The World in a Suitcase:
A Collection of Short Fiction

Creative Thesis Analysis
by
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Honors Thesis
*************************
PASS WITH DISTINCTION
TO THE UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE:

As thesis advisor for Jared Brickman,

I have read this paper and find it satisfactory.

[Signature]
Thesis Advisor

10-21-2011 Date
Précis

College students consistently rank study abroad experiences as valuable and inspiring. The collection of short fiction “The World in a Suitcase” is a product of this inspiration. This creative project contains twelve selections of short fiction, one from each country I visited on my study abroad in fall semester of 2010 with the program Semester at Sea. Additionally, a nonfiction prologue and epilogue serve to place the stories in context and give my perspective on the adventure as a whole.

This essay analyzes “The World in a Suitcase,” and how the stories inside illustrate a connectedness between the importance of setting and theme. While placing a story in Ghana or Japan creates distinctive visual details, the humanity of universal struggle or relief remains similar. One does not escape human problems by simply crossing a border. The aim of the collection is to ask readers to consider this balance of place and humanity.

The collection stands within a specific genre of writing: the short story. Many authors from around the globe have tackled this nuanced form of fiction. Borrowing from this wealth of knowledge helped me to form the stories in the collection, especially pieces by authors from the countries written about. Research also included general advice and instruction from books on writing and craft.

Writing of “The World in a Suitcase” began on the Semester at Sea voyage itself, and continued through the spring and summer of 2011 with editing taking place both concurrently and in the fall of 2011. Specific times for writing were not set due to my writing preferences, though deadlines were self-imposed. Reading other authors’ selections of short fiction and meditating on place and theme occurred between actual stretches of writing.

In addition to adhering to the academic framework exploring setting and theme, each story carried some commentary on a world issue. Everything from stifling the creativity of
children, to environmental concerns, and the human cost of war is touched upon in the collection. This mix of content creates a global connection beyond the simple concept of travelling the world.

Overall, I hope to inspire and excite readers with “The World in a Suitcase.” My goal is to preserve and share my memories of a journey within the context of unique places that still bear universal humanity. The ultimate culmination will be to publish the collection. Whatever the case, it must stand within the genre of short fiction as a worthwhile addition with an interesting concept.

Please enjoy the collection, as well as this piece of analysis for what it is: a glimpse into my experiences and mind; a glimpse of the world in my suitcase.
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Introduction to Short Fiction and the Creative Project

Storytelling connects humans around the world in a fascinating way. Very early in human history, oral tradition began explicating and dramatizing the occurrences of life, forming a bond between a storyteller and his or her audience. With the advent of written language, these storytellers became writers. A more recent occurrence is the resurgence of short fiction in the literary world. But every language and culture has developed a unique way of shaping their world through writing. Simultaneously, the themes existing in fiction transcend the differences of most people in a global context.

From the magical chalk of Japan’s Kobo Abe, to the African representation of manhood purported by Chinua Achebe, and the dry humor of living as a modern American Indian like Sherman Alexie, short fiction has attempted to explain the human experience. There is the interesting dichotomy of the innate importance of place, complimented by the thematic issues that transcend a country’s borders. The relationship is comparable to the concept of yin and yang: two parts creating a whole. In short, a setting is the pivotal backdrop of a story, but what is said about humanity within that place is also of interest to an author or reader. This can be tackled through a collaboration of both realms of thought, welding a need for place with the humanity of togetherness. But what sets apart the short story as an art form?

Some view writing short fiction as an easy way out compared to the volume of writing a novel requires. On the contrary, literary technique becomes paramount in short stories due to the issue of brevity. Former American author and fiction writer Rust Hill explains that “The story writer won’t use any of the aspects of fiction technique loosely, the way a novelist does. In a story, everything’s bound together tightly” (Hill, 3). As such, the genre takes more discipline,
though comparably less time, than crafting a novel. This means the focus can be on showing the world, rather than filling up pages.

Within short fiction, one tends to focus less on some elaborate plot, and more specifically on one driving moment or image. Broad storylines reaching thousands of pages catalogue an entire life or history. Short fiction takes a few dynamic points of a life and pulls them to the forefront. The events of a short story are those that change a life dramatically. This could be as simple as a daily routine interrupted. Readers are given a glimpse and then shut out again so they can reflect on what the short moment means contextually.

Why would anyone choose to write short fiction? The answer returns to the history of telling stories. Author Steve Almond claims he writes short fiction “because I believe the short story is the purest form of what we commonly refer to as storytelling, by which I mean the most intuitive, satisfying, and elegant of our narrative possibilities” (Almond, ¶ 1). There is an innate power in short fiction to take a place and theme and forget about the bonds of a lengthy plot.

So what does a writer of short fiction focus on? More specifically, how do they balance characters, setting, and plot in a way that might capture the reader while exposing an absolute human truth? Two options arise for anyone writing within the context of a specific culture. They can write from within the culture looking out, or from the outside scrutinizing the culture within.

A writer’s own country becomes a pivotal starting point. This is where they learned to write and how to think. Culture and education separate a vast majority of literary minds. There needs to be some context for the story beyond being on earth. Is the reader exploring the urban heat of Mahasweta Devi i’s India or the rural upheaval of Africa shown by Ngugi wa Thiong’o? Here, the concept of place becomes paramount for the reader’s understanding. However, these two authors are concerned with a similar issue of the fervor of globalization and the loss of a
cultural identity. From this perspective, location means little. Both stories can provide an understanding of the issue. Readers can feel this thematic pressure no matter the actual setting of the story. What results is an amalgamation of the two concepts. Authors fill a specific backdrop with universal themes. Place and theme work together for an author in conveying a complete message to the audience. A complete yin-yang.

To understand the literary process and the identity of place juxtaposed with universality in thematic issues, I wrote a collection of short fiction framed by my travels abroad on Semester at Sea. Each country I visited is represented in a story which showcases the individual nature of a particular culture compared against a global human issue or theme prevalent in a universal context. There are twelve stories in all, as well as an introduction to the literature, and an epilogue wherein I reflect on my journey.

**The Writing Goal**

During the fall semester of 2010, I left the rolling wheat fields of Eastern Washington for a study abroad program called Semester at Sea. Joined by hundreds of students from around the country and the world, I embarked on a journey that circumnavigated the globe in just over one hundred days. The ship stopped in fifteen ports along the way in twelve different countries. The experience changed my outlook on global citizenship, and shaped my future teaching goals to include stints abroad.

While aboard the M.V. Explorer, the floating classroom that brought me around the world, I attended a class on short fiction. The concept of the class stood out. The literature we read and analyzed came straight from the countries we visited. The class culminated in writing our own stories, influenced by our travels.
Once home, I wondered how I could retain the memories of so many countries and experiences. A journal with several entries offered a realistic look at my own adventures; however, the feel of the countries and people were missing. So entered the creative thesis project of writing a story about each country I visited.

The overarching goal of this collection is to provide a glimpse of each country through the eyes of an outside observer. Moreover, I wish to present a relationship between the importance of place complimenting the universality of humanity. In effect, a story must be grounded in a particular setting that is pivotal in plot and imagery. However, the human themes of struggle and growth, love and hatred, can be portrayed anywhere. One does not lose a sense of humanity by simply crossing a border. For example, there are instances of confusion concerning sexuality in two of the stories from the collection. While India and Spain provided very different backdrops, this same theme persisted. Shows of manhood and dominance appear on both Table Mountain of South Africa and Lantau of China in the collection.

From my writing, I hope to show this duality of place coexisting with themes prevalent universally. Another goal of the collection is to discuss or criticize current global problems and policy. An in-depth analysis of this is provided in the "Thematic Review" section. In short, there are many hypocrisies I wish to expose with this writing, albeit subtly. Simply creating interest or thought on the subjects involved would prove the collection a success of my own goals.

Finally, the lasting goal for this collection is its inclusion in the realm of short fiction. By that, I mean for it to stand as a worthwhile piece of literature alongside and compared to other works. Author and poet Raymond Carver said "Every great or even every very good writer makes the world over according to his own specifications" (Carver, 32). I hope to have achieved this. The
collection must find a place in the history and prevalence of work in short fiction measured by the comparative writing of past and current authors.

**Influences and Comparisons**

Most writers draw much of their style and inspiration from the influence of authors who told a particularly poignant story. It would be remiss not to analyze at least some of these contributors in relation to my collection of work. Each writer I looked to for inspiration added some framework for the understanding of place or theme, and the juxtaposition of the two as major facets of stories. Also, simple convention and discipline techniques pass from one author to the next, and I attempted to take advantage of any type of lesson learned from reading selections of short fiction.

The audience understanding the plight of each character in a story is pivotal in creating a connection with the reader. To explore the intricacies of characterization I read a number of pieces from African author Chinua Achebe. Well known for his novel *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe balances manhood with powerlessness in many of his stories. The encroachment of modernity on custom and the bureaucracy of new government policies such as “egg-rashers” in “Civil Peace” are prevailing themes in Achebe’s work (Achebe, 4). I tried to capture this feel with my own look at attempted democracy in “The Brown Grass,” and took the characterization of the manly yet helpless in “Sinking.”

While trying to create a truly captivating sense of place, the work of Beryl Markham stands out as a strong influence on my fiction. Focused on the landscape of Africa, often told from flying above the savannah, Markham paints scenery with words. An interesting concept of hers that carried through to my work is the concept of traces of humanity in a landscape. In her story “The Stamp of the Wilderness,” Markham makes the presence of humans felt with the
appearance of smoke in a tight column. She calls it a kind of human footprint, or “matchstick in
the sand” (Markham, 37). I tried to bring out the same sort of identification for humanity in my
own writing, such as traffic, pollution, or noise, since the settings of most of my stories were
urban. This connection between place and humanity plays perfectly into the academic
framework of the collection.

Because of the nature of the collection, cultural norms and attitudes played a major role
in the exposition and actions of character. While American Indians did not play a role in my
own writing, their spirit portrayed by Sherman Alexie influenced some of my own
representations of cultures. The wry humor and stark realities presented in the adventures of
Victor and others on a reservation in Spokane showcase the flashes of dissent with a cultural
identity. Meanwhile, that very dissent is opposed by a hatred of the dissolving traditions in the
reservation. This internal struggle transferred to some of my own work, though I attempted to be
gentler with sarcasm and pessimism.

A bold contrast to the realism of Alexie is the fantasy of Kobo Abe’s “The Magical
Chalk.” Often compared to the likes of Kafka or Ionesca (Solomon, 315), Abe creates skewed
realities to present engaging plotlines and thoughtful thematic choices. In the story of the chalk,
a man finds his fantasies come true by simply drawing what he desires. Sadly, he fails to control
his own creations, and is ultimately faced with the complexity of sheer creation. “He had to
draw the whole world all over again. Discouraged, Argon collapsed onto the bed” (Abe, 324).
This creative dilemma shadows my own pieces “Fading Dreams” and “At the Cost of Creativity.”
Interestingly, it also follows the struggle an author has when creating everything from nothing.
Like the man with the chalk, writers must create the world over again in the minds of readers,
making the story an excellent allegory to writing.
To further explore how similar themes can permeate stories of two very different, yet meaningful, settings, I looked at the work of Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Mahasweta Devi. In Thiong’o’s story “A Meeting in the Dark,” a teenage boy primed to leave the rural villages of Africa for a proper education is faced with the dilemma of fathering a child. The pressures get the best of him until he kills his girlfriend in a spate of anger, and realizes that “Soon, everyone will know that he has created and then killed” (Thiong’o, 110). In Devi’s selection “Dhwoli,” a woman is raped and carries the child of a man who is in a higher cast. The same public shame overtakes her as does the boy in Thiong’o’s piece. Also, creeping modernity has taken hold of both places, threatening a cultural ideal and way of living. Some characters embrace this, while others reject it vehemently. Ultimately, while the two stories take place halfway around the world from each other, the human struggles mirror and compliment. My own story from Ghana, “The Brown Grass” takes a cue from this comparison, as the modern Vodaphone takes over shacks in Takoradi. A woman who is used by the men of the town attempts to make changes, but is shamed into obscurity. The parallels shape a combined human experience I wish to convey with the collection.

Overall, I took thematic and craft direction from a number of the stories I read. However, there are marked differences in some realms. For one, my stories stick to a shorter form than some of the past works, such as Yukio Mishima’s fifty-three page “Act of Worship.” Also, I wrote a few stories from the perspective of a visitor to a culture, something I never ran into when reading other short fiction. Finally, I toned back much of my dialogue in any piece where I felt I did not have a perfect grasp on speech mechanics, something the native writers easily portray from experience.
Writing Methodology

The method for writing short fiction varies drastically from author to author. As such, my strategies for creating the stories in the collection differ from many of the authors discussed in the last section.

Creating and analyzing my short fiction involved five concurrent processes. This methodology allowed for creative exploration within the genre of short fiction, while supplementing my knowledge of writers and craft. The five concurrent stages were: the actual writing of short fiction, preparation and journaling of creative thoughts, analysis of the craft of writing short fiction, reading other short fiction pieces, and editing.

The bulk of the creative work occurred while writing the actual pieces of short fiction. The ideas in the stories pulled from my experiences abroad and any creative thoughts during the other methodology, such as a thematic thought borrowed from another piece of fiction or an image in everyday life. Writing occurred primarily during times of creative thought, not forced by deadlines or structured scheduled writes. This indicates one of my own preferences not always associated with the traditional writing discipline. However, as Author Damon Knight points out, “you must learn to write your own way, or you can never learn at all” (Knight, 9).

To supplement the stories, I reflected on image and place and copied this down in a notebook. This is not so much journaling as it is the short thoughts of everyday life and a brief captured image. Other preparations for writing included research on language and mannerisms to add realism to the pieces. This encompassed my experiences as well as documented linguistics and customs of the region being written about.

Short fiction is undoubtedly different from other forms of writing. As such, I considered advice from several sources that taught the genre. This included books on writing such as Hills’
Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular: An Informal Textbook, and analysis of the short fiction of authors like Isaac Babel and Ha Jin. I focused on how these authors balanced place and theme. Basic storytelling rounded out the analysis.

Understanding the form of short fiction would be impossible without gleaning ideas from past writers. During the project I read a number of short stories from a wide array of authors. These authors were chosen based on their importance to the genre, as well as how they utilize place and theme in a larger context. Authors from the regions I am writing about were of particular interest. My findings are included in the previous section “Influences and Comparisons.”

Finally, a vast majority of my time was spent editing my pieces of fiction. This involved several drafts styled in accordance to suggestions from Professor Goodrich as well as my own tastes. General grammatical and typographical editing took place after each new draft as well. Often the editing process spanned a great deal of time, as reflecting on a piece was difficult too soon after its first creation.

Ultimately these five stages of work allowed for a complete and polished product of fiction.

Thematic Review

The culmination of the creative work rests largely in the thematic content of the stories. Each country presents a particular issue and theme relevant to their society, as I saw it, but also to the world as a whole. This global perspective with a flair for place fell neatly into the academic framework of the project. More importantly, each story stands alone in its telling of a purported human truth.
An enduring theme of the collection begins in the introduction with the idea of packing the world into a suitcase. In effect, people see the world based on the physical objects they can return to. Sometimes these items represent a holistic memory, whereas a picture may not conjure up the same recollection of smell or sound. As such, each story has images and objects that represent the overarching theme. Coral in the story of Mauritius or soap from Morocco spell out the issues of conservation and trust, respectively. Of course, this long form metaphor of the suitcase is the basis of the title of the collection.

In addition to the thematic choices of the collection, I also focused on current issues I see prevalent in the United States, presented around the world in caricature. I find the ideas behind standardized testing to be deplorable on student creativity and true learning. Because of the heavy impact of grade rankings and testing in Japan, I utilized the story “Fractured English” to comment on the failings of this educational standard. In addition, keeping in tradition with many African authors such as Achebe and Mohammed Naseehu Ali in his story “The Manhood Test,” my story from South Africa, “Sinking,” features a struggle with gender identity and what it means to be a real man. Other pieces of the collection have similar subtle satire in my aim to show universality in theme, despite the variation of setting.

**Lessons from the Project and Future Steps**

Many obstacles face a writer on the precipice of creation. What haunts many is the sheer multiplicity of options presented by fiction. The ability to create virtually anything overloads the mind with ideas. I faced this challenge on several occasions, compounded with the restrictions of writing about every country. I wanted to represent the region in so many ways; a single story hardly scratched the surface of what is there. The amount of inspiration and material afforded to
me by the project actually became an obstacle at times simply because I was anxious to include as much as possible.

Another roadblock presented itself when choosing the descriptors for various countries. Small details became pivotal. A sign in Ghana differs from a sign in China, but how? Both are bold and blunt in what they say. But the former is attached to a rusted pole rising above shacks, and the latter is emblazoned along a glass skyscraper. These distinctions did not always come easy, and distinguishing the heat of Singapore from the heat of Morocco became an obstacle in the creative process.

A final issue with the project arose from the academic framework and how I could incorporate the details of place while preserving universal themes sufficiently. Assuring the reader an accurate feel for each country, coupled with a thematic consideration, proved difficult at times. This often resolved itself once the story developed, but the initial concept often held me back from writing until I was faced with some storyline epiphany. Ultimately, I learned this method is not always particularly forgiving and caused a lot of stress.

Of course, struggles lead to the maturation of any art form. While I found some aspects of the project difficult, I ultimately enjoyed the process and took away a lot of valuable information regarding myself as an author, as well as the discipline of writing. My previous love of overbearing dialogue disappeared, imagery taking its place. Subtlety became paramount over my past preference of spelling out everything for an audience. I felt my writing improved, but more importantly, my confidence in telling stories and tackling complex issues with a literary critique blossomed.

Author James Best once pointed out the most surprising thing about writing is "How it's never done. When I think I've got it just right, I print it out and find all kinds of things to change. I relate writing to restoring an antique car. There's always another nook or cranny that needs to
be polished" (Fascinating Authors). I would agree, and this collection will continue to change until I have exactly what I want. This will include revisions, edits, and complete overhauls.

However, the real challenge is getting the final product out to those who might be interested. Self-publishing through a company like Createspace is one option for the collection. But simply having a book to hold is not the ultimate goal. My next step is to find publishers of literary magazines and send individual selections of my work to them. From there, the collection may have a greater chance of being picked up in a very competitive market. This thesis process may also open doors for interested readers.

**Conclusion**

Short fiction has power. Some of this force comes from place and theme. Neither takes immediate precedence over the other. This collection stands as commentary on the importance of both facets. The premise of the stories hinges on the physical place described, yet the challenges and issues faced by the characters could happen anywhere. This balancing act is part of the craft of telling stories, and causes readers to think beyond the text.

It is presumptuous to assume the quality of a creative work. What stands out as a spectacular piece to one person may be dry or boring to another. As such, I wish to conclude not with accolades to myself, or even an attempt at rating my writing. Instead, I wish to discuss the implications of the writing.

The inclusion of so many places in one collection has decided implications on a reader. What is quickly perceived must be the similarity seen in the struggles of the characters. This is where the universality of theme becomes prevalent. This collection was written, in part, to show the interconnectedness of a global community. Countries cannot separate themselves from this
new universal consciousness. While customs and traditions set us apart, modernity is closing the gap aggressively.

Also, I hope to impart a sense of adventure to readers of this creative project. Very few authors explore the reaches of so many cultures all in one anthology. Anyone interested in travel writing, narrative explorations of exciting and strange culture, or a simple story of human will should find the collection worth their time. Writers catalogue the intrinsic qualities of living in a specific context, and I wish to add to that collective knowledge base. Simply put, this collection is my world in a suitcase. This is what I brought home.
Works Cited


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**Extended Reading List**

The following is a list of short fiction not analyzed in this piece, but which helped shape my own understanding of the craft.


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The World in a Suitcase

A Collection of Short Fiction

By Jared Brickman
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Acknowledgments

My parents sent me around the world. It is impossible to thank them enough for their perpetual love and support in everything I do. These crazy dreams are for them.

Traveling the world would have been lonely and boring without the bonds that grew onboard the MV Explorer. My SAS friends will always play a special role in my life, and inspired this collection.

Stephen Cushman opened my eyes to short fiction. His class on Semester at Sea validated the notion that an open discussion of literature far exceeds any drawn-out lecture.

And lastly, I must thank professors Burwick and Goodrich for editing these stories, and taking me from rough fiction to something I can be extremely proud of.
Everyone knew Archbishop Desmond Tutu was aboard the ship. He seemed so small, barely peeking over the podium with a flashing smile and a distinctive laugh. "Dream," he said, just as the ship rolled over its inaugural waves. The student union on the M.V. Explorer shook from the turning of the ocean, almost as if the room was waiting for our distinguished guest to speak again. The shaking mirrored the excited sentiment of seven hundred students packed into the room, seated or standing in any conceivable open space. "Dream the craziest dreams and never stop."

This was my introduction to Semester at Sea. The program took me around the world in one hundred and nine days to twelve countries, four continents and three oceans. In addition, I received college credit, taking classes from renowned faculty who apply over a year in advance for every voyage.

At the end of the voyage I faced a seemingly trivial matter: repacking. Clothes were easy; I just put those back where I had originally packed them. Then the real dilemma began. I spread out everything else onto my familiar bed, a foot too short for me to stretch out in with a swirling blue comforter and made every day by my amazing cabin steward Renee. How do you pack the world into a suitcase?

Will I lose the tiny metal hands with the blue gems I bought in Morocco? Can I put the lizard made from a used oil drum in South Africa next to the fragile doll my Indian host mother gave me? Should I fold over the elaborate tapestry a Vietnamese man made for me from a picture I had found online? The decisions I made reminded me that the past four months were real. Memories are as fragile as the Indian doll with her coy smile and flowing skirt of red and yellow. Once they are lost, they can only return as a smudged reproduction, an altered reality influenced by feelings and failings of the mind. The moment I zipped up my last curio was the moment I realized the voyage was actually coming to an end.
So what memories are worth preserving? Are they the sensational stories of me surviving terrifying rope bridges at Kakum National Forest in Ghana, or tempting death in an Indian auto rickshaw? Or should it be of the woman in Ghana who sold me bitter, unsweetened cocoa for less than a dollar, calling me an Obruni, or outsider, with the widest smile I have ever seen? Should I focus on preserving the memory of the principal I met in South Africa who wakes up every day and puts on a shirt and tie knowing funding for his school may not come today, or tomorrow, or any day this year?

Sadly, that last memory reminds me how powerful money can be. Nearly every day my Global Studies professor reminded us that more than half the population of the world lives on fewer than two dollars a day. That meant each voyager’s tuition and board could support fifteen thousand people for a day.

I cannot thank Semester at Sea for everything it gave me without first thanking my parents, whose generosity is only outweighed by their cravings for photographs from my journey. In a way, those photographs serve as memories, but still lack the movement and feeling of a moment.

One moment no picture could explain happened in Morocco, a predominantly Muslim country. It happened to be September 11th. This was just days after the scandal involving some nut job wanting to burn Qurans in Florida. A Moroccan man accosted me, demanding to know if I was American. We were standing in the maze of shops and restaurants brought out during the night in the medina of Marrakesh. Trapped. I nodded, ready to duck into a store or find a friend lest anything happen. But instead of a spate of hatred or fire, the man looked at me with eyes of understanding. He said, in near perfect English, “You know, we are all one people.” He left on that, moving into a murmuring crowd that suddenly felt so much more inviting. So I am taking his words and making them my own. We are all one people.

Memories such as that do not fit into a picture, so I write them down. This collection is the product of that. While I will tell some of my own stories, I am more concerned with taking what I saw
and telling the stories of others. I am not recounting memories of actions, but rather people and feelings. It would be easy to tell everyone the story of my journey to Lantau in China, but there would be no purpose to it other than filling people in on my life, which I have already done. Instead, I will tell a fictional story created around a person I saw who was climbing the thousands of steps through the yellow and brown underbrush on the hillside in Lantau while I sat comfortably in a sky tram.

In the sky tram with me was my friend Brian, a couple from Australia, and a man from China. I noticed how each and every one of us reacted in awe to seeing the person on the steps. That person was more interesting than us at that moment. That person was more interesting than any picture I took that day. Why? Because they were an outlier. They challenged what we thought of as sane or possible. And yet, they were human just like the five of us in the sky tram, inching its way up the mountain.

That is what I wish to focus on in this collection. No matter the place, human beings are interesting. We do irrational things, we think crazy thoughts, and we challenge the status quo. I think that is what Desmond Tutu meant in his speech in that stuffy student union with the terribly uncomfortable red chairs. The world will not change without a little uprising from those who dream beyond the sky tram.

My journey began in Portland, Oregon. There's a sculpture there: a giant bronze face outside of what used to be PGE Park. I met my friend Kelly there, a meeting which served as the last memory of my old life. That familiar façade melted away in a matter of days and was completely gone after four months. When everything was done, I had been to Canada, Spain, Morocco, Ghana, South Africa, Mauritius, India, Singapore, Vietnam, China, Japan, and Hawaii. This collection explores each location in a piece of short fiction. It contains stories concerning issues that transcend the borders of countries, framed within the conscious of a culture I only caught a glimpse of. Take it as it is. This is simply the every day, bundled and shaped into a small world.

My small world tucked into a suitcase. My crazy dream.
"Public transportation is a wonder of human planning. That is, until people get on board. The rather plain signs and easily understood routes seem to confound the most reasonable of people. The sheer vastness of options, stops at every block, simply adds to the chaos. People get on the Max, then hop off on the next stop... literally two blocks away." ~ Portland, Oregon. August 24th.

“What really interested me was the juxtaposition between the historic and modern in Halifax. One of the oldest churches in the city is in the shadow of a huge glass skyscraper. Most of the area we explored was in the older district of the city, but even this was dotted with modern additions on every few blocks.” ~ Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. August 26th.

“Humans are peculiar. Put us on a boat together and every little thing is something to celebrate. We cheered (and I say “we” as in the people on the ship; I politely clapped) when the first tether disappeared from the boat. We cheered when all the tethers fell away. We cheered when the boat started to move. We cheered when we were in position to finally pull away from shore. We cheered when we left. We cheered when we hit the open ocean. We cheered when we sighted our first whale. We cheered when we saw the sunset. I would half expect us to cheer if pirates arrived to take us hostage…” ~ Onboard the MV Explorer crossing the Atlantic Ocean. August 28th.
"This is why I hate Americans. The guy ahead of me (I’m not sure if he was SAS or not) didn’t attempt any Spanish. He simply started yelling at the lady who would soon yell at me. ‘What’s wrong with this (f'ing) place? There’s no organization, it took me half an hour to get through the line! I was in England a month ago and this never happened. This is (f'ing) pathetic.’ How much of this the woman understood I’m not sure. But another man came over to calm down my fellow American. He ended up getting a ticket to Madrid, which he exclaimed was “way overpriced” and then pushed his way into the terminal area. Hooray America.” ~ Cadiz, Spain. September 5th.

Modernity is simultaneously the savior of the Western World’s economy, and the murderer of its vulnerable culture.
Coffee Grounds

Puddles collected in the dips of uneven concrete in the parking lot. Angela heard the drumming of larger drops as water skidded down her windshield. Waiting for her father was a nerve-wracking affair. The folder of papers in her lap stood out to her as some sort of betrayal. Just as she looked again to make out the door across the street, a biker in bright yellow streaked across her path, weaving in the rain as if the side to side movement would somehow avoid the pelting drops. Portland was full of these yellow beacons, taunting modernity to collapse in on them.

In fact, Angela was in her van in the parking lot, soon to be a lake, because modernity was waiting for no one, her father Harold included. Andromeda Incorporated kept bringing in her father for offers to buy the old house she grew up in. A house she despised. But it was in a good location, and companies with giant towers of tinted glass needed to expand faster than the water spreading out over the concrete.

Inside the building, lines flooded across Harold’s brow. The stack of paper shook in his hands as he brought it closer and closer to his face. Fonts blurred, creating a sea of helplessness for a man who only read books with the large print font. He hated checking those books out. The librarian thought he was old. He just knew she laughed at him behind his back. The booming voice scared him back to reality.

“How do the new terms look, Mr. Graves?” Mr. Blue Suit taunted him. Harold’s eyes darted up and down as if to indicate he was checking all the details of the contract thoroughly. He pointed his finger at one random line and drew it across with a slight nod of the head, then looked up.

“Nope. Won’t do. Will not do.” Harold shoved the document back to Mr. Blue Suit, folding it against his outreached arms. Mr. Blue Suit’s shoulders drooped and he sighed.
“What is it this time?” The little conference room seemed to shrink for Harold with every question. A pitcher of water sat on a corner table adjacent to the desk they were both sitting at. Harold grasped at it like he could dive into the moisture and escape the onslaught.

“We raised the price well above what the property is worth. There’s no reason for you to stay. You could buy any home in your daughter’s neighborhood.”

“I’m not selling,” Harold sprang up, knocking the pitcher to the floor, contents seeping into the carpet. Mr. Blue Suit wouldn’t let him leave. He kept saying things about his daughter and the neighborhoods.

There were no windows. The room reminded Harold of his old days working in the stock room at Rosauer’s, throwing fifty pound bags of potatoes on carts and trucks and pallets. The only light he ever saw at work was a bare, flickering bulb, which would cover him in a faded brownish glow. He snapped back to reality as he reached the door, slamming on it with his hand.

“You’re free to leave, Mr. Graves. I’ll keep you updated as usual. Just know that Andromeda Inc. is ready and willing to buy your property at twice the market price.” Mr. Blue Suit put the document in a briefcase and walked toward Harold. The old man put his hand on the door again, almost clawing at it like a caged animal. “Harold. You can go.”

“Well, yes... umm...” Harold trailed off, his eyes glazed over with a hint of sadness in them. His hands searched the surface frantically to no avail. Mr. Blue Suit opened the door and stepped out first. Harold looked at the handle sheepishly, put his hand on his head and followed outside. Mr. Blue Suit led him down the maze of hallways to the lobby and showed him the exit.

Fresh air and stinging droplets hit him almost instantly. Angela crossed the street to meet him, her arms wide. She wrapped her arms around his body, huddling him against the cold air and wetness that broke straight through his old knit sweater. Another biker zipped by, the sound of rubber on wet pavement ripping its way up the street and off to the nearest café or gallery. As soon as they found
refuge back in the van, Angela turned to him, her mother’s eyes staring at him with a mix of accusation and concern.

"Dad, what did they say? Are they giving you a better price?" Harold’s mind melted around the windshield wipers, spreading back and forth in even tones.

"What?" Harold looked up at her with a dazed expression. The corners of his mouth turned up slightly, and then dipped to a stark frown. His indignant attitude returned like the flash of sun that spread through clouds on a rainy day. "I’m not going anywhere. I built that house with my father and I’m not selling it. That’s final." A few more brushes of the wipers broke up the pools of water lingering to watch the drama unfold. Angela grabbed the folder she had left on the dashboard and tossed it to the back seat.

"Dad, you can’t go on living there for the winter. The heater doesn’t work right and the house is falling to pieces. You don’t even have food in the cupboards." Angela’s last visit had consisted of an embittered jaunt to the grocery store, ending in Harold insisting on only coffee and bread.

"I have food. What do you think I am, some sort of... invalid?" Harold finished his tirade with a flourish, releasing himself from Angela’s gaze. He looked back and tapped his foot on the van’s little floor mat. There was too much of her mother in her, he thought. It was the eyes, definitely the eyes, with their dark pits he could fall into. She blamed him for everything behind his back, he just knew it.

"Let’s go then," Angela sighed. She put the van into gear and watched as Harold glazed over. She imagined him playing out the days in his head, some sort of dream land he could escape to when things became difficult. Then there were the constant accidents. Angela worried he was having more troubles with his eyesight.

Car rides tended to be exhausting for Harold. There was too much stimulus. He peered out the window to see the school children running around in their jackets, stomping in puddles with soaked leaves sticking to their boots. He liked children. They always knew how to have fun and never talked.
behind his back. They were honest and straightforward, not like everyone else. The gaggle of kids brought Harold back to the days when his children were young, waiting at the door for him when he got home from work. They would dance around at his legs, grabbing at his sweat-stained shirt and yell about their adventures in life. Adventures he always dreamed about while he stacked the potatoes and strained his back in the uneven light.

“Dad, are you okay?” Harold jumped a bit and looked over at her. “Your legs were shaking again.” There was a long pause as they rolled to a stop. As if waiting for the red light to disappear and the haze of green to flood his brain, Harold sat patiently. The image of his children in the days where he was a hero and could do no wrong always made him twice as thoughtful.

“I was just remembering when you kids would dance around when I got home,” Harold said with a warm smile. Angela’s face became hard for a second. The blur Harold could see meant he never picked up on the strained look in her eyes, the flush of exasperation creeping across her cheeks. She knew the truth. Angela could no better remember dancing around her father as he got home as she could her mother ever saying a single swear word. Telling him the truth now would just change the status quo. She was the only one who hadn’t given up.

“Yes, that was nice.” She turned her attention back to the road while Harold fiddled with his sweater. Who gave him this awful sweater, he wondered. It had no redeemable qualities, seeing as it wasn’t warm or attractive. Probably, he thought, his wife gave it to him. She had always tried to make him sick so she could outlive him and sell the house.

“Ha, I sure did win that one!” His face melted as he realized he had said it out loud. He glanced over at Angela who seemed to ignore his outbursts. Maybe she didn’t hear him, he thought. That pleased him. He didn’t want his favorite daughter to hate him like all the others. Ever since the funeral they hated him. They never visited him. He just knew they all said terrible things about him behind his back. Everyone wanted him gone now.
Except Angela.

Angela pulled the van up to the little house in the shadow of Jeld-Wen Field. Harold remembered the day they started construction on the baseball field, originally called Multnomah Stadium. At first he had seen it as a blessing. He dreamt of taking his two boys to the games on weekends. Then he realized his whole house would be engulfed by its presence. The games were too expensive anyway. His choices were coffee in the morning or a baseball game. Coffee always prevailed.

There was, however, a day where he took the whole family to Multnomah Stadium for a game. It came after his only promotion in his career at Rosauer's. He had become the stock room manager in 1953. He brought all of them: the two boys, all three girls, and even his ungrateful wife. The seats had been pretty far back, but Harold didn't mind. They all ate peanuts and his oldest boy Eric even called over the usher and made the payment. Harold was proud of how the boy had simply run over with the wad of cash in his hand. All the other spectators saw his boy. They saw all that cash. Envy. They all wanted his money and his perfect family, he knew it.

"Remember that game we..." Harold trailed off as he realized he was already alone. The van was creeping down the road. Harold hated it when he missed the goodbye. That happened a lot lately. He would be with Angela one minute, and dreaming the next. Then she would be gone. He wondered if she really said goodbye or just left when she saw him shut down. The former is what he always imagined. There was little else he had.

The residence of Harold Graves was nestled between the Portland Towers and a European diner in a Victorian cottage called Plainfield's. Just off of Burnside, it was prime real estate. Prime, but overgrown with choking vines and marshy piles of mud and leaves. A black iron gate leaned into the property, drooping more with every year, as if it was mirroring Harold in some cosmic expression of loyalty.
Harold and his father built the ranch style home when Harold was only thirteen. He hobbled onto the old porch, remembering how he had built it all on his own. His father was so proud of him. The bright new birch with thick white paint was vivid in his mind. It always confused him a little when he saw the cracks in the wood and paint. “I paint it every year,” he pondered. “Don’t I?”

By the time she reached her apartment, Angela’s eyes stung with redness and regret. Her father did it again. The blank look as she said goodbye and kissed him on the cheek poisoned her heart. The father she knew was gone. She drove around a stranger every week, drowning in the realization that one day she too would lose some grip on reality. Her brother Eric was of the opinion that she already had.

“Why do you even bother with him anymore?” Eric asked, glancing over his paper at her from the couch. Two months before the rainy goodbye to her father, Angela visited her brother in Eugene. Eric’s wife kept the house spotless, and Angela felt as though her presence somehow upset some sort of unspoken order. She felt like a speck of dust to be swept away any time she bothered to try and reunite her only remaining family.

“He needs us, Eric. You especially.” Eric snorted quietly and put down his paper. His face made the same incredulous look Harold had when she suggested selling the old house in Portland.

“All that man needs is a place to lay down and die.” Angela felt a stab in her heart from his blunt attitude.

“How can you say that? This is our father. The man that worked his whole...”

“Working his whole life? Is that what you were going to say?” His voice was now rising and the paper flailed about for emphasis. “That man hardly worked a real day in his life. And when he did, he would piss away all the money to go to bars so he could get drunk and beat mom. Goddamn him! Does that sound like a man who deserves our time?” Eric stormed away, leaving Angela in silent repose on the slick, leather couch.
"I guess that's not how I remember it," she said under her breath, defeated. She hadn't seen Eric since that day. She couldn't let what he said be true. Not if she wanted the family to come together again. Angela parked the van and almost forgot to grab the folder from the back seat as she went inside.

Harold tossed and turned in his bed later that night, gasping for breath and searching for a warmer configuration. He was, however, very careful to never ruffle the left side of the bed. His wife would somehow still scorn him from the grave, he just knew it. The heater rumbled below him and coughed out dust and a hint of warm air. These were the worst nights, but not because of the cold. Because of the dreams.

The hospital bed had been changed so quickly. White sheets now covered the spot where Harold's wife had died. He slumped lower in his chair, a vase on the table next to him with no flowers, only ruddy water. Forty seven years. Harold wondered if anyone could really love someone else for that long. When had he stopped loving his wife? Year ten, maybe twenty? She had always been ungrateful, but his heart still hiccupped every time he realized she was actually gone.

In his hands was the pearl necklace she had worn almost every day of the marriage. They had hung around her dignified neck for so many years he hardly recognized her without them. His wife had never been beautiful. She was too short, maybe a little uneven in the face. Something about her just made her flat out ugly at times to Harold. Yet, when it rained, her hair matted down as she rushed in the groceries, something would spark inside him. There were five children to attest to that, at least.

A doctor walked in and motioned for him to talk outside. Harold stood up but could not move. He just stared at the bed longer, as if he could see her there, the graying blonde hair done back. He saw the tiny nose she was always embarrassed by that he secretly loved. There were the soulless pits for
eyes she could freeze over Hell with. And yet, something was missing. Electricity she always exuded. A beautiful confidence. The doctor interrupted.

"Your sons gave me the funeral information. We had hoped to make it as painless as possible," he chattered, his eyes and hands directing Harold toward the door. There was a moment of static between the two, a mental standoff of willpower and bravado. Harold dropped the pearls in his breast pocket and gave a coy look.

"Is that what you do? Make it painless? You're terrible at your job," Harold spat back, hobbling to the door. "There, I'm out of your precious room. Bring in the next victim." Harold stepped out of the room and started shouting down the hall. "Next victim, next victim!"

Mr. White Coat rushed out and tried to restrain him. "Please... Mr. Graves... it's all right everyone. It's all right."

"Of course it's all right! Next victim, next victim!"

Harold awoke in a cold sweat mouthing the word "victim." The clock said it was a quarter past four. The faint sounds of early morning commuters buzzed in the distance. Harold stood up out of habit and threw on his old knit sweater. He glanced over at his wife's side of the bed, barely illuminated by a sliver of sun peaking over the horizon and in from the blinds. Still empty.

Harold stood over the toilet for almost a minute. Nothing happened. He couldn't remember the last time he had peed. Maybe it was yesterday? What did he do yesterday? A cup of coffee might help him to urinate again, he thought.

The kitchen light blinked on with an iridescent glow. Harold plugged in the coffee grinder and walked to the cupboards. They were empty. But he had gone to the store yesterday, right? Angela took him there, right? He had seen her for sure. He tapped at the old linoleum counter and went back
to the coffee grinder. There were still some old grounds in the filter. It would have to do. And so his mind wandered.

"Dad, I have to talk to you." It was his son, Eric. Both men were standing at the reception, all dressed in black and greeting the mourners. The funeral for Harold’s wife was held on a little hill in the Lone Fir Cemetery. Contrary to the season, sun was glaring down on all of those in attendance.

"What’s there to say?" Harold asked. "Your mother is gone. No matter what, the house will be yours." A second cousin walked by with this head low, murmuring something to the pair. Eric was red in the face, staring down his father. Ever since Eric had gone to college the father and son had been at odds. Harold could not believe how brash Eric was becoming in talking to him.

"That’s just it, dad. I don’t want the house." Harold looked up at Eric bewildered, the sun striking him into a momentary blindness. All that remained of his son was a hazy shadow outlined by a city creeping in on the green space of the cemetery.

"What do you mean you don’t want the house? Your grandfather and I built that house..." "Yeah, yeah, I know," Eric interrupted, rolling his eyes. A groundskeeper drove below the hill they were standing on, sending up a mix of chopping and whirring sounds with the fragrance of cut grass.

"Dad, what did you use to insulate the house?" Eric’s face looked sternly down at Harold. Harold looked at him questioningly. Flashes of reports and news stories and arguments flared into his mind and blocked out the world. All Harold could muster was single word.

"What?"

"How did you insulate the house? Did you use asbestos?" The rest of the mourners were now shuffling closer, Angela in particular, trying to see what the two were arguing over. Eric pulled him in close to keep things private. Harold put up his arms in confusion, pleading with the onlookers to come over and rescue him.
“I don’t even know what that is. Your grandfather and I did everything,” he shifted a bit, his eyes turning away from Eric.

“Dad, this has to stop. Why can’t you face reality? The asbestos used in that house killed your wife. Doesn’t that bother you?” Harold just kept looking past Eric, trying to hash out the sounds with the chirping of birds or the beating of traffic in the distance.

“You killed your wife by not moving out of that house. After all those years of pushing her around, you finally did it. You... you killed mom.” Eric turned away, seething, while Harold stood, petrified on the spot. Just then, the first raindrop fell, landing on his left cheek.

Harold jumped at the sound of the coffee grinder crashing to the floor, the plug ripped from its socket. He moved to do something about it, but realized his knees were locked up again. The sun was just then gleaming into the kitchen window, bathing him in some bit of light. A dog barked and Harold felt his knee pop back, thrusting him forward to the broken coffee grinder. He picked up some of the glass and plastic gingerly, bending slowly back up, and dropped the pieces into the sink on top of a stack of dirty plates.

The clock suddenly showed eight and the sun was in full force. Harold wondered what had happened to the time. At least he wasn’t still daydreaming, he thought. There was a knock at the front door, much to his surprise. The coffee grinder would have to wait.

“Dad, I just thought I should drop by after yesterday,” Angela said, standing on the old porch Harold had built all by himself. “I brought you a guest.” A youthful man in a green dress shirt put out his hand.

“Adam Hanson, nice to meet you.” Harold looked at the man’s hand, then to his face with some confusion. Adam looked down at Harold’s hand awkwardly, and then withdrew the offer.
"Who are you?" Harold asked, squinting his eyes to see a large black car in front of his house.

This was some sort of trick, he knew it.

"I'm just here to talk."

"Can we come in, dad?" Angela asked, urging him with her hands. "It's so cold out, you know."

Rain had now given way to a strange fog. Sunlight tried to break through in several places, making shapes on the sides of the giant glass structures all over the city. The fog was so thick Harold could not even see the strange bronze smiling face statue that greeted visitors at Jeld-Wen Park across the street. All he could see was the sad iron fence and crumbling pathway that snaked up to his porch.

"Of course, come in. I'm afraid I already finished the coffee," he muttered, leading his guests inside.

"Quite fine," Adam returned. "Not much of a coffee man here, myself. Your daughter tells me you built this house with your father?" There was something too excitable about this man, and Harold hated it.

"Why would she tell you that?" Harold looked at him suspiciously. "It's not for sale."

"Oh, I'm not here to buy the house," Adam chuckled.

"We just want to talk to you about a place I think you might like, dad." Angela made them all sit in the living room. Harold looked her in the eyes, searching for words. Nothing came. It was just like urinating, Harold thought. He so much wanted to say something. He wanted to say yes. He wanted to go away from here. Away from the cold. Away from the coffee grinder. But it wasn't that easy. He knew he couldn't take the easy way out. There was an investment in this place that no person could buy from him.

"I have to... stay, umm," Harold's words stumbled out. "I have to stay with your mother." The last few words spilled out faster than any stream of urine, with a quiet, subtle splash. Angela sat silently,
her green eyes searching between her father and Adam. The room seemed to get darker, the stadium next door growing until it blotted out the foggy sunlight.

"Dad, she’s been gone for seven years," Angela said quietly. Harold’s eyes grew and his hand went up to his eyes. He counted and scratched his head.

"No, no, no..." he stuttered. “She never left. She’s still here!” He jumped up, as fast as a fifty year old man, perhaps, feeling invigorated. “She’s here, she’s here!”

“Yes, our loved ones are always with us," Adam said soothingly.

“No, you don’t get it. She’s here!” Harold picked up a pillow from the sofa and held it up for him. “She’s here, she’s here!” Harold shuffled into the kitchen, throwing open the empty cabinets and refrigerator. Angela and Adam followed him, trying to calm him down. They nearly stepped right into the remains of the coffee grinder.

“Dad, you can take some things with you. She can come with you...” Angela pleaded, watching her father stomp about the hallway, caressing every last inch of cracking wallpaper like it was his wife’s cheek. It was like some sort of cartoon animation. A marionette man, five and a half feet tall, running about in a tattered sweater, yelling to anyone who would listen.

“I loved her, don’t you get it? Loved her to the day she died, the ungrateful hag! She’s here, she’s here!” Harold was now in the bedroom, crouching beside his wife’s side of the bed. He suddenly ripped off the sheets and covered himself in them, holding them tight. The sun came back, lighting everything for the astonished visitors. “She’s here!”

Adam stepped off the curb and opened the door on the sleek black car he had brought. “We’ll give him another day and bring him to the Lucianis Center tomorrow. As you know, the rates in the dementia wing are slightly higher.”
"I know," Angela said, her head bowed toward the broken old mailbox that stuck out into the street. "I signed over the house last night and got more than we were expecting. Cost won't be a problem."

"I'm glad," Adam returned. "Your father... he needs this."

"I know. I've known for a long time now."

Harold's head popped up in the window facing the front yard. He had a strange smile on his face as the black sedan rolled away. Angela looked back at him and waved, crossing her arms and lowering her head. If it were not for his eyesight, Harold would have seen the tears dripping down her cheeks. Harold just went on smiling: beaming at finally expressing his love to his wife. He knew his children would forgive him now, he just knew it.

Harold turned back and shuffled over to the bathroom. He dreamed of the amazing times he still had to live out. His children would love him again, and come over for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Eric would take the house and pass it on to his son. Everyone would be happy again, just like they were when they would dance around him after work.

Harold sighed as the urine flowed out. He looked at himself in the mirror. "What an awful sweater," he cackled, another smile breaking onto his face.
Survivor’s Guilt

Even for December, the old man seemed to be bundled up far more than was needed. A rust-colored down jacket peaked out from a heavy soot covered overcoat that looked decades old. He was just around six feet of synthetic padding covering natural bulk, a red face with faded whiskers popping out to survey the world. A large scar trailed from just above his whitened left eyebrow down to the dented chin.

Edward Murray owned a decent piece of land in the expansive wilderness of Nova Scotia. He stood in the wild maze of white spruce, a gentle wind shaking needles to the forest floor. One tree was particularly impressive, towering almost fifty feet into the azure abyss above with perfect symmetry. A uniform conical spiral of green climbed the trunk, making it the perfect shape for what the Nova Scotia Department of Natural Resources needed.

William Condon, the man in charge of the selection of the tree and negotiations with Mr. Murray, peered up in approval. Young for his position, Condon felt somewhat intimidated by the bulk, scar, and age of Mr. Murray. Nothing over the phone indicated any problems would persist, but the careful nature of the elderly gentleman and his apparent love of the forest worried Condon. Cutting down such a specimen would surely be cause for contention.

“It’s a terrific sight,” Condon said, smiling warmly. The old man circled the tree silently, daintily stepping over underbrush. Condon trailed behind him, trying to think of something to add. The thick smell of evergreen sap held back his words. He had taken the job with the Department of Natural Resources because of his love for the forest. The old man suddenly stopped, knelt down, and brought something up for them to look at.

“It started as this.” The old man’s gloved hand dropped a tiny seedling, two centimeters in length, drifting back toward the mix of dirt and grasses. Again, Condon tried desperately to come up
with something profound in return, but the seniority of his host made him second-guess every statement. The old man put a hand on the tree to catch his breath, and then shivered a bit.

"It's cold." With that, the pair moved back to the beautiful cabin nestled into one corner of the forest. Picture windows gazed into the green and brown sea of trees. Rows of carved bark made up a railing on the back deck, still damp from a morning shower of snow mixed with rain. Inside the cabin swirled an inviting mix of smells and warmth: cinnamon mixed with cedar, wrapped up by a smothering ring of smoke from the wood fireplace Mrs. Murray had been tending to. Cider and sweet bread adorned the rustic table adjacent to the picture windows. The men sat down as Mrs. Murray ambled around them and back to the kitchen. She seemed to plod slowly, unsure of her footing, eyes blankly staring into the next room.

Condon explained the offer slowly, continually adding how important the tree was to tradition and goodwill. Boston Commons needed a Christmas tree after all, and they certainly deserved it. The old man simply listened and nodded, sipping on his cider from time to time, and putting up his hand to silence Condon anytime a bird flew up to perch near the window. Murray would scrawl something in a leather notebook, and then let the conversation continue.

After an impassioned presentation, Condon brought out the contract and placed it on the table. Without any hesitation, the old man scribbled his initials onto the paper and went back to watching his forest clearing.

"Oh, thank you so much, Mr. Murray. You are truly a generous spirit." The old man just nodded and bit down on a piece of sweet bread. Condon put the contract back in his suitcase and got up, holding out his hand. The old man seemed not to notice and spoke up for the first time inside the cabin.

"What's the year?" His voice was lower now, thoughtful and slightly depressing. The fireplace in the corner snapped and puffed out another plume up the chimney.
"The year is 1978, sir." The old man straightened out as the words hit his ears. A bird perched next to the window, but now Mr. Murray ignored it and turned to Condon with an incredulous look about him.

"It's been 61 years? Good God, that makes me 80 years old." He motioned for Condon to sit back down and poured them both another cider. "I was there, you know." A sly smile now permeated the wrinkled face.

"Fascinating," was all Condon could muster. Not much else could be said to anyone who actually suffered through such an event. Condon's own grandfather had been there and lost an arm while trying to rescue others. The mist of war on the horizon had been enough to induce panic to the shores of Halifax Harbor, but what happened sixty one years before, the reason the tree was to be sent to Boston Commons for Christmas, etched itself in the mind of every citizen of Halifax.

"I would love to hear about it," Condon said slowly. He worried the succinct old man would be disinclined to share, but Condon always wondered about that day. "I had family there."

With noon quickly approaching, light filtered through the trees and drenched the two men at the table. Mr. Murray stood slowly and held out his hand to stop Condon from getting up. The young man waited for a few minutes until Mr. Murray returned with a picture. A young man, no more than twenty, peered back at them with a stoic glance and a bandage on the left side of his face. And so, Mr. Murray began to speak again, this time in long narrative, only pausing for recollection and the occasional sip of cider, taking the men well into the evening. "I remember the harbor being too bright that day..."

I had to squint into the sunlight dancing across the ships floating in and out of the Narrows. That part of Halifax was always bustling with activity. Ship captains would use a series of whistles and light signals to communicate with each other while travelling the shipping lanes.
I was part of the CME, still pretty young but engineering-minded. When the war broke out, the Canadian government rushed me through schooling to help build up the harbor. With the stronghold defenses afforded to us by Citadel Hill, along with our location, Halifax was a prime shipping hub for North America to supply Britain. Also, the German U-boats wouldn’t dare try and pick off ships in the harbor with the natural protection of the Narrows.

This was an unusual day for me. Typically I would be working on plans in Fort George for major shipping fortification. Simply put, I designed ship armor, balancing the need for protection with weight and expense. But on that day, well, I was pursuing my real dream.

The Halifax City Council chamber was rounded off by a thick wood banister. I had to sit at a giant table across from the raised council seating. In the center was a grand seat reaching up past the chair molding until it nearly touched the ceiling. I remember being immensely intimidated. To this day, I still don’t know how I was able to explicate my whole plan without fainting from fear and exhaustion. I had spent the night before poring over my plans with reckless abandon.

A new system for the Narrows. Quite honestly, having built ship armor my whole life, I was convinced there was a better system than sticking boats through one tiny passage in the harbor and watching them scrape each other to Hell. Of course, defense remained the biggest issue. German boats might take advantage. But I planned out a drain system and early detection array that would solve all that.

"Voting will take place next week, after we are able to look at all the details thoroughly, Mr. Murray," the senior council member boomed. Something inside me felt dejected. Many wartime plans were put into second reading for vote immediately due to importance. Apparently I had not convinced them of the immediate need of a wider shipping channel.

The long walk back to Citadel Hill was too daunting to take on when feeling hungry and rejected. I ambled down to the docks, hoping to find a vendor with fried fish or a recent catch on a makeshift grill.
The sea salt in the air was heavier closer to the dock. It was as if someone drew a curtain over the H.M. Dockyard blocking out the fresh air coming over the hills to the west.

Small boats rocked up against Upper Water Street, men scurrying around to fill crates or pile on just enough cargo before their vessel would sink. It was a curious balancing act, and occasionally, someone would do their calculations wrong and end up having to salvage their cargo and boat from the bottom of the harbor.

The ladies of Halifax took dainty steps around fish guts and puddles of seawater. Many of them were shopping for fresh fish to take home for supper. The ones from inland Nova Scotia who never shopped a fish market before were often squeamish, holding out their purchase at arm’s length with a disgusted look in their eyes. But that day I saw one of the old pros. She looked to be in her fifties, dress arms rolled back to avoid getting fishy oils on them. She grabbed two fish and plopped them on a crate, picking over them to see if they were any good. She caught me staring and gave me a toothy grin. Then she went back to her work with some strange amount of pleasure. I wonder what happened to her.

I strolled along the street in the direction of the fort. It was still quite early in the morning and I doubted anyone would be out grilling fish yet. I turned away from the harbor and headed up Gerrish Street in search for a café or bakery. Little brick buildings lined the street, mostly leaning or asymmetrical. That always made me angry for some reason. I wanted everything to be lined up perfectly.

I weaved back down the next alley and turned back on the street adjacent to the harbor. A sailor bustled past me just as a low horn sounded from the Narrows. Ship captains communicating, of course. I turned my gaze out to the crowded harbor, and then back to the street. A small café with sweet smelling cakes caught my attention. Shoddy stonework lined the front façade with green accents on the wooden door and window.
An exquisite girl was sitting inside by the window, looking out past me. Her green eyes caught mine for a second before returning to the puffy clouds and circling sea birds high above all the ships. Brown curls hid behind her, falling just past her shoulder. Trying not to stare, I stumbled toward the café.

Opening the door let out a powerful blast of warmth blanketed by smells of breads and tea. My mouth watered instantly. The girl at the window paid me no attention as I removed my hat and winter coat, putting them on the coat rack by one other set of raiment. An older woman smiled at me from the table, kneading a heap of dough and braiding the edges. She wiped off her hands and walked up to me.

“What can I treat you to, sir?” I selected a beautiful looking sweet bun and small cup of tea. Three tables stood scattered about the room with no real planning. I contained my need to rearrange them and sat down in the corner of the room. The stunning girl was still at the window and a sailor was finishing his scone at one of the other tables. Somehow my failure from earlier melted away with the sweet smells and warmth. I quickly devoured my breakfast and watched as the girl stood up to walk outside in a rather excited manner.

The sailor was the next to rise, heading over to the window, and then dashing outside. The older woman and I shared confused glances and I stood up. Walking over to the window, I immediately saw the large crowd of people outside on the edge of the street watching some sort of commotion in the harbor.

“Some to-do in the harbor, ma’am.” I dropped my money on the table and stepped outside. About twenty people were now clambering about, chatting and pointing. Not wanting to get into the crowded fray, I moved farther down the road until I could position myself for a better look. Two ships in the Narrows were dangerously close together. One was a giant French cargo ship, and the other a ship I had never seen before.
Then the crowd saw it: smoke, billowing out between the ships. Apparently they had collided trying to navigate the tighter lanes entering the harbor. This happened quite frequently. In fact, this was one of the scenarios I tried to compensate for when designing ship armor so the collisions wouldn't cause too much damage to the ship. Knowing the French ship fairly well, I could tell the structural damage would be minor, but the smaller ship looked to be lodged underneath.

Excited yells from the crowd brought my eyes lower. Frenchmen jumped out of the ship and into lifeboats. They were yelling some gibberish at the crowd and waving their arms wildly. This was peculiar, as I didn't see any imminent danger from such a minor collision. Still, the crew began rowing away from our shore off toward Dartmouth.

Realizing this incident was mostly resolved, and being late back to Fort George, I turned from the crowd and started my long journey back. It was the strangest stroll of my life. Eyes glanced at me from behind windows as I walked by. Everyone on the harbor seemed captivated by the collision and was standing watch from inside to avoid the December chill.

I turned up Cornwallis Street just as a young boy ran by. His mother trailed behind, watching the harbor nervously. The rows of buildings seemed to be drawn to the commotion as well. Shaking my head, I turned one more time to see the same ships, still smoking and lodged in the narrows. I remember thinking to myself how easily people were amazed by such simple spectacles. Turning back around, I could see Citadel Hill in the distance.

The explosion came from behind. I was knocked forward, headlong into the curb running up the street. My ears buzzed and nose cracked. I was weightless for several seconds, and then realized brick had fallen down around me. Screams rang out in all directions, but they seemed muffled, like I was listening to sounds coming from a cave. Bubbling sea foam inched around my face mixing with the dark crimson spilling from my wounds.
My eyes didn’t open again for two or three minutes. I couldn’t really breathe. Dust and chips from the bricks were lodged in my throat. Blood mixed with this sooty debris on the left side of my face where I had hit the raised walkway by the brick buildings. All I could at first was turn over and sit up. The glaring sunlight blinded me momentarily. But the sunlight was no longer pure. Ash and smoke filtered its rays, bringing everything into a premature twilight.

I stumbled to my feet to see almost all the buildings along the shore leveled. The little boy and his mother were dead, lying crumpled in the street, flattened by the massive blast. My own survival was hardly fathomable. The blast must have been blocked by the buildings I had left in my wake while walking back to Citadel Hill. If I had lingered with the crowd a few moments longer I would have surely perished.

Somehow the fire brigade and militia were already running through the streets to put out fires and help people. How long was I out? In any case, I stumbled back to Upper Water Street. Docks were smashed and splintered. The street was falling into the bay. I saw no sign of the two ships other than a steaming carcass bobbing around. What an explosion!

An officer ran up to me and grabbed my shoulders. “Sir, are you okay? I am here to help.” All I could do was point to the side of my face, still stinging. He nodded in understanding and ran off to get help for my injury. I stood there, motion all around me. Sounds were still muffled to some extent. My reality was slow compared to the frantic pace around me. Flashes of people wove in and out of the street, sometimes stopping to see if I needed help. I fell into a trance of sorts.

I didn’t come around again until I found myself sitting on the stoop of a building that was long gone. The side of my face has covered in cloth and tape. The pain was still there, but the ringing in my ears had disappeared. I glanced around to see if there was someone I could thank, but the bustling relief effort jumbled everything into a mix of chaos. On the very next set of steps was another person. It took me a second to recognize her.
The beautiful girl from the café. How had she survived? Her eyes were covered in bloody bandaging. She was still shaking with silent sobs and tremors. She kept mouthing a word and rocking in shock. I moved over to her and heard the quiet oration. “Germans... Germans...”

Had we been attacked? I flagged down the nearest infantryman who looked at me bewildered. He didn’t know what had happened either. Catching my bearings, I stumbled over a fallen chimney and worked my way toward the town hall. All the people rushing to safety or leading others headed in the opposite direction, seeking refuge on Citadel Hill and the Common.

The City Council Chamber was in ruins as well. The giant table was in tatters, pieces scattered across the floor. Two of the council members were still at their seats, slumped over and silent. Relief efforts hadn’t made it this far into the city yet. I remember throwing up on the spot, my tasty breakfast splattered across the ruins. My plans for the widened shipping channels were nowhere to be found.

A dark streak across the sky beckoned me back to the harbor. There were no fires, just menacing smoke. This was the first time I realized most everything was soaked. The few posts standing were dripping from water. More water than any fire brigade could supply. Most of the alleys were flooded with seawater. My own clothes were still damp. Had there been some sort of flood? Every crisis imaginable seemed to be piling on one another. How had I not drowned while lifeless in the street?

The café was leveled. The fragrant smells lingered and mixed with burning oil and harbor water. I couldn’t find the owner. Shards of glass lined the front of the foundation. Blood pooled around the sharp debris. A tattered blue scarf peaked out from the remains of a table. I recognized it as the beautiful girl’s and picked it up to bring to her. When I returned to our refuge at the stoops she was already gone.
Somehow I found myself on a wagon taking survivors up to Fort George. Many people were homeless and needed beds. My own bunk was already in use. My commanding officer assumed I was dead and reacted to my return as if a ghost had risen before him.

Fort George has a field between its outer wall and interior fortification. Tents and other covers were set up there, with cots and sleeping rolls for survivors. I was shuttled in one and left there for the bitter cold of the night. Sleep was hardly an option. My heart hadn’t stopped beating quickly the entire day. Instead, I walked out with blankets draped about me.

There is a knoll on the Commons that overlooks the whole bay. I sat there, watching the stars glitter and blink. Smoke still crept into the sky. Lanterns in the bay moved about frantically. Many people were still trapped. The world does not always wait for us to recover. Clouds rolled into the night sky, followed by snow.

I returned to the makeshift camp, where scores of people were shivering together for warmth. Many people had injuries, ranging from broken arms and legs, to split open faces like my own. Most haunting, however, were the number of people with padding over their eyes. Glass shards attacked the gazing onlookers in store windows. Those eyes watching me as I walked from the smoking ships were now useless puddles of blood.

The snow evolved into a blizzard by the following day. Most of us gathered inside the prison cells at the fort just to be indoors. Soldiers would come in periodically for reports. Some people were still echoing sentiments of a German attack. One man swore on his remaining good eye that he would kill the “whole damn country.” Others talked of how the Germans must be laughing at them, cackling into the night.

“I don’t think it was an attack,” I murmured quietly. The room fell silent for the first time. Several people turned their gaze to me, a mix of questioning and anger.
"Who are you?" "What are you talking about?" "Why should I believe you?" The questions blazed in, causing me to sink further and further back to one of the stone walls. I never did get a chance to explain my suspicions.

Word of the explosion was hard on the British. They knew how important Halifax was to the war effort. The Boston Red Cross came up from the states to help with relief. That's why we send them a tree every Christmas, right?

"Yes, that's right," Condon interjected for the first time. "Your tree will commemorate their bravery and goodwill." Murray continued without pause.

Well, after everything was over, two thousand people were declared dead. Something like five times that many injured. Most of us had to stay in makeshift housing until complete reconstruction of the bay area.

I deserted the day my injuries healed. I couldn't take the violence anymore. I didn't want my life's work to be ships that could kill thousands. The walk down Citadel Hill with Fort George over my shoulder was nerve-wracking to say the least. I imagined a great hand reaching out and pulling me back. Snow covered most of the buildings now. The parts of town that survived the blast looked as if nothing ever happened. The same poorly constructed, asymmetrical houses and businesses stood down rows of stone walks.

Instead of wandering aimlessly, I went directly to a cemetery. Halifax has a bunch of them. This one was new, full of people who never did anything wrong.

I should probably be in the ground there.

I sat on a stone bench in the middle of the memories. The blue scarf I found in the wreckage of the café fell out of my pocket, wafting down to the icy stones and snow-covered grass. I leaned down to pick it up, and if playing some sort of game with me, the wind blew it down the line of graves.
No eulogies, memories, or descriptors. I wondered about how my own name would look etched in the grey stone. Edward Murray. 19. Even if there had been more to these graves, what would people have said about me? Ship armorer? Loyal member of the CME? No family to speak of? The thought was shattering. So much so that I left the scarf there, wrapped around the spindly branches of a bush that lined the outer edge of the gravestones. I stood frozen in the strange space between relief for surviving, and guilt for being so lucky.

The beautiful girl broke me from the trance. An elderly gentleman led her into the cemetery slowly, her hand grasping his arm and her steps careful. The glinting colors from snow swirled down from trees and fences making her hair shine. I grabbed the scarf and moved toward them timidly, not sure what to say. And really, the rest is history. I think that’s enough for one night...

The fire in the corner flickered and died. Only crumbs remained on the plate. Condon searched the old man’s eyes.

“But what happened with the scarf?” Condon exclaimed, invested in the tale. Murray just smiled as the trees shobk outside the picture windows. The old man stood up and disappeared into another adjacent room. Condon waited patiently for several minutes. Eventually he worried his host might not return.

“He always does that,” Murray’s wife said, ambling into the room with a smile on her face. “He simply wants to give you a reason to come back. He loves to tell his stories.” She stumbled around him, placing her hand hesitantly on several objects in her path. A long pause sat between them with the lingering scent of cider and sweat breads hanging in the air.

“I should really be going,” Condon said sheepishly. He stood up and held out his hand. The woman seemed not to notice and headed over to the door slowly and carefully. The harsh cold rushed
in as soon as she opened the door. Condon buttoned up his jacket and stepped outside. The pair exchanged pleasant goodbyes and he moved off to his car. Murray's wife stared at him with blank eyes all the way, huddled up in the doorway.

Condon looked up at her one final time before throwing his car into reverse. That's when he saw her tattered blue scarf, flapping in the wind.
Fading Dreams

The bowl of gazpacho spun during its descent to the stones below. Tiny chunks of onion separated from the blood red soup and froze in the air. A shattered mess of white glass clattered on the floor, the crimson liquid exploding around the colorless world. Cloudy streaks came across my eyes as I watched the chaos. I reached for the suspended onions with desperate hands. Two, three, four of them escaped, blazing across the room and out a window. The rest stayed just out of reach. The ivory shards from the bowl picked themselves off the floor and began to block my reach, threatening to cut and gash my wrists.

Someone else entered the room. A large person who made the stones scream as he stepped on them. There was no escape, only a more hurried attempt to gather the floating onions from the guard of the bowl remains. The giant man simply chuckled. His mood changed everything, calming the shards back to the floor and cleaning the red soup from the walls. He took the onions easily, making my own arms tremble in jealousy.

And as though the falling bowl was never as issue, more soup appeared at the table. An icy pool of carmine beckoning my lips. The gargantuan man plodded away slowly, laughing and saying something about how his restaurant never runs out of soup. Restaurant? No, this was my home. I knew it by the little shower of light coming down on the soup from the crack in my roof. I looked up at the crack and it began to bleed, dripping specks onto my nose and cheek. I shook violently.

The color melted away with the shaking. Drenched in darkness, I sat up in bed, rigid. A tiny drip was coming from the leak in my roof. Shattered glass from a vase on my bedside table lined the uneven stone floor. Another dream. They were becoming a problem. Any number of things would happen while I dreamed of a world everyone else imagines when they think of Spain. Bullfights and flamenco dancers, giant feasts followed by incessant naps, a lazy life full of wonder and beauty. A lie.
I glanced over at the little alarm clock I bought from the store on Calle Novena. Only three minutes until the alarm would go off. I pulled myself out of bed and turned off the little device with a click. My room has two small end tables sandwiching a twin bed. An old armoire from Seville stands in the corner, diagonal to the small space I have to move. A mirror hangs on the wall adjacent, reminding me every day how ugly I am.

I do not have the curves of a woman. When I look in the mirror, all I see is a gaunt young woman with splotchy skin and hair that neither shines nor lays flat. Clothes do not fit properly or flatter. And the clothes are hardly an upgrade, worn and frayed at the seams. Color has all but completely drained from every inch of fabric I own. The summer sun of Cádiz spares nothing.

Only three more weeks of the sun until I can go back to university in Barcelona. My parents can’t afford to send me, so I usually work for my uncle in Seville. He couldn’t take on another employee this year, so I was sent to live with a distant cousin in Cádiz. Instead of waiting on impatient gentlemen in a café, I get to sweep streets and clean public monuments and statues.

The work is terribly boring. I daydream a lot, but those simple wanderings of the mind transform. My brother calls it escapism. My father thinks I’m bipolar. Some days I think he’s right. I can be rational one second, and be staring down the most incredible, impossible things the next. The boring work causes more dreams, and every day I wonder a little more if what I’m seeing is ever real.

Days like the one two weeks ago, cleaning the giant bird statue outside the Agencia Tributaria de Cádiz.

The body and head of the bird is a thick wire frame made of several long pipes. Because of this, you have to clean all around the tubes on the inside as well. The legs of the bird are frighteningly realistic. Instead of the pipes of the body, the legs are made from one solid bronze sheet, molded into thick veins and powerful muscles covered by mottled skin. The bird’s talons grasp a silver perch attached to a dark grey pedestal with acknowledgements carved in.
I brushed the pedestal for what seemed like an eternity. Sweat dripped down my nose as a shadow above me began to move. The pipes creaked as I glanced up, the bronze talons gripping harder and harder until the silver perch burst into dust that rained down on me. There were no wings, so the bird toppled over, rolling into the street, grasping at the air with the sharp claws. A pair of gleaming ruby eyes appeared just inside the frame making up the head. It stared at me pleadingly.

I found myself debating whether to finish cleaning or to help the bird. There were no sounds from its sculpted beak, but the eyes tore at me. The flailing legs rolled it around the street, smashing into cars and bicycles. I followed it several blocks, fleeing onlookers at its mercy. The golden gleam flashing off its frame blinded men as they fled. Women hid their glances and covered their children’s eyes.

The bird finally stopped, stuck trying to pass under the wall at the Plaza de la Constitución. The porous walls made of seashells and stone wore away, desperately trying to hold back the flailing creature. The eyes, fiery and beating, leaped out to touch my heart, pulling me closer and closer. People tried to warn me to stay back, but I couldn’t stop. I couldn’t speak or even think. Putting out a hand, the bird began to shrink, swallowing up dust and air as it compacted to the size of a Valencia orange. It fell into my open palm to the cheers of the crowd. I turned to see the onlookers in frenzied adoration.

Little pieces of the wall then started to descend around me. A woman in a red dress pointed up in horror. I followed her gaze to see the whole wall collapsing on top of me. Hundreds of years of history crushed me into another story to be told to children.

Sun glare. An elderly man sitting across the street on a bench stared at me. How long had I been dreaming? I had been standing motionless for some time, I was sure of that. Sometimes it doesn’t happen at night. This time, the very act of cleaning the bird statue sent me into that other world. A realm that contained my disillusioned thoughts on the country I called home.

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But that was nearly two weeks ago. The bird statue incident led me to ask a psychology major from school about dreams. Being from Cádiz, Clarisa was more than happy to sit down with me for lunch under the shadow of La Catedral. Like many others, we were situated on the steps of the massive structure that acts as a public meeting place. Walls of chafed brown stone give way to white marble at the top of the towers of La Catedral. From the mass of steps below, there was no way to see the top. Even the doors towered high above each visitor, requiring several men to push them open.

“So what are your dreams about?” Clarisa and I spread out a few tapas for a light snack. I bit down on some bruschetta before explaining the strange things my mind was conjuring up. There seemed to be no end to what I could imagine. Mostly it was about the world around me. But sometimes, even I changed completely. The truth about Spain fell to pieces while I imagined what outsiders thought of it. I immediately remembered my dream about the bullfighting.

Trapped. Cornered. Angry. The matador brandished the bait, a striking red cloth with lovely hand-stitched detailing. The movement and color seemed to possess me as I reared back and then lumbered forward. Somehow I was a bull, hulking about in frustration while the crowd cheered my artistic demise. But even though I was the bull, I felt like a woman on all fours. I could not topple the man waving about cloth, hiding the piercing source of my death, even if I could hit him.

So instead I pranced back, avoiding the conflict. His hypnotic movement of the cloth could not confuse a mind more tamed than a beast trained to attack. I would win. His failure was not so much in his inability to kill me, but rather, not being able to goad me into this charade, this dance ending in an exhausted and embittered death. The crimson cape stuck out so vividly in my mind, but I fought the temptation.

The ring began to shrink. Every step I took away from him, the matador took two toward me. I ran out of places to go, caged in by thousands of onlookers. Children moving anxiously, men tense in their seats, silence fading up into the clouds. The color of the cape darkened with every move. The
sword behind it grew, larger and sharper until it hung above me like the falling wall. And then there was an opening. I took it.

The swirling cape danced over my eyes as I rumbled around to find my mark. I found flesh and bucked hard, but as I came out from the kaleidoscope of death, the matador was already behind me. What had I hit? Was I merely imagining it? As I turned, my body felt heavier, like something was weighing me down to one side. The giant sword stuck out from my body, waving into the crowd as people cheered. There was no real pain, just heaviness; a weight that pulled me further and further toward the dirt and dust below.

"I have never been to a bullfight," I blurted out as Clarisa and I wandered around La Plaza de las Flores. Vendors were clipping the flowers for the day and putting them on display. Fantastic violets and greens jumped out to greet us. A single fountain trickled in the middle of it all, water glinting in the sun.

"But you had the dream about the bull? That is strange." Clarisa was still trying to explain how dreams worked. It was something about subconscious desires. Apparently my subconscious wanted me dead this summer.

"I've always wanted to. I mean, I've lived my whole life in Spain," I said absently. My eyes were now on the façade of Los Correos. More of the same crumbly sea stone worked its way up the building.

"This isn't the movies, Dorotea. We don't all go watch those shows." Something in her voice was patronizing. She was stepping gingerly, almost like a dancer about the stage, around the many random flower pots and displays. No longer in the mood to talk, I crossed over her path to a little shop that sold single stems.

"I know," I murmured, glancing through a mix of flowers, hoping that would end the conversation. For some reason I am not one to talk much. It usually just makes me uncomfortable.

"It would seem to me that you just aren't satisfied with life right now. Your brain is tricking you into excitement."
“Oh, well isn’t that convenient,” I mumbled back. Something lurched inside me. I wanted to throw the flowers at Clarisa. I wanted to run off and never let anyone look at me, hiding my ugly face behind the flowers. Something inside me said I should just leave all of Spain and tell the world that nothing there is worthwhile. Everything in Spain is a lie.

I turned around to see Clarisa buying a flower. She handed it to me and shook her head. That night, I felt bad for being so rude to Clarisa. I drifted off, the explosion of flowers from the plaza still fresh in my mind with the graceful steps of Clarisa tapping around in my brain.

Several wooden tables gathered around the stage. Men in flashy suits and women in dresses sat around the tables sipping sangria. I stood in the back near a stucco fireplace, ice cold from never being lit. Dim lighting permeated the room from flickering lanterns. A clanging noise brought bright light to the stage. Clarisa stepped out in her wondrous dress, colored like the sangria served at the tables.

The music was fast and enchanting. The people at the tables involuntarily swayed with every note, mystified by Clarisa’s movements. I too, was captured by her dance, my feet moving me back and forth in the back of the room. The flames in the lanterns swayed in the rhythm as well, spinning the room in ruddy light. Then the music changed.

Nothing more than horrid shrieking came from the lips of my friend. The guitar began riffing and playing out of key. Moans of discontent came from the crowd as they covered their ears. My body stopped moving and instead began to shrivel up to protect itself. The fancy people at the table began to fall over, scarlet rivers running from their ears. Clarisa’s dancing was faster now, overbearing and dominant. The walls shook and stucco melted away to reveal the frame. No one could stand to even attempt to stop her.

Silence. The room was blanketed with an eerie mist as my ears buzzed from the remnants of the cacophony. Clarisa stepped down from the stage, gliding over the lifeless bodies in the audience. The floors were stained by an odd mix of blood and sangria. She approached me and drew me to her at
the same time. Our lips came together, faces aflame in a rufescent painting of passion. She pulled away and whispered in my ear.

"Don’t let your dreams control you, Dorotea.” A blank canvas, my sheets pulled over my eyes. My heart was still beating like rushing waves at high tide. Everything was soaked in sweat, my body overheated and flushed. The slight tingling between my legs was enough to make me shut my eyes in embarrassment. How could my subconscious override everything I knew I felt in real life? Was there a hidden secret I just didn’t want to face?

The dreams subsided for a while. Maybe my mind was finally coming to terms with the boredom my job afforded me. The dreams were replaced with mood swings. I yelled at my cousin constantly. My boss became afraid of my outbursts, and put me on cleaning jobs in the places I demanded. My final demand was the big project I hoped would break me out of this angry, fire red fog in my mind.

Only a week until my return to Barcelona, I assigned myself to help a team of temporary workers clean the monument in La Plaza de España. This massive white stone sculpture depicts the rise of the constitution of 1812 through war and peace. There is an empty presidential armchair in the middle of various depictions of battle and diplomacy.

The day we began the cleaning project, several school children were ushered by the monument to be told the story of the constitution. Each student carried a little water bottle with them, sucking at it every few minutes because of the scorching heat. Some took refuge in the little bit of shade provided by the trees lining the plaza. The luckiest found an empty bench in the cooling darkness. I simply watched in envy, quickly growing impatient with the repetitive monologue told by each guide or teacher. I tried to focus on working instead.

As the afternoon began to shrink away, some of the other workers left for other jobs. They disappeared up Avenue del Puerto, walking along the harbor. A cruise ship sat in the bay, a blue and
As I turned back to the statue, the ground began to shake. Sunlight drained out of the sky, leaving a darkened plaza, but still hot like the baking noon hour. Crunching noises began to permeate the monument as a soldier broke free from the backdrop. His shining white arm raised a commanding gesture. A lion broke from the monument as a result, crashing down to the ground and roaring triumphantly.

On the other side of the monument, the people representing peace cowered back and covered their gazes. The lion stalked back and forth in front of them while the statues of war began to come to life. Each had a weapon or a frightening expression frozen to their face. The first man who had risen the signal for the lion sat triumphantly in the presidential armchair. Politicians and civilians began to protest, a murmur of malcontent in the air.

A massacre followed. The soldiers cut down everyone piece by piece. The white stones of peace exploded and shattered, falling to the ground. Cries of innocence leapt up, only to be silenced by massive blades or death blanketed by gunpowder. All the while, the man in the presidential armchair stared right at me.

Fire from the memorial torch in front of the monument began to rise up. Everything seemed to glow in and orange and red sea. The flames covered the soldiers and their leader, only proving them more frightening. Their focus moved to me, and the lion pounced down to face me. The mane of white had melted away, and only flames remained. The mouth pursed slightly, letting out a powerful bellow. It pounced on me, my head hitting the plaza stones.

I awoke on the same stones, one of the other temp workers dripping a wet rage onto my forehead. He said something, but it was lost somewhere between his lips and my mind. I sat up slowly,
my head banging in pain. A few groups of school children were watching me, worried. The worker helped me to my feet and said something about the heat.

The monument was back to normal, the hateful lion still perched to Mother Spain’s left. I turned to look back at the bay and the ship was gone. Had it been part of my dream? Or did it simply leave while I was passed out? Instead, a cargo ship gently bobbed in its place. An ugly cargo ship, full of modern things to expand Cádiz down the arm of the peninsula.

My last week went by very slowly. Probably because I didn’t sleep much. Every time I closed my eyes I was terrified to face another strange world. And yet, something about it caused excitement in me. No other time did my heart race or my face flush. Nothing else could make my mind rush with wonder and creativity. These strange images cured the boredom of my summer life. The idea that my dreams far surpassed my reality wore on me every day.

During my last night in Cádiz, I had my final wild dream. It was unique in the fact that it was the only time I ever had the same dream as some night before. In fact, it was the dream I had my first night in the sleepy coastal town.

The ocean stretched back from La Caleta beach into a distant world. Early stars in the setting sky were blinking above me, wrapping me in a strange calmness. Waves rolled in, closer and closer until my feet were getting sprayed with foam. It tickled, making me shake and roll in the sand with a laugh. There was no anxiety, no destruction or death; just a sleepy wonderland where sand covered me in a protective cocoon from an angry Spanish world.

A little boy, no more than eight, approached me with a soccer ball. He waved at me, urging me to play with him. I stood up, just as the flaming orange sun disappeared to the horizon with an emerald flash. Palm trees stood in silent reverie along the plaza above the beach. Beachgoers began to pack up, putting on their street clothes and folding up shade umbrellas. But the boy still wanted to play.
We kicked the ball back and forth, barefoot. He let out a wild little scream every time he got it past me or had to fall in the sand to stop my shots. He chattered incessantly about the World Cup and smiled with the whitest teeth I have ever seen on a young boy. His eyes sparkled like the stars, playing a simple game that he loved so much. Why he had picked me to play it with him I will never know.

Once he was tired out, the night had completely set in. I watched him run off, afraid of a scolding or missing the first round of tapas. The stars were now bright, almost dancing to the calming sound of the waves moving up. Nothing bizarre happened. No one appeared out of nowhere to offer me cold soup, no statues came to life to torment me. Only serenity.

And so perhaps this was Spain. The bullfights, flamencos, and history were there, yes, but they didn’t matter. I wasn’t angry anymore. My mind cleared of the fog. Content.

I heard something in the distance. My eyes strained into the darkness. The cruise ship was on the horizon, lit up by fog lights and decorative strings of white. The blue underside disappeared with the darkened cobalt sea. Like the sun, the ship slowly sank into the distance. But the sun would return in a few hours. The ship would not. A cruise ship was like the preconceived vision of Spain so many tourists had. It existed outside reality.

Only in faded dreams.
The Lost Continent of Africa

"The market is all about haggling in Morocco. My friend Kathryn was simply amazing at this, getting most of her purchases at a quarter of the original asking price. We routinely worked the cab drivers down from their ridiculous fares to something more manageable. I also had to ‘assist’ one restaurant owner with his math when he tried to overcharge us. I guess he thought I wouldn’t notice. I would say, however, that I was the best haggler, simply because I never bought anything... my kind of shopping." ~ Marrakesh, Morocco. September 12th.

"Trouble slaves, or freedom fighters, were held in this area. A strange looking hole made up the window this time. The room was about ten feet by twenty feet. It housed over eighty men. For you non-math majors, that’s about two and half square feet per person. This was home for upwards of three months. No bathroom, no bed, no sunlight, and meals portions that would starve a small child. The room was never officially cleaned, either. They relied on occasional rainwater and the crashing tide coming in from the window to wash away everything in small channels in the floor. The guide stopped and picked up some dirt from the channel. ‘This is the blood, feces, puke, urine and tears of my ancestors.’” ~ Cape Coast Slave Castle, Ghana. September 22nd.

“Have you ever known that quaint old person who does random things that make you smile? That can very simply describe this man. Tutu has so much energy for a man his
age, literally bouncing around the ship, dancing from the excitement he sees in all of us.

In his first speech onboard, the Archbishop told us how he feels reborn to live with so many young people. How he sees the future in all of us and how that makes him giddy. I can see it.” ~ Onboard the MV Explorer, en route to South Africa. September 28th.

“One hundred and fifty rand. That’s about twenty two dollars. It’s also the same amount of money many South Africans pay for school dues each year, and often that can be a struggle. The latter half of my time in Cape Town was mostly spent in what are called Townships, much like the projects in major cities around the United States. Poverty is everywhere, a strange juxtaposition to the crowning jewel of downtown Cape Town.” ~ Khayelitsha, South Africa. October 6th.

There’s competition seeded within desperation. Know who to trust in this lost continent or it will swallow you whole.
The Price of Soap

Despite the distinctive eagle of patriotism emblazoned across the inside of his passport, Derrick Goodwin told most shopkeepers in Morocco that he hailed from Canada. A furtive glance from the accuser under a patchwork awning in the middle of the marketplace maze caused Derrick to swallow hard. But the accusatory hardness of the ruddy, wrinkled face, gave way to a yellowed smiled that matched the stained teapots on display. Ever since his adventure to Marrakesh, Derrick resorted to dodging his nationality. Not because he was a bad American, or embarrassed, but rather, it simply made life easier. It meant people asked fewer questions, children gave fewer stares, and products came priced at fewer dirhams.

Evening crept over the walls of the Old Medina of Casablanca. Walkways no wider than two shoulder widths weaved in and out of the marketplace where Derrick looked at the teapots. An occasional bustle of men moving products made him look over his shoulders instinctively. A string of lights flickered on, stretching back behind him. Derrick ran his right hand over the scratchy surface of one of the teapots. Little specks of yellow dust floated up in front of him.

“Maybe later,” he said, turning away from the vendor. The wrinkled man started chattering after him, lowering his price and talking about the quality of the pots. Derrick just mumbled “la” over and over until the teapots receded from view.

The walls of the medina sprang up instead. A white surface inlayed with various designs from brown stones curled its way around the medina, with a few keyhole-like entrances dotting the perimeter. Newer construction stood in the distance, a contrast on the horizon. Strange smells filled the air: a mix of jasmine and standing, putrid water. One scent would mask another at times, but the overpowering combination was unlike anything Derrick had encountered, even back in Marrakesh. Every city here had its own smell.
The black outline of a palm tree caught his eye. Rick's Café. He imagined Humphrey Bogart just inside the walls, playing out classic American cinema. This would never exist without tourists or the film background, he thought. With a shrug of the shoulders, Derrick walked over to the white building with the inconspicuous sign, hardly even visible from a distance. Before he entered, he turned back to see the medina resting behind him, the energy of the shopkeepers bottled up for the next day. The ocean was not far either, lightly lapping against the shore and sending a fishy smell to the entrance of the café.

Once inside, Derrick glanced around for the bar. Curved arches broke the room into several sections, with light glancing off brass lamps, creating shadows of hanging plants on every white wall. The inner courtyard let in twinkling stars, sparkling over tablecloths and fancy cutlery. This establishment clearly catered to tourists and the more affluent Moroccans, judging from the décor. Past the courtyard and several casually dining patrons stood a sculpted bar reminiscent of that in the film. Palm tree sculptures lined the back of the bar, giving a border to the elaborate glass shelves holding alcohol of every type. Derrick walked over to it just as notes from a piano playing "As Time Goes By" filled the air. A few customers bobbed and hummed to the tune. Derrick sat down and immediately ordered brandy, feeling like a patron from the film.

As the barkeep filled his glass, another man sat down next to Derrick and ordered something else. He towered above Derrick, who, granted, was only about 5'7". The massive man looked over and down at Derrick and gave a warm smile. He looked American, with a white polo shirt that strained against a rotund belly and khaki shorts. Sweat beaded on the brow of a reddened face and would occasionally slip down to full cheeks, and eventually, the collar of the polo.

"You look exhausted, kid," the man said with a slight snort. Derrick nodded a little and saw the huge man put out a hand. Derrick shook it. "The name's Daniel Gilbert. I'm from Texas, you know." The southern twang resonated with Derrick as he took a sip from his brandy. He coughed a little from the strength of the alcohol.
“Derrick. Derrick Goodwin.” The big man grinned and turned in his barstool toward Derrick. After having only interacted with Moroccans for the past week, Derrick felt almost clumsy with his social niceties.

“We’ve done got good initials, huh?” the man chuckled. Derrick gave him a confused look, but the simple coincidence quickly flooded over him with a nervous laugh.

“Haha, yeah. Best ones around.” Another gulp of brandy. The piano stopped playing, leaving the air buzzing with light chatter. One of the waiters moved the lamp off a table, casting light across Derrick’s face, making him blink hard. The Texan seemed interested in continuing the conversation, ordering another drink. Derrick casually mentioned his backpacking trip across Europe, which had eventually led to crossing into Africa.

“So where you originally from, Mr. Goodwin?” the giant asked as the piano came back to life. Derrick shifted a bit, still a little uncomfortable. But this hulk of a man seemed genuine. He wasn’t out for money or a trade. He didn’t need Derrick’s dirham to buy bread; carried no trinkets that he claimed to have made by hand.

“Seattle, actually,” Derrick managed. The large man nodded and threw back some of his drink. Derrick felt a little weight released from his shoulders, as if his nationality was a ball and chain pulling him into the sand dunes outside of Marrakesh. Talking to another American snapped the tether.

“You travelin’ alone, friend?” the man asked. Derrick nodded with the sound of the piano louder every second. The pair moved in a little closer to hear each other. Derrick could feel the radiating heat from the man’s heaving chest. The booming voice dropped a few levels in volume.

“That’s not terribly safe around here with these Moslems.” Derrick fought the urge to roll his eyes.

“I’m not too worried. After Marrakesh, I can handle just about anything.” They both chuckled a bit as the bartender came back to freshen their drinks.

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“Well, I’ve got nowhere to be. Why don’t you tell me about it?” The big man leaned back a bit and grinned, teeth browned from soda. It was strikingly different from the pearly white teeth of the children in Spain, and the yellow stain of the Moroccan shop vendors. It was as if Derrick could tell something about people based purely on their dental hygiene.

“It all started with a train ride...”

Sitting there was like being in a tiny, cylindrical oven, surrounded by hundreds of other people, cooking, melting into the background. The smell of sweaty bodies hung in the air, suffocating all of us. Many of the Moroccans huddled in around me seemed impervious to it all. A pair of women sat across from me, never looking me in the eye and shifting uncomfortably every few minutes. The train screeched to a halt in the middle of an endless field.

I looked out the window and tilted my head a bit in confusion. A couple of men walked up the side of the train, looking under the carriage, stopping every few feet to chatter at each other. No one else on the train seemed alarmed or confused, so I settled back into my pool of sweat and tried to close my eyes. The heat was so uncomfortable that I couldn’t even sleep it off. The business man sitting next to me had such thick cologne on that I couldn’t keep a clear head. I felt trapped, in a way, and the train sat in the field for over an hour.

I awoke with a start. The train lurched forward as I realized I had finally drifted off to sleep. So much for that, anyway. My friend the businessman was now gone, replaced by a teenager fiddling with an ancient tape player covered in dust. He noticed my awakening and motioned toward my feet and shook his head, pointing out the back of the train car. It took a second for me to shake off the sleep, and once I came around, I realized what the teenager was saying. My travel bag was gone. I had placed it at my feet at the beginning of the train ride. All that remained were my ruddy hiking boots. My heart dropped to my stomach.
"Goddamn, where did..." I realized mid-sentence that my outburst had startled everyone around me. The teenager pointed at the back of the car again and I stood up, shirt sticking to my back. I grabbed my backpack, which I had kept on my lap, and started moving back down the aisles of the train.

Eyes followed me as I went. Most were curious. What is this small white guy doing, pushing past everyone in such a hurry? Children pulled at their parents to try and follow me. Women averted their glances just enough to not be overtly conspicuous. Row after row of torn, fabric-cushioned chairs stretched back until I came to the final car. I peered through the windows between cars to see only two men in the compartment.

A rush of air. Changing between cars. Clouds of burnt coal swirled above me. The constant rhythm of the track undulated below. I pulled open the final door into the last car and shut it behind me, my ears buzzing still from the outside wind.

Both men looked up at me, puzzled. One had a finely trimmed goatee against his sweating face, no larger than I am. The other was large, with broad shoulders concealed under a sweat stained white dress shirt. They both stood, as if to greet me. My travel bag sat on the seat next to the smaller man.

"That's mine," I said firmly, pointing at the khaki pouch. Both men looked me in the eyes and grinned, knowingly.

"La, mine," the small man returned, putting his hand on his chest. I shook my head, but the large man moved toward me ominously. I shrugged it off and reached for my bag. The two men grabbed for it as well, spilling some of the contents to the ground. My bottle of shampoo exploded on the floor, leaving a trail of liquid down the aisle. The larger man slipped on it and cracked his face on the arm of one of the seats. The small man put his hand on my face, still tugging at the bag, and started digging his nails into my forehead. I fell back, surprised by the sudden jabbing pain. The small man gathered up the fallen articles and crossed his arms over the bag.

"La, la afham inglizi!" he shouted.

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I stood, and was about to go for my bag again when the large man smacked me across the face. A buzzing in my temple left me sprawled out in the adjacent train seat. The men looked down at me nervously and quickly made their way out of the train car, back toward the front. I attempted picking myself up, but was still too dizzy. I drifted off as I felt a little trickle of blood run down my forehead and sting my eye.

“What a story, kid!” the Texan exclaimed, throwing his hand against his knee. “You done fought with those Moslems.” Derrick laughed a bit with him and ordered another drink. Many of the patrons were now filing out of the restaurant. The night grew quieter, but the Texan was more and more boisterous every time he opened his mouth.

“Well, there’s a whole lot more...”

“Oh, I bet. Let me tell you about Fes, though,” the big man interrupted. “The lady and I were up there just last week and had to chase around this guy named Sa’id.”

I woke up early in the morning while the missus tried to scrape out just a little more shuteye. The hotel we stayed in, Ibis I think it was, stood only a few blocks away from the bustling medina. I knew I had to go there to pick up tickets for a camel trek that would take us to Marrakesh. We were supposed to be traveling through the Dades Valley or something like that.

A couple of boys followed me up the road into the medina. I think they like watching a big old white man stroll through with a cowboy hat or something. Oh, yeah, I’m not wearing that hat now, but I’ll get to that. Anyway, I done found the entrance with the guides milling around and one of them took my arm and asked where I was heading. Now, I’m no fool, but I didn’t know where this camel trek place was, so against my better judgment, I took him with me.
This guy had on those long, flowing white robe things, the whole getup. A thick black unibrow, too, poor guy. But he had good English and seemed an okay sort. Took me straight to the little stand advertising the camel treks my wife and I had found the day before. The business was built right into the white outer wall of the medina, with little red flags and posters of the desert all around. Another Moroccan sat at the booth with a wide grin while I paid my guide some ungodly amount of dirham. The guide wandered off with a spring in his step, ducking through the patchwork tent of some other vendor.

The sun was damn hot that day, and even my hat didn’t seem enough to keep it out of my eyes. The market sure was busy for the morning, and it seemed like these guys fed off the energy of the sun. The man now sitting before me wore one of them white collared shirts you was talking about. Trying to look all official and whatnot. He wasn’t the one I booked the tour with, but I assured myself it made no difference. I just needed to pick up the tickets.

“Howdy. I bought tickets for the camel ride to Marrakech here yesterday.” The man pulled out a little box and started rifling through some pieces of paper.

“Your name, sir,” he asked. Or at least I think that’s what he said. All these Moroccans just mumble and so forth. Can’t hardly understand them.

“Should be under Gilbert, from Texas,” I boomed. Best place in the world I assured him. He smiled and shut the little box of papers.

“Oh, you’re American? I thought so,” he nodded and started scribbling on a notepad with a tiny pencil. He handed the paper to me. “Sa’id has your tickets. He will find you in the market square.”

“What’s that now?” I was all sorts of confused. How is this Sa’id going to find me? Why does he have my tickets? Why did it matter that I was American? Ugh, these Moroccans made no sense. The guy at the stall assured me this is how business sometimes worked here, and that the tickets were still being processed. He then held out his hand expectantly. I gave him ten dirham and huffed a bit.

Everyone here is just out for our money, you know?
So I walked back to the hotel and woke up my wife. She wasn’t real happy about that. When I tried to explain the situation, she was even more heated. Threw a pillow at me, even! She also complained about the air conditioner in the room dripping on her feet in the middle of the night. I couldn’t even tell if the darned thing was on. So she changed into one of her big old sundresses and we checked out of the hotel.

The marketplace in the medina is crazy. Guys running around with snakes and monkeys lined the stores and attracted all the less savvy tourists. We sat in a little open air café that bordered the market, sipping on water and eating kebabs. I know; kebabs for breakfast? It was the only thing I could understand on the menu. Our little metal chairs were already warming in the morning heat, and my wife complained about it every chance she could.

After sitting there for about half an hour, some guy walked up to us like we’re best pals. He patted me on the back and put the tickets on the table.

“You Sa’id?” I asked, turning the tickets over in with my fingers. And by tickets, these were really just scraps of paper with Arabic scrawled over them in pencil. The man looked down at me and laughed a little.

“La. I am Sa’ids’brother, Jawad.” I put out my hand to shake his, but he didn’t seem to notice. None of these guys seems to notice. That’s how I knew you were American. But anyway, I stood up with tickets in hand and motioned for my wife to do the same. “If you follow me, I will take you to Sa’id. He will take you to the camels.”

“Oh, no thanks. I know where the place is,” I said, sliding him a little money to get off my back. He gave me a suspicious look and wandered off. I watched as he weaved back into the crowd, the sun flying high above us. My wife tugged at my shirt and gave me an angry look.

“What do you mean you know where the place is?”
“Hun, you don’t let strangers take you anywhere around here. He could have robbed us blind.” My wife roiled her eyes and sighed while I looked around for a store with some kind of map. Most of the shacks with merchandise blended together. The same souvenirs hung in every other store. Anything of actual use seemed to be hidden away behind lamps, beads, and banana shoes. One storekeeper watched as I scoured his shack and moved over.

He didn’t really know much English. I think he was asking about what I wanted to find. I tried explaining a map to him, with a lot of hand gestures and miming. It was all lost on him. He ended up showing me a bunch of paintings of sand dunes. I left the shop empty handed, my wife milling around the next store’s teapots. She tapped her foot in the dirt and looked at me with her usually exasperated expression. My advice, never get married, kid.

Anyways, we walked around for another hour or so, lost to no end. I couldn’t even remember which way we entered that medina. It’s got so many mazes of streets and buildings that you would have to have GPS with you to not get lost. Well, we ended up back at the market café, my wife in a huff and more kebabs on the table. Then that kid Jawad showed up again, waving at me and walking right up to us.

“You still here? Camels leave soon.” I shrugged my shoulders a bit and he motioned for us to come with him. “I show you, come.” My wife jumped up, so I really had no choice. We followed the Moroccan past spices and snails boiling in pots. We walked under a number of blanket awnings and through the tangle of pathways. Eventually we came to the door of a little shop with a bunch of soaps and incense. He shuffled us in and told us to look around.

I wandered around for a bit, and noticed the entrance, the only way out. Two angry-looking guys blocked the door. My wife seemed oblivious to the trap, but I was on to the ruse. They wanted me to buy something, probably at twice the actual value, just to get out. The owner of the shop showed my
wife a number of bath salts, chattering to her half in Arabic, half in French. She just nodded and rolled her eyes.

Our guide, Jawad, came over to me and asked if I wanted to buy anything. I said something about a chunk of soap on one of the shelves, and he told me the price. Eighty dirham for an ugly square piece of soap. That’s ridiculous. But I didn’t say anything about it. My wife had picked out some incense and brought them to me, since she knew I was the one who did all the haggling. I grabbed those and the soap and brought out two hundred dirham.

“What are you doing, Dan?” My wife exclaimed, almost laughing at the outrageous amount of money I was willing to spend. I pulled her in close and whispered about the men at the door. For the first time that day she shut up, overtaken with the danger of the situation. The smell of the incense seemed to make the room even tenser. I held the money out for a moment, and the shopkeeper grinned. He swiped it quickly, his brown fingers rough against my palms. Jawad nodded to the men at the door, who stepped aside.

“Now, let me take you to my brother,” he exclaimed. And you know what, he did. Jawad walked us back through the maze and into a little plaza with a bunch of other tourists. Sa’id greeted us and took our tickets, not even bothering to look at them for confirmation. By golly, we were in Marrakesh two days later after riding those uncomfortable excuses for horses everywhere. We stopped in here for our flight back to the states.

Derrick and the Texan sat around a small table now, eating lamb kebabs. The story had whetted their appetite. A new rush of patrons filled the establishment with dancing and dining, gin and good times. A waiter filled Derrick’s sparkling crystal glass with water from a brand new Pellegrino bottle. He thought about the terrible fights with brackish water in Marrakesh. Worse still was the resulting visit to
the hole in the ground that many Moroccans used for a toilet. Derrick shook off the memory of paying
two dirham to use a public bathroom and turned back to the Texan.

"Well, as I said before, the train was only the beginning."

I awoke with a damp cloth over my forehead. Everything appeared wavy and distant. Someone
spoke in the distance, whispering sounds I couldn’t comprehend. The light bent over my eyes and
eventually evened out, an elaborate copper ceiling reflecting down on me. My legs hung down off an
opulent couch with pillows everywhere. My backpack stood on another pillow that sat on the floor.
Before I could do anything, a young man entered and knelt beside me.

“Oh, you’re awake. Are you all right?” I blinked at him questioningly and stumbled over my
words.

“I, umm... what happened? Where am I?” The man dabbed my face with the cloth and I saw
the soaked blood. The memories from the train flooded back, flushing my body into a panic. “I have to
go,” I proclaimed as I got up and grabbed for my bag.

“You really shouldn’t be out in this heat with a head wound,” the man returned with a look of
concern. The sea of magenta and gold couches made me dizzy. I steadied myself on a round table with
raised edges where a teapot sat in waiting. The steam from the pot rose up with a minty scent mixed in.
My hands grasped at the wood of the little table and drew my fingers across the fine grains. The sensory
overload was too much for my mind to handle, and I stumbled to the floor.

The man pleaded with me to stay, but I tuned him out. I didn’t trust any of them anymore. I
patted my pocket to make sure my wallet and passport were still in place, and stumbled out of the room
with my backpack. The man followed me as far as the front door, where I tripped out into the afternoon
sun, world spinning.
I found myself wandering in no particular direction. The sights and sounds of the medina in the distance beckoned me further. A few people looked at me with concerned faces, a large gash still running up the side of my face and forehead. Time passed without notice, as one second I was a mile from the striking walls of the marketplace, and the next, I was staring at the souks across the Djemaa el Fna. Koutobia Mosque rose up in the distance, the falling sun glancing around it with rays of brilliance. Somehow the evening hours crept in already.

Activity everywhere. Men scrambled around the market to take down day stalls. Giant pots rolled in along with tables and chairs. Snake charmers disappeared, and came back with new attractions. Henna artists gave way to glow-in-the-dark jewelry sellers. Dust kicked up from the whole of the square, making everything fuzzy. Lamps glowed into the now darkening sky. Men and women sat down to dinner at the new stalls. Tourists gagged through bowls of snails that had boiled in the giant pots. Slaughtered animal carcasses hung from restaurant awnings. A person didn’t need a menu here. You simply pointed at what you wanted to eat.

My head started to clear out with the tiny bit of cool air provided by the retreating sun. I felt the bruise on my face and winced a little. One man stared right at me, probably wondering how I ended up in the middle of this torrent of activity. I wondered that as well. My hotel reservation had been in my travel bag. I still had my wallet and passport, but no change of clothes, and only a little food and water in my backpack.

“You look lost. You American?” a man asked from behind me. He didn’t grin like most of the men. He just looked inquisitive. His English was fairly easily discernible. With those facts combined, I let my guard down for a moment.

“Umm, yeah. I... don’t know where I’m going.”

“Ah, eternally lost? Like a metaphor.” He tilted his head as I smiled a bit.
“Haha, not quite...” I stumbled in a circle and he followed, gently nudging me away from the crowds and off to the side of the square.

“Well, I don’t understand. Would you like directions?” He stood there, the mosque towering up behind him. His eyes had a little light in them. He was curious. It felt different from the people on the train or the shopkeepers when haggling.

“Umm, sure. Train station?” I decided I could try and retrace what had happened from the station. My hotel was in that area, as well. The man nodded and took my hand. That startled me at first. I had never held a man’s hand before. Something totally effeminate in the U.S. stood for something different in Morocco. I began seeing several other men walking hand in hand. A little detail I will never forget. His hand was impossibly soft. The act only bothered me for a short while. It eventually felt safe and almost natural.

We shot past the souks, twisting through little alleys and heading out toward a large street. A bent old sign with “Avenue Mohammed V” pointed down the street covered with cars and people. Carriages drawn by old, white, sickly horses trudged along with tourists in tow. Crowds moved in an out, closing in on the market square. My friend and I moved the opposite direction, large gates for the medina in the distance:

We took a turn into another little maze with hundreds of doors. Many of them had large brass knockers in the shape of hands. Pink and blue paints dominated the winding walls as we went deeper. I could see the large outer wall rise up as we got closer to the gates. The tiny walkways gave way to a long path that ended at the wall in a T. We headed down the path to the intersection just as the sun disappeared completely.

Blocked in. The two paths branching from the T both had locked gates. My guide let go of my hand and tried opening both of them. He banged on one loudly and looked back at me.
“Sorry, friend.” I smiled and said it was okay, motioning back down the path. We could easily go another way on the main road. That’s when the realization hit me. The loud bangs on the gate attracted attention. Three men exited doors in the alley. My guide joined them in forming a wall in front of my one direction of escape. The buildings seemed to grow around me, cutting off any connection I had to the outside world. A light flickered on above the group of men in front of me, revealing shiny little blades in their hands.

“Okay, what do you want?” I said slowly, raising my hands in surrender. The other men looked to the guide, who spoke in Arabic back at them. The men exchanged a few words before returning their gaze to me.

“Your money, your watch, your shoes, and your passport.” I rifled through my pockets to pull out everything. I then stepped out of my shoes and kicked them over to the men.

“Do you really need my passport? I... I really can’t.” I dropped six hundred dirham in front of the men, who almost salivated at the sight of my hotel fees, taxi, and train money. I stripped off my watch and dropped it in the pile.

“Yes, your passport, too.” The little navy blue book plopped down on the pile and one of the men gathered it all up. The guide waved at me and motioned for his men to follow him. They disappeared into one of the many houses, the easiest escape for any criminal in history. My face flushed and blood pounded up to my wound. I gingerly stepped over the stones and dirt back down the path, back into the main street of the medina.

Around midnight, and I’m guessing since my watch now hung around the wrist of some criminal, I finally found the train station. A huge glass entrance greeted me. A bronze star adorned the front façade along the glass. Above it all, the word’s “Gare de Marrakech” could be found etched into the top face of the building. Tiny tiles covered the walls in a mosaic of color subdued by the darkness. I tugged open the glass doors, my eyelids growing heavier with every step.

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The building was mostly empty. Trains didn’t run at night, though there were a few workers milling about. One man sat inside the little glass box where the tickets were sold. The high vaulted ceiling of the station echoed with the scratching of a cleaning lady’s shuffling shoes on the tiled floor. My bare feet seemed silent in comparison. I stopped in front of the glass box and realized it was no use. My pockets were empty. My debit card had been in my travel bag. I had no way of getting back to my comfortable hotel room in Casablanca.

The man in the glass booth stared at me with inquisitive eyes. I shrugged and headed back into the wide expanse of the train station. Darkened shops lined the outside edge of the building. There was even a McDonald’s in one corner, advertising a burger with egg on it. Green, contoured benches lined a few columns near the edges of the room. I sat down on one and stared at the floor. Before I could make any more decisions or come up with a plan, I slipped into dreams.

Commotion. I jumped at the noise of the early morning train station. People bustled past me and announcements came over an intercom. A woman sat on the bench across from me, sending me an occasional glance.

"Hey, it’s you." I turned to see an unfamiliar man peering down at me.

"Sorry, I think you have the wrong guy." I turned away, clutching my backpack and rocking back and forth a bit. My whole body stung and my head was still throbbing from the previous day.

"Here. I think this is yours." The man put something down next to me on the bench. I glanced over my shoulder slowly and couldn’t believe my eyes. A passport. I opened it quickly and found my familiar picture. The man nodded knowingly and smiled.

"Thanks. I umm, well I don’t have anything to give you."

"Give me? You don’t have to give me anything. Don’t you trust any of us?" He chuckled a bit and walked off. Still bewildered, I sat up and continued to rifle through the passport. Stuck between
the last few pages I found about thirty Euros. Easily enough to exchange for dirham and a ticket back to Casablanca. I picked up a new wallet on the way back.

The Texan sat in awe and raised his glass, finishing it off with a flourish. "What a story, kid. Damn, you lucked out."

"Haha, I sure did."

"Hard to tell who you can trust around here, huh?" The Texan dropped some money on the table for the waiter and stood up. "The missus will probably be looking for me."

"It was a pleasure," Derrick said, standing as well. The men shook hands and the Texan walked off. Derrick sat back down as another waiter took away the glasses, plates, and tip. Derrick sighed and looked around the room. Most everyone had left once more as the bar began to shut down. Ten minutes until closing. The piano sat dormant in the corner. Workers stripped cloths from tables and folded them into tiny, white squares.

Derrick closed his eyes for a second. The sound of a waiter running up to him brought him back around. It was a little man with big, white eyes. He shook a little as he pointed toward the door of the café. Then he tried his best to talk.

"Sir, did he take your wallet?" Derrick looked at him dumbfounded and patted his pocket. The familiar bulge jutted out reassuringly.

"Haha, no. Right here in my pocket. He's my friend."

"Well, I tried to stop him. I could have swore he took your wallet." The man lingered, and Derrick smirked a bit.

"Here, I'll show you." Derrick reached into his pocket and pulled something out, dropping it on the table with a thud. The blood rushed out of Derrick's face. There was no wallet, just a square chunk of ugly, Moroccan soap.
The Brown Grass

A water tower once stood in a deserted field on the Sekondi side of a river that ran by Nkruma Road. I made a daily journey there to gather water for my ailing father. The water tower could only be seen after passing above a small ridge, but once it appeared, it dominated the barren landscape. The giant metal structure was ugly in every way imaginable, tilted to one side and shaking on rusted tripod legs. Old blue paint chipped off and blew away with the dust, revealing a rugged bronze outer cover. Ugly or not, reaching this overt landmark in the amber field meant everything to me.

The decrepit shacks I walked by every day all looked the same. Sheets of metal were thrown together with reckless abandon, strung tight by wire, twine, chords or old strips of kente cloth wound into solid ropes. Rust climbed up the sides, poisoning the stressed structures until they ultimately tumbled down in a rain of scrap metal and cardboard. The shocked owner would stare at the pile as if it would reassemble itself, assuming they had the luck of not being inside when the collapse occurred.

Nkruma Road presented this unending loop of tragedy for me as I walked to the water tower in the distance. The makeshift homes lurched as I passed by, almost as if they were yearning to come with me on my journey.

Except for Mr. Mbenga’s shack. The loudest and most outgoing man of the slums of Takoradi had a bright red shack with the word “Vodaphone” emblazoned in stark white lettering on the side adjacent to the street. I had been walking back from the water tower the day he had proudly finished painting his masterpiece, funded by a budding cell phone company. Anyone who passed Mr. Mbenga had the misfortune of hearing him blabber on about his latest business scheme. Apparently the company paid him the upkeep of his six foot by eight foot shack in return for advertising space.

Still lugging both jars of water from the tower, a third balanced perfectly atop my head, Mr. Mbenga flagged me down, smiling widely with a paintbrush still in his hands. I put down the jars I was
carrying and looked him square in the eyes. Mr. Mbenga was not particularly interesting to talk to; yet, denying him the pleasure would send him into a tirade in some language no one had ever validated.

Mr. Mbenga dropped his paintbrush on the ground and wiped a mix of sweat, paint, and general grime from his broad forehead. His eyes darted from the jar on my head, to my eyes, and then down my shirt: his usual custom. The kente cloth I wore was tattered from years of labor, and Mr. Mbenga knew he could catch a glance of my rather large breasts simply by being overt. I folded my arms across my chest to get his attention and he looked up.

"Nice, right?" He said, a sly grin on his face. I looked over at the shack and nodded. The paint was just now drying in the sun, a blazing orb sapping the moisture out of everything in sight. The water in my jars was already creating condensation, dripping onto the ground and creating a tiny little chasm in the dirt. Mr. Mbenga seemed to motion forward toward his little hut, offering me a step into the shade. I shook my head and gathered my water, being extra careful in rebalancing the first jug above me.

"You're no fun, Afia." He spat and hunkered inside. I didn't need the money that day, anyway. The fried plantains in my side bag were enough for both father and me. That day was the first in almost a week that I had not traded my body for something. All the men on Nkruma Road knew me from that. I was the girl who carried water from the tower far away, hiding her true means of income from her ailing father.

About two miles past the shacks, half way to the water tower, hung a gate made of some shiny metal. This glittering spider web, interlinked and locked in the middle, blocked a perfectly paved roadway down into a little valley. At the bottom of the valley was a lavish hotel for wealthy visitors, so out of place it was like the countryside was a plantain that had rotted through and over, with one tiny spec of edible skin in the center.
Sometimes I would stand outside the gate, on days when the sun was tired of herding goats into the shade. There was rarely any sound from the hotel. I imagined the inside being filled with fantastic music. A bas relief on the side of the building in the distance pictured a band made up with all the traditional instruments and players. The music in my mind would melt away the second I realized no Ghanaian playing his goje fiddle or pounding a xylophone to asonko music would ever be permitted access. The image on the side of the building was both a literal and figurative façade. It was as if the three foot smile of the drummer was not out of love for music, but a keen mockery of anyone who traipsed by with water balanced on her head. I could never figure out how Ekuwa could stand to look at it all day.

Ekuwa owned the little shop across from what we both referred to as the palace of the obrunis. She was a hardened woman with a deadbeat taxi driver husband. "He is With You Food and Store" popped up across the way from the glittering gate just days after the opening of the hotel. The store served as a good resting place on my journey, and Ekuwa and I grew from the occasional awkward nod to an occasional awkward hello. The day she had a rich customer in the store from some place called Massauchu Sits was when we first became friends.

"Well, I will give you ten cedi, that's it." The woman facing Ekuwa was flushed and drenched in sweat. Much like the gate, sun gleamed off the woman and burned my eyes so that I could never look at her directly. The kente cloth she was bargaining for was worth little more than two cedi, but Ekuwa was masterful when it came to tricking these obrunis. She simply gave a blank look to the ever-reddening woman, which prompted a short tirade on how people around the world should know how to speak English if their country was claiming it as the national language. The simple fact was Ekuwa, like almost everyone else, knew plenty of the language, but found these outsiders' loud overuse of it to be irritating.

Eventually the deal worked to twelve cedi. I watched the puffy white lady toddle out across the street to meet her husband who was taking pictures of every pebble he happened across. Ekuwa sat
down next to me and grinned, the lines in her face like tangles of infant cassava roots competing for a drop of water. I remember thinking how I should say something about the excellent bargaining, but all I could muster was a contented sigh and nod. God spoke between us that day, and the awkward hello transformed into a sisterhood. I needed a mother figure in my life, after all.

The death of my real mother was hard on my father. I imagined tiny holes bleeding out from his heart and into his red eyes. The holes never healed. Mr. Dramani, the closest thing my family knew to a doctor, never could explain my father’s new condition. Neighbors said it was because a married man could never return to being a walk-alone.

For the first few days we both sobbed underneath the deafening pitch of rain landing on our tin roof. Little paths of water trickled through the slat under the door and ran down to our feet, meeting our tears in a salty pool of confusion. It was comforting to think of God weeping with us, for even He had not foreseen my mother lying down in the street, heaving and lurching, her body in a swirl of dust until her lungs seized and took her away. I remember kneeling next to her, Mr. Dramani and half the rest of our neighbors crowding about. When I glanced up, beyond the shadows of people standing about was a sign I passed by every day going to school. It was the fast food stall “Jesus Loves You.” I did not believe the sign that day. And I never got to go back to school.

“What do you think about those assemblymen?” Ekuwa pointed at her store’s back wall, which was open to the street. On it were two signs, scrawled out in big letters with names and a cut-out photo from newspapers. Kojo Addo and Mr. Mbenga were once again running for the general assembly of Takoradi. Addo was elected this term, as he was for the last three. Mr. Mbenga held the spot the two times before that, and Addo once prior as well. In fact, these were the only two men in the position for the last twelve terms, as far as anyone else remembered.

I can recall my first vote because I got to wear a new outfit my mother had bought for me. There was a little makeshift tent on the corner of the market plaza where everyone could come and sign
their name and then vote. Both Addo and Mr. Mbenga stood by the booth, making last second appeals.

The line curled around the corner, with aunties walking up and back selling water in plastic bags. The only thing I don’t remember was actually voting. It was like the booth swallowed me up into darkness and when I came out, I was a new woman. The street was a little cleaner, sun a little less harsh.

Ekuwa pointed at the posters again and smirked. “Hey, still nothing new.” We both laughed from the pits of our stomachs. The same pictures were used last year. It was five years since I had even bothered with waiting in line to vote. I had only voted once after my mother’s death. She used to go with me. My father could not come with me because he could not stand in the line long enough.

Farther along the road toward the water tower I crossed the bridge. Technically it signaled that I was no longer in Takoradi, but rather Sekondi. I liked this part of my journey the most, outside of talking to Ekuwa. Somewhere in the distance I could hear water crashing into stone. The river I was crossing led straight into the ocean. The smell here was terrible, like urine washed with harsh chemicals and then cooked into jollof. And yet I still loved it. The shacks and palace for obrunis and everything else was all behind me on the road. This bridge, all splintered wood, sagging down toward the water, meant crossing into some sort of freedom.

The day the bridge sagged completely and split off into the river was the day I decided I would never prostitute myself again. The men of Nkruma Road took notice of this, and stared at me with hateful eyes as I returned home. I could no longer reach the water tower without that bridge. Perhaps I could have left it at that, and just gone to the closer water tower on our side of the river. But I would lose Ekuwa, and more importantly, I would lose my escape. The long walks were my own form of medication. I could not let a few broken logs steal my prescription pad.

And so I made a poster. Lots of posters, actually. I was determined to race against Kojo Addo and Mr. Mbenga so I could use our community money to rebuild the bridge. Ekuwa was the first to laugh at me.
“Child, what is this?” She held the poster up and examined it the way she would a scrap of kente. I explained my rather delicate situation that day, sitting with her and watching the road. I walked that road every day, and yet it seemed strange to simply observe it. Every once in a while a car would sputter by, dust and smoke trailing behind it. Less often a nice new car would slide past, harsh bright colors speeding against the earthen browns and yellows of the countryside. I yearned to be a bright color.

“What’s your father think?” Ekuwa chuckled. Truthfully, I hadn’t told him. I would eventually, I thought, but only on one of his good days.

The rest of the posters found spots on market walls and old posts or crumbled dugouts. Immediately there was a commotion. I assumed the uproar concerned my being a woman. Instead, I heard many of the people talking about how there were three candidates. This was rather unheard of. For the longest time, two candidates, Mr Mbenga and Kojo Addo, both ran under the presumption of being supported by God. Somewhere down the line people had accepted the fact that God could endorse two men, showing His own affinity toward democracy. But how could God truly endorse three people? It was as if He could not make up His mind! Of course, I had to have Him on my side. When every business hung pictures of Jesus in the window, or named their establishment after Christ himself, public opinion tended to look down on those without His support.

Two days before the election, all the interested people gathered in the market circle to hear us speak our opinions. Ekuwa let me borrow a nice new kente outfit she made for the rich obrunis. It covered all of me, yet was still tailored enough to show off my body. A tall woman with large breasts was something of a spectacle around the shacks, and I did not want to lose that slight edge over the male voters.

The evening appeared as the proceedings began, lighting the sky with a ferocious red scar. Nearly three hundred people gathered around, filling up every inch of the market. This was an unusually
large turnout, as many of the spectators came to see how it could be possible for God to support three people, and even a woman. A stinging hush came over the crowd, only the sound of a shack being banged together could be heard in the distance.

Silence reminded me of the water tower. I would always reach it during the very middle of the day, when shadows disappeared beneath their creators. Little tufts of grass grew under the water tower, shade and an occasional splash of water sustaining bright green hairs of the earth. Sometimes I would pick one of the blades of grass and squish it between my fingers. I did not see why it had been so lucky. Just by mere happenstance that roots had touched upon a blessed place of sustenance while the rest of the grass outside the shade shriveled into brown spikes. I imagined their green cousins crying out in anguish and then feeling bad, but only for a fleeting second.

Seconds are delicate. The few thousand I had to explain my stances to the people seemed to shrivel and die like the brown grass right in front of me. Some of the people in the crowd jeered when I talked of the bridge.

"Let Sekondi handle that," Mr. Mbenga responded. He nodded with audience approval. The moment held fast to some strange caricature, as though Mr. Mbenga was dancing above them and pulling every string like the market woman and her puppets. But what truly scared me was not the rote approval, but what he said. Was I being selfish? Did we really need that bridge? I did not find out until two years later that the bridge was used by Vodaphone shippers, as well as the largest contingent of shore fishermen in the country. This was quite literally the economic life vein into the heart of our part of Takoradi. It was rebuilt almost immediately.

I remember the gathering in the market being over before I could state all of my points. The men liked to talk over me, which only seemed to amuse the audience. I closed my eyes and imagined being back at home with my father. At this time he would be finishing the fufu I pounded earlier. Maybe he would grab the woven quilt my mother had made him and bury himself in it. My daydream
carried me through the rest of the ordeal, until the sun had completely surrendered, and onlookers ambled home to start preparations for the following day.

"We talk now?" Mr. Mbenga said with a smile. Kojo Addo had already disappeared into the street behind the market. Mr. Mbenga put a hand on my knee, sending a tiny shock into my brain. I glowered at him, and turned away.

"What your daddy think if I tell?" I could feel him drilling through the back of my head with that cocky smirk. It drained me of everything, my heart pumping faster yet nothing seeming to flow forth. I felt like I lost all of my color, so that I was just a flushed white woman from Massachu Sits who was bargaining without any leverage. Mr. Mbenga could tell my father about all the nights where I snuck out and did whatever the men of Nkruma Road paid for. The holes in my father's heart would widen and meet, until there was nothing left holding him together.

I voted for Mr. Mbenga. Of course I received very few votes overall. Not only did I fail at the speech and gathering, but also because no one really knew who I was. Just some random girl that their cousin said might be a common whore on Nkruma Road. There were also rumors I associated myself closely with a devil woman that tried to trick God into endorsing me. I later found those rumors to be partly true. Ekuwa was my only friend, and being born on a Wednesday, she was suspected always of something sinister. That unfortunate fact, coupled with her store being so close to the palace of obrunis, made her even more of a pariah than me.

Pumping water from the tower was difficult some days. The rust on the handle flaked off as I grabbed it, and chafed my burning hands. My three containers would be lined up in a row under the spigot. On the hottest days, I filled my first container and then hoisted it up and turned it over in the brown grass. I did this while staring angrily at the green grass hiding under the tower itself. Brown grass deserves it as much as you, I said over and over. Then I would come around to how silly and wasteful I was being, and continue the usual process of pumping and filling.
Today, the water tower is being taken apart. I have been told that there was a new one put closer to the shacks in Sekondi. It doesn’t matter, really. My father is dead. I suppose I come here out of habit. The rusty pipes are split open by power tools, a loud whine ringing across the field. What would that sound be like from the bridge? Could Ekuwa hear it?

I sit there, on a little mound of dirt, picking at pebbles while watching my water tower lurch and groan to the ground. I breathe heavy, my kente sticking to me. The terrible smell of the river reaches me somehow. Or maybe that is how the inside of the water tower smells, too. A rare breeze comes across the field as the final scraps of the tower are rounded up. Two men look over at me and say something I will never know. They then get in their truck and haul away the pieces, kicking up a mix of dust and memories, swirling together like Mr. Mbenga dancing above a crowd.

There is one thing left. The green grass. I walk over to it and lay down around it. The earth is cooler here, after decades of perpetual shade from the equatorial imminence. I rustle around a bit, basking in some strange glory.

“Soon, you are like the other grass,” I said under my breath, running my fingers in the tufts of greenery. “Brown, and dead.”
Fumes of exhaust wafted through the bus windows as the boys climbed on. The Cape Town Detention Center for Boys cast a shadow across the cracked pavement, creeping up next to the bus as if the building would attempt to follow. The first bit of escape for the population of the DCB was an overnight trip to Table Mountain.

One of the older boys sat in the very last seat with his arms crossed and his eyes only half open. Manne watched the others take seats and calculated who would have to sit with whom. Of course, the younger, smaller boys would double up on the threadbare bench seats. Manne spread his arms across his seat and put on an intimidating stare. No one dared sit with him.

As the bus driver pulled out of the parking lot, Manne looked back and glared at the giant brick building he lived in. The DBC catered to boys for age 11 to 18. Most were runaways or left behinds that got into trouble stealing or squatting. Manne was one of the few there for a violent crime, and he took an established pride in that fact. Only a few of the boys talked to him, and he liked it that way.

The bus passed by a few low walls and fences, crumbling and falling apart in the heat. A few school children walked past with their shaved heads and pink uniforms. One older man watched the bus closely as it slipped by, slowly escaping from the township. Manne wondered if anyone mistook this bus for the tour buses that whizzed by every few hours. Then he shook the thought out of his mind. This bus was sputtering and rusty. And hot.

Bouncing along just outside the township, many of the students chatted excitedly. Their first official field trip created a lot of buzz. One of the benefactors of the DBC said the journey up Table Mountain created manhood: strong men with good morals and a taste for adventure. Of course, the generous donation for the program helped it along as well.
Manne leaned back in his scratchy seat. Sweat already dripped down his forehead, stinging his eyes with every little drip. He closed them, and drifted away for what seemed like a few minutes. The low murmur of the boys mixed with an occasional excited yelp or jarring bump in the road made it an uneasy bit of rest.

And then they were there. Manne squinted out the window at a giant stone wall. Trams ferried people up the sheer, magnificent cliff. But Manne didn't get his hopes up. He had overheard the counselor. They were to climb this mammoth. Manne moved his eyes across a little path that wound up the mountain, going back and forth, back and forth, noting the length and uneven stones. He rolled his eyes and stood up as the boys filed out.

When he was eight years old, Manne would have never imagined seeing Table Mountain. He also would have never thought of bringing harm to others with his fists. But the latter experienced changed the night his mother left.

"I don't want to hear it, bitch!" Manne's father yelled in the kitchen. Manne's room was down the hall, but nothing in the house really ever stayed a secret. Such a small place with thin walls and no doors meant privacy was at a premium.

"I swear, it wasn't me," his mother returned. Manne could practically hear the pounding of tears of the kitchen floor. Her voice strained from every syllable.

"Well, I have it. So it must be from you." Manne then heard a thud and a gasp. Loud shrieking followed. Then, banging. The clatter of pans. Cupboards slamming. It sounded like a thunder storm inside the house. Then it stopped as abruptly as it started.

Manne crawled out of his little, worn bed and slipped down the hall quietly. He could hear his father breathing heavily, and his mother sobbing silently. When he turned the corner to the kitchen, his hands began to tremble. A streak of blood stretched out across the floor. A frying pan lay bent on the
kitchen counter. Other pots and pans were strewn about. The handle from one cupboard was still in his father’s hand.

Then there was his mother. She sat in the corner with a cookie sheet in her hands, holding it above her face like a shield. Her arms were bloody and her mouth was wide with terror, sobs draining out involuntarily. Before she could say anything, Manne’s father turned to him and pointed out the room.

“Go back to bed, boy. Don’t let me catch you out here again.” And that’s when it happened. Like the snapping of a cord or the moment when something breaks the surface of water. Manne changed in an instant. He charged at his father, yelling, his tiny voice breaking and shrieking. His mother tried to stop him, but it was too late.

Whack!

Manne was on the floor. He tried to get up, but the stinging in his head left him floating in a linoleum sky. A leg cast a shadow across his vision, and he clawed at it, his fingers trying to break the massive limb off. It did nothing. Another sharp pain, this time in his side. Gasping, Manne went blank. When he woke up the next morning, his mother was gone.

Table Mountain jutted up behind Cape Town like a protective border from the rest of the African continent. Fog in the morning was likened to a table cloth covering the natural spectacle. Lion’s Head and Devil’s Peak flanked the Table Mountain plateau and created a natural amphitheatre where the city lived. A breathtaking, jagged, grey and brown stone backdrop for the pearl city of Africa.

“It’s just a stupid mountain,” Manne lamented under his breath. The screaming hole in his lungs formed while climbing up the steep trail to the top of the mountain was finally stitched shut. A sweeping view of the harbor reflected in his eyes while he dangled his feet over the edge of Table Mountain. The sign behind him warned visitors to stay back, but Manne didn’t care. In his mind, the whole trip to this so called “icon” was a waste of time.

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The lanky group counselor with buggy eyes and a receding hairline finally puffed his way up to the group of delinquent boys. Someone muttered "bossie" under his breath. Mr. Bossie, as the boys called him, leaned down, his head toward his knees, pulling in air with a dry cough.

"Good work boys," he started, pausing to suck in more air. "We can stop here for lunch."

"We takin' the tram thing back down?" Colin asked Bossie in his often annoyed voice. Colin was the only white boy in the group, but garnered his respect from being the oldest as well. He also served as a constant reminder that the stories about white people being so virtuous and above the criminality of the blacks and coloured were nothing but legend, a mere wisp of idealism lost to the constant wind atop Table Mountain.

"No, no. This is a two day trip, boys. That's why we packed so much." Their bumbling leader had finally regained his breath and was now spreading mustard across a piece of bread. "You can look around if you want, just be back in half an hour. We're going to the highest point on the mountain next."

Manne sighed and stood up, wandering off toward the throngs arriving at the café just a short walk from the tram station. Most of the crowd was school children, their shaved heads gleaming in the sun, a subtle reminder of their submission to the wills of others.

"Where you going, Man?" Robert asked with a whistling sound in his voice. Manne rolled his eyes and turned to face Robert.

"Why do you care, Teeth?" All the boys called Robert that because he had metal in his mouth: some sort of botched set of braces that Robert had tried to remove with a screw driver. No dentist would touch the strangled mess of metal, not that Robert had the money for it anyway.

"I just thought you might be running off with Colin and I," Robert returned with a crack forming in the corner of his mouth. Manne raised an eyebrow and motioned Robert to walk with him.

"You know what happens if we leave, Teeth? You want to go back to the detention cells?"

Robert just smiled, or what could be described as such in his state and threw up his arms. Manne hated
Robert, but talked to him because he was more annoying if you didn’t. And he had Colin’s respect for some reason, so Manne let it be.

“T’、“m innocent, Man. No way those fuckers should be allowed in my dad’s bar. I beat those guys because I had to,” Robert said. Robert, Colin, and Manne were the three boys at the DBC with a violent past.

“The way I hear it, you beat one of their asses and the others gave you a little donner and bliksem.” Manne laughed a bit and pushed Robert casually.

As soon as the words hit Robert’s ears he jumped Manne and grasped for his throat. The two boys struggled in front of the mob of people, two teachers looking on aghast, trying to lead their year two students away. Blood rushed into Manne’s hands, his heart pumping with a vigor he only felt when fighting. It was not long before Robert ended up on his back, Manne standing above him with a gash over the knuckles on his left hand where the metal in Robert’s mouth had cut him. Robert looked up at him with hatred in his eyes, mouth bleeding profusely.

“Yeah, what? You’re still too scared to go with me and Colin,” Robert spat, scrambling up, holding his hand to his mouth. The words trickled down in front of Manne while Robert walked toward the bathroom to clean’up.

Fear. Men don’t feel fear. That’s what Manne’s father told him the day he died. Manne remembered scratching the speckled paint on the hospital chair while he waited for the doctor outside his father’s room.

“Be brave, child,” a soothing voice boomed at him.

“Gogo?” He looked up at the elderly woman across the hall from him. She was a thick woman with an unflinching resolve in her eyes. There was some sort of warm draw between them for a fleeting moment.

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Before the woman could utter another word, the doctor swung open the door and waved him in.

Manne got up and walked toward the threshold. The old woman put a hand on his arm.

"Every man is made in a different way. Be strong for him." The hand left his arm leaving a shadow of risen blood. The feeling of drowning Manne had been feeling for days seemed to wash away, the suffocating, brackish water draining out into the harbor in his stomach.

"Go away, pommie," Manne's father waved at the doctor. As soon as Manne was alone with his father the sun glared into the room, brushing them with the unreal Polaroid hue of brightness and vibrance. "I thought he would never go away. He says he don't treat us coloured men anymore past this point." Manne moved closer, salty wells forming in his eyes.

"What does that mean?" Manne wiped away a tear, his father now hazy in his vision.

"Get those fucking tears out of your eyes, boy. You gotta' be a man now." Manne fell to his knees, a ten-year-old crumpled at his father's bedside, soaking his pride in tears.

"But I'm afraid!" The cry rang out, travelling to the ears of everyone to ever value the manhood of South Africa.

"You stop that before I klap you!" His father rose up, knocking a file to the ground with big words to the ground. Some sort of deficiency syndrome that Manne could hardly read. "A man's got to be a man all the time. Men aren't afraid of anything." At the drop of the last word, Manne swallowed hard, the faucet turned off, rerouted to somewhere inside him where he could hide the tears. His father just nodded and leaned back, motioning toward the door.

When he left the room, Manne saw the old woman talking to the doctor. The woman seemed to stumble for a second, stabilizing herself against the wall with a trembling hand. "What am I supposed to do without my husband?" she burst out. Manne wondered how his mother would have reacted just then. Somehow that question simply conjured up anger, a convenient blanket to cover the wound that formed in that dark place he would never let anyone see. 

~ 95 ~
Back on Table Mountain, Manne found Robert coming out of the bathroom. Their eyes met for a moment, anger mixed with an understanding.

"I'm not afraid. Maybe I just don't want to hang out with a bunch of bergies like you.‖ This time Manne could see the anger flare into Robert, but the bloody mouth was enough to blow it aside.

"Fine, have fun with Mr. Bossie and the rest of the lovable losers.‖ Before Robert could storm off, another voice boomed in behind them.

"Howzit?‖ They both turned to face Colin. "Man coming with us, Teeth? We're running short on time. Now, now.‖ The other boys looked at him a little surprised, and then he noticed the blood.

"Aww, you got yourselves into a little jaunt, didn't you? Come on, you can kiss and make up later." The three boys walked in the opposite direction of all the tourists, far into the great, flat expanse of Table Mountain. Colin led the way with Manne and Robert jockeying for position at his immediate right. The fog was all but gone from the mountain by that point in the day, a table cloth being prepared for wash. Sun was now glaring down at them, demanding their reverence.

"Where are we going, anyway?‖ Robert piped up. He was grabbing at his leg now and again, scratching at some itch that wouldn't go away.

"You gotta' relax, Teeth. Just a shortcut.‖ Colin had a way of always holding one little piece of information out in front of people for bait.

"To what?‖ Manne chimed in, trying to act annoyed like Colin always did.

"To the top. We're gonna be sitting there waiting for old Bossie when the group gets there," Colin said with a laugh. He pointed toward a ridge in the distance, and the boys continued their climb.

"But then we'll just be caught,‖ Robert piped up. He finally stopped scratching and was now starting on his lunch while walking. Manne wondered how he could eat with the mess of metal in his mouth.

~ 96 ~
“Caught for what? We just tell him we thought it would be a good lesson in being men by blazing the trail. Isn’t that the giyn shit he’s always talking about?” There was a twitch inside of Manne, that single word cutting out a thread of his past. The thread that tied him into the DBC unwillingly.

Two years before, when Manne was 14, he left the orphanage where he lived to work on the street. Because her worked in the same area his father did, most of the rich kids knew about him and his family.

“Oh, look, it’s the little coloured boy. How’s it going, jukka? Why aren’t you out with your daddy?” The year ten boy burst out into laughter with his cohorts, gathered around Manne on the corner separating his township from the outside world. Manne always worked on that corner, cleaning car windows or fixing things for the rich white folk that passed by. The three boys in front of him were frequent visitors to the braai across the street.

“Just leave me alone.” Four years of stabbing pain in the pit of Manne’s heart had made him hard to the ridicule, but he had a tipping point.

“Of, that’s right. His daddy died. How’d he die, gammie?” The boys laughter echoed up and down the streets.

“You know how he died. Just move along.” Manne knew everyone had heard. His father was one of the first big cases in the coloured community. The whites saw it spreading from the black to the coloured and were afraid it might work its way to them.

Yeah, I know you have to be a giyn fag to get it,” the boy hollered back. Manne stood up and looked at them hard. The boy continued, speaking in a higher pitched voice.

“What, you one of them, too? You want my body, giyn? Don’t worry, I already had your sist...” before he could finish the word, Manne’s fist landed with the deafening crack of nose cartilage failing under hundreds of pounds of pressure.
Manne was amazed by how quickly a rich white kid could fall. The other two shrunk back, running to the braai asking for a phone. Manne looked down at the boy, struggling to stop the gushes of blood that were now pooling and sizzling on the hot pavement.

“Yeah, I want your whole body.” Manne kicked him again and again, each time harder until the sound of bones cracking sent the chills into his brain. No drug could simulate that feeling. Manne rolled the boy over and nudged the boy’s crotch mockingly. “Oh, wait. There’s nothing there to want.” Manne spat on the boy and gave him one final blow to the face, already caved in from the assault.

Manne was arrested that same day and sent to the DBC. None of the boys there knew the whole story, but rumors filled in the gaps. Manne didn’t mind, as long as the part about his father being called a giyn fag never reached his ears.

Back on Table Mountain, the boys stopped at a pile of rocks. Colin identified it as their final destination.

“This is lame,” Robert said, throwing his backpack against the pile of rocks. Without knowing what they were looking for, a person could easily miss the highest point of Table Mountain. At the end of a long trail, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, a giant mound of stones denoted the peak. The tourists weren’t clamoring about. Their tiny electric fans wouldn’t have cut it out here.

“Yeah, well this is it. I’m going to sit on the top and wait for them,” Colin replied, exasperated with the other two boy’s lack of enthusiasm.

“Why do you get to sit on the top?” Robert shot back, looking jealous and dejected.

“What, you gonna’ fight me for it? Didn’t Man woop you good enough already?” The two boys began scrambling up the little mound while Manne just stared off into the distance. He turned back to them and yelled up.

“Hey, what’s the thing over there?” He pointed, and Colin held his hands over his eyes for shade.

“Oh, that’s the beach.” Colin turned back to continue climbing.

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“Very funny,” Robert said, a few rocks below him.

“No, I’m serious. I’ve been there before.” Colin said a lot of things like that. Some days Manne wondered if Colin really had done everything he claimed.

“A beach on top of Table Mountain? You think I’m doff or something?” Manne yelled up.

“Whatever, man. Don’t believe me. Just get your scared ass up here and see for yourself.” Colin threw a rock down by Manne with a thud. Manne turned, glaring up, every muscle in his hand twitching.

What happened next could only be described as a rabid dash up the mound. Rocks flew to the ground as the three boys crawled all the way up. Colin, already having the lead, made it to the top first, sitting up on the peak and stretching out his arms in victory. He opened his mouth to speak just as Manne crested the top, tackling Colin and bringing both of them tumbling off the other side.

“Take it back!” Manne yelled as the two rolled, struggling against each other. The rocks burned and jabbed into them until the ground rose up and smacked them both back to reality.

“Shit, get off of me. I think my leg’s swak!” Colin growled, heaving Manne back against the pile and crumpling into a white mess on the ground. His leg was gashed up and down, not to mention bent at a peculiar angle. There was a moment of disbelief in Manne. Something about Colin had always made him seem so immortal, so powerful. Now he was writhing on the ground with a snapped leg, blood and tears drying in the dust.

“Bra, you done it now,” Teeth yelled from the top of the pile, now sitting triumphantly. He jumped up and skidded down beside them with his metal grin glinting in the sunlight. “Once Bossie gets here you’re gonna’ get it. I’m talking solitary.” Robert laughed and picked up a rock, throwing it near Colin, who flinched and yelled in pain.
"Goddamn, why'd you do that?" Colin growled.

"Because I love seeing you squirm around like that, Cocoa," Robert beamed. Somehow the irony of Colin's nickname only became apparent to Manne years later.

"I'm getting out of here," Manne said, not looking at his fallen comrade.

"Yeah, get the fuck out of here, jukka." Colin pulled himself over to a perch against the rocks. His face was bright red like the double-decker buses Manne saw in advertisements for studying in Britain. These were the first tears Manne had seen fall from those eyes, dark and filled with hatred. Somehow he was almost jealous.

"I'm going to this so-called lake. Tell Bossie I'll be back later tonight. And tell him you fell. Don't want the boys knowing some crunchie messed you up, do you?" Manne stormed off, not looking back. He heard the crunching steps of Robert following.

"I'm coming with, Man. I gotta' see this lake up close", Robert said quietly. Manne made his hand into a fist and almost knocked him flat right there. But he held it in.

"Whatever." All Manne could feel was the rush of blood. The palpable feeling of lust for causing harm. The snap of Colin's leg. The power.

And then it appeared: a lake just beyond a little grove of tropical growth. Hardened mud turned to soft, white sand. Manne stopped and stared at the expanse of water, so out of place on top of a mountain. Robert shuffled past him and stripped off his shirt and pants, stumbling over in the sand while removing his left shoe. Manne shook his head and sat on a rock that poked into the sandy, white crescent by the shore.

"What, you can't swim or something?" Robert laughed. He flopped into the water and paddled around, almost as if he was punching through the water instead of swimming. Manne shrugged and closed his eyes, hoping the boy would shut up.
“Sorry if I don’t want to swim around in my boxers with you, Teeth,” he yelled back. A cloud rolled in, giving him some shade momentarily. The only bit seemed centered on his rock, keeping him from sweating too much.

“Haha, you’d probably like it, giyn,” Robert teased back. Manne made a fist and shook his head, breathing deep.

“Leave it alone, Teeth,” Manne grumbled.

“Like they always say,” Robert replied. “Like father, like son.”

Time stopped. Manne felt his body move slowly, but his mind was racing. How did Teeth know? Why would he say it? Did he not already have enough of a beating that day?

And then Manne’s thoughts returned to his childhood home. His mother had left two months earlier. School frustrated him, so one day he went home early. The little house looked strange in the afternoon sun, like walking away from school created some surreal universe that disappeared the second students were excused from class. A forbidden world that only adults took part in.

Manne walked inside, not expecting his father home from work. But noises came from his father’s bedroom. Manne dropped his school bag and rushed in, hearing violent noises and voices calling out.

Manne knew his father was no giyn fag. A woman straddled his father and yelled, a deep, long groan. Manne thought it looked like some strange kind of wrestling, but deep down he knew what it was. He never considered his father with anyone but his mother. And this woman looked all too familiar, like she walked down the street in tight clothes, boys and men whistling at her knowingly.

His father jumped up the second he saw Manne. The woman tumbled off the bed and yelled several curse words. Manne shut his eyes, tears draining out. He felt his father grab him. The most terrifying part was that his father didn’t say a word at first. He simply pulled Manne into the kitchen and the stove clicked on. Manne felt the heat filling the room. Then his pants and underwear dropped to
the ground and his father heaved him up. Manne opened his eyes for a second to see his father staring deep into his soul.

“You don’t ever miss yo’ school, boy.” Manne heard his tears sizzle on the stovetop beneath him. Manne shut his eyes tight. “You understand me?” Manne nodded, his nose snotty and face burning. His father turned off the burners. Until after his father died, Manne never skipped school again.

Underwater. Manne saw bubbles rush up as he struggled with Robert in the lake. He felt a slice on his hand as he pushed Robert’s face down, the metal mouth catching on Manne’s palm. A few errant yelps came from the boys as they jockeyed for position in the water. Manne was just too big for Robert.

The flailing in the water slowed down a bit. Robert’s arms swung back and forth without any force or target. Manne broke the surface, took a breath, and went under again, watching the bubbles leak out of Robert. The metal mouth suddenly shot open and Robert gasped, water rushing in. The struggle went quiet. Manne won.

Out of the water, Manne rolled the body over in the sand. All the white stuck to Robert. His lips were mangled and bloody from the dental work and the struggle, but they held a blue tint Manne understood.

But something was wrong. Manne didn’t feel any better. His rage remained, crawling around him like a parasite. He felt no remorse. People told stories of killing men for the first time and throwing up from the reality. Manne didn’t throw up. He wanted more. He wanted something that would just let out the anger. He wanted to hurt others the way his father had hurt him and his sister and his mother.

“What’s happened?” A voice brought Manne back. An old man hobbled down from the top of the beach. “I was just hiking and I saw you two struggling out there.”
"Nothing. He just can’t swim," Manne lied. His fingers flexed. Something inside him sized up the little old man. No challenge equaled no reward.

"Now, I’m no lifeguard, but..." the man paused, cracks forming across his face. Speech took time for South Africans. They seemed to be drawn out like a boy unwillingly going to school. "Every life deserves so much better."

"What do you know about it?" Manne just stood up and stormed up the beach. The old man poked at his nerves.

"Are you really going to leave him here?" the old man asked, sadness permeating his voice.

"So what?"

"I’m sorry, I mistook you for a man." Manne stopped straight, water still dripping down his arms.

The thought of beating the old man to death crossed his mind once more. No one told him he wasn’t a man. Men are violent. Men don’t care about dead boys on a beach. Just as Manne turned to face the old man, the crackling voice jumped out again.

"You think the power to kill makes you something? Makes you a man? You hide behind violence. You are a coward." The old man never faltered in his speech.

Manne walked right up to him. He towered there for a second, the elderly hiker no higher than his shoulders, but not wavering for a second. Manne looked down, his shoulders tense. But then something flashed in his mind. The old woman at the hospital. Her husband died. Robert died. His father died.

"Then what makes you so brave, old man? I should wallop you right here." Still, the old man stood in front of him without any sign of fear. Manne felt his knees buckle a bit. His mind wore on his body. Something welled up inside him. The pain. The sadness. It needed an outlet and this man was pushing all the right buttons for a violent onslaught.

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"I am brave because I need no one to tell me I'm brave. I'm a man because I need no one to tell me so." At that, the man pointed at Robert.

Manne couldn't take it any longer. He raised his arm to strike the old man, but the rush didn't come. The adrenaline he expected never gushed through his veins. The only emotion spilled out in front of him. His arm lowered. Tears mixed with the sand. The sand puffed out as his knees came down.

Manne cried for the first time in a long time. Wept. And the old man cried with him, putting his hand on Manne's head.

"Now, now you can be a man," the old man nodded. Manne stood up and heaved Robert over his shoulders. The sun had just passed under Table Mountain, tourists already shut into their hotels and school children studying.

Some tears never dry.
Trade Winds of the Indian Ocean

"Hawaii is really far from India. Tough deal for them. Instead, rich Indians tend to flock to this little island called Mauritius. Ever heard of it? Probably not, unless you pay attention to countries that aren’t struggling and don’t need our attention. Mauritius is an island the size of Maui about 500 miles from Madagascar. It is among the world leaders in almost every positive category one can think of. In fact, it has the most stable economy and government in Africa. Also, Mauritius is a leader in stopping the Somali Pirate problem. Yeah, I’d never heard of it either.” ~ Port Luis, Mauritius. October 14th.

"Tug-of-war. Rock, paper, scissors. Synchronized swimming. Crab soccer. Welcome to the Sea Olympics. Every semester, the shipboard community on SAS competes in a series of events to determine the best ‘Sea.’ Every student is part of a sea based on where they live on the ship. Faculty, staff and family join together to make their own sea for the competition. Being on deck two gave me a unique experience. Our entire deck is one sea, compared to larger decks which are split up into three. The oft forgotten Aegean Sea of Deck Two was poised as the underdog.” ~ Onboard the MV Explorer in the Indian Ocean. October 20th.

“Rickshaws are terrifying. No one should ever ride one. Even if you think it looks cool or fun, it’s all cunning trickery by tourist agencies and rickshaw drivers. There are no doors to save you from the crazy traffic. There’s no leg room (even for people shorter
than me!). Just skip it, you’ll be glad you did, unless you’re one of those people who does things just because you want to be on the edge of death. Then it’s perfect for you…” ~ Chennai, India. October 23rd.

“Everything was ready for Halloween night for the Sentosa Spectacular. There are all sorts of rides and photo opportunities. Oh, and a Universal Studios… but we stuck to the cheaper options. Most prominent on the island is a gigantic statue. At first glance it looks like a towering lion. Then you realize it has a fish body. This is Singapore’s mascot: the Merlion. A mix between a mermaid and a lion. Okay, so Singapore is a little strange…” ~ Singapore. October 31st.

Your childhood slips away with the winds along these shores. It’s time to grow up and realize the majesty of things much larger than yourself.
A Coral Menagerie

Little fragments of coral scratched through Aurélie's toes. The waves came in gently now as the crackling music from the ice cream truck began again. A few of the other children ran, leaving the beach to Aurélie and the foreigners. She called them lobsters, burnt head to toe with bodies spilling over their towels into the sand. They came to Mauritius for sun and relaxation.

A part of Aurélie wanted to join the other ten-year-olds, excitedly pawing at the ice cream truck to buy fruity popsicles or frozen fudge bars. But mama needed her help, and Aurélie didn't have the three rupees anyway.

Coral was the only goal. Not the tiny pieces that tickled Aurélie's feet as waves washed over her ankles. She was looking for the big pieces stuck in the sand or caught on rocks just off the shore of Flic en Flac. Some jutted from the beach in peculiar shapes, like a bird's foot or a tiger's claw. Those were the best finds since mama didn't have to do much work on them. Maybe just a bit of sanding here or there would make them fine pieces.

In the evening, Aurélie watched, entranced by her mother sitting at the kitchen table with the sandpaper and knife, carving little figures out of the coral. Sometimes they sat alone, only the sound of the coral grating against the sandpaper reaching their ears, until Aurélie fell asleep in the big armchair her father had brought home from the furniture swap. The house with only three rooms seemed massive compared to the miniature world mama created.

And with Mauritius as her playground, Aurélie didn't need some massive home on the slope of Trou aux Cerfs to keep her happy. There were plenty of adventures waiting just inside the sugarcane fields. The day she turned nine, long before mama started scraping at coral, Aurélie followed her father out to the field where he worked like any other day during the school break.
"Take your schooling serious when you get back," he said, barely looking at her, waving an indifferent hand. "One day you can live without breaking your back in a field."

When they reached the little gate that led to the trailer where her father started the day, Aurélie would usually continue on the road to the Ramgoolam's to play with her friends. But on that day, tradition and routine wore on her spirit, and the mystery of the green stalks behind the fence beckoned for her to break the rules.

The sound of crunching fronds as she squeezed past the rows of sugar cane was achingly loud. If someone found her she would be punished severely. There was a boy two months before who was caught chewing on the fronds and beaten with the very stalk he dared to steal. And with her father there, Aurélie knew the punishment would extend beyond the field and back to the tiny box she called home.

Row after row of emerald crowned a tangled mess of stiff khaki shoots closing around her. The further she moved into the field, the denser the undergrowth became. The piquant smell of fertilizer mixed with the intoxicating sweet scent of sugar cane quickly had her head spinning. It didn't help that every direction looked the same. A sharp whistle to her left brought her body to a standstill.

"You guys hear that? I think we got something back there." A few muffled words were exchanged while Aurélie tried to stop everything, even her heart from beating too loud.

"Well, we gotta' go get it." This time it was her father's voice, booming close enough above her that she could jump out at him and attack his leg playfully the way she did when she was five.

A mad scramble. The rows of sugarcane closed off any quick escape. There were only deliberate, powerful movements from her pursuers. A heavy crunch would fall every other second behind her, closing in to the point that she could feel the snapping fronds on the backs of her heels. Luckily she was small enough to be hidden from view. A hand grabbed at her shoulder, but she hit the
fertilizer and scrambled through another bramble until her shirt was sticking to her from sweat and earth.

As the fronds began to thin again, Aurélie dashed through to an opening. She stumbled out and tripped her way across the dirt road to the jungle on the other side. Something caused her to turn back at that final fleeting moment before disappearing into the forest. Her father cleared the sugarcane just in time for this, locking eyes with her for what seemed like eons. Then the darkness of the jungle took hold and Aurélie made her way to the Ramgoolam’s as usual.

When her father returned that night, covered with the sweet yet tainted smell of the sugarcane fields, Aurélie expected to be severely punished. On the contrary, he was carrying with him a small white and blue bike with a bow.

“Oh, what a surprise,” her mother exclaimed. It was rather obvious there was little surprise to her mother at all, but Aurélie was too taken aback to notice. Her father just smiled wide, his crooked teeth catching the shadowy candlelight. There was a sense of knowing in his eyes as he placed the bike before her. That was the striking blow. Aurélie could take punishment, but guilt drove her to tears.

“I’m so sorry, daddy,” she exclaimed, grabbing him around the waist, sobbing. Her mother looked on with a confused look while he patted her on the head.

“It’s your birthday. What’s there to be sorry about?”

Aurélie’s father never said a word about the sugarcane incident. She wondered if maybe he hadn’t seen her at all. That perhaps that fleeting look that lasted an eternity was only a figment of her imagination. In any case, her mother never knew a thing, and Aurélie had a bike to take on her adventures. Transportation was a strange turning point in her life. Aurélie had always walked everywhere, which kept her to the east side of Mauritius mostly. But with a bike, she could go just about anywhere. She knew how to ride from her training bike, which had disappeared three years
before. It was suspected that another kid from the neighborhood took it, but Aurélie never knew for sure.

The first long ride on the white and blue bike, with little streamers on the handle and a ripped foam seat took Aurélie to the giant Shiva statue. It was her second time there, and Aurélie fondly remembered the bevy of monkeys that hung around the statue to beg for bananas from tourists.

The Mangal Mahadev, or statue of Lord Shiva, towered over the central fields of Mauritius as a bronze beacon of Hindu faith. The right palm up, facing Aurélie, seemed impossibly massive. Shiva was shirtless, and his body shape reminded Aurélie of her father, hardened by the long days working in the field. Around the mammoth statue was a little common square where people took pictures and left sacrifices.

Aurélie never really understood the meaning of Shiva. The Ramgoolam’s tried to explain it to her once, but she was convinced any faith that had a god with an elephant head was not taking things seriously. She was there more for the monkeys and tourists, of which there was never a shortage. On that day, one particularly red faced tourist was hopping about, pretending to imitate one of the monkeys. He then threw a piece of banana on the ground and hooted and hollered as the monkey grabbed the prize and scampered back into the jungle.

"Hey, you! Little girl," the red faced man pointed at her and stumbled up. "You wanna feed the monkeys, sweetheart?" Aurélie just stared at him, pretending not to know English just the way her father had taught her to deal with tourists. He then said the sentence over again, slowly and loudly, motioning the action of handing out bananas. Meanwhile, the troupe of monkeys took note and began to dance around both of them in frenzy.

Suddenly, monkeys were no longer cute. They were not human toys that listened to commands and made cute faces for human delight. Aurélie watched the grabby fingers and flaying mouths, pointy
teeth and grasping toes in fear. The red faced man also seemed unsettled, trying to shoo them off, only managing to display the bananas more prominently.

The attack came like a cascade. One monkey led to three, which led to seven, until all the monkeys had swarmed the red faced man, tearing at his clothes and taking the bananas by force. The man let out a frightened and feminine yelp before running in a broad circle about the common square. Aurélie also began to scream and rushed back to her bike for safety. The rest of the square broke out in laughter. Once the monkeys were dispatched and the bananas gone, the red faced man’s wife came running up, trying to console him through fits of uncontrollable laughter.

One man yelled out, “That’s what happens when you mess with wild animals, bro!”

Aurélie never returned to the Shiva statue. There were ways of going around it so as to not face the screeching, maniacal monkeys. This led her many other places, but most days now were filled with journeys to Flic en Flac for coral. Some time just before her tenth birthday, Aurélie’s father was laid off from his job in the sugarcane fields. His brother tried to set him up as a cab driver for tourists, but work was relatively slow, and her father didn’t have the manners or patience for foreigners.

To keep up the family income, Aurélie’s mother began to make little statues of animals or charms out of coral. Mama called it a menagerie, a long word Aurélie never really understood, but liked the sound of. So Aurélie volunteered to retrieve the coral her mother would shape and sell during the afternoons in Port Luis. The day with the ice cream truck changed that routine forever.

The children clambered back to the beach with their sweet treasures. The cerulean waves lapped up further, catching Aurélie off balance a bit. She laughed a bit as more coral fragments tickled her toes. She kicked around in the water a bit and looked back at the gentle trees on the edge of the beach campsite. Two strange men stared back at her from a picnic table. Their glares unsettled Aurélie to the point that her little pouch of coral spilled out into the receding water. She dropped to her knees quickly to recover everything.

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As she rose, something blocked out the afternoon sun and made her eyes adjust. The two men were now towering over her. “Go away!” She yelled as loud as she could, hoping to attract the lobsters’ attention. No one seemed to notice.

“Calm down. We are from the National Police and Coast Guard.” The two men flashed badges and papers. “Please, come with us.” One of the two men, who had a scraggly black beard and round face took her hand and led her back up the beach. Aurélie didn’t trust these men, but her throat was suddenly full, as if the coral had found its way into her lungs to choke her. She watched helplessly as her blue and white bike faded into the shadows along the beach, coral still lapping against the shore.

“You can’t take coral from the beach, young lady,” said the round faced man. The other man, with a pointed nose and Indian complexion nodded and paced about the room. They had brought Aurélie to a little coast guard station by the beach. “We must preserve the natural wonders of our great country, don’t you agree?”

“But, but... mama says all the coral on the beach is dead.” The round faced man smiled casually and pulled out a folder stuffed with loose papers. Meanwhile, Mr. Pointed Nose stopped his pacing and glanced at her with one eye.

“Well, yes. But we can’t know for sure if you are only taking what has washed ashore. A year ago we enacted a law making all coral a natural resource of Mauritius not to be removed.” All these words made Aurélie’s head spin. She knew she was in trouble, but not even her parents could come save her. These men were talking over her head and addressing her like a criminal. Mr. Round Face began again.

“We’re going to find your parents. Aurélie is it? You just sit tight while we bring your mommy or daddy in.” The two men left her alone in the room. A map of Mauritius hung on one wall, and an old artist’s sketch of a dodo bird covered another. A door dominated a third wall, with a tiny box window with wood shutters right next to it. The final wall was completely blank, a meadow-like beige color.

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Sitting trapped in the little room reminded Aurélie of the day she saw the giant tortoises at the Terres de Colours. They were wonderful creatures, basking in the afternoon glow that lit up the beautiful sand nearby. The seven colored earth, as tourists knew it, was a natural wonder of rolling hills of multicolored sand. At certain angles, with the right amount of light, Aurélie could pick out all the ravishing and rusty colors.

The day she saw the turtles was a few months after the Shiva incident and before the coral menagerie. It was still tourist season, and Aurélie easily scooted past the ticket collector with a group of lobsters that each carried a camera strung around their neck. Aurélie thought the way they talked sounded funny, like little yelps and flicks of the tongue. Her own olive skin looked strange juxtaposed against the creamy hue that was just starting to grow pink from the sun.

Aurélie walked from platform to platform that surrounded the miraculous sands. Little flecks of emerald gleamed amongst the ruddy backdrop. She was so tempted to jump across the fence and lose herself in the pool of colors. But the signs said that would get her in a lot of trouble because the colorful earth was a national resource. So she backed away from the little wooden fence and turned down a little path to a sea of lobsters. They were all staring at something intently, taking pictures and chattering.

As Aurélie approached the commotion, a little girl, probably a few years younger than her, ran out of the crowd with the most gleeful smile Aurélie had ever seen. "I touched it, I touched it," the little girl squealed. This only made Aurélie more curious.

After weaving through legs draped by sun dresses and khaki shorts, Aurélie came to another little wooden fence. This time, peering back at her was not majestic sands of all colors, but the dry, cracked face of the largest turtle she had ever seen. Aurélie was a little startled at first, but the gentle movements of the turtle put her at ease. This was not something out to get her like the monkeys or the workers in the sugarcane fields.
"Go ahead, you can touch its shell," one of the lobsters said to her. Aurélie looked at her suspiciously, and then at a sign only two feet away declaring that the turtles should not be touched. She shook her head and pointed. "Oh, sweetie, they just say that. No one will stop you."

As if listening to the old lobster, the turtle moved its head back from the wooden fence and began to walk toward the middle of the enclosure. Many of the tourists let out a sad sigh, having not touched the turtle or taken a close-up photograph. Some peace of mind came to Aurélie. She didn't like all these lobsters touching the poor old turtle that was wasting away in the sun. She imagined coming back in the dead of night and releasing the turtle, leading him out to the ocean where he could swim free with the broken bits of coral and other turtles just like him.

But the turtle never got to leave. Aurélie returned a few times over the course of the tourist season. At one point, Aurélie was excited that a second turtle was added. She hoped they could become good friends. But eventually the thought set in that now there were two turtles that needed saving, bored in the tiny enclosure, tired from being harassed by lobsters. She never went back, hoping that if she wasn't there, maybe the turtles wouldn't be either.

And now, in the little room, she found herself trapped just like the giant turtles. Her legs clacked against the chair the round faced man had put her in. She thought about getting up and running out, but every time she did her legs froze up. It was as if she was one of the turtles, but turned on her back so she couldn't move except for feeble attempts to right herself.

The door swinging open brought Aurélie back to reality. The two strange men filed in, followed by mama, who had the shadows of tears around her eyes. Mama crossed the room and took Aurélie in her arms.

"My little Aurélie, what's going on?" Aurélie could only look up at her mother with shameful spheres and turn away so all she could see was the dodo bird on the wall, lamely staring back at her.

The men began to speak, a cacophony swirling around her head like a rainstorm. The rain poured into
her throat, drowning her until she could only squeeze out tears instead of words. The crying mixed with
the picture of the dodo bird on the wall reminded her of her tenth birthday.

On that day, one year after getting a bike and after months of searching for coral, Aurelie came
home to her mother smiling. A little plush dodo bird sat on the table. She ran up and emptied her little
pouch next to mama, revealing the creamish coral. This was a good day for big pieces, and Aurelie was
proud to be such a big help to her family. She picked up the plush dodo bird and turned her head.

“What’s this?” she asked, inspecting it from all angles. The toy had a fat body with soft grey
fleece to simulate feathers. The beak was yellow fleece, strutting out and ending in a tip. The eyes were
wide and lifeless.

“I know it’s not as good as the bike like last year... but you know daddy and I are trying hard.”

Aurelie looked at mama and put the plush down.

“This is it?” Aurelie saw her mother’s face droop like she had been punched in the stomach.

Guilt welled up into Aurelie, and she quickly grabbed the dodo bird lovingly to overcompensate. The
damage was already done, she could tell, and mama retreated to the other room. Aurelie followed and
tried to make up more ground. “I mean, what is it? Some kind of bird?”

Mama returned with a forced smile. They both knew Aurelie learned all about the dodo bird in
school. It was a national symbol. But mama could tell Aurelie was making an effort to backtrack and
apologize, in a way. She just motioned toward her to sit on the floor next to the big arm chair. “This is
the national symbol of our country, Aurelie”

“Wow, neat,” she exclaimed, still feigning interest. But mama knew how to really sell the guilt
to Aurelie. She began to recount the whole tale of the dodo bird, starting with how they became so
large when most birds were not. Then the settlers came that used the dodo as easy prey. Mama made
bopping motions and noises while explaining. Aurelie had heard the story a number of times, but for
some reason it resonated with her more now than ever. She began to sob at her mother’s feet, thinking of all the defenseless birds.

“But mama, why not keep them as pets? Why kill them all?” Aurélie crawled into her mother’s lap, still shaking from the sudden emotional connection with the silly stuffed animal.

“I don’t know. I don’t know...” Her mother trailed off, just holding her close. The house melted around them and back into the little room with the strange men.

“So, as I have explained, your daughter is not allowed to take coral from the beach, and you are certainly not allowed to sell it, ma’am.” The man with the pointy nose looked at both of them sternly. Somewhere in the distance the ice cream truck was making another round. The catchy little tune was drowned out by ambient traffic sounds from the rushing midday traffic.

“But my husband lost his job. We are just trying to get back on our feet,” mama replied indignantly. The statement hung in the air for a few seconds before the men waved it off. Mr. Round Face opened out his palms.

“You could try one of the taxi companies. They accept women now. And your daughter here could sell things... other things... to tourists. I’m sorry, but taking our natural resources is out of the question. This is a delicate ecosystem we are dealing with.” The long explanation still did not seem enough for mama, but Aurélie could tell she was giving up.

“Fine. It won’t happen again. Can we go?” The men nodded and showed them the door. Aurélie looked back to see her little pouch still on the table, coral peaking out at her as a cruel reminder.

Later that night, Aurélie began to sob again. “What is it, Aurélie?” her mother asked, bringing a handkerchief with her. They settled down in the big arm chair.

“It’s not fair, mama. I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Her legs kicked about as the streams of her soul spilled out onto the chair and floor.
“It’s not your fault, Aurélie. We will be okay.” The pair sat for a long time, becoming alert any
time they heard footsteps, wondering if it was Aurélie’s father, back from searching for work. He didn’t
come back that night. Or the next.

Aurélie went back to Flic en Flac a week later. She sat in the sand, watching the waves wander
up. Sun glinted off the water, a catamaran floating off in the distance. Lobsters were sitting everywhere
around her, slathering on lotions and grunting about how the sand isn’t as fine as in Cadiz. A boy ran up
to one of the lobsters with something in his hands.

“Look, dad! Hey, mom, it’s really cool, right?” Aurélie caught a glimpse of the piece of coral in
his hand. It was shaped like the dodo’s beak. Long and rounded, with a sharp little tip at the end.

“Just hand it here, son. We’ll put it in your suitcase for later,” the father said. Jealousy bubbled
up from the waves hitting Aurélie’s feet.

The little boy ran back to the ocean, flopping into the waves recklessly. Another day in paradise.
In the Eyes of the Beholder

My mother tells me the woman I am to marry has the most enchanting eyes in Madras. My brother says they are a bright emerald color, with swirls of blue like the sky. These are just words to me. Colors may have well described the blood in her veins or the muscles letting her dance the Bharatanatyam: underneath and invisible, the way I perceive the world. Being blind in India means the spectacular colors people speak of in the market are no more than terms. Taunts.

Truthfully, I should count myself lucky for the simple fact that I am to be wed. No family in India considered such a farce for most of my early adult life. Of course, my mother was convinced someone would stumble upon the sheer epiphany that my lack of sight would make for an excellent husband, even if she didn’t believe it herself. All she believed was that a man as handsome as I should have a wife. She often bragged of my looks to friends. And of course, our family’s wealth and status didn’t hurt.

In life, however, I am a constant failure to my mother and my family. Unlike the majority of blind people in India, I was not put into darkness by some terrible act of violence that set a scar upon my face. I could not illicit the sympathy of boys with eyes burnt shut or war veterans with half a face. I could not procure a job readily or take traditional schooling. I know most of the world simply by what I’m told.

I first met Jigisha on a Tuesday morning in a café near the Semmozhi Poonga. Our mothers sat at the table with us, whispering hints under a table that felt sticky from foam. My mother assured me the establishment catered to affluent international businessmen and families of a higher caste. If so, I wondered, why do the chairs sigh and squeak under my weight? Why is there no shade from the rising sun?

"The gardens are lovely this time of year," my mother offered with a commanding voice. The fragrant waves from the Semmozhi Poonga transported her words along to the other side of the table.
"Yes. Perhaps Jigisha and Darshan could walk among them today after our meal?" said Jigisha's mother with a whispy, unsure quality of voice. I held in a woeful howl and plastered a crooked smile over top of it. All that saved me from this unfortunate event was the waiter bringing out our tea.

Heat radiated from the teapot, tugging at my senses. A faint minty smell wafted around the heated pot until it split into four separate cups. My hand crept along the sticky table until it found the ceramic cup, so small in my massive palms. I could cup the heat and mint inside with my hand and then take a deep breath, opening my sinuses. Another smell charged in, however. Thicker. Heavier. Something like a mystical fountain or spring. The waiter's cologne blanketed me for the briefest moment. Then it was gone.

"I would enjoy a walk," Jigisha said flatly. Pulled back to reality, I burnt my tongue on the tea and put down the cup with a noticeable clank. I imagine my mother was furious with my minor outburst, but one of the advantages of never seeing her expression was the ability to pretend she had a warm, round face full of love and acceptance. What a dream.

"Sorry, the tea is hot," I responded, lamely. Another prick in my mother's side, I'm sure. A muffled laugh came from the other side of the table. I doubt Jigisha knew I heard it. Perhaps people think that if you can't see their lips move or their mouth quiver you must not be able to hear them. People speak loudly at me. Maybe I should just stop listening?

The formalities ended abruptly when the meal ended. My mother hurried me away from the table as I stumbled to find footing. I imagined the other two women sitting at the table, staring at us in wonderment. There's no doubt in my mind that my mother and I are a spectacle, her dragging me around like a goat on a tether. In any case, she pulled me onto a hard metal seat with fumes of gasoline climbing up into my face. The rickshaw rumbled to life, jostling me a bit, and we were off. I wouldn't see, or rather hear, my wife to be for another month.
On the day I was to meet Jigisha on my own, my morning routine took me longer than usual. Someone, likely my brother, moved the shirts in my armoire. He often borrowed my good clothes for dates with young women or job interviews. I suspect the latter was merely a cover for the volume of the former. He’d often come home from these interviews with a sad story about how the boss was unfair. All the while, his collar smelled of jasmine.

When I finally did lay my hands on the silk buttoned shirt I was groping for, I realized it had a few rough patches in the material along the side stitching. I teased the fabric through my fingers for a few seconds and then called out to my brother.

Heavy breathing. My younger brother always breathes through his mouth. His breath smelled of cardamom. At 26 years old, my brother should have been getting married. Instead, he defied our mother and custom by dating young women from the university. Often he pretends to work there or be enrolled just long enough to “get what he wanted.” I’m not quite sure I know what he means by that, but mother yells at him for it.

“What is it, Darshan?” he asked with a hint of boredom and a dash of frustration. I turned the shirt over to try and show him the area of rough cloth.

“Is there something wrong with my shirt?” I asked, trying to be as diplomatic as possible, not accusing him or making claims to which I had no evidence.

“It’s fine. Just a little fraying.” He stomped out. I started to retort but his mouth breathing and heavy footsteps were already down the stairs. This was quickly followed by the swifter steps of my mother, who was wheezing and moaning her way up to me. Her lungs were getting progressively worse ever since she got rid of our sixth servant and had to do more things around the house.

I felt a tugging at my shoulder as she sidled up next to me, catching her breath. These were the moments she felt most fragile. The scratchy breath and aching hum in her would disappear in seconds. The real mother returned.
"You will be late. Put on your shirt," she said, pushing my arms out to the side so she could drape the shirt on me. Her hands worked around me, giving little tugs at my body from time to time until the shirt was buttoned. I resented the fact that she wouldn't let me do it myself, but I was in no mood to argue. I still wondered about the rough patch.

"What is on your shirt?" she exclaimed, rubbing at the side seam.

"Brother said it was nothing."

"Your brother is a lazy goat," she replied, spitting loudly. I felt a little damp circle on my side now as her fingers stroked the cloth with her spit. Seemingly satisfied, she moved off without another word. I finished dressing myself after groping for shoes and then slowly made my way down the stairs. I've only fallen once.

Jigisha and I met on one end of Marina Beach and sat on some stone benches. My hands gripped the bumpy edges of the bench, somehow hoping that would make the time pass more quickly. We sat in silence for an eternity, the quiet trickle of waves and children playing droning out the screaming awkwardness of it all. Quite bluntly, the beach smelled terrible and I don't know why she would pick such a place. Everything in my nose was fish guts and garbage.

"Have you ever walked a beach?" she asked quietly. Something in her voice led me to believe she already knew the answer. Beaches in Chennai, and especially Marina Beach, were notorious for the dangers lurking in the sand. My mother told me of broken glass, used syringes, and little plastic balloons hiding in the sand.

I shook my head in response to her question. The silence returned. A hand squeezed my shoulder. I could imagine my mother was there with a grip like that. The hand wasn't rough or wrinkled like hers, but it had an authority about it. In fact, most people had hands like that. My brother, the girls at market who used to help me around, and especially the police the one time they thought I was a blind beggar.
Only two people have ever held gentle hands. My friend Lal, and the man at the post office. Anytime I went to get letters for mother, he would take my hand and lead me to the box. The post office was quiet when I went, mostly because it was late at night, and I felt serene. The air wasn’t as blanketing, the smells not quite as strong. And the man at the post office had the most soothing voice. His words would bend around my ears and sneak in without the invasive attack of my mother’s shrill demands or my brother’s gruff frustration.

But it was his hands that really made a mark. Never a single bump or callous. The hair on the top was fine and smooth. The fingers didn’t grip tight or scratch with unkempt nails. They simply led me to my box. After we were back outside, he would tell me to come back at the same time next week to pick up the mail. He said it gently. His hands, his words: they all felt so safe. Mother stopped letting me go about a year ago without any explanation. I miss those nights.

Jigisha moved her hand over to my chin and tilted it up. I felt her stand and scoot closer toward me. The heat of her body mixed with mine. And then I felt her lips. They brushed across my lips, a slightly salty taste as she moved away. I felt a little trace of saliva left on my lower lip and wiped it off, quickly.

“How dare you~?” I asked, blood rising into my hot face. “We are not even married yet. And in public!” My last few words rose sharply. A lurch deep in the pit of my stomach made me feel sick. How could I let this happen? This strange taste lingered in me as I gasped for air.

“No one saw,” she said, exasperated. “But it’s obvious now. I’m telling our mothers the wedding is off.” I threw my hands in the air in confusion as I heard her footsteps turn away.

“Because I believe in the Lord Vishnu?” I exclaimed, merely citing custom and tradition for my lack of acceptance of a kiss.

“No. Because you don’t feel anything for me. You don’t feel anything for anyone because you can’t experience life.” Her breath held for a moment, as if she was embarrassed by what she said. Then
her breath was gone. The earthy scent of her body oil dissolved into the watery stench of the beach. The stinging of blood in my lips flowed out.

Of course, this was only a minor outburst. Jigisha’s mother convinced Jigisha that it was for the best, and that many women go through a momentary stage of worry about their future husband’s ability to love. I resented that really. Men can love. Their love is perhaps more pure, because it’s deeper. You don’t earn it right away.

A week before the wedding, my friend Lal invited me to his house for tea and congratulations. The chairs at his house were very uncomfortable. I sank into one until I could no longer stand without assistance and he laughed his deep, hearty laugh. Everything about Lal is hearty. Even his voice runs deep with some kind of passion, as if the sound waves are thick with cologne like that waiter. When Lal talks, people listen.

And so we sipped tea. The minutes bubbled past as we discussed the wedding, the call center where Lal worked, the movie *Endirhan*, and everything else. The liquid became a little cooler with every story, the rich, grassy flavor fading into the air. Our stories stopped, only the tapping of Lal’s foot against the floor breaking the silence. He called it a nervous tick. I was usually the only one who ever heard it or noticed. ‘

“I’m going to miss you, Darshan,” he said slowly. The words jostled around in my mind, a confusing cacophony until I split my lips to respond.

“What do you mean? I’m not going anywhere.” A long silence. Lal put his hand, his smooth, gentle hand, on my shoulder. He left it there for ages. My mouth went dry, thinking about how Jigisha had kissed me after placing a hand on my shoulder. I half expected my friend to do the same and started to laugh.
"Darshan, why are laughing at me?" Lal asked, amusement trying to cover up a shade of sadness. He took his hand off my shoulder and his chair swallowed him up with a whooshing plop. I heard him wrestle around with it. Then we were both standing in an instant.

"I don't know," I said. "I just have strange feelings sometimes." His hands closed around mine. We stood there, two men, two large men, embraced. I felt so embarrassed. Men don't do that together. I wouldn't even do that with Jigisha.

"Your mother will be very proud of you next week," Lal said. I felt the sensation of a tear down my cheek, and his gentle hand wiped it away. Then he kissed me.

I walked home that day. Some young boy eagerly led me around with a tugging hand. I promised him 50 rupees for taking me to the right place. My stomach hadn't lurched like it had with Jigisha. Instead, I had melted, in a way. I felt something, my blood rushing all through my body. I felt something. Jigisha was wrong.

My wedding day danced to life before I could even catch my breath from that kiss. Either kiss, really. I'd never kissed someone before. And I guessed I still hadn't, seeing as both took me by surprise and I didn't kiss back. I wondered if I would have. Would things be different?

My mother fussed with my clothes a lot. She wanted it to be the perfect wedding day, perhaps because her own had been interrupted by reality. My brother mouth-breathed in and out of the room, making comments about the people outside, ready for the Kanyaa Daanam. When mother left the room for a moment to check that everything was ready, my brother came up right next to my ear, so close I could smell the cardamom on his breath again.

"The flower bed looks lovely. Shame you're still a child." The words left a wet film on my ear. He walked away chuckling. I wanted to retort. I wanted to remind him I was the older brother. But I'm not sure that's what he meant.
The flower bed weighed heavy on my mind. I knew little of what I had to do there, but my mom said it was where I am to consummate the marriage. That sounds difficult. When I asked her what it meant, she just squeezed my hand. When I asked Lal a day later, he started his hearty laugh, but then got very quiet. I wish I could have read his face. All my life people have kept visual secrets from me. My mother taught me everything, but I worry she left some parts out.

And then I was in the ceremony. My mother pulled me along slowly. It wasn’t tradition for her to be in the threshold ceremony, but my wedding was unusual in many obvious aspects. Jigisha’s mother took my hands, blessing them gruffly. The officiating priest chanted in the background, filling the air with a palpable buzz of Hindi and Sanskrit. Then I felt the cool dab of the tilak on my forehead. The smell of turmeric flooded over me and, in a sense, Ganesha removed the obstacles to the union. Except, perhaps, those in my heart.

The rest of the wedding flew by, a mix of my awkward stumbling and the excited chattering of the guests. We skipped the Vara Prekshanam, though it agitated the priest. The day passed as everything else was done ad infinitum. Hours of long rehearsal and recitation paid off. I faltered only once in my speeches.

And then I felt her hand again. Jigisha still gripped too harshly. Her hands felt like tight bonds around my fingers as she led me in the sacred fire ceremony. Fragrant herbs snapped in the fire, releasing pockets of explosive smells and tastes. I imagined what it all looked like, with the fire and colors and people watching close. Heat overtook that thought. The fires wafted coals and cinders disguised by fragrances. The temperature suffocated me.

Jigisha finished the sixth ring of fire. We both hesitated. I grasped her hand now and led her, my feet shuffling against the scraping stone floor. At times she gave little tugs to make sure I didn’t lead us straight into the heat, the rings. The burning sensation of my toes usually saved us, regardless. My
ring, the final and seventh, took much longer than any Jigisha made. Our shaky path must have created
the most atrocious ring to ever bless a marriage. But blessed it was.

And so I had a wife. The entrapment of the fire soon replaced itself by the deafening,
overwhelming mixture of voices congratulating us. Even my brother sounded faint in this sea of praise
and adulation. My mother broke into the fray to kiss my cheek, a sharp, fast peck. Even so, I could feel
the tears on her face. I could practically hear the tears in her heart. Her son, the blind boy who couldn't
get a job and never went to school, married a most beautiful woman.

music. A sensory overload. Had I seeing eyes, I may have blotted them out simply to understand all the
other sensations.

Then it disappeared. Jigisha and I sat on the flower bed alone that night. I slipped a petal
between my fingers. Silky, soft. It reminded me of Lal’s hands. Or the man at the post office. Jigisha
took it away from me gently. Gentle for the first time. Did marriage change the touch of a woman?
Does she become more cognizant of that simple thing? My heart settled for the first time that day.

“What do you think I look like?” she asked. I heard that question a lot. Many people tried to get
me to outline their face with my hands. I would lie and say I knew what they looked like after that. Fact
is, I could only tell things like softness and shape. Nothing of beauty. Hardly even whether they were a
man or woman. Men have stronger faces. More interesting, perhaps.

“My mother tells me you have the most beautiful eyes,” I replied. My mother told me that
women love compliments about their eyes. She said you can look into someone’s soul through the eyes.
I had to take people’s word for what their soul might offer.

“That is very kind of her,” Jigisha said with a sigh. I felt bad. My compliment didn’t work. I
wanted so much for her to be happy, I really did. But how well can you make someone else happy when
all you want to do is curl up and shrivel into a husk? I did the one thing I thought might work. I trailed

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my fingers up her side and to her face. Taking her face with both hands, I drew her to mine. Our lips touched for the second time. This was my first real kiss, I was sure of it.

Maybe I was wrong. I heard stories when I was a child about how the first kiss is so magical. All I felt were cold lips. There was no rush of blood through my body like with Lal. And then it hit me. A kiss was only special if shared by both people. I gave her a kiss, but we did not share in it. I could not find the happiness I was supposed to feel.

We laid in the bed for a long time. Her fancy body oil rubbed off on the silky sheets and filled the room with an earthy smell. Jigisha’s finger traced along my arm and chest slowly, tickling me. It made my stomach lurch a little, just like the day she kissed me.

“We must consummate the marriage,” she said. Her voice was low, almost pleading. I nodded, my head ruffling the pillow.

“How do you... with your sight and everything...” she trailed off. This tugged at my heart. My breathing quickened and I felt like throwing up. The feeling transformed somewhere inside me. I felt rage well up through my throat instead of nausea.

“One does not need sight to love!” I exploded.

She took in a quick breath. The tenseness from my shoulders released and I fell next to her. Tears dribbled onto the pillows. Her hair slid across my face. She kissed my forehead and sobbed a little.

“But you don’t love me, do you?” she replied. Her voice was no longer sad. It was stone. It was sand. No longer living. Unfeeling. Cold.

“No. But I must try.”
At the Cost of Creativity

Plumes of mist rose from the rushing waterfall etched in the side of the moss covered ebony rocks. Aiden clamped his fingers over the thickest part of a fern and reached out for the splashing crystals falling past him and down hundreds of feet below. A forceful hand pulled him back, Chloe shaking her head with the teeming mountain tropics behind her. Rolling his eyes, Aiden waited in the shroud of the mist for Sonic to appear from the undergrowth, sweat drenched through his bright orange tank top.

Lost in the Himalayas, the trio of friends’ search for water finally came to an end. Of course, getting to it without scaling down the mountain to the pool at the base of the waterfall was another challenge. The little ledge next to the waterfall was just a foot too far from the shimmering wall of refreshment. The coolness of the water only served to make Aiden’s throat seem more parched, a desert stone cracking under heat and stress.

“Dun worry, he can one lah,” Sonic said. Chloe gave him a scowl for using Singlish, and pointed over at the edge of the jungle. Shadows of something lurking in the emerald abyss brought their breathing to a momentary stall.

“Just hold onto me,” Aiden whispered, gesturing back toward the cascade. The two others nodded, Chloe a bit hesitant. Aiden shuffled over to the very edge of the cliff, tiny shavings of dirt falling away and mixing with the tumultuous roar of the waterfall. Sonic grabbed Aiden’s belt and leaned as a counterweight, and Chloe held his ankles while spread on the ground.

Coolness sprayed across Aiden’s face as he inched closer. Buzzing insects from the jungle seemed to hold their breath as everything became utterly silent. Closer, hands outstretched, Aiden smelled the silky rainwater smell of water and air mixed erratically. When the rushing sensation finally

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reached Aiden’s hand, the jungle shrank. The waterfall melted away and became a small stream down an ornamental rock.

“What are you kids doing?” an angry little man yelled, ambling up to the three young children. He grabbed the boy reaching over the railing to touch the little waterfall and pulled him back. The other little boy and girl fled across the Coolhouse and back outside to the burning heat. It would be easy for them to hide in the Singapore Botanical Gardens, so the angry man turned his attention to his first captive. Aiden, nine years old and still thirstier than ever, looked up at the man and frowned.

“You never give me wat!” Aiden yelled defiantly. The man looked down at him in disapproval and started dragging him outside the cool confines of the Himalayas display.

“Speak to me in standard English.” Recently, many people in Singapore started demanding proper English as a way to conduct everyday speech. Schools in particular cracked down hard on the youth that used the slang after hearing it from their parents over and over.

“It’s not my fault. I was just thirsty.” Aiden continued to explain his case as the man walked him back around the maze of pathways to the entrance of the gardens, explaining how boys his age shouldn’t be playing make-believe. Rings of ivy created a tunnel, giving way to a plaza with a beautiful fountain adorned by sculptures of a crane. Every color imaginable sprang up from the gardens, leaving an explosion of sensation for the eyes. One flower in particular caught Aiden’s eye as he was marched to the exit. It was pink and white, with center buds that spiraled out to a fuchsia edging.

Soon, the man and Aiden reached the exit and gift shop. Aiden’s mother saw him almost immediately, shaking her head as he walked up with a sheepish look on his face. His mother worked at the gift shop and let him explore the gardens on his own with his friends, but many days ended with a scolding and banishment to the park outside the gardens. The angry man explained the situation and Aiden’s mother nodded, thanking him for bringing her son back.
“There’s water here,” she said, pointing at the water fountain at the back of the store. In fact, there were many placed all over the gardens.

“It’s hot and tastes funny,” he shot back. She just sighed and wiped a drop of sweat rolling down his face that had combined with a few tears. They walked underneath the giant leaf-shaped fans to the outside park. Their eyes met, and Aiden could tell she was pleading for him to be less trouble for the rest of the day. He swallowed hard, the tears dry from the scorching heat, and turned to go find some shade.

Chloe and Sonic sat in the shadow made by a sign for the little café in the next building over. They smiled up at Aiden knowingly and he joined them. The area outside the botanical garden was basically a large field of grass, bordered by a thick grove of palm trees and other tropical plants. Across the rolling hills of viridian stood an amphitheatre on the edge of a large pond. Families sat on blankets in the field with picnics. Other people wandered around, just taking in the free green space that Singapore often lacked. A few teenagers spread out in the clearing throwing Frisbees and joking.

“Is your mom mad?” Chloe asked. She had the best English of the three, and being a year older than the boys, felt a need to always speak properly. Aiden nodded in response and stood up. The other two followed him down the path to the field.

“Really, meh?” Sonic said behind him. “We weren’t dun anything wrong.” Aiden shrugged and found another place with shade. They stood in the sanctuary and watched people move around them. A man was teaching his son arithmetic in the shade next to them, but the boy watched the teenagers throwing the Frisbee more intently. His eyes moved back and forth with the spinning disk, and his father would have to wake him up from the daze every few seconds.

“Let’s go back,” Aiden said quietly. The other two looked at him in confusion. “The back entrance my brother told us about.” Chloe shook her head and Sonic grinned.
“Can huh?” Sonic asked, not sure if the adventure was possible. Aiden looked at him with hard eyes. Memories of all the strict rules and punishment flooded his mind. Singapore tried to stop everyone from doing everything. He couldn’t even chew gum lest he accidentally spit it out, or speak in the language he felt most comfortable. No one would stop them this time.

A year ago, Aiden climbed the side of a mountain. The merlion stalked him from somewhere around a corner. He heard the heavy breathing, the scales of the beast scraping against the earth, searching for water. A path led past a little cave to safety at the top of the mountain. Aiden knew he would have to risk being chased by the mighty beast inside the alcove.

Peering around the corner of the cave entrance, Aiden saw it. The majestic mane flowed around angry whiskers and fierce eyes. The head of the lion gave way to the silvery body of a fish, tail wagging against the far wall with splashing sounds. Aiden knew the merlion was slow-moving on land, and once he got to the top of the mountain away from the river, he would be safe. But there was still the run up the hill that worried him.

The path he needed slithered up the other side of the cave, surrounded by bushes and thick forest. Wind darted in and out of the trees, chilling him, adrenaline ready to kick in. The path looked stable, but a few errant stones could send him to the dirt, and he would be completely vulnerable. There was only one try at this.

Movement. Bellowing from inside the cave. A flash of fur and scales blurred into Aiden’s peripheral vision. He looked over his shoulder at the creature splashing into the river along the path. He bit down hard and broke into his fastest sprint, climbing the side of the mountain with everything rushing past him. Crashing waves and groans from the merlion crept closer and closer until Aiden felt a shadow come over his shoulder. He looked up just in time to dive into the bushes by the path, just out of reach from the attack.
A growl rang out as the merlion sniffed for its prey. Aiden moved carefully through the greenery until he saw the clearing at the top of the hill, too far from the river for the merlion to pursue. A quiet lapping of the water in the river indicated the beast had returned. This was his chance. Aiden ran out again at full speed, but his feet were tangled in the branches and roots of the underbrush. A thud in the dirt followed by a split knee caused Aiden to groan out. The merlion perked up from the water and leapt again, charging at him.

"Aha!" Something jumped out in front of the merlion. A girl brandishing a sword, waving it back and forth at the fearsome creature, loomed above him. A roar of defiance echoed out, chasing birds from the surrounding trees. Aiden jumped up to see the girl warding off the merlion, but he knew there was only so much she could do. The massive tail turned in an arc and swept the girl to the ground. Aiden ran over and took the sword from the stunned girl, jumping at the merlion and plunging in into the heart of the beast.

The giant fell to their feet in an instant, shrieking in pain. The girl stood next to Aiden, a pair triumphant over the mythical felon. Other animals on the mountain seemed to applaud as the sounds of the forest became louder. The girl smiled at him and took her sword back, sticking out her tongue.

"I’m Chloe," she said.

"Aiden." The pair stood over their trophy for a second, muscles still tense, breathing finally going back to normal. Aiden put one foot on its body, posing like the victorious slayer of a dragon. Chloe just laughed and sat on the scaly body. Trees fell around them, the mountain shrinking back to a hill, and tourists teemed about.

"Move, we want a picture," a woman yelled at them. The two children climbed off the merlion statue that overlooked the park on top of Bukit Tamah. The white sculpture stood just off the plaza that opened to sweeping views of all of Singapore. Chloe dropped her stick sword and skipped over to the benches across from the statue. Aiden followed, looking out to the bay filled with massive, glittering
ships and construction cranes. A building with three bending towers was being built as one of the newest architectural wonders of the city.

Before Aiden could sit next to his savior and new friend, his mother grabbed his hand. The little pull away made Aiden sigh. He waved at Chloe who just giggled.

"Let's play again," she yelled out to him as he disappeared down the trail to the buses. They passed by the little cave with the merlion painting, along the stream heading down the hill with the steps to the parking area. A few people milled around or practiced yoga in the little patches of grass along the path. His mother squeezed his hand.

"That imagination of yours. You need to stop running off." Silence blanketed the pair for the rest of the journey to the car, the merlion disappearing into the hillside. Aiden would see Chloe again at school, and the two became inseparable.

The lake stretched back for what seemed like miles. A castle on the edge of the lake towered above Aiden and his friends. Three towers spiraled up into the sky, overlooking the lapping water. A forest closed in most of the lake. Heavy breathing monsters lurked just beyond the tree line, so the trio had to be careful. On the other side of the lake stood the mountain that separated them from the waterfall on the other side.

"Let's go," Aiden whispered, stalking close to the water's edge. Progress was slow, as they froze any time one of the monsters bellowed in the distance. Then it happened. Noises from the castle, yelling all around them. A catapult.

Aiden dove to the ground and rolled left. He saw a blur go past him the other way and a splash. Chloe's face appeared next to his suddenly as both crawled along the ground. Thwock! Another launch of the catapult. Aiden's mind raced as he shuffled up next to a boulder on the water's edge for protection. He finally righted himself to look at the attack.
Sonic flailed about in the shallows of the lake. Instead of going left from the attack, Sonic had gone straight to the water. Aiden swallowed and looked to see the catapult. Somehow it had disappeared, but several knights poured from the castle, just like in the movies from America. Chloe stood and faced the onslaught, pulling a sword. Aiden didn’t know who to save.

Splashing. Aiden charged into the lake, grabbing Sonic’s arm. Silent yelps bubbled up from the surface of the water as they struggled. The sand bottom of the lake gave away any time they looked for a foothold. Aiden forced his eyes closed to avoid the stinging lake water and pulled with all his strength toward the shore. The final violent effort jettisoned the boys onto the grassy lip of the lake with a heavy thud.

Chloe screamed out to them. It was too late. The knights had overpowered her, pulling her back toward the castle. Aiden jumped up to give chase, with Sonic still coughing up water from the lake. Before he could make up any ground, Chloe shook her head and yelled.

“Go!” She pointed toward the mountain and looked at him pleadingly. Aiden nodded in understanding and turned back to Sonic, who was finally able to stand, water dripping off his orange tank top. The knights cheered behind them, but fell silent with the murmuring of a giant in the distance. Aiden and Sonic knew they had to move quickly, and sprinted around the rest of the lake, only looking back once to see the castle melt back into an amphitheatre. Teenagers throwing a baseball around on the edge of the lake shook their heads at the boys for getting in the way, almost hit by a baseball. One muttered something about “little kids.” A group of children playing games around the amphitheatre danced around Chloe, holding her hostage and laughing all the while.

Aiden slowed for a second, but Sonic patted him on the shoulder. They would have to make the rest of the journey alone.
Ocean spray hit Aiden with a tickle on his nose. The ship was rocking less than usual that day.

Sea stretched back on a curve, too far for Aiden to see anything but a wavy cerulean expanse. Three sails popped concave led the vessel along slowly. Sharks followed the tail of the ship, occasionally biting at the edge of the water for a mutineer.

“Ya lor, captain. The sea is too quiet,” Sonic, the first mate, said. Both boys stared off into the distance while the ship rolled under them. A large wave knocked the ship around a bit, and a heavy wind sprang up. Conditions were changing almost instantly. Darkness stretched across the horizon with a crack of thunder and a streak of lightning. Rain beat against the deck, making it slick and dangerous. Members of the crew scrambled to keep the ship upright while Aiden yelled out orders.

A roaring gush of water came over the side of the ship, knocking down Sonic. Aiden grabbed the mast and held on tight. Looking over his shoulder, another object came into sight. A huge ship with no sails and made of sleek metal instead of wood. This ship powered through the crashing waves, unaffected by the weather conditions. A massive gun battery on the top of the new ship turned to aim at the tiny wooden vessel.

“Hard turn!” Aiden yelled, rolling his ship to starboard. More water splashed onto the deck, batting crewmembers off into the ocean. Loud bangs and the smell of gunpowder filled the air. Cannons were no match for the armor of the modern cruiser. The gun battery responded with punishing effectiveness. Aiden’s ship cracked, wood flying everywhere. Three pieces of the ship now began to sink separately, prompting a panicked escape by the crew.

Sonic grabbed at Aiden to take him to the rowboats to escape. Aiden shook his head. He learned a captain goes down with his ship from all the movies. This was no exception. Sonic smiled and stood next to him, also ready to face the watery depths. The metal ship moved closer, knocking around floating pieces of wood. The rain picked up further until the air was almost as wet as the ocean. A porthole on the metal ship opened, revealing a middle aged woman.
"Aiden, Sonic, come on. It’s raining, we have to come inside." The pieces of ship gave way to playground equipment outside the school. Foundation students were running inside to escape the sudden downpour. The boy’s teacher was in the threshold, just out of the rain, waving everyone inside. A skyscraper loomed behind the school in the distance. The Marina Bay Sands, with three towers topped by a massive, modern ship, was one of the more peculiar and breathtaking additions to the Singapore skyline. All the Foundation students talked about going up to the top, but of course, no one ever had.

The boys stomped inside, hair matted by the rain and clothes soaked. Outdoor time cancelled, students went back to working on their little art pieces from the morning. Aiden laughed a bit as he fumbled with a glue bottle, another adventure behind him.

“What splendid creativity, Aiden,” his teacher beamed, looking at the artwork.

A strange sensation blasted down on the boys as they scaled the mountain on the other side of the lake. Snow. Tiny white flakes with gleaming crystals swirled around their faces and onto their tongues. The rocks grew cold and slick, slowing them down even more. Hundreds of feet below, the edge of the lake and forest slowly disappeared, obscured by mist at they climbed.

“I think we’re close,” Aiden yelled back to Sonic. The crest of the mountain appeared with a sizeable ledge. Wedging his feet for one final push, Aiden pulled himself up and onto the ledge, looking down at his friend, still a good distance behind. Aiden jumped up and walked around the ledge a bit, and even peered off the other side to the teeming jungle where the waterfall waited, still sprinkling rocks with liquid crystals.

All sorts of creatures roamed around the jungle. Aiden watched from above as they circled the mazes of paths through the jungle, waiting for his approach. Waiting for prey. Some tried to blend in with the fantastical colors of the forest, while others lay in wait at one certain location, as if pondering
something in the clearing. All of them were relaxed, though a sudden noise or movement in the
underbrush caused an instant tense stature. Hunters.

Aiden turned around to see Sonic smiling up at him, pulling himself up from the last few stones.
A gust of wind picked up behind Aiden, making him stumble toward the ledge. He teetered for a
moment, but caught his footing, just in time to see Sonic lose a handhold. Both boys let out a terrified
breath as Aiden dropped to his knees, putting a hand out for his friend. Sonic grabbed on, but his feet
were unsteady. His body flailed away from the edge of the cliff, and only Aiden held him in place above
the hundreds of feet to the lake.

"Pull!"

"I’m trying," Aiden pleaded, leaning back and rotating his shoulders with every last bit of energy.
The snow picked up, a fury around them, wrapping them in a confusing whirlwind of struggle. Sonic
managed one hand onto the ledge, using his strength as well. Color drained from his knuckles and both
boys heaved. Failure.

Sonic tumbled, down, so far down, bouncing against the side of the mountain and into the mist.
Aiden could only make out a shadow and muffled screams. Boulders around him shuddered at the noise
of Sonic’s yell. Then there was silence. Aiden bit his lip, his heart stalling after beating ten times too fast.
The thought to go back crossed his mind, but there was nothing he could do for Sonic now. The
waterfall waited.

Aiden turned around to the jungle just as the façade of the cliff melted away. A tall, concrete
barrier that separated the pond from the outer edge of the botanical garden took its place. Sonic rolled
around on the bottom, holding his arm, wincing. He knew there was no way for Aiden to help him, so he
waved his friend on. A parent at one of the picnics spotted Sonic and ran over, checking his arm and
asking what had happened.
“Kids and their games,” the father said, helping Sonic to his feet and leading him to the bathrooms to get cleaned up.

A few weeks earlier, the three friends crossed the lava fields of Sentosa. Clouds of sulfur bubbled up from the cracked earth. Aiden, Chloe, and Sonic made their way through and around a maze of volcanic tubes. Openings in the ground revealed steaming lava, ready to shear the skin from their bodies. Each step brought a crackling under their shoes as the caked, ashen ground splintered into tiny pieces. The adventurers knew that no more than one step could be taken on one spot, lest the area give way to the pulsing, pumping lava below.

Chloe cleared the maze of tubes first, leading to a river of lava flowing over a ridge. The group stood perpendicular to the river, and had to clear the expanse to continue toward the cave of the giant merlion. A series of precarious patches of crusted outcroppings stretched over the steaming obstacle. Sonic and Aiden met her a few seconds later, surveying this newest challenge. A few silent nods led to Aiden jumping to the first of the outcroppings.

Each movement shook dust and stones into the lava. The fiery horizon seemed to close in on them, making the whole clearing burst with heat. Aiden watched behind him, confirming his friends were making progress. Then he heard it: something in the lava, moving it and causing it to sizzle up the sides of the river.

“Faster!” Aiden yelled, just as the giant serpent crested the surface of the orange liquid. The skin of the beast was completely black, with shiny scales that looked hardened to prevent burning in the horrendous temperatures. Hypnotizing yellow eyes moved from one adventurer to the next before it plunged back under. Aiden looked at the others, confused. They started moving again, carefully, watching the surface of the lava.
The attack came from behind. Fangs dripping with fire slammed into the outcropping Aiden held onto. The soulless eyes flared at him as the mouth bit down around the rocks. Aiden lost his grip and tumbled toward the lava. His hands dug into the side of the ashen stone just before his feet would have been swallowed. He heaved himself up and leapt to the next spot, the serpent wrapping around his previous safe haven until it crumbled into the lava.

The snake went under again. Aiden looked over at his friends, who were trying to find another path to reach the edge of the river since the serpent had destroyed the obvious route. One final jump brought him to the shore, while Chloe worked her way to an adjacent column. Silence covered the river for a few seconds, tensing the adventurers.

The sizzling splash of the serpent broke the silence as the beast jumped out at Sonic. He pounced to another island, sailing just inches above the opened mouth of the serpent. A hiss of defiance rang out across the river. Aiden waited, worried, on the riverbank. Chloe found her way down to the shore as well, joining him. Steam wafted up from the middle of the river, above the path of the serpent. Aiden pointed, following the path with his finger until it disappeared into the lava tube mazes, looking for other, less experienced adventurers to prey upon.

"Oi, that was close," Sonic exclaimed, joining the others on the side of the river. They turned and headed up the last ashen hillside toward the cave of the giant merlion. Scavenging birds circled above them, brown dots fleeting in and out of the bloody sky. Wind would not cool, but merely blow tiny particles of dust and ash into their tear-filled eyes. The mouth of the cave came as a huge relief for the group.

Stepping inside, Aiden could hear the deep-throated growl of the giant merlion. He hoped it was sleeping, satisfied with devouring past adventurers trying to reach its fantastic gold treasures. Several different tunnels wrapped around the inside of the cave. Chloe turned on a tiny flashlight, only to reveal a man standing at the entrance of one tunnel.
"The merlion is closed, kids," the man said as the cave lit up into a sheltered line queue. The giant merlion on Sentosa loomed above them, closed for the evening. Stretching back behind the head of the merlion was a series of fountains and footbridges for children to play in. The black serpent stretched back through the fountains, down the hill the children had adventured up.

Aiden lowered his head and sighed. The three friends moved out of the queue and back toward the giant plaza and mall where their parents would be wandering around, trying to spend a nice evening before the weekend ended. Universal Studios Singapore sprang up, dominating the whole plaza. Chloe put her hand on his shoulder and smiled at him.

"Someday we will," she said. Somehow Aiden knew it was only a comforting lie. Already the fountains and mazes were feeling tight and small. Childish.

Aiden’s lungs burned as he wheeled his body around a cluster of jungle trees. Natives chased him, furious with his encroachment upon their land. His attackers had seen him cresting the mountain and climbing down to the valley with the waterfall. The mad chase that ensued left Aiden’s temple pounding and feet feeling like thousands of needles were piercing his soles. Refuge could only be found in the thick underbrush of the jungle.

Safety. He slid under a bush just a few hundred meters from the waterfall. He could hear it in his mind, crashing down to the pool below without ever letting up. Thinking about the endless movement and violence at the point of impact made him dizzy. One native stopped at the bush, looking around a bit. Aiden swallowed and watched with pensive eyes. Birds chirped in the distance, and then fluttered off. The natives pointed in that direction and moved away. Aiden let out the air from his lungs and peered beyond the bushes.

Now or never. Aiden jumped up and ran across an open field to the grove of trees surrounding the waterfall. The natives didn’t see him, too far off, investigating a clump of jungle on the other end of
the clearing. Aiden pushed away branches, kicked through roots and leaves, and climbed over logs until the waterfall was just beyond his sight. He pulled back a pair of large branches, which caused a cold blast of air to hit his face. There it was. The waterfall.

Aiden moved forward, licking his dry lips. A sign suddenly caught his eye. "The Singapore Botanic Gardens' Coolhouse." He stopped dead. The illusion was broken. A little wooden walkway inside the coolhouse appeared. Aiden shut his eyes, trying to bring back the jungle. It didn't work. The jungle shrank back into individual plants lined along the coolhouse wall. The crashing waterfall turned into a rushing water feature in the middle of the display.

Aiden no longer felt his throat screaming at him. He wasn't even thirsty anymore. The mountains in his mind became hills and fences. The lake dried up into a pond. Merlions froze to statues. Snakes spat water instead of flames. Natives wore khakis and suits over their tribal garb. Everything was real again. Boring.

Aiden shrank back from the water feature and to the door of the coolhouse. One of the attendants who had chased him after he scaled the outer wall caught his eye and ran over. Aiden just nodded as the man scolded him, telling him trespassing was not a game. Life is not a game, not an adventure. They moved back to the gift shop, and Aiden saw his mother crying, a man stripping the nametag from her chest and pointing toward the gardens yelling.

Aiden never played make-believe again.
Mysteries of the Far East

“Our guide moves on to a patch of grass that is fenced off. He grabs a wooden pole leaning on the fence and drives it into the grass. Lo and behold, the ground gave way, flipping open to reveal a pit laden with bamboo stakes, known as punji sticks. This was an actual trap set by the Vietcong, now preserved for visitors to see the brutal yet ingenious contraption. The tour guide, being quite the comedian, proudly exclaimed, ‘Here in Vietnam, we have real tourist traps.’” ~ Củ Chi Tunnels, Vietnam. November 5th.

“Imagine a small pagoda surrounded by twenty-story buildings. The Taoist temple we visited sat in the shadow of a few very modern buildings. The sign outside said no pictures were allowed, but our tour guide said it was okay. “I’m good friends with them,” he said excitedly. While the staff didn’t seem to mind photos, many of the patrons looked visibly angry if a flash went off. I decided to turn off my flash just to make sure not to offend anyone. The temple was filled to the brim with incents, a smoky haze that almost made it hard to breath.” ~ Hong Kong, China. November 12th.

“You can get lost in thought when alone on a churning ship. Most of the other voyagers are climbing around the Great Wall right now. I’m stuck with ‘in-transit’ living due to the cavernous hole in my wallet. But for once, the stars seem to gleam brighter. Maybe it was the fancy food they served us pitiful left-behinds. Something told me, though, that
it had more to do with the majesty of Hong Kong in the distance, and Shanghai springing up, lighting up the sky in a dizzying array of modern dominance and frightening power.” ~ Aboard the MV Explorer in-transit to Shanghai. November 14th.

“There is one vending machine for every 23 people in Japan. There are 128 million people in Japan, a country smaller than California in area. If you do the math (and I almost always do for everyone else’s sake), there are thirty eight vending machines for every square mile in Japan. In just two days, I used four vending machines.” ~ Osaka, Japan. November 20th.

We take for granted our own culture until faced with the glaring realization that not everyone eats food with a fork or talks loud enough for every passerby to hear.
Phuong dangled her feet off the helipad. She realized each motorbike looked exactly the same from so far up. In fact, from this distance, she could even imagine the streets of Ho Chi Minh City to be clean or free from beggars. Her perch on the massive Bitexco Financial Tower overlooked all the bustle that hinted at progress. Sweeping glass buildings popped up around the aging plaster and metal structures that lined the clogged arteries of the city. Luckily, over six hundred feet of air separated Phuong from the smog and heat from those thoroughfares, streets jammed from sidewalk to sidewalk with scooters and the occasional Vinasun taxi.

A sudden blast of wind whipped Phuong's stringy black hair in her face. A good way to hide her from the world, she thought. For a moment, she wondered if that's how the architect of the tower felt. The glass and metal stuck up so much higher than everything else. Some saw it as a triumph, but most as a farce. The helipad jutted out from the fiftieth floor, an ugly aperture to many and simply not practical to others. Helicopters are rarely allowed in the airspace above the city.

Phuong looked out again, tracing the winding streets until her eyes peered straight down. Her hand slid across the scratchy metal edge of the helipad and gripped hesitantly. The slight tan on her scrawny arm fell into view, making her jam her eyes shut. Images of beautiful milky skin and faces with youthful resilience to wrinkles flashed through her mind. Beauty could never be achieved working in the sun all day with cracked hands and sun stained clothing.

A loud fog horn in the bay startled her back to the tower. Dizzy from the height, she scooted back from the precipice and sighed a bit. Clouds threatened the city, drifting in for the afternoon downpour. Umbrellas dotted the tiny streets now, identifiable from this distance only by their vibrant colors. A collective groan seemed to overtake the cluster of buildings. Glass and concrete have no shelter from the pelting drops, and neither did Phuong.
The first raindrop. Phuong watched it trail down her arm, new drops joining every few moments. The storms always kicked up smells, and the metallic scent of the building overpowered her. She could taste the titanium and hydrocarbons on her tongue like battery acid mixed with tears. In a last ditch effort, she stuck out her tongue to catch the drops, which grew larger and heavier with each bombardment. Stinging explosions of fresh, wet raindrops washed away the taste in her mouth and replaced it with a blank, silky film over her tongue.

Do raindrops feel fear? Can they understand the rush of falling only leads to an implosion of atoms and bonds upon the first solid surface it crashes into? Phuong couldn’t bear to know the answers because they compounded her failures. Her fear kept her glued to the ledge, not free like the descending dots of moisture, reeling to a denouement with a deafening crescendo. Of course, the rainwater never truly died. It would come back day after day, reliving the freefall all over the world. Phuong knew that would not happen for her. After all, how many times can a phoenix rise from the ashes? Her fourth attempt at suicide would surely be successful.

The rain soaked through Phuong’s plain white shirt with bare threads at the bottom seam. Sitting there reminded her of the day she sat in the middle of Nam Ky Khoi Nghra Street during the rain.

Ben Thanh Market stood a block over, the clock tower peeling away time. The last seconds of her life. Or so she thought.

Steaming motors whizzed past Phuong every few seconds. Loud horns buzzed in her ears as the people driving in the street cursed at her. Somehow, in all the chaos of the street, no one hit her. She sat there in the rain, drenched and shaking, while puddles bubbled up in the pavement around her. Her hair matted against her face and blew off slightly every time the gush of a passing motorbike came a little too close. A few people on the sidewalk stopped to watch the woman in the street, yelling crude
remarks or pleading for her to come back to the relative safety of the curb. Phuong tuned it all out, the noises of the street consuming her mind.

A sudden sensation: warmth, very close but not flying by. Phuong opened one eye hesitantly and saw a motorbike stopped next to her. The motor sputtered and smoked in the rain, as each splash kicked back into the air brilliantly. She looked up to see a fairly young boy, maybe fifteen, peering down at her with confused eyes. His cheekbones stuck out wide, and his spindly legs hardly held the motorbike in place. The boy put out his hand for her.

“Why are you in the street?” An innocence in his voice resonated with Phuong. A boy less than half her age knew nothing of the hardships of growing old. His face had not cracked into spider webs.

“Please go,” she returned lamely and stared back at the ground. The sputter of the motor cut out and the boy climbed down next to her. He huddled in, legs crossed as he sat in the street. Time slowed as the pair watched the rain slow to a few errant drips. A car swerved to miss the stationary bike, kicking up a puddle over the pair in the street. They both jumped a little and the boy began to laugh a bit. He looked over at Phuong and realized the dripping from her face was not rain water.

“You look like my mom,” he said. She clenched her teeth and held back a sob. “Yeah, my mom. She died when I was twelve,” the boy trailed off.

“Lucky her,” Phuong snorted, burying her face in her soaked shirt. The boy turned to look over his shoulder as the sirens rang out. He patted her on the knee and stood up.

“Please don’t leave with her,” he said as he climbed back on his bike. “Scars fade.” The motor coughed to life and the boy rode off. Phuong wrung out the cuffs of her shirt as the police arrived. They shouted gruff words in her ears and dragged her off the street. The rainclouds had all but disappeared, replaced by a smoggy sky abuzz with voices and motorbike horns. Phuong drifted off in the white police car with the blue stripe. A sign advertising a massage for foreigners was the last thing she remembered.
seeing on the side of the street. When she awoke, she had no cuts, or bruises, or burns - anything to show she had even tried to die.

Weeks later, the thoughts of hatred returned. Phuong went to the Mekong Delta.

Reeds floated around the little bridge Phuong stood on above the water. Palm fronds shot out of the water in thick patches, creating little channels between the swampy islands dotting the expanse of the delta. Occasionally, a boat drifted under the bridge; tourists clicking shots of the surroundings while an elderly boat master pushed along with a paddle wearing his nón lát. A Japanese family walked on the bridge behind her, talking loudly and heading toward the coconut candy huts that steamed with faint smells of sugar.

A giant emerald leaf floated under her feet, which now dangled over the water. The water smelled of mud mixed with herbage. The chatter of the Japanese faded and a slight calm came over the area. Insects buzzed lightly, and a bird cawed in the distance. A cooling sensation hit the bottom of her feet as the water rolled under her, spitting up a little bit of the murky liquid. Her body tensed as she pushed off the bridge with her hands, going under with a deafening splash.

Phuong shut her eyes and felt the stones pulling her down. They tugged at her shoes and pockets, fighting her body's natural response to flail up to the surface. So did the reeds and roots in the water, tangling around her ankles and shins. Bubbles escaped from her mouth, floating up and disappearing at the water's edge. Sun cut through the opaque water, lighting up the torrid display of thrashing and struggle. Above the surface, little could be seen except for a slight swirling of the water and white foam kicking up by the bridge.

The pressure on Phuong's chest became painful. Her subconscious yelled at her, trying to mediate the loss of oxygen in the body. Involuntary spasms kicked out some of the rocks and ripped at the tangling undergrowth. Phuong tried to calm her body and opened her mouth to swallow death.
Warmth rushed over her chest, relaxing her a bit. The mind slipped back, into the depths of the now placid water.

Blank. Is this what death looks like? She could still feel the pressure of the water wrapped around her body. A barely audible ticking resonated through the water, slower and louder with every beat. Her heart? No, it was pounding in its own rhythm, dying quietly. The ticking stopped with a rush of water against her body, which seemed to be floating in empty space. Life drained out from her open, bobbing mouth. Total darkness. No feeling. Success.

Somewhere in Ho Chi Minh City, a boy giggled at the orangutan at the zoo. The ape’s orange fur hung down around its gaunt body while he licked an old plastic wrapper clean. Starvation was a concept the young boy didn’t completely understand. Most of the animals in the zoo knew it far too well. The chipped green paint of the bars couldn’t hide the aging façade.

Quickly, the boy’s attention was turned away from the ape. A young girl stood a few hundred meters down the pathway, enthralled by the butterflies in a large, netted enclosure. She jumped up and down, following the fluttering insects around the net. The little boy ambled down to see what all the commotion was about. Clouds and giant trees filtered out most of the sun. Orchids and other Vietnamese foliage sprang up along every inch of the path, as if to pull people’s attention away from the poor conditions of the animals.

Yellow and orange butterflies flitted about the inside of the enclosure, occasionally landing on the bushes and trees dominating the interior. A lock hung on the entrance, but that didn’t stop the girl from enjoying herself. She stuck her little fingers inside the netting and watched carefully, jumping back playfully when wings tickled her. The grass around the netting was muddy and caused her to slip occasionally, which made the boy laugh.

“You walk funny,” he said, pointing. She stuck out her tongue at him and continued chasing around the net. A few adults walked by and whispered something, giving the girl sideways glances. She
didn’t notice, simply dancing about in youthful bliss. The boy walked up and watched more closely, his sandals sinking in the mud. A butterfly swooped up, startling him. He wobbled, feet stuck in the viscous ground, tumbling down with a splat. The girl giggled and skipped over to him.

"Scaredy. They’re just butterflies." He looked up at her, indignant, with a swirl of shame across his eyes. His hands used the net to pull up, a blanket of mud left behind on his trousers and shirt.

"Butterflies are boring," he fumed, wiping off his clothes as best he could. The girl smiled and stared up at the sky. She sighed contentedly as the clouds dissipated for a quick second, showering her in light. The enclosure lit up as well, the graceful wings making a silent hum with rustling in the leaves of the giant tree.

"But they’re pretty," she shot back as the boy started to walk away. A tiger growled in the distance as the boy looked back, a lone tear in his eye from embarrassment.

"Well..." he yelled, flustered. "You’re not pretty!" He then started running, tears flowing down his face. The girl stood, petrified. No one had ever told her that. How could she ever compare to a graceful butterfly? A puddle by the mud revealed her face, but it was old. Phuong’s adult face stared back at her with depressed and tired eyes.

Coughing. Bright light. Pounding on her chest. Phuong awoke in one of the coconut shacks near the bridge. A whirring ceiling fan came into view while muted voices boomed all around her. She shivered as water leaked off into the ground. A large hand waved over her face and an old Vietnamese man looked down at her with concerned eyes. Phuong rolled over, groaning, trying to cover her face from the crowd. A single ray of sun sneaked into the hut through a hole in the thatching of the roof. This beam flashed into her eyes, but she didn’t care.

"Ma’am, are you all right? Ma’am?" The older gentleman rocked her shoulder gently while the onlookers whispered. Someone brought the meat of a coconut and put it down on the ground next to her on top of a palm leaf. Her jittery hand grabbed a small piece and brought it to her lips, wrinkled
from the water. The creamy, faint flavor brought Phuong some comfort as the old man draped a blanket across her.

"I’m fine," she said quietly, her lungs burning. Some of the people in the crowd moved off with more important matters to take care of. Others, including the old man, just sat and waited for her to do something. Phuong felt like one of the animals at the zoo: on display for everyone to watch. But she wasn’t a butterfly, nor a cute baby tiger, or even a powerful lion roaring defiantly at onlookers. She felt like the orange, gaunt orangutan; a spectacle of human ugliness and peculiarity. She just wanted them to leave.

Which they did, eventually. As the afternoon faded into a deep blue, tourists abandoned the delta for food at fancy hotel restaurants. The old man stayed, but only because he owned the hut she rested in, rolling around, trying to understand why her plan failed. As night set in, the old man sat next to her and started talking of his life. Phuong didn’t so much as listen, but rather used the hum of his voice to drift in and out of sleep. Insects buzzed in the distance while cool breezes kept her clutched to the tattered blanket.

The old man went silent for a few minutes. Phuong strained to hear if his breath was heavy with sleep. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness and made out his hand drumming ever so slightly on his chair. She rolled over slightly and looked up to see him smiling.

"Ramblings," he chuckled. He began to stand, but Phuong put out her hand. She grabbed his ankle lightly and tugged, making him sit back down. Instead of the stories of that war, the old man spoke of his children. His hushed tone melted over Phuong until she was paralyzed at his feet, listening like a child. A question broke her trance.

"I found the stones in your pocket. Why?" Phuong turned away from the sudden interrogation. Even the hum of the insects stopped, as if anticipating her answer. Why did everyone care? Why
couldn’t she just end her life in peace? After all, they didn’t know her. Anger stirred inside her and she jumped up, pointing at her face.

“Because of this!” she yelled and stomped her way out of the room. The old man followed Phuong just to the edge of the hut. She glanced back and saw him, his eyes filled with sadness. Leaves crunched under her feet and she plunged into the darkness.

Phuong emerged into modern, manmade light months later. She tied the back of her maid outfit as she walked into the lavish lobby of the Rex Hotel. Forty thousand dong a day doing laundry suited her for a while.

The rooms of the Rex stunned Phuong. The rich hardwood floors shined back at her as she stripped beds covered with Egyptian cotton sheets and comforters. She walked around the bed and took a moment to look out the picture windows from seven stories up. An even glow from the sculpted goblet lighting made the glass hazy. She switched one off, revealing the glowing cityscape below. As she fumbled to turn the light back on, she accidently knocked a bottle off the end table. Phuong inhaled sharply and closed her eyes, waiting for a crash. Instead, the bottle made a little thud and bounced on the floor a little. Plastic.

Phuong sighed in relief and picked up the bottle. It was peculiar to her. She recognized the style of labeling, however. The back was full of warnings in English. Her limited handle on the language meant she couldn’t know for sure, but she thought it to be some sort of medication bottle. She placed it back on the end table and went about putting the new linens on the bed, as requested by the guest.

The fresh scent of the clean sheets wafted up lovingly as she tuck each corner around the mattress. Her fingers threaded in and out of the material, feeling the softness.

Done. Phuong started carting out the old linens, ready for the next room. She looked back to make sure everything was in order, and caught sight of the medicine bottle again. The news always talked of the dangers of such invasive Western medicines. She had heard of overdoses and how many
people used them to end their life relatively comfortably. Duty tugged her away to the next room, but not for long.

Phuong returned to the bottle and picked it up, peering at the liquid inside. A horn blared in traffic out on the street, making her jump. She worried someone would find her, so she took the bottle into the bathroom and locked the door. The opulent shower with hand tiling had a little carved stone seat that jutted out. She sat down on it and twisted upon the cap on the bottle. This action took a few tries, as it turned strangely.

With the cap off, Phuong sniffed the liquid. The odor wrinkled her nose. She likened it to a mix of aloe pastes, sugary candies, and cleaning liquids. Surely this would work. She glanced out of the shower and saw herself in the mirror. The ragged hair and ugly maid outfit made her shudder. She dropped her head back and swallowed ounce after ounce of the medicine. The taste somehow outmatched the smell in being revolting. She almost choked it back up. There was a strange mix of cherry and alcohol flavors, masked by a stinging sensation on the tongue.

With the bottle empty, Phuong waited. The fancy porcelain toilet gurgled a little as someone a floor below flushed. Tiles swirled around the sink in concentric circles, almost hypnotizing her. The medicine worked slowly, but Phuong could feel her eyes getting heavy. The taste still coated her mouth and made her gag from time to time. Lights in the room seemed to dim as she slumped over against the shower wall. She shut her eyes and felt her body go rubbery. It felt like floating in the water of the delta, but without all the pressure.

Clouds blanketed the sky around her. Phuong always wondered what a cloud felt like. She pulled part of one in, the moisture separating and foaming around her hand. Buildings far below looked up at her with jealousy. She swam around the sky, moving from cloud to cloud and falling through them just for the momentary rush of cooling liquid. One cloud floated up and surrounded her, following her
relessly. She liked the feeling as it wrapped over her body. Her tongue went out to taste the fluffy cloud.

Something was wrong. The cloud tasted terrible, like the medicine. She spat it out, but couldn’t get rid of the cherry-laced-with-poison taste. Her body writhed inside the cloud as she tried to escape. Her movement worked, releasing her from the cloud, but now she couldn’t fly. She plummeted toward the jealous buildings that now smiled at her demise. Her fall took her past all the buildings, trapped between as they mocked her. Then she hit the ground. She woke up.

"Phuong?" Another maid looked down at her, puzzled. Phuong felt the soft sheets below her like the fluffy clouds. An American man stood in the corner of the room, vaguely concerned, but more perturbed. Phuong’s mind cleared a bit, and she looked around. The guest sighed and threw up his arms.

"Well? She drank all my Nyquil," he said, disgusted. "Where am I supposed to find that around here?" He grumbled something else and sat down at the desk in the room. The other maid tried to respond, but couldn’t put English words together cohesively. The guest got up again and stormed out. As he did, he yelled back at them.

"If you think I’m going to take pity on her because of her face, you are dead wrong." The words hung in the doorway, little reminders of life. Tears welled up in Phuong’s eyes as the other maid frantically moved to clean up all the mess. The guest would want new sheets for sure.

Phuong shook away the memories, bringing her back to the helipad. Nighttime brought out more lights across the city. Phuong looked down from the helipad and started walking back toward the access door to the elevator. Something wouldn’t let her do it. Maybe it was fear, but she suspected it to be just another failing in her life. Only the worst human being could want to end their life, and then fail miserably at it.
Phuong stopped in the middle of the giant “H” of the helipad. Flashing lights danced up into the sky, signaling helicopters that would never come. Cold had crept into her body, making her shiver a bit as she looked back at the ledge once more. Her hand went up to her face and traced the outline. The sunken cheeks and stringy hair were just accessories. The deep, reddish scars from burns were what really bothered her; that, and the split, misshapen lip, or the eye that never quite lined up. Those deformities caused pity, but mostly fear. Fear of reality and truth. Fear of a past no one wanted to admit to or remember. A blast of liquid fire spewing from the history books.

She broke into a dead sprint. Charging toward the edge, she felt the momentary rush of adrenaline before doing something dangerous. This feeling replaced itself with the queasy, stomach bending thoughts of pain and being scared. But it was too late. Her momentum carried her to the open air with a triumphant leap.

Time froze. All the buildings shrank back, lights flickering. Freefall mixed excitement with sheer terror. The wind whipped her hair and pulled at her mouth and cheeks. She didn’t scream. That would simply attract attention. People would watch her plummet and turn away, scared by the image of imminent death.

Phuong remained remarkably calm. The pavement rose up toward her faster each second, but it didn’t faze her. She simply hoped the death would be as quick and painless as possible. She wondered who would find her. Would her body disrupt traffic? Who would miss her? All this and more flashed through her mind as a creeping blanket of guilt started to smother her. She had failed the boy who sat with her in the street. The old man in the hut pulled her from the water for nothing. Another maid risked her livelihood to stay with her through the disgusting medicine. What had they done? Why did she spite them? Soon, the guilt would disappear.

Butterflies shot up inside the netting at the zoo. The buildings stood even older and more dilapidated than before. Even the flora seemed muted in tone as Phuong walked around, grown and
bitter with the world. The shadow of a little girl left tracks in the mud by the enclosure. For once, the display was actually unlocked, allowing patrons inside with the butterflies and the giant tree whose branches swayed with the wind.

Phuong stepped inside, fluttering wings everywhere. She felt the tiny puffs of air on her cheeks as butterflies danced around her in the sky. A worker for the zoo also stood in the enclosure, gently cupping his hands around one specimen in particular. He motioned for Phuong to come and look. She peered down at a butterfly with a broken wing, bent back, probably from some overly eager child grabbing at it.

“Look how beautiful she is,” the zoo worker said. “It’s a shame that she won’t survive. It would be cruel to make her live long without being able to fly”

The words rattled around in Phuong’s head, and the sudden rapid heartbeat the thought gave her took her back to the freefall. She threw out her arms. Butterflies floated up and pulled her into the sky, in among the clouds.

Phuong finally felt beautiful.
The assistant to the CEO of Vitasoy International Holdings Limited first told me of the Big Buddha on Lantau while giving me an honorary tour of Hong Kong. I recall it specifically because the excitable little prick in his firmly pressed button-down had accidentally knocked incense ashes onto the only suit I brought. That suit was Bottega Veneta. It cost more than his whole wardrobe, I can guarantee that.

We were in the middle of the city in some temple of sorts. I could hardly believe it. Some shrine among the skyscrapers. It was that gaudy red, gold, and green motif one would expect of a cheap Chinese restaurant in rural America. But this was Hong Kong, the jewel of the East, right? The man had me running around temples hazed over with smoke that smelled like some hippie joint in Seattle. I couldn’t get that smell out of my hair for days. It was the worst business trip of my life.

Or so I thought. Months later, my boss comes to me saying the fucking CEO at Vitasoy dropped our contract, just like that. No call, no nothing. And we had his goddamn signature. I mean, who does he think he is, Mao or something? So I get the lovely assignment of flying my ass back to Hong Kong just to talk with this delusional son of a bitch.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. I work for this big beverage company in the U.S. called Blue Sky. And me, I’m the guy that gets everything done. Every company has that one go-to guy, and that’s me. I’ve made more million dollar deals than most athletes or celebrities. I wasn’t about to let some Chinese idiot ruin my record. A deal is a deal.

So when I get there for the second time, these jerks try and pull the same little routine. This CEO and his son, or some guy that looks just like him, take me all around town for two fucking days before they even recognize we have business with each other. What’s up with that? I’m trying to make an $837 million
Acquisition and all these guys can talk about is the skyline from Victoria’s Peak. I mean, sure, it’s impressive, but I didn’t fly half way around the world to pose for pictures with everybody and his uncle.

We finally get to the dealings on day three. The CEO has us in his lavish boardroom with all the furniture strategically tilted in some direction to focus their chi or some shit. I don’t really care; I just know you don’t put a goddamn plant in the middle of a room where it blocks the view of everybody. His little assistant clambers up to me with this goofy smile and holds out a small present wrapped in bright red paper and tells me the company’s “energy is expansive.” Right. Like that makes any sense. So he stands there for a few seconds staring at me like he’s a dog and I have a prime rib stapled to my jacket pocket. Whatever he was waiting for, I didn’t have it. I later found out the gift was a travel alarm clock. It was like they were attempting some ill-conceived joke or something.

Long story short, the CEO apparently felt like our company wasn’t respecting him. I guess he didn’t get a fucking Christmas card or something. So he tells me the only way he will renew my contract is if I make some sort of symbolic journey in Lantau to prove I respect him and his culture. I am not some mindless drone that wanders out in a field looking for salvation, and I put that fact to him rather bluntly. His stupid fern in the center of the room may have felt the full brunt of my frustration at this silly game he was playing. This is not how one does business, especially in a mutually beneficial partnership.

But for some reason I found myself buying hiking gear that night and meeting his beady eyed assistant at the base of some gigantic hill by a bay the next day. The sun was just then rising over the hill, laying a golden blanket across the bay. I remember looking up and seeing the longest tram lines I’ve ever seen hundreds of feet above me. The trams trailed up and into the hills, off toward some shadow the assistant would only refer to as Tian Tan. Then he said we were going to make the same journey on foot and end at the Wisdom Path. Ridiculous.
"That has to be twenty goddamn miles," I spat, throwing up one arm toward the path. The assistant gave a hesitant nod, probably because he doesn't know what a mile is because they use meters, I bet. And it was practically all uphill on this shitty wooden staircase carved into the hillside. No shade, just scratchy underbrush and splintering steps for miles. Then this assistant has the nerve to start jogging up the steps. He motions for me to follow and tells me he will meet me at the top. Fuck him.

I think I stayed in sight of that son of a bitch for about an hour. That's when he finally disappeared as a tiny dot passing over a rise in the hill. Once he was gone I saw no point in killing myself with that crap, and stopped for a few minutes to catch my breath. Honestly, I am in pretty good shape and this hill was kicking my ass. I run on treadmills and use a stair climber with even heights. These steps looked like they were built decades ago, and were never quite the same height. When I started again, the tourists had finally started passing overhead, snapping shots of the countryside. And me, a speck of dust in their lens who was hot as hell and pissed off to no end.

I reached the top of the first major rise at about noon. The assistant was waiting there, sitting on the one bench I had seen on the path so far, his eyes mostly closed, listening to his iPod. Or maybe his eyes were open, I could never tell with these people. Let me just say the stereotypes are true. Well, regardless of his eye situation, he looked up at me when I arrived, my shirt soaked in sweat. I had been smart in not gelling my hair that day.

"How much further?" I puffed, bending over with hands on my knees. He waggled his hand mysteriously and jumped up. He gave me a little sack and then told me he would see me at Tian Tan. I sat down and fumbled open the sack. It had a bunch of little snack foods in it with bizarre labels I could not for the life of me figure out. I could speak a little Chinese, but the letters are just over the top. At the bottom of the bag were two cartons of Vitasoy San Sui Soy Milk. Great, just what I needed.

What amazed me most about this place was how damn ugly it was. Seriously, I felt like I was in the middle of rolling hills nowhere USA. I always pictured foreign countries as these beautiful lands of
extravagant colors. All this place had was yellow and brown earth tones washed over hill after hill of sagebrush. A breeze ducked in just then, a fleeting chance for me to actually get my body back to a reasonable temperature. As if coming in with the wind, slow footsteps up the path caught my attention.

I will never forget this woman. She had to have been an ancient artifact or something. I half expected her to collapse dead right there, an eighty pound sack of bones and skin. She had the whitest hair I've ever seen, like those blinding smiles of people in toothpaste commercials. Her skin was in tight folds over her tiny face. I suppose they could be called wrinkles, but I would liken them more to the endless divots and ravines in the hillside around us. She wore what appeared to be one piece of cloth draped around the whole body, shabby in seam work and even worse off from wear. I think we were both a little surprised to see each other.

How that woman made it up the hill I will never know. She had a walking stick. It was in her left hand, which was grasping feebly at it with every step, body slumped against the support. I jumped up from the bench, seeing she was in far more need of it than I was. I am, after all, a gentleman. She waved off my generous offer and said something in a weird dialect I didn’t quite understand. Or maybe she was just senile and spouting off jibberish, one can never be sure with these people. Instead, she just passed on by, heading off into the next stretch of paths winding endlessly around the hill.

Of course, I decided to leave my lunch refuge as well. There was no reason a woman old enough to have seen the construction of the Great Wall should outduel me in a climb to the top of this hill. Her pace was surprisingly even, and it took me a few minutes to make my way around her. As I went around off the path next to her to pass she said something again, her voice crackling at the end like she was telling a joke of some sort. Crazy old lady was going to die of heatstroke out there.

An hour later or so and I had practically forgotten about beating the old woman up the hill. She was so far behind I had no qualms about slowing down a bit. As I did, I crested the second hill, revealing
a little village, and in the distance, a massive bronze statue. I caught myself gawking after tripping up the uneven stairs again. Who would put this thing way out here?

The village was a contrived little tourist trap. I could tell that even a mile or two off. It was arranged to look like a real town, but really just served as a touristy escape from the dead surroundings. Each building served as a restaurant or souvenir shop. There was even one stall that just had those old capsule toy dispensers I used to put quarters in at the store. It was eerie in a lot of ways, but most of all, it was fucking crowded. Today was the day every tourist decided to flood this place. I was the only one different from these ungrateful slobs because I earned this place, climbing stairs for over seven hours.

Then there were more goddamn stairs. I am not kidding, this Big Buddha was atop another platform with some couple hundred stairs. The statue was certainly large enough, and it cast a shadow reaching down the steps into the throngs making their way up or down. Thank whoever these people call God for the shade. I hobbled up, my thighs killing me from the journey. Signs all over the place proclaimed how I was transcending thought with Buddha himself. Fantastic. People took endless pictures from every angle, stopping abruptly every few steps as we climbed closer still.

That coy son of a bitch was waiting for me again; this time leaned against the wall of the statue pedestal itself. He yawned and walked over like some cool member of an elite club. I just rolled my eyes and peered up at the statue. Buddha's right hand was up with the palm out, while the left was cupped as if begging for something. At least that's what it looked like. It reminded me of the business dealings and how the little assistant had begging eyes for some gift I wasn't going to give him.

“You're late,” he said with a little smile. I shot him a look and probably swore a couple times under my breath. I swear a lot sometimes, but only when shit has been pulled on me that isn't right. From there he proceeded to tell me some boring story about a tree and Buddha and making wishes. There were a bunch of smaller statues around the Big Buddha made of bronze as well. They all had things in their hands. Maybe they were offering things? I don't remember. What I can recall is the

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burning in my lungs finally ceasing the second the goddamn assistant said we had another short hike to complete to the Wisdom Path. Damn him.

This walk was different. We were now in what was kind of like a forest, or maybe a jungle. I don’t really know the difference, but there were trees and shade, so I was content. After a little while, we passed a rundown restaurant with dogs lying out in the sun peaking through trees. Maybe they were on the menu for the next day. They eat dog in China, right? Whatever the case, I wouldn’t be eating any of their shit.

When we finally reached the Wisdom Path, I was thoroughly underwhelmed. The forest cleared into another stark hillside of boring underbrush. The only thing that made this different were a bunch of tall wooden pillars arranged roughly in a figure eight on the hillside. Big fucking deal. I don’t remember the story or why all this was important, but it had something do with a sutra. Not kama sutra, I think that’s something from India. Whatever the case, with me reaching the Wisdom Path, I had passed the test. The assistant made a call and said everything would be taken care of. Then he said something snide about how he hoped the journey had opened my eyes to the world. Sure, sounds good to me.

My boss was really fucking happy. I guess the CEO of Vitasoy sent him the message of our renewed partnership and added something about how I was part of the family. I better be a part of his family after all that I went through. My feet were blistered for weeks after that day. But I guess it was all worth it. My commission was $3.2 million. I will probably use it to travel somewhere better than China. Some place with exotic scenery and people who aren’t always shouting when they talk. Maybe a beach with an all inclusive resort? Yes, I will go to a resort for sure.

And what about that old woman? Craziest thing. The assistant and I are walking back from the Wisdom Path and I see that crazy old bat walking her way up the stairs to the Buddha. My God, I thought I was seeing things. There was no way she made it all that way without having her body fall to
pieces and shrivel up in the sun. I pointed at her and told that wise-guy assistant how I had seen her on the path up. He nodded and walked on as if it were normal. I asked him how she could have survived it.

“She does it every week,” he replied indifferently. I laughed and passed the tacky sign that said “Go to Big Buddha.” There was no way that was true. I nearly passed out and I am a healthy American man. I let the assistant know that as we passed the little capsule toy place. Even so, he kept repeating how she makes the journey every week. I finally called his bluff and asked him how he knew.

“I know because she is the mother of my boss.” What do you know? Who would have fucking guessed that?
Fractured English

There is a park in Osaka with hundreds of winding pathways surrounding the old castle. Miharu loved the area most during the fall, when radiant colors of leaves overpowered the crisp cold that would bring her knees shaking under her school uniform. No one in the park would bother her. The old man and his grandson hitting a tennis ball against the outer walls never asked her harsh questions. The messenger boy on his bike, weaving back and forth, never made lewd passes at her like the boys in school. The mysterious woman who would dunk her feet in the pond despite the harsh cold only smiled at her the way her mother did. Miharu knew the leaves, the shades of red and gold, had some power over the people of Japan. A power that only one man seemed to resist.

“What do you mean you got a check on your English paper?” Miharu’s father asked in an even yet still frightening tone. Sitting in their little home tucked far away from the protection of the castle and trees, good grades were all that could soothe the wrath of her father.

“It’s how he grades, Otou-sama,” Miharu replied, her face melting at the sight of her father’s building anger. Somehow he always caged it, but much like a lion in the Tokyo zoo, there were still roars of defiance bellowing to the frightened onlookers. Her father would make curt replies like the silent murmur of the lion.

“Hmph, dumb Americans.” Her father dropped the folder onto the Noguchi and looked away from her. The shame of it was almost too much for Miharu, driving needles into her throat. “How, then, does he determine marks and rank?” Her father returned his gaze in her direction accusingly. She was unsure how to proceed, but the words seemed to fall from the pupils in her eyes before she found the voice to speak them.

“Sensei says he will do an overall evaluation from our work.” This was some sort of theory the American teacher always went on and on about. There was some sort of portfolio system that was
apparently the only way to do things in America. All the students in the class squirmed at the thought of being left alone to revise and craft this strange language that ignored honoratives and was so terribly direct.

"Then how do I track your progress, Miharu?" She sat in silence, unable to respond. The little statue of the Bodhi tree in the corner seemed to grow around her. Miharu wished she could hide in the roots of the tree, protected from the icy glances of her father, only coming out to eat the figs. But such thoughts were too selfish.

"Next you’re going to say you’re dating an American boy," her father grumbled, stalking off. If one could slam a fusuma shut, this was certainly the case. Miharu sat in silence, an opportunity to fully contemplate her shameful state of underachievement. The idea of the checkmark wore on her more than anything. Was she not good enough for the illustrious plus from her American teacher? Did she really need to take a class in English?

Another thought tore at Miharu’s heart. Her father had mentioned an American boy, just like the one on the subway. Every day he stared at her intently like his eyes were lasers scanning every inch of her face. She attempted to look away, not wanting to shame him or laugh from embarrassment. It was difficult. Something would always tug at her neck, some magnetic need to look back at him.

Only two weeks before her father stormed to the washitsu about checkmarks and schoolwork, something on the subway changed. The boy walked up to Miharu, squeezing through the throngs of businessmen and giggling kōhai. Her eyes immediately dropped to her feet, trying to ignore his curly blonde locks and strange tan dots on his cheeks.

"Sue-mee-moo-sen," he said strangely. She tried to hold back a laugh. Such a silly pronunciation. Miharu of course couldn’t ignore him entirely.

"Good morning. How are you?" she replied in her most polite English. The boy’s shoulders seemed to release some gigantic load. The weight of his world fell beneath the subway rails. There was
always something strange about conversing on the subway. So many people packed into the space made it seem as though you were always talking over someone. Miharu found it to be a sensory overload, with flashy ads, rumbling noises, and peculiar smells rising up from someone’s lunch pack. She glanced at the boy’s eyes for just a second to catch the dots of blue, and then went back to looking at the ground.

“Oh, fine I guess. You speak English? Sorry, I’m really sucky at Japanese.” His foot grinded into the bottom of the subway car.

“Sucky?” She let the word string out from her mouth, confused at something her English teacher never mentioned. There was something terribly foreign about it, like raisins in a rice ball.

“Err, I mean bad,” he said sheepishly. Miharu noticed his feet shift again, her eyes still at the ground. There was a long silence from that point. The boy seemed to duck his head to imitate her. Two stops later and there was still an excruciating silence. Miharu’s father had always told her to value silence, and never speak unless first spoken to. This lesson never sat well with Miharu, who felt it polite to converse should there be a receptive party on hand.

“Are you... student?” she asked shyly, barely raising her face. The boy seemed surprised and inwardly delighted that she should speak to him.

“Kind of. My mom is a teacher. Umm, sensei. I’m here with her.” He looked out the window thoughtfully, glass buildings whizzing by. Suddenly he seemed to remember something important and looked back at her. “How about you?” he asked. She gave him a quizzical look and he retooled the sentence. “Are you a student?” Miharu felt embarrassed for not understanding the first inquiry. She covered her mouth as she laughed a bit.

“Yes, yes. I’m taking English from an American sensei.” As she finished the sentence, the train halted, shaking everyone from their sure footing. Miharu looked over and realized it was her stop. “Oh,
I must go now." She shuffled past him, the boy quite bewildered. He grasped her shoulder and Miharu stopped, unsure of what to do. This was certainly not an appropriate time or place for such a gesture.

"If you ever need help with English, I can tutor you some time... err, I guess I say that because people in my mom's class always ask to practice, or, umm..." he trailed off. Miharu bowed a bit and hurried away, afraid of being a spectacle for those who saw the incident. She had been so embarrassed that later that evening she offered to scrub the genkan free of mud for her mother.

Still there was the checkmark: a mere inch of crooked red ink tearing a rift between her and success. The classroom was the problem, she was sure of it. There was crowding, and Miharu was placed next to the window. Everyone knew the danger of this. Half the day was spent gazing out the window, watching the world bustle down below. Miharu loved seeing the businessmen shuffle through crowds to get to the next train on time. They were little dots playing a game in the streets like those she once played in the video arcade. But those fun images would always disappear as the class took to discussions.

"Come on people, talk to me like I'm alive," her teacher would say. It was a common ploy for him. There was a collective silence any time he said something so bold. Answers danced in front of their eyes, but the group didn't dare make a wrong pronunciation or extrapolation. Miharu was always confused at this American style of teaching. Did he not understand the importance of marks and rank? This meant everything to a Japanese student.

"Miharu, what did you think of the section on restaurant terms?" he asked, dropping an atom bomb in her stomach. The fusion reaction seemed to fizzle up into her throat and down into her hands. She hid the shaking by putting her hands under the table and looked up, lips parting and closing, attempting to create something sensible.

"I liked it. It made me... hungry." The teacher looked at her for a second and gave a slow smile. Tiny strings seemed to tighten the corners of his mouth and his eyes gleamed on past her. The idleness
made her assume he was looking for something more. That was very American. “I would like an American cheeseburger,” she squeaked. The classroom filled with muffled laughter. One boy stuck out his tongue and imitated the motion of eating with one’s hands. The teacher cleared his throat and the room was silent again.

“Thank you. So who can tell me what Miharu will need on her table? Why don’t you call on someone, Miharu?” This was always the worst request of all. Shadows of faces dominated her vision as no one would forgive her for calling them. She hesitated, long enough, perhaps, for some inkling of understanding from the teacher, who stopped her before losing face. “How about we just go on down the line, here? Yukari?”

The anxiety melted away slowly while the next classmate stumbled over the word “napkin.” Time resumed on its normal course, plodding down the road to an eventual escape from the terrifying reality of being taught for learning sake and not for exams. What would her father think of such a farce? He would surely find a way to have this radical American fired.

The weeks passed with more disappointment. Miharu began to hide her checkmarks from her father. Supper was always a dangerous prospect. Miharu would sip her misoshuru with one eye on the bowl and the other on her father. He never looked at her directly, only glanced toward the side of the table. Miharu had heard the proverb that silence was the most deafening sound of all, but this was far beyond any silence she had ever encountered. Mama-san eventually caught on to this routine and spoke up.

“What is a family without words?” The small room off the kitchen with the table and fine dishes began to spin in Miharu’s mind.

“One with nothing but shame to speak of,” Miharu’s father responded indignantly. One to never give up quite so easily, Mama-san shot back.
"Then perhaps we should speak of it. I see no shame in finding Miharu tutoring." The final word hung high in the air with the steam of the *misoshuru*. Miharu carefully studied every twitch in her father's face.

"I will consider it." Failure. Both Mama-san and Miharu went back to staring at their bowls. They knew exactly what it meant when he said such things. Stirring with her spoon, Miharu thought about the boy on the train. He was good at English, she was sure of it. She remembered his word and mouthed "sucky" over and over until she thought her father might be watching.

That night, Miharu stared at the ceiling for hours, wondering how she could gain the approval of her father. The only way she could succeed in English was if she received tutoring from someone. But that very act would shame her almost as much as low marks. She heard the silent tread of slippers outside her room and strained to distinguish whether they were from her mother or father. Her fusuma opening answered that for her.

"Mother, what is it?" Sound lit up the room as well as a lamp. The outline of her mother moved in close to her and put a tender hand over Miharu's mouth for a fleeting moment.

"Your father must not hear us," her mother whispered. Miharu nodded in understanding. She realized her mother could likely not see her affirming nod, and squeezed her hand knowingly instead. "I will tell him you have joined an afterschool club that will help you with your schoolwork. Find a tutor, and pay them with this." Miharu felt her mother place a leathery pouch in her hand. Her mother then stood up to head back out.

"But where is the money from?" Miharu glanced down and felt the thick wad of cash and coins imprisoned within the little purse.

"Don't worry about that. Just do this. One day you will prove to him that you are worth more than empty glares." Before Miharu could protest further, her mother disappeared into the shadows and
silence. In a matter of minutes, Miharu’s eyes shut, her hand going limp and the pouch rolled out onto the floor with a nearly inaudible thud.

Miharu clenched the very same pouch the following morning, standing in the crowded subway car. When the boy with the golden hair stumbled on, still afraid to accidentally bump another person crowding in, Miharu moved over. He saw her coming and smiled wide. Miharu stopped short, thinking she must have embarrassed him by being so forward as to approach him in public. The boy saw her stop and tilted his head to one side. He then squeezed between two businessmen to reach her.

“Hi, uh, oh-hi-yo?” He choked out. She covered her mouth to hide her giggle. “Err, you remember me, right?”

“Yes!” she said, almost cutting him off. They both looked away awkwardly. The train halted in unison, more people filing into the car. Once the low hum of the subway began again, Miharu started once more. She had practiced how to ask the boy all morning. “You are good at English?”

“Haha, around here I am,” he beamed. Miharu noticed something strange in the way he said it, and he looked at her as if there was some sort of expected reaction. When nothing came, he looked down at his feet sheepishly.

“Well, I am looking for a tutor,” Miharu said as confidently as she could. She held out the pouch of money. “I can pay you for your time.” The boy looked from her face to the pouch, then back at her. His gaze was so intense to Miharu. No one ever stared at her like that because it was rude. But somehow she wasn’t offended. His eyes were different than the caustic glare of her father or gawking of school boys.

“I'd be happy to,” he returned. Then he put out his hand. She knew Americans like to shake hands, so she took it lightly, glancing around to make sure no one was watching too closely. “I'm Ryan.”

“Miharu.”
Weeks disappeared with the beauty of early fall. On the last day of warm weather, Ryan invited her to study in the park near the castle. He had brought a picnic blanket and a sack with rice balls and persimmon for them to snack on during her English tutoring. One of the most vivid images in her mind was Ryan’s curly blonde hair bouncing in dancing unkempt curls as he walked down the little hill to the Tatami tree she was sitting under.

“Hey, how’s my best student?” Ryan asked, laying out the blanket. The fabric bunched up against the tree because his eyes were on Miharu and not the task at hand. She simply laughed under her breath and helped him straighten out the cloth.

“As far as I know, I’m your only student,” she shot back, a huge grin on her face. Ever since her English improved, so had Miharu’s American sense of humor.

“How long has it been now?” he asked, unpacking the food. Pages of a calendar fell away in Miharu’s mind as she remembered back to the beginning of fall. By this time all the leaves had turned or fallen, and winter would be creeping over the sea from China at any moment. Even the cool fall air was making her shiver a little, but Ryan insisted on a picnic.

“Nearly two months.”

“You’re a fast learner,” Ryan exclaimed, biting into a rice ball. Miharu felt the blood rush to her face. She still had trouble taking compliments from anyone, especially Ryan.

“No, no. You’re just a good teacher,” Miharu returned meekly. Ryan knew to simply let the compliment stand. While his Western ideals had shaped Miharu to a point, he had also learned some of the virtues of Japanese culture, as well as the proper pronunciation of “excuse me,” and “good morning.”

“When are you going to tell your father?”

“I don’t think he needs to know.” There was some defiance in Miharu’s words that danced around the picnic blanket. The simple fact was that Miharu had hidden every bit of the tutoring from
him. In fact, the pretend afterschool story and improved English grades greatly pleased her father, who
was convinced his stalwart attitude of control was succeeding.

"It's going to be sucky when I go back to America," Ryan said dejectedly. Miharu felt the chill
across her heart, an icicle that had been growing, dripping into her blood from the day she started to
have feelings for Ryan. It was then that he turned to her, his eyes unusually vivid and alive. The kiss
happened quickly, before Miharu could remember herself and be ashamed of such a public display. The
ice crystals melted onto his lips, but shadows remained in the back of her conscious. Somewhere in the
park someone must have been watching, cursing the abject display of such affections. And furthermore,
said display being between a Japanese girl and an outsider?

There was a long silence before Miharu gather herself to speak. She didn't really know what to
say, so she just blurted out "sucky." It was the first word she learned from him, but she didn't even
know what it meant. Ryan looked at her strangely, a drooping hint of disappointment in his eyes.

"Wow, I'm that bad of a kisser?" he lamented, staring up at the undressed branches of the
Tatami tree. Miharu leaned sideways inquisitively.

"Is that what 'sucky' means? Bad?"

"Yeah, didn't you..."

"I'm so sorry!" Miharu impulsively began to bow in shame, switching between "gomen nasai;"
"sumimasen," and "I'm sorry."

"Whoa, whoa, you're okay. I understand," he said, rather amused by her torrent display of
regret. They sat in silence once more, Miharu taking a hesitant bite from a persimmon. "So I'm an okay
kisser then?" Ryan said, quietly hopeful.

"Yes, of course," Miharu blurted out before regaining her mental balance. She simply looked
back at the ground, and nodded.
“Arigato,” Ryan replied. A redeemed glow about him, Ryan started in on a juicier slice of
persimmon. Something about his Japanese startled Miharu. It was so strange to think of her own
language in the context of someone from another country. She wondered if that’s how he felt when she
said “thank you” or “my tutor.” She was instantly cradled by strange warmth coming from some
realization within her. The realization slowly became a poison in her veins, making her wish it had never
existed. She no longer needed a tutor. That meant losing Ryan.

Of course, even as her English surpassed what Ryan could improve, the pair still saw each other.
The morning subway ride and tutoring turned into secretive meetings at the park by the castle. Snow
began to wash over the endless pathways in the park. Miharu knelt down and made little designs in the
fresh snow with her finger. She waited for Ryan patiently as he crossed the icy bridge under the shadow
of the castle.

He grabbed her from behind, lifting her up from the snow playfully, and placed her down with
their eyes locking. “We don’t get snow where I’m from,” he said wistfully.

“What? But it’s so beautiful,” she broke away from him to twirl around in the cool winter air.
He followed after her and they twirled around until they both fell into the cold, crunchy clouds that
covered the ground.

“Yeah, I’m going to miss all the beautiful things in Japan,” he said with a hint of knowing in his
voice. She knew it was another one of his frustratingly cute compliments that she couldn’t take without
blushing. “I, l...” he trailed off and his eyes began to redden.

“What is it, Ryan?” She sat up in the snow and put her hand on his cheek.

“I found out today...” he began to choke on his words and rolled over so she couldn’t see the
tiny icicles falling into the snow from his eyes. “We, my mom and l... we’re going back tomorrow. She...
she said it was a surprise.” The snowy park began to spin around Miharu like a blizzard had taken hold.
A little girl across the field began to scream about snow in her boot. The old man who used to hit tennis balls against the wall in the fall wandered past with his grandson in puffy winter coats.

“But I thought we still had two more weeks,” she replied with anxious hope. All he could do was shake his head and bury it in the snow. They sat there together for nearly an hour, neither one speaking. Ryan took her hand and held it the whole time, his fingers tracing the outline of hers. When he finally did speak, breaking the deadening silence, it was with a voice she hardly recognized. He already seemed thousands of miles away.

“I will always keep in touch with you, Miharu. The second I can come back, I will.” She looked at him for a long time, trying to come to terms with what she really felt.

“No. You don’t belong here.” He looked up at her with trembling lips. She stopped his sobs with a kiss. “And neither do I.” It was Miharu’s first goodbye.

The night she left was a Thursday over two years later. Her American teacher, who had long since given her high marks and kept in touch for the few years he was in Japan, finally packed for home. Miharu had mentioned her desire to study in America many times in their correspondence. Mama-san and the American teacher helped her apply for colleges in the United States and acquire a student visa without her father’s knowledge.

The plan was, and Miharu trembled at the thought of it, to bring the American teacher to meet her father. Apparently her acceptance into the University of Arizona triggered it all.

The American teacher rang the bell and was greeted by Mama-san warmly. His huge brown shoes were left in the genkan, exchanged for an old pair of slippers worn by Miharu’s uncle Haitao-san some years ago. Color drained from Miharu’s life when her father called out asking for the name of the visitor. Luckily the two years spent in Japan gave the American professor enough expertise in the ways of Japanese culture, so he didn’t respond himself. Mama-san went to Miharu’s father and gave the teacher’s name. Miharu couldn’t see her father, but she knew the face he would make. His eyes would
widen just slightly, hardly noticeable to someone who didn’t know to look for it. His ears would shake a little, as if the anger was steaming out like in those old American comedy shows. But most telling would be his lips, which would all but disappear into his stony gaze.

"Can you speak Japanese?" he asked the teacher doubtfully, almost trying to talk fast to gain a greater advantage.

"Of course," the teacher responded. "Though my diction may be imperfect." Miharu’s father fought the urge to raise an eyebrow. Miharu hid in the room adjacent, her ear to the paper and wood fusuma. Mama-san joined her, hunkering down with a slight sigh.

"All right then. Good. Can I offer you something to drink? Tea, coffee, water?" It was another test. Miharu’s father was out to prove how un-Japanese the teacher was. Miharu inwardly hoped her teacher would not refuse such a gracious offer, lest the conversation fall apart.

"That would be fine."

Success! By not saying which he preferred, the teacher not only agreed to the gracious offer but let her father choose the drink for him. Tea was exchanged and both men took a tentative seat on the floor.

"So, why have you come?" the father asked, a slight drip of tea winding down his chin.

"I want to talk to you about Miharu’s future."

"How is that your concern?" Miharu’s father asked a valid question. A strange man talking about a young girls’ future would upset almost any father.

"I remember her in class. She has real promise in teaching English to others. Or just teaching for that matter."

"What are you suggesting?" Miharu’s father was still holding the curtain over his anger. He was like a matador taunting the teacher to strike while holding a blade hidden by crimson waved about for all to see. Miharu saw it as an art form in motion, delicate and disastrous at the same time.
"There's a program in America that could really expand her possibilities as a future educator, even as a mere student. She's already been accepted." This caught the matador off guard. Maybe the bull found a weakness. Perhaps the bull knew something the matador did not, a kernel of information about the arena or the crowd. An unsettled matador must strike, it seemed.

"How dare you come to my home and try and take away my only daughter! I could have expected as much from an American." What totally took the teacher by surprise, though Miharu was all too familiar, was that words with such passion and anger could be espoused with so little emotion. The father's eyes never sprang our like a Moroccan's, nor did his nose flare like in India, or his voice rise with the spirit of American anger.

And so it was done. Rarely did Miharu's father give a direct "no" about anything. This was the only example she could ever remember. Perhaps that's why she decided to leave on her own. All it would take were the savings from sweeping the ramen shop. She planned on finding Ryan at the University of Arizona. Maybe that was why she applied there in the first place. The boy with the bouncing curls had never left her thoughts. The night they rolled naked together on tatami mats, writhing in pleasure one last time before he departed never left her. He said he would always write. He always did.

"Miharu, are you really going?" Mama-san asked in the dark void of the genkan. Night had a way of making everything surreal. That was the last bit of protection Miharu needed in her mind. Maybe it was all a dream, she thought for a few fleeting seconds. Then the stark details around her banished that thought.

"I will miss you, Mama-san," Miharu choked into the darkness. "I promise to always write you. Tell Otou-sama I love him."

"Yes. Families need words." And with that, Miharu staggered out into the rest of her life. She wondered how such a small moment could change everything. Moments like a boy on a train telling you
how “sucky” his Japanese is. She decided it was like in poetry, or a short story perhaps, where one must always fondle the details. Or at least that’s what her American teacher used to say every day before the fractured English would spill from her classmates’ throats.
Sailing Home

“I could regale you with fantastical stories about Hawaii. Like how I ate a gigantic burger at Ken’s, or created a lifelike replica of my friend Miranda in the sand, or traipsed through lava tubes and sulfur fields. But I won’t. Why? Maybe I’m just damn tired of writing and want a vacation…” ~ Some black sand beach in paradise.

December 5th.

Sometimes we take for granted the everyday paradise and comfort of being home. What we have to realize, though, is that home is only a starting point, and maybe an end. The middle, the adventure, is out there on the horizon.
I carried a small flag everywhere I went on Semester at Sea. The flag was silver, and emblazoned on both sides was my school logo, a crimson cougar made out of the letters W-S-U. Each time I came across a national icon or particularly stunning sight, I got out the flag and took a picture with it. Part of this process came about to appease my father, an alum from Washington State who thought the idea of bringing something around the world with me was intriguing. He was right. There existed a strange sense of connectedness with home whenever I would look at the flag. In effect, a simple item tied me back to a world I once knew.

Desmond Tutu signed my flag with a blessing to my family on the journey back to the United States. I saw this as a fitting last hurrah for a little piece of fabric that travelled the world with me. It made me start to think about all the little things that circumnavigated the globe. The water bottles I brought with paint chipped off from the stone walls of Table Mountain, to the watch my brother bought me for Christmas that still smelled of India, and the white New Balance shoes now stained with dirt, sand, and mud from four continents made the breadth of my voyage almost unimaginable.

Despite the distance I covered in four months, the flag was a constant reminder that seemed to spawn impossible connections to the world. I met a waitress in South Africa who jokingly refused to serve me because she went to my rival school, the University of Washington. A boat in the harbor at Mauritius had the very same crimson cougar painted on one side. A boy in Hong Kong stopped me and asked about Washington State, saying he would be coming for a student exchange in the spring. And finally, sitting at a table in Hilo’s fantastic Ken’s House of Pancakes, a group of Washington State alumni started chatting with me from one booth over.

I left Ken’s with two of my best friends from the voyage, Julie and Stephanie. They lived down on Deck Two near me and put up with my rather eccentric behavior. This was our last day in Hilo, and
consequently, our last day in port for the whole voyage. Hilo seemed familiar to us, though none of us had ever been there. We walked down Bayfront Highway in search of downtown, the ship and Ken's fading behind us.

The tops of my feet burned. Ultimately it was my fault for never letting my ghost-white toes see the light of day and then suddenly deciding wearing flip flops was a good idea. No clouds hung in sight, only a surreal blue that reflected in the lazy water lapping against the black sands of the Big Island. Time slowed down in Hilo, holding our one final adventure together in limbo.

We caught a glimpse of shining gold along the road. I instantly knew the sight of King Kamehameha, holding one hand out to the sea with the other gripping a spear. Having some family heritage from Hawaii, I knew the story behind him and the statues that adorn most of the islands. My friends once again marveled at my vast breadth of knowledge (or at least I would like to think so, ignoring the occasional eye roll). Of course, the walk down the road was put on hold to take pictures. After travelling the world, one becomes accustomed to photographing anything and everything that might seem interesting. And it served as an easy final photo shoot with people I miss dearly.

My awkward smile in place, Julie took a picture of Stephanie and me by the statue. I met Stephanie on the first day of the voyage. She served as the RA on my deck and part of the official welcoming committee. To this day we argue about whether she actually liked me at first, as I seem to remember an angry look or two come my way. But that melted away through both of us being utterly bizarre people in the eyes of others. Instead of worrying about the status quo, we felt no shame being nerdy beyond all reproach, reminiscing about everything from Dungeons and Dragons to our love of Animorphs when we were kids. And Stephanie was one of those strong people who didn't shy away from telling you exactly what she thought, something I find pretty amazing when most of us avoid conflict or bitter truths.
Like many people onboard, Stephanie chose to shave her head when we crossed the equator. Seeing pictures of her with hair throws me for a loop every time. Standing with her in front of King Kamehameha brought me back to our times climbing terrifying rope bridges in Ghana and laughing about Merlions in Singapore.

Stephanie brought something with her around the world as well. Rather, a collection of things. Instead of Semester at Sea pens and mugs, Stephanie wanted to give unique gifts to people around the world. What transpired was an epic journey for her collection of old Beanie Babies. The little stuffed animals were perfect for the children we met around the world, though many didn’t quite understand the novelty. Near the end of the journey, Stephanie gave each of her close friends a Beanie Baby as well. The little brown dog on my desk will always attest to a bond I earned with a person who, despite travelling to the same places I did, had a completely different experience. Not better or worse, just a variation of what could be done.

Like me, Stephanie had a lot of choices when packing her version of the world into a suitcase. She had crazy little toys from Japan to fly home with her stuffed Simba doll. Next to that, perhaps the tapestry she bought from Dakshinachitra in India of a blue Ganesha, destroyer of obstacles. With her clothes she could roll up her shirt from skydiving in Honolulu, a feat that perfectly topped off the adventure and bravery she showed in every port. These were just a few of the items that made up her memory of travelling the world.

Past the statue and walking into town, I suddenly felt very American. There was something about Hilo that made me feel like I was home. Maybe it was the right combination of street signs, or the simple box architecture that was so similar to the rest of small town America. We continued up to the heart of the commercial district to find a tattoo parlor. Not to get tattoos ourselves, but to meet another one of my friends, Miranda.
Walking into the parlor was a little intimidating. Two large Hawaiian men with black face tattoos grinned at us as we came in. The hallway we were in had a little window into the room where the tattoos were done. I peered in to see Miranda already close to being done. We asked if we could go in, and one of the two big Hawaiians nodded. After meeting the tattoos artist, another large Hawaiian who found us far too amusing, we all sat down to watch the final few lines.

Miranda gripped my hand like her life depended on it. I later joked to her about trying to break it. But realistically, I wouldn’t have done much better. This was her first tattoo, and a large one at that. In the end, Miranda brought the world home in a way none of the rest of us could. Her stomach and side now bear a world map symbolic of the journey and her uncontrollable spirit. When others shaved their head, Miranda cut off the sides and made her gorgeous hair into a Mohawk. When many people on the voyage had their trip paid for by trust funds, Miranda made and sold awesome hair clips to cover costs and experience the world instead of wasting it all on material things.

In fact, not wasting her life, or anything really, was part of why I loved Miranda as a friend. She was, and still is, completely devoted to changing the world for the better by promoting green products and energy. The flower clips she brought with her around the world seemed to mirror that any time she wore them.

Having her grip my hand, shaking a little as the piercing needle seeped ink into her skin, brought me back to Mauritius and Hong Kong, Vietnam and Ghana. We travelled in country to so many amazing places. And even though we went to the same square to shop in Cape Town, we still packed away a different memory. I brought home a black and brown belt made of ostrich; she took back a lizard sculpture for her brother.

Along with that silvery lizard, Miranda struggled to fit everything into her suitcases. She had clothes made locally from nearly every port. There were bindi powders from India that we used to give me black hair on Halloween. In one last crevice she could fit the kimono she bought for her father, a

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man she talked about all time. The strength I saw in him as a karate instructor made perfect sense for
the fire in Miranda’s character. She was an almost perfect antithesis to my carefully planned lifestyle.
Maybe that’s why we could travel together so easily, once I got over my incessant worrying and
obsession with time, that is. Okay, I never really got over it... but suppressed it some at times.

Miranda had other plans for the day and we said goodbye. After all, we could see each other on
the ship in just a few hours. It was easy to take that for granted, since now there are thousands of miles
separating most of us. Julie, Stephanie, and I headed back down toward the coastline to spend some
time on one of the black sand beaches. A little relaxation would be nice on our final day off the ship
together. As we headed down a street, scorched by the sun we hadn’t seen much since Vietnam, a sign
cought our eyes. A used book store stood on one corner, and being bibliophiles, we couldn’t quite pass
it up.

The shop was a single room, walls completely covered by books, wedged in any direction they
would fit. The owner was an older man with a long beard and didn’t seem to notice us enter, looking
over a donation box of books. The selections appeared to be arranged by author, though a few jumped
out of order. We picked through books for a while, stopping to look at each others’ selections.
Stephanie sparked a quick conversation with the owner while I sat down to flip through the pages of a
Chuck Palahniuk.

Julie sat across from me in a little foldable chair that could have been for a child. The amusing
sight reminded me of the South African school Julie and I travelled to where we sat in tiny chairs with
the elementary students. Julie and I were nearly inseparable for large parts of the voyage. We floated
down the Mekong Delta in Vietnam together and climbed for hours around Table Mountain. Once again,
it seemed our eccentricities brought us together.

I found it very easy to find Julie around the ship. I just had to look for red hair and a jacket that
matched. She really loved her hair, enough to dissuade her from cutting it off on Neptune Day, and it
probably suited her. Julie was a colorful person with passion and drive to match. She was the only person on the ship I knew to study tirelessly and make note guides and flash cards. I couldn’t help but admire her ability to strive for success.

Though most of us were onboard to learn about the cultures of other countries, the exchange of our own regional and personal preferences dominated ship life. Julie and I took turns introducing the other to music (mine is apparently very depressing), movies, and games. Of course, I also had to regale her with the majesty of Oregon, seeing as how she is from the inferior state to the south. One thing I could always count on with Julie was the unexpected, and as an author that often knows exactly what other people are going to say, spontaneity in friendship is exceedingly important.

Julie brought home too much to carry. As we walked away from the ship in San Diego, I remember helping her by carrying her gorgeous safari painting she purchased in South Africa. Somewhere in her crammed bags was rose oil from Morocco pushed up against a rum bottle full of sea shells from Mauritius. If I closed my eyes I could almost hear her wooden xylophone from Ghana wrapped in the protective fluff of a rainbow sweatshirt from the Harujuku District in Tokyo.

We left the store after about half an hour. The hill back down to the highway, and thus across to the beach, gave way to a little flat area where a busy market popped up. A group of Semester at Sea students gathered around a sign for a shuttle that would take them back to the ship. We greeted them and talked about our last day in port. Julie, Stephanie, and I debated on taking the shuttle back and trying a beach closer to the ship. We stood in the shade of the market for a long while, but the shuttle never appeared.

What, or rather who, did appear, was our friend Bryan. Like Julie, he is easy to find. Bryan has bright red hair, cut short from the shaving on Neptune Day, and, like me, stands a towering 6’4”. It was nice to have someone else floating above the clouds with me, and walking around China together was
quite a spectacle for the locals. So much so that one couple wanted to take a picture with us along the Bund in Shanghai.

Bryan loves English even more than I do. While I brought a flag around the world, Bryan brought a tiny journal, filled with scribbles, words, descriptions, and anything else that caught his mind. Deciphering the dictation was a little like solving a mystery, but with only strokes of lines as clues. He couldn’t even figure them out all the time, but his habit paid off in a lot of ways. When I read some of his short fiction I was terribly jealous of the little details he added; details Bryan had written down in that journal for later.

In keeping with the theme of writing, one adventure Bryan and I went on together was finding a poetry reading in Cape Town. The Touch of Madness bar and café was on the other end of town from the ship, so it was quite the taxi ride to a sketchy part of town. But when we arrived to the Victorian cottage and walked into a little room set up for the reading, the atmosphere was instantly cozy. What blew us away was the sheer talent and breadth of the night’s performances. In two hours we heard a traditional African drum and song performance, a Spanish essay, an Irish limerick, a feminist outcry from a woman from Chicago, and a mix of other local poetry.

Bryan wheeled some of his possessions off the ship on a bamboo longboard he bought on impulse in Hawaii. Something about him rolling around a college campus on it fits perfectly with how laid back Bryan was. He was excitable, yes, but ultimately just wanted to have fun. While skateboarding around on his souvenir, I could also see Bryan draping his Ghanaian flag he found in Takoradi over his back like a cape. Both of us are superheroes, after all.

Realizing the shuttle ran on Hawaiian time, where punctuality means next to nothing, we ventured across the highway next to the shoreline. We walked along the ocean, back toward the ship. Eventually, the black sand beach we were looking for appeared. The girls settled on a spot to sunbathe while I walked along the lazy waves. A group of teens ran around the beach and pushed a small
Polynesian canoe into the water. I watched them sail out into the azure abyss until a higher wave chilled my bare ankles.

At the very far end of the beach sat a collection of large, black stones. I perched myself on one and took off my flip flops. The water bubbled up around my toes while I dreamt of the amazing adventures I took part in. But my stories differed greatly from many other people on the ship. We visited the same countries, but beyond a passport stamp, what we experienced in each place was unique.

This was readily evident with Alex, who lived across the hall from me on Deck 2. Alex was from Germany, and this was his second time on Semester at Sea. Though we travelled to Rabat together in Morocco, most of our other adventures never converged. That didn’t stop us from having battles over silly door decorations and the quality of Taco Bell.

Alex carried a t-shirt with him throughout the voyage. Like my flag, he took pictures of it in every country. The photographs were posted online to a website that promoted a friend’s business with the shirt. People would then have to try and guess where Alex took each shot. I got to take the picture in Rabat, outside the tomb of a former king.

One place Alex travelled to that I did not was Cambodia. While in port in Vietnam, many students hopped over to the country best known for Angkor Wat. Alex carried home a picture painted right in front of him while visiting the vast temples. The only colors used were black, green, and orange: the dominant color scheme for the site. The commercialized nature of most ruins doesn’t exist in Cambodia, partly making this Alex’s best memory from the trip.

I glanced down at my watch and realized on-ship time was approaching quickly. The girls wanted to stay longer, right up to the final minute, so I walked back alone. There are a number of little grottos and parks along the shore. Banyan trees provided shade for the walkway I plodded along.
didn’t hurry, walking in and out of the openings in the trees. I felt calmed, but also sobered. The voyage was coming to an end, and no one wanted to face that.

And then it was gone. Hawaii faded away while the people on the ship came together for a barbecue. I knew the little celebration happened in order to keep us from a bitter realization, a diversion from the stark reality of returning to mundane lives imprisoned by a lack of mobility. Staying in one place no longer made sense, no longer felt right.

I stopped by Miranda and Kathryn’s cabin after the barbecue. In a lot of ways they were the perfect roommates; instant best friends from an experience most people will never have. Kathryn opened the door and greeted me with “Jawad!” When walking Marrakesh together, Kathryn and I saw a sign for a real estate agent named Jawad Bramahaman, and it quickly became my nickname due to its similarity to Jared Brickman.

Kathryn has the most amazing smile of anyone I know, and better yet, she always seems to be smiling. Our journey by train to Marrakesh worked out perfectly, mostly because I could scare people off by being large and intimidating, and she could haggle better than a used car salesman. But I also got to run around Mauritius with her, and visit a Bollywood studio with her in Chennai. Most of the time, though, she was being way too adventurous for my blood. She bungee-jumped off two of the highest locations in the world, and went skydiving in Hawaii. She even tried to go paragliding in South Africa, though it never panned out.

Kathryn and Miranda kept all sorts of candy on hand for the entire voyage. Naturally, visitors to their cabin would always find a way to come away with some. To protect her stash, Kathryn collected a vast array of animals made out of coconuts. The “guardians” eventually took up more room than the candy itself. I found her a new addition in Vietnam: a monkey playing a drum while wearing the stereotypical Vietnamese rice hat.

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I watched Kathryn pack over the course of probably ten days. There was a lot to go through. There was the brown, triangular chair she bought in India that smelled so funky it had to air out for days. She added the bright yellow banana shoes from Casablanca to a bag full of accessories. Her bungee and skydiving certificates laid flat on top of a collection of clothing no doubt found in every corner of the globe.

After saying goodbye, I walked the familiar path back to my room. I opened the door to my cabin and sat down in front of the poster of the world map that Semester at Sea had put in everyone’s room.

We travelled the world. The feeling of awe never quite sets in completely. All of us look back at pictures and share stories that we’ve told ten times over. What we brought home with us was more than simple souvenirs. These trinkets and clothing items, the artwork and jewelry, all construct our memory of the world. What we carried home was our craziest dream, glimpses into our suitcases and minds. It serves as a look into our planet, as we saw it.

“I hope we can accept a wonderful truth: we are family. We are family. If we could get to believe this we would realize that to care about the other is not being altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest.” ~ Archbishop Desmond Tutu
About the Author

Jared Brickman is studying journalism at Washington State University with a minor in English. He released his first novel, *A Town Called Mayhew*, in 2008. In addition to these selections, Jared penned two screenplays for short films. He acted in these films, as well. Jared has written a wealth of other selections, ranging from full screenplays, to poetry, news pieces, and other short fiction.

In the fall of 2010, Jared participated in a program called Semester at Sea. This voyage took him to the countries in this collection while studying short fiction of authors from the various regions visited. The experience culminated in a thesis for the Washington State University Honors College, defended in the Fall Semester of 2011.

Jared grew up in Baker City, Oregon, graduating from Baker High School in 2008 with valedictorian honors. He is an avid tennis and racquetball player, with interests ranging from the culinary arts to architecture and physics. He plans on teaching abroad in the future as a result of his experiences in other countries, and hopes to eventually return to Semester at Sea as an instructor or lifelong learner.

"If you go half way, then go half of that, and keep going just half way, you'll never truly make it." – Jared Brickman
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