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The escape artist

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The escape artist

by

Manori Neelika Jayawardane

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)
Major Professor: Barbara Haas

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Manori Neelika Jayawardane

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Major Professor

For the Major Program

For the Graduate College
In memory of my Aach'chi Amma, who was the embodiment of grace
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"The Escape Artist" is a piece of writing that I began as an endeavour to combine elements of fiction and non-fiction, poetry and prose. It begins with the protagonist's reminiscences: she has exiled herself to a Buddhist monastery in the Himalayan foothills in Nepal after the death of her mother, who died under dubious circumstances, possibly at the hands of her father. The story is told in flashbacks, wherein the protagonist relives the history of her life, explaining how, and why, she has arrived at this seemingly improbable destination.

In many ways, my protagonist's life mirrors mine: I have, almost, lived her life. I created a character who feels dispersed and ambivalent about conventional morality, cultural norms, and other widely held systems of belief, because I, too gave up the safety of being "normal" in my culture. In both our cases, giving up that safety was not necessarily a choice, but an inevitability. In fiction, I am exploring how fragile this self-formed identity is, one that is created out of necessity. However secure I feel with my academic successes in America, I always know that my house built-upon-the-sand may fall any time. I am always wary.

In the story, the protagonist is the ultimate "escape artist", finally escaping from the harshness of her predicament by entering monastic life. She is fully conscious of the irony of her decisions. The same is true for me: I escaped to the world of academia, using my academic degrees like mantras, perhaps even as aeroplanes, to take me away. I am fully aware of the selfishness of engaging in escapism.
CHAPTER 1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

I am having dreams of my mother again. Her face is pale, slightly blue, with a ceramic hardness to it like a Madame Tussaud's waxwork; her auburn hair, luscious, flows all about her, as if she has been carried deep into blue green nocturnal waters by ocean currents. In my night visions, I see only her head - - she is a middle aged, drowned Ophelia, devoid of body and youth. Swirls of white fibres and translucent raw silk curl about her like streams of heavy cream in water, churning and churning. Her funeral garb is spoiled by the water. When I wake up to feel the weave of the reed mat below my body, the stone floor of the monastery is cold as her face in death. I glance at the sleeping nuns, their bare heads gleaming in the lamplight, hoping that I have not disturbed anyone. And even though my eyes are open, all I can see are images of my mother's face, clear as on the day of her cremation, when I watched my father light the funeral pyre.

While my mother's body had burned, my father held my hand tight, he who never held hands. For a moment, I turned and searched my father, the man I once admired most in the world. I remember just one other time when he clutched my hand - in Moscow, when he took me to see Lenin in his mausoleum, he held his brown bear-fur hat in one hand, and my tiny fingers in the other, just in case I was afraid. But of course I was brave, like I thought he wanted me to be. My father loved Eastern Europe - he had been educated in the University of Moscow. He took me there when I was nine years old, so that I could see the land of his mythical youth, one he had not seen in over a score of years. Winter was setting in over the city like a dark shroud, and we walked past endless rows of war memorials and
fountains, red carnations staining the granite tombs for the unknown men of war. Grey clad soldiers, stiffer than stone, lifted their legs in slow motion precision, straight out, parallel to the waist, then back down, in a march of indulgence and pain, all at once. The snow had just begun to fall, covering all our hard edges, and like every child who saw snow fall for the first time, I ran about, pink tongued, airborne, my arms stretched out wide, like the wings of an albatross.

As my mother's hair and skin singed and blistered, my father's eyes looked directly at the flames swallowing her. I thought of Lenin, in spectacular stiffness, waiting calm-faced in his glass coffin, a Snow White anticipating the kiss of life. Millions of suitors filed past, and no one revived him. My father and I shuffled along in the long queue, our eyes never moving away from the centre of the room, the brilliant white light directing our gazes to the body. I knew that my mother was not still in death; she certainly had not been still in life.

In Nepal, the high mountains and walls of land and ice trapped the soul; perhaps that is why so many sinners come to this monastery. Having nowhere to go, one could only think of getting out. And for the Buddhist, there was only one way to escape - through death. These nights in the monastery, when I wake up from my dreams, I unfold myself from the blankets and creep out of the sleeping rooms, careful not wake my companions. Tonight, it is so warm, I almost cannot believe I am high on top of the earth. On the mountain meadows, lit by the near full moon in a cold, neon light, I walk to the goatherd's hut. Earlier this year, when the dreams of my mother first returned, I had been wandering without any particular direction, and found the hut. Since then, I go often, and over the last month, almost every night. It is the only place where I am utterly alone, unwatched.
The nuns are always watching me, afraid that I may do something, something to myself. They are kind, and spend much energy on me, but I am lonely and wanting to be alone all at the same time, although I dare not say it, as I know that all attachment to the things of this world can only bring suffering. Angst and personal indulgences are not a part of my religion, I know this, and yet, they are the biggest detractors from my daily meditation.

At dawn, when I hear the great brass bell pealing for morning meditation, I run back to the monastery, and arrive breathless and flushed from the cold morning air, my robes, the colour of a Sahara sunset, orange and salmon, russet red and crimson, all swirled in one vat of paint, twirling around me in the morning light. I am an exploding fireball, I am the heat of a life-giving star. I feel elation and excitement, anticipation of the lie I have to tell the nuns - that I have been meditating on the mountain. Perhaps they let me alone, because they see that I am improved. There is a great deal of fulfillment to be found here; I pray for the villagers, for anyone - I am more fulfilled by this work than by any other.

I have never really lived in a country where it has been legal for me to work. I live as a perpetual beggar. I discovered what it meant to be dependent early in life, when I went to America for my university education; at sixteen, I had realized that education was the only way out of my family's misery, so I completed my secondary school education as fast as I could, convincing my father to let me stay at home and take classes from private tutors. College in America was funded by the mining company for which my father worked in Namibia. The South African Consolidated Mineral Company had set up a trust fund for the further education of every child of expatriate workers - - it was part of their benefits package, designed to attract labour
to what was perceived as God-forsaken lands. They even had a fund for us to travel back from wherever we were sent to be educated - - and so I got to fly back, once or twice a year, to see my family. I always chose the Christmas holiday, because that was the shortest, opting to take extra classes in the long, three-month summer holiday, so that I would not have to go back.

During each visit, I saw that I could never go back, especially when, in a moment of nostalgia, I agreed to go home for the winter months of June and July. One time, I walked into my family's property after my habitual twenty minute run. It always took me several days to get used to the high altitude and the thin, crisp air, laden with the winter's dry, red Rift Valley dust, after being used to Iowa's lowland spring. Every morning, I made a big racket at the gates, poking my hand through a hole soldered out of the solid sheet of iron, fiddling with the heavy bolt until it loosened and gave way. All six of my mother's dogs were barking a veritable symphony in welcome to my staggering figure, making a most graceless entrance, having made the last few metres of my run on a death wish. The four guard dogs, two Alsatians, a Rhodesian Ridgeback, and a yellow Labrador Retriever, all had deep throated, heavy barks, resonating in the walled garden like the voices of three damaged baritones. As they rushed me, a mass of wagging tails, vying for attention, their pulpy, lapping tongues competing for salty sweat treats, I could hear the thin, high pitch of the indoor dogs - the fluffy white miniature monsters my mother raised on bread and butter - white bread, and a spread of centimetre-thick butter. I staggered past the rose bushes, which were making a comeback after the winter's pruning, scratching my legs on the bare twigs that thrust out more thorns than lurid blooms, and entered the garage through the inner gates.
As I opened the second iron gate into the inner space, I heard screams, sudden and terrifying; the barking had prevented them from reaching me before I walked into the house. When we were kids, we were told that only fishmongers yell. Terrified, I took steps back into the rose bushes; I wanted no part in anyone's fight while I was home - I got into no controversies, and took no sides.

They were blocking my way to the shower: my older sister, my mother, and two of the maids, Rosemary and Katherine. Actually, it was my sister doing the screaming, while the maids explained in ingratiating, softened tones. My mother, as usual, was wandering in and out, fussing, thrusting in a bit of commentary when she can.

I could tell from the battery of words coming out of my older sister Asirini's mouth that one of the maids had stolen something - money, the equivalent of about five dollars, maybe less.

"You stole that five-thousand Kwacha, I know it - why do you think I put it in the ironing, you bitch? I knew you were a thief!"

"But madam, I didn't take it, you found it in the clothes - please, madam, please listen," plead Katherine, the maid who has been working for my family for over three years, and is therefore on the verge of getting her sainthood.

"Katherine, you have to stop supporting thieves," my sister pronounced, wagging a finger, "I found the money later - she must have somehow smuggled it back into the clothes pile. I told you that I found money missing from my bag yesterday, and did this to see if she would take money again." To my sister, Rose was now a repeat offender; Two Strikes and You're Out. I wanted to tell her about the finer points of law, about the term "entrapment".
Instead, though, I swept past, ignoring the interjections of my mother: "Can you believe this, love, after all we do for these people. Well, good riddance - she thought she's white, anyway, the coloured rag!" I did not know why my mother has concluded that Rose, a mixed race woman with cafe-au-lait skin like mine, and lovely almond-shaped eyes with a pocket of fat underneath that crinkled when she smiled, thought of herself as "white". Apparently, her white blood made her too arrogant for my mother, too violently sexual, too attractive to have in the house as long as my father was around.

I walked on past the group, my mother circling them like a vulture, into the bedroom to throw my clothes off - clothes Rosemary dutifully washes, and puts away everyday. I headed for the shower, hearing her voice, plaintive and fearful, "Please, madam, please."

In the bedroom, I stripped off my sweat soaked running clothes, while my kid sister, Aruni, gave me the dirt: our older sister had left some bills in the ironing as a ploy to see if the maid would take it - the previous day, she had lost some money in a bag that she left next to the ironing. Apparently, Rosemary, the maid, had taken it.

In the shower, I thought about being so broke down poor that I stole dollar bills from the kitchen-money pot we kept in the communal Christian house I lived in for a year. I pictured stealing vegetables from people's garden plots near the railroad, because I had two dollars in my checking account - the picture of someone walking out of the sliding glass doors and finding me with a handful of hairy green beans, arms scratchy from the vines, is still shamefully imprinted in memory. I remembered needing a job so badly that I would have thought nothing of cleaning toilets - only no one offered me anything, because it is illegal for me to work in the
US. As the water in the shower hit me, I heard the car peeling out of the garage, scattering gravel. I peeked out, above the beveled glass roses of the shower windows, rubbing the steam off the smooth upper panes. On my tip toes, water drops slithering off my oiled back, I saw the car rush by: my older sister Asirini driving, Rosemary in the back. Rose’s face is fear, oh, swollen eyed, tearful fear, caught with a bunch of beans in her hand, not even enough for a meal.

Aruni told me later that Rose has been taken to the police.

I saw that if I stayed any longer, I would become like my mother, like my older sister.

I was afraid for my Aruni, my little sister of the sunrise, named for the day’s dawning, who was born ten years after me. She had not seen rapture since the day of her birth. And I could not transport her to glory, either; I, too, had forgotten myself in an endless cycle of dawnless days.

The hardest thing that I had to come to terms with during my years in Iowa was the fact that I had to allow my family to die in order for me to live. It seemed to me then that all things were in a constant state of dying -- and human life one big futile attempt to stop this inevitable end. Yet I saw that a person could choose to keep a few things alive that were really important to them; perhaps then, one would be successful at creating the illusion of immortality, since one could focus one’s attention on the things one found most valuable.

In my life, I saw that each time I called home, a small part of me withered. But I am sometimes unsure if I did indeed make any choices during those years. It seemed as if I struggled along the best I could, and finally, reaching a moment in which there was time to reflect, I saw the end result of thousands of half-consciously
made decisions. It is as if I looked back down a cliff I climbed, and saw all the tiny footholds that I placed my feet upon, and the crevices into which I dug my hands.

After this visit, I did not return to Namibia for a long time. My father would lament on the phone, saying that letting me go was the biggest mistake he had made in life, to which I would reply that it was the best thing I had done for myself. Besides, he was not very believable; he would alternately say that marrying my mother was the biggest mistake he had made in his life. After this visit, I did not go to see my family for seven years - - seven years of self-imposed exile, refusing to visit even for the holidays.

Only after seven years did I go back to see my dead mother, only to help my father take her body back to Ceylon.
CHAPTER 2. MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE RANCH . . .

During my seven years away from my family, I led a strange, unraveling life, far from anything my father would have wanted for me. I built myself a bucolic life. I learned to dance.

My friends and I made our way to Lovish, the basement dance club of tight proportions at least once every fortnight to roll our arses and shift our feet to the liquid, heel-pounding rhythm - one, two, three, four - salsa, merenge, and the occasional tango. The place was a hole in the ground damp with Latin rhythm in the middle of tiny, bleached white, Ames Iowa. We gathered in a gaggle, so as to ward off the amorous grindings of our dance partners, who thought that since we were not Latin women, we were obviously loose. Alright, maybe not loose enough for a one night stand, but reliable enough for a cheap feel. The idea was that we could be counted on for some cultural stereotyping; they thought that we, being non-Latinas in America, would be sure to believe that certain traits belonged to certain nationalities or ethnic groups. Most Americans seemed to think that Latin men were so genuinely hot-blooded that the occasional grab was part of what was expected. So, Latin men, knowing what was expected of them by Anglo-Americans, took advantage of the existing views, and managed liberties with white women that any self respecting Latina would never allow.

We would observe such events periodically as we sat in the dark recesses of the fourteen by twelve metre room, ruminating over export bottled beer and contemplating the glowing tips of Panter cigars. The floor was caked with a permanent layer of grime and stickiness, and the tables were either wet from freshly
spilled beer or on its way to a glue-like tackiness from previous weekends' mishaps. Ash, dirt, salt from the streets of winters past seemed to float with the thick haze of smoke, taking up residence on the walls and light fixtures, further dimming the already darkened room. We were almost enveloped in the lava of night debris, as if taken over by the volcanic spewings of a weekly Popeii, and encased in the volatility of a predictable eruption for which we went, again and again, to witness, and to participate.

The inevitably short handed bar staff shlepped out watered-down beer from the tap for, as one of them put it, the "Mexican brothers from Perry meat packing plants who only have ten dollars for the night." I had once been hanging out a lot with this particular bartender one Autumn, during which time he would drive the thirty minutes down to Des Moines, the Big City in Iowa, just to get the R&B station on the radio, and watch the airplanes land and take off from the city airport. The same thing happened every time we went there: around two am, we would see one plane land or take off if we were lucky. The rest of the time, he would give me lessons in hip-hop culture -- his West African family moved to America when he was a baby, so he had become an authority in American music. I would twirl his huge mass of ropy dreadlocks, while listening to tributes to Biggie Smalls and Tupac, while he told me that there was no such thing as a East-coast-West-coast rapper war. I was amused and amazed, having been raised on Cheesy Eighties British Pop. Afterwards, we would drag into Des Moines' hippest coffee shop to get wired for the drive back, and sometimes, run into gangs of high-school Goths, whose black decking, dark makeup, and blue fingernail polish I had to explain to my hip hop boy. He couldn't understand the Goths' posturing, nor their need to perform serenades
and skits on the makeshift stage at Java Joe's. We usually left as soon as the kids showed up.

One night, my friend Vanessa and I had just been given the salsa of our lives by two *bandelleros* in squeaky, tiny, very blue jeans, and turned-brim cowboy hats. Vanessa had been trying to get the exact nature of my relationship with several men, including hip-hop boy, out of me, when we had been cajoled into the salsa of our lives. The Blue-Jean Squad had come creaking over, reeking of whiskey, oozing alcoholic sweat and some oily hair product from wet looks, as the Gypsy Kings CD belted out "Volare". A blue bandanna was hanging from the back pocket of one of the men, and we giggled covertly while shooting fast ones about his sexual orientation, fashion sense, and gang affiliation possibilities. He was quickly dubbed a member of the Mexican Mafia, when our dear friend Eddie from Peru whispered to us, "Please, girls, realize that there's a proper name for such a group: *Bandelleros.*" We were momentarily ashamed of our ignorance, and stood corrected. However, we instantly remembered that the person speaking to us was, after all, Eddie from Peru, who had asked us women to collectively rub his blond hair-encased back and legs with tanning oil on a Spring Break trip to Mexico the year before. We called it quits when we discovered gnats stuck to his sweaty dollops of hair. One can't stand too corrected by such a man. Instantly, we breathed a sigh of superiority, and one of us mumbled, "Eddie, you can't make us stay with you by guilt-tripping us on our lack of PC, you know."

In these situations, Vanessa had the advantage of being over six feet tall, especially when she wore the six-dollar heels that she had scored at a Kinney's sale. So she could intimidate the men, even though she was only white. However, she
had the disadvantage of having a fine pair of breasts, between which many of the pint sizes liked to nestle their heads. I, on the other hand, was the same height as many of the men, but looked Hispanic, which garnered me immediate respect. So, I would be politely asked to dance, but my partners would quickly become morose and disconcerted when they found out that I could not speak any Spanish.

I’d felt ashamed about my lack of learning. Mortified, a whole crew of my friends and I took a Strictly Latin Ballroom Dance class to compensate for our ignorance. Our dance instructor was Gloria the Black Widow/Spider Woman of Ames. Sylvia, our friend from Puerto Rico, had nicknamed her years ago, when The BW had started hanging out in the Latin joints nightly, clad always in black, never spotted without being covered with an inch-thick layer of base, blush, eyeliner, and occasionally, false eyelashes - she frequently flashed those false eyelashes, and scored with the college boys - boys towards whom we were directing all manner of obscene gestures in vain attempts to get them to go home with us. No one had seen The Black Widow without her Ensemble of Doom. That is, not until The Summer of Salsa.

In one-hundred percent humidity and ninety-five degree heat, my friends and I signed up for the dance class that the Octagon Centre for the Arts offered in the so-called downtown Ames. It was located in the corner of two streets, across from the town's only funeral parlour - Adam's - a huge, restored Victorian mansion complete with eves, arches, trellises, and every bit of gaudy paint one could slap onto boards of old wood. The neon sign in the front gave the secret away. Not old money - just gauche nouveau-riche making money from embalming Midwestern old money. The Centre for the Arts was always reputed to be in trouble, with much gossip about its
possible demise circulating amongst the "Artiste" crowd in town. Over the last few years, the current director had turned the "Art in the Park" to what we snobbishly called "Craft in the park", or even "Farts in the Dark" on our more irreverent days, as we watched the 60-plus North Ames crowd come to buy the pre-fab Adirondack chairs and too-cute hat pins from farm wives: the charity of the Bourgeois. They ignored our porno art quite mercilessly. Yet, bitchiness aside, many of us gave lessons in our respective fields during the summer - what better than to complain and teach flower arrangement painting to the up-and-coming artist brat children from the split level ranches and cookie-cutter homes sprawling to the west and north? We also got to have the studio space for free when we wanted, and could, as an additional bonus, take lessons from our fellow instructors at discount prices.

That summer, we trekked up to the second floor dance studio, with its flailing wood floors which badly needed sanding and refinishing. We were squeezing out beads of sweat already, just from walking from our air conditioning-blasted cars to the building. Climbing the stairs did not help. In the studio, the air was dank, and stifling - and although it was large, large as a good studio ought to be, we felt uncomfortably close. I was already complaining about my overproductive pits, warning the boys that my pheromones were out of control. They ran away in mock horror, as I screamed, "You're just a skert of me. My sex is powerful, honey," using white-trash-speak that every one loved to teach me, just to see what would come out of my mouth.

"You know I want to sneak into your trailer tonight!" Vanessa yelled back.

Just then, in walked Gloria, teeter-tottering on tiny, three or four inch black heels, the kind which veer to a death-defying point at the toe in a way no human
foot possibly would. She was wearing one of those hideous denim shorts/skirt combinations. We all exchanged glances, but were collectively comforted by the tight black lycra tank top she wore. Her dyed black hair, which was thinning at the crown, was pulled in a top knot with a satin band; her face was glistening with sweat from the climb to the second story, combining in an eerie glow with the pale blue eye shadow covering her upper lids. She immediately turned on two fans, and clapped her hands. She muttered about the heat, and told us about the grand studio that she had owned in Argentina. "I had mirrors, all around, you know, all around," she cried, pursing her lips, creaking makeup into the lines around her mouth.

By the end of the night, all her makeup was streaking and conglomerating in a vile mess - a mass of splotches in parts of her face. Her condition was exaggerated when she made a trip to the bathroom every ten minutes or so to get some tissue to wipe her face. Only a thin layer of eyeliner remained in place - the rest of her evening's efforts were nullified by the unforgiving Iowa heat, which paid no attention the aging glamour of foreign salsa dancers. I saw her, looking almost kind, in a defeated sort of way. Gloria, with her enormous black eyes, accented by the liner, looked caught by surprise, startled that she had ended up here. Even with sweat hanging on the tip of her tiny, delicate chin, dripping down the shriveled space between her breasts, she looked rather pretty. I wondered if she had had any children.

She gave me a ride home after the lessons, in her 1995 Toyota, with the license plates which said, simply, "SALSA".
"You know," she said, in her now familiar way of starting and ending sentences, "you got to have friends in this place. Without that, you're nobody here." Something I had spent nearly a decade finding out.

"What about that Belgian, Fabricio, for you, hah? You have a boyfriend? I want to make you dance together." I declined politely. Fabrice was a granola muncher, who volunteered his time at the Ames organic coop, Wheatsfield. I was tired of White Liberals - Wheatsfield Liberals - I'd been their mascot for long enough.

"Ok, next time," she said, in the grating voice of the long-time smoker, as she waited for me to get out of the car.

"Call me when you go out, ok?" she rasped, as I closed the door to the car.

I smiled a fake-friendly, pitiful smile as I waved, dying to run to the coffee shop to hash the night's events with my friends.

Vanessa had already called me and left a message on my answering machine: "Meet us at Beaudelaire!" I quickly took a shower, got ready, and walked the half mile to the coffee shop, which was owned by one Claudio Gianelli from Brazil. He liked to think of himself as the dark-haired, blue-eyed Casanova of the lower tundra. By the time I came in, the room, decorated in kitschy jungle decor, and giant outdoor umbrellas in the green which tried to match the Brazilian flag's colour, but came up with JC Penny hunter green, was infested with heavy smoke. The gang was already there: Sylvia from Sardinia, Sylvia from Mexico, Fabrice, Wassif from Jordan, Selena from Sudan, Shelly from Boulder, Colorado (an exotic an far away place to Iowans), and skinny-assed, no-rhythm-having Andy Kaufman from California. They were laughing about how Gloria had slapped Andy's ass and tried to make him "move, come on, move dahling". Andy was terrified, and wanted a
refund. He asked me about the possibilities, seeing as I had connections at the Octagon.

"No go, Whitey." I squashed his hopes.

Then, we all took turns slapping his bottom. We dished for the rest of the night as we got inebriated on Beefeater, and later, as the night went on, shots of Sex on the Beach. Vanessa and I beat everyone at the task of licking the whipped cream topping on the shot glass, taking the rim in our teeth, and downing the sickly sweet liquor in one gulp, no hands, mom. "Wassif, BW wanted your ass!" shouted Vanessa, who had harboured dark longings for the man for a year now, while both of them drifted in and out of several relationships, and several post-relationship depressions. The rest of us were all trying to get the two of them together, but to no avail. Vanessa put off Wassif's fake Muslim sensibilities by being too vulgar (which he was alternatively attracted to), and she was put off by his long string of American conquests. Now it looked like Gloria could become one of his Latina conquests.

"You Guyz!" he grinned through his permanent five-o-clock shadow. "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful."

Sylvia from Sicily, who also secretly crushed on him, but kept any affection hidden under a tight facade of bristling sarcasm, said, "It's not your beauty that's making us hate you."

A fight was averted by the entrance of one whom Shelly called "The Don Juan of Lebanon". The Don walked in bearing two Russian women from the economics department on either arm. We girls at the table had never succumbed to The Don's charms, perhaps because his roly-poly curls reminded us of Kid and Play of the Eighties rapper era. Perhaps the Russians had no MTV at the time, I thought.
The Russian-Lebanese delegation graced us by sitting down at the table. The Don had some interesting anecdotes to add to the Gloria discussion. He knew a person who lived in the duplex next door to Gloria's west Ames house. She'd been spotted at around two am, making out with one of the Puerto Ricans who frequented the bar, one whom The Sylvias and I had longed to nab for months and months. Gloria had been, it was reported, near to getting it on in the front seat, under the light of the street lamp.

"Isn't she married?" asked Shelly.

"I think so. Her husband's a professor in the Statistics Department," said one of the Russian Duo.

"Maybe she's lonely; maybe he spends his nights writing grant proposals and making love to the calculator," I quipped.

"You're just saying that because you spent four years with the Pig Manure Engineer -- don't bring your personal experiences into this discussion," corrected Sylvia S.

"Well, in any case, I heard that her husband's in jail." I dropped the final bomb to spite Sylvia S.

We spent the rest of the night speculating, discussing any unsubstantiated lead which could possibly take us to the whereabouts of Gloria's husband. We all agreed that whatever we may speculate about, there was no need to wonder about the quality of The BW's legs: by far, she had the best legs we had seen on any woman in Ames - at fifty plus, she had all of us girls beat with her petite figure, and those unbeatable pair of muscular legs.
After three months of summer lessons in salsa, merenge, rumba, and the occasional flamenco and tango step, my friends and I were ready to enter Lovish's Basement ballroom, after gathering courage from bottles of gin. When the Autumn semester began, we were there in full force.

One night in the early days of autumn, Vanessa and I went there without our usual collection of friends. We were immediately accosted, spun around, and thoroughly dizzied by our dance partners. At one-thirty in the morning on Saturday, Gloria had sauntered in, balancing thinly on her ever present pencil heels, without which she could not even walk, as we had found out in dance class. She wore a spaghetti-strapped black dress with a flapping fringe that swished around her from just below her crotch to her calves. It was tight as a drum. We all held our collective breaths as she requested a tango, and stepped confidently to the floor with her partner - a man with a military air about him, looking rather like a vestigial organ hanging about Gloria's waist.

As she dipped for the first time, our breaths came out in an audible gasp. None of us were sure if under those swishing fringes, there was a pair of underwear. To our visible disappointment, the outfit turned out to be some kind of shorts outfit, so tight that we could not tell if it were a dress or not. Hormones exploding from the display of the dance of love, the Bandelleros came once again in our direction. Vanessa and I ran. Up the steps and out of the bamboo enclosure surrounding the patio above the dance room. When we reached the parking lot, we screeched and vibrated with long-held laughter. What a story we had for our friends, the fools who had "to study" that night.
We lit up Panters, and wobbled, slightly giddy from the fresh air, towards my new apartment. It was conveniently located close to all the bars and theatres in campustown, and many a friend had already crashed there after an outing, unable to drive, or even wake up, the comforts of my roadside-treasure couches being too great an attraction for their inebriated bodies. At the gyro stand run by two scruffy kids, we contemplated buying pitas filled with greasy so-called lamb before calling it a night. A middle-aged man, who periodically walked his tan Great Dane up and down the streets just as people were streaming out of the bars at closing time, came up to us. We chatted him up and petted his dog - just what he wanted, I suppose, poor lonely bastard. Females were suckers for a big dog. I told him that I had a chocolate coloured Dane back home in Southern Africa, named Queenie, who ate great sides of cow. He said that he had rarely seen chocolate Danes, to which I replied that my mother had given her to me as a present when I had won my race in the 200 metre butterfly. It was a rare dog. He knew that he could not give me anecdotal bullshit about his prop of a dog, since I had owned one, and slowly shuffled his way to a group of short-shirted, tight skirted girls coming out of a corner bar, belly-buttons in full mating ritual display, clutching their arms around their waists against the early autumn cold.

Vanessa and I started crossing the street. Across from us, a large group of couples in gaudy dress up clothes - big-flower dresses and long-tailed tuxedos - were coming out of a dance club that played the same techno music every week to the regulars, who came to pick each other up for the weekend. What a mixing of normal floras, I mused, half disgusted, half clinically curious.
The fancy dress kids stood milling around the gum-strewn pavement, looking self-consciously important, their dying carnations and fern fronds in disarray. One of the couples started walking hurriedly up the pavement leading to the parking lot behind my house, just as Vanessa and I crossed the street. The woman was holding her arms crossed, walking stiffly, while her companion, long-tailed tux coat in arm, tried to grab her elbow.

Vanessa and I walked a little warily behind them, exchanging glances, and snickering a little. For a second, we nearly bumped into them, as the woman reeled around.

"Leave me the fuck alone! " She sneered, as her companion raised his free arm and swung it, open palmed, cracking it across her left cheek. Her face spun towards us, and she tottered a little on her two-inch pumps.

We saw her fold her legs under her like a foal. Blood and saliva were dripping down between her fingernails, and globules of pink were already staining the concrete under the white glow of the street light that she was sitting under. She put her hands to her mouth. Her hair, a damaged mass of spirally, over permed curls, upswept into a bun on top of her head, was coming undone in tangly strings, sticking to her cheeks. The man, who looked little over twenty years old, saw us staring, standing back a little. He had that instant recognition in his eyes - one that both Vanessa and I were familiar with: he was pissed off that we had witnessed a spectacle in his life, and was alarmed that we would call the police or something; yet he also had that desperate look which indicated that he was going to do his best now to cover up, be good. He bent down towards his companion, lifted her elbow,
and dragged her to the ledge that ran in front of the marigolds growing valiantly in the dusty street corner.

Vanessa and I had stopped behind them, actually taking steps back. It was obvious that whatever we said would be heard. We said nothing. They got up, she tugging the short skirt of her flowery wedding-party dress around her legs; the cloth had gathered around her hips in a crumpled mass as she had crouched on the ground. The man put his arm around her in a firm lock, and walked forward. She put his head on his shoulder, and stumbled unsteadily, shaking with sobs.

Just as we neared my house, we saw her sit once again in a dark spot under the oak tree behind my house.

"Should we?" I asked.

"I don't know - what can we do? Call the police?" Vanessa offered.

"Well, we need a plan if we're going over there."

"What can we say - this is so stupid, you know, after all our big talk about how we'd rule the world . . ."

"Yeah. All those Women's Centre seminars for nothing," I realized.

We looked over - she was sobbing violently, and he was bending over her. He looked up momentarily, and saw us watching, then went back to rubbing her shoulder. Maybe he was trying to look caring for our sake.

"We should say something - anything," I said again, looking imploringly at Vanessa. The thought that this could be a great story for our friends crossed my mind, only to be squashed immediately out of the guilt I felt at not being able to be the Samaritan I wanted to be. I saw my mercenary ugliness, along with the
situations in my life which mirrored the events that were taking place before my eyes.

"It would be a great story," whispered Vanessa, and we both let out a relief laugh.

We approached, knowing that the man was looking at us. We looked at each other, the concrete pavement, the oak tree, anything to stop our eyes from meeting with his. I had no idea what to say or do, as each centimetre between us closed. When I reached the woman's huddled body, I bent down to the ground, took some tissue out of my bag, and wiped her eyes, her blood-spattered lips and chin. The man stood shifting his feet, aside.

"Would you want to come and talk to us a while?" I asked her, as she looked up at me, the mascara in her eyes streaming with the tears, collecting in pools and lines under the lip of her eyes. I wiped again.

"I'll make you a cup of tea - yes, that's what we need," I said, remembering that a cup solved all my mother's problems, hour after hour of her miserable life. "You can tell me anything, anything you want - don't worry about him being around," I added, glaring at the boyfriend.

She stumbled as she got up, holding my hand for support. "My mother... she's always trying to control me," she blurted out of nowhere, "always trying to get me to do things - everybody wants me to do things - go to church, get married, whatever. And he," she pointed to the embarrassed companion, "he doesn't understand. He's just like them."

"So are you angry?" I asked, as a possible opener, while leading her towards the steps to my place.
"Yeah! I'm angry. That's true," she cried, as if something new had been revealed to her.

I let Vanessa chat the boy up, and he, obviously feeling guilty and ashamed, was following rather sheepishly behind us. He made some slight remark about never having done anything like this before - that he had never been like this before. Vanessa and I exchanged "yeah, right" glances. I knew that he could, possibly, be telling the truth, and looking at the state of the girl, drunk, spoiled, mad at who knows what, I could have slapped them both silly, and sent them both in for some "counseling".

We seemed to be heading rather inevitably towards my flat, without any plan as to what we were going to do once we were up there. I lived in a old, run down house, the last of a line of homes on the street owned by a man who refused to put money into repairs - opting to tear the houses down when they did not meet building codes, converting the empty lots into parking areas. My house probably had only a few years left - the shingles were falling off, and the eves leaked, forming huge icicles around the north windows in the winter. I was sure that the peeling paint was lead based. The house had quite a reputation, as it was so close to the bars - countless friends, upon being told that I lived in the white house with the green roof on Stanton told me that they had either had a one night stand there, or some sort of brief affair with a Bad Idea boy or girl. It was a Booty House. When we reached the stairs to my second story flat, she looked at the steep steps with frightened eyes, and held the door frame with both her hands. She gripped my hand hard, using me to steady herself.
"You're really good," she slurred slightly, "really good people - I mean, you don't even know us . . . ."

We arrived at my door. I unlocked it, and walked in through the narrow entryway. I switched on the lamps, throwing my keys in the infamous Condom Bowl - one which I had made in a ceramics class at the Octagon. It was the bowl in which, in addition to my house keys, I also kept individually packaged condoms. I was involved in the local AIDS Awareness Week on campus, and amassed hundreds of these condoms, giving them away at numerous parties to my friends, showering them with latex and catchy 'Nineties graphics-covered packaging. I had yet to actually use one myself, being afraid that the microscopic holes in condoms, which let the occasional sperm get through, would let the much tinier virus or bacterium squirm though as well. I had that peculiar brand of fear instilled through having too much knowledge - it was a better chastity belt than any Buddhist or Catholic guilt trip could ever have conceived.

Vanessa went into the kitchen to put the kettle on, and I went to the bathroom to get a towel for the girl's face. As I was running warm water to moisten the towel, I called out in a friendly tone, "Sit yourselves down anywhere - I'll be right out!" I was aware that I had taken out one of my best white towels, not even thinking about why. I wondered if the blood would stain it permanently, or if I could possibly bring myself to use it again. I resolved to boil it in the hottest water in the wash cycle.

When I came out of the bathroom, I found that the boy was seated awkwardly on of the settees, crouched down, with his hands clasped together. The girl had perched herself on one of the mission chairs, one I had refinished over the past summer - it was a freebie I had found in the basement of a house I had once lived in.
The chair was not a comfortable one - I mean, there were more comfort-giving furniture in my place. But it seemed like she wanted to distance herself as much as possible from her companion, who looked rather morosely from his seat. Perhaps that was the reason for the mission chair. She sat up perkily as I entered, and crossed her stocking-clad legs prettily, pulling her dress down just a little.

"My name's Maria," she chirped, seemingly unaware that her face looked a disaster of makeup, tears, and saliva. Maybe she sat there knowing the effect she has on people - I suppose she knows how to look her cutest, I thought. A sofa would not have given us the view of her legs that this chair afforded - and anyway, now she could shoot daggers at the boyfriend from across the room.

There was an awkward silence as I walked over to Maria to wipe her face with the towel. Jack looked away, his eyes searching for something of interest through the north window. As I lifted her tiny face, her huge blue eyes seemed to be imploring for something - but it wasn't help she wanted. I wiped slowly, afraid that the towel was too rough. She closed her eyes, and held on to my wrists. There was blood on the underside of her chin, and strips of mucus around her nose and mouth. I wondered if I would ever have the courage to get over my microbe phobia and use this towel again. I rubbed the last of the straggling mascara from around her eyes.

"Better now, yes?" I asked, and she nodded, a tiny smile forming on her mouth. I folded the towel, put it down on a stool, and turned to sit down. Maria was sitting up perkier than ever, a big smile on her face. What a capacity for putting up a good face, I thought. I wondered what she's seen in her life to be able to do that so well - a feat I had yet to master, being a person who did not turn up for scheduled events, classes, and appointments of import whenever the slightest thing happened.
to upset my routine, the rigidity I had managed to prop up around myself for a semblance of stability. I looked at her convincing happiness, and at Jack, who was crumbling with humiliation in the corner of the room. I finally decided to introduce myself to break the awkwardness.

"And this is Vanessa," I waved towards Vanessa, who had walked in from the kitchen and seated herself next to me. We shook her dainty hand, and then looked politely at the guy.

"Er, hi. Hi, I'm James - Jack," he stammered, shaking our hands with caution. He didn't seem to be used to shaking hands firmly; perhaps he just didn't expect women to shake with a firm hand. "Boy, that's a nice grip you got there," he said, grinning a little.

"I'm a hockey player - I play for the ISU women's team," said Vanessa, "and we both swim. In fact, we were coming home early from the bars because I have practice tomorrow at eight."

"And I get together with my swim partner every Sunday at seven am to do laps." Vanessa seemed to be hinting that all men ought to fear us, Women of the Amazon, left breasts sacrificed for the good of the hunt, so I added to the myth.

"Where were you two before this?" Maria asked, cheerily.

"We went out to dance - there is a Latin music bar near here - we go all the time," I replied, poking the stained towel a little.

"Latin dancing? You man, like the tango?"

"We all learned to dance Latin ballroom last summer, so we try to go out to practice at least once a week." Vanessa was staring at the towel too, I noticed.

Maria got up, walked towards the paintings on the wall.
"You have beautiful furniture, and art! I never thought that it would be so beautiful in here."

"That one was done by a friend," I began, but she quickly interrupted my description of the history of the nude in Western Art.

"Latin dancing!" she cried, excited. "You mean, like salsa and tango? Oh, I've never danced much, you know, not like that. We went to that stupid bar tonight - but it's not romantic, like that," She was becoming too loud, waving her hands around. I knew that she must still be under the effect of alcohol, and was glad for the tea which was on its way.

"Well, it's not so hard to," I said, "merenge is easier, salsa has more steps you have to learn."

"Will you show me? Please? I'd love to learn to salsa. He doesn't even know how to do anything - he doesn't want to go any place like that!" Maria stage whispered conspiratorially in our ears, looking over at Jack a couple of times, as if he could not hear her. He shifted a little, fingerling the embossed green vines and flowers on the gaudy settee.

Vanessa and I looked at each other. We had never before thought of taking over Gloria's position as teachers in dance. But we got up dutifully. I went to my bedroom to put on our salsa CD, and as the first song came on, we took Maria's hands in ours, and showed her how to roll her hips to the music. We stepped one, two three, kick! to the right, then repeat, kick! to the left. She gripped our hands hard, looking very straight into our eyes, and stumbled a little as she followed our steps.
"Well done," I cried, and rubbed her shoulder. "You're a natural. Gloria would be proud!"

The kettle was boiling, so Vanessa took this as an excuse to run off into the kitchen. Not to be outdone, I followed, after seating Maria back down, music still blaring.

"Ceylon tea or flavoured Celestial Seasonings?" chirped Vanessa. "Let's see - we have Mango Zinger, Sleepytime Herbal, and Apricot Ginger - which one?"

"For god's sake, I don't think they care, or know the finesse of Bougie Teas. Just get that strong Ceylon stuff; that'll sober them both up," I whispered fiercely, and broke into muffled giggles.

"Nope. I disagree. I bet they do know the finesse of tea picking. I think they care that you hiked all the way to Boulder and back for that tree-hugger flavoured tea," mocked Vanessa.

Maria walked in and seated herself on the edge of the end table on which I had placed my gigantic, prehistoric microwave, bought for twenty-five dollars from a tiny old man who had advertised it in the gossipy local newspaper. There was not much space on the edge of that table. But the girl seemed to have an affinity for perching on the edge of uncomfortable places. I sat on the park bench I had stolen from the basement of yet another place I had lived in, removing the mould from floods past, varnishing it to a lovely, aged, warm brown. Vanessa sat next to me while the tea brewed.

"So, were you at a wedding or something before this?" Vanessa was ready to burst with questions.
"Yeah. One of his friends got married, you know. We drove all the way from Cedar Rapids, and reserved a room in the Holiday Inn, even. We had everything planned so well. I wasn't ready for it, though, I don't think I should have ever come. But I didn't know..." she trailed off.

"Do you mean that you didn't know his friends very well? Sort of like you were not ready because you felt out of place, then?" I asked her.

"No. No. My sister's funeral - it was just like that," she blurted. Vanessa and I started at the latest bomb Maria dropped on us. She seemed to have a knack for blurring out intimate details of her life, information which strangers such as ourselves did not know what to do with. How was it that a wedding had anything to do with a funeral? And her sister was dead?

"I mean, the receiving line," she mumbled. Tears were streaming down her face again. Words were running out of her mouth.

"We were going down the line to wish the couple good luck and all that. I didn't even care. I remembered waiting for all those people who came to say something stupid to us at the church. I mean, who cares if they came to the funeral. I couldn't stand to be there, all those people, that long, long line. My legs, they felt like they were going to fall off," she sobbed.

I got her tissue from the bathroom. Jack walked over warily from the living room, and placed himself next to the seated girl, bent over with tears. He rubbed her crouching shoulders, with a set expression on his face, as if he had heard this story before, as if he could not comprehend the reason for her inability to "deal". He didn't get the connection between a wedding and a funeral, either.
But now he was in a stranger's home, and had to perform acts of kindness towards his girl, towards whom he seemed to be attracted - - if only she did not come with this capacity to connect dissonant events. He hadn't bargained for her vacuous prettiness to arrive with twisted strings inside; even I hadn't guessed that she had the capability to own the contortions of hurt. As much as I had thought of myself as a deeply empathetic soul who had seem the World's Pain, often angry that my supposedly unfeeling acquaintances had no ability to see my terrifying life the way I saw it, I had not given Maria any credit for thoughts more raveled than any I had ever felt. I knew then that a person more melodramatic than I existed in Iowa.

When she was over her brief crying episode, I asked her how her sister had died, as Vanessa poured the tea. Holding the mug in her hands, steam rising to obscure her puffy eyes, Maria looked as if she was cold, even though the autumn temperatures were not that low yet, and the flat was still warm from the oven being on all afternoon - - I had been baking bread before we went out for the night. Maria told us that her sister had been hit by a drunk driver - two years ago, at age seventeen. Maria was the older one in the family - she was now twenty-two.

"I'm so mad, so mad. I'll never have her again. I wanted to kill myself. I tried, you know. I tried in so many ways. My counselor says there are many ways to kill yourself." She ended abruptly.

"Oh, yeah," I sighed, my curiosity peaked.

"You do?"

I nodded, smiling, being real for once that night.

"I was always around bad, bad, people," she slurred again. "I drank a lot - I mean, lots. This was the first time I drank after I went to counseling; tonight was a
bad night. I couldn't handle being around all those dressed up people - all that food, and church stuff. I used to be drunk, with lots of different boys," she noted, looking pointedly at Jack. "I wanted to stop being lonely. Nobody understood - I was so mad at my mother!" she ended suddenly, and took a sip of her too-hot tea. She did not seem to notice burning her mouth. I pulled a chair for Jack, who was still shuffling around, hovering over Maria's shoulders. The kitchen was crowded with four people.

Jack started to become more bold. He asked us a couple of questions about how Vanessa and I knew each other. We had to work to remember - for the life of us, we could not recall how exactly we had met. We worked backwards, and arrived at the confluence. Vanessa was a part of a group who performed a dance native to Arab countries - the Debke, run by the Don Juan of Lebanon. I had invited them to perform at a variety show that I was organizing at the time, and the rest was history. Because of The Don's attempts to wrest power from women in the group who did a better job of teaching the steps than he, the Debke group soon became defunct.

We all remained friends, more or less. The Don had sulked for a period of time, saying that the group broke up because he refused to perform at the Student Union bar. He had suddenly embraced Islamic values, explaining that he did not want to "step into a drinking place". We didn't buy. Especially since he'd been spotted practically every weekend at Beaudelaire or Lovish, with a different woman of international origin hanging on him.

All our friends were, somehow or the other, involved in some kind of dance group, at different levels of mediocrity. We often quibbled and complained about so-and-so entering the group, usually through a sexual interest in one of us, wanting to
be taught how to dance. As if. We thought of ourselves as the Cosmopolitan Club, but we were rather cliquish and closed, I realized, even as I was telling Jack and Maria about our circle of friends.

"But you're so different!" quipped Maria, of the Sudden Perkiness Syndrome. "How did you become friends?"

"I think we have a lot in common - I'm from Rapid City, South Dakota, and she," Vanessa swept her arm towards me in grand gesture of introduction, "she's from, well, lots of places; we practically grew up in the same neighbourhood."

We exchanged looks of sarcasm, but the joke went over Maria's head, while the boyfriend looked uncomfortable again. "I have a friend whose Korean, you know. She was my best friend - she was so good to me when my sister died. I've known her since I was a tot."

"Was she born here?" I asked, half politely. Maria was becoming tedious once again.

"Yes, her parents came here long time ago - her grandmother's here too. She never really talked about Korea, except when she invited me to her grandmother's funeral."

"She probably didn't know much about her parents' country - I don't know much about the country I was born in, but people expect me to," I forced, attempting to suppress the urge to kick them the two of them out of my home.

"She brought me sweets from the funeral - little bread - Korean sweets. They were not really sweet. Then she had a special name for her grandmother, in her language. She told me, but I forget now. I bet you two are friends like we were," Maria kept on and on, oblivious to my stares, and Vanessa's lowered jaw.
"No, I think we have a different friendship," Vanessa mumbled under her breath, and I nudged her, wishing that I could pass a secret message to her in another language; my sisters and I would speak in French if we did not want our parents to understand. Vanessa and I could speak several languages between the two of us, but sadly, English was our only language of commonalty. This was a problem of great magnitude when we wanted to communicate in the presence of Gringos.

Maria and Jack were looking at us hard, noticing our rolling eyes.

"Jack, you might want to wash the shirt off a little," I said, trying to divert attention from the exchange between Vanessa and myself. I had noticed little specks of pink and red on the left shoulder of his rented shirt. He looked at himself, and stared angrily at Maria.

"How did that get there?" she asked, sounding as if she really did not know. I think that she was so wasted that she had periodic moments of forgetfulness that evening. "What is that stuff?" she rubbed the smear a little, driving the stain into the fabric even more, while laying her head on Jack's shoulder with softness I had not witnessed before.

"I'll tell you later, ok? Later," he insisted firmly, as she became a little whiny and cute, trying to get him to talk. I noticed then that he had been ever so quiet all evening; it was startling to hear him talk. He had a type of furtiveness about him, a forced tenderness. The sudden lovey-dovey act was alarming me. I was familiar with the game already.

"It's never going to come off," he directed to us, moving away from Maria's vicinity. "I have to take it back to the rental place tomorrow, and they're probably
going to charge me for it. Blood never comes off." I wondered if he was trying to get us to sympathize with him, noticing our irritation at Maria's cultural blunders earlier on. Was he playing us?

"All you have to do is rinse it off - here, just take it off and run it under water. I'll get you a t-shirt to wear while you're doing that," I said, and went off in the direction of my room. When I returned with one of my shirts, he had his white dress shirt off, and was holding it out to me. I saw that he had a white under shirt on. "So you don't need a shirt?" I asked, annoyed.

"No, no. I have one," he said, still holding the starched shirt in his hand.

I was confused. "Well, why don't you go in the bathroom, and rinse it off? I have some soap next to the sink - that'll help," I rambled, realising then that he was expecting me to wash his shirt off.

"Here's the light - help yourself to whatever. You won't have to worry about extra charges if you take care of that now. It's easy enough work." I was livid inside, but walked quietly to the kitchen. He turned away with an embarrassed grin on his face. I wondered if he did not want to remove the stain so that he could hold the inevitable extra charge over Maria's head, twist her with a guilt trip - - a "look what you did to my shirt after I beat your face in" statement he could force on her if she ever brought the incident up at a later date. At this point, however, Maria seemed to have happily erased the whole episode out of her mind, opting instead to ramble on and on about the injuries of years past.

When I returned to the kitchen, she was telling Vanessa about how her entire family was trying to get her to go to church as a functioning "believer". "They want
me to have children, get married. But it's so hard to believe everything. I don't know if I can believe everything," she insisted intimately to us.

"Well, love, you don't have to believe in everything," I said. At least we all had guilt in common.

"We certainly don't, honey!" laughed Vanessa, throwing her hands in the air.

"You can get along in life without believing everything that everyone wants you to," I repeated.

"I don't know if I can do it. I've known him for two years," Maria mock whispered, pointing towards the bathroom, where the sound of running water gave her strength to talk about "him" more boldly. "He doesn't know anything about me. He wants to pretend parts of my life didn't happen."

"You mean like past things in your life - like when you were drinking?" I asked, now noticing a familiar path.

"Yes, and the boys, you know, the times when I was really bad," she was almost growling now. I looked at her hopelessly, not knowing how I could relay mine, Vanessa's, and ten other people's collective knowledge. She was going to be a Mary Magdalene, as far as her family and her boy were concerned. Saved and conquered.

"I don't know if I can believe in all that," she repeated again, her face looking more and more pathetic. Jack walked in, wet shirt in hand.

"Believe what?" he asked.

"All that church stuff, like to be good, and have children, and all that stuff," she said.
"All you need is faith. If you have faith, you can do all that - remember all the classes we’ve been going to?" he looked at her pointedly.

"Well, look where all that faith got you tonight," Vanessa bristled.

I took the shirt from Jack's hands and hung it in front of a fan in the living room, trying to use any excuse to get those three out of the kitchen, out of the crampedness of it all. But nobody followed. I went back in, afraid. There was a long silence, unbroken since I had walked out with the shirt.

"Listen, lovey. Nobody can tell you to have faith. It doesn't come in a hey presto! fashion," I started rambling again, pop-therapist style.

Maria got up and faced me. "But we all have a purpose. A purpose. Like yours and mine," she waved an indiscriminate hand towards the females in the room, "is to have babies. And to love. We should be wonderful mothers. I know that's our purpose," she smiled convincingly.

Vanessa and I looked at her in disbelief and astonishment. I wondered if the girl was about to come out with a third personality any moment soon. "Well, I know that the two of us here won't fulfill that purpose anytime soon," burst Vanessa, and she and I rolled back with unsuppressed laughter.

"But I love being in church. I love to go and take the classes, and ask questions. Next year, at Easter, I'll get to hold the sacraments, like this," she continued excitedly, and got up, raising her arms high above her head, as if holding the platter containing Christ's disintegrated body. She began to sing, "One Blood, One Body," in a high pitched, wavering voice, taking processional steps down the kitchen's narrow length. I looked on in wonder, and not a little disgust. I began to feel a bit sorry for the boyfriend.
Maria smiled a wide round for all of us, and started chattering about Amy Grant songs she and her friends had sung at someone's wedding. She demonstrated once again. I knew the song from my old experimental days with the Fundamentalist Church of Doom, wherein any self-respecting teen and college age student loved Amy Grant, or any other Christian pop singer. I began to sing along, but Vanessa shot me a look of mock horror, interrupting the camp-song lovefest. She’d had enough surprises that evening.

"I'm kinda hungry." Vanessa hunted around aimlessly in my cupboards. But I was snackless.

"Want some baguettes?" I asked, knowing the answer. Nobody said no to my family recipe loaves, which always came out of the oven with crunchy, hard brown crusts, and humid, soft insides. I had some cooling in the oven. I bought out two long ropes. These loaves had miraculous effects on people - - I could make friends overnight with the stuff.

My father had taught me to make bread, painstakingly, over cold, damp, Southern African winters. For fresh loaves, we got up at five am to knead the dough to rubbery smoothness, making fresh tea from the Tanzanian highlands to warm our bones - this was the stuff of sustenance between my father and myself, when we had nothing to say to each other. I was impatient to leave, to get away from made from scratch everything, from the open marketplace vegetable stands on the edge of the Rift Valley, from a town which still had sugar and flour shortages when the roads were bad from the rains.

I had looked forward to the day in which I could leave to the big cities from where he had taken us, to eat everything from a can, everything from a package. I
had told my father firmly that I would never learn to cook if I could help it, since cooking was for girls. I knew that modern women didn't cook - they had no time, too busy living lives fraught with jobs, excitement, and affairs with lots of lovers. I knew this at fourteen. He had laughed, and told me that I would come back with Kwashiorkor, a childhood disease that one gets from being malnourished: we had seen lots of pictures of babies with distended bellies, and stick-like arms and legs during the famines in the 'Eighties. I had hooted with laughter.

After a year of dorm food, I had moved off campus, and soon re-learned my father's recipes, out of necessity. I found out that canned goods were not the gold mine I had imagined them to be - and cardboard box food was only affordable if I wanted to live on macaroni and strange, powdered, fluorescent-orange cheese. My family's recipes had saved my life at a time when I could not stand the thought of going home - - penniless, close to having no place to live, and next to nothing to eat, I had found a coffee shop which wanted me to make their desserts - the small fact that it would be illegal for me to work in the US notwithstanding my ability to curl chocolate into dark locks, and make caramel lace horns filled with brandy cream. I cooked to live.

Having returned to school, with a stipend which seemed luxurious, I now only baked when I wanted to, allowing my hands to go back to the soft manicured state which my mother had so desired. Still, fresh bread was something I did not seem to be able to do without. Measuring out the scoop of yeast, the brown sugar and salt, holding my arm under the warm water until it was just the right temperature, stirring until the beer of fermented sugars and dividing yeast cells infused the air in the kitchen - it was heavenly solitary labour.
I knew that we all needed those loaves - each of us, strangers to different degrees to each other. Each of us with secrets big as houses, some wanting to hide them at all costs, one blurtling them out unceremoniously under the heavy influence of alcohol. I broke the loaf into small sections, and passed it around. We chewed silently. We sipped the tea as if it would give us the warmth missing from our lives, as if it was the blood of Christ. I knew that if it was not for my current set of friends, books, and homework, I may only be a step away from Maria, or even Jack. The efforts of the lighthearted people I had chanced upon helped me forget to be as serious and morose as I wanted to be. I was lucky to be around people who did not demand that I believed in any particular thing, except a passing knowledge of Latin dance.

After the bread, Maria appeared much more sober. She picked at her stockinged thigh repetitively. "Don't you hate it when you start growing old?" she asked, looking up at us suddenly.

"But you're twenty-two!" I exclaimed.

"Look, though. I have this purple vein on my leg - it didn't use to be there," she dabbed her right thigh. Sure enough, there was a tiny varicose vein marking a thin passage on her leg.

"I hate it - that I'll grow old. I'll be ugly then."

I looked at her petite figure, encased in the flowery pastel tightness of her party dress. She was far from old, far from ugly. She had a figure that I had owned at nineteen, when I was swimming every day, a mile. And I knew that Maria realized that she was attractive to men, that she knew exactly what her bodily assets were. Perhaps that was why she knew to worry when she saw the beginnings, even the
most minuscule beginnings, her temple’s demise. If she did not have that, she had no worshippers; there was no other god in her building to seduce believers. But she knew she wanted something more than what she had seen so far in her twenty-two years. Maria had not allowed the divine to walk in; she spent her time trying to force divinity, trick that mystery, entrapping it in order to fill her vessel with something, anything.

At that time, my friends, gossip, armchair politics, idle nonchalance, potluck dinners with dishes which miraculously went together, even though our travels spanned six continents - - it all saved my life. I knew that Gloria, despite our huge joke at her expense, was right about friends. Maybe she had known these things all along, even during her youth, when she had taken part in Carnival, as a dancer in the parades during Mardi Gras. While the rest of us were singing "One Bread, One Body" in some crowded Easter service full of the repentant, she was probably groggily picking off the loose feathers from her gigantic headdress, turning over to kiss her lover on Easter morning. She was that odd person in the middle of white, middle class Ames, but she knew that if she surrounded herself with insulation, she could be as odd as she wanted. She was probably going to be odd even if she had no friends. She seemed that strong, that uncaring about what everyone said or thought.

But perhaps I was wrong. Maybe, inside Gloria, there was a little Maria, all packaged and tucked away in her most insecure spot. Perhaps that was why she needed male adornment, the tight clothes, the salsa allure. Maybe we were all Gloria’s waiting to happen. My foremothers, in their chastity belts of virtue, and
elegant acceptance of sorrow, had fallen into the opposite role so easily. All I knew was that I wanted neither end for myself.

Seeing that Vanessa and I were almost asleep on each other, Jack got up. He thanked us awkwardly, shaking our hands with a firmer grip this time. Maria collected herself, and got up from her perch on the microwave table. She pulled her dress down, covering the whisper-thin line of blue, that giant signal of mortality and impending doom. She asked for our addresses; Vanessa and I honestly did not believe, nor really care if we ever heard from her again. But we did tell he to call us if she needed help later that night, or anytime while she was in Ames, with the fear that Jack would hit her later, after he got her in the hotel room.

Throughout those years in Iowa, surrounded by too much happiness, and too many funny guys, all I could think about was my mother, and how she must have been, at one time, just like Maria: young, absolutely lovely (and knowing it), and very, very lost.

I knew I would have to go home one more time to see her.
CHAPTER 3. THE ART OF LOSING

The women in my family came from a long line of terror and oppression, the weight of my forefathers' many hued, blood-lined pasts obliterating our chances for any semblance of contentment. We bore these sins, piled high on their chests, and condensed our bodies and minds into pulpy masses. My mothers were unable to respond to the most joyous events, nor the most wicked. They were pressed to death in the same fashion libelous and treacherous traitors were in long gone days, only in my family's case, the weights were added in a slow moving procession starting on the day of each girl's birth. In my family, young girls' breasts sagged on the day of initiation. All our eyes had the same quality of resignedness, as if waiting for the deciding weight to be offered by the kindliest of the men, the one which would finally eliminate the intangible light on which our black-holed pupils were trained.

When they allowed me to leave, my family did not foresee that I would forcibly rip apart their hold on me, making a unilateral declaration of independence during my years in America. I was seen as selfish by my older sister, Asirini, who stayed at home to help my father with his business, taking the daily blows that he dealt to her person, and as a hero by Aruni, who desperately wanted to leave as well, but had to bide her time for now, as my parents were not so willing to let her go after their experience with me.

I rebelled against my family's philosophy of keeping each other bound and shackled, a system of belief which dictated that if we tied one another with threats and fear, we would stay together. I thought I was better than the rest of my family, living freely on my own. But I had found out that even one phone call in the middle
of the night, the sounds of my sobbing sisters reaching me with the promised pin-
drop clarity, could never be left behind. I could run away as far as I wanted, and still
be tied by a long chain of guilt, the excruciating horror of realising that they still lived
in an unchanged environment coming alive over the long beams of satellite and
telephone lines.

I abandoned my meandering river, I lost my continent. The art of losing was
not hard to master, when I was not even aware that I was losing anything at all. I left
my sisters to negotiate for peace in my parents' war, and remained in a nation which
asked me, every time my visa was up for renewal, when I was going to leave. In
America, where it is considered a great shame to be dependent materially, or
emotionally, I was an outcast, asking for the scraps of academia, the pity of the
liberal minded; I survived there due to the guilt of the decadent. I learned what it
meant to be individualistic.

In this monastery, to beg is the highest form of virtue, as I can allow for those
with great sin to part with the material, in order for me to impart to them a scrap of
my peace. We barter in the world of eternal suffering, the endless cycles of birth
and rebirth. I know those with only folk knowledge of Mahayana and Theraveda
Buddhism believe that they could, possibly, be a human in this life, and an ant in the
next - a difference in one's acts of humility, generosity and *ahimsa* being the
difference between the human and animal world. When I was a child, I spent
endless hours by the water tank outside the kitchen of my parents' home, fishing out
ants from the water. I believed, quite wholeheartedly, that each struggling six-
legged, soggy black creature may have been a sinning soul in the last life. I wanted
to give them a chance at life. I did not realize that the death of an ant could have
been the portal for that soul into a better, human life. I simply could not stand the
death. So I blew on each one until it was dry, and then lined them up on the stone
terrace, watching them carefully until they crawled off, shiny and black as oil in the
sun. I sometimes wonder if saving a thousand ant lives bestowed cosmic grace
upon me.

Here in the monastery, I am lonely, even though I know I am supposed to find
peace away from the clatter and noise of the world. I cannot bear the mutterings of
the nuns when I receive the small brown packages of tampons and pads every few
months, cellotaped and affixed with tiny paintings - American stamps - stamps which
my friends picked with care, the prettiest scenery, the commemorative releases from
the post office, African American scientists, Marilyn Monroe, and a series dedicated
to acknowledging women in flight. My friends are careful to remind me of my past
passions - they hope, perhaps, that these two-centimetre square temptations will
bring me back after this year is done. Knowing that I held mock-rejoicing
ceremonies whenever I saw the American flag being burned in some far off country,
they never lick the 32-cent American flag stamps for my packages.

The tampons are a definite luxury, a looked-down upon material gift that I
cannot share with the rest of the inhabitants of the monastery. Everything has to be
shared, but these, these the nuns would not take even if I begged them to. I think
they believe that the hymen will be broken, or that one may derive some
unspeakable pleasure when inserting the elongated, thin pencils of cotton into the
vagina. The terror of pleasure is too much to overcome curiosity or convenience.
And anyway, convenience is for the heathen - otherwise, the monastery would be a
den of microwaves and dishwashers, allowing more time for us to devote to
meditation and chanting. Some here even believe that work of any sort results in sin; we may inadvertently step on some unsuspecting animal, or our planting hoes may cut into an earthworm. I am one of these sinners. I am mired in twenty-odd years of damnation piled on top of whatever I have from my past lives, as I did not come to the monastery until I was thoroughly done with a life of utter debauchery and lechery.

The nuns whisper about me, I know it. I am only now beginning to speak Nepalese with some fluency, and they take advantage of my ignorance. Some are kind, in the same fawning manner that the Protestants in America were, hoping to convert the heathen. As a foreigner in a Midwestern university, I was always accosted by overzealous, and quite well meaning evangelists from various fundamentalist churches: the people my friend Selena fondly refers to as "The Fundies". They had courted me since my first semester in school, and I was attracted to them simply because I was so lonely - no one else would talk to me in the dorms. Evangelists seemed kind, but I soon realized that their kindness and friendship was contingent on my adherence to their paradigms, and an absolute renunciation of my former beliefs. They shook their bible verses and parables at me as if their covenants and contractual agreements with Jehovah applied to me as well: "Jesus said that there will be no more fathers and sons, and that children will leave their families for their belief in the Son of Man," they proffered. Somehow, the promise of an excuse to cut myself off from my legendarily tumultuous family seemed golden at the time.

But I was a fickle believer. I would get Christ and lose sight of Him within short periods of time. So numerous groups of Fundies believed that I had converted
at several different points in my life - - three, if I recall correctly. Once, I was taken to an indistinct brick and concrete church on Thirteenth Street on a Wednesday night, where a scattered congregation of diehards sat in an empty room devoid of any religious symbols. Only the plain wooden cross on the wall, framing the podium with its microphone, distinguished this room from a chemistry lecture hall. I imagined that night, as the impassioned preacher shouted epithets about Jesus, that there were flowers all around me, as if I was in a temple, and that he was an animated Buddha come to life. I was awash in repentance and joy; at this moment, I knew that I believed in the God of whom the Christians spoke.

That night, goaded by the preacher, I stepped up to the front of the church.

"You have no faith!" The preacher shook. "<i>Ashalla sola mollaaaaaaaay ashallaaaaa!</i>"

I could not speak in tongues, as did the rest of the congregation.

"I command you, in the name of God the Almighty, the Creator of Light, Father of Heaven and Earth, speak!"

My failure, he believed, was a sign of the devil in me. I looked around me and saw the horned one in all the people around me who rolled their eyes and contorted their torsos, burbling words out of their twisted mouths like babbling fountains. I looked up at the furious face framed by the wooden cross, and whispered, "Yes, I believe in Christ," if only to pacify the leering man at the podium.

"Emmanuel! Our God is With Us!" The preacher-who-ended-all-statements-with-an-exclamation concluded.

After each such conversion, the Fundies would go amongst their particular faction proclaiming that they had "led" me "to Christ", whereas I would have the
distinct impression that God had led me there, wherever that was, whomever that was. So I would be a bit miffed as soon as I was informed of my conversion through gossip in the church. People would literally state things like "I heard Mary Alice led you to Christ," or "So, you accepted Christ Friday at Randy and Carol's house?" As if Christ was an after dinner mint easing the passage of Carol's chicken and biscuits through my innards. How was I supposed to say that I didn't really believe in Christ - God, maybe, but not Christ - to such people? After all, what sane ex-Buddhist atheist searching for acceptance in America could possibly swallow that the Son of the God of Israel come down to earth in the flesh, so that he could become the ultimate sacrifice for all of humanity's sins? I did not even come from a culture of sacrifice as atonement for sin - for Buddhists, there was no way out. We dealt with our foibles, and died sorely apologetic.

In Nepal, the nuns teach me Sanskrit and help me as I stumble over the verses, in that "take pity on the foreign heathen" way. Others avoid me altogether. When the occasional packages arrive, I finger the stamps, trailing the tips of my fingers over the serrations, the waves of my fingerprints going over the sensory pleasure of ridges and valleys, ridges and valleys. I am long over the untaping and unstringing; it is as if my friends are afraid that someone else will open the presents, and tie them up, like small, cube-shaped Houdinis. I, the accomplished escape artist, untie the packages with unsealed drama and delight, saving the triumphant escape till the last moment. The tampons burst out again and again, unthwarted by any amount of locks and devices.

Sometimes, now, I almost wish for a surreptitiously smuggled in present, a chocolate, a flower petal, something, other than dutiful orange robes, hand sewn, or
incense sticks. As if I cannot get incense sticks here - poor chaps, they purchase them in smelly basement shops selling "ethnic jewelry" and second-hand records, and send them here, to Nepal. It's not that I don't appreciate these gifts, or recognize the sweetness of their intentions, but I just wish that they'd break the rules every once in a while, and suddenly appear, weary from a 22-hour flight on Air India to try to take me away. But nobody comes to take me away. Nobody visits me. Everyone I know lives far away, other lands, other minds. I chant for them, I offer flowers and food to the Lord Buddha for them. I pray for their souls, even though I do believe that there is a no god, as pure Buddhism dictates, and I certainly do not believe I can change things from here, the top of the world, high up on my mountain perch, my head buried in the snow and ice.

Yesterday, my birthday, the package which arrived contained a new size of Tampax brand for medium flow - containing forty six tampons - ten FREE. An economy package! I wonder if my friends are getting tired of sending things, and are trying to cut down on the regularity of their generosity. Maybe now they are distancing themselves from me, and sending occasional bursts of nobless oblige my way. But I am reassured when I look at the stamps - Billie Holiday and Jimi Hendrix, sixty cents each. Their lament is shrouded in song, and in the tiny frames of their stamps, they live out their high-speed lives brutally, a pair of quixotic impossibilities. On weekends, my friends and I would all meet in my second story flat, the aroma of baking bread mingling with the more modest fragrance of lemon oil from the freshly-polished hardwood floors, pile our plates full of potluck food, and listen to Billie's sometimes heroin-muffled voice purr.

If you can't be free
Be a mystery

Inside my birthday package, there is a long letter from Selena; she has included photographs of the log cabin that my lover and I found one summer, on Mount of the Holy Cross near Aspen, Colorado. Often, I fail to push out the carnal from my thoughts, and mull over making love with him in various locations. We had stayed in the cabin one night, after having driven for over fifteen hours from Salt Lake City, weaving up the unpaved, mountain road. It was close to midnight, and there was no dull, neon glow from city lights to spoil the darkness. All we could see, as we inched up the rocky, steep road, were the rustling heart-shaped leaves of aspen trees, whispering and whistling in the wind, lit by the headlights of the car. We knew that our Rand-McNally map showed us that there was a camping site just outside of Aspen - there it was, the tiny upside-down triangle. We had no idea that it was half way up the mountain. When we finally reached the campsite, and discovered the unlocked cabin, we built a fire, and ate smoky red beans and rice, our meal strewn with ashes from the cabin's chimney. We watched the summer night sky, curled up gratefully inside a sleeping bag together.

It was late August, and the yearly meteor shower pounded the sky with streaks of lightning. I recited a story my father had told me when I was a child, about a king who had asked all suitors of his daughter's hand to find out for him the number of stars in the heavens. After many beheaded suitors, one man came and asked for a long sheet of black paper. He then took a needle, and spent the night meticulously pricking the paper full of holes. In the morning, he went before the king, and asked him to hold the paper up, covering the sun. The light shone through the millions of holes in the black paper, a myriad of jewels, a crystalline
conglomeration of stars in the night sky. The suitor said, "This many stars in the night sky."

I knew my father wanted more than my broke, architecture-student lover for his daughter. I never told him about whom I was seeing, as this changed often.

My friends had gone to Mount of the Holy Cross to celebrate my birthday - they thought that being on top of the mountain was a way of being as close to me as they could afford. There was even a cake - the kind I used to make, made with a whole pound of black, dark-as-the-earth Lindt chocolate, a pound of sweet cream butter, two whole cups of unrefined sugar, and ten extra large eggs. They spread it with a layer of mocha buttercream, and piled it with autumn raspberries to cover up the sinkhole in the cake - it inevitably sunk after about five minutes out of the oven, there being no flour to hold the air bubbles intact, and became a cylinder of silk smooth darkness, with a meteor crater in the middle. There it was in the pictures, lurid black and red, like a cross section of Sudanese Selena's glossy black Nuer arm, heavier than a thousand cycles of lives, weighted fat with sin. They had poured Couvoisier brandy, my favourite, over the berries, and lit it - Cordon Negre, ablaze. In their mouths, the butter and chocolate must have been like a river of warm slurry, seeping first from fork to tongue, pressed against pink palates and alveolar ridges, touching incisors and molars, and then finally slipping involuntarily into the gullet, where taste and decadence ended.

There are also pictures of my friends standing outside of Brekke's Farm and Pet Supply store out on the gravel roads of rural Iowa. The pumpkins are lined up, puffed out in orange glory, like limbs swollen from elephantitis, right next to the fifty pound bags of cow manure. Vanessa is holding her choice pumpkin, and Selena
has positioned two dried sow's ears on her head. Vanessa introduced Selena and me to Brekke's when I had first started planting a garden - tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, things everyone in Iowa grew, and to surprise the neighbours, courgettes, okra, and aubergines. We splurged in a fit of impracticality, and planted sunflowers, for which we did not have enough space. On my first day at the store, we discovered the dried pig's ears and snouts - chew toys for dogs. "I wonder if they are real," I pondered, while Vanessa tried to squeeze the dirty-white snout, as if checking for authenticity. From behind us a big dry voice boomed, "Yup. They're real all right." We turned around to see a man in very blue, very new jeans, red braces holding them up from below his gourd-like belly, snickering in an almost girlish manner when we dropped the snout back into the bin. "The dogs really love 'em. You should see how fast our Jake chows one of those down."

It was autumn, a week after my birthday, when I received the phone call. Vanessa and I had baked an ovenful of pies, using only the best - Brekke's cream textured, sweet, Iowa pumpkins. We were lounging on the secondhand couches in my flat, mouths crammed with still-warm pie, passing the water-bong back and forth between us. I knew something was wrong, because my father never called me.

It has nearly been three years since I arrived in Nepal, heart and head swollen shut, gut empty and turbulent, throat tight with tears. Three years since I last saw my college friends, and the boiling gold of an Iowa autumn. I eat rice from the smooth black begging bowl, my only possession, usually with lentils, or mung beans. When I find a small bead of uncrushed cardamom or fennel seed, I hold it on my tongue, then finally, grind it on my teeth, waiting for the numbing sensation of sharp spice to invade my palate. I am afraid to close my eyes, lest it be seen that I
am enjoying my food too much. My hands long to scrape the final grain of rice, the last dribble of curry from the rolled edge of the bowl. I am perpetually hungry; it has been long since I tasted meat, fish, or sweets.
CHAPTER 4. OUR LIVES BEFORE US

I grew up in the land where the yellow, undulating desert sand met the waves of the Atlantic Ocean. I loved my flat expanses of savanna, the violet haze in the horizon where the earth hugged the heavens. The earth, pleating in and out of shadow like the peaks and valleys of a browned meringue, supported my life, and my limbs become tough and wiry as the desert grass. The wandering flows of sand were soft and pliable, an unfolding stretched out body, complete with rolls of flesh. I ran wild-haired and brown-bodied along desiccated river beds, watering the dry earth with my childish joys. Being six years old at the time of our move, I quickly forgot the forests of Ceylon. I learned to watch for storms in late October, note the ominous rain clouds coming from miles away. When the rains came, all the children in my school would run out, and soak themselves jumping into ditches filled with gushing water.

The Kafue river coursed its way through the high plateau near our home, cutting a deep gash which meandered back and forth like the body of a maamba snake. Tame and brown in the dry season, it always awed our senses to see the Kafue rise ten or more feet within days of the first rains, turning the yellow, mineral rich acidic soil into a waving sea of malachite green. In some years of heavy rain, the river’s belly rose high, sending fingers of water which reached out and tore whole acacia trees from the banks, carrying them away with layered sheaves of glinting mica still clinging to the roots. The waddy behind our house, feeding from the waters of the Kafue, released lung fish and tiny shrimp, their gills waving in the water in slow motion triumph, one, two, three, at having survived another drought.
A few days later, tiny frogs arrived to cover our gardens and verandahs, and termites emerged from hard clay mounds as big as houses, thousands of soft bodies flying in one night of fairy tale passion. Sunbirds lined up on the telephone wires, darting back and forth from their perches, swallowing termite after termite, who gave up their day-old lives for the annual feast of thanksgiving. Migrating swallows, so blue that they seemed black, sliced the evening skies with their sickle wings, screeching songs of European summers past.

Every rainy season, I would prune the rose bushes and the grape vine with our grey bearded gardener, Chaiinda, who had been with our family ever since we had arrived in southern Africa in the late seventies. Chaiinda was from the region between Zambia and Zimbabwe, and spoke a Zulu dialect - - he was Ngoni, an ethnic group which fled Shaka Zulu's wars of conquest, driving their vast herds of long-horned cattle ahead of them through Shona and Ndebele lands north of the Limpopo River, leaving the large expanses of land that the Dutch took over upon their arrival.

Chaiinda had moved to Namibia in search of a job during Zimbabwe's war for independence in the late seventies, just as my family had arrived in Namibia from Ceylon. He had learned several languages along the way besides his own and English. He liked us, my sisters and myself, because we worked with him, doing the heavy work, unlike our Amma, who stood over the servants as they worked, and pointed out to them what they were doing wrong. I gossiped with him in Bemba, the local language, so that Amma and her tea-and-biscuit cronies wouldn't understand what we were saying. Still, Chaiinda was wary of what he would discuss with me, even after years of raising me out of girlhood; much of his youth was spent in the
time before independence, and he had trained himself into a thoroughly non-
confrontative personality.

He knew all my secrets: about my quiet, surreptitious crush on a German
Olympic swimmer who swam the butterfly and the front crawl. He knew I fawned
over Richard Noble, my seventh grade teacher’s buck-toothed son. Chaiinda would
smile his wide, tobacco-stained smile when my friend Melanie de Silva and I
whispered about Richard, calling the poor boy “rabbit teeth”, and “Bugs”, thinking
ourselves awfully clever and original.

Once, when Chaiinda was walking the three of us home from school, I cut my
finger on a blade of elephant grass; we always took the short-cut through the veldt,
meandering back and forth among the dusty paths among the groundnut and maize
fields instead of walking along the roads which took us straight home. The grass
towered above our sun-browned faces. Richard was trying to show me how you can
pull the top part of the grass, and chew on the tender inside which was protected by
the razor sharp outer leaves. Embarrassingly, I cut the tip of my middle finger while
trying to do this, and a surprising gush of blood rushed out.

"Suck it! You should suck the blood," Richard shouted at me in alarm.

Then, as if my motions were too slow, he grabbed my fingers and stuck them
in his mouth. I felt the warm wet of his tongue pull on my fingertips, and felt
strangely lightheaded in the unbearable heat of September, the sensation of the
burning cut tingling through my whole arm.

Afterwards, my face burning red from embarrassment, I faced my mother and
the Red Cross kit - - she didn’t know what to do about a cut on a child’s hand. So
Chaiinda did the honours, using a strip of soft brown plaster and a wad of cotton, wiping my tears after alcohol stung the cut.

Chaiinda took care, though, that my parents' wishes were not overturned. He had once quietly objected when Paul, our houseboy, taught me Bemba, saying that our parents may have not liked us learning African languages - knowing what views foreign people had of Africa. However, my father had encouraged both Chaiinda and Paul to speak to us in any language they wanted, having read somewhere that children are able to pick up languages better if they had been exposed to the sounds of varied languages before the age of ten. What Thath'tha really hoped was that some language learning centre in our brains would be activated, and remain thus, so that when we went on to learn the respected languages, such as French, German, and his personal favourite, Russian, we would excel.

Sometimes, Chaiinda and Paul would listen to the British Broadcasting Service's World News with me at six am, when I got up to study for my GCE 'O' Level exams, and shake their heads when he heard about yet another bomb going off in Sri Lanka. They sat with me under the blossoming grape vines on those December mornings, watching the mist from the surrounding valley evaporate into the sky as the sun rose, leaving only the trail of dew droplets rising from the river - - a snail's viscous silver path, easing its way through the red plateau soil, betraying the water's journey through the woodlands. We drank coffee from the Kenyan highlands, swirling the fine grounds to the bottom of our cups, they postponing the long day of hard labour in the garden and washrooms, and I, my British history and geography. Our small white china cups collected a layer of dew drops in the chill of the morning. I would explain the history of the country my family had left as political
and economic exiles, running from civil war and unemployment lines. In a rare show, Chaliinda would connect his life with my family's, and say, "Madam, we have both come to Namibia to run away from those who fight. In the desert, nobody asks you to leave your home."

We all knew that our safety nets, the extended families who would take us into their protective enclosures in times of trouble, were in danger every day, and yet the only connection we had to them was the BBC World News; while they would take us back any day we returned, we had left them behind to machine guns, air raids, and the occasional car bomb. We remembered their predicaments whenever we saw a low-flying helicopter or fighter plane sweep the desert, so low that we could see the South African insignia with the binoculars we used for birdwatching.

My mother would interrupt our solitary happiness if she ever caught us together. She thought it vulgar for a daughter of hers to seat herself with two male servants. Amma was a person whose tides were wholly controlled by the waxings and wanings of my father. In turn, she tried to control her daughters, with the same unpredictable cruelty. I often ran to the river beyond the confines of our garden gates, joining my friends for a clandestine smoke, which was the worst trouble into which we could think of getting ourselves, wandering along the oxbow lakes and the elephant grass. Once we saw a baby crocodile, which crashed into the water only a metre or so away from my feet - it had been frightened by the racket we had been making. We saw its nostrils rising out of the water a few minutes later when it came up to take a breath. My friends tried to entice it by throwing pieces of Marie biscuits into the water, but to no avail. Afterwards, Paul, our houseboy, told me that crocodiles only came for meat; and that if I had dangled my feet in the water, it
would surely have come over to take a bite. I screamed in mock horror, and giggled profusely. Paul was the favourite in our household – not only had he taught me Bemba, the local language, he comforted me when our parents fought. I communicated with him in our secret language, much to our parents' consternation, who disliked all things African, except for the sterling pounds that they received for being a part of the mining industry.

Paul once had a venereal disease. Or what we now call a sexually transmitted disease. I later found out that the disease he had was gonorrhea, specifically. I received this piece of vital information when once I went back home for the December holidays, after a term of studying bacterial forms. I had four months of medical microbiology crammed into my head, during which time I learned how to tell the difference between a bacillus, a spirulum, a coccus, and a gonococcus. Gonococcal bacteria, specific only to gonorrhea - so it was a defining characteristic - looked like two cells stuck together to form a miniature bum-like shape under the microscope. In many lab sessions, we used actual virulent forms of the bacteria, which grew with frightening rapidity on our petri plates. The gonorrhea colonies looked like tiny viscous globules on the chocolate agar, and we all sterilized our instruments with extra caution at the end of that lab session. Afterwards, my lab partner Steve and I joked around, saying that if we ever got an STD, we could blame it on Microbiology 450.

It was a semester in which time was long and drawn out, so tedious that I actually looked forward to going home - minus the twenty-two hour stuffy plane ride, and the six hour wait at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York, with its unforgiving egg-shaped seats on which no human being could sleep. After months of Ramen
noodles, I looked forward to my father's homemade pasta, and the secret-recipe lasagna with pine nuts, mirabelles and cream sauce.

So when I got off the rickety twin engine plane which took me from the capital to my home, I didn't mind the nausea, nor the horrid apricot sweets which the flight attendant pressed into my hand. I looked over and enjoyed the vastness of the veldt, now a billowing green sheet with the months of rain. Here, in the long grass and the canopy of the acacia, I felt the most comfort, the closest to home, even though my parents still thought of themselves as expatriates, even after twenty years of life in Southern Africa. They were always talking of "going back": to where, I did not know, as they had sold off most of their property in the island in which they were born. Maybe there was a hint of their fear of us, their daughters, running off with men from Africa. As a child, I wondered at their comments, aghast that they would even connect me to boys. I was a sensible, and terribly shy person as a teenager and was not receptive to the charms of boys. I liked the life cycle of frogs and ferns. I wanted a stamp from every country in the world.

After a week of obligatory parties and endless twin air kisses from various hostesses, I settled down to do my favourite activity: gardening. I had been pruning the Cape gooseberry bushes, while Chalinda was helping my father put metal rods into the ground for a swing for my kid sister. The gates to our property were wide open, because we were expecting guests that evening for a party that my parents were giving for their friends - in my honour. Hearing the shrill of my mother's voice calling me to clean up and get dressed, I put my shears down, and wiped my face off with the pruning gloves. I looked up to see Paul standing in front of me. I had not seen him in over three years. He was thinner than I remembered him, and more
haggard looking, but still handsome, still beautiful. My father had not seen Paul coming in, because he and Chaiinda were in the back of the garden, hidden by the house.

Paul had been our houseboy since I was ten years old, a boy whom Chaiinda had brought to my mother when my kid sister had been born: there was extra work, nappies to be washed, and a house to be taken care of. He was constantly getting fired (and then rehired) for various offences - - he was a generation younger than Chaiinda, and fawned less on his master and madam.

After talking around in circles about how we were, and what we had been doing, Paul asked me if I thought he could work for my family for a few weeks. He was hard up for some cash, since he had not been able to find steady work after a stint in jail: bar-brawl, he explained, grinning a little from embarrassment. Paul still felt rather shy around us girls, I suppose - he knew he was supposed to live up to some standard of purity, one imposed by my parents, which he was never able to meet. I chatted with him in the Bemba that he had taught us, him correcting me when I erred, and interjecting with new slang words so that I would remain hip. I explained that I was only here for the holidays from college in America, and since I had no knowledge of the inner workings of our household, which my mother guarded with tight-fisted secrecy, I wasn't sure if we needed the help.

We walked to the back entrance of the house, the doorway to the kitchen through which the servants entered, exclaiming on the health of the grape vines. Paul had planted them fifteen years ago, and had nursed them through several fungal diseases, feeding them bone meal and cow's blood from the local abattoir - increased the sweetness of the grapes, he said. And sweet they were - year after
year, as the vines matured, we were the envy of our neighbours for our candy-sweet grapes, and our signature port-style reds which we produced for a few friends and family. In public, we claimed our Portuguese ancestors as the source of our wine making skills, but privately admitted that it was Paul, with his lovely, slender, pianist's fingers, who whispered to the vines every day as he rubbed the thick veins of the chocolate coloured base, as if he was stroking a lover's legs. I could hardly believe now, that this Paul who stood before me was the same person who had given me piggy back rides, and had engaged in terrific pillow fights while watching world cup soccer matches, telling me gossipy stories about football players.

As I stood there in a slightly stupefied confusion of emotions, my mother ran out and exclaimed, "Why, Paul, you're just what we needed. What with my daughter being back, I can't keep up with the work - you know how awfully spoiled they are!" Then she popped herself back into the house, without asking Paul anything about where he'd been or what he'd been doing since the last time they fired him for whatever reason. Probably too many girlfriends over in the servants' quarters, I supposed - that had always been the rub between him and my mother. I smiled wryly at Paul, and shook the mud from my boots. In Bemba, I said, "You remember that my mother could never have enough servants in the house - she thinks her daughters never learned how to make beds."

"I knew I could count on her - especially since it's Christmas. She does have her own brand of kindness, even if she seems like she'll blow up at you anytime," Paul shuffled his feet delicately.

"Oh, go on! You were always her favourite - I rather thought that she had a little crush on you," I retorted slyly.
"Well, you wouldn't know that by the number of times she's been mad at something I'd done and fired me!"

We both giggled a little, but stopped short, as we saw my mother poking her head out of the windows facing the back of the house, unashamedly spying on the goings on. Probably wondering why I was not snapping to attention and doing her bidding like I used to as a little girl, I thought, and headed inside.

Later, when I was in the bath, my mother came barging into the bathroom and berated me for my "actions earlier on". Knowing that it was futile to speak to her on the virtues of privacy, I looked at her innocently, and asked, "What actions?" I knew full well that she did not want us to speak in Bemba, since she did not understand it, and thought that it was not worthwhile language to learn.

"You know perfectly well what I mean," she huffed, "they'll wash their hands over your heads if you give them half a chance." This was an expression which my mother translated directly from Singhalese (the language of our Asian grandmothers) to English, and it generally meant that people (usually those of a lower class) would take advantage of your kindness if they could.

"So, I am being scolded for fraternizing with the servants?"

"You know that Paul isn't like Chaiinda. He is insolent and dirty. We fired him years ago for his bad behaviour," and added, as if to prove her point, "your father agrees, you know."

"Oh? I thought that you fired him because he kept bringing home different girls from the shanties and beer gardens. Mother, wasn't one of the firings because of an STD?"
I had a picture in my mind of Paul coming to the kitchen in the early winter mornings as we were getting ready for school, asking for the keys to the gates. "She's going," he would say simply, while my sisters and I would stare in curiosity. He would then escort a woman swaddled in a bright batik chitenge, her rounded bottom rolling in the folds of fabric, her breasts, hard-nippled from the cold, bobbing like buoys in the current. We watched as they made their way from his red brick one-room servants' quarters at the bottom of our garden to the iron gates, seeing them shiver in the tongues of mist which wandered out from the river.

Looking at my fingers wrinkling from being in the tub too long, I wondered what it would be like if I had to ask my parents for the gate keys in order to let my lovers out in the morning after a party. The thought almost made me laugh hysterically. I controlled myself, however, seeing as my mother was obviously getting a bit worked up.

"Of course we fired him for that! What do you expect, him laying there for weeks with some gonno disease? And three daughters in the house?"

I resisted the urge to tell her that any semblance of respectability that she was trying to hold up was lost around the time when we had started getting phone calls from women with African accents, asking for our father. We had always said that they were probably prank calls made by our school friends, out to make trouble - in secondary school, my sisters and I had often made prank calls using thick, feigned accents, using the skills we learned living in a place containing people from every part of the world, each speaking their own special brand of English. Instead, mindful of the fact that I was on holiday, I said, "Gonno disease? Mother, do you by any chance mean gonorrhrea?"
"You don't have to act like you know everything, just because you've been to college and read books all day without doing anything." She was positively bristling. My mother was always sensitive to the fact that she had not gone to university when she was young, refusing at that time to attend, opting for society life. I knew she chafed with regret regarding that decision now, blaming her lack of education for not being able to leave my father, whose transgressions towards her were innumerable.

So instead of resorting to sassiness, I said tiredly, "Oh, mother, can we not get into this now? I just want a quiet bath," knowing that even this statement was a hurtful one to her, for she knew that I always tuned out everything that I did not want to deal with, going into a private place which even she could not penetrate. Seeing my face cloud over, blocking everything, my mother stalked away, reminding me to be careful not to run around "half naked, because you aren't so young anymore". My sisters and I swore that we could never masturbate, not even in the bathroom, as long as we lived with our mother and her ever present "How long do you think you are going to stay in there? Don't waste the water - you know we are living in this God-forsaken place with a dry season as long as an Arctic winter," and "Good grief! Has anyone slept so long in their lives?" She was always poking her head uninvited into our private spaces.

As I dried myself, I peered into the garden through the beveled glass flowers of the bathroom widow. Chalinda and Paul were getting the braai fire going for searing meat: this was how we celebrated Christmas and New Year - smoky game meat burning with the heat of red chili marinade, saffron-infused rice pilau, cucumber salad in yogurt sauce to cool the tongue, ending with chocolate truffles drenched in Drambui and blue flames as night fell to the flickering of fireflies.
Aruni, my little sister who had been born in Africa, was already testing the new swing. Looking at her, I saw a stranger: I knew nothing of who she was becoming. I remember that I was always looking out of my bedroom windows while I was home, always trying to find a way out.

No matter how I tried, I could not separate the memory I had of Africa from that of my family, who went there to plunder with the classic brutality of colonialists. We had not realized, then, that the style in which our family had lived for generations, moving from one country to another, taking the money and privilege, averting eyes from the destruction we left behind, would rub off on us; we did not think that we would be left with minds as parched and robbed of wealth as the lands from which we took.

Our great-grandfathers had come to Ceylon from Portugal with the same attitude as had my father upon transporting our family to Southern Africa. Only by our time, the women of the family could leave: using shear will and stubbornness to counteract the Machiavellian tactics of manipulation with which the men of our family kept the women tied to them. But these things - our guilt, intermingled with our Buddhist sense of loyalty and respect for the elders of our family - I could not leave these, I could not be that disloyal. I was never as free as I had told myself. Two cultures and four continents kept me a veritable whore, selling out to wherever I lived in order to best fit in, to best get by as inconspicuously as I could. I was a Vishnu with half a dozen legs instead of six arms, straddling each culture to which I had to pay homage, while my throat filled with bile at the realization of my predicament.

I remember watching the smoke from the *braai* fire drift up and mingle with the flowering frangipani trees, which we had planted many rainy seasons ago. The
blooms unfolded in trumpets in November night mists, in showy, yet delicate, bridal bouquets which covered the entire expanse of branches: five hundred five-pealed sirens in egg yolk damask softness on one tree, and raw silk halogen white on the other. When they bloomed into the night sky in the November rains, it looked as if they were twin mirrors which reflected the moonlight back into the earth's atmosphere, sending out beacons of rays, messages to the stars. Every winter I had spent in Iowa, watching geese honking as they flew overhead from the creaking window of a ramshackle flat, I woke up in the middle of the night, having dreamt of the blossoming frangipanis. It was as if the fragrance molecules from the flowers were microscopic perfume-carrying couriers, packaged in pale beams light, coming to call me home. In the heat of a Southern African December, flowers always wilted and fell off on to the acidic plateau soil, suffusing the air with a death-like sweet scent - a mixture of absolute earthly sensuality intermingled with decay. But heady, heady, even in funeral.
CHAPTER 5. STORYTELLER

For most of my childhood, my family had lived in Namibia, near Witwatersrand. My father had gone to work in the diamond mines near the west coast, taking his wife away from her safe place amongst family and childhood friends in our native Ceylon. At a young age, I had already seen my parents in a countless parade of battles, injurious to both their bodies and mine, and had, even then, prepared myself to not love them.

My mother was a spendy woman, or so we were told by our father. She had grown up rather rich, protected and terribly spoiled for the world. I thought of her as an overripe mango, her flesh sweet with decadence, the hint of the death lingering about her even at the time she met my father. She was seventeen. My father, from a poor family of ten children, went to a Buddhist school for boys, while my mother attended a prestigious private Catholic school for girls, one which was gated and fenced by great iron bars. My father met her - or saw her - when his school was invited to hear someone of great import speak at my mother's school. It was what all adolescents their age, in their time and place, waited for: a chance to scope the opposite sex, under the guise of enriching their minds. Neither of my parents remember who the speaker was, or even what they spoke about.

The only way my father could meet and speak to my mother was to try to accost her as she left the great garrison of her secondary school. He and his friends waited several days outside the school gates, only to get a glimpse of her pristine school uniform, a white dress with immaculately pressed pleats all school girls in
Ceylon wear. Only her school tie, and the whiteness of her starched dress betrayed the school she attended, differentiating her from my father's sisters, whose dresses were ever so slightly yellowed with age, and pressed only under the pressure of their heads; they were too poor to have an iron, and placed their folded shirts and dresses under their pillows at night so that the wrinkles would come out.

My father had tried to speak to my mother on several occasions, only to collect a shy glance from her before she got in the black Morris, as well as a dirty look from the chauffeur, Banda, who waited outside the school gates daily, waiting for the bell to ring. Banda was always on the dot. So my father and his friends decided to be more pro-active: noting that Banda always smoked a cigar as he waited, sauntering over to the gates as he took luxurious puffs of cigars on which my father could not even dream of laying his hands, the potential Romeo and his erstwhile assistants decided to puncture the wheels of the Morris. All four wheels. The plan was that my mother would then have to ride the bus - the Bentley of the masses - because her family would be worried terribly if she was not home at the expected time. Then, finally, my father could talk to her.

It was a complicated, and seemingly idiotic plan. The potential for failure, if not outright disaster resulting in criminal proceedings against my father and his cronies, was rather obvious. However, fate was looking to unite these two people, and my father's elaborate plan was a success. My mother left the unwitting Banda to curse the mystery ruffians. He, fearful of being sacked by my grandfather for being lackadaisical, tried to rectify his lack of diligence with his employer's property the best he could by displaying a great show of anger. His concern was probably very genuine - - Banda truly did feel very protective of my grandfather's property, the
way many servants who are owned by their employers often do, dedicating their lives to the furtherance of whatever "mahathaya" or "nona" wants. My mother, quite insensible to any of miserable Banda's pains resulting from his social and economic bondage, was elated at her unexpected chance for freedom. She had money in her hand for the bus.

Their romance is legendary among those who knew my parents in their youth. It is spoken of over lavish meals of saffron rice and curried prawns, food so hot that sweat runs in rivulets down the throat and into the brown cleavages of women, exposed by their tight sleeved, figure hugging hatteya - women's sari blouses. I imagined my father, young, his already wrinkled copper brow hidden by a mop of black curls, being taken in by my mother's light skin, her elegant, long-fingered hands which had never seen work, and the secrets of her long, auburn hair, bound up in a tight braid. The promise of her must have wagged at my father as she boarded the bus with him, she mounting the steps up to the conductor ahead of him.

My father had controlled her thoughts since those first chance moments on the bus. He found that isolating her helped his cause even more, so that she had no one she could go to for a second opinion, no one who would tell her that she was, indeed, human. When he moved our family to Namibia, he truly became the king of his domain.

My mother had always hated Africa - - she was isolated and lonely, and thought of Africans as barbaric and ugly. Even after living there for years, she never knew anyone she could call a friend. Working for the mining companies in Southern Africa was a transitional and unstable life; people came and went with company contracts, and anyone to whom one became attached inevitably lost their job, or
moved to a different part of the Commonwealth. My parents' only communication with Africans was with money: they frequently pressed wads of peach-coloured fifty Kwacha notes, which had the freedom fighter with the broken chains on them, onto receptive hands.

In the desert, even amongst all that cacophonous life, one could feel as cloistered as a nun. When the rains stopped after a month, and the last fish flopped its final breath in the drying river mud, I knew that my mother felt terribly alone. In life, she had been a person who consumed an innumerable number of pills daily, many of which were much past the date of expiration, dusty and half crumbling in their tiny ziplock bags, spilling out on her dressing table. She could not bake cakes, nor take care of her children, leaving us to a grandmother, and later, after we moved to Africa, to an army of cooks, maids, gardeners, and nannies.

Once a month, my sisters and I would help my mother dye her hair black, combing the knots which had gathered on the base of her head, using a large-toothed yellow comb to make it as painless as possible. She only combed the hair on the surface, for it often tangled up at night, and hurt if she tugged too much. She abhorred pain, even the slightest pinprick. So once a month on a Saturday morning, we would take her thin satin strands in our hands, and cover them with creamy black hair colouring bought in bulk during the last trip to a Johannesburg Woolworths, making her sit still on a stool in the bathroom, her strange, familiar, fertility-goddess body wrapped in an old nightie. On these days, she would tell us tall tales, and sometimes, just to hear our shrieks, hoist the fabric of her nightie to show us her middle: she has no belly button. When my mother lifted her dress up, the many folds of her belly parted to reveal a large gash running all the way across her
stomach - - the scars from the stitches ran like a railroad track across her girth. She said it was from an operation to remove her gall bladder - - she was in horrible health, even back before we were old enough to remember. The surgeon, coming out of the operating theatre, had asked my father if he could scrape the fat from my mother's belly, since they'd already cut her open. Of course, my father agreed. Daddy used to proclaim this part of the story rather proudly, if he was in the mood for the story. But the surgeon botched the impromptu liposuction job, and left a scar across my mother's belly, spreading out like a macabre smile - - he took her navel out as a part of the payment for my father's vanity.

My mother's attempt to cover the emergent greys in her thin reddish hair was, even then, an attempt to regain her youthful beauty, to hide the scar tearing across her belly. In old photographs, she is slender as a coconut leaf, her hair heavy and full, gathered in long braids when she was young, and in an elegant bun at the nape of her neck in her engagement pictures. She was always the one who stood out among her blue-black haired friends, and I think that she wanted her hair to be dyed black, now that she was going grey, in an effort to look like everyone else. So my sisters and I gathered in the bathroom, pouring water over her scalp, stroking her hair to loosen the tangles, and watch her close her eyes and imagine herself emerging from the cocoon of the bathroom, her splendour reborn. Twenty minutes after the application of the dye, we washed her hair and dried it with old towels, and she struggled to her feet, her knees stiff and unyielding as the wings on a new butterfly, only to see her same ragged self in the mirror, with skin too pale for hair so black. I saw the same expression on her face every month: her mouth would sag, her jowls would move just a twitch to note her distaste for our mediocre work in the
makeshift beauty parlour. She was entirely dependent on her children, yet bitingly
critical of anything we did. We knew her well; we learned to mother her, and each
other. She could not take care of herself. I had spent my entire life trying to prove to
myself I could.

But she would make up for all her deficiencies with a good story. Amma told
us countless stories on rainy afternoons, with her ever present cup of ginger tea.
She loved to ham up a story, telling us horrifying details and making us squirm in an
odd mixture of fright, delight, and disbelief. So when we were older, we would never
know whether to believe her or not, although she would have sworn on her life (and
the lives of other innocent bystanders) that all she said was the Gospel Truth. My
mother, with her stage whisper and raised eyebrows, made a terrific story-teller, and
even after we had become grown women with the skeptical minds of the world-
weary, we were suddenly believers again.

Once, she told this story about the gory goings-on in rich, old colonial
families, and how one of my father’s brothers had raped a girl, and “gotten away”
with it. Amma began by telling us about how mothers of sons would hire pretty,
young girls from poor families in far-away villages to be maids in their sprawling
bungalows. The girls were hired specifically to clean to sons’ rooms in the morning,
and to provide sexual pleasure for the horny boys if necessary; the latter part of the
job description was, of course, not made very clear to the maids. The whole
elaborate mess was orchestrated so that the boys would not go around violating
respectable, wealthy families’ daughters. They would just violate powerless village
girls’ lives and bodies, and go on to marry the respectable daughters of wealthy
families. The shame was on the maids’ shoulders, not on the boys’. I noted that it
was only shame that the families were worried about, not incarceration for their rapist-sons. Once the girl started "to show", my mother said, she was sent home to her village with the blame placed on her for the "act". Everyone reasoned that she ought to have not put herself in shameful situations - Boys will be Boys, you know.

My paternal grandfather had died of a stroke when my father was eleven; high blood pressure runs in my family. He left behind ten children and a wife. The youngest child was only two months old. My grandmother had a bungalow on top of a hill surrounded by a hundred acres of coffee beans, but no money nor training to earn a living for the family. She sold off a large portion of the land to keep themselves going during the toughest times. My father, a story-teller whose abilities rivaled my mother's skills, tells us of eating cashew nuts when they were hungry, not wanting to make my grandmother feel guilty for allowing her children to go hungry.

So of course there were no maids for these boys, but a lingering feeling of colonial power and ownership of everything in the land remained, despite their lost fortunes. The discipline in the family was enforced by the violent iron fist of the eldest boy in the family, who had learned this style of absolute power from his predecessor, his dead father. This boy-man, who ruled the household after my grandfather's death, started working in order to earn a living for the family at seventeen years of age. He tortured his siblings with crazy punishments when they fell out of line - that is, performed badly in school, or got into fights with each other. Academic achievement was the only way for them to regain their family's former wealth, power, and respect in the community. And loyalty to the family was not a voluntary act due to the love that existed between them all, but enforced through fear.
My father was a favourite of my oldest uncle, especially since Thath'tha was a genius with his school work. However, he was frequently punished for getting into fights with his best friend, the brother who was closest in age to him: the boy who would grow to become the infamous Chuti Mahappa. "Mahappa" means, in our language, "older brother of father", and "chuti" means "little", as in younger. So, he was the younger of my father's two older brothers. When my father and Chuti Mahappa got into a row over marbles, or some other trivial thing, my oldest uncle, The Big Boss, would make the two angry boys kneel facing each other, with their arms held out at 90-degree angles for as long as twenty minutes at a time. Pretty soon, the boys forgot to be angry at each other because of the pain and discomfort, but while my father felt remorse, Chuti Mahappa was building rage inside of himself; rage at the bizarre and cruel punishment, and the punisher. How dare he do this to me when father is gone? and why does our mother allow him to single me out always? Yes, he was punished more than my father was, as he was the older of the two, and also because my oldest uncle disliked him for his independence of spirit. Free will does not do well in a dictatorial family. Through all this, my grandmother was a passive bystander, as all genteel women were raised to be like in her time.

So when Chuti Mahappa grew up to rape two girls from genteel families, and their brothers came looking for blood, my oldest uncle joined the outsiders in giving the now grown Chuti Mahappa the beating of his life. My dad was just walking up the hill to the bungalow, now in disrepair, with my then six-year-old sister Asirini after taking her to the dentist in town. I was only two at the time, and inside with my mother.
My sister has a very distinct memory of seeing the brothers beating Chuti Mahappa, and of his broken, bloody body on the gravel road that ended on top of the hill. She had never known why this happened, until my mother had told her the whole story, twenty years later, with her classic flair for a horror story.
CHAPTER 6. CAPRICORN TO CANCER

After my mother's funeral, I was given the remains in a small ceramic pot, bone chips and teeth, one false one, charred from the cremation fires. I had the driver take me to the Kelaniya temple, a holy place situated only a mile away from my mother's ancestral home in Ceylon. The road wound around paddy fields, the air moist from the recent monsoons, the tips of single rice plants peeking up from the water. White egrets perched on the backs of lumbering water buffaloes, landing and alighting in sudden flurries as the great animals swished their tails. Thin brown boys in cotton sarongs, tucked right up to their thighs, sat on the muddy paths between the paddies, fishing. At the temple walls, I took off my shoes, and lined them up on the sand, next to countless other pairs; there was a full moon, so many people had come to the temple to offer incense on the holy day. My feet sank into the soft sand, coating my sweaty soles. The moment I emerged from the air-conditioned car, baubles of sweat jeweled on my temples and armpits. The driver looked at me curiously, handing me a white handkerchief.

"Nona, I'll stay out here in the car, no?" He lilted, in that singing, Sinhalese-speaking-English voice.

"Don't call me nona, Wije," I mumbled. He grinned his crooked tooth grin, knowing that we'll never come to a compromise on that issue - I hate to be called "nona", which means "madam" in Sinhalese. I looked at him, buck teeth yellowed with age, grey hair slicked back with coconut oil, the son of the man who had driven my mother around when she was a child. Loyalty was important to my family.
Inside the Kelani temple's walls, I waded through the thick white layer of sea sand coating the entire compound, lighting a few oil lamps, my fingers fragrant from coconut and jasmine. I wiped the oil in my hair, careful not to spoil my white silk sari, the lace on my blouse which my father had bought for me when I had arrived for the funeral. I'd never worn a sari. So he'd taken me to the fancy shops in Galle Face near the sea shore, the breeze cooling off the monsoon heat, and bought me a white sari to celebrate my mother's death. In the Oxford Street of Colombo, women poked and smiled, fitting me with blouse after blouse, muttering in Singhalese about the thickness of my upper arms. They couldn't believe a girl would want her arms to be so big. I flexed my biceps proudly, and told them I was a swimmer, and that big arms came with the butterfly and the front crawl. Finally, when they had me trussed up like a stuffed bird, they looked me up and down, and complimented my father on the lightness of my skin. "Like Indian chaai, her skin," they glowed, "don't let her into the sun too much." I told them that I got my skin colour from my mother.

When I was very young, my father took me to the Galle Face beach every week, using the time to educate me on tide pool ecology - he never missed an opportunity to tell me that barnacles were the garbage collectors of the ocean. He picked up starfish, their bright arms flailing around, and showed me the suckers on their soft, damp underside. When I first found a sea urchin, its thousand black arms waving around like seaweed in a storm, he told me about how the spines were like poison darts, filled with venom, and taught me how to pick it up without getting pricked. We wandered around, gathering seashells for my collection until the moon came up, its reflection dancing over the incoming tide. We dug for turtle eggs and
mussels, opening the shells with an old kitchen knife, eating them fresh and raw, our mouths puckering at the fishy taste.

Because of our frequent excursions to the sea, I learned to swim before I learned to walk: my father, a man who was deathly afraid of deep water, had unceremoniously dumped his children into the Indian Ocean as soon as we had reached the age of seven months. He waited until we were that age, for our paternal grandmother, Aach’chi Amma, had told him firmly that she would not have him "experimenting" with her grandchildren before they reached the blessed seventh month. Aach’chi Amma was a quietly resilient Buddhist, and believed seven to be a lucky number - Prince Sidhartha, four thousand five hundred years before our time, had taken seven steps immediately after his birth, inspiring the earth under each footstep to release a lotus blossom to cushion his newborn feet; he then announced his mission in this world.

On the day that I became seven months of age, my father packed sandwiches and sliced pineapples into a basket, rolled up a palm leaf rug that Aach’chi Amma had woven for the occasion, curled me up in his left arm and set down the hill for the sea shore. Mother, Aach’chi Amma, and my older sister, who was four years old at the time, followed along with towels and a garland of psychedelic orange king coconuts, which could be split open for their sweet water, and scraped for their pudding-like clear meat. The sun was a salmon-fleshed pomegranate; the sea, a mirror of jewels reaching into the sky, melding water and air as if they were molten metals whirling into one. I was liquid in the gauze of saltwater, twisting and curling, surrounded by an animal which moved with my every movement. My fingers clutched it, my dimpled limbs spun in it, and it swallowed me
whole and filled the orifices of my body. I was in the ocean's belly. The water roared, rushing like wind through tunnels of trees, gurgling and chortling as I did, when milk-drunk. I found gills, fanning out to swallow life, opening their gates to iron transporters in my blood; I had fins, sliding me in a gliding sideways song. When I broke surface, sunlight suffused my dilated pupils: yellow, white. Arching my back, joining my feet together, I kicked once, legs rolling, whale-fashion, curling my body back into that womb place of ripples: a mammal gone back to the water from whence it came. My mother says that Thath'tha had to wrestle with my tiny limbs to get me back to the surface. Aach'chi Amma never wanted me to be in the sea again. She named me after the blue water lily, which floats, tranquil, on the surface of fresh water, and opens only for the evening. It was her hope that I would always find my way to the surface, to the kinder light of the moon.

Upon our migration to Southern Africa, I had to content myself with a twenty-five metre chlorinated pool, in which my parents never let me swim alone. When I joined the swim team in the first grade, my parents were happy that I would always be supervised, and be in the company of other children who were nearly as attached to the water as I. By the seventh grade, I was famous as the girl with the gigantic lattisimus dorsals. It made me excessively proud that I had bulging biceps, and that I could beat up anyone's big brother, if they wanted me to. Boys called me "Big Mamma" because I was the tallest girl in our class - a fact at which my friends in college hooted, seeing my now dwarfish 5'1" frame.

Inside the temple rooms, frescos depicting the story of the Lord Buddha's life from birth to death adorned the walls. My favourite mural is the one in which a giant king cobra, realising the Buddha's divinity, coiled itself around his form, and puffed
its hooded neck out in an umbrella above his head to protect him from a passing storm. The Lord meditates, fearless, legs folded in lotus position, right hand placed over the left, palms facing up, eyes closed in enlightened peace. His body is surrounded by the affable cobra, the heart-shaped leaves of the sacred Bo tree dripping raindrops, making tiny pockmarks on the sand.

In the inner rooms, a huge statue of the Bodhisattva in repose stretched out before me. From the tip of the Buddha's curling topknot, coming undone in sleep, to the soles of his henna-painted feet, the statue was over ten metres long. He rests, lengthy-eared, long-eyed, in stylized serenity, his right palm supporting his head, orange robes pleating in soft folds around his body. As I walked from the entrance to the interior, only oil lamps and the glowering tips of incense sticks lit the fragrant room. A thousand dying flowers exuded their perfumes, lining the floor, crushed by the many feet of the morning's visitors.

Setting aside the urn of ashes, and kneeling in front of the Bodhisattva's face, I twisted my waist-length hair high above my head, Prince Sidhartha style, and cut it off as close to the skull as I could with a panga. I saw strands of it fall and mingle with frangipani petals, and a few clumps held on to the folds of the orange robe circling the statue.

I sank back into the flowers, and held my breath, as if I was under water. This was how I had learned to control air in my lungs when I was a swimmer in school, practicing the killer stroke, the butterfly. Even in the bath tub, I would fall back into the bubbles and hold my breath under the water, and blow disjointed bubbles, one by one. When I couldn't take it any more, I would rise to the surface, heaving for air,
spluttering. Holding my breath soon became a way to concentrate and blot out whatever blew in through the door to take away the peace.

When the sadhus from the temple rushed at me, I told them, I want to enter the monastery, I want to enter the monastery. They told me later that I was screaming and slicing my arms with the panga, and that there was blood all over the floor, congealing as it hit the cold black stone, covering the long clumps of hair about my feet. I had cut through the layers of muscle I built up as a swimmer, arrogant in the strength I found during my years in America. The white sari I so carefully kept clean all day was heavy with syrupy crimson liquid.

In the hospital, I had heard one of the poets of the country, singing in his sweet, dark baritone over the radio, and regained consciousness, to see myself taped to the bed, arms swaddled in bandages.

_Thasana vasana thuru_

_Nivan thakina thuru_

_Nali upathinnate_

_Hethu wasana, waywa,_

_Hethu wasana_

He wanted to be born again and again on this island, on this land; to be blessed and free of sin, enough fortune to be with him to be given life, once again, to be born to touch this soil in another life.

I wanted, then, to never be born again, on land or in heaven.

My frantic sisters, who never left my parents out of guilt, dependency, and fear, had begged me to stay with them, saying that after a few months, I would be able to go back to a normal life — possibly come back to live with them. My father
tried to get a court injunction to declare me legally insane, so that I would grow my hair back, and he could put me in long sleeves to hide the scars on my arms. He thought that with all his connections, relatives in high places, and political circles, he could get his way. But in Buddhist Ceylon, they understood that nothing but a monastery would save me. They believed and admired my wants. Besides, the rumours about my father's role in my mother's death had spread around well enough, and not even his money and shameless pandering could have won anyone over. Not over the plain request registered on his pale-skinned daughter's calm, vacuous face, her head shaven to a gleaming nakedness, one grim, bare, scarred arm emerging from the flame-red cloth of her robes.

I chose to go to Nepal, because thirty years ago, before my father was married to my mother, he had visited this very monastery, and would tell me stories of how he felt complete rest during the week he had lived in the mountains. My father always told stories when he wanted to get back in my good graces. Once, he and my mother were fighting; I remember being bored with this not-too-unusual scene of tears, screeching, and hysteria. But just as I was turning to walk away from the kitchen, I saw my father's large, dark hand fly out in a fist. My mother's mouth opened ever so slightly, blood and saliva dribbling out between her already swelling lips. She was silent. I only heard the banging of her body, as it hit furniture, dishes, and glass. My father did not utter one word, one sound. I saw his brow furrowed in concentration, his blue-black curls loose and bouncing, his body lurching back and forth like a boxer, getting every blow in. He followed my mother's fall to the floor, grabbing the cushion on which I sat to reach the mahogany table. He pressed it hard against her face, his open palm forcing it down where her nose would be
underneath. My mother was a wild horse out of breath. Her body buckled and kicked under my father's straddling thighs. I saw her spectacles on the floor, broken into tiny diamond pieces. Picking the hollow frames up, I ran out of the back door, into the woods, where the dark canopy of the coffee and the cashew nut trees welcomed me.

Aach’chi Amma’s coffee plantation, on which I had spent the first few years of my life, was my frequent refuge. At harvest, I ran among the trees, picking the ripe purple berries for drying and roasting, leaving the still green and red berries for the second harvest. Among the berries were star-shaped white blossoms, with whisper-thin stamens spreading out from the centre: coffee-bean flowers. When the rains came, I knew that all the coffee growers waited for the boughs to be covered with those sprays of tiny flowers, showing up brilliant white against the dark emerald of the leaves. But I had learned a trick: if I picked the flower carefully, pulled the sepals off, and extracted the pistil out of the base, I could get a single drop of coffee nectar on the tongue. I perceived that each time I indulged myself by picking a flower, I was hurting the harvest.

I sat on a fallen tree trunk, in a spot where the moon shone through, picking off bits of fungus, fingerling the rubbery forms fanning out like elephant ears from the rotting log, contemplating whether this occasion was special enough for me to hurt the harvest. I made a tiny pile of sticks, and pretended to light a fire - we were in the highlands of Ceylon, and nights were misty and cool sometimes. Hearing the rustle of night animals, and the hoot of an owl, I sang songs for the wood creatures. That was how my father found me, asleep on the soft, loamy floor of the woods, the moonlight filtering in through the leaves of the giant jackfruit tree. He had come
looking for me, trying to get me to return. He sat me on his knee, fingered the curls of twisted knots on my head, and told me about Nepal, where he had been able to lay down by the stream near the monastery, and stroke the soft bellies of mountain trout. Animals were tame, and feared no harm from humans, because no one there ate flesh. He promised to take me there.

My father's charm not withstanding, I had still refused to go back in, so he brought my dinner outside, and pointed out the constellations, and told me the story of a king who had asked all suitors for his daughter's hand to find out the number of stars in the sky. I sat on his knee, frozen-faced, mouth full of unchewed rice and fish curry, wondering what questions my Amma's father, gentle faced, grey-bearded Siya, had asked my father, when he asked for my mother's hand. How can it be, I thought, that during his marriage inquest, no one asked about my father's crushing fists?
CHAPTER 7. LIFE AFTER DEATH

My birthdays come and go without a mention in the monastery. I am discouraged from having possessions; they are temporary, and of the earth. I am told that attachment to the material world is attachment to sin, and a way of ensuring that I will never get out of the endless cycle of birth and rebirth. I have always known this, even from childhood. But I am now suddenly afraid to achieve Nirvana, the end of suffering, the end of rebirth, where there is nothing. Although it is nearly impossible for me to even hope for Nirvana now, I am afraid of it anyway. I want to live - I want to return to this world, be surrounded by the senses, and whirl through life after life. I long now, on my bad days, to see the gargantuan curls of Starry Night, the wash of blues and violets so dark that they seem to be black, the yellow of the lights in the valley below, the psychotic rambling of the brilliant white Milky Way above.

I want to wander in the village in the valley, step through dark alleyways in bazaars haggling for paper cones of spices for food, mull over purchasing earrings of cloves, tiny bombs packed with sharpness to crush in my mouth for sweet breath. I long to strew cinnamon over my body, smell like a spice-picker's lover, make a village man's home heady with the licorice sting of star anise. I picture the embroidered gold, and tiny, opalescent pearls on my mother's wedding silk; I covet a husband, the nights of curling limbs and twisted torsos. I hear Maria Callas' arias in the mountains, sending down showers of shaved ice in revenge for Tosca, and I think of jumping over the balconies of the monastery. But I am hardly ever alone, so I cannot, even if I ever have courage to.
When I creep out into the mountain meadows at night, this is the only time I can feel a semblance of solitude. It is the only thing I allow myself to own, to make mine. I spread my arms and body on the grass and wildflowers, wade into the stream, toes, ankles, calves, and oh, burning ice, burning skin, my pubis and navel, finally, my nipples, hard and brown like small currants from the cold, into the melting snowy water. It is ecstasy, it is glorious rapture. I am screaming for mercy and more cold. The monastery is far away, and I hear Jimi Hendrix’s guitar throwing a marathon of notes into the sky, and Billie Holiday’s heroin-tortured peal of joy. I am holding hands at midnight, I am kissing the sky, the water, and earth, I am touching my breasts, fingers in my vagina, sucking the juices off my nails and fingertips, red lolly, yellow lorry, tasting myself, silk and tang, butterscotch and lemon drop, rolling on a swollen orgasm. I am feeling, and alive, and wanting another life.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Palihawadena Aratchige Manori Neelika Jayawardane was born on the 16th of October, 1971 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. She began her primary education in Sri Lanka, and completed secondary school in Kitwe, Zambia. In the autumn of 1996, she received the Bachelor of Arts in English from Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa, and was later accepted into the Master's programme in English, with a specialization in Creative Writing at the same institution. She was awarded the Freda Hunke Award from the ISU Department of English in the spring of 1996, two consecutive Focus Grants, the Pearl Hogrefe Fellowship in 1997, and some other rather dubious honours, such as the Student Affairs Human Relations Award. Ms. Jayawardane is the President of Student Union Board, an active member of the ISU Lectures Committee, and was initiated into the academic honour society, Phi Kappa Phi, during her last semester as a graduate student at Iowa State University. She works odd jobs to support her writing habit.