fingers. A kind of thick, abusive humidity you cannot imagine. Your clothes stick to you and stretch and feel heavy and strange. Your entire body is leaking, and you wonder, how much water must I consume to keep up? You've got crotch rot and ass puddles and isn't that lovely? And I was only

sitting. Moving meant resistance, like the air was pushing against you. Your entire body feels heavier and just the *thought* of moving robs you of the required energy to do so. Your brain doesn't function either and you start to wonder if it, too, is sweating. There's only one thing to do in a climate like that – nothing. Lethargy is required. It's expected. So I obliged and happily sat and read my wet newspaper. Ferociously sweating but in no hurry to move. Then I remembered that we were going to Chiang Mai next, and the good times Dan and I had there were fresh in my mind. And, of course, those wonderful sandwiches.

I ran to the room to force Seamus awake, but that didn't work, so I told him the cops were after us because of *blah blah blah* and purposely trailed off as I hurriedly packed.

“What?” he asked, squinting at me with one eye.

“THE COPS! Weren't you listening? I don't have time to explain it all over again.”

“But why are we ... ”

“Jesus, do you wanna go to jail? Is that what you want? Just pack it up quick like, and I'll tell you 'bout it in the car. Good Lord, *blah blah blah* ... ” Within minutes we were in the car and pointed north.

On the road there was little to hold our attention and no music, so I pressed the gas pedal to the floor and almost through it. We made it to Chiang Mai in seven hours, five faster than the buses. We got lost once and asked a security guard for directions, but he didn't speak English. So we backed over his aluminum sign and wasted half an hour before finding the highway again. The car tapped out around 150 km an hour. Nobody passed us all day.

My foot with the basketball blisters was giving me problems. I noticed it a couple days earlier but just brushed it aside like I do all injuries. Expecting it to heal itself through magical forces. And then at some point just before amputation is necessary, I'll bounce into a hospital and the doctors will say something like, “If only you had come in sooner, we could've ... ” Ah, regret. I could no longer fit my foot into my shoe, it had swelled too much and was quite painful. I could still walk, though barely, and I had a few ideas on how to kill the pain.

I had been talking up the Chiang Mai Saloon to Seamus during the ride, and we were both anxious to go. So after checking into our guesthouse, we started walking for the saloon. Seamus in my Nikes and me wearing his nasty flip-flops, but I quickly returned them to the room and went barefoot instead.

Harry was throwing a party at the saloon, it was one of the girl's birthdays. We dove into the punch and ordered beers and shoved free finger food into our mouths by the handful. Then we ordered dinner. We didn't know what was in the punch, but it was strong and did its job well. I thought about taking Seamus to the weird boxing ring area with all the bars, but that meant the possibility of running into the two girls that Dan and I had picked up just a few weeks before. So we walked down the street from the saloon, and bars lined both sides. Small, cozy places with wide-open fronts where petite Thai lovelies do their best to boost your ego onto a bar stool. There is nothing in this world more fragile and easier to manipulate than the male ego. Their job is your pleasure. And they are damn good at it.

A few girls arm dragged us into the Marin Bar. We met a Canadian named Lionel and some old man with a rucksack of Viagra jokes. But he disappeared quickly. *drink*

drink drink drink drink ... and then I was chattering away at one of the girls, tip toeing around my lustful intentions. Seamus was playing checkers and losing badly. Lionel and I began talking drugs, and soon we had a sack from the bartender. It was near closing time and the only people still there, other than the girls, were Lionel, Seamus and me. All night there had been only a trickle of other men stopping briefly, but they could see the joint was ours. We had carefully marked our territory. One girl pulled down the garage door in front, and two others went to the night market for food. I was rolling joints on the bar with Lionel, and Seamus was getting blasted at pool. And soon we had food, a huge feast of different plates of spicy vegetables with tasty sauces and pork on sticks that had been grilled to juicy perfection. Everything was tasty and filled us up right.

It was around 2am and the cops were patrolling the streets, looking to thump the late nighters. Most of us were huddled in a backroom storage area. Every so often one of the girls would scream, "POLICE!" and we'd all get silent. Then we'd come out for a while and smoke a joint, shoot some pool. And again one of the girls would yell, and we'd all sprint for the back room holding our tongues and beers. This repeated itself many times in the course of an hour ...

And then it was 7am, and one of the girls threw open the garage door and said, "We open again." Seamus was inhaling a roach at the bar, and I sat with two of the girls on the front deck. We were talking of going swimming and there were sexual overtones. Of this, I am certain. But then Seamus bumbled his way through us onto the street and announced loudly that we would walk with Lionel since he was going in the same direction as us. Then the two of them swayed away like long lost drunks. "Rat bastard," I said under my breath. I turned to the girls and mumbled something about missed opportunities and said goodbye then hobbled down the street with wild eyes and one huge pink foot.

We slept a few hours then loaded the car and drove to the saloon for one last meal. I was still drunk and my foot was growing larger and more painful. Back on the road we pointed the car west and pushed her to Pai. It was a short three-hour drive through rolling hills dotted with vegetable stands and tiny villages. We got a room, then Seamus and I went to the hospital. I could no longer tolerate the pain. Pai is one of these tiny villages, and its hospital resembled a concrete MASH unit. We met a Canadian girl there with scrapes on her arm who barked incessantly about her slightest of injuries like she was about to drop dead at any moment. Oh, how I wished to trade injuries with her. Or at least shove my big, swollen foot into her mouth. If she was attractive, then it would have at least been tolerable. This doesn't look good, I thought, staring at my foot. There's no doubt about it, they'll have to amputate. I was chuckling nervously at the thought when ...

"If they don't know how to treat it," Seamus was saying. *No no, do not finish that thought.* "They'll just chop it off. *WHACK!*"

"You fuckin' Republican!"

The nurses were wearing the old school, white uniforms. One of them seemed to even understand me when I spoke. I remembered the eye drop incident then began thinking about club feet and plastic limbs, which led my mind to stray over to steely hooks for hands then that awful movie with Jennifer Love Hewitt. And of course after that my mind was ruled by sex until ...

“Mister Meesstraa ...”

“Yep, here,” and I hop followed the nurse into some kind of huge surgery shed. Seamus came along. He enjoyed seeing me in pain. I climbed onto a table with the standard cloth sheet running down the center. Seamus was telling me how much this was going to hurt, just as the doctor, presumably a doctor, came in and began fondling my foot. She looked just like the nurse only in a different uniform. And she had plenty of time to change clothes. She said that my foot was badly infected. One of my blisters, she said. One of the blisters I got playing basketball with no socks. *SEAMUS!* She had a tray loaded with sharp instruments and a fabulous collection of needles. She smiled at me and really seemed to enjoy her work. Then she stabbed me between the toes two times with a syringe, while I squeezed my eyes shut and gripped the sides of the table. She left for ten minutes then came back in with more cutting devices. She draped a sheet over my legs with a hole positioned over the infected toe. Then she went to work on it.

My eyes were closed so tight I wondered if they would ever open again. I can't be sure, but I think the doctor was using a cheese grater on my toe. There was a lot of scraping and digging, like she was landscaping her yard. I lifted my head at one point and saw Seamus hunched over and squinting, half looking away with a sour, wincing look on his face. And he couldn't even see my toe clearly, just the crazy woman assaulting my foot and me writhing in obvious pain. I kept thinking, OK, just about done, that *has* to be it. But it never was. My mind was back on that mountain in India pushing the damn bike, an endless orgy of suffering with no end in sight.

Right before the doc dug into my toe, a huge green insect with a wingspan of at least 4 inches flew in an open window and began circling above me. The doc looked up and saw it then casually returned her attention to my toe. I looked at Seamus, and he shrugged. The two of us followed it around the room with our eyes, and that big, dumb bug flew right into a fan and sprayed out the other side. The wall was awash in multicolored bug juice. Orange and yellow and green pus dripping down the wall. I looked back at Seamus and his hands were grappling with his head. This was the precise moment that the doctor began torturing me.

When I finally fell off the table, I discovered that I had sweat through my clothes. My shirt was nearly dripping and my shorts had just a few dry patches. I was told to come back the next morning so they could inflict more pain, then Seamus and I walked slowly back to our guesthouse. My toe looked like it was wearing a marshmallow. A huge white bandage pushed the neighboring toes into one another. We wandered around a bit, but it was raining, so we settled in someplace to eat and drink a few beers. I had painkillers now and ate a small handful. The shots at the hospital had worn off, and my toe was blazing with pain. We were worn out from the previous night, so we made it in early and smoked a couple of joints and I passed out quick and slept hard. In the morning my toe throbbed me awake.

We got out of the room just before checkout and ate lunch while a sudden rainstorm violently thrashed the town. The air was almost cool, and we were dripping from the short hop across the street. We stopped at the hospital on the way out of town, but it was packed with hill tribe people in far-out clothing, and one man laid out on a stretcher didn't appear to be breathing. Home health care had become a hobby of mine out of necessity. Surely I could manage a little infection. We jumped back into the car

and headed south on a circular two-lane highway through thick jungled hills. We had no destination in mind, although I secretly wanted to go back to Chiang Mai. There was one girl that I couldn't shake from my mind.

The road was weavy and loopy with many turns and bends and I tried to go as fast as possible without crashing and burning. Seamus had a firm grip on the dashboard. We passed motorbikes, buses, cars and trucks, tractors, trailers of sorts and other strange vehicles. Passed them like they were standing still at times ... *whoosh!* The tires squealed on several sharp curves, and Seamus screamed over the rushing wind, "TIRES AREN'T SUPPOSE TO SQUEAL IN FOURTH GEAR!"

"It'll be OK," I said. "Try and relax." I was having fun. It reminded me of the time I drove through the 14 or so mountain ranges across northern Nevada on the Loneliest Highway in America. A spectacular, swervy dervy ride with both hands locked on the wheel. Or going through Tahoe on the same highway. It's like trying to steer a roller coaster.

Eight hours later we were back in Chiang Mai at the saloon, sitting over a couple of sandwiches. We missed a turnoff, or maybe my subconscious was to blame, so we drove in a huge circle, and the whole trip was one long Disney ride. My hands were vibrating like I'd just hit a tree with a baseball bat. Seamus threw up in the restroom then blamed it on lunch. The last hour to Chiang Mai was narrowly accomplished in the dark of night with no street lights or highway reflectors or medians, and all the vehicles seemed to be driving in whatever lane they damn well felt like driving in. Headlights bearing down on us, swerving at the last minute to avoid a mash up. And me passing slower cars even though I couldn't see anything with dust shooting everywhere. Seamus squirmed in his seat, slowly turning a delicious shade of green.

Harry was throwing another party, some other girl's birthday, he said. Once again we ate and drank ourselves silly. We were beginning to feel special, and we told Harry so. I told him about my hospital visit, and he cringed. I ate a couple more painkillers, then we walked to the Marin Bar. There was an old American guy at the bar with a young Thai man, and we sat next to them. We ordered a couple of beers and were telling the girls all about our foul-up on the road and how we were glad to be back, when the old man suddenly slammed his hand on the bar.

"Get me an 18 year-old girl and a big bag of Viagra," he said, turning to Seamus. "You want one young fella?" The Viagra guy! Could it be? He was telling Seamus about his Thai son-in-law who was sitting next to him.

"I don't know what he's saying, and he doesn't know what I'm saying, but we're going out drinking." He never mentioned his name but went on forever about where he was from in northwestern Montana and his wife, who we assumed was back home sheering sheep or churning butter. Knitting a cow perhaps.

"She only believes in having sex to make babies, and she don't want no more babies." Then he popped off his stool, a frail old man, and pointed across the room at two girls shooting pool. "You wanna fuck me? I have plenty of Viagra." Then he jiggled his hips, and I thought I heard something crack. Seamus was in tears.

The old man left, and Seamus and I sat out front on the patio and played checkers. We were drinking at a good clip, and I continued to pop painkillers. One of the girls was off on her scooter getting us a sack.

"I just want a girl that isn't too comfortable in a whore house," Seamus said, out of the blue. "Ya know what I mean? I was gonna hook up with this girl once, but a

cockroach ran by her foot and she didn't scream or even seem startled, so I ditched her. I was gonna go home with her, but I don't want *any* girl that doesn't mind cockroaches. If only they knew how quickly they could make an error."

"YOU ARE A MORON!" And I said it nice and slow, hoping it would sink in. But he just went on about something else that made no sense.

Somehow I learned that the girl I liked was named Pawn, and before the nightly run to the market we had gotten a little cozy. I was on a stool, and she was to the side of me with her arms around me and eventually crawled into my lap. She couldn't speak or understand a word of English, but I talked to her anyway. The bartender asked if I wanted to go along to the market, so she and Pawn and I piled onto the scooter and zoomed across town. I looked down at my bare feet, my big white bandage now black and unraveling in the wind. Pawn rubbed my leg the whole way there. I bought the food since they got it last time, and we sped back to the bar and closed the garage door. Barrels of sticky rice and more pork on sticks and assorted dishes of everything, buckets and sacks of food scattered across the bar and all for less than \$5. I leaned back in a chair, while Pawn fed me a bite of each dish.

As usual I lost track of time and soon the huge door was open again and so was the bar. I sat out front staring into the morning sun in a complete and pleasant stupor. Pawn came over and sat in my lap, just as a Thai guy jogged by carrying hand weights.

And then we were out in the street. Pawn and the bartender were trying to get into a *tuk tuk* but the driver was passed out in the back seat and snoring. They went through his pockets and pulled out money and lighters, and he began to moan but refused to wake up. They tried, too, kicking him and pinching him, pulling his belt off and beating him with it. Then the bartender explained how she pays him monthly to drive the two of them home after work. He was stinking drunk because it was his birthday, she said. They finally woke him, and he was hammered, puttering and slobbering into the driver's seat. We all piled into the back and he agreed to drop Seamus and me at our guesthouse, but a quarter mile down the road he stopped suddenly and jumped out.

"You want give me fuck?" He was swaying back and forth with his knees bent, his body just barely winning the fight against gravity. His stomach hanging out of his ripped and rotten shirt. His face visibly dirty like a stupid child. A delicate pearl of drool resting on his chin. "Come on, you want fuck me?" He started to unzip his pants. "Come on, it my birthday!"

"I sure hope he's not talking to us," Seamus said.

"No," the bartender said. "Him OK, he just drunk. And stupid." She leaned her head out of the *tuk tuk*, "You fool, get your ass back." Pawn was in my lap, and I was feeling satisfied. But I'd be leaving town in several hours and had to make a quick move if I wanted to spend more time with her. I thought about it with all my might.

Back at the room.

"What happened to Pawn?" I asked.

"She went home with that other girl," Seamus said. "That was a half hour ago."

"No shit?" I put a CD in my laptop upside down. Seamus fixed it 5 minutes later, and I passed out listening to Lenny Kravitz sing, "*And I'm always on the run.*"

A few hours later we ate our usual Chiang Mai departure meal at the saloon and said so long to Harry, then got out on the road and headed south toward Bangkok. We

still had a little pot left over from the previous night, and Seamus had the bag in his hand, carefully examining it. He was determining how much we had left. How big of a joint I could roll. He was a little upset that we always seemed to be running out of herb. He looked ready to pitch a fit. There was some commotion up ahead on the highway, but there was a large truck in front of us, so we couldn't see what was happening. At the last moment I was able to see that the police were picking out select vehicles for some kind of inspection, and we were now being flagged off the road. Before I could say anything, Seamus shoved the pot into the cassette player as the car rolled to a stop. The policeman poked his head into my window as Seamus was retrieving his hand from the tape deck. A little corner of the bag stuck out, and I thought of that wonderful Hunter S. Thompson line – “Well ... why not? Many fine books have been written in prison.” But the officer spoke absolutely no English, so we motioned back and forth until his arms got tired. At one point the cop made some kind of gesture like he was ‘raising the roof’, which tickled Seamus to pieces. He was overcome with laughter. Finally the cop put down his arms and straightened out his smile, then silently turned and walked over to another car, hoping the people in it weren't crazies and foreigners to boot. We watched him a second then roared off.

We stopped for the night in Ayutthaya, about 50 miles north of Bangkok. It's famous for the ancient architecture inside its old city walls. But it was dark and confusing when we arrived, and we were both too consumed with fatigue to give a damn. We got a room in a lively guesthouse then showered up. My toe was throbbing and my foot caked with dirt. I washed it best I could and changed the bandage. It was my first look at the toe post mutilation, and I quickly realized why the procedure had been so painful. There was a large hole in my toe. A sizeable chunk was gone, and the entire thing was bright red. I filled the hole up with bacteria cream and wrapped it up tight, then we jumped across the street to a large restaurant and bar showing videos.

It's strange living each day thinking about nothing except where to sleep, where to eat and where to drink and smoke and whore around. Very little responsibility in a life like that. It was perfect for me, if not for my conscience. And yet I had chosen to leave. But why? Soon I would be back in the States, going to work, seeing the same boring people day after day. Never anything new or exciting. Life out of a backpack had drawbacks, all the injuries and illnesses for one. But it wasn't predictable. Every day was Mr. Toad's Wild Ride. I mean, how often do you go out for breakfast and 10 minutes later you're waving at the Dalai Lama? That's a pretty unexpected way to start out your day. Also, backpacker life was full of maniacs, and I sure was happy about that. Because a Zen lunatic living in a third-world cave is probably going to be infinitely more interesting than an accountant from Pittsburgh. I never knew who or what was coming for me. And I grew to love not knowing. Even on the tamest of days there existed a great chance for madness. A great chance to discover something new. A chance to meet someone significant. It wasn't every day, but over the previous nine months I was often surrounded by weirdness. I often discovered new things. About the world. And about myself. And I met many wonderful people. People I would always call friends. But I was leaving it behind. And I had no idea why.

Before leaving Bangkok on our road trip, I saw Wan again at the Bamboo Bar. She was a petite girl with a wonderful, innocent smile, and she threw me looks all night and stroked my arm. She said she wanted to leave, but she wanted me to go with her.

She was nervous and stumbled her way into saying we should get a room somewhere. So we went to the Playboy and began the preliminaries. But after my boxers slipped to the floor and my big prick rose fully extended, she could only gasp and cry out, her muffled words tempered behind a cuffed hand. "Oh! You so very beeg man!" She had the look of a frozen-stiff Jap in the streets of Tokyo watching the horrors of Godzilla himself as he stomped the city and bit the heads off babies and three-legged puppies. Oh, the humanity! I tried to explain, sounding like the neighborhood dentist, that it wouldn't hurt one bit. Just lie back and relax. But we both knew it was a lie. It was like shoving a penguin through a keyhole. We agreed to try again when I returned from Chiang Mai.

Seamus and I had little trouble returning the car. The traffic gave me the frights again, but I was more comfortable maneuvering the beast. And somehow we found the rental place as if we knew where we were going. We got a taxi back to the Tavee then went to Khao San Road to buy CDs. We had a misunderstanding with two Thai guys over the word, "fucking" and nearly had to fight them because of it. And for something completely innocuous, like: "Hey man, these tacos are fucking good." "What did you say about my mama?" In the evening we went to the Bamboo. I was flying out the next night at midnight, so this would be the grand farewell. Wan was sitting with me, but I kept jumping around the joint saying "hi" and "bye" to everyone, hijacking the DJ booth several times. Poor Seamus was beginning to experience the dangers of Thai fever, while he waited again for Tao who never showed. All the girls knew I was leaving. Rin was there and angry. Apple was affably jealous but bought me a shot of tequila anyway. But I drank little, and Wan and I left before midnight.

I wanted to take her someplace nicer than the Playboy, so we strolled around the Nana area looking for a hotel. There was a big black dog lying on the median and people clumsily stepping over him without recognition. I crouched down in a crowd and petted him while waiting for the light to change. I could sense that Wan thought this strange, but I paid no attention. I was haunted by memories of a dead dog, and the sadness came rushing back.

When the light changed, the dog got up and followed us. I walked to a food stall and bought two giant hot dogs on sticks and broke them into small pieces and fed him. I wanted to take him with us and turned several times to look at him as we walked off. He stared at me with sad eyes, refusing to look away.

During the night I awoke suddenly, unsure of my whereabouts. I was falling off the left side of the bed and looked over at Wan who was still wrapped around me, both of us naked. Her half of the bed was being neglected so I crawled over her and fell back asleep. The next time I woke up I was falling off the *right* side of the bed, and again Wan was tight against me.

In the morning we walked to the Bamboo. She had to work. The girls got two days off every month and could use them when they chose. After a cup of coffee, she grabbed my arm and pulled me into the street. She took the day off, she explained, because she wanted to spend some time with me before I left. But I couldn't. I made excuses and tried in vain to console her. She wanted me to go back to her apartment with her. I told her I didn't have time. She wanted to do anything with me. I lied to her and said my flight left earlier than it did.

We stood on the sidewalk at the bottom of an escalator leading up to the sky train platform. She continued to persuade me with pouty looks, but I couldn't go with her. I didn't know why. My mind was anything but clear. She turned away from me and walked to the escalator, looked back once and smiled sadly. Then she climbed on, and soon she was gone. I stood and stared at her, trying to make sense of things. Trying to make sense of myself. Why couldn't I go with her, I wondered? I wanted to chase after her, but a larger part of me wouldn't allow it. Everything was getting mucked up, every farewell sadder than the one before it. And her sudden departure was strange and unsettling. I flagged down a taxi and climbed inside.

I saw her as the car pulled off the curb. She had come back down the other side and was walking back to where she thought I'd still be. But I wasn't there, and she looked on the verge of tears. I paused and put my palm against the window as the taxi passed, just 10 feet away from her. But she didn't see me. She was a sweet girl, a 30 year-old with the innocence of youth, and I liked her. Oh, the timing of life, I thought. I slumped back in the seat, nearly in tears myself. Wishing for clarity. Wishing I wasn't leaving.

At midnight I was sitting on a toilet in the Bangkok airport scribbling parting thoughts into a notebook. Seamus and I said goodbye under an umbrella on a dark street corner about an hour before. I threw my pack into the back seat of a taxi and climbed in next to it then rolled down the window and said, "See ya later, bro." On the way to the airport I hummed a song that had never once come to my mind before this, "*I'm leaving on a jet plane, don't know when I'll be back again.*"

The plane was boarding. I was still on the toilet, now reading thoughts from days previous. Laughing at it all. I turned back the clock with my notebook, days reduced to minutes, and relived the experiences in my head. A minute ago I was road tripping around northern Thailand with Seamus. A few minutes before that, Dan and I were panting at everything that moved in Chiang Mai. And soon I'll land in Chicago, work at my friend's bar and return this life to a relative state of normalcy. It really is amazing how quickly everything can change. I smiled broadly at the mad times and wonderful friends I had made. At everything good and bad that happened along the way. I smiled because the entire journey began on faith. With a one-way ticket to India and no plans.

Chapter 18

Thugs, Pedophiles, Ham Jammers and Whores

Things didn't work out in Chicago. Turned out my friend was the Devil. Not a devil. Thee Devil! And when I failed to slay thee Devil, I had to flee. I had no choice. There was a long, gloomy cross-country road trip in a rented car on no sleep and so hung over and miserable that I wanted to die and take others with me. I wouldn't hit Nebraska till dark. And then it was 6 hours of flat and straight. The perfect time to take a little nap, your brain thinks, as it powers down for the night. You, of course, aren't *in* bed and should not be sleeping, so you and your car go careening across three lanes of traffic and introduce yourselves to a large metal railing and now you're flying *and falling* because you fell asleep on a bridge, though plenty awake now thanks to the loud *BANG* of the guard rail, and just before you hit what appears to be a soft, pillowy pile of rocks, you realize how insignificant everything is. This is the dream you're having as you jerk yourself awake and see that you're driving on the shoulder of the highway at 105 miles per hour. Suddenly sweating in a way that would give others some concern.

I slept in my parked car somewhere in the Colorado foothills and woke once and found hundreds of elk loitering about. They were huge. Sniffing all around the car, fidgeting with the door handle. Perhaps looking for something tastier than salad. But were their teeth sharp enough for meat, I wondered? There was a very real chance that I'd be *gummed* to death, and that could take hours. Coming back to the States was clearly a bad idea. First a duel with the Devil, then a near-death experience on that 15 hour drive through corn country, and now I was going to be eaten alive by elk. And I was way too tired for that.

It was nearly Christmas so I decided to stay a while with the family in Colorado. Specifically, with my folks in Evergreen. I lived in Fort Collins, Colorado for the entire 1990s. I delivered pizzas, got drunk and high more often than necessary, arranged for some drama from time to time, and also got to see my nieces grow up just old enough to realize that their uncle was a madman. There were also some side trips from Fort Collins. I spent one summer in Reno, Nevada getting ditched by my girlfriend without warning or note in our slum motel room on 2nd Avenue with the derelicts and losers and addicts and wife beaters. It was one of those moments when you say, how did I get here? Later there was one 5 month stretch at a restaurant in Daytona Beach, Florida, serving drinks and food, leisurely bouncing around the deck that sat in the sand, staring

at the lazy ease of the Atlantic Ocean and getting drunk for free while I worked with a great group of people. It was one of those moments when you say, how did I get here?

During my late teens, before moving to Colorado, I left my home in Chicago to see what existed elsewhere. There was a 7-month stay in Phoenix working in an illegal phone room, scamming people out of their money. And I was good at it. Of course, I didn't realize it was illegal till I went to work one day and the doors were locked and everything gone. Including my last paycheck. I had just moved into an expensive Scottsdale apartment with my girlfriend. So it was obviously the right time to go. I moved from Phoenix to San Antonio for three months of poverty with a 27 year-old alcoholic and his 42 year-old redneck girlfriend. Co-workers of mine. We stayed in the cheapest motel we could find, and it came with a wonderful assortment of thugs, pedophiles, ham jammers and whores. I left the room often so they could fuck. I ate nothing but bologna sandwiches out of a Styrofoam cooler. And even had to ration that. Between staying a couple weeks among the lost and depraved at the YMCA in downtown Phoenix and then that savage motel in the heart of drug town, I was growing up fast and seeing the world how it really existed. The curtain was ripped away. And I was much too innocent for the madness on the other side. From 12 years in small Lutheran schools to scum infested inner cities was quite a leap. All around me the worst of everything. The worst in everyone. Every day a lesson on how horribly we people can treat one another. And these lessons were learned very well indeed.

It was after Florida that I decided to move to Denver and return to college. I was 31 years old. I went to Metro State with all the other poor, unconventional students. I finished in December of 2000. Three months later I left for India.

Christmas came and went.
New Years, too.

While I was staying with my parents, "The Beach" came on HBO one night, and although I had already seen it and didn't much care for it, I had to watch. I first saw the movie the night before I left for India, and it gave me goose bumps and filled my head with wonderment. And now, watching it nearly a year later, I saw myself in my own movie and my own search for paradise, and the ending with the email photo of better days made me emotional and brought back all the crazy feelings of the past year. It was time to move on. But where?

Even though I had enough college credits to graduate in the fall of 2000, I didn't apply for graduation. Instead I registered for one class per semester. And I applied for student loans. After I received the money, I dropped the one class. It amounted to a few thousand dollars and paid for my travels. I figured it was a good investment. I'd write a great book, make a lot of money, then pay back my loans. No worries.

I drove down to the campus travel agency and stood drooling in front of a huge map of the world. Pointing and plotting, pricing flights. I had considered many places and even purchased a Central America guidebook. New Zealand, Eastern Europe, even Iran. But at the last moment I decided to go to Morocco. The flight to Casablanca was several hundred dollars more than a flight to Madrid. So Madrid it was, and I would overland to Africa from there. It was settled. The flight was leaving in two days. *Africa!*

Chapter 19

All Goose Nipples and Optimism

I was drunk, medicated and stumbling around the Madrid airport. I had no guidebook, no idea where to go next. I sat on a bench outside waiting for a bus. But to where, I thought? I was exhausted but excited. A man from the Philippines who now lived in Madrid came over and began talking to me, and soon we were on a bus, then wandering around a neighborhood by the train station. He was giving me the grand tour and even helped me find a room. I desperately needed a few hours of sleep, so he said he'd call me later and help me get a train ticket, even though I assured him I could manage it on my own. I spent the afternoon passed out hard. The helpful Filipino came by just after sunset and phoned my room, and it took me a long time to crawl out of bed. Waking up in a dark room is very disorienting. The mind's first thought is to roll over and go back to sleep. I had to fight this urge, and it was not an easy thing to do. We went to the train station, and I got a ticket leaving the next day. Then he vanished, and I never got his name and barely a chance to thank him.

I took the long lost way back, finally found my guesthouse and showered up, then hit the streets looking for a little fun or innocent trouble. All night I hopped between shanty places with dim lighting, wandering the back alleys looking for a fix. It was raining out, and the alleys were blanketed by a soft, misty yellow light. Slick cobblestone under drunken feet squished and squeaked. I remember a round Argentinean girl pouring my drinks who spoke decent English ... and then it was 3am, and I was back in my room licking special sauce off my leg dripped from a Big Mac.

At 6am I was woken by a loud group of Spanitos. My head was bouncing violently in its cage. My stomach, too. I went to the balcony and smoked a cigarette. It was still dark outside and the air had a wonderful chill. I went for my wallet but couldn't find it. My passport, too, was missing. Apparently I had hid them before passing out but couldn't remember doing it or *why* I did it. Soon I found them tucked into a corner of my pack. But then I discovered that my Visa debit card was gone. My only source of funds, no doubt left in an ATM.

I had this feeling that my parents were waiting for me to grow up. They never said anything, but there were moments when there were looks and then there were sighs, and a sigh can only mean one thing. But I was ignorant of the specifics, the one two three of how this grown up thing is accomplished. I mean, how does one become

bona fide? Is there a certification process? Would having *kids* make me a grown up? How about if I were to *beat them*? That's a pretty grown-up thing to do. Must I give a damn about my meaningless job? I'll no doubt need to purchase some hand tools. Adults seem to have a lot of tools. There'll be no time for day dreaming, of course. But to make up for that my life will be routine, stressful and devoid of excitement. I'd have to buy a house, a minivan, 5 or 6 TVs, expensive living-room furniture which is not to be used, ice cube trays, lawn fertilizer, motor oil, then spend hours each week engaged in upkeep. Becoming a grown-up, society's version anyway, made no sense. I'd have to surrender too much of myself.

I sat at the train station all day waiting for the 6pm train, doing the sleepy head bobs into my Jack Kerouac anthology that I borrowed from the Evergreen library back in Colorado. I called my father and asked him to wire me money. "I'll pick it up in Granada," I said. "I got drunk and lost my bank card. You know how it goes." He did. He was a bigger delinquent than I was when he was young. I once saw him wasted and dancing with a broom, and not just for one song. Too bad it was a church event.

Finally on the train, I sat back struggling to stay awake. The sun was just setting. Sublime yellow-green hills moved like ocean waves through the countryside, and I rolled with life's inconveniences and even smiled at them. Then I opened my laptop to write in my journal and the keyboard fell out onto the floor.

"That can't be good."

The train swung into Granada at 11pm, and I ran around in the rain for nearly an hour looking for a room. I finally found one with a balcony hanging over a noisy construction alley, then went for a late meal and back to my room for some much-needed sleep.

The women of Spain are absolutely stunning, and I liked Granada immediately but had no money to do anything until I could find a Western Union. I also had to fax my bank, it was a mess. I suffered from extreme jet lag and slept only a couple hours each morning. I lay in bed all night listening to an ancient clock outside chime 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 before finally dozing off around sunrise. The sleepless hours saw me out on the balcony watching life's participants enjoying themselves or inside on a lumpy bed with my head in a book. I walked the cobblestone streets at night hoping to meet a goddess with questionable morals and sacks of tasty drugs. But instead I found Alhambra, a massive old Moor fort perched high atop a hill. I spent several nights wandering its vacant courtyards, admiring the views of the town below.

Granada is a beautiful city with well-dressed beauties circling grand fountains, tiny balconies with metal railings holding all the world's potted plants, everyone out and walking at all hours. Even the senile and the old. All of them mingling freely. All of them directly underneath my balcony. My bed wobbled like a kitchen table with one short leg. I dreamt I was at sea. One day I went to the tourist booth with a question like, "Where the hell can I find a Western Union?" But the girl inside spoke not one word of English. I had the feeling that the only reason she was in there was because she was ugly and dumb and the beautiful people of Spain wanted nothing to do with her. So they caged her up and let the tourists have a go at her. "Do Not Feed," read the sign on the window. The momentum I had at the end of my last journey was lost. And I feared it would never return.

I eventually found a Western Union then jumped on a train to Algeciras. There's something electric about moving on, going someplace you've never been before. Something so reassuring about the *chukka chukka* rhythm of a train. And I was all goose nipples and optimism. The train roared through the southern Spain landscape of desert and symmetrical bushes all in a row and pinkish-gray spires of rock. Children jump-waving who hadn't seen a train for hours. Old men in old hats wearing old expressions in faraway depots where the cats lay in the shade and have nothing better to do than watch the trains pass by. *Rigorow ... rigorow*. A shepherd tending his flock sits on a rock in a lonely pocket of green earth. In the seat behind me a child snaps his gum just to piss me off, while his little sister cries about something that all children cry about. I squirmed in my seat, trying to avoid the blinding afternoon sun.

Having stepped off the train with a stabbing headache, I walked across the street to a nice hotel and threw \$65 at the kind Spaniard behind the counter, and he gave me a wonderful room with attitude improvement guaranteed. Just one night, I told myself. I need this room. And after a hot bath and a good meal, I could not have felt better.

The next morning I was scheduled to leave on a ship for Morocco, but my stomach was doing cartwheels. Again I was ill. I had lost 30 pounds in Asia. I could not afford to lose any more weight. I stayed in my expensive room for three nights because I was too sick to look for another. The ferry ticket was good for a year, so no worries there. But I still wasn't sleeping and constantly sprinting for the toilet. I would lay awake at night and imagine myself on the Larry King show after writing a winning novel. One that had spent three years atop The New York Times best seller's list. And that's quite an imaginary achievement. Before going on the show I got horribly drunk to squash my nerves. But I was still nervous, and at some point during the interview I threw up all over poor Larry. Drowning his desk in what looked like chunky clam chowder with bits of hot dog. His notes and pens slowly floating away. He was pleasant enough about the mess and like a true professional continued on with the interview. Improvising.

"HOT DOGS!" Larry screamed. "You know, those things aren't good for you. All lips and assholes." I threw up again. "Is that corn? I wonder why that stuff doesn't digest. So weird ... say, if you throw up some rice that would be all four food groups. I'm certain I can see dairy in here. Now me, I can't eat dairy. It clogs me up something awful. I once didn't shit for an entire month, and when I finally did it looked like a giant chocolate Easter bunny. I didn't know whether to flush it or eat it." At which point I would throw up again.

I was beginning to feel better by the third night and went for a walk down to the port to look at the ships. I passed a happy hooker on the way back and she asked for a smoke. And after giving her one ...

"You want *senorita*? Fucky fucky?"

I'm a guy, of course I do.

"No thanks."

Then I went back to my room and watched Demi Moore suck off Michael Douglas in Spanish. The following morning I strapped on my pack and walked to the port, anxious to begin a new country. Spain stole my Visa card, broke my computer and gave me the shits. I was all too happy to leave.

Chapter 20

Little Boy Retard

After crossing a construction site and climbing over a lazy fence with a gurgling stomach, I boarded a large ship stuffed with eighteen-wheelers in its belly. I was headed to Tangier, my first visit to a Muslim country and coming during a curious time. America was still bombing the hell out of Afghanistan.

I pulled a ham sandwich out of my pack and slowly ate, trying to regain my strength. Afterward I fell onto a bench on the upper deck, the Mediterranean Sea on my left and the Atlantic Ocean on my right, staring into a sky so blue it hurt to look at it. A guy with bright orange hair came over and asked if I'd watch his bag while he went to the bathroom. His name was Matt, from London, and he carried with him a copy of William S. Burroughs "Naked Lunch." I, of course, sat with my 900-page Jack Kerouac anthology, and we began talking about those beat maniacs and what it must have been like when they all descended upon Tangier some 45 years previous.

Burroughs holed himself up in a hotel called El Muniria during the soda-shop '50s for a year, shooting poison into his veins and staring at his shoes. As legend has it, he never left his room or showered or changed his clothes. He was an outstanding drug addict. Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg and a few others hung out in Tangier for a while as well, all of them staying at the hotel Matt said he was going to straight off the boat. I had no plans of my own, so I went along.

We got a couple of rooms and dumped our bags then wandered through the funky, old medina and into the Kasbah. Getting deeper into the maze with its fantastic walls and narrow walkways that never see the sun. Then we met Abdul. He was our guide. Payment would be expected, but we were having too much fun to care.

It was a mad scene. Bearded men in hooded robes and women covered from head to toe. Huge markets full of screaming hustlers, enormous bins of olives and dates, eels piled three feet high on wooden planks. Containers everywhere full of living food. Slimy things sliding, gilled gliders gliding, creepy crawlers crawling. Live chickens! Can't get fresher than that, I thought. Kill and then eat. What a concept. There were gigantic barrels of spices sending exotic odors as far as the wind would carry them. A calf head spinning from a rope. Everyone yelling and exchanging money and fingering pieces of flesh. A butcher hacked away at some kind of a leg, his hand dripping with blood. A round woman completely covered delicately poked at a loaf of fresh bread.

Abdul dragged us to shops and told us ancient stories of misunderstood times and then the buying of drugs conversation began at the Rolling Stones café, which was only a concrete slab with cheap plastic patio furniture. It was filled with smoking Moroccan men drinking mint tea and watching a football match. We left and dove further into the maze, past ancient faces, up and down stairs and steep vertical inclines, then declines, right left left, the jiggle and wiggle dance of curious feet through the damp alley to the drug seller's house we went.

"America very good friend to Morocco," Abdul said, looking at Matt. "First American embassy here."

"But I'm from England," Matt said.

"That is OK. We good friend with them, too."

At his friend's house we drank mint tea and smoked a fine light brown hash that looked like wet sand, but it was tasty and true and popped our tops just right. The grandfatherly drug dealer sat in a Lazy-Boy recliner behind a mountain of hashish resting on a brown, plastic TV-dinner tray. He molded his product into golf ball size pieces then carefully set them in neat rows on a different tray. For two hours we talked in broken English about politics and religion. Abdul said that the old man had three wives, but we never saw them and figured they might have been chained up in the cellar making hashish. The old man spoke no English but he loved MTV. And he liked it loud. Abdul was telling us about judgment day, while Britney Spears yelled in my ear.

"If you hold the book in your right hand, you go straight to heaven. If the book is in your left hand, then you go to waiting room. If the book is behind your head, up here, you will go to hell."

"Well that's easy," Matt said confidently. "I'll just make sure I have the book in my right hand."

Abdul made certain we sampled properly before we bought, so we smoked several joints before the bargaining began, which is always tricky in these situations. But Abdul assured us many times that he is a friend. I turned back to the TV and let Matt haggle for a while. The old man had thankfully changed the channel. Now we were watching Morocco play Senegal in an African football tournament. The camera panned into the crowd to a very distinguished-looking Arab man. Probably the owner of a team, I thought, or maybe a politician. Then he reached under his seat and pulled out a giant hookah and took a good long drag. I turned, mumbling and pointing at the TV, while Abdul laughed and pointed back. Matt and I each bought a piece of hash, about half a golf ball, for 250 dirham, then the three of us were back in the medina searching for food. And after a nice meal of couscous and chicken and fresh bread, Abdul led us back to our hotel. We paid him 100 dirham, about \$10, and said goodbye.

Connected to the hotel is the Tangier Inn Bar with photos on the walls of the old beatniks. I grabbed a beer and hopped around like a geek monkey psycho, flying between photos, reading the extended captions written by Ginsberg, spilling my beer on the floor.

"What room did Burroughs stay in?" I asked the teenage bartender.

"Room nine. But it is no open public." Some kind of shrine, Matt and I figured.

"Jack Kerouac stay in room four."

"But that's my room," I said.

"Yes, I know."

"Jack Kerouac stayed in *my room*, is that what you're telling me?"

“Yes. This is what I am telling you.”

After a few more beers Matt and I went up to my room and smoked a couple of joints at the little table next to my window. Then I spent the next two nights alone, waiting for the ghost of literature past to show himself while I stared out the window at the changing colors of the bay and sky.

Matt left early the next morning for Fez. I was up and out early as well, looking for a cyber café, when a barnacle guide attached himself to me and refused to let go. His name was Ali. But he was no Abdul, and I disliked him from the start. Someone at my bank sent me an email saying that I needed a notarized letter to give my father power of attorney. He needed this so he could access my bank account. But I quickly got the feeling that the word “notarized” doesn’t translate into Arabic, and it was a long, frustrating day of jumping from banks to administrative buildings, looking for someone to stamp a piece of paper declaring that I was an irresponsible moron. Everyone was too suspicious, though, and looked closely at the paper like it was a fresh archeological discovery, turning it around and upside down slowly with a face full of bewilderment. Looking for that fatal flaw. Then they would hand it back to me and say, “I cannot help you.” “But there is a stamp right there,” I often pleaded. They all had the same expression. One that said, “Nice try, slick.” It was useless, and I was worn out. I gave Ali 20 dirham, but he wanted 100. I tried to rid myself of him several times during the day and told him he would get no money right from the beginning, but now he was angry. I held my tongue and walked away, while he shouted at me in Arabic.

I went for lunch at a café then back to the room to wash some boxers. As the sun set over Tangier, I sat at my window smoking a joint, gazing out at the palm trees and the beach, watching little children run the bread home for the evening meal. Three girls in a window across the alley took a curious interest in me, giggling and ducking out of sight whenever I looked their way. It was a peaceful scene and I felt strangely content, like I could have spent the rest of my life at that window. I hummed a Bob Marley tune while the ship’s horns rang deep from the bay.

I woke up around sunrise the following morning when songs and chant-praying began to resonate from a nearby mosque. And then a moaner in the alley below yelling, “I hurt,” then something in Arabic, repeated over and over. I wanted to look out the window and see who or what was responsible for that awful wailing. But as I lay in bed half asleep, I envisioned a man fumbling down the street with a severed arm and a partially-eaten foot. And I’d see others dodging and plodding through and around him, paying him no mind. And this is not something I wanted to see ever and certainly not at that Godless hour. I was out in minutes despite the moaning.

I awoke a few hours later and took a taxi to the train station. I arrived in plenty of time and bought a ticket to Marrakech. It was a nine-hour trip, and I sat back looking out my window. We rumbled past an enormous field where children played and animals grazed. The area was littered with trash and debris, even a rotting animal carcass. But the children laughed and played anyway, just as children do everywhere.

I arrived in Marrakech around 10pm. The train was much longer than I had thought, and the station parking lot was jammed to the bursting point with people and cars and aggressive cab drivers. I stepped into a taxi driven by a sadist who tried to cross three lanes of traffic with cars all around us. *SMASH!* It was a direct hit and on

purpose but not terribly hard, just a warning tap from an angry driver. But now our vehicles were stuck together. *SCURREEEP HARUMP!* Honking from all sides, people screaming. My driver flung his hands out the window and gestured wildly.

I rented a room at the Hotel Mabrouka for 70 dirham, but when I got to the room I found a sign on the door indicating that the room was only 40 dirham. And it was one helluva fine establishment. The kind of place where you sleep with your clothes on because the sheets are brown and sticky. The kind of place where you don't feel bad about pissing in the room sink at 5am because you're too groggy lazy to walk down the hall to the bathroom. The kind of place where creepy desert insects and creepier local residents crawl through the open window spilling into a dodgy alley. The kind of place where winged creatures take flight every time you turn on the light. The kind of place that if your soap slips from your fingers and touches any part of the crusty sink you immediately get a new bar. Especially if you've been pissing in it. It's the kind of place where you smoke a cigarette right after your spliff to disguise the smell, because hotel management strikes you as the shifty sort that would sell your soul to the devil and your ass to the police for a pocket full of kryptonite. I remembered a local guy I met on the train.

"Do not smoke hashish in Marrakech. Very dangerous. Police arrest and no one see you again." I smoked anyway then swam in the deep waters of my own paranoia. The next morning I switched hotels.

I got a room at the Hotel Central Palace on *Bab Agnou*, the pedestrian walkway that leads into *Jamaa el Fna* – the huge square that is one third circus, one third barbecue and one third freak show. At night the place comes alive with monkeys on chain leashes that perform for children with money. Snake charmers and fortune tellers, musicians playing strange instruments. Everyone singing and dancing. And then there are the food sellers. Grills all around shooting billowy clouds of smoke into the sky, hard-sellers yelling at tourists and locals alike to come sample the edibles. My guidebook said it was the largest outdoor barbecue in the world.

But it was morning and mostly barren except for the twenty or thirty stalls selling fresh squeezed orange juice, nuts and dates. There were a few circles of people spread out and I curiously wandered over to one, having just smoked a fat, good-morning spliffy. Because you don't expect drama in the morning. Drama is a night creature. So I felt safe with a head full of mud.

Some 20 or 25 people were standing in a circle. A veiled belly dancer was performing with crashing finger symbols and whining musical accompaniment. The kind of music that makes you nostalgic for the soothing sound of a dentist drill. She came over to me with palms up. Confused, I gave her two dirham. Did she want me to dance, I thought? She blinked twice then enthusiastically threw the coins on the ground and grabbed my hand. But I don't dance and tried to tell her. And certainly not now, not under these conditions. She was strong and hairy like a chimp. Howling and mad with eyes like sapphired cantaloupes. The others in our circle were eagerly watching us and licking themselves silly. She was persistent and tugged at me, now clutching my arm. I pulled then she pulled, back and forth in rhythm with the groaning of the crowd. The belly dancer spoke with her eyes but my ears couldn't hear her. I kept waiting for her to let go, but she wouldn't and why not, I wanted to know. It seemed like we had been struggling forever, and I just wanted out of that circle. The crowd was

ooooohhhing and *aaaahhhing* with cannibalistic intentions. Animalistic repression can reverse itself with any mob, and these deviants were rapidly devolving. I suddenly screamed as if death was reaching down for me, then gave the dancer a firm push and ran off frantic and muttering. I turned around once and saw the crowd coolly converge around her, obscuring my eyes from the slaughter.

It was Super Bowl Sunday, and I couldn't find the game on anywhere. Sure the four and five star hotels would have it. But would they have me, disheveled with wild hair and dirty clothes? I walked into the new city and bought two bottles of wine. I still had some hash left and spent the early evening with a book in my room. Lying on my back, smoking a joint, ashtray on my chest, bottle of wine within reach on the floor. Around 11pm I crossed the street to *Jamaa el Fna* for dinner. I was wearing an old, blue hooded sweatshirt with the number 23 on it. My body fighting through the smoke, my nose enthusiastically scanning the scene. It looked like certain tables had certain specialties and others seemed to be selling the exact same food, maybe, but with the smoke in your eyes and the bright lights and the strange music and hordes of other confused tourists bumping each other off the scent, really you just tire out and give in to the next advance before your head falls off.

"Hey, number 23! Come. Sit."

I ate couscous legume with a side of olives and fresh bread with dipping sauces. The family running the stall was friendly, and I stopped by every night for my evening meal. Each time getting the same greeting.

After dinner I walked the streets. All of the decent people were home tucked into bed. A few stragglers fumbled down poorly lit alleys, ducking into shady-corner establishments to get good and pissed on cheap whiskey. I came upon a small man in a dark alley. He was smoking and bouncing around, then coughing up some nice, bloody mucous to spit on the ground. He seemed more than drunk, much too energetic. Perhaps some local plant that you shove up your ass and then you're wired for days. Whatever it was, he was lost to it. He invited me into a closed café for some mint tea. I obviously accepted.

Kamel was his name, and I understood him little as he gestured wildly and coughed often from black lungs through rotted teeth. Three other men sat two tables away watching "Stars of Mecca" on TV, then a news show featuring everyone's favorite army on foreign land. All of them wasted. I wondered about their political views and religious tolerance. What their reactions might be should I stand on a table and sing "God Bless America." Would they join in or at least clap along? Kamel tapped my leg incessantly to make his point, whatever it was. He pulled his lips back and showed me his black gums then hit my arm and laughed and coughed. He spat out slippery foreign words while I drank my tea and smiled. He wanted to sell me drugs. I said I had no money. He wanted me to follow him into the bathroom to see his stash. I pretended not to understand. I finished the last of my tea and thanked him. He enthusiastically shook my hand, and I lied and promised to come back the next day.

Down the alley stood a horse attached to a garbage cart that had spilled some of its trash. Malnourished kittens mopped up the refuse with tiny whiskers. It was a moonless night, and the horse seemed sad, embarrassed even. His coat was filthy and matted. It was no doubt white at birth but dirty ever since. Oh what poor dumb luck, you miserable beast, I thought. You could've been born in Nevada where the horses run

free, and the government gives them empty land to roam and play at sunset. The third world horse cannot even imagine such a paradise, and the cats think they have it good when they find oozing, rancid food slithering from a plastic bag discarded. They lap it up and they're tough, not frightened when you pass. "You have to be tough here, my pampered American friend." I turned back toward the emotionless horse, unable to walk away. He was never a beautiful animal, born into such an awful existence, but he had beautiful sad eyes. "SAVE THE ANIMALS," I screamed. "SAVE YOURSELF," they yelled back. "We're already dead." It was Super Bowl Sunday.

The pedestrian mall was always a parking lot of people, and suddenly point A to point B wasn't so simple. Every step meant bumping into someone. Step bump. Step bump. And on and on it goes. And even though there's no room to walk, somehow there's room to ride a bike. Though not really. Which is why it usually ended badly for those risking it. On the street bisecting the mall, shadowy figures with lecherous ambitions circle in the dust, while buses unload packs of camera-toting tourists who never stray too far from their *own* kind. Predator and prey. A man crosses the street pulling two camels, vehicles honk in protest, scaring the humpbacked beasts who let out a deep moan. Beaten horses attached to carriages feel the sting of a whip for lying down on the job. A blind man walks out of an empty alley, and I wonder how he will navigate his way through the congestion with no sight. He pauses briefly and lifts his head. Then into the monster he goes, confident that he'll come out the other side intact.

Bank problems persisted, and I was nearly out of money again. Nobody in Morocco understood what I needed, and my bank could not understand this. I walked in and out of several banks, embassies, police stations and other such buildings and no one would help me. My head felt like a soft-boiled egg. One stiff poke and shit would start dripping out. But I gave myself a pep talk, and we all agreed to give it one more try. At the post office ...

"I need this notarized, need it stamped," as I brought down my fist to symbolize an ink stamp. But the man behind the counter just stared at me like I was some kind of an idiot who wanted to send a piece of paper through the mail with no envelope. And I must have been pounding my fist because I *really* wanted a stamp.

"You need envelope first, he say," said the kid standing next to me. Well, that seems a bit premature, I thought. But I walked around the corner from the bank anyway, some 10 feet from the door, and purchased an envelope from a hooded man selling a hundred unrelated items off the sidewalk, then returned quickly to the bank, which was now closed. I walked to a café and ordered a brochette for lunch. Halfway through my sandwich it finally occurred to me, the misunderstanding of the word "stamp." I emailed my bank and convinced them my situation was hopeless. A couple days later my father withdrew my money and sent part of it via Western Union.

On the way back from the internet café I stopped for a pack of smokes and a newspaper. A grizzled, old man came rushing up to me outside my hotel.

"Newspaper?" he asked.

I looked down in an exaggerated motion at the fresh paper in my hand.

"No thanks," I said.

"Can I have?" he pointed at my smokes.

"I haven't opened them yet."

"You *can* open."

“Yes, I *can*, this is true, but I still have an old pack back in my room.” Not sure how much of that he understood.

“You open now?”

“No, I don’t open now. I open *laaateer*.”

“But I want one now.”

I went numb, then fell speechless. I was staring right through him, my head spinning like a merry-go-round caught in a tornado. It had already been a long day of hassles and was only 3pm. I was on the brink, one false move could send me over the edge. He sensed this.

“Newspaper?” he asked again.

“No thanks,” I replied again. Then he rushed back to his corner as though the entire cigarette exchange had never happened. The next day I saw him again and gave him *two* cigarettes.

During my search for a notarized signature I went to the police station one day for help. I was assured they could, as I was every time someone sent me off in another direction. There was a British kid at the station with a bundle under his arm. He told me he got taken on a magic carpet ride after drinking drugged tea. Stories like this are common in Morocco. When Matt and I first arrived in Tangier we went to a carpet showroom, and he drank the tea. I asked for a bottle of a water, figuring one of us should partially lucid. But when it came the seal was broken, so I drank none of it. Tricky fuckers, I thought. I seriously doubted there was any drug that would make me buy a carpet. But it was my first night in Morocco, and the last thing I wanted was to drag a god damn rug around the country for the next three months.

So when I was approached by a carpet guide, I was excited and curious. After all, I had no debit card and most of my cash was in the room. There was no possible way I could buy a carpet. Ahmel was my guide and he walked very fast through the *souqs*, the largest covered market in Morocco. Ahmed passed me off to another man, Muhammed, and he gave me the grand tour and showed me how the carpets are made. Then he brought me into the showroom and asked if I would like some tea. I drank and he talked. Then another man named Muhammed came into the showroom and unfolded carpet after carpet and stacked them neatly on the floor, while Muhammed number 1 made comments about each like, “This carpet made with finest sheep from the high in the Atlas Mountains. Look here, it is proof of fire. It cannot get fire.” He was on all fours, stupid with glee and grinning like a politician. Torching an innocent carpet with a cigarette lighter. I said something like, “Yes, of course. But what if I want to smoke it? What then?” He struggled with that one while I helped myself to more tea. I was beginning to feel giggly and having a damn fine time. Then Muhammed number 2 farted loudly while Muhammed number 1 did a somersault back into his seat and began the bargaining. I scratched my head and smiled dimly. I had apparently shown too much interest in one of the carpets. But which one?

He wrote an amount on the top of a piece of paper, his highest amount, then handed it to me. I wrote an amount on the bottom of the paper, signifying my lowest amount, and from there we’d meet somewhere in the middle. He wrote another number, slightly lower than his first, then I also wrote a number lower than my first. He said my price needed to be higher, but I didn’t want a carpet. It was becoming clear to him that this was no sale. He had tortured that poor carpet and for what? He prodded

me with questions about how much I could afford, how much I had on me. I had nothing and told him. His frustration began to manifest into something more sinister. His face was becoming goopy, malleable, slight distortions growing wilder. Carpets turning liquid, dripping colored patterns onto the floor. The whole showroom was melting. I stood up suddenly and shook his hand and promised to come back later with fistfuls of cash. Then I was back into the crowded market. The effects of the tea in full force.

My guesthouse had a rooftop patio with clear views of the city. Everything pinkish-orange and clay-like. Palm trees lethargically swayed in the breeze. In the early evening when the sun began its descent, the sky became an ever-changing canvas of colors and shapes. Barbecue smoke poured over the medina while the lights from Koutabia mosque glowed bright yellow inside tiny windows. The mosque's tower perfectly silhouetted against a sky just beginning to turn dark. Everywhere a postcard waiting to be captured. But the mind cannot fully grasp such surreal surroundings, and in time you get used to that feeling like you're just watching an enormous television tuned into the Discovery Channel. A mere spectator in your own life. I had to remind myself everyday that I was in *Marrakech*. I had never given any thought to going to such places just a couple years before. Marrakech, Kathmandu, Bangkok, Singapore – these were places of fantasy, points on a map much too far away to be real. Places I would surely never visit. And yet, there I was.

I walked downstairs to look for food. A big bear of a man wearing a thick brown *djellaba* stood next to an antique bike outside the entrance of the hotel. He introduced himself and asked if I wanted to go to his house for some mint tea. His name was Said, and his smile was big and bright, like that of an overgrown child. He pushed the bike and talked a little, while I followed next to him. He said he was Berber, from the High Atlas Mountains. During the winter months he lived in Marrakech, in the *Mellah* – the old Jewish quarter. It was a twenty-minute walk from the hotel, into the bustling depths of the medina. The alleys grew narrower and the sky more scarce, and I wondered how anyone could make sense of direction in such a confusing place.

After talking a while and drinking our tea, he pulled out a box of handicrafts that he makes and sells. I leaned back and wondered if anyone in Morocco would like me if I had no money. I was a dollar sign, their livelihood. The bargaining began, and I bid so low as to be offensive.

"I'm just a poor student," I said. "I'm sorry, I cannot." He handled it well. And after another pot of tea he led me out of the *Mellah* and walked me back to the guesthouse.

I woke up early to retrieve some money from Western Union. I ate a big breakfast then wandered around a while, fingering the bills in my pocket. Smiling like I had just won the lottery. The Western Union office had been closed for two days because of some holiday I hadn't figured on. I had gone without food and cigarettes for both of those. Also, I was anxious to buy a bus ticket and move on. A man approached me on the street.

"Hashish?" he asked.

"How much?"

"Piece like this, 500 dirham."

“No no, too much.”

“400 dirham.”

“300 dirham.”

“OK. One hour, I meet you here.”

I was standing outside my hotel on the always-crowded *Bab Agnou*. He came back on time but shifty like and agitated. I spotted him across the road and followed him into a café. We sat down and ordered tea. Without saying anything he sneakily reached under the table and handed me a stick of hashish wrapped in foil, probably following some procedure he'd seen in a James Bond movie once. I gave him a little nod then handed him 300 dirham in the same manner. He said the hash was 500 and began the negotiations again. You mother fucker, I thought. I wanted to jump over the table and stab him in the eye with my butter knife. I paused for a second, completely in disbelief. Never in hundreds of drug transactions had that happened. I took a good long look around the room. The café was packed. This was not the ideal place to bargain for illegal drugs, and in a country with strict drug laws no less. And suddenly paranoia ran across the restaurant and jumped into my lap. *Ah, my old friend*. I quickly conceded and we split the difference. I slipped him another 100 dirham under the table then took a drink of my tea. But then the Mother Fucker had to push it and ask for 50 dirham for himself, for *his* troubles. I took another look around to see if others were watching us. Surely they knew our business. It's quite easy to spot two imbeciles passing money and drugs back and forth under a clear glass table with no cloth. And now I was the imbecile holding the hashish if things turned ugly. I turned back to the Mother Fucker and dropped 25 dirham on the table in front of him. He looked disgusted and asked for my cigarettes. Then I became angry and threw him half a pack, keeping several for myself, which he dutifully pointed out. And in one motion he jumped up and grabbed the smokes.

“I must go, you finish your tea,” and off he ran.

I was already carrying a respectable buzz. A pleasant touch of paranoia. But now his sudden departure had me on the edge of hysteria. My mind conjured up scenarios involving the Mother Fucker ratting me out to the police who would take my hashish, resell it back to the Mother Fucker and toss me into a hole for the rest of my life with other dumb backpackers who had bought drugs from a stranger. It was a big racket. The cops make some money on the hash, and the Mother Fucker purchases his stuff back at a discount. But this was not drug paranoia talking. This *happens*. There are backpackers in third world prisons all over this planet, wondering for thousands of caged days, “Why oh why did I?” I jumped up quickly and ran out behind him and back to my hotel, looking over my shoulder the whole way.

Said came by my hotel later that night, and we went to a café for some coffee. I was feeling loopy from all the bus fumes and a long day of hustler dodging – “just to talk. Come. Where are you from? Ah yes, have many friend there. What would you like? Please, it is no problem.” *KEEP MOVING!* “Hallo, just one minute please. You come look my shop. Come look magic box, very good many powers.” Earlier in the day I saw a heavily-bearded man wearing a *djellaba*, the hood barely exposing his red glowing eyes. “*Sookamba*,” he said slowly, looking eerily through me as he walked past. Though it was said so softly that I thought maybe the voice was in my head. But now I was relaxed and sitting on a balcony with Said.

The café overlooks a large parking lot surrounded by narrow roads and lining the roads are shops of all kinds, but not the touristy sort. Metal shops and wood workers, motorcycle repair, tailors, shops that fix widgets and gadgets and another that sells the thingamijiggets that connect the widgets to the gadgets. The city's upper class come in nice cars and wave condescendingly through the mess at a blue-jacketed attendant. Men pushing carriages of scrap and horses pulling carriages of men. Ancient bicycles, mopeds from 1970s' America. Cats nervously jumping across the street like frogs. And in the middle of this pit a little boy retard begs convulsively for his dinner. He never sees the moon. He contorts his broken body up to the shiny elite before the cars even stop, nearly getting sucked under a tire, but he is relentless and pursues the unflappably apathetic with great gusto. He doesn't know any better. A man gets out of a car and ignores with no pity and no money, just gathers up his youngster out the back seat and up into his loving arms. Wifey gets out next, also ignoring, and the three of them go bounding carefree, and what a lovely sight to see the family unit enjoying themselves on a cool Saturday night in Marrakech.

Little Boy Retard wrangles his body next to the parked car frozen and watches them walk away and never wonders why he wasn't born healthy to better circumstance. He doesn't think that way. He's not capable. But somewhere deep inside he feels a twinge of pain and his heart becomes heavy and without knowing why or understanding these feelings he slunches and sags his tortured body into a moment of sadness. It's in his eyes. A car alarm goes off, and his joy is restored and he dances a wild jig, kicking jumping yelling, then spins three times like a top in a clockwise spasm and falls to the ground. Another boy tries to help him back onto his feet, but he just hangs and swings on the boy's arm like a spoiled American child who doesn't want to walk through the shopping mall any longer. Little Boy Retard doesn't want up, he can't face it anymore and he's too dumb to cry out. Who would listen anyway? People walk by and turn away or wiggle an arm to avoid his contact or *shoo* him away like a stupid animal. He is an animal. He gets to his feet and struggles over to the parking lot attendant who says something. "Get lost kid. Get back over there and beg." And with the wave of a hand, "*Shoo!*" Probably his father. He does what he is told. He doesn't know any better. Then the whole miserable cycle repeats itself, including the same damn car alarm and the same idiot dance and tumble. I force my attention away and eventually lose him in the crowd. The next day I left for Essaouira.

Chapter 21

No Strange Flies

The bus pulled into Essaouira at 10pm. I followed a little Moroccan girl speaking French but no English. She knew “Apartment?” though, and then me, “Yah!” Her mother wore a black hood and melted into the shadows. I almost didn’t notice her. She spoke only Arabic and was two paces behind us. Ducking through the damp and dark alleys of the medina, then up a narrow spiral staircase that barely accommodated my body and pack, and then the unexpected. The apartment was spectacular, with a west-facing balcony staring out at the Atlantic past the winding streets of the medina. The balcony doors opened wide, leading into a huge bedroom waiting to soak up the coastal breeze. The bedroom is two steps down from the balcony and the kitchen is two steps down from the bedroom, everything open and connected like one big loft.

“How much for a month?” I asked excitedly.

“(something in French).” And so our troubles began. I fumbled through my pack for a small book of translation. It took half an hour to determine that the apartment was more than I could afford. The mother and daughter motioned for me to follow them, which I did, but my mind stayed behind in the apartment, on the balcony with the moon, listening to the crashing waves. And soon we were at a guesthouse and a nice man named Mohammed was showing me a room. I took it, but I couldn’t get my mind off that balcony, and I knew immediately that I’d be in Essaouira for more than just a few days.

Mohammed ran the guesthouse for a German man named Carlos, and the place was appropriately called Casa de Carlos. There were eight rooms on four floors, and the rooftop view was the best in town. Marrakech had suffocated me and now I could breathe. From the roof I watched the graceful Eleanor's Falcons gliding in the moonlight. The moon was big and bright and lit up the town and its whitewashed buildings and the dark blue waves of the ocean. Ripples in the sea sparkled like stars.

Several people showed me several apartments but nothing nice and trust was an issue. With already a half day of looking gone, I stumbled upon Rachid while searching for lunch. His English was bad, but that didn’t keep him from trying. We looked at many places over the course of two days, and none would be as nice as the first apartment, but I finally found one that I liked deep in the medina. There were no ocean

views, but it was huge and bright, pouring into a busy alley. I signed a one-month lease. Rachid promised to come by on my first night and cook *tagine*, but he never showed.

While I was back in Colorado I had found a job online teaching English in South Korea, and I was expected to be there in about a month and a half. I was waiting on a graduation notice from my university, which was needed to obtain a South Korean work visa. Everything was set, in place, and I was devoid of responsibility in one of the slowest paced towns on the planet. Even my heart rate felt slower.

I ran into Mohammed often. My apartment was down the alley from Casa de Carlos. Rachid came by the following night to apologize and cook me dinner. The tiny propane burner on the floor served as my stove, and this is why *tagine* is so popular. It's basically stew. Everything in one dish over one flame.

"Go smoke and I cook," Rachid said, pushing me out of the kitchen. I can do that, I thought. I played solitaire in the other room and listened to some music.

KAPISH! He dropped some dishes on the floor.

"(something in Arabic), for why?" Then we both laughed. A while later he came in and told me it would be done in twenty minutes, just remove and eat.

"You don't wanna stay?" I asked.

"I have rendezvous these two Germans. I look him and speak you but him not speak me, so I say him, no."

"Uh ... OK."

And that's the way it went with us. He spoke and I agreed, never really understanding what he was saying. He borrowed 200 dirham, and this too would become common. Rachid looks like a shifty Ralph Macchio with bad teeth and a jet black mustache, but he seemed like a good guy, and I trusted him. How could I distrust the Karate Kid?

The apartment came with a black and white TV that only received one channel. There were only two in Morocco, and I was told by several people that I got the good one. Occasionally, late at night, I'd find an American movie dubbed in French with Arabic subtitles. "Le Forreste Gumpe" one night, and then another night I watched Moroccan professional basketball, Casablanca versus Rabat. It was not good. I watched a tennis match one lazy afternoon and never saw the ball through the static. But I smiled and stared at the TV anyway. *Fuckin' drugs!*

Reading the International Herald Tribune occupied several hours of each day, as did walking up onto the ramparts to see the mighty Atlantic, shopping in the crowded medina for the day's groceries or wandering on the beach or around the port.

Fishing seems to be big business in Essaouira, but on a small scale. The port is awash with colorful ships cast from an era when swinging swashbucklers dressed like clichés patrolled the seas. The day's catch is usually brought onshore in the late morning, and the rest of the day is spent mending nets or refurbishing the ancient boats. The falcons have the schedule memorized and the sea air is thick with them along the port. They dive in like thieves for bits of fish too small to keep. While the tourists' cameras go *snappity snap*.

I often bought eggs and bread at a little shack a few steps from my front door. But the first time I asked for eggs I got a confused look and a slight shrug.

“You know, chicken, *balk balk!*” Then again with arms flapping. I squatted like I was about to give birth to an omelet.

“Ah, *tinlay*,” the shopkeeper said.

“Yes! *Tigling*.”

Next to the food shack sat a little store selling the usual tourist crap. The guy who ran the shop was named Moorad. He was to become my nemesis. Everyone in Essaouira wanted my clothes. “To change?” “No thanks.” I never understood why. Many of them had nicer clothes than my one stained pair of cargo pants and dirty t-shirts. Moorad was no different, and I agreed to trade my Teva sandals for a pair of Moroccan handmade sandals. He got a great deal, but I hadn’t been wearing mine and was thinking of purchasing a pair of the other anyway. Then he sold me a bit of hash that turned out to be cow shit. His way of saying thank you, I suppose. He was the sleazy slobbering sort, spitting between lost teeth, always grabbing at me for some kind of favor when I passed. I quickly grew to dislike him and limited my conversations with him to two words – no thanks.

Rachid came by often, each time to lift some dirham, always accompanied by an unintelligible story.

“After for him, for you look you, for me I speak for you, he give me the money. But today closed, but he say come to me village. I speak with you, after tomorrow I give your money in morning. I mean, I no like to come back village. I speak you him, give me just one thousand, but him say no. Nick, it is no your problem. It is my problem and him problem, but it is no your problem.

“It’s beginning to feel like my problem.”

“No! It is no your problem.”

“How much do you need?”

“300 dirham.”

When it rained outside, which was often, it also rained inside through a huge skylight. The refrigerator quit working, and there was something rotting in the freezer that was there when I moved in. The bathroom sink leaked all over the floor, and I couldn’t get the hot water heater to work. And every time I left the apartment I was chased down with ...

“Morocco and America very good friends. Come look in shop.” The local integration wasn’t working. It was often the same damn people asking the same damn things.

“This nice. You change for souvenir?”

“I can’t. This is my only pair of pants.”

“Why not?”

“Really? OK, well, if I give you my pants I’ll have nothing to wear. I mean, it’s not like I can wrap that painting of an angel around my waist and walk around town. I get stared at enough when I’m fully clothed. Know what I mean?”

I could see he didn’t. And that’s all his shop had, the same painting. Some in different sizes or colors, some with more stars. But the same God-awful angel in every one.

“You want look? To buy?”

“God no. Those are hideous. Besides, religious art makes me aggressive.”

“Maybe tomorrow?”

“Maybe not.”

It was subtle torture. The bombardment never ended, and I thanked the herds of moneyed tourists for this. I yelled at them in German, “*Ich bin ein Berliner.*” But that was the only German I knew, and this did not dissuade them. If anything it encouraged them. Weaving and dodging, I tried to ignore but ...

“Hallo.”

“Hello.”

“Come look for my shop.”

“It’s right there. Behind you.”

“No, come look inside.”

“No thanks.”

“Why not?”

“‘Cause I don’t want to.”

Then I’d get a look like I was wearing an angel painting where my pants should have been.

Ah, but there was one place I could go to recharge and relax. The ramparts faced the Atlantic Ocean, and I went there each day. Climbing onto the wall, sitting between pillars of molded earth that once pointed cannons out to sea. Some 50 feet down the waters might and fury smashed against jagged black rocks that have been on this planet since before man was walking upright. There’s something special about staring into a body of water so large that no land can be seen on the horizon. It always inspires in me a sense of awe. A sense that there is something bigger at play in the world. Call it God or any other name you prefer. Staring into the Atlantic from my little African town, sitting alone on a piece of living history, these feelings inspired in me a sense of clarity and calm. But when I’m suffocating in cities it feels like God is dead. Like he saw what man had become and abandoned us out of disgust and shame. Only in the majesty of nature do I find Him alive again.

Walking around one day I met Mbark and Rachid, a different Rachid. They owned a tiny spice and herb shop and made great pots of tea and different every time. They took turns explaining in detail what each ingredient was and where it came from, as they placed it into the boiling water. Their English was good, and they played Bob Marley and Bob Dylan all day while they squatted inside and smiled at the girls passing by. They were nice guys, and I promised to go back.

I continued to see Moorad and continued to blow him off, but he persisted in asking me for a joint or to buy or trade or give for free perhaps. Always something. Rachid came by often, of course to pinch some hash or borrow money. His debt worked its way to \$130US, and I gripped my head and thought, how the hell did that happen? Everyone always had their hands out, in my face, tugging on my dirty clothes. I couldn’t walk five feet without some dim-wit asking me to buy some piece of crap for the 167th time. The hustlers that once were exotic were now annoying. For the first time I could see just how much I’d changed. I barely resembled the person I was a year before, the one that was too scared even to raise his voice in Delhi. My evolution was clearly visible now. But it came with unexpected side effects like bitterness, cynicism and arrogance. And it turned me into a bit of an asshole at times. It seemed to me that I needed to iron out the highs and lows, make them a little more manageable. I needed to take things in

stride more consistently, and know that regardless of my surroundings there is something stronger inside of me that keeps me calm and patient and compassionate. With more experience, I was sure this would come.

The old woman who I rented the apartment from came in one day carrying an armful of rotting meat. She waddled into the kitchen and threw it into the broken freezer with the other bags of decaying flesh. The freezer was hot and the smell nearly punched me out. She reached around the back and tugged on bare wires with wet hands until the fridge began to hum. Then she turned to me and spoke several minutes in Arabic, while I said, "That's wonderful, really, but I can't understand a word of it, and at some point I keep thinking you're gonna realize that. As for that fridge, you know it's just gonna shut off again." Then she waved and left. She was gone two minutes when the fridge quit humming.

I chased devilish, elongated shadows through the stoney alleys in the dark night, wearing the confused grin of a maniac. A reluctant idealist who knows too well the score. Hoping to understand but coming up short. An old man crawled under an archway to die silently. He curled into a ball and pulled his hood over his face. Around the corner, little alley kids gathered up a scared dog to throw rocks at while a parent looked on approvingly. The dog was shaking, terrified, underfed and out of luck. Further up the alley a half-dead baby kitten cried out of a plastic bag. *STOP!*

"You want hashish?"

"No thanks."

"Double Zero, very good."

"No thanks."

"America, can I ask you something? What is it you are looking for?"

I got to Rachid's at 11am, the time we had agreed on. But when I arrived, the lamb was still alive and chained to the wall.

"Hey big fella," I said.

"*baaaaaahh.*"

"Rachid, you not kill yet?" I asked, pointing at the lamb.

"No, my brothers no here."

Within minutes three men entered carrying large steely knives. I was sitting in a little room by myself drinking tea. The entrance was wide, and I had a clear view of the slaughter. First a struggle, then a sharp knife through soft flesh, animal screams and throaty gurgling. Desperate hooves clawing at cold concrete. The floor was becoming a sea of blood weaving its way to the drain. The men's feet, too, were covered. They left red footprints when they walked. I got up and walked over as the last bit of life slipped away. The eyes of death staring directly at me.

All over the Arab world millions of lambs were being sacrificed in honor of Allah sending a lamb to Ibrahim so that his son Isaac would be spared. It was tradition, one of the biggest festivals on the Muslim calendar, and I had been invited to attend the event at Rachid's house. In fact, looking back on it, it's very likely I paid for that beast that I had just watch die. For several days prior I had seen lambs throughout town being wheeled around in wooden carts. Everyone was stocking up and storing the live animals in their homes for the big day. Children laughed and mimicked the animals, taunting and poking the beasts with sticks. The entire town sounded like a petting zoo.

The lambs cried throughout the night, and the one living in the room above my bedroom was particularly loud.

Rachid told me to come over at 9am. They were slaughtering the animal at that time, he said. I told him I didn't want to watch and asked if I could come over at 11am instead. He laughed and made fun, sliding his finger under his throat. But because of some delay, I had made it just in time.

Two hours later the animal was completely disassembled, looking like something you'd find at a butcher shop. The men pumped its stomach full of air then carved off its fur and sawed off its hooves. They hung the animal upside down in the doorway and removed the head. Intestines and all inner organs were placed into a bucket and the skin draped over a motor scooter leaning against a wall. I got up and told Rachid I had to go. I had lost my appetite.

Makeshift grills had been erected throughout town. Around every narrow corner of the medina lay squatters raking burning lamb's heads through the coals. Boys playing with the burnt skulls like toys, throwing them at one another. A man crazily hacked at a lamb's head with a meat cleaver. His face covered in soot, pieces of skull lodged in his hair. The smell of burnt animal suffocated the medina. I bought a newspaper and went home.

Reading the newspaper was making me lose all hope in humanity. But I had little else to do, and the International Herald Tribune is a damn fine paper. The Olympics were being overshadowed by the usual doping incidents and judging scandals, and now lawsuits, overturned medal decisions and grumblings of protest from world leaders who should have more important matters on their minds. Religious violence in India was reaching crisis levels. Two-hundred dead in one night, a family of eight burned alive in their car. Hindus killing Muslims and Muslims killing Hindus. Sunni Muslims killing Shiite Muslims for the smallest of religious differences. *Won't God be proud!* Suicide bombings in Israel. Senseless occupation and daily humiliation of Palestinians, bombings and more bombings. Murder revenge retaliation. A hopeless cycle of the weak and stupid. In the Indian state of Assam, 47 children between the ages of 1 and 5 die each day from malnutrition, and nobody knows or cares. And yet an entire country can become outraged over a dumb sporting event.

I got up to stretch and roll a joint. It was getting late and the festivities and madness had begun to fade. I leaned out my window and saw an old man pedaling his bike through the wet alley below. Lamb hooves dangling off his handlebars like streamers.

The flies in my room never give me any trouble. The only time I notice them is when they're passed out on my ceiling or flying in circles above my smoking table. But now one is trapped in a Coca-Cola bottle, trying to fly out while another fly squats on the bottle's lip and watches. His wings are too soaked with cola to work properly, and after a desperate, frantic attempt to buzz his way out with wings furiously beating, he winds up body surfing again in the week-old soda. So I help. I love all things. The fly is halfway up the bottle now after fermenting in syrup all night, but he still can't find his way out. I tip the bottle, thinking it'll be easier for the fly to walk out, and then he'd be free and thanking me vigorously, and we'd sit and enjoy a good smoke and hearty laugh. It'll fly circles around my table and everything back to subnormal, but I tip the bottle too much, "Whoops," and he's engulfed by a river of brown goo and once again swimming

in cola. I try again, tipping slower now. He struggles to the bottle's outer edge as I tip a little more, conscious of my mistakes from the last time. I force him toward the opening by advancing the Coca-Cola, and soon he will be free and glad and everything will be right with the night. Order restored and gladness prevailed. Only once free he gets really pissed and starts shaking his bug legs violently and making wild sounds then takes off blindly bouncing off the walls and the light, yelling at me with evil fly eyes. Disturbing all the good flies who are peacefully sleeping.

It turns out that he is an illegal alien fly, much bigger than the others, an outsider whom I've never seen before, and had I known I would have taken him and the bottle down to the alley and dropped him off there. NO STRANGE FLIES! But he ignored the sign on the door, or maybe one of the good flies snuck him in secretly. Hmmm. And now all the flies are zooming through my room in protest, and how's a guy supposed to roll a joint with all this commotion? It's 2am and the good flies just want to sleep, but the big fly is really out of control. He's huge and rotten, deep and nasty with a super sugar buzz. I try to ignore him as do the good flies and we resume our nightly practice of smoking then passing out. But once I turn out the lights and climb into bed, he starts to stir and squeal in the total blackness, and I can hear his deranged buzzing which sounds choppy and coded like he's plotting strategy and systematically moving in closer for the kill. And, in fact, the sounds are growing nearer but often from different directions, and if his plan involves confusion, he's succeeded, because I cannot tell where he is in the dark, only that he's too close and freaking me out. He's still angry about something, and he torments me not realizing that I saved his miserable life. And then I fade away. The next morning I find him back in the bottle. Dead!

Rachid came by again to explain why he didn't have my money. And this would be the last time I'd see him. He sat nervous and waved his arms, leaning back often, brushing the front of his shirt like a well-to-do gangster.

"You make it good for me. It is no possible I make it no good with you. For why I make it that way with you?"

"Money!"

"Ah, money for me, money is nothing. Money is nothing. I make it in the bank, at the post. I take money for eat, for live. I have nothing, I work little I have little money. For me I not take too much money. Understand? But it is no problem. You come with me, I like you to come and stay in village. Tomorrow I give your money.

"Tomorrow I get my money?"

"No tomorrow, post is closed. After tomorrow ..."

"Monday? Ah, *Lundi*?"

"Yes yes and no. Sure *Lundi* and no problem."

It was the only time he came by without asking for anything.

I stopped by the spice shop to visit Mbark and Rachid. I had been going there every day now. Rachid had been spending time with a girl named Claudia from Budapest, and she was quite cute. He told me he had fallen in love with her, but she had just left, and now he was heartbroken. He bought her four postcards and asked me to help him write to her. He had little to say, so I wrote them by myself and even signed his name. Rachid excitedly ran off to send them just as Moorad showed up slabbering and jabbering, wanting something for nothing, so I left, too. I went home and packed

my things then walked down the alley to Casa de Carlos for a room. My month in the apartment was up.

My Rasta buddy and part-time drug connection, Abdul, was there talking to Mohammed. Two girls from New Zealand were staying at the guesthouse, also sitting around the table, and we all agreed we needed to throw a party and get good and pissed. Claire went on a pastry run, and Abdul was in charge of the wine and beer. Rhonda and I were joint rollers, and Mohammed made Moroccan spaghetti.

Carlos's two dogs were lounging around for attention, barking at everything, and people poured in as the night stumbled along. Strange Moroccan men attracted by the scent of Western women. Then the two lesbians came home, and I said, "Why wasn't I informed we had lesbians?" Nobody knew their names, so we all referred to them as, "The Lesbians." They seemed OK with it.

A room full of misfits, drinking wine, smoking spliffs, people pretending to understand and others that truly do. Someone wrestles with the dogs while a Moroccan man gyrates obscenely to an African American singer belting out soothing sounds of hope. And suddenly we have more wine. No one knows for sure what they are saying, but no one listening will remember it anyhow. Wasted thought, lack of thought, just a haze of drunken familiarity, and that's how so many friendships are formed and sustained on the road. Based on the best of intentions but held together with booze and drugs and faded memories.

"That shouldn't be happening. Not now, not ever," Rhonda says, pointing at Dancing Boy.

"*Habib sockwa huchelm gibberish,*" Dancing boy shoots back.

The clearing of tables, dirty dishes everywhere from the Moroccan spaghetti, ashtrays full of roaches, bottles clanking and tipping, smoke rings and hazy vision.

"WRONG COUNTRY!" Claire screams at Dancing Boy. "I'm not from Australia."

"I am brother," Dancing Boy responds.

"Yah, that may be, but I'm still not from Australia."

"Happy happy," Dancing Boy says to on one, jumping up and down like a pogo stick.

"Hey America," Rhonda says, jabbing me in the side. "Take this."

She's passing out Dixie cups half full of wine. It's Sunday and someone figured that communion would be appropriate.

"Haven't we been communing all night?" I ask.

"Not in the official 'God sense'," Rhonda says. "Come now everyone. Lift your glasses. Blood of Christ. Uh, body and blood, transfiguration ... and now we drink it."

"That was a good idea, Rhonda," Claire says, in a tone of reminiscent glee. Then she turns to me and says, "My parents are religious ... but I'm a vegetarian."

Dancing Boy flaps his arms with an unlit cigarette hanging out of his mouth. Bob Marley sings and we continue to drink and smoke.

"He is off the Richter. He's pumped up," Claire says to Dancing Boy's friend, Shy Guy, who is coming on late and starting to feel that warm blanket buzz that makes people act strangely. "You are outrageous. You're wicked!"

"*Get up, stand up, stand up for your rights.*" People gyrating fantastically, others talking, touching, groping drunken affectations soon forgotten. Much hugging and ear whispering. Little Rasta Abdul is freaking out, the alcohol has made him mad, and now he sits fidgety and frazzled, speaking in tongues to himself. His eyes crossed, he hits his

leg with a closed fist and with increasing ferocity. But no one seems to notice. People dancing, shouting, huddled together in corners, rolling up the walls, gnawing on each other's thoughts. Someone is playing fetch with the dogs, only there's no room to move, so the dogs go bouncing off people, spilling ashtrays, knocking over dishes, sliding sliding sliding ... The music gets turned up, as does the shouting and everything else, including the lights. But why? They burn white hot until they flash in brilliant slow motion and then disappear. And suddenly I'm alone in my room. Scratching my head.

Well into the wee hours, with the party over and everyone gone. My mind has just begun to function again, when Claire comes down with some story about not being able to find her room. I give her a strange look and tell her it's right above mine, then we decide to go to the roof for a smoke. But as often happens we begin to debate about politics. More fittingly, she starts to rip on the U.S. A favorite pastime of so many, I was beginning to see.

"You have to see and I'm sure you'd agree that you Americans have thoroughly fucked up the world. No disrespect, mate. It's not your fault. But YOU Americans have been fucking up shit for like 50 years, killing the planet and running around all arrogant with your big fucking army."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

She didn't know, but it didn't matter. I wasn't paying that close of attention. I had heard it all before, had it memorized, in fact. I was tired of trying to defend America. But that didn't stop me from trying. But understand this. I often agreed with others political opinions. I just didn't appreciate the tactless and aggressive manner in which they often expressed it.

"Oh, big bad America," I say. "Boo fuckin' hoo. At least I don't live in a country that has no influence on the world. That's even more insignificant than Canada. You're jealous. That's what it is. Everyone wants to be number one. Everyone wants to be king. Well, it's not an easy job, and I'm sorry for saying this but you and your little piece of shit country aren't qualified. And that's the truth. No disrespect ... *mate*."

I wanted to argue intelligently, but neither of us were up for it. It was obvious Claire had come down for sex. So why the attitude? Just before her rant we were talking about the best things in life.

"A proper fucking shag," she said slowly, passing me a drag off her cigarette.

A couple of days later and Rhonda, Claire and The Lesbians had left. But now there were two cute French girls staying at the Casa. I went for a walk around the medina, looking for Rachid and my money but ran into Moorad instead. He didn't see me, though. Ran right past me mad and crazy, excited and spitting all over some tourist in a flowery shirt. He was disheveled, much more than usual. His face looked burnt and battered and he had a piece of cloth wrapped over each ear as though they had long ago been connected by a pair of sunglasses. Then he ran over to a distinguished-looking Arab man and slurred and spit at him, moving demonstratively and yelling about things unknown to all but God.

Like most days, I dropped by the spice shop, and the guys told me that Moorad had gone nuts. Some drug, they said. I went with Rachid to the internet café and wrote several emails to his girlfriend. Then back to Casa de Carlos for some lunch. The guesthouse was always empty during the day, so I lounged around with a book and a

smoke, often playing with the dogs. When Mohammed came back I asked him about Moorad.

“Yes, I know. He go crazy.”

“Mbark and Rachid said it was some kind of drug.”

“No, I do not think so. Moorad have not good mind. He was crazy once before for long time. He always say that one day he will go crazy again.”

I went back to the spice shop around 8pm, the streets much cooler and quieter. The little shop was loaded with travelers, but all of them left while Rachid and I ran to the internet café for a quick note to his girl. Mbark took off when we returned, and I watched the shop while Rachid went for some beers. It was fun playing shop owner, watching all the curious people wandering by outside. Wondering about the crazy white man inside.

Actually, to call it a shop seems strange. It measured about eight feet by six feet, with all the products lined up on the walls. Four or five people and the place was full. Soon Rachid was back, and we drank our beers sneaky style behind our backs, out of view. A friend of Rachid’s came by and began to play *Gnaoua* music on his homemade guitar. Then Rachid started clapping fantastically while his friend belted out lyrics. And soon I was clapping, then Rachid improvised and sang, “Yala, yala, it’s time to drink some beers.” And then they looked at me to go next, so I sang, “Yala, yala, it’s time to smoke some hash.” We went around like this until we could think of nothing more to say. Then we all started laughing and toasted to booze and women and friendship. Rachid’s friend left, and the two of us closed up the shop and headed back to the Casa to smoke a joint or two with Mohammed and the pretty French girls.

We saw him coming straight at us, down the middle of the road with a terror-stricken look like he had just met the Devil, and maybe he had. He walked between us without saying a word or acknowledging us in any way. Brushing by so close as to scrape an arm or brush a shoulder. Rachid and I looked at each other and agreed. Seeing Moorad had sobered us up.

Back at the Casa, I introduced Rachid to the girls and began rolling a joint, but they were acting strange because of some misunderstanding on their first night. And now they hated me.

“We heard someone say they were going to stab us with a knife,” the short one said.

“Oh, I’m sure no one said *that!*”

“That is what I told them,” Mohammed said. “I told them you were very generous and I did not think anyone would say that.”

I assured them that I was still an asshole but innocent on all counts of conspiring to murder beautiful French girls. Rachid left a couple of joints later, and I talked for several hours with the tall one. Who either was or wasn’t flirting with me.

The French girls left the next morning, but I was getting stuck in. The graduation notice I needed for my teaching job was weeks late arriving from my school. I emailed my contact in South Korea and assured him I was graduating in two months, and that the delay was the school’s fault. He sent an email back telling me to come out anyway.

I went by the spice shop to inform the guys of my departure and write a couple more emails for Rachid. He took me for lunch, then the two of us and Mbark sat in front of their shop listening to Bob Dylan, talking to all the girls that passed by. I introduced

them to “import export,” an Indian euphemism for sex, and they laughed and slapped their knees.

On the way back to the guesthouse Moorad jumped at me with food in his hands, all mashed up and smeared across his face like a dumb child. He ran circles around me, and I nearly fell over twisting to keep my eyes on him. There was no way I was letting that thing out of my sight.

“You take,” he said, shoving a handful of food at me.

“No, man. That’s disgusting.”

Then he ran up to the mosque and stood in front of the wall, yelling something about Allah, then jogged around, back and forth, pronouncing himself insane so loud for everyone to hear.

“I AM CRAZY! I GO CRAZY!” he yelled, looking right at me. It felt like a warning to stay away. Then he dashed off and began spitting food and teeth at another man.

I had a nightly ritual that involved a long walk through the medina or along the beach, usually around midnight when the streets were nearly deserted. On my last night a strong wind was spraying the town with dust and sand, blowing the tips off ferocious ocean waves. The falcons performed acrobatics in the wind tunnel gusts, barely silhouetted against a moonless black sky. I stumbled slightly, leaning into the wind as I walked, shielding my eyes from all the flying sand. I went to the late night shop and purchased my usual two packs of chocolate chip cookies. I told the man I was leaving and not to expect me the following night. He nodded and said, “*Shokran.*”

On the way back to the Casa I was run down by Broken Arm Man. I saw him several days a week, and we always exchanged some words. I even signed his cast. But now he was drunk and carrying an ugly white poodle named Cookie, infringing on my precious snack time.

“Come to my house. You must. I have friend there, just meet him tonight. Don’t know ... some Frenchman.”

I said no many times but he persisted and I gave in. Cookie looked up and growled. We stopped at a food shack, and he picked up some supplies, then we walked to his house while he slurred at me and slapped me on the back. The Frenchman was lying on a couch and said nothing when we came in. Said nothing the entire time, in fact. He looked like a man who had just awoken in a strange time and strange place. Unsure how to act, what to say. Broken Arm Man put an Iron Maiden tape into a cassette player and began to dance with Cookie.

“Oh sweet Jesus!” I blurted out. “I’m gonna roll a joint. You got any papers?”

And I proceeded to roll fast. I am way too sober for this, I thought. Broken Arm Man unloaded the groceries onto the table. He broke some kind of sandwich into three pieces and passed one to each of us. Then a yogurt cup, and finally the passing around of a large, plastic bottle of orange juice until it was gone. The sandwich was filled with butter and boiled egg smear, lard maybe and spices. My stomach was dodgy, and I ate very little of it. But it was still hard for me to turn down food. It’s an insult to some. So when no one was looking I stuffed the remainder of the sandwich into the pouch on the front of my hoodie.

But that damn dog was on to me and kept sniffing around, crawling over me to get at the sandwich melting in my pocket. Frenchman was stiff and silent and now stoned and even more useless. Broken Arm Man did most of the talking. He cranked up

the music till it became deafening then passed around an enormous box of photos. He kicked the TV several times to get it working, while I fumbled through the photos with one hand, holding Cookie back with the other. To a sober person it would have been obvious that something was amiss. Cookie was coming at me like he or she or it was possessed by something that could damn the Devil to Hell. Unrelenting and vicious. I started out being careful not to injure the little fucker, but now I had the dog by the throat. Holding it so its feet were dangling in the air. And yet neither of them seemed to notice.

“Oh jeez,” I jumped up quickly, dropping Cookie harmlessly to the ground. “I gotta go.”

“Why you go?”

“I gotta pack. Leaving very early tomorrow. Yep, it’s true, I assure you.”

Mohammed was still awake when I got back. I handed him one pack of cookies and sat down next to him on the couch. We talked about movies and women and jobs, the possibility of him going to college in France like he wanted. But he had no money, he said. There are no government education loans in Morocco and not many job opportunities even if you have a degree. He and the short French girl had become close in the few days they were together, but now she was gone. People came and people left, each time returning to better lives than Mohammed will ever know. He said that he loves America because there is so much opportunity. His best friend, Abdul, told me once that he learned English specifically so he could get an American visa and go to school there. But his application was denied several times, so then he started learning German, determined to find an education and a better life.

“When I was in high school,” Mohammed said, “I dream all the time. But then I get older and know my dreams will never come true. So I make myself stop.”

Chapter 22

Serendipity

The bus pulled into Marrakech around 5pm.

“Maybe you want something?” some common riff raff asked, as I retrieved my pack from under the bus.

“Nope,” I said.

“Maybe taxi?”

“Yes, you have taxi?”

“Yes, come, I have taxi.” So I followed him, feeling bad and reminded myself for the seventh time that day not to judge people too quickly and to always give the benefit of the doubt. And after a one minute walk into the parking lot ...

“Here, taxi.” But this taxi already had a driver. “You give him 10 and me 10.”

“Give you 10 dirham for what? Walking with me, deceiving me? Nope, not gonna happen.”

I threw my pack into the back seat then climbed in front. The little man had his hands through the window, in my face, and the driver refused to move.

“We gonna fuckin’ go, or do I have to get out and find another taxi?” And off we went.

The Hotel Central Palace was booked, so I stayed in a different hotel. After Essaouira, Marrakech seemed oppressive, so I hid in my room most of the night, going out only for food. I was in no mood for the city’s endless barrage of hustlers.

I left early the next morning on a train to Kenitra. I woke late and quickly packed, jumping into a screaming cab that sideswiped another taxi, and I nearly lost my arm, pulling it in just fast enough. The side mirror wasn’t so lucky. It was gone, bouncing down the road somewhere behind us. At the train station I had two minutes to decide on my destination. I was planning to leave in a few days, so I wanted to pick someplace close to Casablanca. But that still left me a lot of choices.

“Hell, I don’t know,” I said to the man at the ticket counter. “Kenitra, I guess. One ticket please.” I purchased the ticket as the train was pulling away.

I had no idea what time the train was getting in, and after four hours of rumbling across barren land I assumed we were getting close. Each time the train pulled into a station I looked over at a Moroccan woman holding a small child and asked, “Is this Kenitra?” Each time she shook her head and said, “No.” After a few more attempts we

shortened the routine to me looking at her and her shaking her head. I was beginning to fall asleep when I heard a woman's voice.

"Kentira!"

Kenitra quickly reminded me of a small Midwestern city. The town has money somehow and used to be a major player in the manufacturing world. But like so many factory towns in Michigan and Ohio it looked slightly gutted and beat down. I liked it immediately.

There were no tourists, no hard-sellers or hustlers, no red clay buildings crumbling into history. No hooded Ali Babas hiding in the shadows. Every street was dotted with outdoor cafes. Well-dressed businessmen sip their tea and dab their mustaches, while modern women in skirts showing some skin walk by. I promised myself a shower and a cold beer.

I got a room and to my pleasant surprise a *hot* shower. Now for the beverage, I thought, trying to look as presentable as a filthy vagabond can. I found a seedy little dive bar and walked in, grabbed a stool at the bar and ordered a beer. The place was full of rough-looking locals. Mostly men but a few hard women, a couple of cute ones, too. A barfly sat down next to me and I began buying her drinks. Would my generosity pay off, I wondered? She wasn't very attractive, but I had a raging boner nonetheless. Hours later we were very drunk. I went into my pocket and discovered that I was out of money, knowing from experience to leave the majority of my cash in the room on drinking nights. I turned and the girl was gone. She knew my wallet had run dry before I had. I spun off my seat and on the way to the door noticed a photo on the wall. A photo of the World Trade Center towers in New York City.

The following day I slept in late then priced tickets to Korea and vowed not to drink. I had a wonderful dinner of roasted chicken, rice, French fries, vegetables and lots of fresh bread, and all for just 20 dirham. I left the restaurant feeling good and full, satisfied. It was a beautiful spring evening, and I enjoyed walking the streets without the hassles. A man came up to me only to talk. He was learning English and promised he'd speak better the following year. I promised to improve my Arabic, and I think we agreed on an annual meeting to gauge our progress.

"Spy Game" was playing at the local theatre. It was dubbed in French with Arabic subtitles. The theatre was old school Americana with a huge balcony. I took a seat in the far upper back. Of course, I couldn't understand one word that was being said. But I had a great time anyway, and it dawned on me how little I needed to be happy. After the movie I passed a McDonalds that was still open and went in for a few hamburgers then back to my room. Sitting on my tiny window ledge I smoked a cigarette that I had purchased off the street for 1 dirham, enjoying a moment of complete calm. That wonderful feeling of contentedness. Confident that no matter what, everything was going to be all right.

In the morning I strapped on my pack and headed off on foot for Medhiya, a small town on the Atlantic Ocean. It was a 10-mile walk along mostly paved roads with little traffic. I passed a suburban ghost town half constructed, and now bad economic times had hit and shut down the project. Along the way there was a broken-down military complex with armed guard kids and barbed wire all around with tank-sized holes. A shy goat herder tried to keep his flock together. The younger goats played and pushed each other down, while the older ones lazily grazed.

I was excited about Medhiya from the start. But then I arrived. I walked into town around 3pm and had trouble finding a room. Every place was closed. Finally I found the one hotel that was open, and they gouged me for 150 dirham. In the hallway outside my door was a framed photo of Saddam Hussein. I walked across the street to the beach and bought a cigarette. It was incredible, the beach was a garbage dump. Litter strewn everywhere with the crashing waves of the Atlantic washing some of the refuse out to sea. I mumbled my disappointment to the Cigarette Man and walked off. There were many cafes on the beach and they all *advertised* food. But none of them *served* food. I may have found this amusing had I not been so hungry and exhausted from my walk on an already empty stomach. And my reason for coming to Medhiya? The lovely beach, of course.

I found a little food shack and bought a Snickers and two bananas then walked over to the pier and sat down. I couldn't believe all the trash, all the locals using the beach anyway, just walking over it and around it. The undertow grappled with a fat little kid while several other children tried to surf but got trampled by a wave. All the while the adults lay on the beach content, happy even. Completely surrounded by garbage.

Everywhere I went in Morocco people ran up to me, grabbing at me, asking the one question that I feared most – “How do you find Morocco?” “Fuckin' disappointing,” is what I wanted to say. But I was always polite. So I looked them in the eyes and lied my ass off.

My room was nice and big, with an enormous window that opened up to the Atlantic just a few meters away. I quickly decided it was worth the money then pulled up a chair and randomly opened up my Kerouac anthology. I found comfort in knowing that he, too, was a wanderer, always engaged in too much thought. Looking for the meaning in perhaps a meaningless world. Optimistic, self-indulgent, completely overjoyed and saddened at the same time. As long as I had a Kerouac book, I would never be alone. But my hero is a dead man who drank himself to death. What good can come from this, I wondered? Would I also suffer the same fate? Would I too become disillusioned? And what happens when the party is over, when the glass is finally empty? Will I see angels? Or just a flashback of angel paintings?

I came down from my room in the early evening absolutely famished. Sitting at the bar I had a wonderful fish dinner and several cold Flag beers. The owner's son was serving my drinks and we began to talk. He had spent many years in America as a limo driver. I asked why all the restaurants didn't serve food. He said it was because it was the off-season. Then he leaned over the bar and told me in confidence that the Israelis were behind the World Trade Center attack. This is when I met Fred.

A couple of guys came in and sat at the bar. One of them overheard me talking to the bartender and introduced himself. His name was Fred, from New York City and home for vacation. He was born in Morocco but had lived in the U.S. for the last 18 years. We talked about sports for an hour and it was nice to be understood. He said that he was going to Rabat the next day, which is where I was headed, and asked if I wanted a ride. I said yes, and we agreed to meet at the hotel bar at 2pm. Then he finished his beer and left.

The hotel had entertainment, even though I was the only guest. Apparently it was the hot spot in town. Or maybe the only spot in town. Four male musicians were

obscured by four swaying females on a bright orange stage. It reminded me of a Robert Palmer video. The girls moved in slow motion, looking the way women did in old Italian paintings. Long black hair, Mediterranean complexion and thick around the middle. And then the band would speed up, working the girls into a frenzy, a psychotic episode of sorts with everything jiggling out of control. Every song sounded like the one before it, with the same lazy beginning and same furious ending. The girl that drank my money away two nights earlier in Kenitra came in and said hello. What are the chances of that, I thought. She was milking another sucker who still had money in his pocket.

I was the only foreigner in the bar and one of only 10 people total. My buzz was peaking, so I decided to go for a walk on the beach. It's dark, I told myself. You can't see the trash. I underestimated the surf and walked too far. Dark blue moonlit waves barreled toward me, soaking my shoes and pants knee high. I collected piles of sand with each step and sang into the cool night. Then I stopped suddenly and stared into the sea looking west. Thinking about America, my family and friends. What are they doing right now, I wondered? Oh yes, working. I let out a little snicker, a drunken *he he*. Then I tripped over some garbage and fell into the water head first.

Fred picked me up the next day. During the drive we talked about many things, and it felt great to have a conversation with someone who spoke perfect English. Someone just like me. Then out of the blue ...

"I'm gay. I just wanted you to know."

"So what?" I said. "But I'm not, by the way."

In Rabat, Fred helped me find a cheap room with neither shower nor toilet, just a tiny closet down the hall with a porcelain hole in the ground and the customary bucket of brown water off to the side. I threw my bag in the room, and we went for a couple of beers ...

And 17 hours later we were eating split pea soup outdoors somewhere with the sun coming up. We zoomed from bar to bar all afternoon, then ate dinner at a restaurant hanging onto a cliff over the ocean, then hopped from club to club while I rolled joints in the car.

"I'm gonna be an important writer some day," I said at one point, "so please don't crash the car and kill me."

I awoke around 9am with a blistering mind. Fred was gone. He was passed out on the other bed last time I looked.

"Oh my head," I cried. "What day is it?" I went for my wallet. *Oh, the stupidity!* I had spent almost \$100 during the binge, and all I could remember from the night was how hot the Moroccan girls were at the clubs and what Fred had said.

"So, have you gotten laid in Morocco?"

"No way, man. I don't wanna die."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I see the way people look at me. I figured if I tried to bone a local broad, I'd get creamed by an angry mob."

"No! Moroccan men aren't like that. They don't even care."

"Well that's just fuckin' great. It's a little late now, don't you think?"

It's funny what the mind remembers. I sat on the edge of the bed, trying to focus, picking the fur off my tongue. And then it hit me. I had to leave immediately. My spending spree meant I could not afford to stay even one more day. I walked into the

bright sun with a spin-cycle stomach, sleuthing through the capital city for a travel agency where someone spoke some English. And this was no easy task. I finally found one after two torturous hours and bought a ticket to Seoul leaving the next day. I had only \$20 left in the world after paying for the ticket, and nobody in Korea knew when I was coming. The decision to flee had happened too fast, and I couldn't find an internet café to warn them. My flight ticket would be reimbursed by the school, but I had no idea when. On the way back to the guesthouse I bought some bread and cheese at a market and made a sandwich in the room. My stomach was a mess, and I ran to the porcelain hole often. I slowly packed and wondered about the flight time, something I had shockingly failed to find out.

The flight was scheduled to depart at 6:30am. I thumbed through my guidebook and discovered that the last train to Casablanca was at 6pm and the service wouldn't resume until 6am, which would be too late. I looked for my travel alarm clock and it read 5:12pm. I quickly shoved everything into my pack, made one last run to the hole, then outside to find a taxi.

"Train station?" I asked through the window.

"(something in Arabic)"

"*Gare de statione*," I tried to say in French.

"*Chuckachucka chuckachucka*," the driver said, moving his hand like a train.

"Yes! *Chuckachucka ... woo woo!* Very late, Benson, must go quickly." And he seemed to understand.

I made the last train with time to spare, then sat cross-legged on the platform eating the last of the bread and cheese. The train whisked me to Casablanca in less than an hour. I went into the station to buy another ticket to the airport, but after I walked up to the window and said, hello, a man came up talking excitedly and squeezed in next to me.

"Oh no!" I said, putting the back of my hand in front of his face. That's the one thing I never got used to. Even though the people have nothing but time, so much of it they don't know what to do with it all, they never wait in line. Always a free-for-all rather than a queue. It never made sense. Then a cute girl waved and smiled at me, and I began feeling better, hungry even. I got to the airport at 8pm, 10 hours before my flight would begin boarding. I took a seat inside a little café and ordered a tuna sandwich. The movie "Alive" was on a small TV sitting on the counter, and I had arrived just in time to see the plane crash. A stray black cat wandered underneath my table as I ate.

After the movie I found a reasonably comfortable-looking hard wooden bench. I lay down with my feet on my pack, my head under a balled-up sweatshirt. The locals walked by with odd looks, their curiosity peaked by the long-gone traveler trying to find a few winks. I could feel my ribs through my shirt. I never did fall asleep, but my scattered thoughts kept me company. I was a bit apprehensive about the teaching gig. Being stuck in a room full of children wasn't exactly my scene. I was more accustomed to hanging out with drunks and hookers, the occasional convict. Yes, and the strippers! *These* were my people. And the stoners, can't forget about them. My God, all the drug and alcohol abuse. "What do I know about children?" I said aloud. I opened my eyes and looked around. How long had I been talking, I wondered. There was a growing collection of people, all of them silent and staring. Waiting to see what the madman did next.

The flight to Amsterdam was much shorter than the six-hour layover I had afterward, but I did find an internet café and sent a message to the school saying that I was coming. Then I sat down and watched CNN on a big screen through small eyes. The time crawled by.

The flight to Seoul was 10 hours, but there were movies on board and all the free booze I could drink. I was getting my second wind now. A few rows up from me a girl sitting sideways in her seat read a magazine. She was tall and athletic, cute as hell, and I couldn't stop staring. She had a great crooked smile and long brown hair pulled back tight into a ponytail.

We noticed each other often throughout the night, and I wondered if she was thinking about me the way I was her. In the morning a John Cusack love story came on, "Serendipity," and I could see that she was watching it, too. My heart slowly came undone with the passing minutes, bathing in a feeling so strong as to be completely foreign to me. I'll never see her again, I thought. I don't know her, yet I will miss her. In time my memory of her will fade, but not that feeling I had when I looked at her looking at me. Each of us holding our glances longer as the night grew into morning. And I think, maybe *this* is serendipity – a fortunate accident, fate, destiny, call it what you will. Our eyes meet again and something special and unspoken is being shared. Upon landing, she went one way, and I went another.

Chapter 23

Life is Good

After an hour-long bus ride to Gimpo Airport, another layover lasting several hours, a 45-minute flight and a 30-minute cab ride, I walked into the Ding Ding Dang academy in Daegu, South Korea and met my fellow teachers.

I was to share an apartment with an affable Scottish guy named Gordon, and it was an adequate place. It had the usual amenities, like any neglected big city pad in the States. I got into town on a Sunday and would begin teacher training the next day, which gave me just one day to shake off the drearys. It had been 45 hours since I left Rabat, getting two hours of sleep in three nights. My stomach had more vodka in it than food. And visiting the school had given me bad vibes.

It was Monday, April 1st, and oh how appropriate. While waiting to begin a long day of teacher training, I stood dumbly in the hallway with that deer-in-the-headlights glow emblazoned on my face, as a small gaggle of monsters pressed and contorted their eager alien faces against a window, beating and thrashing, snot and drool and food all over those snarling faces, dirtied and diseased, screaming and oh my God if I didn't wonder, what the fuck am I doing here? That same night I turned on the TV and watched Linda Blair's head spin around in "The Exorcist." A sign? Sure, why not? Anything to get me out of this mess, I thought. During my first training class I turned over my formal looking observation sheet and wrote, "I tried to jump out the window, but it wouldn't open," and then I laughed to myself. But the kind of laughter that said the joke was on me. Then I made a note to buy aspirin.

No good can come from this, I thought. At best I lose my mind and savagely beat one of them for confusing simple past with past perfect. At worst I get that window open and begin tossing kids out of it like confetti. Screaming, "HELL IS FOR CHILDREN!" And that could be grounds for dismissal. Nope, this will not do. But where could I go? I had exactly a dollar fifty.

One of the teachers said that the most important thing was to have fun. I was thinking about the impossibility of that when I phoned my folks for a small loan. Just enough to get me home, I told them. Hadn't I thought this teaching thing through, you ask? Yah, right. Remember the mountain bike?

I threw an excuse at my boss, picked up money at Western Union, bought an airline ticket to Denver and hopped on a train to Seoul. My flight didn't leave for several days, so I'd have time to get to know the capital city. On the train I remembered a conversation I had with Gordon the night before. He was telling me about a teacher who, "whacked a kid."

"The teacher hit the kid?" I asked.

"Yah, he flogged him proper."

"Jesus, that would've been me for sure."

I hate it when people make that sound with their mouths like they're eating soup or slurping up dew worms out of the ground, *hheeeuuuuuuugggtthhgg*. These are the people I usually sit next to on long train journeys – assigned seating of course, just like the movie theatres, "and we'll come and drub ya if you're not in your proper place, and I don't care how many empty seats there are." The man sitting in front of me had the affliction. It came at regular intervals as if guided by an internal clock, *huuuurrrrssrrzztthh*. Like a vacuum cleaner sucking up a pool of snot. And why are these people always old, can you explain that one to me? I wanted to punch him in the face and throw him from the train. Have some fucking manners, civility please! Do you see anyone else on the train eating imaginary soup? I pick my nose religiously behind closed doors, but in public I'm more discreet.

Then he got up and stood right next to me. I could stab him with my pen, I thought, and perhaps the sound of blood gurgling from his neck hole would drown out the slurp slurp. Or maybe he'd keep doing it even while struggling with death. But I love everyone, even the slurpers, and I repeated this over and over as I played with the pen in my pocket.

I rented a closet in Seoul at a place called Inn Daewon, smack dab in the heart of the city. The room was a box measuring five feet by seven feet with a ceiling about a foot shorter than my six foot two inch frame. What a modern, clean and well organized city, though, and I looked forward to exploring it. Street food stalls lined every road, selling anything you could imagine and cheap, too. My first night I walked to a theater and watched "The Royal Tenenbaums" in English. When I got up to leave I forgot where I was, and it took me about 30 seconds to remember what city I was in. What country even.

It was dark now and the cityscape had changed in that short time. Lights everywhere and big screen TVs hanging in the sky thirty stories up showing videos, everything spinning and blinking. Everything big and loud and screaming to be noticed. I read in the English language version of the Korean Times that South Korea had the highest per capita rate of alcohol consumption in the world. The women didn't seem to drink much, but the men made up for it. Seeing a businessman dressed in a thousand dollar suit puking in the street or passed out on the sidewalk was nothing to bat an eye at. This is what is referred to as being a Korean man.

They came at me with tiny, angry eyeballs, sneering, yelling, blatantly stumbling into me, trying to provoke an altercation. One man actually cocked his arm back as if preparing to swing at me but changed his mind when he saw how much I towered over him. I had never seen a group of people change so much after a little drink. It was as if their inner asshole, their natural collective personality, was finally free to express itself while under the influence. After all, they couldn't be held responsible for things done

while drunk. It was like an entire country of stupid teenagers. But then I came to see that their daytime behavior wasn't much better. You see, the Koreans didn't want my money. They just wanted me to get the fuck out of their country.

No one seemed to have an original thought, and there is no questioning of anything in Korean society. You don't like your boss, just internalize with drink and stumble into any white face you can find. But under no circumstances should you confront him. And I assure you, it will be a *him*. Everyone followed the Korean code at all times, regardless of how ridiculous or inefficient or backwards it was. There can be no deviation, no differing opinions or personalities. You do what you're expected to do, or you jump off a tall building with your children in your arms. Those are your choices.

The drivers, however, do what they want, a curious exception to the orderliness, and they surely have the right of way and the right to run down those who disagree. Even if you're crossing the road legally as everyone always is. If you can afford a nice shiny car then your life is obviously worth more than some poor dope who just stepped off a bus. Which is why accidentally attacking him with your car is not so much of a problem. And if you're a foreigner, a *waygook*, they'll make an extra effort. *Screech bam splat*. And they'll give you a dirty look, too, as you drag yourself bloody and mangled from the car's undercarriage. And it's that look that says it all. We don't want you here.

Back in my cubicle, lying on the thin mattress on the floor. Half asleep. Half distressed about my life. I was confused. Just as confused as I was before leaving for India. What now, I thought? Where do I go from here? My whole life I had been hopping around with no direction like a heavenly bum, convinced that at some point I'd find my place. But some point hadn't come yet, and I was feeling anxious. All of my friends were settled in with careers and families. But somehow I was programmed to reject those things. Which is why I sometimes felt like I was spinning out of control. Fighting the natural order of American society is no easy win, particularly if you're doing it unconsciously. To go against the grain is to go alone, and this is how I often found myself.

And then my mind took a different turn and I was thinking about the dying children in India, the child prostitutes in Bangkok, the deformed beggars and tortured Tibetans, the Little Boy Retard in Marrakech, the persecuted and starving and hopeless of the world that I conveniently shield myself from. That I somehow manage to forget about. I thought of Mohammed and his reluctance to dream. They were all there with me in my room, staring at me. Laughing at me. They taunted me and said things like, "It is OK. If you are truly unhappy, we will trade places with you."

I wandered the rainy streets on my last day abroad in a mental fog. A three-legged dog wearing a red and white sweater hopped out of an alley and onto the sidewalk in front of me. I continued on to Insa Dong, the artistic area of the city. An area I got to know well during my short stay. The neighborhood was taken over by a large group of high school kids who called themselves the Smile Korea Gang. Two girls ran up to me.

"Where are you from?"

"America."

"I love America!"

And we proceeded to talk, and they gave me a list of helpful hints of adjustment to Korean life: “Smile when a Korean looks at you strangely, give your seat to an elderly on the subway, if invited to dinner eat deliciously and cleanly.” There were others, too, and while the language was choppy and awkward, the message was genuine. I was approached often that day by pairs of kids, and each time we talked for several minutes about all kinds of things. All of the bad feelings I had of Korea melted away that afternoon. I walked back to my guesthouse full of hope for the future.

I’m sitting next to a man who is also from Denver. I order the standard two-at-a-time baby vodkas and a bottle of tonic, then drink fast while I look over the dinner menu and movie selection. The plane is much nicer than what I’m used to, with TV screens on the backs of every seat and continuous entertainment of my choosing. I order two more vodkas and listen to some music on the alternative channel. The Green Day song comes on that I used to hum to myself back in McLeod Ganj. Back when I was walking friends to the bus stop every other day. The song I sang to myself as Dan, Seamus, John and I left to meet Mario and Wade for greater and grander adventures that I never could have predicted.

*“Another turning point
A fork stuck in the road
Time grabs you by the wrist
Directs you where to go
So make the best of this test
And don’t ask why
It’s not a question
But a lesson learned in time
It’s something unpredictable
But in the end it’s right
I hope you had the time of your life.”*

The flight attendant brushes by the sleeping passengers as I gulp down the last of my drink. The sun is just beginning to rise, a fast forward spectacle of ambushing light. My lids are barely open but enough to see a blanket of golden cotton balls floating underneath the plane. A bright orange sun finally shows itself in the east, firing streaks across the sky. A red carpet leading me home. An Oriental man sitting in front of me reaches into a bag under his seat and pulls out a ball cap then puts it on his head. On the back are three words – “Life is Good.” I smile, then like Dorothy I click my heels together three times.

Tomorrow I’ll have to hunt down a job and surrender myself for bread money and cable TV. Tomorrow I’ll begin plotting my *next* escape. But today I’m still a wandering lunatic, an experienced vagrant whose eyes have seen the light, whose ears are full of suffering, whose tongue has tasted compassion, whose soul has been rewarded. A man with absolutely no ambition, a man who doesn’t give a damn about anything. A man on the verge of something wonderful.